

Karl Sornig: Review article: The ultimate assessment

Torsten Timm: *DER DISKOS VON PHAISTOS. FREMDEINFLUSS ODER KRETISCHES ERBE?*¹
Norderstedt 2005, Books on demand GmbH, 238 pp.

0. Writing is a revolutionary new way of communication, it is apt to transcend time and space, its message can be re-read and re-remembered infinitely, even re-discovered, although sometimes deprived of its communicative function (see below).

1.0. Writing systems – as a means to transfer semiotic elements from one medium to another – represent segments of textual passages, either linguistic (phonemes, morphemes, words) or semantic (referents, ideas).

Thus, unmistakably iconic signs could be interpreted as pictograms, which applies to the majority of the discos signs, e. g. D15, representing a tool (axe or hatchet), but definitely not the sacred Minoan labris.

These systems usually develop from iconic pictograms towards more and more abstract symbols to be used by the insider.

1.1. The discos of Phaistos is fascinating for a number of reasons: the iconicity of its signs has been familiar in the Near Eastern area since time immemorial, though the spiral structure of the text sequence is rather exceptional, but above all, the discos is unique for its innovative writing technique, millennia ahead of Gutenberg we are confronted with a felicitous primary idea, viz. the use (and re-use) of separable printing seals.²

1.2. A specific kind of (partly iconic) signs without phonetic values, in use exclusively for semantic differentiation, are determinatives, i. e. hints to distinguish between such classes as "persons", "countries", "plants" or "weapons". 02 might either be a prefix (in leftwards reading) or could mean "person" (:180; 02-12, as a consequence probably "people").

1.3. The number of different signs (45) used for the discos and the mean length of the chains (3,9; linear B = 3.7., linear A = 3.2.³) are the facts why the author favours a syllabic reading of the text (possibly a mixture of syllables and ideograms (:71)), similar to that of

1 Der Diskos von Phaistos ist das fascinosum par excellence für die Schrift(un)kundigen – kaum zu schlagen von den Maya-Hieroglyphen mit ihren Lese-Hilfen: Berichte der Spanier, die extante Indiosprache und die Fülle der Texte.

2 The material of the printing seals has been a subject of discussion ever since the disc was found. Moreover, to use individual printing seals may protect a text against falsification (:187); this is something that deserves consideration for specific text types (see below: 7).

3 This difference is probably caused by the difference in text types.

the various cuneiform writing systems (Akkadian, Hittite, Elamite etc.). The two writing systems (beside the so-called hieroglyphs) in use in Crete, linear A and linear B, have been deciphered as syllabic⁴: a fact tempting enough to interpret the discos writing as syllabic, too.

2. To my knowledge unprecedented, is the author's methodical approach i. e. to implement statistical analysis, so that e. g. the frequency of certain combinations of signs gain syntactic or typological relevance. Moreover, even for short passages in linear A probably significant distributions of signs are evident (:122).



50. Umschreibung der vom A nach B (Seite 126)



51. Umschreibung der vom B nach A (Seite 126)

3.1. Inside-out, or reverse?

The spiral line that structures the text was presumably incised beforehand; besides, there are vestiges of corrections, which leads to the conclusion that the text started from the rim to the centre of the disc.

3.2. Front or back side?

Another similar question to be decided on, is, which side of the discos should be regarded as the beginning of the text (unless the two sides represent two separate texts). Contrary to the original decision which side should be "read" as the first to have been inscribed, the author – on a number of indications and considerations – argues that (the flat) side B was the first (thus, A would find its end in the rather decorative rosette).

4 What strikes me as peculiar is the fact that the interpretation of A and B uses exclusively syllables with initial vowels (VC), whereas all cuneiform systems employ alternatively both VC and CV combinations.

3.3. Directions

The problem of the direction of writing (and consequently (?) of reading) is pertinent to the question whether certain syllabic elements should be regarded as pre- or suffixes, which furthermore may be decisive for typological assumptions.

3.3.1. Leftwards reading: the decisive conclusion

Starting from outside, the discos-signs present what is evidently usual with pictogram-like characters: the reader is faced by the iconic characters (e. g. 01, 02), the same is true for Egyptian hieroglyphs.

Once the direction of writing (and presumably, though not necessarily, of reading as well) has been ascertained the position of the signs inside the chains becomes relevant: final position may indicate suffixes, whereas for the initial position there is a choice between prefix, determinative or ideogram.

4. SYNTACTIC CHARACTERISTICS

The tripartite structure of the chains (some of them recurrent)⁵ indicates a typological model: prefix – word-stem – suffix. The question that arises as a consequence, whether the language of the discos is agglutinative or inflectional must remain undecided.

