

It is not uncommon for an archaeologist, in the course of an excavation, to come across an object so unusual and enigmatic that it becomes an immediate focal point of international scrutiny. Such was the case with the Italian School of Archaeology's discovery of the so-called Phaestos Disk in 1908. Found in the ruins of the Minoan palace at Phaestos, this object was a circular disk of baked clay, about 16 cm in diameter, with both surfaces covered with pictographic signs. From the context in which the disk was found, it would seem to date to the period 1700-1600 B.C. But, what was this unique object?

That it contained a form of writing seemed apparent to all who studied the disk. There were 241 signs inscribed in all on both sides; these were divided by vertical lines into groups, of which there were 30 on one side and 31 on the other. Examination quickly showed that there were 45 individual signs in this script, some of them appearing many times in the different groups. But here agreement came to an end, and numerous questions beset the investigators.

For example, one of the basic problems was to identify the start of the inscription: did it begin in the centre of each side, or at the circumference? Opinions were divided, but the majority view was that the circumference seemed a better place for the inscription to begin. Then, were the various signs phonetic or simply ideographic? Again there was no unanimity, but most scholars working on the disk preferred to see it as phonetic in nature. As for the question of what language was expressed by these signs, numerous theories evolved, championing such tongues as Minoan, Greek, Carian, Hittite, Etruscan, Basque, and Luvian. At present it is Luvian which is receiving the most attention, especially through the work of Leonard Palmer and Vladimir Georgiev. This language belonged to a people living in southwestern Asia Minor during the Bronze Age, and Palmer believes that the Minoans came to Crete from that region.

Complicating the entire matter, however, is the theory held by many authorities that the Phaestos Disk was not made in Crete, but was an import from some other country. This was the belief of Arthur Evans, the excavator of Knossos and the virtual father of Minoan studies; he thought the disk may have been imported from southwestern Asia Minor. Recent work on Crete, however, has revealed signs akin to those found on the disk on other objects that seem native to Crete, and so the current consensus is that the Phaestos Disk was indeed a Minoan artefact. Nonetheless, there is still a vocal minority who point out the "unMinoan" features of some of the signs, such as a man with a feathered headdress and a lady in a garment foreign to the Minoan world.

As far as the content of the disk is concerned, many different and conflicting "translations" have been made. Those who favour Basque as the language of the inscription, for example, have read it as a religious hymn to the Rain God; Georgiev prefers to see a message from one prince to another, complaining of political difficulties; others have found a list of soldiers, or a legal document. A recent suggestion has been offered by Leon Pomerance, who views the signs as ideograms and translates the disk as a kind of farmer's almanac, full of astronomical signs to help a farmer know when to sow and when to reap.

Of course, the main problem in all this is the disagreement among scholars as to what the signs represent. One man's sun symbol turns out to be another man's soldier with a feathered helmet, and so on. Thus, at present we still have a long way to go before the Phaestos Disk will be "cracked." Pessimists feel that unless other examples of this script come to light, the problem will never be solved; optimists, like Pomerance, believe that we are getting closer and closer to finding the key that will unlock the mystery. Let's hope the optimists are right!