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Niels Bantelmann · Bernhard Hänsel
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A Linear A Text on a Clay Reel from Drama, South-East Bulgaria?¹

by Alexander Fol, Sofia, and Rüdiger Schmitt, Saarbrücken

KEY-WORDS:

Bulgarien; Thrakien; Drama; Späthelladisch III; Tonspule; Linearschrift A.
Bulgaria; Thracia; Drama; Late Helladic III; clay reel; Linear A script.
Bulgarie; Thrace; Drama; Helladique Récent III; bobine; écriture linéaire A.

During the excavations at Drama, district of Yambol (SE Bulgaria) in 1996 there was uncovered a clay reel, in the middle section of which five signs are engraved retrograde. The first three signs can be identified with those of the Minoan Linear A writing system (AB 01–51–301 ...); sign A 301, which is restricted to Linear A, rules out the possibility that the text is belonging to Linear B. The last two signs remain problematic, however; in this respect the new text is not an inscription in ‘classical’ Linear A. The find from Drama (of Late Helladic III B/C or even earlier date) is enlarging the dossier of Linear A texts from the regions outside the Aegean proper, as they are known from Samothrace and from the western coast of Asia Minor (Troy, Miletus). In the following article the epigraphic and historical problems of this new find are discussed in full detail.

Bei den Ausgrabungen in Drama (Bezirk Jambol, SO-Bulgarien) wurde 1996 eine Tonspule gefunden, in deren Mittelteil fünf Zeichen retrograd eingraviert sind. Die ersten drei Zeichen lassen sich der minoischen Linearschrift A zuweisen (AB 01–51–301 ...); das auf Linear A beschränkte Zeichen A 301 schließt die Zugehörigkeit des Textes zum Linear B-Corpus aus. Die letzten zwei Zeichen bleiben dagegen problematisch; insofern liegt hier keine Inschrift in ‘klassischem’ Linear A vor. Der Fund von Drama (Späthelladisch III B/C oder früher) erweitert das Dossier der Linear A-Texte von außerhalb der Ägäis, wie sie bisher aus Samothrake und von der kleinasiatischen Küste (Troja, Milet) bekannt sind. Die epigraphischen und historischen Probleme, die der Fund aufwirft, werden hier eingehend und umfassend diskutiert.

En 1996, lors des fouilles de Drama (district de Jambol, Sud-Est de la Bulgarie), on a trouvé une bobine en terre cuite portant en son milieu cinq signes gravés en sens inverse. Les trois premiers signes sont attribuables au linéaire A des Minoens (AB 01–51–301...); le signe A 301 limité au linéaire A exclue toute appartenance de ce texte au corpus du linéaire B. Par contre, les deux derniers signes restent problématiques. Nous ne sommes donc pas en présence d’une inscription en linéaire A “classique”. La trouvaille de Drama (Helladique récent III B/C ou plus tôt) élargit le dossier des textes en linéaire A provenant de l’extérieur de la Mer Egée comme ceux de Samothrace et de la côte d’Asie Mineure (Troie, Milet). Les problèmes épigraphiques et historiques soulevés par cette découverte sont discutés de manière approfondie.

The Bulgarian-German archaeological expedition, which under the direction of Alexander Fol (Sofia) and Jan Lichardus (Saarbrücken) since 1983 has been working at Drama, district of Yambol (South-East Bulgaria),

has excavated among others an antique cemetery on the elevation called Kajrjaka south-east of the village².

In the area of ‘Construction B’, a sanctuary, which was in function from the middle of the 2nd millennium to the 1st century B. C., in September 1996 there has been uncovered a pierced clay reel with irregular ends (3.2 cm. high and measuring 2.65 and 2.6 cm. in dia-

¹ The archaeological parts of this paper are by Alexander Fol, the epigraphic commentary is by Rüdiger Schmitt, who is also responsible for the final English version. The authors owe Professor Louis Godart (Rome and Naples) a great debt of gratitude for his most competent advice about the inscription published here and his detailed comments (per litteras) on an earlier version of this paper.

