



A Minoan-Mycenaean scribal legacy for converting rough copies into fair copies

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A Minoan-Mycenaean scribal legacy for converting rough copies into fair copies

January 3, 2020 By Gregory Nagy listed under By Gregory Nagy

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2020.01.03 | By Gregory Nagy

§0. In an earlier work, Nagy 2011 (in the Bibliography), where I studied traces of dialectal variation in the Greek language as spoken in the Mycenaean era and as written by way of the so-called Linear B script, I argued that the scribes who used this script in that era could write their texts not only on sunbaked clay tablets but also on parchment, that is, on leather specially prepared to serve as a surface for writing. Since the production of parchment was and always has been quite “labor-intensive” and therefore very costly, the medium of baked clay would have been far more economical for the writing of rough drafts—or let me call them “rough copies.” By contrast, however, as I went on to argue, at least some “fair copies” of texts could have been written on rolls made of parchment. There is an irony built into this argument, since the same fires that destroyed the Mycenaean palaces toward the end of the second millennium BCE accidentally preserved the “rough copies,” written on clay, by way of fire-baking the clay. Thus the “rough copies” were accidentally converted into permanent records for us today, while whatever “fair copies” existed in the past would have gone up in flames, lost forever. But we may well ask: is there really any evidence for saying that Mycenaean texts written on parchment ever even existed? In the paper I already cited, I did in fact argue for the existence of such evidence, but now I will try to deepen my argument, and I will start by taking a closer look at a word attributed to speakers of Greek on the island of Cyprus—a word attested only in the post-Mycenaean era, dating only as far back as sometime around the middle of the first millennium BCE. This word, as I will show in more depth here, referred to a class of scribes who prided themselves on their practice of writing texts on rolls of parchment. In the illustration that introduces my posting here, I show a photograph of a Cypriot statue that I think represents such a scribe.



Limestone statue of a seated scribe. Metropolitan Museum of Art, Fifth Avenue, New York. Accession Number 74.51.2708. Provenience: Cyprus. Dated around the third century BCE. The seated figure is shown in the act of writing on a roll (that is, a “scroll”), with a writing-implement in his right hand. Some even think that this figure is not just any scribe—and that he is the god Apollo himself as a model for scribes. [Image](#) via the Met.

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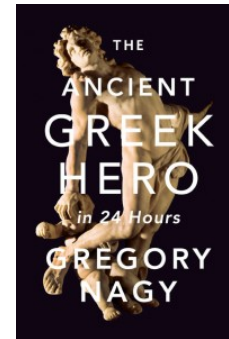
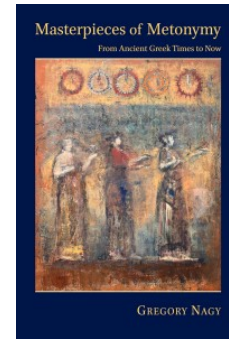
§1. The word for 'scribe' in the Greek language as spoken in Cyprus around the middle of the first millennium BCE is attested in an ancient dictionary attributed to Hesychius: what we read there is διφθεράλοιφος· γραμματοδιδάσκαλος παρὰ Κυπρίοις (the accentuation of διφθεράλοιφος has generally been emended to διφθεραλοιφός), which can be translated as 'diphtherāloiphós [means] teacher-of-letters [grámmata] among the Cypriotes'. In the work I cited at the beginning of my essay, Nagy 2011, I pointed out at §26 that this word *diphtherāloiphós* means, etymologically, 'parchment-painter', derived from a combination of the noun *diphthērā* 'leather, parchment' with the verb *aleiphein* 'dab' in the sense of 'paint with a brush-pen'. Also attested in Hesychius is ἀλειπ<τ>ήριον· γραφεῖον. Κύπριοι, which can be translated as 'aleiptērion [means] writing-implement [grapheion], [so say the] Cypriotes'. This word *aleiptērion* means, etymologically, 'painting-implement', and it too is derived, like the word *diphtherāloiphós*, from the verb *aleiphein* 'dab' in the sense of 'paint with a brush-pen'. And, I must add, the same word for 'scribe', *diphtherāloiphós*, is also attested in a Cypriote inscription from Marion, dated to the sixth century BCE (Egetmeyer 2010 I p. 170). This inscription, ICS 143 (Masson 1983:167–168, figure 37 plate XVIII:2), is written not alphabetically but syllabically, by way of the local syllabic script of the Cypriotes, and it marks the tomb of a man named Onasagoras son of Stasagoras; this man is described there as -ti-pe-te-ra-lo-i-po-ne, which spells in the Cypriote syllabary the Greek word *diphtherāloiphōn*, which would correspond to what could be written in alphabetic writing as "διφθεραλοιφών" (genitive singular -ō has a by-form -ōn in the Cypriote dialect).

