SUNDAYS ZAMAN

WHO REALLY DISC0VERED THE NEW W0RLD?

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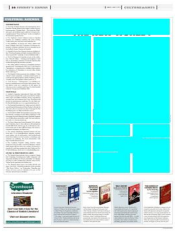


WHO REALLY DISCOVERED THE NEW WORLD?

MARION JAMES İSTANBUL

"In fourteen hundred and ninety-two Columbus sailed the ocean blue / He had three ships and left from Spain; he sailed through sunshine, wind and rain / He sailed by night, he sailed by day; he used the stars to find his way / A compass also helped him know how to find the way to go."

This rhyme takes me back to elementary school history class. As I child, I could picture brave Christopher Columbus setting off from Europe and heading for the unknown in ships with the romantic names Pinta, Nina and Santa Maria. Aiming to reach the east by traveling west he was flying in the face of conventional wisdom which said the earth was flat. Many were afraid he and his crew would fall off the edge of the world in their attempt to prove that the earth was round.

He discovered America, being the first European to set foot on the continent. Thinking the islands in the Caribbean Sea were actually off the coast of India he called them the West Indies, a name we still use today, particularly in reference to one of the most successful cricketing sides of all times.

Right? Well, to be honest, modern scholarship says that most of this is fanciful embroidering of the basic facts. Columbus wasn't the first to arrive on the shore of the good ol' US of A. He was following in the wake of a number of other Portuguese explorers and he had a pretty shrewd idea that there was land to be conquered in the name of his monarch.

In fact, we have evidence in the form of maps that the Portuguese had visited the area, leaving to history a chart dated 1428. Some four to five centuries earlier, the Viking explorer Leif Erikson landed his longboat at a point near Newfoundland in Canada. Going even further back, some believe that the seafaring Phoenicians may have traveled to the New World.

Author Gavin Menzies added a handful of imagination and a whole load of combustion to the debate a few years ago with his book "1421: The Year the Chinese Discovered the World." In this he surmised that the Chinese, in fact, sailed across the Indian Ocean to discover America some 71 years before Señor Columbus.

His premise was, "On some early European world maps, it appears that someone had charted and surveyed lands supposedly unknown to the Europeans. Who could have charted and surveyed these lands before they were 'discovered?'"

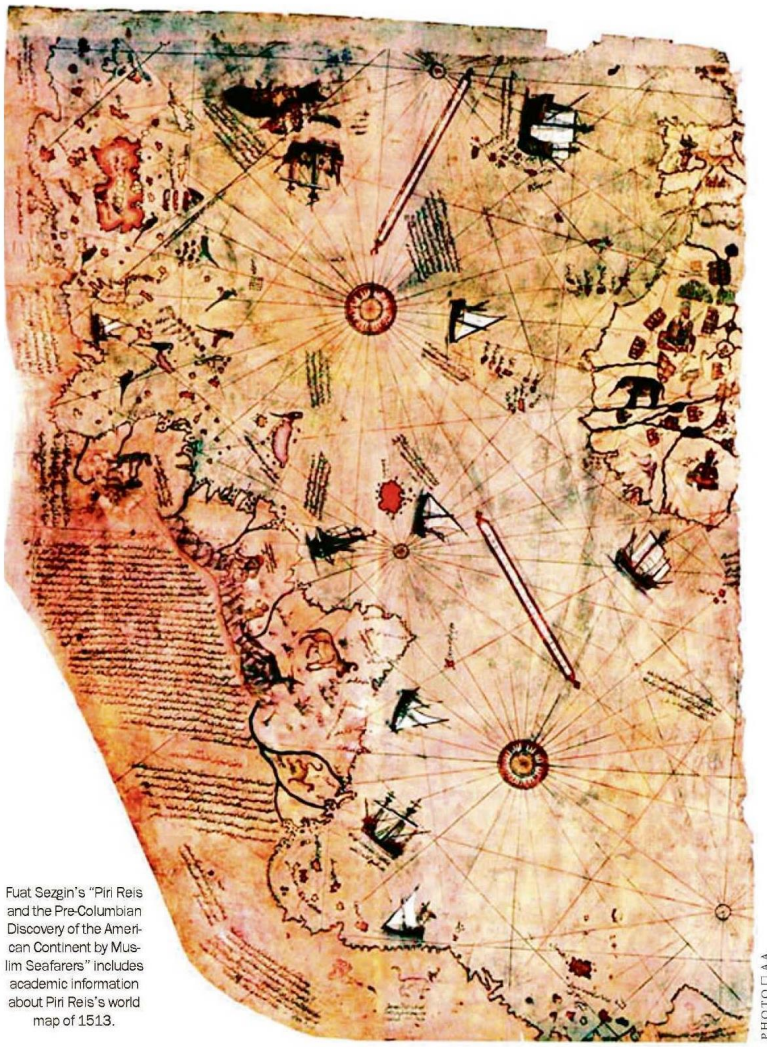
As part of its series to celebrate the year of Piri Reis, the Boyut Publishing Group has just published a study by Fuat Sezgin that answers this question in a different way from Menzies' China theory, as its mouthful of a title, "Piri Reis and the Pre-Columbian Discovery of the American Continent by Muslim Seafarers" shows up-front.

