

Michael Ventris Papers

Program in Aegean Scripts and Prehistory (PASP)

Classics Department
University of Texas at Austin

Collection Summary

Creator: Michael Ventris

Title: Michael Ventris Papers

Inclusive Dates: 1948-1956

Bulk Dates: 1948-1956

Abstract: The publications, manuscripts, and correspondence of Michael Ventris, the man credited with the decipherment of Linear B in 1952. Correspondence includes letters with various colleagues and associates, primarily Emmett L. Bennett, Jr. Alice E. Kober, and Sir John L. Myres.

Quantity: Five document boxes in the PASP offices; 249 items (6.5 linear feet/1.75 cubic feet)

Call Number: N/A, pending

Administrative Information

Acquisition Information:

Donors: Emmett Bennett, Jr., Thomas G. Palaima, the Ashmolean Museum, and the University of Uppsala.

Donation Date: 1985

Processing Information:

Item level inventory and finding aid.

By: C. Costlow

Date: Fall 2007

Index Terms

Persons

Bennett, Emmett L., Jr.
Blegen, Carl
Chadwick, John
Daniel, John Franklin
Hrozný, B.
Hunter, Patrick
Kober, Alice
Myres, Sir John
Sittig, Ernst
Ventriss, Lois

Organizations

Architectural Association
Royal Air Force

Publications

American Journal of Archaeology
Antiquity
Archaeology
Documents in Mycenaean Greek
Études Mycéniennes
Jahrbuch für kleinasiatische Forschung
The Listener

Subjects

Cypro-Minoan
Decipherment
Linear A
Linear B
Minoan Syllabary
Statistical Analysis

Places

Crete
Greece
London
Oxford
Pylos
Knossos
Scarborough

Document Types

Articles
Carbon copies

Letters
Offprints
Photocopies
Transcripts

Creator Sketch

Michael George Francis Ventris (1922–1956) was born in Wheathamstead, England, and educated privately in England and Switzerland and later at Stowe School from 1935 to 1939. As a boy, Ventris was fascinated with the classics, and much of his early education was of an informal nature, obtained primarily through books, travel, and self-taught languages. Ventris could speak six European languages as well as read Latin and classical Greek.

In 1936, during a school trip to the Burlington House Exhibition, 14-year-old Ventris heard the famed archaeologist Sir Arthur Evans lecture on the Linear B script that he had discovered at Knossos. This encounter sparked Ventris's lifelong obsession with Linear B. Four years later, in 1940, his first attempt at the decipherment of Linear B, "Introducing the Minoan Language," was published in the *American Journal of Archaeology*, although he would later reject the theories presented in the paper.

In 1940, Ventris entered the Architectural Association School. His studies were interrupted shortly thereafter by World War II, during which he served in the Royal Air Force as a navigator. Upon completion of his service in 1946, Ventris reentered the Architectural Association School, and he earned his diploma with honors in 1948. During the next few years, Ventris returned to work on the ancient scripts during his spare time, creating a "work group" of colleagues that exchanged notes through correspondence. To members of the group Ventris circulated his work notes, which detailed his progress step by step. In addition, Ventris circulated a questionnaire to survey the progress of others working on decipherment, including, among others, Alice E. Kober and Emmett L. Bennett, Jr. The results of this survey were compiled into the "Mid-Century Report" in 1950.

Ventris' progress on the decipherment of Linear B was influenced heavily by the work of other scholars, particularly that of Kober. She had noted that certain words in Linear B inscriptions had changing word endings, or declensions in the manner of Latin or Greek. Using this clue, Ventris constructed a series of grids associating the symbols on the tablets with consonants and vowels. Although *which* consonants and vowels they were could not yet be identified, Ventris learned enough about the structure of the underlying language to begin guessing.

In 1951, additional Linear B tablets were discovered on the Greek mainland and were subsequently published, and Ventris began to suspect that some of the sequences of symbols he encountered on in the tablet texts were actually names. Noting that certain names appeared only in the Linear B texts, Ventris made an inspired guess that the names applied to cities on the island. Using the symbols he could decipher from this, Ventris soon decoded much of the text and determined that the underlying language of Linear B was in fact an archaic form of Greek. In June of 1952, Ventris announced his discovery over a British radio program.

