

Ethel Beatrice Abrahams Travel Award 2017
The British School at Athens' Mycenaean Greek/Linear B course

The Ethel Beatrice Abrahams award enables a postgraduate student to pursue further study in Greek. This year I was obtained the grant in order to undertake a two-week course in Mycenaean Greek, and the script (known as Linear B) that was used to record it.

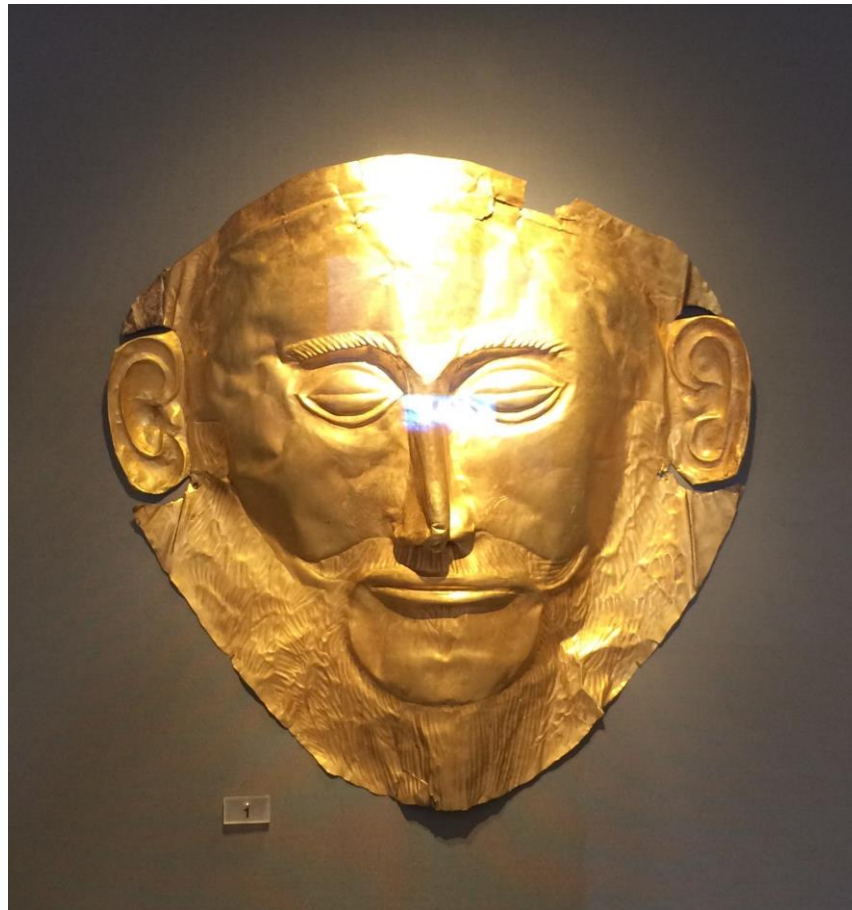


The existence of the Linear B writing-system was brought to light in 1900, when Sir Arthur Evans excavated the palace at Knossos on Crete. There he found 3000 tablets (an example above) in a then-unknown script/language. In 1939 the American archaeologist Carl Blengen found a further 600 tablets in an archive room of the Mycenaean palace at Pylos. Though a number of scholars were engaged in study of these tablets, the language upon them was not deciphered until Michael Ventris circulated his famous 'Work Note 20' in 1952. He went on to prove beyond doubt that the language of the tablets was Greek (at the time a hugely controversial proposition). From that point study of the content of the tablets was able to proceed.

As my research focuses on Homer, knowledge of Linear B and Mycenaean Greek is crucial to my study. There are two main reasons for this. Firstly, the language of Homeric poetry preserves elements of morphology, metrics, and diction that were originally Mycenaean (or even pre-Mycenaean). From the perspective of the Homeric *Kunstsprache*, an understanding of how Mycenaean Greek worked – and of the lexical items that we see crystallised in epic poetry – is essential for any scholar working on Homer today. Secondly, the world (or at least one of the worlds) that constitutes the dramatic setting for Homer's narrative was broadly Mycenaean (or at least what Homer thought was Mycenaean). The course gave me a grounding in the wider social, economic, and administrative contexts of the Mycenaean world that lies – in some way – behind Homer's poetry.

The course itself was residential; for the majority of the two weeks we were based at the BSA in the centre of Athens. Classes ran from half 9 in the morning until at least half 5 in the evening, and all were taught by the Director of the school. A few days deviated from this schedule. Most were library study days, but one involved a trip to the National Archaeological

Museum with the BSA Director and Assistant Director. Here we saw the results of Schliemann's excavations at Troy and Mycenae (for instance 'Agamemnon's death mask' below). During the course we also made our own tablets from clay, and tried to produce a faithful facsimile of an existing tablet. At the end of the week we burned the tablets on a bonfire to simulate the process of clay-firing that took place when the palaces (and the Linear B tablets within) were destroyed.



As the course aimed to augment linguistic study of Mycenaean with an introduction to the material world of the Mycenaean age, two days were spent viewing sites around the Peloponnese. We were given a tour around current excavations at Pylos by Jack Davis, the Carl Blengen Professor of Archaeology at the University of Cincinnati. This included an exciting opportunity to see the grave of the 'Griffin Warrior', the discovery of which made international headlines in 2015. We were guided around the palaces of Tiryns and Mycenae by the BSA's Assistant Director.

The chief purpose of the course was to provide training in Mycenaean linguistics, in reading the syllabary, and in the wider world of the Mycenaean age. But it also gave me the opportunity to meet other post-graduate researchers engaged in study of various aspects of the Mycenaean world. The environment was collegial and convivial, and in the evenings we had time to explore the city and sites of Athens. Particularly memorable was a full-school visit to the Acropolis in the evening around closing time (see below).



In sum, without the EBA award I would not have been able to learn a new script and syllabary. In addition the award gave me the chance to further my understanding of the Mycenaean world that the tablets show us (however darkly). The grant also enabled me to meet a number of likeminded scholars, with whom I have established international networks of cultural and knowledge exchange, on the model of the Mycenaean world that we discussed so fruitfully. I would urge anyone who wishes to undertake further Greek study to apply for the award next year.

Matthew Ward