A Cambrian crown annelid reconciles phylogenomics and the fossil record

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Annelids are among the most disparate animal phyla, encompassing ambush predators, suspension feeders and terrestrial earthworms[1]. Early annelid evolution remains obscure or controversial[2,3], partly due to discordance between molecular phylogenies and fossils[2,4]. Cambrian annelid fossils have morphologies indicating epibenthic lifestyles, whereas phylogenomics recovers sessile, infaunal and tubicolous taxa as an early diverging grade[5]. Magelonidae and Oweniidae (Palaeoannelida[1]) are the sister group of all other annelids but contrast with Cambrian taxa in both lifestyle and gross morphology[2,6]. We describe a new fossil polychaete, *Dannychaeta tucolus*, from the early Cambrian Canglangpu Formation[7], preserved within delicate, originally organic dwelling tubes. The head has a well-defined spade-shaped prostomium with elongate ventrolateral palps. The body has a wide, stout thorax and elongate abdomen with biramous parapodia with parapodial lamellae. This character combination is shared with extant Magelonidae, and phylogenetic analyses recover *Dannychaeta* within Palaeoannelida. *Dannychaeta* is the oldest polychaete unambiguously belonging inside

crown annelids, providing a constraint on the tempo of annelid evolution and revealing unrecognised ecological and morphological diversity in ancient annelids.

Systematic Palaeontology

Phylum: Annelida Lamarck, 1809
Unranked: Palaeoannelida Weigert & Bleidorn, 2016
Family: Magelonidae Cunningham & Ramage, 1888
Dannychaeta tucolus gen. et sp. nov.

Etymology: *Danny:* referring to Danny Eibye-Jacobsen, for his contributions to our understanding of early annelids; *chaeta* (Latin): bristle; *colus* (Latin): dwelling in; *tubus* (Latin): tube.

Holotype: YKLP 11382 part and counterpart (Fig. 1, Extended Data Fig. 1)

Referred material: YKLP 11383—11402 (Fig. 2-3, Extended Data Figs. 2-6).

Locality and Horizon: Canglangpu Formation, Cambrian Stage 3, Hongjingshao Member (~514 Ma), at southwest of Guanshan reservoir, Chenggong, Kunming, China[7].

Diagnosis for genus: Elongate, slender polychaetes with organic dwelling tubes. Head with anteriorly tapering spade-shaped prostomium, with paired palps attached ventrolaterally near the mouth. Body heteronomously segmented, with wider thorax containing at least 8 chaetigers. Parapodia with lateral lamellae in the posterior part of the abdomen. Abdominal parapodia biramous, unknown in thorax. Capillary chaetae in both rami, occurring in tight parallel bundles.

Description: The holotype (Fig. 1, Extended Data Fig. 1) is incomplete posteriorly (~40 mm long), showing the wider anterior region (thorax; max width 3.9 mm) (Fig. 1a-e) and abdomen (~1.9 mm exclusive of parapodia) (Fig. 1h-i). The number of thoracic segments would consist of ≥8 chaetigers, extrapolating from segment spacing (15.5 mm length and 1 segment per 1.9 mm). The prostomium is a spade-shaped lobe (Figs 1c-e, 2a-h, Extended Data Figs. 1a-g, 2a-h) and is longer (~4 mm) than wide (~2 mm). The relief of overlapping anatomical features preserved on different planes indicates that the prostomium is dorsal of the palps (Fig. 1d-f, 2b-d). The palps cross over each other in the holotype (Fig. 1d-f), are incompletely preserved anteriorly, but are ≥30% the length of the thorax. A specimen in ventral view shows palps inserting ventrolaterally, anterior of a putative burrowing organ (Fig. 2a-d). The prostomium has a faint pair of tapering ridges (Fig. 2d). The gut is preserved as a carbonaceous film (Fig. 3f) that terminates adjacent to palp bases (Fig. 1d-f), indicating palp attachment near the mouth opening.

