REVIEW ARTICLES

BIG BOOKS ON LINEAR B

†Bennett, Emmett L. Jr / Melena, José L. / Nakassis, Dimitri / †Olivier, Jean-Pierre / Palaima, Thomas G., *The Palace of Nestor at Pylos in Western Messenia. Volume IV: The Inscribed Documents. Part 1, Documents 1–616. Part 2, Documents 622–1589*. Pp. lxxvi + 746, b/w & colour ills. Columbus, GA: Lockwood Press, for the University of Cincinnati, 2025. Cased, US$100. ISBN: 978-1-957454-82-5 (978-1-957454-21-4 open access).

Killen, John (ed.), *The New Documents in Mycenaean Greek. Volume One: Introductory Essays, Drawings of Selected Tablets. Volume Two: Selected Tablets, Transcription, Translation, Commentary, Endmatter*. Pp. xxviii + 1145, ills, maps. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2024. Cased, £189. ISBN: 978-0-521-83812-2 (vol. 1), 978-0-521-83813-9 (vol. 2), 978-1-009-28609-1 (set).
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Mycenologists evidently love their work. At least, it is hard to see what else could have prompted the main authors of these two massive works to keep going for so long after they had retired and ceased to have any obligation to do so. Both works were written over extraordinarily long periods: *The New Documents in Mycenaean Greek* (henceforth *Documents*) took more than 20 years and *The Palace of Nestor at Pylos in Western Messenia* IV (henceforth *Palace of Nestor*) more than 60. In both cases multiple contributors died along the way.

The rest of us also love Linear B, which has a special status in the long history of our discipline because its texts were deciphered (and in most cases even discovered) less than a century ago. They shed significant light on the ancient world and are just plain fun to interact with. Therefore, both these works are important not only to Mycenologists but also to the wider community of Classicists – but there is no getting around the fact that they would have been more important if they had appeared earlier. Some of their contents is already outdated, and, as the fourth complete corpus of the Pylos tablets to appear in six years, *Palace of Nestor* might even be claimed to be redundant – though it is probably the most useful of those four.

To start with the latter issue, the Linear B tablets from Pylos have been published repeatedly, starting with pre-decipherment versions in the original script (E.L. Bennett, *The Pylos Tablets* [1951, 1955]) and continuing with the seminal *Pylos Tablets Transcribed* (E.L. Bennett and J.-P. Olivier [1973, 1976]) and a large number of addenda and corrigenda scattered through different publications. All these were always intended as interim works to placate scholars before the official publication of the excavations, namely the fourth volume of *The Palace of Nestor at Pylos in Western Messenia* (volumes I–III, covering the buildings and frescoes, having appeared between 1966 and 1973). Drafts of that publication circulated among Mycenologists for decades as its text was gradually improved; but given their

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unofficial status, restricted availability and changing text, these drafts were difficult to cite, and eventually scholars' patience ran out. So in 2020 two other full corpora of the Pylos tablets appeared (L. Godart and A. Sacconi, *Les Archives du roi Nestor*; J.-P. Olivier and M. Del Freo, *The Pylos Tablets Transcribed: Deuxième édition*), followed in 2021 by a third (J.L. Melena and R.J. Firth, *The Pylos Tablets: Third Edition in Transliteration*). Now that the official corpus has at last reached its definitive form, those are its obvious competitors: which of the four corpora should one use?

