INTRODUCTION

When I was young, I could count on an argument with my father every year right around this time -- around Columbus Day. I would insist that Christopher Columbus was Italian -- Genoese to be precise -- as I had been taught in school. My father would smile and respond, “No, he was Greek.” I would roll my eyes, thinking this was just another example of ardent Greek chauvinism. “And I’ve got the book to prove it,” he would continue, pointing to a blue-covered book high on a shelf.

That book came to me after my father died. And last year, around Columbus Day, I decided to find out what my father had been talking about. So I pulled the book off the shelf and, rather skeptically, began to read it. I simply could not
put it down; and when I was finished it completely changed my thinking about
Christopher Columbus.

This evening, I would like to bring that book and its thesis to your
attention, and reconsider with you the possibility that Columbus was in fact Greek.

It turns out that we know precious little about Columbus before he “sailed
the ocean blue in 1492.” There is very little documentary evidence about him before
about 1476, when he says he arrived in Portugal. And Columbus was cryptic about his
origins -- some say purposely. As a result, there is now literally a mountain of
controversial scholarship on the thorny subjects of when and where he was born, what
his family origins were, where and how he spent the years before 1476, where he is
buried, and even his proper name.¹

Columbus‘ origins are what concern us this evening, and as to his origins
there are all kinds of theories. The traditional one is that he was a poor, not-very-well-
educated Genoese wool-worker who went to sea not as a sailor but as a kind of
traveling salesman, accompanying cargoes of wool, silk, and sugar around the
Mediterranean and further abroad along the Atlantic coast of Europe and possibly
Africa. But there are many other theories.

Some say he was Spanish. Some say he was born out of wedlock to a
Portuguese prince and then became a secret agent for King John II of Portugal, keeping
the Spanish distracted with a scheme to reach the East by sailing west while the
Portuguese advanced their own plans to reach the Indies by sailing around the southern
tip of Africa. Others say Columbus was a Catalan-speaking Jew, either from Majorca or
Ibiza, whose parents may have converted to Christianity to avoid the Spanish
Inquisition. There are even theories that he was English (born in London), or Corsican
(born in Calvi), or was even a Franco-Swiss.

Tonight, we will consider the thesis that Columbus was Greek, as put
forth in a book by Seraphim G. Canoutas. The book is Christopher Columbus: A Greek
Nobleman.

¹ No less a biographer than Washington Irving said: “The time of his birth, his birthplace,
his parentage, are all involved in obscurity; and such has been the perplexing ingenuity of commentators,
that it is difficult to extricate the truth from the web of conjectures with which it is interwoven.” W.
Biographical Information

First, a few words about our author. Canoutas was born in Greece, graduated in law from the University of Athens, and became a member of the European Bar at Constantinople before coming to America in 1905 and graduating from an American law school. In this country he became a member of the Massachusetts and New York Bars. I think he died in the 1940s.

His wife, Euphrosyne Palaiologos, was said to be a scholar, musician, writer, and “scion of the house of the last of the Byzantine emperors.” Canoutas had two daughters (Pothoula and Daphne). One, I am informed, married a diplomat; the other became a Radio City Rockette.

In the early part of the last century, Canoutas was a preeminent leader in Greek American society and letters. He was a prolific writer and is said to have visited the Greeks of every state in the Union except Arizona and New Mexico. Based on those visits, he published (beginning in 1908) useful information for new immigrants in his

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2 T. Burgess, Greeks in America: An Account of Their Coming, Progress, Customs, Living, and Aspirations, with an Historical Introduction and the Stories of Some Famous American-Greeks (1913), at 73.

3 T. Burgess, Greeks in America, at 206-07.
annual *Greek American Guide and Business Directory*. Incidentally, he had this to say in his *Directory* about the Greek community in Washington: It was, he said, “one of the most peace loving and progressive in America, showing none of those absurdities which are usually to be seen in some of the other communities and colonies.”

In 1913, Thomas Burgess, a member of the American Branch Committee of something called the Anglican and Eastern Orthodox Churches Union, wrote a book called *Greeks in America*. It seems to have been the first comprehensive study of the Greeks in American society at the time, and Canoutas, says Burgess, was his inspiration and the source for much of the information in the book. Canoutas himself later wrote his own history of the Greeks in America from 1453 to 1938.

Canoutas’s nearly 300-page book on Columbus was published in English in New York in 1943. It took him, he says, eight years of work. It appears to be the first time anyone proposed in scholarly fashion that Columbus was a Greek, in fact a noble Byzantine Greek. But Canoutas’s book was privately published, presumably in a small print run, and has been long out of print. After 1943, the book seems to have been all but forgotten and has certainly been overlooked by most Columbus scholars.

Being a lawyer, Canoutas presents his thesis that Columbus was a Greek nobleman something like a law case. He methodically lays out the evidence and then draws persuasive conclusions based on the evidence. A reviewer in 1945 said that “this book presents a case which students of the vexed ‘Columbus question’ must consider with the utmost care.” I hope you will agree at the conclusion of my remarks that Canoutas’s thesis deserves renewed attention.

**The Broad Dimensions of the “Columbus Question”**

Let us first understand the broad dimensions of the controversy about Columbus’s origins so we can see where Canoutas’s theory falls in context. The theories about Columbus’s origins fall into two main schools of thought.

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4 T. Burgess, *Greeks in America*, at 73.

5 Quoted in T. Burgess, *Greeks in America*, at 170.

One school (the traditional one) is supported by certain Genoese legal documents from Columbus’s time. These documents show that someone named Cristoforo Colombo was born in or near the city of Genoa, was a wool-worker, and later became a merchant and gained sailing experience by accompanying various cargoes to their destinations.

