

BEYOND THE BLOCKADE

**NEW CURRENTS
IN CUBAN
ARCHAEOLOGY**



**EDITED BY SUSAN KEPECS, L. ANTONIO CURET,
AND GABINO LA ROSA CORZO**

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New Currents in Cuban Archaeology

Edited by

SUSAN KEPECS, L. ANTONIO CURET,
and GABINO LA ROSA CORZO

Chapters by Cuban authors
translated from Spanish by

SUSAN KEPECS

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Turey Treasure in the Caribbean

Brass and Indo-Hispanic Contact at El Chorro de Maíta, Cuba

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Based on the interpretive possibilities offered by a group of European metal assemblage found in association with an indigenous cemetery, we present an analysis of Indo-Hispanic contact at the archaeological site of El Chorro de Maíta in northeast Cuba. In an area with very few ethnohistorical or historical descriptions of the processes of contact, archaeology enables us to discover a local population influenced by elements of European culture. Funerary practices were modified, although the local population maintained its capacity for decision making and cultural expression. We perceive a dynamic interaction with multiple facets, in which local elite individuals played key roles in both indigenous society and the Hispanic project of domination.

A partir de las posibilidades interpretativas que ofrece la identificación de un grupo de objetos metálicos europeos encontrado junto a entierros indígenas, se presenta un análisis del contacto indo-hispánico en el sitio arqueológico El Chorro de Maíta, en el nororiente de Cuba. En un área con muy pocas referencias etnohistóricas o históricas sobre estos procesos de contacto la arqueología descubre un caso de población local fuertemente influenciada por elementos de la cultura hispana, que modifica sus prácticas funerarias aunque mantiene capacidades de decisión y expresión propia. Se percibe una interacción dinámica y con múltiples facetas en la cual también se insertan individuos de la elite local en razón de su papel clave, tanto para la sociedad indígena como para el proyecto de dominación hispano.

Analyses of the links between indigenous groups and Europeans, and an examination of the processes of change both populations confronted in the Antilles as a

result of their encounter, are key to understanding colonial history and many aspects of modern sociocultural structures as well. Lamentably, the historical vision of the processes of contact is incomplete due to the exclusively European perspective and the imbalance in the ethnohistoric and documentary coverage of the different events and locations in the Caribbean during this period. Under these circumstances archaeological investigation appears to be an important tool in the task of establishing a picture of greater objectivity, since it offers information that allows us to evaluate diverse spaces and social behaviors, including those that pertain to disenfranchised groups ignored in the written record or incapable of expression via written means (Deagan 1996; Lightfoot 1995).

Conceived from that perspective, our research offers new information on Indo-Hispanic contact in Cuba, based on a study of European metal materials obtained from the archaeological site of El Chorro de Maíta, in the modern province of Holguín, northeast Cuba (Figure 8.1). This chapter is based on part of an extensive investigation under the direction of the first author.

Indo-Hispanic Contact in Cuba: Archaeological Studies

The study of Indo-Hispanic contact in early Spanish settlements is underdeveloped in Cuba. Nevertheless, there exists a long tradition of investigation at indigenous archaeological sites, where distinct relationships with the Spaniards or with their material world are reported. Studies such as those carried out by Rouse (1942) in the highlands of Maniabón used the presence of European materials—or indigenous copies of European objects—as chronological markers to define the “historic” character of the sites where these appeared, linking them to documented events for the zone vis-à-vis the conquest and colonization of the island.

Other investigations (García 1949; Morales and Pérez 1945) extended the analysis and reporting of this evidence, noting quantity and type of materials and emphasizing their value not only in verifying contact between the two cultures but also in considering the intensity of contact and the possibility of perceiving processes of transculturation—an exchange of influences in which elements are gained and lost, giving way to the development of new cultural expressions (Ortiz 1983:90). With advances in excavation and recording methods this focus was improved, establishing a specific classificatory methodology (Domínguez 1978) for identifying two different contexts. Sites of contact were those at which European material was superficial, not very abundant, and unmodified. At sites of transculturation, in addition to abundant European objects with traces of use, modification, or reuse, objects indicating a mix of European and indigenous cultural influences appear.

Later studies have made clear the necessity of going beyond simple contextual classification (Rives et al. 1991); today we focus on analytical schemes that permit

the determination of changes in indigenous cultural behavior generated by links to the Europeans, as well as the detection of indigenous presence in periods later than the first half of the sixteenth century. To that end researchers have considered modifications in utilitarian artifacts (Rives et al. 1987; Tomé and Rives 1987), economic changes including modifications in diet, specialized production of certain goods, and variations in ceramic decoration (Domínguez 1984).

The idea that the disarticulation of the indigenous society was neither uniformly fast nor complete has been supplemented by the view that profound cultural exchanges were generated via transcultural processes as well as through diverse circumstances of survival and indigenous integration. However, to date these ideas remain largely in conceptual terms (Domínguez and Rives 1995).

In general, previous approaches focused solely on the processes of change, leaving many themes unexamined, including the motives that sustain indigenous practices in the process of adopting European elements, and the peculiarities of interaction at the level of context and social actors. In this chapter we propose an approach to these issues. The investigation offers a rereading of the Indo-Hispanic relationship in El Chorro de Maíta based on the interpretive possibilities of a situation in which metal elements used in European clothing in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries were encountered in the context of native burials. This research is focused on the symbolic meaning behind the materials through an examination of the dynamic responses to the arrival of European metals, where observed changes in material meaning are neither immediate nor simplistic. The symbolic influences that determined the use of European metal were the result of dynamic interaction in which change was neither immediate nor total. The evidence also reveals some characteristics of indigenous social structure, especially traces of hierarchy, which are not clearly recorded in ethnohistorical texts and only rarely examined in Cuban archaeology.

