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## Cretan Protolinear Script: Some Syllabograms of Human Theme

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### Abstract

This is a study on four signs of the Cretan Protolinear script that is the script whence all the Aegean Bronze Age scripts are herein considered to have evolved. These signs, conveying CV type syllables, depict humans or parts of the human body.

**Key-words:** Cretan Protolinear script, Aegean scripts, Linear A, Cretan Hieroglyphics, Linear B

### 1. Introduction

The Aegean Bronze Age (2nd and 3rd millennia BCE) scripts include Linear A (LA), Linear B (LB) and Cretan Hieroglyphic (CH) syllabaries, related to the Cypriot syllabaries<sup>[1]</sup>. Their signs are called “syllabograms”: each sign renders (usually one) syllable of the Consonant-Vowel (CV) pattern. LB indisputably conveys Mycenaean Greek<sup>[2]</sup>, while LA and CH convey some other languages of Minoan Crete. The Cretan Protolinear (CP) syllabary has been suggested as the origin of LA, LB and CH<sup>[3]</sup>. The linguistic affinity of CP to the Sumerian language has been either suspected or attested repeatedly<sup>[4]</sup>, namely that the phonetic values of CP syllabograms correspond to the Sumerian names of the objects depicted by those syllabograms, four of which, related to images of human bodies, are presented here. Before proceeding, some reading conventions should be noted: According to a predominant rule of Sumerian phonology, the closing consonants of words were silenced unless followed by vowels (usually of suffixes)<sup>[5]</sup>. So, closing consonants are enclosed in parentheses, like “he(q)”. In our transcription of ancient words, “q” stands for a velar or more back consonant than “k” which is palatal or more front than “q”. Originally, in transcribing from Cuneiform, /x/ (and not /h/) is intended by “ḫ” (“h with breve below”), which is absent from most fonts, so the UoP<sup>[6]</sup> uses a simple “h” instead and we follow this usage. However, for the Proto-Indo-European (P.I.E.) language, “h” here stands for any of the laryngeals. We must also clarify that, after our studies, we support the theory of monogenesis (one common origin) of all languages; accordingly we sometimes compare roots between old languages of different linguistic families.

### 2. Sign “he”

The sign “he” of CP could not be found in LB, although it is one of the commonest signs in CH, representing an “eye” (Fig. 1a). Generally, CH depicts the eye reminiscent of the sun, having the eyelashes (exaggerated) resembling the sun’s rays (Fig. 1b). In Sumerian Cuneiform, the eye is found as “igi”, where “-i” is added at the end only for pronouncing the “g”, which was in fact a “q” (rule 5.0.39<sup>[7]</sup>). The root of this “igi” is also found in P.I.E. as “heq”; this same root in Turkic has produced the old verb “uq-” (= “to understand”, i.e., to mentally “see”). Indo-Europeanists generally hold that this root began with a laryngeal which turned the root’s /e/ into /o/ (hence the root is found only with “o” in Greek, e.g. ophis, opōpa, and in Latin, e.g. oculus etc.) Given the common ancestry of languages, the word began, in Sumerian too. With an “h” which as always does not appear in Cuneiform, so “igi” Was really “heq” (in Cuneiform, “e” is usually represented as “i”<sup>[12]</sup>). In LA this letter is generally not used, but we know two occurrences, on a clay tablet (Fig. 1c) and a stone

inscription (Fig.1d). On seeing this syllabogram, Minoans readily recognized an eye, called “he (q)”, and so recalled the syllable “he”.

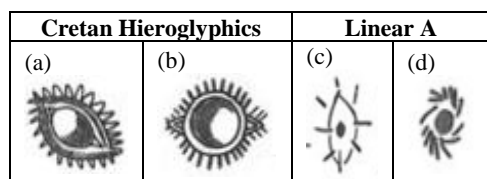


Fig. 1: Syllabogram “he”.

### 3. Sign “je”

To the modern reader it is not apparent what this syllabogram depicted in LB (Fig 2a), but the equivalent sign of LA with human legs (Fig.2b) helps recognize the original image, which was clearly that of a human being, while in the first (left) form of the sign in LB (Fig. 2a) we may also see a kind of skirt; that person sketched stands facing in a solemn posture, showing magnificence; he is a man and not a woman, because he is depicted the way men were ideographically shown (Fig. 2c), with broad shoulders and narrow waist, as opposed to women (Fig. 2d). In ideograms representing people, the head was rendered only rudimentarily and sometimes not depicted at all, because the purpose of the scribes was that the reader barely recognize what was represented, using minimal lines, in the minimum space of the clay tablets and the minimum time required for drawing the signs; In the syllabograms of LB, the head of human figures is normally not depicted, because it was a detail not indispensable for recognizing the sketched figure – while scribes were always trying to save space on the tablets and write as fast as possible.

