Michael George Francis Ventris Personal Papers and Memorabilia (PASP at UC)

Overview

Accession Code: UC PASP-MGFV
Principal Creator: Michael Ventris
Title: Michael G.F. Ventris Papers
Inclusive Dates: 1948-1956
Bulk Dates: 1948-1956
Abstract: These records represent the publications, manuscripts, and correspondence of Michael G.F. Ventris, the man credited with the decipherment of Linear B in 1952. Correspondence includes letters with various colleagues and associates, primarily Emmett L. Bennett, Jr. Alice E. Kober, and Sir John L. Myres.
Quantity: Five boxes
Immediate Source of Acquisition: PASP. Donors: Emmett L. Bennett, Jr., Thomas G. Palaima, the Ashmolean Museum, and the University of Uppsala
Donation Date: 1985
Processing Information: Item level inventory and finding-aid
By: C. Costlow in Fall 2007
Revised: Fall 2026 by Jeffrey L. Kramer

Index Terms

Persons
Bennett, Emmett L., Jr.
Blegen, Carl W.
Chadwick, John
Daniel, John Franklin
Hrozný, Bedrich
Hunter, Patrick
Kober, Alice E.
Myres, Sir John L.
Sittig, Ernst
Ventris, Lois

Organizations
Architectural Association
Royal Air Force

Publications
American Journal of Archaeology
Antiquity
Archaeology
Documents in Mycenaean Greek
Études Mycéniennes
Jahrbuch für kleinasiatische Forschung
The Listener

Subjects
Cypro-Minoan
Decipherment
Linear A
Linear B
Minoan Syllabary
Statistical Analysis

Places
Crete
Greece
London
Oxford
Pylos
Knossos
Scarborough

Document Types
Articles

Carbon copies
Letters
Off-prints
Photocopies
Transcripts

Creator Sketch

Michael George Francis Ventris (1922–1956) was born in Wheathamstead, England, and educated privately in England and Switzerland and later at Stowe School from 1935 to 1939. As a boy, Ventris was fascinated with the Classics, and much of his early education was of an informal nature, obtained primarily though books, travel, and self-taught languages. Ventris could speak six European languages as well as read Latin and classical Greek.

In 1936, during a school trip to the Burlington House Exhibition, 14-year-old Ventris heard the famed archaeologist Sir Arthur J. Evans lecture on the Linear B script that he had discovered at Knossos. This encounter sparked Ventris's lifelong obsession with Linear B. Four years later, in 1940, his first attempt at the decipherment of Linear B, "Introducing the Minoan Language," was published in the *American Journal of Archaeology*, although he would later reject the theories presented in the paper.

In 1940, Ventris entered the Architectural Association School. His studies were interrupted shortly thereafter by World War II, during which he served in the Royal Air Force as a navigator. Upon completion of his service in 1946, Ventris reentered the Architectural Association School, and he earned his diploma with honors in 1948. During the next few years, Ventris returned to work on the ancient scripts during his spare time, creating a "work group" of colleagues that exchanged notes through correspondence. To members of the group Ventris circulated his work notes, which detailed his progress step by step. In addition, Ventris circulated a questionnaire to survey the progress of others working on decipherment, including, among others, Alice E. Kober and Emmett L. Bennett, Jr. The results of this survey were compiled into the "Mid-Century Report" in 1950.

Ventris' progress on the decipherment of Linear B was influenced heavily by the work of other scholars, particularly that of Kober. She had noted that certain words in Linear B inscriptions had changing word endings, or declensions, in the manner of Latin or Greek. Using this clue, Ventris constructed a series of grids associating the symbols on the tablets with consonants and vowels. Although which consonants and vowels they were could not yet be identified, Ventris learned enough about the structure of the underlying language to begin guessing.

In 1951, additional Linear B tablets were discovered on the Greek mainland and were subsequently published, and Ventris began to suspect that some of the sequences of symbols he encountered on in the tablet texts were actually names on Crete. Noting that certain names appeared only in the Linear B texts, Ventris made an inspired guess that the names applied to cities on the island. Using the symbols he could decipher from this, Ventris soon decoded much of the text and determined that the underlying language of Linear B was an archaic form of Greek. On 1 July of 1952, Ventris announced his discovery on the BBC.

