

An Interpretation of Theseus and the Minotaur

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Abstract

This essay describes the legend of Theseus and the Minotaur. It next uses Jungian archetypes to interpret the legend. It is argued that this myth forms an essential part of the archetypical heroic pattern that Theseus's life (in its wider context) exhibits. In particular it is argued that these events represent a more fitting journey to the Underworld (as part of the heroic pattern) than any of Theseus's other adventures.

1 Introduction

The myth of Theseus and the Minotaur describes Theseus's journey to Crete to free Athens from a commitment to send young people to Minos's Knossos, where they were fed to the Minotaur. Theseus succeeded, with help from the gods via Ariadne.

This essay describes the legend of Theseus and the Minotaur. It next uses Jungian archetypes to interpret the legend. It is argued that this myth forms an essential part of the archetypical heroic pattern that Theseus's life (in its wider context) exhibits. In particular it is argued that these events represent a more fitting journey to the Underworld (as part of the heroic pattern) than any of Theseus's other adventures.

2 Theseus and the Minotaur

After Androgeos, the son of King Minos of Crete was killed by Athenians, King Minos demanded seven youths and seven Maidens to be sent to Crete once every nine years as a sacrifice for the Minotaur (*Encyclopædia Britannica* 1986, 8:171). The Minotaur was a monster — half man and half bull — who was kept by King Minos in the labyrinth underneath Knossos, King Minos's palace on Crete (van Reeth 1994, 165).

When the third “instalment” was due, Theseus convinced his father, Aegeus, legendary king of Athens, to be one of the youths sent as sacrifice (*Encyclopædia Britannica* 1986, 8:171). When their ship reached Crete, the youths and maidens were paraded before King Minos, his wife Pasiphae and their daughter Ariadne. Influenced by Aphrodite (Cotterell 2001, 83), Ariadne fell in love with Theseus and decided to help him by giving him a sword and a ball of string. In return she expected Theseus to take her with him to Athens and marry her.

Theseus entered the labyrinth, fastened the string to the entrance and unrolled it as he walked through the labyrinth. He killed the Minotaur with the sword and then used the string to escape from the labyrinth. The labyrinth was, after all, built by the master craftsman Daedalus, and, without help, it was impossible to escape from the labyrinth.

Theseus did take Ariadne with him, as promised. However he left her on Naxos, rather than taking her all the way to Athens.

On his departure from Athens, Theseus promised his father to replace his ship’s black sails with white sails if his mission were successful. Theseus, however, forgot to do this. When his father, Aegeus, saw the ship returning with black sails, he lost all hope and committed suicide by jumping into the sea. This sea was henceforth known as the Aegean sea.

Many variations of this basic tale exist. While most versions state that the sacrifice was due once every nine years, versions exist in which it was due every year (*Encyclopædia Britannica* 1986, van Reeth 1994, Cotterell 2001).

In most versions Ariadne helps Theseus escape by giving him a ball of string; in some versions, however, she gives him glittering jewels with the same purpose (*Encyclopædia Britannica* 1986, 8:171). The string has been compared to an umbilical cord linking Theseus to the World while he descended into the Underworld.

Perhaps most intriguing is the fate of Ariadne: In some versions Theseus abandoned her when she was asleep on Naxos. In other versions she went ashore to recover from seasickness and a strong wind blew Theseus’s ship seawards while he was conducting some necessary repairs (*Funk & Wagnalls New Encyclopedia* 1983, 2:323). In some versions he abandons her simply because he wasn’t in love with her, or was in love with someone else; in other versions he abandons her because he is warned by Athene that she is intended for Dionysos. In some versions she dies after being left behind on Naxos; in most versions, however, she is indeed married to Dionysos (*Funk & Wagnalls New Encyclopedia* 1983, 2:323). And then there are versions where she is abandoned on Dia rather than Naxos (Cotterell 2001, 23).

