ARTICLES

Ventastega curonica and the origin of tetrapod morphology

Per E. Ahlberg¹, Jennifer A. Clack², Ervīns Lukševičs³, Henning Blom¹ & Ivars Zupiņš⁴

The gap in our understanding of the evolutionary transition from fish to tetrapod is beginning to close thanks to the discovery of new intermediate forms such as *Tiktaalik roseae*. Here we narrow it further by presenting the skull, exceptionally preserved braincase, shoulder girdle and partial pelvis of *Ventastega curonica* from the Late Devonian of Latvia, a transitional intermediate form between the 'elpistostegids' *Panderichthys* and *Tiktaalik* and the Devonian tetrapods (limbed vertebrates) *Acanthostega* and *Ichthyostega*. *Ventastega* is the most primitive Devonian tetrapod represented by extensive remains, and casts light on a part of the phylogeny otherwise only represented by fragmentary taxa: it illuminates the origin of principal tetrapod structures and the extent of morphological diversity among the transitional forms.

The fossil record of Devonian tetrapods, the earliest and most primitive limb-bearing members of the tetrapod stem group, was for many decades restricted to the iconic 'four-legged fish' Ichthyostega from the Famennian (latest Devonian) of Greenland¹⁻⁵ and the fragmentary genus Acanthostega from the same strata². During the last 20 years, intense collecting and research has produced complete skeletal material of Acanthostega⁶⁻⁸ and a series of new taxa, greatly expanding the temporal and geographical range of these animals. Devonian tetrapods are now known from as early as the late Frasnian, the earlier part of the Late Devonian period, and have been recorded from Gondwana and north China as well as Laurussia9-18. However, most of these new forms remain very poorly known, typically represented by no more than lower jaw rami or isolated postcranial bones; Acanthostega and Ichthyostega are still the only Devonian tetrapods known from near-complete skeletons. We know less about the fishtetrapod transition than the taxic diversity suggests.

Among the more fragmentary forms are five (Metaxygnathus, Densignathus, Elginerpeton, Obruchevichthys and Ventastega) that combine a characteristically tetrapod lower-jaw morphology with the retention of coronoid fangs and other 'fish' characters absent in Acanthostega, Ichthyostega and more crownward limbed members of the tetrapod stem group^{19,20}. These genera seem to fall into the morphological gap between Acanthostega and Ichthyostega and the (paraphyletic) elpistostegids, but all except Ventastega are very incomplete. Ventastega was originally described in 1994 from the Pavāri locality in the late Famennian Ketleri Formation of Kurzeme, western Latvia²¹ (Supplementary Information 1). Further excavations at this site up to 2001 have yielded an extensive body of material, including previously unknown or incompletely known elements such as a near-complete skull roof plus braincase and associated cheek (Fig. 1), scapulocoracoid, anocleithrum, interclavicle and ilium (Fig. 2). All come from a single horizon, and the occurrence of multiple identical examples of several elements (jaws, cheek plates, maxillae, clavicles, cleithra, nasals) indicates that only one tetrapod taxon is present. The new material allows us to reconstruct the whole skull except the basioccipital-exoccipital complex for the first time, as well as most of the shoulder girdle and part of the pelvis (Fig. 3). It also permits a more robust phylogenetic analysis of Ventastega, confirming its position below Acanthostega in the tetrapod stem group. Ventastega thus

provides the first detailed picture of a Devonian tetrapod more primitive than *Acanthostega*.

The skull

The overall skull shape is characteristically 'early tetrapod' with a spade-shaped snout and large dorsally positioned orbits (Figs 1 and 3a-d). However, its proportions resemble more closely those of Tiktaalik²² than do the skulls of Ichthyostega³ and Acanthostega⁸, as shown both by visual comparison (Fig. 4a-c) and morphometric analysis (Fig. 4e, f and Supplementary Information 2). Furthermore, the conservation of morphological landmarks such as notches and projections of the skull-table margin is almost perfect between Tiktaalik and Ventastega, showing that the two differ only in proportions, whereas Acanthostega and Ichthyostega lack many of the landmarks. One landmark is a lateral projection posterior to the orbit, which in Ventastega is formed by the lateral corner of the intertemporal bone; we infer, from the presence of an identical projection in *Tiktaalik*, that an intertemporal may also be present in that genus. These results corroborate the hypothesis that the remodelling of the dermal skull across the fish-tetrapod transition was gradual²³. The dermal skull morphology of Tiktaalik is closer to Ventastega than to the less crownward elpistostegid Panderichthys²⁴. Ventastega differs from Tiktaalik principally in having a smaller skull table, wider spiracles and larger eyes.

As regards the dermal bone pattern of the skull (Fig. 3b–d), *Ventastega* resembles *Acanthostega* and *Ichthyostega* in retaining a preopercular bone in the cheek, but differs in possessing an intertemporal bone^{3,8}. Other features are shared with *Acanthostega* but not *Ichthyostega*: these include a pair of median rostrals (also present in *Elpistostege*²³) rather than a single bone, paired postparietals, and midline separation of the nasals. The last feature is associated in *Ventastega* with a large internasal fontanelle (Fig. 3c) which forms part of a trough-shaped midline depression in the snout. In *Acanthostega* there is only a narrow slit between the nasals and the trough is correspondingly smaller⁸. A possibly homologous small interpremaxillary fontanelle is present in several Carboniferous forms such as *Crassigyrinus*²⁵ and colosteids (J.A.C. personal observation) but it is unambiguously absent in *Ichthyostega*³. The presence of a fontanelle in *Ventastega* is clearly derived in the sense that less

¹Subdepartment of Evolutionary Organismal Biology, Department of Physiology and Developmental Biology, Uppsala University, Norbyvägen 18A, 752 36 Uppsala, Sweden. ²University Museum of Zoology, Cambridge, Downing Street, Cambridge CB2 3EJ, UK. ³Department of Geology, University of Latvia, Rainis Blvd 19, Riga LV-1586, Latvia. ⁴Natural History Museum of Latvia, K. Barona Str. 4, Riga LV-1712, Latvia.