With the assistance of Cambridge linguist John Chadwick, Ventris assembled striking evidence supporting his theory. Their historic paper, "Evidence for Greek Dialect in the Mycenaean Archives," was published 1953, followed by an almost universal acceptance of the decipherment. Tragically, Ventris was killed in an automobile accident on 6 September 1956. Ventris' and Chadwick's second major publication, *Documents in Mycenaean Greek,* was published just a few weeks after Ventris' unexpected death.

Scope and Content

Publications, manuscripts, and correspondence are included in the c. 249 items that comprise the Michael Ventris Papers (1948-1956).

The first group (Series I) of the collection includes Ventris' scholarly publications, one of which is Ventris' first published attempt at decipherment from 1940, "Introducing the Minoan Language." Also included are several articles published after the decipherment of Linear B, including two that were written in conjunction with John Chadwick.

The second group (Series II) of materials, Manuscripts, contains two versions of the manuscript "Evidence for Greek Dialect in the Mycenaean Archives." This paper was written by Ventris and Chadwick in support of Ventris' decipherment of Linear B. The paper was published in 1953 in the *Journal of Hellenic Studies*. The second manuscript, "Europe's Oldest Written Language," was never published.

Radio Transcripts and Other Records comprise the third group (Series III) of the collection. The radio transcripts subgroup (Series III.1) include Ventris' speech on BBC radio during which he announced his decipherment of Linear B in 1952. The second transcript, of a talk entitled "The Tablets of Ancient Crete," was broadcast in 1956.

The second subgroup (Series III.2) of material is Other Records. This group contains Ventris' Greek identification card, biographical notes written by Bennett, obituaries published after Ventris' death, and a script written by Andrew Robinson about Ventris' life and his decipherment of Linear B.

The fourth and last group (Series IV), Correspondence, comprises the bulk of the collection. The majority of the letters are correspondence with Emmett L. Bennett, Jr. (Series IV.1), Alice E. Kober (13 items), and Sir John L. Myres (Series IV.2). The letters document the progress of the work on the Linear B decipherment, and in a letter sent by Ventris to Bennett on 18 June 1952, Ventris announces his decipherment of the script. The letters sent between Ventris and Myers detail Ventris' interest and work in Linear B from dates as early as 1940. Also included in this second subgroup are letters written to Lois Ventris, Ventris' wife, and correspondence with the *American Journal of Archaeology,* the journal that published Ventris' first article.
NB: The correspondence includes both original letters and photocopies. While some photocopies are duplicates of the originals, most of the photocopies represent materials not held in the collection.

Provenance

The bulk of the materials were donated by Emmett L. Bennett, Jr. to PASP under the custody of Dr. Thomas G. Palaima in 1985. The collection was transferred to the Department of Classics at the University of Cincinnati in 2024.

Photocopies of correspondence between Ventris and Myres are taken from Myers' materials housed at the Ashmolean Museum, Oxford.

Photocopies of correspondence between Arne Furumark and Ventris were provided courtesy of the University of Uppsala.

Related Material

The Architectural Association
34-36 Bedford Square, London WC1B 3ES.
http://www.aaschool.ac.uk

Department of Antiquities, Ashmolean Museum
Beaumont Street, Oxford OX1 2PH
http://www.ashmolean.org/departments/antiquities/

ICS Michael Ventris Archive
School of Advanced Study, University of London
Digital Repository
http://sas-space.sas.ac.uk/dspace/handle/10065/329

Ventris-Chadwick Archive
Mycenaean Epigraphy Group
Faculty of Classics, University of Cambridge
http://www.classics.cam.ac.uk/faculty/research_groups_and_societies/mycenaean_epigraphy/

Detailed Description of the Collection

The following section contains an item-level listing of the records in the collection

Series I: Publications

Box 01

Publications, 1940-1956

Folder 1.1: "Introducing the Minoan Language," *American Journal of Archaeology* 44.4 (1940), 494-520. (1 item: Proof)

