

MYCENAEAN STUDIES

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The newly formed Institute of Classical Studies of London University has acted on the view that to address itself to a particular task is the best way to announce itself to the world and to justify the hopes of its founders. It had an adventurous subject ready to hand. The recent decipherment of the Minoan Linear 'B' script by Mr. Michael Ventris, and the identification of the language of the tablets as a form of Greek has opened an exciting new window into the age before Homer. At a number of meetings arranged by the Institute scholars of different disciplines have met to consider problems raised by the decipherment and to work towards their solution.¹

So begins the foreword to the first issue of the *Bulletin of the Institute of Classical Studies* in 1954, written by its first director, T. B. L. Webster. Compiling a virtual issue of *BICS* on Mycenaean Studies means returning to the exciting period following the decipherment of Linear B in 1952 and the origins of the Mycenaean Seminar, which is still convened by the Institute of Classical Studies today. Despite Webster's reference to 'the Minoan Linear "B" script', the decipherment overturned Sir Arthur Evans's notions about the dominance of Minoan Crete over the mainland of Greece, revealing that the tablets Evans had found at Knossos were in fact written in 'Mycenaean Greek'. The Mycenaean Seminar has evolved from its early focus on Linear B to cover Aegean Prehistory in general. As a result 'Mycenaean' is a misnomer for both the seminar series and this virtual issue, but it is too late to change the name of the seminar now, and besides it has become well-known among Aegean prehistorians throughout the world. The first summaries of these seminars were published in *BICS* in 1963 and have continued, with the occasional hiatus, ever since. These summaries, as well as the Mycenaean Seminar contributions which were written up as articles for *BICS*, provide a rich resource for Aegean Prehistory. The articles in this virtual issue trace the history of the seminar and hence the discipline as a whole; the inclusion of the most recently published seminars highlights the current diversity of seminar topics over sixty years on.

The first issue of *BICS* starts, appropriately enough, with an article by Michael Ventris included here. Unexpectedly, perhaps, it is in Ventris's own neat architect's hand: this was probably the only way to keep the Linear B signs in the text intact. Indeed the purpose of the article is to wrestle with problems such as this, putting forward a 'suggested code of practice' for Linear B scholars to adhere to rather than using their own epigraphic conventions. Characteristically for Ventris, he notes that it was the product of discussion between him and a number of other scholars. The solution to the problem of including Linear B signs in publications was to use Roman letters, and for syllabic signs Ventris modestly notes that 'the actual values used in transcribing the texts are of course at the discretion of the individual editor' but suggests referring to existing publications. Ideograms were more challenging but the pragmatic solution, in the absence of a Linear B font, was to represent them with their

¹ T. B. L. Webster, 'Foreword', *Bulletin of the Institute of Classical Studies* 1 (1954) 1.

meanings, such as WHEAT. He ends by suggesting that: ‘While the affinities of the language are still under discussion, we think it best to refer to it by a descriptive and non-committal name, viz. *Mycenaean* /dialect or language/, rather than by some such term as Old Achaeae, Proto-Arcadian etc.’ As Bennet notes in his contribution to this issue (see below), we should be thankful that those first meetings did not end up as the ‘Old Achaeae Seminar’.

Nevertheless the term ‘Mycenaean’ is not as neutral as it seems because it had already been used to describe a culture encompassing mainland Greece in opposition to Minoan Crete, presupposing a people to go with the language. Such articles can be seen as part of the establishment of a discipline, two years after the language of the tablets had been revealed.

