



G18 Homicide or Suicide? An Unusual Case of “Spiritual” Death

Eloisa Maselli, MD, Biagio Solarino, PhD, Roberto Vaglio, MD, Maricla Marrone, MD, and Alessandro Dell'Erba, PhD, Univ of Bari, Piazza Giulio Cesare, Bari, ITALY*

After attending this presentation, attendees will be able to understand that crimes with spiritual aspects are unlikely to be interpreted. The crime scene investigation and autopsy data with histological, biological results and circumstantial elements are basic to reconstruct a crime hypothesis.

This presentation will impact the forensic science community by demonstrating that making a possible link between religion, spiritualism, and manner of death is not easy. Durkheim in 1897 published one of the most important studies about the role of religion in suicide. After this report, many authors presented cases and statistical reports about crimes with spiritual backgrounds.

A case of a 36-year-old man who, after being missing for one day, was found in a cave close to an olive grove will be presented. According to the parents' story, shortly after reading a book titled *Celestino's Prophecy*, the victim showed a state of spiritual delirium characterized by the intention to “purify the world” and to “free the world from evil and technology.” He left the house, saying to his wife and sons that he “would return only with the spirit.”

The crime scene examination revealed the body was found supine, wearing only underpants. A hammer and a hacksaw were found less than one meter to the right and above his right hand.

The external examination of the body showed diffuse, numerous yellowish-red abrasive lesions due to the action of the local microfauna (ant activity). The frontal region of the head displayed a 23-centimeter (cm) lacerated wound extending to the occipital area. Below this injury, two parallel, longitudinal lesions of 17cm and 10cm with large hemorrhagic infiltration of the periosteum were found. The brain tissue showed one cut injury (5cm long and 2cm deep) with surrounding hemorrhagic infiltration. Near major cuts were numerous longitudinal and oblique scratches (hesitation marks). Histological examination confirmed macroscopic evidence.

No alcohol or drugs of abuse were found in the blood or urine collected at autopsy. The cause of death was identified as diffuse hemorrhage and brain damage caused by multiple blunt and sharp force head injuries.

Crime scene investigations showed the presence of numerous blood spots on the cave walls and floor with a large pool of blood about a meter from the head of the victim. In the surrounding area 16 olive trees were found whose trunks had bloodstains that genetic analysis showed belonged to the victim. Regarding the manner of death, the victim banged his head on each of 16 olive trees; thereafter, the head was cut twice. It is difficult to say if someone was present at the moment of his death.

The case was closed as homicide (spiritual/satanic homicide?) by unknown, despite doubts about the possibility of the case being a very unusual suicide. Crime scene investigation and successive genetic analysis did not reveal the presence of another person on the scene; on the other hand, only a great alteration of the victim's behavior (mystic delirium?) could explain a suicide with such head injuries.

Spiritual Crime, Traumatic Brain Injury, Crime Scene Investigation