Mykenes röst

Tolkningen av Linear B

J.Chadwick

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To decipher an old text is different from deciphering a secret code, the latter is meant to be unbreakable, while the difficulties of an old text are accidental and unintentional, and as such surprisingly more insurmountable than those of the latter. In many cases the unravelling of an ancient text is due to a lucky break, such as a Rosetta stone, in which there is a partial correspondence with an already known text. The difficulties are two-fold. On one hand there is the obvious of interpreting the signs, on the other hand the impossibility of knowing what language it is framed in. If the language is known straightforward statistical and combinatorial analysis is usually enough, provided there is enough of a varied text[1]. A language could either be fonetic, as with the case of most standard alpahbets, or syllabilic, such as modern Japanese to some extent, in which different syllables are encoded. Finally we have purely ideogrammatic languages, such as Chinese, consisting of hieroglyphes one corresponding to a concept. Those clearly are the most intractable.

Scripts from ancient Aegean civilizations were discovered in the early 20th century on clay tablets. Two related scripts were identified, named Linear A and Linear B. Ironically the retention of the clay tablets were due to the fact that the palaces in which they were stored were plundered and burned to the ground, causing them to be fired and potentially indefinitely survivable. Most of the tablets were of the Linear B type, which were mainly found in the former palace of Knossos[2]. Many attempts were made to decipher them by amateurs, i.e. professional classical philologists and archeologists. Daring hypothesis were framed, some of which were unfalsifiable involving unknown languages which were made up as they went along. The author makes a few sarcastic comments. The breakthrough would wait until the early 50's when an amateur, a young architect by name of Michael Ventris, broke the code. His method was painstaking and combinatorial, assuming a syllabic script in which consonants were paired with vowels. By sifting through texts finding regularities (and in this he was aided by a very good visual memory) he strove to construct tables in which syllabic signs corresponding to the same vowel or consonant were placed vertically and horizontally respectively. In the struggle of doing so it dawned upon him that the language used was in fact Greek, and not one of several others he had provisionally tried. Once this assumption was made a breakthrough was imminent. He enlisted the aid of an experienced Greek philologist - J.Chadwick (the author of the present book) to reassure

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[1] The case of Etruscan is a point. It is written in a known script but an unknown language. To figure out the language has turned out to be impossible, as the amount of text is limited and unvaried.

[2] The discovery and excavation of which was done by the English archeologist Arthur Evans (1851-41)

himself that he was on the right track. Apart from a few dissenting voices his interpretation was quickly and universally accepted and he was hailed as a hero, having accomplished the greatest feat in the humanistic sciences of the the 20th century, having pushed back Greek history almost a thousand years. Soon after this triumph he was killed in a traffic accident n his early thirties.

Now how can you be reasonably sure that a solution is indeed the right one? The check is obvious, use your solution to new texts more o less unrelated to those you have used to decipher. If your rules of interpretations are incorrect, what will ensue is nonsense, but if not, surely you are correct, that stands to reason. That kind of confirmation was soon in the coming.

Now what did this new ability add to our knowledge of Mycenaean civilization beyond that disclosed by archeological excavations? One important fact has already been established, namely that the language used was Greek, and that the civilization in a sense was a precursor to the classical. Otherwise the quarry turned out to be meager. All of those tablets concerned different kinds of inventories and keeping of records, all done in a kind of short-hand. Thus there are no traces of any literary or private communications, and the tablets were obviously not meant to be preserved over the years[3]. Still they have added somewhat to the knowledge of archaic Greek, part of which had been reconstructed anyway. In the almost sixty years which have passed since the decipherment not too many new and exciting tablets seems to have been found. As Chadwick writes in his book, the possibility of finding a Mycenaean library is exceedingly slim. It is doubtful whether the literacy did go beyond the employed experts in the palaces, anyway the skill seems to have vanished after their places of employment were sacked and destroyed.

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[3] Possibly they were just preliminary notes later to be transcribed to paper or pergament, which expired in the conflagrations that ended the civilization.