



Case Report

“Lupara Bianca” a way to hide cadavers after Mafia homicides. A cemetery of Italian Mafia. A case study



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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 19 October 2014

Received in revised form 8 December 2014

Accepted 18 December 2014

Available online 30 December 2014

Keywords:

Lupara Bianca
Italian Mafia
Skeletal remains
Identification

ABSTRACT

The Gargano, also known as the ‘Spur of Italy’, is a sub-region of Italy which is located in North of Puglia, in the Province of Foggia. A ravine located in this area was used as a dumping ground in past. During a clearing operation, a team of speleologists discovered human skeletal remains, which led to an official investigation by the local prosecutor’s office. The prosecutor called a team of forensic specialist for a scene investigation to recover and identify the human skeletal remains. Four different human skeletal remains located at four different levels of depth underground were found and were in different conditions. A complete forensic investigation was initiated and comprised of radiological imaging with DNA profiling. Three of the four human skeletal remains that were found were identified as those belonging to men who vanished mysteriously in the nineties. The studies conducted have demonstrated that the victims found were murdered and the murders were attributed to the “Mafia of Gargano”. The Mafia of Gargano was officially recognized as a criminal organization dating back to 2009 and their criminal activities included the smuggling of firearms and cigarettes, human trafficking, and smuggling of undocumented immigrants. Murders in which corpses are made to disappear is common practice in criminal activities including that of the Italian Mafia. The “Lupara Bianca” is a colloquial term commonly used in Sicily to refer to concealed murders. To the best of our knowledge, this is the first reported study describing the discovery of one of the locations used extensively by the local Mafia as a “cemetery” for victims of “Lupara Bianca” homicides. Based on evidences collected at the site, an explanation of this homicidal modality will be provided.

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1. Introduction

There are four Italian Mafias, 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 [1]. In the Apulian territory (a region of Italy) there are several subsidiary independent criminal groups that modeled their organization after the Mafias. Among these, the “Mafia of Gargano” (Gargano is located in the North of Puglia, also known as ‘The Spur of Italy’) started their criminal activities in the nineties with a series of violent murders committed between 1990 and 2002. This group was initially classified by the local attorney and authorities

as a group of “familial thugs” of rural origin, but are now known as a large notorious organization [2]. The “Mafia of Gargano” was responsible for approximately 198 murders amongst which 12 were classified as “Lupara Bianca” (“white shotgun”) murders. “Lupara” is the Sicilian dialectal term for shotgun, “Bianca” (white) symbolizes the absence of blood because corpses and traces of murders are concealed.

A case of four of the twelve “Lupara Bianca” homicides committed by “Mafia of Gargano” will be discussed.

2. Case history

During a clearing operation of a ravine located in the Gargano area (30 m wide and 107 m deep), where old and wrecked cars were dumped, a team of speleologists discovered human skeletal remains. All clearing activities were interrupted and the prosecutor was alerted. A team of forensic specialist were summoned to the

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crime scene for recover and identification of human skeletal remain. The team went deep into the ravine where it became apparent that a column of more than twenty wrecked old vehicles were piled on each other in the ravine (Fig. 1).

Four different human skeletal remains located at four different levels of depth underground were found (Fig. 2).

The first human skeletal remains were found at a depth of 70 m below ground level, inside a car bonnet. Ribs, pelvic, arm and leg bones, were found partially concealed within a whitish plastic bag. Evidence of ligatures with a reddish rope around the wrists and ankles, were also present. Outside the car, at a slightly lower depth, a white plastic bag containing remains of a human skull was discovered (Fig. 3A). The large amount of mud in this area rendered the recovery and identification processes tedious and difficult. Following the recovery of the first cadaver, the cars were gradually removed from the bottom of the ravine.

Inside the bonnet of another car, 3 m below, further skeletal remains were discovered concealed in a large plastic bag (Fig. 3B). They included: a mandible, fragments of cranial bones, ribs, vertebrae, limb and pelvic bones.

Upon removal of further cars, the third human skeletal remains were discovered lying in mud in the prone position at a depth of 80 m. A plastic bag was found covering the head and part of the trunk. Moreover a gun cartridge with a shotgun shell was discovered inside the plastic bag. Skeletal remains of the legs were found tied with a reddish rope (Fig. 3C).

The fourth human skeletal remains were hidden 4 m deeper, lying in the supine position covered in mud, with a plastic bag enclosing the head (Fig. 3D).

The recovery process took 3 days to complete. During this time the team performed nine further crime scene investigations. After recovery and collection, the human skeletal remains were

registered on-site and numbered. They were then transferred to the Institute of Forensic Pathology at the University of Foggia for a complete multidisciplinary investigation.

Forensic investigations consisted of radiological studies namely Conventional Radiography (CR) and total body Multi-Detector Computed Tomography (MDCT) scan. A DNA profile was utilised for identification.

3. Post mortem procedures

3.1. Bones study

All bones were cleansed from mud and classified according to anatomic topography. A detailed description of bone status was performed and osteological measurements taken.

3.2. Radiological study

Total body CR (Axiom Iconos, Siemens Healthcare, Erlangen, Germany) and MDCT (Aquilion 64, Toshiba Medical Systems, Tochigi, Japan) studies were performed. Slice thickness was 0.5 mm, with 0.75 mm collimation and a 512 matrix. Technical parameters used were 200 mA, 120 kV. The bones of all 4 human skeletal remains were anatomically placed on the scan table for easier radiological interpretation and scanned with specific bone filtering in order to identify potential lesions. Post-processing was performed on Vitrea workstation (Vital Images, Toshiba Medical Systems, Tochigi, Japan) adopting Multi-Planar Reconstructions (MPR), 3D Volume Rendering (VR) and Maximum Intensity Projection (MIP) with bone and metal enhancement. MIP reconstructions with bone & metal windowing highlighted a metallic fragment



Fig. 1. (A) The ravine of Zazzano; (B and C) our crime scene investigation team going deep into the section of the ravine; (D) old and wrecked cars stacked on each other in column into the grave.

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