

# On the sudden Appearance of Groups of allied Species in the lowest known Fossiliferous Strata.

There is another and allied difficulty, which is much more serious. I allude to the manner in which species belonging to several of the main divisions of the animal kingdom suddenly appear in the lowest known fossiliferous rocks. Most of the arguments which have convinced me that all the existing species of the same group are descended from a single progenitor, apply with equal force to the earliest known species. For instance, it cannot be doubted that all the Cambrian and Silurian trilobites are descended from some one crustacean, which must have lived long before the Cambrian age, and which probably differed greatly from any known animal. Some of the most ancient animals, as the Nautilus, Lingula, &c., do not differ much from living species; and it cannot on our theory be supposed, that these old species were the progenitors of all the species belonging to the same groups which have subsequently appeared, for they are not in any degree intermediate in character.

Consequently, if the theory be true, it is indisputable that before the lowest Cambrian stratum was deposited long periods elapsed, as long as, or probably far longer than, the whole interval from the Cambrian age to the present day; and that during these vast periods the world swarmed with living creatures. Here we encounter a formidable objection; for it seems doubtful whether the earth, in a fit state for the habitation of living creatures, has lasted long enough. Sir W. Thompson concludes that the consolidation of the crust can hardly have occurred less than twenty or more than four hundred million years ago, but probably not less than ninety-eight or more than two hundred million years. These very wide limits show how doubtful the data are; and other elements may have hereafter to be introduced into the problem. Mr. Croll estimates that about sixty million years have elapsed since the Cambrian period, but this, judging from the small amount of organic change since the commencement of the Glacial epoch, appears a very short time for the many and great mutations of life, which have certainly occurred since the Cambrian formation; and the previous one hundred and forty million years can hardly be considered as sufficient for the development of the varied forms of life which already existed during the Cambrian period. It is, however, probable, as Sir William Thompson insists, that the world at a very early period was subjected to more rapid and violent changes in its physical conditions than those now occurring; and such changes would have tended to induce changes at a corresponding rate in the organisms which then existed.

To the question why we do not find rich fossiliferous deposits belonging to these assumed earliest periods prior to the Cambrian system, I can give no satisfactory answer. Several eminent geologists, with Sir R. Murchison at their head, were until recently convinced that we beheld in the organic remains of the lowest Silurian stratum the first dawn of life. Other highly competent judges, as Lyell and E. Forbes, have disputed this conclusion. We should not forget that only a small portion of the world is known with accuracy. Not very long ago M. Barrande added another and lower stage, abounding with new and peculiar species, beneath the then known Silurian system; and now, still lower down in the Lower Cambrian formation, Mr Hicks has found South Wales beds rich in trilobites, and containing various molluscs and annelids. The presence of phosphatic nodules and bituminous matter, even in some of the lowest azotic rocks, probably indicates life at these periods; and the existence of the Eozoon in the Laurentian formation of Canada is generally admitted. There are three

great series of strata beneath the Silurian system in Canada, in the lowest of which the Eozoon is found. Sir W. Logan states that their "united thickness may possibly far surpass that of all the succeeding rocks, from the base of the palæozoic series to the present time. We are thus carried back to a period so remote, that the appearance of the so-called primordial fauna (of Barrande) may by some be considered as a comparatively modern event." The Eozoon belongs to the most lowly organised of all classes of animals, but is highly organised for its class; it existed in countless numbers, and, as Dr. Dawson has remarked, certainly preyed on other minute organic beings, which must have lived in great numbers. Thus the words, which I wrote in 1859, about the existence of living beings long before the Cambrian period, and which are almost the same with those since used by Sir W. Logan, have proved true. Nevertheless, the difficulty of assigning any good reason for the absence of vast piles of strata rich in fossils beneath the Cambrian system is very great. It does not seem probable that the most ancient beds have been quite worn away by denudation, or that their fossils have been wholly obliterated by metamorphic action, for if this had been the case we should have found only small remnants of the formations next succeeding them in age, and these would always have existed in a partially metamorphosed condition. But the descriptions which we possess of the Silurian deposits over immense territories in Russia and in North America, do not support the view that the older a formation is the more invariably it has suffered extreme denudation and metamorphism.

