

MYTHS AND LEGENDS

THESEUS AND THE
MINOTAUR



GRAEME DAVIS

MYTHS AND LEGENDS

THESEUS AND THE MINOTAUR

BY GRAEME DAVIS

ILLUSTRATED BY JOSÉ DANIEL CABRERA PEÑA



CONTENTS

| | |
|---|----|
| INTRODUCTION | 4 |
| Sources ❷ Theseus and the Metaphor ❷ The Age of Theseus | |
| THESEUS' EARLY LIFE | 7 |
| The Journey to Athens ❷ Arrival in Athens ❷ Alternate Versions ❷ The Growth of Athens | |
| THESEUS AND THE MINOTAUR – THE MYTH | 18 |
| The Birth of the Minotaur ❷ The Death of Androgeus ❷ The Tribute ❷ The Challenge of Minos ❷ Into the Labyrinth ❷ The Escape from Crete ❷ The Return to Athens | |
| MINOS, THE LABYRINTH, AND THE MINOTAUR – THE HISTORY | 27 |
| King Minos ❷ The Cretan Bull ❷ The Labyrinth ❷ Mazes and Monsters | |
| THESEUS IN CRETE – VARIATIONS, HISTORY, AND INTERPRETATION | 37 |
| The Death of the Minotaur ❷ Ariadne ❷ The Crane-Dance of Delos ❷ Other Traditions | |
| KING OF ATHENS | 43 |
| THESEUS' OTHER ADVENTURES | 47 |
| Theseus and Pirithous ❷ Lapiths and the Centaurs ❷ Helen and Persephone ❷ Theseus and the Amazons ❷ Phaedra and Hippolytus ❷ Theseus in Other Myths | |
| THE LEGEND GROWS | 62 |
| The Ancient World ❷ Movies and Televisions ❷ Games ❷ The Minotaur Brand | |
| CONCLUSION | 71 |
| GLOSSARY | 74 |
| BIBLIOGRAPHY | 79 |

INTRODUCTION

The story of Theseus and the Minotaur is one of the best-known Greek myths. It has inspired plays, films, books, and countless fantasy games. The Minotaur, originally a unique monster, has spawned an entire race of bull-headed ogres in games like *Dungeons & Dragons*. But the slaying of the Minotaur is only one part of an entire cycle of tales recounting Theseus' adventures.

Born with divine blood, Theseus' youthful adventures mirror the spread of Athenian influence through the surrounding region of Attica. He is said to have traveled with Hercules, battled the Amazons, sailed with the Argonauts, and kidnapped a youthful Helen in the years before the Trojan War. As king of Athens, he enacted reforms that laid the foundation for Athenian democracy.

The historical Theseus, if there was one, seems to have lived at some time between 1300 and 1200 BC. A generation before the Trojan War, this was a pivotal time in Greek history, when history was only just beginning to emerge from the mists of mythology. The land of Greece, dominated by the Mycenaean and Minoan cultures of the late Bronze Age, was beginning to take its first steps toward the Classical era.

Sources

As well as being among the best-known Greek myths, the adventures of Theseus are also among the most retold. Each version differs from all the others, and there is no single authoritative text. The two principal sources are the *Life of Theseus* by the first-century Greek writer Plutarch and the *Metamorphoses* by the Roman poet Ovid. Each writer has his own strengths and weaknesses.

Plutarch is considered by some to be the father of modern biography. He is careful to record as many different versions of a tale as he can, and he makes reference to many earlier historians whose work are now lost. His *Life of Theseus* is thorough, but his digressions into alternative sources and versions can make it difficult to read.

An illustration of Plutarch. His *Life of Theseus* is the most detailed ancient source for the hero's story. (Alamy)



Ovid's *Metamorphoses* collect over 250 myths into 15 books, united by the overall theme of love and its power to make fools even of the gods. The adventures of Theseus are found in the seventh book, and are retold in a highly poetic style that can also be hard to follow.

In addition, certain episodes from Theseus' life and adventures – especially the deaths of his wife Phaedra and son Hippolytus – were popular with Greek and Roman tragedians, each of whom told a slightly different version of the story.

