

READING PASSAGE 2

You should spend about 20 minutes on **Questions 14–26**, which are based on Reading Passage 2 below.

Michael Ventris: The Man Who Deciphered Linear B

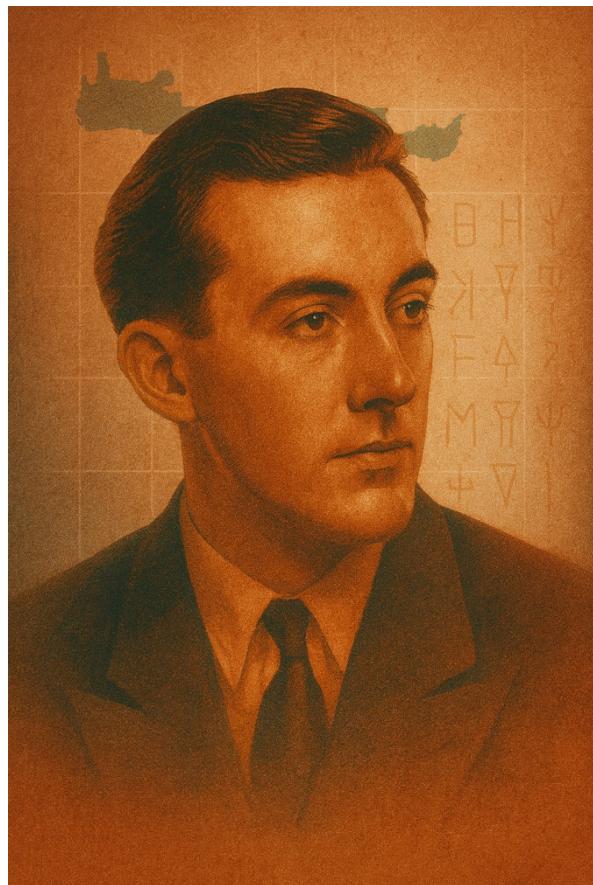
The decipherment of Minoan Linear B by architect Michael Ventris is one of the great dramas of 20th-century archaeology. But who was Michael Ventris, and how did he do it?

Andrew Robinson, the Literary Editor of the Times Higher Education Supplement, has now written a fascinating biography, *The Man Who Deciphered Linear B*.

Michael Ventris was born in 1922 into a well-to-do military family. His mother was half Polish – and artistic – so he was brought up to chatter away in Polish, but his father suffered from TB and went to Switzerland to find a cure. Therefore, Michael received his early education in Switzerland, so that by the age of 10 he was fluent in English, Polish, French and German. Being a superb natural linguist, he ended up speaking most European languages fluently. He studied Latin and Greek at Stowe, and at the age of 14 quizzed Sir Arthur Evans on the Minoan B tablets. His first major paper on the tablets, proposing that they were a form of Etruscan, was written when he was 18. However, he also had other interests: his arty mother mixed with the Hampstead artistic set – Ben Nicholson, Henry Moore, and particularly Naum Gabo were all friends. Michael's interests were split: should he follow his artistic beliefs and become an architect, or should he become a classicist and continue his attempts to decipher the unknown script?

He decided to become an architect and enrolled in the Architectural Association, already a hotbed of modern architecture. But then the war intervened, and he joined the RAF, surviving a tour of duty bombing Germany in Halifaxes in 1945.

After the war he returned to architecture. At first it was very exciting; a brave new world of socialism and modern architecture was being constructed and he wanted to take part in it. He did not, however, have the talent to become a great architect; his strength lay as an organiser.



Gradually his interest in Minoan script reasserted itself. This was the crucial time for the decipherment. The script had originally been discovered by Sir Arthur Evans, but as he grew older, Evans sat on these discoveries, hoping to decipher them himself. Then, dramatically, more tablets were discovered, this time by the American Carl Blegen, at Pylos. The lure of the tablets gripped Ventris. Although by now he had a wife and two young children, he decided to give up architecture and live off his private income for a year or so and devote himself full-time to the decipherment of the tablets.

He had two main methods of working, both with precedents from his architectural training. The first was the concept of 'group working'. With extraordinary generosity, he established a system of 'Work Notes', which he sent out to his colleagues and possible rivals round the world.

The other technical device was that of a grid. It had long been clear that Linear B was a syllabary – that is, each sign represented a combined consonant and vowel. How did they fit together? He devised a grid with five vowels across the top, V1–5, and fifteen consonants down the side, C1–15. His grids were drawn up with architectural precision, and lettered with his superb lettering ability. He worked solidly, producing Work Notes at the rate of about one a month. Then, suddenly, in March 1953, when he was about to produce Work Note 20, the breakthrough was made. Some of the signs appeared to be the names of places.

How about trying to see if they fitted the names of the Cretan towns in the classical period? He tried out Amnisos, the port of Knossos. This fixed several positions on the grid: he applied these to another group, and the word Knossos emerged. In a rush, more Cretan towns emerged – Tu-li-so (Tulissos), Pa-i-to (Phaestos), and Lu-ki-to (Luktos). On June 1st, he sat down to type what would turn out to be his final work note, number 20, and boldly titled it 'Are the Knossos and Pylos tablets written in Greek?' He called this merely a frivolous digression, but rapidly more and more words began to fit in. Carpenters, wainwrights, chairmakers and bakers made their appearance, as did Father (pa-te) and the people (da-mo).

A BBC producer happened to come to dinner. She realised she had a scoop, and on the 1st July 1952, the decipherment was announced on the Third Programme. At Cambridge, a young scholar of early Greek dialects, John Chadwick, heard the programme, and immediately offered to help. A pioneering book, *Documents in Mycenaean Greek*, was written jointly by Ventris and Chadwick, and published by the Cambridge University Press.

The world was at his feet, but which way should he go? The academic world did not entice such a free spirit, so he returned to architecture, but at the end of six months, he was becoming disenchanted. On the 5th September 1956, he left his new house late at night, and, driving fast down the Barnet bypass, crashed into the back of a stationary lorry, and was killed instantly: he was only 34. The suspicion remains that if it was not exactly suicide, it was something close to it. Should one recall perhaps that other frustrated classicist, Lawrence of Arabia, killed on his motorbike?

Andrew Robinson, the literary editor of the Times Higher Education Supplement, has written a superb biography of Michael Ventris, combining a warm account of his life with just enough technical details to satisfy those who have knowledge of linguistics or indeed of the classics. It is a splendid read, and a fine memorial to the split personality that enabled Ventris to decipher Minoan Linear B so triumphantly.

References

- Man Who Deciphered Linear B. (2003, September 4). World Archaeology.
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