

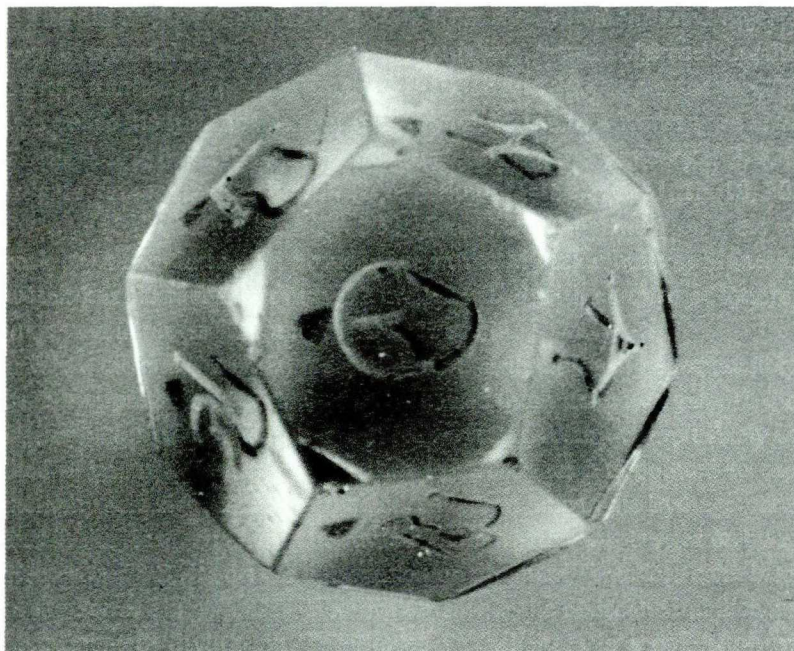
ANGELOS CHANIOTIS

*A Dodecahedron of Rock Crystal from the Idaean Cave
and Evidence for Divination in the Sacred Cave of Zeus*

THE EPIGRAPHY of the Idaean Cave primarily consists of inscriptions on pottery¹: numerous lamp signatures², a dipinto³, and a few inscribed pottery sherds. There must have been stone inscriptions there, such as the treaty between Kydonia and Apollonia⁴, but only a fragmentary inscription has been found, possibly an honorary inscription for a Roman emperor⁵. The rest of the inscriptions are on objects made of other materials: a bronze cauldron with a dedicatory inscription⁶, a golden phylactery⁷, and the inscription which I present in this article.

* This contribution was not presented during the Conference, but, because of its intrinsic value for the region, it is included in the Proceedings by kind permission of the editor.

1. I should express my gratitude to Jannis Sakellarakis for the opportunity he gave me to participate in the excavations of the Idaean Cave (1982-1986) and for entrusting me with the publication of the inscriptions found there.
2. See SAPOUNA 1998, 91-117 (cf. *SEG* XLVIII 1212). cf. BALDWIN-BOWSKY 1999, 324-325. CHANIOTIS 2005.
3. BALDWIN-BOWSKY 1999, 325, no. 67.
4. Polybius 28.14. Diodorus 30.13. CHANIOTIS 1996, 285-287, no. 41.
5. *IC* Ixi.2.
6. CHANIOTIS 2002 (cf. *SEG* XLIV 714 and LII 862).
7. *IC* Ixi.8.



Description

Dodecahedral cube, made of rock crystal and inscribed with a letter / number on each of its 12 faces. Height 2 cm, length of the sides of each face 8.1 cm, letter height 0.5 cm.

Provenance

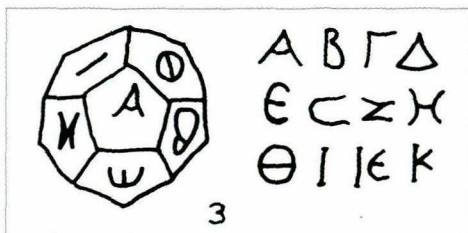
Idaeon Cave (1885), part of the Τριφύλλης Collection. It was donated to the Herakleion Museum in 1902.

Inventory number

Herakleion Museum Υ(άλινα) 118.

Date

c. 1st century A.D. The letter forms and the shape of the cube are very similar to a die found in a dated context (first century A.D.) in Patrae (see below note 15).