² For a report on the excavations up to 1995 see Lichardus et al. 1996, esp. 50 ff. and the maps on figs. 1 (p. 11) and 38 (p. 108).

meter at the ends), which was completely preserved and in all probability was worn on a necklace. In its middle section several signs are engraved (see fig. 1 and 2). The reel cannot be dated with certainty, since it was found not within a particular stratigraphic layer, but within a deposit and thus clearly in a secondary location, in area C 08 outside the Iron Age stone circle 'Object 26', about 50 cm. below the surface³. So by analogy with other finds from Drama-Kajrjaka one may think of L(ate) H(elladic) IIIB/C, but also of an earlier period (i. e., 15th/14th century or even earlier).

The decisive question raised by the signs which can be made out is, whether or not they are characters of some writing system. Since in case of a favourable answer this object will be most significant historically and will be used without doubt as basis for far-reaching conclusions or hypotheses, it is imperative (even more than usual) to weight the pros and cons most carefully. It must be admitted that such carved signs (graffiti) on small objects only very rarely are actual writing at all and that on the contrary one has to do nearly always with simple "decorative" motives that are engraved. In view of this fact there is little hope that one may find an inscription on such an object. But it must be added at once that the quite asymmetric and hardly decorative drawings on this particular reel do not give the impression, that one has to do with mere ornament there.

Before we look at the signs on the clay reel found at Drama, it seems advisable to range a little wider. In general terms it may be said that theoretically the prerequisites are given to connect the signs of the Drama reel with those of any of the so-called Minoan scripts⁴, since Mycenaean cultural influences can be detected on the Thracian coast and in Bulgaria quite well (cf. Tončeva 1973; Katinčarov 1979; Fol 1991). With special regard to Drama it must be emphasized that potsherds have been uncovered in the area of 'Construction B' of Drama-Kajrjaka, which obviously coming from imported vessels could be identified as Late Mycenaean and assigned to the period LH IIIC (see Lichardus et al. 1996, 101; 133). From the samples analysed with regard to the composition of the clay used for them it could be established that "ein Produktionsort in Kleinasien oder auf einer der nahegelegenen, vorgelagerten Inseln ist sehr wahrscheinlich" (ibid. 134), perhaps Miletus, but at any rate Ionia⁵. Next to the place where the reel has been found is grave no. 27 from the same period, where the only burial object⁶ was a small ascoid

pot of autochthonous fabrication, the date of which is corresponding to an earlier phase of the Mycenaean period, archaeological finds of which have scarcely been detected until now anywhere in Bulgaria (cf. Lichardus/Vladár 1996, 36 f.).

Moreover, already in 1965 by chance a bronze rapier of the so-called type A (now in the Museum of Nova Zagora) has come to light in Drama, in which likewise we have to see a testimony of Thracio-Mycenaean relations since the 16th century B. C. (see Kănčev/Kănčeva-Ruseva 1993). Also the pieces of painted pottery vessels and unpainted grey ware appearing in Drama find their next counterparts on the island of Thasos, in Troy and at the west coast of Anatolia. All those connections – one may compare fig. 3 with a map showing the places mentioned – seem to be favoured by the ancient prehistoric route from the Aegean along the rivers Hebros (now Maritsa) and Tonzos (now Tundža) to eastern Thrace⁷. From the village of Cherkovo, district of Burgas, i. e. from the same south-east Bulgarian cultural region, comes a copper bar in form of a fleece (containing also a number of signs), as they are known as objects of trade from Crete, too⁸.

As far as the spread of the Minoan scripts is concerned, there are earlier studies at hand like Buchholz 1971 or Vladár/Bartoněk 1977. The two scholars from then Czechoslovakia followed mainly the spread of those scripts to the northern neighbours in the Bronze Age, and special emphasis was placed by them on the objects found at Vatin (Serbia), a small clay disc and a whorl with linear signs seeming to be characters⁹. The resemblance to signs of the Minoan linear scripts is far greater, however, in the case of the Drama reel, in accordance with the shorter distance from the northern Aegean.

It is known that Linear A has spread more widely to regions outside the Aegean proper than the other Minoan scripts including Linear B. Even for that reason the thought suggests itself to interpret the signs on the Drama reel as Linear A signs and not as Linear B. And though far more than 95 per cent of the Linear A documents come from Crete, such evidence¹⁰ is available all the same from a number of other Aegean islands (Cythera, Thera, Melos, and Keos) and here and there on the Peloponnese (in Laconian Hagios Stephanos, in Tir-

³ See Lichardus et al. 1996, 77 ff. and the enclosed plan no. 6.

⁴ For the pre-alphabetic writing systems of the Aegean different collective terms are in use, e. g. Aegean or Cretan scripts. In this paper they are named 'Minoan scripts'.

⁵ Cf. also Lichardus/Vladár 1996, 38 for the overall context.

⁶ See Lichardus et al. 1996, 101 ff. with fig. 36.

⁷ For this route see Fol 1982.

⁸ See the publication by Karajotov 1978 (who tends towards dating that piece to the middle of the 2nd millennium B. C.); a good reproduction is in Velkov 1979, 120.

⁹ Cf. Vladár/Bartoněk 1977, 391 with fig. 22.

¹⁰ The places, where Linear A inscriptions have been found, are shown on the map in Niemeier 1996, 99. Most important is, however, the list of the non-Cretan Linear A documents compiled by Godart 1994 b, 712 ff.; to this should be added that the Thera ostrakon THE Zb 5 has been edited by Michailidou 1995.

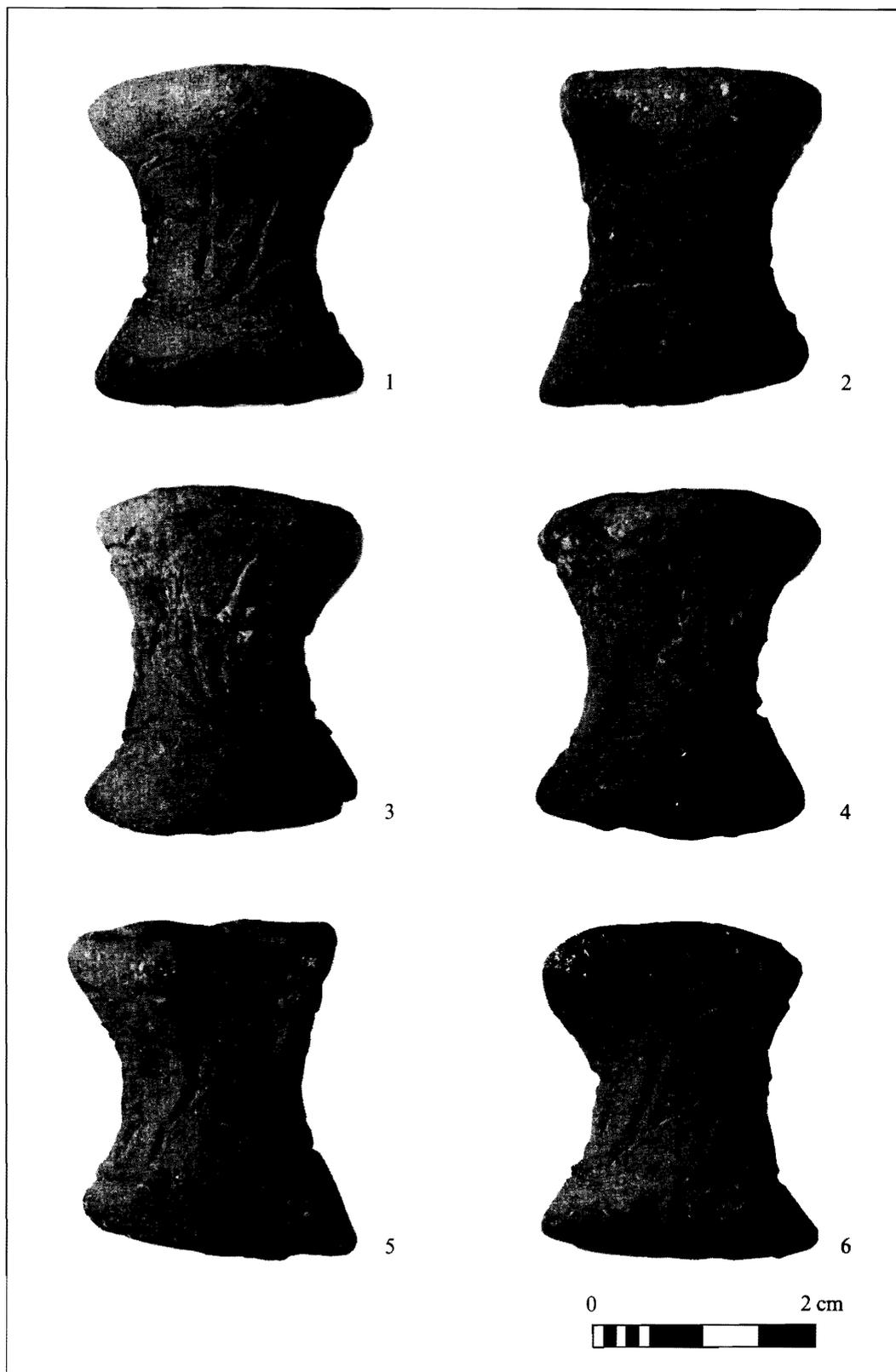


Fig. 1. Drama-Kajrjaka. Clay reel with linear inscription

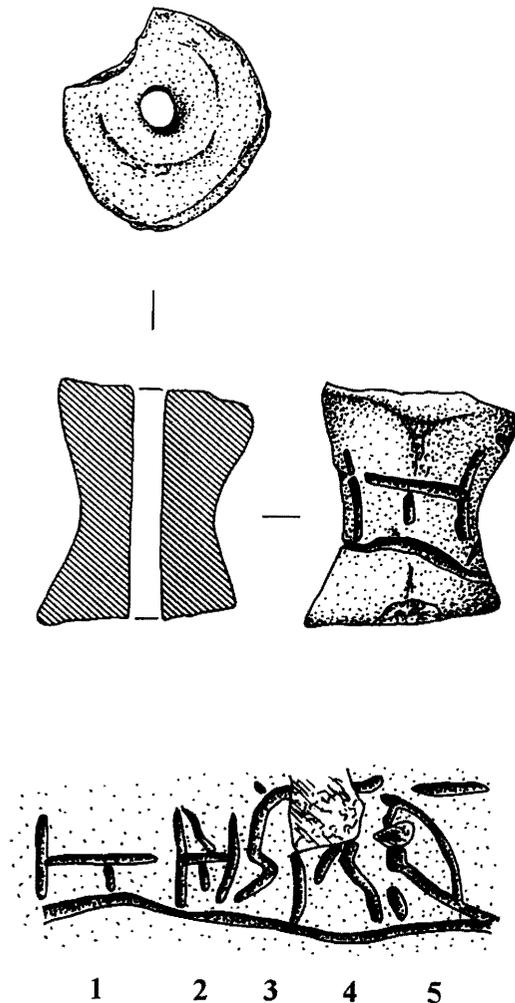


Fig. 2. Drama-Kajrjaka. Clay reel with linear inscription (with the inscription turned into dextroverse)

yns, and Mycenae¹¹). Add to this that – contrary to Linear A which is attested on all sorts of objects – Linear B is found only on documents of archives and on vases. Moreover, Linear B must be excluded here by the very fact (which will be discussed in more detail below) that one of the three identifiable signs does not occur in the Linear B syllabary at all.

Recently Linear A documents have been found – and in this respect the situation has changed since 1985¹² – on the island of Samothrace and at sites on the western coast of Asia Minor, viz. in Miletus and Troy. The Milesian inscription found in 1994, which has been published by its discoverer as “the first secure Linear A

¹¹ For the last-named place cf., with the necessary reservations, Vladár/Bartoněk 1977, 399 fig. 33 and pp. 402 ff.

¹² Godart 1994 b, 714 has emphasized this fact with reference to the final volume of the Linear A corpus, “GORILA 5” (Godart/Olivier 1985).



Fig. 3. Map showing the places mentioned in this paper

inscription found on the Anatolian mainland”¹³, is on a fragment of the belly of a large vessel (MIL Zb 1) uncovered in a deposit from about 1425 B. C. (see Niemeier 1996).

From Troy come two clay spindles (known already since Schliemann’s times) with five engraved signs, which only Godart 1994 a and 1994 b, 717 (cf. p. 722 fig. 5) has identified as Linear A documents (TRO Zg 1–2). It was he who could anchor them firmly to the corpus of the known Linear A inscriptions by stating the same digraphs (groups of signs) and thus showing the close relation to those texts.

Now can be added to all this material a small clay ball with three Linear A signs (SA Wc 1) found together with two hieroglyphic seal-impressions at Mikro Vouni on the island of Samothrace by D. Matsas¹⁴. Still more surprising is, however, a Linear A inscription (LACH Za 1) on a large “apparently locally-made” vessel dating “to the earlier part of the 12th century”, which has

¹³ Seemingly Niemeier 1996, 88 f. did not yet know of Godart 1994 a and 1994 b.

¹⁴ See Matsas 1991 (with drawing and photo on p. 170 f. figs. 15–17).

been found in Tel Lachish in 1987 (see Finkelberg et al. 1996).

It was on this base that Godart 1994 b, 717 could write: “Les limites géographiques dans lesquelles s’inscrivaient les trouvailles de textes en linéaire A en 1985 sont profondément élargies.” Just on that line initiating by the Samothracian and Trojan texts, which testify to the Minoan presence in the northern Aegean, the discovery of the clay reel of Drama-Kajrjaka is taking us a lot further. Since it is fitting quite well into the overall picture, it is of great historical importance.

With regard to chronology one text or the other out of these new Linear A documents may reach beyond the terminus ad quem usually given for Crete (ca. 1450 B. C.) down to the 14th or 13th century, e. g. the slate plaque from Haghios Stephanos (HS Zg 1)¹⁵. And Bartoněk 1993, 17 ff. (with fig. 2) does not rule out even the possibility, which is absolutely out of the question, however, that Linear A signs exist on a Cretan inscription of ca. 300 B. C. (supposedly from the Psykhro area). On that stone fragment three linear signs have been added afterwards by a second hand to an alphabetic, but non-Greek (perhaps Eteocretan) text¹⁶. The new-found texts from the ‘north’ seem to belong to earlier times, however, since the Trojan spindles and the Samothracian clay ball are dated to the 18th century B. C. (see Godart 1994 b, 715; 717 ff.)¹⁷.

One must not overlook that the new piece published here is in plain contrast to many of those graffiti. If one looks at the signs on the photographs or drawings available of the original reel or an impression of its inscription, with all necessary reservation and principal mistrust one has to acknowledge, however, the following facts:

1. It is obvious that we are in front of a sequence of five signs written retrograde. (This fact may [but must not] be interpreted as meaning that in the case of an impression of the object they appear in the ordinary dextroverse way.) See fig. 2.

2. The first three signs, which are not damaged and therefore can be read without great difficulty, correspond rather exactly to three Linear A signs, which are well known and clearly identified as such: the signs AB 01, AB 51, and A 301 according to the classification by Godart/Olivier 1985, XXII–XXVII.

¹⁵ Cf. Bartoněk 1993, 7.

¹⁶ This object has been dealt with in detail by Duhoux 1982, 95–111 and 328 fig. 27.

¹⁷ The pithos fragment from Tiryns TI Zb 1 comes from a LH IIIB2 context, i. e. 1300/1200 B. C. (cf. Olivier 1988, 255; 262 f.); therefore Olivier 1992, 447 did assume that the object is some centuries older and somehow has come into a younger 13th century context. But there are doubts whether this text is in Linear A at all (cf. Godart 1994 b, 715 ff. fn. 18).

3. It is much more difficult, however, to judge the last two signs. The damaged sign no. 4 eludes any assessment for the time being and does not allow any linking with some attested Linear A sign. Sign no. 5 is rather problematic, too. One might suppose that it bears a vague resemblance to (particular variants of) the sign AB 79. This idea remains so uncertain, however, that it should not be pursued any further.

Besides it must be noted (mainly in view of the second point), that the concave form of the surface is not particularly suited for signs being engraved. Thus it is small wonder that the signs on the Drama reel are not in full agreement with the standard forms of the Linear A signs. On the contrary, they add further variants to those attested before in great number¹⁸ without showing, however, variations going beyond those already known.

Nevertheless one should indicate by the dots customary in such cases that in view of the unusual character of the medium and consequently of the inscription itself the document is somewhat uncertain. So the beginning of the text reads AB 01-51-301 ...

