



## Physical Anthropology Section – 2004

### H32 The Archaeology of Tyranny

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The goal of this presentation is to present the identification of human rights victims in the Republic of Panamá.

This presentation will impact the forensic community and/or humanity by demonstrating anthropological methods that can be successfully used for human rights identifications, even in tropical environments, that are not conducive to good preservation of remains.

The Republic of Panamá has experienced a tumultuous first century of independence from Colombia, including the military dictatorships of Omar Torrijos (1968-1981) and Manuel Noriega (1981-1989), and the United States invasion in 1989. During the period of the dictatorships, over one hundred individuals were “disappeared” or executed for their political views. In 2001, the Panamanian Truth Commission (Comisión de la Verdad) was formed in attempts to identify the “disappeared” and offer some closure to the families of the victims. Based on informant testimony received by the Truth Commission that suggested some of the “disappeared” may be on Coiba, the authors, under the auspices of the Truth Commission, and with the cooperation of the National Police and the assistance of many others, undertook a large scale excavation of the Marañon Cemetery on the island of Coiba, Republic of Panamá. A Tprobe was used to locate soft areas in the ground, suggesting possible graves. Workmen shoveled down through the ground until the outlines of a grave or remains were located, or until hard, undisturbed ground was reached. Careful excavation of the remains then followed, in hopes of retrieving intact elements to aid in the identification process.

This paper will focus on the analysis of the remains of two individuals, one who remains unidentified, the other who now has name, Jerónimo Díaz Lopez. The first individual nicknamed El Pectorado, for the large wooden cross lying on top of the chest area, was in a relatively good state of preservation. The remains were determined to represent an adult male of indigenous ancestry (like the general population of Panama) most likely in his late thirties or forties. A reactive healing fracture was noted at the distal third of the left fibula. In addition, there was evidence of a healed fracture to the right nasal and frontal process of the maxilla. A perimortem, comminuted fracture with no evidence of healing was observed approximately one third of the distance from the acromial end on the left clavicle. Fractures of the outer third of the clavicle are relatively rare, involving only 15 to 30% of clavicular fractures. The fracture appears to have resulted from a direct blow to the anterior aspect of the one, rather than a fall on a shoulder, which is the most common cause of clavicular fractures. This individual may represent one of the prison inmates or one of the “disappeared,” and the authors continue to hope that his biological profile may match a profile as information continues to be revealed.

The other set of remains, now identified as Jerónimo Díaz Lopez, displayed variable states of preservation with the long bones being relatively well preserved, while the axial skeleton was very fragmentary and poorly preserved. Several religious artifacts, such as rosaries and religious icons, were found around the neck area. Sex was assessed via gross morphology of the cranium and pelvis and age was assessed via the epiphyseal union method. The remains were determined to be those of a male in his early twenties, with African admixed ancestry. Seven coins were also recovered in the grave with dates ranging from 1965 to 1983, indicating a date of death no earlier than 1983. All of these factors were consistent with the biological profile of Jerónimo, who was said to have escaped Coiba on a raft in 1985. The clinching identifying characters were two gold upper central incisors, one of which was false, the other was a gold cap inscribed with what appeared to be the letter “V.” These teeth were consistent with those of Jerónimo, described by his sister, and positively identified by his brother. After 18 years of wondering where Jerónimo was, if he would ever come home, his family now knows where he has been and that, unfortunately, he cannot return home. This work demonstrates that anthropological methods can be successfully used for human rights identifications, even in tropical environments, that are not conducive to good preservation of remains.

**Human Rights, Panama, Forensic Anthropology**