

THE MYCENAEAN ADMINISTRATIVE SYSTEM BASED ON DOCUMENTS IN LINEAR B

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Abstract

This article aims to present the Mycenaean administrative system from documents in Linear B, especially tablets. The specific study of a type of document is added to this discussion: vessels with stirrup handle. Such containers were conceived to store and transport liquids and vary greatly in size and finish, ranging from small, refined examples to larger and rustic vases produced specifically for transportation. In this last category is a group of vases that received inscriptions, mostly produced in western Crete, but found in great number in the continent, thus being important pieces to elucidate the relations established between the Mycenaean administrative centers in the Balkan Peninsula and productive areas in Crete.

Keywords

Linear B; Mycenaean administration; vases with stirrup handle.

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Resumo

O presente artigo visa apresentar o sistema administrativo micênico inferido a partir dos documentos em Linear B, em especial os tabletes. A essa discussão acrescenta-se o estudo específico de um tipo de documento: os vasos com alça em estribo. Tais recipientes foram concebidos para armazenamento e transporte de líquidos e variam muito em tamanho e acabamento, indo desde exemplares pequenos e refinados até vasos maiores e rústicos produzidos especificamente para o transporte. Nesta última categoria encontra-se um grupo de vasos que receberam inscrições, tendo sido produzidos, na sua maioria, no oeste de Creta, mas encontrados em grande número no continente, e por isso são peças importantes para elucidar as relações estabelecidas entre os centros administrativos micênicos na Península Balcânica e áreas produtivas em Creta.

Palavras-chave

Linear B; administração micênica; vasos com alça em estribo.

Introduction

The deciphering of the documents in Linear B by Michael Ventris in 1952 proved that the recorded language was an archaic form of Greek; the history of the Greeks goes back to the Bronze Age. The social, political and economic structure of this period, however, is fundamentally different from the world of poleis that emerged from the 8th century BC, result of their own development originated from the reorganization performed after the disruption of the Mycenaean organization. Documents in Linear B, along with archaeological traces, which are abundant and varied, are the primary sources for the study of the Mycenaean period. The earliest written documents are dated 1450 BC, but the archaeological traces point to a well-established social structure as early as 1600 BC, and a possible establishment of new populations in the Balkan Peninsula from 1900 BC.

The archaeological context indicates that writing was not very widespread in the Mycenaean world. No tablets were found in smaller sites, being always associated with administrative centers. Thus, Chadwick feels safe to assert that writing would have been only an administrative tool (1987, p. 11). Such idea is corroborated by its complete disappearance after the collapse of Mycenaean administrative centers.

The Mycenaean writing system

Linear B is a writing system used by Mycenaeans in the late Bronze Age, fundamentally for the registration and control of economic activities. The use of Linear B occurs in a telegraphic and standardized way, with the purpose of transmitting precise information, objectively and specifically. The basic pattern, from which there may be a very restricted variation, is the use of one or more words in a linear syllabary, usually an anthroponym or a toponym, followed by the insertion of an ideogram that specifies a commodity or raw material and, finally, the determination of the quantity from the use of numerals, or, in specific cases, signs for weights and measures.

We have found three types of support: clay tablets, vases with usually painted inscriptions and clay nodules. Among the 5,500 documents in Linear B, most are tablets. What is unclear is whether there was a higher level of documents (papyri and/or scrolls), although many researchers assume that it did (Palaima, 2003 and Driessen, 1997 V. Bennet, 2001).

