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Indo-European Toponymy in Minoan Crete: An Etymological Approach

Abstract

Linear A is the yet undeciphered Aegean writing system of the ancient Minoan civilization which flourished in Crete. Many attempts have been made to decipher Linear A, or connect it to a plausible language family, with limited success. The Indo-European connection to Linear A has been rigorously explored over time because of the Mycenean Greek encoded by its descendant writing system, Linear B. This paper proposes possible etymologies of place names in the Linear A script, following a hypothetical relationship to the Indo-European family of languages. We apply historical-phonetic methodologies and the comparative method in order to analyze these plausible toponyms. Potential place names were determined using Linear B phonetic values to determine the phonetic equivalents of Linear A signs, and by examining the position of these sign clusters on various articles. This paper does not attempt to connect Linear A to a language family – rather, it explores the hypothetical connections that could be drawn, the reconstructions we could make, and aims to contribute to the current debate and discussion around Minoan toponymy.

Keywords

Linear A, minoan, toponymy, Indo-European, etymology

1. Introduction

This short linguistic note proposes a new interpretation of the etymologies of possible place names in the Linear A script. Linear A is an undeciphered Aegean writing system used in the Bronze Age in Crete by the Minoan civilization and 'conceals' the so-called (unknown) 'Minoan language'. Linear A has been found on a variety of artifacts, including tablets, bars, labels, roundels, vases, architectural features, and libation tables. A great deal of the articles containing Linear A served an economic purpose. The number of articles containing the Linear A script is limited: there are 1,427 artifacts, with signs appearing approximately 7,400 times (Schoep, 2002).

The present article reconstructs the etymologies of some possible Minoan place names according to an Indo-European key of interpretation, by applying historical-phonetic methodologies and the comparative method to the analysis of those toponyms.

Given that Linear A is an undeciphered writing system, it is difficult, if not impossible, to establish whether the phonetic clusters identified as place names in the Linear A documents (mainly clay tablets) are real toponyms. Their transcription is achieved by applying the phonetic values of Linear B (Linear A's 'daughter' writing system, which was deciphered by Michael Ventris in 1952 and was found to transcribe Mycenaean Greek, an Indo-European language) to Linear A, on the basis of the many syllabograms shared by Linear A and Linear B and postulating that the 'common' syllabograms have the same (or, at least, similar) phonetic values. The idea that specific clusters of symbols in Linear A could represent place names is not only connected with this syllabic/phonetic comparison, but also with the specific position of these clusters of symbols in the Linear A documents.

All attempts to decipher Linear A as if one were transcribing an Indo-European language (for example, to Greek, *in primis*, based on Linear B, but also Luwian, Hittite, and so on) have failed so far, and so did the attempts to reconstruct the language 'hidden' behind Linear A as a Semitic or Afro-Asiatic language.

The present reconstruction of Indo-European etymologies for possible Linear A place names is highly experimental and works at a theoretical level. It provides, nonetheless, a new perspective for interpreting Linear A and,

possibly, adds a relatively new approach to the body of scientific literature on the undeciphered Aegean writing system.

2. Deciphering attempts

Many scholars have tried, over time, to decipher Linear A, unfortunately without any success.

Vladimir Ivanov Georgiev considered Linear A as an Ancient Greek variant (Georgiev, 1957; Nagy, 1963, p. 210). In his interpretation, the Hagia Triada tablets were written in Ancient Greek, and all other Linear A documents transcribed Hittite-Luwian (Georgiev, 1963).

Leonard Robert Palmer (1958, 1965) considered Minoan to be an Indo-European Anatolian language, linked to Luwian. This was based on the belief that Greece and Crete were twice invaded by Indo-European people during the second millennium BC (Palmer, 1961). This, according to Palmer, resulted in a migration of Indo-European people to Crete. Palmer based this belief on two elements: the presence of "Minyan" ware in Beycesultan (Western Anatolia), and a Linear A inscription which he interpreted as "Mount Parnassos" and which, according to him, was based on Luwian. In Luwian, 'Parnassos' means '(place) of the temple'.

Gregory Nagy (1963) worked on an Indo-European (i.e., Ancient Greek) hypothesis of Linear A. Although there are a number of examples introduced in this paper which demonstrate the connection between Linear A and Indo-European elements, these findings have been replicated in a variety of other language families. A key weakness of this approach to decipherment is that these lexical elements are prone to being borrowed from other neighboring languages. This is a common difficulty shared by many decipherment attempts.

