

GARETH A. OWENS

## THE COMMON ORIGIN OF CRETAN HIEROGLYPHS AND LINEAR A\*

In connection with the Cretan Hieroglyphic and Linear A scripts, J.-P. Olivier recently discussed the problem of terminology<sup>1</sup>. He rejected Pope's suggestion that the Cretan Hieroglyphic Script be known as the "First Cretan Palace Script"<sup>2</sup>, on the grounds that the Archanes Hieroglyphic Script is Pre-Palatial EM III – MM IA<sup>3</sup>. It is also worth stating that the Hieroglyphic archives of Knossos and Malia date from MM IIIB, that is, from the earlier part of the Second Palace period. Since, therefore, Cretan Hieroglyphs are used from EM III – MM IA (associated primarily with MM IA pottery according to the excavators) until MM IIIB, this script should perhaps rather be known as Middle Minoan.

In addition, the terms Pictographic, Hieroglyphic and Linear should be more closely considered. Evans used the terms Pictographic and Hieroglyphic Script indiscriminately to describe the earliest writing on Crete<sup>4</sup>. Due to the religious connotations of the term Hieroglyphic (as in Egypt), and as the content of the texts cannot be determined until the script has been deciphered and the Minoan language understood, Hooker preferred to use the term Pictographic Script, while Chadwick retained the term Hieroglyphic Script for reasons

---

\* I would like to thank my wife, Kalliope Nikolidaki-Owens, for her assistance.

<sup>1</sup> See J.-P. Olivier, *The Possible Methods in Deciphering the Pictographic Cretan Script*, *Problems in Decipherment*, BCILL 49, 1989, 39–58.

<sup>2</sup> See M. Pope, *The First Cretan Palatial Script*, *Atti e Memorie del 1<sup>o</sup> Congresso Internazionale di Micenologia*, v. 1, 1967, 438–46.

<sup>3</sup> See E. Grumach and J. Sakellarakis, *Die neuen Hieroglyphensiegel vom Phourni (Archanes) I*, *Kadmos* 5, 1966, 109–114, and P. Yule, *Early Cretan Seals: A Study of Chronology*, *MSFB* 4, 1980, for these earliest Minoan inscriptions c. 2000 B.C.

<sup>4</sup> See A. Evans, *Primitive Pictographs and a Prae-Phoenician Script from Crete and the Peloponnese*, *JHS* 14, 1894, 270–372; *Further Discoveries of Cretan and Aegean Script*, *JHS* 17, 1897, 327–361; and *Scripta Minoa* I, 1909.

of familiarity<sup>5</sup>. As both Pictographic and Hieroglyphic are inaccurate terms, and potentially misleading, one is justified in asking whether a more neutral term be required.

The following discussion is offered as a report of work in progress a hundred years after Sir Arthur Evans first visited Crete.

A comparison between the signs of Middle Minoan Linear A archival documents and Olivier's tentative list of the syllabograms of the Cretan Hieroglyphic script (following the number of attestations in the clay documents) shows the following results<sup>6</sup>. There are 58 Linear A Palatial clay archival documents of the Middle Minoan period which use 38 different syllabic signs<sup>7</sup>. Of these 38 signs, 15 can be paralleled in Olivier's tentative Hieroglyphic list (Table 1). Even at this early stage it is clear that there is a fairly high proportion of shared HA signs<sup>8</sup>.

There are also important examples of sign-groups common to both scripts, and of Linear A and Cretan Hieroglyphic inscriptions on the same sites in the Middle Minoan period. The sign-group 'double-axe/gate and sepia', A/JA-SA, is well attested in Cretan Hieroglyphic from Archanes Fourni (MM IA) and in Linear A from nearby Iouktas (MM III)<sup>9</sup>. From the Palaces of Knossos and Malia have come MM IIIB archival documents in both Cretan Hieroglyphic and Linear A. MM II Quartier Mu at Malia contained Cretan Hieroglyphic records, while MM II Phaistos has produced Proto-Linear A, and recently at Knossos there has been found an MM II clay administrative document<sup>10</sup>. It is sometimes not easy to say to which scribal tradition a

<sup>5</sup> See J. Hooker, *Linear B: An Introduction*, 1980, and J. Chadwick, *Linear B and Related Scripts*, 1987. See also G. Owens, O DISKOS TIS PHAISTOU KAI I ALLES GRAPHES TIS MINOIKIS KRITIS, in *Modern Greek*, TO BIMA TIS KYRIAKIS, Athens, 13/2/1994, and the subsequent correspondence on this subject of terminology.

<sup>6</sup> See Olivier, loc. cit. (n. 1 above), Figure 5, for the Cretan Hieroglyphic signs and GORILA 1–5, 1976–1985, for Linear A.

