



ANCIENT GREECE: MYTH AND ARCHAEOLOGY

THESEUS AND THE MINOTAUR

Teachers' notes

The Year 5 and Year 6 classes had already covered a number of Ancient Greek topics earlier in the term. For the next four lessons we turned to buildings, but also incorporated myths and legends, thus introducing cross-curricular themes. The story of Theseus and the Minotaur also formed an excellent starting point for an investigation of the Knossos palace.

These lessons were planned around interpretations of history, with a focus on the archaeologist Sir Arthur Evans' interpretation of the palace he uncovered at Knossos in Crete. We chose to concentrate on Knossos because the varying interpretations of this building would provide a good basis for developing the children's skills of interpretation. Ofsted has highlighted interpretations as a weakness in the teaching of history at KS2. The children could adopt the role of archaeologists and so discover something about their working methods and the ways in which they interpret the past.

How this approach has been adapted

Read Jacqui Dean's account of the Theseus session taught on the Returning to Primary Teaching course. Jacqui modelled the teaching approaches, with the course members cast as pupils. Returner Judith Grazier used the ideas and approaches from the session when she taught Ancient Greece to a Year 6 class in her practice school.

Class/Year group And Time

Year 5/6, mixed gender and ability. Four lessons of one hour 15 minutes each, one lesson per week.

Learning objectives

For the children to:

- consider the evidence in myths and how to interpret it
- understand the nature of old palace buildings
- relate this understanding to a possible interpretation of the myth of Theseus and the Minotaur, and the plan of the building uncovered at Knossos
- make sense of the plan of the palace at Knossos
- bring the palace to life, and understand something of the culture and beliefs of the people who lived there.

Key questions

Did Evans the archaeologist get it right?

Was Knossos really a palace?

What can the finds at Knossos tell us about life there, and their relation to the myth of Theseus and the Minotaur?

Resources

Atlases

Large sheets of paper, one per pupil

Story of Theseus and the Minotaur. You will find many versions of this tale in children's books, as well as on the internet. Most of the latter are inadequate, but a reasonable one is at:

www.greekfoodanddrink.com/culture/mythology/LegendsMinotaur.htm

For detailed background information about the Minotaur, try:

www.en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Minotaur

Arthur Evans' plan of the palace at Knossos. You can find it on:

www.mlahanas.de/Greeks/Cities/PlanOfThePalaceOfKnossos.html

Topic books. The two I found most useful were:

James Mason, 1991, *Ancient Greece Resource Book* (Longman)

R Burrell and P Connolly, 1989, *The Greeks* (OUP)

Pictures of finds from Knossos and other Minoan palaces in Crete, each mounted on a separate sheet of paper – one set per group of children.

I used pictures from Rodney Castleden's 1990 book: *The Knossos Labyrinth: A New View of the Palace of Minos at Knossos* (Routledge).

You can access similar pictures, in colour, from several internet sites. The most useful are:

Picture of a Minoan funeral procession: www.dilos.com/region/crete/sarcofag.html

A range of frescoes can be found on Google images by typing: *Knossos Minoan frescoes*. They include the throne room, acrobats bull-leaping, fashionable women sitting chatting, a Minoan prince.

For pictures of pottery, type: *Knossos pottery* into Google images.

For pictures of key symbols (double axe and bulls) see

<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Image:Labrys.jpg>

http://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/Image:Knossos_bull.jpg

For pictures of bull's head, and figurine of snake goddess:

http://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/Image:Bull's_head_vase.JPG

http://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/Image:Snake_Goddess_Crete_1600BC.jpg

To see an aerial photograph of the Knossos site, type: Knossos aerial view into Google images)

There are many sites with good information and pictures. A sound one is:

www.ancient-greece.org/archaeology/knossos.html

The teaching [Lesson 1]

During the first lesson we introduced the idea of archaeology, discussed myths, told the story of Theseus and the Minotaur, and thought about which elements of the myth might be true.

Episode 1

Focus: *Asking questions and pooling ideas.*

I began by asking the class how we know about people who lived as long ago as the Ancient Greeks. Quickly the children came up with the word ‘archaeologist’ and I pooled their various ideas about the meaning of this term on the board.

Episode 2

Focus: *Introducing Arthur Evans and the myth of Theseus and the Minotaur.*

Next I introduced the name of a famous archaeologist, Arthur Evans, and said that when he was a schoolboy he heard his teacher tell the story of Theseus and the Minotaur. I was going to tell the children this story, which we call a myth.

