Deciphering Bronze Age Scripts of Crete The Case of Linear A

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0. Introducing linear A

Linear A is a script used in the Aegean area, mainly in the island of Crete. The texts discovered up to now can be dated between about 1850 B.C. and 1450 B.C. Linear A appears in two types of documents: accounting documents and the non accounting ones. More than 90 % of our texts are of the accounting type. The whole linear A corpus has 7.386 signs. This means about ten typewritten pages.

1. Decipherment of the script

Linear A has signs which are clearly ideographic: they represent objects, living creatures, or concepts.

Apart from these clear ideograms, there are about one hundred signs whose ideographic character cannot be proved. This number is just what we expect from a syllabary, and especially from an open syllable one, with signs for syllables like *ba, ca, da*, and so on.

Linear A is cognate to another script, linear B, which has been deciphered, so one can read most of its syllabograms. There are about seventy linear A and linear B syllabograms which have the same form. For various reasons, it seems quite probable that the creators of linear B have not drastically changed the phonetic values of linear A. We can, then, use the linear B values for the transliteration of the most frequent linear A signs.

2. Interpretation of linear A texts

The structure of the *linear A accounting texts* is rather easy to grasp, because they are full of ideograms, and especially of one kind of them: the numbers. Thanks to these numbers, we understand the only two words of the whole linear A corpus we are absolutely sure about: the names of the "total" and the "grand-total".

The *linear A non accounting documents* are extremely interesting, because they possess a very elaborate syntactic pattern and very developed morphological features. The difficulty is that we have not enough material to test our interpretations on extensive grounds.

3. Identification of the linear A language

The identification of the language of linear A is the most tantalizing task we are faced with. Linear A's language has been recognised as cognate to an impressive list of languages: Hittite, Luwian, Lycian, Sanskrit, Greek, Indo-european, Semitic, Carian, Basque, and so on. Unfortunately, there is no single one decipherment which fulfils our requirements.

4. What about the future?

We could work in three directions.

First, *find new texts*. Regularly, the archaeologists find new linear A inscriptions. These finds are vital for our studies, because they increase the number of our texts, which are for time being so few.

Second, *the internal study of linear A* should be systematically done. A full statistical study of the syllabograms and of their associations should be done - looking, for instance, for possible vocalic harmony. One should try to determine the probable status of every linear A word: is it a proper noun, or a term of the lexicon, and so on. Try to define the morphemes and describe their function. Create morphological and syntactical models, and test them on the largest possible number of texts. And so on.

Third: we should develop the *comparative study of linear A*. Other scripts than linear A were written in Crete. I think especially of the "hieroglyphic" Cretan script. Although we have very few texts, the comparison could be illuminating, and should be done.

Outside Crete, linear A should be compared with the languages of the Mediterranean world. Of course, in this area, the Semitic and the Indo-european languages are very important families, and one should pay enough attention to them. But there are many other languages which should deserve careful investigation. Languages which are neither Indo-european, nor Semitic - think for instance of languages such as Hattic, or Urartean, or Hurrian, and so on¹.

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¹ For more details on the whole subject, see Y. DUHOUX, *Le linéaire A : problèmes de déchiffrement*, in *Problems in Decipherment* (Y. DUHOUX, Th. G. PALAIMA, J. BENNET éd.), Louvain-la-Neuve, Peeters, 1989, pp. 59-119.