

Minos and the Minotaur A Greek Myth of the Call Refused

A promise broken:

King Minos was one of three sons of the god Zeus and the beautiful mortal woman Europa. He and his brothers were adopted by King Asterius of Crete when the king married their mother. Years later, when Asterius died, the three brothers vied for the throne of Crete.

Minos claimed the right to the throne because he was favored by the gods. To solidify his claim he constructed a great sacrificial altar to Poseidon, god of the sea. Then he prayed to Poseidon to send him a bull which he would sacrifice to the gods so that they would bestow their blessings and energy upon his people.

Poseidon heard his prayer and responded immediately. The sea began to foam, and soon a great white bull emerged from the surf.

Minos had the bull take to the altar, where he prepared to sacrifice it on behalf of his people. As he looked at the great bull, though, he became so awed by the animal's beauty that he could not bring himself to kill it.

"This animal is far too beautiful and valuable to sacrifice," he thought to himself. "I shall keep it for myself and kill one of my own."

Thinking that Poseidon would never notice such a small switch, Minos sacrificed one of his own white bulls and released the gift bull into his herd.

Poseidon seeks revenge:

But Poseidon had not been fooled, and one does not trifle with the gods. The great sea god watched patiently as Minos became very successful, awaiting an opportunity for revenge. Finally, when the king married the beautiful Pasiphae, Poseidon saw his chance, and he created in Pasiphae an incredible passion for the bull.

Pasiphae, at a loss as to how to satisfy her desire, went to Daedalus, the great artist, craftsman and inventor. The two devised a plan so that Pasiphae could satisfy her passion. From that union she gave birth to a hideous baby which had the body of a man and the head of a bull. The child became known as Minos' bull, or the Minotaur.

Two Problems to solve:

In the meantime, the white bull had escaped from Minos' herd. The animal began to ravage Crete, destroying the people and the land at will. No one could control it, and the best became a terrifying reminder of Minos' betrayal of the public trust he had accepted as king.

Minos now had two problems: the ravage white bull and avoiding the scandal which would be caused if the people found out about the Minotaur. In desperation, he consulted an oracle for advice.

"You must move our home in Knossos," the oracle told him. "To hide the Minotaur, you must construct an elaborate labyrinth. In that you can die the beast."

Minos hides his shame:

Following the oracle's advice, Minos moved to a new palace in Knossos. To build the labyrinth, he hired Daedalus, not realizing the role the craftsman had played in the birth of the Minotaur.

Daedalus labored for any months designing planning the building the complex structure. In the end, it is said, his work was so magnificent that Daedalus himself was barely able to find his way out when it was finished.

Minos imprisoned the Minotaur in the labyrinth. The animal, now a symbol of Minos' was at symbol of Minos' shame. Once inside however, the creature demanded periodic sacrifices, and many of Crete's youth died to satisfy the beast.

Unexpected help:

While the Minotaur fed on the people of the island, Minos struggled with his other problem: the raging white bull. With the bull, however, Minos was lucky, for the problem was solved for him by the Greek hero Heracles.

As punishment for a death that he had caused, Heracles had been assigned twelve labors. One of them was to capture the Cretan bull. The Greek came to Crete and, after a great battle,, captured the bull. He took it back to Athens, where he presented it to the goddess Hera, Zeus' wife.

Minos loses a son:

Sometime later, Minos' son Androgeus, traveled to Athens for an athletic contest. A strong and gifted youth Androgeus won the contests easily. The Greeks, however, were jealous that a foreigner had won their games that they killed him.

When Minos learned of his son's death, he raised a great army and attacked and conquered Athens. As a tribute for the murder of his son, Minos demanded that the Greeks send him fourteen youths, seven men and seven women, to be sacrificed to the Minotaur. The tribute was to be paid every Grand Year (100 lunar cycles, or nine years).

The Greeks had no choice but to agree, and every nine years they sent fourteen youths to Minos, who put them into the labyrinth, where they were devoured by the Minotaur.

