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Cristina Cattaneo · Eric Baccino

A call for forensic anthropology in Europe

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In the past few years a relatively new discipline within the forensic sciences has been gaining more and more relevance: forensic anthropology.

Forensic anthropology has been defined according to the American Board of Forensic Anthropology as follows:

“The application of the science of physical anthropology to the legal process. The identification of skeletal, badly decomposed, or otherwise unidentified human remains is important for both legal and humanitarian reasons. Forensic anthropologists apply standard scientific techniques developed in physical anthropology to identify human remains, and to assist in the detection of crime. Forensic anthropologists frequently work in conjunction with forensic pathologists, odontologists, and homicide investigators to identify a decedent, discover

evidence of foul play, and/or the post-mortem interval. In addition to assisting in locating and recovering suspicious remains, forensic anthropologists work to suggest the age, sex, ancestry, stature, and unique features of a decedent from the skeleton” (<http://www.csuchico.edu/anth/ABFA>).

Such a definition could be expanded since nowadays forensic anthropology also entails issues concerning identification of living individuals.

There has been an increase in forensic cases requiring expertise in identification of both dead and living individuals. In particular, the need for experts dealing with the retrieval, recovery and study of badly decomposed human remains has increased, also because of the growing rate of crime and clandestine immigration. At the Institute of Legal Medicine in Milano alone, which performs over 1,000 autopsies every year, there are on average 30–40 cases every year (many of them charred, skeletonised or dismembered) which require application of anthropological or odontological techniques, either for constructing an accurate biological profile (e.g. aging, sexing, facial reconstruction, etc.) or for performing positive identification. Furthermore in many cases (over 20 in the past 5 years) the application of forensic anthropology and forensic archaeology was required for the search

C. Cattaneo (✉)

Laboratory of Forensic Anthropology and Odontology,
Institute of Legal Medicine, Università degli Studi di Milano,
via Mangiagalli 37, 20133 Milano, Italy
e-mail: labanof@tin.it

E. Baccino

Centre Hospitalier Universitaire, CHU Montpellier,
Hopital Lapeyronie, 191 avenue du Doyen Gaston Giraud,
34295 Montpellier, Cedex 5, France

and recovery of buried human remains and for the determination of the post-mortem interval.

It is clear from the small example mentioned above for the city of Milano, as well as from several other reports (Iscan 2001; Iscan and Olivera 2000; Cattaneo et al. 2000) that there is a practical need for forensic anthropological expertise. Some of the areas in which the forensic anthropologist is necessary and indispensable in forensic scenarios are:

- Scenes of crime, particularly in the case of human remains, especially charred bodies and buried skeletons, where in order to recover and appropriately register such remains, experience in forensic archaeology, a subdiscipline of forensic anthropology, is necessary
- Diagnosis of species of origin of osseous or charred remains
- Diagnosis of the post-mortem interval in cases of skeletal remains, in particular buried remains
- Constructing a biological profile: diagnosis of sex, age, race, stature, skeletal pathologies, dental status and facial reconstruction
- Personal identification by anthropological methods: comparison of bone morphology, facial features, etc. when DNA or odontology are not applicable
- The study of bone trauma (blunt injury, sharp force injury, gunshot wounds, saw marks in cases of dismemberment, etc.)
- Age determination and identification of living individuals
- Recovery and identification of victims of mass disasters and war crimes.

In the United States this discipline is well organised as far as training is concerned, but in Europe it has not yet acquired its own status amongst the forensic sciences. There seems to be a distinct division between experts who work in the forensic scenario, namely forensic pathologists, and those who work in the classical anthropology context, mainly anthropologists working on archaeological material. There is clearly a professional void for dealing with human remains found in the forensic scenario: because of the intrinsic nature of their training, most forensic pathologists understandably have no expertise in anthropology. On the other hand classical anthropologists usually do not have experience with forensic material, the study of lesions, the construction of an accurate biological profile or positive identification by bone morphology. It is therefore clear that there is indeed the need to bring together the expertises in classical anthropology and forensic medicine/forensic sciences in order to create properly trained forensic anthropologists.

The authors therefore propose to create a European forensic anthropology group under the umbrella of the

International Academy of Legal Medicine, which must bring together the world of physical anthropology and forensic sciences in order to meet the requirements mentioned.

The function of this group would be to enhance knowledge, standards and research in the field and to eventually provide certification for European registers.

The objectives are:

1. To encourage the study of, improve the practice of, establish and enhance standards for, and advance the science of forensic anthropology and related disciplines
2. To harmonise techniques and diagnostic procedures in forensic anthropology across Europe and introduce quality control in anthropology laboratories
3. To encourage and promote adherence to high standards of ethics, conduct, and professional practice in forensic anthropology
4. To promote certification for forensic anthropology registers within the association.

The purpose of this brief communication is clearly to stress the need for properly trained forensic anthropologists and for qualified forensic anthropology laboratories across Europe as well as to bring together physical anthropologists and specialists of the forensic fields, especially forensic pathologists. Both disciplines must come together and set aside their differing perspectives in order to create excellent anthropological expertise for the purposes of justice. This can only be done by the formation of a multidisciplinary group willing to create the abovementioned group.

The main aim of this letter, however, is to function as a call for those who are interested in pursuing this goal. For this reason, at the next international forensic meetings (International Academy of Forensic Sciences in Montpellier, September 2002; International Academy of Legal Medicine in Milano, September 2003, as well as, hopefully, other meetings in the near future concerning physical anthropology) there will be an initial "registration poll" for this group. Those who are interested in the formation of this group can contact the present authors at the e-mail addresses indicated above.

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