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LOW-RELIEF POTTERS' MARKS AND THE PHAISTOS DISC: A NOTE ON THE "COMB" SIGN (N. 21)*

GIORGIA BALDACCI

Riassunto. Lo studio condotto dall'Autrice sui marchi da vaso in bassorilievo, rinvenuti a Festòs durante gli scavi effettuati da Doro Levi (1950-1966), ha consentito di verificare che il marchio inedito presente sul fondo del bacino F 4718 (MM IIIA iniziale), proveniente dalla Casa a Sud della Rampa, reca uno dei segni presenti sulla faccia A del Disco di Festòs, il cosiddetto "pettine" (N. 21). Nel presente articolo, il marchio sul bacino F 4718 viene esaminato in modo contestuale, prendendo in considerazione anche le caratteristiche del vaso e il suo luogo di rinvenimento. Sulla base dei dati raccolti vengono in seguito valutate le implicazioni relative alla presenza dello stesso segno sui due manufatti, il bacino e il Disco.

Περίληψη. Η μελέτη που διεξήχθη από τη συγγραφέα του παρόντος άρθρου, με θέμα τα σημεία των κεραμέων σε αγγεία από το υλικό των ανασκαφών του Doro Levi (1950-1966) οδήγησε στην αποκάλυψη ότι η βάση της φιάλης F 4718 (πρώιμη MM IIIA) από την Casa a Sud della Rampa φέρει ως σημείο κεραμέως το ίδιο σύμβολο με αυτό που εμφανίζεται στην όψη Α του Δίσκου της Φαιστού το επονομαζόμενο "comb sign" (N. 21). Το παρόν άρθρο μελετά το σημείο του κεραμέως στη φιάλη F 4718 λαμβάνοντας υπόψη τα αρχαιολογικά συμφραζόμενα σχετικά με το ίδιο αγγείο και τον χώρο εύρεσής του με σκοπό να διερευνήσει ζητήματα που αφορούν στη χρονολόγηση και τη λειτουργία του. Στη συνέχεια εξετάζονται οι επιπτώσεις της παρουσίας του ίδιου σημείου στο αγγείο και τον Δίσκο.

Abstract. Study of the low-relief potters' marks found at Phaistos during Levi's excavation (1950-1966) revealed that the unpublished mark placed on the bottom of the bowl F 4718 (MM IIIA early), coming from the Casa a Sud della Rampa, bears one of the signs which appear on side A of the Phaistos Disc: the so called "comb sign" (N. 21). Here the potmark on bowl F 4718 is examined in its context, along with the vessel and its findspot, to ascertain its chronology and its function. Then, the implications of the presence of the same sign both on the bowl and on the disc are taken into account.

1. LOW-RELIEF POTTERS' MARKS IN THE WESTERN MESARA: AN OVERVIEW

Low-relief potmarks have been found on semi-coarse vessels, generally plain or simply painted in dark-on-light, in the three major Minoan sites of the Western Mesara, Phaistos¹, Hagia Triada² and Kommos³, which share the same ceramic tradition. In addition, a good number of specimens come from Malia⁴, and one is recorded at Archanes⁵ too. The appearance of such marks is much restricted to the Protopalatial era, being attested in the Mesara area in all the ceramic phases of the period (MM IB, MM IIA, MM IIB), while few examples have been found in contexts dated to MM IIIA. Afterwards, this practice seems to disappear, likely as a consequence of the changes observed in technology and society after the fall of the First Palaces.

* The present article is part of a wider project of mine, which aims at a global study of the low relief potmarks at Phaistos: it is the subject of a postdoctoral fellowship awarded by INSTAP (Institute for Aegean Prehistory, Philadelphia), which organization I warmly thank. I would like to express my gratitude to the Greek Archaeological Service and to the former director of the Italian Archaeological School at Athens (IASA), E. Greco, for granting me permission to study the potmarks found at Phaistos during Levi's excavations. My gratitude goes also to D. Panagiotopoulos for welcoming me at the Institute of Classical Archaeology at Heidelberg, where I carried out part of the research with a DAAD scholarship. I. Symiakaki's help proved essential in retrieving from the IASA Archives the documentation pertaining to the mark presented here. My warm thanks go to S. Mandalaki, and to E. Tziraki, respectively director and curator of the Archaeological Museum of Heraklion, for giving me the possibility to see and study the potmark. Lastly, I want to express my gratitude to F. Carinci and to the other

friends – S. Antonello, B. Montecchi, A. Sanavia – who were helpful in giving me advice and discussing the theoretical problems related to the research; a warm thank you to M. Anastasiadou, N. Cucuzza and D. Panagiotopoulos for reading a draft version of this paper, and to the two anonymous referees who improved the text with useful suggestions.

¹ Cf. LEVI 1976, pl. 228.

² BALDACCI 2013b.

³ VAN DE MOORTELE 2006, 299-300, 308 and, in general, 345-346, pls. 3.17A and B (Ja/45, Ja/46, Ja/47, Je/30 and Je/31).

⁴ Quartier MU: POURSAT *et alii* 1978, 106-116, NN. 58-81 and POURSAT 1996, 176-178, NN. 332-337; Sanctuaire MM II: POURSAT 1966, 536; Maison des morts: VAN EFFENTERRE-VAN EFFENTERRE 1963, 95, pls. XI, XXXV.

⁵ SAKELLARAKIS-SAKELLARAKI 1997, 274-275, figs. 219, 221.

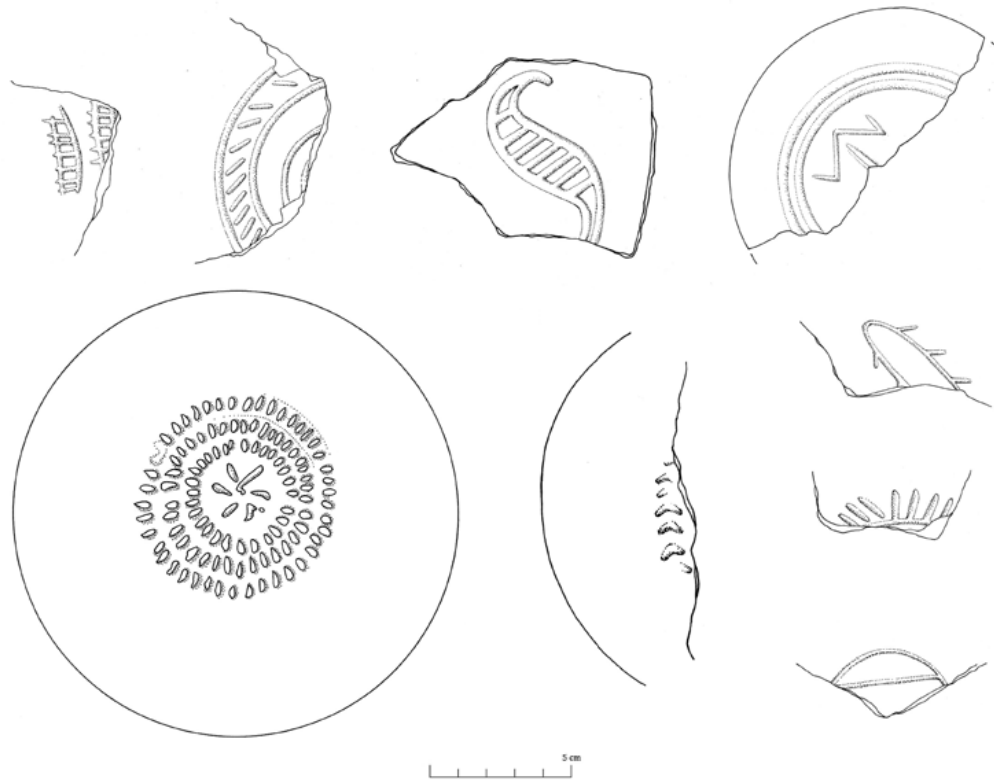


Fig. 1. Low-relief potmarks: specimens from Hagia Triada (drawings by G. Merlatti).

