



## Physical Anthropology Section – 2007

### H94 Investigating the Spanish Civil War: Forensic Anthropological Investigations in Santaella

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After attending this presentation, attendees will learn about the current internationally collaborative forensic efforts in Spain by highlighting the results of one of the first systematic excavations and identifications of a Spanish Civil War mass grave. The paper discusses some of the unique problems of working in Spain, including current political obstruction of investigations and the nature of antemortem information.

This presentation will impact the forensic community and/or humanity by demonstrating the forensic community must continue to contribute to the training of international colleagues and help apply political pressure to promote scientific human rights investigations.

The Spanish Civil War officially began in July, 1936, as the military and right-wing fascists challenged the democratically elected Republican government. As part of a systematic strategy of terror in southern Spain, fascists supported local uprisings and the killing of Republicans and leftists. The relative peace the small village of Santaella had enjoyed that tumultuous summer was shattered on September 11 of that year. A group of fascist soldiers and civilians belonging to the Spanish Falange interrupted a village-wide celebration and kidnapped 18 men. The men were loaded onto a truck and taken to a neighboring village. One man jumped from the moving truck and escaped but the others were transported to a cemetery and forced to dig a trench for their own mass grave. There they were executed. A few months later several more men disappeared from Santaella and were suspected to be buried in the Santaella cemetery. All of the victims were civilians. One was a shoemaker, another a municipal employee and the rest were farmers. For the next 68 years the families were denied access to their missing and were purposefully intimidated by those loyal to President Franco's authoritarian regime. The social climate of national amnesia related to Fascist atrocities continued even after Franco's death in 1975. In 2004 the families of the victims were finally given some hope of finding their loved ones.

A regional social organization, Foro por la Memoria, enlisted the assistance of Spanish archaeologists and an American forensic anthropologist to locate the mass grave(s), recover the remains, and identify the victims. In June of 2004 a hand dug trench was found inside the LaGuillarrosa cemetery. Seventeen skeletons were tightly packed together, side by side, with alternating head direction. Artifacts recovered included a variety of bullets, some metal personal effects, and leather clothing remnants, such as sombreros and boot soles. Simultaneously, another team of archaeologists searched for the other missing men in the Santaella cemetery. Five skeletons were exhumed from three graves at this site.

In August 2005, forensic anthropologists from Binghamton University joined two physical anthropologists from the Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona (UAB) to conduct a complete analysis of the 22 skeletons recovered from the La Guillarrosa and Santaella cemeteries. Standard methods of age, sex, and stature estimation were employed and pathological conditions were recorded. Perimortem and postmortem trauma were also described and diagrammed.

All of the recovered skeletons were male and most were young. Skeletal estimates of age indicate seven men were between 18 and 30 years, 14 between 30 and 50 years, and one was estimated to be over 50 years. Sixteen of the 22 individuals (72.7%) displayed clear evidence of perimortem trauma, 14 from LaGuillarrosa and two from Santaella. All of these individuals exhibited perimortem gunshot trauma and one also suffered blunt trauma to the face and head. The majority of the gunshot wounds are observed in the torso and limbs with only three men suffering one or more gunshot wounds of the head. This patterning of gunshot wounds supports a purportedly common scenario during the war in which the victims stood against the cemetery wall and the assassins fired from the hip.

Due to the lengthy postmortem period, antemortem information is derived from photographs and the recollection of family members concerning dental, physical and health characteristics rather than formal dental and medical records. Stature was not helpful for identifications because none of the individuals were particularly short or tall. Only one individual exhibited any dental treatment and was tentatively identified. Other presumptive identifications can be made based on antemortem fractures and the estimated age of the most elderly male but confirmation must await DNA testing.

**Forensic Anthropology, Human Rights Investigations, Trauma**