



Article

“I Die for Freedom”: How an Inscribed Medallion Led to a Positive Identification of an Execution Victim of the Spanish Dictatorship

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Abstract

Introduction: During an excavation in 2022 of a mass grave within a cemetery in Castilla-La Mancha containing the remains of executed victims of the Spanish Civil War and Francoist dictatorship, the scientific team discovered a medallion with a name and a date inscribed on it. The medallion was associated with an individual recovered from a grave containing 12 other individuals in 5 separate stratigraphic layers. This paper aims to outline the identification process of the deceased from the skeletal remains and associated medallion. **Methods:** This process included archival research, gathering witness testimonies, archaeological evidence, osteological examination and DNA analysis. **Results:** After restoration, the medallion revealed the words “VIVA LA FIJL. VIVA LA FAI.” on one face and “MUERO POR LA LIBERTAD.” on the other. The human skeletal remains associated with the medallion showed male morphological characteristics and were estimated to be between 21 and 30 years old at the time of death, with a height between 1.64 and 1.67 m. There was skeletal evidence of ballistic trauma on the right mandible and the right scapula. Genetic analysis confirmed an mtDNA match with his maternal niece. **Discussion/Conclusions:** This study demonstrates the importance of a multidisciplinary approach to the identification of human remains from the Spanish Civil War and the Dictatorship which followed, and how the objects found within a mass grave can be useful in aiding a positive identification.



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Keywords: Spanish Civil War; object conservation and restoration; forensic anthropology; DNA analysis; human identification

1. Introduction

The coup that initiated the Spanish Civil War occurred when the Army of Africa landed in Melilla on 17 July 1936. Little over a month later, Franco's troops had moved into Andalucía in the South of Spain and then were heading northwards to Castilla-La Mancha. Even though this autonomous region remained in the Republican rearguard for some time, it suffered many acts of political violence by the Nationalists in the first year of the Civil

War. Its population suffered many extrajudicial executions that began to decrease by the end of 1936 and practically disappeared at the beginning of 1937 [1,2].

Current estimates reveal that approximately 170,000 people were executed throughout Spain during the war (1936–1939) and the first years of the ensuing dictatorship. In the province of Ciudad Real, which is the focus of this paper, in the autonomous region of Castilla-La Mancha, a total of 53 deposition sites have been identified to date. These are believed to have contained 3457 bodies in total [3–5]. It is important to note that this is the province with the second highest number of deaths during the post-war period in all of Spain [5–8].

Franco's troops entered Ciudad Real in the last days of March in 1939. Summary trials resulting in executions of Republicans by the Francoist regime were common during this time.

The mass grave under investigation was located in a cemetery of the municipality of Manzanares, in the Spanish province of Ciudad Real (Figure 1), and a reported number of 288 victims were thought to be within its cemetery walls. The bulk of the executions took place between 1939 and 1940, with 149 executions having occurred in 1939 and 136 executions in 1940.



Figure 1. Location of Manzanares cemetery [9].

On 10 April 1939, three Republican prisoners were executed and became the first to be buried inside a clandestine mass grave within the cemetery of Manzanares. Historically, the cemetery contained a walled-off area within its grounds that separated the civil cemetery from the catholic cemetery. This wall was nicknamed “*Muro de la Vergüenza*” or ‘Wall of Shame’ by the family members of those buried within. Victims of summary executions would be interred on either side of the wall depending on whether or not they had confessed prior to their death [5,7,10]. The wall was finally taken down in the 1980s. The municipal cemetery remains open to the public to this day as a functioning cemetery containing on its grounds both identified family plots and mass graves [10].

As part of a larger project to map all the mass graves located within the province of Ciudad Real and identify all the victims within clandestine graves from the Francoist period, a project was put in place to open up the different mass graves located within the municipal cemetery of Manzanares. This was in accordance with the law of democratic memory within Spain to preserve the memory of the victims of the Spanish Civil War [11,12].

The aim of this paper is to provide an outline of the identification process of one individual buried in one of the clandestine graves in Manzanares. This includes prior archival data collection by historians, the testimonies obtained from different interviews by social anthropologists, the exhumation process by forensic archaeologists, the object restoration by a conservator, the osteological study performed in the laboratory by forensic anthropologists, and the genetic analysis by forensic biologists. In particular, this paper will focus on the analysis of the skeletal remains and the objects associated with them.

