

# UNLOCKING THE SECRETS OF ANCIENT WRITING

The Parallel Lives of Michael Ventris and Linda Schele  
and the Decipherment of Mycenaean and Mayan Writing



Photograph © PASP slide archives (JLM)



Photograph © Justin Kerr

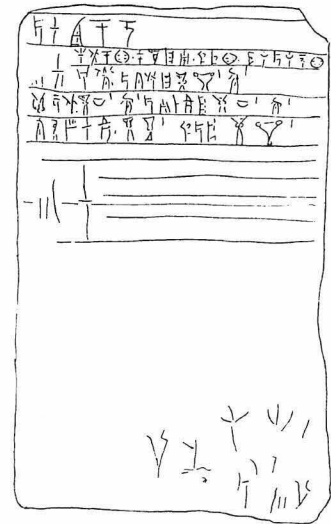
AN EXHIBITION  
March 9–August 1, 2000

*Organized at the Nettie Lee Benson Latin American Collection, General Libraries, UT Austin  
in conjunction with the Eleventh International Mycenological Colloquium, May 7-13, 2000*

*Sponsored by the Program in Aegean Scripts and Prehistory,  
Department of Classics, University of Texas at Austin*

*Figure 1: Left Cover Photograph*  
**Linear B tablet, Pylos Tn 316**  
 Mycenaean, Late Helladic III B, 1200 B.C.E.  
 Clay, accidentally fired  
 H 7.8 in. x W 5.0 in. x D 0.9 in.  
 National Archaeological Museum, Athens  
 Photograph © PASP slide archives (JLM)

On the front side of Pylos Tn 316, the famous ‘human sacrifice’ tablet, the scribe experimented with the layout for entering information about ceremonial offerings made by the community of Pylos (*pu-ro* in large characters twice at left) to sanctuaries in the palatial territory of Bronze Age Messenia. Note the ideographic characters for golden vases and for human beings. Entries continue on the *verso*. It is debated whether the MAN and WOMAN entries were ‘sacrificial victims’ or ‘sacristans’ bringing the vases. The lower part of the *recto* surface has graffiti, possibly the Linear B abc’s or *iroha*, written by the scribe in testing the readiness of the clay. Cf. T.G. Palaima, “Kn02 - Tn 316,” in S. Deger-Jalkotzy *et al.* eds., *Florent Studia Mycenaea* (Vienna 1999) Band II, 437-461.



*Figure 2: Drawing of the front of tablet PY Tn 316. Line drawing by Emmett L. Bennett, Jr.*

*Figure 3: Right Cover Photograph*  
**Jade celt, the Leiden Plaque**  
 Maya, Early Classic period, C.E. 320  
 Incised jade  
 H 8.5 in. x W 3.4 in. x D 0.4 in.  
 Rijksmuseum voor Volkenkunde, Leiden, Holland  
 Photograph © Justin Kerr, K2909

This incised jade, once used as a royal belt ornament, carries an inscription on the *verso* that tells of the accession (the “seating”) of a Maya ruler which occurred on September 17, C.E. 320 (8.14.3.1.12 1 Eb the seating of Yaxk’in). A portrait of this ruler is presented on the front side of the celt. He stands with his arms held to his chest, cradling the double-headed serpent bar, a symbol of authority. The ruler is costumed for his accession in the ornate regalia associated with Maya kings. On the ground behind the ruler lays a bound captive to be sacrificed during the rituals celebrating the royal accession.

The Leiden Plaque was featured in both *Blood of Kings: Dynasty and Ritual in Maya Art* (co-authored with Mary Miller, 1986) and *A Forest of Kings: The Untold Story of the Ancient Maya* (co-authored with David Freidel, 1990).



*Figure 4: Drawing of front and back of the Leiden Plaque. Line drawing by Linda Schele.*



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Catalogue of an Exhibition  
in conjunction with the  
Eleventh International Mycenological Colloquium

The Nettie Lee Benson Latin American Collection, General Libraries  
Rare Books Room  
Sid Richardson Hall 1.101  
The University of Texas at Austin

March 9–August 1, 2000

Curators and Authors: Thomas G. Palaima, Elizabeth I. Pope, and F. Kent Reilly, III  
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2000

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We thank Justin Kerr for his generosity in allowing us to reproduce his photographs.

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We thank Sheldon Ekland-Olson, former dean of Liberal Arts and now provost, and Richard W. Lariviere, current dean of Liberal Arts, at UT Austin for their support with funding.



## DEDICATION

We dedicate this exhibition to all who continue to work with painstaking care and passion at piecing together the puzzles of ancient scripts, symbol systems, and languages.

MYCENAEAN SYLLABARY					
A etc	a	ɛ	i	o	u
z <sup>2</sup> T Δ Θ	ta	te	ti	to	tu
K Γ X	ka	ke	ki	ko	
Π Β Φ	pa	pe	pi	po	
	ja	je		jo	
F	wa	we	wi	wo	
Σ	sa		si	so	
Λ Ρ	la/ra	le/re	li/ri	lo/ro	lu/ru
M	ma	me	mi	mo	
N	na	ne	ni	no	

The homophones are distinguished by having a fixed use in different words & endings.  
 -λ, -p, -σ, -v, -i not written when they close a syllable, except rarely. -ü written everywhere it is original, never where it is compensatory only (in -ov).  
 MW 18 June 52

*Exhibition Checklist no. 12: State of Linear B phonetic grid on June 18, 1952.*  
 Enclosed in a letter from Michael Ventris to Emmett L. Bennett, Jr.  
 Annotations by Bennett indicate improvements to be made to the grid.



Figure 5: Modern photograph of Knossos Linear B tablet Fp 13  
(see Ashmolean cast, Exhibition Checklist no. 15).

Evans, BS. No. 11, 12, 13, 14, 15, 16, 17, 18, 19, 20, 21, 22, 23, 24, 25, 26, 27, 28, 29, 30, 31, 32, 33, 34, 35, 36, 37, 38, 39, 40, 41, 42, 43, 44, 45, 46, 47, 48, 49, 50, 51, 52, 53, 54, 55, 56, 57, 58, 59, 60, 61, 62, 63, 64, 65, 66, 67, 68, 69, 70, 71, 72, 73, 74, 75, 76, 77, 78, 79, 80, 81, 82, 83, 84, 85, 86, 87, 88, 89, 90, 91, 92, 93, 94, 95, 96, 97, 98, 99, 100, 101, 102, 103, 104, 105, 106, 107, 108, 109, 110, 111, 112, 113, 114, 115, 116, 117, 118, 119, 120, 121, 122, 123, 124, 125, 126, 127, 128, 129, 130, 131, 132, 133, 134, 135, 136, 137, 138, 139, 140, 141, 142, 143, 144, 145, 146, 147, 148, 149, 150, 151, 152, 153, 154, 155, 156, 157, 158, 159, 160, 161, 162, 163, 164, 165, 166, 167, 168, 169, 170, 171, 172, 173, 174, 175, 176, 177, 178, 179, 180, 181, 182, 183, 184, 185, 186, 187, 188, 189, 190, 191, 192, 193, 194, 195, 196, 197, 198, 199, 200, 201, 202, 203, 204, 205, 206, 207, 208, 209, 210, 211, 212, 213, 214, 215, 216, 217, 218, 219, 220, 221, 222, 223, 224, 225, 226, 227, 228, 229, 230, 231, 232, 233, 234, 235, 236, 237, 238, 239, 240, 241, 242, 243, 244, 245, 246, 247, 248, 249, 250, 251, 252, 253, 254, 255, 256, 257, 258, 259, 260, 261, 262, 263, 264, 265, 266, 267, 268, 269, 270, 271, 272, 273, 274, 275, 276, 277, 278, 279, 280, 281, 282, 283, 284, 285, 286, 287, 288, 289, 290, 291, 292, 293, 294, 295, 296, 297, 298, 299, 300, 301, 302, 303, 304, 305, 306, 307, 308, 309, 310, 311, 312, 313, 314, 315, 316, 317, 318, 319, 320, 321, 322, 323, 324, 325, 326, 327, 328, 329, 330, 331, 332, 333, 334, 335, 336, 337, 338, 339, 340, 341, 342, 343, 344, 345, 346, 347, 348, 349, 350, 351, 352, 353, 354, 355, 356, 357, 358, 359, 360, 361, 362, 363, 364, 365, 366, 367, 368, 369, 370, 371, 372, 373, 374, 375, 376, 377, 378, 379, 380, 381, 382, 383, 384, 385, 386, 387, 388, 389, 390, 391, 392, 393, 394, 395, 396, 397, 398, 399, 400, 401, 402, 403, 404, 405, 406, 407, 408, 409, 410, 411, 412, 413, 414, 415, 416, 417, 418, 419, 420, 421, 422, 423, 424, 425, 426, 427, 428, 429, 430, 431, 432, 433, 434, 435, 436, 437, 438, 439, 440, 441, 442, 443, 444, 445, 446, 447, 448, 449, 450, 451, 452, 453, 454, 455, 456, 457, 458, 459, 460, 461, 462, 463, 464, 465, 466, 467, 468, 469, 470, 471, 472, 473, 474, 475, 476, 477, 478, 479, 480, 481, 482, 483, 484, 485, 486, 487, 488, 489, 490, 491, 492, 493, 494, 495, 496, 497, 498, 499, 500, 501, 502, 503, 504, 505, 506, 507, 508, 509, 510, 511, 512, 513, 514, 515, 516, 517, 518, 519, 520, 521, 522, 523, 524, 525, 526, 527, 528, 529, 530, 531, 532, 533, 534, 535, 536, 537, 538, 539, 540, 541, 542, 543, 544, 545, 546, 547, 548, 549, 550, 551, 552, 553, 554, 555, 556, 557, 558, 559, 560, 561, 562, 563, 564, 565, 566, 567, 568, 569, 570, 571, 572, 573, 574, 575, 576, 577, 578, 579, 580, 581, 582, 583, 584, 585, 586, 587, 588, 589, 590, 591, 592, 593, 594, 595, 596, 597, 598, 599, 600, 601, 602, 603, 604, 605, 606, 607, 608, 609, 610, 611, 612, 613, 614, 615, 616, 617, 618, 619, 620, 621, 622, 623, 624, 625, 626, 627, 628, 629, 630, 631, 632, 633, 634, 635, 636, 637, 638, 639, 640, 641, 642, 643, 644, 645, 646, 647, 648, 649, 650, 651, 652, 653, 654, 655, 656, 657, 658, 659, 660, 661, 662, 663, 664, 665, 666, 667, 668, 669, 670, 671, 672, 673, 674, 675, 676, 677, 678, 679, 680, 681, 682, 683, 684, 685, 686, 687, 688, 689, 690, 691, 692, 693, 694, 695, 696, 697, 698, 699, 700, 701, 702, 703, 704, 705, 706, 707, 708, 709, 710, 711, 712, 713, 714, 715, 716, 717, 718, 719, 720, 721, 722, 723, 724, 725, 726, 727, 728, 729, 730, 731, 732, 733, 734, 735, 736, 737, 738, 739, 740, 741, 742, 743, 744, 745, 746, 747, 748, 749, 750, 751, 752, 753, 754, 755, 756, 757, 758, 759, 760, 761, 762, 763, 764, 765, 766, 767, 768, 769, 770, 771, 772, 773, 774, 775, 776, 777, 778, 779, 780, 781, 782, 783, 784, 785, 786, 787, 788, 789, 790, 791, 792, 793, 794, 795, 796, 797, 798, 799, 800, 801, 802, 803, 804, 805, 806, 807, 808, 809, 810, 811, 812, 813, 814, 815, 816, 817, 818, 819, 820, 821, 822, 823, 824, 825, 826, 827, 828, 829, 830, 831, 832, 833, 834, 835, 836, 837, 838, 839, 840, 841, 842, 843, 844, 845, 846, 847, 848, 849, 850, 851, 852, 853, 854, 855, 856, 857, 858, 859, 860, 861, 862, 863, 864, 865, 866, 867, 868, 869, 870, 871, 872, 873, 874, 875, 876, 877, 878, 879, 880, 881, 882, 883, 884, 885, 886, 887, 888, 889, 890, 891, 892, 893, 894, 895, 896, 897, 898, 899, 900, 901, 902, 903, 904, 905, 906, 907, 908, 909, 910, 911, 912, 913, 914, 915, 916, 917, 918, 919, 920, 921, 922, 923, 924, 925, 926, 927, 928, 929, 930, 931, 932, 933, 934, 935, 936, 937, 938, 939, 940, 941, 942, 943, 944, 945, 946, 947, 948, 949, 950, 951, 952, 953, 954, 955, 956, 957, 958, 959, 960, 961, 962, 963, 964, 965, 966, 967, 968, 969, 970, 971, 972, 973, 974, 975, 976, 977, 978, 979, 980, 981, 982, 983, 984, 985, 986, 987, 988, 989, 990, 991, 992, 993, 994, 995, 996, 997, 998, 999, 1000.



Figure 6: Photograph of Fp 13 cut out by Alice Elizabeth Kober for her research files (see *Annual of the British School at Athens*, volume 6 for 1899–1900, Exhibition Checklist no. 1).