The other school of thought rests on the numerous -- sometimes glaring -- inconsistencies between the Genoese legal documents and other sources of information, especially Columbus’s own writings (he was a prolific writer), the biography written by his son Ferdinando and by Bishop Bartolomé de las Casas, Columbus’s family friend and a famous historian of the Spanish conquest of the New World. Both of these men had access to Columbus’s papers after he died in 1506.

Canoutas repeatedly emphasizes in his book that the Genoese wool-worker theory simply cannot be squared either with what Columbus and his biographers said about him or with common sense. He points out over and over again that those who adhere to the Genoese theory have to contort or ignore certain important facts or accuse Columbus of being a deliberate liar in order to make him fit the profile of Cristoforo Colombo, the Genoese wool-worker.

Canoutas gives ten specific examples. Here are four of them:

(1) The prevailing view is that Columbus grew to majority in Genoa or its vicinity, then gave up wool carding and became a traveling salesman or trader of woolen goods, and then settled in Lisbon as the agent of a well known Genoese mercantile firm called Centurione. But when Columbus became famous all over Europe after his four voyages of discovery, no one at the Centurione firm ever remarked on the earth-shaking accomplishment of the firm’s former clerk.

(2) Domenico Colombo, who, according to the Genoese documents, was Columbus’s father, appears to have died in Genoa in abject poverty in either 1498 or 1499. Canoutas thinks it is beyond belief that Columbus, who is known to have been affectionate to his brothers and sons, would have shamelessly ignored his impoverished father at the end of his life, particularly when, at the time of Domenico’s death, Columbus and his brothers were at the height of their fame and prosperity.

(3) Canoutas says it is generally conceded that Columbus did not know Italian.
Neither did his two brothers, Bartholomew and Diego. He certainly never used Italian when he corresponded with his brothers. Isn’t that odd, says Canoutas, for three boys who were born, grew up, and lived in Genoa until reaching full manhood? Some of the traditionalists, by the way, get around this problem by saying that Columbus must have been illiterate while he lived in Italy and therefore forgot his Italian when he settled in Portugal. Canoutas points out that it does not make sense that someone who was illiterate, and who had forgotten the language he probably spoke for thirty years or so, then quickly picked up Spanish, Portuguese, Catalan, and Latin.

(4) In 1515, and again in 1520-21, Columbus’s son and biographer Ferdinando visited numerous northern Italian cities, including Genoa. He was specifically looking for relatives and for his father’s birthplace. It should be explained that Ferdinando was only 14-16 when he accompanied his father on his fourth and last voyage to America in 1502-1504 and was only 18 when his father died. So Ferdinando did not have personal knowledge of his father’s origins and believed, as many did, that Columbus was of Genoese origin. But when Ferdinando made inquiries in Genoa and the vicinity in the hope of discovering relatives, he was disappointed. No one came forth, not even Bianchinetta Colombo, who the traditionalists say was Columbus’s sister and who was living in Genoa at the time of Ferdinando’s visits, as well as her husband Giacomo Bavarello and their son Pantaleone. In other words, these were Ferdinando’s aunt, her husband, and Ferdinando’s first cousin. How can you explain, asks Canoutas, why none of these people or anyone else claiming to be related to the by-now internationally famous Admiral of the Indies came forward to meet their kinsman and perhaps even share in the Discoverer’s huge estate?

**Canoutas’s Case**

So now that we have a sense of the overall dimensions of the controversy, let us see how Canoutas makes his case.

First, he surveys the earliest sources on Columbus’s life. Here he examines the letters, chronicles, and histories of twenty-six contemporaries or near-contemporaries of Columbus -- anyone who said something about him in writing.⁷

⁷ 16 Italians (of whom 3 are the main Genoese historians), 4 contemporary Spaniards (and 3 later ones), and 3 Portuguese.
Here we learn that, for unknown reasons, Columbus never spoke clearly of his place or date of birth, or even of his family name.

In reviewing these various authors, Canoutas points out that, although several of them knew Columbus personally, corresponded with him, and generally had excellent opportunities to find out everything possible about him, some never said a word about where Columbus came from. Others were either vague about his origins or were contradictory about them, not only with each other, but sometimes even with themselves. Most who said anything at all about Columbus’s origins call him simply “Italian,” or “a certain Ligurian man,” or “Genoese,” or “of the Genoese nation.” A few say he came from specific Ligurian cities or towns, like Piacenza, or from the Duchy of Milan (Genoa then being a protectorate of the Duchy of Milan).

As Canoutas points out, seven cities claim to be Homer’s birthplace, but more than three times that number claim Columbus. The early writers cannot even agree on Columbus’s name.

Among the Italian historians, Canoutas dwells on the three Genoese historians -- Gallo, Senarega, and Justiniani. Most modern commentators trace to these three the source of the notion that the Discoverer was a humble Genoese wool-worker named Cristoforo Colombo, the son of Domenico Colombo and Susanna Fontanarossa. Antonio Gallo was the first of these Genoese historians; Bartholomew Senarega copied Gallo verbatim; and Augustin Justiniani repeated Gallo in substance.

So Canoutas focuses hard on Gallo. In addition to being a chronicler of his time and a contemporary of Columbus, Gallo was chancellor of the famous Genoese Bank of St. George, a powerful state institution that had exclusive management of all the affairs of the Genoese colonies abroad. One writer says: “The Bank of St. George, for seven hundred years, held an unrivalled position in the world, and combined the qualifications of the Bank of England with those of the East India Company.”

