

**Changes in properties of vineyard Red Brown Earths
under long-term drip irrigation, combined with varying
water qualities and gypsum application rates**

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by

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I dedicate this thesis to my grandmother (Nan)

Nora Theresa Clark

(13/4/1908-20/12/2000)

Table of Contents

Statement	viii
Acknowledgments	ix
Summary	xi
Chapter 1. Introduction and Background	1
1.1. Introduction	1
1.1.1. Significance.....	1
1.1.2. Objectives	4
1.2. Features and Properties of Red Brown Earths	4
1.2.1. Texture contrast profile	6
1.2.2. Composition	9
1.2.3. Soil Physical Properties	11
1.2.4. Soil Chemical Properties.....	12
1.2.5. Soil Biology	13
1.2.6. Summary.....	14
1.3. Irrigation and Water Quality	15
1.3.1. Irrigation in Australia	15
1.3.2. Quality of Irrigation Water	17
1.3.3. Influence of Irrigation Method on Soil.....	20
1.3.4. Summary.....	22

1.4. Impact of Saline Irrigation Water on Soil.....	22
1.4.1. Soil salinity	23
1.4.2. Soil sodicity	25
1.4.3. Impact of Irrigation on Red Brown Earths	29
1.5. <i>Vitis vinifera</i> as an irrigated crop.....	30
1.5.1. Effects of Irrigation on <i>Vitis vinifera</i>	30
1.5.2. Effects of Salinity on <i>Vitis vinifera</i>	31
1.5.3. Effects of Sodidity on <i>Vitis vinifera</i>	32
1.6. Methods to prevent or remediate soil degradation caused by saline drip irrigation	34
1.6.1. Leaching	34
1.6.2. Gypsum Application	34
1.6.3. Modified cropping.....	36
1.6.4. Increased organic matter	37
1.7. Conclusions.....	38
 Chapter 2. Site Description, Properties and Soil Classification	40
2.1. Site Description	40
2.1.1. Introduction	40
2.1.2. Location and general description	40
2.1.3. Geology and geomorphology	46
2.1.4. Climate.....	49
2.2. Soils.....	52
2.2.1. Barossa.....	52

2.2.2. McLaren Vale	55
2.3. Pedogenic processes	55
2.3.1. Introduction	55
2.3.2. Parent Material.....	56
2.3.3. Climate.....	56
2.3.4. Time	56
2.3.5. Carbonate Formation	57
Chapter 3. General Methods.....	59
3.1. Introduction	59
3.2. Soil sampling and gypsum application	59
3.2.1. Paired Sites (Chapter 5).....	59
3.2.2. Seasonal Changes in Soil Properties (Chapters 6, 7 and 8).....	61
3.3. Laboratory Analyses.....	65
3.3.1. Physical Analyses	65
3.3.2. Chemical Analyses.....	67
Chapter 4. Regolith Processes.....	70
4.1. Introduction	70
4.1.1. Formulae for loss and gains of constituents during pedogenesis.....	71
4.1.2. Soil Formation Calculations	71
4.2. Methods.....	72
4.2.1. Sample Preparation	72
4.2.2. Elemental Chemistry	73
4.2.3. Inductively Coupled Plasma (ICP)	73
4.2.4. Material Analysed	74

4.2.5. Mass balance formulae	74
4.3. Results and Discussion	77
4.3.1. Concentration of major elements in soil	77
4.3.2. Selection of parent material	78
4.3.3. Loss and gain calculations	79
4.3.4. Geochemistry of Non-Irrigated and Irrigated Sites	83
4.3.5. Carbonate-rich samples	87
4.4. Conclusions	87
Chapter 5. Impact of Long-term Irrigation on Soil Properties	88
5.1. Introduction	88
5.2. Materials and Methods	89
5.3. Results and Discussion	90
5.3.1. Classification	90
5.3.2. Morphological Properties	91
5.3.3. Physical Properties	92
5.3.4. Chemical Properties	97
5.4. Conclusions	103
Chapter 6. Irrigation with Bore Water in the Barossa Valley: Effects of	
Gypsum Application	106
6.1. Introduction	106
6.2. Methods	107
6.3. Results	107
6.3.1. Non-Irrigated Site	108
6.3.2. Bore Water without Gypsum	110

