

The Linear A inscriptions of votive axes AR Zf1 and AR Zf2 from the Arkalochori cave

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Abstract

Two votive axes from the Arkalochori cave (AR Zf1, AR Zf2) have completely identical inscription consisting of four Linear A signs: AB28, AB01, AB80, AB04. The inscription is read from left to right and from right to left. When the inscription is read from left to right, we receive the first part: *Ida-mate* – “Mother Ida”: *mate* – “mother” is a borrowing from Mycenaean, *Ida* means “the large/sublime”, *Ida* is a name of the tutelary deity of the corresponding mount. When the inscription is read from right to left, we receive the second part: *te-ma-da-i*, that is a verb: *te-* is a marker of optative, *-ma-* - a marker of patient, *da* – the root “to help”, *-i* – a marker of tense/aspect. Being joined together, both parts give the following: *Ida-mate te-ma-da-i* “May the Mother Ida help me/us”. Such an unusual form of recording is due to the ritual nature of the object.

Keywords: Minoan language; Linear A; Hattic language; Mycenaean language; Arkalochori cave; Minoan religion

1. Introduction to the problem

In the cave located at Arkalochori in central Crete (Fig. 1) were found many votive double axes (Fouda 2015).

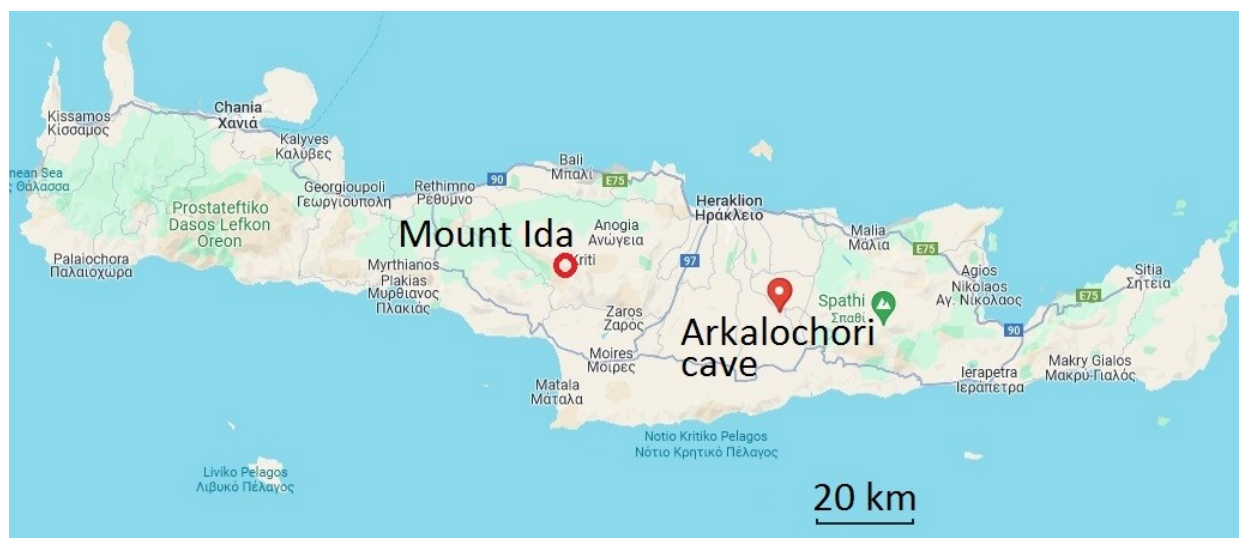


Fig.1. Locations mentioned in the article (the map has been drawn after a Google Maps screenshot)

Among these artifacts there was a miniature silver double ax with an inscription made by four signs of the Linear A script (Fouda 2015: 47; Fig. 2). The same inscription also can be seen on a

gold double axe from the Boston Museum of Fine Arts (Fig. 3), and it was suggested that the Boston example also comes from the Arkalochori cave (Fouda 2015: 47). Both votive axes are dated to about 1550 – 1500 BCE (Late Minoan IA Period).

