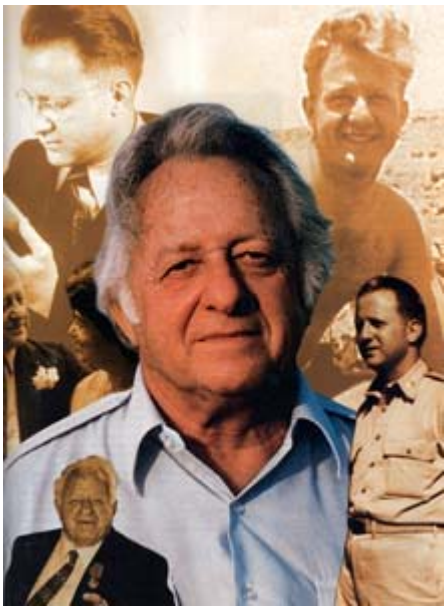
Print Article

Against the Tide: An Interview with Maverick Scholar Cyrus Gordon

By Hershel Shanks

Sidebar: Is Linear A Semitic?



Courtesy Cyrus and Constance Gordon

N.B. My article, "Is Linear A Semitic?" appeared as a sidebar to this main article. You may find it below starting at the very bottom of p. 11 and continuing through p. 13. - G.A.R.

Cyrus Gordon is a scholar of enormous range. His bibliography of more than 35 books and 350 articles is divided into over 20 categories, focusing largely on linguistics and social history. Among them are Aramaic-Syriac-Mandaic studies, art and archaeology of the Near East, Assyriology, Biblical studies, Egypto-Semitic studies, Minoan, and Phoenician and Hebrew inscriptions.

Gordon's views have gained varying degrees of acceptance in the academic world:

His *Ugaritic Grammar* is universally hailed as a major contribution, making Canaanite religious literature accessible for the first time.[1]

His emphasis on the connections between the Greek world and the Hebrew world was initially met with great skepticism when Gordon first proposed it more than 35 years ago. Today it is commonplace to acknowledge such connections.

His decipherment of Linear A, which as he says in the following interview he regards as his greatest scholarly achievement, is extremely controversial and is accepted mostly only by his former students.[2]

His continued belief in the authenticity of North American inscriptions (such as the Bat Creek inscription from Tennessee) that would place Semites in the western Hemisphere in about 800 B.C. has very few adherents in the scholarly world.[3]

Perhaps this explains why in his long life he has had important mentors and approximately 60 devoted, sometimes adoring, Ph.D. students (many of whom are now senior scholars in their own right) but few colleague friends. "Academia," he has written, "is full of litigious and ill-willed people." Famous scholars like Ephraim A. Speiser tried to "destroy" him. William F. Albright treated him "misanthropically" and kept him on "unilateral respiration." One college president where he taught was "dictatorial"; another was "vindictive and ruthless." His academic colleagues were sometimes "jealous" and "vicious," resorting to "shameless 'dirty tricks.'"[4]

Cyrus Gordon occupies his own unique scholarly niche, however. Throughout his long career, he has been, as he describes himself, "a disturber of the *pax academica*." Although his career "has been fraught with pain," he has also had the "satisfactions that scholars who live by conformity and compromise can never know."[5]

Courtesy Cyrus and Constance Gordon

Colonel Gordon, a member of the U.S. Air Force Reserve, posing for an official picture in 1960.

Courtesy Cyrus and Constance Gordon

Gordon, who served in the U.S. Air Force Reserve, proudly displays a medal he received in commemoration of the 50th anniversary of World War II, awarded by the Russian Federation to Americans they wished to honor who had served in the Persian Gulf Command during the war.

Hershel Shanks: You were born in 1908, 92 years ago. If my calculations are correct, that's only 18 years after the first scientific excavation in Palestine by Sir William Matthew Flinders Petrie in 1890 at Tell el-Hesi.[a]

Cyrus Gordon: Yes. Petrie really established scientific archaeology in that excavation, by combining ceramic typology and stratigraphy. He worked out the typology with wavy ledge handles. [Such handles are placed near the broadest section of a vessel. Ledge-handle vessels can be picked up by placing one's fingers underneath the handles.—Ed.] Petrie put these handles in sequence. Over time, they would change in size—growing or shrinking. So you find one stratum in which the handles were bigger and later strata in which they ended up smaller. [That is, the stratigraphy establishes the typical sequence of handle sizes over time.—Ed.] The idea of stratigraphy he got from that character who excavated Troy—Heinrich Schliemann.[b]

Oriental Institute of the University of Chicago

Sir William Matthew Flinders Petrie revolutionized archaeology when, in 1890 during a dig at Tell el-Hesi, he combined typology and stratigraphy. He realized that the size and form of ledge handles, such as the ones on this pot, differed from strata to strata. Petrie was able to put the handles in chronological sequence, allowing future generations of archaeologists to date strata based on ledge handles. The vessel shown here, with folded ledge handles, was found in 1926 at Megiddo, north of Jerusalem, and dates to the Middle Bronze Age (2200–2000 B.C.E.).

HS: Did you know Petrie?

CG: Yes, but not well. I used to meet him at tea parties at the American School of Oriental Research in Jerusalem. I was there—between there and Iraq—from 1931 to 1935.

National Portrait Gallery, London

Sir William Matthew Flinders Petrie, who revolutionized archaeology when, in 1890 during a dig at Tell el-Hesi, he combined typology and stratigraphy.

