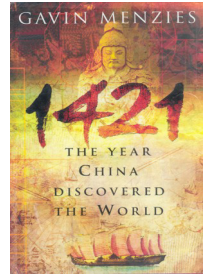


Book Review

1421, The Year China Discovered the World by Gavin Menzies, Bantam Press, 2002

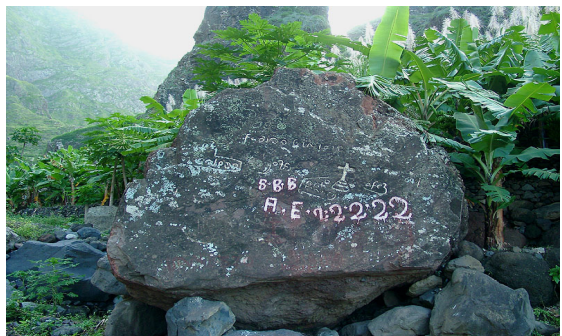
Review By Dan Gibson for Nabataea



In this book Gavin Menzies, a British submarine captain puts forward the claim that Chinese admirals traveled around the world visiting every corner of the globe in 1421. In 520 pages, Menzies puts together a fantastic account of seven incredible voyages. Although scholars of Chinese history have long known of Admiral Zheng He's voyages, Menzies is the first person to claim that the Chinese sailed around the whole world. Most scholars insist that the fleet of treasure ships commissioned by Chinese Emperor Zhu Di sailed only in the Indian Ocean and South China Seas. The Chinese were meticulous in writing their histories, and no mention is made of Admiral Zhen He's voyages to the North Pole or to the Atlantic Ocean.¹ So it seems that Menzies will have to produce some very strong evidence to support his claims. But what kind of evidence does he produce for Chinese treasure fleets sailing around the world? Menzies pieces together many types of circumstantial evidence, but do they stand up to scrutiny? Let's examine some.

Menzies claims on page 103 that there are inscriptions on a large red sandstone rock some 3 meters high, standing on the Cape Verde Islands in the Atlantic, which he photographed. Interestingly enough he does not provide us with any copies of his photographs, or even line drawings of the inscriptions, which he claims are in the Malayalam language (a language spoken by millions of people in south India). Menzies then claims that the Chinese carved these Malayalam inscriptions, which he never translates for us. He simply mentions them and then moves on to ancient maps.

Unfortunately, red sandstone is unknown on the islands, and interested locals have only been able to identify one rock which might fit the description (right). Note that this rock is somewhat redish but it does not contain any Malayalam script, only Portuguese. The rock is called *Pedra da*



Nossa Senhora which stems from interpretations of the writings on the rock by Catholic priests as being the first documentation of Portuguese sailors setting foot on *Santo Antao* Island. In the center of the rock is a further inscription and a cross which documents the death of a Portuguese sailor. Sorry, there is no red sandstone, and no Malayalam. It seems that the author is feeding us fables. Should we bother to read on? It might be entertaining to see what else this author conjures up as evidence of the Chinese.

Much of Menzies' claims are based on the Piri Reis map, drawn by a Turkish admiral in 1512. On page 116 Menzies asks "...who originally provided the information to enable Patagonia to be drawn on the Piri Reis and how did he obtain it?" By asking this question, Menzies infers and wants us to believe that the Turks obtained their information from the Chinese.



