

RAPID COMMUNICATION

First report of *Wiwaxia* from the Cambrian Chengjiang Lagerstätte

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Abstract

The robust spines and sclerites of the early to middle Cambrian ‘mollusc’ *Wiwaxia* are ubiquitous in suitably preserved deposits, but are strikingly absent from the Chengjiang Lagerstätte (Cambrian Stage 3, Yunnan Province, SW China). Here we provide the first record of *Wiwaxia* sclerites from this rich deposit, extending the record of the genus to the earliest Cambrian Series 2. This reinforces the cosmopolitan distribution of this iconic Cambrian lophotrochozoan and demonstrates the strong faunal continuity that unites distant Cambrian Lagerstätten.

Keywords: Maotianshan shale, Mollusca, halwaxiids, Cambrian explosion, China.

1. Introduction

Since the first discovery of its isolated sclerites (Matthew, 1899), *Wiwaxia* has established itself among the iconic Burgess Shale problematica. Until recently, its affinity was considered unresolvable (Eibye-Jacobsen, 2004); its interpretation as a mollusc – whether at a crown-group or stem-group level (Scheltema & Ivanov, 2002; Scheltema, Kerth & Kuzirian, 2003; Caron *et al.* 2006, 2007; Conway Morris & Caron, 2007) – had competed with alternative positions in the annelid crown group or stem group (Walcott, 1911; Butterfield, 1990, 2003, 2006, 2008; Conway Morris & Peel, 1995), or in the stem group to Annelida + Brachiopoda (Conway Morris & Caron, 2007). Membership of an extinct phylum with remote affiliation to the molluscs had also been proposed (Bengtson & Conway Morris, 1984; Conway Morris, 1985). A position among Mollusca was finally established through the identification of radula-like mouthparts, a creeping ventral foot and an aculiferan-like scleritome, even if the exact affinity of *Wiwaxia* within the molluscs remains unresolved (Smith, 2012, 2014).

Despite the phylogenetic uncertainty, the morphology of *Wiwaxia*'s dorsal imbricating scleritome is well constrained by hundreds of articulated specimens from the Burgess Shale (Walcott, 1911; Conway Morris, 1985; Smith, 2014), complemented by a handful of further individuals from Utah (Conway Morris *et al.* in press) and two localities in South

China (Sun *et al.* 2014; Yang *et al.* 2014). The *Wiwaxia* scleritome comprised eight rows of overlapping scale-like sclerites, punctuated in adults by two rows of elongate dorsal spines. Sclerites are arranged in four distinct zones on either side of the body (ventral, lower lateral, upper lateral and dorsal), with a distinct zone of sclerites arming the anterior of the body. Leaf-like, the sclerites comprise a smooth proximal root that opens out into an oval, siculate or spinose blade; this blade has a reinforced margin and edge-parallel ribs, and sometimes bears a pustular ornament (Butterfield & Harvey, 2012; Smith, 2014). Elongate internal chambers indicate that they were secreted by microvilli, suggesting a chitinous original composition (Butterfield, 1990; Smith, 2014). This recalcitrant carbonaceous construction gives the sclerites a strong preservation potential in suitable taphonomic regimes, either as Burgess Shale-type macrofossils or as robust acid-extracted microfossils (Small Carbonaceous Fossils, see Butterfield & Harvey, 2012).

