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Les archives du roi Nestor. Corpus des inscriptions en linéaire B de Pylos, I-II

Louis Godart, Anna Sacconi, *Les archives du roi Nestor. Corpus des inscriptions en linéaire B de Pylos, I-II. Volume I, Séries Aa-Fr; Volume II, Séries Gn-Xn. Pasiphae*. Pisa; Roma: Fabrizio Serra editore, 2020. Pp. xxx, 386; 420. ISBN 9788833151915 €945.00.

Review by

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After more than half a century since they were discovered, the photographs of every tablet in the corpus of the Linear B inscriptions from Pylos, Messenia, are available in a single publication. Linear B was the script used by the Mycenaean civilisation in the Bronze Age; the decipherment by Michael Ventris in 1952 revealed that the script represents an early form of ancient Greek. The work under review, *Les archives du roi Nestor. Corpus des inscriptions en linéaire B de Pylos* by Louis Godart and Anna Sacconi, is a *magnum opus* that stands out in skill and workmanship, but its publication is the result of a patiently enduring editorial process, amidst academic debates and divisions.^[1]

The story of the tablets starts just before World War II, on a spring day, when Carl W. Blegen of the University of Cincinnati found five tablets written in the Linear B script in what was soon to be recognised as the central archive of the Palace of Nestor in Messenia. The tablets were strikingly similar to the ones found by Arthur Evans on Crete in the Palace of Minos at Knossos in the early years of the 20th century. This prompted a flurry of activity, led by Emmett L. Bennett Jr., the founding father of Mycenaean epigraphy, who wrote the *editiones principes* of the tablets found by Blegen in 1939, *Pylos Tablets I (PT I)*, and in his subsequent excavations of the 1950s, *Pylos Tablets II (PT II)*.

Since Bennett's foundational editions, several transcriptions and drawings of the texts have been published, with the collaboration of the most important researchers involved in Linear B studies. Seminal publications include *Pylos Tablets Transcribed I* (1973) and *Pylos Tablets Transcribed II* (1976), by Emmett L. Bennett Jr. and Jean-Pierre Olivier, which provided complete transcriptions of the tablets known at the time and the first palaeographical analysis. Bennett and Olivier continued Bennett's criteria for classification from *PT I* and *PT II*: series, scribal hands, 'classes', 'stylus' groups and find-spots, but crucially provided no lists of sign forms or analysis of the scribes' work. This endeavour was eventually taken up by Palaima in the 80s (*Scribes Pylos*). Originally, the definitive edition of the tablets from Pylos was to appear as the fourth volume of the series *The Palace of Nestor at Pylos in Western Messenia*, which currently comprises three published volumes, 1966-1973. The collaborative endeavor of the fourth volume^[2] is still in production, but poised to culminate with complementary 3D models of the inscriptions (D. Nakassis and K. Pluta 2017, *Aegean Scripts, Proceedings of the 14th International Colloquium on Mycenaean Studies. Copenhagen, 2-5 September 2015*, ed. M.-L. Nosch and H. Landenius Enegren, 285-298; see [The Pylos Digital Tablets Project](#)). In the meantime, other important new texts and joins have been published since the 1970s, by C. W. Shelmerdine and J. Bennet in *Kadmōs* and J. L. Melena in *Minos*. In January 2020, M. Del Freo and J. -P. Olivier produced a second edition of the 1973 work, *The Pylos Tablets Transcribed*, but still without photographs and drawings. This was published just before the start of the Covid-19 pandemic (thus *non vidi*).

Indeed, the story that has led to the production of the *corpus* is one of multiple endeavours and contributions over decades of cumulative and painstaking work. I will borrow the words of John Killen, one of the most important Mycenologists today, to describe past work on the tablets: 'the Linear B tablets from Pylos have been fortunate in their editors' (J. T. Killen. 1976. Review of *The Pylos Tablets Transcribed* in *The Journal of Hellenic Studies*, Vol. 96, 259-260). However, that was written more than a generation ago, and as is often the case, the road since then has been long and winding.

The publication by Godart and Sacconi is admittedly the achievement of a lifetime. ^[3] It is no wonder that Godart uses twice, at the outset, the word '*souffrance*', token and testimony of the effort behind this. In these two volumes, the inscribed faces of each tablet and inscribed object, intact or fragmentary, are illustrated with lavish colour photographs in full scale, accompanied by drawings, transliterations of each text and basic information on each piece. In 2008 I was fortunate enough to see and photograph the inscriptions from Pylos during one of my visits to the National Archaeological Museum in Athens. Seeing and holding the tablets in my hands was a real privilege. But those were just a few objects, available to me for a limited time. A *corpus* is altogether a different story.

In *Les archives du roi Nestor*, the inscriptions are gathered in alphabetical order, according to the standard classification of the series (sets of tablets recording information on the same themes). The first volume sets out the inscriptions from the Aa series (dealing with palace personnel) through the Fr series (accounts of olive oil). Other important tablets in this volume deal with land-holding (E tablets) and livestock (C tablets). The second volume follows with the Gn to Xn series, concerning subjects such as metal allotments (J series), taxes (Ma), weapons, chariots and armor (S), miscellaneous inventories (U), and furniture such as tables and chairs (Ta). Fragmentary tablets (X) and inscribed nodules (W) are also included. Each tablet is presented with details related to its dimensions, find-spot (the majority are located in the Archives Complex, rooms 7 and 8), and scribe identification.