The potmarks consist of quite elaborate motifs (Fig. 1) left in low-relief on the external base of the vases (Fig. 2): they are formed from contact with the uppermost part of the wheel-head arrangement (the so-called “bat”)⁶, which bore the sign incised (in negative). The bat, as it has been possible to ascertain through the observation of the *chaîne opératoire* in the Cretan traditional potters’ workshops⁷, was a removable device and will have been placed on the wheel-head; it was secured by raw clay placed between itself and wheel-head: this assured adhesion and also could be used to guarantee the device was horizontal (Fig. 3). The vase was modelled and left dry on the bat, acquiring thus its central motif as a low-relief. During the drying phase, the bat was removed from the wheel-head, so further pots could be produced. Such bats have been recovered in Phaistos Palace⁸ (Fig. 3), Hagia Triada⁹ and in Quartier Mu at Malia¹⁰.

Being made during the first stages of the vessel’s manufacture, the low-relief potmarks on the vases’ bottoms belong to the class of the pre-firing marks, clearly distinguished from the marks applied in the later stages of life of the pot, i.e. signs scratched or incised *after* firing. At the same time, low-relief marks are different in nature from the usually simple signs incised in clay¹¹ prior to firing which are found in the same sites and levels¹² and, more generally, are used as marking systems not only in many Cretan¹³, Aegean¹⁴ and Eastern Mediterranean¹⁵ sites throughout the Bronze Age, but also in cultures distant to each other

⁶ For the functioning of this type of potter’s wheel, cf. EVELY 2000, 283, 274, fig. 111 (Type 2).

⁷ FIANDRA-PELAGATTI 1962, 14-16; HAMPE-WINTER 1962, 16-19 (Asomatos); VOYATZOGLOU 1984, 135 (Thrapsanò); ΣΚΑΒΕΝΙΤΗΣ 1996, 87 (Hagioi Pantes).

⁸ F 2298 and F 2307: CARINCI 1997, 320; EVELY 2000, 273, NN. 29 and 31, fig. 111, pl. 73.

⁹ HTR 1052: CARINCI 1997, 320; BALDACCI 2013b.

¹⁰ 71 M/H 427: POURSAT *et alii* 1978, 115, N. 80b, pl. XXVIII; M 91/3114-18: OLIVIER 1996, 178, N. 338, pl. 69. See also POURSAT 1996, 112; POURSAT-KNAPPETT 2005, 34-35.

¹¹ Such marks were applied either with a pointed tool or with the fingernails.

¹² Phaistos: LEVI-CARINCI 1988, 297; Hagia Triada: unpublished cooking pot from a MM IB-MM IIA level in *vano δ* retrieved in the soundings beneath the LM III *Sacello* (BALDACCI 2013a); Kommos: VAN DE MOORTEL 2006, 345-350; Malia: POURSAT 2001. On the interpretation of such marks see: POURSAT 2001 and POURSAT-KNAPPETT 2005, 183, n. 44 (Malia); VAN DE MOORTEL 2006, 346-350 (Kommos).

¹³ For a general catalogue and discussion, cf. CHRISTAKIS 2014 (impressed and incised marks are considered together).

¹⁴ Cf., for example HALEPA BIKAKI 1984 (Hagia Irini) and LINDBLOM 2001 (MH and LH Aeginitan pottery).

¹⁵ Cf., for example HIRSCHFELD 2002 (Late Bronze Age Enkomi; note that pre-firing marks characterize only the Red Lustrous Wheelmade spindle bottles, while the other marks detected are post-firing ones).

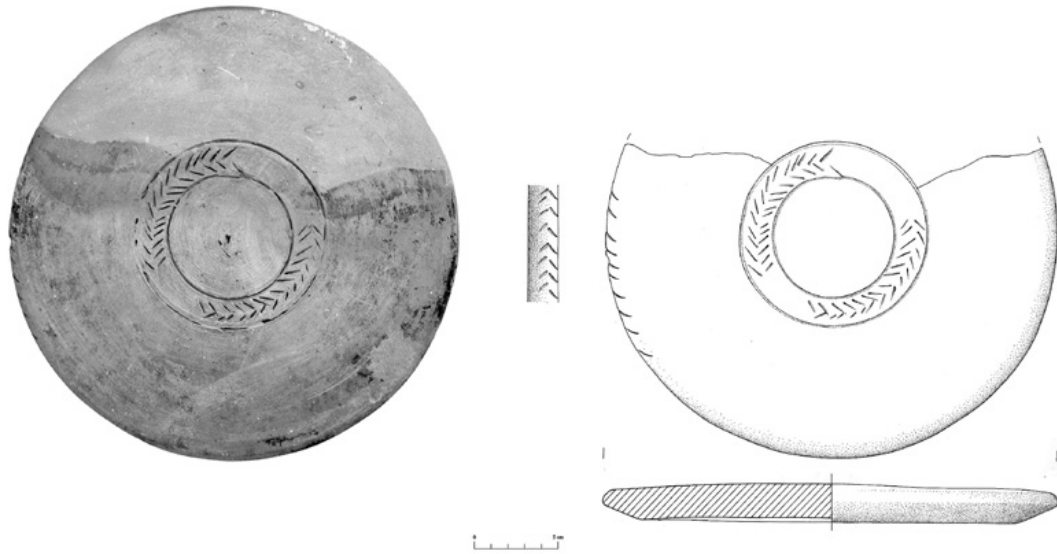


Fig. 2. Bat with incised motif from Phaistos (F 2298) (photo by the A.; drawing by G. Merlatti).

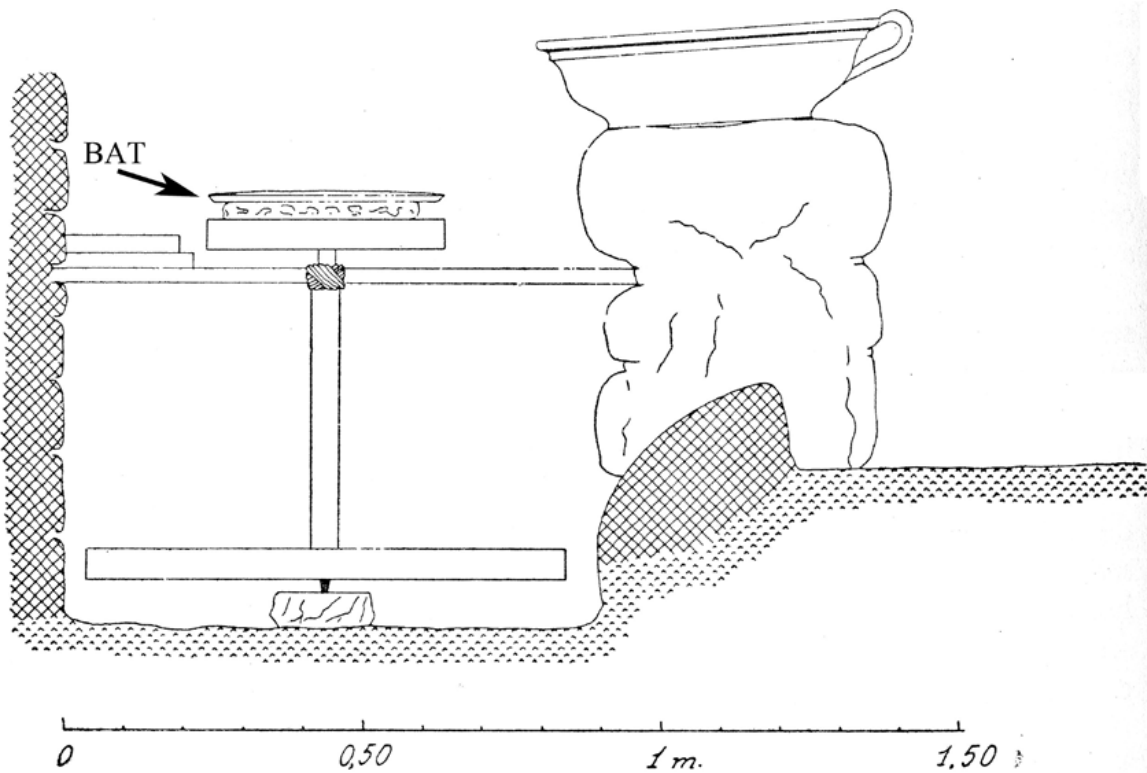


Fig. 3. Potter's wheel with bat, as observed in Cretan traditional workshops in the 1960s (after FIANDRA - PELAGATTI 1962; re-elaborated by the A.).

in time and space¹⁶, albeit not necessarily with the same meaning and function. Thus, in comparison to incised potmarks, low-relief marks on the vases' bottoms have a limited diffusion, being attested only at a few Cretan sites and only in a specific time-span.

