A Linear B Tablet from Pylos (P 641)
Matthew Hartnett, St. Mark’s School
matthewhartnett@stmarksschool.org

Goals:
- To introduce students to Linear B
- To convey the idea that a language and the writing system used to record it are independent
- To give students a feel for the excitement of decipherment

Part 1: Background:
- Greek Bronze Age
- Linear B
  - Undeciphered until the 1950s, by Michael Ventris
  - Was it being used to write the Greek language?
  - Writing systems: alphabetic, syllabic, pictographic

Part 2: Explain the handout: Tablet above is transcribed below
Guide students to the following assumptions:
- The sequence of signs on each transcribed line correspond to the following pictogram
- The vertical lines following each pictogram are numbers
- The short vertical lines between the signs are sense divisions

Part 3: The Assignment
- Students must decipher the meaning of as many of the sequences of signs as possible
- Clue: Look for similarities among pictograms (e.g., shape of vessel, number of vessels, number of handles) and find corresponding similarities in sequences of signs

Part 4: The Solution:
- See attached transcription
- first sequence denotes type of vessel
- last sequence denotes number of handles (pots)
- same two signs appear in sequences for “tripod” and “three-handled”
- Was it being used to write the Greek language?
  Share the following syllabic values (or have students find them from table):
  - ti-ri-po denotes “tripod” (cf. Gk: τρίπος, -όδος, three-footed)
  - qa-to-ro denotes “four” (cf. Latin quattuor)
  - a-no denotes “none” (cf. alpha privative)
  - o-we denotes “handles” (cf. Gk: οψ, ὀψ, ear, handle)
  - di-pa approximates Homeric δέπας (although different vessel?)
  - me-zo-e denotes “larger” (cf. Gk: μεγίζουν)
- This tablet, in fact, was largely responsible for the acceptance of Ventris’s decipherment and the conclusion that the tablets were written in Greek
A Linear B Tablet from Pylos (P 641): A Short List of Useful works

**Introductory works:**
- -----, *The Mycenaean World* (Cambridge, 1976)
- -----, *Linear B and Related Scripts* (California, 1997)

**More advanced works:**
- Palmer, L.R., *The Interpretation of Mycenaean Greek Texts* (Oxford, 1963)
- Ventris, Michael and Chadwick, John, *Documents in Mycenaean Greek* (2nd ed., Cambridge, 1973)

**For a comprehensive bibliography, see:**
  (A page from the web version of Jeremy Rutter’s Prehistoric Aegean Archaeology course at Dartmouth)
From L.R. Palmer, *Mycenaeans and Minoans: Aegean Prehistory in the Light of the Linear B Tablets*  
(NB: The incomplete entry that runs from the end of the first line of the tablet to the beginning of the second line is not transcribed below)
TRIPODS Aiku-type Cretan workmanship

TI RI PO DE AI KE U KE RE SI JO WE KE

TRIPOD  ONE FOOT (?) ONE HANDLED (?)

TI RI PO E ME PA DE O WE WE

POT  LARGER  FOUR-HANDED

DI PA ME ZO E GE TO RO WE

POTS LARGER THREE-HANDED

DI PA E ME ZO E TI RI O WE E

POT  SMALLER  FOUR-HANDED

DI PA ME WI JO GE TO RO WE

POT  SMALLER  THREE-HANDED

DI PA ME WI JO TI RI JO WE

POT  SMALLER NO-HANDED

DI PA ME WI JO A NO WE
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Letter</th>
<th>Linear B</th>
<th>Sound</th>
<th>Linear B</th>
<th>Sound</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>a</td>
<td>a</td>
<td>e</td>
<td>i</td>
<td>o</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>da</td>
<td>da</td>
<td>de</td>
<td>di</td>
<td>do</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ja</td>
<td>ja</td>
<td>je</td>
<td>jo</td>
<td>ju</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ka</td>
<td>ka</td>
<td>ke</td>
<td>ki</td>
<td>ko</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ma</td>
<td>ma</td>
<td>me</td>
<td>mi</td>
<td>mo</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>na</td>
<td>na</td>
<td>ne</td>
<td>ni</td>
<td>no</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>pa</td>
<td>pa</td>
<td>pe</td>
<td>pi</td>
<td>po</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>qa</td>
<td>qa</td>
<td>qe</td>
<td>qi</td>
<td>qo</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ra</td>
<td>ra</td>
<td>re</td>
<td>ri</td>
<td>ro</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>sa</td>
<td>sa</td>
<td>se</td>
<td>si</td>
<td>so</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ta</td>
<td>ta</td>
<td>te</td>
<td>ti</td>
<td>to</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>wa</td>
<td>wa</td>
<td>we</td>
<td>wi</td>
<td>wo</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>za</td>
<td>za</td>
<td>ze</td>
<td></td>
<td>zo</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*The basic Linear B syllabary.*