

On the Succession of the same Types within the same Areas, during the later Tertiary periods.

Mr. Clift many years ago showed that the fossil mammals from the Australian caves were closely allied to the living marsupials of that continent. In South America, a similar relationship is manifest, even to an uneducated eye, in the gigantic pieces of armour, like those of the armadillo, found in several parts of La Plata; and Professor Owen has shown in the most striking manner that most of the fossil mammals, buried there in such numbers, are related to South American types. This relationship is even more clearly seen in the wonderful collection of fossil bones made by MM. Lund and Clausen in the caves of Brazil. I was so much impressed with these facts that I strongly insisted, in 1839 and 1845, on this "law of the succession of types," — on "this wonderful relationship in the same continent between the dead and the living." Professor Owen has subsequently extended the same generalisation to the mammals of the Old World. We see the same law in this author's restorations of the extinct and gigantic birds of New Zealand. We see it also in the birds of the caves of Brazil. Mr. Woodward has shown that the same law holds good with sea-shells, but, from the wide distribution of most molluscs, it is not well displayed by them. Other cases could be added, as the relation between the extinct and living land-shells of Madeira; and between the extinct and living brackish water-shells of the Aralo-Caspian Sea.

Now, what does this remarkable law of the succession of the same types within the same areas mean? He would be a bold man who, after comparing the present climate of Australia and of parts of South America, under the same latitude, would attempt to account, on the one hand through dissimilar physical conditions, for the dissimilarity of the inhabitants of these two continents; and, on the other hand through similarity of conditions, for the uniformity of the same types in each continent during the later tertiary periods. Nor can it be pretended that it is an immutable law that marsupials should have been chiefly or solely produced in Australia; or that Edentata and other American types should have been solely produced in South America. For we know that Europe in ancient times was peopled by numerous marsupials; and I have shown in the publications above alluded to, that in America the law of distribution of terrestrial mammals was formerly different from what it now is. North America formerly partook strongly of the present character of the southern half of the continent; and the southern half was formerly more closely allied, than it is at present, to the northern half. In a similar manner we know, from Falconer and Cautley's discoveries, that Northern India was formerly more closely related in its mammals to Africa than it is at the present time. Analogous facts could be given in relation to the distribution of marine animals.

On the theory of descent with modification, the great law of the long enduring, but not immutable, succession of the same types within the same areas, is at once explained; for the inhabitants of each quarter of the world will obviously tend to leave in that quarter, during the next succeeding period of time, closely allied though in some degree modified descendants. If the inhabitants of one continent formerly differed greatly from those of another continent, so will their modified descendants still differ in nearly the same manner and degree. But after very long intervals of time, and after great geographical changes, permitting much intermigration, the feebler will yield to the more dominant forms, and there will be nothing immutable in the distribution of organic beings.

It may be asked in ridicule whether I suppose that the megatherium and other allied huge monsters, which formerly lived in South America, have left behind them the sloth, armadillo, and anteater, as their degenerate descendants. This cannot for an instant be admitted. These huge animals have become wholly extinct, and have left no progeny. But in the caves of Brazil there are many extinct species which are closely allied in size and in all other characters to the species still living in South America; and some of these fossils may have been the actual progenitors of the living species. It must not be forgotten that, on our theory, all the species of the same genus are the descendants of some one species; so that, if six genera, each having eight species, be found in one geological formation, and in a succeeding formation there be six other allied or representative genera, each with the same number of species, then we may conclude that generally only one species of each of the older genera has left modified descendants, which constitute the new genera containing the several species; the other seven species of each old genus having died out and left no progeny. Or, and this will be a far commoner case, two or three species in two or three alone of the six older genera will be the parents of the new genera: the other species and the other old genera having become utterly extinct. In failing orders, with the genera and species decreasing in numbers as is the case with the Edentata of South America, still fewer genera and species will leave modified blood-descendants.

Revision #1

Created 13 August 2019 13:18:09 by Textpedia

Updated 13 August 2019 13:18:24 by Textpedia