



Physical Anthropology Section – 2005

H84 Dismembered Bodies - Who, How, and When

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Attendees will become familiar with various forensic aspects of postmortem dismemberment.

In the forensic literature there are many isolated case reports of postmortem dismemberment, this presentation will impact the forensic community and/or humanity by attempting to provide a comprehensive view of the main features common to the majority of dismemberment cases.

Close scrutiny into 14 cases of body dismemberment of homicide victims, analyzed at the National Centre of Forensic Medicine – Israel National Police (Israel) and the laboratory of Anthropology of the University of Granada (Spain), provides insight into various aspects of this type of postmortem mutilation.

The sample includes eight males and six females whose ages ranged between 12 and 67 years old. Four of the bodies are unidentified while the remaining ten were identified by means of a variety of techniques including fingerprints comparison, dental and medical data, and comparison of DNA profiles.

The investigation into these cases reveals common features regarding intent, state of mind of the perpetrator, cutting method, anatomical location of the severing cuts, and most commonly used tools to accomplish the deed.

The approach for an exhaustive analysis of all aspects of dismemberment cases requires careful handling of the remains to avoid damage during autopsy, thorough photography prior to removal of the severed parts, systematic documentation of the anatomical distribution of the cutting activity and examination of the walls of the cut-marks to expound the nature of the tool employed.

The objective of the perpetrator can be elucidated by the care or lack thereof in concealing the dismembered cadaver. In 5 cases (35%), the perpetrators cut off the hands and heads of their victims in order to hinder the identification of the deceased. This assertion is confirmed by the removal of portions of skin from the chest and back of two of the victims to eliminate tattoos that could have been conducive to positive identification of the cadavers. The disposal of the victims is a good indicator of the aim of the perpetrator; often the objective is to “send a message.” In two cases the assassins decapitated their victims and left them to be found in their own homes; in five instances the mutilated body parts were left in areas of easy access to the public.

The most common reason for dismembering a body is to facilitate concealment and transportation; in 35% of the cases the taphonomic features indicated that the body parts were kept under refrigeration and were subsequently disposed of – either buried or wrapped separately and thrown in scattered garbage containers.

The state of mind of the person behind the murder can be ascertained by the number of cut marks on the cadaver. As a rule, a very high number of cuts or stabs are considered indicative of “overkill” or high disregard for the victim. This phenomenon was encountered in ~45% of the cases examined.

Oftentimes the postmortem interval precludes determining the cause of death; in six of the 14 cases, lethal stab-wounds were detected while in one case the perpetrator confessed that he had strangled the victim. For the remaining seven cases, the cause of death is undetermined.

The skills required to successfully dismember a cadaver are revealed by the neat results obtained by perpetrators somewhat proficient in human anatomy or in meat processing that cut very near or within the joints, utilizing dedicated tools like surgical scalpels or butcher knives. In six cases, the perpetrator's knowledge of anatomy was reflected in the small number of incisions and a minimum of kerf marks. In contrast, the unskilled perpetrator utilizes heavy utensils and due to his lack of knowledge in anatomy leaves many “false starts” In two cases (one from Israel and one from Spain) the perpetrator severed the body in half through the lumbar vertebrae but couldn't separate the limbs from the torso. The cut-marks left in the soft tissue in the vicinity of the axillary and inguinal areas are good indicators of the cutting sequence in these cases.

The implementation of 3-dimensional techniques including casting and photography will be illustrated. Typical marks associated with specific cutting devices will be described in detail. In 20% of the cases the perpetrators used more than one tool to accomplish the dismemberment; this information was instrumental for the police investigation.

Dismemberment, Taphonomy, Tool Marks