

WHO IS BURIED IN COLUMBUS' TOMB?

By Joseph Scafetta, Jr.

Who is buried in Columbus' Tomb? The easy answer is obvious and immediate: Columbus. The harder answer is to the questions "Which tomb?" and "Which Columbus?"

THE VALLADOLID TOMB

Between 1492 and 1504, Christopher Columbus made four voyages back and forth across the Atlantic Ocean. Racked by arthritis and other ailments, he died in Valladolid, Spain, on May 20, 1506, Ascension Day. The first Admiral of the Ocean Sea was almost 55 years old. As it was the usual practice at that time, the body was quickly buried. The interment took place in the graveyard of a nearby convent next to the Church of St. Francis. Upon reading his will shortly thereafter, his two sons learned that Columbus had wished to be buried in Santo Domingo, the capital of Hispaniola.

THE SEVILLE TOMB

In 1509 the widowed King Ferdinand II of Aragon appointed Diego Columbus, the older son and the second Admiral of the Ocean Sea, to be the new Viceroy of Hispaniola. Before departing for Santo Domingo, Diego arranged to have his father's remains temporarily relocated to a crypt inside the Franciscan Monastery of Las Cuevas in Seville. Since the body had already lain in the ground for more than three years, there were only bones and dust to be moved in a small container. After going to Santo Domingo, Diego authorized the construction of the Cathedral of Santa Maria in 1521.

THE SANTO DOMINGO TOMB

While back in Spain in 1526, Diego died unexpectedly at the age of 46. His widow, Dona Maria de Colon y Toledo, arranged for her husband to be buried next to his father in Seville. When the Cathedral of Santa Maria was completed in 1544, she petitioned King Charles I to allow her to remove the remains of her husband and father-in-law to Santo Domingo. Permission was granted and the bodies were disinterred. For a fifth voyage across the Atlantic Ocean, Christopher's body and the body of his son Diego were then shipped to Hispaniola to be placed beneath the principal altar of the cathedral with Christopher's 90-year-old brother, Bartholomew, who had died earlier that year in Santo Domingo. There they rested together for the next 251 years.



The tomb of Christopher Columbus in Seville, Spain.

THE HAVANA TOMB

In 1795 King Charles IV of Spain ceded Hispaniola to France by the Treaty of Basil. However, in their haste to depart before the arrival of the French, the Spanish removed only one small unmarked casket from beneath the main altar in the cathedral and took it with them to their new Caribbean headquarters in Havana, Cuba.

In 1844 a revolt broke out in Santo Domingo, a constitution was adopted and the Dominican Republic was established. An extensive and long-term restoration of the 300-year-old cathedral was later undertaken. On September 10, 1877, workmen brought to Father Francesco Javier Billini an



The tomb in Santo Domingo.

antique lead box with the cryptic initials “C.C.A.” on the outside. Inside underneath the lid, was the inscription: “The illustrious and excellent man, Don Colon, Admiral of the Ocean Sea.” In the box, there were a few bone fragments, some dust, a small lead musket ball and a thin silver plate, which read: “The last part of the remains of the Admiral, Don Colon.”

But which Colon was it? Was it the Italian-born father or the Portuguese-born son, both of whom died in Spain and were known by the Spanish version of their honored family title, Don Colon? Furthermore, both had also held the title of Admiral of the Ocean Sea. Since Bartholomew did not, Father Billini ruled out that the box held the remains of the brother. Billini boldly declared that the remains were those of “Cristobal Colon, Admiral” and that the Spanish must have the remains of either Diego or Bartholomew in Havana.

The Spanish Viceroy of Cuba rejected the theory of the Italian-French priest in the Dominican Republic on the grounds that the cathedral in Havana held the “first part,” or the majority, of the remains of Christopher and that the “last part” held in the lead box were unidentifiable scraps of undeterminable origin.

BACK TO SEVILLE

In 1898, the Spanish retreated from the American invasion of Cuba and took the unmarked casket from Havana to Spain. Thus, Christopher presumably completed the return leg of his fifth voyage, made in death, across the Atlantic Ocean. There in the great gothic cathedral of Seville, the casket was placed upon an allegorical catafalque adjacent to a fresco of Saint Christopher. It was supported at each corner by four elegantly carved figures representing the kingdoms of Castille, Aragon, León and Navarre.

DOMINICAN LIGHTHOUSE TOMB

In 1931, the Dominican Republic held an international design competition to build an appropriate mausoleum to honor Columbus. It was won by 24-year-old Joseph L. Gleave (1907-1965) of

Glasgow, Scotland. He proposed a huge cross-shaped lighthouse to be 688 feet long, 131 feet wide, and 109 feet high at its head. However, because of its tremendous cost for such a poor country, construction was delayed for 55 years until 1986.



The Lighthouse to Columbus, or *Faro a Colon*, in Santo Domingo.

After it was completed facing east towards Spain, President Joaquin Balaguer arranged for the lead box to be moved in a solemn procession from the Cathedral to the new *Faro a Colon*, or Lighthouse to Columbus, on October 6, 1992. Five days later, Pope John Paul II celebrated mass there and the memorial lighthouse was opened to the general public on October 16.

The most outstanding feature of the monument is the lighting system, which is composed of 149 searchlights and a 78-kilowatt beam that circles out for almost 44 miles. When the lighthouse is illuminated the lights project a gigantic cross in the sky which can be seen for miles.

WHERE IS COLUMBUS?

Unfortunately, since there are no confirmed hair, skin, blood and other body parts either of Christopher, Diego or Bartholomew known outside of the two small caskets, a comparative DNA test cannot be made. Furthermore, since they are so closely related, half of the DNA would be the same. More importantly, neither the Spanish in Seville nor the Dominicans in Santo Domingo are interested in resolving the controversy. Both continue to assert, as they have for the past 121 years, that they have Christopher and that the other has either Diego or Bartholomew.

Also, what happened to the third casket? Some historians assert that Dona Maria de Colon y Toledo commingled the bones and ashes of Christopher and Diego into the single small unmarked casket for ease of shipment from Seville to Santo Domingo in 1544 and the lead box contains only the residue of the remains that were not transferred. Others contend that Bartholomew was never buried beneath

the principal altar with Christopher and Diego, but rather still lies undiscovered somewhere else, either inside another altar or within the walls or beneath the floors of the old cathedral in Santo Domingo.

In any event, it is ironic that the remains of the man who first crossed the Atlantic Ocean more than 500 years ago could be in either the Old World of Europe or the New World of the Americas or both. The reality that Don Cristobal Colon is divided between two hemispheres seems appropriate. Particularly, the whereabouts of the remains of Christopher's body is like a great shell game in which everyone is left to speculate under which shell (tomb) is the pea (remains) really hidden.

Of course, the great legacies of Columbus are the towering societies that developed in Anglo North America and Latin South America in the aftermath of his discoveries made during his four voyages while he was alive. These edifices are the true monuments of his life and death, regardless of the answer to the question: "In which tomb is Christopher Columbus really buried?"

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