Text

A, B, Γ, Δ, E, ζ, Z (rather than N), H, Θ, I, IE, K

The 7th letter can be read both as zeta (7) and as nu (20). The reading Z is to be preferred, because in this way we get a complete sequence of numbers from 1 to 10.

The 12 numbers have been written on the 12 faces of the cube. The following numbers are written in opposite faces: 1 and 4, 5 and 6, 2 and 20, 9 and 3, 10 and 15, 7 and 8. If we take the side with the number 1 as the top face, the numbers are arranged in the following manner:

top: 1

second zone (from right to left): 5, 2, 9, 10, 7

third zone (from right to left): 3, 15, 8, 6, 20

bottom: 4

If the reading Z (not N) is correct, the numbers on the cube are based on the decimal system (1-10, 15 and 20). The numbers seem not to have been written randomly: in two cases adjacent numbers are on opposite faces (5-6, 7-8), in another two cases the number on one face is a multiple of the number on the other (3-9, 2-20); finally, 10 and 15 are multiples of 5, and the numbers 1 (μὴν) and 4 (τετράς) are of central importance in mathematical theory.

This object was certainly used as a die. Dice made of various materials (glass, faience, metal, rock crystal, marble, etc.) and with a different number of faces are quite common from the Classical period onwards, but they are particularly diffused in the Hellenistic period and in the Roman Empire⁸. In addition to the common dice with six faces⁹ one quite often finds dice with 18, 19, and 20 faces¹⁰. They were probably used in games¹¹.

The dice with 12 faces, inscribed with the first twelve numbers in Latin or Greek, are less common. Examples are known from Germany (made of bronze, with Latin numerals)¹², Antioch (of red stone, with Greek numerals)¹³ and Egypt (of black stone, with Greek numerals)¹⁴.

8. See, in general, Daremberg-Saglio, s.v. *tessera*, col. 128.

9. E.g., *SEG* XXXIV 449-450. From Crete, I know of a bronze die with six sides found in Knossos (Imperial period?), delivered to the Herakleion Museum by Δ. Καλπατζής in 1961 (unpublished, to the best of my knowledge). It has dots on three sides: one dot on two sides, ten dots on another.

10. For examples see Daremberg-Saglio, s.v. *teserra*, col. 128. DORNSEIFF 1925, 151. PERDRIZET 1930, 24.

11. Daremberg-Saglio, s.v. *teserra*, col. 128. HEINEVETTER 1912, 51-52. PERDRIZET 1930, 5-13. EMPEREUR 1981, 562 (cf. *SEG* XXXI 1634). ΠΑΠΑΠΟΣΤΟΛΟΥ 1983, 30-31.

12. VON COHAUSEN 1879, 393. VAN VLEUTEN 1876, 193. HEINEVETTER 1912, 51. A die with 18 sides (made of black stone), also found in Germany, combines 12 sides inscribed with the first 12 Latin numbers with 6 sides inscribed with various combinations of letters; see VAN VLEUTEN 1876, 192.

13. HEINEVETTER 1912, 51.

14. PERDRIZET 1930, 4 no. 15 (pl. II, 14).

The die of the Idaean Cave differs from the aforementioned objects both in material and in the selection of numbers; instead of presenting the 12 first numbers, it has the numbers 1-10, 15 and 20. The closest parallel is a dodecahedral die made of rock crystal found in a Roman grave in Patrae¹⁵. It is inscribed (in Greek characters) with the numbers 1, 2, 3, 6 (stigma, rather than Ω = 800), 7 (Ζ, or perhaps Ν = 50), 10, 11, 15, 18, 20, 30, and 40 (Μ, rather than Σ = 200). One should also mention a die of rock crystal of unknown provenance in the Münzkabinett at Munich, which has 20 faces, but only 12 are inscribed with couples of letters, which again represent numbers (ΑΝ, ΒΞ etc.)¹⁶.

