

PROFESSOR ALICE KOBER

1907- May 16, 1950

By Laura A. Voight

Professor Alice Kober was an important force in the world of ancient Minoan and Greek studies. Though technically trained as a classicist, her endeavors unquestionably fostered the understanding of various archaeological contexts. Professor Kober's life-work reflects her dedication to the ancient field in general, as well as to cultivating sound teaching environments at her university and aiding in the preparation of examinations in Braille for blind students(1).

Dr. Alice Kober, born in 1907, attended Hunter College in New York as an undergraduate, majoring in classics and graduating in 1928. While she taught classics at Hunter College from 1928 to 1930, she also, remarkably, worked on her Ph.D. in Classics at Columbia University. During her studies as both undergraduate and graduate student, Ms. Kober explored diverse avenues, from astronomy and mathematics to the natural sciences, never limiting herself to the classics. Dr. Kober completed her doctorate in 1932, at which time she accepted a position in the Brooklyn College Classics Department. In 1936, she was made Assistant Professor, and on January 1, 1950, the year she died, she received the position of Associate Professor. Alice Kober was only 43 when she passed away from an undiagnosed illness contracted a year earlier. Despite her determination to cure herself through rigorous diets, Dr. Kober's health only continued to fail. In the summer of 1949, Dr. Kober underwent an exploratory surgery ~~with~~^{7/4} no avail. According to her obituaries, however, she remained hopeful until the end that she

could eventually return to her teaching and research. Dr. Kober never married, but appears to have been very close with her brother, William Kober.

As a graduate student at Columbia University, Alice Kober was a diligent and hard-working student. Her dissertation, entitled "The Use of Color Terms in the Greek Poets, Including all the Poets from Homer to 146 B.C. except the Epigrammatists," was submitted under the direction of Professor Charles Knapp, her advisor, as well as Professors La Rue Van Hook, Clarence Young, and Wilbert Carr. In her own words, "the purpose of this dissertation is to collect within a small compass the various color terms used by the Greek poets, ... and to classify the instances of the use of each term according to the objects to which it was applied by those poets...." The dissertation, dedicated to her parents, was published by the W.H. Humphrey Press of Geneva and New York, in 1932.

Her archaeological experience did not begin until 1936, when she excavated with a field group in Chaco Canyon through the University of New Mexico. In 1939, Dr. Kober developed her classical archaeological training, excavating in Greece with the American School of Classical Studies in Athens. Perhaps it was then that she realized what could be her greatest contribution to the field of archaeology as a classicist: aiding to decode the Minoan writing system. Dr. Kober's agility in ancient languages, in addition to Greek and Latin, is shown by the vast number of those which she studied, beginning with Sanskrit. Dr. Kober was a member of the Hunter Chapter of the classical fraternity Eta Sigma Phi, whose members studied Sanskrit. Kober's interest in the language was more than passing, as she took advanced courses with Prof. Edgerton at the Linguistic Institute in 1941 and 1942, and at Yale from 1942 to 1945. She also took courses in Hittite, Old Persian,

Tocharian, Old Irish, Akkadian, Comparative Semitic Grammar, Sumerian, Chinese, and Basque. Apparently, her objective was to distinguish the structure of these unrelated writing systems, a process she believed would ultimately help her in deciphering her true special interest, the Minoan language.

Kober's life-work was impassioned by her desire to crack the Minoan codes, a desire she had had from her days as an undergraduate. As most of her knowledge of this language was self-taught, she began to attack it in a systematic and orderly fashion. Her first task completed was a catalogue of all non-Indo-European elements in the Greek vocabulary, with the hope of discovering Minoan correspondences. By 1944, Kober was publishing her findings on the Minoan script, which were met with overwhelming approval and acceptance. One important link to the archaeological world, was that from 1944 on, her publications were largely printed in the *AJA*, which better printed the necessary illustrations than the classical journals. Her articles were characterized by many in the field as having an 'absolute clarity,' and a 'painstaking accuracy.'

In 1946 she received the prestigious Guggenheim Fellowship, enabling her to travel to Crete and England to study Minoan scripts. Kober studied first hand, the inscriptions at Knossos, while in England, Kober studied with Dr. John Meyers of Oxford University. There, Kober had complete access to the vast amount of unpublished material left by the excavator of Knossos, Sir Arthur Evans. From her assiduous work during this fellowship, she compiled a systematic classification of the Knossosian documents. Though her premature death cut short her ability to complete her dream of actually deciphering the Cretan linear script, her contributions to it, and thus to

understanding the archaeological contexts of the Minoans, remain invaluable to the field.

Dr. Kober was actively involved in organizations pertaining to her interests, as a research assistant at the Minoan Research Center of the University Library at the University of Pennsylvania, and as a member of the American Oriental Society, the New York Classical Club, the Classical League, and the Archaeological Institute, for which she served on the Board of Advisory Editors of the *AJA*.

ENDNOTE

1) I would like to thank Holle Haswell, curator of Columbiana at Columbia University and Gerry Visco Capello, Departmental Administrator, Dept. of Classics at Columbia University for all of their cheerful assistance in locating bibliographical information on Alice Kober.

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