

Summer 6-11-2014

## Neither "Headache" Nor "Illness:" The False Narrative of Syphilis and its Origin in Europe

Michael W. Horton  
*Bowling Green State University, mhorton@bgsu.edu*

Follow this and additional works at: [https://scholarworks.bgsu.edu/hist4800\\_atlanticworld](https://scholarworks.bgsu.edu/hist4800_atlanticworld)



Part of the [European History Commons](#), and the [History of Science, Technology, and Medicine Commons](#)

[How does access to this work benefit you? Let us know!](#)

---

### Repository Citation

Horton, Michael W., "Neither "Headache" Nor "Illness:" The False Narrative of Syphilis and its Origin in Europe" (2014). *HIST 4800 Early America in the Atlantic World (Herndon)*. 2.  
[https://scholarworks.bgsu.edu/hist4800\\_atlanticworld/2](https://scholarworks.bgsu.edu/hist4800_atlanticworld/2)

This Student Project is brought to you for free and open access by the Student Scholarship at ScholarWorks@BGSU. It has been accepted for inclusion in HIST 4800 Early America in the Atlantic World (Herndon) by an authorized administrator of ScholarWorks@BGSU.

Mike Horton  
HIST 4800: Research Seminar  
Dr. Ruth Herndon  
June 11, 2014

## Neither “Headache” Nor “Illness:”

### The False Narrative of Syphilis and its Origin in Europe.

#### Abstract

In this paper I argue that the master narrative of the origin of syphilis in Europe, known as the Columbian Theory does not hold up to historical review since it does not contain enough concrete evidence for we as historians to be comfortable with as the master narrative. To form my argument I use the writings of Girolamo Fracastoro, an Italian physician known for coining the term “syphilis,” as the basis when I review the journal of Christopher Columbus. I review his journal, which chronicles the first voyage to the Americas, to see if there is any connection between the syphilis disease and him or his crew. After reviewing this evidence I turn to the secondary source literature referring to historians who support the Columbian Theory on syphilis and those who criticize it. I use the lack of evidence to connect Columbus to the syphilis disease to counter what supporters of the Columbian Theory argue and explain that the Columbian Theory can’t be used for the master narrative as the origin of syphilis in Europe.

One of the biggest debates in the medical world today is the question of the introduction of syphilis to Europe in the closing years of the 15<sup>th</sup> century. While this has been a great debate for over five hundred years now many historians have come to believe the master narrative of what is called the “Columbian Theory” on the origin of syphilis. This theory states that during Christopher Columbus’s first voyage to the Americas in 1492 some of his crew contracted the disease that existed among the native peoples that they encountered. After contracting syphilis they unknowingly brought the disease back with them to Europe. It is believed that this event led to the major syphilis outbreak three years later, in 1495, in Naples, Italy. Even though this theory is wildly accepted as what likely did happen to spread syphilis to Europe it is based on a long list of speculations and lacks concrete evidence that would be needed to prove the theory as true.

The other major theory about the origin of syphilis in Europe is known as the “Pre-Columbian Theory.” This theory states that syphilis was present in Europe prior to Columbus’s journey to the Americas however it went undetected and was often confused with leprosy until the outbreak in Naples. While some medical research has been conducted on skeletons from this time period in Europe it is currently going through the review process so the theory has not been proven yet. There is also a third theory on the origin of syphilis in Europe that is slowly gaining support amongst historians called the Unitarian Theory. This theory states that the syphilis disease was present in both the Old World and the New World dating back to prehistoric times and has evolved in humans ever since. Based on accounts from key contributors that lived during the initial outbreak of syphilis in Europe and accounts from those who traveled with Columbus during his voyage to the Americas there is nothing found in their accounts that could link syphilis to Columbus and his crew. My argument in this paper is that this lack of evidence to connect Christopher Columbus and his crew to syphilis is sufficient enough to show that the Columbian Theory on syphilis has no validity for the time being unless some substantial evidence is found in the future to give serious consideration to this theory, particularly as the master narrative to explain the origin of the disease in Europe.

In order to properly examine the accounts of the men from Columbus’s first voyage to the Americas and see if anything they say could have a connection to the syphilis disease among their crew it is important to know the symptoms and signs of the syphilis disease. Girolamo Fracastoro was an Italian physician and poet who: “was born in Verona, perhaps in 1478...was hailed as the greatest poet of the age, an equal of Virgil.”<sup>1</sup> Fracastoro is most well-known for having named the syphilis disease in his poem “Syphilis or the French Disease.” In this poem

---

<sup>1</sup> Girolamo Fracastoro, *Fracastoro’s Syphilis*, trans. Geoffrey Eatough, (Great Britain: Liverpool, Francis Cairns, 1984), 1-2.

Fracastoro extensively describes the disease and names it syphilis which until this time was known most commonly as the French Disease. In this book Fracastoro breaks up his observations into three separate parts. In part one of his book Fracastoro talks about the symptoms and transmission of the disease through all of its major stages. Part two of the book focuses on potential cures for the disease that people have tried in Europe since the initial outbreak in 1495. The final part of the book describes Fracastoro's own theory on where the disease originated from including thoughts on it coming from the gods as punishment. His observations of the disease and how he describes it will serve as the basis for my review of the accounts presented by Columbus and his crew.



