Jeff Garrett C.H.GORDON: EVIDENCE FOR THE MINOAN LANGUAGE

Since 1900, when Sir Arthur Evans began his excavations, the linear scripts of Crete and the Aegean have attracted a wide variety of students. Scholars (some reputable, some less so), brilliant and not so brilliant amateurs, and all manner of antiquarians long under Luna's spell have been driven to the most fantastic excesses in attempts to come to grips with these strange, and for the most part, impenetrable scripts. The major stumbling block was finally removed in 1952, when Michael Ventris deciphered the script class commonly called Linear B.[1] Ventris, with the aid of John Chadwick, analyzed and interpreted 300 tablets which had been discovered in archives at Knossos and in later excavations at Pylos and Mycenae. These were found to be written in an archaic and truncated dialect of Greek, subsequently named Mycenaean. These texts, with translations and a full linguistic discussion of Mycenaean grammar, were published in Documents in Mycenaean Greek,[2] a volume which, in spite of much intelligent research over the past few years, remains the major tool for students of the Mycenaean scripts.

Presently, these students and others of the above-mentioned band, while carrying on the research of Mycenaean, are also turning their attentions toward interpreting the earlier class of script known as Linear A. The Linear A tab-

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[1] For a full account of this decipherment, certainly one of the most interesting intellectual achievements in the history of linguistics, see John Chadwick, The Decipherment of Linear B (New York, 1959).

[2] Cambridge, 1956. Hereafter = Documents.

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lets, much less numerous than the Linear B (Mycenaean) tablets, have so far been discovered only on Crete among strata datable ca. 1650 B.C. to ca. 1400 B.C.

The main problem thus far has been one of interpretation, since the 90 sign syllabary of Linear A has recognizable counterparts in the Mycenaean syllabary for over half its values. This situation of common phonemes is partially confirmed by common placenames, e.g. pa-i-to (Phaistos),[3] occurring in both the Linear A tablets and Mycenaean. Even though this would seem to ease the problem greatly, a majority of potentially useful tablets, those found near Hagia Triada, are so full of gaps and partially defaced signs that their correct transcription and interpretation are beset with innumerable problems. So far these tablets cannot be assigned to a definite linguistic group, even though there exist numerous backers for the two most popular candidates: the Anatolian and the Semitic language groups. The major and most convincing protagonist for the Anatolian hypothesis is Leonard Palmer,[4] while the Semitic hypothesis is championed by Cyrus H. Gordon.

Over the past decade Dr. Gordon has studied the Linear A scripts and has attempted, with the aid of the values deciphered by Ventris, to interpret these Cretan scripts as representing a Semitic language. His Evidence for the Minoan Language[5] is the summation of his studies, and it is with a small portion of this work that we concern ourselves here.

In examining this scholar's work, we might begin by checking his claims and by defining a few terms. In the opening paragraph entitled "The Decipherment of Minoan" we find both term and claim. Gordon writes, "The problem of deciphering Minoan thus resolves itself into fixing by context the meanings of pronouncable Minoan words and phrases to establish the identity of the language, which can be done if Minoan belongs to a known linguistic family."[6] This is pretty much what we have already said, yet it must be stressed that this is not a problem of "decipherment" but rather one

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[3] E. Peruzzi, "Le Iscrizioni Minoiche," Atti dell'Accademia Toscana di Scienze e Lettere "La Columbaria" 24 (1959-60), p. 34.

[4] Cf. his Mycenaeans and Minoans (2nd edition: London, 1965), pp. 327-58. For a view contra, cf. M. Pope, "The Minoan Goddess Asasara - An Obituary," Bulletin of the Institute of Classical Studies of the University of London 8 (1961), pp. 29-31.

[5] Ventnor, N.J., 1966, pp. 3-44; Plates I-XII. Hereafter = Evidence.

[6] Ibid., p. 26 #114.

of "interpretation." Decipherment, when applied to a script whose values are unknown means determining those values. If the script values are known or, in the case of Linear A, partially known, the problem consists in discovering the patterns into which these values fall. This is interpretation.[7]

Another term used by Gordon is a bit more specific. In his introduction he maintains that "virtual bilinguals provide opening wedges for identifying the Minoan language."[8] This term "virtual bilingual" is applied by Gordon to ideograms or determinatives whose pictographic representation is either obvious, such as those on the famous tripod tablet from Pylos,[9] or already determined, such as the frequently occurring Mycenaean ideogram denoting wheat and other grain commodities. Such pictographs are helpful, providing sort of a rough "Learn Linear A through Pictures" manual, but the question remains as to whether or not we may assume that such general signs can elucidate specifics.

In his paragraph (Evidence: p. 26, #116) discussing HT 86[10] he writes:

> The WHEAT determinative following ku-ni-su tells us that the word means 'wheat.' In Akkadian ku(n)nišu means 'emmer wheat.' Its Aramaic cognate כוסנא (a masculine noun from the Semitic root *knṯ) is defined as 'spelt' wheat. Now si-to followed by the same WHEAT determinative in Linear B = σῖτος . This shows that Minoan ku-ni-su Mycenaean si-to; both can designate 'wheat' in Semitic and Greek, respectively. Via the WHEAT determinative we accordingly have a Greco-Semitic equation.

