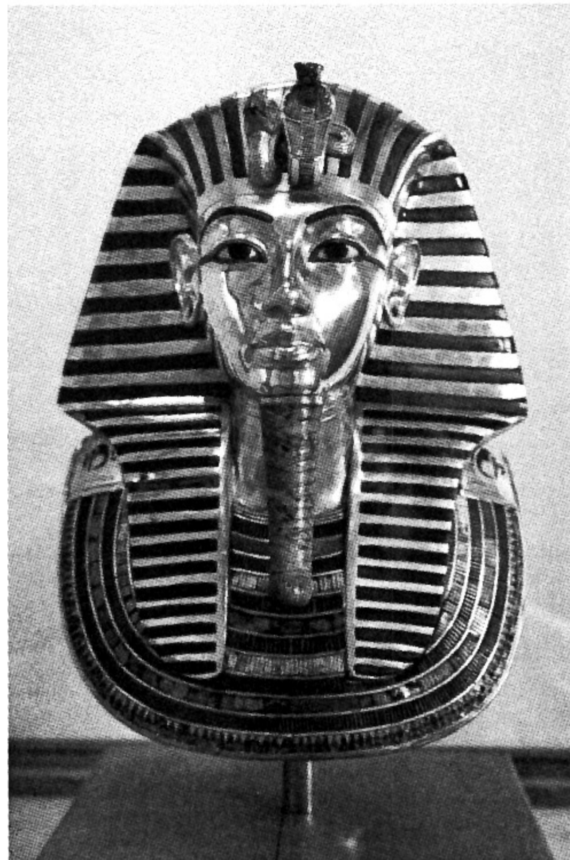
Chapter 5

Renewing Births

The Middle and New Kingdoms and the Decline of Egypt

THE ANARCHY OF THE so-called First Intermediate Period was brought to an end by a Pharaoh of the eleventh dynasty, called Mentuhotep I, whose mortuary complex at Deir-al-Bahri contained fine sculptured reliefs modelled on those of the



Gold Mask of Tutankhamun

Old Kingdom. The revival of pharaonic authority brought with it a new faith in the immanence of an Absolute God, now called Amon "the hidden one" and associated with the Sun as Amon-Re. Egypt, however, had changed. People sought a more personal form of religion, perhaps to strengthen their resolve after the breakdown of the previous culture.

An ancient myth described the birth of five children to the sky goddess Nut. Of these, the boy, Osiris, grew up to become the perfect Pharaoh of Egypt ensuring justice and peace and teaching the art of agriculture to his people. He married his sister Isis, who ruled in his stead whilst he went abroad to teach the people beyond his kingdom. Isis, too, was a model of virtue and knowledge, the merciful mother, goddess of fertility and of the earth, like the matriarch goddess of the later Cretans and other Mediterranean peoples.

In Osiris' absence, his brother Seth, the embodiment of evil, plotted to kill him and seize the throne of the Pharaoh for himself. He gathered around him seventy-two conspirators. When Osiris returned, Seth invited him to a great feast, during which a magnificent chest, made of cedar from Lebanon, ebony from Ethiopia and inlaid with gold and silver, ivory, lapis lazuli and precious stones, was brought to the royal table. Seth challenged everyone to see whether they could lie in the chest with a perfect fit. None could do so, until Osiris lay there, for Seth had earlier measured his brother's body by a trick. The conspirators leapt forward and slammed the lid, securing it with nails and molten lead. The chest was taken to the Delta and cast into the sea. Seth proclaimed himself Pharaoh and the grief-stricken Isis could only wander about the whole land of Egypt, seeking her lost consort. The chest came ashore at the ancient city of Byblos on the Phoenician coast, where it lodged in a tamerisk tree, of sweet scent and bark, which slowly entwined it in its branches, until the chest became a part of the trunk itself. So beautiful was the tree that Astarte, the queen of the country, removed the trunk to her palace.

