Ancient Crete: The Minoans, Mycenaeans, And their Writing Systems
“One of the great islands of the world
In midsea, in the winedark sea, is Krete,
Spacious and rich and populous, with ninety
Cities and a mingling of tongues.
Akhaians there are found, along with Kretan
Hillmen of old stock, and Kydonians,
Dorians in three blood lines, Pelasgians -”

-Homer, The Odyssey (XIX: 202-208)
The Minotaur and the Labyrinth

- King Minos' succession struggle
- Prays to Poseidon
- Keeps bull instead of sacrificing it
- Pasiphaë falls in love with bull and copulates with it
- Minotaur born
- Labyrinth built at Knossos to house him
Original Find:
- Arthur Evans (1851-1941) attached great importance to myths
- First found seal stones, Cretan Hieroglyphics, from 2nd millennium BC
- Concentrating at Knossos, found few Linear A and much Linear B
- Could not translate either script, but distinguish the two
Cretan Hieroglyphics

- Earliest form of Cretan writing
- Used 3rd millennium - 1500 BC on Crete
- Over 90 syllabograms
- Evolved into Linear A
- Show early Babylonian and Egyptian influence
- 1500 signs on 300 documents

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Linear A:
- Used until ~1450 BC on Crete and other Aegean Islands
- First found at Phaistos palace
  - Clay tablets inscribed with stylus
- Was a syllabry of ~75 signs
- Syllable either vowel, or consonant+vowel
- Unknown what language it encodes
- May end up being read, but never understood
  - Similar fate to Etruscan
- 75,000 signs on 1500 documents
Linear B:

- Adapted from Linear A
- Originally dates to 16th c BC in Greece and Crete
- Had around 87 signs
  - Scaled back to 55 for Greek
- Found almost exclusively in economic archives
  - Knossos
  - Pylos, Mycenae, Thebes, Tiryn
- Could be deciphered as encoded known language
- Clumsy writing system
  - Omitted consonants at end of vowels
  - Conflated signs into 1 sign:
    - L & R
    - P & B & PH
    - G & KH
- 30,000 signs on 2,000 documents
Linear B:

- Also made use of logograms
- Forms evolved from Cretan Hieroglyphics
The Decoder:

- Alice Kober (1906-50)
- Laid groundwork
- Identified word stems and grammatical cases
The Translator:

- Michael Ventris (1922-56)
- Claimed that Linear B had Etruscan affinities
- Changed view, deciphered Linear B in 1952
  - Early form of Greek - Mycenaean
Proof of Greek Linear B:
- Carl Blegen (1887-1971)
- Excavated Pylos in Greece
- Found tablet describing pots

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<tr>
<th>English</th>
<th>Linear B</th>
<th>Greek</th>
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<tr>
<td>1 tripod</td>
<td>ti-ri-po</td>
<td>tripou(s)</td>
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<tr>
<td>2 tripods</td>
<td>ti-ri-po-de</td>
<td>tripode</td>
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<tr>
<td>Tripod without handles</td>
<td>a-no-we</td>
<td>an- (prefix for without)</td>
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<tr>
<td>3 handles</td>
<td>ti-ri-yo-we</td>
<td>Tri- (prefix for three)</td>
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<tr>
<td>4 handles</td>
<td>qe-to-ro-we</td>
<td>(Prefix quattor is Latin)</td>
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Decipherment of Linear A:

- Phonetic values assumed from Linear B
- Language of Linear A, Minoan, unknown
- Numerous theories as to what language(s) it encodes
  - Semitic
  - Language from Asia Minor
  - Related to Etruscan?
  - Language isolate?
- Without a bilingual text, may never be translated
Etocretan:

- Believed to be descendent language of Minoan after Minoan Civilization ended
- Shows possible links to Semitic languages
  - Wine bottle inscribed ya-ne = yan (wine) in Ugaritic
  - Totals in accounting labeled ku-lo (all) = kull- in various Semitic languages
  - Bowl labeled a-ga-nu = 'agganu (bowl) in Hebrew, Aramaic, Akkadian
  - Not enough to determine if truly Semitic or cases of linguistic borrowing
Psycho Stone at Dictyan:

- Made ~300 BC
- Written in Etocretan with three Linear A syllables at the end
- Possibly shows link between Minoan and Etocretan
- Continues Minoan tradition of dedicatory texts
  - “I, Enete son of Siphai, have presented this engraved stone, (Linear A syllables)”
  - Although no one translation of this is definite
Who Were the Minoans?

