



Physical Anthropology Section - 2012

H63 Thinking Outside the Box (of Bones) in Forensic Anthropology: Revisiting Roles, Components, and Naming Rights of the Discipline

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After attending this presentation, attendees will fully understand the relationship between forensic archaeology and forensic anthropology and the significance of this role in the determination of a wide range of issues critical to the medicolegal investigation of the outdoor death scene.

This presentation will impact the forensic science community by discussing the diversity of roles forensic anthropology plays beyond just the determination of biological profile from human bones.

Forensic anthropology was formally defined in the early 1970's as a laboratory-based discipline focused almost exclusively on aiding the process of establishing the identity of the victim. Typically, law enforcement and coroner/medical examiner officials brought human remains to the forensic anthropologist only after other mainstream identification efforts such as analysis of soft tissue features, dental comparisons, and even clay reconstructions failed.

The bulk of these cases involved, therefore, skeletal remains or bodies altered or decomposed to a point at which the forensic pathologist could get little information from the soft tissues. As is the case today, most of these remains came from environments in which the body had gone undetected for long periods of time: burials and outdoor scenes. While their indoor counterparts were subjected to increasingly sophisticated mapping, documentation and information retrieval techniques, outdoor scenes were deemed by law enforcement as too altered and complex to receive the same treatment. Animals, weather conditions, and other natural processes would have erased most of the evidentiary information originally present at the scene. The absence of walls and other fixed spatial references made indoor mapping techniques impracticable, and burials were shoveled or backhoed to retrieve the body in order to send it ASAP to the morgue.

It was in this environment of hastily processed outdoor scenes and laboratory-based anthropologists that the field of forensic anthropology was defined and incorporated into the AAFS as an independent section. At the time, many forensic anthropologists saw the potential utility of archaeological techniques to process outdoor scenes and burials. A few of them took an active role in the recovery of the body and associated contextual information. However, for a variety of reasons, the initial acceptance of archaeologists into the Physical Anthropology section of AAFS was delayed.

During the last four decades, the evolution of the field has resulted in a completely different reality. Paralleling a similar trend in paleoanthropology, forensic anthropologists gradually realized the need to collect and analyze scene information in order to answer many of the old and new questions posed by investigators and tribunals. For example, interpretation of skeletal trauma may be confounded by taphonomic and site formation processes, which cannot be reconstructed without carefully recorded scene data. Accurate methods of bone detection and recovery also required the involvement of an osteologist in the analysis and processing of the recovery scene. Archaeology and paleontology methods were demonstrated to be superior over conventional criminalistics techniques, and their adaptation into the medicolegal context translated into the development of forensic archaeology.

The application of archaeological techniques and methods to crime-scene recovery resulted in increased analytical capabilities that go well beyond the assessment of the biological profile for identification purposes. Forensic archaeology and taphonomy allowed for the reconstruction of events surrounding death, including factors such as original position and location of the decedent, and the estimation of postmortem intervals.

Today, forensic archaeology has been embraced and is an integral part of the work of forensic anthropologists. In addition, archaeologists have taken an active part both in the research and development of new forensic archaeological techniques, and in their application in forensic investigations. This presentation argues in favor of the necessity of acknowledging this reality within the Forensic Anthropology Section of AAFS, by accepting and incorporating forensic archaeologists into the section and renaming it accordingly.

Forensic Archaeology, Scene Context, Forensic Taphonomy