¹⁶ Many examples of marking systems based on pre-firing incised signs are known: see, for example, TRUFELLI 1994 (period VII at Arslantepe, Late Chalcolithic), GATES 2001 (Late Bronze II Kinet Höyük, Cilicia), GLATZ 2012 (Late Bronze Age Anatolia), DUIS-

TERMAAT 2008, 550-552 (Late Bronze Age Tell Sabi Abyad, Syria), GALLORINI 2009, 112-114, 119-142 (Late Middle Kingdom Kahun, Egypt), DONNAN 1971 (Moche civilization in northern Peru, 1st c. BC-8th c. AD).

While D. Levi and F. Carinci devoted great attention to the formal and decorative aspects of the Protopalatial pottery found at Phaistos during the excavations carried out from 1950 to 1966¹⁷, several questions related to its manufacture were not considered. In particular, though Levi noticed the presence of marks characterized by a low-relief motif on the bottom of some vases he had unearthed, he only published photographs of four of them¹⁸. Most of the marks were not even described or mentioned in the files of the inventoried vases from the site kept in the Archives of the Italian Archaeological School at Athens. A small number of vessels bearing the same kind of marks were subsequently identified also in the Protopalatial levels of the nearby sites of Kommos (five specimens) and Hagia Triada (nine specimens), and fully published by A. Van de Moortel (Kommos)¹⁹ and myself (Hagia Triada)²⁰. The studies carried out on the marked vessels from both the sites agree in identifying the marks as indicators of the craftsmen or workshop that produced the vases (and hence are referred to here as “potters’ marks”), instead of being related to their contents or owners. The main reasons which led to this assumption are:

- a) the position of the marks themselves. Their location at the vase bottom and the subsequent difficulty at inspecting the motifs, all the more so when the pots were filled, allow one to rule out the possibility that the signs bore some information about the content;
- b) the contextual analysis of the Hagia Triada’s marked vessels. The largest quantity of the low-relief marks (six out of nine) found at the site comes indeed from the same MM IB primary deposit, while the other three were found in mixed secondary levels. Assuming that, being in the same context, the six marked vessels found together belonged to the same owner (being a single person or a household), and considering that each vase bore a different motif, it is possible to reject the hypothesis that the motifs were indicating the vases’ owner.

The habit on the part of the potter of personalizing the upper disc/bat placed on the wheel with an incised “logo” which then resulted in a low-relief mark on the formed pot’s bottom has been attested also in some traditional Cretan workshops at the beginning of the 1960s²¹. Such a practice has been detected by ethnographical research in the Andes too by B. Sillar, who states that «This desire to identify individual producers was presumably one of the reasons for marking the centre of the potter’s plates (*molde*), so that the vessels made on these will have an indication mark impressed on their base», though he never seems to have witnessed for himself these “molde” being used thus to differentiate the products of different potters²².

In order to explore thoroughly the low-relief potters’ marks on Protopalatial vases from the Mesara, a project has been undertaken to create a *corpus* of the marked vessels retrieved from the Palace and nearby quarters in Phaistos, which have never been examined or published before²³. The data from Phaistos proves crucial, as the site has yielded the largest amount of Protopalatial pottery in the Western Mesara, most of which comes from contexts of primary deposition. The first data from this study, which is still in progress, happily seems to confirm the results obtained on the basis of the material from Hagia Triada and Kommos, but also add some new dimensions. In particular, it has been possible to verify that the marks’ presence, which characterizes a very small percentage of the relevant semi-coarse shapes on which such marks may be found, does not occur only on standardized and easily confusable vessels (such as amphorae or jars). As K. Christakis argued in his recent analysis of the Cretan Bronze Age pre-firing marks²⁴, supported by ethnographic studies²⁵, such marks are likely to have been used by single artisans/potting groups in order to distinguish their output from that of other artisans/potting groups working in the same potting area, in particular in the case of a shared use of community kilns. This argument does not seem to fit completely with the record from Phaistos. There, low-relief potmarks occur equally both on widespread and quite standardized shapes and on specialized shapes – sometimes indeed one unique within the whole *corpus* – which did not need marking to be distinguished. Moreover, as shown also at the site of Hagia Triada, their occurrence is very rare and the marked vessels often appear in groups in the same context. It is quite possible that different reasons existed for marking the vessels. One can, however, conclude that (a) the marking operation did not represent

¹⁷ LEVI 1976 and LEVI-CARINCI 1988.

¹⁸ LEVI 1976, pl. 228.

¹⁹ Ja/45, Ja/46, Ja/47, Je/30 and Je/31 in VAN DE MOORTEL 2006, 299-300, 308 and, in general, 345-346 with pls. 3.17A and B.

²⁰ BALDACCI 2013b.

²¹ FIANDRA-PELAGATTI 1962, 15, pl. II.

²² SILLAR 2000, 74.

²³ The collection of a complete *corpus* of the low-relief potmarks from Phaistos is currently in progress by the author.

²⁴ CHRISTAKIS 2014, 159-165.

²⁵ For Latin America, see DONNAN 1971 and SILLAR 2000, 73-74; for Africa (Kenya), see LINDBLOM 1920, 135, 538-539. For ethnographic analogies in the study of potters’ marks, see also LINDBLOM 2001, 19-21, with bibliography.

a daily practice in the workshops and that (b) it was done only for some specific occasions, in which – at least in some cases – a particular control over the production process was required.

2. THE BOWL F 4718 AND THE "COMB" SIGN AS A POTTERS' MARK

Among the Phaistian vessels which bear a low-relief potter's mark is the bowl F 4718 (Figs. 4, 5), found in 1965 in the *Casa a Sud della Rampa* (House to the South of the Ramp) (Fig. 6), located in the Quarter to the South of the Middle West Court of the Palace (*Piazzale I*)²⁶. The bowl, now at the Archaeological Museum of Heraklion²⁷, was published by D. Levi, first in the volume which presented the results of his excavations and then in the volume devoted to the pottery of the site, co-authored by F. Carinci²⁸.

The shallow bowl, made in the local semi-coarse fabric, has a base-diameter of 32.5 cm and is well preserved. It is straight-sided with a rectangular-sectioned, slightly everted, rim. Two opposed horizontal handles are placed about half way up the wall, measuring 11.5 cm. The pot is characterized by a peculiar feature, which makes it a *unicum* in the ceramic sample of Phaistos: on its inside, is a semi-cylindrical pipe of clay: this starts at the rim (equidistant between the handles) and, following the side and base of the vessel, runs to the centre of the bottom, where it ends with its mouth facing upward. Both the outlets of the pipe are broken. The bowl exterior is framed by two orange/red bands and is decorated in the "Kamares style" with a black running spiral which is reserved on the black slip, while the rest is painted in white. Both the top and the exterior side of the rim are decorated with white parallel strokes on the black slip. The upper part of the bowl's interior, just beneath the rim, is covered by the black slip, the rest is unpainted, with some black spots.

The mark's presence at the centre on the external, unpainted bottom of the bowl, was noted in the vessel's inventory file kept in the archives of the Italian Archaeological School at Athens and also by D. Levi, while describing the pot, in the 1976 publication²⁹. Levi just mentioned the mark without giving further information about its shape but gave, in the text, a schematic – and inaccurate – reproduction of it; no other graphic or photographic illustrations of the mark were present among the figures and the plates of the book.

As is typical with these marks, the one on the bowl from the *Casa a Sud della Rampa* comprises two elements: an external border and a motif inside it (Fig. 5). The circular border here has a diameter of 7.5 cm. The motif is composed by a central "T" element, with a short vertical bar; at each end of the horizontal bar is placed vertically a "comb" element (each with six "teeth", that face outwards).

The bowl was found in room LXXXVII of the house, a nine-roomed building preserved only at its basement level. Room LXXXVII is part of a single structure together with the communicating LXXXVI, located in the easternmost part of the complex. A door in room LXXXVII opened to room LXXXIX. The two spaces LXXXVI and LXXXVII were long and narrow, separated by a wall 2.60 m long. The bowl was found inside a fill (40 cm thick), containing pottery, lime and plaster fragments, used to close access to room LXXXIX. After the filling operation, the two rooms were abandoned, while the rest of the house continued to be used. The pottery group contained in the fill is considered one of the earliest deposits of MM IIIA at Phaistos³⁰.

