



### D15 Tangled Corpses: Interpreting a Complex Mass Grave at the Parc Safari Cemetery

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After attending this presentation, attendees will better understand the complexities of mass grave excavation, especially the necessary archaeological methodology for collecting, analyzing and interpreting disarticulated skeletal and non-skeletal remains, where no oral narrative of that burial event exists.

This presentation will impact the forensic science community by augmenting with traditional grave recovery tools, an interdisciplinary methodology, to assist mass grave investigation. That, in turn gives the community at large, an approach that can be applied in parts of the world where sensitive social relations exist as a result of human rights abuses.

Very often, investigations of human rights abuses have focused on the identification of individual and mass graves. Reconstruction of the burial event has taken a secondary position in those scenarios. Yet, using an interdisciplinary methodology, the scope of investigation can be widened by collecting important contextual information during grave identification and excavation.

A more thorough recovery and analysis of the collected contextual information offers scholars and human rights investigators greater understanding of the depositional context, and the stratigraphy related to the burial event. That information is augmented with an analysis of the recovered skeletal and non-skeletal remains.

On-going studies of a mass grave at a zoological park in Quebec, Canada will be presented as an example of that interdisciplinary methodology. The fall 2008 excavation recovered from the mass grave the disarticulated remains of up to four mammalian individuals, including a zebra, bighorn sheep, antelope, and water buffalo and a black garbage bag with the semi-decomposed remains of a flamingo. Found in close proximity to the mammalian remains, were garbage bags with semi-decomposed intestinal remains.

The spatial entanglement of the skeletal and non-skeletal remains suggested that the individuals were buried in a single burial event. The bodies were piled on top of each other, rather than arranged side-by-side in the grave. The disarticulated state of their remains led excavators to speculate that the animals were partially dismembered before burial. Laboratory examination and analysis of the skeletal remains confirmed the hypothesis when, cut marks were identified at two points: below the head, and on the lower thoracic vertebrae. No cutting implement was recovered in the excavation. Investigations to identify the implement that was used for dismemberment are continuing.

Close examination of the soil stratigraphy in the excavation unit indicated the northern edge of the grave cut. The remains were situated in the southwest of the grave. There are strong indications that more individuals will be recovered from that part of the grave. The material evidence of the buriers suggests that the dismembered bodies were likely transported in garbage bags to the burial site. Excavators recovered thick nylon ropes from the grave. The rope is seen in prevalence on the surface, and just below ground cover throughout the cemetery. That in turn has raised questions about how it was used by the buriers.

There exist no institutional records at Parc Safari for this mass grave, or for the cemetery grounds where excavations are taking place. This cemetery ground is no longer used by Parc Safari, and represents up to forty years of animal burials. Because there is limited or no memory about the mass grave of interest, or about burial practices in the past, excavators are relying on high-resolution collection and analysis for their reconstruction of the burial event.

**Mass Graves, Excavation Methodology, Human Rights**