

The Pylos Ta Series and the Process of Inventorying Ritual Objects for a Funerary Banquet¹

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The thirteen tablets of the Ta series at Pylos (Melena and Firth 2021: 189–193) are arguably the most informative set of documents pertaining to paraphernalia used in ceremonies and rituals in the Linear B corpus. In the Ta inventory are listed, in entries consisting of compact identifying descriptions and mostly with finely drawn ideographic representations, the following kinds of objects: pouring vases, receptacle vases, fire implements, portable hearths, ritual heirloom tripods (some ‘of Cretan manufacture’), two ceremonial headstalls or bridles to control animals brought to sacrifice, two stunning axes, two sacrificial knives, inlaid tables with varying numbers of ‘feet,’ throne and stool ‘sets,’ other stools.² We should take note of what is not here: kylikes or any kind of drinking cups.

Setting the Stage

The record-keeper notes in the heading for the entire series (Ta 711.1) that the *wanaks* (king) set in motion this detailed inventory of ritual objects by performing a ceremonial action upon another power figure (*damo-ko-ro*), likely one of the two provincial governors (Nakassis 2013: 176 n. 85) who presided over the nine and seven districts that comprised, respectively, the Hither and Further Provinces of the united territory brought into being and governed by the palatial center at Pylos (Del Frio 2016b: 634–643; on the palatial system and its associated elites, Palaima 2012). In other words, in the minds of the contemporary inhabitants of Messenia in early LH III C ca. 1180 BC (Davis 2022: xvi, xxxi, xxxiv; Vitale 2006; Davis *et al.* forthcoming), this

inventory was a key step in enacting a major ritual event of extreme importance and with serious consequences for the well-being of the entire population. The inventory is written by Hand 2, one of the four most competent ‘scribes’ among the thirty some tablet-writers identifiable within the Pylos corpus (Palaima 2003a: 173–177; Palaima 2011; Palaima and Bibee 2014; Del Frio 2016a: 202–203, 205–206). To underscore the significance of these texts, we need look no further than the elegant assessment of linguist and Homerist Michael Meier-Brügger: ‘La série Ta de Pylos est une des séries *les mieux connues et les mieux recherchées*.’ (Meier-Brügger 2008: 503 italics mine.)

The contents of the thirteen Ta tablets relate to scribal and administrative practices and to the interests of the honoree of this volume in how the inhabitants of the Aegean world in the second millennium BC behaved in the sphere of religious ceremonies and what special artifacts they used in their performances of rituals.

There is a full bibliography developed over seventy years now concerning the purpose of the Ta series. It begins with discussions of the Pylos texts after the announcement of the decipherment of Linear B on July 1, 1952. First, working in 1952 and 1953, Ventris and Chadwick (1953) presented the evidence for the tablets being written in an early form of Greek. Simultaneously during the excavation season of 1952 at Pylos, tablet Ta 641 was discovered (Blegen 1953–1954; Ventris 1954). It is the famous ‘tripods tablet’ (Figure 1a), and it was immediately used by Michael Ventris to demonstrate how his decipherment values worked (Figure 1b).

It still is used to illustrate how Linear B worked and how our earliest Greek looked.³ We then moved for three decades through the principal studies of the Ta set.⁴ Intensive scholarly work on the series continues.⁵

¹ * My thanks to José L. Melena for being the most indefatigably effective research assistant I have ever had. My thanks also to Jake Morton, Nicholas Blackwell and Kyle Mahoney for sending me a draft of their comprehensive paper on the physical *realia* and ritual events connected with the Ta series for my comments. One half of the draft has appeared as Morton, Blackwell and Mahoney (2023) and provides interesting alternatives to my interpretations here. Writing in honor of Robert Koehl is an honor in itself. It also makes me remember with a special joyful sorrow our departed mutual friend Ellen Davis. Special thanks, as always, to Carol Hershenson for tablet image permissions. Finally my great thanks to Judith Weingarten for her typical encouragement and patience, without which this paper would not exist.

² Shelmerdine (2012: 685), quoting Palaima (2000), with my updating and nuancing of two specific items: the ceremonial headstalls and questioning whether the stools here are exclusively footstools. For these objects, see conveniently Weilharter (2005: 140) and the corresponding signary numbers in Olivier and Vandenaabeele (1979: 221–223; 225–232; 234–239; 239–240; 246–252; 240–241; 161–172; 187–188; 60–61; 47–49). On heirloom tripods and other kinds of heirlooms in the Ta series, Palaima (1999: 26–27; 2003b 198–199; 2019: 594, 596–598).

³ On the use of Ta 641 and the header tablet Ta 711 as exemplars, see Duhoux (2008: 314–321), Ruipérez and Melena (1990: 249–250), Bernabé and Luján (2020: 381–383), Colvin (2007: 77–79). For Ventris’s first analysis of Ta 641, see his letter to Carl Blegen illustrated in Davis (2022: 46 fig. 21).