Low-relief potters' marks seem to be characteristic of the Protopalatial period and have been found at Phaistos and Hagia Triada, in closed deposits dated to each of the three ceramic phases of the period, MM IB³¹, MM IIA³² and IIB³³. Beside bowl F 4718, only one other vessel bearing a low-relief mark has been found in a MM III – precisely, as with the other, in MM IIIA early – deposit: it is the shallow, beaked bowl with three small feet F 3970³⁴, from the *Kouloura III*³⁵. If the two vessels coming from MM IIIA

²⁶ On the *Casa a Sud della Rampa*, see LEVI 1976, 489-505, CARINCI 2001 and, for a punctual reconsideration of the ceramic deposits, GIRELLA 2010, 68-81, with pls. 5-15.

²⁷ Inventory N. 126310.

²⁸ LEVI 1976, 500, pl. 184g-h; LEVI-CARINCI 1988, 27, pl. 14k-l.

²⁹ LEVI 1976, 500.

³⁰ See GIRELLA 2010, 68-70 (Deposit 6a), with pls. 5-6, and 52, table 4.

³¹ See the deposit beneath the room to the S of the *Bastione* at Hagia Triada (BALDACCIO 2013b, in particular 164-167).

³² See the two finds from the sealed deposit under room CVII at the slopes of the *Acropoli Mediana* at Phaistos (BALDACCIO 2017, 210 N. 465, pls. 47, 96 and 238 N. 814, pls. 73, 110).

³³ Many unpublished vessels with low-relief mark at their bottom come from the destruction levels of the Phaistos' Palace, dated to MM IIB.

³⁴ LEVI 1976, 354-356, fig. 553; LEVI-CARINCI 1988, 26, pl. 14b.

³⁵ For the context, see LEVI 1976, 354-358; for a re-assessment of the related ceramic finds, see GIRELLA 2010, 81-82 (Deposit 7) with pl. 16, and 52, table 4.

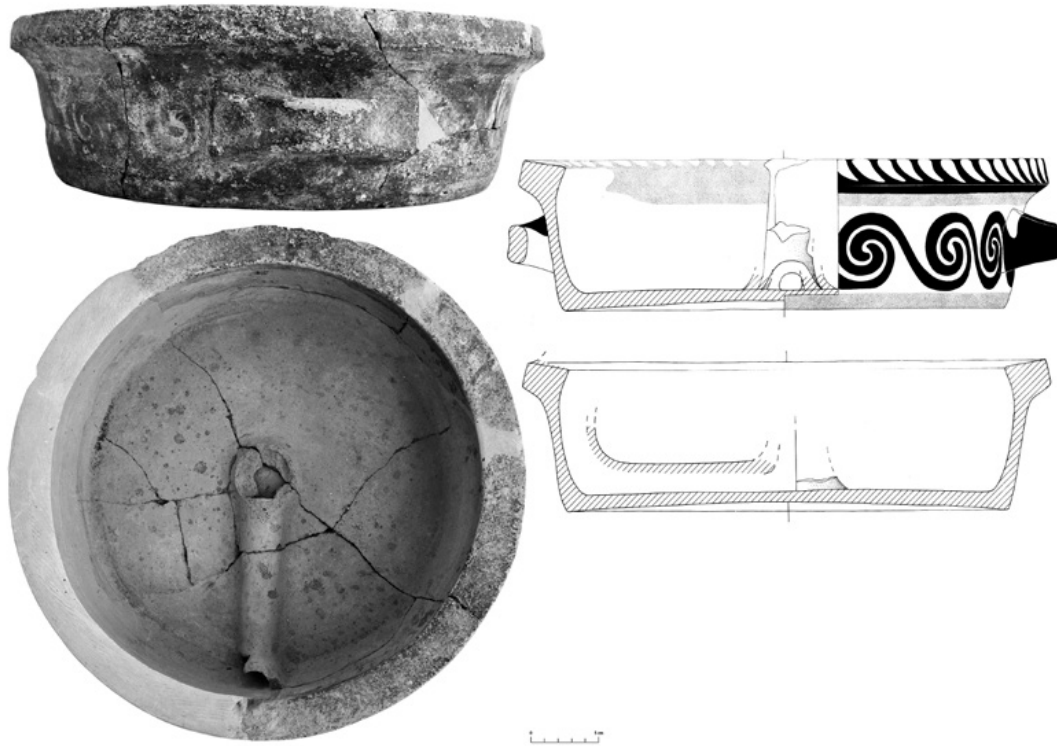


Fig. 4. Bowl F 4718 from *Casa a Sud della Rampa*, Phaistos (photo by the A.; drawing by G. Merlatti).

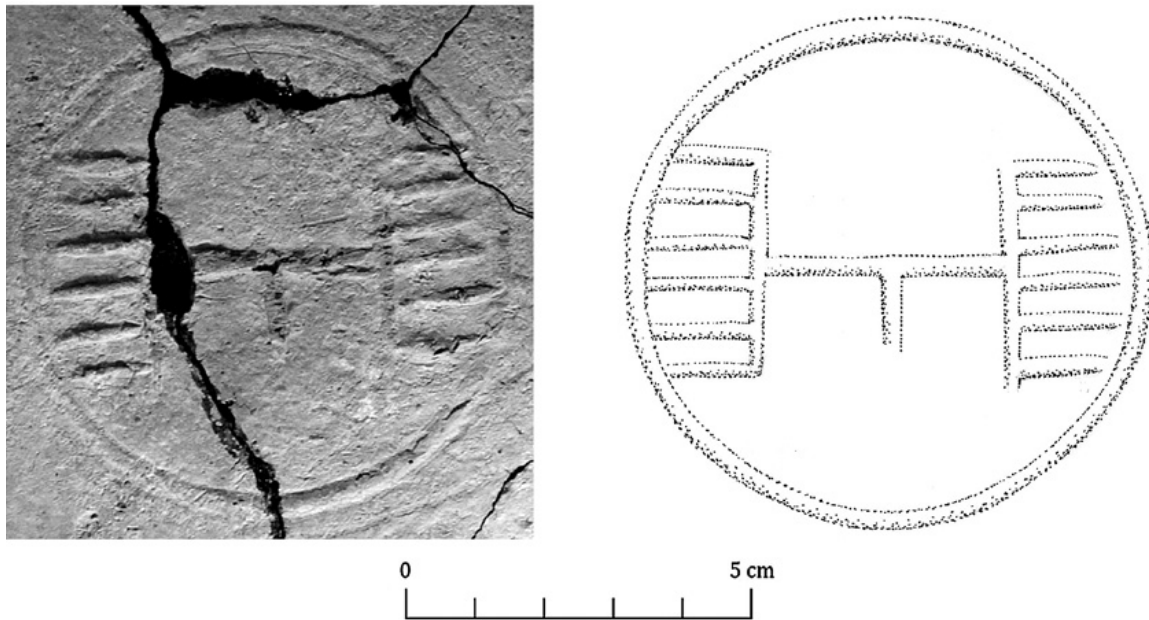


Fig. 5. Detail of the mark on the bottom of bowl F 4718 (photo by the A.; drawing by G. Merlatti).

early deposits are considered from a typological/stylistic point of view, it is possible they might belong to MM IIB. The bowl F 4718 from the *Casa a Sud della Rampa* is an *unicum* and both its manner of manufacture and decoration fit well with MM IIB. In particular, the spiral motif is well attested also on the vessels from the MM IIB destruction levels of the Palace³⁶. Moreover, it has been observed that some of

³⁶ See the doubts expressed by Carinci about a MM III chronology in LEVI-CARINCI 1988, 27.

