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Florentine's Friendship and Kinship with Christopher Columbus

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INTRODUCTION

Famous people are always subject to a variety of interpretations, interpretations that, with repetition and the passing of time, become indisputable doctrine. To question such doctrines entails the risk of being labeled a nut or a snob. This is the case with Christopher Columbus, a historical figure who has been studied from many different perspectives. His numerous ailments and illness are obscured; a great man, even for his detractors, cannot be chronically sick. It is likewise repeated that he died a poor man, which is nonsense in the extreme.

There exists today a wealth of information on Christopher Columbus as well as something of a void in regard to many facets of his life. Columbus himself forged the image that he wished to leave for posterity. His first major biographers, his son Hernando and Fray Bartolomé de las Casas, quite tamely aided in the advancing of that image, either through omission, embellishment, or the plain falsification of facts. This assertion does not mean that the account of either the dominican or the bibliophile is worthless; indeed they both are valuable, but one must compare and contrast them.

This introduction is meant to serve as a frame of reference for the theme developed in this paper: the friendship and influence of a selected group of Florentines closely associated with Columbus and his family, heretofore not studied. This group of people is hardly mentioned in the Colombian sources par excellence — the Admiral himself, his son Hernando, or Las Casas. Yet, its influence deserves greater attention than it has received up to the present.

Both Fray Bartolomé and Hernando omit any mention of Columbus' non-Spanish friends. Neither biographer cites any Italian close to the Admiral, not Pinelo, not Riberol, nor even Juanoto Berardi. Only Bartolome Fiesco is mentioned in passing as if the Italian facet of Columbus' life were to be intentionally avoided.

A look at the Italians mentioned by the Admiral in his writings, not counting his family — his brothers Bartolome and Diego, his sons Diego and Hernando, and his relatives Juan Antonio and Andrea Columbo — yields a scant two dozen names in the ninety-three documents (memorials and letters) that have been preserved. It is commonplace in the historical treatment of the Discoverer, that upon his arrival in Castile, he surrounded himself with an important group of Genoese who eventually became his close friends. And in fact, of the twenty-five individuals mentioned, twenty-three are Genoese, seemingly confirming the opinion commonly held. The other two are a Novaran, Fray Gaspar de Gorricio, and a Florentine, Amerigo Vespucci.¹

In order to examine the Italian surroundings of the Admiral, the present paper shall consist of three parts: *Columbus and his bankers*, *Columbus and his propaganda*, and *Columbus and his personal life*. Each, on the one hand, shall contrast the facts about these individuals as supplied by the Discoverer himself with those provided by other sources. On the other hand, each part shall point out the profound differences that existed between the Genoese and the Florentines. Because of this line of approach, one case, that of Fray Gaspar de Gorricio, shall be omitted.

COLUMBUS AND HIS BANKERS

Of the sixteen Genoese residing in Seville mentioned by Columbus in his accounts, eleven were bankers — much in keeping with the Admiral's obsession with money! Some of these individuals appear exclusively as royal bankers, as in the case of the Centurions, Martin, Agustin and Pantaleon. They were the ones who supplied the two million "maravedies" that the crown invested in the third voyage. The head of the firm was Martin who, from Sevilla, went to settle permanently in Granada, where he ran an important business concern.² It was this concern that Columbus approached to satisfy the financial needs of his sons, Diego and Hernando, when they found themselves part of the royal entourage in Granada. The Centurions, however, did not trust the Admiral and, in the end, the personal bankers of the Genoeses, Francisco Doria and Francisco de Riberol, were the ones to supply the necessary letters of credit.³ Duardo Escaja and Bernardo De Grimaldo were simply agents of the Centurions in Sevilla and, as such, refused to pay the "albala" sent by Columbus, via Ximeno de Briviesca, in April of 1498.⁴

The Admiral mentions Francisco Pinelo twice, in two consecutive letters to his son, Diego, in December of 1504. He asks Diego to look after the bearer of the letters, Pinelo's son, for his father is doing for him "all that he can, with much affection and good will".⁵ This friendship has been stressed because Pinelo was, along with Luis de Santangel, co-director of the Santa Hermandad's treasury, the entity responsible for financing, in part, the voyage of discovery, with Pinelo having an active hand in the affair. Also, in

