

New Nonfiction from David James: “The Arch-Island Crete”

The Greek lands have been conquered many times— Romans, Venetians, Ottomans, now the tourist hordes—but the Greek spirit itself has remained free. Just as the Greeks brought the arts to rustic Latium, and science and philosophy to the Muslims, now they teach something even more important to the foreign sun-seekers—how to live.

If all the lands and islands of Greater Greece, from Peloponnese to the Dodecanese, were imagined to be a single body, Crete would be the protective belt holding together the abundant Aegean world of the Hellenic cosmos. Due to its rugged shape it is sometimes called *paximathi*, the Greek word for a bread rusk used to make *dakos*, a type of Cretan bruschetta. It was described as the “three-masted schooner” by its literary native son Nikos Kazantzakis. It is the largest of the Greek islands by far, 260 kilometers long but never more than 50 kilometers wide, with over 1000 kilometers of coastline. Because it is almost completely covered by mountains and steep hills, with three distinct massifs all surpassing 2000 meters in elevation, and with innumerable deep valleys and gorges criss-crossing the landscape, Crete feels more like a land apart, or a continent unto itself, than a relatively small island (only the fifth largest in the Mediterranean).



At the Palace of Knossos.

Zeus himself was Cretan-born, in a cave on Mount Ida. That almost every character in Greek mythology has some association with Crete shows its centrality in Hellenic culture, despite its peripheral status. It was to Crete where Zeus, in his bull avatar, carried off the Phoenician princess Europa, who then gave her name to the continental mainland. And it was Crete, in real historical terms, that was home to the Minoans, the sophisticated, 5000-year-old Bronze Age civilization that was the oldest to develop in Europe. Arthur Evans invented this name upon his fortuitous discovery of Knossos, choosing the legendary King Minos, son of Zeus and Europa, as the most appropriate namesake. Homer's epic poems make abundant reference to Crete as the rich and fertile, "hundred-citied" home of one of the greatest Achaean warriors, King Idomeneus. The wily (or mendacious, depending on your point of view) Odysseus, in his overly protracted voyage home to Ithaki,

falsely claimed to be a Cretan no less than three times while trying (and failing) to hide his true identity: once to his loyal protectress Athena, once to the loyal swineherd Eumaeus, and again to his loyal, long-suffering wife Penelope. These so-called Cretan lies most likely gave legs to the Paradox of Epimenides, a Cretan who made the immortal statement that "All Cretans are liars." Such a statement was already famous in antiquity and was referenced by the Apostle Paul and other ancient writers, philosophers, and church fathers, and more recently by Bertrand Russell and Douglas Hofstadter. In my experience, it may be true that Cretans are liars, but only insofar as all humans, including Cretans, are liars to greater or lesser degree.



Model of a typical Minoan trading vessel, one of hundreds of such displays at the Naval Museum of Crete.



The mysterious Phaistos Disk, written in Cretan hieroglyphics, which, along with Linear A, remains undeciphered.

My first trip to Crete was in January 2011 with my future wife. January is a propitious month to make such a visit, as it is the lowest of seasons for tourism, while the climate is very mild and not unpleasant. After an overnight ferry brought us to Heraklion at dawn, we walked the few kilometers to Knossos, which was practically empty. We enjoyed at leisure the various winding levels of the labyrinthine palace remains. It was here that the original labyrinth of Daedalus was located of course, and while no traces remain of this legendary structure it is likely that the enormous palace itself was the actual labyrinth. The word labyrinth most likely comes from the ancient Anatolian word “*labrys*”, or two-headed ax, which was a symbolic motif prominently displayed in Knossos and other Minoan sites. The ax, curiously, was always accompanied by a female presence, either human or divine. The

