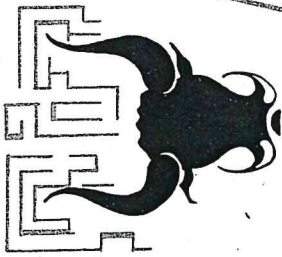


## THESEUS



**M**OST terrible of all the evils that ever beset the city of Athens was the tribute to the Minotaur.

Although he was called Minotaur, which means bull of Minos, the monster was actually half-human. His mother, the queen of Crete, had borne him to Poseidon's magic white bull, and he was a grotesque combination of the two forms. So ugly was his nature that King Minos kept him hidden far from human eyes in a tremendous tortuous maze, the labyrinth, which he had had commissioned to be built by the master architect Daedalus. The loneliness of his life merely increased the beast's savagery, so that no one was safe to venture inside the labyrinth at all; since he had devoured some early unfortunate adventurers, the Minotaur had grown very fond of human flesh.

Once every nine years, his greed was satisfied by the sacrifice of seven youths and seven maidens from Athens. The Athenians were forced to select the most beautiful of their youth, and every ninth year the streets of the city were filled with the wailing of mothers for the children who were to be taken over the sea and sacrificed to the Cretan monster.

So powerful was Crete that the Athenians could find no way to escape the dreadful tribute, until the king's son Theseus became filled with determination to end the bloody payments forever.

Paying no heed to the pleadings of his father, King Aegeus, Theseus insisted upon taking the place of one of the young men chosen for the sacrifice. He would, he claimed, find some way not only to save himself and rescue the other Athenian youths, but to kill the Minotaur and end its curse.

Though he mourned what he believed to be the inevitable death of his dearly-loved son, old Aegeus dared not forbid him to go; he loved

the people of his city too, and wept with them when their sons and daughters were taken from them. How could he interfere in what might be their only chance for reprieve?

"I will pray to Athene for your safety, my son," he said, "and since I have always served her faithfully and done her honour, perhaps she will not toss aside an old man's prayer.

"Take this white sail, and if you live, put it up to replace the black one our tribute ship always carries. That way I and my people shall know of your success as soon as you sail over the horizon, and we may welcome you as a hero."

The sad little band of Athenians did not take long to reach the harbour of the Cretan capital, Cnossos. There, by the side of the water, waited Minos, sneering triumphantly at the fourteen timid captives who soon would be food for the Minotaur. Immediately Theseus challenged the king's prerogative to do as he wished with the captives.

His stratagem for catching the king's attention was successful. "What, will you make fun of me?" demanded Minos. "Will you scorn the fate which we have prepared for you? Very well, then—you shall be the first to be fed to the Minotaur, and the others shall remain outside until you have faced him alone and become a mass of bloody bones!"

But there was another who noticed Theseus, who admired his boldness and manliness, and who shuddered to hear the words of the king. This was the princess Ariadne, and her soft heart ached when she thought of what would happen to the handsome lad who was brave enough to laugh at her father.

That night, a lithe form slipped past the guards into the room where Theseus was spending his last night on earth.

"I have a plan which can save you," Ariadne whispered. "This magic ball of twine was given me by Daedalus, and it knows the secrets of the labyrinth. Tie one end to the entrance, and let the ball roll on the floor. It will lead you straight to the Minotaur. When you have finished your task, wind the ball up again to find your way back to the entrance."

Theseus was filled with amazement and gratitude. He knew well that part of his problem would have been the labyrinth itself, for its corridors wound for miles, most of them leading nowhere. A man could die of starvation before he found his way out of the maze.

"And here is a sword," Ariadne continued. "Your fists would be no defence against the Minotaur, but with this sword, you may be able to stay alive. Goodbye, and may the gods watch over you!"

Next morning, Theseus began his long walk through the complexity of passages which made up the labyrinth. After what seemed hundreds of miles, he discovered the fearsome monster in the dim gloom of the inner chamber. Perhaps Athene and the gods really were on his side, for the Minotaur was asleep! Summoning all his strength, Theseus plunged Ariadne's sword into the monster's heart. With a great bellow he stumbled to his feet, eyes red with rage and jaws slavering with hunger; yet the blood poured from his breast, and in just a few seconds, with a scream he collapsed and lay still.

Then Theseus, rolling up the ball of twine as he walked, wound his way out of the labyrinth. As he emerged into the sunlight at the maze's mouth, the Cretan crowd fell silent, as if they knew that their days of sacrifice were over. Even the king's guards made no move to hinder Theseus as he went to the prison, freed his companions, and boarded the ship for home. With him he took Ariadne, but he soon forgot the debt he owed her, and abandoned her before reaching Athens.

The victorious return was marred by tragedy, for so elated was the hero that he forgot his father's request to change the black sails for white.

Aegeus had spent all the days since his son's departure pacing upon the cliffs near the city, watching for the ship which would bring glorious or tragic tidings. As he saw the black sail rise over the horizon and move slowly towards the city, the king was overcome with grief and guilt. He plunged over the cliff, and his body was smashed to pieces on the rocks below.

In honour of his father, the anguished Theseus decreed that the sea on whose shores he had died should be called after him. Filled with sorrow, Theseus took his rightful place as the new hero-king of Athens.

## IN HISTORY

The story of Theseus is bound up in the legends which surround Crete, one of the most fascinating and still mysterious countries of antiquity.

Until this century, most of our knowledge of the island came from myths. We now know that Cretan civilization greatly influenced mainland Greece, so it is natural that stories of Crete, or stories that originated there, should have been woven into Greek mythology. The peculiarity which strikes the reader of these myths is the fact that a bull features prominently in all, from the story of Europa, who was borne to the island on the back of a white bull, to Theseus, who killed the bull-like monster.

Sir Arthur Evans, who conducted excavations in Crete from 1900, dug up one of the most exciting finds in archaeological history—the palace of Cnossos, so vast that it staggers the imagination. Suddenly the elements of the Theseus story became clear, for the ground plan of the palace was a tremendous maze, and everywhere appeared symbols apparently sacred to a great Cretan deity—the horns of a bull, and a two-headed ax called a **labrys**. This palace network was undoubtedly the labyrinth of the story, its name taken from the labrys symbol which everywhere decorated it. The bull, too, undoubtedly meant "Crete" to the Greeks.

We do not know whether the Cretans actually offered human sacrifices, but the story of the Athenian tribute makes such a conclusion quite possible. The story of Talus in the adventures of the Argonauts appears to be another version of a horrible fate awaiting Greeks who roamed to the island of Crete. In that story, Talus was a bronze giant who crushed aliens to death; some scholars have combined the Minotaur and Talus stories to conclude that humans were sacrificed into a huge bronze vessel, which bore the emblem of the bull.

The actual early history of the island still has many gaps which must be filled by the imagination. Archaeologists have discovered that a civilization was growing there as early as 3000 B.C., and reached a period of greatness about 2100. A great catastrophe of some kind occurred about four centuries later, but upon the ruins was built an even greater culture.

About 1400 B.C., Cretan civilization fell. Although the Cretans themselves claimed it was a natural disaster which wrecked their civilizations, Athenians related that when Minos (which may have been a title designating the ruler, like Pharaoh in Egypt) set out with his navy in pursuit of Theseus, his land was left open to attack. Other tales say that during his pursuit of Theseus, the civilization fell. Some scholars have deduced, from the mixture of myth and archaeological evidence, that a weakening Crete was finally defeated by raiders from mainland Greece. At any rate, Crete ceased about that time to be a decisive force in the history of the Mediterranean lands.