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The Real Birth-Date
of Columbus

1451

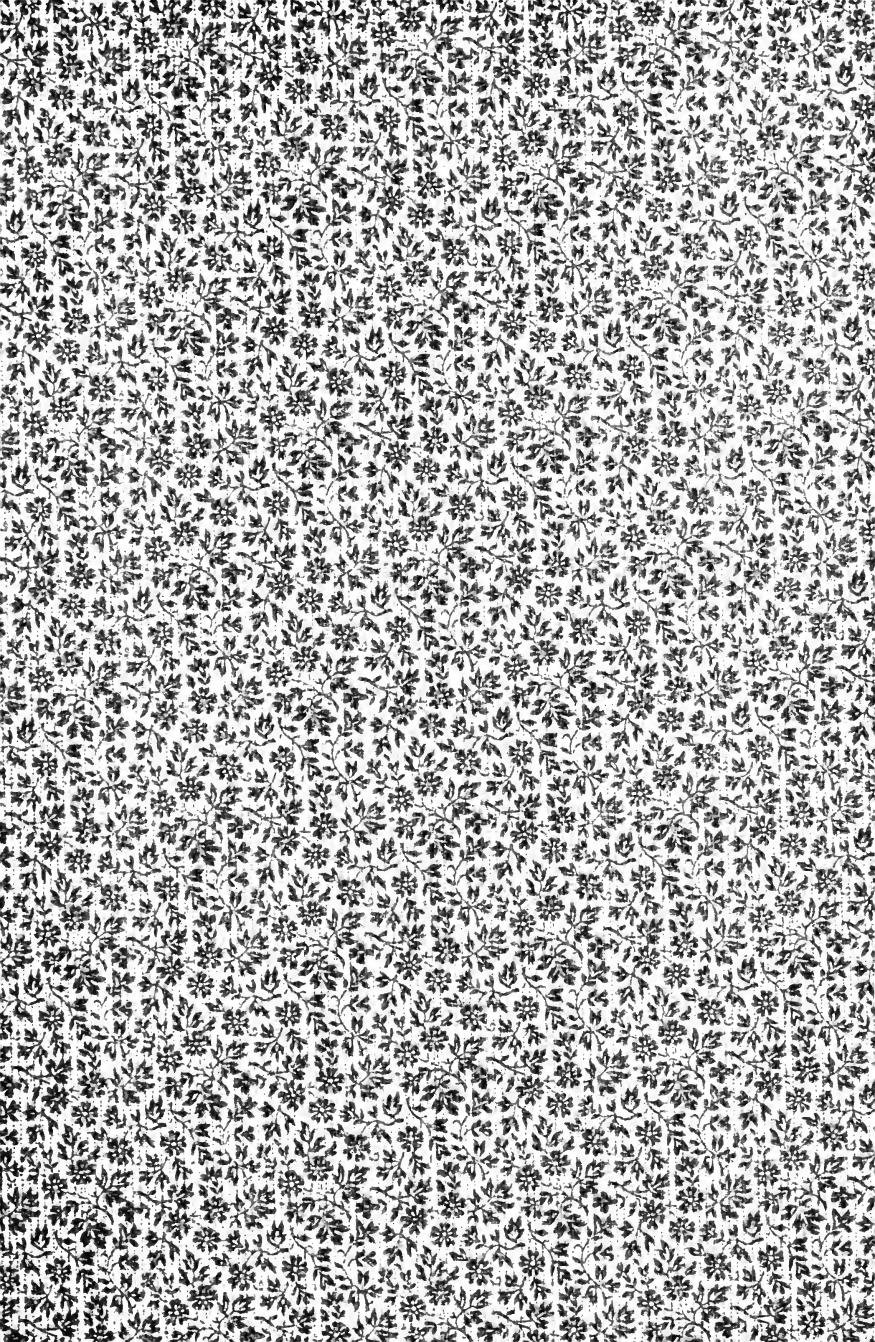


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THE REAL BIRTH-DATE OF
CHRISTOPHER COLUMBUS

1451

CRITICAL STUDY
OF THE VARIOUS
DATES ASSIGNED
TO THE BIRTH OF
CHRISTOPHER COLUMBUS

The Real Date

1451

WITH A BIBLIOGRAPHY OF THE QUESTION

BY

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etc. etc. etc.



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INTRODUCTION.

THE question as to the date of the birth of Columbus is one of the most controversial among those bearing upon the beginning of his career, which is far from lacking in points of obscurity. Neither Columbus himself, nor his son Ferdinand, nor Las Casas furnishes us with any definite light on this subject.

At different times Columbus mentions the age he had attained at certain memorable periods of his life, and it might, at the first blush, be thought that therefrom we should be able to deduce the necessary arguments for resolving the problem ; but when the attempt is made it is found to result in nothing, inasmuch as his statements are self-contradictory. Nothing consequently can be obtained from this source

of information ; Columbus has never correctly reported his age, and what he does say on the subject, far from elucidating the difficulty, serves rather to render it still more confused.

Both his son and Las Casas, who have written his life in its fullest details, who knew him personally, who had been in the closest relations with all the members of his family, and who had had in turn all his papers in their hands, maintain on this point a silence which is undoubtedly remarkable. How are we to admit that, situated as they were, neither of them knew the date of the birth of him whose historiographers they became ? When any special circumstances bring any individual prominently into light, or call particular attention to him, it usually happens that the first questions asked about him bear upon his age and whence he comes, because this information, when obtainable, is more direct and satisfying than any other that can be given.

That this is so may be shown by what we do ourselves in similar cases. It is, therefore, somewhat difficult to believe that Ferdinand Columbus and Las Casas never asked themselves what was the date of the birth of the man whose great discoveries they were undertaking to narrate, or that having asked themselves the question they were unable to answer it; it is still more difficult to believe that, having answered it to their own satisfaction, they did not think that the date was worth recording for posterity.

Their silence, under all the circumstances, leads to the belief that they were intentionally mute, and that, for some reason or other which we cannot fathom, they did not wish to convey to us what they knew, what indeed they could not help knowing on the subject.

With about a single exception, all the contemporaries of Columbus are equally silent on the point. In their case this

may be explained by the mutism of Columbus and his relatives, for had Oviedo and Peter Martyr, for instance, both of whom have written at considerable length about him, known of this peculiarity, it is not to be supposed they would have abstained from mentioning it. Bernaldez alone gives us fairly precise information on the point, information which has been for long accepted without discussion, but which documents discovered in our own day oblige us to set aside, as will be fully shown later on.

This sort of conspiracy of silence, as to the date of the birth of the man to whom we owe our knowledge of one half of the globe, would certainly have left us in ignorance on that subject had not chance led to the discovery of documents, buried for centuries among the papers of lawyers of Genoa and Savona, the places of origin of the Columbus family, which amply atone for our previous lack of information, and which

we now possess in sufficient number to enable us to definitely settle the question.

The only sources of information, therefore, from which to-day we can seek to fix the date of the birth of Columbus, are the assertions of Columbus himself, the testimony of his contemporaries when it is forthcoming, and the deeds and documents of Italian notaries in which mention is made of Columbus or members of his family.

By studying the information obtainable from these three sources, and by comparing it with facts absolutely known, various results have been obtained which, according to the method employed, vary by ten, fifteen, and even twenty-five years, and which conduce to placing the birth of the great Navigator at different dates between the years 1430 and 1456. It is needless to say that all these results thus obtained are not equally plausible; some cannot stand investigation, some may, however, be seriously discussed.

But in order to make such a discussion useful it is necessary to have before one's eyes the very texts which form its basis. They will be found here in their entirety. Unfortunately they are neither very numerous nor very long.

After having submitted to a searching examination the different dates assigned to the birth of Columbus, as they have been drawn from these texts, we shall propose the one which for us really results; and we shall give the reasons which entitle us to say it is sufficiently well-established to be acceptable to even the severest critics.

A CRITICAL STUDY OF THE VARIOUS DATES ASSIGNED TO THE BIRTH OF CHRISTOPHER COLUMBUS.

CHAPTER I.

Factors of the Problem: The Texts.

I.—COLUMBUS'S OWN ASSERTIONS.

The statements of Columbus from which any information may be gathered about his age are drawn from his own writings, which have come down to us, some directly from him, the others through his son, Ferdinand Columbus, or through his historiographer Las Casas, who had in their hands all the papers of the discoverer, and who were in close contact with all the members of his family. We give exactly the source of each statement.

I.

COLUMBUS: December, 1492.—That he has overrun the world during 23 years almost without interruption.—*Yo he andado veinte y tres años en la mar, sin salir della tiempo que se haya de contar.* (Columbus's Journal, 21 December, 1492. Navarrete's *Viages*, vol. I., p. 101.)

If Columbus reckoned these 23 years from the day on which he was speaking, they carry back to the beginning of 1470, and end with 1492. But it may be that he spoke of 23 years' voyages previous to his coming to Spain; in that case they would begin in 1461 and end in 1484.

2.

COLUMBUS: January, 1493.—That at that date there were seven years that he had been in the service of Spain—since 20th January, 1486.—*Despues que yo vine á les servir,* (the Catholic Kings) *que son siete años agora á 20 dias*

de Enero este mismo mes. (Columbus's Journal, 14 January, 1493. Navarrete's *Viages*, vol. I., p. 137.)

3.

COLUMBUS: end of 1500. — That seven years were spent in conferences (with the Crown) and that nine were employed in executing things worthy of remembrance.—*Siete años se pasaron en la plática y nueve ejecutando cosas muy señaladas y dignas de memoria.* (Letter to the Nurse: end of 1500. Navarrete's *Viages*, vol. I., p. 266.)

As Columbus here speaks at the end of 1500, the sixteen years he mentions begin with 1485. The first seven lost in discussions would therefore embrace the years 1485 to 1491 inclusively, and the nine years employed in active work would be 1492 to 1500 inclusively. Here Columbus makes his relations with Spain begin in 1485.

In 1503 Columbus repeats that he spent seven years at the Court of Castile: *Siete*

años estuve yo en su Real Corte: (Letter known as *rarissime*, Navarrete's *Viages*, vol. I., p. 311.) The same assertion is made in a letter of which Las Casas gives an extract: *Ya saben Vuestras Altezas que anduve siete años en su corte.* (Las Casas, *História*, Book I., vol. I., chap. xxii., p. 250.) Finally the same phrase is found in an undated letter addressed to the Catholic Kings: *Siete años estuve yo en su Real Corte.* (Navarrete's *Viages*, vol. II., p. 263.)

4.

COLUMBUS: end of 1500. — That it was now seventeen years since he had entered the service of the Catholic Kings, the first eight of which were spent in negotiations.—*Ya son diez y siete años que yo vine servir estos Principes con la impresa de las Indias: los ocho fui traído en disputas.* (Letter written by Columbus at the close of the year 1500. Navarrete's *Viages*, vol. II., p. 254.)

Here Columbus, still writing at the end of

1500, states that his relations with Spain date back seventeen years, that is to say to 1484. Nor is it now any longer seven years that were wasted in preliminary discussions, but eight years have been so spent, namely, those which begin with the year 1484 and end in 1491, for Columbus's formal agreement with the Catholic Kings is dated January, 1492.

5.

COLUMBUS: 1501.—That he was quite young when he first took to the sea; that he had continued his sea-faring life up to the very time he is now speaking, and that he had navigated for forty years.—*De muy pequeña edad entré la mar navegando, y lo he continuado hasta hoy; . . . ya pasan de cuarenta años que yo voy en esto uso. Todo lo que hasta hoy se navega he andado.* (Letter of Columbus of 1501 quoted by Las Casas, *Historia*, Book I., vol. 1., chap. iii., p. 47,

and *Historie*, chap. iv., p. 8. Navarrete's *Viages*, vol. II., p. 262.)

If, in 1501, Columbus had sailed for 40 years, he must have started his sea-life in 1461. This statement is in agreement with the one made in December, 1492. (See No. 1).

6.

COLUMBUS: 1503.—That he had entered the service at twenty-eight.—*Yo vine a servir de veinte y ocho años.* (*Rarissime* Letter of 7th July, 1503. Morelli, p. 47. Navarrete's *Viages*, vol. I., p. 311.)

The text does not convey that Columbus is speaking of his entry into the service of Spain; but, as he is writing to the Catholic Kings, and as the letter only deals with services he has rendered them, it may be assumed he is referring to the years spent in their service. Morelli and de La Roquette, who have translated the letter, the one into Italian the other into French, have so understood it. Morelli writes: *Io veni*

a servire vostre maesta di tempo di anni 28. (Lettera Rarissima, pp. 47-48.) De la Roquette thus translates it: *J'étais âgé de 28 ans lorsque je suis venu pour vous servir.* (*Relations des quatre Voyages*, vol. III., p. 161.) M. Harrisse likewise so understands the phrase. (*Christophe Colomb*, vol. I., p. 223, note.) The question has some importance, for the same consequences do not follow from the statement if Columbus is only speaking of the age at which he first took to the sea and began his career. For this reason it has been supposed there might be an error in the mention of the age, 28 years. Spotorno: (*Codice Colombiana*, p. xxi.); Morelli: (*Lettera rarissima*, Note 6, p. 47); Bossi: (*Histoire de Colomb*, pp. 89-90); D'Avezac: (*Canevas*, p. 24); and Lollis: (*Scritti di Colombo*, vol. II., p. 204, note 1, in the *Raccolta Colombiana*), propose to read 38 years. Navarrete (*Viages*, vol. I., p. lxxx., note, and p. 311, note) suggests 48 years. The two texts of this letter, copied by Navarrete and Morelli, alike give 28 years.