memorable frescoes feature more evidence that Minoan culture gave more status to women than is typically found in ancient human civilizations: the famous bull-jumping scene, for example, has female athletes holding the creature's horns and catching the leaper after he has completed his somersault. The Cretan writer Nikos Kazantzakis, while freely wandering the newly discovered ruins of Knossos, was inspired by the timeless frescoes to create his idiosyncratic philosophy of the "Cretan Glance", which encapsulated his idea of existential freedom and struggle. This idea was behind his masterpiece, the 33,333-line modern sequel to the *Odyssey*, where Odysseus himself becomes a symbol of human striving and potential. Such are the reflections that strike me when visiting ancient sites and walking the hallowed ground with hewn stones and rough engravings cut thousands of years ago. I feed off the energy of such historical, geographical, and cultural ramblings, and feel a strong connection to the past and the similarities we share with our forebears who lived so long ago. They had the same emotions, experiences, needs, and desires to be satisfied and be surrounded by beautiful places and things. In fact, I have come to believe that the need for beauty in our lives is one of the strongest of humankind, only preceded by our needs for food and water. Why else have I seen countless historical sites located on hilltops with beautiful views of the sea and the landscape, surrounded by beautiful gardens, built up with beautiful architecture, and decorated with beautiful artwork. Even simple ceramic vases, probably the most numerous ancient artifacts we possess from all civilizations, were invariably decorated with beautiful scenes and patterns.



Model of a hypothetical Palace of Knossos, the original labyrinth, from the Archaeological Museum of Crete.



Some of the hundreds of labrys of all sizes found across Crete, most likely serving as tutelary totems.

My return trip to Crete in July 2026 (by now my seventh trip to Greece overall) with wife and twin daughters was different from the first one in every way, despite following the same itinerary. We went to Knossos on our first day, using pre-ordered tickets to jump ahead of the long queue, only to find that the entire site was a long queue. The open space, while large, is full of narrow pathways leading around the site clogged with multiple 40- and 50-person tour groups. The latent energy of the site was non-existent, long since bottled up, used up, or leached away. It is not an unfamiliar feeling. I live near Venice and have often experienced something akin whilst wandering the narrow and labyrinthine thoroughfares crowded with an interminable line of tourists, until I usually turn onto some quiet abandoned alley in search of space and air. Likewise while walking the narrow, cramped corridors of

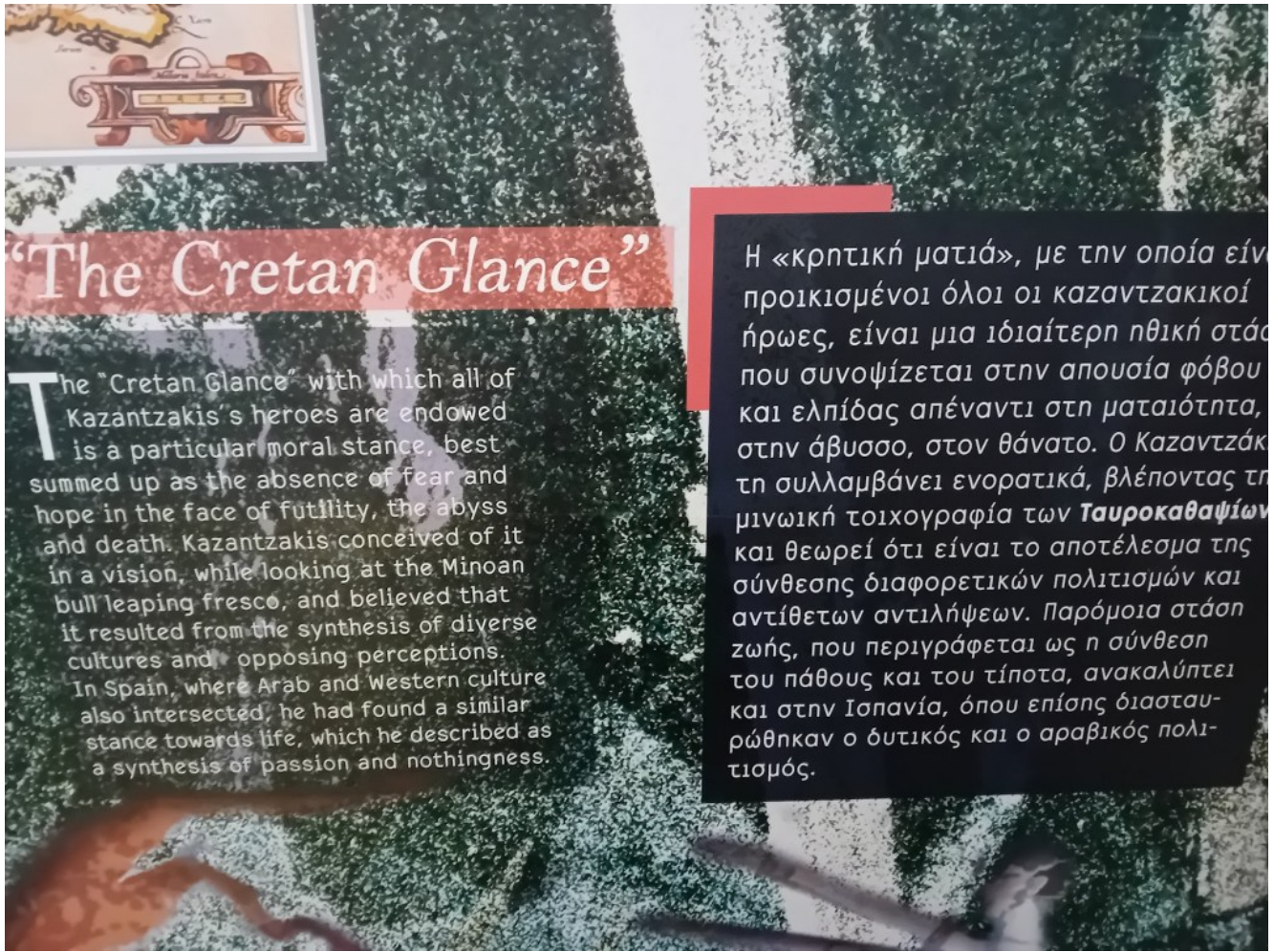
the Uffizi or the Vatican, where one feels lucky to glimpse a fragment of some Botticelli or Raphael canvas that is not covered by tourist hordes holding up selfie sticks in the tiny rooms. This is all explained by my newly formulated "Sightseeing Paradox": *the more people that travel in search of authentic sites to see, the less authentic those same sites become*. One could also call this the Disneylandification of Historical Sites, which equally applies to Venice, Rome, and most Italian places, and is accelerating across Greece, including Crete.



