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News from the Caribbean as of Friday January 27, 2006

Whence Columbus? DNA to decide in Spanish test

01-25-2006

by Pierre Ausseill

BARCELONA, Spain (AFP): Whence Columbus? The true origins of the great explorer have puzzled historians for centuries but an international investigation under way in Spain, Italy and southern France is out to lay the issue to rest using DNA material collated from hundreds of people.



The tomb of Christopher Columbus in Seville's cathedral. AFP PHOTO/Samuel Aranda

Jose Antonio Lorente is the man leading investigations at the genetic identification laboratory at the University of Granada in southern Spain. The team of experts came together in November to work on the mystery of the sailor who changed the face of the world.

"We are trying to piece together a genetic map of the Columbus family in several areas of the Mediterranean where various theories have it Christopher Columbus was born," explained Lorente, an acknowledged expert in genetic identification using DNA samples.

"It is not about showing that Columbus was Catalan, Spanish or whatever. Certain historians believe he was not Genoese, but the majority say he was," he added.

"Eventually, we will be able to see which region the DNA Y chromosome of Colombus has most affinity with and where, probably, we can surmise he originated."

More than 120 people with the family name Colom -- the Catalan derivative -- gave a saliva sample while in the French region of Perpignan, just over the border, 18 people with similar names such as Colomb or Coulom also did the test. In Italy, samples will be taken from people with the family name Colombo.

Lorente hopes to publish results of the survey in time to mark the 500th anniversary of Columbus' death in the central northern Spanish city of Valladolid on May 20, 1506.

His laboratory is seeking to determine the variety and DNA profile of the Y chromosome (transmitted in identical fashion from fathers to male offspring) of people living in a single area who could be descended from Columbus. The samples will be compared with those of the explorer's elder son, Hernando, whose remains lie in Seville Cathedral.

Testing began in Barcelona and has since been undertaken in Valencia further south on the Mediterranean coast, the Balearic Islands, the Catalan region of southern France and in Genoa, Italy.

Columbus fascinates Lorente, who has notably taught at the FBI academy and whose work has allowed identification of victims of Spain's 1936-39 Civil War as well as those of Latin American dictatorships.

Lorente is particularly curious how Columbus continued on his travels even in death, with his remains first taken to Santo Domingo in 1544, then to Cuba, prior to being returned to Spain in 1898.

However, the Dominican Republic insists the authentic remains are still on its soil at the Columbus lighthouse.

Lorente's team has already carried out tests on the badly deteriorated remains of a skeleton at the cathedral in the hope of obtaining a formal identification it could be of Columbus.

In 2003 Lorente had the explorer's supposed remains exhumed from his tomb in Seville Cathedral to compare their mitochondrial DNA, handed down from mothers to children, with samples from his brother Diego, whose remains have been authenticated at their resting place in the southern region of Andalusia.

The small sample of bones, weighing only a total 150 grams, coupled with their poor condition, has thrown a spoke in the investigation's wheel, however.

Even so, "the preliminary results show up an identity between the mitochondrial DNA of Christopher and Diego Columbus which allows us to think that the Seville remains are indeed those of the navigator," says Lorente.

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