Source: Attributed to Titian, "Portrait of Girolamo Fracastoro" (circa 1528), National Gallery of Art. Accessed through Wikimedia Commons:

[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Titian\\_Girolamo\\_Fracastoro.jpg](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Titian_Girolamo_Fracastoro.jpg)

When looking at any disease and its effects on human beings it is important initially to analyze three criteria. The first of these three criteria is how is the disease transmitted and spread from person to person. Fracastoro too first talks about how people contract the syphilis disease in his poem. Fracastoro observed that the disease was transmitted through the blood and stated that: “From the whole of man this filthy disease seizes on that in the blood which is thick and dirty through its sluggishness, feeding on the rich slime. The disease and blood correspond in this particular way.”<sup>2</sup> Today we know that venereal syphilis is transmitted through sexual intercourse and the mixing of bodily fluids tainted with the disease and can also be spread through coming into contact with blood cells infected with the syphilis disease, from research performed by the Center for Disease Control, confirming Fracastoro’s initial observation that the disease was transmitted through the blood. This observation of the transmission of the disease is very important when trying to track the spread of any disease and is something that I was looking for when reviewing the accounts from Columbus and his crew during their voyage.

The second criterion to look for when observing a disease is the amount of time it takes from initial contraction of the disease to the initial appearance of symptoms caused by the disease. Knowing this information is important because it provides a general time table to track the progression of the syphilis disease in a particular person infected by it. Fracastoro was able to observe this criterion as well when he observed those infected and gives readers a good general sense as to how long it takes symptoms of syphilis to physically appear in a person who has contracted the disease. Fracastoro stated in his poem that: “What especially caused wonder was that even after the infection was caught the moon often completed its circle four times before sufficiently clear symptoms were shown. For it does not openly betray itself as soon as it has been received within a body, but it lies hid for a fixed period and gradually gains strength by

---

<sup>2</sup>Fracastoro, *syphilis*, 53.

feeding.”<sup>3</sup> I interpreted this as Fracastoro timed out that the Moon completed its full orbit around the Earth four times before symptoms of syphilis would appear in the victims. Since it takes approximately twenty-eight days for the Moon to orbit around the Earth, we can infer that it can take anywhere up to four months for symptoms to appear in the victims of the disease. This four month window gives at least a general idea as to when a particular victim first contracted the disease which is important for figuring out when a member of Columbus’s crew contracted the disease, if indeed it is found that they did contract it during their trip to the Americas in 1492.

The third criterion required to efficiently analyze a disease is looking at the symptoms themselves and looking at how the symptoms define the disease by how they affect the victim. Fracastoro describes the symptoms in three primary stages though it is difficult to tell exactly how far along the disease is during each stage. The way that Fracastoro describes the initial symptoms, they seem to correlate around that fourth month period after initial infection where the victim seems to feel differently but doesn’t understand why yet. Fracastoro describes these initial symptoms as: “Those afflicted were burdened by an unusual lethargy and feeling a languor with no apparent cause, performed their tasks with increasing weariness and tried to keep themselves going although their whole body felt sluggish.”<sup>4</sup> These initial symptoms center on the victim feeling weary, tired, and perhaps unable to focus clearly. These symptoms appear similar to those of say the flu or the common cold which means that victims could initially feel they had something much different and less lethal than what they actually had contracted. The second stage of syphilis gives the disease more clarity and allows for a more clear diagnosis of the disease. Fracastoro describes the next set of symptoms as: “Slowly a caries, born amid

---

<sup>3</sup> Fracastoro, *Syphilis*, 55.

<sup>4</sup> Fracastoro, *Syphilis*, 55.

squalor in the body's shameful parts, became uncontrollable and began to eat the areas on either side and even the sexual organ."<sup>5</sup> This symptom further distinguishes syphilis as an STI, or sexually transmitted infection, that after a certain time begins to attack the sexual organs of its victim causing decay and disfiguration of the area. The final set of symptoms that Fracastoro describes about the disease is an advanced stage of the disease though he gives no time line as for when these symptoms appear. Fracastoro states that: "Unsightly sores broke out over all the body and made the face horrifyingly ugly, and disfigured the breast by their foul presence...pustules with the shape of an acorn-cup and rotten with thick slime, which soon afterwards gaped wide open and flowed with a discharge like mucous and putrid blood."<sup>6</sup> This very graphic depiction of the disease would likely be a very advanced stage of the disease likely towards the point of when the disease becomes fatal. All of these criteria are important to remember when reviewing the accounts given by Columbus and his crew.

