



TEI of Crete

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The written assignment to subject Introduction to History of Crete & Greece

Mythology of Crete

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1 Introduction

Crete is the largest island in Greece and many of the most well-known ancient Greek myths have Cretan roots [7]. The mythology is mostly connected with ancient Greek gods and also with the Minoan civilization. We will describe the most important stories regarding mythology connected with Crete, but we won't go into much details since it is out of the scope of this work.

1.1 Family tree of Greek gods

The family tree of Greek gods and goddesses, including primordial deities, which were the first gods and goddesses, gave birth to the Titans. The Titans gave birth to the Olympians are in very simplified version depicted in Figure 1. Simplified means that there were much more gods presented.

To be more precise, at the beginning there was only Chaos (the Void). Then there were Gaea (the Earth), Tartarus (the Abyss or the Underworld), Eros (love, desire and sexual attraction), Nyx (night) and Erebus (darkness). The primordial deities Uranus (sky) and Gaea gave birth to the Titans. The Titans Cronus and Rhea give birth to Zeus, who will be the beginning of our work.

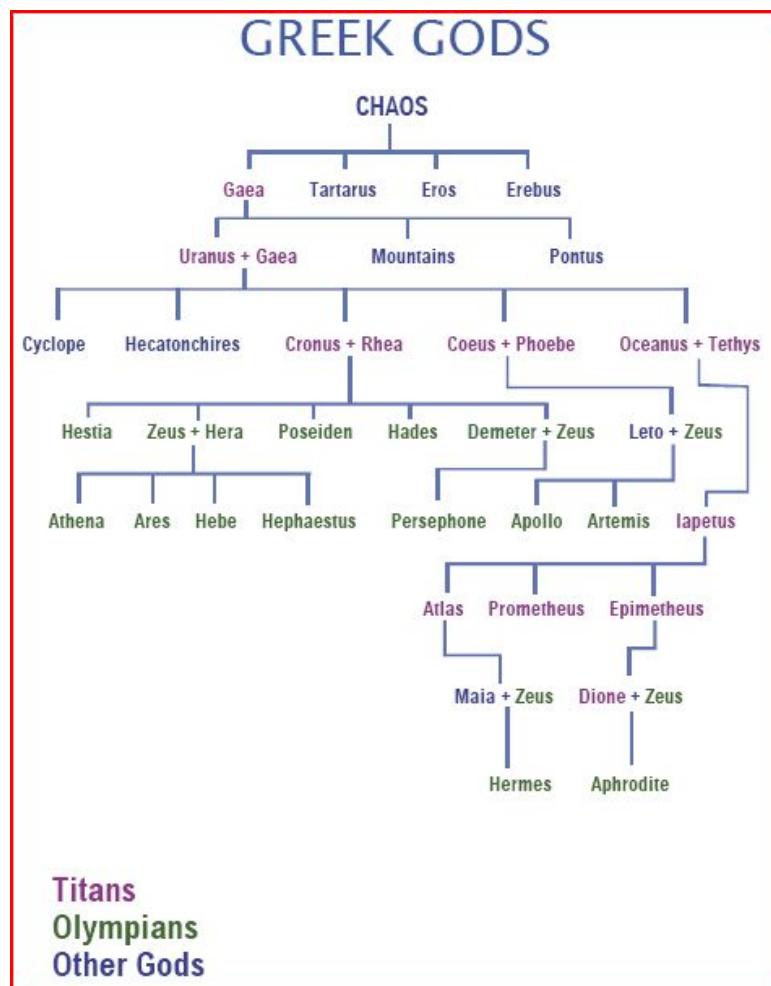


Figure 1: Family tree of Greek gods and goddesses starting with Chaos.

This work is structured as follows. In Section 2 we will talk shortly about the birth of Zeus and his further life. Section 3 will be about the guardian of Crete named Talos and Section 4 will provide information about Minos and Minotaur along with a short mention of Theseus. The last story, in Section 5, will be about Daedalus who build the famous Labyrinth and his son Icarus.

2 Zeus

Zeus was one of Olympians, he became the king of the gods and he was born from Titans.



Figure 2: Zeus, at the Getty Villa, from [8].

2.1 The birth of Zeus

This story begins with Kronos (son of Uranus and Gaia) who married his sister Rhea. They brought many children into the world. But Kronos, scared by a prophecy that he would lose his throne to a child of his, swallowed all the newborns, as an attempt to avoid the fate. However, when Rhea gave birth to her last child, Zeus, she managed to trick Kronos with the help of the Titans Uranus and Gaea. She gave her husband a rock in swaddling clothes to swallow, as a substitution to her child, and sent Zeus away to the island of Crete. Special daemons named "Curetes" made noise by hitting their shields, so that Kronos would not hear the cries of the baby. A legend also told that Rhea birthed Zeus in a cave in the mountains and according to the myths, it had been in The Diktaean Cave at Mount Dikti.

