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Blair Drawson , Sheldon Oberman

Island of the Minotaur. Greek Myths of Ancient Crete

United Kingdom and Canada (2003)

TAGS: Afterlife Apollo Architecture Argo Argonauts Ariadne Athens Atlantis Centaur(s) Cerberus Crete Cronus / Kronos Cyclops / Cyclopes Daedalus Dionysus / Dionysos Europa Fate Gods Golden Fleece Greek Art Greek History Heracles Hercules Jason Katabasis Labyrinth Maze Medea Metamorphoses (Ovid's) Metis Minos Minotaur Pan Pasiphae Poseidon Theseus Twelve Labours of Heracles Underworld Zeus



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General information	
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Creators



Blair Drawson , b. 1943
(Illustrator)

Blair Drawson is a Toronto-based author and illustrator specialising in books for children. Prior to working in illustration, he was an editorial illustrator, creating images for magazines. He teaches graphic narrative at the Ontario College of Art and Design, and at Sheridan College. Drawson's other classically-themed illustration publications include *Arachne Speaks* (author Kate Hovey, McElderry Books, 2000).

Source:

Official website (accessed: June 15, 2020)

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Sheldon Oberman , 1949 - 2004
(Author)

Sheldon Oberman (1949–2004) is a Canadian author and teacher. He studied literature at the University of Winnipeg and at the University of Jerusalem, and he spent a season studying at the Banff School of Fine Arts where he was mentored by the Canadian author W.O. Mitchell. Oberman worked as an English and Drama teacher for over thirty years before focusing on writing. He published twelve books, including *The Always Prayer Shawl* and *The Shaman's Nephew*.

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Additional information

Summary

This is an interesting take on the myth of the Minotaur which places it within a wide context by telling a selection of myths that build up to the Minotaur's demise. This creates a multi-generational story which arcs from the days of Cronos until Phaedra's departure from Crete as the last queen of Knossos. The myths of Medea and Ariadne are told in contrast to each other. The work begins and ends with historicising interpretations of the myths, relating the myths' connections to Minoan culture and going further to assert that Plato's Atlantis was Minoan Thera. The book is lavishly illustrated with striking stylised images that emphasise over-sized eyes and noses in a semi-grotesque manner.

The book opens with an introduction which provides a summary of the myths and a historicising interpretation of many of them which discusses Minoan culture. Each chapter is called a "tale" (chapter one is "first tale").

The Curse of Cronos (p. 8) begins with Rhea talking to unborn Zeus and promising to protect him. She is depicted as playing a very proactive part in sheltering Zeus from Cronos' aggression. He is sheltered in a cave on Crete, where he is nursed by the Kind Ones and guarded by the Curetes. Rhea tricks Cronos into consuming a stone in place of the infant Zeus.

Zeus and the Olympians (p. 16). Zeus grows in the cave and comes to understand his divinity. Pan is his only friend. Rhea visits Metis and obtains a poison that Zeus administers to Cronos under Rhea's direction. The other Olympians awaken and fight their way out of Cronos' belly. Zeus frees the "Hundred-Handed Giants" and the Cyclopes, who bring talismans for some of the Olympians: thunderbolt for Zeus trident for Poseidon, and helmet of invisibility for Hades. There is a war amongst the gods which results in Cronos' displacement. The Olympians divided the realms. Hera choses earth, Poseidon seas, Zeus sky, Hades the Underworld, Demeter plants, and Hestia the home.

Europa's Wish (p. 22). Zeus determines that the humans of Crete should learn the art of sailing from the humans of Phoenicia. Poseidon suggests that he compel them to teach, but Zeus prefers a more subtle trick. He transforms himself into a bull and runs off with Europa,

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princess of Phoenicia, who had just been wishing for somewhere to live with no rules but her own. Zeus makes her queen of Crete and she teaches its people the ways of the sea.