Clay tablets have two basic forms: page, the height being greater than the length; and palm leaf, in which the proportions are reversed and the length is greater than the height. The latter holds from one to three lines of writing, while the first can have up to 25 lines. Knossos in Crete has the largest collection of tablets, but their state is more fragmentary. There are about 4,300 pieces, of which 75% are incomplete and 56% have fewer than five signs or symbols. The site of Pilos in Messenia appears in second place in number of tablets, having about 1300, but the general state of conservation is better – 50% are complete – and the finding context is also well established, since much of it belongs to the archives room, that is, the tablets were found in their storage context, while those of Knossos were scattered in several areas of the main building and in some areas of disposal, that is, in secondary context. The tablets were inscribed in raw and moist clay, dried in the sun and stored, which indicates that they were temporary files whose shelf life would be, at most, one year. Since sun-dried tablets are fragile, it is unlikely that they had been produced in places other than their finding context. This may also suggest the existence of permanent archives in perishable materials that have not reached this day. Such a data refers us to the fundamental feature of the documentation: they were preserved because they were cooked in the fires that destroyed the buildings in which they were stored. They represent, therefore, information circumscribed to the period of disturbances of the Mycenaean world (except for the fragments discarded in Knossos that may belong to earlier periods). Therefore, we must consider that the tablets have different dates, and the oldest would be from a group of Knossos associated with the destruction of the building around 1450/1430 BC, while the most recent are those from Pilos, dated 1200 BC.

Nodules are small pieces of clay that have three faces, two possibly written and one with stamp printing. In nodules, unlike tablets, logograms appear isolated, without numerical or measurement indication, since it is assumed that they represent a pre-established quantity of the merchandise in question. Nodules have standardized rules for their use, and their main function was to transmit a certain amount of basic information about the item they accompanied. Nodules may contain an anthroponym, a toponym, or an ideogram representing a type of commodity, sometimes an adjective to describe the state of the commodity, and an economic term representing the type of transaction or obligation fulfilled. In some cases, only the printing of a stamp, without any inscription, was enough to convey the necessary information (van Alfen, 1997, p.267).

The last type of material that received inscriptions are vases. They are mostly vases with stirrup handle for transport with inscriptions painted on the shoulder or bulge before burning. To date, 197 vessels with Linear B inscription are known, of which 186 are transport vases with stirrup handle. Unlike tablets, which were probably temporary archives belonging to distinct periods, vases, on the contrary, were cooked at the time of their manufacture and have a well-established chronological context restricted to 1300 BC. However, neither the site of discovery nor the assigned date obtained at the archaeological level of the discovery may be considered a priori as a primary context. Vases with stirrup handle are the documents in Linear B that have traveled the most, most having been produced in Crete and found on the Greek continent, especially in Argolida and Boeocia: 74 were found in Thebes and 46 in Tirinth, being the two largest sets. Analysis of the chemical composition of the ceramic paste showed that they were produced in western Crete, in the region of Cidonia, where the third largest group with 44 specimens comes from. Even before such analyses, experts had already pointed out that most of the toponyms referred to the western portion of the island.

There are also the stamps that probably served as labels on boxes with tablets or seals on warehouse doors. In the latter case, they worked to control the withdrawal of goods in standardized quantities. At each withdrawal of a pre-established quantity, the stamp would be withdrawn and kept, and after the end of a certain period the stamps were counted, accounting for the total of goods withdrawn and, finally, discarded.

The administrative system inferred from tablet inscriptions

The main collections of documents belong to the sites of Pilos and Knossos. In the other sites, the documentation is very fragmentary, although it is equally relevant for the construction of a geographical and economic picture regarding the Mycenaean world. It is important to point out the differences in the corpus of the two centers. In Pilos, central archives were found, and the building had a single destruction established in 1200 BC. One can, therefore, speak of unity of the files and it is probably for this reason that there are no individual records in elongated palm leaf-shaped tablets, considered preliminary records, but rather censuses of information in larger tablets in page format. In Knossos, on the other hand, we do not have this kind of evidence that is characteristic of central files that have not been found in this center. There are at least two major destructions of the

building, and the resulting fires have preserved tablets from distinct eras, but mostly those with partial information, when individual records were registered on palm leaf-shaped tablets.

