

Columbus did not bring syphilis back to Europe, research shows

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One of the St. Polten skeletons
Photo: Medical Univ. of Vienna

Traces of the STD's effects are found on 14th-century Austrian skeletons, scientists say.

(HealthDay)—It's a common notion that after discovering America, Columbus and his crew then brought back the scourge of syphilis to Europe.

But there's now conclusive evidence that the theory simply isn't true, and [syphilis](#) was already present in the Old World long before Columbus set sail in 1492.

Researchers at the Medical University of Vienna, Austria, say they have discovered evidence of congenital syphilis—the type of illness passed from a mother to her fetus—in skeletons buried as early as 1320 in the cathedral square of St. Polten, Austria.

The investigators, from the university's Center for Anatomy and Cell Biology, cut away extremely thin slices of bones and teeth of the skeletons to examine under the microscope.

The teeth provided especially good [evidence](#) supporting syphilis infection, said a team led by Karl Grossschmidt and Fabian Kanz, of the university's department of cell and developmental biology.

"We found so-called Hutchinson's [teeth](#) with central notches and converging edges and mulberry molars, which are characteristic signs of syphilis," the authors explained in the study.

"The discovery clearly refutes the previous theory," Grossschmidt and Kanz wrote. They say that further research, using high-tech molecular biological testing and other methods, will be used to confirm the findings.

The 14th-century skeletons examined in the research have plenty of neighbors. The researchers reported that excavations have already recovered more than 9,000 skeletons from St. Polten cathedral square, the largest number unearthed from any archaeological site in Europe.

The study was published online Nov. 18 in the *Journal of Biological and Clinical Anthropology*.

More information: The U.S. National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases has more about [syphilis](#).

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