SCHLIEMANN AT TROY AND MYCENAE

In the nineteenth century it seemed unlikely that the Homeric epics were based on fact but Heinrich Schliemann was convinced that archaeology could reveal a prehistoric Greek civilization, and his discoveries at Troy and Mycenae vindicated this belief.

When Heinrich Schliemann first visited Greece and Turkey in 1868, most scholars believed that the *Iliad* and *Odyssey* were poetic fantasies. It was not thought likely that the heroic age of Greece, so vividly described by Homer, might have a historical basis. Yet ancient Greek writers were not so sceptical. The siege and sack of Troy lay in the distant past even for them but they could see the monuments of this era: for example, at Mycenae Pausanias describes the fortifications, supposedly built by giant Cyclopes since the blocks of stone were so enormous; the lion gate, and the graves of Agamemnon and his followers, who were murdered on their return from Troy. Travellers in Greece in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries also saw and recorded some of these monuments but they did not make the connection between these remains and Homer.

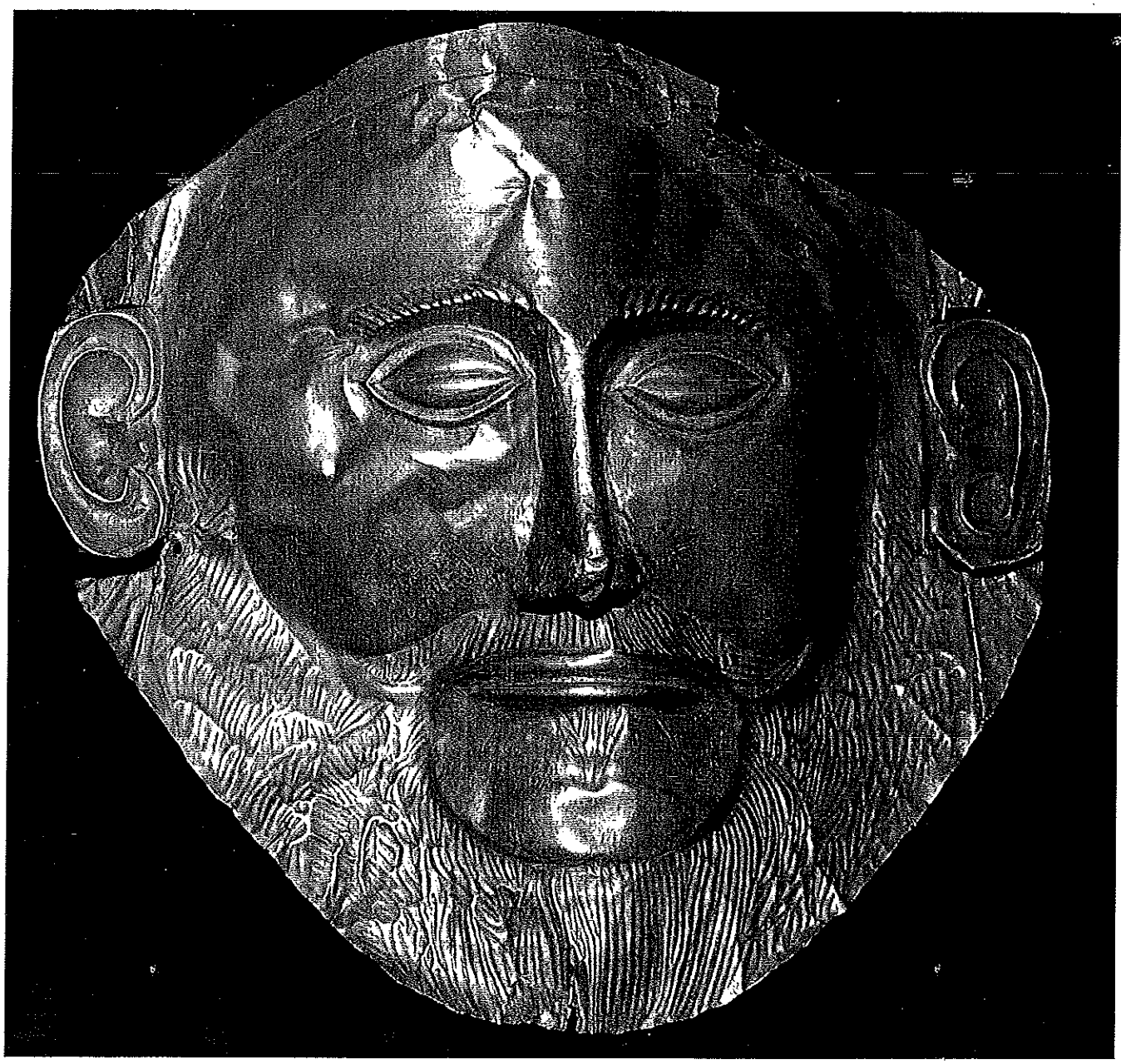
Heinrich Schliemann was born in Germany in 1822. His father was a pastor and apparently kindled his son's passion for Homer when the boy was just eight years old. However, Schliemann's scholarly ambitions were thwarted by family circumstances and he settled in Russia where he made his fortune as a merchant. Eventually he was able to retire and could at last pursue his interest in classical antiquity. In the course of his travels around Greece and Turkey his faith in Homer as a historical source was confirmed, but he needed proof; so in 1870 he began preliminary excavations at Troy.

