

## CHAPTER I

## MICHAEL VENTRIS

The urge to discover secrets is deeply ingrained in human nature; even the least curious mind is roused by the promise of sharing knowledge withheld from others. Some are fortunate enough to find a job which consists in the solution of mysteries, whether it be the physicist who tracks down a hitherto unknown nuclear particle or the policeman who detects a criminal. But most of us are driven to sublimate this urge by the solving of artificial puzzles devised for our entertainment. Detective stories or crossword puzzles cater for the majority; the solution of secret codes may be the hobby of a few. This is the story of the solving of a genuine mystery which had baffled experts for half a century.

In 1936 a fourteen-year-old schoolboy was among a party who visited Burlington House in London to see an exhibition organized to mark the fiftieth anniversary of the British School of Archaeology at Athens. They heard a lecture by the grand old man of Greek archaeology, Sir Arthur Evans; he told them of his discovery of a long forgotten civilization in the Greek island of Crete, and of the mysterious writing used by this fabulous people of pre-history. In that hour a seed was planted that was dramatically to bear fruit sixteen years later; for this boy was already keenly interested in ancient scripts and languages. At the age of seven he had bought and studied a German book on the Egyptian hieroglyphs. He vowed then and there to take up the challenge of the undeciphered Cretan writing; he began to read the books on it, he even started a correspondence with the experts. And in the fullness of time he succeeded where they had failed. His name was Michael Ventris.

As this book is largely the story of his achievement, it will not be out of place to begin with a short account of his life. He was

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born on 12 July 1922 of a well-to-do English family, which came originally from Cambridgeshire. His father was an Army officer in India, his mother a highly gifted and beautiful lady who was half-Polish; she brought him up in an artistic atmosphere, and accustomed him to spend his holidays abroad or in visiting the British Museum. His schooling too was unconventional; he went to school at Gstaad in Switzerland, where he was taught in French and German. Not content with this, he quickly mastered the local Swiss-German dialect—an accomplishment that later on endeared him at once to the Swiss scholars whom he met—and even taught himself Polish when he was six. He never outgrew this love of languages; a few weeks in Sweden after the war were enough for him to become proficient in Swedish and get a temporary job on the strength of it. Later he corresponded with Swedish scholars in their own language. He had not only a remarkable visual memory, but, what is rarely combined with it, the ability to learn a language by ear.

Back in England, he won a scholarship to Stowe School, where, as he once told me with typical modesty, he ‘did a bit of Greek’. One cannot help thinking that his unusual interests would have made him difficult to fit into a normal school routine; but he seems to have settled down happily enough, though none would then have prophesied that his hobby would make him famous. He did not go on to a university; he had made up his mind to become an architect, and he went straight to the Architectural Association School in London. The war came to interrupt his studies, and he enrolled in the R.A.F., where he flew as navigator in a bomber squadron. Characteristically he chose navigation. ‘It’s so much more interesting than mere flying’, he remarked; and on one occasion he horrified the captain of his aircraft by navigating solely by maps he had made himself.

After the war, he returned to the study of architecture, and took his diploma with honours in 1948. Those who saw his work as a student were impressed and predicted a brilliant future for him as

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an architect. He worked for a time with a team at the Ministry of Education engaged on the design of new schools; and he and his wife, herself an architect, designed a charming modern house for themselves and their two children. In 1956 he was awarded the first *Architects' Journal* Research Fellowship; his subject was 'Information for the Architect'.

He might well have become one of the leading figures in his profession; but it was not in this way that he was to win fame. He had never lost his interest in the Minoan scripts, and with a rare concentration he devoted much of his spare time to painstaking studies of that abstruse problem. In 1952 he claimed to have found the key to its understanding, a claim which has been fully vindicated during the last five years. Honours he received included the Order of the British Empire 'for services to Mycenaean palaeography', the title of honorary research associate at University College, London, and an honorary doctorate of philosophy from the University of Uppsala. These were but a foretaste of the honours that would surely have been paid to him.

