



# Editorial: Technological Frontiers in Dinosaur Science Mark a New Age of Opportunity for Early Career Researchers

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**Keywords:** dinosauria, digitization, 3D modelling, interdisciplinarity, early research career

## Editorial on the Research Topic

### Technological Frontiers in Dinosaur Science Mark a New Age of Opportunity for Early Career Researchers

Implementation of innovative techniques and methodologies is currently fundamental to better understand and improve our knowledge of extinct faunas, like those of the dinosaurs. Today, dinosaur science is experiencing a revolution thanks to these innovative techniques that stem from multiple scientific disciplines (**Figure 1**). In fact, young researchers are taking the lead in research with new scientific approaches (e.g. Falkingham et al., 2018; Lefebvre et al., 2020; Manafzadeh and Gatesy, 2020; Bailleul et al., 2021; Nieto et al., 2021; Serrano-Martínez et al., 2021; Van Bijlert et al., 2021; Ma et al., 2022; Wiemann et al., 2022). Young scientists are the key to bringing new perspectives into science and pushing technological and methodological developments. By publishing this collection we wanted to showcase this, and present high-impact scientific projects mainly developed by worldwide young researchers in vertebrate palaeontology.

The innovative approaches presented in this volume will, not only advance palaeontological knowledge but also provide new tools to all vertebrate palaeontologists, since working protocols and tasks can be easier and faster to carry on with these techniques. One impressive example is the implementation of deep learning algorithms when automating image processing, like in the labelling and segmentation of computed tomography images or when osteohistological features need to be identified. Yu et al. analyze how deep neural networks can efficiently segment protoceratopsian dinosaur fossils, which can save significant time from current manual segmentation. In the case of the implementation of deep neural network-based methods, Quin et al. have tested this technique for getting segmented maps with different osteon regions on a histological dataset from various taxa within alvarezsaurian theropods. These works set an important base for analyzing larger sets of images and samples, but also developing more complex deep learning algorithms.

It is a fact that the use of 3D models in descriptive studies and for soft tissue reconstructions is growing exponentially year after year. One really nice example is the partial ankylosaur skull from the mid-Cretaceous of Queensland (Australia), which Frauenfelder et al. have digitized by synchrotron radiation X-ray tomography and then reconstructed in 3D to facilitate the virtual preparation of the separate cranial bones. Although encased in a limestone concretion, thanks to this technique the palatal anatomy of Australian ankylosaurs has been elucidated, being indeed an important element in resolving ankylosaur phylogenetic relationships. It is essential to study well-preserved fossils when assessing anatomical features for descriptions, comparisons and phylogenetic analyses. However, as

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### Edited and reviewed by:

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University of Kansas, United States

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### Specialty section:

This article was submitted to  
Paleontology,  
a section of the journal  
Frontiers in Earth Science

