

LOST IN THE LABYRINTH
SUPPLEMENTARY INFORMATION

The Myth

The story about Theseus, the maze and the Minotaur upon which LOST IN THE LABYRINTH is based is a long tale with roots and limbs in many other tales. As briefly as possible, here it is:

Theseus was reared by his mother Aethra, daughter of the ruler of the little kingdom of Troezen, on the Greek mainland. As he grew to manhood, he questioned her about the name of his father. She directed him to lift a great stone, under which he found a pair of sandals and a sword, left for him by his father Aegeus, King of Athens.

Wishing to go to his father, he bade his mother and grandfather goodbye. They begged him to travel safely by ship but he refused, insisting on walking the dangerous road from Troezen to Athens. On this journey he met and vanquished scores of robbers and monsters, freeing the people of those regions from oppression.

Arrived in Athens, he was met by a cheering multitude. Grateful to the young man for making the road safe, the populace turned out to give him a hero's welcome. In the king's palace, a witch named Medea was busily weaving her spells around the king's heart. By her art she knew who the young man was, and, loath to give up either her own or her children's place in the court, was determined to destroy him.

She told Aegeus that the stranger was dangerous. Aegeus was, so far as he knew, childless. He had only left the sword and sandals under the stone *in case* Aethra should bear a male child who would survive to healthy maturity. It was therefore widely believed that Athens would be left without a ruler when Aegeus died. Medea warned Aegeus that a young man so loved by the people was a threat to him. She convinced him to invite the boy to court and then poison him.

As Theseus raised the poisoned cup of wine to his lips, however, his father recognized the sword the young man bore. He dashed the cup from his son's lips and claimed him as his own. Medea fled.

Athens had other troubles besides the lack of an heir to the throne. Years before, mighty King Minos of Crete had left his beloved oldest son in the care of Aegeus, while Minos waged war in another part of the sea. Aegeus, either foolishly or maliciously, dared the young boy to fight the Marathonian Bull. The child died in the unequal contest, and since his death, the rulers of Crete had demanded a tribute of seven young men and seven young women to be offered to the Minotaur.

It is necessary here to backtrack and explain about the Minotaur.

In a dispute about the kingship of the island kingdom of Crete, the god Poseidon gave Minos a very beautiful bull and promised him the crown provided that he sacrificed the bull to the glory of Poseidon.

When he became king, not wishing to kill such a beautiful animal, Minos sacrificed another bull instead. Poseidon was naturally not fooled by this, and plotted revenge. He caused Pasiphae, wife of Minos, to fall in love with the bull. The resulting union produced the Minotaur, half man and half bull.

Rather than choosing to expel or execute his wife and her strange offspring, Minos instead had an Athenian exile named Daedalus build the Labyrinth to house the Minotaur.

Now, as soon as Theseus understood the plight that the youth of Athens were in, he insisted upon being one of those given to the Minotaur. He believed that he could kill the monster and escape to Athens. His father begged him not to do so, but when the ship of young people sailed to Crete, Theseus was on it. Aegeus made Theseus promise to loft a white sail rather than the black sail with which they had set forth if Theseus were still alive on the homeward voyage.

When Theseus arrived in Crete, Ariadne, daughter of Minos and Pasiphae, fell in love with him. She begged Daedalus to help her. He told her to give Theseus a clue of thread (a ball of thread – this is where the word “clue” comes from) to unwind as Theseus walked through the maze.

Theseus walked the maze with the assistance of the ball of thread and, in his passage through the maze, killed the sleeping Minotaur.

The story has many endings. It is said that there was a battle at the harbor but that the Athenians were able to escape. It is also said that: A) Ariadne did not leave Crete but became queen, or B) Theseus abandoned Ariadne on Naxos (an island) either by choice or else because bad weather kept him away from the island until Ariadne committed suicide, believing herself abandoned. Or finally, C) Rather than killing herself, Ariadne became the wife of Dionysius, god of wine, after her abandonment on Naxos.

In any case, Theseus sailed on triumphant. Nearing home, he forgot to change the black sails for the white and his grieving father hurled himself into the sea which now bears his name: the Aegean. Theseus then became ruler of Athens and had a long and illustrious career. Many other stories are told about him, but the only one that concerns us is the very last.

In old age Theseus married Ariadne's younger sister Phaedra, who then fell in love with Hippolytus, his son from a prior marriage. Theseus believed Phaedra when she said that his son made improper advances to her (she was angry after Hippolytus refused her love). He therefore exiled his son, who then died. Phaedra hanged herself.

After the escape of the Athenians from Crete, Daedalus was immediately blamed. He and his son Icarus were imprisoned in a tower. The talented inventor constructed wings for the two of them and they flew away from Crete. Daedalus warned his son before taking flight not to fly too high, lest the wax holding the wings together should melt in the heat of the sun. Icarus disregarded his father's advice. His wings disintegrated and he fell into the sea and was drowned.

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Why is LOST IN THE LABYRINTH different from the traditional myth in some ways?

It seems obvious to me that the tale we know today must have much earlier origins than other Greek myths. In fact, I believe that the story about the Labyrinth is the oldest surviving story in western civilization.

The civilization on Crete reached its greatest peak between the years 1900 – 1450 BCE. Remember, BCE (Before the Christian Era) dating works backwards. In other words, 1900 BCE is 450 years earlier than 1450 BCE.

In 1450 BCE, disaster struck. Many of the palaces on Crete were destroyed. It is believed that this happened as a result of a violent volcanic eruption on the island of Thera, 70 miles away from Crete. Over a period of about 50 years mainland Greeks invaded and took over the devastated empire. Never again was Crete more powerful than mainland Greece.