⁴ Doria (1956), Doria (1970), Doria (1973), Higgins (1956), Hiller (1971), Hiller and Panagl (1976: 230–238), Palmer (1957), Palmer (1969: 338–363), Ventris and Chadwick (1973: 332–348, 496–502). Palaima (1999) analyzes comprehensively prior interpretations of the numbers and kinds of objects and rescues the work of Doria from obscurity.

⁵ Aura Jorro (2021), Bernabé (2021), Blackwell and Palaima (2021), Díez Platas (2021), Farmer and Lane (2016) Palaima and Blackwell (2020), Perna and Zucca (2021), Petrakis (2020), Piquero (2021),

Readers of this paper should begin with Meier-Brügger (2008) and Weilhartner (2005: 139–140) which lays out the information in the Ta series, including the ideographic forms of the recorded items where ideograms are used. Readers should also consult Palaima and Blackwell (2020), Blackwell and Palaima (2021), Pierini (2021), Duhoux (2008: 314–321), Petrakis (2020: 63–73, 78–81), Bernabé (2021: 55–59), Díez Platas (2021: 76), Morton, Blackwell and Mahoney (2023) and Shelmerdine (2012) in order to get their bearings concerning the complexities of the Ta series and how the inventoried items were put to use on the occasion that brought this inspection inventory into being.

Aura Jorro's (2021) survey of explanatory theories proposed over time for what the palatial elites at Pylos were doing—and under what conditions or motivating factors—to bring the peculiar inventory recorded in the Ta series into existence reinforces how key this series is for our understanding of Mycenaean palatial behaviors surrounding ritual and ceremonial events.

My concerns here are related to my third comprehensive treatment of Mycenaean ruler ideology that appeared in the *Festschrift* edited by Robert Koehl in honor of Ellen Davis⁶ and to Robert Koehl's expertise in ritual objects, notably the rhyton. Topics in Aegean prehistory at the interface between textual documentation and material objects, whether recovered as archaeological artifacts or represented as images pictorially or in glyptic art, present knowns and unknowns and presumed knowns that we need to sort out.

Phugeg^wris and the Inspection Inventory

In Palaima and Blackwell (2020: 89–90), Blackwell and Palaima (2021: 24) and Palaima (forthcoming) I have argued that the now prevailing standard interpretation of the heading of the Ta series (Pylos tablet Ta 711 line .1) has a legitimate explanatory rival. Ta 711.1 tells us that *Phugeg^wris* took responsibility for having visually inspected all the items in this highly complicated inventory of 75 ceremonial objects.⁷ It then tells us that this occurred on the occasion when, according to the standard view, the *wanaks* 'appointed' (Linear B *te-ke* = *θηκε*) an individual named *Augewas* (*vel sim.*) to the key office of *da-mo-ko-ro*, as mentioned above, one of two

provincial governors (Pierini 2021: 108 and n. 2 with references therein). But I have shown clearly (Palaima forthcoming) that *te-ke/θηκε* can mean 'buried' by refuting arguments that passages cited from Homer and from later Roman imperial period tomb inscriptions prove that *te-ke/θηκε* can only mean 'buried' when there is an explicit or implicit syntactically connected reference to the burial place and the physical body or remains of the dead person to be buried. Thus the Ta series can have been compiled when the king conducted a burial ritual for a prominent figure in the power hierarchy of the palatial territory of Messenia.

It is rightly observed (Pierini 2021: 115 and 119; Shelmerdine 2012: 686) that the Ta tablets, although written by an accomplished tablet-writer known as Hand 2 (Palaima 1988: 59–68; Palaima 2003a: 173–177), contain an unusual number of erasures, syntactical irregularities, and violations of semantic categories of the sort that our most competent Linear B tablet writers use in order to make the information on the texts readily retrievable and accurate and to maximize record-keeping efficiency. Pierini (2021) brings this up in her careful analysis of the semantic categories, the *ordo verborum*, Hand 2 uses. She uses the patterns of identifying descriptions as an aid to interpreting some of the less obvious lexical units.

Here I wish to elaborate on points relevant to interpreting the Ta series as an inventory that includes furniture for seating elite attendees at a funerary feast⁸ for an official of the highest standing. The two *da-mo-ko-ro* rank right beneath the *wanax*, and probably the *lawagetas*. While we cannot rule out that the, relatively speaking, deluxe ritual paraphernalia on the thirteen Ta tablets were used in connection with an official appointment, the general importance of burial ceremonies and the conspicuous placement of the elite dead over time in the environs of the palatial center at Pylos and out in the landscape the palatial elites may have come from and eventually came to control lend strong support to interpreting *te-ke/θηκε* as 'buried' (Davis, J. L. 2022: 80–86; Murphy, Stocker, Davis and Schepartz 2020; Murphy 2014; and more fully Palaima forthcoming). We might add in further support the frequency of terracotta throne models found in funerary contexts 'in the core regions of the Mycenaean Palatial mainland', a practice that is 'widespread but mainly confined to more affluent burials' as 'core rituals of the palatial elite' (Vetters 2011: 323–327).

