



Physical Anthropology Section – 2007

H69 The Importance of Archaeological Site Formation Processes and Flexible Excavation Strategies to the Development of Successful Medicolegal Approaches to Mass Graves Excavation: Al Hatra, Iraq

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After attending this presentation, attendees will learn to recognize some of the pitfalls of generic approaches to mass graves work, particularly with regards to practical issues of site assessment, recovery methodology, data processing, staffing, and evidence handling. Attendees will also recognize the importance of considering historical, sociocultural, political, and environmental aspects of the mass grave(s) and the funding authorities' goals prior to devising a scope of work.

This presentation will impact the forensic community and/or humanity by providing a discussion of key considerations when devising an ethical and efficient investigation/excavation/analysis plan for mass graves.

A number of authors have presented general guidelines to mass graves excavation and monitoring techniques, primarily based on experience in the former Yugoslavia, Rwanda, Guatemala, and Honduras. While these guidelines provide valuable experience-based approaches to mass graves excavation, they are quite general in nature. This may have the unwanted effect of implying that "one size fits all," leading the less experienced investigator to ignore crucial aspects of site formation and data analysis, preventing adequate planning. In this paper, the authors will point out two vital and sometimes overlooked aspects of successful mass graves investigation and excavation: (1) the sociocultural and political history of the region, and (2) the goal of the investigation or excavation. Examples from a mass graves site near Al Hatra, Iraq, will be provided.

The goal of mass graves excavations varies geographically and temporally and can be strongly influenced by the entity providing funding. The object of excavation may range from individual identification and repatriation of remains to collection of evidence for use in the prosecution of war crimes. Numerous characteristics specific to the project in question (including the region's political and social history, site formation processes, and goals of the perpetrators) may be factors in achieving these goals.

Individual identification requires dedicated funds and staff for mtDNA sample and family reference sample collection, public records searches (ID cards, etc.), witness and family interviews, collection of antemortem dental records and medical/dental x-rays, genealogy, and short- and/or long-term storage. This aim also requires careful consideration of cultural practices, such as settlement patterns. While mtDNA can provide valuable data regarding identity in many situations, its use in a matrilineal society is complicated by the associated reduction of mitochondrial lineage variability, particularly in cases where a mass grave consists entirely of victims from a single village. Furthermore, the presence of members of the victims' families as observers or members of the persecuted population as excavators presents significant risk of contamination. A primary goal of prosecution requires different planning strategies for long-term storage, reburial, or memorial design/dedication, as well as a focus on incident reconstruction and site formation processes. For example, the presence of multiple graves from several temporally distinct events, such as those seen in the Al Hatra area, may be important to prosecution if the aim is to prove deliberate, well-planned episodic genocide. Cause of death may be an important piece of information for prosecution, potentially requiring the involvement of forensic pathologists, ballistics experts, and the like.

The goals of the perpetrators are also important considerations for investigators, particularly where prosecution is a primary goal. Genocide patterns may range from torture and a high degree of military force and coercion (as in the former Yugoslavia) to minimum-effort-maximum-efficiency styles of execution accompanied by deceit (as in the Al Hatra area), and these patterns will be reflected in trauma patterns and the disposition of remains. These patterns are influenced by the political, social, or religious agendas of the regimes and, to some degree, the personal dispositions of the individuals responsible for carrying out the executions. Choice of weapons, demography of the victims, and morphology of the grave may provide important clues about these goals and agendas and may strongly influence recovery methods.

Mass Graves, Excavation, Iraq