



Physical Anthropology Section – 2006

H69 Characterizing Primary and Secondary Mass Graves and Their Impact on Identification Methodology: The Experience in Bosnia and Herzegovina

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After attending this presentation, attendees will learn new ways of approaching the methodology of exhumation, recognizing it as the first stage in the identification process. Furthermore, the attendee will learn of the different types of mass graves and its influence on the identification process.

This presentation will impact the forensic community and/or humanity by showing that a more detailed analysis of the archaeological context of the recovery and a customized exhumation strategy is an important first step in the identification process.

This presentation evaluates the procedure of body identification in remains obtained from primary and secondary mass graves. It is maintained that the process of identification starts with a sound methodology for collecting the body parts in the field using a procedure which acknowledges the characteristics of the mass grave. The material evidence that indicates a primary grave is reviewed to show how it differs from the more common cases found in the Bosnian, secondary mass graves. The author also describes a third situation: the robbed mass grave. The characterization of a mass grave is dictated, to start with, by the archaeological data encountered during excavation. However, in many cases, human physical remains often provide evidence that runs contrary to the archaeological interpretations.

This small-scale study is based on data recovered in the excavation of mortal remains from the mass graves of Tomašica and Stari Kevljani, two of the many graves produced during the 1992-95 war in Bosnia and Herzegovina. The excavation was a joint task between the International Commission on Missing Persons (ICMP) and the local National Commission for the Disappeared. This joint task force for identification of victims of the war has been working over the past five years to identify as many remains as possible, including isolated body parts. Currently, the identification is made with the use of DNA testing, which has replaced traditional methods as the primary means of identification.

The objective of the excavations of mass graves by ICMP and the National Commission in Bosnia is to identify the bodies recovered. As such, the process of identification begins in the field, where it is imperative to collect parts of a single body together. Furthermore, it is paramount to have a clear understanding of the conditions of the grave: Is it a primary grave? Is it a secondary grave? Or is it a grave used during a period of time that only resembles a secondary mass grave, where body parts of a single individual might be spread over a small area? The author uses archaeological as well as anthropological evidence to define the various possibilities of graves: primary, secondary, combination of primary and secondary graves, as well as robbed graves. Evidence is presented that is used to link remains obtained from robbed graves with remains, from the same body, and from secondary graves. There have been several cases of a body reassociated from body parts from several sites.

It is concluded that an exhumation strategy subordinated to the assessment of the kind of mass grave being excavated will greatly facilitate the re-association work at the morgue, as it will help in keeping parts of the body intact. This more detailed work in the field will save time and money in the process of identification, even in the context of a DNA-based identification, where re-association is important to produce the more complete bodies for their return to families and final reburial.

Exhumation, Mass Graves, Re-Association