Linear A

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Summary

Linear A is a Bronze Age (ca. 1800-1450 BCE) script attested primarily on Crete, but also sporadically in the Aegean islands, Mainland Greece and possibly Asia Minor. Typologically it is classified as a logo-syllabary, as it consists of signs representing syllables (syllabograms) and signs representing real-world referents (logograms/ideograms). To date, the script remains undeciphered and writes the still ill-understood Minoan language. Inscriptions appear on a number of different supports for administrative or cultic purposes. Incised clay documents (e.g. tablets, roundels, sealings) were used to record economic transactions within palatial administrations, while carved stone and metal objects and painted clay vessels were found in non-administrative contexts, mostly cultic or utilitarian. There is no evidence of monumental inscriptions, diplomatic correspondence, historiography or literature. However, writing on perishable material (papyrus or parchment) is likely to have existed, although it has not survived. Despite the script still being undeciphered, some information can still be gleaned from the texts, e.g. place-names, personal names, commodities, transaction terms. However, the nature of the evidence (short formulaic inscriptions with little syntax), the relatively small amount of inscriptions that have survived and their often poor state of preservation significantly hamper our appreciation of the language recorded.

Keywords

Linear A, Aegean Scripts, Bronze Age, Crete, Minoan

Linear A is a logo-syllabic script used in the Bronze Age Aegean in the period ca. 1800-1450 BCE. The script, still undeciphered, writes the Minoan language traditionally associated with the *Minoan civilisation* of Bronze Age Crete. Attested primarily on Crete, it is also found sporadically in the Aegean islands (*Thera*, Kea, *Melos*, *Samothrace*, *Cythera*), Mainland Greece (Haghios Stephanos) and Asia Minor (*Miletus*). The extant evidence amounts to ca. 1,500 inscriptions (some of which still unpublished), which occur on a variety of supports in both administrative and non-administrative contexts. Small clay tablets, roundels, and sealings of various types were used as economic records of palatial administrations, while other objects made out of stone or metal bear inscriptions with a ceremonial or dedicatory function. A few graffiti have also survived, although badly preserved and illegible for the most part. The script received its conventional name Linear A by Sir Arthur Evans, the excavator of the Palace of Knossos, to distinguish it (together with *Linear B*) from the more pictographic script he dubbed Cretan Hieroglyphic. Like Cretan Hieroglyphic (equally undeciphered), the Linear A script is understood to be an indigenous creation, developed on Crete independently of pre-existing templates but on the theoretical knowledge of the existence of writing in the neighbouring regions (stimulus diffusion theory), e.g. Egypt and the Near East. Although we know that Linear A worked as a template for the creation of Linear B (writing *Mycenaean Greek*) and most arguably the Cypro-Minoan script (undeciphered), the debate about the precise relationship between Linear A and Cretan Hieroglyphic is still ongoing.[1]

[1] Silvia Ferrara, Barbara Montecchi and Miguel Valério, "The relationship between Cretan Hieroglyphic and Linear A: a palaeographic and structural approach" (forthcoming). Ester Salgarella, "Imagining Cretan scripts: the influence of visual motifs on the creation of sript-signs in Bronze Age Crete", *ABSA* (forthcoming).

The Linear A sign repertory

Structural characteristics

Typologically, Linear A is a logo-syllabary as it consists of phonetic signs standing for syllables ('syllabograms') and more or less realistic picture-signs standing for commodities ('logograms/ideograms'). Syllabograms are understood to represent open syllables of the type vowel-only (e.g. /a/), consonant-vowel (e.g. /na/), or consonant-semiconsonant-vowel (e.g. /nwa/). The traditional sign list of Linear A classifies signs based on their graphic form in increasing order of complexity: 'simple' signs (tot 178; table 1, table 2) and 'complex/composite' signs (tot 164; table 3, table 4, table 5). In addition, there are fractional signs (tot 47; table 6) and numerals (units to thousands).[2] From a graphic perspective, simple signs are independent graphic units, whereas complex/composite signs are the combination of two or more simple signs (by ligature or juxtaposition). From a functional perspective, simple signs prefer a syllabic behaviour, meaning that they are used to represent syllables of words (e.g. *ku-ro* 'total'). However, simple signs can behave both syllabically and logographically based on context. By contrast, complex/composite signs only behave logographically/ideographically, although a few could represent monograms and be read as words (e.g. A 559 combines AB 80/ma and AB 26/ru, likely to be read as /maru/ 'wool').[3]

