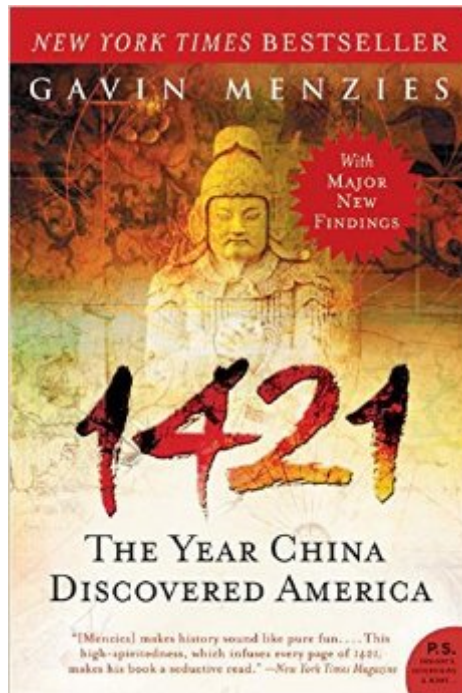


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1421: The Year China Discovered America



Synopsis

On March 8, 1421, the largest fleet the world had ever seen set sail from China to "proceed all the way to the ends of the earth to collect tribute from the barbarians beyond the seas." When the fleet returned home in October 1423, the emperor had fallen, leaving China in political and economic chaos. The great ships were left to rot at their moorings and the records of their journeys were destroyed. Lost in the long, self-imposed isolation that followed was the knowledge that Chinese ships had reached America seventy years before Columbus and had circumnavigated the globe a century before Magellan. And they colonized America before the Europeans, transplanting the principal economic crops that have since fed and clothed the world.

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Customer Reviews

Gavin Menzies is a charming, seductive, inventive story teller, but his book is just an elaborate literary hoax, and belongs on the fiction list. Gavin claims he has real, tangible evidence. Not true. Just check out for yourself some of the sources he cites. His own sources do not support the claims he makes. For example, at pp 201-2 (hardcover) Gavin writes of a pulley "for hoisting sails" found on the beach at Neahkahnie, Oregon, about 60 miles south of me. I drove down there and spoke with the curator of the Tillamook County Pioneer Museum. He had talked with Gavin in 2002 and Wayne told Gavin the pulley had already been carbon dated (in 1993) to 1590; and, the wax was beeswax for candles, prized and common cargo for the Spanish trade galleons that traveled between the Philippines and the west coast of North America, on a regular basis, between 1564 and 1815. The pulley was from one of those Manila galleons. In his book (page 520) Gavin lists as a source "Tales

of the Neahkahnie Treasure", prepared by the Nehalem Valley Historical Society Treasure Committee, 1991, published by the Tillamook County Pioneer Museum. It clearly states (p5) the beeswax, not as Gavin states "paraffin wax" a hydrocarbon product, had been carbon dated to 1681. Further, a pollen study of the beeswax had revealed its source was northern Luzon in the Philippines where there was a certain variety of shrub the bees visited for pollen. Gavin ignores the inconvenient facts, hides them from the reader, and writes as if he is just waiting for the lab to confirm the finding of some possible real Chinese evidence. It's not possible, as Gavin well knows, the lab work has long since been done and it does not fit his time frame. For another example consider the Bimini road story.

The subject of this book, the Chinese exploratory voyages of the early 15th century, is an interesting one, and questions remain as to exactly how far they got and what they did. Unfortunately, there is little factual information in this book that is not to be found in other sources, and the novel claims are poorly substantiated. All too often, the "facts" cited are wrong, the nature of the argument Menzies means to make is unclear, or the evidence that he claims to exist is not actually produced. Let me illustrate from some of Menzies' linguistic arguments. He claims that the Squamish language (which he mistakenly locates on Vancouver Island rather than on the coast of the mainland of British Columbia) contains no less than forty words that are identical with Chinese words. He does not cite any of the Squamish words and cites only three Chinese words. Not one of the three alleged Chinese words actually occurs in Chinese. At another point, he cites the fact that there is a village in Peru whose people speak Chinese. Aside from the questionable source of this claim, even if true, what would it prove? To constitute evidence that the Chinese had visited Peru prior to Columbus, he would have to show that the people in this village had spoken Chinese hundreds of years ago. He does not even assert this, much less provide evidence of it. Menzies' own account of his research techniques leaves one gasping with incredulity at his incompetence. He claims to have inspected a stone inscription in the Cape Verde Islands in a language unknown to him. Thinking that it might be from India, he sends a photograph of it to the Bank of India. The Bank responds that the inscription is in Malayalam.

I was not expecting to believe all the claims in this book, though I was intrigued by the possibility of unexpected new findings about the age of exploration. The Europeans were clearly not the first to sail great distances and discover new lands. You would have once been dismissed as a crackpot for claiming that the Vikings reached the Americas 500 years before Columbus, but that's now

accepted history. There's also plenty of proof that the Chinese were regularly sailing to the Middle East and East Africa centuries before Europeans could even leave their own shores. But this book, claiming that the Chinese momentarily and influentially circumnavigated the globe in 1421-1423, is a disaster of hyperbolic claims and selective interpretation of historical evidence. That's because Gavin Menzies started with an idea, compiled evidence that seemed to point in the right direction, and convinced himself that he was finding mindboggling breakthroughs. But there is little reason for us to be as convinced as he is. You can see plenty of other reviews (here and elsewhere) debunking the many, many research errors committed by Menzies. Most of these criticisms are more believable to me than Menzies' assertions. On a higher level I'll add that Menzies is an unabashed member of the "incredible coincidence" school of history. In just a couple of examples, among multitudes, he claims that the presence of Asiatic birds in South America means "the conclusion is inescapable" of visiting Chinese sailors; or an ice-free depiction of Antarctica on a map "confirm[s]" that the Chinese were there during a January. Menzies also unquestioningly accepts Chinese court histories as accurate, without considering the possibility that they may be distorted by embellishments or state propaganda.

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