

SINCLAR HOOD

A MONUMENTAL LINEAR INSCRIPTION FROM KNOSSOS

This unpromising fragment of a dressed limestone slab was found by me in 1976 in the area of the old gypsum quarries on Lower Gypsadhes at Knossos (KS² 57 no. 303). It was placed in the Knossos Stratigraphical Museum where it is still housed.

It was my intention to include a brief account of the slab and the signs on it at the end of the catalogue, now in preparation, of Bronze Age masons' marks of the Knossos area. With this in mind I had consulted Mr William C. Brice about the possible identification of the signs. But on examining the slab again at Knossos in November of 1994, and after discussion with the Knossos Curator, Dr Colin Macdonald, I decided that it required separate publication.

The slab is of shelly limestone, and the part of it preserved measures 0.42 m in length and has a maximum width of 0.34 m, with a maximum thickness of 0.09 m. It is not very prepossessing in appearance, but when I came to draw it some unusual features began to emerge. Three sections of dressed edges have survived with lengths of 0.22, 0.18 and 0.14 m. These edges are neatly cut with vertical marks of the cutting tool clearly visible on them (Pl. 2). But the edges are not at right-angles to each other, and they are not straight: all of them have a slight inward curve. The two angles where these surviving edges should meet are rough and broken over a distance of some 4 to 5 cm, as if small projections of some kind had once existed there. What such projections might have been like there is no way of telling.

The series of inward curves separated by projections is reminiscent of a particular Minoan convention for rockwork associated with the sea or rivers.¹ Rockwork of this type appears for instance in the miniature fresco of the Sea Battle from Room 5 of the West House at

¹ For rockwork in Aegean Bronze Age art in general see Lyvia Morgan, *The Miniature Wall Paintings of Thera* (Cambridge University Press, 1988) 32–40.

Akrotiri on Thera assignable to the period of Late Minoan IA in Crete.² More or less contemporary examples of similar rockwork are found on a fragment of a stone vase with a fine relief of a lurking octopus from the Palace at Knossos;³ on another fragment of a stone relief vase from Knossos with a dolphin (Fig. A);⁴ and surrounding the relief of a long-necked bird with a marked crest, on an ivory plaque from Palaikastro.⁵ Versions of this type of rockwork are also conspicuous on the famous Marine Style vases of the Late Minoan IB period.

In the Thera miniature fresco the rockwork of this type is at the edge of the sea (Fig. B), and a connection with the sea is obvious in the case of the octopus and dolphin reliefs on stone vases and the painted decoration on clay Marine Style ones. The rockwork of this type on the Palaikastro ivory plaque may also be meant to indicate the sea or the shore by it, especially if the bird which it surrounds can be identified as a shag, as Mr John Godbey has suggested to me. But rockwork of this type is also found in association with rivers in Aegean Bronze Age art. In the miniature frescoes in the West House at Akrotiri on Thera it is used for the edges of rivers, with what Lyvia Morgan has convincingly identified as a conventional sign for water in the river itself beyond its rocky banks.⁶

This type of rockwork is also found, however, along with other varieties of stylised rockwork in the paintings which included scenes with monkeys and birds (apparently doves) from the House of the Frescoes at Knossos. Evans had no doubt that the patch of rockwork of this type from the House of the Frescoes came from a marine scene and showed "rocks with seaweed and coralline clinging to them, and at times fringing small blue pools, while below is seen a margent of sea sand with golden grains".⁷ The seaweed is not very obvious, however, and Mark Cameron has demonstrated that the decorated fragment which Evans had taken for part of an argonaut shell was in fact from the wing of one of the birds.⁸ But Evans may

² Ibid. 35 pl. 42. S. Marinatos, *Thera VI* (Athens, 1974) colour pl. 7, right.

³ A. Evans, *The Palace of Minos at Knossos ii* (1928) 227 fig. 130; 503 fig. 307.

