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# What Is a Mass Grave? Toward an Anthropology of Human Remains Treatment in Contemporary Contexts of Mass Violence

Élisabeth Anstett

The intentional production of civilian dead on a mass scale left its sinister imprint upon the twentieth century, the “century of genocides,” as the historian Bernard Bruneteau (2004) has described it. Arriving at an understanding of this extreme violence, which seems over time to have developed an increasingly varied repertoire of forms, constitutes one of the greatest challenges currently facing the social sciences (Assayag 2006). No continent has been spared these mass crimes, which have marked every decade of the twentieth century. Europe in particular has seen the Armenian genocide, the Holocaust, and, more recently, the genocide perpetrated in Bosnia. Africa has not only seen the genocide committed against the Herero and the Rwandan genocide, but also several million civilian deaths in the Great Lakes region and the Horn of Africa, in particular. Asia has seen the Cambodian genocide and the massacres that have repeatedly taken place in Indonesia, Sri Lanka, East Timor, and many other regions, against a background of religious, cultural, and/or political conflict. In the Americas, the twentieth century saw the emergence of such new social phenomena as the globalization of systematic, planned killing (in particular, through the implementation of Operation Condor in South America) and a degree of spatial and sociological contamination by extreme violence (in Guatemala, Peru, Colombia, and Mexico, for example) so total as to make it difficult to find words to describe this endlessly shifting cycle of atrocities carried out – sometimes simultaneously – for political, economic, or purely sordid motives.

## The Mass Production of Mass Graves

However, these tens of millions of victims of mass violence have not disappeared; their corpses have not simply evaporated. Their bodies have in fact always undergone specific and complex forms of treatment: in some cases quite intentionally left to lie in spaces earmarked for pollution or conquest; in others exhibited as trophies; and in yet others meticulously destroyed or hidden (Anstett and Dreyfus 2012). Yet it should be emphasized that the remains of the victims of mass violence have, in the vast majority of cases (including the Holocaust), been deposited directly into the ground by their killers or by accomplices of the latter.

These deposition sites are innumerable, and across the planet today there exist tens of thousands of such mass graves. It has been possible to map these sites fairly systematically in certain countries, such as Poland and Spain, and less completely elsewhere, such as in Rwanda, where work on a preliminary inventory of mass graves began in the summer of 1994. Work has yet to begin on such studies in other contexts, such as the mass graves

of the Soviet camps (Anstett 2012). All of these examples attest to the scale of the practice of mass burial.

The form of these depositions varies from one case to another. Their size ranges from trenches containing a few or dozens of bodies (in the context of the Spanish Civil War, for example) to gigantic pits containing hundreds or even thousands of bodies, as seen in Rwanda. The technological complexity involved also varies enormously (Fowler and Thompson 2015; Thompson, 2015). It can range from simply using the characteristics of the terrain to maximum effect, as seen in Cambodia, where corpses were left in the furrows of rice paddies, and the use of karst crevices, or Foibe, by Yugoslav troops in northern Italy, for example (Zamparutti 2015), to the digging of pits several meters deep using earth-moving machinery and the creation of secondary or even tertiary graves, as took place in Bosnia (Jugo and Wastell 2015).

Whether in their immediate aftermath or at a later stage, these crimes and their associated charnel pits have given rise to a massive search process aimed at locating the victims, undertaken in some cases by survivors and in others by local or international organizations (Rosenblatt 2015). For one of the side effects of the mass violence of the twentieth century has been to generate mass exhumations, thus ushering in a new phenomenon of large-scale disinterments, which Holocaust historian Robert Jan van Pelt has qualified as a true "forensic turn" in human history (Anstett and Dreyfus 2015).