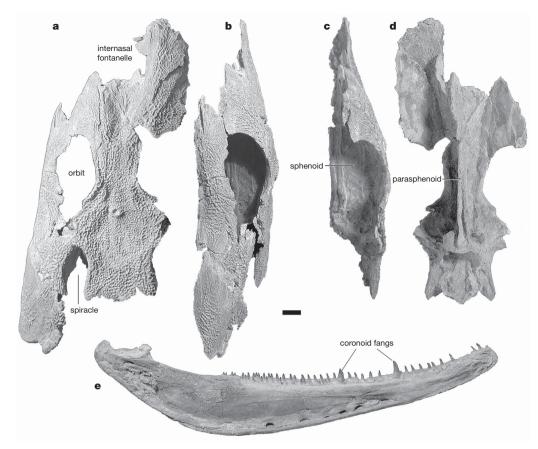
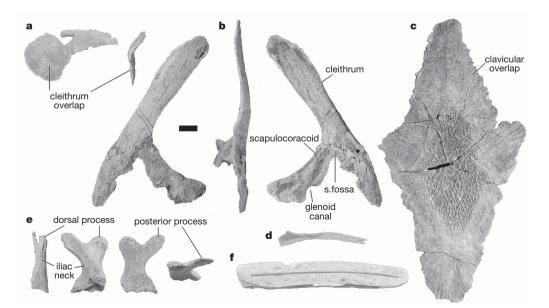
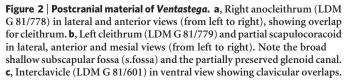


Figure 1 | **Cranial material of Ventastega. a**, **b**, Associated skull roof (LDM G 81/775) and cheek (LDM G 81/776) in dorsal (**a**) and left lateral (**b**) views, anterior at the top. The internasal fontanelle, orbit and spiracle are indicated in **a. c**, **d**, The same specimen without the cheek in left lateral (**c**) and ventral (**d**) views, anterior at the top, showing the three-dimensionally preserved

braincase. The parasphenoid and sphenoid are indicated. **e**, Complete lower jaw (LDM G 81/777) in medial view with coronoid fangs shown. Scale bar, 10 mm. 'LDM G' denotes the geology collections of Latvijas Dabas Muzejs, the Natural History Museum of Latvia. For other cranial material see ref. 21.





d, A probable tetrapod rib (LDM G 81/781). **e**, Right ilium (LDM G 81/780) in anterior, lateral, mesial and dorsal views (from left to right), showing the iliac neck, dorsal process and posterior process. **f**, A probable tetrapod caudal fin lepidotrichium (LDM G 81/782) on a block of matrix. Scale bar, 10 mm; all specimens shown to same scale. For other postcranial material see ref. 21.

crownward taxa like *Tiktaalik*, *Panderichthys* and tristichopterids have unbroken dermal skull roofs, but the nasal bones of these forms are separated in the midline by postrostral bone(s)^{23,24}. It is thus possible that the absence of nasal–nasal contact in *Ventastega* and *Acanthostega* is primitive, with the fontanelle resulting directly from the loss of the postrostral bones. Another unique skull character of *Ventastega* is the size of the spiracular notch, which is substantially larger than those of both elpistostegids^{22,26,27} and known Devonian tetrapods^{3,8}. A lamina extending down from the dorsal margin of the squamosal forms part of the lateral wall of this notch. The posterior ramus of the pterygoid is narrow as in *Acanthostega*, indicating the same type of spiracular architecture^{21,27}. The increase in size of the spiracular opening across the transition has been interpreted to indicate increased reliance on air-breathing among the tetrapod stem members^{27–29}.

The exceptionally preserved, three-dimensional braincase of *Ventastega* comprises a sphenoid and prootic region together with the dorsal part of the opisthotic (Fig. 5). The roof of the cranial cavity, spaces for the anterior and posterior semicircular canals, and endo-lymphatic ducts can be seen in ventral view. The basioccipital–exoccipital complex is missing, and the ethmoid region is unossified as in other early tetrapods. In most regards the braincase closely resembles that of *Acanthostega*⁷: the shape of the prootic region and its relationship to the ventral cranial fissure and the fenestra vestibuli are almost identical, as are the basipterygoid processes and the laterally open post-temporal fossae. A minor change in

interpretation concerns a large and (in *Ventastega*) bi-lobed nerve foramen on the anterior face of the prootic; this was interpreted as transmitting nerve VII in *Acanthostega*⁷, but its large size, position on the anterior face of the otoccipital, and bilobed shape all suggest that it is actually the opening for nerve V. The presence of a fenestra vestibuli and absence of a lateral commissure suggest that the dorsal-most element of the hyoid arch was a stapes, rather than a hyomandibula as seen in *Panderichthys*^{24,27,30} and *Tiktaalik*²². Compared to the overall similarity between *Ventastega* and *Acanthostega*, the otoccipital region of *Ichthyostega* is very distinctive and evidently autapomorphic⁴.

The one area where the braincase of *Ventastega* differs notably from that of *Acanthostega* is the orbito-temporal region immediately dorsal to the basipterygoid processes (Fig. 5b). Here, *Acanthostega* has a fairly large interorbital foramen comparable to that in many other early tetrapods⁷, but *Ventastega* has a solid interorbital wall pierced only by small foramina for the pituitary vein and carotid artery, as in *Panderichthys* or 'osteolepiform' fishes—less crownward members of the tetrapod stem group³⁰⁻³². *Ventastega* also has an anterodorsally directed tract for the optic nerve (II) with an oblique anteriorly facing opening, virtually identical to that in *Panderichthys*. *Ventastega* is more primitive than *Acanthostega* in regard to these characters; unfortunately we lack comparable information for *Ichthyostega*.

Although the braincase of *Tiktaalik* has not yet been described in detail, the published figures show a basicranial fenestra and a posteriorly

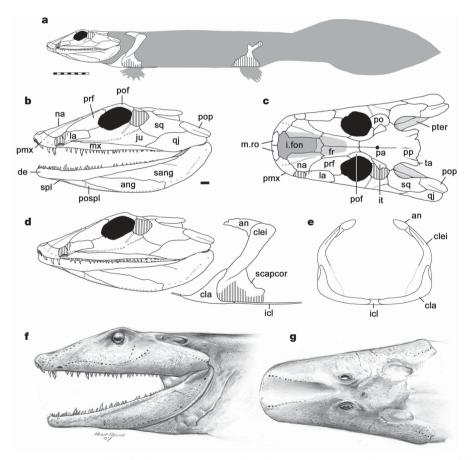


Figure 3 | Reconstructions of Ventastega. a, Whole-body reconstruction showing known skeletal elements on a body outline based on *Acanthostega* (modified from ref. 5; original *Acanthostega* body reconstruction by M. I. Coates). Scale bar, 10 cm. b, c, Skull reconstruction in lateral and dorsal views, based on material presented here and described previously²¹.
d, Reconstructed association of skull and shoulder girdle in lateral view.
e, Shoulder girdle in anterior view. Curvature of cleithrum based on LDM G 81/522 (ref. 21). Unknown bones are indicated with vertical hatching. Scale

bar for **b–e**, 10 mm. **f**, **g**, Life reconstructions of head in lateral and dorsal views (copyright P. Renne, 2007). an, anocleithrum; ang, angular; cla, clavicle; clei, cleithrum; de, dentary; fr, frontal; icl, interclavicle; i.fon, internasal fontanelle; it, intertemporal; ju, jugal; la, lacrimal; mx, maxilla; m.ro, median rostral; na, nasal; pa, parietal; pmx, premaxilla; po, postorbital; pof, postfrontal; pop, preopercular; pospl, postsplenial; pp, postparietal; prf, prefrontal; pter, pterygoid; qj, quadratojugal; sang, surangular; scapcor, scapulocoracoid; spl, splenial; sq, squamosal; ta, tabular.

