



## Physical Anthropology Section – 2005

### H58 Closed Case Files: Sequelae of a Case of Complex Postmortem Mutilation

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After attending this presentation, attendees will understand the potential usefulness of anthropological analysis in the reconstruction of a complex postmortem mutilation.

This presentation will impact the forensic community and/or humanity by presenting a detailed case study of a complex dismemberment which underscores the utility of anthropological analysis in the corroboration of documented details of a crime.

This poster describes the follow-up to a serial murder case that is being presented as a paper at these meetings (Dr. John Verano, Tulane University), in which the perpetrator and his accomplice strangled, dismembered, and dispersed the parts of three women. Whereas Dr. Verano has amply covered the details contributing to the resolution of the case, this poster details the follow-up examination of the torso of one of the victims as a case study in complex postmortem treatment involving dismemberment and extensive fragmentation. This case is unique in that the accomplice has provided law enforcement personnel with a detailed confession chronicling the murders and their aftermath, against which the accuracy of the anthropological analysis could be tested.

The perpetrator had intentionally disfigured and dismembered the victim after her murder, in an effort to both dispose of the body and to prevent her identification in the event that the parts were discovered. Working on information provided by the accomplice in the murders, the Jefferson Parish Sheriff's Office recovered a severed Caucasian female head from a St. Charles Parish swamp. Separately, New Orleans Police recovered the partially decomposed torso of a Caucasian female in the New Orleans area in January 2002. Because the torso bore characteristics similar to open dismemberment cases in Jefferson Parish, the N.O.P.D. transferred the torso to the Jefferson Parish Coroner's Office for autopsy and analysis. The torso was recovered in a state of moderate decomposition, and was comprised of the thorax from cervical to lumbar vertebrae with the right shoulder and arm attached, but the fingers removed. The other appendages, pelvis and sacrum were never recovered, although the head collected by J.P.S.O. from a separate context was suspected to be from the same victim. Relevant portions of the skeleton were removed for anthropological analysis by Dr. John Verano of Tulane University, and the remainder of the torso was stored in the morgue freezer at the Jefferson Parish Forensic Center. The head was ultimately determined to be from the same individual and a positive identification was made. Due to the preponderance of evidence, both perpetrators eventually plead guilty in the case.

After adjudication and before interment of the victim's remains, the torso was also analyzed to examine the extent of the perpetrators' efforts to conceal the body. The bulk of decomposed tissue was first removed mechanically by gentle manipulation with wooden tools by the death investigator in the case, Bill Donovan of the Jefferson Parish Coroner's Office, and the presenting author. The bones were then macerated and degreased using a non-bleaching method (1). Due to extensive fragmentation, some adherent soft tissue was left surrounding shattered elements, which were wrapped individually in cheesecloth during the process to retain all fragments. Subsequent to removal of soft tissue, the skeletal elements were refitted and analyzed by the presenting author to determine the type and sequence of damage, which included various forms of cut marks and extensive fragmentation. Anthropological analysis revealed significant fracturing and cutting consistent with both the observed damage to the head of the same victim and with certain damage to the remains of the successive victims. An unusual tool mark on the clavicle was also consistent with distinctive tool marks observed on the head.

The tool marks and degree of destruction observed in anthropological analysis were then compared with the tools used by the perpetrators, which were collected from a local bayou by law enforcement agents based on a statement from one of the perpetrators. The cause and sequence of damage surmised by the anthropologist was also compared with the actions of the perpetrator and his accomplice, as gleaned from extensive taped confessions made to law enforcement officers. Comparison with documented details of the case supported the anthropological analysis, stressing the effectiveness of anthropological analysis in reconstructing complex postmortem treatment.

#### References:

1. Fenton TW, Birkby WH and Cornelison J. A fast and safe non-bleaching method for forensic skeletal preparation. *J Forensic Sci* 2003; 48(1): 274-476.

#### Dismemberment, Reconstruction, Forensic Anthropology