'Those whom the gods love die young', said the Greek poet Menander; yet we had never dreamed that the life which had shown so much genius, and held promise of so much more, would be cut short in the very hour of triumph. On 6 September 1956, when he was driving home alone late at night on the Great North Road near Hatfield, his car collided with a lorry, and he was killed instantly.

For me, who had the privilege of being his friend and of working closely with him for more than four years, it is hard to find words in which to describe him. I know how he would recoil from extravagant praise; yet he was a man whom nothing but superlatives fitted. His brilliance is witnessed by his achievement; but I cannot do justice to his personal charm, his gaiety and his modesty. From the beginning he advanced his claims with suitable caution and hesitancy; a promising sign to those who had repeatedly experienced the assurance of previous decipherers. But

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even when his success was assured, when others heaped lavish praise on him, he remained simple and unassuming, always ready to listen, to help and to understand.

If we ask what were the special qualities that made possible his achievement, we can point to his capacity for infinite pains, his powers of concentration, his meticulous accuracy, his beautiful draughtsmanship. All these were necessary; but there was much more that is hard to define. His brain worked with astonishing rapidity, so that he could think out all the implications of a suggestion almost before it was out of your mouth. He had a keen appreciation of the realities of a situation; the Mycenaeans were to him no vague abstractions, but living people whose thoughts he could penetrate. He himself laid stress on the visual approach to the problem; he made himself so familiar with the visual aspect of the texts that large sections were imprinted on his mind simply as visual patterns, long before the decipherment gave them meaning. But a merely photographic memory was not enough, and it was here that his architectural training came to his aid. The architect's eye sees in a building not a mere façade, a jumble of ornamental and structural features; it looks beneath the appearance and distinguishes the significant parts of the pattern, the structural elements and framework of the building. So too Ventris was able to discern among the bewildering variety of the mysterious signs, patterns and regularities which betrayed the underlying structure. It is this quality, the power of seeing order in apparent confusion, that has marked the work of all great men.

## CHAPTER 2

## THE MINOAN SCRIPTS

The year 776 B.C. witnessed the first Olympic games, a festival which all the Greeks kept at the precinct of Zeus at Olympia in the north-west of the Peloponnese. Whether it was really the first is doubtful, but it was so reckoned by the later Greeks whose records went back to that date. It is a significant date in Greek history because it marks and symbolizes the adoption in Greece of the Phoenician alphabet, from which ultimately all other alphabets are descended; from the eighth century B.C. onwards the Greeks were a literate people, able to record their own history. Thus Greek history in the strict sense may be said to begin then, and what lies before that date can be termed pre-history. But this was no more the beginning of Greek history than A.D. 1066 was of British. Long before that men and women had lived, fought and died among the mountains and islands of Greece, and by the only test which can properly be applied, that of language, they were as Greek as their successors.

There are three ways of penetrating the fog which blots out the early stages of the development of the Greeks; none of them satisfactory or offering more than scraps of information, but by a cautious synthesis allowing some general conclusions.

First, there is the memory of people and events which survived into a literate era. The Greeks of the classical period had many legends of a remote past, a heroic age when men were capable of heroic feats and the gods were always at hand to help; many of the heroes were the sons of gods or goddesses. There are two notable events recorded in these legends: the war against Thebes in Boeotia and the expedition against Troy. The latter is better known, since it provides the background for the twin masterpieces of Greek literature, the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*. These, traditionally the work

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of Homer, are long epic poems which seem to have acquired their present form somewhere towards the end of the eighth century B.C.—again that significant century, when writing changed much of the Greek way of life, not least its poetry.

Poets there must have been before Homer, but nothing of their works remains—or so we thought. But modern research has shown that Homer was not a brilliant imaginative artist who created his poems out of his head. He not only made use of an existing legend; we now believe that he was in fact the last, and greatest, of a long line of epic poets who had sung the tale of Troy. Sung, not written; for the process of composition is quite different among illiterate peoples from what we know to-day. The bard, if we may borrow a Celtic word to translate the Greek *aoidos*, 'singer', was called upon to entertain the company with stories of heroic deeds; and he recited his tale using stock turns of phrase, well-known formulas and epithets, but each time improvising afresh on the basic theme. In this way we can surmise that the legends Homer used, including quite trivial details, had been transmitted from an earlier age. The impossibility of reconstructing real history from such material is obvious. The legends recorded after Homer are legion, but they are inconsistent and it is hopeless to try to sift out the few grains of truth they probably contain. Much in the Homeric tale too is clearly due to the imagination of the bards. But here at least is a strong pointer to a period of Greek pre-history when the country was organized in strong kingdoms centring round Mycenae—though in historical times this was no more than a small country town.