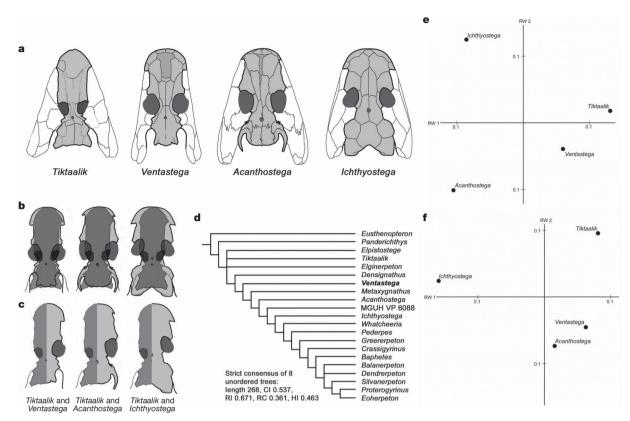


Figure 4 | **Skull shape and phylogeny. a**, Skulls of *Tiktaalik*, *Ventastega*, *Acanthostega* and *Ichthyostega* in dorsal view, showing the skull roof (grey) used in the morphometric comparison. In *Ventastega* and *Acanthostega* the internasal fontanelle is shown darker grey. Not drawn to scale. **b**, **c**, Comparison of the skull roofs of *Tiktaalik* and *Ventastega* (left), *Tiktaalik* and *Acanthostega* (centre) and *Tiktaalik* and *Ichthyostega* (right). The skull roofs are overlaid in **b**: a left half-roof of *Tiktaalik* is compared to a

The skull roofs are overlaid in **b**; a left half-roof of *Tiktaalik* is compared to a right half-roof of *Ventastega, Acanthostega* or *Ichthyostega* in **c**. *Tiktaalik* is shown in darker grey than the tetrapods. A slight distortion of *Tiktaalik* has been corrected using the 'skew' command in Photoshop (**b**, **c**). **d**, Strict

consensus unordered phylogeny of tetrapodomorph fishes and early tetrapods based on 117 characters scored for 21 taxa. For further phylogenies see Supplementary Information 3. 'MGUH VP 6088' is an undescribed Famennian tetrapod from Greenland. CI, consistency index; HI, homoplasy index; RC, rescaled consistency index; RI, retention index. **e**, **f**, Relative warp analyses of skull roof outlines shown in **a–c**; including (**e**) and excluding (**f**) the tabular horn of *Acanthostega*. The first relative warp (RW) is on the horizontal axis; the second relative warp is on the vertical axis. For a full discussion of the relative warp analysis see Supplementary Information 2.

positioned lateral commissure supporting a hyomandibula²². These features compare closely with *Panderichthys*³⁰, probably indicating a broadly similar morphology—a 'lobe-fin' otoccipital comparable at

least in its ventral parts to *Eusthenopteron*³¹ or *Gogonasus*³² but different from the tetrapod pattern. *Tiktaalik* also retains pterygoid separation by the parasphenoid and an osteolepiform lower jaw structure, whereas

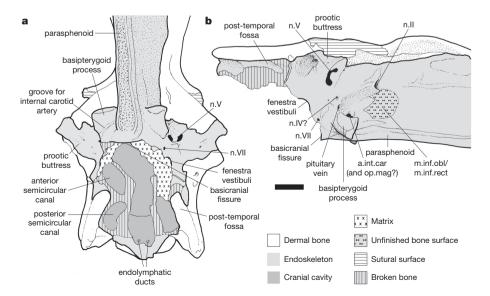


Figure 5 | **Braincase of Ventastega. a**, **b**, Posterior half of braincase plus skull roof of LDM G 81/775 in ventral and lateral views. a.int.car, foramen for the internal carotid artery; m.inf.obl/m.inf.rect, muscle scar for the

inferior obliquus and/or inferior rectus eye muscles; n.II–n.VII, cranial nerves II, IV, V and VII; op.mag, ophthalmica magna artery. Scale bar, 10 mm.

Ventastega has pterygoid–pterygoid contact and a tetrapod lower jaw albeit with coronoid fangs^{19,21,22}.

The postcranial skeleton

The preserved pectoral girdle of Ventastega comprises interclavicle, clavicle, cleithrum, scapulocoracoid and anocleithrum (Figs 2 and 3d, e); the cleithrum was previously misidentified as an ilium²¹, but a real ilium has since been collected and the discovery of a cleithrum with attached scapulocoracoid confirms its identity. Of these elements the interclavicle, clavicle and anocleithrum resemble those of Acanthostega⁶ rather than Ichthyostega. The cleithrum of Ventastega is similar in outline to those of Ichthyostega and Acanthostega, and like them it lacks ornament, but in contrast to Acanthostega it lacks a postbranchial lamina. Such a lamina is also absent in *Tiktaalik*³³, suggesting that its presence in *Acanthostega* may not be primitive as originally supposed³⁴. The scapulocoracoid of Ventastega is incomplete (Fig. 2b), but enough is preserved to show that it is essentially Acanthostega-like with a broad shallow subscapular fossa⁶. In Ichthyostega³, Hynerpeton¹⁴ and the girdles attributed to *Elginerpeton*¹³, the subscapular fossa is deeper with a more acute apex. A large, posteriorly positioned, partly preserved foramen in the scapulocoracoid of Ventastega may correspond to the 'glenoid canal' of Ichthyostega3 and foramina 'D' and 'E' (or possibly 'A') of Acanthostega⁶. There is no trace of a coracoid foramen similar to that in Tiktaalik³³. As in all Devonian tetrapods except Tulerpeton¹¹, a scapular blade is absent. Overall, the pectoral girdle of Ventastega is clearly of tetrapod grade, quite different from those of Panderichthys³⁵ and Tiktaalik, and we infer that it bore limbs with digits.

