

Columbus’s first transatlantic crew was entirely Catalan and spoke Catalan

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Article d'En Jordi Bilbeny, traduït a l'anglès per Heather Hayes, intitulat en català "Els mariners del primer viatge transoceànic colombí eren tots catalans i parlaven català".

If we blindly believe the chronicles, and other documentary evidence that speaks of the Columbus's first trans-Atlantic crew, then we must deduce that nearly all his expeditionaries were Anadalusian, and that they embarked from Palos de Moguer. We would also have to resign ourselves to accept, academically though irrationally, that we Catalans remained on the sidelines of the whole endeavor. But over the course of the past twelve years, I have uncovered so much information about official censorship and the insidious manipulation of history books that we may now approach old accounts with a fresh critical eye, giving us a different vision of past events, and allowing us to winnow reality from the chaff of historical adulteration.

First of all, I have shown that these men did not set sail from any Andalusian port, much less from Palos de Moguer, since the town never existed in the first place--then or now. I have unearthed engravings where one clearly sees Catalan pennants, streamers, and flags--the very same banners that appear on a myriad of maps of the New World as a sign of territorial possession. I have exposed contemporary accounts that firmly and clearly state that it was King Ferdinand[1] alone who sponsored the armada, and whose administrators in the Cancelleria Catalana[2] supported and paid for it. I have also revealed that the men listed as Ianyes and other mariners who accompanied Columbus were amply documented in the Catalan Civil War from 1462 to 1472, some in l’Empordà, particularly in the town of Pals. I have established, through reason and documentary evidence, that that the expeditionary crew that embarked from Pals on what was to be the first of four journeys by Columbus was one-hundred percent Catalan. I have proven that the currency these sailors were paid in, and that was used to carry out absolutely all of this enterprise's economic and commercial transactions, was completely Catalan: the ducat, a currency inexistent in Castile. I have also shown that the Viceroyalty that became the first-ever public institution in the Americas, and the hub of all of the Spanish monarchy's

New-World policies turned, was also a Catalan institution, rooted in, and developed around, the Crown of Aragon, and that it completely lacked any percievable presence in a single Castillian territory.

So, by changing, misplacing, or relocating Catalan place-names to Castile, the nationality of these crew-members was eliminated, and they went from being Catalan to Andalusian to Castillian. If I am correct in this assertion, then within the Columbian texts themselves, we should find some corroborating evidence, and we should be able to see in Columbus's own words that he and his men were from a shared nation, and were speakers of a common language. And that is exactly what I have found.

When the Discoverer notes in his Diary on Monday, November 12, that “toda esta noche estuvo a la corda[3], como dicen los marineros” (“all that night [it] was [sailing] by the ropes, as the sailors say”)[1], and that on Tuesday, November 13, his sailing vessel “estuvo a la corda, como dizen los marineros”[2] (“was [sailing] by the ropes, as sailors say”), he himself provides us with the proof that his sailors were Catalans, since they expressed nautical concepts in Catalan. Columbus used the expression to go or to be “a la corda'' many times. During his first voyage, he used it on October 11 of 1492: “es posaren a la corda,” (lit. “they got [sailing] by the ropes”) [3]. He used it again, on November 13, as mentioned above; and again on November 27: “es tingué aquella nit a la corda” (lit. “that night, it was kept [sailing] by the ropes;” etc. [4]). He used it again on December 5: “tota aquesta nit anà a la corda” (...the whole night was spent [sailing] 'by the ropes'), etc.] [5]). He used it again on December 25: “temporejà a la corda fins que fou de dia” (lit. ''[sailed]” by the ropes with hardly any sail until daybreak')[6]; and again on January 11: “estigué a la corda tota la nit” (...[it] was the entire night [sailing] by the ropes, etc.) [7]; and, finally, on February 21: “estigué a la corda tota aquesta nit” ([it sailed] by the ropes the entire night'']][8]).

As Columbuis never tired of using this popular and well-known expression when his ships had to sail in such a way as “not to allow that the sails take much wind, so as not to advance at all”, according to accounts from Pare Cases [9].

Even if Julio Guillén Tato does not explicitly acknowledge that the phrase in question is foreign to the Castillian language of the time, he does state that “at any rate, it seems to be a Lusism”[10]. Joan Coromines and José A. Pascual, in their Diccionario Crítico Etimológico Castellano e Hispánico (Critical Etymological Castillian and Hispanic Dictionary), show somewhat better knowledge of Peninsular linguistics when they say that “the nautical voice 'poner a la corda' or 'estar a la corda' [...] must be taken from the Catalan or the Portuguese” [11]. Since the majority of sailors who accompanied Columbus on his first trans-Atlantic voyage were definitely not Portuguese, a simple process of elimination makes it evident that they were Catalan, and that, exactly for this reason, they used expressions from that language.

