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Historian: First European in California Was Spanish, Not Portuguese

LOS ANGELES – A Canadian historian appears to have resolved the mystery of the birthplace of the first European explorer to set foot in California, a man claimed by both Portugal and Spain.



Until now, the consensus has been that Juan Rodriguez Cabrillo was born in the northern Portuguese town of Cabril, around 40 kilometers (25 miles) from the Spanish border.

But historian Wendy Kramer says she has found that the 16th- century explorer was born in Palma del Rio, which is in southern Spain.

The most surprising aspect of Kramer’s discovery is that it was Cabrillo himself who confirmed his place of origin, in a sworn deposition before a court investigating the disappearance of a consignment of gold that left Veracruz, Mexico, in 1532 aboard a ship bound for Seville.

Cabrillo, a resident of Santiago, Guatemala, was a passenger on the ship carrying the gold that colonial administrator Gabriel de Cabrera dispatched to Spain.

“In two documents he states his name (Juan Rodriguez Cabrillo) and says he is a native of Palma de Micergilio (as Palma del Rio was then called),” Kramer told EFE, reading from the materials written in 16th-century Spanish.

The manuscripts have been digitalized and are available to the public on the Spanish Archives Web site, of Spain’s Education, Culture and Sports Ministry, whose catalogue keeps growing as historical documents are scanned and uploaded to the Internet.

Kramer found the information “by accident” as she was looking for new data on Gabriel de Cabrera, at the time a more relevant figure than Cabrillo, then still a decade away from leading the California expedition from which he would never return.

“There is no other Juan Rodriguez Castillo,” she said. “There were not

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that many residents” in Santiago.

News of Kramer’s finding didn’t sit well with the Portuguese community in Southern California, who hold an annual festival in Cabrillo’s honor.

“It probably bothers some people,” said Idalmiro da Rosa, president of the organizing committee, while downplaying the importance of the new information about Cabrillo’s origins.

“We are not 100 percent sure that it is the same person,” Da Rosa said, adding that, in order to dispel all doubts, it would be necessary to find a birth certificate.”