

## **The Witch Hiker's Guide (2008)**

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### **Befriending the Minotaur, by Thorn Steafel**

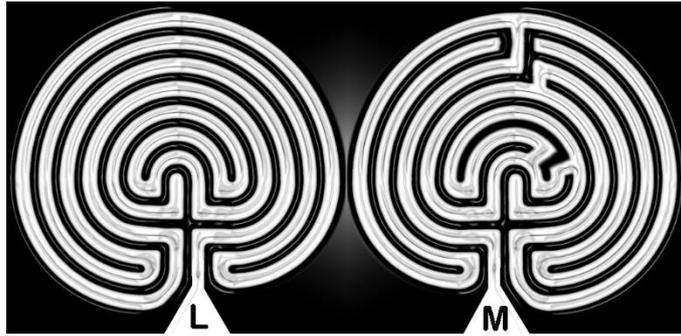
The best myths prevail because they sparkle with archetypal energy, holding timeless truths which speak to both listener and tale-teller. Similarly, the magical tools that survive are the ones that are flexible, and user-friendly; and demonstrate to an apprentice very quickly that they do actually work. And if that makes it sound like myth and magic are things outside of ourselves, with an intelligence and existence of their own, then - good! Now we can begin exploring the concept and visual pattern of the labyrinth, and its fragmented user guide, the Minotaur myth.

Cropping the myth down from its many authors' contradictory accounts into a single sentence, is really hard to do: but here is the ADHD version of the Minotaur myth.

Every few years a set of youths and maidens from Greece were demanded by Crete, and were put inside a huge maze-prison built by brilliant inventor Daedalus, in which lived the son of the King and Queen of Crete, Minos and Pasiphae, a half-animal half-human creature called the Minotaur.

Theseus, son of the king of Greece, snuck over as one of the youths. Ariadne fell in love with him, learned from Daedalus how to navigate the maze, gave Theseus a ball of thread which she held one end of, and entered the maze, killed the Minotaur, found his way out along the thread again, and escaped with Ariadne and the other Greeks.

Now, in modern labyrinthology, authors distinguish carefully between 'labyrinth' and 'maze':



A labyrinth (left) has one route from start to finish. A maze (right) has one route from start to finish, but offers path-choices, dead ends and/or loops.

The specific labyrinth pattern above is the most common one, historically; evolving round the Mediterranean and Baltic Seas, spreading along the Silk Route into Asia; appearing (probably independently) in North America; and, meanwhile, developing in medieval European manuscripts into the form of which Chartres Cathedral labyrinth is most famous.

Now, that long European tradition of labyrinth-drawing wouldn't have happened if the myth of Ariadne, Theseus and the Minotaur hadn't kept alive the whole labyrinth idea (from late Antiquity to Medieval times, as taste for Ovid's tales which described the legend, remained great). First the labyrinth spread through the Roman Empire with mosaics illustrating the myth; then, over centuries of (largely Christian) manuscript-copying, Theseus, Ariadne and the Minotaur slowly were replaced in and around the labyrinth by Christ, Mary and Satan: different faces, same motif.

But here is where it gets complicated a moment - for over all these centuries, we're see only pictures of labyrinths illustrating what is clearly, in Ovid, Pliny and the later commentators, a maze.

Even if we boil down the story into a single concept (inside a confusing maze you can't get out of, is a suprahuman creature waiting to kill you, which you must outwit) we need a maze, not a labyrinth. A labyrinth, in fact, promises certain death; at least in a maze you have a chance (choice) of surprising an enemy. Yet, bizarrely, in art (graffiti, coins, mosaic, paintings, pottery) the Minotaur's lair is always depicted as a labyrinth - never once a maze. Why is this?

Well, you could fill libraries with the books written on this topic. (A mobile library, anyway.) The answer I use in my workshops, however, is a nice simple one. First let's rephrase our questions as, 'Why was the maze (the visual shorthand version) of this myth, traditionally illustrated as a labyrinth?' In other words, what is the narrative point of the story overall?

It is that Theseus with Ariadne's aid solved the maze. And take away the dead ends followed, the loops, the mistakes made in walking any maze, and you are left with a one-route path from start to finish, a unicursal labyrinth. Just as was traditionally illustrated until the 16th

