Phylogeny and evolution of head shape in Amphisbaenia (Reptilia: Squamata).

São Paulo

2017
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Filogenia e evolução das formas da cabeça em Amphisbaenia (Reptilia: Squamata).

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Tese apresentada ao Instituto de Biociências da Universidade de São Paulo para obtenção do título de Doutora em Ciências Biológicas.

Área de Concentração: Zoologia
Orientador(a): Hussam El Dine Zaher

São Paulo, 2017.
RESUMO

Dentre os Squamata, a subordem Amphisbaenia é composta por organismos que apresentam diversas modificações morfológicas adaptadas para hábitos fossoriais. Atualmente, Amphisbaenia possui 192 espécies descritas que são divididas em seis famílias (Amphisbaenidae, Blanidae, Bipedidae, Cadeidae, Rhineuridae e Trogonophidae) que possuem ampla distribuição, ocorrendo na região Neotropical, África subsaariana, partes da região do Mediterrâneo, Baixa Califórnia e Flórida. Apesar do progresso do conhecimento acerca do grupo, o posicionamento filogenético de Amphisbaenia dentro de Squamata, bem como as relações entre as famílias e gêneros ainda permanecem incertos. Muitos trabalhos atribuem as dificuldades para compreensão da origem e evolução das Amphisbaenia à convergência de diversos caracteres morfológicos, como as diferentes formas da cabeça presentes neste grupo. Sendo assim, o presente trabalho visa investigar e contribuir para preencher algumas lacunas sobre o conhecimento do grupo. Para isso, este trabalho fornece uma nova proposta filogenética e taxonômica para Amphisbaenia usando uma amostragem abrangente de táxons e diferentes métodos de sequenciamento (Sanger e Anchored Phylogenomics) para compreender as relações entre as famílias e gêneros, bem como inferir o posicionamento filogenético de Amphisbaenia dentro de Squamata. Este trabalho também visa compreender a evolução das formas da cabeça dentro de Amphisbaenia, testando se essas formas possuem relação filogenética, com o ambiente ou se são convergências morfológicas. Para isso foi utilizado tomografia computadorizada de alta resolução, marcos anatômicos (Landmarks) e técnicas de morfometria geométrica de 135 espécies de Amphisbaenia.

Palavras chave: Sistemática, Filogenia, Genomics, Squamata, Amphisbaenians.
ABSTRACT

Within the Squamata, the suborder Amphisbaenia consists of a group of legless lizards that have adapted to fossorial life through several morphological changes. Currently, Amphisbaenia comprises 192 described species that are divided into six families (Amphisbaenidae, Blanidae, Bipedidae, Cadeidae, Rhineuridae, and Trogonophidae). The suborder is widely distributed, occurring in the Neotropical region, sub-Saharan Africa, parts of the Mediterranean region, Baja California and Florida. Despite advancements in the knowledge of the group, the phylogenetic position of Amphisbaenia within Squamata and the relationships among its families and genera remains uncertain. Many studies attribute the difficulties in understanding the origin and evolution of the Amphisbaenia to the convergence of the head shapes. Thus, the present study aims to investigate and contribute to fill these gaps in the knowledge of this group. For this, it was provided a new phylogenetic and taxonomic proposal for Amphisbaenia a combination of different approaches for taxon and character methods (Sanger, Anchored Phylogenomics and morphological data) to understand the relationships among families and genera, as well as to infer the phylogenetic position of the Amphisbaenia within Squamata. Additionally, this study aims to understand the evolution of head forms within Amphisbaenia, testing whether these forms have a phylogenetic or environment relationship, and if they are morphological convergences. High-resolution X-ray computed tomography (HRXCT), anatomical landmarks and geometric morphometrics techniques were used to analyze the differences in head shape of 135 species of Amphisbaenia.

Key words: Systematic, Phylogeny, Genomics, Squamates, Amphisbaenians.
GENERAL INTRODUCTION

Squamata (snakes, "lizards", amphisbaenians and mosasaurs) are reptiles with a vast fossil record (Conrad, 2008) and share several morphological characteristics, which support them as a monophyletic clade. Amphisbaenia is classified as a suborder of Squamata, comprising organisms that have strictly fossorial habits. Their anatomy has several modifications for this lifestyle, such as extremely rigid skulls joined by sutures to assist in the excavation, an elongated body, short tail and a unique modification of the inner ear, which detects low frequency sounds (Gans, 1978; Kearney, 2003).

