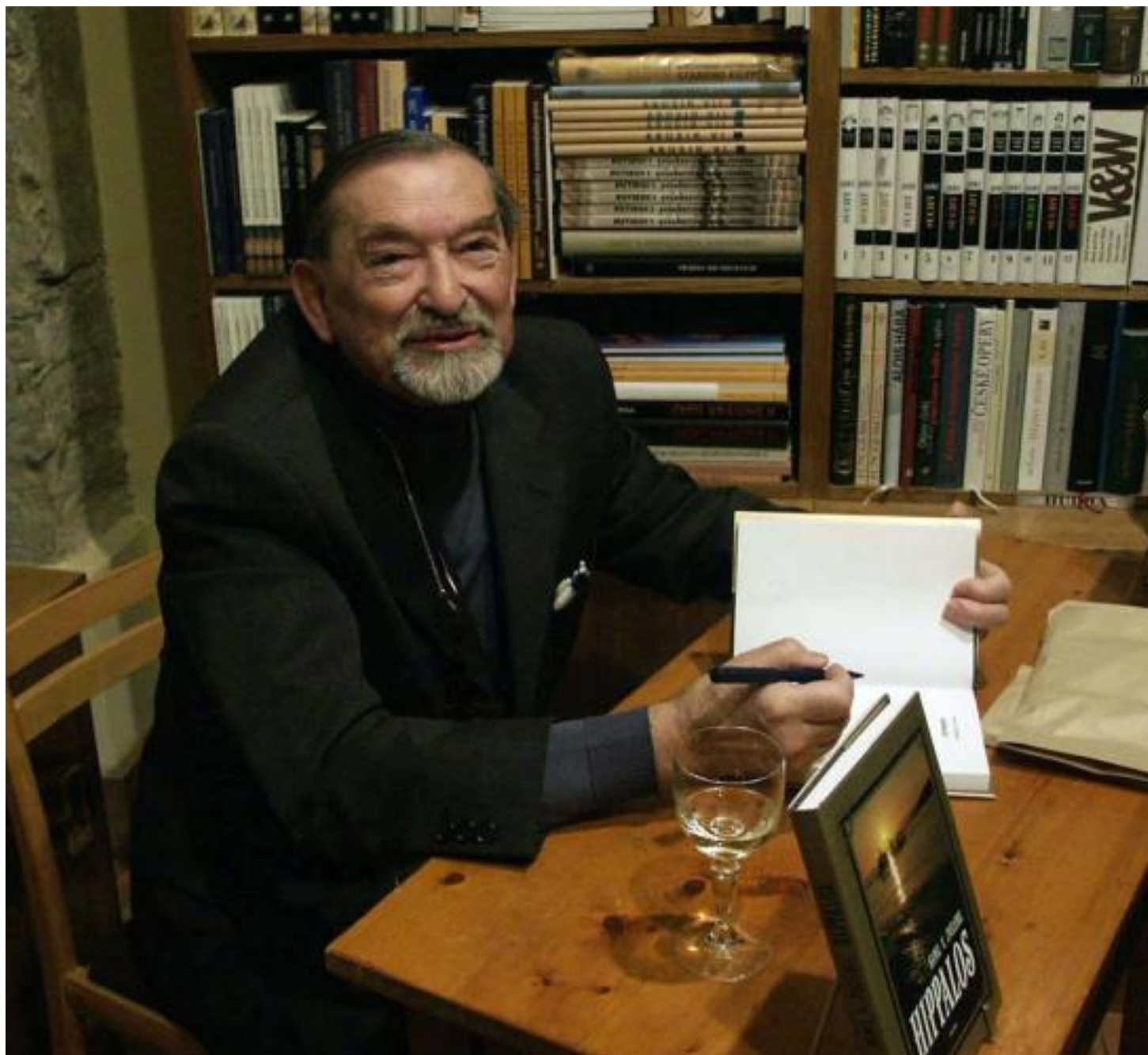

Zvelebil

Prof. Kamil Veith Zvelebil



On January 17, 2009, Prof. Kamil V. Zvelebil, a world-renowned Czech specialist in Indian studies, Tamil and Dravidian, and founder of Czech Tamil and Dravidian studies, passed away in France after a prolonged illness.