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[7] Following Johannes Friedrich, Extinct Languages (F. Gaynor, translator), New York, 1957.

[8] Evidence, Forward.

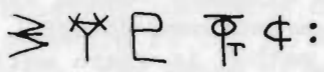
[9] Ta 641 (#236 in Documents: pp. 336-7, Plate III (b) facing p. 111). It is a wonder that this tablet has not been submerged in the verbiage concerning it. The last three items are the salient features and illustrate splendidly the term virtual bilingual.

di-pa ..... qe-to-ro-we		: "goblet ... four-handled"
di-pa ..... ti-ri-jo-we		: "goblet ... three-handled"
di-pa ..... a-no-we		: "goblet ... handle-less"

This tablet, discovered by C. Blegen after Ventris had communicated the decipherment, provided an after-the-fact verification. However, one critic went so far as to maintain that the entire affair was a hoax and that Ventris, who had obtained the tablet illegally, had fabricated the decipherment by providing the necessary Greek values to fit the tablet!(?) Cf. Palmer, op. cit., pp. 64-76.

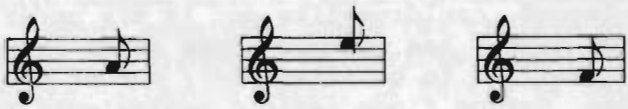
[10] HT (Hagia Triada) numbers refer to the enumeration of the tablets

The WHEAT determinative[11] (𐄳) is very common in the Mycenaean texts where it usually stands alone and unaltered. However, in Linear A, it is one of the most frequent ligatured signs, that is, it usually appears with a subscript complement of some sort, and the combinations are numerous. Sometimes the subscript is a single syllabic sign, e.g. 𐄳 to be read perhaps as WHEAT-ku (meaning unknown). Evidence, Pl. VIII shows HT 86:a:1-2, b:1-2, with the WHEAT determinative followed by two distinct signs, neither appearing in the syllabary proper.



ku-ni-su WHEAT (𐄳) 20

In music we see ligatured ideograms of the same type:



Will scholars of the future assign a primary value to the treble-clef sign and leave the little extras to shift for themselves?

The fact remains that such complements may have been used as volume or weight indicators and, as such, would not affect the basic value of the ideogram. However, disparate use of the ligatures within a single tablet and indifferent totaling of the various ligatured items seems to negate this interpretation.[12] We might assume that the scribes of Minoan Crete used this ideogram plus complement

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followed by W. C. Brice, Inscriptions in the Minoan Linear Script of Class A, (Oxford, 1961), and also in G. Pugliese Carratelli, "Le iscrizioni pre-elleniche di Hagia Triada in Creta e della Grecia peninsulare," Monumenti Antichi 40, pp. 422-610.

[11] Referred to by Mycenaeologists as the GRANUM ideogram, #120 in the sign list published in J. Chadwick and J. T. Killen, The Knossos Tablets (3rd edition: London, 1964), hereafter = KT III.

[12] Cf. Documents, pp. 33-6, and Fig. 7, showing common HT ideograms, with and without complements, p. 34.

to refer to many different types of grain. HT 14 has pu-L82(AB22)[13]-te followed by the uncomplemented WHEAT determinative, so it would seem that ku-ni-su has hardly the currency we might be led to expect. In commerce with the Levant and/or Mesopotamia these scribes undoubtedly came across a variety called kunnišu by its dealers, and, for want of a better name, these same scribes borrowed the term, which they wrote syllabically ku-ni-su. This Greco-Semitic equation may indeed be a hapax legomenon; it cannot be considered otherwise at present. As a Semitic lexical item within the HT tablets, this word should be noted well, but it hardly weights the evidence toward assuming that a Semitic language will be mainstream Minoan.

Gordon's method is again well illustrated in his discussion of HT 31.[14] In this tablet, an apparent inventory list corresponding to the most common type of Mycenaean inscription, the outstanding features are six representations of various types of vessels with Linear A signs written in a smaller "case" as adjuncts above the pot-pictographs. Of the six examples of writing, values can be applied in five cases (the three-legged, cauldron-like pot in the upper right-hand corner of the tablet has perhaps three signs above it, yet they are so small as to be illegible); out of the five readable examples, Gordon finds Semitic equivalents for four. He transliterates and translates as follows:

qa-pa$_3$ = Heb. כף / Akk. kappu / Ug. kp (?)
su-pu = Heb. סף / Ug. sp
ka-ro-pa$_3$ = Akk. karpu
su-pa$_3$-ra = Heb. ספל / Ug. spl[15]

The su-pa$_3$-ra reading is somewhat suspect, for the ra sign is not written above the pot-pictogram, as are the others, but to the left of it and in a case equal to, if not larger than, the representation of the vessel itself.

