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Cretan writing in the second millennium B.C.

J.-P. Olivier

Maitre de Recherches du Fonds National Belge de la Recherche Scientifique

The three Cretan protohistoric writing systems are known conventionally as 'Cretan Hieroglyphic', 'Linear A' and 'Linear B'. So far the first has been found only in Crete; the second is also attested in certain Aegean islands (Kea, Kythera, Melos and Thera) and on the Greek mainland, in southern Laconia, in the form of a two sign 'inscription'; the third has been found almost exclusively in the Mycenaean palaces of Knossos on Crete, and Pylos, Mycenae, Thebes and Tiryns on the mainland (Fig. 1). Cretan Hieroglyphic (in the strict sense of writing) appeared for the last time around 1500, and Linear A about 1450, while Linear B continued in use on the Greek mainland until around 1200. (Unless otherwise stated the chronology followed is that ofCadogan 1975: 17–20.)

I Origins

Whereas the end of the use of these three writing systems poses few problems, their origins are much less well established, whether one considers the circumstances surrounding their creation or, more especially, the date.

The first traces of Cretan Hieroglyphic are probably to be found on seals dating to the end of the third millennium B.C., in what has been dubbed 'the writing of Arkhanes' (Yule 1980: 170), perhaps prematurely, since in no case has it been proven that this is a form of writing conveying a precise and unequivocal meaning. Nor can we be certain that the 'hieroglyphic writing' found on seals and clay sealings until the mid-fifteenth century is not, in fact, a more or less arbitrary grouping of signs (of which a number undoubtedly belong to the Cretan Hieroglyphic system) used for decorative or ornamental purposes, and not as writing stricto sensu (Olivier 1981). In fact the oldest true inscriptions which have appeared are not in Cretan Hieroglyphic (for which, at present, the earliest attestation in archival documents can scarcely date before 1625), but in an 'archaic' Linear A. These inscriptions, the earliest of which date to the eighteenth century, were uncovered in the remains of the first palace at Phaistos (Vandenabeele 1985: 12–15). They were inscribed with a stylus on small clay tablets which in shape are in no way reminiscent of contemporary Mesopotamian documents. Linear B, whose origin must
J.-P. Olivier

date back to the sixteenth century in Crete according to some scholars (Olivier 1979: 45–8), and in Greece according to others (Godart 1979: 34–36), is not in fact attested before 1375, at Knossos. It is certain, however, that this is a form of Linear A adapted by the Mycenaeans for the purpose of writing their own language, Greek.

II Nature

Without doubt, the Minoans at the beginning of the second millennium did not 're-invent' writing independently, even if they were well able to take their first steps in this direction without knowledge of the Mesopotamian or Egyptian systems. However, starting with ideas from elsewhere, they created an original and astonishingly uncomplicated system for recording the sounds of their language by means of signs. This system consisted of a simple syllabary of the open type, each sign representing a single vowel, or a consonant followed by a vowel. Between 50 and 100 signs sufficed for rendering all the syllables of the language. Although we do not yet know the exact number of syllabograms in the Cretan Hieroglyphic system, it is thought to be in the region of 90. The Linear A syllabary consisted of 75 signs which appear more than five

\[
\text{Figure 1 The Aegean region, showing the sites mentioned.}
\]
times in the texts, while the Linear B syllabary comprised a total of 87 signs, some of which were extremely rare (Fig. 2). The classical Cypriot syllabary of the first millennium B.C., the last descendant of Cretan writing, used only 55 signs in the representation of Greek.

It seems more than likely that the Minoans developed their system of writing in response to economic needs. At least its development coincides with that of the first Cretan palaces (1900-1625). The script represented not only the syllables of the language(s). The Minoans established also a remarkably simple method for the representation of numbers, based on a decimal system. In general this is common to all three scripts (Fig. 3), whereas the signs used for denoting fractions and/or units of weights and measures are largely different. But these are as yet far too little known (with the exception of Linear B) for us to be able to do other than mention them here (Bennett 1950, 1980). In addition, the Minoans succeeded in representing the objects, animate or inanimate, with which they dealt in their archives, by the use of small pictures which were more or less realistic, at least in the early stages. These pictures – of which some are the same in all three writing systems – have been incorrectly labelled ‘ideograms’ in specialised literature. In fact they should be called ‘logograms’, since they represent words rather than ideas. Thus for Linear B, where the system is better known, one has the logograms for man, woman, sheep, pig, wheat, oil, wine, cloth, armour, ingot, spear, arrow, sword, chariot and for a variety of containers, to mention but a few of the more pictorial ones (Fig. 4). The systematic study of the more naturalistic logograms is of no negligible interest to archaeologists, especially in comparison with objects found on excavations or with other painted or engraved representations (Vandenabeele and Olivier 1979).