6.3.3.	Bore Water – Gypsum 4 tonnes/hectare	113
6.3.4.	Bore Water – Gypsum 8 tonnes/hectare	116
6.4.	Conclusions.....	118
Chapter 7.	Irrigation with Mains Water in the Barossa Valley: Effects of Gypsum Application.....	124
7.1.	Introduction	124
7.2.	Methods.....	125
7.3.	Results	125
7.3.1.	Mains Water without Gypsum	125
7.3.2.	Mains Water – Gypsum 4 tonnes/hectare	127
7.3.3.	Mains Water – Gypsum 8 tonnes/hectare	129
7.4.	Conclusions.....	131
Chapter 8.	Irrigation with Bore Water in McLaren Vale.....	136
8.1.	Introduction	136
8.2.	Methods.....	136
8.3.	Results	137
8.3.1.	Non-Irrigated.....	138
8.3.2.	Bore water with long-term gypsum application.....	139
8.4.	Conclusions.....	141
Chapter 9.	Changes in Soil Solution Chemistry	144
9.1.	Introduction	144
9.2.	Methods.....	146
9.2.1.	Suction cup design, installation and testing	146

9.2.2. Sample collection from suction cups and laboratory analysis	150
9.3. Results and Discussion.....	152
9.3.1. Pore Water Chemistry with Bore Water Irrigation	153
9.3.2. Pore Water Chemistry with Mains Water Irrigation	159
9.3.3. Comparison of Soil Solution to Saturation Extract Composition.....	162
9.4. Conclusions.....	169
Chapter 10. Changes in Redox Potential	179
10.1. Introduction	179
10.2. Methods.....	182
10.3. Results and Discussion.....	183
10.3.1. Bore water without gypsum application.....	186
10.3.2. Bore water with application of gypsum 4 tonnes/hectare	187
10.3.3. Mains water without gypsum application.....	188
10.3.4. Mains water with application of gypsum 4 tonnes/hectare	189
10.4. Conclusions.....	190
Chapter 11. Forecasting soil properties using a 2D computer model.....	192
11.1. Introduction	192
11.2. Theory and Input Data	193
11.2.1. The TRANSMIT Model.....	193
11.2.2. Soil Profile.....	194
11.2.3. Soil Physical Data	195
11.2.4. Salt Transport and Accumulation	197
11.2.5. Weather and Crop.....	198
11.2.6. Irrigation	200

11.3. Simulations and Data Obtained	200
11.4. Results and Discussion.....	201
11.4.1. Distribution of salts through the soil profile.....	202
11.4.2. Seasonal Variations in Salt Content.....	209
11.5. Conclusions.....	215
Chapter 12. General Discussion and Recommendations	218
12.1. General Discussion	218
12.1.1. Implications and Recommendations	222
12.2. Recommendations for Future Research	225
References.....	228
Appendix A: Climatic data for field sites	255
Appendix B: Morphological description of non-irrigated and irrigated soil profile in the Barossa Valley.	259
Appendix C: Saturation Extract Data	262
Appendix D: Soil Solution Data	287
Appendix E: Saturation Extract versus Soil Solution Data	296
Appendix F: Soil Redox Potential (Eh) Prior to Averaging.....	300
Appendix G: Barossa Valley Irrigation Water Composition	302
Appendix H: Saturation Extracts for Barossa Valley Control Site.....	305
Appendix I: Oral Presentations.....	306
Appendix J: Publications	308

Statement

This work contains no material which has been accepted for the award of any other degree or diploma in any university or other tertiary institution. To the best of my knowledge and belief, this thesis contains no material previously published or written by another person, except where due reference is made in the text.

I give consent to this copy of my thesis, when deposited in the University library, being available for loan and photocopying

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Louise Jayne Clark

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Summary

Irrigation water of poor quality can have deleterious effects on soils. However, the effect of drip irrigation on seasonal and long term (*e.g.* over 50 years) changes in soil chemical properties is poorly understood, complicated by the two-dimensional water flow patterns beneath drippers. Field and laboratory experiments were conducted, along with computer modelling, to evaluate morphological and physio-chemical changes in a typical Barossa Valley Red Brown Earth (Palexeralf, Chromosol or Lixisol) when drip irrigated under various changing management practices. This work focused on the following two management changes: (i) switching from long-term irrigation with a saline source to less saline water and (ii) gypsum (CaSO_4) application.