[2] Louis Godart, and Jean-Paul Olivier, *Recueil des inscriptions en linéaire A*, Vol. V (Paris: Librairie Orientaliste Paul Geuthner, 1985), xxii-xxvii.

[3] This composite Linear A sign was continued on to Linear B and used as logogram for wool (**145/LANA*). It likely to represent the monogram of the Minoan word for wool, borrowed into Greek as μαλλός 'wool/fleece'. Hesychius preserves the gloss μάλλυκες /mallykes/ explained as the word for τρίχες /trikhes/ on Crete. Hesiod uses the term μαλλός /mallos/ for 'fleece' (*Works and Days* 234).

When behaving logographically/ideographically, both simple and complex/composite signs stand for groups of people or commodities (agricultural products, livestock, vessels, textiles). The 'core' of Linear A simple signs (ca. 90; table 1) is common to all sites that yielded Linear A evidence and for the most part it is also shared with Linear B. For this reason, Linear A – Linear B shared signs are preceded by prefix 'AB' in the sign list. The remaining simple signs, instead, are specific to Linear A (preceded by prefix 'A' only) and show a site-restricted distribution.[4] Linear A complex/composite signs are also specific to Linear A and are mostly hapaxes. However, the criteria by which simple signs are combined together to form complex/composite signs are shared across sites.[5] In addition to syllabic and logographic/ideographic behaviour, Linear A sings can also function as 'transaction signs', understood to provide information about the kind or purpose of the transaction.[6] These signs usually occur on top of a tablet (heading), enclosed within dots and followed by logograms. Linear A inscriptions are written left to right (with a few examples of sinistroverse or bustrophedon writing), and words (or sign-groups) may be separated by a dot. On tablets, words can be split across consecutive lines, which are usually not ruled to guide writing.

[Insert Fig. 1: Different types of Linear A signs on tablet HT 9a: syllabograms (blue), logogram (green), transaction sign (red), numbers (black), fractions (orange), word-dividers/dots (purple) (drawing by author)]

[4] Charts showing simple sign distribution are given in Ester Salgarella, *Aegean Linear Script(s): Rethinking the Relationship Between Linear A and Linear B* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020), 153-155 (Figures 16-17).
[5] Composite signs combinations and lists thereof are given in: Salgarella, *Linear Script(s),* 55-84; Ester Salgarella, "Mix and Match: a combinatory (re-)classification of Linear A signs", *TALANTA* (forthcoming).
[6] Definition and contextual discussion of transaction signs is given in Ilse Schoep, *The Administration of Neopalatial Crete. A Critical Assessment of the Linear A Tablets and their Role in the Administrative Process* (Salamanca: Ediciones Universidad de Salamanca, 2002), 140-142, 159-167.

Script relations and 'readability' of Linear A

Linear A was used as graphic template for the development of Linear B, within a script transmission process which entailed language change from Minoan (unidentified linguistic family) to *Greek* (*Indo-European*).[7] Graphically, the two scripts show a 70% sign similarity with respect to syllabic signs, while the logographic repertory shows substantial changes in Linear B with the demise of Linear A complex/composite signs. Given this close script relationship and the successful decipherment of *Linear B* as *Greek*,[8] it is assumed that most homomorphic signs (i.e. signs showing the same morphological shape in both Linear A and B) may be read with the same, or closely approximate, phonetic value in both scripts (see grids showing assumed phonetic values).[9] This assumption is supported by evidence of shared sign-sequences spelled the same in both scripts and therefore likely to contain homophonic signs (e.g. place-names: *pa-i-to* 'Phaistos', *su-ki-ri-ta*; man-names: *da-i-pi-ta*, *pa-ra-ne*). The restricted use of Linear B to administrative purposes and its likely creation on Crete are also strong elements in support of script continuity on both graphic and phonetic levels. It is therefore possible to 'read' Linear A inscriptions in phonetic transcription with approximation (e.g. inscriptions from Haghia Triada, inspcriptions from elsewhere), although an appropriate understanding of the language behind the script still defies us.

