Columbus First Letter a Catalan Letter?

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Why should anything written by the Genoeseexplorer Christopher Columbus be counted as Catalan literature?Yes, many people consider Columbus not to have been Genoese at all,but a Catalonian. And if he were, then the letter he wrote in 1493to Ferdinand and Isabella on his way back from the Indies, called"the most important printed document of universal history [1]," isoneof the most significant things written by anyone of his nation.This study addresses not only the claim that since Columbus wasCatalan, anything he wrote belongs to the literature of Catalonia;it also addresses why the 1493 letter provides both external andinternal evidence that its author was not from Genoa —or Corsica,Greece, Croatia, Norway, Galicia, or Castile, as has also beenclaimed— but from somewhere in the Països Catalans.

Should Columbus' First Carta de las Indias Count as a Work of Catalan Letters?

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This study addresses not only the claim that since Columbus was Catalan, anything he wrote belongs to the literature of Catalonia; it also addresses why the 1493 letter provides both external and internal evidence that its author was not from Genoa —or Corsica, Greece, Croatia, Norway, Galicia, or Castile, as has also been claimed— but from somewhere in the Països Catalans.

First it may be useful to give a very brief overview of the question of Columbus's nationality [2] . It is only fair to say that the upholders of the official thesis of Columbus's origins insist that there really is no such question, as only dilettantes and lunatics have claimed that the Admiral was anything but a Genoese Italian. Be that as it may, there is a long history of oral traditions, books and articles that reject the Genoese and Italian account [3]. Briefly, here are the reasons that have been given for doing so.

First of all, Columbus never said, in any of his many letters and other writings that are extant, that he was Genoese. (The one document in which he does speak of Genoa "en ella nací e de ella salí" is a forgery.) He was not called Genoese in any document issued by the chanceries of Castile or Aragon, nor do King Ferdinand or Queen Isabella ever call him Genoese. Neither does the letter of naturalization by which his brother Diego is made a Castilian say anything about Genoa, whereas all the other Castilian letters of naturalization that survive do say from where the person being naturalized is.

Nor did the Genoese ambassadors who were present in 1493 in Barcelona when he was received by the Iberian monarchs refer to him as a fellow citizen when they wrote to Genoa. Furthermore, early authors who do say Columbus was Genoese seem to be very hesitant about doing so and never claim to have heard it from him and are never sure about any particulars of his early life.

But, object the Genoverians, none of that matters. Authentic documents show that a Cristoforo Colombo was born in Genoa in 1451 and left there in the 1470s. Other documents attest to the fact that a man who came to be called Cristóbal Colón came to Castile in 1485 after having lived for some years in Portugal. He must have been the same man as the Colombo born in Genoa.

But the differences between Colón and Colombo seem to be too great to be explained away to those who doubt that Columbus was Italian.

To sum up these differences,

Colombo was born in 1451, Colón in 1436 or 1446;

Colombo was uneducated, Colón read and wrote in such a way and about such things as to suggest that he had been schooled for years;

Colombo was a wool-weaver and cheese merchant, Colón was a nobleman;

Colombo can have had no great experience as a mariner and a ship's captain, Colón had years of experience as both; Colombo spoke the Genoese dialect of Italian, Colón did not, or any other kind of Italian;

the Genoese wool- weaver's name was Colombo, the Admiral of the Indies never called himself Colombo and was never called Colombo by anyone who knew him.

So if he was not a Genoese, why believe that he was Catalan? To begin with, the original form of Columbus's surname was neither Colombo nor Colón, but Colom. And Colom was a Catalan name. If it had been Colombo, it would have stayed Colombo in Castile. Colomo and Colón, the two forms the name has taken there, are simply phonetic castilianizations of Colom. Columbus did not insist on being identified as a Catalan because his family had fought against King John the Faithless in the 1462-1472 civil war waged by the Generalitat de Catalunya against the King of Aragon, and he wanted a favor of John's son Ferdinand. Many of his greatest supporters and associates —Lluís de Santàngel, Joan de Coloma, Joana de la Torre, Pere Margarit, Bernat Boyl, Miquel Ballester, Antoni de Torres— were Catalans (or Valencians).