Based on the inscriptions of the tablets, economic activities related to administrative centers can be characterized by the Mycenaean word *ta-ra-si-ja*, which means heavy quantity and prepared for processing. The *tarasija* system was based on the collection of raw materials by the central authority and their distribution to dependent or partially unpaid workers who were paid in kind (Shelmerdine, 2008, p. 80). The administrative centers controlled in this way the production of some specific goods whose destination was for the use of the center itself, as is the case of armaments and war cars, and which would have a value linked to social status, or for export, as is the case of perfumed oils, given their commercial value (Killen, 2011, p. 163).

Also, another system that can be identified in tablets is related to the word *o-no*, understood by most scholars as benefit, a form of payment given to self-employed workers for the supply of certain items whose production was not directly controlled by the centers, most likely due to their lack of commercial or social interest. That would be the case of network manufacturers that appear on the *ono* tablets, but not on the tablets that belong to the *tarasija* system. It is interesting to note that records of transactions associated with benefits make up a small portion of the archives. These are largely dedicated to the *tarasija* system, and this is most likely because the *ono* system did not belong to the main sphere of action of the administrative centers, and its registration did not show the importance of the control that was necessary in the *tarasija* system.

The tablets provide a range of research on the organization of agricultural and industrial production, the extent of the territories controlled directly or indirectly and studies on the hands of scribes carried out, above all, on the tablets of Pilos and Knossos. Within the *tarasija* system, the Cn series of Pilos and Da-Dg of Knossos deal with sheep herds. In Pilos, the record was structured in two ways: a toponym followed by an anthroponym and the information about a herd; or a toponym followed by an anthroponym, plus a second anthroponym in the genitive, the word *a-ko-ra* and the information about a herd. According to Ventris and Chadwick in the 1953 first edition of *Documents in Mycenaean Greek*, the second anthroponym would be in the genitive because it would be a determinative complement of the term *a-ko-ra* – from the Greek *agorá* –, whose meaning was, roughly speaking, understood as assembly, meeting, collection, flock. Therefore,

such individuals were identified with the term collector. In Knossos, there is a similar system, but without the explicit use of the vocabulary *a-ko-ra*. The formula found in Knossos is an uppercase anthroponym followed either by a toponym, or by a toponym and a second anthroponym sometimes in the genitive. The collector is normally in the genitive, which would indicate ownership, and where there is no collector it is assumed that the owner would be the *wanax* or the center. There are four collectors identified in Pilos, but there are at least 15 collectors identified in the Da-Dg series in Knossos. The total number of sheep in Knossos is much higher, about 19,000, against 4,000 in Pilos. The most important similarity between Pilos and Knossos is that a collector can have flocks in several places.

There are important debates about the figure of the collector, but, in general, the authors seem to agree that, in Pilos, the so-called collectors would be the administrative staff of the center, responsible for the management of certain activities, although it is discussed – both for Pilos and for Knossos – whether they would also perform records, being also scribes. The clearer context in Pilos may be explained by the unit of the archives, and their good state of preservation by the existence of a central archive, a smaller territorial extension and, consequently, with a lower number of identified collectors, but, above all, by the history of occupation and control of the region, which was, most likely, through gradual expansion from the administrative center.

The big question is who the collectors would be in Knossos, a problem hindered by the lack of unity of the archives, their fragmented and partial state, the absence of a central archive, the large territorial extension that the center seemed to control – directly or indirectly – and the great number of collectors.

John Bennet (1992) believes that these are local landowners and that Mycenaean administration would have been built taking advantage of the pre-existence of regional economic units. His approach is quite interesting, since it considers the previous history of the administration of the Minoan period and the economic organization of Crete, and because he approaches Mario Liverani's theory on the palatial mode of production. On the other hand, Pierre Carlier (1992) thinks that they would be employees, since he does not identify a difference in the treatment of records of herds directly associated with the administrative center and those associated with the collectors. Louis Godart (1992) attributes to the collectors a much greater proximity to power, associating them with the ruling family, and a direct control of Knossos over the territories, since he believes that all the estates

and herds belonged to the center. Jan Driessen (1992) is the only author to consider that there are two phases of the archives, the first dating from 1450 BC, and a second from the second destruction in 1370 BC. In this way, he points to the non-existence of the figure of collector in the first phase, when it is possible to identify in the records of the Carriage Tablet Room only one military elite. In the second phase, a nomenclature elite is distinguished, that would also have military characteristics, and also an economic elite, which would be the collectors. Finally, John Killen (1995) states that collectors would be the ruling elite, since some names of collectors appear in other records as owners of labor, products, lands, and also associated with external commerce.

