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DNA may expose the shady origins of Columbus

January 15 2006 at 01:53PM

By Elizabeth Nash

Madrid - Spanish scientists are to test the DNA of hundreds of Catalans with the surname Colom to determine whether Christopher Columbus, far from the Italian gentleman he has long been believed to be, was in fact a pirate born in Catalonia.

The experiment, in determining whether any of the participants are related to the pioneering explorer, is designed to clarify the disputed origins of the man who made landfall in America in 1492.

While historians have mostly assumed that Columbus was an Italian born in 1451 in Genoa, a persuasive counter-lobby argues that the mariner who pioneered the Spanish conquista was in reality the Catalan Cristofol Colom, who airbrushed his past to conceal his activities as a pirate and conspirator against the king.

About 120 Catalans are to donate samples of their saliva this week to a team of geneticists headed by José Antonio Lorente Acosta, the head of the laboratory of genetic identification at Granada University.

Tests on another 180 people sharing the name Colom will follow in Mallorca and Valencia. Investigators will compare the results with the DNA from Columbus's illegitimate son, Hernando, whose remains lie in Seville Cathedral.

"We're not looking for descendants of Columbus but a common ancestor who may be the link between the admiral and today's Coloms. If we find a Y chromosome (the only one that males inherit by the paternal line), we could say they were related," a spokesperson for Acosta said this week.

The first historian to suggest that Columbus was Catalan was a Peruvian, Luis Ulloa Cisneros, who published his theory in Paris in 1927.

Linguists favour the idea, saying that Columbus used Catalan "or something like it" rather than Italian or Castilian Spanish in his writings, and gave many of his discoveries in the New World Catalan names.

One historian points out that most of the places in the Caribbean and Central America named by Columbus can be linked directly to the Balearic island of Ibiza.

Historians have speculated that Columbus may have been a Catalan nobleman who joined a failed uprising against King Joan II of Aragon, the father of King Ferdinand, and took orders from the French in various acts of piracy, including the sinking of Portuguese galleons.

Columbus then expunged his former identity to avoid reprisals and maintain the support of the new monarch for his planned voyage to America. Ferdinand and his wife, Queen Isabella, united Spain and sponsored Columbus's voyages, and on the strength of his discoveries, founded the richest maritime empire the world had ever seen.

Some versions suggest Columbus was the illegitimate son of Prince Carlos of Viana, a mallorquin nobleman related to Ferdinand and Isabella.

They suggest that Columbus was aware of his royal connections, which were never acknowledged, addressing his patrons with the unusually familiar "my natural lords".

Other theories include that of the historian Salvador de Madariaga, who argues that Columbus was from a Catalan family who fled to Genoa to escape persecution for being Jews. Acosta, who favours the Catalan thesis, has spent years trying to establish by DNA testing where Columbus's bones lie: whether they are beneath the cathedral crypt in the Dominican Republic or in a lead box uncovered in 2003 in a Seville ceramics factory, formerly a Carthusian monastery.

Whoever he was, and wherever he is, we do know Columbus died on May 20 1606 in the Castillian capital of Valladolid, north of Madrid. The city will host big quinqucentenary celebrations in May by which time



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quintecenary celebrations in May, by which time investigators in Catalonia hope to be able to confirm, or not, the nationality of Europe's pioneering mariner.

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