9.5: A More Detailed Discussion of Cutting Tablets in Linear B

In the above section two principal explanations are given for the practice of cutting Linear B tablets: saving on clay and rearranging the information. Let us now explore these two possibilities in more detail.

Saving on Clay

The easiest explanation for cutting Linear B tablets is saving on clay, since its surplus could be reused for producing further tablets. However, since clay is not a particularly scarce substance in Greece, saving was probably not the main motivation behind the practice of cutting tablets. A more likely aim appears to be a reduction of the size of tablets, and consequently of their weight, in order to economise on the space needed for their storage (for the maximum of one year, as numerous studies have shown). How were Linear B tablets stored?

In most cases Linear B tablets were found in such a state that it is impossible to say much about their initial storage. All over Knossos they were found in a secondary position, having fallen from the upper floor(s) during the destruction of the palace. The most we can say therefore is that Linear B archives in Knossos were stored above the ground floor: the upper rooms, with a good source of light, would have been an adequate setting for writing purposes (Begg 1987), but exactly what these archives looked like we do not know. The relatively small quantities of tablets from Mycenae, Tiryns and Chania make it difficult to discuss their archives. As for the fairly numerous Thebes tablets, their archaeological context is very much disturbed (Aravantinos et al. 2002: 8–15), which mostly precludes discussions about the organisation of the archive(s).

The only Linear B archive where a more precise method of storing tablets is known is the Archives Complex of Pylos, thanks to its placement on the ground floor. Here more than 1000 tablets were stored, probably on wooden shelves (Pluta 1996–1997: 240–241; for the meaning of the word ‘archives’ applied to Linear B administration see Olivier 1984: 15–18; Pluta 1996–1997: 240–241). The small size of the two archive-rooms and the construction of the shelves,
possibly not fit for a heavy load, may have required strict removal of superfluous clay on tablets. However, until the corpus of Pylian tablets is published (with facsimile drawings and photographs), it is difficult to say if the storage method was in any way related to the practice of cutting the tablets; at this moment we cannot say what percentage of Pylian tablets was cut and what was the relationship between the amount of inscribed texts and cutting of the tablets.1

The transport of tablets within the palace may have also required removal of unused clay. It has been suggested that tablets were transported in wicker baskets on top of which clay labels were pressed. These labels had no string that would attach them to the baskets, but were simply pressed against them while the clay was still moist, so traces of wickerwork are visible on their backs. They had no seal-impression, but were incised (Wb series at Knossos: 35 examples, Wa series at Pylos: 19 examples). These labels labelled various sets of tablets as they were delivered to the archive, or as they were stored and filed (Blegen and Rawson 1966: 97; Chadwick 1958; Palaia 1988: 179; Palaia 1996: 380, n. 3; according to Palaima and Wright 1985: 260–261, labels were confined to transport only, and their small number in the Archives Complex suggests that they were probably not kept there for long after the baskets arrived; otherwise many more would have been found).

Rearranging the Information

This section takes us back to the RCT documents and already mentioned simili-joins. The practice of cutting the tablets is especially apparent in the RCT; here 124 tablets (nearly 20%) were cut, on their left or right side or even both sides. This group of documents consists of approximately 645 tablets (for a thorough study of these tablets see Driessen 2000). Only some 20 are page-shaped, and the rest are elongated. Nearly all tablets from the RCT that have been cut are elongated. Only a single page-shaped tablet from this deposit, KN Ap 5077, has traces of cutting (on the bottom). This tablet is a palimpsest. The text runs along its upper half, while the bottom half is not inscribed. Since the tablet is too large for the text that is preserved, it seems that it was cut after the tablet was inscribed for the first time (a similar explanation may, for example, be valid for cut KN Gm 840, not an RCT tablet, Figure 3).