So, this syllabogram depicted a man standing imposingly, wearing a kind of apron or skirt, which was rather uncommon and special attire in the Minoan society, where the usual garment was a simple short loincloth. Mesopotamian Sumerian art gives many representations of this kind of “skirt” as worn by rulers; it was a symbol of authority. The high priest (esse) s of the Minoans are also depicted wearing a long ritual “skirt”. So, the sign “je” intends to represent a ruler, a “boss” that was called “jeḡ” in Sumerian. In Sumerian Cuneiform “jeḡ” became “jœm” which appears as “um” (rules 5.0.4, 5.0.13, 27 [7]), and with the addition of “aja” (= “father”, as a honorary appellation) it is found as “um-mi-a; um-me-a” (it is likely that the “a” before “j” was degraded to the closer “ə”, so the word was pronounced “jœməja”, stressed on “œ”) (on the first compound, as always in the Sumerian). This “œməja” appears in Cuneiform as: ummia wr. Um-mi-a; um-me-a “expert, master craftsman”, Akk. ummānu = “craftsman, specialist” (however in ETCSL [8]: um-mi-a = “scholar”); this was the common appellation for a boss, a school’s principal, a business or workshop manager, a workers’ supervisor etc. Also note that the Emesal (Sumerian women’s sociolect) has “u<sub>3</sub>-mu-un; umun” instead of the common word “en” (= ruler, master, also used for gods’ names like Enki, Enlil), and that “u<sub>3</sub>-mu-un; umun” is not a different pronunciation of “en” (then it would be “un”, actually “œn”); “u<sub>3</sub>-mu-un; umun” (pronounced “jœmœn”) is the Emesal form of “jeḡ” (master, boss, possibly with the addition of “en” = dominant), according to the well-known phonological tendencies of Emesal (“e” to “œ”, “ḡ” to “m”). To sum up, the syllabogram “je” depicted a man in

front view standing magnificently, wearing that special “kilt” as a symbol of power; so, the sign rendered the word “je(ḡ)” (= master, boss) and hence the syllable “je”.

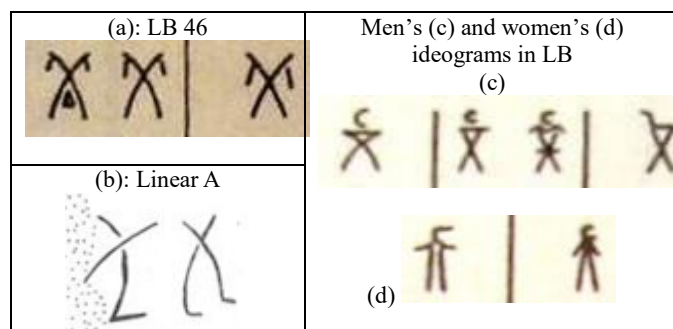


Fig.2: Syllabogram “je”.

