

# The analysis of a cold case. Crimes in Astigiano in the 90's: serial killers or different authors?

Agostino Raso,<sup>1</sup> Giulia Maestoso<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Maresciallo of Carabinieri, serving as a Maresciallo Chief in the Carabinieri, serving as Judicial Police Officer at the Nepi Carabinieri Station Command (VT). Doctor of Science in Administration and Security, Security Curriculum and Investigations, title obtained at the University of Rome Unitelma Sapienza. The topic of national interest was presented during a graduate thesis session during the academic year 2015-2016; <sup>2</sup>Laureata in Psicologia clinica e di comunità, Master di II livello in Criminologia, Sistema penale, Investigazione e Sicurezza UNINT (Università degli studi internazionali di Roma), tirocinante presso l'Istituto internazionale di Scienze Criminologiche e psicopatologico-forensi (Ministero dell'Università e della Ricerca Italy codice car. 62065CSS), Italy

## ABSTRACT

"Cold case" is an unsolved major crime (mainly homicide or abduction), which, after long time, can be re-examined by using modern technologies for their investigation. Unsolved homicides are typical examples of "cold case". Many crime news' cases (either recent or past) have undergone new examinations, with the support of forensic science. In some cases, these new activities have led to crimes' solution. To face this new need, both "Carabinieri" and "Polizia di Stato" have established recently specific units as part of their own Criminal Investigation Department.

## RIASSUNTO

Per "cold case", si intendono i c.d. "casi freddi" o "piste fredde", con riferimento ai delitti più gravi, irrisolti, che anche a distanza di numerosi anni possono essere oggetto di nuove indagini eseguite in particolare attraverso l'utilizzo delle moderne tecniche investigative. Tra questi rientrano per eccellenza gli omicidi rimasti senza colpevole. Numerosi sono i casi di cronaca più o meno recenti che, specie con il supporto delle scienze forensi, sono stati oggetto di nuove indagini, talvolta risolutive. Per far fronte a tale esigenza sia l'Arma dei Carabinieri che la Polizia di Stato hanno creato di recente specifici Reparti di investigazione, all'interno delle proprie strutture centrali di Polizia Giudiziaria.

## RESUMEN

Para "casos fríos", nos referimos a c.d. "Casos fríos" o "pendientes frías", con referencia a los crímenes más graves, no resueltos, que incluso después de varios años pueden ser objeto de nuevas investigaciones llevadas a cabo, en particular, mediante el uso de técnicas modernas de investigación. Estos incluyen la excelencia para los homicidios que quedan impunes. Existen numerosos casos recientes o recientes que, especialmente con el apoyo de la ciencia forense, han estado sujetos a nuevas investigaciones, a veces resolutivas. Para satisfacer esta necesidad, tanto las Armas de Carabinieri como la Policía del Estado han creado recientemente Departamentos de Investigación específicos dentro de sus propias estructuras de Policía Judicial Central.

## Introduction

We define "cold cases" all those cases that are unresolved for reasons of insufficient evidence to resolve a case. These cases are also referred to as a "cold track", *i.e.* when it is decided to reopen a case that is apparently resolved by finding new evidence and sufficient evidence to be able to ascertain the involvement of the perpetrator of a crime and/or to absolve the suspect.

Other investigative tracks become "cold" (usually after the discovery of the corpse) when the offense emerges after the fact is completed or, in a case that is filed as suicide, evidence emerges that modifies the motive, identifying it as a murder.

Cold track cases analysis is a forensic methodology that allows investigations into the scene of a crime, or at a criminal level where there are not enough elements to initiate judicial and investigative procedures except when there may be new elements such as witnesses capable of providing new information, or mod-

ifying a behavioral pattern from a suspect, or even re-elaborating evidence and evidence through the evolution of technologies currently acquired to carry out scientific investigations.

Certainly, this is combined with investigative intuition by investigators in highlighting certain inconsistencies leading to re-elaboration and evaluation of the tests (*e.g.* repeatable tests) for further analysis.

Thanks to the upgrading of the currently available technologies (see DNA testing), several so-called unresolved cases have been reopened (see, for example, the Case of the Olgiata).

