Christopher Columbus boldly carved out a prominent place for himself in European and American history by sailing westward to the New World in 1492. He became one of the most important figures in western civilization by changing the very thrust of European expansion for the next five hundred years. For this reason, he quickly became the subject of great interest to scholars and reading publics all over the world who early realized the significance of his voyages. In the past thirty years historians have conducted more revealing research on him than in all the previous years combined.\(^1\) We know today most of the details surrounding his initial contacts with Isabel and Ferdinand. The facts regarding his voyages to the New World are common knowledge. In short, our collection of data about his life after he became famous is large and not subject to much controversy anymore. What is still clouded is his early life until the late 1480s. Most of the recent research on Columbus has been concentrated in this earlier period and some interesting discoveries have resulted.\(^2\) Of the various lines of investigation in this regard which has produced the greatest amount of controversy, the issue of his origin is the most important.

While always the subject of some heated debate, this issue did not attract any wide attention until about thirty years ago when Samuel Eliot Morison, an American historian, published a biography of Columbus in which he stated that the discoverer was Italian born and raised in Genoa.\(^3\) In effect, Morison gave his stamp of approval for the most commonly accepted interpretation of the navigator's origin. And even today, hardly a European or American textbook disputes these facts with the sole exception of the Spanish who, at the time Morison published his book wanted to call Columbus one of theirs, never publicized their views outside of Spain. Yet at about the same time that Morison published his biography another highly respected scholar released other findings.

Salvador de Madariaga, a Spaniard living in England, published a massive biography summarizing the various controversies regarding Columbus and added his views with sagacity and prudence. Essentially, Madariaga argued that the discoverer had been raised in Genoa by his Catalan family which was of Jewish extraction rather than Roman Catholic. Arguing his case more forcefully than Morison, he marshalled evidence from Italian and Spanish sources to prove his contention.\(^4\) With two leading historians at odds on the question, it was only inevitable that other scholars would cross-check the facts and attempt to resolve the issue. The historiographical argument resulting from these two books has continued unabated for thirty years in the United States, Italy, Portugal, and Spain, and shows no signs of decreasing. Yet in the process of taking sides, historians have unearthed a great deal of new information on the early life of Columbus.\(^5\)

But why the argument about his origins? In part the answer is that historians invariably want to settle unanswered mysteries especially if there is an audience to read their findings. But in the majority, national pride inspired a voracious hunt for the facts. Literally thousands of articles and several important volumes have appeared on Columbus as a result of this controversy.\(^6\) Italians wanted to claim Columbus as one of their own in order to take credit for his achievement. To a Castilian Spaniard, such a thought was revolting since the reign of Ferdinand and Isabel represented the greatest and most exciting chapter in Spain's history and to grace it with a foreigner became inconceivable. For such an
individual, it seemed imperative that the discoverer of the New World be a Catholic Spaniard not an Italian or a Jew.

Yet others have vied for Columbus as well. With less success, a few Portuguese historians explored the possibility that the navigator was a bastard son of the royal family. Calling forth such facts as his long tenure in Portugal, speaking knowledge of their language, and Lisbon’s reputation as a maritime center, they argued that he was in fact a relative of the Spanish king and queen. However, few historians outside of Portugal ever took this reasoning seriously. In fact, the Portuguese have done the least amount of work on Columbus in the past generation and probably because they have been so discouraged by Spanish and Italian historians.

The other major group claiming Columbus have been the Catalans who inhabit the northeast corner of Spain. Catalonia, long a maritime center and the home base for many sailors, maritime lawyers, and merchants in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, early made its bid for Columbus. To Catalans no better crown for their proud maritime heritage could be found than to prove Columbus one of them. Their historians have done the most thorough research on the discoverer, finding the greatest number of new facts regarding his early life. It is to their work that attention should be drawn since little of it has ever appeared in English and because their findings shed light on Christopher Columbus.

Local pride induced Catalans to call Columbus, or as they would argue by citing old documents, Colom, one of their own. There is no denying that he had ties with this region. Some of his sailors on the first voyage were Catalans. When the Admiral returned to Spain he presented himself to Ferdinand and Isabel with his Indians, corn, tobacco, and other souvenirs at Barcelona, Catalonia’s principal port. In fact, part of his first expedition was financed by Catalan bankers long experienced in dealing with maritime investments. It is fairly accepted that earlier in his life, Columbus fought near the Catalan coast during a local civil war. Even today, visitors to Barcelona are reminded of him. In the harbor is a full sized reproduction of one of his ships. Near the docks stands a large statue of the discoverer while less than two hundred yards away the landing where he unloaded his vessels after the first trip remains preserved as a maritime museum. The throne room in which he reported to Isabel and Ferdinand is open to tourists and the guides are quick to point out that Columbus visited the chamber.

The city of Barcelona also houses a treasure of archives long used by Catalan scholars. Because it is rich in information regarding Columbus and other local mariners, odd pieces of information on the navigator continually appear. The municipal naval records and those of the Crown of Aragon have shown that Columbus visited Barcelona on several occasions for business requiring legal documentation. Major findings have yet to be made; however, many local historians believe that Columbus’s diary of his first trip, which he publicly gave to Isabel in Barcelona and has subsequently been lost, is stored in the Aragon files. The possibility of other papers of his being there is strongly believed since some of his less important ones have been found there.

