

# Disproving the history books

MIQUEL RIERA

● Jordi Bilbeny writes, in the introduction of his book *Cristòfor Colom, príncep de Catalunya*, that when he became interested in the subject of Columbus 18 years ago, he discovered that the accepted facts did not add up.

"Some authors said", wrote Bilbeny, "that Columbus was one of the wisest, best educated men of his time, an important cosmographer, a tireless sailor, a prolific writer and avid reader who spoke different languages. Meanwhile, other authors claimed that he had no education at all." Bilbeny discovered that there were many such contradictions in the descriptions of the famous mariner. As a result he began to investigate the story, together with other researchers; these are some of the arguments Bilbeny claims prove that Columbus was a Catalan.

## Prince of Catalonia

The Christopher Columbus of history is, in fact, Joan Cristòfor Colom i Bertran, who was born in Barcelona in 1414 into the noble merchant family of Colom i Bertran. The description of Joan Colom i Bertran ties in perfectly with that of Columbus, because apart from being a nobleman he was a sailor, a minister, a governor, soldier, a pirate, he had legal and fiscal training, a brother who was president of the Generalitat and another who was a member of the clergy. "It is not hard to understand", said Bilbeny, "that this Colom and Columbus the discoverer of America begin to interweave and become one single person. Furthermore, we know that the brothers and parents of Colom have the same name as Columbus' brothers and parents."

## The Catalan expedition

In the 15th century, Cristòfor Despuig explicitly claimed, in his work *Colloquis de la insigne ciutat de Tortosa*, that "the discovery of America was the work of King Ferdinand, and the Castilians had nothing to do with it." In the 17th century, the Franciscan monk from Perpinyà, Andreu Bosch, wrote in his *Sumari* that all the sailors were Catalan. Bilbeny and his group believe the same, basing their arguments on the following evi-

*Jordi Bilbeny is convinced that the entire story of Christopher Columbus and his discovery of America was subsequently falsified*



Above: Columbus lands in the New World; below: an old map of the Palamós-Girona coast/ARCHIVE

dence—the *Capitulacions* signed by Joan de Coloma, which are kept in the Arxiu Real in Barcelona, the fact that the expedition was funded with ducats, a currency that was not in existence in Castille, and that all the organising team were from the Catalan kingdom, such as Lluís de Santàngel, Gabriel Sanchis (the general treasurer), Joan Cabrero (King's chamber master) and Alfonso de la Cavalleria, a royal minister.

## The port of Pals

Columbus did not set sail from the port of Palos in Andalusia, as is commonly believed. The old textbooks are full of contradictions on the subject, saying that he sailed from coastal towns such as Palos de Moguer, Palos de Espanya, Palos in Portugal and many others. So why does Bilbeny believe Columbus sailed from Pals in the Empordà? For many reasons—it is a well documented port, while his ship could not have sailed from Palos in Andalusia because the port was not deep enough. Columbus had many friends in Pals, such as Yànes Pinçon, who had fought under King Pere IV.

## Arrival in Catalonia

Bilbeny claims that the fact that Columbus' voyage began and ended in Catalonia is another clear sign that he was a Catalan. The documents claiming he arrived back in Palos, and his reception by the kings in Barcelona are one of the many supposed facts that do not add up. Columbus could not possibly have crossed, on foot, in just a few days, the entire peninsula with his sailors, the indigenous people from the Indies and everything they brought back from America. In addition, the dates of the letters sent to and from the Kings in Barcelona and Columbus do not make sense if the sailor arrived in Andalusia. Bilbeny claims that all this suggests that it makes sense to replace Catalonia with Portugal, where no document supporting these details exists.

These are just some of the many arguments Bilbeny and his team have put forward to prove that Columbus was in fact Catalan, and that the truth was hushed up.

## Yes, Columbus was a Catalan, but...

● Joaquim Arenas is the president of Centre d'Estudis Colombins, a body created in 1989 to defend the idea that Christopher Columbus was Catalan. "It is true that Columbus never said where he was from", Arenas admits, "but a study of his life does show where, through his friendships, the people with whom he associated, his coat of arms, handwriting and language, were from. Everything points to the fact that he was Catalan."



Joaquim Arenas/ARCHIVE

The members of the Centre d'Estudis Colombins are currently very pleased, after the program broadcast by Discovery Channel supporting the theory that Columbus was from a family of Catalan nobles, that he fought against King Joan II, that he had been a

pirate, that his native language was Catalan and that, obviously, he was not born in Genoa. In recent months, the centre has been working with Discovery Channel and six universities to find out more about Columbus' origins.

The central part of the investigation is the DNA tests on

Catalans with the surname Colom and Italians with the surname Colombo. However, they are also going through piles of old documents from the past 500 years. "We have been examining an enormous amount of files and archives", said Arenas "to try and find a link between the Columbus of history and the real Columbus. We believe Columbus was a Catalan, but we realise we lack definitive proof."

The Centre does not believe the "definite" claims of other researchers, such as Jordi Bilbeny, who they say lacks scientific rigour. "We'd be very happy if what Bilbeny claims turns out to be the truth, but things have to be proved scientifically, and Bilbeny hasn't done that", said Arenas.

