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## The Disc of *Hermesios* – Reconstruction of a Bronze Statue

### Introduction

The bronze disc (Inv. No. B 1956; fig.1a), which has been discovered 19<sup>th</sup> June 1941 during the excavations of the Westthermen, is a small but exceptionally interesting find. A preliminary report and a detailed publication have already appeared<sup>1</sup>, but a short description is necessary here as well. The solid cast disc is 5.5 mm thick and measures 19.7 cm in diameter. It is absolutely flat, and only one side is decorated, the other one is left plain. In the middle there is a rectangular hole (11 x 11 mm) which is surrounded by a small round depression (27 mm in diameter). The remaining surface of the disc is covered almost exclusively by a characteristic pattern of circular crescents which is most often referred to as a whirligig. The crescents (24 in number) are divided by deep cuttings from each other, which may have served to fasten some kind of inlays. On the rim, but still on the upper surface, there is a narrow band (ca. 6 mm wide) running all around the disc. Here there is a short inscription, and I think it is worth discussing it before we turn our attention to the object itself.

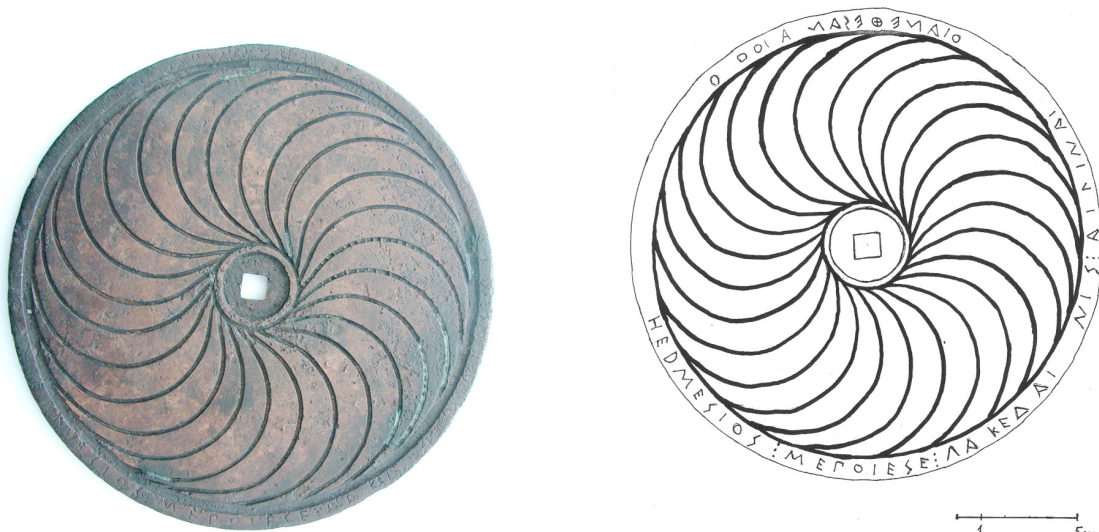


Fig. 1 - Bronze disc (B 1956) from Olympia (photo and drawing by the author).

<sup>1</sup> PATAY-HORVÁTH 2006; PATAY-HORVÁTH 2007.

### The inscription

The letters were incised very carefully and are very well preserved; there are only a few characters, which can not be read with certainty (the damages being caused by corrosion), but the missing letters can be restored without any difficulty. The text reads as follows:

Ηερμέσιος : μ'ἐποίησε : Λακεδαι[μό]νι[ο]ς : Αἰγιναῖ     →  
 [vacat] οἱ ἀνέθεσαν [vacat]     ←

The inscription consisting of two uneven lines is written in the boustrophedon manner. Four words at the beginning are written from left to right, the last word with the last two letters of the previous one from right to left. The two lines, arranged in two opposite sections of the rim, are separated from each other by long blank spaces. In these stretches of the rim there are a few, barely legible signs scratched on the surface. Even if they were intended to be letters, they do not make any sense, and in any case the technique of their rendering is so fundamentally different from the letters of the actual inscription, that they can not be considered as part of it; they were most probably sketches for the quite unusual layout of the inscription, for which I actually do not know any parallel<sup>2</sup>. I would suggest perhaps, that the original plan was to write the whole text in an unbroken line along the edge of the disc, but afterwards the arrangement has been changed. A possible goal for adopting this second solution, which is admittedly a bit awkward, might have been to achieve easier legibility: if the disc was positioned so as it is illustrated in my drawing (fig. 1b), one was able to read the text without turning the disc or one's head. The disc was accordingly to remain fastened in this particular position, and it can be assumed that it was designed to be viewed only in this way.

