

Linear B

a Characteristics. The script is written like Linear A from left to right the words being divided into small upright strokes. There are about ninety signs used to spell out words syllabically; each stands either for a vowel (a e i o u) or for a consonant plus vowel (ka ke ki ko ku, etc.) There is a simple decimal notation for numerals with symbols representing digits, tens, hundreds, thousands, and ten thousands; each symbol is repeated the necessary ^{number} of times up to nine. There are also well over fifty ideographic signs known, used in connection with numerals: these represent material objects, commodities, and weights and measures. Many of these ideograms are recognizable pictures (men, women, horses, chariots, vessels, weapons): others are formal patterns which can be interpreted only when there are other clues to their meaning (e.g., sheep, wheat, figs, flour, olive oil, wine).

b The language is an archaic form of Greek, which can be understood only with difficulty, since it antedates by more than five centuries the earliest literary texts and is written in a clumsy and unsuitable script. The written form represents little more than the rough outline of the word which must be supplemented by the reader to make sense; thus $K\alpha - K\omicron$ represents $K\eta\alpha\iota K\omicron\iota$ (?) "bronze," $po-me$ = $poimen$ "shepherd," $pa-ka-na$ = $phasgana$ "swords." The consonants l, r, m, n and s are omitted at the end of words or syllables; the diphthongs ai, ei, oi are usually simplified to α , e, o; a single series of signs does duty for l and r, for k, kh, and g, for p, ph, and b, for (?) and th. On the other hand the script makes distinctions which are unknown in classical Greek; there is, for instance, a series of signs with the values qua, que, etc.; and w, the digamma of the Greek dialects, appears regularly. It must not therefore be supposed that final consonants were actually lost in Mycenaean speech: their elimination from the script is merely a scribal convention. Mycenaean clerks, like modern stenographers, no doubt found this abbreviated spelling adequate for their records. There is no evidence that the script was ever used for monumental or literary purposes.

(Insert 1 c, d, e here)

Decipherment. The decipherment of Linear B was achieved in 1952 by the English architect Michael Ventris (1922-1956). In the absence of bilingual texts he had to rely on purely cryptographic methods. Statistical analysis suggested that the script was a simple syllabary, and thus similar to the related script from classical Cyprus, which had long been known. Comparison of sign groups demonstrated the presence of inflexional variations in the endings, and this and other clues enabled Ventris to reconstruct the relationships of the more common signs, determining which shared the same vowel of the same consonant. This imposed a rigid check on the next stage in the decipherment - the substitution of real values, which were obtained from the identification of certain groups of Cretan place names. The values thus obtained enabled Ventris to recognize the language as Greek, and he was then able to deduce the rules governing the abbreviated spelling mentioned above. With the assistance of specialists in the Greek language Ventris was soon able to offer translations of a number of texts. The correctness of the decipherment was put beyond all doubt by the discovery by Carl W. Blegen in 1953 that a newly found tablet from Pylos contained pictures of vessels, which were accurately described by the accompanying text when deciphered on Ventris' system.