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The First Americans' New World Roots – A Forgotten Question Reconsidered



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Preface

“So this is China!” Such was the happy conviction of Monsieur Jean Nicolet as, appropriately attired in a robe of Chinese damask, he discharged his pistols over the heads of the astonished Indians on the western shores of Lake Michigan in 1634. It is said that the Canadian town of Lachine satirically memorializes in its French name, *La Chine*, the mistake of early French explorers in assuming that the “sea people” living on a “great water”, of which the Algonquins had told them, were inhabitants of the Flowery Kingdom. Nevertheless, the error brings home to one the vastness of those inland waters which Nicolet took for Chinese seas.²

This is one example of similar declarations made in the past centuries. However, it was not the mistake of the French explorers that led to such erroneous views, but Spanish political maps which in the 16th century depicted America and Asia as one single landmass. Indeed, a closer look at the development of such maps reveals that Nicolet’s assumption was not unusual, as he, like others, based his “knowledge” on fictitious maps. In this context today’s world maps about the history of humankind on which the American continent is left out have to be considered. Such presentations are similar to those of the maps of the late 15th century. As a reason for omitting the Americas on those maps which today present the history of humankind, the argument is brought forward that in the Americas no proof for an early presence of humankind has been found and that therefore the Americas can not be part of the history of humankind’s evolution. It is, however, necessary to study the history of ideas in order to find further causes for the fact that one of the largest continents is still not included in the history of humankind. This is a main aspect of this work, because the century-old neglect of the Americas is connected very closely to the development, the reception and the impact of ideas about the origin of the first Americans.

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² Chater, Melville: Michigan, Mistress of the Lakes, in: The National Geographic Magazine, Vol. LIII, No. 3, Washington, March, 1928, p. 269.

1 Introduction

It was originally intended to use the translation of a part of the title of the German version³, which would have been “Development, reception and impact of ideas of origin”. The actual title “*The first Americans’ New World roots. A forgotten question reconsidered*” was chosen, because there had been questions about why the German version did not contain references to actual finds which would prove an American origin of the first Americans.

A book, however, dealing with the development of ideas, their reception and impact on past or current investigations, has more or less to remain within a theoretical framework. Only if the scientific communities concerned with the research into the peopling of the Americas decide to consider any of the aspects presented here and to apply them to their research or even to initiate a study of the history of science of their own fields, then sooner or later the open questions will definitely be answered.

The few archaeological or paleontological finds which are mentioned in this book serve to demonstrate how the continuous use of pre-existing ideas of origin and the exclusion of alternative approaches have influenced many investigations.

Although a rising interest in the question of the origin of the first inhabitants of the so-called New World can be observed in the various media of the scientific as well as the popular literature, the main stream of ideas about the first Americans’ origin, however, only represents the possibility of an Old World origin.

But what happened to the question whether the inhabitants of the Americas developed, like the inhabitants of other continents, on their own continent? A first glance at the history of research into the peopling of the Americas shows that the possibility of an autochthonous

³ Gemegah, Helga: Die Suche nach den ersten Amerikanern – Entstehung, Rezeption und Auswirkungen von Ursprungsideen, Frankfurt, 2007.

evolution of paleo-Americans on the American continent is often completely rejected. It furthermore has to be noted that the denial of this issue began centuries ago.

Numerous ideas about an external origin have been spreading since the 16th century. These ideas included assumptions about maritime contacts between the Old World and the Americas and also about a peopling from Asia over a land bridge. These ideas of origin have not only influenced the scientific but also the popular literature regarding the peopling of the Americas and thus they have decisively contributed towards our perception of the Americas.

The research into the peopling of the Americas is at present raising more questions than it is giving answers. Finds in South America, for example, are much older than the assumed accessibility of Beringia would allow. When maritime contacts between the Old World and the New are thought to be the reason for finds in South America, then this possibility turns out to be improbable as well, as the necessary corresponding Old World populations of origin often did not exist at all or had not yet developed. If in such cases a possible New World origin of the first inhabitants is mentioned as a solution of the problem, then the research in molecular genetics and in linguistics is presented as an example for modern sciences confirming an Old World origin of the first Americans. It is not noted, however, that the interpretation of the data in these fields shows strong similarities to those ideas which have been widely distributed for centuries.

Therefore a closer look at the development, the reception and the impact of ideas of origin is necessary. This will especially give insights into the historical processes which led to the exclusion of one of the most important questions that is needed to obtain a complete questionnaire regarding the presence of humankind in the Americas: the possibility of a New World origin of the first Americans.