7.

COLUMBUS : May, 1505. — That during fourteen years he had been unable to get the King of Portugal to listen to him.—*Que en quatorce años no le pude hacer entender lo que yo dixé.* (Letter of May, 1505. Las Casas : *História*, Book II., vol. III., chap. xxxvii., p. 188. Navarrete : *Viages*, vol. III, pp. 527-528.)

8.

COLUMBUS : without date.—That he took to the sea at fourteen years.—*Che comincio a navegar di quatordici annis.* (Fragment of a letter quoted by Ferdinand Columbus in *Historie*, chap. iv., p. 9, *verso*.)

II.—CONTEMPORARY WITNESSES.

The contemporaries who refer either directly or indirectly to the age of Columbus only number three, and of these the third may be considered as apocryphal.

9.

BERNALDEZ : 1513.—That Columbus being at Valladolid in May, 1506, died at a fine old age, being about 70 years old.—*Estando en Valladolid el año 1506 en el mes de Mayo murio en senectute bona de edad de setenta años poco mas o menos.* (*História de los Reyes Católicos*, Seville, 1869, vol. II., p. 82.)

It will later on be seen that this phrase has given birth to much discussion, and that most of the critics think we have here a clerical error by the transcriber, who has written *setenta* (seventy) in place of *sesenta* (sixty).

10.

FERDINAND COLUMBUS : 1539.—That the Admiral secretly left Portugal towards the end of 1484 with his son Diego.—*Il qual nel fine dell' anno 1484 col suo figliuolino Don Diego si parti segretamente di Portugallo.* (*Historie*, chap. xii., p. 32 *recto*.)

Las Casas repeats the same with this slight difference ; according to him Columbus “left Portugal in 1484 or at the beginning of 1485.” (*História* : Book I., chap. xxix., vol. I., p. 226). The date of Columbus’s departure from Portugal affects some of the calculations made to discover the year of his birth.

11.

P. MARTYR (according to Ramusio) : 1534-1553.—That Columbus was forty years old (*et essando d’ eta anni XL*) when he for the first time laid his schemes before the Republic of Genoa (*pro-*

pose primo alla Signoria di Genova . . .) and afterwards went to Portugal. (P. Martyr : *Sommario dell' Historia dell' Indie occidentali*, 1534, in Ramusio: *Delle Navigazioni*, vol. III., p. 1, 1553.)

This expression is not from P. Martyr to whom Ramusio attributes it. D'Avezac has shown that it is an interpolation (*Canevas*, pp. 10-11), and M. HARRISSE has completed the proof. (*Christophe Colomb*, vol. I., pp. 93 and 238.) It is only mentioned here because some authors have based upon it their calculations as to the date when Columbus first saw the light.

III.—DEEDS OF ITALIAN NOTARIES.

These deeds, patiently dug out from among the archives of the lawyers of Genoa and Savona of the period when the Columbus family dwelt in those two cities, consist of contracts, dealing with obligations entered into of various kinds, wherein figure either Columbus himself or

members of his family, the contents of which may afford some information as to his age, profession, and places of residence. Partially known since the beginning of the 18th century through Salinero, who has published a certain number of them in his *Annotations to Tacitus* (*Annotaciones Julii Salinerii Jureconsul. Savonensis, Genuæ, 1702, 4°.*), these documents subsequently have formed the theme of several publications, and M. Harrisse has collected a great number for the Appendix to his *Christophe Colomb*, which, originally, was meant to contain many more.

They have been all collected for the *Raccolta Colombiana*, and they will be found with an exact description of their origin at the end of the Memoir of MM. Belgrano and Staglieno: *Documenti relativi a Cristoforo Colombo e alla sua famiglia*, which constitute volume 1 of the Second Part of this magnificent collection.

These precious documents number 138, but of these only a few bear directly on the age of Columbus, the point which now

alone engages our attention. We do not reproduce them here *in extenso* because, like all documents of this character, they are drafted in a tedious and uninteresting style, but we give the essential portions, those on which arguments may be raised.

12.

GENOA: 22 September, 1470.—Domenico Columbus and his son Christopher, authorized by him, appoint an arbitrator. Domenico Columbus, son of Giovanni, and Christopher his son, in the presence and with the consent of the said Domenico, his father, present and consenting thereto, of the one part, and Jerome de Porto —*Dominicus de Columbo quondam Johannis et Christofforus ejus filius, in presentia et consensu dicti Dominici patris sui, presentis et consentientis, ex parte una, et Jeronimus de Portu*—take as arbitrator Giovanni Agostino Goano in order to settle their differences with Jerome de Porto. *Giacomo Calvi*, notary. (Deed found and

published by the Marquess de Staglieno in 1888. Reproduced by Belgrano and Staglieno: Document no. xxviii in the *Raccolta*.)

13.

GENOA: 31 October, 1470.—Columbus, with the consent of his father, admits a debt.

Christopher Columbus, son of Domenico, having completed nineteen years, and in the presence, with the authority, after advice and consent of the said Domenico, his father, present and authorizing him.—*Christofforus de Colombo filius Dominici, major annis decemnovem, et in presentia, auctoritate, concilio et consensu dicti Dominici ejus patris* — recognizes, with his father's guarantee, that he is debtor to Pietro Bellesio for 48 lire 13 soldi, the price of a pipe of wine the latter had sold to him. Lazzario Ragio, Notary. (Found and published by Staglieno in 1887. Reproduced by him and Belgrano: Document no. xxxiv in *Raccolta*.)

14.

GENOA: 25 May, 1471.—Suzanne, wife to Domenico Colombo, agrees to the sale of her marriage portion.

Suzanne, daughter of the late Giacomo Fontanarossa and wife to Domenico Colombo, cloth-weaver, here present and consenting, assisted by all and everyone of the undersigned, knowing and having full cognizance of the sale made by Domenico to Giuliano Caprili and to Stampino Caprili of certain lands and properties knowing also that the said lands and house are charged and encumbered with her dowry and the benefits she receives from her contract of marriage and furthermore knowing that the aforementioned sale is made for the benefit and profit of both husband and wife, etc., therefore, of her own free will and with full knowledge of the facts, and not through any error of right or deed, and without any deception, she has consented and does consent to the said sale—
Suzana filia quondam Jacobi de Fontana-

*rubea et uxor Dominici de Columbo textoris pannorum lane, presentis et auctorizantis omnibus et singulis infrascriptis, sciens et certam noticiam habens de quadam vendicione per ipsum Dominicum facta Juliano de Caprili et Stampino de Caprili de certis terris et possessionibus sciens etiam dicta terras et domum fore sibi obligatas et hypothechatas pro suis dotibus et antefacto, et sciens dictam vendicionem fore factam ad omne commodum et beneficium ipsorum iugaliū etc. ideo sponte et ex ejus certa scientia, nulloque iuris vel facti errore ducta seu modo aliquo circumventa, dicte vendicione consensit et consentit, etc. Francesco Camogli, Notary. (Belgrano and Staglieno: Document no. xxxviii in *Raccolta*. Published previously by Harisse: *Christophe Colomb*, vol. II., no. xii.)*

15.

SAVONA: 20th March, 1472.—Columbus witnesses a Will.

Nicolo Monleone, son of the late Giovanni, has disposed of his person and goods in

favour of as is hereafter mentioned
 Done at Savona, in the street of the
 Court of Common Pleas, in the shop of
 the Testator, the said Nicolo, a shop he
 has rented from Giovanni Uxilia, in pre-
 sence of Giovanni Vigna, tailor, Francisco
 Urmeta . . . [Dominico de Facio, cloth-
 shearer, Jeronimo Bootmaker] Bernardo
 Sambaldo, tailor, Christopher Columbus,
 wool-stapler of Genoa, and Dominico
 Vigna, tailor, citizens of Savona, witnesses
 being convoked and entreated hereto by the
 mouth of the Testator himself.—*Nicolaus
 de Monleone quondam Johannis. . . . de se
 bonisque suis disposuit pro ut infra. . . .
 Actum Saone, in contracta palacii causarum
 communis, in apotheca ipsius Nicolai testa-
 toris, quam titulo locationis conducit a
 Johanne de Uxilia; presentibus Johanne
 Vigna sartore, Francisco Urmeta [Domi-
 nico de Facio accimatore, Feronimo
 calegario] Bernardo Sambaldo sartore,
 Christoforo de Columbo lanerio de Janua
 et Dominico Vigna sartore, civibus Saone,
 testibus ad hec vocatis et rogatis ore proprio*

ipsius Testatoris. Ludovico Moreno, notary.

(Harrisse: *Christophe Colomb*, vol. II., no. xiv. Belgrano and Staglieno: Document no. xxxxi in *Raccolta*. The words within brackets are not in the *Raccolta* text.)

16.

SAVONA: 26 August, 1472.—Domenico Columbus and his son Christopher admit they are the debtors of Giovanni Signorio.

Domenico Colombo, wool-stapler, dwelling at Savona, and Christopher, his son, with the consent of his father, etc., freely declare to Giovanni Signorio, present, etc., that they are bound to him and must give and pay to him one hundred and forty livres in Genoese money, being the price for the sale of 7 quintals of Sorlinis and Biolante wool, etc., at the rate of 20 Genoese livres per quintal.—*Dominicus Columbus lanerius, habitator Saone, et Cristoforus ejus filius, patre consentiente, etc., sponte*

confitentur Johanni de Signorio, presenti, etc., se eidem teneri ac dare et solvere debere libras centum quadraginta monete Fanue; et sunt occasione precii vendicionis cantariorum VII lane Sorlinis et Biolante, etc., ad rationem de libris xx^{ti} Fanue pro singulo cantario. Tomasso del Zocco, Notary.

(Harrisse : *Christophe Colomb* : vol. II., no. xvii. Belgrano and Staglieno : Document xxxxi in *Raccolta*.)

17.

SAVONA: 7 August, 1473. — Suzanne, mother of Christopher and of Pellegrino, and assisted by them, ratifies a sale made by her husband.

Suzanne, daughter of the late Giacomo Fontanarossa de Besagno and wife to Domenico Colombo of Genoa, having appeared before me and before the under-mentioned witnesses knowing and having full cognizance that the said Domenico her husband has sold and alienated or has the intention to sell and alienate a house

belonging to him the said Domenico, situated in Genoa in the street of the Olive tree Gate. . . . freely, after examination and with deliberate intention and full knowledge of the facts, she, Suzanne, for herself and heirs, has approved and agreed and approves and agrees the said sale. . . . Furthermore Christopher and Giovanni Pellegrino, sons of the said married couple, Domenico and Suzanne, who are here present and who have heard and understood and who are fully acquainted with all that precedes and is contained in the present deed, have approved and agreed and do approve and agree and consent to the afore-mentioned sale. . . —*Suzana filia quondam Jacobi de Fontanarubea de Besagno et uxor Dominici de Columbo de Janua constitua in presencia mei notarii et testium infrascriptorum, . . . sciens et perfectam scientiam habens dictum Dominicum de Columbo virum ipsius Suzane vendidisse et alienare velle quandam domum ipsius Dominici sitam in civitate Janue in contrata porte Orivelle . . . sponte, consulte,*

deliberate et eius certa scientia, ipsa Suzana per se et suos heredes annuivit et consensit, ac annuit et consentit dicte venditioni.
Pietro Corsaro, Notary.

(Harrisse : *Christophe Colomb*, vol. II., no. xxii. Belgrano and Stagliano : Document no. li in *Raccolta*.)

It is to be noted that in the original draft of this deed there is a clause, that was subsequently struck out, whereby Christopher and his brother Pellegrino intervene with the consent of their parents: It runs:—
“ Christopher and Giovanni Pellegrino, sons of the said couple Domenico and Suzanne and with the permission and consent of their said parents, present, consenting, and authorizing.” Thus the Notary, after thinking it was well to stipulate that it was with the sanction of their parents that Christopher and Pellegrino convey their consent to the intended sale, judged this formality needless and suppressed it.

IV.—GENOESE STATUTES OF THE COLUMBIAN PERIOD BEARING ON THE DIFFERENT MAJORITIES.

