

# Heritage Reinvents Europe

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Edited by Dirk Callebaut, Jan Mařík and Jana Maříková-Kubková

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## **Heritage Reinvents Europe**

Edited by Dirk Callebaut, Jan Mařík and Jana Maříková-Kubková

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Cover image:

The Provincial Heritage Centre in the archaeological park of Ename (Belgium), where the local past and the future Europe meet.

Photo: Tom Nevejan, Digital Cordon Bleu bvba

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## 11 | 'Not just bones'. A cultural and political history of mass grave exhumations in Spain

Lore Colaert

**Abstract:** In this paper I analyze the exhumations of mass graves of the Spanish Civil War (1936–39) and dictatorship (1939–75) as spaces where processes of attribution of meaning take place, and I'll propose a provisional thesis on how cultural and political meaning is formed through the performance of forensic exhumations of mass graves. Hereby the focus is on the attribution of meaning to the exhumations in the public sphere, or, to say it with the words of Johannes Fabian, I consider death 'a prime datum of communication' (Fabian 2004). I argue that not only forensic truth is the object of the exhumations, but also the 'making of' truth, as a process of public acknowledgement and identification with the dead.

### Introduction

I have to start with admitting that I am not a specialist in heritage. My paper is about mass graves, and mass graves are rather sites characterized by the fact that they are known, but invisible and unacknowledged in the public sphere. Therefore these public secrets could almost be considered as the opposite of a monument, although it is said by Robert Musil that "there is nothing in this world as invisible as a monument" (Musil 1987). In this paper I will analyze the exhumations of mass graves (fig. 11.1), like other types of 'heritage', as a space where processes of attribution of meaning take place, and I'll propose a provisional thesis on how cultural and political meaning is formed through the performance of forensic exhumations of mass graves.

In my PhD research project I am trying to write a cultural history of mass grave exhumations on the basis of a couple of micro histories of Spanish villages with a mass grave of the Civil War. Hereby the focus is on the attribution of meaning to the exhumations in the public sphere, or, to say it with the words of Johannes Fabian, I consider death 'a prime datum of communication' (Fabian 2004).

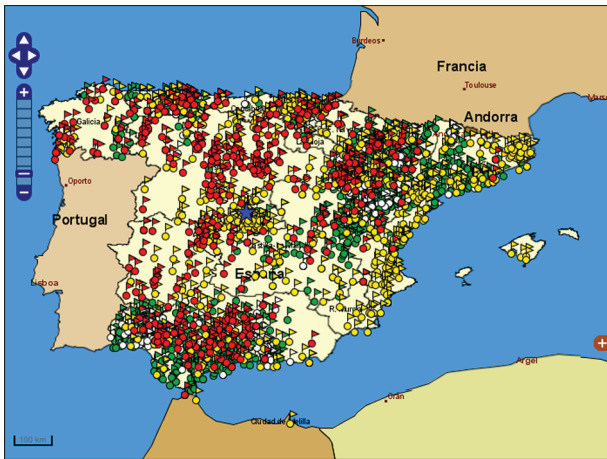
First of all I need to present some facts and figures about the exhumations in Spain. In this paper, I deal with mass graves of victims of the Civil War (1936–39) and the following Francoist dictatorship (1939–75). During and after the Civil War tens of thousands of civilians were killed by the Francoist army, police and paramilitary groups, and left in mass graves at the side of the road, in the open field, or at the sides or entrances of cemeteries, in order that the people would walk over them.

In 2000, the grandson of one of these '*desaparecidos*' or disappeared, Emilio Silva, initiated the first scientific exhumation of a mass grave in Priaranza del Bierzo (León), in order to rebury the body of his grandfather (Macías & Silva 2003). Since that moment, several associations

have exhumed approximately 5,300 missing persons, in approximately 230 mass graves (Huete Machado & Moro 2010). In total the memory movements are searching for approximately 130,000 missing persons – a number confirmed by historian Francisco Espinosa and judge Baltasar Garzón – in mass graves all over the country (Junquera 2008). Various associations, who only receive little financial support from the federal government, carry out the exhumations. In almost all



Fig. 11.1: Mass grave exhumation of the ARMH in Oropesa de Toledo (Toledo), November 2010 (L. Colaert).



cases, the exhumations are performed without any legal proceedings. We could say they happen in a legal limbo, because the human remains are too young to be considered archaeological, and too old to be investigated by a judge, although the latter depends of how that judge interprets the international law on enforced disappearances and the inapplicability of the terms of limitations in the case of crimes against humanity (United Nations 2006, United Nations 1968). In May 2011 the Spanish government published a 'map of mass graves' (fig. 11.2), which displays over 2000 mass graves all over the country. The associations however claim that most of the research was done by them, and that not all regional governments collaborated, which is why the result is far from complete (interview La Mazorra). Moreover, some of the forensics criticise the fact that the map is published without a compulsory protocol. They are afraid that non-professionals as well can now start exhuming the graves.

