Conflicting developmental and paleontological data: the case of the bird manus

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Phylogenetic inference is based on the distribution of characters across taxa. Characters and their states should be described in all of their complexity. The entire development of a structure should be considered to determine its significance in the search for homology and synapomorphy and for the determination of homoplasy. Simplistic description of characters often leads to comparisons of homoplasies. The pattern of development of the manus of living amniotes demonstrates a basic plan that has been retained in living birds but has been modified in theropod dinosaurs. The primitive pattern of digital and metacarpal reduction in buds (2-3-4) and other living amniotes is contrasted with manus reduction pattern of the theropods (1-2-3) based on comparative morphology. Neither digital pattern reduction is derivable from the other. The recent discovery of early dinosaurs with primitive stages of the derived reduction patterns indicates an earlier origin for buds than previously postulated. This study demonstrates the use of developmental data in distinguishing homologous structures from homoplastic structures which is important in cladistic analysis.

Key words: homology, homoplasy, amniote manus, avian manus, theropod manus, digital reduction pattern.

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Introduction

The basic data of phylogenetic inference are characters and taxa, and the distribution of the former across the latter. In most paleontological material characters are effectively fixed, because they are usually preserved in the adult condition, whereas in living taxa the ontogenetic pattern or 'the ontogenetic trajectory' (Alberch et al. 1979) is available for study. In the comparison of living and fossil groups, developmental data can be inferred based on relationships with extant forms. Furthermore, developmental data are derived from living crown groups in which ontogenetic patterns
may have been modified during their phylogeny from the ancestral ontogenetic trajectory (Alberch et al. 1979). The tracing of the history of developmental trajectories can be inferred by study of the distribution of these characters (ontogenetic trajectories) across taxa on a cladogram or a phylogeny.

A case in point is the numbering convention of the digits of bird manus by paleontologists and by developmental biologists. These two groups of investigators have differed in their interpretation for at least one hundred years. Owen (1836) identified the bird digits as 2-3-4, Parker (1888) numbered them 1-2-3. Since that time developmental biologists have numbered the digits as 2-3-4 and paleontologists as 1-2-3 (Hinchliffe & Hecht 1984). The disagreement resolves itself to a question of whether the similarity in the number of digits between birds and other reptilian groups is a synapomorphic feature or a case of homoplasy.

The neontological debate on the homologies of the digital developmental trajectories has been ignored by most paleontologists (Padian 1992, Weishampel et al. 1990). Recently however, Clark (1992) in his review of the paleornithological section of a symposium on controversies in tetrapod evolution (Schultze & Trueb 1991), pointed out the general failure of the participants in considering the digital data. Clark (1992: p. 534) stated: "The only substantive problem with the theropod-bird hypothesis remains the discrepancy between the homology of the digits of the manus as indicated by the fossils and the development of extant birds (Hinchliffe 1985), something touched upon, but not elucidated..." by the participants (Martin 1991; Ostrom 1991; Tarsitano 1991; Witmer 1991). It is important to note that Clark (1992) is a supporter of the theropod-bird relationship hypothesis. The discrepancy has been the basis of previous reconsiderations of this problem (Tarsitano & Hecht 1980; Hinchliffe & Hecht 1984; Hinchliffe 1985; Thulborn & Hamley 1982). New data on dinosauroomorph diversity (Sereno & Novas 1992) require reconsideration of the two interpretations 1-2-3 or 2-3-4 digital homologies, since one pattern can not be directly derived from the other.

The morphological data

The classic paleobiological interpretation can be illustrated by Romer's treatment (1956, 1966). He used early reptiles as an archetype for the primitive reptilian carpus and manus in which the reptilian digital (Roman letters) and phalangeal formula (numerals) is:

\[(I)_2-(II)_3-(III)_4-(IV)_5-(V)_3\]

(with the postaxial side marked by the presence of the pisiform and metacarpal 5). Thus he oriented his numbering of the digits of Archaeopteryx to fit the archetypal number of phalanges. Since he considered Archaeopteryx as the most primitive known bird, to him the homologies were clear. The only paleontological studies which have not accepted these homologies are Tarsitano & Hecht (1980) and Thulborn &
Hamley (1982). The former accepted the embryological interpretation (2-3-4) which required the loss of a single phalanx from each digit of Archaeopteryx. This observation oriented Tarsitano & Hecht’s entire analysis. The latter, Thulborn, & Hamley (1982) requires new homologies for the theropodan manus for which there is no evidence. Most paleontologists have followed the 1-2-3 digital convention.

