

Was Columbus a Pirate?

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By RICHARD EDER
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MADRID, April 13—Christopher Columbus, far from being an Italian, was a Gascon, or Basque pirate, according to an article today in A.B.C., a leading Madrid newspaper.

The article is based on a study, written after two years of research, by an 81-year-old amateur historian and genealogist, asserting that Columbus was a close relative, probably a nephew, of Guillaume de Casenove Coullon, a Gascon seaman who alternated between piracy and steadier work as Vice Admiral of France under Louis XI.

The author, Fernando del Valle Lersundi, is a corresponding member of the Spanish Academy of History. His paper was presented to the academy, which has referred it to its West Indies section.

Theories about Columbus's

origins are numerous and difficult to confirm, since the discoverer himself is believed to have been less than truthful on the subject. Also some important documents concerning him have come under attack as fraudulent.

Another Spanish historian, Salvador de Madariaga y Rojo, says Columbus was a Catalan Jew, and arguments have been advanced for Galicia and Portugal.

Working out new variants, and attacking older ones, is a minor sport in Spain. It is less popular than bullfighting but almost as dangerous, in a sense, and probably as strenuous, considering the age of most of those who engage in it.

Mr. del Valle, a tall man with a white mustache and untidy white hair, looked tired as he sat in his apart-

Continued on Page 10, Column 3

Continued From Page 1, Col. 7

ment today. "It has been a hard three months," he said.

He said that not long ago he had met a man he would not name "who told me he had found four sources to prove that Columbus came from Valencia."

Mr. del Valle said he had told the man: "I will wager 100 pesetas against 25 that the academy rejects your idea and accepts mine."

He said the other historian, who of course was a Valencian, "just turned and walked away."

No Ruling by Academy

The thesis of Mr. del Valle, who is a Basque, has been neither endorsed nor rejected by the academy. This annoys him. "That is what they are there for," he said. But A.B.C., which is serious if rather stuffy, calls it "a brilliant and rigorous theory which could prove decisive in investigating the origin of Columbus."

Mr. del Valle repeats familiar arguments against the Genoese claim: Columbus never wrote in Italian, even to relatives, and there are no uncontested documents in which he speaks of Genoese birth.

The historian notes that Columbus spoke Spanish before he is supposed to have arrived in Spain. He also notes that Columbus's brother, Bartolome, lived for a year in the royal palace in Paris. This, he writes, would be extraordinary if he were the son of Genoese artisans, as Genoese sources contend the family was.

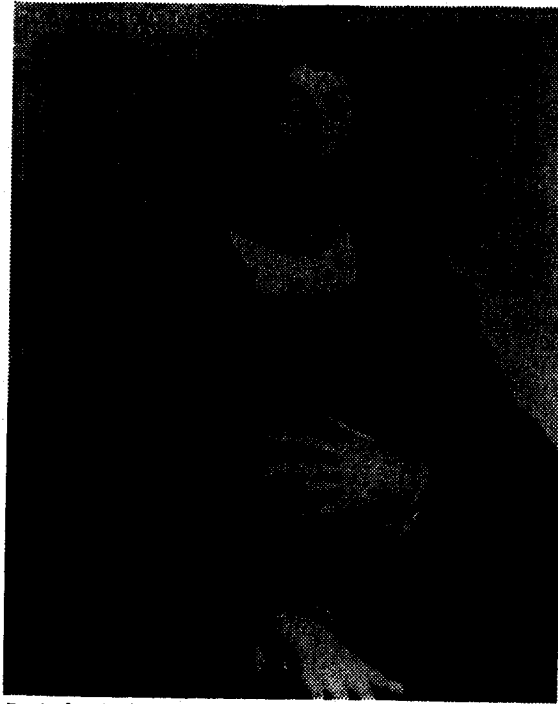
However, it would not be extraordinary, he continues, for a relative of Admiral Casenove Coullon, whose last name—originally a nickname meaning seagull—is spelled in records of the time also as "Collon" and "Colombo." Columbus's name is spelled with the same variations.

Cites Contemporary Chronicle

Mr. del Valle goes on to cite the account of a contemporary chronicler, Alonso Fernandez de Palencia, who describes in detail the marauding activities of Coullon off Spain. One incident was an attack on Spanish ships off the Basque coast, another was an attack on three Genoese ships off Portugal.

This same attack is also described by two principal chroniclers of Columbus, Bartolome de las Casas and Fernando Colon, the latter the discoverer's son. Both say that Christopher Columbus served under Coullon—though spelling his name Columbo or Colombo—and identify him as a relative of the admiral. De las Casas calls him "a famous man, the greatest pirate of the time."

Mr. del Valle suggests a reason that Columbus made a



Portrait of Christopher Columbus by Sebastian del Pombo

mystery of his origin. The records of the Spanish court list him simply as a foreigner, at that time a non-Castilian, although the records were usually more specific. Mr. del Valle says it would have been mutually embarrassing for King Ferdinand and Columbus if it were known he had served in pirate raids on Spanish ships.

Admiral a Gascon

Mr. del Valle believes that Columbus's relationship to Coullon is established. The admiral is recorded as a Gascon, that is from Gascony, which includes the French Basque country and might have included part of the Spanish Basque country, as well.

Mr. del Valle, says that a search of records should be undertaken in the region to establish where Coullon came from and thus pinpoint Columbus's origin and his exact relationship to the corsair admiral.

Birthplaces Galore

"It seems that there are few places left which are not privileged to have been the birthplace of Christopher Columbus."

"It's one of those enjoyable little ideas which none of us should take very seriously."

With these and similar comments, professors of history at Columbia and Yale universities yesterday indicated they were not inclined to accept the theory that Columbus was a

Gascon or Basque, and a pirate to boot.

Robert S. Pope, the Durfee Professor of History at Yale University, who was born and reared in Genoa, compared the Del Valle theory with that of the Loch Ness sea monster and "the old story of a woman who became a pope."

"It's like an old story that keeps popping up. There's just no substance to it whatever," Professor Lopez said in a telephone interview from his home in New Haven.

Professor Lopez said that the Spanish Academy of History, to which Mr. del Valle submitted his paper, had "long ago approved documents that showed Genoa was the Columbus birthplace."

These documents, he said, included a letter in Columbus's handwriting which said that, although he was residing in Seville, "my heart is in Genoa, my birthplace." Other documents, "which couldn't have been forged," showed "precisely who his father and mother were and that he was a resident of Genoa as a baby," Professor Lopez said.

Describing the Del Valle theory as "pure baloney," Professor Lopez said similar claims had been made often before for places in Greece, France, Spain, Wales and elsewhere.

John H. Mundy, chairman of the department of history at Columbia, described the Del Valle thesis as "standard stuff—taking old stuff and reshuffling it."

"Every little village in Italy thinks he was born there," Professor Mundy said, adding that theories about the birthplace of Columbus "seem to go on forever."

Commenting on the notion that Columbus was a pirate, Prof. Mundy noted that in the explorer's day "half of those" in Spanish maritime life were Italians—"and everybody was semi-piratical."

He explained that the many governments made a common practice of issuing letters of marque to their sea captains, authorizing them to prey on the commerce of rival powers.

"Piracy was just an extension of this," Prof. Mundy added. "A pirate didn't have a Letter of Harque; he just did his thing anyway."