Folder 1.2: "Notes on the Position of the "Eteo" Languages," *Jahrbuch für kleinasiatische Forschung* 2.2 (February 1952), 218-223. (1 item: Photocopy)

Folder 1.3: "Deciphering Europe's Earliest Scripts," *The Listener* (July 10, 1952), 57-58. (1 item)

Folder 1.4: (with John Chadwick) "Greek Records in the Minoan Script," *Antiquity* 27.108, (1953). (1 item)
Folder 1.5: "King Nestor's Four-Handled Cups: Greek Inventories in the Minoan Script," *Archaeology* 7.1 (1954), 15-21. (1 item: Offprint)
Folder 1.6: "Bibliographie Mycénienne 1953-1955," *Études Mycéniennes* (1956), 2-24. (1 item: Offprint)
Folder 1.7: (with John Chadwick) *Documents in Mycenaean Greek*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1956. (1 item: Select pages)

Series II: Manuscripts and Unpublished Papers

Box 01
Manuscripts and Unpublished Papers, 1952, n.d.
Folder 1.18: "Evidence for Greek Dialect in the Mycenaean Archives," 1952 (2 items)
Folder 1.9: Photocopy of second draft (1 item) [Later published in *Journal of Hellenic Studies* 72 (1953).]
Folder 1.10: "Europe's Oldest Written Language," n.d. (1 item)

Series III: Other Records

Subseries III.1: Radio Transcripts
Box 01
Radio Transcripts, 1952-1956
Folder 1.11: "The Cretan Tablets," 1952 (1 item: Address during which Ventris announced the decipherment of Linear B)
Folder 1.12: "The Tablets of Ancient Crete," 1956 (1 item)

Subseries III.2: Other Records
Box 01
Other Records, 1953-1956, n.d.
Folder 1.13: Greek Identification card, 1953 (2 items: Original with photocopy)
Folder 1.14: Biographical notes by Bennett, n.d. (2 items)
Folder 1.15: Published obituaries, 1956 (3 items)
Folder 1.16: Script by Andrew Robinson, "The Schoolboy who Beat the Experts: The Decipherment of Linear B," n.d. (1 item)

Series IV: Correspondence

IV.1: Correspondence with Emmett L. Bennett, Jr.
Box 02
Correspondence, 1949-1951
Folder 2.1: 16 April 1949
Folder 2.2: 20 April 1949
Folder 2.3: 12 August 1949
Folder 2.4: 17 August 1949
Folder 2.5: 26 January 1950

Folder 2.6: 28 January 1950
Folder 2.7: 2 February 1950
Folder 2.8: 16 April 1950
Folder 2.9: 20 May 1950
Folder 2.10: 22 June 1950
Folder 2.11: 11 November 1950
Folder 2.12: 14 November 1950
Folder 2.13: 4 December 1950
Folder 2.14: 12 December 1950
Folder 2.15: 27 March 1951
Folder 2.16: 8 May 1951
Folder 2.17: 13 May 1951
Folder 2.18: 20 May 1951
Folder 2.19: 1 June 1951
Folder 2.20: 29 June 1951
Folder 2.21: 16 August 1951
Folder 2.22: 6 September 1951
Folder 2.23: 3 October 1951
Folder 2.24: 24 October 1951
Folder 2.25: 18 November 1951

Box 03
Correspondence, 1952-January 1954
Folder 3.1: 24 January 1952
Folder 3.2: 18 April 1952
Folder 3.3: 26 April 1952
Folder 3.4: 3 May 1952
Folder 3.5: 22 May 1952
Folder 3.6: 24 May 1952
Folder 3.7: 29 May 1952
Folder 3.8: 7 June 1952
Folder 3.9: 18 June 1952 [announces the decipherment of Linear B]
Folder 3.10: 26 June 1952
Folder 3.11: 9 July 1952
Folder 3.12: 23 July 1952
Folder 3.13: 27 September 1952
Folder 3.14: 25 October 1952
Folder 3.15: 26 October 1952
Folder 3.16: 25 November 1952
Folder 3.17: 13 December 1952
Folder 3.18: 1 March 1953
Folder 3.19: 20 May 1953
Folder 3.20: 23 June 1953
Folder 3.21: 9 July 1953
Folder 3.22: 5 October 1953
Folder 3.23: 16 October 1953