Some background also needs to be filled in. Poseidon gave Minos a beautiful white bull. Minos should have sacrificed this bull to Poseidon. However, he decided to keep the bull. As punishment, Poseidon made Minos’s wife, Pasiphae, fall in love with the bull. The Minotaur was born out of this relationship (van

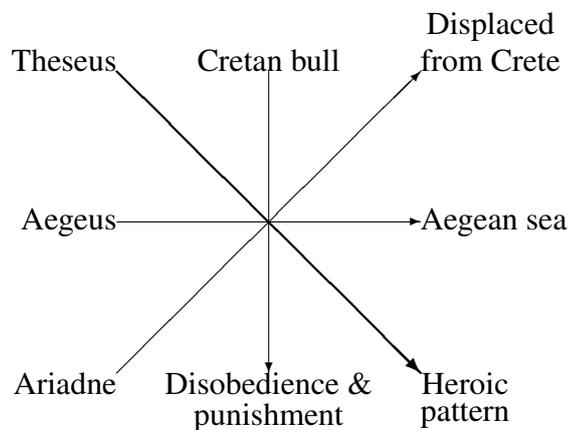


Figure 1: The major storylines in the legend

Reeth 1994, 165).

At the time of this adventure, Theseus was no stranger to heroism: he had killed the robbers Perifetes and Sinis (van Reeth 1994, 245), the giant Sciron (*Encyclopædia Britannica* 1986, 11:705) and Procrustes (*Encyclopædia Britannica* 1986, 11:705), won a wrestling match against the king of Eleusis, Cercyon (Cotterell 2001, 82), and freed the Athens region from the Crommyonian sow (*Encyclopædia Britannica* 1986, 11:705). He also rescued his father from Medea (van Reeth 1994, 245). After the events on Crete, he participated in the Calydonian Hunt, captured an Amazon princess and accompanied Jason and the Argonauts in their quest for the Golden Fleece. He is finally killed on the island of Scyros (van Reeth 1994, 245–246). The fact that he had died is underlined by the fact that Odysseus meets him in Hades in the *Odyssey*.

3 Interpretation

In a certain sense the legend of Theseus and the Minotaur presents an opportunity to unravel a number of storylines that are not necessarily related. The main threads are depicted in figure 1.

The tale that Aegeus jumped from the Acropolis into the sea, which was henceforth know as the Aegean Sea, is in all likelihood separable from the main legend, and functions in a pure etiological manner — to explain the name of the sea. Given the distance between the Acropolis and the sea, this is, however, not a very satisfactory etiological explanation.

The storyline that deals with Ariadne being left behind on Naxos is slightly

harder to deal with. The fact that such a great variety of versions exists, probably indicates that this storyline can also be separated from the main storyline. If Theseus abandons her because he is not in love with her (or because he is in love with someone else) it can indicate his fallible human character. If, on the other hand, he abandons her because she is destined for a god, it can indicate his obedience to the gods. If his ship was blown to sea, it indicates fate. Because of these inconsistencies, we do not consider its significance in our analysis of the Myth, except for noting that Ariadne was originally a Cretan goddess, but was later honoured as a goddess on a few islands, including Naxos (van Reeth 1994, 26).

A storyline that is probably significant is the one that deals with the origins and destiny of the Minotaur. Remember that the Minotaur formed part of Poseidon's punishment of Minos — it was precisely because he was disobedient by not sacrificing the white bull, that Pasiphae fell in love with the bull and this resulted in the Minotaur being born. However, the facts that

- Minotaur means *Minos's* bull (Cotterell 2001, 62); and
- Minos used the Minotaur to exact a toll out of the Athenians

indicate that the punishment has not had the desired effect. By removing this asset from Minos, the punishment can be completed. Viewed as such, this aspect of the story can be explained by the archetypical Jungian disobedience followed by punishment.

The outline of the main storyline is as follows:

1. A perilous situation exists (the imminent sacrifice);
2. A potential hero steps forward (Theseus);
3. He is helped by someone with access to special powers or goods (Ariadne);
4. He descends into the labyrinth; and
5. He emerges victoriously.

