Ægeus, king of Athens, and Æthra, daughter of Pittheus, king of Troezen. Thus through his father he was descended from Erechtheus and the autochthones of Attica ; through his mother he came of the Asiatic house of Pelops. Ægeus, being childless, went to Delphi to consult the god, who gave him an ambiguous answer. He went to Træzen, and told the oracle to Pittheus, who, seeing its bearing, contrived that Ægeus should have intercourse with his daughter Æthra. Ægeus then departed to Athens, and in due time Æthra, who remained at Troezen, brought forth Theseus. It was given out that the child’s father was Poseidon, the great god of Troezen, and in after ages the Troezenians pointed to the Holy Isle as the place where Poseidon and Æthra met, and where Æthra raised a temple to Athene Apaturia, at which Træzenian maids dedicated their girdles before marriage. For his tutor and guardian young Theseus had one Cannidas, to whom, down to Plutarch’s time, the Athenians were wont to sacrifice a black ram on the eve of the festival of Theseus. On passing out of boyhood, Theseus, in accordance with custom, went to Delphi, and there cut off his front hair. Ægeus had deposited his sword and boots under a heavy rock, telling Æthra that, if she gave birth to a son who, on attaining manhood, should be able to lift the rock and remove the sword and boots, she was to send him with all secrecy to his father at Athens. Theseus now lifted the rock, removed the sword and boots, and set out for Athens. He encountered many adventures on the way. First he met Periphetes, surnamed Corynetes (Clubman). Him Theseus slew, and carried off his club. At the isthmus of Corinth dwelt Sinis, called the Pine-Bender, because he killed his victims by fastening them to the top of a pine tree (or two pine-trees), which he had bent down and then suffered to fly up. Theseus hoisted the Pine-Bender on his own pine-tree. Now, the deceased Pine-Bender had a pretty daughter, who ran and hid herself in a thicket where asparagus grew plentifully; and, when Theseus came to look for her, she prayed to the asparagus, and promised that if it would hide her she would never injure asparagus any more. Theseus wiled her from the thicket, and from their union sprang the family of the Ioxids, who worshipped asparagus. Next Theseus despatched the Crommyonian sow (or boar), a dreadful monster. Then he flung over the cliff the wicked Sciron, who, while his guests were perforce washing his feet, used to kick them over into the sea. In Eleusis Theseus wrestled with and killed Cercyon. A little farther on he slew Procrustes, who had only one bed for all comers : if his guest was too short for the bed, he stretched him out *; if* he was too long, he cut him down to the requisite length. At the Cephissus Theseus was met by the Phytalid family, who purified him from the taint of bloodshed. As he passed through the streets of Athens, his curls and long garment reaching to his ankles drew on him the derision of some masons, who were putting on the roof of the new temple of Apollo Delphinius : “ Why,” they asked, “ was such a pretty girl out alone ?” In reply Theseus took the bullocks out of their cart and flung them higher than the roof of the temple. He found his father married to Medea, who had fled from Corinth. Being a witch, she knew Theseus before his father did, and tried to persuade Ægeus to poison his son ; but Ægeus at last recognized him by his sword, and took him to his arms. Theseus was now declared heir to the throne, and the Pallantids, who had hoped to succeed to the childless king, conspired against Theseus, but he crushed the conspiracy. He then attacked the flame-spitting bull of Marathon and brought it alive to Athens, where he sacrificed it to Apollo Delphinius. Now comes the adventure of the Cretan Minotaur (see Minos), whom Theseus slew by the aid of ARIADNE (q.v.). While Theseus was in Crete, Minos, wishing to see whether Theseus was really the son of Poseidon, flung his ring into the sea. Theseus dived and brought it up, together with a golden crown, the gift of Amphitrite. On the return voyage the ship touched at Naxos, and there Theseus abandoned Ariadne. He landed also at Delos, and there he and the youths danced the crane dance, the complicated movements of which were meant to imitate the windings of the Labyrinth.@@1 In historical times this dance was still danced by the Delians round the horned altar—an altar entirely composed of left-sided horns. Theseus had promised Ægeus that, if he returned success­ful, the black sail with which the fatal ship always put to sea@@2 should be exchanged for a white one. But he forgot his promise ; and, when from the Acropolis at Athens Ægeus descried the black sail out at sea, he flung himself from the rock, and died. Hence at the festival which commemorated the return of Theseus there was always weeping and lamentation. Theseus now carried out a political revolution in Attica by abolishing the semi-inde­pendent powers of the separate townships and concen­trating those powers at Athens, and he instituted the festival of the Panathenæa,@@3 as a symbol of the unity of the Attic race. Further, according to a democratic tradi­tion, he abolished the monarchy, and substituted in its place a popular government ; but, to obviate the evils of a pure democracy, he instituted the three classes or castes of the eupatrids (nobles), geomori (husbandmen), and demiurgi (artisans). He also minted coins bearing the figure of an ox. He extended the territory of Attica as far as the isthmus of Corinth.

He was the first to celebrate in their full pomp the Isthmian games in honour of Poseidon ; for the games previously instituted by Hercules in honour of Melicertes had been celebrated by night, and had partaken of the nature of mysteries rather than of a festival. Of Theseus’s adventures with the Amazons there were different accounts. According to some, he sailed with Hercules to the Euxine, and there won the Amazon Antiope as the meed of valour ; others said that he sailed on his own account, and captured Antiope by stratagem. Thereafter the Amazons attacked Athens. Antiope fell fighting on the side of Theseus, and her tomb was pointed out on the south side of the acropolis. By Antiope Theseus had a son, Hippo­lytus. On the death of Antiope, Theseus married Phædra. She fell in love with her stepson Hippolytus, who, resist­ing her advances, was accused by her to Theseus of having attempted her virtue. Theseus in a rage imprecated on his son the wrath of Poseidon. His prayer was answered : as Hippolytus was driving beside the sea, a bull issuing from the waves terrified his horses, and he was thrown and killed. This tragic story is the subject of one of the extant plays of Euripides.

The famous friendship between Theseus and Pirithous, king of the Lapiths, originated thus. Hearing of the

@@@1 The Ostiaks of Siberia have an elaborate crane dance, in which the dancers are dressed up with skins and the heads of cranes (Pallas, Reise durch verschiedene Provinzen des russischen Reichs, iii. 65).

@@@2 So, too, the ship that sailed annually from Thessaly to Troy with offerings to the shade of Achilles put to sea with sable sails (Philostratus, Heroica, xx. 25). The ship that was to bring Iseult to the mortally wounded Tristram was to hoist a white sail if she was on board, a black sail if she was not. The black sails recur in the modern Greek version of the tale of Theseus. Compare Asiatick Researches, ix. 97.

@@@3 Besides the Panathenæa, Theseus is said to have instituted the festival of the Synoikia or Metoikia. Wachsmuth ingeniously sup­poses that the latter festival commemorated the local union in a single city of the separate settlements on the Acropolis and its immediate neighbourhood, while the Panathenæa commemorated the political union of the whole of Attica (C. Wachsmuth, Die Stadt Athen im Alterthum, p. 453 sq.).