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The origins of Christopher Columbus, a never-ending controversy

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Abstract

A lot of speculation and hypothesis has been and still is about Christopher Columbus' birthplace, but the historiographic consensus mostly favours the established theory that the Admiral of the Indies was a Genoese citizen, even if the exact point within the Republic is difficult to ascertain. We also mention the most well-known alternative hypothesis that states Columbus' was Catalan. We here agree with the global consensus as it is the best explanation in regards to primary sources and first-hand witnesses.

Keywords: Christopher Columbus, Genoa, Historical Speculation, Conspiracy Theories, Gonzalo Fernández de Oviedo.

Resumen

Ha habido y aún hay muchas hipótesis respecto a la ciudad natal de Cristóbal Colón, pero el consenso historiográfico favorece la teoría establecida de que el Almirante de las Indias era ciudadano genovés, aunque el lugar concreto dentro de la República sea difícil de certificar. También mencionamos la hipótesis alternativa más conocida que afirma que Colón era catalán. Aquí estamos de acuerdo con el consenso historiográfico, pues es la mejor explicación de acuerdo con las fuentes primarias y testigos de primera mano.

Palabras clave: Cristóbal Colón, Génova, Especulación histórica, Teorías de conspiración, Gonzalo Fernández de Oviedo.

Résumé

Il y a eu et il y en a encore beaucoup d'hypothèses concernant la ville d'origine de Christoph Colomb, mais le consensus historiographique favorise la théorie établie qui dit que l'Amiral des Indes était citoyen génois, même si la place exacte dans la République soit difficile de certifier. Nous faisons mention aussi à l'hypothèse alternative plus connue qui affirme que Colomb était catalan. Nous acceptons ici le consensus historiographique, car il est la meilleure explication en regard aux sources primaires et témoins directs.

Mots clé: Christoph Colomb, Gênes, Spéculation historique, Théories du complot, Gonzalo Fernández de Oviedo

Christopher Columbus is a historical figure known by absolutely everyone since the very moment he came back from the New World, what we call nowadays America. As such a personality, he never made clear or made sure to obscure his origin, and so many theories and controversies have arisen around the place that saw him be born. The general historiographic consensus goes with the idea that he was Genovese or ligur (Liguria is the region where Genoa is) , as the evidence towards this theory is overwhelming: notarial acts, Columbus' testament, contemporaries' testimonies, documents produced by Columbus himself, etc.

This massive amount of evidence, however doesn't pinpoint exactly the place where he first came from, only points towards the fact of his being a citizen of the Most Serene Republic of Genova, so many a city has claimed to be the “cradle of Columbus”: Genova, Cogoleto, Savona and Terrarossa Colmo (the Colmo was a later addition). Bearing all this in mind, we here agree with the mainstream historiographic consensus that Columbus was, in fact, a citizen of Genova and not, as many historians affirm either Catalan, French, Galician, Scottish, Jewish, Majorcan, Greek, Polish or Armenian, and thus we are hereby going to present some evidence regarding his “genovesity”.

Gonzalo Fernández de Oviedo y Valdés was a Spanish chronicler and writer of the first half of the XVI century, a man of great culture and impressive friendships: he served as a page of the much-beloved John, prince of Asturias, befriended Columbus' sons at different points in life, met Hernán Cortés, served as governor of Santa Marta del Darién, was murdered by Pedrarias Dávila, survived being murdered by Pedrarias, earned himself the enmity of Bartolomé de las Casas, and in the end was one of the greatest Spanish genealogists and heraldists.

In his condition as a man of great knowledge and unstoppable curiosity, he wanted to know the truth on Christopher Columbus' origins, as far as his friendship with Diego Colón didn't actually do him much in that task, for the Admiral kept his humble origins a closely-guarded secret in order not to be thought by the Castilian aristocracy as the parvenu he was. So, Gonzalo Fernández de Oviedo made his enquiries among the Genovese people:

Christopher Columbus, according to what I have learned from men of his nation, was originally from the province of Liguria, which is in Italy, where the city and the Seignory of Genoa stands: some say that he was from Savona, others that he was from a small place or village called Nervi, which is on the eastern seashore two leagues from the city of Genoa; but it is held to be more certain that he may have been originally from Cugureo (Cogoleto) near the city of Genoa.

