H51 The Importance of Body Deposition Recording in Event Reconstruction and the Re-Association and Identification of Commingled Remains

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After attending this presentation, attendees will understand how proper mass grave excavation and recording techniques can assist in the re-association and identification of remains.

Proper mass grave excavation techniques are not ideas that should be lightly tossed aside when time and money constraints are considered. This presentation will impact the forensic community and/or humanity by demonstrating how such techniques have direct influences on mortuary analysis and the identification process and so should be considered just as an important part of the process as laboratory work.

Dumping of bodies in a mass grave usually happens in stages where several loads of bodies are deposited one after the other. Careful excavation and recording of these separate deposits and their contents can assist in the understanding of the grave formation process. The past activity that created the grave is thus better understood. Physical evidence recovered and recorded from the grave can then be used to corroborate witness statements. In addition to assisting criminal investigations, recording of body deposits can directly help in the re-association of disarticulated body parts to their bodies and in identification process as a whole.

Bodies buried within mass graves have usually been subjected to massive trauma both from the wounds that lead to the death and often from the burial activity usually carried out by heavy machinery. Trauma caused by the digging activities of heavy machinery is especially noted in secondary graves where remains have been dug up from their first resting place and reburied with the intention of concealing them in a better or more secure location. In addition, the regular taphonomic conditions within the grave, particularly older ones where the remains have had longer exposure, will have taken their toll on the remains. As a result remains are often recovered with parts missing.

The re-association of hundreds of disarticulated body parts from a large mass grave is a complex and time-consuming process. However, the identification and recording of deposits within the grave and the human remains within a particular deposit can help lessen the burden of the anthropologist in the mortuary by first limiting search parameters. Instead of trying to match a particular body part to all the bodies missing that part within the entire grave, the search can first be limited to just those elements within the same deposit. The assumption here is that those disarticulated remains within a deposit are most likely to belong to bodies or other body parts within the same deposit. Searching elements by deposit instead of grave could be particularly helpful in mortuaries with limited space to layout all the body parts and bodies missing parts from the whole grave.

Recording of deposits may also assist in identifying bodies that have resisted DNA analysis and traditional mortuary identification methods. It can be assumed that vehicles used to transport the bodies were loaded at or near the location where the people were killed and/or buried. If a number of bodies from a specific deposit are positively identified then, through those identifications, it may be learned where those bodies generally originated. Often this origin will often be the location near where the people lived or were last seen. It is very probable that the unidentified bodies within that same deposit originated from the same area; that those unidentified bodies were loaded up on the vehicles at the same time and place as those that have been identified. Thus, it would be prudent to inquire as to who may still be missing from that point of origin. Additional blood and antemortem data could be collected from the surviving family members, friends and neighbors in that location. In essence this gives a direction from where next to search for information (or collect blood) regarding the remaining unidentified.

This presentation will outline the process of identification of deposits within mass graves and demonstrate some examples of re-association of body parts within deposits, and the potential of locating the area of origin of unidentified bodies from mass graves containing the remains of Kosovar Albanians killed in 1999.

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