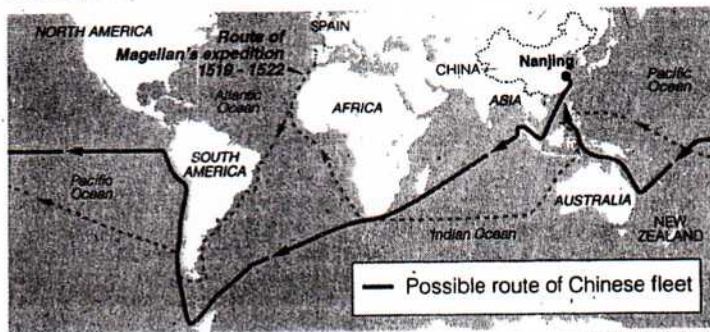


By JOHN NOBLE WILFORD

## Before Magellan?

A British navigator believes that part of a Chinese fleet led by Zheng He circled the globe from 1421 to 1423. Other ships from the fleet were said to have explored the Caribbean and the North American coast.



The New York Times

Mr. Menzies said he determined that the first European explorers of the New World, including Columbus and Magellan, carried maps derived from Chinese charts that somehow found their way to Venice in 1428 and then to Portugal. Authorities on the history of cartography said this might be the most controversial part of the new theory.

But the fact that Mr. Menzies was given a respectful hearing at the venerable geographical society indicated that his ideas were not being dismissed as those of a crank. The

## Challenging the story of world exploration.

audience of diplomats, naval officers, geographers and other scholars raised no immediate objections to the evidence or reasoning. Publishers were also there, in anticipation of a planned auction of rights to a book Mr. Menzies is writing.

Mr. Menzies issued 17 pages of what he said was supporting evidence to back his findings. He said there was more evidence but it would not be disclosed until publication of the book.

In the meantime, some scholars reacted with polite skepticism.

"The burden of proof remains on

Menzies' shoulders," said Dr. John R. Hebert, chief of the map division of the Library of Congress, who has not studied the evidence on which the new theory is based. "I have no problem accepting the voyages if Menzies can provide a convincing, well-documented presentation, with sufficient contemporary documents to support the claim."

Dr. Gillian Hutchinson, curator of the history of cartography at the National Maritime Museum in England, is not persuaded that a link has been established between Chinese maps and those the Europeans used in their American voyages.

"It is possible," she told The Daily Telegraph of London last week, "that Chinese geographical knowledge had reached Europe before the Age of Discovery. But Mr. Menzies is absolutely certain of it, and that makes it difficult to separate evidence from wishful thinking."

In the lecture, Mr. Menzies said: "If people disagree with me they have got to come up with an alternative scenario. I say there is none."

Adm. Sir John Woodward, who served on submarines with Mr. Menzies in the 1960's, said that he "is not some mad eccentric but a rational man, good at analysis — and he certainly knows all about charts."

In his lecture, Mr. Menzies said the primary evidence for his theory stemmed from his chance discovery that in 1428, the Portuguese had a chart of the world showing Africa, Australia, South America and various islands in remarkably accurate detail. For example, the chart clear-

ly showed the Cape of Good Hope, which the Portuguese did not sail around until the end of the 15th century. He said the secret chart was the progenitor of several European maps in the later 15th century and in the early 16th century.

Mr. Menzies explained that the map was evidently based on documents that had been spirited out of China by the Venetian merchant and explorer Nicolo da Conti, who supposedly sailed with Admiral Zheng on part of one voyage. Da Conti is well known to historians as a source of knowledge about China in the 15th century.

Through research in Venice, Spain and Portugal, Mr. Menzies said that he found some of these early maps and also determined how the Chinese explorers were able to measure latitude and estimate longitude in the Southern Hemisphere, using Canopus as the guide star in place of Polaris, the North Star.

Mr. Menzies noted that the old maps "refer not to the world as it is today, but as it was five centuries ago, when sea levels and the apparent position of the stars were different."

Using the program Starry Night, he recreated the star positions of that time. Then, to try to "anchor" the stars to the old maps, he drew a perpendicular line from a star in the Southern Cross to Deception Island off the tip of South America. "The maps suddenly line up with current coastlines to an uncanny degree," he said, showing the Chinese must have gotten that far west and south.

Mr. Menzies also described nine wrecked Chinese ships that he said had been detected in the Caribbean Sea, which he said were further evidence of global voyaging by the Chinese fleet. He would not disclose their whereabouts. Scholars noted that the Caribbean has been thoroughly explored by undersea archaeologists and treasure hunters, and it seemed unlikely that such large wrecks would have been overlooked. The most current histories of cartography have no references to Zheng He voyages beyond the east coast of Africa.

In any event, after the admiral returned to China in 1423, political upheaval cost the emperor his throne. Conservative Confucian mandarins took over and turned the country inward. World discovery became a European enterprise.

1) What is his most credible piece of evidence?

2) Do you buy his theory?