- Wide mingling of peoples
- First people arrived in Crete 7th millennium BC from Asia Minor
- After ~4,000 BC influences from Mesopotamia and Syria-Lebanon
- Late 2nd millennium BC brought people from Egypt and Levant, as well as Bronze Workers from Asia Minor
- Major stepping stone
Knossos:
- Major palace building ~1700-1600 BC
- Arrangement of interior gardens
- Mesopotamian style
- Fairly advanced plumbing
- Egyptian and Mesopotamian style pillars
- Commanded trade with Troy, Greece, and Asia Minor
Phaistos:
- Palace on southern shore
- Commanded trade with Egypt and Levant
- Equal power to Knossos
Minoan Trade:

- Set up various colonies throughout region:
  - ~2,000 BC at island of Cythera, mainland Onugnathos, and Thera
  - Mainland Greece
  - Rhodes
  - ~1600 BC Aegean Coast of Asia Minor at Miletus
  - Cyprus, Syrian Coast (Ugarit and Alalakh)
  - Egypt and Cyrene
- Cretan wheat and barley high quality
- Wine and Olive Oil money makers
Minoan Politics:

- Likely ruled by bureaucratic monarchy
  - State operated as a business
  - King ruled as entrepreneur
  - Extensive economic records
- Strong navy
Minoan Art and Leisure:

- Reveled in interpretations of nature
- Earlier works under Mesopotamian and Egyptian influence
- Impressionistic tones lacking solemnity of Mesopotamia or tranquility of Egypt
  - Playful art focusing on earth-mother
- Participated in leisure sports (unusual)
  - Bull jumping
  - Boxing
Minoan Decline:

- ~1500 crater island Thera erupted
  - Cretan colony buried under 25-50 feet of ash
  - Tidal wave devastated Crete
- Knossos revived, but 14th c BC rocked by earthquake
- Knossos again revived under Mycenaean rule
Who Were the Mycenaeans?

• Greek mainlanders under Cretan influence
• Immortalized in Illiad as Greeks fighting Troy
• Controlled fortified cities of Mycenae, Pylos, Thebes, Tiryns, and Athens
  • Later conquered Crete
• Heavily militaristic
• Ruled by warrior kings – wanax
  • Second in command warrior caste – heqetas
• Had advanced bronze weaponry
Adoption of Writing:

- Adapted Linear B from Linear A at Knossos
  - After 1300 BC Linear B found at Pylos and Thebes
- Used to record extensive trade and labor force
- No literary epics or literature in Linear B found
Mycenaean Trade:

- Inherited Minoan trade
  - Precious metals, linen, papyrus and rope from Egypt
  - Crete, Rhodes, Miletus became dependencies
  - Cyprus settled and copper mines opened
  - Settlements opened in Israel, Lebanon, Syria
  - Babylonian seals found at Thebes
  - Mycenaean type gold and bronze objects found at Tbilisi
  - Settlers on Sicily
  - ~1400 settled Taranto in Italy
  - Marked first time trade with Spain
  - Mycenaean beads and motifs found in France, England, and Ireland
Mycenaean Decline:

- ~1200 – 1000 Mycenaeans decline and collapse
- Dorians from Northern Greek Plains overrun them
  - Pylos, Mycenae, Tiryn destroyed
  - Athens somehow spared
- Greece enters 'Dark Ages'
  - Non-literate again until ~600 BC
Conclusions:

- Cretan Hieroglyphics inspired by Egyptian and Mesopotamian Writing
- Abundance of trade and political development necessitated writing system
  - Evolution of Linear A
- Conquest of Minoans by Greek speaking Mycenaeans
  - Evolution of Linear B to better fit language
- Writing systems adapt to languages using them
Sources:


