

History Mystery: The 'Myth' of the minotaur's labyrinth



Mythology exists in every known ancient culture in the world, stories about heroes, Gods, monsters, and quests. Myths are a traditional story, often passed down through generations, that often pass along a message or lesson. Some of the most famous myths come from ancient Greece, where we have all likely heard about the strength of Hercules, the power of Zeus, the hideousness of Medusa, and many more. One famous myth is that of Theseus, the young prince who battled the terrible beast called the Minotaur who lived in a stone maze built under the city of Crete.

But are myths based completely on fiction? After all, they usually seem impossible. But could they be more real than we think? And if they are, what can we learn from these 'myths'?

This week, your job is to explore the 'myth' of the Minotaur of Crete, and the huge underground maze that he was trapped in called the labyrinth. Using primary and secondary sources, different versions of the myth, Art pieces, video evidence, and newspaper articles, it is your job to figure out:

- 1. Is the Minotaur just a myth, or could this creature be based on something real?**
- 2. What are the origins of this story? What can it tell us about life in Ancient Greece?**
- 3. Did the labyrinth of Crete really exist, and if so could it still be hidden under the ground waiting to be discovered?**

Time to solve this History Mystery!

The Minotaur 'myth': Evidence #1

The story of Theseus and the minotaur, adapted from the original Greek myth (this is one version of MANY different stories)

Once, there was a boy who lived with his Mother. The boy's name was Theseus, and he was very noble, brave, and strong. He was happy with his mother, but he wanted to learn more about his Father, since he had never met him and did not know who he was. Theseus' mother told him that if he was strong enough to lift the boulder in their yard, he would discover the truth. When Theseus became a young man, he successfully lifted the boulder and discovered a jeweled sword underneath it. His mother revealed that Theseus' father was King Egeus, and encouraged him to go speak with him, even though she was heartbroken to see him leave.

Theseus traveled the long journey to Athens, battling many thieves, giants, and monsters along the way. When he finally arrived, the King had already heard of his bravery and welcomed him as a hero. But when Theseus revealed he was really the King's son, King Egeus was overwhelmed with joy and declared him a Prince.

Prince Theseus was greatly loved by his father, King Egeus. Theseus, however, was much too brave for his own good... he did not want to just sit and rule quietly. His ambition was to perform more heroic deeds. One morning, Prince Theseus awoke to sobs and screams of woe—from the king's palace, from the streets, and from the temples. He put on his clothes as quickly as he could and, running over to his Father and asking what was happening.

"My son, I am sorry you must see this," said King Egeus. "This is the saddest anniversary of the year. It is the day when we draw names to see which of the young men and women of Athens will be sacrificed to a dreadful beast. You see, each year we are forced to send 7 young men and 7 young women to Crete, where they will be pushed into the labyrinth, a terrible maze under the palace. They will wander around the maze, lost beyond hope, until they come face to face with the bloodthirsty Minotaur and meet a terrible fate."

"Why do we send our citizens to their death, Father? Why can we not stop this madness?" Theseus yelled.

His father sighed deeply, then replied, "If we refuse to send our sacrifices, the King of Crete will begin a war with us. And it is not a war that we can hope to win. We are sacrificing these 14 lives to save the lives of the rest of our citizens."

"Let me fight this horrible Minotaur!" exclaimed Prince Theseus; and, like a brave young prince as he was, he put his hand on his sword. "Tell me everything about this monster, because this

will be the last time we send our children to their death. I am going to kill that beast and free Athens from this curse!"

But King Egeus shook his head and explained more about the creature that lived under Crete. Born from a curse put upon Crete by Poseidon, the Minotaur was a horrible hybrid of human and animal. It was violent, unpredictable, strong, and hungered for humans. King Minos of Crete, a powerful but cruel king, built a maze under the city, a labyrinth, that was almost impossible to escape from. King Minos threw the creature into the labyrinth, hoping to hide it from the world. A few years before, there had been a war between the city of Athens and the island of Crete.

Crete was victorious against Athens, and the Athenians could only beg for peace if they agreed to seven young men and seven maidens, every year, to be devoured by the pet monster of the cruel King Minos. When Theseus heard the story, he said, "Let the people of Athens this year choose only six young men, instead of seven. I will myself be the seventh; and let the Minotaur devour me if he can!"

Despite his father's protests and cries, Theseus had made up his mind. He was going to kill the Minotaur and free his people from this curse, or die trying. As Prince Theseus was getting on board the ship sailing for Crete with the other prisoners, his father said, "My beloved son, do you see that the sails of this vessel are black, since it goes upon a voyage of sorrow and despair? I do not know whether I can survive till the vessel returns. But as long as I do live, I will go to the top of the cliffs to watch if there is a sail upon the sea. And if by some happy chance you should escape the jaws of the Minotaur, then tear down those black sails, and hoist others that shall be white and bright as the sunshine. When I see the white sails, I and all the people will know that you are coming back victorious."

Theseus promised that he would do so. Then he set sail, and eventually arrived at King Minos' kingdom. The guards of King Minos came down to the waterside and took charge of the 14 young men and women. Theseus and his companions were led to the king's palace. When King Minos saw Theseus, the king looked at him more attentively, because his face was calm and unafraid. "Young man," asked he, with his stern voice, "are you not afraid of being devoured by this terrible Minotaur?"