Tomb of Kazantzakis upon the Martinego Bastion above Heraklion.

My question is: are the people of a place happy about their home becoming just another tourist-dominated area where the locals are outnumbered by the visitors in high seasons? Does the growth of tourism and the money it brings in outweigh the loss of an authentic and traditional lifestyle? In Venice, the

loss of their independent maritime empire and the start of the tourist-driven Grand Tour has been over 200 years in the making, and the dwindling number of permanent residents are far from happy about it. This was already a well-known and easily observed phenomenon in the late 19th-century Venice described by Henry James. Greece, on the other hand, has been a center of tourism and sightseeing even before it was conquered by the Romans (when the legion showed once and for all its superiority to the phalanx). In the modern sense, however, the European tourist boom has only begun since the end of the Second World War, growing year after year from the 1960s and 70s until today. In 2025, there were over 40 million visitors to Greece, a country of only 10 million people. Crete is one of the top destinations, just behind regions like Attica, and southern Aegean Islands like Santorini and Mykonos. How is it possible that even such an ancient and unique place like Crete is in danger of losing its hard-earned freedom and authenticity?



“The Cretan Glance”

The “Cretan Glance” with which all of Kazantzakis’s heroes are endowed is a particular moral stance, best summed up as the absence of fear and hope in the face of futility, the abyss and death. Kazantzakis conceived of it in a vision, while looking at the Minoan bull-leaping fresco, and believed that it resulted from the synthesis of diverse cultures and opposing perceptions. In Spain, where Arab and Western culture also intersected, he had found a similar stance towards life, which he described as a synthesis of passion and nothingness.

Η «κρητική ματιά», με την οποία είναι προικισμένοι όλοι οι καζαντζακικοί ήρωες, είναι μια ιδιαίτερη ηθική στάση που συνοψίζεται στην απουσία φόβου και ελπίδας απέναντι στη ματαιότητα, στην άβυσσο, στον θάνατο. Ο Καζαντζάκης τη συλλαμβάνει ενορατικά, βλέποντας τη μινωική τοιχογραφία των **Ταυροκαθαψιών** και θεωρεί ότι είναι το αποτέλεσμα της σύνθεσης διαφορετικών πολιτισμών και αντίθετων αντιλήψεων. Παρόμοια στάση ζωής, που περιγράφεται ως η σύνθεση του πάθους και του τίποτα, ανακαλύπτει και στην Ισπανία, όπου επίσης διασταυρώθηκαν ο δυτικός και ο αραβικός πολιτισμός.

From the Kazantzakis Museum.

