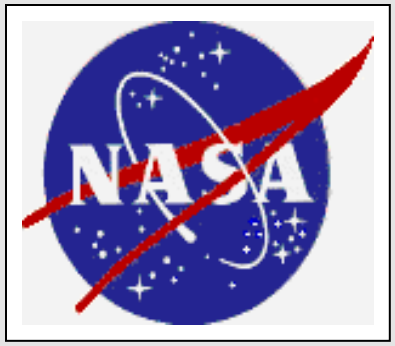


Should You Believe in Evolution?

Riderwood
September 4, 2008
Robert Hazen, Geophysical Laboratory
& George Mason University

OBJECTIVES

1. Define "evolution".
2. Explore possible alternatives to evolution.
3. Introduce "emergent complexity."
4. Present two examples of complex evolving systems: minerals and prebiotic chemistry.
5. Review what Darwin said.
6. Explain why I "believe" in evolution.

Part I: What is Evolution?

1. Change over time.

2. An increase in complexity (i.e., diversity, behavior, structure)

3. Common descent

4. Darwinian evolution by natural selection.

Part II: What are Alternatives to Evolution?

Consider life's origin, which could have been:

1. **A miracle – an act of divine intervention**
2. **An event consistent with chemistry and physics, but extremely unlikely**
3. **An inevitable consequence of natural laws, given an appropriate environment and sufficient time**
4. **The result of intelligent design**

Chemical Evolution

Life arose by a natural process of "emergent complexity," consistent with natural laws.

This hypothesis predicts that life began as a sequence of chemical steps.

Intelligent Design

Life is "irreducibly complex." Therefore, a supernatural designer must have formed it.

This hypothesis requires a combination of natural and supernatural processes.

Is ID Science?

ON THE ONE HAND:

ID makes predictions, albeit negative ones.

These predictions are falsifiable.

BUT:

ID is based on supernatural processes.

ID is therefore inherently untestable, and is unsupported by observational evidence.

THE “DEBATE”

“Both sides ought to be properly taught ... so people can understand what the debate is about.” G. W. Bush

“Intelligent design should not be taught in high school biology classes as an alternative to evolution.”
American Chemical Society

How Should Science Respond to ID?

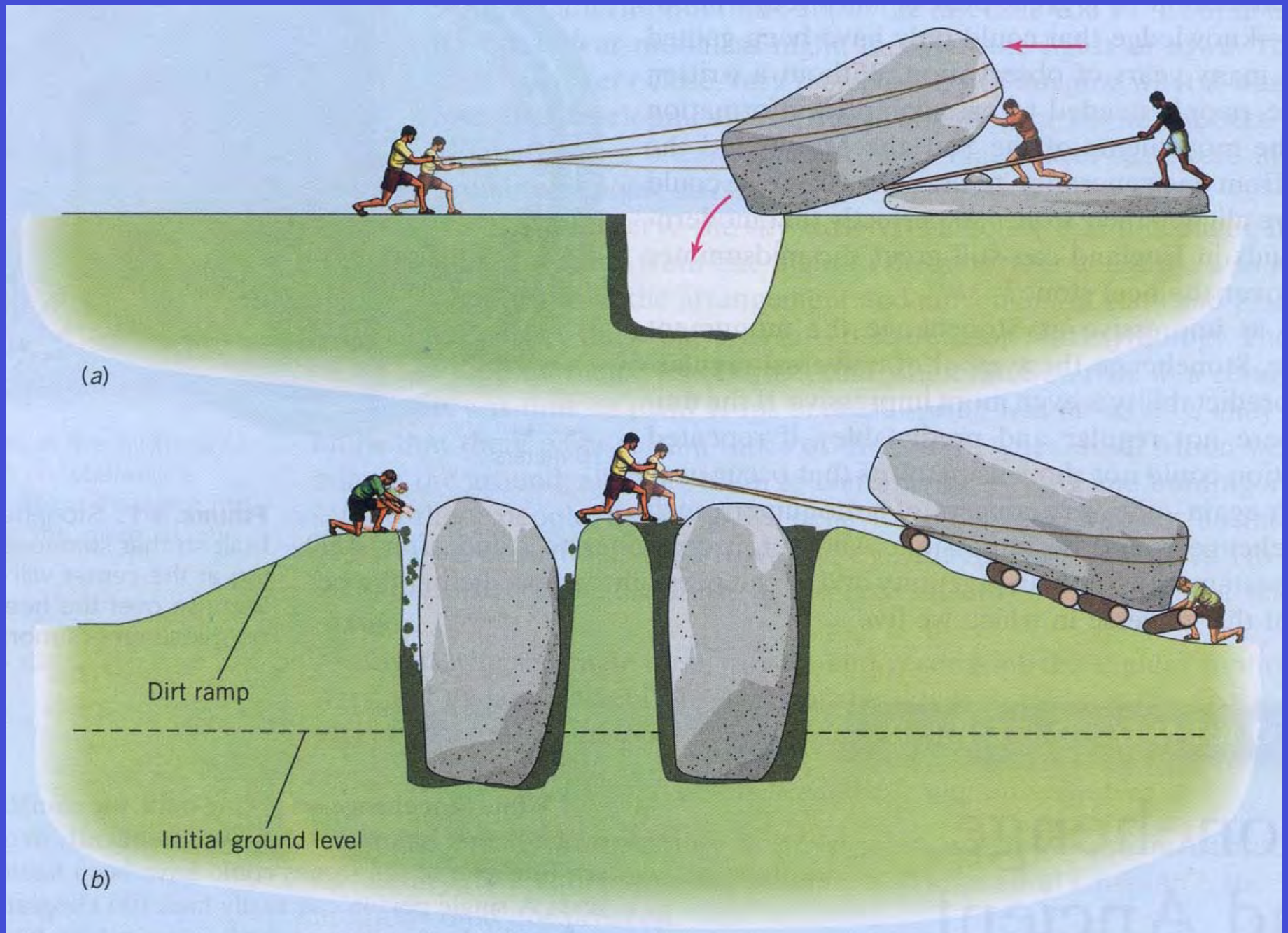
Design a research program that demonstrates the natural transition from chemical simplicity to emergent complexity.

How Should Science Respond to ID?

Design a research program that demonstrates the natural transition from chemical simplicity to emergent complexity.

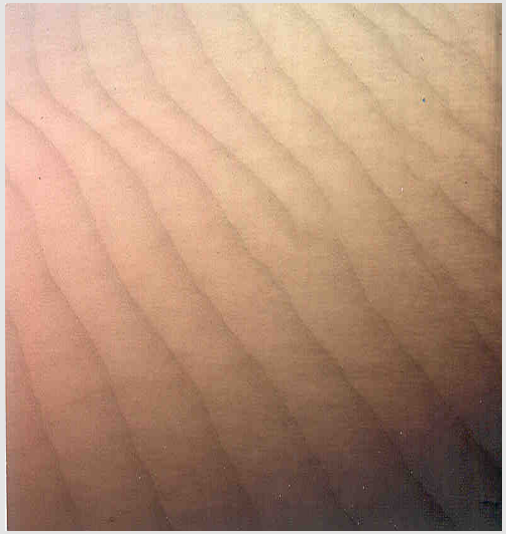
If complexity can be shown to arise spontaneously as the result of natural processes, then ID is unnecessary.

STONEHENGE


(a)
Dirt ramp
Initial ground level
(b)

Part III: Emergent Complexity

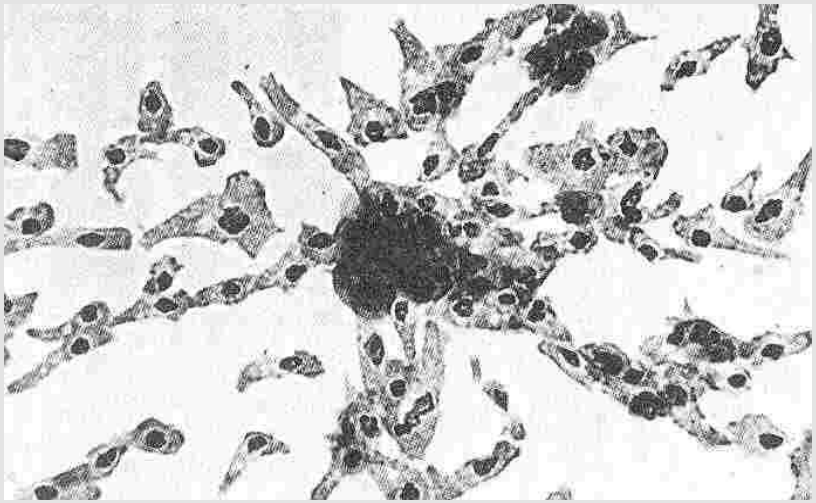
Emergent phenomena arise from interactions among numerous individual particles, or “agents.”

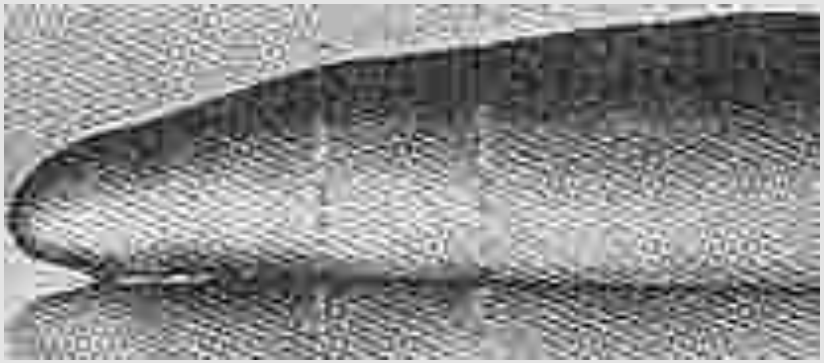


The Emergence of Slime Mold

→

Chemical
Potential
Gradients



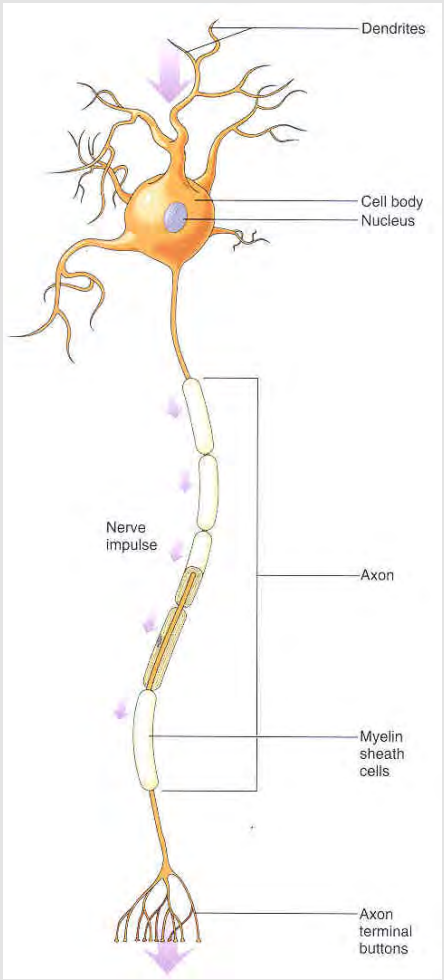


Dictyostelium

The Emergence of Slime Mold

Dictyostelium

The Emergence of Consciousness



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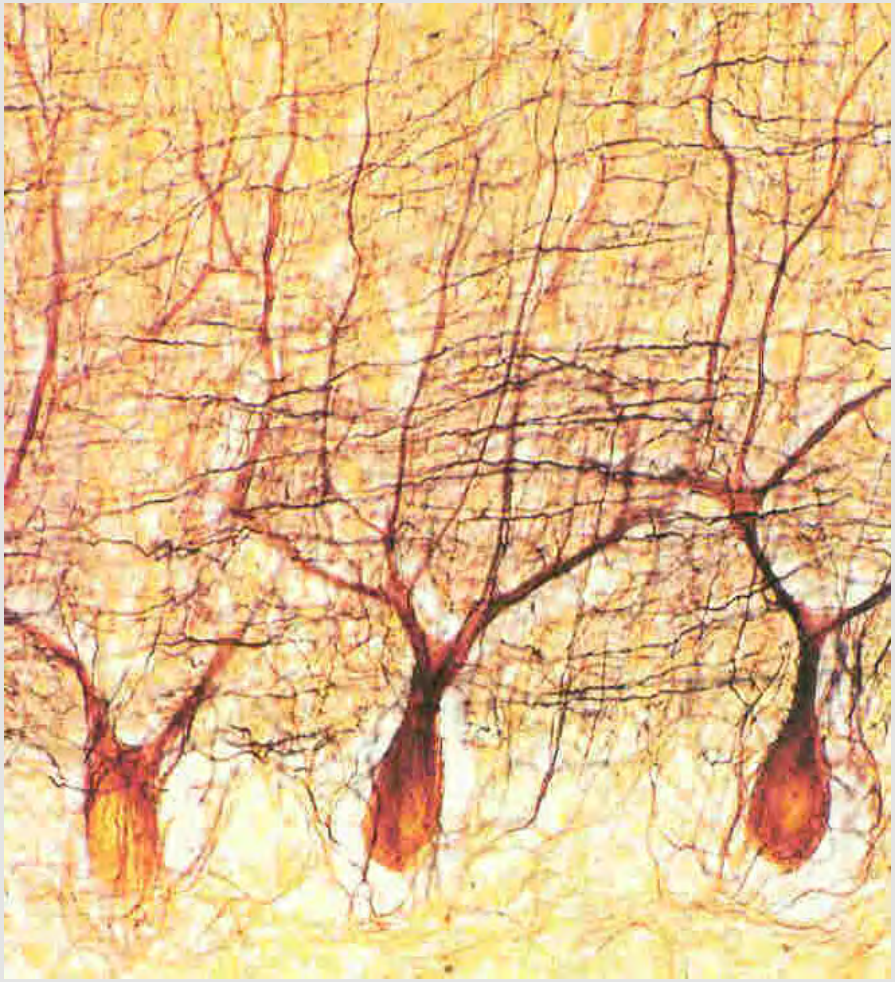
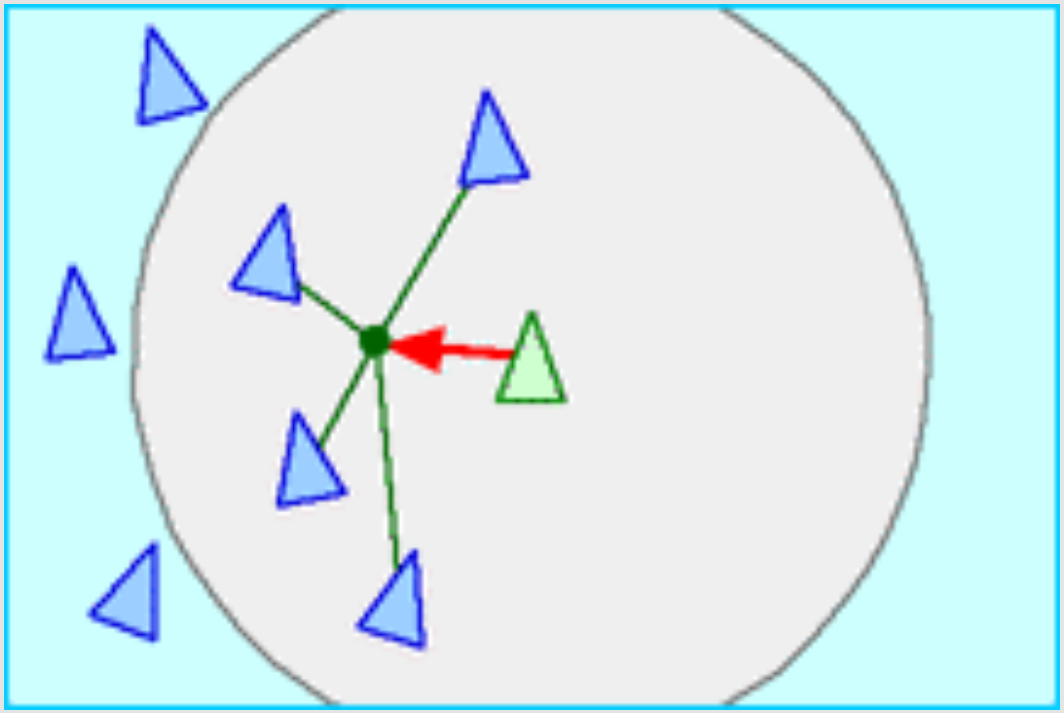
Neural connections and electrical impulses



