COMMENTARY



Open Access

Anaerobic animals from an ancient, anoxic ecological niche

Marek Mentel¹, William Martin^{2*}

Abstract

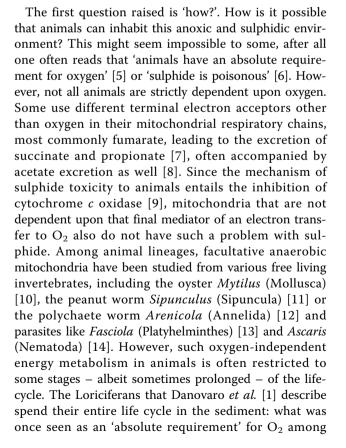
Tiny marine animals that complete their life cycle in the total absence of light and oxygen are reported by Roberto Danovaro and colleagues in this issue of *BMC Biology*. These fascinating animals are new members of the phylum Loricifera and possess mitochondria that in electron micrographs look very much like hydrogenosomes, the H₂-producing mitochondria found among several unicellular eukaryotic lineages. The discovery of metazoan life in a permanently anoxic and sulphidic environment provides a glimpse of what a good part of Earth's past ecology might have been like in 'Canfield oceans', before the rise of deep marine oxygen levels and the appearance of the first large animals in the fossil record roughly 550-600 million years ago. The findings underscore the evolutionary significance of anaerobic deep sea environments and the anaerobic lifestyle among mitochondrion-bearing cells. They also testify that a fuller understanding of eukaryotic and metazoan evolution will come from the study of modern anoxic and hypoxic habitats.

Commentary

The newly reported tiny marine animals that complete their life cycle in the total absence of light and oxygen are members of the phylum Loricifera, a phylum discovered less than 30 years ago, and they are less than a millimetre in size [1]. They were collected from a deep basin at the bottom of the Mediterranean Sea, where they inhabit a nearly salt-saturated brine that, because of its density (>1.2 g/cm^3), does not mix with the waters above. As a consequence, this environment is completely anoxic and, due to the activity of sulphate reducers, contains sulphide at a concentration of 2.9 mM. Despite such harsh conditions, this anoxic and sulphidic environment is teeming with microbial life, both chemosynthetic prokaryotes that are primary producers [2], and a broad diversity of eukaryotic heterotrophs at the next trophic level [3,4]. That this ecological niche also supports animals is a surprise that poses all sorts of interesting questions. Despite being unexpected, however, the finding ties together recent developments from several independent fields (marine biology, cell biology, evolutionary theory and geochemistry) that all point to the evolutionary significance of eukaryotic life in anaerobic environments.

* Correspondence: w.martin@uni-duesseldorf.de

²Institute of Botany III, University of Düsseldorf, 40225 Düsseldorf, Germany





© 2010 Mentel and Martin; licensee BioMed Central Ltd. This is an Open Access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution License (http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/2.0), which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited.

animals should now be seen as a lineage-specific preference, albeit it one that is very pronounced, especially among those animals that, like ourselves, live on land, permanently above the soil line.

Anaerobic mitochondria: more common all the time

A look at the phylogenetic distribution of characterized anaerobic mitochondria among animal lineages shows that these are not clustered but spread across metazoan phylogeny (Figure 1). Are these recent adaptations to anaerobic habitats or are they holdovers from our more distant evolutionary past? The biochemistry and the enzyme equipment used in the facultatively anaerobic mitochondria of metazoans is nearly identical across lineages [7,10-15], strongly indicating a common origin from the metazoan ancestor that might have lived some 600 million years (MY) ago [16]. The examples in Figure 1 cover both the Lophotrochozoa and the Ecdysozoa, where the newly-described Loricifera with their distinctive organelles belong. Although no biochemical data are yet available for these intriguing new Loriciferan mitochondria, from the electron micrographs presented by Danovaro *et al.* [1] the organelles look like hydrogenosomes - anaerobic forms of mitochondria that generate H₂ and adenosine triphosphate (ATP) from pyruvate oxidation [17] and which were previously found only in unicellular eukaryotes. Danovaro et al. [1] also report that the animals harbour structures resembling prokaryotic endosymbionts, reminiscent of the methanogenic endosymbionts found in some hydrogenosome-bearing protists; fluorescence of F_{420} , a typical methanogen cofactor [18], or lack thereof, will bring more insights as to what these structures are.