Before taking these descriptions of the syphilis disease into the analysis of Columbus's journal, I compared Fracastoro's depiction of the syphilis disease to the modern depiction of the disease in order to verify that his observations were correct in identifying the syphilis disease. The most reliable source for modern disease research is provided by the Center for Disease Control, also known as the CDC. According to the CDC website, syphilis is a sexually transmitted disease that: "can cause long-term complications and/or death if not treated correctly."<sup>7</sup> Since the disease is labeled as a sexually transmitted disease it is primarily spread through sexual intercourse but can also be spread through contact with infected blood and also can be passed to unborn children from their mothers. The Health Resources and Services

---

<sup>5</sup> Fracastoro, *Syphilis*, 55.

<sup>6</sup> Fracastoro, *Syphilis*, 55.

<sup>7</sup> Center for Disease Control, "Syphilis-CDC Fact Sheet," Accessed April 19, 2014  
<http://www.cdc.gov/std/syphilis/default.htm>.

Administration is a government organization that also provides background information on syphilis, including an updated incubation period. According to the Health Resources and Services Administration website; “Primary syphilis manifests after an incubation period of 1-3 weeks from exposure.”<sup>8</sup> This incubation period is very important when looking at Columbus’s first voyage and determining the likelihood of his crew contracting syphilis from the natives they encountered. Probably the most important thing that the Center for Disease Control says about the disease is that: “Syphilis has been called the “great imitator” because it has so many possible symptoms, many of which look like symptoms from other diseases.”<sup>9</sup> This statement is very important because it shows how difficult it can be to diagnose the disease and distinguish it from other diseases. This is important in the ongoing debate of the origin of syphilis in Europe because past accounts of the disease spreading could often be confused with other diseases such as leprosy. This makes it even more difficult to determine the origin of the disease in Europe which means that proving the Columbian Theory is also all the more difficult. While the modern definition of the disease and its symptoms is much more detailed, overall the depiction of syphilis provided by Fracastoro is fairly spot on with what is known today about syphilis. This shows that Fracastoro can be used as a reliable source for the study of the syphilis disease.

Knowing all of these criteria and analyzing Columbus’s journal entries I found that there is nothing in his diary of the first voyage to the Americas to suggest that any new or strange disease came back with him or his crew. There is a severe lack of any sort of medical references of any ailments among the crew. With so many people under his command and the harsh conditions that this journey had exposed them all to it would have been important for Columbus

---

<sup>8</sup> Health Resources and Services Administration, “Syphilis,” Accessed June 7, 2014  
[http://hab.hrsa.gov/deliverhivaidscares/clinicalguide11/cg-629\\_syphilis.html](http://hab.hrsa.gov/deliverhivaidscares/clinicalguide11/cg-629_syphilis.html)

<sup>9</sup> Center for Disease Control, “Syphilis Fact Sheet,” Accessed June 5, 2014.  
<http://www.cdc.gov/std/syphilis/default.htm>.



to remain well informed of all medical changes throughout the crew. The fact that there is little to no mention of anything relating to the health of the crew, other than overall morale, suggests that for the most part the crew was healthy and fit for duty. It stands to reason that any sort of strange or new illness would be immediately reported and logged to the commanding officer on the expedition which in this case would have been Columbus himself.

While reviewing Columbus's diary from the first voyage I found that there only two logged references that have anything to do with the medical condition of him or his crew. The first medical reference in his journal refers to a condition that Columbus himself was dealing with at this time. The journal entry is dated at Saturday, February 16<sup>th</sup> 1493 and in this entry Columbus says: "This night the Admiral rested somewhat because, since Wednesday, he had not slept or been able to sleep and hardly had the use of his legs because of always being exposed to the cold and water and because of little eating."<sup>10</sup> This reference in his diary is talking about an arthritis condition that Columbus suffered throughout his life that was becoming increasingly agitated from the stormy conditions they were experiencing. This is obviously not a connection to the syphilis disease and cannot be used as evidence to support that Columbus or his men are carrying the disease with them at this time. There is only one other medical reference made by Columbus in his journal during his first voyage and it is dated on Tuesday, November 27<sup>th</sup> 1492. Columbus states in this passage that: "An old man with a kidney stone from which he had suffered all his life and then after two days was cured."<sup>11</sup> This report of a man with a kidney stone and Columbus's own arthritis are the only mentions in his journal that pertain to any medical ailment neither of which have anything to do with the syphilis disease. An even more compelling statement that Columbus makes in his journal that shows the overall health of the

---

<sup>10</sup>Bartolome de Las Cases, *The Diario of Christopher Columbus's First Voyage to America 1492-1493*, trans. Oliver Dunn and James E. Kelly, Jr. University of Oklahoma Press: Norman and London, 1989): 375-76.

<sup>11</sup> Casas, *Columbus*, 185.

crew is from the same passage of Tuesday, November 27<sup>th</sup> 1492. Columbus states that: “Because, Our Lord be praised, to this day there has not been one person from all my crew who has had a headache nor been in bed with illness.”<sup>12</sup> These three quotes from Columbus’s journal are the only medical notes mentioned anywhere in his journal.