The Emergence of Consciousness

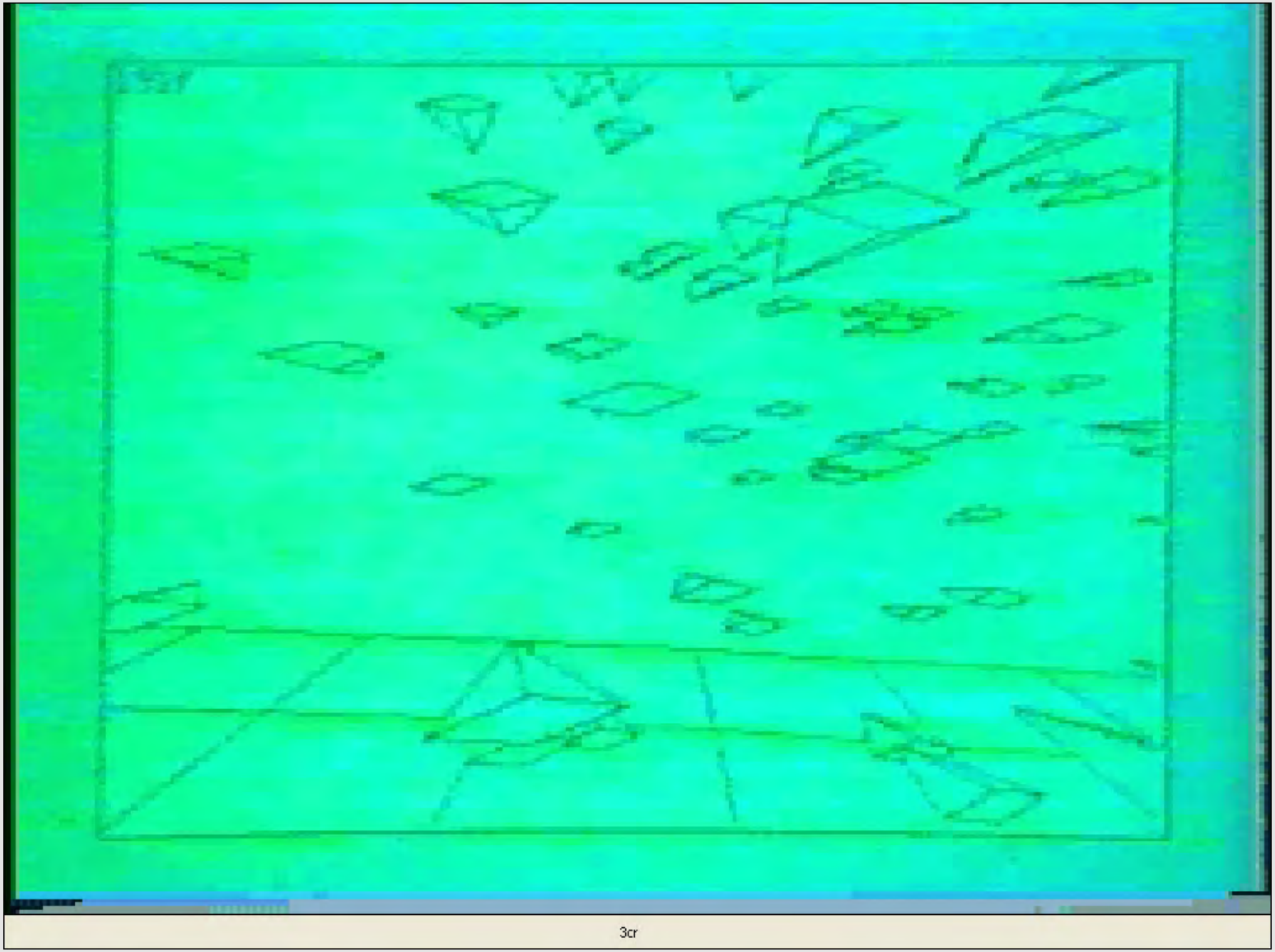
Emergent Complexity: Craig Reynold's BOIDS

Three steering rules for the flock:



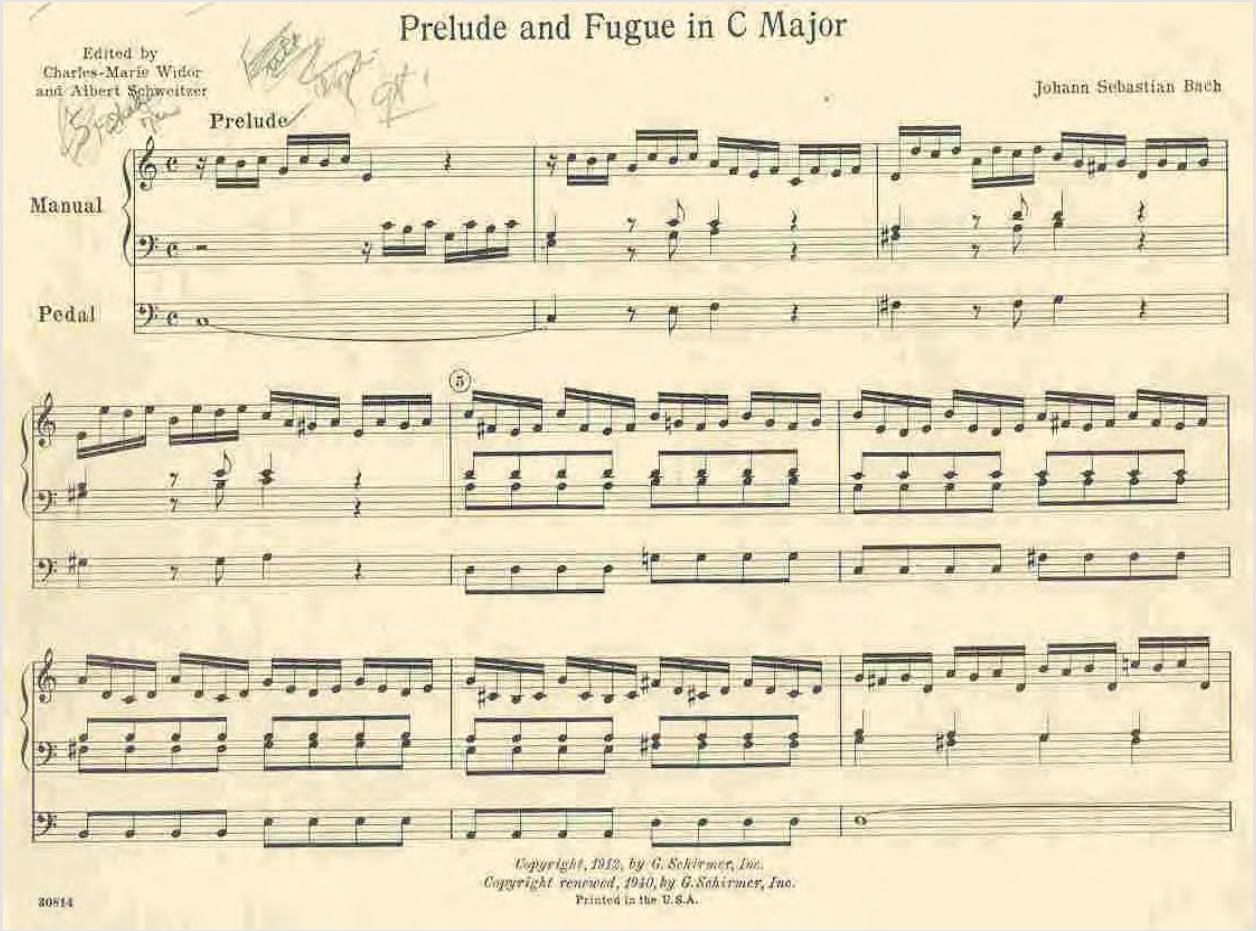
1. Separation: Steer to avoid crowding local flockmates.
2. Alignment: Steer toward the average heading of local flockmates.
3. Cohesion: Steer to move toward the average position of local flockmates.