§2. In the same work I cited at the beginning of my essay, Nagy 2011, I argued at §25 that we can reconstruct a Mycenaean heritage for the use of this Cypriote word for 'scribe', *diphtherāloiphós*, in the sense of 'parchment-painter' or, more generally, 'leather-painter'. I also argued there that the phonological shape of the component *diphthērā* 'leather, parchment' of *diphtherāloiphós*—literally, 'parchment-painter'—reveals a dialectal feature that I call "standard Mycenaean" as distinct from "substandard Mycenaean." That is to say, the noun διφθέρα/*diphthērā*, meaning 'leather' generally or 'parchment' more specifically, would have been **dephthērā* in "substandard Mycenaean," as we know from the fact that this noun διφθέρα/*diphthērā* 'leather' is derived via **depstērā* from the verb δέψω/*dépsō* (also δεψῶ/*depsō*) in the sense of 'tan hide'—as in the 'tanning' of leather or of that special kind of processed leather that we call parchment. Whereas all Greek dialects surviving into the post-Mycenaean era of the first millennium BCE represent, in terms of my argument, "substandard Mycenaean," the exceptional survival of "standard Mycenaean" words in that era points to a pattern of selective retention, by elites, of customs and practices that we can trace all the way back to a Mycenaean heritage. A case in point is the use of the word διφθέρα/*diphthērā* 'leather' with specific reference to the scribal practice of writing on parchment—a use that we see attested in the Cypriote word for 'scribe', *diphtherāloiphós*, in the etymological sense of 'parchment-painter'.

§3. Besides such specific evidence for the use of the word διφθέρα/*diphthērā* with reference to 'parchment' in the case of Cyprus in the first millennium BCE, there is also general evidence provided by Herodotus (5.58), who says that the word διφθέρα/*diphthērā* was used by the Ionian Greeks of Asia Minor with reference not only to 'parchment' but also to 'papyrus', βύβλος/*búblos* (5.58.3). Herodotus adds here a most telling observation: he says that the Ionian Greeks of Asia Minor in his day, that is, in the fifth century BCE, actually referred to papyrus as διφθέρα/*diphthērā*, and that they used parchment only in situations where papyrus was not available (again, 5.58.3). The implication here is quite clear: if scribes had access to papyrus, they would not need to use parchment. And such was the case, Herodotus is saying, in his own post-Mycenaean era, in the middle of the first millennium BCE. But why should Ionian Greeks in Asia Minor use a word that transparently means 'parchment' when they mean to say 'papyrus'? The answer, I propose, has to do with the prestige of the word διφθέρα/*diphthērā* with reference to scribal writing, and such prestige can be traced back to the Mycenaean era. I repeat here what I think is the essential fact: the word itself, διφθέρα/*diphthērā*, is a Mycenaean word, and we know this because the noun διφθέρα/*diphthērā* passes the phonological test for determining whether a given Greek word as attested in the first millennium BCE derives from the standard Mycenaean dialect of Greek as attested in the second millennium BCE. In the standard Mycenaean dialect, we see the linguistic innovation of raising *e* to *i* next to a bilabial. And such raising is precisely what we see in the form διφθέρα/*diphthērā* (in this case, the bilabial is *ph*). In substandard Mycenaean, we would expect the form **dephthērā*, which is not attested in the Linear B texts. By contrast, whereas the noun διφθέρα/*diphthērā* as attested in the first millennium BCE passes the test, so to speak, as a genuine inheritance from the Mycenaean era of the second millennium BCE, the corresponding verb δέψω/*dépsō* (also δεψῶ/*depsō*) fails the same test, with its original *e* left unraised. Also failing the test is the residual noun δέψα/*dépsa*, attested as an entry in the *Lexicon* attributed to Zonaras, where it is glossed as βύρσα/*búrsa* 'hide'.