Unfortunately, Menzies doesn't seem to have actually had a good look at the writing on the Piri Reis map, for the Turkish admiral clearly states on each part of his world map from where he obtained the information for that section. In the corner of the map, near South America and Antarctica is the following inscription in Turkish (using the Arabic script):

"This section shows in what way this map was drawn. In this century there is no map like this map in anyone's possession. The hand of this poor man has drawn it and now it is constructed. From about twenty charts and Mappae Mundi: these are charts drawn in the days of Alexander, Lord of the Two Horns, which show the inhabited quarter of the world; the Arabs name these charts Jaferiye—from eight Jaferiyes of that kind and one Arabic map of Hind, (India) and from the maps just drawn by four Portuguese ... and also from a map

drawn by Colombo in the western region I have extracted it. By reducing all these maps to one scale this final form was arrived at. So that the present map is as correct and reliable for the Seven Seas as the map of these our countries is considered correct and reliable by seamen.”²

This part of the map was clearly drawn from several other earlier maps. The Caribbean section was taken from a map made by Columbus. The South America section was drawn from maps made during the time of Alexander the Great and his Generals who followed. It mentions Alexander, Lord of the Two Horns, (This could refer to Alexander the Great, or Ptolemy II, who collected maps at the Great Library in Alexandria.) It clearly mentions that Arabs created the original maps of this part of the world during the time of the Alexanders, not the Chinese. Much of Menzies' arguments fail here, but let's press on.

What is puzzling about this is that Menzies lists a number of scholars in his footnotes that all clearly communicate what the notes on the side of the map state. Is Menzies deliberately trying to mislead us by failing to tell us about them or was his research so sloppy that he missed such an important point (which undermines every reference he makes to the Peri Reis Map.) Perhaps Menzies was so intent in trying to find evidence for the Chinese that he simply missed such an important statement.

I believe that Menzies has done what many others before him have done. That is: assume that they are researching the very first cross-Atlantic voyages, thus not taking into account that others may have been there before. There is no question that the Chinese sailed into the southern hemisphere (Chie Thang Shu is a good example)³. They assuredly sailed through the Philippines and may have explored Australia and New Zealand (such as Xi Uang Ji's voyage recorded in the Hsi-Yang-Chi).⁴ But this does not prove that Admiral Zheng He's treasure fleets sailed to the Antarctica and South America.

A few pages later, Menzies claims that Megellan knew where to find the straight that separated South America from Antarctica, and that he sailed straight for it presumably because he had maps showing where the straight was. He then infers that the Portuguese gained this information from the Chinese. Why does Menzies not tell us that Megellan had access to Arab maps? Why does he ask questions that tend to mislead naive readers? Is Menzies a fraud or simply an uninformed fool?

Menzies' chapter on the first colony in America proposes that a Chinese junk sank in the Sacramento River and that the survivors built a colony about seventy miles north-west of the wreck. Menzies quotes several studies, but does not provide us with the names of these studies, or indeed any footnotes that would help a researcher check out his claims. This lack of footnoting is very frustrating as the reader cannot check further into Menzies' sources. No matter, if the evidence is true, then it points to a single Chinese junk being blown off course across the Pacific where it finally crashes on the North American coast. The sailors leave the wreck and seek shelter in California, eventually starting their own colony inland, far from the sea. If the junk had been part of a huge treasure fleet, then I would assume that other ships from the fleet would have rescued the sailors. If the Chinese wanted to establish a trading

colony, then I would also assume that they would have built their colony near the shore where further trade could have been carried out with China. So we apparently have evidence of Chinese in California, but no clear evidence that a treasure fleet ever visited those shores.

In the chapters that follow, the process of making and using lacquer is explored, suggesting that the Chinese and the Mayans used an identical method. We must agree that this is possible evidence that there was communication between South America and China but this kind of communication could have been made through merchants visiting both civilizations, rather than direct contact between them. The rest of the chapter presents long argued opinions on cross-Atlantic trade, this time however with a Chinese twist. Did people actually trade across the Pacific? Perhaps, but there is no direct evidence that the great treasure fleets of Zheng He ever took part in this trade.

