Gareth Owens and His Decipherment of the Phaistos Disc

I have taken a look at Owens's website (http://www.teicrete.gr/daidalika), have read the various texts there that pertain to the Phaistos Disc, and have watched his TEDx-Talk twice.

1. First, some preliminary remarks.
There are four scripts in prehistoric Crete that write at least two languages. The 4 scripts are those on the Phaistos Disc (PhD, hereafter) and on documents written in Cretan Pictographic/Hieroglyphic (CP herafter), Linear A, and Linear B (usually AB, hereafter). The languages are Greek in the Linear B documents and whatever language or languages that were written on the Disc and on the CP and Linear A documents.

Linear B (ca. 1400-1200 BCE) was deciphered in 1952 (Ventris & Chadwick, *Documents in Mycenaean Greek*) and it records our earliest Greek texts. The script is a syllabary consisting of some 90+ signs. It is obvious that these signs were adapted from the signs in the earlier script Linear A (Godart & Olivier, *Recueil des inscriptions en Linéaire A*), which was in use in Crete from about 1900 to 1500 BCE. These two scripts use abstract signs, most of which do not resemble any object.

Many of the Linear A signs developed from the slightly earlier CP script (ca. 1950 to 1700 BCE; Godart & Olivier, *Corpus inscriptionum hieroglyphicarum Cretae*), and most of these Pictographic signs are obviously schematic drawings of real objects (persons, animals like a dog head or a fly, man-made objects like an ax, and plants like a tree or branch).

2. It is standard practice to work backward from the known Linear B to the unknown Linear A and Cretan Pictographic (AB sign charts, http://people.ku.edu/~jyounger/LinearA/ABgrids.html; CP sign charts, http://people.ku.edu/~jyounger/Hiero/Hgrids.html). It is fairly clear that sign 04 in Linear B ( , the syllable *te*) was adapted from sign 04 in Linear A ( , the syllable TE), which was adapted from sign 25 in Cretan Pictographic ( , *TE*?). We indicate this development by drawing the signs and by transcribing their phonetic values slightly differently.

We are fairly certain of most of the phonetic values for Linear A based on what we know about Linear B. For the phonetic value of about 29 CP signs most of us are in agreement, but for the rest we are much less certain. For instance, does Cretan Pictographic sign 34 () become AB 39 (), 62 (), or 72 ()? Or is it CP sign 77 () that becomes one of these AB signs?

3. Owens is extending this principle of "epigraphic continuity" (as he calls it), that an early script's signs develop into a later script's signs, by bringing the PhD signs into the discussion (http://people.ku.edu/~jyounger/PHDisc/; http://people.ku.edu/~jyounger/PHDisc/PHDiscSigns.html).

4. About the PhD signs, we are even less certain about their relationship with the signs of Cretan Pictographic and of Linear A/B. For instance, PhD sign 35 () is probably a naturalistic branch

that becomes the more abstract CP sign 25 ( ) and the still more abstract AB sign 04 (,). If so, we could transcribe Phaistos Disc sign 35 ( ) as **TE**.

5. For 8 more signs, most of us are more or less comfortable about giving them hypothetical phonetic values (I say "hypothetical" because the line of development from the Phaistos Disc to Linear B is not clear by any means). For the following 8 signs, I therefore might accept the Owens's phonetic values in column 4 for the PhD sign in column 1, "for the sake of advancing the argument."

PhD sign	CP sign	AB sign	Owens: acceptable ID
PhD 08	CP 09	AB 28 I	AB 52 NO (a reasonable development)
PhD 12	CP 47 ?	AB 77 KA or 78 QE	AB 78 QE
PhD 14	CP 34	AB 59 TA	59 TA
PhD 15	CP 43	B 12 SO	B 12 SO
PhD 19	CP 27 ?	AB 01 DA	AB 01 DA
PhD 23	CP 62	AB 06 NA	AB 06 NA
PhD 34	CP 21	AB 39 PI	AB 39 PI
PhD 35	CP 25	AB 04 TE	AB 04 TE

According to the chart Owens showed in his TEDx-Talk (and reproduced on http://disk.aboutcrete.eu/), in the 8 cases above, he adopts values that have been more or less accepted for some time. In the first case, the identification of AB NO for PhD 08, the shape of the AB sign could indeed have developed from a naturalistic glove with fingers (and a thumb in the CP sign); I would accept that identification for the sake of argument.

