

First occurrence of a Hymenosomatid crab *Elamena mathoei* (Desmarest, 1823) (Crustacea: Decapoda: Brachyura) in the Mediterranean Sea

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Abstract

Mediterranean fauna is undergoing drastic modifications as a result of anthropogenic activities and global warming. The most important of these is the colonization of the Mediterranean Sea by alien species, many of them entering through the Suez Canal. While many of them are still confined to the Levant Basin, several have extended their distribution westwards to Tunisian waters. The presence of the Indo-west Pacific hymenosomatid crab *Elamena mathoei* on a rocky shore at Sidi Daoud, Cape Bon Peninsula, Tunisia, is the first Mediterranean record of this species. It is a testimony to the changes in the patterns of invasion in the Mediterranean Sea.

Keywords: *Elamena mathoei*, Hymenosomatidae, crab, alien, Tunisia, first Mediterranean record.

Introduction

Tunisian carcinological fauna remains rather poorly studied, inshore fauna in particular; species lists are often dated and based on a small number of locals. For example, for the NW shores of Cape Bon Peninsula (Fig. 1), Forest & Guinot (1956) record 3 species: *Xantho porressa* (Olivi, 1792), *Eriphia verrucosa* (Forskål, 1775) and *Pachygrapsus marmoratus* (Fabricius, 1787). Fifty years later, Limam *et al.* (2004) recorded 4 species in the same area, along the Zembra Archipelago: *E. verrucosa*, *Inachus phalangium* (Fabricius, 1775), *P. marmoratus* and *Percnon gibbesi* (H. Milne Edwards 1853), the latter being an alien species of Atlantic origin. The lack of baseline data is to be regretted, as the change in the biota resulting from anthropogenic activities is significant. The most important alteration factor is undoubtedly the colonization by aliens entering through the Suez Canal and establishing populations in Mediterranean waters (e.g. Galil *et al.*, 2002; Zenetos *et al.*, 2010). While so far many Indo-Pacific species are confined to the Levant Basin, some have extended their distribution westwards to Tunisian waters (Zaouali, 1993).

In February 2011, two crabs, were found amongst seaweed on a rocky shore in the vicinity of the small fishing harbour of Sidi Daoud. They were identified as a Hymenosomatid *Elamena mathoei* (Desmarest, 1823), of a family previously unrecorded in the Mediterranean

Sea. The species is known from the Indo-West Pacific Ocean and the Red Sea.

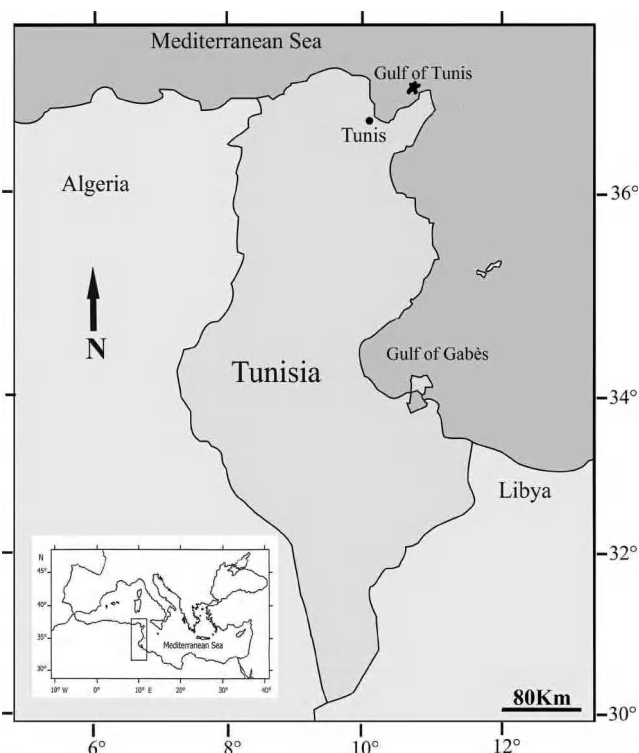


Fig. 1: Map of Tunisia showing the collecting site of *Elamena mathoei* (Desmarest, 1823) (black star).