Let’s look at more of the history of Crete. Even if we leave off the myths, the ancient Minoans, Bronze Age Collapse, Classical, Hellenistic, Roman, and Byzantine periods, the more modern history is nearly equally distinguished. After the Fourth Crusade of 1204, when the Crusaders never even reached Jerusalem but were induced to sack the city of Constantinople itself in order to pay back their transportation debts to the Venetians, the island of Crete then came under the increasing dominion of The Most Serene Republic for well over 400 years. Marks of Venetian control are omnipresent, especially in the notable fortresses and walls of the main port cities of Heraklion, Chania, and Rethymno. The island was called Candia back then, which was also the name for the capital city (later Megalo Kastro, and finally Heraklion). Venetian Renaissance architecture in the form of palaces, churches, arches, fountains, and harbors are all still evident and striking.

This period of domination by the Latinate and Roman Catholic Venetians was difficult for the Greek-speaking and Orthodox population. There were constant revolts throughout the entire four-century period (at least 27 major uprisings), which is when the Cretans' reputation for belligerence and love of freedom began. Cretans could be considered the Scots of Greece. The very distinct dialect, the rugged and isolated landscape with scattered clans fighting family feuds as much as foreign invaders, the traditional martial dress, featuring a long dagger and rifle, high leather boots, baggy, kilt-like pantaloons and embroidered waistcoat, topped with a black headscarf called a *sariki*.



Outside the Kazantzakis Museum, pondering the most deserving non-Nobel winner of the past century.

The Venetians, fortified in their castles and ports, were

harsh rulers of Crete, often enacting reprisals through executions, torture, burning entire villages, and orthodox churches and monasteries (which often protected the rebels). The revolts never really stopped for four and a half centuries, but they grew less frequent and bloody as the Venetians learned how to divide and conquer: buy off some of the main *andartes* (rebels) with land and titles. This happened most notably in the case of the Kallergis clan. After the fall of Constantinople in 1453 (hastened by the Venetians' earlier sack of the great City), the Turks became the dominant power in the eastern Mediterranean. This put the rising Ottoman Empire up against the then-declining thalassocracy (a word that would also describe the Minoans) of Venice, and a 250-year conflict ensued. By the middle of the 17th century the Ottomans turned their attention to Crete. Venetian fortifications were the most technologically advanced of the time, and after capturing Chania in two months and Rethymno in one month, their forces broke against the walls of Candia (Heraklion). Under the leadership of the future doge Francesco Morosini, the Venetians held out for 21 years, the longest continuous siege in history. Only when French forces finally arrived to aid the Venetians, but then convinced the same long-suffering Venetians to give up before the French had even fired a shot, did the end come. This two-decade struggle was the end of Venetian dominance, and the quantity of gold and men spent by both empires was equally ruinous to both. In fact, even the Ottomans were now already in their own long period of decline. Side note on Francesco Morosini: after his mostly successful 21-year defense of Crete, he later earned the Roman-style nickname "Peloponnesiaco" for his actions fighting the Turks in the mainland of Greece during the Great Turkish War; it was actually he who was single-handedly responsible for the near destruction of the Parthenon, which had remained mostly intact for two millennia until proudly bombarded by the reckless Venetian commander for a very short-term tactical gain.



Nondescript crossroads monument at the site of the Fermor-led abduction of German General Kriepe.

The Turks, fortified in their castles and ports, were harsh rulers of Crete, often enacting reprisals through executions, torture, burning entire villages, and orthodox churches and monasteries (which often protected the rebels). The revolts never really stopped for two and a half centuries, but they only grew more frequent and bloody as the Turks never learned how to divide and conquer, and the locals despised their Muslim rulers even more than their former Catholic overlords. Nearly every male Cretan was either a full-time rebel fighter, or was prepared to be one when necessary. Throughout the Hellenic world, only the Maniots were more rebellious and warlike than the Cretans. When there were no active rebellions happening, piracy was a major profession. The revolts increased markedly in the second half of the 19th century after Greece had achieved its own independence, and the idea

of Hellenic *enosis* (union) became widespread. The Great Cretan Revolt of 1866-69 put the Turks on the back foot and rallied global attention, especially after the inhabitants of the Arkadi Monastery decided to blow themselves up along with the besieging Turks instead of surrendering. Finally, the 1897 revolt convinced the major powers—Britain, France, Russia, and Italy—to intervene with a naval blockade on behalf of the island and declare *de facto* independence for Crete.