Because the text consists of a Laconian artist's signature and of an Aeginetan dedication and the object itself was found in Olympia, there are three possibilities to be considered in determining the alphabet and the dialect of the inscription: it might have been written either with Laconian or Aeginetan or perhaps even with Elean letters in any of these dialects. There are no characteristic Elean or Laconian letter-forms to be found in the text. The form of the Gamma, which occurs here, is unparalleled in Elean inscriptions, and similarly the form of the Delta would hardly fit in the Laconian alphabet. The triple-dot interpunction has no parallels whatsoever in Laconian inscriptions, and it is to be found only sporadically in Elean ones. If we suppose, on the other hand, that the alphabet used in this inscription, was the Aeginetan, we do not have to face such problems. The D-like form of the Rho in the very name of the Laconian artist, Hermesios confirms this assumption, since this particular letter-form is frequently found at Aegina, but never attested neither in Laconian nor in Elean inscriptions. The triple-dot interpunction occurs also quite often in Aeginetan inscriptions<sup>3</sup>. It might perhaps seem strange, that a Laconian artist would have written his name with foreign characters, but actually this practice seems to be quite normal: Gorgias, another Laconian artist, signed his statues on the Athenian Acropolis (and possibly one piece at Olympia as well) with Attic letters<sup>4</sup>. One might therefore reasonably assume, that Hermesios was a Laconian artist practicing his craft on Aegina, and because he was working regularly for Aeginetans, he became accustomed to use the letter-forms of the Aeginetan alphabet even in his signature. The other possibility could be, that he had an Aeginetan assistant in his workshop who was responsible for engraving the inscriptions<sup>5</sup>. Anyhow, if either of these conclusions regarding the genesis of the inscription are valid, we are entitled to compare the letter-forms of the inscription with those from Aegina itself and in this way we can determine an approximate date not only for the inscription but for the disc as well. Now, the best parallels regarding the letter-forms (especially those of

<sup>2</sup> The usual layout for inscriptions arranged on the rim of a circular object is shown e.g. by the votive inscription on the rim of a mirror from Brauron (OBERLÄNDER 1967, 185 No. 273; THEMELIS 1974, 62) and by the inscriptions referred to infra N. 6.

<sup>3</sup> JEFFERY 1990, 183 (Laconia), 207 (Elis), 109 (Aegina).

<sup>4</sup> LOEWY 1885, Nos. 36-37.

<sup>5</sup> PATAY-HORVÁTH 2008, 283–285.

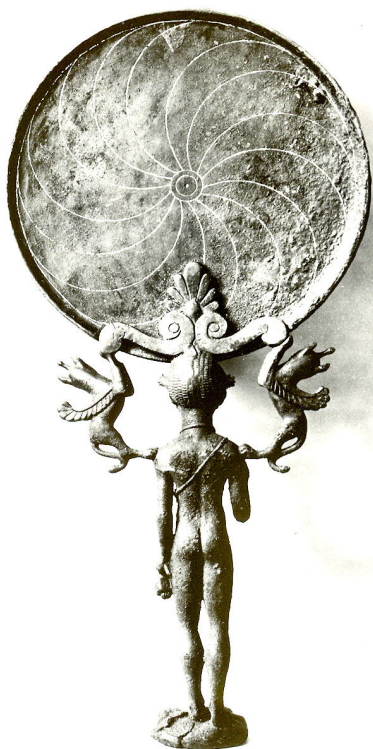


Fig. 2 - Laconian bronze mirror (New York, Metropolitan Museum of Art 38.11.3, photo courtesy of the museum).



Fig. 3 - Tondo of a Laconian *kylix* (Rome, Villa Giulia, after STIBBE 1972, pl. 96.1).

Alpha and Lambda) and the interpunctuation suggest very strongly, that the disc B 1956 has been produced sometime during the first half of the 5<sup>th</sup> century B.C.<sup>6</sup>

We have therefore gained not only the signature and the original work of a Laconian artist, who was unknown so far, but we also know, that he was active during the late archaic and early classical period, when Laconian art was, according to the view of many<sup>7</sup>, not any more capable of such marvellous achievements as during the preceding centuries. The small bronze disc in itself

is of course not a major work of art, which could prove the contrary, but one must not forget, that it is only part of the votive dedication referred to in the inscription. The rectangular hole in the middle, which served to fasten the disc, points quite clearly in this direction and encourages us to ask what the whole composition looked like. One is tempted to think that the analysis of the peculiar decoration might yield some clues for the reconstruction.