1493, in the capacity of royal banquer, Pinelo administrated the funds invested by the crown in the fleet of that year. Nevertheless, from then on there is no written mention of this banker either in regard to Columbus' personal life or his business affairs. It is within the realm of probability that they remained in contact and were even friends, but not to the point of Pinelo being a frequent caller at the Admiral's home. This banker never lent any money to or honored any letter of credit for any of Columbus relatives and, furthermore, he never was the Admiral's personal banker. With Francisco's brother, Bernardo, Columbus' relationship was acrimonious to say the least, ever since Bernardo, as royal factor, had been placed in charge of organizing the fleets destined to the Indies.⁶

Other sources shed light on the financial activities of the Discoverer of the Indies. Juanoto Berardi's active part in the first two Columbian fleets is well known and indisputable. Also well known is that this Florentine was the Admiral's first factor and the one responsible for organizing the convoy sent by the crown in answer to the Genoese's call for help in February, 1492. What has not received enough attention is that Columbus formed a business partnership with the Florentine to handle the traffic of the Indies. It was this concern that Bartolomé Columbus approached on his arrival from France and it was Berardi who advanced him the monies and supplies for his first trip to the New World.⁷ In fact, Berardi over-extended himself financially to the point that, after Columbus' first voyage, he was unable to enter into a single business contract of his own, save for the traffic to the Indies, and proceeded to liquidate his debts. His broad business interests, about which there is ample documentation, were automatically cancelled. Berardi abandoned everything and worked only with Columbus, investing in this new venture his last maravedi.⁸ This, in fact, became the first instance of an American-related bankruptcy, since this costly fleet sank in January of 1496, barely a month after Berardi's death.⁹

Berardi's demise resulted in a professional advance for Vespucci.¹⁰ As he himself stated, from a mere employee of the company, he became patron and factor to Columbus¹¹ and, in fact, the liquidation of a bankrupt business, rather than separating them, brought Amerigo and Columbus closer together. This is supported by the fact that an outstanding bill owed by the Admiral to Berardi¹² and dating back to 1495, had disappeared from the books by Berardi's death, no doubt owing to Amerigo's good offices. Yet, Berardi's heirs still owed 144,000 maravedies as late as 1511!¹³

Before closing this section, mention must be made of a third Florentine factor, Columbus' brother-in-law, Francisco de Bardi, who will be discussed in the section dealing with the Admiral's personal life. The first two factors, then, as well as the last one, were Florentines. No Genoese ever occupied that spot, the factors between Vespucci and Bardi being all Sevillian.

COLUMBUS AND HIS PROPAGANDA

Little attention has been given to the propaganda that Columbus manufactured and spread abroad about his person and his voyages. Whereas the Admiral's letter to Luis de Santangel — the first best-seller of American historiography — was widely known, the news from ambassadorial desks in Spain to their respective countries, were quite meager. The only exception was the case of the Sigoría di Firenze, which received news of the Discoverer's doings by letter. The only account of the contents of this missive — author unknown — that has survived is a resume by Tribaldo de Rossi. It is surprising that this resume, which might well have been treated to embellishment by Rossi, came to be the longest and most complete version of Columbus' first voyage to reach the European courts. If the news came from Sevilla, one must ask whether Juanoto or Amerigo — closest to the Medici — were the ones to write it. If not them, who could it have been? The Florentine orator does not seem a probable choice because in this case the message would have been sent to the X of Bailia. On the other hand, a Medici employee or someone within this circle and, given the time factor, close to Columbus, seems to be a more plausible choice. For example, Donato Nicolini, who often corresponded with his patrons, could fit the bill. All things considered, the first option seems to be more logical given Vespucci's love of letter-writing and the fact that no letter to Florence in Berardi's hand has been discovered.

Of the Admiral's other voyages there are several synchronistic accounts. Only one came by the hand of a Genoese, Michele de Cuneo. The Florentines, Simon Verde and Juan Bardi, sent parallel accounts.¹⁴ Verde wrote to Pedro Nicoli the accounts of the second voyage from Valladolid, and of the third, from Cadiz. Juan Bardi wrote from Seville to the court at Mantua the first news of the second trip.