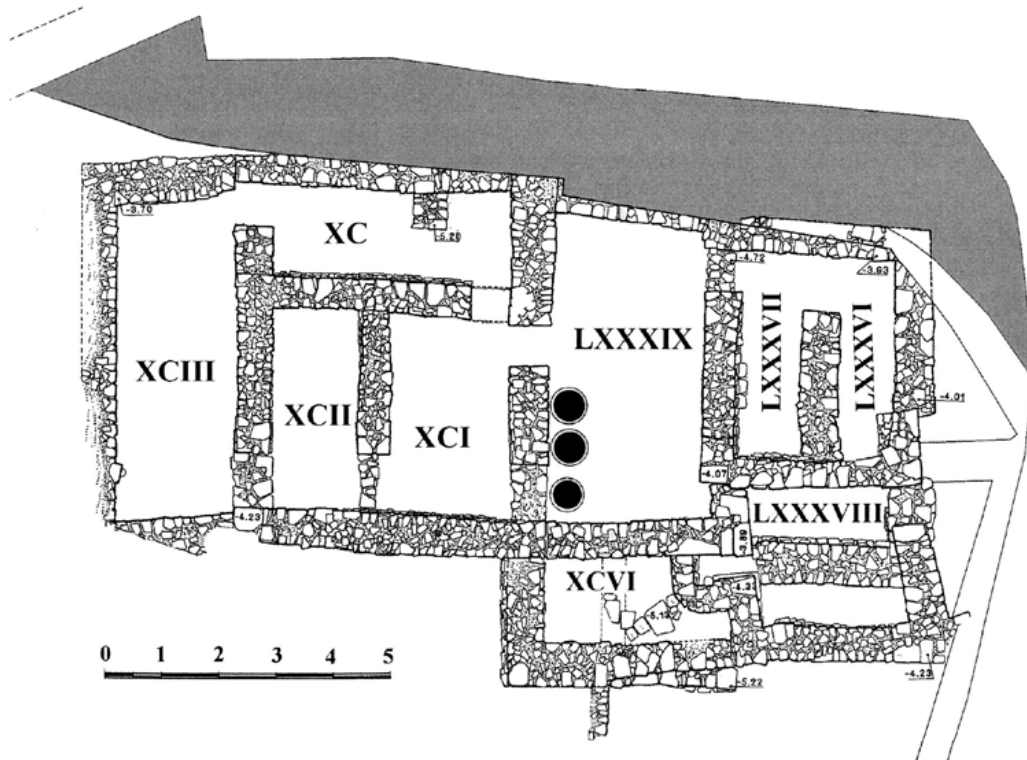


Fig. 6. Plan of *Casa a Sud della Rampa*, Phaistos (after GIRELLA 2010).

the materials found in the house seem to have been MM II vessels, recovered from the ruins and re-used³⁷. The only comparison for the bowl F 3970 from the *Kouloura* III is a MM IIB artefact found in the Palace³⁸ that, besides being similar in shape, has an identical treatment of the surface (red monochrome coating) and bears a low-relief mark too. To sum up, two scenarios are possible. In the first hypothesis, the two vessels, produced in MM IIB, continued to be in service when the pottery of the very next ceramic phase was in use, and were discarded in the MM IIIA early deposits they were found in (which, however, are not primary ones). In this case, it should be assumed that the low-relief marking practice in the Mesara area ceases at the end of the Protopalatial period. In the second hypothesis, if the two vessels are considered as actually made in MM IIIA early, they represent the last products to carry low-relief marks, as no specimens with this feature are known in later deposits.

It is clear that bowl F 4718 was a specialized vessel, used in connection with liquid substances, but its function remains uncertain, due to the lack of comparisons and to the fragmentary condition of both ends of the pipe. Due to the peculiar character of bowl F 4718, L. Girella thought that it could be considered as part of a ceremonial set, together with the pedestal with plastic dolphins (F 4822), a *rhyton* (F 5778) and an amphora (F 4982), which were found in the same context³⁹. Considering the vessel's rich decoration and the assemblage it belongs to, it is accordingly possible to hypothesise that it was not a utilitarian vase, but one that involved a ritual use of water or other liquids and libations⁴⁰.

As the research into the Phaistian low-relief potmarks is showing, they are not infrequently found on uncommon and specialized vessels as, for instance, the so-called "graters"⁴¹. However, while all the other marked vessels from Phaistos and – in general – from the Mesara, are plain, simply painted in dark-on-light or, rarely, coated with a monochrome slip, the bowl from the *Casa a Sud della Rampa* is the only which bears a polychrome light-on-dark decoration. Moreover, that only plain or undecorated pottery

³⁷ CARINCI 2001, 210.

³⁸ F 469, coming from the destruction level of room IL of the Palace (LEVI 1976, 197, pl. 175b; LEVI-CARINCI 1988, 26, pl. 14a).

³⁹ GIRELLA 2010, 134 n. 380 and, for the deposit, 68-70, with pls. 5-6.

⁴⁰ See the Hittite relief decorated vases of the Inandik type which, as with the Phaistian bowl, present an internal pipe ending in an outlet at the rim; they have been interpreted as "libation instruments of some kind" (SCHOOP 2011, 258).

⁴¹ On the "graters", see LEVI-CARINCI 1988, 222-223.

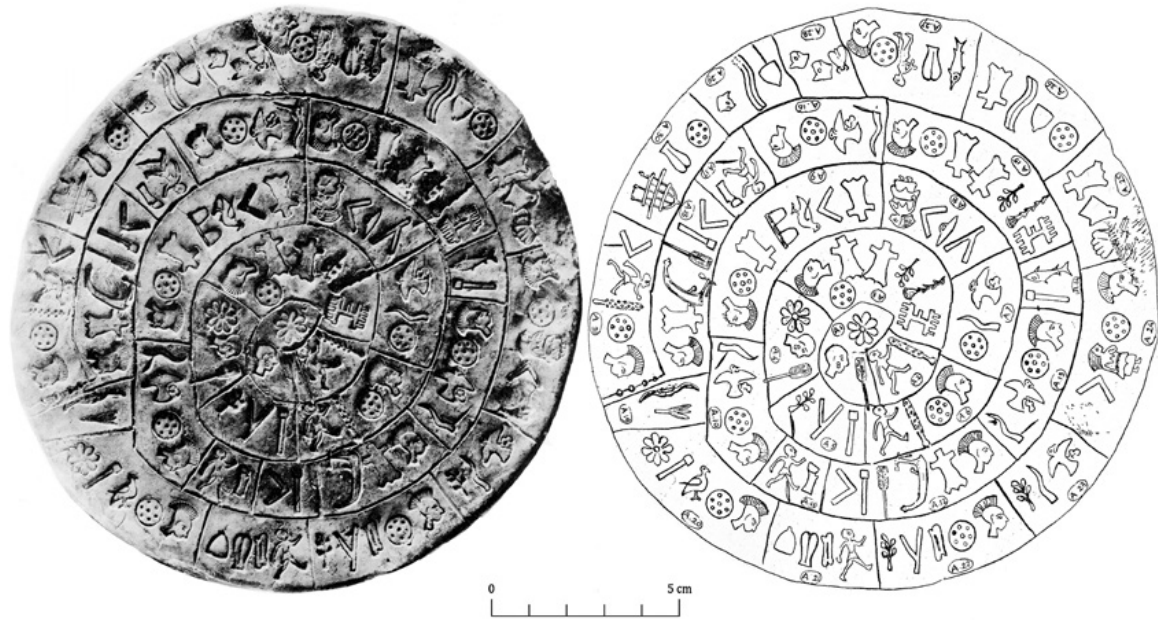


Fig. 7. The Phaistos Disc, side A (after EVANS 1909).

was marked seems to be a general character of all such systems known in Bronze Age Crete⁴² and outside it, such as in Late Bronze Age Anatolia⁴³.

3. THE “COMB” SIGN ON THE PHAISTOS’ DISC AND ON THE SEALING CMS II.5, N. 246

The mark, as a low-relief, is attested only once, as is true for the major part of the marks detected⁴⁴. The fact that most of the marks are attested only once could be put down to insufficient material excavated, as we would expect that the same bat had been used more than once to make different pots. However, the sign present on bowl F 4718 appears twice more in the archaeological record of Phaistos, in association though with other object classes. Levi compared the low-relief sign on bowl F 4718 to the mason’s marks found mostly in the monumental buildings of the palatial centres of Crete (and dated to the Proto- and Neopalatial periods)⁴⁵, which he defined as «the mysterious signs incised on many big blocks, vaguely recalling some Minoan hieroglyphics»⁴⁶. Actually, the potmark on bowl F 4718 does not seem to find that good a comparison among the known mason’s marks, but it is almost identical to one of the 45 syllabograms of the Phaistos Disc – namely N. 21, the so-called “comb”, which appears twice on side A of the artefact⁴⁷, in both the cases as the first sign of an identical sequence composed of seven syllabograms (Figs. 7, 8). Moreover, a very similar sign is found as a seal impression on the sealing CMS II.5, N. 246, which also comes from Phaistos⁴⁸ (Fig. 9).

While on the basis of the known archaeological record it is not possible to ascertain if the sign represents a comb⁴⁹ or, indeed an actual object at all, yet its particular and complex shape, which is found three times with minor differences, does allow one to deduce that it was a meaningful and specific sign. In other words, whilst simple and identical signs may be found in different times and contexts, or on different media, as a result of quite independent processes, yet between identical and complex signs a more specific correlation is supposed to exist⁵⁰. The latter way of thinking applies in the case of the “comb” sign,

⁴² CHRISTAKIS 2014, 122-123.

