

# THE PHAISTOS DISK: A 100-YEAR-OLD HOAX? ADDENDA, CORRIGENDA, AND COMMENTS

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## Another Possible Reason for the Creation of the Phaistos Disk

In his article 'The Phaistos Disk: A One-Hundred-Year-Old Hoax', recently published in the July/August 2008 issue of *Minerva* (pp. 9-24), the writer realised that he had omitted to mention an important possibility. Luigi Pernier - in addition to his possible wish to compete with the spectacular discoveries of Federico Halbherr at Gortyna and Arthur Evans at Knossos - may have created and planted the disk to excite the sponsors of the excavation to encourage them to supply further backing. Joseph MacGillivray, in his very revealing book on Evans, *Minotaur* (2000), notes that Evans became woefully short of funds for the excavations and reconstruction of Knossos. Pernier could have encountered the same problem at the Palace of Phaistos. The raising of resources/capital to fund continuing excavations was, and still is, a common problem for archaeologists.

## An Accomplice?

The writer is also researching the possibility that Emile Gilliéron may have been involved in the manufacture of the disk. He was the brilliant artist and restorer who did the mural and object reconstructions for Evans at Knossos. He and his son also made reproductions, some in electrotype, of Cretan objects and published an illustrated catalogue of them. His son even claimed authorship for at least one famous Minoan gold ring, the Archanes ring, published by Evans, an identical copy of which was found in Evans's possession after his death. One of Gilliéron's assistants, in fact, confessed on his deathbed that he had been creating forgeries for the antiquities market for several years. A correspondent informed me that, according to his research, Gilliéron was present when the Phaistos Disk was found and that Pernier was napping at the time.

## Aesthetics of the Forger

As the writer noted in the article, several of the errors made by the forger of the disk fit into the categories tabulated by the forger in his 'Aesthetics of the Forger: Stylistic Criteria in Ancient Art Forgery' (*Minerva*, May/June 1992, 10-15), but he inadvertently omitted a very important one: Miniaturisation (or enlargement) of an element. Sometimes a complete object, reduced in

size, becomes only part of another object. This would appear to be the case in signs nos 2 (plumed head), 3 (tattooed head), 4 (captive), and 6 (woman), all probably derived from Egyptian wall paintings or reliefs; no. 9 (tiara), from a Hittite wall carving, and no. 24 (structure), from a Lycian rock-cut tomb or an Egyptian wall relief.

## Additional Attempts at Decipherment

Since the publication of the article a number of additional attempts at deciphering the disk have been noted by the writer and received from correspondents, some scholarly and a few more pseudo-scientific. These will be enumerated at the Phaistos Disk Conference on 31 October (see p. 1) and published in a future issue of *Minerva*.

## Corrections and Additions

Since the article was not peer-reviewed, and the writer does not have a background in epigraphy, he had expected to receive many corrections. Fortunately there were few, but he greatly appreciated those that came from Thorsten Timm, since in correcting or commenting on the writer's statements, he inadvertently pointed out two more possible sources for the signs on the disk. In the article it was stated that, in referring to sign no. 7, the helmet or breast (Fig 1), that 'There is no ancient parallel for a single breast as a sign', however Mr Timm points out that there is indeed a rare Egyptian hieroglyphic sign, D27A, that represents a single breast (Fig 2) and is translated as 'breast', 'suckle', or 'tutor'. For the Phaistos Disk sign no. 7, if it represents a breast rather than a helmet, the breast was turned upside-down, the nipple facing upward. This is a typical ploy used by the forger, a mirror-image or reversal of a known element, to confuse the epigrapher (see J. Eisenberg, 'The Aesthetics of the Forger: Stylistic Criteria in Ancient Art Forgery', p. 15), but not a very logical way to portray the female breast.

The writer also stated that for sign nos 42, the grater (Fig 3), and 43, the strainer (Fig 4), there are too many dots for a small ancient hieroglyphic sign. Mr Timm refers to a few Minoan hieroglyphic signs that have a multiplicity of small dotted markings. Several examples, that would have been available to Pernier, were published by Arthur Evans in his *Scripta Minoa I* (1909)

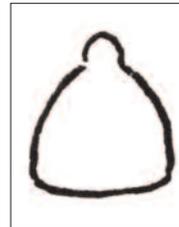


Fig 1. Phaistos Disk sign no. 7, the breast or helmet.

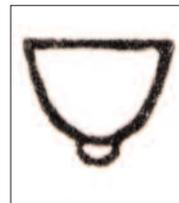


Fig 2. The Egyptian hieroglyphic sign for breast, Gardner 27\*. Compare to sign no. 7. After Alan Gardiner, *Egyptian Grammar* (3rd edition, 1978), p. 453.

