

# Women in Mycenaean Greece: The Linear B Textual Evidence

—  
Graham Braun

*The Linear B script, inscribed on clay tablets recording the movement of commodities and people within the palaces of Mycenaean Greece (ca. 1700–1150 BCE), offers Classical scholarship a wealth of information regarding the linguistic, economic, religious, and social developments of early Greece. Yet the study of women in Mycenaean Greece has only recently arisen as an area of interest. While the Linear B texts present issues regarding archaeological context and translational difficulties, they nevertheless reveal much about three general classes of women: lower-class peasants, religious officials, and aristocratic women. This paper analyzes how these classes of women are presented on the Linear B tablets and identifies both gender roles between men and women, and hierarchal distinctions amongst women themselves. This leads to conclusions not necessarily representative of Mycenaean society as a whole, but rather that point towards different roles for women specifically in Mycenaean palatial economies.*

## Introduction

In 1952, Michael Ventris announced on a BBC radio broadcast that the Linear B syllabic script, found on clay tablets at Late Bronze Age (ca. 1700–1150 BCE) palatial sites on Crete and throughout mainland Greece, recorded the Greek language.<sup>1</sup> This was met with immediate skepticism, however by the time Ventris had published his first official publication of the decipherment alongside John Chadwick,<sup>2</sup> most Classical scholars had accepted the legitimacy of his claims. Although Ventris is usually considered the spearhead for the Linear B decipherment, there are other prominent scholars who were instrumental in the process. Alice Kober's preliminary work was imperative to Ventris'

1 Michael Ventris, 1952; The manuscript was published in "Deciphering Europe's Earliest Scripts: Michael Ventris on the Cretan Tablets," *Listener*, July 10<sup>th</sup>, 1952. The sites which have produced the richest collections of Linear B tablets are Knossos, Pylos, Thebes, and Mycenae. The recently excavated archive at Ayios Vassileos in Laconia is currently unpublished but will certainly provide much valuable information about the nature of the Linear B and the palace in which there were found.

2 Michael Ventris and John Chadwick, "Evidence for Greek Dialect in the Mycenaean Archives," *Journal of Hellenic Studies* 73 (1953).

decipherment, as she concluded that Linear B recorded an inflected language, even without knowing it recorded Greek.<sup>3</sup> Carl Blegen was an important contributor, making the Linear B tablets he excavated at Pylos available to specialized scholars. In fact, his testing of Ventris' syllabary on the famous Tripod Tablet (PY Ta 641) definitively proved that Linear B recorded Greek. In addition to the above names, Emmett Bennett and Sterling Dow both played influential roles. So, while Ventris was the first to develop a comprehensive and accurate syllabary, the Linear B decipherment would not have been possible without certain scholars creating the groundwork for Ventris' discovery.

The Greek Bronze Age (ca. 3000–1100 BCE) was a period of dynamic interconnection throughout the Aegean Sea and wider Eastern Mediterranean. While powerful civilizations like Mesopotamia and Egypt dominated their respective domains, prehistoric Greek civilizations interacted with them through trade relations, thereby experiencing a lot of cultural exchange. In the Middle Bronze Age period (ca. 2000–1550 BCE), the Minoan civilization on Crete dominated the Aegean. The Minoans were well known for their distinctive art, often containing elegant nature scenes, and lavish palaces, which first started centralizing the economy in the MM (Middle Minoan) IB period (ca. 1925–1900 BCE).<sup>4</sup>

Around the LM/LH (Late Minoan/Late Helladic) IIIA period (ca. 1400–1300 BCE), the Minoan civilization seems to come under the control of the ever-expanding Mycenaean population, originating on the Greek mainland.<sup>5</sup> In the Late Bronze Age, the Mycenaeans,

3 Alice Kober, "The Scripts of Pre-Hellenic Greece," *Classical Outlook* 21, no.7 (1943); "Evidence of Inflection in the 'Chariot' Tablets from Knossos," *American Journal of Archaeology* 49, no.2 (April 1945); "Inflection in Linear Class B: 1–Declension," *American Journal of Archaeology* 50, no.2 (April 1946); "'Total' in Minoan (Linear Class B)," *ArchOrient* 17, no.1 (April 1949). It is truly a tragedy that Kober, despite such a contribution, passed away before she could see the decipherment come to fruition.

