

# **King Minos: The Father of Heavenly Law**

AGRS 28 Term Paper

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GSI: Rebekah McKay, Fridays 1-2pm

Submission Details

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Term Paper Topics

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Re-submit Assignment

Paper View

I'd like to do prompt 1, and specifically look at the character of Minos. Specifically, I'm interested in the role of Minos in modern works such as Dante's *Inferno*, and others.

great

Rebekah Mckay , Feb 27 at 1:39pm

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One of the most important figures in mythology in regards to order within society is King Minos, son of Zeus and Europa. In mythology, he is most well known for being the king of Knossos, a city located on the island of Crete, and is also well known for his conversations with Zeus to bring laws to the land below. While references of Minos in mythology are really limited to only a few select myths, his legacy as a lawmaker and the myths he's a part of have had a lasting impact on several significant works in contemporary works.

Within mythology, perhaps *the* most famous myth in which Minos appears is that of Theseus and the Minotaur. As the myth goes, Theseus grows up in Troezen and arrives in Athens, where he learns of the punishment given to the Athenians – every year, the city must surrender fourteen children (seven boys and seven girls) to face the minotaur, a half-human, half-bull that resides within the Labyrinth built by Daedalus. This minotaur is intimately connected to Minos, as it is the product of the divine punishment Poseidon exacted upon the king, for not sacrificing the snow-white bull to him. Specifically, he had Minos's wife Pasiphaë fall in love with the bull, thus giving birth to the Minotaur. Minos then had Daedalus construct a labyrinth to entrap the bull, and later when Minos defeated Athens in conflict, began demanding for sacrifices to it.

Upon learning of these sacrifices, Theseus volunteers as one of them, and travels to Knossos to face the minotaur himself. Once there, he was "well received by King Minos" (Seltman 1953, 2), and Minos's daughter, Ariadne also falls in love with Theseus. Knowing that he is about to be sent into the labyrinth, Ariadne gives Theseus a ball of thread, allowing him to retrace his path to the entrance after slaying the minotaur. Theseus does just that, and subsequently elopes with Ariadne, and this is where the relevance to Minos ends.

In terms of the plot, Minos really only serves as a catalyst and one of many adversaries Theseus ends up journeying on in order to become recognized as a staple hero in mythology. This is

significant, since it highlights that in the grand scheme of things, Minos's role in this story is relatively minor – Theseus's journey continues without the mention of Minos, highlighting his role as a one-time hurdle and nothing more.

Alongside this myth with the minotaur, Minos also appears in the *Odyssey*, where he is said to have “conversed with great Zeus” every nine years, and it is from these conversations that he “brought back laws fore the cities” (Levaniouk 2011, Chapter 5). This passage is significant, because it succinctly summarizes why we associate Minos so heavily with divine law in modern (i.e. anything preceding the Greek and Roman era) times. The nature of these conversations being implied to be the source for the laws of the land highlights not only Minos's connection to divine law, but it also accentuates Minos's importance as a figure in Greek mythology, as this responsibility of passing down the law of the gods demonstrates that he is far from any ordinary king.

In terms of roles in major myths, as far as I can tell, this is where the road ends – there aren't any other *extremely* notable instances where Minos appears, perhaps he makes a minor appearance in other myths relating to his children, but never again does Minos take the central pedestal as he does in these two myths I've just discussed. However, despite this relatively limited scope, Minos's legacy has made him almost synonymous with divine law in many works that later incorporate the character. One such case of this is in one of Plato's dialogues, titled *Minos*. Firstly, it's obvious that this work is related to king Minos in some way; after all, the entire dialogue is effectively named after him, so already this highlights his importance as a mythological character as he's important enough that Plato has dedicated an entire dialogue to him. More importantly, however, are the contents of this work. The dialogue revolves around Socrates and an unnamed companion debating about law itself, opening with the question of “what is law?”, and exploring