Before telling the story, I asked the class to explain what they thought a myth was. We discussed their ideas about a myth containing some elements that were probably true and others that were not.

I then told the story of Theseus, his voyage to Crete, his killing of the Minotaur, and return to Athens.

Episode 3

Focus: *Using the story as possible evidence – analysing its elements.*

After I finished the story we began thinking about its content. The children jotted down, with reasons, aspects that they considered:

Definitely true • May have been true • Definitely not true

Episode 4

Focus: *Discussion and reasoning about interpretations.*

We discussed as a class what the children thought about the story. Some very interesting ideas emerged on what may have been true, or not true, with marked differences of opinion and varying interpretations of the Minotaur. In offering reasons many children drew upon their own ideas of what seemed reasonable, for example the view that normal parents simply would not let their children be sent off to be eaten by the Minotaur.

Here are some examples of the pupils’ reasoning, based on their interpretation of the story:

NOT TRUE that the Minotaur existed, because:

impossible for it to exist

don't believe in that creature

feeding it would be difficult

could not live in those conditions

people would not send children to be taken by the Minotaur

parents would protect their children.

MAY BE TRUE that the Minotaur existed, because:
a man-eating bull as a description could have existed
could have been a badly deformed bull.

DEFINITELY TRUE that Aegeus threw himself into the sea because:
the Aegean Sea was named after him and the Aegean Sea exists (checked by
pupils on a map).

The teaching [Lesson 2]

We now moved on to the topic of Ancient Greek buildings, with a study of the Minoan palace at Knossos in Crete. Palaces are amazingly complex structures that reflect their social, political, legal and economic functions. How can we help children to make sense of them? The lesson began by giving pupils the task of creating a palace. We were in effect encouraging the children to imagine an old, large palace building in terms of spaces and their size, layout and function. We also thought back to the Theseus story and recalled the labyrinth – for if the Knossos palace were indeed the location for the Theseus story, we might expect to find evidence of the labyrinth.

Episode 1

Focus: *Storytelling – Arthur Evans and Knossos.*

I began by recalling to the children the name of Arthur Evans, whom I had introduced briefly in Lesson 1. I told the children the story of how Evans became interested in archaeology, and how this interest led to his dig at Knossos in 1900. I had researched the information, then turned it into a story, with the key building blocks as follows:

Evans' family and home life as a child.

His interest in small objects.

His early travels to the Balkans and Turkey.

His job as special correspondent to the *Manchester Guardian*.

Reconstruction of Evans' meeting with Heinrich Schliemann.

Evans' finding of three- and four-sided stones in antique dealers' trays in Athens.

His meeting with Minos Kalokairinos.

His problems gaining access to the excavation site.

Start of the excavation in 1900.

The discovery of the Throne Room.

As the teacher, I had to convert these dry basic facts into the colour and excitement of what was a truly fascinating story.

I deliberately finished my story at the point where Evans unearthed what he considered to be the Throne Room of the palace of King Minos. He was starting to interpret the site as a palace.

Episode 2

Focus: *Posing key questions; discussing ideas.*

I now asked the children the questions:

- *If you were an archaeologist, and thought that you had found the remains of a palace, what type of spaces would you be looking for?*
- *What would the rooms, courtyards and area around the palace be used for?*

On the board I built up the children's ideas of the kinds of rooms and spaces they associated with a palace building.

After a considerable time spent discussing ideas, I gave each pupil a large sheet of paper and asked the class to draw a plan of a palace-type building. It should show the kind of rooms and spaces Arthur Evans might hope to excavate if his interpretation of a possible palace was accurate.

Episode 3

Focus: *Drawing individual plans of palaces.*

The children now worked until the end of the lesson on their plans, discussing and exchanging ideas.

When the bell rang, I took away the children's work. In looking through the plans I was especially interested in two aspects:

Arranging spaces: Were the pupils simply arranging rooms in random order, or was there any attempt to group them according to some sort of logic?

Logical thinking: Were any attempts made to introduce a logic to the entire building? For example, was the palace built around a focal point?

When I examined the children's work, I found that their plans did show a sense of logic in the arrangement of the rooms; for example, store room, kitchens and dining area related, a waiting room next to a small throne room; king's and queen's bedrooms and dressing rooms were grouped together; as were the money, treasury and counting rooms.

In terms of the second point, several designs demonstrated logical thinking: for example, making a throne room the focal point of the palace; having a series of wedge-shaped rooms – all pointing towards the labyrinth; having a long hall running the entire length of the palace and ending at the throne room.

