



Case report

World War One Italian and Austrian soldier identification project: DNA results of the first case

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ABSTRACT

We report the results of an attempt to identify the supposed remains of a famous World War I (WWI) Italian soldier who was killed in battle along the Italian front in 1915.

Thanks to the availability of offspring from both paternal and maternal lineage Y-STRs and mtDNA were analysed and both showed a clear exclusion scenario: the remains did not belong to the supposed war hero.

This is the first effort of identification of the remains of soldiers who perished during World War I within a multidisciplinary project aimed at the retrieval of historical and cultural aspects linked to WWI, and the systematic study of the remains of soldiers and ultimately their identification. This last step involves both Italian and Austrian laboratories.

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1. Introduction

Veneto is one of the regions of Northern Italy bordering on Austria in the North and the Adriatic sea in the South-East (Fig. 1). Its capital is Venice and its population is approximately 4,500,000 inhabitants. During World War One (WWI, 1915–1918) the Italian and the Austro-Hungarian Armies faced each other in close proximity along the border between the two Nations. Some of the hardest battles on the Italian front were fought in the Northern part of Veneto, in the territory of the Provinces of Vicenza and Belluno. The Armies that in different periods and battles fought along the Italian front registered about 1,500,000 casualties not counting the missing ones. A great number of soldiers from Italy and from several other nations lost their lives during this war. This led Italian, German, British, American, and French administrations to create war cemeteries in order to commemorate each Nation's dead. Lombardia and Veneto provided a high number of soldiers to the Army, and most of them fought along the Italian–Austrian front in their own land of origin. These are some of the reasons why local

people's sensitivities are markedly affected by WWI issues even nowadays. This popular feeling led the Regional Veneto Administration to enact a law aimed at “the characterization, the survey, the classification, the retrieval and the development of historical, cultural and social aspects linked” to WWI [1]. This regional law was followed by a National Law with the same purpose for the whole Italian territory [2].

After the end of the war five sections of the Mortuary Military Police were established by the Italian Army with the aim of recovering the remains of the soldiers lying in the battlefields and burying them in war cemeteries. These officers recovered about 140,000 Italian soldiers but only 4–5000 of them were identified, whereas an even smaller number of Austro-Hungarian soldiers were buried under their names into various ossuaries. Many remains of Italian and Austrian soldiers have never been found. Every year remains are occasionally found along the front lines. From time to time the discovery of skeletons had been reported, often in inaccessible areas; the following recovery procedures were inaccurate most of the times, thus hampering the possibility of their identification with appropriate technologies.

More recently, the bodies of three Austrian soldiers killed during WWI, almost perfectly preserved, have been found on a glacier

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Fig. 1. Geography of the location of the Veneto region in Europe today with an enlargement displaying the main cities (a).

bordering on the West of the Veneto region [3]. Some time later the remains of a soldier recognized as being an Italian infantryman by the distinctive stars on his uniform, were recovered into the territory that had been occupied by the Austro-Ungarian forces in 1915. That finding was roughly in agreement with the reports of the disappearance of Libero Zugni Tauro, a famous local athlete living in the town of Feltre (Fig. 2). The diary of the 56th regiment of infantry

which Libero Zugni Tauro belonged to dealt in fact with a night attack led by the Italian Army in a mountain area near Belluno (Fig. 3). As a local native Libero Zugni Tauro drove a company of volunteers to the attack. He fell during the attack and his body was never recovered. He was decorated for bravery after the end of the war. The recovery of the remains was not performed under forensic surveillance or following archeological standards. This is why



Fig. 2. Libero Zugni Tauro.



Fig. 3. The Italian–Austrian border in 1918 and the site of the battle area in dotted line.

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