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# Two new Linear B tablets and an enigmatic find from Bronze Age Pylos (Palace of Nestor)

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**Abstract:** This article presents two newly-discovered fragments of Linear B tablets from recent excavations at the site of Ano Englianos, Bronze Age Pylos, along with a third possibly inscribed object.

**Keywords:** Linear B; inscriptions; Pylos; Mycenaean Greece; Bronze Age Aegean.

In 2017, in the course of the third season of renewed excavations at the site of Ano Englianos (Bronze Age Pylos, also known as the Palace of Nestor), single fragments of two elongated (palm-leaf) Linear B tablets were found: one (NSF1220) on the acropolis, northwest of the Main Building, the other (NSF1755) in surface levels, in the Tsakonas field, on the slope beneath the acropolis, to the northeast (Fig. 1). Neither comes from a chronological horizon that can be defined stratigraphically, nor do we think that either can be linked to an existing group of tablets from the Pylos corpus. They have been assigned the designations **PY Ua 1586** and **X 1587** respectively. In the following 2018 season, an enigmatic fragmentary clay object (NSF3095), possibly inscribed, was found in surface levels about 25m south of Tholos IV (Fig. 1). This object does not appear to be inscribed in Linear B, and may not belong to the Bronze Age (or even represent any form of writing), but is included here for the sake of completeness.

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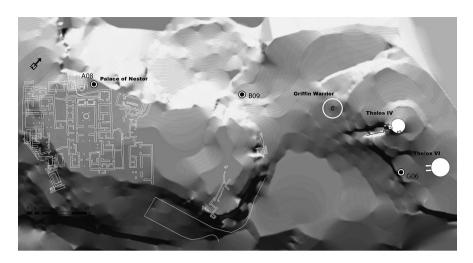


Fig. 1: Plan of excavated areas in the vicinity of the Palace of Nestor, showing locations of findspots of objects discussed in this article. A08 = Ua 1586, B09 = X 1587, and G06 = NSF3095 (Courtesy of the Department of Classics, University of Cincinnati)

### Find contexts

PY Ua 1586 (NSF1220) derives from trench N-A08-02 (Fig. 1: A08), which represents cleaning of the southeastern scarp of trench WK1, dug by William Kittredge in 1962. The scarp was cleaned in order to get an idea of the stratigraphy in this area prior to opening new trenches nearby. Excavation reached at its lowest elevations a stratum with LH I pottery but no associated walls. Above this level, the earliest constructions uncovered included walls of LH IIB and a drain of LH I/ II cut down into the LH I stratum. Two pits were cut into the LH IIB deposit, one with LH IIIA1 late/IIIA2 early pottery and much mudbrick, the other of the same date, with burnt pottery. Sterile soil was not reached. The fragment could therefore be from any phase of the Late Bronze Age, but was preserved by a burning episode within the Late Bronze Age life of the Palace.

PY X 1587 (NSF1755) derives from a surface level in trench N-B09-01 (Fig. 1: B09), in which LH IIIA1 to IIIC early ceramics are dominant, although a wider

<sup>1</sup> NSF1220 is the excavation's registration (Small Find) number. N stands for Nestor, that is a trench at or around the Palace. A08 is the trench number. 02 is the level number within the trench.

**<sup>2</sup>** PoN<sup>3</sup>: 43–7, Fig. 311.

range of material is present, from MH to modern. No architecture was found in this trench, but, instead, beneath slope wash a series of surfaces was identified, one of LH IIIA1, three of LH IIB, and two of LH IIA. The Linear B tablet fragment was found in the slope wash and so cannot be assigned to any specific phase, although, again, it presupposes a burning episode for its preservation.

**NSF3095** was recovered in 2018 from a surface level (N-G06-01: Fig. 1: G06) containing medieval and modern material, with very little Bronze Age. The find-spot, a surface level, at quite some distance from the palace, does not suggest a clear association with Bronze Age activity in or around the palace. Given its atypical mode of inscription (see below) and the possibility that the object to which it belonged was deliberately fired, it is likely that it post-dates the Bronze Age.