An incomplete right ilium of Ventastega (Fig. 2e) also shows an Acanthostega-like morphology⁶: the slender iliac neck—which lacks an iliac canal-branches into a distinct dorsal process with an unfinished dorsal surface and a posterodorsally directed posterior process with an upright oval cross-section. In Ichthyostega, by contrast, the robust iliac neck is pierced by a canal, the dorsal process is broader and less distinct, and the posterior process is horizontal³. These characters also occur in the ilia attributed to *Elginerpeton*¹³. In addition to these unambiguous stem tetrapod bones, Pavāri also yields numerous slender unjointed lepidotrichia, 70 mm or more in length (Fig. 2f), which we tentatively interpret as caudal lepidotrichia of Ventastega because of their similarity to those of Acanthostega⁶. A single slender Acanthostega-like rib (Fig. 2d) may also belong to Ventastega. The strongly Acanthostega-like character of the postcranial bones, coupled with the evidence for a large caudal fin, suggest that the overall body morphology of Ventastega resembled Acanthostega. We have accordingly used a reconstructed body outline of Acanthostega⁵, originally based on the work of M. I. Coates, as the basis for a tentative reconstruction of Ventastega (Fig. 3a).

Ventastega and the origin of tetrapods

Although Ventastega is one of the youngest Devonian tetrapods, deriving from the late Famennian, it occupies a relatively deep position in the tetrapod stem group. All permutations of our phylogenetic analysis (Fig. 4d and Supplementary Information 3) place it below both Ichthyostega and Acanthostega; only Elginerpeton consistently occupies a more basal position. The postcranial elements attributed to Elginerpeton show that vertebrates with limbs had originated before the end of the Frasnian¹³. The recent redating of Metaxygnathus as late Frasnian³⁶, in conjunction with the phylogenetic topologies recovered by our analysis, implies not only that Ventastega represents a lineage of Frasnian origin but that a substantial part of the Devonian tetrapod radiation occurred during the Frasnian. This is consistent with the occurrence of Livoniana, a fragmentary taxon apparently more derived than Tiktaalik, in the latest Givetian of the Baltic region³⁷. It seems that the Famennian tetrapod record has only a poor stratophylogenetic fit, a contention

that is further supported by the co-occurrence of the very primitive humerus ANSP 21350 (ref. 38) and much more derived whatcheeriid-like skull elements (J.A.C. personal observation) in the upper Famennian Catskill Formation of Pennsylvania.

Overall, the character combination shown by Ventastega carries a clear signal: with the exception of some possible autapomorphies, all its character states match either Acanthostega or the elpistostegids Elpistostege, Tiktaalik and Panderichthys. No characters are shared uniquely with Ichthyostega or with the cranial and attributed postcranial material of *Elginerpeton*. Among the less complete tetrapod stem-group members, Metaxygnathus and Densignathus have lower jaws rather similar to Ventastega, but their general morphology is unknown^{15,19,20}. This pattern suggests that the shared Ventastega-Acanthostega character complex is paraphyletically distributed through a segment of the tetrapod stem group rather than being synapomorphies of a clade. Consistent with this interpretation is the fact that certain aspects of the character complex, for example, the shape of the otic capsule and ilium, also occur in much later and more derived tetrapods such as anthracosaurs39,40 and Crassigyrinus⁴¹. We interpret these as persistent primitive traits rather than homoplastic reversals in the latter taxa. The morphometric similarities between Ventastega and Tiktaalik, in particular the conservation of landmarks around the skull table, suggest that the changes in skull shape during this part of the fish-tetrapod transition were substantially proportional: the eyes and spiracles grew larger, the skull table smaller, and the snout broader. This contrasts with marked pattern changes in the dermal bones of the cheek, skull roof and palate, and with a restructuring of braincase that resulted in the loss of the intracranial joint, basicranial fenestra and lateral commissure as well as a host of other smaller changes. With a few modifications such as the gradual withdrawal of the notochord and the rearward extension of the parasphenoid across the basicranial fissure, this new braincase morphology remained essentially constant up into the base of the tetrapod crown group⁴². Even the highly specialized braincase of *Ichthyostega* is recognizably derived from this pattern⁴. With regard to the postcranial skeleton, Ventastega consistently resembles Acanthostega; all the changes that distinguish Devonian tetrapod from elpistostegid limb girdles-loss of the supracleithrum and post-temporal; enlargement of the scapulocoracoid; loss of the coracoid foramen; enlargement of the interclavicle, creation of a sacrum-seem to have already occurred.

Because of its phylogenetic position and character complement it is tempting to interpret Ventastega as a straightforward evolutionary intermediate, which represents with reasonable accuracy the character complement of the tetrapod stem lineage at a point on the internode between Tiktaalik and Acanthostega. However, this simple picture should be approached with a degree of caution. ANSP 21350 and *Elginerpeton* in particular (whether or not the latter taxon is taken to include the disputed humerus GSM 104536; refs 13, 38) show character combinations that are substantively different from those of Ventastega and Acanthostega without being obviously autapomorphic, and both probably occupy deep positions in the phylogeny. At a minimum this demonstrates the presence of considerable morphological diversification among the earliest tetrapods. More importantly, however, the discovery of articulated material of these or similar forms could have a substantial impact on the tree topology. Ventastega, like Tiktaalik, conforms remarkably well to prior expectations of what a transitional form at that particular point in the phylogeny should be like; whether the same will be true of future discoveries remains to be seen.

METHODS SUMMARY

The material was excavated from Pavāri locality in 1970, 1973, 1988, 1991, 1995 and 2001 and deposited at the Natural History Museum of Latvia. In the laboratory, fossils were freed from surrounding sediment (unconsolidated sand) by mechanical preparation with a mounted needle. Relative warps analysis⁴³ was used to quantify head-shape variation in the various Devonian tetrapods and elpistostegids. Landmarks were digitized from published reconstructions^{3,8,22,24} using the program tpsDig v. 1.40 (ref. 44). Relative warps analysis was conducted in tpsRelw v. 1.39 (ref. 45). Phylogenetic analysis was performed in PAUP 4.0b10 (ref. 46) using a Branch-and-Bound search with default settings, with *Eusthenopteron* specified as the out-group. Life reconstructions were drawn by P. Renne under the supervision of P.E.A.

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Supplementary Information is linked to the online version of the paper at www.nature.com/nature.

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Supplementary Information 1: Geological context

The locality of Pavari (Figure 1), source of the majority of *Ventastega* specimens including all that are featured in the present paper, lies within the Upper Devonian (upper Famennian) Ketleri Formation and represents a natural outcrop of this formation on the left bank of the Ciecere river (Luksevics & Zupins 2004)⁴⁷. The Ketleri formation, which crops out in South-west Latvia and extends subsurface into Lithuania, is the youngest vertebrate-bearing Devonian formation of the Baltic region. It comprises some 45 m of sands, sandstones, clays and dolomitic marls, deposited in a partly enclosed basin that probably took the form of a shallow brackish-water bay. The locality of Pavari represents the middle part of the formation (the Pavari Member); the upper part (the Varkali Member) has also yielded tetrapod remains, though these are more fragmentary.

