

## Mycenaean Epigraphy

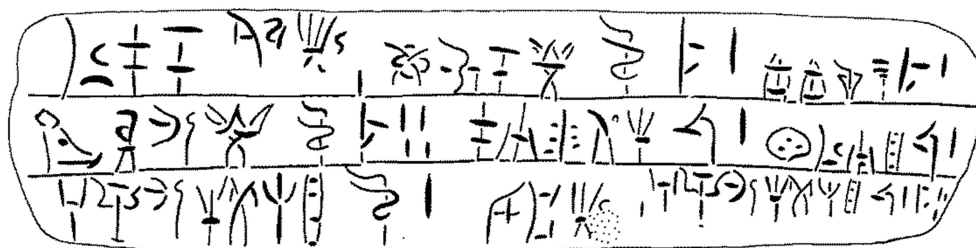
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Mycenaean epigraphy is a discipline that deals with the study of Linear B, a writing system used in Crete and in mainland Greece from about 1450 to 1200 BCE for an archaic form of Greek.

The vast majority of the Linear B inscriptions are engraved on administrative clay documents (tablets, labels and nodules). Some inscriptions, also of administrative nature, are painted on transport clay vessels called “stirrup jars”. All these documents come from palaces or buildings relating to palaces. Linear B – which derives from Linear A, an undeciphered writing system used in Crete and in the Aegean from about 1900 to 1450 BCE – includes 87 syllabograms (with structure V, CV or CCV), a number of logograms (designating men, animals, foodstuffs and objects), some metrograms (for weight and capacity measures) and five numerical symbols (for 1, 10, 100, 1,000 and 10,000). At present around 6,000 Linear B documents are known from more than twenty different sites.

Example of a Linear B text from Knossos (Fp 13) recording olive oil offerings to divinities (c. 1370 BCE):



(from *CoMIK I*, p. 9; drawing by L. Godart)

- .1 ra-pa-to ‘me-no’, \*47-ku-to-de OLE V 1 pi-pi-tu-na V 1
- .2 au-ri-mo-de OLE V 4 pa-si-te-o-i S 1 qe-ra-si-ja S 1
- .3 a-ne-mo-i-je-re-ja OLE 1 u-ta-no , ‘a-ne-mo-i-je-re-ja’ S 1 V 3

In the month of Lapathos: to \*47-ku-to (place name) 1,6 l. oil, to *Pi-pi-tu-na* (goddess name) 1,6 l.; to Aulimos (place name) 6,4 l., to all the gods 9,6 l., to *Qe-ra-si-ja* (god’s name) 9,6 l., to the priestess of the winds 28,8 l.; *U-ta-no* (place name), to the priestess of the winds 12,8 l.

### The first discoveries

The first Linear B texts came to light in Knossos in 1900. During the systematic excavation of the palace the English archaeologist A. J. Evans found numerous archival documents written in three different scripts. In *Scripta Minoa I* (Oxford 1909) Evans called these scripts “Cretan Hieroglyphic”, “Linear A” and “Linear B”, where the term “linear” alluded to the stylized and cursive shape of the signs compared to the more decorative and calligraphic form of the Cretan Hieroglyphics. The volume, which represents the founding work of Aegean epigraphy, studies the relations between the three writing systems and analyses in detail the

first one. Subsequently, a selection of Linear B tablets with commentary was published by Evans in the fourth volume of *Palace of Minos* (London 1935). This last volume contained also a commentary on the vase inscriptions found on a number of Greek mainland sites, among which those excavated in Thebes by Keramopoulos in 1921. In the last years of his life, Evans also worked on a full edition of the Linear B texts from Knossos. That volume, however, remained unfinished and was published only after his death (1941) by J. L. Myres (*Scripta Minoa II*, Oxford 1952).

In 1939, shortly after the publication of *PoM IV*, the American archaeologist C. W. Blegen began the excavation of the palace of Pylos in Messenia, bringing to light the remains of an important archive of Linear B tablets similar to those from Knossos. That discovery raised the problem of the relations between Minoan Crete and the Greek mainland at the end of the Late Bronze Age. The outbreak of the Second World War, however, prevented the continuation of the work, which was resumed by Blegen only in the 50s.

### The decipherment of Linear B

The following decade, marked by the conflict and then by the difficulties of the immediate post-war period, was characterized by a series of fundamental contributions for the decipherment of Linear B. The American scholar A. Kober, on the basis of some alternations in the Knossos texts (the so-called “triplets”), hypothesized that the language of the Linear B was of inflectional type (1946); then, she convincingly demonstrated the existence of two variants, masculine and feminine, of the word for ‘total’ (1949). Meanwhile, E. L. Bennett Jr., one of Blegen’s most brilliant students, developed a reliable syllabary of Linear B based on the Pylos unpublished inscriptions (1947).

In 1950 the English architect M. Ventris, who had been interested in Linear B for more than a decade, decided to circulate a questionnaire among a number of scholars (the so-called “Mid-Century Report”); this way he came into close contact with Bennett, who was about to publish the texts from Pylos. Based on this edition (*The Pylos Tablets*, Princeton 1951) and on the drafts of *Scripta Minoa II*, Ventris gradually refined his method, noting down the results in a series of “Work Notes”. In particular, based on the statistical analysis of the frequencies and the alternations of the signs, he progressively developed a phonetic grid of the syllabograms (whose columns and rows corresponded to the same vowels and consonants), until, by assigning to some syllabograms the phonetic values of the homomorphic signs of the Cypriot syllabary, he identified the Kober’s triplets as Greek toponyms and ethnics (e.g. *Amnisos*, *Amnisios*, *Aminisiā*, etc.). As a result, in his last “Work Note” (No. 20 of June 1, 1952) Ventris tentatively advanced the hypothesis that the Knossos and Pylos tablets might be written in Greek.