During the period 1900 BCE – 1450 BCE, Athens was a relatively primitive and underdeveloped place. The glittering empire across the waves must have seemed both threatening and infinitely desirable. The myth must have originated during the time of Crete's zenith of power, when Crete was capable of forcing Athens to send young lives as tribute.

The story about the maze and the Minotaur was not written down until somewhere between 100 and 200 AD (Anno Domini, or, after the beginning of the Christian Era). This would have been at the very least 1,550 to 1,650 years after the events in the tale could have taken place. I chose to set my story in the year 1750 BCE.

In a time when writing was much less common than it is now, it was customary to hand down stories of the past orally, by mouth. During all of those retellings, I cannot help but feel that some changes must have been made, especially those changes which would have reflected well on the Athenians, who were the only ones left to tell the tale.

It makes no sense, for instance, to say that an Athenian, Daedalus, built the Labyrinth, assuming Knossos is the structure of which the myth speaks. Knossos would have been an ancient structure at the time the story took place.

I also had some difficulty working the god Poseidon into the story. Poseidon was the Greek god of the ocean. It was he who was supposed to have given Minos the beautiful bull.

The archeological record on Crete is incomplete. We don't know exactly what their religion was like, or their political structure or their daily lives. What we can see, however, is that based upon the available evidence, most of the images of a deity were of females. There seems to have been no god similar to Poseidon. There was, however, a goddess named Poteida. I cannot help but suspect that Poseidon is really Poteida, changed from female to male when adopted by the mainland Greeks. This is purely a guess on my part, though.

Women appear to have possessed a good deal of power in ancient Crete. Representations of women are everywhere evident in the surviving art, and they are depicted as being involved in many activities of ritual and social importance.

In Greece, however, during the time when the myth was first given a written form, women were chattel – they were owned by their male relatives. A society in which women gave orders and held real power would have seemed very strange to a Greek male in this period.

Theseus is said to have married an Amazon queen. The Amazonian men were said to do the household tasks while the women ruled and defended the country. No tribe similar to the Amazons has ever been documented. I wonder if these Amazons were not confused with the powerful women of ancient Crete.

Was ancient Crete a matriarchy, in which the female principle was worshipped and the rule of the nation descended from mother to daughter? No such society has been found before, which makes it less likely.

Still, it's fun to think about what such a society would have been like, and if one ever did exist, ancient Crete seems like a possible place for it to have grown up. LOST IN THE LABYRINTH is a fantasy novel and I have not felt bound by the strictest rules of historical fiction in writing it.

Some evidence in the myth seems to me to support my idea of a country in which, at least, women had a great deal of power. There is the striking fact that after Queen Pasiphae gave birth to a monstrous child, half bull and half human, who was clearly not the son of King Minos, both mother and child were allowed to live. Not only that, but the royal couple remained married, and special housing was built for the child. If the king ruled supreme, this is a surprising outcome.

The alternative ending for the myth in which Ariadne becomes queen after her lover escapes also suggests that a daughter might become queen even when she had brothers living (Molus and Glaucus).

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About Knossos and Ancient Crete

Crete has been populated since the Stone Age. The island has many thousands of caves that were homes for the early inhabitants. As time went on, simple huts made of mud bricks were erected. The site of Knossos was an early Neolithic village of some importance.

After 2600 BCE there was a positive explosion of culture. Instead of stone, bronze was forged into weapons and tools (hence the name, Bronze Age). Large houses, both of stone and brick, were erected. Beautifully decorated pottery and fine gold jewelry have been found from this period, as well as many figurines of the Mother Goddess.

The great palaces, at Knossos, Festos, Malia, Zakros, and probably other sites, were built beginning in about 1900 BCE. However, as they were extensions of existing buildings, the oldest sections date from a much earlier time.

The civilization on Crete was a marvel. While their neighbors to the east, the Egyptians, possessed an older culture, in many ways the ancient Cretans were more advanced. Knossos was equipped with a plumbing system, for instance, that was not equaled for thousands of years.

Crete controlled most of the eastern Mediterranean. Cretan ships roved far and wide, carrying goods for trade, putting a stop to piracy and wars between other nations that would have threatened prosperity.

The affluence of this civilization allowed the population to explode. Crete began to develop colonies on islands all over the Mediterranean. Prosperity was not limited to the rulers – even ordinary farmers owned multi-roomed dwellings and a variety of goods, including luxury items like jewelry.

The artwork produced during the peak of ancient Crete was remarkable. Pottery from the island was exported all over the known world because of its quality and beauty. Exquisite jewelry and woven cloths adorned the bodies of both men and women. The palaces were decorated with huge frescoes (wall paintings). Sculptors and stone workers produced naturalistic and exceptionally beautiful pieces. It is difficult to look at this work and not feel that these were an unusually joyful and creative people.

Even after most of the palaces were destroyed, Knossos continued to be inhabited until the 4th century A.D. Then, like the walls of the Labyrinth, the knowledge of this great civilization crumbled into dust and was forgotten. By the 19th century A.D. educated people assumed that the whole tale of the Labyrinth was nothing more than that: a tale.

In 1900 A.D. excavations started on the site of Knossos under the supervision of an Englishman, Sir Arthur Evans. Gradually he realized the extreme antiquity of

the society his team was slowly unearthing. He named these ancient people “Minoans” after King Minos of the myth.

I have refrained from calling them “Minoans,” partly because they would never have done so themselves, and partly because my version of Crete features a female ruler rather than a male (and “Pasiphaeans” is too much of a mouthful). Instead, I chose to refer to the ancient people of Crete (and Crete itself) by the names their contemporaries, the equally ancient Egyptians, gave them: the Keftiu of the Island of Kefti.

Links to other sites about ancient Crete

www.dilos.com/region/crete/knos_pcl

www.emuseum.mnsu.edu/prehistory/aegeaan/galleryimages/minoanimages