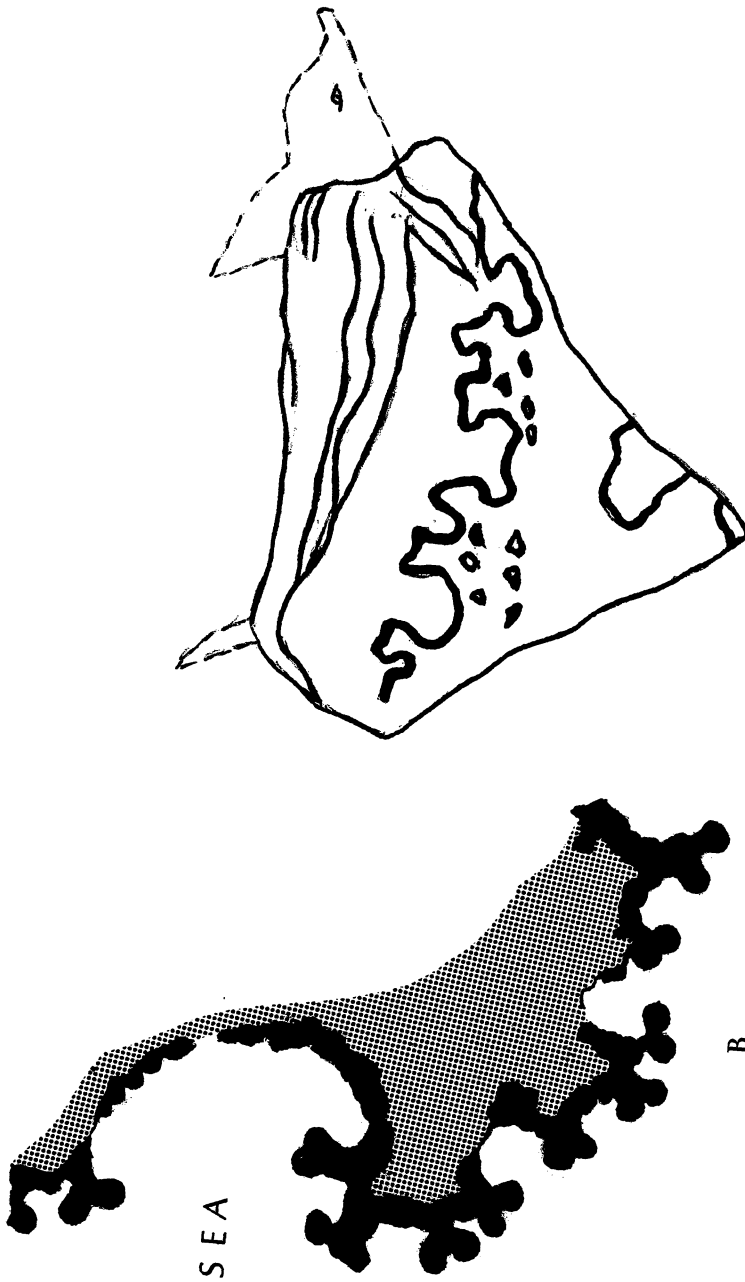
⁴ Morgan, 1988 (supra n. 1) 61 fig. 44.

⁵ S. Hood, *The Arts in Prehistoric Greece* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1978) 121 fig. 109.

⁶ Morgan, 1988 (supra n. 1) pls. 43, 44.

⁷ Evans, 1928 (supra n. 3) 452-3, 500-1 fig. 305. Cf. Morgan, 1988 (supra n. 1) 38 fig. 21.

⁸ M. A. S. Cameron, *Unpublished Paintings from the 'House of the Frescoes' at Knossos*, BSA 63 (1968) 5 n. 17.




A: Relief of dolphin swimming above rocks on fragment of steatite vessel. Adapted from Arthur Evans, PM II 504
B: Rockwork at edge of sea. Adapted from C. Doumas, *The Wall-paintings of Thera* (Athens: The Thera Foundation, 1992) pl. 29


have been right about the association with water: in his reconstruction of the paintings from the House of the Frescoes Cameron has placed this patch of rockwork adjacent to a stream which descends from the foot of a waterfall above.⁹

The upper surface of our slab with the signs on it is more or less flat and relatively smooth, but it has no obvious tool marks like those which appear on the dressed sides. The underneath of the slab is only roughly flattened, and is not dressed smooth; this suggests that the slab when complete was set against a backing of some kind.