Likewise important is the longstanding prevalence, in the 3rd and 2nd millennia BC in Mesopotamia, Egypt, the Levant, and Syro-Hittite territory, of banqueting scenes, and especially scenes with seated pairs of

Morton, Blackwell and Mahoney (2023), Shelmerdine (2012), Varias (2016), and Weilhartner (2005: 139–140) and Palaima (forthcoming).

⁶ Palaima (2016: 140–150) for discussion of the key terms *wanaks*, *megaron*, *skēptron* and *thronos*.

⁷ There are 30 vases of nine different kinds, all but one represented ideographically as well as lexically; 32 or 33 articles of furniture (chairs, stools and tables) connected with seating and laying out and consuming drink and foodstuffs—the tables may even be somehow connected with procedures of sacrifice proper; six items connected with maintaining fire and cooking with fire; 2 stunning axes; 2 sacrificial knives; and 2 'headstalls' or 'ritual bridles' for sacrificial animals).

⁸ Let me repeat that my argument is not dependent on the ceremonial feasting being connected with a burial *per se*.

banqueting persons, connected with funerary ritual as a dominant iconographical theme (in some cases a veritable *Totenmahl*) involving power elites (Zentzer 1982: 24–26, 26–29, 30–34, 35–46).⁹

First, the tablets need to be interpreted in what Shelmerdine (2012: 685) calls the ‘plausible order’ I established: Ta 711, 709, 641, 716, 642, 713, 715, 714, 708, 707, 722, 721 and 710.

By so doing we can see how *Phugeg^wris* faced the challenge of coming up with unique ways of identifying each item so that it will be retrievable and checkable when returned to its original place of daily use or storage (Palaima 1999: 4–16, 24–26). Given the numbers of items and their diversity, this is quite an intellectual challenge. There are 74 or 75 items, none of which has the kind of tag associated with modern institutional inventorying. Almost all have to be individually verifiable with some serious attention paid to the condition of component elements in order to check later that the items are in their original state upon completion of the pertinent ceremonies and rituals. This is accomplished by noting details that serve to characterize and make uniquely recognizable specific objects or small clusters of objects, while paying attention to economy of space on the Linear B tablets. Highlighting special parts of objects safeguards against loss, through damage or theft, of components made from rare materials, like ivory, gold, green glass (*pa-ra-ku-we/pa-ra-ke-we*), blue glass (*ku-wa-no*), and rock crystal. Here I focus on the seating equipment that was used for the highest dignitaries at events such as this.

The Ta texts for articles made of wood (*to-no* ‘seat’, *ta-ra-nu* ‘stool’ and *to-pe-za* ‘table’¹⁰) record the materials used for decorative inlays or for variety in component elements and specify motifs (Bernabé 2021: 58–59; Piquero 2021: 46).

Pierini is correct that the first category for each *to-no* (*thornos*) on Ta 708 and 707 is the wooden material of which the ‘seat’ or ‘chair’ is made (see also Petrakis 2020: 64–65): *ku-te-se-jo* in three cases (Ta 708.1 and .2; Ta 707.2) and in one case, seemingly mis-written after the fact, *ku-te-ta-jo* (Ta 707.a). Anomalous in this small group is Ta 707.1. It has no designation of

wooden material for *to-no*, but immediately proceeds to describing the backrest (*o-pi-ke-ri-mi-ni-ja*) of the chair. Rather than viewing this missing entry for material on Ta 707.1 as an error of some significance, I would maintain that in constructing the inventory the decorative motif of ‘little birds’ (*o-ni-ti-ja*) (Pierini 2021: 121 and n. 40) on the backrest of this particular throne caught the attention of *Phugeg^wris*. Since it is a *hapax graphomenon* used only here and it is also an unusual and eye-catching decorative feature, the ‘little-birdy’ backrest would constitute a unique identifier of this unique ‘chair.’ That would make the designation of material (*ku-te-se-jo*) superfluous, both for the ‘chair’ and for the paired ‘stool’ (*ta-ra-nu*).¹¹

If we keep firmly in mind this rather *ad hoc* process of ‘unique’ identification of objects by materials, design features and decorative motifs, individually or in grouped or paired categories, then we can also explain the very first entry dealing with *to-no* and *ta-ra-nu* on tablet Ta 714 (line .1). It was written before the entries on Ta 708 and Ta 707. Rather than being potentially anomalous in not designating the ‘wood’ of which the *to-no* is made, I would suggest that, just as we have seen with the ‘little birds’ motif, so here with the very first *to-no* recorded, what caught the inventory-compiler’s attention was understandably a rare ‘inlay’ material: *we-a₂-re-jo* ‘of rock crystal’.¹²

Phugeg^wris cannot be accused of departing from a bookkeeping procedure or intellectual pattern of analysis that he personally had not yet devised. Later (Ta 707.a and 707.1) when he at first omits the descriptor of wood material because he fixes upon the ‘little birds’ motif, he is simply relying on a *unicum* to make later identification of this paired *to-no* and *ta-ra-*

¹¹ See a similar practice below in inventorying royal furniture of Henry VIII and his successors.