In this excerpt from the General and Natural History of the Indies, Gonzalo de Oviedo provides us with three possible places where Columbus came from: Nervi, Savona and Cogoleto, all

of them within the province of Liguria or Seignory of Genova.



Fig.1 Map of Liguria with the places mentioned by Oviedo marked in red

The evidence pointing toward Cogoleto is relatively feeble but we have to consider it due to Oviedo's opinion. There is a house in Cogoleto purported to have been the place where Columbus came to this world. The strongest pieces of evidence come from a copy of Domenico Columbo's testament made in 1586 and used in the trial between Columbus family and the crown by some Columbos of Cogoleto as evidence of their blood-bond with the navigator, so they would be entitled to a small part of the benefits that legitimately belong to the Columbus family. Fernández de Oviedo knew Christopher Columbus decently well, and so did Bartolomé de las Casas, both of whom affirm Columbus to be Ligurian, yet only Oviedo goes into some detail about the exact place. We now quote Las Casas:

This distinguished man was from the Genoese nation, from some place in the

province of Genoa; who he was, where he was born or what name he had in that place we do not know in truth, except that before he reached the Nation in which he arrived, he used to call himself Cristóbal Colombo de Terrarubia.

Here we are presented with one of the names that has created more speculation within the historiographical community. The Admiral signed his charts (so did his brother) as “Columbus de Terra Rubra opus edidit”. Terra Rubra in Latin means “Red Land”, and thus the idea that it may help us clarify his origin goes nowhere. There are many places that Tecan match that description, or even Terrarossa (nowadays Terrarossa Colombo) a small place within Liguria separated from the shore by the Maritime Alps, which makes an unlikely place as the origin of a navigator, yet not impossible. Álvaro de Mendaña and Pedro Fernandes de Queiros were born nowhere near the coast and both sailed the oceans. Continuing with the three cities mentioned by Fernández de Oviedo, we deem necessary to reference the Savonan hypothesis, defended by Guadalupe Chocano in her book *La cuna y orígenes de Cristóbal Colón*. We now proceed to quote the review appeared in *Revista de Estudios Colombinos*, number 7, pages 87-89:

To consolidate these details (that Columbus was from Savona) the Chief of Research of the School of Naval Warfare resorts to the information presented by the admiral's grandson for accessing the Order of Santiago. In order to enter that order it was necessary to make a sworn declaration of the candidate's genealogy before the court of the Order of Santiago, a procedure that held place in secret. Thus, the first admiral's grandson could confess his grandfather's origins without fearing the suspicions of the castilian aristocracy, for the documents would be kept in the archive of the aforementioned order. On said document it is written on Diego Colón's grandparents: “Paternal grandparents/ Christopher Columbus, natural of Saona, near Genova, / and Dona Felipa Moniz natural of Lisbon”. Other documents by witnesses presented by Diego Colón to consolidate his version corroborate the same, that the Admiral was genovese from the city of Savona, ten leagues from the Republic's capital.

With regards to Columbus' origin as actual native to the city of Genova, the main body of evidence comes from the historical compilation by Filippo Casoni titled *Annali della Repubblica di Genova*, published in 1708, comprising the city's events from the years 1507 through 1598. Filippo Casoni is currently mostly forgotten because of how specific his works are, covering only events or characters from the city of Genova, such as his biography of Ambrogio Spinola.

In the documentary corpus mentioned above, Casoni uses primary sources such as public scriptures and transcriptions of documents from the period he is covering, which guarantees some very strong historiographic rigor, even without adding a bibliography, a practice not

yet extended in the field of History. We here quote a brief passage of his *Annali*, page 69 of the 1799 printing:

Christopher's forefathers, for what it comes from public scriptures, lived in a place called Terra Rossa, little distant from Nervi, in the middle of a skirt of Monte Fasce, between Moconesi and Fontana Buona that gives name to the Valley, where there still is a tower called “de Colombi”. His grandfather was Giovanni di Quinto, alive by 1440. The father was called Domenico and was a genovese citizen resident in Santo Stefano's parish, the mother Susanna Fontana Rossa was born in Saulo Luogo, in the vicinity of Nervi