2. Archival Research

The archival information and testimonies come from the Mapas de Memoria team of social and cultural anthropologists from the National University of Distance Education (UNED). Firstly, the General and Historical Defence Archive (*Archivo General e Histórico de Defensa*) in Madrid was consulted for information on the summary trials performed by Franco's judges and supporters. The documentation would sometimes include information on the executions, such as the dates these executions took place or their purpose, as well as specifications on the burial proceedings such as the exact row within a grave site or the size of the grave, and the orientation of the bodies within. This initial research was then followed by an analysis of the *libros de defunciones* (death registers) of the Civil Registries of each major town in Ciudad Real. This included filtering through terms such as "haemorrhage" or "traumatic shock" being used as a cause of death as these terms may have been used to mask the true cause of death since there would not necessarily be an entry marked "execution" within these records. In addition to official records, the search for information on the grave sites and the people buried within them also included conversations with family members, neighbours, and other witnesses to collect their testimonies. This, along with any information about an ante-mortem profile of the victims, would allow the scientists to explore possible locations for a grave site. The information provided by witnesses might be, for example, that the grave included grave markers placed by loved ones [5].

During the excavation of one of the mass graves located at the municipal cemetery of Manzanares, an inscribed medallion was found associated with the skeletal remains of one individual with a name that did not appear on the initial list of victims composed by the Mapas de Memorias team at that particular location. The team identified the name Ramón R.A. inscribed on the medallion. The historians returned their search to the Civil Registry for further information about Ramón R.A. and investigated the possibility of any living relatives. Ramón R.A. was a labourer from Membrilla, a neighbouring town of Manzanares, and he was executed at the age of 27 years old at 5.30 a.m. on 17 August 1940. Furthermore, the Registry mentioned that Ramón R.A. had been a member of the *Confederación Nacional del Trabajo* (CNT), a Spanish confederation of anarcho-syndicalist labour unions. With regard to relatives, Ramón R.A. was found to have been single and had had no children before his passing. However, the investigation enabled the anthropological team to put together a complete family tree with which to find the descendants of Ramón's sister who herself had died in 2004 [13].

3. Archaeological Excavation

The excavation at the Municipal Cemetery of Manzanares (Figure 2) took place in March 2022 by a team of forensic archaeologists and anthropologists from the Complutense University of Madrid (UCM). Forensic archaeological protocols as outlined in the law of democratic memory [12] and the exhumation protocol of victims of the Civil War and dictatorship [14] were followed. In addition, archaeological methodology and documentation employed the Harris matrix and took into consideration CIFA [15,16].



Figure 2. Manzanares Cemetery location (red circle) on the outskirts of the town. Right: detailed aerial view [17].

The targeted grave excavated in the Manzanares cemetery, was located in row 6, pit 2. The grave measured 2.05 m in length, 0.84 m in width at its southern end, and 0.62 m in width at its northern end. The first collection of skeletal remains were encountered at a depth of 1.20 m. The grave fill comprised five stratigraphic layers containing a total of thirteen individuals. Six individuals were discovered in the first layer ending at 1.70 m, then four individuals in the second layer with a maximum depth of 3.20 m, and one individual in each of the final three layers at depths of 3.40 m, 3.50 m, and 3.75 m, respectively. The bottom of the grave was located at 3.94 m.

The individual (Sk004), who is the focus of this paper, was the fourth individual encountered in the first stratigraphic layer. He was found lying on his right side, by the grave's northern wall (Figure 3). In association with the human remains of this individual several shirt buttons, a ring on the left ring finger, and a medallion in the inside of his breast pocket were discovered. Both the ring and the medallion had hand-carved inscriptions.

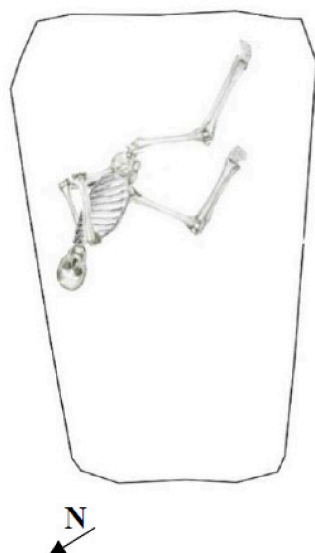


Figure 3. Diagram of the position of Sk004 inside the grave.