Children on the Delta sea-shore told Isis of the chest set afloat in the sea. She found her way to Byblos and to Astarte's palace. In return for Isis' care for her daughter, Astarte let Isis examine the tamerisk trunk, and the body of Osiris was found by his lamenting queen, who took it back to Egypt. The evil of Seth had not abated. He stole the body and cut it into fourteen pieces to ensure that Osiris could not be reborn. They were scattered far and wide; but Isis was indefatigable. She travelled the length of the Nile and breadth of the Delta to recover them.

Isis either buried the pieces of Osiris' body at fourteen different places, which each became a sacred site, or she buried the complete body at Philae, the holy island beyond the First Cataract. A son was born to her, named Horus, the falcon, the all-seeing eye, the form of the Pharaoh, and the avenger of his father, Osiris. When he grew to manhood he killed Seth and rid Egypt of evil. Hence the living Pharaoh was Horus and the dead Pharaoh was Osiris in each generation, son and father.

Osiris was an *avatara*, an incarnation of God. When he died he went to the under world and became the judge of the dead. His judgement was the truth about every man, for each soul, or ba, came to him in the underworld and answered for the man's actions in life, before his heart was weighed in a pair of scales against the feather of truth, emblem of the goddess Maat. A divine dog, called Anubis, held the scales,

whilst a fiendish creature with crocodile jaws waited to devour those found unfit. Osiris did not judge the morality of a person, but his or her purity. To do so he asked the soul to make forty-two confessions, most of which were negative in form. Though they reflected the conditions of life in Egypt, such as the special need to protect the waters of the Nile, they were universal in scope; they included:

"Hail Fenti,	I have not done violence to any man.
Hail Am-khai-bitu,	I have not committed theft.
Hail Neha-hra,	I have slain neither man nor woman.
Hail Maata-f-em-seshet,	I have not acted deceitfully.
Hail Neba,	I have not purloined the things that belong unto God.
Hail set-qesu,	I have not uttered falsehood.
Hail Uatch-nesert,	I have not uttered vile words.
Hail Hetch-abchu,	I have invaded no man's land.
Hail Am-besek,	I have not laid waste the lands which have been ploughed.
Hail Thenemi,	I have not set my mouth in motion against any man.
Hail Tututef,	I have not committed fornication and I have not committed sodomy.
Hail Maa-aut-f,	I have not lain with the wife of a man.
Hail Seshet-kheru,	I have not made myself deaf unto the words of right and truth.
Hail Serekhi,	I have not multiplied my speech beyond what should be said.
Hail Nefer-Tem,	I have never uttered curses against the king.
Hail Tem-sep,	I have not fouled running water.
Hail Nehab-kau,	I have not increased my wealth, except by means of such things as are mine own possessions."[1]

The meaning of these confessions was related to transmigration of souls, for the Egyptians did not believe that the life of a man was completed in one embodiment. After death the ba would pass into a higher or lower state according to the purity of the previous life, and might be reborn in another human body or as an animal; hence the attention given to creatures of all kinds: to cats, crocodiles, birds, many of which were mummified. Over a million mummified ibises have been found in a huge underground necropolis at Memphis. The way out of the cycle of death and rebirth, which otherwise was never ending, was through unity with Osiris. Once the Osiris myth had become powerful, it offered this unity to all men, not just to the Pharaoh, who was ensured of it on his death. Every man who could truthfully state the forty-two confessions was proved pure, "sound of voice", and became one with the immortal God.

Osiris was, therefore, the saviour of men. He was the god of life, of rebirth, of vegetation, and of the seed of corn, which later became the supreme symbol in the Greek mystery religions. From the innocent victim of evil, the sacrificed perfect man,

he became the judge of all men and the way of salvation. His story is the cycle of life, death and rebirth in nature and in Man.