Selection Rule Approach: BOIDS

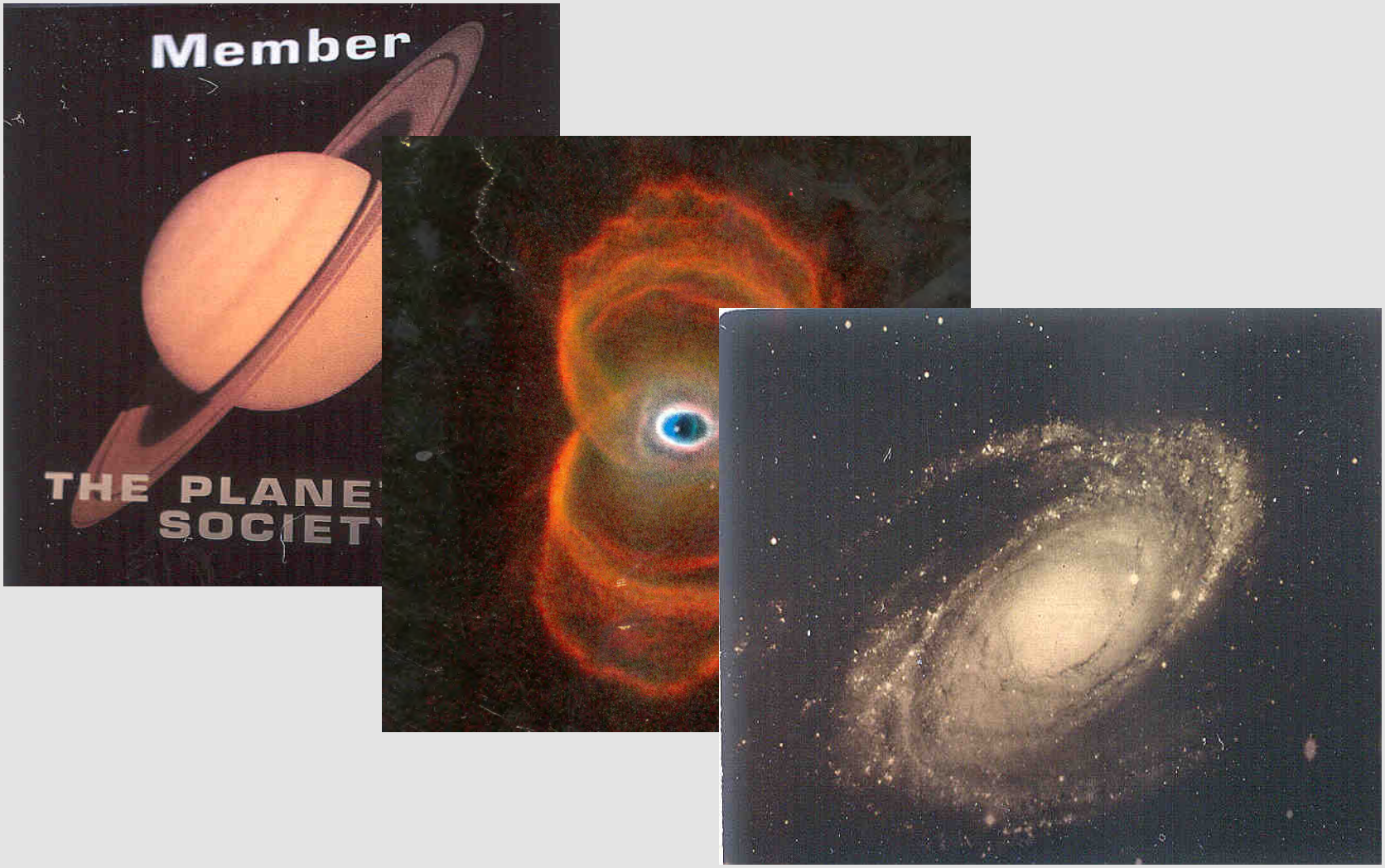


Emergent Complexity: Music

Interactions by rules of harmony and counterpoint

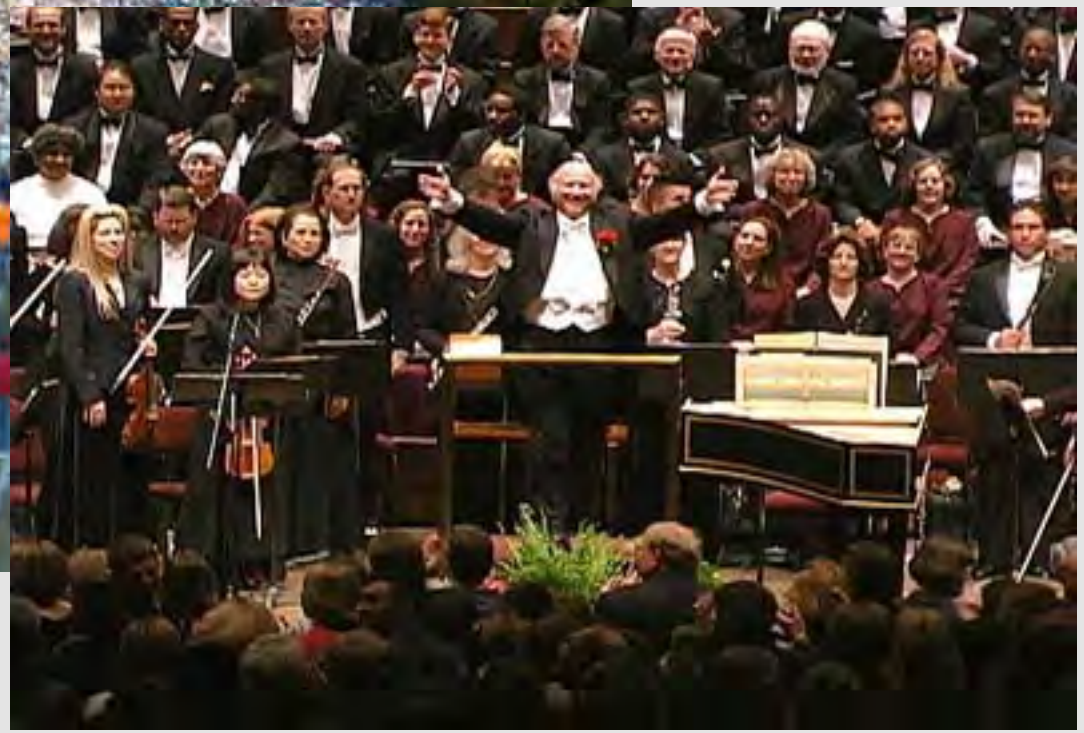


Emergent Phenomena – Space



Emergent Phenomena – Life

Emergent Phenomena – Society



Part IV: Examples of Complex Evolving Systems

1. Look for empirical similarities in a wide variety of complex evolving systems.

2. Use those aspects of complex phenomena to guide our research on evolution.

Complex Evolving Systems:

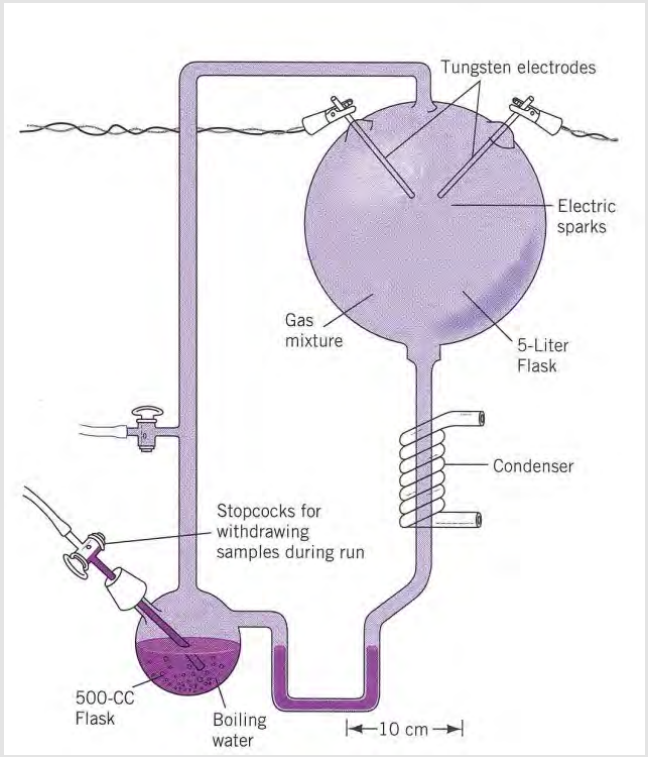
Examples: **Nucleosynthesis**

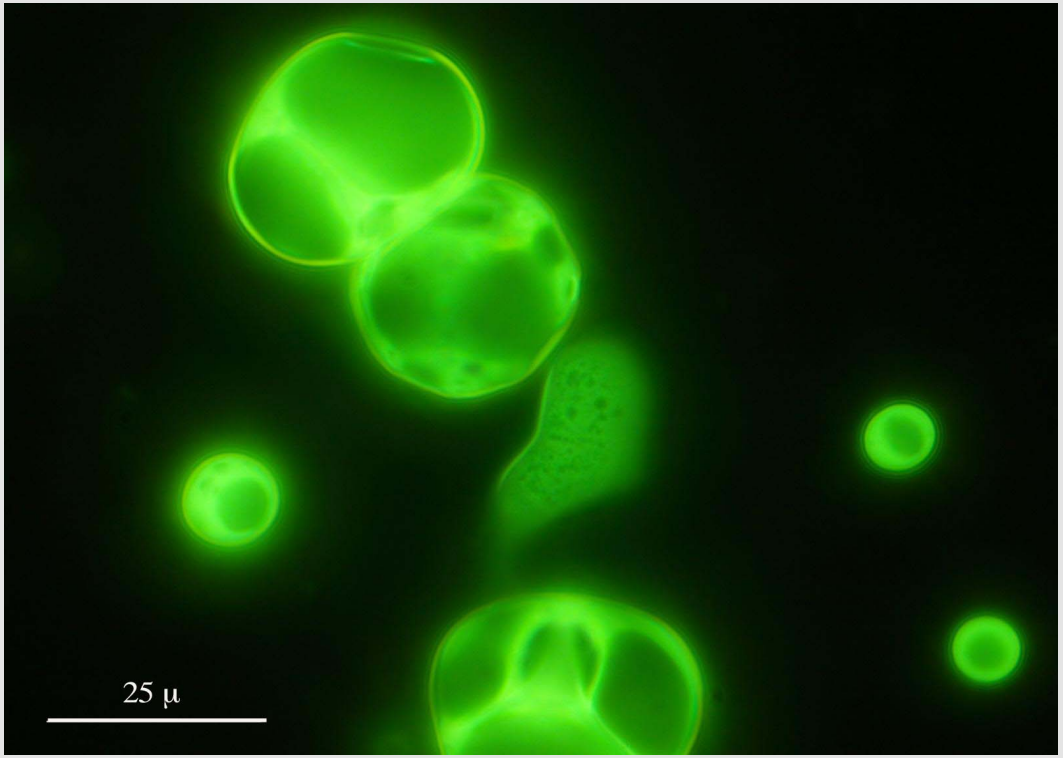
Complex Evolving Systems:

Examples: **Nucleosynthesis**
Mineral evolution

Complex Evolving Systems:

Examples: **Nucleosynthesis**
Mineral evolution
Prebiotic chemical evolution





Complex Evolving Systems:

Examples: **Nucleosynthesis**
Mineral evolution
Prebiotic chemical evolution

Languages

Complex Evolving Systems:

Examples:

Nucleosynthesis
Mineral evolution
Prebiotic chemical evolution

Languages
Material culture

Complex Evolving Systems:

Examples: Nucleosynthesis
Mineral evolution
Prebiotic chemical evolution

Languages
Material culture
Biological evolution

Complex Evolving Systems: Five Themes

Selection

Diversification

Niches

Punctuation

Extinction

Mineral Evolution

A change over time in:

- The diversity of mineral species
- The relative abundances of minerals
- The compositional ranges of minerals
- The grain sizes and morphologies of minerals

What Is Mineral Evolution?

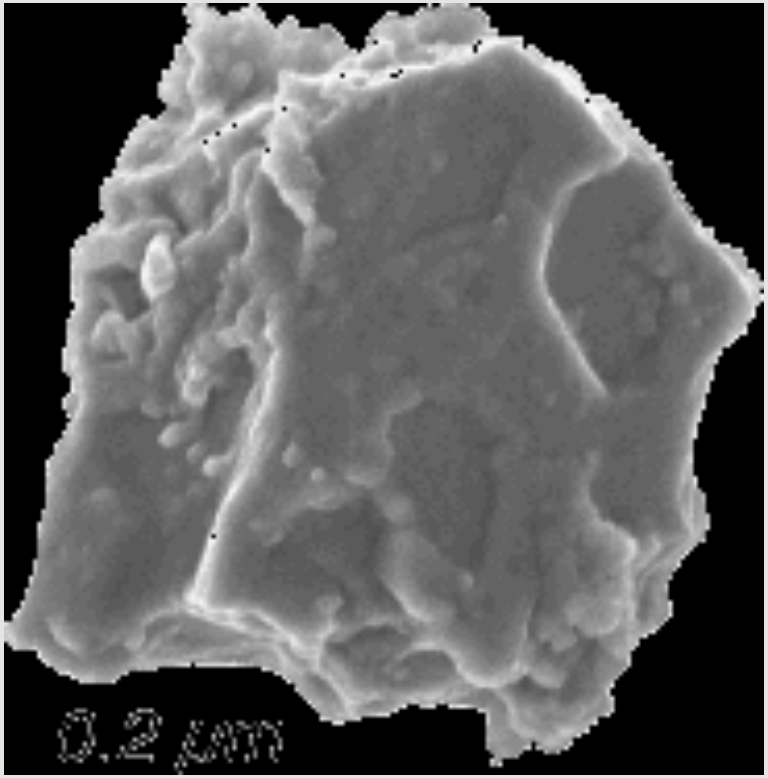
A change over time in:

- The diversity of mineral species
- The relative abundances of minerals
- The compositional ranges of minerals
- The grain sizes and morphologies of minerals

"Ur"-Mineralogy

Pre-solar grains contain about a dozen different minerals:

- Diamond (C)
- Graphite (C)
- Moissanite (SiC)
- Osbornite (TiN)
- Nierite (Si_3N_4)
- Rutile (TiO_2)
- Corundum (Al_2O_3)
- Spinel ($MgAl_2O_4$)
- Hibbonite ($CaAl_{12}O_{19}$)
- Forsterite (Mg_2SiO_4)



How did we get from a dozen minerals to >4300 on Earth today?

What Drives Mineral Evolution?

Three processes that might occur on any planet or moon:

1. **Cycles separate and concentrate the chemical elements from their original uniform distribution.**

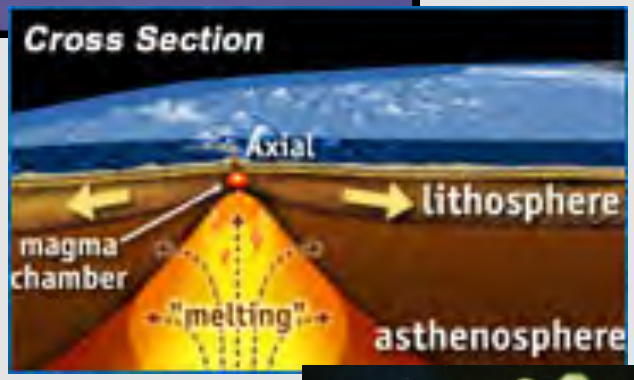
2. **An increase in the range of temperature and pressure.**

3. **The influence of life.**

Three Eras of Earth's Mineral Evolution

1. The Era of Planetary Accretion

2. The Era of Crust and Mantle Reworking



3. The Era of Bio-Mediated Mineralogy

First Era: Planetary Accretion

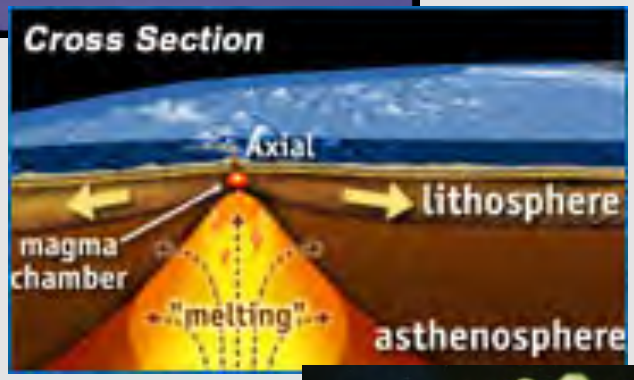
~60 primary mineral species

~250 total known mineral species

Three Eras of Earth's Mineral Evolution

1. The Era of Planetary Accretion

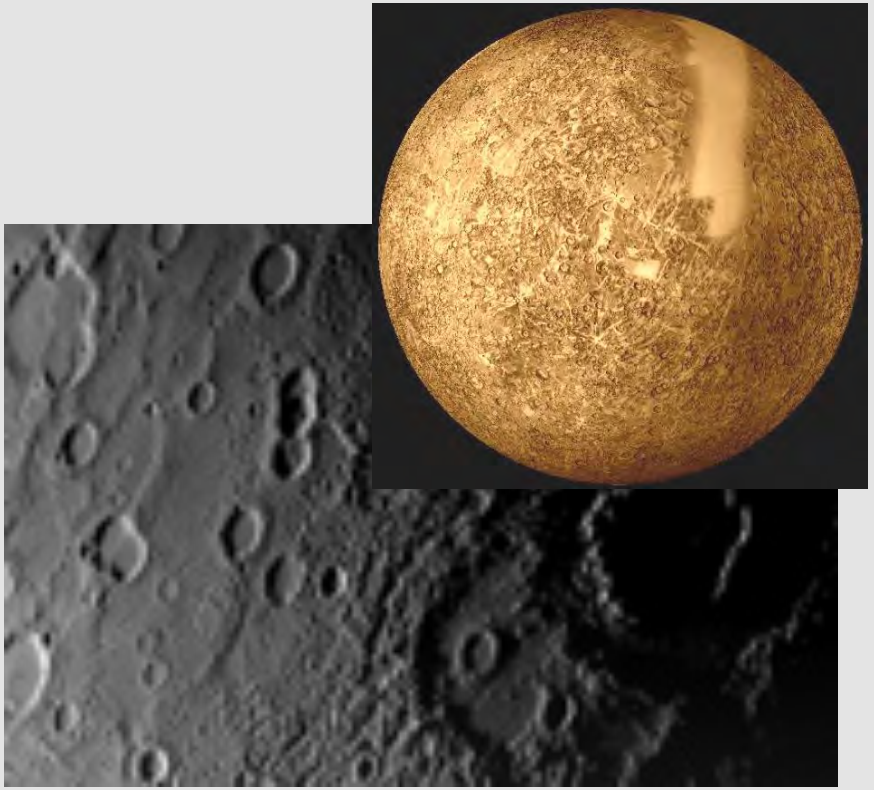
2. The Era of Crust and Mantle Reworking



3. The Era of Bio-Mediated Mineralogy

Second Era: Igneous Rock Evolution on a Water-Poor Body

~350 mineral species?