### A New Social Phenomenon: Mass Exhumations

For the moment, any history of this entirely new process, which has seen social groups disinterring bodies on a massive scale, can necessarily be sketchy at best. As far as its methodological premises are concerned, there can be no doubt that the extensive practice of informal exhumations and large-scale pillaging alike carried out on Amerindian tombs at the end of the nineteenth century in the United States (Platt 2015), and the collection at the turn of the twentieth century by German, French, and British anthropologists in Africa of human remains resulting from their colonial wars (Harrison 2008), directly contributed to the birth of physical anthropology as an academic discipline, constituting the foundations of a system of knowledge that would later be put to use in order to identify soldiers who had fallen in battle (Wagner 2015). These new ways of appropriating human bodies would at the same time legitimize not only the constitution of human osteological collections on a vast scale but also the very principle of mass disinterment.

The geography of this process of large-scale exhumations is no less rich and complex than its history. Indeed, the rapid globalization of the practices involved in opening mass graves in order to locate and identify bodies appears to be linked as much to the spread of a new system of technical knowledge that brings together funerary archaeology, physical anthropology, and forensic science (Signoli 2008) as it is to the ability of societies to face up to their past and to commit themselves, for various

reasons, to disinterring their dead (Thomas 2010), whether in Argentina, Poland, Guatemala, Bosnia, Spain, Rwanda, or elsewhere. Nevertheless, exhumation as a social phenomenon remains relatively little studied if we take into account its dramatic contemporary extension. The issues raised by, and the very real consequences of, exhuming bodies “en masse” have yet to be thoroughly examined, despite the fact that this practice has already radically modified the sociotechnical space of funerary practices and, indeed, the very notion of what these are.

## The Question of Burial

Although the main objective of these exhumations remains the location and identification of the victims, the survivors also tend to have considerable expectations as far as understanding the violence in question is concerned (Anstett and Dreyfus 2015b). The examination of the bodies and the study of these charnels can provide crucial information regarding the context of the process of killing and of the perimortem treatment of the corpses. In this respect, this information also enables us to take an entirely fresh approach to the notion of burial itself. The term “charnel pit” will be used here to render the original, etymologically related French term *charnier*, which in French is used virtually interchangeably with the term *fosse commune* (literally “common pit”), which is in turn usually translated as “mass grave.” While, in an archaeological context, “charnel pit” most often refers to a secondary burial site in which skeletal remains are placed following the decomposition of soft tissues, it is also used in relation to primary burial places linked to modern episodes of mass violence. It also presents the advantage of lacking the funerary connotations of the term “mass grave,” a distinction that will be of some importance in the analysis presented in this chapter.

According to the now classic definition provided by the *Dictionnaire de la préhistoire* de Leroi-Gourhan (Leclerc and Tarrête 1988), a burial (*une sépulture*) is indeed the “place where the remains of one or more dead individuals have been deposited, and where enough indications remain to allow the archeologist to perceive in this deposition the intention of carrying out a funerary act.” The notion of burial thus closely associates intentional deposition with a funerary intention: “what makes a burial is the intentional nature of the deposition, and the desire to carry out a funerary act” (Leclerc 1990: 14), to the extent that Duday even refers to an “intentional character of the deposition which is obviously necessary if it is to be described as sepulchral in character” (Duday et al. 1990: 30; emphasis added). Yet this definition implicitly conflates the authors of the deposition with those of the possible funerary acts when in fact this association is far from being a given. The criminology of extreme violence in fact shows us that the relations existing between the killers and the corpses of their victims belong to a complex set of registers, which combine not only psychological and potentially psychiatric elements but, above all, sociological, cultural, ideological, and political factors (Shute 2015; Ranaletti, 2014). Positing a “necessary” association between the funerary act on the one hand, and the

voluntary deposition of the corpse on the other, thus proves extremely problematic in the context of mass crimes, as an examination of the charnels of the twentieth century shows that funerary acts may be organized on sites where the voluntary nature of the deposition of bodies is debatable and, conversely, that technically highly elaborate depositions may be carried out without any funerary intention whatsoever. Archaeologists Jesse and Skinner (2005) have shown perfectly in their pioneering work how complex and difficult it may be to develop a typology of mass graves and mass grave-related sites from a simple technological perspective.