The precise location of Troy was in fact disputed. Most scholars favoured the site of Balli Dag, but Frank Calvert, a local antiquarian, persuaded Schliemann that he should excavate at Hisarlik, and the results of the first season encouraged Schliemann to undertake a major campaign there. Between 1871 and 1873 he and his team of 150 workmen drove a series of vast trenches through the mound at Hisarlik. The site they uncovered was extremely complex – containing layer upon layer of levels – but Schliemann believed that he could distinguish four successive cities, the second of which had been destroyed by fire. Surely this was Homer's Troy, the city of Priam, besieged and sacked by the Greeks. In May 1873 Schliemann glimpsed gold in one of the trenches. An early lunch break was called and the workmen dismissed. Schliemann, apparently accompanied by his Greek wife, Sophia, then excavated a hoard of gold, silver and bronze objects that were promptly smuggled out of Turkey. The Turkish authorities were furious, since they should have been given some of the finds, but 'Priam's Treasure', which disappeared from Germany at the end of World War II and has recently resurfaced in Moscow, made Schliemann famous and vindicated his belief in Homer.

He could not continue his excavations at Troy, however, and so he turned his attention to Greece. In the Homeric epics, Mycenae is the city of Agamemnon, the leader of the Greeks at Troy, and is described as 'rich in gold'. It was only natural that Schliemann should take an interest in Mycenae, especially as the mas-

ABOVE: Heinrich Schliemann's Greek wife, Sophie, seen wearing some of the elaborate Early Bronze Age jewellery from 'Priam's Treasure', which was found at Troy in 1873.

LEFT: Bronze dagger with inlaid gold and silver figures from one of the shaft graves at Mycenae. The scene represents a lion hunt, with the hunters protected by huge shields covered in oxhide.



The 'Face of Agamemnon', a gold funeral mask from one of the shaft graves at Mycenae.

sive 'Cyclopean' fortifications and stone tholos tombs could still be seen. The identity of Mycenae was not in doubt. Pausanias had written that Agamemnon and his companions were buried inside the fortifications and Schliemann therefore concentrated on the deep deposits just beyond the lion gate. Once again his intuition was rewarded. In July 1876 he discovered the shaft graves, deep pits cut through the rock and earth, in which the early rulers of Mycenae had been buried in spectacular style. Their offerings included gold, silver and bronze jewellery, plate and weapons. When he found a gold mask in one of the graves, Schliemann declared that he had gazed on the face of Agamemnon, but the shaft graves date from the early years of the Mycenaean civilization, the sixteenth century BC. If there was a historical Agamemnon, he would have lived and died at Mycenae in the thirteenth century BC.

