

ANNALES DE L'UNIVERSITÉ DE CRAÏOVA
ANNALS OF THE UNIVERSITY OF CRAIOVA

ANALELE UNIVERSITĂȚII DIN CRAIOVA

SERIA ȘTIINȚE FILOLOGICE

LINGVISTICĂ



ANUL XLI, Nr. 1-2, 2019

EUC

EDITURA UNIVERSITARIA

ANNALES DE L'UNIVERSITÉ DE CRAÏOVA
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ISSN: 1224-5712

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LINEAR A LIBATION TABLES: A SEMITIC CONNECTION EXPLORED

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Introduction

Linear A is best known as the writing system of the language of the Ancient Minoan Civilization that flourished in Crete (Figure 1). Following the proposed chronology by Cadogan (1976: 17-20), the writing system was used between 1700-1450 BCE before it was replaced with systems modelled after it: Cypro-Minoan (used by the pre-Greek people of Cyprus) and Linear B (used by the Mycenaeans for Mycenaean-Greek) (Davis 2010). Linear A, together with Linear B, was first discovered by Sir Arthur Evans in 1886 on clay tablets recovered from the Palace of Knossos in Crete. It was also on artefacts such as vases, jewellery, and other objects. Since then, Linear A inscriptions have also been found in many different locations, such as Cyprus, other Aegean Islands (Kea, Kythera, Melos, Thera) (Perono Cacciafoco 2014), and in mainland Greece and Turkey (Anadolu Agency 2014) (See Figure 1). Linear A and Linear B were named as such because of the linear structure of the scripts, uncommon among other writing systems that existed around the same time.

Since its discovery, many researchers have been trying to decipher the writing system or establish a language family relation, with limited or controversial success. With several potential candidate language families for the language hidden behind Linear A, this paper attempts to further the efforts of previous researchers by examining artefacts in a specific context and by comparing the script with other languages of the Mediterranean.



Figure 1. Field sites for Linear A artefacts
 (<http://www.my-favourite-planet.de/english/europe/greece/dodecanese/dodecanese-01.html>)

Linear A

Linear A has around 75 signs/symbols (Olivier 1986), and was used as a writing system on a variety of artefacts. These include economic archives on clay (tablets and bars, sealings, labels, and roundels), stone vases (some inscribed, others painted), inscriptions on stucco architectural features, libation tables, metal objects, and items in other materials. This is unlike Linear B, where most of the samples found so far have been inscribed specifically for economic archiving. The roundels (see Figure 2) are small clay discs with one or more impressions. They were used as the “conveyance of a commodity, either within the central administration or between the central administration and an external party” (Schoep 2002: 17) and this gives us a better understanding as to how the Minoans carried out their resource management: roundels were part of an information system, the impression indicating the person or office responsible for the transaction (Palmer 1995: 146-147).

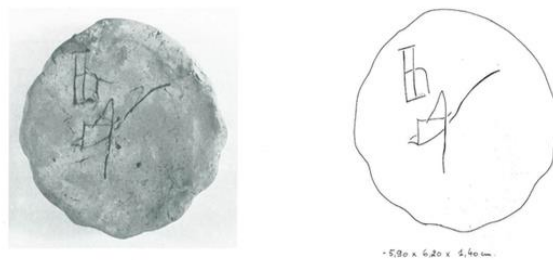


Figure 2. Roundel KH We 2057, from *GORILA*, Vol. 3

Various issues have held researchers back from finding a consensus, let alone deciphering the language behind the writing system. The corpus of Linear A is, as of now, very small. There are 1427 artefacts with Linear A inscriptions, with signs appearing around 7400 times (Schoep 2002). While this may seem like a lot, this has proven to be insufficient for deciphering the writing system. In contrast, Linear B appears on more than 4600 artefacts with signs occurring around 57000 times.