Once excavated, the human remains were documented and transported to the laboratory at UCM for further analysis, while the ring and the medallion were sent for restoration and conservation.

4. Restoration and Conservation of Material Culture

The associated objects with the individual's skeletal remains Sk004 were thought to potentially yield information to help with the identification of the deceased. The medallion measured approximately 2 cm in diameter and on recovery had soil concretions on its surface and appeared to potentially have some motif or representation. In addition, the ring was a "signet type" ring with a flat front piece that showed a small engraving on its surface. After initial inspection by the conservator, dry mechanical cleaning was carried out, using a binocular magnifying glass and scalpel tip to remove any soil. This cleaning was complemented with cotton swabs soaked in ethyl alcohol. The process continued with the application of an inhibition treatment, which consisted of immersing it in a 3% solution of Benzotriazole in ethyl alcohol. With this treatment, the aim was to generate stability in the metal surface through chemical process, which slowed down the chemical oxidation reaction of the metal in contact with the environment that surrounded it. Finally, a double protection was carried out on the metal surface of the medallion, to act as an insulator from humidity and oxygen. This was undertaken by applying 5% Paraloid B-72 in acetone with a brush and then applying a coat of microcrystalline wax.

After the cleaning process, an inscription was revealed on both sides of the medallion (Figure 4). On one side, the restoration revealed the words "MUERO POR LA LIBERTAD. RAMON R.A.", which in English translates to "I die for freedom", on the other side it read "VIVA LA FIJL. VIVA LA FAI. RAMON R.A.". These sequences of letters can be interpreted to be the acronyms for the Iberian Federation of Libertarian Youth (FIJL, *Federación Ibérica de Juventudes Libertarias*) and the Iberian Anarchist Federation (FAI, *Federación Anarquista Ibérica*), respectively. These organizations were both allies of the Popular Front fighting against Franco's troops during the Spanish Civil War [18].



Figure 4. Medallion pre- (top) and post-restoration (bottom row) showing engraving on both sides.

The ring also showed the letters “FAI” on its flat surface, similar to the inscription on the medallion, with this again likely being a reference to the Iberian Anarchist Federation. Additionally, an inscription on the inner surface of the ring reads “MUERTE EL 28.2.40” (Figure 5). This means “death on the 28.2.40” which could potentially be interpreted as the date that the person that had inscribed the ring thought that he would be executed or at least the date on which he had inscribed the ring during his imprisonment. However, this date does not match with the date of the supposed execution of the individual within the Civil Registry, this being 17 August 1940.



Figure 5. Inscription read as FAI on the outside after restoration work and “Muerte el 28/2/40” on the inner surface.

5. Skeletal Analysis of the Human Remains

A skeletal inventory of the human remains was undertaken in the laboratory, followed by documenting of the state of preservation (completeness, bone condition) and any other taphonomic (post-mortem) alterations. Over 95% of the skeleton of Sk004 had been recovered. However, portions of some of the individual’s bones, several hand and foot phalanges, and the coccyx were missing. The degree of preservation was good overall, with minimal cortical erosion and low fragmentation. Green discoloration could be observed on all three of the hand phalanges of the left 2nd digit, as well as the proximal phalanges for digits 3 and 4 (Figure 6). This green discoloration on the left hand was likely due to the ring found associated with this individual [19].



Figure 6. Green discoloration on some of the bones of the left hand.

