Social and symbolic aspects of Minoan writing

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Abstract: This article looks at the non-utilitarian functions of writing in Crete during the Palatial period. It argues that writing was used as a marker of status and prestige and that it was also used for communication with the divine. It also attempts to interpret what have usually been seen as isolated examples of writing systems as pseudo-writing.

Keywords: Aegean Bronze Age, Arkalochori axe, Crete, Cretan Hieroglyphic, Linear A, Linear B, Phaistos disc, pseudo-writing

The two main scripts of the Aegean Bronze Age[1], Linear A and Linear B, were closely related to each other. Linear B was developed from Linear A in order to write Mycenaean Greek, almost certainly a very different language from that represented by Linear A. Both scripts were primarily used for administrative purposes in the palatial bureaucracy, and neither Linear A nor Linear B seems to have been used for writing long continuous texts of a literary, religious, or historical nature. On the other hand, their use and significance do not exhibit an exact correspondence. Differences in the administrative use of the two scripts have been discussed by Bennet (1990) and Palaima (1987). Furthermore, while the use of Linear B seems to have been restricted to the palatial bureaucracy, Linear A clearly had a much wider area of use. This suggests that Linear A had social and symbolic meanings which were not carried over into Linear B. The purpose of this article is to look at the non-administrative aspects of Minoan writing in the Palatial period.

Most discussions of early writing systems concentrate on questions of literacy and the communicative function of writing. However, writing can also have important symbolic meanings which are linked to the physical appearance of the signs used or to the act of writing.[2] Characters in themselves can have or acquire a magical or religious significance as was the case with Egyptian hieroglyphs, with northern European runes, and with Arabic in West Africa (Davies 1990:86–92; Moltke 1985:77, 487–493).[3] The ability to write can be perceived as a sign of magical or spiritual power. In societies where literacy is connected with religion, writing

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can be regarded as an exclusive means of communication with the supernatural (e.g. Tambiah 1968). When writing is part of élite identity, as was the case in Mesoamerica, literacy may be regarded as a prerogative of the élite and strictly guarded (Coe and Kerr 1998:97–101; Houston 2000:150; Marcus 1992:27–28, 437–438; cf. Baines 1989:475 on Egypt). In societies where literacy is restricted, writing therefore often symbolizes prestige or authority, and consequently the symbolic aspect of an inscription may be as important as or even more so than the actual information conveyed by the text. This is an important factor in understanding the meaning and function of large public inscriptions in societies where literacy is restricted to an élite or a small scribal caste.

In the Protopalatial period there seem to have been two systems of writing in use on Crete, Linear A and the so-called Cretan hieroglyphic script. It seems probable that the creation of writing in Crete was related to the emergence of a palatial élite and the development of centralized administration in Middle Minoan Ia at the latest (Godart 1979; Olivier 1986:379; Schoep 1999, 2001).[4] More clearly, the economic nature of the first palatial documents, the Proto-Linear A from Phaistos and the Cretan Hieroglyphic associated with Malia and Knossos, gives the impression that the primary purpose of early Minoan writing was administrative. The function of the earliest evidence for writing, the so-called Archanes script, has also been associated with the development of an administrative system, as has the use of seals in the Prepalatial period. There is no evidence that writing was used for monumental display purposes, and writing does not otherwise seem to have been overtly associated with statements of political and social power. On the other hand, since writing was clearly an integral part of the functioning of power, it is possible that there was some recognized connection between the ability to record information in a permanent form and the legitimation of the palatial élite. Moreover it has been argued that at Malia seals with hieroglyphic inscriptions were used primarily for a religious purpose (Poursat 1989:223).

Writing seems to have developed clear ritual connotations by the beginning of the Neopalatial period, and it is arguable that the potential of writing was exploited to some extent by the élite in order to manifest its ritual power and thereby strengthen its position. Many examples of writing are on objects which have a religious function, such as the inscribed stone vessels and the metal double-axes found in cultic contexts.[5] These are objects which reflect the high status of the dedicator and they can therefore be associated with the expression of status and power in a ritual context (cf. Schoep 1994:20). Writing may therefore have played an important role in materializing the relations between the élite and the divine world. By means of the inscription, the dedicator could display the ability to communicate with the gods and could visibly affirm a privileged relationship with the divine. It might also be possible to say that the display of writing in cultic contexts played a role in the development of close associations between ritual and political power in the Neopalatial period.