My findings for this paper are mainly based on fieldwork in 2010. I use a combination of data collection techniques, such as formal and informal interviews and participative observation during exhumations. In 2010 I attended exhumations in Candeleda (May 2010) and Oropesa de Toledo (November 2010) (Toledo) of the *Asociación para la Recuperación de la Memoria Histórica* (ARMH). I also included some results from my participation in exhumations in La Mazorra (May 2011) (Burgos) and Puebla de don Rodrigo (May 2011) (Ciudad Real). These findings lead to a preliminary thesis about the cultural and political attribution of meaning to mass grave exhumations.

### The attribution of cultural and political meaning to mass grave exhumations "Truth" and "Evidence" or the rise of scientific and legal discourse?

#### *Oropesa de Toledo, November 2010*

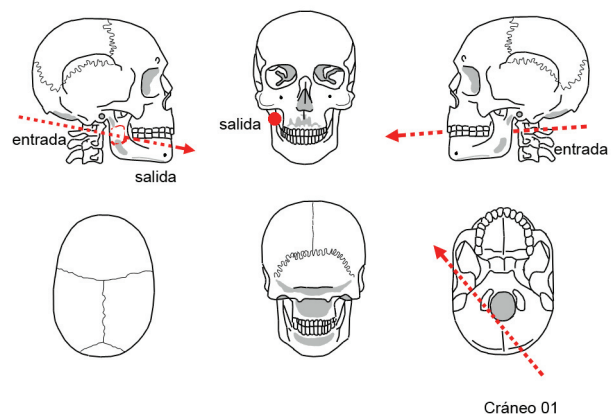
The team of the ARMH is excavating a mass grave of seven victims of the Civil War, '*paseados por las cunetas*', persons shot and left at the side of the road.

Fig. 11.3: Image from the forensic analysis of an exhumation in Fontanosas (Ciudad Real, 2006): "Interpretation of the injuries in the skull" (Etxeberria, Rissech & Herrasti 2010).

Fig. 11.2: The 'map of mass graves', published by the Spanish government in May 2011. Each flag represents one mass grave. The green flags stand for unexhumed graves; the red ones for exhumed (in total or in part); the yellow ones for mass graves transferred to 'Valle de los Caídos', the blue star on the map (the megalomaniac memorial for Franco and Primo de Rivera, where approximately 40.000 bodies of victims of the Civil War, of both sides, are buried). The white flags represent disappeared mass graves (Ministry of Justice, Spain).

A lot of relatives and neighbours of the victims pass by on a daily basis. When the archaeologists start to collect the bones to transport them to their laboratory in Ponferrada (León), one of the relatives starts questioning the method of the team of excavators. He denounces the uselessness of transporting the human remains to the lab hundreds of kilometres up north. The remains are in such a bad state, that it is already clear that the forensic analysis will not reveal new facts or the identity of the remains. The man thus wonders why it is not possible to rebury the bodies immediately. Consequently, the exhumation team starts to legitimize its method. One of their arguments is that they are performing a *scientific* investigation. According to their protocol, a forensic anthropologist has to draw up a scientific report and at least declare that those are human remains.

Since the first professional exhumation in 2000, there is indeed a rise of scientific discourse and practice surrounding the exhumations (fig. 11.3). Before 2000, some villages did rebury their victims, but the villagers put all bones together in a coffin, without examining or identifying them. Nowadays, forensic anthropologists legitimize their work by emphasizing the objective truth they reveal. The forensic anthropologist that founded the famous forensic team of Argentina (the *Equipo Argentino de Antropología Forense* or EAAF) in 1984, once stated that 'bones don't lie', (Guntzel 2004), on Facebook someone recently wrote to the main memory organization in Spain: 'the earth is speaking and you know how to listen to it', and in Madrid a protester of the 15M movement told me that the *cunetas* (the term to describe mass graves at the side of the road) speak us as much as archives (Madrid, June 2011). This belief that the past can be read in the material of bones is comparable with the 19<sup>th</sup> century





