



Physical Anthropology Section – 2009

H69 Evolution of Forensic Archaeology and Anthropology in Italy: Three Criminal Cases

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After attending this presentation, attendees will be briefed on the first three cases where forensic archeology was applied in Italy for the search and recovery of victims of organized crime, and how the scenario is evolving.

This presentation will impact the forensic community by showing the application and advantages of archeological methods to the search and recovery of buried corpses.

Forensic archeology applies the techniques of search and recovery commonly performed in the archeological context to forensic cases, and aims at the best possible conservation of the deposition site and the human remains. Thus it should be considered of primary importance by police and judicial authorities in cases where a body needs to be found and adequately recovered. Nevertheless, in Italy and in southern Europe this discipline is still rarely applied in real cases, with obvious disastrous outcomes.

The first case occurred in October 2001 in a wooded area at the outskirts of Milan. Children from a nearby nursery school found a boot emerging from the ground that appeared to contain several bones. The skeletal remains were recovered as indicated by archeological recommendations; a conservative recovery of all the skeletal elements, clothes, and personal belongings was then performed. The area was recorded by topographical methods, and tree roots crossing the deposition site were sampled, which made a postmortem interval estimation (PMI) possible. The botanical and product analysis of clothes limited the PMI estimation to between 1995 and 1998. The reconstruction of biological data revealed that the skeletal remains belonged to a 20-25 year old female subject. A facial reconstruction was performed and the resulting broadcast helped a prostitute from Kosovo recognize the subject as a friend called Viola, but at the present time a positive identification has not yet been achieved. The anthropological analysis pointed out a cut mark with peri-mortem characteristics at the lower margin of the 10th left rib.

The second case concerns the corpses of two missing adolescents found in May 2004 in a wooded area near Varese. The discovery came after a confession from their murderers, called "Satan's Beasts" because of their devotion to drugs and Satanism, who indicated the woods in which the victims had been buried. The first recovery procedures were conducted by cadaver dogs, followed by field walking, and the use of a metal detector/georadar. After no signs of burial were found, the murderers were led to the site and indicated a new field, where the application of archeological methodology led to the appearance of a ditch. The fill was then removed and on the bottom two skeletonized corpses were found. The first subject was male, 15-18 years old, and the second one was female, 17-22 years old. The two corpses were identified as the missing adolescents according to odontological and anthropological methods. The female subject was hit at least 11 times by a sharp force tool (a large knife). The male subject was hit at least 12 times and was also hit by a mallet in the facial region. The lesions observed were consistent with the events referred to by the murderers.

The third case concerns the search of a buried body (a victim of a mafia execution) which, according to the murderer, took place in December 2006 in a wooded area in the outskirts of Milano. His accomplices reported he had shot and beheaded the victim, although he had always denied it (he in fact had said that he was only responsible for burying the body, not for the murder). Thus, the magistrate wanted to verify whose version was true. At the beginning of the search, a 10 x 10 m area was defined the analysis of soil anomalies went on until excavation activities revealed the cranial vault. The human remains in the fill were cleaned, photographed, sketched, and then a 3-D digitizing analysis of the site was performed. Close to the cranium, a dental prosthesis was found. The subject was male, 20-28 years old, according to anthropological analyses. Positive identification was reached by odontological data based on the prosthesis found during the excavation procedure. The cranium, severely fractured, was finally cleaned and reassembled in order to verify the presence of lesions. The analysis of the cranium pointed out that the victim was hit by two gunshots. No lesion consistent with a possible beheading was observed.

These cases show how, at least in northern Italy, judges and police authorities are beginning to employ anthropologists and archeologists for the retrieval and recovery of buried bodies. Among pathologists and magistrates, these cases have also strengthened the theory that only by proper archaeological methodology can proper reconstruction of identity, mode of deposition and trauma analysis be performed.

Forensic Anthropology, Forensic Archeology, Buried Corpses