
Contributor: ROBINSON, Andrew [56836]
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RE: Dr Mark Curthoys[30005] AE: N. G. Wilson [1166]

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Ventris, Michael George Francis (1922–1956), classical scholar and architect, was born at Wheathampstead, Hertfordshire, on 12 July 1922, the only child of Edward Francis Vereker Ventris (1884/5–1938), an officer in the Indian army, and his wife, (Anna) Dorothea Janasz (1889/90–1940), who was half-English, half-Polish. She was largely responsible for Ventris's upbringing, especially after her divorce when her son was thirteen, until her suicide in 1940, following the Nazi invasion of Poland.

Ventris was educated at schools in England and in Switzerland, notably at Stowe School in Buckinghamshire from 1935 to 1939, but never attended a university. Instead, encouraged by his mother's passion for modern art and design, he trained as an architect at the Architectural Association School in London from 1940 to 1942 and from 1946 to 1948, with a break for war service as a navigator in the Royal Air Force. In 1942 he married a fellow architecture student, Lois Elizabeth Knox-Niven (1920–1987), with whom he had a son and a daughter and designed a family house in Hampstead, London. His training in architecture, for which he had an undoubted talent, and his lack of conventional academic education, contributed to his success in archaeological decipherment, which made him famous during the 1950s.

As a boy Ventris showed exceptional ability in both classical and modern European languages—he spoke fluent French and German, learnt in Switzerland, and acquired Polish from his mother—and began private study of philology and the history of archaeological decipherment. In 1936, during a school trip to an exhibition on the Minoan world in London, Ventris by chance met Sir Arthur Evans, the excavator of ancient Knossos in Crete. Evans showed the school party some clay tablets he had discovered in 1900 and after, written in 'Linear Script of Class B', while admitting that this pre-Homeric Minoan script, dating from c.1450 BC, along with a second, older, Minoan script, Linear A, were undeciphered. An intrigued Ventris immediately took up the hobby of trying to decipher Linear A and B, a puzzle that he eventually solved in 1952 in the case of Linear B, making it Europe's earliest readable writing.

Aged only eighteen Ventris published his first article on the Minoan scripts in the *American Journal of Archaeology* in 1940. Here he proposed, following Evans, that the language of Linear B could not be Greek, largely because Evans had found the Linear B tablets only in Crete, not in mainland Greece. 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 article 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 him to the American classicist Alice E. Kober, who in the 1940s published important analyses of the Minoan scripts that crucially influenced Ventris's work. Although Ventris did not directly collaborate with Myres and Kober this contact revived his teenaged conviction that the Linear B problem was amenable to logical solution.

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 Evans's first publication in 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 multilingual responses, collected together, translated by Ventris, and informally circulated by him in 1950 to anyone interested, became known as the *Mid-Century Report*.

Encouraged by the statistical analysis of the Linear B corpus performed in the United States by Kober and especially Emmett L. Bennett Jr, Ventris identified a variety of revealing patterns in Linear B sign groups and made a number of plausible guesses as to the sound and meaning of the more frequently occurring signs. These led him, following Bennett, to the conclusion that Linear B consisted of a core of eighty-nine syllabic signs with the addition of various logographic signs representing words and concepts. To aid him visually Ventris devised a 'grid' consisting of unknown vowels in the vertical columns and unknown consonants in the horizontal lines, to which he then allotted Linear B syllabic signs as his analysis progressed. He also continued to circulate his work in progress to other scholars in a series of 'work notes', some of which contained these grids. The work notes contained many speculations, blind alleys, and even outright absurdities, but Ventris, characteristically, 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 of three similar-looking Linear B sign groups that apparently demonstrated the existence of inflection, which Ventris had dubbed Kober's 'triplets'. Kober (who had died in 1950) had been unwilling to guess the triplets' meaning, but Ventris hazarded that they 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 application 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 plainly words written in an archaic form of Greek. An excited Ventris wrote to Myres about Linear B in mid-June 1952: '[T]hough it runs completely counter to everything I've said in the past, I'm now almost completely convinced that the tablets are in GREEK' (Robinson, 102). Shortly after, on 1 July 1952, Ventris announced his preliminary results in a BBC radio talk—in preference to more conventional channels, such as an academic conference or a journal article.

The talk was heard by John Chadwick, a specialist in early Greek who had acquired cryptographic experience during the Second World War. Ventris and Chadwick now collaborated closely in consolidating the decipherment. It received overwhelming support in 1953 after the discovery of new Linear B tablets at ancient Mycenae and ancient Pylos on the Greek mainland. One of the Pylos tablets showed pictographic tripod cauldrons which matched almost perfectly with the symbols' accompanying syllabic textual descriptions in Linear B, as translated by Ventris and Chadwick. From 1953 to 1956, with the willing co-operation of other classical scholars—inspired at least partly by the charm and modesty of Ventris—he and Chadwick published joint papers, most notably 'Evidence for Greek dialect in the Mycenaean archives' (*Journal of Hellenic Studies*, 1953) and a seminal book, *Documents in Mycenaean Greek* (1956); its title clearly stated that Linear B must write a form of Greek contemporary with ancient Mycenae, not an unknown 'Minoan' language as maintained by Evans.

Ventris quickly received, besides an OBE (1955), an honorary doctorate from the University of Uppsala, and became an honorary research associate of University College, London, which established a vigorous seminar to apply the decipherment. Yet, despite an

achievement comparable with the great decipherments of the nineteenth century, Ventris spurned all offers of an academic career, being anxious to return to architecture. Always a complex and conflicted personality, in early 1956 he accepted the first research fellowship offered by the *Architects' Journal*. Within months, however, he was killed, probably in an accident, while driving alone in his car near Hatfield, Hertfordshire, in the early hours of the morning of 6 September 1956. His gravestone in the village of Welford, Northamptonshire, from which his mother's family hailed, reads: 'Michael Ventris who first read the Minoan Linear B script as Greek'.

Andrew Robinson

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SOURCES SHEET

Article: *Ventris, Michael George Francis (1922–1956)* [36640]

MATERIAL USED IN THE PREPARATION OF THE ARTICLE

1. A. Robinson, *The man who deciphered Linear B: the story of Michael Ventris* (2002) [T]
2. J. Chadwick, *The decipherment of Linear B* (1958) [U]
3. M. G. F. Ventris, *Work notes on Minoan language research and other unedited papers*, ed. A. Sacconi (1988) [S]
4. M. G. F. Ventris, 'Deciphering Europe's earliest scripts', *The Listener* (10 July 1952), 57–8 [C]

ARCHIVAL DEPOSITS

Named collections

Important deposits in other collections

U. Cam., faculty of classics, corresp. with John Chadwick [U]
 U. Lond., Institute of Classical Studies, papers [U]
 U. Oxf., Sackler Library, notes on Minoan language [U]

Moving-picture archives

Unknown

Sound archives

Third Programme, BBC Radio, 1 July 1957 [recording used in *A Very English Genius*, BBC TV, 2002, www.youtube.com/watch?v=&under;CgjVjI2bNU] [U]

LIKENESSES

1. photograph, 1954, Getty Images [P]¹⁴⁹¹⁴
2. photograph, U. Lond., Institute of Classical Studies [CR]
3. photographs, Camera Press, London [P]

WEALTH AT DEATH

£72,761 11s. 9d.: probate, 5 Dec 1956, *CGPLA Eng. & Wales*

Sources queries and comments: