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Earliest Aptian Caprinidae (Bivalvia, Hippuritida) from Lebanon

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Abstract: The presence in Lebanon of *Offneria murgensis* and *Offneria nicolinae*, two characteristic components of the Early Aptian Arabo-African rudist faunas, fills a distributional gap of the corresponding assemblage between the Arabic and African occurrences, on the one hand, and the Apulian occurrences, on the other hand. This fauna bears out the palaeogeographic placement of Lebanon on the southern Mediterranean Tethys margin established by palaeostructural reconstructions. The associated micropaleontological elements suggest an earliest Aptian age (early Bedoulian) for the *Offneria murgensis* - *O. nicolinae* assemblage found in the "Falaise de BLANCHE" stratigraphic interval, instead of a late Early Aptian age as proposed for most of the peri-Adriatic and Middle East occurrences recognized so far. These caprinid specimens are characterized by relatively modest sizes, moreover other rudists commonly part of the assemblage are lacking. The dominance of caprinids in the study area suggests a distal platform setting, i.e., close proximity to the platform edge.

Key Words: *Offneria*; rudists; Aptian; Bedoulian; Jezzinian; Beirut; Lebanon.

Introduction

Early Cretaceous rudist bivalves have a significant record in the Mediterranean region where they are usually associated with shallow-water carbonate platforms (SIMO et al., 1993). During Early Aptian times carbonate platforms were widely distributed on both the northern and the southern margins of the Mediterranean Tethys (MASSE et al., 2000; PHILIP, 2003) and rudist faunas were highly diversified (MASSE, 1985, 1992; MASSE & GALLO-MARESCA, 1997; SKELTON & MASSE, 2000; MASSE et al., 2002; SIMO et al., 1993).

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Figure 1: Location map of the area studied. J, Jurassic; C1, Grès de base; C2a, transitional beds; C2b, "Falaise de BLANCHE".

Skelton & Gili, 2012). Due to a mid-Aptian crisis, the faunal assemblages of the Early and Late Aptian are quite different (see discussion on the various zonal schemes and definitions of the corresponding stages or substages in Réboulet et al., 2011, and Moullade et al., 2011, or Skelton et al., 2013). More than 90% of the Mediterranean rudist species and 70% of the genera disappeared. This extinction event affected mainly the Family Caprinidae and also drastically reduced representatives of the Requieniidae, Monopleuridae and acellular Radiolitidae (Massé, 1989, 1998a, 1998b; Skelton & Gili, 2012; Massé & Fenerci-Masse, 2014).

In Lebanon initial investigations on Early Cretaceous rudists started in the late XIXth century and were summarized by Douvillé (1910), who mentioned two radiolitids of Late Aptian ?-Albian age: Eoradiolites plicatus (Conrad) and E. Iyatus (Conrad). Douvillé (1913) also reported a single Early Aptian taxon that he identified as Agria marticensis (Orbigny). This form was subsequently reassigned by Astre (1930) to a new species, Agria libanica. Following its later transfer to Agriopleura by Kühn (1932), Agriopleura libanica (Astre) was merely ignored by most subsequent paleontologists (Massé & Fenerci-Masse, 2014).

The foregoing shows that all but one occurrences of Early Cretaceous rudists from the region were essentially Late Aptian ?-Albian in age. The present paper deals with the discovery of earliest Aptian representatives of the Family Caprinidae in the "Falaise de BLANCHE" or Jezzinian Regional Stage, as recently reappraised by Maksoud et al. (2014). Our goals are to define the taxonomic position of the corresponding fauna and to discuss its stratigraphic, palaeobiogeographic and palaeoenvironmental significances.

Regional context

The town of Beit Mery¹, Matn District (Lebanon), is located in Beirut's hinterland, overlooking the Lebanese capital and the Mediterranean Sea (Fig. 1). On one of its heights ("the southern hill"), some 10 km E of Beirut corniche, 5 km N of Aley area, is the historic Maronite Monastery (Fig. 2.A) of Saint-John the Baptist (Deir al-Kalaa²: 35°51'16. 99"N, 35°35'52. 30"E, altitude = 716 m), which was built on the ruins (Fig. 2.A & c-D) of old Phoenician and then Roman temples (Ronzvalle, 1900; Perrot & Reignach, 1903). While visiting the site we first identified rudist sections (Fig. 2.B) in some large pieces of columns of the temple of the Roman ruins, then on the monastery exterior sidings, before being able to locate the nearby Roman quarry (Fig. 2.E), on the edge of the "hill".