A literature review (**Chapter 1**) focuses on the distribution, features, properties and management of Red Brown Earths in the premium viticultural regions of the Barossa Valley and McLaren Vale, South Australia. The effects of irrigation method and water quality on the rate and extent of soil deterioration are emphasised. The review also discusses the irrigation of grapes (*Vitis vinifera*) and summarises previous research into the effect of sodicity and salinity on grape and wine characteristics. This chapter shows the importance of Red Brown Earths to Australian viticulture, but highlights their susceptibility to chemical and physical degradation. Degradation may be prevented or remediated by increasing organic matter levels, applying gypsum, modifying cropping and through tillage practices such as deep ripping.

Chapter 2 provides general information on the two study sites investigated, one in the Barossa Valley and the other at McLaren Vale. Local climate, geology, geomorphology and soils are described.

Chapter 3 details laboratory, field and sampling methods used to elucidate changes in soil chemical and physical properties following irrigation.

The genesis of the non-irrigated Red Brown Earth in the Barossa Valley is described in **Chapter 4**, and is inferred from geochemical, soil chemical, layer silicate and carbonate mineralogical data. Elemental gain and loss calculations showed 42 % of original parent material mass was lost during the formation of A and A2 horizons, while the Bt1 and Bt2 horizons gained 50 % of original parent material mass. This is consistent with substrate weathering and illuviation of clay from surface to lower horizons. The depth distributions of all major elements were similar; the A horizon contained lower amounts of major elements than the remainder of the profile, indicating this region was intensely weathered. This chapter also compares the non-irrigated site to the adjacent irrigated site (separated by 10 m) to determine if the sites are pedogenically identical and geochemical changes from irrigation. Many of the differences between the non-irrigated and irrigated sites appear to be correlated with variations in quartz, clay, Fe oxide and carbonate contents, with little geological variation between the sample sites.

In **Chapter 5** morphological, chemical and physical properties of a non-irrigated and irrigated Red Brown Earth in the Barossa Valley are compared. Alternating applications of saline irrigation water (in summer) and non-saline rain water (in winter) have caused an increase in electrical conductivity (EC_{se}), sodium adsorption ratio (SAR), bulk density (ρ_b) and pH. This has resulted in enhanced clay dispersion and migration. Impacts on SAR and ρ_b are more pronounced at points away from the dripper due to the presence of an argillic horizon, which has greatly influenced the variations in these soil properties with

depth and distance from the dripper. Dispersion and migration of clay were promoted by alternating levels of EC, while SAR remained relatively constant, resulting in the formation of a less permeable layer in the Bt1 horizon. Clay dispersion (breakdown of micro-aggregate structure) was inferred from reduced numbers of pores and voids, alterations in colouring (an indication that iron has changed oxidation state) and increased bulk density (up to 30%). Eleven years of irrigation changed the soil from a Calcic Palexeralf (non-irrigated) to an Aquic Natrixeralf (irrigated) (Soil Survey Staff, 1999). These results, combined with data from Chapter 4, were used to develop a mechanistic model of soil changes with irrigation.

Chapters 6, 7 and 8 describe field experiments conducted in the Barossa Valley and McLaren Vale regions. This data shows seasonal and spatial variations in soil saturation extract properties (EC_{se} , SAR_{se} , Na_{se} and Ca_{se}). At the Barossa Valley site (**Chapter 6**) non-irrigated soils had low EC_{se} , SAR_{se} , Na_{se} and Ca_{se} values throughout the sampling period. The irrigated treatments included eleven years of drip irrigation with saline water (2.5 dS/m) and also gypsum application at 0, 4 or 8 tonnes/hectare in 2001 and 2002. Salts in the profile increased with gypsum application rate, with high levels occurring mid-winter 2002 prior to rainfall leaching salts. SAR has declined with gypsum application, particularly in the A horizon and at 100 cm from the dripper in the Bt1 horizon; this has the potential to reflocculate clay particles and improve soil hydraulic conductivity.

Chapter 7 presents further results from the Barossa Valley site, this treatment had been irrigated for 9 years with saline water (2.5 dS/m) prior to switching to a less saline water source (0.5 dS/m). The soil also received gypsum at 0, 4 or 8 tonnes/hectare in 2001 and 2002. It was found that the first few years are critical when switching to a less saline water source. EC declines rapidly, but SAR requires a number of years, depending on

conditions, to decline, resulting in a period during which the Bt1 horizon may become dispersed. Gypsum application increased the EC_{se} but not to the EC_{se} levels of soil irrigated with saline water.