Abdominal parapodia are distinct lobes, projecting ~300 μm from the body (Fig. 3c-e). Anterior abdominal chaetae in the holotype are ~500 μm long (Fig. 1h). In narrower midbody fragments, chaetae are ~800 μm long (e.g. Fig. 3d), suggesting variable chaetation along the body. Abdominal chaetae are in tight fascicles (Figs 1j, 3c-e, Extended Data Fig. 3k) and are most clear using fluorescence microscopy (Fig. 3d). The chaetae are directed slightly anteriorly (Fig. 1i) which is used to orient fragmentary specimens. In two specimens, lateral lamellae occur adjacent to chaetal bundles (Fig. 3g). Lamellae are crescent-shaped and approximately half the body width in length, with a dorsolateral (Extended Data Fig. 1k) to dorsal (Extended Data Fig. 5f-h) placement. As the rami are often parallel, biramous morphology is revealed by subparallel chaetal bundles (Fig. 3d) or rare oblique views (Fig. 3h, Extended Data Fig. 5). Fine details of chaetal morphology are obscure but are consistent with capillaries in the abdomen (e.g. Fig. 3d).

The pygidium is never well-preserved, but one specimen has putative pygidial cirri (Extended Data Fig. 5j, k). An ovoid structure between chaetiger one and three is of uncertain identity but resembles a blood lacuna (Fig. 1d-f, Extended Data Figs. 1h-j, 4g).

Eight specimens are preserved within a structure that extends beyond the body margin and chaetae (Fig. 3a-f, i-k, Extended Data Figs. 2-4). This is parallel to the body axis, approximately four times the body width (excluding parapodia) (Fig. 3a) with a sharp boundary with the matrix, which is visible using light (Fig. 2f) and fluorescence (Fig. 3h) microscopy and elemental maps for iron (Extended data Fig. 3f). This structure is consistent with a dwelling tube, or tube-lined burrow. The tube has a slightly darker appearance relative to the matrix and lacks identifiable agglutinated bioclasts or grains. Tubes have slight relief (Extended Data Fig. 3g) and sometimes have thick walls at their margins (Extended Data Fig. 5c-e), due to compaction. Like the body, the tube contains iron (Fig. 3f) localised to small grains in the matrix that appear bright in SEM backscatter images (Extended Data Fig. 3f). This is consistent with an organic composition, with organic material acting as a substrate for pyrite formation[8]. Specimens preserved in tubes vary from well-preserved with delineated parapodia/chaetae

(Fig. 3c-e, Extended Data Fig. 3) to highly effaced, indicating in situ decay[9] (Extended Data Fig. 4,6). Preservation quality varies along individual specimens (e.g. Extended Data Figs. 3a-d).

Discussion

Due to low preservation potential[9], annelid body fossils are rare and distributed discontinuously and unevenly through geological time[10]. Diverse fossil polychaetes are known from the early and middle Cambrian deposits (e.g. Sirius Passet[3,11] and Burgess Shale[12]), but rare from China[13,14]. Cambrian annelids typically are generalised polychaetes in morphology, with well-developed biramous parapodia (suggesting motility[15]), elongate chaetae and a pair of palps[2,3,6,11]. They cannot be assigned to extant annelid subclades[6,12] and lack proposed annelid synapomorphies (e.g. the prostomium-peristomium head structure[3] and typically pygidial cirri[12]) and are interpreted as stem-group annelids[6]. The lack of Cambrian crown annelids has prompted hypotheses of relatively late crown group diversification, perhaps late Cambrian/Ordovician[4], when jawed polychaetes become diverse and abundant[16].

