

# TRUE. MAYBE. NOT TRUE?

Greek myths were an important part of ancient Greek society. Most Greek myths include elements of fantasy, adventure, and violence, but they were not viewed by the Greeks as simply "exciting stories." Many of them were used as education by example; others were warnings to human beings about bad behaviour (against the gods), while others sometimes personified ideas or events in human life that are difficult to understand, such as Death, Time, or Fate.

Most Greek gods had similar characteristics, both good and bad, to human beings. They were portrayed as men or women, but they were thought to be immortal and to hold special powers. The gods could exercise their powers on one another and on human beings as they wished, for their own vengeance or pleasure. For this reason it was important to pay attention to the gods and to appease them by making food offerings such as nectar and ambrosia, or by making animal sacrifices at the temples.

The most important Greek gods were the 12 Olympians, who were said to live on Mount Olympus and to have descended from the first generation of Gods: the Titans. Greek stories and legends also include stories of demigods and heroes, who had some of the special powers of the gods but who were not immortal. These included Atlas, Achilles, Heracles, Daedalus and Icarus, and Narcissus.

In ancient civilizations myths were told to explain a creation or a happening, but that they included some facts about their culture and history, and this makes it difficult to verify what is based on fact and what came from the storyteller's imagination. Because facts are included in the myths, readers can learn something about a culture when they read myths.

'Theseus and the Minotaur.' Listen to the story. As you listen, make a list of things which you think might be facts from the story. At the end of the story, we will share our lists and figure out if we were right."

- Have the students create a three column organizer headed

**Definitely True, May have been True, Definitely Not True.**

- Read the story aloud. Students fill out the chart.

# Legend of the Minotaur

One of the most popular of the myths is the story of Theseus and the Minotaur. It centers around an early civilization on the island of Crete. It is a myth told long before Athens became the ruling capital of Greece. It is the legend of the Minotaur.

King Minos had angered the Greek God Poseidon by not sacrificing a great white bull that had been sent to him. Poseidon decided that he would punish King Minos by making his wife Pasiphae fall in love with the bull. Pasiphae hid herself within a hollow wooden cow statue to get away from the bull. Unfortunately the bull found the statue attractive. As the result of their union Pasiphae gave birth to the Minotaur, a fierce creature with the head and torso of a bull, and the lower half of a man. The Minotaur was kept inside a maze (labyrinth), built by the chief architect at Knossos, Daedalus.

In ancient Greece, the Athenians had a great fear for the island of Crete and its King Minos. Years earlier, King Minos had defeated King Aegeus of Athens and had threatened to destroy his country unless he gave seven young women and men for sacrifice to the Minotaur every nine years.

King Aegeus had agreed to these terms and every nine years without fail a ship with black sails would set sail from Crete to Athens to collect the prisoners. Once the ship arrived in Crete, the young men and women were prepared for sacrifice. They were dressed in the finest of robes and fed with the most delicious foods but then they were taken to the doors of a huge labyrinth, where the Minotaur lived. One by one, each of the prisoners would enter the labyrinth. Horrific screams could be heard from the outside. No one ever returned from the labyrinth. The Athenians would then be safe for another nine years.

Theseus, King Aegeus's young son, had no idea why every nine years his father was so sad and begged his father to tell him why. Aegeus told him of the sacrifice he made to King Minos. Theseus decided that he must go to Crete as one of the prisoners and slay the Minotaur. King Aegeus protested that Theseus was his only son and heir to the throne, and no one had ever been seen alive after entering the labyrinth. Theseus was determined to be a hero, and set sail on the ship with the other prisoners. Once in Crete he

was fed at a huge banquet that was given in honor of the young men and women to be sacrificed. At the banquet he sat next to King Minos's daughter Ariadne. Theseus and Ariadne began to talk and she became entranced with his handsome features and his courage. Ariadne decided that she would help Theseus in exchange for him marrying her and taking her back to Athens. Ariadne gave Theseus a ball of silken thread and explained that as he walked around the labyrinth he should unwind the thread so he could find his way back out of the maze.

Once Theseus had entered the maze, he attached the thread to the door and took hold of his sword. He could hear the heavy breath of the Minotaur sleeping in the distance. He kept walking deeper into the maze, unraveling the silken thread as he walked, and after a while no longer heard the Minotaur. Theseus crept along quietly and found that he had entered a large dark cave. A half-man, half-bull creature, the Minotaur, was awake and looming in front of him. Theseus dropped his sword in fright at sight of the terrifying, huge beast. The Minotaur began to attack Theseus, but Theseus managed to grasp his sword and plunge it into the Minotaur, killing it.

Theseus and Ariadne boarded the ship back to Athens. On the journey home Theseus had a dream where the god Dionysus visited him. He requested that Theseus should not marry Ariadne because he, Dionysus, had already chosen her as his bride. Dionysus told Theseus that he must leave Ariadne on the island of Naxos for Dionysus to collect later. Theseus did leave Ariadne on the island but was so full of sorrow on the way home that he forgot to change the black sails on the ship to white, to indicate that he has survived the Minotaur.

Theseus's father King Aegeus was watching for the safe return from a cliff and saw the ship with the black sails. He assumed that his beloved son was dead. A disconsolate Aegeus jumped into the sea, drowning himself. That is why this stretch of water is called the Aegean.

Theseus became King and was the great hero of Athens; he is known as the founder of Athens democracy and as a king who helped the poor. Late in life Theseus died in exile from Athens, but soldiers at war often reported seeing his ghost, so his bones were brought back to Athens and were placed in a sacred tomb to honor his memory.