It was real enough to persuade a romantically minded German business man of the nineteenth century, Heinrich Schliemann, to retire from business and devote his time and wealth to the pursuit of tangible evidence of this forgotten age. Thus was forged the second tool of the Greek prehistorian, archaeology. Digging for buried treasure was already becoming elevated into a rudimentary science, and the aim was no longer the mere discovery of precious

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or curious articles. With the amateur's faith and enthusiasm Schliemann set out, Homer in hand, to bring to light the god-built walls of Troy.

This is not the place to record his career in detail; but we must pause for a moment to recall his momentous excavation of 1876, when he found the famous grave circle at Mycenae. For it was the revelation of the wealth and artistry of the civilization he unearthed that convinced scholars of the essential truth behind the legends. 'Mycenae rich in gold', sang Homer; and the gold came from the shaft graves in quantities to stagger even Schliemann. It took many years of patient work by Schliemann's successors to establish the pattern of events which can now be traced in outline. Pre-Hellenic archaeology, as it has been called until the last few years, distinguishes three phases of the Bronze Age in Greece: Early Bronze, roughly 2800–1900 B.C.; Middle Bronze, 1900–1600 B.C.; Late Bronze, 1600–1100 B.C. The great flowering of civilization took place first in Crete in the Middle period, culminating in a violent destruction about 1400 B.C. On the mainland it took place rather later, beginning with the Late Bronze Age and lasting until the twelfth century, when one after another all the important centres of Greece were sacked and left in ruins. It is this last period which is called, after the first site to be excavated and its chief centre, Mycenaean.

Among the many scholars who were in Athens in the 1890's to see the Schliemann treasures was an English scholar named Arthur Evans. His appreciation of the high level of civilization reached by these Mycenaean led him to speculate on the economic structure of a kingdom wealthy enough to produce such art and monuments. Mycenae has no natural wealth—no gold or silver mines, or any other exploitable commodity. Yet the craftsmanship of her products implied intense specialization, and this in turn an economic system in which the means of life were available to specialized workers. Did not this demand a system of writing which should serve at least for the book-keeping of the palace

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secretariat? Evans thought for this and similar reasons that the Mycenaeans must have been able to write; but no inscriptions had been found in their graves and palaces; and the Greek alphabet was generally considered to have been borrowed from Phoenicia two or three hundred years after the fall of Mycenae.

It was this speculation that spurred Evans to search for traces of prehistoric writing; and his attention was attracted by some engraved gems which could be found in the antique-dealers' shops in Athens. They showed a style of composition clearly different from those known in the Near East, and some had arbitrary collocations of signs which might represent a kind of script. Evans traced these to Crete, and while the island was still under Turkish rule and in a state of ferment, he traversed it from end to end with another young man, who was later to share with him the honour of a knighthood, John Myres. They found abundant evidence of the origin of these seal-stones, for they were frequently worn by peasant women as charms; the women called them 'milk-stones'. From their study Evans first identified the earliest script of Greece.

But this was not enough. A few characters engraved on gems were no evidence of the book-keeping needed to run a civilized country. He determined to dig himself, and in 1900, as soon as the liberation of Crete from Turkish rule opened the way, he began the excavation of a site already well known as that of Knossos, a classical town of importance and, if Homer could be trusted, the royal seat and capital of a legendary empire. His first object, the discovery of writing, was rapidly accomplished; the first tablets were found on 30 March, only a week after he had started to dig. But as he went on, season after season, clearing the complex of buildings which he had unearthed, the excitement of that discovery was forgotten in a new theory which grew in his active mind. Civilization in Crete was incomparably older than in Greece; and even in the Late Bronze Age it was still more advanced. Legend told of Athens' subjection to King Minos of Crete; here was the alien civilization which held the Greeks in



