Diversifying the picture: indigenous responses to European arrival in Cuba

Marcos Martinón-Torres, Jago Cooper, Roberto Valcárcel Rojas[1] and Thilo Rehren

There is a growing interest in cultural contact between indigenous peoples and Europeans following their arrival in the New World. In this article the authors explore local responses to European arrival in Cuba, through analysis of metalwork found in indigenous graves. These studies demonstrate that the local communities valued particular metals quite differently from the Europeans, as the imported materials were incorporated into pre-existing symbolic systems relating to sacred power.

One of the fascinating potentials of archaeology is that it may allow us to give voice to non-literate peoples of the past who did not leave texts for the modern historian. Another, which makes archaeology relevant to the present day, is that the study of material remains within their cultural context can reveal the relative value of things, and sometimes challenge the validity of what are often accepted as universal principles.

The cultural contact between indigenous peoples and Europeans following their arrival to the "New World" is one episode where these dimensions of archaeology come into play. Through historical sources we know of the European ambition for gold and other mineral wealth, and their keenness to spread Christian religion; little, however, is known about the local communities, their impressions, their reactions and responses to the new cultural contact. Christopher Columbus's diary is of little help in this regard. How can we overcome this limitation?

European explorers in an indigenous village

El Chorro de Maíta is one of the largest archaeological sites in northeast Cuba (Fig. 1). Archaeological excavations since the 1980s, and subsequent studies by archaeologists at the Cuban Ministry of Science and Technology and the UCL Institute of Archaeology, have revealed evidence of a relatively large indigenous community, established from at least the 12th century, and showing signs of social stratification under the rule of caciques (Fig. 2).

Probably, this is the situation that Columbus's crew encountered shortly after 27th October 1492 when their ship arrived in Bariay Bay, a short distance from El Chorro de Maíta. It is not easy to reconstruct the mutual first impressions and interactions from an indigenous perspective, as European sources provide only a simplified caricature, emphasizing the naivety of these "west Indians" and often depicting them as cannibals. These descriptions were written with an agenda to appease the European sponsors behind the New World enterprise, and their strong biases make them unsatisfactory for a modern scholar.[2] Is it possible to provide an indigenous perspective on the Euro-Caribbean encounters? Can we discern active decisions and strategic choices that might unveil the internal diversity of indigenous populations?

Figure 1 *Map of Cuba in the Caribbean. The stars indicate the location of, from east to west, the sites of El Chorro de Maíta and Los Buchillones.*

Figure 2 *Reconstruction of the village of El Chorro de Maíta.*

The centre of El Chorro de Maíta is dominated by a large cemetery, where approximately 120 indigenous skeletons have been recovered so far (Fig. 3). Anthropological studies have confirmed that this is an indigenous population, and therefore it is quite surprising to find a significant number of them buried in the extended supine position, reminiscent of the Christian custom, and different from the traditional flexed burials more commonly found elsewhere on the island. Furthermore, a number of skeletons have no evidence of cranial deformation – a widespread practice among the indigenous population.[3] It is tempting to interpret this as evidence of European influence on local customs and values, but it is not possible to assess the broader cultural changes associated with these new practices. Is an extended burial a direct indication of Christianity? To what extent was the new burial rite amalgamated with previous indigenous religious systems? Is it possible to employ archaeological research to unveil indigenous values?

Figure 3 *Reconstruction of some of the burials excavated at El Chorro de Maíta.*

Burial goods and good metals

Approximately 20% of the burials at El Chorro de Maíta contain grave goods, principally in the form of body

Figure 4 *Some of the gold-silver-copper alloy ornaments recovered in the cemetery.*

ornaments. These goods consist primarily of beads made of coral, shell, resin, stone and metal. The beads are unequally distributed among the burials, with some containing a wealth of different materials and others yielding no grave goods at all. Interestingly, a large proportion of the individuals with body ornaments are children, which might – if we assume that grave goods are indicators of wealth – indicate that power and wealth were hereditary within families.

Particularly dominant artefacts in the burials are the metallic objects. Given the intensive European plundering and the relative scarcity of metal sources in Cuba, it is rather unusual to find metals in Cuban archaeological sites. This is one of the reasons why we decided to concentrate on the study of these metal objects, hoping that they would provide additional information about an indigenous community, its relationships with the European newcomers and their respective value systems.