That depends on what you are looking for. You can get a good edition of the Pylos tablets from any: they all provide largely the same transcriptions, since they are all based on versions of the same materials (the collaboration between the different authors was dissolved at an advanced stage). Decisions on doubtful readings may differ, however; see below for more information on this point. Godart and Sacconi provide photographs and drawings; *Palace of Nestor* provides photographs (different from those in Godart and Sacconi; both sets of photographs are excellent) but not drawings; the other two provide neither. *Palace of Nestor* and Melena and Firth have introductions in English, while the other two use French. *Palace of Nestor* arranges the tablets by number (beginning An 1, Un 2, Cn 3, Cn 4, An 5, Un 6, Bn 7 . . .), while the other three arrange them by series (beginning Aa 60, Aa 61, Aa 62, Aa 63, Aa 76, Aa 85 . . .). The latter arrangement seems more convenient because it allows for easy comparison of all the tablets on a given topic, but *Palace of Nestor* has reclassified some tablets so that they have different letters (e.g. its Bn 7 is what the other corpora call Fn 7), so its numerical arrangement is actually more helpful in allowing readers to find tablets. And users of *Palace of Nestor* can locate the numbers of tablets within each series from Index 2 (pp. 723–32).

All four versions include some additional material with the presentation of each tablet. *Palace of Nestor* provides a detailed palaeographic apparatus (in English) noting erasures and possible alternative readings, followed by dimensions and other physical information including the maker's fingerprints (if identifiable), some information on prior editions (but excluding those in other Pylos corpora both old and new as well as in *Documents* and other works focusing on interpretation rather than readings), detailed information on the different fragments making up the tablet (including their original numbers, find spots, photographic inventory and the history of their joins), and the scribe and 'stylus' to which the tablet is attributed. Melena and Firth provide a palaeographic apparatus (in English), some physical information and the scribe; this information is typically a subset of that provided in *Palace of Nestor*. In both these corpora there is no space between text and apparatus, so that inattentive readers might fail to realise where one ends and the next begins. The other two corpora leave a blank line and then give a palaeographic apparatus in French, usually with information that is different from that in the English corpora but very similar (not identical) to each other – as well as dimensions, scribe and some information on prior editions (again matching each other more closely than the English corpora).

The biggest differences appear in the introductions and endmatter. *Palace of Nestor* starts with a long introduction explaining how and where the tablets were excavated, their classifications, scribal identification, physical features of the tablets and the reasons for those features, how to use the corpus and other useful information. The work ends with multiple indexes, plans of the palace showing tablet find spots, and charts of the syllabograms and ideograms used at Pylos. The information provided is generally accurate, clear and helpful. Melena and Firth give an earlier (and therefore now superseded) version of the same introduction and endmatter; some information that *Palace of Nestor* locates below the editions is there presented as additional endmatter. Olivier and Del Freo have a much shorter introduction focussed on how to use their corpus (also good within its limited scope) and similar endmatter. Godart and Sacconi offer a medium-length introduction with a

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broader scope, but some problematic features including a debateable re-dating of the Pylos tablets.

Another significant difference is in accessibility. *Palace of Nestor* is online open access (https://doi.org/10.5913/2025825) as well as a print-on-demand hardback with excellent quality, allowing the photographs to be clearly read. Olivier and Del Freo can be purchased in hard copy for 35 euros, and Godart and Sacconi for 945 euros.

Basically, therefore, it makes sense to use *Palace of Nestor*. The edition by Melena and Firth seems to be entirely superseded, but the two French corpora cannot entirely be ignored, and not only because only Godart and Sacconi provide drawings. In some places the different editions genuinely say different things; and although the points involved are always small, it is not always advisable to follow *Palace of Nestor*'s readings blindly. A revealing example comes at Jn 658.11, where *Palace of Nestor* reads the numeral '2', Godart and Sacconi read '𐄒' and Olivier and Del Freo read '𐄑'. All three note that *Pylos Tablets Transcribed* reads '3', but that in 1995 Killen re-examined the original, decided that the third stroke had been erased, and proposed reading '2'. *Palace of Nestor* accepts Killen's revision, Godart and Sacconi reject it, and Olivier and Del Freo read '𐄑' on the grounds that if there has been an erasure, as opposed to an accidental brushing of the tablet, it involves two strokes rather than one. From the photographs one can definitely see their point; for, although the first stroke is considerably deeper than the others, there seems to be no difference between the state of the second stroke and that of the third. Given the excellent quality of the photographs even the fact that Killen was looking at the original does not justify reading '2', especially not without underdotting. So why did Killen suggest that reading? Because '2' would be the right number; this line offers a total of the previous lines, so we know what it ought to say. I personally would read '𐄒' here, and I suspect that the only reason erasure was ever proposed was to deal with the mathematical error. But regardless of whether I would be right on that point, the larger issue is that *Palace of Nestor*'s readings are not necessarily better than those of the other corpora, and sometimes readings that are genuinely uncertain do not even have underdots. Therefore, someone making an argument about a topic that depends on detail, such as the accuracy of the Mycenaean scribes' arithmetic, would do well to consider the readings of all three corpora.

