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Is there still someone laughing at Christopher Columbus?

Leonardo Punzi, Alberto Perez-Negrete, Marco Amedeo Cimmino, Andrea Doria, Roberto Gerli, Gian Domenico Sebastiani, Luigi Sinigaglia, Piero Marson

Institute for the History of Rheumatology, Venice, Italy

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Correspondence: Leonardo Punzi, Institute for the History of Rheumatology, Venice, Italy. E-mail: punzileonardo@gmail.com

Dear Editor,

Christopher Columbus's voyages have undoubtedly changed the history of humankind. Despite already being a public figure in his lifetime, several facts concerning Columbus's life, including his final illness, are still under debate. As is often the case with geniuses and pioneers, many disbelieved or even derided Columbus. In 1987, Gerard Weissman, a famous immunologist and rheumatologist, published "*They all laughed at Christopher Columbus: Tales of Medicine and Art of Discovery*", a book discussing medical and social issues of diseases as seen from a broad range of viewpoints, such as art, literature, philosophy, city planning, politics, and psychology. Weissman highlighted the gap between progress and the resistance of human society to accept its conceptual and practical effects (1). One of his case studies was the fate of Columbus, who was not only laughed at because he believed that the earth was round, but also when he spoke of his illness. The spur for the provocative title of his book came from a famous musical piece by George and Ira Gershwin, "They all laughed at Christopher Columbus when he said the world was round; they all laughed when Edison recorded sound; they all laughed at Wilbur..." originally played by Jimmy Dorsey in 1931, and later by other singers, including Emma Fitzgerald and Frank Sinatra.

Columbus joint disease

The most accurate information about Columbus's disease derives from two reliable people, his son Hernando and the distinguished doctor Diego Alvarez Chanca, physician of the King and Queen of Castilla and Aragon, who participated in his second voyage. In 1980, Allison published in *The Lancet* the paper "*Christopher Columbus: first case of Reiter's disease in the old world?*" (2), in which he elaborated on their historical data. He claimed that the association of arthritis, eye trouble, pain, and "running blood" occurring after an epidemic on the ship indicated that the previous clinical hypotheses, such as syphilis, gout, or rheumatoid arthritis (RA), were untenable (2, 3). Columbus's disease was a form of progressively disabling polyarthritis, primarily involving the lower limbs in association with severe systemic manifestations. Although the disease onset dated back to his first voyage, its most evident symptoms appeared during the

second one, with "high fever and drowsiness, so that he lost his sight, memory and any other senses, for more than five months". The hypothesis that Columbus's clinical manifestations were due to RA or gout is highly unlikely; in fact, Hernando used the word gout as a catch-all word for arthritis to describe his father's illness, as was common in that time. The recurring crises affecting Columbus for the rest of his life, which often left him bedridden, support the clinical hypothesis of reactive arthritis, which was supported by Weissman (1) and by Hoenig, who, in his article "*The arthritis of Christopher Columbus*", carefully described the clinical history and the various episodes occurring in the fourth voyage (4).

Furthermore, Arnett *et al.* presented this case at the Historical Clinical-pathological Conference of the Maryland University School of Medicine (5). These considerations have been revisited recently with new available tools for medical history investigation, such as DNA studies.

DNA studies

The first step when a disease in human remains is under investigation is to establish the identity of the proband. In 2006, Martinez-Gonzalez *et al.*, forensic scientists from the University of Granada, Spain, genotyped 17 Y-chromosome STRs in samples of bones kept at Columbus's mausoleum in the Cathedral of Seville (6). Under normal conditions, this procedure is easy and rapid, but the bones attributed to Columbus and his family members in Seville were scarce, deteriorated, and highly contaminated. Therefore, the analysis lingered for want of new and better analytical methods. A press conference held at the University of Granada in May 2021 announced that DNA analysis of three members of the Columbus family at five international laboratories was in progress. The authors explained the gradual steps of this long investigation, as well as the eight heterodox theories about the national origin of Columbus. However, no scientific papers were subsequently published, and the preliminary results were released only through the documentary "*Columbus DNA: His True Origins*", co-produced with Spain's state-owned station TVE, which attracted a record audience of over 2 million viewers when aired on October 12, 2024. Yet no independent expert opinions or consistent, peer-reviewed data were put forward. Some leading DNA researchers were shocked by the preposterous results of the alleged remains of Christopher

Columbus. Lorente, a coauthor of the DNA study, claimed that Columbus was probably a Sephardic Jew who lived on Spain's Mediterranean coast, thus challenging the dominant historical view of his Genoese origin.

What is more, David Reich of Harvard University, one of the world's foremost experts on ancient DNA, challenged these results and stated that "it is not a trivial task to confirm that someone is connected to a specific group [such as Sephardic Jews]. Based on the type of analysis described, there does not seem to be any solid foundation for claiming a connection with medieval Spanish Jews. Before we can take such a claim seriously, all the evidence and data must be published". Reich, himself a descendant of Jews who fled Europe during the Holocaust, also emphasized the importance of independent verification: "it would be preferable for an independent laboratory, one that is not tied to a television channel, to analyze the DNA and confirm the results" (7). So far, Christopher Columbus is still being laughed at, more than 500 years after his death.

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