Both inscriptions consist of the following signs: Υ Γ M E (AB28, AB01, AB80, AB04), that is read as *i-da-ma-te* using the phonetic values of the signs of Linear B (Fouda 2015: 47). It is supposed that in the phrase *i-da-ma-te* there is the name Demeter/Damater – the ancient Greek goddess of harvest and agriculture, and *i-* is a prefix/preposition of unclear meaning (Wikipedia 2024, Owens 1996). It seems to be quite illogical that the name of Demeter was written on an ax. An ax can be a tool or a weapon, while Demeter is a goddess of agriculture, and it would be more logical to write on an ax not the name of Demeter, but a name of a deity who, for instance, patronizes war or construction work.



Fig. 2. A heavily fragmented votive double ax with a Linear A inscription – AR Zf2 (image source – Godart, Olivier 1982: 143)



Fig. 3. A votive golden double ax with a Linear A inscription – AR Zf1; length 9 cm, width 8.3 cm (image source – MFA Boston 2024)

The double ax – labrys is usually considered one of the symbols of Minoan Crete. Numerous works have been written about the possible meanings of labrys in Minoan culture, based mostly on the fantasies of certain authors on the topic of Minoan culture, and ascribing the most incredible meanings to labrys. In reality, everything is much more prosaic. Initially the double ax had a completely utilitarian meaning; the labrys was an ax that was used in carpentry works and was an especially important tool in the construction of ships (Trevor Hodge 1985). As far as the whole life in the Minoan Crete was closely connected with the sea, so constructing of ships was a matter of vital importance for the Minoans, and thus the double ax could be considered as a symbol of prosperity and an apotropei.

2. Decoding of the inscription

First, it should be noted that the generally accepted direction of reading of the inscription is not obvious. The inscription is usually read from left to right, which is generally logical because inscriptions made by Linear A are usually read from left to right. However, it should be noted that in this case there are no serious proofs for such reading. Thus, the inscription can be read as *i-da-ma-te* or as *te-ma-da-i*.

The inscription can be in the Minoan/Kaftiw language, or can be in Mycenaean Greek or can contain elements of both.

If the inscription is read as *i-da-ma-te* then it is quite logical to single out the components *i-da* and *ma-te* in it. The component *i-da* correlates with the toponym Ida – the highest mountain on the island of Crete. It is noteworthy that this place name also has the variant of Ita. And the component *ma-te* correlates with the Mycenaean word *mate* “mother”.

I am to note that this fact actually doesn't corroborate Evans' ideas that the Minoan religion was a cult of the Mother Goddess. Evans' image of the Mother Goddess is actually completely artificial and abstract: his hypothetical Great Mother has no other attributes, doesn't perform any other functions, but is only the Great Mother, while all the real goddesses that can be designated as Great Mothers, usually are not just Great Mothers, but also perform some concrete functions and have some areas of responsibility.

This Ida-mate is not an abstract Mother Goddess, but, first of all, is the tutelary deity of a certain mountain, and then possibly the tutelary deity of the whole island of Crete.

The component Ida evidently is a name/byname of this goddess, and this component Ida is of Minoan/Kaftiw origin.

Previously it was shown that the Minoan language (the language of Linear A) is a very close relative of Hattic: the Hattic language can be used as an immediate key for decoding samples of the Minoan/Kaftiw language (Akulov 2023a, 2023b, 2021a, 2021b, 2017), and so it is completely logical to use Hattic as the key in the current case also.

Generally the name Ida is considered as a name of unknown origin.

In the name *Ida* can be singled out the component *i-* that correlates with the Hattic demonstrative *i-* “that”¹, and the component *da* that correlates with Hattic **te / *ti* – “sublime”, “large”², and thus, the name *Ida* can be translated as “that large/sublime”, “the large/sublime”. This name perfectly fits the fact that the Mount *Ida* is the highest mount on the island of *Crete*.