One of the early attempts to ‘read’ Linear A was done by assigning to grammatically similar Linear A signs the phonetic values of their counterparts in Linear B. Because Linear B (which was deciphered by Michael Ventris in 1952) was modelled on Linear A, it has already been established that the two writing systems share many signs. By doing this, we are able to ‘read’ the signs of Linear A, but the reliability of doing so is compromised. This is because of multiple reasons – one is that Linear B is a later script, and encodes Mycenaean Greek. Additionally, 80% of Linear A signs are unique (Younger 2000, Section 7b). Attributing the same values as Linear B (Godart 1984) to Linear A’s segmentation and phonemes has proved to be fruitless as it produces meaningless ‘words’. What this has demonstrated is that Linear A is not transcribing a form of Greek and the language hidden behind the writing system may not even be Indo-European. The underlying language that the signs encode, the so-called Minoan, is unknown, and appears unrelated to any known language. Among the proposed language relations have been Greek (Nagy 1963), Etruscan (Facchetti & Negri 2003), Sanskrit (Owens 1999), and various Semitic languages (Gordon 1966, Best 1972). It is this uncertainty that allows us to postulate that Linear A may not encode an Indo-European language at all.

The first deciphering attempt of Linear A was based on the possibility that the language behind the script was related to Greek. It was initially proposed by Vladimir I. Georgiev in 1957, and Gregory Nagy would continue this line of inquiry in 1963, presenting arguments on the phonetic-graphemic, lexical, and semantic levels. Nagy shows preliminary evidence of “varying worth” (1963: 209) of these Greek-like, or Indo-European, elements. In his paper, he identifies, for example, from Graffito II 12 of Phaistos, the combination *ne-ma i-ja-te*. This comes of interest to Nagy because *i-ja-te* in Linear B is seen as a Greek word with a “clearly Indo-European origin” (200). Although Nagy proposes a fair number of examples that show a possible Indo-European connection, similar findings have been highlighted in other language families. This will be discussed later. Adopting Youngers’ stance on this method of determining language family relationships, we find that the weakness of Nagy’s method of decipherment lies in the use of vocabulary to identify a language. This is because vocabulary is prone to being borrowed and the examples given by Nagy may not actually be from Linear A / Minoan (Younger 2000: 8). Nagy speculates towards the end of his paper that Luwian, an Indo-European Anatolian language, could be related to Linear A.

Leonard R. Palmer had also earlier theorized, based on the Linear B phonetic values, that Linear A could be the writing of an Anatolian language, possibly Luwian, or a Cretan variant of Luwian. Palmer posited this mostly because he believed that “Greece and Crete were twice invaded by Indo-European people during the second millennium BC” (Palmer 1961: 26), which could have sparked a migration of the people to Crete. Palmer based this conclusion on two elements: the presence of “Minyan” ware in Beycesultan (Western Anatolia), and a Linear A inscription that he interpreted as “Mount Parnassos” and, according to him, was based on Luwian. In Luwian, ‘Parnassos’ means ‘(place) of the temple’. He also based this theory on the inscriptions found on “vessels of Minyan shapes”, and the fact that he claims to have recognized Luwian deity names in Linear A on, for example, the Pylos tablets. One such example is Pylos FR1227, where Palmer claims to read *wa-na-so-i pa-se-da-o-ne*, believing it to mean ‘The two Queens and Poseidon’ (Palmer 1961: 123-125 and 232.) Another supporter of the Indo-European link was Gareth Alun Owens, who released a collection of essays entitled *Kritika Daidalika* (Owens 2007), suggesting that Linear A could be an archaic relative of Luwian. Using Linear B phonetic values, he detailed 50 words of the Minoan language which he ‘deciphered’ (Owens 2004: 5). Owens attributed to two Linear A inscriptions the values *ja-di-ki-te* and *i-da*. These he linked to the two holy mountains in Crete (Dikte and Ida). He stated that these words had “good Indo-European etymology” (Owens 2007: 299). *I-da*, in particular, he proposed to be very similar to *i-na-/i-ja-*, and suggested that these words “(come) from the same root and indicate ‘holy’” – a root which he connected to *ieros* in Greek and *isirah* in Sanskrit, ‘proving’ that Linear A must encode an Indo-European language. Owens postulated that Linear A represents a language from the *Satem* branch of the Indo-European family with “closer lexicographical characteristics with Greek and Sanskrit, more than with Hittite” (Owens 2004: 9).