The outcrop at Pavari comprises a sandstone body more than 3 m in thickness, predominantly composed of very fine-grained to fine-grained, white or pale yellow, almost unconsolidated quartzose sandstone. In the lower part of the section (Figure 2) there is an erosional surface, interpreted as a shallow (about 0.5 m deep) and at least 8 m wide erosional channel formed by water flowing from NNE to SSW. The vertebrate fossils occur predominantly in the lower part of the channel infill, which is composed of cross-bedded sands containing some layers of clay pebbles. Above the vertebrate-bearing level the sediments become more fine-grained and appear to represent deposition in quieter environments. The bones show two preferred orientations, suggesting the influence of two distinct current directions, which may indicate tidal influence. One possible interpretation is deposition in a low-tidal terrigenous shelf environment between low islands, in a shallow channel formed by tidal processes. At any rate the deposits were not laid down in a continental freshwater or flood-plain environment. This contrasts with the emphatically nonmarine localities yielding the elpistostegid *Tiktaalik*²² and the Devonian tetrapods Hynerpeton, Densignathus (Cressler 2006) 48, Acanthostega and Ichthyostega (Olsen 1993) 49.

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Figures

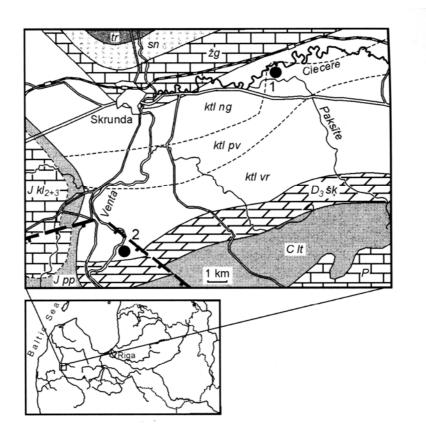


Figure 1. Map of Latvia showing fossil localities in the Ketleri Formation, from Luksevics & Zupins (2004). 1, Pavari; 2, Ketleri. Stratigraphic abbreviations (moving up section): tr, Tervete Formation; sn, Snikere Formation; zg, Zagare Formation; ktl ng, Nigrande Member of Ketleri Formation; ktl pv, Pavari Member of Ketleri Formation; ktl vr, Varkali Member of Ketleri Formation; sk, Skervelis Formation; C lt, Letiza Formation (Carboniferous); P, Naujoji Akmene Formation (Permian); J pp, Papile Formation (Jurassic, ?Lower Callovian) ; J kl₂₊₃, Jurassic, Middle-Upper Callowian.

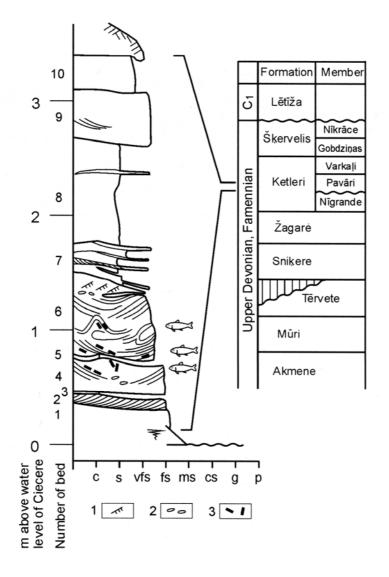


Figure 2. Geological section through the Pavari outcrop, with a stratigraphic diagram of the Famennian and Lower Carboniferous of South-western Latvia. Sedimentological abbreviations: c, clay; s, silt; vfs, very fine sand; fs, fine sand; ms, medium sand; cs, coarse sand; g, gravel; p, pebbles. Graphic symbols in boxes: 1, ripple marks; 2, clay pebbles; 3, vertebrate remains.

Supplementary Information 2: Relative warp analysis

In order to quantify the basis for the perception that the skull roof shape of *Ventastega* is "more similar" to that of *Tiktaalik* than either *Acanthostega* or *Ichthyostega*, a relative warps analysis⁴³ was conducted on these four skull roofs using the software tpsRelw v. 1.39⁴⁵. The program tpsDig v. 1.40⁴⁴ was used to digitalise 31 landmarks from recent skull roof reconstructions (Figure 1; see legend to Figure 4 of paper for further information). Eighteen sliding semi-landmarks were used (Figure 1: 2, 3, 6-9, 11-13, 15, 16, 21-25, 29, 30), since the contours of portions of the various heads should be homologous whereas some individual points may not.

In the first analysis landmarks were selected in such a way that the tabular horn of *Acanthostega* was represented in the shape estimate. In this run (Figure 2A, B) the first relative warp represents 50.83%, the second 35.97% and the third 13.19% of the total variance. Together these three relative warps estimates makes up the whole 100% of the total variance. *Ventastega* is closest to *Tiktaalik* among the tetrapods in both first and second warps; in the first warp, *Ventastega* is in fact much closer to *Tiktaalik* than to *Ichthyostega* or *Acanthostega*. The latter two genera cluster close together in the first warp but are widely separated in the second warp. (Figure 2A, B).

Because the tabular horn of *Acanthostega* is an isolated autapomorphy with a big impact on the position of semi-landmarks 18 and 19, we performed a second analysis where these semi-landmarks were positioned as if the tabular horn was absent (Figure 1, compare left and right sides of *Acanthostega*). In this analysis, the first relative warp represents 61.01%, the second 28.99% and the third 10% of the total variance (Figure 2C, D). *Ventastega* and *Tiktaalik* are still closest neighbours in the first warp, somewhat closer than *Ventastega* is to *Acanthostega*, with *Ichthyostega* far more distant. In the second warp, however, *Acanthostega* and *Ventastega* are close, whereas *Ichthyostega* falls between these two and *Tiktaalik*. From this analysis it is clear that the remote position of *Acanthostega* in the first analysis is due to the tabular horn. When excluding this feature, *Acanthostega* shows a much higher degree of similarity with *Ventastega*. In both analyses *Ventastega* is closer to *Tiktaalik* than *Acanthostega* in first and second warps. The subjectively perceived "similarity" of *Ventastega* to *Tiktaalik* thus has a measurable basis.