Zeus was raised by a goat, Amalthea, that nourished Zeus with her milk until he was grown up. One day, as young Zeus played with Amalthea, he accidentally broke off her horn. To make up for it and as a sign of gratitude, Zeus blessed the broken horn, so that its owner would find everything they desired in it. It became known as the Horn of Amalthea or the Cornucopia, an eternal symbol of abundance. When Amalthea died, Zeus used her hide to create his thunder-shield (the Aegis).

2.2 Zeus, the king of the gods

Soon came the day where Zeus was mature enough to claim the Kingdom of the World and he started a battle against his father and the Titans. This battle is also known as "Titanomachy". Firstly, Zeus managed to liberate his elder brothers and sisters from his father's stomach by giving him a special herb and making him disgorge. Then, with the help of his siblings, Zeus overthrew the Titans in the depths of the Underworld, the Tartarus. After overthrowing his father Kronos, Zeus was confronted with the Giants and also the monster Typhon, which he both defeated successfully. And then the time had come for the Kingdom of the World to be in the hands of Zeus and his siblings.

Justly, Zeus drew lots with his brothers Poseidon and Hades to let luck determine who would become the new king of the gods. Zeus won the draw and he officially became the ruler of the Earth and the Sky and the Lord of Mount Olympus, the highest mountain of Greece [4].

3 Talos

Talos was a giant bronze man in Greek mythology, who protected Minoan Crete from invaders. Talos was not born but made, either by Zeus himself or, according to other versions of the myth, on Zeus's orders, by the ingenious Daedalus or Hephaestus, god of fire and iron. Talos's task was to defend Crete from invaders and he was circling the island three times each day. He did not allow any enemy ships to approach, hurling massive rocks to sink the wooden ships of those who dared to threaten Crete. He didn't protect Crete only from enemies, but also from any kind of injustice. He went round all the villages of the island three times a year, carrying on his back bronze tablets inscribed with the divine laws

Talos managed to defeat the enemies of Crete for many years, until his time finally came. Of course a bronze "robot" could not be killed by arrows or other weapons, as it was invulnerable, nor could it succumb to old age. Talos was killed by trickery.

The legendary ship Argo, bearing Jason, Medea and the Argonauts, had a long journey past the Hellespont. On reaching the south coast of Crete, the Argonauts wanted to beach the ship, rest and obtain supplies. The ship was in danger of sinking when Medea took over. She went to the side of the ship and began to talk to Talos. She was using spells and promising him eternal life. She deceived Talos and persuaded him to remove the bronze peg from his ankle. All his "blood" ran out onto the ground and he fell lifeless. However, there is another version, in which Medea looked deeply into his eyes and used her magic to drive him mad. As he ran up and down in a frenzy, he struck his vulnerable point, the bronze peg snapped and he fell dead.

3.1 Symbolism

The bronze hero Talos symbolises a great technological development in the field of metalworking in prehistoric and Minoan times. The Minoans were so advanced that they imagined a bronze superhero to protect them. Additionally, it shows how important justice was in ancient Crete. It was no coincidence that the laws were considered divine; Minos received them from his father, Zeus, and so they had to be obeyed.



Figure 3: On a coin found in the Minoan palace of Phaistos, Talos is depicted as young, naked and winged. The wings may explain his great speed, as he could travel round the whole of Crete three times a day [3].

4 Minos and Minotaur

Minos was a great mythical king in the island of Crete, the son of Zeus and Europa. He was famous for creating a successful code of laws; in fact, it was so grand that after his death, Minos became one of the three judges of the dead in the underworld [2]. During his rule, Crete became a naval superpower and had an excellent educational system. The story in this section continues with the beast Minotaur, son of Minos's wife. It also includes Daedalus and Icarus as these stories are connected to each other. For more information related to Daedalus and Icarus, please read Section 5.

4.1 Minos, the king of Crete

According to legend, Minos was a mighty king and a great warrior, rumoured to be a son of the Greek god Zeus and the mortal woman Europa, the princess, the daughter of the king of Phoenicia and personification of the continent of Europe. He had a wife, Pasiphae and three children: Androgeus, Ariadne and Phaedra. His splendid labyrinthine palace at Knossos was built for him by the great genius Daedalus. He was a strong character, but he was also very harsh, and not well liked. As the ruler of one of the most powerful nations of the ancient world, he was greatly feared and respected by all the neighbouring kingdoms [5].

