

Atocha Wooden Bed Post, Tag #85413

By James Sinclair, MA

Perhaps one of the more unique finds from the *Atocha* over the past permit period is that of a turned wooden bed post.



Turned Lignum Vitae Bed Post, tag #85413, found by the Dare on 10-18-2014

Length: 144.8 cm.

Width: 9.5 cm.

Min. Width: 15 mm

Weight 8.4 kg.

This fragment of opulent furniture was located not far from the Primary Cultural Deposit. The Wood was so hard that when first located crew believed that the object might be modern. The first order of investigation was to identify the type of wood that the bed post was made of.

For wood identification we have used the services of;

Alden Identification Service
3560 Brookeside Drive
Chesapeake Beach, MD 20732
<http://woodid.homestead.com/ais.html>

Dr. Alden identified our post as Lignum Vitae (from Latin “Tree of Life”) a portion of the report follows:

1 - Furniture *Lignum-vitae* *Guaiacum sp.*

Lignum-vitae (Guaiacum spp. L. /Zygophyllaceae), also known as Guayacan or Gai"ac, is composed of about 5 species of slow growing shrubs and trees in the Caltrop Family (Zygophyllaceae), native to subtropical and tropical regions of Central and South America. The five recognized species are:

1. *Guaiacum angustifolium* Engelm. -Texas Lignum-vitae (Texas, Northeastern Mexico)
2. *Guaiacum coulteri* A.Gray - Sonoran Lignum-vitae (Western Mexico, Guatemala)
3. *Guaiacum officinale* L. - Common Lignum-vitae (The Caribbean, Northern South America)
4. *Guaiacum sanctum* L. - Hollywood Lignum-vitae (southern Florida, The Bahamas, Southern Mexico, Central America, Greater Antilles)
5. *Guaiacum unijugum* Brandegee - no common name (Northwestern Mexico)

The common name, Lignum-vitae, is actually a Latin phrase meaning "tree of life" as it was originally (16th C) thought to cure syphilis and other diseases (coughs, gout, rheumatism and arthritis). See Wikipedia for more detailed medical information.

The wood of Guaiacum officinale is the densest and hardest commercial hardwood it will sink when placed in water and was used as shaft bearings in submarines (USS Nautilus - SSN-571) and hydro-electric power plants (Conowingo), due to its self-lubricating properties in water. It was also used in cricket balls, croquet mallets, mortars & pestles, British police truncheons, belaying pins, deadeyes, and sheaves of blocks on 18th C sailing ships (HMS DeBraak).

Logs with 20" diameters were common during the 18th Century. "When this timber was first imported into England, during the early years of the 16th Century, it was especially valued for the medicinal properties of its resin, known as guaiacum and used as a remedy for gout, rheumatism and other ailments.

Colonial furniture makers organized themselves into guilds of craftsmen much as their counterparts in Spain had done for centuries. While research into the actual guild and possible individual workers in the guilds is beyond the scope of this short report much can still be said about this post.

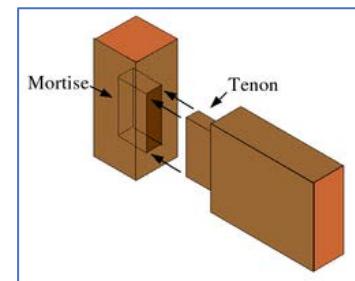
The selection of the wood is of significance, the general importance of Lignum vitae is clear, as having medicinal and spiritual properties that a wealthy colonial Spaniard would have sought. The post was created on a lathe and these were run by hand or with the use of a simple machine. The fact that our fleet and much of the cargo it carried is from the South American area would indicate that this object was produced in what was most likely the area of the Vice Regency of Peru. The fact that a bed was broken down and stored as cargo in the lower hold points to its value to one of the wealthy passengers or officers aboard the vessel.



Turned Finial

The turned wooden bed post is finished at the upper end with a finial design, popular in other Spanish decorative arts made in this period. The bottom where the post runs to square is where the fittings for the sides of the bed frame would go, mortise and tenon fashion the bottom is finished in a rounded knob that served as the foot of the post.

The bed frame gives a unique view into the more intimate lives of wealthy colonists, whereas materials recovered from the primary cultural deposit were overwhelmingly commercial cargo there were those objects, that highlighted other aspects of the life of the aristocracy, silver wares plates jewelry and chains all spoke of the opulence and vast wealth obtained in the New World by the Spanish upper class. The bed post while not of great intrinsic value allows us to look into the private lives of these long-gone people.



Colonial bed example