A month later, Ventris publicly announced the outcomes of his decipherment at a BBC radio broadcast (July 1, 1952); then, after a few days, he came into contact with J. Chadwick, a Cambridge specialist of ancient Greek, who helped him solve the linguistic problems posed by the decipherment. Their collaboration led to the publication of the founding article of Mycenaean epigraphy: “Evidence for Greek Dialect in the Mycenaean Archives” (*The Journal of Hellenic Studies* 1953). Meanwhile Blegen had informed Ventris that, by applying the phonetic values of his grid to a new Pylos text found in 1952, the syllabic sequence that preceded the figure of a tripod could be read as *ti-ri-po* (Gr. *tripōs*), a circumstance which provided the final confirmation of the decipherment.

### The development of the Linear B studies

In the following years, Ventris and Chadwick developed their collaboration and published the first general synthesis on Mycenaean texts: *Documents in Mycenaean Greek* (Cambridge 1956 [2nd ed. 1973]). In the same year, the first international colloquium on Mycenaean texts took place in Gif-sur-Yvette, near Paris.

The interest raised by the decipherment of the Linear B texts was immense: in a short time several research centres emerged and a growing number of scholars concentrated on the interpretation of the Linear B documents as well as on the study of the linguistic characters of the Mycenaean dialect. The comparison with the contemporary Near Eastern documents and the later Greek texts allowed immediate progress in the

reconstruction of the society and the economy of the Mycenaean kingdoms. In the meantime, the tools needed for the analysis of the texts (editions, indexes, lexicons, grammars, concordances, bibliographies and palaeographic analyses) began to appear.

In the following years the method of inquiry was gradually refined. The Linear B texts started to be studied in a more complex way by combining textual, palaeographic and archaeological parameters (i.e. by taking into account the contents, the scribal hands and the find places of the documents). The combined use of those criteria (that would have been later complemented by the study of fingerprints) shifted the interest of the specialists to the interpretation of the documents, their mutual relations and the nature of the record keeping systems. The discoveries of new inscriptions (especially in Argolis and Boeotia) opened the way to new interpretative hypotheses and significantly contributed to the progress of the discipline.

This tendency is clearly visible in the international conferences on the Mycenaean texts which followed that of Gif-sur-Yvette, in the monographs dedicated to the various sectors of the Mycenaean economy, and in many of the contributions submitted to the most representative journals in the field of Linear B studies (*Minos*, *Kadmos* and *Studi Micenei ed Egeo-Anatolici*).

### The current situation

Today, more than sixty years after the decipherment, Mycenaean epigraphy is a well rooted discipline with a wide range of work tools. Detailed information on this aspect can be found in the most recent handbooks (*Introducción al griego micénico*, Saragoza 2006; *A Companion to Linear B*, 3 vols, Louvain-la-Neuve 2008-2014; *Manuale di epigrafia micenea*, 2 vols, Padova 2016).

The most common tools, in addition to those already mentioned, are in any case the following:

#### 1) Editions:

*Corpus of Mycenaean Inscriptions from Knossos*, 4 vols, Cambridge – Pisa – Roma 1986-1998.

*The Pylos Tablets Transcribed*, 2 vols, Roma 1973-1976.

*Thèbes. Fouilles de la Cadmée. IV. Les textes de Thèbes (1-433)*, Pisa – Roma 2005.

*Corpus delle iscrizioni vascolari in lineare B*, Roma 1974.

#### 2) Lexicons:

*Diccionario micénico*, 2 vols, Madrid 1985-1993.

#### 3) Paleographic analyses:

*Les scribes de Knossos*, Roma 1967.

*The Scribes of the Room of the Chariot Tablets at Knossos*, Salamanca 2000.

*The Scribes of Pylos*, Roma 1988.

In some cases, the current reference works are now outdated. This is the case, for example, of the general indexes of Linear B, which date back to the 70s, or of the *Diccionario Micénico*, whose second volume was published in 1993, more than twenty years ago. For the texts of Pylos there is only one edition in transliteration (1973-1976) and no photographs nor accurate drawings are available yet. Some projects, however, are underway and new updated tools should be available soon.

In addition to the traditional tools and reference works, there are now also a number of online resources on Linear B.

The web page on Linear B of the MNAMON project, an initiative of the Scuola Normale Superiore of Pisa [<http://mnamon.sns.it/>], offers a reasoned catalogue of this kind of resources, divided by sites of general interest, institutions, projects, study centres, teaching materials, fonts, museums, collections of texts, people and bibliographies.

Furthermore, the Linear B texts can now be consulted online thanks to three different projects: *DĀMOS – Database of Mycenaean at Oslo* [<http://www.hf.uio.no/ifikk/english/research/projects/damos/>], *LiBER – Linear B Electronic Resources* [<http://liber.isma.cnr.it/cgi-bin/home.cgi>] and *CaLiBRA – Cambridge Linear B Research Archive* [<http://calibra.classics.cam.ac.uk/>].

A preliminary updated version of the general indexes of Linear B is available on the website “Biblioteca Virtual Miguel de Cervantes” [<http://www.cervantesvirtual.com/bib/portal/diccionariomicenico/>].

Finally, *Nestor*, the main bibliographic tool for the Mycenaean epigraphy and, more generally, for the studies about the Aegean Bronze Age, is online at the following address [<http://classics.uc.edu/nestor/>].

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