## The finds

**PY Ua 1586** (-) (Figs 2, 3)

Dimensions (cm): L 2.81-3.65; H 3.37; Th 0.92





**Fig. 2: PY Ua 1586** *r*. and *v*. photos (Courtesy of the Department of Classics, University of Cincinnati)

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recto
.a]*86 *166[
.b]ko-u-ta-po[
↓
verso
]-to-[.][
```

*r*.a: \*166+WE cannot be excluded.

.b: -po[: -me also possible.

v.: traces of [.] appear most compatible with EQU, although this is unexpected on a tablet whose recto records textiles. Within the general surface damage to the left of to, there are some very indistinct traces of smudged strokes, which may be part of a preceding sign. The left-hand edge appears to be broken along the line of a stroke, which may perhaps be compatible with me (if the other small traces are not part of another sign, this would probably be word-final due to the large gap between this and to).

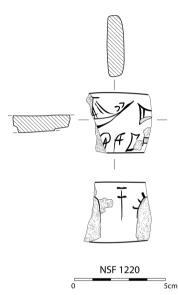


Fig. 3: PY Ua 1586 facsimile (Courtesy of the Department of Classics, University of Cincinnati)

The fragment is uniformly fired to a dark pink colour. It is broken at both edges and shows signs of rounding on the edges and some on the inscribed faces, particularly the recto, but the original surface is mostly preserved. Both top and bottom sides are flattened perpendicular to the inscribed faces, but there is a greater curve on the verso, which, along with some indications that the only completely visible sign there was smudged (particularly the upper horizontal of the to), may further suggest its identification as verso rather than recto. Since top and bottom are almost parallel to one another and the thickness is uniform left to right, it is difficult to estimate how much of the tablet is missing on either side. In dimensions the fragment is not dissimilar to some of the **PY La** documents by Hand 13 S626 (e.g. La 626, 630),<sup>3</sup> with which it shares other characteristics, such as rotation and opisthography (see below).

<sup>3</sup> Palaima 1988: 75-6.

## Textual and palaeographic notes

The fragment is part of an elongated (palm-leaf) tablet, broken at both ends, with two lines of text on the *recto* and one on the *verso*. No lines are ruled, but the large size of the signs on *r*.a compared to those on .b suggests that .a may be the first line of the text. Between writing the *recto* and *verso*, the tablet was flipped over vertically.

r.a \*86This is the sixth attestation of the undeciphered sign \*86, whose entire corpus is now as follows:

man's name	KN Ce 61.2	me-*86-ta	H124-B	
man's name	KN Dc 1117.B	wa-*86-re	H117	
toponym	PY Na 466	ų-ra-*86	H1	
toponym	PY Na 1039	u-ra-]*86	H1	
toponym	PY Na 1086	u-ra-]*86	H1	
?	PY Ua 1586	]*86	-	

It seems plausible that this new example is a further instance of the toponym  $\mu$ -ra-\*86,4 in which case this is the first example of this toponym found outside of H1's **Na**-series relating to collections of flax (SA), but with little further context this term cannot be certainly restored.5 Unfortunately, since the word is incomplete, this new example does not add to the sign's current prospects of decipherment, which – given its small number of attestations, all in personal and place names that may well be of non-Greek origin – remain very limited.6

The relatively elaborate form of \*86 on this fragment is markedly different from H1's simpler forms; Knossos H117's form provides the closest parallel for the curve extending from the top of the 'mast' to the 'prow', as well as for the extra elaboration around the 'prow', although this new example is in some ways even closer to the most elaborate forms of Cretan Hieroglyphic 040, as seen on seals, which clearly show the sign's origin as a depiction of a ship. This does not, however,

**<sup>4</sup>** See Sainer 1976: 59–60.

<sup>5</sup> It has also been suggested that ]\*86 on **Na 1039** and **1086** may represent the end of a different toponym rather than *y-ra-*\*86 (Sainer 1976: 59–60; Melena 2000: 48).