The theories of an Indo-European or, specifically, Luwian connection to the language behind Linear A did not become the consensus among the academic community due to a variety of reasons. Palmer is criticized first for his heavy reliance on his interpretation of the tablets, which can have varying interpretations because of the incomplete understanding of the orthography. Immerwahr’s 1963 critique of Palmers’ work also touches on the issue of the Minyan ware, expressing how “few prehistoric archaeologists will accept this premise that the Minyans were Luwians and that the Indo-European migration that marked the end of the Early Helladic was not yet a Greek migration” (305). Immerwahr cites the shortage of archaeological evidence to support Palmer’s hypothesis. Mylonas (1962) also challenges the Luwian theory on various grounds, echoing Immerwahr’s view that there is a large amount of doubts about whether the Beycesultan people were Luwians, citing that Palmer’s evidence of the Minyan Ware was not sufficiently qualified (Mylonas 1962: 286). This is because Minyan ware is determined based on several characteristics (i.e. colour and form features, like a much grooved stem

or foot) and it is difficult to establish how the pottery of the area developed (see Mylonas: 287-288, for a detailed explanation). Mylonas highlights similar archaeological issues that conflict with Palmer's theories. Palmer had suggested a Luwian connection based on an invasion in 1700 BC, coinciding with the use of Linear A, and, subsequently, on the naming of a mountain, *Parnassos*. However, there is still a lack of concrete evidence of when Mount Parnassos was named and, additionally, no archaeological evidence that the Luwians used the area at all as a place of worship. The mountain could not possibly have been named after a temple that did not yet exist, further bolstering a lack of physical evidence to support Palmers linguistic evidence. There is, all in all, very little evidence pointing to anything other than trade contact between Luwians and Minoans and, therefore, it is unlikely that their languages would be related. Additional reasons include the small states along the Western coast of Asia Minor that would have been natural barriers to the contact between the Luwians and Minoan Crete, and no remarkable resemblance between Minoan and Luwian morphology (Perono Cacciafoco 2017).

The second major language family of interest for Minoan is the Semitic language family, first proposed to be connected with Linear A by Cyrus H. Gordon (1966). Gordon, like most scholars working on the topic, applied the phonetic values of Linear B to the Linear A samples, and found five words identified by Ventris and Chadwick (Ventris & Chadwick 1973): *su-po*, *ka-ro-pa*, *pa-pa*, *su-pa-ra*, *pa-ta-qe* (all accompanied with pot signs), as well as the commonly found *ku-ro* at the end of administrative tablets. Gordon, who had extensive knowledge of the Semitic languages and worked specifically with Ugaritic, recognized that three of these vessel words show consonantal roots that exist in Ugaritic: *sp*, *krpn*, and *spl* (matching the first, second, and fourth words listed previously). Over time, Gordon continued identifying words in Linear A that were recognizable in various Semitic languages like Akkadian and Hebrew, and his initial hypothesis that Linear A encoded an East Semitic language eventually changed to West Semitic. Western Semitic is a possibility, as dialects of it were spoken along the Mediterranean seaboard, an area which is geographically close to Crete. Maurice Pope (1958) gave a lecture based on Gordon's (1957) initial findings, bolstering the possibility of Semitic as the language family that Linear A belongs to. Beyond corroborating some of the words Gordon had identified, Pope pointed out certain Semitic grammatical features, like the presence of a copula on tablets 117a, and 122a & b, with *u-* found at the beginning of the second word consistently. In Akkadian and Ancient Hebrew, 'and' is denoted by *u* and *waw*, showing a possible connection to Semitic once again. While by no means conclusive, this, along with the presence of some grammatical inflection (Pope 1958: 19) seemed to support the Semitic hypothesis. The word *kuro* is also commonly raised as an indicator of, at a basic level, some Semitic influence – it is the only word in Linear A whose meaning is the most probable under the Semitic theory, meaning 'total'. Present archaeological evidence does not rule out Semitic influence, but, at the same time, it does not fully

