



Decoding the Heavens: A 2,000-Year-Old Computer--and the Century-Long Search to Discover Its Secrets

By Jo Marchant

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Unmatched in complexity for a thousand years, the mechanism functioned as the world's first analog computer, calculating the movements of the sun, moon, and planets through the zodiac.

In *Decoding the Heavens*, Jo Marchant details for the first time the hundred-year quest to decode this ancient computer. Along the way she unearths a diverse cast of remarkable characters—ranging from Archimedes to Jacques Cousteau—and explores the deep roots of modern technology, not only in ancient Greece, but in the Islamic world and medieval Europe. At its heart, this is an epic adventure story, a book that challenges our assumptions about technology development through the ages while giving us fresh insights into history itself.

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Decoding the Heavens: A 2,000-Year-Old Computer--and the Century-Long Search to Discover Its Secrets By Jo Marchant Bibliography

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Editorial Review

From Publishers Weekly

Starred Review. Marchant, editor of *New Science*, relates the century-long struggle of competing amateurs and scientists to understand the secrets of a 2000-year-old clock-like mechanism found in 1901 by Greek divers off the coast of Antikythera, a small island near Tunisia. With new research and interviews, Marchant goes behind the scenes of the National Museum in Athens, which zealously guarded the treasure while overlooking its importance; examines the significant contributions of a London Science Museum assistant curator who spent more than 30 years building models of the device; and the 2006 discoveries made by a group of modern researchers using state-of-the-art X-ray. Beneath its ancient, calcified surfaces they found "delicate cogwheels of all sizes" with perfectly formed triangular teeth, astronomical inscriptions "crammed onto every surviving surface," and a 223-tooth manually-operated turntable that guides the device. Various described as a calendar computer, a planetarium and an eclipse predictor, Marchant gives clear explanations of the questions and topics involved, including Greek astronomy and clockwork mechanisms. For all they've learned, however, the Antikythera mechanism still retains secrets that may reveal unknown connections between modern and ancient technology; this globe-trotting, era-spanning mystery should absorb armchair scientists of all kinds.

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From [Booklist](#)

Discovered a century ago in an ancient Mediterranean shipwreck, the Antikythera mechanism instantly attracted scientific interest. It had gears, which was and remains unique among artifacts from Greco-Roman civilization. So begins Marchant's mystery about the object, a tale that ends in triumph but not before inveigling individuals who not only puzzled over the device but also became obsessively devoted to figuring it out. Tantalized by the Antikythera mechanism, scholar Derek de Solla Price felt it was the clue with which he could rewrite the history of technology. Price's conclusions, however, were challenged by a museum curator of Industrial Revolution technologies; he was Michael Wright, who emerges here as the David among academic Goliaths who, by the early 2000s, were closing in on a conclusive interpretation of the Antikythera mechanism. By then, archaeological evidence dated the ship on which it sank to between 70 and 60 BCE and suggested its connection to the astronomer Hipparchus. Science readers will be entranced by Marchant's vibrant depiction of the characters in this remarkable story of ancient technology. --Gilbert Taylor

Review

Nature , 10/16/08

"[A] gripping and varied account...Fascinating final chapter."

Users Review

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