While the cubes with 20 faces found primarily in Egypt have plausibly been interpreted by P. Perdrizet as dice used in an unknown game¹⁷, the interpretation of the dodecahedra of rock crystal as dice—or exclusively as dice of games—is less certain. Already Perdrizet has pointed to the metaphysical significance of the dodecahedron among the Pythagoreans and in the Academy¹⁸. An alternative interpretation was suggested by F. Heinevetter¹⁹. Based on the information on divinatory practices contained in the *Sortes Sangallenses*, Heinevetter saw in the dodecahedral dice an instrument of divination. The *Sortes Sangallenses* is a collection of oracular responses (third century A.D.?), divided into chapters, of which each contains twelve oracles. The enquirer used a dodecahedral die in order to find the response to his question²⁰. F. Dornseiff, following Heinevetter's suggestion, pointed also to the survival of a divinatory practice involving the use of a dodecahedron until the Middle Ages²¹. Plutach describes a method of divination with the use of dice by the Pythia and the priest in Delphi, but unfortunately the relevant passage is problematic²². A magical papyrus describes a method which uses dice (διὰ ψήφου) to find out whether a person is still alive or has died²³. In Asia Minor, enquirers

15. ΠΑΠΑΠΟΣΤΟΛΟΥ 1983, 29-31 (cf. *SEG* XXXV 397. *Bull. épigr.* 1987, 127).

16. DORNSEIFF 1925, 151-152.

17. PERDRIZET 1930, 4 (cf. *SEG* VIII 811).

18. PERDRIZET 1930, 14-15, who quotes the Scholia in the 13th Book of Euclid (V.2, p. 291, 14, ed. Heiberg-Stamatis): ἐν τούτῳ τῷ βιβλίῳ γράφεται τὰ λεγόμενα Πλάτωνος ε' σχήματα, ἃ αὐτοῦ μὲν οὐκ ἔστιν, τρία δὲ τῶν προειρημένων ε' σχημάτων τῶν Πυθαγορείων ἔστιν, ὃ τε κύβος καὶ ἡ πυραμὶς καὶ τὸ δωδεκάεδρον.

19. HEINEVETTER 1912, 52.

20. DOLD 1948, for the date see pp. 8, 14-15. For the method of divination see p. 10.

21. DORNSEIFF 1925, 152.

22. Plut., *Moralia* 391 d (de E apud Delphos 16 ed. Flacelière): ὁ πρῶτος ὑμῖν γίνεται τῶν τριῶν κλήρων εἰς τὰ πέντε, πρὸς ἀλλήλους, ἐκεῖνης τὰ τρία, σοῦ δὲ τὰ δύο βάλλοις. See V. Ehrenberg, s.v. *Losung*, in *RE* XIII.2 (1927) 1453.

23. *Papyri Graecae Magicae* LXII 48-52: Μέθοδος [ος] δ]ιὰ ψήφου μαθ[ε]ϊν, εἰ ζῆ ἢ ἔτελεύ[τ]ησεν, οἶον ποίησ[ον] αὐτὸν ψηφίσ[α]ι τόδε(ε) τῆ φιά[λ]η. πλυσάτω ταύτην ὕδατος, προσθοῦ [βολλομένη] τῆ ψήφω χιβ (= 612), ὃ ἔστιν θεοῦ ὄνομα, οἶον Ζεὺς,

identified the answer to their query in collections of oracular responses by using knuckle-bones. A large number of collections of such astragalus or dice oracles (ἀστραγαλομαντεῖον, «Würfelorakel») have been found in sanctuaries and public spaces of Asia Minor cities, but also in graves²⁴.

The use of such lists of oracular responses is quite common in ancient divination. The *Homeromanteia*, e.g., were selections of verses of the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*, arranged in groups of six verses which served as answers to oracular questions²⁵. The *Sortes Astrampsychi* were a collection of 92 questions and 1,030 potential answers; the enquirer selected a question and then identified the corresponding answer through a complex procedure which involved the drawing of lots²⁶. Collections of metrical oracular responses arranged alphabetically («alphabetical oracles», «Buchstabenorakel») were widely diffused in Asia Minor²⁷. None of these divinatory practices, however, involved the use of a dodecahedron.

The find from the Idaean Cave is, to the best of my knowledge, the first dodecahedral die found in a sanctuary. Its discovery in a cult place does not necessarily mean that it was used for divination. Since dice used in games are known to have been dedicated in sanctuaries²⁸, we cannot exclude the possibility that this dice was the ex-voto of a visitor. Two observations, however, support the interpretation of the dodecahedral dice as instruments of divination: the selection of numbers and the material.