Some police departments have established sections of "unresolved unity units" whose task is to re-examine the new investigative elements worthy of particular attention. In Italy, the police have a section dedicated to cold houses: The Unrestricted Crime Unit, which coordinates investigations into cases that are unresolved and archived.

Founded in 2009, this unit works through collaboration between scientific police and operational teams, combining the

use of the most advanced resources available to traditional investigation methods. Thanks to this Unit, investigations have been reopened in more than 30 cases and 17 of them have had a positive conclusion.

In addition to the contributions of new technologies in the field of scientific investigations, it is important to emphasize the need for law enforcement officers to make use of the collaboration of internal and external professionals in what is today, in various scientific contexts, the winning element, a multidisciplinary approach that sees the collaboration of several professional figures for solving a case.

A famous international cold case is the one of the “Green River monster”, G.R., in the United States, condemned to 49 life sentences. G.R. was arrested in 2001 for killing 49 women, mostly prostitutes, but he then confessed more than 70 murders. He was sentenced by the evolution of DNA analysis, which allowed investigators to attribute murders to G.R., committed between 1982 and 1990.

A famous Italian cold case is the 1991 Olgiata crime. The murder of Countess Alberica F.d.T. remained unresolved for about twenty years. The case was then reopened, first in 2007 and later in 2011. Here too, thanks to DNA analysis, it was possible to name the culprit M.W., a former family employee who was arrested and sentenced.

The research and analysis of a possible cold case found on the national territory, as part of the proper activities of systematic investigative-scientific research, starts from the analysis of the arrest of a forty-year-old worker, D.M., resident in the province of Asti, which took place on April 15, 2001 and is already being examined in criminological literature. The man had attempted to strangle an Albanian prostitute with a rope after trying to stun her with a spray. Thanks to the reaction of the unfortunate and the intervention of another prostitute who went to help, the crime was not completed and the author, found shortly after the facts, was stopped.

From some articles appearing on local newspapers due to the fact and still available on the net, some unsolicited murders occurred in the 1990's in the same geographical area, to the detriment of prostitutes, assuming crimes could have been committed by a serial killer, which the press meant to be D.M.

The hypothesis proposed by the press about these crimes that at first presented some elements in common began the search for court proceedings referring to murders of: Marina Z., whose corpse was found in San Marzano Oliveto (AT) in 1992; Piera Melania V., killed in February 1995 in the Castle of Annone (AT) and Jessica M., whose corpse was rediscovered on January 27, 1999, always in the Castle of Annone (AT). The first activity of analyzing the series of crimes was undertaken through the acquisition of investigative and prosecutorial files at the judicial offices of Asti<sup>1</sup>, except for those relating to the murder of Marina Z., unfortunately not found.

## The murder of Piera Melania V.

Piera Melania V., who lives in the province of Cuneo, is 42 years old when she disappeared in the Astigiano on 10 February 1995 during the practice of prostitution. Two days after an unidentified inter-

<sup>1</sup> Documentation acquired, with the authorization of the A.G., from the acts contained in the files held at the Tribunal and the Prosecutor's Office of Asti, by Agostino Raso and Riccardo Mazzei.

locutor contacted 112, and reported that at a farmhouse in Loc. Crocetta of the Town of Castello di Annone (AT) there is a corpse of a woman. After about two hours, the same subject contacts again the 112, reporting that the corpse is in Loc. Alberone of the same Commune. Shortly afterwards, the Carabinieri staff finds the life-long body of Piera Melania V. in the courtyard of a farmhouse located in the second designated location.

The woman's exuberant body is poured on her left flank and uncovered in intimate parts. It is immediately established that the victim has been injured with numerous stab wounds, one deeper in the neck.

On the scene of the crime are found some finds among which the box of a condom and not far away a condom with inside probable biological fluid. Both investigators and the legal practitioner make it clear that the woman before she was killed had sexual intercourse.