Both molecular[1,5,17] and morphological[18] phylogenies have converged on scenarios where annelids evolved from polychaete-like ancestors. However, reconciling fossil and phylogenomic evidence has been challenging[2,6,12,15]. Molecular phylogenies recover a grade of infaunal, sessile and tube-dwelling taxa as deep branches[1,5], including Magelonidae, Oweniidae, Chaetopteriformia and Sipuncula. These groups differ from Cambrian polychaetes in terms of gross morphology and inferred mode of life[6]. A tube-dwelling annelid ancestor has been proposed[19] (although see[20]), which is contradicted by interpretations of the fossil record[15], and morphological hypotheses regarding the origin of annelid body plan features, e.g. segmentation and parapodia[18,20]. Fossil specimens interpreted as sipunculans (which phylogenomic studies recover within Annelida[1,5]) are known from the early Cambrian Chengjiang Lagerstätte[21] but are rare and poorly known. If correctly interpreted, the oldest fossil crown annelids therefore belong to taxa that have lost most annelid synapomorphies[6], including segmentation[22]. Magelonidae and Oweniidae (Palaeoannelida[1]) are recovered as the sister group of all other annelids and so have featured prominently in recent discussions of the annelid ancestor[15,17,19]. These families are unusual among polychaetes, as they lack nuchal organs, possess monociliated epidermal cells and simple nervous systems[1,17].

Dannychaeta is dissimilar in gross morphology to that of previously known Cambrian polychaetes, but shares derived characters with extant Magelonidae. A spade-shaped prostomium with ventrolateral palps (Fig. 2) is characteristic for Magelonidae, which also have a differentiated thorax composed of eight or nine chaetigers[23,24]. Other well-known Cambrian annelids lack a clearly demarcated head and prostomial lobe[3] (but have lateral palps[15]), suggesting the typical annelid head structure evolved after the origin of a segmented body, parapodia and palps[3]. The presence of a differentiated head in *Dannychaeta* is unique among Cambrian annelid fossils, indicating in itself a phylogenetic position proximal to or within the annelid crown group[3]. The significance of the putative blood lacuna is uncertain, but small ring shaped vessels occur in *Magelona*[23] and a larger lacuna occurs in *Poecilochaetus*[25]. However, both are placed more anteriorly, nearer the prostomium.

Although not widespread (~7% of species[24]), several magelonid species live in tube-lined burrows[26] with an organic/parchment-like composition, some adhered sediment grains/bioclasts. These tubes are similar in inferred construction materials and dimensions relative to the body as in *Dannychaeta*. The presence of both obliquely and parallelly oriented specimens (e.g. Extended Data Figs. 2, 4) suggests at least some transport prior to burial.

We reconstruct *Dannychaeta* as a sessile, infaunal polychaete that fed in the water column using elongate palps (as in extant Magelonidae[24,26]; Fig. 4a, b). Our phylogenetic analyses recover *Dannychaeta* in the magelonid stem group (Fig. 4c, Extended Data Figs. 6, 7). Parapodial and chaetal morphology differ in some details in *Dannychaeta* and Magelonidae. In extant *Magelona,* the chaetae of the abdomen are hooded hooks, which are generally shorter than the thoracic capillary chaetae and occur in rows[24], whereas abdominal chaetae in *Dannychaeta* resemble capillaries held in bundles (Fig. 3c-e). Hooded hooks in certain families share details of ultrastructure and formation[27] resulting in a proposed close relationship between Capitellidae, Spionidae and Magelonidae[27], which is not supported by phylogenomics[1]. The absence of hooded hooks in *Dannychaeta* may therefore provide consilient evidence of convergent chaetal evolution in these families. Parapodial lamellae also differ in some details in *Dannychaeta,* as they are dorsolaterally placed, but occur partially in inter-ramal space in some species in *Magelona*[24]. *Dannychaeta* is larger than extant magelonids that are typically less than 1 mm wide[24], although tubicolous species (e.g. *M. alleni*) achieve the largest widths and share a more robust anterior region (thorax) with *Dannychaeta*[24].

Other non-pleistoannelid polychaetes also share some characters with *Dannychaeta. Spiochaetopterus* has elongate palps, a differentiated anterior region and organic tubes[28]. However, chaetopterids have ridge-like parapodia (tori) with short, hooked chaetae (uncini[2]), which are distinct from laterally projecting, lobate parapodia in *Dannychaeta.* The head of *Spiochaetopterus* is neither a distinct anterior lobe nor spade shaped. Nevertheless, chaetopterids branch proximally to Palaeoannelida[5]. A close relationship between *Dannychaeta* and chaetopterids would also suggest the presence of tubicolous, early branching crown group annelids in the early Cambrian.