Material and Methods

Sampling of the rocky mediolittoral and upper infralittoral macrofauna was carried out along the north-western coast of Cape Bon (37°02'40.61"N - 10°54'25.50"E) northern Tunisia (Fig. 1) in February 2011. Collected crustaceans were fixed in 95° ethanol. The two specimens recorded herein were deposited at the Royal Belgian Institute of Natural Sciences, Brussels. Drawings were inked using Adobe Illustrator software.

Results

Elamena mathoei (Desmarest 1823) Fig. 2.

Hymenosoma Mathaei Desmarest, 1823: 275-276; 1825: 163-164; H. Milne-Edwards, 1837: 33-35.

Hymenosoma Mathei Rüppell, 1830: 21, pl. 5 fig. 1.

Elamena mathaei; Paulson, 1875: 71, pl. 9, figs. 3-3b; Tesch, 1918: 20 (key), 21; Gordon, 1940: 63, figs. 1a-b, 2, 3; Paulson, 1961: 77, pl. 9, fig. 3-3b; Lucas, 1980: 158 (key); Ng & Chuang, 1996: 70, fig. 29.

Elamene Mathaei; Heller, 1861: 371.

Not *Elamene Mathaei* H. Milne-Edwards, 1853: 223, pl. 11 fig. 4 (? = *Halicarcinus* sp.).

Material: Sidi Daoud, 37°02'40.61"N - 10°54'25.50"E, on algae growing on rocks, 15-25. ii.2011: 2 males, length x width: 3.2 x 3.7 mm and 2.6 x 2.7 mm, RBINS, Inv.

Diagnosis of Tunisian specimens: Carapace slightly broader than long, bluntly triangular to broadly pyriform, without grooves, laterally smooth. Rostrum very broad, bluntly truncated with ventral rostral keel triangular, strong, visible dorsally. Eyes scarcely visible dorsally. Chelipeds stouter than ambulatory legs, with spatulate fingers. Ambulatory legs long and slender; with more or less distinct protrusion at distal dorsal edge of both merus and carpus; with dactylus laterally flattened, slightly curved inwards, ventral border lined with well-developed row of setae and with 2 subterminal teeth (one tooth broken on P5). Abdomen triangular and 5-segmented, with lateral border of antepenultimate and penultimate segments forming an angular concavity on each side. First gonopod sigmoid, tapering to pointed tip; with 9 subterminal setulose setae.

Colour pattern (in alcohol): pale brown; Desmarest (1823) described it as "couleur de corne" [horn coloured] and Rüppell (1830) as "einformig erdbräun" [uniformly earth brown].

Maximal length of carapace: "just under 6 mm" (Gordon, 1940).

Habitat: among algae on a rocky shore (present material) or "zwischen dem Meergras" [between sea grasses] (Rüppell 1830).

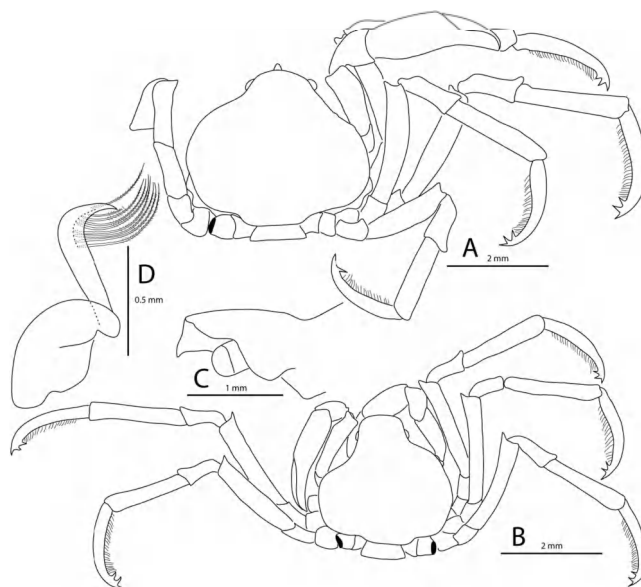


Fig. 2: *Elamena mathoei* (Desmarest, 1823), males, Sidi Daoud, 37°02'40.61"N - 10°54'25.50"E. A-B, habitus; C, anterior part of carapace in lateral view (largest specimen); D, right first gonopod.

Type locality: Ile-de-France (= Mauritius)] (Desmarest, 1823, 1825).