Elongated RCT tablets are typically cut on their right or left sides, immediately before the first sign or immediately after the last one, which suggests aiming to save on clay wherever possible. The RCT tablets generally give an impression of economy: the entire surface of the tablet is usually inscribed, without leaving any unused space, and when a tablet proved larger than needed, the unneeded parts seem to have been excised. The practice of cutting is especially frequent in the Vc and Sc series of the RCT tablets (lists of people and armour respectively), but also amongst scribes 115 and 141, who also worked in the south part of the West Wing of the Knossian palace (Driessen 1988: 135).

As mentioned above, another explanation has been proposed for the cutting of these RCT elongated tablets: the practice of dividing a set of information into separate records. This interpretation is suggested by some features of the Vc(1) set, in which the tablets consist of a personal name followed by the number one and a cut immediately after that (Chadwick 1968: 18). Driessen managed to join together a number of tablets of the Vc(1) series, and some of the tablets of the Xd series, proving that these small elongated tablets initially belonged to one larger tablet, and named them, as already said, simili-joins. Simili-joins are indicated by a plus sign inscribed in a circle in text editions.2

Apart from the actual cutting, another feature may be an indication of the practice of simili-joins. A certain number of elongated tablets from the RCT, of the Vc and Vd series, have vertical lines incised across them.3 These lines are too long to be either word-dividers or numerals; they run practically from the top of a tablet to the bottom. It seems that their
function was to divide certain sections of a tablet. The best example is Vd 7545+137 (Figure 4) where we can see three, possibly even four, such lines dividing the contents of the tablet into at least four sections (because the tablet is partly damaged, possible additional vertical lines are no longer visible). Perhaps vertical lines on this and other RCT tablets were incised to indicate where to cut them (Driessen 2000: 55). Evans (1935: 695) already entertained this possibility, suggesting that the purpose of these lines was to divide the tablet into six units but if so, the question is: why did they remain undivided? Although a significant number of such tablets were left undivided, I believe that it is correct to interpret incised vertical lines as indicators for cutting (note, however, that Duhoux [1999: 228, n. 10] is not convinced about such an interpretation). Here is one example that supports this interpretation. On Vc 64 (Figure 5), a vertical line runs along the left edge of the tablet. We know that this tablet was cut at both ends, and has been identified as a simili-join. At least here we have evidence that the tablet was cut where indicated by an incised line. As for the purpose of simili-joins, Driessen suggests that larger tablets were divided into smaller units for the purpose of rearranging the information: "...the men were booked for one reason, perhaps something they all had in common. This relationship was broken to create another one" (Driessen 1987: 161). I agree with Driessen on this matter, and here is a possible scenario of the purpose of such rearranging. The Vc series is composed of tablets with a personal name, often followed by the number one. They may be individual records of people. Driessen has argued (1992: 202–203) that the Sc series represents the allocation of military equipment, the interpretation which is accepted by Oliver (1994: 54), whereas Vc tablets list individuals who were already equipped. As we have seen, some of these Vc tablets were initially parts of longer records that were divided into units — simili-joins. The initial record may have simply listed the names of people. By dividing this list into individual records, the information could have been rearranged as required, for example, according to the status of the people recorded, or according to their type of work (paid work or un-paid, slave work), or according to their particular duties, such as potters, textile workers, leather workers, etc. (a colleague once humorously reacted to this idea, describing my scenario as the earliest Excel system in Europe). Records of this type were probably written with the anticipation of a need to rearrange the data, meaning that the simili-joins may have been planned in advance. Hence the practice of marking tablets with vertical lines for cutting. These lines must have been incised when the tablet was still moist, i.e. either while inscribing the text, or not long afterwards. Simili-joins are a feature almost unique to the RCT. We rarely find it anywhere else in Linear B and never in Linear A. The only other Linear B example, as detected by Olivier, is simili-joins B 7035 ⊕ B 808. The latter was found in the Long Corridor at Knossos, but the findspot of B 7035 is unknown (Driessen 1987: 161). Simili-joins from the RCT may be another reason for believing that this deposit is chronologically different from the rest of the Knossian documents. The practice of simili-joins may have been an early and experimental Linear B feature that ceased after the RCT period. A single later example (KN B 808 ⊕ B 7035) could be regarded as a short-lived legacy from the preceding RCT practice, which afterwards disappeared from the rest of the Linear B records, both on Crete and the Mainland. It must be noted, though, that lines possibly incised for the purpose of dividing a tablet have also been noticed at Mycenae. In this case, the lines are horizontal (e.g. at the bottom of the tablets MY Oe 117 and MY Oe 120, but are no longer easily visible since the tablets were snapped in two at this spot). Emmett Bennett noticed that these lines were incised more deeply than the ruling lines on these two tablets. He suggested that the purpose of these deeper incisions was precisely to facilitate the snapping of a tablet into two parts: “This would be equivalent to writing a line at the top of a sheet of paper and then folding it over and tearing off the top line” (Bennett 1958: 13). Although the practice of incising lines for the purpose of dividing tablets is not recorded out-side Linear B, there is a feature in Cretan Hieroglyphic that at least visually resembles it. Several Cretan Hieroglyphic tablets and bars are...
incised with vertical lines. We saw that in the RCT these lines probably indicated where an elongated tablet was to be cut into separate, smaller tablets. The arrangement of vertical lines on Hieroglyphic documents, however, casts doubt on the idea that they had a similar purpose.