While the problems raised by the use of the word "burial" in contexts of mass violence are manifest in the very definition of the term, other limits of the notion are revealed by the comparative analysis of various charnel pits, as I shall shortly argue. An important question may thus be asked: in such cases, might the funerary act not in fact be much more important than the voluntary nature of the deposition?

In this respect, situations of mass violence raise key questions regarding the nature and identity of mass graves. Do they cease to be simply charnel pits when they become the object of devotional practices? This in fact often occurs when the areas in which massacres have taken place see the killers living alongside their victims permanently, when the locations of charnels are known to neighbors and survivors, and when sites of interment become spaces (publicly declared or otherwise) for commemorative rituals, thus becoming instituted as proper burial spaces even though they had not initially been conceived of as such by the killers, as is the case in the killing fields of Cambodia (Jarvis 2015). The study of the fate of corpses in situations of extreme violence thus allows us to ask questions that go to the very heart of what constitutes a burial.

### Framing the Analysis of the Treatment of Human Remains : the Advantages of a Comparative Approach

Addressing the very issues described here, the interdisciplinary research program entitled "Corpses of Mass Violence and Genocide," which ran from 2012 to 2016 thanks to funding from the European Research Council, enabled a group of researchers to carry out a study and comparative analysis of the treatment of victims' remains in contexts of mass violence and genocides. In this project, the treatment of corpses was placed at the heart of research carried out jointly between anthropologists, legal specialists, and historians. The general objective of the program was to arrive at a better understanding of the processes of production and reabsorption of extreme violence, the study of which had hitherto generally ignored the precise functions assigned to the bodies of victims.

The different axes of analysis corresponded to the three stages constituted successively by the treatment of these remains by the perpetrators (Anstett and Dreyfus 2014), by the search for bodies (Anstett and Dreyfus 2015a), and finally by their treatment within society (Dreyfus and Anstett 2016). These stages were separated not so much for chronological reasons

as for the fact that they each seemed to relate to the types of logic and issues involved in the practices of the destruction, identification, and reclaiming of bodies, respectively, each of which can be considered as a distinct area of study.

The research produced in the context of this program was based on a number of case studies carried out in Europe (Poland, Spain, Bosnia, Belarus, Armenia), as well as in Africa (Rwanda, South Africa, Namibia, Zimbabwe), Latin America (Argentina, Uruguay, Mexico, Columbia, Peru, Guatemala), and Asia (Cambodia, Malaysia, Indonesia), thereby allowing a wide range of situations involving the extermination of civilian populations to be examined.

This program has not only helped to confirm the status of an entirely new field of research devoted to the study of the social uses of corpses (Anstett 2013), but has above all enabled a certain number of differences and similarities between the different fates that befall the corpses of victims of mass crimes to be revealed, thus opening up the way for a structural study of the production of violence. The study of the often surprising details of the stage of the treatment of corpses by the killers, which involves some form of manipulation of the body along with, in the majority of cases, its interment, produces some particularly revealing outputs. This study has allowed us to establish two sets of oppositions.

### Visibility regimes

A first major distinction may thus be drawn between two visibility regimes that are directly revealed by the treatment of corpses: on the one hand stands a logic of the invisibilization of human remains, to which belong all those practices that involve hiding bodies from the eyes of perpetrators, from future victims, and/or from survivors; and, on the other, stands a converse logic of display which characterizes all practices that involve exhibiting bodies – directly or indirectly, for example through the use of images – and the instrumentation of the visual impact of the dead body.

Examples of practices of display are easy to find since they relate to the larger question of the use of trophies, the long history and universal distribution of which is attested by historians and anthropologists. As the British scholar Simon Harrison (2012) has brilliantly argued, the use of human trophies was revived in the context of colonization through the collection of skeletal remains, a practice given scientific legitimacy by racist physical anthropology. This is the case, for instance, with the Herero skeletons that German universities have to this day been unable to fully return to Namibia (Shigwedha 2016). The practices surrounding the display of dead bodies are also highly varied, involving widely differing degrees of sophistication, from simply leaving bodies on the site of killing to staging elaborate spectacles using corpses. Examples of the latter include the corpses that were left to decay on gibbets beside roads during the Armenian genocide (Kevorkian 2014), the practice seen in Guatemala and South Africa of dismembering the bodies of victims and leaving the body parts by the roadside (Rousseau 2014), and the distribution of booklets

containing photographs of corpses, produced for propaganda purposes in northern Italy (Dato 2016).

