

THE ANCIENT PAST

LEARNING A LANGUAGE TO CONNECT MATERIALS WITH USERS

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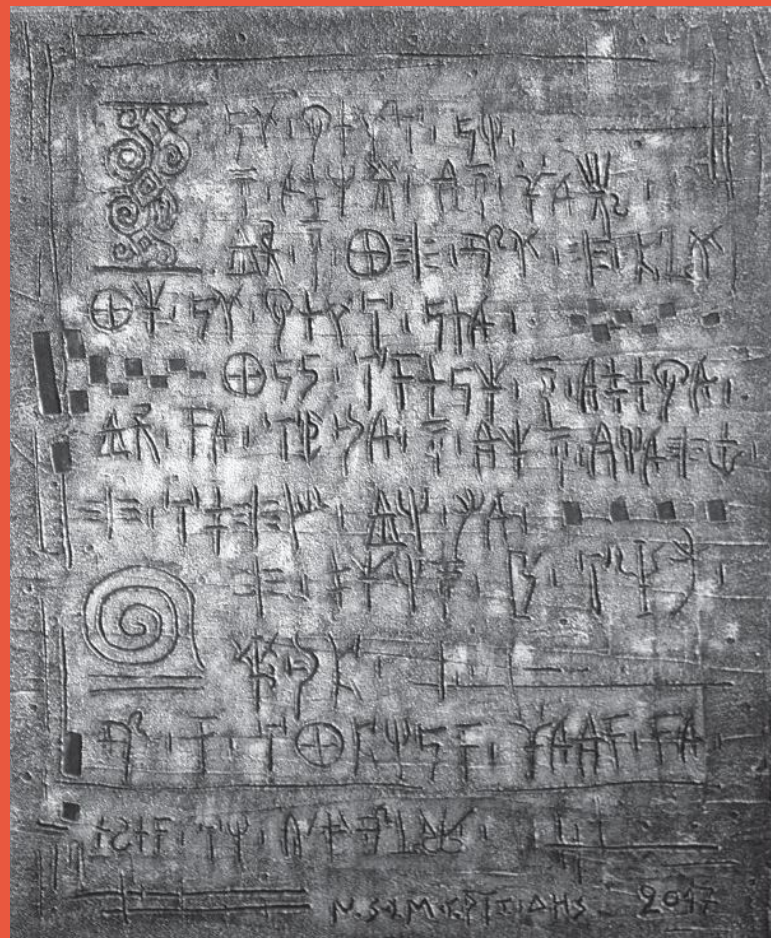
Archives of the ancient world evince the longevity of our shared interests in preserving and documenting the culture, government, and knowledge of civilization. Whether studied by global travelers, classical archaeologists and historians, or filmmakers and television producers, archival materials from the ancient Mediterranean are contributing to collective memory, educational programming, and institutional collections.

In this vein, the Program in Aegean Scripts and Prehistory (PASP) in the Department of Classics at The University of Texas at Austin fosters research and scholarship on the use of writing in Minoan Crete, Mycenaean Greece, and the island of Cyprus during the Bronze Age. There is a special focus on two early writing systems: Linear A and Cretan hieroglyphics (1900–1450 BCE) and Linear B (1400–1200 BCE).

The program boasts an international base of researchers and users, and in recent years, staff have improved collection accessibility by reconfiguring physical spaces, advancing digitization projects, preserving endangered email accounts, and expanding the scope of collections to provide better access to these important materials.

Making Space for Digital Processing

In response to increased requests for material online, we configured a new processing area for both digital archiving and physical archiving work. The benefits of digitizing materials in-house cannot be overstated, as it ameliorates issues with



incomplete documentation or scanning done by third parties. Although setting up this area meant we deaccessioned obsolete equipment such as a microfilm viewer, we ultimately created more space for acquiring new material.

A contemporary painting by Nikos Samartzidis using Linear B texts. *Courtesy of The University of Texas at Austin.*

We follow the workflows set forth by the US National Archives and Records Administration's (NARA) *Technical Guidelines for Digitizing Archival Materials for Electronic Access*¹ to keep our digital scanning economical while also achieving high-quality digital images. Working within budget, we purchased an Epson Perfection V600 photo scanner and external hard drive for storing digital files. PASP adheres to rigorous standards in making decisions about the preparation, scanning, reshelving, processing, and attributing of keywords to our material. We employ open-source and free software for processing digital images, such as GIMP, PDFsam, and ABBYY FineReader Sprint 9.0, which keeps costs low while retaining high-quality digital files.

