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# DNA tests may solve mystery of explorer Columbus' origin

GENETICISTS SEEK CHROMOSOME MATCH

By Amy Harmon  
New York Times

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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 five centuries after he opened the door to the New World, Columbus' revisionist biographers have found a new hope for vindication: DNA.

In 2004, a Spanish geneticist, Dr. Jose 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.

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. Columbus kept books in Catalan and his handwriting has, according to some, a Catalanian flair. 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 a few Frenchmen have swabbed their cheeks to supply cells for comparison.

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"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 TV station whose saliva sample will help test the contention that Columbus was born in Catalonia, the once-independent eastern region of modern Spain.

No chance, said Renato Colombo, 62, a retired Italian engineer who proffered his DNA. "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."

Colom and Colombo are both "Columbus" in their native tongues. Along with their names, each inherited from their father a Y chromosome - a sliver of DNA passed 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 Catalanian 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 hoped that DNA would endorse his deeply held belief in the Catalanian 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.

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