It is no surprise then, that the first time that this utterance ever appears in a Castillian-language text, according to scholars, is in 1492 in Columbus's own Diari [12]. This very fact once again makes obvious that it is not a Castillian-language mode of expression, since prior to 1492, it had never existed in that language. Also, and for that same reason, both the (Spanish-language) Enciclopedia General del Mar (General Maritime Encyclopedia) and the Diccionario de la Lengua Española (Dictionary of the Spanish Language), directly specify that this saying comes “from the Catalan 'corda'” [13]. This is furthermore supported by Nito Verdera, who, in his book “Cristóbal Colón, catalanoparlante'' (Christopher Columbus: Speaker of Catalan), he inserts this expression from Columbus and his mariners as an unabashedly Catalan expression [14], without ever arriving at any conclusions regarding the nationality of said sailors. This is due to the fact that, as impossible as it seems, when Verdera listed the times that Columbus used the expression, he never made a single observation regarding the extremely important phrase “com diuen els mariners” (“as the sailors say”), twice uttered together the expression itself. Thus, Verdera erases any hint of the shared nationality of Columbus and his crew, even though the text's contents very explicitly illustrate that they were from the same nation.

Of course, it is symptomatic that neither Coromines's Diccionari Etimològic i Complementari de la Llengua Catalana (Etymological and Supplemental Dictionary of the Catalan Language) [15] nor the Alcover-Moll dictionary make mention of the corda phrase even though the word is one-hundred percent Catalan. The Alcover-Moll does contain an entry regarding the expression “anar fora corda” (lit. “to be outside [the] rope”), which means “to be very excited” [16]. This would almost seem to indicate that we are looking at an expression that came out of another, contrasting, expression, which must have been “anar a corda” or “anar a la corda”, since it is used, as we have already seen, to indicate that the vessel is kept still, or does not advance at all. Therefore, if in Catalan, we say “anar fora de corda” to indicate that someone or something is very excited, there must also have existed the phrase “anar a corda” or “anar a la corda” in order to illustrate that someone or something was slow or still. And that is exactly what Columbus is telling us in his Diari, according to accounts by Cases.

Thus, it is irrefutably clear that the sailors who accompanied Columbus used the expression “anar a la corda.'' Since we know that this is a Catalan-language saying, we must deduce that these mariners spoke Catalan, that their language

had to have been Catalan, and that (logically) they were Catalan. If this is true, if the language of these first expeditioneries was, indeed, Catalan, then would there not have been clear remains of it in texts by the Great Admiral? Of course there would. Let us examine them:

Thus, in his “Relació» (lit. “account”) of his journey to Cuba and to Jamaica, from February 26 of 1495, Columbus writes that he took an Indian with him, “who is Jaume Colom, one of those who went to Castile, and who speaks our language very well” [17]. Later, he insists: “I responded with the intercession of this Indian, whom I have with me, one of the ones who went to Castile, as I have said above, and who very well understands our language, can pronounce it, and is a very good person”[18].

Now, the Indians that Columbus took with him to Spain arrived at Catalonia and never went to Castile. In Barcelona, they were first presented to the Monarchs, and then, according to contemporary chroniclers, were taken down to the Cathedral to be baptized. Even today, there hangs a commemorative stone on the baptismal font, in honor of the occasion. Hence, even this veiled reference to Catalonia is no obstacle, because when Columbus writes that this indigenous person spoke “la nostra llengua” (lit. “our language”), it is understood that he means Catalan. His use of the term “la nostra” (our) indicates that it is his own language, the language of those who accompany him, and that of persons surrounding the Monarchs, as well as the recipients of his letter, unless he is including directly the language of the King himself. We know from Feliu de la Penya's writings on the efforts of the monarchs of Catalonia toward a journey by monks of the Monastery of Montserrat to the Indies, that “even in that time the Monarchs spoke in Catalan.”[19] They spoke it and they wrote it, and as though to make it clear, he published “here the two letters culled from the Archives at Montserrat,”[20] both of which are in Catalan. If, on the other hand, we interpret the language of the Monarchs to be Castillian, this phrase would make no sense, since the Castillian language had never been that of Columbus.

