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In 1492, whose DNA sailed the ocean blue? Are you sure?

By Amy Harmon,

New York Times News Service

Barcelona, Spain | When schoolchildren turn to the chapter on Christopher Columbus' humble origins as the son of a wool-weaver in Genoa, they are not generally told that he might instead have been born out of wedlock to a Portuguese prince. Or that he might have been a Jew whose parents converted to escape the Spanish Inquisition. Or a rebel in the medieval kingdom of Catalonia.

Yet with little evidence to support them, multiple theories of Columbus' early years have long found devoted proponents among those who would claim alternative bragging rights to the famous explorer. And now, five centuries after he opened the door to the New World, Columbus' revisionist biographers have found a new hope for vindication.

The Age of Discovery has discovered DNA.

In 2004, a Spanish geneticist, Jose A. Lorente, extracted genetic material from a cache of Columbus' bones in Seville to settle a dispute about where he was buried. Ever since, he has been beset by amateur historians, government officials and self-styled Columbus relatives of multiple nationalities clamoring for a genetic retelling of the standard textbook tale.

Little known of past

Even adherents of the Italian orthodoxy concede that little is known about the provenance of the Great Navigator, who seems to have purposely obscured his past. But contenders for his legacy have no compunction about prospecting for his secrets in the cells he took to his grave. And the arrival today of another anniversary of Columbus' first landfall in the Bahamas has only sharpened their appetite for a genetic verdict, preferably in their own favor.

A Genoese Cristoforo Colombo almost certainly did exist. Archives record his birth and early life. But there is little to tie that man to the one who crossed the Atlantic in 1492. Snippets from Columbus' life point all around the southern European coast. He kept books in Catalan and his handwriting has, according to some, a Catalanian flair. He married a Portuguese noblewoman. He wrote in Castilian. He decorated his letters with a Hebrew cartouche.

Since it seems now that the best bet for deducing Columbus' true hometown is to look for a genetic match in places where he might have lived, hundreds of Spaniards,

Italians, and even a few Frenchmen have happily swabbed their cheeks to supply cells for comparison.

"You would be proud to know that the man that goes to America the first time was Catalan," said Jordi Colom, 51, an executive at a local television station whose saliva sample will help test the contention that Columbus was born in Catalonia, the once-independent eastern region of modern Spain that still fosters its own language, culture and designs on independence.

No chance, said Renato Colombo, 62, a retired Italian engineer who proffered his DNA to reassert his nation's hold on the status quo. "It has never been in doubt that he was from Liguria," the region in northwest Italy of which Genoa is the capital, he insisted. "In his personality, there are the characteristics of the Genoese, mostly represented by his project and his visceral attachment to money and his determination."

Names and DNA

Colom and Colombo are both "Columbus" in their native tongues. And along with their names, each inherited from their father a Y chromosome - a sliver of DNA passed exclusively from father to son - which would have been virtually unchanged since the 15th century. A Columbus match to either man's Y-chromosome DNA would tie him to that line's Italian or Catalonian home.

"What I want to write is the final book on Columbus, and I will not be able to do it without science to settle this," said Francesc Albardaner, who was seduced by the possibility that DNA - a tool whose answers are treated as indisputable fact in courtrooms and on TV shows - would endorse his deeply held belief in the Catalonian Columbus.

An architect in Barcelona, Albardaner took more than three months off work, called 2,000 Coloms and persuaded 225 of them to scrape their cheeks at his Center for Columbus Studies in Barcelona. The swabs along with 100 Colombos collected in Italy are being analyzed by Lorente at the University of Granada and a team of scientists in Rome.

A Colom match could overturn conventional wisdom about the nationality, class, religion, and motives of the man who began the age of American colonization. On the other hand, an association with Colombo DNA would cement Italy's national pride in a man who remains a hero to many, sundry complaints from American Indians he slaughtered, Africans he enslaved and Vikings who got there first notwithstanding.

A waste of time?

But some petitioners think it's a waste of time to scour the phone book for Columbus' long lost kin. Insisting that they know who Columbus' father really was, they are asking Lorente to perform a 500-year postdated paternity test.

The council president of Majorca, for instance, has paid him to examine the exhumed remains of Prince Carlos of Viana, the one-time heir to the Catalonian crown who purportedly fathered a son with a woman on the island whose last name was Colom.

Those who had hoped DNA would crash the Italian party expected a genetic pronouncement from the scientists on the 500th anniversary of Columbus' death last May. Or last Columbus Day. Surely by this one.

After 500 years in a crypt, however, a mere trace of DNA was all that could be extracted from Columbus' bones, and Lorente has said he is loath to use it indiscriminately.

"My heart," said Albardaner, "will not endure so many delays."

"Will Lorente continue to hide what the scientists know concerning Columbus' DNA?" asked Peter Dickson, a retired CIA analyst whose self-published book on Columbus argues that he was part French, part Italian, part Spanish and part Jewish, in an e-mail message to fellow Columbus buffs. "Will he remain silent on Columbus Day once again?"

Lorente says he will.

"I'm very sorry about the great expectation among some historians that they all want the DNA to confirm their hypothesis," said Lorente. "But science needs its time and has its pace."



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