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THE PYLOS Ta SERIES:
FROM MICHAEL VENTRIS TO THE NEW MILLENNIUM

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The thirteen tablets of the Ta series from Pylos, all but one fragment of which were discovered in the Blegen excavations of 1952, are famous for offering three-legged proof of the Ventris decipherment and our most detailed lexical and ideographic view of specific forms of precious vases, elaborate inlaid furniture and other paraphernalia. They are equally famous among Mycenologists for having defied interpretation as to their details and their purpose. This paper surveys theories about the series from Ventris to the present, while examining the features of the tablets that provide clues as to how and why the series was written. Thereby it is possible to assess the validity of certain schools of interpretive method as applied to Mycenaean documents and to understand how errors were perpetuated and possible avenues of investigation neglected. It is also possible to clarify the still disputed numbers of individual items, to propose the very order in which the tablets were written and to use this new information to explain the circumstances in which the set was written and to illuminate the working habits of the tablet-writer, Pylos Hand 2. As a problem for scholarly interpretation, the Ta set provides an excellent example of the need to use a combinatorial approach that uses the insights gained by linguistic, archaeological, anthropological, art historical, epigraphical, palaeographical, archival, dialectal, text-pragmatic and general prehistorical studies of the tablets, their contents, and the archaeological and social setting in which the tablets were written, used and preserved. As a lesson in the history of scholarship, they offer a firm reminder that Mycenologists and Aegean prehistorians *must* do the thorough background work that used to be *de rigueur* in fields like textual criticism. Otherwise we run the risk of not understanding the real basis for our current *opinioniones communes*.

I propose *inter alia* that:

1. Michael Ventris *pre-decipherment* had already developed to a fine art what Leonard Palmer later championed as the contextual approach to interpreting Linear B documents. Thus the accusation that interpretations in *Documents in Mycenaean Greek* (1st ed., 1956) are flawed because they result from Chadwickian *lexical* interpretation is seen to be suspect.
2. Several major early discussions of the series (by Ventris, Ventris-Chadwick, Palmer, Doria, Hiller) do not include discussion of all the tablets and do not attempt to come up with total numbers for the individual items listed on the tablets. Other scholarly treatments are selective (e.g. Vandanabeele-Olivier on ideograms). Thus no correct figures for the numbers of inlaid chairs (*to-no* = *thronoi*), tables (*to-pe-za* < **torpedjai*), and footstools (*ta-ra-nu-we* = *thranuwes*) have been determined.

3. Killen is correct in viewing the series as an inventory of furniture and utensils (including sacrificial implements: 2 gold 'bridle chains', 2 stunning axes and 2 sacrificial knives) that would be used for the kind of central commensal ceremony that Davis and Bennet locate in the court between the SW Building and the main palatial complex. The association of the Ta record with tablet Un 718 (a list of commensal banquet 'ingredients') in an unusual location in tablet-entry room 7 of the Archives Complex supports this view.

4. The tablets refer to a specific event as indicated by the first line of the heading text Ta 711. They are not a 'generic inventory'.

5. Certain textual features (erasures, data grouping, layout and arrangement) point toward the texts being the result of a rather spontaneous process of solving how to inventory a large collection of complex objects that had to be recorded in such a way that each object could be readily and unmistakably identified and accounted for. I think, but cannot prove, that information was given orally to the 'scribe' (Hand 2) who wrote the series as he accompanied an official who was examining the objects.

6. The tablets were written and meant to be read in the following order (again proved by the logic of entries and by such things as erasures and other text changes): Ta 711, 709, 641, 716, 642, 713, 715, 714, 708, 707, 722, 721, 710). The object sequence is: pouring vases, flat receiving vases, fire implements and portable hearths, tripods (including heirlooms of Cretan origin), other vases, 2 ceremonial 'bridle chains', 2 stunning axes, 2 sacrificial knives (these last three being rightly interpreted as instruments of sacrifice), inlaid tables, throne and footstool 'sets', footstools. Items are generally listed one-by-one as is natural for Mycenaean 'inspection inventory' texts (cf. PY Sh series). Items are occasionally entered *ad hoc* in twos and threes for expediency when they are simple and can be easily identified. This is best seen at the end of the series when many footstools are the last objects to be entered and the text is adjusted in Ta 721.2 to make the use of two more single entries unnecessary.

7. There are 11 tables, 6 *thronoi*, and 16 footstools. I think that each table is meant to have two 'sitting' pieces, thus explaining the 1:2 ratio between 11 tables and 22 thrones + footstools. This would be parallel with the scenes of banqueting from the throne room at Pylos.