The distinctive shape and robust constitution of *Wiwaxia* sclerites has led to their recognition in a worldwide suite of deposits representing platform to outer shelf environments from Cambrian Series 2 to 3 (Fig. 1; Conway Morris, 1985; Butterfield, 1994; Zhao, Qian & Li, 1994; Ivantsov, Zhuravlev & Leguta, 2005; Fatka, Kraft & Szabad, 2011; Sun *et al.* 2014; Yang *et al.* 2014). Thus, although articulated specimens are only known from four sites (Conway Morris 1985; Zhao, Qian & Li, 1994; Sun *et al.* 2014; Yang *et al.* 2014; Conway Morris *et al.* in press), isolated sclerites extend the range of *Wiwaxia* to North America (Mount Cap, Stephen, Earlie, Pika and Spence formations; Matthew, 1899; Walcott, 1911; Conway Morris, 1985; Conway Morris & Robison, 1988; Butterfield, 1994; Harvey & Butterfield, 2011; Butterfield & Harvey, 2012), South China (Tsinghsutung and Kaili formations; Zhao, Qian & Li, 1994; Zhao *et al.* 1999; Harvey *et al.* 2012; Sun *et al.* 2014), Australia (Emu Bay Shale and Monastery Creek Formation; Porter, 2004), Siberia (Sinsk Formation; Ivantsov, Zhuravlev & Leguta, 2005) and the Czech Republic (Buchava Formation; Fatka, Kraft & Szabad, 2011). Nevertheless, *Wiwaxia* has not been reported from Chengjiang, even though this is among the richest and best sampled Cambrian Lagerstätten (Zhao *et al.* 2012, 2014) and has a broadly equivalent ecological and taxonomic composition to the Burgess Shale biota, where *Wiwaxia* is known from hundreds of specimens (Conway Morris, 1985; Smith, 2014). Here, we fill this surprising gap in *Wiwaxia*'s distribution with a report of associated sclerites from Chengjiang.

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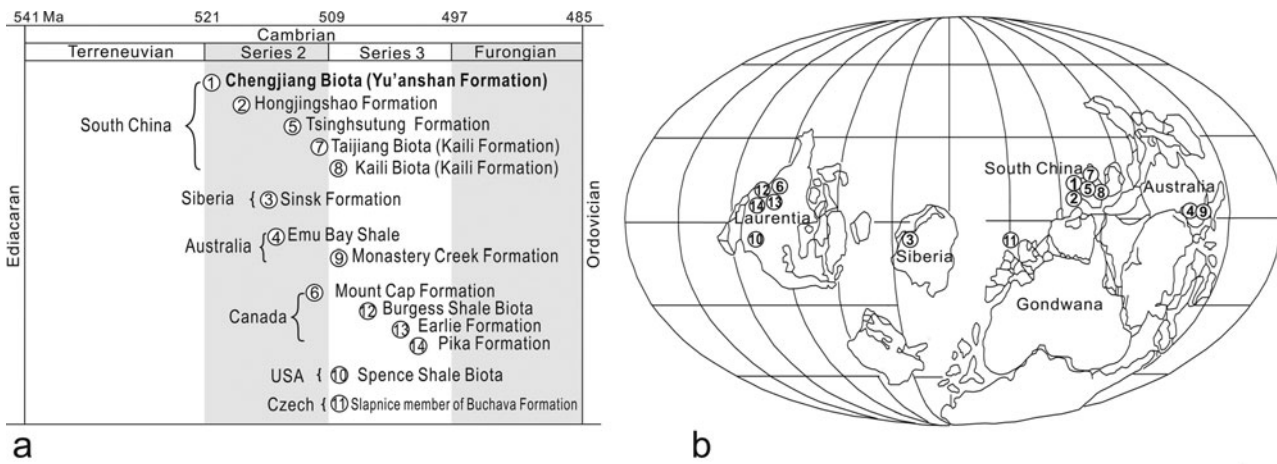


Figure 1. Distribution of *Wiwaxia*. (a) Stratigraphic distribution. (b) Palaeogeographic distribution (modified after McKerrow, Scotese & Brasier, 1992; Álvaro *et al.* 2003; Fatka, Kraft & Szabad, 2011). Numbers in (a) correspond to those plotted in (b).

