Kazantzakis the Cretan: versions of the Minoan past from the author of *Zorba the Greek**

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The most famous book by Nikos Kazantzakis has become known throughout the world by its translated title, which was also the title of the film based upon it: *Zorba the Greek*. To what extent that book, whose original title can be rendered as *Life and Opinions of Alexis Zorbas*, really does present an idealised type of the "modern Greek" is a discussion for another time. That is the way the book has been read, at least outside Greece; and its author

* This paper is intended to complement and extend my earlier discussion of aspects of the subject, treated in a different context: "Minoans in modern Greek literature", in: G. Hamilakis and N. Momigliano (eds.), *Archaeology and European Modernity: Producing and consuming the "Minoans"* = *Creta Antica* 7 (2006) 183-95. In order to avoid overlap between the two papers I have included here no more than a summary of my fuller discussion of Kazantzakis's *Odyssey* in the earlier paper. Unavoidably I have had to give some consideration here to passages from *Report to Greco* that were also discussed in the earlier paper; but here the conclusions reached are considerably amplified, and in some respects have had to be modified by research carried out in the meantime.

Lectures based on this paper were given in the autumn of 2007 at King's College London, the University of Cambridge, and the Edinburgh Scottish Hellenic Society, while earlier versions were tried out on audiences at the University of East Anglia (March 2007) and at an international conference on Kazantzakis held at Würzburg in July. I am grateful to participants in discussion on all these occasions for much stimulating advice and commentary.

All quotations from Greek are given, in the main text, in my own translation, while the original can be found in the notes. Where published English translations exist, page references to them are also given in the notes.

was beyond question a fiercely loyal champion of the Modern Greek national identity, at least during long periods of his life.

But Greece's only internationally recognised novelist had another identity as well. Kazantzakis had been born and spent most of his formative years in the island of Crete, which did not become part of the Greek state until 1913, when he was thirty years old. Throughout the nineteenth century, long before Kazantzakis's time, the Christian Orthodox population of Crete had been engaged in a relentless and violent struggle to bring an end to Ottoman rule in the island; a succession of revolts between 1770 and 1896 had all the hallmarks of intercommunal and inter-faith conflict, as these phenomena are known in parts of the world today. In nineteenth-century Crete, the struggle was not just between Christian subjects and Muslim rulers, as it has usually been portrayed, but between Christian and Muslim communities, numbering approximately sixty per cent and forty per cent of the population respectively. These two communities shared a common language, the Cretan dialect of Greek, and each had a deep historic attachment to the island that was home to both of them.

From his upbringing, Kazantzakis had a consciousness of Crete as different from other parts of what would soon become the enlarged Greek state. It was not just its recent history and the fierce attitudes that had been shaped by more than a century of intercommunal tension and violence that made Crete different. In 1878, five years before Kazantzakis's birth, the first discoveries had been made of a prehistoric civilisation to which archaeologists were beginning, even then, to give the name "Minoan", after Minos, the legendary king of Crete.[1] Systematic excavation at

[1] On the 1878 excavations at Knossos, see K. Kopaka, "Μίνωος Καλοκαιρινού, ανασκαφές στην Κνωσό", *Παλίμψηστον* 9-10 (1990) 5-69, summarised in English in J. A. MacGillivray, *Minotaur: Sir Arthur Evans and the archaeology of the Minoan myth* (London: Cape 2000), pp. 92-6. Credit for coining the neologism "Minoans" is often erroneously given to Evans, who popularised it after 1900. On this see N. Karadimas and N. Momigliano, "On the term 'Minoan' before Sir Arthur

Knossos and other sites could not begin, for political reasons, until after the island had been granted a precarious independence under the guarantee of four European powers. This happened in 1898, and the "Cretan State" (Κρητική Πολιτεία) would last until the island was incorporated into Greece in 1913, in the aftermath of the Balkan Wars.

By March 1900, the hill of Kefala, near Heraklion, which was generally believed to be the site of ancient Knossos, had been acquired by the British amateur archaeologist of Welsh extraction, Arthur Evans. As well as being a brilliant archaeologist (and lucky), Evans was also a supreme publicist. The previously little-known Minoan civilisation that emerged from the Kefala site was quickly sensationalised in the world's press; it soon came to be forgotten that the actual discovery had been made twenty-two years before, by another Minos, Minos Kalokairinos. Meanwhile, from other sites all over the island, excavated by French and Italian archaeologists, came confirmation that Crete in the late Bronze Age had enjoyed a level of civilisation previously unsuspected. The popular imagination was especially fired by evidence for artistic tastes among the newly discovered Minoans that uncannily seemed to anticipate the current *fin de siècle*, as well as by evidence for their great wealth and signs of luxurious living (such as baths and drainage). Even before Evans began his controversial partial restoration at Knossos, enlisting the talents of the Dutch architect Piet de Jong and the Swiss artists Emile Gilliéron and his son, it had become clear that the ancient civilisation of Crete had been quite different from anything found in the Middle East, and more different still from the classical Hellenic civilisation that had reached its peak a millennium and more after its heyday. Evans in particular, during his time as Curator of the Ashmolean Museum at Oxford, had acquired considerable animus against the prevailing attitudes among the classical scholars of his day, and delighted in emphasising every characteristic that seemed to drive a wedge between his Minoans and the revered civilisation