With the assistance of Cambridge linguist John Chadwick, Ventris assembled striking evidence supporting his theory. Their historic paper, "Evidence for Greek Dialect in the Mycenaean Archives," was published 1953, followed by an almost universal acceptance of the decipherment. Tragically, however, Ventris was killed only a few years later in an automobile

accident on September 6, 1956. Ventris' and Chadwick's second major publication, *Documents in Mycenaean Greek*, was published just a few weeks after Ventris' unexpected death.

Scope and Content

Publications, manuscripts, and correspondence are included in the 249 items that comprise the Michael Ventris Papers (1948-1956) of the Program in Aegean Scripts and Prehistory.

The first group of the collection includes Ventris' scholarly publications (7 items), one of which is Ventris' first published attempt at decipherment from 1940, "Introducing the Minoan Language." Also included are several articles published after the decipherment of Linear B, including two that were written in conjunction with John Chadwick.

The second group of materials, Manuscripts (3 items), contains two versions of the manuscript "Evidence for Greek Dialect in the Mycenaean Archives." This paper was written by Ventris and Chadwick in support of Ventris' decipherment of Linear B. The paper was published in 1953 in the *Journal of Hellenic Studies*. The second manuscript, "Europe's Oldest Written Language," was never published.

Radio transcripts (2 items) comprise the third group of the collection. The first transcript is that of Ventris' speech on BBC radio during which he announced his decipherment of Linear B in 1952. The second transcript, of a talk entitled "The Tablets of Ancient Crete," was broadcast in 1956.

The third group of material is Assorted Material (8 items). This group contains Ventris' Greek identification card, biographical notes written by Bennett, obituaries published after Ventris' death, and a script written by Andrew Robinson about Ventris' life and his decipherment of Linear B.

The fourth and last group, Correspondence (229 items), comprises the bulk of the collection. The majority of the letters are correspondence with Emmett L. Bennett, Jr. (126 items), Alice E. Kober (13 items), and Sir John Myres (67 items). The letters document the progress of the work on the Linear B decipherment, and in a letter sent by Ventris to Bennett on June 1, 1952, Ventris announces his decipherment of the script. The letters sent between Ventris and Sir John detail Ventris' interest and work in Linear B from dates as early as 1940. Also included are letters written to Lois, Ventris' wife, and correspondence with the *American Journal of Archaeology*, the journal that published Ventris' first article.

The correspondence includes both original letters and photocopies. While some photocopies are duplicates of the originals, the majority of the photocopies represent materials not held in the PASP Archives.

Provenance

The bulk of the materials were donated by Emmett L. Bennett, Jr. to PASP under the custody of Dr. Thomas G. Palaima in 1985.

Photocopies of correspondence between Michael Ventris and Sir John L. Myres are taken from Sir John's materials housed at the Ashmolean Museum, Oxford.

Photocopies of correspondence between Arne Furumark and Ventris were provided courtesy of the University of Uppsala.

Related Material

The Architectural Association
34-36 Bedford Square, London WC1B 3ES.
<http://www.aaschool.ac.uk>

Department of Antiquities, Ashmolean Museum
Beaumont Street, Oxford OX1 2PH
<http://www.ashmolean.org/departments/antiquities/>

Emmett L. Bennett, Jr. Papers; Alice E. Kober Papers; photocopies of correspondence between Arne Furumark and Ventris (courtesy of the University of Uppsala)
Program in Aegean Scripts and Prehistory
Department of Classics, University of Texas at Austin
<http://www.utexas.edu/research/pasp/>

ICS Michael Ventris Archive
School of Advanced Study, University of London
Digital Repository
<http://sas-space.sas.ac.uk/dspace/handle/10065/329>

Ventris-Chadwick Archive
Mycenaean Epigraphy Group
Faculty of Classics, University of Cambridge
http://www.classics.cam.ac.uk/faculty/research_groups_and_societies/mycenaean_epigraphy/

Organization of Records

The Ventris collection is arranged in folders placed within archival storage boxes. The material is shelved on existing cabinets in the PASP offices.