The lack of evidence in Columbus’s journal works heavily against the validity of the Columbian Theory as if they did bring the disease back with them there was ample time for symptoms to show while they were on the ship and still there was no mention of any strange illness or disease affecting the crew. To clarify the time frame of Columbus’s first voyage to the Americas his voyage began with the departure from Spain on August 3<sup>rd</sup>, 1492. Columbus and his crew first landed and made contact with natives in the Americas on October 12<sup>th</sup> 1492, Columbus set course back home to Spain on January 4<sup>th</sup>, 1493 finally returning home on March 15<sup>th</sup>, 1493. This time frame shows that there was over a five month period of time between initial contact with the natives and the return to Spain. What this means is that based on the incubation periods provided by both Fracastoro and the Health Resources and Services Administration, if Columbus’s crew had contracted syphilis from the natives in the Americas then symptoms would have certainly shown before returning to Spain and would have been recorded in Columbus’s diary. The lack of evidence in Columbus’s journal shows that there is no direct connection to the syphilis disease existing in the Americas and its transport to Europe by Columbus or members of his crew, thus the Columbian Theory is not yet valid.

There was another person from this time that also studied Columbus’s first voyage to the Americas and wrote about it. Bartolome de Las Casas wrote the book, *History of the Indies*, and published it in 1561. Dr. Cesar Lopez, who wrote the article “Medical Notes on Columbus’s First Trip to America,” quoted Las Casas in saying that: “To treat the sores and to perform other

---

<sup>12</sup> Casas, *Columbus*, 185.

medical tasks he [Columbus] left among those people a surgeon named Maestre Juan.”<sup>13</sup> Las Casas is referencing the colony Columbus set up at Navidad in Haiti where Columbus left thirty nine men to establish a settlement. However after I reviewed Columbus’s diary there is no mention found of this particular quote and this means that Las Casas’s statement doesn’t have validation. When Columbus talks about the Navidad settlement, in a passage dated on Wednesday, January 2<sup>nd</sup> 1493, he states that: “Left 39 men with the fort and...over them, as lieutenants, Diego de Arana, a native of Cordova, and Pero Gutierrez (sic), steward of the king’s dais and a servant of the chief steward, and Rodrigo Descobedo, a native of Segovia.”<sup>14</sup> This is the only case in which Columbus names specific people he left at the Navidad settlement.

In Las Casas’s book he refers to Columbus’s diary from the second voyage to the Americas in which Columbus writes about his return to the Navidad settlement. Las Casas states that: “Tuesday, November 26, he ordered another search for the thirty-nine Christians left in the fortress...When asked about the fate of the Christians, they answered that some had died of illness and others had gone inland, taking many women along with them. Columbus knew then that all had perished.”<sup>15</sup> It is believed that the Europeans left at the Navidad settlement began raping the native women and angered the natives to the point where they attacked and killed the settlers. What these three quotes from Lopez, Columbus and Las Casas tells us is that there is nothing confirming that Columbus left a surgeon named Juan to try and cure sores and other things ailing the crew. This is confirmed because Columbus never mentions this person’s name or even that those he left there were ailed with any sort of disease. Finally the third quote from Las Casas shows that the Navidad settlers were never heard from again since they had been

---

<sup>13</sup> Cesar A. Lopez MD, “Medical Notes on Columbus’s First Trip to America,” *Journal of American Medical Association* 236 (1976): 1599, Accessed April 19, 2014.

<sup>14</sup> Casas, *Columbus*, 301.

<sup>15</sup> Bartolome de Las Casas, *History of the Indies*, trans, Andree Collard (New York: NY, 1971), 46-47.

killed off by the natives which means that Las Casas can't say with certainty that those at the Navidad settlement were afflicted with any sort of disease whatsoever. This removes the possibility of another potential link between syphilis and Columbus's crew thus adding to the doubt of the validity of the Columbian Theory.

There has been a large ongoing debate over the origin of syphilis in Europe and this debate has split historians down the middle on one of the two primary theories, those theories being either the Columbian or Pre-Columbian Theory. Even Fracastoro himself provided stories in part three of his book to suggest what he thought may have been the origin of the disease. In part three of his book though his language is vague, Fracastoro tells a story that most likely refers to the journeys Columbus made to the Americas and his interaction with the native people there. Fracastoro tells us: "The whole band, Spaniards and people of Ophrye had assembled...a great number of fold stood set apart...all with melancholy hearts and hideous bodies, scaly with scabs, flowing with pus...The race from Europe stood amazed...at the contagion seen nowhere else at any time."<sup>16</sup> This description does indeed sound like the syphilis disease but the description lacks specific names and dates to help pinpoint exactly when this meeting may have occurred. At the same time, from this description, I can see where people were already starting to believe the story behind the Columbian Theory and it shows how the master narrative may have formed so early, which since the story is so old it is more easy to convince people it is the truth.