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Evans's work in Crete", *Studi Micenei ed Egeo Anatolici* 46/2 (2004) 243-8.

of the classical period. Minoan society and religion, according to Evans, had been matriarchal; in language and race the Bronze Age inhabitants of Crete had nothing in common with the later Hellenes. Almost from the beginning, Minoan civilisation came to be associated in the popular mind with its most exotic aspects. These included: the strange ritual of bull-leaping depicted on frescoes and seal-stones; the bare-breasted women known from figurines, sometimes with snakes twining up their arms; the mysterious hieroglyphics preserved on the Phaistos Disk; the supposed cult of the Goddess, the supreme mother.[2]

All this affected Kazantzakis greatly. We know this because he gave prominence to his putative Minoan ancestors in at least four of his works, and returned to the subject, giving it a surprising new twist, at the very end of his life in his fictionalised autobiography, *Report to Greco*. Undoubtedly the discovery of Minoan civilisation encouraged Kazantzakis in his belief that there was such a thing, in the modern world, as a distinct Cretan identity. In different works, at different points in his life, he explored the possible implications of this in contrasting ways.

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The fullest, though not the final, statement by Kazantzakis on how he viewed his Minoan heritage comes in an open letter published in the Athens journal *Nea Estia* in 1943. At the time, Greece was under military occupation by German, Italian and Bulgarian forces; all publications were subject to censorship. Kazantzakis, holed up on the island of Aegina, had just finished writing *Zorba*. The context for his remarks, and the subject of the open letter, is a

[2] On all of the issues touched on in this and the preceding paragraph, see more fully G. Hamilakis and N. Momigliano (eds.), *Archaeology and European Modernity: Producing and consuming the "Minoans" = Creta Antica* 7 (2006).

long defence of his monumental epic poem, *Odyssey*, which had been published in 1938, against its critics.[3]

At the end of this defence, Kazantzakis draws on a long-established and somewhat stereotypical distinction, that goes back to antiquity: between the Hellenic and the "Oriental" modes of thought. The "world-view" that animates his epic poem, Kazantzakis insists, is neither the one nor the other; this, he implies, may be why so many Greek readers have been unable to understand it, or even to give it the benefit of the doubt. He even thanks his interlocutor for giving him this opportunity for "confession": "to explain how I connect my soul with the primeval ancestral soul and how from those roots emerges my world-view".[4]

Crete, Kazantzakis goes on, is for him the "synthesis" of [ancient][5] Greece and the Orient, and has equipped him with an outlook that is also a synthesis of those stereotypical opposites. He defines this outlook like this: "the ego gazing on the abyss without disintegrating; on the contrary, this gaze full of composure, pride and manly courage".[6] For the first time in his writing, at the age of sixty, Kazantzakis sums up this distinctively Cretan way of looking at the world in an expression that has since become a catchphrase, almost a cliché, in the secondary literature: the "Cretan glance".[7]

The origin of this "glance", which is really more of a stance, Kazantzakis explicitly attributes to the Minoans, whom in this way he tacitly claims as his own spiritual ancestors:

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[3] Nikos Kazantzakis, "Ενα σχόλιο στην *Οδύσεια*", *Νέα Εστία* 34 (1943) 1028-34.

[4] "[...] να ξηγήσω πώς συναρτώ την ψυχή μου με την παμπάλαιη προγονική ψυχή και πώς από τις ρίζες αυτές βγαίνει η κοσμοθεωρία μου" (Kazantzakis, "Ένα σχόλιο", 1033).

[5] For this important distinction, not explicitly made in the text, see note 11 below.

[6] "[...] το εγώ ν' ατενίζει την άβυσσο χωρίς ν' αποσυνθέτεται· το εναντίον, η ενατένιση αυτή να το γεμίζει συνοχή, υπερηφάνεια κι αντρεία" (Kazantzakis, "Ένα σχόλιο", 1033).

[7] "Και τη ματιά τούτη που ατενίζει έτσι τη ζωή και το θάνατο, την ονομάζω *κρητικιά*. ... Την ηρωική χωρίς ελπίδα και χωρίς φόβο, παιχνιδιάρα ματιά [...] τη λέω: *κρητική ματιά*" (ibid.).

> In the Minoan civilisation the Cretan glance was like that. Minoan Crete, with its terrible earthquakes that were symbolised for them by the Bull, and with the games that the Cretans made directly with the Bull himself, achieves what I call the supreme thing: Synthesis.[8]

In a passage that would later be elaborated and refined in his autobiography, *Report to Greco*, Kazantzakis goes on to explain how he saw this synthesis being achieved in the Minoan frescoes that depicted the ritual bull-leaping: "In this way the Cretan transformed horror into a sublime game. [...] He defeated, without obliterating it, the hideous Bull, because he did not consider it an enemy, but as a fellow-worker."[9]

Finally, in the open letter of 1943, Kazantzakis refers to the harsh times that Europe is enduring, times which need exceptional courage and far-sightedness. Under conditions of censorship he does not, of course, refer to the world war that is going on; but in any case the German or Italian censors in Athens would have found nothing to object to in what he says, which chimes with earlier statements by Kazantzakis that can be read as endorsing, if not Fascism or Nazism itself, then certainly the cathartic effect of the violence these movements were unleashing on the world at this time.[10] In any case, the qualities that Kazantzakis claims are most needed in the midst of the turmoil of a world war are *not*

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[8] "Στο μινωικό πολιτισμό τέτοια ήταν η κρητική ματιά. Η μινωική Κρήτη, με τους τρομαχτικούς σεισμούς της που τους συμβόλιζε ο Ταύρος και με τα παιχνίδια που κάνουν οι Κρητικοί ίσια ίσια με τον Ταύρο αυτόν, πραγματοποιεί αυτό που θεωρώ το ανώτατο: τη Σύνθεση" (ibid.).