Menzies continues his errors into the next chapter, noting on page 243 “*the Portuguese simply did not have the capacity to survey the islands with such accuracy - for the cartography of Antilia was amazingly good. I concluded that it could only have been the Chinese.*” This type of argument lacks credibility. Just because the Portuguese possessed maps of greater accuracy than their scientific ability could produce is not evidence that the Chinese made them. If it wasn't the Chinese, then it could have been anyone, including the Arabs who had long sailed the world and who may have been the first to develop the science of astronomy, giving us the names of 360 stars.⁵ On the other hand it could have been the Phoenicians long before this who were also renowned as world sea travelers. The proofs given by Menzies only bring us to the conclusion that the Americas had been visited before the Portuguese arrived. This is no surprise, since it seems that the ancient Egyptian pharaohs possessed items and plants that were native only to the Americas. Obviously some people had been crossing the seas for many centuries. But was it the Chinese? Menzies fails to prove this.

The same goes for the following chapter where Menzies describes (pg 276) how explorer after explorer in the New World came across fair skinned people with white tunics. Were these Chinese as the book supposes or were these people of other races? This kind of speculation is interesting, but it is certainly not conclusive proof the Chinese ever arriving in the Caribbean.

In the chapter titled Settlement in North America, Menzies quotes Verrazzano, who arrived at Rhode Island in 1524. He describes the local people as: “*the color of brass, some of them incline more to whiteness: others are of yellow colour, of comely visage, with long and black hair, which they are very careful to trim and deck up; they are black and quick eyed, and of sweet and pleasant countenance... The women are of the conformity and beauty; very handsome and well favoured, of pleasant countenance and comely to behold; they are as well-mannered and continent as any woman, and of good education . . . [women] use other kinds of dressing themselves like unto the women of Egypt and Syria; these are of the elder sort: and when they are married, they wear divers toys [jeweler] according to the usage of the people of the East, as well men as women.*”⁶

On page 285 Menzies protests that Syrian or Egyptian sailors would never have reached the Atlantic, and that their women would not have been taken on long

voyages. If only Menzies had bothered to read the notes on the side of the Piri Reis map, where it boldly proclaims that Arab sailors visited the shores of North and South America during the time of the Ptolemy rulers, he might have written a different book!

Menzies has put together other interesting evidence, such as the carved stone on the island of Corvo off the coast of Portugal which displays a man seated upon a horse, his head uncovered and bald, his left hand on his horse and his right hand pointing towards the west. Below the rock is writing that has not been translated. Sorry, no pictures, no pen drawings, and no further mention of it, not even on the website.

Menzies' next chapter on an expedition to the North Pole is based solely on the fact that the Chinese had square rigged shipped and would have had a hard time sailing west, unless they had traveled around Greenland. He then uses the highly questionable Vineland map as his evidence,⁷ and a line in Columbus's book by Pope Pius II where he states "*Men have come hither (to Iceland) from Cathay in the Orient.*"⁸ Cathay was the name that Marco Polo used for the Orient, particularly China. Along with this, Menzies mentions that Needham states that there are more than 20 different ancient claims that the Chinese reached the North Pole, trying to make it sound like they took nautical journeys when of course the Chinese could have simply journeyed north overland from China to get there, and would not have needed to get to the Atlantic to do this.

On the other hand, the ancient Arab sailors had lug sails, or triangular sails that allowed their ships to tack, and sail virtually against the wind. They would have had much less of a problem crossing the Atlantic than the slow square rigged junks that Menzies is trying to convince us about.

In chapter fifteen Menzies continues along the same logic. He mentions the Portuguese Cantino map of 1502 and then states "...*My belief that it was based on information obtained from the Chinese voyages of 1421-3 arose from Portuguese historian Antonio Galvao's comment about the map....*" Unfortunately Galvao' simply states that they had maps of the east, never mentioning China. In the very next paragraph Menzies quotes from King Joao II of Portugal to his explorers "*He recommended him very much to enquire whether beyond the Cape of Good Hope it was possible to navigate to India.... Then the king sent two of his trustworthy men who could speak Arabic well and were experienced travelers....*"