The developmental data

The 2-3-4 digital convention has been followed by developmental anatomists since the beginning of this century, and had been reinforced by the work of Montagna (1945) and Holmgren (1955). These two authors based their interpretations on tetrapod archetypes of the manus, which required finding the number of carpal blastema elements of a hypothetical primitive tetrapod in the chick and other amniotes. These older observations have since been disputed by Hinchliffe (1985, 1989a, b, 1991). Using radiographic techniques he demonstrated that the primitive carpal elements have been lost or fused independently early in the history of the lissamphibians and amniote lineages, and that earlier interpretations were in error. Despite these earlier errors, however, interpretation of the pattern of digital development has remained stable. The views of Holmgren and Montagna were primarily Haeckelian based on strict recapitulation without consideration that crown groups have evolved from their primitive condition by modifying their ontogenetic trajectories.

Modern evidence and interpretation of metacarpal and digital development has been reviewed by Hinchliffe & Hecht (1984) and Hinchliffe (1985). These reviews have concluded that the development of extant birds supports the 2-3-4 pattern of digital and metacarpal homologies. Furthermore, the developmental sequence of the appearance of the digits that is characteristic of the chick has been found in five orders of birds examined (Hinchliffe & Hecht 1984) and therefore should be considered plesiomorphic for extant birds. Despite these ontogenetic findings, the century-old dichotomy of interpretation of the homology of the digits of birds persists.

The amniote pattern of digital development of the manus

Recent studies on developmental programs of the basic pattern of limb development allow for the development of a general groundplan (or bau-plan) for the tetrapod limb without a Haeckelian backdrop (Shubin 1991). Chondrogenesis of the metacarpals and digits, with its accompanying developmental processes (condensation, segmentation, fusion of elements and the digital arch), accounts for known morphology diversity of the manus, but at the same time retains a general pattern for almost all amniotes (Shubin & Alberch 1986; Burke & Alberch 1985; Muller 1991,
Hinchliffe 1989b; Shubin 1991). The development of metacarpals and digits is constrained and apparently determined by the digital arch of the developing manus (Shubin & Alberch 1986).

The general reduction and associated morphological changes of tetrapod limbs and digits was summarized by Lande (1978) and described in lizards by Raynaud (1985). In most amniotes the general order of reduction of metacarpals and digits (5→1→2→3→4) is the reverse of the sequence of the appearance of metacarpals and digits (4→3→2→1→5). The last digital elements formed are usually the first elements lost in digital reduction (Greer 1991; Raynaud 1985). The late development of the fifth and first digit is characteristic of most amniotes and is known in chelonians (Burke & Alberch 1985), crocodilians (Muller & Alberch 1990), lizards (Greer 1991), birds (Hinchliffe 1985) and in virtually all mammals (Holder 1983; Shubin & Alberch 1986). This basic tetrapod pattern of the digital arch in the manus is found in frogs and modified in the urodeles (Shubin and Alberch 1986; Oster et al. 1988). The distribution among living amniotes of the developmental or reductional sequence of the manus indicates that the program is primitive or plesiomorphic in the amniotes.

One of the arguments for the relationship of birds to the crocodylomorph clade has been the retention by the latter of the amniote digital and metacarpal chondrogenic program (Muller & Alberch 1990). The pattern of development revealed by their study of the Alligator forelimb was interpreted as being primitive for the Archosauria.

**The theropod digital pattern**

In the recent review of the Dinosauria (Weishampel et al. 1990) all the contributors identified the digits of theropods using a numbering system indicating a reduction program starting on the postaxial side (5-4-3-2-1). Within this clade there are varying degrees of reduction in the manus from the loss of a single digit to the loss of four digits. Assuming this interpretation is correct, this pattern of reduction is unique in the Amniota and could therefore be regarded as a synapomorphy for the Theropoda. Across the component theropodan taxa there are many examples of parallel reduction sequences.