HS: So he was already an old man?

CG: Younger than I am now. He was married to Lady Hilda. Although she was on the threshold of old age, she was still a beauty. She retained the charms of youth even in her old age.

I also went to see Petrie at Tell el-Ajjul, which he thought was ancient Gaza. He was wrong, but he found more gold in that one year than archaeologists have found in the past hundred years in every site combined.

HS: How do you account for that? Archaeologists today aren't able to find such magnificent things very often.

CG: Petrie explained it perfectly. He said that idiots—the other archaeologists—would go to the places where the prophets lived. Now, if you want to know about Amos, it's in the Bible. You don't dig for it. And also the high standards of morality and ethics in the Bible don't go with high standards of living with a lot of gold sitting around. We know, for example, that the Philistines came from the West with a tradition of miniature work in gold. In the Bible, when the Philistines wanted to appease the God of Israel, they made five golden hemorrhoids, or tumors, and five golden mice [1 Samuel 6:4–5] because a plague of mice had afflicted them. They wanted to appease the gods they had offended. The Hebrews were concerned with God and the Ten Commandments and with what was right; you don't go there for gold. Petrie said, if these idiots had only had more sense, they could have found these things, but they always went to the wrong places and for the wrong reasons. He was a very shrewd guy. I got along very well with him. He published a report with time-exposed photographs every year after his excavation. That's not the usual thing. He had a lady's hatbox, and he put a hatpin through it and took time exposures, very long time exposures. This was the beginning of photography in archaeology.

HS: You got your Ph.D. from the University of Pennsylvania in 1930 at the age of 22, didn't you?

CG: Actually, two weeks before my 22nd birthday.

Courtesy Cyrus and Constance Gordon

Fast learner. Cyrus Gordon graduated from high school in 1924, at the age of 16. Only six years later he had already graduated from college and was about to receive his Ph.D.

HS: Were you raised in Philadelphia?

CG: Yes. We lived in a very fine brownstone house at the corner of Broad and Mifflin, but my parents sent me to public school. My fellow students in public school were blacks and Neapolitan and Sicilian Italians, who were gearing up—although

they didn't realize it—for the prohibition age. They would grow up to be bootleggers. The blacks had been emancipated from slavery only 50 years earlier. It took them time.

The kind of family that I came from knew what to do with a book, knew what to do with a text. Someone with some funds was not what was respected. What was respected was learning. You see, not all Jews are the same. A Litvak [a Lithuanian Jew] worked on texts. If you have two sons, and one is a conformist, good kid, gets good marks in school, he's a gentleman and all that, but if he's in business, you can't expect too much of him. However, if you have a son who can't earn a nickel, but he's a brilliant scholar and knows how to analyze a text, that's what would bring respect in our community. That's the way I was brought up. Nothing was said about it. You don't have to say anything. It's in the atmosphere.

My father was a physician, but at night he would come home and work on his books. He read a whole series of books on the history of medicine.

HS: What did he do to educate you?

CG: I learned from a *malamed* [a children's tutor]: A *malamed* is a guy who couldn't make it in scholarship. If you're a high-class guy in the community, you're in the yeshiva [studying Talmud], but you don't teach children. So the *malamed* had a bad reputation, and they were often sadistic, taking it out on the kids. My father hired a man, a very sweet man, Mr. Abelson, who had a wife and two daughters. He was my teacher; I could ask him questions. One of the questions I asked him was where babies came from. He said they come out of ladies. I was five years old. At the supper table my parents asked me what I had learned. So I told them. My mother was very Victorian; she went to school in the 1890s in New York. She nearly hit the ceiling. She said to my father, "You discharge him at once. He's teaching our child immorality." My father, who was much more worldly, said, "Look, he's got a wife and two kids to support; he needs this money. I'll tell him not to discuss things like that anymore." So that established peace in the family.

HS: Your first name is Cyrus, and your middle name is Herzl. Herzl, of course, is the father of modern Zionism. Were your parents Zionists?

CG: Yes, Cyrus [the Great, the Persian successor to the Babylonians] sent the Jews back to Palestine to rebuild the temple [in the sixth century B.C.E., ending the Babylonian Exile; Ezra 1:1–3; 2 Chronicles 36:22–23]. Theodor Herzl came to the fore in the Dreyfus case.[c] During the Dreyfus case my father became an ardent Zionist, not just a theoretical Zionist or an idealistic Zionist, but a conscious political Zionist. Herzl was an Austrian journalist and a theater critic. Very respected. He realized that you have to have a country to represent you. You can't just be a stranger in every land. So my father took the name of the founder of ancient Zionism, Cyrus, and the founder of modern Zionism, Herzl, and that's why I'm called Cyrus Herzl Gordon. My father was very active in the Zionist movement. He organized Zionist clubs in Philadelphia and across the river in Camden.

Courtesy Cyrus and Constance Gordon

Cyrus on Cyrus. Cyrus Herzl Gordon, while on military assignment in Fars (Persia), visited the tomb of his namesake Cyrus the Great, who allowed the Jews to return to Palestine in the sixth century B.C.E. The Persian king was, therefore, according to Gordon, the founder of ancient Zionism; Gordon's father, an ardent political Zionist, chose to name his son for that famous king and for Theodor Herzl, the founder of modern Zionism.

HS: When you got your doctorate, had you ever participated in an archaeological excavation?