The Bronze Giant (p. 28). Now wealthy, the Cretans had become a "gentle and peace-loving people." Pirates began threatening their island. Europa's son, Minos, beseeched Zeus for help with processions and prayers at the cave of his birth. Impressed, Zeus granted him three wishes and got in return a bronze giant, Talus, who could defend the island. Every nine years, the king thanked Zeus in the sacred cave.

The Will of Zeus (p. 34). After generations, the new King Minos showed disrespect to Zeus, who determined to address this disregard. Zeus sent a storm which brought Medea and the Argonauts to Crete. Medea used trickery to bring down Talus, leaving Crete undefended.

The Great White Bull (p. 40). Zeus sent a beautiful bull to Crete, which arrived from the sea. Poseidon demanded that Minos sacrifice the bull in his honour, but Minos did not. The bull escaped and entered the Queen's bedroom. In the Spring, a child was born to the Queen with the head of a bull.

The Puzzle of Daedalus (p. 46). Minos and Queen Pasiphae could not bear to rear the Minotaur, but could not force a child of royal blood to leave. Daedalus solved their predicament by building a maze that would trap the monster yet keep it apart from them.

The Deadly Quest of Androgeus (p. 50). Minos and Pasiphae's son, Prince Androgeus, announced that he would capture the escaped Bull from the Sea. Hercules had already captured it and taken it to mainland Greece. Androgeus followed. He attempted to capture the bull at Marathon, using a decoy cow built by Daedalus, but the Prince was killed, gored by the bull.

Theseus and the Minotaur (p. 56). Minos held the Athenians responsible for the death of Androgeus and determined on revenge. He compelled them to send him fourteen young people every nine years, and would send them into the labyrinth. Meanwhile, a stranger arrived in Athens – Theseus. Many of his exploits are listed. Medea, who by now lives with King Aegeus of Athens, attempts to kill him, but Aegeus recognises him as his long-lost son at the last minute. Theseus sails to Crete, determined to kill the Minotaur and free Athens of its

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burden. When Theseus arrives, Minos throws a ring into the sea and bids Theseus fetch it. Theseus completes this task, and returns with an additional item, a crown that he feels inclined to give to Princess Phaedra and simultaneously compelled to give to Princess Ariadne. That night, a god appears in Ariadne's dream, urging her to help Theseus. She frees him and his companions and shows them to the labyrinth. There she gives Theseus a ball of thread and a sword. Theseus returns some time later and recounts a tale of how he killed the monster. The group escape Crete and stop off on Naxos on the way back to Athens. A storm strands Ariadne. Women approach chanting the name of Dionysus. Finally the god appears and Ariadne recognises him as the god from her dream. He asks her if she wishes to be reunited with Theseus, and she tells him that she would rather stay with him. Together they held aloft the crown he had sent to her and it becomes the Corona Borealis constellation.

The Flight of Daedalus and Icarus (p. 72). A furious Minos determines that Daedalus must have helped Theseus. Daedalus overhears and escapes with his son. He constructs wings so that the two of them might fly from the island. Daedalus' son, Icarus, shouts boastfully that he is like a god and he tries to fly higher and higher in the hope that the gods will see him and recognise his divinity. Icarus drowns.

King Minos Seeks Revenge (p. 78). Daedalus appeals to the god, Hephaestus, for help. He sees a volcano erupting – a sign from the god, and heads to Sicily, where he is welcomed. Minos arrives on Sicily a short time later looking for Daedalus. He sets a task that Daedalus secretly solves, inadvertently revealing that he is on the island. But as Minos attacks to capture Daedalus, the king falls into a trap of Daedalus' invention and is killed.

The Giant Wave, The Cloud of Death (p. 84). Theseus has now become king of Athens following the death of his father. A terrible wave and cloud decimate the kingdom and Theseus wonders why Queen Phaedra would do this to him. He sends to Delphi for insight but does not understand the answer he receives. He sails to Crete. There he finds Phaedra, enthroned in an abandoned palace. Phaedra explains that an island "which you Athenians call Atlantis" has exploded. Theseus takes her with him as the palace begins to collapse. They agree that she will come to Athens with him and they will rule together.