Two years later Ventris tragically died in a car accident, leaving John Chadwick to carry on the work of their collaboration. A short contribution by Chadwick, ‘The Knossos Horse and Foal Tablet (Ca 895)’ marks the watershed between Sir Arthur Evans’s publications of the undeciphered Linear B tablets² and Ventris and Chadwick’s seminal *Documents in Mycenaean Greek*.³ This particular tablet was important because, as Chadwick explains, Evans had correctly read the signs next to the maneless horses as ‘po-lo’ (Greek πῶλος, meaning foal) by using Cypriot signs, but had then rejected this. As noted above, the idea that these ‘Minoan’ tablets were written in a form of Greek was anathema to Evans. After studying the fragments of the Knossos Linear B tablets in Heraklion Museum, Chadwick had found a joining part of this tablet which helped to explain the listing of foals: other ideograms were qualified with ‘i-qo’, horse and ‘o-no’, ass. The article underlined the need for a complete edition of the Knossos tablets, once new joins had been identified. Four of the early *BICS* supplements were devoted to this task, paving the way for the definitive publication.⁴

The articles by John Killen and Cynthia Shelmerdine in this virtual issue illustrate how work on Linear B documents has developed. As Killen’s paper shows, Linear B scholars have sought to integrate the documents into an understanding of Mycenaean (or at least Pylian, Theban, or Knossian) social practices. Among these, feasting or banqueting has increasingly become a topic of debate.⁵ Killen’s paper is a forerunner of much later work on Mycenaean feasting, using a historical analogy from the Incas in order to help elucidate the evidence from the tablets for the mobilization of animals. He also brings in the evidence from sealings from

² Linear B tablets from Knossos were discussed extensively in A. J. Evans, *The Palace of Minos* (London 1921–35) and published in A.J. Evans (ed. J. Myres), *Scripta Minoa II* (Oxford 1952).

³ M. Ventris and J. Chadwick, *Documents in Mycenaean Greek* (Oxford 1956).

⁴ R. Browning, *The Linear ‘B’ Texts from Knossos*, Bulletin of the Institute of Classical Studies Supplement 1 (London 1955); E. L. Bennett, J. Chadwick and M. Ventris, *The Knossos Tablets*, Bulletin of the Institute of Classical Studies Supplement 2 (London 1956); J. Chadwick and F.W. Householder, *The Knossos Tablets*, 2nd edn., Bulletin of the Institute of Classical Studies Supplement 7 (London 1959); J. Chadwick and J. T. Killen, *The Knossos Tablets*, 3rd edn., Bulletin of the Institute of Classical Studies Supplement 15 (London 1964); J. Chadwick, L. Godart, J. T. Killen, J.-P. Olivier, A. Sacconi, and I. A. Sakellarakis, *Corpus of Mycenaean Inscriptions from Knossos* (Cambridge 1986–1998).

⁵ E.g. *Hesperia* 73.2 (2004), a special volume on Mycenaean feasting introduced by J. C. Wright; P. Halstead and J. C. Barrett (eds), *Food, Cuisine, and Society in Prehistoric Greece* (Oxford 2004); L. A. Hitchcock, R. Laffineur, and J. Crowley (eds), *DAIS. The Aegean Feast* (Liège and Austin 2008).

Thebes, smaller documents which were an important part of this process. Shelmerdine also touches on feasting in her paper on Linear B administration, suggesting that though the palaces organized these events, there are indications that supplying them involved negotiating with local providers. Previous scholars had assumed that the tablets reflected the complete control of the palace over the supply chain, or at least those parts of it that were recorded in Linear B documents. Shelmerdine argues for a nuanced view of the relationship between the palace bureaucracies that produced the tablets and the individuals named in them. These relationships were more contingent, and affected by factors such as status and geography, than had previously been assumed. Killen and Shelmerdine show how close attention to the tablets, combined with wider frames of reference from historical analogies or archaeology, has ensured that the study of Linear B continues to produce insights about Mycenaean societies.

The lecture which provided the text for Killen's paper was given in 1992 to commemorate forty years since the decipherment of Linear B. The year 2000 brought another anniversary lecture, by Peter Warren, as part of a day to celebrate 100 years since Sir Arthur Evans began excavating at Knossos. It took Evans only a few days to find, in his words, 'clay tablets analogous to the Babylonian but with inscriptions in the prehistoric script of Crete', but of course his finds at Knossos were much more than this. Warren evaluates Evans's achievements, highlighting his extensive publication record and influence on the periodization of the Bronze Age. In this Evans was aided by Duncan Mackenzie, his foreman at Knossos, who did much to establish this chronological framework in his study of the pottery and stratigraphy of Knossos. His achievement is recognized in a paper by Nicoletta Momigliano which was published in Nicholas Coldstream's festschrift, *KLADOS*. Momigliano went on to expand this subject in a separate *BICS* Supplement.⁶ Such histories of the discipline are useful reminders that many of our theories and assumptions, as well as some of the intellectual frameworks of Aegean Prehistory, are inherited from earlier scholars.