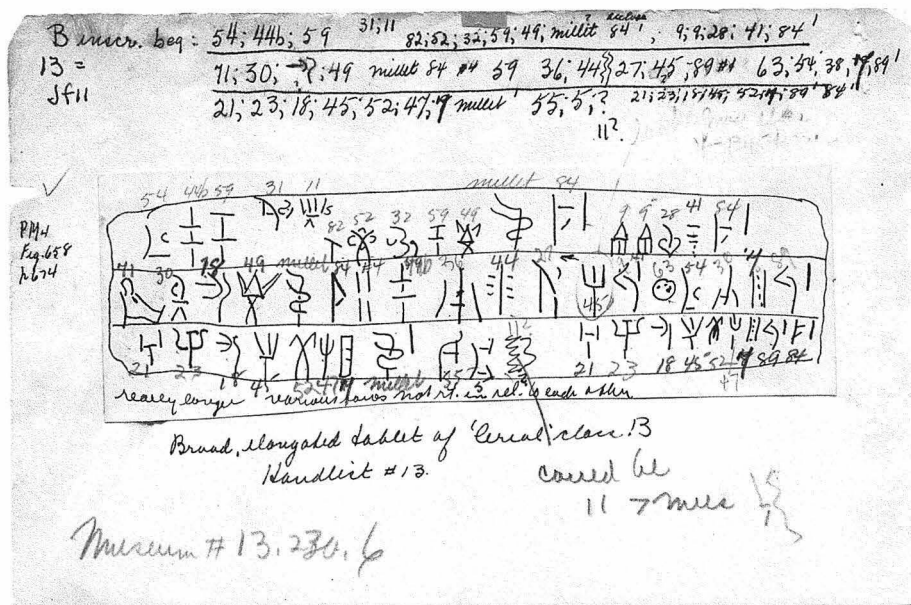
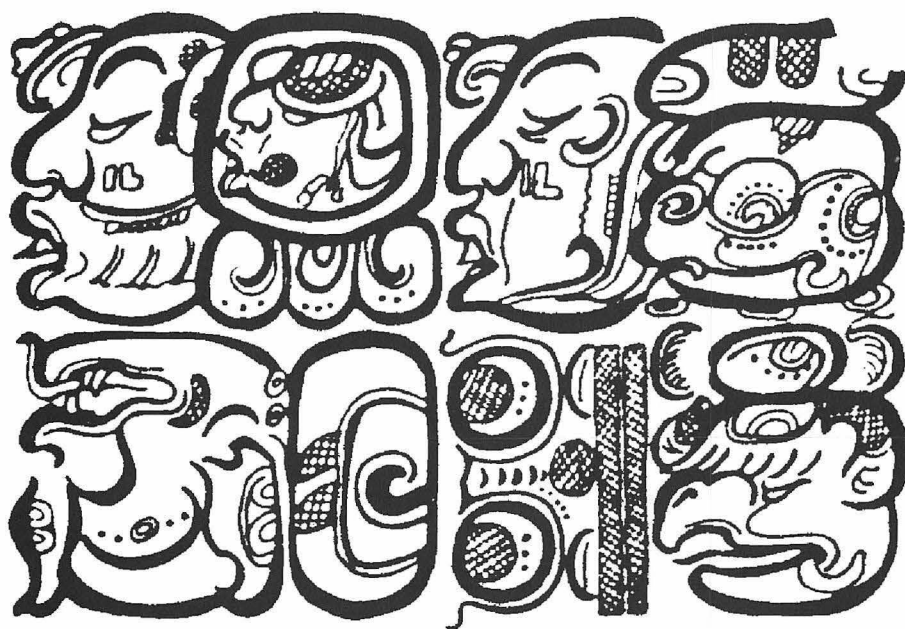


Figure 7: Drawing of Fp 13 by Alice Elizabeth Kober with detailed annotations concerning sign occurrence and possible meanings of ideograms.



*Figure 8:* Detail of ‘Tablet of the 96 Glyphs,’ Palenque. Photograph © Justin Kerr.



*Figure 9:* Detail of line drawing, ‘Tablet of the 96 Glyphs,’ Palenque. Drawing by Linda Schele.



*Decipherments are by far the most glamorous achievements of scholarship. There is a touch of magic about unknown writing, especially when it comes from the remote past, and a corresponding glory is bound to attach itself to the person who first solves its mystery. Moreover a decipherment is not just a mystery solved. It is also a key to further knowledge, opening a treasure-vault of history through which for countless centuries no human mind has wandered. Finally, it may be a dramatic personal triumph. Though many decipherments have been carried through by professional scholars as it were in the normal course of duty, this is not so for the three most famous: the decipherment of the Egyptian hieroglyphs by Champollion, of cuneiform by Rawlinson, and of Mycenaean Linear B by Ventris. These were exceptional feats of exceptional men. The rest of us are tempted to ask of each of them*

Where do you find his star?...

Have we aught in our sober night shall point

Such ends as his were, and direct the means

Of working out our purpose straight as his...?

*But there is another aspect of decipherment which makes it worthy of attention and which has nothing whatever to do with any of these romantic considerations; namely, that as a sociological phenomenon it is specific to the modern world. Those who remember 1953, the year when Ventris and Chadwick published the decipherment of Linear B, will recall that it was marked by two other great accomplishments. Hillary and Tensing made the first successful ascent of the highest mountain in the world. Crick and Watson established the structure of the DNA molecule, and so took the first step in explaining the mechanism of life. Whichever is regarded as the greatest personal feat or the most important in its consequences, there can be no question which of them belongs to the rarest category of achievement. People in other societies have climbed mountains. People in other societies have made scientific discoveries about what is not obvious to the senses. But the recovery of the key to an extinct writing system is a thing which has never been attempted, let alone accomplished, by anybody except in the last two or three centuries of our own civilization.*

—Maurice Pope, *The Story of Archaeological Decipherment*  
(Charles Scribner's Sons: New York, 1975) p. 9

NOT CHECKED IN TALKS DEPARTMENT WITH 'AS BROADCAST' SCRIPT	
PRODUCER: PRUDENCE SMITH	By Michael Ventris
Recorded: Monday 20th June 1952. 11.30 - 12.30 SLO 11320	
Transmission: Tuesday 1st July 1952. 7.25 - 7.45 p.m.	
THIRD PROGRAMME	

~~It was just 150 years ago that Champollion, at the age of 11, embarked on the studies which were to lead to the first classic decipherment, that of the Egyptian hieroglyphic writing.~~  
~~It was just 150 years since a young French boy, Jean-François Champollion, embarked on the studies which were to lead to the first classic decipherment, that of the Egyptian hieroglyphic writing.~~  
 In 1802, the oldest known languages were Greek, Latin and Hebrew;

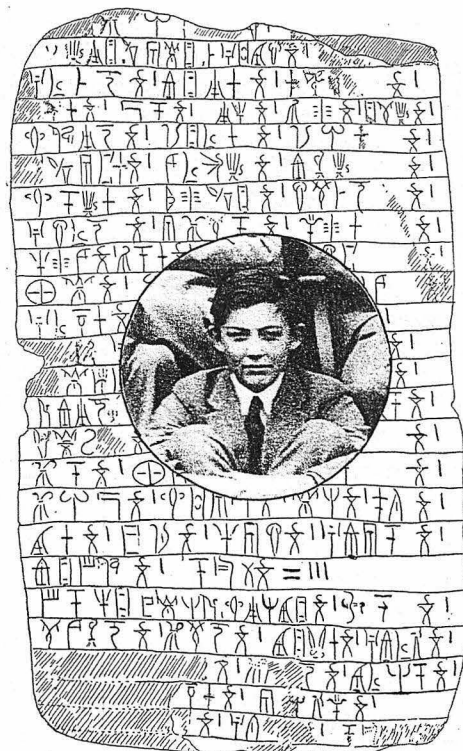
*Exhibition Checklist no. 7: Opening of original typescript for the BBC broadcast (July 1, 1952, 7:25-7:45 PM) by Michael Ventris about his decipherment of Linear B. Text changes handwritten by Ventris.*

## THE NATURE OF DECIPHERMENT: MYCENAEAN LINEAR B AND MAYAN WRITING

This exhibition is devoted to understanding the achievements of two great individuals in the history of decipherment, one 'Old World' (Michael Ventris and the Mycenaean Linear B syllabic script) and one 'New World' (Linda Schele and Mayan hieroglyphic writing). The decipherments of the Mycenaean and Mayan writing systems revolutionized the ways we look at the cultures that used them. The work of Ventris and Schele produced major breakthroughs that have given scholars access to rich new data for continuing research and discovery about the languages and cultures of the Minoans, Mycenaean, and the Maya.

As this exhibition makes clear, decipherment of an unknown script without the benefit of bilingual texts is a complicated process. It is both logical and quirky. The term serendipity is applied to aspects of the work of Schele and her collaborators. We can use the same word in discussing how Ventris and his coevals worked. The general public, among whom we include ourselves, is captivated by the idea of the great 'lone-wolf' intellectual of Holmesian aloofness who uses preternatural skills of analysis and abstract deduction to break the secret code of texts in an undeciphered script. Our delight increases if the mysteries hidden in undeciphered texts are revealed by someone who is not a member of the hidebound scholarly establishment. For this the archetype is the decipherment of Egyptian hieroglyphic writing, as Michael Ventris understood when he referred to Champollion in announcing his own decipherment on the BBC Third Programme on July 1, 1952 (Exhibition Checklist no. 7). We naturally associate professional scholars with pedantic wrangling over minutiae and with missing the forest of kings for the trees. An unproduced film script for a program on the life of Michael Ventris and his decipherment is in fact called "The Schoolboy Who Beat the Experts."

Elements of the decipherment of Linear B and Mayan will satisfy and disappoint our expectations. In both cases, many years of painstaking collaborative effort among scholars built the platforms that made the eventual leaps forward by Michael Ventris and Linda Schele possible. They were no lone wolves. But both were outsiders. Ventris possessed an enormous natural facility at learning modern languages and his public school training culminating at Stowe School gave him an enviable command of classical Greek. But there his formal education in languages ended. He was not a comparative linguist, nor an archaeologist, nor even a Classicist. Contrary to a widely circulating myth, he did not serve in cryptanalysis or cryptography during the war. His training was in architecture, interrupted by his service in World War II as a bomber navigator, and eventually he became an architect of extraordinary promise. Yet Ventris persisted in pursuing his interests in undeciphered scripts. His fascination began in his early childhood and was reinforced by a chance meeting at the age of fourteen with Sir Arthur Evans, the progenitor of Minoan archaeology and the first great student of



*Exhibition Checklist no. 6: Close up of Michael Ventris at Stowe School from the unproduced film script "The Schoolboy Who Beat the Experts" by Andrew Robinson for Brian Lapping Associates Ltd.*

Minoan writing. Four year later, in 1940, Ventris sent Sir Arthur a preliminary typed version of what would become his first published article on Aegean scripts.

During his training as an architect in the 1940's Ventris became a practitioner of the method then in vogue known as 'group working.' This method rejected the grand *auteur* model and inclined a disciple like Ventris to seek out the views of others, to make the most of their contributions, to invite their participation in a kind of open brain-storming about problems at hand, and to share openly with them his own ideas. His receptivity to the views of other scholars and his capacity for precise analytical work placed him in a position to 'crack the code' of Linear B in 1952. In the years following the decipherment, he was graciously candid about how much the work of others, like the American scholars Alice Elizabeth Kober (Exhibition Checklist nos. 4, 8 and 9) and Emmett L. Bennett, Jr. (Exhibition Checklist no. 5), contributed to his achievement.

Linda Schele also came from a non-linguistic background. Hers was studio art. Graduating from the University of Cincinnati with degrees in education and art, she embarked on a career as an artist and teacher of studio art. Unlike Ventris, Linda came upon her life-passion for the Maya late and serendipitously. Traveling with her husband David and a group of her students in December 1970, she first visited Mexico's ancient ruins. Their journey to the site of Palenque was a last-minute side trip. Once Linda saw this ancient city, she was instantly attracted to the didactic power of its art and the mysteries surrounding the people who had made it. From that time onward, Schele continually searched for a deeper understanding of the ancient Maya culture through an investigation of its art and writing system.

As with Ventris, Schele actively sought out collaboration, believing each individual could contribute their own unique insight into a question. One such question was the nature of Mayan hieroglyphic writing. In the late 19th century, Ernst Förstemann and, later, Joseph Goodman and John Teeple, revealed the nature of the calendrical system, yet it was not until the mid-twentieth century that many of the non-calendrical signs began to be read. One major breakthrough that led to the decipherment of Mayan hieroglyphic writing came in the early 1950's with the work of Yuri Knorosov who demonstrated that Mayan writing was syllabic, rather than alphabetic. In the 1970's, several people, including Schele, Peter Mathews, and Floyd Lounsbury, worked together to reveal a large portion of Palenque's Classic period dynastic history. Their deeper understanding of the hieroglyphic inscriptions came from looking at them as complete texts and seeking patterns within them.

Collaboration characterized Schele's career. Not only did she work extensively with other scholars—her numerous co-authored publications reflect this—but she also looked for inspiration and ideas from outside of the academic community. Most notably, by teaching her decipherment method at the Workshop on Maya Hieroglyphic Writing, UT Austin (presently known as the Maya Meetings at Texas) and at workshops among modern Maya communities, she included literally thousands of people within the decipherment process.

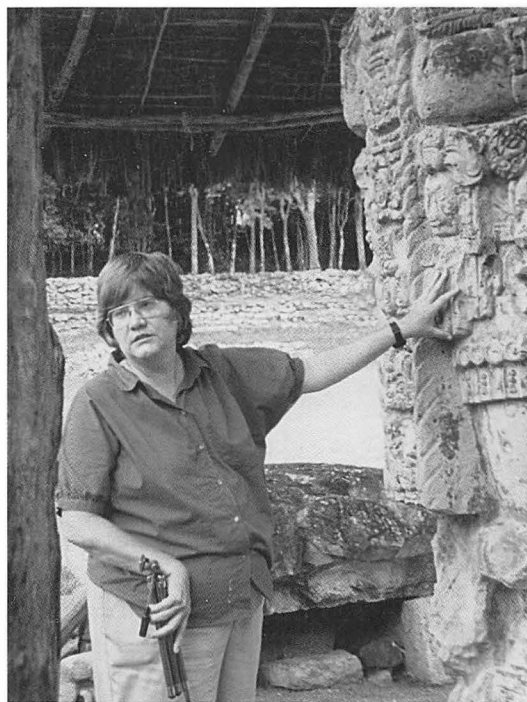


Figure 10: Linda Schele discussing Copán Stela C, 1986.