In order to understand the Notarial Deeds which have just been called into notice, it is necessary to know the texts of the legal statutes in force in Genoa at the period, and to which the lawyers had to conform in drafting their deeds. The common law of Genoa, among which are to be found these conditions, have been collected and printed twice during the life-time of Columbus himself under the following title : *Statuta et decreta communis Genuæ*. The first edition is dated 1494, the second 1498, Bologna, 1 vol. fol. There is a third edition published at Venice in 1567. The Statutes composing this collection are of different dates ; but according to a note given by M. Desimoni to Mr. HARRISSE they remained in force until 1589. (HARRISSE : *Christophe Colomb*, vol. I., p. 226, note.)

They are, to a great extent, to be found in the laws which have replaced them, and which constitute the Collection, in Italian, of 1613, (*Degli statuti civili della Serenissima Republica di Genova Libri sei, tradotti in volgare da Oratio Taccone, Genova: 1613, in fol.*) and in Latin of 1663, (*Statutorum civilium serenissimæ republicæ Genuensis Libri sex. Genova: 1663, in fol.*)

Before giving the texts let us remember that Roman Law prevailed at Genoa as at Savona. As is known, among the Romans, paternal authority, which alone here occupies us, lasted throughout life, and in fact never ceased unless by the emancipation of the children whatever might be their age: that is to say, in the absence of this emancipation children could not enter into contracts unless with the consent of their parents. Genoa and Savona restrained this extravagant right by creating, before the full majority of xxv years, several majorities or age limits, each of which enfranchised the child, under certain determined conditions, from the paternal authority.

There were three such majorities :—

That of xvi years for the son engaged in business with the knowledge of the parents and without their opposition ;

That of xvii years for the son who, although not engaged in business, obtained when he required it the support of two relatives or even of two neighbours ; and

That of xviii years for the son who obtained from the magistrate or prince the age dispensation.

In each of these cases the son, although a minor of xxv years, might freely enter into contracts, that is to say without the paternal sanction, provided always that he did not involve his father, in which case the latter's authorisation and consent were necessary.

It is these limitations, restrictive of the paternal authority as in use among the Romans, that governed the Statutes whose essential clauses we are about to reproduce. Let us add that, apart from these exceptional cases, it was the principle or prescription of Roman law that was applicable ; that is to say, the son, although he might

have obtained the Roman and Genoese full majority of xxv years, remained, in theory, subject to the paternal authority. In point of fact, nevertheless, he was enfranchised therefrom, and but few cases can be cited where the principle was rigorously applied.

18.

Paternal Consent necessary for Children of all ages.

“The person of masculine sex above the age of 25 years, who may be under the control of his father or grandfather, cannot contract or enter into obligations without the consent of his father or grandfather :”
Masculus major annis xxv qui sit in potestate patris vel avi non possit contrahere et obligare, nisi de consensu patris vel avi.

(Genoese Statute of 1414 quoted by Desimoni, *Quistioni Colombiane*, in *Raccolta*, p. 33.)

This is the Roman paternal law without any restriction. The children remain under paternal authority so long as they are not emancipated therefrom.

19.

Authorisation unnecessary when the major of 25 years is in business.

“ An individual of the masculine sex, above the age of twenty-five, who is under the control of his father or grandfather, may not contract, bind himself, give a receipt, or execute any other deed, unless it be with the consent of the father or grandfather under whose control he may be, unless this son of the family, above the age of twenty-five, is in business with the permission of his father or grandfather or without their open and public disapproval ; then and in this case the contract and liability will be valid and will bear their effect as though they had been entered into with the authority of the father and grandfather, always, however, with the condition that the father or grandfather be not bound by the said contract :” *Aliquis etiam masculis major annis viginti quinque, qui sit in potestate patris vel avi, non possit contrahere, se obli-*

gare, remittere vel facere aliquid, nisi de consensu patris vel avi, in cujus fuerit potestate. Salvo tamen si talis filius familias major annis viginti quinque, paciente patre vel avo, vel non contradicente palam sive publice negociaretur, tunc et eo casu contractus et obligatio talis valeat et teneat perinde ac si factus esset auctoritate patris vel avi, Ita tamen quod pater vel avus in dicto tali contractu non obligetur.

(*Statuta et Decreta*: 1498. Book III., chap. ii, fol. 35.)

This is the Statute of 1414 modified by a restriction on the father's authority who now may not prevent his son, over the age of 25, from freely contracting if he carries on business openly to the knowledge and with the tacit consent of his parents. It will be seen that the following Statute still further lessens the paternal power by placing the period when commercial majority may be acquired at a lower age. But the other conditions of the old statute remained in force, for they are to be found, almost in identical terms, in the revised edition of the

Genoese Statutes of 1673. Here is the new text:—"Men over the age of 25 who are subject to the authority of their father or paternal grandfather may not bind themselves, make contracts, or be parties to lawsuits unless with the consent of the father or grandfather under whose authority they are placed, but should they carry on business openly or publicly, their father or grandfather tolerating the same or offering no opposition thereto, in that case the engagement or contract would be valid as though it had been made with the permission of the father and the grandfather, provided always that the father or grandfather is not made a party thereto."—*Masculi majores viginti quinque annis existentes in patris, vel avi paterni potestate non possint se obligare, contrahere, nec in Judicio comparere, nisi de consensu patris, vel avi, in cujus potestate fuerint, salvo si negotiarentur palam, vel publicé, patre, vel avo patiente, vel non contradicente, quo casu obligatio, et contractus valeat perinde ac si factus esset cum auctoritate patris, vel avi, dum*

tamen pater vel avus ex dicto contractu non obligetur.

(*Statutorum civilium*: Genova, 1663. Book IV., chap. xx., p. 170.)

20.

Authorisation unnecessary when the major of sixteen years is in business.

“ If anyone has entered into partnership or contracted liability with a person under the age of xxv, but above the age of xvi, with the purpose of trading, the magistrate shall hold this contract to be good and valid, as though it had been made with a major, and the magistrate shall not listen to the plaintiff pleading minority, but, on the contrary, the magistrate shall treat the plaintiff, if the plaint comes before him, as though he had contracted with a major. If the said person under the age of xxv has himself entered into partnership or contracted liability, either for his own profit or for his business, the magistrate shall hold this contract for good and valid, even though the minor have a father or grandfather. And

everyone under the age of xxv, but above the age of xvi, who shall trade or do some business shall be bound by the contracts he himself has made in connection with that business, and may be pursued at law as if he were over the age of xxv years. And the contracts he shall have made for the before-mentioned things shall be held as valid."—*Si quis societatem vel accomendationem fecerit alicui minori annis xxv majori tamen annis xvi causa negotiandi, ipsum talem contractum ratum et firmum habeat magistratus perinde ac si major esset, nec ipsum conquerentem vel lamentantem occasione minoris aetatis audiat magistratus, immo lamentantis magistratus exinde faciat rationem, si coram se lamentatio facta erit, perinde ac si contraxisset cum majore. ¶ Si vero dictus minor annis xxv fecisset contractum de ipsa societate vel accomendatione vel ejus occasione seu de ejus negotiatione, contractum illum firmum et ratum habeat magistratus, etiam si ille minor patrem vel avum haberet. ¶ Et quicumque minor annis xxv major tamen xvi annis in aliqua negoti-*

atione negotietur et mercetur, teneatur de contractibus per ipsum factis occasione ipsarum mercationum et possit conveniri perinde ac si esset major annis xxv. Et contractus super praedictis facti per eum rati habeantur.

(*Statuta et Decreta*: 1498. Book III., chap. xxxvi, fol. 60 *recto*.) With the exception of the last line, M. Harrisse has given the whole of this text. (*Christophe Colomb*: vol. I., p. 229, note.)

This provision, which M. Desimoni rightly considers as a modification in a wider sense of the preceding Statute, carries the commercial majority to xvi years, and, on this point, it abrogates that portion of the former Statute which fixes that majority at xxv years; but it neither abrogates nor modifies the clauses conveying that authorisation is unnecessary, unless the son carries on business with the tacit consent of the father, and that it is necessary, even in this case, when the contract involves the father. This results from a comparison of the texts and the reproduc-

tion of the ancient Statute with some verbal corrections in the revised Statutes. See above No. 19.

M. Desimoni remarks that, at Savona, it was only at xviii years the minor could bind himself in commercial engagements, always, nevertheless, with the restriction that he did business publicly and with the tacit consent of his father. (*Quistioni Colombiane*, p. 34, in *Raccolta*.) It must also be noted that in practice the provisions of this Statute were applicable to all commercial undertakings and not alone to partnerships and limited liabilities; in other words, it was generally applicable to all engagements and contracts which, in either a small or large degree, affected commercial relations.

21.

The major of xvii years cannot bind himself without the authorisation of his father, or, if there be no father, without the guarantee of two relatives.

“If a male minor, of sound mind, over

xvii years of age, or a female of over fifteen years of age, has made a contract, an agreement, a deed of obligation or of liquidation with any person by taking an oath, with the aid and advice of two of their nearest kindred who, if they can be found, will also swear ; or, in their absence, with the aid and advice of two of their neighbours, or even of one relative and of one neighbour, who will swear that they believe the said contracts, deeds of obligation or of liquidation, are made in the interest and not to the detriment of the said minor, every magistrate is bound to consider and hold as good and valid the said contract, agreement, deed of liquidation or of obligation, in such a manner that the said minor cannot demand or receive back complete restitution. Unless the said minor of the male sex or female has a father or paternal grandfather present having the requisite rights, and that they are under the control of one of them ; in that case they may pledge themselves with the authorisation of their father or of

their paternal grandfather, under whose control they may be, and, without further formality or being subject to make restitution, the same engagement will be held to be good and valid, unless it be contracted in favour of the father himself or of the grandfather, for in that case an examination of the affair and of the interest of the minor therein will be required, as also the authorisation of the magistrate himself, otherwise the contract will be null and void in law.”—*Si quis minor masculus sanæ mentis, ex quo compleverit annos decem septem, vel fœmina ex quo compleverit annos quindecim, fecerit aliquem contractum, finem, obligationem, vel remissionem cum aliqua persona cum Juramento præstito, cum et de consilio duorum ex melioribus propinquis suis : qui jurent, si poterunt inveniri, alioquin cum et de consilio duorum ex vicinis eorum, vel mixtim : qui jurent se credere dictum contractum, obligationem, vel remissionem fieri ad utilitatem, non ad lesionem dicti minoris, teneatur quilibet magistratus dictum contractum, finem, remissionem et*

obligationem firmum habere et tenere. Ita quod dictus minor non possit petere vel habere restitutionem in integrum, salvo si dictus minor masculus vel fœmina haberet patrem, vel avum paternum præsentem et idoneum: et esset in potestate alterius eorum: quo casu possint se obligare auctoritate patris vel avi paterni, in cujus ipsorum fuerit potestate, et indistincte absque alia solemnitate vel restitutione ipsa obligatio habeatur firma et rata, nisi ad beneficium ipsius patris vel avi, quia tunc requiratur causæ cognitio et utilitatis ipsius minoris, et auctoritas ipsius magistratus, aliter vero contractus factus ipso jure non valeat.

(*Statuta et Decreta*: 1498. Book III., chap. ii., fol. 35 *recto*.)

This text is considerably involved: it amounts to that a person over the age of xvii years may enter into contracts (in non-commercial matters) with the authority of his father or of his grandfather; and, if neither his father nor his grandfather be present, with the concurrence of two rela-

tives or even neighbours; provided always that the obligation undertaken be not to the benefit of the father or grandfather, in which case the consent of the magistrate is required.

22.

Authorisation is unnecessary to the major of xviii years who had obtained age dispensation.

“Every person over the age of xviii years may make a request for age dispensation before the magistrate, after the magistrate has himself made an investigation as to the age, morals, and good conduct of the said minor from the two nearest and best agnates, if they exist, and, if they do not, from the two nearest cognates; or, again, if neither agnates nor cognates exist, from two neighbours of the said minor who may be the best informed. And if the age dispensation has been granted by any magistrate it shall have the same force and validity as though it had been granted by the Prince.”

Possit quilibet ætatis annorum xviii completorum petere veniam ætatis coram magistratus, habita informatione per ipsum magistratum de ætate, moribus et prudentia dicti minoris: et hac a duobus proximioribus et melioribus agnatis si extant, et, si non extant, a duobus proximioribus cognatis: vel non existentibus agnatis vel cognatis a duobus utilioribus vicinis dicti minoris. ¶ Et si concessa fuerit venia ætatis per aliquem magistratum, perinde valeat et habeatur, ac si esset a principe illa concessa.

(*Statuta et Decreta*: Book III., chap. xxvi, fol. 50, verso).

This statute gives to the person benefiting by it a general right, obtained once and for all, whereas the major of xvii years must in each case have recourse to the assistance that he requires.

CHAPTER II.

**Critical Examination of the Dates assigned
to the Birth of Columbus according
to Columbian Sources.**

We will examine in this Chapter only those dates it has been sought to establish by relying solely on the statements of Columbus himself or of those whose information came directly from him. The Texts referred to are indicated by the number they bear in the Chapter on the Factors of the Problem.

1430.

