

PROOF THAT COLUMBUS WAS BORN IN 1451: A NEW DOCUMENT

IT is well known that neither Columbus nor his first two biographers, his son Ferdinand and Las Casas, have mentioned the date of his birth, though all three speak of his studies, his voyages, and his nautical experiences in a manner which leaves it to be supposed that his life was a long one and that he had spent much time in preparing himself for the discovery he was to make. It is on this account that particular interest attaches to the date of the birth of Columbus, and this explains why so much ink has been shed to clear up this obscure point. Columbus having left us only contradictory statements respecting his age at different periods of his life,¹ while his two biographers have said nothing to enlighten us on the subject, criticism has been compelled to seek elsewhere for information, and has fortunately discovered in the notarial archives of Genoa and Savona, towns where Columbus spent his youth, documents which make up for the reticence of those from whom we had the right to expect authentic information on so important a fact.

These documents, dated from 1470 to 1473, supply indeed the material required for solving this problem. Unfortunately those who first studied them did so from a point of view which obscured rather than cleared up the question.

Inasmuch as these papers—with one exception, and that was only discovered later than the others—do not mention in precise terms the age of Columbus, it was thought possible to fix it approximatively from the nature of the deed in which mention was made of the future Admiral. Thus, after having ascertained that the Genoese legal code of the period recognized four different majorities (those of sixteen, seventeen, eighteen, and twenty-five years, each one of which limited the minor's legal rights within certain defined restrictions), the deduction was drawn that, according to the purport of the deed to which Columbus was a party, he must necessarily have one or the other of the majorities admitted by the law. For instance, on August 26, 1472, Columbus, with the authorization of his parents, signs a deed whereby he renders himself responsible

¹ They have all been quoted in our essay, *The Real Birth-Date of Columbus* (London, 1903), and in the third of our *Études Critiques sur la Vie de Colomb avant ses Découvertes* (Paris, 1905).

for a debt¹; therefore, so we are told, he was not then twenty-five years of age, for, had he attained those years, he would not have required their permission; consequently he was born less than twenty-five years before that date, in other words, after August 26, 1447.

Again, on August 7, 1473,² Columbus authorizes his mother to consent to a sale which his father wishes to make; this proves, so it is alleged, that he had attained then the great majority of twenty-five years, as otherwise he could not have given the said authorization, whence it follows that he was born before August 7, 1448.³ If Columbus was not twenty-five years of age on August 26, 1472, but was so on August 7, 1473, he was necessarily born between August 26, 1447, and August 7, 1448.

Yet another calculation. On May 25, 1471,⁴ Columbus was not twenty-five years of age, because on that date his mother legally binds herself without his intervention. On March 20, 1472,⁵ he witnesses a will; therefore he had then attained the great majority, and consequently he was born between May 25, 1446, and March 20, 1447.⁶

The error in these apparently very clear and simple demonstrations is that they are based on questionable data. It is not by any means clear that it was because he was a minor that Columbus required the authorization of his parents in order to render himself liable for a debt in August, 1472.⁷ It is not satisfactorily established that Columbus on August 7, 1473, intervened without the sanction of his father, for the very nature of the deed then in question presupposes in fact that sanction.⁸ It does not follow from the fact that his mother on May 25, 1471, agreed to the sale of property under her marriage settlement without her son's consent that he was not then of a legal age to give it. In addition to the point's being obscure in itself, Columbus may have been absent at the time. Finally, the fact that he witnessed a will on March 20, 1472,

¹ *Documenti relativi a Cristoforo Colombo*, no. 44, in *Raccolta Colombiana*, part II., vol. 1, also in our *Real Birth-Date*, p. 18, and in our *Études*, p. 220.

² *Documenti*, no. 51; *Real Birth-Date*, p. 19; *Études*, p. 221.

³ Desimoni, *Quistioni Colombiane*, in *Raccolta*, part II., vol. 3, p. 23.

