

Theseus and the Minotaur

Many years ago, in Ancient Greece, great architects and sculptors were venerated by society. Daedalus was hailed as one of the greatest architects, a skilled inventor and a master craftsman. His incredible inventions and constructions were known and admired throughout the land and when he arrived on the island of Crete, King Minos was happy to welcome him and quickly began to make use of his talents.

One of his first tasks was to construct a huge labyrinth, a vast underground maze of tunnels which twisted and turned in every possible direction, so that, upon entering, a person would very quickly become lost and would be unable to find their way out again.

This giant maze served one simple purpose. It was to contain the Minotaur: a huge beast - half man, half bull. Standing twice as high as any human, the Minotaur had horns, as long as a man's arm, with sharp points, on which it skewered its victims. It had almost unbelievable strength and was constantly hungry – hungry for the flesh of humans.

King Minos had come up with his own special way of satisfying the Minotaur's hunger. Every year, he demanded that the city of Athens send him a tribute of seven young men and seven young women and these would be sacrificed to keep the creature happy and well fed. If they refused, Minos would use his formidable Navy to attack and destroy the city. In desperation, Athens agreed.

One by one, those sacrificed would be forced to enter the labyrinth. They would then wander, sometimes only for hours but sometimes for many days before, somewhere in the pitch black tunnels, they would encounter the Minotaur.

It goes without saying that none of them were ever seen again. Well, that's not quite true actually, as one of the young men not only found and killed the Minotaur, but also found his way back out.

This man was Theseus, the son of King Aegeus of Athens. He had forced his father to agree to let him be sent as one of the seven young men, swearing that he would somehow kill the Minotaur and return home safely in order to save the people of Athens. He knew that if he managed to kill the terrible

beast, no more Athenians would need to be sent to their death. He snuck onto the boat headed for Crete with the other men and women, disguised so that he did not draw attention to who he truly was.

As their ship docked in the harbour below the mighty palace of Knossos on Crete and the youths were dragged from the ship, Ariadne, the daughter of King Minos, was watching.

She saw Theseus and found herself falling in love with him there and then. She vowed to herself that somehow she would help him when it was his turn to enter the maze. This was the moment when Daedalus found himself involved in a way which he knew would not end well for him and his young son. Ariadne went to him and asked him to help her save Theseus from the jaws of the Minotaur as he was the only one who knew the intricate details of the labyrinth. After convincing, he gave her a great ball of flaxen thread.

“Somehow, you must get this thread to Theseus along with a sword. Tell him to tie one end of the thread to the door of the labyrinth and hang on to the other end. He can then use it to find his way back out again. But you must be ready to flee the moment he escapes, for, when your father finds out what you have done, your life will be in great danger.”

And so will mine, he thought to himself. *So will mine.*

Their plan worked well. After searching through the winding tunnels, Theseus found the Minotaur and, after a long battle in the gloomy depths of the labyrinth, he killed the beast, slaying him with the sharp blade of his sword. Using the thread, he found his way back to the door, through the pitch-black maze, to Ariadne. Making their way quickly to his ship, they set sail for Athens to safety.

However, Theseus had forgotten one important detail. He had told his father that should he be successful, he would sail back to Athens with white sails above his ship. If he failed and was killed by the Minotaur, the ship would return with black sails. In his excitement to return, he forgot to change the sails and as King Aegeus looked out to the horizon to welcome back his son, he was greeted by the horrific sight: black sails. He was so mortified by the idea that his son had been killed that he jumped into the sea and drowned. It is from this story that the sea surrounding Greece takes its name: the Aegean Sea.