On the cause of death, the legal practitioner has no doubt that it was caused by the wound she had at the front of the neck, with a cutter. This wound is described as: “... on the front surface of the neck, from right to left, crescent shaped, long cm.12 there is a large cut wound ...”. Regarding the weapon used, the consultant exposes: “... it could be assumed that a knife was used, probably a sharp, probably wide and sufficiently heavy blade ...”

Investigations lead to the suspicion of two prostitutes and a man likely to be in opposition to the assassinated woman who, for reasons connected with the business associated with the prostitution of the area, had decided to give a lesson to the same, degenerated into the murder. In the days immediately following the crime, one of the people investigated had started their vehicle at the ruin despite being in good condition. The car is then traced and seized by investigators who acquire biological traces on it. The suspects are imprisoned.

The expertise designed to extract DNA from such finds and the subsequent comparison with that of the victim, however, results in a negative outcome and therefore the investigated are released and the procedure taken over is archived.

Nevertheless, it has not been possible to analyze the findings of the used condom found on the scene of the crime and therefore never evaluated for extracting the DNA genetic profile for subsequent comparisons.

## The murder of Jessica M.

Jessica M., was a 27-year-old Nigerian prostitute who, as often happened to other fellow countrymen, had come to Italy in search of work, ending as a victim of intra-ethnic crime and forced to prostitute. The woman had settled in Turin and practiced prostitution on the street in Astigiano province. The girl disappears on the evening of 06 January 1999 and she is found dead on January 27, 1999, in a ditch outside the town of Castello di Annone (AT), near the Tanaro River.

On the scene of the crime, the corpse is exposed to the back and with obvious damage caused by stabbing with a cutting weapon and with the right ear cut. Not far from the corpse, some condoms are found, one of which contains seminal fluid.

From the reading of the examination report and the autopsy exam, some singular elements emerge. The woman had several cut wounds, more than ten, among which one more important under the left mandibular arch.

This injury had been caused by a weapon of a length of at least 12/14 cm, which had produced wounds that could be attributed to a particularly strong blade, the Coroner writes in this regard “... of the

type of the ones belonging to the military bayonets ...”, concluding about the legal-medical diagnosis that “... such a defective picture is perniciously indicative of a homicidal mode.”

On the other hand, the desire to kill was also apparent from the fact that the ornamental objects and jewels worn by the victim had not been removed, thus excluding the hypothesis that the crime had had a purpose of robbery and then degenerated into the murder.

Investigations, having beaten tracks connected with clients or people who were known to the victim, as well as the racket of prostitution, ended up crashing without identifying any author.

It is also apparent from this case that, even in this circumstance, the finding of the condom found on the scene of the crime has never been analyzed and then extracted its DNA genetic profile, a finding that today would allow for a possible comparison.

## The attempt murder of Seva D.

This is the event that allowed the arrest of D.M. and provided the starting point for the launch of this research, as described in the premise.

The event dates to the night of April 14, 2001, eve of Holy Easter. M.D. settled in an industrial area of Castello di Annone (AT) with the 27-year-old Albanian prostitute Seva D.. At a certain point, according to the procedural reconstruction, while the two consume sexual intercourse, the man sprinkles on the face of the woman the contents of a spray bottle commonly used for starter motors, then with a rope tightens the neck of the unfortunate, which, however, can escape the grip and, before moving away, removes the keys from the car by throwing them out. Seva D. with her screams catches the attention of another prostitute who demands the intervention of the State Police.

The on-site staff visits inside and around the vehicle in use, the



Figure 1.

material used to commit the crime, the spray can and the rope, as well as a squeegee knife, held on the dashboard of the car.

On the same night investigators find D.M. as he attempts to return to his home hidden in the car of a friend.

Many knives, laces, ropes, as well as objects near a kind of altar adorned with pendants, Buddha statues and more, as well as a picture of an unidentified young woman, are found in the searched apartment. In the man's bedroom is documented the presence of numerous crucifixes.

D.M. is sentenced by the Tribunal of Asti for attempted murder of Seva Dayana to the definitive penalty of six years, then reduced to appeal.

But the material seized on the occasion, both on the scene of the crime and at home, appears to be of particular interest to hypothesize some affinities with the insolent crimes referred to in the preceding paragraphs, inferable both means used and of the modes of action.