**<sup>6</sup>** None of the values which have been suggested for \*86 (which include  $na_2$ ,  $sa_2$ , and dwa: Georgiev 1955: 6–7, 73; Lejeune 1956: 149, n. 33; Melena 1983 and 2014: 16, 54, 88) can therefore be regarded as secure (see Judson 2016: 172–4 and forthcoming [2020]).

imply that this example of \*86 would have been symmetrical, as the Cretan Hieroglyphic forms are; Linear A and Linear B are consistent in representing only half of the 'ship' in their forms of AB86/\*86 (although the orientation of AB86 varies). Similarly, the sign's palaeographic comparison with KN H117 and with Cretan Hieroglyphic does not necessarily provide evidence for this fragment being dated earlier than the majority of the Pylos tablets, since variation between more elaborate and simpler forms of the same sign is attested even between scribes who are clearly contemporary, at both Pylos and Knossos.<sup>7</sup>

#### .a \*166

Although the sign is incomplete, and the ligatured form \*166+WE cannot therefore be entirely excluded, a comparison with other examples of \*166+WE suggests this is more likely to be the simple ideogram. The form of this sign, with an extra inner vertical stroke at the left-hand edge, is closest to that seen on PY La **626.**a (]\*166, or perhaps ]\*166+WE; H13) and **640** (]\*166 or ]\*166+WE; Ciii S628);<sup>8</sup> the examples of \*166+WE on **Ob 1372** and **1373** (Ciii), **Ua 1413**.a (Ci), and **Un 6**.6 (H6) all lack this stroke, as do the examples at Knossos. Whether ligatured with +WE or not,\*166 represents a form of textile; cf. its (very probable) attestation alongside TELA+PA on **PY La 626.** The assignation of this tablet to the **Ua**-series of tablets with multiple ideograms, rather than a textile-related L-series, is due to the possible appearance of another, seemingly unrelated, ideogram (EQU) on the verso.

#### .b |ko-u-ta-po[

No similar sequence is attested elsewhere in the Linear B corpus. Due to this lack of parallels, and to the incompleteness of the tablet, it is not possible to say whether |ko-u-ta-po| is (for example) a personal name, a toponym, or a specification of \*166 or of another commodity. The last sign might alternatively be read me (cf. the forms of this sign with a flat rather than curved top in, e.g., PY H21

<sup>7</sup> For a discussion of the palaeography of the undeciphered signs relating to the issue of chronology, see Judson 2016, chapter 3, esp. 231-53, and forthcoming [2020].

**<sup>8</sup> La 626.**a: ]\*166 is read by both PTT and PoN<sup>4</sup>, with ]\*166+WE suggested as a possible alternative. La 640: PTT reads \*166, PoN4 |\*166+WE. Although both of these examples are incomplete, and so marked as uncertain by both corpora, they appear nearly certain based on the photographs in CaLIBRA.

<sup>9 \*166:</sup> KN Sc 255 v., 5141 v., 7462 v. \*166+WE: KN Oa 745.2, 878.1, 8018.

<sup>10</sup> Vandenabeele - Olivier 1979: 152-3.

and S868-Ci). <sup>11</sup> Unfortunately this alternative reading does not offer any parallels either.

### v. ]-to-[.][

All that is visible of the last sign, read -[.][, are three small strokes extending from the curved edge, which itself appears to be broken along the line of a stroke. This seems to be compatible with a form of EQU 'horse' – for examples of EQU with small straight strokes instead of ovals forming the 'mane', cf. **KN Ca 895.1** and **Sc(3) 5061.** This ideogram is, however, otherwise attested at Pylos only on **PY Sa 22** (Ciii), whose form of the sign is distinctly different from the traces preserved on this fragment. Although the identification of this sign as EQU is far from certain, no other plausible possibilities seem to present themselves. If this reading is correct, this may represent a use of the *verso* for a separate text unrelated to that on the *recto*: compare the two separate texts on **PY Un 616** (*ex* **An**), whose *recto* records a series of commodities such as cyperus, fruit, wool, coriander, etc. and whose *verso* lists men belonging to four different *ke-ro-si-ja* (/geronsiai/ 'councils of elders'), or **PY An 35**, whose *recto* contains two apparently unrelated records, listing groups of builders (.1–.3) and a series of commodities given in exchange for alum (.5–.6). 14

