Michael Ventris at the British Museum with a Linear B tablet, at the time of the decipherment, 1950s.

# The man who deciphered Linear B

**Andrew Robinson** reflects on the achievements of an amateur archaeologist who cracked the code of Europe's earliest readable writing

This year the British Museum is celebrating archaeological decipherment, in particular the bicentenary of the Egyptian hieroglyphic decipherment. At the same time, let us remember a second, equally great, decipherment—achieved without a bilingual inscription like the Rosetta Stone – and its intriguing decipherer, whose birth centenary falls in 2022.

In 1953, a young architect, Michael Ventris (1922–1956) gave a widely attended lecture at the Society of Antiquaries. His subject was not architecture, however, but rather his recent decipherment of a mysterious ancient script known as Minoan Linear B. The language of the script was, Ventris demonstrated, an archaic dialect of ancient Greek half a millennium older than Homer's, dating from about 1450 BC – making Linear B the earliest readable writing from Europe.

Ventris's talk provoked a leader article in *The Times* the next day, declaring that the decipherment might reveal the origins of Homer's poetry. Since the leader was printed right next to a piece by Edmund Hillary celebrating

Clay tablet from Knossos inscribed with Linear B script recording offerings of oil to religious personnel and deities, *c.*1375 BC.

his conquest of Mount Everest, the decipherment was quickly dubbed 'the Everest of Greek archaeology' – to the considerable embarrassment of Ventris.

The decipherment had begun half a century earlier, in 1900, when Arthur Evans began to excavate Homer's 'great city' Knossos in Crete. There, he discovered what he believed was the palace of King Minos. He also dug up writing in the form of fairly primitive characters scratched on clay tablets. 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 his family fortune on reconstructing the palace and the rest of his life trying to decipher Linear A and Linear B. Despite some progress, Sir Arthur died in 1941 without a breakthrough. Indeed, Linear A remains undeciphered to this day.

As a boy in the 1920s and 30s, Ventris was far from being deeply interested in the classical world and its literature. However, he showed extraordinary ability in both classical and modern European languages. Aged seven, he began the private study of ancient scripts and languages by purchasing a book in German on the Egyptian hieroglyphs. In 1936, as part of a school trip to a London exhibition on the Minoan world at Burlington House, by chance he met the aged Evans, who showed the school party some undeciphered clay tablets. Ventris was transfixed.

In 1940, aged 18, he published his first article on the Minoan scripts in the *American Journal of Archaeology*. Here he proposed, following Evans, that the language of Linear B could not be Greek. Instead he favoured a language similar to Etruscan, a non-Indo-European language, and maintained this incorrect view up to the very announcement of his decipherment. However, his youthful venture into print attracted the attention of Sir John Myres, Evans's friend and executor, who asked for Ventris's help in editing the Minoan scripts for publication and also introduced Ventris to the American classicist Alice Kober, then publishing important analyses of the Minoan scripts that would influence his work. Although Ventris did not collaborate directly with Myres and Kober (who died in 1950), this contact revived his teenage conviction that the Linear B problem was amenable to a logical solution.

From 1940 to 1942 and from 1946 to 1948, Ventris trained as an architect at the Architectural Association School in London, with a break for war service as a Royal Air Force navigator. His architectural training and lack of conventional academic education contributed to his success in decipherment. Architecture trained him to recognise patterns behind raw visual data, and to welcome group working.

In 1949, while beginning architectural practice, Ventris started an intense study of the Minoan scripts. Encouraged by the statistical analysis of the Linear B corpus by Kober and especially Emmett Bennett, Jr., he identified a variety of revealing patterns in Linear B and

William Blake Richmond, *Arthur Evans among the Ruins of the Palace of Knossos,* 1907. Evans is holding a clay tablet. Ashmolean Museum, Oxford.

made a number of plausible guesses as to the meaning of the more frequently occurring signs. These led him, following Bennett, to propose a core Linear B syllabary of about 89 signs, with the addition of various elements symbolising entire words (logograms), some of which were pictographic.

His breakthrough occurred during the first half of 1952, when he applied his analysis to groups of three similar-looking Linear B sign groups that apparently demonstrated the existence of grammatical inflection, which Ventris had (jokingly) dubbed Kober's 'triplets'. Kober had been unwilling to guess their meaning, but Ventris hazarded that they might write the names of Cretan towns and their ethnica, for example 'Knossos', 'Knossian men', 'Knossian women'. His guess enabled him to allot phonetic values to the triplets' sign groups, which then allowed him to identify the phonetic values of other sign groups. The resulting transliterations were recognisable as words written in archaic Greek. As he excitedly informed Myres: 'though it runs completely counter to everything I've said in the past, I'm now almost completely convinced that the [Linear B] tablets are in GREEK.' Shortly after, on 1 July 1952, Ventris boldly announced his preliminary results in a historic BBC radio talk, produced by a classicist friend.