The Indigenous Peoples of the Contact Period

At the moment of European arrival, Cuba was occupied largely by indigenous communities of the ethnolinguistic Arawak group, related to the so-called Taíno culture (Rouse 1992). Cuban archaeologists do not generally use the term "Taíno," instead employing classifications based on economic factors or archaeological indicators: *Etapa Agroalfarera* (Agricereamic stage [Tabío 1984:39]); *Fase Agricultores* (Agricultural phase [Guarch 1990:31]); *Comunidades neolíticas* (Neolithic communities [Domínguez et al. 1994:29]); or *Comunidades tribales agroceramistas* (Agricereamic tribal communities [Torres 2006]). Although important cultural similarities exist across the Antilles, recognized even by the Spaniards (Fernández 1992:115), archaeological and historical data indicate that the populations that settled in Cuba had not reached the higher demographic densities found in His-

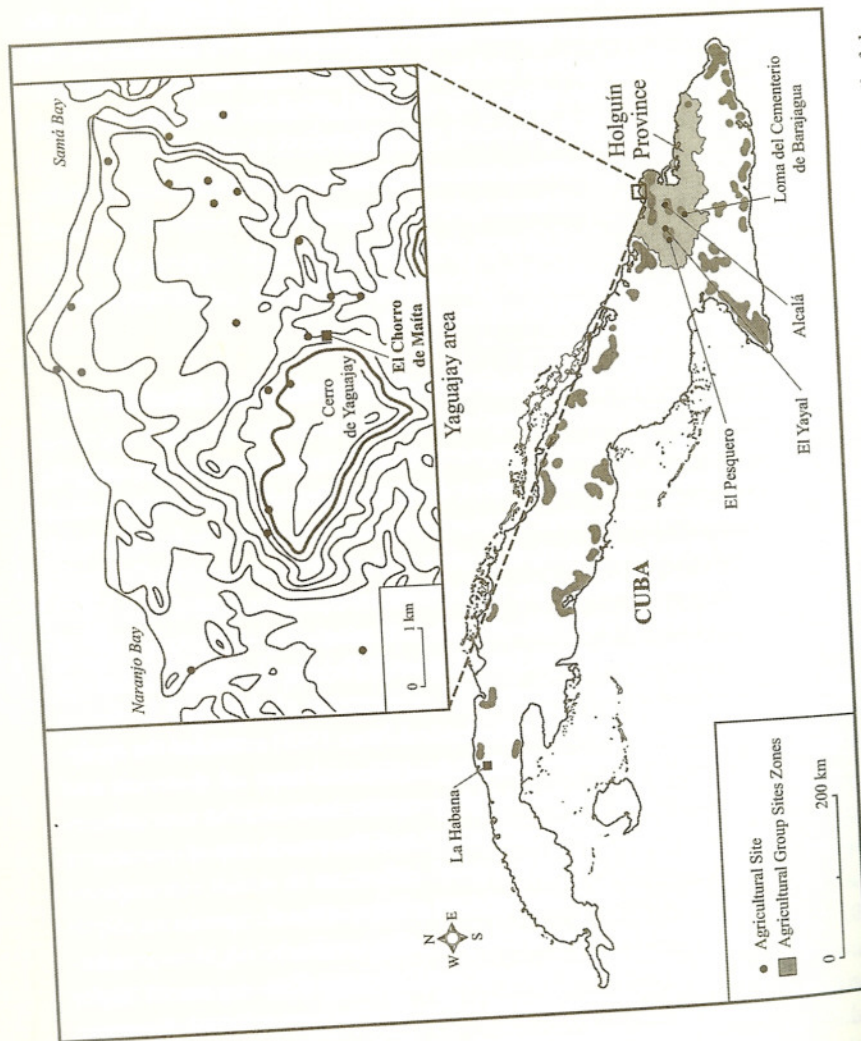


Figure 8.1. Reported agricultural-ceramicist sites in Cuba, including sites referred to in text, with detail of the Yaguajay area showing the location of El Chorro de Maíta.

paniola and Puerto Rico, and that ceremonial and political expressions in Cuba also were different in character (Domínguez et al. 1994:46).

The principal distribution of Arawak ceramic agriculturalist sites concentrates in the center of the Antilles archipelago; in Cuba, these settlements cluster in the eastern portion of the island (Figure 8.1). It is widely believed, although some authors (e.g., Keegan 1992:4–89; Knight this volume) question whether there is archaeological support for this idea, that at the moment of European contact the western part of Cuba was populated only by fisher-gatherer groups.

The agricultural occupation of Cuba clearly began by the ninth century A.D. (Valcárcel 2002a:20), though calibration of the earliest dates indicates that it might have begun 200 years earlier, stretching it back to the seventh century A.D. (Torres 2006:36). Agricultural contexts include utensils of ceramics, wood, shell, bone, and stone; very rarely do archaeologists recover the textiles and items of vegetable fibers mentioned by the Europeans. Ceramics are predominantly related in some measure to what Rouse (1992:96) calls the Meillacan ostionoid subseries, although they clearly are Cuban variants (Valcárcel 2002a). Ceramics linked to Rouse's Chican subseries are also found, though these are restricted to the extreme eastern end of the island and also have a clear local profile. These ceramics were made by sedentary societies that depended heavily on land animals and marine species as well as plant resources; agriculture was centered on the cultivation of tubers.

Agricultural-ceramic sites are very abundant in the archaeological area of Banés (Valcárcel 2002a:26), situated in the northeastern part of the island in the modern province of Holguín. Within this area are groups of sites delimited to some degree by accidents of geography (Valcárcel 2002a:65, 85), the densest of which are found in the hilly zone known as Yaguajay. El Chorro de Maíta is the largest and most fertile of the known sites in this region (see Figure 8.1).

In Yaguajay, as in other parts of the Banés area, archaeologists have located indigenous sites with early European materials (Rouse 1942; Valcárcel 1997). Nevertheless, historical references to indigenous presence in this zone or to the situation that generated these contexts are very rare. Several authors have assumed a possible link between this territory and the "provincias indias" of Baní and Cubanacán (García 1941; Rouse 1942:157), the first visited by Diego Velázquez in 1513 (Pichardo 1971:70). We also know, based on the fragmentary document of a judgment of residence applied to Gonzalo de Guzmán in 1530 (Mira 1997:425), a bit about the transfers and allocations of Indians in Baní and of the existence of an encomienda. Rouse (1942:157) correlated some of these very general dates and references on the process of conquest and colonization in northeast Cuba with the material record of the archaeological zone of Banés. However, his conclusions are questionable given the lack of precision in the available historical information and the very limited level of analysis vis-à-vis the processes of Indo-Hispanic interaction at the sites he considered.

El Chorro de Maíta

This site is located 4 km from the north coast, on the eastern slope of Yaguajay hill, at a height of 160 m above sea level. Rouse (1942:103–106) explored and provided a written description of the site, which he considered the most important in the Yaguajay zone. He reported abundant archaeological material and mentioned the collection of numerous ceremonial objects and body adornments.