[9] "Κ' έτσι ο Κρητικός μετέτρεψε τη φρίκη σε υψηλό παιχνίδι [...] Νικούσε χωρίς να εξαφανίζει τον αποτρόπαιο Ταύρο, γιατί δεν τον θεωρούσε οχτρό, παρά συνεργάτη" (ibid.). See also Nikos Kazantzakis, *Αναφορά στον Γκρέκο* (Athens: Ekdoseis Kazantzaki 1982), p. 481 = Nikos Kazantzakis, *Report to Greco: An autobiographical novel*, trans. P. A. Bien (London: Faber 1973), p. 486.

[10] For a number of telling instances, drawn from Kazantzakis's travel books of the late 1930s and early 1940s, with commentary, see Christos Alexiou, "Ιδεολογία και πραγματικότητα στον Καζαντζάκη", *Θέματα Λογοτεχνίας* (Νοεμ. 1996-Φεβρ. 1997) 121-49 (see pp. 140-1).

those traditionally associated with the ancient Hellenic achievement, but rather that achieved by those ancient Cretans, the Minoans. In his own way, and rather like the archaeologist Evans, Kazantzakis is struck by how *contemporary* the lost Bronze Age civilisation of Crete now seems, and how alien, by comparison, is that of the classical age.

A few months later this distinction came to be clarified further in the pages of the same periodical, when the novelist and dramatist Giorgos Theotokas published an extract from a letter that Kazantzakis had sent him. The latter had been at pains to emphasise that, while his "Cretan" glance was different from that of Greeks from other parts of Greece, all these together formed part of a composite "Modern Greek soul". The vital distinction he had wished to draw, Kazantzakis now emphasised, was not with other contemporaries, but with the "ancient classical glance".[11]

So, shortly after completing the novel *Zorba*, Kazantzakis emerged with a conception of the ancient Minoan civilisation of Crete as something fundamentally at odds with the universally admired civilisation of classical Hellas, but at the same time as a fundamental, even formative, aspect of his own identity as a Cretan and as a writer.

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This is consistent with the way in which the Minoans are presented in *Zorba* itself. In a little-noticed chapter near the middle of the novel, the narrator takes a break from lignite-mining and the company of his mentor Zorba, and goes for a long solitary walk. His goal is a "small Minoan city" that has recently been excavated.[12] The description of the abandoned ruins, against a

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[11] "[...] δεν εννοούσα τη νεοελληνική παρά την αρχαία κλασική ματιά", [Kazantzakis cited in] Giorgos Theotokas, "Η 'κρητική' ματιά", *Νέα Εστία* 34 (Οκτ. 1943) 1263.

[12] "[...] μικρή μινωική πολιτεία [...]", Nikos Kazantzakis, *Βίος και πολιτεία του Αλέξη Ζορμπά*, 6η έκδ. (Athens: Ekdoseis El. Kazantzaki 1969), p. 203 = Nikos Kazantzakis, *Zorba the Greek*, trans. Carl Wildman (London: Faber 1961), p. 170.

background of intense sunlight and the narrator's own instinctive response to the resurgence of spring in nature all around him, reminds us of poems by Sikelianos and, more surprisingly perhaps, also by Seferis.[13] The narrator's somewhat trite thoughts about human insignificance in the face of the long sweep of history are interrupted by a young shepherd boy, who rudely tries to bum a cigarette. It is the boy, suddenly elevated in the narrator's imagination to become the guardian spirit (στοιχειό) of the place, who sums up the lesson of the experience: "That lot are dead, we're alive; push off and good luck to you!"[14]

At the heart of the Minoan city, the narrator identifies "the shrine of the Great Goddess, with the exposed overflowing breasts and sacred snakes on her arms".[15] Despite the categorical nature of the description, it is evident that neither the shrine nor the effigy is actually visible to the narrator; the Mother Goddess of the Minoans is present only to his imagination. Later in the chapter, disconcerted by his encounter with the shepherd boy, he acts on an impulse and pays a long-deferred visit to a nunnery nearby. Here he learns about an effigy of the Virgin Mary that has become the focus of local legends and an object of pilgrimage. Implicitly, the ancient Minoan Mother Goddess continues to be worshipped in the twentieth century by pious Christians, in a transformed guise. And the lesson of the chapter comes full circle in its conclusion. Back home on the deserted Cretan shore that he shares with Zorba, Kazantzakis's narrator experiences a moment of elation. It is as though he has escaped a great danger, and now,

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[13] Michael Paschalis, "Η κυοφορία του *Ζορμπά* και οι τέσσερις μαίες του: Όμηρος, Πλάτωνας, Δάντης και Σαίξπηρ", *Νέα Εστία* 1806 (2007) 1114-91; see pp. 1162-3. Paschalis suggests that the then recently published "King of Asine" by Seferis might lie behind aspects of this description; on the other hand Kazantzakis's account, in some intriguing aspects, seems to be taken up by Seferis, later, in the poem "Engomi" (1955).