The Linear A inscriptions on a gold ring from the Mavrospelio cemetery (CMS II.3:38; Godart and Olivier 1982:KNZf13), a gold pin in the Ayios Nikolaos Museum (Godart and Olivier 1982:KR(?)Zf1; Olivier et al. 1981:3–25), a silver pin probably

from a Neopalatial burial in the area outside the tombs at Platanos (Alexiou and Brice 1976; Godart and Olivier 1982:PLZf1), and a silver pin from the Mavrospelio cemetery (Alexiou and Brice 1972; Godart and Olivier 1982:KNZf31) would seem clear evidence that writing was also used as a marker of status and prestige. Accordingly, as in many other societies, early writing in Crete may have functioned as an expression of religious and social status. However, the fact that Linear A inscriptions have also been found on objects of mediocre manufacture could suggest that the ability to write was not necessarily restricted to the élite (Karetsou et al. 1985:105; Schoep 1994:9, 19).[6] The use of writing for cult purposes seems also to have survived the downfall of the Neopalatial élite, as can be seen from the inscription on a figurine found in a building at Poros. The figurine has been dated to the transition between Late Minoan IIIa1 and IIIa2 (Dimopoulou et al. 1993).

The symbolic connotations of early Cretan writing are also suggested by the occurrence of what have been considered isolated examples of otherwise unattested writing systems. One of the most enigmatic objects in Minoan archaeology is the Phaistos disc (Fig. 1).[7] This is a circular disc of baked clay which has on both sides a number of signs arranged in a spiral. In all there are 242 signs which were made in the wet clay by some kind of stamped typeface. The impression that the signs on the disc represent some form of writing is given by the fact that a number of the signs occur more than once and by the fact that they are divided into groups by incised lines. Some of the signs on the Phaistos disc are vaguely comparable to signs of the Cretan hieroglyphic script, but on the whole they bear no conclusive resemblance to the two existing Cretan writing systems (Godart 1979:37).[8] Although the inscription on the Phaistos disc is unique, it has been almost universally assumed that the signs depicted on the disc are

Figure 1. *A and B Both faces of the Phaistos disc. (Photographs: gentile concessione della Scuola Archeologica Italiana di Atene).*

meaningful and represent some form of writing. However, as writing can be defined as a system of communication based on conventional signs, which is used to record information conveyed through language in a permanent or semi-permanent form, a writing-system cannot have existed for use on just one object. It has therefore been assumed, explicitly or implicitly, that the script of the Phaistos disc must have been represented on other objects that have not survived, possibly because they were made of perishable materials. As both Cretan Hieroglyphic and Linear A occur on objects made from non-perishable materials – such as pottery, stone, ivory, and metal – this seems *prima facie* rather unlikely.[9] Alternatively, the Phaistos disc has been considered an import, but convincing extra-Cretan parallels are also non-existent (cf. Chadwick 1990:190–192).

The fact that no clear parallels, Cretan or otherwise, exist for the sign system of the Phaistos disc raises the possibility that the signs are not logograms or syllabograms, constituting real writing and a meaningful text, but represent rather the idea of writing, that is to say, pseudo-writing. The majority of the signs on the Phaistos disc are clearly pictographic, representing humans, fish, birds, or floral motifs. They have a generic resemblance to motifs found in the seals and amulets of the Mesara tholoi which suggests that they could derive from the same repertoire of images (cf. Branigan 1970:66–69). It can accordingly be suggested that the maker of the Phaistos disc used motifs that were familiar from seals and amulets and assembled them into groups in order to imitate the appearance of writing. The technique of stamping designs on clay is known from a pottery fragment found at Psychro and from an offering table found at Phaistos which is decorated with stamped bulls around the rim (Gesell 1985:16, cat.102, pl.122; Hooker 1979). Since many of the signs on the Phaistos disc are pictographic it can further be posited that the maker of the disc had a pictorial script in mind. Accordingly, it can be suggested that the inscription was intended to imitate Egyptian hieroglyphs and was made by someone who knew that Egyptian hieroglyphic writing was iconic in character, consisting of recognizable pictures of natural or man-made objects. The inscription can then be seen in the context of the number of Egyptian or Egyptianizing objects in Crete in the early Minoan and middle Minoan periods.