## A Brief History of CIPEM Mycenological Conferences

The first international colloquium concerning texts in Minoan and Mycenaean scripts was convened at Gif-sur-Yvette near Paris April 3-7, 1956, a mere five months before the untimely death of Michael Ventris, the decipherer of the Linear B script. The colloquium focused on some thirty papers by scholars who had been invited from Finland, Great Britain, the United States, France, Bulgaria, Greece, Italy, Sweden, Switzerland, and Spain. The attendees represented an expansion of the 'working group' of scholars whom Michael Ventris had drawn together during the period 1947-1953 when work towards decipherment of the linear scripts was most intensive.

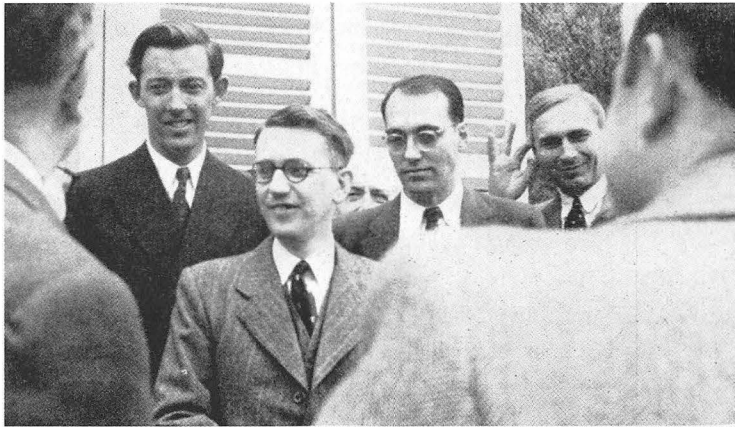


Figure 11: Photograph of Michael Ventris, John Chadwick, and Emmett L. Bennett, Jr., at Gif-Sur-Yvette, April 1956. *Archaeology* 9:4 (1956) 280.

The first colloquium made good use of having so many 'Mycénologues' assembled in one place. In committee discussions, reports, and resolutions, they addressed critical areas for continuing research in the field we now call Mycenology or Aegean scripts and prehistory. Their frank discussions and collective good will set the tone and spirit for all subsequent meetings—and for general work in this field. The five official resolutions of the colloquium dealt with the need to publish the known Linear B and Linear A material in definitive or preliminary form; to deposit photographic documentation of all the inscribed material in as many national centers of study as possible; to establish conventions for the presentation of texts; and to involve scholars in cooperative publication of the analytical bibliography of work in the field, *Studies in Mycenaean Inscriptions and Dialect*, begun by Michael Ventris at the University of London. The plan was to circulate bibliographical updates every six months through fascicles of the main journal of Aegean scripts and linguistics, *Minos* in Salamanca, Spain, and then to publish a cumulative bibliography every two years or so.

In order to facilitate work on these goals and to organize the next international colloquium, *une commission permanente* was established composed of Bennett (USA), Lejeune (France), Meriggi (Italy), Ruipérez (Spain), and Ventris (Great Britain). This committee functioned until the UNESCO-affiliated *Comité International Permanent des Études Mycéniennes* or CIPEM was formed between the 4th (1966) and 5th colloquia (1970).

CIPEM continues to fulfill its founding mandate as a governing body that gives direction to research and sees to the organization of the international Mycenological colloquia that have settled into a rhythm of meeting every five years. Reports and committees at these conferences review new discoveries of texts; the progress of publication of texts, grammars, lexica, and other research tools; the current state of understanding of the syllabaries; and the need for international representation in work in this field. CIPEM also invokes when necessary *l'esprit de Gif* to help resolve amiably the kinds of disputes that from time to time arise among scholars united in the pursuit of knowledge within a highly specialized field of study.

## CIPEM Colloquia

Location	Date	Organizers
Gif-sur-Yvette, France	April 3–7, 1956	M. Lejeune
Pavia, Italy	September 1–5, 1958	P. Meriggi, M. Lejeune
Racine, Wisconsin USA	September 4–8, 1961	E.L. Bennett, Jr.
Cambridge, England	April 7–12, 1965	J. Chadwick, L.R. Palmer, O.J.L. Szemerényi
Salamanca, Spain	March 30–April 3, 1970	M.S. Ruipérez, F.R. Adrados, A.L. Eire, M.G. Teijeiro
Chaumont, Switzerland	September 7–13, 1975	E. Risch, H. Mühlestein
Nürnberg, Germany	April 6–10, 1981	A. Heubeck, G. Neumann
Ohrid, Yugoslavia (FYROM)	September 15–20, 1985	P.H. Ilievski, L. Crepajac
Athens, Greece	October 2–6, 1990	J.-P. Olivier
Salzburg, Austria	April 30–May 6, 1995	S. Deger-Jalkotzy, S. Hiller, O. Panagl
Austin, Texas USA	May 7–13, 2000	T.G. Palaima, C.W. Shelmerdine, R. Palmer, K. Pluta

### A Brief History of the Program in Aegean Scripts and Prehistory (PASP)

In 1984 a small group of Mycenologists (J.-P. Olivier, J.T. Killen, E.L. Bennett, Jr., and T.G. Palaima) began to explore the possibility of setting up an archival research center devoted to the study of all aspects of the use of writing systems of the Bronze Age Aegean. They defined the following *desiderata* for such a center:

- a. It would house a complete set of ca. 10,000 1:1 scale photographs of inscriptions in the three main branches of Aegean prehistoric writing: (1) Minoan Hieroglyphic and Linear A; (2) Mycenaean Greek Linear B; (3) Cypro-Minoan and its successor Cypriote Syllabic.
- b. It would collect research materials (microfilms of excavation notebooks; offprints and standard reference works; etc.) to facilitate work with the inscriptions.
- c. It would construct computerized databases that would integrate all the information pertinent to the study of the inscriptions: archaeological, palaeographical, linguistic, and textual.
- d. It would encourage the preservation of the papers of the first generation of Mycenaean scholars by acquiring such documents or by keeping track of papers safely donated to other research institutes or libraries.
- e. It would ideally be located in a strong archaeology and/or Classics program with a good and accessible library in Greek archaeology, linguistics, and prehistory.

These aims were unanimously endorsed by the *Comité International Permanent des Études Mycéniennes* (CIPEM), a UNESCO committee, at the 8th International Mycenological Colloquium in Ohrid, Yugoslavia (now FYROM) in September 1985. The resolution of CIPEM encouraged all Mycenaean scholars in possession of partial collections of any materials of the

above kinds to cooperate in efforts to organize the center. By fortunate coincidence Thomas G. Palaima at the same time received a MacArthur Fellowship (1985-90) and began to create the Program in Aegean Scripts and Prehistory (PASP). He later discovered that in the late 1940's Alice Elizabeth Kober and John Franklin Daniel had succeeded briefly in setting up a center of similar design at the University of Pennsylvania. This center disintegrated with the deaths of these two brilliant young scholars soon thereafter. PASP now houses the scholarly papers of Professor Kober. Dr. Nicolle Hirschfeld of PASP has built upon the work of Daniel in her comprehensive studies of Cypro-Minoan writing and pot-marking systems.

PASP is a graduate research program located in a small complex of offices (Waggener Hall 14A) in the Department of Classics at University of Texas at Austin, the largest Classics program in the United States. PASP contains a substantial archives of high-quality 1:1-scale photographs of Aegean and Cypriote inscriptions, as prescribed by CIPEM. PASP has its own collection of reference works; an extensive offprint collection going back to the turn of the century; microfilms of the excavation notebooks for key sites; selected original papers of scholars like Alice Elizabeth Kober, Emmett L. Bennett, Jr., and Michael Ventris; and the proceedings of the Beattie seminars. PASP has photocopies of such materials as the correspondence of Arne Furumark; the memoirs of Carl Blegen; the correspondence of Sir John L. Myres with Kober and Ventris; and materials from Oliver Cox, Prudence Smith, and Andrew Robinson connected with the life of Ventris.

PASP has cooperative book exchanges with the following institutes and journals: *Ziva Antika* in Ohrid, FYROM; the Institute of Classical Studies, University of London; the Istituto per gli Studi Micenei ed Egeo-Anatolici in Rome, Italy; and the Department of Antiquities, Cyprus.

In its fourteen years of existence, PASP has organized several major conferences on such topics as ancient administration (1989), economy and trade (1991), and kingship and the organization of power (1993). It will host the 11th International Mycenological Colloquium May 7-13, 2000. Its students have published important articles on ancient archives and administration, linguistic terminology, theoretical aspects of writing systems, Mycenaean economy and trade, and Cypro-Minoan and Cypriote historical inscriptions. Many short- and long-term visitors have worked at PASP on research projects and have taken part in seminars and classes.

Since 1993, PASP has cooperated with the Université de Liège, Belgium in the publication of the monograph series *Aegaeum*. The director of PASP is co-editor of the journal of Aegean linguistics *Minos*, published at the Universidad de Salamanca, Spain. PASP, under the editorial direction first of Elizabeth Sikkenga and now of Peter van Alfen, has revived the annual analytical bibliography of work in Mycenaean studies entitled *Studies in Mycenaean Inscriptions and Dialect (SMID)*. The original *SMID*, begun by Michael Ventris in 1953, ran until 1978. PASP has now published *SMID* for 1979-83 and 1994-95. The volume for 1996-97 is underway. PASP has received a UT technical computer support grant to put *SMID* and other databases on-line.

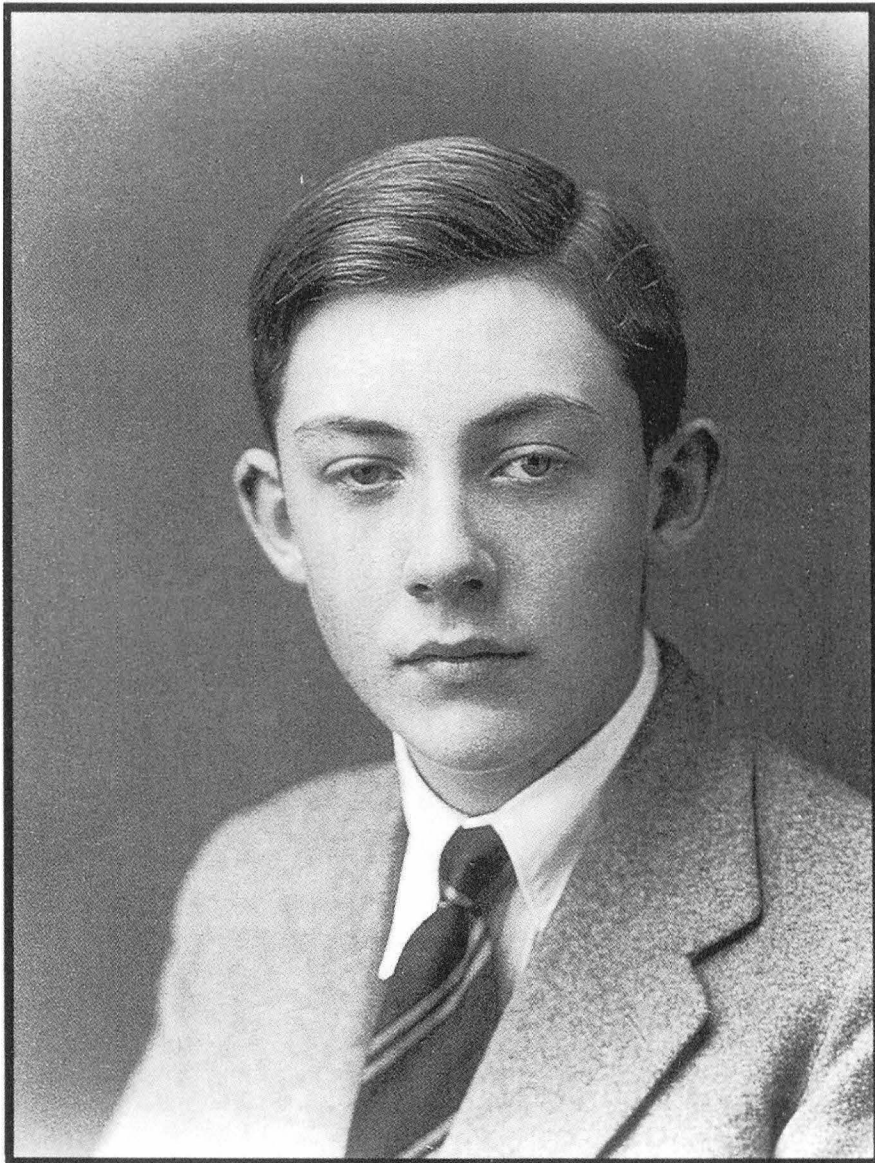
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*Figure 12:* Photograph of Michael Ventris as a schoolboy. Photo by R. & H. Chapman, Buckingham. From Andrew Robinson, *The Story of Writing*, Thames and Hudson: London 1995. Courtesy of Andrew Robinson.

## MICHAEL VENTRIS

*The tragic and untimely death of Mr. Michael Ventris has naturally drawn attention to his dramatic deciphering of Minoan script. It was, however, in the sphere of modern architecture that an even more brilliant career almost certainly lay before him. Indeed it was the very methods, techniques, and orderly thinking that he had developed as an architectural student, as a member of the Ministry of Education's Schools Group, and as a private architect that had led to his archaeological success—for him a side line . . . He seems deliberately to have limited his activities—it was almost a fault—so that he could within those limits produce something uniquely faultless.*

—Mr. R. Furneaux Jordan in the *London Times*, September 10, 1956: 14b

In such an unfortunately brief life as that of Michael Ventris (July 12, 1922–September 6, 1956), the early years assume a greater significance. His formative years gave him remarkable language skills and habits of self-absorbed concentration and personal inventiveness. But his independence of mind was combined with a strong predilection for working closely with others. All these qualities were crucial in his eventual decipherment of the Linear B script. Oliver Cox, Ventris's close friend and fellow architectural student and later partner and collaborator, confirms that Ventris's training as an architect instilled in him methods of solving complex problems that proved invaluable in his work on the Cretan scripts.