⁴³ GLATZ 2012, 29.

⁴⁴ Up to now, only one mark seems to be attested more than once, both in Phaistos and Kommos.

⁴⁵ On the Cretan mason’s marks, see in general: HOOD 1987 and 2002; BEGG 2004.

⁴⁶ Author’s translation («[...] i segni misteriosi incisi su numerosi grossi blocchi, vagamente ricordanti certi geroglifici minoici [...]»), LEVI 1976, 500.

⁴⁷ For this sign, GODART 2009, 200.

⁴⁸ PINI 1970.

⁴⁹ Among the actual Minoan-Mycenaean combs known, no double combs are found; moreover, the double combs attested in other cultures have an essentially rectangular shape and do not show a “T structure” as does the Phaistian sign. BUCHHOLZ 1984/85; cf. also POURSAT 1977, 23-24. For other interpretations on the object represented by the sign, see EISENBERG 2008, 18.

⁵⁰ SACCONI 1987, 374; about coincidental similarities between marks or marks and script signs, see also GATES 2001, 140, and GLATZ 2012, 26.

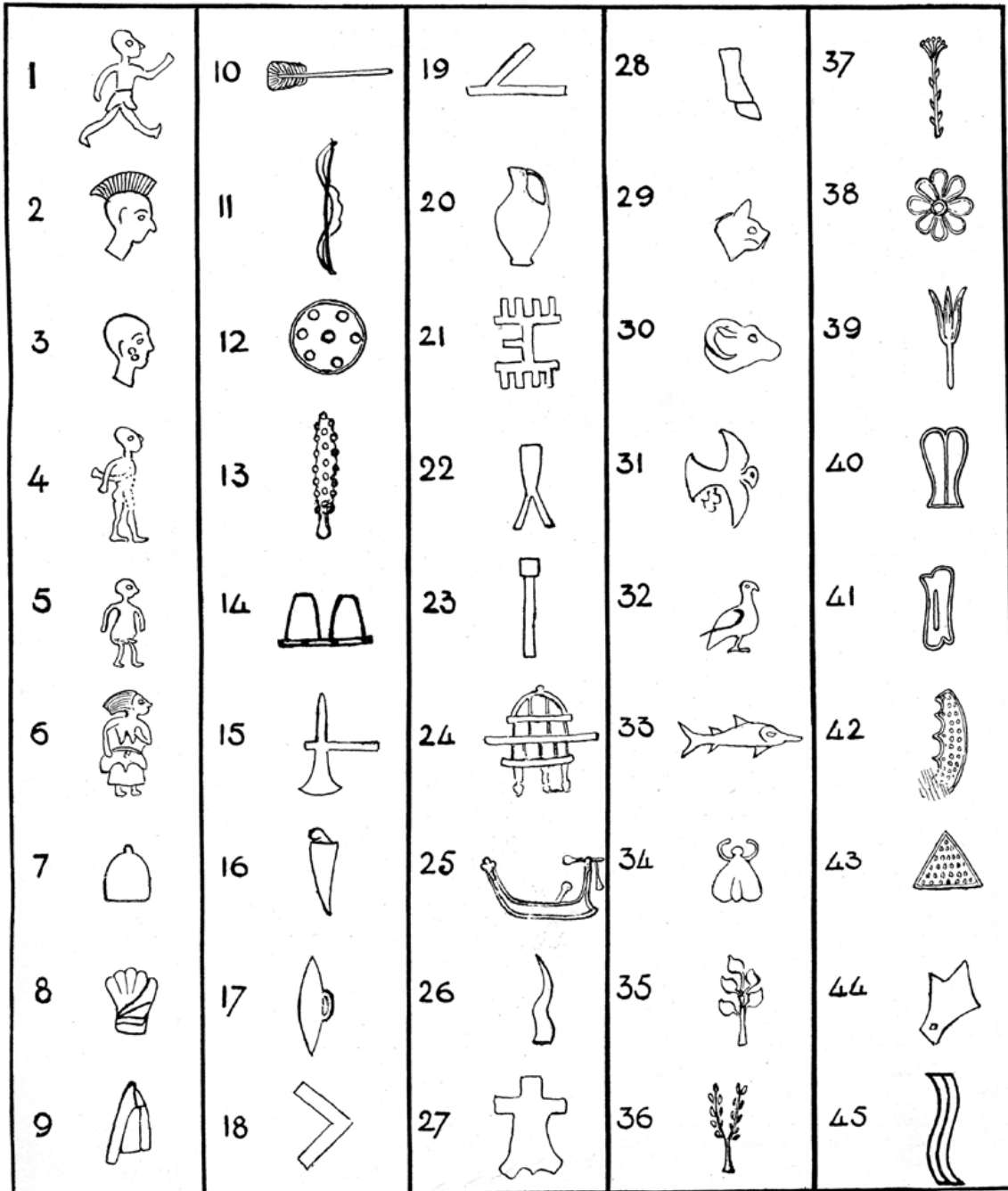


Fig. 8. Signs on Phaistos Disc (after EVANS 1909).

whose layout is almost identical in the three artefacts (Fig. 10), varying only in the number of the lateral, horizontal “teeth”⁵¹.

Recovered in 1908 by L. Pernier in the North-Eastern Complex at Phaistos⁵², in room XL/101, the Phaistos Disc represents one of the most famous and at the same time mysterious Minoan objects ever found (Fig. 7). Due to the circumstances of its recovery, its authenticity has repeatedly been considered doubtful⁵³. In recent times this opinion has been re-expressed by J.M. Eisenberg, who considered the Disc a fake devised by Pernier himself⁵⁴. On the basis of a careful reading about the object’s recovery, V.

⁵¹ On the bowl’s potmark they are six, on the sealing five and on the Disc four. Note that in some graphic representations of the last artefact the spaces between the single teeth of the “comb” are seen as other teeth (see for example the sign drawn by E. Stefani in PERNIER 1908, 209, here Fig. 10b).

⁵² PERNIER 1908. Among the several contributions about the Disc, see: EVANS 1909, 273-293; DELLA SETA 1909; OLIVIER 1975; DUHOUX 1977; GODART 1994 and 2009.

⁵³ See the critical analysis in CUCUZZA 2015.

⁵⁴ EISENBERG 2008.

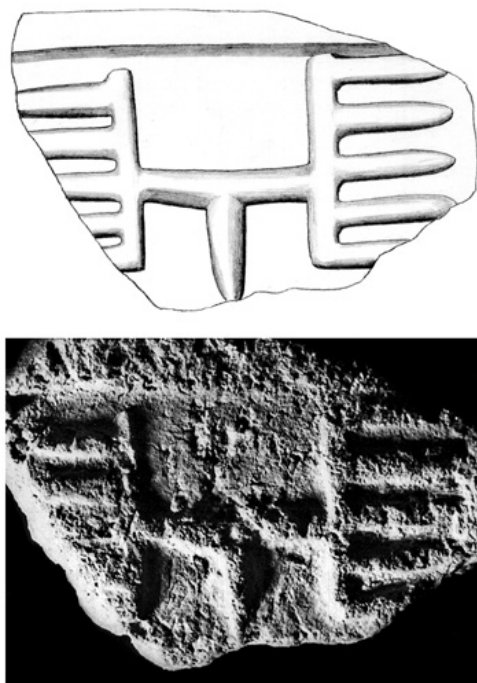


Fig. 9. Sealing CMS II.5, N. 246 (length 1.3 cm; height 0.7 cm), from Phaistos (image courtesy of the CMS Heidelberg).

La Rosa⁵⁵, N. Cucuzza⁵⁶ and P. Hnila⁵⁷ have stressed the illogicality of considering the Disc as a fake. A further irrefutable argument in favour of the authenticity of the Disc is the fact that the sealing CMS II.5, N. 246, which bears a sign that is almost identical to the Disc sign N. 21 was only recovered in 1955⁵⁸. In other words, it would have been impossible for a forger of the Disc, recovered in 1908, to have used the sealing as a source, since the latter was found in 1955⁵⁹; nor can the sealing be a forgery since it came to light in regular archaeological excavations! To this evidence can now be added the bowl F 4718 that is presented here. The pot with the comb sign impressed on its base was found in regular excavations during the 1965 campaign. Since the sign on this pot is almost identical to the Phaistos Disc sign N. 21, this vessel is a further piece of evidence that shows that the Phaistos Disc is a genuine artefact. The comb motif is too complicated to have been devised by chance by a forger working without any knowledge that the motif existed in Minoan times. To repeat, since, the Disc aside, the two other artefacts that bear the motif were found in 1955 and 1965, the appearance of this motif on the Phaistos Disc proves that the Disc is genuine.