His coat-of-arms, which he had before the first voyage, was Catalan. The language underlying his acquired Castilian was Catalan. Many of the names, such as Montserrat, that he gave to places in the Indies were Catalan. The admiral of the French fleet with whom he fought against

the Genoese in 1476, Guillem de Casanova Colom, was Catalan, and probably a relative. His library included many Catalan books. His son Fernando, who found no relatives in Italy, seemed at one point to be looking for them in Catalonia, but he was forbidden to continue by the King of Castile. The lands of the New World had been annexed to the Crown of Castile, and Catalans were even prohibited from going there. The port that enjoyed a monopoly of trade with the Indies was Castilian. Consequently, the Castilian administration had an interest in concealing the Catalan nationality of the man who was responsible for finding the Indies for them. It concealed his nationality with great success, by means of censorship of chronicles, suppression of documents, and legal actions against his family.

Before showing how the "Letter from the Indies" supports the thesis of Columbus's Catalan nationality, it is important to understand what that letter was. There were three of them sent by Columbus from Lisbon to Barcelona in March 1493 giving an account of his first voyage of discovery: one to Ferdinand's escrivà de ració, Lluís de Santàngel; a nearly identical one to Gabriel Sánchez, or Sanxis, the treasurer general of the Crown of Aragon; and a similar one to Ferdinand and Isabella themselves. The letter to Santàngel was printed in Barcelona in April 1493, by the press of Pere Posa, and again in Valladolid in 1497 [4] . The Sánchez letter was translated into Latin and printed by Stephanus Plannck in Rome in May 1493; and other editions of the Latin translation were published that same year in Antwerp, Basle, and Paris (three editions). Also from 1493 are no fewer than five editions of a verse translation into Italian by Giulio Dati, in which the Admiral is called "Colombo" in Italian for the first time [5] . (In the Latin epigram appended to the Coscó translation he was called "Columbus" for the first time). In 1497 the German translation appeared in Strasbourg. In all there are seventeen early editions of the various versions of the letters to Sant&agrae;ngel and Sánchez. Antonio Rumeu de Armas says of the diffusion of the letter throughout Europe that "no hay acontecimiento comparable en propagación a todo lo largo del Renacimiento [6]."

As for the letter written directly to the Catholic monarchs, it was not known at all until 1985, when the so-called Librocopiador turned up in a bookstore in Tarragona. Rumeu de Armas, who edited the Libro copiador in 1988, calls attention to the symbolic and real importance of this letter to Ferdinand and Isabella, naming it "the baptismal certificate of America" and the "authentic pearl among all the Columbine documents" [7].

The nine manuscript letters of Columbus in the Libro copiador are mid-sixteenth century copies. The original of the "Carta a los Reyes" was presumably once in the royal archives of Aragon or Castile, but it has disappeared. Columbus kept a copy of the letter he sent from Lisbon, and in 1500 he sent a second transcription to the monarchs. Both of these documents have also disappeared, and the originals of the letters to Santàngel and Sánchez have also disappeared [8].

Was there a Catalan version of the letter? None survives, but there must have been one. The 1497 German edition was "getüeschet vss der katilonischen zungen vnd vss dem latin," translated from the Catalan language and from Latin [9]. And in a register of Columbus's son's own library, the Colombina, appears the entry, "Letra enviada al escribano de ración. 1493. en catalán [10]." The letter this entry refers to is not in the Colombina, however. No one knows where it is; it has suffered the fate of so many documents related to Columbus, namely of having disappeared without a trace.

Caius Parellada believes that this
Catalan letter must have belonged to Fernando's father because its register entry lacks the details of purchase that mark items Fernando himself acquired.

