

## CHAPTER 4

# A GREAT CIVILIZATION IS BORN

## MIGHTY MYCENAEANS

It's 3,000 years in the future. Archaeologists are excavating the remains of an advanced civilization. They uncover a great city with houses, roads, works of art, mysterious machines, and magnificent monuments. They also find flat pieces of a plant-based material, usually white, covered with black squiggles. The scientists think that there used to be many more of these, but that most of them were destroyed in the calamity that brought down the civilization.

It occurs to someone that the squiggles must have held meaning for the people, now vanished, who once lived in this great city. A scholar works for years deciphering them, and finally, she cracks the code! In her hand she holds the first precious words translated from that long-dead language. They are:

Lettuce  
Bread  
Crackers  
Spaghetti sauce

Can you imagine the archaeologist's disappointment? After all her work, it turns out that what she has been struggling to understand was nothing but a shopping list.

This is what happened to an Englishman named Michael Ventris in 1953. Even as a child, Ventris was so interested in ancient

“ LINEAR B TABLET  
FROM THE PALACE  
OF KNOSSOS



*The Lion Gate marked the entrance to Mycenae. The powerful lions symbolized the strength of the city's rulers.*

*hieros* + *glyphein* =  
 “sacred” + “carving”  
 Ancient Egyptians carved  
 hieroglyphs on monuments.

languages that at the age of eight he bought himself a book about Egyptian **hieroglyphs**. When he was 14, he went to hear Sir Arthur Evans, the excavator of the huge palace at the city of Knossos on the island of Crete, give a lecture about some mysterious clay tablets. Evans and his team had found dozens of these small objects in palaces on Crete and the Greek mainland. Symbols were cut into or painted on them in straight lines. Evans called the writing “Linear B.”

After the lecture, Ventris went up to Sir Arthur and said, “Did you say they’ve never been deciphered, Sir?” Sir Arthur told him that this was so. Ventris was hooked.

As an adult, Ventris became an architect. But in his spare time, he kept up his interest in the tablets. When photographs and drawings of them became available, he wrote letters to other people all over the world who were also interested in deciphering Linear B.

Ventris wrote out copies of his research notes and sent them to these other people, who sent comments back to him. They gave him some helpful ideas, but it was slow going.

“Archaic” comes from  
*archaios*, which means  
 “extremely old.” It especially  
 refers to an early period  
 of a culture.

Finally, Ventris decided to see if the language was a kind of **archaic** Greek. He didn’t have much hope, though. Almost everybody thought that Greek civilization had not yet reached the island of Crete where most of the Linear B writing had been found. He said in a note to the people who were helping him out, “I suspect that this line of decipherment would sooner or later come to an impasse or dissipate itself in absurdities.”

To Ventris’s surprise, when he substituted Greek letters for the Linear B symbols, he started finding words that sounded like Greek. At last, he could read the deathless words and important thoughts of these long-vanished people. And what did he first read?

A list of seventy oxen.

Ventris then realized that he wasn’t going to read some great tale or interesting history on the clay tablets. Still, he was excited—he had the key. He wrote to a friend, “I have, I think, great news for you. You must judge for yourself, but I think I’ve deciphered Linear B.” He went on to say that the language was actually Greek.



*Sir Arthur Evans found this clay tablet in 1900 at the palace of Knossos and called the script Linear B. Nobody could read it until 1953, when Michael Ventris discovered that the script was an early version of Greek.*

Many of the tablets contained lists. One said:

For chariots: 18 men, for wheels: 18 men  
 For flint points: 13 men, for halters: 5 men  
 For shafts [of spears]: 36 men

Even from this short list, historians can figure out some information. The people who wrote Linear B knew how to make chariots and must have been preparing for hunting or battle. Other tablets and painted pots have yielded more facts.

Once Ventris and other scholars were able to translate the tablets, they found out more about the Minoans, as recorded in Linear B tablets (written by their Mycenaean conquerors). For one thing, just the fact that the Minoans kept lists shows that they had an organized society. They thought it was important to keep track of things like how many pieces of equipment were made by particular artisans, who owned them, and where they were stored.