<sup>7</sup> See F. Vandenabeele, *La chronologie des documents en Linéaire A*, BCH 109, 1983, 3–20. Of the 1427 Linear A documents in the GORILA corpus, c. 92.5 % are LM IB Administrative Records, c. 2.5 % are Middle Minoan Palatial Records and c. 5 % are Non-Administrative Inscriptions. The Middle Minoan Linear A syllabic signs are those which can certainly be identified as syllabograms, i.e., they stand within sign-groups.

<sup>8</sup> See J.-P. Olivier and L. Godart, *Corpus hieroglyphicarum inscriptionum Cretae* (CHIC), Paris 1995.

<sup>9</sup> See A. Karetsou, L. Godart and J.-P. Olivier, *Inscriptions en Linéaire A du sanctuaire de sommet minoen du Mont Iouktas*, Kadmos 24, 1985, 89–147.

<sup>10</sup> I thank the curator of Knossos, Dr. MacDonald, for permission to study this unpublished Middle Minoan inscription from Knossos.

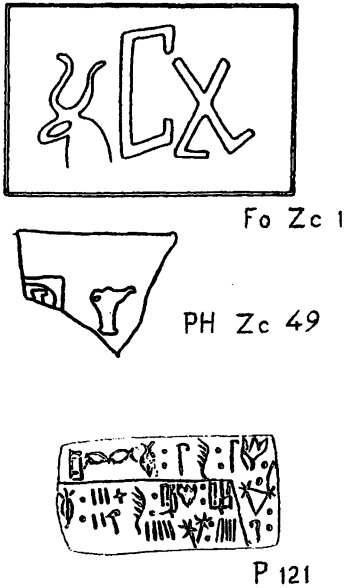


Fig. 1

descended from a common parent script, as yet unidentified<sup>14</sup>. It is at least evident that the Phaistos Disc is written in a Cretan script and language. It is of note that the inscribed stone libation tables bear Linear A signs executed in a pictographic manner more akin to the Archanes Fourni and other Cretan Hieroglyphic signs, particularly the Maliote Cretan Hieroglyphic Stone table, than to contemporary Linear A signs on clay documents. There is more epigraphic similarity between inscriptions on hard material (e.g. stone, metal,

particular inscription belongs; for example, the painted sarcophagus from Archanes Fourni, the painted sherd from Phaistos and the Middle Minoan tablet from Phaistos (Fig. 1)<sup>11</sup>.

The cave of Archalochori has yielded two axes engraved in Linear A and one in Cretan Hieroglyphs. This axe, along with the Maliote Stone Block, may act as an epigraphic bridge between the Cretan Hieroglyphic inscriptions, the Phaistos Disk and Middle Minoan Linear A<sup>12</sup>. The main difference in their execution is that the signs of the Phaistos Disk are more pictographic, as would be expected from a font of imprinted signs<sup>13</sup>. It has been argued on purely epigraphic considerations that the Phaistos Disk signs and their comparable signs in Linear A are

<sup>11</sup> See E. Sapouna-Sakellarakis, *Praktika* 1988 [1991] 244–263 and pl. 177 for FO Zc 1; P. Militello, *Sileno* 16, 1993, 325–341 for PH Zc 49; and Evans, *Scripta Minoa* I, 1909, p. 179 for the Phaistos Middle Minoan tablet.

<sup>12</sup> See N. Boufides, *Inscribed Axes from Archalochori Crete*, *AE* 1953–54, 61–74; F. Chapouthier, *Inscription hiéroglyphique minoenne gravée sur un bloc de calcaire*, *BCH* 62, 1938, 104–109; and J.-P. Olivier, *Disque de Phaistos. Edition photographique*, *BCH* 99, 1975, 5–34, and Y. Duhoux, *Le Disque de Phaistos - Archéologie - Epigraphie - Edition Critique - Index*, 1977.

<sup>13</sup> See A. Bradshaw, *The Imprinting of the Phaistos Disk*, *Kadmos* 15, 1976, 1–17, and *The Overcuts on the Phaistos Disk*, *Kadmos* 16, 1977, 99–110.

<sup>14</sup> See Y. Duhoux, *Les langues du Linéaire A et du Disque de Phaistos*, *Minos* 16, 1983, 33–55.

gem stones and the stone table from Malia) of whatever period, than between the inscriptions on stone and those on clay from the LM IB period (Fig. 2).