The inscription on a large bronze double-axe from the end of the middle Minoan period, found in a ritual deposit in a cave at Arkalochori in central Crete, is also unique and may be a further example of fake writing in Minoan Crete.[10] Like the Phaistos disc, the Arkalochori inscription seems to refer to actual writing. Some of the signs have been compared to Linear A and to the Cretan hieroglyphic script.

Parallels for fake writing can be found. In the Greek Archaic period, vases with nonsense inscriptions, including fake letter-forms, are known (Boardman 1974:200–201; Spivey 1991:142). Egyptian motifs taken out of context were popular among Phoenician seal engravers who copied scarabs. In several cases, these Egyptianizing objects were provided with pseudo-hieroglyphs (Markoe 2000:154). According to Boardman (1974), the purpose of the fake writing on the Greek vases was to increase the prestige and value of the vase, and presumably, the imitation of Egyptian writing by the Phoenicians served the same purpose.[11] Another example comes from Iron Age Scandinavia, when thin gold discs stamped with designs

derived from Roman Imperial coins, called bracteates, were very popular as personal ornaments (Moltke 1985:108–121; Page 1987:30).[12] A large number of these have runic inscriptions, most of which are unintelligible and include at times fake runic letters. It seems obvious that these bracteates were made by illiterate goldsmiths for customers who were themselves illiterate and unable to check the genuineness of the writing. As long as the fake runic inscription gave the appearance of real writing, the customer presumably would in most cases have been satisfied. There is also a possible example from Crete itself. A small number of stirrup jars from the Post-palatial period have painted inscriptions in Linear B which are difficult to read. It has therefore been suggested by Hallager (1987:176, n. 46) that unauthorized workshops may have copied without understanding the signs from other vases or painted them from memory in order to increase the value of their products.[13] Further investigation might reveal that fake writing is a not uncommon phenomenon in societies where the use of writing is known, but where a large part of the population is illiterate.

The double-axe was a cultic symbol in Minoan Crete and the context of the Arkalochori axe was clearly ritual. The material with which it was found included bronze swords, daggers, and a large number of double-axes in gold, silver, and bronze. Two of the double-axes, one in gold and the other in silver, had inscriptions in Linear A. It can therefore be concluded that the imitation of writing on the large bronze axe was intended to have a ritual significance. In the same way as the writing in Linear A on other objects found in cultic contexts, the purpose of the inscription will have been to enhance the symbolic force of the dedication.

The purpose of the Phaistos disc is not so easy to discern. However, the assumption that the inscription had a similar cultic function or significance would seem a reasonable starting-point. Although the literature on the Phaistos disc is immense, interest has been almost exclusively epigraphical and concentrated on analysing the signs, the writing system, and the nature of the text recorded on the disc. The disc itself has usually been seen merely as a vehicle for the text, related to the clay tablets with Cretan hieroglyphic script or Linear A. However, in contrast to all other documents from Minoan Crete written on clay tablets, the Phaistos disc was deliberately baked and its circular shape is unique (Duhoux 1977:17, 1998:11). Although this may be incidental, it could also be significant and indicate that the function of the disc itself was not unimportant.