Nevertheless the discovery of the shaft grave circle was a triumph for Schliemann. In 1880–81 he excavated at Orchomenos where he investigated the Mycenaean tholos tomb known as the 'Treasury of Minyas', praised as 'one of the greatest wonders of the world' by Pausanias. In 1884 he uncovered the Mycenaean palace at Tiryns and was back at Troy in 1878–9 and again in 1889-90 when he clarified the stratigraphy of the site and demonstrated that there were seven 'cities'. He would certainly have continued his excavations at Troy, but in December 1890 he fell ill in Naples and died. ■

Evans at Knossos

Although it seemed likely that the island of Crete might prove one of the centres of Aegean civilization, it was not until 1900 that Arthur Evans was able to start his excavations at Knossos. As a result he discovered the earliest literate society in Europe and revealed the remains of Minoan civilization.

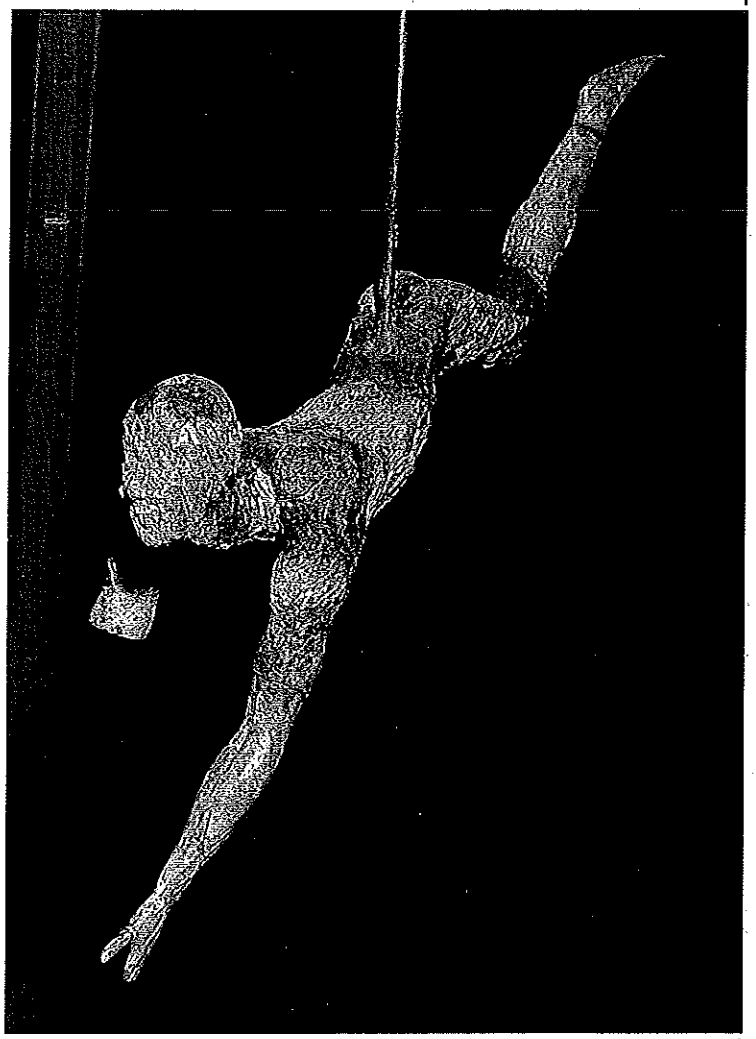
In 1887 Heinrich Schliemann (see p. 98) visited Crete and became convinced that Knossos would repay investigation. There had already been excavations on the site, undertaken by the aptly named Minos Kalokairinos in 1878. Kalokairinos had cleared one of the storerooms of the palace that was lined with clay jars. Schliemann entered into negotiations with the Turkish landowner but they could not agree a price and so he returned to Troy.

Seven years later, in March 1894, Arthur Evans saw Knossos for the first time and was no less impressed, but his attempt to buy the land was also frustrated. However, Evans was more determined than Schliemann and eventually, in 1900, he was able to excavate at Knossos.