Between 1979 and 1987, personnel from the Department of Archaeology of Holguín, under the direction of J. M. Guarch Delmonte, explored the site and excavated several deposits of possible domestic refuse and an ample burial grounds (Guarch 1988:162). From the absence of domestic or workshop waste (Guarch 1994:13), the abundance of burials, and the observed continuity of burial practice in one location, Guarch (1996:20) considered this zone to be a cemetery, the only one reported to date at an agricultural site in Cuba. The investigation carried out by the Department of Archaeology of Holguín and successive studies related to the material collected from that project concentrated on the funerary context. Beyond that, there have been only a few limited excavations.

In Excavation Units 2 and 5, located near the cemetery, archaeologists encountered refuse deposits containing faunal remains and abundant fragments of indigenous ceramics with ash lenses and carbon from cooking hearths. Guarch (1996:16) thought they were part of an indigenous village established around the cemetery. In both units fragments of European ceramics and domesticated pig bones (*Sus scrofa*) were recorded in superficial strata and in small quantity.

The contents of Excavation Unit 6, to the west of the cemetery (Figure 8.2), included faunal remains, ceramics, and various indigenous pieces for body adornment and ceremonial use (Guarch 1994:37). Also recovered in this unit were a thin sheet of metal with a perforation, a fragment of Columbia Plain mayolica pottery, also perforated, and a small, round European bell. Other items from the extension of Unit 6 included pig bones (*Sus scrofa*), more sherds of Columbia Plain (white and green-on-white varieties), sherds of ordinary Spanish lead glazed coarse earthenwares (Melado and Bacín Verde), fragments of the "early style" (ca. A.D. 1500–1570) olive jars, and a ceramic vessel with designs very similar to those on pieces made in Concepción de la Vega, Hispaniola (Guarch 1994:37–38), a settlement established in 1494 and abandoned in 1562 (Ortega and Fondeur 1978:11).

Excavated from the cemetery in a controlled fashion were 106 skeletons provisionally identified as indigenous individuals, one intrusive modern burial, and a quantity of disarticulated human remains tentatively identified as being from indigenous individuals.¹ In addition excavators recovered the skull of an individual with features some investigators (Rivero et al. 1990:85) consider to be Europoid; the skeleton to which it belonged could not be identified (Guarch 1996:17–20). A great variety of burial positions were noted, although supine burials with the

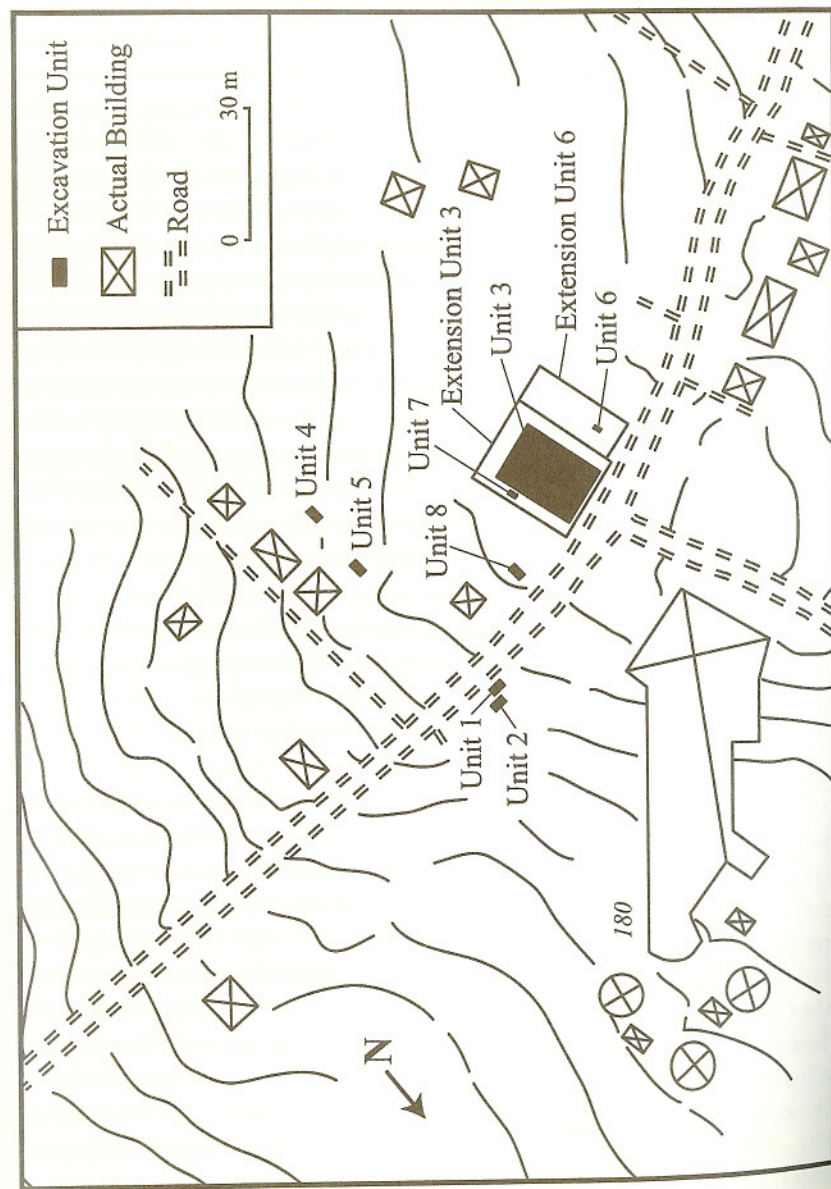


Figure 8.2. Plan of El Chorro de Maíta.

legs flexed to varying degrees was the most common burial position. In most of the preserved skulls, fronto-occipital tabular oblique deformation was present, although, according to Guarch (1996:21), the skulls of one adult skull and some juveniles were not deformed.

Radiocarbon dates were obtained on bone from two of the skeletons: burial No. 25 (conventional radiocarbon age 870 ± 70 B.P., Beta-148956; $d_{13c/12c} = -19$ percent; 2 Sigma calibration: cal A.D. 1020 to 1280 [cal 930 to 670 B.P.]) and burial No. 39 (conventional radiocarbon age 360 ± 80 B.P., Beta-148955; $d_{13c/12c} = -19$ percent; 2 Sigma calibration: cal A.D. 1420 to 1670 [cal 530 to 280 B.P.]). In addition, we have a date obtained on wood carbon taken from Excavation Unit 5 (Valcárcel 2002a:142), which indicates the pre-Columbian use of parts of the site for food preparation (conventional radiocarbon age 730 ± 60 B.P.; Beta-148957; $d_{13c/12c} = -25.0$ percent; 2 Sigma calibración: cal A.D. 1200 to 1320 [cal 750 to 630 B.P.] and cal A.D. 1350 to 1390 [cal 600 to 560 B.P.]). Unit 5 also contained an indigenous skeleton.