## The hypothesis of serial murders.

### Analogies between cases

By proceeding in the analysis of the crimes described in a unified way, some important analogies emerge between them, which are likely to be further investigated.

While it cannot be assumed that the offenses are serial and can be attributed to the hand of D.M. some elements that can be highlighted below cannot be neglected.

The analogies reported are those objectively found in the reading and analysis of the acts acquired within the open files in relation to the offenses acquired during the search:

- All victims are prostitute women and, as such, naturally more vulnerable, of the so-called “easy prey”;
- Crime Scenes are all located in the Town Hall of Castello di Annone (AT), birthplace and domicile of D.M.;
- The commission of crimes is preceded by a sexual relationship between the author and the victims, a circumstance that can be inferred from the finding of both the scenes of the crime of Piera Melania V. and Jessica M. of condoms with biological liquid interior (circumstances arising from the reading of the crime scene inspection, carried out on 12/02/1995, by staff from the Castello di Annone Carabinieri Station Command and on 27/01/1999 by staff of the Police Department of the Asti Police Headquarters). Similarly, the execution of Seva D. attempted murder is also seen by acts preceded by sexual intercourse (an element emerging from the outcome of the trial by M.D., pronounced by a sentencing judgment, issued on 27/02/2002, by the Court of Asti, which became irrevocable on 11/07/2003);
- The deaths of Piera Melania V. and Jessica M. were both caused by serious injuries to the throat, using a robust knife cutter (ascertained through the Legal Medical Consultants, issued on 02/03/1995 respectively, by Dr. A. Gaglio and on 20/05/1999 by Dr. R. Testi); in the case of Seva D., the victim is found after a stunning attempt with a rope on the neck and aboard the vehicle used by M.D. a knife is found, typically a blade knife, as shown in the photograph below, acquired in the photographic file prepared for the case by the staff of the Police Department of the Police Department of Asti on 14/04/2001:

Also at the residence of the same D.M. will be found cutting weapons (Figure 1), illegally detained, as reported in the above-mentioned judgment;

In both homicides there is a ferocity and wickedness in the execution of the crime, the victims are attended by numerous

knocks with the most likely end to pain, and only one of them is killed to kill, as detailed in the autopsy exams performed by the legal doctors through the technical advice already mentioned.

The hypothesis of serial delicts emerges also from the reading of the request for validation of the arrest carried out by M.D. In this regard, the Public Prosecutor, Dr. A. Ricci writes: "... the absolute gratuitousness of the gesture made, the means used, and the modus operandi could even suggest a serial crime ..." (abstract of the request for validation of the stop dated 16/04/2001, Procura della Repubblica di Asti).

The reported cases may be subjected to new investigations as well as to Criminal Profiling analysis, being able in this case to fall into one of the serial killer profiles analyzed and studied by industry experts to provide useful elements for an eventual reopening of archived records.

To this end, it is conceivable a comparison of the genetic profile of DNA reported to D.M. which, as far as it is apparent, has never been withdrawn, with the DNA profiles extracted through the expertise of the findings found in the murder by Piera Melania Vico, kept in the files of the investigation.

Correspondence: Agostino Raso.  
E-mail: agostino.raso.roma@gmail.com

Keyword: Cold case, serial killer, investigation, criminal profiling.  
Parole chiavi: *Cold case* (caso freddo), *serial killer* (assassino seriale), investigazioni, *criminal profiling* (profilo criminologico).  
Palabras clave: Casos fríos, asesino en serie, investigaciones, perfil criminológico.

(This article is based on Chapter IV of the Dissertation discussed in the 2015/2016 Winter session, Degree in Administration and Security Sciences, Security Curriculum and Investigations).

Received for publication: 10 June 2016.  
Revision received: 15 September 2016.  
Accepted for publication: 1 February 2017.

©Copyright A. Raso and G. Maestoso, 2017  
Licensee PAGEPress, Italy  
*Rivista di Psicopatologia Forense, Medicina Legale, Criminologia*  
2017; 22:3-6