4 John Cherry, "Politics and Palaces: Some Problems in Minoan State Formation," in *Peer Polity Interaction and Socio-Political Change*, eds. Colin Renfrew and John Cherry (New York: Cambridge University Press); Ilse Schoep, "Chronology and Geography: Middle Bronze Age: Crete," in *The Oxford Handbook of the Bronze Age Aegean*, ed. Eric H. Cline (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 113; Peter M. Warren, "Minoan Palaces," *Scientific American* 253, no.1 (July 1985): 97. While palatial sites are often problematic to identify, four may be confidently distinguished as palatial centres: Knossos commanding North-central Crete; Phaistos to the South of Knossos, overlooking the Messara Plain; Malia directly East of Knossos; and Kato Zakros on Crete's far Eastern coast.

5 John Griffiths Pedley, *Greek Art and Archaeology*, 5<sup>th</sup> ed. (New Jersey: Pearson), 89; Kim Shelton, "Chronology and Geography: Late Bronze Age: Mainland Greece," in *The Oxford Handbook of the Bronze Age Aegean*, ed. Eric

also exercising centralized economic and political activities through palatial elites, saw the cultural transfer of Minoan practices to the mainland. These included arts of various media, certain religious practices, and developments in political structures. One of the most influential transfers was the practice of utilitarian writing systems for recording palace goods and the movement of commodities. The Mycenaean Greek system, known as Linear B, likely developed from the Minoan Linear A script.<sup>6</sup> Despite this exchange, one should note that although both Minoans and Mycenaeans used essentially the same script, they recorded completely different languages and although Linear B has been deciphered, aided by its recording of Greek rather than a lost language, Linear A has yet to be deciphered.<sup>7</sup> Having considered the cultural context in which Linear B originated and developed, one may begin to understand the information Linear B tablets can present, as well as the restrictions to its interpretation.

The Linear B script, the use of which extended from ca. 1450-1200 BCE, records a syllabic script composed of syllabograms, characters that represent sound-values constructed in vowel-consonant pairs. This differs from an alphabet or abjad, which record individual sounds. A syllabic script is much less dynamic and malleable when recording spoken language, since it requires sound values that agree with its more exclusive vowel-consonant pairings. Hindrances introduced by the syllabic nature of Linear B, like the absence of final consonants and initial sigmas, makes translation and transliteration increasingly difficult. So, while spoken Mycenaean Greek may have retained those sounds, recording them in Linear B was effectively impossible due to its syllabic nature. For this reason, only highly trained palace scribes could read and compose Linear B tablets. Additionally, since only ten Mycenaean consonants existed, certain syllabograms transliterate to multiple different Greek consonantal sound-values. For example, the q- consonantal group records almost all Greek labiovelars,<sup>8</sup> and the r- group records the sound values for both “ρ”

H. Cline (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 143.

<sup>6</sup> John Chadwick, *Reading the Past: Linear B and Related Script* (London: British Museum Publications, 1987); John Chadwick, *The Decipherment of Linear B*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1958), 13-15; Thomas G. Palaima, “Thematic Topics: Linear B,” in *The Oxford Handbook of the Bronze Age Aegean*, ed. Eric H. Cline (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 356-357. This conclusion is based off of comparison between syllabograms, morphological similarities, and chronological cohesion.

<sup>7</sup> The decipherment of Linear A is further complicated by the nature of its contents; that is, lists of commodities without any complex sentences indicative of grammatical or syntactic qualities.

<sup>8</sup> Labiovelar consonants are consonantal sounds created at the velum and

(/r/) and “λ” (/l/). This, along with the absence of final consonants, makes many Mycenaean words difficult to translate into Classical Greek, and short, two-sequence words are almost impossible to discern out of context, since they could represent multiple Greek words.

One should also note the archaeological context in which tablets are found. Since the tablets are both texts and physical artifacts, their contexts are inherently connected to their contents; for example, the inscriptions often identify the room they are in, like at the wool workshop in the Mycenaean palace at Thebes, Boeotia.<sup>9</sup> Despite the clear advantages the tablets offer for modern scholarship, they do not present a wholistic view of Mycenaean society, because they are found solely at Mycenaean palatial sites and written specifically from the point of view of palatial elites. This becomes problematic when one attempts to use them to explain cultural phenomena and interactions from outside the palace. They were also exclusively used for utilitarian purposes, like recording goods moving into the palaces as taxes from surrounding polities, or recording the movement of people, usually workgroups working for the palace. Although there are some recordings of cult materials being supplied or received for ritual feasting, these simply list resources used for an unconfirmed religious purpose. So, although the Linear B tablets are extremely useful in the study of the Mycenaean civilization, it is vital to note that these very particular contexts and contents present a limited scope of Mycenaean life.