Many historians have published pieces arguing in favor of one theory over the other and many at the same time attempting to disprove the other theory. One viewpoint on the origin of syphilis in Europe held by George Armelagos who co-wrote "The Science behind Pre-Columbian Evidence of Syphilis in Europe: Research by Documentary" is that evidence supporting the Pre-Columbian theory does not hold up as valid in peer review and that new

---

<sup>16</sup> Fracastoro, *Syphilis*, 99.

evidence has been found to support the Columbian theory. In this article Armelagos puts evidence provided in a documentary called *The Syphilis Enigma* under peer review and examines the evidence provided in that documentary. The documentary examined four skeletons found at a place called the “Hull Friary” in England that were carbon dated to have lived around the time range of 1300 to 1430. These skeletons were found to have syphilis like lesions on them, which if the time period was accurate would prove that syphilis was present in Europe long before Columbus went to the Americas thus disproving the Columbian theory. However in this article Armelagos argues that the evidence provided was inaccurate and that the dating method used on the skeletons gave the wrong date range. Armelagos stated that: “Skeleton 1216 has been radiocarbon dated twice, once in 2000 and again in 2003...The first radiocarbon date for skeleton 1215 gives a range of AD 1310-1435, the second, a range of AD 1428-1611...the latter date is consistent with an individual who contracted syphilis after 1493.<sup>17</sup>” While this provides a new date range that makes it possible for this person to have lived and contracted syphilis after Columbus’s voyage it also still leaves the possibility for the man to have lived and contracted syphilis before Columbus’s voyage.

After Armelagos presents his evidence attempting to disprove the evidence in support of the Pre-Columbian Theory on syphilis he presents new evidence that he believes provides more support for the Columbian Theory. Armelagos states this new evidence as: “Skeletal evidence from many pre-Columbian sites in the New World indicates a high prevalence of treponemal disease...this suggests a non-venereal form of the disease, similar to modern day yaws...was present.<sup>18</sup>” Armelagos goes on to discuss how this non-venereal form of syphilis may have been carried by Columbus’s crew back to Europe and then mutated to venereal syphilis in response to

---

<sup>17</sup> George J. Armelagos, “The Science behind Pre-Columbian Evidence of Syphilis in Europe: Research by Documentary,” *Evolutionary Anthropology*. 21 (2012): 53.

<sup>18</sup> Armelagos “Science,” 56.

the new environment. This provided evidence adds to more speculation and fails to directly connect venereal syphilis to Columbus and his crew as there is still nothing to show that Columbus or his crew were suffering from any syphilis-like illness.

Richard Frank wrote an article entitled “Fracastoro: Poetry vs. Prose,” which was published in the *International Journal of the Classical Tradition* in spring of 2003. In this article Frank refers to the writings of Bartolomeo de Las Casas and talks about how Las Casas followed Columbus’s path to the Americas and had contact with some of the native peoples that Columbus himself had encountered. Frank states that: “Las Casas...asked the Indians whether they had known the disease before Europeans came; he was told that they had indeed suffered from it since time immemorial...The New World origin of the disease seems most likely although alternative theories are still advanced.<sup>19</sup>” Though this evidence would appear to support the Columbian Theory, it does not prove it. Even though it is known that a non-venereal form of syphilis was present in the Americas during this time it does not directly link the disease to Columbus’s crew and further link it to the venereal syphilis outbreak in Naples in 1495. This piece of evidence further adds to the speculation of the Columbian Theory but there is still no concrete proof.

John Frith wrote an article entitled “Syphilis Its Early History and Treatment Until Penicillin and the Debate on its Origins,” this article was published in the *Journal of Military and Veterans’ Health*. In the article Frith describes the disease and gives a brief overview of its history over the past five hundred years. Frith then goes into looking at both the Columbian and Pre-Columbian Theory of syphilis and presenting the cases of both theories. In the case of the Columbian Theory Frith refers to the testimony of Ruiz Diaz de Isla, who was a physician in Barcelona at the time Columbus returned from his first voyage to the Americas. Frith quotes

---

<sup>19</sup> Richard Frank, “Fracastoro: Poetry vs. Prose,” *International Journal of the Classical Tradition* 4 (2003): 527.

Diaz as saying: “De Isla wrote that he had treated the men for the disease but hadn’t realized it was the same disease that had been ravaging Europe until many years later.<sup>20</sup>” When I reviewed this statement the question I had was that if Diaz was treating several of Columbus’s men for a disease, then why is there no mention of any severe illness in Columbus’s diary by either him or the three physicians taken on the voyage.

These above historians all provide evidence that they claim gives merit to the Columbian Theory and provides a connection between the syphilis disease, its arrival in Europe, and Columbus’s first voyage to the Americas. However, after analyzing the evidence that these historians provided, I found that there is still no clear cut connection between syphilis and Columbus or his crew. Since there is no connection between syphilis and Columbus the Columbian Theory is just that, a theory. Until evidence can be provided that proves Columbus or members of his crew were experiencing at least the early symptoms of syphilis on their return from the first voyage to the Americas therefore directly linking syphilis to Columbus or his crew, the Columbian Theory is built solely on speculation.