Unlike the hexahedral dice and the dice with 20 faces, which always indicate (with letters or dots) the same numbers (1-6 and I-XX), each of the dodecahedral dice is unique as regards the selection of numbers. Leaving aside the Roman dodecahedral cubes found in Germany (above note 11), we encounter the following combinations:

- ❖ Antioch (see above note 12): the first twelve numbers in Antioch;
- ❖ Patrae (see note 15): the first three numbers, the number 10 and its multiples (20, 30, 40, perhaps also 50), multiples of three (6 and 18), and the numbers 7 (?), 11, and 15;
- ❖ Idaean Cave: the first ten numbers, 15, and 20.

[τοῦ] δὲ μακροῦ ἀπ[ο]βαλέτω τνγ (= 365), ὃ ἐστὶν Ἑρμῆς. εἰάν οὖν εὐρεθῆ ζεύγη ἐν τῇ ψήφ[ω], ζῆ, εἰ δὲ μή. [ἔ]χει θάνατος.

24. For an overview see NOLLÉ 1996/1997. cf. NOLLÉ 1987. For examples see NOLLÉ AND SCHINDLER 1991, no. 4. ŞAHİN 1999, nos. 205-207. HORSLEY AND MITCHELL 2000, no. 5.

25. MALTOMINI 1995.

26. TANNERY 1898, 96-106. BROWNE 1983.

27. See the articles of J. Nollé cited in note 24. For examples see BRIXHE AND HODOT 1988, nos. 45-46. RITTI 1989. NOLLÉ 1993, no. 23. CORSTEN 1997. PETZL 1997. HORSLEY AND MITCHELL 2000, no. 159.

28. See KILIAN 1978, 221-2. JACQUEMIN 1984, 170-171 nos. 16 and 18.

If these combinations are not random, they may be related with a divinatory practice, in which the oracular response was identified with the use of dice.

The material may also be significant. According to the ancient treatises which deal with the magical and medical properties of stones (Λιθικά), rock crystal was regarded as one of the most sacred and powerful stones, used, e.g., for the lighting of sacred fire²⁹.

The finding place also points to the religious function of the two rock crystal dice. The die from Patrae was found in the grave of a young man. Two of the grave offerings, two rings, strongly support the assumption that he was somehow related to divinatory activities. One of the rings shows the head of a prophet, the other a mantic tripod³⁰. The excavator, I. A. Papapostolou, associated the second ring with the office of the *quindecimviri sacris faciundis*. The members of this board kept and interpreted the books which contained Sibylline prophecies. Papapostolou is certainly right in his assumption that the young man belonged to one of the prominent families of the Roman colony of Patrae, a member of which had served as *quindecimvir sacris faciundis*³¹. I suggest that the die of rock crystal and these rings are associated with a divinatory activity. One should also mention that the grave also contained two silver knuckle-bones (astragals)³², which may have been used in *astragalomanteia* (see above). The religious character of the grave goods is confirmed also by the discovery of a silver *crepitaculum*, an object often used for magical or apotropaic purposes³³. Three objects, which the excavator interpreted as heirloom (rings) or presents of the childhood (astragals, die, *crepitaculum*)³⁴, may well be connected with a particular religious function of the buried person. As Papapostolou has pointed out, there can be no doubt about the high social position of the young man. Two inscriptions, one found in the mausoleum, the second near it, mention names (Aequanus, Va., Aequ.) which can be associated with known families in Patrae (Aequani, Varii, and / or Vatronii). Aequana Musa served as a priestess of Artemis Laphria, Varius Secundus and Varronius Syneros were *augustales*³⁵. An attractive hypothesis in view of the discovery of several objects related to

29. *Ἐμφύως Λιθικά Κηρύγματα* 1.34 (ed. Halleux-Schamp). See also HALLEUX AND SCHAMP 1985, 301-302.

30. ΠΑΠΑΠΟΣΤΟΛΟΥ 1983, 7-12, 14-16.

31. ΠΑΠΑΠΟΣΤΟΛΟΥ 1983, 15 and 33.

32. ΠΑΠΑΠΟΣΤΟΛΟΥ 1983, and 19-20 no. 12.

33. ΠΑΠΑΠΟΣΤΟΛΟΥ 1983, 18-19.

34. ΠΑΠΑΠΟΣΤΟΛΟΥ 1983, 31. Papapostolou rightly stresses the untypical character of the grave offerings (ΠΑΠΑΠΟΣΤΟΛΟΥ 1983, 31-32).

