

Was Juan Rodriguez Cabrillo from Spain?

Testimony from 1532 may be "smoking gun" settling historical debate between Portugal and Spain



By [Peter Rowe](#) | 1:09 p.m. Sept. 14, 2015



A Canadian researcher may have solved a nearly 500-year-old mystery, to the delight of California historians and the dismay of San Diego's Portuguese community.

Ancient documents unearthed by Wendy Kramer show that Juan Rodriguez Cabrillo, whose 1542 landing in San Diego was Europe's first foray into California, was Spanish.

"This," Cabrillo National Monument historian Robert Munson said of Kramer's discovery, "could be the smoking gun that proves where Cabrillo was born."

If so, it will settle a centuries-old debate between Portugal and Spain, who have vied for the honor of claiming Cabrillo as their countryman. The conquistador has been a shadowy figure, and historians had hunted in vain for documentation of his birthplace.

“In all the articles I’ve written about Cabrillo,” said University of San Diego history professor Iris Engstrand, “I note we have no proof of where he was born.

“Now, we sort of do.”

Last month, Toronto’s Wendy Kramer logged into the online General Archive of the Indies. Examining digitized documents from a 1532 lawsuit involving the theft of New World gold from a Spanish vessel, Kramer was stunned by the testimony of a witness.

He was identified as Juan Rodriguez Cabrillo, “natural de” — native of — Palma de Micergilio.

A town in the province of Cordoba, Spain.

“Oh my God!” Kramer remembers exclaiming. “Look who was on the boat!”



Wendy Kramer

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Her find was hailed as major historical breakthrough by Munson, Engstrand and Harry Kelsey, a Huntington Library research scholar and biographer of Cabrillo.

“Right now,” Munson said, “all the circumstantial evidence points in the right direction. This is the most exciting thing to happen to me in 40 years.”

Yet the news disturbed Idalmiro Manuel da Rosa, president of San Diego's Cabrillo Festival, whose 52nd edition will be held Sept. 26-27. In the local Portuguese-American community, the annual event celebrates a historic icon they believe was a Portuguese navigator.

Kramer's evidence, da Rosa said, must be carefully evaluated.

"I've requested that the documents be sent to us so we can turn them over to the Portuguese government," he said. "We definitely want to get to the bottom of this."

As da Rosa noted, other clues have supported Portugal's claims. A 1615 book by Antonio de Herrera y Tordesillas, for instance, described Cabrillo as a Portuguese navigator.

Yet Herrera's source for that claim is unknown, while Kramer's research is rooted in the Archive of the Indies, a storehouse of records from Spain's colonial era. Following Kramer's lead, other historians are scanning the 483-year-old documents — and finding them persuasive.

Munson, for instance, noted that Cabrillo testified to his Spanish roots while under a sacred oath.

"These people lived in an era when invoking the name of God is putting your immortal soul in danger," he said. "There would be no reason for Cabrillo to perjure himself on this."

Chicken scratch

Wendy Kramer, 59, admits that her specialty — colonial Guatemalan history — is not the sexiest topic.

"Most of my friends' eyes glaze over," she said.

Yet she's been entranced by this topic since the 1970s when, as a college student, she traveled to Central America to improve her Spanish. Intending to stay one year, she lingered for four, swept up in the tales of Spanish adventurers creating a new society in 16th century Guatemala. That society was shaped by mountains of paperwork — grants, deeds, contracts — copied by clerks using an intricate calligraphy.

"It looks like a study in chicken scratch," Munson said.

Not to Kramer, though. In Guatemala and later as a graduate student in Spain, she mastered Hispanic American paleography, the art of reading this arcane writing.

"She was very good at paleography, and I was not," said Harry Kelsey, who met Kramer when both were researching in Seville's Archive of the Indies. "That's where she still shines today."

Her work resulted in a Ph.D. from England's Warwick University and a 1994 book, "Encomienda Politics in Early Colonial Guatemala, 1524-1544: Dividing the Spoils" (Westview Press). Fascinated by the first generation of conquistadores in Guatemala, she set out to write brief biographies of each, working alphabetically.