### ***The ornament***

The ornament which dominates the disc is made up of slim crescent-shaped sectors of equal dimensions, arranged closely side by side. This pattern is most often called a whirligig, and I will follow this practice now, but it is perhaps interesting to note, that there are several other expressions used to describe it, such as polyp-ornament, whorl, whirling pattern, circular pattern of large crescents, crescent wheel, wheel of crescents, radial crescents, just to name the English terms; in other languages there are some more varieties, like Windrademblem, Girandole, laufendes Rad, Sichelrad, croissants rayonnants, roue aux rayons courbés and rosone a raggi falcati<sup>8</sup>. None of these can be regarded as a generally accepted, standard term, and I have not found any collection or analysis of the numerous occurrences. So I tried to gather as many

<sup>6</sup> JEFFERY 1990, Pl. 17 Nos. 16, 18. (both dated ca. 475-450).

<sup>7</sup> See e.g. BALTRUSCH 1998, 97. A full bibliography and a careful discussion of this common assumption is given by HODKINSON 2000, 271-290.

<sup>8</sup> For these many different designations see e.g. FURTWÄGLER 1885, 131; POULSEN 1927, 83; STIBBE 1972, 216; CALLIPOLITIS-FEYTMANS 1974, *passim*; CHASE 1979, 60; GOETTE *ET AL.* 2004, 80.



Fig. 4 - Lead figurines from Laconia (Sparta, Archaeological Museum, photo courtesy of the 5<sup>th</sup> Ephoria of Prehistoric and Classical Antiquities).



Fig. 5 - Bottom of a plate from Akraiphia (Thebes, Archaeological Museum, photo by the author).

whirligigs as possible, and arrived at about one hundred examples<sup>9</sup>. The list is perhaps not exhaustive, but I am pretty sure, that it is representative enough, and allows us to draw some general conclusions about the use of the pattern.

The basic feature of the design are the crescents, the number of which varies (without any kind of discernible regularity) from 3 to more than 30<sup>10</sup>; if they are rendered in colour, they may be bichrome (red-and-black; black-and-white; red-and-white), or red, white and black in turn. There are two different types of a whirligig. The first is a simple circle with the curving lines meeting at the centre of the circle; the second, more elaborate variety has a central circle in the middle, and the curving lines do not meet at the centre but terminate at the edge of the central circle. The first type is very common in vase-painting, the second one is much less frequently used. The disc B 1956 from Olympia, and some other Laconian works-of-art (figs. 2, 3, 4) belong to the second type.

<sup>9</sup> PATAY-HORVÁTH 2007, 158–163.

<sup>10</sup> BOSS 2000, 63.



Fig. 6 - Interior of a plate from the tumulus of the Athenians (Marathon 766, after GOETTE ET AL. 2004, fig. 97).



Fig. 7 - Detail of a Corinthian column crater (Firenze, Archeological Museum 4198, photo by the author).



Fig. 8 - Painted plaque from the Athenian Acropolis (Athens, National Archaeological Museum 414, photo by the author).

There are two related, but distinct fields, where the whirligig is used: as a purely decorative design, which can be applied to fill any round-shaped surface, it is often found in the central tondos of round flat dishes (figs. 5, 6) or on the outside surface at the bottom of small round vases, like aryballo<sup>11</sup>. On the other hand, the whirligig is often used as shield device, covering either the whole surface of the shield, or (less frequently) only the centre of it (fig. 7). There is no reason to suppose a special meaning behind this shield device: it is associated with all kinds of gods (fig. 8), heroes (figs. 3, 9) and ordinary warriors (hoplites: figs. 4, 10, 11; riders: figs. 3, 12, 13); even an acrobat can have it on his shields (fig. 14). It occurs quite frequently in Corinthian vasepainting (figs. 7, 12), but is also found in Laconian (fig. 3), Attic (figs. 6, 8, 14) and other workshops (figs. 5, 9, 10, 11). During the 6<sup>th</sup> century it seems to have been very popular practically everywhere from east to west, as it is quite clearly demonstrated by the numerous representations on Clazomenian sarcophagi (fig. 15)<sup>12</sup> on the wooden slabs from the tomb at Tatarli (fig. 16) and on terracotta friezes from Cerveteri (fig. 13)<sup>13</sup>. After-

wards the whirligig seems to have disappeared (at least as a shield device), since it is only sporadically to be found in attic red-figure (fig. 11) and only once to my knowledge at least in the south-italian vasepainting (fig. 17)<sup>14</sup>. It is, however, retained as an ornament on metal vessels and appears even at a much later period, at

<sup>11</sup> PAYNE 1931, fig. 24 and 25.

