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The Discovery of Linear B

The revelation of the Bronze Age in the Aegean area began with the epoch-making discoveries of Heinrich Schliemann at Troy and Mycenae towards the end of the nineteenth century. At that date the science of archaeology had hardly come into existence, and we ought not to blame Schliemann for the irreparable damage that he did to the sites he attacked. At Troy he dug a great cutting through the middle of the hill to expose the earliest layers. But at least he demonstrated that there had been civilisations in the Aegean long before the historical Greeks came on the scene, even though we now know that what he originally identified as Priam's Troy was in fact a thousand years too early for the Trojan War of Greek tradition.

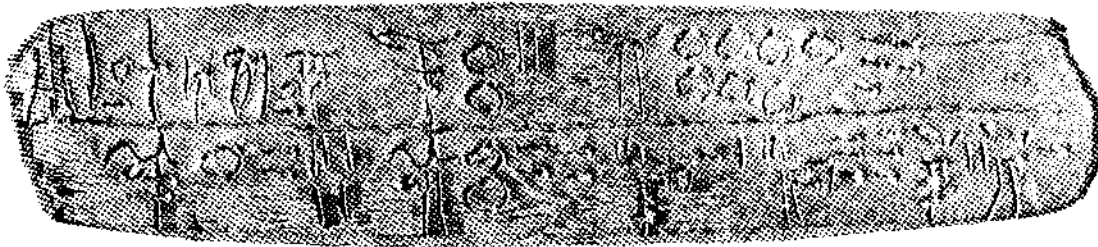
Now that the chronology has been well established, we can confidently assert that the greatest pre-classical civilisation flourished in what is called, after the first of its sites to be excavated, the Mycenaean period. This can be dated roughly between the sixteenth and twelfth centuries BC. It is generally believed that the epics of Homer describe the Aegean world towards the end of that period; but the more facts we learn about it, the more it is evident that Homer's knowledge was incomplete and imperfect. We have moved a long way from Schliemann's faith in the literal truth of Homer.

An English student of archaeology, Arthur Evans (later Sir Arthur), was so impressed by the level of culture these Mycenaeans had achieved on the mainland of Greece, that he formed the opinion that such a civilisation could not have functioned without a knowledge of writing. Yet neither at Troy nor at Mycenae had Schliemann's excavations yielded a single inscription. Whether Evans' opinion was justified may be disputed, but his hunch proved to be right, and it was he who succeeded in finding the proof, though it led to such important new discoveries that he later lost interest in the problem that had started his search.

He noted that dealers in antiquities in Athens sometimes had engraved stones for sale, which had clearly been intended for use as seals. They were unlike any later seals, and were covered with small pictures of objects arranged in such a way that they might be a system of writing. It may be hard in such cases to be sure whether

the signs are really writing, or merely a pictorial representation of a name. Heraldic shields, for instance, often have devices which suggest the owner's name. But Evans thought the system on these seal-stones was more like a script, and his researches led him to the conclusion that they had come from the great island of Crete.

At this date Crete was still occupied by the Turks, and successive Greek revolts throughout the nineteenth century were unsuccessful until 1899, when the Turks finally withdrew. Evans had already travelled widely through the island, and had decided where to dig. The site he chose was Knossos, a few miles inland from the principal town of the island, now known as Iraklion. Greek traditions told of a King Minos who had in prehistoric times ruled a sea-empire in the Aegean from Knossos. It seemed therefore a promising site to investigate, and local diggers had already recovered interesting finds from it. When the Turks left, Evans was able to purchase it, and he began digging there in 1900.



1 Knossos tablet Co 907, listing sheep, goats, pigs and cattle

It became clear at once that he had found a major Bronze Age site, and he was rewarded by the discovery of large numbers of inscribed clay tablets. The writing was much more highly-developed than on the seal-stones, and there could be no doubt that this was a true script. But the characters were unlike any script then known, and although Evans started with high hopes of deciphering it, his work came fairly soon to an end, for it was overshadowed by more exciting finds.

Evans had hoped to find a Mycenaean site on Crete to rival Mycenae on the mainland. Sure enough, the huge complex of buildings he unearthed at Knossos must have been a major palace, and it had flourished during the Mycenaean period. But it differed in type from the site at Mycenae, and what was quite unexpected was that it went back much further in time. The king of Knossos was living in some degree of luxury long before the walls of Mycenae were built. In fact, it is now accepted that a high level of civilisation developed in Crete as much as two hundred years before the mainland began to imitate it. It was no longer possible to call this Mycenaean, and Evans coined the new term 'Minoan' to describe the Bronze Age culture of Crete.