Canoutas argues that what Gallo knew of Columbus he learned not from Columbus family members, but from certain transactions Columbus is known to have had with the Bank of St. George toward the end of his life, none of which supports the

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M. Tagliattini, *The Discovery of America (A Documented History)*, Ch. 10 “Christopher Pellegrino or Christopher Columbus: A Critical Study on the Origin of Christopher Columbus,” found at http://www.millersville.edu/~columbus/tagliattini.html.
poor wool-worker story. And Canoutas points out the strange silence, after Columbus
died, of his so-called Genoese heirs. So in Canoutas’s view, Gallo’s contention that
Columbus was the wool-worker son of Domenico Colombo is highly doubtful.

Next, Canoutas critically examines the accounts of Columbus’s first two
biographers -- Columbus’s son Ferdinando and his family friend Bishop Bartolomé de
las Casas.

Ferdinando Columbus (1488-1539)

Ferdinando Columbus (1488-1539) (known in Spanish as Don Hernando
Colón) was the Admiral’s youngest son. Born at Cordova in Spain, he was the product
of a union between Columbus (then a widower) and his mistress, Doña Beatriz
Enríquez de Harana. In 1494, Ferdinando was taken by his uncle, Bartholomew, into
the Spanish court. There he received a thorough education, was a fellow-student and
playmate of Prince John of Castille, and became a page to Queen Isabella.

Later in life Ferdinando became a respected scholar. He wrote many
scientific treatises and met with notable people of his time, like Erasmus and Martin
Luther. With the generous income from his father’s lands he was able to engage his
passion for collecting books. At his death in 1539 his 15,000-volume book collection was
the largest private library in Europe. About 7,000 volumes still survive (including many
volumes he inherited from his father bearing the Admiral’s marginal notations) and are
now known as the Biblioteca Colombina, maintained by the Cathedral of Seville.
At the age of fourteen, Ferdinando accompanied his father on his fourth and last voyage to America (1502-1504). In later years, he accompanied the Spanish king (Charles V) to Italy, Flanders, Germany, England, and other parts of Europe. He also travelled extensively throughout Italy buying books and seeking information about his father’s birthplace. As we have seen, he searched for it in vain. He went to Genoa, Savona, Cugoreo, Piacenza, and many other places mentioned as the possible birthplace of his father. While in Cugoreo, he met with two brothers named “Coloni” (the younger one was more than 100 years old). They were reported to be somewhat related to the Admiral. But they could give Ferdinando no information about his father.

Ferdinando wrote his father’s life in Spanish, presumably between 1525 and 1538, but the manuscript remained unpublished at the time of his death. It was not published until 1568 in Venice in Italian as translated from the Spanish by Alonso Ulloa. Ferdinando’s original manuscript has never been found. The Italian version, which has been republished many times, is usually known as the Historie, a shortened version of its lengthy Italian title.

According to Canoutas, the overwhelming opinion of scholars is that Ferdinando’s biography is authentic and of utmost value in understanding Columbus’s life. They agree that it was composed with the benefit of the Admiral’s own documents and with other authentic records that referred to him. Among other things, Ferdinando indignantly denied that his father was of plebeian origin, as the Genoese biographers (particularly Justiniani) claimed.

Canoutas tells us that it is generally believed that all the notes, documents, and other papers that Ferdinando relied on, and even his manuscript itself, were turned over to Bishop Las Casas, who became Columbus’s second biographer. Las Casas also had available to him some additional documents that Ferdinando did not have.

Bartolomé de las Casas is known as the “Apostle of the Indians.” This is because, in his famous history of the Indies, the Historia de las Indias, he denounced Spanish cruelties against the natives of the New World.

Las Casas’s father was one of Columbus’s companions on the second voyage to America in 1493. Las Casas himself came to the Americas in 1500, but did not take holy orders until 1510, becoming the first priest to be ordained in the New World. Thereafter, he devoted his life to defending the Indians and vigorously pleading their cause before King Ferdinand and his successor, Charles V, on numerous visits back to
Spain. After serving in Mexico as Bishop of Chiapas, he returned to Spain permanently in 1547 and spent his last years in a monastery in Valladolid completing his *History of the Indies*. His room there was said to be so full of manuscripts that one could hardly get in and out.

**Bishop Bartolomé de Las Casas (1466-1574)**

His manuscript remained in Spain for over three centuries. It is not known why, but it was not published until 1875 in Madrid. As of Canoutas’s time, no translation had been made into English.

In dealing with Columbus, Las Casas adopted practically all the statements of Ferdinando Columbus and supplemented them with additional information that was unavailable to Ferdinando. The fact that Las Casas copied many of Ferdinando’s statements but died five years before Ferdinando’s *Historie* was published is thought to corroborate the accuracy of Ferdinando’s work.

Importantly, both biographies make the key points that are at the heart of Canoutas’s case for Columbus’s Greek origins. Here they are:

- The Admiral “was honorably descended, though his parents, through
the peevishness of fortune were fallen into great poverty and want.”

“I am not the first admiral of my family.”

It might be added here that Ferdinando, citing one of his father’s letters, said that Columbus’s ancestors and he always traded by sea. This directly contradicts the notion that Columbus was the son of a wool-worker.

“As concerning the cause of the Admiral’s coming into Spain, and his being addicted to sea affairs, the occasion of it was a famous man of his name and family, called Colon, renowned upon the sea, on account of the fleet he commanded against infidels . . .. This man was called Colon the Younger, to distinguish him from another who was a great seaman before him. . . .. [T]he Admiral sailed with the aforesaid Colon the Younger . . . a long time . . ..”

After carefully analyzing what Ferdinando and Las Casas had to say about Columbus’s origins, Canoutas begins his attack on the Genoese legal documents.