positivist idea of historians that the sources speak for themselves. Therefore, the forensic practice fits well in the hunger to know history "as it actually happened" in recent post conflict situations, a phenomenon that Darnton has called a 'Rankean rage' (Darnton 1981). The high status that 'evidence' is invested with in the exhumations is also a sign of the rise of a *legal* discourse in memory debates. Until now it is rather an exception that judges cooperate in exhumations, and usually the aim of the relatives is only to recover the body of their member of the family. But in all official acts like reburials, conferences or protests, many members of the memory movement demand a legal investigation of the crimes of the Spanish Civil War and dictatorship. The main memory movement, the ARMH, always goes to the police office to declare that they have found a mass grave, and they keep an archive with all the reports of the exhumations, in case there would ever be a judge who wants to investigate the crimes of the Spanish Civil War and dictatorship. One forensic anthropologist once said that he was reluctant to sign a report on the identity of the victims without a judge confirming this. Apparently the status of forensic truth is even higher once established by a judge. Or would the memory movements call upon judges because there is not only a need for truth, but also a need for 'institutional' and 'definite' *acknowledgement* of what happened? And what *cultural* traditions regarding dealing with the dead and the missing can we reveal beneath the surface of this scientific and legal discourse?

#### *"Acknowledgement" and the politics of public or private bones*

Let's try to answer the first question. What kind of truth is at stake in the exhumations? An argument often heard in defence of post conflict policies such as truth commissions and mass grave exhumations is that the aim of victims' relatives is to find the truth. This aspect of the exhumations is also the least controversial and the most convincing argument in defence of the exhumations in Spain. But in the case of those policies, as I will argue for the case of Spain, the truth is often already known by the relatives and local residents. One of the informants of the memory project '*Todos los Nombres*' (all the names) in Ciudad Real once asked what her benefit was by giving testimony. The anthropologist answered that the truth had to be known. She answered, 'but I know already what happened' (interview Puebla de don Rodrigo). So what kind of process of truth making do the exhumations generate?

In Spain, most mass graves are known in the villages as public secrets. During the Civil War, the militia often obliged villagers to bury the victims themselves, in order to install a form of continuous terror (interviews Oropesa, La Mazorra, Puebla de don Rodrigo). Once the bodies were buried, it was prohibited to mourn publicly (interviews Oropesa). Out of fear, people lied about the fate of the victims. A woman of Burgos explained

to me for instance how her grandmother told her that her parents had left her. In fact, her parents were killed, and the grandmother wanted to protect the girl against the stigma of being a '*rojo*' (republican) or '*vencido*' (loser of the Civil War) (Interview Madrid). These situations did create taboos in the villages where there were mass graves. Forensic anthropologists like to say that mass graves don't exist until the moment of an exhumation, but they do exist, 'under the surface' (Ferme 2001). They are known by individuals but not socially shared, not acknowledged in the public sphere, and not institutionalised by a public 'ritual' like a truth commission or a memory law, or by 'experts' such as a judge, a historian or a forensic anthropologist.

Of course, the exhumations do reveal some truth. Sometimes they exclude doubt and provide facts with the status of hard, material evidence. There is always the undeniable confirmation that there is a mass grave. Sometimes however, the bodies are not found (Puebla de don Rodrigo), the amount of bodies does not coincide with the written and oral sources, or identification of the remains is impossible (Oropesa de Toledo). But even in these cases the relatives are positive about the results of the exhumation, underlining the positive effects of getting to know the other families, finding a space to give testimony, and participating in a social process of repairing the dignity of the victims (Puebla de don Rodrigo, Oropesa de Toledo).

So, revealing 'truth' alone does not serve as a satisfactory explanation for the exhumations. The public character of the exhumations in Spain helps us to point to another function: the pursuit of *acknowledgement* of the truth. Acknowledgement has been defined by Thomas Nagel as the 'potentially significant material' that is admitted 'into the category of what must be taken into consideration and responded to *collectively* by all parties in the joint enterprise of discourse, action, and justification that proceeds between individuals whenever they come into contact' (Nagel 1998). The main memory movement the *Asociación para la Recuperación de la Memoria Histórica* (ARMH) has called this the pedagogic function of an exhumation. Francisco Ferrándiz, a social anthropologist, once told the most active forensic anthropologist in Spain, that he worked too fast, and that he had to let the mass grave 'breathe' more. He referred to the fact that after some days of exhuming, more people come to visit the site to share memories of their past, and conversations about the mass grave disseminate throughout the village (fig. 11.4). This way the gravesite becomes a temporary



Fig. 11.4: A daily scene during the exhumation in Puebla de don Rodrigo (Ciudad Real, May 2011): elderly who come to give testimony to the anthropologists and to share their memories with fellow-villagers, and youngsters receiving explications from the archaeologist. (L. Colaert).