No mention of speaking Chinese, just Arabic. It appears that Menzies has totally missed the fact that the Arabs were the sea merchants of the Indian Ocean (and beyond) from the time of Christ until the 1500's. He totally missed the fact that during the period just before Admiral Zheng He's fleet set sail there were over 100,000 Arab and Persian merchants living in Canton China! There were so many foreign merchants that strife had arisen between them and the Chinese.⁹ This is all well documented. It was Arabs who traded between Europe, India and China. It was Arabs who invented navigation and much of astronomy. It was Arabs who had mapped much of the globe. It was Arabs who brought merchant trade to China. And so the Portuguese King



Above: The Kangnido Map of 1402 by Ch'uan Chin and Li Hui demonstrates the poor accuracy of Chinese Map mapping. India is on the right, the Arabian Peninsula in the center and Africa, filled with a lake is on the left. Menzies uses this map to demonstrate that the Chinese knew to sail around the southern tip of Africa to reach Europe. He fails to point out the miserable map-mapping skills of the Chinese in 1402, but claims that they accurately charted the entire world with greatest accuracy 19 years later!



Above: Selected area of Al Idrisi's map with Arabia in the center.

advised the explorers to take along Arabic speaking men not Chinese speaking men! But for some reason Menzies thinks this is somehow proof of a Chinese connection!

Menzies then goes on to describe at great length how the Chinese told time in order to calculate longitude. He talks about “*as far back as 721 AD the Chinese had realized that the length of the sun's shadow varies not only with the time of day but with the time of year and latitude of the observation points.*” Bravo. But Menzies seems totally unaware that Ptolemy devised maps and globes with latitude and longitude some 500 years earlier, not to mention the Arab science of Qiyās which was the early science behind the development of the astrolabe, which Arab navigators used to guide the Portuguese and others across the world.

On page 332 Menzies claims to have examined a collection of old Arab maps and states, “*the best Arabic medieval maps, such as those of Al Idrisi, bear no comparison in detail or accuracy to the Cantino of 1502. Although the Arabs understood how to calculate longitude by lunar eclipse, they never mastered how to measure time, with the necessary accuracy, something that the Chinese achieved, and hence the Arabs could not have produced the Cantino or the Waldseemüller chart.*”

And so in two sentences, Menzies dismissed an age old question of who developed these technologies first. Rather than researching the writings of various scholars on either side of this argument, Menzies looks at some Arab maps in the British Library and dismissed the Arabs since they could not tell time, assuming that this was the only way to calculate longitude! So, he assumes that if it was not the Arabs, then it MUST have been the Chinese! He totally misunderstands the Arab navigational system that used nautical manuals known as *rahmānis* to list cities and locations using *isba'* and *taf'ila* rather than drawn maps.¹⁰

In Chapter 16 Menzies begins to describe to us the world from a 1470's

Portuguese perspective, admitting that “*Arabs had sailed over the whole known world for centuries.*” He admits that the Portuguese copied Arab ship designs in order to begin their sailing ventures. He admits that the Portuguese solved the problems of longitude with help from the Arabs, and that they used the Arab names for the star navigation, Arab charts and Arab navigators to guide them. He admits that the Portuguese learned from the Arabs that the Spice Islands could be reached by sailing west, rather than east. And then, much to our surprise, he insists that the maps that the Portuguese used were of Chinese origin. He states “*One can only imagine the extraordinary impact these carts, based on the Chinese voyages of 1421 to 1423 must have had on the Europeans ...*” Excuse me, but I fail to catch the connection. After 14 pages of describing Arab accomplishments, the Chinese are suddenly credited with the production of the maps! Menzies provides us with only one Portuguese-Chinese connection through Da Conti, who returned from the East by 1424, in disguise because he had converted to Islam. But Menzies is convinced that Da Conti sailed with the Chinese around Africa to the shores of Portugal. Interestingly enough, Da Conti’s own journals make no mention of this trip, neither the Chinese, nor Chinese navigators.¹¹ Where did Menzies get his facts? He didn’t. He makes it all up and then implies that the Portuguese must have gotten their maps from the Chinese.

