

Study finds shoelace tags better than gold

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A British study finds the device that prevents shoelaces from fraying was more valuable than gold to indigenous Cubans who traded with Columbus's fleet.

Archaeologists at University College London analyzed material from one of the largest burial sites in northeast Cuba. To their surprise very little gold was discovered, despite its relative abundance in the region. Instead, the most common artifacts were small metal tubes made of brass that were often threaded onto necklaces.

While brass making was widespread in medieval and earlier Europe, no evidence exists of brass production in America by indigenous people in the Caribbean -- known as Taíno -- before the arrival of the Europeans. Using microstructural and chemical analysis, the researchers were able to prove the brass originated in Germany.

Columbus's 1492 Spanish fleet was the first European presence to arrive in Cuba and radiocarbon dating shows remains from the burial site at El Chorro de Maíta, Cuba, date from a few decades after the conquest. Columbus's diaries also mention the trade of "lacetags."

The research appears in the November edition of the *Journal of Archaeological Science*.

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