Gareth Alun Owens (1997) highlighted possible similarities between Luwian and the language 'hidden' behind Linear A. Later he thought that Minoan could have been an Indo-European language linked to Sanskrit, Ancient Greek, and Latin (Owens, 1999, 2007). Owens was able to 'translate' fifty words of the language transcribed using Linear A using Linear B phonetic values. Owens postulated that Linear A represents a language from the Satem branch

of the Indo-European family, with lexicographical characteristics that were closer to Greek and Sanskrit, rather than being closer to Hittite (Owens, 1999).

Theories of the Indo-European, or more specifically, Luwian connection to the language encoded by Linear A have not become unanimously accepted by researchers for a wide variety of reasons. Criticism of Palmer's approach stems from a lack of archaeological evidence to support the migration hypothesis (Immerwahr, 1963). George E. Mylonas (1962) also challenges the Luwian theory on various grounds, echoing Immerwahr's view that there are numerous doubts about whether the Beycesultan people were Luwians, claiming that Palmer's evidence of the Minyan Ware was not sufficiently qualified. Decipherment attempts which use a 'Greek-like' lexicon have also been criticized for "retrospectively extrapolating Greek words from later Homeric, and, worse yet, much later classical Greek", without taking into consideration that "any superstate word introduced into a substrate language must conform to the standard orthographic and syntactical conventions of the substrate language" (Janke & Solcà, 2018. p. 3).

Jan Best (2001), following Cyrus Gordon (1982), tried to interpret Linear A as an ancestor of Phoenician. Gordon identified words in Linear A that could be connected to various Semitic Languages, including Akkadian and Hebrew. This hypothesis was also supported by Maurice Pope (1958), who pointed out Semitic grammatical features (such as the apparent use of copulas on tablets) and grammatical inflections. The word *kuro*, which has been found repeatedly at the end of economic tablets, is also commonly raised as an indicator, at a basic level, of some Semitic influence – it is the only word in Linear A whose meaning, 'total', is the most probable under the Semitic theory.

The language families which have been proposed only continue to grow, with scholars employing a variety of methods: Kjell Aartun (1997) theorized Semitic origins for Minoan and the Minoan Civilization, while Margalit Finkelberg (2001) connected Linear A with Lycian. Hubert La Marle (1997, 2002a, 2002b, 2007) tried to decipher Linear A by analyzing the frequency of its syllabograms and by developing statistical comparisons, proposing an Indo-Iranian origin for the writing system. Giulio Mauro Facchetti hypothesized a possible link of Linear A to the so-called Tyrsenian languages, that is, Etruscan, Lemnian, and Rhaetic/Rhaetian (Facchetti & Negri, 2003), postulated by Helmut Rix (1998). A similar theory has been developed by Sergey Aleksandrovich Yatsemirskiy (2011).

John Grimes Younger (2000) has provided a phonetic/phonological transcription of Linear A on the basis of the application of phonetic values of Linear

B syllabograms plausibly shared by Linear B and Linear A. Such an approach, despite being based on the assumption that Linear A and Linear B were 'read' the same way, has allowed to hypothetically reconstruct the general vocabulary of Linear A and some specialized lexicons (e.g., Minoan toponymy).

Richard Vallance Janke and Alexandre Solcà (2018) explores the idea of a new diachronic interpretation of the Linear A corpus and postulates a possible moment of transition between Linear A and Linear B, in which Linear A was the writing system the Mycenaeans were using to transcribe their language, Mycenaean Greek.

Peter Revesz (2017) considered the language of Linear A to be related to the Uralic language family. Rather than approaching Linear A using Linear B phonetic values, Revesz instead uses an algorithm to determine the syllabic values. This method uses a feature-based similarity measure to visually compare script symbols and to produce a proposed Linear A phonetic grid. Using these values, Revesz was able to create a 'Linear A Dictionary' (a proposed lexicon of words that had been transcribed in Linear A). These words were then compared to dictionaries for Uralic, Finno-Ugric and Ugric to establish potential word meanings. It is worth noting that, in this work, Revesz uses clusters that are found on libation tables and objects as opposed to economic tablets with a known, and agreed upon, context.

Another approach is that of the Cretan Protolinear Theory, which suggests that all the Aegean syllabaries (including Linear A, Linear B and Cretan Hieroglyphics) have evolved from a common ancestor script, the Cretan Protolinear Syllabary. This was initially proposed by Willetts (1977), and has since been furthered by Tsikritsis (2006). A recent work by Papakitsos (2021) has used the Cretan Protolinear Syllabary in order to assign phonetic values to Linear A signs, and has found (using this assumption) that 44 signs of Linear A convey the same phonetic values as their Linear B counterparts, with fifteen syllables found to be different from those derived using the typical syllable-equivalence method. While this is not a decipherment attempt, the Papakitsos paper hopes to facilitate decipherment by proposing new syllabic values that may be used for analysis.