Further analysis of the tablet uncovers problems with pa$_3$ (?) which is the questionable value of L1 (Carra-

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[13] 182 refers to the index of signs in Carratelli, op. cit., while AB22 is the same sign in Brice, op. cit., following the enumeration established by J. L. Myres in Scripta Minoa II, (London, 1954). The value is still undetermined.

[14] Evidence, Pl. VIII.

[15] Ibid., p. 26, #115. The fifth example, which Gordon ignores, may be transliterated pa-ta-qa, whatever that may mean.

telli); AB18 (Myres, Brice), assigned tentatively in Documents, p. 23. Now the syllabary given in KT III lists the sign as #56 and no value is given. This suspect sign is far more common in Linear A than in Mycenaean. In the extensive vocabulary included in Documents (Appendix I), I have not found it once, although it does occur in several personal and place names: e.g., ka-pa$_3$(?)-no (KN Df 1219); pa$_3$(?)-ro KN Dw 1422) equals Βαλίος (?) It would seem to represent a phoneme alien to Mycenaean (and, by extension, Greek) while it is the most common voiced/voiceless labial in Linear A. Of course, this last is true only if its assumed value is correct. Its frequency is obvious, for already it appears in three of four important instances cited. It is interesting that pa (the standard labial in Mycenaean, not counting the labio-velar series, the usage of which is frequent, elaborate, and not sufficiently understood)[16] occurs not at all in Gordon's vocabulary (Evidence, pp. 38-39)--only in a few personal names,[17] again a hint of perhaps a foreign element. Suffice it to say, this polarization of usage is at present impossible to explain, but it does provide an instance where we may credit Gordon with a tentative decipherment.

After examining these two tablets alone, we can see that Gordon's discovery of various Semitic words used in the HT tablets, although valid, is hardly as forceful as he would have us believe. Pot-names and grain-names are just the type of technical terms which are as portable as the items they represent. These vocabulary items may find their way into any linguistic group and really do not weight our evidence toward labeling Linear A as a Semitic language. Gordon's efforts toward establishing a Semitic vocabulary

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16 E.g., in lieu of explanation, of labiovelars operative in Mycenaean, cf. i-qo> hikwos (Gk. ἵππος Lat. equus) in TA 722 (#246 in Documents, p. 345). Cf. also the commonly assumed Latin series *penque > qwenque > quinque. Cf. the change pa$_3$ qa (L62, AB35) in the history of Mycenaean studies, Proceedings of the Third International Colloquium for Mycenaean Studies, E. L. Bennett, ed., (Madison, 1964), p. 14. See also L. Palmer, "Some Points for Discussion," Proceedings of the Cambridge Colloquium on Mycenaean Studies, Palmer and Chadwick (eds.), (Cambridge, 1966), pp. 275-84.

17 pa-i-to "Phaistos" ---HT 97: a:3; 120:6; 122:a:2-3?
pa-de (personal name) ---HT 9:a:2; B:2; 122:a:5
pa-da-su (personal name) ---HT 20:1
pa-da-su-ti (feminized personal name) ---HT 104:3-4
pa-ya-re (Egyptian personal name) ---HT 8:b:4; 88:4; 117:a:5
(cited in Evidence, p. 39).

within these Minoan texts gives other interesting and even surprising items,[18] but we must remain aware that vocabulary alone hardly consitutes a language.

A sentence in Documents fits our purposes here:

> The final classification of a language depends ultimately on its grammar and syntax, and it will be shown in what follows that in this respect Mycenaean displays undeniably Greek features.[19]

Ventris and Chadwick went on to analyze numerous whole tablets which revealed exactly what they had promised--a morphology and syntax with undeniably Greek features. Gordon has made no such promise and rightfully so, for he never bothers to analyze any tablet in toto. Herein lies the weakness of Evidence, for if the HT tablets do not reveal a Semitic morphology and syntax, then they simply do not reveal a Semitic language. A few sentences from the section "Minoan Orthography" (pp. 33-34) are alarming in their implications:

> 143. The r-signs also cover L.
> 144. The s-signs cover Ugaritic (1) s, (2) š, and (3) ṯ....

Would any Semitic language with such a paucity of phonemes ever be interpretable?

The section on "Minoan Morphology" (pp. 26-27) even begins with a distortion:

> 151. The normal Semitic case endings of triptotic nouns (nom. -u, acc. -a, gen. -i in the sg.) may be assumed.

The more than casually interested reader will search in vain for verification of this assumption.[20]

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[18] Evidence, 117 & 118, p. 27. Gordon takes ku-ro, long recognized as a total indicator, to equal Semitic kull- (Heb. כל). The word(s) po-to-ku-ro, which appears as a reading before two ku-ro sums (HT 122, Evidence, Plate VIII), can be seen therefore to indicate a "grandtotal" in this context. Gordon explains as follows: "Tentatively we suggest that po-to-ku-ro stands for what would be represented in Hebrew script as בת כל 'daughter of all' = 'grandtotal.'" !!!

[19] Documents, p. 70.