The examination of women in the Linear B texts is also subject to such challenges. The ability to identify women in Linear B texts is eased by the presentation of gendered inflections, however the nature of writing Linear B and Mycenaean Greek presents issues like the requirement of final consonants to identify gender, ambiguous proper nouns, and many obscure, foreign names.<sup>10</sup> Barbara Olsen has discerned three ways to identify women in the Linear B tablets.<sup>11</sup> The first is the presence of the MUL ideogram,<sup>12</sup> indicating the recording

the lips.

<sup>9</sup> John Chadwick, “Linear B Tablets from Thebes,” *Minos* 10, no.1 (1970): 127.

<sup>10</sup> Barbara A. Olsen, *Women in Mycenaean Greece: The Linear B Tablets from Pylos and Knossos*, (London: Routledge, 2014), 25-26.

<sup>11</sup> Olsen, *Women in Mycenaean Greece: The Linear B Tablets from Pylos and Knossos*, 26-40.

<sup>12</sup> An ideogram is a character that represents an entire word or subject. Ideograms often, but not always, resemble the subject they are intended to represent; however, this can lead to issues of identification if there is no clear reason to attribute a certain subject to a specific ideogram. The presence of ideograms allowed Linear B scribes to save space and time by simply including the ideogram and the number next to it when recording commodities or people.

of women. The second is the use of a gender-specific family title like ma-te<sup>13</sup> or tu-ka-te.<sup>14</sup> The third is the use of gender-specific occupational titles or ethnic groups, which often possess feminine endings like \*-i-ja or \*-e-ja. This can distinguish workgroups of women or singular women in certain positions, for example do-e-ra<sup>15</sup> or i-je-re-ja,<sup>16</sup> as opposed to their masculine counterparts. Despite the issues and difficulties concerning the translation of Mycenaean Greek and identifying women in the Linear B tablets, much can still be uncovered about the social position of women in Mycenaean Greece.

The decipherment of Linear B in the 1950s was arguably the most important discovery for Aegean archaeology in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. It allowed scholars to read and interpret the Linear B texts in order to inquire about Mycenaean culture, politics, and social structures. Several important terms have been identified, such as wa-na-ka, or “lord.” There is also da-mo which, in Mycenaean Greek, translates to the governing body representing the people in a certain province, controlled by a palatial site. While much scholarly work has been done on political and social activities in the Linear B texts, including land tenure, agricultural practices, social hierarchy, and religion, the study of gender roles and women on the tablets is somewhat lacking. This paper will examine the roles of women in the Mycenaean economic, religious, and aristocratic spheres, while considering the problems of translation and archaeological context for the Linear B tablets. In doing so, it will identify trends in the activities and roles of women in Mycenaean palaces, from common occupations to the potential social mobility that was offered to women in the Late Bronze Age Aegean.

### Women and Production

The best evidence for middle- and lower-class women in Mycenaean Greece comes in the form of workgroups indicated by feminine endings. These include a few different occupations that seem consistent throughout most of the Mycenaean palaces. Workgroups appear to be gender-segregated and women never infringe on perceptually masculine roles like bronzeworking and martial occupations.<sup>17</sup> The perfume industry seems to be a male-dominated economic realm as

well.<sup>18</sup> While this may seem peculiar based on modern, Western gender roles, which often feminize the perfume industry, one should not forget that perfume was used extensively throughout Greek chronology, regardless of gender. The exclusivity of labour division in the Mycenaean world is interesting when considering later Greek occupations, which were also gender segregated. For example, women were expected to be weaving, whereas men were expected to be out in the fields or participating in civic duties, among other public activities.

The most common industry utilizing female labour is the textile industry.<sup>19</sup> Among the variety of roles for textile workers were wool carders (pe-ki-ti-ra),<sup>20</sup> spinners (a-ra-ka-te-ja),<sup>21</sup> weavers (i-te-ja),<sup>22</sup> and linen-workers (ri-ne-ja),<sup>23</sup> along with some others.<sup>24</sup> The tablets often indicate these occupations by recording allocations of raw materials (provided by taxing surrounding regions) to certain groups, who seem to have been assigned quotas and expectations in working those materials like linen, wool, or animal hides, into finished products.<sup>25</sup> Textile working was prominent at both Pylos and Knossos; however, the processing was much more centralized at Pylos, whereas Knossos took extensive records of textile processing outside the palace.<sup>26</sup> As mentioned previously, numerous tablets in the Kadmeion at Thebes identified a lucrative wool industry including many of the same positions as other palaces.<sup>27</sup>

18 Shelmerdine, “Women in the Mycenaean Economy,” 626; Cynthia W. Shelmerdine, *The Perfume Industry of Mycenaean Pylos*, (Gothenburg: Paul Aströms Förlag, 1985).

