H62 Recovery of Missing Persons in Cyprus: Methods and Techniques of Complex Well Excavations

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After attending this presentation, attendees will learn the methods and techniques that were developed by thebi-communal forensic teams of the Committee on Missing Persons in Cyprus (CMP) in order to recover remains of missing persons buried in deep wells at several sites across Cyprus during the 1960s and 1970s.

This presentation will impact the forensic science community by sharing best practices of the CMP forensic archaeologists to overcome the difficulties and safety risks associated with excavating human remains from deep wells.

The Bi-communal Forensic Team (BCFT) of the CMP has been conducting excavations since 2005 in order to find persons reported missing from the inter-communal fighting between the years 1963 and 1974. As a result of the violence during those times, a total of 494 Turkish-Cypriots and 1,493 Greek-Cypriots were officially reported as missing by both communities to the CMP. From our experience over the past five years, 145 individuals have been recovered from 82 deep-well excavations.

Well excavation methods vary according to the type, the depth, and the type of soil surrounding the well. The wells in Cyprus are mostly wheel wells for drawing water, dry wells, drainage wells, and reservoir wells, which are typically shallow wells. The depth of the wells excavated thus far varies from 5 meters to 30 meters. The well depth depends on the soil type and water level of the area. As a result, the BCFT establish an excavation plan, which includes decisions about what type of heavy machinery will best serve the excavation process. Management of the excavation process begins with gathering historical and circumstantial data related to the missing person(s), and dominant landforms, land use, and geomorphology of the excavation area. These data inform the necessary excavation methods and techniques.

Due to the prevalence of well excavation sites, the CMP forensic archaeologists developed a system of access ramps for heavy machinery, pockets, and pools, which are excavated next to the mouth of the well to manage excess ground water. Initially, a well feature is opened on three sides by an excavator, not only for safety and timeliness, but also to allow access for the team to recover remains and additional evidence in situ. The excavator does not disturb the sediment inside the well; rather it makes a ramp with the assistance of a wheel loader, which transports large amounts of loose soil out of the excavation area. This method enables CMP archaeologists to excavate the deepest wells successfully by maintaining provenience of recovered evidence, while reducing excavation times and keeping costs low. For example, the CMP archaeology team excavated and recovered remains from wells in Gökhan/Voni and İskele/Trikomo that were 28 and 31 meters deep, respectively.

Over the past five years, the CMP Bi-communal Forensic Team has developed methods and techniques for excavating deep wells, which enables efficient excavation and recovery of remains. In doing so, the CMP forensic archaeologists overcome archaeological, logistical, and physical difficulties to reach human remains of individuals that went missing as a result of the inter-communal across Cyprus during the 1960s and 1970s.

Forensic Archaeology, CMP, Well