Most Cretan Hieroglyphic documents with vertical lines are inscribed on more than one side: four-sided bars are inscribed on all four sides, two-sided bars and one tablet are inscribed on both sides. RCT elongated tablets with vertical lines, on the other hand, are never inscribed on their versos. Moreover, vertical lines on Cretan Hieroglyphic documents rarely correspond in their position, so that if one were to cut the document following the vertical line on one side, the text would be severed on the other sides.

Some Cretan Hieroglyphic documents have two lines of text inscribed on one side and divided by a ruling line. The vertical lines on them are either not placed underneath each other, or appear in only one line and not in the other (for example, #063.a, #113.b, #120.a). It seems that in these cases the vertical lines are used to divide the information, i.e. separate entries into sections, rather than to divide the actual tablet. Since in a few cases these vertical lines separate a sign-group from a number, they are used differently from the word-dividers known from Linear A and Linear B, which may separate sign-groups, logograms or transaction signs, but do not separate these categories of information from the following or preceding numbers. In Linear A it was usually the case that an entry ended with a number, and the next sign-group was therefore part of a new entry. This practice made it unnecessary to place a word divider between a number and the following sign-group in order to stress that they referred to separate entries, hence the small number of word-dividers in Linear A (Tomas 2003: chapter III, §5.7). However, it seems that Cretan Hieroglyphic needed to mark the separation of entries, and that vertical lines were employed for that purpose.

This brief study of the vertical lines on Hieroglyphic documents does not support a connection with the vertical lines on the RCT documents: the former appear to be used to separate entries, and the latter to guide the cutting of the tablet. That said, Olivier has noticed (1994–1995) that bars #057 and #058 (Figures 6–7) match nicely when placed against each other — they must have made up a single bar that was cut into two separate documents. Olivier consequently refers to them as simili-raccord, following Driessen’s term (1987) ‘simili-joins’. Three sides of bar #057 have vertical lines. Although there is no line on the fourth side, Olivier argues that a line was initially there, but is no longer visible after the bar had been cut. Both parts have holes for suspension. Oliver claims that the two bars were inscribed by two different hands (1994–1995: 262), which was never the case with simili-joins in the RCT. All RCT simili-joins were inscribed by only two hands: 124r and 124s. Of these two, however, it was always the same hand that inscribed the matching simili-joins (Driessen 1987: 156–157, 162).

