D26 Excavation of Mass Graves in Cyprus

Demet Karsili, MA, and Andri Palla, BA*, Ledra Palace Hotel, PO Box 21642, Nicosia, CYPRUS*

After attending this presentation, attendees will learn about mass graves in Cyprus and the techniques that are used to exhume human remains.

This presentation will impact the forensic science community by providing examples of practical methods and techniques used by the CMP bi-communal forensic team in the excavation of mass graves in Cyprus.

In 1981, talks between Turkish Cypriot and Greek Cypriot leaders were held under the auspices of the United Nations which led to an agreement for the establishment of the Committee on Missing Persons in Cyprus (CMP). The CMP is mandated to establish the fate of missing persons without investigating cause or establishing accountability. The number of missing persons from both communities stands at 1,958, with 1,464 Greek Cypriots and 494 Turkish Cypriots missing. On August 28, 2006, the CMP formalized the beginning of a bi-communal program of exhumation across the entire island.

Most mass graves excavated in Cyprus are in open fields, pits, wells, caves, hills, mountains, stream and river beds, with open fields and well excavations being the most common type of mass grave encountered in Cyprus. Despite these commonalities, once the excavations have started, methods may be modified to take into account the unique characteristics of each site as they are presented. This presentation contains examples from all the mass graves that have been exhumed by the CMP Bi-Communal Forensic Team (BCFT).

Mass graves are a complex and confusing mix of bodies, body parts, grave fill, and artifacts. A mass grave can contain complete bodies in layers or partial bodies—commingled and complete bodies in a single burial feature. The exhumation techniques focus on detailed recording; using photography, sketching, site mapping, and categorizing the recovered remains as bodies, body parts, and general body parts, which may be associated with recovered artifacts.

When mass grave burial features are encountered for the first time, the excavation proceeds in a manner to define the horizontal and vertical limits of the site grave feature and to expose the evidence *in situ*. This is particularly the case with sites under threat from development and damage. In these cases, a combination of methods is used.

After setting the boundaries of the mass grave, a bit larger than the real margin of the grave, the soil from the burial feature is removed manually and systematically. Once remains and artifacts are discovered, further removal of soil is performed by using small masonry scoops and wooden sticks. The associated grave fill is sieved in order to recover small bone fragments and unassociated teeth.

Before removing the uncovered remains, all paper bags, boxes, and forms are properly labeled with the appropriate code to ensure that provenience and context is maintained. Taking detailed photographs together with the appropriate documentation during the critical points of cleaning and lifting each skeletal unit, complete or partial skeleton, has proven essential. Placing flags in the areas where human remains have been located facilitates subsequent mapping with a total station.

At the conclusion of the fieldwork, all recovered evidence is handed over under chain of custody to the CMP Anthropology Laboratory and the BCFT prepares an excavation report describing context and associations of recovered evidence. The archaeological data and reports, when combined with the skeletal and genetic reports, form the basis of nearly all CMP identifications.

Mass Grave, Excavations, Techniques