⁴ *Documenti*, no. 38; *Real Birth-Date*, p. 15; *Études*, p. 219.

⁵ *Documenti*, no. 41; *Real Birth-Date*, p. 16; *Études*, p. 220.

⁶ HARRISSE, *Christophe Colomb*, I, 227.

⁷ According to the Genoese law of 1414 this authorization was required at any age, so long as regular emancipation had not been granted. Desimoni, *Quistioni*, p. 33; *Real Birth-Date*, p. 25; *Études*, p. 224.

⁸ See *Real Birth-Date*, pp. 61-63, and *Études*, pp. 244-246.

does not prove that he was then major, for it was perfectly legal in similar cases to act as witness although still a minor.¹

From the above brief observations, which are here merely indicated but which have been fully developed elsewhere, it may be seen that the data which have been employed to fix approximatively the age of Columbus at certain dates are wanting in consistency. If they were absolutely fixed and certain, the conclusions to be drawn from them would not be contradictory; which, however, is the case, inasmuch as it follows from them that Columbus, who was not twenty-five years old on August 26, 1472, had already attained that age on March 20 of that same year.

None of the documents which have been quoted in the above calculation mentions definitely the actual age of Columbus. But in 1887 one was discovered which gave this valuable information; the deed in question is the one bearing the date of October 31, 1470, wherein Columbus is described as then being over nineteen years of age. This document in fact completely destroyed all the fine quibbling which tended to prove that Columbus was born before such and such a date and after such and such another; but, unfortunately, those who had so exercised their ingenuity, instead of yielding to the force of the new evidence, sought only to make it fit in with their preconceived theories. The argument they adopted was the following: the deed of October 31, 1470, reads, "Christopher Columbus, son of Domenico, of more than nineteen years accomplished" ("Christofforus de Columbo filius Dominici, major annis decemnovem").² Well, then, this we are assured does not mean what it says: *major annis decemnovem*, more than nineteen years of age, or of nineteen years fully, or of nineteen years accomplished; no, what this really means is: more than nineteen years of age but not yet twenty-five³; that is to say, that Columbus may then have been twenty, twenty-one, twenty-two, twenty-three, or twenty-four years of age at the date this deed was signed. All therefore that can be deduced from this deed, according to this argument, is that Columbus could not have been born before October 31, 1445, because otherwise he must have been twenty-five years of age on October 31, 1470, and consequently dispensed from requiring the authorization of his father; or, that he could not have been born after

¹ HARRISSE, *op. cit.*, I. 227.

² See the text in *Documenti*, no. 34, and here in the appendix.

³ "The expression used here means that Columbus had attained the majority of nineteen years, and not yet that of twenty-five." HARRISSE, *Christopher Columbus and the Bank of St. George* (New York, 1888), p. 89, note 4. See also *Christophe Colomb devant l'Histoire* by the same author (Paris, 1892), p. 65.

October 31, 1451, as in that case he would not have been more than nineteen years of age at the date of the aforesaid document.

The error of this reasoning is so evident that it is simply astonishing that the argument could ever have been for a moment maintained. Had it indeed been that the laws of Genoa recognized a particular majority of nineteen years (as they did in fact admit majorities of sixteen, seventeen, eighteen, and of twenty-five years), it might have been legitimate to argue that the phrase *major annis decemnovem* meant what it is sought to read into it. But such is not the case, nor does any one claim that it is so; on the contrary, all the authorities are agreed upon the point that the laws of Genoa make no mention of a majority of nineteen years. It follows therefore, as clearly as day follows night, that if Columbus had then been twenty, twenty-one, twenty-two, twenty-three, or twenty-four years of age, instead of nineteen, the notary would have so stated. Why, otherwise, should he have hit upon nineteen years of age unless that was actually the age of Columbus?¹

