

Experiences from the past. Comparative research between hospital archive sources and human remains

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Abstract. Criminal anthropology has obtained great interest in the field of History of Medicine. Lombroso had several followers between the late 19th and the first half of the 20th century and the literature of that time showed that the positivistic tools of biomedicine were useful to demonstrate a profound connection between “anomalous behaviors and anomalous anatomy”. Although these concepts are outdated, it is interesting to highlight how scientific methods adopted in this case by De Blasio, or the comparison between the archival sources and bone samples, is extremely modern for the time.

Key words: Abele De Blasio, Ossuary of Annunziata, Naples, Criminal Anthropology

The examination of scientific activity of Dr. Abele De Blasio, physician and anthropologist between the end of the 19th century and the first half of the 20th century, continues to reveal interesting analogies with contemporary research in biological anthropology.

Of course, the methods and tools for analyzing human remains have been updated, both in the forensic and bioarchaeological fields, but in his approach and above all the spirit of initiative towards research is certainly innovative for the time and admirable from current academics.

We know Abele De Blasio (Guardia Sanframondi, September 5, 1858 - Naples, April 5, 1945) had a strong interest in criminal anthropology and his positivist approach led him more and more to push himself towards osteological research, meticulous in the search for the association between form and substance, between the anatomy and the psyche (1).

But his interest in osteological research is also expressed in his research on anatomical collections from historical and archaeological contexts. He analyzed osteological remains from Italian archaeological sites (2-5) but he also analyzed finds in museum collections (6-9).

The scientific method with which he conducted his investigations, both those by forensic medical

experts and archaeological ones, has always impressed contemporary scholars.

In the field of biological anthropology there is currently a great deal of interest in osteological collections from cemetery contexts of the modern age (10), also given the sometimes possibility of being able to proceed with comparisons with archival sources.

This type of interest was also developed by De Blasio when on 28 June 1895 he obtained permission to house at his university a part of the osteological sample recovered from the Ossuary of the Santissima Casa dell'Annunziata in Naples (Southern Italy) during some necessary construction works (11).

Even if it is disturbing both from a paleopathological and ethical perspective to read in the introduction of the article “that the other skeletal remains - i.e. those that have been recovered but have not been transported to the university institute - were used as material for filling” (12), we must unfortunately point out that until some a year ago the bone samples recovered following renovation work in the churches of ancient foundations generally ended up in common ossuaries or other burial spaces, thus losing a great deal of information that could no longer be recovered. Osteological human remains represent important biological archives to recover paleopathological data and

consequently to reconstruct the history of health in past populations (13).

However, De Blasio does not seem to denounce this loss perhaps because for his special studies it was only the skulls that were of interest to him.

This does not surprise us given that among his studies we note among the primary interests the connection between the morphology of the skull and deviations, between cranial malformations and psychic alterations. In this regard, it is important to cite several studies which face of the issues of behaviors-anatomies. In 1901 De Blasio published in the same Journal *Delitto e forme geometriche della faccia fra i delinquenti napoletani* in which he profiled the shape of the criminals based on anatomical observations (14, 15) and in the same years he communicated the results of a study conducted on a skull with several anomalies associated with the diagnosis of epilepsy (16, 17). Through the writing we are analyzing, we have the possibility of appreciating De Blasio's investigative approach to the initial stages of the research, i.e. the recovery of the osteological sample to be analysed.

It is very interesting to note that the author indicates exactly the place where the cemetery area affected by renovation works was, in particular it was situated in St Peter's ad Aram Street, a space 48 long, 9 wide and 5 meters high.

The identified districts containing bone material were eight and they indicated the different mass graves present.

According to archival sources examined by De Blasio and other researchers engaged in the historical study of the place, these areas were already involved in the past by funerary reclamation works. And of extreme interest is the historical note which indicates that exhumation works were carried out in 1658 "after the terrible plague of 1656 in Naples and the Viceroy fearing a second plague invasion, among other measures, ordered that the burials of the churches be emptied in the enclosure of the cities, and the bones transported to the catacombs and certainly those of the church of the hospital of the Annunciata under the title of the Santi Quaranta [...]" (18).