Columbus leaves Portugal in 1484, his son informs us (No 10), where he had dwelt fourteen years according to his own statement (No. 7). Consequently he arrived there in 1470, and as, according to

Ramusio's Peter Martyr (No. 11), he was forty years old when, having failed at Genoa, he went to make his offers to Portugal, he must have been born in 1430.

This date, which is only attainable by giving to the passage cited from Ramusio an origin it cannot in fact have, cannot be taken into serious consideration. The objections urged later on against the date 1435-1436 apply with still greater force against 1430. No one, except Navarrete, had admitted it, and even he does so with some reservation.¹

1436.

This date is drawn solely from the assertion of Bernaldez (No. 8), that Columbus died at about the age of seventy years, a statement which undoubtedly has great weight since it comes from a truthful chronicler, who was in a position to be well informed upon Columbus, for, besides having known him personally and having

¹ Navarrete: *Viages*, vol. I., p. lxxix.

received him under his roof, he was Chaplain to Diego de Deza, one of the great Navigator's most faithful friends. Nevertheless his expressions lead to the belief that he judged Columbus's age by his looks: now, we know that the admiral had aged very early, and that his hair which in youth had been fair was quite white at thirty.² It is therefore possible and probable that Bernaldez was led astray by the fact that Columbus looked older than his years. However, Oviedo says he was old when he died,³ and we know that in 1505 he was granted permission to ride a mule just on account of his age and infirmities.⁴ Furthermore it has been suggested that instead of seventy (*setenta*) sixty (*sesenta*)

² "Nella sua gioventù hebbe i capelli biondi, benche, giunto che fu a trenta anni, tutti gli divennero bianchi" (Ferdinand Columbus, *Historie*, chap. iii, fol. 7 *recto*). Las Casas expresses himself much the same: "During his youth his hair and beard were brown, but they whitened rapidly after his trials" (*História de las Indias*, Book I., vol. I., chap. ii., p. 43).

³ Oviedo: *História General*, vol. I., p. 80, col. 2.

⁴ Navarrete: *Viages*, vol. II., doc. 156.

should be read. Errors of this kind are not uncommon in manuscripts as may be easily understood.

This date of 1436—or 1435 or 1437—, for in calculations of this kind a greater or less range is always possible, is the one most authors have accepted, and among them we must mention Navarrete, Humboldt, Washington Irving, and Fiske.

It lies under the following objections.

If Columbus was born in 1436, his mother must have then been 20 or 15 years old at least; she would therefore have been born about 1420 or 1415, and as she had a fourth son, Diego, in 1468 and a daughter again after that, she must have become a mother for the fifth time at the age of 55 or 50 at least. Columbus would thus be 32 years older than his brother Diego, and it must have been when he was over 50 that he gained the conquest of Beatrice Enriquez de Arana, and their son, Ferdinand Columbus, born the 15th August 1488, must have come into the world when his father was already

52.⁵ So much for the mother of Columbus: now let us see how the date affects his father. It is established to-day that Domenico was born in 1418 or 1419, for a notarial deed exists, dated 1429, in which it is stated he was then 11 years of age. He would therefore have had his son Christopher at the age of 17 or 18 if the latter were born in 1436.

Finally, if we must place at this date the birth of our Genoese, he was 34 years old in 1470, a year in which we find an authentic legal deed wherein he is described as having completed nineteen years.

1439.

Columbus says that he sailed for 23 years (no. 1), which must be reckoned as passing before his arrival in Portugal. If we deduct these 23 years from the year 1476, which we now know was the year

⁵ D'Avezac: *Canevas*, pp. 19 and 20. M. HARRISSE has made use of the same argument in a very lively manner: *Christophe Colomb devant l'Histoire*, Paris, 1892, p. 39.

that he went to Lisbon, we find it was in 1453 Columbus began sailing, and, as he also says he was then aged fourteen (no. 8), he could only have been born in 1439.

This date is obtained, as has been seen, by one of those numerous combinations to which the different statements of Columbus lend themselves. This is one of the least convincing, for the supposition that Columbus had navigated for 23 years before going to Portugal will not hold together. This date appears to have been first suggested by the learned editors of *Cartas de Indias*, Madrid, folio, 1877, p. 740, col. 2. Señor Paz y Melia has taken up and developed this theory in his Memoir: *Mas datas para la vida de Cristóbal Colón*, published in nos. 23 and 24 of the *Centenario*, Madrid: 1892, vol. III., p. 115.

1445-1446-1447.

In 1501 Columbus reckoned forty years of navigation (no. 5) which had begun at the age of fourteen (no. 8). In 1501 he

was therefore 54 years old, and had consequently been born in 1446 or 1447.

Another calculation : Columbus had sailed for 23 years without a break (no. 1). These 23 years ended with the year 1483 as it was in 1484 he fixed his residence in Spain (no. 10), after which he did not sail again until 1492. Therefore he began to voyage in 1460, and, as in that year he was fourteen years old (no. 8), it was in 1446 he was born.

Yet another calculation : Columbus overruns the seas for 23 years (no. 1). The discussion of his schemes in Spain occupy 8 years (no. 4). In 1500, 9 years had elapsed since he began his discoveries (no. 3). These total 40 years (no. 5), if we add the 14 years he was old when he began to sail, we get 54 in 1500 : consequently he was born in 1446.

These three dates—1445, 1446 and 1447—are all obtained by the same method and have just the same value, for all calculations of this character, when expressed in round figures, allow for a divergence of several

months more or less either way. When, for instance, we say that Columbus was 54 in 1500, his birth might equally well be at the end of 1445 or at the beginning of 1447 according to the period of the year in which he attained his fifty-fourth year. The year 1446 is chosen as a mean.⁶

This date of 1446 sufficiently well agrees with the facts known about the life of Columbus, and it has been found, as will be shown later on, that it was confirmed by inferences to be drawn from the notarial deeds mentioned in the Chapter on the Factors of the Problem. It is the date which finds most favour in the eyes of the

⁶ D'Avezac, who has presented in their most attractive form the arguments based on Columbus's own assertions which tell in favour of the year 1446, admits that the years 1445 and 1447 have also about the same value, but that the empirical law of averages should incline us to accept 1446. "Finally," he says in closing the discussion, "it is for the mean year 1446 that we are entitled to choose, and it was during the course of this year 1446, according to the most reasonable interpretation of his own evidence, that the illustrious discoverer of the West Indies was born." (*Canevas chronologique de la vie de Colomb*, Paris, 1873, pp. 30-31).

greater number of competent critics.⁷ The fact that it is based on the testimony of Columbus himself does not give it any special value, inasmuch as it is in contradiction with other statements made by him. Let it further be observed that, if Columbus was born in 1446, his mother and father preserved the procreative faculty during a quarter of a century. For we know that Diego, Domenico's fourth son, was born in 1468, and that Bartholomew, the third, saw the light in 1460. Pellegrino, who died young, was born before Bartholomew, and Bianchineta, the last of the family, came into the world after Diego. Her birth may, therefore, be placed about 1470. If Columbus was born in 1446, there is thus an interval of 24 years between the births of the first and last children of Domenico and his wife Suzanne. We shall see elsewhere what to think of the inferences to be drawn from the notarial documents.

⁷ See in the Appendix the Bibliographical Table of the various dates assigned to the birth of Columbus.

1448.

Columbus in one place tells us that he entered the service of the Catholic Kings in January, 1486 (No. 2); elsewhere he assures us he was then 38 years of age (the text has 28, No. 6). Thirty-eight years before 1486 brings us to 1448, in which year, therefore, Columbus was born.

This demonstration, which belongs to M. de Lollis, is based on two hypotheses. The first is that in contradiction to the Columbian text of the *rarissime* letter we must read 38 instead of 28. The second is that Columbus speaks, in the phrase where this number is found, of the period when he took service with Spain, which is quite possible though the text does not say it. Others have supposed that Columbus intended to speak of the date of his arrival in Portugal. M. de Lollis finds confirmation of his thesis in the notarial deed of 31st October, 1470 (No. 13) which, accord-

ing to him, establishes that Columbus was born after the 31st October, 1445, and before the 31st October, 1451, in which case he must necessarily have been more than 28 in January, 1486, which demonstrates that the number 28 contained in the *rarissime* letter cannot be accurate, and must, therefore, be corrected by being increased.⁸

1456.

Columbus enters the service of the Catholic Kings when 28 (No. 6), and his son tells us he went to Spain in 1484 (No. 10). He was, therefore, born 28 years before 1484, that is in 1456.

Columbus does not say it was in Spain he took up service when 28 years of age, and his son does not say that this event took place in 1484, he confines himself to the statement that it was in this year his

⁸ Lollis : *Scritti di Colombo*, vol. I. (*Raccolta*), p. 204, note I.

father left Portugal and proceeded to Spain. Columbus himself declares, in very explicit terms, that it was in January, 1486, that he took service with Spain (No. 2). We cannot, consequently, deduce from these data that Columbus was born in 1456.

Another argument is : In December, 1492, Columbus says his record of sea-service runs to 23 years (No. 1), a service which elsewhere he tells us began at the age of 14 (No. 8) ; he was, therefore, born 37 years before December, 1492, which makes his natal year to be 1456. But Columbus nowhere states that these 23 years of sea-faring life immediately preceded his great voyage of 1492 ; nor can we even suppose he wished to convey this impression, because he himself admits that he spent the six years immediately preceding that voyage on land.

One more method of arriving at this date is : At the end of 1500 Columbus reckons 17 years spent in the service of Spain (No. 4) : that is to say this service began

in 1484, and as he was then of the age of 28 years (No. 6) it was in 1456 that he was born.

These three arguments belong to Peschell⁹ who has developed them with much learning but without success. Besides the reasons already alleged, which completely destroy their force, it must further be remarked that if Columbus was born in 1456 he could not have completed his nineteenth year in 1470, as he is alleged to have done by an authentic legal document (No. 13). Nor would he have been 60 or 70 years old in 1506, but only fifty, and Bernaldez could not have said of him that he had died at a ripe old age.

1458.

Columbus takes service in Spain the 20th January, 1486 (No. 2) being then of the age of twenty-eight (No. 6): he was, therefore, born 28 years before the 20th

⁹ Peschel : *Das Ausland*, 1866, no. 50, and in *Geschichte des Zeitalters der Entdeckungen*, Stuttgart, 1877, p. 76.

January, 1486, which accordingly takes us to the year 1458.

The critical examination that has just been made would appear to demonstrate that all the dates that have been considered likely for the birth of Columbus, drawn solely from Columbian sources, that is to say, from what he has said himself or statements traceable to him, are alike absolutely unacceptable. They all have the same origin, they all rest on equally authentic statements, having exactly the same value and being all, nevertheless, contradictory. Undoubtedly there are some which are so opposed to what is likely that they may be dismissed without further discussion ; but the fact that there are others which are plausible, and which may be reconciled with what we undoubtedly know of the life of Columbus, is in no sense a guarantee for their accuracy, and several of the arguments come into this category.

How are we to make a choice among these? Why should we eliminate one

rather than another when they all proceed from the same source, and all raise equally the same serious objections ?

What is extraordinary therein, and what does open the door to all manner of conjectures, is that such remarkable differences should exist among Columbus's assertions. Was it his memory which failed him, or did he deliberately express himself in such a manner as to hoodwink us each time he had to say something which might put us in the way of discovering his real age ? This latter supposition appears so unlikely that we hesitate to adopt it. Yet how otherwise can we explain—unless by deliberate intention—that a man who has so often spoken of the number of his years at certain periods of his life has never made mention of the year of his birth, nor the age he was at the moment he was actually speaking ?

Whatever explanation may be offered for this singular fact, we must conclude that the information coming from Columbus alone, far from clearing up the difficulty of determining the date of his birth,

tends only to further embroil the question and compels us to seek elsewhere for the material necessary to solve that problem.

Let us see if we can find it in the legal parchments of the lawyers of Genoa and Savona, referring to him but not coming from him.

CHAPTER III.

**Critical Examination of the Dates usually
assigned to the Birth of Columbus
according to Notarial Deeds.**

The dates we are about to consider are drawn from different sources to those which gave us the information we have already investigated. They come from authentic documents, from notarial deeds (the roll of which is enumerated in the Chapter on the Factors of the Problem), legal documents referring either to Columbus himself or to members of his family.

We have already explained, but it is well to repeat, how criticism may draw profit from these deeds for the research we are making. The laws of Genoa and Savona, the towns which were the birth-place of the Columbus family, where the

deeds in question were drafted, recognized four kinds of majorities : those of 16, 17, 18 and 25 years, whereby, in a number of cases, the liberty of action of individuals who had attained to one or other of them was in certain cases restricted within fixed limits. It is, therefore, at times possible to infer from the tenor of some of these deeds that the persons mentioned therein had either attained or had not attained to such and such a majority at the date borne on the documents in question, and thus we arrive approximately at their age.

If, for example, an authentic deed proves the participation of Columbus to a transaction in which he could not legally have taken part before he had attained the full majority of 25, without the sanction of his parents, one may conclude that at the date of this deed he had ~~not yet~~ attained to his full majority. And if there exist several deeds of this nature, as is the case, we may, by a process of comparison, arrive at circumscribing, within sufficiently narrow limits, the period when he must have

reached that majority, and this method will give us, within a few years, the date of his birth.