Of him, Plutarch said:

> "But he himself is at the remotest distance from the earth imaginable, being unstained and unpolluted, and clean from every substance that is liable to corruption and death . . . when men are loosed from the body, and removed into the unseen, invisible, impassible and pure region, this God is then their leader and king."[2]

It is possible that the whole epic story of Osiris and the religious faith associated with him was a living influence on ancient Egypt much earlier than the beginning of the second millennium. The alignment of the southern passages of the Great Pyramid with Orion and Sirius confirm that the Old Kingdom revered Osiris, for he was associated with the Orion constellation, as was Isis with Sirius. The Pyramid Texts refer many times to the star Orion as the Soul of Osiris and to the departed Pharaoh as joining Osiris in Orion:

> "Live and be young beside your father (Osiris), beside Orion in the sky."[3]

Moreover, the configuration of the three main pyramids at Giza follows remarkably that of the three stars of Orion's belt, notably in the slight offsetting from alignment of the smallest pyramid. If this architectural "mapping" of the constellation was intentional, it shows both that the stellar rather than solar element in Egyptian religion was predominant, and that the Osiris myth was a powerful influence long before the reign of Mentuhotep, probably as an oral tradition. That the human soul may become, and indeed has been, a star was a belief familiar enough to Plato:

> "he (the Creator) divided the whole mixture into souls equal in number to the stars, and assigned each soul to a star... He who lived well during his appointed time was to return and dwell in his native star, and there he would have a blessed and congenial existence."[4]

Whatever its origin, the story of Osiris revived Egyptian religion at the beginning of the second millennium. The kingdom awoke once more to its heritage of high civilisation. A single administration was established once more for the whole country, mines and quarries were re-opened, trade routes revived. In c1938 BC the Chief Vizier of the Pharaoh assumed the throne when his master died. Ruling as Amenemhat I, he took the title of "renewing births" in the spirit of the Osiris myth and completed the restoration of pharaonic authority. A new capital, called Itj-towy, was established just south of Memphis, though Thebes remained a great religious centre. The frontiers were secured by vigorous campaigns, especially in the south in Lower Nubia. A tomb inscription in Upper Egypt recorded the achievement of the founder of the great twelfth dynasty:

> "His majesty had come that he might crush iniquity, arisen as Atum himself, and that he might repair what he had found ruined, what one town had seized from another, and that he might enable the towns to know their boundaries with each other, their boundary stones being secured like heaven, and their water rights, according to what was in the documents and verified according to antiquity, through the greatness of his love of Maat."

Needless to say, Amenemhat met opposition to his reforms. He was assassinated, but he had taken care to have his son crowned as Sesostris I.

This Pharaoh began the great temple at Karnak, which remained for the rest of Egyptian civilisation as probably the most impressive of all its temples. For several generations the twelfth dynasty continued the work of Amenemhat. Under Sesostris III, the illegitimate power of the nomarchs was completely broken. All land was restored to the Pharaoh, except much temple land, and a just system of taxation was re-introduced, based upon the surplus product of land. Herodotus wrote of it:

> "It was this king, moreover, who divided the land into lots and gave everyone a square piece of equal size, from the produce of which he exacted an annual tax. Any man whose holding was damaged by the encroachment of the river would go and declare his loss before the king, who would send inspectors to measure the extent of the loss, in order that he might pay in future a fair proportion of the tax at which his property had been assessed. Perhaps this was the way in which geometry was invented, and passed afterwards into Greece."[5]

The system was very precisely measured out. The annual tax was related to the extent and depth of the flooding by the Nile in the period mid-August to September each year, for on the water and silt of the great river all fertility depended. Hence those nearest the banks of the river paid the highest taxes. Since the government needed revenue - paid in kind in wheat, barley and other produce - in advance of its expenditure, the assessment was made by means of nilometers, which were gauges at intervals along the river, indicating by their reading of depths the level of later flooding downstream. In addition, annual taxes had to be adjusted every year, when land boundaries changed as a result of flooding. The effect of this naturally just system was that the marginal farmer on poorly irrigated land was free from the burden of tax, and an even level of agricultural prosperity was maintained. By the end of the reign of Sesostris III, no more elaborate tombs of nomarchs were to be seen. The office of nomarch reverted to its original status, as that of a royal appointee with no inheritable rights.

