



Case report

A serial killer of elderly women: Analysis of a multi-victim homicide investigation

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ABSTRACT

Between 1995 and 1997, in the territories of Southern Italy, there were fifteen murders of elderly women over the age of 70 years old. Initially, however, not all the murders were attributed to a single serial killer. The majority of the victims were stabbed multiple times in the neck, except for three cases in which the cause of death was manual strangulation. There was evidence of sexual assault in only one of the cases. All the victims were discovered in their own apartments, which were located on the ground level, with no signs of forced entry. In most of the cases, the offender stole money and/or jewellery. A multi-disciplinary team reviewed the cases during the investigation and created a profile of the killer. The team determined that the method of operation was completely unusual for the local criminal element. They suggested that the perpetrator could be an immigrant, who committed the murders for sexual motivation and who may have been arrested previously for sex-related incidents. On 15th September 1997, a suspect was arrested. He was identified as Ben Mohamed Ezzedine Sebai, a 35-year-old white male, originally from Tunisia. He was charged and convicted of four of the murders and was given a life sentence. In 2005, Sebai confessed to the murders of four additional elderly women, for which nine other people had already been previously tried and convicted, among them, a man who committed suicide in jail. In 2007, Sebai finally confessed to committing fifteen murders that occurred between 1995 and 1997. Sebai also admitted to experiencing sexual gratification at every homicide scene, even though there was no physical proof at most of the crime scenes. The goal of this article is to illustrate a little-known but noteworthy case concerning a serial sexual killer of elderly women that occurred in Southern Italy, highlighting the method of operation, the victim selection process, and the injuries inflicted. The article will also discuss his motivation, the mental health history of the offender, his clinical diagnosis, and his self-reported childhood abuse.

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1. Introduction

Serial murders are relatively rare events and because of this serial murder investigations present many significant challenges to criminal justice professionals. The rarity of serial murder hinders the identification of a serial murder series by the public officials involved in the case, because there is a limited understanding of the unique nature of serial killers. Coupled with this, there are other investigative factors that hamper the linkage of a murder series to a single murderer. These include limited physical evidence, the absence of personal relationships between the

offender and the victims, insufficient communication between different law enforcement and/or judicial jurisdictions, and limited investigative experience in dealing with these types of crimes. All of these issues lead to a lack of recognition by authorities that a serial murderer is active and operating in their jurisdiction [1–3].

2. Case history

Ben Mohamed Ezzedine Sebai, was originally from Kairouan (Tunisia), and in 1990, he immigrated illegally to Italy. In 1991, he was charged with attempted murder and rape by the police headquarters of Bolzano (Northern Italy) and they issued an expulsion order. Sebai fled before trial and took refuge in the province of Foggia (Southern Italy), where he worked occasionally as farm labourer. Between 1996 and 1997, in the Apulia territories of Southern Italy there were twelve homicides of elderly women

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Table 1
Elderly women aged over 70 and stabbed multiple times on the neck as listed in the territories of Southern Italy between 1996 and 1997.

Case #	Date	Name	Age	City	# of stab wounds on the neck			
					L side	Anterior	R side	TOTt
1	24 April 1996	M C	81	Lucera	1			1
2	29 May 1996	G G	72	S. Ferdinando	15		2	17
3	10 August 1996	S A	85	Ginosa	4			4
4	15 January 1997	T M	75	Cerignola	1	10		11
5	04 April 1997	M G	75	Massafra	1			1
6	01 May 1997	S A	70	Trinitapoli	1			1
7	09 May 1997	L S	82	Canosa	8			8
8	14 May 1997	L P R	86	Castellaneta	3			3
9	29 July 1997	V M	83	Palagiano	15	6	4	25
10	21 August 1997	L L	90	Laterza		2		2
11	27 August 1997	S A	84	Spinazzola		5		5
12	16 September 1997	N L	75	Palagianello	5			5
# TOT					49	23	6	78



Fig. 1. Areas where the victims were killed, along two main areas of the Apulia territories under the jurisdiction of three different Tribunals.

over the age of 70. The murders were committed in two main areas of Apulia territories: the Province of Foggia at north and the Province of Taranto, which is located approximately 300 km south of Foggia (Fig. 1). These territories are under the jurisdiction of three different tribunals: the Tribunal of Foggia and the Tribunal of Lucera at north and the Tribunal of Taranto at south. The distribution of the victims chronologically was 3 victims in 1996

and 9 victims in 1997. All 12 of the victims were stabbed in the neck. Table 1 shows the list of the 12 victims describing the age of the victim, the city where the crime occurred and the number of stab wounds. The highest number of stab wounds listed in a single case was 25. In three of the cases, the number of stab wounds were more than 10. In the rest of the cases, the number of stab wounds were less than 5, with three cases having a single injury. Regardless of the number of stab wounds, most of the injuries were located on the left side of the neck. In the twelve murders, a total of 49 out of the 78 stab wounds inflicted were located on the left side of the neck and were distributed among ten of the cases. In two cases, stab wounds were observed on the right side of the neck. Fig. 2 details some of the features observed among the cases with stab wounds to the neck. These wounds are mostly shallow and angled, consistent with being inflicted from the front by a right-handed individual. A knife was never recovered at any of the crime scenes, as the offender took the weapon from the scene. Based upon where a particular victim lived, murder investigations were conducted separately by three different Judicial Authorities under the jurisdiction of three different Tribunals (the Tribunal of Foggia and Lucera at north, the Tribunal of Taranto at south). Because of jurisdictional issues, all the autopsies were performed by different forensic pathologists within the various jurisdictions. Based on the morphology of each stab wound (size and shape), forensic pathologists are routinely able to deduce the maximum width of the blade and an approximation of the length [4]. The knife in these cases was consistently determined to be a single edged blade, 2–3 cm maximum width and no less than 10–12 cm long. In one case, the incised wounds were extremely deep and extended to the vertebral column suggesting that the victim’s throat was cut from



Case # 1 - MC
Lucera,
24 Apr 1996

Case # 2 - GG
S. Ferdinando,
29 May 1996

Case # 6 - SAM
Trinitapoli,
01 May 1997

Case # 9 - VM
Palagiano,
29 Jul 1997

Case # 11 – SA
Spinazzola,
27 Aug 1997

Fig. 2. Features of injuries observed among the cases with one or few stab wounds on the neck.

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