In the quarry the rudist facies is in the uppermost strata of the "Falaise de BLANCHE" (but, due to erosion, not necessarily representing the top of the stratigraphic unit). These limestones form the structural surface on which is sited the monastery; therefore in this locality we were unable to see the transition from the Jezzinian to the overlying unit, i.e., the Cardium beds.

¹ also spelt "Beit Mary" and "Beit Méry" ² also spelt "Deir el-Kal'a", "Deil el-Kaala", or "Deir-el-Qala'a"
Figure 2: A) The Maronite Monastery of Saint-John the Baptist (Deir al-Kalaa), with the Roman temple basement on the left hand side of the picture; B) a rudist section on the side of a stele (Pl. 1, fig. I); C) a Roman stele with rudist sections in the garden of the monastery; D) a Roman column with rudist sections on the back of the monastery; E) the quarry, below the car park, at the entrance of the monastery.
DUBERTRET (1955) ascribes a Late Aptian to the "Falaise de BLANCHE", which appears with the label "c2b" (and ? "c2a") on the Beirut map (DUBERTRET, 1945; see Fig. 1). Below "Falaise de BLANCHE", Lower Cretaceous strata are referred to the "Grès de base" and labelled "c1" on the map. In the same area, near Beit Mery and W of Mansourieh, TIXIER (1965, p. 23-25) measured a 150 meter-thick section consisting mainly of sandstones below the first limestones bearing "Nérinées" representing the base of the "Falaise de BLANCHE".

Taxonomic aspects

Rudist occurrences in the "Falaise de BLANCHE" are mostly represented by sections photographed on natural or artificial (quarried) outcrops and polished slabs. Sections are ascribed to the genus Offneria PAQUIER, 1905 (Caprinidae), which is characterized by the presence of pallial canals on both valves. Canal walls are essentially radial and are associated with oblique or tangential, vertical partitions; in addition, transverse, concave cupules (i.e., towards the commissure) are also present, giving the overall canaliculate structure a somewhat complex architecture; cupules are numerous in the RV - right valve - and much rarer in the LV - left valve - (PAQUIER, 1905; MASSE, 1992; CHARTROUSSE, 1998).


Offneria murgensis MASSE (1992): This species is represented by numerous sections of both valves. The antero-posterior diameter of sections of the LV is in the range of 3-4 cm, and the dorso-ventral dimension is in the same range. Longitudinal sections show a prosogyral, spirogyrate habit; low density of tabulae in the body cavity and low density of transverse partitions in the canals (Pl. 1, figs. A & C). There is a single row of ventral, ogival or pyriform canals with few radial bifurcations, except at the antero-ventral and posterior-ventral edges (carina) with one or two orders of bifurcations (Pl. 1, figs. A-B & D). The ventral side is slightly depressed (Pl. 1, figs. A-B). Sections of the RV are poorly preserved but show the high density of cupulate canals giving to the tangential, longitudinal sections a grid-pattern (Pl. 1, figs. E-F). The overall transverse dimensions of the Lebanese specimens are slightly smaller than those of the type material from Italy (CHARTROUSSE, 1998); this may be due either to the fact that the recorded sections are not commissural or more probably to a more primitive evolutionary state. Another difference, having the same significance, is the scarcity of bifurcations of ventral canals, a common feature of apical sections of O. murgensis from Italy and the Middle East.

Offneria nicolinae (MAINELLI, 1983): The recognition of this species is essentially based on longitudinal sections of the RV, which is characterized by a relatively small diameter (1.5 to 2 cm), a significant elongation (up to 10 cm), a high density of tabulae in the body cavity, and a high density of cupules in the shell wall (Pl. 1, figs. H-I). A transverse section of the LV with a small antero-posterior diameter (2.5 cm) and radically elongated, surrounded to ogival, simple (non-bifurcated) canals, lacking tabulae in the body cavity, is tentatively ascribed to O. nicolinae, because the ventral canals are not well preserved (Pl. 1, fig. G).