Under the early dynasties of the Middle Kingdom, Amon became, at Thebes, the supreme deity of Egypt. The Pharaohs were believed to be his sons. Their majesty, however, never attained the sublimity of the third and fourth dynasties of the Old Kingdom. They needed military force to consolidate their power. Sesostris III built eight large forts each side of the Nile near the Second Cataract, primarily in order to control Nubia, and he also campaigned in Syria. Sculpture of the twelfth dynasty shows the Pharaohs as careworn, yet noble, figures; for the only time in Egyptian history they are portrayed as humans in need of support from their people, whom they did indeed serve well. Artistic heights could still be reached. The polished granite figure of Princess Sennuwy, for example, sits in serenity and balance, with the exquisite profile of a Helen or Cleopatra, a meditative ideal of beauty, portraying the inner being rather than the outer form.

Egypt of the twelfth dynasty was rich; it developed the mineral resources of Nubia and the desert near the Red Sea: iron, copper, tin, gold and precious stones. It built palaces, forts and temples, using plentiful supplies of granite, sandstone and limestone.

It developed the marshy area of the Fayum, west of the middle Nile, by a vast drainage scheme, building there a huge labyrinth, which may have been a model for that at Cretan Knossos and astonished Herodotus fourteen hundred years after its construction. Egypt of the Middle Kingdom was granted a long period of stability and a strong remembrance of the glories of the early Pharaohs.

After the zenith of imperial power reached by the twelfth dynasty, however, Egypt became weaker and subject to attack from abroad, especially from Asia, where the Hittite and Mittani peoples were exerting pressure in Syria and Palestine. Into the Nile Delta from the east came settlers called Hyksos or "foreign peoples" who by about 163O BC were powerful enough to become Pharaohs. Nevertheless, they tended to adopt Egyptian customs and during their rule the native culture was not greatly affected. For example, the Rhind mathematical papyrus, which amongst much else gave a calculation of pi, was written under a Hyksos Pharaoh. The movement of the Hykos into Egypt was a foretaste of the general disturbance in the whole eastern Mediterranean, associated with the fall of Cretan and Mycenean culture and perhaps even the war between Greeks and Trojans. So, too, was the migration of the Jewish people into Egypt, culminating in the Exodus under Moses, probably in the reign of Merneptah of the nineteenth dynasty. It was as though the end of the great Bronze Age was approaching.

Eventually an Egyptian leader was strong enough to expel the Hyksos and had himself crowned Pharaoh as Ahmose in c1539 BC. His New Kingdom dynasty, the eighteenth, contained some of the most glorious and also most bizarre events of Egyptian history. Sixty years after Ahmose, his descendant, Tuthmosis III, became Pharaoh when a boy, so that his step-mother Hatshepsut ruled as regent with great panache for fifteen years, supported by a Vizier, Senenmut, whose versatile talent recalled the great Imhotep. Under his guidance, Hatshepsut sent an extensive trading mission to Punt on the Horn of Africa, which returned with exotic riches : perfumes, oil, myrrh, ivory, panther-skins and ostrich plumes. She also built a magnificent temple for her tomb in the Valley of the Kings at Deir-al-Bahri, its huge colonnaded terraces cut out of the solid rock.

Tuthmosis was not content with the reflection of his stepmother's fame. Within a year of becoming king in his own right, he led a huge military expedition to Palestine to face an Asian coalition, and at Megiddo in c1478 BC inflicted an overwhelming defeat on the Asians, so that for three generations Egyptian power in Western Asia was dominant. His forbears had learnt from the Hyksos the use of the horse and the wheel; the elaborate chariots bear witness to the wealth of the eighteenth dynasty. Tuthmosis III was perhaps Egypt's greatest general. In the south the empire was extended beyond the Fourth Cataract, and in the west the Libyans, also, were defeated. Military success was put to good use through the control of conquered territories by local princes, supported by Egyptian envoys, whilst trade developed; for example, in the Sudan, where the important trading and garrison town of Napata was founded. Artistic activity was stimulated by foreign contact; new temples were built and existing national shrines extended. Sculpture and painting looked back to the Middle Kingdom for models and precious minerals available in the new territories were welcomed by craftsmen. In short, the reign of Tuthmosis III was a time of great prosperity.