Chapter 8 examines soil chemical properties of a McLaren Vale vineyard, irrigated with moderately saline water (1.2 dS/m) since 1987 and treated with gypsum every second year since establishment. This practice prevented the SAR (<8) rising and a large zone of the soil profile (20 to 100 cm from dripper) has a high calcium level (>5 mmol/L). However, irrigation caused the leaching of calcium beneath the dripper in both the A and B horizons (0 to 20 cm from dripper) (< 4 mmol/L).

Chapters 9 and 10 interpret and discuss results from continuous monitoring of redox potential (Eh) and soil solution composition in the Barossa Valley vineyard, irrigated with saline or non-saline water, and gypsum-treated at 0 and 4 tonnes/hectare.

Soil pore water solution (**Chapter 9**) collected by suction cups is compared to results obtained in chapters 6 and 7. The soil has extended zones and times of high SAR and low EC. This was particularly evident in the upper B horizon, where the SAR of the soil remained stable throughout the year while the EC was more seasonally variable with EC declining during the winter months. The A horizon does not appear to be as susceptible to clay dispersion (compared to the B horizon) because during periods of low EC the SAR also declines, which may be due to the low CEC (low clay and organic matter content) of this horizon.

Chapter 10 presents redox potentials (Eh) measured using platinum redox electrodes installed in the A, A2 and Bt1 horizons to examine whether Eh of the profile varies with irrigation water quality and gypsum application. Saline irrigation water caused the B horizon to become waterlogged in winter months, while less saline irrigation water caused

a perched watertable to develop, due to a dispersed Bt1 horizon. Application of gypsum reduced the soil Eh particularly in the A2 horizon (+500 to +50 mV) during winter. Thus redox potential can be influenced by irrigation water quality and gypsum applications.

Chapter 11 incorporated site data from the Barossa Valley non-irrigated site into a predictive mathematical model, TRANSMIT, a 2D version of LEACHM. This model was used to predict zones of gypsum accumulation during long-term irrigation (67 years). When applied over the entire soil surface, gypsum accumulated at 60 to 90 cm from the dripper in the B horizon; higher application rates caused increased accumulation. When applied immediately beneath the irrigation dripper, gypsum accumulated in a ‘column’ under the dripper (at 0 to 35 cm radius from the dripper), with very little movement away from the dripper. Also, the zone of accumulation of salts from high and low salinity irrigation water was investigated. These regions were found to be similar, although concentrations were significantly lower with low salinity water. In low rainfall years salts accumulated throughout the B horizon (35 – 150 cm), while in periods of high rainfall (and leaching) the A, A2 and Bt1 horizons (0 – 60 cm) were leached, although at greater depths (80 – 150 cm) salt concentrations remained high.

Chapter 12 summarises results and provides an understanding of soil processes in drip irrigated soils to underpin improved management options for viticulture. This study combines results from redox and soil solution monitoring, mineralogy, elemental gains and losses, and seasonal soil sampling to develop a mechanistic model of soil processes, which was combined with computer modelling to predict future properties of the soil. Major conclusions and recommendations of this study include:

- Application of saline irrigation water to soil then ameliorated with gypsum - The first application of gypsum was leached by the subsequent irrigation from extended regions of the soil. As Na continues to enter the system via irrigation water, gypsum needs to be regularly applied. Otherwise calcium will be leached through the soil and SAR increases.
- Application of non-saline irrigation water to soil then ameliorated with gypsum – The soil was found to only require one application at 8 tons/ha as this reduced SAR sufficiently. As less salt is entering the soil, subsequent gypsum applications can be at a lower rate or less frequently than required for saline irrigation water.
- Gypsum applied directly beneath the dripper systems distributes calcium to a narrow region of the soil, while large regions of the soil require amelioration (high SAR) and are not receiving calcium. Therefore, gypsum application through the drip system or only beneath the dripper should be combined with broad acre application.
- A range of methods to sample vineyards is recommended for duplex soils, including the use of saturation extracts, sampling time, sampling location (distance from dripper) and depth of sampling.

This work is critical for vineyard management and may be applicable to other Australian viticulture regions with Red Brown Earths.