Michael George Francis Ventris was the only child of Edward Francis Vereker Ventris and Anna Dorothea Janasz (Janaszówna). His father was a career soldier, reaching the rank of colonel and serving for long periods in India. His mother came from a wealthy Polish background. Michael attended an English boarding school at the age of six. Because his father suffered from tuberculosis and he himself from bronchial asthma, he spent much of his first eight years in Switzerland where his school lessons were conducted entirely in German or French. In these years he taught himself Polish and otherwise developed an astonishing facility with the modern languages of Europe. Already interested in scripts as well, he founded a school club called 'La Kaboule.' At the age of eight Michael purchased the copy of *Die Hieroglyphen* by Dr. Adolf Erman that now still attests to his precocious interest in scripts.

From 1931 to 1935, with interruptions for two stays abroad again for health reasons, Michael attended Bickley Hall School. During this time Michael's mother and father were divorced. He lived with his mother in a fashionable flat at High Point in London, where she maintained close friendships with distinguished architects, sculptors, painters, and designers, including Walter Gropius, Marcel Breuer, and Naum Gabo. In this milieu Michael gained firsthand impressions of what it meant to be engaged in the highest caliber of creative work. Meanwhile at Bickley Hall School he made great progress in Latin and Greek. Beginning in 1935, he continued his studies of classical languages at Stowe School. Michael's Classics master at Stowe, Patrick Hunter, has described him as "not outstanding in a narrow academic sense, but. . . far from unproductive. He had a perceptive and clear intelligence, and (when interested) a capacity for taking infinite trouble." One of his fellow students remarked of Michael: "I do remember that even at the age of fourteen or so he was very interested in philology. The rest of us did not understand what it meant, but he already spent a lot of his leisure hours musing over the origins of languages—and just occasionally telling us what he was doing." Certainly the most fateful event of these years took place in 1936 during a trip organized by Patrick Hunter to Burlington House where an exhibition was being held celebrating fifty years of archaeological discoveries made by excavations of the British School at Athens. There the boys met Sir Arthur Evans who described for them his finds of Minoan writing. Patrick Hunter recalls Michael piping up from the group with a question, "Did you say they've never been deciphered, Sir?"

In 1939, because of hardships caused by the German invasion of Poland and confiscation of the property of his mother's family, Michael left Stowe School. His mother Dorothea, upon the death of her own father, committed suicide in 1940 at the age of 51. Michael was "adopted" by close family friends, the Russian sculptor Naum Gabo and his American wife. They became, according to Michael's wife Lois, "the nearest thing to a family Michael ever had." He began his professional studies at the Architectural Association School in 1940. In this choice of schools, Michael was following advice his mother Dorothea had solicited from Marcel Breuer in 1939.

During what must have been a disturbing period for a solitary young man in his late teens, Michael concentrated his energies on writing his first serious scholarly article, published in *American Journal of Archaeology* in 1940. He sent a draft of this piece to the aged Sir Arthur Evans, then nearly ninety. When Sir John Myres came upon it in sorting through Evans's papers after his death, he contacted Ventris, who by then had married a fellow architecture student, Lois Knox-Niven. In a letter to Myres, Ventris expressed reservations about having proposed his ideas so incautiously in print, but he clung fast, as he would until shortly before his own correct decipherment, to his notion that Etruscan-related Pelasgian was written in the Linear A and B tablets.

By this point Ventris was serving as a bomber navigator in the RAF, which he joined in August 1942. He trained for six weeks in Winnipeg, Canada, where, according to a local high-society lady who entertained "Michael and the boys" during musical weekends at her house, he spent the first week learning the material for the whole course and the next five improving his Russian. From November 1944 to April 1945 Ventris flew many missions over Germany. Because of his command of German he was assigned briefly to service in post-war Germany. Ventris never served in encoding or decoding. His wife Lois later explained how the widespread belief that he



Figure 13: Photograph of Michael Ventris working on sign forms on his glass-topped desk, 1953. Photograph by Tom Blau, Camera Press, London. From Andrew Robinson, *The Story of Writing*, Thames and Hudson: London 1995. Courtesy of Andrew Robinson.



had been involved in cryptanalysis took hold. Those who had taken part in the British intelligence service during the war were sworn to secrecy for fifty years afterwards. When asked whether he had performed wartime service in decoding, Michael truthfully denied being part of it. People interpreted his denial as his obeying his oath of secrecy.

In 1946, Michael Ventris returned to Lois and their two young children and to study at the Architectural Association School. While in Germany he had met one of his fellow architectural students Graeme Shankland, who had also gone to Stowe School. Shankland, Oliver Cox, and Michael and Lois Ventris formed a tight-knit group. They worked together on projects and shared common ideas about architecture and social philosophy. They became active contributors to the student association's journal *Plan* and therein outlined clearly their own views of the theory of 'group working in architecture.' In summer of 1947, Oliver Cox, Graeme Shankland, and Michael Ventris went off to work in Sweden. During these ten weeks, Michael and his partners put into practice the techniques of 'group working.' He also kept up intermittent correspondence with Sir John L. Myres about ongoing work on Linear A and Linear B. In 1948 he became interested once again more intensively in matters of script, and especially in the editing and writing of *Scripta Minoa* II, in which Sir John and the American professor Alice Elizabeth Kober were principally engaged. From 1948 until his decipherment in June 1952, he carried on correspondence with scholars worldwide. Most of them had never been in contact with one another. Ventris drew them together into something like a 'working group' for the decipherment of the Minoan linear scripts. He pressed them for information, shared freely of his own ideas, and circulated multiple copies of work notes containing his own thoughts and those of others.

Following the announcement of his decipherment, Ventris collaborated with John Chadwick of Cambridge University, presenting the first results of the decipherment in a superb joint article in *Journal of Hellenic Studies* for 1953. They then wrote what is still regarded as 'the bible of Linear B texts' *Documents in Mycenaean Greek*, published in 1956. In 1954, the University of Uppsala in Sweden conferred an honorary doctorate upon Michael Ventris, and in 1956 the *Architects' Journal* research board awarded him a fellowship. He died in an automobile accident in the early morning hours of September 6, 1956.

**Note:** In writing this brief biographical sketch and the account of the decipherment of Linear B that here follows, I have made use of the sources cited in the bibliography, and the personal letters and scholarly papers of Michael Ventris, Alice Elizabeth Kober, Emmett L. Bennett, Jr., Sir John L. Myres, and Arne Furumark archived in the Program in Aegean Scripts and Prehistory at UT Austin, at the Institute of Classical Studies, University of London, and the Ashmolean Museum, Oxford. I have had extensive discussions with Oliver Cox, Ventris's close friend and architectural partner. We are currently working on a joint article that will trace the interplay between Ventris's intellectual development as a student of scripts and as an architect from 1939 to 1952. Andrew Robinson kindly provided a tape of an interview with Patrick Hunter in 1990 and answered several e-mail queries about British ways of thinking and speaking. While I was in Winnipeg, Canada in March 1997, Professor Michael Cosmopoulos kindly took me to what remains of the RAF training facility where Michael Ventris spent six weeks in the early 1940's. He also arranged for me a telephone conversation with the then aged and terminally ill Mrs. Scott, the 'high-society' lady cited above, who reminisced about entertaining Michael and his fellow RAF students. In this conversation the late Mrs. Scott offered a most impressive proof of the force of Ventris's personality. She and her husband named their only son Michael as the result of this six-week friendship with Michael Ventris. She told me that they had lost contact with Michael after the war and had written him only once, when news of his decipherment reached them in Canada.

Thomas G. Palaima  
February 8, 2000

## The Decipherment of Linear B: ‘Group Working’ Spearheaded by Michael Ventris

“Mr [sic] Ventris would have no trouble getting a job as scribe for King Minos.”

—Alice Elizabeth Kober, letter to Sir John Myres, July 8, 1948

On March 23, 1900, after six years “encountering obstacles and delays of every kind,” Sir Arthur Evans began scientific excavation on a gentle hill site, now known as Knossos, in north central Crete. He had been drawn to the area by his own investigations into what appeared to be the characters of some type of script incised into stone seals dating from what was then known as the ‘Mycenaean’ Bronze Age, roughly the second millennium B.C.E. Many of the seals that Evans collected were said to have come from the Knossos area. He also had seen in 1896 what he called “a graffito fragment” of a clay tablet from the site, which had been subject to brief local excavations in 1878. Evans published several studies of the writing on these seals in the years 1895–1898.

On the eighth day of excavation, the British team came upon “part of an elongated clay tablet with a chisel-like end, engraved with what appeared to be signs and numbers.” Other tablet discoveries quickly followed, so that in the report of the first season of excavation Evans could illustrate via a photograph (Exhibition Checklist no. 1) fragments from thirteen tablets of various shapes, sizes, and formats. These were the first tablets in the Linear B writing system published for the general scholarly world.

In the next two decades, Evans at Knossos and excavators at other Cretan sites would go on to uncover many more inscriptions. By 1909, Evans had enough material to produce his classic volume on the scripts of what was now called ‘Minoan’ Crete: *Scripta Minoa* I (Exhibition Checklist no. 2). Therein he identified three formal writing systems. He named them according to his analysis of their manner of execution, their appearance, and their chronological sequence: Cretan Hieroglyphic writing (carved on seals and written on some clay documents) followed by the Minoan linear scripts of classes A and B. In puzzling over the origins and affiliations of Cretan writing, Evans compared selected signs in the three Minoan scripts to those of roughly contemporary and later scripts used in Cyprus, the Levant, and Egypt.

*Scripta Minoa* I, as its title suggests, was intended to be the first stage in the presentation of the known data. In it Evans concentrated on the Cretan Hieroglyphic and Linear A scripts. The Linear B material was to be next, but World War I intervened. After the war Evans worked on publishing the results of his extensive excavation of the ‘palatial complex’ at Knossos. Four masterful volumes entitled *Palace of Minos* appeared between 1921 and 1935. Only in the last of these volumes did Evans finally present a relatively small number of Linear B tablets with selected drawings and photographs. Privately, he continued working on a manuscript devoted to Linear B inscriptions, entitled *Scripta Minoa* II, but it remained unfinished at his death in 1941.

In March 1939, Carl W. Blegen of the University of Cincinnati began excavation in Messenia in southwestern Greece at what he hoped would prove to be a mainland ‘palatial complex.’ Just as at Knossos, on one of the first days of work, the team of excavators found tablets. By great good luck, they had laid out their very first trench over the central Archives Complex of what Blegen would call the Palace of Nestor. Some 636 tablets in all were excavated and photographed during that first season. Photographs of a mere seven tablets were published in the preliminary excavation report and the *Illustrated London News*. These created a sensation because they convinced some, and reinforced Blegen’s own strongly argued position, that the mainland Mycenaean Greeks were much more independent than Evans’s theories of pan-Minoan cultural hegemony suggested. Again, however, publication of the material was greatly delayed, in this case by the outbreak of World War II and the widespread disruption of normal life that continued well after the cessation of hostilities.

### Building the Platform

In the decipherment of Linear B the most crucial preliminary work was done from the late 1930's until just before Ventris's formal decipherment in June of 1952. Three figures, besides Ventris himself, loom large in this work.

Sir John L. Myres, an eminent Greek historian at Oxford, had taken part in Evans's excavations at Knossos and later had written a superlative assessment of the origins of Greek culture, *Who Were the Greeks?* (1930). Myres's chief interests were in history, not prehistory, yet, beginning in 1941, it fell to him to manage the intellectual inheritance of Sir Arthur Evans, and in particular to realize the publication of Sir Arthur's manuscript-in-progress, the definitive edition of the Linear B tablets from Knossos, known as *Scripta Minoa II* (Exhibition Checklist no. 19). Myres enlisted the help of Michael Ventris, Alice Elizabeth Kober, and Emmett L. Bennett, Jr., and they brought it to press in 1952. During much of this decade of work, he was writing a major book on the Greek historian Herodotus. Nonetheless Myres's correspondence with Ventris and Kober, now kept in the Ashmolean Museum, Oxford, reveals how seriously he worked on the publication of the Knossos tablets. In long exchanges, Myres explained to Ventris his own notions of which sign groups in the Linear B texts were likely to be place names and which personal names. Myres correctly deduced that the personal names must conform to the well-known Greek pattern of compound formation. But he cautiously explained that such a pattern also had parallels in Semitic. Through his editorial work on *Scripta Minoa II*, Myres provided one of the main tools by which scholars could begin to answer better his own question posed twenty years earlier: "Who were the Greeks?"

We are told by one of her professors that Alice Elizabeth Kober declared at her graduation from Hunter College in 1928 that she would decipher the Minoan linear scripts, which she had learned about in an undergraduate course entitled "Ancient Greek Life." Nevertheless she wrote her Ph.D. dissertation at Columbia University on the mainstream topic of "The Use of Color Terms in the Greek Poets" (Exhibition Checklist no. 3). Throughout her career as a professor at Brooklyn College she taught standard courses in Greek and Latin authors and on general subjects in classical culture. She never taught a single course in linguistics or epigraphy or the Aegean Bronze Age. The excitement engendered by the publication of *Palace of Minos* volume IV in 1935 and the discovery of additional Linear B tablets at Pylos in 1939 seem to have induced Kober to focus her scholarly interests seriously upon the undeciphered scripts of the Aegean. She set herself to acquiring the linguistic tools necessary to work on decipherment. In her non-teaching time between 1940 and 1945, she learned many ancient and 'Old World' languages and scripts—from Sanskrit, Hittite, and Akkadian to Chinese, Basque, and Semitic. She then used an appreciation of scientific and mathematical logic and method, acquired in her undergraduate days, to lay out a program of systematic study of the known texts designed to ferret out patterns of morphology and syntax.