By the fourteenth century BC, however, faith in the all pervading power of Amon had diminished. Amenophis III, though a powerful and skilful ruler, who gained much by diplomacy and built the Colossi of Memnon in his temple near Luxor, allowed the cult of Aten, god of the sun's disc, to grow at the expense of Amon and the traditional pantheon. Already the rays of Aten with their slender bands granting beatitude to Pharaohs and men, were appearing on temple and monument reliefs. When his son, Amenophis IV, succeeded him, a revolutionary change was imminent.

The new king was a strange, intellectual man, with a gaunt frame, neck and elongated skull, long chin and high, protruding cheek bones, a physique which became the model for the original, and sometimes grotesque, art of his era. He soon took the cult of Aten to an extreme conclusion. At first other gods - except Ra - were ignored; then they were officially proscribed and their insignia destroyed. Amenophis IV changed his name to Akhenaten, "servant of Aten", and founded a new capital city, called Akhetaten, "horizon of the Aten", on the east bank of the middle Nile, where a line of hills make a level horizon for the rising disc of the sun. New priests and officials were appointed; those associated with the other gods were now a disaffected force within the state. The presence of soldiers at Akhetaten showed that the Pharaoh correctly feared a counter-revolution.

Akhenaten and his influential and beautiful queen, Nefertiti, gave a strong impulse to new forms of art, all centred on the worship of the Aten. The Pharaoh was Aten's son and was depicted under the winged sun-disc whose rays were arms or mercy and sustenance. Yet he was also shown in homely scenes with his family, in unkingly poses, reclining or nursing children. He was at once dignified and awkward, divine and domestically commonplace. Tradition was eschewed; innovation was inventive yet sometimes trivial. Free standing sculptured figures of Akhenaten are strangely powerful, for the Pharaoh is like a man possessed, intent on a single idea, yet slightly mocking, with his hollow cheeks and huge bony frame.

Akhenaten had a vision of the one supreme God. He recalled the religion of his predecessors, the distant Djoser, Khufu and Khafre: the Atum, from which all gods and men were generated; Ptah of Memphis speaking creation into existence; Ra as the solar form of Atum; but he did not understand the strength of age-long habits and ideas. His people were attached to multiplicity, to a pantheon of gods, and so the vision of unity was condemned.

When Akhenaten died in c1335 BC, his successor, Smenkhare, reigned very briefly and was succeeded by the ten-year old Tutankhaten, probably Akhenaten's son by another wife, Kiya. The priests and officials of Amon, those who looked back eighteen years to the old forms of life, took control. The boy Pharaoh was renamed Tutankhamun, after the breath (ankh) of Amon. Akhetaten was razed to the ground. The gods were restored, though Aten remained, a god amongst gods, to grace the gilded chair of Tutankhamun, which was buried with other treasures in his tomb in the Valley of the Kings. The "Hymn to the Aten", perhaps composed by Akhenaten himself, also remained:

> "When thou risest in the morning and shinest as Aten by day thou dost put to flight the darkness and givest forth thy rays. The two lands rejoice, they awake and stand on their feet, for thou hast aroused them. They wash their limbs and

take up their clothes, their arms do adoration to thy rising. All the land performs its labours. All cattle rejoice in their pastures. The trees and herbs grow green. Birds and winged things come forth from their nests, their wings doing adoration to thy spirit How manifold are thy works! They are concealed from us. O sole god to whom no other is like! Thou didst create the earth according to thy desire when thou wast alone, men and cattle, all goats, and all that is upon the earth and goeth upon its feet, and all that is in the sky and flieth with its wings……. Lord of every land, who risest for them, disk of the day, great of might. Thou art in my heart."[6]

For all its magnificence, the vision of Akhenaten could not overturn the nature of the Egyptian people, which Plato recognised and which he knew was proof against innovations, even of a religious genius like Akhenaten:

"….their young citizens must be habituated to forms and strains of virtue. These they fixed and exhibited the patterns of them in their temples; and no painter or artist is allowed to innovate upon them, or to leave the traditional forms and invent new ones...their works of art are painted or moulded in the same forms which they had ten thousand years ago …if a person can only find the natural melodies, he may confidently embody them in a fixed and legal form."[7]

