

'Walking cactus' rewrites arthropod odyssey

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Image credit: Mingguang Chi

Fossils of a bizarre animal dubbed the "walking cactus" have shed light on the evolution of crabs and spiders, Chinese researchers reported in the journal *Nature* on Wednesday.

Specimens found in 2006 in rocks in the Jianshan area near Haikou, in southwestern China's Yunnan province, have revealed an "armoured lobopodian" that lived nearly half a billion years ago.

This was during the so-called Cambrian Explosion, an astonishing burst of [biodiversity](#) that determined the future of species which are alive today.

Measuring around six centimetres (2.4 inches) long, it comprises a

central spine that resembles a skinny, soft-bodied worm, from which 10 pairs of spiny and apparently jointed limbs emerge.

The paper suggests the primitive critter is the closest-known [fossil](#) relative to modern arthropods.

Its finding boosts theories that arthropods derive from ancestors whose legs developed a tough external skeleton before their bodies did.

The species has been dubbed *Diania cactiformis*. "Dian" is a linguistic derivation in Chinese of Yunnan while "cactiformis" refers to cactus-like shapes.

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