K.V. Zvelebil finished classical grammar school in Prague and then started to study Indology (specialising in Sanskrit) and English at the Philosophical Faculty of Charles University. Step by step he turned his attention to India. He attended the lectures of two prominent representatives of Czech classical Indian studies, Professors V. Lesný and O. Friš, who significantly influenced his future professional profile not only in the sphere of linguistics, but also that of literature and literary and cultural history. In English studies K. Zvelebil acquired expertise in linguistic methodology along the lines of the Prague Linguistic School. This was especially thanks to Prof. B. Trnka, one of the best Czech specialists in the historical grammar of English and a leading representative of the Prague functional approach to linguistic theory. However, Zvelebil's life interest was inspired by Prof. O. Pertold, who specialised in Indian religions and ethnology and who knew a number of modern Indian languages including Tamil, besides of course the traditional classical languages (Sanskrit and Prakrits). Such good philological erudition made it easier for Kamil Zvelebil to study Tamil alongside the main subject of his studies, which was Sanskrit. He studied Tamil as an autodidact and partly also with the help of the employees of the Indian Embassy, whose mother tongue happened to be Tamil.

After finishing his studies and passing the 'rigorous' exam in 1952, he acquired a research position in the Oriental Institute of the then Czechoslovak Academy of Sciences, which was headed by V. Lesný. Though V. Lesný passed away soon after that (1953), he managed to lay the foundations for the further development of the study of modern languages in Prague by providing an opportunity for young and talented graduates of Indian studies (but also other Oriental languages) to develop new spheres of knowledge. At that time Zvelebil's other colleagues were starting serious studies of Bengali (Dušan Zbavítel, b. 1925) and Hindi (Vladimír Miltner, 1933–1997) and in the mid-1950s the teaching of modern languages also started at the Philosophical Faculty of Charles University (Vincenc Pořízka /1905–1982/, Odolen Smékal /1928–1998/). K. Zvelebil taught Tamil at the faculty as a part-time teacher in the years 1960–1965.

Until then, modern languages had been studied at several universities in Europe and in the United States and at that time this was an important broadening of the scope of Czech Indian studies and Oriental studies in general, which began to participate in the international process of the formation of modern Oriental studies, based on thorough knowledge of both the classical tradition and modern languages and cultures. In the course of the following almost twenty years the studies of classical and modern languages developed in harmony and it is a strange historical irony that this was taking place at a time which in many respects was a period of 'darkness' in the then Czechoslovakia. K. Zvelebil significantly contributed to this creative milieu, both through his pure research work in the sphere of Tamil linguistics (he obtained the title CSc. = PhD. in 1959) and also through his translations and his books for the general public, sometimes called 'popularising' work, including literature for children. It is, however, necessary to underline that in the sphere of Oriental studies the role of good 'popularising' work is equally important both for the development of the particular field of studies and for the development of knowledge in general.

During the time of his work in the Oriental Institute (1952–1970) Kamil Zvelebil devoted much of his time to intensive research into Tamil dialects and into the historical grammar of Tamil. He published a number of systematic descriptions of the main Tamil dialects based on his field work in Tamil Nadu. Most of them appeared in the international journal *Archív Orientální*, published by the Oriental Institute, and partly also in journals abroad (mainly in India and Sri Lanka). He contributed significantly to a more precise delimitation of the dialectal regions of present-day Tamil (including Ceylon Tamil), and also to a more precise definition of the basic characteristics of these dialects. Besides that he also started his work on the historical grammar of Tamil by way of detailed studies in particular areas. It was during his time in Prague that he started to work on the comparative grammar of Dravidian languages and began his field work in the area of the Blue Mountains (Nilgiri), to which he later devoted a number of specialist studies and also books. At that time it was particularly for 'popularising' purposes that he also worked in the field of cultural history or religion, but years later he returned to these topics at a deeper level with more detailed studies. During his "Prague" period he also devoted much of his time to translating, particularly from old and middle Tamil, but also from modern Tamil (short stories) and from Malayalam (the novels of T.S. Pillai), and later also from Kannada.