Using morphological parameters for estimating the biological sex (e.g., those in Buikstra and Ubelaker [20]), Sk004 was estimated to be a male individual. The age-at-death was estimated between 21 and 30 years old, with a narrower age range of 25–30 years. This was based upon the full fusion of all the long bone epiphyses; the incompleteness of the maturation of the sternal end of the clavicle [21]; the sternal ends of the fourth ribs [22]; and the lack of eruption of the upper left 3rd molar [23]. In addition, there was absence of any osteophyte or degenerative bone disease. Stature was calculated between 164 cm and 167 cm using a combination of measurements of the bicondylar and maximum lengths of both femora taken with an osteometric board with equations developed for a contemporary Iberian population [24]. These findings of the biological profile agree with the findings made in the Civil Registry of an adult male of 27 years old at the time of death. Pathological conditions were examined macroscopically including dental pathology following reference textbooks (e.g., [20,25,26]). Ante-mortem tooth loss was observed in three instances, along with some calculus. Nine teeth in total had been lost post-mortem (five from the maxilla, and four from the mandible). The right 3rd upper molar could be observed within the alveolus but remained unerupted. The vertebral column evidenced several Schmorl's nodes. The 12th thoracic vertebra had a diagonal groove from the left pedicle running along the body of the vertebra and culminating in a depression on the right side of the ventral aspect of the body. Evidence of periostitis was visible on the inner/visceral surfaces of the left and right ribs.

Peri-mortem (wet-bone) trauma was assessed with reference to published work (e.g., [27–30]). The skull was reconstructed to allow for better trauma analysis since it was fragmented. The right ramus of the mandible evidenced a semi-circular defect approximately 10 mm in diameter (Figure 7) with radiating fractures and internal bevelling. This has been interpreted as a high-velocity (ballistic) entry wound, with a potential exit around the area of the right orbit which presented comminuted fractures and bone loss. Possibly associated with this same trauma are the fractures affecting the first cervical vertebra (atlas) and the right occipital condyle.



Figure 7. Peri-mortem trauma on right ramus of mandible [image cropped from the original].

In addition, a circular defect between 11 and 14 mm in diameter was observed on the body of the right scapula (Figure 8), and although some post-mortem alterations have

altered some of its characteristics, due to the colour of some of its borders, and its shape it was possible to interpret it as peri-mortem trauma.



Figure 8. Peri-mortem trauma on blade of right scapula.

The biological profile and trauma pattern of sk004 was similar to the findings of the other 13 individuals inside row 6/pit 2, which was explored in a previous paper [31]. All were adult male individuals each with a singular gunshot wound to the head, which is consistent with other Spanish Civil War and Francoist executed victims [3,6,32,33].

6. Genetic Analysis

The samples were received through a chain of custody form at the laboratory facilities of CITOGEN on 7 April 2022 and were delivered by the Laboratory of Anthropology and Forensic Odontology of the School of Legal Medicine of the Complutense University of Madrid (LAOF-UCM).

The first step in the treatment and identification of the remains is to guarantee the chain of custody and the maintenance of traceability and control of the material received, therefore, upon receipt of the samples, they were immediately reviewed, inventoried and documented, by coding and photographing the biological material. After checking the list included in the chain of custody document, the dental pieces were selected for analysis.

Prior to processing the selected material, the outer (enamel) surface layer was removed with a Dremel drill to remove any fleshy residue or impurities from the selected material. Each tooth was processed separately in a small transparent plastic chamber, which was washed with detergent, treated with ethanol and subjected to 15 min of UV radiation before being used, to maintain aseptic conditions.

Each tooth was fragmented with the aid of a metal mortar to obtain fragments small enough to be pulverized in an electromagnetic mortar capable of reducing bone fragments to powder. This so-called Freezer/Mill was set to three pulverizing cycles at 14 strokes per second for 2 min. Each pulverizing cycle was interspersed by 2 min of sample cooling. Each sample was pulverized separately.

Some of the DNA extracts obtained may contain other molecules that inhibit the PCR reaction, and which have become known under the generic name of “inhibitors”. This name groups together a set of molecules of diverse nature, which do not have to be the same in all extracts.

As for the origin of these inhibitors, it has been proposed that they may be compounds from the soil (humic and/or fulvic acids, porphyrin residues and/or products of their degradation, etc.) and by-products of organic degradation (products of degradation of the DNA itself, etc.).

The so-called “blanks” of extraction and amplification were processed in parallel. These controls contained all the reagents except the DNA of the sample, so that any positive amplification result in them indicated the introduction of contaminating DNA during the experimental process.

As far as possible and depending on the amount of powder obtained, several extractions were carried out from each, as well as various amplifications of the same extract. This criterion allows the detection of contamination of a particular extraction and/or amplification, as well as the presence of chemical modifications in the endogenous DNA.

On the other hand, the analysis of different extracts increases the probability of amplification of endogenous sequences when the remainder analysed contains a low amount of DNA.