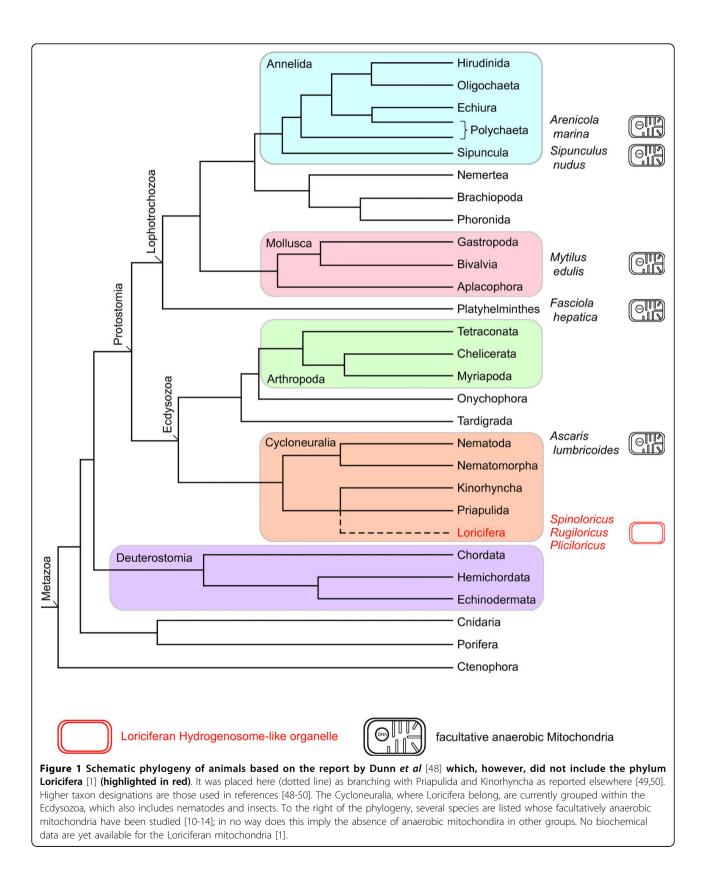
If we follow the anaerobic lifestyle further back into evolutionary history (Figure 2), beyond the origin of the metazoans, we see that the phylogenetic distribution of eukaryotes with facultative anaerobic mitochondria, eukaryotes with hydrogenosomes and eukaryotes that possess mitosomes (reduced forms of mitochondria with no direct role in ATP synthesis [19]) shows a similar picture to that seen for animals. In all six of the major lineages (or supergroups) of eukaryotes that are currently recognized [20], forms with anaerobic mitochondria have been found [21]. The newest additions to the growing collection of anaerobic mitochondrial metabolisms are the denitrifying foraminiferans [22,23]. For this group, the underlying enzymes also have yet to be worked out. However, for the remainder of the eukaryotes summarized in Figure 2, a handful of about a dozen enzymes make the difference between a 'normal' (in the sense of 'familiar from older college textbooks') O₂-respiring mitochondrion found in mammals, and the energy metabolism of eukaryotes with anaerobic mitochondria, hydrogenosomes or mitosomes [7,19,21,24].