support Semitic influence either. Jan Best (1972) would continue Gordon's attempts, presenting a controversial paper promoting Linear A as the script of a Semitic language, closely related to Ugaritic (Rendsburg 1982).

Language contact with Semitic, at the very least, is a possibility. Minoans traded all over the Eastern Mediterranean, and there has been evidence of cultural contact in places like Cyprus, Canaan (located in present-day Lebanon, Syria, Jordan, and Israel), and the Levantine Coast. Minoan-Style wall paintings were also discovered in 2009 in Tel Kabri in Israel. In Tel Kabri we have the remains of a Canaanite city from the Middle Bronze age (2000-1550 BC). This coincides with the time when the language of Linear A was in use, and Canaan is a Semitic speaking region. Kamares Ware (a distinct type of Minoan Pottery that reached its peak in popularity around MMIB, about 1750 BC) has also been found in many Egyptian sites including the Delta, Middle Egypt, and Aswan in Upper Egypt (Bradley 2014: 50). There is evidence of Middle Minoan pottery (2100 BC to 1500 BC) in the Aegean Islands, the Near East (the countries of the Arabian peninsula), Mesopotamia, and Anatolia, showing how much the Minoans traded in the surrounding regions.

Of course, no theory comes without controversy. Many scholars reject Semitic as a possibility for the language of Linear A. One reason is that Gordon found only approximately 50 words that he could connect to Semitic, and the reliability of these matches is compromised because all the words identified are vocabulary items, which, as told earlier, are not a reliable means of identifying a possible language family connection (Younger 2000: 8). Packard (1974) also points out the difficulty in connecting the five words (*su-po*, *ka-ro-pa*, *pa-pa*, *su-pa-ra*, *pa-ta-qe*) with Ugaritic names because of how vowels are ambiguous in Semitic writing (Packard 1974: 27). Additionally, because trade was so prominent, these word strings, found on administrative tablets, could have just been loanwords from the surrounding regions. Chadwick also rejected the Semitic theory, stating that "if the vowels are ignored we are leaving out half the information presented by the script" (Chadwick 1975:147). This is because, in Semitic languages, vowels could be considered 'semi-vowels' with a specific 'colour'. The common criticism of Gordon's work also stems from the fact that he linked various elements to not one Semitic language, but several – Canaanite, some Aramaic, some Akkadian, and so on. This apparent lack of any specific Semitic language prompted the view by many scholars that Gordon's work was not successful in establishing a Semitic link.

With a significant amount of the work on the decipherment of Linear A suggesting a possible Semitic connection, this paper aims to further test this theory by looking specifically for recurrences in the context of libation tables, and seeing if these recurrences present any (possibly) known Semitic root. Libation tables are tables on which liquid offerings are poured at religious sites, explaining the presence of ladles, jars, and cups that bear the same inscriptions.

Methodology

The inscriptions on specific artefacts were analyzed and recurrences were noted down. The artefacts examined are libation tables and other religious objects like votive candles, cups, or vessels from in and around peak sanctuaries which, in Bronze Age Greece, were limited to Minoan Crete. Based on its architecture and the artefacts that were found there, the most important peak sanctuary is theorized to be the one in Iouktas (a mountain in North-Central Crete, better known as Mount Juktas) (Peatfield 1983: 277). Another reason for choosing libation tables was because the majority of them have a large amount of their inscriptions intact, or that has been restored for research purposes (Figure 3).

