

Columbus the Catalan?

On the 500th anniversary of Columbus' death, Catalonia Today investigates the theories claiming he was a Catalan

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● As schoolchildren we all learned that Christopher Columbus was born in Genoa, and that years later he arrived in Castille where the Catholic Kings funded his ambitious expedition and, finally, on October 12, 1492, he discovered America. This is what we learned, thanks to books, films and drawings of Columbus at different stages in his life, such as when he demonstrated, using an egg, that the earth is round, especially when he set foot on the New World.

However, this story, or much of it, could be about to be rewritten, if DNA tests confirm the theory that Columbus was of Catalan origin. In fact, it's not one single theory, but a collection of them, from the most radical to the mildest alteration of hitherto accepted events, some of them possible, and some of them less so, and others that are no more than products of the oral tradition. Even so, they all agree on one thing—Columbus spoke Catalan and was not born in Genoa, but whether in Catalonia or someplace in the kingdom of Aragon, such as the Balearic Islands remains to be seen

An abundance of theories

It is true that around Europe, many other theories exist as to Columbus' origin, including the official one – that he was from Genoa – though this is beginning to look less likely. But the ones that claim that Columbus was Catalan have the virtue of fuelling the academic industry surrounding Admiral Columbus, and of solving some major gaps in the "Columbus was born in Genoa" theory.

To begin with, there is the sur-

name Colom (Columbus), which is unmistakably of Catalan origin and appears in a great many documents connected with the Admiral, and is linked to a family of nobility, mer-

chants and mariners based in Barcelona and that was against King Joan II, characteristics that would tie in perfectly with many parts of the Columbus story.

Furthermore, there are many

links between Columbus and Catalonia that have been unearthed during the course of time, one of which is the names—of Catalan or Balearic origin—that Columbus used when nam-

ing geographical locations that he came across in the New World.

His native language

More recently, Lluís de Yzaguirre, a lecturer at the Pompeu Fabra University, has put the original Spanish texts written by Columbus (which are the only ones that have been preserved) through a computer program that is expressly designed to detect lexical mistakes in written texts and to determine, as far as possible, what the author's native language was. Yzaguirre's conclusions were clear—Columbus spoke and thought in Catalan. This discovery will be officially presented at the Museu Marítim de Barcelona on May 20, which is also the 500th anniversary of the death of Columbus.

There are many other clues to Columbus' true origin, such as the importance of King Ferran of Aragon in his first two voyages, and the fact that the closest people to him were all from that kingdom; as well as this, there is the fact that two of them received a letter from Columbus when he arrived in America, and it is known that a version of this letter exists in Catalan. Was it the original copy? Everything leads us to believe so. And, finally, there was the way he was welcomed in Barcelona.

The first theories

Theories about Columbus' Catalan origin were developed in the 20s, and not by a Catalan but a Peruvian, historian Luis Ulloa, who immediately found other researchers who agreed with him, such as Ricard Carreiras Valls (*continued next page*)



Some of the more than one hundred portraits of the man who discovered America/ARCHIVE

Columbus: man of a thousand faces

● It is a curious fact that out of the approximately 100 portraits that exist of Christopher Columbus, none of them bear much resemblance to the others. The main reason given for this is the fact that they were all painted after his death. However, one of the most reliable portraits, experts claimed, is the one painted by the Florentine artist Rodolfo Ghirlandaio (1483-1561 – top left), which is on display at a museum in Genoa. As for textual descriptions of

the Admiral, Bartomeu Casas wrote that Columbus "was above average height, with an aquiline nose... he had a pale face which was sometimes flushed. In his youth he wore a beard and had reddish hair, though this soon turned white." His son Ferran remembered him thus "he was a well-formed man who was taller than average, with a sharp face and very high cheek bones; he was neither fat nor slender. He had an aquiline nose and white hair."

