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Swab the cheeks! DNA quest for Columbus

AMY HARMON IN BARCELONA

WHEN schoolchildren turn to the chapter on Christopher Columbus's 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's early years have long found devoted proponents. And now, five centuries after he opened the door to the New World, Columbus's revisionist biographers have found a new hope for vindication.

The Age of Discovery has discovered DNA.

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.

Francia, un rendez-vous único



In 2004, a Spanish geneticist, Dr Jose A Lorente, extracted genetic material from a cache of Columbus's bones in Seville to settle a dispute about where he was buried.

Since it seems now that the best bet for deducing Columbus's 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 test the contention that Columbus was born in Catalonia.

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," he insisted, referring to the region in northwest Italy of which Genoa is the capital. "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. A Columbus match to either man's Y-chromosome DNA would tie him to that line's Italian or Catalan 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 would endorse his deeply held belief in the Catalan 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 Centre for Columbus Studies in Barcelona. The swabs along with 100 Colombos collected in Italy are being analysed by Lorente at the University of Granada and a team of scientists in Rome.

But some petitioners think it's a waste of time to scour the phone book for Columbus's long-lost kin. Insisting that they know who Columbus's father really was, they are asking Lorente to perform a 500-year post-dated 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's death last May. After 500 years in a crypt, however, a mere trace of DNA was all that could be extracted from Columbus's bones, and Lorente has said he is loath to use it indiscriminately.

To make things even more difficult, he has discovered that Catalonian Coloms and Genoese Colombos are so closely related, it is hard to distinguish them with the standard Y-chromosome tests. So he is searching for more subtle differences that would allow him to link Columbus to a single lineage.

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

Others have accused Lorente of nationalist bias, of covering up results that suggest Columbus was a Jew and of withholding a historical treasure from the entire Western world.

"Will Lorente continue to hide what the scientists know concerning Columbus's 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.

In the absence of data, rumours are flying.

Olga Rickards, a Lorente collaborator at Tor Vergata University in Rome, has been quoted as saying that she "wouldn't bet on Columbus being Spanish." A graduate student of Lorente's who had studied the Colombo DNA led Italian newspapers to believe Columbus was from Lombardy, north of Genoa, although she had apparently never seen Columbus's DNA. And Nito Verdera, a journalist from the Balearic island of Ibiza, who says the explorer was a Catalan-speaking Ibizan crypto-Jew, cited leaks from Lorente's team that link Columbus to North Africa.

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Comments

1. **Guga II**, Rockall / 2:50am 14 Oct 2007

I thought it was Eric the Red who was the first European to discover America. Columbus was only the first European to discover assorted Caribbean islands.

2. **49th State**, heading for a nap on the couch / 5:37am 14 Oct 2007

1 Guga

It was Leif Erikson who is attributed to having described as place called "Vinland." We still do not know where this place may have been, but we are certain the Norse were here 500 years before Columbus set sail. Scots were most likely among the Norse who came here.

3. **P.C Murdoch** / 7:11am 14 Oct 2007

Lets ask Al Gore, he will know.

4. **Rulesbutnotrulers**, Don't blame me, I didn't vote for any of them. / 8:27am 14 Oct 2007