§4. As I argued further in my earlier work, Nagy 2011 §27, the noun διφθέρα/*diphthērā* in the sense of 'parchment' maintained its prestige as a survival from the standard Mycenaean dialect, referring as it did to the elite activity of scribes writing on parchment, while the corresponding verb δέψω/*dépsō* (also δεψῶ/*depsō*) in the sense of 'tan hide' carried no such prestige, since it would have been a substandard word in the dialectal world of the Mycenaean era of the second millennium BCE—and in fact this word remained substandard in all the dialects of the first millennium, continuing to refer as it did to the non-elite activity of tanners tanning hides—whether or not any of these hides ever underwent the additional processing required to produce the smooth surface of parchment used by scribes for writing their texts. Unlike the elite activity of scribes writing on parchment, the activity of tanners would have been clearly non-elite: the work of tanners, even in the manufacture of such an exalted medium as parchment, was and still is a dirty and malodorous business, what with the need for soaking the hides in pungent solvents and then scraping the leftover flesh and follicles respectively from the inner and the outer sides of skin flayed from carcasses of slaughtered goats, sheep, and cattle.

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§5. What I have just said about the prestige of parchment as an exalted medium for scribal writing is not meant to discount the prestige of papyrus as a rival medium in the ancient world. Even the primary Greek word used for papyrus in the first millennium BCE, βύβλος/*búblos*, conveys a sense of the genuine prestige at work here: this word is derived from the name of the great Phoenician seaport of Βύβλος/*Búblos*/Byblus, prime mediator of papyrus exported from Egypt. In the passage I cited earlier from Herodotus (5.58.3), where he says that Ionian Greeks in Asia Minor preferred to use papyrus over parchment and that Greeks in general used parchment only when papyrus was not available, the historian goes out of his way to accentuate the prestige of γράμματα ... φοινικῆια / *grámmata ... phoinikēia* 'Phoenician letters' (5.58.2).

§6. Here I return to the illustration I chose for the introduction to this essay. We saw there a photograph of a statue found in Cyprus and dating from around the third century BCE, showing a seated scribe in the act of writing on a roll. I should add that there is a number of other such Cypriote statues attested, likewise showing seated scribes in the act of writing on a roll. So, given that the population of Cyprus in the first millennium BCE was a mixture of Phoenician as well as Greek cities, the question arises: would these writers be imagined as using the syllabic script inherited by the Greeks of that island—a script that was morphologically cognate with the Linear A and Linear B scripts of the second millennium BCE—or, alternatively, would they be using the Greek alphabet, borrowed in the first millennium BCE from the alphabetic writing of the neighboring Phoenicians? My answer is this: such scribes as represented by these statues would be using the Greek Cypriote syllabic script, and the rolls on which they were writing their texts would be rolls of parchment—given that the native Greek Cypriote word for 'scribe', as we have already seen, was *diphtheráloiphós* or 'parchment-painter'. The evidence of this word is most telling, since the native Greek-speaking populations of ancient Cyprus retained a syllabic script for the writing of their dialect, Cypriote Greek. Alphabetic writing, derived from the Phoenicians, was introduced in Greek-speaking zones of Cyprus only after the local Cypriote dialect was replaced by the universalizing Koinē Greek of the Hellenistic age and beyond.

§7. Aside from Cyprus, however, in all other parts of the Mediterranean world, syllabic writing had become extinct after the collapse of the Mycenaean Empire, and it was replaced by alphabetic writing derived from the Phoenicians, starting already in the early centuries of the first millennium BCE. To illustrate as briefly as possible the new prestige of Greek-speaking scribes who wrote Greek texts in Phoenician letters, I cite the inscription SEG 27:361 from Lyttos in Crete, dated around 500 BCE, where the word for a public scribe named Spensithios is νοινικαστας/*phoinikastās*, that is, 'the one who writes in Phoenician letters' (for incisive commentary, I recommend Detienne 1988b:83–85).