None of these corpora provides translations, commentary or even references to other works containing that kind of information. Such provision would not have been impossible; it is made in the corpus of Linear B tablets from Thebes, which was produced in a much shorter time frame than any of the recent Pylos corpora (V.L. Aravantinos, L. Godart, A. Sacconi, *Thèbes: Fouilles de la Cadmée* [2001–6]). But since none of the Pylos corpora offer it, readers wanting to know what the tablets mean will continue to turn to other works, chief among which is *Documents in Mycenaean Greek*.

The new *Documents* is another project with a long and complex history, and once again its claim to the scholarly space it occupies will not be uncontested. The original *Documents*, published by Michael Ventris and John Chadwick in 1956 with a second edition in 1973, is described in the preface to this new version (p. xv) as 'the "bible" of Linear B', a judgement in no way exaggerated. Any successor was bound to have a tough time measuring up to the original, and one can be impressed that the new *Documents* comes so close. Nevertheless, the gap is sufficient to raise the question of whether the new *Documents* can really fill the place of the old one, particularly given the competition from Y. Duhoux and A. Morpurgo Davies (edd.), *A Companion to Linear B: Mycenaean Texts and their World* (2008–14), and also M. De Freo and M. Perna (edd.), *Manuale di epigrafia micenea: Introduzione allo studio dei testi in lineare B* (2016). Again the question is which of these to use, and unfortunately the answer is again not entirely straightforward.

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The new *Documents* is enormous, more than three times as long as the first edition and almost twice as long as the second edition. The expansion has benefits, obviously, allowing for greater detail and coverage of more topics. But it also contributes to the work's no longer providing a truly accessible overview of current thinking on key topics. Instead of being a unified work like the original, the new *Documents* has been divided among fifteen contributors from a wide range of backgrounds, many of whom seem to have prioritised speaking to scholars in their own particular specialism over addressing a more mainstream audience.

As in the old *Documents*, Part I of the new version offers a synthetic discussion of key topics. Originally this part had five chapters: 'Discovery and Decipherment', 'The Mycenaean Writing System', 'The Mycenaean Language', 'The Personal Names' and 'The Evidence of the Tablets' (for Mycenaean society, religion, economy, geography etc.). It now has thirteen sections: 'The Archaeological and Historical Context' (J. Bennet), 'Discovery and Decipherment' (†M. Ventris, reprinted from the original), 'Syllabic Scripts in the Aegean and Cyprus in the Second and First Millennia' (†J.-P. Olivier), 'The Mycenaean Writing System' (R. Thompson and T. Meissner), 'The Absolute Values of the Symbols for Weight' (P. de Fidio), 'The Absolute Values of the Symbols for Volume' (P. de Fidio), 'The Linear B Documents' (M. del Freo; this covers the tablets' physical characteristics, find-places, scribes and extent of literacy), 'The Mycenaean Language' (R. Thompson), 'Geography' (J. Bennet), 'Economy' (P. de Fidio), 'Mycenaean Society and Political Systems' (C. Shelmerdine), 'Mycenaean Religion' (J. Killen) and 'Mycenaean and Classical Greek Religion' (R. Parker).

In the old *Documents* Part II provided a discussion of selected tablets; that discussion now forms Part III, and Part II offers drawings of most (but not all) of the tablets in it. The drawings are good and well worth the space they take, but they would be more helpful if presented with the discussions of the tablets they illustrate, or if those discussions at least carried cross-references to alert readers when there is a relevant drawing.

