

SOME GENERAL NOTES ON THE MINOAN WRITTEN DOCUMENTS

It is not unusual to find, in papers dealing with Minoan archaeology, great hopes expressed as to the contents of the Cretan inscribed clay tablets. Some people dream of literature or, at least, of the famous laws of Minos. In reality, things seem to be different. In the case of the Minoan script, we have to do with a special material. Unlike the Egyptian and the Cuneiform scripts, we have here before us practically a single category of written material: clay tablets, and a single kind of contents: inventories and lists.

In the development of every script from pictographs to the later forms, the material plays an important rôle. In Mesopotamia, where the material was soft clay, we see the development of a printed script; the original pictographs have been transformed into cuneiform signs. In Egypt, on the contrary, where papyrus and ink were employed, the simplification of the pictograms followed a quite different law and ended in the Hieratic and Demotic scripts.

We see now, that in Crete the development from the pictographs to the later letters shows clearly not a printed, but a written script. Such a script is quite unsuitable for the soft clay of the tablets. It was destined to be written with ink on papyrus, or with colour and a painter's brush, or else incised with a sharp instrument upon stones and walls. Of all these cases we have examples. Ink was employed for the inscriptions upon two cheap vessels found in Knossos¹. That these are of the commonest

¹ Evans, *Palace*, I, p. 588, fig. 431, and p. 613, figs. 450-452.

class is of interest to us, as we shall see further on. The chief material for writing in Crete was apparently the papyrus, brought from Egypt or possibly cultivated at that time in the island.

A great number of the clay seals found in Crete show the traces of many very thin threads, spread on a flat surface, upon which the clay seal was applied. They were clearly letters or other documents on papyrus. In the Minoan mansion of Sclavocampōs, which I excavated before the war and of which I recently published an account¹, I discovered (for the first time in Crete) seals, examples of which, printed with the same seal (apparently gold-signet rings), had previously been excavated in Haghia Triada, Gournia and Zacro, on the extreme east point of the island. We have apparently to do with a chief cultural centre (say Knossos) which corresponds with the provincial centres. It is hard to believe in any other thing than papyrus letters, judging from the thin threads on the back of the seals. With such threads only letters could be fastened, not «commercial parcels» or other heavy objects.

Egypt and the Orient have affinities with the Minoan culture, which become more and more apparent. The «Holy Letters», that is the original hieroglyphs in Egypt, remained to the end the sacred script, while for every-day necessities the Egyptians used the simplified script. The same is the case in Crete, but to a lesser degree, because the Minoans had not, even in religion, the formidable conservatism of the Egyptians. However, the Phaistos-Disc, the bronze axe of Arcalochori² and the inscriptions on the holy stone from Malia³ must be simply inscriptions of sacred contents in archaic script. It is therefore not necessary to consider the Phaistos-Disc as a foreign document.

Through a series of other considerations, we arrive at the conclusion that the contents of the two ink-written inscriptions on the above-mentioned vessels must be incantations against evil spirits. In the Orient, fear of the dead led to the custom of burial in clay jars. These were closed with a lid after putting the dead

¹ 'Αρχ. 'Εφ., 1948, p. 91-92.

² *Arch. Anz.*, 1935, p. 254, fig. 6.

³ *Arch. Anz.*, 1937, p. 250, figs. 8-9. I explained this stone as an altar. Prof. Bittel in a letter to me expressed the opinion that it may be an inscribed door-post, such as occurs in Babylonia. This seems to me much more probable, though we have no other example of such door-posts and pivots from Crete.

into them. In this way, a dead man, firmly closed in his last and perpetual home, became incapable of harming living people. All these burial customs are known in Crete. Moreover, excavators in Crete have often found in sacred rooms whole series of the above-mentioned cheap handleless jars, placed upside down on the soil. We know again from the Orient, that this is a custom analogous to that of covering the dead who were feared. Evil spirits were attracted by a little food and were captured in the inverted vessel. In the Temple of Bêl at Nippur were discovered similar vessels upside down, but of later date, some of which show ink-written Aramaic inscriptions which are incantations against evil spirits. Such may also be the contents of the inscribed vessels of Knossos¹.

In accordance with the above-mentioned facts, scripts of the nature of literary compositions, laws, correspondence and similar products, if ever written in Crete, were written on papyrus and similar perishable materials. Owing to the climatic conditions, there is no hope of finding such materials under the soil of Greece.

There remains now the chief class of written materials from Crete and Mycenaean Greece, the clay tablets. Some scholars have recognized here oriental influence, others have found the tablets absolutely unbabylonian, and they are right. The Cretan tablets show neither the form nor the very varied contents of the Babylonian tablets. In Greece we have always to do with a single case: the tablets here belong to shops, and their contents are unvaried, namely, enumeration of material property. One is inclined to suppose that the reason for employing clay here is a practical one: safety from the teeth of mice.

The contents of the tablets refer to stored objects such as chariots and their accessories, swords, arrows, copper talents and the like. On the other hand, there exist inventories of livestock, horses, oxen, swine, sheep and goats. As was to be expected, we find mention of oil and other agricultural produce, for which the huge and numerous store jars were destined. It is difficult to believe that in such company we shall ever discover tablets with scientific, for instance «astronomical» contents.

¹ See about the incantation-vessels my paper in *Arch. Anz.*, 1929, p. 166-170, and *'Apχ. 'Eφ.*, 1948, p. 79 and note 1.

Flocks and herds lived in several parts of the island, and possibly in districts beyond the island, as happened later with the herds of Odysseus. It is therefore highly probable that in the tablets are mentioned towns, districts and localities where the herds grazed. This is an important consideration for the deciphering of the tablets, as prehellenic toponyms exist in abundance. We have three different sources: 1) classical authors, 2) inscriptions, and 3) living tradition which, in a wonderful way indeed, has preserved prehellenic names from the prehellenic period down to our days. In a paper to be published in the *Mélanges Charles Picard*, I have collected such Cretan names of localities unknown to the written tradition, but preserved in the mouths of the Cretan peasants. Zominthos and Samitos are names of two mountains. Panassos, Nipidittos, Nyvritos and Nithavris are names of villages, Zakathos and Tarmaros are names of localities. The last is the name of the place where the Palace of Malia with its extended Minoan town is situated. (Cf. Termilai, the name which the Lycians brought with them from Crete, and Termera, the Carian town). All these names must be collected and studied. It is possible that a happy combination may give us the first sure reading of such localities in the Cretan tablets.

SPYRIDON MARINATOS

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