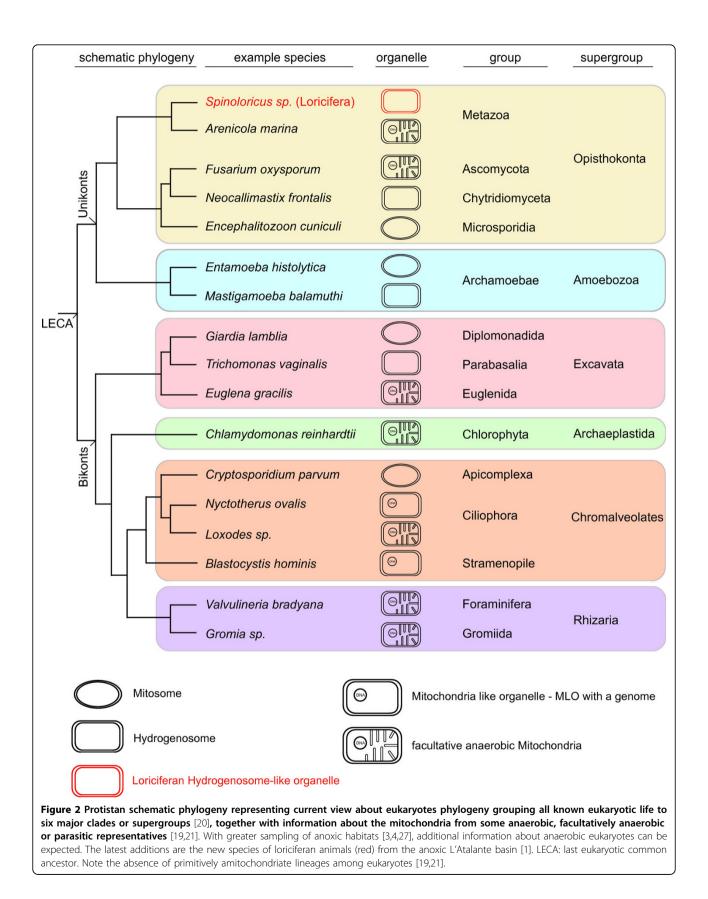
Notably, the full complement of those enzymes, once thought to be specific to eukaryotic anaerobes, surprisingly turned up in the green alga *Chlamydomonas reinhardtii* [24], which produces O_2 in the light, has typical O_2 -respiring mitochondria but, within about 30 min of exposure to heterotrophic, anoxic and dark conditions, expresses its anaerobic biochemistry to make H₂ [25,26] in the same way as trichomonads, the group in which hydrogenosomes were discovered [17]. Thus, *Chlamydomonas* provides evidence which indicates that the ability to inhabit oxygen-harbouring, as well as anoxic environments, is an ancestral feature of eukaryotes and their mitochondria; in that sense it is a true missing link that unites mitochondria like our own and those from the anoxic world [19].

It is not yet known what role, if any, the mitochondria of the newly discovered loriciferans play in the energy metabolism of those animals and, unfortunately, the same is true for the myriad of fascinating eukaryotic protists that inhabit the very same environment where the anoxic loriciferans were found. In a series of recent papers, Stoeck and colleagues have surveyed the protistan diversity from L'Atalante and similar habitats with environmental sequencing and metagenomic techniques [3,4,27]. Those reports lead to a wealth of representatives from many of the same groups shown in Figure 2 being uncovered: ciliates, fungi and chromalveolates, in addition to representatives of many other eukaryotic groups, including the choanoflagellates [3], which are regarded as the unicellular sisters to the metazoan clade. The investigation of anaerobic mitochondria remains an area of rapid progress and it will be a challenge to discover what those mitochondria are doing in real-life anoxic and hypoxic environments, which are very widespread among modern habitats [28] and where eukaryotic anaerobes abound [27].

Evolutionary significance?