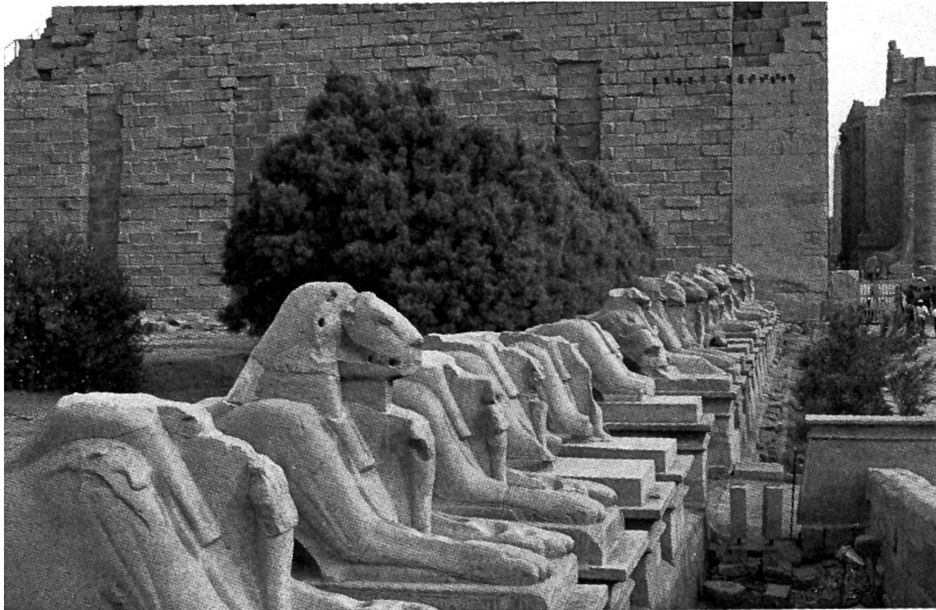
The reign of the young Pharaoh, Tutankhamun was unexceptional, dominated as it was by a general who seized the throne for himself after Tutankhamun's death, but a quirk of history has granted the boy king a new kind of immortality. In 1922 Lord Carnaervon and Howard Carter, British archaeologists, discovered his tomb in the Valley of the Kings. In it was not only the Pharaoh's mummified body, but - since the tomb had been missed by looters - the greatest hoard of Egyptian treasures ever found. Though the quality of the craftmanship could not attain that of the Old Kingdom, the profusion of superb artefacts demonstrated the magnificent wealth and culture, even of the New Kingdom. The furniture included a chest with ivory and ebony marquetry, a folding camp bedstead, an ivory headrest, a gaming box with animal legs and feet and the great throne with its gold embossed Aten symbol. Of ornaments, there were bracelets, fan-shaped earrings with amber, blue and turquoise inlays and a "Birth of the Sun" pectoral chain with ibises and blue scarabs. Gold sandals, shabtis (figures of men said to perform the king's duties after his death), fire making apparatus, fly whisks of hair, an ornamental alabaster boat, garlands of flowers, a golden fan showing Tutankhamun hunting, a walking stick with a handle carved as prisoners of war, a linen dalmatic adorned with tapestry and needlework - these and much more indicate the range and beauty of the Pharaoh's possessions and the gamut of materials available in his society. Outstanding, perhaps, were the chariots found in the tomb. Their elegant, light frames were encased entirely in gold, embossed with traditional patterns and scenes and edged with semi-precious stones and polychrome glass. They were sprung with leather thongs and pulled by horses decked with sumptuous trappings, surmounted by a crest of ostrich feathers. A tablet of Akhenaten says: "His Majesty ascended a great chariot of electrum, like Aten when he rises from his horizon and filling the land with love.. ."

