

Kristin Haebler

Anthropology of individuals from a poorhouse cemetery; investigating medieval skeletal remains.

One goal of historic anthropology in general is tracking the development of human populations through one specific or several time periods, thereby shedding light on certain aspects of everyday life for people who lived during these epochs. The primary objective of my dissertation is to establish a complete picture of a group of people on the social periphery of late medieval, early urban society.

419 skeletons, dating from between the 12th and 16th centuries AD, were recovered by archaeologists during the 2005-2006 excavation of a medieval poorhouse in the city of Regensburg, Germany. Poorhouses provided shelter to elderly and impoverished persons, and those unable to care for themselves due to illness or physical handicap. People working in poorhouses tended to the sick, feeble, and dying, and also acted as midwives and cared for mothers in the days following delivery. Still, little is known about the emergence of the social group on the lowest rung on society's ladder. Gaps in our knowledge persist regarding the origins of the social network of institutions designed to support, shelter, feed, and heal society's outcasts in medieval Europe.

These skeletal remains offer the rare opportunity of gaining a glimpse into the historical evolution of the social welfare system, and into the health, nutrition and fitness of the indigent in society. This leads to the following question: how were the indigent treated or dealt with in the Middle Ages? I will attempt to answer this question by means of the morphological examination of the skeletal remains themselves, and by employing a diverse array of biochemical methods, such as stable isotope analysis on bone carbonate and collagen. The morphological examination of the skeletons will focus in particular on pathological features and other indicators of general health and fitness. This facilitates the establishment of the entire spectrum of maladies with which this population group was afflicted and also the techniques used to remedy them. The types of surgical procedures employed in some instances can indicate disease or injury type, and vice versa.

Nutritional status represents another important criterion necessary for establishing the welfare of these individuals. Because this segment of the population was sick and poor, we might presume that their nutrition differed from that of the rest of the population. The hypothesis will be tested using stable isotopes of carbon and nitrogen (^{13}C , ^{15}N) in bone collagen. When people are malnourished they tend to suffer from deficiencies that make them more susceptible to infections. Chronic malnutrition leads to a cycle in which the person weakens, becomes prone to illness, is no longer able to work, and as a consequence is ostracized by society. In order to discern nutritional differences, the results of my investigations will be compared with previously published data deriving from other skeletal series, for example, those comprised of individuals belonging to a higher social stratum.

A further goal of this study is the investigation of the catchment area for the sick and elderly found at the Regensburg poorhouse, using stable oxygen and carbon isotopes (^{18}O , ^{13}C) of structural carbonate. Regensburg had already become a trade center during the early Middle Ages. Its pivotal role as the nucleus of "Bavaria" is due to its favorable location along the Danube River. In addition, active migration took place around 1200 AD as a result of people leaving provincial areas for the cities. Were the people buried at the cemetery all from the local vicinity, or had they travelled long distances to the poorhouse because such institutions were so scarce?