Annelid tube fossils are well-documented[10]. Some late Ediacaran and early Cambrian fossil tubes are tentatively assigned to annelids or described as of 'annelid grade'[30], but lack diagnostic features that would allow confident phylogenetic placement. Tube dwelling has evolved several times among extant annelids, and 'annelid mimicking' taxa with lophophorate affinities are well known from the early Palaeozoic[29], indicating caution should be exercised when assigning fossil tubes. The controversial late Ediacaran tubular fossil *Cloudina* has been tentatively reconstructed as an annelid based on the presence of a tubular gut[30].

Regardless of the phylogenetic position and fossil record of sipunculans[4,21,22], *Dannychaeta* confirms crown annelids as minimally early Cambrian in age, revealing early exploration of sessile ecological niches, over a hundred million years prior to other unambiguous examples of tubicolous annelids[10,29]. *Dannychaeta* reveals that stem-group annelids coexisted with members of the crown group in the early Cambrian and exhibited a diversity of life modes, including epibenthic[15] and sessile forms.

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Acknowledgements.

This work was supported by NSFC grant 41861134032, and Yunnan Provincial grants 2015HC029, 2018FA025 and 2018IA073. LAP was supported by a YIBS Donolley Postdoctoral Fellowship. DYZ is supported by the Key Research Program of the Institute of Geology & Geophysics, Chinese Academy of Sciences (IGGCAS-201905). XYM is supported by a Natural Environment Research Council Independent Research Fellowship (NE/L011751/1). We thank Kunhong Chen and colleagues from the Xiazhuang subdistrict office in Chenggong for generous support in field collection. Thanks to Peiyun Cong, Di Wu, Ting Zhao, Yang Zhao and Mengying Yin for help in fieldwork, to Xiaoyu Yang and Huijuan Mai for SEM-EDX technical support, to Runqing Zhou for micro-CT scanning. We thank Danny Eibye-Jacobsen for providing detailed comments on an earlier version of this manuscript and for his continued support and valuable mentorship. We thank Robert Nicholls for the artistic reconstruction of *Dannychaeta tucolus*.

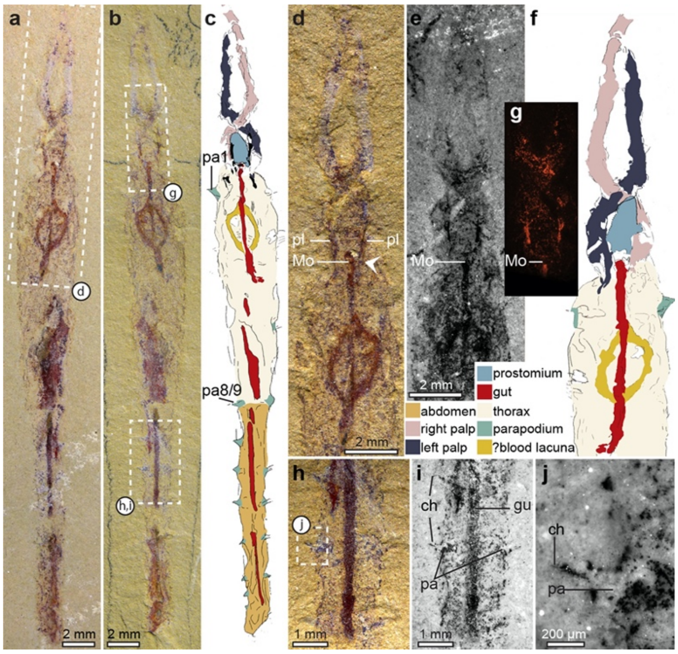

Figure 1 | *Dannychaeta tucolus,* holotype specimen YKLP 11382. a, b, part and counterpart, direct light. **c,** interpretative drawing of counterpart, colour scheme detailed in **f. d,** anterior region of part. **e,** anterior region of counterpart under fluorescent light. Specimen mirrored for easier comparison with part. **f**, interpretative drawing of the anterior, based on both part and counterpart. **g,** Fe map from SEM-EDX analysis. **h**, **i,** abdominal region, counterpart, direct light (h), fluorescent light (i). **j,** close-up of parapodium and chaetae**.** Abbreviations: ch – chaetae, gu – gut, mo – mouth, pl – palp, pa1 – parapodium of segment one, pa8/9 – parapodium of segment eight or nine, pa – parapodium.