35. ΠΑΠΑΠΟΣΤΟΛΟΥ 1983, 32-33. For improved editions of these inscriptions see RIZAKIS 1998, 84-86 no. 5, 130-131 nos. 49-50.

divination—a hypothesis which, however, cannot be proven—is that the buried man had served as *augur* (οἰωνοσκόπος) of the Roman colony³⁶ and that the dodecahedral die was used for divination.

Given the possibility that the dodecahedral die of rock crystal from the Idaean Cave may have served for divinatory purposes one should consider the oracular function of Zeus' sanctuary. Was divination one of the primary functions of Zeus' cave on Mt. Ida and in which period? Several arguments for such a function have been put forth by G. Capdeville³⁷, most of them entirely inconclusive. Neither the tradition about the periodical visit of Minos to the cave of Zeus³⁸, nor the discovery of tripods in the cave—a common find in early sanctuaries—can be taken as evidence for oracular activities in the Idaean Cave³⁹. It is also questionable whether the tripod represented next to an armed divinity—Zeus according to Capdeville, Athena according to other scholars⁴⁰ on a mitra found in Axos has anything to do with the cult in the Idaean Cave or with divination. Coins of Axos show a tripod on one face and the head of a young man wearing a laurel wreath on the other; the man was identified by Capdeville with Zeus Idaios⁴¹. This identification should be rejected. The laurel wreath supports an identification with Apollo Pythios, whose sanctuary did exist in Axos⁴². Capdeville was on safer grounds when he pointed to the fact that according to Porphyrios the chorus in Euripides' lost tragedy *The Cretans* consisted of *prophets of Zeus* (Διὸς προφήτας)⁴³. Unfortunately, Porphyrios is a very late source, and one should note that in the preserved passage of the tragedy the members of the chorus designate themselves as Διὸς Ἰδαίου μύσται and not as prophets.

Capdeville's arguments in support of an oracular function of the Idaean Cave are not conclusive, but there are some other indications for

36. The office of the *aug(ur)* seems to be attested according to RIZAKIS 1998, 185-186 no. 135, although I suspect that the letters AUG. are the abbreviation of *aug(ustalis)* as in no. 49.
37. CAPDEVILLE 1990.
38. *Odyssey* 19.178-179. Plat., *Legg.* I 624a-625b. [Plat.], *Minos* 319b-e. Strabo 10.4.8. C 476 (cf. *FrGrHist* 60 F 147). Nikol. Damask., *FrGrHist* 90 F 103 aa 1. Maximus Tyr. 38.2 C (ed. Hobein). Val. Max. 1.2 ext. 1 (ed. Kempf). On this tradition see GÖRGEMANN 1960, 65. ΠΑΝΑΓΟΠΟΥΛΟΣ 1981, 167-170. VERBRUGGEN 1981, 84-85.
39. For this reason SPORN 2002, 221, rejects Capdeville's suggestion.
40. HOFFMANN 1972, 23-24 no. 2. CAPDEVILLE 1990, 93-101 (with the earlier bibliography). It should be noted that the identification of the figure with Zeus had already been suggested by N. Kontoleon (KONTOΛΕΩΝ 1962).
41. CAPDEVILLE 1990, 96-97 (with earlier bibliography).
42. *SEG* XXIII 566 lines 8, 17, 22-23 (late fourth century B.C.). The Pythion of Axos is mentioned also by CAPDEVILLE 1990, 97 and 100.
43. Porphyrios, *de abstinentia* 4.19, p. 261, 67 ed. Nauck (= Euripides *fr.* 3.10 ed. Cantarella). On this passage see CANTARELLA 1964, 68. CAPDEVILLE 1990, 101, note 40. On the *Cretans* of Euripides see more recently COZZOLI 1993.

such a function. The most important relevant traditions are those which connect the cult in the Idaean Cave with Epimenides. His theological and prophetic activities begin after his legendary sleep in the cave⁴⁴. According to a mythological tradition the Idaean Cave was the very place where Laios, Keleos, Kerberos and Aigolios were transformed into prophetic birds⁴⁵. These myths and legends which directly associate the Idaean Cave with divination should not surprise us. Both as a cave and as a cult place of Zeus —one of the primary patrons of divination—⁴⁶, the sacred cave on Mt. Ida was an ideal place for an oracle. Many important oracles were located in caves, natural chasms, or spots which were constructed in such a way as to remind one of caves and chasms (e.g., Apollo's oracle in Delphi and Klaros, the oracle of Trophonios in Lebadeia, the cave of Sibylla in Kyme)⁴⁷. As late as A.D. 302 Diocletian is said to have received an oracle which stressed the priority of oracles given from caves over oracles given on top of the earth's surface⁴⁸. In a passage, in which Iamblichos summarizes the main divinatory methods, he refers to prophets who drink water, seated in caves, or inhale vapors⁴⁹.