In addition to a thorough review of relevant written and iconographic sources, we carried out an analytical investigation of the metal objects, employing methods such as X-ray fluorescence and scanning electron microscopy with energy dispersive spectrometry. These techniques, typically used in materials science departments, are increasingly used in the study of archaeological remains, as they provide valuable information about the manufacture and origins of the objects studied. It was therefore particularly fortunate that some of the artefacts excavated in Cuba could be brought to the Wolfson Archaeological Science Laboratories at UCL, as a part of an agreement between UCL and the Cuban Ministry of Science, and supported by a Marie Curie Fellowship for training in archaeological science.[4]

An unexpected discovery

The scientific study of these metal objects produced some interesting results. First, we identified two miniscule gold beads, only 2mm in diameter, which had been formed by carefully hammering tiny gold nuggets. These had probably been sourced by panning in a local river and made by an indigenous craftsperson, before assembly in a necklace where all the other beads were of locally sourced stone. Second, a small number of more sophisticated ornaments were documented, including a bird-like pendant and a handful of laminar beads. All of these were made of an alloy of gold, copper and silver (Figs. 4–5). Stylistic study, together with the chemical analysis, allowed us to suggest that these had been manufactured by skilful goldsmiths in continental South America, probably Colombia, and had been brought to Cuba through existing interaction networks.

The most abundant metal found in the richest burials, however, was neither gold nor a gold alloy: it was brass. Approximately thirty brass tubes were recovered in the cemetery (Figs. 6–8). All of them exhibited a very standardized manufacture and shape, consisting of a thin metal sheet, a third of a millimetre thick, which was rolled to form a three centimetre long tube with a slightly tapering end. This shape appeared to make them particularly useful for threading and hanging in visually appealing ways, as they were found associated with different body parts including the neck but also the waists, knees and ankles of the deceased. The presence and abundance of brass at this Cuban site was initially a puzzle for researchers. An alloy of copper and zinc, brass is not known to have been manufactured anywhere in the Americas before the European arrival. In Europe, however, brass was a relatively cheap metal with a modest market value. Was this the earliest evidence for an indigenous production of brass in the Caribbean? Alternatively, if this brass was European, what was it doing in indigenous burials?

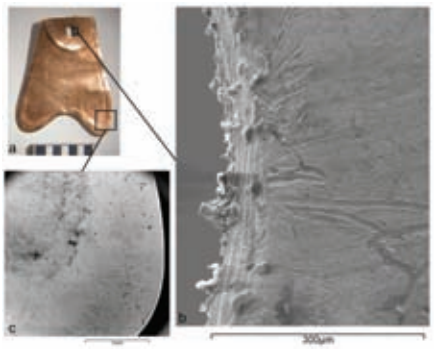

Figure 5 *One of the laminar pendants and details of its manufacture under the scanning electron microscope. Image b shows the cutmarks lefton the metal when making the perforation. Image c shows how the repoussé decoration was achieved by engraving three parallel lines.*

The first question required a detailed analysis of the composition of the tubes. This revealed that the brasses, besides copper, zinc and lead, contained very

Figure 6 *Two of the brass tubes, one (lower) before and one after conservation treatment.*

Figure 7 *Brass tubes, similar to those from El Chorro de Maíta; these examples were found in London.*

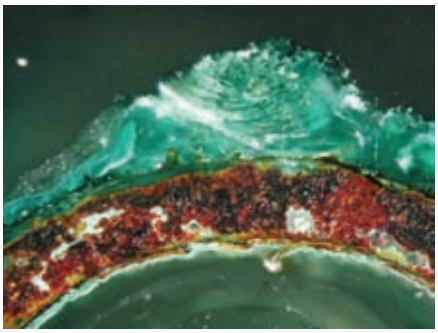

Figure 8 *Detail of the cross-section through a corroded brass tube under the optical microscope. Besides the corroded metal itself (red-brown), the corrosion products on the surface of the tube (green) show the relict structure of the cotton textile that was originally in contact with the metal and has subsequently disintegrated. The width of the image is approximately 2mm.*