2. Materials and methods

Our material was collected from the mudstone-dominated Maotianshan Shale Member of the Yu'anshan Formation, Cambrian Series 2, Stage 3, *Eoredlichia–Wudingaspis* Zone (Chen *et al.* 1996; Zhu *et al.* 2001), at the Mafang section, Haikou, Yunnan, SW China (24° 46' 20" N, 102° 35' 10" E). Detailed locality information and fossil taphofacies were presented by Zhao *et al.* (2009). The material was prepared using a blade and is deposited in the Nanjing Institute of Geology and Palaeontology, Chinese Academy of Sciences, China (NIGPAS). Photographs were taken under dark field illumination using a Zeiss Discovery V20 microscope system.

3. Description

The material consists of part and counterpart of a single slab of fine-grained mudstone (NIGPAS160801a/b) preserving compressions of four aligned bundles of sclerites on a single bedding surface (Fig. 2). It exhibits characteristic Chengjiang-type preservation (Zhu, Babcock & Steiner, 2005); its originally carbonaceous components are reflected by weathered aluminosilicate films associated with superficial iron oxides.

The sclerite bundles contain one to four sclerites of similar size, around 8 mm long and 0.8–1.6 mm wide; sclerites within a bundle are closely aligned such that their tips and bases are almost adjacent. Sclerites appear to vary in curvature and width between bundles, with the aspect ratio varying from 6:1 to approximately 10:1. This apparent variation may reflect differences in the obliquity of the sclerites' burial angle, or result from post-mortem deformation. Each sclerite proceeds from a narrow root to a gently curved blade that tapers to a pointed apex with an angle of ~ 20°. Longitudinal ribs adorn the blade, although these are difficult to distinguish from sclerite margins. Individual sclerites can only be discriminated by identifying their tips: four sclerites are evident in the first bundle, five in the second, one in the third and four in the fourth. These counts may represent underestimates; sclerites with occluded tips cannot be identified, and if additional sclerites exist, their margins are difficult to distinguish from ribs.

The identity of this material as *Wiwaxia* sclerites is indicated by the sclerites' outlines, longitudinal ribbing, smooth root and limited three-dimensional relief (indicating an originally robust carbonaceous composition). Their close

association indicates that they were linked by connective tissue (presumably decayed) when they were buried.

The parallel preservation of multiple bundles recalls a transverse row of sclerites (cf. Smith, 2014, fig. 5B). Under this interpretation, the four bundles correspond to the four zones of body sclerites. However, the absence of the fan-like splaying typically associated with non-ventral sclerites (e.g. Fig. 2e) militates against this interpretation, as does the extreme difference between the length:width ratios of the second and third bundles of sclerites (*c.* 8) and the smaller values in the non-ventral sclerites of *W. corrugata* (1.8 ± 0.5) and *W. foliosa* (1.82 ± 0.3) (Fig. 3a). (Detailed measurements from *W. herka* are not available.)

More promisingly, the fossil might correspond to iterated bundles of ventral sclerites. This interpretation accounts for the curvature present in all sclerites, the regular spacing of the four bundles and each bundle's limited splaying. The length:width ratio of each bundle fits the profile of the ventral sclerites of *W. corrugata* and (assuming a similar trend with increasing sclerite size) *W. foliosa* (Fig. 3b), the latter species being only currently known from diminutive (juvenile?) specimens. (Owing to oblique preservation, particularly in the first two sclerite bundles, measurements of sclerite width are likely underestimates.) We therefore interpret our material as an articulated series of ventral *Wiwaxia* sclerites of indeterminate species.

4. Discussion

This is the first report of *Wiwaxia* from the Chengjiang biota, representing the earliest record of the taxon and further expanding its broad geographical range. Its apparent absence from the Chengjiang deposits was a long-standing puzzle, particularly given its prominence in multiple Burgess Shale-type biotas throughout the Cambrian period and the relatively high preservation potential of *Wiwaxia* sclerites in Burgess Shale-type biotas (Butterfield & Harvey, 2012). Evolution, biostratigraphy and ecology had been cited to account for its absence (Butterfield, 2003). We can now show that *Wiwaxia* had evolved and was present in the Chengjiang region by the Cambrian Stage 3, adding it to a growing roster of species that were once considered endemic but are now recognized in both Lagerstätten: taxa such as *Primicaris* and *Misszhouia*, previously unique to Chengjiang, have recently been described in the Burgess Shale (Caron *et al.* 2014), whereas taxa such as *Nectocaris* have been identified in Chengjiang after being considered unique to the Burgess Shale (Smith, 2013).