The name *Ida* was the name of the tutelary deity of the mount, the deity who dwelled there. *Ida-mate* was not an abstract Mother Goddess but the tutelary deity of the concrete mount.

It can be supposed that the Mycenaean form *mate* in the current case is a calque of an original Minoan form.

This name indicates that at this time (1550 – 1500 BCE) contacts between the Minoans and the Mycenaeans had already begun, and started a mutual influence between the two cultures.

Also, it is interesting that if the inscription is read from right: *te-ma-da-i*, then it also is a meaningful Minoan phrase: *te-* correlates with the Hattic optative marker *te*³, *-ma-* correlates with a Hattic marker of direct object – *-m-*, supposedly the marker of 1sgpt⁴. Moreover, the component *-ma-* correlates with the prefix *-ma-* from the word *hun-ma-katu* meaning “you protect me with magic means” from the Kaftiw spell against *samauna* disease, in this form *hun-ma-katu* the component *-ma-* seems to be a marker of patient, supposedly 1sgpt⁵. The component *-da-* seems to be the root, it can be collated with the Hattic form *tuk/dug/*dugh/duk/tug* – “to help”, “to assist”, “to come”⁶. The component *-i* can be correlated with the Hattic verbal suffix *-e* that is probably a marker of future tense⁷.

And thus, the phrase *te-ma-da-i* has the following structure: OPT-3sgag-1sgpt(?)-help-FUT(?), (the agent of 3sg seems to be expressed by the zero morpheme), and means: “may she help me/us”.

The phrase *te-ma-da-i* is evidently connected with the compound *Ida-mate*, the whole inscription is: *Ida-mate te-ma-da-i* that means “May the Mother *Ida* help me/us”. This sentence is in Minoan, and only the word *mate* is a borrowing from Mycenaean.

3. Conclusion

Thus, the Linear A inscription on AR Zf1 and AR Zf2 is read as *Ida-mate te-ma-da-i* that means “May the Mother *Ida* help me/us”.

It is obvious that this inscription is quite unusual: it consists of only four signs, but it is read first from left to right, and then from right to left, and in both cases we receive a meaningful phrase, and being joined together both phrases also give a meaningful sentence. Such an unusual form of recording is clearly due to the ritual nature of the object.

¹ Soysal 2004: 204.

² Soysal 2004: 313.

³ Kasian 2010: 179.

⁴ Kasian 2010: 178, 179.

⁵ Akulov 2017: 31 – 32; Akulov 2023a: 5.

⁶ Soysal 2004: 316.

⁷ Kasian 2010: 178, 180.

The use of the Mycenaean loanword for “mother” instead of the original Minoan in the inscription means that there were already quite regular contacts between the Minoans and the Mycenaeans in that period, and that this thing might have been made for a person whose first language was Mycenaean.

It can also be assumed that the Mycenaean word *mate* was used instead of a Minoan word because in this case it was easier to create an inscription that could be read in both directions. The original Minoan word for “mother” probably was **mu*⁸, and the compound “Mother Ida” written with the use of only Minoan words would look like the following: **Ida-[nV]-se-mu*⁹. Being inverted, this phrase becomes *mu-se-[nV]-da-i* that is a meaningless abracadabra in Minoan.

Also, it seems that the maker of ergative case, which should be attached to the compound of *Ida-mate*, was omitted for the sentence was better rhythmically organized. The existence of ergative case in Minoan can be derived from the fact of presence of an ergative construction in the Kaftiw spell against *samauna* disease¹⁰. And also the ergative marker *-i* could simply merge with the final *e* of the word *mate*.

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⁸ It is a reconstruction after Hattic *mu* “mother”.

⁹ This form is reconstructed after the standard Hattic possessive genitive construction. The Hattic possessive genitive is formed according to the following model: X-n + te-Y where X is the noun that denotes possessor and Y is the noun that denotes possessed (Kassian 2010: 183).

¹⁰ Akulov 2017: 32.

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