¹² As Shelmerdine (2012:686) and Pierini (2021:118) have both pointed out, an entire ‘chair’ made primarily of ‘rock crystal’ seems unlikely. It could refer to, again, an eye-catching inlay. We have pieces of rock-crystal suitable for inlay from portico 2 at Pylos (Blegen and Rawson 1966: 62 and fig. 267). Rock crystal has a long history of use as an inlay in the seating furniture of power figures in the Middle and Near East (Moorey 1994: 95) and in Egypt (Nicholson and Shaw 2000: 52) and in trade with Minoan Crete (Warren 1995: 1–5). Alternatively, there are other ways of analyzing *we-a₂-re-jo* and perhaps *we-a-re-ja* on Ta 642.1 where the first of three ‘stone’ (*ra-e-ja*) tables is listed as *to-pe-za ra-e-ja we-a-re-ja* followed by specification that the table proper is inlaid with an ‘aquamarine’ material. Meier-Brügger (2008: 506) proposes a connection with the root **ues-* that specifies ‘cloth’ and proposes tentatively that on Ta 714 *we-a₂-re-jo* might be reconstructed as */*uehalo-*/ comme dérivé d’un **ues-alo-* dans le sens de l’allemand ‘Auskleidung’, donc parallèle à */*ueh-ano-*/. *Auskleidung* would mean something like ‘the lining that protects the inner surface’. Therefore, on Ta 714 it would mean that the inlays of *ku-wa-no* and *pa-ra-ku* and *ku-ru-so* (gold) would somehow be ‘interior’ on the *to-no* = **thornos*. Pierini (2021: 123) favors a return to the proposal of Ventris and Chadwick 1973: 344 that the root of the adjectival form here: **wes-r-* is related to the root for the season known as ‘spring’. The *to-no* here would be a ‘springtime’ chair, whether because it has decoration that presents a springtime scene or because its construction is suitable for use outdoors in non-wintery or non-summer-heat conditions.

⁹ This is not to deny—and Zentzer (1982) in his comprehensive study of seated funerary banquet scenes and textual accounts pertaining thereto does not—that there are other occasions and motives for enacting ritual banquets. These include celebrations of (1) victories in combat, (2) successful hunts, (3) marriages, (4) conclusions of alliances, and (5) festivals to deities. See Ziffer (2005).

¹⁰ Four of the tables are made of stone (*ra-e-ja*) Ta 642.1, .2, .3 and Ta 713.1. At least two are made of ‘false ebony’ *Laburnum vulgare* or African Blackwood *Dalbergia melaoxyloxi* (Piquero 2021: 45) Ta 713.3 and Ta 715.1. One is perhaps made of yew wood or ash wood, depending on whether *mi-ra*, on Ta 715.3 is related to later Greek σμίλαξ or μελία or is unidentifiable.

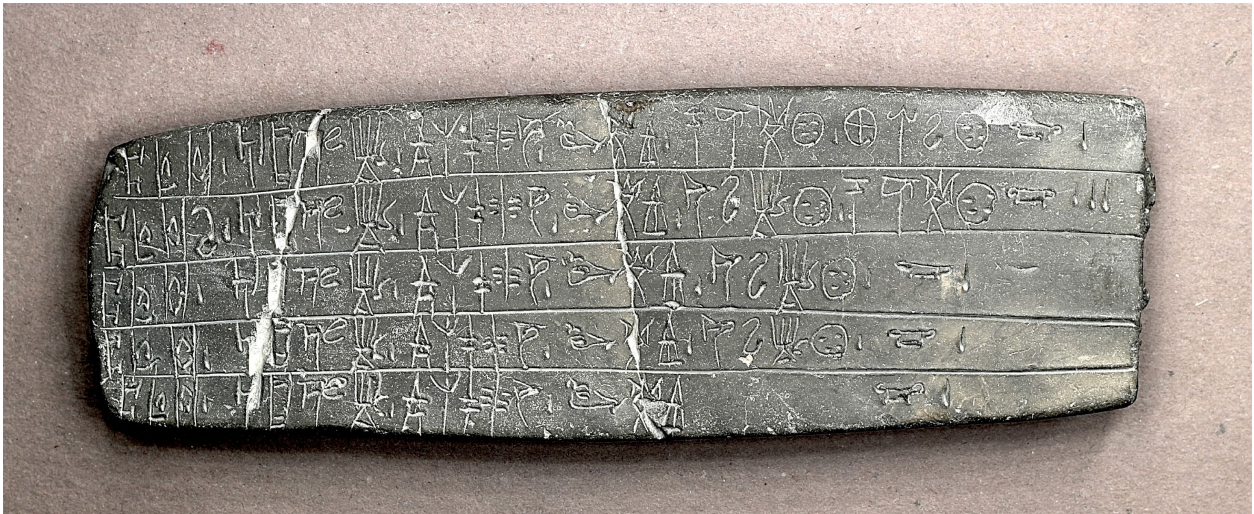


Figure 2. Ta 721 RTI image unsharp masking. Courtesy of The Pylos Digital Tablets Project and The Palace of Nestor Excavations The Department of Classics University of Cincinnati.