The use of logograms followed by numerals renders the ‘basic economic document’ fairly easily understood, at least in part, whether it is written in Cretan Hieroglyphic, Linear A or Linear B. This would have been as true for the semi-literate or illiterate protohistoric Cretans as for the modern epigraphist, who is often in much the same situation. The model is:

‘Personal Name, Geographical Name, OVIS 100’

which, in Linear B (which we can read) could give

‘E-ko-to, pa-i-to, OVIS 100’

to be translated:

‘Hector, at Phaistos, (has a flock of) 100 sheep.’

The texts and translations of 325 Linear B documents, with their commentaries, can be found in Ventris and Chadwick (1973). From this volume one can see that in reality the documents are much more complicated than the example cited above, since summary or fiscal documents or even those of doubtful or unknown purpose are far from rare, and there is still a relatively large number of logograms which remain unintelligible. For Cretan Hieroglyphic and Linear A, unfortunately, we cannot turn to any comparable study, since these scripts have not been deciphered.
Figure 2 The syllabary of the Linear B script, with the conventional numbering, transcription (when known) and frequency of each sign.
Cretan writing in the second millennium B.C.

Figure 3 Number notation in the three Cretan scripts.

Figure 4 Some of the Linear B logograms with the conventional numbering and Latin transcription (when known).
III Decipherment

The Linear B of the tablets from Knossos and Pylos was deciphered in 1952 by M. Ventris (Ventris and Chadwick 1953; Chadwick 1967), who first read the script and then recognised in it a Greek dialect which was subsequently called Mycenaean. We are still a long way from being able to read Linear A adequately, and probably we shall never succeed with Cretan Hieroglyphic.

Why?

First, because when Linear B was deciphered there was sufficient material — more than 30,000 signs on over 2,000 documents — for it to be studied in a serious fashion with some chance of success. For Linear A there exist at present only 7,500 signs on less than 1,500 documents, while Cretan Hieroglyphic offers only some 1,500 on less than 300 documents.

Second, because once Linear B was read it could gradually be better understood, since it represented a known language (even if the first attestation of that language does not come until 500 years later) belonging to a well documented and well studied family of languages — Indo-European.

If we assume that one day we may have a corpus of some 20,000 signs for Linear A (that being three times as many as at present, a not implausible supposition since Linear A was used throughout Crete, was written on several different materials, and new documents continue to be discovered almost every year), it should be possible eventually to read most of it (80 per cent?). This appears the more likely since it is already possible to read both Linear B, which derives from Linear A, and the classical Cypriot syllabary which also descends from it (Chadwick 1979). But reading is not understanding. If the language (or languages) recorded in Linear A is not adequately known already, we will not be able to understand it any more than we understand Etruscan which has been read for more than a century (it is written in a slightly modified Greek alphabet) but in which we understand only the meaning of the epitaphs, which are generally short, of stereotype content and exist in their thousands. We cannot understand any of the lengthier texts, which are of a different nature, whether they are religious, administrative or of any other type. That is to say that all ‘decipherments’ of Linear A (not to mention Cretan Hieroglyphic) published so far are failures, and were destined to be so.

Generally speaking the phonetic values of homomorphic signs in Linear B have been attributed to the signs in Linear A. This method in itself is not necessarily unsound, since Linear B derives from Linear A. However, it is necessary that we agree on the homomorphisms (which is not yet entirely the case), and we should then undertake to demonstrate the validity of the equivalence of the phonetic values sign by sign, not on a purely graphic basis — what relationship is there between the Greek ‘rho’ and the Latin ‘P’, or between the Greek ‘eta’ and the Latin ‘H’? — but from an internal analysis of the documents, something which no decipherer has yet risked doing and which seems impossible, at least for the moment, for more than about ten signs (Olivier 1975).

