

Trilobites: Denizens of Ancient Seas

Trilobites are extinct arthropods, distantly related to modern lobsters, horseshoe crabs, and spiders. Trilobites thrived on every continent on Earth from the Cambrian to Permian period, approximately 520–240 million years ago. Most were small, from ¼ inch to about 3 inches in length; a few, from 19 to 30 inches in length, were giants.

Looking something like a hard-shelled bug, trilobites had multiple body segments, joined legs, and a shieldlike head. Two grooves down its back divided it into three lobes; thus the name tri-lob-ite. Trilobites were covered by a thick exoskeleton that molted as they grew; that exoskeleton is what is typically preserved as a fossil. Geologists believe that these animals were one of the first forms of life to develop complex eyes; some species had thousands of lenses in each eye. They were bottom-dwelling scavengers that ate organic detritus.

Over 200,000 species of trilobites have been scientifically recognized. Trilobites and other marine fossils help geologists to map ancient seaways and correlate rock strata.