Through Kober's work, most serious scholars eventually learned to shy away from arbitrary comparisons between characters in the Aegean linear scripts and those of contemporary or later Cypriote and Near Eastern writing systems. Kober also disciplined herself to complete every possible manner of preliminary analysis before speculating on the nature of the language(s) represented by linear writing. She was the first to detect inflectional patterns in Linear B. These occurred in threes and so became known, in humorous tribute to the maiden scholar who found them, as "Kober's triplets" (Exhibition Checklist no. 4). Kober was also the prime mover in editing the Linear B tablets from Knossos for *Scripta Minoa II*. Although frustrated by the inaccessibility of the original tablets in the post-war Herakleion Museum, the poor quality of many of Evans's photographs, and Sir John Myres's own understandable desire to preserve much of the outdated contents of the manuscript he had inherited from Evans, Kober persevered. Her

awe-inspiring cigarette-carton files contain minuscule, but precise drawings of all the available texts, analyses of all sign occurrences by word-position, and comparative data from other contemporary scripts (Exhibition Checklist nos. 8 and 9). She was the first to stress the need to improve upon the existing competing signaries for the script, so that one could be sure which signs were which, before proposing values. She also was the first to propose that the undeciphered tablets be classified according to their ideographic characters and other elements of textual content and layout. Her excellent system has now been replaced by the independently devised system of Emmett L. Bennett, Jr. Just before her death she was working with Sir John Myres on a substantial typescript of an updated corpus of Linear A and Cretan Hieroglyphic inscriptions. Known as *Scripta Minoa* III (Exhibition Checklist no. 18), it was never published.

In 1939 Carl W. Blegen entrusted to Emmett L. Bennett, Jr., a first-year graduate student at the University of Cincinnati, the work of publishing the Linear B tablets uncovered at Pylos. Bennett completed his M.A. in 1940 on a historical topic, "The First Peloponnesian War." In late December 1941, weeks after the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor, Kober and Bennett met for the first time at the annual joint meetings of the Archaeological Institute of America and the American Philological Association, where they presented papers in the same session on problems relating to the Linear B script. They then went off and worked independently of one another until the late 1940's. During WW II, Bennett was called to work on the early stages of decoding Japanese documents. His later work on the Pylos material in many ways mirrored Kober's independent work on the Knossos material. In his Ph.D. dissertation (1947) Bennett completed the first scientific palaeographical analysis of a body of Linear B documents, with the aim of establishing the core signary of the script and understanding the workings of the scribal system. Ventris himself once remarked that Bennett's analysis and interpretation of the Minoan fractional system, published in 1950, had given him the spirit to continue his own work because it demonstrated what could be achieved by sound method and rigorous research. Bennett's publication of the Pylos material (Exhibition Checklist no. 5) in normalized transcription appeared in 1951. In late March–April 1952 Ventris obtained from Myres full proofs of *Scripta Minoa* II and from Bennett a complete index of Knossos and Pylos sign-groups. Together these gave Ventris the mass of evidence that he needed to complete his own work. Michael Ventris wrote personal letters to two people in mid-June 1952, privately announcing his tentative decipherment of Linear B: Sir John L. Myres and Emmett L. Bennett, Jr. To Bennett he wrote (Exhibition Checklist no. 11): "I am sorry to inflict another letter on you so soon after my last one, but I have, I think, great news for you. You must judge for yourself, but I think I've deciphered Linear B, & that Knossos & Pylos are both in Greek."

### The Ventris Decipherment

The circumstances of Ventris's early life gave him special talents. We can document his serious interests in ancient script from the time he was eight years old. His schooling in Switzerland and England gave him a foundation in Latin and Greek most Ph.D. candidates in Classics these days would envy. His early years abroad gave him a fluency in French, German, and Swiss German and a facility with languages that enabled him to learn Polish on his own as a child, Russian while stationed as an RAF trainee in Winnipeg, Canada, and Swedish while preparing to work in Sweden in 1947.

In 1939 and 1940 when Ventris was still a teenager, he wrote and submitted a scholarly article, first to the *Journal of Hellenic Studies* which turned it down, and then, with considerable revision, to the *American Journal of Archaeology* which published it. The naivete of the article is clear in its title: "Introducing the Minoan Language." Ventris believed he could demonstrate that the language which underlay the Linear B script was related to Etruscan and what ancient writers called the pre-Greek Pelasgian language family. While obviously wide of the mark he would later



hit, the article displayed an impressive erudition in ancient languages for someone his age, and it showed that he had gleaned from the inscribed material then published the salient data regarding sign forms and even the possible formal parallels between linear scripts A and B and Cypriote Syllabic writing. The article contained some statistical breakdowns of which signs appeared most frequently in particular word-positions, and Ventris hypothesized from text context about what kind of word a sign-group was likely to be. Thus he proposed that a particular list of sign-groups be interpreted as 'Etruscan' name-radicals with compounding suffixes. He also isolated by position the words that were likely to represent 'boy,' 'girl,' and 'total.' He proposed an 'Etruscan' solution for the last. He maintained that by playing these kinds of hunches, one could have Minoan throw light on Etruscan and Etruscan on Minoan, a procedure that "would necessarily be slow, and it will require the combined labors of many researchers before a final and satisfactory position is reached." He also expressed a wish that indicated his own recognition of the need for scholars to work together in attacking the problems posed by Minoan-Mycenaean scripts: "Beyond this point all that is required is hard work, and the collaboration of all workers in this field."

In many ways Ventris's 1940 article represented little improvement over some of the earlier and more amateurish attempts to decipher the Minoan linear scripts. There was still no systematic analysis of all the known data, presumed parallels between Linear B signs and those of known scripts like the historical Cypriote Syllabic were used piecemeal to suggest some values for Linear B, and many bald assumptions were made about the underlying text messages. In this way Ventris could propose Etruscan readings for many sign groups, all of which his later correct decipherment would disprove. In fact the 1940 article underwent a kind of *damnatio memoriae*. Neither Alice Kober's magisterial "The Minoan Scripts: Fact and Theory," in *American Journal of Archaeology* for 1948, nor Sterling Dow's survey of scholarship on Minoan scripts in the same journal for 1954 makes reference to Ventris's article. Its main value now is to mark the starting point from which Ventris himself would run the race to decipherment.

Ventris's architectural training gave him a model for working collectively and also reinforced his own tendencies towards exactitude and careful planning. Oliver Cox, his fellow student, architectural partner, and friend during the period 1946-56, has pointed out that working with grids and thinking problems through in triads also were part of the 'group working' principles as practiced by Ventris, Shankland, and Cox. 'Group working' was devised to solve the complex problems posed by modern architecture and social planning. But it also disposed Ventris to seek help from others, to communicate results freely and effectively among as many cooperating experts as possible (cf. his work notes), and to make progress through a process of group brainstorming, evaluation, reappraisal, and further brainstorming.

From 1948 through 1952, these methods were put into practice by Ventris as he corresponded with leading experts worldwide. Few had been talking to one another until Ventris brought them together through his own circular mailings and by acting as a conduit for information. From 1948 through her death on May 16, 1950, Ventris maintained a correspondence with Alice Elizabeth Kober and intermittently assisted her and Sir John L. Myres in their efforts to produce a useful scholarly corpus of the Linear B tablets excavated by Evans at Knossos. Ventris was obviously in awe of Kober's work and at one point in their correspondence ceded Linear B to her, while he concentrated for a while on Linear A. From her and from Emmett L. Bennett, Jr., Ventris learned how essential it was to establish a correct signary, to work with precise normalized transcriptions, and to analyze sign frequencies and the statistics for sign positioning within words. Once he learned such techniques, his own talents and his uncompromising standards for precision and systematization enabled him to excel. But he never went so far as Kober, or Bennett, in eschewing all hypothesizing about the languages that lay behind the linear scripts. Kober acquired a knowledge of many ancient scripts and languages to be in a position to test them once she had

fully analyzed all the texts available. Bennett followed her in a healthy respect for how conscious or unconscious assumptions about the underlying language might skew analysis of the data. But Ventris could and did combine his ongoing analysis with speculation. Notes preserved in the Institute of Classical Studies, University of London, show the results of Ventris's wide-ranging reading in the records of well-documented ancient Near Eastern cultures. While Kober compiled her own mental and written database of languages, Ventris learned from studies of Near Eastern texts what clay tablet records were likely to contain in the way of references to personnel, materials, institutions, and even technical vocabulary.

Most revealing about methods is the letter full of questions that Ventris sent in December 1949 to Bennett and twenty other scholars. Ventris circulated the answers he received in what he called the "Mid-Century Report." Most of the questions posed by Ventris in this questionnaire asked the recipients to speculate about the structure and workings of the script and the underlying language. This went well beyond anything that Kober and Bennett were willing to do, even with their more extensive knowledge of the texts. Note on Bennett's copy of the letter (Exhibition Checklist no. 10), his terse marginal handwritten comments: "no," "not," "speculative," and so forth. Kober was blunt in her reply of February 20, 1950: "I have no intention of answering the questionnaire. In my opinion it represents a step in the wrong direction and is a complete waste of time."

In the next two years, Ventris would analyze with exacting care traces of inflectional patterns and positional sign frequency of the sort Kober had pinpointed in the mid-1940's. He placed signs provisionally on his "grid" which represented different vowels horizontally along the x-axis and consonants vertically along the y-axis. By checking and rechecking the positions and sending the results in work notes to some thirty scholars at a time, he moved ever closer to a stage when test values might have an appropriate 'domino effect,' if the relationships among signs on the grid were accurate. This method certainly involved trial-and-error, so the positions of signs in the 'un-valued' grid changed as new information was assimilated. Contrast the tentative positions of signs in his pencil-written grid sent to Bennett on January 24, 1952 (Exhibition Checklist no. 14) with those in the grid circulated as figure 11 of Work Note 17, dated February 20, 1952 (Exhibition Checklist no. 20). This system of working would later open the Ventris decipherment to criticism by skeptical scholars, such as A.J. Beattie, who ran an anti-decipherment seminar at University of Edinburgh. The skeptics, who knew little about syllabic-logographic scripts, believed that, by placing signs on the grid by internal analysis of their alternations relative to one another in the tablets and then later proposing test values, Ventris had undercut the scientific purity of the decipherment. Their perverse argument was that Ventris should have been like Kober and that his final values in June 1952 were conjured up to give the illusion of proof to a decipherment that had been concocted well before it was announced. That Ventris for so long believed that the underlying language would be Etruscan or Pelasgian further confused the issue, because he had along the way proposed certain values for signs based on these languages.

Ventris long had shared with Sir John L. Myres a belief that groups of prominent Cretan place names and personal names would provide the real clues for test values. And he plucked some test values for signs from values for comparable signs in the classical Cypriote syllabary. In the end Ventris tested values on likely place names in the Knossos tablets and was able to read Kober's triplets relating to place names like Knossos (*ko-no-so*) and Tylißos (*tu-ri-so*). He announced the results personally to Emmett L. Bennett, Jr. in a letter of June 18, 1952. The tablet now known as Knossos Ce 59 is the first text an American ever read in Linear B (Exhibition Checklist no. 16). Ventris's grid (Exhibition Checklist no. 12), as it was then understood, had a few inaccuracies mainly because he was not fully familiar with the phonology of the Greek language at the time of the tablets, over 500 years earlier than Homer.

## Impact on the Field

Shortly following the announcement of his decipherment on July 1, 1952, Michael Ventris began a fruitful collaboration with John Chadwick, a lexicographer at Cambridge University. Together they presented the evidence that Linear B represented Greek and what kind of Greek it was. Chadwick's deeper and more technical understanding of the history of the Greek language and the Greek lexicon complemented Ventris's skills at decipherment and his considerable knowledge of how contemporary societies recorded information on clay tablets. Their joint interpretive volume, *Documents in Mycenaean Greek*, published in 1956, systematically laid out the essentials about script and language and about the contents of three hundred representative texts presented according to subject categories. Ventris also continued to adhere to 'group working' strategies, and strove to make sure that scholars in this new field of study marshaled their resources and moved forward in a collective endeavor. In 1953, he started the analytical bibliography *Studies in Mycenaean Inscriptions and Dialect* in order to make quickly available the results of work in the many different sub-specialties related to the tablets: linguistics, archaeology, art history, Homeric and Near Eastern studies, and the study of writing. He also devised with Chadwick and Bennett standard principles for the phonetic transcription of texts. Together they put these into practice in transliterating the Linear B tablets from Knossos (Exhibition Checklist no. 21). *Documents in Mycenaean Greek*, *Studies in Mycenaean Inscriptions and Dialect*, and *KT II* were three major steps forward in the post-decipherment program of work which, as the Swedish scholar Arne Furumark commented, "contain[ed] work for many people during many years."