There are other historians who share the view with me that there is a lack of evidence supporting the Columbian Theory of the spread of syphilis. They also reviewed Columbus’s journal and even suggest other possible ways that syphilis may have arrived in Europe at the end of the fifteenth century. Dr. Lopez whose article reviewed Columbus’s journal, chose to review it from a different point of view stating that: “Although it has been studied and analyzed from almost every aspect, little is known or has been written about it from a medical point of view.”<sup>21</sup> In his review Lopez also references the two medical conditions that Columbus does mention in his journal pointing out that there are the only two references in all of Columbus’s journal.

---

<sup>20</sup> John Frith, “Syphilis- its early history and Treatment until Penicillin and the Debate on its Origins,” *Journal of Military and Veterans’ Health*, 20 No. 4, (2012): 55.

<sup>21</sup> Lopez, “Medical Notes,” 1598.

Lopez states that: “It is known that the trip was uneventful from a medical point of view, that the crew were healthy, and that the physicians had little to do. The journal has only two entries in which medical problems are mentioned.”<sup>22</sup> Lopez goes on to quote the two passages from Columbus’s journal referring to Columbus’s arthritis and the old man’s kidney stone. This reaffirms that there are no significant medical statements in Columbus’s journal that connects him or his crew to the syphilis disease.

In 1992 John Frye wrote a book called *Los Otros: Columbus and the Three Who Made His Enterprise of the Indies Succeed*. This book covered many of the major topics concerning Columbus’s journey including disease and the debate over syphilis. Frye talked about Fracastoro’s depiction of the disease and then went on to say that: “Syphilis has also been confused with yaws, a tropical disease but not venereal originating in the rain forests of Africa, and thus possibly contracted by Portuguese and Spanish on voyages to Guinea.”<sup>23</sup> This opens up the possibility that the non-venereal form of syphilis could have been brought to Europe earlier from Africa and not the Americas. Stories of this non venereal yaws disease in Africa, which is very similar to the syphilis disease has caused some researchers to propose a third theory as the origin of syphilis in Europe, known as the Unitarian Theory. Angela Aristone wrote an article entitled, “Syphilis: Etiology, Epidemiology, and Origin Theory.” In this article she writes about the disease and also delves into potential origin theories where she references the Unitarian Theory. Aristone writes that the Unitarian Theory states: “that syphilis existed in both the Old and the New World as far back as prehistoric times...syphilis evolved with human populations and was present in both the Old and New Worlds at the time of Columbus’s discovery of

---

<sup>22</sup> Lopez, “Medical Notes,” 1598.

<sup>23</sup> John Frye, *Los Otros: Columbus and the three who made his enterprise of the Indies succeed* (New York: Edwin Mellen Press, 1992), 64.



America.”<sup>24</sup> This is another prominent theory in the debate of syphilis and has slowly been gaining more credibility over the years.

Aristone also refers to historical stories that could have a connection to the syphilis disease that occurred centuries before the discovery of the New World. For example, Aristone refers to the leprosy disease during the medieval era of Europe and states that: “during the medieval period, Saracen ointment, an early medicine containing mercury, was used by “lepers.” Hudson considers these lepers to be syphilitics who were misdiagnosed.”<sup>25</sup> To go along with this statement Aristone refers to an article written by George Armelagos. In his article Armelagos states that: “Mercury has no effect on true leprosy but was the mainstay in treating syphilis until the early 20<sup>th</sup> century.”<sup>26</sup> This was a huge red flag for me when reviewing the Columbian Theory on the origin of syphilis in Europe because it shows evidence that a known treatment for syphilis was being utilized in medieval Europe long before Columbus discovered the New World. Going along with this the Pre-Columbian Theory believes that syphilis went misdiagnosed as leprosy until the end of the 15<sup>th</sup> century and since mercury has no effect on leprosy but it does cure syphilis it is very possible that these “lepers” were actually “syphilitics.”

Andrew F. Downing was a physician who also explored the debate over the origins of syphilis and has questioned the Columbian Theory concerning the disease. Downing reviews the facts about Columbus’s voyage as he attempts to prove once and for all whether there is hardcore evidence to suggest that Columbus’s crew brought back the disease with them from the Americas. In his article entitled “Were the Sailors of Columbus the First European Syphilitics?” which was published in the Boston Medical Surgical Journal in 1916 reviews a letter written by

---

<sup>24</sup> Angelina Aristone, “Syphilis: Etiology, Epidemiology, and Origin Theory,” *The University of Western Ontario Journal of Anthropology* Vol. 3, No. 1 (2011), 33-34.

<sup>25</sup> Aristone, Origin Theory, 33.

<sup>26</sup> Brenda Baker and George Armelagos, “The Origin and Antiquity of Syphilis: Paleopathological Diagnosis and Interpretation,” *Current Anthropology*, 29, No. 5 (1988), 707.

Columbus in February, 1493. Downing states that: "In the letter...dated on board the Nina, there is no mention or suggestion of any strange disease...a physician, Maestro Alonzo of Moguer, would undoubtedly have reported to Columbus the presence of any new malady among the sailors. If these men were infected in Hayti, there was ample time for some symptoms to appear."<sup>27</sup> This lack of evidence to suggest any syphilis-like disease among Columbus's crew along with the ample time period for symptoms to have appeared while still at sea makes any claim that they brought the disease back with them from the Americas to be pure speculation at best.

