

# Discovering the Oldest Strategies of Planetary Mycological Past with Fossil Fungi

Emma Charles\*

Department of Geology, College of Organic Petrology, University of Science, Levuka, Fiji

## DESCRIPTION

Fungi a kingdom comprising an astonishing diversity of organisms including yeasts, molds and mushrooms play a important role in ecological systems. These organisms decompose organic matter, form symbiotic relationships with plants and contribute to nutrient cycling. Fossil fungi the preserved remains of ancient fungal species, provide critical insights into the evolution of life on Earth and the historical dynamics of ecosystems. Fungi are integral to terrestrial ecosystems primarily as decomposers. Understanding their evolution through fossil evidence helps us comprehend how modern ecosystems developed. Fossil fungi also shed light on past climatic conditions, plant-fungal interactions and the evolutionary timeline of eukaryotic life. Fungal fossils are widely difficult to find and study due to the typically soft and perishable nature of fungal bodies.

### Early fossil records

Despite these challenges some remarkable discoveries have been made. The oldest known fungal fossils date back to the Proterozoic Eon, around 1,000 million years ago. These ancient fossils discovered in shallow marine environments, suggest that fungi were among the earliest colonizers of terrestrial habitats.

One of the most significant early discoveries is the microfossil Tappania, found in 1.5-billion-year-old rock formations in China and Australia. Tappania displays characteristics consistent with modern fungi such as filamentous structures and possible spore production indicating that fungi were well-established long before the appearance of complex plants and animals.

### The Devonian explosion

The Devonian period approximately 419 to 359 million years ago was a transformative era for fungi. During this time the terrestrial landscape was dominated by vast forests and fungi played a critical role in decomposing plant material and forming symbiotic relationships with early vascular plants.

One of the most remarkable Devonian fungi is *Prototaxites*. This enigmatic organism which reached heights of up to 8 meters was

initially thought to be a giant alga or a tree. However, detailed analysis revealed its fungal nature. *Prototaxites* provides a glimpse into the diverse and complex ecosystems of the Devonian period highlighting the significant role of fungi in early terrestrial environments.

Another important Devonian fossil is *Mycokidstonia* a genus of fungi associated with the roots of early land plants. The discovery of *Mycokidstonia* fossils alongside fossilized plant roots suggests a symbiotic relationship similar to modern mycorrhizal associations where fungi aid plants in nutrient absorption in exchange for carbohydrates.

### The carboniferous and permian periods

The Carboniferous period (approximately 359 to 299 million years ago) witnessed extensive coal formation due to the proliferation of vast swampy forests. Fungi were important in decomposing plant material although their activity was somewhat limited by the high water content and anaerobic conditions of coal-forming swamps. Fossil evidence from this period includes saprophytic fungi that broke down plant debris contributing to soil formation and nutrient cycling.

In the Permian period (approximately 299 to 252 million years ago) the diversification of fungi continued. Fossil fungi from this era such as *Palaeogaster* provide insights into the adaptations and ecological roles of fungi during a time of significant environmental change. The Permian period ended with the largest mass extinction event in Earth's history which had deep effects on fungal communities and their interactions with other organisms.

### Mesozoic and Cenozoic eras

The Mesozoic era (approximately 252 to 66 million years ago) saw the rise of dinosaurs and the breakup of the supercontinent Pangaea. Fungal fossils from this era such as Ascomycetes and Basidiomycetes show the continued diversification of fungal lineages. Amber fossils from the Cretaceous period in particular have provided well-preserved specimens of ancient fungi including parasitic fungi that infected insects and plant-associated fungi.

**Correspondence to:** Emma Charles, Department of Geology, College of Organic Petrology, University of Science, Levuka, Fiji, E-mail: charlese1@organicgeology.csu.fj

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The Cenozoic era beginning around 66 million years ago and continuing to the present has yielded a rich fossil record of fungi. Amber from this period has preserved fungal spores, hyphae and fruiting bodies in exquisite detail. These fossils offer valuable information on the evolution of fungal diversity and the co-evolution of fungi with plants and animals.

### Technological advances in fossil fungi research

Recent advancements in technology have revolutionized the study of fossil fungi. Techniques such as Scanning Electron Microscopy (SEM) and molecular analysis have enabled researchers to examine the fine structures of fungal fossils and compare them with modern counterparts. Additionally Synchrotron Radiation X-Ray Tomographic Microscopy (SRXTM) has allowed for non-destructive 3D imaging of fungal fossils providing before insights into their morphology and development.

### CONCLUSION

The study of fossil fungi offers a rare window into the deep past revealing the important roles these organisms have played

throughout Earth's history. From the ancient Proterozoic microfossils to the towering Devonian Prototaxites and the rich amber-preserved fungi of the Mesozoic and Cenozoic eras, fossil evidence demonstrates the deep impact fungi have had on ecological and evolutionary processes. These ancient fungi were among the first to colonize land forming symbiotic relationships with early plants contributing to nutrient cycling and aiding in the decomposition of organic matter. Technological advancements have enhanced our ability to study these fossils providing detailed insights into their morphology and evolutionary adaptations. As study progresses the continued exploration of fossil fungi potential to deepen our understanding of their evolutionary study and their enduring influence on the biosphere. Through this exploration we not only uncover the history of fungi but also gain valuable perspectives on the broader narrative of life on Earth.