

What Came Before the Cambrian Explosion?

The Cambrian was an important era in the evolution of animal life. What came before that paved the way for new body forms to evolve? The geologic era immediately before was the Ediacaran. It lasted from about 635 to 542 million years ago. Scientists often characterize this era as an “experimental” phase in the evolution of animals.

By this time, unicellular life had been around for millions of years. A mat of microbes covered parts of the seafloor. The first multicellular animals that evolved could have grazed on those microbes. Fossils mostly show soft-bodied organisms. Some of these fossils look like blobs and are hard to identify. Others seem to be related to anemones. Still others might be soft-bodied relatives of animals like crabs. Some are trace fossils: rocks showing tracks of ancient worm movements. Many of the fossil animals remain mysterious. It's possible that those may be from lines of animals that no longer exist.

The name Ediacaran comes from the Ediacra Hills of South Australia, the most famous location of these fossils. Fossils from this era have been found in over 30 different sites worldwide. These puzzling fossils continue to give scientists a picture of the earth before the Cambrian.

Photos:

https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Cyclomedusa_cropped.jpg

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