Some of these burials contained body adornment objects—ear spools, necklaces, and bracelets—made of stone, coral, and vegetal resins (Guarch 1996:21). But the cemetery's largest, most complex assemblage of ornaments (Figure 8.3) was buried with skeleton No. 57, a female between 19 and 21 years of age (Guarch 1996:21). Beads of gold, quartzite, coral, and pearls, as well as pendants made of an alloy of gold, copper, and silver were recovered. Other objects made of these ternary alloys included a small bell and a bird's head. The bell and bird's head are clearly not Antillean; in the case of the latter, Oliver (2000:201, 207n.37) and Juanita Saenz Samper (personal communication to Roberto Valcárcel 2004) suggest that the bird's head came from Colombia given its similarity to Tairona pectoral ornaments from the Caribbean coast of that country.

Small metallic tubes (Figure 8.4) also were found with this burial, as well as with 16 other skeletons in the cemetery (Valcárcel and Rodríguez 2005:137). Five of these tubes (Figure 8.5) were excavated with skeleton No. 25, these tubes were found in association with a metal disc covered with cotton cloth forming a single ornament (Guarch 1996:20). Few adornments were found with the rest of the burials, although these objects were of great value in the indigenous world (Guarch 1994:8; Valcárcel and Rodríguez 2005:139). A certain degree of complex craftsmanship was involved in the elaboration of some of these objects, including the manufacture of quartzite beads as small as 1.5–2 mm.

For Guarch (1994:37, 1996:22), who directed the first studies of these materials, this site was clearly one of "Indo-Hispanic contact," as indicated by the objects, animal bones, and human remains of apparent European origin, as well as the local modification of European materials and the elaboration of a vessel that copied, with native techniques and materials, Hispanic ceramic forms of indeterminate type. Guarch (1988:177, 1996:22) considered the extended position of some

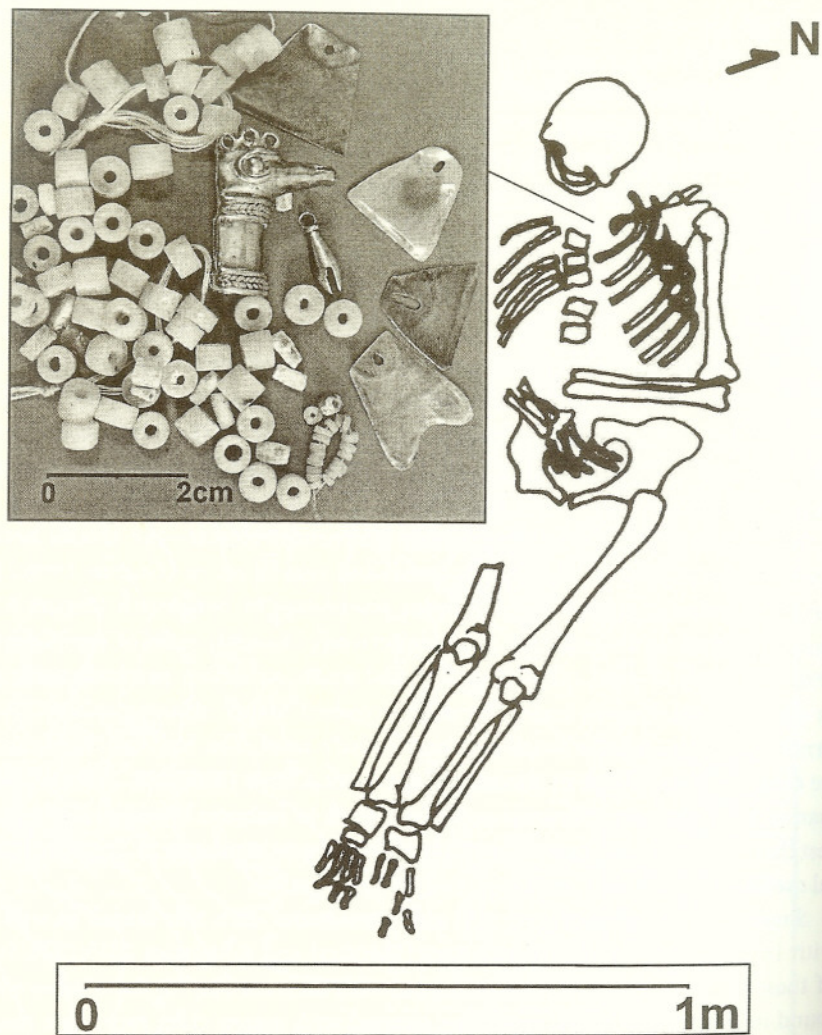


Figure 8.3. Burial No. 57 with some of the reported objects.

of the burials, along with the existence of individuals lacking cranial deformation, as probable indications of contact between indigenous peoples and Spaniards, although he admitted the difficulty of determining the nature and depth of this link given the absence of both adequate chronology for the burials and historical references to the site.

This conservative focus was appropriate, since compared to other indigenous sites with the reported presence of European materials in northeast Cuba (see Figure 8.1), including El Yayal (Domínguez 1984; García 1938), Alcalá (Valcárcel

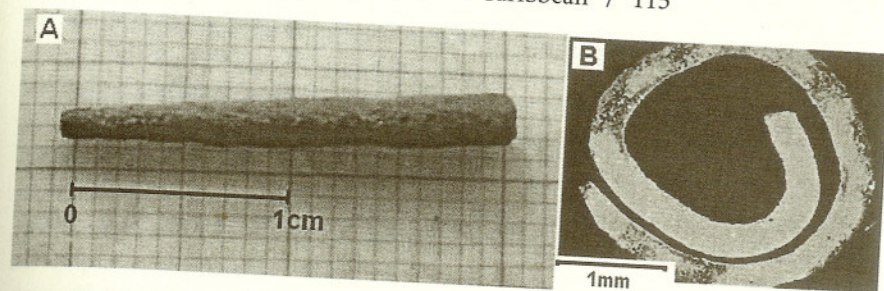


Figure 8.4. Brass tubes (lacetags); (a) photograph of a complete piece, (b) transverse view.