Perhaps the most remarkable impact Michael Ventris has had upon the field he created has been *l'esprit de Gif*, the spirit of mutual cooperation and team effort that has prevailed, with rare exceptions, among Mycenologists ever since they first convened outside Paris in 1956. From 1948 through his death months after the meeting at Gif-sur-Yvette, the personality and 'group working' habits of Michael Ventris defined how scholars should conduct themselves towards one another. On November 8, 1956, Furumark, having learned about Ventris's tragic accident, wrote a letter of condolence to Lois Ventris. It conveys some of the profound effect that Michael Ventris had upon his peers in Mycenaeanology:

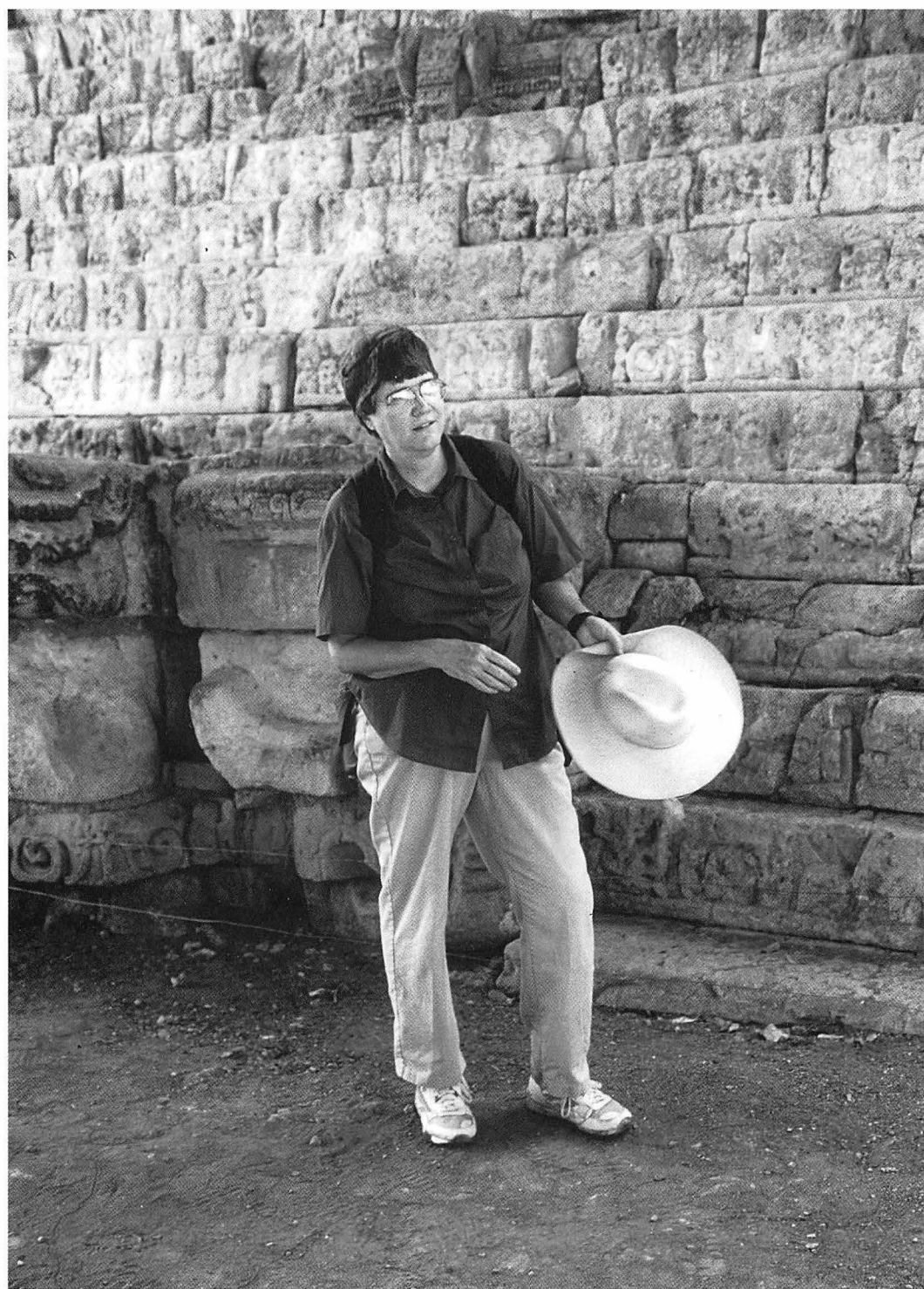
... [W]hat has happened means a very great and deeply felt loss to me personally. I have lost in him not only an extremely charming and young friend but also a man who for the first time in my experience proved to me that the word 'genius' was a reality and not only an empty phrase.

separate spelling, & that-L, -N, -R, -S & Diphthongal -I are not written when they close a syllable. This is one stage worse than the Cypriot syllabary, & perhaps comes from the nature of the Linear A Language.

### ΚΝΟΣΣΟΣ

(59)	Υ	Φεργαται	₪ 6	Δαφος?	Φεργαται	₪ 6
	Φ	Φεργαται	₪ 6	Τα..τος	Φεργαται	₪ 6
	Τυλισσός	Φεργαται	₪ 6	..τονια	Φεργαται	₪ 40

Exhibition Checklist no. 16: Ventris's transliteration of Knossos tablet Ce 59 from a letter to Emmett L. Bennett, Jr., June 18, 1952.



*Figure 14:* Photograph of Linda Schele at the base of the Hieroglyphic Staircase, Copán, Honduras.



## LINDA SCHELE

*A decoder of Maya glyphs must have an extraordinary mind. He or she must be an exacting linguist; be able to manage mathematics, astronomy, and anthropology, and have a working interest in natural history; and, above all, be able to think or conceive the world like a Maya. Linda exemplifies such abilities. Having been a painter as well as an art historian, she draws glyphs with both precision and elegance. She can walk up to a blackboard and write in Maya glyphs as easily as she might write in English. She is possessed of an unbelievable visual memory, and she sees Maya images through Maya eyes.*

—Gillett Griffin, *Archaeology* 44 (5) September/October 1991, 38

Coming from a background in studio art, Linda Schele (October 30, 1942–April 18, 1998) became a seminal figure in the decipherment of Mayan hieroglyphic writing and the study of ancient Mesoamerican civilizations. One of Schele's primary interests was the incorporation of a non-professional audience into the decipherment process, which previously had been the property of a limited number of academics. Her chosen vehicles for this dissemination were her numerous critical publications on ancient Maya art, culture, and writing; the ground-breaking exhibition catalogue entitled *The Blood of Kings* which was co-authored with Mary Miller; and the annual Workshop on Maya Hieroglyphic Writing at The University of Texas at Austin. Among the lasting impacts of her career were her widely influential decipherments of Mayan inscriptions and her interpretation of the ideological content of Maya works of art. In the later years of her academic and personal pursuits, Schele's interests expanded to include the ethnography and culture of the contemporary Maya of Belize, Guatemala, Honduras, and Mexico.

A graduate of the University of Cincinnati with degrees in education and art, Linda Schele came to the study of the Maya by chance after an early career as an artist and as a teacher of studio art at the University of South Alabama. In 1970 she and her husband David traveled to Mexico with a group of her students. Almost by accident they visited the ruins of the ancient Maya city of Palenque. For Linda the ruins were a revelation—among them she found a world, unlike her own, where art was central to the way the culture defined itself and expressed its distinct cosmological vision. Recalling her first visit to the site, Schele stated: "When I walked among the tumbled rocks and broken plaster of Palenque's wonderland, I knew I had found the dream made real. I had to understand how, why, when, and who had made these things" (Schele and Freidel 1990, 14). Linda devoted the rest of her life to seeking the answers to these questions through an extensive study of the culture and writing system of the ancient Maya.

As Schele repeatedly emphasized, her approach to decipherment was based on collaboration and was founded upon the previous work of such well-known scholars as Heinrich Berlin, David Kelley, Yuri Knorosov, George Kubler, Floyd Lounsbury, and Tatiana Proskouriakoff. The work of these pioneering scholars of Mayan writing revealed three salient epigraphic facts: the hieroglyphs reflect Mayan language; they were written primarily syllabically; and the inscriptions often dealt with the reigns of kings and other historical events. Schele's first great moment in decipherment occurred in 1973 at the *Primera Mesa Redonda de Palenque*, a working conference organized by the artist and scholar Merle Greene Robertson. At this meeting Schele and Peter Mathews focused their attention upon identifying the name glyphs and dates associated with the rulers of Palenque. In just three hours, they reconstructed a large portion of the site's Classic period dynastic history. This rapid decipherment took the world of Maya scholarship by storm!

After the *Primera Mesa Redonda de Palenque*, much of the groundwork for future hieroglyphic decipherment was laid at a series of mini-conferences held at Dumbarton Oaks between 1973 and 1979. These mini-conferences, organized by that research center's director, Elizabeth Benson, reunited several scholars from the first *Mesa Redonda*. Summarizing the approach taken

at the Dumbarton Oaks meetings, Schele stated: "... our team worked out the syntactical and discourse structure of the hieroglyphic writing, and we used distributional and structural studies of iconography and archaeological context as parallel fields of data to tease meaning out of the archaeological record" (1996, 413).

At these early meetings, Schele and her colleagues made huge strides towards the decipherment of Mayan hieroglyphic writing. This is reflected in the fact that "[p]rior to the first Mesa Redonda, the meanings of roughly 30 percent of the glyphs at Palenque could be guessed at, mostly glyphs for dates. Within a decade more than 95 percent of them could be *read*" (Griffin 1991, 38).

The widely-heralded decipherments originating from the Dumbarton Oaks mini-conferences led Nancy Troike in 1977 to organize, under Linda Schele's direction, the Workshop on Maya Hieroglyphic Writing at The University of Texas at Austin. Over the years that Linda conducted these meetings she instructed literally thousands of individuals in her structural approach to the decipherment of hieroglyphic texts. Her personal charisma and exuberant teaching method provided large audiences with the fundamental tools that allowed them to participate in and contribute to the on-going process of decipherment. These meetings, re-named the Maya Meetings at Texas and currently organized by Peter Keeler, have become a major source for many of the significant epigraphic and iconographic discoveries made about ancient Mesoamerican civilization.

In 1981, Schele joined the Department of Art and Art History at The University of Texas at Austin. In 1988, she was named the John D. Murchison Regents Professor of Art at the university. Through her teaching and the large number of students whose dissertations she directed, Schele's influence has permeated ancient Mesoamerican studies, ensuring the permanence of her legacy.

The great advances made in the decipherment led Schele to consider the function of Mayan hieroglyphic writing within the larger context of Maya artistic production. In 1986, in conjunction with Mary Miller, Schele organized a groundbreaking exhibition for the Kimbell Art Museum in Fort Worth, entitled *The Blood of Kings: Dynasty and Ritual in Maya Art* (Exhibition Checklist no. 39). This exhibition and its accompanying catalogue approached hieroglyphic texts as the narrative component of Maya visual art. Together, hieroglyphs and visual images functioned as an artistic language through which the historical and the ritual worlds of the Maya elite spoke to audiences both ancient and modern.

Building upon the success of *The Blood of Kings*, Schele published numerous journal articles and books on the Maya and their civilization, each revolutionary in its own way. For example, *A Forest of Kings: The Untold Story of the Ancient Maya* (1990) (Exhibition Checklist no. 40), co-authored with David Freidel, demonstrated that decipherments in concert with archaeology and iconographic interpretation made it possible to reconstruct many details of Classic Maya dynastic and political history. In addition, *Maya Cosmos: Three Thousand Years on the Shaman's Path* (1993) (Exhibition Checklist no. 41), written with David Freidel and Joy Parker, was a synthesis of thousands of years of Maya ideological belief and astronomical vision. In *Maya Cosmos* this trio of scholars recovered such intangible aspects of the Maya culture by integrating information extracted from works of art, ancient writing, surviving 17th century texts, and modern ethnographic sources. This book more than any of her other publications illustrated Schele's growing awareness of and dedication to the survival of the modern Maya: "The modern Maya can claim their past because it lives in their present. Their pageants and beliefs shed light on the ancient arts of their forebears in ways that cannot come from our world or our science, and they offer us the gift of new knowledge about an ancient cosmos" (Schele in Freidel, Schele, and Parker 1993, 14).



*Figure 15: Photograph of Linda Schele at a Maya hieroglyphic workshop in Guatemala.*

This dedication took concrete form in a series of hieroglyphic workshops held for Mayan-speaking peoples in Guatemala and Mexico. Schele, working with the scholars Nikolai Grube and Frederico Fahsen, insisted that the goal of these workshops would be the re-introduction of hieroglyphic writing and the stimulation of interest in ancient Maya history amongst contemporary Maya. As with most of Schele's projects, these workshops were founded in a spirit of collaboration: "We have learned as much from the Maya as we have taught them" (1996, 415). The Maya trained in these hieroglyphic workshops are now actively engaged in the decipherment of the writing system of their ancestors. In Schele's view, by reading their past in their own language, the Maya could reclaim their history and maintain the integrity of their culture.

Although it is difficult to summarize the contribution Linda Schele made toward the decipherment of Mayan hieroglyphic writing, her lasting impact is two-fold. First, influenced by the work of several pioneering scholars in the field, she developed a structural method that reveals substitution patterns within the texts. Second, she disseminated this approach in workshops and publications with a style and a wonder that made ancient Mayan writing accessible to both professional and non-professional audiences. Because of the advances she made toward understanding the content of ancient inscriptions, she will be remembered for opening a window on the ancient American past and unveiling a civilization as splendid and accomplished as any that has existed in human history.

## The Decipherment of Mayan Hieroglyphs: Schele's Scholarly Foundation and Collaboration

*We attempt to bring many minds with different agendas and experiences together in an atmosphere of generous and unrestricted sharing . . . No one person can know everything or even enough different things to command the field. I have spent my life collaborating with many different people—and our work together is my great strength.*

—Linda Schele in *Griffin Archaeology* 44 (5) September/October 1991, 38

Linda Schele would be the first to admit that her work, though original, would not have been possible without the continuous brainstorming and ferment that occurred through scholarly and non-academic interaction. Undoubtedly, three scholars in particular supplied the critical mass that was necessary for Schele's major accomplishments in the decipherment of Mayan hieroglyphic writing: Yuri Knorosov, Heinrich Berlin, and Tatiana Proskouriakoff. In 1952, Knorosov argued that Maya scribes wrote syllabically; and he established a method of phonetic analysis for the decipherment of Mayan hieroglyphs. Just over five years later, Berlin (1958) illustrated that much of Mayan written material was political in nature and was linked to major cities, some of whose glyphic names he had identified. The work of Proskouriakoff (1960) demonstrated that ancient Mayan inscriptions encapsulated royal history by discussing the major events in each ruler's reign.

By 1973, the year in which Merle Greene Robertson organized the first *Mesa Redonda de Palenque*, the field was poised to reach the next level in Mayan hieroglyphic decipherment using the work of Knorosov, Berlin, and Proskouriakoff as the foundation. At the *Mesa Redonda*, Michael Coe suggested that Schele and Peter Mathews work together: he observed "Linda, you know every stone in Palenque, and Peter knows every glyph—why don't the two of you see if you can put together a dynastic history of Palenque? No one has attempted that yet" (Coe 1992, 204).

Seated around Robertson's kitchen table, the two young scholars, joined by the linguist Floyd Lounsbury, focused upon patterns of royal titles and dates within Palenque's inscriptions. In less than three hours, these epigraphers made the fundamental breakthrough into what, until then, had been the unknown royal history of a Maya kingdom. Their decipherments revealed nothing less than the major events associated with six successive Palenque rulers.

