

## Book Review

### *The Oracle: The Lost Secrets and Hidden Message of Ancient Delphi*

William J. Broad, New York: The Penguin Press. 2006. 320 pages (ISBN: 1-59420-081-5).

Reviewed by Julie Scott, M.A., Grand Master and President, English Grand Lodge for the Americas of the Rosicrucian Order, AMORC

Just beneath the surface of everyday life lies something extraordinary, something magical. Perhaps nowhere has this been better demonstrated than in Delphi, home of the ancient Oracles—the women prophesiers.

Ancient historians reported that gases, wafting from the floor of the Holy of Holies in the Temple of Apollo, coincided with the Oracles' extraordinary abilities to foretell the future; however European researchers in the early part of the last century put an end to such nonsense. The findings from the excavations at the newly uncovered temple showed no crevasses or fissures through which such gases could have escaped, casting doubt on the source and even the existence of the Oracles' abilities. This theory dominated academia for almost 100 years. Then, in the last years of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, serendipity brought together researchers from various fields to vindicate the ancient sibyls.

In his book, *The Oracle: The Lost Secrets and Hidden Message of Ancient Delphi*, William J. Broad presents a fascinating report on the trans-disciplinary research that uncovered one of the most elusive secrets of the ancient world—one of the possible sources of the Oracles' abilities to reach other states of consciousness. This synergistic collaboration between a geologist, archaeologist, geochemist, and health professional resulted in a convincing argument that overturned the prevailing theory that had misled and stifled researchers for almost a century.

Broad's book presents a logical history of the study of Delphi and describes the modern researchers' findings. It took the entire team to produce their results—more than a geologist, archaeologist, chemist, or health professional would have been able to do alone. Broad also offers fascinating and easy to understand introductions to such diverse subjects as Greek history and religion, toxicology, academic validation, chemistry, volcanoes and earthquakes, continental drift, and much more.

The most important chapter in his book, however, is the final one in which he discusses what the research did not reveal. The Oracles at Delphi inspired Greeks for millennia. Surely their source of power was something more than getting high on hydrocarbon gas.

Broad shares some of the reflections of the team's leader, Jelle de Boer; "He argued that the team's discoveries said nothing about a range of oracular feats that were indisputably real. For instance, the chemical stimulus in no way explained the Oracle's cultural and religious power, her role as a font of knowledge, her liberation of hundreds of slaves, her encouragement of personal morality, her influence in helping the Greeks invent

themselves, or—by extension—whether she really had psychic powers. Even if her prognostications were judged to have no basis in literal foreknowledge, it gave no explanation for how she reflected the underlying currents of ancient Greek society and how her utterances stood for ages as monuments of wisdom. It said nothing of how the priestess inspired Socrates or functioned as a social mirror, revealing the subconscious fears and hopes of those who sought her guidance, or of how she often worked as a catalyst, letting kings and commoners act on their dreams.”

Indeed, these questions were not answered in this book (they are probably unanswerable); however this was not its focus. Its purpose was to report on the recent research. Broad’s commentary on the limits of scientific study alone and the importance of other ways of perceiving is a bonus. This story will appeal to anyone who believes that some mysteries lie beyond the dissection of science, even fascinating, trans-disciplinary research such as this.

Broad, a science writer for *The New York Times* who has twice shared the Pulitzer Prize with colleagues there, writes, “Some people may see this book as an attack on science. It is not. I have devoted all my professional life to exploring its nuances and trying to convey its insights, as I attempt to do here with the story of the fume discovery. I see science as one of the supreme achievements of humane civilization as well as the engine of astonishing material progress... This book, rather than an attack, is ultimately an inquiry into the true breadth and depth of modern science. It examines the philosophic implications of the fume discovery and finds them indicating that science regularly overreaches in terms of explanatory power.”

*The Oracle* inspires the reader to open her mind to other ways of knowing and to the wisdom of the mystics. Broad begins his book with the following statement, “This book is about a voice from the remote past that has come back to question the metaphysical assumptions of our age, to urge us to look beyond the claims of science and reexamine our attitudes toward spirituality, mysticism, and the hidden powers of the mind. The Oracle of Delphi has prompted this kind of reassessment before, starting three millennia ago, and, as improbable as it seems, is doing so again. Her message challenges some of the most basic tenets of our day, suggesting that we have deluded ourselves into thinking we know more than we really do.”

While reading Broad’s book, I heard the Oracle’s voice. Perhaps she and Broad and every reader are the final collaborators on this trans-disciplinary team, and, with some humility, we can finally learn some of the secrets that lie just beneath the surface, in Delphi.