The archetypical characteristics of the hero are well-known (Harris & Platzner 1995, 229): amongst others, a "*hero often makes a journey to the Underworld*" and accomplishes "*a victory over the ... wild beast*". This description clearly fits the current legend. However, the heroic pattern covers an entire life — not a single adventure. Before this interpretation can be accepted, it is therefore necessary to verify that (1) this event is indeed the most acceptable descent that Theseus makes, and (2) the remainder of Theseus's life can be accounted for using the heroic pattern.

The first of these two aspects represents the bigger challenge: Theseus did indeed descent into the ‘real’ Underworld and return (Harris & Platzner 1995, 216). This happened when Theseus and Pirithous decided that, since they had (according to some versions at least) a god as one parent, only a daughter of Zeus would suffice as a wife. They accordingly descended to the Underworld, to capture Persephone, Hades’s wife and daughter of Zeus. They were then held captive by Hades and only released when Heracles arrived. His motives are also very questionable (Harris & Platzner 1995, 216). This casts doubts on whether Theseus’s decent to the Underworld can be classified as the archetypical descent. In our opinion the descent into the labyrinth form a much better candidate for the archetypical descent. This is based not only on a much nobler motive and a successful completion, but also on the fact that this precedes his mounting of the throne of Athens.

As a comparison consider Orpheus who initially convinced Hades to let his wife, Eurydice, return to the land of the living (Cotterell 2001, 67). When Orpheus failed, it was due to love that Orpheus’s soul was granted a place in Elysium (Harris & Platzner 1995, 217). Heracles’s descent into the Underworld led to his capture of Cerberus and to immortality for himself.

Also note that the string as metaphor for an umbilical cord may emphasise the *rebirth* nature of this particular journey of Theseus.

The fact that the rest of Theseus’s life is compatible with the heroic pattern will be dealt with briefly. The events described by Lord Raglan (Harris & Platzner 1995, 229) will be used. Theseus’s mother is a royal virgin — Aethra is the daughter of King Pittheus (Cotterell 2001, 82). His father, Aegeus, is indeed a king. He is conceived while his father is intoxicated, just after Aegeus visited the Delphic Oracle (Cotterell 2001, 82). Pittheus spreads the rumour that his daughter is pregnant by Poseidon (Cotterell 2001, 82). When Theseus is old enough he travels to Athens — his future kingdom. Now it is time for him to travel (symbolically) to the Underworld (the labyrinth) and to kill the Minotaur. At his return Aegeus dies and Theseus becomes king. However, after a riot in Athens he has to flee to Scyros where he is pushed from a rock and dies (van Reeth 1994, 246). Afterwards, Athenians worship him (*Encyclopædia Britannica* 1986, 11:705). When this life history is compared to the heroic pattern, only the following aspects are missing:

- No attempt is made at birth to kill him; however upon reaching manhood, Medea does attempt to kill him so that her own son can become king of Athens (Cotterell 2001, 82).
- Theseus is not “spirited away” at the time of his birth.
- He is not reared “by foster parents in a far country”, but by his own mother

(in a far country).

- His body is buried — at least his bones are moved from Scyros and buried in Attica (*Encyclopædia Britannica* 1986, 11:705).

While the major contention of this essay is that the legend of the Minotaur serves to add a vital ingredient to the archetypical heroic pattern, it should be pointed out that the legend can be also seen as a metaphor for the shift in power from Crete to Athens at the dusk of Minoan society. Given that the hero often marries the daughter of his predecessor, it is particularly significant to note that Theseus married Phaedra — also a daughter of King Minos — after abandoning Ariadne (Cotterell 2001, 73).

To conclude this section, a possible origin of the legend will be considered. In Crete the sport of bull-leaping was practised before Greek times (Cotterell 2001, 23). The palace at Knossos contained large painted murals that probably depicted this sport (Beckett 1994, 14). To an observer, this could have looked like someone fighting a beast. This could explain why the legend took the specific form it did.

4 Conclusion

This essay described the myth of Theseus and the Minotaur. It then looked at possible interpretations of the myth.

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