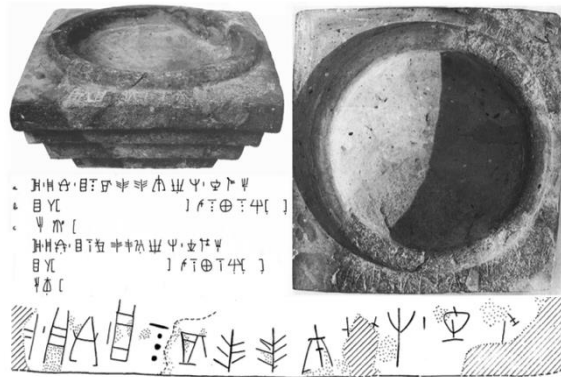


Figure 3. Libation table PK Za 8, from Davis 2011

The method adopted implies an examination of the inscriptions on these libation tables and a search for recurrences in the strings of symbols, then comparing them to other artefact types (for example, tablets), to see if the same strings were present on other objects.

From the analysis of the libation tables and other related religious artefacts and documents from various peak sanctuaries, 9 recurrences were found:

- 1) A-TA-I-A301-WA-JA
- 2) I-PI-NA-MI-NA- SI-RU-TE
- 3) I-PI-NA-MA
- 4) U-TI-NUYI-NA-TA
- 5) U-NA-RU-KA
- 6) JA-PA-QA
- 7) U-NA-KA-NA-SI
- 8) JA-DI-KI-TE-TE-A307-PU-RE
- 9) JA-SA-SA-RA-ME

Sequences (1) to (9) appear exclusively on libation tables and other related religious artefacts.

Some of these recurrences appear together in a string, for example, out of the 8 times we found string 1) followed by more inscriptions, we found that (8), JA-DI-KI-TE-TE-A307-PU-RE, or a variation of it, occurs 3 times. Plausibly, this could be 4 times if we include PK Za 15. (9) JA-SA-SA-RA-ME only ever occurs at the end of a line, denoted by the ‘●’ symbol in many of the transcriptions. All of the following artefacts that these strings recurred on were found in and around peak sanctuaries such as those in Iouktas, Petsofas, and Kophinas, near sanctuaries such as Kato Syme and Palaikastro, or other sites that were considered sacred, such as the Psychro Cave and Apodoulou’s ceremonial building. The recurrence of these strings was not restricted to a specific size or shape of libation table.

Minoan tablets were used for economic purposes, recording transactions and resources management (Palmer 1995) and, as such, it is unlikely that the strings found on religious artefacts would be found on tablets. However, we did expand the search to all other available Linear A documents. The search on the other Linear A documents did not result in any string matching those on the libation tables. We can, therefore, conclude that, to the best of our knowledge, the recurrent strings (1)-(9) are restricted to religious contexts.

Because the purpose of the paper is to try to ascertain or disprove a Semitic connection for Linear A and Minoan, it was necessary to segment the strings, then, and to ‘cut’ the vowels from the consonants, so that (Semitic-like) triconsonantal strings could be reconstructed, although we do acknowledge that, with the vowels removed, we encountered the issue highlighted by Chadwick (1975), according to which some information was lost. We focused on strings 1-9 because we have a clear understanding of the context of these artefacts. By removing the vowels from the strings and, then, by separating the strings into groups of three consonants, we get the data shown in Table 1.