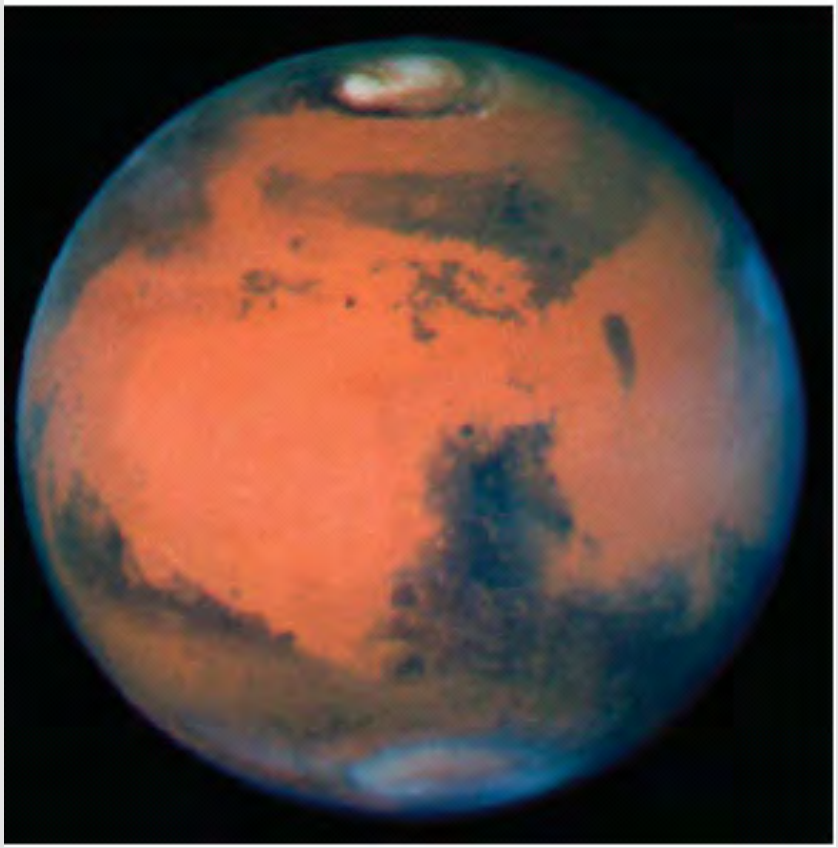


Is this the end point of the Moon and Mercury?

Second Era: Igneous Rock Evolution on a Water-Rich Body

>500 mineral species

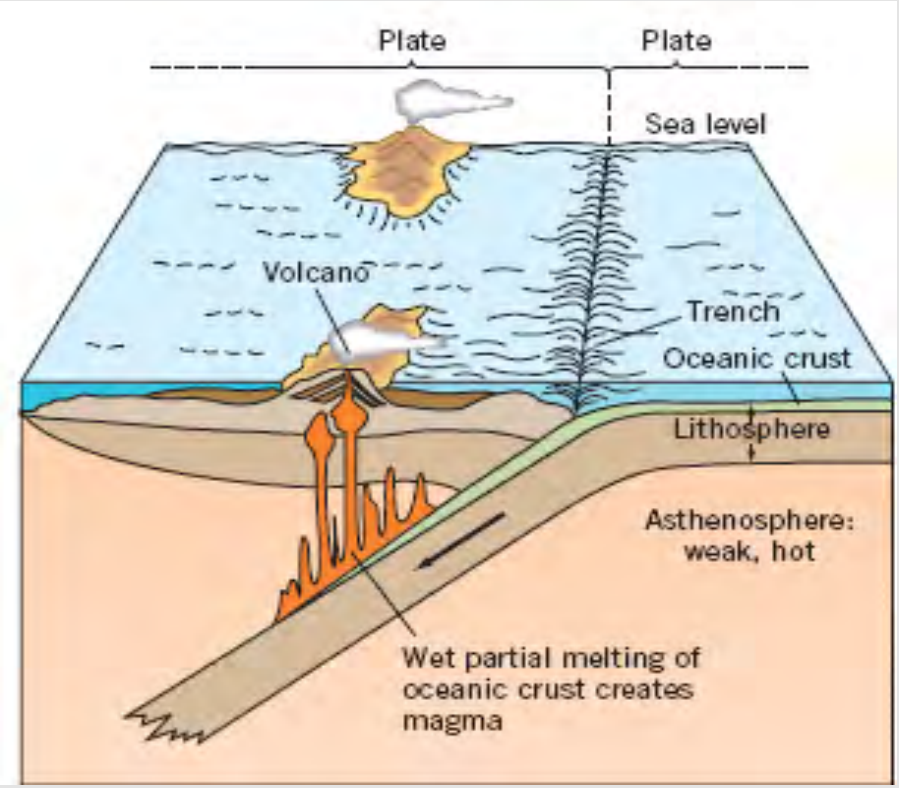
Second Era: Igneous Rock Evolution on a Water-Rich Body



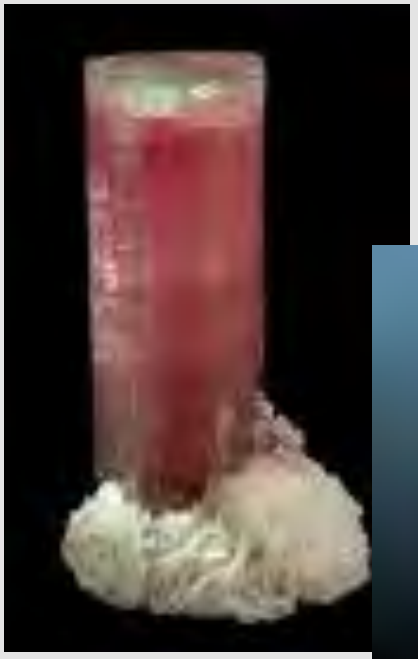
Is this as far as Mars or Venus progressed?

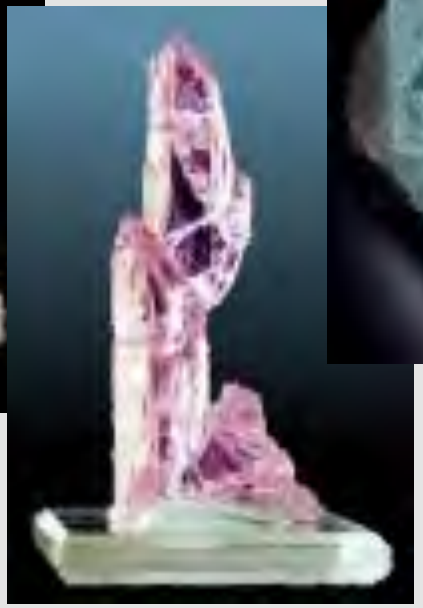
Second Era: Plate Tectonics on a Water-Rich Body

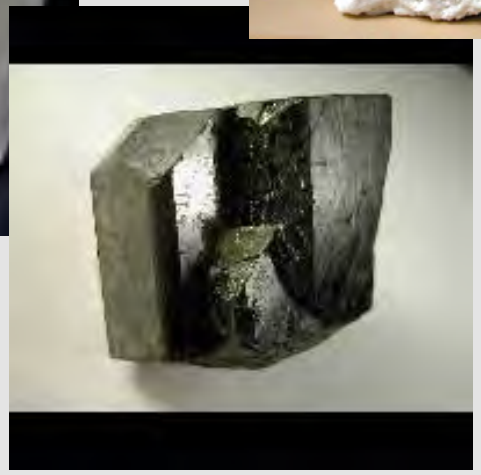
1,500 mineral species



Rare Pegmatite Minerals







It took a at least a billion years on Earth before these minerals could have formed!

Pegmatites

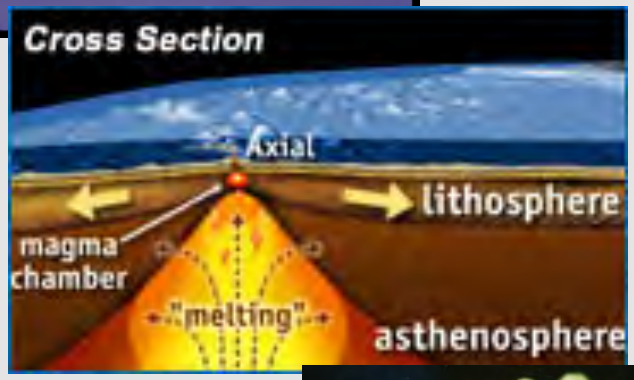
Are there pegmatites on Mars?

Are there emeralds on Venus?

Three Eras of Earth's Mineral Evolution

1. **The Era of Planetary Accretion**

2. **The Era of Crust and Mantle Reworking**



3. **The Era of Bio-Mediated Mineralogy**

Third Era: The Influence of Life

>4000 mineral species, most formed by weathering in an oxygen-rich atmosphere.

Thousands of New Minerals!

“Biomineralization”

Two Phases of Life's Evolution

1. **Chemical Evolution – The "origin of life"**

2. **Natural Selection – Once a reproducing cell exists, complexity arises from competition.**

Central Assumptions of Origin-of-Life Research

The first life forms were carbon-based.

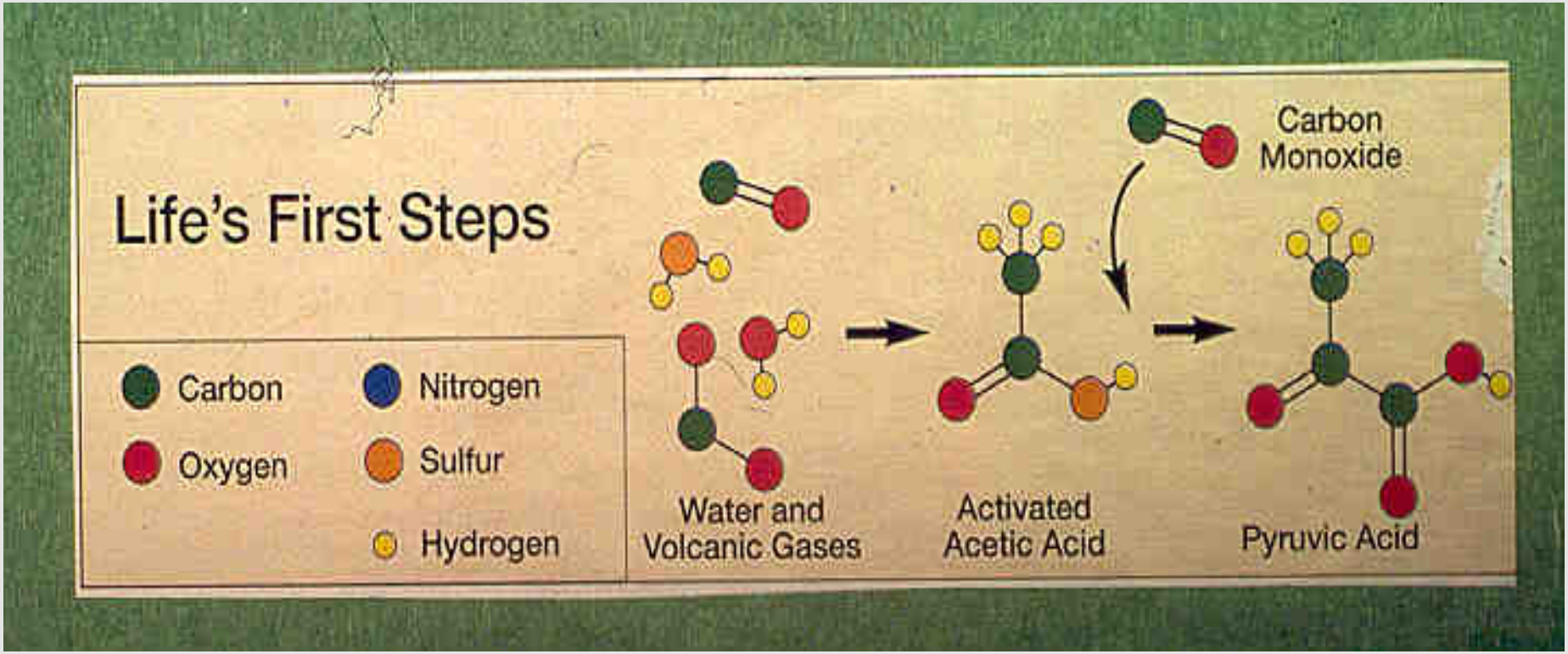
Life's origin was a chemical process that relied on water, air, and rock.

The origin of life required a sequence of emergent steps of increasing complexity.

Four Emergent Steps

1. Emergence of biomolecules
2. Emergence of organized molecular systems
3. Emergence of self-replicating molecular systems
4. Emergence of natural selection

Emergence of Biomolecules



The strategy is to use simple molecules to build larger molecules.

