

**MEMORIAL RESOLUTION OF THE FACULTY
OF THE UNIVERSITY OF WISCONSIN-MADISON**

ON THE DEATH OF PROFESSOR EMERITUS EMMETT L. BENNETT JR.

Emmett L. Bennett Jr., a classicist who played a vital role in deciphering Linear B, the Bronze Age Aegean script that defied solution for more than fifty years after it was unearthed on clay tablets in 1900, died on December 15, 2011 in Madison, Wisconsin. He was ninety-three years old.

Bennett was considered the father of Mycenaean epigraphy — that is, the art of reading inscriptions from the Mycenaean period, the Greek Bronze Age from about 1600 to 1200 BC. His analysis of the Linear B tablets could distinguish the handwritings of many different Bronze Age scribes and opened a window onto the Mycenaean world, one of the most challenging archaeological decipherments of all time. Working with an unknown language in an unknown script, the difficulty was multiplied a thousandfold.

Bennett's work on the Minoan fractional system, published in the *American Journal of Archaeology* in 1950, is considered an authoritative work to this day. He founded the publication *Nestor* in 1957, an international bibliography of Aegean studies, Homeric society, Indo-European linguistics, and related fields that he ran on his own for 20 years. Now published at the University of Cincinnati, *Nestor* is still the primary way of locating works of scholarship in Aegean prehistory. Bennett also served on the editorial board of the prestigious journal *Kadmos*.

Linear B recorded the administrative workings of Mycenaean palatial centers on Crete and the Greek mainland from about 1400-1200 BC: accounts of crops harvested, flocks tended, goods manufactured (including furniture, chariots and perfume), preparations for religious feasts, and preparations for war. It was deciphered at last in 1952 by a young English architect named Michael Ventris. The decipherment made him world famous before his death in an automobile accident in 1956. As Ventris acknowledged, he was guided by Bennett's work, which imposed a much-needed order on the roiling mass of strange, ancient symbols.

In his seminal monograph *The Pylos Tablets* (1951), Bennett published the first definitive list of the signs of Linear B. Compiling such a list is the essential first step in deciphering any unknown script, a list of about 80 characters. According to Ventris' decipherment, each character stood for a syllable of the still-unknown language. Linear B also contained a set of signs that stood for concepts like "man," "woman," "horse," "goat" and "chariot." Linear B is now the earliest readable writing in Europe.

Emmett L. Bennett Jr. was born in Saint Paul, Minnesota, on July 12, 1918. He earned bachelor's, master's and doctoral degrees in classics from the University of Cincinnati, where he studied with the eminent archaeologist Carl W. Blegen. During World War II, the young Bennett worked as a cryptanalyst for the Department of Defense, acquiring skills invaluable for his analysis of Linear B.

The tablets were first unearthed in the spring of 1900 at Knossos, Crete, by the English archaeologist Arthur Evans, who dated them to about 1450 BC. The script was unlike anything ever seen. The language it recorded was unknown. Many peoples had lived in the Bronze Age Aegean, and there was no way to tell which had produced the tablets. Evans tried for decades to crack Linear B but was unable to do so before he died in 1941. About the only thing of which he, and later investigators, felt confident was that the script did not record Greek. As Ventris discovered, Linear B *did* record Greek — an early dialect spoken hundred of years before Homer.

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Bennett worked with a cache of Linear B tablets from Pylos on the Greek mainland unearthed by Blegen, in 1939. Blegen entrusted Bennett to transcribe, analyze and publish their contents. The result was *The Pylos Tablets*. Though the book did not attempt a decipherment, its careful transcriptions, comprehensive list of signs, and analysis of characteristic patterns gave Ventris something to work with.

Bennett taught at Yale and the University of Texas but was most closely associated with the University of Wisconsin, where he held an appointment at the Institute for Research in the Humanities. He retired in 1988.

His many honors and awards included numerous scholarships, two Fulbright Fellowships, and a Guggenheim Fellowship. He was an honorary member and honorary councilor of the Archaeological Society of Athens, one of only a dozen foreign scholars to receive this honor. In 1991, Dr. Bennett received the Gold Cross of the Order of Honor, the highest award that the Greek government can present to a foreigner. In 2001, he received the Gold Medal for Distinguished Achievement from the Archaeological Institute of America. In 2003, he was awarded an honorary doctorate from the University of Athens and in 2006, the Lifetime Achievement Award from the Institute for Aegean Prehistory.

He is survived by two daughters and three sons, a sister, a brother, and four grandchildren. His wife, the former Marja Adams, whom he married in 1941, died in 2005.

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