19 Olsen, *Women in Mycenaean Greece: The Linear B Tablets from Pylos and Knossos*, 68; Shelmerdine, “Women in the Mycenaean Economy,” 626.

20 Related to the Classical Greek verb πέκω (“to comb”). cf. PY Ab 578; PY Ad 694.

21 Related to the Classical Greek noun ἰλακάτη (“distaff”). cf. KN Ak 5009; KN Lc 531; PY Aa 89; PY Aa 240; PY Ad 677; TH Of 34.

22 Related to the Classical Greek noun ἴστος (“loom”). cf. PY Ad 684.

23 Related to the Classical Greek noun λίνον (“linen”). cf. PY Ab 745; PY Ab 746; PY Ad 289; PY Ad 295; PY Ad 326; PY Ad 664; PY Ad 670; PY Ad 672; PY Ad 678; PY Ad 697.

24 Olsen, *Women in Mycenaean Greece: The Linear B Tablets from Pylos and Knossos*, 72-84.

25 Shelmerdine, “Women in the Mycenaean Economy,” 627.

26 Olsen, *Women in Mycenaean Greece: The Linear B Tablets from Pylos and Knossos*, 164-165; Cynthia W. Shelmerdine and Emmett L. Bennett, “Mycenaean States: Economy and Administration,” in *The Cambridge Companion to the Aegean Bronze Age*, ed. Cynthia W. Shelmerdine (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 306.

27 Chadwick, “Linear B Tablets from Thebes”; Marie-Louise Nosch, “The Textile Industry at Thebes in Light of the Textile Industries at Pylos and Knossos” in *Festschrift in Honour of A. Bartonek (Studia Minora Facultatis*

13 Classical Greek μήτηρ (“mother”).

14 Classical Greek θυγάτηρ (“daughter”).

15 Classical Greek δούλη (“slave-woman”).

16 Classical Greek ἱέρεια (“priestess”).

17 Cynthia W. Shelmerdine, “Women in the Mycenaean Economy,” in *Women in Antiquity: Real Women Across the Ancient World*, eds. Stephanie L. Budin and Jean M. Turfa (London: Routledge, 2016), 625-626.

Other labour positions held by women are sparse compared to those in the textile industry. The second-most frequent occupation is working in food production and general palace maintenance.<sup>28</sup> These women included flour-grinders (me-re-ti-ri-ja),<sup>29</sup> “bath-attendants” (re-wo-to-ro-ko-wo),<sup>30</sup> and palace attendants (a-pi-qo-ro).<sup>31</sup> Many occupational titles are attested through allotment of rations, probably as payment for labourers. Ration tablets show two important aspects of gender roles in Mycenaean Greece. First, rations are the exact same for women and men of the same economic standing.<sup>32</sup> Second, many tablets show children, designated by gender (ko-wa and ko-wo),<sup>33</sup> receiving rations alongside their mothers. All adults received two T-measure rations of both wheat and figs each,<sup>34</sup> and all children received one each.<sup>35</sup> It appears that young children accompanied their mothers to their workplaces until they were old enough to work on their own; girls would usually gain their own position in their mother’s workgroup, and boys would eventually join a male workgroup.<sup>36</sup> This certainly reinforces the gender segregation of occupations in Mycenaean Greece, and one might consider the main role for low-class women in the palace as textile workers. Considering the evidence presented by the Linear B tablets, it does not seem implausible to suggest that the established gender roles in the Late

---

*Philosophica Universitatis Brunensis* 6), ed. Irena Radova (Brno: Universitas Masarykiana Brunensis, 2001).

28 Olsen, *Women in Mycenaean Greece: The Linear B Tablets from Pylos and Knossos*, 89.

29 Derived from the reconstructed noun \*μελέτρια. John T. Killen, “The Textile Industries at Pylos and Knossos,” in *Pylos Comes Alive: Industry and Administration in a Mycenaean Palace*, eds. Cynthia W. Shelmerdine and Thomas G. Palaima, (New York: Fordham University Press, 1984), 58; Olsen, *Women in Mycenaean Greece: The Linear B Tablets from Pylos and Knossos*, 89; Michael Ventris and John Chadwick, “Evidence for Greek Dialect in the Mycenaean Archives.” cf. PY Aa 62; PY Aa 764.