### 4. Sign “pe”

It is relatively easy to realize what this syllabogram depicts (Fig. 3); even the way that some scribes make it inclined helps to recognize it as an object with not really a vertical line: a human ear (in the profile of a head looking to the right as things are normally depicted in CP). Today there are instructions on the internet on how to draw a human ear [9]. The Minoan scribes, having only a few millimeters of space on a clay tablet, where a line could not be too thin, and only a small fraction of a second to write a sign, simplified the sketch as we see it now. In Sumerian Cuneiform the ear is “ḡiš”, used in many word pairs as it is common in Sumerian to combine one noun to one verb. In Sollberger’s glossary alone [10], there are the following entries: “ḡiš” (ear), “ḡiš šub”, “ḡiš tu(g)”, “ḡiš ur<sub>4</sub>”. From the usual phrase “ḡiš tu(g)”, the word “ḡeštu” was derived, which meant “attention, noticing” (literally “ear – set” as is the expression in modern Greek too: “στήνω αυτί”). Many scholars inaccurately took “ḡeštu” as “ear”, like Pettinato [11]: entries “ḡeštu”, “ḡeštu-gub”, “ḡeštu-ri” (actually “ḡez-” as Cuneiform renders every –z or –s as –š). Falkenstein (page 30 [12], for showing rules 5.0.4 and 5.0.13 [7]) states: “ḡeštu(g), Emesal mu.uš.tu ‘Ohr’”. It is this association with “mu.uš.tu” that made scholars think that the main dialect’s word for ear was “ḡeštu(g)”, while “ḡeštu(g)” has a second component, as explained previously. The ear was simply “ḡeš”, in fact “ḡez” (rule 5.0.38 [7]); this “ḡez” is from an original form “pez” (rule 5.0.15 [7]). In turn, “pez” is of the same root as the P.I.E. “pewdh” (in Greek: π(ε)υθ hence πεύθομαι, πυθ-, πυθάνομαι = “to listen to the news, to be informed”; in Sanskrit: “b(a)udh” = “to be informed”). The original Sumerian form “pez” (ear) has also given “ḡizzal [EAR]” (as the UoP entry has it [6], again with a second component). So, the Minoans recognized this syllabogram as depicting an ear, called “pe (z)”, bringing to mind the syllable “pe”.

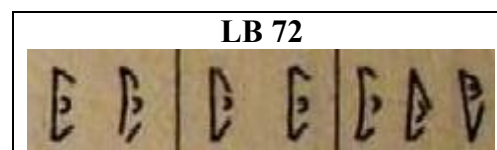


Fig. 3: Syllabogram “pe”.

### 5. Sign “wo”

It is not difficult to recognize this syllabogram, remembering that the head is usually omitted in LB

syllabograms depicting human beings (as in sign “je” above). So this sign is at the first glimpse puzzling in its LB form (Fig. 4a), but if we also consider the equivalent forms in LA (Fig. 2b), then it is understood that it started from a typical image of a woman, similar to LB ideograms (Fig. 2c). The long dress in all earlier (pre-modern) times and nations was typical of women, but specifically in Minoan society it meant not a young unmarried woman, since girls wore shorter dresses (or loin clothes, as seen on wall paintings etc.). The LB sign forms, on the upper right or left, show two tiny lines converging or curving into a shape similar to a “3”; these tiny lines is what remained from the part of the sketch showing an arm bent behind the shoulder, so as to indicate a bending body of an old woman. Such a bent arm is typical of many LA ideograms depicting elderly women working at various tasks, of course not requiring much muscle strength, but every kind of work was valuable in the Minoan society, that needed to exploit all resources available; especially, elderly women were much needed for child care. Now, the word for an elderly woman was “wom”. In Sumerian Cuneiform, the word is found as: (UoP<sup>[6]</sup>) wr. Um-ma, “old woman”, Akk. Sibiu; also:

ETCSL<sup>[8]</sup>: um-ma = “experienced woman”.

The word “um-ma” is found in various glossaries as well, in the form “um-me” (in Sollberger’s glossary<sup>[10]</sup>: um-me = “wet nurse”). So, “um-ma / um-me” was not always really old, since in some cases she could also nurse the children. Certainly, the word did not have the degrading connotation that “old woman” has in some languages, but rather a connotation of intimacy like “grandma”, applied also for a “nanny”. This “um-ma / um-me” was pronounced “wom”, the final “a” / “e” (or rather “-a”) being added only for having “-m” pronounced. So, every Minoan reader immediately recognized this letter as a “nanny”, which was “wo (m)” in their language, thus calling to their mind the syllable “wo”.

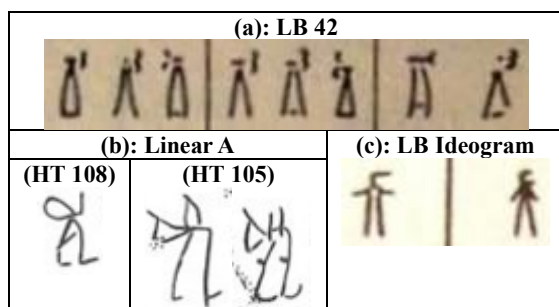


Fig. 4: Syllabogram “wo”.

## Conclusions

The CP syllabograms are classified<sup>[13]</sup> as depicting objects, nature, plants, animals, humans and human body parts. Four human-image syllabograms have been presented herein, showing the Minoan minimal sketching techniques and the rebus function.

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