Columbian propaganda, as was mentioned above, was directed for the most part by the Admiral himself. It is interesting to note, then, that as soon as Columbus came in contact with Pedro Martir de Angleria, a man from Milan, the Florentines ceased being the conveyers of his news. J. Gil has pointed out that from the third voyage on, Columbus reported directly to Angleria who then engaged in building up his compatriot's public image.¹⁵ Thereafter, fallen in disgrace, the Admiral used other means of distribution; the letter from Simon Vede, an obscure businessman, holding no interest for him anymore. Instead, aiming at the publication of the account of the fourth voyage in Venice, Columbus availed himself of the good offices of an Oderigo or a Trevisan, this being the only Genoese having a hand in Columbian propaganda.

COLUMBUS' PERSONAL LIFE

The Admiral's personal life, as gleaned from his letters, shows the existence of a banker, Francisco Sobranis de Riberol, a diplomat, Nicolo Oderigo;

three servants, Marco de Bargali, Bartolome de Fiesco and Geronimo Santiesteban; a cleric, fray Gaspar de Gorricio; and a businessman Amerigo Vespucci.

Among the Genoese bankers of the Admiral, Francisco Sobranis is without a doubt the one with whom Columbus maintained, not only a business relationship, but a strong intimate friendship. From April, 1492, when they met in Santa Fe, until the death of Columbus, they remained close. Riberol had in his possession a copy of the Admiral's *Libro de los privilegios*, which he sent to the bank of Saint Georgi in Genoa for safekeeping and the information of the directors who had been empowered to look after the affairs of Columbus in Spain; it was in their interest to do so adequately.¹⁶ Franco Cataneo, a Genoese from Cádiz, was Riberol's emissary in the matter of giving the document to the Republica.¹⁷ Also in Riberol's charge were copies of the monarchs' letters, letters that Columbus needed to safeguard at all costs. When in May, 1502, the Admiral decided to appeal to the new Pope in Rome, it was again Riberol who took upon himself the arrangements for the frustrating trip.¹⁸ Finally, it was he, as mentioned earlier, who provided don Diego and don Hernando with letters of credit. Riberol, then, moved within Columbus' personal circle as if he were a member of the family, presenting quite a contrast to the other bankers.

An important figure in the courts of the Catholic Monarchs was Nicolo Oderigo, the Genoese ambassador. Oderigo came to Castille with instructions signed by the Canciller Benito del Porto himself — the same one mentioned in Columbus' will and whose father had been engaged in litigation with the Columbus family. Firstly, because of this position, Oderigo had to come in contact with his fellow countryman. Later, and at Columbus' request, he handled through the Genoese bank some testamentary instructions, a fact that appears in two letters by the Admiral in 1502 and 1504.¹⁹ Their relationship seems to have been limited to business affairs. And it is apparent that Oderigo did not live up to the trust that Columbus had placed in him, for the Admiral complained bitterly of not having received in two years' time, a single word, written or otherwise, from him. Nevertheless, Columbus sent him a copy of the last voyage's account.²⁰

The three remaining Genoese who appear in Columbus' writings were all in his personal service. Marco de Bargali, his squire in the third voyage, must have remained in the Admiral's service for a while for he also appears as his emissary. Bartolome de Fiesco, captain of one of the vessels during the fourth voyage, was, together with Diego Mendez, the rescuer of the explorer.²¹ Geronimo de Santiesteban, who can be identified as the same Girolomo de Santo Stefano who travelled to India in 1499, arrived in Castille during the fourth voyage.²² The relationship must be traced back to Portugal, where they both resided prior to 1485. It is not known whether they ever met in Spain. The Florentine environment of the Genoese, at this time embodied by Amerigo Vespucci, was mentioned only once by Columbus, in a letter to his son Diego, then at court.²³

Columbus never referred to anyone else with the same fondness and it is timely to remember that his relationship with Vespucci went beyond the financial one. Vespucci, in fact, was the Admiral's representative to the King, when through his son's contacts at Court, Columbus tried to obtain an appointment; little did he know the new metier that was to be Vespucci's!²⁴ Their respective trips impeded continuous contacts with one another, never even travelling to the Indies together. The Admiral never recriminated the Florentine about his voyage for the Portuguese even though he did attack Hojeda, a fellow traveller of Vespucci, and never had any but kind words for his friend. In the end, after Columbus' death, it was Vespucci who came forward, in aid to the family, to testify to the authenticity of Columbus' signature on a document ordering the settlement of landmarks in the name of Diego, on a tract of land in Hispaniola.²⁵

