

RE-DISCOVERED FRAGMENTS OF LINEAR B TABLETS
FROM KNOSSOS
NOW IN THE ASHMOLEAN MUSEUM OXFORD*

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Introduction

There are c. 40 Linear B Tablets in the Ashmolean Museum Oxford which were given to Sir Arthur Evans by the Cretan State prior to political union with Greece in 1913 and the antiquity laws which came into effect in an attempt to protect the heritage of the country.¹ These 40 Mycenaean inscriptions constitute the largest collection of Linear B tablets outside of Greece. There are also Linear B tablets in the British Museum and University College (London), Manchester, Liverpool, Fitzwilliam Museum and the Mycenaean Epigraphy Group (Cambridge).² The Knossos Linear B tablets now in the Ashmolean Museum are an important study collection which deserves to be better known and better understood by students of the Ancient World.³ There follows a brief description and discussion of the re-discovered fragments from Knossos, which were given by the illustrious excavator and which are

* The research for this article was carried out during a study of the Minoan and Mycenaean Inscriptions in English Museums while Lecturer in Linear B at the Institute of Classical Studies, London University in 1991/92, and again during the summer of 1998 while Director of the ICS Summer School "An Introduction to Linear B". I wish to thank colleagues in Crete, London and Oxford for their assistance, particularly Ann Brown, Gillian Trench and Kalliope Nikolidaki.

¹ See Brown 1989 and Brown 1993, both published by the Ashmolean Museum for an illustrated guide to the early days of archaeology at Knossos from where these tablet fragments derive.

² See Owens 1997a; Owens 1997c; also Owens 1990, for a detailed study of a Linear B tablet now in the UK; and see Killen *et alii* 1994, for tablets in Cambridge and Liverpool.

³ See Owens *et alii* 1999 forthcoming, for a full study of the Ashmolean tablets.

now in the Arthur Evans' Gallery. These tablets are catalogued following the practice of KT5, the 5th edition of the Knossos tablets.⁴

Fragment (a)

KN X 9948 (Re-Discovered, Unknown Subject Matter)
ASHM.1938.857. Unpublished

This possible Linear B tablet fragment (c. 5.0 cm x 2.0 cm) is anepigraphic and now on display in the Linear B Case in the Arthur Evans' Gallery of the Ashmolean Museum. This fragment is red in colour, is now warped as a result of bending during the accidental baking and constitutes the tablet end. It preserves both a straw hole and a depression on both *recto* and *verso* where the straw ran horizontally through the tablet.⁵

Fragment (b)

KN X 9949 a-b-c (Re-Discovered, Unknown Subject Matter)
ASHM.1938.1167. Unpublished

These three Linear B tablet fragments (c. 5.5 cm x 2.0 cm) are fused together and are now on display in the Minoan and Mycenaean Writing Case in the Arthur Evans' Gallery of the Ashmolean Museum. These tablets have melted and been warped during the conflagration and as a result have fused together. Two of the fragments are facing each other (a and b), and their upper edge (*latus superior*) is clearly seen, while the third fragment (c) is situated behind them in the now baked mass of clay which is red brown in colour with white inclusions. There is a trace (*vestigium*) of an inscribed sign on the back (*verso*) of fragment (a) but it is impossible to identify what it may be. There are however clearly incised lines on fragment b which can perhaps be identified with

⁴ See Melena/ Owens/ Serrano 1990/91 and Melena *et alii* 1992/93, for the latest reports on the International Joins Programme. So far over 1500 joins have been achieved by Prof. Melena and his team between the tablets and fragments of the Knossos archive, and research continues. In addition, see Owens 1997b. The old Knossos tablets from Evans' excavations were numbered in Killen/Olivier 1989, assisted by J.L. Melena, until number KN 9947, while new tablets recreated entirely out of fragments have been numbered from 10001 onwards.

⁵ The necessity of a piece of straw being used in the making of a Linear B tablet, and as indicated by the horizontal straw holes in many tablets, was ably demonstrated by L. Godart (1988, 245-251), in his pinacological reconstructions at tablet making which failed until he included the straw in the forming of the tablet.

ideogram B 125 cyperus.⁶ If this is correct then the tablet may belong to the Ga series like KN Ga 676 now in the Fitzwilliam Museum, Cambridge. On the back (*verso*) of fragment (c) are clearly discerned fingerprints. The tablet surface (*recto*), back (*verso*) and upper edge (*lat. sup.*) on fragment c have all been smoothed.⁷

Fragment (c)

KN Xf 9950 (Re-Discovered, Unknown Subject Matter)
AE.2307. Unpublished

This possible Linear B tablet fragment (c. 3.5 cm x 2.5 cm) is anepigraphic and now in the Sealing Drawer Teaching Collection of the Arthur Evans' Gallery of the Ashmolean Museum. It has a reddish brown interior and grey exterior. It had been fried in the conflagration(s) which destroyed Knossos and preserved the Linear B archive(s) and is now badly worn.⁸ The lower (*latus inferior*) and upper edges (*latus superior*) can be identified, demonstrating that the bottom of the fragment is flat and the top is curved. The presence of a straw hole also shows that this fragment is a tablet, the surface of which had been smoothed in preparation for writing. The grey colour could denote that it is from the Arsenal.⁹

Conclusion

These re-discovered fragments from Knossos, as suspected by Arthur Evans who kept them and passed them on to the Ashmolean Museum, are indeed Linear B tablets.¹⁰ This is demonstrated by traces of signs (*vestigia*) on one of the tablets, clearly defined *recto*, *verso* and upper and lower edges (*lat. sup.*, *lat. inf.*), straw holes, smoothed surfaces for writing and fingerprints left by the maker and/or writer of the tablets.

⁶ See Ventris/Chadwick 1973, 221-222, for a discussion of spices at Knossos including cyperus.

⁷ For a discussion of fingerprint studies, see Sjöquist 1980, as well as Sjöquist/Åstrom 1985 and Sjöquist/Åstrom 1991, the latter of which has an appendix by J.-P. Olivier demonstrating how this work can complement the textual study of scribal hands.

⁸ See Owens 1994/95 and Owens 1999 forthcoming, for a discussion of destructions and scripts at Late Minoan Knossos.

⁹ For a discussion of tablets from the Arsenal and the relevant scribes who wrote them, see Olivier 1967.

¹⁰ It is of course possible that some of these fragments may even have been clay twists which were destined to be made into tablets, but which were still unworked when the Palace of Knossos was destroyed by fire.

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