Figures

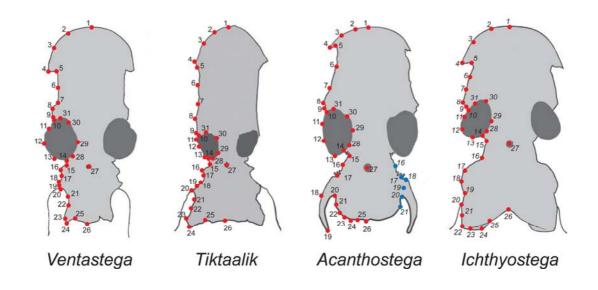


Figure 1. Skull roofs of taxa used in analysis, showing semi-landmarks. Not to scale.

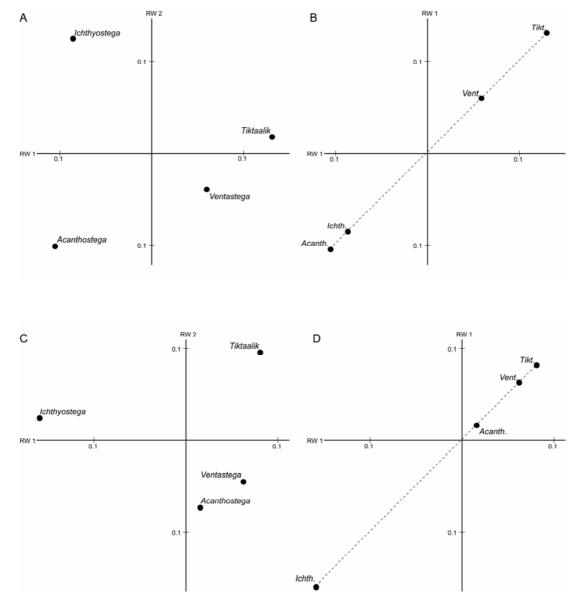


Figure 2. Plots of relative warps analyses. **A**, first analysis, first warp (horizontal axis) vs. second warp (vertical axis). **B**, first analysis, first warp shown on both axes. **C**, second analysis, first warp (horizontal axis) vs. second warp (vertical axis). **D**, second analysis, first warp shown on both axes.

Supplementary Information 3: Phylogenetic analysis

Results

A phylogenetic analysis was performed on a matrix of 117 characters scored for 21 taxa (see below). The scoring of *Elginerpeton* included the assumption that the tetrapod shoulder girdles and ilia from Scat Craig can be attributed to this taxon. Runs were performed in PAUP 4.0b10 using a Branch-and-Bound search with default settings, with *Eusthenopteron* specified as the outgroup. In the first run, characters 17, 35, 39, 58, 74, 76 and 87 were ordered: this produced 64 trees with a length of 275 steps, C.I. = 0.524, R.I. = 0.676, R.C. = 0.354, H.I. = 0.476. The strict consensus tree (a) shows a high degree of resolution, the only unresolved areas being a quadrichotomy of Elpistostege, Tiktaalik, Elginerpeton and more derived forms (present in all runs; in every case the 50% majority rule consensus resolves *Elginerpeton* above *Tiktaalik* + *Elpistostege* with 75% support (e)), a quadrichotomy of Ichthyostega, MGUH VP 6088, Densignathus and post-Devonian tetrapods, and a trichotomy of *Balanerpeton*, *Dendrerpeton*, and an anthracosaur clade. *Ventastega* is placed below Acanthostega, immediately above the Elginerpeton qaudrichotomy. Metaxygnathus is positioned between Acanthostega and the Ichthyostega quadrichotomy.

In the second run, all characters were run unordered. This generated 8 trees with a length of 268 steps, C.I = 0.537, R.I. = 0.671, R.C. = 0.361, H.I. = 0.463. The strict consensus tree (**b**) again shows the *Elginerpeton* quadrichotomy and the *Balanerpeton-Dendrerpeton*-anthracosaur trichotomy, but is otherwise fully resolved. Two taxa have moved: *Metaxygnathus* is now placed below *Acanthostega*, and *Densignathus* has moved three nodes down the tree to a position between *Elginerpeton* and *Ventastega*. MGUH VP 6088 is resolved to a position immediately below *Ichthyostega*. The relative positions of *Ventastega*, *Acanthostega* and *Ichthyostega* are unchanged, as is the pattern of the post-Devonian tetrapods.

These analyses show that the phylogenetic signal of those taxa that are represented by reasonably complete skeletons is not greatly affected by the a priori judgements on character transformation implicit in ordering characters 17, 35, 39, 58, 74, 76 and 87. *Densignathus* and *Metaxygnathus* on the other hand are strongly affected, presumably because the majority of ordered characters are mandibular characters and these taxa present no non-mandibular data.

In order to assess the robustness of the topology, Bremer support for the nodes was determined for the ordered strict consensus tree. We also performed a run with ordered characters of a reduced matrix omitting *Metaxygnathus* and *Densignathus*, and determined Bremer support and Bootstrap values (1000 replicates) for this data set (**c**,**d**). The rationale for running the reduced data sat was the very large number of unknown character states in *Metaxygnathus* and *Densignathus*, which seemed likely to obscure the phylogenetic signal of the more complete taxa. Bremer support values for the Devonian tetrapod nodes were indeed raised substantially by the removal of *Metaxygnathus* and *Densignathus*, whereas the post-Devonian values were unaffected. In the reduced data set, the internode separating *Ventastega* from *Acanthostega* has a Bremer support of 3 and a Bootstrap support of 68, while the internode between *Acanthostega* and MGUH VP 6088 + *Ichthyostega* has corresponding values of 4 and 79. Interestingly, the Bootstrap analysis also separates *Elginerpeton* from the elpistostegids with a support of 74.

We conclude from these analyses that the position of *Ventastega* as less crownward than *Acanthostega*, which is in turn less crownward than *Ichthyostega*, is well supported.