But, in order to be effective, this method of arguing presupposes two things:—firstly, that the law did really forbid, under the conditions stated, what it is said to have forbidden; and secondly, that the notarial deeds, cited as evidence, say in fact what it is alleged they do say.

This being clearly understood, we shall proceed to lay bare the principal theses authors have maintained in order to show, after the data thus obtained, that Columbus was born at such a date, or, to put it more exactly, between such a date and such another.

M. Desimoni's Argument.—We begin with the thesis of M. Desimoni, who, in his quality of Genoese lawyer, is particularly well informed on the legal aspect of the question, and whose views upon the subject have been largely followed.

This learned lawyer informs us that Columbus was born between the 25th

September, 1445, and the month of November, 1447. He cannot have been born before the first of these dates nor after the second, inasmuch as on the 25th September¹⁰ and the 31st October, 1470, and on the 26th August, 1472, he signs documents with the sanction of his parents, thus proving that on those dates he was yet under 25 years of age, and that consequently he was born less than 25 years before the date of the first of these documents, that is to say, after the 25th September, 1445.

On the other hand, on the 7th August, 1473, with his younger brother Pellegrino, he freely enters into an engagement which neither he nor his brother could have undertaken, without the sanction of their parents, unless they had both attained their great majority of 25 years, and this

¹⁰ M. Desimoni writes throughout "25th September," and we repeat his own words ; but it is evident he intends to refer to the deed of 22nd September. This would not, however, in any way alter his argument. (See chap. i, no. 12).

carries back the birth of Columbus before the month of November, 1447, for, being the elder of the two, he was at least ten months older than Pellegrino.¹¹

Having obtained this first result, M. Desimoni seeks among the data supplied by Columbian sources confirmation of his theory and some more precise information.

¹¹ M. Desimoni establishes this point in the following manner. After having shown that for three different deeds dated 25th September 1470, 31st October of the same year, and 26th August 1472, Columbus needed the sanction of his parents, while on the 7th August 1473 *he did not need it*, our critic says:—"Therefore we have here four documents, in three of which Christopher Columbus binds himself with the consent of his father; consequently he is less than 25 years of age. In the other deed, that of 7th August 1473, *he binds himself freely*, consequently he is at least of full 25 years of age, which would suppose that he was born at least before the 7th August 1448. But in the same deed of 1473, we see appear and intervene, also freely, the younger brother of Columbus, John Pellegrino. He therefore was also major. If with Harrisse we suppose an interval of ten months between the births of the two brothers, Christopher would have been born before November 1447, and therefore he could not have been major before the month of November 1472; this he was not yet on the 26th August of the same year, a date on which his father authorizes him to bind himself. All this perfectly agrees with the date we have assigned to the Admiral's birth in placing it between the years 1445-1447." (Desimoni: *Quistioni Colombiane*, in *Raccolta*, p. 231).

He finds both in one of the ingenious combinations obtainable from Columbus's varying statements ; it is the same one of which Spotorno, Robertson, D'Avezac and others have made use, and which has been laid bare in a previous chapter :—Columbus goes to sea when fourteen ; in 1500 he had spent 40 years sailing, and he died six years later, that is to say at 60 years of age. He was, therefore, born in 1446, a date which falls naturally within the interval fixed by M. Desimoni, between 1445 and 1447.¹²

We have seen in a preceding chapter what may be thought of this last argument, drawn from the assertions of Columbus in direct opposition to others made also by him, and which consequently are of equal

¹² I have collected the clearest of these passages (of Columbus) and I find that the admiral in one place declares that he began to navigate at fourteen years of age, and in another, in 1500, that he had navigated for forty years ; he had therefore at that moment lived fifty-four years, and as he died six years later, in 1506, that would mean he was then sixty years old, and had been born in 1446." (Desimoni: *Quistioni Colombiane*, in *Raccolta*, p. 18).

weight ; it is, therefore, unnecessary to go over the same ground again. As regards the fundamental argument of M. Desimoni, the argument to which, evidently, he attributes most importance, it is erroneous. The fact that Columbus was authorized by his parents to sign in 1470 and 1472 does not necessarily imply that he had not yet reached the full majority of 25 years. With M. Desimoni we do think that such was the case, but it is not by the verification of an authorisation having been given that it is shown. There are two reasons why paternal authorisation might in this case have been necessary, no matter what may have been the age. The first is that, even though a major of 25 years, the son could not in all cases commit himself without the consent of his father or grandfather,¹³ unless it were established

¹³ See no. 18 in the Chapter on The Texts. "The legal majority," says M. Desimoni, "under the Genoese Republic was also, as with the Romans, at full 25 years of age." (*Quistioni Colombiane*, p. 33). No doubt custom and commercial usages must have introduced at Genoa certain restrictions to the exercise of this right, and

that he carried on business publicly with the tacit consent of those relatives.¹⁴ The second is, that in the three deeds in question the father of Columbus was bound, and that, in this case, these deeds would have been null if he had not intervened, even though his son were fifty years of age and openly engaged in commercial affairs. The Statutes are very explicit on this point.¹⁵ The fact that Columbus was authorized in 1470 and 1472 proves nothing, therefore, with regard to the age he might then have had, because that authorization was necessary to him whether he were major or minor. M. Desimoni's reasoning on the subject of the deed dated 7th August, 1473, is no better. He lays it down, in

perhaps M. Desimoni is right in saying that in such a town as Genoa the severity of the paternal authority was chiefly of a theoretical nature. Nevertheless it had assumed a legal character, and this fact suffices to leave us in doubt respecting the cases where the Statute was applied.

¹⁴ See above, in chapter I, the Statute to which reference is made, no. 19.

¹⁵ See the same Statute in chapter I.

fact, that Columbus intervenes in this deed without having received paternal sanction, which is itself doubtful, and he infers from this uncertain fact that at this date Columbus was major, although the Statutes provide for cases where the minor may contract without authorisation. Because the deed of 7th August, 1473, does not contain a distinct statement that the two sons of Domenico and Suzanne were authorized by them, we are not to conclude that they were free to dispense with such authorisation, and that they had not received it, for it follows from the very nature of the deed itself that it is with the consent of their parents they intervened, for it is at their request and for their benefit that they do so.¹⁶

It may, furthermore, be asked if a formal authorisation was necessary for a major of xvi trading on his own account, as was assuredly the case with Columbus, who, in 1473, had certainly passed his twenty-first

¹⁶ Later on we return to this argument.

year,¹⁷ in order that he might take part in a deed of the nature of the document of 7th August, 1473, conveying a purely formal consent in favour of his father, who was, moreover, himself present, and who was in no way bound by its contents.

These two objections completely overthrow M. Desimoni's carefully built up argument.

Mr. Harrisse's Argument.—We pass now to Mr. Harrisse's theory; he is the authority who, more than any other, perhaps, has contributed to the prevailing

¹⁷ See chapter I., no. 20, where we say that the dispensation granted to a minor of XVI practically extended to a number of things. M. Desimoni, who is also of this view, gives the opinions of Italian legal authorities according to which "the contract entered into by the minor (evidently above sixteen years of age) was valid in so far as it bound himself, and that the son still under the paternal authority might freely dispose of things in which his father had no usufruct, that is to say, in a general manner, of the things in which the father is not interested, without the consent of the said father." (*Quisitioni Colombiane*, p. 34). This was the case with regard to the 1473 deed wherein Columbus only binds himself. In the three deeds of 1470 and 1472, cited by M. Desimoni, the father being interested had naturally to intervene; there was no need for him to do so in the 1473 deed which in no way concerned him.

opinion that it may be inferred, with certainty, from certain documents left us by the notaries of Genoa and Savona, that Columbus at the date recorded by these documents had or had not attained to his full majority of twenty-five years.

In his great work on Columbus, published in 1884, the eminent critic makes the following reasoning:—

Columbus was born after the 24th May, 1446, and before the 20th March, 1447, because on the 25th May, 1471, he binds himself with the sanction of his parents, which proves he had not then attained to 25 years of age, and because on the 20th March, 1472, he witnesses a will, a thing he could not have done if he were not of the age of twenty-five.¹⁸

This reasoning is founded on two con-

¹⁸ "The Will of 20th March 1472 and *à fortiori* the guarantee given the 26th August following authorize the supposition that in the spring of that year he (Columbus) had reached the period of majority. Christopher Columbus would therefore be born between the 25th May 1446 and the 20th March 1447." (Harrisse: *Christophe Colomb, son Origine*, etc., vol. I., p. 240).

testable points. The fact that the mother of Columbus, on the 25th May, 1471, called in the aid of her neighbours, without having recourse to her son, does not necessarily imply that he was then a minor; for, on the one hand, he might have been absent; and, on the other, the legal texts applicable to the case are not sufficiently explicit to warrant such a statement; and that this is so Mr. HARRISSE himself admits.¹⁹ In the same manner, the fact that Columbus witnesses Monleone's will does not prove he had then reached his full majority, inasmuch as a minor might witness acts of that nature; it is again Mr. HARRISSE himself who shows this.²⁰ Confronted by

¹⁹ Speaking of the deed of May 1471, and of those of March and August 1472, Mr. HARRISSE says:—"They do not absolutely prove that Christopher Columbus was at least 25 years of age in May 1471, nor in March and August 1472; but neither can we also conclude from them that on these dates he was still a minor." (*Christophe Colomb*, etc., vol. I., p. 238).

²⁰ "We cannot infer from the Will of Nicolo Monleone that Christopher Columbus was at least 25 years of age in March 1472." (*Christophe Colomb*, vol. I., p. 227). Some authors have thought that he must have been at least a major of 21 years in order to act as a witness.

these two objections, this first argument of Mr. Harrisse collapses like that of M. Desimoni.

After the discovery of the document dated 31st October, 1470, wherein it is stated Columbus had then completed nineteen years, a fact which upsets all the previous calculations, but does not shake Mr. Harrisse in his conviction that this document, like the others, only proves that Columbus had then attained a certain majority without having yet reached the other, the author of *Christophe Colomb* made out another case which may be thus stated :

The 31st October, 1470, Columbus was more than 19 years old but was under 25. He cannot, therefore, have been born before the 31st October, 1445, because, otherwise, he would have been 25 on the 31st

But M. Desimoni, who rejects this opinion, says that he is not acquainted with any text requiring more than 14 years in such cases, and he quotes in support of his view the formulary of the Notary Viceti:—*Formularium instrumentarum Testamentarum, procurarum*, etc., Genova, 1672. See *Quistioni Colombiane*, p. 36.

October, 1470; nor can he have been born after the 31st October, 1451, otherwise he would not have been over 19 years old on the 31st October, 1470.²¹

This theory is in contradiction with the other. In the latter case Columbus might have been born on the very morrow of the 31st October, 1445, the 1st November for instance, for he would still have required one day, the 31st October, 1470, in order to reach the full majority of 25. In the former case he could only have been born after the 25th May, 1446, because had he been born before that date he would have been major on the 25th May, 1471, when, according to Mr. HARRISSE, he was still a minor. Furthermore, if Columbus was over 19 years old in October, 1470, and was 25 in March, 1472, as Mr. HARRISSE

²¹ "As in Roman and Genoese law there were several majorities, the last of which was fixed at the age of twenty-five years, Christopher Columbus was born between the 31st October 1446 and the 31st October 1451. We incline towards a date nearer 1446 than 1451." (*Christophe Colomb devant l'Histoire*, Paris, 1892, 8vo, p. 36). Mr. HARRISSE has written "October 1446," but it is clear he intended to put "October 1445."

alleges he was in his first theory, it must necessarily have been between these dates that he attained his full majority. He must, in consequence, have been born between the 31st October, 1445, and the 20th March, 1447, and not between the 31st October, 1445, and the 31st October, 1451. This interpretation of the document of October, 1470, does not, moreover, agree with that given to the other documents. For, finally, if Columbus was 25 years old in November, 1472, as M. Desimoni establishes after Mr. Harrisse himself, his age on the 31st October, 1470, was not merely 19 years but 22 years, and, in that case, the lawyer would have stated the fact. The same remark also applies to the deed of 20th March, 1472, a date when Columbus is supposed to have been 25 years of age.

Conclusions :— It is unnecessary to mention the opinions of other authors who have sought to fix the date of the birth of Columbus by the debateable interpretation, exposed above, of documents drawn from the archives of the notaries of Genoa and

Savona. They introduce no fresh element into the discussion, and their argument follows the lines of MM. Desimoni and HARRISSE; the dates put forward are sometimes different, but the reasoning thereon does not differ and can only lead to disputable conclusions. In order to reach results that shall be unquestionable, in order to affirm that the documents in discussion show that Columbus could only have been born in 1446 or in 1447, or between the years 1445 and 1451, it is first necessary to begin by proving that the age conditions mentioned as indispensable for participating in the various deeds which form the basis of the argument are well defined, are never subject to exceptions, and are incapable of a double interpretation.

