



THE DNA AGE Seeking Columbus's Origins, With a Swab



Denis Doyle for The New York Times, left; Associated Press

Gabino Colom Rosada of Barcelona is among those whose DNA may help determine the origins of Christopher Columbus.

By AMY HARMON Published: October 8, 2007

BARCELONA, Spain — When schoolchildren turn to the chapter on Christopher Columbus's humble origins as the son of a 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 among those who would claim alternative bragging rights to the explorer. 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.

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. 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.

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 on Oct. 8 of another anniversary of Columbus's 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's life point all around the

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Stefano Buonomici for The New York Times  
A statue of Columbus stands over Barcelona, Spain, whose claim to the explorer is challenged by several other places.

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'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 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."

Mr. Colom and Mr. Colombo are both "Columbus" in their native tongues. And along with their names, each inherited

from his 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 would tie him to that paternal 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 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 Catalanian Columbus.

Mr. Albardaner, a Barcelona architect, 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 Dr. Lorente at the University of Granada and scientists in Rome.

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*Peter Kiefer contributed reporting from Rome.*

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