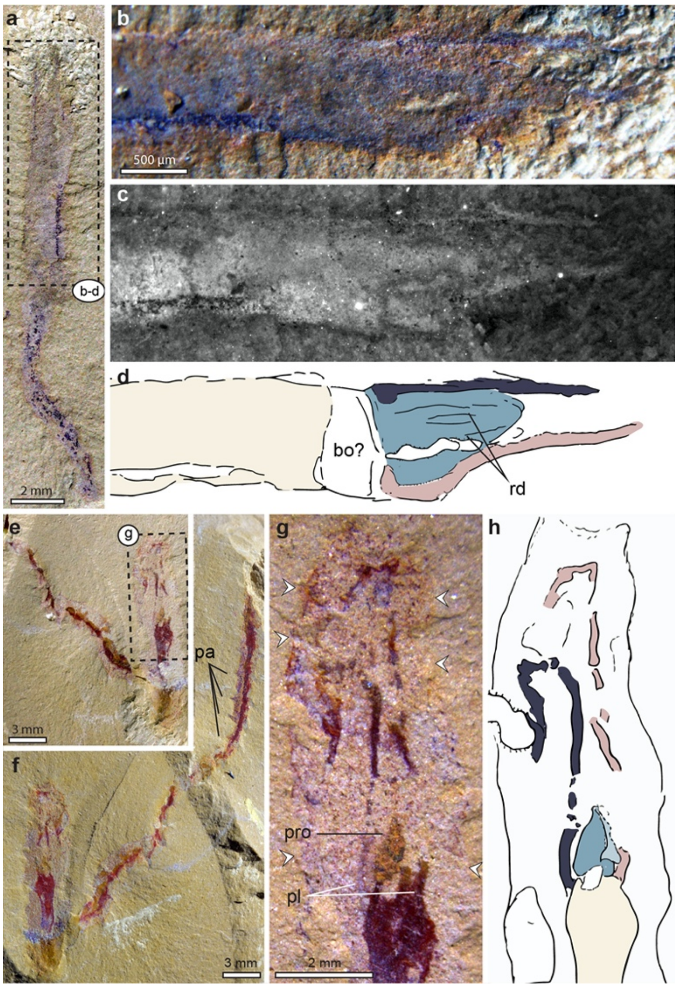

Figure 2 | *Dannychaeta tucolus*, anterior region. a, YKLP 11390b, anterior fragment with head and palps. **b,** anterior region of YKLP 11390b, low angle illumination from the northwest. **c,** region as in **b,** fluorescent light. **d,** interpretative drawing outlining anatomical features (colour scheme as in Fig. 1f). **e,** YKLP 11393b specimen preserving anterior region, dwelling tubes and a partial abdomen. **f**, YKLP 11393a, part. **g,** YKLP 11393b, details of anterior region, white arrowheads indicate tube margins. **h,** interpretative drawing of **g.** Abbreviations: pl – palps, pa – parapodium, pro- prostomium, bo – burrowing organ, rd – prostomial ridge.

