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January 13, 2006

On the trail of Columbuses

FROM GRAHAM KEELEY IN BARCELONA

STANDING in Barcelona harbour pointing out to sea, the statue of Christopher Columbus is as popular with pigeons as camera-toting tourists.

It is a monument to the great explorer who set sail from this part of Spain to discover America. But a novel scientific study will try to discover if Columbus had more than a passing link with Spain.

A research project is searching for his distant descendants to mark the 500th anniversary of his death in May.

Scientists from Granada University are taking DNA samples from Spanish men with the surname Colón (Columbus) to try to trace where his family came from.

Though Columbus is widely thought to have been born in Genoa, in Italy, some theories have suggested he was from Catalonia, in north-east Spain.

The samples, in the form of saliva, have been taken from volunteers in Catalonia, and will be compared to DNA from the bones of one of Columbus's sons, Hernando Colón. Similar searches are under way in Genoa, Majorca and Valencia.

Already 300 Spaniards have agreed to take part, hoping to establish a link with the admiral who set sail from Spain to discover the New World in 1492. Josep Colom, a taxi-driver from Sort, a town north of Barcelona, told the Spanish newspaper La Vanguardia: "It seemed a bit strange to me at first, but then I agreed.

"I am very hopeful we are related. My son is called Arnau Cristóbal [Christopher] and I wanted to give him Cristóbal as a first name, but the family thought it was too much." His family's surname takes the Catalan form of Columbus.

But researchers have their work cut out. In Catalonia alone, there are 2,000 Columbuses on the electoral register. José Antonio Lorente Acosta, who is leading the project, said: "We are looking for men who share the same Y chromosome as the son of Columbus."

The centuries-old row over where Columbus is buried appeared to have been settled last year after Spanish anthropologists exhumed bones from a cathedral in Seville. When they turned out to be those of Columbus's son, Diego, scientists conceded he is most probably buried in Santo Domingo, in the Dominican Republic.



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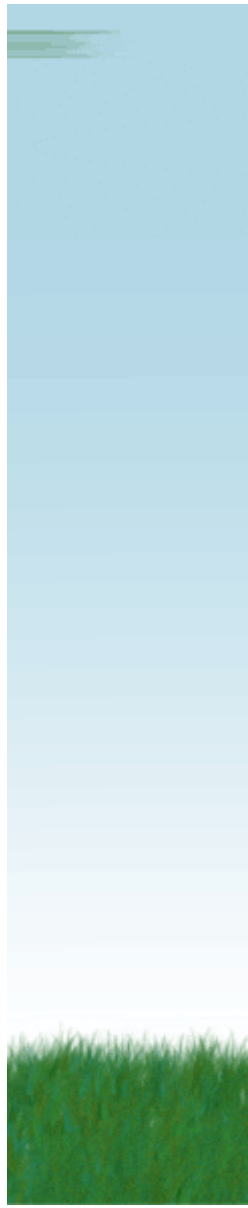
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