Let us now return to the topic of rearranging data on the RCT elongated tablets and examine another argument in favour of such an interpretation. Some of the RCT elongated tablets have a single sign inscribed on their verso (e.g. Xd 94+187, Vc173, Vc 177, Sc 7457, Xd 7813+7953, see Figure 8), or a single word, most commonly a complete or incomplete form of the ethnic a-mi-ni- si-jo (Sc 217, Sc 237, Sc 252, Sc 7476, Sc 7772, Sc 7782+8568, Sc 8471, see Figure 9). Since some of these tablets show traces of cutting, it is possible that the purpose of single signs / words on the verso was reclassification according to, say, the origin of the people registered: from a-mi-ni-so — the well-known site of Amnissos near Knossos (see Aura-Jorro 1985: 56). These tablets perhaps needed to be marked as different, since the other RCT elongated tablets seem to have dealt with only local business. Here follows the justification for the last statement.

Toponyms in the RCT records more commonly occur on page-shaped tablets. Out of 24 page- shaped tablets,
contain toponyms (42%). Out of 585 elongated tablets, only 23 contain toponyms (4%) (note that the shape of 36 RCT tablets cannot be determined due to their fragmentary state). Put in the context of the total of different words, 21% of the vocabulary from page-shaped tablets are toponyms, compared to only 6% in the case of elongated tablets (all counts are from Tomas 2003: chapters 2–3). One the one hand, this may indicate a difference in the function of the two types of documents in the RCT, namely that page-shaped tablets more often recorded transactions that involved the mention of toponyms, i.e. references to non-local business. Due to their low number of toponyms, on the other hand, it may be argued that the RCT elongated tablets were mainly involved in local transactions (cf. Bennet 1988: 21–22, n. 8, who pointed out that the majority of Linear B tablets do not contain place-names, in which case we assume that they refer to the storage of goods or activities conducted at the centre). If that is so, those elongated tablets with a-mi-ni-si-jo on their verso can be seen as an exception to this practice, and perhaps relate to individuals from a-mi-ni-so. This may be the reason why these tablets were differently marked, to distinguish them from the other elongated tablets that typically referred to transactions with individuals from Knossos. Driessen similarly uses two RCT examples of the ethnic i-ja-wone (Xd 146.4, B 164.4) to argue that this group of people (Ionians) “must have been considered different from the groups the palace usually dealt with to deserve a specific ethnicon” (Driessen 1998–1999: 85).

If we accept that examples of a-mi-ni-si-jo on the verso mark out mentioned tablets as different from the rest, meaning that they may have dealt with non-local individuals, we can assume that these examples of a-mi-ni-si-jo were subsequently incised as classifying marks, according to which the elongated tablets may have been rearranged. Opisthographic tablets (i.e. those inscribed on both sides) are rare amongst the RCT elongated tablets — only 44 are opisthographic, 8%, (counts in Tomas 2003: chapter 3) — so inscribing a-mi-ni-si-jo on the verso was an exceptional epigraphic feature used to mark exceptional matters, that is, non-local transactions in the majority of tablets dealing with local ones.

It must be mentioned that a-mi-ni-si-jo is not the only ethnic mentioned on the RCT tablets. Altogether 10 ethnics have been recorded in the RCT: two on page-shaped tablets, and eight on elongated tablets (counts in Tomas 2003: chapter 2). Most occur elsewhere in Knossos, but a-pu2- ka occurs only at Pylos apart from the RCT at Knossos. I am aware of the possibility that an ethnic can also refer to a place, like a toponym. In the RCT, however, it is also possible that ethnics denote people, i.e. an ethnic used instead of a personal name. This was already argued by Killen (1981: 80): “...the use of ethnics as personal names is a widespread phenomenon on the tablets”. In that sense it is significant that ethnics occur more frequently on elongated tablets since a great majority of them records personal names. They are here listed in the same way as other personal names, so they do not stand out as denoting different business. A-mi-ni-si-jo is the only ethnic marked on the verso of tablets.