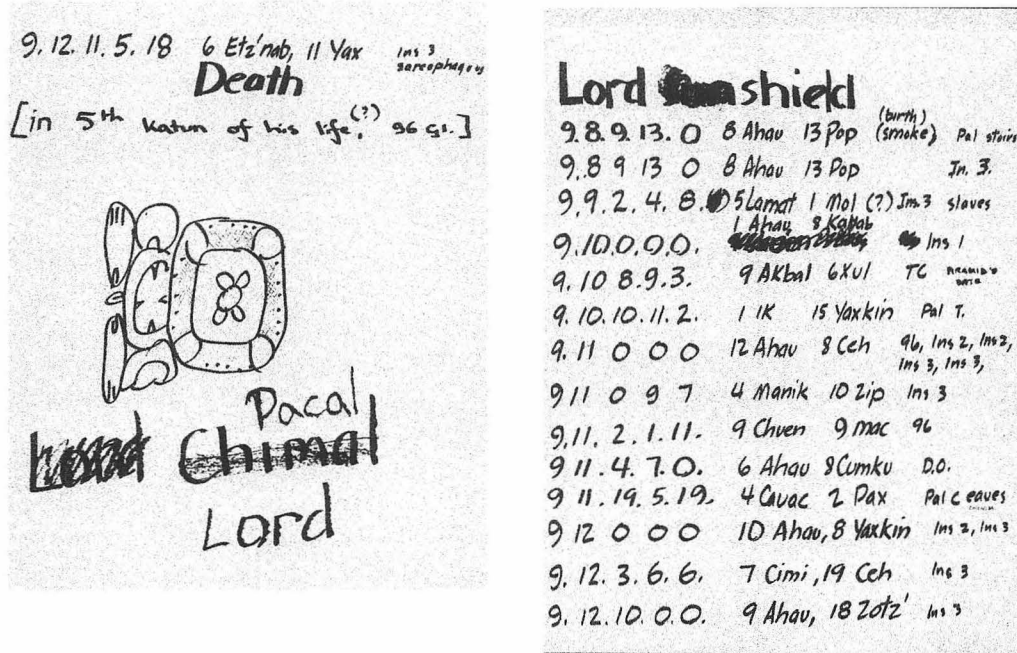
The dynastic history reconstructed by Schele and Mathews was anchored to the reign of a Palenque king who the then young scholars called "Shield" (Exhibition Checklist no. 26). During the



*Exhibition Checklist no. 26:* Photograph of a cast of the bust of Hanab Pakal who ruled Palenque from C.E. 615–683. Schele was given this cast in the late 1970's or early 1980's.



presentation of their discoveries to the larger group, the local expert and historian of the Palenque ruins, Sr. Moises Morales, strongly protested the use of the English name "Shield." Morales correctly pointed out that if "Shield" was this Maya king's name, then his name should be read in Mayan. Agreeing with Morales's concerns, it was suggested, with the aid of Mayan dictionaries and an earlier decipherment by David Kelley, that this king was named *Pacal*—a reading that has stood the test of time. With Schele and Mathew's decipherments, history silent for a millennium was given voice in the language of the ancient Maya (Exhibition Checklist nos. 29 and 30).



Exhibition Checklist nos. 29 and 30: Working notes of Linda Schele and Peter Mathews used to present their reconstruction of the dynastic history of Palenque.

The enormous excitement generated at the *Primera Mesa Redonda de Palenque* continued in a series of mini-conferences held at Dumbarton Oaks under the direction of Elizabeth Benson. Among the Palenque scholars who were reunited at Dumbarton Oaks were Schele, David Kelley, Floyd Lounsbury, Peter Mathews, and Merle Greene Robertson. Working together, these scholars used Mayan dictionaries, previous decipherments, natural histories, and colonial documents to develop the linguistic and structural methods which have remained fundamental to the decipherment process ever since. In Schele's opinion, what was particularly important about the mini-conferences was that the epigraphers were examining the inscriptions as whole texts rather than as a collection of individual glyphs (Coe 1992, 212).

Recognizing the success that came from working with others, Schele continued to seek out collaboration throughout her career. This is most clearly evident in her publications—which were often co-authored with scholars including Mary Miller, David Freidel, and Peter Mathews. Her publications served as the catalysts for subsequent Maya research in the fields of epigraphy, ancient history, Maya culture, and iconographic interpretation.

Schele's desire for collaboration expanded into an equally strong desire to share the on-going academic decipherment experience with the broader public. One medium for this interaction was the Workshop on Maya Hieroglyphic Writing. For over twenty years, these meetings have provided a dynamic working environment for both professionals and non-specialist alike. The interplay of such diverse participants as Nikolai Grube, Nickolas Hopkins, Tom and Carolyn

Jones, Kathryn Josserand, John Justeson, Terry Kaufman, the late Ben Leaf, Justin Kerr, Simon Martin, Peter Matthews, and John Pohl was in many ways an expanded version of the give-and-take of Schele's classroom. This interchange was augmented by the modern Maya participants, including Nikte', Lolmay, Waycan, Saqahix, Martin Chacach, and Pacal, who provided essential insights into the culture and language of the Maya.

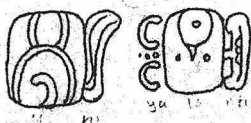
In the middle years of her career, much of Schele's research focused on the inscriptions and iconography of the ancient Maya city of Copán, Honduras (Exhibition Checklist no. 31). At that site, Schele was a valued member of a research team led by Ricardo F. Agurcia, E. Wyllis Andrews IV, William Fash, and Robert Sharer. The joint efforts of Schele and the other scholars affiliated with the Copán project helped to unlock the political history, ritual events, and daily life of this important Maya kingdom. Among her numerous contributions to research at Copán, she initiated the *Copán Notes*, a series of short reports addressing epigraphic and iconographic research at Copán. The *Copán Notes* established a forum for discussion among diverse scholars and students that allowed for the exchange and fast dissemination of new theories and discoveries. Further expanding upon the dialogue generated by these reports, Schele spearheaded the *Texas Notes on Precolumbian Art, Writing and Culture* to address the increasing breadth and depth of Precolumbian studies. Schele was conducting research at Copán in May of 1997 when she became aware of the illness that would take her life the following year.

Toward the close of her life, in the culmination of her academic and personal exploration of Maya culture, Schele worked more closely with such important Latin American scholars as Enrique Florescano and Federico Fahsen. Their intellectual contributions to pre-Columbian scholarship influenced Schele to see the Maya in broader brush strokes. This extended vision was reflected in her later publications, in which she and her co-authors emphasized the continuities between the intellectual and cultural foundations of ancient pre-Columbian peoples and their modern Latin American descendants.

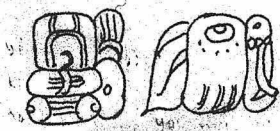
In particular, Schele was drawn to the cultural and economic realities of the modern Maya in Guatemala and Mexico. Schele was convinced that one of the worst crimes perpetrated against an indigenous people was the theft of their history and culture. This conviction led to the establishment of a series of summer workshops, led in conjunction with Nikolai Grube and Federico Fahsen, which guided modern Maya in a recovery of the hieroglyphic writing of their ancient past. She saw these workshops as a collaboration in which every person could bring their unique insights to the discussion. Schele's proudest moment was when she began to receive communications from her Maya friends and colleagues written in the hieroglyphic system of their ancestors (Exhibition Checklist no. 38). Moreover, she stated (1996, 415): "Our hope is that there will be Maya epigraphers, archaeologists, and art historians in the future who speak directly to their own people."

Schele once observed that the most significant result of the decipherment of Mayan hieroglyphic writing had been the transformation of the ancient Maya from prehistory to history (Schele in Wertime 1991, 36). She played a major role in this transformation as she helped to reveal the names of Maya rulers and the major events of their reigns. In addition, she and her co-authors reconstructed the cosmological and ideological framework in which these historical events were couched. Schele was a primary contributor to the recovery of the pre-Columbian written tradition, and ultimately, her work helped to uncover a significant cultural episode in human history.

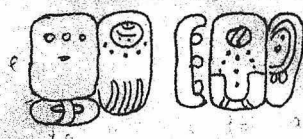
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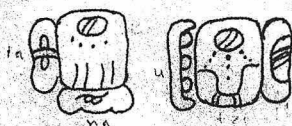
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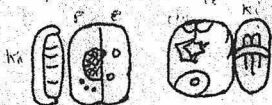
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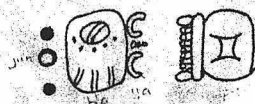
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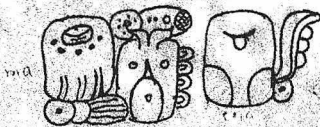
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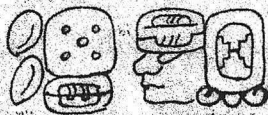
kape chik  
venga otra vez



jun b'ay apo  
otra vez de aquí en el futuro



matyox chawe  
gracias a usted



nub'is Kab'lajuj tijax  
mi nombre es 12 tijax

MCh

Exhibition Checklist no. 38: This letter was written to Schele by Kab'lajuj tijax (Martin Chacach) who participated in many of Schele's workshops.

## Early History of Decipherment and Schele's Decipherment Methodology

*... my field has undergone a revolution of perception and interpretation during the last twenty-five years. The driving force behind that revolution has been the ongoing decipherment of the Maya hieroglyphic writing system and its contribution to the understanding of Maya cultural history.*

—Linda Schele in *Art Bulletin*, September 1996, 412

In 1841, the American travel writer, John Lloyd Stephens and the English artist, Frederick Catherwood published an account of their visit to Central America and Mexico. Within his text, Stephens (159-160) made a startling conjecture about Mayan hieroglyphic writing: "One thing I believe, that its history is graven on its monuments. No Champollion has yet brought to them the energies of his inquiring mind. Who shall read them?"

One major advance toward the decipherment of Mayan hieroglyphic writing came in the late 19th century from the work of Ernst Förstemann. He, along with later scholars including Joseph Goodman (1901) and John Teeple (1925), revealed how the calendar worked. Among his many discoveries, Förstemann demonstrated that the calendar was vigesimal (base twenty) and utilized a place-notational system for the so-called 'Long Count.' The next major step toward reading Mayan hieroglyphs came with a better understanding of the nature of the non-calendrical information carried within the inscriptions. Cyrus Thomas (1892; 1893) established the reading order of Mayan hieroglyphic writing and illustrated the powerful insights that could be gained by using ethnographic sources. Moreover, he was one of the early proponents of the idea that Mayan writing was in part phonetic, although this idea was not accepted at the time.

In the early 20th century, several scholars continued to add to the developing decipherment of Mayan hieroglyphs. For example, the linguist Benjamin Lee Whorf (1933; 1935) argued that ancient Mayan writing recorded spoken language, and, therefore, that it reflected the structure of the language. Hermann Beyer (1937) also examined the structure of the writing system, showing that the texts included repeated series of glyphs that could vary in form. His structural approach provided a guide for future generations of epigraphers.

The next major breakthrough occurred through the work of Yuri Knorosov (1952; 1967). Starting from a re-evaluation of the 'alphabet' recorded by Fray Diego de Landa in the 16th century, Knorosov demonstrated that Mayan hieroglyphic writing was syllabic. He further showed that words often were formed in consonant-vowel + consonant-(vowel) combinations (1952). In addition, he argued that Maya scribes often utilized a 'Principle of Synharmony' in which the second vowel, which was silent, often repeated the vowel of the first part. Complimenting Knorosov's discoveries was the work of Heinrich Berlin and Tatiana Proskouriakoff. In 1958, Berlin identified a certain group of signs he called "Emblem Glyphs" which were closely associated with specific sites. He argued that these "Emblem Glyphs" represented place names, tutelary deities, or dynastic names. Two years later, Proskouriakoff's publication of the inscriptions of Piedras Negras further demonstrated that the inscriptions detailed historical information about rulers. By revealing the pattern of dates within the texts that corresponded to the important events in a ruler's life, she was able to identify the hieroglyphic signs for birth, accession, and death. Knorosov's phonetic approach, combined with an understanding of the historical nature of the inscriptions established by the work of Berlin and Proskouriakoff, led the way for the later epigraphers.

Building upon the great accumulation of information and insight provided by decades of previous scholarship, the scholars gathered at the 1973 *Primera Mesa Redonda de Palenque* further revealed the structure and content of Mayan hieroglyphic writing. Fundamentally, this was due to the collective effort of three people: Floyd Lounsbury, Peter Mathews, and Linda Schele.



Lounsbury previously had developed a method for decipherment that combined linguistic, epigraphic, ethnographic, and iconographic evidence (1973). This approach served as a guide for the three scholars as they sought the dynastic history of Palenque. Mathews, a student of Dave Kelley's, contributed his enormous and well-organized corpus of the Palenque inscriptions as well as his knowledge of what earlier scholars had suggested about the glyphs. To the task, Schele brought the eye of an artist and the developing skill of an iconographer. She also brought her method of seeking patterns within the hieroglyphic inscriptions and following where they led.

The combined skills of these three epigraphers and the numerous scholars who influenced them produced a decipherment method that served as the basis for much of Schele's later work. Her personal approach was based upon the following principles:

- a. Mayan hieroglyphs are fundamentally syllabic in value. However, some signs function ideographically or morphemically.
- b. Most Mayan hieroglyphs were written with a combination of two consonant-vowel signs in the form consonant-vowel + consonant (vowel). The second vowel was silent, and would often be the same as the first.
- c. A structural approach is needed to reveal patterns that are inherent within the hieroglyphic system itself.
- d. A "System of Substitution" exists in which different signs substitute for each other in the same context. By establishing the patterns of substitutions, new decipherments then become possible.
- e. The syntax of modern Mayan languages is reflected in the structure of ancient hieroglyphic inscriptions.
- f. The hieroglyphs are the written expression of Mayan language. Therefore, Colonial and modern Mayan dictionaries are primary sources for their decipherment.

In the early 1990's Schele stated that her role as a "Young Turk" had passed to the next generation of epigraphers, yet her role as a teacher continued up until her death in 1998. Schele believed that her job in the later part of her career was to bring the information gained by professional archaeologists, art historians, ethnographers, and epigraphers to the public and say: "Listen, folks, let me tell you a story about a great king . . ." (Schele in Wertime 1991, 36).

