



Physical Anthropology Section – 2008

H118 Uncovering the Truth Behind the Killings: Predicting Patterns of Perimortem Trauma Using Skeletons Exhumed From Ex-Military Bases in Guatemala

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After attending this presentation, participants will learn about the types of perimortem trauma that were inflicted on the Guatemalan population in military bases during the armed conflict. They will become aware of the fact that all aspects of the population were affected and that the FAFG is using these patterns to predict trauma in future exhumations.

The Guatemalan Forensic Anthropology Foundation (FAFG) has to date worked on 847 cases totaling more than 5000 skeletons. Of these 847 cases, 12 have taken place within Guatemala's ex-military bases distributed throughout the country, comprising 386 skeletons. It is estimated that during Guatemala's armed conflict 200,000 people were killed, spanning all ages, and 50,000 were disappeared. Many of the disappeared were transferred to the military bases from other areas, and as a consequence the majority of skeletons exhumed from these bases are awaiting identification pending DNA testing. Despite the lack of identification, all of these skeletons have been analyzed and are being held in evidence by the FAFG.

The analysis of these remains revealed that the majority of skeletons exhumed from ex-military bases have evidence of perimortem trauma as well as signs of antemortem torture. Typical traumas observed in the skeletons from this type of exhumation are ballistic bone traumas to the cranium, blunt trauma to the thorax, knife-cut wounds to the cervical area, blunt-sharp trauma (machete wounds) to the cranium and thorax and decapitations. It is hypothesized that the type of trauma will vary depending on factors such as the type of grave, or the biological profile of the victims. It is the intention of this paper to search for and present patterns of trauma based on a number of selected independent variables. It is not the purpose of this paper to detail the antemortem torture, but to conduct a statistical analysis of the perimortem trauma observed in the skeletons, and as a result to be able to predict the type of trauma based on a single independent variable or a number of independent variables.

A statistical analysis will reveal if it is possible to predict the type of trauma from a number of independent factors including sex, age grouping, size of grave (number of skeletons), placement of bodies in the grave, presence of clothing, depth of grave, presence of ballistics, presence of rope- type artifacts, signs of antemortem torture, etc. It is expected that a pattern of perimortem trauma will emerge linking a type of lesion with a particular group or circumstance.

Five cases were selected consisting of skeletons with the cause of death well established. One of these cases is an ex-military base situated in the department of Chimaltenango, where 218 skeletons were recovered, consisting of 154 male adults, 40 female adults, 12 sub-adults and 12 elderly victims. These statistics show that the military campaign was not only directed at adult men of fighting age, but rather the population as a whole. Typically the types of perimortem trauma observed in the victims recovered from this ex-military base are gunshot wounds to the cranium, decapitations and various sharp-force traumas to the thorax and the anterior cervical region.

The results of the analysis will be used to inform the exhumations of military bases in the future and will serve as a part of the forensic report produced by the FAFG for the Prosecutors Office.

Perimortem Trauma, Ex-Military Base, Guatemala