We do not possess a single deed of the Genoese notaries of the time wherein mention of the age does not state the actual age of the individual mentioned therein. For instance, when one of these notaries writes in a deed, dated September 10, 1484, referring to Jacopo or Giacomo Colombo, "major annis sexdecim, juravit", it is clear he wished to make evident that this younger brother of Columbus was then fully of sixteen years of age, because he adds that he has made him swear that such is the case. Had Jacopo been

¹ It is curious to note that M. Desimoni, who may be considered as the inventor of the four-majorities theory, admits that the declaration of age is only a means of verifying the identity of the contracting parties. *Quistioni*, p. 37. M. Ugo Assereto, who has studied this question from the legal point of view, makes the observation that when it was a question of verifying the fact that the contracting party had attained one of the legal majorities—the majority of nineteen years, for instance, which conveys the right of undertaking the engagement stipulated in the deed—the formula usually employed runs: *minor annis viginti-quinque major tamen annis decemocto* (of less than twenty-five years but of more than eighteen years). M. Assereto explains that very seldom in notarial engagements is mention made of an age intermediate between two majorities, such as those of eighteen and twenty-five years, and that when it does take place "it is to bring into prominence that the contracting party being older than eighteen, the age strictly required to validate his action, should for a greater reason be presumed to have a knowledge of the importance of the engagements he is undertaking". This judicious critic concludes, as we have ourselves done, that every time when "in a notarial deed it is stipulated that one of the contracting parties is older than nineteen, is older than twenty, is older than etc., we may be sure that he is not yet twenty, or twenty-one, etc., for, were it otherwise, there would have been every reason for mentioning the second age rather than the first." "La Data della Nascita di Colombo", in *Giornale Storico e Letterario della Liguria*, La Spezia, January-February, 1904, pp. 6-7.

then of a different age, he would not have sworn he was at that time sixteen.¹ The deed of 1508, wherein Zerega, indicating his age, says "maggiore di quarant'anni",² and the one in which Pantalino Bavarello, the son of Columbus's sister, owns to twenty-seven years³ have exactly the same bearing.

This was the state of the question when the author of these lines published, in 1903, his essay, *The Real Birth-Date of Columbus: 1451*,⁴ an essay reproduced later in French in our *Études Critiques*,⁵ wherein are set forth at length the views here summarily stated, with the texts bearing thereon; whence it may be gathered that the deed of October, 1470, gives the exact age Columbus then had; and whereby his birth is determined as coming between October 31, 1450, and October 31, 1451.⁶

But when we made this demonstration the only document then known which could efficiently support our argument was the one of 1470, and, as Columbus was still a minor in 1470, those who clung to the four-majorities theory had still a pretense for arguing

¹ *Documenti*, no. 68. MM. Desimoni and Lollis both admit that this deed signifies that Jacopo was then a little over sixteen years of age.

² M. Desimoni, who himself gives this example, refers also to the mention of the phrase *major annorum XXII*. which he has found, and which, according to him, merely indicates the actual age because there existed no legal majorities of forty and of twenty-two years. *Quistioni*, p. 37.

³ *Documenti*, no. 111.

⁴ *A Critical Study of the Various Dates assigned to the Birth of Christopher Columbus. The Real Date 1451. With a Bibliography of the Question* (London, Henry Stevens, Son, and Stiles, 1903).

⁵ *Études Critiques sur la Vie de Colomb avant ses Découvertes* (Paris, Welter, 1905, pp. 544). This volume, as the colophon shows, left the printer on January 30, 1905.