§8. Still, what we have read in Herodotus (5.58.3) about the usage of the Greek Ionians of Asia Minor in referring to papyrus as *diphthērā*, which should really mean 'parchment', does not apply to the overall situation in Cyprus, where, exceptionally, scribes were directly associated with writing on parchment, using a syllabic script that was morphologically cognate, as I already noted, with Linear B—and even with Linear A (though the language represented by the second of those two scripts was not the language of the Mycenaeans).

§9. So, what we see represented by Cypriote statues showing scribes in the act of writing on a roll must have been imagined as writing on parchment, not on papyrus. A case in point is the illustration that I showed at the beginning of this essay, even though we cannot tell the difference here, on the surface, between papyrus and parchment. Since rectangular cuts of parchment could be glued or sewn together to form a roll that looks just like a roll of papyrus, which would be glued together in similar fashion, I have no doubt that the attested Cypriote sculptures showing scribes in the act of writing were seen as representations of writing on parchment, not papyrus. Either way, though—whether the roll we see in such representations is parchment or papyrus—my argument remains the same: the very act of writing on a roll derives its prestige ultimately from the Mycenaean era.

§10. So far, however, I have not adduced any archaeological evidence for Mycenaean uses of parchment as a medium for preserving "fair copies" of texts originally written in clay as "rough copies." In my previous work, Nagy 2011 §26, I did manage to cite evidence for Minoan uses of parchment, but not for Mycenaean uses. The relevant Minoan evidence I cited back then came from an article by the archaeologist Judith Weingarten (1983a; also relevant is her book, Weingarten 1983b), who showed that scribes in the Minoan palace at Zakros in Crete must have produced texts that were written on parchment. The modus operandi, it appears, for those scribes was to write texts on parchment for longer-term archival records, sealed and identified by way of sealings attached to such records—as opposed to their use of clay tablets for producing shorter-term records. The state of affairs is admirably summarized by Thomas Palaima (2003:171), who writes: "We do have evidence for the use of parchment documents in association with Minoan flat-based nodules" (citing Hallager 1997 I 135–58 and Weingarten 1983b). Palaima adds (p. 171n28): "[as of 2003] 708 of these 'document sealings' are known from nine Minoan sites on Crete."

§11. Further evidence can be cited concerning scribal uses of the Linear A script for writing on parchment as well as on clay tablets. In particular, I have in mind an article by the archaeologist Ilse Schoep (2019) focusing on seals and sealings used by scribes working at the various palaces in operation throughout the island of Crete during the era known as "Late Minoan IB," which came to an end around the beginning of the fifteenth century BCE: during that era, texts having to do with localized economic and administrative concerns were written on clay tablets, while texts having to do with more regional concerns, as Schoep reconstructs such concerns, were probably written on parchment and then sealed. To quote the wording of Schoep (2019:216–217), such texts would have been written on "perishable material, probably [...] parchment." I would not rule out, however, the possibility that such perishable material as used for such texts could also have been, at least in some cases, papyrus instead of parchment.

Odysseus **Odyssey** Olympia
Pausanias Phaedra Pindar Plato
Poetics **Sappho** Theseus weaving
Zeus

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§12. I infer that the Linear B scribes of the Mycenaean era followed an analogous procedure: they would write their temporary records on clay tablets, and some of those records would then be rewritten on parchment and then sealed. I cite the relevant comments of Jan Driessen (1994–1995:244), with specific reference to the “Archives Complex” of Pylos, which he describes as “chronologically limited and transitional central depositories with an interrelated series of current records which were meant to be reviewed and selected before copying onto perishable material and disposal of the clay records.” Thomas Palaima (2003:171) has this to say about this description by Driessen: “The arguments for another stage of information processing and storage beyond the clay-tablet stage in the AC [= Archives Complex] are reasonable and based on an understanding of formal aspects of Linear B script and document typology, and on administrative considerations.” That said, however, Palaima (again 2003:171) does not rule out an opposite interpretation, represented by John Bennet (2001:27), who argues that there is “no compelling need for a further stage of documentation on a perishable medium such as papyrus or parchment” and certainly no level of economic planning “in addition to the ‘one-year window’ attested on clay.”

