

Cambrian and Recent Morphological Disparity

We congratulate D. E. G. Briggs *et al.* for tackling the fascinating, difficult, and important issue of changes in the pattern of overall morphological disparity through geologic time (1). They conclude that modern disparity of arthropods is about equal to that in the Cambrian, thus controverting a widely held premise (2) that maximal disparity occurred early in the history of metazoan life and that disparity has subsequently decreased as many body plans became extinct while surviving designs stabilized through some form of genetic and developmental "locking" (often evolving great ecological diversity within surviving body plans—barnacles to lobsters among Crustacea, for example). We think, however, that a methodological error invalidates Briggs *et al.*'s conclusion and that the error's direction of bias affirms the opposite view that Cambrian disparity was greater. Moreover, even if their conclusion were correct, it would support the idea of unusual speed and flexibility in Cambrian evolution followed by constraint upon fundamental anatomical change.

In historical sciences, tests and experiments cannot always be ideally controlled because one must work with the available organisms that happened to evolve and because one cannot always manipulate situations to yield an optimal experimental design. Therefore, any unavoidable bias should lie in a direction that would tend to disconfirm one's preferred hypothesis. Briggs *et al.* attempt to falsify the hypothesis of maximal Cambrian disparity by showing that modern disparity is just as great, but their methodology artificially inflates modern disparity. Their Cambrian arthropod sample consists of 25 taxa that "allow an adequate number of characters to be coded" (1), but the modern sample includes only one chosen representative from each "of the 21 main classes or subclasses of Recent arthropods" (1).

Well-fossilized Cambrian arthropods may not represent a truly random sample of those forms that swam and crawled in the Cambrian seas, but because complete sampling is not needed to measure disparity as average distance in morphospace (3, 4), there is no obvious reason to suppose that the Cambrian sample is biased with regard to morphological disparity. Ironically, the sample of Recent arthropods in the study by Briggs *et al.* is biased. To a first approximation, the major classes and subclasses of arthropods represent a series of coherent morphological designs. Although it may seem that each of these designs should be included in a study of disparity, a random

sample of Recent arthropods would likely include several representatives of some (sub)classes and no representatives of others. Thus, a random sample would have several points relatively close together in morphological space (representatives of the same design) and would likely exclude some of the morphologically more peripheral designs. Briggs *et al.*'s Recent sample, because it lacks multiple representatives from single arthropod subgroups and because it must include a member of each major subgroup, has higher apparent disparity (fewer short distances and greater total range) than would a random sample.

If a modern sample so biased to overdispersion still falls somewhat short (although not statistically so) of Cambrian disparity, then we can conclude that comparable samples would probably yield higher Cambrian disparity. Moreover, Briggs *et al.*'s own data support maximal Cambrian disparity in two ways.

1) Even with the inherent biases, and as shown in figure 2A of the report by Briggs *et al.*, 9 of the 11 points most distant from the joint centroid represent Cambrian taxa. The only modern arthropods in this group of maximally "unaverage" forms are the millipede *Julus* and the horseshoe crab *Limulus*; the latter, at least, represents a taxon of minimal size that might not have been included at all under a sampling scheme comparable to that used for the Cambrian taxa. The hypothesis of Cambrian maximal disparity does not argue that all peripheries of morphospace should be occupied by Cambrian taxa, but only that decimation and stabilization reduced the number of post-Cambrian designs to fewer potential positions.

2) Briggs *et al.* include a cladistic analysis to supplement their phenetic study with the argument that "the number of character transitions involved in the acquisition of a particular morphology from an ancestral form provides a measure of disparity" (1). Although we question this argument (5), we note that, as Briggs *et al.* allow, Cambrian taxa are more disparate by their own criterion of greater average cladistic distance from the basal node of the cladogram (1). This situation arises, as Briggs *et al.* (1) state, because many modern (and few Cambrian) forms are uniramian, and uniramians (as a major arthropod subgroup) branch off low on the cladogram. This branching pattern supports the idea of maximal Cambrian disparity because most of the highly derived subgroups had already originated within the Cambrian [figure 3 in (1)]. Later extinctions removed many of these derived

groups, thus reducing disparity. Contrary to the implication of Briggs *et al.* [(1), pp. 1672 and 1673], the idea of maximal Cambrian disparity (2) does not rest on the number of extinct "phyla" or problematica, but on the perceived magnitude of differences among Cambrian animals.

The fact that morphological disparity has not increased dramatically since the Cambrian agrees with a claim made by one of us that arthropod evolution does not represent a "cone of increasing diversity" (2), that is, a concordant increase in taxonomic diversity and morphological disparity. Yet such a pattern would be expected if the magnitude of morphological constraints and transitions did not change greatly over geologic time (4, 6). The fact that 500 million years of post-Cambrian arthropod evolution has not produced a greater variety of form than a few million years of Cambrian evolution argues for an increase in constraint on morphological evolution after the Cambrian. What combination of evolutionary and ecological mechanisms have produced this change in constraint remains an open question.

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Briggs *et al.* (1) demonstrate that the proliferation of higher taxa during the Cambrian "explosion" is largely a taxonomic artifact and that morphological diversity among Cambrian arthropods was no greater than among extant forms. However, those with the view that morphological diversity was greater in the Cambrian (2) can still argue that the analysis performed by Briggs *et al.* was biased in that it considered only "good" arthropods, while the Cambrian "oddballs," those with the most bizarre body plans, were excluded from the study.

This criticism can be countered only by repeating the analysis on a much wider cross section of organisms (from different phyla)—a rather intractable proposition that would involve attempting to quantify morphological differences between animals as dissimilar as a cockroach and an earthworm.