The purpose of this book is to collect together information from a wide range of contradictory sources and organize it as clearly as possible without losing the diversity represented by the different versions. It also seeks to set the stories in their historical contexts – the times they represent and the times in which they were written down – and to show how they might reflect actual Bronze Age events that have been established by historians and archeologists.

Theseus and the Metaphor

The story of Theseus is set in a kind of dreamtime where history and mythology overlap. Although the tale has many elements that are pure myth, it is also thought that it contains echoes of historical truth, albeit in a highly mythologized and allegorical form.

The earliest surviving sources for the story of Theseus date to the Classical era, when Athens was the undisputed mistress of Greece. While Theseus is not credited with founding the city as Romulus is with founding Rome, he is still the greatest Athenian hero and an allegorical embodiment of the city's might and destiny, seen by the Athenians in much the same light as medieval Britons regarded the legendary King Arthur. The myths of Theseus can be read at face value as a series of adventure stories, or they can be seen as an allegory for the early spread of Athenian influence in an age dominated by the Minoan and Mycenaean cultures.

The Age of Theseus

Most classical sources place the life of Theseus between 1273 BC and *c.* 1223 BC, a generation before the Trojan War. Theseus' sons Demophon and Acamas were said to have been among the warriors who hid in the famous Trojan Horse.

Late Minoan IIIC

In Crete, archeologists call this period Late Minoan IIIC. It marks the final phase of the Minoan civilization, and is marked by the widespread destruction by fire of Minoan palaces on Crete and Mycenaean palaces on the Greek mainland. The events surrounding the destruction are unclear, and theories include civil strife or invasion by the Dorian Greeks or the mysterious Sea Peoples who attacked across the eastern Mediterranean at this time.



Theseus and the Minotaur
by Etienne-Jules Ramey,
1826. Tuileries Gardens,
Paris. (Photograph by
Thesupermat)

The Sea Peoples are also credited with destroying the Hittite Empire in Anatolia and the Mitanni civilization of southern Anatolia and northern Syria at about this time, and with attacking Egypt in the reign of Ramses III. However, they are not mentioned in any of the Theseus myths.

The Dorian Greeks are said by some ancient writers to be the descendants of Hercules, who returned to Greece after several generations in exile. Given that Theseus and Hercules are said to have adventured together, it seems that this must have taken place well after Theseus' time. In light of a dearth of hard evidence for a distinctive Dorian people, some modern archeologists believe that the "Dorian invasion" was invented in the 19th century to explain the collapse of the Minoan and Mycenaean civilizations. Even if these people did exist, the Dorian invasion does not figure in any of the Theseus myths, and it is unlikely that such a significant historical event would have gone unmentioned.

It is also worth noting that the victims of this destruction were Mycenaean Greeks rather than Minoans. The Greeks had occupied Crete and taken over its palaces around 1420 BC, following an earlier disaster that for some signals the end of "pure" Minoan culture.

FROM MYTH TO HISTORY

It might be argued that the Trojan War marks a dividing line between the age of Greek myth and the dawn of Greek history. Homer's account of the war was once thought to be nothing more than a legend, but since the 19th-century German archeologist Heinrich Schliemann discovered the ruins of a great Bronze Age city near the village of Hisarlik in western Turkey, it has been generally agreed that the Trojan War was a real historical event.

Although all accounts agree that Theseus lived before the Trojan War, he is still one of the latest of the Greek heroes, and to some extent he reflects his times. Gods no longer walk the earth, and their meddling in mortal

affairs is positively restrained by Olympian standards. Theseus' adventures provide a link between the Age of Greek Mythology and the Classical era of Greek History, underpinning historical events such as the rise of Athens to regional prominence and the last days of the Minoan-Mycenaean cultural complex that had dominated the eastern Mediterranean in the late Bronze Age.

As might be expected, then, the surviving accounts are a mix of mythic adventure and early history. Like Jason, Theseus was a hero who walked in two worlds. Despite the overtly fantastic nature of some of his adventures, he is perhaps the most likely of all the Greek heroes to have actually lived.