In the Archives of the Cuevas de Seville, there appears a letter described as "a letter from the first Admiral to the second admiral, his son, dated May 10, in which he asked him to look carefully after Simon Verde".²⁶ The relationship between the Florentine businessman, Simon Verde, and the Columbus family was of a permanent nature. When, on 2 January, 1498, Simon Verde told Mateo Cini about the third voyage of the Genoese, he admitted having used an account by Columbus himself, which indicates that by that time theirs must have been a close friendship.²⁷ As the Admiral's agent, Verde received the printed Papal Bull of Julius II on 15 November 1504. As a close family friend, Verde travelled to Valladolid to take charge of Columbus' remains and escort them to the monastery of the Cuevas de Sevilla.²⁸ It was Verde, who in Castille and acting as Bartolome Columbus' agent, made the necessary purchases for his home in Santo Domingo.²⁹ He also appears as executor to the wills of Columbus' brothers and heir to a legacy of 40,000 mrs. assigned to him by don Diego.³⁰ And, at least on two occasions, Verde acted as banker to don Diego and don Hernando,³¹ and for the latter was instrumental in 1509, in securing Savonarola's *Triumphus Crucis*, published in Venice in 1505.³²

It is logical to assume Verde's participation in the more or less learned gatherings hosted by Columbus. A couple of years ago, Taviani advanced the hypothesis of a possible intervention by Vespucci in determining the route of the third voyage, encouraging Columbus to try out a new route, viable under the Tordesillas treaty,³³ and suggested by the cosmographer Jaime Ferrer. Verde, too, gave Columbus advice on "How to deal kindly with the residents of the Indies", advice obviously highly prized by the Admiral, for he ordered a copy made of the Florentine's document.³⁴

One last Florentine formed part of the personal circle of the Admiral, Francisco de Bardi. Married to Bripolanja Muñiz, the most influential woman in the Columbus' Clan. Bardi's was a much felt presence during the last two years of the Discoverer's life. In August of 1505 Bardi sent him from Seville two personal letters from Miguel Ballester and Vasco de San Martín, recounting the rumors of Nicolas de Ovando's bad government in the Indies

and informing him of the arrival of a consignment of seven or eight thousands pesos in gold.³⁵ Francisco played an active part in the negotiations between Columbus and the duke of Medina Sidonia when the Genoese tried to arrange the marriage of his first son to a daughter of the Andalusian aristocrat.³⁶ In December of the same year, while in Salamanca, Columbus granted Bardi his last power of attorney "To receive the gold and jewels that should come from the Indies" and to act for him in all his affairs, thus making him in fact his third Florentine factor.³⁷ It was he who, upon Columbus' death on 20 May 1506, secured the necessary sum of money for the burial, obtaining from Tomas Calvo and Gaspar Centurion's Genoese banking firm 50,000 mrs.³⁸

CONCLUSION

Several conclusions can be reached from the facts presented above. The Seville of Columbus' time had an active and restless colony of Genoese whose members, for the most part, belonged to branches of large commercial firms based in Genoa and Lisbon. This is why Columbus went directly to Seville on his arrival in Spain — whether he was or was not at la Rabida beforehand is irrelevant to this argument — to meet with his compatriots for whose firms he had worked in Portugal: The Negros, the Centurions, the Spinolas. All these people are remembered in his will, always in reference to debts acquired prior to his sojourn in Spain.³⁹ Undoubtedly, he approached them first, but did they extend to him the aid and protection he sought? Absolutely not. Whether they had no faith in his geographic theories or whether they did not see the matter clearly, the fact is that they never supported him. Columbus, then, was forced to appeal to the Andalusian noblemen who spoke kind words but contributed few maravedies. Always after the Court, his last recourse, the Admiral spent more time between 1485 and 1492 away than in Sevilla. He lived in Cordoba two or three years, returned to Portugal, travelled to Murcia, Malaga and Granada, and only after 1492 did he spend a few spells in Seville. By this time, his Sevillian friends were of no use to him, for the monarchs, as was logical, imposed their own Genoese bankers, not because of coincidence or because they were his compatriots, but because these bankers were the official royal money lenders. The future Admiral then forgot the Negroes and Company and became associated with a Florentine, Berardi. On Berardi's death he used the services of an old friend, Riberol, who had little to do with his old Lisboan friends. Columbus' constant dealings with the Genoese, whether or not to his liking, were the only alternative left to him. He never severed his relationship with them; he could not, and it would not have been wise. Though unskillful in many facets of his life, Columbus knew that he needed them and so they used each other to their mutual benefit. The difference between this and a closer relationship is far and wide. The only Genoese friend he had was Riberol, his intimate circle having been formed by other