The son of the prehistorian John Evans, Arthur Evans must have seemed destined to become an archaeologist. Yet he first made his name as a journalist, becoming the special correspondent of the *Manchester Guardian* in Bosnia. But he also made a study of the antiquities of the Balkans. He saw an exhibition of the finds from Troy and subsequently met Schliemann in Athens in 1883. Evans believed that the prehistoric Greeks must have been literate. He thought that the designs engraved on seal-stones, which he had examined in Athens, might be hieroglyphic symbols. Since Crete was known as a source of these seal-stones, he went there and was shown Knossos.

Evans was not an experienced excavator but he was assisted by Duncan Mackenzie who had been a member of the British team at Phylakopi on Melos in 1896–9. The excavations began on 23 March 1900 and within a week they had found a 'kind of clay bar, rather like a stone chisel in shape, though broken at one end, with script on it and what appear to be numerals': Evans had already proved that this was a literate society. Moreover, it seemed that the pottery was 'prae-Mycenaean' and so earlier than Schliemann's discoveries at Mycenae. The presence of a gypsum throne suggested that this must be a palace.

Since Minos was the legendary ruler of Knossos, Evans called the complex which he had uncovered the Palace of Minos and the civilization therefore became known as the Minoan. As he had surmised, the Minoan civilization was older than the Mycenaean. The first palace at Knossos had been constructed around 2000 BC. It was rebuilt and underwent a number of modifications before it was destroyed by fire in the fourteenth century BC. The plan of the palace, dominated by a large central court, at first seemed haphazard and complex, literally labyrinthine. But careful study revealed that the blocks of rooms were arranged around the court so that the palace had been designed inside out. Moreover, the rooms at first-floor level often determined the plan of those below. It was also evident that the palace was multi-functional. There were elegant residential suites, gypsum-paved and fresco-decorated, and spacious rooms, which might have served as the state apartments, on the first floor. But the enormous capacity of the storerooms exceeded the needs of those who were resident in the palace and must have supported a large retinue. There were specialist craftsmen based in the palace, and also bureaucrats whose records were written on clay tablets. The palace was also a cult centre. Evans identified a number of shrines and it is likely that the large paved courts were used in religious ceremonies, some of which are depicted in the frescoes that Evans found and carefully restored. ■



ABOVE: An ivory figurine of a bull-leaper from Knossos. Although the body is abnormally elongated to stress the youth's athleticism, the muscles and veins are realistically rendered.

LEFT: One of the frescoes from the Palace at Knossos restored so that the images of male and female bull-leapers are visible.