3. Indo-European Minoan place names?

The following possible Minoan toponyms are reconstructed according to an Indo-European key of interpretation, that is, as if they were Indo-European in their origin and as if they had, therefore, an Indo-European etymology.

The list of possible Minoan place names comes from Younger (2000) (in the section "Place Names"). The place names identified in this list also feature correspondences with place names in Linear B (Steele & Meißner, 2017).

The following etymological reconstructions are theoretical in their nature, and they are based on postulates which are not proven (otherwise Linear A would be a deciphered writing system) but provide a proposal for discussion and debate and show how Minoan could have had Indo-European origins.

The main problems we have to take into account are:

- It is not granted that the phonetic clusters listed below are place names. Linear A documents are undeciphered and, therefore, all kinds of readings of the writing system they witness are highly hypothetical and not confirmed – these clusters are thought to be place names because of their phonetic transcription (see the following point) and because of their position in the Linear A documents where they appear.
- It is not granted that the phonetic clusters listed below can be read correctly according to the given transcriptions, because the transcriptions themselves are based on the idea of a phonetic and phonological equivalence between Linear A and Linear B, and therefore Minoan and Mycenaean (Linear A signs are – arbitrarily – given the phonetic values of the equivalent Linear B signs). If Linear A transcribes a language incompatible with Linear B (i.e., a Semitic language, or an Afro-Asiatic language, for example, while Linear B transcribes Indo-European Mycenaean Greek), the reconstruction of these phonetic clusters is simply wrong. An improved understanding of the relationship between Minoan and Mycenean societies and the ways these are reflected in the script supports the use of Linear B phonology when reading Linear A. A recent study by Steele and Meißner (2017) has found a significant correspondence between Linear A and B, with new finds and improved epigraphic study contributing to an increased number of sign correspondences (72% of Linear A and B symbols have been found to be shared).

If we assume that the analyzed clusters are (or could be) place names, and accept their (potential) Indo-European origin, we can try to reconstruct, through a historical and comparative approach, their etymologies. These are listed below and constitute the essence of this short article. Purely hypothetical parallels have been included wherever relevant on the basis of semantics or etymology. Some analysis has also been included for certain proposed reconstructions, wherever applicable. It must be stressed, ultimately, that any proposed parallels or correspondences for place names have been made merely as an experiment with the concept of Linear A's language having an Indo-European origin, as unlikely as this may be.

Figure 1. PK Za 8

DI-KI-TE = Δίκτη < **Dǐ k̂ -tēs*- 'border of the sky' (Pape & Benseler, 1911, p. 300).

Proposed etymology: Ancient Indian *dīktắs* 'from sky's regions'- ŚBr. (Śatapatha-Brāhmaṇa) *dīkpắtʰā*- 'path of the horizon' (Monier-Williams, 1899, p. 479). Assuming the reconstruction, this could be referring to the highest place in Crete, which is now the peak Timios Stavros on Mount Ida, or Psiloritis.

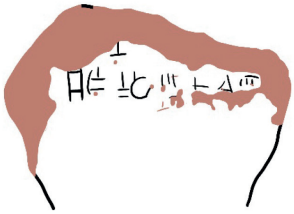

Figure 2. PK Za 9

I-DA = ῞Ιδη, Doric ῞Ιδᾱ < **H*$_a$*ǐ-h*$_a$*id-ă·h*$_a$ 'strong mountain, strong high ground' (Pape & Benseler, 1911, p. 534).

Proposed etymology: The first element is the Indo-European **H*$_a$*ǐ-h*$_a$*id-ă*, meaning 'strong'.

The second element, **h*$_a$, means 'mountain', or 'something that comes up from the soil'.

A possible semantic parallel for this string is that of a mountain: in Asia Minor, near ancient Troy (Kaz Dağı, in Turkish), the mount ῾Ιδη (Idē/Ida), in Ancient Greek, and *Īda/Īdē*, in Latin. This is a particularly interesting parallel, where the proposed meaning of the signs and semantic parallels have the same meaning and, possibly, the same Indo-European etymology.