compatriots. This group, in the beginning, had also come from Portugal where they had formed part of the influential commercial firm of Marchioni, for whom they all worked.

Columbus' choice is at first surprising because the Genoese colony in Sevilla was rich and powerful, whereas that of the Florentines was infinitely weaker. Then, he surrounded himself with a group of people with meager resources who needed him as much as he needed them. The Admiral, an immigrant of doubtful social status, arriving in Castille without money, was not welcomed by his compatriots who saw in him a hapless adventurer. By contrast, Berardi, a Florentine of rising status due to the slave trade and his appointments as factor to the Andalusian Medicis, was the one who came to Columbus' aid, willing to make a bet since he held all the winning cards. The Admiral, proud as a good Genoese, never forgave the affront, and when intending to safeguard his interests he made his move, he did so not through his compatriot bankers in Sevilla, but instead, in a typical gesture of haughtiness, he approached the Banca de San Georgi. The Centurions, the Grimaldos and Company had lost a most worthy client.

NOTES

1. Por orden alfabético son los siguientes: Marco de Bargali; Franco Cataaneo; Luis y Martín Centurión; Francisco Doria; Batista, Gaspar y Nicolás Spinola; Bartolomé Fiesco; Gaspar de Gorricio; Bernaldo y Francisco Grimaldo; Agustín y Pantaleón Italian (Centurión); Paolo del Negro; Nicolò Oderigo; Francisco Pinelo; Benito y Gerónimo del Porto; Micer Ribera; Francisco de Riberol; Gerónimo Santiesteban; Antonio Vazo y Amerigo Vespucci.

2. Y en Granada murió en 1534. Sobre estos banqueros of. A. Boscolo "Il genovese Francesco Pinelli, amico a Siviglia di Cristoforo Colombo" *Saggi su Cristoforo Colombo* (Roma, 1986), 7-13.

3. Cf. las cratas de Colón a su hijo Diego en C. Varela, *Cristóbal Colón, textos y documentos completos* (Madrid, 2ª edic., 1984), pp. 345 y 342.

4. *Ibidem* p. 199.

5. *Ibidem* p. 340 y 341. Para las relaciones de Pinelo y Colón véase el artículo citado de A. Boscolo en la nota 2.

6. Basta para ello consultar las numerosas notas marginales que colocó Bernardo Pinelo en los *Libros de Armadas*, que conserva el Archivo General de Indias de Sevilla, quejándose del almirante.

7. La intervención de Berardi fue estudiada en detalle por J. Manzano y Manzano *Cristóbal Colón siete años decisivos de su vida 1485-1492* (Madrid, 1964), p. 326 y ss.

8. Como comprueban p.e., los documentos del *Registro General del Sello* del Archivo General de Simancas de fechas; 10, julio; 23, octubre y 29 de marzo de 1495.

9. Para todas las incidencias de esta flota véase A. B. Gould, *Nueva lista documentada de los tripulantes de Colón* (Madrid, 2ª edic., 1984), pp 316 y ss.

10. Murió en Sevilla el 16 de diciembre de 1495; un día antes efectuó su patético testamento, que publicó la Duquesa de Berwick y Alba *Nuevos autógrafos de Cristóbal Colón y Relaciones de Ultramar* (Madrid, 1902), p. 7.

