

# A Linear B Tablet from Pylos (P 641)

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- 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: *τρίπους*, *-οδος*, three-footed)
    - qe-to-ro denotes “four” (cf. Latin *quattuor*)
    - a-no denotes “none” (cf. alpha privative)
    - o-we denotes “handles” (cf. Gk: *οὔς*, *ὠτός*, ear, handle)
    - di-pa approximates Homeric *δέπας* (although different vessel?)
    - me-zo-e denotes “larger” (cf. Gk: *μείζων*)
- 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:**

- Chadwick, John, *The Decipherment of Linear B* (2<sup>nd</sup> ed., Cambridge, 1967)  
-----, *The Mycenaean World* (Cambridge, 1976)  
-----, *Linear B and Related Scripts* (California, 1997)  
Pope, Maurice, *The Story of Decipherment* (rev. ed., Thames & Hudson, 2001)  
Robinson, Andrew, *The Man who Deciphered Linear B* (Thames & Hudson, 2002)

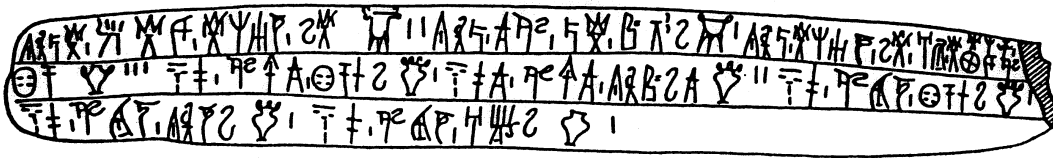
### **More advanced works:**

- Hooker, J.T., *Linear B: An Introduction* (Bristol, 1980)  
Palmer, L.R., *The Interpretation of Mycenaean Greek Texts* (Oxford, 1963)  
-----, *Mycenaeans and Minoans: Aegean Prehistory in the Light of the  
Linear B Tablets* (2<sup>nd</sup> ed., Knopf, 1965)  
Ventris, Michael and Chadwick, John, *Documents in Mycenaean Greek*  
(2<sup>nd</sup> ed., Cambridge, 1973)

### **For a comprehensive bibliography, see:**

[http://devlab.dartmouth.edu/history/bronze\\_age/lessons/25bib.html](http://devlab.dartmouth.edu/history/bronze_age/lessons/25bib.html)

(A page from the web version of Jeremy Rutter's Prehistoric Aegean  
Archaeology course at Dartmouth)



ΑΒΓ ΔΕ, ΖΗΘΙ, ΚΛΜΝ, ΟΠΡ, ΣΤΥ Φ Ψ Ω 11

ΑΒΓ Δ, ΕΖΗ, ΘΚΛ, ΜΝΞ 1

ΠΡ, ΣΤΑ, ΒΓΔ 1

ΠΡΑ, ΣΤΑ, ΑΒΓΔΑ 11

ΠΡ, ΚΛΖ, ΒΓΔ 1

ΠΡ, ΚΛΖ, ΑΒΓΔ 1

ΠΡ, ΚΛΖ, ΤΥΦ 1

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)

Handwritten text on a scroll-like background, consisting of three lines of symbols and characters.

ΛΣ ΓΔ, ΕΖΗ, ΘΨΧ, 2Α Ω (A dog icon) 11

ΑΣ Γ, ΑΖΗ, ΕΖΗ, ΒΑ'Σ (A dog icon) 1

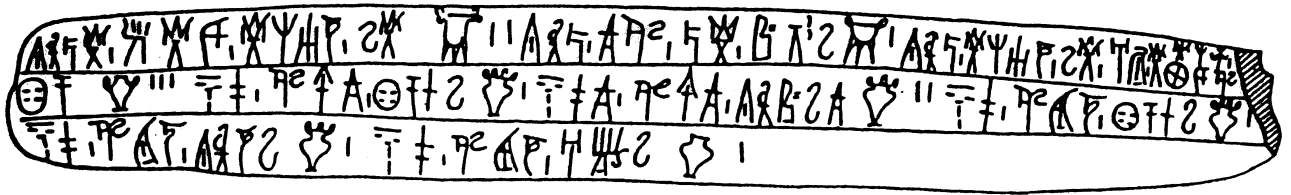
(ΕΖΗ), ΖΗΑ, ΘΖ+Σ → (A dog icon) 1

ΕΖΗΑ, ΖΗΑ, ΑΣΒ'ΣΑ → (A dog icon) 11

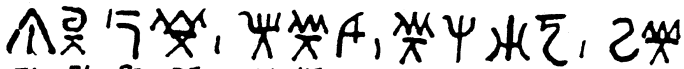
ΕΖΗ, ΖΗΔ, ΘΖ+Σ → (A dog icon) 1

ΕΖΗ, ΖΗΔ, ΑΣΔ'Σ → (A dog icon) 1

ΕΖΗ, ΖΗΔ, ΨΧ'Σ → (A dog icon) 1

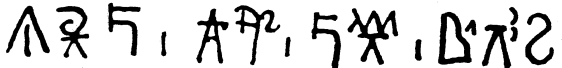


TRIPODS AIKU-TYPE CRETAN WORKMANSHIP

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

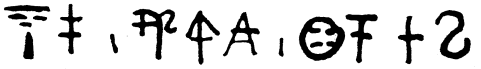


TRIPOD ONE FOOT (?) ONE HANDLED (?)

  
 TI RI PO E ME PO DE O WO WE

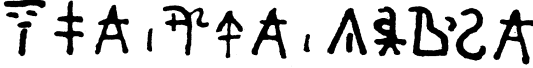


POT LARGER FOUR-HANDLED

  
 DI PA ME ZO E QE TO RO WE




POTS LARGER THREE-HANDLED

  
 DI PA E ME ZO E TI RI O WE E




POT SMALLER FOUR-HANDLED

  
 DI PA ME WI JO QE TO RO WE

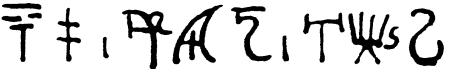


POT SMALLER THREE-HANDLED





























































  
 DI PA ME WI JO TI RI JO WE



POT SMALLER NO-HANDLED

  
 DI PA ME WI JO A NO WE



 a	 e	 i	 o	 u
 da	 de	 di	 do	 du
 ja	 je		 jo	 ju
 ka	 ke	 ki	 ko	 ku
 ma	 me	 mi	 mo	 mu
 na	 ne	 ni	 no	 nu
 pa	 pe	 pi	 po	 pu
 qa	 qe	 qi	 qo	
 ra	 re	 ri	 ro	 ru
 sa	 se	 si	 so	 su
 ta	 te	 ti	 to	 tu
 wa	 we	 wi	 wo	
 za	 ze		 zo	

The basic Linear B syllabary.