30 Derived from the noun λoετροχός (“the one drawing a bath”). cf. PYAa 783; PY Ab 553.

31 Related to Homeric ἀμφιπόλοι (“handmaidens” or “slave women”). cf. PY Aa 804; PY Ad 690; PY Fr 1205; TH Of 34.

32 Shelmerdine, “Women in the Mycenaean Economy,” 628.

33 Classical Greek κόρη (“girl”) and κόρος (“boy”).

34 Measures were distinguished with characters distinguishing dry and liquid measures, there being three standardized sizes of each. T-measure rations were the smallest dry measures in Linear B. Ventris and Chadwick, *Documents in Mycenaean Greek*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1959): 54-56.

35 Olsen, *Women in Mycenaean Greece: The Linear B Tablets from Pylos and Knossos*, 67.

36 Shelmerdine, “Women in the Mycenaean Economy,” 630-631.

Bronze Age had some sort of influence on gender roles in the following Geometric, Archaic, and Classical Greek periods, since textile working was an idealized role for women in these subsequent periods as well.

Despite low-level labour positions for women working at a Mycenaean palace, it was nevertheless possible for women move up in the economic hierarchy. Two types of supervisors for the workgroups detailed above are distinguished in Linear B: DA and TA.<sup>37</sup> There are two differences between them, one connected to gender and one connected to hierarchical power. The DA supervisors managed all facets of production and the TA supervisors ensured daily operations were conducted well. DAs were always male, and TAs were always female.<sup>38</sup> While this does indicate some women were able to gain responsibility and leadership over a small group, she was always under the control of her male DA. Additionally, TAs are only ever seen controlling female workgroups. Although this shows a limited amount of economic power for Mycenaean women, one realm in which women often held distinguished positions and experienced a relatively high level of liberty was the religious sector.

### Women in Religious Positions

Religion in prehistoric Greece has long been studied in its relation to female deities. From the Neolithic to Middle Minoan periods, the “Great Mother Goddess” has been conceptualized and considered as the main object of worship, starting with steatopygous figurines (figurines with especially accentuated breasts and buttocks) and working towards famous images like the snake goddess of Knossos. Mycenaean religion was influenced considerably by Minoan art and culture, and somewhat ambiguous female goddesses labelled “po-ti-ni-ja” were common in the Linear B texts, alongside many Olympian deities.<sup>39</sup> With the prominence of female divinities came the importance placed on female religious positions. The most common religious position held by women was priestess (i-je-re-ja),<sup>40</sup> attested at Pylos and Knossos.<sup>41</sup>

---

37 Named so due to the single, consonantal syllabograms *-da-* and *-ta-* that denote the positions’ titles.

38 Shelmerdine, “Women in the Mycenaean Economy,” 627-628.

39 Olympian divinities attested in the Linear B texts include Zeus, Poseidon, Ares, Hephaistos, Hermes, Hera, Demeter, and Dionysus, among some other minor deities. Athena, Artemis, and Apollo have also been suggested, but are by no means common. John Chadwick, *The Mycenaean World* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1976), 85.

40 Classical Greek ἱέρεια (“priestess”).

41 While the absence of *i-je-re-ja* at Thebes and Mycenae is notable, this may be due to survivorship bias in the archaeological record. Mycenae has



At Pylos, the specialized position of “key-bearer” (ka-ra-wi-po-ro)<sup>42</sup> is also mentioned with solely feminine inflections. The key-bearer seems to be a woman responsible for the keys to the sanctuary or treasury, and is associated with “sacred gold” (i-je-ro-jo ko-ru-so-jo on PY Ae 303) and “temple’s bronze” (ka-ko na-wi-jo on PY Jn 829).<sup>43</sup>

Often priestesses and key-bearers were allocated slaves to serve them and the sanctuary as a whole.<sup>44</sup> In addition to slaves, women of high religious status like key-bearers or priestesses could even own land. In fact, religious women make up almost all attestations for women owning property of any sort.<sup>45</sup> The nature of property ownership can be best seen with the case study of Eritha (e-ri-ta), the most prominent priestess at Pylos. She was the priestess of Pakijane (pa-ki-ja-ne), a cult site somewhere in the immediate area surrounding the palace. She appears on PY Ep 704, a tablet which certainly contains the most complex grammatical constructions to be found on a Linear B tablet. The tablet reads as follows: “[3] Eritha the priestess has a leased plot of communal land from the damos, so much seed: 374.4.1 wheat. [5-6] Eritha the priestess has and claims a freehold holding for her god, but the damos says that she holds a leased plot of communal land, so much seed: 374.4.1 wheat.”<sup>46</sup> This tablet shows a land dispute between Eritha and the damos (da-mo),<sup>47</sup> the local administration. Eritha claims she holds a plot of land designated for the gods, which is “freehold,” or free of tax, and the damos asserts that she holds communal, taxable land. The counts of seed show the size of each plot, measured in capacity of seed. In considering what this tablet shows about gender roles in Mycenaean society, one may suggest that women, in the position of priestesses, could

---

not produced a high number of Linear B tablets, and much of the Theban Kadmeion is buried beneath the modern city, making recovery efforts nearly impossible.

