

ANDREW ROBINSON on the curious tale of Michael Ventris, the modest genius who deciphered an ancient Cretan script that had defied experts for years

LINEAR B, a script written on clay tablets found in the 'Palace of Minos' at Knossos in Crete a century ago, is Europe's oldest readable writing, dating from about 1450BC. Sir Arthur Evans, the renowned archaeologist who discovered it, spent four decades trying to decipher it, but he died in 1941 a disappointed man. Many other experts had a go, but they made not much more progress than Evans. To read Linear B became one of the great challenges in archaeology.

On 1 July 1952, in a broadcast on the BBC's Third Programme, an unknown young man announced – with a mixture of firmness and diffidence – that he had 'cracked' the problem and could read Linear B as an archaic form of Greek predating Homer by more than 500 years. Michael Ventris was an amateur, an English architect without even a university degree, who became obsessed with Linear B as a schoolboy in 1936 when he visited a Minoan exhibition at Burlington House, stood in front of a cabinet containing a few tablets, and heard his guide, the 85-year-old Evans himself, admit that he could not decipher the script.

Ventris's achievement is generally regarded as the greatest of all archaeological decipherments, an intellectual accomplishment comparable to the decoding of the 'double helix' structure of DNA, which curiously occurred at the very same time in 1952-53. For although the Linear B decipherment, unlike the decipherment of Egyptian hieroglyphs, Mesopotamian cuneiform and Mayan glyphs, did not reveal the history and literature of a great civilisation, Ventris achieved his breakthrough without the aid of a 'bilingual' such as the Rosetta stone, and with a comparatively small amount of available text.

'The Everest of Greek archaeology'

In 1953, when the correctness of Ventris's analysis was confirmed by the American archaeologist 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 assuredly have had one in his 30s.

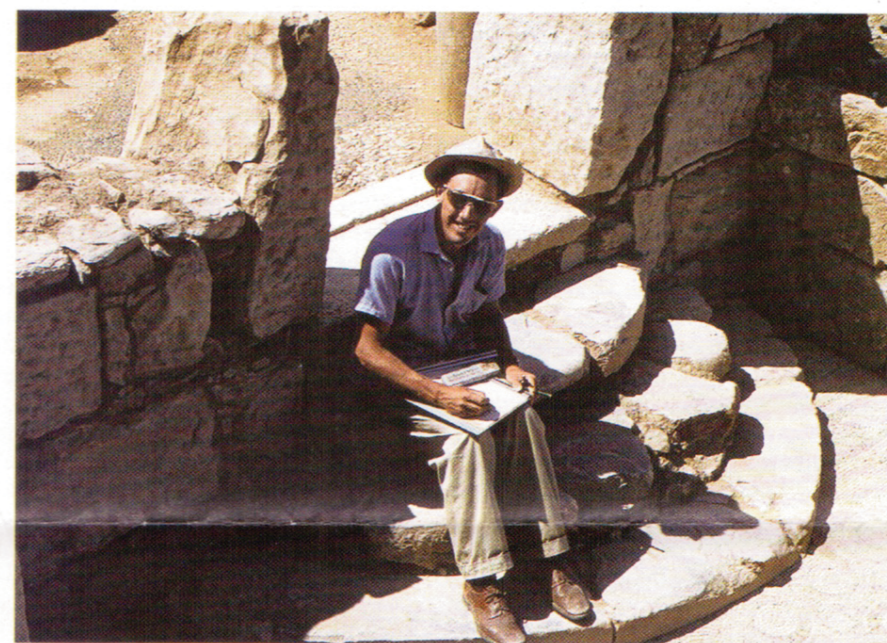
There is a fine book about the decipherment itself, *The Decipherment of Linear B*, written by a former Bletchley Park codebreaker and Cambridge University classicist John Chadwick, who collaborated with Ventris after his original breakthrough in 1952 and jointly wrote the Linear B 'Bible', *Documents 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 reticent Chadwick gives little clue. In an unpublished private letter to Ventris, Chadwick compared him to Sherlock Holmes and himself to the 'pedestrian' 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 classicists, architects and his surviving family among others – revealed a paradoxical man. Almost everyone remarked on the

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Top: Linear B tablet from the 'Palace of Nestor', Pylos, Greece with part-transcription by Ventris (main pic, taken early 1950s) which he translated into archaic Greek and then English. Like much of Linear B, its message is mundane: 'tripod cauldron of Cretan workmanship of the *aikou* type 2'



'Physically he looked much more like a tanned, glamorous sportsman than an etiolated scholar' – Michael Ventris at an ancient Christian Basilica on the Greek island of Chios, 1955

CRACKING THE LINEAR B CODE

charm of his company, but he could be withdrawn and uncommunicative; he was a dazzling polyglot who took pride in speaking many European languages (he was fluent in French, German, Swiss-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 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 much more like a tanned, glamorous sportsman (he was an avid skier and diver) than an etiolated scholar, a City gent more than an absent-minded 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 alarmingly' 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 the key to his eventual triumph. It drove his detective work, step by step. I am certain that we understand Ventris's brilliance better by inter-


weaving his life with the details of Linear B. Besides, we all have a natural curiosity to know how genius differs from ourselves. Ventris surely deserves 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 in tune with 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. A 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 trades and lists of goods – although careful detective work on them has 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 espe-


cially 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 Pylos], and was there really a period of about 400 years when the Greeks were quite illiterate, until the introduction of the Greek alphabet that we know?' Fifty years after Ventris's ground-breaking decipherment, definite answers to these interesting and significant questions still elude us. **H**

JOURNEYS

 *The Man Who Deciphered Linear B* is to be broadcast on BBC 4 this month. Check schedules for details.

 *Documents in Mycenaean Greek* by Michael Ventris and John Chadwick (Cambridge 1956); *The Decipherment of Linear B* by John Chadwick (3rd edn: Cambridge, 1992); *The Story of Writing* by Andrew Robinson (Thames and Hudson, 1995); *Cretan Quests: British Explorers, Excavators and Historians* edited by Davina Huxley (British School at Athens, 2000).

 Linear B tablets can be seen at the Ashmolean Museum, Beaumont Street, Oxford OX1 2PH. Tel: 01865 278 000.

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