Godart and Sacconi closely follow the standard definition of an epigraphic corpus. It is a pity that photographs are not provided of the uninscribed surfaces of the tablets, since a lot can be garnered even from the sides or faces of objects that bear no inscription (palm or finger prints, for starters): in brief, there is something to be said about seeing an object in its entirety and fullness, but this is too much to ask of a printed corpus, which already weighs more than ten kilograms and is very expensive as is. Several Appendices crown the catalogue, with a table of the Linear B syllabograms and logograms from Pylos and the scribes, especially those for which the authors offer a new identification (*Tableaux des signes des scribes de 651 à 663M; Tableau des signes communs au scribe 626 et à Tn 316.1-; Tableau des signes des scribes 626 et 663 en Tn 316; Tableau des signes communs au scribe 602 et à Jo 438*). Further, concordances of the inscriptions are provided. These are not mere appendices: they propose a new classification and a radical change in the history of Mycenaean epigraphy.

In a brief, concise introduction, a radical reappraisal is presented: in some cases hands or scribes (meaning 'tablet writers') are re-classified or identified afresh; Bennett's complex 'class' and 'stylus' groups are whittled to hand assignments, and scribes are re-numbered via a new system using the number range 601-700 (in analogy with the scribes from the other corpora: the Mycenaean documents range from 51 to 100, while the Knossos ones run from 100 to 300, and those at Thebes are assigned 301 to 400; the inscribed vases run from 501). In this way, scribe 1 of Pylos becomes 601, and this correspondence is followed down to scribe 650, as identified by Palaima (*Scribes Pylos*) and Bennett (*PTT II*). New hands are assigned numbers from 651 to 700. The new system thus displays both continuity and change; its advantage is that it produces a coherent system for all the Linear B documents. Nonetheless, it could be confusing in light of the history of Mycenaean hand identifications, particularly because a concordance has not been provided within the volume. All the same, the new identifications receive ample space in the tables at the end of volume II, with hand drawings correlating individual signs to proposed scribal hands.

What is proposed by this palaeographical re-evaluation is not without repercussions: Godart and Sacconi offer a considerable shift in the chronology of the Pylian tablets, and, they argue to move the whole Archive to an earlier date, namely the Late Helladic IIIB1, as opposed to IIIB2, the phase which has been commonly accepted. The argumentation pivots around the scribe behind tablet La 994, whom they propose was also responsible for other documents related to tablets dealing with wool—La 632 and La 635—all of which would share the same date, namely the beginning of the 13th century BCE.

Moreover, new insight is gained on the workings of the palatial administration. For instance, important identifications focus on the series dealing with metals. Godart and Sacconi propose that the scribe of the famous Jo 438, which registers requisitions of gold from the two provinces in which the region of Messenia is divided and administered (mainly for fiscal purposes), is scribe 602. It is this scribe who also wrote another very famous tablet, Jn 829, which mirrors somewhat tablet Jo 438, but deals with bronze instead. The assumption is that this important high official managed taxation: indeed, the authors propose that his hand is behind the Ma series and three texts of the Mn series. In this case, scribe 602 cannot be other than the top fiscal administrator in the province. The picture, thus, becomes not only clearer, but also more coherent.

There is no doubt that these new attributions and the revolution in the classification of the scribes will not be accepted universally by the experts of Mycenaean epigraphy, language and archaeology. And it is likely that this publication will spark admiration but will also be met with an equal measure of reservation and criticism: a long-awaited, definitive milestone in the history of the subject has been reached, but the journey, and all its adversities, is arguably not over. Models in 3D will certainly surpass traditional methods of corpus building and create a new the state of the art. Yet this work is a monumental achievement: two heavy and precious building blocks, which future research and teaching will have to refer to for the next generation of Mycenaean studies.

Bibliography

PT I = Emmett L. Bennett. 1951. *The Pylos Tablets: A Preliminary Transcription*. Princeton.
PT II = Emmett L. Bennett. 1955. *The Pylos Tablets: Texts of the Transcriptions Inscriptions Found, (1939–1954)*. Princeton.
PTT I = Emmett L. Bennett and Jean-Pierre Olivier. 1973. *The Pylos Tablets Transcribed. Part I: Texts and Notes*. (Incunabula Graeca, LI). Rome.
PTT II = Emmett L. Bennett and Jean-Pierre Olivier. 1976. *The Pylos Tablets Transcribed. Part II: Hands, Concordances, Indices*. (Incunabula Graeca, LIX). Rome.
Scribes Pylos = Thomas G. Palaima. 1988. *The Scribes of Pylos*. (Incunabula Graeca LXXXVII). Rome.

Notes

^[1] Disclaimer (added January 2021): Professor Louis Godart became a Scientific Advisor of the ERC project, "INSCRIBE Invention of Scripts and their Beginnings," which is led by Professor Silvia Ferrara, after this review of his book had been submitted to BMCR.

^[2] Involving the work of E. L. Bennett, Jr., J. L. Melena, J.-P. Olivier, R. J. Firth, and T. G. Palaima

^[3] The authors, together with the late Jean-Pierre Olivier, have particular expertise in corpus-building:

CHIC = L. Godart, and J.-P. Olivier. 1996. *Corpus Hieroglyphicarum Inscriptionum Cretae*. Paris.
CoMIK = J. Chadwick, L. Godart, J. T. Killen, J.-P. Olivier, A. Sacconi, and Y. Sakellarakis. 1986-1998. *Corpus of Mycenaean Inscriptions from Knossos*. (Incunabula Graeca, LXXXVIII). Cambridge/Roma.

GORILA = L. Godart and J.-P. Olivier. 1976-1985. *Recueil des inscriptions en Linéaire A*. Études Crétoises 21. Paris.

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A. Sacconi, 1974. *Corpus delle iscrizioni vascolari in lineare B*. Rome.