The Bioarchaeology of the St. Mary's Free Ground Burials:
Reconstruction of colonial South Australian lifeways

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ABSTRACT

Seventy skeletons were archaeologically recovered from the unmarked section of a suburban Adelaide church cemetery. The generally well-preserved sample consisted mostly of subadults comprising more than two-thirds of the collection. Twenty-nine (41.4%) individuals were infants aged less than one year at death. A total of 50 (71.4%) subadult skeletons (aged less than 15 years at death) were recovered. Although skeletal lesions among the subadult group were rare, it is believed that infection was the principal cause of death among this group. One right to nine-year-old girl, presented with arthrogryposis lesions indicative of congenital syphilis.

The twenty adult skeletons ranged in age from approximately 18 to 59 years at death. Observed among the group were a variety of infectious, traumatic and occupational lesions. Infectious lesions existed in 70% of adults some of which allowed diagnosis of conditions including acquired syphilis, tuberculosis/pulmonary infection and unspecified systemic infection. Perimortem traumatic pathologies allowed, in two cases, positive identification of the individual against historical records. Skeletal markers of stress were observed in the majority of adults aged over 30 years at death. High rates of upper limb robusticity, spinal and joint lesions corroborated historical records indicating a hardworking and physically active community. Dental analysis
revealed very poor dental hygiene and very little alleviating dental intervention beyond tooth extraction.

Characterised by factors such as high infant representation, high rates of infectious and traumatic lesions; and, corroborating historical records, the skeletal collection showed a society, struggling to cope in its new environment. However, application of bone stable isotope analysis and documentary evidence suggested that nutrition was not necessarily the principal cause. Comparison with various other skeletal samples indicated that the St. Mary's people were a population in transition.

Life table analyses using church burial records showed that following an establishment period, the colony was able to overcome many of its problems, leading to improvements in infant mortality and life expectancies. The principal causes of infant mortality and deaths among adults were alleviated following improvement in living conditions. Furthermore, a growing awareness of personal hygiene, inoculation against disease; and, improved access to medical facilities saw significant improvement by the turn of the 20th century.

The material was analysed with the intention of deriving information regarding past individual and population lifeways. Church records indicated that the unmarked burial area dated from 1847, and was still in use into the 20th century. Analysis of the skeletal material provided an opportunity to gain insight into the lifeways of a little known and discrete group of people. The study area had long been associated with burial of the poor and destitute. The 'poor people section', as the area had come to be known, was also used for disposal of the many still and newborn babies.
Biographical details of the positively identified individuals and others buried in the study area, suggest that some individuals may have chosen an unmarked burial on ideological grounds. This finding, in association with other analyses, shows that despite struggling through an establishment period, the St. Mary's people were, hardworking, adequately nourished and generally (in the health sense) robust; not the 'paupers' that popular myth would have us believe.