He points out that next to the registration of the other two copies of the letter in Fernando's library, the Coscó translation and the Dati versification, is the annotation, "costó un cuatrín." So the only letter Fernando inherited from his father was this "letra al escribano de ración, en catalan [11]."

To believe that the original letter was written in Catalan does not seem farfetched in view of the fact that its two private recipients, Santàngel and Sánchez, were Catalan speakers and that its first translator also spoke Catalan. Leandre de Coscó was from the Aragonese branch of the Coscó family that originated in a town in Noguera, but he had lived in Barcelona for a long time and was doubtless in touch with the numerous Catalan Coscós in that city [12].

His translation of the Sánchez letter ab hispano idiomate into Latin was printed in Rome in the spring of 1493 even before Columbus arrived in Barcelona from Lisbon. A comparison of it to the printed version of the Santàngel letter, which may have also been a translation from one hispano idiomate into another, that was published in Barcelona that same spring, shows several features that cast light on its author's nationality [13].

First of all, the Sánchez-Coscó version has the new lands found by Columbus claimed not "for your Highnesses" ("por sus Altezas") but "for our most happy king" ("pro felicissimo rege nostro"), that is, for the count of Barcelona and king of Aragon alone (Sánchez 220; Santàngel 308). Then where the Santàngel letter tells the monarchs that they can dispose of the new lands "as completely as of the kingdoms of Castile" ("tan complidamente como de los reinos de Castilla") (224), the Sánchez-Coscó letter omits this phrase. In the Santàngel version the Indians are said to be inclined "to the love and service of your Highnes- ses and of all the Castilian nation" ("al amor y cervicio de Sus Altezas y de toda la nación castellana") (222); in the Sánchez letter theIndians are favorably inclined "to the King and Queen our Princes, and to all the nations of Spain" ("erga Regem, Reginam Principes nostros, et universas gentes Hispaniae") (314). And one more possibly telling difference is the fact that the Sánchez letter has Columbus saying "thirty-three days after I set out from Cádiz I arrived in the Indic Sea" (309), whereas he wrote to Santángel "in thirty-three days I passed to the Indies" (220). Several proponents of the Catalan thesis, notably Teresa Baqué and Jordi Bilbeny, see the version in the Sánchez letter as evidence that the first voyage left from Catalonia, specifically from Pals in the Ampurdà, stopping or passing Cádiz, which of course is east of Palos, on the way to the Indic Sea [14].

The Roman edition of the Sánchez letter concludes with an epigram by "R.L. de Corbaria, bishop of Montipalussi, to the undefeated King of the Spain" (324). This prelate has been identified by Francesc Albardané as another Catalan, Ramon Lluís de Corbera, bishop of Montepoloso in the Basilicata, the son of Joan de Corbera, a knight of Barcelona [15]. Albardané believes that Sánchez, Santàngel, Coscó and Corbera were part of a Catalan attempt to forestall the complete Castilianization of the enterprise of the Indies [16]. The edition in Barcelona by Pere Posa of the Santàngel letter was also part of this attempt, though it was more subject to censorship and pro-Castilian editing than the translation Coscó made and printed in Rome. The monarchs themselves had almost managed to keep Columbus's arrival in Barcelona a secret. The official dietaris of the city and of the Generalitat do not even mention his stay there in the spring of 1493. The copy of the letter addressed to them was hidden until 1985, and of course the original letters were destroyed or more definitively misplaced. The two private letters that were printed, censored or not, at least established Columbus as the discoverer of the Indies, even if they did not succeed in giving Catalonia-Aragon its full share in their exploitation and colonization.

