CRACKING THE LINEAR B CODE

In 1953, when the correctness of Ventris’s analysis was confirmed by the American archaologist Carl Blegen, who used Ventris’s sign list to read a tablet (see opposite) newly excavated at the ‘Palace of Nestor’ at Pylos in mainland Greece (a sort of Rosetta stone, said Ventris, when he heard about it), the decipherment became headline news. It was the subject of a leader in The Times and appeared at the top of the front page of The New York Times. Ventris himself received an OBE and honours from London, Oxford and other universities; and the decipherment was quickly dubbed ‘the Everest of Greek archaeology’ – because the summit of Mount Everest was reached at almost the same time as the discovery of the new tablet. If Nobel prizes were awarded for archaeology, Ventris would almost certainly have won one to be in the company of his heroes.

There is a fine book about the decipherment itself, The Decipherment of Linear B, written by a former Bletchley Park codebreaker and Cambridge University don John Chadwick, who collaborated with Ventris after his original breakthrough in 1952 and jointly wrote The Linear B ‘Bible’, Documents in Mycenaean Greek: Chadwick published his solo book in 1958, after Ventris’s mysterious death in a car crash in 1956 at the age of only 34. But the book keeps almost silent about Ventris himself. Why did he succeed where everyone else had failed? The return Chadwick gives little clue. In an unpublished private letter to Ventris, Chadwick compared him to Sherlock Holmes and himself to the ‘police dog’ Dr Watson. When I got to know Chadwick personally in the 1990s, I felt that he was almost afraid to investigate Ventris’s personality in case it overwhelmed him.

My own research on Ventris – based on hundreds of unpublished letters and conversations with classics, archaeologists and his surviving family among others – revealed a paradoxical man. Almost everyone remarked on the charm of his company, but he could be withdrawn and uncommunicative; he was a dashing polyglot who took pride in speaking many European languages (he was fluent in French, German, Swis-German, Polish, Russian, Greek, Swedish, Danish, Italian and Spanish); yet he felt close to few people, and these were mainly English speakers; as an architect and decipherer he believed passionately in collaboration and cross-fertilisation, yet he kept his 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 Classical Greek, 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 much more like a turned, glamorous sportsman (he was an avid skier and diver) than an etiolated scholar, a City gent more than an assertive-trained professor. It would be easy to continue the list of paradoxes – not the least of which is that Ventris was never satisfied with his success in Linear B and wanted to be a creative architect. Above all, he showed a modesty that verged on diffidence – almost alarming, so, according to one architect friend – despite having as much (indeed more) to boast about as a Nobel laureate.

There can be no doubt that Ventris’s highly unconventional personality was key to his eventual triumph. It drove his detective work, step by step. I am certain that we understand Ventris’s brilliance better by understanding his life with the details of Linear B. Besides, we all have a natural curiosity to know how genius differs from ourselves. Ventris surely deserved to be called a genius – he combined incredible powers of persistence and logic with the imagination and intellectual courage to take leaps in the dark, coupled with an ability to look at a problem from many and unexpected angles. Archaeological decipherment is both a science and an art. Ventris – architect and decipherer – was one of those rare individuals who is equally at home in the sciences and the humanities.

As for what the humanities – archaeologists, historians, literary scholars and others – have learnt from the decipherment since Ventris’s time, the answer is, honestly speaking, a little disappointing, set beside the artistic treasures and legends of Troy, Mycenae and Knossos. No new world may have opened up for Greek scholars such as Chadwick (whose student John Killen became Cambridge University’s first professor of Mycenaean Greek); but its boundaries are strictly circumscribed. No great battles, great thoughts or great poetry. There is nothing of literary value in Linear B: the tablets merely record prosaic details of palace administration – lists of names and their trade and lists of goods. Although careful detective work on them shed light on Bronze Age Greece as a whole, such as the possibility of human sacrifice at Pylos. The names and terms common to both Linear B and Homer have been especially exciting for scholars – but sadly nothing directly related to the Trojan war has turned up in the tablets.

In a last broadcast for the BBC in May 1956, Ventris asked two leading questions. ‘Did epic poetry of the school of Homer already exist in Mycenaean times, and was it perhaps already committed to writing?’ And, ‘Was knowledge of writing really lost suddenly in about 1200bc, [with the fall of Troy], and was there really a period of about 400 years when the Greeks were quite literate, until the introduction of the Greek alphabet that we know?’ Fifty years after Ventris’s ground-breaking decipherment, definitive answers to these interesting and significant questions still elude us.

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