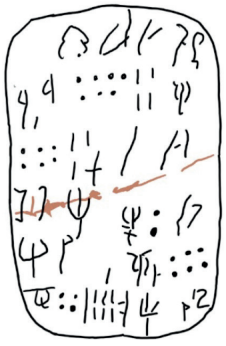

Figure 3. HT 120

PA-I-TO = Φαιστός < **B*^{ɦ}*ắh*$_a$*-ǐ-sth*$_2$*-ṓ-s* (**B*^{ɦ}*ắh*$_{2/4}$*-ǐ-sth*$_2$*-ṓ-s*) 'place in the sun'

Proposed etymology: The second element, *ǐ-sth*$_2$*-ṓ-s*, matches the *-stum* and *-stom* elements in the Hispano-Celtic Bergistum and Celtiberian Boustom.

Ancient Indian ^{2}*bʰa* 'light, clarity, splendor; Sun' (Monier-Williams 1899, p. 750).

A hypothetical etymological parallel is Hispano-Celtic Bergistum and Celtiberian Boustom. If a hypothesized parallel is to be made from a historical-semantic angle, another possibility would be Italian Solaro.

Phaistos is one of the most important centres of the Minoan civilization, often said to be the wealthiest and most powerful city in southern Crete. The name Phaistos means 'place in the sun' and is speculated to have come from ancient Indian *B*^{ɦ}*ắh*$_a$*-ǐ-sth*$_2$*-ṓ-s*, meaning 'light, clarity, splendor; Sun' (Monier-Williams, 1899, p. 750). Further search also indicated that the Minoan palace was found in Phaistos. This is probable if one looks at it from the viewpoint that the king is like the sun, providing light to his subjects; leading and guiding his kingdom along the correct path.

Figure 4. PH Wa 32

SU-KI-RI-TA = Σύβριτα? = Σύγριτα < **[H₁]sŭ̆-ĝ rĭtă·hₐ* (**[H₁]sŭ̆-ĝrĭtă·h₂/₄*) 'well stretched out'

Proposed etymology: The first element is the Indo-European **h₁sŭ̆-*, the second element, *-ĝ rĭtă·hₐ*, relates to the description of an action and with the meaning of 'stretched out' ' < √**ĝrēi̯* 'to stretch' (Pokorny, 1959, p. 401; Rix & Kümmel 2001, p. 170).

A hypothetical correspondence for this place name is *Sybrita/Sygrita*, a town in ancient Crete located in the Amari valley, located near modern Thronos. This town was first settled before the end of the Minoan period and was found to be one of the early Cretan cities to strike coins. It was, and continues to be, a wine-producing area (Stillwell et al., 1976).

Figure 5. KO Za 1b

TU-RI-SA = Τύλισος f. < **Tŭ́(hₐ)-lĭ-hₐsŏ-s, *Tŭ(hₐ)-lĭ-hₐsă·hₐ* 'provided with height'

Proposed etymology: The first element is paralleled to prehistoric Indo-European appellative **tūlŏ-*, **tūlō-*, 'height' (Pokorny, 1959, pp. 1080–1085; Mallory & Adams, 1997, pp. 560–561, 382–383, 417; Rix & Kümmel, 2001, pp. 639–640). The second element is paralleled to Anatolian suffix **-ĭ-hₐsŏ-*, and is compatible with an Anatolian descriptive suffix meaning 'characterized by' or 'provided with'.

A hypothetical semantic parallel comes from the the Polcevera Table (or Sententia Minuciorum). This is an ancient bronze inscription dating back to the year 117 BC and contains a decree of the Roman Senate with several place names listed on it. Among them, is Tuledonem. Tuledonem (accusative masculine singular), is a mountain in Liguria, Italy, and is a plausible parallel for TU-RI-SA.

Figure 6. ZA 15a

I-TI-NI-SA < **H₁ĭ-tĭ-nĭ-nm-s-ă·hₐ* (**H₁ĭ-tĭ-nĭ-nm-s-ă·h₂/₄*) 'intensive pastures along the way'

Proposed etymology: The first element is compatible with Ancient Indian ǐtĭ- 'to go', and the second element with Ancient Greek Νῖσα/Νίσα 'wandering life' (Pape & Benseler, 1911, p. 1011) ~ νίσσομαι, 'to go, to go to' (Beekes & van Beek, 2010, p. 1008)

A hypothetical semantic parallel is *Wandersleben*, in Thuringia. This village and former municipality in Germany was previously attested as *Wantesleben* and *Wantesleibo*. Νῖσα/Νίσα can equally represent a form from √**nĕm-*, in the institutional meaning of 'dividing up the territory', and, therefore, **Nĭ-nm-s-ă·h₂/₄* could instead be interpreted as a 'set of repeated subdivisions'.