nu set secure. Near the end of the entire inventorying process, on Ta 721 (Figure 2 image unsharp masking), he has the categories down pat for seven of the *ta-ra-nu*(-we). They are listed with a certified public accountant’s exactitude (Perna and Zucca 2021: 97-99):

1. ta-ra-nu . a-ja-me-no , e-re-pa-te-jo , au-de-pi,
to-qi-de-qe, ka-ru-we-qe *220 1
2. ta-ra-nu-we , a-ja-me-no , e-re-pa-te-jo , au-de-
pi, so-we-no-qe , to-qi-de-qe *220 3
3. ta-ra-nu , a-ja-me-no , e-re-pa-te-jo , au-de-pi,
so-we-no-qe , *220 1
4. ta-ra-nu , a-ja-me-no , e-re-pa-te-jo , au-de-pi,
so-we-no-qe , *220 1
5. ta-ra-nu , a-ja-me-no , e-re-pa-te-jo , au-de-pi
*220 1

Each *ta-ra-nu* here is inlaid (*a-ja-me-no*) using ivory material (*e-re-pa-te-jo*) in the form of an obscure motif (*au-de-*) that is also found on a portable hearth (*e-ka-ra*) on Ta 709.2. The *ta-ra-nu-we* are then differentiated by further motifs (*to-qi-de* ‘spiral’ and *ka-ru-we* ‘nut’ 1x; *so-we-no* ‘?’ and *to-qi-de* ‘spiral’ on three *ta-ra-nu-we* 1x; *so-we-no* 1x and 1x; and without any additional motif, essentially the basic model, 1x).

Each one of these seven stools has ivory *au-de-pi* as one of its decorative elements. What is interesting is that the inventory here proceeds from the most complex (and most valuable?) stools until it arrives at the basic model, rather than proceeding upwards from the basic model. The use of a word-divider *after* the motif term *so-we-no* in lines .3 and .4 I believe favors dictation here. *Phugeg^wris* as inspector of these precious items is dictating to an accompanying ‘scribe’ who inserts a word-divider in anticipation of another motif that never arrives from the ‘inspector’ giving out the information.

Here on Ta 721 lines .3 and .4, as on Ta 713.3 and Ta 715.1, the ‘scribe’ writes identical descriptions on consecutive lines in dealing with stools (*ta-ra-nu*) and with tables (*to-pe-za*). This proves *Phugeg^wris* is going item by item and must have sometimes surprised himself when two consecutive items turned out to be, at least for purposes of description, identical. Hand 2 dutifully writes those entries. I do not know quite what to make of it, but on Ta 713.3 and Ta 715.1 the scribe foregoes writing the numerical entry ‘1’. We may wonder whether there was some hesitancy in locating the second ‘matching’ *to-pe-za*, so that instead of ‘pairing’ these two identically described *to-pe-za*, they are listed individually, one on the last line of a tablet, the other at the beginning of the next, but without numerals.

Let me re-emphasize that each one of the seven *ta-ra-nu-we* on Ta 721 is described as having ivory *au-de-pi* as one of its decorative elements. The phrase *e-re-pa-te-jo au-de-pi* also describes the *ta-ra-nu* paired with a *to-no* on Ta 707.1. It just might be at the moment he is writing and completing Ta 721 that the tablet-writer goes back and adds quickly—and faultily—*ku-te-ta-jo* (instead of *ku-te-se-jo*) at the very top of Ta 707 (a new line .a), cautiously thinking he would thereby prevent a mistake from being made in any reckoning after the funerary banquet has been conducted.

There is a long debate, succinctly summarized by Petrakis (2020: 67 and n. 32), Pierini (2021: 113 and 177) and Díez Platas (2021; 76–77) about the numbers of *to-no* and *ta-ra-nu*¹³ and about what exactly a *ta-ra-nu* is and how it functions separately or in tandem with a *to-no*.

¹³ Cf. Palaima 1999 for a comprehensive survey of nearly fifty years of scholarship about the numbers of items.



Figure 3. Ta 714 RTI image specular enhancement. Courtesy of The Pylos Digital Tablets Project and The Palace of Nestor Excavations The Department of Classics University of Cincinnati.

With apologies to our *o-ni-ti-ja*, we might be able to kill several birds here with a minimum number of stones.

Elite Seating

The Ta series relates to a ceremonial event connected with a king and what the Mycenaean called *to-no* = *thornoi* (in compound *throno-worgos* with a differentiating metathesis effected by the second element of the compound) and *ta-ra-nu-we* = *thrānuwes*. Whatever the specific meaning(s) of *ta-ra-nu* may be, it is hard, in my view, to dispute that a *ta-ra-nu* in its basic sense is a simpler form of seating support. The etymologies of later Greek *θρόνος* and *θρᾶνυς* have been difficult to explicate. A relatively recent breakthrough, however, by Charles de Lamberterie (2004) provides some help. Rather than *θρόνος* being original and the Mycenaean form *to-no* and the later gloss *θρόναξ* coming about through metathesis, de Lamberterie argues that the form *θόρνος* (Mycenaean *to-no*) is primary, ultimately from an enlargement in h_2 of the root $*d^her-$ ‘befestigen, fixieren.’ *θρᾶνυς* would come from the zero-grade of d^herh_2- suffixed as d^horh_2-no- . Historical Greek *θρόνος*, which gives us our word for a high-class manufactured object on which privileged people get to ‘set themselves down,’ would be modeled after the outcome of zero-grade d^hrh_2-no- as *θρᾶνυς* and *θρᾶνος*.¹⁴ This makes sense linguistically, but it also makes sense semantically. The simpler, more functional shape of built object for fixing the seated human body at rest would be the *θρᾶνυς* and it would come first. The