As especially Godart 1994 b has emphasized and made clear by examples, in the case of such isolated finds from outside Crete one has to examine thoroughly, whether the sign combinations (digraphs etc.) noticed there do recur in ‘good’ unquestionable Cretan Linear A texts (mainly the archive texts from Haghia Triada etc.). The identification of such a document as a Linear A text gains much plausibility, if it is supported by the structural uniformity within the Linear A corpus as such. So for the present case we have both to record and to underline the fact that at least¹⁹ the initial digraph 01-51 occurs also in Knossos and Haghia Triada (initially, to be precise): 01-51-73-24 in KN Zf 31, and 01-51-80-59 in HT 95 (cf. Godart/Olivier 1985, 141)²⁰.

Since the first three signs of the (retrograde) graffito on the Drama clay reel may be interpreted as Linear A signs and show an initial digraph attested elsewhere, we are fully entitled to reckon with a Linear A inscription despite all scepticism which might be legitimate. As already indicated above, the idea of considering the inscription in question as Linear B is excluded by the very fact that the sign A 301 is restricted to Linear A and does not occur in Linear B. This is confirmed by the fact that also the digraph 01–51, which according to the values of the Linear B syllabary would be *da-du-*, apparently is not attested as word-initial in the corpus of Linear B texts.

¹⁸ See the full survey in Godart/Olivier 1985, XXVIII–LII.

¹⁹ The sign A 301 is attested far more rarely than the other two, so that it is not astonishing that we cannot indicate a matching sign combination.

²⁰ We find it also in medial position, 03-59-01-51-29-27], in HT Zb 160; cf. Godart/Olivier 1985, 143.

Thus this new Linear A text, to which we may give the label "DRA Zg 1", is to be read in its entirety as AB 01-51-301- [•]-[•]

If we have to do here with a Linear A document – as there may be good reason to assume –, theoretically there are left open various interpretations: One may think that the piece itself has been imported from the (northern) Aegean, though the somewhat rough fabrication of the reel is in favour of a production by 'barbarians'. Therefore one might think of a local imitation of an imported piece as the most likely interpretation; then the inscription, too, may imitate the signs seen on such an import, as is the case in a number of other such pseudo-inscriptions which have been made by people unable to write. But there is no doubt that one may consider also other possibilities. It seems quite unlikely, however, chiefly because of the isolation of the Drama find, that we have to reckon with an actual knowledge of the Linear A script by the people of the Tundža valley.

The interpretation of this text as a Linear A document now raises another problem, that of its date. One has to take into consideration, however, that this clay reel comes from a deposit and has been uncovered in secondary location. Therefore it may well belong to a period older than LH IIIB/C, i. e. to an age for which we have to reckon with an actual use of Linear A. Even if Linear A has not been used in the Cretan archives beyond the end of Late Minoan IB, basically there is no reason why we might not assume that the script continued to be used occasionally in 'non-official' texts, as it has been supposed recently also for the statuette with inscription from Poros²¹. All this means, however, that we are not forced to assume an engraver, who has borrowed some signs from an older stock of signs, of which in a strange way he had got some knowledge, or who has copied signs related to the Minoan writing systems, but lacking any phonetic value after having been borrowed²².

At any rate it must be admitted that among the attested Linear A documents there is no other item which could be compared closely with the reel found at Drama-Kajrjaka and that this piece does not fit into the categories of Linear A texts known from outside Crete. It cannot be judged therefore to be an inscription in 'classical' Linear A²³.

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²¹ Cf. Dimopoulou/Olivier/Réthémotakis 1993, 515.

²² In that case we would not really have an inscription, but only something produced with intent to decorate the object according to a model with an authentic Linear A inscription.

²³ This judgement meets with Professor Godart's approval, too.

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Prof. Dr. Alexander Fol, Bălgarska Akademija na Naukite, Institut po trakologija, Moskovska ul. 13, 1000 Sofija, Bulgarien;
Prof. Dr. Rüdiger Schmitt, Universität des Saarlandes, Institut für Vergleichende Indogermanische Sprachwissenschaft und Indoiranistik, Postfach 151150, 66041 Saarbrücken