The joyful, evocative Bull-Leaping Fresco uncovered at Knossos. Unlike Spanish bullfighting, the Minoans merely teased the bull but shed no blood.

The island remained an independent polity for 15 years, until it formally joined the Kingdom of Greece under the leadership of the great statesman Eleftherios Venizelos, who was himself from Crete. Cretans fought with distinction in the Balkan Wars, World War One, and the doomed Greek invasion of Anatolia. After the exodus of over one million Orthodox Greeks

fleeing the new Republic of Turkey, a relatively small number, exactly 33,900, settled in Crete. When the Second World War began, Mussolini, annoyed by the *Fuhrer's* continual refusal to inform or involve *il Duce* before invading new countries, and wanting to assert Italy's own military dominance, invaded Greece from across the Albanian border. The Greeks quickly stopped the Italian forces and began to push them back over the border, showing that Mussolini should have listened to the warnings of his generals. Hitler was forced to send three Panzer divisions to help his erstwhile Pact of Steel ally, and the German forces quickly rolled up the Greeks. The courage and stiff resistance of the Greek soldiers was praised publicly in a speech by Hitler, and he allowed them to return home with their weapons, a unique event during the war. Strategically and in hindsight, the Greek invasion contributed to a five-week delay of Operation Barbarossa, which means that it may be one of the most crucial factors the Germans were not able to completely defeat the Soviet Union before the winter weather arrived, which means that the Greek resistance contributed in some way to the Germans (and Italians) ultimately losing the war.



British War Cemetery at Souda Bay, containing the mortal remains of 1564 British Empire servicemen killed by Germans in Crete.



Small, unkempt British cemetery at the base of Hill 107.

With the Greek mainland, and the entire Balkan Peninsula, under control of the Axis forces, Crete remained the lone bastion of freedom in all of Europe. The British heavily fortified the island, with aid from the Aussies and Kiwis (the only other time besides Gallipoli that ANZAC was deployed). This base for British naval and air power in the Southern Mediterranean was too dangerous for Germany to tolerate, and in May 1941 Hitler authorized the airborne invasion of Crete, named Operation Mercury. 10,000 German *Fallschirmjäger* (paratroopers) were dropped on the island, and after a few days were able to take control of the major cities of the northern coast. Despite heavy resistance from the British forces (especially the New Zealand contingent) and local fighters (hundreds of Germans were stabbed or shot before reaching the ground), the Germans were able to secure the Maleme airfield (the only one on the island) and bring in

reinforcements and resupply. The British, whose navy was not able to reach the island without being sunk by Stuka bombers, could not resupply their own troops, and they were forced to evacuate a full 18,000 soldiers from beaches on the southern coast. Over 12,000 British soldiers were captured by the Germans, with a small number hiding out and continuing to resist from the mountains. One of the local resistance leaders was British officer, Patrick Leigh Fermor, who helped plan and carry out a bold action to abduct the German general in charge of the island, Heinrich Kriepe. This inspired a popular book, *Ill Met By Moonlight*, which was made into a film starring Dirk Bogarde as the suave Fermor (who was himself one of Fleming's inspirations for James Bond, and a travel writer whom I admire, and whose house on the Mani peninsula I have visited). All told, the Germans lost well over 5000 soldiers during the Battle of Crete, and this heavy cost convinced Hitler that airborne invasions were no longer worth the trouble. All German paratroopers were converted to ground troops and sent to the Russian front.