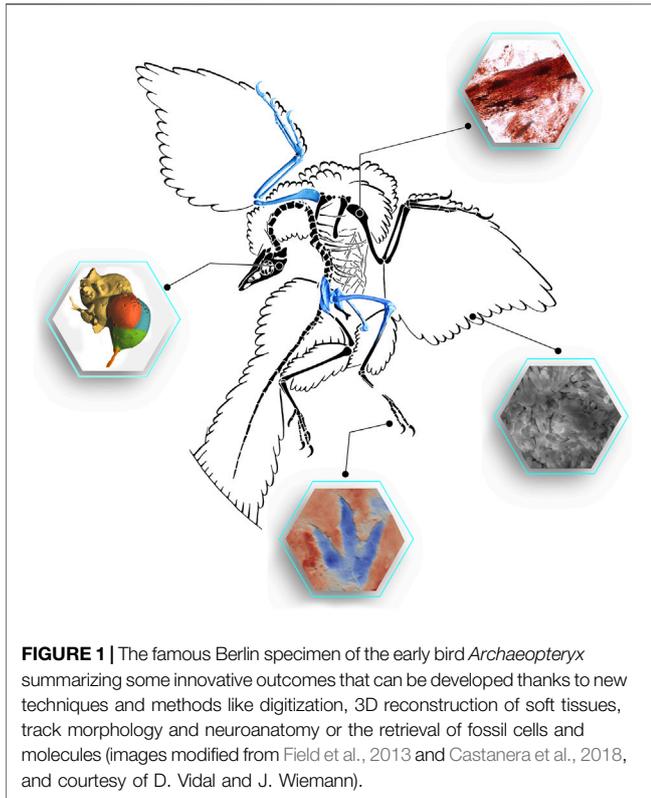
**Received:** 20 June 2022

**Accepted:** 24 June 2022

**Published:** 01 August 2022

### Citation:

Díez Díaz V, Cuesta E, Vidal D and  
Belvedere M (2022) Editorial:  
Technological Frontiers in Dinosaur  
Science Mark a New Age of  
Opportunity for Early  
Career Researchers.  
Front. Earth Sci. 10:973459.  
doi: 10.3389/feart.2022.973459



most of us—palaeontologists—know, this is not the case most of the time. As Demuth et al. state in the first sentence of their abstract “taphonomic and diagenetic processes inevitably distort the original skeletal morphology of fossil vertebrate remains”. These authors propose a novel reconstruction workflow combining retopology and retrodeformation, allowing the original morphology of both symmetrically and asymmetrically damaged areas of fossils to be reconstructed. They test this workflow in 3D reconstructions of the sternum of the crownward stem-bird *Ichthyornis* and some cervical vertebrae of the sauropod *Galeamopus* in the modelling software MAYA. DeVries et al. also propose a retrodeformation and reconstruction workflow for digital restoration of fossils using the armatures of the open-source software Blender, with the specific goal of recording the specific changes and decisions made for retrodeformation. The authors test this technique with fossil bones of an unnamed basal thyreophoran dinosaur from the Jurassic of Niger.

For a few decades we are able to analyze how extinct animals moved (see, e.g., Sellers et al., 2017), and even to 3D reconstruct more realistically their musculoskeletal system (see, e.g., Díez Díaz et al., 2020; Vidal et al., 2020). But not always the important role of the articular cartilage is kept in mind. Voegele et al. present a new method for modeling joints that allows testing hypotheses about articular cartilage morphology in extinct taxa. They examine the left elbow joint of the sauropod dinosaur *Dreadnoughtus* using articular cartilage reconstructions constrained by extant

phylogenetic bracketing, and by following a different approach focused on joint contact surfaces. Also related to the study of cartilage in extinct animals, little seems to be known about chondrocytic fossilization. To further understand the spectrum of cellular preservation in this tissue, Bailleul and Zhou analyze the morphology and the chemistry of some intralacunar content seen in avian cartilage from the Early Cretaceous Jehol biota (more specifically *Yanornis* and *Confuciusornis*). They combine standard paleohistology with Scanning Electron Microscopy and Energy Dispersive Spectroscopy, but also paired with actuataphonomy experiments. A field of study that also provides very important data for the study of the biomechanics of extinct animals is palaeoichnology. Sciscio et al. test traditional and more novel landmark-based geometric morphometric (GM) analysis to describe the sauropod Jurassic trackway of the Courtedoux-Tchâfoué (TCH), in NW Switzerland. This method helps to assess if there is variation in morphology within the sample, which is greatly useful for ichnotaxonomic studies.

As a whole, this Research Topic explores innovative techniques and approaches, crossing technological frontiers, that have recently led to a rapid advancement of our understanding of the biology of the life of the past. Traditional methodologies, such as cladistic or anatomical comparison, which has been followed in dinosaur palaeontology for more than a century, are still fundamental to the understanding of evolution. But we can not just stagnate here and, hence, it is also essential that these “more classic” methods be linked with these new approaches to break new grounds towards a more inclusive, technological and revolutionary palaeontology. Thanks to these methods we can automate repetitive tasks, make data more accessible, digitally restore fossils and even better comprehend behavioural patterns of extinct animals.

Despite studying specimens millions of years old, palaeontology is an extremely innovative field that can gain expertise from other disciplines and apply it to its purposes. The contributions to this volume are clear examples of how the next generation of palaeontologists will continue contributing to such a unique multi-disciplinary research approach.

## AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

VD drafted the first version of the manuscript. VD, EC, DV, and MB developed it and provided comments and editions. DV created Figure 1.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

We would like to thank all reviewers for their contributions, and all authors of the submitted manuscripts. We also would like to thank Ursula Raba, Kanzis Mattu and the Frontiers Team for their support and suggestions.

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