In considering the Genoese documents, we must understand how the so-called documentary proof of Columbus’s origins came to be. Columbus never became a naturalized Spaniard, and in Spain he was known as an extranjero, a man of foreign birth. As he became famous throughout Europe, his designation by Peter Martyr as a Ligurian and by Gallo as a Genoese naturally kindled the national pride of the Italians. But until the last quarter of the 16th century, the claims of various Italian cities to be Columbus’s birthplace were based on nothing more than the fact that there were families in those places known by the name Colombo. There was no documentary

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9 “Procedette di sangu e illustre, ancorché i suoi padri per malvagità della fortuna fossero venuti a grande necessità e bisogno.” [F. Columbus, Historie, Ch. I].

10 “Io non sono il primo ammiraglio della mia famiglia.” [F. Columbus, Historie, Ch. II (quoting a letter Columbus wrote in 1500 to the nurse of Prince John of Castile, Doña Juana de la Torre)].

11 “Quanto al principio e alla causa della venuta dell’Ammiraglio in Ispagna e di essersi egli dato alle cose del mare, ne fu cagione un uomo segnalato del suo nome e famiglia chiamato Colombo, molto nominato per mare per cagion dell’armata che conduceva contro gli infedeli . . .. Questi fu chiamato Colombo il giovane, a differenza di un altro che avanti era stato grand’uomo per mare. . . .. [I]n compagnia del detto Colombo giovane l’Ammiraglio navigava . . . lungamente . . ..” [F. Columbus, Historie, Ch. V; B. Las Casas, Historia de las Indias, Ch. IV (emphasis added)].
evidence and, as has been pointed out, nobody came forward in those cities to claim a relationship to Columbus when his son passed through no more than fifteen years after his father’s death.

Then, in 1578, Columbus’s last male heir died. This brought forth from two Ligurian towns a certain Baldassare Colombo of Cuccaro and Bernardo Colombo of Cogoleto, each claiming to be Columbus’s relatives and each laying claim to his immense estate and to the title Admiral of the Indies. After a long dispute, the two competing claimants agreed to present their claim jointly in the name of Bernardo Colombo; and Bernardo went to Spain to make his claim, carrying with him various supposed documentary proofs and a letter of recommendation from the Genoese Senate to Genoa’s ambassador in Spain.12 The Spanish courts considered Bernardo’s claim for many years and eventually dismissed it, declaring all his evidence false. So the right of succession went into the female line.

But despite the decision of the Spanish courts, various Italian cities continued to vie for the honor of being Columbus’s birthplace. And the controversy continued right through the creation of modern Italy in 1860. Here, Canoutas makes a very interesting point.

He makes note of six 19th century Italian historians who variously contended that Columbus was from five different Italian cities (Cuccaro, Genoa, Cogoleto, Savona, and Piacenza). Each town, he observes, pointed either to a specific house as being Columbus’s residence as a young man or to tombs of various of his Colombo ancestors. Canoutas then points out that, to support their claims, they found evidence -- in four of these five cities -- of a person named Domenico Colombo who had sons named Cristoforo, Bartolomeo, and Giacomo. What a coincidence!

By 1892, it was time to commemorate the four-hundredth anniversary of Columbus’s so-called discovery of America. That year, the modern nation of Italy was slightly more than thirty years old. National spirit was high, particularly in Genoa. And so a group of scholars decided to search for, assemble, and publish any document that could be found that supported Gallo’s assertion that Cristoforo Colombo was the son of Domenico Colombo, and, like his father, was a son of Genoa.
Documents were found. They were meticulously published in 14 volumes between 1892 and 1896 in a collection commonly referred to by its shortened Italian name, the *Raccolta Colombiana*. These have become the documents that support the traditional view of Columbus’s Genoese origins.

Followers of the Genoese school say that these documents describe the Discoverer of America and his family. They supposedly establish that Columbus was born in Genoa in 1451, that he was the son of the weaver, Domenico Colombo, and was himself a *lanaiolo* (wool-worker) until at least 1473. Thus, they say, Columbus’s claims of descent from an illustrious family, of extensive studies, of forty years’ seafaring life, and of voyages to all parts of the world are gross fabrications, and so are the corresponding assertions of Columbus’s son Ferdinando and of Bishop Las Casas.

Canoutas begins his attack on the Genoese documents by agreeing that, if they are correct, then Columbus must truly have been an impostor. He claimed around the year 1500, for instance, that he had been at sea for 40 years. That means he would have started sailing around the age of two (i.e., 1453) if the Genoese documents are correct. You can do the math: subtract 40 from 1500 and subtract another 7 years, which Columbus said he wasted at the Spanish court. That brings you back to 1453, or just two years after the Genoese documents say he was born (1451).

Likewise, Columbus’s claim to have been captain of a ship in the service of King René of Anjou must just be false if the Genoese documents are true. Canoutas observes that modern scholars conclude that Columbus’s voyage for King René could only have taken place between 1459 and 1461, because after that time King René retired to private life. During this period, Columbus was only 9-10 years old according to the Genoese documents. How could he have been the captain of a ship at that age?

This is a good example, by the way, of how followers of the Genoese school deal with awkward facts. Take Professor Samuel Eliot Morison of Harvard, for example, whose 1942 biography of Columbus is still considered the definitive English-language study. Professor Morison puts Columbus’s voyage for King René about a decade later than Canoutas does, i.e., during an 18-month period (October 1470 to

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13 They seem to prove that a certain Domenico Colombo of Genoa, a weaver, had for sons (Cristoforo, Giovanni-Pellegrino, Bartolomeo, and Giacomo) and one daughter (Bianchinetta). The daughter was married to a cheese-monger, Giacomo Bavarello, and had at least one son named Pantaleone.
March 1472) when the Genoese documents do not account for Columbus’s whereabouts. And Professor Morison says Columbus must have been a deckhand, not captain as Columbus said he was, because “[n]o young fellow of about twenty who had been carding and weaving wool most of his life could so quickly have risen to command.” And to tie up the package, he says that when Columbus was relating this incident nearly a quarter century after the voyage in a letter to the Spanish sovereigns (1495), Columbus just promoted himself to captain.\(^\text{14}\) Canoutas observes that Columbus had no reason to tell such lies to his royal masters.

