

Michael Ventris studying a
Linear B tablet in the 1950s.
Photograph by Tom Blau,
Camera Press London.



MICHAEL VENTRIS: THE MAN WHO DECIPHERED LINEAR B

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When Arthur Evans began to excavate Homer's 'great city' Knossos in Crete in 1900, he discovered writing in the form of fairly primitive characters scratched on clay tablets, which today form a celebrated part of the Ashmolean's Aegean collections.

Evans dubbed it 'Linear Script of Class B' to distinguish it from similar-looking but nevertheless distinct characters on archaeologically older tablets, 'Linear Script of Class A'. He spent the rest of his life trying to decipher Linear A and Linear B, but despite some progress, Sir Arthur died in 1941 without a breakthrough. Indeed, Linear A remains undeciphered to this day.

In 1936, when he was 85, Evans encountered a schoolboy, Michael Ventris (1922–56), who was destined to decipher Linear B. The old man happened to be present at Burlington House in London when a school party arrived with their classics master, Patrick Hunter, to see a Greek and Minoan art exhibition. Evans proved willing to lead them around the Minoan Room with an impromptu running commentary. When they reached a glass cabinet containing some clay tablets, he remarked that no one had been able to read them, though he himself had tried hard. At this point — a surprised Hunter sharply remembered to me when I was researching Ventris's biography two decades ago — the most junior member of the party "piped up, very politely" with a question to Evans: "Did you say the tablets haven't been deciphered, Sir?" If Evans had not been present that day, or if the 14-year-old Ventris had never set eyes on a tablet, who knows? — he might never have become fascinated with the Minoan scripts.

Born a century ago in 1922, Ventris deciphered Linear B in 1952–3. But he was never a professional scholar like Evans and others. He was an architect by training who never attended a university and treated Linear B as a kind of hobby. A second irony is that he succeeded where professional scholars failed by being as candid in his decipherment methods as they (and this would include Evans) were habitually secretive. Yet a third irony is that he was largely *uninterested* in classical literature; it was the problem, the puzzle, of deciphering Linear B that transfixed him, not so much what the inscriptions might tell us about ancient Greece, including Homeric poetry.



📍 **Sir William Blake Richmond** (1842–1921), *Sir Arthur Evans among the Ruins of the Palace of Knossos*, 1907, oil on canvas, 24 x 90 cm. Ashmolean Museum (WA1907.2). He holds a clay tablet.

📍 Page-shaped Linear B tablet from Knossos, incomplete, with 14 rows, listing women workers. Late Minoan IIIA1 Period (c.1400–c.1375 BC), clay, 10.5 x 10.7 cm. Ashmolean Museum (AN1910.218).



If there is one word that sums up Ventris, it is 'unconventional'. Almost everyone who knew him remarked on the ease and charm of his company. However, he could be exceptionally withdrawn and uncommunicative. He was a dazzling polyglot who took pride in speaking most major European languages, yet he felt close to hardly anyone, and those few were mainly English speakers. As an architect and decipherer he believed firmly in collaboration and cross-fertilisation, yet he kept his many personal relationships in remarkably separate compartments. His tastes in architecture were thoroughly modern and anti-classical, but his interest in Linear B required an intimate knowledge of the classical world. He had a substantial private income, but he was not interested in living the lifestyle of the rich and had socialist tendencies; even physically he looked more like a tanned, glamorous sportsman (he was an avid skier) than an etiolated scholar, a City gent far more than an absent-minded professor. It would be easy to continue with this list of paradoxes.

Above all, Ventris showed a modesty which verged on diffidence — "almost alarmingly so", according to an architect friend — despite having as much (indeed more) to boast about as a Nobel prizewinner. No wonder his distinguished classicist collaborator from Cambridge University, John Chadwick, once confessed to Ventris that he was the 'pedestrian' Dr Watson to the master decipherer's Sherlock Holmes. ■

Andrew Robinson is the author of *The Man Who Deciphered Linear B: The Story of Michael Ventris*, Thames & Hudson, 2002, which was adapted by BBC TV as a drama-documentary, *A Very English Genius*.

📄 Page-shaped Linear B tablet from Knossos. Its inventory list records chariot wheels, including a number of bronze-bound wheels and others made of willow and perhaps elm wood. Late Minoan IIIA1 Period (c.1400–c.1375 BC), clay, 13.5 x 7.8 cm. Ashmolean Museum (AN1910.211).