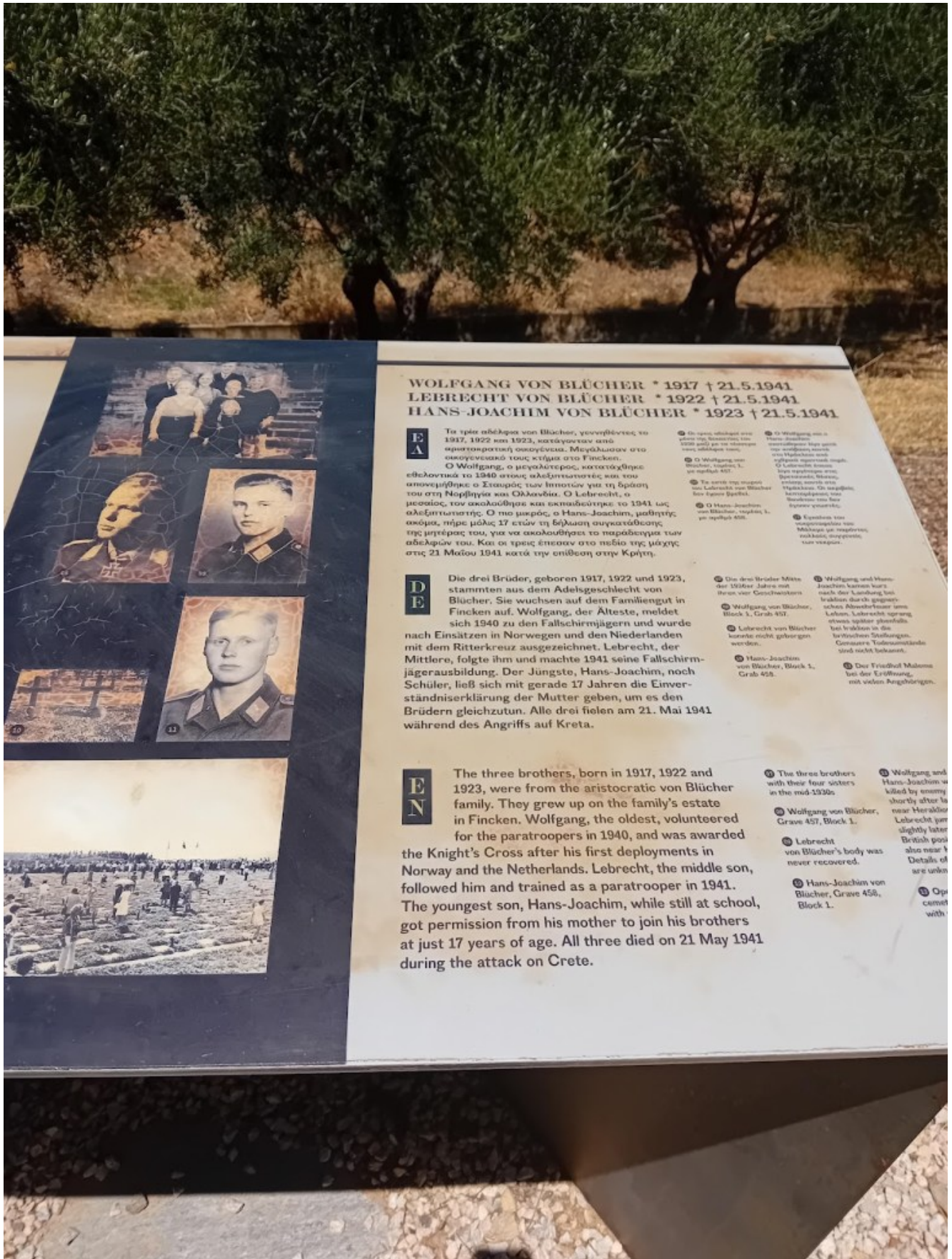
Inside the serene Holy Trinity Monastery on the Akrotiri peninsula, one of hundreds of Orthodox monasteries found on the island.

The Germans, fortified in the cities and ports, were harsh rulers of Crete, often enacting reprisals through executions, torture, burning entire villages, and orthodox churches and monasteries (which often protected the rebels). The revolts never really stopped for over three years, and the locals despised their Nazi overlords even more than the previous Muslim and Catholic rulers. The Germans completely burned and razed to the ground over 100 villages, which are now called the “martyred villages of Crete”, and would line up and execute civilians in groups of 100 or more at a time in response to a single German soldier being killed. A similar episode was part of the plot of John Fowles’ novel *The Magus*. Werner Herzog’s first film, *Signs of Life*, also depicts a German officer stationed on a Greek island who gradually loses

his mind (due to, one imagines, the disconnect between Dionysian spirit inhabiting the place and German war crimes). During the nearly four-year German occupation, the Germans controlled the coasts and the roads, but not the mountainous interior. The resistance was fueled by *andartes* constantly moving around and evading capture among the jagged limestone cliffs and gorges. They communicated by runners who would literally run back and forth across the unforgiving landscape. One of these resistance runners, George Psychoundakis, wrote a firsthand account called *The Cretan Runner* (translated into English by Fermor). It is one of the few accounts from the entire war written by a local resistance fighter. When the Germans were defeated at Stalingrad and inevitably started losing the war, their position in Crete and the Balkans in general became untenable. Before gradually retreating throughout the island and consolidating their position at Chania (including its vital air and naval bases), they struck out with their most violent reprisals to date, hoping that wholesale massacres would prevent the local resistance from impeding their escape from the island, and from justice. A small garrison held out even after the end of the war, and the Nazi flag was not lowered until two weeks later on May 23, 1945.