The signs appear to be deliberate and not fortuitous marks. Their tops are in a diagonal line, which is roughly parallel with one of the preserved edges of the slab. The vertical elements of the signs may have been gouged with a pick or a punch rather than with a chisel; their cuttings are more or less U-shaped in section, and the bottoms of the channels are irregular. In contrast to this the shorter diagonal cuts are V-shaped in section and look as if they had been chiselled.

Three signs or parts of signs appear to be involved. The left-hand vertical of the first sign (1) is complete (length 0.14 m), but the lower end of its right-hand vertical is missing owing to wear of the stone at the edge of the block. The same is true of the vertical element of the middle sign (2) with a length preserved of 0.20 m. The only part of the third sign (3) which survives is a vertical *c.* 0.15 m in length.

The signs are not very illuminating. That in the middle (2) corresponds to L 30 (GORILA 5, xxviii, AB 01). But the first sign (1) is more difficult to parallel. Mr William Brice from a study of photographs suggested that it might conceivably be intended for the human figure sign L 99  (GORILA 5, xxii, xliii, A 100/102) if the small diagonal which appears to the left of it in the photographs (Pl. 1), but is omitted in the drawing, was in fact part of the sign and not a chance cut as I have assumed.

Professor Maurice Pope has suggested to me that the first sign might be a version of L 26  (GORILA 5 xxii, xxix, AB 06) with the two normally horizontal lines being made diagonal to harmonise with the slanting angle of the whole inscription. But, as he observes, the assumption that the sign is L 26 excludes the upright stroke on the left and leaves it unexplained. He considers that the inscription looks more like Linear A than Linear B.

⁹ Ibid. fig. 13 opp. p. 26, at bottom right of central panel. Cf. Morgan, 1988 (*supra* n. 1) 38–9 fig. 22, at bottom right.



Plate 1. Fragment of inscribed stone from Knossos



a



b



c

Plate 2. Dressed sides of stone, with inscribed face to right: (a) and (b) (from top to bottom) A and B; (c) B and C.

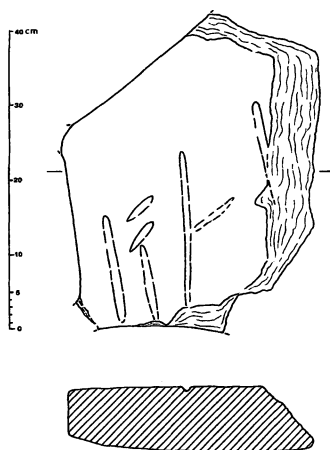


Fig. 1 Fragment of inscribed stone from Knossos

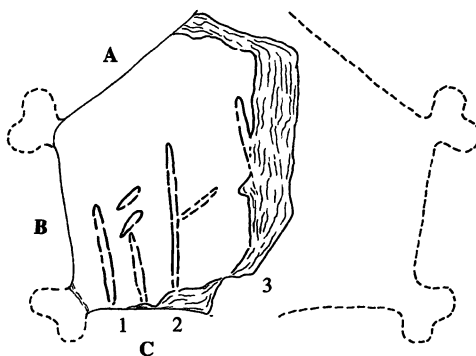




Fig. 2 Hypothetical reconstruction of inscribed stone from Knossos


Dr Jan Driessen from an inspection of the actual stone agrees that it appears to bear a Minoan inscription, but is inclined to see it as belonging to the category of Linear B rather than Linear A, suggesting that the first sign might be the 'Throne' no. 61  (Evans B 27), which would give a reading O-DA for the first two signs. This sequence of signs (O-DA) is found at the beginning of several words in Linear B.¹⁰

Another possibility is that the first sign might be a version of GORILA 5 xxii, xlv, AB 131b , as found on a Linear A tablet from Arkhanes and another from Khamia (GORILA 3, 6 f. ARKH 2, line 2; 24 f. KH 5, line 2), with the pair of horizontal lines made diagonal to follow the slanting angle of the inscription as suggested by Professor Pope above. But AB 131b is a rare sign, only so far attested by these two examples, where it occurs in the first case in isolation followed by numerals, and in the second in combination with one other sign also followed by numerals.