Last month, arriving at the letter C, she was investigating Gabriel de Cabrera. The Archives' online index led Kramer to three cases involving this lawyer, who had been given the task of conveying to Spain two chests of gold — taxes owed to the crown, as well as private individuals' funds. He and this treasure boarded a ship in San Juan de Ulúa — present-day Veracruz — and sailed for Cadiz by way of Cuba.

When the vessel landed in Havana, Cabrera's journey was interrupted.

"Some of the gold that he was taking to the crown was stolen while he was on the boat," Kramer said. "These guys get hauled off to jail, and authorities start putting together this big case."

The trial dragged on through hearings in Havana, Tenerife, Cadiz and Seville. Among the witnesses testifying were his fellow passengers from the voyage — including Juan Rodriguez Cabrillo, born in Palma de Micergilio.

Is this the same man now honored by a national monument at the tip of Point Loma? In separate documents, "Juan Rodriguez de Palma" is linked to personal details — conquering the Aztecs with Hernan Cortés, marrying a Spanish woman — that agree with what historians already know about the explorer. Moreover, his presence in Spain in 1532 is well documented.

"It is pretty clear," Kelsey said, "that the man who made this statement is the same Juan Rodriguez Cabrillo."

'Just a fluke'

Cabrillo made landfall on what is now Point Loma on Sept. 28, 1542. At this moment of triumph, he was 43 or 44 — his exact birth date in 1499 is unknown — and had little more than three months to live.

After a brief stay in San Diego Bay, his expedition sailed north and charted the California coast beyond San Francisco. Sailing south, his flotilla stopped in the Channel Islands, where Cabrillo suffered a broken bone. He died weeks later, possibly the victim of gangrene.

Or was he killed by mutinous crew members? Like so much of Cabrillo's story, his death is shrouded in mystery. No one knows where he was buried, although a possible headstone was found on San Miguel Island.

"It's marked JR with a small 's'," said da Rosa, noting that the Portuguese spelling of the explorer's name is "Rodrigues," rather than the Spanish "Rodriguez."

In fact, the Portuguese version of the name — Joao Rodrigues Cabrilho — is inscribed on one plaque at the national monument. Another plaque, at the park's 19th century lighthouse, uses the Spanish name: Juan Rodriguez Cabrillo.

The park's statue of the explorer, perched high above the Pacific, was commissioned by the government of Portugal in 1939. "The Portuguese government has proof that he was Portuguese," da Rosa said. "And in Portugal, there is a town, Cabril, and it is assumed he was born near there."

Still, historians have been unable to reach a consensus on Cabrillo's birthplace. In a 1978 KPBS radio segment on Cabrillo, San Diego State University history professor James Moriarty argued that he must have been Portuguese; another guest, University of San Francisco history professor Michael Mathes, favored the Spanish side.

Why hadn't they known about Cabrillo's 1532 testimony, where he is identified as a Spaniard?

"It was buried in a document that had nothing to do with him," Kramer said. "It was just a fluke that I found this."

Yet this find has added credibility because it is in the 16th century equivalent of a court reporter's official transcript. Moreover, Kramer has found three separate documents where Cabrillo testifies; in two of these occasions he identifies himself as a native of Palma de Micergilio. In the third case, he calls himself "Juan Rodriguez de Palma."

"You Cabrillo-in-Spain deniers will say it's not the same guy," Kramer predicted. "But this is him."

In fact, da Rosa cautioned against a rush to judgment. "I would really have to read really carefully the contents of this document," he said. "Let's not just pinpoint bits and pieces and leave it at that."

Munson agreed, to a point. Historians, he said, should seek birth records in the Spanish town of Palma del Río — the current name of Palma de Micergilio.

"You have to pin this down to a gnat's eyelash," he said. "We've got a nice little circumstantial case going here and if it turns out to be true, it's a gold mine."

While thrilled by this discovery, Kramer understands why some might be disappointed.

“I feel bad for the Portuguese,” she said. “I really like them. I like the Spanish, too, but I have a real weakness for Portugal.”