[7] On the strucutral and palaeographic relations between Linear A and Linear B, and the script transmission process see lastly Ester Salgarella, "Drawing Lines: the palaeography of Linear A and Linear B", *Kadmos* 58 (2019): 61-92, and Salgarella *Linear Script(s).* The author argues that Linear B not only emerged out of Linear A but actually is a graphic variant of the Linear A script, pointing to a high level of continutiy between the two.

[8] John Chadwick, *The Decipherment of Linear B*, 2nd ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014).

[9] Philippa M. Steele, and Torsten Meißner, "From Linear B to Linear A: the problem of the backward projection of sound values." In *Understanding Relations Between Scripts: The Aegean Writing Systems*, ed. Philippa M. Steele (Oxford and Philadelphia: Oxbow Books, 2017), 93-110.

Chronological and geographical distribution

Most Linear A evidence is dated to the end of the Neo-Palatial period (ca. 1600-1450 BCE, Late Minoan IA/B),[10] which was affected by scattered fire episodes that significantly damaged Minoan palatial centres and baked the clay documents stored in them. In the Neo-Palatial period Linear A is well attested all over Crete for both administrative and non-administrative purposes. Archival documents mostly come from Haghia Triada, Khania, Zakros, Phaistos, Knossos, Mallia, Arkhanes, Tylissos. Outside of Crete, Linear A is attested in the Aegean islands in both administrative and non-administrative contexts (*Thera*, Kea, *Melos*, *Samothrace*, *Cythera*), in Asia Minor (clay vessels from *Miletus*) and in Mainland Greece (non-administrative inscriptions from Haghios Stephanos, *Tiryns*, *Argos*). The earliest attestations of Linear A go back to the Proto-Palatial period (ca. 1800-1700 BCE, Middle Minoan II-III),[11] when Linear A was in concomitant use with Cretan Hieroglyphic. Although the earliest Linear A is understood to be at home in south-central Crete (Phaistos), while Cretan Hieroglyphic in north Crete (Knossos, Mallia, Petras), there are a few documents

[10] Ilse Schoep, "Context and Chronology of Linear A Administrative Documents", *Aegean Archaeology* 2 (1995): 29-65. Schoep, *Neopalatial Crete,* 17-24. Salgarella, *Linear Script(s),* 43-46.

[11] Maurizio Del Freo, and Julien Zurbach, "La préparation d'un supplément au Recueil des inscriptions en linéaire A. Observations à partir d'un travail en cours", *BCH* 135.1 (2011): 84-85.

from Knossos and Mallia (traditionally called 'dubitanda')[12] that defy a clear-cut classification, as they could be equally taken as either Cretan Hieroglyphic or Linear A. Linear A ceased to be used after the end of the Neo-Palatial period, at least for administrative purposes. A number of objects with Linear A inscriptions have been found in slightly later contexts (a figurine from Poros, a building block of the Kephala Tholos tomb, a miniature cup from Khania, a pithoid jar from Knossos).[13] These are all non-administrative in nature and some may have been inscribed prior to the Late Minoan IB destruction horizon. These objects may be evidence of continuation of the Linear A writing practice, although scarcely, outside of palatial contexts for some time after the fall of Minoan palatial administrations.

[Insert Fig. 2: Geographical distribution of Linear A on Crete (after Salgarella 2020)]

[Insert Fig. 3: Geographical distribution of Linear A outside Crete (after Salgarella 2020)]

Document types

Linear A is written on a variety of different supports (clay, stone, metal) used for either administrative purposes (records of economic transactions) or non-administrative purposes (mostly cultic; see also *Minoan and Mycenaean religion*). To date, we have no evidence of monumental inscriptions, historiography or diplomatic correspondence.