42 Related to Greek κλειδόφορος (“key-bearer”). cf. PY Ae 110; PY Eb 338; PY Ed 317; PY Ep 704; PY Jn 829; PY Vn 48; PY Un 6.

43 Cécile Boëlle-Weber, “Women in Mycenaean Religion,” in *Women in Antiquity: Real Women Across the Ancient World*, eds. Stephanie L. Budin and Jean M. Turfa (London: Routledge, 2016), 611-612.

44 Olsen, *Women in Mycenaean Greece: The Linear B Tablets from Pylos and Knossos*, 237.

45 Olsen, *Women in Mycenaean Greece: The Linear B Tablets from Pylos and Knossos*, 136-144; 190-192. This includes women in religious positions at both Pylos and Knossos, however it excludes the ownership of small amounts of rations by middle- and low-class women in these palaces. Simple lists of objects owned by women in the Linear B texts, from wheat to landholdings, can be deceiving. One must note that any substantial ownership of materials besides rations is primarily held by priestesses or key-bearers.

46 PY Ep 704 lines 3; 5-6, trans. B.A. Olsen 2014.

47 Classical Greek δήμος (“people” or “population”).

own and lease land, as well as represent themselves in judicial disputes.

One more religious position from the Linear B texts should be highlighted. This is the “slave of the god” (te-o-jo do-e-ra).<sup>48</sup> Although scholars have debated much about these people, their role in Mycenaean religion remains ambiguous. Fifty are mentioned at Pylos, twenty-three of which hold land related to Pakijane.<sup>49</sup> Interestingly, their status as slave of the god was passed down to their children, and it seems this distinguished them from priestesses, who were appointed.<sup>50</sup> This practice seems to be unique to prehistoric Greek religion, for no convincing comparison comes to mind from Archaic-Classical Greek religion.

In the broader context of Mycenaean religion, women played an important role, as indicated by the Linear B texts. Women in religious positions had noticeably more freedom and independence, evidenced by their ability to own large amounts of property and attend civic functions if needed. Positions like priestess and key-bearer were prestigious and important for ensuring cult operations were completed correctly. For a society in which political and religious power were so interconnected, the importance of balance and reciprocity between the palace and the sanctuary surely played a significant role in allowing Late Bronze Age priestesses to exercise their own autonomy.

### Women in the Aristocracy

While women in religious positions may be considered somewhat elite in comparison to average palace workers, aristocratic women connected to the palace remain markedly enigmatic, specifically in the textual evidence. There were two notable elite titles associated with the palace, the wanax (wa-na-ka)<sup>51</sup> and lawegetas (ra-wa-ke-ta).<sup>52</sup> There was also the

---

48 Greek θεοιο δούλη. Male variants of these are attested as well.

49 Boëlle-Weber, “Women in Mycenaean Religion,” 613-615.

50 Boëlle-Weber, “Women in Mycenaean Religion,” 613-615.

51 Related to Classical Greek ἀνάξ (“lord”).

52 Derived from the reconstructed \*λαFαγέτας, related to λάος (“men/mankind,” also sometimes “army”). Etymologically it has been suggested to translate to “leader of the people,” who might have been the highest-ranking military leader or the official overseeing specialized labour organization for specific economic tasks. Stavroula Nikoloudis, “The Role of ra-wa-ke-ta. Insights from PY Un 718,” in *Colloquium Romanum, Atti del XII Colloquio Internazionale di Micenologia, Roma, 20-25 febbraio 2006*, eds. A. Sacconi, M. del Freo, L. Godart, and M. Negri (Rome: Fabrizio Serra Editore, 2008); Thomas G. Palaima, “Mycenaean Militarism from a Textual Perspective: Onomastics in Context: lawos, damos, klewos,” in *Polemos: le contexte guerrier en Égée à l’âge du Bronze: actes de la 7e Rencontre égéenne internationale, Université de Liège, 14-17 avril 1998 (Aegeum 19)*, ed. Robert Laffineur (Liège: Université de

basileus (qa-si-re-u),<sup>53</sup> the leader of the local polities surrounding the palace. Of the three, the wanax held the most political power, ruling over the entire area under palatial control. These titles only ever appear as masculine, and no female counterparts are ever attested.<sup>54</sup> In fact, politically or socially elite women remain quite invisible in the Linear B corpus.