One day a magnificent white bull appeared in his kingdom. The god Poseidon demanded that the bull be sacrificed to him, but Minos thought it was such a fine creature that he decided to keep it for himself and sacrifice another animal in its place. The gods were angry, and decided to punish Minos by making his wife Pasiphae fall in love with the bull. Poseidon ordered the love god Eros, to strike Pasiphae with a love for the white bull. Mad with desire, she sought the help of Daedalus, who created a mechanical cow in which she could hide and approach the bull. The bull was duly deceived and as a result of her union with the animal, she gave birth to a monstrous creature with the head of a bull and the body of a man, the Minotaur. Regarding the white bull, he was later captured as one of the seven labours of Hercules and taken to Greece.

Minos was horrified, and in fury he imprisoned Daedalus in a tower (some versions say that in Labyrinth). However, keeping the brilliant genius captive proved impossible. Using wax, wood and feathers, Daedalus created two pairs of wings - one for himself and one for his son, Icarus. They used these wings to escape the tower and fly away over the sea, as it is detailed in Section 5.

4.2 Minotaur and Theseus

In the meantime the Minotaur had grown into a fearsome flesh-eating monster, and Minos wisely had it imprisoned in the maze beneath his palace. Minos's son, Androgeos, went to Athens to compete in a competition there. A fine athlete, he captured first place in all the events – arousing the jealousy of king Aegeus of Athens. He ordered his men to ambush Androgeos on the road to Megara – where he was slain. Once Minos heard of his son's death, he attacked Athens and imposed harsh terms of surrender: every year 7 young men and 7 young women were chosen by the Athenians and sent to Crete. There they were thrown into the Labyrinth – a huge structure with spiraling and interconnecting paths built by Daedalus under the Palace itself.

The son of king Aegeus of Athens, prince Theseus, was so appalled that he volunteered to go as one of the fourteen and try to slay the monster himself. He believed, that he would find a way to free the Athenians from their humiliating punishment. Of course, king Aegeus was very afraid for his son. Before the black-sailed ship carrying the youths left for Crete, he told the sailors that when they returned, they were to hoist white sails if Theseus had survived, and to keep them black if he had been killed.

When Theseus arrived in Crete, Minos's daughter Ariadne saw him among the victims and fell in love with him. She said she would help him defeat the Minotaur if he would promise to take her home and marry her. He agreed, and she gave him a magical ball of twine to guide him through the maze where the Minotaur lurked. With the help of the twine, which unwound before him to show him the way, he soon found the beast, and after a long and fierce battle he finally killed it. Following the path marked by the magic twine, he led the other young Athenians out of the maze, to safety.

They escaped the island by boat, taking Ariadne with them. However, on their way back to Athens they stopped off at the island of Naxos, where the ungrateful Theseus abandoned her. Realising she had been deceived, the young woman cried to the gods for vengeance. She was heard by the god Dionysus, who instantly fell in love with her and made her his wife. With the help of her husband, Ariadne got her revenge on Theseus by making him forget to change the sails from black to white as he returned home. King Aegeus saw the black-sailed ship and was consumed by grief, thinking his son was dead. In his despair he threw himself into the sea and drowned. Today, the stretch of water where he killed himself is still known as the Aegean Sea.

Theseus' troubles did not end there. After the death of his first wife, Hippolyte, he married Phaedra, the second daughter of king Minos. Phaedra was very jealous of the love he bore his son by Hippolyte, Hippolytus. She accused Hippolytus of attacking her, and Theseus was so angry that he asked Poseidon to punish the young man. One day when Hippolytus was driving his chariot along the beach, Poseidon sent a great wave which terrified the horses into bolting. The chariot crashed and Hippolytus was killed. When Theseus then discovered that Phaedra had lied to him, he was furious. The terrified woman hanged herself to escape his wrath.

This story revolves around a toll imposed as a punishment by Minos on Athens, by which annually 14 young men and women became prey to the Minotaur: it recollects and reflects both the Minoan 'sport' of bull-leaping and the influence Knossos wielded in southern Greece. It is perhaps the most famous of all the myths associated with ancient Crete.



Figure 4: Theseus and Minotaur, Tuileries Garden in Paris, by French sculptor Étienne-Jules Ramey.