the “limits of law” itself (Lutz 2010, 992). Throughout the second half of the dialogue, Socrates propels the idea of Minos being a symbol of divine justice, by explaining how Minos learned “whole kingly art” from his conversations with Zeus, then proceeded to “use this art [to] make divine laws that teach virtue and bring happiness.” (Lutz 2010, 998). To start, the characterization of the laws as a “whole kingly art” highlights the immense value Socrates, and therefore Plato holds to the laws Minos passes down, and furthers the synonymity between Minos and the notion of divine law. Further, Socrates also explicitly points to Minos’s conversations with Zeus as the “evidence for the divinity of Minos and his laws,” claiming that Minos was “the king of Knossos and the confidant of great Zeus” (Lutz 2010, 999). This explicit connection Socrates draws by labelling Minos as Zeus’s “confidant” indicates to the reader that Minos’s status is nearly equal to that of a god, and given this elevated status, further solidifies the notion that the laws he passes down are divine, and are hence of the utmost importance.

In addition to placing Minos on this divine pedestal, Socrates also uses the example of Minos to highlight the philosophical dilemma surrounding the creation of law itself. For instance, aside from defining what law is, one of the other central questions *Minos* asks surrounds the creation of law itself – specifically, whether an “ideal legislator” exists (Mulroy 2007, 122). Within the dialogue, Socrates uses Minos as an example of divine law passed down from the gods, and contrasts this with the example of Hipparchus, who “seeks wisdom from his own invention and readings” (Mulroy 2007, 122). This contrast is then used to ask the question of “whether god or some man deserves credit for [the creation and dissemination of] laws.” (Mulroy 2007, 122). At the end of it all, both Socrates and the companion agree that neither of them can reasonably be deemed the ideal legislator. (Mulroy 2007, 122) The use of Minos within this dialogue exemplifies perfectly the way Minos is portrayed in contemporary works, as he is being used here as a prime

example of divine law. Further, the deep philosophical question that's being asked as a result of this contrast also serves to highlight the importance of Minos in modern society, as the question of legal authorship and the limitations explored in this work remain central to legal philosophy today.

Furthermore, another incredibly famous work that Minos appears in is Dante Alighieri's *Divina Commedia* (Divine Comedy). Within the comedy, it is well known that Dante doesn't shy away from incorporating historical Greek and Roman figures into his work. For instance, the most obvious example of this is Virgil, who serves as Dante's guide through *Inferno*, describing the souls trapped within each circle of Hell, and overall serves as the symbol of wisdom throughout the entire journey. Here, we encounter Minos as Dante and Virgil descend past the circle of limbo, and is described to "judge each sinner [...] and sentences [them] by [...] wind[ing] his tail around himself as many times as the number of the circle that he assigns" (*Inferno* V, 6-12). Dante also calls Minos a "connoisseur of sin" (*Inferno* V, 9) to further expand on Minos's role as a judge of the underworld. Here, the portrayal of Minos is actually incredibly complex: on one hand, Dante also furthers the repeating theme of Minos's association with divine law by giving him the power to decide the appropriate punishment for sinners who confess before him. Yet, at the same time, Dante places Minos in hell along with all the other damned souls, which almost serves to highlight that despite Minos's unshakable connections with divine law and what is considered "morally good", Dante nevertheless decides that Minos himself has sinned enough that he too deserves to be placed in hell. This is significant because this highlights a nuanced perspective that is not seen in Plato's *Minos*: Plato chooses to discuss Minos in what can be considered to be unilaterally a positive light, whereas Dante chooses to not only highlight that despite Minos's divinity, but also remind the reader that he has nonetheless also sinned enough and hence

must be punished in hell just like everybody else. While it is unknown what actions specifically prompted this portrayal, one instance that would provide a strong argument for placing Minos in hell would be the suffering he has caused on the Athenian people by demanding for human sacrifices in the minotaur myth. If anything, this intricate portrayal of Minos in Dante's *Inferno* is far more complex and fascinating than his mythological counterpart, and his placement here also demonstrates the legacy he has created for himself, as he is supposedly entrusted by God (or Dis, the "God" of the underworld in Dante's world) to carry out the task of exacting the proper punishment for the sins committed by people in the corporeal world.

