

The following text is taken from The Island of Bulls, by Roy A. Gallant

Theseus and the Minotaur

According to a Greek myth going back more than 2,500 years, there once was a young man named Theseus, son of the king of the great city of Athens, the capital of Greece. At this time there also lived on the nearby island of Crete a king named Minos. Minos was so powerful and so greatly feared that he was able to demand and get whatever he wished, not only from the people of his island-state but also from the people of nearby Athens on the Greek mainland.



Now it happened, according to the myth, that Minos kept on Crete a fierce monster called the Minotaur, a beast that was half bull and half man and ate human flesh. The word "minotaur" is built out of two words--King Minos's name and the Greek word *tauros*, meaning "bull." The Minotaur was supposedly kept in a labyrinth, a great maze or place of numerous winding corridors that was so complex that it was impossible to find the way out without help.

From time to time, Minos demanded that the king of Athens send him the seven handsomest young men and the seven most beautiful maidens of the land. These fourteen youths were then led into the labyrinth, where one by one they were found and devoured by the Minotaur.

When Theseus came of age he told his father that he wanted to be one of the youths sent to King Minos so that he might slay the Minotaur and once and for all end this terrible sacrifice the people of Athens were forced to make. Although he feared that his son would never return, Theseus's father granted the young man his wish.

On the appointed day the fourteen youths boarded the ship to Crete, a ship that always flew black sails, a sign of the certain death awaiting its passengers. When they arrived the youths were paraded before King Minos, for him to judge whether all were fair enough for the Minotaur. When the king's daughter, Ariadne, saw Theseus, she fell in love with him. She then managed to see him alone before the youths were led off to the labyrinth. Ariadne told Theseus of her love and gave him a small sword and a ball of thread.



As Theseus led the way into the maze he carefully unwound the ball of thread. On hearing the ferocious roars of the Minotaur as it came charging around a corner of the labyrinth to attack him, Theseus dropped the ball of thread and began slashing at the beast with the sword given to him by Ariadne. He managed to weaken the Minotaur and finally cut off its head. He then picked up the thread and followed it out of the labyrinth, leading his thirteen companions to safety and home.

Before he had departed from Athens, Theseus had agreed to change the black sails to white if all had gone well and he had slain the Minotaur. He forgot to do so. When his father, waiting for the ship's return, saw the black sails, he presumed that his son had been killed. He was so stricken with grief that he killed himself before the ship docked. Theseus then became king.



The following excerpts have been taken from The Island of Bulls, by Roy A. Gallant

The Greek poet Homer, who lived about 850 b. c., gave us the first known account of the Cretan king Minos and his palace. Later, in 455 b.c. the Greek scholar Thucydides, who lived in Athens, wrote an account of King Minos and his powerful fleet of ships that ruled the Aegean Sea. Still later, the philosopher Aristotle, born in 384 b.c., also wrote of King Minos dominating the whole Aegean area. And there were some who thought that Crete might have been the legendary kingdom of Atlantis, mentioned by the philosopher Plato about 400 B.C.

The Cretans were called Minoans after King Minos. The legend of King Minos and his Minotaur had existed for centuries before the Minoans used writing. It had been handed down orally in story form from one generation to the next. But because it was only a legend, no one could be certain that there had actually ever been such a kingdom.

An English scholar from Oxford University named Sir Arthur Evans decided to find out if there was any truth to the Minotaur legend. The Minoans had ruled supreme from about 3000 to 1450 b.c., although as a civilization they were still older. The Minoan population at its peak was about 80,000.

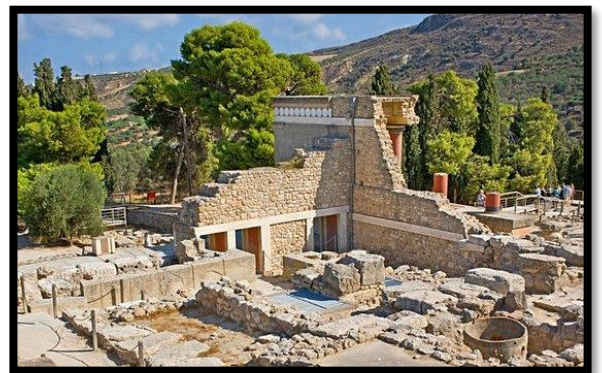


Evans's interest in Crete began during a visit to Athens where he bought a few moonstones from a Greek merchant. The stones, worn by his wife as lucky charms, had strange writing scratched on them. It was the writing that led Evans to Crete in 1894, where he found more of the stones containing the same writing. He first went to the capital of the island, Knossos, where he noted that many of the women were wearing similar round stones of clay around their necks or wrists as lucky charms. Although some of the stones

had simple designs carved on them, others had what appeared to be some form of writing. As he traveled around Crete, Evans saw many such stones. They turned out to be very old indeed, and some had been used as personal identity disks by the ancient Cretans. One such stone had the design of a labyrinth. Another had the shape of a creature half human and half bull.

