

Protista

Protista knowledge

Small but fundamental

Protista are microscopic, mainly unicellular organisms, i.e. consisting of one cell only. Unlike Monera, which have no distinguished nucleus, Protista have a nucleus and this is why they are called eukaryotes. Their genetic material (DNA) is in the nucleus, wrapped in a membrane that separates it from the cytoplasm.

Protista are the kingdom with the highest degree of variability, which includes micro-organisms with very different shapes, structures and living conditions.

All Protista can reproduce asexually, i.e. they can duplicate without exchanging any genetic material. This is the most frequently used method to increase the number of individuals. But, in case of need, they can recombine their genetic inheritance, i.e. reproduce through “sexed” methods. All Protista have an aerobic metabolism, i.e. they need oxygen to live.

They consist of two large groups: autotrophic and heterotrophic protista.

Autotrophic protista

They can perform photosynthesis and mainly consist of unicellular algae. They can be divided into a number of systematic groups according to the shape of their cells and the type of photosynthetic pigments they use.

- **Chrysophyta or golden algae:** they live in both sea and freshwater; the most common ones are diatoms, which are equipped with a typical siliceous shell (SiO_2), consisting of two parts joined with each other like a box and a lid. The shell is provided with many small holes through which the cell communicates with the external environment. Diatoms usually live near the seabed.
- **Dinoflagellata:** they generally live in the sea and are also equipped with a shell, consisting of many cellulose plates. They have two flagella (resembling cilia, only longer) for covering small distances. They are among the most important components of the marine phytoplankton.
- **Euglenida:** they live in ponds and lakes. These organisms are provided with chloroplasts (cellular organelles containing chlorophyll, the pigment involved in the photosynthesis) and can therefore perform the photosynthesis; however, without light, they become heterotrophic and start therefore feeding on the organic substances they find in the surrounding environment. Their cell is equipped with two flagella and an eyespot, i.e. a concentration of light-sensitive pigments that allow Protista to move towards light.

Heterotrophic Protista

These Protista are also known as Protozoa, which means “first animals”; in fact, the term does not mean that all protozoa are the ancestors of the animals, but refers to the fact that they ingest food, which is typical of animals.

Some of these Protista are predators and feed on bacteria and other Protista, i.e. they feed on dead organic matter, while others are parasites that exploit the resources of several organisms.

They can be divided into three main groups depending on how they move:

- **Amoeboid protozoa:** they move with the aid of the pseudopodia, which means “false feet”, i.e. extensions of the cellular cytoplasm that allow the cell to move. The pseudopodia are also used to take in the food particles by phagocytosis (absorption of particles by a cell). This group includes amoebas: they have no external coatings, live in still water and damp soils and some species can be parasitic, such as *Entamoeba histolytica*, which transmits a disease, amoebic dysentery. On the contrary, Foraminiferida are provided with a calcareous coating with many holes, out of which protrude the pseudopodia, and always live in the sea. Heliozoia and Radiolaria, instead, differ from the others organisms

for they have special props in their pseudopodia that keep them fairly stiff.

• **Flagellate protozoa:** they are equipped with between one and many flagella, through which they move. This group includes organisms that live on their own as well as parasitic ones, some of which transmit intestinal infections, such as the *Trichomonas* or *Tripanosoma*; this protozoan lives in Central Africa and moves from the body of the tsetse fly to the body of man or cattle, transmitting the serious sleeping sickness, which causes about 5,000 deaths a year. Other protozoa are symbionts, i.e. they benefit their hosts, such as the *Tryconimpha*, that lives in the stomach of termites, helping them digest the wood they feed on.

• **Sporozoa:** they have no organs to move. They are all parasites of animals, of other protozoa and man. They can produce spores. This group includes the *Plasmodium malariae*, which causes the disease transmitted by the female *Anopheles*, and the *Toxoplasma gondii*, which transmits toxoplasmosis.