[14] "Αυτοί πεθάνανε, εμείς ζούμε· άε στο καλό!" (*Βίος και πολιτεία*, p. 205 = *Zorba the Greek*, p. 172).

[15] "Και στην καρδιά της πολιτείας [...] το ιερό της Μεγάλης θεάς, με τ' ανοιχτά ξέχειλα στήθια και τα ιερά φίδια στα μπράτσα" (*Βίος και πολιτεία*, p. 204 = *Zorba the Greek*, p. 171).

plunging naked into the sea he believes that he "had once again clung fast to the breast of the Mother that nourished me".[16]

So the spirit of the ancient, primitive Minoan Mother Goddess is alive and well in Crete in the first half of the twentieth century, and still has the power to sustain Kazantzakis's earnest pilgrim in search of the meaning of life. In keeping with what he would shortly write in his open letter to *Nea Estia*, Kazantzakis here seems to acknowledge the primitive, atavistic source of his own world-view, and to affirm the existence of an unbroken continuity of belief and experience from ancient times to the present. What is absent from *Zorba*, on the other hand, is the insight summed up in the term "Cretan glance", that had perhaps not been minted then,[17] and perhaps more strikingly the *contrast* between the Minoan and the classical legacies, that Kazantzakis would make in the open letter of 1943.

To explain these discrepancies we have to look a little more closely at the passage from *Zorba*.

The first thing to notice is that the site visited by the narrator of *Zorba* is not the famous palace of Knossos excavated by Evans. This is evident from the description of "grey stones, ironstones, brilliant nakedness";[18] the spectacular partial restoration of the Palace of Minos at Knossos, which Kazantzakis describes elsewhere and admired, is wholly absent here. Nor can this be one of the other well-known sites described by Minoan archaeologists as

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[16] "[...] μου φάνηκε πως είχα γλιτώσει από ένα μεγάλο κίντυνο, κι είχα πάλι αρπαχτεί σφιχτά από το βυζί της Μάνας και βύζαινα" (*Βίος και πολιτεία*, p. 213 = *Zorba the Greek*, p. 179).

[17] In a letter to Prevelakis dated April 1936, Kazantzakis had referred to Crete and ended with a drawing of an eye in the centre of a huge circle, below which is the comment: "Αυτές τις μέρες, αυτό το Μάτι που βλέπει ακέραιο τον κύκλο βρήκα να εκφράζει απλά και άρτια την ψυχή μας. Σας υποβάλλω το έμβλημα αυτό", Pantelis Prevelakis, *Τετρακόσια γράμματα του Καζαντζάκη* (Athens: Ekdoseis Kazantzaki 1984), p. 457. It has been suggested that this, implicitly, and not the open letter of 1943, marks the earliest recorded appearance of the "Cretan glance" (Alexiou, "Ιδεολογία και πραγματικότητα", p. 136).

[18] "Πέτρες γκρίζες, σιδερόπετρες, γύμνια όλο φως" (*Βίος και πολιτεία*, p. 203 = *Zorba the Greek*, p. 170).

"palatial": Kazantzakis is at pains to point up the maze of little streets, the workshops of the artisans. The site is called a "town" or "city", certainly not a palace; within it, and presumably on a similar scale, is "the king's palace", placed next to the market-place with what Kazantzakis rather ambiguously calls "democratic consent".[19] Probably Kazantzakis had in mind a pre-palatial Minoan site, of which the best known is the town of Gournia (plausibly a three-hour walk from the part of the south coast where Zorba and the narrator are supposed to be mining lignite, as the text has it). These Minoans, exemplified by the industry of their craftsmen and their devotion to the Mother Goddess, are imagined as a humble collective, the whole town is compared more than once to an ant-heap. There is nothing here of the spectacular palace-culture that came to dominate Crete in the last centuries of the Bronze Age, and would result in the great palace complexes excavated at Knossos, Phaistos and Mallia and (perhaps) the enduring legends of Minos and the Minotaur.

Those had already earned a place in Kazantzakis's imagination, and the way he recreated the "high" culture of Minoan civilisation at its peak is very different from what we find in this minor episode from *Zorba*.