Theseus accepts the call:

Just before this tribute was to be paid the third time, Theseus, son of Aegeus, the King of Athens, returned to claim his birthright as heir to the throne. At this time, the white bull had been released by Hera on the Plain of Argos, and the animal was ravaging the towns and countryside between there and Marathon, killing hundreds of people.

Theseus traveled to Marathon and captured the white bull. Holding it by the horns, he dragged it through the streets of Athens to the Acropolis, where he sacrificed it to the goddess Athena.

After sacrificing the bull, Theseus learned of the tribute to be paid to Minos. He went to the port where the voyage was being prepared. When he saw the faces of the parents of the youths who were to be sent, he was deeply saddened.

"Father," he asked the king, "let me be among those who go to Crete. I will try to kill the Minotaur and end this tribute."

Reluctantly, Aegeus agreed, and Theseus prepared for the voyage. Traditionally, the ship which carried the tribute carried black sails as a symbol of the sadness of the

voyage. Aegeus, however, gave Theseus a set of white sails for the return trip if he successfully killed the Minotaur. Finally ready, Theseus set sail.

After great difficulty, he landed in Crete. Once there he and his companions prepared for sacrifice to the monster. Theseus knew that he faced a deadly challenge, but he was fortunate. Fate intervened on his behalf.

Ariadne finds a way:

At the banquet given in honor of the youths to be sacrificed, Minos' daughter Ariadne saw Theseus and immediately fell in love with him. She managed to find a way to talk privately with him and discovered his mission.

"I will help you find a way to kill my half-brother, the Minotaur," she told him, "but you must promise to marry me and take me with you when you return to Greece." Theseus agreed.

Ariadne went to Daedalus, the builder of the labyrinth, for help. He gave her a magical ball of thread.

"Have Theseus tie the end of this thread at the entrance to the labyrinth," he told her. "It will unroll itself and guide him to the center of the maze. Once he has killed the Minotaur, Theseus needs only to rewind the thread and follow it out."

Inside the Labyrinth:

Ariadne did as Daedalus had told her. She gave Theseus the magical thread, but she helped him even more as she had found a magical sword for him to use on his quest. When the fourteen Greek youths were led into the labyrinth, Theseus was with them, his sword cleverly hidden in his clothing.

Once inside, Theseus tied the thread at the entrance. While the others waited, he carefully worked his way into the labyrinth, following the ball of thread as it unwound. After some time, he could smell the beast and hear it pawing the ground with its hooves.

Theseus unsheathed the sword and charged into the Minotaur's lair at the center of the labyrinth. A great battle ensued. Using Ariadne's sword, Theseus was able to kill the beast, sacrificing it to the sea god Poseidon. Then he rewound the thread and followed it back to the others.

Theseus led his companions quietly out of the entrance to the labyrinth. They quickly boarded their ship, hoping to escape unnoticed. However, Minos' soldiers saw what had happened and sounded the alarm. The Greeks were forced to fight a brief sea battle before they could escape the harbor and sail for home.

Escape and promise broken:

The adventure was not over, however. On the way home, Theseus and his crew landed on a small island for a brief rest. While on the island, Theseus was thinking about the scandal he would cause by bringing home the daughter of Minos to be his bride. He was walking along the beach, pondering his predicament, when a vision of the god Dionysus appeared to him.

"Ariadne is a beautiful woman, mighty Theseus," the god said to him, "but she will only bring misfortune to the people of Athens. If you will leave her on the island, I will see that she will want for nothing."

Theseus considered the god's words. He did not want to break his promise to Ariadne, but he did not want to offend Dionysus. After careful thought, he decided that the risks of returning to Athens with her were too great, so he sailed without her.

A fatal distraction:

But Theseus was a man of honor, and on the voyage home he grieved deeply at having deserted Ariadne. She had been his savior and had given up her home and her family to be with him. So distracted was he by his grief, when his ship sailed into Athens, he forgot to raise the white sails that his father had given to him to use if he had successfully slain the Minotaur.

Aegeus, watching for Theseus from the cliffs above, saw the boat return under black sails. Broken-hearted because he thought he had lost his son, Aegeus flung himself to his death in the sea. Theseus had returned triumphantly to tragedy.