Any remaining doubts remain regarding this point should disappear in the face of another new reference by Columbus: on Monday, November 12 of 1492, Father Cases, in summarizing Columbus's log entry that day, wrote that the coast of Babec Island “was mostly populated along the river, which he called Del Sol”[21]. He then immediately remarks that Columbus “said that the previous Sunday, eleven September, he had thought it a good idea to take a few of the persons from this river to the King and Queen, for them to learn our language”[22]. This phrase, uttered by the Genoan Columbus irrationally postulated by some, would have meant that his language and that of Father Cases and their sailors would have to have been the Genovese dialect of Italian—a possibility so absurd that it merits no further comment.

On the other hand, if our starting point is a Catalan Columbus, then his language, Father Cases's language, and the language of the men who sailed those “newly” discovered seas could have been Catalan. And that would explain the use of Catalan expressions among crew-members. Even so, the text holds a hidden revelation: we are only in the throes of his first voyage, yet Columbus is saying that he wants to take a few of natives “to the King and Queen for them to learn our language.” Now, even if we never figured out what language Columbus and his crew spoke, we know from this passage that these Indians were to be taken to the King and Queen, wherever they were, in order to learn it. Well, the King and Queen were in Catalonia, and it was there, in Barcelona, that these Indians were received with honors, and then baptized. And it was there that the second voyage was prepared for seven months, as is explicitly described in over a hundred documents issued and signed in Barcelona by the Monarchs, which have been preserved to this very day.[23] The expedition finally embarked from Barcelona, with Pere Bertran Margarit commanding the armada, as confirmed by contemporary chronicles and by Feliu de la Penya.

De la Penya states that, in 1493, when Columbus returned from the New World, “the Pope was notified, and having given thanks to God, he chose Apostles for the conquering of the Souls of these Gentiles: twelve Catalan priests from the Holy Monastery of Montserrat. Most favor was given to Fr. Bernat Boïl, of that same Convent, with the dignity of the First Patriarch of the West Indies and of its Legacy,” which served to “breathe new life into Catalans with regard to the enterprise. Many sailed from Barcelona with Columbus, captained by Pere Margarit. They embarked from Barcelona with Columbus's fleet.”[24]

Now what Columbus writes in his Relació del Segon Viatge (Account of the Second Voyage) makes perfect sense: he informs us that he found a one-year-old baby abandoned in a village, when all its inhabitants had fled. And he ordered it given “to a woman who from Castile had come here; now [he] is very good here, and speaks and understands our language marvelously well.”[25] Since we now know that the second voyage embarked from Barcelona, with a new armada of Catalans, we must infer that the language the child learned with that woman was Catalan. And that is why it once again makes sense for Columbus to say that the child understood and spoke “our language” marvelously.

We get a additional confirmation the the crew was completely Catalan in a new reference from the Diary of Columbus's first voyage, which, on December 26 of 1492, speaks of a ship called the Santa Maria, which had run aground some

days previous. It states: “It was great good fortune and the certain will of God that she should run aground just there because she could let the people off, for had it not been for the betrayal of the quartermaster and of the people, all or most of whom were from his homeland, not wanting to toss the anchor off the stern in order to get the ship out as the Admiral had bid them, the ship could have been saved.” [26].

Notwithstanding, according to a royal notification issued on February 28 of 1494, we know that Cossa was the quartermaster of the aforementioned ship that ran aground on that first transoceanic journey. In this document, the Monarchs make it perfectly clear that “in our service and at our bidding were you master aboard your ship on the seas of the ocean, where, on such voyage were discovered the lands and islands of the area called the Indies, and during which you did lose such ship”[27]. That is to say that Cossa was the quartermaster on the Santa Maria, as almost all authors who mention him assure us. According to Ballesteros Beretta, “there can be no doubt or hesitation in proclaiming that Joan de la Cossa, quartermaster of the Santa Maria, had an important role in the brave and distinguished discovery of America,”[28] and he emphasizes the fact that “Joan de la Cossa, [was] the owner of a transport vessel that Columbus called a ship.”[29]

Some chroniclers, however (among them, Fr. Cases himself [30]), say that he was from Biscay, making it even more tempting to call everyone who sailed with him “Basques.” It should not surprise us then, that Segundo de Ispizua wrote “we had thought that the Santa Maria was a ship built on our coasts, since the captain was Basque; [and] most of her crew, as will be shown, [was also] Basque”[31]. And Juan Manzano, following this same falsely founded logic, subscribes to the same conviction that “most of the crew of the crew of the Santa Maria were from Biscay, or other Northern coasts, countrymen of Joan de la Cossa, her quartermaster”[32]. But this statement is extravagant and disproportionate, and has been discredited by those very same chronicles, and by experts on the origins of the crew-members of that first journey, who have found hardly a Basque among them.