Other interesting clues about the context in which the Disc was brought to light come from the recent fieldwork (2013 and 2015) carried out by P. Militello in the area of the North-Eastern Complex⁶⁰. During the fieldwork, a fragment of a Linear A tablet (PH 54) was identified in room 101. It was the habit of the first excavators, when circumstances dictated, to refill an area using the same earth/pottery fragments that had been found in the self-same area itself. Militello has therefore argued that the new tablet was part of the original deposit of the room, and that to this original deposit belonged also the Linear A tablet PH 1, which was found here together with the Disc by L. Pernier. The pottery the new tablet was associated with was shown to be substantially homogeneous – dating to MM IIIA ripe, as already stressed by L. Girella on the basis of the material published by Pernier⁶¹; the only exceptions are represented by both a few older and more recent sherds.

The sealing CMS II.5, N. 246 (Fig. 9) comes from the Protopalatial levels beneath room 25 of the Second Palace of Phaistos. That context, retrieved in the trial carried out in 1955 by C. Gerra Brusa and

⁵⁵ LA ROSA 2008 and 2009.

⁵⁶ CUCUZZA 2015.

⁵⁷ HNILA 2009.

⁵⁸ GODART 2009, 203; HNILA 2009, especially 64-65; ANASTASIADOU in press.

⁵⁹ The incorrect and chronologically impossible opinion that the sealing with the “comb” sign was used as a source by the Disc’s forger is stated by EISENBERG 2008, 18.

⁶⁰ MILITELLO 2014.

⁶¹ GIRELLA 2010, 59-61 (Deposit 4a), and 52, table 4.

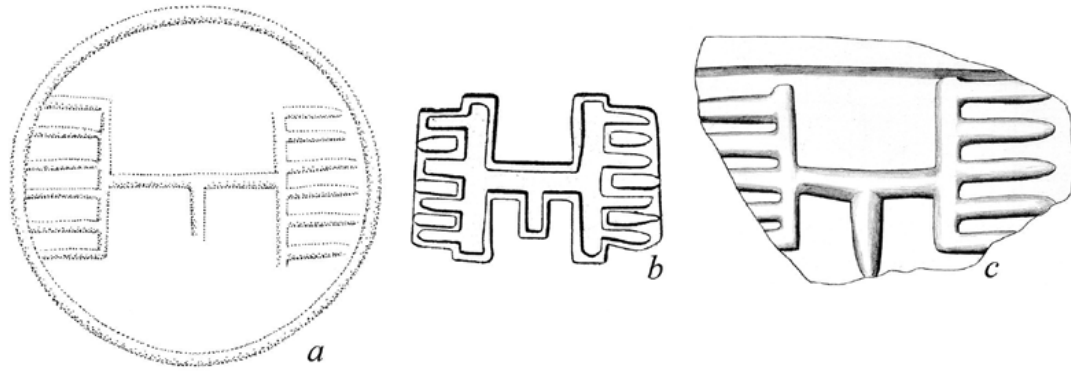


Fig. 10. Comb sign on bowl F 4718 (a; drawing G. Merlatti), on Phaistos Disc (b; after PERNIER 1908) and on sealing CMS II.5, N. 246 (c; courtesy of the CMS Heidelberg) (not to scale).

E. Fiandra, under D. Levi's direction, represents one of the most important set of Minoan administrative documents (so-called *archivio di cretule*), which consisted of a total of ca. 6000 pieces including sealings and Linear A tablets⁶². Both the nature and the chronology of the finds have been debated. As far as the nature of the archive is concerned, Levi considered it as a primary *in situ* deposit, while Fiandra thought it had been discarded and mixed with heterogeneous material during the Second Palace's building operations⁶³. Both the opinions have received support in more recent years⁶⁴, until the new study carried out by P. Militello, in which decisive arguments are advanced in favour of the "*in situ* interpretation"⁶⁵. Indeed, the present author claims that, on the basis of the unpublished excavation report of C. Gerra Brusa, it is possible to argue that the sealings-stratum belonged to a destruction level, in strict connection with the walls which defined a room measuring 2×4.5 m, that can be thus considered as the archive room. The pottery of room 25 associated with the administrative documents is dated to MM IIB⁶⁶. Moreover, on the basis of the architectural layout of the room it has been possible for P. Militello to put forward the hypothesis that it belongs to the very last phase of the First Palace, i.e. to the so-called *Fase dei Sacelli*. This phase, detectable only on an architectural basis, as the ceramic style does not show any difference from the previous one, both being MM IIB in date, represents a short-lived, partial revival of the Palace after a first destruction caused by a seismic event and before the final destruction⁶⁷.

CONCLUDING REMARKS: THE "COMB" SIGN IN CONTEXT

1. The attestation of the "comb" on three artefacts, in all the cases as a stamped sign (impressed in low-relief from a potter's bat on the bowl F 4718; from a seal on the sealing CMS II.5, N. 246; and from a stamp, likely metallic⁶⁸, on the Disc; Fig. 10) seems to carry particular meaning. This is due (a) to the complexity of the sign itself, which allows one to argue that it was reproduced deliberately to represent *some specific and single sign*, and not as a result of some independent processes with no shared beliefs⁶⁹ and (b) to the fact that the three artefacts come from the same site and their varied find-spots belong to a quite specific time-span. As discussed above, the sealing is dated to the end of the Protopalatial period, probably to the very end, i.e. to the *Fase dei Sacelli* – MM IIB in ceramic terms. The bowl's F 4718 deposit in the *Casa a Sud della Rampa* is dated to MM IIIA early, but on stylistic basis, a MM IIB date for the vessel cannot be excluded too. In my opinion, P. Militello's last fieldwork in the North-Eastern Complex resolved many doubts in respect to the Disc's context. However, if one still rejects the idea that the Phaistos Disc comes from a substantially good, homogeneous MM IIIA ripe context, it is nonetheless possible to conclude that (a) the identification of the "comb" sign as a potter's mark, when added to the already known sign

⁶² On the context, see FIANDRA 1975; LEVI 1956, 261-267, 1957/58, 7-26 and 1976, 385-392; MILITELLO 2002, 55-62, with Gerra Brusa's excavation report (Appendix I, 80-84).

⁶³ FIANDRA 1975, 6; LEVI 1976, 388.

⁶⁴ WEINGARTEN 1994, 278, 290 (secondary deposit) and Kanta, discussion in KANTA-TZIGOUNAKI 2000, 209-210 (primary *in situ* deposit).

⁶⁵ MILITELLO 2002, 55-62.

⁶⁶ MILITELLO 2002, 61-62.

⁶⁷ CARINCI-LA ROSA 2007, 86.

⁶⁸ GODART 2009, 194.

⁶⁹ Above, n. 50.

on a sealing CMS II.5, N. 246, constitutes a conclusive argument in favour of the Disc's authenticity and (b) that the chronology of both the sealing and the bowl, which come from closed and stratigraphically defined contexts, may offer interesting clues about the chronology of the Disc itself.

The more recent and thorough analysis and discussion on each sign appearing on the Disc and on any archaeological realities they might refer to was carried out by L. Godart: he concludes by stating that it is possible to find archaeological comparisons for the Disc's signs which date from 1750 (i.e. MM III) to 1200 BC (i.e. LM IIIB)⁷⁰. However, in his opinion, the only two decisive signs that points to LM I as a *terminus post quem* for the Disc's chronology are N. 20, likely representing a shell, more precisely a *dolium* (or *Tonna Galea*), and N. 25, clearly representing a ship. The suggested LM I (B) chronology for the sign N. 20 (Fig. 9) comes from the recovery, in room 13 of the Villa at Haghia Triada, of the *Tonna Galea* obsidian-replica⁷¹. Indeed, such shells are known, at Phaistos, already in the Protopalatial period, as a specimen has been found, together with triton fragments (*Charonia*), in room IL of the SW wing of the Palace, whose assemblage belongs to the destruction levels of the building (MM IIB)⁷². Moreover, sign N. 20 is so stylized that, even if it does actually depict a shell, it could just as well represent a triton too. The post-LM I chronology claimed for the sign N. 25 (Fig. 9) is based on a comparison with the Mochlos ring (LM IB), where a ship is represented⁷³. It is indeed similar in shape to the ship-sign on the Phaistos Disc, as both belong to the type without a mast; however such a ship is already known as a Linear A sign⁷⁴, making possible a comparison with pre-LM IB material.

