



Physical Anthropology Section – 2004

H73 Forensic Anthropology in Guatemala

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The author will introduce the forensic community to the work of three organizations—the Guatemalan Foundation for Forensic Anthropology (FAFG), the Center for Forensic Analysis and Applied Sciences (CAFCA), and the Exhumations Team of the Guatemalan Archbishop's Office for Human Rights (ODHAG)—currently carrying out forensic investigations in Guatemala.

This presentation outlines the growth and development of forensic anthropology in Guatemala as a response to its contemporary social needs.

In February 2003, for the first time, forensic anthropologists from throughout Latin America responsible for pioneering the application of forensic anthropology to human rights and training in their own countries, and Dr. Clyde Snow, who trained and continues to support many participants, gathered at Austin College in Sherman, Texas. Participants discussed national experiences, commonalities and differences in particular cases and possibilities for working together to further forensic work in judicial investigations in Latin America. Representatives from three organizations currently carrying out forensic work in Guatemala—the Guatemalan Foundation for Forensic Anthropology (FAFG), the Center for Forensic Analysis and Applied Sciences (CAFCA), and the Exhumations Team of the Guatemalan Archbishop's Office for Human Rights (ODHAG)—were present. Following this meeting, ALAF, the Latin American Forensic Anthropology Association was founded. ALAF's founding members, including representatives of the three aforementioned organizations, work for non-governmental organizations that were trained by Dr. Clyde Snow.

This paper presents the Guatemalan context for the emergence of forensic investigations of human rights cases, examines the current state of these investigations and discusses particular perspectives, trends and challenges that have emerged from our work over the course of more than a decade.

During the thirty-six years of internal armed conflict that Guatemala endured, the population was subject to many human rights violations. Most of these atrocities occurred in rural Mayan communities. The Historical Clarification Commission (CEH) reported that, as a result of the conflict, over 200,000 people perished or disappeared.

Even before the Peace Accords were signed in 1996, the victims' families began the search for their lost loved ones and began the struggle of uncovering the truth. However, Guatemala did not have organizations that could attend to these needs. Recognizing this pressing issue, teams (FAFG, ODHAG, CAFCA) were gathered and trained to carry out forensic anthropological investigations, with a focus on exhuming clandestine burials and analyzing the remains found.

The emergence of forensic anthropological teams in Guatemala dedicated to the application of forensic anthropology and archaeology to human rights and judicial investigations was stimulated further by the Historical Clarification Commission's recommendation that all cases of massacres and extrajudicial executions be investigated, giving back to the victims' relatives the right to know the truth about what happened to their family members and consequently strengthening the country's judicial system.

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Guatemala, Human Rights, Forensic Anthropology