On the other hand, I can say that Joan de Cossa had already been documented in Catalonia during the Civil War of 1462-1472 as the Governor of Provence, and a captain under King Renat when the latter was Lord of the Catalans. Brother of Gaspar Cossa, Count of Troia and Lord High Chamberlain of Provence. Ernest Martínez Ferrando tells us that “he became so famous for behaving so arrogantly in l'Empordà,”[33] and that both brothers “were persons of Renat's utmost confidence, as well as that of [his] eldest son.”[34] In February of 2002, I wrote a commentary on his detailed study of his passage through Catalonia and of the Catalan style of his map-making, in a work titled “Joan de la Cossa i Catalunya” (Joan de la Cossa and Catalonia)[35], which, I believe, shows once and for all that the Johan de la Cossa mentioned in Columbian texts is one and the same “Joan de Cossa» of Catalan documents of the last third of the 15th century.

It is obvious and, it seems to me irrefutable, that, if Joan de Cossa were in Catalonia, and if he accompanied Columbus to the New World as quartermaster of the Santa Maria, then when the latter writes the above entry for December 26, 1492 in his Dairy to say that the sailors in Cossa's ship “were all or almost all from his same homeland,” then the logical and congruent interpretation would be that they were all Catalan.

But the trail doesn't stop there: all my speculation and interpretation regarding the Catalan language and homeland of Columbus and of those who sailed with him on his ocean crossings are definitively and conclusively corroborated in his Relació del Tercer Viatge (Account of the Third Voyage). In it, Columbus describes his men as having been invited by indigenous people to the Terra de Gràcia (lit. Land of Grace) to dine together. However, “people on both sides were very saddened because they could not understand one another: they, upon enquireing of us for our homeland, and we upon enquireing of them for theirs.”[36] This is not an empty phrase. A copy of the account of this voyage, in an entirely different manuscript found at Tarragona during the latter twentieth century, together with other Columbian documentary evidence published by Rumeu de Armas, says exactly the same thing: “people on both sides were very saddened because they did not understand one another: they, upon enquireing of us for our homeland, and we upon enquireing of them for theirs” [37]. In other words, Columbus explicitly acknowledged that he and his men were from one and the same homeland. It is unthinkable they they were all Genoan, since documentary evidence and historical events openly deny this. The passage only makes sense if they were all Catalan.

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[1] BARTOLOMÉ DE LAS CASAS, Historia de las Indias (A History of the Indies); published by Agustín Millares Carlo with preliminary study by Lewis Hanke, Fondo de Cultura Econòmica, S.A.; second reprint, Mexico City, 1996, vol. I, p.

236.

[2] CRISTÓBAL COLÓN, “Diario del Primer Viaje (1492)”, Textos y documentos completos (The Diary of the First Voyage [1492], Complete Text and Documents); published by Consuelo Varela and Juan Gil, Alianza Universidad-320, Alianza Editorial, S.A., second expanded edition, Madrid, 1992, p. 136.

[3] Idem, p. 109.

[4] Idem, p. 145.

[5] Idem, p. 152.

[6] Idem, p. 178.

[7] Idem, p. 193.

[8] Idem, p. 211.

[9] B. DE LAS CASAS, op. cit., vol. I, p. 236.

[10] JULIO F. GUILLÉN TATO, La parla marinera en el Diario del primer viaje de Cristóbal Colón (Maritime Speech in the Diary of Columbus's First Voyage); Instituto Histórico de Marina, Madrid, 1951, p. 56, note 39.

[11] JOAN COROMINES – JOSÉ A. PASCUAL, Diccionario Crítico Etimológico Castellano e Hispánico (Critical Etymological Castillian and Hispanic Dictionary); Editorial Gredos, 2nd reprinting, Madrid, 1992, vol. II, p. 273.

[12] Idem.

[13] Enciclopedia General del Mar (General Maritime Encyclopedia); op. cit., vol. III, column 33; Diccionario de la Lengua Española (Dictionary of the Spanish Language), Real Academia Española, 21st edition, Madrid, 1992, tome I, p. 570.

[14] Vg. NITO VERDERA, Cristóbal Colón, catalanoparlante (Christopher Columbus: Speaker of Catalan); Editorial Mediterrània-Eivissa, Eivissa, 1994, p. 175.

[15] JOAN COROMINES, Diccionari Etimològic i Complementari de la Llengua Catalana (Etymological and Supplemental Dictionary of the Catalan Language); Curial Edicions Catalanes – Caixa de Pensions «La Caixa», Barcelona, 1986, vol. 2, p. 931-933.

[16] MN. ANTONI Mª ALCOVER i FRANCESC DE B. MOLL, Diccionari Català-Valencià-Balerar (Catalan-Valencian-Balearic Dictionary); Editorial Moll, Palma de Mallorca, 1979, vol. 3, p. 530.

