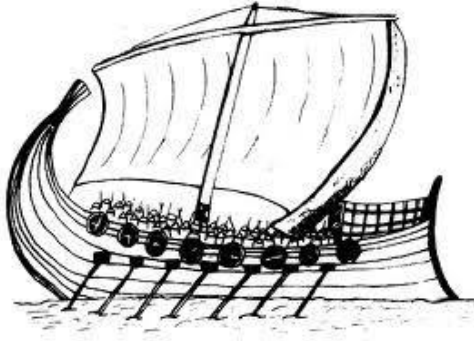


THESEUS AND THE MINOTAUR

The ancient Greeks told many tales, or myths, about their gods and about the world around them. Myths often included real events from Greek history. This tale recalls a time along ago when Greece was dominated by the island of Crete and Athens was not yet a powerful city state. It tells the story of the hero Theseus, who overcame the Minotaur, a terrifying beast which was half man and half bull.



Athenians trembled at the very mention of Crete. The name 'Minotaur' was enough to make the bravest man shiver. Every nine years, King Minos of Crete demanded a terrible tribute from the Athenians. Seven young men and seven young women were sent to Crete to be fed to the fearsome Minotaur. A ship with black sails would come to Athens each time the tribute was due. As the ship sailed, a huge crowd would gather at the harbor, weeping and wailing.

In Crete, the prisoners were guests of honor at a huge banquet. They were given fine clothes and offered the most delicious food. Few of them could eat. Afterward, they were shut in a large room filled with every possible luxury, but few could sleep.

The next day, they were taken to wooden doors, carved with pictures of galloping bulls. From behind came a loud bellowing and stamping. The doors opened and a prisoner was pushed through.

The small crowd of prisoners, guards, and priestesses waited until they heard a blood-curdling scream. Then a priestess would point to the next prisoner to be sent through the doors. This went on until the prisoners had all met their fate. Then the Athenians could rest

easy for nine years until it was time to make another tribute.

One year, young Theseus was amongst the people sent as a tribute to Crete. He, unlike the other prisoners, sat dry-eyed on the ship. He laughed and chatted as they prepared for the banquet until the others began to feel quite cheerful too. At the banquet, he sat near King Minos's daughter Ariadne, who was charmed by this handsome and brave young man. All evening, they sat and talked.

Ariadne told Theseus that behind the doors there was an elaborate maze. Innumerable paths twisted and turned, confusing the eye and the mind. A person entering the maze could never find their way out. In the very heart of the maze, there lived the Minotaur. He knew all the twists and turns and blind alleys. If someone stumbled into the maze, the Minotaur would find him or her within moments.

Ariadne was determined to help the brave Theseus. After the banquet, she crept into the sleeping chamber and called softly to Theseus. All his weapons had been taken away, but Ariadne handed him a sword. Then she led the way to the great, carved wooden door of the maze.

"Here I must wait for you," she said, and she handed Theseus a ball of thread. "What is this for?" Theseus said, puzzled. "As you walk through the maze, unwind this thread behind you. If you succeed, you can follow the thread back. The Minotaur will be asleep, so creep silently through the passages until you reach his lair. With surprise on your side, you may beat him."

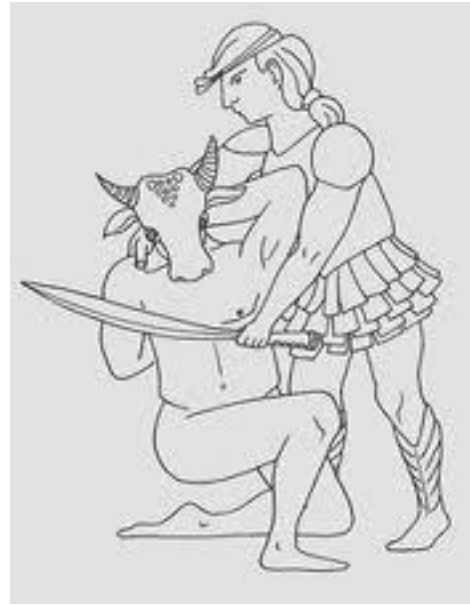


Theseus took the thread from Ariadne and pushed open the great door. He stepped inside and closed the door, trapping the end of the thread in the crack. Then, holding his sword in front of him, Theseus headed into the puzzling maze. He could hear the snores of the Minotaur and set off towards the noise. A few minutes later, however, he could hardly hear the noise. The path had doubled back, and he was now further away from the center than when he has started. Theseus picked up the hanging thread and followed it back to the last place where there had been a choice of paths.

"If I take a path which seems to lead towards the Minotaur, I end up further away," he said to himself. "So, if I choose a path which leads away, I will eventually reach the Minotaur."

So Theseus set off, creeping quietly along a path that appeared to lead away from the Minotaur's snores. Suddenly, he found himself stumbling into the mouth of a dark cave. From inside, he heard a huge roar, followed by the sound of heavy footsteps. The Minotaur appeared in the entrance. Theseus gasped. The Minotaur was even more terrifying than he had imagined. It had the body of a huge, strong man, and the head of an angry bull. Theseus picked up the sword, which he had dropped when he stumbled, just as the Minotaur leaped forward to grab him. He struck the Minotaur a terrific blow on the leg. The Minotaur was not used to people fighting back. Most of his victims were prisoners who were resigned to their fate and did not resist. Within a few minutes,

Theseus had struck a terrible blow and the Minotaur lay dead at his feet.



Picking up the end of Ariadne's thread, he retraced his steps through the maze to the outer door. Ariadne was waiting for him. "Quick," she whispered, "we must hurry. Once my father finds out he will send all the guards to look for us."

Theseus and Ariadne hurried back to the room where the prisoners were held and told them what had happened. Ariadne distracted the guard while the prisoners slipped out. Then she led them all down to the harbor. They set sail for Athens just as the alarm was raised in the palace. Theseus was proclaimed a hero by the people of Athens. The Athenians rejoiced that they no longer had to pay their terrible tribute to King Minos.

Epilogue: Theseus managed to flee Crete with Ariadne, but then abandoned her on the island of Naxos during the voyage back to Athens. King Aegeus had told his son Theseus that upon returning to Athens, he was to fly a white sail if he had triumphed over the Minotaur, and to instruct the crew to raise a black sail if he had been killed. Theseus, forgetting his father's direction, flew a black sail as he returned. Aegeus, in his grief, threw himself from the cliff at Cape Sounion into the Aegean, making Theseus the new king of Athens and giving the sea its name.