New Light on Phaistos Disc

Dr. Roberta Rio, Historian - Austria

Abstract

A clay disk that looks perhaps like a child's game has remained an enigma for archaeologists, historians and scholars worldwide. And for the throngs of tourists who visit Crete, it has always been fascinating for the mystery it contains.

The Phaistos Disc was discovered in 1908 by Italian archaeologist Luigi Pernier. Pernier found the Disc in the Minoan palace-site of Phaistos on the Greek island of Crete. The Disc dates to the middle or late Minoan Bronze Age, second millennium BC.

This is an absolutely unique thing of its kind both for Crete and the rest of the world; a circular disc of fine fired clay, decorated on both sides by many signs, which when seen together formed spirals. These signs are still unknown to any system of writing even to the present day.

The single stamped signs remind us of concepts and situations which correspond to a “Mediterranean” environment and they illustrate visual experiences from every day life from that age, working tools, plants, animals and figures of the human condition. The deciphering and research of its meaning has occupied many scholars up until now, contributing to keeping interest alive in the Phaistos Disc.

This new interpretation which is derived from knowledge and experiences beyond the pure historical and archaeological context, leads me to say that the signs stamped on both sides are not only graphic symbols but deal with a ritual sequence.

This is a new interpretation which opens horizons never before imagined.
In today's historical and archaeological context, there are many things that we cannot explain. This has many reasons, one being the difficulty of dating, and another being that it can be very hard to understand the message that people in the past wished to convey. The difficulty of understanding lays both in the code of communication, which is no longer understood, and in the contents themselves, since neither of the two falls within our current wealth of knowledge.

Sometimes, because of the difficulties mentioned above, we tend to turn to myths and legends rather than things that were real; things that our ancestors actually knew and felt. Crete is full of myths in this sense: think of the Minotaur, the Labyrinth, Theseus and Ariadne. Crete is full of artefacts that have also served to build the common image we have of the ancient Cretan civilization.

Among the numerous archaeological finds in the Archaeological Museum in Heraklion, you can find, for example, the Goddess of Snakes, glazed terracotta statuette attributed to the period Neopalatial 2000 to 1700 BC. It’s a female figure in a long dress, gathered at the sides with an apron-shaped element. A tight bodice shows a narrow waistline and leaves her breasts uncovered. She is holding her hands up and to the sides, one snake in each hand. Or the luxurious gaming board, known as the “Chessboard”, or "Game Matrix" (Dimopoulou) or "Great Chess" (Evans), with inlays of ivory, rock crystal and glass paste, covered with gold and silver leaf, on a wooden base. It was found in the Corridor of the Draughtboard in the Palace of Knossos, north of the Royal Apartments. It's attributed to the period Neopalatial 1600 to 1500 BC.

But the most embarrassing artifact that Crete offers as a challenge to human pride, which claims to know and justify everything with reason, is undoubtedly the Phaistos Disc.

The Phaistos Disc was discovered in 1908 by Italian archaeologist Luigi Pernier. Pernier found the Disc in the Minoan palace-site of Phaistos on the Greek island of Crete. Its maximum diameter is 165mm and the minimum diameter is 158mm. Its thickness varies from 16 to 21 mm. It's a disc of fine clay, worked with extreme care, on which 244 signs were “impressed” - or rather “printed”: 124 on side A and 120 on side B. The signs are set in a spiral pattern on both sides. The figures are grouped in sections or subdivisions, marked by vertical lines. The purity of the clay used, the perfection of the firing, the ability and the precision in the construction of the “matrix” or punches used to print the signs are all remarkable. For some scholars, in fact, given the system of signs impressed in the clay, the Phaistos Disc is considered to be a precursor of the Gutenberg printing system.

The stratigraphical dating ascribes it to roughly 1700 - 1600 BC, although Pernier labelled the area as “disturbed” through the course of history and, therefore, not reliable for any stratigraphical study.

