



Physical Anthropology Section – 2006

H46 The Shallow Grave as an Option for Disposing of the Recently Deceased: Goals and Consequences

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The goal of this presentation is to show that processing a clandestine grave following a classic approach will result in the destruction of contextual evidence, as this type of evidence can only be accessed and registered sequentially. Consequently, scene processing must be planned with consideration of the multi-layered structure of the evidence, and ultimately, can only be properly processed by employing contemporary archaeological methods.

This presentation will impact the forensic community and/or humanity by increasing the awareness about the risk of information-loss derived from improper shallow grave recovery.

Edmond Locard's astute observations (*Locard's Exchange Principle*) regarding the correlation of evidence, suspects and place have served as a central tenet in the discipline of forensic science and forensic investigation since the turn of the 20th century. As a guiding principle during the location and collection of evidence at the indoor crime scene, the resultant precise documentation of the minutest of details has served the discipline well. Unfortunately, the application of these principles at outdoor scenes has lagged very far behind.

In the present contribution a perpetrator is followed who has chosen to hide a body through emplacement in a shallow grave. The different alternatives presented to her during the process will be examined, from the time of acquisition of the body, through transport to the grave location, and finally, through the act of digging the grave. For example, early in the grave digging process, the perpetrator faces an important decision involving a trade-off between time employed in the entire process (from killing, to transport, to digging of the grave) and likelihood of body detection. The longer the time and greater the effort spent in hiding the body, the less likely the remains will be discovered and the case investigated. On the other hand, a protracted effort to hide the body will increase "exposure" time (time involved in transporting the body and digging the grave) and increase the probability of the perpetrator being discovered while doing so.

Aside from the transference of physical evidence, depending on the option chosen at each step of the process, different types of contextual evidence will be produced and imprinted on the scene in a *sequential* way. Therefore, the sequential nature of the decision-making and inhumation processes translates into a layered ordination of the contextual evidence, similar to the deposition of geological and archaeological materials at larger time scales, so that the relevant contextual information can only be retrieved through a similarly ordered and sequential process. Classical scene processing methodologies, however, focus almost exclusively on the *amount* of physical evidence present at the scene (which is believed to be primarily a function of the area, number of victims and physical objects, and cause and manner of death). This mindset results in scene recovery protocols in which the recovery of discrete and isolated types of evidence (fingerprints, body parts, blood stains, etc) is tantamount. This approach, however, does not take into account the order in which that evidence was deposited on the scene. For example, parameters related to the shape of the grave or the shape and number of tools employed in its digging will be altered or completely destroyed if not identified at the moment when they are revealed in the recovery process. The same applies to relative position of items of evidence in different stratigraphic layers. Therefore, the advantage gained from the larger amount of information imprinted on the scene by more complex efforts to hide the evidence on the side of the perpetrator will be lost if stratigraphic and archaeological principles are not applied during the processing of the shallow grave.

This presentation will show that processing a clandestine grave following this approach will result in the destruction of contextual evidence, as this type of evidence can only be accessed and registered sequentially. Consequently, scene processing must be planned with consideration of this multi-layered structure of the evidence, and ultimately, can only be properly processed by employing contemporary archaeological methods.

Shallow Grave, Recovery Methods, Trade-Offs