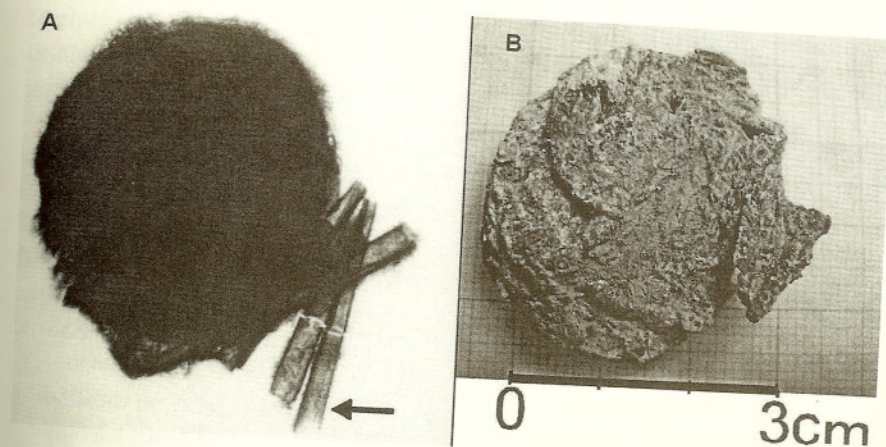


Figure 8.5. Ornament from burial No. 25; (a) radiograph, (b) photograph.

cel 1997), or El Pesquero (García 1940), the level of contact at El Chorro de Maíta seemed notably moderate (Valcárcel 1997:73). However, without a reliable chronology, the absence of cranial deformation and the extended burial position are not, by themselves, sufficient evidence to assume that they were the direct result of European influence.

Brass, Lacetags, and Turey

The tubes found with the skeletons are made of very thin metal sheets rolled around themselves, creating a hollow structure. Through the tubes passed the string that served to suspend them or insert them into other objects. The average dimensions of complete specimens are 29 mm (length) with a diameter of 2 mm at the narrowest end and 3 mm at the widest part (Figure 8.4). From the moment of discovery researchers believed, probably because of the green tones present on some pieces and spots of the same color on the bones upon which the artifacts

rested, that these tubes were made of copper (Guarch et al. 1987:29). One of the tubes was submitted to laser microspectral analysis with an LMA-10 microprobe, which determined that the composition of the metal was largely copper with other unidentified elements (Guarch et al. 1987:31).

In 2002 and 2003 Valcárcel (2002b) coordinated new studies on the metal objects from El Chorro de Maíta, carried out at the Center for Technological Applications and Nuclear Development of the Ministry of Science, Technology and Environment in Havana. X-ray fluorescence determined the presence of copper in the perforated piece from Excavation Unit 6 and of gold in one of the beads from skeleton No. 57. In addition 19 tubes (or fragments thereof) were analyzed and determined to be composed of brass (Valcárcel 2002b; Valcárcel et al. 2007). Nevertheless, this method of analysis provided information only on the composition of the objects' surfaces; given the high grade of corrosion in most cases, quantification of the elements present was not thoroughly reliable, and evaluation of various aspects of the technology used in creating the artifacts was impossible.

Ultimately some contradictory evidence emerged. Although apparently there are cases of accidental production of low-zinc brass in pre-Columbian America (Craddock 1995), its presence on the continent fundamentally began with European importation. The unexpected identification of brass in one of the ornaments from skeleton No. 25, dated to the pre-Columbian period, necessitated both an evaluation of this chronological placement and additional analyses of the metal composition of the objects found in the cemetery.

Thus in 2005 the authors of this article carried out new studies on the tubes in the Wolfson Archaeological Science Laboratories at the Institute of Archaeology at the University College London (Martínón-Torres et al. 2007). Six tubes, some already analyzed in Cuba, were analyzed by scanning electron microscopy with energy dispersive spectrometry for composition and structure. This examination revealed that they were made of brass with relatively high concentrations of zinc. The microscope also revealed evidence of various episodes of hammering, followed by brief periods of annealing. The composition of these tubes is very similar to brass produced in large quantities by cementation processes used in central Europe in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, especially in Nuremberg, Germany (Martínón-Torres et al. 2007:8).

If we take into account the preceding analysis in Cuba and the similarity among all of these objects, it seems possible that all of the tubes were made of brass. Thus the tubes must have arrived at the cemetery via some type of contact between the local population and Europeans. The form of the pieces also supports this interpretation; an examination of pictorial sources, archaeological data from fifteenth-century Europe (Martínón-Torres et al. 2007) and information on early colonial contexts in the Americas (Deagan 2002:174–175) reveals that the tubes were elements used in European clothing during the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries.

known as *agujetas* in Spanish or aglets, lace chaps, or lacetags in English (Deagan 2002:175).

Deagan (2002:175, Figure 8.24) and Martínón-Torres et al. (2007, 2008) show paintings from this period in which the use of lacetags is illustrated. They were placed on cords used to adjust or close items of clothing; when the tube pressed the end of the cord it prevented the closure from coming undone. Deagan (2002:174–175) describes such cords as the most common clothes-closing devices in the Spanish colonies until the second half of the seventeenth century. They have been recovered archaeologically at La Isabela, a fifteenth-century site in the Dominican Republic (Deagan and Crucent 2002:155); at sixteenth-century sites including Concepción de la Vega, Dominican Republic (Deagan and Kulst 1998:14), Puerto Real, Haiti (Marrinan 1995:193), and several sites in the United States including Santa Elena, South Carolina; St. Augustine, Florida; and Jamestown, Virginia (Deagan 2002:174–175; Kelso and Straube 2004:173–174).

Deagan (2002:175, Figure 8.23) depicts archaeological lacetags from Saint Augustine that are very similar in form and dimension to those from El Chorro de Maíta. Elsewhere in Cuba, lacetags have been found at the indigenous site of Alcalá and in sixteenth-century archaeological contexts in Old Havana (Valcárcel et al. 2007). Lacetags of this kind are rare after 1650 and have not been reported in eighteenth-century contexts (Deagan 2002:174–175).