Detailed Description of the Collection

The following section contains a detailed listing of the materials in the collection

Michael Ventris Papers Arrangement
1948-1956, n.d.
249 items

Publications, 1940-1956 (7 items)

- Box 1.1 “Introducing the Minoan Language,” *American Journal of Archaeology* 44.4 (1940), 494-520. (1 item)
 Proof
- Box 1.2 “Notes on the Position of the “Eteo” Languages,” *Jahrbuch für kleinasiatische Forschung* 2.2 (February 1952), 218-223. (1 item)
 Photocopy
- Box 1.3 “Deciphering Europe’s Earliest Scripts,” *The Listener* (July 10, 1952), 57-58. (1 item)
- Box 1.4 (with John Chadwick) “Greek Records in the Minoan Script,” *Antiquity* 27.108, (1953). (1 item)
- Box 1.5 “King Nestor’s Four-Handled Cups: Greek Inventories in the Minoan Script,” *Archaeology* 7.1 (1954), 15-21. (1 item)
 Offprint
- Box 1.6 “Bibliographie Mycénienne 1953-1955,” *Études Mycéniennes* (1956), 2-24. (1 item)
 Offprint
- Box 1.7 (with John Chadwick) *Documents in Mycenaean Greek*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1956. (1 item)
 Select pages

Manuscripts and Unpublished Papers, 1952, n.d. (3 items)

- Box 1.8 “Evidence for Greek Dialect in the Mycenaean Archives,” 1952 (2 items)
 Carbon copy, 1952 (1 item)
- Box 1.9 Photocopy of second draft (1 item) [Later published in *Journal of Hellenic Studies* 72 (1953).]
- Box 1.10 “Europe’s Oldest Written Language,” n.d. (1 item)

Radio Transcripts, 1952-1956 (2 items)

- Box 1.11 “The Cretan Tablets,” 1952 (1 item)
 Address during which Ventris announced the decipherment of Linear B
- Box 1.12 “The Tablets of Ancient Crete,” 1956 (1 item)

Assorted Material, 1953-1956, n.d. (8 items)

- Box 1.13 Greek Identification card, 1953 (2 items)
Original with photocopy
- Box 1.14 Biographical notes by Bennett, n.d. (2 items)
- Box 1.15 Published obituaries, 1956 (3 items)
- Box 1.16 Script by Andrew Robinson, "The Schoolboy who Beat the Experts: The Decipherment of Linear B," n.d. (1 item)

Correspondence, 1948-1956, n.d. (229 items)

- Bennett, Emmett L., Jr., 1949-1956 (132 items)
Originals, 1949-1956 (78 items)
- Box 2.1-2.25 Apr. 16, 1949 – Nov. 18, 1951 (25 items)
- Box 3.1-3.29 Jan. 24, 1952 – Jan. 7, 1954 (29 items)
Letter from June 1, 1952 announces the decipherment of
Linear B
- Box 4.1-4.24 Feb. 1, 1954 – May 23, 1956 (24 items)
- Box 4.25 Photocopies, 1949-1955 (54 items)
- Blegen, Carl, 1953 (1 item)
- Box 5.1 Photocopy, May 19, 1953 (1 item)
- Box 5.2 Chadwick, John, 1952 (2 items)
Typed transcript of original letter, July 13, 1952, with related
correspondence (2 items)
- Box 5.3 Daniel, John Franklin, 1948 (1 item)
Original, Feb. 23, 1948 (1 item)
- Hrozný, B., 1950 (2 items)
- Box 5.4 Original, Oct. 24, 1950 (1 item)
- Box 5.5 Photocopy, Oct. 24, 1950 (1 item)
- Box 5.6 Hunter, Patrick, 1942-1943 (2 items)
Photocopies, Dec. 1942 – Nov. 5, 1953 (2 items)
- Kober, Alice, 1948-1949 (13 items)
- Box 5.7-5.13 Originals, Mar. 26, 1948 – Feb. 22, 1949 (7 items)
- Box 5.14 Photocopies, Mar. 26, 1948 – Feb. 22, 1949 (6 items)
- Myres, Sir John, 1948 (67 items)
- Box 5.15 Original, Mar. 26, 1948 (1 item)
- Box 5.16 Photocopies, 1940 – Jan. 19, 1954 (66 items)

- Sittig, E., 1951 (2 items)
Box 5.17 Original, Oct. 24, 1951 (1 item)
Box 5.18 Photocopy, Oct. 24, 1951 (1 item)
- Ventris, Lois, n.d. (2 items)
Box 5.19 Photocopies, n.d. (2 items)
- American Journal of Archaeology*, 1940-1941, n.d. (4 items)
Box 5.20 Originals, Sept. 22, 1940 – Jan. 14, 1941 (3 items)
Box 5.21 Photocopy, Nov. 8, 1940 (1 item)
- Related Material, n.d. (1 item)
Box 5.22 Correspondence summary list by Bennett, n.d. (1 item)