

MICHAEL VENTRIS: THE MAN WHO DECIPHERED LINEAR B

By Andrew Robinson



Tablets inscribed with records in Linear B script, c. 1450-1200 BC, from the Palace of Knossos, Crete. © Trustees of The British Museum

In June 1953, a 30-year-old architect gave a widely attended lecture at the Society of Antiquaries in Burlington House, London. Michael Ventris's subject was not architecture, 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 the Greek of Homer, dating from

about 1450 BC – making Linear B the oldest readable writing from Europe.

Ventris's talk provoked so much interest that *The Times* devoted a leader article to it 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 his conquest of Mount Everest, the decipherment was quickly dubbed 'the Everest

of Greek archaeology'—to the considerable embarrassment of Ventris. When his very first scholarly publication on the decipherment, 'Evidence for Greek Dialect in the Mycenaean Archives', appeared shortly after in the *Journal of Hellenic Studies*—co-written with the Cambridge University classicist John Chadwick—Ventris sent a copy to his Stowe school classics master. He inscribed it with characteristic modesty and

wit: 'Not quite the Greek you taught me, I'm afraid!'

The decipherment of Linear B had begun half a century earlier, in 1900, when Arthur Evans began to excavate in Crete the 'great city' of Knossos mentioned by

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Homer. There, Evans 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. He 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'. Sir Arthur spent his family fortune on reconstructing the palace and the rest of his life trying to decipher Linear A and Linear B. He made some progress, yet 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 deeply interested in the classical world and its literature. However, he showed extraordinary ability in both classical and modern European languages; he spoke fluent French and German, which he learnt in Switzerland, and acquired Polish from his half-English, half-Polish, artistically inclined mother, who brought him up alone after her divorce from her English army-officer husband.

Aged seven, he began private study of ancient scripts and languages by purchasing a book in German on the Egyptian

hieroglyphs. In 1936, as part of a Stowe 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 of his undeciphered clay tablets. Ventris was fascinated on the spot and immediately took up the challenge of trying to read the script. At school, one of his fellow boarders recalled that Ventris would study the problem after official 'lights out' by torchlight under his bedclothes.

In 1940, aged only 18, Ventris 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; Ventris 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, who was then publishing important analyses of the Minoan scripts that would influence his work. Although Ventris did not collaborate with Myres and Kober directly, this contact revived his teenage conviction that the Linear B problem was amenable to a logical solution.

In 1940-42 and 1946-48, Ventris trained as an architect at the Architectural Association School in London, with a break for war service as a navigator in the Royal Air Force. His architectural training and lack of conventional academic education contributed to his success in archaeological decipherment. Architecture trained him to recognise patterns behind raw visual data,

and to welcome group work. A university education, especially in the classics, would probably have stifled his originality and daring, as happened to several professional scholars interested in deciphering Linear B.

In 1949, while beginning architectural practice, Ventris started an intense study of the Minoan scripts. Having surveyed the published work of those attracted to the problem since 1900, he compiled his own suggestions for future research and mailed them, with a detailed questionnaire, to every scholar in Europe and the United States whose work he had studied. This enquiry, and their responses, which Ventris collected together and informally circulated in 1950, became known as the *Mid-Century Report*.

Encouraged by the statistical analysis of the Linear B corpus performed in the US by Kober and especially by Emmett Bennett, Jr., Ventris identified a variety of revealing patterns in Linear B and made a number of plausible guesses as to the meaning of the

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more frequently occurring signs. These led him, following Bennett, to the conclusion that Linear B consisted of a core syllabary (of about 89 signs) with the addition of various elements standing for entire words (logograms), some of which were pictographic. To aid him visually, he devised a 'grid' consisting of vowels in the vertical columns and consonants in the horizontal lines, to which he then allotted Linear B syllabic signs as his analysis progressed.

Ventris also continued to circulate his work-in-progress

to other scholars in a series of 'Work Notes' (some of which contained his grids), despite the fact that these contained many speculations, blind alleys and even outright absurdities; moreover, he continued to adhere to his teenage Etruscan hypothesis. Clearly Ventris felt that a successful decipherment was more important than his personal success and scholarly reputation.

His breakthrough occurred during the first half of 1952 when he applied his analysis to some groups of three similar-looking Linear B sign groups that apparently demonstrated the existence of grammatical inflection, which Ventris had dubbed Kober's 'triplets'. Kober herself had been unwilling to guess their meaning, but Ventris hazarded that the triplets might refer to the names of different Cretan towns and their ethnica, for example 'Knossos', 'Knossian men', 'Knossian women'. His guess enabled him to allot phonetic values to the sign groups in the triplets; these values, by virtue of his grid, now led him to identify the phonetic values of other sign groups in a sort of 'chain-reaction'. The resulting transliterations were recognisable to him and professional classicists as words written in an archaic form of Greek. As he excitedly informed Myres in early June:

'During the last couple of days I have been carrying on with the fantasy I discussed in my last Note; and 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 on the Third Programme, produced by a classicist friend.



This talk was heard by John Chadwick, a specialist in early Greek with cryptographic experience during the Second World War. Chadwick and Ventris now collaborated in consolidating the decipherment. It received overwhelming support in May 1953 with the discovery by the archaeologist Carl Blegen of new Linear B tablets at ancient Pylos on mainland Greece (not on Crete). One of these tablets showed pictographic representations of tripod cauldrons  and goblets  that matched almost perfectly 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 by Homer in the *Iliad*, before Nestor sets off for the Trojan War. (I have a copy of Ventris's 1954 paper, 'King Nestor's Four-Handled Cups', with its Linear B signs immaculately drawn by Ventris, personally autographed by Ventris; it was given to me by his

Stowe classics master, Patrick Hunter.)

In 1953-56, with the willing cooperation of others, Ventris and Chadwick rapidly published papers and a seminal Cambridge University Press book, *Documents in Mycenaean Greek*. The book's title clearly stated that Linear B was a form of Greek contemporary with the excavations of ancient Mycenae, 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'.