Now it happens that this point is very obscure and is of extreme difficulty in deciding to-day. We have indeed the texts of the law which confirms the assertion that in general a minor could not freely contract himself, that is to say, unless

he had the consent of his parents ; but these texts are not so explicit but that they may be interpreted in different ways and even made to say what they do not say. Because a minor was entitled to enter into a contract as early as the age of sixteen or eighteen with the consent of his parents or the magistrate, it does not follow that this consent was unnecessary to him at a more advanced age, for we have seen that it was requested even after 25 years of age.²² We have also seen that a minor of fourteen, it is M. Desimoni himself who states a case in point, may act as witness to a will.²³ The presence of Columbus, therefore, as a witness to the deed of 20th March, 1472, does not prove that he had then reached his majority.

²² See chapter i, text no. 19. Mr. HARRISSE, who also quotes this Text, adds the commentary :—"this perpetual tutelage of the son was general in Italy." (*Christophe Colomb*, vol. I., p. 233). How, after this, can it be asserted that because Columbus was authorized on the 26th August 1472 he was necessarily under 25 years of age ?

²³ Desimoni : *Quistioni Colombiane*, in *Raccolta*, pp. 36-37. Mr. HARRISSE had already made the same observation.

Mr. HARRISSE, who has discussed this question with great learning, has shown that at least two of the documents quoted prove nothing ; and, after reading his work, one is compelled to admit, notwithstanding his arguments, that the legal provisions invoked are subject to so many exceptions and are capable of so many readings as to make it impossible to draw from them any conclusions that will be in agreement with one another relative to the year of the birth of Columbus.²⁴ It should furthermore be stated that it is very difficult in our day to say how the lawyers of the period understood and applied these laws. How many legal provisions in our own time are either ill understood or wrongfully applied by

²⁴ See the chapter : *Date de sa naissance* in Mr. HARRISSE's *Christophe Colomb*, vol. I., pp. 223-241. A clear proof of the uncertainty reigning with respect to the scope of the legal provisions relative to the age limits established by the Statutes of Genoa and Savona is that two critics so well versed in the matter as MM. HARRISSE and DESIMONI cannot agree upon the interpretation to be given to the deed of the 26th August 1472. Mr. HARRISSE thinks Columbus was then major, M. DESIMONI thinks he was not.

judicial officers! How, then, can we be absolutely certain that under given circumstances it was because Columbus was or was not twenty-five years of age that he was or was not a party to certain legal documents? How many different reasons, impossible to fathom now, may have accounted for the presence or absence of Columbus at the signing of these documents!²⁵ The deductions, drawn from these documents, whereby some think they can put forward that Columbus was born in 1446, in 1447, or between one of these dates and 1451, should therefore be considered simply as likely indications the value of which may be weakened or des-

²⁵ M. Desimoni, one of the most competent critics who have dealt with this matter, makes the following remark, which shows that the very Texts on which the legal provisions were based were themselves not absolutely fixed: "It is known that these Statutes—those of Genoa—were not general, but merely constituted exceptions to Roman law, and that moreover many things had crept therein by custom, which had by degrees been formed through the development of commerce and civilisation, without having been inserted in the laws before later times." (Desimoni: *Quistioni Colombiane*, in *Raccolta*, p. 31).

troyed by other indications with which they are not in agreement. From uncertain premises no certain conclusion can be drawn.

CHAPTER IV.

True Birth-date of Christopher Columbus.

1451.

State of the Question:—We have shown what objections may be raised against the various dates that have hitherto been assigned to the birth of Columbus. We have seen that not one, not even that of 1446-1451 which has appeared acceptable to so critical a judge as Mr. HARRISSE, can be entertained otherwise than as a mere hypothesis in default of one more plausible. It may even be added that, if this date in particular has been taken into serious consideration, it was because the arguments whereon it was thought to be established were themselves not submitted to a sufficiently rigorous examination.

We propose to show that, among these same documents whence have with difficulty been drawn unsatisfactory indications of a date which stern criticism must unhesitatingly reject, there is one which does yield to us the solution of the problem, and allows us to state as a fact that Columbus was born in 1451.

The first person who saw that the document to which we refer pointed to this solution was Mr. Richard Davey, author of an interesting article on the youth of Columbus, published in London in 1892. Mr. Davey had been sent to Rome by Sir Augustus Adderley, Commissioner for the West Indian Section of the Colonial Exhibition, in order to gather documents relating to the American Colonies, and, during his researches, he became interested in facts bearing on Columbus. In the above-mentioned article he confined himself to putting forward that Columbus was born in 1451,²⁶

²⁶ "From another and most important document recently discovered by the Marquis Staglieno in the *Atti Notarilli* of the City of Genoa, Christopher Columbus is

without, however, developing his theory or substantiating his view which, in fact, did not attract attention, and I am not aware that it was again taken up by anyone until Señor de La Rosa brought it before the Congress of Americanists in 1901, when he also affirmed that Columbus was born in 1451, a statement one can find repeated in his Memoir on the Problems bearing on Columbus extracted from the minutes of the said Congress.²⁷ In our turn we pro-

stated to be nineteen years in 1470. He was therefore born, we may presume, in October 1451, precisely during the time of his father's residence in the house, now declared officially to have been his birthplace, and situated hard by the noble old gate of St. Andrea." (Richard Davey : *The Boyhood and Youth of Columbus*. —*The National Review*. London, October 1892). Lower down in his article Mr. Davey gives an English translation of the principal clause of this document.

²⁷ "Columbus has purposely been made out older than he was in order to be able to explain his imaginary voyages and other legends ; he was born at Genoa, and not at Savona (in spite of certain documents), in 1451, probably on the 25th July, Saint Christopher's day. This date is all important, and, once determined, all the rest is capable of easy explanation. M. Harrisse's hesitation between 1446 and 1451—at bottom he really agrees with us—comes from his not having seized the true meaning of the municipal laws of Genoa of the XVth century on majorities, of which we have made a study. (Ed. 1498)."

pose taking up the question and showing that MM. Davey and de La Rosa were right in assigning 1451 as being the date of the birth of Columbus.

The 31st October, 1470, Document and the phrase: nineteen year old major.—The document which justifies this conclusion is a notarial document known to all who have interested themselves in the date of the birth of the celebrated Navigator since its publication in 1887. It is the document before mentioned, drafted at Genoa the 31st October, 1470, by the notary, L. Ragio, wherein Columbus is described as the son of Domenico of the full age of nineteen years: *major annis decemnovem*.²⁸

It would seem that this expression was susceptible of only one interpretation, and that nothing could be found therein beyond what was conveyed by the text itself, namely

M. Gonzalez de La Rosa: *La solution de tous les problèmes relatifs à Christophe Colomb*, etc. Extracted from the *Compte Rendu au Congrès international des Americanistes* held in September 1900, Paris, Leroux, 8vo, p. 19.

²⁸ See the document in the chapter on the Factors of the Problem: The Texts, no. 13.

that the person mentioned therein, Columbus, was more than nineteen years of age. Nevertheless, MM. Desimoni and HARRISSE, to whom the document was communicated, and even M. Staglieno himself, have judged otherwise: they have considered that the phrase *major annis decemnovem*—literally “major of nineteen years”—meant not only that Columbus had passed his nineteenth year, but that, moreover, it indicated that he was not yet twenty-five years old. In other words the phrase *major annis decemnovem* meant for them: more than 19 years old but not yet 25.²⁹

In expressing this opinion these eminent critics start from the fact, mentioned above, that the Statutes of Genoa of the period recognize several majorities each one of which was limited by certain restrictions, and they suppose that the notary had only

²⁹ “The expression used here means that Columbus had attained the majority of nineteen years and not yet that of twenty-five.” HARRISSE: *Christopher Columbus and the Bank of St. George*. New York, 1888, 4°, p. 89, note 4. See also the same author’s *Christophe Colomb devant l’Histoire*, Paris, 1892, p. 36.

to specify the majority which had been attained. Thus, when the lawyer mentions a majority of 16, 17, 18 or 25 years, he intends only to convey that the individual to whom this majority is attributed enjoys the legal right to perform the act recorded in the document the said individual is actually executing. For instance, major of 18 years would mean not that the person is 18 years of age, but that he has attained the 18 year majority, that is to say he has acquired the right to exercise the privileges conveyed by that majority, not that one may infer therefrom that the person in question was only 18 years of age ; he might be 19, 20, 21, and even 24, but not 25, because, in the last case, the lawyer would have stated that he had that majority and not the eighteen year old majority.

Is this theory, which is perhaps sound in certain cases, applicable where the notary mentions a number of years which does not correspond to any one of the four majorities established by the Statutes, as is the case with regard to the number we are now dis-

cussing? Let us grant that the expression "major of 25 years" may mean only an age limit, that is to say a legal capacity, and that the individual in whom the notary recognizes this legal age qualification might possibly be very much older than twenty-five. But, would it be the same if the lawyer recorded that he was major of 26 years, major of 27 years, major of any number of years beyond the full legal majority of 25? That is the question. A closer examination of the texts will show what we ought to think on the subject.

The legal provisions applicable to the case.—Of what does the document of the 31st October, 1470, treat? Of an undertaking entered into jointly by Domenico Columbus and his son Christopher to pay to a certain Bellesio a sum of 48 lire and 13 soldi in Genoese money remaining due to him for a piece of wine he had sold them. What was the notary's duty in this case? He had to satisfy himself that Columbus had the legal qualification to undertake such a liability; that is to say, he had to

find out if, from the point of view of the written law or custom of Genoa, he were in the conditions required to make his act of juridical effect.

We have seen above that at Genoa paternal authority, as understood by the Romans, was weakened by certain Statutes which created various majorities or age limits, under which a son, within stipulated conditions, might bind himself without the consent of his father. If Columbus, when he appeared before the Notary Ragio to admit his debt towards Bellesio, had not been accompanied and authorized by his father, it would have been the lawyer's duty to ascertain if he came within the conditions required by law in order that one of the Statutes, restricting paternal authority, was applicable to him ; namely : if he were major of XVI years and engaged in business to his father's knowledge and without his opposition ³⁰ ; if he were major

³⁰ See in the chapter of the Factors of the Problem, The Texts, no. 20, extract from the Statutes of Genoa in force in the time of Columbus.

of xvii years and, although not in business, provided with the authorization of his parents or neighbours³¹ ; if he were major of xviii years and provided with the dispensation of age, a magistrate might grant him³² ; or, finally, major of xxv years, and whether, in any one of these cases, the document Columbus was about to sign engaged the responsibility of his father without the latter's knowledge.³³

But the lawyer was not called upon to deal with any of these points, because the father's presence and participation in the deed simplified matters and suppressed all legal difficulty ; and it, therefore, only remained for him to establish the identity of the person who was about to execute the deed, and this was done more particularly by stating his age. It might have been done by inscribing in the document that Columbus had attained one of the majorities

³¹ *Ibid.*, no. 21.

³² *Ibid.*, no. 22.

³³ *Ibid.*, nos. 19, 20 and 21.

fixed by Statute; he might, for instance, have said that Columbus was a major of 16, 17 or 18 years' standing, which would only approximately have indicated his age, but would, in this case, have been quite sufficient owing to his father's presence. Had the notary so expressed himself, it might have been right to think that this mention of a particular majority in no way prejudged the question as to how many years Columbus might have had beyond the actual majority indicated.

But the notary proceeded otherwise. Instead of saying Columbus had reached one of the majorities foreseen by the Statutes, he describes him as being a major of XIX years: *major annis decemnovem*. Why? In the theory we are here contesting it is held to mean he had passed the age of XIX, but had not yet reached that of XXV. In order, however, that this interpretation should be valid, it would be necessary to assign some reason for this mention of XIX years attributed to Columbus, yet we find none.

If, according to law, the age of XIX de-

terminated a legal limit under which certain actions might not be validly performed, as we have seen was the case with the ages of XVI, XVII and XVIII, one might possibly give to the expression this special significance. But such is not the case ; there is no mention of any legal majority or limit of age at XIX in the ancient laws of Genoa. Moreover, if we admit that some legal provision may have indicated that certain actions might not be performed before the age of XIX was reached, this provision would not be applicable in the case we are discussing, because the law imposed no limit of age whatever in the matter of undertaking to pay a debt with the consent of the father. Therefore the reason it is sought to find for the mention in the document that Christopher was XIX years of age does not exist. On the other hand all is quite naturally explainable if one sees in the document only what is said therein. Columbus is : *major annis decemnovem, i.e.* had attained to the full age of XIX. We have here a clear, precise, and definite state-

ment, and there is no need to seek for any further meaning than what is conveyed by that phrase : that is to say, the actual age of the person to whom reference is made. Columbus, declares the lawyer, was XIX years of age on the 31 October 1470, the day on which he appeared before him. In other words he was not then 2, 3, 4, or 5 years more than any special majority fixed by law, or less than some other legal majority, but exactly of the age of XIX, that is to say, he was not yet XX. In fact it is clear that if Columbus was then XX, XXI, XXII, or more, and not actually XIX, the notary would have mentioned the fact ; and, instead of penning the words "a major of XIX years," he would have written, "a major of XX, XXI, XXII years or more," and this could only be read in its literal sense without any juridical meaning, inasmuch as a legal majority of XX, XXI, etc., no more existed than did a legal majority of XIX.

