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**HEADLINE:** DNA May Reveal Who Can Claim Columbus  
  
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He gave new meaning to the phrase "world-class celebrity," but like Garbo, Christopher Columbus had little interest in talking about himself and dismissed queries about his origins with a rhetorical shrug: "Vine de nada" -- "I came from nothing."   
  
It was never enough. For centuries, scholars have wondered about this enigmatic mariner whose compulsion to travel east by traveling west altered the course of Western civilization and effectively ended the Middle Ages.   
  
He may have been born in Genoa, but he wrote in indifferent Latin or in good Spanish -- never in Italian. He had French connections, married a Portuguese woman, may have been Jewish, may have lived in Catalonia and died May 20, 500 years ago this week, in the Spanish city of Valladolid.   
  
To commemorate this event, researchers led by Spanish forensic pathologist José Antonio Lorente Acosta are comparing the DNA of Columbus's illegitimate son, Fernando, with DNA from hundreds of possible Columbus descendants in at least three countries.   
  
The goal is to determine once and for all whether Columbus, as traditionalists hold, was the son of Genoese wool weaver Domenico Colombo, or was instead a Spaniard named Colon; or a Catalan Colom, from Barcelona; or a French Coulom or Colomb; or perhaps Corsican or Mallorcan.   
  
"We'll get something, but it will be complicated," Lorente said in a telephone interview from his University of Granada office. "The trick is to differentiate between the Columbuses from different places -- and there's no guarantee."   
  
Lorente's original idea was to examine purported Columbus remains in Seville, Spain, and at the Faro a Colon monument in the Dominican Republic to find out where Columbus was truly buried.   
  
The admiral's bones were allegedly taken from Santo Domingo in the late 18th century and sent to Seville, but Dominican workmen later found a lead box in the Santo Domingo cathedral with Columbus's name on it.   
  
Either he never went to Seville, or his bones are in both places, or the Dominican box holds somebody else's remains. Lorente sought to compare DNA in both places with DNA from Fernando and Columbus's brother Diego.   
  
The plan foundered because there were not enough remains from Seville to provide conclusive DNA samples, and the Dominican government refused to let the team examine the bones there, telling Lorente he had been authorized only to evaluate the "state of preservation of the admiral's remains," not take samples.   
  
This was perhaps predictable, for in the Columbus wars, those who hold the upper hand never relinquish it. Why would the Dominican Republic allow a Spaniard to compare their Columbus remains with Spain's?   
  
"People want him to be theirs," said Peter Dickson, a retired CIA analyst and independent Columbus scholar. "If you're Spanish, you want him to be in Spain. If you're Italian, you want him to be Italian."   
  
One thing that Dickson and others agree on is that Columbus never made the slightest effort to clarify his origins. "I don't know if I agree he did it deliberately," said retired historian Eugene Lyon, "but he was really secretive."   
  
This trait, coupled with the difficulty of evaluating 500-year-old records, are what make Columbus's origins so elusive. All the main theories have facts to support them, but all have significant shortcomings, as well.   
  
Lyon, an independent maritime scholar, supports the traditional view -- that Columbus was born Cristoforo Colombo, in 1451 in Genoa, the gritty port city at the eastern terminus of what is today the Italian Riviera.   
  
The Italian story largely rests on evidence from about 60 documents detailing the history of the family, including Christopher's activities representing Genoese merchants in Portugal in the 1470s and a family decision to send a cousin to serve with Columbus, "admiral of the king of Spain," in the 1490s.   
  
"There's no question in my mind as to the Genoese origin of Columbus, even though all these other people claim him," Lyon said in a telephone interview. "The other stories are just local pride."   
  
Maybe not. The Italian story fails to explain why there is no record of Columbus ever communicating with the Genoa Colombos or having written anything in Italian. Instead, copious notes in the margins of books he owned, as well as logs, letters and other documents are all in Latin or Castilian Spanish, the language of his benefactress, Queen Isabella.   
  
"The Latin is always awkward, but the Castilian is very fluent and even elegant in places," said foreign-language historian Charles Merrill of Mount St. Mary's University. "But it shows signs of not being his native language."   
  
Merrill said Columbus made consistent errors in his prose, "but they weren't Italian errors." Instead "a lot of them seemed to be Portuguese, but they were the same mistakes that a Catalan would have made."   
  
Catalonia, on Spain's northeast coast, was embroiled in a civil war against King John of Aragon -- father of King Ferdinand -- in the 1460s, and one of the leading rebel families were the Coloms of Barcelona, Catalonia's principal city. Merrill is convinced that Columbus was part of the uprising.   
  
"I feel that Ferdinand and Isabella knew for certain who he was," Merrill said. The monarchs agreed to bankroll Columbus in 1492, on the "understanding that he would not insist on his national identity."   
  
This was one reason for secrecy. Another was that Columbus quite likely commanded a warship under the duke of Anjou, a Catalan ally and a sworn enemy of Aragon. This would mark Columbus as a seafarer -- something the Italian story does not explain very well -- but it would also make him much older -- by 17 years.   
  
Merrill has no quarrel with the Italian documents, but he thinks the Italian Cristoforo was a different person. One way to show this would be to examine the Dominican remains for clues to his age at death -- if he was older than 55, then he was not the wool weaver's son.   
  
Still, the Catalan story has the same major weakness as the Italian story: Columbus never wrote in Catalan and never claimed to be Catalan. The Castilian grammatical errors, as Dickson noted, "are the only good card they [the Catalan theorists] have."   
  
Dickson espouses a multicultural view -- that Columbus could have Catalan, French, Italian and Jewish roots. Columbus himself referred to French and Genoese relationships and may have been a product of intermarriage of families that lived in the Genoese Republic.   
  
Dickson also notes that Columbus in his will bequeathed "one-half mark of silver" to "a Jew who lived at the entrance to the Jewish Quarter in Lisbon," a deathbed affirmation, perhaps, of ties to the Jewish community that were never evident in Columbus's life.   
  
If Columbus was the mixture that Dickson suggests, Lorente's DNA analysis is unlikely to settle the argument. Instead of "coming from nothing," it may turn out that the fabled admiral of the ocean sea "came from everything."   
  
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