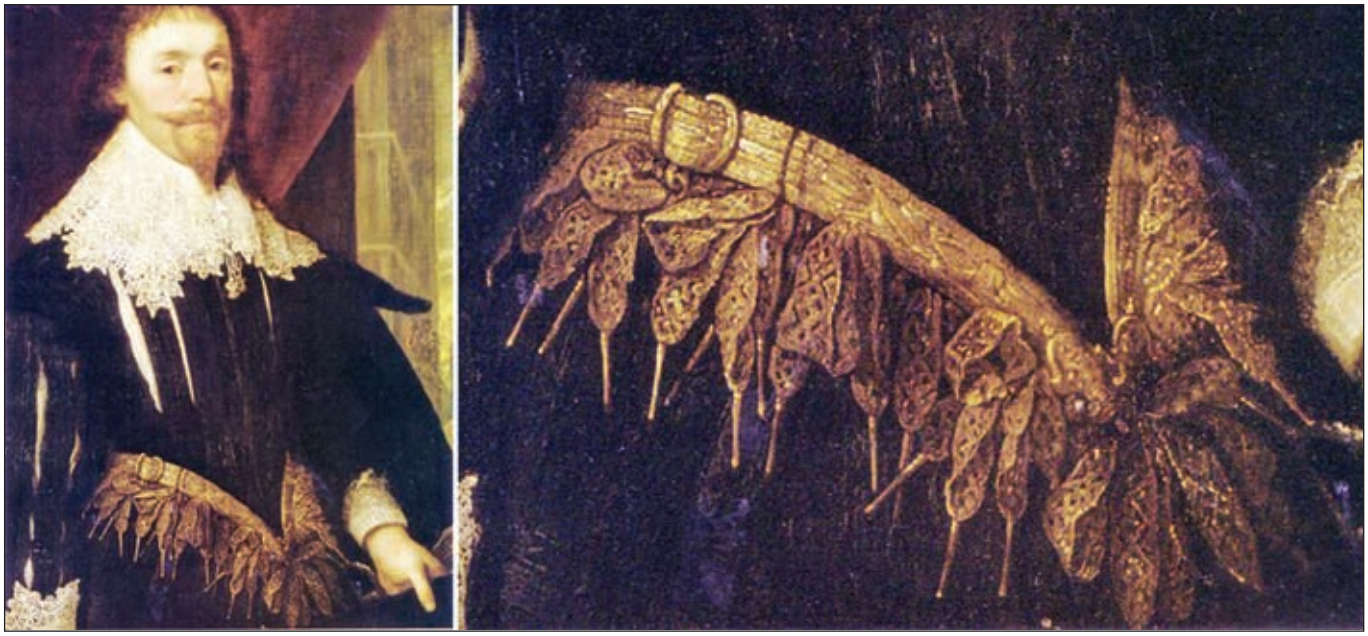

Figure 9 *Portrait of William Style of Langley by Gortzius Geldorp (1553–1618), and detail of his belt, with numerous lacetags like the ones found in El Chorro de Maíta.*

small concentrations of impurities such as nickel and iron. These impurities constitute what we call the "geochemical signature", which often allows us to determine the geological origins of the metal in question. In this case, it was possible for us to suggest that the brass found in Cuba had most probably been made by brassmakers in Germany. From there it would have been exported to Spain, before leaving for Cuba.

Another issue to be addressed was whether the brass had been transported as ingots or in some other form, and was subsequently remelted and reshaped by the Taínos, or whether the Europeans had brought the brass already in the tubular form. The answer was reached through a review of iconographic sources. The tubes turned out to be aglets or lacetags from European clothing. Like their modern plastic counterparts, the tubes were used in Europe in the tips of shoelaces, or other laces used in clothing, to prevent them from fraying and to facilitate threading. Many are represented in paintings of the period, used in various garments (Fig. 9). Thus the most abundant metal artefacts found with the indigenous bodies in the cemetery were lacetags from European clothing. Although it is possible that in some cases indigenous peoples were buried in European clothes, in some instances it was obvious that the tubes had been detached from European garments and combined with other ornaments to make pendants, necklaces or medallions. How could this be explained? Why did the local caciques and other high-status individuals use brass, and not gold, to express their wealth and power?

Foreign metals and indigenous values

The relative abundance of different metals in the indigenous burials of El Chorro de Maíta can be explained with reference to their own value system. Early chroniclers report their puzzlement that pure gold, or *caona*, was the least valuable metal among the indigenous communities. Conversely, the ternary gold-copper-silver alloy, known as *guanín*, was deemed of much more value. It was not its gold content, but rather its peculiar colour, iridescence and smell that made *guanín* especially appealing to the local elites, who wore ornaments made of this alloy to display and reinforce their sacred status, and their role as mediators between the natural and supernatural. Although it is possible that *guanín* objects were imported into Cuba before the European arrival, it is also possible that the Europeans themselves brought this metal from continental America into the island, hoping to exchange it for the Cuban high-carat gold.