The case at present must remain inexplicable; and may be truly urged as a valid argument against the views here entertained. To show that it may hereafter receive some explanation, I will give the following hypothesis. From the nature of the organic remains which do not appear to have inhabited profound depths, in the several formations of Europe and of the United States; and from the amount of sediment, miles in thickness, of which the formations are composed, we may infer that from first to last large islands or tracts of land, whence the sediment was derived, occurred in the neighbourhood of the now existing continents of Europe and North America. This same view has since been maintained by Agassiz and others. But we do not know what was the state of things in the intervals between the several successive formations; whether Europe and the United States during these intervals existed as dry land, or as a submarine surface near land, on which sediment was not deposited, or as the bed of an open and unfathomable sea.

Looking to the existing oceans, which are thrice as extensive as the land, we see them studded with many islands; but hardly one truly oceanic island (with the exception of New Zealand, if this can be called a truly oceanic island) is as yet known to afford even a remnant of any palæozoic or secondary formation. Hence, we may perhaps infer, that during the palæozoic and secondary periods, neither continents nor continental islands existed where our oceans now extend; for had they existed, palæozoic and secondary formations would in all probability have been accumulated from sediment derived from their wear and tear; and would have been at least partially upheaved by the oscillations of level, which must have intervened during these enormously long periods. If, then, we may infer anything from these facts, we may infer that, where our oceans now extend, oceans have extended from the remotest period of which we have any record; and on the other hand, that where continents now exist, large tracts of land have existed, subjected, no doubt, to great oscillations of level, since the Cambrian period. The coloured map appended to my volume on Coral Reefs, led me to conclude that the great oceans are still mainly areas of subsidence, the great archipelagoes still areas of oscillations of level, and the continents areas of elevation. But we have no reason to assume that things have thus remained from the beginning of the world. Our continents seem to have been formed by a preponderance, during many oscillations of level, of the force of elevation. But may not the areas of preponderant movement have changed in the lapse of ages? At a period long antecedent to the Cambrian epoch, continents may have existed where oceans are now spread out, and clear and open

oceans may have existed where our continents now stand. Nor should we be justified in assuming that if, for instance, the bed of the Pacific Ocean were now converted into a continent, we should there find sedimentary formations, in recognisable condition, older than the Cambrian strata, supposing such to have been formerly deposited; for it might well happen that strata which had subsided some miles nearer to the centre of the earth, and which had been pressed on by an enormous weight of superincumbent water, might have undergone far more metamorphic action than strata which have always remained nearer to the surface. The immense areas in some parts of the world, for instance in South America, of naked metamorphic rocks, which must have been heated under great pressure, have always seemed to me to require some special explanation; and we may perhaps believe that we see in these large areas the many formations long anterior to the Cambrian epoch in a completely metamorphosed and denuded condition.

The several difficulties here discussed, namely, that, though we find in our geological formations many links between the species which now exist and which formerly existed, we do not find infinitely numerous fine transitional forms closely joining them all together;— the sudden manner in which several groups of species first appear in our European formations, the almost entire absence, as at present known, of formations rich in fossils beneath the Cambrian strata,— are all undoubtedly of the most serious nature. We see this in the fact that the most eminent palæontologists, namely, Cuvier, Agassiz, Barrande, Pictet, Falconer, E. Forbes, &c., and all our greatest geologists, as Lyell, Murchison, Sedgwick, &c., have unanimously, often vehemently, maintained the immutability of species. But Sir Charles Lyell now gives the support of his high authority to the opposite side, and most geologists and palæontologists are much shaken in their former belief. Those who believe that the geological record is in any degree perfect, will undoubtedly at once reject my theory. For my part, following out Lyell's metaphor, I look at the geological record as a history of the world imperfectly kept and written in a changing dialect. Of this history we possess the last volume alone, relating only to two or three countries. Of this volume, only here and there a short chapter has been preserved, and of each page, only here and there a few lines. Each word of the slowly-changing language, more or less different in the successive chapters, may represent the forms of life, which are entombed in our consecutive formations, and which falsely appear to have been abruptly introduced. On this view the difficulties above discussed are greatly diminished or even disappear.

---

Revision #1

Created 13 August 2019 13:09:16 by Textpedia

Updated 13 August 2019 13:09:33 by Textpedia