




[Qatar News](#)
[World News](#)
[Business News](#)
[Sports News](#)
[Entertainment](#)
[Features](#)
[Young Editors](#)
[Commentary](#)
[Editorial](#)
[Photo Gallery](#)
[Discussion Forum](#)
[From Our Archives](#)

Search

All Sections 

Search

Free Newsletter

e-mail:

Contact Us

[Contact Details](#)

[Advertising](#)

[Newspaper Subscribe](#)

[Letters To The Editor](#)

[Site Feedback](#)

DNA may reveal who can claim Columbus (LAT-WP)

By Guy Gugliotta

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 travelling west altered the course of Western civilisation 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 Josi Antonio Lorente Acosta are comparing the DNA of Columbus’ 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.

“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’ 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 Dixon, 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.”

One thing that Dixon and others agree on is that Columbus never made the slightest effort to clarify his origins. “I don’t know if I agree he did it deliberately,” said retired historian Eugene Lyon, “but he was really secretive.”

This trait, coupled with the difficulty of evaluating 500-year-old records, are what make Columbus’ origins so elusive. All the main theories have facts to support them, but all have significant shortcomings, as well.

Lyon, an independent maritime scholar, supports the traditional view — that Columbus was born Cristoforo Colombo, in 1451 in Genoa, the gritty port city at the eastern terminus of what is today the Italian Riviera.

The Italian story largely rests on evidence from about 60 documents

Other Top Stories

- ▶ [US restores ties with Libya](#)
- ▶ [New QCCI board elected](#)
- ▶ [Qatari to get 40 lashes for drunk driving](#)
- ▶ [SMS alerts on traffic violation, visa status](#)
- ▶ [Minister opens Milipol expo](#)
- ▶ [Qatar witnesses impressive growth in e governance](#)
- ▶ [Woman moves NHRC against family bid to force her into marriage](#)
- ▶ [Majority of expats reel under debt burden](#)
- ▶ [Ghashamiya residents left without basic services](#)
- ▶ [Mount Merapi spews gas, ash](#)
- ▶ [EU to offer Iran best civil N-know how](#)

detailing the history of the family, including Christopher's activities representing Genoese merchants in Portugal in the 1470s and a family decision to send a cousin to serve with Columbus, "admiral of the king of Spain," in the 1490s.

"There's no question in my mind as to the Genoese origin of Columbus, even though all these other people claim him," Lyon said in a telephone interview. "The other stories are just local pride."

Maybe not. The Italian story fails to explain why there is no record of Columbus ever communicating with the Genoa Colombos or having written anything in Italian. Instead, copious notes in the margins of books he owned, as well as logs, letters and other documents are all in Latin or Castilian Spanish, the language of his benefactress, Queen Isabella.

"The Latin is always awkward, but the Castilian is very fluent and even elegant in places," said foreign-language historian Charles Merrill of Mount St. Mary's University. "But it shows signs of not being his native language."

Merrill said Columbus made consistent errors in his prose, "but they weren't Italian errors." Instead "a lot of them seemed to be Portuguese, but they were the same mistakes that a Catalan would have made."

[Qatar News](#) | [World Watch](#) | [Business News](#) | [Sports News](#) | [Entertainment](#) | [Features](#)
[Young Editors](#) | [Commentary](#) | [Photo Gallery](#) | [Discussion Forum](#)

[Back to the Top](#)

© 2001 The Peninsula. All Rights Reserved.
[Contact Us](#) for any content re-production.
To advertise on the site, please get in touch with our [Ad. Manager](#).

Site designed
and developed
by:
[SiDSnetMinds](#)