Many archaeologists followed Evans to Crete, and important new palaces were excavated at Phaistos in the south and Mallia further to the east along the north coast. Both of these sites and several others, notably Haghia Triada only a few miles from Phaistos, produced small quantities of clay tablets, but these were rather different from the Knossos ones. Evans thought at first this might be due to a special royal script at Knossos, but later it was seen that the differences correlated with the date. The earliest inscriptions were those on the seal-stones, rarely found on clay; Evans named this script 'hieroglyphic' because of a supposed resemblance to the early Egyptian script known by that name, but there is no reason to think that they are related. A little later the pictures of objects become more stylised and thus less recognisable, especially when written on clay. Evans named this script Linear A, because the signs were simple outlines. Few examples of this were found at Knossos, for there the bulk of the inscriptions were in a later version of this script, which he called Linear B. This was restricted to the latest phase of the Palace, which we can now date as from about 1450–1375 BC.

The clay tablets had not been baked when they were made, but only dried in the sun, so that they survived only if they happened to be in a building which had been burnt. Thus tablets were only found in destruction layers, and must date to the very end of the period of the building's use. Unfortunately, at Knossos there has been since Evans' time a long argument over the date of the final destruction, and although most scholars accept a date somewhere around 1375 BC, it has been seriously proposed that a date in the thirteenth century would be possible. There is nothing in the documents to settle the argument, but on the whole a fourteenth century date still seems more likely.

Evans studied his Linear B tablets and drew some obvious conclusions. But although he prepared an edition of all the hieroglyphic material then known, his preparations for an edition of the Linear B tablets were still incomplete when the outbreak of the Balkan Wars, and then the First World War, diverted his attention to other matters. After the war he produced his vast work on the palace at Knossos, which he confidently named the Palace of Minos. This contained a section on the tablets, and a number of them were illustrated, but the vast bulk of the documents still remained unpublished and hence inaccessible to scholars. It was not until 1952, eleven years after Evans' death, that an old friend and colleague, Sir John Myres, finally published the volume that Evans had planned and largely compiled around 1911–12.

It was unfortunate in many ways that it had been so long delayed. Earlier publication would have made a great deal of information available, so that serious work on the decipherment could have started much earlier; even those who succeeded in seeing material in Iraklion Museum were inhibited by the rule that no one may anticipate in print the finder's first publication of his finds. When it became possible for scholars to work on the originals, it was quickly discovered that the edition had been imperfect and incomplete. Three separate collections of fragments of tablets recovered in Evans' excavations have since come to light in

Iraklion Museum, but none of these appear in the 1952 publication. Their study at once revealed that no serious effort had been made to join the fragments, and so to reconstruct complete, or more nearly complete, tablets. This task has fallen to a devoted band of scholars of several different nationalities, who have worked together as a team to reconstitute the tablets and publish a complete and trustworthy text.

But as early as 1939 a major new discovery had totally changed the situation as regards Linear B. In that year a joint American–Greek expedition under Carl W. Blegen of the University of Cincinnati had begun to excavate a site in the south–west of the Greek mainland. It lies a little to the north of the modern town of Pylos, just inland from the Bay of Navarino, one of the finest natural harbours in the Mediterranean. It proved to be a Mycenaean palace destroyed by fire at the end of the thirteenth century BC. By a stroke of luck the first trench laid out by the excavators ran across what we now know as the Archive Room, since it contained hundreds of clay tablets, hardened by the fire which destroyed it. As soon as the first pieces were lifted from the ground, they could be identified as written in the same Linear B script already well known from Knossos.

This news did not perhaps create the sensation it should have done. The world had more serious matters on its mind in 1939–40 than Bronze Age writing. For the



2 Pylos tablet Tn 996, showing numbers of bath-tubs and other vessels, some of bronze, some gold

first time Linear B was seen to be not restricted to Knossos, or even to Crete, but to be in use on the mainland, for such an archive is hardly likely to have been transported from where it was written. Yet if it were simply, as Evans asserted, a modified version of Linear A, a purely Cretan script, did this mean that the Cretan language too was used on the Greek mainland? Was this the proof Evans had sought to show that all southern Greece had once been under Minoan control?