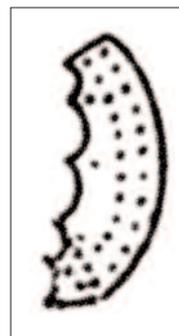
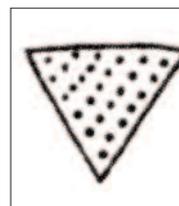


Fig 3. Phaistos Disk sign no. 42, the grater.

Fig 4. Phaistos Disk sign no. 43, the strainer. A triangular object with a dotted pattern inside.



including his sign no. 50, the 'grain' or 'honey jar' (Fig 5), no. 93, and no. 115, an enigmatic symbol (Fig 6).

Dr Jean Faucounau has kindly sent the writer a copy of his book *Le Déchiffrement du Disque de Phaistos* (1999) from which the writer had previously only taken quotes from other authors. He was gratified to find illustrated several excellent sources for at least four of the signs. No. 12 (Fig 7), the shield, closely resembles the shields carried by the Sea People (the Sherden or Shardana) on the Kadesh battle reliefs on the walls of the Ramasseum at Thebes (Fig 8). For no. 17 (Fig 9), the lid or tool, a match is made with the cutting tool used by a leatherworker on a 6th century BC Attic vase (Fig 10)! Sign 27 (Fig 11), the hide, though missing his tail, is well-matched by another on a wall (relief) from the 18th dynasty tomb of Rekhmire in the Valley of the Kings (Fig 12). Sign 31 (Fig 13), the eagle and the serpent, has a good parallel in a similar scene on another 6th century Attic vase (Fig 14). Again, an author in favour of the authenticity of the disk has unwittingly provided sources for the forger. It should be noted that these sources are many centuries apart, a common disparity in time-placement so often made by a forger.

## Comments on the Article

It was gratifying for the writer to receive so many favourable comments from scholars on his article. Professor Louis Godart, Professor of Mycenaean Philology at the University of Naples and author of *The Phaistos Disc - the enigma of an Aegean script* (1990, 1995) wrote: 'Many thanks indeed for your extremely kind letter and for your excellent article on the Phaistos Disk. I must say that it seems to me quite difficult to contest the authenticity of the disk but your arguments are sound and perhaps - I am thinking about that - it would be possible to find other arguments against the authenticity.' Dr Thomas Balistier, author of *The Phaistos Disk - an account of its unsolved mystery* (2000) writes '...Your point of view is a new dimension to look at the history of the Phaistos Disk... I must declare that the theory of a forgery for me is a great challenge/provocation. But science should be engaged to reality and truth. Therefore I hope your work will contribute a

# The Phaistos Disk

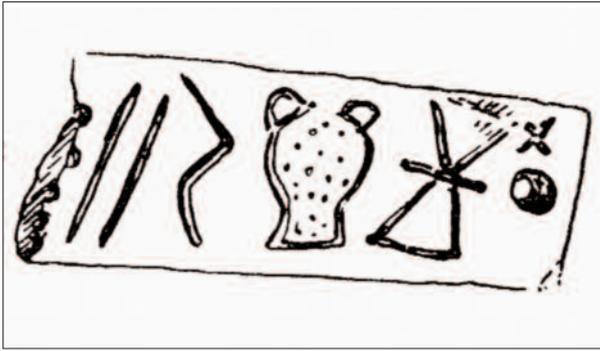


Fig 5 (left). Evans' hieroglyphic sign no. 50, the 'grain' or 'honey jar', inscribed on a Minoan clay bar, P. 109.



Fig 6. Evans' hieroglyphic sign no. 115, an enigmatic symbol, inscribed on a Minoan clay label, P. 92.

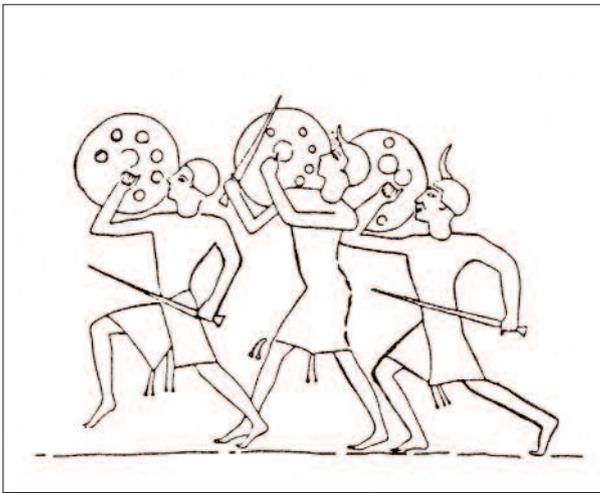


Fig 8 (left, second down). Drawing of a Kadesh battle relief, Ramesseum, Thebes. Compare the shields to sign no. 12.

