

Myths and facts about the Minotaur

The story of the Minotaur

King Minos of Crete was a powerful man, feared by the rulers of the lands around him. When he demanded they send tributes to honour him, they sent them without question. It was the only way they could stop him going to war with them. King Minos had a great palace built for himself with a giant maze, a Labyrinth, inside. At the centre of the maze, he kept a terrifying creature, the Minotaur; half man and half bull. It loved to eat the flesh of humans.

As for Athens, Minos demanded that every year the King send him seven young men and seven young women as food for the Minotaur. One day Theseus, the King's son, decided to end the tradition, "Father, when it is time to send the next tribute, I will go as one of them and I vow that it is the last time the Minotaur will be fed with the flesh of any of our people."

His father could not persuade him to change his mind. Theseus insisted that he understood the dangers but would succeed. "I will return to you, father," cried Theseus, as the ship left the harbour wall, "and you will be proud of your son." His father said "I shall keep watch for you every day. If you are successful, take down these black sails and replace them with white ones. That way I will know you are coming home safe to me."

As the ship docked in Crete, King Minos himself came down to taunt the Athenians and to humiliate them even further. "I will let you choose which one goes first into the Minotaur's den. Who is it to be?" he jeered.

Theseus stepped forward. "I will go first. I am Theseus, Prince of Athens and I do not fear what is within the walls of your maze."

Standing behind the king, listening, was his daughter, Ariadne. From the moment she set eyes on Theseus, Ariadne fell in love with him. As he entered the labyrinth and the guards walked away, she called softly to him. "Theseus, take this," she whispered. "Even if you kill the Minotaur, you will never find your way out again."

She threw him a great ball of string and he tied one end of it to the entrance. He smiled at her, turned and began to make his way into the maze, the string playing out behind him as he went. Theseus walked for hours in the dark. Eventually, with his hands held out in front of him feeling his way, he suddenly touched what felt like a huge bony horn. In an instant he was picked up between the Minotaur's horns and tossed high into the air. When he landed on the hard cold stone, he felt the animal's huge hooves come down on his chest.

But Theseus was no ordinary man. As the Minotaur bellowed Theseus grabbed the animal's huge horns, and twisted the Minotaur's neck. With one final tug on the head, the creature's neck snapped. Theseus struggled to find the string, which he had dropped in the fight, but eventually, with a whoop of delight, he knew he had found the thread which would lead him back out. Ariadne was waiting for him.

"You must take me back to Athens with you," she cried, "My father will kill me when he finds out that I have helped you." "But of course you must come with us," said Theseus. Quickly and quietly, they unfurled the great sails of their ship and headed for home. But, in his haste to get away, Theseus forgot to change his sails to white. King Aegeus, waiting on the headland, saw the ship approaching with its black sails flying in the wind.

"My son has failed and he is dead," he cried. And in despair, he flung himself from the cliff into the raging waters below. From that day on, the sea was named in memory of Theseus' father, and to this day, it is known as the Aegean Sea.

Archaeology in Crete

There is a palace in Crete and it was excavated in the early 20th century by an archaeologist called Sir Arthur Evans.

Local farmers had been ploughing up lots of pottery and coins from the ancient town of Knossos. It was known to have been lived in by Romans from the 5th to 2nd centuries BCE. The Romans believed in the old stories about King Minos, the Minotaur and Ariadne and made coins showing some of those characters.



Illustration 1: Coin showing the Minotaur on one side and Ariadne's head on the other, surrounded by the meander pattern which represents the Labyrinth

When Evans started to dig he found underneath the Roman town the remains of an amazing palace that could have belonged to King Minos. The palace was huge and the connecting rooms looked a little like a maze.

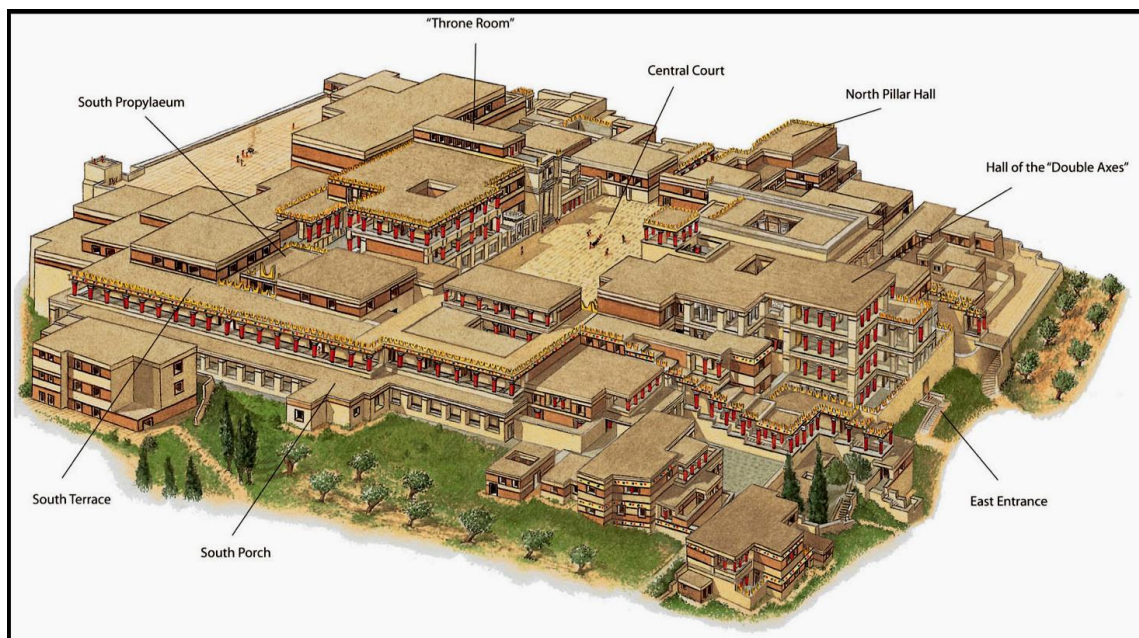


Illustration 2: This is a reconstruction of what the palace at Knossos may have looked like

The meander pattern was also painted as decoration on the small bits of wall plaster that he found.



Illustration 3: Painted wall plaster found at Knossos decorated with the meander pattern

What is also amazing from the painted wall plaster is what appears to be an ancient festival where young men jumped over bulls.



Illustration 4: A young man in the process of jumping over a bull on painted wall plaster from the palace at Knossos

Could this be the origin of the myth of the Minotaur?

From looking at the style of pottery found at Knossos, Sir Arthur Evans worked out that the palace was lived in from 1900-1300 BCE. The earliest written version of the story comes from about 450 BCE, so over time, it obviously picked up some embellishments.