The Phaistos disc consists of a roughly circular clay disc, approximately 160 mm in diameter. Comparable objects on Crete are not easy to find. On the other hand, fairly close parallels to the shape and size of the Phaistos disc can be found in clay plaques or discs, identified as game-boards, which are known from various times and places in the Near East (Decker 1992:125; Fittà 1998:150, fig. 254; Murray 1952:21; Pusch 1979:156). One example comes from seventh-century BC Ur and was used for playing an Egyptian game known as hounds and jackals (Fig. 2). The Phaistos disc has an incised spiral pattern which is divided into segments, and which may be a stylized rendition of a snake. As such it is not unlike examples of the Egyptian board game *Mehen*, which was played on circular boards with a representation of a coiled snake occupying the entire surface. The body of the snake was divided into sections separated by narrow grooves or incised lines (Fig. 3). *Mehen*

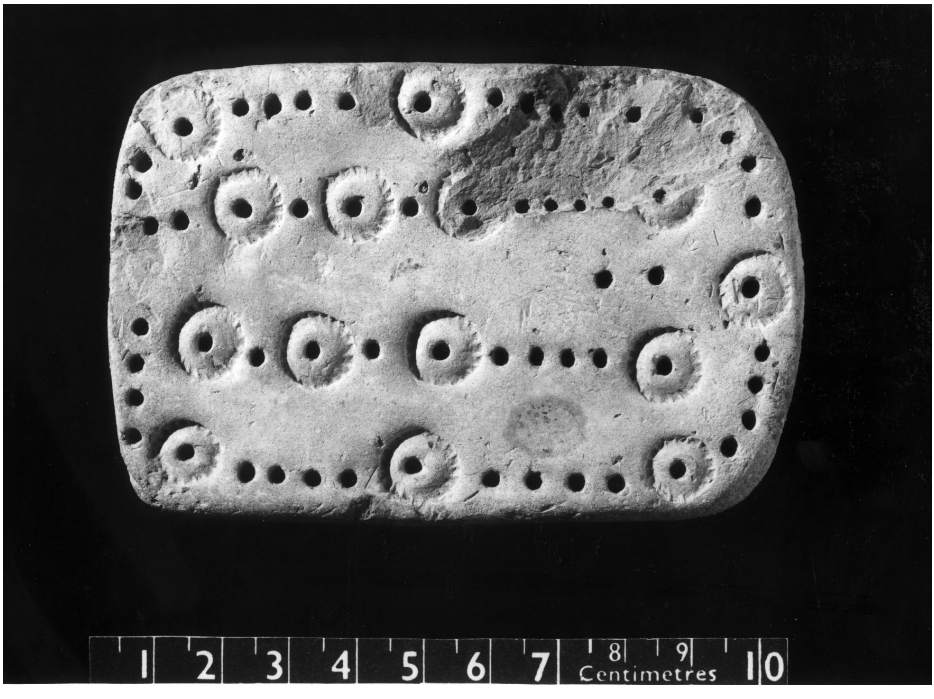

Figure 2. *Clay game-board from Ur. (Photograph: courtesy of the Trustees of the British Museum, London.)*

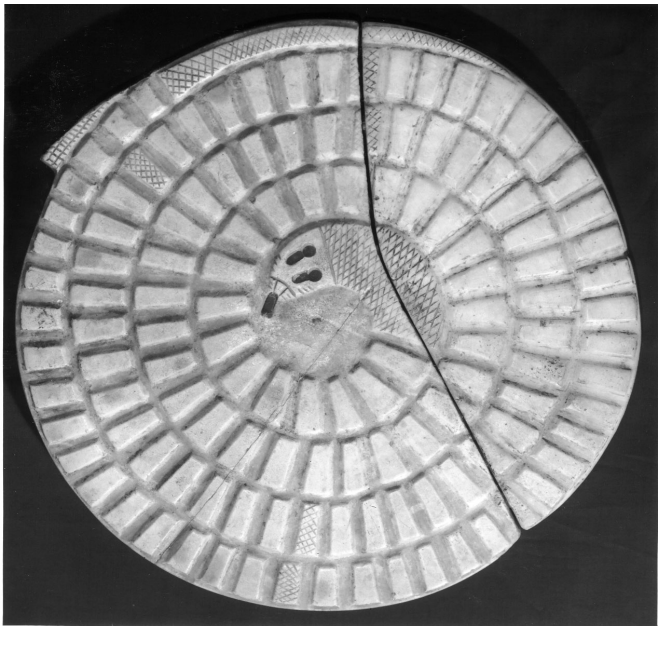

Figure 3. Mehen *game-board from Egypt. (Photograph: courtesy of the Fitzwilliam Museum, Cambridge.)*

