

In Crete in the footsteps of translator Kyllikki Villa

In the summer of 1966, translator, author, journalist and traveler Kyllikki Villa (1928–2010) travelled to Crete following in the footsteps of author Nikos Kazantzakis. In 1963, Villa had translated Pandelis Prevelakis' novel *Ο ήλιος του θανάτου* into Finnish under the title *Ikuinen aurinko*, and soon after the trip to Crete she also translated Kazantzakis' novel *Οι αδελφοφάδες* that appeared in Finnish under the title *Veljesviha* (1967).

Fifty years later, I travelled to that very same island following, in my turn, in the footsteps of Villa. My objective was to visit the Pandelis Prevelakis archives at the library of the University of Crete to read Kyllikki Villa's letters to Prevelakis. I hoped that the correspondence could provide me with evidence that would help me solve some of the questions I am dealing with in my dissertation research on the Finnish translations of Modern Greek literature.

Heraklian adventures

Having arrived in Crete, I first spent a couple of days in Heraklion. I climbed up to Nikos Kazantzakis' grave on top of the wall that surrounds the city, just like Villa did before me. I visited the Historical Museum of Crete that Villa, too, had visited. The museum houses Kazantzakis' study that was transferred from Antibes along with some of the author's books, manuscripts, personal items and, of course, a selection of his works in translation. At the time of my visit, three Finnish translations were on display.

My trip took a most unexpected turn in Heraklion, when I had to learn a skill I never expected a PhD would require. I wanted to visit the Nikos Kazantzakis Museum that opened in 1983 in the small village of Myrtia, which is located some 15 kilometers inland from Heraklion. Unfortunately, there was only one daily bus departure to the village and back, so the options were either to stay in the village overnight – or to learn how to drive a scooter. I ended up doing the latter, and as soon as I got over the initial suspense, it was actually rather nice to drive through the Cretan countryside dotted with olives and vines!

The Kazantzakis Museum was definitively worth the visit. The first floor of the museum is dedicated to the life of Kazantzakis, while the second floor showcases his works both in original and in translations and movie adaptations. The Finnish translation, *Kerro minulle, Zorbas* (orig. *Βίος και πολιτεία του Αλέξη Ζορμπά*) was on display in two different editions.



Nikos Kazantzakis' grave in Rethymno. His tombstone reads: "I hope for nothing. I fear nothing. I am free."

The trip to the museum helped me understand how many different faces of Crete Kazantzakis saw during his lifetime: he was born under Ottoman rule, lived during the years of Cretan independence and died after the island was annexed to Greece. Crete's complex history is reflected in his literary works.



The Rethymno castle.



The street named after Nikos Kazantzakis in Myrtia.

In the archives in Rethymno

The main reason for my expedition to Crete was, however, to visit the Pandelis Prevelakis archives at the University of Crete's library in Rethymno to read letters sent by Kyllikki Villa to Prevelakis. In 1966, Kyllikki Villa interviewed Prevelakis for a newspaper, and in the piece she mentions that she had been in correspondence with the author in 1963 while translating the novel *Ο ήλιος του θανάτου*/*Ikuinen aurinko*. Furthermore, Villa mentions that she made recourse to the Danish translation, *Dødens sol*, as well as the Greek original, although the title page of the Finnish translation does not mention these two source texts; it simply states that the Finnish translation is based on the German *Die Sonne des Todes*. I was hoping that Villa's correspondence with Prevelakis would reveal more about how Villa went about translating the novel.

My trip to the archives turned out to be even more fruitful than I could have hoped, as it turned out that Prevelakis had corresponded with many of his translators.

The correspondence with Villa brings to light that Villa had trouble translating the names of some plants. The Danish translator, in turn, wrote to Prevelakis that the English translation, *The Sun of Death*, was of much help as he puzzled out some words with which he was unfamiliar, but his translation was still primarily based on the Greek edition. Based on the correspondences, the German and the English translations both seem to have been made directly from Greek.

In other words, the Finnish translation, *Ikuinen aurinko*, bears influence from four language-versions: the German, the Danish, the Greek, and the English.

The Finnish translation is thus more complex in terms of influences that one might

expect. This way of translating from several source texts has not gained much attention in Translation Studies, even though the practice has been used throughout history. Adopting this kind of translation strategy highlights the fact that translators may go through a lot of trouble to ensure that they understand correctly the text they are translating even when they are not able to read the text they translate in its original language. These are some of the themes that I deal with in my ongoing dissertation research.

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Text and Photos: Laura Ivaska

Further reading

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