<sup>12</sup> COOK 1981, G 8, 9, 23, 25, 31 (pl. 31, 48, 50, 62, 63).

<sup>13</sup> ANDREN 1940, 17, 25, pl. 5, 10. 12; 8, 22.

<sup>14</sup> For this last piece see KAESER 2000, 269–270, fig. 8.

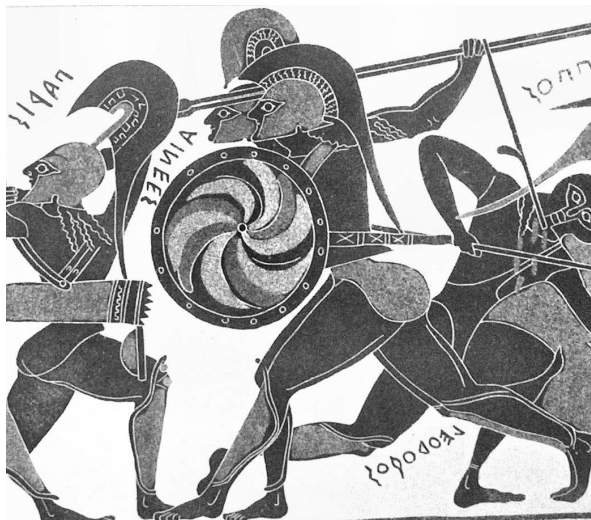


Fig. 9 - Detail of a Chalcidian amphora by the Inscription Painter (lost, after RUMPF 1927, pl. XII).



Fig. 10 - Fragment of a Chian chalice from Naukratis (London, BM 1888.6-1.512 after LEMOS 1991 pl. II).



Fig. 11 - Amphora by the Painter of the Louvre Centauromachy (private collection, after Sotheby, sale catalogue 8. 7. 1994, 69, no. 322).



Fig. 12 - Late Corinthian column crater by the Cavalcade Painter (Vatican, Mus. Greg. Etr. 16448, after SIMON 1976, pl. XII).

the end of the 4<sup>th</sup> century: in these cases the whirligig is always made up from the perforations in the bottom of a strainer (fig. 18)<sup>15</sup>.

### ***The problem of the disc***

After this review of the usage of the whirligig we can safely conclude, that the collection of the pieces featuring this special ornament type and the analysis of the motif do not actually provide any considerable help for determining the original purpose of the disc B 1956. One can only observe that the whirligig is apparently suitable for the decoration of any circular object or surface, but every kind of object, where the whirligig is actually occurring as a decoration can be practically excluded in this particular case. It is, I think, quite clear, that the disc can not

<sup>15</sup> An archaic strainer: FILOW 1927, 73 No. 72, pl. XIII,2. Examples from the fourth century are known from Derveni Tomb B (VOKOTOPOULOU 1996, 208) and Vergina (ANDRONICOS 1984, fig. 108, 178.)



Fig. 13 - Etruscan terracotta frieze from Caere (Copenhagen, Ny Carlsberg Glyptothek, photo by the author).



Fig. 14 - Panathenaic amphora (Paris, Cabinet des Médailles 243, photo by the author).

number of shields depicted with a whirligig as a device makes the interpretation as a miniature shield or shield device very attractive, but shield devices are much thinner, and shields or even miniature shields are usually convex and not so flat as our disc<sup>16</sup>.

There are only a few special cases, where the whirligig is applied neither to a shield nor to the central tondo of a vessel but to another kind of circular object. First of all, there is an archaic mirror (fig. 2), decorated on its rear side with an elaborate whirligig, but the disc of Hermesios can not be a mirror, because mirrors do not have a rectangular hole in the middle and on B 1956 there is no trace of a handle. Furthermore there is a terracotta head of Athena from Olympia, wearing an earring decorated with a whirligig (fig. 19), and on one of the Clazomenian sarcophagi it appears as the decoration of a chariot<sup>17</sup>. But B 1956 can not have been an earring, simply because of the dimensions of the disc, which would have thus belonged to an unrealistically great statue. From the technical point of view (dimensions, fastening hole in the middle), it would be perhaps possible to interpret the disc of Hermesios as a revetment plaque, applied in a similar way to a lifesize bronze chariot, which is otherwise completely lost. I think, however, that there are some serious objections to such an interpretation<sup>18</sup>.