Next, Canoutas shows how the Genoese records do not square with the account of Antonio Gallo. Gallo says that Bartolomeo Colombo (Cristoforo’s younger brother) was the first to establish himself in Lisbon and did so as a map-maker. He does not say when Bartolomeo arrived in Portugal, but Columbus says he himself arrived in Portugal in 1476. So if Gallo is correct, Bartolomeo had to be in Portugal before 1476. But the Genoese records show him to be in Savona or Genoa as late as 1480. The Genoese documents also have Bartolomeo being born in 1461, meaning that if he got to Portugal before Columbus did (in 1476), he would be no more than 15 years old, much too young to be established as a map-maker.

What do the followers of the Genoese school do with these inconsistencies? They change the facts, but ultimately they still cannot reconcile the Genoese documents with Gallo’s claim that Bartolomeo was the first of the brothers to arrive in Lisbon. They make Bartolomeo about a dozen years older. But this ties them up in another knot, which is that it puts the birth years of Cristoforo, Bartolomeo, and a third brother (Giovanni-Pellegrino), who they agree was born in between them, all within the timeframe 1447-1448. The birth of three children within such close proximity is physically impossible, unless two were twins (for which there is no evidence) or they were triplets (for which there is also no evidence). So in the end, they do not reconcile the Genoese documents with Gallo, and they end up contradicting themselves. They accept that Bartolomeo was the first to settle in Portugal, as Gallo says, even though they elsewhere acknowledge that Columbus went to Portugal in 1473-1474, and that Bartolomeo was still in Savona or Genoa as late as 1480, as the documents also say. They also acknowledge that the documents do not explain when or how Bartolomeo, also supposedly a wool-worker like his older brother Cristoforo, would have had the opportunity to learn cartography.

Another of the Genoese documents, which one scholar has called “notoriously false,” says Cristoforo Colombo of Genoa was about 27 years old in 1479, *i.e.*, born in 1451-1452. But this does not square with Columbus’s statements that he had had 40 years’ sea service by the year 1500, and that he had gone to sea at age 14. Together, these statements indicate that Columbus was born either around 1445-1446. If you subtract another 7 years when Columbus was not at sea but was tied up at the Spanish court, then his birth year gets carried back to 1438-1439. Either way, the numbers do not come out to a birth in 1451-1452, as the Genoese documents would have it. And when you also consider the only other statement we have of Columbus’s age, from his friend Andrés Bernaldez, which was that Columbus was 70 or a little less when he died in 1506, the Genoese record just does not hold up.

So from these and other examples, Canoutas concludes that the Discoverer and the Cristoforo Colombo of the Genoese documents are not the same person. And if Gallo’s story cannot be squared with the Genoese documents, then doubt is cast on Gallo’s statement that Columbus and his brothers were impoverished wool-workers. And it is from Gallo that the whole wool-worker story begins.

So if Columbus was not a Genoese wool-worker; and if he displayed a knowledge of seamanship, history, cartography, cosmography, mathematics, philosophy, and languages (other than Italian, it should be remembered), all of which would have been highly unusual for a wool-worker; and if he likewise displayed characteristics of refinement, social grace, and ease of interaction with kings, cardinals, and nobles of every stripe, which would not have been expected of a wool-worker (King John II of Portugal, for example, addressed Columbus in a letter of 1488 as “noso especial amigo” (our special friend), and the Spanish sovereigns stood up when Columbus went to kiss their hands on his return to Spain in 1493, a most unusual concession); and if he could have the boldness, unthinkable for a common merchant, to demand of King Ferdinand and Queen Isabella before he began his first voyage that he be made Admiral, Viceroy, and Governor-General of whatever lands he should discover, that he be granted privileges and prerogatives equal to those of the High-Admiral of Castile, that he have one-tenth of the profits of his enterprise and other lucrative rights – then just who was he?

The answer, Canoutas says, is in Columbus’s claim that he was not the first admiral in his family, and in his son Ferdinando’s references (repeated by Las Casas) that Columbus was “honorably descended” and sailed “for a long time” with “a famous man of *his* name and family,” a man who was called “Colon the Younger” to
distinguish him from another Colon who was a great seaman before him.

Who was this “Colon the Younger”?

Ferdinando Columbus and Las Casas do not tell us, probably because they did not know. Nor did subsequent scholars for the next 350 years. They either just repeated the story of Columbus’s claim of relationship to Colon the Younger without further elaboration or challenged it as a pretentious fabrication.

Then in 1874, the renowned Columbus scholar Henry Harrisse discovered information that began to unravel the puzzle. Harrisse revealed that there were two famous corsairs, one elder and one junior, both in the service of King Louis XI of France. These two corsairs were naval companions, and Harrisse believed them to be French, not Italian or Genoese. The elder of the two went by the name Coullon, which was italianized into Colombo and hispanicized into Colón. “Coullon” was not his real name; it was his sea-name or sobriquet. No one knows how he came by that name, but there is speculation that it came from one of his ships, which was called “Colomb,” which in French means dove. His real name was Guillaume de Casenove, and in Louis XI’s navy de Casenove held the rank of vice-admiral. He is thought to have died around 1483.