Columbus and his crew brought numerous items of European material culture, including metals such as iron, bronze and brass. This latter metal, however, seems to have exerted a particular attraction among the locals. Its shine and smell, together with its exotic origins, meant that brass was soon incorporated in the indigenous value system as the most powerful and sacred material. Spanish priest Bartolomé de Las Casas recalls: "Anything made of brass was esteemed more than any other metal. They called it *turey*, as a thing from the sky, because their name for sky was *turey*; they smelled it as if by doing so they could sense it came from the heavens."[5]

Thus, when taking into account the specific cultural background and value system of the indigenous peoples who lived and died in El Chorro de Maíta, the pattern of material culture identified in the cemetery is more easily understood. It seems that rather than simply accepting European values and customs, local peoples selectively appropriated certain aspects of European material culture and conceptually transformed them into something rather different. Brass was no longer a cheap material used for practical applications, but sacred matter that conveyed power and spiritual meaning to those wearing it. The fact that a European metal was appropriated as the chief sacred material must have had dramatic implications for the relationships between indigenous peoples and Europeans. Not least, we can infer that both communities must have developed a trade system that, to their own eyes, benefitted themselves: the Europeans got the gold they sought, which the locals were happy to let go, and the indigenous peoples obtained sacred *turey*, which Europeans dismissed as cheap and disposable lacetags. Thus the Europeans and their metals must have had a profound impact on the political organisation of El Chorro de Maíta since, from the moment of contact, access to the sacred material required contact with the foreigners. However, this is not to say that European culture was simply accepted and assimilated in Cuba. Instead, we begin to see specific choices and strategic decisions on the part of different indigenous populations.

Figure 10 *Reconstruction of indigenous huts near the site of Los Buchillones.*

Diversifying indigenous perspectives

Some 300 kilometres to the west of El Chorro, also on the north coast of the island, a team of archaeologists from UCL and Cuba have been excavating another indigenous settlement: Los Buchillones. Here, the study of material culture has revealed a thriving indigenous community integrated in a wide coastal and island interaction network.[6] (Fig.10) The existence of these extensive contacts allows us to infer that they must have known of the European arrival and had the potential for contact. However, virtually no European materials have been found at this site so far, in spite of recent radiocarbon dates indicating site occupation as late as the seventeenth century. Is it a coincidence that a population that appears to have avoided contact with the Europeans has survived successfully? Did contacts take place, but perhaps materialized in different forms that have not survived in the archaeological record? Maybe the Europeans themselves showed no interest in Los Buchillones as a village with no apparent wealth?

Whatever the answers to these questions, it is increasingly clear that the indigenous communities in Cuba were not a monolithic group that passively accepted the fate the Europeans chose for them. Rather, there must have been a diversity of indigenous populations, with different cultural backgrounds and adaptive strategies, who actively showed distinct responses to the presence of newcomers. A combination of archaeological, iconographic, historical and scientific research has the potential to unveil a diversity of Euro-Caribbean contacts, where the cultural backgrounds of the different communities are acknowledged and appreciated. We can only hope that future work will progressively allow us to reconstruct the "conquest of America" as a diverse mosaic of cultural encounters where all of the players are duly represented.

Notes

1 Departamento Centro-Oriental de Arqueología, Ministerio de Ciencia, Tecnología y Medio Ambiente, Holguín, Cuba.

2 P. Hulme, *Colonial encounters: Europe and the native Caribbean 1492-1797* (London and New York: Routledge, 1986).

3 R. Valcarcel Rojas & C. Rodriguez Arce, "El Chorro de Maíta: social inequality and mortuary space", in *Dialogues in Cuban Archaeology*, L. A. Curet, S. L. Dawdy & G. La Rosa (eds), 125–46 (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 2005).

4 For details of the analytical study of the metals and its interpretation, see M. Martinón-Torres, R. Valcárcel Rojas, J. Cooper & Th. Rehren, "Metals, microanalysis and meaning: a study of metal objects excavated from the indigenous cemetery of El Chorro de Maíta, Cuba", *Journal of Archaeological Science* **34**, 194–204, 2007, and J. Cooper, M. Martinón-Torres and R. Valcárcel Rojas, "American gold and European brass: metal objects and indigenous values in the cemetery of El Chorro de Maíta, Cuba", in *Crossing the borders: new methods and techniques in the study of archaeological materials from the Caribbean*, C. Hofman, M. Hoogland & A. van Gijn (eds), 34–42 (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 2008). For a review of metals found in indigenous sites in Cuba, see R. Valcárcel Rojas, M. Martinón-Torres, J. Cooper and Th. Rehren, "Oro, guanines y latón. Metales en contextos aborígenes de Cuba", *El Caribe Arqueológico* **10**, 2008.

5 J. Oliver, "Gold symbolism among Caribbean chiefdoms: of feathers, çibas, and guanín power among Taíno elites", in *Precolumbian gold: technology, style and iconography*, C. McEwan (ed), 196–219 (London: British Museum Press, 2000)

6 J. Cooper, *Island interaction in the prehistoric Caribbean: an archaeological case study from northern Cuba* (PhD thesis, University College London, 2007).