The place of vases with inscription in the Mycenaean administration

The vessel with stirrup handle is a characteristic form of the Bronze Age, but that did not continue in later periods. It became the trademark of Mycenaean pottery of domestic use and exportation during 1400 to 1200 BC, reaching its peak of production and circulation around 1300 BC, although it was probably developed in Crete between 1700 and 1600 BC. It is a specialized way for the storage, transport and pouring of liquids. In publications, the vessel is commonly known as *stirrup jar*, a term used by Arthur Evans, in quotation marks, in the 1902 excavation report. The name adopted in Portuguese, “vaso com alça em estribo”, is nothing more than the translation of the English term most used by researchers. According to Halford Haskell (1985, p.221), the vessel can be described as a closed form with a narrow cylindrical central false neck, permanently closed by a clay disc. Two stirrup-shaped handles come out from the shoulder to the edges of the disc. Placed on the shoulder, near the false neck, is the true opening. Its defining elements are therefore concentrated in the upper part of the vessel: the false neck closed by a disc, the displaced true opening and the handles in the form of a stirrup.

These containers may vary greatly in size and regarding the treatment of the ceramic paste, and, therefore, they were divided in small versions of refined ceramic both in the treatment of the paste and in decoration, and the larger version of coarse ware. Arne Furumark (1941, p.610) classified stirrup handle vessels in form 46 and then subdivided them into 22 specific types (FS 164 to 185). The vessels that received inscription belong to the FS 164 form. This is the shape of the large stirrup handle vases with rustic ceramics for exportation and storage. They have a highly standardized

manufacturing, showing an average height of 40 centimeters and capacity that varies between 12 and 14 liters. They are found in various contexts, from dwellings to warehouses, and in shipments. They are not usually found in graves, being occasionally found in those of Crete and rarely in tombs of the Greek continent. The finding contexts characterize such a form as being utilitarian, serving mainly for the transport and storage of large quantities of liquids, probably olive oil (although wine is also a possibility). The peak of production and circulation of such vessels is from 1350 to 1300 BC, a complex political and archaeological time in Crete, but which corresponds to the height of Mycenaean commercial expansion. Their distribution in the coastal sites of the Eastern Mediterranean is wide, having been exported from the producing centers in Aegean to Anatolia, Cyprus, the coast of Palestine and Egypt. Their presence is also attested in the cargoes of the wrecked ships in Uluburun, Chelidonia and Irina. In addition to being part of what appears to be an intensive trade network with the Near East, such vessels have also been found in smaller numbers in southern Italy, Sicily and Sardinia, attesting to contacts with the Western Mediterranean.

Of the 186 vessels with stirrup handles with inscriptions, except for fragments that carry a sign that cannot be identified and vessels with a single sign that may be the spelling of the syllable *ka*, but whose meaning is unknown, since it is not an abbreviation known in the tablets, the inscriptions of the vessels can be classified into two categories. In 61 vessels, the inscriptions have only one word, usually an anthroponym, with the exception of two specimens whose inscription is a toponym. In a second category, which covers 18 vessels, the inscriptions have three words: an anthroponym in the nominative, followed by a toponym, and an anthroponym in the genitive. In this category, most (15) of the vessels belong to the set found at the site of Thebes.

In the second case, the parallel with the formula found in the D series of Knossos tablets is evident with regard to sheep herds. It is assumed that the first anthroponym refers to the producer, the toponym to the place of production, and the second anthroponym to the receiver, called the collector. There is a subgroup in which the receiver is the *wanax*, since in such inscriptions the third word is not a proper noun, but the adjective *wa-na-ka-te-ro* (relative to *wa-na-ka*) or its abbreviation, *wa*. Therefore, the inscribed vessels seem to have the same distinction as tablets between a production controlled directly by the centers and another controlled by an intermediary.