"I have offered my life for a good cause," answered Theseus, "and so I am willing to die for my people. But you, King Minos, aren't you afraid of what kind of cowardly king you are, for sending children to their doom? You are a more terrible monster than the Minotaur himself!"

"Aha, you think me so?" cried the king, laughing in his cruel way. "Tomorrow you shall have an opportunity to see which is the greater monster, the Minotaur or the king!"

Near the king's throne stood his daughter Ariadne. She was a kind woman who looked at these poor doomed prisoners with very different feelings from those of the cruel King Minos. Every year, she begged her father to set them free.

“Quiet, foolish girl!” her father would shout. He would not hear another word from her. Then, the prisoners were led away to a dungeon. The seven maidens and six young men soon sobbed themselves to sleep. But Theseus was not like them. He felt that he had the responsibility of all their lives upon him, and must think of a plan to save them.

Just before midnight, the gentle Ariadne snuck down to the dungeon. “Are you awake, Prince Theseus?” she whispered. She invited him to follow her. Ariadne led him from the prison into the moonlight. She told him he could sail away to Athens and be free, so that he could rule his people in kindness.

“No,” answered the young man; “I will never leave Crete unless I can slay the Minotaur and save my people.”

“I knew you would say that,” said Ariadne. “Come with me. Here, I have stolen back your sword from my father. You will need it.” She led Theseus to the hallway. Ariadne pressed her finger against the stone wall, and it opened a secret passageway. She said, “In the center of this labyrinth is the Minotaur. If you are truly hoping to slay the beast, you will find him there.” They heard a roar that sounded like a raging bull, but that had a sort of human voice as well.

“That is the Minotaur’s noise,” whispered Ariadne. “Follow that sound through the labyrinth and you will find him. Take the end of this string; I will hold the other end. Then, if you win the victory, it will lead you again to this spot. You will not get lost and starve to death in the labyrinth, at least.”

So Theseus took the end of the string in his left hand and his father’s sword in the other, and stepped boldly into the labyrinth. The maze, built under Crete to house the Minotaur, smelled of ancient dirt and decay. It was dark, except for a few torches on the walls. The labyrinth was made of stone, extending many feet into the air, and unimaginably big. It was littered with human bones. Each twist and turn looked exactly the same, and the Prince felt pity for all the souls who had lost their way in here before him. Theseus followed the sounds of the creature, twisting and turning with the string behind him. Closer and closer he got to the roars and cries. Finally, at the center of the labyrinth, he saw the hideous creature, crouched over in what must be his lair.

Sure enough, what an ugly monster it was! It had the head of a bull, with sharp and menacing horns, and the body of a tall man. He was bent over like an animal, crying and roaring (in hunger or anger or sadness, it was not clear). Theseus hated the monster but also felt pity. The Minotaur let out a roar; Theseus understood that the Minotaur was saying to himself how miserable he was. But Theseus was not afraid! It strengthened his heart to feel a tug at the rope, which he was still holding in his left hand. It was as if Ariadne were giving him all her might and courage. Now, the Minotaur caught sight of Theseus and instantly lowered his sharp horns, exactly as a mad bull before it attacks. They began an awful fight.

At last, the Minotaur made a run at Theseus, and wounded his left side with his horn. The creature knocked Theseus down to the ground. When Theseus lay still, the creature thought he had won the fight. The Minotaur opened his twisted bull mouth, full of teeth, and prepared to devour the prince. But Theseus had leaped up and caught the monster off guard. He slashed at the creature's neck with his sword, removing the bull head from the human body and killing it. So now the battle had ended. Theseus, as he leaned on his sword, taking breath, felt another pull on the rope. Eager to let Ariadne know of his success, he followed the guidance of the rope and retraced his steps, and soon found himself at the entrance of the labyrinth.

"Thou hast slain the monster!" cried Ariadne, smiling and crying in joy.

"Thanks to thee, wonderful Ariadne," answered Theseus, "I return victorious."

"Then," said Ariadne, "we must quickly summon the rest of the prisoners, and get them and thyself onto the boat before dawn. By morning, my father will avenge the Minotaur and kill you All."

The poor captives were awakened and told of what Theseus had done, and that they must set sail for Athens before morning. Prince Theseus lingered, asking Adriane to come with him. But the maiden said no. "My father is old, and has nobody but myself to love him." So he said farewell to Ariadne and set sail with the others. On the homeward voyage, the 14 Athenians were in great spirits, joyful to have survived. But little did Theseus know that misfortune would still befall him.

You will remember that Theseus' father, King Egeus, had said to change the sails on the boat to white instead of black ones. That way, if Theseus should overcome the Minotaur and return victorious, he would know his son had survived. In the joy of their success, however, Theseus never thought about whether their sails were black, white, or any other colour. Thus the boat returned with black sails, like a grim reaper on the ocean. Poor King Egeus, day after day, had climbed to the cliff that overhung the sea, and sat watching for the boat. He hoped to see the white sails and know that his son was homeward bound; and no sooner did he behold the fatal blackness of the sails than he believed that his dear son had been eaten by the Minotaur. The poor man cried out and fell over the side of the cliff, and was drowned, poor soul, in the waves below. The hungry sea was later named after him in his honour.

This was terrible news for Prince Theseus, who, when he stepped ashore, found his father was dead and Theseus himself was now king of all the country. However, he sent for his dear mother, and, by taking her advice in matters of state, became a very excellent monarch, and was greatly beloved by his people.