What is the evolutionary significance of the new findings? The L'Atalante basin has been anoxic for only about 50,000 years [1] but have all of its microbial and metazoan inhabitants only recently adapted to life in anoxic conditions during that time? Hardly. Nobody seriously considers that anaerobic prokaryotes dwelling in such anaerobic habitats, such as methanogens and sulphate reducers, have only recently adapted to anaerobic niches. The prokaryote inhabitants have existed for well over a billion years, and have reached this new habitat by dispersal, not by adaptive evolution de novo and in situ. Indeed, geochemical evidence has shown that methanogenesis and sulphate reduction, and the niches in which they occur, are truly ancient [29,30]. (For marine environments, dispersal is not a fundamental problem because, despite vast distances, similar types of





seafloor habitats often harbour similar communities, from microbes to large animals [31]). However, when it comes to eukaryotes, there is still a curious tendency to assume that eukaryotes only invaded anaerobic niches of late. Perhaps this stems from a tendency (latently anthropocentric, no doubt) to view mitochondria as obligately O₂-dependent organelles with the anaerobic forms of mitochondria being rare exceptions, even though the data (for example in Figures 1 and 2 or elsewhere [7,8,17,19,21]) tell us otherwise. In environments such as the L'Atalante basin, 'normal', O2-dependent mitochondria are the rare exception, if they exist at all, but eukaryotes abound [1,3,4,32,33]. Hence, further study of mitochondria from such environments should be revealing. That, however, is easier said than done, since, as seen in the present study [1] as in other work on organisms from anoxic marine sediments [32], a considerable effort has to be invested in order just to demonstrate that the organisms are even alive and not just sunken carcasses. Work on organisms from these environments poses substantial technical challenges, making every new insight all the more exciting.

While Danovaro *et al.* opt for the term 'enigmatic' in discussing the evolutionary significance of their findings, we have a decidedly different view. Given that anaerobic forms of mitochondria are widespread throughout the eukaryotic world, we see eukaryotes in anaerobic habitats as evidence for evolution in the Darwinian sense of descent with modification, with the traits that support survival in anaerobic environments having been conserved from earlier phases of Earth's history. This view is underpinned by what geologists and geochemists have been trying to tell biologists over the last 10 years about the prevalence of anoxic and sulphidic environments during the early phase of eukaryotic and metazoan evolution, but with the biologists perhaps not taking as much notice as they should.

The bigger picture: add geological time

What are the geologists trying to tell us about anoxic and sulphidic marine habitats? A readable summary of about 10 year's progress is given in three papers [34-36]. In a nutshell, the geologists are saying that the rise in atmospheric oxygen some 2.4 billion years ago is one thing, but that the oxygen levels in the ocean, where evolution was taking place, is quite another. Several lines of isotope evidence indicate that deep ocean waters were not fully oxygenated until about 580 MY ago, about the time when the first large animals made their fossil debut. The reason for this anoxia, they say, has to do with high levels of sulphide in marine environments, from the workings of sulphate reducers [36], themselves strict anaerobes. The message for biologists is that the Earth's oceans appear to have been largely anoxic and sulphidic (like the L'Atalante basin, but not hypersaline) below the photic zone (the upper about 200 m) [34,36] and, possibly, also in the lower photic zone [35] for the time spanning roughly 1.8 billion years ago to about the beginning of the Cambrian period 560 MY ago. That was the time during which eukaryotes arose and diversified [21]. Hence, it should hardly be surprising that the anaerobic lifestyle is widespread among eukaryotic lineages, right up into the animals [37]. One view is that the oxygenation of deep environments allowed the animals to become larger [38], which is different from saying that oxygen might in any way be causal to the Cambrian appearance of diverse animal forms [39]. Geologists have not been trying to hide their perspective from us biologists [40-42], nor have we biologists been trying to hide our progress in understanding eukaryotic anaerobes [21,43-46]. However, it seems that it will still take some time for a new default view of deep marine environments in the Late Precambrian - a new synthesis of sorts - to be accepted by biologists. The scenario is one of widespread anoxic and sulphidic habitats, almost certainly (in our view) teeming with little eukaryotic creatures, all with their mitochondria well suited to life with little or no oxygen [37] and all more or less like the ones we see in anoxic and sulphidic environments today. Such environments staged and witnessed the origin of evolution's greatest early inventions [47] and the new insights emerging from them deserve our close attention.

