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## Finding the real Christopher Columbus is as simple as `DNA'

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DPA , MADRID AND ROME  
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As the world marks the 500th anniversary of the death of Christopher Columbus, the mysteries surrounding his birth and death -- his origin and the location of his tomb -- could be about to be resolved.



Scientists investigating DNA from bones half a millennium old and from people still alive are trying to determine whether Columbus was an Italian, Spaniard or Frenchman, and whether his remains lie buried in southern Spain or across the Atlantic in the Dominican Republic.

Both investigations are based on three sets of bones to which researchers gained unprecedented access in Seville in 2002 and 2003.

An ornate tomb in the cathedral may contain the bones of Columbus and is known to hold the remains of one of his sons, Hernando.

A third set of bones from Seville could have belonged to Columbus' younger brother, Diego.

The bones thought to be those of the great explorer have deteriorated so much, they only provide fragmentary genetic evidence, said Miguel Lorente, a member of a Spanish investigative team based in Granada University.

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Those believed to belong to Diego are not in much better shape, but Hernando's bones have been relatively well preserved, Lorente said in a telephone interview.

Spanish scientists are collaborating with others in Italy, the US and Germany.

Weaver's son

Mystery surrounds the birth around 1451 of the admiral credited with "discovering" America, in 1492. Christopher Columbus is usually presented as a wool weaver's son from the Italian port of Genoa, but other theories claim he was a Spanish aristocrat, a converted Jew, a French pirate and even the illegitimate son of Pope Innocent VIII.

Some believe he was Catalan, Basque, Portuguese, Greek, Corsican or even Swiss. Genetic research could throw some light on the puzzle, with experts busy comparing DNA samples taken from Hernando's bones to that of possible male descendants who bear surnames like Colombo, Colon, Colomb or Coulomb in Italy, Spain and France.

Saliva samples have been taken from more than 200 people in Italy alone, said molecular anthropology professor Olga Rickards from Rome's Tor Vergata University.

"We are still collecting samples, as we are finding more people with Columbus-type surnames than we had originally expected," Rickards said.

Only men are being tested, because researchers are focusing on the Y chromosome, which determines male sex. The results are not expected until September.

The second riddle that DNA could crack is Columbus' place of burial, a politically sensitive subject, because both Spain and the Dominican Republic claim to have his remains.

Posthumous travel

The navigator died on May 20, 1506 in relative obscurity in the Spanish city of Valladolid, from where his remains were taken to a Seville monastery in 1509. In 1544, they were shipped to Santo Domingo, now capital of the Dominican



Republic, because he had wished to be buried in the Americas.

In 1795, when Spain ceded Santo Domingo to France, bones thought to be those of Columbus were taken to the Cuban capital Havana to allow them to rest on Spanish soil.

But when the Spaniards were thrown out of Cuba, the remains were returned to Seville in 1898. In 1877, however, workmen in the cathedral of Santo Domingo made an unexpected discovery. They unearthed an urn containing bones and displaying the inscription: "The illustrious and distinguished male, Don Christopher Columbus."

The Dominicans triumphantly concluded that the Spaniards had taken the wrong bones and erected a monumental tomb for the admiral.

If, however, DNA from the bones in Seville matches that of Hernando and Diego, that would make it look likely that the Dominicans are mistaken and that Columbus did find his final resting place in Spain.

"So far, the evidence indicates that the man to whom those bones belonged was related to Hernando and Diego on the maternal side," Lorente said. "There are rarely absolute certainties in science, but we expect to reach conclusions with a high degree of probability."

Lorente does not dismiss the possibility that Columbus' bones could be divided between Spain and the Dominican Republic, meaning the explorer rests on both ends of the sea route he discovered.

This story has been viewed 376 times.

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