⁶ We think it only right to repeat here, as we have already stated elsewhere, that we were not the first to seize the real significance of this document. Already in 1892 Mr. Richard Davey had called attention to it (*The National Review*, London, October, 1892, pp. 219, 222); and in that same year M. Asensio, in discussing it, had implicitly admitted that it must be construed as we have construed it, though he raised the difficulty that the *Christofforus de Columbo filius Dominici* of the deed in question may not have been our Columbus (*Cristóbal Colón*, Barcelona, [1891], I. 216). In 1900 M. González de la Rosa boldly declared to the Americanist Congress that it followed from this document that Columbus was born in 1451; but we are the first who subjected this notarial act to a detailed critical examination, and who showed that it really means that Columbus had fully accomplished nineteen years of life in 1470. In 1904, about a year after the publication of our English memoir on this point, M. Assereto repeated the same demonstration in the article quoted below; and, inasmuch as he does not refer to us, we must believe he had not seen our work, although it raised some discussion at the time. Our argument is summed up in pages 95-101 in the English volume and in pages 26-63 in the French. In 1902, in our *Toscanelli and Columbus* (London, Sands and Company), pp. 262-263, we had already given the result of our studies on this point.

that the notary, in recording the fully nineteen years of Columbus, wished only to indicate thereby that he had already passed the legal majority of eighteen years, without, however, having yet attained the majority of twenty-five. To-day the position is altered. Another document has been discovered which also gives the age of Columbus; but this later discovery no longer lends itself to the support of the meaning it was sought to give to the deed of October 31, 1470.

This deed, which M. Assereto had the good fortune to find among the notarial archives of Genoa, and which he made public in February, 1904,¹ is dated August 25, 1479, and contains a deposition made by Columbus (who was then fixed at Lisbon but was passing through Genoa) in which he states that he was at that time aged about twenty-seven years.² Here, at any rate, there can be no misunderstanding. It is the notary himself who asks Columbus what his age may be and who writes down his reply, wherein the word *major*, the origin of so many difficulties, does not occur, thus closing the door to all ambiguity that might have arisen from the expression "major of twenty-seven years"; which in itself, however, could scarcely have led to confusion, inasmuch as the legislation of the period nowhere recognizes a later majority than that of twenty-five.

When therefore Columbus said he was twenty-seven years of age or thereabouts, he could have meant to say only what the phrase itself indicates, that he was either a little more or a little less than the age indicated; and this in the first case would fix his birth toward the end of 1451, and in the second toward the beginning of 1452. But the point which is here left in doubt is fortunately cleared up by the deed of 1470, which demonstrates that it is in the first sense that we must interpret the declaration of Columbus; for according to the wording of that document he was over nineteen years of age on October 31, 1470, which would have been impossible if on August 25, 1479, he had not passed his twenty-seventh year.³

The two deeds thus complete one another and enable us to cir-

¹ Ugo Assereto, "La Data della Nascita di Colombo accertata da un Documento Nuovo", *Giornale Storico e Letterario della Liguria*, January-February, 1904.

² "Interrogatus quottannis est . . . Respondit quod est etatis annorum viginti septem vel circa." ("Being asked what was his age . . . he replied that he was twenty-seven or thereabouts".) See the deed in the appendix.

³ M. Assereto remarks, on this point, that according to custom the witness mentioned the number of years he had accomplished already, so that when Columbus declares he is twenty-seven or thereabouts he intends to convey that he was over twenty-seven but not yet twenty-eight years of age. *Op. cit.*, p. 8.

cumscribe within closer limits the period within which Columbus must have been born. Quite clearly, if on October 31, 1470, he was more than nineteen years old, and if on August 25, 1479, he was more than twenty-seven and less than twenty-eight, he must first have seen the light of day within the two months and five days comprised between August 26 and October 31, 1451.¹

The deed of 1479 therefore definitely settles the question of the date of the birth of Columbus. From whatever point of view we may consider the matter, it is impossible to deny the conclusion to which this deed leads when it is placed beside the deed of 1470, and we may now set forth with full assurance that it was only during either the month of September or that of October, 1451, that Columbus was born.

Without dwelling upon this point, it is well to observe that this important date in the life of Columbus is not the only point which modern criticism has successfully determined. Since 1892, thanks to Salvagnini's researches, we also know that it was only in 1476 that Columbus first landed in Portugal, and to this information we may now add that he was then twenty-five years of age. We know also from his own notes and from Las Casas that it was in the beginning of 1485 that he passed into Spain, and we have the proof that he quitted no more the Spanish peninsula until he set sail in 1492 from the port of Palos.