There is one thing in the two private letters that relates explicitly to

Catalonia. Columbus writes that the circumference of the island he named Española is more than "all Spain from Colonia (or Cologna) to fontem rabidum," (316) as the Latin translation of the Sánchez letter has it, "máás que la España toda desde Colunia por costa de mar fasta Fuenterabía en Viscay," according to the Santàngel letter (223). (The letter to the monarchs says simply, "Esta otra Española es mayor en cerco que toda la España" [230]). Colonia/Colunia/Cologna has been interpreted as Catalonia by some translators and editors. Consuelo Varela claims in her edition that it means "La Coruña" (230), which is strange since the comparison is to "toda la España." Henry Harrisse read it as Cotlliure, however, surely the correct reading, Fuenterrabía and Cotlliure being the towns at either extremity of the Spanish coast [17]. Caius Parellada points out that there was a famous "Viatge de Circumval.lació" from Fuenterrabía to Cotlliure in 1476, when a Franco-Portuguese fleet met King Afonso V of Portugal in Lisbon and took him to France. The commander of that fleet was none other than an admiral named Colom, the same one, Parellada and others have argued, to whom Columbus was related, and with whom he fought in the battle of Cape St. Vincent in August 1476 against the Genoese. So if Columbus made this voyage from Fuenterrabía to Cotlliure with his relative seventeen years earlier, it is not strange that he should have used it as a basis of comparison in his letters to Santàngel and Sánchez[18]. This reinforces the association of Columbus with the "Caseneuve-Coulon" who fought the Genoese, and is another indication that he was not Italian but Catalan.

In 1892 José Asencio wrote that rumors had circulated the year before according to which in "a village of the Principality of Catalonia" the original of the Santàngel letter had been found [19]. If it had been found, it was lost or hidden again. But the appearance of the letter to the Monarchs in 1985 in the bookshop of the Cathedral of Tarragona was almost as remarkable. The bookseller (José del Río) would not reveal where he had obtained the Libro copiador, but Antonio Rumeu de Armas says that it had supposedly been in a private Majorcan library all these years [20]. At any rate, it is noteworthy for our purposes that this third form of the letter has Catalan connections, too. As for the language of the letters, it is hard to make any firm deductions about the language of the author since the original manuscripts are not available. But if the original were in Catalan, or if the original Castilian were written by a man whose first language was Catalan, the Catalan substratum ought to be detectable. And that substratum is undeniably there. Even Cesare de Lollis thought that there must have been an editio princeps in Catalan that would account for the many catalanisms in the Barcelona edition [21]. Pere Català i Roca, Josep Maria Castellnou, Caius Parellada, and Nito Verdera have also published studies on the question of Columbus's language [22]. There is one glaring and transcendental Catalanism that appears in the surviving versions of both the Sánchez and the Santángel letters; their author is identified as Colom. At the end of the Santángel letter we read "Esta carta envio Colom al escribano de racion de las islas halladas[23]." But that letter was edited in Barcelona, it may be objected, and the Catalan printer may have been responsible for changing the original form of the name to Colom. But then one finds at the beginning of the Latin translation of the Sánchez letter the words "Epistola Christophori Colom," and at the conclusion, by way of signature, "Christophorus Colom, Oceanae classis praefectus" (308, 322). This Colom (published in Italy) is not an abbreviation, and it is the form that appears in all printed versions of the Latin letter, even in the ones where emendations to the first edition were made, such as changing "Rafael" to "Gabriel" Sánchez, and changing one of the clauses to read that the new found lands were claimed "for our King and Queen." Not only is there absolutely no reference to its author being Italian, the Italian form of his name has been sedulously avoided. It seems likely that Coscó was faithfully and carefully transcribing the form of the surname that he considered most authentic, not latinizing it to Columbus, as R. L. de Corbaria did in the appended epigram, or to Colonus, as Pedro Mártir de Anglería always did, but leaving it in its original form. And that original form was the Catalan Colom.

And that fact, along with the other evidences alluded to above, makes it legitimate to claim that the "Carta de las Indias" was not only the first thing written by a European about the New World, not only "the most important printed document of universal history," but also one of the most significant and valuable works in the history of Catalan letters.