Casoni is right most of the time but asserts Columbus to have died at the age of 60, making the Admiral born 1446, while this might be slightly off chronology-wise. Most probably Columbus was born in the year 1451 if we take into account the document named Assereto for his discoverer Ugo Assereto in the year 1929. The Assereto Document is a public scripture by a notary, a transcription of a trial between some Cristoforo Colombo, Genovese, aged 27(ish), working for house Centurione is called to court for his commercial malpractice concerning a business conducted with sugar in Madeira. This young Cristoforo Colombo is coherent with the later Cristóbal Colón, as in the Admiral's testament (1506), Columbus orders a payment to be made to the heirs of Paulo di Negro for a amount of 50 ducats, the same amount he was owing Paolo in 1479:

To those same heirs and the heirs of Paulo di Negro, genovese, a hundred ducats or their worth; they have to be one half for the former heirs and one for the latter heirs

With these documents in mind and the testimonies of a solid dozen of contemporaries that explicitly call Columbus “Genovese” should suffice to close the case, but with the Admiral's zeal in obscuring his true origin, theories of every flavour have arisen over time, to the point where we can see in the newspapers every two or three months a piece of information proclaiming that new evidence has surfaced establishing a new theory for Columbus' birthplace or parentage.

Besides the widely accepted Genovese theories, by order of relevance we can point towards the Catalan Hypotheses, the Jewish hypothesis, the Galician, the Portuguese and the Polish Theories. The interesting point about these hypothesis is when they first came to light.

It is only after the commemorations related to the IV Centenary of the Discovery that historians or history enthusiasts first seemed to notice inconsistencies within the historical consensus. The first great contestator was the Peruvian scholar Luis Ulloa, who wanted to prove Columbus a Galician, ended concluding that he must have been a Catalan.

The line of research first opened by Ulloa was followed by many historians, and his intellectual heirs are the now renowned Institut Nova Història, a group of Catalan self-styled scholars trying to prove and promote the idea that, throughout History, a massive conspiracy by the Crown of Castille, the Inquisition, and any institutions that may be related to Castille has been orchestrated against the nation of Catalonia to deprive it of its History and cultural identity in order to promote Castille. They claim that the following characters are Catalan or of Catalan ancestry and culture: Columbus, Leonardo da Vinci, Miguel de Cervantes, Amerigo Vespucci, the whole Della Rovere lineage, Hernán Cortés, Albrecht Dürer, Hieronymus Bosch, Erasmus of Rotterdam and whoever pleases them. The evidence presented by Ulloa in order to show Columbus as a Catalan is merely circumstantial and not supported by any contemporary sources of the Admiral's time. Ulloa claims that Columbus' written language was full of Catalanisms, which is quite plausible even considering the navigator a Genoese man, as the navigators from that era in the Mediterranean area needed to communicate to big numbers of people and so they spoke a lot of languages, yet none of them correctly.

Another point raised by Ulloa is the way Columbus' name was written in some sources. The Spanish version of Christopher Columbus is Cristóbal Colón, yet in some of the documents it appears as Colom, which may point towards a Catalan origin, as Colom is a family name found in Catalonia. We need to clarify that Spanish language grammar was codified but the only time orthography rules were actually enforced was from 1714 on. Even Gonzalo Fernández de Oviedo writes Columbus' Spanish name as Colom, which can mean nothing particularly noticeable.

As of present, Ulloa's intellectual successors, the INH, claim that Columbus was in fact Joan Colom i Bertran, a Catalan noble that fought against Ferdinand II in the Catalan civil war of 1462-1472 and so he needed to change identity in order to avoid persecution by royalist forces. The evidence pointing towards this is very weak, considering that Joan Colom is considered dead in official acts as of 1488, which would normally incapacitate

anyone to navigate or even breathe. Concerning the hypothesis launched by the INH, the evidences they provide are not based on primary sources, but on speculation and might be called out on the grounds of historical revisionism motivated by political interests. We now proceed to scrutinize some of the bases regarding what they claim as inconsistencies.

Jordi Bilbeny and his followers claim that there never was a town called Palos de Moguer, and even less a port in Palos, so the idea that the discoverer parted from the port of Palos must be dismissed. In this very year, archaeological excavations are on their way in the ancient dependencies of the port of Palos de la Frontera, historically referred to as Palos de Moguer or simply Palos. The port was not as noticeable as the ports of Genoa or Barcelona, but it had enough draft to fit a caravel or more. More dependencies discovered in the area include a fountain, customs, a tavern and a kiln.