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In his monumental *Odyssey*, written between 1925 and 1938, Kazantzakis had given an important place to his native island. The action of books 5-8, of the twenty-four that make up the whole poem, is set there. Crete is the first landfall that Odysseus makes after leaving mainland Greece, and the second stop on a trajectory that will take him across the length of Africa, to end up in the vicinity of the South Pole. In this early part of the narrative, Kazantzakis's sequel to Homer is still fairly action-packed; its early books are often reminiscent of the historical novels based on the same archaeological record, written a little later, for example

[19] "[...] με δημοκρατικιά συγκατάβαση" (*Βίος και πολιτεία*, p. 204 = *Zorba the Greek*, p. 171).

by Mary Renault. Minoan Crete, in the final, decadent phase of its "palace culture" as depicted by Evans, is ripe for destruction. The palace of Knossos is depicted as a hothouse of depravity. The bull-leaping ritual, far from inspiring a balanced perspective on life and death, as Kazantzakis would later describe it when he came to define the "Cretan glance", here becomes an outlet for bloodlust, thwarted incest, and ritual murder; its sequel includes a night-long orgy of sex, intoxication, and the frenzied consumption of raw flesh. Of all the exotic and disturbing practices that have been attributed to the Minoans since the rediscovery of their civilisation in 1900, only child sacrifice and ritual cannibalism are absent from Kazantzakis's picture, although in some details he comes pretty close even to those. We can be sure that had the evidence for these things, that would come to light in the early 1980s, been available to Kazantzakis, he would have exploited their imaginative possibilities to the full.

As depicted in the *Odyssey*, the advanced and sophisticated civilisation of the Minoan palaces, in their final phase, stands as a memorable and powerful reflection of the decadent civilisation of his own day. The hero, the Greek Odysseus, plays a leading part in the timely destruction of this ghastly excrescence, mobilising the forces of internal disaffection and allying them with the external threat of the blond-haired newcomers, the Dorians, whose ships are massing just over the horizon. Crucial to the violent overthrow of the rotten palace of Knossos is the exploitation of new technology: with the Dorians comes the secret of forging iron. On top of everything else comes the superior intelligence of Homer's hero, now remoulded by Kazantzakis to become, for a time, the necessary agent of historical change. It is Odysseus who exploits all these possibilities and draws them together. Before book 8 is over, the palace of Knossos has become a smoking ruin; Odysseus, for the time being accompanied by Helen of Sparta, is ready to move on.

Kazantzakis's depiction of the palace society of Minoan Crete in the *Odyssey* (published in 1938) is the most negative that he ever produced. But even here there are indications that the hot-

house society of Knossos during the last days of the palace is not to be taken as the whole story. In vignettes Kazantzakis gives us glimpses into the lives of the humbler people of Minoan Crete, who seem much more like the Cretan peasants of his own day. The civilisation of the palaces may be a doomed outgrowth of the native Cretan spirit, as surely condemned to violent destruction as Kazantzakis believed that the bourgeois world of his own day was condemned; but in the pages of his *Odyssey* can also be found traces of a belief in a bedrock of little-changing human nature and experience, which perhaps is meant to imply a bond of continuity between those distant times and his own.

This view of Minoan civilisation as irrevocably alien to the later Hellenic spirit would change significantly towards the end of Kazantzakis's life – and, as I believe, for a very specific reason. But before that, during the 1940s, he would devote two whole works to revisiting the last days of the Palace of Minos, and to re-interpreting, in modern terms, the enduring legend of the Minotaur.

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Neither of these works is at all well known. The novel for children, *In the Palace of Knossos*, was written in 1940 to be serialised in the magazine of the Metaxas youth movement [*Η Νεολαία*], but the publication was shelved because of Greece's entry into the Second World War, and the book did not see print until 1981.[20] The other is the verse drama *Kouros*, written during

[20] Nikos Kazantzakis, *Στα παλάτια της Κνωσού* (Athens: Ekdoseis Kazantzaki 1981). The English translation renders the title with irritating over-literalness: Nikos Kazantzakis, *At the palaces of Knossos*, trans. Theodora and Themi Vasils (London: Peter Owen 1988). The translators declare that they have worked from an early typescript of the book, which appears not to be identical to the version published in Greek; they have also re-edited it in ways which seem overall to be coherent but make it difficult to match the two texts in detail.

"a few days" in 1949 and first performed, in translation, on Swedish radio the following year.[21]

The novel for children, like its companion piece on the life of Alexander the Great, has been ignored by criticism, no doubt on the grounds that is not "serious" literature; the play is serious to the point of sententiousness, and has provoked some high-minded discussions.[22] But nobody has so far thought of looking at these two works together, as variations on a common theme, that of the reinterpretation of Minoan civilisation by a Cretan writer shortly before the midpoint of the twentieth century.

In the Palace of Knossos begins with a young stranger spying out the palace of the title. It soon transpires that this is Theseus, son of the king of Athens. Athens is a backward place compared to Crete at this time, and (as in the legend) subject to the overlordship of Minos, king of Crete and ruler of the waves (as Evans believed about the historical Minoans). Soon the younger of the king's two daughters, Ariadne, who is portrayed as a flighty schoolgirl, will be half in love with the handsome foreigner. A fast-moving intrigue soon develops, involving Ariadne's slave and confidante Krinó, a fictional child-exile from Athens called Haris, and Minos's chief of police, the thuggish Malís. There are walk-on parts for Daidalos and his son Ikaros, and tacked rather awkwardly on: the Minotaur. Neither the mythical monster nor King Minos had appeared in the Cretan episodes of Kazantzakis's *Odyssey*, because according to Homer and tradition, Odysseus's contemporary in Crete was Idomeneus, younger by two generations than the more famous Minos.

