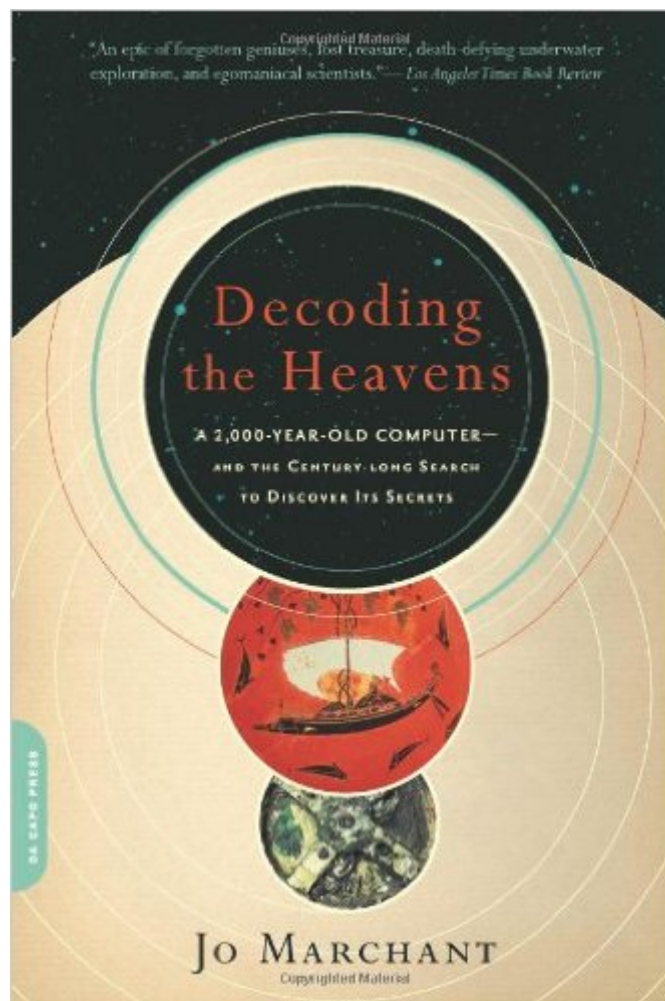# Decoding The Heavens: A 2,000-Year-Old Computer--and The Century-long Search To Discover Its Secrets

Synopsis

In Decoding the Heavens, Jo Marchant tells for the first time the full story of the hundred-year quest to decipher the ancient Greek computer known as the Antikythera Mechanism. Along the way she unearths a diverse cast of remarkable characters and explores the deep roots of modern technology in ancient Greece and the medieval European and Islamic worlds. At its heart, this is an epic adventure and mystery, a book that challenges our assumptions about technology through the ages.

Book Information

Paperback: 344 pages

Publisher: Da Capo Press; Reprint edition (March 2, 2010)

Language: English

ISBN-10: 0306818612

ISBN-13: 978-0306818615

Product Dimensions: 5.5 x 0.8 x 8.3 inches

Shipping Weight: 1.1 pounds (View shipping rates and policies)

Average Customer Review: 4.5 out of 5 starsÂ Â See all reviewsÂ (57 customer reviews)

Best Sellers Rank: #166,210 in Books (See Top 100 in Books)   #60 inÂ Books > Computers & Technology > History & Culture > History   #162 inÂ Books > History > Ancient Civilizations > Greece   #203 inÂ Books > Engineering & Transportation > Engineering > Reference > History

Customer Reviews

The "Antikythera Mechanism" has baffled archeologists and scientists for more than a century. Discovered in an ancient Greek shipwreck in 1901 near the Greek island of Antikythera, between Kythera and Crete, it is the first known mechanical computer in human history. It is rumored to have been used to calculate astronomical positions, and probably dates to the first century before the Common Era (BCE).The "Antikythera Mechanism" was remarkable in that its many gears betray a complexity not found elsewhere in the ancient Mediterranean world. Not until the high Medieval era would technological artifacts of similar complexity be found. With more than 30 gears, there is some difference of opinion on the number, it had the potential to enter a date and the mechanism could calculate the position of the Sun, Moon, or the other planets. It also had the capability to predict lunar and solar eclipses.Jo Marchant, a well-known journalist and the editor of "New Scientist," has written a fascinating account of the discovery of this remarkable relic, its reconstruction, and the process of discovery of scientists gradually coming to understand its use. Made of bronze and found

in pieces on the sea floor, it took considerable time to put it back together and to get it to work.Hundreds of scholars have investigated the "Antikythera Mechanism," and employed high-technology analysis to understand the artifact. Even so, it took a century to unlock its secrets. Michael Wright, curator at the Science Museum in London, worked for more than two decades to build a working model of the artifact, using only tools and methods known to have been available in ancient Greece.

Below is a different review of the same book, which I wrote for 'Antiquarian Horology':JO MARCHANT,Decoding the Heavens :A 2,000-Year-Old Computer and the Century-Long Search to Discover Its Secrets, published by Da Capo Press, Cambridge MA, 2009, hardcover. Also available in a UK edition as Decoding the Heavens: Solving the Mystery of the World's First Computer. Or borrow from the NAWCC Library in Columbia (Members only)Most students of the history of timekeeping machinery will have come across various pieces of information on the Antikythera mechanism in their reading and recall the outline account of its discovery. In the fall of the year 1900, the Greek Captain Dimitros Kontos and his crew of sponge divers stumbled upon a shipwreck from antiquity off the island of Antikythera, and thereby started the science of underwater archeology. In addition to a large number of statues and other artifacts, one recovered item was completely different. It consisted of several fragments of a very complex, geared, bronze mechanism with mysterious inscriptions. Whatever that object was, it was destined to substantially rewrite the history of technology.The book under review is an up-to-date, detailed retelling of the story of this mechanism, its discovery, its interpretation and the search for its function. The author incorporates the discoveries and new theories that have been developed about the Antikythera mechanism during the last several years.Michael Wright, formerly of the London Science Museum, has constructed a new replica and published his findings in this magazine and elsewhere. Regular readers of Antiquarian Horology are probably familiar with his three major articles on the subject in 2003 (Vol. 27, pp. 270-279), 2005 (Vol.29, pp.

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