It is not entirely clear whether the *-to-* forms the end of a word, with one or possibly two signs preceding, or whether it should be read as an isolated sign. If the latter, and if the reading of the final sign on this side as EQU is correct, it seems possible that *to* could be an abbreviation for *to-ra(-ka)* /thōraks/ 'breastplate', <sup>15</sup> but this is a very tentative suggestion. Likewise, a comparison to the frequent occurrences of EQU alongside chariots and armour in the **KN Sc**-series suggests that another ideogram such as BIG 'chariot', TUN 'corselet', or ARM 'suit of armour' could have preceded EQU, but again the state of the fragment does not allow any of these to be securely read or reconstructed.

<sup>11</sup> Palaima 1988: 242, 261. This suggestion is owed to José Luis Melena (pers. comm., 19/04/2018).

<sup>12</sup> For a possible link between textiles and military equipment, see Picard-Schmitter 1968: 134–52, esp. 144, although it is far from certain whether a chariot would originally have been recorded alongside <code>EQU[</code>.

<sup>13</sup> Bennett 1992: 114-15.

**<sup>14</sup>** In both cases, *PoN*<sup>3</sup> suggests that the two different texts may have been written by different hands; *PTT* and Palaima 1988, however, assign the whole of **Un 616** to H1 and the whole of **An 35** to H3. See also Bennet – Halstead 2014, 275–77.

**<sup>15</sup>** This term appears at Pylos as *to-ra-ke* (**PY Sh 736**, **Wa 732**.1) and perhaps *to-ra* (**PY Wa 569**.1: Melena 1996–1997: 161); cf. *to-ra* (**KN Sk 789**.[B], **8100**.Bb) and *to-ra-ka* (**TI Si 5**.1.2).

Overall, the recto of this fragment shows some similarities both of content and of palaeography to the **La**-series tablets of H13 and S622-H13?, which originate from Room 6 (the megaron). 16 In addition to the similar form of \*166 on **Ua 1586** r. and La 626.a, other forms on the recto of Ua 1586 are comparable to those written by H13: note, in particular, the form of ko, with a round 'head' and the two upright strokes meeting at the top (cf. H13's example on La 623 v. and S622-H13?'s example on **La 624**), and the form of *u* with the horizontal stroke drawn second, crossing the vertical (cf. H13's examples on La 623 v. and 630.a), although this latter feature is shared with several other Pylian scribes.<sup>17</sup> The tablet's overall formatting – inscription on both recto and verso with vertical rotation, two lines without ruling, and with the upper signs significantly larger than the lower could also be compared to, e.g., that of La 626. However, this fragment has too few preserved signs, and too insecure a find context, some distance away from Room 6, to make any attribution to a particular hand or deposit of tablets, and the relationship of its verso to the recto is unclear. It should be stressed again that the tablet's find context does not allow a secure association either with the palace's final destruction or with an earlier period. The comparison to the La-series must therefore remain a very tentative possibility, and the fragment remains unattributed to any scribal hand, stylus, or class.

**PY X 1587** (-) (Figs 4, 5) Dimensions (cm): L 5.37; H 2.56; Th 0.83–1.02

a-ke-re

This fragment is uniformly fired to a pale- to mid-pink colour and has clearly been worn on all sides, as one might expect for a ceramic object in a slope-wash level; the microscopic mineral inclusions in the clay stand proud of the existing surface on both faces of the object. Although the top and bottom edges are more or less complete and parallel to one another, the piece is thicker (1.02 cm) to the left than to the right (0.83 cm). Its left and right edges are preserved, if only partially, suggesting the writing surface is complete. That surface has, however, been eroded

**<sup>16</sup>** On this series, see Palaima 1988: 75–7, 137–9 and Skelton 2011a. It has been argued that these tablets are of earlier date than the majority of the Pylos tablets (Melena 2000–2001: 367; Skelton 2008: 163, 171–2, 2011a, and 2011b: 75). This early date is, however, based on palaeographic grounds (Skelton), and on the distinctive appearance of the tablets as a group (Melena), and is contradicted by the association of these tablets with the layer of debris which fell into the megaron from above during the palace's final destruction (*PoN*!: 89–91; Palaima 1988: 137).

**<sup>17</sup>** H1, H2, H3, H6, H21, H44: see the palaeographic charts in Palaima 1988: 227–77.

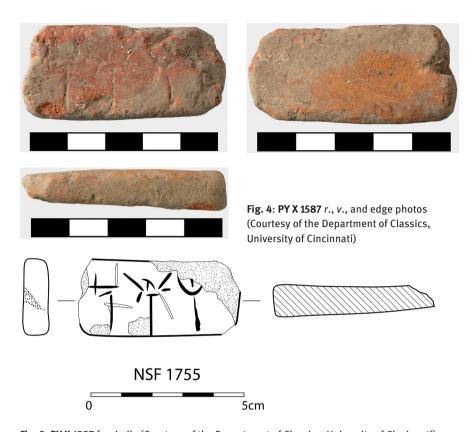


Fig. 5: PY X 1587 facsimile (Courtesy of the Department of Classics, University of Cincinnati)