A more intriguing result of Briggs *et al.* concerns their phylograms. The validity of performing a cladistic analysis on such a limited, heterogeneous selection of arthropods (some Cambrian and Recent species, with no taxa from the intervening period) is questionable, even if the arthropods are accepted as monophyletic. Analyses (of tetrapod relationships) that considered a similarly limited number of taxa (3) have been shown to yield spurious results (4). Nevertheless, if one assumes that the phylograms of Briggs *et al.* are approximately correct, it follows that, on average, the Cambrian organisms have accumulated 32.4 character state changes from the reconstructed ancestor at the base of the tree, while recent organisms have accumulated only 27.2 changes. Yet Cambrian organisms were separated from this ancestor by a few million years, while Recent organisms are separated from it by an interval of nearly 600 million years. In other words, these results imply that Cambrian arthropods underwent as many evolutionary changes during the Cambrian as extant organisms have undergone during the whole of the Phanerozoic. The analysis by Briggs *et al.* includes an "exhaustive" list of morphological characters, including (cladistically uninformative) unique derived traits; hence it cannot be argued that recent taxa are actually more highly derived than Cambrian taxa, but that many changes in the former, being autapomorphies, were not considered in the cladistic analysis.

Only two other explanations remain. One is that morphological change has effectively ceased since the Cambrian, which is obviously not true. The other is that only a limited number of changes are possible in the arthropod *bauplan*, that all these possibilities were exhausted by the end of the Cambrian, and that since then arthropod evolution has involved nothing but convergences and reversals. During the Cambrian most changes were divergent, but by the end of the period the limits to divergence had been reached and changes were largely homoplastic. This interpretation is supported by the low consistency index (0.268) of the cladistic analysis performed by Briggs *et al.* and by their conclusion that the morphospace occupied by Recent arthropods is approximately the same as that occupied by Cambrian arthropods. In other words, morphological change has continued, and Recent taxa have accumulated far more

changes from the ancestral state than had their Cambrian counterparts. However, because post-Cambrian changes have largely involved loss and reacquisition of traits that had already appeared during the Cambrian, these extra steps could not be detected on the most parsimonious phylograms (for example, a gain and subsequent loss of a trait would have mapped onto the phylogram as no change at all). Hence extant taxa, when compared with their hypothetical ancestor on the phylograms, do not appear to be any more derived than their Cambrian counterparts. The lack of further divergence of arthropods since the Cambrian suggests the existence of rigid evolutionary constraints and is a finding that cannot be ignored.

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Response: Foote and Gould generously applaud our attempt to address the difficult issue of disparity among Cambrian animals independent of a restrictive taxonomic framework. Gould's account of the Burgess Shale (1), an enormous stimulus to research on the pattern of evolution during the Cambrian radiation, drew the important distinction between taxonomic diversity and morphological disparity. Noting the large number of taxa with unusual morphologies that appear to negate the possibility of relationship to any modern group, he concluded that "[t]he Burgess Shale includes a range of disparity in anatomical design never again equaled, and not matched today by all the creatures in all the world's oceans" (1, p. 208). The arthropods (most diverse in the Cambrian, as today) appeared to support this view on the basis of a comparison of the totality of design in the Cambrian and in Recent times: "group after group of orphaned arthropods spoke of Burgess anatomy far beyond the range of any later time" (1, p. 167). Our study (2) was an attempt to test this view by quantifying disparity and allowing the amount of morphological evolution during the Cambrian

radiation to be assessed. Of course we do not deny that the Cambrian radiation took place—the evidence to support it is overwhelming—we merely caution that it may not have been as dramatic as previously supposed.

Foote and Gould argue that our selection of Recent taxa biased the study and that we should have used a random sample for comparison with the Cambrian taxa. Because more than 90% of modern arthropods are insects, the chances of a random sample including much else are small; such a sample, however, tells us more about the diversity of hexapods than about disparity among modern arthropods. The selection of Cambrian taxa also was not random; it is biased in favor of benthic muddy substrate dwellers. A random sample of known Cambrian arthropods would have been no more satisfactory because it would have been dominated by trilobites as a result of their favorable preservation potential. It should be obvious that we cannot obtain a modern sample truly comparable to the Burgess sample. Thus we compared *known* disparity in the Cambrian with that in the Recent sample and demonstrated that earlier studies (1) have exaggerated our impression of the former in the light of the number of problematic taxa (those that could not be readily assigned to living groups). Our Recent sample provided a reasonable way of including the range of modern arthropod morphology, although much more disparate forms could have been selected. Because the Cambrian arthropods fall into the same major clades (2, 3), the range of morphology they display is limited by the same phylogenetic constraints.

Foote and Gould argue that the lack of multiple representatives from single arthropod subgroups results in an apparent higher disparity in the Recent sample. Higher taxa are not necessarily equivalent in morphological separation—six of the living uniramians lie in a much tighter cluster than the three Cambrian trilobites, for example. Multiple sampling would result only in a slight rotation of the cloud of taxa to align it with the more densely clustered points; furthermore, one of our metrics (range) is not directly affected by such clustering. To discuss disparity in terms of exactly which taxon is most distant from the centroid runs the risk of overestimating the precision of the approach and the significance of individual morphologies. Distances incorporate no directional information, and we have no measure of the significance of slight variations in the values. Hence our conclusions were couched in more general terms. On the cladogram, the average distance of the Cambrian arthropods from the basal node exceeds that of the Recent arthropods but, as we empha-

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