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[21] Nikos Kazantzakis, *Θέατρο, Α΄* (Athens: Ekdoseis Kazantzaki 1964), pp. 269-379. There is no English translation of this play. For a French translation see Nikos Kazantzakis, *Théâtre. Melissa, Kouros, Christophe Colomb*, trans. Liliane Princet – Nikos Athanassiou (Paris: Plon 1974). On the date and speed of writing see Kyriaki Petrakou, *Ο Καζαντζάκης και το θέατρο* (Athens: Militos 2005), p. 461.

[22] See Peter Bien, *Nikos Kazantzakis: Politics of the spirit*, vol. 2 (Princeton: Princeton University Press 2007), pp. 356-62. Petrakou (*Ο Καζαντζάκης*, pp. 461-85) gives a full and well documented account of older interpretations.

But with that difference, the story that Kazantzakis tells in *In the Palace of Knossos* is essentially the same as he had told earlier in books 5-8 of his *Odyssey*. The place of King Idomeneus is taken by Minos himself; that of Odysseus by Theseus. The real meat of the story concerns the power-struggle between a top-heavy, indolent and corrupt Cretan civilisation and its up-and-coming vassal Athens. The encounter with the Minotaur is side-lined, and placed about two thirds of the way through: even the fabled monster is too miserable and exhausted to want to fight. Theseus is a thoroughly Aryan hero, cutting a swathe through the ranks of the Cretans whose palace he gleefully puts to the torch before fleeing with Ariadne and the survivors of their friends. As also in the *Odyssey*, great significance is given to the restless barbarian tribes from the north, who become the allies and helpers of Theseus as they had previously been for Odysseus, and also to the new secret weapon, iron. Together these historical forces make inevitable the overthrow of the bloated and overweening civilisation represented by the Palace of Minos. And at several points the novel looks forward to the future glory of Athens as chief representative of the Hellenic ideal of the classical period, which of course at the time of the action lay many centuries in the future.

In the Palace of Knossos is a surprisingly good read, and a case could even be made for it as Kazantzakis's first work that succeeds in telling a well-organised, well-paced fictional story in prose. In those respects the play *Kouros* could not be more different.

This is a verse drama in an uncompromising modernist mode. Like the contemporary dramas of T. S. Eliot in English, it strictly observes the classical unities of time, place, and action; all the action takes place off stage; verse is used to convey the most profound thoughts of characters who are the embodiments of abstract concepts, and the verse itself is modernist free verse, which in effect is little different from prose, divided arbitrarily into very long lines.

The central characters are only three: Theseus, Ariadne, Minos; what joins them is the monstrous Minotaur, an invisible

but heard presence throughout, but who only appears in the play's very last lines.

Theseus is once again an Aryan hero, muscle-bound and impetuous, but also a dreamer; before coming to Crete he has experienced a homoerotic vision of a new god whose day has not yet dawned, but who will be the embodiment of an ideal of male beauty and harmony – an ideal that the reader can already recognise as that realised in the statues of the classical period, of which the earliest are the so-called *kouroi* (youths) dating from the seventh and sixth centuries BCE – hence the play's title, *Kouros*. Theseus is therefore a man of the future; and this future, with its strong element of homoeroticism, is explicitly predicated on sexual abstinence, at least where women are concerned. Ariadne in this play appears in the guise of temptress; but she also embodies the dark forces of the declining civilisation of Crete, with its atavistic ritual of bull-wrestling, at which she excels, and its cloying, outmoded matriarchy and devotion to the Mother Goddess. Theseus contemptuously rejects Ariadne several times; the labyrinth is at one point redesignated as "woman", her bloodline is condemned as "tainted", since Ariadne is also the half-sister of the Minotaur.[23]

Theseus will do business only with the male. King Minos this time turns out to have learned a degree of wisdom in his old age, and recognises in his young adversary the graft of vigorous, healthy growth that will be needed if the bloodstock of his people is to outlast him (a perennial preoccupation of Kazantzakis). In the end, Minos is prepared to recognise Theseus as his heir, a solution that had also been proposed, only to be brushed aside as unworthy, in the more swashbuckling world of the novel for children. The struggle with the Minotaur takes place; in the course of it the palace is shaken to the foundations. But when Theseus emerges from the labyrinth, his riddling words suggest that

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[23] ΑΡΙΑΔΝΗ: ... φοβάσαι ... το σκοτεινό, δροσερό λαβύρινθο του κορμιού μου (*Θέατρο, Α΄*, p. 298). ΘΗΣΕΑΣ: Το αίμα το δικό σας είναι ανακατεμένο με θεούς και με ζώα, μολεμένο, ξεπνεμένο, δεν μπορεί πια να θρέψει υγιούς και θυγατέρες – (*Θέατρο, Α΄*, p. 297).

writing system – not even the relatively common linear scripts of the Knossos clay tablets but one modelled on the enigmatic Phaistos disk.[28]

The same antithesis is maintained, if anything even more strongly, in the drama. Theseus's speeches early in the play give prominence to many archaeologically attested details, but do so through the eyes of a visitor to whom this whole world is uncompromisingly alien. Theseus scornfully dismisses the whole of Minoan society as: "a great empire, much-indulged, mounted by the bull, all make-up and ornament and perfumes, to cover up its stink".[29]

