

# Will DNA tests solve the riddle?

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More than 215 men with the surname Colom from around Catalonia have given samples of saliva during the past few months in order for their DNA to be determined, and for the resulting information to be used in an investigation seeking to prove scientifically whether Christopher Columbus came from a family of Genoa nobles, as the official theory goes, or whether he was born in the Kingdom of Aragon, as others claim.

The DNA sampling from the Catalans has been organised by the Centre d'Estudis Columbins. Samples have only been taken from people who could trace

The genetic samples are now being analysed in five different laboratories

their Catalan ancestry back five generations, and who had no family connections with each other. "This is a very important project that has been very difficult to carry out", says the researcher Francesc Albardener.

### Checking the chromosomes

The 215 Catalan samples, together with 100 taken from Italian men, are now being analysed in the laboratories of five universities—Granada, Santiago de Compostela, Barcelona, Roma 3, Max Plant in Berlin and the Orchid Center in Dallas.

The results will be compared with the DNA that was extracted from the remains of Christopher and Ferdinand Columbus in 2004. "We want to work out the genetic variability and the Y chromosome characteristics of people with the surnames Colom and Colombo in the areas being analysed, and to deduce from this the relation that they may have with the Y chromosome of Christopher and Ferdinand Columbus", says Professor José Antonio Lorente, from the Laboratorio de Identificación Genética at Granada University. Lorente is also one of the promoters of the research project, which was publicised in 2004 by the Discovery Channel program *Enigma Colón*.

*DNA samples have been taken from 215 Catalans and 100 Italians to compare the results with the genetic make-up of Columbus' bones*



Left: José Antonio Lorente, at work in the Laboratorio de Identificación Genética at Granada University/ARCHIVE

### A scientist's warning

However, Lorente and his team have warned that they might not be able to come to any concrete conclusion. This would support the ideas of other researchers, such as Alfonso Enseñat de Villalonga, who claims that Colum-

bus came from a family in Genoa, but not the Colombos; he believes he was from the Colonne family from Liguria.

The possibility that the analysis might rule out the idea of a Catalan Columbus concern Jordi Bilbeny, who says that the whole

project is a "poisoned boomerang" with respect to proving Columbus' Catalan origins. "There is an enormous amount of confusion surrounding the Columbus remains in Seville", he says. "We are playing with fire."

In any case, we will have to wait

for a few more weeks, at least until late June, before any announcement is made. Lorente and his team originally announced that the results would be made public to coincide with the 500th anniversary of Columbus' death, but the work has been beset by delays, especially the job of collecting samples in Italy, where there has been a general reticence towards taking part in the project, Lorente reported.

In the first episode of the Discovery Channel documentary (the second part will be broadcast at the end of this year or in early

Samples have only been taken from those able to trace their Catalan ancestry back five generations

## "I don't understand the official version of Columbus' life", says American researcher

● Charles J. Merrill is a lecturer at Mount St. Marys college in Maryland, in the United States. Merrill, who speaks and writes perfectly in Catalan, and has studied the links between Tarroja (Segarra) and Columbus, worked on the Discovery Channel documentary that argued Columbus was Catalan.

—Why has the official version of history not taken this theory seriously?

"For reasons that are difficult to understand, for a foreigner. I find the official historical approach towards this subject very strange."

—Do you think we are close to finally demonstrating that the discoverer of America was a Catalan?



Merrill is a specialist in Catalonia and Columbus/C.M.

"Yes. But more Catalan, Castilian, Portuguese and Italian scholars should be working on it to reach an acceptable conclusion."

—How did you first become interested in Columbus and Catalonia?

Because I was interested in

Catalonia in the 15th century, and everything Catalan. When I read for the first time, in the 1970s, the books written in the 1920s and 1930s on the theory that Columbus was a Catalan, I began wondering why I didn't know anything about a theory that was so fascinating and well based, and which referred to a subject that I had read a lot about, which was the history of America, and the Spain of the Middle Ages. I'm convinced that the links between the Barcelona Coloms and the Segarra ones, and their participation in the war against Joan II explain why Columbus and the monarchy did not want to reveal his true Catalan identity."

2007) we saw experts from the University of Granada trying to extract genetic material from the little more than 150 grams of bones, supposedly those of Christopher Columbus, that are stored in Seville cathedral. The lack of material that the researchers to call for assistance from the Orchid Centre in Dallas, an organisation that became famous for identifying the victims of the September 11 attacks on the World Trade Center.

### Brotherhood proved

A few weeks ago, José Antonio Lorente announced the results of the first research phase, which appear to have proved that Christopher and Diego Columbus were in fact brothers. "In the fragments of blank DNA, there is a material that we inherit from some others, and which contains an absolute identity, something that proves they are brothers", said Lorente. Thus, the scientist claims, the remains in the cathedral of Seville have been proved beyond reasonable doubt to be those of Christopher Columbus, the man who discovered the New World.