Palaeobiogeographic significance

The palaeobiogeographic distribution of Early Aptian Offneria species in the Mediterranean Tethys is not uniform and two assemblages with contrasting ages and spatial distributions have been recognized. The first assemblage with O. rhodanica PAQUIER (1905), O. interrupta PAQUIER (1905) is cosmopolitan. It extends from Western Europe to the Middle East, and is essentially documented from the earliest Aptian (MASSE, 1976, 1996; MASSE et al., 1998b, 2004: "Early Bedoulian"). The second assemblage, essentially late Early Aptian, including O. murgensis MASSE, O. italica MASSE and O. nicolinae (MAINELLI) (MAINELLI, 1983; MASSE, 1992; "Late Bedoulian") is restricted to the Arabo-African domain: Italy, Greece, Algeria, Bosnia, Oman, Saudi Arabia, and United Arab Emirates (MASSE, 1992; CASTARI & SARTORIO, 1995; CHARTROUSSE, 1998; STEUBER, 1999; SKELTON & MASSE, 2000; MASSE et al., 2004; HUGHES, 2004). O. arabica CHARTROUSSE & MASSE has not hitherto been identified outside Arabia (CHARTROUSSE & MASSE, 1998). The discovery in Lebanon of two key members, i.e., Offneria murgensis and O. nicolinae, belonging to the Early Aptian Arabo-African assemblage of Offneria is consistent with the Early Cretaceous palaeogeographic configurations placing the Levant on the Mediterranean Tethyan southern margin (e.g., MASSE et al., 2000), as well as with the corresponding palaeobiogeographic reconstructions based on benthic foraminifera and calcareous algae (e.g., PELISSIÉ et al., 1982) or rudists (MASSE, 1985; MASSE et al., 2002; MASSE & FENERCI-MASSE, 2008). The discovery of Offneria murgensis and O. nicolinae in Lebanon fills a distributional gap of the corresponding assemblages between the Arabic (Oman, UAE, Saudi Arabia) and African (Algeria) occurrences, on the one hand, and the Apulian (Italy, Croatia, Slovenia, Bosnia, Greece) occurrences, on the other hand.
Biostratigraphic significance

In Oman Offneria murgensis and O. nicolinae are locally present in beds corresponding with the upper part of the Kharaid Formation (just below the Hawar Formation), where they are associated with Offneria rhodanica and Prae-caprina sp. However Offneria murgensis and O. nicolinae are the cardinal forms found in the overlying Shu‘aiba Formation where they are associated with Offneria italica, a rare species (Masé et al., 1998a). This Shu‘aiba assemblage post-dates the OAE1a event (Granier, 2012, 2013) and its age is late Early Aptian (Note: Busnardo & Granier 2013) have reported and illustrated an ammonite assemblage typical of the Fucata Zone from the condensed section of the Shu‘aiba in the Bab basin, definitely validating earlier ascriptions of Granier (2000, 2008) and Granier et al. (2003). The presence of Palorbitolina lenticularis (Blumenbach), Palorbitolina ultima (Berchi & Schroeder, and Praeorbitolina cormyi Schroeder corroborates a late Early Aptian age (Schroeder et al., 2010). The extent of the two Offneria species in the "Upper Aptian" of Saudi Arabia, as proposed by Hughes (2004) on the basis of an erroneous calibration of benthic foraminifera (e.g., Palorbitolina lenticularis) to calcareous nannofossils, is regarded untenable. Actually the genus Offneria and other associated caprinid species disappeared at the Early-Late Aptian boundary (Masé, 1989; Masé et al., 1998a; at the boundary of the Fucata and the Martini ammonitic zones). Offneria murgensis is a common member of Praeorbitolina-bearing limestones in Italy and Algeria (Luperto-Sinni & Masé, 1992; Masé, 2003).

In Lebanon, the presence of Praeorbitolina cormyi Schroeder identified by Moullade and Saint-Marc (1975), that of Praeorbitolina wienandsi Schroeder, formerly reported by Henson as Orbitolina discoidea var. libanica (see discussion in Simons et al., 2000) and by Saint-Marc as Mesorbitolina lotzei (see discussion in Schroeder et al., 2010), and the possible co-occurrence of Mesorbitolina parva identified by Moullade and Saint-Marc (1975) in the "couches à Orbitolines" (Saint-Marc, 1970), i.e., strata referred to the "Falaise de Blanche", may support a similar late Early Aptian age. Actually new micropaleontological data from Maksoud et al. (2014) based on re-sampling in the context of an accurate regional field survey provide a contrasting picture and suggest an earliest Aptian age for the genuine "Falaise de Blanche" interval, which is characterized by a Palorbitolina lenticularis - Montseciella arabica - ? Rectodictyoconus giganteus assemblage. The "couches à Orbitolines" bearing the Praeorbitolina assemblage are no longer referable to the "Falaise de Blanche" (i.e., not to the Jezzinian), but to the lowermost part of the overlying Car-dium beds. Maksoud et al. (2014) identify a discontinuity separating both discrete units. In addition to the foraminifera Praeorbitolina, Maksoud et al. (2014) report specimens of the ammonite Cheloniceras cornuelianum above this "transgressive surface". Therefore the age of the Cardium beds is not Late Aptian, as proposed by Saint-Marc (1970), but late Early Aptian (Maksoud et al., 2014).