Folder 3.24: 1 December 1953
Folder 3.25: 10 December 1953
Folder 3.26: 12 December 1953
Folder 3.27: 26 December 1953
Folder 3.28: 1 January 1954? [date is based on the "Thursday" written for the first Thursday of 1954, if this was composed before the 7 January letter)
Folder 3.29: 7 January 1954 [letter was "begun" on this date]

Box 04
Correspondence, February 1954-1956
Folder 4.1: 1 February 1954
Folder 4.2: 4 March 1954
Folder 4.3: 12 April 1954
Folder 4.4: 10 May 1954
Folder 4.5: 1 June 1954
Folder 4.6: 14 August 1954
Folder 4.7: 2 October 1954
Folder 4.8: 14 October 1954
Folder 4.9: 1 January 1955
Folder 4.10: 28 February 1955
Folder 4.11: 1 April 1955
Folder 4.12: 14 April 1955
Folder 4.13: 21 April 1955
Folder 4.14: 10 May 1955
Folder 4.15: 31 May 1955
Folder 4.16: 30 July 1955
Folder 4.17: 18 October 1955
Folder 4.18: 15 November 1955
Folder 4.19: 18 November 1955
Folder 4.20: 24 November 1955
Folder 4.21: 2 December 1955
Folder 4.22: 8 December 1955
Folder 4.23: 30 January 1956
Folder 4.24: 23 May 1956
Folder 4.25: Photocopies of various letters, 1949-1955 (54 items)

Subseries IV.2: Correspondence with Other Individuals and Institutions
Box 05
Correspondence, 1940-1956, n.d.
Folder 5.1: Blegen, Carl W., 19 May 1953 (1 item: photocopy)
Folder 5.2: Chadwick, John, 13 July 1952 (2 items: Typed transcript of original letter with related correspondence from Chadwick to Thomas G. Palaima)
Folder 5.3: Daniel, John Franklin, 23 February 1948 (1 item: original)
Folder 5.4: Hrozný, Bedrich, 24 October 1950 (1 item: original)
Folder 5.5: Hrozný, Bedrich, 24 October 1950 (1 item: photocopy)
Folder 5.6: Hunter, Patrick, 1(?) December 1942, 5 November 1953 (2 items: photocopies))

Folder 5.7: Kober, Alice E., 26 March 1948 (1 item: original)
Folder 5.8: Kober, Alice E., 23(?) May 1948 (1 item: original) [note on photocopy is “ante 23”]
Folder 5.9: Kober, Alice E., 23 May 1948 (1 item: original)
Folder 5.10: Kober, Alice E., 7 July 1948 (1 item: original)
Folder 5.11: Kober, Alice E., 17 September 1948 (1 item: original)
Folder 5.12: Kober, Alice E., 1 December 1948 (1 item: original)
Folder 5.13: Kober, Alice E., 22 February 1949 (1 item: original)
Folder 5.14: Kober, Alice E., 26 March 1948–22 February 1949 (6 items: photocopies, omits letter from 17 September 1948)
Folder 5.15: Myers, Sir John L., 26 March 1948 (1 item: original)
Folder 5.16: Myers, Sir John L., 22 October 1942-19 January 1954 (66 items: photocopies)
Folder 5.17: Sittig, E., 24 October 1951 (1 item: original)
Folder 5.18: Sittig, E., 24 October 1951 (1 item: photocopy)
Folder 5.19: Ventris, Lois, n.d. (2 items: photocopies)
Folder 5.20: editor of the *American Journal of Archaeology*, 22 September 1940, 8 November 1940, 14 January 1941 (3 items: originals)
Folder 5.21: editor of the *American Journal of Archaeology*, 8 November 1940 (1 item: photocopy)
Folder 5.22: Correspondence summary list by Bennett, n.d. (1 item)