[17] C. COLÓN, “Relación del viaje a Cuba y Jamaica” (Account of the Voyage to Cuba and Jamaica), texts and complete documents; op. cit., p. 293.

[18] Idem, p. 306.

[19] NARCISO FELIU DE LA PEÑA Y FARELL, Anales de Cataluña. Y Epilogo Breve de los Progressos, y famosos hechos de la Nacion Catalana, de sus Santos, Reliquias, Conventos, y singulares Grandezas; y de los mas señalados, y Eminentes Varones, que en Santidad, Armas, y Letras han florecido desde la primera Poblacion de España (Annals of Catalonia. And a Brief Epilogue of the Progresses, and of the Famous Feats of the Catalan Nation, her Saints, Relics, Convents, and Singular Greatness; and of the most well-known and Emminent Barons, which in Holiness, Arms, and Letters hath Flourished from the First Population of Spain); Jayme Surià, Printer; Barcelona, 1709, third tome, folio 93.

[20] Idem.

[21] C. COLÓN, “Diario del Primer Viaje (1492)” (The Diary of the First Voyage [1492]); op. cit., p. 134.

[22] Idem, p. 134-135.

[23] Vg. MARTIN FERNANDEZ DE NAVARRETE, Colección de los viajes y Descubrimientos, que Hicieron por Mar los Españoles Desde Fines del Siglo XV (Collection of the Sea Voyages and Discoveries of the Spaniards Since the Late 15th Century); Imprenta Real, Madrid, 1825, tom II, p. 21-110.

[24] N. FELIU DE LA PEÑA Y FARELL, op. cit., foli 93.

[25] C. COLÓN, “Relación del Segundo Viaje”, Textos y documentos completos (The Diary of the Second Voyage, Complete Text and Documents); op. cit., p. 238.

[26] C. COLÓN, “Diario del Primer Viaje (1492)”; Textos y documentos completos (The Diary of the Second Voyage, Complete Text and Documents); op. cit., p. 181.

[27] Cf. MARTIN FERNANDEZ DE NAVARRETE, Biblioteca Marítima Española (Spanish Maritime Encyclopedia), Printed by Viuda de Calero, Madrid, 1851, tome II, p. 208-209, note 5.

[28] ANTONIO BALLESTEROS BERETTA, El cántabro Juan de la Cosa y el Descubrimiento de América (The Cantabrian Juan de la Cosa and the Discovery of America); Diputación Regional de Cantabria (Cantabria Regional Government), 2nd edition, Santander, 1987, p. 41.

[29] Idem.

[30] B. DE LAS CASAS, op. cit., vol. II, p. 37.

[31] SEGUNDO DE ISPIZUA, Historia de los Vascos en el descubrimiento, conquista y civilización de América (A History of the Basques in the Discovery, Conquest, and Civilization of America) ; printed by José A. de Lerchundi, Bilbo, 1914, tom I, p. 30.

[32] JUAN MANZANO MANZANO, Cristóbal Colón. Siete años decisivos de su vida: 1485-1492 (Chistopher Columbus: Seven Decisive Years in his Life: 1485-1492) ; Ediciones Cultura Hispànica, Madrid, 1964, p. 395.

[33] J. ERNESTO MARTÍNEZ FERRANDO, Tragedia del insigne Condestable Don Pedro de Portugal (The Tragedy of the Distinguished Constable Don Pedro of Portugal); Consejo Superior de Investigaciones Científicas - Instituto Jerónimo Zurita, Madrid, 1942, p. 201.

[34] Idem, p. 201, note 29.

[35] Vg. JORDI BILBENY, “Joan de la Cossa i Catalunya” (Joan de la Cossa and Catalonia); Revista de Catalunya, #170, Nova Etapa, February 2002, p. 58-81.

[36] C. COLÓN, “Relación del Tercer Viaje;” Textos y documentos completos; (Account of the Third Voyage, Complete Text and Documents); op. cit., p. 373-374.

[37] Vg. Manuscrito del Libro Copiador de Cristóbal Colón; (Manuscript of the Letter Book of Christopher Columbus), transcript by Antonio Rumeu de Armas, Colección Tabula Americae-9, Ministry of Culture – Testimonio Companyía Editorial, Madrid, 1989, tome II, p. 552.

[1]Translator's note: original Catalan “Ferran”

[2]Lit. “Catalan Chancellry:” akin to a foreign ministry

[3]Translator's note: cites originally in Spanish is in simple italics, while cites originally in Catalan is in bolditalics

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