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Description: **4009 Marcella Sorg,** interviewed by Adam Lee Cilli, February 5, 2014, in her office in South Stevens Hall at the University of Maine, Orono. Sorg talks about her forensic anthropology work for the Department of Justice; her role as Associate Director of the Center for the Study of Early Man; changes in the Climate Change Institute over the years; her return to the CCI after a ten-year absence; and the CCI's interdisciplinary character.

Text: 6 pp. transcript
Recording: **mfc_na4009_audio001** 32 minutes

Related Collections & Accessions

Restrictions

Formats Included Document: Original= .docx, Master= .odt, Access= .pdf; Sound: Original= .mp3, Master= .wav, Access= .mp3

Notes

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Narrator: Marcella Sorg

Interviewer: Adam Lee Cilli

Transcriber: Adam Lee Cilli

Date of interview: February 5, 2014

ABSTRACT: This interview took place in Marcella Sorg's office in South Stevens Hall at the University of Maine in Orono. In the first half of the interview, Sorg discussed the forensic anthropology work she does for the Department of Justice and her involvement in the Center for the Study of Early Man, for which she served as associate director. Later, she reflected upon how the Institute changed and evolved over the years, how she got re-involved with it after a ten year hiatus, and on what she believes is its principal strength (namely, it's interdisciplinary character).

Note: This is the transcriber's best effort to convert audio to text, the audio is the primary material.

Cilli: This is an interview with Marcella Sorg. Today is February 5, 2014. And this is Adam Cilli conducting the interview. I'd like to ask you how you got interested in forensic anthropology.

Sorg: Well, forensic anthropology is not my primary discipline. I'm a physical anthropologist. And so forensic is an application of physical anthropology to forensic problems. And I've been doing that for a while, but I didn't start out that way. And I got involved with forensics because the chief medical examiner of the state of Maine asked me to start doing cases for the state of the Maine. And that was in '77. So, I've been doing them ever since. And I currently do forensic work in anthropology for four states: Maine, New Hampshire, Delaware, and Rhode Island.

Cilli: Can you tell me about some of the tasks that that involves?

Sorg: That involves doing recovery, and examining decomposed and skeletal remains basically.

Cilli: To solve various crimes?

Sorg: It involves criminal cases as well as suicides and missing people, and frequently, well, it's a combination of those two things. Occasionally it's a historic set of remains, an unmarked grave that turns up on the landscape…. My research has to do with postmortem processes.

Cilli: Let's talk about your research.

Sorg: So, my research is in the field of taphonomy. And that concerns the fate of remains from moment of death until they are discovered. For paleontology, it would be a long period of time from the moment of death until they are fossilized and discovered, but in forensics it's a shorter post-mortem interval. So we would be talking about decomposition in the early stages of preservation or lack of preservation, until the point of time that the body is discovered.

Cilli: And what methods do you employ to do that kind of work?

Sorg: The recovery of remains is… we use standard archeological techniques as well as a set of techniques when we're doing searches for scattered remains we employ cadaver dogs and that sort of thing. We look at environmental contexts, including things like temperature and vegetation and climate, burial makes a difference. But in terms of the taphonomy, is actually something that I've been doing since I got started in the Institute, which was in 1983, and at that time the Institute received a grant. Specifically, one member of the Institute, received a grant to set up a center for the study of the earliest people in the Americas. And at that time I got involved and became the associate director of that center. And we did some things had to do with taphonomy and had to do with climate change that have endured, even though the center is not here. In terms of our history, that's where we should go with our discussion, because that's the part that's not so easy to find.

Cilli: Sure, I'd love to hear about it. So, Rob Bonnichson asked you to direct the center.

Sorg: No. He was director. I was associate director. We were focused on issues around whether or not, and the timing for, the peopling of North and South America. A controversial topic. A lot of arguments amongst scientists about when that happened and how it happened. The Center's actions were really directed at illuminating the research that was going on globally in that topic. And so we did several things, we started a publication series, we published quite a few books, we started some outreach work to other disciplines and to the public, we started a newspaper that came out periodically (called the Mammoth Trumpet). And both the newspaper and the publication series is now at Texas A & M. The whole center moved when Rob Bonnichson left.

Cilli: He went to Texas A & M I take it.