The Miller-Urey Experiment

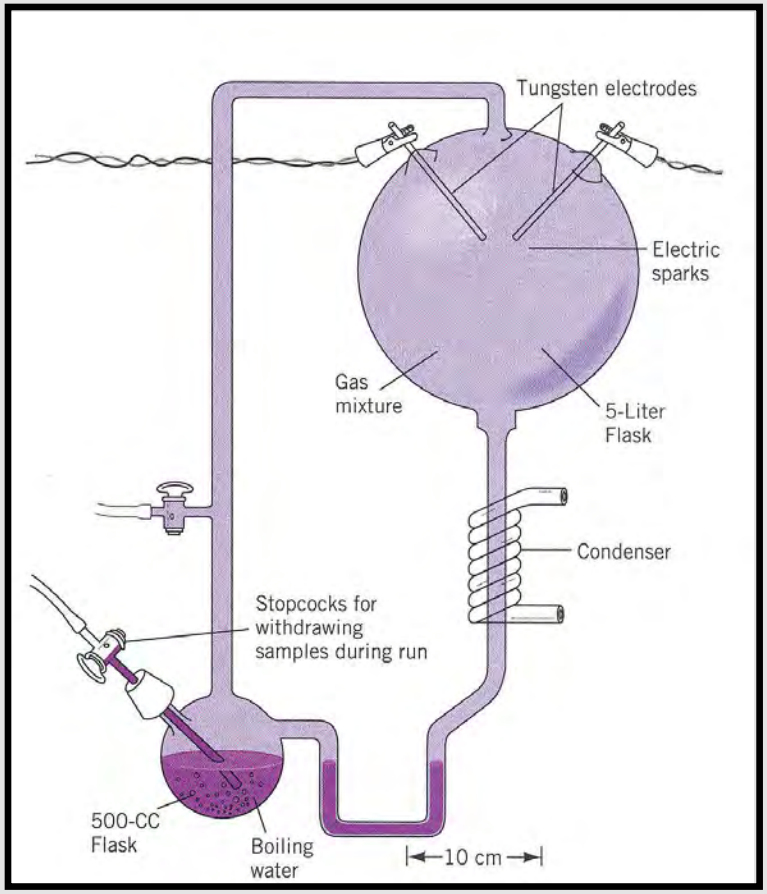


Table 3–8 Some of the products shown to form under prebiotic conditions

Amino acids
- Glycine
- Alanine
- α-Aminobutyric acid
- Valine
- Leucine
- Isoleucine
- Proline
- Aspartic acid
- Glutamic acid
- Serine
- Threonine

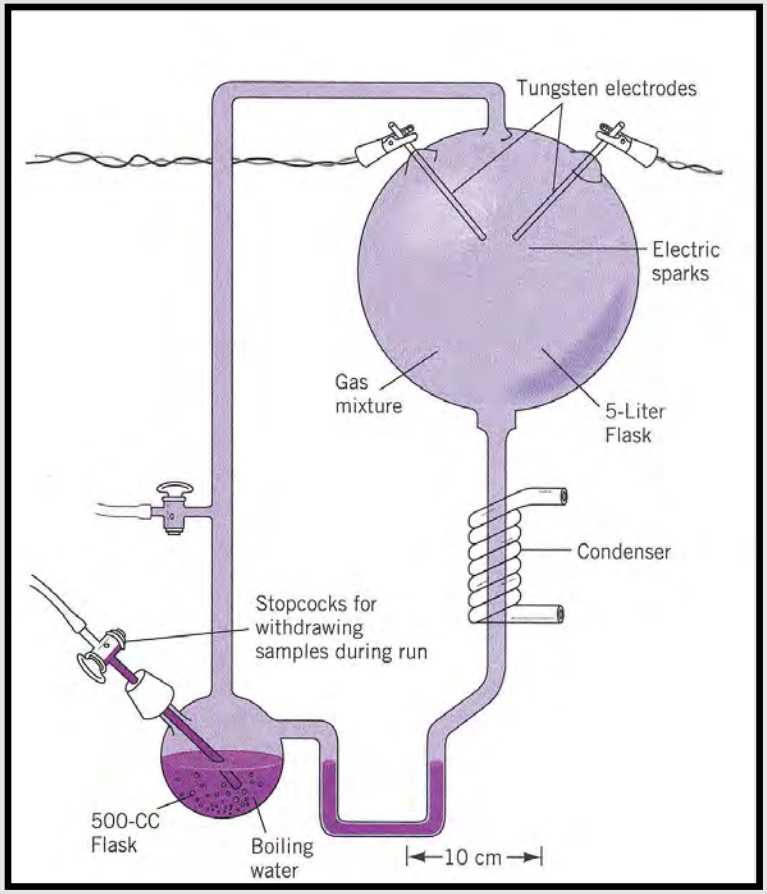
Sugars
- Straight and branched pentoses and hexoses

Carboxylic acids
- Formic acid
- Acetic acid
- Propionic acid
- Straight and branched fatty acids (C_4–C_{10})
- Glycolic acid
- Lactic acid
- Succinic acid

Nucleic acid bases
- Adenine
- Guanine
- Xanthine
- Hypoxanthine
- Cytosine
- Uracil

Organic synthesis near the ocean-atmosphere interface.

The Miller-Urey Experiment



Nutrition Facts

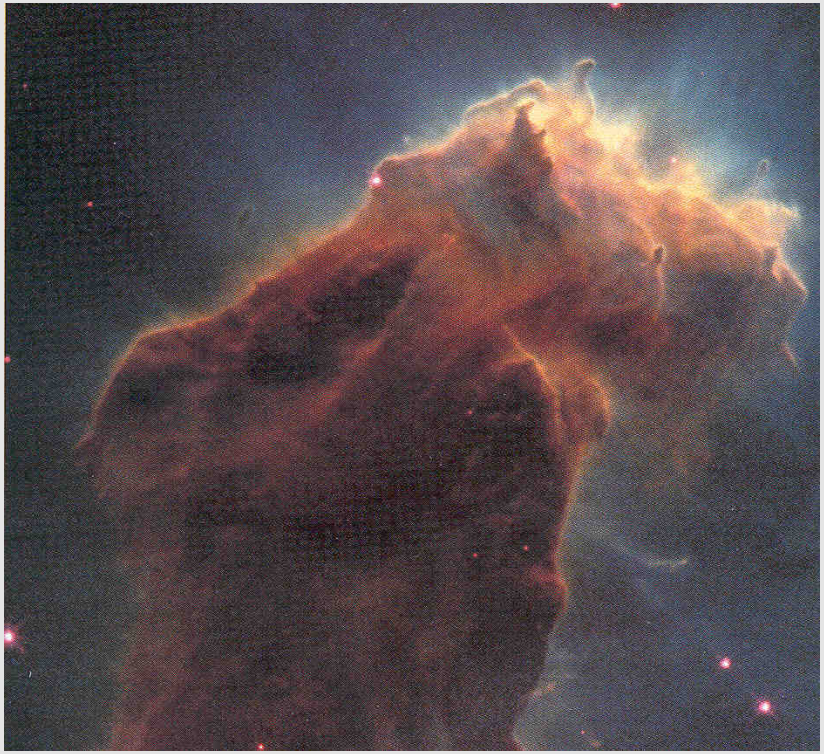
Serving Size 1 cup (30g)
Servings Per Container 17

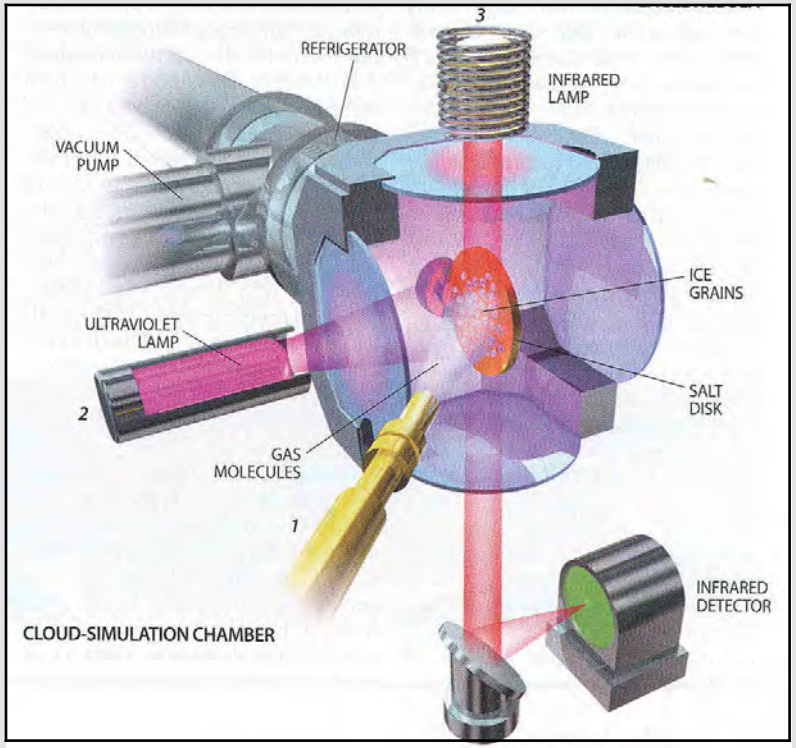
Amount Per Serving	Wheaties	with ½ cup skim milk
Calories	110	150
Calories from Fat	10	10
	% Daily Value**	
Total Fat 1g*	**1%**	**2%**
Saturated Fat 0g	**0%**	**0%**
Trans Fat 0g		
Polyunsaturated Fat 0g		
Monounsaturated Fat 0g		
Total Carbohydrate 24g	**8%**	**10%**
Dietary Fiber 3g	**12%**	**12%**
Sugars 4g		
Other Carbohydrate 17g		
Protein 3g		

Organic synthesis near the ocean-atmosphere interface.

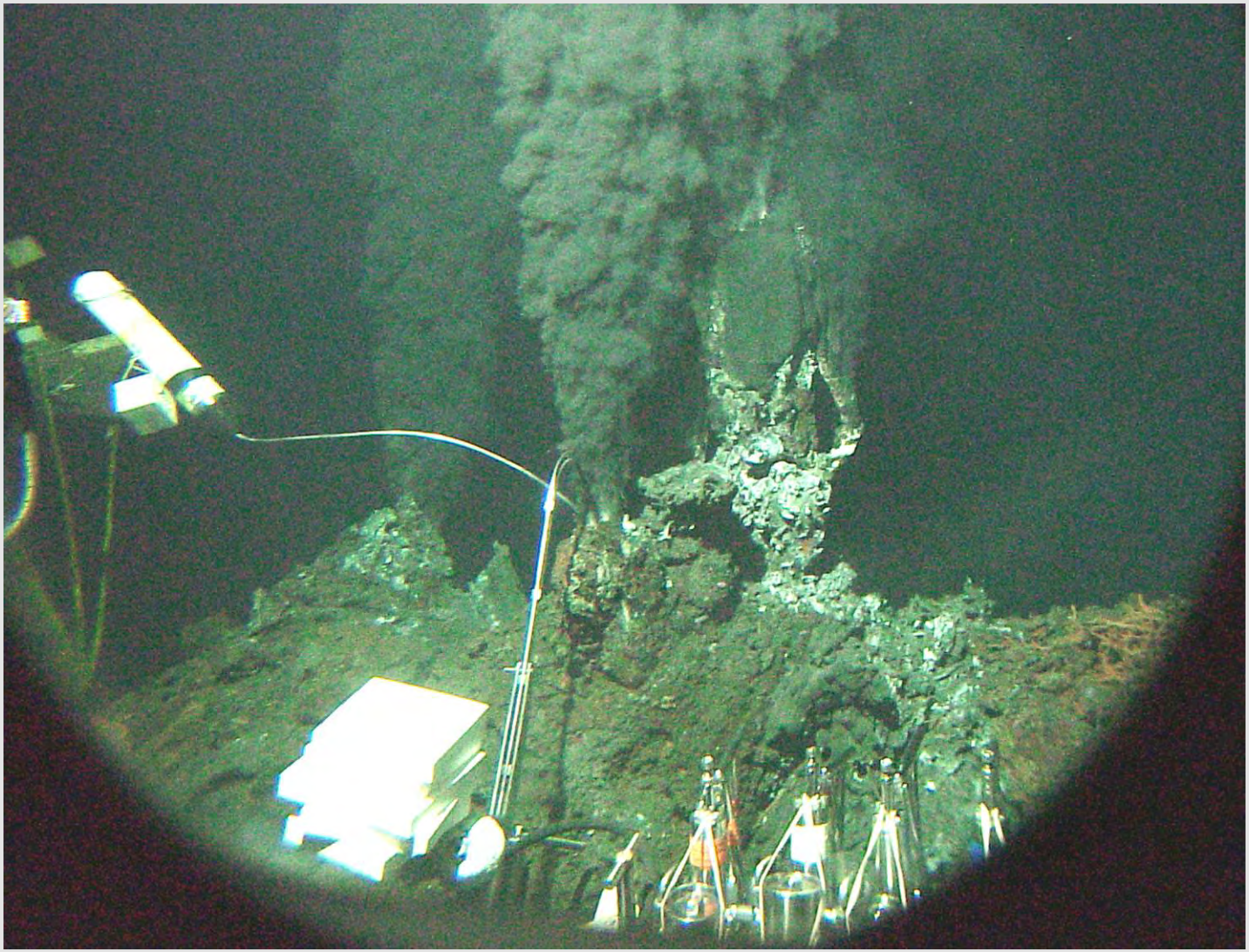
Organic Synthesis in Interstellar "Dense" Molecular Clouds

Experiments at NASA Ames simulate this environment.