On the other side stands Athens, or as a minor character puts it, "the unfettered soul of lean-boned Hellas".[30] Athenians, according to Theseus, are "peasants, we wear sheepskins, we sleep on the ground, we eat with our hands".[31] But theirs, it is quite clear, is to be the future. Athens is associated with masculinity, its new god is provocatively to be a nude male; Crete with femininity, with the cloying pleading of Ariadne, with "incomprehensible spells" addressed to a female deity.[32] An even stronger contrast is between light and dark: the Cretans are repeatedly described as dark-skinned and contrasted with the "fair-haired" Theseus, his fellow-Athenians, and their barbarian allies.[33] Ariadne, like the rest of Minoan civilisation, is strongly associated with the moon; by implication that leaves the sun for the emblem of the Greeks. When the word "Hellene" and its derivatives are

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[28] Language: *Στα παλάτια*, p. 214 = *At the Palaces*, p. 97. Writing: *Στα παλάτια*, pp. 159-60 = *At the Palaces*, p. 66.

[29] "[...] μια μεγάλη αυτοκρατορία, πολυφιλημένη, ταυροπηδημένη, όλο φκιασίδια και στολίδια κι αρώματα, για να σκεπάσει τη βρώμα της" (*Θέατρο, Α΄*, p. 272).

[30] "Είσαι η λεύτερη ψυχή της λιανοκόκαλης Ελλάδας" (*Θέατρο, Α΄*, p. 277).

[31] "Είμαστε χωριάτες, φορούμε κριαρίσιες προβιές, κοιμούμαστε κατάχαμα, τρώμε με τα χέρια μας" (*Θέατρο, Α΄*, p. 303).

[32] ΘΗΣΕΑΣ: Χόρεψαν γύρα μου, βαταλαλώντας τ' ακατανόητα ξόρκια τους *(Θέατρο, Α΄*, p. 269).

[33] See e.g. *Θέατρο, Α΄*, p. 279 for the terms μελαχρινοί, ξανθοί that recur throughout.

used in the play, they always refer to the inhabitants of the mainland. In both the children's book and the play, the Minoans are presented as wholly un-Hellenic, in language, culture, and religion – exactly as Evans had insisted that they should be, and as Kazantzakis would claim too, in his open letter of 1943, in which he would claim kinship with them.

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But this is not the end of the story. Before his death in 1957, Kazantzakis would return to the topic of Minoan civilisation and its archaeological traces one more time. The autobiographical novel, or fictionalised autobiography, *Report to Greco*, was written between 1955 and his death in 1957, although as Peter Bien points out, it also recycles a good deal of material that had been written before this.[34] Towards the end of the book, a visit to the excavated and partially restored archaeological site of Knossos becomes the occasion for an epiphany.[35] Kazantzakis in his autobiography was notoriously negligent about facts and dates; supposedly this moment of epiphany was one of the events that triggered the entire composition of his *Odyssey*, and must therefore be placed at the time of his return visit to Crete in 1924, shortly before he began work on the poem. But what he says he learned from the frescoes, in which lithe Minoan acrobats confront the brute force of the bull, Kazantzakis seems not to have put into words until almost twenty years after that, when he wrote his open letter for *Nea Estia* in 1943. His actual opinion of the Minoan inhabitants of his native island, at the time when he began writing his *Odyssey,* is revealed in the poem itself as much more negative.

More revealing still of the change in Kazantzakis's attitude towards the Minoans over time is a passage that comes earlier in *Report to Greco*. There he writes:

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[34] Bien, *Politics*, vol. 2, pp. 537-42.

[35] *Αναφορά στον Γκρέκο*, pp. 479-82 = *Report to Greco*, pp. 484-7. See also note 9 above.

> Crete was the first bridge to link Europe, Asia, and Africa; Crete was the first place to be enlightened in Europe, that was then totally dark. And here the *spirit of Greece* [my italics] accomplished its fateful mission: it brought god down to a human scale. The giant immovable statues of the Egyptians or the Assyrians here, in Crete, became smaller, acquired grace, the body began to move, the mouth to smile; the expression and stature of the god took on the expression and stature of man. A new form of humanity lived and played on Cretan soil, something original, distinct from the Hellenes who would come later, something svelte and graceful and full of oriental luxury.[36]

The prominence given to sculpture is reminiscent of the play *Kouros*; but there the decisive, humanising step in art history was still imagined as being far in the future, foreshadowed only by Theseus's vision and the miraculous transformation of the Minotaur. In first putting into words his concept of the "Cretan glance", back in 1943, Kazantzakis had ascribed already to the Minoans what he called a "synthesis", something that lay midway between the ancient Hellenic and the "Oriental". But there he had placed the emphasis on the vital *difference*, as he had then perceived it, between that Minoan "synthesis" and the later Hellenic spirit, with which (echoing Evans) the Minoans had nothing in common.