is represented on Cyprus throughout the Bronze Age, and it seems likely that the game was also played on Crete. Large stone slabs with a flat or flattish upper surface, on which depressions have deliberately been made, are often found in connection with floors, courts, and thresholds on Cretan sites (Hillbom 2003; Swiny 1980, 1986; Whittaker 2002). It seems most probable that these stones were game-boards and comparison with the Cypriote material suggests that they were used for the same Egyptian game. In consideration of the parallels between the Phaistos disc and Near Eastern game-boards made of clay it can be suggested that the Phaistos disc represents another example of *Mehen* on Crete. In Egypt, *Mehen* apparently had a funerary significance and was associated with the passage of the dead through the Underworld (Piccione 1990). It is therefore of considerable interest that several of the stones with depressions from Crete have been found in connection with burials indicating that the game may have had a symbolic significance associated with funerary ritual.

If the identification of the Phaistos disc as a game-board is valid, it would seem unlikely that it was intended for actual playing. Rather, it can be suggested that it should be considered a votive miniature, perhaps made specifically for burial. If this was the case it can be compared to the miniature clay models of game-boards which have been found in Greek Archaic tombs (Vermeule 1979:80–82). It is possible to see a further parallel in a brick-shaped terracotta game-board from Cyprus belonging to the Hadjiprodromoi Collection (Fig. 4). The board, which represents the

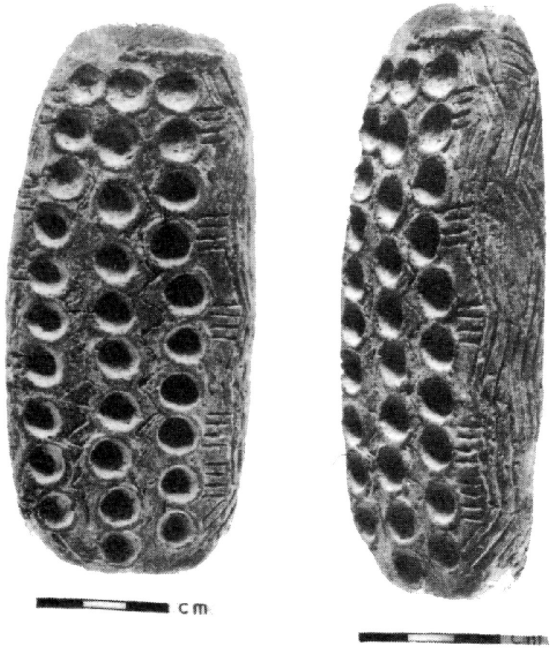

Figure 4. *Two views of the terracotta Senet game-board in the Hadjiprodromou Collection, Cyprus. (Photograph courtesy of Stuart Swiny.)*

Egyptian game *Senet*, is in an excellent state of preservation, which suggests that it may have come from a tomb. Its provenance is uncertain but it may have been purchased in a village which is close to a plundered Middle Cypriote cemetery (Swiny 1980:55, 58, n4, 1986:33). The board, which is 140 mm long and 60 mm wide, is decorated with incised zig-zags and clusters of incised lines in a manner which is typical of middle Cypriote pottery. It seems likely that it should be considered a votive miniature.

The ritual significance of the Phaistos disc is also suggested by its find context. It was found, along with a fragment of a Linear A tablet, in Vano 8 of House 101, just north-east of the palace at Phaistos. House 101 may have had a religious function. The associated pottery dates the find context to the end of the Protopalatial period, but the date of manufacture of the disc may obviously be considerably earlier. The imitation of Egyptian writing may have been associated with the Egyptian origin of *Mehen*, but from a more general perspective the imitation of a script associated with a culture which the Minoans admired and probably were in awe of may have been mainly intended to further increase the prestige and symbolic value of the object.