Howard Carter himself has described his immediate impression of the mask of Tutankhamun when he opened the king's golden coffin:

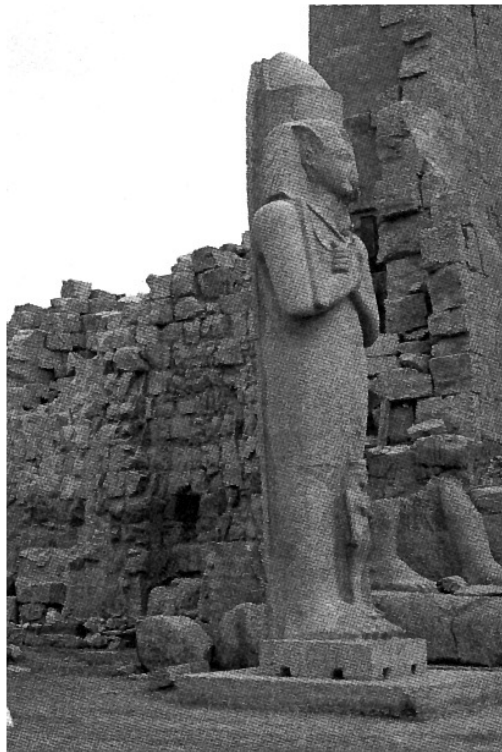
"The beaten gold mask, a beautiful and unique specimen of ancient portraiture bears a sad but calm expression suggestive of youth overtaken prematurely by death. Upon its forehead, wrought in massive gold, were the royal insignia - the Nekhebet vulture and Buto Serpent - emblems of the Two Kingdoms over which he had reigned. To the chin was attached the conventional Osiride beard wrought in gold and lapis-lazuli-coloured glass; around the throat was a triple necklace of yellow and red gold and blue faience disk-shaped beads; pendent from the neck by flexible gold straps was a large black resin scarab that rested between the hands and bore the Bennu ritual. The burnished gold hands, crossed over the breast, separate from the mask, were sewn to the material of the linen wrappings, and grasped the Flagellum and Crozier - the emblems of Osiris. Immediately below these was the simple outermost linen covering, adorned with richly inlaid gold trappings pendent from a large pectoral-like figure of the ba bird or soul, of gold cloisonne work, its full-spread wings stretched over the body."[8]

After Tutankhamun a final blaze of pharaonic glory was to come with Ramesses II of the nineteenth dynasty. Early in his reign he won victories against the Hittites, notably at Kadesh in c1274 BC, though the Hittites themselves claimed a victory; and also against sea-raiders, called the Sherden, whose attacks heralded much greater unrest in the eastern Mediterranean. Ramesses was a master of propaganda, presenting his achievements in fulsome inscriptions; yet the magnificient scale of his numerous buildings marked him as a ruler with a residual sense of majesty. At Abu Simbel in Nubia, four enormous seated figures of Ramesses dominated his new Great Temple. At Karnak he completed the Hypostyle Hall - so large that St Paul's Cathedral in London could fit into it - which had a forest of 134 giant columns. Yet often Ramesses effaced the names of earlier Pharaohs and carved his own cartouche (i.e. his name within an oval ring) in place of them on monuments and other works. Moreover, his grandiose building projects were usually shoddy; often surface ashlar covered hastily packed rubble.

The specious glory of Ramesses II's reign was symptomatic of the collapse of the long-standing values of Egyptian civilisation. When, probably in the reign of Merneptah (c1226-1223 BC), the Jews, who had settled in Egypt four hundred years before, abandoned Egypt under the leadership of Moses, they took with them gleanings of the knowledge preserved for millennia by the Pharaohs and the priests of the temples. It was as though, after the extravagant efforts of Akhenaten to return to some form of monotheism, the Egyptians were deprived, or deprived themselves, of their perennial wisdom. The sea-raiders, probably from Phoenicia, hurled themselves once more upon the Delta; perhaps in the course of wrecking the beautiful culture of ancient Crete. Ramesses III saved his country from their worst excesses by a great victory. Egypt was not to suffer the apparent fate of Troy, whose destruction by the Greeks was soon to mark the symbolic end of the Bronze Age in the west; but never again would it rise to the heights of even the eighteenth dynasty, far removed as that was from the majesty of the Old Kingdom. All over the ancient world the Bronze Age warriors were entering an Odyssey of the unknown. Peoples were on the move. Culture was buried beneath cinders and volcanic ash. The strength of Egypt enabled it to withstand for some while the forces of disintegration. Ramesses III