Abbreviations

ATP: adenosine triphosphate; MY: million years.

Acknowledgements

MM and WM thank the Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft (DFG) and WM is grateful to the European 'Research Council (ERC) for their financial support.

Author details

¹Department of Biochemistry, Faculty of Natural Sciences, Comenius University, Mlynská dolina CH-1, 842 15 Bratislava, Slovakia. ²Institute of Botany III, University of Düsseldorf, 40225 Düsseldorf, Germany.

Received: 16 March 2010 Accepted: 6 April 2010 Published: 6 April 2010

References

- Danovaro R, Dell' Anno A, Pusceddu A, Gambi C, Heiner I, Kristensen RM: The first metazoa living in permanently anoxic coditions. *BMC Biology* 2010, 8:30.
- Yakimov MM, La Cono V, Denaro R, D'Auria G, Decembrini F, Timmis KN, Golyshin PN, Giuliano L: Primary producing prokaryotic communities of brine, interface and seawater above the halocline of deep anoxic lake L'Atalante, Eastern Mediterranean Sea. *ISME J* 2007, 1:743-755.
- Alexander E, Stock A, Breiner HW, Behnke A, Bunge J, Yakimov MM, Stoeck T: Microbial eukaryotes in the hypersaline anoxic L'Atalante deepsea basin. Environmental Microbiol 2009, 11:360-381.
- Edgcomb V, Orsi W, Leslin C, Epstein SS, Bunge J, Jeon S, Yakimov MM, Behnke A, Stoeck T: Protistan community patterns within the brine and halocline of deep hypersaline anoxic basins in the eastern Mediterranean Sea. Extremophiles 2009, 13:151-167.

