The Riddle of the Compass—The Invention That Changed the World

Amir D. Aczel

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The magnetic compass is an essential piece of equipment for outdoor adventure, yet probably few wilderness enthusiasts appreciate the historical significance of the compass or know the fascinating story of its invention. This is not altogether surprising, since the origins of the compass are shrouded in mystery. Fortunately, the well-known science writer Amir Aczel, author of *Fermat's Last Theorem*, helps us better understand the genesis and significance of this invention with his latest book, *The Riddle of the Compass*.

Regarded by many as an invention as technologically significant as that of the wheel, the magnetic compass was one of the first mechanical measuring devices ever invented, as well as the first instrument with a pointer allowing a person to visualize a measurement (a direction in this case). And just as computers and the Internet ushered in the 20th-century information age, the compass gave birth to the 13th-century commercial revolution that opened up the world to exploration.

The Riddle of the Compass is a fascinating read. It is a short book (159 pages of text) with generous line spacing and various helpful tables, figures, and black-and-white photographs. The text reads quickly.

The first few chapters of the book are focused on 13th-century Italy and western Europe—delving into earlier history as needed to understand the dynamics of the “civilized world” during this era—and the role of the compass in the emerging “Commercial Revolution” of the Middle Ages. The story then moves to China, where the compass was actually invented sometime in early antiquity—probably long before the 1st-century AD loadstones and early compasses were widely used as divining tools by China’s “feng shui” practitioners. Indeed, not surprising in view of China being a primarily land-based culture, the compass’ usefulness for naviga-

tion does not appear to have been appreciated by the Chinese until shortly before its appearance in Italy circa 1280. The rest of the book goes back and forth between east and west, recounting how the compass quickly came to be a mainstay for navigation on both sea and land and laid the foundation for western European exploration of Africa, Asia, and the Americas.

I highly recommend *The Riddle of the Compass* to anyone wishing to know more about the origins of the compass and how this invention truly changed the world.

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