

## **Background information on Theseus, Ariadne, Minotaur, and the Labyrinth**

“Theseus was now the recognized heir to the kingdom of Athens. Thus he was on hand when King Minos of Crete arrived to collect his periodic tribute of young men and maidens to be sacrificed to the Minotaur. Because his son had died while in the safekeeping of the Athenians, Minos exerted the power of the Cretan navy to enforce this onerous demand. The Minotaur was a monster, half-man, half-bull, that lived in the center of a maze called the Labyrinth. The beast had been born to Minos's wife Pasiphae as a punishment from the gods. Minos had been challenged to prove that he was of divine parentage, so he called on the sea god Poseidon to send him a sign. The god obliged, and a beautiful white bull emerged from the sea.

Minos liked the bull so much that he neglected to sacrifice it to the gods as he should have done. As a punishment, Poseidon caused the king's wife to fall in love with the bull. She had the master craftsman Daedalus build her a hollow cow in which to approach the beast. As a result, the Minotaur was born. The monster is generally depicted as having the head of a bull and the body of a man. But in the Middle Ages, artists portrayed a man's head and torso on a bull's body. Some say that Theseus expressed his solidarity with his fellow citizens of Athens by volunteering to be one of the victims. Others maintain that Minos noticed the handsome young prince and chose him to be sacrificed. In any case, Theseus became one of the fated fourteen who embarked with the Cretan fleet.

The Labyrinth was a maze so cleverly and intricately contrived by its builder Daedalus that once thrown inside, a victim could never find the way out again. Sooner or later, he or she would round a corner and come face to face with the all-devouring Minotaur. This was the fate, which awaited Theseus. It is clear from the myth that the Labyrinth was a maze from which none could escape because it was so diabolically meandering. Hence the Minotaur was not just its monster but its prisoner. But how exactly this worked as a practical matter with regard to the victims is less clear. Some versions of the myth have it that they were "enclosed" in the Labyrinth, as if it were a box.

When Theseus first entered the maze he tied off one end of the ball of thread, which Ariadne had given him, and he played out the thread as he advanced deeper and deeper into the labyrinthine passages. Many artists have depicted Theseus killing the Minotaur with his sword or club, but it is hard to see how he could have concealed such bulky weapons in his clothing. More probable are the versions of the tale, which have him coming upon the Minotaur as it slept and then, in properly heroic fashion, beating it to death with his bare fists. Or maybe he broke off one of the creature's horns and stabbed him to death with it. Then he followed the thread back to the entrance. Otherwise he would have died of starvation before making his escape.”

From: <http://www.mythweb.com/heroes/theseus/theseus10.html>