



Physical Anthropology Section – 2004

H75 Forensic Anthropology in Colombia

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The authors will introduce the forensic community to the current state of forensic anthropology investigation in Colombia.

This presentation will impact the forensic community by demonstrating the development of forensic anthropology in Colombia and how it differs from other cases in Latin America.

In Colombia, forensic anthropology has developed as an applied science using tools from social anthropology, biological anthropology and archaeology to utilize scientific evidence in death and crime investigations. For over ten years, a small but growing group of anthropologists from different universities and government agencies has demonstrated to police authorities and medicolegal institutions that forensic anthropology is the backbone in the scientific process of determining not only identities from human skeletal or decomposed remains but also to provide important information in determining cause and manner of death. From the late 1980s to the present, many Colombian anthropologists have worked on many different kinds of cases, ranging from simple crime scenes to complex investigations concerning human rights violations.

In the 1980s, the sociopolitical situation, the civil conflict (including armed confrontation), and the lack of specialized analysis in some medicolegal cases contributed to an urgent need for forensic anthropologists. The siege of the Palace of Justice in Bogota in 1985 that resulted in many casualties and total destruction of the building, the terrorist bombings in urban areas and the Armero mudslide disaster all contributed to this need. In the same year, the participation of physical anthropologists in crime investigations grew, particularly in relation to specific cases, including the discovery of an apparent mass grave in a place named Cueva de la Trementina, located in northern Colombia.

With the Constitutional modifications in 1991, many official and government agencies were improved and others created, including the National Institute of Legal Medicine and the Attorney General's office. These agencies created specialized laboratories including forensic anthropology facilities and began to recruit and train professional crews with experience in the analysis of human remains. This training was made possible since 1994 with support from international groups and agencies such as the Argentine Forensic Anthropology Team (EAAF), the International Criminal Investigative Training Assistance Program of the US Department of Justice, the Federal Bureau of Investigation, the Armed Forces Institute of Pathology, the Deutsche Gesellschaft für Technische Zusammenarbeit (Germany) and Universidad del País Vasco (Spain) since 1994.

Forensic anthropology as a formal discipline was introduced in Colombia at the National University in 1994. Since then, this university has established a postgraduate course and several workshops and training courses to reinforce academic training in this area, not only for students but also for officials and medical examiners.

Since the late 1990s, Colombia has established several forensic anthropology laboratories to support crime scene investigators and medical examiners. While in other parts of Latin America, forensic anthropology has grown mostly in relationship to non-governmental teams working in human rights. These teams are often constituted as nongovernmental organizations. Despite the internal conflict in Colombia that has also produced severe human rights violations, forensic anthropology has largely developed within government agencies. By developing within these agencies, forensic anthropologists have had access to a much wider range of forensic cases that included not only human rights cases but also mass disaster cases and more 'normal' criminal cases such as individual and serial murder cases. Since 1997, Colombian forensic anthropologists have also worked as experts and advisors in other countries.

In the near future, further modifications in the Colombian legal system will allow us to expand forensic anthropology's range and to meet new challenges. Lawyers and prosecutors as well as government agencies will employ experts such as forensic anthropologists in courts. Theoretically, this will improve academic and professional performance, provide for proper investigations of deaths and the implementation of the rule of law. However, forensic anthropology has many methodological and empirical difficulties to overcome.

Colombia, Identification, Forensic Anthropology