

Hunter College of the City of New York
Department of Classics

March 5, 1957.

Dear Colleagues:

This year's Earle Lecture, to take place on Friday, March 22, will be on a subject that should appeal to every one.

Not long ago our newspapers gave front-page space to an exciting announcement. A young English architect named Ventris succeeded in solving a supposedly insoluble problem. He had deciphered the Cretan inscriptions written in a mysterious script known as Minoan Linear B: he had proved that these unknown signs each represent a syllable (as scholars had guessed), each syllable consisting of a consonant and a vowel; he had found out what these syllables were; he had also found out what the words consisting of these combinations of syllables meant; and, most exciting of all, he had proved to what language these words belong, and that it was Greek. Scholars in general had not believed that any of these very ancient Cretan inscriptions were in Greek. Of course, it is an extremely old form of Greek, much older than Homer, probably about the same age as Hittite. And in many ways it shows forms that we would expect such an early variety of Greek to have: for instance, the word for "four" begins with a sound which probably presupposes the Indo-European labio-velar (kw) just as Latin quattuor does, whereas the Greek word in the form known to us from a later day, Homeric tessares, Attic tettares, has changed this sign to a dental (t). Also, the decipherment of these inscriptions tells us much about early Greek history: for instance, we now know without doubt that the great Mycenaean civilization of Greece was genuinely Hellenic, not Minoan as many had believed.

The way Ventris did his wonderful job is as fascinating as the solution of any cryptogram or the breaking of any code. Ventris himself has told us about it in a book which appeared just before his tragically untimely death in an automobile accident last fall. Of the small group of scholars who worked with him and who are now continuing his work (for of course a vast amount still remains to be done), one is an American, Professor Emmett L. Bennett of Yale University. He is going to be our Earle Lecturer this year, and he will tell us how the inscriptions were deciphered. We do hope that you will come to hear him, and that you will invite your students to come too. All are welcome.

The Earle Lecture, as I said, will be on Friday, March 22; it will begin at 4:15, and will be preceded by the Earle Tea, from 3 to 4:15. Both Tea and Lecture will take place in the North Lounge.

Yours very sincerely,

E. Adelaide Hahn

E. Adelaide Hahn,
Chairman,
Department of Classics.

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