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Columbus' Tomb in Spain
DNA Suggests Columbus Remains in Spain
By Rossella Lorenzi, Discovery News

Oct. 6, 2004 — Preliminary analysis suggests that Christopher Columbus might be buried in the Gothic cathedral of Santa Maria in Seville, the city from where he set sail in 1492, rather than under a cross-shaped lighthouse in Santo Domingo, where he made his historic landfall in the New World.

In the attempt to solve the long-standing dispute over Christopher Columbus' final resting place, Granada University researchers, led by forensic geneticist Jose Antonio Lorente, removed two boxes from an ornate tomb in the Spanish cathedral last year.

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“ Of course, DNA cannot give a name to the bones. ”



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One is thought to contain Columbus' bones; the other is known to hold the remains of Hernando, Columbus' illegitimate son.

Another box, believed to contain the bones of Columbus' brother Diego, was also exhumed in the Cartuja monastery, close to Seville, in 2002.

Researchers have now announced that DNA tests on the three bone samples, carried out in several laboratories coordinated by Lorente, have produced some positive results despite the degraded and contaminated condition of most of the material.

"There is a consensus between the lab in Granada and our lab in Rome over one part of the sequence. The result shows that the remains attributed to Columbus and those of his brother Diego are similar," Olga Rickards, from the University of Rome's molecular anthropology lab, told Discovery News.

"Basically, we can't rule out that the remains are those of Columbus. To be sure, we need to carry out further analysis. We need to have more results from more regions of the mitochondrial DNA that could support the same maternal lineage," Rickards said.

So far, Columbus' supposed remains have yielded none of the nuclear DNA that could prove a paternal lineage with Hernando, whose genetic material is in good shape. The test would provide

the best possible evidence for Columbus being buried in Seville.

Historians are sure about Hernando's identity because his remains were never moved after his 1539 burial.

With no nuclear DNA to work with, researchers turned to mitochondrial DNA, which is passed down from the mother and is more plentiful in molecules than nuclear DNA.

Rickards' team carried out a blind test, in which the three samples were kept anonymous. "Sample 1" and "sample 3" showed great similarity in two parts of the sequence inherited from the mother, with one part matching. The samples turned out to be the one attributed to Columbus and the one to his brother Diego.

"Of course, DNA cannot give a name to the bones. In the best-case scenario, further analysis will allow us to say that the bone sample from the Seville cathedral has a type of mitochondrial DNA identical to the fragment from La Cartuja. It will be the historian's job to say that those bones are from Columbus and Diego," Rickards said.

Travelling After Death

The man who discovered America travelled almost as much after his death as in his life. In his will, Columbus requested that his remains be taken to what is today the Dominican Republic. Yet he was initially buried in the Castilian city of Valladolid, where he died on May 20, 1506.

He remained there only three years before his bones were moved to Seville's Carthusian monastery. In 1537 they were finally sent for burial in Santo Domingo, along with the body of his legitimate son, Diego.

But in 1795, the French took control of the island and the Spaniards moved Columbus' bones to Havana. In 1898, when the Spaniards were thrown out of Cuba, the remains were taken back to Seville and buried in the cathedral.

The debate began when a box bearing the inscription "illustrious and enlightened male Don Cristobal Colon" and containing bone fragments was found in Santo Domingo's cathedral in 1877.

According to the Dominicans, in 1795 the Spaniards took the wrong body, that of Columbus' son Diego, buried nearby.

Genetic material from the body buried in Santo Domingo would be crucial for the research, but so far authorities in the Dominican Republic have not allowed the exhumation of the remains buried under the lighthouse.

"The hypothesis of some Columbus remains buried in Seville should not be ruled out. Genoa and Pavia also claim to have some of his remains. It seems that parts of his body are scattered

everywhere. Personally, I still believe that Columbus' remains are in Santo Domingo," writer and historian Ruggero Marino, author of several controversial books on Colombo, told Discovery News.

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