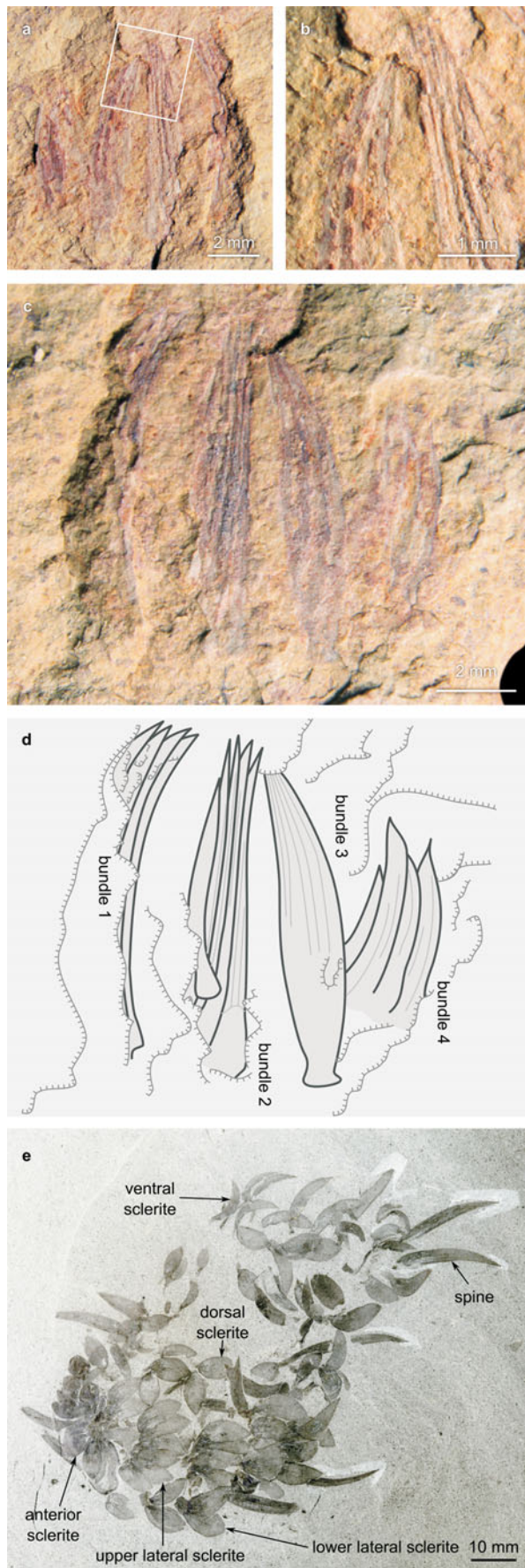


Figure 2. Sclerites of *Wiwaxia*. (a–d) from the lower Cambrian (Series 2, Stage 3) Maotianshan Shale Member, Yu'anshan Formation (*Eoredlichia*–*Wudingaspis* Zone) in the Mafang section, Haikou near Kunming, Yunnan Province; (e) from the

Wiwaxia nevertheless remains a rare component of the Chengjiang fauna – particularly in view of the *c.* 500 articulated specimens known from the Burgess Shale (Smith, 2014). Ecology and taphonomy account for this discrepancy; the Chengjiang deposits represent the relatively shallow-water settings of the continental platform (Zhang, Liu & Zhao, 2008), whereas the majority of Burgess Shale sites sample a basinal setting representing deeper waters off the platform edge (Caron *et al.* 2010, 2014). What is more, substantial differences characterize contemporary Burgess Shale communities that are separated by trivial spatial and stratigraphic distances (Caron *et al.* 2010, 2014), emphasizing the prominent role of local-scale factors in controlling community composition. As such, *Wiwaxia* represents a striking example of faunal continuity between these two Lagerstätten, despite distinct environmental settings, a time difference of some 15 million years and substantial geographic separation.