The teaching [Lesson 3]

The focus of this lesson was to get the class to make sense of Arthur Evans' ground plan of the palace at Knossos.

Episode 1

Focus: *Comparing plans.*

We began by getting the children to compare and contrast their palace plans with each other. How were the plans similar? How were they different? This gave the class an opportunity to remember the previous week's work, as well as preparing them to look at Evans' plan of Knossos.

Episode 2

Focus: *Interpreting the Knossos plan.*

I gave each pupil an enlarged plan which showed spaces and numbers, but no key to explain the meaning of the numbers. I explained that this was a plan of the ground floor only, as the upper floors had collapsed. For some time we discussed the following points:

- the relative sizes of spaces shown – what type of building might have these?
- the black dots (representing pillars)
- speculation as to where the main entrance might be
- how the small spaces might have been used
- whether or not it was a palace.

Episode 3

Focus: *Whole class discussion.*

Considerable time was devoted to a whole-class discussion, in which we explored the children's ideas about the possible function of this unusual building plan, if it were not a palace as Evans thought it was. This was not as neat and tidy as planned, since I wanted to follow up and develop initiatives offered by the children.

Below are the children's ideas and reasons for thinking that the Knossos building may or may not be a palace.

It could have been a smaller palace – for a lesser person than a king.

It's a large building and it must have been a palace.

It could have been a massive office such as a tax office.

Maybe it was some type of museum – a place for collections.

I'm not certain it's a palace ... not sure what it is.

It could be a house of a rich man because it's not big enough to be a palace.

It could have been a prison ... the labyrinth may have really been a prison.

It's a house, the lower floor for servants (shown in Evans' plan), the upper floor for family.

It could be a very big temple.

It may have been a burial chamber, because small rooms are chambers where people are buried.

The entire building could have been the labyrinth. (Clever child!)

Episode 4

Focus: *Labelling and keying the plan.*

In the second half of the lesson the class, working in groups, colour-coded the plan and wrote down what they thought the numbered spaces might have been used for – if the building was indeed a palace.

We had a fairly long lead-in discussion before the colour-coding; this was necessary to help the children to understand this complex plan. We continually made references back to their own palace plans, for ideas about the rooms that would be in the palace.

Some good ideas came from the groups. Good use was made of stairway areas leading up to the missing first floor where some children assumed the more palatial parts of the palace may have been – a theory shared by Evans. There was also a major emphasis by some pupils on toilets and bathrooms, as indeed there had been on their own palace plans!

The teaching [Lesson 4]

In this lesson we tried to bring the palace plan to life, using a range of sources. Here the children took on the role of investigative historians, using questions about a variety of visual sources to push on with their enquiry.

Episode 1

Focus: *Recapping; introducing the next stage of the investigation.*

We began by revisiting the children's ideas from the last lesson, about what type of building Evans had discovered. I told the class I had some pictures of objects and frescoes that Arthur Evans had discovered on the Knossos site. I suggested that these objects might provide clues about the purpose of the building.

Episode 2

Focus: *Using visual sources – pictures as clues.*

I posed the key, overarching question: *What do these picture clues tell you about the possible purpose and function of the building at Knossos?*

The class worked in small groups of three or four children. I gave each group a set of seven pictures of finds from Knossos. Beneath each picture I had written a specific question; for example, *What do these suggest to you? What are the people in this picture doing?* I asked the groups to jot down their ideas about each picture.

As the children worked I moved round amongst the groups, acting as their audience and clarifying the task where necessary.

Episode 3

Focus: *Discussion – the children’s interpretation of the pictures.*

We ended the lesson with a wide-ranging discussion about what the pictures represented, and the possible meaning of symbols such as the bull horns found all over the site.

The important teaching point here is to keep all options open, rather than allowing the children quickly to close down the range of different ideas about the purpose of the building. The teacher’s role is to produce questions to challenge an easy consensus.

The teaching [Lesson 5]

For the next, final, lesson, we visited a Roman palace (at Fishbourne), so the children could use it for comparison with the palace at Knossos.

Learning outcomes

The children:

- considered the evidence in myths and how to interpret it
- began to understand the nature of old palace buildings
- developed their skills of historical enquiry through examining the Knossos palace and the objects, frescoes and symbols found there
- extended their speaking and listening skills through discussing old palaces, the Knossos palace and the culture and beliefs of the people who lived there.

Nuffield Primary History project

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