

Fossils show huge salamanderlike predator with sharp fangs existed before the dinosaurs

July 7 2024, by Adithi Ramakrishnan



This July 2, 2018 image provided by Claudia Marsicano shows an image of the nearly complete skeleton from fossils recovered in Namibia of a giant salamander-like creature at the Paleontology lab in Cape Town, South Africa. Credit: Claudia Marsicano via AP

Scientists have revealed fossils of a giant salamanderlike beast with

sharp fangs that ruled waters before [the first dinosaurs arrived](#).

The [predator](#), which was larger than a person, likely used its wide, flat head and front teeth to suck in and chomp unsuspecting prey, researchers said. Its skull was about 2 feet (60 centimeters) long.

"It's acting like an aggressive stapler," said Michael Coates, a biologist at the University of Chicago who was not involved with the work.

Fossil remnants of four [creatures](#) collected about a decade ago were analyzed, including a [partial skull](#) and backbone. [The findings](#) on *Gaiasia jennya* were published Wednesday in the journal *Nature*. The creature existed some 40 million years before dinosaurs evolved.

Researchers have long examined such ancient predators to uncover the origins of tetrapods: four-legged animals that clambered onto land with fingers instead of fins and evolved to amphibians, birds and mammals including humans.

Most early [tetrapod](#) fossils hail from hot, prehistoric coal swamps along the equator in what's now North America and Europe. But these latest remnants, dating back to about 280 million years ago, were found in modern-day Namibia, an area in Africa that was once encrusted with glaciers and ice.



This image provided by Gabriel Lio shows an artistic reconstruction of what the prehistoric salamander-like creature may have looked like. Researchers discovered a giant salamander-like predator that lived about 280 million years ago, using fossils recovered from Namibia. Credit: Gabriel Lio via AP



This 2014 photo provided by Roger M. H. Smith shows Claudia Marsicano, professor at the University of Buenos Aires, examining the new basal tetrapod fossil at the discovery site of a salamander-like creature near the Ugab River in Namibia. Scientists have identified a giant salamanderlike predator with sharp fangs that likely ruled waters 280 million years ago. Credit: Roger M. H. Smith via AP

That means tetrapods may have thrived in [colder climates](#) earlier than scientists expected, prompting more questions about how and when they took over the Earth.

"The early story of the first tetrapods is much more complex than we

thought," said co-author Claudia Marsicano at the University of Buenos Aires, who was part of the research.

The creature's name comes from the Gai-As rock formation in Namibia where the fossils were found and for the late paleontologist Jennifer Clack, who studied how tetrapods evolved.

More information: Claudia A. Marsicano et al, Giant stem tetrapod was apex predator in Gondwanan late Palaeozoic ice age, *Nature* (2024). [DOI: 10.1038/s41586-024-07572-0](https://doi.org/10.1038/s41586-024-07572-0) Adhi Agus Oktaviana et al, Narrative cave art in Indonesia by 51,200 years ago, *Nature* (2024). [DOI: 10.1038/s41586-024-07541-7](https://doi.org/10.1038/s41586-024-07541-7)

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