§13. In any case, as Thomas Palaima also observes, the conservatism of the Linear B script as a cursive medium not suited for writing on clay remains a primary reason for thinking that the script itself had been designed for writing on parchment. I quote his elegant formulation (again, Palaima 2003:171): “The written forms of the characters of the script are cursive and complex, and as such better suited to writing with pen or brush and ink or paint, as in the stirrup-jar inscriptions. These elaborate forms are retained over time without the kind of simplification that would have made writing on clay easier (contrast the development of cuneiform or even the post-archaic classes of Cypro-Minoan script). One way of explaining such conservatism is to posit the existence of ‘pen or brush’ writing on ephemeral documents of a ‘higher order’ (economic or otherwise), to which writing on clay would then have conformed and which would have exerted a constant conservative ‘cursive’ influence on the styles of writing that scribes used when they wrote on clay.”

§14. Palaima (again, 2003:171) follows up this formulation by citing the evidence for the use of parchment documents in association with Minoan sealing types known as flat-based nodules, and I have already referred to his citation at §10 above. And then he concludes by saying (again, p. 171): “Although this sealing type disappears in the Mycenaean period, this has to do with changes in prevailing transactional and administrative systems and not, one would think, with the total elimination of ‘pen or brush’ writing.” For other formulations that leave the door open to the possibility of such ‘fair copy’ writing in the Mycenaean world, I cite Duhoux 2008:313; also Driessen 2008 71–72 (with specific reference to the Room of the Chariot Tablets in Knossos).

§15. In the Mycenaean bureaucracy as I reconstruct it overall, an official who would be primarily responsible for producing “fair copy” on sealed texts written on parchment would have had an honorific title, and I propose that the word for such a title is actually attested in Linear B texts preserved by the fires that burned down the palace at Pylos around 1200 BCE. Specifically, I have in mind a word we read in the texts of the Pylos tablets Ea 814, Fn 50, Un 219: the word is di-pte-ra-po-ro, which I interpret as *diphtherāphōros*, meaning ‘the bearer of the parchment [*diphthērā*]’, that is, the one who carries, in processions on ceremonial occasions, the sealed documents for which he is responsible. In an engaging article, Jörg Weilhartner (2014) has already argued that this word refers to the carrying of *diphthērai* as ‘leather’ in processions, thus disagreeing with an earlier article, by Jean-Pierre Olivier (1959), who interpreted the Mycenaean word *diphtherāphōros* to mean ‘wearer of leather’, comparing figures who are represented as wearing leather in paintings on the sides of the so-called Hagia Triada sarcophagus, dating from the fourteenth century BCE. I find the interpretation of Weilhartner more plausible, given the semantic parallelism of the title *diphtherāphōros* with other titles that convey the idea of carrying objects in ceremonial processions. A striking example is the title ka-ra-wi-po-ro, applied to women in texts written on Pylos tables Ae 110, Ed 317, Jn 829, Ep 704, Vn 48. This word can be interpreted as *klāwiphōros*, meaning ‘the bearer of the key [or, more accurately, of the bolt]’, that is, the one who carries in ceremonial processions the ‘key’ meant for opening special rooms where special things are kept under lock and key, as it were.

§16. What I add here to the arguments of Weilhartner (2014) is that the leather being carried in ceremonial processions by the official with the title *diphtherāphōros* is specially prepared leather, that is, parchment used for writing “fair copies.” Relevant to this argument of mine is an article by Stavroula Nikoloudis (2012), who shows that the involvement of the *diphtherāphōros* in the text of Pylos tablet Ea 814 has to do with the actual tanning of leather. Perhaps, I ask myself, this involvement also has to do somehow with an interest in getting the best quality of leather for the specialized production of parchment?

§17. In the posting that follows this one, I will have more to say about the uses of parchment, concentrating on the first millennium BCE, with special attention paid to the usage of the word *grammatistēs* by Plato (analysis by Vegetti 1988) and by Herodotus (analysis by Detienne 1988).

§18. Before I close here, I need to offer special thanks to Rachele Pierini for all the valuable help she has given me in putting together my argumentation.

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