Mallorca, like Barcelona, has also yielded evidence of his early life. The Catalan island of Mallorca, like Genoa in the fifteenth century, was a leading center for map makers. Like her Italian competitor, Mallorca produced navigators and sailors who manned ships all over the Mediterranean world. Some historians even feel that at the time of Columbus’s birth in mid-century, Mallorca was the most prominent map manufacturing area in the
Mediterranean. Armed with samples of Columbus’s handwriting, scholars have probed local records in search of proof that the explorer had indeed been a Catalan. A local regis-
ter of municipal documents in Mallorca listed a Cristobal Colom during the 1480s. A long time Mallorquin family, the Socias, has claimed for several hundred years that Columbus was a descendant of theirs; yet positive proof is lacking. The long search for a letter by Columbus in Catalan on the island that was to prove his nationality never ma-
terialized but greater discoveries were made on the mainland.

The Archives of the Indies, housed in Seville, listed a letter by him dated 1493 which described the first voyage in Catalan. Yet this document has not been found in these files. Later such a letter was discovered in Catalonia. Addressed to a Valencian banker who helped finance his first trip, Don Luis Santangel, it was written in Catalan and in the Ad-
miral’s own hand. Other copies existed in printed form. For example in 1497, a German translation of the letter was published in Strasbourg. Three other editions appeared in Italian between 1493 and 1497. In all four cases, the translators noted that the original had been in Catalan and their copies, from which they worked, were also in Catalan.

Other documents culled from Catalan government sources called him Colom as oppos-
ed to the Spanish Colón even before he made his trip to the New World. A letter in the archives of the Duke of Alba refers to the Admiral as Colom and was written by a Casti-
lian. Other Spanish records, mainly indices of documents, listed Columbus either as Colón or Colom. Part of the discrepancies in his name can be attributed to the poor handwriting of Spanish clerks but also to the possibility that Columbus was known to some of his acquaintances by his Catalan or Castilian names. From the scattered pieces of evidence in Castile and in Catalonia, Spanish historians, during the 1950s, moved toward the conclu-
sion that Columbus was not an Italian. By the end of the next decade most believed there was a strong possibility that he was of Catalan extraction. The extremists held that he was Mallorquin.

Most European historians now believe that an Italian Columbus could not be. Consi-
dering the importance of the trip and the responsibility that Columbus had in governing any land he discovered, it seemed highly doubtful that the King and Queen would have sponsored a citizen of another country. Given the rivalry between Spain and other Euro-
pean powers at the time, historians argued that appointing an Italian would have been a bad political move. The governorship of discovered lands probably would have gone to a member of a distinguished Spanish family or even to a royal relative.

There are those who have tried to argue that Columbus was of royal blood in order to support the contention that only a major individual would have received the blessings of the monarchy for such an adventure. Arguing with little reliable evidence, some have tried to show that Columbus was a member of the Portuguese royal family which was related to Spain’s. Neither Spanish or Portuguese researchers have uncovered any birth certifi-
cate or statement of illegitimate birth to substantiate such arguments. Yet the intense ef-
forts to show Columbus’s Spanish background has not been matched in Portugal by ex-
tensive probings into royal archives.

The Catalans have also employed the Spanish argument that only a person with some connection with Spain could have received the titles of Admiral and Viceroy from the monarchy. Rejecting the Italian claim, they believed a Catalan, being a Spaniard, could be given such power and prestige without violating customs, law, and good political sense. Moreover, since Catalonia still provided Spain with her best map makers and sailors, it
was only natural that a Catalan would propose such a revolutionary idea as finding a westward path to the east. Economics was also employed in the argument because at the time, it appeared that a further development of trade with Asia would certainly benefit the Catalans the most since they already had considerable experience in maritime trade while the Castilians did not.  

The controversy over Columbus's origins remains unresolved. The Italian school undercut their own arguments by admitting that Genoa boasted several map makers at the time bearing the name Columbus.  

A birth certificate from a Roman Catholic church or an equivalent document from Jewish authorities bearing the name of the explorer has not been found in Genoa, Lisbon, or in Mallorca. Such a discovery would undoubtedly help settle much of the controversy assuming that an authentic certificate even exists since record keeping was not all that one might want in the fifteenth century. Yet fragments of his writings have been found in Catalan as well as in Latin and in Spanish. We know he spoke Portuguese, Spanish, and some Italian. Possibly he knew Catalan but preferred not to use it around his Castilian friends. Where did Columbus come from, what was his religion, and did he speak Catalan like a native? The solutions to these riddles are still shrouded in mystery. But with more historians than ever before studying his life, the answers may not be long in coming. Until then, Columbus will remain the enigma he has always been.

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Notes
1. For a bibliography of these works see Enrique Bayerri y Bertomeu, Colón tal cual fué (Barcelona, 1961), 25-323.
2. Ibid., 11-23.
6. Besides those already mentioned see Juan Pérez de Tudela, Las armadas de Indias y los orígenes de la política de colonización (Madrid, 1956) and The Life of The Admiral Christopher Columbus By His Son Ferdinand, translated and annotated by Benjamin Keen (New Brunswick, 1959).
7. Summarized in Madariaga, Christopher Columbus, 69-118. See also Moses Bensabat Amzalak, Uma Interpretação da assinatura de Cristovam Colombo (Lisbon, 1927) and Patrocínio Ribeiro, A Nacionalidade Portuguesa de Cristovam Colombo (Lisbon, 1927).
8. Bayerri y Bertomeu, Colón tal cual fué, passim.
12. Madariaga, Christopher Columbus, 25-33.
13. See footnote No. 7.
15. Italian views are collected in Studi Colombiani, 3 vols (Genoa, 1952).