[12] Jean-Pierre Olivier, and Louis Godart, *Corpus Hieroglyphicarum Inscriptionum Cretae* (Paris: De Boccard; École Française d'Athènes, École Française de Rome, 1996), 18.
[13] Nota Dimopoulou, Jean-Pierre Olivier, and Georges Réthémiotakis, "Une statuette en argile MR IIIA de Poros Irakliou avec inscription en linéaire A", *BCH* 117 (1993): 501-521. Laura Preston, "The Kephala Tholos at Knossos: a study in the reuse of the past", *BSA* 100 (2005): 61-123. Erik Hallager, and Birgitta P. Hallager, *The Greek-Swedish Excavations at the Agia Aikaterini Square, Kastelli, Khania, 1970-1987, 2001, 2005 and 2008: Results of the excavations under the direction of Yannis Tzedakis and Carl-Gustaf Styrenius* (Stockholm: Svenska Institutet i Athen, 2016), 290-292. Mervyn R. Popham, "An Inscribed Pithoid Jar from Knossos", *Kadmos* 15:2 (1976): 102-107.

Administrative context

Clay documents, baked by accidental fires, are the main media used for the bookkeeping of palatial administrations and fall into the following categories.[14]

a) Tablets

Small page-shaped tablets were used to record the inflow/outflow of goods from palatial centres, and list mixed commodities, a single commodity or a number of specialized commodities.[15] Tablets are often inscribed on both sides (turned over by the vertical axis), and many show traces of erasures, meaning that the surface was cancelled and re-written more than once. This evidence reveals their ephemeral use, with the information they bore likely to have been transferred onto perishable materials for longer storage before the tablets' reuse. The analysis of textual information provided by tablets, alongside other clay document types, has allowed to tentatively reconstruct the workings of Minoan economy and administration.[16]

b) Roundels

These are small disks of clay inscribed on one or both sides and bearing seal impressions along the lateral edge. Roundels are understood to have functioned as receipts of transactions kept in palatial centres. The inscription (usually logograms) is

[14] For the nomenclature of Linear A administrative documents see: Erik Hallager, "Nomenclature of administrative Linear A documents", in Sigfrid Deger-Jalkotzy, Stefan Hiller, and Oswald Panagl ed., *Floreant Studia Mycenaea. Akten sed X. Internationalen Mykenologischen Colloquiums in Salzburg vom 1.-5. Mai 1995. Band II* (Wien: Verlag der Österreichischen Akademie der Wissenschaften, 1999), 277-288.
[15] Schoep, *Neopalatial Crete*, 67-86.
[16] Schoep, *Neopalatial Crete*, 175-199.

argued to have represent the commodity being dispatched from the storerooms and the seal impressions the units of such commodity.[17]

c) Sealings

Various types of sealed documents were used to keep track of incoming/outgoing goods and to prevent unauthorised manipulation of the sealed item. These documents are small lumps of clay, inscribed on one or multiple sides and with seal impressions, which were fastened to goods to secure their content. There are three main types of sealed documents: 'nodules', 'noduli' and 'direct object sealings'. Nodules appear in different shapes: flat-based (pressed against folded parchment/papyrus), one-hole (attached to the end of a string, probably hanging from parchment/papyrus rolls), and two-hole (attached to commodities as labels, with a string passing through their length). Some flat-based nodules show imprints of fiber and strings on their flat underside, suggesting they had been secured to folded papyrus. This evidence reveals that Linear A was also written on perishable material, none of which has survived. Noduli (dome or disk shaped) are free-standing documents, not attached to any support. These are understood to have functioned as either receipts for work accomplished or commodities delivered to the centre, or tokens exchanged for services or commodities.[18] Direct object sealings are pressed directly onto objects (vessels, jars, containers, door pegs) to seal their content. Although uninscribed, they show seal impressions, and some were found alongside Linear A inscribed tablets (Middle Minoan II Phaistos).