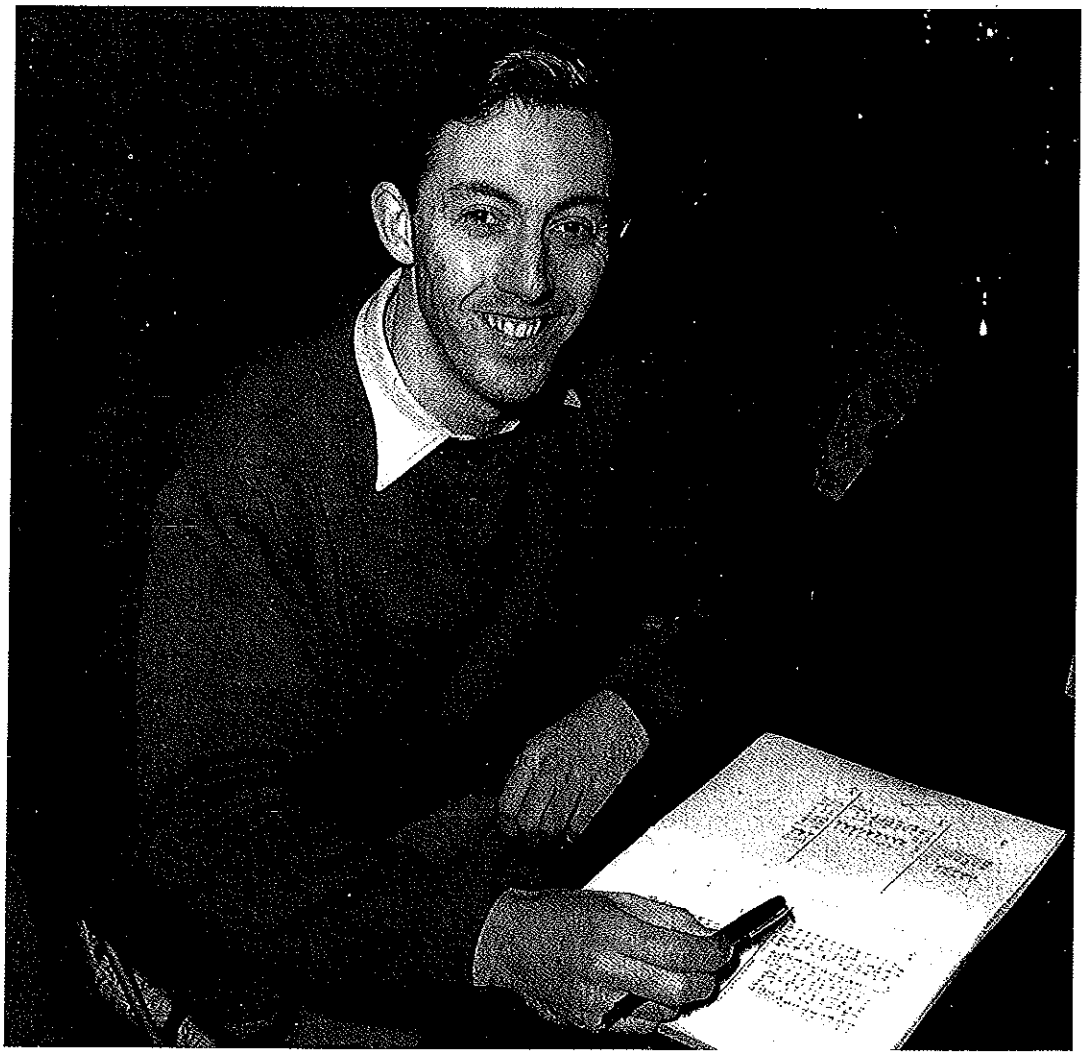
THE DECIPHERMENT OF LINEAR B

The clay tablets that Arthur Evans discovered at Knossos (see p. 93) demonstrated that the Minoans were literate, and in due course the Mycenaean palaces also produced texts written in the Linear B script. It was evident that these were administrative documents, but it was not until 1952 that the script was deciphered as an early form of Greek by architect Michael Ventris.

The excavation of the Minoan palace at Knossos on Crete proved that prehistoric Greek societies were literate, as Arthur Evans had suspected. In the ruins of the palace he found clay tablets that had been written by the palace scribes. He recognized three different scripts and from their context on the site it seemed that they were used in succession. The first of these scripts, the Minoan hieroglyphic, appeared on Crete when the early palaces were built. Evidently the palaces were major political and economic centres that needed a system of written records so that their administration could control transactions. The scribes who developed the first Minoan script borrowed a number of signs from Egyptian hieroglyphic, but it is clear that their language was quite different. Minoan hieroglyphic remains undeciphered and may well remain incomprehensible unless a much larger archive of tablets is discovered. Nor can we read the next Minoan script which is known as Linear A. This was in use at the time of the second palace and is found throughout Crete and even on some of the islands in the Cyclades. Since the number of signs is approximately one hundred it is evident that the script is not alphabetic. Nor is it a pictographic script, in which each sign denotes a word: the signs must represent syllables. There are also numerals that can be understood, since the Minoans adapted the Egyptian system, and it would seem that most of the tablets written in Linear A were inventories.