Si voleu tornar al principi d'aquesta secció d'estudis, piqueu aquí.
Si, en canvi, voleu passar al començament, piqueu aquí.

NOTES

1. Carlos Sanz, La carta de Colón (Madrid: 1956) 11.
2. For a bibliography of books and articles on the Catalan theory of Columbus's origins, see Josep M. Solà-Solé, "A Catalan Columbus: A Bibliography," The Catalan Contexts of Columbus: Proceedings of the Third Catalan Syposium, ed. Josep M. Solà-Solé (New York: Peter Lang, 1994) 161-178.
3. For a longer summary of these arguments, see Charles J. Merrill, "Why Question the Traditional Version of Columbus' Origins?" The Catalan Contexts of Columbus 137-150.
4. Sebastian Plannck printed it again that year, and a third printing was made on the press of Eucharius Argenteus (Demetrio Ramos, La primera noticia de América, [Valladolid: Publicaciones de la Casa-Museo de Colón y seminario Americanista de la Universidad, 1986]).
5. Five editions according to Sanz, La carta de Colón 12; Gil says there were three (Cristóbal Colón, Textos y documentos completos: Nuevas cartas, ed. Consuelo Varela and Juan Gil [Madrid: Alianza, 1992] 219).
6. Libro copiador de Cristóbal Colón.: Correspondencia inédita con los Reyes Católicos sobre los viajes a América (Madrid: Ministerio de Cultura) 1:51.
7. El libro copiador I: 37. The best and most accessible edition of the letter to the Monarchs is in Textos y documentos completos: Nuevas cartas 273-285.
8. As has the letter written by Martín Alonso Pinzón from Bayona in Galicia (La primera noticia de América 6).
9. Sanz XII: 13.
10. Caius Parellada i Cardellach, Cristòfor Colom i Catalunya: Una relació indefugible (Barcelona: La Llar del Llibre, 1992) 20.
11. Caius Parellada i Cardellach, Colom venç Colombo (Barcelona: 1986) 211-21.
12. Francesc Albardané i Llorens, "Seguint la pista de Leandre de Coscó," Butlletí del Centre d'Estudis Colombins 5-6: 20.
13. I will refer to the edition of the Sánchez-Coscó letter published as Epistola Christophori Colom in Navarrete I: 308-325, and to the Pere Posa Barcelona printing of the Santàngel letter published in Cristóbal Colón, Textos y documentos completos: Nuevas cartas 219-235.
14. Jordi Bilbeny, "Christopher Columbus and the Lie of Palos de Moguer," The Catalan Contexts of Columbus 95-108.
15. "Seguint la pista de Leandre de Coscó" 20.
16. Albardané, "Divulgació del descobriment des de Barcelona," Butlletí del Centre d'Estudis Colombins 9: 20.
17. Christophe Colomb, son origine, sa vie, ses voyages, sa famille es ses descendents (Paris, 1884) 420; cited in Parrellada, Colom venç Colombo 203.
18. Colom venç Colombo 200-203.
19. Lluís Ulloa, Noves proves de la catalanitat de Colom: Les grans falsetats de la tesi genovesa (Paris: Maisonneuve, 1927) 205.
20. El libro copiador I: 19.
21. Colom venç Colombo 206.
22. Català i Roca, "Sobre los italianismos observados en la carta de Colón a Santángel," Studi Colombiani (Genova, 1951) II: 283-290; Castellnou, Cristòfor Colom, català (com parlava Cristòfor Colom) (Barcelona, La Llar del Llibre, 1989); Parellada, Colom venç Colombo 118-181, 204-214; Cristòfor Colom i Catalunya 17-28; Nito Verdera, Cristóbal Colón, catalanoparlante (Eivissa: Editorial Mediterrània- Eivissa, 1994).

23. Colom venç Colombo 211.