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### Michael Ventris and the Decipherment of Linear B

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## Linda Schele and the Decipherment of Mayan Hieroglyphic Writing

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1993 *Maya Cosmos: Three Thousand Years on the Shaman's Path*. New York: William Morrow and Co.

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**Note on Schele bibliography:** Michael D. Coe’s *Breaking the Maya Code* (1992) provides a compelling and thorough overview of the personalities and insights which led to the decipherment of ancient Mayan hieroglyphic writing.



## EXHIBITION CHECKLIST

1. ***Annual of the British School at Athens*, volume 6 for 1899–1900**  
copy formerly owned by David Theodore Fyfe, Knossos excavation architect  
H 10.25 in. x W 7.75 in. x D 1.0 in.  
Courtesy of Thomas G. Palaima
2. ***Scripta Minoa*, Volume I**  
Sir Arthur J. Evans, 1909  
Oxford: Clarendon Press  
copy formerly owned by Emmett L. Bennett, Jr.  
H 12.5 in. x W 10 in. x D 1.5 in.  
Courtesy of Thomas G. Palaima
3. ***The Use of Color Terms in the Greek Poets***  
Alice E. Kober, 1932  
Geneva, New York: The W.F. Humphrey Press  
H 9.25 in. x W 6.25 in. x D 0.5 in.  
Courtesy of Niccol T. Graf
4. **“Evidence of Inflection in the ‘Chariot’ Tablets From Knossos”**  
Alice E. Kober, *American Journal of Archaeology* 49, 1945: 143–151  
formerly in the offprint collection of Emmett L. Bennett, Jr.  
H 11 in. x W 8 in.  
Courtesy of Thomas G. Palaima
5. ***The Pylos Tablets. A Preliminary Transcription***  
Emmett L. Bennett, Jr., 1951  
Princeton: Princeton University Press  
H 10 in. x W 6.75 in. x D 0.375 in.  
Courtesy of Thomas G. Palaima
6. ***The Schoolboy Who Beat the Experts***  
Andrew Robinson. Brian Lapping Associates Limited, n.d.  
typescript of unproduced film script  
H 11.75 in. x W 8.25 in.  
Courtesy of Thomas G. Palaima
7. **“Deciphering Europe’s Earliest Scripts”**  
Michael Ventris, 1952  
photocopied copy of the typescript for the BBC broadcast  
H 11.75 in. x W 8.25 in.  
Courtesy of Prudence Smith and Thomas G. Palaima
8. **Fleetwood Cigarette Carton Files: “B. Inscr. Evans’ order”**  
Alice Elizabeth Kober, n.d.  
cardboard, paper, and pencil  
H 2 in. x L 10.75 in. x W 3.5 in.  
Courtesy of Thomas G. Palaima
9. **Entry Slip for Knossos Tablet # 59**  
Alice Elizabeth Kober, n.d.  
paper, pencil, and ink  
H 2 in. x W 3 in.  
Courtesy of Thomas G. Palaima

10. **Letter from Michael Ventris to Emmett L. Bennett, Jr.**  
December 1, 1949  
paper and ink  
H 13 in. x W 8 in.  
Courtesy of Thomas G. Palaima
11. **Letter from Michael Ventris to Emmett L. Bennett, Jr.**  
June 18, 1952  
paper and ink  
H 13 in. x W 8 in.  
Courtesy of Thomas G. Palaima
12. **The State of the Linear B Signary**  
June 18, 1952  
Letter Michael Ventris to Emmett L. Bennett, Jr.  
paper and ink; annotations in red pencil by Emmett L. Bennett, Jr.  
H 13 in. x W 8 in.  
Courtesy of Thomas G. Palaima
13. **Letter from Michael Ventris to Alice Elizabeth Kober**  
March 26, 1948  
typewritten on paper with ink signature and pencil annotation  
H 13 in. x W 8 in.  
Courtesy of Thomas G. Palaima
14. **Early Version of the Ventris Grid**  
January 24, 1952  
Letter from Michael Ventris to Emmett L. Bennett, Jr.  
pencil on paper  
H 13 in. x W 8 in.  
Courtesy of Thomas G. Palaima
15. **Clay Linear B Tablet from Knossos, Crete KN Fp 13**  
ca. 1400–1200 B.C.E.  
1913 reproduction of original in the Ashmolean Museum, Oxford  
H 1.5 in. x L 6.375 in. x D 0.5 in.  
Lent by The Metropolitan Museum of Art. Dodge Fund, 1913. 13.230.6
16. **Clay Linear B Tablet from Knossos, Crete KN Ce 59**  
ca. 1400–1200 B.C.E.  
1913 reproduction of original in the Ashmolean Museum, Oxford  
H 1.75 in. x L 5.5 in. x D 0.5 in.  
Lent by The Metropolitan Museum of Art. Dodge Fund, 1913. 13.230.7
17. **Clay Linear B Tablet from Knossos, Crete Ap 639**  
ca. 1400–1200 B.C.E.  
1913 reproduction of original in the Ashmolean Museum, Oxford  
H 4.5 in. x L 4.5 in. x D 0.875 in.  
Lent by The Metropolitan Museum of Art. Dodge Fund, 1913. 13.230.4
18. ***Scripta Minoa*, Volume III**  
May 1950  
typescript (ca. 129 pages with insertions) of uncompleted work  
H 11 in. x W 8.5 in.  
Courtesy of Thomas G. Palaima

19. ***Scripta Minoa, Volume II***  
 Sir Arthur J. Evans, edited by Sir John L. Myres, 1952  
 Oxford: Clarendon Press  
 copy formerly owned by Emmett L. Bennett, Jr.  
 H 12.5 in. x W 10 in. x D 1.75 in.  
 Courtesy of Thomas G. Palaima
  
20. **Negative Critique of the Ventris Decipherment and Grid**  
 A.J. Beattie, n.d.  
 mimeographed text on paper with attached photograph  
 formerly in the offprint collection of Frank H. Stubbings  
 sheet of paper H 10 in. x W 8 in.  
 photograph H 4.5 in. x 3.5 in.  
 Courtesy of Thomas G. Palaima
  
21. ***The Knossos Tablets. A Revised Transliteration***  
 Emmett L. Bennett, Jr., John Chadwick, and Michael Ventris eds., January 1956  
 London: Institute of Classical Studies of the University of London  
 copy formerly owned by Emmett L. Bennett, Jr.  
 H 10.75 in. x W 8.25 in. x D 0.75 in.  
 Courtesy of Thomas G. Palaima
  
22. **Incised Jade with Scene of the Resurrection of the Maize Tree**  
 Linda Schele, 1993  
 jade  
 H 2.75 in. x W 1.5 in. x D 0.25 in.  
 The estate of Dr. Linda Schele
  
23. **Incised Jade with Image of Tikal Captive**  
 Linda Schele, 1992  
 jade with red pigment  
 H 7 in. x W 2.5 in. x D 0.2 in.  
 The estate of Dr. Linda Schele
  
24. **Incised Jade Necklace with Hieroglyphic Inscription**  
 Linda Schele, 1994  
 jade  
 H 2.75 in. x W 1.5 in. x D 0.24 in.  
 The estate of Dr. Linda Schele
  
25. **Incised Jade with Hieroglyphic Inscription**  
 Linda Schele, unknown date  
 jade  
 H 4 in. x W 2 in. x D 0.25 in.  
 The estate of Dr. Linda Schele
  
26. **Cast of Bust of Hanab Pakal**  
 late 1970's to early 1980's  
 plaster with marble base  
 H 1 ft. 5.5 in. x W 8.875 in. x D 11 in.  
 The estate of Dr. Linda Schele
  
27. **El Rey K'iche'**  
 unknown date  
 wood, paint, and feathers  
 H 14.75 in. x W 5.5 in. x D 6 in.  
 The estate of Dr. Linda Schele

28. **Cross**  
unknown date  
wood, paint, and cotton  
H 1 ft. 4 in. x W 9 in. x D 0.75 in.  
The estate of Dr. Linda Schele
29. **Palenque Dynasty: "Lord Pacal"**  
Linda Schele and Peter Mathews, 1973  
photocopy, ink on paper  
H 11 in. x W 8.5 in.  
The estate of Dr. Linda Schele
30. **Palenque Dynasty: Dates of "Lord Shield"**  
Linda Schele and Peter Mathews, 1973  
photocopy, ink on paper  
H 11 in. x W 8.5 in.  
The estate of Dr. Linda Schele
31. **Working Drawing, Stela I, Copán**  
Drawn by Linda Schele, unknown date  
pencil and ink on paper  
H 19.5 in. x W 11.5 in.  
The estate of Dr. Linda Schele
32. **Notebook: Glyph Book 3 1990 1991**  
Linda Schele, 1990-1991  
pencil and ink on paper; printed cotton cover  
H 8.5 in. x W 5.25 in. x D 0.75 in.  
The estate of Dr. Linda Schele
33. **Notebook: Glyph Journal 1990; Book 2 Miniconference, Codices**  
Linda Schele, 1990  
pencil and ink on paper; printed cotton cover  
H 8.5 in. x W 5.5 in. x D 0.75 in.  
The estate of Dr. Linda Schele
34. **Notebook: 1995 Yucatan, National Museum, Tikal, Seibal (15)**  
Linda Schele, 1995  
pencil and ink on paper; printed paper cover  
H 8.5 in. x W 5.5 in. x D 1 in.  
The estate of Dr. Linda Schele
35. **Notebook: Black Record Book**  
Linda Schele, 1972  
pencil and ink on paper; leather cover  
H 8.875 in. x W 5.75 in. x D 0.5 in.  
The estate of Dr. Linda Schele
36. **Notebook: untitled**  
Linda Schele, 1992  
pencil and ink on paper; printed paper cover  
H 8.75 in. x W 5.75 in. x D 1 in.  
The estate of Dr. Linda Schele



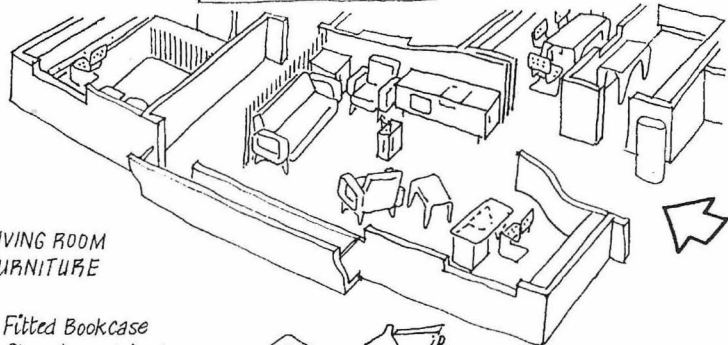
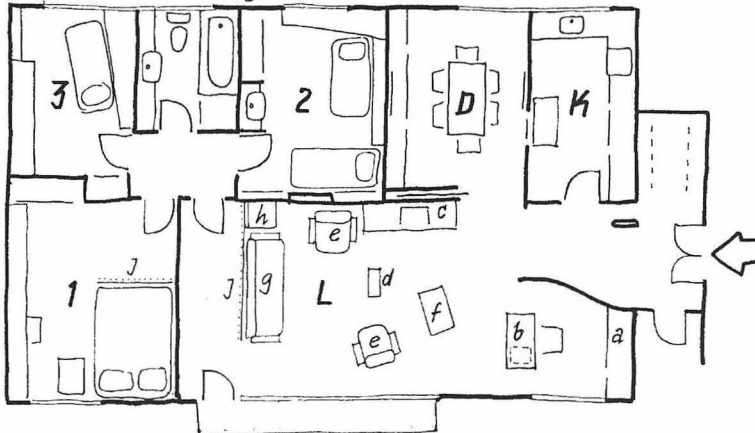
37. **Notebook: Glyph Journal 1989-90**  
Linda Schele, 1989-1990  
pencil and ink on paper; printed paper cover  
H 11.25 in. x W 8.75 in. x D 1 in.  
The estate of Dr. Linda Schele
38. **Letter to Linda Schele from Kab'lajuj tijax (Martin Chacach)**  
1980's  
Ink on paper  
H 8.5 in. x W 11 in.  
The estate of Dr. Linda Schele
39. ***The Blood of Kings: Dynasty and Ritual in Maya Art***  
Linda Schele and Mary E. Miller, 1986  
Fort Worth: Kimbell Art Museum; New York: George Braziller  
H 10 in. W 10 in. x D 1.15 in.  
The estate of Dr. Linda Schele
40. ***A Forest of Kings: The Untold Story of the Ancient Maya***  
Linda Schele and David Freidel, 1990.  
New York: William Morrow and Co.  
H 10.25 in. x W 7.25 in. x D 1.5 in.  
The estate of Dr. Linda Schele
41. ***Maya Cosmos: Three Thousand Years on the Shaman's Path***  
David Freidel, Linda Schele, and Joy Parker, 1993.  
New York: William Morrow and Co.  
H 10.25 in. x W 7.25 in. x D 1.25 in.  
The estate of Dr. Linda Schele

# FLAT 47 HIGHPOINT : AS FURNISHED, 1950

Design & Layout of Loose & fitted furniture by FRS York & Marcel Breuer '36

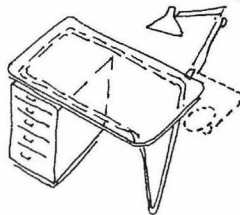
- 1 Betty & Michael's bedroom, formerly Dorothea's
- 2 Nikki & Tessa's bedroom, formerly Michael's study bedroom.
- 3 Nanny's room, formerly Dorothea's study.

O.C. 5.11.98



LIVING ROOM  
FURNITURE

- a Fitted Bookcase
- b Glass topped Desk
- c Radiogram
- d 4-sided Electric fire
- e Armchairs
- f Occasional Table
- g Settee
- h Fitted Cabinet
- j Pinoleum Screens



The Glass topped  
Desk on which  
Michael Ventris  
worked on the  
decipherment of  
the Linear B Script.

Figure 16: Drawing by Oliver Cox of Michael Ventris's flat at High Point.



*Figure 17:* Sunset over the Temple of Inscriptions at Palenque.