Moreover it must be stressed that, while the likeness between the sign N. 21 on the Disc, the potter's mark on the bowl F 4718 and the sealing CMS II.5, N. 246 cannot be doubted, being a comparison of sign against sign (Fig. 10), yet comparisons between the signs of the Disc and other archaeological finds can easily mislead, considering, on one hand, that the archaeological record at our disposal is always partial and, on the other, that the translation from a material reality to its graphic representation is not a straight-forward one.

To sum up, the fact that the "comb" sign N. 21, besides appearing on the Disc, is attested twice in the archaeological record of Phaistos, from contexts belonging to the end of Protopalatial period and likely to the beginning of MM III, and the fact that that sign is not attested at all in the LM period (a) makes it likely a pre-LM chronology applies to the Disc itself and (b) can be taken as a further proof of the fact that the context in which the Disc was found is a good one, and that the MM IIIA ripe date proposed by P. Militello should be accepted⁷⁵. In this respect, we should remark on the continuity in the use of the sign, from MM IIB (late), through MM IIIA early, up to MM IIIA ripe. Furthermore, this continuity can be taken as a proof that at least one of the signs of the Disc finds its origins in the scribal tradition of Phaistos.

2. Two questions arise in considering that the comb sign appears both in isolation (sealing, bowl) and as part of a complex writing system (Disc). The first one is whether the comb sign had an independent origin and was *then* integrated in the syllabic system of the Phaistos Disc or, also when used alone, it was being used as part of an *already known* syllabic system. No answer can be given here, as we cannot exclude the chance that the script of the Disc was already in use during the Protopalatial period, but that no traces have remained in the Phaistian archaeological record. The second question concerns the value of the "comb" sign (in the Disc, as part of a syllabic system, it bore a phonetic value) as an isolated sigil, in the case of the bowl and of the sealing⁷⁶. A. Sacconi⁷⁷ discussed the issue of the marks (both incised and in low-relief at the vases' bottom) found in Quartier Mu at Malia, which present a layout corresponding to Hieroglyphic-script signs. She argued that such marks have no phonetic value and that the link between the layout of some marks and some (complex) Hieroglyphic-script signs merely show that the potters were aware of that script. The lack of a phonetic value can be supposed also for the case of the mark on the bowl F 4718 from Phaistos: actually, it is the only one in the *corpus* of the low-relief marks of the Mesara which presents a sign compatible with a known script. In

⁷⁰ GODART 2009, 203-205.

⁷¹ HALBHERR *et alii* 1977, 88, fig. 57; see also WARREN 1969, 91 (P497).

⁷² SANAVIA 2014, in particular 544 and pl. CLXXIIb. On the basis of the shells found (*Charonia* and *Tonna Galea*), which may represent debris left from the manufacturing of vessels, the author has supposed that here operated a workshop.

⁷³ SEAGER 1912, 89-92.

⁷⁴ Sign AB 86. Elements of comparison have been also identified between the boat sign on the Disc and the ship representations of the "Syros cluster" (WEDDE 2000, 50-51), which comprises the Early Cy-

cladic II "frying pans" from Syros and the pictograph scenes on marble from Korphi t'Aroniou, Naxos.

⁷⁵ Further arguments, developed on independent basis, that re-enforce such conclusions may now be found in ANASTASIADOU in press and in Sanavia in the present volume.

⁷⁶ It should be stressed that, in the past, attention has been devoted to the potmarks almost exclusively with respect to their formal aspect and to their relation with known scripts signs: see, for example, the critical comment in HIRSCHFELD 2002, 49.

⁷⁷ SACCONI 1987, 372-376.

other words, these marks, in general, have just a graphic/symbolic value and so, for this reason, a phonetic value seems to be unlikely also for the "comb" sign on the Phaistian bowl.

3. The "comb" sign both on the bowl – as a potter's mark – and on the seal which left the impression on the sealing CMS II.5, N. 246 from the "archive" should be considered as "identity signs". It is then supposed that both potmark and seal referred to a single individual (or perhaps a single workshop in the case of the potmark). Could a link exist between the "individual" represented by the "comb" seal and the one represented by the "comb" potmark? A definite answer cannot be given. It remains possible that the same sign had been used independently in the two cases, implying the existence of two non-interrelated systems (sealing system *vs.* potters' marks system). However, considering that the two artefacts have a close chronology (one being dated to the end of MM IIB and the other, at the latest, to MM IIIA early), in my opinion the hypothesis that the same sign referred, in both the systems, to the same "individual" cannot be excluded *a priori*. It has been argued that, on the basis of the frequency with which the seals appear on the Phaistos sealings, it is possible to identify three groups⁷⁸. For P. Militello, the difference between the groups may reflect the different roles of the seals' owners: the seals less represented on the sealings (low-frequency group) were used by individuals operating outside the Palace, while the more common ones (medium and high-frequency groups) were used by palace officials⁷⁹. The "comb" motif, being attested only once, on the sealing CMS II.5, N. 246, belongs to the low-frequency group, and thus should not reflect the activity of a functionary, but rather that of someone who acted primarily outside the Palace and was only incidentally involved in administration. Such a profile, hypothetical though it be, can match that of a potter or of a workshop, as an "individual" who carried out his activities outside the Palace, but had some contacts with the administrative apparatus.

4. Not only is the bowl F 4718 unique at Phaistos for bearing this particular sign, but also because it is the only painted and decorated vessel which is marked too. The latter point becomes even more striking if we consider that a common feature with the Bronze Age Cretan marking systems is that they characterize unpainted or undecorated standard vessels⁸⁰. As discussed above, the more accepted hypothesis is that such vases were marked when different artisans/workshops shared common facilities, such as a community kiln: the plain and unpainted pottery was marked before the firing in order to distinguish it afterwards, and to allow to its maker to retrieve it⁸¹. This hypothesis cannot hold completely true for the low-relief potmarks at Phaistos, as in many cases they appear on vessels which have a unique or not-standardized shape (and so are easy to spot). For bowl F 4718, as well as its shape, its decoration made it completely unnecessary to further distinguish it by a mark for purposes of simple recognition. It is therefore possible to argue that this vessel had been marked for other reasons: perhaps to signal that this peculiar vase had been made by someone in particular⁸². As already argued by L. Girella, this specialized pot might be part of a ceremonial set⁸³. Due to its particular features, it is possible that the vase had been made by the potter to satisfy a particular request by its eventual owner. In other words, this unique vase could have been ordered by someone to fulfil some specific need connected to the ceremonial sphere and was likely to have been used in special occasions which involved a symbolic use of liquid substances. In this hypothesis, the affixing of the mark by the artisan could be seen as the result of a "controlled production", in which the potter himself/herself wanted to "declare" the vessel's authorship. While in other case studies of potters' marks⁸⁴, it was possible to ascertain that the marks could not be read by "strangers" to identify the product of a given potter, in the case of the Phaistian bowl F 4718 the role of the potmark would have continued beyond the production stages, and would have had a meaning also for the vessel's user.

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⁷⁸ WEINGARTEN 1988, 13.

⁷⁹ MILITELLO 2000, 227-228.

⁸⁰ CHRISTAKIS 2014, 119-123. This feature has been noted also for other marking systems known, e.g. GLATZ 2012, 29 (Late Bronze Age Anatolia), DONNAN 1971, 465 (Moche civilization in Peru); moreover, it finds comparisons also in ethnographic studies (see LINDBLOM 1920, 538 for Kamba potters in Kenya; and SILLAR 2000, 73 for the Andes). However, it must be stressed that, independent from the marks' presence, «potters around the world generally

have no difficulty in identifying their own work, and they are often adept at recognizing that of peers and neighbours» (KRAMER 1985, 117-118).

⁸¹ CHRISTAKIS 2014, 159-163.

⁸² For potters' marks as means for transmitting individual identity, see in particular CHRISTAKIS 2016.

⁸³ GIRELLA 2010, 134 note 380.

⁸⁴ See the ethnographic study carried out in Peru by DONNAN 1971, 466.

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