Recognition of this reduction pattern is based on comparative morphology. Thulborn & Hamley (1982) regarded the reduction pattern in this clade was a typical amniote pattern and thought it matched the bird pattern. Further criticism of the conflict in digital homologies was expressed by Ostrom (1985), who stated that there can be no comparison of the homologies of the theropod and bird manus because there is no ontogenetic data for theropods. His criticism overlooks the morphological series within the Theropoda (which supports his 1-2-3 hypothesis) and the primitive chondrogenic pattern common to all living amniotes (Hinchliffe 1989a, b; Shubin 1991; Muller 1991).
Benton (1990) and Sues (1990) in a summary of the classification and phylogeny showed that the Herrerasauridae represents a basal sister group to most of the Saurischia if not to the Theropoda. Sereno & Novas (1993) with new material of the Triassic Herrerasaurus illustrate the complete manus with well-developed first, second and third digits and metacarpals but with reduced fourth and fifth digits and their metacarpals. In a cladogram Sereno et al. (1993) place the Herrerasauridae as basal to the Theropoda.

These new data, the reduction of the fourth and fifth digits and fifth metacarpal, demonstrate that the reduction pattern in the Theropoda is much older than previously thought. Herrerasaurus, either as a basal dinosaurotomorph or theropod, illustrates an adult morphology unique to amniotes. It is evident that to arrive at this adult morphology the reduction sequence from the postaxial side is required and not the primitive amniote reduction pattern. In cladistic terms the digital reduction pattern could be coded as either the primitive amniote pattern (developmental bauplan of Shubin 1991) or the derived theropod pattern [with reduction starting from the postaxial side]. Stated in such terms it is apparent that the theropod condition is unique in the evolution of the amniote manus.

The phyletic significance of the reduction pattern of the bird manus

The relationship of birds to dinosaurs was originally espoused by Huxley (1870) and advocated by Ostrom (1976, 1985). Gauthier (1986) has listed a series of synapomorphies, minimally ten, which unite birds with the theropod lineage. Among these synapomorphies is the reduction sequence of the metacarpals and digits. As a result of this inclusion of the birds and Archaeopteryx within the theropod clade, the digits must be renumbered in order to remain a synapomorphy and contrary to the developmental data.

There are several hypotheses of the distribution of the metacarpal and digital reduction pattern ascribed to birds; they are:

1. Crocodylomorph affinity of birds (Martin 1985, 1991; Tarsitano 1991);
2. Dinosaurotomorph affinity of birds (Ostrom 1991; Witmer 1991; Weishampel et al. 1990; Gauthier & Padian 1985);
   2A. Ostrom's interpretation of Archaeopteryx as a bird with digits 1-2-3;
   2B. Archaeopteryx as a theropod (Gauthier 1986) and modern birds as surviving theropods;
   2C. Birds including Archaeopteryx, as a sister group to the Saurischia or the Theropoda in particular;
   2D. Alternatively, a mutational (or possibly epigenetic or heterochronic) change took place in development within the early history of the avian clade causing a reversal to the primitive program.
**Hypothesis 1.** — There is no conflict between the chondrogenic developmental program of crocodylians and the developmental pattern of birds. The similarity of chondrogenic pattern may simply be a synaplesiomorphy and not an indicator of relationships. Furthermore, this hypothesis of relationships requires complex functional transformations and many parallelisms to dinosauromorph taxa. This hypothesis implies a large gap in the fossil record and perhaps saltational steps.

**Hypothesis 2.** — Many similarities in locomotor adaptations which can be used as synapomorphies for monophyly of birds and theropods require the use of many reversal or loss state synapomorphies. There are many variants or subhypotheses of this basic hypothesis. These subhypotheses require that birds are characterized by a derived developmental theropodal pattern [metacarpals and digits] in contrast to the developmental data available for living birds. These subhypotheses may be compared with a cladogram (Fig. 1) modified from Sereno *et al.* (1993).

**Hypothesis 2A.** — If Archaeopteryx is a bird (Aves) this hypothesis would require reidentification of the metacarpals and digits of Archaeopteryx in the primitive amniote pattern. It would also require an earlier origin for the Archaeopteryx lineage as a basal bird as suggested by Elzanowski & Wellnhofer (1993). The hypothesis of Ostrom (1976, 1985, 1990) requires modification in order to incorporate the primitive amniote bauplan of digital and metacarpal reduction as a bird character.

**Hypothesis 2B.** — This hypothesis reduces the number of convergences between theropods and birds but implies that all developmental data on the manus of modern birds are incorrect. Furthermore, if Bryant and Russell (1993) are correct then the furcula was redeveloped in the bird lineage as is indicated by its presence in Archaeopteryx. Muller & Streicher (1989) provide developmental data on the reduction and fusion of elements of the hindlimb of birds. They compared this developmental process in the bird hind limb as evidence for theropod relationship, but stated that such simple patterns have often been demonstrated to have developed in parallel in related lineages (Hecht 1983, 1985) because of developmental constraints.