- 5. Canfield DE, Poulton SW, Narbonne GM: Late-Neoproterozoic deep-ocean oxygenation and the rise of animal life. *Science* 2007, **315**:92-95.
- Grieshaber M, Volkel S: Animal adaptations for tolerance and exploitation of poisonous sulfide. Ann Rev Physiol 1998, 60:33-53.
- 7. Tielens AGM, Rotte C, van Hellemond JJ, Martin W: Mitochondria as we don't know them. *Trends Biochem Sci* 2002, **27**:564-572.
- 8. Tielens AGM, van Grinsven K, Henze K, van Hellemond J, Martin W: Acetate formation in the energy metabolism parasitic helminths and protists. *Int J Parasitol* 2010, **40**:387-397.
- Cooper CE, Brown GC: The inhibition of mitochondrial cytochrome oxidase by the gases carbon monoxide, nitric oxide, hydrogen cyanide and hydrogen sulfide: chemical mechanism and physiological significance. J Bioenergetics Biomembranes 2008, 40:533-539.
- de Zwaan A: Molluscs. Metazoan Life Without Oxygen London: Chapman and HallBryant C 1991, 186-217.
- 11. Grieshaber M, Hardewig I, Kreutzer U, Pörtner H-O: **Physiologial and metabolic responses to hypoxia in invertebrates.** *Rev Physiol Biochem Pharmacol* 1994, **125**:143-147.
- Theissen U, Martin W: Sulfide:quinone oxidoreductase (SQR) from the lugworm Arenicola marina shows cyanide- and thioredoxin-dependent activity. FEBS J 2008, 257:1131-1139.
- van Hellemond JJ, Klei van der A, van Weelden SW, Tielens AG: Biochemical and evolutionary aspects of anaerobically functioning mitochondria. *Phil Trans Roy Soc London Series B* 2003, 358:205-213.
- 14. Barrett J: **Parasitic helminths.** *Metazoan Life Without Oxygen* London: Chapman and Hall, LondonBryant C 1991, 146-164.
- Tielens AGM, van Hellemond JJ: Anaerobic mitochondria: properties and origins. Origin of Mitochondria and Hydrogenosomes Berlin: Springer-VerlagMartin W, Müller M 2007, 85-104.
- Peterson KJ, Cotton JA, Gehling JG, Pisani D: The Ediacaran emergence of bilaterians: congruence between the genetic and the geological fossil records. *Phil Trans Roy Soc London Series B* 2008, 363:1435-1443.
- 17. Müller M: The hydrogenosome. J General Microbiol 1993, 139:2879-2889.
- Cheeseman P, Toms-Wood A, Wolfe RS: Isolation and properties of a fluorescent compound, factor 420, from Methanobacterium strain M.o.H. *J Bacteriol* 1972, 112:527-531.
- 19. Giezen van der M: Hydrogenosomes and mitosomes: conservation and evolution of functions. *Eukaryotic Microbiol* 2009, **56**:221-231.
- Hampl V, Hug L, Leigh JW, Dacks JB, Lang BF, Simpson AGB, Roger AJ: Phylogenomic analyses support the monophyly of Excavata and resolve relationships among eukaryotic "supergroups". Proc Natl Acad Sci USA 2009, 106:3859-3864.
- 21. Embley TM, Martin W: Eukaryotic evolution, changes and challenges. *Nature* 2006, 440:623-630.
- Risgaard-Petersen N, Langezaal AM, Ingvardsen S, Schmid MC, Jetten MS, Op den Camp HJ, Derksen JW, Pina-Ochoa E, Eriksson SP, et al: Evidence for complete denitrification in a benthic foraminifer. *Nature* 2006, 443:93-96.
- Pina-Ochoa E, Hogslund S, Geslin E, Cedhagen T, Revsbech NP, Nielsen LP, Schweizer M, Jorissen F, Rysgaard S, Risgaard-Petersen N: Widespread occurrence of nitrate storage and denitrification among Foraminifera and Gromiida. Proc Natl Acad Sci USA 2010, 107:1148-1153.
- Atteia A, van Lis R, Gelius-Dietrich G, Adrait A, Garin J, Joyard J, Rolland N, Martin W: Pyruvate:formate lyase and a novel route of eukaryotic ATPsynthesis in anaerobic *Chlamydomonas* mitochondria. *J Biol Chem* 2006, 281:9909-9918.
- Mus F, Dubini A, Seibert M, Posewitz MC, Grossman AR: Anaerobic acclimation in *Chlamydomonas reinhardtii* anoxic gene expression, hydrogenase induction, and metabolic pathways. *J Biol Chem* 2007, 282:25475-25486.
- Meuser JE, Ananyev G, Wittig LE, Kosourov S, Ghirardi ML, Seibert M, Dismukes GC, Posewitz MC: Phenotypic diversity of hydrogen production in chlorophycean algae reflects distinct anaerobic metabolisms. *J Biotechnol* 2009, 142:21-30.
- Stoeck T, Behnke A, Christen R, Amaral-Zettler L, Rodriguez-Mora MJ, Chistoserdov A, Orsi W, Edgcomb VP: Massively parallel tag sequencing reveals the complexity of anaerobic marine protistan communities. *BMC Biology* 2009, 7:72.
- Levin LA: Oxygen minimum zone benthos: Adaptation and community response to hypoxia. Oceanography Marine Biol Ann Rev 2003, 41:1-45.