Taxa and principal sources of information

Specimens of all taxa in the analysis have been examined by P.E.A. and/or J.A.C.. The main sources of published morphological information are as follows:

Acanthostega: Coates (1996), Clack (1998a, 2002, 2003), Ahlberg & Clack (1998) Balanerpeton: Milner & Sequeira (1994) Baphetes: Beaumont (1977), Milner & Lindsay (1998) Crassigyrinus: Panchen & Smithson (1990), Clack (1998b) Dendrerpeton: Godfrey et al. (1987), Holmes et al. (1998), Robinson et al. (2005) Densignathus: Daeschler (2000) *Elginerpeton*: Ahlberg (1991, 1995, 1998), Ahlberg et al. (2005a) *Elpistostege*: Schultze & Arsenault (1985) *Eoherpeton*: Smithson (1985) Eusthenopteron: Andrews & Westoll (1970), Jarvik (1980) Greererpeton: Smithson (1982), Godfrey (1989), Bolt & Lombard (2001) Ichthyostega: Jarvik (1952, 1996), Clack et al. (2003), Ahlberg et al. (2005b) Metaxygnathus: Campbell & Bell (1977), Ahlberg & Clack (1998) Panderichthys: Vorobyeva & Schultze (1991), Vorobyeva (1995, 2000), Ahlberg et al. (1996), Boisvert (2005), Brazeau & Ahlberg (2006) Pederpes: Clack & Finney (2004) Proterogyrinus: Holmes (1984) Silvanerpeton: Ruta & Clack (2006) *Tiktaalik*: Daeschler et al. (2006), Shubin et al. (2006) Ventastega: Ahlberg et al. (1994), present paper Whatcheeria: Lombard & Bolt (1995, 2006) MGUH VP 6088: Clack et al. (in press)

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Character list

SKULL ROOF, PALATE

- 1. Anterior tectal/septomaxilla: anterior tectal (external bone, dorsal to nostril): = 0, septomaxilla (external or internal bone, posterior to nostril) = 1, absent = 2
- 2. Ectopterygoid /palatine exposure: more or less confined to tooth row = 0, broad mesial exposure additional to tooth row = 1
- 3. Ectopterygoid as long or longer than palatines: yes, = 0, no = 1
- 4. Ectopterygoid reaches subtemporal fossa: no = 0, yes = 1
- 5. Frontal: absent = 0, present = 1
- 6. Intertemporal: present = 0, absent = 1
- 7. Jugal: does not extend anterior to orbit = 0, extends anterior to orbit = 1
- 8. Lacrimal: contributes to orbital margin = 0, excluded from margin = 1
- 9. Lateral rostral present: yes = 0, no = 1
- 10. Maxilla makes interdigitating suture with vomer: no = 0, yes = 1
- 11. Maxilla external contact with premaxilla: narrow contact point not interdigitated = 0, interdigitating suture = 1
- 12. Maxilla extends behind level of posterior margin of orbit: yes = 0, no = 1
- 13. Median rostral: single = 0, paired = 1, absent = 2
- 14. Opercular: present = 0, absent = 1
- 15. Prefrontal: twice as long as broad, or less = 0, three times as long as broad = 1
- 16. Prefrontal: transverse anterior suture with tectal = 0, tapers to point anteriorly = 1
- 17. Premaxilla forms part of choanal margin: broadly = 0, point = 1, not, excluded by vomer = 2
- 18. Preopercular: present = 0, absent = 1
- 19. Pterygoids separate in midline = 0, meet in midline anterior to cultriform process = 1
- 20. Pterygoid quadrate ramus margin in subtemporal fossa: concave = 0, with some convex component = 1
- 21. Vomers separated by parasphenoid > half length: yes = 0, no = 1

- 22. Vomers excluded from margin of interpterygoid vacuity: yes = 0, no = 1
- 23. Vomers as broad as long or broader = 0, about twice as long as broad or longer = 1

BRAINCASE

- 24. Basipterygoid process: not strongly projecting with concave anterior face = 0, strongly projecting with flat anterior face = 1
- 25. Ethmoid: fully ossified = 0, partly or wholly unossified = 1
- 26. Hypophysial region: solid side wall pierced by small foramina for pituitary vein and other vessels = 0, single large foramen = 1
- 27. Otic capsule lateral commissure bearing hyomandibular facets: present = 0, absent = 1
- 28. Parasphenoid: does not overlap basioccipital = 0, overlaps basioccipital =1
- 29. Parasphenoid: denticulated field: present = 0, absent = 1
- 30. Sphenoid: fully ossified, terminating posteriorly in intracranial joint or fused to otoccipital = 0, separated from otoccipital by unossified gap = 1

PALATAL DENTITION

- 31. Ectopterygoid fang pairs: present = 0, absent = 1
- 32. Ectopterygoid row (3+) of smaller teeth: present = 0, absent = 1
- 33. Ectopterygoid / palatine denticle row: present = 0, absent = 1
- 34. Ectopterygoid / palatine shagreen field: absent = 0, present = 1
- 35. Maxilla tooth number: > 40 = 0, 30-40 = 1, < 30 = 2
- 36. Palatine row of smaller teeth: present = 0, absent = 1
- 37. Pterygoid shagreen: dense = 0, a few discontinuous patches or absent = 1
- 38. Premaxillary tooth proportions: all approximately same size = 0, posteriormost teeth at least twice height of anteriormost teeth = 1
- 39. Premaxillary tooth number: > 15 = 0, 10 14 = 1, < 10 = 2
- 40. Vomer fang pairs: present = 0, absent = 1
- 41. Vomerine fang pairs noticeably smaller than other palatal fang pairs: no = 0, yes = 1
- 42. Vomer anterior wall forming posterior margin of palatal fossa bears tooth row meeting in midline: yes = 0, no = 1
- 43. Vomerine row of small teeth : present = 0, absent = 1
- 44. Vomerine shagreen field: absent = 0, present = 1

45. Vomerine denticle row lateral to tooth row: present = 0, absent = 1

LOWER JAW

- 46. Adductor fossa faces dorsally = 0, mesially = 1
- 47. Adductor crest: absent = 0, peak anterior to adductor fossa, dorsal margin of fossa concave = 1, peak above anterior part of adductor fossa, dorsal margin of fossa convex = 2
- 48. Angular prearticular contact: prearticular contacts angular edge to edge = 0, absent = 1, mesial lamina of angular sutures with prearticular = 2
- 49. Coronoid (anterior) contacts splenial: no = 0, yes = 1
- 50. Coronoid (middle) separated from splenial: yes, by prearticular = 0, no = 1, yes, by postsplenial = 2
- 51. Coronoid (middle) contacts postsplenial: no = 0, yes = 1
- 52. Coronoid (posterior) posterodorsal process: no = 0, yes = 1
- 53. Coronoid (posterior) posterodorsal process visible in lateral view: no = 0, yes = 1
- 54. Dentary external to angular + surangular, with chamfered ventral edge and no interdigitations: no = 0, yes = 1
- 55. Dentary ventral edge: smooth continuous line = 0, abruptly tapering or 'stepped' margin = 1
- 56. Dentary suture with splenial + postsplenial marked by deep furrow: no = 0, yes = 1
- 57. Mandibular sensory canal: present = 0, absent = 1
- 58. Mandibular canal exposure: entirely enclosed, opens through lines of pores = 0, mostly enclosed, short sections of open grooves = 1, mostly open grooves, short sections opening through pores = 2, entirely open = 3
- 59. Mandible: oral sulcus/surangular pit line: present = 0, absent = 1
- 60. Meckelian bone floors precoronoid fossa: yes = 0, no = 1
- 61. Meckelian bone ossified in middle part of jaw: yes = 0, little or no ossification = 1
- 62. Meckelian bone exposure in middle part of jaw, depth much less than prearticular, 0 depth similar to prearticular = 1
- 63. Meckelian foramina/ fenestrae, dorsal margins formed by; Meckelian bone = 0, prearticular = 1, infradentary = 2
- 64. Meckelian foramina/ fenestrae, height: much lower than adjacent prearticular = 0, equal to or greater than depth of adjacent prearticular = 1
- 65. Parasymphysial lateral foramen present: no = 0, yes = 1