Now, in *Report to Greco,* it is *Minoan* art itself that first effects the evolution from the monumentalism of Egypt and the Middle East towards the human scale of the later Hellenic. Nothing of this can be found in anything written by Kazantzakis on the subject earlier. In ascribing the workings of the "spirit of

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36 "Η Κρήτη στάθηκε το πρώτο γιοφύρι ανάμεσα Ευρώπης, Ασίας κι Αφρικής· η Κρήτη φωτίστηκε πρώτη σε όλη την κατασκότεινη τότε Ευρώπη. Κι εδώ η *ψυχή της Ελλάδας* [η έμφαση δική μου] εξετέλεσε τη μοιραία της αποστολή: έφερε το θεό στην κλίμακα του ανθρώπου. Τα τεράστια ασάλευτα αιγυπτιακά ή ασσυριακά αγάλματα έγιναν εδώ, στην Κρήτη, μικρά, χαριτωμένα, το σώμα κινήθηκε, το στόμα χαμογέλασε, και το πρόσωπο και το μπόι του θεού πήρε το πρόσωπο και το μπόι του ανθρώπου. Μια ανθρωπότητα καινούρια έζησε κι έπαιξε στα κρητικά χώματα, πρωτότυπη, διαφορετικιά από τους κατοπινούς Έλληνες, όλο ευκινησία και χάρη κι ανατολίτικη χλιδή..." (*Αναφορά στον Γκρέκο*, p. 151 = *Report to Greco*, p. 151).

Greece" already to Minoan Crete, Kazantzakis has tacitly allowed himself to do something that Evans had always stood out against: he has domesticated the "exotic", "alien" Minoans as *Greek.*

So, what had happened since the 1920s, and even since the late 1940s, to bring about such a change in Kazantzakis's attitude? The answer, I believe, lies in the decipherment of Linear B that had been announced in 1952. Thanks to the work of Michael Ventris and his collaboration with the classicist John Chadwick, since that year we have known that the language inscribed on clay tablets, found in large numbers from the final phase of the Bronze Age palace at Knossos, is Greek.

The decipherment of Linear B does not in itself mean that the *builders* of the Minoan palaces were Greeks. The earlier Minoan script, known as Linear A, remains largely undeciphered, as do several other forms of picture writing known from Crete during the Bronze Age, including most famously that used on the Phaistos Disk. But psychologically, for Kazantzakis, as for many others after him, the breakthrough seems to have changed his whole perspective on the Minoans. Certainly, when one looks more widely at the Greek literature of the second half of the twentieth century, it is from the 1950s onwards, and not before, that Minoans and Minoan civilisation begin to become naturalised in the Greek literary imagination.[37] Kazantzakis is not the only modern Greek writer, though I believe he was one of the first, to have begun to accept the Minoans, after 1952, as part of the continuity of Hellenism. But it was a very different story back in the 1920s, and even in the 1940s, when Kazantzakis was writing his children's books, *Zorba*, and the strange drama *Kouros*.

From being the simple antithesis of everything Hellenic, the Minoans in Kazantzakis's literary imagination have become assimilated to an expanded composite sense of Hellenism. Kazantzakis's Minoans, at the very end of his life, have come to be woven into an imagined diachronic synthesis of Hellenism –

[37] See Beaton, "Minoans".

which is pretty much where they remain today in the communal imagination of Crete in the early twenty-first century.

How much, finally, does all this matter? I think it matters in two rather different ways. First of all, I believe that the imagination of influential writers, such as Kazantzakis, has an important part to play in shaping the communal sense of identity of nations and, perhaps in this case, also of regions. To explore the twists and turns through which Kazantzakis negotiated an identity for himself in relation to what was known during his lifetime about the Minoan past of his native island, may help to explain the continuing process by which a distinctive regional identity has developed in Crete during the last half century or so. It is, for instance, indicative that even when he came closest to Evans in emphasising the contrast between the Minoan and the Hellenic, Kazantzakis vigorously denied any suggestion that might seem to threaten the perceived harmonious homogeneity of the Modern Greek nation: although Kazantzakis's views changed and developed over time, there is never the slightest trace in his writings of what might be termed "Cretan separatism". And indeed, in the social history of Crete in modern times, this development, that might have been expected, on the analogy of other European states in the late twentieth century, is almost wholly absent.

But the issue of how Kazantzakis defined himself, through his writing, as a Cretan, is an important one for the literary understanding of Kazantzakis as a writer. The quest for identity is an abiding theme of many of his most important works. In *Zorba*, the unnamed "Boss", who tells the story, is an intellectual in search of his own true nature. In *Christ Recrucified* and *The Last Temptation*, a spiritually troubled young man struggles to find the secret of his own identity, and ends by identifying himself with the role of the Saviour or Messiah laid down in sacred scripture.[38] And in *Report to Greco*, Kazantzakis's none too truthful autobiography, the semi-fictionalised hero is in search of a mission that will

[38] See Roderick Beaton, "Writing, identity and truth in Kazantzakis's novel, *The Last Temptation*", *Κάμπος: Cambridge Papers in Modern Greek* 5 (1997) 1-21.

define him and give meaning to a life that he believes would otherwise be meaningless and contemptible.

Coming to terms with his distinctively Cretan identity, and with the exotic legacy of his Minoan forebears, Kazantzakis, in the works I have been discussing here, grapples with the same question in his own life as an artist: who am I? Where do I come from? Where am I going? To return to the open question with which I began, if Zorba is "*the Greek*", then surely his creator, Kazantzakis, is every bit as much "*the Cretan*".