¹⁴ See Chantraine (2009: 1307–1308). More recently cf. Petrakis (2020: 63–64) who does not, however, emphasize the significance of *θρᾶνυς* / *θρᾶνος* being the basic term and *θόρνος* / *θρόνος* the later and more structurally complex seating implement. Petrakis (2020: 67 and n. 35) does, however, remark on Hittite records using the same word for stool and footstool and, in Hittite royal funerary rituals, a hierarchical differentiation being made between the king’s cremated remains being placed on a chair or throne and the queen’s remains on a stool or footstool.

more elaborated and luxury-crafted version of seat, the *θρόνος*, would develop out of it.

Díez Platas (2021: 76) observes that *ta-ra-nu* ‘designates two types of objects, unified by the shape, either a stool or footstool.’¹⁵ Some of the *ta-ra-nu-we* are paired with *to-no* and therefore in the prevailing interpretation are taken here automatically as functioning as footstools. Others are, as we have seen, listed on their own and are taken as stools. It is good to point out, however, that if the objective here is to provide equipment so that elite human beings of varying ranks may be seated and dine in pairs, there is no reason that a *ta-ra-nu* has to mean a footstool, just because it is paired with a *to-no*. I will come back to this later.

Here there is an epigraphical problem in understanding a key text. On Ta 714 (Figure 3), we have a text that we can read as follows, again keeping in mind how difficult a task it was for *Phugeg^wris* to identify the items he had to inventory securely for later rechecking and how important it was to make identifying descriptions succinct, as with the *ta-ra-nu-we* on Ta 721.

Ta 714 (text from the definitive transcription of Melena and Firth 2021)

1. to-no , we-a₂-re-jo , a-ja-me-no , ku-wa-no , pa-ra-ku-we , ku-ru-so-qe , o-pi-ke-re-mi-ni-ja
2. a-ja-me-na , ku-ru-so , a-di-ri-ja-pi , se-re-mo-ka-ra-o-re-qe , ku-ru-so , , ku-ru-so-qe , po-ni-ki-pi 1
3. ku-wa-ni-jo-qe , po-ni-ki-pi 1 ta-ra-nu , a-ja-me-no , ku-wa-no , pa-ra-ku-we-qe , ku-ru-so-qe , ku-ru-sa-pi-qe , ko-no-ni-pi 1

The text here can be taken in two ways since there is no Linear B ideogram for a *to-no* that could be used to

¹⁵ Cf. Perna and Zucca (2021: 98–99 and n. 5).



Figure 4 Ta 715 RTI image unsharp masking. Courtesy of The Pylos Digital Tablets Project and The Palace of Nestor Excavations The Department of Classics University of Cincinnati.

make matters clear *for us*. I am sure that within the Pylian record-keeping bureaucracy, the accomplished ‘scribe’ who wrote this text and would most likely later be called upon to read it out would know what he meant when he was jotting down this information as it was dictated by *Phugeg^wris*. Here follow the alternative versions. Arguments that Version A below is an ‘incredibly elliptical reading’ (Shelmerdine 2012: 686; Petrakis 2020: 65 and n. 20) do not factor in the improvisational nature of the inventory, despite its eventual accumulation of detail, and the likelihood that the ‘scribe’ who wrote the text would later be the responsible party consulting it.

Version A

The first two lines record one *to-no* as indicated by the dotted ‘1’ that ends line 2. The dotting is an indicator of caution. It means the editor (Melena) is not fully certain about the reading but considers that the traces on the tablet favor the reading that he gives. In this reading, the two words and sign for ‘1’ at the start of the third line would give a second *to-no* that varies from the first only in the material used for the final inlay motif. The first *to-no* has gold (*ku-ru-so*) *po-ni-ki-pi*. The second has *po-ni-ki-pi* made of ‘glass of blue color’ (*ku-wa-ni-jo*). There is then recorded on line .3 only one *ta-ra-nu*. It is inlaid with the same three materials as the two *thornoi*: *ku-wa-no*, *pa-ra-ku*, and *ku-ru-so*. It has gold *ko-no-ni-pi* and in that aspect aligns with the first *to-no* that likewise has gold *po-ni-ki-pi*. We should notice that a considerable, and I think meaningful, space is left on line 2 *between* the full description of the inlays of the chair and its backrest *and* the gold and blue glass variants that distinguish one *thornos* from the other.

Version B

The reading of the decorative motifs and the materials is the same. But instead of reading the numeral ‘1’ at the end of line 2, the stroke there is read as a word-divider. Therefore, the tablet registers only one *thornos* that would have some *po-ni-ki-pi* in gold and some *po-ni-ki-pi*

in blue glass. Bennett and Olivier (1973: 230–231) read the stroke as the numeral ‘1’ with no question. Melena and Firth (2021: 191) in their apparatus criticus state that the ‘1’ is possibly a word-divider. Olivier and del Freo (2020: 237) read a word-divider and state explicitly in their apparatus criticus ‘après *po-ni-ki-pi* diviseur (ainsi Docs, p. 344) et non <<1>> (PTT)’.¹⁶

I should stress that any argument based on this stroke here having to be a word-divider because the stroke for the numeral ‘1’ is characteristically written by Hand 2 more forcefully or in a different positioning up or down vertically in the line space, should compare *a-pi-qo-to* 1 and *po-ro-e-ke* 1 on line 2 of Ta 715 (Figure 4) and *to-qi-de* 1 on line 2 of Ta 713 (Figure 5) (photographs in Godart and Sacconi 2020: 197–199). They are virtually identical with the contested sign on Ta 714. If all other characters on these three tablets were removed except word-dividers and the number ‘1’, it would be impossible to differentiate many of the word-dividers from the strokes for numeral ‘1’ and vice versa. Moreover, as we have pointed out, in the case of Ta 713.3 and Ta 715.1 the scribe foregoes entirely writing unit strokes for consecutive entries of identical *to-pe-za*.

What is at question here is numbers. If we read Ta 714 according to version A, then we have 6 *thornoi* or ‘chairs,’ 16 *thrānuwes* or ‘stools,’ and 11 *torpedzai* or ‘tables.’ I have mentioned already the prevalence of paired banqueters sharing food and drink together in imagery of funerary and other kinds of feasting ceremonies within the longstanding cultural traditions that influenced the Mycenaean directly or indirectly. 22 seating items and 11 tables create significant pairs. There is no impediment to taking the 5 *to-no* and *ta-ra-nu* ‘sets’ as pairs for dignitaries of different rank: one seated in a ‘chair’ and the other on a stool. As far as symbolizing and conferring status and dignity, we

¹⁶ Docs = Ventris and Chadwick 1973, basic text of first edition. PTT = Bennett and Olivier 1973. Godart and Sacconi (2020: 198) also read a word-divider and give the exact same wording in the apparatus criticus as Olivier and del Freo (2020: 237) indicating a common source.

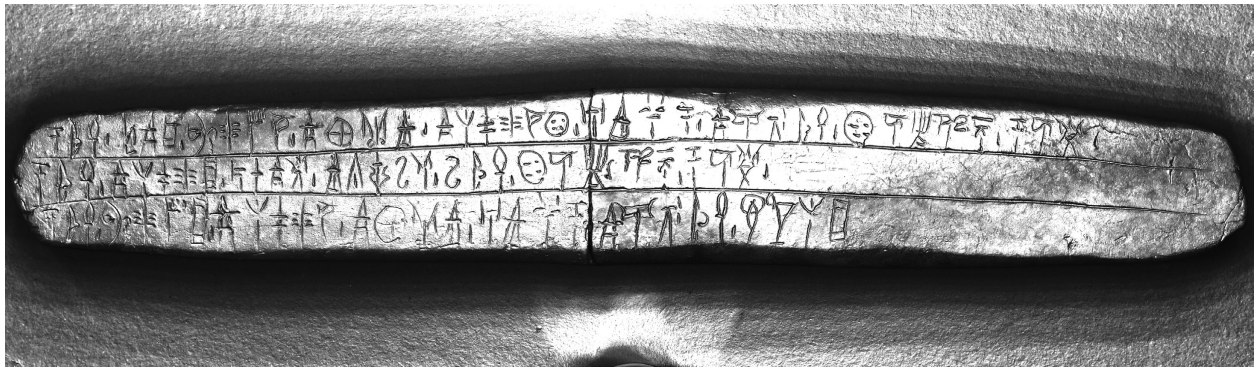


Figure 5 Ta 713 RTI image specular enhancement. Courtesy of The Pylos Digital Tablets Project and The Palace of Nestor Excavations The Department of Classics University of Cincinnati.

should keep in mind that in Minoan power iconography stools are the virtually exceptionless norm (Vetters 2011: 320). And it is now noted that the 22 seating items potentially match up with at least 20 and probably 22 miniature kylikes found in the Archives Complex Room 7 to which the Ta series was delivered (Stocker and Davis 2004: 187–188). More significantly perhaps is that 11 of these kylikes were found in a kind of set along with a collection of cattle bones from a single deposition ‘from at least 10 animals’ (Stocker and Davis 2004: 184 and n. 21). The correspondence of 22 probable miniature kylikes, 22 seats, 11 tables and 11 of the miniature kylikes in among the cattle bone deposition from at least 10, perhaps 11?, animals would seem to be more than wishful coincidence (Stocker and Davis 2004: 191).