Fig. 11.5: This life-size picture of a mass grave in La Andaya is displayed in expositions and on public places such as the Puerta del Sol in Madrid (Cristóbal & Junquera 2010).

of a mass grave exhumation (fig. 11.6). The different associations answer the question to which realm, the public or the private, the dead belong in many different ways. An incident in Candeleda in May 2010 made this clear in a painful way. There, a local organization would normally perform the excavation. But, when the landlord and other persons involved started to dislike the political flavour that this group wanted to give the exhumation, the ARMH took over. According to the president of the first, local organization, the actions of the ARMH were 'mercantile interferences' (Lorenzo 2010), and the bodies belonged to 'the cause' of the republic. According to the ARMH, the dead belong first of all to the families, but at the same time they argue that the public function of the exhumations and reburials benefits the acknowledgement that families would normally receive in a village when a violent death occurs (interview Puebla de don Rodrigo). Studying these notions about public acknowledgement and public belonging of the dead can reveal the potentially political and cultural meaning of the exhumations.

#### *Cultural traditions beneath the surface of the scientific practice*

Not only public acknowledgement, but also the *cultural and symbolic* meaning adds to our understanding

discursive space for memory making. In general we can argue that because of the exhumations, the status of the mass graves changes from public secret to public, full stop.

I consider this choice to keep a mass grave in the private realm, or to acknowledge it in the public realm, a political choice. It is interesting to study in which situations the memory movements situate their work in the public or private realm, and there is a great diversity between organizations and families. This 'politics of public or private bones' is for instance noticeable in the afterlife of the exhumations. In Spain, the reburial of the victims is usually a public ceremony in which local officials, the exhumation team and the press participate. The bodies are often buried together, and a small memorial with their names gives them some visibility. But sometimes the victims are reburied in their respective family graves and they disappear of the public scene. Compared to post genocide Rwanda for instance, where the bones are piled up for the public at yearly commemorations, the Spanish victims of the Civil War are not so visible as one group. They are only present in the images of skulls and bones that circulate, through the pictures of villagers and researchers, new media like Facebook, and pedagogic tools of the ARMH like the 'life-size' picture of the mass grave of La Andaya (fig. 11.5). During an exposition to celebrate ten years of exhumations, some children even drew a sketch

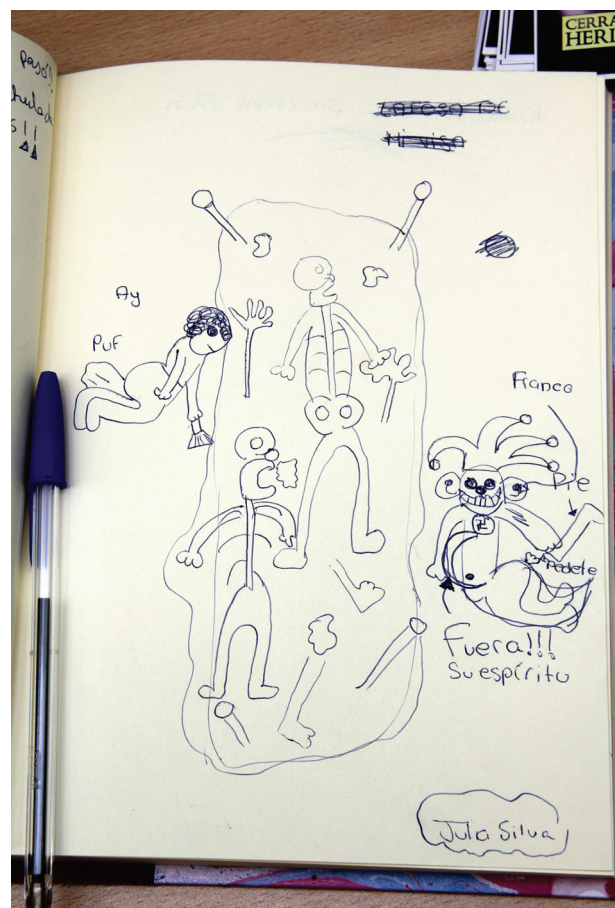


Fig. 11.6: Children's drawing at the conference 'Exhumando fosas, recuperando dignidades', Ponferrada, 18–24/10/2010 (L. Colaert).





