
Christopher Columbus was a Catalan, and possibly Jewish, scholar says

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The debate over the nationality of Christopher Columbus has kept investigators occupied ever since the man credited with the discovery of the New World died in 1506. Thought by many to be the son of a Genovese artisan, a new study by Estelle Irizarry, based on the official documents and letters of the explorer, suggests that Columbus' native tongue was Catalan and that he came from the Kingdom of Aragon.

Furthermore, Irizarry believes that Christopher Columbus' origins are not obscure by chance, but rather the result of the famed explorer's having purposely hid the fact he was a Jew or "converso" (convert to Christianity).

Estelle Irizarry, a linguistics professor at Georgetown University, reached that conclusion after examining Columbus' writings in detail and discovering a simple but important clue that had escaped other researchers: a slash symbol - similar to the ones used in Internet addresses - that Columbus employed to indicate pauses in sentences.

That symbol, also known as a virgule, did not appear in texts of that era written in Castilian nor in writings from any other country, but only in records and letters from the Catalan-speaking areas of the Iberian peninsula, namely present-day Catalonia and the Balearic Islands.

Irizarry explains, "The virgules are sort of like Columbus' DNA. They were a habit of his. Columbus was a punctuator and was one of the few of that era."

Irizarry uses that metaphor as the title of her latest book, Christopher Columbus: The DNA of his Writings, in which she pored over the language and syntax the navigator used in more than 100 letters, diaries and documents. She also found in her research of documents from that era written on the Balearic island of Ibiza that 75 percent contained virgules similar to Columbus'.

At the end of the 15th century and the beginning of the 16th, authors normally left punctuation for publishers and even Cervantes' "Don Quixote" was only filled in once and for all with periods and commas in the 19th century, making Columbus' virgules all the more noteworthy, Irizarry said.

Her book confirms some of the conclusions drawn by scholar Nito Verdera, who identified many words of Catalan origin in the writing. Irizarry thinks the future explorer grew up in a Catalan-speaking region and that explains why he did not express himself correctly in Spanish, which would have been his second language.

Proof of that is the inconsistency of his spelling, she said, noting for example that he would write "trujeron" and "trajeron" - incorrect and correct spellings, respectively, of the Spanish word for "brought" - sometimes in the same sentence. In addition, these peculiarities of his writing and other linguistic aspects associated with Ladino, a Jewish ethnolect in late medieval Spain, suggest that Columbus was Jewish, Irizarry said.

"Columbus even punctuated marginal notes and he included copious notes around his pages. In that sense, he followed the punctuation style of the Ladino-speaking scribes," the professor said.

Irizarry says her research clears up the big mystery surrounding Columbus' place of birth, which he never revealed but which different historians have claimed was Genoa, Italy; the French Mediterranean island of Corsica; Portugal; and Greece, as well as Spain. "The people who hid (their origins) more and had reason to do so were the Jews," Irizarry said, referring to the forced conversions and mass expulsions of Jews in late medieval Spain.

A scientific project launched three years ago to discover his true origins using DNA comparisons between his family and

possible descendants has so far failed to provide conclusive results.

A team of scientists took samples from the tomb of Columbus in Seville and from bones belonging to his brother and son and compared them to the genetic make-up of hundreds of people living across Europe with surnames believed to be modern day variants of Columbus.

Swabs were taken from the cheeks of Colom's in Catalonia, Colombo's in Italy and even members of the deposed Portuguese royal family, who argue that Columbus was the product of an extramarital affair involving a Portuguese prince. Scientists had hoped to establish a common ancestor using standard Y-chromosome tests but they have yet to find a link.

They study may be in vain, however, as there is evidence to suggest that Columbus, who first crossed the Atlantic in 1492, may have adopted his surname later in life to disguise his true origins.

Another theory claims that he once worked for a pirate called Vincenzo Columbus, and adopted that name in order not to embarrass his relations with his new profession.

Columbus himself, when asked about his origins, used to shrug off the questions. "Vine de nada" – "I came from nothing", he said.

[Click here to read an earlier article by Estelle Irizarry entitled: Three Sources of Textual Evidence of Columbus, Crypto Jew](#)