



### D2 Modes of Killing and Rituals in Apulian Mafia Homicides

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The goal of this presentation is to show a series of murders committed by the local Mafia in Puglia (Apulia) (Sacra Corona Unita: United Holy Crown), in order to analyze the particular ritualistic aspects of murders and the different manners of execution.

This presentation will impact the forensic community by showing the ferocious manner of killing and rituals used by affiliated members of Sacra Corona Unita.

The early 1980s witnessed the birth of the *Holy Crown United (SCU)*. This is a Mafia organization, which formed in the south of Italy and is noted for the ferocity of its homicides and the correlating ritualistic methods it used. The name of the organization itself relates to strong mysticism; *Holy*: because its principles are absolute and unchangeable, *Crown*: because its members are bonded together like the beads in a rosary, *United*: because the positions in a rosary are absolute and unchangeable.

The discovery of a considerable number of manuscripts has contributed to support the image of the SCU as an elite criminal organization, which uses rituals for affiliation and killings. The internal structure of the organization is similar to a pyramid, which is articulated on different levels ("minor society", "major society", and "secret society"), the entrance to which is secured only via some "baptism rites" that signify the passage of the subject from a condition of layman to affiliated member.

In keeping with the typical customs of the clan, each affiliated member has a nickname. On this basis are based those rituals related to killings, and in fact it is often possible to find objects and symbols laid next to the dead bodies of the victims, that help both to identify the individual and the killing as that of the SCU. One example was the discovery of the horns of a baby bull next to the body of the son of an affiliated member whose nickname was "the bull" or a rat skull in the clothes of a dead member known as a "sewer-rat".

In this research 83 corpses were examined that had undergone autopsies between 1980 and 2000. Of these corpses, 77 were male and 6 were female. The age of the victims ranged between 21 and 40 years. The bodies are mainly of SCU members, and in some rare exceptions police and law enforcement agencies and other citizens who were accidentally caught in the crossfire. Some of the bodies were found after a period of three years from the official denouncement to the police of a missing person, and were largely discovered thanks to the help and collaboration of SCU member's confessions. The condition of the bodies varies in relation to the date and mode of killing. In particular there were fifty-one "fresh" bodies, thirteen burned bodies, twelve skeletons, and seven adipocere bodies.

The killing and successive burning of the body in cars relate to a symbolic code for all affiliated members of the SCU. It relates to the specific initiation ritual, which states that those who betray the organization will be reduced to ashes. This ritual draws back to the ceremony of affiliation in which an image of a saint (Saint Michel Archangel) was burned. Above all, this technique is a strategy that serves to make it more difficult to determine the identification of the victim and to eliminate all traces left by the executioner.

In other cases killings were followed by body destruction in acids. The most frequent event was the disappearance of the subjects that was supposed to be killed: a homicide without the body buried somewhere in hidden places. These cases were referred as "Lupara Bianca". Lupara refers to the hunting gun that it is used by the SCU to execute its victims and bianca means white, which refers to the fact that there is no victim to identify.

The antropometric research method was necessary in cases where the body was in an advanced state of decomposition (i.e., burnt, skeletonized, adipocerized). This technique was used to ascertain the race, age, sex, weight, and height of the victim along with individual characteristics (i.e., dental records, scars, tattoos, and fractures), which were determined via photos, radiography and clinical records of suspected victims.

Ballistic investigations were conducted in order to identify the types of arms used, and to determine if the same gun had been used in other executions. By the 83 homicides examined, it was determined that most of the victims were killed by a firearm; only in four cases were fatal lesions sustained by blunt objects and in other three cases death was caused by explosive materials.

In more than a third of the cases (73%), lesions at the head (66 by means of a firearm and 3 by means of another blunt object i.e., stick or stone) were the only marks left on the body; in particular lesions caused by a firearm were found to be located on the back of the head, which is hypothesized that at "the moment of execution", the victim was on their knees, maintaining a reverent position. In three cases lesions were caused by a powerful firearm able to cause considerable damage to individuals. Moreover the identification of one victim of the SCU was uniquely made via an examination of an isolated patella.

The conclusion of the ballistic investigation on the firearms and munitions used by the SCU evidences the different origins of the firearms (i.e., from Yugoslavia, Czech Republic, China, etc.) confirming the role of the SCU in the trafficking of international arms.

**Homicides, Ritualism, Italian Mafia**