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## DNA May Reveal Who Can Claim Columbus

By [Guy Gugliotta](#)

Washington Post Staff Writer

Monday, May 15, 2006; Page A06

He gave new meaning to the phrase "world-class celebrity," but like Garbo, Christopher Columbus had little interest in talking about himself and dismissed queries about his origins with a rhetorical shrug: "*Vine de nada*" -- "I came from nothing."

It was never enough. For centuries, scholars have wondered about this enigmatic mariner whose compulsion to travel east by traveling west altered the course of Western civilization and effectively ended the Middle Ages.

He may have been born in Genoa, but he wrote in indifferent Latin or in good Spanish -- never in Italian. He had French connections, married a Portuguese woman, may have been Jewish, may have lived in Catalonia and died May 20, 500 years ago this week, in the Spanish city of Valladolid.

To commemorate this event, researchers led by Spanish forensic pathologist José Antonio Lorente Acosta are comparing the DNA of Columbus's illegitimate son, Fernando, with DNA from hundreds of possible Columbus descendants in at least three countries.

The goal is to determine once and for all whether Columbus, as traditionalists hold, was the son of Genoese wool weaver Domenico Colombo, or was instead a Spaniard named Colon; or a Catalan Colom, from Barcelona; or a French Coulom or Colomb; or perhaps Corsican or Mallorcan.

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"We'll get something, but it will be complicated," Lorente said in a telephone interview from his University of Granada office. "The trick is to differentiate between the Columbuses from different places -- and there's no guarantee."

Lorente's original idea was to examine purported Columbus remains in Seville, Spain, and at the *Faro a Colon* monument in the Dominican Republic to find out where Columbus was truly buried.

The admiral's bones were allegedly taken from Santo Domingo in the late 18th century and sent to Seville, but Dominican workmen later found a lead box in the Santo Domingo cathedral with Columbus's name on it.

Either he never went to Seville, or his bones are in both places, or the Dominican box holds somebody else's remains. Lorente sought to compare DNA in both places with DNA from Fernando and Columbus's brother Diego.

The plan foundered because there were not enough remains from Seville to provide conclusive DNA samples, and the Dominican government refused to let the team examine the bones there, telling Lorente he had been authorized only to evaluate the "state of preservation of the admiral's remains," not take samples.

This was perhaps predictable, for in the Columbus wars, those who hold the upper hand never relinquish it. Why would the Dominican Republic allow a Spaniard to compare their Columbus remains with Spain's?

"People want him to be theirs," said Peter Dickson, a retired CIA analyst and independent Columbus scholar. "If you're Spanish, you want him to be in Spain. If you're Italian, you want him to be Italian."

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