Part III is much expanded. In the 1973 edition discussion of 325 tablets was divided into six chapters: 'Lists of Personnel', 'Livestock and Agricultural Produce', 'Land Ownership and Land Use', 'Proportional Tribute and Ritual Offerings', 'Textiles, Vessels and Furniture', 'Metals and Military Equipment'. Now there is an introduction on 'Interpreting Linear B' (J. Killen) followed by twelve chapters discussing 350 tablets, including 273 of the original ones: 'Lists of Personnel' (J. Killen), 'Livestock' (J. Killen), 'Agricultural Produce' (J. Killen), 'Land Tenure' (Y. Duhoux), 'The Pylos *dosmos* Tablets' (P. de Fidio), 'Taxation' (C. Shelmerdine), '"Industrial" Production' (Y. Duhoux), 'Finished Products I: Vessels and Furniture' (J. Killen and J. Bennet), 'Finished Products II: Military Equipment' (J. Crouwel, R. Plath, J. Killen), 'Religion, Cults and Ritual' (J. Killen), 'The Inscribed Stirrup-jars' (P. Van Alfen), 'Miscellaneous Texts' (J. Killen).

Most of the discussion is excellent on its own terms (especially Killen's chapters, which fortunately are numerous), but it is far from presenting the kind of consistent narrative offered by the old *Documents*. The different chapters show little sign of mutual engagement, with the same topics treated independently in different places. For example, the controversy over the identification of the symbols for 'wheat' and 'barley' is discussed in great detail on pp. 184–92 and tackled afresh at least twice by other contributors without reference to that discussion (pp. 534, 566). Likewise, the Part I chapter on the absolute values of the symbols for volume ends with a surprising note that the translations in Part III will ignore its conclusions in favour of the values used in the old *Documents* (p. 204), but that is not always done (e.g. p. 748 uses the new values).

Which edition of the Pylos tablets did the authors of the new *Documents* use? *Palace of Nestor* (listed as forthcoming and presumably used in draft form) is stated to be the standard

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edition (p. 413), and the bibliography also includes Olivier and Del Freo, but the editions in Part III seem to come from older sources. Thus, in Jn 658 (here tablet 216) the disputed numeral is read as '3' (undotted) and used as secure evidence of ancient error, without mention of possible erasure. Tablet 93 is referred to as Fn 7, ignoring *Palace of Nestor*'s reclassification of it as Bn 7.

The new *Documents*, therefore, is not as up to date as it looks, and that problem unfortunately extends well beyond the texts of the Pylos tablets. One chapter declares that it was completed in 2016 (p. 812), another gives a cut-off date of 2007 (p. 49), and some without specified completion dates are nevertheless not recent (e.g. one has addenda responding to publications from 2014–17: pp. 887–9). Of course, all are more recent than the old *Documents*, a fact that might be considered to guarantee that the new version at least supersedes the old one, but even for that there are caveats. The new *Documents* lacks the beautiful clarity of the original: it buries key points in long digressions, sometimes omits basic information that many readers need, and bristles with specialised symbols, abbreviations (including many omitted from the lengthy abbreviation list) and technical terminology. For example, in explaining the use of glides, the original 'Vowels following *-i-* are generally spelt with a *j-* syllable' has been replaced with 'Between *i/u* and a vowel, the homorganic sub-phonemic glides [j] and [w] arise' (p. 116). One is tempted to wonder whether the lack of engagement between chapters arose because different contributors were unable to understand each other's work. Particularly unhelpful for non-specialist readers is the fact that many of the tablets discussed in Part III are left partially or even completely untranslated.

Therefore, although the new *Documents* is an important work of scholarship, it is not the kind of clear and straightforward presentation of the current state of knowledge that the old one (once) was. I would hesitate to ask a student to read it. So Classicists may be tempted to stick with the old *Documents*, where, although the information may be out of date, at least it is easy to find and to understand. But that would be unwise, since a great deal has changed since 1973. For a clear exposition of current thinking Duhoux and Davies's *Companion*, which since its publication has effectively served as the English-language replacement for the old *Documents*, may continue to be the best option – after all its thinking on any given point is not necessarily older than that in the new *Documents*.

