

## PHILOLOGY

# Unlocking the mysteries of the written word

A philologist presents a lively tour of the world's foundational and undeciphered scripts

By Andrew Robinson

**A**n expert on the undeciphered ancient Cypro-Minoan script, philologist Silvia Ferrara is the founder of a research group focused on the invention of writing, known by the acronym “INSCRIBE” (Invention of Scripts and Their Beginnings). The group organizes scholarly lectures on writing that ranges from the four crucial ancient scripts widely accepted to be of independent origin (Chinese characters, Egyptian hieroglyphs, Mayan glyphs, and Mesopotamian cuneiform) to undeciphered scripts such as the Indus script of Pakistan and India, the Isthmian script of Mesoamerica, Linear A of the eastern Mediterranean, Rongorongo of Rapa Nui (Easter Island), and the notoriously singular Phaistos Disk of Crete. All these scripts receive attention in Ferrara's newly translated book, *The Greatest Invention: A History of the World in Nine Mysterious Scripts*—an intellectually stimulating, deliberately chatty, remarkably diverse survey of the invention and significance of writing in both the ancient and modern worlds.

As Ferrara notes, not everyone agrees with the academic verdict that writing constitutes one of humanity's greatest inventions. Asked to rank the 100 most important inventions in history, adult visitors to the Swedish National Museum of Science and Technology voted for the wheel, followed by electricity, the telephone, and the computer, with the printing press at position 18. Writing was relegated to position 30. “Writing sits just beneath the zipper, and well beneath—wait for it—the stove,” observes Ferrara. “At least it beat the vacuum cleaner.”

Socrates, perhaps surprisingly, was one of those who doubted the wisdom of writing. He authored no texts, unlike his student Plato, who nevertheless shared his teacher's ambivalence toward writing, as discussed by Ferrara. According to Plato,

Socrates spoke of the Egyptian god Thoth, the supposed inventor of writing, who came to the king seeking a royal blessing for his hieroglyphic invention. However, the king admonished Thoth, replying, “You have invented an elixir not of memory, but of reminding; and you offer your pupils the appearance of wisdom, not true wisdom, for they will read many things without instruction and will therefore seem to know many things, when they are for the most part ignorant.” These words, spoken in antiquity, have a distinctly contemporary ring.



This Linear B tablet contains records from the Kingdom of Pylos.

Ferrara sympathizes with this perspective, to an extent. “True list-o-holics,” such as herself, “write exclusively by hand—making lists on the computer is like studying on Wikipedia: nothing sticks. It's all gone by the morning,” she notes. “Plus, what about that triumphant satisfaction you feel when you press your pen to the page and cross out an item with a nice fat line?”

The book's strongest section is probably its discussion of decipherment. Here,

**The Greatest Invention: A History of the World in Nine Mysterious Scripts**

Silvia Ferrara

Translated by Todd

Portnowitz

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Ferrara deals in some depth with Mycenaean Linear B, the earliest attested form of Greek, dating to circa 1450 BCE. She describes classicist Alice Kober's pioneering 1940s analysis of the script before her premature death in 1950, architect Michael Ventris's decipherment breakthrough in 1952, and Ventris's subsequent close collaboration with classicist John Chadwick. Enough Linear B script extracts are illustrated that the uninformed reader can easily follow the decipherment in detail—unlike some other scripts, which lack sufficient extracts.

Moreover, Ferrara's discussion of some key Linear B scholars by name is a departure from most of the other chapters, where many leading modern scholars are left unaccountably uncredited. The Egyptian archaeologist Günter Dreyer, discoverer of the earliest known Egyptian scripts (circa 3200 BCE), for example, and Indus philologist Asko Parpola, author of the classic 1994 study *Deciphering the Indus Script*, receive no mention. Nor, for that matter, do the author's fellow INSCRIBE researchers in Cypro-Minoan.

Such omissions perhaps reflect Ferrara's deeply held—and no doubt valid—belief that future decipherments will depend on broad-based teamwork rather than on solitary scholarship. “These days, the study of writing, and of decipherment, is vastly different,” she remarks. “The mantra today is synergy. Not only of group action but of thought: epigraphists, archaeologists, anthropologists, geomatics engineers, historians, cognitivists, semiologists, and computer scientists. And linguists. Perhaps linguists above all. But that hardly matters. What matters is their united effort.” ■

The reviewer is the author of *Lost Languages: The Enigma of the World's Undeciphered Scripts* (Thames & Hudson, 2009). Email: andrew@andrew-robinson.org

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