Distribution: *Elamena mathoei* has been reliably recorded from Somalia, Mombasa, Madagascar (Ng & Chuang, 1996), Réunion (Milne-Edwards, 1862), Mauritius (Desmarest, 1823, 1825) and the Red Sea (Rüppell, 1830: Bucht von Tor [= Bay of El-Tor]; Heller, 1861: no precise locality; Paulson, 1875: no precise locality; Gordon, 1940: Ghardaqa). The species has been recorded from French Polynesia: (Peyrot-Clausade, 1989), but the record needs confirmation and could be based on other *Elamena* species of the *truncata* group (Stimpson, 1858).

Remarks: The systematic position of the Hymenosomatidae Macleay, 1838, sometimes named false or crown spider crabs (Ng & Chuang, 1996), has been much debated, but recent evidence suggests that it occupies a very isolated position amongst eubrachyuran crabs (Guinot, 2011). The centre of diversity of the family is the tropical and sub-tropical Indo-West Pacific region, with some species living in inland waters and one in sub-Antarctic seas, *Halicarcinus planatus* (Fabricius, 1775) (Lucas 1980; Ng & Chuang, 1996). Hymenosomatidae are absent from a large part of the East Pacific, West Atlantic and North-eastern Atlantic and from the Mediterranean Sea. The Tunisian hymenosomatid specimens agree rather well with the illustrations of *E. mathoei* published by Paulson (1875), Gordon (1940) and Ng & Chuang (1996), except for the lateral border of the carapace, which looks completely smooth instead of presenting two low angles or traces of tooth on each side. This apparent difference presumably results from distortion of the rather soft body of these tiny crabs.

Discussion

The discovery of *E. mathoei* in the Gulf of Tunis is a surprise, because this Indo-Pacific crab was not previously recorded from the Mediterranean Sea, and Indo-Pacific aliens are more likely to be first recorded in the Levant Basin, and only later on in more western parts of the Mediterranean. While several Indo-Pacific alien crab species were recorded in southern Tunisia (Zaouali *et al.*, 2008), only one, *Eucrate crenata*, was recorded from northern Tunisia. This Euryplacidae crab, had first colonized and became abundant in the Gulf of Gabès (southern Tunisia) (Zaouali, 1993), and only ten years later was collected in the lagoon and Gulf of Tunis (Ben Souissi *et al.*, 2003), and the Bizerte lagoon in the northern part of the country (Shaiek *et al.*, 2010). Interestingly, 400 km separate the southern and northern Tunisian populations. The very small size of *E. mathoei* has possibly played a role in the lack of records in the Mediterranean and it must be pointed out that even in its native range there are few records of this tiny crab. It is possible that shipping served as the vector of the present record. The crab may have either arrived from the Red Sea or the Indian Ocean or from a yet undetected population in the Levant Basin. Indeed, several alien species of molluscs and crustaceans, including the presumably ship-transported crab *Hemigrapsus sanguineus* (De Haan, 1853) and *Pilumnopus vauquelini* (Audouin, 1826) (Ben Souissi *et al.*, 2003; 2004; 2005) respectively, which have been found in the lagoon of Tunis (SW of the Gulf of Tunis), where a large commercial harbour has been established. Such large harbours located in a confined environment are suitable environments for the settlement of alien species, which travel on the fouling of ship hulls or in their ballast waters. The Tunisian specimens of *E. mathoei* were recorded less than 100 km from the lagoon of Tunis, which could possibly be the point of arrival of the species. A search for positive and negative records of *E. mathoei* in other localities in Tunisia and elsewhere in the Mediterranean could assist in elucidating its pathway of colonization.

Conclusion

As a consequence of anthropogenic activities, biogeographical boundaries are becoming more mutable. Mediterranean fauna has been heavily affected by these processes, which have increased dramatically in the last decades. The *mare nostrum* is in the rapid process of losing its faunistic identity, the biocenoses of the Levant Basin being already largely dominated by euryecious Indo-Pacific species. The discovery of the crab *E. mathoei* in northern Tunisia indicates that species dispersal capacity is more significant than previously assumed. Finally, there are little doubts that a more thorough monitoring of

Tunisian marine fauna would lead to further discoveries of previously established and recently arrived alien species.

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