The inscriptions of the vessels seem to reproduce the *tarasija* system of sheep tablets in an adapted way, showing, for the most part, only an anthroponym. The absence of the other elements would be explained by the redundancy of their use. It is assumed that the commodity was known, so the vessels themselves would already indicate which product they carried. The same may be said with regard to quantity; it would be unnecessary to indicate it since the vessels have their predetermined volumetric capacity thanks to the standardization of their manufacture. In this way, the vessels and their inscriptions would belong to the administrative sphere of the *tarasija* system.

In the same way as the tablets, vessels and their application give rise to several debates; among them, it is important to mention the issue of literacy in the city, but because it is an example of a vessel very close to the tradition of the tablets, as in the case of the single vessel of Eleusis, which uses a line to divide the text, and in which the syllabograms are very well traced, showing that the author was acquainted with such signs to the point of finding out how the strokes were made on tablets. However, there is also the example of illegible vessels, as is the case of the container found at the site of Orcomenos, in which there are the signs that are not recognizable Linear B syllabograms. These two inscriptions are at opposite poles of the spectrum, the first being the best version of a vase inscription and the second the most indecipherable, constituting, however, exceptions.

The main debate focuses on the function of inscriptions within the Mycenaean administrative system. The following is a summary of the main approaches.

For Peter van Alfen (1997), the inscribed vessels served as batch labels and had the function of monitoring the fulfillment of the obligation of production, and the recipients of the inscriptions were the receivers, although the author did not specify who they would be. Such a hypothesis would explain the small number of inscribed vessels, as well as their insertion into the Mycenaean administrative system. Joseph Maran (2005) is the first researcher to consider the finding context on the continent as a primary context, highlighting the concentration of such vessels in Thebes and Tirinthia, which would point to a specific flow from western Crete to Boeocia and Argolida. The author, however, does not consider that there was a trade between the island and the continent, understanding that Crete had no political autonomy, but would be subject to the continental centers in a system of vassality, within which the vessels would represent the payment of taxes. Julien Zurbach (2006), as well as van Alfen, emphasized

the role of inscriptions in the context of internal management control. Zurbach, however, thinks of an administration centered on Crete, considered by the author as the primary context of circulation and use of vessels, while their presence on the continent would be explained by being prestigious goods. Although it was not the object of study of Kevin Pluta in his thesis on literacy in the Bronze Age (2011), he points out that the inscriptions in vases would attribute certain prestige to its content, and not to the container, taking into account the finding contexts on the continent (in basements or warehouses). This is the same approach of Yves Duhoux (2011), although this author focuses in his analysis on a small sample (only the entire vessels and with inscriptions with assured reading), though it has the merit of recognizing the continent as the primary context of use of the vessels, associating them with tablets that have the figure of the collectors. He considers that the small number of vessels with inscriptions points to a system of exchange of gifts – existing in contemporary societies of the Near East and also in Homer – and not of trade. The inscriptions, thus devoided of any administrative function, would have a symbolic value, as they embellish and give prestige to the vessel. Against such an idea, Cinthia Shelmerdine (1985) had already pointed out that such vases are rustically produced and decorated, elaborated not for beauty, but for the transport of oil in large quantities, and that the acquisition of a prestigious value would be later. Anna Judson (2013) differentiates what she considers pseudo inscriptions, – which would have the function of attributing prestige to the vase, since they could not be read – from the true inscriptions. These two would be related to the administration of Crete, here considering, like many authors, the continent as a secondary context. For the author, as with the stylistic elements of the vase, the inscriptions would indicate, for the Mycenaeans on the continent, the Cretan origin of the contents. Finally, Driessen, Farnoux and Langohr (2015) state that the inscriptions were made as visual elements, and, contrary to van Alfen's and Duhoux's theses, they would not have a reading function, being associated with the container and not with its content. The jars with inscriptions would be, in this way, gifts that would mention the donor, a practice attested in Homer, but also in the Classical and Hellenistic periods.