Sorg: He went first to Oregon and then the Center went to Texas A & M. And I'm not clear on that part of that history. It happened after I left the center, which was in '87. While I was there with him, for four years, we did quite a bit that I think increased the visibility of this issue, and we did have one fairly large international conference in 1984. You could see the… [points to book] Bone Modification Conference. A lot of times archeologists are focused on stone tools as an indicator of human presence, and Rob was particularly interested in the use of bone tools and modification of bone. And connected with that is taphonomy and what happens to remains after you die, and how do you interpret marks on bones, breaks and fractures and their condition. So we had a conference that was focused on that. And in that conference we included quite a bit on climate. It was held in Carson City, Nevada. And we have a book that came out of that… [pulls book from shelf and hands to AC], which is still used today. It's a very strong taphonomy kind of set of research, and it includes issues concerning the function climate can play in human evolution, and this is one of the first places where some of that work is discussed.

Cilli: Fascinating. [leafs through book]

Sorg: And it's still a very important part of what the Institute is about.

Cilli: You said that at a certain point you left the center. Why was that?

Sorg: For family reasons, and I was doing more consulting in those days. And so for about ten years I maintained my affiliation with the university but I didn't work for the Center. Rob Bonnichson was not an easy person to work with, and he didn't last here for a number of those

reasons, which I won't get into. But the Center then moved to Cavallas I believe, and then to Texas. It moved after I left.

Cilli: I'm wondering if you can walk me through how, ten years later, you re-immersed yourself into the Institute.

Sorg: I was all that time doing my forensic work, and during that time did two books on taphonomy, and was basically doing forensic research. And I was also doing epidemiology and public health-related things that are not connected to the Institute or climate change. But I worked with substance abuse quite a bit and was working with the Margaret Chase Smith Policy Center, and there were a couple of grants that came during that time in the mid-90s that kind of brought me back to the university. And then in the 2000s I got a big grant from the Department of Justice, so at that time I reconnected with Climate Change [Institute] and have been with them since 2010, formally.

Cilli: So what sorts of things have you been doing in the last ten years or so?

Sorg: I work in two areas. I work in public policy and public health with the Margaret Chase Smith Center. I do drug-related epidemiology. And I work a lot with the medical examiners to do that, cause we look at mortality patterns and particularly drug-related deaths. And I've also been doing forensic taphonomy all that time, and in 2008 I got a major grant from the Department of Justice to study regional taphonomy, in other words what are the factors that are associated with a particular region that might bear on decomposition patterns and that sort of thing. We did a case review and we did a study of nine pigs in various locations out of doors and kept watch over them, and documented scavenging activities and insect activity and plant activity and that went on for four years and at this point I'm working on a book that is going to come out related to that. But most of my research has been in those two areas.

Cilli: How do you see that connecting to climate science?

Sorg: Climate is a critical set of variables that bear upon how organic remains are, for lack of a better word, processed after death. So it's a big recycling process, when animals and plants die. And that recycling processes is mitigated by and affected by climate. Obviously, how much moisture there is [and] how much heat (those are the two biggies), what kinds of scavengers have access, the plant population. And so regional climate makes a big difference in how we interpret forensic remains.

Cilli: Have you had much opportunity to do research with other members of the Institute?

Sorg: When I did my grant with the Department of Justice, I involved a number of other people in my research, including Hal Borns and Ann Deiffenbacher-Krall and some minor involvement by Ivan Fernandez. There were a few others that got peripherally involved, because I had questions, but those were those the main ones.

Cilli: I'm wondering if you can walk me through your collaboration with Hal and Ann? What parts of the project did they take on?

Sorg: They helped advise us. Hal and the geological interpretation of sites, so how you characterize a location in terms of its… And by the way Alice Kelley helped us do some of that

because Hal was unavailable for a while. And for example the issue that affect taphonomy have to do with the slope, with the porosity of the substrate, how much drainage there is, does moisture accumulate in the site, does it flow away do to the slope, that sort of thing. So they helped us think about our sites in that way, and helped us interpret the plant life associated with a dead pig, essentially. But it doesn't matter whether you're talking about a dead pig, dead deer, or human. They're similar thing. One of the issues we were interested in was something called the decomposition island and how it develops. It actually kills the plants at that location and later, after the body is gone, a new set of plants show up and the plants look different, they have a high amount of fertilization, and so we can use the appearance of this decomposition island as a way of searching for a body in forensics.

Cilli: What do you think has been the Climate Change Institute's most important contributions to climate science?