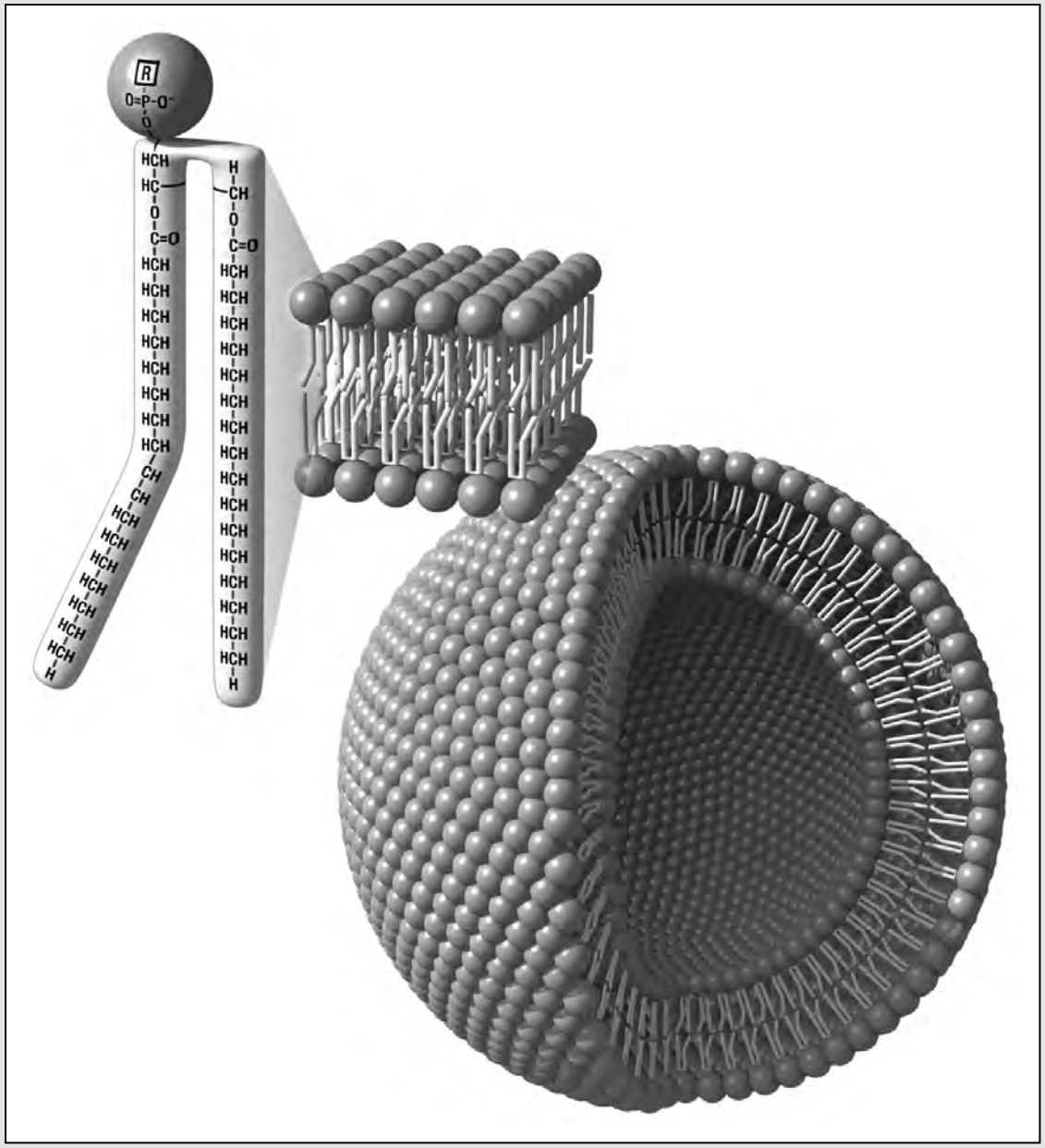


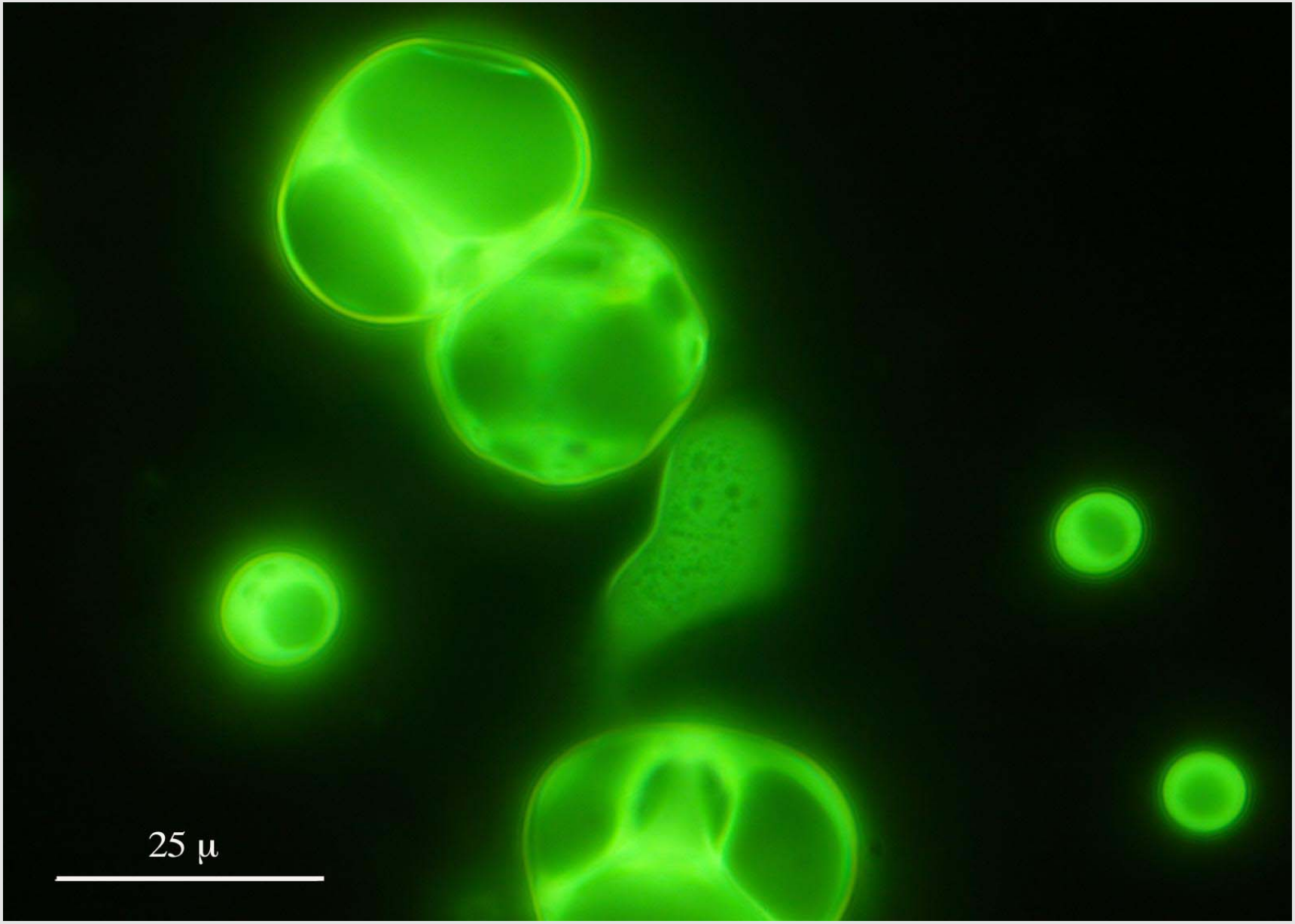
The Hydrothermal Hypothesis



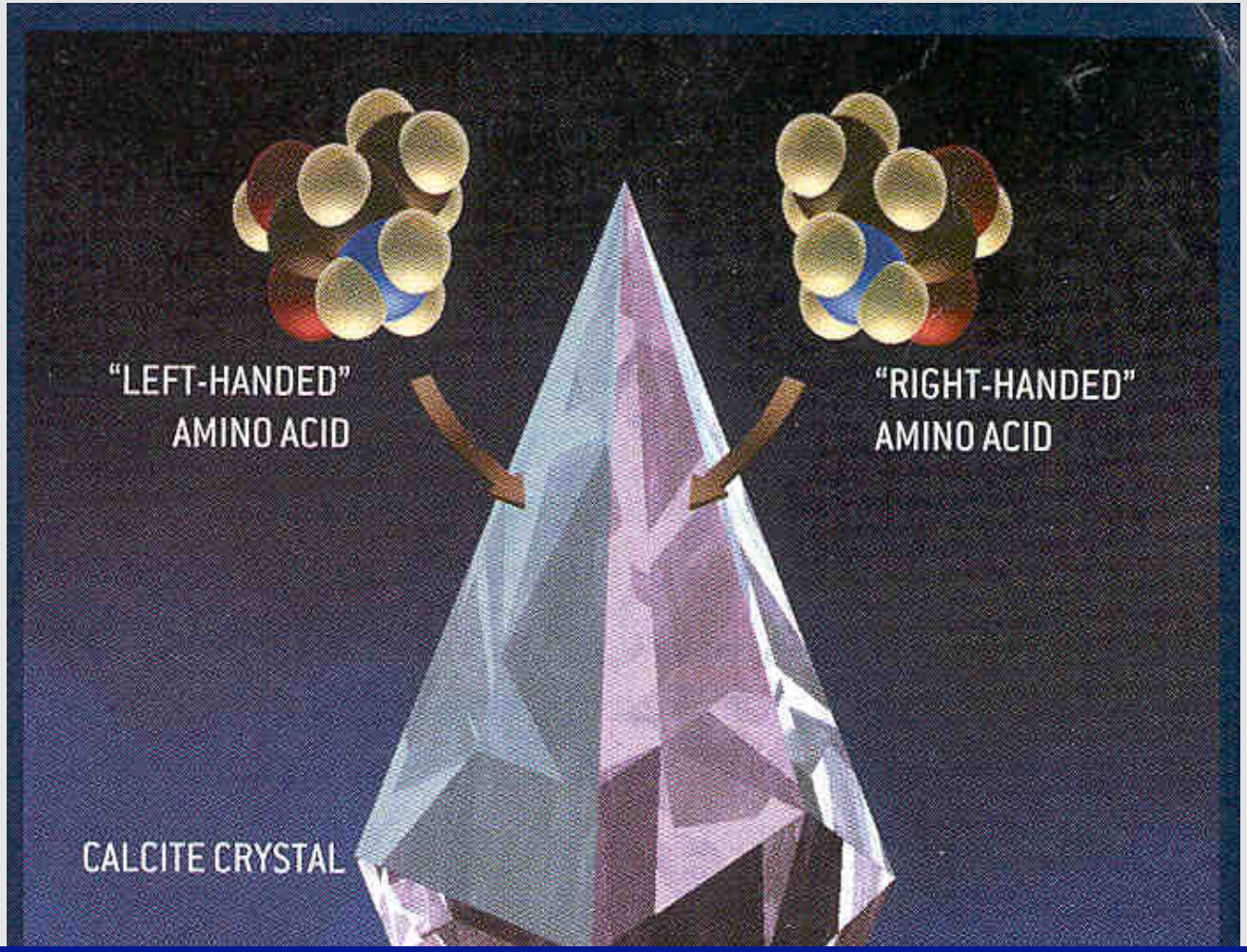
A "BLACK SMOKER"

Self-Assembling Amphiphile Molecules



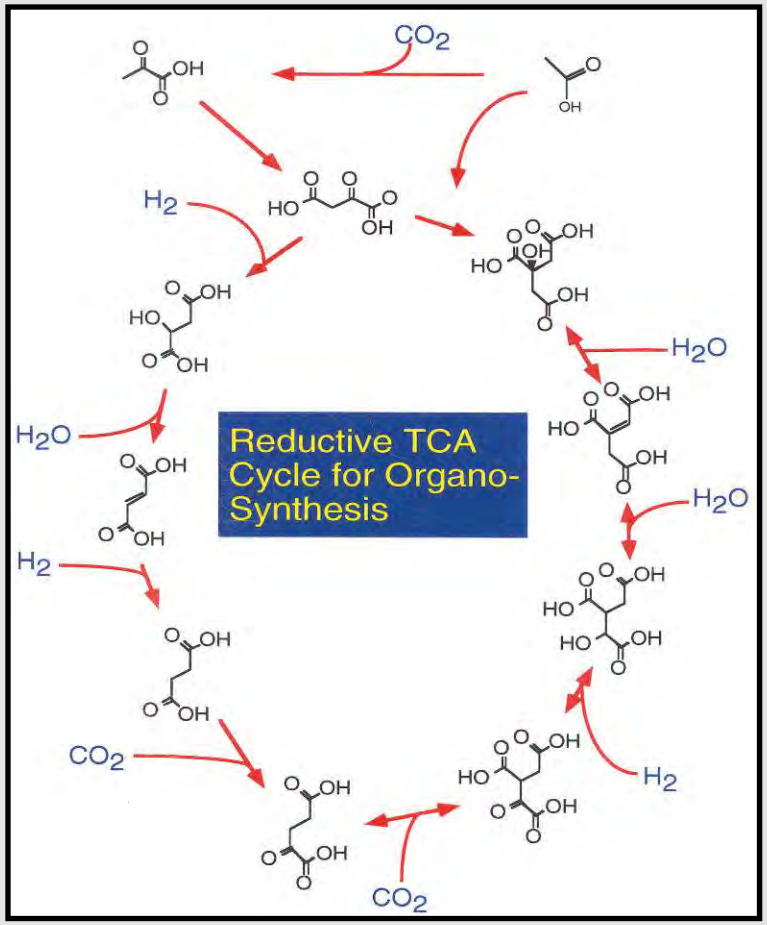

25 μ

Minerals and Chiral Selection



Mineral surfaces select chiral amino acids

The Emergence of Self-Replicating Molecular Cycles



Synthesizing such a cycle is the "Holy Grail" for our experimental program.

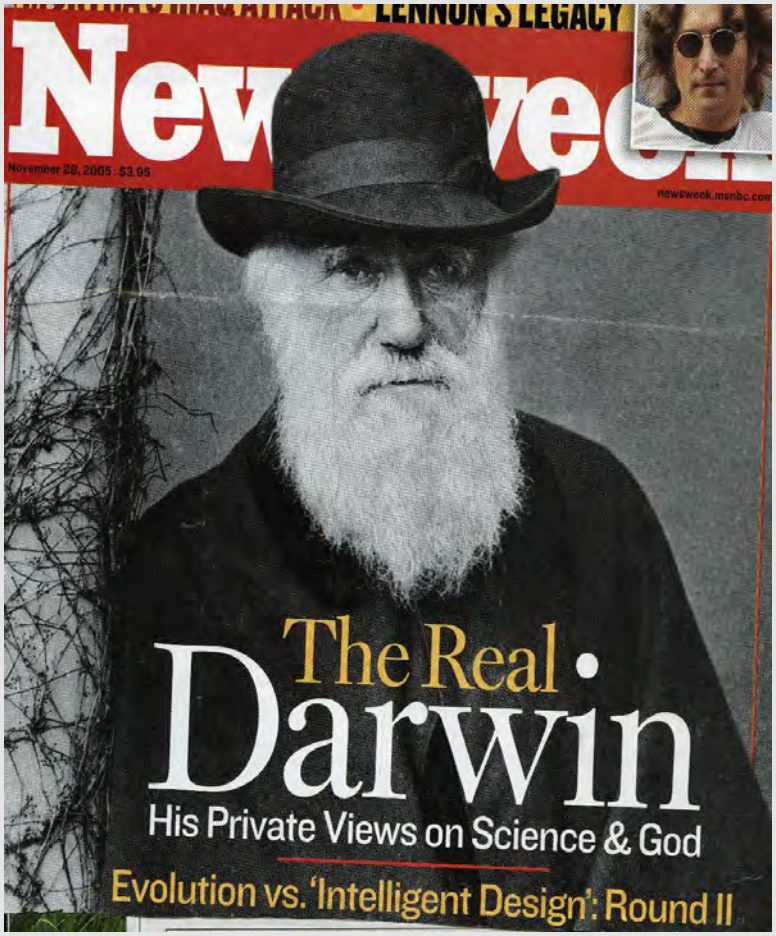
CONCLUSIONS

The origin of life on Earth is best understood in terms of a sequence of emergent chemical events, each of which added a degree of structure and complexity to the prebiotic world.