Other clues found in the excavations on Crete told the archaeologists that at some time in the 15th century BCE, the Mycenaeans, who were based in mainland Greece, conquered Crete. They moved a force into Knossos and ruled the island from there. It must have been an unhappy time for the Minoans. They had controlled the Mediterranean, and now they were being controlled by the Mycenaeans, who used to pay them tribute, or tax.

“ Linear B Tablet from the Palace of Knossos, about 1200 BCE

### INVENTING A WRITTEN LANGUAGE

Michael Ventris wasn't the only person trying to decipher Linear B. But he was the first one to think that it might be a syllabary, and this was his big breakthrough in cracking the code.

A syllabary is a system of writing in which each symbol stands for a consonant-vowel cluster. The language spoken by the members of the Cherokee Nation is a very old one, but its written form goes back only to 1821. That was the year in which the Cherokee Sequoia (also known as George Guess) made a syllabary for his language. Other languages, such as the ancient Egyptian hieroglyphs, are written with a syllabary instead of an alphabet.

The Mycenaeans didn't just rule over the conquered Cretans, though. They learned from them. And one important thing they learned was writing.

The Mycenaeans, who didn't have a written language of their own, used the symbols of the syllabary of the Cretan script, now called Linear A, to write their own language. This is what we call Linear B, the script that Michael Ventris translated in 1953.

Writing must have been so exciting, and must have given the newly literate people so much power that it is no wonder the Mycenaeans suddenly produced many clay tablets. (They probably wrote on parchment and wax, too, but these materials are more fragile and have all disappeared.) By piecing together evidence from different tablets, the archaeologists have figured out some details about the Mycenaean civilization. They found out, for example, that a *wanax*, or a leader, ruled over lower officials. People had to pay taxes. Wool and flax were important, and women did the spinning and the weaving. Slaves, bronze-workers, and furniture makers are listed, although most people were farmers.

Although the first tablets excavated were found on Crete, most Mycenaean settlements were in mainland Greece. Archaeologists excavated large palaces at the center of each citadel on the Greek mainland. They unearthed enormous walls that were specially designed to protect the cities. They found that the Mycenaeans had dug big water tanks so that in case a city was attacked, the people could lock themselves inside and still have enough water to live on.

*Gold cups like this one from Sparta illustrate the wealth of aristocrats from the Peloponnese in the Bronze Age. They also show that the poet Homer knew some details about this era: he describes a cup much like this one.*





*Beehive tombs are a style of Mycenaean tomb. They were covered with dirt, which created a mound with most of the tomb underground, and were connected to the surface by a long tunnel that leads to a door. Inside the tomb, the main circular room was probably used for rituals, and the body was interred in a smaller chamber to the side.*

Scholars discovered that the Mycenaeans grew wealthier and more powerful as they traded all over their known world. Their pottery has been found in the western Mediterranean, Egypt, Anatolia (present-day Turkey), Syria, and Cyprus.

Then around 1100 BCE, most of the Mycenaean cities were destroyed or abandoned. What could have happened? Some scientists think there was an epidemic, an uprising of the peasants against the *wanax*, or an invasion by some foreign powers. Perhaps it was a combination of these.

Michael Ventris's life also had a sudden and unexpected end. In 1956, when he was only 34 years old and before he had finished translating the Linear B tablets, he was killed in a car accident. He never saw his book, *Documents in Mycenaean Greek*, which was published just a few weeks after his death.

#### WHAT'S A WANAX?

To the writers of Linear B, a *wanax* was a leader. By the time the poet Homer was writing about their civilization, the word had lost its "w" and its meaning had changed slightly to "overlord" or "boss." Homer called Zeus *anax andron te theon te* ("ruler of men and of gods"), and Agamemnon, the mythical king of Mycenae, *anax andron* ("ruler of men").