The foregoing stratigraphic interpretation suggests that the Lebanese Offneria assemblage may be older than those recognized in both the Apulian and Arabian regions of the Middle East. Owing to a common trend of increasing size through time reported for rudist lineages (e.g., Skelton & Masé, 1998; Gourrat et al., 2003, among others) the peculiar timing of this assemblage may give a clue for interpreting the relatively modest size of the specimens, compared to their younger representatives from adjacent regions, as well as for interpreting the absence of advanced forms of Offneria such as O. italica, for instance. Placing the "Falaise de Blanche" in the lowermost Aptian has some implications for the stratigraphic interpretation of Agriopleura libanica (Astre) (Astre, 1930), a species assumed to have been collected from the lower part of the stratigraphic unit studied (see Douville, 1913), and recently revised (Masé & Fenerci-Masé, 2014). Agriopleura libanica has a wide extent in Lower Aptian strata of the Apulian and Arabo-African regions where its age is essentially late Early Aptian. Data from Lebanon, the type region, do not match this age; therefore one can expect that the collection of new specimens will confirm the existence of this species in the earliest Aptian times.

Environmental significance of the caprinid assemblage

In Lebanon Offneria representatives appear to be the dominant forms of a "caprinid facies", reminiscent of the "distal caprinid fa-cies" of the Middle East (Masé et al., 1998a, 1998b) and closely resembling the European "caprinid facies" observed in Bedoulian Urgonian carbonate platforms from SE France (Masé, 1976). This facies is characterized by the paucity of requienid and monopleurid rudists and by a close spatial or stratigraphic relationship with coral facies. A peculiar feature of the Lebanese rudist assemblage is the dominance of capinids, whereas poorly-preserved forms (capinids?) are present, but never abundant, and whereas both requieniids and monopleurids are absent. For instance, Glossomyophorus costatus Masé et al., 1984, a form very common in the Middle East and the peri-Adriatic regions (Masé et al., 1984, 2004; Masé, 1992; Skelton & Masé, 1998; Hughes, 2004), has not yet been recorded in Lebanon.
Conclusions

The discovery in Lebanon of *Offneria murgensis* and *O. nicolinae*, two key members of early Aptian Arabo-African rudist faunas, fills a distributional gap between occurrences of this assemblage in the Arabic (Oman, UAE, Saudi Arabia) and African (Algeria) regions, on the one hand, and the Apulian (Italy, Croatia, Slovenia, Bosnia, Greece) area, on the other hand. This fauna bears out the palaeogeographic placement of Lebanon on the southern Mediterranean Tethyan margin as established by palaeostructural reconstructions. The associated micropaleontological elements suggest an earliest Aptian age for the *Offneria murgensis*-*O. nicolinae* assemblage instead of a late Early Aptian age as proposed for most peri-Adriatic and Middle East occurrences recognized so far. This age has some implications for dating some rudist forms, e.g., *Agriopleura libanica*, found earlier in the "Falaise de BLANCHE". The studied caprinid specimens are characterized by relatively modest sizes. Other rudists that are commonly part of the assemblage (e.g., in the Middle East) are lacking here. The dominance of caprinids in the area studied suggests distal platform settings and close proximity to the platform edge.

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Plate 1: *Offneria murgensis*: A) Transverse oblique section of a LV showing the canaliculate shell structure, the arcuate prosogyrate shape and tabulae of the body cavity; B) transverse section of a LV showing the canaliculate habit with pyriform canals, ventral side somewhat damaged; C) longitudinal section of a LV showing the arcuate shell habit, tabulae in body cavity and sparse transverse partitions; D) close up of the antero-ventral edge of a LV showing the bifurcation (several orders) of canals; E) longitudinal section of a RV showing the high density of cupules within the canals; F) Close up of the grid like pattern of canal system of a RV. *Offneria cf. nicolinae*: G) Transverse oblique section of a LV showing the canaliculate habit, posterior canals ogival (becoming rectangular-tangential towards the apex, due to the obliquity of the section), ventral portion damaged. *Offneria nicolinae*: H) Longitudinal section of a RV showing the high density of concave tabulae in the body cavity; I) *Ibidem* [ Scale bar 1 cm ].

A part of the studied material will be registered with MHNUL numbers in the collections of the Muséum d’Histoire naturelle, Université Libanaise, Fanar - El-Matn (Lebanon).

Legend: A - anterior, P - posterior, V - ventral, D - dorsal, tp - transverse partitions, tbc - tabulae of the body cavity (bc), pmc - posterior myocardinal cavity (LV), arrows point to the commissure.


