



## ANCIENT GREECE: MYTH AND ARCHAEOLOGY

### THESEUS AND THE MINOTAUR

#### **Returning to primary teaching: course notes for teachers**

*Jacqui Dean reports*

The session described here formed part of the history element of a 'Returning to Primary Teaching' course. In this course I modelled the Nuffield Primary History approaches used in primary classrooms – an adaptation and extension of Ray Verrier's approach described in the classroom teachers' notes supplied.

The session focused on the relationship between myth and archaeological evidence. History is primarily driven by questioning, speculating and reasoning, then developing possible explanations. Archaeology, with its fragmented remains, provides a perfect domain for speculation and interpretation. With this in mind, I made the main thrust of the session the questioning of archaeological finds at Knossos in Crete. Could they provide explanations for elements of the story of Theseus and the Minotaur?

There were 22 returning teachers (2 men, 20 women) in the group. The Theseus session lasted for approximately one hour.

#### **Key questions for the teachers**

- What kind of society lived in the palace at Knossos?
- Do the archaeological finds throw any light on the legend of Theseus and the Minotaur?

#### **Resources**

We used the same resources as the 'Theseus and the Minotaur' teachers' notes supplied, but added extra pictures of frescoes to make a set of 10 pictures in all.

#### **Working with the teachers**

We began with a story, that of Theseus and the Minotaur. Storytelling is one of the most powerful ways to start a topic, engaging the imagination and creating a past world to enter. See the Nuffield Primary History website

<http://www.primaryhistory.org/teachingmethods/story-telling,183,SAR.html>.

Afterwards, I asked the Returners, in pairs, to categorise the elements of the story into three columns headed: TRUE, MIGHT BE TRUE, FALSE. We talked about the usefulness of this approach with children – it gives them a framework for discussion, reflection and analysis.

We moved on to investigate the floor plan of the palace at Knossos, excavated a century ago by Sir Arthur Evans. I gave the group the plan without the key, and asked them to try to assign rooms and functions to the spaces on the plan. I also asked them to look carefully at how one might enter the palace complex and move around inside it – where were the doorways, passageways and stairs? I told them that there were upper floors, but no rooms underground.

All found the plan odd in that there was no obvious grand entrance. Several people remarked that the whole palace looked rather like a labyrinth. Next I put up on the Smartboard an aerial view of the site as it is today, to give the group a sense of the scale and spread of the palace complex.

The group then examined a set of 10 pictures from Ancient Crete, labelled A to J.

I asked the teachers to look briefly at all the images, to gain an overview, but gave each pair just one picture to concentrate their observations on.

As they discussed the pictures, I asked them to keep two key questions in mind:

**Q** What do the pictures tell us about Cretan society?

**Q** Do the clues throw any light on the story of Theseus and the Minotaur?

After 10–15 minutes, each pair volunteered words that described the society, justified by reference to the pictures (e.g. wealthy, sophisticated, religious, artistic, they had a thing about bulls, also axes with two heads). We discussed each contribution, and recorded their insights on the flipchart.

We now turned to the second key question. At this point, I revealed a few more clues:

- The Ancient Greek word *labrys* means double-headed axe; and labyrinth means house of the double-headed axe.
- Poseidon, god of the sea, was also the god of horses and earthquakes. (The palace was destroyed by an earthquake, probably in the 15th century BC.)

There are two myths which link Crete, Poseidon and bulls:

- King Minos' mother, Europa, was seduced by Poseidon disguised in the shape of a bull. Minos' immortal father was therefore Poseidon.
- Poseidon sent a white bull to Crete; King Minos' wife Parsiphae was infatuated with the bull. She made love to it and gave birth to the Minotaur.

Ideas tumbled from the group as they made connections between the various clues.

- Perhaps the Minotaur was the king, or a priest, in a bull mask.
- Yes, they definitely worshipped bulls.
- The labyrinth was the whole palace, because it was decorated with double-headed axes, and that's what the word means.
- In Athens, they might have thought that their children were fed to the Minotaur in Crete, and rumours can twist events and turn into scare stories.

To close the session, we discussed the oral tradition, how stories are formed and change over time, and how the session could be used in school to investigate myths and legends in literacy.

### Follow-up session in school

Judith Grazier, one of the Returners, was able to teach this subject to a Year 6 class in her practice school. She reported that the class had eagerly taken up the challenge posed by the two key questions, and had finally gone out at dinnertime buzzing with excitement and speculation. One boy refused to leave the classroom. He was so excited he wouldn't leave it alone, exclaiming as he discovered new facts: 'I just don't believe it! This is amazing!'

The teachers had spent an exciting session interpreting visual (archaeological) sources, making connections and constructing hypotheses about the possible reality behind the myth of Theseus and the Minotaur. In so doing, they not only learnt a lot about Minoan society, but also went away with a genuine sense of having constructed a plausible historical explanation from the clues in myths and archaeological evidence, and the relationship between them.

#### **Nuffield Primary History project**

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