Harrisse did not definitively identify who the younger corsair was. But he speculated that the younger corsair was not related to the elder one, and that the younger captain came to be known as Colon the Younger because the two men were regular companions at sea. Harrisse also discovered that the younger Colon was sometimes called Giorgio Griego, or Grecus, or Graecus. These discoveries upset the traditional view, which was that the two Coloni (or Colombi) were Genoese and were related to each other.

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15 What Ferdinando seems to have been told (and what Las Casas repeated) was that the family was the offspring of Junius Colonus, an ancient Roman consul: “[Some say] that I should have proved they [Columbus’s parents] were the offspring of that Junius Colon, of whom Tacitus in his 12th book says, that he brought King Mithridates prisoner to Rome; for which service the people assigned him the consular dignity, the eagle or standard, and consular court.” [F. Columbus, Historie, Ch. 1].

16 Corsairs were captains who had permission (usually from a king) to chase down and capture enemy ships. We get the word “corsair” from the written permission given to them by the French kings, which was called the lettre de course, literally the “racing letter.”
After Harrisse, Alberto Salvagnini made another important discovery. Searching among the archives of Milan and Genoa, he brought to light 122 fifteenth century documents referring to these two famous corsairs of France and their numerous exploits. In these documents, the junior corsair is usually denominated Giorgio Greco, Georgius Graecus, Zorzi Greco, or the like. In other words: George the Greek. But like Harrisse, Salvagnini failed to grasp that these names signified a person of Greek origin or nationality.

Finally, in 1905 another renowned Columbus scholar, Henry Vignaud, after reviewing all the documents examined by Salvagnini, proved beyond all doubt that Colon the Younger was none other than George Paléologue de Bissipat, also called Georges le Grec; that he was a Byzantine prince related to the imperial family of the Palaiologi; and that he held a high rank in the French Navy, being the principal lieutenant of vice-admiral Guillaume de Casenove (that is, the elder Colon), who was known as “Coullon.” Vignaud’s opinion on these points, says Canoutas, has been accepted by almost all subsequent Columbus scholars.

But even so, Vignaud and the others never discovered the correct Greek version of this Byzantine prince’s name; and, convinced that Columbus was the wool-worker of Genoa, they rejected Columbus’s claim of kinship with Colon the Younger. Canoutas, however, says we can learn much about George Paléologue de Bissipat by consulting authorities on Byzantine history that Vignaud and the others overlooked. He begins with Charles du Fresne, Sieur du Cange.

Charles du Fresne, Sieur du Cange (1610-1688)
This Frenchman was a distinguished philologist and historian of the Middle Ages and Byzantium. He published many important scholarly works, not the least of which was his *Historia Byzantina* of 1680. In its section on imperial Byzantine families is found an entry for the *Familia Paleologorum Bissipatorum*. There we find that the correct name of the gallicized name *de Bissipat* is *Dishypatos* in Greek and *Bishypatus* in Latin. *Dishypatos* is itself a compound word, *dis* meaning “twice” and *hypatos* meaning “consul.” Hence, *Dishypatos* means “twice consul.”

According to Du Cange, the Dishypatoi were among the most illustrious Byzantine families. The oldest members on record were one Thomas Dishypatos (mentioned by an anonymous writer in the reign of Leo the Armenian in the 9th century) and George Dishypatos (mentioned in the 10th century). The name appears again and again in various records of the 11th through 15th centuries. One Dishypatos was a reader at the cathedral of Aghia Sophia in Constantinople; another was a priest there; another was Archbishop of Thessaloniki; another was the author of a famous defense of the hesychasts of Mount Athos.

In Columbus’s era, Du Cange tells us, Alexis Dishypatos was a special ambassador in France for the emperor Manuel II Palaiologos, trying in the early 15th century to secure financial aid for the emperor’s war against the Ottomans. John Dishypatos, an officer of the imperial court, was twice sent by the emperor John VIII Palaiologos as ambassador to the Council of Basel and to the Papal court to negotiate in matters concerning the union of the Greek and Latin churches. Besides visiting the Pope, he also met with the King of France and the Holy Roman Emperor Sigismund. In 1434, two other Dishypatos brothers, George and Emanuel, were sent by the Byzantine emperor on another mission to the Pope. Somewhat later, this same George (not to be confused with Colon the Younger of France) was sent by emperor John VIII Palaiologos to the Morea to reconcile his quarreling brothers, Thomas and Demetrios Palaiologos.

So we can see, says Canoutas, that for centuries the Dishypatoi were great personages -- ecclesiastics, officers of the imperial court, diplomats – and enjoyed the full confidence of the Byzantine emperors, who employed them on missions involving the most vital interests of the state and the church.

On his mother’s side, Giorgios Dishypatos (Colon the Younger) was related to the imperial families of the Palaiologi and Laskari and, following the custom

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of the time, he used the surnames of both families. Here, Canoutas observes that between these two families there were at least five famous admirals. It was perhaps to these illustrious ancestors that Columbus alluded when he said he was not the first admiral in his family.

Canoutas then points out certain other details about the Palaiologos and Laskaris families that are important to explaining Dishypatos and, hence, his kinsman Columbus. For example, the House of Palaiologos was closely connected by blood or marriage to many of the ruling families of Italy, including those of Genoa and Montferrat, such as the Doria, Spinola, Centurione, and Gattelusio families. All the marquises of Montferrat were Palaiologi, he points out, and one of them was invited in 1409 to take charge of the government of Genoa. These facts, he suggests, may explain why Columbus was thought to be Genoese or Ligurian.

He goes further and proposes that, if Columbus, as he claimed, went to sea at 14 and had spent 40 years at sea by 1500 plus another seven years at the Spanish court, then he must have been born around 1438-1439, and he must have gone to sea around 1453. This is when he thinks Columbus began sailing with his famous kinsman, Georgios Palaiologos Dishypatos.