Table 1. Segmentation into Semitic-like triconsonantal strings

	Original Strings	Consonant Strings	Triconsonantal strings
1	A-TA-I-A301-WA-JA	T- x*-W-J	→ T-x*-W / x*-W-Y#
2	I-PI-NA-MI-NA- SI-RU-TE	P-N-M-N-S-R-T	→ P-N-M / N-M-N / M-N-S / → N-S-R / S-R-T
3	I-PI-NA-MA	P-N-M	→ P-N-M
4	U-TI-NUŸI-NA-TA	T-N-N-T	→ T-N-N / N-N-T
5	U-NA-RU-KA	N-R-K	→ N-R-K
6	JA-PA-QA	J-P-Q	→ Y#-P-Q
7	U-NA-KA-NA-SI	N-K-N-S	→ N-K-N / K-N-S
8	JA-DI-KI-TE-TE-A307-PU-RE	J-D-K-T-T-x-P-R	→ Y#-D-K / D-K-T / K-T-T / → T-T-x* / T-x*-P / x*-P-R
9	JA-SA-SA-RA-ME	J-S-S-R-M	→ Y#-S-S / S-S-R / S-R-M

**Every x in the string represents a symbol that has no phonetic equivalent in Linear B. Vowels were also omitted. The triconsonantal and biconsonantal possibilities are indicated to the right of the arrow.*

#When comparing the potential strings, 'J' was substituted with 'Y', something that has been done in other explorations of the Linear A family relations (for the string JA-SA-SA-RA-ME, Gordon connects it to YA-SA-SA-RA-MU. See Gordon 1966). For signs lacking a phonetic equivalent, we allowed it to be a random variable syllable when doing a root search.

A search was, then, done to see if there was any potential match amongst known Semitic roots. These strings were, therefore, compared to Semitic roots in two dictionaries, the *American Heritage Dictionary* (Semitic Roots Index 2011) and the *Hamito-Semitic Etymological Dictionary* (Orel & Stolbova 1994).

Results

The comparison of the triconsonantal strings in Table 1 to Semitic roots gave, as a result, only a few possible cognates.

For example,

String 1

T-x-W → TWW, Central Semitic noun meaning 'mark', 'sign'.

x-W-J → GWY, Central Semitic noun meaning 'tribe'

String 8

T-x-P → TRP, Central Semitic meaning 'tat', 'pluck', or 'seize'

→ T-H-P, unknown root meaning

x-P-R → S-P-R, Arabic root meaning 'to become empty'; or Central Semitic meaning 'become yellow'; or West Semitic meaning 'to measure'; or Arabic meaning 'to send on a journey', 'to send a message'

While these would seem to support Semitic relationships, it is important to note that many syllabic vowels were left out because Semitic roots are consonantal, decreasing the accuracy of all 'matching' strings, and this could very well be attributed to 'misplaced ingenuity' (Duke 1967: 327). While there may be plausible matching roots, the very limited and sporadic matches do not present significant evidence for the relation of Linear A to the Semitic language family.

There are several reasons why we found very few possible Semitic strings. This type of approach assumes that Linear A signs have the same phonetic values as Linear B signs. This may not work due, as mentioned previously, to the fact that 80% of the Linear A signs are unique (Younger 2000). A lack of phonetic values for these symbols could be the reason we make very little progress towards actually being able to identify the language the script encodes. Additionally, the elimination

of so many individual syllabic vowels decreases the amount of information we have. Of course, the other possible reason we are finding few relevant strings could be simply because Linear A does not encode a Semitic language. The few words we have potentially found a root for have been vocabulary items, which, as mentioned previously, are not a reliable means of determining a language. We can postulate, for example, that Semitic was the ‘donor language’, with the language Linear A encodes being one that borrowed from a Semitic language. As mentioned previously, the Minoan maritime empire was known for its trade, and reasons for loaning words could be because they are more efficient for communication, or simply because of language contact (Haspelmath & Tadmor 2009: 46-50).

Additionally, this paper aimed at looking at Linear A through a very context specific lens: artefacts found in and around significant religious sanctuaries. All major Minoan settlements had their own peak sanctuary, where ceremonies were carried out, evidenced by the appearance of thick layers of ash found at these sites by archaeologists (Peatfield 1983: 277). Ritual languages, across the world and across ages, feature a special register or vocabulary, including esoteric, foreign, archaic, or unintelligible words. Should Linear A, in this context, actually encode ritual language or text, the style could be deliberately opaque, making any decipherment that much more difficult.