[17] Erik Hallager, *The Minoan Roundel and other Sealed Documents in the Neopalatial Linear A Administration. Vols. I-II* (Liège and Austin: Université de Liège, Histoire de l'art et archéologie de la Grèce antique; University of Texas at Austin, Program in Aegean Scripts and Prehistory, 1996), 116-118.

[18] Hallagher, *Minoan Roundel*, 132. Judith Weingarten, "More unusual Minoan clay nodules: Addendum II", *Kadmos* 29:1 (1990):16-23. Barbara Montecchi, "Further observations on shapes, inscriptions and functions of Neopalatial nodules and noduli", *DO-SO-MO* 11 (2005): 53-69.

[Insert Fig. 4: Clay tablet from Zakros inscribed on both sides (ZA 10a-b, 5.1x8.6x1.2cm) (drawing by author)]

[Insert Fig. 5: Clay roundel from Haghia Triada inscribed on both sides (HT Wc 3008a-b, 3.00x3.2x0.9cm) (drawing by author)]

[Insert Fig. 6: Clay nodule from Khania inscribed on two sides (KH Wa 1001α-γ, 1.50x3.00x1.80cm) (drawing by author)]

Non-administrative context

In non-administrative contexts we find a variety of inscribed objects with primarily cultic, but also functional, purposes.[19] The following media are attested.

a) Clay and stone vessels bearing short inscriptions (carved on stone, incised or painted on clay), found in both religious and domestic contexts (e.g. storage containers).

b) Votive stone libation tables and ladles, bearing slightly longer inscriptions (variations of the 'libation formula'), coming primarily from religious contexts (peak sanctuaries).

c) Metal objects (gold and silver pins, gold ring, bronze bowl, ceremonial double-axes), coming from burial contexts or cultic caves.

d) A number of diverse supports that do not neatly fit into any of the above categories: figurines, architectural blocks, loom-weights, seal-stones, graffiti on plaster.

[Insert Fig. 7: Libation table from Psykhro (PS Za 2) (drawing by author)]

[19] Schoep, *Neopalatial Crete*, 13-16.

Statistically, administrative documents outnumber all documents found in non-administrative contexts. On present evidence, clay sealings are the most common document type (nearly one-thousand examples), next come clay tablets (some three-hundred examples), followed by roundels (just above a hundred examples). Incised clay and stone vessels (including libation tables and ladles) amount to a hundred examples, while inscription on other media (metal, painted vessels) are poorly represented and mostly one-offs.

The Minoan language

At present Minoan is understood to be an isolated language, that is to say not affiliated to any of the linguistic families so far known.[20] The language, as encoded in the Linear A script, is more likely to be agglutinative rather than inflected, as it appears to make high use of affixes (prefixes and suffixes), some of which have been successfully identified by scholars.[21] By applying the etymological method, over the past decades scholars have proposed to take Minoan alternatively as a *Semitic* or *Anatolian* language (most notably Palmer's *Luwian* theory), or somehow connected to Hurrian or *Etruscan*.[22] All these attempts at

[20] The most recent and exhaustive linguistic analysis of Linear A is Brent Davis, *Minoan Stone Vessels with Linear A Inscriptions* (Leuven and Liege: Peeters, 2014), 156-278.

[21] Yves Duhoux, "Une analyse linguistique du linéaire A", *BCILL* 14.1 (1978): 65-129. Yves Duhoux, "LA > B da-ma-te = Déméter? Sur la langue du linéaire A", *Minos* 29-30 (1997 [1994-1995]): 289-294. Miguel Valério, "Diktaian Master: a Minoan predecessor of Diktaian Zeus in Linear A?", *Kadmos* 46 (2007): 3-14.