It can be suggested that the intention of the pseudo-writing on the Arkalochori axe and on the Phaistos disc was to reinforce the votive significance of the object and accordingly that they represent claims to ritual prestige by persons who were not proficient in any of the Cretan writing systems.

The Phaistos disc would seem to be somewhat earlier in date than the Arkalochori axe and the objects inscribed with Linear A from cultic contexts. However, in view of the fact that the seals with Cretan hieroglyphic writing may have had a religious function, it could be hypothesized that an explicit association between ritual and writing goes back at least to the Middle Minoan II period. It is likely that acquaintance with Egyptian writing played a significant part in the development of Minoan writing systems (Olivier 1986:378; Watrous 1998:23). It may therefore be relevant that in Egypt writing was from the earliest period of great ideological importance. Writing was used for religious display and played a not insignificant role in the self-identification of the élite (Baines 1988, 1989). Thus it is suggested that Egyptian influence on Minoan Crete in the Protopalatial period may have encompassed the symbolic association of writing, ritual, and status. However, it can be suggested that the symbolic role of writing on Minoan Crete was relatively marginal in comparison with Egypt. As has been discussed by Baines (1988, 1989) art and writing were closely intertwined in Egyptian élite expression. This does not seem to have been the case on Crete, where writing does not occur in connection with pictorial representation.[14]

The fact that Linear B seems to have been restricted to a utilitarian administrative purpose, indicates that the Mycenaeans were selective in their attitude to literacy. Both the fact that literacy was not put to personal use as a manifestation of status and the fact that the Mycenaeans did not find its use appropriate to communication with the divine may be a reflection of cultural differences between Minoans and Mycenaeans. While the Mycenaeans may not necessarily have deliberately rejected Minoan practice, it can be proposed that Mycenaean society placed an emphasis on immediate oral performance which did not allow for the use of writing in symbolic and social contexts.[15]

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NOTES

1. There are two systems of relative chronology in use for the Cretan Bronze Age, one based on the pottery sequence, the other on the construction, destruction, reconstruction, and final destruction of the palaces. The Cretan Bronze Age is conventionally called Minoan and is divided up into three major periods determined by ceramic styles (Early Minoan c. 3300–2000 BC, Middle Minoan c. 2000–1600 BC, Late Minoan c. 1600–1050 BC) with further subdivisions. The Prepalatial period corresponds to the Early Minoan period; the Protopalatial period, the time of the first palaces, lasted from Middle Minoan Ia to the end of Middle Minoan IIIa. The Neopalatial period lasted from Middle Minoan IIIb to the end of the Late Minoan I period when the palaces, with the exception of Knossos, were destroyed. According to the majority view, the palace at Knossos was destroyed in Late Minoan IIIa2 (c. 1375 BC) and the ensuing period, the last phase of the Bronze Age, is called the Postpalatial period. Both relative and absolute dates are disputed; see Dickinson (1994:10–22) for a discussion of the relative and absolute chronologies of the Aegean Bronze Age.

2. See for example Linders (1992) on the symbolic aspects of the Greek inscriptions containing temple inventories and accounts, and Whitley (1997) on the symbolic purpose of Cretan law inscriptions.

3. With regard to runes, their magic character in the Middle Ages is evident from the fact that Latin prayers or magical formulae could be written in runes in order to increase their efficacy (Holbek 1989:184). On the ritual power of Arabic among the Ashanti of Ghana early in the nineteenth century AD see Goody (1968:201–202) and Wilks (1966:331–332).

4. In Egypt there was an association between the invention of writing and the development of centralized government (Baines 1988:205, 1989:472; Bard 2000:78–82; Davies 1990:110); in the Harappan culture of the Indus Valley, the emergence of writing coincides with the development of complex forms of social, political, and ideological order (Kenoyer 2000:93). For an interesting analysis of the political aspects of early writing in the Mesoamerican world see Marcus (1992). For a general discussion on the function of early writing see Postgate et al. (1995).

5. For a detailed discussion of the inscribed stone vessels see Schoep (1994) and compare Warren (1969:48–49, 62–68) and Karetsou et al. (1985). See also Tsipopoulou (1982) on a bronze bowl with a Linear A inscription which may have come from the Peak Sanctuary at Kophinas.

