



E9 A Mafia Ritual of Hiding Murders: Sheep in Boots!

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Learning Overview: After attending this presentation, attendees will understand the modus operandi of an emerging Italian Mafia called Mafia of Gargano. A distinctive characteristic of the murders by this Mafia is the ritual of concealing the murder. Thanks to the karst conformation of this area, criminals frequently hide corpses in the natural ravines.

Impact on the Forensic Science Community: This presentation will impact the forensic science community by providing scientific data on the multidisciplinary forensic approach used to support investigations, increase the gathered information, and help in the identification process of unknown human skeletal remains.

The Mafia is a highly organized Italian criminal organization that began in Sicily at the beginning of the 19th century. There are four Italian Mafia organizations, namely “Cosa Nostra” (Our Thing or Our Affair) in Sicily, “Camorra” in Campania, “Sacra Corona Unita” (SCU, United Holy Crown) in Puglia, and “Ndrangheta” in Calabria. In the Apulian territory (a region of Italy) there are several subsidiary independent criminal groups that modeled their organizations on that of the Camorra.

One of these is named “Mafia of Gargano” (Gargano identifies an area located in northern Puglia, also known as “The Spur of Italy”). This criminal association began its illegal activities in the 1990s with a series of violent killings committed between 1990 to the present.

In the first years of activity, this outlaw movement was underestimated by the local judges. In fact, they believed that these crimes were committed among rural families for cattle thefts. This organization became very important in the Apulian criminal scenario, of significant interest for several outlaw activities, such as drugs and arms trafficking. To date, the “Mafia of Gargano” has been responsible for approximately 198 murders, 40 of which are classified as “Lupara Bianca” murders. “Lupara” is the Sicilian word for shotgun, a firearm traditionally associated with mafia-type organizations. The term “Bianca” (white) symbolizes the absence of blood because bodies and traces of murders are concealed; for example, burying the corpses in the countryside, in places they would be difficult to find. This Mafia ritual is highly facilitated by the natural conformation of the Gargano promontory. Indeed, the presence of numerous karst ravines gives this territory a unique conformation, useful for hiding drugs, weapons, and corpses. Hiding corpses in the isolated areas of grottoes, valleys, and ravines that are hundreds of meters underground and far from the urban area allows for the body to be hidden, and the criminals can evade prosecution.

During military operations in the ravines located in the Gargano area, a special team of “Carabinieri” (a police unit of the Italian armed forces) discovered numerous bones, some of them in farmer’s boots, similar to human phalanges. Subsequently, they collected these bones and isolated the area, interrupting all activities and alerting the prosecutor. In fact, in 2010, a vehicle of a missing person was found near the same ravine. A team of forensic multi-specialists (forensic pathologist, anthropologist, and geneticist) promptly supported all operations. The team went deep into the ravine where bone identification became very difficult because of the commingled animal remains and other materials. Moreover, a large amount of mud rendered the recovery and identification processes tedious and difficult. During the recovery operations, numerous Kalashnikov bullets were found. After three days of work, no human skeletal remains were located.

The bones previously collected were transferred to the Institute of Forensic Pathology of the University of Foggia for a complete multidisciplinary investigation. Forensic investigations consisted of radiological, histological, anthropological, and genetic studies; all data excluded the presence of human phalanges. It was a sheep in boots!

In conclusion, this study demonstrates the importance of the forensic sciences to support investigative activities. A multidisciplinary approach is very important because it helped gather a variety of information and excluded the presence of human skeletal remains in the analyzed ravine. In the future, the same approach could be very useful to recover the corpses of 40 missing people in the Gargano area.

Italian Mafia of Gargano, Forensic Multidisciplinary Approach, Concealed Corpses