Machete cut marks on bone: our current knowledge base

Abstract

Forensic anthropological research examining sharp force, or hacking trauma, on bone have primarily focused on saw, and knife tool marks on bone. The use of different weapons of opportunity in war crimes, genocide and contemporary crime has led to the need to identify cut marks on bone made by specific weapons and develop standard investigation processes that may identify a specific weapon used in such crimes, especially in the absence of eyewitness accounts. This paper provides a summary of research undertaken to identify cut marks on bone made by machetes and identifies gaps in the knowledge base to assist in further research. The limited numbers of studies to date have not investigated the effects of different weapon sharpening methods, different weapon materials, excluded the effects of weapons becoming blunt through use and made assumptions that some bone types will not exhibit specific weapon traits. The lack of research highlights the need for further research in this field.

Keywords: forensic anthropology, machete, cut marks, bone, crime, war crimes

Table 1: Summary of entry and exit characteristics of three weapon types: cleaver, machete and axe.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Characteristic</th>
<th>Cleaver</th>
<th>Machete</th>
<th>Axe</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Entry Site Recognition</td>
<td>Clearly recognisable</td>
<td>Less clearly recognisable</td>
<td>Sometimes clearly recognisable</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Entry Site Appearance</td>
<td>Clean</td>
<td>Clean, chattering</td>
<td>Clean, chattering, crushing, fractures</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Width of Entry Site</td>
<td>Narrow; approx. 1.5mm</td>
<td>Medium; approx. 3.5mm</td>
<td>Medium to large; approx. 4.5mm</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fractures at Entry Site</td>
<td>Never</td>
<td>Most commonly originate past entry site at kerf floor on obtuse-angled side; several fragments</td>
<td>Originate at entry site; extend outward; large pieces of bone pushed into entry</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Depth of Penetration Due to Cut</td>
<td>Perpendicular cuts never penetrated through entire bone</td>
<td>Rarely penetrated entire bone; mean penetration was 31.5% of bone diameter</td>
<td>Rarely penetrated entire bone; mean penetration was 14.2% of bone diameter</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Exit Site Recognition</td>
<td>No exit sites</td>
<td>Clearly recognizable</td>
<td>Clearly recognizable</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Exit Site Appearance and Fractures</td>
<td>No exit sites</td>
<td>Fractures with several small to medium bone fragments</td>
<td>Fractures with large triangular bone fragments (often only one)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 2: Summary of SEM characteristics of injuries inflicted on bone by a clever and machete.16

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Characteristic</th>
<th>Cleaver</th>
<th>Machete</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Striations on Bone</strong></td>
<td>All but one clever produced parallel striations perpendicular to the kerf floor on the smooth obtuse-angled side of the cut; Striations were thin, fine, distinctive and relatively close spaced; Overall surface of the striations were smooth.</td>
<td>Parallel striations perpendicular to kerf floor on the obtuse side of the kerf wall; Striations were course, more pronounced, had a smoother ‘Rolling hill’ appearance, and were more widely spaced and rugged in morphology than the cleaver.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Striations on Weapon</strong></td>
<td>Displayed a uniform and consistent striation pattern that included numerous thin, fine parallel striations clear at 40X magnification.</td>
<td>Parallel striations with a 450 angle and striations that intersect one another on the used machete; rolling topography present and striations had a course rugged surface.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Cut Surface and Weapon Comparison</strong></td>
<td>Clear similarities in the morphology of striations on bone and topography of the blades. The higher resolution image weapon edge displays more numerous striations than the cut sample due to the malleable properties of metal and the cellular structure of bone.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

They argue that hacking trauma could be differentiated based on size, shape and breakage associated with the different classes’ cut marks and that these wound pattern characteristics were sufficiently different to make a reasonable judgment as to what weapon was used. However, the possible cortical wound closing, or possible partial closing was not considered, nor was the depth of a cut mark which would vary according to an individual’s strength. Additionally, no information regarding wound fracturing (i.e. blunt force trauma associated with sharp force hacking trauma) was discussed. Finally, the sharpness and blunting of the weapons and associated cut marks were not discussed and it is possible this may alter the cut marks. Subsequent analysis on the same cut marks using SEM was undertaken by Tucket et al.,16 showed that the weapons used can be identified to class and possible individual weapons. For example, one of the machetes’ topography was similar to that of a cleaver, and this was reflected in the cut mark. On closer examination, the striations were similar to machete striations, and it was suggested that those striations may reflect the weapon’s use as an agricultural tool as evidenced through the presence of ‘polishing’ on the blade as the striations are comparable to archaeological micro wear analysis on stone tools.15,16 Axe cut marks were excluded due to bone shattering. The accurate identification of trauma, including sharp, blunt, thermal or poly (multiple) trauma, is dependent on pattern recognition as well as intrinsic and extrinsic factors that determine the way bone fractures.17 Additionally, the patterns weapons leave on long and short bones may not be evident in other types of bones (such as flat and irregular bones). To date research into hacking injuries on bone is limited. Examination of the different materials weapons are made from and the different characteristics they may produce is needed. Likewise, more information is needed to determine whether sharp and blunt blades produce significant differences in tool mark morphology and whether different sharpening techniques (grinding machine, file, sharpening stones) produce different microscopic patterns on the weapon and hence the cut mark. Experiments of hacking trauma on different bone type sis also necessary as experiments to date have focused on long bones only.

**Conclusion**

In the absence of eyewitness accounts, class and individual characteristics of tool marks may play a major role in weapon identification. Such identification has the potential to add another level of scientific inquiry when examining evidence in a trial. Forensic anthropology will continue to develop as offenders continue to use different weapons of opportunity. This variety of weapon usage necessitates further research to enable the identification of the marks that each of the weapons leaves on their victims. Further experimentation is currently being undertaken by the author as part of a PhD.

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**Conflicts of interest**

The author declares that there are no conflicts of interest.

**References**