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As a matter of fact, in the layer of earth at the same depth of the Disc and below it, ceramic remains were found, which were more or less attributable, according to Pernier, to the end of the Middle Minoan: Several fragments of Kamares pottery and of pithoi. A piece of a cup was also found, perhaps Mycenaean, and also (but not only) the handle of a “Hellenistic” hydria. Neither carbon 14 tests nor tests of luminescence have been done on the clay. The Phaistos Disc is one of a kind in the series of documentations written in antiquity. No other inscription carries this set of ideograms or characters. The single stamped signs remind us of concepts and situations which correspond to a “Mediterranean” environment and they illustrate visual experiences from everyday life from that age, working tools, plants, animals and figures of the human condition. The great interest for such a small object, apparently of negligible importance, is no doubt due to the great mystery it contains - a mystery that archaeologists and historians of the last 100 years have failed to uncover. The deciphering and research of its meaning has occupied many scholars up until now. They have elaborated the most diverse theories and in doing so, have contributed to keeping interest alive in the Phaistos Disc.

This new interpretation which is derived from knowledge and experiences beyond the pure historical and archaeological context, leads me to say that the signs stamped on both sides are not only graphic symbols but deal with a ritual sequence.

The new interpretation

The Phaistos Disc was created in 2500 BC in Anafi, a small island which belongs to the Cyclades. Its presence at Phaistos must be considered purely coincidental: By the time it had been taken to the location where it was found, its original meaning and purpose had already been lost, even to those who had brought it there. A Cretan priestess devoted to sexual rituals, a member of the priestly community of Malia, had had it made for her exclusive use. The ability to decode the signs through direct knowledge disappeared with her death. Malia, now a tourist town and seaside resort on the northern coast of the island was, during the epoch of the Disc, inhabited only by priests, mostly from the area and some Egyptians. These priests were devoted to ceremonies, cults and rituals and to the learning and teaching of ceremonial procedures and of knowledge which was once reserved to only a few. The Disc was used once a year along with the Kernos Stone, a circular object about 90 cm in diameter, with 34 depressions along the perimeter (thirty-three of the same size and one larger). Today the Kernos Stone is inside the archaeological site of Malia, which is where it was constructed in 2560 BC. This stone is commonly identified as a kind of surface upon which offerings were made; specifically, the so called Panspermia, which was a mixture of different kinds of seeds offered to the Gods along with other agricultural products. It was a common practice in antiquity. In the classical period it was common, for example, to mix small amounts of wheat, barley, oats, lentils, beans, oil, milk, wine, honey, poppy seeds and sheep's wool and offer them to the Gods in small cups. The Panspermia was not first performed by the Minoans, but was already old when they began to perform it. They inherited it from their Neolithic ancestors. Seeds were, indeed, placed in the circular indentation located directly around the large hole in the center of the stone. However, the term Panspermia encompasses two Greek words: pan meaning “all, whole, unique” and sperma meaning “semen” or “seed”.

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The holes of the Kernos Stone were not filled with seeds, but with sperm; the sperm of 34 young men. Originally the stone was inside the ritual area of the Temple of Geometrical Times or the Temple of the Time’s Forms in the district of Gouves, near the present day village of Kalo Chorio, a small inland town not far from Knossos. The site has not yet been subject to systematic excavations, although satellite measurements have been made. It is a pleasant hilly area in the hinterland of the northern coast of the island. The remains of the temple are completely buried. In every ancient tradition, the choice of the location where rituals were carried out was a fundamental one: The form of the temple and the energy of the place itself were both important in making this choice. It was never random: Earth’s forms and energies combined to create the Connection sought in the ritual.

And this was also the case for a very specific ritual which was held during the daytime hours in the Temple of the Time’s Forms in 2500 BC, on June 21. This is the date that we know as the Summer Solstice. This is the day of the year on which there is the maximum duration of light; the maximum light intensity. The sun is perpendicular and the dark forces are less powerful because they are illuminated by the sun: In other words, the strength of what is opposed to the Goal of the ritual is lessened. This is the reason that this was a diurnal ritual.

**The Ritual**

The ceremony consisted of two parts: The first part was a public procession, while only two people were admitted to the second part: the officiant, who was a priestess, and a priest. In this part, the Phaistos Disc and the Kernos Stone were used as *Onfaloi*.