CG: No, I never wanted to be an archaeologist! But my mentor at Penn, James A. Montgomery, told me that I could get a fellowship to go out on digs with [William Foxwell] Albright and others, and I should do this. "You have to have field work," he said. "This is where the new discoveries come from." So I got the fellowship, and they renewed it for four years. Montgomery, who was president of the American Schools of Oriental Research, got me fixed up so I would work in Iraq during the winters, and in the summers I would work in Palestine.

HS: How did you get to Palestine?

CG: I came by ship. It left from Philadelphia, then it went to New York, and then it stopped at Boston, and then it went to the Azores, and then to Lisbon. It was a wonderful experience. You got this gradual change. Then we went through the Straits of Gibraltar, to Marseilles, and then to a couple of Italian cities, and then to Athens, and then to Istanbul, and then we went on to

Haifa, which was a military harbor. Then we went to Jaffa. In Jaffa there were two very big rocks. If the seas were quiet, you got off the boat in rowboats with your baggage. If it was stormy, everyone had to wait until the storm subsided. The boats were all manned by illiterate Arabs. The people they ferried were mostly Jews. The older ones came to die there and the younger ones to build up the land. I wanted to get to the American School in Jerusalem, so I asked my boatman how to do this—in classical Arabic. He didn't understand a word. Then I asked him in classical Hebrew. He didn't know that. I tried English. Not a word. Then he says to me, "*Efsher redst du zhargon*?" (Do you perhaps speak Yiddish [literally, jargon]?) This was the international language. I told him I knew German. We didn't speak Yiddish at home, but I was able to talk to him in German.

Courtesy Cyrus and Constance Gordon

In June 1931, barely 23 years old, Cyrus Gordon found himself aboard the Patria on a month-long journey to Palestine. He landed in Jaffa, found a cab and, with a goat for a seat partner, rode to Jerusalem, where he headed for the American School of Oriental Research. Within a week he was working for William Foxwell Albright, considered the dean of Biblical archaeologists, on the dig at Tell Beit Mirsim.

HS: How long did that trip take, from Philadelphia to Jaffa?

CG: A month.

HS: How did you get from Jaffa to the American School in Jerusalem?

CG: I took a seat in a cab. I took a front seat, but the trouble is, they sold two front seats, and the guy with the other front seat was holding a goat.

I spent just a few days at the American School. And then I went to dig at Tell Beit Mirsim under Albright and also at Beth-Zur under Ovid Sellers. Sellers was a wonderful guy, but, although he was the director, Albright made all the decisions as to where to dig and how to dig.

HS: And what did you do?

CG: I worked on the mound; I learned ceramic chronology from Albright. Some of the time I spent in the work tent, where I kept the record of all the finds, of all the scarabs and coins.

HS: Did Albright or Sellers do any actual digging with their own hands?

CG: No.

HS: And you did not either?

CG: No, this was beneath our dignity. You didn't have educated people soiling their hands until the Israelis were running the place [after 1948].

Courtesy Cyrus and Constance Gordon

Surveying at Tell Beit Mirsim in 1932, Gordon steadies his theodolite, an instrument used to measure the level of a find relative to other finds or to an archaeological feature. Gordon was also responsible for recording all the finds for the dig, but he wasn't required to do much hard labor! According to Gordon, digging was "beneath our dignity. You didn't have educated people soiling their hands."

HS: Who did the actual digging?

CG: All local Arabs. And we used Egyptian taskmasters. To get the workers to bring you the finds, you had to give them baksheesh [bribes]. They brought you the finds, and you would buy it from them with a chit, and on payday they would collect. Now, you mustn't give them too much baksheesh, because if you do, they'll bring things from outside and say they found it in your dig. You have to give them enough baksheesh, but not too much.

HS: I don't understand.

CG: Suppose you give them five dollars for something that on the open market is worth 50 cents. They would then get such things not from the mound but from the market. You have to learn how to do these things.

HS: Was there no American supervising them, watching them?

CG: I was supervising them, and other people were too. If they gave me a Seleucid or Ptolemaic coin, I knew this could be found there, but if they gave me a Turkish coin, I knew that it came from the outside. If they did that, you'd fire them. You don't tell them why. You just fire them. And then they'd tell the other workers, "These Americans are magicians; they knew that I was lying."

HS: How did you control for stratigraphy?

CG: The Egyptian taskmasters were very good at implementing our instructions. They cracked whips. They used to beat the workers. I couldn't imagine an American beating the workers, but the Egyptians did.

Reproduced from the Prints and Photographs Division, Library of Congress

Egyptian taskmasters? Yes, but it isn't ancient Egypt. It's 20th-century Israel, where the earliest archaeological digs employed taskmasters to watch over the diggers. According to Gordon, many of the taskmasters carried whips, which they didn't hesitate to use when necessary. This archival photograph from an early Beth-Shemesh excavation shows two supervisors displaying their whips; one stands to the left of the long line of workers carrying baskets on their heads, the other is at the upper right. The man standing above the workers, wearing a dark suit and hat, is likely one of the head archaeologists.

HS: Why were they beating them?

CG: That's the only kind of communication they understood. You didn't have working men's rights, human rights, things like that.

HS: Were there Egyptians with whips at Tell Beit Mirsim?

CG: All over. You couldn't have a Palestinian whipping people of his own tribe. The Egyptians did it. They wouldn't eat with the Palestinians. They mustn't have any intimacy. The Egyptians were dignified about it and efficient. They were mostly Coptic Christians.