The Language of the Collection

Better access to materials means thorough and accurate description—an especially difficult task if you don't know the language in which a record was written. One of PASP's core collections is the Emmett L. Bennett, Jr. Papers. Bennett, a "founding father" of Mycenaean script study, assembled a

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research library of 2,500 items from his career and editorship of the journal *Nestor*, which he founded in 1957. His hundreds of records spanning half a century are in several languages—Greek, French, German, or Linear B.

In processing 500 items of correspondence in Bennett's extensive collection, archivist Garrett Bruner learned a new language—Linear B! Bruner studied tablet classification standards, the conventions of Linear B publication material, and publications such as John Chadwick's *Linear B and Related Scripts*, *The Mycenaean World*, and *A Companion to Linear B*. His colleague, Classics PhD candidate Cassandra Donnelly, was engaged in similar study for her work, along with fellow student Caolán Mac an Aircinn, and the three regularly met with PASP Director Thomas Palaima, who assisted in editing and tutoring on Linear B paleography. The time that PASP staff set aside to teach the language basics and syllabary was invaluable.

These newly processed pieces and the overall expansion of our digital presence has garnered a greater international reception, according to Texas ScholarWorks. Usage statistics for online collection materials in 2017 had hovered around 600 to 900 downloads a month. Since uploading Bennett's correspondence, downloads have been as high as 3,400 per month—a 440% increase. Such data inform the usefulness of our projects in PASP and the direction our energies might go to make our material more widely available.

PASP's archival collections form the core—but not the entirety—of materials one can encounter both onsite and online. To provide a more thorough catalog of our materials, we created a digital asset directory encompassing PASP's files, reference materials, and digitized holdings. Data on obsolete media such as ZIP disks and hard drives are being imaged and backed up locally and via ftp to university-recommended cloud storage services.

Preserving Emails While We Can

Our email preservation efforts reveal how endangered digital communications, especially nonactive messages, truly are. We contacted the University of Wisconsin, where Bennett taught for thirty years, but was informed that staff had purged all email accounts left un-updated in 2012—just a year after Bennett's death.

This loss of material prompted us to consider the emails of Palaima (a MacArthur Fellow for his work in Aegean prehistory and early Greek language and culture), which we soon backed up on a local disk storage and a cloud-based server space (designated for storage rather than point of entry for public access). In 2018, using a combination of Thunderbird and an add-on import-export tool, all emails and attachments were

migrated successfully; individual messages and threads can be generated into a range of formats such as PDF, raw .txt, or .csv files. Appraisal using Stanford Libraries' ePADD app² is ongoing and is necessary before permitting online or offline access to this material.

While Palaima's emails span the years 1993 to 2018 and number more than 150,000 messages, we discovered that this was not his first account at Texas. An earlier account on a defunct domain server could be accessed only through local copies in Eudora file formats that we now need to restore using a legacy app or emulation.

Connecting the Past with the Present

Our collection of scripts from the ancient past expanded to include the contemporary painting collection of Nikos Samartzidis. A painter, poet, musician, Hellenophile, and scholar of Aegean scripts, Samartzidis uses Linear B to represent as visible speech famous poems and songs on poignant human themes. He then uses Linear B texts as decorative, design, or symbolic elements in his paintings and inscribed works of art, such as the surfaces of CDs and artistic clay tablets. His paintings imitate the aesthetic of recovered fragments of tablets inscribed with Linear B characters.

Bruner exercised his new language skills in transliterating the paintings—with hundreds of lines of Linear B—to the Roman alphabet. Samartzidis provided translations of each donated painting's poem from Greek to English.

To display this unique collection, an online exhibit was created using Scalar and Texas ScholarWorks.³ Palaima's research in PASP placed Samartzidis' poetic-paintings in the historical context of Linear B and the traditions of Greek oral poetry. Bruner and graduate student Yogita Sharma completed cataloging for the digital surrogates and exhibit metadata of the Samartzidis collection in Spring 2018, and we've digitally preserved the exhibit using Scalar's RDF-XML export tools, HTTrack for rebuilding the site in HTML pages, and .csv metadata files.

PASP's vast materials are essential to furthering the study of Linear B and related subjects, and there's much we can still do to engage with them. Clear documentation of project scope and goals, digital copies of data, students' assistance, and scholars' feedback will move the work forward. ■

Notes

- ¹ "Technical Guidelines," NARA (2004), <https://www.archives.gov/files/preservation/technical/guidelines.pdf>.
- ² "ePADD," Stanford Libraries, <https://library.stanford.edu/projects/epadd>.
- ³ "Scalar," Alliance for Networking Visual Culture (2018), <https://scalar.me/anvc/scalar/>. See further project description at <http://sites.utexas.edu/scripts/2018/02/28/paintings-and-poetry-in-linear-b-the-nikos-samartzidis-collection/>.