Finally, and as regards the facilities in which the materials have been processed, the recommended separation of the pre-PCR, PCR and post-PCR work areas has been carried out; the first for sample preparation and DNA extraction, the second for preparation of the PCR reactions and the third for the amplification itself.

In all areas dedicated to DNA extraction and amplification, following the recommendations for this type of analysis, a UV light fluorescent is available to sterilize the area before and after each analysis process.

As for instruments and equipment, sterile factory solutions are routinely used, pipette tips with filters, reusable material is treated with DNase and subsequently irradiated with UV light, sample handling is carried out with gloves, and a face mask and hairnet are used by the research staff.

To determine the maternal relationship of C.Q.R. (available relative and maternal niece of Ramón R.A.), mitochondrial DNA (mtDNA) analysis was performed.

Due to its special inheritance, all individuals related through the maternal line will share the same form of this marker and, for example, all the children of the same woman will share it. Likewise, when comparing two siblings, the marker will be identical, just as for example for two first cousins through the maternal line.

This marker is useful for establishing this type of relationship when it is the only possible link between the individuals analysed, that is, we will not differentiate whether two people are mother and daughter or granddaughter and maternal grandmother, but we can say that this result is compatible with them being related through the maternal line, if the doubt is that they are maternal grandmother and granddaughter versus that they have no relationship between them.

The mtDNA analysis of the buccal epithelium samples on cotton swab support provided by C.Q.R. (living relative and maternal niece of Ramón R.A.), consisted of the sequencing of the control region or D-loop.

The dental pieces went through a process prior to DNA extraction, including the phases of cleaning and pulverization of the material. Subsequently, organic DNA extraction was carried out followed by PCR amplification of the control region of human mtDNA and the subsequent sequencing reaction by cyclic PCR with BigDye™ Terminator Cycle sequencing kit and detection in the SeqStudio automatic sequencer (Applied Biosystems, ThermoFisher Scientific, Waltham, MA, USA). The genetic sample obtained from a dental piece of sk004 was compatible through the maternal pathway with those of the buccal epithelial sample of his maternal niece.

The haplotypes obtained for the samples, based on the comparison with the revised Cambridge Reference Sequence [34,35], which is used as a reference standard by international consensus, were compared.

Based on the results and the comparison of the mitochondrial DNA haplotype of C.Q.R. with those obtained from the material from the grave, a match was detected, whose comparison with those included in the EMPOP database [36] as of 12 June 2024, did not reveal any matches in any geographical area.

These results, together with the research on the individuals presented in the anthropological and osteological studies, supported the identification of the remains Sk004 as corresponding to Ramón R.A.

7. Conclusions

In conclusion, the way that the identification of one individual is explored throughout this paper confirms the need for an interdisciplinary approach when trying to reach a positive identification, specifically in the instance of victims of human rights conflicts, as the restoration of an object found with the skeletal remains revealed a gap within the, what was believed to be confirmed, list of victims within the mass grave site. Some limitations were encountered based on the availability of the archival records from the Francoist period that impeded finding out more on the life and death of Ramón R.A. Additionally, the decomposition and taphonomy of the skeletal remains impacted some of the interpretations in the trauma analysis.

The remains of Ramón R.A. have since been returned to Manzanares for reburial by his family. This included a ceremony for the families of the identified victims of the mass graves interred at the Manzanares cemetery. Additionally, the national Spanish newspaper of *El País* published an exposé about the findings discussed in this paper [13] and the objects are being used for an exhibition on victims of the Francoist dictatorship.

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Institutional Review Board Statement: The research falls under the umbrella of the collection of the Laboratory of Forensic Anthropology and Odontology at the Legal Medicine Department under ethics code of the Complutense University Madrid. This study has been approved by The Comité de Ética de la Investigación de la UCM (Complutense University Madrid), approval number: CE_20230209-06_SAL, approval date: 9 February 2023. Human remains used for this study were treated with respect and dignity and according to ethical standards.

Informed Consent Statement: The authors attest that relatives of the deceased have provided their signed consent for genetic and anthropological analysis of the skeletal remains. They have also provided consent for this publication.

Data Availability Statement: The authors confirm that the data supporting the findings of this study are available within the article with any additional data and reports available upon request.

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