At El Chorro de Maíta, some indigenous individuals may have been buried in European clothing. Cloth fragments found in burial No. 57 seem to support that idea. Nevertheless, the available evidence is insufficient to draw that conclusion, at least for now. The location of the tubes on the skeletal remains indicates that originally they were placed on the wrists, near the neck and chest, or at the waist. These placements coincide with those of lacetags in European clothing of the sixteenth century, but these are the same body parts on which the natives wore ornaments (Alegría 1980). Thus we cannot exclude the possibility that the lacetags were placed apart from clothing and were used as items of adornment rather than as clothes-closing devices. In fact, the Spaniards on Columbus's first and second voyages (Álvarez 1977:92; Colón 1961:149) used lacetags to barter with the indigenous communities.

The above-described, complex ornament on skeleton No. 25 from El Chorro de Maíta (Figure 8.5), in which the lacetags appear associated with a cotton-wrapped metal disc, was located on one of the individual's legs, a location evidently related to traditional ornamentation practices. Below the knees, the indigenous peoples used cotton cords that girdled the legs, making them look thicker. Also the design of this object resembles indigenous ornaments: tubes of amber and gold suspended from belts, and ornaments made of gold discs probably encrusted in cotton bases are described at Hispaniola (Alegría 1980:12, 22–23).

The skeletal remains with which this particular ornament was found belonged

to a man who in life must have been very robust in any event and whose height (172 cm) distinguishes him in a mortuary sample in which the average height of men seems not to have exceeded 159 cm (Rodríguez 2003:87, 90). This information suggests that the person in question may have had certain status, a detail that underscores the importance of the object. The reuse of lacetags in this piece may be explained if we examine the significance of metals in the indigenous societies of the Antilles, especially that assigned to brass.

Metals, Indigenous Societies, and Brass

Archaeological (Siegel and Severin 1993) and ethnohistoric (Vega 1988) evidence indicates that long before the arrival of Europeans, the indigenous peoples of the Greater Antilles used objects of gold or an alloy of gold, copper, and silver called *guanín*. Pure gold, obtained from placer deposits, was hammered into sheets of varying thickness and occasionally embossed. The prepared sheets were made into body ornaments, parts of religious images, and luxurious ritual implements (Oliver 2000:204).

References pulled together by Vega (1988:37–38, 42–44) mention that the indigenous peoples perceived in *guanín* a special odor. They preferred it to gold, recognizing it as an extremely valuable material. The Europeans, taking advantage of this situation, began bringing *guanines* from other places to trade for gold in Hispaniola (Oliver 2000; Vega 1988). Its use in the Greater Antilles dates back to pre-Taíno times (Siegel and Severin 1993:76), although its elaboration seems not to have been local since the indigenous peoples of the Antilles lacked the smelting techniques necessary to produce this alloy. In fact, we lack archaeological evidence of furnaces where this process could have been executed (Siegel and Severin 1993:77). Vega (1988:43), citing the opinion of Rivet and Arsandoux (1946) on the possible Guayanese origin of the pieces held by the Taínos of the Antilles, suggests that the material was obtained via contacts on the continent (see also Oliver 2000:202; Rouse 1992:9). Still, we lack archaeological confirmation of the source; it is possible that Venezuela and Guyana received these metals from further afield, potentially from Colombia.

In various descriptions of caciques' vestments the presence of *guanín* and gold contrast with the simple image of the common Taíno (Oliver 1998:67). The foreign origin of *guanín* and its limited availability are factors in its great worth, as highlighted by its noteworthy role in Taíno mythology. Arrom (1975:154) points out its religious value, finding it mentioned in important mythological passages about the origins of Taíno social practices. Oliver (2000:209–215) offers a more detailed analysis of these passages defining the social order, establishing *guanín* as a sacred unifying principle among the symbols of chiefly power.

With the Spaniards came new metals, some of which were incorporated into in-

igenous society for use as body ornamentation. Among these are objects of copper, bronze, and, in most cases, brass. Vega (1988:36) cites an illustrative comment made by sixteenth-century Spanish cleric Bartolomé de Las Casas (1965:281), in which he clarifies the meaning of the indigenous interest in brass objects, including the lacetags: "All things of brass they esteemed more than any other, and for this, for a piece of a lace chape, they gave without difficulty everything they had, calling it *turey*, like something from the sky, because they called the sky *turey*."

The term *turey* could designate diverse objects of European origin, as Diego Álvarez (1977:93) indicates, although some investigators (Oliver 2001:198; Vega 1988:35) relate the term in particular to brass. For Oliver (2000:198) the most appropriate translation of *turey* is "the brilliant part of the sky, excluding the clouds." Las Casas (1965:281), cited in Vega (1988:36), specifies that in brass the indigenous peoples perceived a special odor, just as they did with *guanín*. Like *guanín* brass was shiny and golden hued, and the remoteness of its origin²—Spain—as well as the strangeness of its providers, individuals considered immortal by the indigenous communities (Cassá 1992:190, 227; Crespo 2000:125), loaded this metal with sacred values. These qualities (Oliver 2000:199) determined its rapid insertion in the symbolism of power, creating a demand for brass analogous to that of *guanín* that the Europeans took advantage of, exchanging it for pure gold.

This information confirms that the act of reusing the lacetags for the adornment found with skeleton No. 25 goes beyond the passive acquisition of a foreign object. Instead, the evidence indicates precise selection, based on native symbolic codes that generated a cultural reordering of the metal. The lacetags of *turey* were a valuable resource, containing special qualities. The complexity of the ornament from skeleton No. 25—and the decorative concept with which it was designed and used—distinguishes it not only as an object of great importance but also as a creative act structured by local concepts.

This interest in brass was not isolated; the presence of *guanines* in burial No. 57 is another case that illustrates the interest in valuable metals; the large cache of precious goods, especially metals (a lacetag and seven *guanines*, as well as beads of pearl, gold, quartzite, and coral) apparently mark a hierarchical context, although we cannot know whether the symbolic meaning of the brass in burial 57 is similar to that of the metals from burial 25 discussed earlier.

Brass and Indo-Hispanic Contact

The identification of the lacetags provides new insights on the universe of European objects (in this case, elements of clothing) to which the indigenous individuals buried at El Chorro de Maíta had access. We now understand something of the processes of reutilization of these objects according to native symbolic codes. In addition, the data from these burials provide a valuable chronological and cul-

tural reference that lets us reevaluate aspects of this cemetery, including certain funerary practices and the temporality of the burials themselves.