That place had a hospital that was expanded several times over the centuries. The hospital church was

located on the lower floor and the church cemetery housed the hospital dead.

De Blasio recalled that already in 1854 there was a funerary reclamation work concerning the fifth room and the human remains removed during that phase were taken to the *Fontanelle*.

It is evident that also in this case the osteological sample was thus completely dispersed and deprived of that valuable information content for anthropologists. In 1894 the collapse of a wall which originally separated an ossuary from an adjacent shop led to the discovery of many bones which were brought to *Poggioreale*.

On that occasion, other ossuaries came to light.

On the origins and events regarding the hospital and funerary spaces of Annunziata several scholars were analysed during this research (19-21).

According to what emerged then, burials 6, 7, 8 are those containing the greatest number of bones remains, containing human remains of more than 700 individuals.

What emerges from the ossuary number 8 is really interesting, a place intended for the burials of both children -probably abandoned by their parents and left in the convent- and of the nuns who lived in that place.

De Blasio's analysis is an example of how a complete study on an anthropological sample should be carried out, i.e., by comparing it with the written sources of the time. The archive of the place conserved registers from the year 1761 to 1809. De Blasio calculated 12.722 deaths in that period which resulted in an average annual mortality of about 259 and since the hospital was active from 1322 to 1809, there could have been 126,423 people buried in the building.

Another very interesting aspect is that from the registers the author identified that the peak of mortality occurred in the year 1764 since in that year there were 730 deaths.

This figure was surpassed in 1493 when "there was an epidemic in Naples imported by the Jews who had come the year before from Sicily and Spain [...]" (22).

The anthropological and paleopathological analysis conducted by De Blasio inside burial 8 determined the presence of cases of rickets and tooth decay. According to De Blasio's interpretations, these pathological bones

belonged to those children who were abandoned by their families and who, due to their conditions, could not find any temporary mother who wanted to feed them and thus ended their lives in a short time.

After these considerations De Blasio begins to analyze an osteological sample composed only of 100 skulls, 50 of men and 50 of women.

His choice falls on skulls belonging to adult subjects, with a diagnosis of certain sex and without pathological alterations.

The choice is evidently clear, he intended, always with his positivist approach, to identify the most recurring morphology in Naples for the reference period.

He identifies the different varieties for both sexes: ellipsoides, ooides, rhomboides, pentagonoides, beloides, shaeroides and naturally concentrates his observations on the cranial capacity.

In summary, it records a reduced cranial capacity for the skulls of the Annunziata whose values did not exceed 1347, the female average 1294 while the male 1401.

As anthropological research required, De Blasio calculated the cephalic, vertical, frontal, palatine and nasal indexes.

The calculation of the anthropometric indices, the meticulous observations on the cranial anomalies are all typical approaches of the positivist observer who intended to explain the psychic phenomenon through an objective test (23).

The study presented here was perfectly in line with the interests of the criminal anthropology of the time initiated by Lombroso. We recall that De Blasio also took care of outlining the morphologies of the faces trying to determine the “criminal types” (24-27, 11). Certainly, they are concepts deconstructed by science and outdated but the method of anthropological research that the author produced is certainly admirable also for today’s anthropologists, who should always intervene during emergency recoveries to contribute, in accordance with ethical principles, with the study of osteological samples to the knowledge of the history of diseases of historical periods.

The criminal anthropologists of that time focused their observations especially on the skull, a district intimately connected with the psyche. De Blasio actually proved to be a scholar engaged in this type of research,

supporting the close connection between form and substance.

There are numerous publications by Abele De Blasio that demonstrate this type of interest (28-32).

The biological anthropology of that time was truly indispensable for the development of the discipline of criminal anthropology (33, 34), not to mention paleo-anthropology (35, 36) and the studies on fossil finds which undoubtedly contributed to the development of the theories of atavism considered today, and by many even in the past, pseudoscience (37).

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