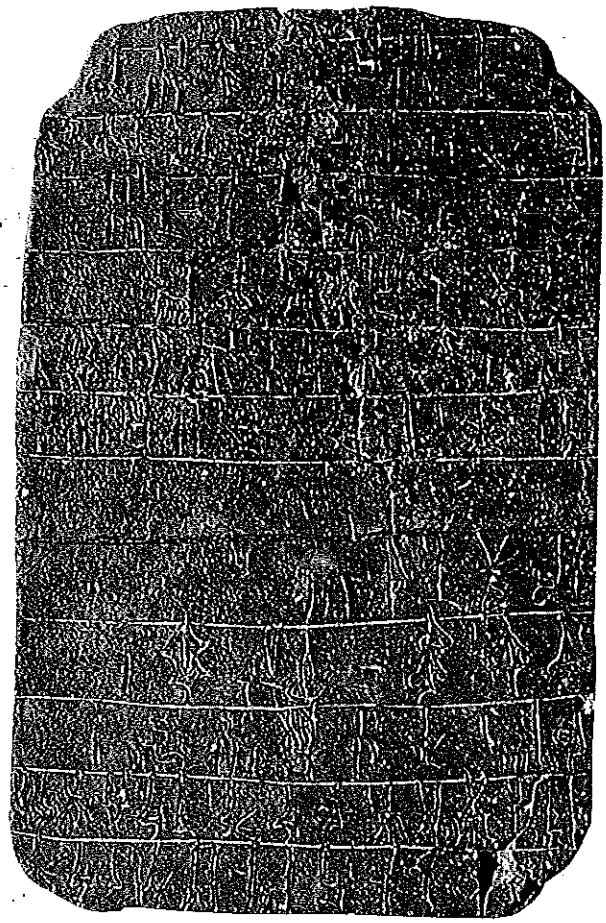
The third script dates from the final phase of the palace at Knossos. Arthur Evans found over 4000 tablets written in Linear B. Subsequently tablets have been discovered at Chania, another site on Crete, and in the Mycenaean palaces at Mycenae, Pylos, Thebes and Tiryns in mainland Greece. Linear B evidently evolved from Linear A and is also a syllabic script. Evans could identify numerals and also ideograms – single signs that indicated what was listed on the tablet – but he could not decipher the script.

In 1936 Arthur Evans gave a lecture on his discoveries that was attended by Michael Ven-

