

The age distribution histogram, together with the transverse lines percentages, lead us to make two alternative interpretations: the first one is biological, specifically epidemiological, the second has social implications.

As we know from demographic data, there is a greater risk of death in the first year of life (Ubelaker 1974). Nevertheless, in our studies, the major percentage of deaths was found in the 3 - 6 age group. This brings to mind the possibility of a collective child sacrifice, which is mentioned in historical documents from the sixteenth century as a common practice in prehispanic times. Whether the death of these children was due to a social or biological factor (perhaps an epidemic?) is a question that unfortunately cannot be answered. It is, however, possible to estimate the precarious condition of life among these people. The health status of our sample, as we found after this analysis, was not good, with a high incidence of morbidity.

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#### TRICHURIS TRICHIURA INFECTION IN COLONIAL BRAZIL

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Three naturally mummified human bodies from the village of Itacambira, State of Minas Gerais, were examined for parasitic infections. The bodies belong to the private archaeological collection of Dr. Simeão Ribeiro Pires, and were those of a child under one year of age and a male and female, both adults. They were found by the collector about 20 years ago in a small church built at the end of the 17th century.

After making a small opening in the abdominal and thoracic cavities, we used a long forceps to pick up fragments of the organs. From a piece of tissue of about 1 square centimeter, taken from the abdominal cavity of the adult male, we scraped up a black crust. As it seemed to be feces, it was rehydrated using the trisodium phosphate technique. A direct smear was made after 72 hours and then examined under the microscope. Three eggs of T. trichiura were found, and we concluded that the material examined was probably a fragment from the intestine.

Although these bodies were taken from beneath the floor of the church,

they were not originally buried there. They were interred in a small cemetery in front of the temple, and about a hundred years ago they were transferred when the cemetery was removed. Since there are no records of the burials available and the graves were destroyed, neither individual identification nor the date of the deaths could be obtained.

The village was founded by an explorer in 1674, but it was only in the following century that, after a rush for diamonds, the people actually became settled there. It is supposed that the cemetery had not been in use for at least 60 years before it was removed. This is because a span of at least three generations must have elapsed before the removal of the relatives of the older people still living in 1880 would have been allowed. Thus we can make a gross estimate that the bodies are probably from the 18th century or the beginning of the 19th century.

Although whipworm infections have already been found in pre-Columbian populations (Araújo 1980; Pizzi 1954), infestation records in early colonial times, especially from scarcely populated areas in the interior of the continent, should provide a good basis for studies in historical pathology in the Americas.

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#### MORE NEWS FROM SOUTH AMERICA...

Jane Buikstra (Northwestern University, Evanston, Ill.) writes: 'I spent four weeks in August and September 1980 evaluating the research importance and curation needs of skeletal remains at the site of Santa Fe la Vieja in Santa Fe province, Argentina. The project was sponsored jointly by the Argentine government and the Organization of American States. Santa Fe la Vieja is a Spanish colonial site, occupied between 1573 and 1660, and excavated approximately 30 years ago. The skeletal remains in subfloor crypts from three churches were exposed *in situ* and had been treated (generously) with multiple coatings of shellac. Given that two of the three churches had been flooded (one twice) since excavation, and that the remains had undergone 'creative repositioning' upon numerous occasions followed by reshellacking, osteological analysis presented quite a challenge. My first task was to assign burial numbers and attempt to develop a demographic profile. The demographic patterning was then compared with that for crypt markers from a 19th century church in the 'new' town of Santa Fe. Obvious pathology included healed fractures and other evidence of trauma. There is potential here for the study of dental health, as well as interbreeding between the Spanish and indigenous populations. Such studies, as well as those of more subtle evidence of pathology, must await the laborious removal of shellac from the nearly 250 remains on the site.'