**Hypothesis 2C.** — This hypothesis requires that the bird lineage [including Archaeopteryx] diverged from the saurischian base prior to the origin of the theropods and the developmental switch to a new manus reduction program (dotted lines Fig. 1). Therefore other morphological similarities to the theropods are homoplasies or primitive states. This hypothesis requires the retention of the furcula [as clavicles] in birds as a primitive state or possibly as a neomorph (Bryant & Russell 1993). If this hypothesis is accepted, then birds diverged from the Theropoda in the early Triassic predating Chatterjee’s (1991) disputed Protoavis.

**Hypothesis 2D.** — This hypothesis, reversal from the derived condition of theropods to the primitive condition of birds, requires modification of the 'developmental bauplan' (Shubin 1991) of the amniotes. It has been suggested that a shift of the central developmental axis from the fourth
Fig. 1. Cladogram of postulated relationships of dinosaur groups and birds. Solid lines following Sereno et al. (1993). Dotted lines are postulated relationships of birds. Dotted lines [on left] represent relationships based on 1-2-3 hypothesis. Dotted lines [on right] represent relationships based on the 2-3-4 hypothesis. 1 - minimal age of origin of the derived digital reduction pattern.

digit (see Shubin 1991: Fig. 2b) to the third digit could accomplish this reversal. This proposed change simplifies the difference in the reduction patterns of these two groups because it omits the symmetry of metacarpal and digital loss in amniotes. The wide taxic distribution of the developmental bauplan and its reduction pattern among the living amniote groups is certainly an argument for stability of the system. Developmental processes are constrained (Alberch et al. 1979; Shubin & Alberch 1986) as demonstrated by the amniote chondrogenic pattern (Hinchliffe 1989a, b). The theropod condition having evolved once, would need a mutational event affecting symmetry and central axis to reverse the process. In such a complex process as development of the manus it is highly improbable that a program could be altered with all evidences of prior history erased.

**Conclusions**

The above discussion is a study in the interpretation of characters and of different classes of characters. The use of a simplified character description, such as three digits, conceals the complexity of character development. The description of a character should be considered within its entire ontogenetic trajectory within taxa and compared across taxa. By comparing the ontogenetic trajectories of characters across taxa as synapomorphies in corroborated cladograms, it is possible to determine primitive states and patterns of polarity.

The relationships of birds, an often discussed problem, is further complicated by the similarity of the developmental bauplan of the amniote
manus. In order to relate birds to the saurischian or theropod clade, it is necessary to deny the reductive amniote sequence which has been inferred from many studies on the development of the manus of modern birds. A hypothesis of bird-crocodileomorph relationships implies only the retention of a primitive amniote developmental bauplan – a primitive state.

If one accepts the derived theropod developmental program [determined from morphology] as a synapomorphy supporting theropod monophyly, one can approach the solution to the bird relationship problem. The fossil record requires this reduction developmental program to have evolved by the early Triassic as indicated in *Herrerasaurus*. This discovery requires birds, retaining the primitive amniote bauplan, to have diverged from the clade earlier than the origin of the hypothesized development program for the theropod manus. Therefore the many other similarities between theropods and birds may be a mix of plesiomorphies and homoplasies.

In this analysis it appears that the developmental program of the manus has been heavily weighted. The validity of this criticism depends as to whether the developmental program is considered a very complex set of characters or a simple character of little phylogenetic weight. The time of origin and homologies of the manus are important to further research in developmental evolutionary biology. In our opinion the new data from paleontology and developmental biology require a reanalysis of all putative theropod-avian synapomorphies. The theropod-bird relationships have not been satisfactorily established to the exclusion of alternative hypotheses until the contradicting ontogenetic data for the bird manus is considered. As in all phylogenetic inference more corroborative data are needed to test hypotheses.

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References


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**Streszczenie**

Wyprowadzony z danych embriologicznych styl redukcji metakarpalitów w skrzydle ptaków (2-3-4) jest odmienny od udokumentowanego paleontologicznie stylu redukcji dłoni teropodów (1-2-3). Jeśli uznać zasadność tej rozbieżności ptaki wyodrębniły się z gałęzi ewolucyjnej dinozaurów przed powstaniem teropodów.