



Physical Anthropology Section - 2012

H66 **Redefining the Scope of Forensic Anthropology: Embracing Archeology Would Help to Guide the Development of Best Practice for Field Recoveries of Human Remains**

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After attending this presentation, attendees will understand: (1) why forensic anthropologists should formally recognize archeology as a subfield of forensic anthropology; and, (2) why anthropologists must more actively advertise their field recovery skills to the medicolegal system.

This presentation will impact the forensic science community by clearly defining the five basic skill sets required for field recoveries of human remains and presenting a “best practice” argument for an increased reliance on archeologists in such cases.

Traditionally, forensic anthropology has been defined in terms of laboratory skills in skeletal analysis and human identification. Less appreciated by the medicolegal system is the fact that most American anthropologists are trained broadly in multiple subfields, including archeology. As a result, many jurisdictions continue to rely on crime scene investigators to process outdoor human remains scenes. However, compared to other types of forensic cases, decomposed human remains are relatively rare. The typical CSI will have little practical experience with these cases, and few agencies will invest the resources to properly train their personnel in all aspects of field recovery. CSI's tend to come from criminal justice and other non-science backgrounds and have little formal training in field methods. Short continuing education courses do not provide enough theoretical background or experience for them to conduct adequate recoveries, particularly of buried remains.

Five major skill sets are necessary to conduct controlled field recoveries. First, one must identify and inventory human bones and decomposed soft tissues in any condition so that missing elements can be noted and found before the scene is released. This skill requires coursework in osteology and anatomy. Second, one must interpret soil stratigraphy and understand how various processes have altered the soils, helping in the search for clandestine graves and the exclusion of irrelevant areas from continued investigation. This skill requires coursework in geology and sedimentology. Third, one must understand the techniques of controlled archeological recovery to minimize damage to the remains, to maximize evidence recovery, and to prepare effective maps. This skill requires coursework in archeological methods, surveying, and an intensive archeological field school. Fourth, one must recognize unusual forms of evidence, such as plants and insects that can link a suspect to the crime scene or help to estimate the postmortem interval. One must also trace all evidence back to specific soil strata so that its temporal association with the remains can be firmly established. This skill requires coursework in biology and the laboratory analysis of archeological materials. Fifth, one must recognize and interpret phenomena that alter the crime scene through time, including scavengers, water action, and agricultural practices, so that the final distribution of remains and evidence can be understood. This skill requires coursework in taphonomy, ecology, and site formation processes.

Only anthropologists with formal training in archeology are likely to possess all of these skills. At a time when the qualifications of all forensic practitioners are falling under scrutiny, the question must be asked whether the inconsistent, unregulated approach to human remains recovery in this country constitutes best practice. Systematically extending our established expertise in field recovery techniques into the forensic realm can significantly improve the quality of death investigations and increase the sophistication of interpretations drawn from the available evidence. Otherwise, we may witness more situations where, under informed cross-examination, a police recovery “expert” may not be able to render opinions regarding assailant activities, the original deposition point of the body, how the scene was altered in the postmortem interval, and how the evidence helps to explain the circumstances of death. Worse, crucial evidence may be impeached for lack of proper contextual associations.

Anthropology has an opportunity to increase its public impact by encouraging its professional archeologists to participate more frequently in local medicolegal investigations. We must partner with law enforcement to find ways of educating archeologists in the unique problems and specific needs of forensic casework. In support of these initiatives, we should expand the traditional definition of “forensic anthropology” to include the subdiscipline of archeology, formally define minimum professional qualifications for field recoveries, and establish an appropriate certification process in forensic archeology.

Forensic Archaeology, Field Recoveries, Decomposed Remains