HS: Did they actually hit the workers with their whips?

CG: Of course they did. Look, you can't tell the Egyptians how to make the Palestinians work. You can't do that.[d]

Courtesy Cyrus and Constance Gordon

All's quiet? After his first seasons of excavating in Palestine, Gordon drove across the desert to Baghdad, Iraq. From there he took a train to Mosul, where he excavated at Tell Billa, near Nineveh. It was evidently not entirely peaceful there! This photograph from February 1933 shows soldiers in machine-gun squads, dispatched from Mosul to maintain order.

HS: Was there any effort to dig layer by layer?

CG: Look, you dig. And when you come to hardened earth, this is because this was a floor. So you tell them, don't dig through the floor. Just clear away laterally. And then when you clear away laterally, you run into what's left of walls. So both the walls and the surface of floors tell you where to stop and clear a level. Then, when you've cleared a level and removed the objects of value, you're ready for the next level, and after you've taken photographs of everything, you destroy the floor and dig down further. The Egyptians, the taskmasters, knew it. And the men, by the way, the common laborers, were very intelligent about it. They understood. The idea that illiterate people are stupid is not true. It simply isn't true.

HS: Did you dig in squares?

CG: No. But we knew we couldn't dig the whole mound. So we'd take a 20-meter square and just dig in that area.

HS: How did you decide where to dig?

CG: If you want to get the big buildings, the palaces, the governor's house, you go to the highest point on the mound. At the foot of the mound, you'll have a city wall if there was a city wall.

HS: What was your impression of Albright?

CG: He was revered. Albright was looked upon as a genius. But he built himself up.

HS: In what way?

CG: I'll give you one example. It's how I got into Egyptology. Albright was giving a course in Egyptian—I think in Jerusalem. And only one student had signed up. I felt he'd be happy that I joined; it's nicer to have two students than one. He kicked me out of the class. I asked him why. "You know too many languages already." He kicked me out because I knew too much already. Did you ever hear of anything like that? Coming from a man of that position and stature?

Later, I got a job teaching Assyriology at Dropsie [a college for Hebrew studies in Philadelphia]. When I arrived I was told I was to teach Assyriology and Egyptology. I didn't know Egyptian. But whenever people did this to me, I never disillusioned them. I tried to live up to their illusions. So I taught a course in Egyptian. I taught semester after semester. And I never read the same literary text. I always changed things; I either read Middle Egyptian, Late Egyptian or Coptic. At the end of the ten and a half years I was there, I was known as the most distinguished of the Coptologists outside of the University of Chicago and a man at the University of Michigan.

This, by the way, is characteristic of me. When I was to write my doctoral thesis, Montgomery said to me, "It takes a Jewish scholar to read rabbinic texts—the Babylonian Talmud, the Jerusalem Talmud. You're a Jewish scholar. You can do this. I want you to write on the rabbinic exegesis of the Vulgate of Proverbs." Now, I could have said, "Look, I may be Jewish, but I wasn't born with a knowledge of the Jerusalem Talmud." I mean, this isn't something that is part of the baggage of being Jewish. But I didn't say that. My first instinct was to live up to his illusions.

HS: How many ancient languages do you know?

CG: I would say there are upwards of 20. Somewhere along the line, I was told that you should always go back to the sources, and if the sources meant the original language and the original script, then you simply do it. My students—there are about 60 of them in tenured positions in about 20 different fields—were all raised this way.

HS: How many modern languages do you know?

CG: French and German were required. But I also passed sight-reading exams in Portuguese, Italian, Dutch, Danish and Norwegian; Swedish I knew before.

HS: What about Yiddish?

CG: No. There was a reason for that. My father wouldn't send me to a congregation with an Eastern European tradition because it wasn't American enough. I went to the congregation of Mikveh Israel [which followed the Spanish and Portuguese tradition]. That congregation was founded in 1740. They recently celebrated their 250th anniversary. This was the congregation of Haym Solomon, who gave his whole fortune to George Washington for use in the Revolution. When the war was over, the United States didn't have a treasury to return what they owed to Haym Solomon, so by an act of Congress, long after he was dead, they voted money to his heirs to pay him back.

This congregation was a flag-waving congregation. I was raised there. All the best families among the Jews of Philadelphia belonged. You didn't get any Yiddish there.

HS: Didn't your parents speak Yiddish?

CG: Only to keep secrets from the children.

HS: Where did you go after Tell Beit Mirsim and Beth-Zur?

CG: After Tell Beit Mirsim and Beth-Zur, I was given my instructions to go to the dig at the American School in Baghdad.

HS: How did you get from Jerusalem to Baghdad?

CG: In a 1920 Rolls Royce across the desert. We went over desert trails. We came to the area of Baghdad where the Tigris and Euphrates come very close together. From there I took a train to Mosul. Mosul is just opposite Nineveh.

HS: Where did you excavate in Iraq?

CG: In two places near Nineveh—Tell Billa and Tepe Gawra. Fred [Ephraim A.] Speiser was the director of both of these digs. But after a year he went back to America to run things from headquarters [at the University of Pennsylvania]. Speiser wanted to undo me completely, ruin me.

HS: Why?

CG: I'm not a psychiatrist. The best I can figure, I think he sensed in me a person who could not be trusted to abide by the consensus. I mean, how can you trust a guy who says that you have to look at original sources and if the consensus doesn't fit in and your new facts are right, then you don't accept the consensus? That's the best I can make of it.

