

By Mary Morton Cowan

# AN ANCIENT DISK'S SECRET MESSAGE

Have you ever decoded a secret message? On the Greek island of Crete, in the Mediterranean Sea, there is a message so puzzling that it has remained a secret since its discovery almost one hundred years ago.

The message is ancient. Almost four thousand years ago it was stamped onto a disk that was pressed from a ball of clay. In order to read the message, you need the right system. The problem is, no one knows that system.

This mysterious clay disk is on display at the Archaeological Museum in Iraklion, Crete, along with other Minoan treasures. (The term Minoan refers to Crete's ancient civilization.) The disk, slightly larger than a saucer, is thicker in the center than at the edge. Both sides are covered with hieroglyphics—writing in pictures and symbols.

In 1900, archaeologists uncovered an ancient palace on the north shore of Crete, older than any other European ruins. Crete quickly became a popular digging site. Soon other palaces were

discovered. One July day in 1908, a group of Italian archaeologists were digging among the ruins at the ancient Palace of Phaistos (FYS-toss) on the south shore of Crete. One of them, Dr. Luigi Pernier, uncovered a mud-brick box in a storage room. Inside he found a clay tablet etched with linear writing, pieces of a broken pottery jar, and the clay disk. Brushing dirt off the disk, Pernier saw the mysterious hieroglyphic message.

The Phaistos Disk, as it came to be called, became famous for the way the message was inscribed. Each figure was pressed onto the clay with a stamp or punch—an early form of the printing process. Whoever stamped the disk used a set of punches, probably made of wood or ivory. We can tell that a punch was used for each character because each character is exactly the same every time it appears.

John Chadwick, who was a

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professor of Greek at the University of Cambridge in England, was a world-famous expert on Cretan scripts. In one of his books, he calls the Phaistos Disk “the world’s first typewritten document.” Other scholars agree. Forty-five different characters are stamped onto this disk. If you were going to take the time and effort to make forty-five tiny, well-detailed stamps—each design is only about a half-inch high—you would plan to use them more than once. According to Chadwick, “Its maker must have intended to produce a large number of documents.”

This unique disk is more than an example of ancient printing, however. It is an unsolved puzzle. Nothing like it has been found anywhere else in the world. For years scholars argued about the direction of the writing. “But,” said Chadwick, “it has now been firmly established that in some places one sign very slightly overlaps that to its right.” That proves the maker kept stamping toward the left, creating a spiral toward the center.

For almost a century, scholars and amateurs have been trying to interpret the Phaistos Disk to discover its secret. The most widely accepted opinion is that it has a sacred meaning. We know that Minoans and other ancient Mediterranean cultures worshipped gods and goddesses. The



Forty-five stamps were used to press a total of 241 imprints on the disk (122 on this side, 119 on the other).

thing, the reddish-brown clay is not like clay found on the island. Archaeologists have found so many styles of pottery among the ruins on Crete that they know Minoans traded with people from other Mediterranean cultures. Many of the characters stamped on the disk show distinct cultural features that are *not* Minoan. The pagoda-like structure resembles those from Asia Minor, and the man with a bristly plumed head-dress is probably Philistine, from across the Mediterranean Sea.

For now, the Phaistos Disk remains unreadable. No one has found the key to unlock its secret message. Maybe someday, somewhere, archaeologists will uncover more disks. Then perhaps an expert will decode the system and read the secret of this ancient disk.

• ^ <> # Ω δ - ~ δ // # Ω <> Δ + !

**Clues:**

δ = I      # = B      Ω = E  
/ = L      <> = Y      ^ = A

Answer: It will be yours!

Palace of Phaistos faced north, toward a sacred mountain, and it included areas for sacred rituals. Moreover, other religious relics with spiral inscriptions have been found elsewhere on Crete. Similar signs were etched on a stone altar at another Cretan palace and on a bronze ax found in a sacred cave in the mountains.

When you look closely at the disk, you notice that the message is divided into sections, which may be words or phrases. Several sign groups repeat, suggesting a refrain. Each side of the disk could be a verse of a song or hymn. “But we do not even know if the text is complete,” Chadwick admitted. He believed more disks must be still hidden in ruins somewhere. He always hoped so, for he knew scholars need more

than one document in any script to be able to read it. “My own view,” he wrote, “shared by all serious scholars, is that the Disk is undecipherable so long as it remains an isolated document.”

It is hard to guess where additional disks might be because experts are not sure where the Phaistos Disk was made. For one



This grand staircase leads up to the Palace of Phaistos, where the disk was found.



The island of Crete sits in the middle of the eastern Mediterranean Sea.