Owens's large chart shows drawings of the two faces of the Phaistos Disc and, in red, the phonetic values he assigns to the signs. On the website, move your mouse over each sign-group to see the phonetic values assigned. The following identifications strike me as acceptable, at least on grounds of shape alone (again, for the sake of argument):

PhD 08 	AB 52  NO (fingers from PhD 08 and a thumb from its presumed CP counterpart).
PhD 24 	AB 38  E, on shape
PhD 29 	AB 85  AU, assuming PhD 29 is a pig head and not a cat head, as Godart has called it.
PhD 30 	AB 21  QI (the AB sign is also the logogram for sheep, OVIS)
PhD 31 	AB 81  KU, long assumed to be like a bird in flight.
PhD 32 	AB 60  RA (in CP instances of  , with a assumed phonetic value of A-SA-SA-RA-NE, the fourth sign often appears not like a hand but like a bird body.
PhD 36 	AB 30  NI
PhD 39 	AB 27  RE
PhD 40 	AB 69  TU; the AB sign is usually thought to have derived from an ivy leaf, but a "bull's hindquarters" (as Godart identifies it), with tail is also possible.

To accept the rest of Owens's identifications, however, I would need to read his arguments.

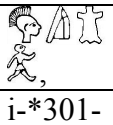
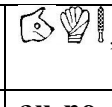
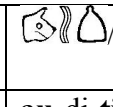
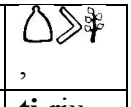
Finally, comparing Owens's word-groups as rendered phonetically, and, ignoring the prefix I-QE-, there is only one exact match with a Linear A word (PhD I-QE-SI-DA-TE with Linear A SI-DA-TE, a heading on ARKH 2.1) and one approximate match (PhD I-QE-PA-JE-RJU, PA-JE-RE-SA and SO-TI-PA-JE-RJU with Linear A PA-JA-RE, a name that occurs on 4 documents). Otherwise there are very few matches in the beginnings or endings of Owens PhD words with those of Linear A words.

6. Thus far, I can follow Owens. For the remainder of his thought process (sections 7-12, below) I cannot; it relies on too many assertions and, eventually, on very thin links.

7. Having given phonetic values to about 90% of the signs (as he says in his TEDx-Talk), he then proceeds to "transliterate" the sign-groups (words). He lays special emphasis on two words and a string of words.

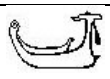
8. The string of words is sign-groups BXVII-BXXIII, which he transcribes and compares to words in the "Libation Formula" (a fixed sequence of 8 words that appear on objects, many of which are dedications at peak sanctuaries). The "Formula" has been much discussed; here is a short presentation: http://people.ku.edu/~jyounger/LinearA/#12.

In the chart below, Owens gives a sequence of 7 words (and his transliteration) which he compares to 4 words in the Libation Formula (words 1, 2 [placename for Dikte, perhaps], and words 6 & 7).

BXVII-BXXIII							
Owens transcription	i-*301-wa-je	**au-ni-ti-no**	**au-no-**pa	**au**-di-**ti**	*?-**au-ni-ti-no**	wa-**pi-na-**dwa	**ti**-rju-**te**
Libation Formula	i-*301-wa-ja			ja-di-ki-tu		i-pi-na-ma	si-ru-te

In the chart above, I have put in bold those signs that I have already indicated as acceptable transliterations (above), for the sake of argument.