Discovering a Lost World (p. 92). This final tale tells the story of how

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Sir Arthur Evans came to find and excavate Minoan sites on Crete.

The book concludes with a Glossary and a brief Afterword (p. 104) by Dr Robert Gold (retired Assoc. Prof. Classics, Winnipeg), who describes how myths reveal how the ancient Greeks liked to think about their past and how such stories can still be retold in new ways.

Analysis

The smooth way in which many myths are worked together in this volume disguises the complex and inconsistent nature of myth in antiquity while revealing the many connections between myths and demonstrating the long scope of mythic story-telling. Rather than a one-off heroic adventure, Theseus' encounter with the Minotaur becomes one episode in a rich multi-generational drama. Numerous ancient sources or modern books making use of ancient sources have been drawn on to inform the array of myths. At 22 cm by 28 cm, with its extensive use of illustration, one might easily guess wrongly that this book is intended for young children, but the content, font size and vocabulary demonstrate that older children would be a more appropriate audience. The illustrations, moreover, frequently have a sinister and somewhat grotesque quality that makes them less suited for young children and which adds a macabre and surreal atmosphere to the myths.

These myths of ancient Crete describe a world in which the gods play a very direct role. The gods are present in the story before the arrival of humans, and once humans have made an appearance, the gods remain interested in their lives, and intervene directly by, for instance, abducting Europa to bring sea-faring to Crete, appearing in dreams, and sending tidal waves. This introduces young readers to ancient ideas about the role of the gods' will in human lives – not always visible or understandable, yet ever-present. The depiction of human behaviour towards the gods is also well-informed. The accounts of humans attempting to please gods with processions, dance, and sacrifice are a good representation of ancient ritual practice, as are the accounts of humans behaving badly towards the gods; scorning a god's power (Minos) or claiming to be a god (Icarus) meets with swift punishment. The overarching moral of the myths together is that Crete was powerful when it respected the gods and fell when they let that respect fade.

The tale of Prince Androgeus is an unusual inclusion in modern

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retellings, and helps to tie the Cretan and Athenian elements of the myths together. The manner in which it is done diverges somewhat from ancient versions in a manner that creates a better impression of Athens. Traditionally King Aegeus plots against Prince Androgeus who is murdered by competitors at the games in Athens (Diodorus Siculus, 4.60.5–61.3) or dies when Aegeus sends him to face the bull, and an oracle no less recommends that the Athenians atone. Here the Athenians welcome the prince and beseech him not to throw his life away against the beast. When King Minos decides to take revenge against Athens this is therefore presented a pretext that he devises to disguise his own guilt. Thus the Athenians sent to the labyrinth are all innocent victims of King Minos' narcissism and Athens has no blood-guilt to atone for. This simplifies the moral of the narrative and paves the way for Athens' take-over. The omission of the tradition about Aegeus' suicide also softens the path towards Theseus' ascendency.

The contrast established between Medea and Ariadne as two extremes of female behaviour arguably extends sexist stereotypes about Medea that exist in many ancient traditions. Ariadne's passive obedience appears preferable to Medea's proactive intelligence. This is very much Ovid's Medea (*Metamorphoses* 7.1ff). While Medea is shown to be clever in out-smarting Talus, the illustrations of her doing so depict her as a wild old hag rather than the youthful beauty that she is more often thought of at this early stage in her story. When she is reintroduced at Athens the narrator describes her as having, "ruined the life of Jason, who had been foolish enough to trust her." (p. 58). She is depicted again in grotesque style fetching poison from Cerberus' slobber and, furious that Aegeus revokes the plan to kill Theseus, rides off in "a chariot pulled by dragons" (*Metamorphoses* 7.405–426). There is no intimation of her divine ancestry or of another perspective on her relationship with Jason. Ariadne's tale is more refreshing and draws on the Diodoran tradition in which Theseus did not betray her or deliberately abandon her (Diodorus Siculus, 4.61.4–5; with Plutarch, *Theseus* 20). Because the story focuses on Crete, Ariadne as princess of Crete does not simply disappear from the story as soon as Theseus has gone. Oberman anticipated the later stage of the myth by having Ariadne motivated by a dream (rather than desire, as Diodorus has it), and the dream is later explained when Dionysus appears to her on Naxos and explains that he has been drawn by her dreams and sent dreams to her in response (Diodorus Siculus, 4.61.5). The manner in which she reacted to the dreams is represented as part of the exploration of obedience or disobedience

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towards divine requests. Emphasis is placed on the Indian origin of Dionysus. He is depicted with brown skin tones, talks about travelling from India to find Ariadne, and there is no reference to him being a son of Zeus.