Currently, Amphisbaenia comprises of 193 nominal taxa (Uetz et al., 2017) that are divided into six families (Kearney, 2003; Vidal et al., 2008). Of the six families in Amphisbaenia, four have restricted geographic distributions: Rhineuridae consists of only one extant species distributed in the southeastern United States of America; Bipedidae comprises three species, which are found in southern Baja California, Guerrero, and Michoacán in Mexico; Blanidae comprises seven species distributed in the Mediterranean region (Kearney, 2003; Sindicato et al., 2014); and Cadeidae consists of two species restricted to Cuba (Vidal et al., 2008). The other two families have a widespread distribution: Trogonophidae consists of six species divided into four genera, distributed across the Middle East (including Socotra Island) and North Africa (Gans, 1990; Kearney, 2003); and Amphisbaenidae, which is the most diverse family (174 nominal taxa), has a disjoint distribution, occurring in sub-Saharan Africa, South America and the Caribbean island (Kearney, 2003; Vidal et al., 2008; Montero, 2016; Uetz et al. 2017).

Because of the extensive distribution and the cryptic nature of fossorial organisms, Amphisbaenia is often poorly represented in museum collections. Considering these facts, the taxonomy and phylogenetic relationships of this group remains disputing. Furthermore, many
studies attribute the difficulties to understanding their relationships to convergence, i.e. homoplasy, of several morphological characters.

Estes et al. (1978) conducted one of the first phylogenetic studies involving large groups of Squamata based on morphological characters including osteology and the anatomy of the soft tissues. The results of this study suggested that Amphisbaenia form a monophyletic clade with Dibamidae and “snakes”. However, due to morphological convergence, the phylogenetic position of this clade was considered uncertain (Estes et al., 1978). Besides, it is noteworthy that in this study, the phylogenetic analysis did not utilize information from fossil records that seems to affect significantly the results of analyses based exclusively on morphological data.

Historically, studies based only on morphological characters grouped Amphisbaenia with Gekkota (Lee 1998; Evans & Barbadilo, 2008), Lacertidae (Schwenk, 1988; Wu, 1996), Scincidae (Conrad, 2008), Dibamidae (Greer, 1985b; Hallermann, 1998; Kearney, 2003; Rieppel & Zaher, 2000a; Lee, 2000; Gauthier et al., 2012) and snakes (Rage, 1982). However, recent studies based on molecular and morphological analyses (total evidence) suggest that Amphisbaenia are related to Lacertidae (Townsend et al., 2004; Vidal & Hedges, 2005; Vidal & Hedges, 2008; Wiens, 2010, 2012; Müller et al., 2011; Streicher & Wiens, 2017).

Similar to the question concerning the affinities of Amphisbaenia within Squamata, phylogenetic analyses of familial and generic relationships are also challenging, and these relationships have been uncertain for more than a century. Morphological studies by Taylor (1951), Vanzolini (1951, 1951b) and Gans (1978, 1974) recognize four families: Amphisbaenidae, Bipedidae, Rhineuridae and Trogonophidae. However, these studies did not employ phylogenetic method to establish the affinities among families. Kearney (2003) analyzed 162 morphological characters, and introduced the first and most complete phylogenetic proposal for Amphisbaenia.
In this study, Amphisbaenia was inferred to be the sister group of Dibamidae, and a new family was described (Blanidae). This study also supported the classical hypothesis of *Bipes* as the sister group of all Amphisbaenians.

With the advent of molecular biology new proposals on the phylogenetic relationships within Amphisbaenia were presented, showing some contrasts among morphological phylogenies. Kearney & Stuart (2004) analyzed two nuclear genes for 18 species of amphisbaenians and found Rhineuridae as sister group to all other Amphisbaenia. These authors also found Bipedidae as sister group of the clade composed by Trogonophidae and Amphisbaenidae. Macey *et al.* (2004) analyzed the complete mitochondrial genome of 12 amphisbaenian species and supported the new hypothesis that Rhineuridae is sister group of all other families, with Bipedidae as sister group of Trogonophidae and Amphisbaenidae. Furthermore, Vidal *et al.* (2008), analyzing 22 taxa mitochondrial and nuclear genes, also corroborated the hypothesis that Rhineuridae is the sister group of the remaining families. Additionally, these authors described a new family (Cadeidae) for the genus *Cadena*, from Cuba.

Although some studies discuss the phylogenetic relationships among Amphisbaenia families, there are few studies that detail the intra-generic and intra-specific relationships. Measey & Tolley (2013) analyzed the phylogenetic relationships within the African radiation of Amphisbaenidae and found the following three main clades: 1) composed by *Geocalamus*, *Dalophia* and *Monopeltis*, 2) composed by *Chirindia* and *Cynisca*, and 3) composed by *Zygaspis*. Furthermore, it was also notable that specimens of *Geocalamus acutus* from Kenya and Tanzania were recovered as highly divergent lineages. In summary, theirs results showed that the Sub-Saharan species are the sister clade of the South American radiation, and supported the hypothesis of a single origin for South American members. Although the phylogenetic relationships between
African species were well resolved, the phylogenetic tree presented low support for some clades, which probably was a consequence of the limited taxon sampling.