Among the most important elements of the new *Documents* (and one not shared by Duhoux and Davies) is the glossary. This 136-page work includes every complete Mycenaean word recorded up to 2018, along with many incomplete ones. It is generally good, clear and concise, though its list of abbreviations is incomplete ('PN' in small capitals stands for 'place name'). Readers with limited Spanish will be excited at the prospect of no longer needing to rely on F. Aura Jorro's Spanish dictionary (*Diccionario griego-micénico* [1985–93], supplemented by F. Aura Jorro, A. Bernabé, E.R. Luján, J. Piquero and C.V. García, *Suplemento al diccionario micénico* [2020]), but actually in many respects Aura Jorro's work is not superseded. It provides comprehensive references to scholarly debates about each word, whereas the new glossary normally gives only a word's meaning, references to tablets containing it and at most a remark or two about its possible form(s) or etymology. The lack of references to scholarship in the glossary is part of a pattern in the new *Documents*, especially in Part III, whereby such references are minimised and/or grouped together in a note at the start of a section rather than being provided at the specific points where they are relevant. Such streamlining can have clear advantages in terms of clarity and concision, virtues that are obvious in the glossary (where after all those who need references can usually find them in Aura Jorro). But in other chapters the documentation sometimes borders on inadequate, for example with unreferenced statements such as 'there have been recent attempts at identifying a functional difference between *o-* and *jo-*' (p. 117).

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The usefulness of Part III would have been considerably increased if the entry for each tablet had been equipped with an up-to-date list of references to other discussions, as is done in the 'Mycenaean Anthology' in volume I of Duhoux and Davies's *Companion.*

In addition to a general index, the endmatter includes indexes of modern authors cited, of ancient authors cited and of Homeric references – but, strikingly, no index of Linear B tablets discussed nor of Linear B words. A concordance comparing tablets' numbers in the new *Documents* to their numbers in the original is organised around the new numbers and therefore of little use if one is starting from a tablet's standard number or from an old *Documents* number. Some help is given by the organisation of the chapters in Part III, but this help is much less in the new version than in the old one, for tablet sets are now rather unpredictably divided. For example, while most of the Cn tablets are still in the 'Livestock' chapter, Cn 608 has been moved to 'Taxation' and therefore is number 206 instead of 75. And unless one is using the searchable online version, there is no way to find the many discussions of individual tablets in Part I.

Although in general the work is carefully produced, the editions occasionally have wrong readings (e.g. tablet 62 [Cn 719] line 8 should read *a-so-ta-o* rather than *a-ko-so-ta-o*, though the omission of *ko* was clearly a mistake on the part of the original scribe). Cross-references by page number are sometimes off (e.g. on p. 413 the cross-reference to pp. 1135–40 should read 1140–5), and those without page numbers can be frustratingly vague (e.g. the reference to 'Introduction' on p. 508 indicates pp. 492–507, when the information referred to is on p. 499). The list of contributors (p. xiv) gives no information apart from names and institutions, and it includes one person whose contribution is not specified in the table of contents (M. Arbabzadah). Given how diverse the contributors' specialisms are, it would have been nice to have the usual set of short biographies to tell readers what kinds of expertise each one has. The marginal symbols indicating whether material is newly created or carried over from the old *Documents* are used inconsistently, sometimes even inaccurately, and may be more distracting than helpful. Illustrations, though sometimes present, are often omitted where particularly needed, for example in the discussion of the shape of Mycenaean armour (pp. 807–9), where laborious descriptions are employed when a simple drawing like those in the old *Documents* (p. 377) would have been clearer.

Overall, however, both the new *Documents* and *Palace of Nestor* IV make major contributions to Mycenology. The rest of us should be grateful for the massive efforts of their authors.

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