

# ONCE UPON A TIME..... INDISTINGUISHABLE FROM MAGIC



By: Sdr. K.H. Man, Standing Committee on Publications

If someone said that the Oracle at Delphi worked via the equivalent of glue-sniffing by the priestesses, you'd probably be incredulous. Not long ago however, de Boer, Hale, Chanton and Spiller found that the spring around which the Oracle's Temple of Apollo was built was associated with a fault in bituminous limestone that produced a wide range of hydrocarbons. Most notably, it produced ethylene, which can cause disembodied euphoria and altered mental states. It's not that different from cultures that use mescaline.

Priestesses were probably rambling and babbling while high on ethylene. Legend has it that the oracle prophesied after inhaling the sacred fumes of Gaea. Plutarch wrote that the fumes were sweet-smelling and the oracle prophesied in delirium in a small underground chamber, sometimes with fatal results. Ethylene gas matches these observations. Sacred fumes indeed...

Arthur C. Clarke once wrote: "Any sufficiently advanced technology is indistinguishable from magic." Although he was referring to the future, the statement can also work in reverse. We humans are not very good at filling in the holes in our historical record properly. This is a failure of our civilisation, and it condemns us to repeat the same mistakes over and over again. It also cause people to dream up spectacular theories and guesswork to explain a multitude of things.

Much of what we call ancient mysteries have perfectly mundane explanations, but many people simply cut corners and start speculating without first gathering adequate data. Humans are too good at seeing patterns and jumping to conclusions, and far too many seemingly intelligent people fall into that trap.

It is telling that there are few mysterious structures in China, an accidental product of a culture that records its history without too many embellishments. Many ancient civilisations however either did not produce much historical records or did not have the means to make them. In other instances, records were sadly lost when the civilisation went into decline. Oral records are particularly susceptible to change.

A case in point is the history of Rapa Nui, the Polynesian name of Easter Island, famed for its huge statues known as the moai. The first European visitors did more than anyone to make Rapa Nui a favourite example of an ancient mystery. They simply could not believe that the natives were capable of carving and erecting the moai. Today we know that they are built to honour the spirits of deceased relatives. The moai is an impressive and ingenious work of civil engineering by a people who had few tools to work with.

The reconstructed probable history of Rapa Nui is instructive and is painfully relevant today. At its peak, Rapa Nui had perhaps 20,000 inhabitants. Unchecked growth far exceeded the capacity of the island's small and isolated ecosystem. Complete deforestation from initial colonisation took perhaps 700 years. Without wood to make canoes, the population could not extract much protein from the sea. Rats became a dietary staple.

The people switched to grass for fueling fires. The demand for plant material eventually robbed the soil of nutrients, plunging the ecosystem into further distress. Eventually the inhabitants started eating each other. Rapa Nui is mostly barren grassland today.

The ruling elite who lead the construction of the moai were overthrown in an upheaval. Many of the statues were never completed or erected on their platforms. The work involved much of the population and thus drew off an enormous amount of resources that could have been put to better use. Rapa Nui could be flourishing at the time of its discovery by Europeans if its people had thought to apply their ingenuity to sustaining their society. Unfortunately that did not happen.

Society and culture might well have unravelled at a frighteningly rapid pace. For a time, they must have thought that they were doing the most important work imaginable, in honour of the spirits and the gods. Then life on Rapa Nui turned into a living Hell. ■

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