Owens's identification would rely on AB values assigned to 8-9 more PhD signs:

PhD 02 	AB 28  I
PhD 09 	A 301  *301
PhD 27 	AB 54  WA
PhD 01 	AB 46  JE
PhD 13 	AB 03  PA
PhD 45 	AB 07  DI
PhD 22 	??
PhD 25 	AB ? DWA
PhD 18 	AB 26  RU

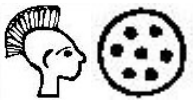
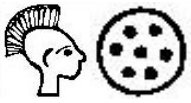
Without special argument, I don't see how the PhD sign in the first column develops into the AB sign in the second column. Perhaps the three strokes at the top of AB 28 (I) refer to the spikey

hairstyle of PhD 02 (Owens's "Punk" sign), perhaps A301 (phonetic value unknown) emphasizes the handle of the "plow" sign PhD 09, perhaps AB 54 is an exaggerated upside down version of the "hide" sign PhD 27, perhaps AB 46 emphasizes the arms of the walking man PhD 01 but loses his head, and perhaps the two cross-bars on AB 03 refer to the dots on the "rasp" sign PhD 13.

But the last three identifications (ignoring the non-identification for PhD 22 [why is that not an upside down AB 31  SA?) elude me.

If one does not accept Owens's phonetic values for the signs above, the resemblance to words in the Libation Formula falls apart (let alone the PhD sequence's resemblance to the Libation Formula's sequence which it follows, according to Owens, only for the first word and last two).

9. Owens also focuses on two PhD words. One word is  NA-DA-TE (side A, word-group XXVII, an acceptable transliteration), He identifies this word as a "*nomen agentis*," that is as having the ending -της (in Greek; as in English "athlete," a person who does "athletics"). Owens interprets such an ending as Indo-European, which it might be IF "NA-DA-TE" actually meant in the Minoan language "a person who did NA-DA things." But this is impossible to prove.

10. The second word is  . In his publication, "The Phaistos Disk: The Enigma of the Minoan Script," available on his Daidalika website (http://www.teicrete.gr/daidalika/documents/phaistos_disk/enigma.pdf), Owens gives PhD 02  the phonetic value of A according to its "statistical frequency" (as he says in his TEDx-Talk); that is, the sign is always initial as is Linear A's double ax sign 08  , which has the phonetic value A. Owens then phoneticizes  as A-QE (the "cookie"-like second sign is acceptably the prototype for AB 78 QE). In its appearance in signgroup AXIX,  /, Owens transliterates the word as A-QE-KU-  and reinterprets the phonetic value of the first 2 or 3 syllables as A-KWE, which he then relates to Indo-European *akka*, a word for "mother."

11. In his TEDx-Talk, Owens re-interprets the phonetic value of  as I (with the help of John Coleman, Professor of Phonetics at Oxford), thus now producing I-QE-KU, which again he reinterprets as I-KWE, a sound sequence that he still relates to *akka*, "mother." Apparently, it

does not matter what sound value one gives to  ; the result will always be a reference to "mother."

12. Relying on the work of Yves Duhoux and possibly myself ("The Aegean Bard: Evidence for Sound and Song," 2007), Owens accepts the song- or hymn-like structure of the text on the Phaistos Disc (words separated by word dividers and grouped in phrases marked by short strokes under some final syllables, repeated syllables at the beginnings of words on side A [alliteration] and at the ends of words on side B [rhymes]), Owens then concludes that the text on the Phaistos Disc is a hymn to the Mother goddess of Crete.

13. Such an identification seems old-fashioned to me, especially since Owen also equates the Linear A word A-SA-SA-RA as the Minoan equivalent to Astarte ("'All Religions Are One'," *Cretan Studies* 5, 1996, 209-218). But there is no evidence that A-SA-SA-RA is a goddess; instead, B. Davis has demonstrated that it should be the word for "dedication" or something similar in the Libation Formula (*Minoan Stone Vessels with Linear A Inscriptions* 2001, soon to be published as Aegaeum 35).

I think Owens starts off well, and in the company of many of us who have tried to place secure phonetic values on PhD signs by working backward from Linear B, but by the time we get to CP signs, the identifications have become insecure and the step to identifying PhD signs now seems a leap. Owens has bridged some of that leap, but I cannot follow him in identifying 90% of the PhD signs, let alone seeing in his transcriptions true parallels to Linear A words.