1453, of course, is the year of the fall of Constantinople to the Ottoman Turks after standing for more than a thousand years as capital of the Byzantine Empire. As we know, this cataclysmic event dispersed many prominent Byzantine families to the West. Canoutas does not mention it, but this dispersal is well illustrated by a document that survives from those times. It is a passenger list of a Genoese ship loaded with refugees that got away from Constantinople on May 29, 1453, the very day the city fell. As far as I know, the Dishypatos family is not named on the list. But aboard that ship were six Palaiologoi, two Cantacuzenoi, two Laskari, two Komnenoi, and two

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18 Georgios Palaiologos Dishypatos (Georges de Bissipat), Georgios Palaiologos (commanded Byzantine fleet in the late 12th century), Emmanuel Palaiologos (in 1410 defeated the Turkish fleet at the Princes Isles), Messih-Pashas Palaiologos (converted to Islam, became admiral of the Turkish fleet), and Dimitrios Laskaris Leontaris (or Leontios) (served under Emperor Manuel II Palaiologos).

19 Canoutas also observes that many Palaiologi, like the Dishypatoi, were highly cultured and strongly religious. Several Palaiologan emperors and members of their families gave up their worldly affairs and retired to monasteries. For this reason, Canoutas asks whether it was mere coincidence or an hereditary habit that Columbus was himself highly religious, verging at times on mysticism, and sometimes wore a Franciscan monk’s robe.
members of the Notaras family. The ship took some of them to Chios and others to Venetian Crete, from where they made their different ways to the Morea, to Corfu, or to Italy.\footnote{D.M. Nicol, The Immortal Emperor: The Life and Legend of Constantine Palaiologos, Last Emperor of the Romans (Cambridge 1994), at 110.}

Turning back to Canoutas, he found additional information about Georges de Bissipat in the writings of another French historian, Abbé Renet, who published a history of the de Bissipat family in 1889. From these and other sources, we know that sometime after the fall of Constantinople, Giorgios Dishypatos made his way to France, where he was received by King Louis XI with great honors for his excellent military feats. We do not know exactly when Dishypatos reached France, but he first appears in French documents in 1460, where he is called “our noble man Georges le Grec, counselor and chamberlain of the King and vicomte of Falaise.”\footnote{C. Isom-Verhaarren, “Shifting Identities: Foreign State Servants in France and the Ottoman Empire,” JOURNAL OF EARLY MODERN HISTORY, 8, 1-2 (2004), at 127.} Eventually, Dishypatos (as de Bissipat) became commander of the French fleet in the English Channel. And in French records, de Bissipat’s name is always qualified as a descendant of the emperors of Constantinople.
Louis XI granted Dishypatos properties in Bordeaux, Beauvais, and Toucques. And Dishypatos carried out important missions for the French king. In addition to returning King Alfonso V to Portugal from France in 1477, about which I will say more in a moment, in 1483, shortly before Louis XI’s death, the king sent Dishypatos to the Cape Verde islands to obtain the blood of a special sea turtle in the hope of healing the king’s skin disease (possibly leprosy).

Among other things, Canoutas brings out three telling aspects of Dishypatos’s career that help explain how Columbus settled in Portugal, how he was able to marry into the highest ranks of the Portuguese nobility, and how he was able to present his plan of discovery to the King of England.

(1) First, in August 1476, Guillaume de Casenove (that is, Colon the Elder, or Coullon) is known to have commanded a Franco/Portuguese squadron in a fierce and famous all-day sea battle that took place against Genoese ships near Cape St. Vincent off the coast of Portugal. De Casenove’s trusted second-in-command, Colon the Younger (that is, Dishypatos) was there, too. Ferdinando Columbus and Las Casas record that Columbus was sailing with his famous kinsman, Colon the Younger, when they fell into battle with a fleet near Cape St. Vincent. Columbus, they say, had to jump into the sea to save himself at one point and, clinging to an oar, was able to make his way to shore and from there to Lisbon, where he settled and married a Portuguese woman. Scholars agree that Columbus was present at the 1476 sea battle, and that about 1479 he married Doña Felipa Perestrello e Moniz, a noble Portuguese woman. But the traditionalists ignore the claim that Columbus was sailing with Dishypatos, which would have put him on the “wrong” side of the battle, the Franco/Portuguese side. This does not fit the Genoese wool-worker story, so they put Columbus on the Genoese ships. Canoutas convincingly shows how the traditionalists are mistaken.

(2) Second, it is known that in 1477 Dishypatos was appointed by Louis XI to escort King Alfonso V of Portugal back home from France, where King Alfonso had been visiting for a year trying to obtain the French king’s military support. Alfonso was said to have been so pleased with Dishypatos’s escort that he asked Louis XI to reward Dishypatos with French naturalization, which the French king did later in 1477. Peter Dickson, a local scholar, has explained how Dishypatos’s delivery of

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22 Louis XI’s 1477 naturalization of Dishypatos reads in part: “We have received the humble supplication of our well loved and loyal counselor and chamberlain, Georges de Bicipat called the Greek, chevalier, native of the land of Greece, captain of our great ship and of our city and castle of
Alfonso V back to Portugal is the key to Columbus’s marriage into the exalted Braganza-Norona family of Portugal. In Alfonso’s large entourage in France (perhaps even onboard his ship on the 1477 return voyage with Dishypatos) were two of the four Braganza princes, Alfonso and Alvaro. Their family had been favored by King Alfonso, and they had an interest in seeing him back on the throne. Columbus, you will recall, had been in Portugal about a year when Alfonso V returned with Dishypatos and the Braganza princes in 1477. So a year after Columbus had settled in Portugal, his kinsman, Dishypatos, performed a special service that deeply ingratiated him with the Portuguese king. Dickson, who has scoured the relevant Portuguese genealogical records, has established that, in marrying Felipa Perestrello e Moniz in about 1479, Columbus essentially married “to the foot of the Portuguese throne.” Pointing out the closeness of Felipa’s family to the powerful Braganzas and to the Portuguese royal family, Dickson says Columbus’s marriage can be explained as a favor to Dishypatos. And such a marriage would have been impossible, say both Canutas and Dickson, had Columbus not been a nobleman himself. And you will recall the letter of King John II of Portugal, addressing Columbus as “our special friend.” King John was King Alfonso’s son.

