

Discovery Day, a national holiday reflecting America's diversity

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Today, class, we'll address the burning question, "Who discovered America?"

Before you commit to Christopher Columbus, consider the alternatives. Excavations in New England confirm the advent of Vikings long before the Niña, Pinta and Santa Maria set sail. British author Gavin Menzies constructs an open-and-shut case in *1421: The Year China Discovered America*.

Ancient Chinese archives uncovered by 18th century French scholar Joseph de Guignes reveal that five Chinese monks cruised the West Coast in the 5th century A.D. and spent time among Oregon's Indians. Phoenicians, Egyptians and sub-Saharan Africans get the nod from Ivan Van Sertima, whose book, *They Came Before Columbus: The African Presence in Ancient America*, lays out a wealth of compelling evidence.

The mysterious Mound Builders appeared along the Mississippi River in 1500 B.C., superimposed their monumental vision on the locals, and vanished around 700 A.D. In Cahokia (just north of East St. Louis, Missouri), largest of their many settlements, population 50,000, they built Monks Mound, bigger at its base than the Great Pyramid of Cheops.

And the Ainu look-alike whose 9,300-year-old bones popped from the Columbia River at Kennewick, Washington may give Japan or Polynesia a leg up on Scandinavia, China and sub-Saharan Africa in the discovery sweepstakes.

Face it, people have been discovering America for more years than we know, coming from all directions, by land and by sea. Northeast Asians, recognized as the First Americans, crossed the ice-free Bering Straits land bridge from Siberia some 14,000 years ago, though tests at several South American sites reveal the presence of earlier people.

Things get really interesting when Native American lineages are thrown into the mix. According to recent DNA studies, New England's Algonquin-speaking tribes added Europeans to their four Asian lines of descent 30,000 years ago. Blackfoot, Iroquois, and other tribes of Minnesota, Michigan, Ontario and Massachusetts are linked to the ancient Jomon of Japan.

The first people of Mexico, Peru and the southern United States lacked any Asian ancestry whatsoever, meaning their forebears arrived a very long time ago, or from somewhere other than Asia.

The better question is, "Who *didn't* discover America?"

No one denies that newcomers, in sufficient numbers, change everything. The official First Americans are blamed with killing off most large Pleistocene mammals—including the horse, which originated in Oregon and other western states 50 million years ago, and is thought to have reached Asia by way of the Bering Straits land bridge.

I've often wondered why the tribes and bands of Northwest Oregon spoke so many languages and dialects in random pockets. Was this patchwork the result of some aboriginal version of the Oklahoma Land Rush, where each band grabbed off what it could?

We know that people dislodged by calamities invade space claimed by others, where and when they can. Perhaps the Great Cascadia Earthquake of January 26, 1700 caused Oregon's coastal inhabitants to rush inland, randomly bumping others from traditional sites. Perhaps floods, droughts or volcanic eruptions—or pressures of population and consumption, which may have displaced the Mississippian Mound Builders—sent people scrambling into somebody else's backyard.

Or it may be nothing more than itchy feet, the wanderlust and curiosity that separate our species from sensible, stay-at-home creatures. Displacement's been a given since our progenitors first left their footprints in wet sand and mud. Assimilation's been hit-or-miss.

But this makes me wonder: Does truth outweigh time-honored tradition? Are we stuck with pictures of Washington chopping down a cherry tree? Nero fiddling while Rome burns? Columbus discovering America?

Why not opt for truth? Drop Columbus Day. Adopt Discovery Day.

Think about it—celebrating the myriad discoveries of America on a national holiday set aside by Congress. The 12th of October. 10/12. Discovery Day.

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