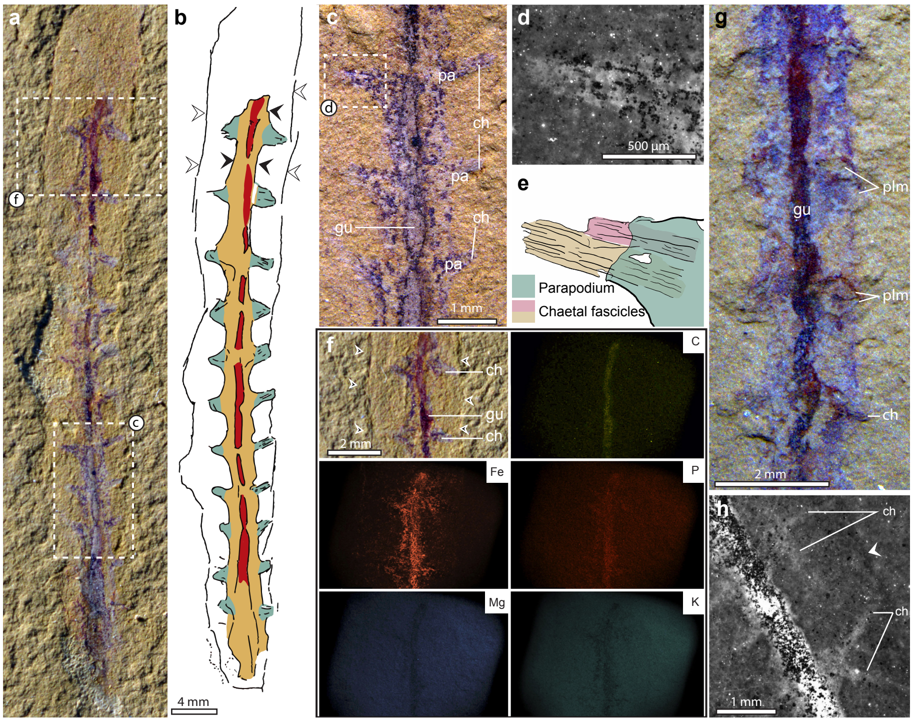

Figure 3 | *Dannychaeta tucolus*, morphological details. a-f, YKLP 11383. **a,** abdominal region within dwelling tube **b**, interpretative drawing of **a** (colours as in Fig 1). Anteriorly, black filled arrowheads indicate the body margin and white filled arrowheads indicate the tube edge. **c,** close up showing the segmented body and parapodia. **d,** close up of chaetal fascicle. **e,** interpretative drawing outlining chaetal fascicles**. f** close up and SEM-EDX maps. **g-h,** YKLP 11389. **g**, close up showing parapodia and lateral lamellae. **h,** close up of YKLP 11384a showing biramous parapodia, chaetae (white arrowhead indicates tube edge). Abbreviations: ch – chaetae, gu – gut, pa – parapodium, plm – parapodial lamella.