Examples of the invisibilization of corpses in contexts of mass violence are similarly numerous. The most elaborate example – which provides further evidence of the organized character of the enterprise of destruction – is without a shadow of a doubt the creation of hidden extermination sites and the associated use of crematory ovens during the crimes of the Nazis (Van Pelt 2014). Another example involving a particularly elaborate logistical operation is Operation Carrot (Lopez-Mazz 2015), in which the Uruguayan army exhumed the corpses of murdered political opponents, which had initially been hastily buried, in order to carry out a meticulous process of destruction, before dumping any remains over the sea. These processes of concealment are not always so sophisticated, and may manifest themselves through purely pragmatic measures, such as throwing corpses into naturally formed holes or waterways, as some examples of pits in Bosnia and Rwanda have shown. In general, however, the simplest and most widespread practice of invisibilization still involves the burying of bodies.

### Property regimes

It is also possible to draw a second major distinction between two opposing regimes of property: on the one hand, a logic of appropriation by the killers (involving a principle of objectification, in which corpses become the property of the perpetrators) may be perceived, while on the other is a logic of abandonment or rejection, which stems from a desire to expel the victims from a territory and a social or symbolic order, leading the killers to get rid of corpses using a variety of practices, ranging from simple disposal to careful destruction.

Numerous examples of corpses being appropriated by perpetrators exist, from the “disappeared” of the Latin American dictatorships (Crossland 2000) to the prisoners of the gulags, whose remains were never returned to their families. In such cases, corpses are confiscated not only in order to deprive loved ones of the ability to mourn but also as part of an attempt to erase the victims’ very existence. Generally speaking, these logics of appropriation manifest themselves through the implementation of practices of concealment, which may involve recourse to interment. In this sense, mass graves become places for the storage of bodies, which are thus seen as “belongings,” either watched over or kept carefully hidden in order to remain accessible to the killers alone.

Conversely, there are innumerable examples of disposal, from the Cambodian killing fields, where corpses were left to rot in the open air (Guillou 2015), to the Rwandan genocide, where the bodies of Tutsis were thrown into latrines and rivers, or left lying in the banana fields and forests. In other cases, perpetrators have disposed of bodies by burying them summarily, the charnel pit serving the purpose of removing the undesirable and inconvenient presence of human remains from the public space; by incinerating them, as was the case in the Holocaust and also for the victims of the Stalinist Great Purge in Moscow and the Argentine dictatorship in

Buenos Aires, in particular; or, finally, by dumping them in the sea, as was the case with the “death flights,” again in Argentina.

### Analytical Matrix and Research Question

Although property and visibility regimes both arise from distinct factors that vary in relative importance according to their context, the two regimes are nevertheless always linked to one another. Their intimate connection enables us to draw up an analytical matrix that is applicable to all examples of charnel pits studied to date

The comprehensive analysis of each mass grave, nevertheless, reminds us that it remains essential to deal with the specific facts of violence in a global manner, taking into account both the general logic of the production of death en masse in a given sociohistorical context (i.e., the diachronic character of the process of legitimizing extreme violence) but also a local situation and a *modus operandi* that are specific to each massacre (i.e., the synchronic character of the perpetration of this violence).

In this respect, the function attributed by the perpetrators to the site where corpses are deposited remains highly variable, even when the pits in question are identical from a purely technological point of view. This function may also on occasions include elements of a mortuary or funerary nature, when the status of human beings is accorded to the victims or, for instance, when elements of a religious grammar are pressed into service by the perpetrators’ ideology. It may equally contain none of these when the killers see themselves as simply manipulating bodies, which they perceive as *detritus*. The use of these sites of deposition by survivors and the local population is also highly variable, ranging from avoidance to sacralization. It is, unfortunately, not possible to go into the details of these practices in the space available here.