The clearest case is that of the 16 burials Guarch (1996:16) encountered in extended position. Our reevaluation diminishes that number to 14 (13 supine, one prone). Of the 13 supine burials, 9 were found with their hands crossed and placed on the chest or abdomen; the arms of two were extended along the sides of the body; on one skeleton one arm was extended along the side of the skeleton, the other toward the head. The arm position of the remaining skeleton could not be determined because the remains were deteriorated.

The extended position is extremely unusual in burials of indigenous agriculturalists in Cuba. It is found in groups of fisher-gatherers in Cuba and other parts of the Antilles, and occasionally in early sedentary communities with Saladoid ceramics (Sannen 2006); but extremely rare at sites associated to "Meillacan ostionoid" or "Chican ostionoid" ceramics (Rouse 1992) such as those present in Cuba. In these cases the bodies were usually supine or placed on the side, with the lower extremities flexed to varying degrees (Crespo 2000:119; Guarch 1978:182; Jiménez 1979:268; Veloz et al. 1976:314, 317n.4). The flexed position does not register clearly in the ethnohistoric record of the Greater Antilles, although some confusing descriptions of Taíno burials referred to in the European chronicles might pertain to this type (Crespo 2000:136). Nevertheless, given the persistence and frequency of flexed burials they must be strongly related to religious beliefs and should have figured largely among groups that attributed a great deal of importance to acts related to death.

Thus the presence of extended burials in pre-Columbian contexts in the Greater Antilles is often considered atypical (Veloz et al. 1976:314n.4) or interpreted as an isolated event unrelated to funerary rituals (Crespo 2000:157). At the site of El Atajadizo, in the Dominican Republic, the extended burial position is reported for individuals who may have met a violent death and were buried hastily, without regard for traditional burial practices (Veloz et al. 1976:313-314). At early European burial sites in the New World, however, extended burials prevail, even when indigenous individuals were laid to rest in such contexts, such as at La Isabela, in the Dominican Republic (Guerrero 1999:108), or Puerto Real, Haiti (Marrinan 1995:179). The typically Christian extended position at these sites is supine, legs extended, hands crossed over the chest or abdomen, and laid out along an east-west orientation so that the individual, awakening on the day of judgment, could see the face of God in the east (Parker Pearson 2003:6).

In Cuba, a strong tendency toward flexed-position burials prevails even in places where there is evidence of relations with the Europeans (Miguel 1949; Rouse 1942:136). Only in indigenous settlements where this relationship was very intense and prolonged, such as El Yayal or Barajagua (Figure 8.1), do some native burials appear extended (Rouse 1942:136).

At El Chorro de Maíta, over half of the 106 burials exhibit some degree of flexed lower extremities (this excludes the 14 extended examples and 33 cases in which the position of the legs could not be determined due to deterioration or alteration of the remains (Guarch 1996:18, Table 2). The lone prone burial (No. 97) does not fit the Christian norm. In two of the remaining extended burial cases all of the characteristics of Christian burials are present; 10 examples comply with two or three Christian practices. In 6 of these burials, all laid out with hands crossed over chests or abdomens, brass was present. This consistent pattern establishes a clear relationship between the extended position and European influence. The discovery of brass in almost half of the extended burials provides a cultural and chronological reference that confirms Guarch's original interpretation and complements a picture in which, in addition to incorporating foreign materials, the local communities were abandoning established cultural traditions in favor of new funerary practices.

Spatially, the extended position burials marked by the presence of brass artifacts are concentrated in the central part of the cemetery, where the tentatively identified European skull also was found. This spatial link suggests some degree of temporal proximity among the burials and indicates, above all, an interconnection among these individuals that expresses, without excluding other motivations, the genesis of a shared process: changes in local culture determined by interaction with Europeans.³

The confirmation of the relationship between extended burial position and European influences increases the number of inhumations that clearly post-date the arrival of the Spaniards. If we consider all of the extended burials without brass, but with two or more elements of the Christian burial pattern (there are 6 of these), and add them to those with brass (17), we have a total of 23 post-Columbian burials. This does not exclude the possibility that many of the nonextended burials lacking brass are also post-Columbian. Although we lack a full chronology for the cemetery, the large number of deceased could be related as much to a long period of use after European arrival as to a post-Columbian increase in use in the location, or an increase in mortality during this period.

The presumed pre-Columbian origin of the cemetery was based on the dates from burial No. 25 and the carbon from Excavation Unit 5 (Valcárcel and Rodríguez 2005). The presence of brass with skeleton No. 25 highlights the problem with this assumption and forces us to evaluate with caution the relationship between the rest of the human remains in Unit 5 and the skeletons found in the central zone of the cemetery (Unit 3; see Figure 8.2). Moreover, if we consider the absence of cemeteries at known pre-Columbian indigenous agriculturalist sites in Cuba, and the ample number of burials post-dating the arrival of the Europeans, the notion of pre-Columbian origins for this cemetery requires further scrutiny. We are looking at either an indigenous burial ground transformed into a cemetery at the

start of European contact, or even a cemetery that originated during the contact period.

In this context of strong post-Columbian use with clear evidence of modifications to local funerary practices, the lack of cranial deformation may also be related to European influence. In a preliminary consideration of the burials containing undeformed skulls, we noted one individual (skeleton No. 45) with brass also buried in extended position. Cranial deformation functioned as an ethnic identifier associated with the beliefs, rituals, and aesthetics (Crespo 2000:227–230) of agricultural, ceramic-producing groups. At least in Cuba, the absence of cranial deformation in burials recovered at agriculturalist-ceramicist sites is rare.

The high degree of change we see in these groups resulting from European pressures undoubtedly influenced this particular situation. Since the deformation process began in childhood, the practice may have been ended by indigenous peoples protecting children born after European arrival. However, sixteenth-century documentary references to the prohibition of cranial deformation in Peru (Dingwall 1931:215) illustrate the conquistadors' eagerness to modify the aspects of indigenous culture they saw as opposed to the canons of civilization and religion, including those related to the body. The adult with an undeformed skull—skeleton No. 45—was approximately 25–30 years old at time of death; even if this adult came from another area, the additional presence of subadults of varying ages (Guarch 1996:21) lacking cranial deformation points toward the presence of strong Spanish influences for at least several years.

