# Section 1: Evolution and Classification

**Evolutionary Origins**

The **phylum Bryozoa (bryon, "moss" + zoon, "animal")** represents an ancient and morphologically distinct group of **sessile, filter-feeding invertebrates**. Fossil evidence places their first appearance in the **Ordovician period (~480 million years ago)**, though some molecular studies suggest they may have originated as early as the Cambrian. Bryozoans were once grouped with **brachiopods (lamp shells) and phoronids (horseshoe worms)** due to their shared **lophophore**, a tentacle-bearing feeding structure used for suspension feeding. Along with these phyla, bryozoans belong to **Lophophorata**, a subgroup within **Lophotrochozoa** that is united by the presence of this specialized feeding organ.

Despite their soft-bodied appearance, **Bryozoa possess an extensive fossil record**, primarily due to their ability to secrete **calcified exoskeletons**. Fossilized colonies indicate that early bryozoans played a crucial role in **paleo-marine ecosystems**, often forming reef-like structures alongside corals and sponges. The evolutionary success of Bryozoa is attributed to their **modular, colonial organization**, allowing for adaptive growth patterns in diverse marine environments.

One of the ongoing **phylogenetic debates** surrounding Bryozoa concerns their relationship to **Entoprocta**, another sessile, lophophore-bearing group. While entoprocts were historically considered part of Bryozoa, differences in body plan—such as the placement of the **anus outside** the lophophore ring in bryozoans versus inside the ring in entoprocts—suggest that these groups are evolutionarily distinct. Understanding their evolutionary position provides a framework for studying the adaptations that have allowed Bryozoa to persist and diversify for nearly half a billion years.

**Distinguishing Characteristics of Bryozoa**

Bryozoans are **unique among lophotrochozoans** due to their **colonial organization, polymorphic zooids, and exoskeletal support structures**. While individual bryozoan units, called **zooids (zoion, "animal")**, are **microscopic**, colonies can form **large, complex structures** in marine and freshwater environments.

1. **Colonial Lifestyle**
	* Unlike solitary invertebrates, most bryozoans function as **integrated colonies** where individual zooids specialize in feeding, reproduction, or defense.
	* Colonies range from **encrusting mats** on hard surfaces to **branching, fan-like forms** in open water.
2. **Lophophore-Feeding Mechanism**
	* All bryozoans possess a **lophophore**, a **ciliated, tentacle-bearing structure** used for **suspension feeding**.
	* The lophophore’s **ciliary motion** generates a **water current**, drawing plankton and organic particles toward the mouth.
3. **Zooid Specialization**
	* **Autozooids:** The primary **feeding zooids**, responsible for **nutrient intake**.
	* **Heterozooids:** Specialized for **defense (avicularia), structural support, or reproduction**.
4. **Exoskeleton Composition**
	* The **body wall** is reinforced by **chitin or calcium carbonate**, forming protective chambers.
	* In many species, each zooid is enclosed within a **protective casing**, known as the **cystid (kystis, "bladder")**, which houses the **polypide (the lophophore, digestive system, and nervous system).**
5. **Sessile and Modular Growth**
	* Colonies **expand through budding**, forming **intricate, modular structures** that adapt to their surroundings.
	* Some freshwater species **form free-floating statoblasts**, which aid in dispersal and survival.

**Major Subgroups of Bryozoa**

**Class Phylactolaemata (Freshwater Bryozoans)**

The **Phylactolaemata** are **exclusively freshwater bryozoans** and are unique among the group due to their **gelatinous or chitinous colonies** rather than a rigid, calcareous exoskeleton. The term **gelatinous** refers to the **soft, mucous-like consistency** of some colonies, which lack a mineralized framework, while **chitinous colonies** have a flexible yet protective organic exoskeleton. These bryozoans are typically **sessile**, attaching to submerged vegetation, rocks, or other surfaces in lakes, rivers, and ponds.

This class is the **smallest** of the bryozoan groups, with **only about 80 known extant species**. Unlike marine bryozoans, **Phylactolaemata lack polymorphic zooids**, meaning all zooids in a colony serve the **same feeding function**. They reproduce primarily through **statoblasts**, specialized **dormant propagules** that allow colonies to survive seasonal drying, freezing, and other environmental stresses. Phylactolaemates play an important ecological role in **filtering freshwater systems**, reducing phytoplankton populations and contributing to water clarity.

### Species Profile: Magnificent Bryozoan (Pectinatella magnifica)

This freshwater bryozoan forms gelatinous colonies that can exceed two feet in diameter, appearing as translucent, brownish masses attached to submerged surfaces like sticks or rocks. Each colony comprises numerous rosette-shaped clusters, each containing 12-18 individual zooids. During unfavorable conditions, they produce statoblasts—hard, seed-like structures—that ensure the species' survival and dispersal. As filter feeders, they play a role in improving water clarity by consuming microscopic organisms. While generally harmless, their large colonies can occasionally clog water intake systems.

**Class Gymnolaemata (Marine Encrusting and Arborescent Bryozoans)**

The **Gymnolaemata** are **predominantly marine** and are the most **species-rich class** of bryozoans, containing **over 3,800 extant species**. They are distinguished by their **calcified exoskeletons**, which provide structural integrity and protection. **Gymnolaemates form encrusting or arborescent colonies**—terms that refer to their growth forms. **Encrusting colonies** grow as thin, sheet-like formations on hard surfaces such as rocks, shells, or ship hulls, whereas **arborescent colonies** develop **branching, tree-like structures** that extend into the water column.

Many gymnolaemates exhibit **polymorphic specialization**, with **defensive zooids (avicularia and vibracula)** protecting the colony from predators and fouling organisms. Some species, such as Bugula neritina, produce **bryostatins**, secondary metabolites with potential **anti-cancer properties**. Ecologically, gymnolaemates contribute to **benthic marine ecosystems**, providing shelter for small invertebrates and serving as a substrate for epiphytic organisms.

### Species Profile: Brown Bryozoan (Bugula neritina)

This species forms dense, bushy colonies that are often reddish-brown in color. Notably, Bugula neritinaharbors symbiotic bacteria that produce bryostatins, compounds of interest for their potential medicinal properties, including anti-cancer activities. Its widespread distribution and biofouling capabilities make it both ecologically significant and a focus of biomedical research.

**Class Stenolaemata (Tubular, Deep-Sea Bryozoans)**

The **Stenolaemata** are **exclusively marine**, with a lineage dating back to the **Paleozoic era**. They are characterized by **tubular zooids**, meaning that each individual zooid within the colony is housed in an **elongated, tube-like chamber**. This structure provides rigidity and protection, making stenolaemates particularly **common in deep-sea and fossil deposits**.

This class has a relatively small number of living representatives, with **around 600 extant species**. Unlike the more flexible Gymnolaemata, **Stenolaemata colonies tend to be rigid and erect**, often resembling small **coral-like formations**. Their tubular shape allows for **efficient water flow through the colony**, maximizing the effectiveness of their **lophophore feeding** system. While many species are **extinct**, modern representatives still exist in deep-sea habitats, where they contribute to the formation of **complex reef-like structures**.

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