- 66. Parasymphysial mesial foramen present: no = 0, yes = 1
- 67. Postsplenial with mesial lamina: no = 0, yes = 1
- 68. Postsplenial pit line present: yes = 0, no = 1
- 69. Postsplenial suture with prearticular present: no = 0, yes but interrupted by Meckelian foramina or fenestrae = 1, uninterrupted suture = 2
- 70. Prearticular sutures with surangular: no = 0, yes = 1
- 71. Prearticular sutures with mesial lamina of splenial: no, mesial lamina of splenial absent = 0, yes = 1, no, mesial lamina of splenial separated from prearticular by postsplenial = 2
- 72. Prearticular with longitudinal ridge below coronoids: no = 0, yes = 1
- 73. Prearticular with mesially projecting flange on dorsal edge along posterior border of adductor fossa: no = 0, yes = 1
- 74. Prearticular centre of radiation of striations: level with posterior end of posterior coronoid = 0, level with middle of adductor fossa = 1, level with posterior end of adductor fossa = 2
- 75. Splenial has free ventral flange: yes = 0, no = 1
- 76. Splenial, rearmost extension of mesial lamina: closer to anterior end of jaw than to adductor fossa = 0, equidistant = 1, closer to anterior margin of adductor fossa than to the anterior end of the jaw = 2

LOWER JAW DENTITION

- 77. Coronoids: at least one has fang pair recognisable because at least twice the height of coronoid teeth: yes = 0, no = 1
- 78. Coronoids: at least one has fangs recognisable because noticeably mesial to vertical lamina of bone and to all other teeth: yes = 0, no = 1
- 79. Coronoids: at least one has organised tooth row: yes = 0, no =1
- 80. Coronoids: at least one carries shagreen: no = 0, yes = 1
- 81. Coronoids with a row of very small teeth or denticles lateral to tooth row: yes = 0, no = 1
- 82. Coronoids: size of teeth (excluding fangs) on anterior and middle coronoids relative to dentary tooth size: about the same = 0, half height or less = 1
- 83. Dentary tooth row: homodont = 0, markedly heterodont = 1
- 84. Dentary with parasymphysial fangs internal to marginal tooth row: yes = 0, no = 1
- 85. Dentary teeth: same size as maxillary teeth = 0, larger than maxillary teeth = 1, smaller than maxillary teeth = 2
- 86. Dentary with a row of very small teeth or denticles lateral to tooth row: yes = 0, no = 1

- 87. Dentary tooth number: > 70 = 0, 56-70 = 1, 46-55 = 2, 36-45 = 3, < 35 = 4
- 88. Parasymphysial tooth plate: present = 0, absent = 1
- 89. Parasymphysial plate dentition: shagreen or irregular tooth field = 0, organised dentition aligned parallel to jaw margin = 1, no dentition = 2
- 90. Parasymphsial plate has fang pair: no = 0, yes = 1.
- 91. Parasymphysial plate has tooth-row: no = 0, short tooth row, separated from coronoid tooth row by diastema = 1, long tooth row reaching coronoid = 2
- 92. Prearticular shagreen field, distribution: gradually decreasing from dorsal to ventral = 0, well defined dorsal longitudinal band = 1, scattered patches or absent = 2

GENERAL SKULL CHARACTERS

- 93. Anterior palatal fenestra: single = 0, double = 1, absent = 2
- 94. Dorsal fontanelle on snout: absent = 0, present = 1
- 95. Interpterygoid vacuities: absent = 0, at least 2 x longer than wide = 1, < 2 x longer than wide = 2
- 96. Intracranial joint: present in dermal skull roof = 0, absent = 1
- 97. Nature of dermal ornament: tuberculate = 0, fairly regular pit and ridge = 1, irregular = 2, absent or almost absent = 3
- 98. Nature of ornament: 'starbursts' of radiating ornament on at least some bones: no = 0, yes = 1

POSTCRANIUM

- 99. Anocleithrum: oblong with distinct anterior overlap area = 0, dropshaped with no anterior overlap area = 1, absent = 2
- 100. Cleithrum: ornamented = 0, not ornamented = 1
- 101. Cleithrum, postbranchial lamina: present = 0, absent = 1
- 102. Digits: absent = 0, present = 1
- 103. Humerus: narrow tapering entepicondyle = 0, square or parallelogram-shaped entepicondyle = 1
- 104. Ilium, iliac canal: absent = 0, present = 1
- 105. Ilium, posterior process: oriented posterodorsally = 0, oriented approximately horizontally posteriorly = 1
- 106. Interclavicle: small and concealed or absent = 0, large and exposed = 1
- 107. Interclavicle shape: ovoid = 0, kite-shaped = 1, with posterior stalk = 2

- 108. Lepidotrichia in paired appendages: present = 0, absent = 1
- 109. Posttemporal + supracleithrum: present = 0, absent = 1
- 110. Radius and ulna: radius much longer than ulna = 0, approximately equal length = 1
- 111. Ribs, trunk: no longer than diameter of intercentrum = 0, longer = 1
- 112. Ribs, trunk: all straight = 0, at least some curving ventrally = 1
- 113. Ribs, trunk: all cylindrical = 0, some or all bear flanges from posterior margin which narrow distally = 1, some or all flare distally = 2
- 114. Scapular blade: absent = 0, small with narrow top = 1, large with broad top = 2
- Scapulocoracoid: small and tripodal = 0, large plate pierced by large coracoid foramen = 1, very large plate without large coracoid foramen = 2
- 116. Subscapular fossa: broad and shallow = 0, deeply impressed posteriorly = 1
- 117. Squamation: complete body covering of scales, all similar = 0, ventral armour of gastralia = 1

Data matrix

Eusthenopteron Proterogyrinus Crassigyrinus Metaxygnathus Panderichthys Silvanerpeton Ichthyostega Acanthostega Balanerpeton Dendrerpeton Densignathus Elginerpeton Elpistostege Greererpeton MGUH VP 6088 Whatcheeria Eoherpeton Ventastega Tiktaalik Pederpes Baphetes

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Trees

