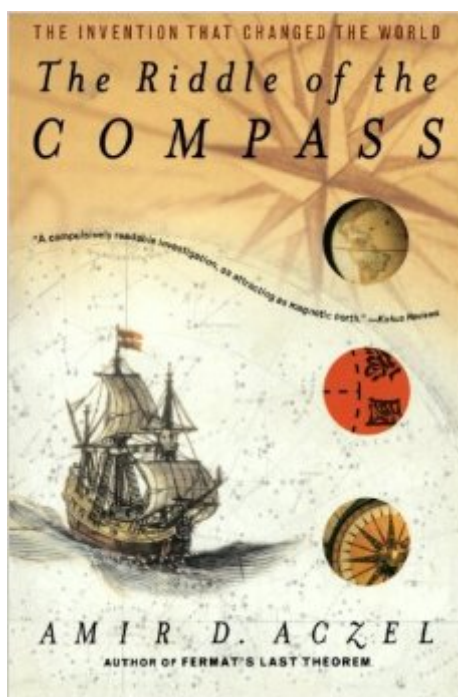


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# The Riddle Of The Compass: The Invention That Changed The World



## Synopsis

The story of the compass is shrouded in mystery and myth, yet most will agree it begins around the time of the birth of Christ in ancient China. A mysterious lodestone whose powers affected metal was known to the Chinese emperor. When this piece of metal was suspended in water, it always pointed north. This unexplainable occurrence led to the stone's use in feng shui, the Chinese art of finding the right location. However, it was the Italians, more than a thousand years later, who discovered the ultimate destiny of the lodestone and unleashed its formidable powers. In Amalfi sometime in the twelfth century, the compass was born, crowning the Italians as the new rulers of the seas and heralding the onset of the modern world. Retracing the roots of the compass and sharing the fascinating story of navigation through the ages, *The Riddle of the Compass* is Aczel at his most entertaining and insightful.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

Amir Aczel's *The Riddle of the Compass* tells a sweeping tale spanning continents and centuries. While this tale includes some discussion of the natural history of the earth's geological composition, magnetic field, and recent research showing that certain nerve fibers in fish are sensitive to this magnetic field and may play a role in their migratory behavior, the book concentrates on the human history of navigation and how the development of the compass spurred commerce, trade, and the expansion of European naval powers. He weaves into this tale a survey of maritime navigational techniques used in antiquity by the Greeks and Egyptians. He gives an impressively

well-researched survey of the references to the compass in European writings, the earliest dating to 1187 by the English Augustinian Monk Alexander Neckam. Aczel touches on a number of unusual subjects that turn out to be connected to the compass in surprising ways: the Chinese art of feng shui, ancient Chinese divination practices, Aegean archeology, including a particular Etruscan chandelier, the travels of Marco Polo, the development of cartography and nautical charts in medieval Europe. Along the way he treats the reader to a crash course in Italian history ranging from the Roman empire, the Crusades, through the rise of the city-states Amalfi, Naples, and Venice, the navigational methods employed by the great Spanish and Portuguese explorers such as Magellan, da Gama, and Columbus, and some interesting trivia such as the real meaning and origin of the phrase "to sail the seven seas" and how a possibly misplaced comma bears on the identity of the man who at one time was thought to have invented the compass, and of whom the residents of Amalfi erected a statue as a tribute. Like his earlier books, this one is accessible, entertaining, and edifying. The narrative has a natural flow and the stamp of Aczel's personal connection with the subject. (He spent much of his youth working on board a Mediterranean cruise ship that his father captained.) In places, footnotes would have been helpful. While there is a useful bibliography, certain passages in the text cry out for specific documentation. For example, he mentions that Jesuit priests in 17th century China ordered the prohibition, and even burning of books on the subject of feng shui. It would have been helpful to see specific documentation for such claims. Aside from this, The Riddle of the Compass is an admirable book that uncovers a little-known history of the compass, a navigational tool so common today that we take it for granted, and discusses how, by radically improving maritime navigation, it changed the world by opening up new possibilities of commerce and conquest.

If you think of objects in the category "inventions that changed the world," you might not think of the compass right off the bat, but a good case can be made for it having changed the world more than any invention since the wheel. Amir Aczel makes that case convincingly in The Riddle of the Compass: The Invention that Changed the World (Harcourt), an entertaining look at an invention most of us don't use every day but which has gotten used on our behalf for centuries. He starts in Amalfi, home of Flavio Gioia, the inventor of the compass. Well, he wasn't really the inventor, as the Chinese were using it, sometime before 1040 CE, and Flavio lived around the fourteenth century. What he invented was the nautical compass box, with the familiar star on the disc with the elaborate arrow that always points north. Actually, he probably didn't even invent that. He probably didn't even exist. It is a funny story as to how he came to be regarded as the inventor of the compass, and even

got his statue in the center of Amalfi, when he probably was a nonentity. The Chinese had trade only by land and river, so there was little reason for the compass to be developed as a navigational tool. It was, essentially, a mysterious toy. They used the compass for feng shui. The practical use perfected in Amalfi was passed, when Amalfi lost its power base, to the glory and enrichment of Venice. With a compass, Venetian ships could sail during clouded winters, and could become huge transports. When other nations began using it for transoceanic trade, they put Venice into eclipse, and brought on our modern world. Aczel covers the long era of pre-compass navigation, showing how sailors were dependent on clear skies and on the lead-weighted sounding line, which could tell the depth. They also used seasonal knowledge of winds and currents, and even looking for the traveling patterns of birds and sea snakes. He spurns the idea that they only piloted by "hugging the shore," which would never explain how they managed when they left sight of land, and which represents taking on the greatest of navigational risks, running aground. The compass, when we got around to using it, changed all that: "A great invention can lie dormant or be used for secondary purposes for a very long time and then suddenly be discovered by the right people - individuals with vision and an entrepreneurial spirit - and be exploited to its fullest extent. When this happens, such inventions can change the way we live." Aczel, a fine popular science writer who has most recently written on Fermat's Last Theorem and on the mathematical search for infinity, has here combined national histories, sea lore, and personal insight to make an absorbing history of an underrated tool.

Aczel describes the compass as the second most important technological innovation in history, after the wheel. He then proceeds to wander through a series of brief histories without chronological order, giving disproportionate attention to a man who may or may not have lived in Amalfi, Italy. Aczel is at his best in capsule histories of maritime activity, but is frustratingly unsystematic in his chronologies and his descriptions of how the compass is used. He mentions the Global Positioning System, but does not tell us how it works. The figure titled "how the magnetic compass works" is misleading, as it shows the axis of the Earth's magnetic field coinciding with the Earth's axis of rotation. One gets the impression of a hastily written book.

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