On June 21, the priestess came from Malia to the Temple of the Time’s Forms, where many people had already gathered for the ritual. She had the Disc with her. From the public area of the temple the priestess, the priest and 34 men continued alone to the ritual site. They walked along a path which led them to a nearby hill, which was slightly higher than the rest of the area. Here, in an energy place, in a place of connection between Form and Time, in a very small place enclosed on four sides but open to the sky, in the place where the Kernos Stone was located and with the Disc, the actual ritual took place.

Of the procession, only two people were admitted here: the officiant (the priestess) and the priest. The following factors were vital to the success of the ritual:
1) The location and its energy
2) The geometrical shape of the location itself and the architectural forms at the location
3) The time and the date
4) The presence and the union of both Masculine and Feminine
5) The ritual objects: The Phaistos Disc and the Kernos Stone to be used as a Connection with Creation.

The Disc was placed above the central hole in the Kernos Stone with what is commonly known as side A facing up; exposed to light and to the Union Energy (the side A and side B are the same as is commonly referenced). The face of side B was facing down; exposed to darkness: The procedure in the ritual that served to weaken the forces of the division is described on this side.

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The Phaistos Disc had a very exact position on the Kernos Stone: one specific sign sequence on side A was placed pointing to the largest hole on the perimeter of the Kernos Stone.

Both the priest and priestess stood on the Kernos Stone on opposite sides of the central hole, facing each other - the priestess was on the side of the stone’s largest hole and the priest stood on the other. The Connection was created through the super-positioning of all the elements: the Kernos Stone, the Phaistos Disc and the fusion of Masculine and Feminine. The Disc is one of the elements of this Connection. The combination of all the elements created a vertical flow; a flow moving downward from the Disc and a flow moving upward from the Disc.

Side B of the Disc, which was facing the ground, was the “involution” phase for the priestess; the purpose of this phase was to go deeper into herself and into Matter. The central hole in the Kernos Stone, a sort of cup, served as an energetic amplifier for the process because it profoundly intensified the movement into Matter. Conversely, side A was the “evolution” phase for the priestess; the purpose of this phase was to go to Spirit.

Because side A was facing up and side B was facing down during the ritual, the two spirals developed in opposite directions: the spiral on side A developed clockwise, and the spiral on side B developed counterclockwise. Now, when looking at the Disc, the side being observed is generally facing up and therefore the signs on both sides are read in a clockwise fashion.

The signs describe the steps of the ritual and were intended to help the priestess recall these steps in their correct sequence. They are signs and not symbols\(^1\). Circular lines on both sides of the signs create both a boundary for the signs themselves and at the same time indicate the mode of proceeding for the ritual; side B spiraling downward and side A spiraling upward. Vertical lines divide the signs into groups or sequences: 30 on side B and 31 on side A. Since there are 120 signs on side B and 124 on side A, it follows that the average number of signs per sequence is 4 on both sides. In detail, we can see that the sequences on side B contain a minimum of 2 to a maximum of 5 signs and there are a minimum of 2 to a maximum of 7 in the sequences on side A. Sequences with three signs are more frequent on side A (9), and those with 4 are more frequent on side B (14). These facts suggest the rhythm of the ritual: alternating concentration and expansion.

Conclusion

This new interpretation of the Phaistos Disc is the rediscovery of an ancient ritual and is proof that the ancients had knowledge of the spiritual world in much more depth than we do now. The ritual was one of the most important occasions that put this knowledge and these capabilities into practice. The purpose of the ritual described by the Phaistos Disc was to connect with a specific part of our deepest World - a place beyond the duality that characterizes the world we normally know. In this place we enter an area where we are "one" with a part of Creation. For a few moments, the priestess experiences the "Union" between human, animal, plant and beyond. Many archaeological

\(^1\) "Symbol means the conduit which connects us to a determinate “truth”» (Alessandrini).

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remains testify to the deep bond that the ancients had with that part of Creation with which they were in constant dialogue, even though it was and is not a visible part of Creation itself. The ancients knew several ways to establish this Connection. The Phaistos Disc was one of them. At the moment the Connection was activated duality was overcome through the Union of Masculine and Feminine. This corresponds to the moment in which the ritual reached the Flower, which is the central sign of side A and is one of the patterns of Creation.

Bibliography