6. See also Godart and Olivier (1982:TyZg1) for an example of a Linear A inscription on a clay figure from Tylissos.

7. The Phaistos disc is a unique object and the temptation to disregard it as a fake or a hoax is considerable. However, as it was found in a good archaeological context, the balance is heavily weighted towards accepting its authenticity (Duhoux 1977:15–16). See, however, Godart (1979:36) on the find circumstances. In general on the Phaistos disc see Duhoux (1977) and Olivier (1975).

8. See, however, Owens (1997:41, 2000:238) who argues that the inscription on the Phaistos disc should be seen as a variant of the Cretan hieroglyphic script; cf. Hood (1971:112) who compares the signs on the Phaistos disc to those on a stone block (possibly part of an offering table) from Malia. See also Hooker (1979:17).

9. For Cretan Hieroglyphic see Olivier and Godart (1996). For Linear A see Godart and Olivier (1982). See also Tsipopoulou and Hallager (1996) on the examples of hieroglyphics and Linear A found at Petras.

10. On the Arkalochori axe see Duhoux (1998:14–16) and Hooker (1979:18). That the inscription on the Archalochori axe was made by an illiterate person has previously been suggested by Godart (1995, not seen). This suggestion has been emphatically rejected by Duhoux (1998) and Owens (2000:242–244); their arguments do not, however, seem decisive or relevant. The fact that two of the votive axes with which the Archalochori axe was found have inscriptions in Linear A does not signify either way.

11. Vickers (1985:127) has, however, argued that Athenian potters worked from drawings intended for silversmiths, and that the bad spelling and nonsense inscriptions seen on some black figure vases derive from mistakes made in copying. For a refutation of Vicker's views on Athenian pottery see Boardman (1987) and Cook (1987).

12. The bracteates have been dated to a 100-year period on either side of AD 500. The centre of production seems to have been Denmark, but they are also found elsewhere in Scandinavia.

13. I owe this reference to one of the reviewers.

14. I owe this point to one of the reviewers.

15. The importance of oral performance to the state ideology at Pylos is emphasized by Davis and Bennet (1999).

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BIOGRAPHICAL NOTE

Helène Whittaker is Professor of Greek and Latin at the University of Tromsø. She wrote her doctoral dissertation on Mycenaean sanctuaries (*Mycenaean Cult Buildings. A Study of their Architecture and Function in the Context of the Aegean and Eastern Mediterranean*, Monographs from the Norwegian Institute at Athens Vol. 1, 1997) and has published on both classical philology and archaeology (mainly Bronze Age Greece).

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ABSTRACTS

Aspects sociaux et symboliques de l'écriture minoenne
Helène Whittaker

Cet article se penche sur l'emploi non fonctionnel de l'écriture en Crète pendant la période palatiale. On prétend que l'écriture fut utilisée comme indicateur de statut et de prestige, de même que comme moyen de communication avec le monde divin. De plus, on essaie d'interpréter comme pseudoécriture ce qui jusqu'à présent a été considéré comme des systèmes d'écriture isolés.

Mots clés: âge du Bronze égéen, hache de Arkalochori, Crète, hiéroglyphes crétois, linéaire A, linéaire B, disque de Phaistos, pseudoécriture

Soziale und symbolische Aspekte der minoischen Schrift
Helène Whittaker

Der Artikel beschäftigt sich mit den non-utilitaristischen Funktionen der Schrift während der kretischen Palast-Epoche. Er legt dar, dass Schrift als Marker von Status und Prestige sowie weiterhin auch für die Kommunikation mit der göttlichen Ebene genutzt wurde. Zudem versucht er, das, was gewöhnlich als isolierte Beispiele von Schriftsystemen angesehen worden ist, als Pseudo-Schrift zu interpretieren.

Schlüsselbegriffe: Ägäische Bronzezeit, Axt von Arkalochori, Kreta, kretische Hieroglyphen, Linear A, Linear B, Diskos von Phaistos, Pseudo-Schrift