Persistence and Change

The presence of brass with burial No. 25, assigned a pre-Columbian date in the original radiocarbon assays, and the wide range of calibration on the date for burial No. 39 (see above) are unresolved problems. However, during recent fieldwork in nonfunerary contexts at El Chorro de Maíta carried out by Valcárcel, Knight, and Persons (2007; also Persons et al. 2007), we identified an indigenous context dated to the first half of the fifteenth century, as well as strata containing diverse types of European ceramics ranging in date between 1490 and 1650. If we assume the existence of some contemporaneity between the use of the cemetery and of the surrounding spaces, we have a potentially long period of post-Columbian use, related to diverse moments and situations of Indo-Hispanic contact. In these circumstances the lacetags distinguish a group of individuals of certain chronological proximity, although the exact period of their use is difficult to determine.

Except for burial No. 25, in which the ornamental use of brass is clear, we do not know if we are seeing clothing with lacetags or independent ornaments. Still, we can distinguish some basic elements of culture and the exercise of power, evident in the selective capture of European objects, funerary patterns that persist or

change, and elite individuals inserted into the ambient interaction. In the case of burial No. 25, the presence of brass implies the specific use of European materials and their reordering according to local ideological norms, in terms of both the indigenous symbolic universe and native mechanisms of legitimizing rank.

The use of brass in this case reflects an independent, active perspective from which the metal is adopted and adapted to indigenous ornamental practices. The extended burial position provides a different perspective, underscoring the loss of deeply ingrained cultural practices related to ritual schemes and indigenous identity and their replacement by new practices linked to Christian burial rituals. It is difficult to know if these changes respond to real ideological adjustments, since the available historical evidence refers to communities that even in conditions of complete subjugation remained attached to their rites and ceremonies (Pichardo 1945). We might be looking at a population that accepted changes to survive, using these as a means of protection through which autochthonous beliefs were maintained. In any event, in the case of extended burials the subordinate position of the indigenous population and their receptivity to European norms related to the imposition of religion is clear.

The entry of the European burial position may mark distinct incidents and levels of Hispanic pressure or domination. It may even be related to inherent aspects of the social rank of the indigenous individuals or their personal relation with the material or religious world of the Spaniards; perhaps for this reason the pattern is not generalized. Yet the majority of the burials with brass follow indigenous burial customs (10 of these burials are semi-flexed or very flexed). Although we still lack a diachronic perspective, these burials suggest the persistence and continuity of local patterns. The position of skeleton No. 25 was very flexed. This is the best example we have of the confluence of post-Columbian moments with indigenous practices, pointing to circumstances in which certain prerogatives and possibilities of indigenous expression were maintained even while changes determined by European influence were present.

The use of ornaments that include brass probably reflects the existence of post-Columbian indigenous elites (Valcárcel and Rodríguez 2005). As a case in point, one of the individuals in our sample (burial No. 57) contains mortuary objects of interest to the Europeans, including the gold beads and guanín. Perhaps the Spaniards gave differential treatment to the chiefly levels of society, since the recognition of their political importance, established even by colonial legislation, was a key element in ordering their relations with the indigenous communities (Deagan and Cruxent 1993:70; Moscoso 1986:319–324). In addition, burial No. 57 is one of the best examples of Christian burial in our sample, a phenomenon probably linked to Spanish interest in the development of ties to local elites as a means of promoting acceptance of Catholic beliefs. In fact, there are very early historical references to the Christianization of caciques in Cuba, as well as indications that

children of native families of high rank were sent to Spain in 1526 to be instructed in the Catholic faith in order to diffuse this belief system among their own people (Pichardo 1945). Nevertheless, the potential for elites to maintain a certain level of local autonomy, visible in the maintenance of symbolic and mortuary customs, probably was determined by a situation in which relationships with the Europeans were not coupled with total disarticulation from indigenous society and its institutions.

The selective use of European elements, and the changes this generated, calls attention to elite strata reiterating their key role in the panorama of Hispanic/indigenous interaction. We cannot ignore the fact that the important personage in the case of burial No. 57 was a young woman, which bears reference to the recognized feminine protagonism in indigenous spaces of power and to the important role played by women in the processes of contact with the Europeans (Sued-Badillo 1989).

Conclusions

The identification of the use of brass lacetags in the cemetery at El Chorro de Maíta rectifies earlier ideas about the metallic composition of these objects and determines the precise nature of their European origin. This new evidence brings about a radical change in the way we understand Indo-Hispanic contact at this site, and provides new insights into the post-Columbian character of many of the burials. The results of our investigation underscore, here as at other contact-era sites in the Antilles (Deagan 2004), the need to focus on methodologies directed toward questions of interaction rather than depending on the typical investigation strategies used in pre-Columbian contexts.

At El Chorro de Maíta, the level and characteristics of the cultural connections were discovered not just through an assessment of the quantity of European material or the presence of transcultural objects. Rather, we explored the possibilities these items offered for achieving an integrated evaluation of diverse elements within the burial contexts and recognizing the give and take among indigenous attitudes and the reality of the imposition of Spanish practices. Thus consideration of the nature and intensity of Spanish contact as expressed in the objects of transculturation is but one element in the larger task of understanding the development and results of cultural interaction.

The lacetags, in a modified mortuary environment, help us perceive strong links between the native population and elements of European culture, both material and ideological, as well as variations in important aspects of local cultural practices. The lacetags demonstrate intense use of the cemetery in post-Columbian times and force us to reevaluate our original notions of its pre-Columbian origins. In a place where historical documentation is scant and imprecise, we discov-

ered through archaeology a cemetery that contains evidence of great interest regarding Indo-Hispanic interactions. Despite changes in important native cultural practices the indigenous peoples maintained their capacity for self-expression. The elite appear central in actions of cultural continuity as well as in changes regarding their key roles in local society within the project of Hispanic domination. With these data, Indo-Hispanic interaction appears as a highly dynamic process in which change was neither immediate nor comprehensive. Indigenous communities were not the passive receivers of influences and elements as portrayed in earlier historical visions, but rather active agents living through a unique period of cultural interaction in the Caribbean.

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Notes

1. According to Valcárcel and Rodríguez (2005:134), the number of aboriginal skeletons could reach 110. This possibility is based on unconfirmed information concerning remains found during the construction of a museum at the site.
2. The concept of Spain as a distant place is an important factor. Objects from distant points of origin, as is the case with guanín, may be linked to the notion that in traditional societies cosmological distances are perceived as equivalent to geographic distances; thus goods or people from far away are perceived as possessing supernatural powers (Helms 1993).
3. Valcárcel and Rodríguez (2005:141) suggest that the selection of this space may also express hierarchical distinctions.