Mott & Vieites (2009) investigated the phylogenetic relationships within the South American species. In this study, representatives were included from each amphisbaenian family, except Cadeidae, and from each Neotropical genus except Mesobaena. The results of this study suggest that Neotropical species form a monophyletic group. However, Amphisbaena, Bronia and Cercolophia were recovered as non monophyletic. The exception was Leposternon that was monophyletic in their study, but was also positioned within Amphisbaena. Moreover, the monophyly of Anops was not tested, because only one species (A. kingii) was represented in the phylogeny. Considering these results, the authors suggested that the morphological characters that define the South American groups represent adaptive convergences, and that the Brazilian genera of Amphisbaenia should be considered, by nomenclatural priority, as belonging to a single genus Amphisbaena. Contrary to Mott and Vieites (2009), Ribeiro et al. (2011), described a South American species, and revalidated the genus Leposternon, stating that the taxonomic changes on the Neotropical amphisbaenids were precipitated due to the low bootstrap supports and little morphological evidences. Although plausible, Ribeiro et al. (2011) considered that the decision to synonymize the genus Leposternon to Amphisbaena needed more evidence.

Many of these studies attribute the difficulties to understand the origin and evolution of Amphisbaenia to convergence, i.e. homoplasy, of several morphological characters. Although these species are poorly studied, some of their adaptations to live underground are well known. Such adaptations include blindness, elongated body and reduction or absence of limbs. The absence of limbs is often understood as the results of the use of their heads to burrow through the soil (Gans, 1978). Although environmental features (e.g. microhabitats, temperature, etc.) are key
factors driving diversity and phenotypic diversification in many vertebrates (e.g. Stayton, 2003), in fossorial organisms these factors have been imposed by the burrowing lifestyle.

According to Gans (1974), the different morphological skull shapes in Amphisbaenia are correlated with the digging behavior, which is related to fossorial habits. Some taxa such as *Anops* and *Mesobaena* have a head with a characteristically keel-headed shape, in which the skull is dorsolaterally depressed. The *Leposternon* and *Rhineura* genera share the same head form called shovel-headed shape, with a flat nose and a sharp craniofacial angle. Another form found in Amphisbaenia is the spade-headed shape, present in Trogonophidae family, where the sharp craniofacial angle is achieved through a separate underlying arrangement of bones and overlapping scales on the head. Other species of Amphisbaenia exhibit a general round-headed shape, whereas the *Amphisbaena* and *Zygaspis* genera have a robust and rounded skull.

According Gans (1974, 1978), the head shapes are related to the distribution of Amphisbaenia. Gans (1978) suggests that the taxa which are shovel-headed shape from Africa, North America and South America, as well as those with a keel-headed shape from Africa and South America, could have evolved locally from taxa with the rounded generalized form (round-headed shape). Kearney (2003) using morphological data concluded that the Amphisbaenia with the keel-headed and shovel-headed shape form a monophyletic group, but these groups were considered tentative, given the possibility that this character is functionally correlated (Gans, 1974). However, Kearney & Stuart (2004) and Mott & Vieites (2009), based on their results, stated that the cranial morphotypes are a result of morphological convergence. Furthermore, Kearney & Stuart (2004) emphasized that the different forms of the head would be related to the geographic distribution of these taxa, as suggested by Gans (1978). Hoogmoed *et al.* (2009) described a new species of Amphisbaenia from South America, and suggested that the head shape of *Mesobaena*
rhachicephala does not fit to any of the categories suggested by Gans (1974). This result highlights the importance to study the forms of the head of Amphisbaenia, and also indicates that there is more variation within the suborder than the four morphotypes already described in previous studies.

