

Absence of Batrachians and Terrestrial Mammals on Oceanic Islands.

With respect to the absence of whole orders of animals on oceanic islands, Bory St. Vincent long ago remarked that Batrachians (frogs, toads, newts) are never found on any of the many islands with which the great oceans are studded. I have taken pains to verify this assertion, and have found it true, with the exception of New Zealand, New Caledonia, the Andaman Islands, and perhaps the Solomon Islands and the Seychelles. But I have already remarked that it is doubtful whether New Zealand and New Caledonia ought to be classed as oceanic islands; and this is still more doubtful with respect to the Andaman and Solomon groups and the Seychelles. This general absence of frogs, toads and newts on so many true oceanic islands cannot be accounted for by their physical conditions; indeed it seems that islands are peculiarly fitted for these animals; for frogs have been introduced into Madeira, the Azores, and Mauritius, and have multiplied so as to become a nuisance. But as these animals and their spawn are immediately killed (with the exception, as far as known, of one Indian species) by sea-water, there would be great difficulty in their transportal across the sea, and therefore we can see why they do not exist on strictly oceanic islands. But why, on the theory of creation, they should not have been created there, it would be very difficult to explain.

Mammals offer another and similar case. I have carefully searched the oldest voyages, and have not found a single instance, free from doubt, of a terrestrial mammal (excluding domesticated animals kept by the natives) inhabiting an island situated above 300 miles from a continent or great continental island; and many islands situated at a much less distance are equally barren. The Falkland Islands, which are inhabited by a wolf-like fox, come nearest to an exception; but this group cannot be considered as oceanic, as it lies on a bank in connection with the mainland at a distance of about 280 miles; moreover, icebergs formerly brought boulders to its western shores, and they may have formerly transported foxes, as now frequently happens in the arctic regions. Yet it cannot be said that small islands will not support at least small mammals, for they occur in many parts of the world on very small islands, when lying close to a continent; and hardly an island can be named on which our smaller quadrupeds have not become naturalised and greatly multiplied. It cannot be said, on the ordinary view of creation, that there has not been time for the creation of mammals; many volcanic islands are sufficiently ancient, as shown by the stupendous degradation which they have suffered, and by their tertiary strata: there has also been time for the production of endemic species belonging to other classes; and on continents it is known that new species of mammals appear and disappear at a quicker rate than other and lower animals. Although terrestrial mammals do not occur on oceanic islands, aerial mammals do occur on almost every island. New Zealand possesses two bats found nowhere else in the world: Norfolk Island, the Viti Archipelago, the Bonin Islands, the Caroline and Marianne Archipelagoes, and Mauritius, all possess their peculiar bats. Why, it may be asked, has the supposed creative force produced bats and no other mammals on remote islands? On my view this question can easily be answered; for no terrestrial mammal can be transported across a wide space of sea, but bats can fly across. Bats have been seen wandering by day far over the Atlantic Ocean; and two North American species, either regularly or occasionally, visit Bermuda, at the distance of 600 miles from the mainland. I hear from Mr. Tomes, who has specially studied this family, that many species have enormous ranges, and are found on continents and on far distant islands. Hence, we have only to suppose that such wandering species have been modified in their new homes in relation to their new position, and we can understand the presence of endemic bats on oceanic islands, with the absence of

all other terrestrial mammals.

Another interesting relation exists, namely, between the depth of the sea separating islands from each other, or from the nearest continent, and the degree of affinity of their mammalian inhabitants. Mr. Windsor Earl has made some striking observations on this head, since greatly extended by Mr. Wallace's admirable researches, in regard to the great Malay Archipelago, which is traversed near Celebes by a space of deep ocean, and this separates two widely distinct mammalian faunas. On either side, the islands stand on a moderately shallow submarine bank, and these islands are inhabited by the same or by closely allied quadrupeds. I have not as yet had time to follow up this subject in all quarters of the world; but as far as I have gone, the relation holds good. For instance, Britain is separated by a shallow channel from Europe, and the mammals are the same on both sides; and so it is with all the islands near the shores of Australia. The West Indian Islands, on the other hand, stand on a deeply submerged bank, nearly 1000 fathoms in depth, and here we find American forms, but the species and even the genera are quite distinct. As the amount of modification which animals of all kinds undergo partly depends on the lapse of time, and as the islands which are separated from each other, or from the mainland, by shallow channels, are more likely to have been continuously united within a recent period than the islands separated by deeper channels, we can understand how it is that a relation exists between the depth of the sea separating two mammalian faunas, and the degree of their affinity,— a relation which is quite inexplicable on the theory of independent acts of creation.

The foregoing statements in regard to the inhabitants of oceanic islands,— namely, the fewness of the species, with a large proportion consisting of endemic forms — the members of certain groups, but not those of other groups in the same class, having been modified — the absence of certain whole orders, as of batrachians and of terrestrial mammals, notwithstanding the presence of aerial bats, the singular proportions of certain orders of plants,— herbaceous forms having been developed into trees, &c.,— seem to me to accord better with the belief in the efficiency of occasional means of transport, carried on during a long course of time, than with the belief in the former connection of all oceanic islands with the nearest continent; for on this latter view it is probable that the various classes would have immigrated more uniformly, and from the species having entered in a body, their mutual relations would not have been much disturbed, and consequently, they would either have not been modified, or all the species in a more equable manner.

I do not deny that there are many and serious difficulties in understanding how many of the inhabitants of the more remote islands, whether still retaining the same specific form or subsequently modified, have reached their present homes. But the probability of other islands having once existed as halting-places, of which not a wreck now remains, must not be overlooked. I will specify one difficult case. Almost all oceanic islands, even the most isolated and smallest, are inhabited by land-shells, generally by endemic species, but sometimes by species found elsewhere,— striking instances of which have been given by Dr. A.A. Gould in relation to the Pacific. Now it is notorious that land-shells are easily killed by sea-water; their eggs, at least such as I have tried, sink in it and are killed. Yet there must be some unknown, but occasionally efficient means for their transportal. Would the just-hatched young sometimes adhere to the feet of birds roosting on the ground and thus get transported? It occurred to me that land-shells, when hybernating and having a membranous diaphragm over the mouth of the shell, might be floated in chinks of drifted timber across moderately wide arms of the sea. And I find that several species in this state withstand uninjured an immersion in sea-water during seven days. One shell, the *Helix pomatia*, after having been thus treated, and again hybernating, was put into sea-water for twenty days and perfectly recovered. During this length of time the shell might have been carried by a marine country of average swiftness to a distance of 660 geographical miles. As this *Helix* has a thick calcareous operculum I removed it, and when it had formed a new membranous one, I again

immersed it for fourteen days in sea-water, and again it recovered and crawled away. Baron Aucapitaine has since tried similar experiments. He placed 100 land-shells, belonging to ten species, in a box pierced with holes, and immersed it for a fortnight in the sea. Out of the hundred shells twenty-seven recovered. The presence of an operculum seems to have been of importance, as out of twelve specimens of *Cyclostoma elegans*, which is thus furnished, eleven revived. It is remarkable, seeing how well the *Helix pomatia* resisted with me the salt-water, that not one of fifty-four specimens belonging to four other species of *Helix* tried by Aucapitaine recovered. It is, however, not at all probable that land-shells have often been thus transported; the feet of birds offer a more probable method.

Revision #1

Created 13 August 2019 13:24:01 by Textpedia

Updated 13 August 2019 13:24:16 by Textpedia