The Queen's Art Collection: Challenging 'Slow' **Ideas of Petrified Wood Formation**

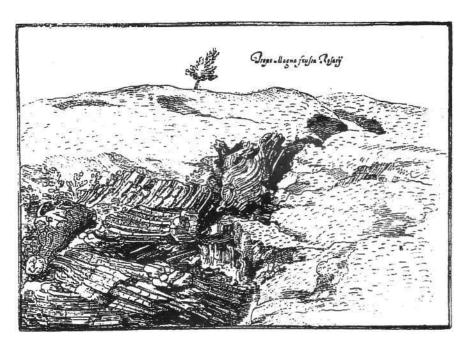


Figure 1. Drawing of a view of the fossil wood deposits in the locality of Rosaro, Umbria, Italy

In the 17th Century, a Roman arts patron assembled a remarkable collection of more than 7,000 watercolours, prints and drawings.

This collection attempted to 'embrace all human knowledge in visual form', and is now mostly in the possession of England's Royal Family.1

Included in it is a set of several hundred remarkably detailed drawings

and descriptions of fossilised wood, from a site in Umbria, Italy (see Figures 1 and 2). At a time when wondered wood had turned to stone, or petrified wood turned into living trees. this was a serious scientific study of a petrified wood deposit.

Professor Andrew Scott, of the Geology Department at the University of London, visited the site, and concluded that the scholarship involved was 'brilliant'. He thinks that

'these sites might give us a quite different view of how woods are preserved in the fossil record'. 1

The site contains a massive range of preservation, from 'unaltered wood to petrified to pyritised (containing iron pyrites)'. Scott says, 'Even today, we can't even explain all the stages of preservation'.

What appears to be baffling those who thought that petrification needs many thousands, even millions, of years are drawings 'where wood is shown to be normal at one end and petrified at the other'. The article describes this as a 'glimpse of petrification in action', but avoids the obvious question: How can the unpetrified portion of the wood still remain as wood for millions of years, if that is how long it took to petrify the other portion?

The same question of course applies to the entire deposit, which Professor Scott confirms as containing 'unaltered wood'. How can it be millions of years old? All of this gives powerful support not only to the idea petrification that (including pyritisation) can take place in less time than it takes ordinary wood to decay, but also to the view that the entire Umbrian fossil site is not millions of years old at all.

REFERENCE

Highfield, R., 1997. Inspired by the Queen's drawings. The Daily Telegraph (London), March 26, p. 20.

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whether Figure 2. Drawing of two pieces of fossil wood from Umbria, Italy the right hand specimen with branches.