• **Ciliates:** they are considered the most developed group because of their complexity. They can live either in freshwater or salty water, and move with the aid of the cilia, that in some species cover all the cell, while in others they only cover some areas. In these protozoa, the food is not fed into any point of the cell, but in a specific area, the cytopharynx, near an opening between the cilia, which flutter to move in the food particles. This class includes the paramecium, the vorticella and the *Balantidium coli*, which causes intestinal lesions in man.

A long food chain

Even if protista are rather small in size (usually between few microns to a few millimetres), they are very important for natural organisation, given the important role that photosynthetic protozoa play in the food chain of the aquatic organisms.

They mainly feed on bacteria and thus play an essential role in the food chain, since they are the main producers on which all other organisms depend. The number of these organisms belonging to marine plankton can be huge; they have been found even as at 1,000 and 5,000 metres deep. This group includes, for instance, diatoms, which, as we said before, are equipped with a siliceous shell.

After the organism dies, it can fall and settle on the seabed, thus originating, especially in the coldest seas, some siliceous deposits that are called "infusorial earth", used for instance to polish silver and to make toothpaste.

Diatoms are food for many forms of life, such as small crustaceans, called Copepoda, which in turn are food for the shoals of herrings.

Plankton is also composed of other protozoa, such as Radiolaria, large amounts of which lived in the past geological ages. After death, their shells settle on the seabed, building up a thick, hard rock, known as radiolarite, which, along with siliceous deposits from diatoms, compose the "infusorial earth".

Together at all costs: the symbiosis

There are cases of symbiosis between animals and protozoa, in particular unicellular algae. The animals in which this phenomenon is most common are Radiolaria and Foraminifera (among protozoa), Coelenterata, Ctenophora, Platyhelminthes and molluscs (among Metazoa). In omnivore or herbivore species, such as, for instance, Radiolaria and Foraminifera, the algae adapt inside the cell by developing systems to resist the attack of some digestive enzymes of the host, especially cellulase. For instance, the zoochlorellae, even if they can also live on their own, can always be found in the *Convoluta* sp. Turbellaria (resembling a flat worm), where they get under the epidermis. They can invade the animal through the capsule of the egg, by which they are attracted. The *Convoluta* cannot live without these algae, because it needs the lipids they produce.

Zooxanthellae

Another case of symbiosis is the one between the mollusc *Tridacna*, which lives on the reefs of the Asian Pacific region, and the zooxanthellae. The latter live on the edge of the coating of the mollusc, which contains "hyaline bodies", i.e. transparent bodies, that make it easier for light to penetrate; the zooxanthellae crowd around these bodies to perform the photosynthesis. The zooxanthellae are symbionts, also of Coelenterata, and reproduce through eggs. In the

Mediterranean Sea, they live only in some sea anemones, but in the Tropical seas the symbionts live in very many species of Coelenterata, especially in the Madreporaria of the reefs. The polyp of the madrepores contains these algae that give it its brown-reddish colour. The algae supply the polyp with energy in the form of sugars and amino acids, produce oxygen and remove carbon dioxide (which could form carbonic acid and damage the calcareous skeleton of the polyps). In return, the polyps offer protection to these small algae. Every square centimetre of a madreporite contains approximately one million algae sp. *Zooxanthellae*.

Protistas' ancestors

The most ancient fossil traces of the first eukaryote cells date back to approximately 1 and a half billion years ago. Prokaryotes had appeared two billion years earlier, and up to then they had been the only inhabitants: in the intervening time, the bacteria had had the opportunity to differentiate into two different lines of evolution. One of these originated the first eukaryotes, i.e. Protista, following the spread of bacteria that could perform the photosynthesis (cyanobacteria), enriching the atmosphere with oxygen. Since all Protista have an aerobic metabolism, they could not have developed before that time. It seems some bacteria may have started to form symbiotic associations with several bacteria, some of which could have evolved into cellular organelles (e.g. mitochondria and chloroplasts).