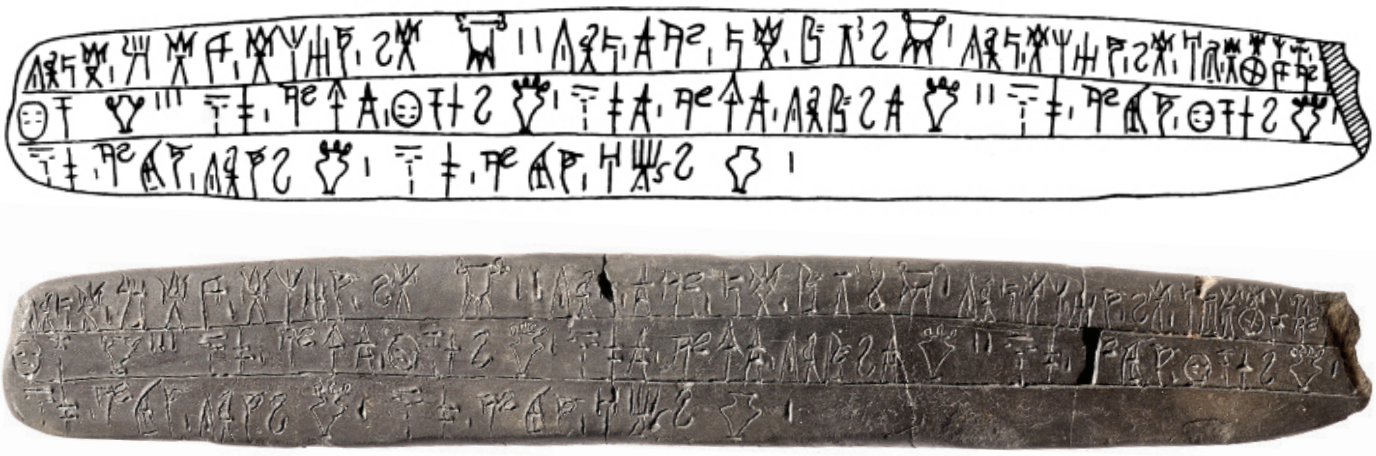
This talk was heard by John Chadwick, a specialist in early Greek with wartime cryptographic experience. He and Ventris now collaborated in consolidating the decipherment. It received overwhelming support in May 1953 with the discovery by archaeologist Carl Blegen of new Linear B tablets at ancient Pylos on the mainland of Greece (not on Crete). One showed pictographic representations of tripod cauldrons

and goblets

that matched almost perfectly with the accompanying textual descriptions in Linear B, as translated by Ventris and Chadwick. The four-handled goblet reminded every scholar of King Nestor's four-handled cups, as mentioned in Homer's *Iliad*, before Nestor sets off for the Trojan War.

In 1953–6, with the willing cooperation of others, Ventris and Chadwick rapidly published papers and a seminal book, *Documents in Mycenaean Greek* – its title clearly stating that Linear B must write a form of Greek contemporary with the excavations of ancient Mycenae on the Greek mainland, not an unknown 'Minoan' language as maintained by Evans. Ventris, who had returned to architectural practice in early 1956, spurning all offers of an academic career, was killed in a car crash just as this magnum opus appeared. Always a complex personality, he had been suffering for some months from depression at his lack of progress as an architect. His gravestone in the Northamptonshire village of his birth reads simply: 'MICHAEL VENTRIS WHO FIRST READ THE MINOAN LINEAR B SCRIPT AS GREEK 1922–1956'.

Andrew Robinson is the author of *The Man Who Deciphered Linear B: The Story of Michael Ventris*, on which was based the BBC TV drama-documentary, *A Very English Genius*.



Above: Michael Ventris's drawing of a key Linear B clay tablet from Pylos, *c.*1425–1200 BC, that confirmed the decipherment, 1953 (photo courtesy of The Institute of Classical Studies). Below: the Pylos tablet (photo courtesy of Kostantinos Xenikakis, Louis Godart and Anna Sacconi).