However, while the matrix in Table 13.1 facilitates a better understanding of the symbolic and social functions assigned to these sites by the people who created them, it leaves open the question of the exact nature of these sites. For what, in the end, is a mass grave? And to what extent can we consider this peculiar place as a “grave” or even a burial place? I would argue that several elements need to be taken into consideration here.

### Mass Graves and Burial: The question of intentional deposition

Here too, it may be useful to return to the definition of the term “charnel pit.” “Charnel” derives from the same Latin root *carnis* (meat/flesh) as the French *charnier*, which is in turn defined thus: A place where flesh is piled up, the charnel pit [*charnier*] is simultaneously a delimited funerary space, having a social function and being identifiable as such, and a place where death is not accompanied by a tomb, attesting to catastrophe ... Furthermore, it is through reference to the original sense of the term, which



designated a place where salted meat was kept that, by analogy, the charnel pit still carries its pound of flesh. (Signal 2008b: 71)

In contexts of extreme violence, the charnel pit as the very first expression of a mass grave is thus positioned as the product of an intentional deposition that signals a highly specific stage in the perpetration of the atrocities in question, namely, the bringing together of dead bodies. The victims were either assembled when still alive and murdered on the site of their future burial, as in the case of some pits from the Holocaust in Belarus (Straede 2015), open-air charnel pits in Cambodia (Guillou 2015), and pits linked to the Stalinist Great Purge that have been exhumed at the Butovo complex in Moscow, for example (Rousselet 2008), or transported there following their murder, as in the case of the mass graves of the Holocaust in Poland (Sturdy Colls 2015), the secondary and tertiary graves in Bosnia (Jugo and Wastell 2015), and virtually all the mass graves identified in Rwanda.

The intentional nature of the deposition is in this sense linked to the intentionality of the crime (an essential element which all judicial instances recognize as a qualification of the latter), of which it is both an indication and a piece of evidence. For, even if the postmortem treatment of bodies was not initially specified as part of the pre-established plan for killing, it is always subject to choices made on the ground by the killers according to considerations that induce variation in the regimes of the visibility and appropriation of victims' bodies, as was explained earlier. Even in the technically highly complex cases of comingled remains (Adams and Byrd 2008), the work of archaeologists and forensic anthropologists allows light to be shed on these choices.

The chief indicator regarding the intentionality of the deposition of corpses is thus the location of the sites chosen for their interment. The choice of a site is made according to several criteria: accessibility, degree of frequentation (whether already abandoned and rarely visited or, in contrast, of particular importance for the victim group), and the pre-existing symbolic significance of the site, following a logic of pollution/contamination or, conversely, of conquest/cleansing. Similarly, the site may subsequently be abandoned by the perpetrators or placed under their surveillance.

Nevertheless, in the case of situations of mass violence at any rate, the intentionality of the deposition of remains does not systematically imply the existence of a "funerary" act – far from it. It would, for example, be extremely problematic to argue that any funerary intention was present in the case of Holocaust cremations, given that here the perpetrators specifically denied their victims the status of human beings (McConnell 2014). Similarly, one would be hard pressed to prove the funerary intention of those who threw the bodies of Tutsis down latrines, thereby explicitly associating them with excrement, during the Rwandan genocide (Korman 2014). In contexts of mass violence, then, particularly close attention needs to be paid to the distinction that can be drawn between mortuary space and funerary space.

The question of ideology

However, qualifying these practices of interment as mortuary in nature also raises questions insofar as acts of desecration carried out upon victims' remains are both numerous and varied. Such profanatory intentions not only are visible in the practices of postmortem dismemberment or mutilation observed in a great number of contexts (Armenia, Rwanda, Guatemala, South Africa), but are also apparent in the discourse of the perpetrators.