A Major of.... or at the Age of... are synonymous.—The comparative examination of a sufficient number of notarial docu-

ments similar to the one in question confirms the conclusion that being a major of so many years, or being so many years of age, meant the same thing. Other formulas are only found in circumstances where, the age question being unimportant, the notary does not aim at precision. He then makes the word *about* follow the mention of the age. Thus, in the apprenticeship indenture of Giovanni, the son of Antonio Columbus,³⁴ it is said he was of the age of XIV or thereabouts *vel circa*, because the question of age having no importance for the validity of the deed there was no need to be more precise. One may also quote the apprenticeship indenture of Antonio Leverone,³⁵ wherein it is stated he was about XII years of age: *ætatis annorum XII in circa*. But when the lawyer expresses himself with precision, whatever may be the age, he makes use of the formula, a major of so many years, that is to say of so many full

³⁴ 4th June 1460. *Raccolta . . . Documenti*, no. 16.

³⁵ 1st April 1439. *Ibid.*, no. 2.

years of age. Thus in the case of Jacopo (Diego), Columbus's brother, who claims to have attained his first majority,³⁶ it is said in the deed: a major of xvi years, and in order to show that the object is to clearly establish that he has that age he is made to swear to the fact; *major annis xvi et juravit*. Had he been older than xvi evidently he would have so stated.

The case of Cressio furnishes another example of the similar employment of the word major.³⁷ The deed states that he is a major of xxv (*ut asserit*), and in support of this declaration he is made to add that it is of public notoriety that he carries on his own affairs without his parents having to intervene. It would seem to refer to some person whose appearance did not bespeak him xxv, or whose age might be called in question, and the lawyer shows that in addition to the declaration of the interested party there are facts in corrobo-

³⁶ 10th September 1484. *Ibid.*, no. 68.

³⁷ 27th March 1451. *Ibid.*, no. 13.

ration of it. Had Cressio exceeded the great majority by several years the lawyer would have registered the fact, as is done in the case of Zerega, quoted by Desimoni. Zerega declares that he is a major of 40 years, which means that he was of the full age of forty; in other words, 15 years over the great majority of 25.³⁸ Otherwise the phrase could have no meaning. M. Desimoni cites another document wherein an individual is described as a major of twenty-two years.³⁹ What other sense can be attributed to the phrase except it be that the person in question has certainly the legal majority of sixteen, or seventeen, or eighteen, inasmuch as he is twenty-two years of age? This scholar, whose conclusions are however different from ours, does not hesitate to say that, in his opinion, even the phrase: *major annorum XVI*—and *à fortiori* that of “a major of XIX years”—is but a routine expression of the lawyers, and

³⁸ Desimone : *Quistioni Colombiane in Raccolta*, p. 37

³⁹ *Loc. cit.* p. 37.

does not indicate any age limit.⁴⁰ If it did indicate one, if it meant that the major of XIX years had passed the first majority of XVI but had not yet attained the succeeding majority, which would only determine his age within a certain limit, how are we to explain the same phrase when instead of XIX we read XXII or XL ?

A Major of XIX means aged of XIX years

⁴⁰ "The authors who have interested themselves with Columbian matters have often been checked by expressions wherein the number of years is mentioned : as for instance, *major annorum XVI*, or *major annorum XVIII*, which signify of sixteen years' majority and of nineteen years' majority ; and they have asked themselves whether there was not a legal limit, different in each state or profession, with regard to contracting a liability. For our part, outside the limits we have already mentioned (those indicated above), we find other examples which appear to show that the declaration of age, in most cases, would appear to have been a general and customary formality with the lawyers, in order to substantiate the identity of the contracting parties. Thus, we see Pontalino Bavarello, a nephew of Christopher Columbus, declare his age as twenty-seven without being able therefrom to draw any conclusion respecting an age limit. In other documents we find mention of *major annorum XXII*, of 22 years' majority, without being able to see therein any allusion to an age limit. Again we see that in 1508 a John de Zerega says he is a major of 40 years and a public merchant, whereas it would have sufficed for him to have said that he was of full majority." (Desimoni : *Quistioni Colombiane*, in *Raccolta*, p. 37).

fully accomplished.—Must we not now yield to the evidence and admit that the expression—*a major of so many years*—is but a manner of expressing the actual age of the person to whom it is applied? We have therefore the right to conclude that, when in the deed of 31st October, 1470, Columbus is declared to be a major of XIX years, it simply means that he at that time had lived and accomplished XIX years but had not yet reached his twentieth year. The lawyer employs this formula to declare that the witness is in order inasmuch as he is XIX years old, that is to say, three years more than the small majority of XVI, which was the legal majority required under the circumstances.

The deed of August, 1473 (No. 17), we are told, is antagonistic to this conclusion, inasmuch as if Columbus were only XIX years old in October, 1470, he could not have been XXV in 1473. That is quite evident, and were it definitely established that on the 7th August, 1473, Columbus was really XXV, our argument would fall to the

ground. But such is not the case. It is only *supposed* Columbus was xxv at that date because it is also *supposed* he must have been of that age in order to execute that document, a supposition which is very far from being established. There is no reason to think the minor of xxv years, who was at liberty to contract and incur liability in not a few cases without the leave of his parents, had not the right to give a purely formal consent to the sale his parents were effecting. The objection that he required, in order that this consent should be valid, the sanction of his parents is puerile, for this sanction in fact results from the very nature of the document itself to which his parents themselves were the principal parties. It would have been absurd for the notary to have inscribed in the deed that Columbus was authorized by his parents to authorize them to do what they were about doing. It is not in spite of his parents Columbus participates in this deed; it is at their request; it is on their behalf he does it. He was therefore as

well authorized as he could be, and there was no need for the notary to insert a clause to the document stating a fact that was self-evident from the document itself.

Let it also be carefully observed that if, as it is contended, Columbus, who was the oldest member of the family, was, with his younger brother Pellegrino, twenty-five years old on the 7th August, 1473, he must also have been of that age on the 26th August, 1472, for there is but an interval of 11 months and 12 days between these dates. For in order that he could have been a minor on the 26th August, 1472, on which date he requires the consent of his parents (No. 16), he must have been born only ten or eleven months before Pellegrino, which, though possible, would have been an extremely rare and most improbable event, for it is a very generally accepted fact that after the nine months spent in child-bearing the woman requires several months' rest before conceiving again.

Thus the omission in the document dated

7th August, 1473, of all mention that Columbus was authorized by his parents to sign, in no way proves that he was not authorized, nor is it evidence that he had passed the age at which such authorization was not required. An omission of this nature, susceptible of a most natural explanation, cannot in any way destroy or even weaken the effect of the most precise and deliberate wording of the document of the 31st October, 1470, wherein we read in the plainest language that Columbus had then completed his nineteenth year. At that date had he been 22 years old, as would have been the case were he 25 in 1473, the notary instead of writing "major of XIX years" would have written "major of XXII years" as he has done in similar cases, one of which, as we have seen, is actually quoted by M. Desimoni himself. The case of Zerega, also mentioned previously, who is described as a major of XL years, is another example equally applicable to the circumstance. These examples — they are far from being the only ones — demonstrate we

must unhesitatingly set aside the opinion that, in the documents of the Genoese lawyers of the XVth Century, the phrase "major of so many years" invariably means that the person to whom allusion is made is not under the age mentioned, but, possibly, may be older. *Major annis decemnovem* should not, therefore, be translated by "major of XIX years," which, moreover, has no sense, for there was no such majority recognized by the laws of Genoa, but by the phrase "XIX years of full age," which, for reasons fully alleged above, means "over XIX years of age but under XX years." From this it follows Columbus was born, not between the years 1445 and 1451, but exactly in the year 1451 itself, or, at the very earliest, within the months of November or December of the year 1450.⁴¹

⁴¹ If Columbus were born on the 30th October 1451, he would have been 19 years and one day old on the 31st October 1470. If he were born in January 1451 he would have been 19 years and 10 months in October 1470; but it may be he was born in the last two months of 1450, as in that case also he would not yet have attained his

Conclusions. — Is the supposition that Columbus was born in 1451 in contradiction with assertions made by Columbus himself? Undoubtedly it is with respect to some, but not more, nay even less, than the suppositions put forward by others to resolve the problem. The statements Columbus made bearing on his age at different periods of his life, or the use he had made of his time, are contradictory, and however they may be combined they can neither be made to agree with one another or with the ascertained dates of his life. Let us, therefore, take the date of 1451 as being the year of his birth, and, without seeking to make it agree with all his statements, which would be impossible, let us see how it fits in with well-known facts of his life, and with other indications suggested by considerations of quite a different kind.

We are not acquainted with the year of

twentieth year in October 1470. In calculations of this nature there must always be a margin of some months more or less.

the marriage of Columbus's father ; but we do know Domenico Columbus was born either in 1418 or 1419,⁴² and we have some information as to the dates of the birth of his third and fourth sons, Bartholomew and Jacopo (Diego). Bartholomew declares in 1512 that he had then passed his fiftieth year.⁴³ If by that we are to understand, as seems probable, that he was not yet fifty-one, he was born in 1461. Jacopo (Diego) is mentioned in a deed of 1484 as being then of full sixteen years of age.⁴⁴ However this phrase may be rendered in this case it must always, at least, signify that Diego was then not less than sixteen ; he was, therefore, born in 1468. We are not certain that Bianchinetta, Domenico's daughter, was his last child, though everything tends to that supposition, and we may admit, without fear of being mistaken,

⁴² Belgrano and Staglieno : *Documenti in Raccolta*, no. 1.

⁴³ Pleitos de Colón, vol. I., p. 182.

⁴⁴ Belgrano and Staglieno : *Documenti in Raccolta*, no. 68.

that at the earliest she was born in 1469 or 1470. The belief that Columbus was born in 1451 perfectly agrees with these *data*, for, in that case, he would have seen the light some twenty years before his sister. This is already a sufficiently wide interval between the first and last born of the same father and mother, and it is not reasonably permitted to increase it without proof. By asserting Columbus was born before 1451 this interval is increased. If he were born, for instance, in 1446 he was at least 23 or 24 years older than Bianchinetta; 22 years older than his last brother, Diego; and 14 or 15 years older than his third brother, Bartholomew. This is certainly possible, but highly improbable; and, in the absence of definite evidence to that effect, we are entitled to hold our belief.

Other remark : Domenico's elder brother, Antonio, was at the latest married in 1445, for he had a son in 1446. In order that Columbus also could have been born in 1446 it was necessary that the elder and younger brothers should be married in the

same year, and that each should have his first-born at the same time : a thing that is quite possible, but is almost as improbable as that a woman should retain her fecundity for more than twenty years, as must have been the case if Columbus was born before 1450.

If, on the other hand, Columbus was born in 1451 all the chief events of his life naturally dovetail between this date and that of his death. It is in 1465—or thereabouts—at the age of fourteen, as he tells us (No. 18), that he takes to the sea for his nautical education, and it is during this apprenticeship, which did not oblige him to go very far from home, nor to be absent for long periods, that he reappears under the paternal roof in 1470, 1472 and 1473. It is in 1474 or 1475, as may be demonstrated, at the age of 24 or 25, that he embarks on his first important voyage, namely, to Chios. It is in 1476, as may also be demonstrated, when 26 years of age, that he lands for the first time in Portugal where he does not remain. It is

in 1477, as he asserts himself, that he goes to Iceland. It is at the end of this same year, or in the first month of 1478, that he takes up his residence in Portugal and there really begins his great career. He was then 28 years old, and he himself says it was at this age he first offered his services.⁴⁵ During the following seven years he marries, makes his different voyages to Guinea, and enters into relations with King Joao II. It is at the end of 1484, as his son asserts, or at the beginning of 1485, as Las Casas reports, that he goes to Spain, and it is on the 20th January, 1486, as he says, that he enters the service of the Catholic Kings, or considers himself as being engaged by them.⁴⁶ He was then 37 years of age, and it is after six years of supplications, in June, 1492, as he informs

⁴⁵ See above, chapter i., no. 6. The phrase is ambiguous ; it states that Columbus was 28 when he offered his services without adding to whom. If he speaks of Spain, as the context would denote, the statement is false. It is true if it relates to Portugal.

⁴⁶ Columbus's *Journal* or *Log-Book*: 20th January 1493. Navarrette : *Viages*, vol. I., p. 137.

us himself, that he obtains his request. He was therefore 41 when he discovered America, and 56 when he died in 1506 having already the appearance of an old man.