These considerations oblige us to look out for other possibilities as well. There are some other round objects which could have been decorated with a whirligig, although we do not have any such pieces or representations of them in the actually remaining material. Of all the round objects to be considered (e.g. revetment of a horse harness or furniture decoration), the most likely candidate is a disc used and dedicated by athletes, because the dimensions (diameter and thickness) of B 1956 are practically identical to those of the remaining votive discs from Aegina and Sicily, which are approximately of the same date and were decorated with delicate incised figures<sup>19</sup>. The only problem is the hole in the middle of the disc, which never occurs on votive discs. But in this case the disc was not a votive offering on its own, but most probably formed

<sup>16</sup> See e.g. the miniature shield from Sparta (WOODWARD 1927/1928, 99–100 fig. 9).

<sup>17</sup> Berlin, 3145 (COOK 1981, 127 G 28, pl. 71) The exact purpose of the round object at the rear part of the chariot is not quite clear, but it is usually interpreted as a handle.

<sup>18</sup> PATAY-HORVÁTH 2007, 152–3.

<sup>19</sup> JACOBSTAHL 1933, 5–10.



Fig. 15 - Painted decoration of a Clazomenian sarcophagus (Leiden I. 1896/12.1, after COOK 1981, pl. 48.3).

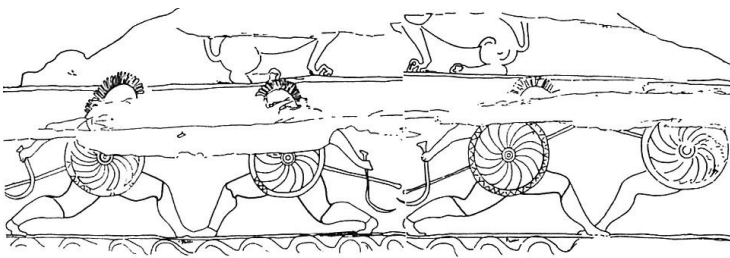


Fig. 16 - Painted decoration of the chamber tomb at Tatarli (after BINGÖL 1997, fig. 27).

part of a larger dedication, and the hole was necessary only from a technical point of view for joining the different parts of the votive offering together. Its rectangular form must have derived from a rectangular peg, which prevented the disc from rotating around its axis. As the analysis of the inscription has already shown, there was only one intended position of the disc and this special kind of joint was necessary for keeping the disc in this particular position.



Fig. 17 - Apulian crater by the Bendis Painter (München, Staatliche Antikensammlungen 9623, photo courtesy of the museum).



Fig. 18 - Silver strainer from Tomb B at Derveni (Thessaloniki, Archaeological Museum, photo courtesy of the museum).





Fig. 19 - Terracotta head of Athena (Olympia, Archaeological Museum, after WALTER-KARYDI 1987, fig. 187).



Fig. 20 - Reconstruction No. 1 (montage by Alfons Neubauer).

### **Reconstruction of the original statue**

One can suggest therefore that the disc belonged to an athlete's statue, dedicated after a victory in pentathlon. It must have been fastened with a square peg in the middle to the athlete's wrist. The peg and the hole were covered by a flat cap (which made them invisible) and the fingers grasped the rim at the break in the inscription. This suggested reconstruction offers consequently a perfect explanation for the conspicuous break i.e. for the interruption of the name of the votaries in the inscription and allows at the same time to calculate the size of the lost monument. The blank area caused by the break in the inscription is 5.1 cm long, which is actually too short for a lifesize figure. Four fingers of an adult person are approx. 8.0 cm in width, which means that the disc belonged to a statue which was ca. 2/3 life-size (approx. 1.2 m high).

There are two possibilities for reconstructing the athlete's statue. If he was represented holding the disc with one hand only (fig. 20), one can only imagine a statue like Myron's famous Discobolos. Other positions are excluded on technical grounds or because of the positioning and orientation of the letters<sup>20</sup>.

If we assume that the other hand was holding the disc as well (grasping the rim on the blank space after the end of the inscription), we arrive at another position (fig. 21), frequently shown in contemporary Athenian vase-painting<sup>21</sup>. This second variety is, however, less probable because of the awkward orientation of the inscription.

Anyway, the signed disc enables us to reconstruct one statue of Hermesios, who must have been an important Laconian artist, working most probably on Aegina in the first half of the fifth century. Although he

<sup>20</sup> PATAY-HORVÁTH 2007, 155.

<sup>21</sup> KNAUSS 2004, 102–115.



Fig. 21 - Reconstruction No. 2  
(montage by Alfons Neubauer).

has been completely neglected by ancient art historians, he might have played an important role in the formation of the famous Aeginetan school of sculpture<sup>22</sup>. His reconstructed statue represented a victorious Aeginetan athlete, whose name is not recorded by literary or epigraphic sources, but must have been written on the lost statue base.

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<sup>22</sup> PATAY-HORVÁTH 2008, 286–288.

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