and scored, a circumstance that makes it difficult in some cases to be certain whether a shallow line represents the remains of an eroded original stroke, or accidental damage; of the three signs, the final re is the only one whose form is perfectly clear. Because the tablet appears to be complete at both edges, it has a highly unusual format. For this reason, and due to the lack of any ideograms in the text, we have assigned it to the X series.

# Textual and palaeographic notes

а

The first sign is almost certainly an *a*, of the type with double horizontal strokes, but it is awkwardly constructed, with the main vertical off-centre relative to the top of the sign; the top right-hand vertical is very shallow, and not entirely certain, and an extra stroke, probably accidental, crosses the main vertical at an angle.

#### ke

The top of the sign is clearly that of a *ke*, but it has been constructed over a single, central vertical rather than the usual two slanting 'legs' with a shorter central stroke. The shallow slanting stroke to the right is, however, probably an additional 'leg'; although this is an unusual form for this sign, a parallel for this form (a straight central vertical and a slanting stroke to the right) can be found on **TH Ft 140.**4.

No trace is visible of any sign following -re, and there is little space for another sign in the damaged section before the right-hand side (on which, as noted above, part of the original edge of the tablet probably remains); this word is therefore most likely to be complete and not an example of the Pylian toponym a-ke-re-wa. The term a-ke-re /ageirei/ '(s)he collects' is found on **PY Cc 660.**a (H21), and so this could well be a second example of the same verb. However, the purpose of a small tablet containing only the term '(s)he collects' remains obscure, unless one imagines it describing the bearer's 'business' within the palace's vicinity, bearing in mind its findspot some distance to the northeast of the main building complex (which could, however, simply be due to displacement from an original location in or nearer to the palace).

## **NSF3095** (Figs 6, 7) Dimensions (cm): L 5.44 H 3.5 Th 1.36







**Fig. 6: NSF3095** *r.*, *v.*, and edge photos (Courtesy of the Department of Classics, University of Cincinnati)

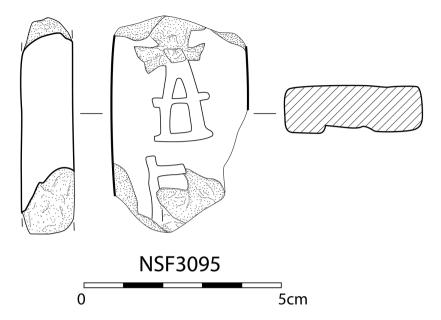


Fig. 7: NSF3095 facsimile (Courtesy of the Department of Classics, University of Cincinnati)

This fragment is uniformly fired (possibly deliberately) to a pale pink colour. The clay is unlike that of the two Linear B tablet fragments discussed above; it is finer and has tiny red inclusions. Although the object has clearly been rolled and worn in the top soil, it appears to preserve some edges (more to left and right than at the top and bottom) and some of the reverse, uninscribed, side. The two visible signs appear to have been incised with a relatively blunt tool into the clay when it was almost dry or leather-hard (not when wet), as is clearest in the uppermost stroke on the right-hand sign in Fig. 6 (this is the left-hand vertical stroke of the upper sign in Fig. 7), where there are signs of the tool 'sawing' back and forth.

Neither sign is complete and the orientation of the 'inscription', if such it is, is unclear. The upper sign resembles Linear B e (AB38); however, this would normally be 'open' at its base, nor would it have had the additional elements at the top that are present here, although their exact form is obscured by damage to the surface. The lower sign, damaged both below and to the right, does not resemble any Linear B sign. If there were a second parallel line on its long side, then Linear B ja (AB57) might be possible, but it became clear after cleaning that there is no trace of this second line. Neither sign has any closer parallels in the Greek alphabet.

If the object is read vertically, then one might think of it as the remains of a handle with incised marks. However, the preserved piece shows no sign of curvature on its long axis, and the incised face is also perfectly flat, as are the two edges. Ultimately, however, it is impossible to assign this object to any known writing system or even to determine whether these signs form (part of) an inscription at all.

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