

Introduction

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When I started professional forensic work in 1999 in Bosnia, I had just finished the coursework and field school for my master's degree. I was feeling pretty smart until about 10 minutes after starting work, when I realized how much I still had to learn (this realization is ongoing). I was extremely fortunate to be on teams in the field and morgue staffed by Colombians, Argentines, Peruvians, and Guatemalans.

Ten years later, in 2009, I was helping direct a mass grave excavation course for government forensic scientists in Colombia. After about two days of the class, I was pretty certain that the “students” knew about as much or more than the “teachers.” Almost a decade after that, in 2017, I returned to Colombia with the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) to manage a team of three forensic anthropologists. One of whom, Angel Medina, I had worked with in the former Yugoslavia; another, Juan Felipe Berrío, had been in the mass grave excavation course in 2009. The third was Pedro Pérez Torres, co-author of the EAAF biography in this special issue. In the three and a half years that I was with this *equipazo pequeño* (great small team), we recruited two more remarkable forensic anthropologists from the prosecutor's office: Liliana Alvarez and Juan Benavides Caro.

Between 2006 and 2009, I was doing my doctoral research in Spain. The *equipazo* there is part of the *Aranzadi Zientzia Elkarte* (Aranzadi Society of Sciences, <http://www.aranzadi.eus/?lang=en>) from the Basque Country. There, Dr. Francisco (Paco) Etxeberria leads teams in the excavation of clandestine mass graves created during their 1930s civil war or postwar violence. I watched him pull out a vacuum cleaner to clear loose sediment off of skeletons—something I had only previously read about (Hochrein 2001)—before he gave victim family members a guided tour of the grave (ever the professor, he captivates his audience and demonstrates by example that the legitimacy of the work rests in its closeness to victim families).

I have always been in awe of many Latin American forensic scientists and the colleagues in Spain: they have seen it all

and they take things in stride. The philosophy is often quite distinct from the conventional Anglo model that puts up the yellow tape and keeps everyone (sometimes including families) at a distance. Perhaps greatest among the things that amaze me about forensics in Latin America, however, is the lack of forensic education programs in countries with so great a need.

Many state scientists and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) are constantly working, case after case. The lack of academic programs, comparatively little time for research, and time/incentives to publish, mean that in the English-speaking world we generally know little of their vast and deep experience. That was the inspiration for this special issue of *Forensic Anthropology*. The condition was this: if we are going to share their experience and ideas, they also need to be published in their native language.

Fortuna et al. give us a shocking overview of the scale and complexity of the problem in Mexico. Despite recent developments in the country to address disappearances and violent death, the problem is not abating. Also from Mexico, Caballero Valencia and Landa Juarez propose a field investigation method that was developed in the US. Sadly, even where world-class expertise exists locally and resources abound, authorities in many North American jurisdictions simply do not employ these methods. It is remarkable, then, that we should see the proposal and implementation of these standards in other, “less-developed” countries.

Molina et al. present a novel experiment. Not only is their interdisciplinary research design well laid-out, but they address a “grey” area in terms of responsibility in forensic analysis, that of clothing. According to the authors, this is clearly the job of the archaeologist who specializes in material culture analysis and it provokes the question of what practitioners in North America and Europe, for example, are doing and could learn from Latin America.

Another grey area in forensics is presented by Serulla Rech: the forensic analysis of human remains that are religious relics. I want to acknowledge that Dr. Serulla Rech was the first to submit an article for this special issue and was extremely timely with his revisions. He has suffered the longest wait because of his diligence, tempered only slightly by the fact that the case comes from 1991. When we consider

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that “forensic” simply refers to *legal* (rather than the more commonly understood *criminal*) questions, we are reminded of the pertinence of such cases to our discipline.

Reyes Baeza speaks of the *interpretative* (cf *translation*) needs when collecting antemortem information, as the people who are subjects of forensic investigation are often from marginalized populations, those distinct from investigators. This challenge is clear for those involved in international investigations or in countries with great inequality based on ethnic, racialized, or other grounds. Even in progressive Canada, a judicial review of a serial homicide investigation showed that police had serious problems interviewing members of the LGBTQ2+ community because of distrust and lack of empathy expressed by investigators (Epstein 2021). When the American Academy of Forensic Sciences section changed its name from “Physical Anthropology” to just “Anthropology”, it was in part a product of the recognition of the multidisciplinary nature of anthropology that this and other articles in this issue demonstrate. Like it or leave it, we cannot deny the sometimes-critical importance of adopting methods and perspectives from our cultural colleagues.

Of course, for most North American forensic anthropologists, the obvious connector between Latin and North America is Clyde Snow (Reyes Baeza, this issue; Pérez Torres & Congram, this issue). While Snow did not “create” forensic anthropology in Latin America, he certainly helped it take root. What has grown in the decades since is a testament to the staying power of forensic anthropologists in Latin America, seen in particular with Luis Fondebrider, co-founder and former President of the Argentine Forensic Anthropology Team (EAAF) recently assuming the head position of the forensic unit of the ICRC.

The articles here are complimented by a biography of the EAAF. Practically everyone knows *about* the EAAF, but perhaps without really knowing the EAAF.¹

1. Editor’s note: This is perhaps an unsuccessful attempt to use a clever play on words because of different forms of “to know” in Spanish; see Spanish translation.

Their foundational efforts and orientation are exemplary for our discipline.

These articles highlight some of the remarkable work in the Spanish-speaking world, but also intimidating and necessary challenges for the region: the need for greater resources, specialized forensic education and research, improved interagency collaboration, increases in specialized staff (e.g., forensic archaeologists and anthropologists), and interdisciplinary work toward identification, among other issues.

I owe the contributors of this issue an apology. It took much, much longer to get to print than anyone expected—too long, in fact—and I share responsibility for this. It would be trite to blame the pandemic.

I would like to thank and acknowledge the peer reviewers. I also thank Devin Finn who balanced a new baby with translations. As I rushed to get a proposal for funding of translations into the Humanitarian and Human Rights Resource Center of the American Academy of Forensic Sciences, I was duped by an automated online estimation system for translations, which gave me a gross underestimate of translation costs. Many thanks to AAFS HHRRC for giving me what I had asked for, and a very special thanks to the ICRC delegation in Colombia for covering the additional costs required for translation.

I hope you enjoy reading this issue and I hope it inspires more regional exchange in forensic anthropology!

References

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