



## MANCHESTER CRUISING ASSOCIATION

**1421 – The Year China Discovered the  
World**

**Ian Hudson: 8 March 2007**

Ian came to talk about the phenomenon of 1421 and some of the latest developments. Created by the book by Gavin Menzies (pronounced Mingiss) published in 2002, it has spawned a website and a devoted band of enthusiasts determined to show that the Chinese sailed and mapped the world seventy years before Columbus. There is an equally determined armada of folk who claim that the book is utter tosh and Menzies is in it for the money. Some of them have websites with red or fluorescent green backgrounds (the modern equivalent of letters written in capitals with purple ink) but they also seem to number most academic historians who have even acknowledged the book's existence. So a rather different evening from our usual saline saunters.

Menzies' theory is that on 8 March 1421 (and alert readers will note that our talk was on the 586<sup>th</sup> anniversary) a vast fleet set off from Nanking(?) with the instruction from the Emperor Zhi Di to go forth and seek out civilisations around the world (or was that Star Trek?) and get some tribute. The fleet was hundreds strong and the biggest ships were 150m long with double-skinned hulls and watertight compartments lined with cement. If the drawings of the bigger boats were even near right, sail handling would have been a challenge. With crews of 1000 they were packed with food including herds of pigs and some of the compartments were flooded as giant fish ponds stocked with, as expected, fish. The fish, in a nice touch, were shepherded by trained otters taken along specifically for this purpose.

Commanded by eunuch admirals the fleet vanished into the mists for nearly two years(?) until it returned to Nanking. Fashions changed, Zhu Di fell and the fleet was left to rot, its voyage unrecorded. It had had enough time to sail round the world a couple of times while it was away. Now while some of us (you know what sailors are) might suspect that they had popped off to some fairly local archipelago and spent the time nibbling *dim sum* between the odd game of *mah jong* and some serious eunuch-roistering, Menzies is convinced that they sailed round the world.

Ian went through the evidence for this and it seemed to be based on maps, genes, animals, culture, wrecks and sightings.

The maps evidence was detailed but an important element was that there were maps available to Portuguese explorers that showed the whole world – before any westerners had actually been there. It has to be said that some of them were copies of earlier maps that have disappeared.

The genetic evidence that Chinese had roamed the coast of North America was based on similarities between the DNA of indigenous coastal Americans (particularly in Central America) and Chinese. Mainstream pre-historians

have all the indigenous Americans strolling across the frozen Bering Straits from the east around 10, 000 years ago so the crucial question would be how recent the oriental DNA is. And is it really concentrated along the coast. More intriguing to some in the audience was evidence of the Mongolian Spot. The Spot is a blue/brown spot seen on the buttocks of east Asian babies. It normally disappears when they are toddlers and the same thing is seen on native American babies. So, when did the Spot come?

The evidence from animals (and indeed plants) was that species that belong in China are seen around the world. Ian mentioned horses, water buffalo, rice and bananas in the US and turkeys in Europe.

The cultural evidence was that, for example, some native Americans could understand Chinese visitors with ease. A Chinese fort in the entrance to the St Lawrence, a stone from the Cape Verde Islands, the Bimini slipway and strange dunes were also claimed as part of the fleets trail of glory.

The wrecks were interesting. A large number of wrecked junks are supposed to have been found around the world. I was particularly taken with the one supposed to have been found in the Great Dismal Swamp in Virginia, USA (which sounds nearly as happy as Windermere when they put up the fees) and I took a little trouble to follow it up afterwards with a bit of surfing. The wreck has made three appearances. I was disappointed to find that the references were to a 1977 reading text for children and an e:mail sent to Menzies from the relative of a man killed in a plane crash in 1943 who recalled that the search team had found a Chinese boat. There's another wreck near Sacramento CA apparently but this has not been seen: it's deduced from material retrieved from boreholes.

Then finally there are reports of Chinese and their vessels being seen around the world around the time – or later.

Ian did a good job in presenting his torrent of evidence but there was so much that it's impossible to do it justice. It is all set out on the 1421 website [www.1421.tv](http://www.1421.tv). Or you can buy the very successful book.

The great fleet seems to have missed western Europe and Britain altogether (where Henry V would have been quelling the French again or Henry VI would have been mewling in his crib). Which is a pity. We would probably have had a decent written account if they had visited us – and they would have livened up our cuisine no end.

As it is, it's up to you. Serious history or Da Vinci Code? You decide.

GCM

©Manchester Cruising Association 2007