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FIFTY YEARS OF THE MYCENAEAN SEMINAR AND ARCHIVES ON-LINE*

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It is hard for us today – more than 50 years on – to recapture the heady atmosphere of the early 1950s, when Michael Ventris was pouring out a steady stream of research on Linear B: the famous Mid-Century report *New Year 1950* on the languages of the Minoan and Mycenaean civilisations and the numerous work-notes that he circulated amongst interested scholars in 1951–52. Then came the truly astonishing announcement on the Third Programme that Linear B was – after all – ‘an archaic form of Greek’. Even the circumstances of the announcement were extraordinary: a radio broadcast devoted to a review of Sir John Myres *Scripta Minoa* II. Moreover, breakthroughs in philology were matched and confirmed by further discoveries in the field. Blegen’s return to Pylos brought to light new tablets, effectively offering ‘unseens’ against which the decipherment could be tested. As Blegen wrote after applying the syllabary to Ta 641 and reading *ti-ri-po-de* for three-handled vessels and *an-no-we* for handle-less pots, ‘all this seems too good to be true’.

But true it was. Swiftly Ventris was joined by John Chadwick, a young Cambridge philologist, and together they set out their stall in *Journal of Hellenic Studies* for 1953. Not long after – 16 October 1953 – the Institute of Classical Studies came into being. The Annual Report records somewhat laconically: ‘Not unnaturally, questions of organization were a prime concern this year. But the Institute has found time to run an advanced seminar to study the decipherment of Minoan Linear B, an activity that has aroused wide interest in the University and elsewhere.’ Thus on 27 January 1954 the first seminar took place – not in the original premises of the Institute in Bedford Square, but in University College where a larger room was available. Certain ‘tools’ were available beforehand:

- stencilled copies of the transliterated Pylos tablets prepared by T.B.L. Webster
- photostat copies of the signs
- copies of the Ventris – Chadwick article in *JHS* could be obtained at the cost of 5/- from Miss Alicia Totolos in Bedford Sq.

Further tools would be available at the Seminar itself

- a private glossary compiled by Mr Ventris
- card index compiled by Professor Webster with words common to Pylos / Knossos.

A note by T. B. L. Webster outlined the aims of the Seminar (here paraphrased):

1) Archaeological: the circumstances of the tablets’ discovery; interpretation of objects portrayed on the tablets; further implications, e.g. where gold offerings were kept; are what we call palaces partly temples?

2) Linguistic – grammar, syntax, personal names, names of crafts, commodities etc.

3) Economic: what kinds of records were kept; weights and measures; the picture of life in Pylos; parallels to Eastern civilisations / later Greece.

4) Social: names of officials / gradings of the population; then lapsing into the vernacular – *what is the set-up?*

* The following text represents a corrected and slightly updated version of the summary published in *BICS*-48 (2005) 197-9.

5) Religious: what gods / goddesses are recorded; what offerings given to them; how do they fit with archaeological evidence for Minoan / Mycenaean religion and later Greek religion?

6) Historical: what light is thrown by the tablets in conjunction with other evidence archaeological and literary on (a) Minoan civilisation (b) Mycenaean civilisation; c) Eastern contacts; (d) Trojan War; (e) Homer and the epic cycle.

Sadly we have no records of the first seminar, but from the second meeting onwards, formal Minutes were produced and circulated to members of the Seminar. The Minutes contained summaries of papers and discussions; they also listed recent bibliography and occasionally included what today we might call 'breaking news'.

Minutes were always intended as confidential documents – their circulation restricted to Members of the Seminar. Yet by 1964 there had been an increasing demand, especially from libraries and institutes for copies of the Minutes. A circular was duly dispatched to Members detailing arguments for and against wider circulation. Correspondence in the Seminar Archive reveals that opinions were sharply divided. The matter was carefully considered by the Management Committee – on the assumption that the Seminar had before it *several years* of useful work. Thus, minutes would continue to be produced and their circulation would remain private. But henceforth summaries of the seminar papers would appear in the *Bulletin*, subject to the authors consent. Thus Seminar Summaries were born and within a few years Minutes were quietly abandoned.

In its long history the fortunes of the Seminar waxed and waned; its focus and interests have subtly evolved. In first decade, the Seminar met eight or nine times per year, with texts and philology predominating. By the early–mid 1960s, the number of meetings was dwindling ominously: four, three or even two. Of course quantity is no indicator of quality and these years saw a crucial innovation, namely the inclusion of archaeology that was *unrelated* to texts – indeed unrelated to *Mycenaean* topics *per se*. Early examples include the papers presented by J. L. Caskey on his excavations at Ayia Irini on Kea or Sinclair Hood's account of EM and MM levels at Knossos. From the mid-1970s the seminar was again meeting six to eight times per year, as it does today. And archaeology had become enshrined as the main focus of the Seminar. Indeed by the early 1990s there was a danger that language would cease to be represented at all. Thus for the past 10 years we have tried to devote at least one meeting a year to texts and their application.

To sum up the history of the seminar and its achievements in a few paragraphs is impossible. However, the first complete list of Seminars – more than 300 in all – is currently being compiled. This will indicate papers for which summaries and discussions exist in the unpublished Minutes, as well as references to all summaries published in the *Bulletin* – about 200. Of these 110 summaries – a *complete* record – have appeared in the past 10 years alone: proof, if proof be needed, of the continued health of the Seminar and a lasting contribution to the field of Aegean prehistory.

Work on the Seminar Archive will continue in coming years, as will the sorting and cataloguing of the Ventris Papers entrusted to the Institute by the Ventris family in the late 1980s, on the death of Lois (Betty) Ventris, Michael's widow. For the most part, these are family papers e.g. photographs, personal letters, architectural sketches and drawings, drafts for talks and lectures, radio scripts, obituaries and newspaper cuttings. A full catalogue of the Ventris Papers now available on-line through SAS-Space.