

17 November 1959

Mr. David Kahn  
Windsor Gate  
Great Neck, New York

Dear Mr. Kahn:

The forwarding of your letter has not caused all of the delay in answering, nor has the rather difficult question you asked. I wish I knew just how to answer it offhand, but I don't.

I think part of the answer is in the very aspect which first attracted you to it, that it is a remarkable feat of cryptography. The practical value of cryptography or cryptanalysis you will admit is far smaller than the satisfaction one has in working with ~~the~~ cryptograms as things to be composed or broken down. With Linear B there is the additional matter that everyone can get into the act, for there still is and always will be the matter of interpreting into intelligible Greek what the texts provide as a less satisfactory representation of speech than we, or even the later Greeks, are used to. But as with cryptograms, the process by which this one was broken will probably not give any specific clues to the next problem of an undeciphered script, so that the breaking of this in itself will have no useful effect on this kind of cryptographic problem. The elements of Ventris' method are not new; only the right combination in competent hands, and enough stuff was needed. So that part of the matter has a high, but thoroughly unpractical interest.

As for the information directly discovered from the texts, since they are not royal correspondence, laws, or religious texts, but only probably routine economic accounting, we are not likely to find more practical value than in Thomas Jefferson's household accounts.

As for the information indirectly discovered from the texts, such as the presence of Greeks in Crete rather than that of Cretans in Greece, or Palmer's Indo-Europeans as a stronger element in Greek origins (correctly interpreted, but a debatable question for others than Palmer), these are interesting to the ancient historian, who will use them as centers for pulling together facts into new theories or new accounts of the history of Greece or the Near East in those times. But for practicality, it is very difficult even to use the full narratives of Thucydides as a guide for modern conduct of politics or warfare (though this has been tried, e.g. Geo. Marshall) it would be impossible to use a modern ancient historian's reconstruction of Minoan or Mycenaean history in any practical way. But again a thoroughly fascinating thing can be ancient history, if one has found an interest in it, and then every new piece of the puzzle of what happened in ancient history is fascinating too.

I imagine that the decipherment does have some immediate historical importance, but I also think that it probably cannot now be known. Compare Champollion and Egyptian, which are surely responsible for an Obelisk in Central Park, for a monstrous pylon gate to a cemetery in New Haven, for the Oriental Institute of the University of Chicago, perhaps even in some remote way for this decipherment. But could Champollion or any of his contemporaries have foreseen such good and bad results? I should think some then saw its importance as another step in our knowledge of our origins, while others saw the mysteries of ancient wisdom about to be unveiled. Even for Mycenaean I've found a few of the latter type.

I remain blissfully ignorant of journalism, though I have been asked your question before by at least half a dozen newspaper people, among them Sanka Knox, and I've not yet found a satisfactory answer for you. But if you ask how it might impinge upon the interests of the educated person who is not an historian, I begin to suspect that the ~~answer is~~ failure to answer is not entirely my fault but partly the result of the type of question asked. For instance: In British newspapers the subject has found no want of material to write about. I take it that British education and British political interests and the fact that an Englishman did it will account for a lot of it. Greek is still studied a bit earlier in life and a bit more intensively than it generally is over here, Britain is full of Roman ruins, which are always turning up, and keep the normal Briton aware of antiquity, Britain has ~~intimate~~ intimate and sometimes distressing ties with Greek-speaking countries, especially in Cyprus, and has always had far closer relations with Greece itself than we have had, except in 1822 and in the Marshall plan. And you will admit, as I must, that the British are pretty good at cryptanalysis anyhow. ~~Still~~ Though the number of scholars actively interested in the problem in England is hardly any larger than those over here, the average educated Briton is likely to have a few more catchwords than the average American to draw his attention to the decipherment or its results. On the other hand, I can't think that the average American (educated or not) is as uniform as I suspect journalism supposes him to be. Lots of people have studied some Greek, more have studied Latin and know it to be an ancient language, lots who studied Latin were told, as I was, that there was Etruscan, still an unreadable language, lots have had some contact with ancient history, some have read novels like "The King must die"---any one of these and other unexpected bits of interest might turn somebody's eye to the story of the decipherment. There'll be lots of thoroughly educated people who will pay no attention to it, for lack of any connection with their interest, just as I, being out of the country in 1953-54, and having no television set, can not get excited about either McCarthy or Van Doren, and will not read more than a paragraph of a story about either.

But I don't want to stop before I suggest at least one book which might give a better answer to your question. That's T. B. L. Webster's From Homer to Mycenae, London, Methuen, 1958. He's got a lot of detail in it, but also a considerable imagination, and makes out a fine picture of Aegean history in the time covered by his title. Also, I can't tell from your letter whether you know Chadwick's Decipherment of Linear B, which is a sort of improved first half of Ventris and Chadwick's, Documents in Mycenaean Greek, and very well done.

One last addition, as a few moment's recreation for the president of the New York Cipher Society. In the fuss raised by Professor Beattie of Edinburgh about the correctness of the decipherment one of the more ingenious examinations of Ventriss's methods and replies to Beattie was done by an Australian named Treweek, who is at least a mathematician and perhaps cryptographer too, though I'm not sure of that part. But he presents this:

PR QWERTYUIO IPGGEHPYSUN JU ZAJXAO OJXAOKJXAO

TUERIZ RJ IPER XJ ZAOJGPUZOEK

I hope I've put no garbles into it.

I should be very glad too, if it is at all possible to see or have copies of your talks on the decipherment. I am trying to make myself a sort of archive of everything which pertains to it, for I'm sure that many pertinent things will be hard to find if after thirty or forty years some historian tries to go back over it.

I wish I'd been able to give you a more satisfactory answer, and perhaps somebody could have, but I can hope that mine has been of some help.

Sincerely yours,

Emmett L. Bennett, Jr.