I have also mentioned that the seating equipment was reserved for the elite. The mere act of sitting was a token of honor (see below on Henry VIII). We can get a sense of the special station of seated figures at these kind of events by reckoning what kind of attendance the foodstuffs for such a banquet would serve. The superbly cautious and meticulously detailed study of Bendall (2007: 86–93, esp. 89–90) gets across how lavish major feasting events associated with the palatial center at Pylos would have been, using both textual data and animal bone deposits as evidence. Depending on reasonably variant allotment portions of meat per person, single-day banqueting events could involve and satisfy 1020 to 5100 people. Estimating from tablet records giving amounts of wine, 1371–2747 persons. The palatial center is providing seating equipment for 22 elites. To be seated on luxury-designed seating equipment, chair or stool, was indeed a rare privilege.

I close with an historical parallel both for elite seating and for the difficulty of accurately inventorying elite palatial furnishings. King Henry VIII died on 27 January 1547. In September, ‘formal instructions were given for an inventory of his moveable property to be drawn up’ (Starkey 1998: ix). We can consult this massive record because of the exacting scholarly labors of the Society

of Antiquaries, London. We also have drawings and paintings of seating arrangements and paraphernalia in the royal sphere. The James Stephanoff painting of the later (1818) royal receiving room at Hampton Court Palace (Figure 6) is consistent with our inventory. Rank and hierarchy are reflected in seating devices. For the king, a throne. For those privileged enough to be in proximity of the king, stools¹⁷ or no seats at all.¹⁸

Those charged with inventorying had to make differentiations. Whether like or unlike the Mycenaeans, depends on our perspectives. In the inventory of Henry VIII, stools are recorded by the kinds and colors of cloth material used; and the motifs represented on this material were used as key identifiers. In the history of such inventorying, in fact, ‘[w]ith, perhaps the exception of bedsteads, the woodwork of furniture constructed of that material was regarded as distinctly subordinate to the fabrics with which it was covered or upholstered. Chairs and stools are usually indicated by the material and embroidery of their coverings’ (Goodison 1925: 52). The wood is very much secondary. This is even the case with ‘the seat that matters the most, the king’s throne. It is known as the Cloth of the Estate (including the chair, cloth hanging overhead, and carpet underneath). The throne was the physical representation of the king and kingship even when he was not present in the chamber or palace.’¹⁹

¹⁷ Miranda Lee Elston, who is writing her dissertation at UNC-Chapel Hill on ‘Spatial Interaction: Architectural Representation in Early Tudor England,’ provided me with information and advice. She notes that ‘seating in the presence-chamber was very flexible and changed depending on the day and events that were taking place’ (personal communication January 3, 2022). She also emphasizes that ‘in terms of the inventory, there are many inconsistencies. Meaning, the same chair or stool may be called a chair vers[us] a footstool depending on the scribe at the time and location. In the early Tudor period, furniture was very flexible in its use’ (pers. comm. January 3 and 11, 2022).

¹⁸ See the drawing of King Henry VIII dining: https://www.britishmuseum.org/collection/object/P_1854-0628-74.

¹⁹ Miranda Lee Elston (per. comm. January 10, 2022).



Figure 6. https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Hampton_Court_Palace,_Throne_Room,_by_James_Stephanoff,_1818_-_royal_coll_922131_313703_ORI_2.jpg

As to vocabulary, consider entries 9894 to 9900:

9894 Item a Cloose stoole of purple vellat the seate and Elbowes embraudered with two Basons a Codpece and a Cundite of tynne.

9895 Item One Lowe square stoole for women couered with clothe of golde raised with purple vellat pirlled and fringed with purple silke.

9897 Item two like square stooles couered with crimson vellat and fringed with silke.

Then a switch comes.

9903 Item two footestooles of wooded painted thupper partes couered with tawney vellat pirlled and fringed withe silke.

9906 Item Joyned stooles withe steepes.

Items 9428–9439 differentiate among: Cheires / chayres / cheyres and Stooles/ foote Stooles / and Footestools.

The whole point of such variation in seating, with dignitaries and their equals on formal chairs and those somewhat lower in rank on stools or footstools of different heights, sometimes women sitting on cushions or pillows invisible under their spreading skirts, is that just being given the honor of seating is a mark of higher rank and status. We should not be

misguided by modern sensibilities of the comfort level of sitting on a stool.²⁰

I hope that my observations reinforce the need to consider in our historical reconstructions of the equipment for ritual events what careful study of vocabulary items, numbers, inventorying methods, record-keeping practices, epigraphical details of the tablets and historical comparanda all combine to suggest.

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²⁰ In the development of Chinese civilization there was a fixed preference for ‘multiples of so many fixed tables’ serving 10–12 persons and for the use of stools even in elite households except for honored guests: “Stools, also, rather than chairs were invariable for dining, except when special honor was to be shown to one person... and [N.B.] although not especially comfortable for Westerners, they never seem to be considered inadequate by old-fashioned Chinese.” (Kates 1948: 36–38, 48–53, quotation from 38.)

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