In addition to his appearance in literature, perhaps an amusing instance where Minos makes an appearance is during a confrontation between Michaelangelo and an individual named Biagio Baroni de' Martinelli. Here, the story goes that while Michaelangelo was completing *Last Judgment* artwork, he was visited by Biagio before the work was completed. From here, there is slight disagreement on what specifically transpired – some retellings of the story say that Michaelangelo was "offended that the master of Ceremonies [Biagio]" visited "without his consent," whereas other sources say that Biagio was "appalled by what he saw" and commented that the artwork was "a very disgraceful thing to have made" (Land 2013, 17). Regardless of the details, Michaelangelo then proceeds to replace Minos' face with that of Biagio's on this painting, which now sits on the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel. Biagio then attempts to have the painting removed as he believes it to be inappropriate, to which the Pope replies, "my authority does not extend into hell" and thus "[I] cannot free you from there" (Land 2013, 17).

Not only is this story comical in the sense that Michaelangelo's response to Biagio's comments is to eternally punish him in hell, this appearance of Minos in this story is also a callback to Dante's *Inferno*. In the painting, Minos's tail is "transformed into a snake, which twice encircles

Minos's body" to symbolize Biagio's placement in the second circle of hell, along with the lustful. Further, considering that this painting resides in the Sistine Chapel – one of the most important religious sites for Christianity – this work is perhaps one of the most elaborate and important works in Michaelangelo's entire artistic career. For him to include Minos's character as part of this artwork truly demonstrates the fact that the principles tied to him: a symbol of divine law and an adjudicator, is held in immensely high regard by Christian principles, and hence a testament to the magnitude of his legacy.

In the modern day, references to Minos directly are relatively limited, but references to the myths in which he plays a central role are still rather common. In the 1990s, one of the challenges in video game making was finding ways to create a truly 3-dimensional game, as all games that preceded it were all two-dimensional (an example of such a game is *Contra*, whose gameplay is entirely implemented in 2D). In 1993, a game titled *Labyrinth of Time* is one of the first examples of developers trying to "push boundaries and experiment" with adding the third dimension. This game is also clearly inspired by the Greek myth of Minos and the minotaur, as the player is tasked by Deadlus to navigate through the labyrinth in order to "collapse Minos's plans" (Clare 2022, 18). While this game is not well-known like some of the other games of this era, the existence of such a game is still significant as it highlights that Minos's legacy carries on even in modern culture. In fact many modern games, for instance *The Legend of Zelda* series (in particular *Breath of the Wild*), repeatedly make use of elaborate maze-like structures called labyrinths, directly referencing the original Greek myth of Minos and the labyrinth. If nothing else, the incorporation of labyrinths in these video games serves as a striking example of just how persistent and permeating the myths of Minos really are, and is a testament to the lasting impact his character has made on popular culture.



Finally, and possibly the most important instance of Minos's influence in modern time, is archaeologist Arthur Evans's propagation of what is now called the "Minoan civilization", a term used by many scholars today and is a term which is directly linked to king Minos himself. While it is now known that Evans's objective was primarily to forward the argument that "Crete was the cradle of European society" (Schoep 2018, 7), and subsequent analyses of his work seems to suggest that his work can't be completely trusted as Evans had "preconceived vision of the Minoan civilization he would discover" (Schoep 2018, 9), his impact in popularizing the term "Minoan" to refer to this particular time period in ancient civilization stands out as one of the most important homages to Minos in modern times. Further, despite Evans's skewed predispositions, it is still significant to note he decided to dedicate what he believed to be *the* birthplace of western civilization to king Minos, and his subsequent popularization of this term also serves to highlight the sheer scale of Minos's influence, as his character and his myths still play a significant part in the creative decisions we make to this day.

All in all, despite Minos's limited presence as a character in Greek myths, it is clear that his influence on modern works is felt throughout many facets of modern culture, ranging from video games, grand works of poetry, to dialogues of law between legendary philosophers. Unlike other well-known figures from mythology such as Zeus whose influence in popular culture is ubiquitous, and rightly so as he is the king of the gods, it was a genuine surprise investigating Minos's influence in popular culture and uncovering the immense depth that Minos's legacy carries despite his limited mythological presence. Considering the wide range of works in which we can find his influences, it is clear that Minos has cemented himself firmly as one of popular culture's staple characters, and his influences will be felt throughout the rest of time.

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