In his search for Crete's past, Evans came across several seals. The one at the left represents the legendary labyrinth. The seal below shows an athlete leaping over a bull's back.

While in Knossos, Evans became curious about several large blocks of carved stone lying about. He decided to dig a few test trenches near the stones to see if anything might lie buried below. Only a few inches beneath the surface one of his thirty workers struck something hard with a spade. Evans's excitement grew as they continued to dig around the hard object. After only a few hours of digging Evans was almost certain that he had stumbled onto the walls of a large and ancient building, possibly the palace of the mighty Minos. In all, he spent more than twenty-five years working in Crete reconstructing the Minoan remains at Knossos. The hard object just beneath the surface indeed turned out to be the palace of King Minos, built some 3,500 years earlier, even earlier than the time of the great rulers of ancient Egypt just across the sea to the south.



Month after month, year after year, the work continued. The palace of Minos turned out to be enormous, sprawling over an area larger than ten city blocks. It was shaped like a large rectangle, in the center of which was a huge courtyard of red cement. Some sections of the building were five stories high. There were twisting corridors and stairways. There were dead-end passageways and a bewildering number of rooms. Indeed, it was a labyrinth. Evans had no doubt that here was the building described in legend as both the home of Minos and of the dreaded Minotaur.

There was great excitement when the workers uncovered the first fresco. Frescoes are paintings done on walls when the walls are being plastered.

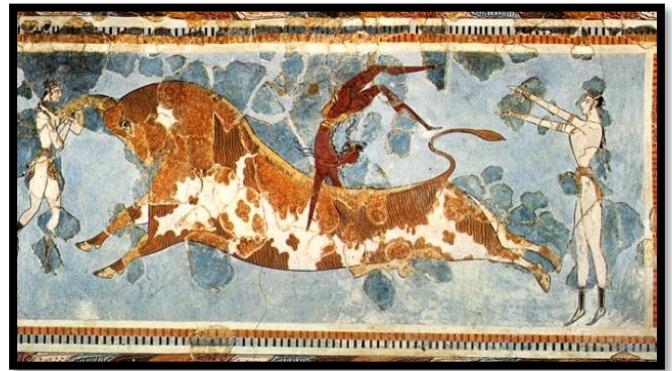
Throughout the palace were images of a two-bladed axe, a symbol associated with the Cretan mother-goddess, whom the Greeks called Rhea. At will she was able to enter the double-axe and vanish. An ancient word for this axe was *labrys*, from which the word labyrinth comes.

A ground plan reconstruction of the late Minoan palace at Knossos reveals a labyrinth of passageways and hundreds of rooms.

Minos seems to have been the name of the first Cretan king who constructed the original palace. In his honor, each of the future kings of Crete took the name of Minos and added to the palace to suit his own taste.

As the weeks and months passed, many more discoveries were made. Paintings and impressions of bulls on vases and other objects were so common that it caused Evans to remark: "What a part these creatures play here!"

Like the people of Spain today, the ancient Minoans seem to have loved a sport involving acrobats and bulls. One large fresco shows a bull in full charge and three young acrobats, two girls and a boy. If we read these frescoes correctly, some sport like this may have taken place: Three youths entered a sports arena containing a bull. As the bull charged, one of the youths would grab the animal's horns, leap over the bull's head, and do a handspring off the bull's back, landing upright on his feet and in the arms of one of the other two youths. This sounds like an impossible trick, but so many Cretan artifacts suggest that some such event took place that it is hard to doubt. Is it possible that this type of event inspired the myth of the fourteen Athenian youths, King Minos, and the deadly Minotaur?



There are frescoes that also show audiences watching the contests in the bull ring. Although in Spain the object of the cruel contest is to kill the bull by plunging a sword into it, in ancient Crete the purpose seemed to be to demonstrate the athletic skills of the acrobats. But surely, from time to time, some of the youths must have been killed during the contests.

With a navy second to none, the Minoan kings ruled the seas. They were wealthy, as suggested by an elaborate game table Evans found, set with crystal, ivory, and gold and silver pieces. And they were enlightened, as evidenced by the modern system of plumbing unearthed at Knossos:

Their wealth most likely came from overseas trade. Elegant pottery made by them, and copied by other people, has been unearthed in Egypt, in the Near East, on the Aegean Islands, and in Greece. For many centuries the Minoans enjoyed the good life, but then their civilization collapsed and quickly disappeared.

About the year 1450 b.c. Knossos and other Minoan centers burned. By about 1400 b.c. these cities were completely destroyed. While some scholars have supposed that invaders swept over the island and conquered it, others doubt that this is what happened. They suspect that the catastrophic explosion of the volcanic island of Thera (also called Santorin), 60 miles north of Crete, sent the Minoans and their splendid civilization into oblivion.