A hypothetical correspondence for this place name is *Itanos*, a former municipality in eastern Crete. In ancient Crete it was an important city and port, but a great amount of information on its Minoan history has been lost due to erosion and the passage of time (Vafidis et al., 2005).

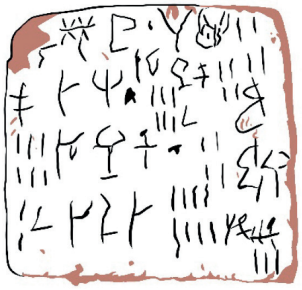

Figure 7. HT 10a

KU-NI-SU < **K̂ŭn-h₁/₄ĭsh$_a$-ŭ-s* (**K̂ŭn-h₁/₄ĭsh$_{2(/4)}$-ŭ-s*) 'Dogs' Shrine'

Proposed etymology: The first element is compatible with Indo-European **k̂ŭn-* 'dog'.

The second element is compatible with the Britannic hydronym *Isu*[*rium*], √**h₁/₄ēi̯s(h$_{2(/4)}$)-* 'impetuously moving, to entrench' = 'where the dogs were buried'.

A hypothetical historical-semantic parallel comes from the Britannic hydronym *Isu(rium)*. If hypotheses are carried out for possible parallels while keeping in mind the context of the naming process, an alternative parallel is the Italian place name *El Paradis di can* (*Il Paradiso dei cani*), 'Dogs' Heaven', in Valtellina (Lombardy).

Although it would be tempting to connect this string with *Knossos*, there is little evidence to support this correspondence. Its recurrence as a heading on commodity lists (Hooker, 1975), however, makes it a likely place name. Articles containing this string have been found in Hagia Triada, making it possible that this place could be found within Southern Crete.

SE-TO-I-JA < **Sĕnt-ŏ-h₁ĭ-i̯ă·h$_a$* (**Sĕnt-ŏ-h₁ĭ-i̯ă·h$_{2/4}$*) 'passage with path'

Proposed etymology: The first element is compatible with Celtic **sĕntŭ-* 'path' (Falileyev, 2007, p. 28)

The second element is compatible with Lithuanian *pérėja* 'passage, mountain pass' < **pĕr-h₁ēi̯-ă·h$_{2/4}$* (Wodtko et al., 2009, p. 221, as cited in Blažek, 2009).

The hypothetical correspondences for this place name are *Archanes* or *Ioukhtas*. The possible correspondence with *Archanes* was initially proposed by Owens (1994), who found that the high recurrence of the string was accompanied by a high amount of trade activity. *Archanes* has ancient roads which lead to *Ioukhtas* (now more commonly known as Mount Juktas) a mountain in north-central Crete, one of the most important peak sanctuaries in the Minoan world. The proposed etymological reconstruction would align well what we know about these locations topographically, along with their economic and religious significance.

Figure 8. HT114a

SA-RA$_2$ < **S̥rh₃-ă·h$_a$* (**S̥rh₃-ă·h$_{2/4}$*) 'flowing'

Proposed etymology: **s̥rh₃-* < √**sĕrh₃-* 'to move with a hostile attitude' → 'to flow' (Mallory & Adams, 1997, p. 207; Pokorny, 1959, pp. 909–10; Rix & Kümmel, 2001, p. 535), as well as **war-* / **uar-* / **var-*, 'to flow', is linked to the 'description' of watercourses.

A hypothetical semantic parallel is the French hydronym *Saire*.

At the etymological level, these nine possibly Minoan place names have all relatively solid (Indo-European) etymological reconstructions, which are consistent not only linguistically, but also by testing their semantics with the hydro-geo-morphology and the landscape features of the possible actual places (when existing) that they could indicate. That said, this once again relies on an Indo-European reading of Linear A, and on the assumption that the language underlying the script shares a relationship with this language family. As mentioned in the brief literature review presented above, there are a multitude of reasons why an Indo-European reading cannot be fully supported.

However, the Indo-European Toponymy of Minoan Crete is and remains just a fascinating hypothesis, with Linear A still being an undeciphered writing system.

4. Final words

This short note applies a strongly experimental approach to what can be called 'Minoan Toponymy'. The attempt to reconstruct etymologies for possible lexical items (in the case of this research, toponymic lexical items) from an undeciphered script is necessarily theoretical and limited. Nothing can be confirmed or disproved, in a context like this, until the undeciphered writing system is deciphered. This short article, nonetheless, might be a modest contribution to the current debate and an interpretation of (possible) Minoan toponymy using an original approach.

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