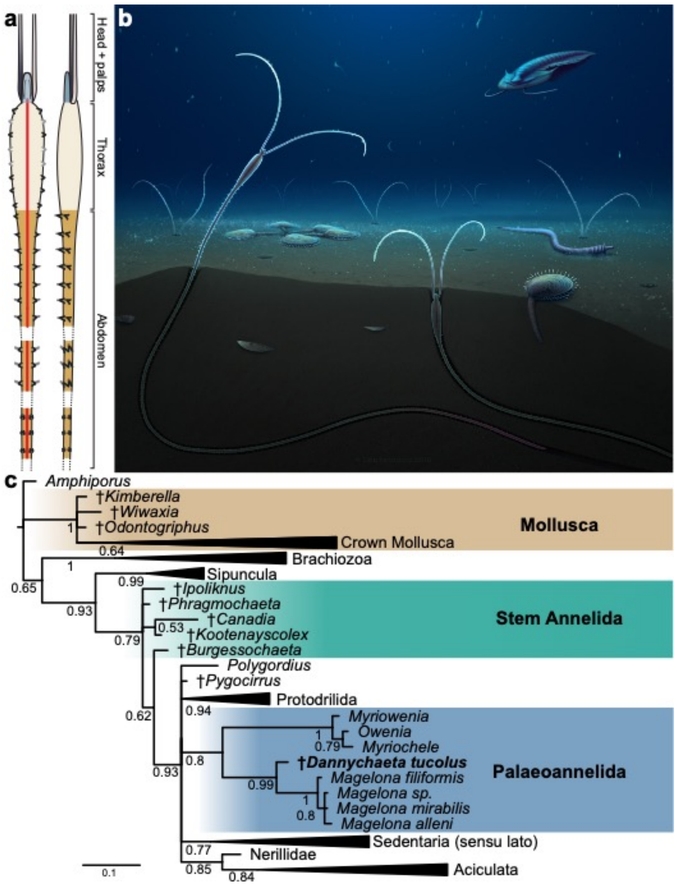

Figure 4 | Reconstruction of *Dannychaeta.* **a,** technical drawing showing proportions, body regions and gross anatomy, colour scheme is as in Fig 1f, dorsal view (left) and right lateral view (right). Parapodia in the thorax not observed but inferred shown in grey. **b,** life reconstruction showing *Dannychaeta tucolus* living in buried tubes, artwork by Bob Nicholls. **c**, Bayesian phylogenic analysis (365 characters, 143 taxa, mki + gamma model) incorporating *Dannychaeta tucolus*. Numbers at nodes are posterior probabilities with scalebar in number of substitutions per site (see Extended Data figure 7 + 8 for full results and additional information).

Methods

The specimens were studied, photographed at the Yunnan Key Laboratory for Palaeobiology, Yunnan University (YKLP) and at the University of Exeter, and are deposited in YKLP. Photographs were taken using a Canon EOS 5DSR coupled with a MACRO 100 mm lens, and a Leica DFC7000T linked to a Leica M205 FA fluorescent microscope. The excitation wavelength of GFPL is 480 nm, and the excitation wavelength of RFPL is 546 nm. Images used a gain value of 3.3, saturation value of 52.00, gamma value of 0.92. The external light source of the fluorescence microscope was a LEICA KL 300 LED, used for taking white light images. Scanning electron microscope images were collected using a FEI Quanta 650 FEG using an accelerating voltage of 25kv and a working distance of 12.4 mm. Energy dispersive X-ray (EDX) analyses used an EDAX Pegasus using accelerating voltages of 25-30kv with a working distance of 12.4-13 mm.

Phylogenetic analyses were based on a previously published character matrix for annelids and their close relatives[6] which has been updated successively with the addition of new taxa and fossil data[14-16,31]. We performed Bayesian analyses using MrBayes 3.2.6 using the mki model with the Lewis correction for the scoring only of informative characters[32], with default priors for all parameters (ie.g.e. all trees given equal prior probability). Bayesian analyses with and without topological constraints based on phylogenomic trees were used to investigate if the conflicting topologies recovered from morphological and molecular data impacted the phylogenetic position of *Dannychaeta tucolus*. These constraints were constructed by incorporating results from the most recent[17] and taxon rich[33,34] phylogenomic analyses of annelids and are outlined in detail in the supporting information. We followed ref[15] by excluding *Arkonips* and *Guanshanchaeta* from the character matrix as they contain redundant character scores. For both analyses 100 million generations were requested, with the analysis stopping once the average deviation of split frequencies dropped below 0.01. Convergence was then assessed using ESS (>200) and PSRF (~1.0) values for all model parameters. Parsimony analyses without topological constraints were conducted in TNT 1.5[35] (courtesy of the Willi Hennig Society), using both equal weights and implied weights with *k*=10. Bremer support and jackknife and bootstrap frequencies from 1000 replications were inferred for equal weights trees and frequency differences were inferred from 1000 replicates of symmetric resampling for the implied weights trees.

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Author contributions

LAP, HC, JV and XYM designed the study and interpreted the fossil specimens and their anatomy. HC, DYZ and XGH collected the specimens. HC prepared and photographed all specimens and performed the EDAX elemental analysis. LAP made the figures, performed the phylogenetic analyses and composed the first draft of the manuscript with substantial input from all co-authors.

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ETHICS DECLARATIONS

Competing interests.

The authors declare no competing interests.

DATA AND CODE AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

All data analysed in this paper are available as part of the published paper, the extended data or supplementary information. The phylogenetic dataset and commands and topological constraints necessary to run the MrBayes analyses are included as NEXUS formatted files. The nomenclatural acts in this publication have been registered at ZooBank (LSID: urn:lsid:zoobank.org:pub:5BC89E47-2955-4539-94FD-D400E8C947FB).