A small number of tablets mention named, high status women, named, receiving valuable goods like sandals, baskets, and worked hide or leather.<sup>55</sup> That they are named should not be considered particularly significant, since many individuals are named in the Linear B tablets, regardless of social status.<sup>56</sup> The main difference, and reason why elite women do not appear as much as cult officials, is likely due to priestesses' economic activity. While priestesses, owning property and interacting with palaces in the form of ritual feasts, festivals, and rites, have many economic roles to attend to and as such are often recorded in the palace archives, elite women would not be working for the palace or do much of anything in terms of management, production, or political work, so there was simply no need to record their actions in the Linear B tablets.<sup>57</sup> Despite their high social status as aristocrats, these women were clearly not given any economic or political power beyond receiving small amounts of luxury goods.

## Conclusion

Upon examination of the Linear B tablets found at Pylos, Knossos, and Thebes, the role of women in the Late Bronze Age Aegean in the economic, religious, and aristocratic realms becomes clear. Low-status women are most commonly described, appearing as labourers working for the palace. Their expected roles were likely in the textile industry; however, they could also be palace workers like "bath-attendants" or general servants. It seems that their children accompanied them and received rations alongside them for their work. Female and male labourers appear to have received equal rations for their work, but it does not seem that low-status women exercised particularly high

---

Liège, 1999).

53 Classical Greek βασιλεύς. This word becomes a common word for "king" following Iron Age Greece.

54 Olsen, *Women in Mycenaean Greece: The Linear B Tablets from Pylos and Knossos*, 63.

55 Olsen, *Women in Mycenaean Greece: The Linear B Tablets from Pylos and Knossos*, 150-152. cf. PY Ub 1318; PY Vn 34.

56 Dimitri Nakassis, *Individuals and Society in Mycenaean Pylos* (Leiden: Brill, 2013).

57 Olsen, *Women in Mycenaean Greece: The Linear B Tablets from Pylos and Knossos*, 153.

social mobility or autonomy. Women in religious positions, on the other hand, likely had the highest autonomy and economic freedom. They held high-status positions that were important for Mycenaean religion and politics, and could own large amounts of land, property, and even slaves. The case of Eritha shows they could even initiate legal disputes and represent themselves in front of the damos if they saw any sort of discrepancy. In the case of elite women, while they probably enjoyed comfortable and rich lifestyles, they had little economic or political influence, which were reserved for ruling men. More broadly, women could only be as hierarchically powerful as the TA position in workgroups, who were still under the supervision of the male DA. Women in Linear B were not described as holding any sort of political agency or given a title of socio-political authority, such as a basileus or wanax, with the exception of religious women who corresponded with the palace to ensure religious expectations were met.

Some notable comparisons can be made in relation to later Greek society, an obvious one being the expectation of textile working, as was the case for women in Classical Greece. Priestesses in the Archaic-Classical period also enjoyed some degree of autonomy in connection to their religious position. Additionally, both societies exclude women from holding any sort of political power, despite exercising very different political systems. While these tentative conclusions can be made from the Linear B textual evidence, one should not forget the contextual and translational issues that face the tablets. They present a very specific view of Mycenaean society, and as such should be read with some degree of caution. In addition to the archaeological and economic contexts in which the Linear B tablets are found, it may be tempting to consider how the gender hierarchies in Mycenaean Greece affect our perception of women in the tablets. This avenue, however, may prove to be somewhat fruitless given the utilitarian purpose of the Linear B texts. This is not to discount the reading of any text with gender dynamics in mind, however unlike a poetic or historical text, which may be charged with any number of political or social biases, the Mycenaean texts simply record commodities or people moving in and out of the palaces. Having said this, there may be a different methodological framework in which to view Linear B from a markedly gendered aspect that could be applied in future studies of Mycenaean women. Nevertheless, while the analyses of the roles of women in the Late Bronze Age Aegean present important evidence for their hierarchical status, they should be viewed as hypotheses, with the potential to be elaborated, disputed, and altered with future archaeological discoveries.



