

## **The Origin of the Labyrinth**

**A Brief Overview by Prof. Adam Rappold, Dept. of Classics**

The concept of the labyrinth is almost impossibly ancient --- something so pervasive and so old that it likely touches on the shared culture of all humanity – but it was the ancient Greeks who provided to us both the particular seven course visual pattern which Brock’s labyrinth is based on and even the word labyrinth itself – through the Greek ‘laburinthos’.

Even to the Greeks though, the true origin and meaning of this word was shrouded in mystery –because, as with most words that end in ‘nth’, like the hyacinth flower, it was not originally Greek at all but a loan from the original inhabitants of their land, the mysterious semi-mythical Minoans. To help explain this distantly remembered connection with the past and to explain the mystery of the word, the Greeks, as they often did, turned to myth – in particular, that of Theseus and the Minotaur.

In short, the ancient king Minos, who ruled over the Aegean, demanded that his subjects provide to him 7 young men and 7 young women, at the cusp of adulthood, to be sacrificed in yearly tribute. These adolescents were led to Crete (where Minos ruled) and placed in a subterranean maze of twisty paths called the labyrinth, at the center of which was imprisoned the source of their ultimate doom -- the half-man, half-bull Minotaur – his constant, profane hunger for flesh a punishment for Minos’ own disrespect to the gods. These sacrifices to the Minotaur went on unchallenged until, ultimately the hero Theseus offered himself freely as tribute in place of one of the chosen 14. He likely would have perished without the aid of Minos’ clever daughter Ariadne, who, on the night before Theseus was to die, taught him the

secret paths of the labyrinth, warned him of the doom at its center, and provided him a ball of twine to mark his path and guide him back out again. So prepared, Theseus defeated the Minotaur and saved his people.

And so, when the Greeks used the word labyrinth, its meaning was almost always tied back to this ur-labyrinth. But it should be clear it was not simply a maze. Particularly in visual depictions, although mazes and labyrinths both share twisty corridors and sinuous motion, a maze has a different entrance and exit -- it is a puzzle to be solved -- a labyrinth, on the other hand, only has a single course though it... and rather than leading to an exit, always leads inextricably towards the central space.

This difference might help to explain something unexpected-- the word labyrinth, in addition to Theseus' story of violence and heroism, was also understood to be sacred, quiet, and transformative. This likely derives from the Minoans themselves who had originated the word and who likely had constructed a real 'historical' labyrinth. To the extent that we understand this original labyrinth (the historical reality on which the myth was based), it seems that it was not a place for monsters but instead, likely, a subterranean place of worship for the central goddess of the Minoan, the powerful Potnia Theron -- a queen whose worship linked mankind to the natural world. The idea seems to be that walking the twisting paths of the labyrinth, possibly laid out to reflect the twisting motion of the stars in the sky, confused evil powers, cast off dark thoughts from the walker, and allowed only the pure to access the central chamber where the goddess was experienced. That is, the movement of the labyrinth, always moving inwards both spiritually and physically, was both a real journey in a subterranean place but also a way of confronting a primal darkness and, ultimately, of connecting to something

terrifying but also transformative and transcendent at the center. The Greek myth of the labyrinth and the minotaur, dimly remembered, then partially conceals this original, ancient, spiritual act of the people that had come before them.

Of course, some part of the sacred nature of the labyrinth paths remained to the Greeks as well – the story of the Minotaur was usually told as an explanation for a set of Greek rites of passage: rituals that transformed young men and women into adults. In particular the story goes that after defeating the Minotaur, Theseus originated the traditional *geranos* dance, a lively dance, performed each year by the young men and women of Athens. The dance's twisting movements mimicked the original path of Theseus through the labyrinth, yes, but we are also told that they also represented the twisting course of life itself. And, after the dancers had individually moved through the labyrinthine movements (symbolically accepting the difficulties of life), the conclusion of the dance was a joyous communal movement, bringing together the previously separate young men and women and symbolically marking the ultimate transformation of these youths into adults.

In this light, the story of the Minotaur and the Greek labyrinth takes particular relevance for a college campus full of young adults. To the Greeks and Minoans before them, the movement of the labyrinth was, at least partially, a metaphor for traversing the complex paths of life itself and reaching the center means leaving behind youth and moving into adulthood – a transformation that can only be made after confronting and defeating the terrible monster within: the fears, the evil thoughts, and the doubt that lay inside us all. Thankfully, in the lessons of all those who have come before us and in the very process of education, we all have a metaphorical path of yarn to safely guide our return.