However, K. Zvelebil spent most of his professional life abroad. He concluded his teaching of Tamil in Prague by obtaining 'habilitation' as a 'docent' (associate professor) in 1965, which was shortly before he left for his first appointment at the University of Chicago in 1965–66. After that he continued his work at the Oriental Institute and in doctoral studies at Charles University, but in 1968 he did not return from leave abroad at the end of August (after the occupation of Czechoslovakia by the Soviet army on August 21) and continued to teach at Chicago University until 1970. Formally he had study leave at the Oriental Institute until 1970. He then left the USA and in 1970 he stayed briefly at the College de France. In 1970–71 he was a research worker at Leiden University. At the same time he was a visiting professor in Heidelberg (1967–73). From the beginning of the 70s until the 90s he worked at the University of Utrecht, first as a research worker (1971–76) and then as Professor of Dravidian Studies (1976–91). From there he retired on 1.9.1991 as professor emeritus and since then he had been living in Southern France. After 1989 he visited Prague regularly and held lectures at Charles University, Philosophical Faculty, where he obtained the title Visiting Professor in 1997 and where he also helped with doctoral studies until 2005.

K.V. Zvelebil had already been very prolific during the years he spent in Prague. Besides research works he also published the aforementioned translations and popularising works (to which he partly returned after 1990), but he wrote his main works from the 1970s to 1990s during his stay abroad. Whether it was the sphere of comparative Dravidian,

the history of Tamil literature or tribal languages and dialectology, his works have always presented new ideas and also systematically summarised the knowledge available in the relevant field at that time. K.V. Zvelebil did a lot of field work. For instance, he described the Irula language and showed that it was an independent tribal language. His translation of the phonological and morphological section of the Old Tamil grammar *Tolkappiyam* (published in the *Journal of Tamil Studies*) is also important. Indeed it remains the essential work of Old Tamil linguistics, playing a similar role for Tamil as Paṇini's grammar does for Sanskrit. K.V. Zvelebil also contributed to the discussion about the relationship of the Dravidian languages with the Elamite and Altaic languages and defended a critical opinion concerning the Finnish decipherment of the Harappan script, which attracted the attention of the professional public in the 1970s. Selected papers from Tamil and Dravidian linguistics and a monographic collection of his papers on the Nilgiri languages were published by the Karolinum Publishing house (Charles University) in 1995 and 2001. Through his essential works on the history of Tamil literature on the one hand, and through linguistic work on comparative Dravidian and ethnolinguistic work on the non-literary Dravidian languages (particularly the Nilgiri area) on the other, he became ranked among the foremost researchers respected by the professional world as a whole. His translations into Czech are written in a polished language, in particular his translations of poetry. Much valued are his works in the field of religion and philosophy. He also dealt with Zen Buddhism for many years, both practically and theoretically.

Besides that he was active in a number of international organisations, not least in his capacity as Vice-President of the Academy of Tamil Culture in Madras and Secretary of the International Association of Tamil Research in Madras. He was also a member of several national and international professional societies – the Czech Union of Writers, the American Oriental Society, the Tamil Writers' Association, the Linguistic Circle of Delhi the Sahitya Akademy (National Academy of Letters, India) of which he was Honorary Fellow, and some others.

The results of his work were acknowledged several times in the course of time: he received an award of Special Recognition from the Czechoslovak Academy of Sciences (1957 a 1959), a Prize from the Czechoslovak Academy of Sciences (1964), an Honorary Plaque of the College de France (1970) and the Gold Commemorative Medal of Josef Dobrovský from the Czechoslovak Academy of Sciences (1992).

There is no doubt that K.V. Zvelebil belongs among the most productive Czech researchers with a broad range of subjects and a deep insight into the topics he investigated. He was a rigorous, logical and systematic scholar, but in another sphere of his creative work he could be a sensitive translator or captivating narrator. Besides that he was an inspiring teacher, demanding but also tolerant of new ideas which he always encouraged, while remaining soberly critical about the implications. His bibliography has over five hundred items, and among these are several dozen books – besides translations, original writing and popularising works there are a number of important monographs from the various spheres of his interest. The following selective list includes only the most important books, not his papers or translations published in many Czech and foreign journals.

Select bibliography of Kamil V. Zvelebil

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