In fact, of all the views put forward respecting the date of the birth of Columbus, only two can stand against discussion; namely, the one which maintains he was born in 1446 or 1447, and the other which retards his birth until 1451. Objections may be made to either, but fewer can be urged against 1451, than against 1446-1447. Preference should be given to 1451 because this date is fixed by a notarial deed which is sufficiently explicit, and also because, side by side with this written proof, we have the logical proof that, were Columbus born before 1450 or 1451, there would be an abnormal difference of age between him and the other children of his parents. Even were we only to see in the selection of 1451 an hypothesis similar to the others put forward to solve the problem of his birth, we ought to accept

it in preference to the others, inasmuch as it pre-supposes less exceptional conditions, and by that fact alone unites in its favour the greater probabilities.

But, and we say this without hesitation, we cannot consider as hypothetical a date on behalf of which so many excellent reasons can be urged, and which has in its support an authentic document whose precise meaning cannot be misread unless we go out of our way to have recourse to suppositions which cannot in any way be justified. If logic has not lost all its rights, the fact that Columbus was born in 1451 is as solidly established as many other events which have become historical, and which no one has ever been bold enough to question. Therefore we think we are only putting forward a proposition based on arguments acceptable to the severest critics when we allege we have proof that Columbus in 1470 had not yet reached his twentieth year, and consequently that he was born in the year 1451.

BIBLIOGRAPHY.



IN the first Chapter of this Monograph we have given the exact wording of the texts which constitute our only sources of information as to the probable date when Columbus was born. It remains for us to add here, for the reader's information, a list of the works wherein these texts have been utilized, and wherein are to be found the very different and conflicting conclusions drawn therefrom.

Most of the authors who have written on the life of Columbus have naturally given a date for his birth, and, were we to draw up a complete bibliography of these works here, it would amount to drawing up the bibliography of Columbus himself :

an undertaking which would be carrying us too far afield.

We, therefore, confine ourselves to the mention of those works which have dealt with this question in a special manner ; but this short general bibliography is followed by a table containing all the dates which have been assigned to the birth of Columbus, with a reference to the works wherein they are to be found, together with the names of the authors who have either suggested or accepted them. This Table will show the anarchy which prevails in the opinions formed, and still being formed, as to the period when the revealer of the New World first saw the light of day.

I. Works containing the Texts which serve to determine the Date of the Birth of Columbus.

COLUMBUS (CHRISTOPHER). The Writings of Columbus, where the most important of these texts are to be found, have been several

times collected ; but of these collections the only two that have a real value in the eyes of serious critics are the following :—

NAVARRETE (Don Martín Fernández de). *Colección de los viages y descubrimientos que hicieron por mar los espanoles desde fines del siglo xv.* Madrid : 1825-1837, 5 vols., 4to.

The first three volumes of this important collection contain the Journal, Letters and other Writings of Columbus then known. Other writings have since been found, but none of these can be used for throwing any light on the date of the birth of the great Navigator. The first volume of Navarrete's Collection has been translated into French under the title : *Relation des quatre voyages entrepris par Christophe Colomb pour la découverte du Nouveau Monde . . . Traduit de l'Espagnol par E. de Verneuil et De La Roquette.* Paris : 1828, 3 vols., 8vo.

An excellent translation enriched with numerous notes by the translators and other scholars.

LOLLIS (Cesare de). *Scritti di Cristoforo Colombo publicati ed illustrati da Cesare de Lollis.* Rome : 1892, 3 vols., fol.

This work, which forms the first part of the great collection *Raccolta Colombiana*, published by the Italian Government, on

the occasion of the Fourth Centenary of the discovery of America, has been carried out with the greatest care by a man who was thoroughly competent for the task. The first two volumes contain all the texts known as coming from the hand of Columbus, each text being preceded by a critical commentary. The third volume gives facsimiles of all the autographs of Columbus at present known, each facsimile being faced by a modern transcription.

COLOMBO (Don Fernando). *Historie del S. D. Fernando Colombo Nuovamente di lingua Spagnuola tradotte nell' Italiana dal S. Alfonso Ulloa.* Venice: 1571, 12mo.

An Italian translation from the Spanish text which it would appear Las Casas had had in his hands, but which has remained unknown to everyone else. The authenticity of this work has been the cause of many discussions; there is no doubt that the original manuscript was by the son of Columbus, who died in 1539; but it is equally certain that the translator and Italian publishers made both alterations and additions in the work. The date of Columbus's birth is not to be found in it, but it contains fragments taken from some of his notes and writings, and several indications indirectly bearing thereon.

LAS CASAS (Bartolomeo de). *Historia de las Indias* Madrid : 1875, 5 vols., 8vo.

This is the fundamental work for all that relates to Columbus whom the author, when a young man, had slightly known, and of whose papers he became, for a while, the custodian ; he gives numerous extracts from these documents. Written about 1553, Las Casas's work was not published till our own day.

BERNALDEZ (Andrès). *Historia de los Reyes Catolicos* Seville : 1870, 2 vols., 8vo.

Bernaldez knew Columbus, and, alone among his contemporaries, he records the date of the death of the great Navigator.

MARTYR (Pietro). *Sommario dell' Historia dell' Indie occidentali cavato dalli libri scritti dal Sig. Don Pietro Martire Milanese. In Ramusio : Terzo Volume delle navigationi* Venice : 1553.

This work is, indeed, from Martyr, but the passage on the age of Columbus, in Ramusio's version, is an interpolation.

BELGRANO AND STAGLIENO. *Documenti relativi a Cristoforo Colombo e alla sua famiglia raccolti da L. I. Belgrano e M. Staglieno*. Rome :

1896, 1 vol., fol. It forms the first volume of the second part of the *Raccolta Colombiana*.

This volume contains all the notarial documents gradually gathered in Italy, since the 17th century, bearing on the Columbus family. Inserted in order of dates these precious documents each bear a number, they are preceded by a long critical introduction. Before the publication of this volume M. HARRISSE had united a great number of these documents, and they form Appendix A of his *Christophe Colomb*, Paris, 1884, 2 vols., 8vo.

II. Works and portions of works bearing on the date of the Birth of Columbus.

D'AVEZAC. 1873. *Canevas chronologique de la vie de Christophe Colomb. Année véritable de la naissance de Christophe Colomb, et revue chronologique des principales époques de sa vie.* Étude critique lue à l'Institut en 1873. Paris: 1873, 8vo., pp. 64.

This Memoir was first published in the *Bulletin de la Société de Géographie de Paris*, July and August, 1872. There is a separate edition enlarged by an Appendix of five

pages. It is the first complete work on the subject and has never been surpassed except for those portions which have been modified by fresh discoveries.

HARRISSE (Henry). 1884. Date of the Birth of Christopher Columbus, in his *Christophe Colomb*. Paris: 1884, 2 vols., 8vo, vol. I., pp. 223-241.

Mr. HARRISSE has discussed the question with great learning, and he chiefly relies on the documents of the Notaries of Genoa and Savona, only a few of which were known to D'Avezac. Mr. HARRISSE has frequently returned to the same subject, notably in the following works:—

Christopher Columbus and the Bank of St. George. New York: 1888, 4to., pp. 4 and 84.

Cristoforo Colombo e il Banco di S. Giorgio. Genoa: 1890, fol., pp. 14 and 145, note 5.

Christoph Colomb, les Corses et le Gouvernement français. Paris: 1890, 8vo.

Christophe Colomb devant l'Histoire. Paris: 1892, p. 36, and note 58.

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SANGUINETTI. 1891. *Anno della nascita di Cristoforo Colombo*. Note B of the Appendix to his *Vita di Cristoforo Colombo*. Genoa: 8vo., pp. 294-306.

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DESIMONI (C.). *Quistioni Colombiane* in the *Raccolta Colombiana*, part II., vol. III.

The first chapter of this excellent work is chiefly devoted to this question.

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HUMBOLDT. 1837. Epoch of the Birth of Columbus in his *Examen critique . . .* vol. III., pp. 352-354. See also vol. I., pp. 109 *et seq.*

MARKHAM. 1892. Date of the Birth of Columbus, note to his *Life of Christopher Columbus*. London: 12mo., 1892, pp. 13-15.

III. Table of the different dates assigned to the Birth of Columbus with the names of the Authors and Works wherein they may be found.

(The works are classed according to priority of date assigned.)

1430.

NAVARETTE. 1825. *Viages*, Madrid, 3 vols., 4to., vol. I., p. lxxix. French edition, vol. I., pp. 182-3.

Navarette, however, only puts forward this date tentatively.

1433-1434.

CASTELAR (E.). 1892. *História del Descubrimiento de America*. Madrid, 8vo, p. 57.

1435.

CAMPI (Pietro Maria). 1672. *Discorso storico circa la patria e la nascita di Cristoforo Colombi scopitore del Mondo Nuovo. Di Pietro Maria Campi, Canonico della Cattedrale di Piacenza*. A dissertation at the end of the same author's *Historia ecclesiastica di Piacenza*. Piacentia : 1662, 3 vols., fol., vol. III., pp. 221-257.

CAMPE. 1800. *Histoire de la découverte de l'Amérique.*

There are many editions of this work.

IRVING (Washington). 1828. *History of the Life and Voyages of Christopher Columbus.*

The original London edition says: "about the year 1435 or 1436," vol. I., p. 5. In the following editions there is only "about the year 1435," vol. I., p. 8, Putnam's edition, New York, 1892. The first edition does not contain an appendix on the age of Columbus which is to be found as Appendix 4 in later editions. It is also wanting in the two French editions.

MONTEMONT (A.). 1852. *Christophe Colomb* in his *Histoire générale des Voyages*. Paris, Bry. 4 vols., large 8vo, vol. III. "From 1435 to 1436."

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1435-1436.

MACKIE (Paul). 1891. *With the Admiral of the Ocean Sea*. Chicago, 12mo, p. 347. "At the age of 61 years."

RICARD (Mgr.). 1892. *Christophe Colomb*. Tours, large 8vo, p. 10.

RASTOUL. 1892. *Christophe Colomb*. Paris and Lyons, 8vo, p. 15.

1436.

BERNALDEZ (A.). 1493-1513. *História de los Reyes Catolicos*, ch. 131. Seville: 1870, vol. II., p. 83.

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NAVARRETE. 1825. *Colección de Viajes*. Madrid, 5 vols., 8vo. vol. I, pp. lxxx-lxxxi. French edition, Paris, 3 vols., 8vo, vol. I., pp. 184-186.

PRESCOTT. 1837-1838. *History of the Reign of Ferdinand and Isabella*. Philadelphia: 1872, vol. II., pp. 114-115.

HUMBOLDT. 1836. *Examen critique*. Vol. I., p. 92, vol. II., pp. 109-113, vol. III., pp. 352-354.

ROSSEUW ST. HILAIRE. 1852. *Histoire d'Espagne*. Vol. VI., p. 98, note.

DESCHANEL (E.). 1853. *Christophe Colomb*. Paris, 18mo, p. 13.

CHARTON (Ed.). 1855. *Voyageurs anciens et modernes*. Paris, 4 vols. See *Christophe Colomb*. Vol. II., p. 76.

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1441.

CHARLEVOIX (Father). 1730. *Histoire de l'Ile Espagnole de St. Domingue.* Paris: 2 vols., 4to. Vol. I., pp. 259-260.

PRÉVOST (The Abbé). 1754. *Histoire générale des Voyages.* Paris: 16 vols., 4to. Vol. XII., p. 141. In 12mo edition, vol. XLV, p. 400.

TIRABOSCHI. 1805-1813. *Storia della Letteratura, &c.* Florence: 8vo, vol. VI, p. 245.

CANTU. 1838. *Storia Universale: Chronologia Universale.* In certain editions of this work the years 1435 and 1438 are given.

LAVALLÉE (Jos.). 1850. *Espagne depuis l'expulsion des Maures.* Paris: 8vo, p. 2.

CASANOVA (The Abbé). 1889. *La Vérité sur l'Origine et la Patrie de Colomb.* Ajaccio: 8vo, p. xxx.

THE MUNICIPAL AUTHORITIES OF CALVI, who, at the very spot where they claim Columbus was born, have affixed a plate bearing the legend: Here Cristopher Columbus was born in 1441.

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FOURNIER. 1894. *Histoire de la vie et des voyages de Christophe Colomb*. Paris: Didot, 8vo, p. 4.

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CLADERA. 1794. *Investigaciones Historicas*. Madrid: 4to, p. 38.

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Milan: 8vo. French edition, Paris: 1824, pp.
89-91.

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MOIREAU. 1894. *L'Amérique* in *Histoire Générale du IV^e Siècle à nos Jours*. Paris: vol. IV., p. 905.

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GAFFAREL. 1892. *Histoire de la Découverte de l'Amérique*. Paris: 2 vols., 8vo. Vol. II., pp. 6-8.

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In this remarkable work the learned German geographer does not give explicitly the date of the birth of Columbus, but at p. 16 he says: "on the 30th October, 1470, Christopher Columbus made a legal declaration that he was of the age of 19 years," which shows that he also is of opinion that the lucky Genoese was born in 1451.

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