5. COMPARISON AND HYPOTHESIS: A

Provided the discos is a product from within the vernacular Cretan area, the search for formal (i. e. iconic) parallelisms in the various writing systems seems promising, since it could prove helpful for a future attempt at reading the discos text.⁶

The author presents (rather convincingly) his favourite hypothesis: a relationship with the characters (and the language, as a consequence) of linear A. The comparison is somewhat impeded (:89) by the difference in writing techniques, and last but not least by differences in text structure and purpose. Another fact that remains to be considered is the difference in text material available: the discos text consists of exactly 53 chains, whereas at present there exist about 550 words in A.⁷

5 A side-issue: does the text contain alliteration?

6 I personally cannot detect any similarity of -ra (:171) neither in the Akkadian cuneiform character nor in the ancient Sumerian pictogram.

7 Although similar forms of letters need not necessarily represent identical phonetic values, it is generally assumed that A and B letters present at least similar morphemes.

To discern similarity or dissimilarity of any kind and decide upon its relevancy (architectural symbolic, stylistic, ritual etc.) cannot be the archeologists' business, since their interpretation, is exclusively dependent on the existential understanding of the cultures concerned.

Among other structural and statistically verifiable indications to support Timm's hypothesis is the position (esp. final) of similar signs.

Aware of the danger of over-estimating frequency and position, the author summarizes his results:

"Bei der Diskoschrift könnte es sich um eine bildhafte Variante von Linear A handeln" (:136).

"Der Diskos gäbe demnach eine an Linear A angelehnte Schrift wieder, deren Zeichen, den durch die verwendete Stempeltechnik möglichen Gestaltungsspielraum nutzend, möglichst bildhaft gestaltet wurden. Dies würde erklären, warum die Diskoschrift ein von Linear A verschiedenes Schriftbild besitzt; sie ist eigenständig, bildhaft, versehen mit leichter zu deutenden Motiven. Dadurch hebt sie sich von der als Alltagschrift verwendeten Linearschrift ab" (:134).































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|----------------|---|--|---|--|--|--|---|--|
| Diskos-schrift |  HAEZ ¹²¹ |  H |  D 24 |  D 45 |  A |  D 19 |  D 36 |  D 34 |
| | D 07 | D 12 | D 24 | D 45 | D 22 | D 19 | D 36 | D 34 |
| Linear A |  HAE ¹²² |  A |  AB 54 |  S |  SA |  H |  AB 30 |  AB 39 |
| | AB 57 | AB 78 | AB 54 | AB 76 | A 318 | AB 31 | AB 30 | AB 39 |
| Diskos-schrift |  D 31 |  SA |  S |  S |  SE |  S |  SA | |
| | D 31 | D 16 | D 10 | D 30 | D 43 | D 17 | D 15 | |
| Linear A |  H |  S |  S |  S |  SE |  SA |  SA | |
| | AB 81 | AB 74 | AB 14 | AB 13 | AB 66 | A 322 | A 364 | |

Tabella 13: Formale Zuordnung von Diskoszeichen zu Zeichen in Linear A

6. "TRANSLATIONS"

Since its discovery numerous attempts at deciphering (and translation) of the discos have been ventured and published. The reader gets the impression as if these attempts were governed by a principle of "anything goes".⁸

8 When read logographically, the idea the discos might be a kind of calendar is not altogether inconceivable or abstruse; think of the Aztec La piedra del Sol.

The author presents and discusses a whole gamut of extant research efforts (with the exception of readings from right to left).

7. TEXTUAL FUNCTIONS

Apart from formal (iconic) differences within the obvious resemblance of discos signs and linear A, there is another still more intrinsic difference, as far as textual functions are concerned. In A short lists and notes for everyday purposes were put down in writing, whereas the discos presents a full-fledged text, presumably either political or religious.

Different textual intentions and purposes will imply different stylistic decisions and, as a consequence, produce different surface structures. This means that we can expect complex linguistic elements (syntactical and morphological) in the disco text which are probably absent from the A tablets (though these may contain specific lexical material on the other hand.).

A text of such degree of elaboration and prominent place of deposition (room no 8 in Phaistos) must have served a purpose far beyond what the tiny clay tablets in A or B tried to preserve (for a limited space of time).

Unless some miraculous Rosette-like bilingual text turns up, the present study has – for the time being – to be acknowledged as the ultimate assessment of a mysterious legacy of the Aegean cultural area.

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The latest contribution to a seemingly never-ending discussion that has come to my knowledge was presented by Klaus Krüner (Dresden) in an as yet unpublished manuscript (April 2006). It provides an approach that has hitherto not been considered, the main idea being that the disco-signs (all of them!) should be regarded and understood as ideograms. This hypothesis is accompanied by a comparison of the disco-signs with characters in line A and the Luvian, even the Egyptian hieroglyphs.

In order to interpret the disco-signs as ideograms the author tries to identify their "real" meaning: i.e. not the "real" referents presented but their symbolic implementation! As for the problem of discerning similarity, see above.

Among the few intrinsic details that have rarely been noticed is the striking similarity/analogy between the y-formed sign D 19 and the so-called procession path in the Phaistos palace.