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thrall. Legend told of the tribute of maidens and youths sent annually to satisfy the monster of the labyrinth; rationalization demanded that the labyrinth should be only a vast and complex palace, the monster Minos, the cruel monarch. So was born the theory of an un-Greek Cretan civilization, named from its legendary ruler, Minoan. The similarities between its art and

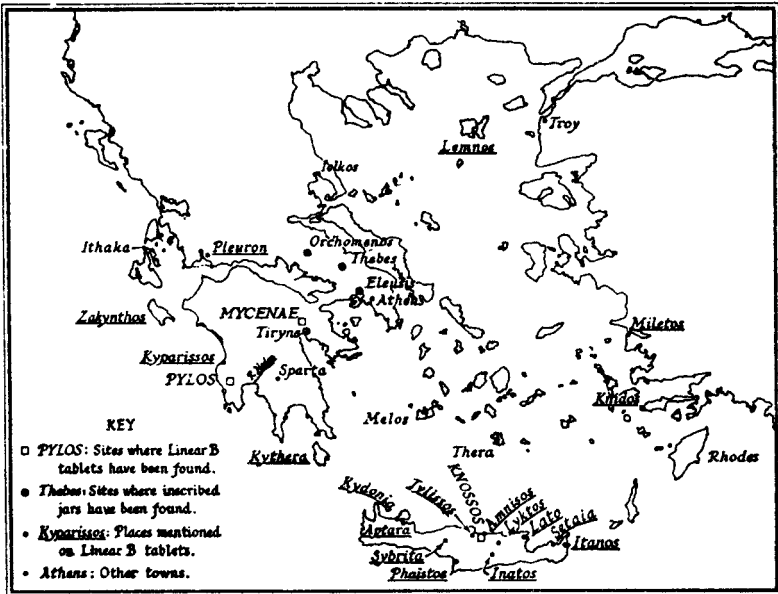


Fig. 1. Mycenaean sites, and places mentioned on the Linear B tablets.

architecture and those of mainland Greece were easily explained if Greece was a Minoan province; and the rise of Mycenae could be imagined as the revolt of a colony, which ended by destroying and dominating the mother city.

The third clue was even more difficult to follow correctly, and even today it is all too often overlooked: it is the study of the Greek language. When the earliest alphabetic inscriptions were made, in the eighth century B.C., every little state had its own dialect. It is as if each English county had its own form, not only

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of spoken, but of written language. But all the Greeks could, more or less, make themselves understood throughout the country; the local dialects were all fragments of one language, split up into pockets by the mountains and the sea. These dialects could, however, be grouped into four main divisions, though these do not correspond to their geographical distribution. Quite unlike dialects had a common frontier, while similar ones were widely separated. From these facts two conclusions could be drawn: at one time all these Hellenic peoples had ancestors who spoke alike; their unity was broken, and the main groups developed separately. Finally, just before the historical period, each local dialect must have developed out of its group.

Now we can apply these facts to the archaeological picture with some confidence. It used to be thought that at least three of the main groups of dialects had evolved outside Greece and been brought in by successive waves of invaders. This theory has lately been modified by new research, and it now seems more likely that the break-up of the dialects began only after the entry of the Greeks into the Balkan peninsula. This has been plausibly equated with the archaeological break between the Early and Middle Bronze Age cultures, about 1900 B.C. At most sites there is evidence of destruction at this period, and the new culture shows some radically different features from the old. The final stage of the movements of the Hellenic peoples is even better defined. The chief areas of Mycenaean power, the sites of the palaces destroyed about the thirteenth to twelfth centuries, were in historical times occupied by one of the major linguistic groups, the Dorians. Starting from north-west Greece (Epirus), these dialects lay in a great arc running down the west coast of the Peloponnese, through Crete, and up to Rhodes and Cos in the Dodecanese. Inside the arc, the Dorians penetrated central Greece as far as Delphi, and absorbed the whole of the Peloponnese except its mountainous core, Arcadia, which remained a separate linguistic enclave. But they never penetrated to the islands of the central