All these facts, henceforth indisputable, are very suggestive; but this is not the occasion to point out the conclusions which may be drawn from them, and we shall merely ask the careful and unprejudiced reader if they can be reconciled with Columbus's repeated assertions that he had sailed for twenty-three years²; that he had crossed all the known seas³; and that for over forty years he had studied the secrets of nature.⁴ We shall furthermore ask him if it be not permitted to say from all this that Columbus had a personal interest in pretending to be older than he was, and also if we do not find here a natural explanation of the fact, otherwise so extraordinary, that he who was so prolix and so fond of talking about himself never mentioned the date of his birth; that all his statements bearing upon his age are contradictory; that his son who

¹ As we do not wish to expose ourselves to the reproach of failing to render to M. Assereto the credit due to him, we think it right to say that he has drawn the same conclusions as we have ourselves from the two deeds in question; indeed no other alternative was possible. *Ibid.*

² The Log-Book, December 21, 1492.

³ *Ibid.*

⁴ Letter of 1501 quoted by Ferdinand Columbus, *Historie* (Venice, 1571), p. 8, and by Las Casas, *História* (Madrid, 1875-1876), I., chap. 3, p. 47.

wrote his life maintains silence on this point; and that Las Casas, who possessed all the family papers and who was personally acquainted with the principal members of the Columbus family, also refrains from saying a word upon the subject.

The document discovered by M. Assereto also gives some new information upon Columbus. We find therein an authentic verification, the first we possess, that he was in Lisbon in July, 1478, and was having business transactions with that same Paulo di Negro who later appears in his will; that at this period he made a commercial voyage to Madeira, a place it was not known for certain that he had visited; that the following year he was at Genoa, whither it was not known he had returned, and where he was then still considered to be a citizen of that town, which leads to the supposition that he was still unmarried in August, 1479, and had not yet in a permanent manner fixed himself in Portugal, for Las Casas tells us that his marriage and settling down in that country made him to be looked upon as a Portuguese.

HENRY VIGNAUD.

APPENDIX

We give below the essential passages of the two deeds of 1470 and 1479. The other portions of these documents, which are both of considerable length, have no bearing on the question under discussion.

I. *Christopher Columbus, aged nineteen full years, with the authorization of his father Domenico admits that he is the debtor of Pietro Bellesio, Genoa, October 31, 1470.*¹

In nomine Domini, amen. Christofforus de Columbo filius Dominici, major annis decemnovem, et in presentia, auctoritate, consilio et consensu dicti Dominici ejus patris presentis et autorizantis, sponte et ex ejus certa scientia et non per aliquem errorem juris vel facti, confessus fuit et in veritate publice recognovit Petro Belexio de Portu Mauricio, filio Francisci, presenti, se eidem dare et solvere debere libras quadraginta octo, soldos tresdecim et denarios sex Janue; et sunt pro resto vinorum eidem Christofforo et dicto Dominico venditorum et consignatorum per dictum Petrum.

II. *Deposition made by Columbus in a lawsuit brought by Ludovico Centurione against Paulo di Negro, Genoa, August 25, 1479.*²

This deposition is preceded by a request made by Ludovico on August 23, 1479, for the hearing of his witnesses. Ludovico ex-

¹ From the Notarial Archives of Nicolo Raggio, file 2, a. 1470, n. 905. First published by Staglieno in *Giornale Ligustico* of 1887, p. 259, and reproduced in *Documenti* of the *Raccolta Colombiana*, part II., vol. 1, no. 34.