Assuming that the phonetic values proposed for the signs in a decipherment are correct, where will this lead us? Since the material is not yet sufficient for a serious internal analysis, it is necessary to approach the problem from the outside. In other words, a solution can only come through a language which is more or less well known to
the ‘decipherer’. Among those which have been proposed we can mention, at random, Greek, a number of languages from Asia Minor, Etruscan, various Semitic languages or dialects, Sanskrit. . . A priori, no language attested in the third or second millennium from the eastern Mediterranean or its surrounding areas can be excluded: who would seriously have considered Greek for Linear B before this conclusion literally forced itself on Ventris? But, if what we think we know about the population of Crete between the neolithic (end of the seventh millennium) and the beginning of the early bronze age (about 3000 B.C.) is correct and does not render any hypothesis totally incredible (Cadogan 1976: 16–17), the languages spoken by people from the coasts of Asia Minor or Syro-Palestine must be favoured. However, over a period of 4,000 years, even in 1,000 years or less, a language can evolve in such a way that it only vaguely resembles its original form. Between 3000/2600 and 1450, the period of the birth and development of Cretan Hieroglyphic and Linear A, virtually no archaeologist assumes any significant change of population in Crete. Thus the introduction of a language known to us from elsewhere is unlikely. In any case, to ‘read’, as is done by most ‘decipherers’, four names of vase types and then to ‘find’ them in Akkadian, two names of divinities and ‘recognise’ them in Lycian, or even two names of cereals and ‘come across them’ in Luwian, could not prove, even in the best examples, anything other than linguistic borrowing. It does not demonstrate that the language recorded by Linear A was Akkadian, Lycian or Luwian.

Without a bilingual text – and such a discovery is highly improbable given the type of documentation that has survived – progress can come only from internal analysis of the available documents, and such progress can come about only through complete and satisfactory editions, furnishing – in addition to the texts themselves, obviously – those working tools which are indispensable to all research: indexes, plates, tables, concordances, etc. This is something which has now been accomplished for Linear A (Godart and Olivier 1976–85), and it is hoped will soon be completed for Cretan Hieroglyphic. Without it, no progress can be expected from attempts at ‘decipherment’ whose bases are tentative, or even non-existent.

IV Functions and materials

Of those documents which have survived (obviously because they were written on durable materials such as stone or metal, or a material which has become more durable, for example the unbaked clay of the archival documents which was accidentally baked in the destruction fires), how many are there, what are they, and what can we understand of their purpose?

Reference to the tables on the next page will demonstrate clearly that the three Cretan writing systems present remarkable similarities and differences both in the materials on which they occur and the functions which they probably fulfilled, at least in so far as can be judged from the sample which has been preserved, admittedly only a small proportion of the millions of inscriptions which must have been written during the second millennium B.C.
### Cretan Hieroglyphic (Knossos: Evans 1909; Malia: Chapouthier 1930, Poursat, Godart and Olivier 1978)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Count</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Economic archives on clay:</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- bars (Plate 1a) and tablets</td>
<td>43</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- sealings</td>
<td>26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- labels</td>
<td>36</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- 'cones'</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Inscriptions incised on pottery</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Inscriptions painted on pottery</td>
<td>26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Inscriptions on stone</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Seals and seal impressions</td>
<td>c. 150</td>
</tr>
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Total: 270

### Linear A (Godart and Olivier 1976–1985)

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<tr>
<td>Economic archives on clay:</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>- tablets (Plate 1b) and bars</td>
<td>318</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- sealings</td>
<td>882</td>
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<tr>
<td>- labels</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- 'roundels'</td>
<td>131</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Inscriptions on stone vases</td>
<td>34</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Inscriptions incised on pottery vases</td>
<td>34</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Inscriptions painted on pottery vases</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Inscriptions on architectural features of stucco</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Inscriptions on architectural features of stone</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Inscriptions on metal</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Inscriptions on other materials</td>
<td>5</td>
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</table>