(3) Third, in August 1485, Dishypatos was appointed by the new French king, Charles VIII (son of Louis XI), to escort the English Duke of Richmond, Henry Tudor, across the English Channel to England from Brittany, where Henry had been living in exile. Later that month (August 22), at the famous battle of Bosworth Field, Henry Tudor slayed King Richard III and became King Henry VII of England, the first of the Tudor kings. It is known that three years later, in 1488, Columbus’s brother Bartholomew presented Columbus’s plan of discovery to Henry VII. How, asks Canutas, did a poor Genoese wool-worker have access to Henry VII, King of England? The Dishypatos connection explains it, he contends. He also points out that, in 1493, Bartholomew was living at the French court, and it was through the French king that Bartholomew learned that his brother, Christopher, had returned to Spain from his first

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voyage of discovery. Bartholomew’s residence at the French court, argues Canoutas, is likewise explained by Columbus’s kinship with Dishypatos.

Dishypatos was much favored by Charles VIII who, like his father Louis XI, entrusted Dishypatos with important missions, not the least of which was command of the French fleet against Italy in 1494. Coincidentally, that year is significant for another reason that illustrates the degree of interaction still ongoing between royal and noble Byzantine refugees and western princes at the time. It was in that year, 1494, that Andrew Palaiologos, nephew of the last Byzantine emperor (Constantine XI), ceded his rights to the Byzantine throne -- to Charles VIII of France.²⁴

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Above are Dishypatos’s arms. They show a patriarchal cross, two Stars of David, and a crescent, symbols of the three great monotheistic religions known to the Byzantines. The Stars of David are of interest given that the Palaiologos family (to which Dishypatos was related on his mother’s side) claimed descent from the House of David. Interestingly, Columbus himself liked to compare himself to King David.

The crescent alludes to Islam, which is also interesting considering that Dishypatos’s first cousin, who is known to us only as Hüseyn, was an ambassador and intelligence agent of Sultan Bayezid II, the son of Mehmet II (the conqueror of Byzantium). In 1486, French King Charles VIII wrote a letter of safe passage allowing Hüseyn to come to France as Bayezid’s ambassador. Greek was Hüseyn’s native tongue, and he had useful connections with Christians in the West, not least of whom was his cousin Dishypatos, who was one of Charles VIII’s most trusted advisors.

Conclusions

I can assure you that there is much more of interest in Canoutas’s book. I have shown you just the tip of a very large iceberg. But given what we have seen so far,

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25 On a Dishypatos burial vault are inscribed the words: “Into the bosom of Abraham.” P.W. Dickson, “Was Columbus Genoese, Greek, a Spanish Jew, or all Three?,” The Greek American (Oct. 10, 1992), at 9.

26 E.g., “I am not the first admiral of my family, let them give me what name they please; for when all is done, David, the most prudent King, was first a shepherd, and afterwards chosen King of Jerusalem, and I am servant to that same Lord who raised him to such dignity.” F. Columbus, Historie, Ch. II (quoting Columbus’s letter of 1500 to the nurse of Prince John of Castille).

what can we make of Canoutas’s theory that Christopher Columbus was a Greek nobleman?

As Canoutas says, if we accept that Columbus was telling the truth when he said he sailed for many years with his noble kinsman Colon the Younger, then “all the incidents of his complex life, all his lofty aspirations, all his talents and accomplishments, and all his peculiar characteristics, which hitherto seemed inexplicable, will be readily explained. It will be easy for anyone to see how he had acquired his education, his religious mysticism, his exquisite manners, his daring courage and, above all, his preparation in seamanship; also how he was able to make all the voyages he claimed and especially those considered by modern critics to be imaginary; and how he succeeded in commanding the respect of several kings and princes and of so many other great personages.”

This is certainly true. But Canoutas’s case hangs on a rather slender reed. It rests entirely on the supposed kinship of Columbus with Dishypatos, for which we have only one source: Ferdinando’s biography (Las Casas merely repeated Ferdinando’s statement). If that kinship connection fails, Canoutas’s theory falls apart.

And even if the connection is sound, it does not necessarily mean that Columbus was Greek. He may have had Greek relatives, but given the fluidity of the times, he may not have lived in a Greek city or holding. And while Canoutas has given us persuasive circumstantial reasons to accept that Columbus was related to Dishypatos, what was the relationship? Was it on his father’s side or his mother’s? Was it by blood or marriage? And we still do not know who Columbus’s parents were or where he was born. Nor do we know why Columbus was so vague about his origins. And we still do not have good information about what Columbus was up to before 1476.

Answering these questions will require much further work. But Canoutas has started us down a very intriguing path armed with a very plausible theory. For now, I hope that by acquainting you with the pioneering work of Seraphim Canoutas, I have awakened your own curiosity about Christopher Columbus, who may indeed have been a Greek nobleman.

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28 S. Canoutas, *Christopher Columbus: A Greek Nobleman* (1943), at 62.