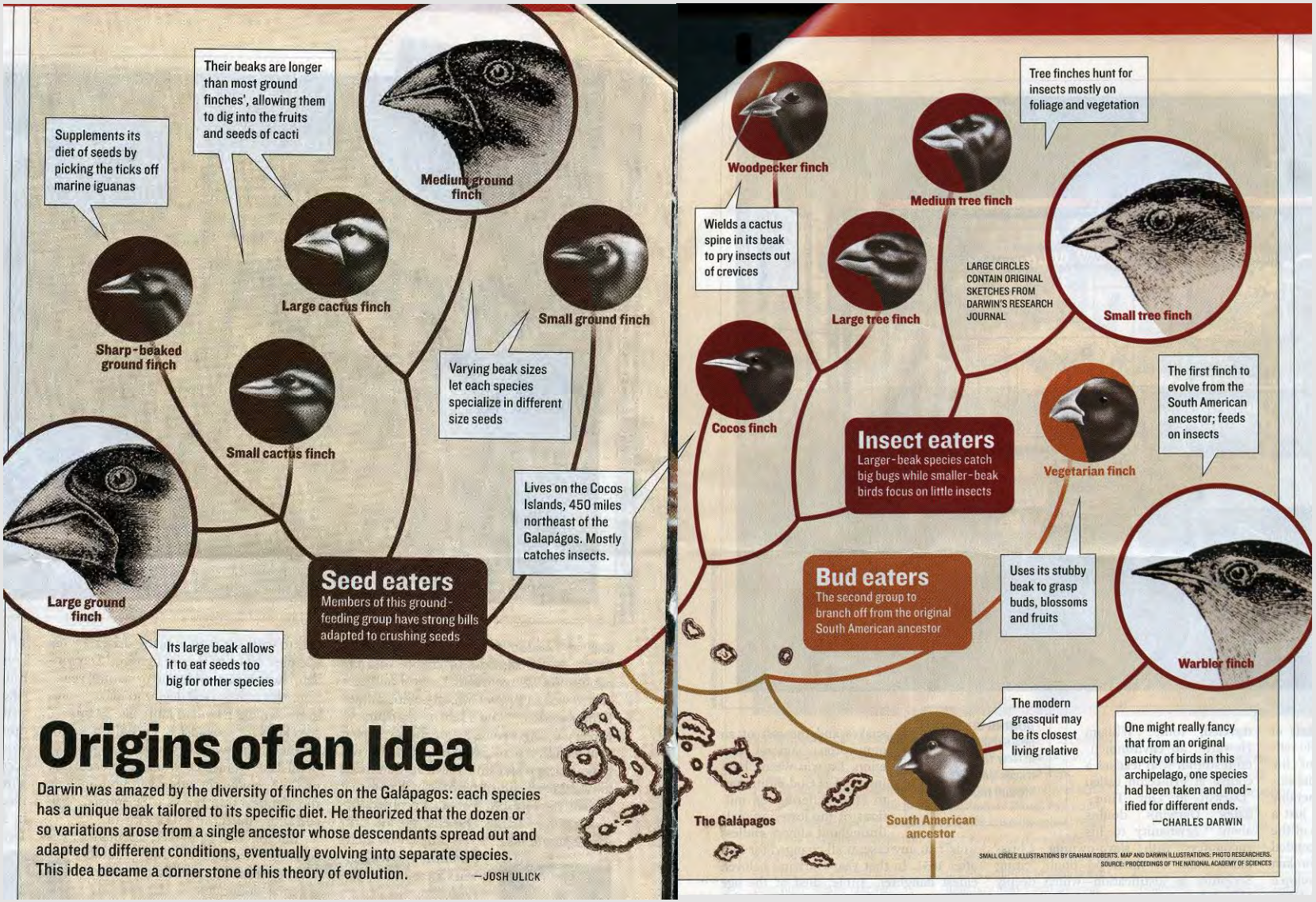
While we don't yet know all the details, there is no compelling evidence to suggest that life's origin was other than a natural process.

Part V: What did Darwin Say?

- The first cell on Earth
  - Had no competition
  - Multiplied rapidly
  - Evolved through cycles of competition and selection



Charles Darwin:
The Beagle at Galapagos



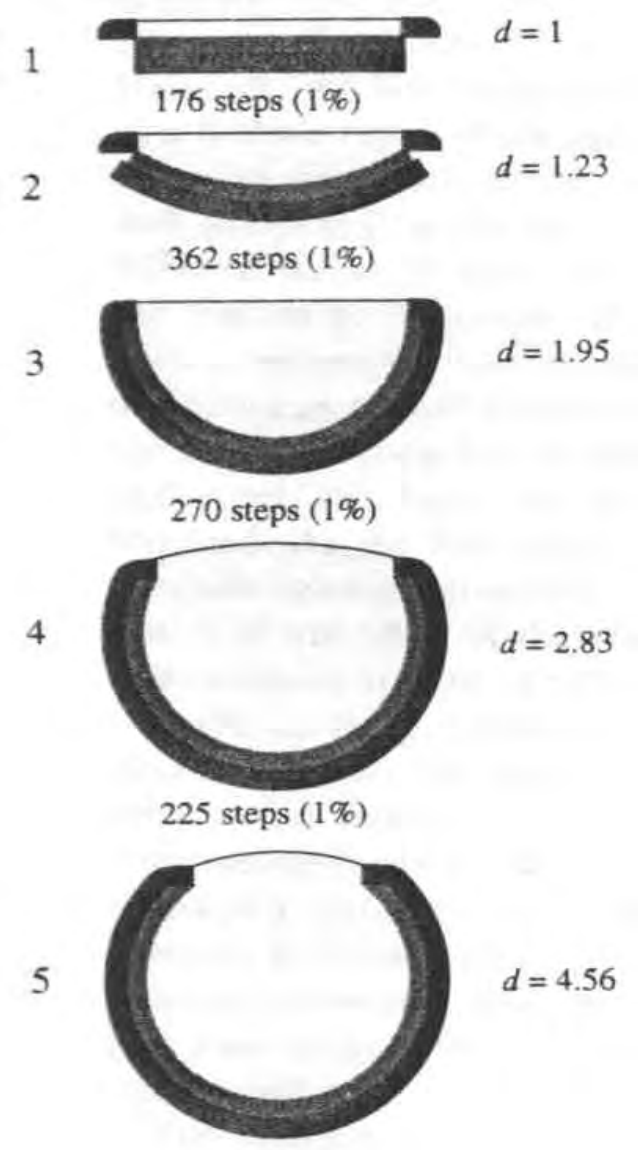
Feedback: Eye Evolution

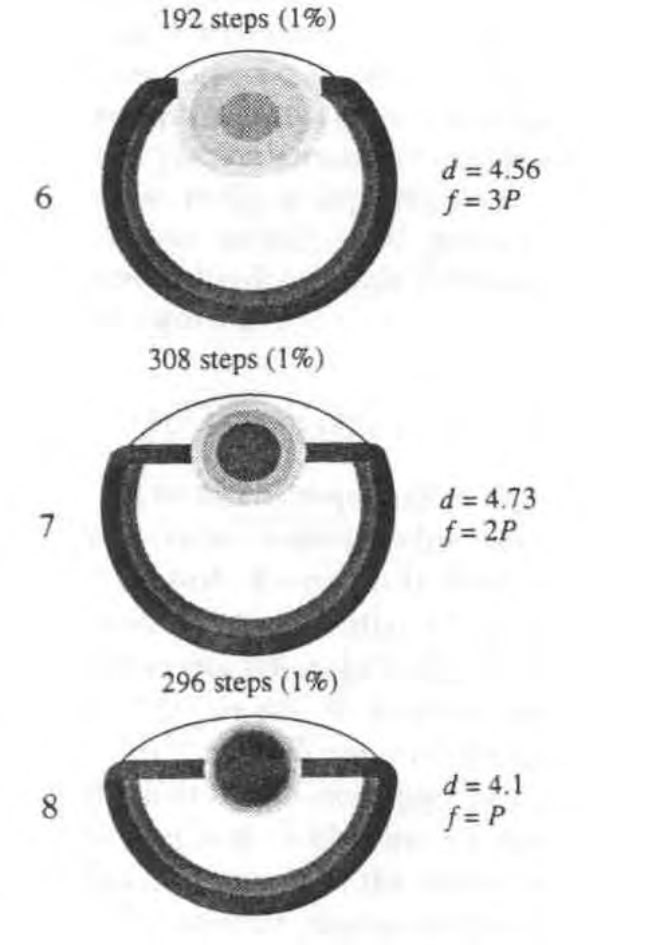
D. Nilsson & S. Pelger, "A pessimistic estimate for the time required for an eye to evolve." *Proc. R. Soc. Lond. B* 256, 53-58 (1994).

Selection rules for model eye evolution:

1. Vary curvature, aperture, and central refractive index randomly by ±1%.
2. If visual acuity (spatial resolution) increases, then retain that variation.

Feedback: Eye Evolution





This evolutionary sequence is continuously driven by selection.

Part VI: Why do I "believe" in evolution

1. We observe complex evolving systems all around us, all the time.

   Nucleosynthesis
   Mineral evolution
   Prebiotic chemical evolution
   Languages
   Material culture
   Biological evolution

Part VI: Why do I "believe" in evolution

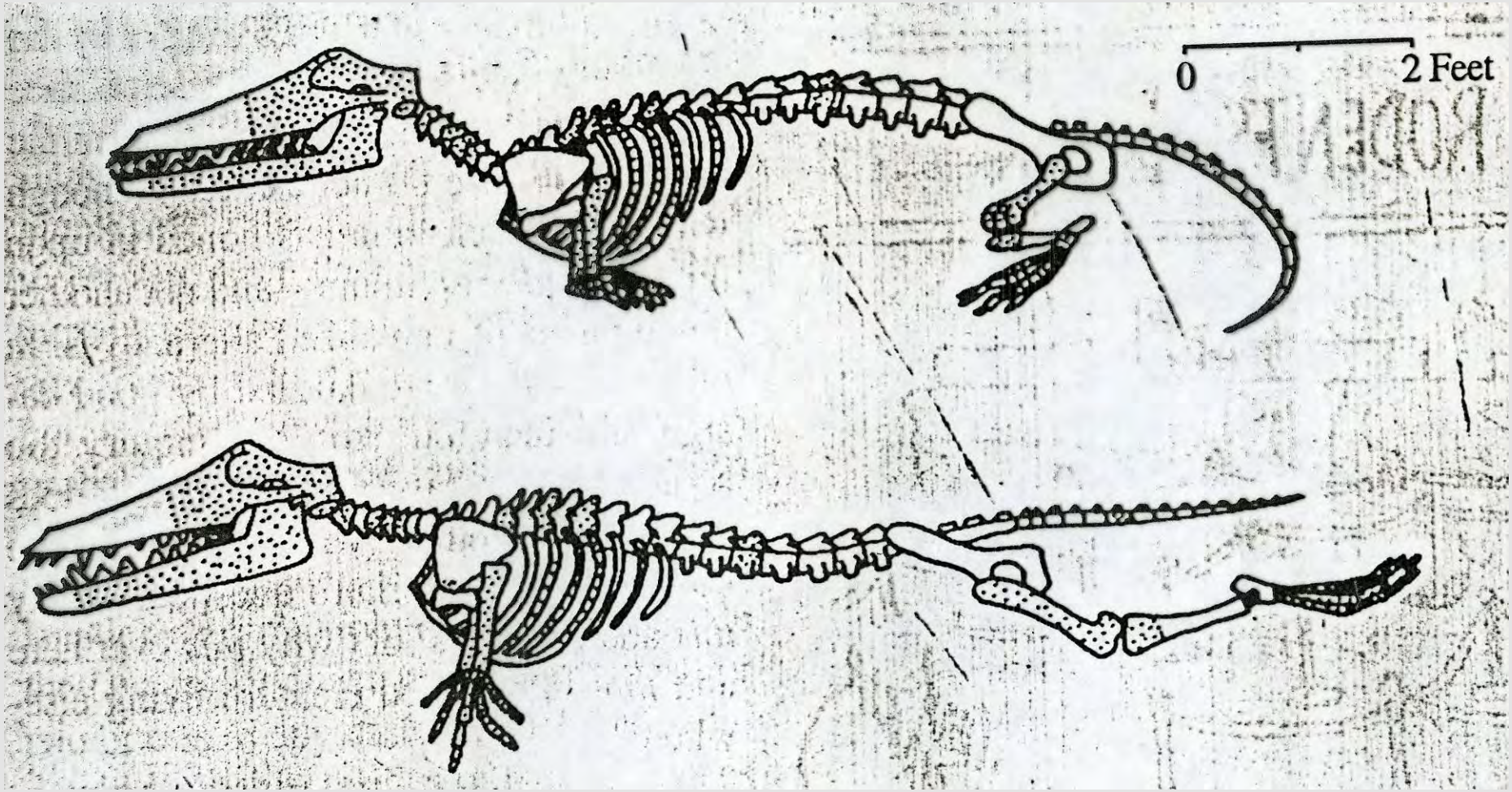
1. We observe complex evolving systems all around us, all the time.
2. The theory of evolution makes testable predictions.

Objections to Darwinian Evolution

"Darwinists rarely mention the whale because it presents them with one of their most insoluble problems. They believe that somehow a whale must have evolved from an ordinary land-dwelling animal, which took to the sea and lost its legs. … A land mammal that was in the process of becoming a whale would fall between two stools – it would not be fitted for life on land or sea, and would have no hope of survival."