Total: 1,427


<table>
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<tr>
<td>Economic archives on clay:</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>- tablets (Plate 1c)</td>
<td>4,515</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- sealings</td>
<td>52</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- labels</td>
<td>54</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Inscriptions painted on pottery vessels</td>
<td>144</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Total: 4,765

*Plate 1a Cretan Hieroglyphic Script: clay bar from Knossos (P 103a; Iraklion Museum); 1b Linear A Script; clay tablet from Zakros (ZA 15a; Iraklion Museum); 1c Linear B Script: clay tablet from Pylos (PY An 1282; National Museum, Athens).*
Cretan writing in the second millennium B.C.
Functions

All three systems served to record economic archives.

Cretan Hieroglyphic alone seems to have featured in the role of ornamental writing, on seals. Although the random nature of archaeological discovery means that we have more of this type of document than of all the others put together, it should be noted that the number of signs represented on the seals is less than 40 per cent of the total number of those which have survived in this script.

Only Linear A seems to appear on votive inscriptions (i.e. inscribed on stone vases, see below), but although this observation is statistically valid in relation to Linear B, it is certainly not valid in relation to Cretan Hieroglyphic.

Linear B seems to have been used solely for economic purposes. This is true not only of the inscriptions on unbaked clay but also of those painted on vases which almost certainly indicate the name of the manufacturer (probably of the contents rather than of the vase itself), possibly with the mention of his place of origin and his status.

There are, in this, a few puzzling features, since, to cite only two of the more extreme cases, it is hard to see why Linear A was not used for purposes of sealing except, perhaps, that Cretan Hieroglyphic, with which it was contemporary, already filled that role, although this was not its sole purpose. Nor is it easy to understand what prevented Linear B from being incised on metal or stone, other than to suppose that its knowledge was restricted to an administrative class who were concerned solely with their archives.

Materials

Unbaked clay was used for all three writing systems.

Only Cretan Hieroglyphic was incised on seals (of ivory, soft stone or metal).

Only Linear A appears to have been inscribed on stone vases. [The contexts of the famous libation tables, nearly all of which were found in cult places, lead one to suppose that the inscriptions on them were dedicatory; one Cretan Hieroglyphic inscription on stone does exist, the 'limestone block of Malia' (Chapouthier 1938), the exact provenance of which is unknown.]

Only Linear B has not yet been found on any medium other than unbaked clay, if one discounts some 150 inscriptions which are painted on vases and the majority of which, although most of them were discovered on the Greek mainland, originate in Western Crete, in the region of Khania (Catling, Cherry, Jones and Killen 1980).

On the subject of materials, there is another question which demands an answer: were there other writing mediums, apart from those which have been discovered? If we consider only the archives, the best known group for the simple reason that they represent 94 per cent of all documents so far recovered, it is almost certain that in all three writing systems the clay documents which have survived are only draft copies, provisional documents destined for a relatively brief existence. At most they are concerned with the current fiscal year, which explains why, at least on the Linear B tablets, we never find any mention of the date when the document was written. Permanent archives, grand totals, censuses, etc., must have been recorded on some
perishable material (of animal or vegetable origin), which disappeared in the course of time, whether in a fire or through simple decay. Some clay sealings provide possible, if indirect, proof of this. As in the Near East such objects generally served to secure the integrity of the contents of various types of container. But there occur also simple balls of clay with one or more seal impressions on them – occasionally they also bear a written sign as a counter mark and very exceptionally a short inscription – displaying also the surviving imprint of a burnt string or the impressions of a number of such fastenings or even the rectangular impression of what could have been a ‘folded sheet’. These sealings, which have been found in their tens or even hundreds, both with and without tablets or other inscriptions on clay, may have served to secure documents made of perishable material (Pini 1983; Weingarten 1983: 38–42). If the existence of other, less durable materials for writing purposes can be proven, there is nothing to stop one speculating about what might have been written on such documents – legal or medical texts, religious or literary compositions, records of international trade, personal and diplomatic correspondence – all of which are now lost to us forever.