The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) has turned the spotlight on the Turkish cartographer Piri Reis this year, celebrating the fact that exactly five hundred years ago he drew the first accurate map of the Americas. It is estimated, although I am not quite sure how, that he completed his work on April 7, and on that day Google's design of the day was inspired by Piri Reis' famous chart.

Born in Gallipoli a few years before Columbus stepped onto the Santa Maria for his momentous voyage, Muhyiddin Piri Bey is famous for his encyclopedia of shipping and the seas called the Kitab-ı Bahriye. He was the nephew of an Ottoman mariner, Kemal Reis, so it is not surprising he took to the sea at a young age, dabbling in some piracy along the way, off the coasts of Sicily, Corsica, Sardinia and France. Joining the Ottoman navy under Sultan Suleiman the Magnificent, his life ended tragically with his execution in Cairo.

The quality that set Piri Reis apart from his peers inside and outside of the Ottoman Empire was his ability to blend science and geography. For many, cartography was a pictorial art; Piri Reis was a map scientist. True, his map was compiled from the work of many others, but he had obviously done a good bit of ocean surveying and his map is amazingly accurate when measured against modern computer-generated images.

Fuat Sezgin's treatise is fairly academic, but Boyut's excellent graphic and pictorial presentation makes this slim volume fascinating. He basically explores two questions. One, posed by Menzies, "Who could have charted these lands before they were discovered?" and the other being, "Who copied whom?"



Fuat Sezgin's "Piri Reis and the Pre-Columbian Discovery of the American Continent by Muslim Seafarers" includes academic information about Piri Reis's world map of 1513.

PHOTO: AA

Dealing in such detail with Menzies' outlandish and unsubstantiated claims about the Chinese seems almost to credit him with an authority he doesn't deserve. Most European historians ignore Menzies' theories, deeming them somewhere between fanciful and fictitious. However, Sezgin's evidence is useful in reminding us that what we all learned at school about Columbus discovering America is equally bankrupt of truth.

He points us to the 1428 map in Venice mentioned above, showing Argentina separated from Tierra del Fuego. He also quotes from Columbus' ship log, showing he already had a map detailing some of the West Indies.

Many European sources assume Piri Reis compiled his map from those produced by Portuguese explorers. Fuat Sezgin emphatically refutes this, giving among his evidence the fact that his book on navigation published in 1521 and 1524 couldn't be quoting from a source published in 1528. He details the degree of accuracy in Piri Reis' work, which was not only more developed than the Portuguese maps it was supposed to have been traced from, but also was of a standard not seen in European map-making until the 18th century.

Sezgin's theory is totally plausible: the maps that Piri Reis compiled had been drawn by Muslim explorers. After all, the Arab Sultan Abu Bakr II is said to have sent a fleet off in 1312 with the aim of reaching "the other side of the ocean." They were never seen again. Even earlier, Chinese court historians between 1178 and 1225 recorded a number of times that Muslim merchants told of ships reaching a fertile country to the west of Africa after approximately 100 days of travel across the Atlantic.

Catholic missionary Guillermo recorded between 1305 and 1314 that Muslim Arabs traveled past the Cape of Good Hope. They seem to have known about the Brazilian coast and some of the Caribbean islands.

The story is fascinating, and well argued. There is a growing renaissance in scientific history that is recognizing the major strides made by Muslim scholars during the period of Europe's Dark Ages and Fuat Sezgin makes a good contribution to this debate.

While it is probably true that Arab ships of discovery had mapped the coast of the Americas long before 1492, the claim that they "discovered it" is probably just as extravagant as that of Columbus. Whether the Phoenicians, the Vikings or the Arabs were first is long lost in the mists of time.

"Piri Reis & The Pre-Columbian Discovery of the American Continent by Muslim Seafarers," by Fuat Sezgin, published by Boyut Yayın Grubu (2013); TL 25.90 in paperback; ISBN: 978-975231060-5. Rating: Three stars out of five.