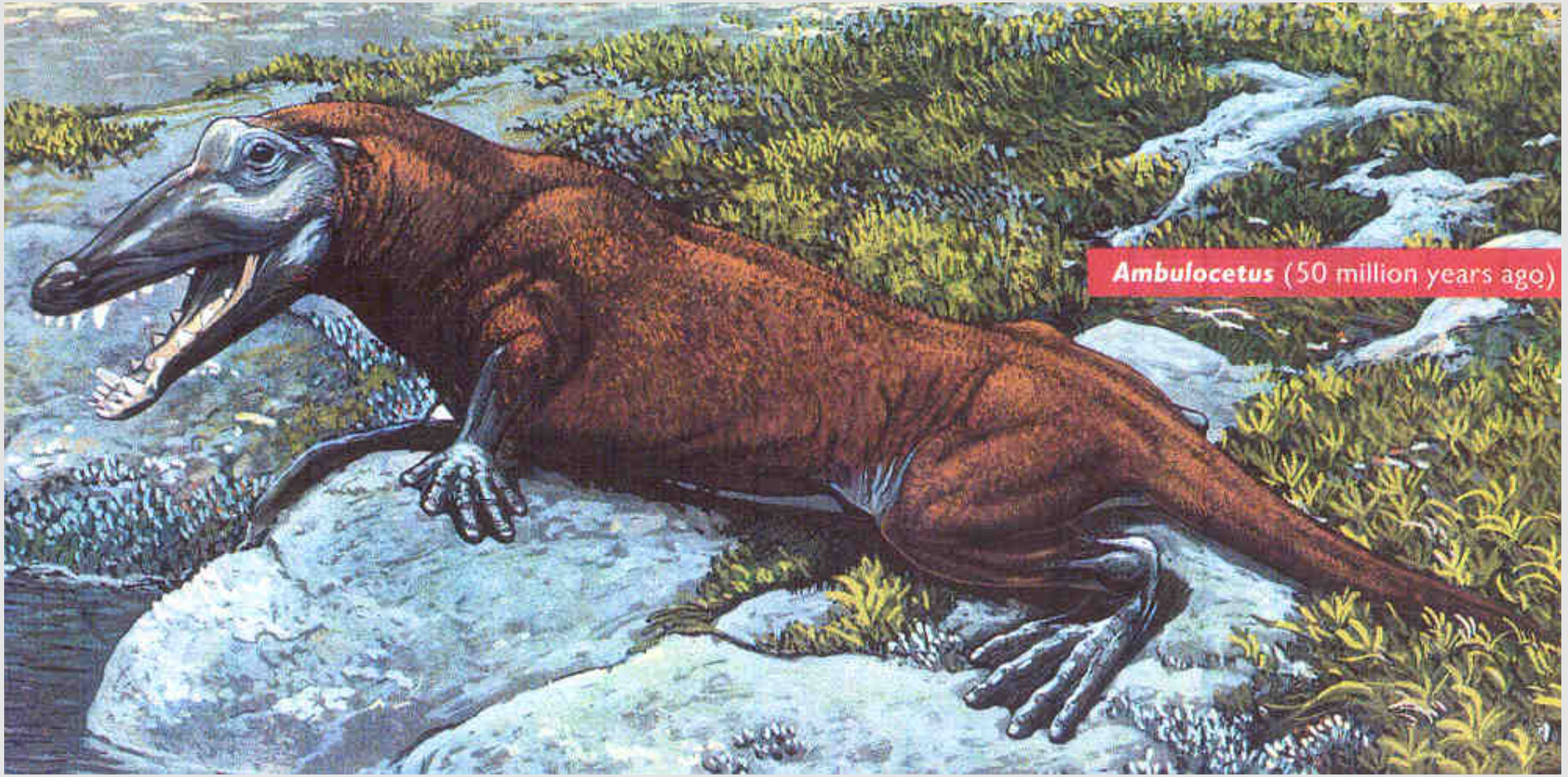
Alan Haywood, 1985

Whale Evolution



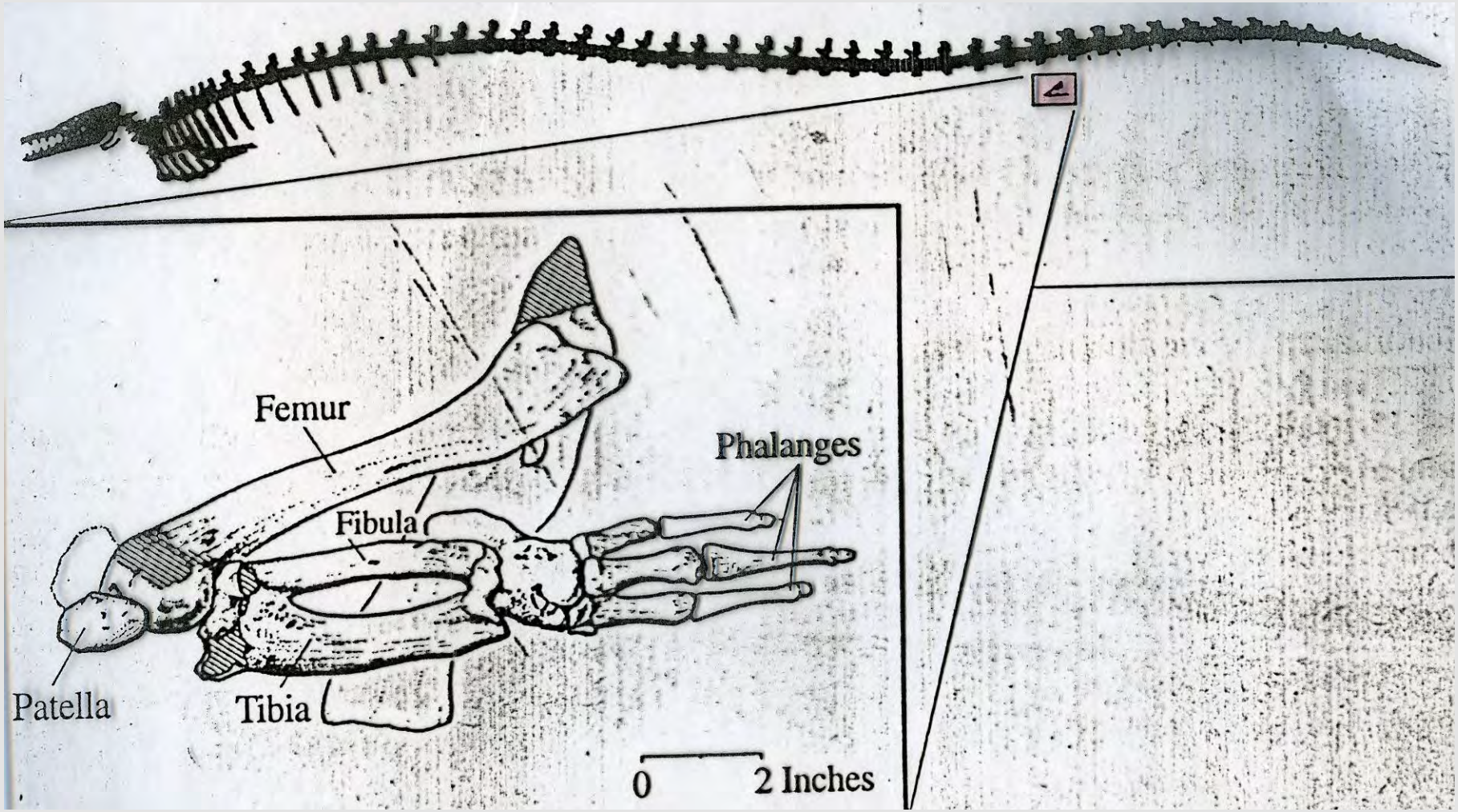
Ambulocetus

Whale Evolution



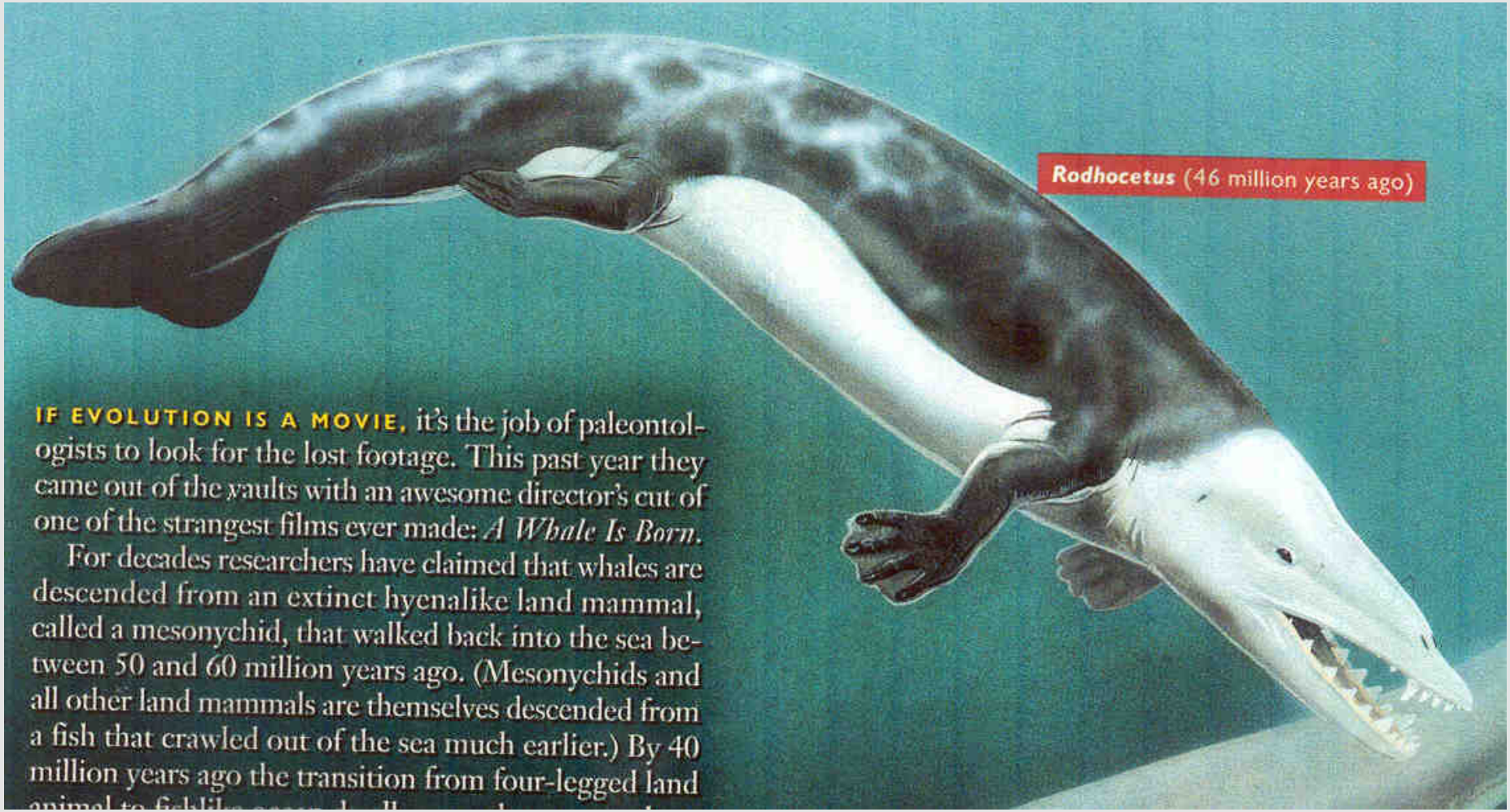
Ambulocetus

Whale Evolution

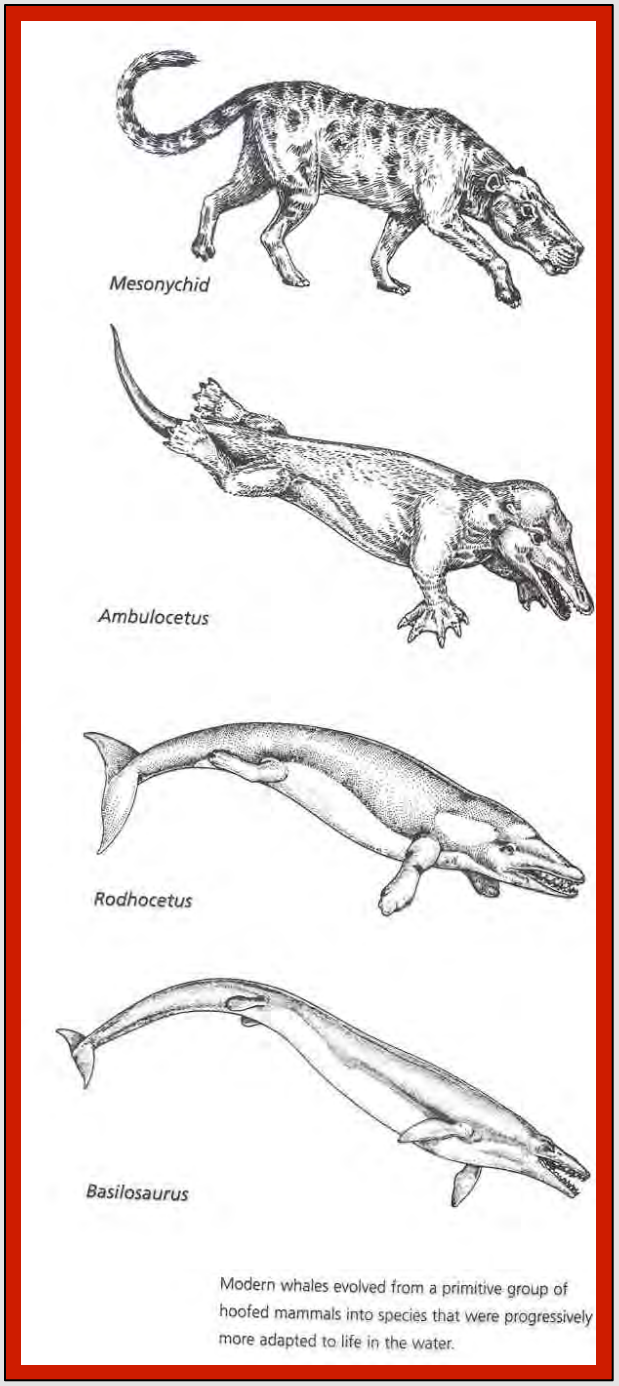


Basilosaurus

Whale Evolution



Rodhocetus



Whale Evolution

The power of the theory of evolution by natural selection lies in its unparalleled predictive power. If we see a gap in the fossil record, then we can predict what kind of rock and what age of rock to search, and we can make a pretty good guess as to what kind of fossil we're likely to find.

Part VI: Why do I "believe" in evolution

1. We observe complex evolving systems all around us, all the time.
2. The theory of evolution makes testable predictions.
3. The alternative ("God in the gaps") is philosophically unacceptable.

Trilobites