Speiser was bright, Albright was certainly bright. And the two of them hated each other, which was fortunate for me, because my business until I got tenure was simply survival. Speiser wanted Albright to fire me. So Albright made a deal with Speiser. He [Albright] would take me as his assistant at Johns Hopkins, and I'd stay there for three years. And Speiser could keep a nobody as his stooge at the dig while he remained in Philadelphia.

You know, academia is not a pretty place. I guess you've discovered that, haven't you?

HS: So you were fired?

CG: No, they did something else. They gave me a great honor. They named me the first Albert T. Clay Fellow without a salary. So here I was going back to America, and I was given this very great honor. But I never acknowledged it. I felt that what they considered an honor was simply a first-class burial.

HS: How did you get back into archaeology?

CG: I continued to teach archaeology. I had photographs of all the seal impressions [of the seals] in the Baghdad museum, and also I made frequent refresher visits. I had Albright behind me at the time. Albright was a big shot. So I would go back to see things, and I would keep up with their publications of what was going on in the field. And in 1935 I worked with [Sir Leonard] Woolley at Ur.[e]

HS: What did you do at Ur?

CG: My job was to read the [cuneiform] tablets. Woolley had no Sumerologist. I was it.

HS: Did you have anything to do with the actual excavation?

CG: No, except that I spent part of every day with Woolley walking around to see what was being dug.

HS: What were your impressions of Woolley?

CG: A marvelous field man. And he had another ability. He knew how to get money from pious widows who were well-heeled. He did it by proving the Bible. Now how do you prove the Bible? Do you remember the goat grazing off a tree, made of gold, that he found [at Ur; see photo]?

University of Pennsylvania Museum/T4-1000

When Woolley found this artifact at Ur, he identified it with the ram in the story of the binding of Isaac. Gordon believes the animal is a goat.

HS: Yes.

CG: What he did was identify this with the ram of the *Akedah*. [The binding of Isaac. A ram caught in a thicket became the substitute sacrifice for Isaac (Genesis 22:13).—Ed.] That won't stand up at all. But nonetheless, for the public it was all right, and for the widows it was all right. And he got the money from the widows.

HS: Why won't it hold up?

CG: Well, a ram is not the same as a goat.

HS: And that's a goat, is it?

CG: Yes, it's a goat. A ram doesn't browse like a goat. A goat grazes, browses, it does everything.

HS: You wrote a book called *The Common Background of Greek and Hebrew Civilization* in 1965. For a long time that idea was rejected; it was considered meshuga [crazy].

CG: It was against everything that was holy: The Greeks were rational; the Hebrews were religious. Greeks were artistic; the Hebrews were against art and against idolatry. [This was the standard view.] I was reading the texts, both the Greek and Hebrew, and I saw that this wasn't so.

HS: Now everybody accepts that.

CG: Of course.

HS: How did it finally come to be accepted?

CG: The opposition died off.

HS: You mean physically died off or your arguments finally won out?

CG: No, no, no, no, no. They died. The arguments were never there on their side, it was on my side.

HS: Give me an example.

CG: There is a relationship, for example, between the tribe of Dan and the Danaans—Greeks.[f] The tribe of Dan came in with the Philistines. The Philistines pushed the Danites into the sterile hills and took over the fertile plains. So the Danites had to find a better home for themselves. They sent spies to find a nice quiet place up north, at Laish, and they seized it and renamed it Dan [Judges 18]. The Philistines worshiped gods other than Yahweh [the God of the Hebrews], for example, Dagon. But Dagon is every bit as Semitic as Yahweh.

The language of the Philistines was Semitic. I like to say that when Samson was courting Delilah [a Philistine], he never took an interpreter along. Scripture records cases where an interpreter was used. They translated between Joseph and his brothers in Egypt, where Joseph was supposed to be an Egyptian [Genesis 42:23]. But Samson and Delilah both spoke Semitic. The Philistines are supposed to be Indo-Europeans. But this is only dogma. True, they didn't practice circumcision, but circumcision emanates from Egypt, from Africa. And none of the other Semites except the Hebrews practiced circumcision. There was no circumcision among the Babylonians, for example.

HS: Larry Stager [of Harvard University, director of excavations at Ashkelon] says that if we ever find some Philistine inscriptions, they'll be Greek. Do you agree with that?

CG: No, no.

HS: What's your view?

CG: There's simply no basis for it.

HS: Well, they came from the Aegean, didn't they?

CG: Look, Noah's son Shem is the ancestor of the Semites. Japheth [another son of Noah] is connected with the Greeks. Now look at Genesis 9:27: "May God enlarge Japheth, and let him dwell in the tents of Shem." The Greeks will dwell in the tents of the Semites. In other words, the area was Semitic before it became Indo-European. Or to put the matter differently, the area was a Linear A area before it became a Linear B area. When the Philistines came to Canaan, they were already speaking what we would call Hebrew. You remember Abimelech, king of Gerar? Gerar is one of the old Philistinian cities [Genesis 26:1]. There is no more Semitic name than Abimelech—a Philistine king.

HS: You mentioned Linear A and Linear B. Can you tell me what Linear B is?