For many Aegean Bronze Age sites another inheritance from earlier scholars is unpublished excavations. The papers by Spyros Iakovidis on Mycenae and Anna Dakouri-Hild on Thebes examined the history of excavation at these sites and the resultant overflowing storerooms. Spyros Iakovidis gave a potted history of both the excavations at Mycenae and the site itself in the Bronze Age, a masterly synthesis which was the result of a lifetime's work at the site. Dakouri-Hild's focus was on the material from the excavation of the 'House of Kadmos' in the early twentieth century. She showed how old boxes and notebooks could be re-excavated to fill out the picture of an important Bronze Age site. These lectures both marked important milestones: Iakovidis was speaking on the fiftieth anniversary of the foundation of the Institute of Classical Studies, and Dakouri-Hild gave the biennial Michael Ventris Memorial Lecture as part of the series of talks marking fifty years of Mycenaean Studies at the Institute. The

⁶ N. Momigliano, *Duncan Mackenzie: A Cautious Canny Highlander and The Palace of Minos at Knossos*, Bulletin of the Institute of Classical Studies Supplement 72 (London 1999).

summaries of the other talks in this series are included here as part of the 2003–04 Mycenaean Seminar Summaries. Some are reflective, of Ventris’s career (Palaima) and Linear B studies generally (Bennet). Others discuss new challenges: putting Cypro-Minoan documents in archaeological context (Ferrara), integrating zooarchaeological evidence with Linear B (Isaakidou) and onomastics (Lane). Olga Krzyszkowska gives an account of the development of the Mycenaean Seminar, including the aims circulated at the first meeting. The aims of the Mycenaean Seminar were never narrowly focussed on texts: archaeology, society, and religion were included on the list circulated by T. B. L. Webster and over time have become staple subjects of the Seminar.

Another theme on Webster’s list was historical, including, among other things, the Trojan War. Susan Sherratt’s paper excavates the Homeric epics to find their prehistoric strata. As she cautions, however, it is overly simplistic to regard the Trojan War as a historical event that can be pinned down using either the evidence from the Homeric epics or from archaeological excavations at Troy. Instead the Homeric epics are an act of eighth-century ‘panhellenic ethnogenesis’ crafted out of stories involving sieges and heroic names which go back to the palatial era of the Late Bronze Age. Bennet helps put Sherratt’s paper in context of the swings over the years between Alan Wace’s initial hope that the Linear B documents would reveal a document by ‘some long-forgotten forerunner of Homer’ and Moses Finley’s attitude that Homer was ‘no guide at all’ to the tablets. Bennet’s article, based on a lecture marking sixty years of the Mycenaean Seminar, provides an up-to-date account of Mycenaean Studies in general and gives a more coherent account of some of the themes touched on above.

Anniversaries have often provided an occasion to invite leading scholars to reflect on the past, present, and future of the discipline, providing as a by-product a series of very readable contributions to *BICS*. The final choice here is not from a special occasion but simply the most recent set of Mycenaean Seminar summaries from *BICS*, showing the diversity of topics presented and debated during an average year’s programme. There follows a complete list of all Mycenaean Seminars to illustrate its evolution and act as an index for the *BICS* summaries to date. Since 2016, *BICS* itself has become a themed issue publication, and the Mycenaean summaries will henceforth be published separately online. They will retain their character and their close connection with *BICS*, but will become more widely available through open access via the *Humanities Digital Library*.⁷ I and my co-organizers, Ellen Adams, Lisa Bendall, Yannis Galanakis, and Olga Krzyszkowska, remain grateful for the continuing support of the Institute of Classical Studies for the subject with which it announced itself to the world.

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⁷ <http://humanities-digital-library.org/index.php/hdl/catalog/category/ics>