Sorg: I'm probably not in a good position to answer that question in a specific way, but I'll talk about it generally. I think the advantage and the contribution have to do with the interdisciplinary collaboration primarily. And it's very difficult on a university campus to make that happen. And Hal made that happen for the Institute for Quaternary Studies, and then the name changed later to Climate Change Institute. But he was able to create a structure that guaranteed that people would actually talk to each other and deal with each other and the university was behind it. And it's very touch to do that. You can say that you're going to have collaboration, but if you're in separate departments and you don't have shared funding, it's almost impossible. And so the idea that this would have a university-supported infrastructure, a place, funding, and of course we've been very successful getting external funding (all of us). It makes a huge difference. And so that is rare. It is rare in academia. Most departments are siloed, and they're siloed in terms of their funding and their siloed in terms of their interaction. So the Climate Change Institute involves anthropology to a great degree, history to a great degree, it's not just the earth sciences that are… although traditionally it's the earth sciences that have done most of the climate change research, here it's different. We've been able to do things, especially with archeology and the long time frame, that other places just don't do.

Cilli: So, you are a little bit of a walking distance from Sawyer and Bryand, where probably a majority of the members are.

Sorg: I have an office in York as well, and so I spend a fair amount of time over there. And all of the anthropologists are here. We meet over there, and we're back and forth.

Cilli: I suppose also the annual gatherings help as well.

Sorg: But we have research that brings us into contact as well. Funding streams make a difference there. And we have staff meetings and that sort of thing.

Cilli: How often do you have staff meetings?

Sorg: It's about once a month or so.

Cilli: And that includes all members of the Institute?

Sorg: Yes.

Cilli: Where do you meet?

Sorg: At Bryand, third floor.

Cilli: Is there sufficient room?

Sorg: It's crowded. But yeah.

Cilli: How do you think the Institute has evolved since you first became involved in the '80s.

Sorg: The structure has endured. And I think there are a lot of things that were in place then that are still in place. I think we had in those days pretty good visibility state wide, in terms of policy makers. I think that is still true today. It's bigger now, obviously. There have been a lot of changes in leadership, but the mission has stayed pretty much the same.

Cilli: What did you think about the name change? Did that seem to undercut the role of archeologists and anthropologists in the Institute?

Sorg: No, I don't think so. Certainly it's a little more focused, but I think that's necessary. Academia is increasingly required to explain itself to the public and so I think the name change is an indication of that attempt. The previous name was just a more general focus on a time frame. But certainly the biggest important feature across that time frame has been climate. And it is climate that is clearly interdisciplinary. So I don't have a problem with the name change.

Cilli: Speaking of popular culture, it seems to be the case that within the scientific community there is no debate about climate change, but outside the realm of science it's still very much debated, particularly in American political culture.

Sorg: Yeah, I think that's changing, but yeah that's certainly true.

Cilli: I'm wondering if you can comment as to why that might be the case.

Sorg: I think people are just uninformed. I think it's as simple as that. And when you're uninformed, then your political agendas and other agendas are more important.

Cilli: So, if those involved in the oil industry for example, if only they knew better or knew the science behind climate change…

Sorg: They're not scientists… so this kind of push pull is a normal thing. It happens all the time. Public policy is done by non-scientists. And the problem of technology transfer into the public sector and into the brains of people who make public policy. How can we expect the people who are policy makers who have these little committee meetings (I'm not minimalizing it at all), but they have public committee meetings with hearings and somehow we have to inform them, we have to get enough into their brains so they can make good decisions. Well, they're not going to school…. It really is tough. They have to run the government, and they don't have knowledge in specific areas where they are making decisions.

Cilli: Should the Climate Change Institute play a role in educating the public and influencing public opinion about climate change.

Sorg: I don't think its goal should be influencing public opinion, but its goal should be public education. It is doing that. I participated in a book that we did recently for Maine's climate future. And so that was an example of an effort to educate the public, and I think that's our job.

Cilli: Maine's Climate Future. How was that distributed to the public?

Sorg: Thousands of copies were made, and I don't know. I wasn't part of the distribution process, so I can't answer that question, and it was made available mostly to policy makers and community representatives, and it's been distributed very widely. And on the website; that's the other place it's available.

Cilli: What else has the Institute done in terms of public outreach?

Sorg: I can't answer that. I haven't been directly involved with those kinds of decisions. So I would say that various people have testified in hearings and that sort of thing. We've certainly made ourselves available to communities that have needed advice about things. A lot of us are involved in a lot of climate projects that have community outreach here at the university. But I'm not currently doing that, so I'm not a good person to answer that question.

Cilli: How do you see the Institute evolving into the future?

Sorg: I think that climate is one of the biggest issues that we're facing as a species. And so I think that they will end up growing in their role as the go-to place for scientific information.

Cilli: Well, that's all the questions I have, but before we conclude the interview I do want to give you a chance to add something that I didn't think to ask you about.

Sorg: I think we've covered the waterfront as best as I can do that.

Cilli: Well, thank you once again for participating in this interview.

Sorg: You're welcome.