4.3 Possible origins of the myth of Minotaur

The Minotaur may have also found roots in the ancient Egyptian culture where they represented their god using an image similar to that of the mystical creature called. In the Egyptian religion, it was called Apis, a sacred bull that was regarded as the incarnation of their god Osiris or of Ptah. This sacred bull was sometimes represented as half man, half bull. Hence, there might be a connection between Apis and the Minotaur considering that the Greek territory under Alexander the great once covered Egypt.

The myth may have also originated from Minoan culture in the island of Crete. In the archeological discoveries by the British archeologist Sir Arthur Evans, there were paintings of bull-leaping on the walls of the palace at Knossos. Bull-leaping was a major sport in the Minoan culture. This may have given birth to the later Greek myth of the Minotaur.

By criteria of elimination, it is a known scientific fact that bulls cannot breed with human beings. Maybe, the story of half a man, half a bull is just a metaphor for a certain person with incredible strength. The sharp horns may suggest his arrogance, stubbornness or rudeness. Therefore, the myth of the Minotaur may be in reference to a certain prince who was very strong, mean and unreasonable. Since bull-jumping was a major activity in the time, it is possible that such a prince was a major participant in this activity. It is also a well-known fact that the Ancient Greeks enjoyed gladiator contests that would often end in death. Therefore, it is possible that the human sacrifices suggested in the story where gladiators offered to fight in the palace arena to fight till death. If the gladiator surrendered, it was a dishonorable act and was considered a coward. Such a prince may have developed the habit of killing such gladiators.

Therefore, it is possible that the story is true, only that it was metaphorical and it is being incorrectly taken literally. It is no secret that the ancient Greek culture produced some of the most brilliant scholars and philosophers. Therefore, the story may have some deep philosophies surrounding it that need clever deciphering.

5 Daedalus and Icarus

Daedalus was a highly respected Athenian descendent from the royal family of Cecrops, the mythical first king of Athens. He was known for his skill as an architect, sculpture and inventor as he produced many famous works.

5.1 The Labyrinth

Daedalus is well-known architect and inventor of Greece from ancient times. Despite his self-confidence, Daedalus once committed a crime of envy against Talus, his nephew and apprentice. Talus, who seemed destined to become as great an artisan as his uncle Daedalus, was inspired one day to invent the saw after having seen the way a snake used its jaws. Daedalus, momentarily stricken with jealousy, threw Talus off of the Acropolis. For this crime, Daedalus was exiled to Crete and placed in the service of king Minos, where he eventually had a son, Icarus, with the beautiful Naucrate, a mistress-slave of Minos.

Minos gave an order to Daedalus to build the famous Labyrinth in order to imprison Minotaur (see Section 4). If the Labyrinth symbolizes the Palace of Knossos and all its architectural complexity, then its creator, Daedalus, stands for the amazing technical work which the Minoans achieved. However, as the story continues, Daedalus revealed the mystery of the Labyrinth to Ariadne, Minos's daughter and when Minos found it out, he was so enraged that he imprisoned Daedalus and his son Icarus in the Labyrinth.



Figure 5: The Minonian ruins of the Knossos Palace in Crete near city Heraklion may have been the historical inspiration for the legend of the well-known Labyrinth built by Daedalus.

5.2 The escape of Daedalus and Icarus

Daedalus was able to escape from the Labyrinth with Icarus from Crete by constructing wings and then flying to safety. He built the wings from feathers and wax, and before the two set off he warned Icarus not to fly too low lest his wings touch the waves and get wet, and not too high because the sun can destroy the wings. But the young, reckless Icarus, overwhelmed by the thrill of flying, did not listen to his father's warning, and flew too close to the sun whereupon the wax in his wings melted and he fell into the sea. Daedalus escaped to Sicily and Icarus' body was carried ashore by the current to the island, later named Icaria in Aegean sea. Icarus' lifeless body was recognised by Hercules, who delivered it later to Daedalus. Regarding Daedalus himself, he flew on, and even though he was overwhelmed by grief, he arrived in Sicily where he lived out his days [6] and [1]. There is also a different version of the myth, in which Daedalus and Icarus escaped from Crete by sailing ship. This sailing ship was supposed to be another invention of Daedalus and it would symbolize the flying because it has a great speed.

Some versions of the story tells, that the king Minos imprisoned them in a tower and not Labyrinth. However, the didactic character of the myth of Icarus is in either way very obvious - the recklessness and thoughtlessness of young men who ignore the advice and experience of their parents, and their elders and betters in general, may have catastrophic effects on their lives.



Figure 6: Flying Daedalus and Icarus, painting did by Saeed Jones.

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