The question of writing and language

It is beyond doubt that Linear B served to record the Mycenaean Greek dialect. Although they have not yet been deciphered and there are opinions to the contrary (inter alia, Godart 1980: 598), it is also nearly certain that Cretan Hieroglyphic and Linear A were used to record at least two languages, since they were in simultaneous use for several centuries in a relatively restricted territory and even co-existed in the same archives (Malia: Chapouthier 1930: 3–7). However, it is by no means certain that the Linear A of the archival documents and that which was used for votive inscriptions recorded one and the same language.

Certain groups of signs, or certain parts of sign groups, of varying lengths – although these can be counted on the fingers of one hand – appear in both series of inscriptions. This is not proof, however, that they are written in the same language, especially since these identical groups of signs can transcribe anthroponyms or toponyms, for which the orthography can perfectly well be the same in a number of different languages using the same writing system. On the other hand there is no evidence to the contrary (Pope and Raison 1978: 33–37). And even if the differences between the Linear A of the archives and that of the votive inscriptions were as little, at the level of vocabulary, as that which exists, for example, between French and English, we would be unable to demonstrate it given the present state of our knowledge.

Conclusions

We have been able to introduce only a few of the numerous questions which arise in the fields of epigraphy, archaeology and history in considering the Cretan writing systems of the second millennium B.C. The paucity of the documentary evidence renders any conclusions problematical, indeed sometimes impossible. We must hope for an
appreciable increase in the quantity of evidence available; in the meantime the only realistic approach is to exploit to the full all that we have, a task which will require considerable effort and ingenuity.

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Fonds National Belge de la Recherche Scientifique, Brussels

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References


Abstract

Olivier, J.-P.

Cretan writing in the second millennium B.C.

Between the end of the third millennium and the beginning of the second, the Minoans invented and developed two original writing systems, conventionally known as ‘Cretan Hieroglyphic’ and ‘Linear A’. These related systems are syllabaries, each consisting of less than 100 signs; the languages which they record remain unidentified. Most of the documents which survive are clay tablets with economic texts on them. The latest texts we have date to around 1450. Linear B was developed from Linear A, probably sometime after the sixteenth century. It served to record the Greek dialect of the Mycenaeans who occupied Crete from 1450 to 1375 at least, and who remained on the Greek mainland until around 1200. It was first deciphered in 1952.'
The infancy of the alphabet

A. R. Millard

Excavating at Byblos on the coast of Lebanon in 1923, the French scholar Pierre Montet cleared a tomb-chamber containing a large stone sarcophagus. An inscription engraved on the edge of the lid announces that this is the coffin of Ahiram, king of Byblos. The text was not difficult to read because the letters were recognizably an early form of the Phoenician alphabet, and the language a Phoenician dialect (Dussaud 1924). At first both the coffin and the inscription were given a date in the thirteenth century B.C., but now there is almost universal agreement that both were made about 1000 B.C. (Dunand 1945: Post-scriptum; Gibson 1982: 12 f; Röllig 1982; Porada 1973). Ahiram’s inscription is the earliest intelligible text of more than two or three words written with the Phoenician alphabet known today. By its time the letters were in a more or less conventional form and showed some cursive traits. The handful of dedications incised on stone at Byblos later in the tenth century makes these points clear (Gibson 1982: 17–24). From then the history of the alphabet can be traced to the present day; a few major questions remain open – the exact time and manner of the Greek borrowing, the rise of the various Indian systems – and new discoveries can bring surprises, as the ninth century B.C. statue from Tell Fekherye in Syria has done for Aramaic (Abou Assaf, Bordreuil, Millard 1982) or the graffiti from Gordion in Phrygia have done for early Greek (Young 1969). The earlier stages of the alphabet’s history are less certainly defined, and it is the purpose of this essay to explore them in the context of the scripts of the ancient Near East.

Writing in the Near East in the third and second millennia B.C.

By the end of the fourth millennium B.C. the distinctive scripts of Babylonia and Egypt, the cuneiform and the hieroglyphic, appear to have become well-established. The evidence indicates that they continued for a thousand years without any serious rival. From Babylonia the cuneiform spread in several directions, notably up the Euphrates westwards and on along the trade routes to the Mediterranean. Since 1975, the Italian excavations at Tell Mardikh, ancient Ebla, south of Aleppo, have revealed far more extensive Babylonian influences in northern Syria during the Early Bronze Age than had
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