

Forensic Anthropology as Mementos Mori

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Abstract

Forensic anthropology has seen an increasing importance in research field, especially in the DNA era, particularly in the process of identification of human remains. This process has been shaped accordingly to the post-war settings, where the discipline has been dealing with a large number of unidentified skeletons, and where large attempts to identify human remains are made. These attempts have psychological connotations with regard to the unresolved fate of many lost persons, but professional staffs will have their own psychological burden to care about. Identification process, even when is performed decennia after an event, will serve for a historical redressing and for giving a sense of truth to remote or recent occurrences.

Keywords: Forensic anthropology; Post traumatic stress disorder; Skeletal remains; Human identification; Mass graves

Introduction

Definition issues are a hard talk theme when it comes to scientific disciplines. Forensic anthropology is widely considered, somehow incorrectly, as a synonym to forensic osteology [1]. However, disciplines sometimes are defined ex cathedra, but their respective scopes are continuously accommodated time after time, even artifactually.

DNA analyses and other major technological advancements revolutionized one of the major purposes of forensic anthropology: identification of human remains. As a half-sister to criminology, it might be that simple; albeit humanistic contribution to anthropological disciplines in general with not permit such a simplification [2]. Post-war settings are testifying that.

Post war setting is an extremely particular environment, and forensic anthropology has substantially served toward redressing human rights violations, by documenting violence and cruelty. Indirectly, such documentation will help avoid impunity and bring perpetrators to justice; when it is not too late. In that unlucky case of very long time distances separating the crime from its respective uncovering, the scientific work might contribute toward the formulation of a historical truth. This is the case of mass killings, and massacres.

In between of being a humanistic, a social, and a natural science, forensic anthropology encompasses methodologically all of what is included in those disciplines; it uses techniques developed from skeletal biology and osteology, and applies them to cases of forensic importance [3]. From the osteological point of view, forensic anthropology might seem to be the antipode of forensic psychiatry, since the first cares about bones, and the second about souls. If such a

statement is not completely untrue, it is nevertheless a matter of controversy.

Mementos Mori

Nations might want to consider museums guarding medical specimen or bone remains as *mementos mori*, whose symbolic value differs accordingly with the position a nations has toward a historical war [4]. Of course, museal expositions of images illustrating war aftermaths will have an enormous visual and conscious impact in viewers.

In the pandemic era of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), and especially, when forensic anthropology is serving immediate or at least short-term purposes of identification of unknown corpses, post-traumatic symptoms will easily become visible even among professionals dealing with posthumous identification [5]. This subjective impression or experience will be even more subjectivized when the objects of identification have an 'unresolved' fate [6]. In fact, 'unresolved' has deep psychological connotations, as the word 'fate' in itself [7]. Now, when it comes to remains of human body, psychological links are numerous and unconscious, since the triangle starting with *trauma*, pointing toward *survival*, but ending up in unlucky cases with *death*, will see converging criminology, psychopathology and forensic sciences in a large extent.

Helplessness and despair are obvious and consistent elements of PTSD, as it is suggested from interviews and self-reports with a very large number of war survivors [8-10]. If the mere exposition to human remains and fragments, as it happens in a more distant form in museums, but as it has in fact become a practice during identification, can all of this lead to PTSD or to a recrudescence of latent symptoms of psychotrauma, this is still controversial. Psychological support and counseling is at any case warranted; even for professionals.

Identification Process and the Reappearance of Faces

It is very clear the proportional increase of research and professional activity of forensic anthropologists in the aftermath of national and regional wars: cases dating back to the Second World War are gathered, exhumations from mass graves are performed, and DNA profiling is widely used for the identification process [6,11-13].

DNA era has substantially contributed toward increasing the accuracy of identification. In fact, previously used methods, mainly the one based on facial recognition techniques, have frequently yielded erroneous results, with misidentification having enormous social, legal and religious implications [14]. Although it might seem as overrun from DNA analysis, nevertheless facial reconstruction is still being used in several cases for identification purposes [14,15].

Here again, the *mementos mori* will get intermingled with interest for pure osteology and anatomy, implicating that the discipline of forensic anthropology is a highly specialized one, and thus has to be practiced only from highly skilled professionals, duly supported psychologically during the entire process.

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