When I reviewed the direct accounts of Columbus's diary in reference to the descriptions of the syphilis disease provided by Fracastoro and seeing no evidence or mention in the diary to suggest a direct link between syphilis and Columbus or his crew means that we cannot put our faith in the Columbian Theory regarding the origin of syphilis in Europe. Those historians who have put their faith in the Columbian Theory and claim it to be the most likely scenario fail to acknowledge the fact that Columbus's journal makes absolutely no mention of any strange disease ailing the crew and in fact promotes that his crew was very healthy during the voyage. Columbian historians have to acknowledge that the lack of evidence provided in Columbus's journal works against the Columbian Theory of syphilis since it provides no clear connection between the disease and Columbus's crew. While evidence supporting the Pre-Columbian Theory is still being reviewed and is by no means proven there is nothing presented currently that suggests that the Columbian Theory is the most likely scenario as to how syphilis came to Europe. At this point until new evidence is presented the outbreak of syphilis in Naples in 1495 and its closeness to Columbus's discovery of the Americas is pure coincidence. The question

---

<sup>27</sup> Andrew f. Downing, "Were the Sailors of Columbus the First European Syphilitics?" *The Boston Medical and Surgical Journal* 175 (1916): 516.

then is will we ever figure out the true origin of syphilis in Europe? Or is this a question that will always be answered by simple speculations and best guesses since it is so difficult to truly know the full story of what did and did not happen.

What makes this project and this argument relevant to the Atlantic World and why is it important to the world today? The story of the origin of syphilis in Europe is very important to the time of the Atlantic World because it is one of the first stories about the New World that reached European ears. The Columbian Theory on syphilis attempts to prove that the native people of the Americas infected the Europeans with the syphilis disease and then upon their return unleashed it all across Europe. Columbus's first voyage to the Americas set the tone for the rest of New World exploration and the belief that syphilis was brought to Europe by them was a big story in Europe once people figured out what the disease was and they instantly believed that story to be true. Not only did this story set the tone for the New World but leading into modern times this story is still believed to be the master narrative and most likely to be true, rarely ever being tested. This story is a classic example of a fearful and uninformed majority placing the blame for a tragic event on an unknown minority. The Europeans blamed the Natives Americans for the syphilis disease and it has stuck for five hundred years now. This was the beginning of a pattern to think of the Native Americans as a savage race of people and beneath Europeans. This is the darker side of human nature as we blame people we don't know as the cause of things we don't understand instead of searching for the facts and finding the truth in the story. It is our job as historians to continue to review history and analyze all aspects in order to ensure the validity of what is taught about the past instead of allowing stories to be twisted to favor a certain group of people by forsaking the truth of what really happened.

## Bibliography

### Primary Sources:

De las Casas, Bartolome. *The Diario of Christopher Columbus's First Voyage to America 1492-1493*. Translated by Oliver Dunn and James E. Kelly, Jr, Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1989.

The Diary of Christopher Columbus's first voyage to the Americas chronicles the voyage of Columbus and his crew west from Europe and their discovery of the New World. This book is crucial to my research because I use his writings to see if there is any connection between the syphilis disease and Columbus or his crew. Based on whether or not there is a direct connection to the disease will help determine if the Columbian Theory has any validity.

De las Casas Bartoleme. *History of the Indies*. Translated by Andree Collard. New York: Torchbook Library, 1971

Bartoleme De Las Casas's book the History of the Indies chronicles a forty year period over the West Indies also known as the Americas from the 1490s to the 1530s. He also closely followed the journey of Columbus and even reviewed and made notes based on Columbus's Journal. This book is important to my research because Las Casas followed Columbus's journey and was present during his return and other important moments after the discovery of the New World. Las Casas also talks about the Syphilis disease briefly and gives his own opinion on the matter.

Fracastoro, Girolamo. *Fracastoro's Syphilis*. Translated by Geoffrey Eatough. Great Britain: Liverpool. Francis Cairns. 1984.

Girolamo Fracastoro's writings on the syphilis in this book covers every aspect of the disease as he observed at the time. In the book Fracastoro talks about the symptoms of the disease, the potential cures of the disease, and a possible origin of the disease. This is very important to my research because it teaches me about the disease and it gives me a basis for what to look for in Columbus's diary to seek a connection between syphilis and Columbus's voyage.

## Secondary Sources:

Aristone, Angelina. "Syphilis: Etiology, Epidemiology, and Origin Theory." *The University of Western Ontario Journal of Anthropology*. 3. No. 1. (2011): 28-36.

In this article Angelina Aristone covers the history of syphilis as a whole. First she describes what the disease is and what it does to humans, including cures that have been used for the disease and how much of a threat it currently is. Then Aristone goes into the three different origin theories that have been presented for the arrival of syphilis in Europe. She explains each theory then adds a few paragraphs on supporters and critics of each theory. For my project I referred to her explanation of the Unitarian Theory on syphilis in order to provide a good overview of the theory and how it stands up in the realm of historical review.