CG: Linear B is Greek. Tablets in it were found in a whole variety of places in the coastal areas of Greece. For instance, in the palace of Nestor [at Pylos, in the western Peloponnese]. It had to be deciphered. That was a great accomplishment [by Michael Ventris]. It's not written in regular Greek. This opened up the possibility of deciphering Linear A [the earlier script], and that's what I did. The signs that are used have the same phonetic value in both systems. It's like Hungarian and English; both are written in the Latin alphabet, but they're different languages. If you know one, however, you can pronounce the other.

HS: Is Linear A Greek?

CG: No, Linear A is Semitic.

HS: That's a very controversial statement, isn't it?

CG: Look, I read this [text], and I give the basis of the explanation and everything else. It's in black and white and documented, so you can check on everything.

HS: But it's still very much a controversial matter, isn't it?

CG: Look, a lot of things can be controversial. But we have facts to deal with. Controversy is made by individuals arbitrarily.

HS: But why is it controversial? Michael Ventris's decipherment of Linear B is not controversial.

CG: It was for a while. I'll tell you why. The Greek scholars were relieved when it [Linear B] turned out to be Greek, because many scholars had said that it's not Greek. When I come along and say that Linear A—the oldest language found on European soil of which we have any hope of pronouncing and translating—is Semitic, this they don't want. And as far as the Semitists go, you take them away from Hebrew script and they're lost.

HS: I think your student Gary Rendsburg pointed out that it's only your students who agree with you.

CG: They're the only ones who've been trained in the damned thing! They're the only ones who read all the languages, not just some of them.

HS: You have no doubt.

CG: I have no doubt whatever. But you have to see it yourself, then you'll see why there's no doubt.

HS: You have written that as a result of your decipherment of Linear A, other scholars have been derisive.

CG: Well, what else can you do if you don't have any factual arguments?

HS: You went on to say, "decades of rebuff, denial and outright scorn followed."

CG: Right. Hershel, I have the thing documented with actual readings, and the evidence. And the evidence, by the way, is in several different scripts, confirming that it's there.

HS: Where does this attitude come from? Where does this derision, this scorn—these are strong words—where does this come from?

CG: It makes no difference whether you go to this campus or that campus; if you have a classics department, this is the attitude. You see, [this decipherment] takes it out of their hands. I show them this, but they are not capable of handling it. If you're not capable of handling a thing, then you resort to denial.

HS: And the Semitists?

CG: There's a wine jar found at Knossos [on Crete] with three other jars. On all three of them the ideogram for wine appears. In other words, you read it as "wine" in English, and *vin* in French. It's an ideogram. But the fourth one reads *yanna*—apparently a place. *Yanna* I recognize immediately; it has to be Semitic *yayin* ["wine"].

HS: Are the ideograms in Linear A?

CG: Yes. Linear A. The ideograms for wine are the same in Linear A and Linear B. This is an ideogram, so you pronounce it in whatever language the text happens to be. There is a place called Yanna, so you write it with the ideogram for "wine" and the suffix na syllabically after it.

HS: Initially you thought that Linear A was East Semitic, and then you later changed your mind and decided it was West Semitic.

CG: Yes. This is because the same words occur in both East Semitic and West Semitic.

HS: You changed your mind?

CG: It's just because I didn't know the same words occurred in West Semitic. But the thing is, I've answered all these things, and it's all arranged in a rational way.

HS: On another subject, do you still maintain that the Semites came to the Western Hemisphere—the United States and

South America—in 800 B.C.E.?

CG: No doubt about it. You have a very big inscription near Albuquerque. And then an expedition of the Smithsonian, at Bat Creek in Tennessee, found the same script.[g]

Warren W. Dexter

Semites in America? Cyrus Gordon is one of the very few proponents of the idea that Semites arrived in the Western Hemisphere as early as 800 B.C.E. He refers to the inscription on the Bat Creek stone, found in Tennessee in 1889, as evidence. Gordon believes that the letters are Hebrew, reading "for Judea," and date to the first or second century C.E.

HS: So you still maintain that the Bat Creek inscription is authentic?

CG: No question about it.

HS: The scholarly consensus today is that it is not authentic.

CG: The evidence is overwhelming, just overwhelming. And what's more, another one was found near Newark, Ohio.

HS: What about the Parahaiba inscription from Brazil?[h]

CG: Parahaiba is another thing. I was right in seeing relationships with other inscriptions, but I was not right in dealing with something that I didn't know anything about: This is the work of a secret society. It's not modern, and it's not ancient. It's in between. It's like the Masonic documents, which are not from Solomon's time, but they weren't created yesterday either; they were created some hundreds of years ago. So I didn't have the requisite experience with secret societies.

HS: The authentic inscriptions then are only in the United States—the Bat Creek inscription and the others? You recognize that almost no scholar agrees with you on that.

CG: But they don't know a goddamned thing about it. They simply don't know.

HS: That's true even of your own students.

CG: Well, that's where they have jobs.

HS: Why do you say that?

CG: For instance, if they have a job in a Christian seminary that is very conservative in most ways, they may have pressures put on them, consciously or subconsciously, I don't know.

HS: What do you regard as your greatest scholarly accomplishment?

CG: Linear A. No question in my mind.

HS: How about your Ugaritic grammar?

CG: Well, for Ugaritic, we have a great bodyof texts. It is taught at every great university in the world, and in seminaries. It [my grammar text] has gone through five editions and reprintings. But I feel that the most significant thing I've done is the Linear A [decipherment].

HS: Why is it so important that Linear A is Semitic?