Menzies’ argument can be summed up by a statement he makes on page 415. “*Who but the Chinese with six centuries’ experience of ocean navigation could have reached the Antarctic?*” Well, let’s see... there were the Arabs, Persians, Greeks, maybe even the Phoenicians. But Menzies is convinced that it was the Chinese. He argues that the Portuguese must have had maps to guide them, but he never once considers that the Chinese may have also had maps to guide them. 1421 is a very late date to discover the world, as other nations had been sailing the oceans of the world for centuries before this.

In conclusion, let’s ask another question. What nations of the world were very self focused, occupied with invading nomadic barbarians for great periods of time, and had periods of history where leaving their shores was strictly forbidden? Ancient China comes immediately to mind. From 618 AD to 907 AD all foreign relations were banned in China. Then from 1264 AD - 1356 AD sea trade was slowly expanded so that Chinese junks began sailing to East China seas once again.

Then in 1421 China broke with their traditional history and launched a fleet of merchant ships. The huge fleet of Admiral Zheng He made at least one voyage around the Indian ocean before China again became self focused. In 1433 this exploration suddenly ceased. The emperor banned all merchants from going abroad. Sea travel was forbidden once again and all exploration suddenly ceased. Did China travel the world, carefully mapping out distant coasts along Antarctica and America? Menzies’ book is the only one suggesting such an idea, and he does little to convince historians that he has uncovered any solid evidence to support his claims.

1. Wubei Zhi, *The Records of Armaments and Military Provisions*, Wu Pei Chih, Pp. 559-561, 577.
2. Hapgood, Charles H. (1966), *Maps of the Ancient Sea Kings: Evidence of Advanced Civilization in the Ice Age*, New York: Chilton Books.
3. Needham, Joseph, *Science and Civilization in China: Volume 4, Physics and Physical Technology, Part 3, Civil Engineering and Nautics*. Taipei: Caves Books Ltd. (1986).
4. Xi Uang Ji's voyage recorded in the Hsi-Yang-Chi, *Hsi-Yang Chi - An Interpretation and Some Comparisons with Hsi-Yu Chi*, Roderich Ptak, Chinese Literature: Essays, Articles, Reviews Vol. 7, No. 1/2 (Jul., 1985), pp. 117-141.
5. Toomer, G. J., *Ptolemy's Almagest*, Springer-Verlag, 1984.
6. Francis I, King of France to Verrazzano, quoted in D. B. Quinn (ed) *North American Discovery*, Harper and Row, 1971.
7. See the article published in *Analytical Chemistry*, August 2002: *Analysis of Pigmentary Materials on the Vinland Map and Tartar Relation by Raman Microprobe Spectroscopy* by Katherine L. Brown and Robin J. H. Clark, with tests done by Christopher Ingold Laboratories, University College London, U.K.
8. The Biblioteca Colombina in Seville's cathedral holds ten of Columbus' books which include *Historia Rerum Ubique Gestarum*, or "History of all things and all deeds" by Aeneas Sylvius (who later became Pope Pius II), printed in Venice in 1477. The pages are covered with marginal notes. At the end of the printed text are five additional handwritten pages.
9. Needham, Joseph, *Science and Civilisation in China, Vol. 1*, Cambridge 1954, pp 215-216, *Reoccurring strife between Arabs and Chinese in Canton*.
10. Tibbetts, G, R., *Arab Navigaton*, Oriental Tanslation Fund, New Series Volume XLII, Royal Asiatic Society, London, 1981, pp 5, 6, 238.
11. Da Conti's journals mentioned in John Frampton's *The most noble and famous travels of Marco Polo, 1579*. See also: *Editorial Introduction to Nicolò de' Conti's Account*, Kennon Breazeale, East-West Center, SOAS Bulletin of Burma Research, Vol. 2, No. 2, Autumn 2004.