Despite the advances made by previous studies, the taxonomy and phylogenetic relationships of amphisbaenids remains uncertain. Given the continuing inconsistencies between the morphological classification (e.g., Kearney, 2003) and molecular phylogenies (e.g., Kearney & Stuart, 2004; Mott & Vieites, 2009) of Amphisbaenia, the first chapter of my thesis aims to investigate and contribute to fill the knowledge gap about the systematics of this group. Therefore, I am providing a new phylogenetic and taxonomic proposal for Amphisbaenia and inferring the phylogenetic position of Amphisbaenia within Squamata. I am using a combination of different sets of evidence and phylogenetic approaches. These approaches comprise an exploration of two distinct methods for phylogenetic inference (concatenation and species tree) using Sanger (mitochondrial and nuclear genes) and Anchored Phylogenomics methods. Additionally, it was performed a total evidence analysis combining a morphological matrix with Anchored Phylogenomic data. I also performed species tree methods to overcome potential gene/species tree conflicts, using ASTRAL, MPEST and STAR. Based on the phylogenetic results, I am revising the classification of Amphisbaenia, with special attention to morphological diagnoses for particular clades. As a result, I am describing two new families in Africa, and two new subfamilies of Amphisbaenidae from the Neotropical region. Also, I am resurrecting one genus for Africa and one subfamily for South American, and I am providing a taxonomic discussion regarding the South American groups.
Additionally, to understand the diversity of cranial morphology in Amphisbaenia, I am answering three main questions in the second chapter of my thesis: 1) Are CSDG morphologically distinct? 2) Do CSDG differ considering soil use? 3) Is the general cranial shape variation related with type of soils? To answer these questions, I used high-resolution computed tomography (HRXCT), phylogenetic inference and landmark-based on Geometric Morphometrics methods. To achieve these objectives I applied the following steps: first, I tested the shape divergence between CSDG using principal components and phylomorphospace analysis; second, I checked morphological disparity between CSDG using disparity analysis; and third, I used geographic distribution of Amphisbaenians and geo-referenced soil maps to correlate CSDG and general cranial shape variation with type of soils using phylogenetic generalized least squares (GLS) ANOVA and Partial Least Squares (PLS) analysis. These analyses showed that there is two statically significant separated cranial shape based in CSDG: 1) composed by shovel-headed group, and 2) composed by keel-headed, round-headed and spade-headed groups. Furthermore, our results showed that extant Amphisbaenians form a multi-starburst pattern in cranial phylomorphospace, and there is criss-crossing of branches within major clades indicated a consistent with mostly homoplastic shape evolution. Also, we found a stronger correlation between general shape and type of soil, this result indicates that of cranial diversity in Amphisbaenians is associate with borrowing habits.

In addition to the two chapters of my thesis, I am also including in the appendix two manuscripts written in collaboration with other colleagues. Both manuscripts are descriptions of new amphisbaenian species, where we also highlight some taxonomic gaps about the South American diversity of amphisbaenids. The first manuscript, entitle: “A new four-pored Amphisbaena Linnaeus, 1758 (Amphisbaenia, Amphisbaenidae) from Brazilian Amazon”, was
already accepted in Zootaxa, and the second, entitle: “A New Species of the *Amphisbaena* (Squamata, Amphisbaenidae) from the Brazilian Cerrado with a Key for the Two-Pored Species”, was already submitted to Zootaxa.
CONCLUSION

For more than a century, the phylogenetic position in Squamata diversity, taxonomic status and phylogenetic relationships among genera and species of Amphisbaenians remains uncertain. Within the vertebrate radiation, organisms with underground lifestyle are difficult to observe, and many aspects of their evolutionary biology remain poorly understood. The cryptic nature of fossorial organisms results in a clear underestimation of their diversity. Traditionally, many studies attribute the difficulties to understanding the phylogenetic relationships and affinities of Amphisbaenia to convergence, i.e. homoplasy, of several morphological characters.

The phylogenetic study, based in morphological and molecular datasets showed that there are a high diversity of families and genera for Amphisbaenians. As a result of this thesis, I described two new families in Africa, and two new subfamilies of Amphisbaenidae from the Neotropical region. Also, I resurrected one genus for Africa and one subfamily for South American, and I provided a taxonomic discussion regarding the South American groups.

Despite is known that cranial shapes are considered as homoplastic, many taxonomic studies still using this morphological character to define groups. Some studies tried to correlate the cranial variation with geography or phylogeny (Kearney, 2003; Mott & Vieites, 2009; Measey & Tolley, 2013). The present study suggested that these groups defined by cranial variation do not reflect the biogeographical distribution neither the phylogenetic relationship. Frequently, studies attribute morphological convergences to adaptations (Harvey & Pagel, 1991), and many homoplastic characters may be associated with ecological and environmental variables instead of phylogenetic relationships. The comparative methods analysis of this thesis also showed a stronger correlation of shape and soil types. However, to completely understand the evolutionary mechanisms that promote the cranial diversity, the results presented here need to be integrated and
correlated with other refined ecological information from the soil types (e.g. temperature, humidity, texture, etc.) to test the adaptive factors that specifically constrained the evolution of skull shapes.

Although this thesis showed the most complete taxon sampling, several information about morphological diversity, phylogenetic relationships among species and new taxonomic rearmaments, the diversity of many families remains uncertain. As an example, there are many species that are just know by type series (e.g. Baikia africana). Also, some species has a restrict distribution, and occurring in areas of difficult access (e. g. Mesobaena huebneri, occurs in an isolate area of Amazon forest). Fortunately, phylogenetic and taxonomic studies will become increasingly workability for Amphisbaenians and a comprehensive understanding of evolutionary and diversification processes are in progress.
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