CG: Because this explains the contacts between the most ancient Greeks and the most ancient Hebrew literature. In other words, you had this common language that was used all through the area. The area was Semitic speaking before the Semites were driven out. It was Linear A before it was Linear B; this explains why there is the common background.

HS: You've also seen correspondences and cultural connections between Homer and the Bible.

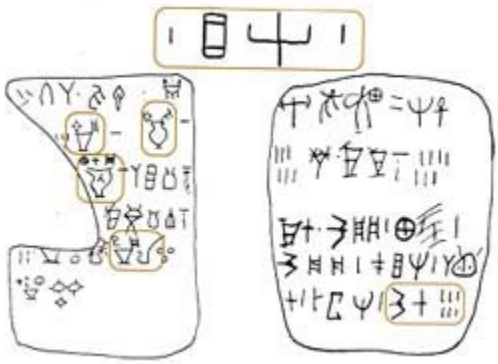
CG: Oh yes, certainly. When [the Israelites] of Jabesh-gilead retrieved the bodies of Saul and Jonathan, they burned the bodies and they fasted [see 1 Samuel 31:11–13]. This is a Homeric funeral for people who die on the field of battle. It doesn't matter whether it actually happened. That we can't prove. But what we can prove is that the same custom prevailed, that they didn't burn bodies that die at peace back at home, but only those who lost their lives on the battlefield.

HS: Thank you very much. You've been very enlightening.

Is Linear A Semitic?

By Gary A. Rendsburg

Sidebar to: Against the Tide: An Interview with Maverick Scholar Cyrus Gordon



Four words for "pot" are highlighted in the drawing of the Linear A text known as Hagia Triada 31, lower left. In each case, the word consists of a combination of syllables and a pictograph of a pot. In the second line, on the right, the two small symbols above the pot are the syllables *su* and *pu*. To the left, two other syllables read *qa* and *pa*. *Pa*, the ladderlike symbol, is repeated in the last two pictographs, which read *ka-ro-pa* (line 3) and *su-pu-ra* (line 5). Cyrus Gordon believes that each of these words is Semitic.

In the drawing at right, *ku-ro*, the Linear A word for "total," appears in the last line, before the six marks that indicate "six." *Ku-ro* appears frequently at the end of administrative tablets, and Gordon believes it derives from the Semitic *kull* (Linear A does not distinguish between *l* and *r*). In the drawing at top, the two symbols between the two vertical lines, which serve as word dividers, read *ya-ne*; the symbols appear on a wine jar discovered on Crete and are related, in Gordon's view, to *yayin*, the Hebrew word for wine.

As Cyrus Gordon describes in the accompanying interview, one of the most controversial aspects of his long academic career has been his work on Minoan Linear A, an ancient script found on the island of Crete.

The modern rediscovery of ancient Crete was in great measure the work of Sir Arthur Evans, an English author and adventurer who came to archaeology in middle age. Starting in 1894 and for several decades thereafter, Evans excavated at various sites on Crete and there discovered the great Bronze Age civilization that he called Minoan, after the legendary king Minos, described by Homer, Herodotus and other Greek writers as the ruler of Crete in the period prior to the Trojan War. Among Evans's many important finds on Crete were several hundred clay tablets inscribed in two different, yet very similar, scripts. Evans called the older of the two scripts Linear A and the more recent one Linear B. Due to the number of signs in Linear A and Linear B, scholars assumed—correctly, as it turned out—that the two scripts were syllabaries and not alphabets—that is, each sign represented a syllable rather than a single letter.

Linear B was deciphered in the 1950s by the young and brilliant Michael Ventris (an architect by training), with the collaboration of John Chadwick (a professional philologian). Ventris and Chadwick showed that Linear B was Greek—not the classical Greek of the Iron Age (from 1200 B.C.E. onward), but an earlier variety from the Late Bronze Age (1550–1200 B.C.E.), which they called Mycenaean Greek. They presented their work in *Documents in Mycenaean Greek* (1956), a volume that was enthusiastically received and that opened many new avenues in the study of ancient Greek language and culture.

Gordon obtained his copy of *Documents in Mycenaean Greek* in December 1956 and immediately set out to decipher Linear A. His method was to apply the values of the Linear B signs, as determined by Ventris and Chadwick, to the Linear A texts.

Actually, Ventris and Chadwick had begun to do the same thing and had come to realize that the words in Linear A were not Greek but rather reflected some other language. Among the words that Ventris and Chadwick recognized on Linear A tablets were names for four kinds of vessels: *qa-pa, su-pu, ka-ro-pa and su-pa-ra*. They knew that these were words for vessels because they were followed by the pictograph for "pot" (circled in the drawing, opposite, left). They also deduced that the word for "total" in Linear A was *ku-ro* because this word was used repeatedly at the end of administrative tablets (opposite, right).

Gordon immediately identified the words followed by the pot pictograph as names of vessels in such Semitic languages as Hebrew, Akkadian and Ugaritic. Gordon equated *qa-pa* with Hebrew and Ugaritic *kp* and Akkadian *kappu; su-pu* with Hebrew and Ugaritic *sp; ka-ro-pa* with Akkadian *karpu* and Ugaritic *krpn* (the predecessor, incidentally, of "carafe"); and *su-pa-ra* with Hebrew and Ugaritic *spl* (the Linear A and B scripts do not distinguish l and r). The word for "total," *ku-ro*, was obviously Semitic *kull* (again, with no distinction between l and r in the script).