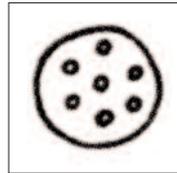


Fig 7. Phaistos Disk sign no. 12, the shield.



Fig 10 (left, third down). Drawing of leatherworkers on an Attic vase. Compare the cutting tool to sign no. 16.

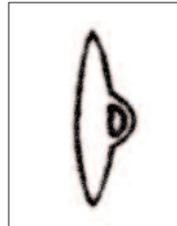


Fig 9. Phaistos Disk sign no. 17, the lid or tool.

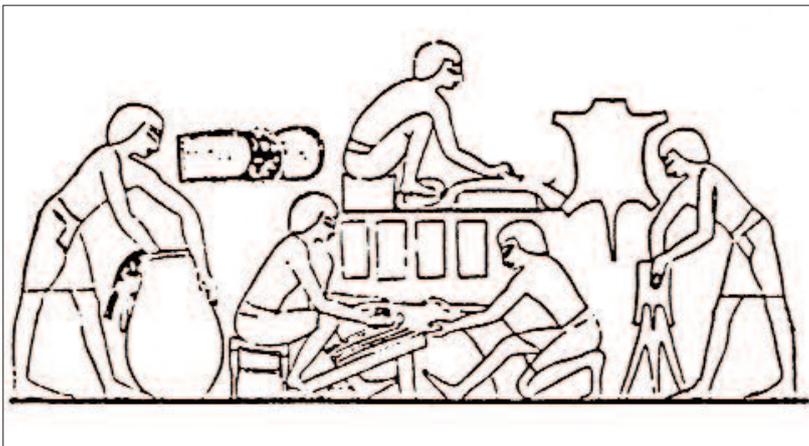


Fig 12 (bottom left). Drawing of a relief of leatherworkers from the tomb of Rekhmire, Valley of the Kings. Compare the hide to sign no. 27.

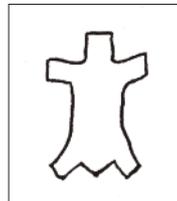


Fig 11. Phaistos Disk sign no. 27.



Fig 13. Phaistos Disk sign no. 31, the eagle and serpent.



Fig 14. Eagle and serpent on an Attic vase. Compare it to sign no. 31.

big step to the solution of this unsolved mystery.'

Dr Michael Coe, the eminent Pre-Columbian scholar and epigrapher: 'I think that there is a 95% certainty that you're right about the Phaistos Disk being a forgery. Of course a TL [thermoluminescence] test would put the final nail in this particular coffin, and the stubborn resistance of the authorities to allow it suggests that they think it a fake too. I was particularly impressed with your round-up of all the so-called decipherments. The Disk has been a veritable Rorschach Test for would-be decipherers. By far the most ridiculous is the one by Steven Fischer, who claims to be the only person who has cracked two scripts – the Phaistos Disk and Rongorongo. I once demolished his book in a review in the *Times Higher Educational Supplement*.'

Dr Mark Newbrook, a specialist in historical linguistics and 'skeptical linguistics' writes: 'Your work appears very thorough and full of detail... I think that you make out a fair case for your view. My main worry is that the strength of your case for specific claims sometimes appears to be overstated... But I find your treatment in terms of error-types (p. 15) more persuasive. I think that this section is one of the strongest and perhaps would warrant greater length.' Dr Thomas Palaima, Director of the Program in Aegean Scripts and Prehistory at the University of Texas, Austin: 'I think it is likely that the disc is a forgery.' Dr Richard Sproat, a specialist in computational linguistics and the study of writing systems wrote: 'I think I am convinced. Of course I know people had long suspected that Pernier had Evans-envy and might have hoaxed the whole thing, and I even mentioned that possibility myself in a talk that I gave last summer at a symposium at Stanford. But your arguments seem much more compelling than what I had previously seen.' The debate continues. ■

Illustrations - Figs 5, 6: After Arthur Evans, *Scripta Minoa*, vol. 1 (1909), p. 174; Figs 8, 10, 12, 14: after Jean Faucounau, *Le Déchiffrement du Disque de Phaistos* (1999).

**International Conference on the Phaistos Disk**  
 on the occasion of the 100th anniversary of its discovery  
 31 October – 1 November 2008  
 At the Society of Antiquaries of London, Burlington House, Piccadilly, W1  
 Organised and sponsored by *Minerva*, the International Review of Ancient Art & Archaeology.  
 See announcement on page 9.