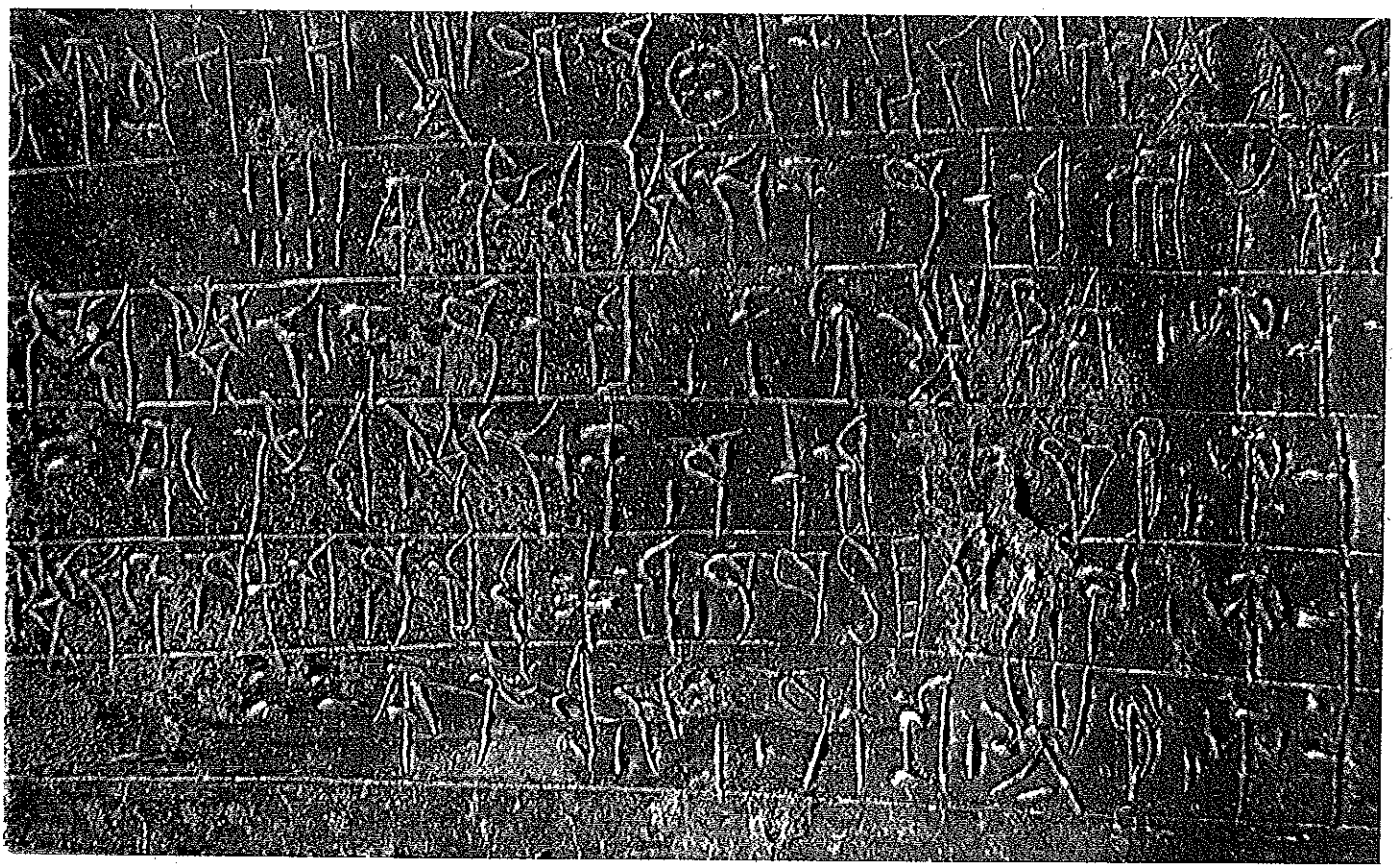


LEFT: Portrait of Michael Ventris taken in 1954 soon after he accomplished the decipherment of Linear B.

ABOVE RIGHT: Clay tablet from the Mycenaean palace at Pylos. The Linear B inscription records offerings of oxen, sheep, wheat, cheese and wine to the god Poseidon.



tris, then aged fourteen. He was already fascinated by languages and decided that he would study these undeciphered Aegean scripts. Four years later, when he was still only eighteen, he published his first article on the subject in which he argued that the language of the scripts was Etruscan. The war then intervened but he did not lose his interest in Linear B and he circulated the results of his research as a series of 'Work Notes'. He devised a grid that indicated which signs were linked and he gradually refined this as more texts became available. However, he still believed that the language was Etruscan. In 1951 he noted 'the remote possibility that the Knossos and Pylos tablets are actually written in Greek', but added 'I feel that what we have seen so far of Minoan forms makes this unlikely.' Ventris did not seriously consider that the language of the tablets might be Greek until June 1952, but he soon became convinced that he had deciphered Linear B. As he was, in fact, an architect by profession, he enlisted the aid of a philologist, John Chadwick, and together they published an article in which they set out details of the decipherment. Scholars were rather sceptical at first, but it happened that Carl Blegen, the excavator of the Mycenaean palace at Pylos (see p. 100), tried out the proposed decipherment on a tablet that he had found the previous summer. Not only could he read most of the tablet, but the identification of a number of words was confirmed by ideograms. Blegen was satisfied that Ventris had succeeded and in due course most scholars also accepted that Linear B was an early form of Greek. Translation of the tablets was a slow process, however, and so the death of Michael Ventris in a car accident in 1956 was a great loss for scholarship. Nevertheless he had transformed Aegean archaeology. ■



ıblet from Pylos, baked by the fire that destroyed the palace in the 13th century BC, and one of a series documenting a system of land tenure.