11. El día 11 de julio de 1510; puede verse la transcripción de su deposición en R. Ezquerro "Los primeros contactos entre Colón y Vespucci" *Revista de Indias* (XLVI), p. 38-39.

12. Así lo declaraba Berardi en su testamento, citado en la n. 10: "El señor Almirante don Cristóbal Colón me debe e es obligado a dar e pagar por su cuenta corriente, ciento y ochenta mill maravedies".

13. Como declaró Vespucci en su testamento de 9 de abril de 1511; texto que tengo entregado a la imprenta y que aparecerá en breve en *Historiografía y Bibliografía Americanista*.

14. Los tres textos, traducidos al castellano, pueden consultarse en J. Gil — C. Varela *Cartas de particulares a Colón y relaciones coetáneas* (Madrid, 1984), docs. IX, X Y X.

15. En la introducción al doc. I del libro citado en la nota anterior, p. 25.

16. Como indica Colón en su carta a Oderigo del 21 de marzo de 1502, *Cristóbal Colón, textos*, p. 313.

17. Carta a Juan Luis de Mayo, *Cristóbal Colón, textos*, p. 348.

18. Carta a fray Gaspar de Gorricio de 25 de mayo de 1502, *Cristóbal Colón, textos*, p. 316.

19. *Cristóbal Colón, textos*, p. 313 y 347.

20. Así en J. Gil "El rol del tercerviaje colombino" *Historiografía y Bibliografía Americanista* (XXIX), p. 107.

21. De ellos habla Colón en una carta a N. Ovando en marzo de 1504, *Cristóbal Colón, textos*, p. 332. Firmó también como testigo en el testamento del almirante, *ibidem*, p. 360 y 363.

22. Véase la carta a Oderigo del 21 de marzo de 1502, *Cristóbal Colón, textos*, p. 313.

23. En carta a su hijo Diego de 5 de febrero de 1505, *Cristóbal Colón, textos*, p. 353.

24. Tras este viaje Amerigo se convirtió en funcionario real, al ser encargado junto con Vicente Yañez Pinzón, de preparar una expedición a las islas de la Especiería. el 22 de mayo de 1508 fue nombrado primer piloto mayor de la Casa de la Contratación.

25. Es la deposición citada en la n. 2.

26. M. Serrano y Sanz, "El Archivo Colombino de la Cartuja de las Cuevas" *Boletín de la Real Academia de la Historia* (XCVII) p. 542.

27. *Ibidem* (XVVI), p. 185.

28. B. Cartero y Huerta, *Historia de la Cartuja de Santa María de las Cuevas* (Madrid, 1950), t. I, pp. 309-310.

29. M. Serrano y Sanz, o.c. (XCVII), p. 545 y 586.

30. "Véase el testamento de don Diego," en *Roccolta de documenti colombiani* (Roma, 1892), II, 1, p. 183 y ss.

31. Como demostró J. Gil, "Pleitos y clientelas colombinas," *Scritti in onore del prof. P. E. Taviani* (Génova, 1986), p. 182-199.
32. Así en S. Arbolí y S. de la Rosa, *Biblioteca Colombina, Catálogo de los libros impresos* (Sevilla, 1886), t. 1, p. 63.
33. P. E. Taviani, *I viaggi di Colombo* (2ª edic. Novara, 1986), p. 381-388.
34. M. Serrano y Sanz, *o.c.* (XCVI), p. 254.
35. La carta de Bardi a Colón fue publicada por J. Gil — C. Varela, *o.c.*, p. 346 y ss.
36. Para lo referente al casamiento de don Diego Colón véase L. Arranz, *Don Diego Colón* (Madrid, 1982), p. 73 y ss.
37. Poder publicado por primera vez por A. Altolaquirre, "Algunos documentos inéditos relativos a Cristóbal Colón y su familia" *Boletín de la Real Academia de la Historia* (XCII), II, p. 513 y ss; y recientemente en *Cristóbal Colón, textos*, p. 355.
38. El documento que lo demuestra y el estudio del mismo, lo publiqué en "El entorno florentino de Cristóbal Colón," *La presenza italiana in andalusia nel basso Medioevo, Roma 1984* (Roma, 1986), p. 132-134.
39. Véase el testamento en *Cristóbal Colón, textos*, p. 359-364.

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