- Grassineau NV, Nisbet EG, Bickle MJ, Fowler CMR, Lowry D, Mattey DP, Abell P, Martin A: Antiquity of the biological sulphur cycle: evidence from sulphur and carbon isotopes in 2700 million-year-old rocks of the Belingwe Belt, Zimbabwe. Proc Roy Soc London Series B 2001, 268:113-119.
- Ueno Y, Yamada K, Yoshida N, Maruyama S, Isozaki Y: Evidence from fluid inclusions for microbial methanogenesis in the early archaean era. *Nature* 2006, 440:516-519.
- Dubilier N, Bergin C, Lott C: Symbiotic diversity in marine animals: the art of harnessing chemosynthesis. Nature Rev Microbiol 2008, 6:725-740.
- Bernhard JM, Habura A, Bowser SS: An endobiont-bearing allogromiid from the Santa Barbara Basin: Implications for the early diversification of foraminifera. J Geophysl Res 2006, 111:G03002.
- Bernhard JM, Buck KR, Farmer MA, Bowser SS: The Santa Barbara Basin is a symbiosis oasis. Nature 2000, 403:77-80.
- 34. Lyons TW, Reinhard CT: An early productive ocean unfit for aerobics. *Proc Natl Acad Sci USA* 2009, **106**:18045-18046.
- Johnston DT, Wolfe-Simon F, Pearson A, Knoll AH: Anoxygenic photosynthesis modulated Proterozoic oxygen and sustained Earth's middle age. Proc Natl Acad Sci USA 2009, 106:16925-16929.
- Lyons TW, Anbar AD, Severmann S, Scott C, Gill BC: Tracking euxinia in the ancient ocean: A multiproxy perspective and Proterozoic case study. Ann Rev Earth Planetary Sci 2009, 37:507-534.
- 37. Mentel M, Martin W: Energy metabolism among eukaryotic anaerobes in light of Proterozoic ocean chemistry. *Phil Trans Roy Soc London Series B* 2008, **363**:2717-2729.
- Shen B, Dong L, Xiao SH, Kowalewski M: The Avalon explosion: evolution of Ediacara morphospace. *Science* 2008, 319:81-84.
- 39. Budd GE: The earliest fossil record of the animals and its significance. *Phil Trans Roy Soc London Series B* 2008, **363**:1425-1434.
- 40. Dietrich LEP, Tice MM, Newmann DK: The co-evolution of life and Earth. *Curr Biol* 2006, **16**:R395-R400.
- Canfield DE, Poulton SW, Knoll AH, Narbonne GM, Ross G, Goldberg T, Strauss H: Ferruginous conditions dominated later neoproterozoic deep-water chemistry. *Science* 2008, 321:949-952.
- Frei R, Gaucher C, Poulton SW, Canfield DE: Fluctuations in Precambrian atmospheric oxygenation recorded by chromium isotopes. *Nature* 2009, 461:250-253.
- Cox CJ, Foster PG, Hirt RP, Harris SR, Embley TM: The archaebacterial origin of eukaryotes. Proc Natl Acad Sci USA 2008, 105:20356-20361.
- Tovar J, León-Avila G, Sánchez LB, Sutak R, Tachezy J, Giezen van der M, Hernández M, Müller M, Lucocq JM: Mitochondrial remnant organelles of Giardia function in iron-sulphur protein maturation. *Nature* 2003, 426:172-176.
- 45. Dyall SD, Brown MT, Johnson PJ: Ancient invasions: From endosymbionts to organelles. *Science* 2004, **304**:253-257.
- Hrdy I, Hirt RP, Dolezal P, Bardonova L, Foster PG, Tachezy J, Embley TM: *Trichomonas* hydrogenosomes contain the NADH dehydrogenase module of mitochondrial complex I. *Nature* 2004, 432:618-622.
- 47. Lane N: Life Ascending: The Ten Greatest Inventions of Evolution. London: Profile Books 2009.
- Dunn CW, Hejnol A, Matus DQ, Pang K, Browne WE, Smith SA, Seaver E, Rouse GW, Obst M, Edgecombe GD, et al: Broad phylogenomic sampling improves resolution of the animal tree of life. Nature 2008, 452:745-749.
- Kristensen RM: An Introduction to Loricifera, Cycliophora, and Micrognathozoa. Integrative Comp Biol 2002, 42:641-651.
- Heiner I, Kristensen RM: Two new species of the genus *Pliciloricus* (Loricifera, Pliciloricidae) from the Faroe Bank, North Atlantic. *Zoologischer Anzeiger* 2005, 243:121-138.

doi:10.1186/1741-7007-8-32

Cite this article as: Mentel and Martin: Anaerobic animals from an ancient, anoxic ecological niche. *BMC Biology* 2010 8:32.