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middle Cambrian (Series 3, Stage 5) Burgess Shale. (a) Part (NIGPAS160801a). (b) Enlargement of boxed area, showing tips of constituent sclerites in bundle 2. (c) Counterpart (NIGPAS160801b). (d) Interpretative sketch of counterpart. (e) Semi-articulated scleritome from the Burgess Shale (Royal Ontario Museum 56965) illustrating variation in morphology between sclerite zones and splayed habit of upper lateral sclerite zone.

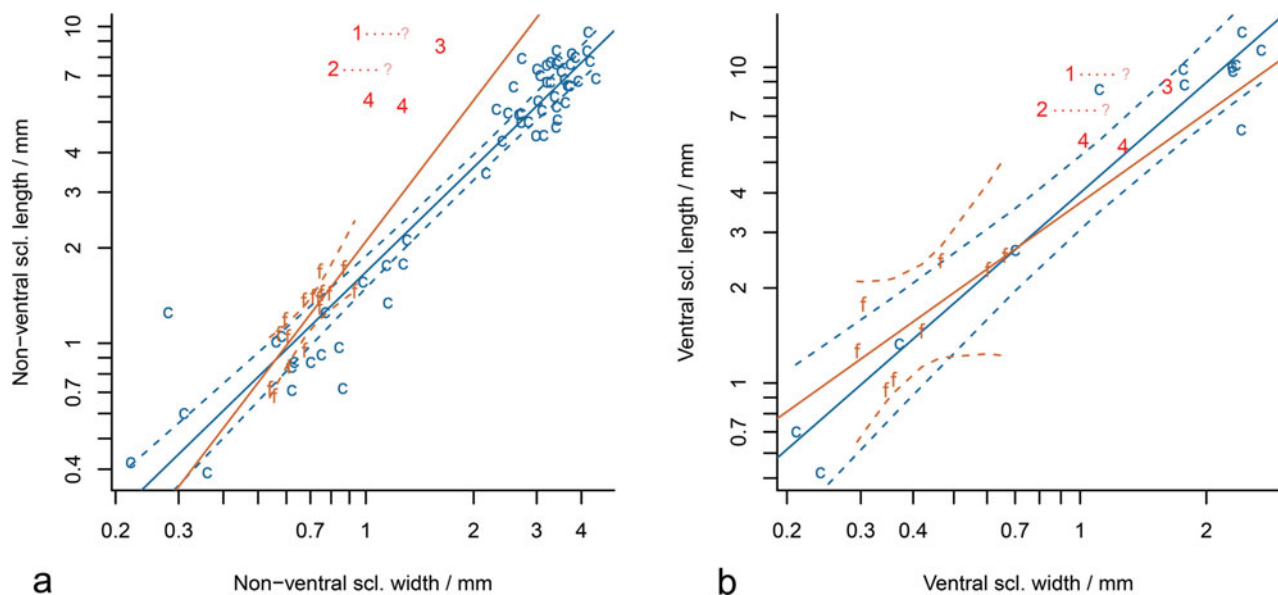


Figure 3. (Colour online) Comparison of sclerites from Chengjiang with those of other *Wiwaxia* species. Aspect ratio of sclerites in first (1), second (2), third (3) and fourth (4) sclerite bundles in NIGPAS160801 compared to non-ventral (panel a) and ventral (panel b) sclerites of *W. corrugata* (c, blue) and *W. foliosa* (f, orange). Width measurements from NIGPAS160801 may represent underestimates owing to oblique preservation (see text).

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