Armstrong J. George. "The Science behind Pre-Columbian Evidence of Syphilis in Europe: Research by Documentary," *Evolutionary Anthropology*. 21. No. 2. (2012): 50-57.

George Armstrong in this article talks about evidence presented in a documentary that supports claims for the Pre-Columbian Theory. He seeks to disprove this presented evidence by claiming the dating methods used in the research are inaccurate. This article is important to my research because it presents a historians view in favor of the Columbian Theory and allows me to review his claims and attempt to disprove his own findings.

Baker, Brenda and Armstrong, George. "The Origin and Antiquity of Syphilis: Paleopathological Diagnosis and Interpretation." *Current Anthropology*. 29. No. 5. (1988): 703-737.

Brenda Baker and George Armstrong provide a good overview on the history of syphilis as a whole as well as the different theories on its origin. The two authors describes the disease as it first broke out in Europe and then go into a variety of the different cures for the disease used throughout the past five hundred years. I used their research to describe the initial cure used by Europeans to help cure what they believed to be leprosy. I show that this mercury based cure did cure the victims but argue that mercury has no effect on leprosy but has been known to cure syphilis and this curative method dates back to the medieval era of Europe.

Center for Disease Control. "Syphilis." Last modified January 16, 2014.  
<http://www.cdc.gov/sTD/syphilis/default.htm>

The CDC website is run by the Center for Disease Control and provides information on a variety of known diseases including symptoms, cures, and lethality. I used this website in my project to compare the modern definition and analysis of the syphilis disease to the descriptions given by Girolamo Fracastoro in his accounts of the disease.

Downing Andrew F. "Were the Sailors of Columbus the First European Syphilitics?" *The Boston Medical and Surgical Journal*. 175. (1916): 515-522.

Andrew Downing's article asks a question that directly correlates to the question over the debate on the origin of syphilis. He too reviews Columbus's Journal and attempts to find a connection between Columbus's crew and the syphilis disease. This is important to my research because his findings agree with my argument that the Columbian Theory does not have enough supporting evidence to be utilized as the primary narrative for the origin of syphilis in Europe.

Frank, Richard. "Fracastoro: Poetry vs. Prose." *International Journal of the Classical Tradition*. 9. No. 4 (2003): 524-534.

Richard Frank's article looks at Fracastoro's work on the syphilis disease and discusses the two primary theories on the origin of syphilis in Europe. He presents an overview of these two theories and presents an argument that states that the Columbian Theory is the most likely scenario for the introduction of syphilis to Europe. This article is important to my research because it contributes to the discussion over the origin of syphilis in Europe and provides me with an example to help discount evidence to support the Columbian Theory.

Frith, John. "Syphilis- its Early History and Treatment Until Penicillin and the Debate on its Origins." *Journal of Military and Veterans' Health*. 20. No. 4. (2012): 49-58.

John Frith's article discusses a general overview on syphilis as a whole. Frith talks about the history of the disease, its treatment and even briefly discusses the debate on its origins in Europe. Frith references several primary authors from the time period of Fracastoro and Columbus's journey. Frith's article is important to my research because it provides a good overview of the disease as a whole and also contributes to what other historians have written about the syphilis disease and its European origins.

Frye, John. *Los Otros: Columbus and the Three who Made his Enterprise of the Indies Succeed*. New York: Edwin Mellen Press. 1992.

John Frye's book covers Columbus's journey to the Americas and several of the other important characters that helped him achieve his goals at sea. Frye also briefly covers the debate over the syphilis disease and presents his own view on how easy it is to confuse syphilis with many other diseases like leprosy and yaws. This is important to my research because it agrees with my argument that it is difficult to make a concrete connection between syphilis and Columbus's crew since syphilis like symptoms are common with many other disease

Heath Resources and Services Administration. "Syphilis." Last modified January 2011. [http://hab.hrsa.gov/deliverhivaidscares/clinicalguide11/cg-629\\_syphilis.html](http://hab.hrsa.gov/deliverhivaidscares/clinicalguide11/cg-629_syphilis.html)

The Health Resources and Services Administration is a government health organization that is similar to the Center for Disease Control in its research of many illnesses and diseases throughout the world. For my research the site provided me with an updated incubation period for initial symptoms of syphilis to appear in its victims to compare with the time frame of Columbus's first journey to the Americas.

Lopez A. Cesar. "Medical Notes on Columbus's First Trip to America." *Journal of American Medical Association* 236 (1976): 1598-1599.

Cesar Lopez's article focused on reviewing Columbus's journal of the first voyage from a medical standpoint. In the article he talks about how there are only two passages in the journal with any medical references what so ever and also that he was unable to confirm a quote from Las Casas concerning syphilis like symptoms amongst Columbus's crew. This is very important to my research because Lopez is looking into the same questions that I am and coming up with similar answers.