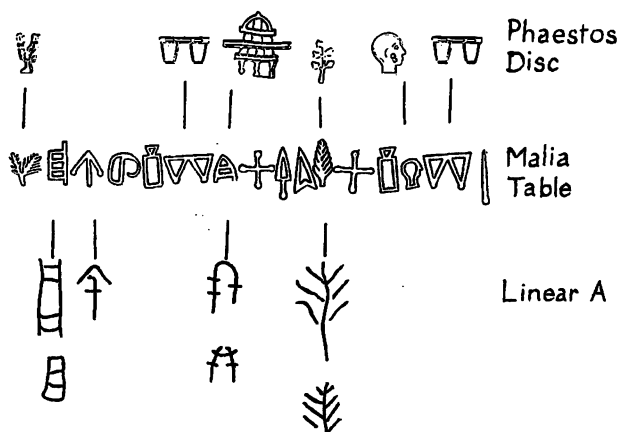


Fig. 2

It seems that in the Middle Minoan period there were two scribal traditions that diverged from a common ancestor, the “Archanes Script”. The contemporary Middle Minoan scripts that have been termed Cretan Hieroglyphic and Linear A appear to be manifestations of different traditions within the first script of Crete. There were administrative records on clay, and religious inscriptions on stone. These two traditions remained in contact at a number of levels in the Middle Minoan period. It is becoming increasingly difficult to draw a distinction between Middle Minoan Cretan Hieroglyphic and Linear A inscriptions. What can be seen, however, are two traditions within the pre-Linear B script of Minoan Crete that are influenced by a number of factors, thematic, chronological, geographical and technical (Table 2).

If (as hitherto generally thought) two scripts were in contemporary use in Middle Minoan Crete, it follows that either the two scripts were created before MM IIB (when they were both employed at Phaistos), or that the two scripts were variants of the same Cretan script. The common character of Minoan culture based on the Palaces, and the unlikelihood that two scripts were created in Crete simultaneously, make it more likely that Cretan Hieroglyphic and

Linear A are different forms of what is basically the same script, which we may term the Palatial script of the Middle Minoan period.

This tentative identification of just one pre-Linear B script on Minoan Crete, with two traditions, will allow the “Cretan Hieroglyphic” corpus to be amalgamated with the Linear A corpus. This will result in an increase of over 20 % in the size of the Linear A corpus (Table 3). This increase in data and the careful publication of the Cretan Hieroglyphic inscriptions and subsequent inscriptions will have taken research one important step closer to the possibility of a future decipherment of Linear A and identification of the Minoan language.

Table 1

Middle Minoan comparable Cretan Hieroglyphic and Linear A signs

LA	CH	LA	CH	LA	CH	LA	CH	LA	CH
01	–	26	23	45	50	60	–	81	–
02	–	27	13	51	–	61	–	118	–
03	–	28	41	53	–	67	–		
04	31	30	76	54	20	69	73	Of the 38 Syllabic signs used on MM Palatial LA records, 15 can be compared to the CH signs used on MM Palatial records.	
06	–	37	79	55	–	73	–		
07	–	38	–	56	–	77	–		
08	03	39	–	57	–	78	71		
10	–	40	–	58	–	79	29		
24	70	41	–	59	–	80	38		

Table 2

The scripts of the Bronze Age Aegean

	Seals and sealings		EM II-III
	Archanes script		EM III-MM I
Cretan Hieroglyphic	Proto-Linear A		MM I-II
Cretan Hieroglyphic	Linear A		MM III
	(Cypro-Minoan)		c. 1600 B.C.
Religious Linear A	Administrative	Linear A	LM I
		Linear A?	LM II
	RCT Knossos	Linear B	LM IIIA1
Religious Linear A	Knossos	Linear B	LM IIIA2
	Khania and Thebes	Linear B	LM IIIB1
	Mainland	Linear B	LM IIIB2

Table 3<sup>15</sup>

Inscriptions		Docs	Signs
GORILA 1–5	(1976–1985)	1427	7147
Post-GORILA 5	(GORILA 6 1996)	55+	212+
CHIC	(GORILA 7 1997)	277+	1569+
Total		1759+	8928+

## Addendum

The number of signs shared by both Cretan Hieroglyphic and Linear A is even larger when the study takes into account the 100+ substantial Minoan religious inscriptions and is not just limited to the few palatial clay archival documents of Olivier's study. In addition, during the last two years discoveries and studies have highlighted still further the epigraphic relation between Cretan Hieroglyphs, Linear A, the Phaistos Disk, and related inscriptions. So much so that, in my view, it is now possible to "read" over half of the Phaistos Disk. See G. Owens, *Kritika Daidalika*, Studies Hooker, Evidence for the Minoan Language: Linear A and the Phaistos Disk, 1996 (Cretan Studies Supplement), and G. Owens, *Daidalika – The Scripts and Languages of Minoan and Mycenaean Crete*, 1996, for a full discussion of these topics.

---

<sup>15</sup> See G. Owens, *GORILA 6 – Gareth Owens Record of Inscriptions in Linear A (1985–1995)*, *Kritika Daidalika*, Studies Hooker, 1996, 223–229.