Rather unusually, the Minotaur plays a smaller part in the narrative than the Bull from the Sea, despite the book's title (Island of the Minotaur). It is depicted as deranged and red-eyed, ripping a guard limb-from-limb. Its human name is never given, but one of the few sympathetic features of the characterisation of Minos is his reluctance to do anything to hurt his "child". The Bull from the Sea (sometimes called the Bull of Crete or Marathonian Bull) is also depicted with red eyes and features in a surprisingly gruesome illustration bursting into the queen's chamber, where he looms over her as she falls back on her bed legs slightly spread. The text does no refer to it raping the queen, but even a young reader would recognise from the illustration that violence is involved. This avoids reference to deliberate bestiality (Bacchylides, *Fragment* 26; Pseudo-Apollodorus, *Bibliotheca* 3. 8–11; Diodorus Siculus, *Library of History* 4.13.4; 4.77.1; Ovid, *Metamorphoses* 8.130ff; 9.735ff; Virgil, *Aeneid* 6.24ff) and is a long way from the Minotaur being conceived owing to the constellation Taurus (for which see entry on Lupton's *Three Greek Myths* in this database).

The book-ending of the myths within historicising interpretations of their relation to Minoan history makes it hard for readers to avoid adopting this interpretation themselves or even to realise that this is only one way of thinking about them. This is reinforced by the Afterword by Robert Gold, as was clearly the intention, although what Gold says is significantly more nuanced than Oberman's account. The story of Theseus and Phaedra is subsumed within this framework, so where most ancient traditions have the marriage arranged by Phaedra's brother (e.g. Diodorus Siculus, 4.62.1), here Theseus literally picks her up and carries her out of the throne room of Knossos. She consents to the marriage, saying, "The glory of Crete has ended. The glory of Athens has begun".

Classical, Mythological, Traditional Motifs, Characters, and Concepts

Afterlife Apollo Architecture Argo Argonauts Ariadne Athens Atlantis Centaur(s) Cerberus Crete Cronus / Kronos Cyclops / Cyclopes Daedalus Dionysus / Dionysos Europa Fate Gods Golden Fleece Greek Art Greek History Heracles Hercules Jason Katabasis Labyrinth Maze

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	Medea Metamorphoses (Ovid's) Metis Minos Minotaur Pan Pasiphae Poseidon Theseus Twelve Labours of Heracles Underworld Zeus
Other Motifs, Figures, and Concepts Relevant for Children and Youth Culture	Adventure Adversity Animals Authority Character traits Conflict Death Desires Emotions Family Freedom Good vs evil History Journeys Judgement Love Magic powers Morality Murder Oppression Past Princes and princesses Rape Relationships Religious beliefs Revenge Romance Sacrifice Tale vs reality Values Violence
Further Reading	Calame, Claude, *Thésée et l'imaginaire Athenian,* Lausanne: Sciences humaines, Editions Payot Lausanne, 1990. Dowden, Kenneth, *The Uses of Greek Mythology*, London and New York: Routledge, 1992. Webster, T.B.L., "The Myth of Ariadne from Homer to Catullus", *Greece & Rome* 13.1 (1966): 22–31. Weinlich, Barbara, "The Metanarrative of Picture Books: 'Reading' Greek Myth for (and to) Children" in Lisa Maurice, ed., *The Reception of Ancient Greece and Rome in Children's Literature. Heroes and Eagles*, Brill: Leiden, 2015.

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