The German cemetery containing 4465 buried soldiers, an almost impossibly peaceful and moving place on top of Hill 107 overlooking the Maleme airstrip and bay.



Three German brothers killed on the same day of the invasion, like the other thousands of young Germans led into the wolf's mouth.

Crete, having been violently oppressed by occupying forces for over 700 years, was finally free, but impoverished and depopulated. What does a people finally do with such hard-fought freedom? Crete stayed mostly uninvolved in the Greek Civil War, the first episode of the Cold War, where the Communists (who had been a huge part of the resistance to the Nazis) were defeated. Churchill was especially responsible for this latest violent chapter of modern Greek history, which destabilized the country well into the 1970s when a military junta was overthrown. Crete, for its part, leaned heavily into the burgeoning tourism that took over the country already by this same decade. The population of the island had always been heavily oriented to the interior, with goat and olive-based agriculture the main livelihood. Now the interior villages are mostly empty, and the coastal cities and beach towns have become the center of the Cretan economy. English is well-spoken by most Greeks, both to support ubiquitous tourism and due to a lingering anglophilia that dates back to the original Greek War of Independence. The rustic but bounteous food of the islanders has become high-priced luxury fare at the hundreds of seaside tavernas in hotspots like Chania harbor. I look around for surly, freedom-loving *andartes* ready to unsheath a dagger after any stray glance, but all I find are people selling things. Everything is for sale, and in this case, the price of freedom means full initiation into the world of the American-style free market and the new religion of all-encompassing capitalism. The ancient tradition of hospitality central to Greek culture since the *Odyssey* lingers merely in the form of a free shot of ouzo offered after an overpriced meal. Authenticity is a quality hard-won from centuries and millennia of traditions piled on top of cultural history. It is an almost chthonic quality that emanates from the very soil where myths and legends slowly merged into ancient history that permeate the natural and built environment. And yet it is not a renewable resource, but one that slowly fades away if not protected and cultivated. Like History itself, it lasts only as long as it is part of

collective human memory. Who was the last person who heard the blind poet recite his tales of war and homecoming? Who was the last person born into the Byzantine Empire who heard the voice of the last Roman emperor? Who was the last person who remembers living under the sway of the doge in the Most Serene Republic of Venice? Does anyone now still live who was involved in the Cretan Resistance of the Second War? *Mais où sont les neiges d'antan!* Authenticity, like freedom, and memory, must be fought for.



Tomb of Eleftherios Venizelos overlooking Chania.

Kazantzakis, the literary father of Crete, addressed his memoirs *Report to Greco* to the great, mystical mannerist

painter Domenikos Theotokopoulos, known as El Greco, and whom Kazantzakis called grandfather. El Greco was born in a small village near Heraklion, and trained in the Byzantine style of iconic art. He left the island at the age of 26, never to return, first to the city of Venice, then eventually to Toledo, Spain. He studied Tintoretto, Titian, and of course Michelangelo, but was unsatisfied to merely copy Italian Renaissance techniques. He famously denigrated Michelangelo's *Last Judgment* and claimed that the great Tuscan artist, who still dominated Italian art long after his death, did not know how to paint. He moved to the rich Spanish empire to escape Italian (and Greek) influence and style and make his own name. He never received the patronage he desired because King Philip did not like his works. Even so, he produced hauntingly modern pictures of intense energy and light that continue to inspire today. Van Gogh, Picasso, and Dalì were among the more modern masters who emulated aspects of El Greco. El Greco lived his life in absolute certainty of his own talents, in freedom, and with indifference to popular opinion. He lived authentically, with the searching, deeply religious eyes in his paintings inspiring Kazantzakis' Cretan Glance every bit as much as the timeless frescoes of Knossos. Perhaps after all, the Cretan lies of Odysseus were in some sense true, and this hero, for all his faults, remains the most enduring portrait of humanity ever created, and the one who can still teach us the most how to live.



El Greco House and Museum in Fodele, a tiny village west of Heraklion.



Three of the 24 reproduction paintings of El Greco displayed in this quaint museum to a respected native son.