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Some mysteries undeciphered

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T HE MAN WHO DECIPHERED LINEAR B. The story of Michael Ventris. Andrew Robinson.

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The decipherment of Linear B, the script found on clay tablets from the Late Bronze Age Palaces of Knossos, Pylos and other Mycenaean sites, by Michael Ventris in 1952, represents, together with the development of Milman Parry's Oral Poetry hypo- thesis, the greatest advance of classical scholarship in the twentieth century. It continues to fascinate the minds of scholar and layman alike, both because of the remarkable and elegant achievement itself and because of the somewhat mysterious figure of Ventris, who tragically died in a road accident only four years after the decipherment, aged thirty-four. That Ventris was not a classical scholar but an architect by training and profession makes him all the more mysterious, as well as installing him as the epitome of the genius gentleman scholar.

Much has been written about the process of the decipherment, notably by John Chadwick, Ventris's collaborator from the outset, in his Decipherment of Linear

B; the interpretation of the tablets has also been frequently discussed. Far less, and certainly nothing comprehensive, has ever been published about Ventris himself: his career as an architect, his background, endeavours and personality, his hopes and doubts, his relationships with family, friends and the world of classical scholarship. The title of Andrew Robinson's book suggests that he seeks to redress this imbalance. In fact, the book tries to interweave the story of Ventris's life closely with the decipherment process.

And, while Robinson's account of the decipherment offers little that is new, his portrayal of Ventris is excellent: well researched and clearly presented.

Alternating between the bio- graphical and technical aspects of his subject, Robinson holds the reader all the way.

In linguistic matters, Ventris had a head start. His mother was Polish, he went to school in Switzerland for two years, and, while he was still a child, he spoke English, French, German and Polish fluently. His family background was otherwise less than perfect. His father suffered from ill health, and his parents' relationship was clearly an unhappy one; it ended in divorce when Michael was thirteen, and his mother took an overdose of barbitone when he was barely an adult.

Gathering evidence from teachers and contemporaries, Robinson portrays the young Ventris as humorous, very bright and interested in all things cryptic, but somewhat forlorn and detached. The dominant influence on him came from his urbane mother, whose social circle included the architect Marcel Breuer, the sculptor Naum Gabo and the painter Ben Nicholson; he was early acquainted with art and design. Robinson's characterization of the young Ventris is in keeping with what is known about the grown man: a highly intelligent, kind, gentle and unconventional man with a wayward

sense of humour who, nevertheless, kept his distance from everyone. In order to explain how somebody of Ventris's profile could succeed where many classically trained scholars had failed, Robinson suggests that the architect, like the decipherer, needs to understand the under- lying structures of complex patterns, to solve problems defined in narrow constraints, to be possessed of a meticulous approach giving attention to the finest detail and to be able to combine the understanding of the functional with the visible. Yet, while attempts at uniting his twin pursuits are valid and indeed necessary, the ultimate impression one takes away from reading the book is that for Ventris architecture was nothing more than an enjoyable but routine profession. His real passion, which finally engulfed him, was for clay tablets.

Ventris's fascination with Linear B famously started on a school outing to a Greek and Minoan art exhibition in London, where he met the ageing Arthur Evans. Here, Robinson corrects a symbolically important detail: Ventris did not attend Evans's public lecture at the Royal Academy of Arts, as is usually claimed; rather, Evans happened to be around at the exhibition when the school party arrived. Chance rather than planning determined Ventris's first encounter with the tablets. This chance meeting sets the tone for Robinson's narrative of the decipherment. His complaint against John Chadwick's account is that it is both too sketchy and too rational, that Chadwick underplays the role of intuition and chance in the process of the decipherment. It is clear that Robinson has worked his way carefully through Ventris's papers. His own version is certainly accessible, especially for readers without Greek, but it is, if anything, sketchier even than Chadwick's.

The identification of place names on the tablets was crucial in the decipherment process. Robinson simply states that Ventris had "suspected" that certain sign groups found only in Knossos contained place names. However, their occurrence in Knossos alone is not a sufficient reason to regard them as place names; they might equally have represented personal names or several items of vocabulary. Additional detail, particularly with regard to the structure of the tablets and reference to the so-called sheep tablets from Knossos, would have elucidated this considerably. It cannot be proved, of course, that Ventris really used these tablets to arrive at his conclusions; even though we know of many dead ends at which Ventris found himself, too few of his thought processes were recorded for us to be able to reconstruct his every step. By stressing the importance of intuition, Robinson is precariously forced to regard the absence of evidence as significant. Ventris was undoubtedly what we call a genius, but Robinson on occasion seems to argue for his apotheosis. He claims that other scholars would almost certainly not have taken the pains to translate the various answers that he received to his circulars from Swedish, German, French and Italian into English. This is an extremely anglocentric view, and in taking it Robinson seriously misjudges European academic culture.

The specialist will find much to fault in the way Robinson deals with detail.

On what is perhaps the most famous tablet of all, the tripod-tablet Pylos Ta

641, one phrase reads "a tripod, with one foot, with one handle". This was first interpreted by Ventris and Chadwick as "a tripod with a single handle on one foot"; but later, more sensibly, as "a tripod with a single handle and one foot". Robinson takes issue with the latter, on the grounds that the ideogram following the description shows a tripod with three feet and two handles; he dismisses Chadwick's explanation that the tablets show a stereotypical depiction, since the ideogram for goblet on the same tablet is variously shown with two, three, four or no handles. But there is an important difference here: the word for "tripod" itself means "having three feet" in Greek, and this would have been clear to any speaker. On the other hand, the word for "goblet", probably a loan word, contains, in as much as we can judge, no implications as to its shape. The issue of the two handles remains, but Robinson's preferred translation, "with a single handle on one foot", does not succeed in satisfying his own demand for a more realistic depiction; from an archaeological point of view, it is untenable.

The final part of Robinson's book, concluding with Ventris's tragic and mysterious death, makes the most compelling reading. He shows how Ventris found it impossible to get back into architecture, but how, at the same time, he felt uncomfortable in the world of classical scholarship, believing he had nothing more to contribute. It was the puzzle of the decipherment, not the implications that the information on the tablets would have for our understanding of Greek culture, that had fascinated him. By the time of his death in 1956, Ventris's relationship with his wife seems to have

been problematic. Andrew Robinson puts forward the theory, as one of several possibilities, that, like his mother, he committed suicide. As ever, with Ventris, who could read his mind?