The difficulty was that most scholars at this time believed that the Mycenaeans known to archaeology were the Achaeans described by Homer as masters of Greece at the time of the Trojan War. Of course poets, like novelists, are liable to make their characters speak their own language; but the fact that most of Homer's characters have names which are significant in Greek implied that Greek was already spoken in Greece in the Mycenaean age, if Homer's stories were not pure fiction. So what was the king of Mycenaean Pylos, Nestor, if we can trust Homer, doing keeping his accounts in a foreign language?

An easy answer to this question is provided by the parallel of the Middle Ages, when kings all over Europe kept their records in Latin, whatever language they spoke themselves. However, further discoveries from other sites on the mainland have now totally altered the picture. Linear B is now seen to be the script of the Mycenaean palaces on the mainland, and it is its intrusion into Crete which is the feature which demands explanation. The solution to the problem came in 1952-3, with the demonstration that the language of the Linear B tablets was Greek. Evans would have been profoundly shocked to learn that his Minoan palace in the last phase of its existence had used the Greek language. This story will form the subject of the next chapter, but we need first to complete the account of discovery.

Even before Linear B tablets had been found on the mainland, it was known that large pottery jars with painted inscriptions in this script had been found on the mainland. The largest collection is from Thebes, to the north-west of Athens, but other contemporary sites have provided specimens. These jars were often used for the transport of olive oil and wine, and it was suggested that these were containers for Cretan produce. This suggestion has now been confirmed in a remarkable way. It was noticed that some of the words on the jars were also found on the Knossos Linear B tablets, where they appeared to be place names; and it would be natural for the exporter to record his name and address on his product. But much more recently an analysis of the clay used to make these jars has revealed that they almost certainly come from Crete.

Small numbers of clay tablets have been found at Mycenae itself, the first significant find being made by the British archaeologist A. J. B. Wace in 1952. He dug some large houses outside the Citadel Walls, and found in them collections of Linear B tablets. This does not prove that Linear B was in widespread use throughout the population, for such houses must have been occupied by members of the royal establishment. Some more, rather badly damaged tablets, have come from a house within the walls, but there is no trace of the main palace archive. Since the palace is at the top of the hill, its site has long been exposed to the weather, and

its archives are likely to have perished. But it is a sobering thought that if Schliemann had known what to look for, he might have been the first to find Linear B tablets. As they come out of the ground, it is only too easy to dismiss fragments of tablets as pieces of coarse pottery, which the early excavators threw away without a thought.

At Tiryns, only a few miles away from Mycenae, stood a huge castle with massive walls. It may have been intended to guard the port, but the sea has now retreated from the site. It would be incredible if this were, as Homer implies, the seat of an independent kingdom. It must have been in some sense under the control of the king of Mycenae, who may have been an overlord having the allegiance of several lesser rulers. From 1971 onwards excavations in the lower town outside the castle walls have revealed a number of fragmentary Linear B tablets. It looks as if these have come down from their original position higher up, and all we can say at the moment is that somewhere on this site there must have been a major archive, but only fragments of it have been recovered.

The situation at Thebes is rather different. The problem here is that the same site has been continuously occupied for at least four thousand years, and it is now a thriving provincial town. This has been built over successive layers of occupation, Turkish, Frankish, Byzantine, Roman, Hellenistic, Classical, Archaic, Mycenaean and even earlier. It is rarely possible here to find a place to excavate, and only when it is necessary to put up a new building are the archaeologists able to investigate what lies beneath the ground. Rescue digs of this kind have so far yielded two small collections of Linear B tablets, and a group of clay sealings, small lumps of clay stamped with a seal and then in some cases inscribed with a few words in Linear B. This evidence makes it almost certain that somewhere below the centre of the modern town lies an archive of tablets. Thebes was clearly the site of a palace which controlled a large kingdom in this part of Greece, and its records would be very important, if we could only find them. But for the moment we can say very little about this kingdom.

The finds show that writing was not in widespread use in Mycenaean Greece. No tablets have been found at minor sites, and all those where they have been found are either palaces or so close to palaces that they can be regarded as dependencies. There is no trace of any private use of writing. This contrasts with the history of the Greek alphabet, which as early as the eighth century BC was used by private citizens to write light-hearted verses on a cup; and during the next two centuries began to be used for laws inscribed on stone in places where all could read them. Nothing of the kind has ever been found in Linear B. Writing seems to have been exclusively a bureaucratic tool, a necessary method of keeping administrative accounts and documents, but never used for historical or even frivolous purposes. As we shall see, the contents of Linear B tablets are almost without exception lists of people, animals, agricultural produce and manufactured objects. But first we must see how it became possible to read a script which had been forgotten for more than three thousand years.