## Bibliography

- Boëlle-Weber, Cécile. "Women in Mycenaean Religion." In *Women in Antiquity: Real Women Across the Ancient World*, edited by Stephanie L. Budin and Jean M. Turfa, 608–617. London: Routledge, 2008.
- Chadwick, John. *The Decipherment of Linear B*. 2<sup>nd</sup> edition. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1958.
- Chadwick, John. "Linear B Tablets from Thebes." *Minos* 10 (1970): 115-137.
- Chadwick, John. *The Mycenaean World*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1976.
- Chadwick, John. *Reading the Past: Linear B and Related Script*. London: British Museum Publications, 1987.
- Cherry, John. "Politics and Palaces: Some Problems in Minoan State Formation." In *Peer Polity Interaction and Socio-Political Change*, edited by Colin Renfrew and John Cherry, 19-45. New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Killen, John T. "The Textile Industries at Pylos and Knossos." In *Pylos Comes Alive: Industry and Administration in a Mycenaean Palace*, edited by Cynthia W. Shelmerdine and Thomas G. Palaima, 49-63. New York: Fordham University Press, 1984.
- Kober, Alice E. "Evidence of Inflection in the 'Chariot' Tablets from Knossos." *American Journal of Archaeology* 49, no.2 (April 1945): 143–151.
- Kober, Alice E. "Inflection in Linear Class B: 1—Declension." *American Journal of Archaeology* 50, no.2 (April 1946): 268–276.
- Kober, Alice E. "'Total' in Minoan (Linear Class B)." *ArchOrient* 17, no1 (April 1949): 386–398.
- Kober, Alice E. "The Scripts of Pre-Hellenic Greece." *Classical Outlook* 21, no.7 (April 1944): 72–74.
- Nakassis, Dimitri. *Individuals and Society in Mycenaean Pylos*. Leiden: Brill, 2013.
- Nosch, Marie-Louise. "The Textile Industry at Thebes in Light of the Textile Industries at Pylos and Knossos." In *Festschrift in Honour of A. Bartonek (Studia Minora Facultatis Philosophica Universitatis Brunensis 6)*, edited by Irena Radova, 177-189. Brno: Universitas Masarykiana Brunensis, 2001.
- Nikoloudis, Stavroula. "The Role of ra-wa-ke-ta. Insights from PY Un 718." In *Colloquium Romanum, Atti del XII Colloquio Internazionale di Micenologia, Roma, 20-25 febbraio 2006*, edited by Anna Sacconi, Maurizio del Freo, Louis Godart, and Mario Negri, 587-594. Rome: Fabrizio Serra Editore, 2008.
- Olsen, Barbara A. *Women in Mycenaean Greece: The Linear B Tablets from Pylos and Knossos*. London: Routledge, 2014.
- Palaima, Thomas G. "Mycenaean Militarism from a Textual Perspective: Onomastics in Context: *lawos, damos, klewos*." In *Polemos: le contexte guerrier en Egée à l'âge du Bronze: actes de la 7e Rencontre égéenne internationale, Université de Liège, 14-17 avril 1998 (Aegeum 19)*, edited by Robert Laffineur, 367-379. Liège: Université de Liège, 1999.
- Palaima, Thomas G. "Thematic Topics: Linear B." In *The Oxford Handbook of the Bronze Age Aegean*, edited by Eric H. Cline, 356–372. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010.
- Schoep, Ilse. "Chronology and Geography: Middle Bronze Age: Crete." In *The Oxford Handbook of the Bronze Age Aegean*, edited by Eric H. Cline, 113–125. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010.
- Shelmerdine, Cynthia W. *The Perfume Industry of Mycenaean Pylos*. Gothenburg: Paul Aströms Förlag, 1985.
- Shelmerdine, Cynthia W. "Women in the Mycenaean Economy." In *Women in Antiquity: Real Women Across the Ancient World*, edited by Stephanie L. Budin and Jean M. Turfa, 618-634. London: Routledge, 2008.
- Shelmerdine, Cynthia W., and John Bennett. "Mycenaean States: Economy and Administration." In *The Cambridge Companion to the Aegean Bronze Age*, edited by C.W. Shelmerdine, 289–309. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008.
- Ventris, Michael. "Deciphering Europe's Earliest Scripts: Michael Ventris on the Cretan Tablets." *Listener*, July 10<sup>th</sup>, 1952, 57–58.
- Ventris, Michael, and John Chadwick. *Documents in Mycenaean Greek*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edition. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1973.
- Ventris, Michael, and John Chadwick. "Evidence for Greek Dialect in the Mycenaean Archives." *Journal of Hellenic Studies* 73 (1953): 84–103.
- Warren, Peter M. "Minoan Palaces." *Scientific American* 253, no.1 (July 1985): 94–103.