The stage of the treatment of victims' corpses by their killers in situations of mass violence bears the imprint not only of a specific historical and sociocultural context (including a religious grammar shared by the majority of individuals, along with usual mortuary customs and funerary practices) but also of a political and/or ideological project, all of which underpin, in a sometimes surprising but always highly specific manner, the production of mass death.

For this reason, taking the specifically ideological dimension of mass killing into account is, we would argue, absolutely essential. Doing so involves documenting the discourses of leaders and ideologues in just as much depth as the practices of the killers. As shown by the studies carried out on dictatorship-era Argentina (Feitlowitz 1998), on Rwanda during the genocide (Korman 2014), on Belarus under Nazi occupation (McConnell 2014), and on Guatemala (Nyberg Sørensen 2014), the semantic and lexical registers mobilized in hate speech are invariably interpreted at face value and translated in an utterly literal manner into the actual modes of treatment applied to victims' bodies.

The killing stage of extreme violence thus relates directly to representations of the enemy, the racist, sexist, xenophobic, or segregationist dimensions of which are translated into dehumanizing metaphors, through which those to be eliminated become subhumans, animals, or base matter. According to the perspective of the killers, then, what point would there be in creating a "mortuary" space for rats, vermin, pigs, or any other living thing that is loathed or held in contempt, let alone for filth or refuse? In order to understand their precise nature and specific characteristics more fully, then, would it not be more accurate to consider the peculiar spaces that are charnel pits in relation to rubbish dumps or landfills, rather than mortuary or funerary spaces? And should less attention perhaps be given to the intentional character of the deposition in itself, in order to concentrate on the careful study of the exact motivations behind this deposition?

### Practices of dehumanisation

Indeed, work carried out by archaeologists and forensic anthropologists involved in the excavation of mass graves linked to mass violence has shown that these pits are often sited near rubbish dumps. This is the case for a number of sites from the Spanish Civil War (Ferrándiz 2013). It is also the case for the mass graves in the Blagovchina forest which served the Nazi extermination camp of Maly Trostenets, and which are now partially covered by the vast municipal rubbish dump of the city of Minsk (in the

1940s it was still some distance away). Similarly, Crematoria II and III of Auschwitz-Birkenau were intentionally sited in a remote part of the concentration camp, which contained sewage ponds and waste treatment areas. In Rwanda, there are also innumerable examples of latrines being used by the killers to dispose of the bodies of Tutsis during the genocide. Without reading more than is necessary into the fundamental semantic ambiguity of the term "pit," it does seem to be the case that in contexts of extreme violence there is a strong symbolic link between the treatment of the dead and the treatment of refuse. In many situations of mass violence, victims' corpses have indeed been likened to rubbish, which suggests that the notion of refuse has a paradigmatic role, as archaeologists of the contemporary past have been pointing out for some time (Rathje 2001). Recent developments in the archaeology of mass violence (González-Ruibal and Moshenska 2015; Rosenblatt 2015; Sturdy Colls 2015), along with the findings of the archaeology of waste (Rathje and Murphy 2001), thus suggest that funerary practices and practices surrounding the treatment of refuse need to be studied simultaneously, within a comparative critical framework, in order to shed light in particular on the logics of inclusion and exclusion applied respectively to the "good" and the "bad" dead. To conclude, it would seem that fundamental epistemological and methodological issues are involved in the integration into the analysis of mass graves of the findings of what Alfredo Gonzalez-Ruibal (2008) has termed an "archaeology of the super-modern," which is prepared to confront the unthinkable question of the intentional large-scale destruction of humans by other humans. Aside from the fact that such an archaeology quite rightly poses afresh essential questions regarding the relation of researchers to the human remains that they disinter, given the highly politically and culturally sensitive contexts of the digs in question (Crossland and Joyce 2015), it also forces us to reconsider the ontology of the corpse itself (Domanska 2005), the threshold object that we have long known has been thought of in different ways in different eras and places but which, as the examples provided by genocides and situations of mass violence have shown, may also be the subject of radically discordant representations within a single society.

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