# Linear B Deciphered

Linear B is the earliest example of written Greek, dating back to more than 3000 years ago, earning the title of the oldest recorded European language that still exists and is spoken today. While Ancient Greek uses the same letters of the alphabet as modern Greek, Linear B consists of eighty-seven different phonetic signs, and after its discovery in 1878 remained undeciphered for seventy-four years. First discovered at Knossos, a town on Crete, by businessman Minos Kalokairinos in 1878, and later by Sir Arthur Evans at Herakleion and Knossos in 1895, the excavators of the scripts didn't live to see their finds deciphered. Over the archaeological history of the Mediterranean, around 5,000 Linear B tablets have been recovered, mainly from Knossos and Pylos, a city which resided in the Peloponnese. Since their excavation, the Linear B tablets have been studied vigorously by several classicists and were eventually deciphered in 1952. Before the Linear B tablets were deciphered, Sir Arthur Evans had also discovered two other scripts–Linear A and Cretan Hieroglyphic, both of which remain undeciphered to this day. The eventual translation of Linear B and its recognition as a Greek language was a result of generational knowledge produced by three main classists. The work of Michael Ventris and his decipherment of Linear B was possible due to the work of Sir Arthur Evans, the original excavator of the Linear B tablets, and Alice Kober, a woman whose extreme passion for Minoan scripts single handedly brought the decipherment of Linear B closer to completion than anyone else.

Linear B has no bilingual inscription–nothing like the Rosetta Stone that contains the same text in two languages or more. These bilingual inscriptions are vital for the decipherment of ancient writing systems, as they allow for a fast and precise decipherment. Of the findings, the most important was that of the largely syllabic nature of Linear B. This means that each sign in Linear B would represent a syllable consisting of either a pure vowel, or a consonant and vowel. These discoveries enabled further classicists to spend the next seventy-four years trying to decipher the secrets Linear B held.

Kober had a system of creating notecards of statistics for various signs, and the fragmentary inscriptions of Linear B and where they were found. Before her death, Kober was able to annotate 180,000 cards, including the frequency of each character in any position in a word (initial, second, middle, next-to-last, and final); the characters that appeared before and after every sign; the chances of a given character's occurring in combination with any other character; and repeated instances of two- and three-character clusters. Kober had three distinguished finds that led to the decipherment: the inflection of Linear B, the creation of "Kober's triplets", and the classification of male and female logographic signs. Ventris would later use "Kober's triplets" as reasoning to tie Linear B to being a proto-classical Greek.

Michael Ventris is able to claim the title of the man who deciphered Linear B due to his architectural guesswork and creativity combined with the generational knowledge produced by Sir Arthur Evans and Alice Kober. Ventris turned to the statistical analysis of the signs. After calculations, Ventris found that the "□","□", and "□" signs appear at a high frequency. He made the conclusion that these must be "pure vowels", or the signs in a syllabic script that do not contain a consonant. Though having major methodological limitations, this singular discovery

ultimately led to the full decipherment of Linear B. Ventris began to supplement the high frequency signs for pure vowels, like “a”, “e”, “i”, and “o” in tandem with using Cypriot, an old script that contains Linear B-like signs. Allotting the letter “a” as “□” and using similar Cypriot script signs, Ventris stumbled across a match for a triplet that spelled out “amnisos”, or in Linear B “□-□-□-□ / A-mi-ni-so”, a major port on Crete. This led to a further investigation in an attempt to find more Cretan towns. It was found that the tablets did procure official documentation from palace archives, written in a pre-historic Greek syllabary. Finally, in 1952, seventy-four years after the first tablets were found, Ventris was able to proclaim that he had solved the excruciating riddle that was Linear B.

Though the process was long, the eventual decipherment of the Linear B tablets was fruitful, giving a civilization lost in history illumination, and a place in the light as a prospering city. Evans, Kober, and Ventris all developed important additions to the knowledge surrounding the Linear B tablets, allowing for a decipherment of an archaeological beauty that had no language, script, or bilingual comparison. Though nothing of literary value amounted from the decipherment, with the tablets only containing lists of names of palace administrators, trades, and goods, Mycenaean society was finally understood. If anything, more questions than answers appeared from the decipherment, due to the mentioning of a possible human sacrifice, as well as questions of whether Homer existed in Mycenaean times, why the writing was lost, why Pylos fell, and if the Greeks were illiterate until the introduction of the classical Greek alphabet known today. However, the accumulation of information from the tablets, as well as the feat of deciphering the tablets was impressive in itself. Monuments of prehistoric Greece have finally been provided with a linguistic commentary, with concluding proof that their makers were Greek. Through Evans, Kober, and Ventris, modern classicists can teach of a Mycenaean civilization through fact, not story.

Great books about Linear B! (all can be found in Olin library)

*The Decipherment of Linear B* – John Chadwick

*The Riddle of the Labyrinth: The Quest to Crack an Ancient Code and the Uncovering of a Lost Civilisation* – Margalit Fox

*The Man Who Deciphered Linear B: The Story of Michael Ventris* – Andrew Robinson