On the other hand, we have Pals (Alt Empordà), the village they claim to have been the actual origin of the expedition. We acknowledge that there was a port near the village as proven by a 1406 document that says so, but there is no other actual reason to doubt the traditional historiography, so thoroughly well documented by chroniclers such as Gonzalo Fernández de Oviedo or Bartolomé de las Casas, both of whom knew the Admiral first-hand.

Going on with more ideas about Columbus' catalanity, we have the heraldic argument. On the fourth quarter of Columbus' coat of arms as per the royal grant of 1493, we have an azure bend on field of gold, and a chief of gules, coat of arms claimed to belong to the Coloms of Tarroja, which may be accurate, but still needs a citation from an armorial book.

Many reasons have been pointed towards Columbus' Catalan origin, yet not a single one of them take into account primary sources or contemporary testimonies, which overwhelmingly establish the fact that the old Admiral was a citizen of the Republic of Genoa.

In 1819, Giambattista Spottorno writes a book titled *Della origine e della patria di Cristoforo Colombo libri tre*, published by Andrea Frugoni, from whom we are going to enumerate all of the contemporaries of Christopher Columbus that call him “Ligur”, “genuensis” or “januensis”:

- 1- Pietro Martire d'Anghiera, personal friend of Columbus and Vespucci.
- 2- Damiao de Goes, portuguese amabassador to the Holy Roman Empire.
- 3- Battista Campofregoso¹
- 4- Antonio Gallo
- 5- Bartolomeo Senarega
- 6- Agostino Giustiniani
- 7- Guicciardini and Bernardo Segni
- 8- Pietro Bembo
- 9- Pietro Coppo da Isola
- 10- Signor Besini di Modena
- 11- Jacopo de Pinci da Lecco
- 12- Cadamosto and Vespucci
- 13- Paolo Giovio²
- 14- Benedetto Giovio
- 15- Gonzalo Fernández de Oviedo
- 16- Gaspar Barreiro
- 17- Ferdinand Columbus (son of the Admiral)
- 18- Giambattista Ramusio
- 19- Antonio Gerladini d'Ameria

We have to acknowledge the massive work put on by the Genovese historian in recollecting all of the aforementioned testimonies and quoting them with accuracy, particularly considering the difficulty of doing so in the XIX century, and that way being a useful tool for the better understanding of the origins and native homeland of the Admiral of the Indies.

As a conclusion, we must explicitly encourage the reader not to take any evidence without consideration, but to closely examine the contents and possible biases of the

1 Battista Campofregoso or Battista Fregoso II (1450-1505) was Dux of Genoa from 1478 through 1483, the time when Columbus was in trial in Genova against the representatives of Casa Centurione, a powerful merchant house.

2 Italian scholar connected to the INH Paolo Pellegrino uses the literary language and wording of Paolo Giovio to denote the fact that Columbus must have been a Catalan and linked to the region Empordà, which can clearly be attributed to confirmation bias of his prejudices, when Giovio clearly states that Columbus was Ligur.

researchers and scholars and decide for himself where to put his or her trust. As a historian, I cannot put enough emphasis on the capital importance of primary sources and first-hand witnesses in order to unveil the truth in our science. Traditionally, in the courts of law, a testimony is a very high proof, while in scientific communities it is the lowest unless duly supported and contrasted. Peer-reviewable evidence, on the other hand is the highest possible form of proof. If someone dismisses primary sources or proof without a thorough examination and conclusive elements pointing towards its irrelevance, falseness or impertinence, said writer cannot pretend to be a scholar in his own right, let alone a scientific mind.

Our conclusion is that, unless solidly proven otherwise, Christopher Columbus was a Genovese citizen of the Republic of Genoa, working on behalf of the Crown of Castile, as asserted by contemporary witnesses, people that had met the Admiral first hand, and primary sources.

Primary sources such as Columbus' testament given in Valladolid, the Book of Privileges of 1502, the Assereto Document and many more are entirely coherent with the navigator's biography and with each other, so they cannot be dismissed on the grounds of massive shadowy conspiracies as some self-styled researchers proclaim. Not a single scholar with a shred of intellectual dignity would call out primary sources proven to be authentic on the grounds of their own personal dislike.

Occam's razor must be also used for a close shave: *Entia non sunt multiplicanda praeter necessitatem*. Or, as frequently noted, the explanation that requires the smallest amount of previous assumptions is most likely to be the true one.



Fig. 2 *William of Occam and his knife*
Image by GDK, Wikimedia Commons

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