² Notarial Archives of Ventimiglia, file 2 (1474-1505), no. 266. Published by M. Ugo Assereto in *Giornale Storico e Letterario della Liguria*, January-February, 1904.

plains that he desires to prove by witnesses who are about to start on a long voyage that the preceding year Paulo di Negro, to whom he had supplied money for the purchase of a consignment of sugar at Madeira, had sent Columbus to that island for that purpose, but that Columbus did not receive the full remittance and consequently was unable to complete the purchase.

This request was notified the same day to Paulo di Negro, and the day but one following Christopher Columbus, a citizen of Genoa (*Christofforus de Columbo civis janue*), says the notary, appeared and was heard. He declared on oath that in the month of July of the preceding year he was at Lisbon with Paulo di Negro, who commissioned him to purchase on his account at Madeira 2,500 arrobas of sugar; that Paulo handed him a portion of the funds necessary for this purchase and forwarded to him another portion at Madeira, where he (Columbus) had contracted to buy the required amount of sugar, but that, the balance of the amount not having been remitted, when the Portuguese captain sent by Paulo di Negro to fetch the sugar arrived, the sellers who had sold for cash down refused to allow the goods to be shipped:

Ejus juramento corporaliter tactis scripturis de veritate dicenda et testificanda dixit se tantum scire de contentis intitulo videlicet quod veritas fuit et est quod cum anno proxime preterito de mense Julii ipse testis et dictus Paulus essent in loco Ulisbone transmissus fuit ipse testis per eundem Paulum ad insulam Amaderie cause emendi rubas duomilia quadringentas sucarorum in plus, cui quidem testi dacti ex tunc fuerunt per dictum Paulum vel alium pro eo occaxione predicta regales centum quindecim milia et inde dum ipse testis esset in dicta insula Amaderie, etiam transmissi fuerunt ipse testi per eundem Paulum seu alium pro eo occaxione premissa usque ad summam regalium tre centum duodecim milia vel circa computatis dictis regalibus centum quindecim milia, et hoc usque ad illud tempus quo ad dictam insulam apulit navigium patronisatum per Ferdinandum Palensium portugalensem in et super quo navigio onerari debetat dicta sucarorum quantitas, que tamen onerari tunc non potuit licet empta et incaparata antea fuisset per ipsum testem, licet tamen presentialiter proprie et ad punctum testificare non possit, que pars dictorum sucarorum tunc empta et per eundem testem incaparata fuisset quia non habet ejus librum in quo distincte omnia continentur et scripta sunt et ad quem se reffert. Verum tempore apulsus dicti navigii sucara ipsa empta et incaparata per ipsum testem ut supra in totum habere non potuit defectu pecunie ipsi testi non transmise per dictum Paulum pro ipsorum sucarorum solucione et ea pars que consignata fuerat ipsi testi per venditores licet non solupta applicato dicto navilio ab eis minabatur ut illa vendi facerent damno et interesse ipsius testis attento quod eorum debitum et solucionem non faciebat, quibus ex causis dicta sucarorum quantitas in et super dicto navigio onerari non potuit.

The remainder of the deposition consists of Columbus's replies to a series of questions relative to the affair. To the last questions he replies that he is leaving for Lisbon next day, that he is about twenty-seven years of age, that he was carrying away with him a little over one hundred florins, and that he sincerely hoped the party who was in the right would win :

Interrogatus si est de proximo recessurus respondit sic, die crastino de mane pro Ulisbona.

Interrogatus quottannis est quantum habet in bonis et quam partem vellet obtinere.

Respondit quod est etatis annorum viginti septem vel circa, habet florenos centum et ultra et vellet obtinere jus habentem.

Actum Janue in contracta santi siri videlicet in scagno dicti Lodixii anno dominice nativitatis millesimo quadringentesimo septuagesimo nono indicione undecima Juxta morem Janue die mercurii vigesima quinta Augusti hora vigesima quarta paulo plus presentibus Johanne Baptista de Cruce qm. Jeronimi et Jacobo Slavina Bernardi civibus Janue testibus ad premissa vocatis specialiter et rogatis.