Conclusion

At this juncture, probably, the pursuit of the decipherment of Linear A would require more artefacts to be found. Sample size is an issue in finding recurrences, but if we could establish with more accuracy if specific strings are toponyms, for example, or determine if JA-SA-SA-RA-ME is really the name of a female deity, as suggested by Palmer (1961) and Gordon (1966), we could have a good place to start (it is worth noting, as well, that both Gordon and Palmer had reached their conclusions despite assuming Minoan to be two different languages. However, this could be because of pre-historic or proto-historic contacts between Indo-European and Semitic). Further research could be done, perhaps, by looking at other contexts: for example, tablets or artefacts belonging to a specific geographical location may allow us to see recurrences in the management of resources and, based on the history of the area and trade at the time, to draw, then, parallels between specific strings and specific commodities. Ultimately, the decipherment of Linear A would allow us to better understand the effects of language contact and development in the Aegean area before the advent of Greek.

Acknowledgement

We wish to acknowledge the funding support for this project from Nanyang Technological University under the Undergraduate Research Experience on CAmpus (URECA) programme.

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ABSTRACT

The writing system of the Ancient Aegean Minoan Civilization, Linear A, is the predecessor to the already deciphered Linear B script (transcribing Mycenaean Greek) and is one of the five writing systems associated with mainland Greece, Crete, and Cyprus before the introduction of the Greek alphabet. Attempts to decipher the writing system have been unsuccessful for several reasons. Unlike the Linear B language (Mycenaean Greek), Minoan, the language hidden behind Linear A and still undeciphered, bears no apparent similarity to Greek, and any 'translation' of Linear A based provisionally on Linear B phonetic values has not produced any tangible result. Additionally, the number of Linear A samples available for examination and translation is limited, especially in comparison to that of Linear B. The research undertaken over the course of this project aimed to expand our understanding of the available samples by looking for recurrences in inscriptions from libation tables, using provisionally Linear B phonetic values. By utilizing these recurrences, an attempt was made to explore a potential association of Minoan with Semitic languages. The results show that there is very little in common between Linear A and the Semitic languages examined, at least in the context of Linear A libation tables.

Key words: Linear A, Minoan Language, Language Deciphering

REZUMAT

Sistemul de scriere al vechii civilizații minoice egeene, linear A, este predecesorul scrierii în linear B (care transcrie greaca miceniană), deja descifrată, precum și unul dintre cele cinci sisteme de scriere asociate cu Grecia continentală, Creta și Cipru înainte de introducerea alfabetului elen. Încercările de descifrare a sistemului de scriere au eșuat din diferite motive. Spre deosebire de linearul B (greaca miceniană), minoica, limba care se află în spatele linearului A și care nu a fost încă descifrată, nu seamănă, aparent, deloc cu limba greacă, iar orice „traducere” a linearului A bazată provizoriu pe valori fonetice ale linearului B nu a furnizat niciun rezultat tangibil. De asemenea, numărul de mostre de linear A disponibile pentru examinare și traducere este limitat, mai ales în comparație cu cele de linear B. Cercetarea derulată pe parcursul acestui proiect și-a propus o aprofundare a înțelegerii mostrelor disponibile, prin depistarea recurențelor în inscripțiile de la mesele de libație, folosind valori fonetice provizorii în linear B. Prin utilizarea acestor recurențe, s-a încercat detectarea unei potențiale asocieri a limbii minoice cu limbile semitice. Rezultatele arată că linearul A și limbile semitice examinate au foarte puține lucruri în comun, cel puțin în contextul meselor de libație în linear A.

Cuvinte-cheie: linear A, limba minoică, descifrarea limbilor

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