[22] Semitic: Cyrus H. Gordon, *Evidence for the Minoan Language* (Ventnor: Ventnor Publishers, 1966); Cyrus H. Gordon, "Minoan", *Athenaeum* 47:1-4 (1969):125-135; Jan G.P. Best, *Some Preliminary Remarks on the Decipherment of Linear A*, (Amsterdam: Adolf M. Hakkert, 1972); Jan G.P. Best, "The first inscription in Punic: vowel differences in Linear A and B", *Ugarit Forschungen* 32 (2001): 27-35. Anatolian: Leonard R. Palmer, "Luvian and

identifying the language behind the script have so far proved untenable, as not supported by enough probative evidence. Current research has shifted towards statistical analyses and digital approaches to the whole Linear A corpus, in order to identify structural characteristics of the system and meaningful recurrent associations of sign-pairs and sign-sequences. Although we are currently at an impasse at identifying the Minoan language, we understand that: a) although unproved, Minoan may be a three-vowel system (/a/, /i/, /u/), as most signs containing the /o/ vowel and one sign containing the /e/ vowel are new introductions in *Linear B*;[23] b) some of the Linear A syllabograms may represent consonantal clusters, as some evidence from *Linear B* would suggest (e.g. *Linear B* inherited sign /nwa/, found in both Linear A and Cretan Hieroglyphic, is not a *Greek* phoneme); c) the substantial use of affixes suggests that these may have been used to express gender, case or derivation or may have had a prepositional meaning; d) the word-order may have been the marked Verb-Subject-Object (at least based evidence from the 'libation formula').[24] These points aside, Linear A still resists decipherment for the relative paucity of extant evidence, the short and formulaic nature of most inscriptions

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Linear A", *Athenaeum* 46 (1958): 431-434; Leonard R. Palmer, "Linear A and the Anatolian languages", *Incunabula Graeca* 25:1-3 (1968): 339-354; Margalit Finkelberg, "Minoan inscriptions on libation vessels", *Minos* 25-26 (1990-1): 43-85; Edwin L. Brown, "Traces of Luwian dialect in Cretan texts and toponyms", *SMEA* 28 (1990): 225-237; Edwin L. Brown, "The Linear A signary: tokens of Luwian dialect in Bronze Age Crete", *Minos* 27-28 (1993): 25-54. Hurrian: Orazio Monti, "Observations sur la langue du Linéaire A", *Kadmos* 41 (2002): 117-120; Orazio Monti, "Considérations sur quelques termes des textes votifs linéaires A", *Kadmos* 44 (2005): 19-22; Orazio Monti, "Observations sur quelques termes linéaires A", *Kadmos* 45 (2006): 69-72; Peter G. van Soesbergen, *Minoan Linear A. Hurrians and Hurrian in Minoan Crete*, Vols. I-II (Amsterdam: Brave New Books, 2017). Etruscan: Giulio M. Facchetti, "Qualche osservazione sulla lingua minoica", *Kadmos* 40 (2001): 1-38; Giulio M. Facchetti, and Mario Negri, *Creta Minoica: Sulle Tracce delle più Antiche Scritture d'Europa* (Firenze: Leo S. Olschki Editore, 2003).

[23] Thomas Palaima and Elizabeth Sikkenga, "Linear A > Linear B", in Philip P. Betancourt, Vassos Karageorghis, Robert Laffineur, and Wolf-Dietrich Niemeier ed., *Meletemata: Studies in Aegean Archaeology Presented to Malcolm H. Wiener as He Enters His 65th Year. Vol. II* (Liège and Austin: Université de Liège, Histoire de l'art et archéologie de la Grèce antique; University of Texas at Austin, Programs in Aegean Scripts and Prehistory, 1999), 599-608.

[24] Brent Davis, "Syntax in Linear A: the word-order of the 'Libation Formula'", *Kadmos* 52.1. (2013): 35-52.

(which therefore do not display insightful syntactical structures) and the lack of an agreed cognate language, not to mention that not a single bilingual inscription has been discovered to date.

Links to Digital Materials

Recueil des inscriptions en Linéaire A - Vol 1

Recueil des inscriptions en Linéaire A - Vol 2

Recueil des inscriptions en Linéaire A - Vol 3

Recueil des inscriptions en Linéaire A - Vol 4

Recueil des inscriptions en Linéaire A - Vol 5

Linear A Texts and Inscriptions in Phonetic Transcription

SigLA - The Signs of Linear A: a palaeographical database

Corpus of Minoan and Mycenaean Seals (CMS)

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