I would like to think that our inscription dates from the Late Minoan I period before the Mycenaean occupation of Knossos, and that it falls within the category of Linear A; but this is very much a matter of opinion. Questions of date and of ascription to Linear A

¹⁰ J.-P. Olivier, L. Godart, C. Seydel and C. Sourvinou, *Index généraux du Linéaire B* (*Incunabula Graeca* vol. lii) (Roma, 1973) 142.

or B become even more open and fluid if it is accepted that the Linear B script developed from Linear A at Knossos after the beginning of the Mycenaean occupation there at the end of Late Minoan I. On this view the signs of the system of writing in use in the Knossos region for some considerable time after the Mycenaean occupation began are likely to have been difficult to distinguish from those of Linear A.

Inscriptions in Linear A occur on stone, notably on cult vases like the so-called libation tables. There is also a short inscription in Linear A on a large block of stone incorporated in the structure of the Palace at Malia.¹¹ The signs of this Malia inscription, however, are relatively small in size. More comparable with our inscription is that on the dressed face of a block on the south side of the entrance of the Kephala tholos tomb at Knossos .¹² Like most of the stone incorporated in the tomb the block with this inscription may have been reused, but the inscription itself probably dates from the time when the tomb was built, which the evidence suggests was in Late Minoan II. The signs of this inscription are roughly comparable in size with those on our slab. It is interesting to see that, like the signs on our slab, those of the Kephala tholos inscription are set in a diagonal. Hutchinson, who excavated the tomb and first published the inscription, noted that the signs were arranged in this curious way *en échelon*, and observed that this was clearly “not due to mere carelessness”; but he could find no satisfactory explanation for it.¹³

It is tempting to suggest that our inscription also had something to do with a tomb. The slab was found in an area near the southern edge of the Bronze Age town where tombs and cemeteries associated with it begin. Some 200 m to the south is an interesting stone-built tholos tomb in use for burials at the end of the Middle Minoan period and into Late Minoan I.¹⁴ Possibly our slab with its signs was part of a funerary monument connected with this or some other tomb of similar date in the area.

¹¹ L. Godart, Una nuova iscrizione in lineare A a Mallia, *Antichità Cretesi* i (1978) 197–8. J.-P. Olivier, in O. Pelon, *Le palais de Malia* V. 2 (1980) 224 no. 301.

¹² R. W. Hutchinson, A Tholos Tomb on the Kephala, *BSA* 51 (1956) pl. 10 b. W. C. Brice (ed.), *Inscriptions in the Minoan Linear Script of Class A* (1961) pl. XXXI: V. 15.

¹³ Hutchinson, 1956 (supra n. 12) 77.

¹⁴ S. Hood and D. Smyth, *Archaeological Survey of the Knossos Area*² (British School at Athens Supplementary Vol. No. 14) (1981) 57 no. 308. *Archaeological Reports for 1957*, 22–3.

Acknowledgements

I am much obliged to all those who have discussed this curious fragment of worked and inscribed stone with me, and notably to Dr Colin Macdonald, Prof. Em. William C. Brice, Professor Maurice Pope and Dr Jan Driessen. I am grateful to them for allowing me to quote their several opinions, and to Mr John Godbey for kindly permitting me to cite his view, based upon strong and detailed arguments, that the bird of the Palaikastro ivory plaque is a shag. Dr Doniert Evely made the tracing of the stone from my original drawing, and Mrs Julian Cole has done that of the possible reconstruction on Fig. 2. The text has been typed and put on disk by Mrs Rosemary Ostley.

