



Note

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“Paleocene” or “Palaeocene”

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There seems to be some doubt as to which of the spellings “Paleocene” or “Palaeocene” should be used in manuscripts submitted for publication in Europe, while in North America the spelling “Paleocene” is standard. The latter is not surprising, as in North America the prefix paleo- is also used in terms such as Paleozoic, paleomagnetism, etc. In Europe, however, the prefix derived from the Greek *palaios* (= ancient, old) is generally spelt “palaeo-”, as for example in palaeontology, Palaeozoic, etc., which is why many assume that one should use the spelling “Palaeocene” when referring to the earliest epoch in the Palaeogene. Accordingly, the spelling “Palaeocene” has been adopted as standard by most journals published in Great Britain. However, most English language journals published in mainland Europe use the spelling “Paleocene” while spelling the prefix palaeo- in this manner in for example Palaeozoic, palaeogeography, palaeoclimatology. This is not inconsistent – on the contrary it is consistent with the origin of the term Paleocene.

The term Paleocene was introduced by the German palaeobotanist and geologist Wilhelm Philipp Schimper in 1874 in an account of some non-marine deposits north-east of Paris. Since Schimper’s treatise was in French, the spelling was “Paléocène”. It was not until around 1920 that the term came into more general use after the beds Schimper had described had been traced into deposits carrying both terrestrial mammals and marine invertebrates. Thus the term Paleocene is not one of Charles Lyell’s epochs, and the term is much younger than the names of the other four epochs in what hitherto has been called the Tertiary; indeed there are textbooks on stratigraphy published as late as in the 1930s that do not mention the Paleocene at all and divide the Tertiary into only four epochs. Furthermore the term Paleocene was not put together in the same way as the terms Eocene, Miocene and Pliocene. In making up these terms the prefix eo- (from *eos*, Greek for dawn) was placed in front of the common suffix -cene (from *kainos*, Greek for new, recent) to imply the epoch which saw the dawn of modern life forms, and so on. “Paleocene” on the other hand is an abbreviation of palaeo- plus Eocene (Murawski 1972). Pal + Eocene implies “the old part of the Eocene” which is what Schimper intended.

Palaeo + cene would mean “old recent”, which is not the same as “the old part of the dawn of the recent”. Deriving “Palaeocene” from Pala + Eocene would be etymologically incorrect; the “ae” in palaeo- must either remain intact or be removed entirely in any abbreviation because it was originally the ligature “æ”. In German textbooks one can find the spellings “Paleozän”, “Paläogen” and “Paläozoikum” on the same page (e.g. Brinkmann et al. 1974, p. 30), and it is likely that mainland European journals have been influenced by German practise which may well stem from Schimper, himself a German. It is worth noting the Arthur Holmes, who was always very careful to trace terms back to their origin, used the spellings “Paleocene” and “Palaeozoic” in his famous book “Principles of Physical Geology”, published in 1965. There is no doubt that if precedence and historical origins are to be decisive, the correct English spelling of the name of the earliest epoch in the ‘Tertiary’ is “Paleocene”, regardless of how one chooses to spell Palaeozoic, palaeontology, etc.

References

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