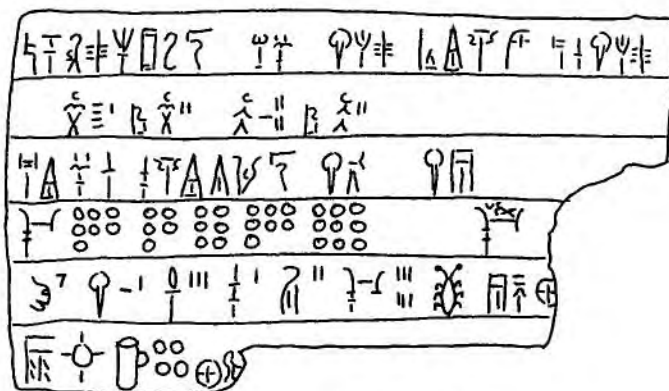


A LINEAR B TABLET FROM HEIDELBERG

During the violent rainstorms that accompanied the 5th International *Aegaeum* conference in Heidelberg, one of the pinacologically minded participants, namely myself, was walking along the river near the congress hall and happened to notice in the eroded bank what looked like an irregular fragment of accidentally fired clay lying face down. I picked it up, turned it over, and—to my astonishment—read the following text in Mycenaean Linear B. Such a momentous discovery certainly should have a bearing on questions like the extent of Aegean trade contacts with northern Europe during the Late Bronze Age, the dissemination of writing, and even the uses to which Linear B writing was put. Unfortunately in my tremendous excitement the slippery document popped, like a wet soap bar, out of my trembling hands and fell into the murky and rapid river waters. Although lost forever *in corpore*, it lives on *in mente*, and I here produce a faithful drawing, transcription, and translation with commentary.



Tablet HE FI 1994

transcription

1. po-to-ri-te-i-ja-we-jo ru-qo ko-re-te ra-pi-ne-u po-ro-ko-re-te
2. VIR 41 o VIR 2 MUL 14 o MUL 2
3. a-pi-qo-ro pa-ne-pi-ti-mi-jo ko-wo ko-wa
4. BOS^m 700 500 600 700 900 BOS^m+VIR^{volans}[
5. *227^{VAS} . KO 11 ZA 3 PA 1 PU 2 MU 6 *305 2 wa-na-ka[
6. VIN 1000 *280^{VAS} 400 ka *221^{VAS}[

commentary

As anyone should know from reading my paper, the first word has the form and the correct position to be a time designation. In this case, the word means "at the festival of" or "in the period of" *ptoliteia*, showing the typical $\pi\tau$ -treatment of the word familiar from Linear B and Homer. Then follow entries wherein officials who are known elsewhere as

“mayor” and “vice-mayor” are listed by personal names: *luk^wos* = Wolf and the notorious *ra-pi-ne-u*, who is also attested on a Linear B text from Corsica which is suspected of being a forgery. It is reported that this personal name also occurs in Tasmanian aboriginal inscriptions. In any event, this individual was a kind of Odyssean figure, gadding about strange and wondrous lands in pursuit of abstruse knowledge and adventures. That his companion and slight superior here is identified as Wolf might have something to do with early totemistic notions.

The second line gives a listing of men and women, 41 and 14 respectively, and also records two missing men and two missing women. If we have identified *ra-pi-ne-u* correctly, we can hardly doubt that these individuals were in his band of traveling knowledge seekers. The proportions of men to women undoubtedly tell us something about the relative roles and status of the sexes in this period of social history. Might the missing men and women have suffered fates like those of Elpenor and other companions of the real Odysseus? We should remember what happened to Polyphemus after Odysseus offered him just a drop.

The third line refers to attendants from the locale of universal knowledge. They are then listed as young men (*korwoi*) and young women (*korwai*), but their numbers have not yet been entered. It is possible that at the *ptoliteia*-festival, the assistance of trained young men and women was vital. These entries recall the Ad series at Pylos.

Line 4 then lists two ideograms. The first is the bull. It is followed by an odd sequence of numerical clusters which I here interpret as a scribal attempt to convey what we mean by “hundreds and hundreds”, that is, an uncountable number. Just before the tablet breaks off appears a new composite ideogram: a bull surmounted by what I interpret to be a flying man. This, I think, is the first textual reference to the central actors, animal and human, in the famous bull-leaping ceremony. It is reasonable to expect such an entry in a festival context.

Line 5 at first appeared problematical. The ideogram is a variation of the bull’s head rhyton ideogram attested at Knossos. Here the only detail drawn is a broken snout. These broken snouts are then reckoned according to place, given by abbreviation: *ko* = Knossos 11, *za* = Zakro 3, *pa* = Palaikastro 1, *pu* = Pylos 2, *mu* = Mycenae 6. If my interpretation is correct, this is our first Linear B reference, albeit abbreviated, to the site of Mycenae. Even more startling is the adjoining of a Minoan fractional sign to the broken-bull’s-snout ideogram. This is obviously an attempt by the scribe to make clear that the item in question is fragmentary. It also illustrates the longevity of the Minoan tradition of writing. Line 5 concludes with a new ideogram, the scarab. The juxtaposed number 2 here, I think, does not refer to the quantity, but to the archaeological period wherein some scholars like Watrous think that this object was meaningful for historical reconstruction. The following sequence *wa-na-ka* I take to be incomplete. It is to be restored as *wa-na-ka-te-ro* and indicates that the scarabs are ‘royal’.

The tablet ends with a listing of other commodities suitable for a festival. First comes 1,000 units of wine. Then comes a new ideogram, in the form of a beer stein, which might suggest that the Mycenaeans, like their contemporaries in Egypt, Syria, Great Britain and Ireland, had a pint now and then. The tablet concludes in typically fragmentary fashion with an ideogram for a cup, partially preserved, preceded by the phonetic abbreviation *ka*. After much pondering, I propose that these be taken together as a reference to another custom which we might be surprised to find attested in such early times: *ka* = *kaphes* + BROKEN CUP signifies *coffee break*. Such a custom would seem to have been necessary as *ra-pi-ne-u* and his WOLF led their contingent of men, women and young assistants through the various stages of the *ptoliteia*-festival.

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