Gordon continued to search for further connections between Linear A and Semitic. A startling example was the presence of the word *ya-ne* on a wine pithos (storage jar) from Knossos, on Crete (opposite, top), clearly the Minoan form of the West Semitic word for "wine," as in Hebrew *yayin* and Ugaritic *yn*.

Gordon published a series of articles in the late 1950s and early 1960s arguing that the Minoan language was Semitic, with its closest relatives in the West Semitic branch. His work on the subject culminated in the monograph *Evidence for the Minoan Language* (1966).

Gordon's view of Linear A led him to a very significant—but much disputed—conclusion: The Minoans, the creators of the high civilization of ancient Crete, were Semites. In fact, this would be in keeping with the ancient Greek tradition that Minos was brought to Crete by Zeus from Phoenicia. Gordon further believes that the Minoans played a key role in the interaction between Greek and Hebrew civilizations, a subject that has formed a major area of research during his career.

I hasten to add that most scholars have not accepted Gordon's interpretation of Minoan Linear A as Semitic. Some believe that the material is Anatolian (a branch of Indo-European that includes Hittite, Luwian et al.), while other scholars believe the question cannot be answered given the limited evidence. But the data we have just reviewed are, in my opinion, plain and straightforward. The most telling objection to Gordon's work is the view that the Minoans could not have been Semites simply because it could not be so. The prevailing attitude, that the Semites were landlubbers, associated more with the desert than with the sea, helped to foster this disbelief. But such closed-mindedness is the antithesis of scholarship, especially as practiced by Cyrus Gordon throughout his remarkable career. He taught his students, of which I am one, to follow the evidence wherever it should lead. And if the above sampling of words from Minoan Linear A points in the direction of Semitic, then such is the path that one should follow.

> *For a more detailed survey of Gordon's work on Minoan, see Gary Rendsburg, "'Someone Will Succeed in Deciphering Minoan': Cyrus H. Gordon and Minoan Linear A,"* Biblical Archaeologist *59:1 (1996), pp. 36–43. For more on the phonology of Minoan ya-ne and the comparative Ugaritic evidence, see Rendsburg, "Monophthongization of* aw/ay > â *in Eblaite and in Northwest Semitic," in Eblaitica: Essays on the* Ebla Archives and Eblaite Language*, ed. Cyrus Gordon and Rendsburg (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 1990), 2 vols., pp. 91–126, esp. pp. 96–97.*

Footnotes:

a. See Shlomo Bunimovitz, "How Mute Stones Speak: Interpreting What We Dig Up," **BAR** 21:02; and Joseph A. Callaway, "Sir Flinders Petrie: Father of Palestinian Archaeology," **BAR** 06:06.

b. See David A. Traill and Igor Bogdanov, "Heinrich Schliemann: Improbable Archaeologist," *Archaeology Odyssey*, July/August 1999.

c. In 1894 Alfred Dreyfus, a Jewish captain in the French army, was convicted of treason and sentenced to life imprisonment on Devil's Island. His conviction was motivated by anti-Semitism, which was then rampant in the French military. Ultimately it was shown that Dreyfus's conviction was based on forged documents. In 1906 a French court exonerated him, and he was reinstated in the army.

d. Other sources confirm the accuracy of these statements.—Hershel Shanks.

e. See "Abraham's Ur: Did Woolley Excavate the Wrong Place?" **BAR** 26:01; Edward M. Luby, "The Ur-Archaeologist: Leonard Woolley and the Treasures of Mesopotamia," **BAR** 23:02; Cyrus H. Gordon, "Where is Abraham's Ur?" **BAR** 03:02.

f. "Danaans and Danites—Were the Hebrews Greek?" **BAR** 02:02.

g. For another view, see P. Kyle McCarter, "Let's Be Serious About the Bat Creek Stone," **BAR** 19:04. See also J. Huston McCulloch, "The Bat Creek Inscription: Did Judean Refugees Escape to Tennessee?" **BAR** 19:04; and see letters in Queries & Comments, **BAR** 19:06.

h. See Frank M. Cross, "Phoenicians in Brazil?" **BAR** 05:01.

Endnotes:

1. See Peter C. Craigie, "The Tablets From Ugarit and Their Importance for Biblical Studies," **BAR** 09:05.

2. Gary A. Rendsburg, "'Someone Will Succeed in Deciphering Minoan': Minoan Linear A as a West Semitic Dialect," *Biblical Archaeologist*, 59:1 (1996), pp. 36–43, esp. p. 40.

3. See J. Huston McCulloch, "The Bat Creek Inscription: Did Judean Refugees Escape to Tennessee?" and P. Kyle McCarter, "Let's Be Serious About the Bat Creek Stone," **BAR** 19:04; letter by Robert R. Stieglitz and response by P. Kyle McCarter, Queries & Comments, **BAR** 19:06.

4. The quotes are from Gordon's autobiography, *A Scholar's Odyssey* (Atlanta, GA: Society of Biblical Literature, 2000), pp. 48, 53, 81, 84–85, 105.

5. *A Scholar's Odyssey*, pp. 1–2.

Reference for this article:

Shanks, Hershel. "Against the Tide: An Interview with Maverick Scholar Cyrus Gordon." *Biblical Archaeology Review*, Nov/Dec 2000, 52-63, 71. http://www.basarchive.org.proxy.libraries.rutgers.edu/bswbBrowse.asp?PubID=BSBA&Volume=26&Issue=6&ArticleID=4 (accessed 7/25/2011)