To sum up: the legends concerning Epimenides and the myth of the prophetic birds directly associate the Idaean Cave with divination. As a sacred cave and as a cult place of Zeus the Idaean Cave probably served as an oracle. One should not exclude the possibility that the interest of the Pythagoreans in this cult place was not only connected with traditions about a mystery cult practiced in the cave, but also with the strong interest of the Pythagoreans in divination⁵⁰. Of course, the traditions which connect the Idaean Cave with divination do not prove that this cult place has *always* and *continually* served as an oracle. The legends and myths seem to refer to an early period, and it is conceivable that in the Classical or Hellenistic period Zeus Idaios as an oracular divinity was overshadowed by other gods, e.g. Apollo.

44. For the evidence see *FrGrHist* 457 with the commentary of F. Jacoby. The prophetic activities of Epimenides are discussed by H. Demoulin (DEMOULIN 1901, 100-106). In general see MELE ET AL. 2001 and cf. PARKE 1988, 174-178.

45. Antoninus Liberalis, *Metamorph.* 19.3 ed. Martini (*Mythographi Graeci* II.2). See also FAURE 1964, 115. VERBRUGGEN 1981, 41-42.

46. PARKE 1967, 16-25. FONTENROSE 1978, 229.

47. PARKE 1967, 26-27. FONTENROSE 1988, 230. For Delphi see FONTENROSE 1988, 199-202. For Klaros see ROBERT 1954, 14-15. For Trophonios see BONNECHERE 1989. For Kyme see PARKE 1967, 80-81.

48. [Eusebios], *Vita Constantini* 2.50 (ed. Winkelmann): τὸν Ἀπόλλω τὸ τινυκαῦτα ἔφασαν ἐξ ἄντρου τινὸς καὶ σκοτίου μυχοῦ, οὐχὶ δ' ἐξ ἀνθρώπου χρῆσαι, ὡς ἄρα οἱ ἐπὶ τῆς γῆς δίκαιοι ἐμπόδιον εἶεν τοῦ ἀληθεύειν αὐτὸν καὶ διὰ τοῦτο ψευδεῖς τῶν τριπόδων τὰς μαντείας ποιεῖσθαι. See FONTENROSE 1988, 206-207.

49. Iamblichos, *de mysteriis* 3.11 (ed. des Places): οἱ δὲ ἐξ ὕδατος πίνοντες..., οἱ δὲ στομίους παρακαθήμενοι..., οἱ δὲ ἐξ ὕδατων ἀτμιζόμενοι.

50. On the connection of the Pythagoreans with the Idaean Cave see, e.g., Diogenes

Even if the divinatory use of the dodecahedron of rock crystal seems quite probable, we cannot answer the question how it found its way to the Idaean Cave: Was it used by priests? Was it at the disposal of the visitors, as knuckle-bones were used in *astragalomanteia* by the pilgrims in other sanctuaries?⁵¹ Or was it brought as a dedication by a pilgrim who had heard of the sanctuary's oracular functions — in early times or still in the first centuries of the Imperial period?

Laertios 8.3 (p. 105,6 ed. Delatte). Porphyrios, *Vita Pythagorae* 17 (p. 43,12-22 ed. des Places), cf. CANTARELLA 1964, 63-69. VERBRUGGEN 1981, 81-83, 88-91. On the interest of the Pythagoreans in divination see Diogenes Laertios 8.23; *μαντικὴν πᾶσαν τιμᾶν*. Photios, *Bibliotheca* 439 a 1418 (ed. Henry). SEG XXVIII 943 = MERKELBACH AND STAUBER 2001, 47-48 no. 08/01/35 (Kyzikos, Imperial period); *μαθήμασι Πυθαγορείοις μάντις ἔών*.

51. HOPFNER 1924, 53-54. A knuckle-bone covered with a silver sheet (early Archaic period?) was found in the Idaean Cave; this object may have been used in *astragalomanteia*, but it may also be a game, dedicated by a young man at the end of his childhood. See SAKELLARAKIS 1988, 187-189, who also discusses the various uses of the object.

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