With regard to the latter hypothesis, as with respect to Duhoux's approach, I would like to make an objection concerning the use of documents from later times or other societies to infer social behaviors in the Mycenaean world. In both cases, it is necessary to proceed with caution and not to automatically transpose practices from one era to another or from one

society to another. Both the approaches of van Alfen, Duhoux and Driessen, Farnoux and Langohr seem to regard Crete and the continent as two distinct administrative and economic areas, and the Cretan elite as being non-Mycenaean.

The study of the vessels of Thebes

Thebes is a site in Boeotia with a history of occupation since the Neolithic period. One of the problems of Thebes research is that the modern city is based on the ancient one, and excavations only happen punctually when some work is carried out on the urban perimeter. However, the site has provided important traces of the Mycenaean period. At the site, 74 vessels and fragments with cadmeion inscriptions (Catling et al., 1980) and 27 tablets were found in a nearby building called the Arsenal. 150 meters west of the Arsenal, 17 more tablets were excavated in the archives room. 70 meters southeast of the Arsenal, near the Homoloïdes Gate, there was a deposit of 56 nodules inscribed in Linear B (Piteros; Olivier; Melena, 1990, p. 105). All these documents have been dated, from ceramics, between 1300 and 1200 BC. Recently, 250 tablets and fragments have been excavated on Pelopidou Street in the Arsenal area and dated 1350/1300 BC, while some stamps and a tablet have been found in the Treasure area and dated 1300/1200 BC.

The site of Thebes has the largest set of inscribed vessels, of which 62 came from the Delta corridor, a well-defined context of storage in the main building, called Cadmeion, where they were found along with another 120 vessels with stirrup handle without inscription. Among the whole or reconstituted vessels, 15 have an inscription with three words (anthroponym + toponym + anthroponym), 23 had only one word (anthroponym), 3 had a word that cannot be identified and 4 bear the sign identified as ka. The set is still composed of 29 fragments of vases with stirrup handle.

In the group of inscriptions of three words, 14 vases bear the toponym wa-to, locality of western Crete. The fifteenth is an inscription whose third word is wa-na-ka-te-ro, understood by scholars as meaning “from *wanax*”, and the toponym o-do-ru-wi-jo, also from western Crete. This fact is corroborated by the analyses carried out on the clay of 54 of the vessels of Thebes, of which 46 had the origin of the clay attributed to western Crete

and only 8 of local production. All vessels with three words were produced in Crete.

In this way, it is necessary to consider that the set of Thebes vases represents a primary context, considering that the finding context is significant, since the vases were stored in the main building of the site. Thus, although they were manufactured in Crete, the production was directed to Thebes; through the analysis of the documents in Linear B, it is concluded with relative certainty that this center controls the oil production of western Crete, without this having been translated into a military or population occupation of the western part of the island by the Mycenaeans.

Conclusion

The Mycenaean administration has several categories of documents and was mainly focused on the control of some specific economic activities. In the local sphere, we have stamps, mainly used for the control of the warehouses of the centers. On a second level, the regional one, we have tablets that, although they were produced in the offices of the central buildings, recorded information collected in other locations, and the nodules, which traveled along with the goods that were delivered to the centers. Finally, there were the vessels, produced to transport the oil made in Crete to the mainland.

The inscribed vessels seem to point to the existence of Mycenaean continental officials or elites acting directly or indirectly in Crete, controlling an oil production that aimed to send products to the continent. Thebes would be, in this case, the center that commanded the production established in western Crete, which had in Cidonia a second-order center submitted to the continental center. In this way, the Mycenaean economic organization, which seems to have been organized to participate in the luxury trade established in the Eastern Mediterranean, would have taken advantage of a pre-existing Minoan organization and structured an administrative control that did not need an effective and massive occupation of productive areas in other locations.

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