Fig. 11.7: A man brought a picture of one of the victims that were claimed to be in the mass grave in Oropesa de Toledo, November 2010 (L. Colaert).

of mass grave exhumations beyond the scientific discourse about “truth” and “evidence”. Intrinsicly, bones don’t carry meaning, nor do they narrate a history. When I am excavating, I can be focused on the technical endeavour of finding one missing leg. Often the conversations of the excavation team and villagers deal with the type of soil and other technical aspects, which frees the act from identification with the bodies. But, the performance of the exhumation turns the bones into persons. First of all, if all goes well, the identification gives them a name (fig. 11.7). Then they are given a human face, because of the pictures the relatives often bring to the site. Sometimes the excavation team members demonstrate with an act of re-enactment, with their own body and gestures how the victims are situated in the grave. After the exhumation in Fontanosas (Ciudad Real) for instance, the whole team even lay down in the grave to show the village how the victims had been buried in the mass grave (Ferrándiz & García 2010). These re-enactments are thought to bring what for some is a distant past, near. Certain objects as well can produce a moment of identification with the bodies. In Pol (Lugo), the team of the ARMH bumped into this pair of boots that looked like the ‘Dr Martens’ shoes that were popular when they were teenagers. They told me they were so intact they ‘could have put them on and walk around with them’. They were shocked, and thought they had found, in their words ‘a real missing person, you know, a recent one’. The aged woman that had known the victim instantly recognized the shoes and started to cry (Interview Oropesa). These boots produced a moment of identification, as if that man was present for a moment through his shoes. Thus, next to a performance or ritual that ‘makes’ truth in the sense of institutionalizing and acknowledging the truth, the whole process of the creation of the mass grave, the taboos around it, the exhumation and the reburial, can be analyzed as a cultural process of meaning attribution to the material of bones.

## Conclusion and epilogue

In this paper, I argued that these scientific exhumations, carried out by experts, could be analyzed as constructors

of political and cultural meaning. This political and cultural meaning may however not be separated. It is often stated that exhumations help societies to find ‘closure’, which can be regarded a cultural way of dealing with death. But ‘closure’, as well as the opposite of ‘closure’, which is ‘liminality’, can create explosive political categories. In the general memory debate in Spain, the exhumations offer a space for questioning the political choices of the generation that chose to ‘forget and forgive’ during the Spanish transition in the seventies. The banner of the ARMH for instance reads ‘why did the fathers of the transition leave my grandfather in the ditch?’ ([www.memoriahistorica.org/joomla](http://www.memoriahistorica.org/joomla)). According to the president of the ARMH, Spain is a ‘country in trance’, haunted by its missing republicans (Seminar “Memoria y pensamiento en el teatro contemporáneo”). Hereby the liminality of the missing is used as a metaphor to point at the ‘black holes’ or lacunas of the Spanish political transition to democracy.

To conclude, I think the Spanish exhumations can help us reveal the political and cultural meaning attribution behind the scientific and juridical discourse that is embedded in transitional justice and democratization projects worldwide.

*The quote ‘Not just bones’ in the title, is based on the line ‘Pero no son, a simple vista, sólo huesos’ (‘But they are not, at first sight, just bones’) from the Pedro Guerra song ‘huesos’. This song from the album ‘Bolsillos’ (2004) deals with the exhumations in Spain, and is often used at reburials or protests of the several memory movements in Spain.*

*I would like to thank my supervisor Gita Deneckere, and colleagues Koen Aerts, Berber Bevernage, Lieselot Leuridan, Gillian Mathys, and Antoon Vrints, for their comments on my project. Lastly I want to thank Francisco Ferrándiz, the ARMH and Aranzadi and for their cooperation in Spain during my fieldwork. This PhD research project is funded by the Research Foundation Flanders (FWO).*



Fig. 11.8: These boots were the first thing the ARMH team found when they were exhuming an individual grave in Pol (Lugo) (Huete Machado & Moro 2010).

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## Links

### Research groups

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<http://www.aranzadi-zientziak.org/antropologia-fisica/memoria-historica>