Karnak: Entrance Way



Karnak: Rameses II

survived a strike of workers in the royal necropolis and a harem conspiracy. Wholesale plundering of tombs began, indicative of a breakdown in the age-long spiritual awareness of the people. From the loss of the Asiatic Empire, there were serious economic effects. By the time of the twentieth dynasty, a tenth of all land was in the hands of temples, so that gradually priestly usurpation of power and wealth strangled economic life. Finally, the country was divided between a priestly dynasty, ruling from Thebes, and a Pharaoh ruling the Delta from the city of Tanis.

Foreign influence grew stronger, as native institutions declined. Libyans entered the country from the west and military tribes, called the Meshuresh, even formed a Libyan dynasty in the Delta. Later, the Nubians advanced from the south and engaged in a struggle with northern dynasties. Religion resembled government in its fragmentation and decay, as the worship and mummification of creatures like ibises, cats and crocodiles assumed huge proportions at ancient religious centres, like Memphis. In the seventh century, the warlike Assyrians burst into the country through the buffer states of Syria and Judah. Assurbanipal, whose dynasty boasted in brilliant stone reliefs of the royal slaying of lions and of the flaying alive of enemy captives, overran it in c665 BC, before the Babylonians abruptly destroyed Assyrian power.

For a brief period in the sixth century, under the Pharaoh Amasis, the light shone again in Egypt; once more the traditional forms of temples and sarcophagi were revived. From his capital of Sais in the western Delta, justice was again dispensed by an Egyptian Pharaoh; Herodotus for instance, said of him:

> "Amasis established an admirable custom which Solon borrowed and introduced at Athens where it is still preserved; this was that every man once a year should declare before the Nomarch, or provincial governor, the source of his livelihood; failure to do this, or inability to prove that the source was an honest one, was punishable by death."[9]

With Amasis the line of Pharaohs who retained a connection with ancient wisdom probably came to an end. In 525 BC, a year after Amasis' death, Cambyses of Persia defeated the Egyptians at Pelusium and incorporated the country into the Persian Empire. For nearly two hundred years, Egypt was subject to the Great King, though there were occasional revolts, stiffened with Greek mercenary soldiers. When Alexander the Great shattered the armies of Darius III, he broke the Persian hold on Egypt, then briefly worshipped at the shrine of Amon in the western desert to demonstrate his fidelity to the religion of the Pharaohs. Greek rule endured under the Ptolemies until the subjection to Rome.

Ancient Egypt was like a bridge that passed from the Bronze Age into the Iron Age, over which crossed a system of knowledge offering salvation to those living in darkness. The Old Kingdom, dedicated to the unity of Atum and foreshadowing the words of Hermes Trismegistus, preserved that knowledge, and through the teaching of Imhotep and other masters allowed it to inform great works of language and music, mathematics and astronomy, medicine, architecture, sculpture and other arts of Man. It was an age of giants. After its culture expired at the end of the third millennium BC, the second culture of the Middle and New Kingdoms could not rise to the heights of its predecessor, but it created the glorious fruits of the twelfth and eighteenth dynasties, not least the prosperity of the people and the magnificence of

the Pharaohs, reflected in the tomb of Tutankhamun. In its nurture of the myth of Osiris, this culture offered a way of human redemption. When the time of dissolution came upon Egypt, as it came to Crete and Mycenae and Troy, the Jewish people probably took with them knowledge of the ultimate unity of Man and God, the secret of ancient Egypt, the mystery in the tomb, the seed of resurrection:

> "The One forever is: the other passes away. The One, indeed, is Truth: the other is the shadow of reality."[10]

Yet not only to Moses was it given to transmit what Egypt bequeathed. For Greece, also, was to take much of the groundwork of civilisation and culture on which to build her own unique contribution to the welfare of Man.

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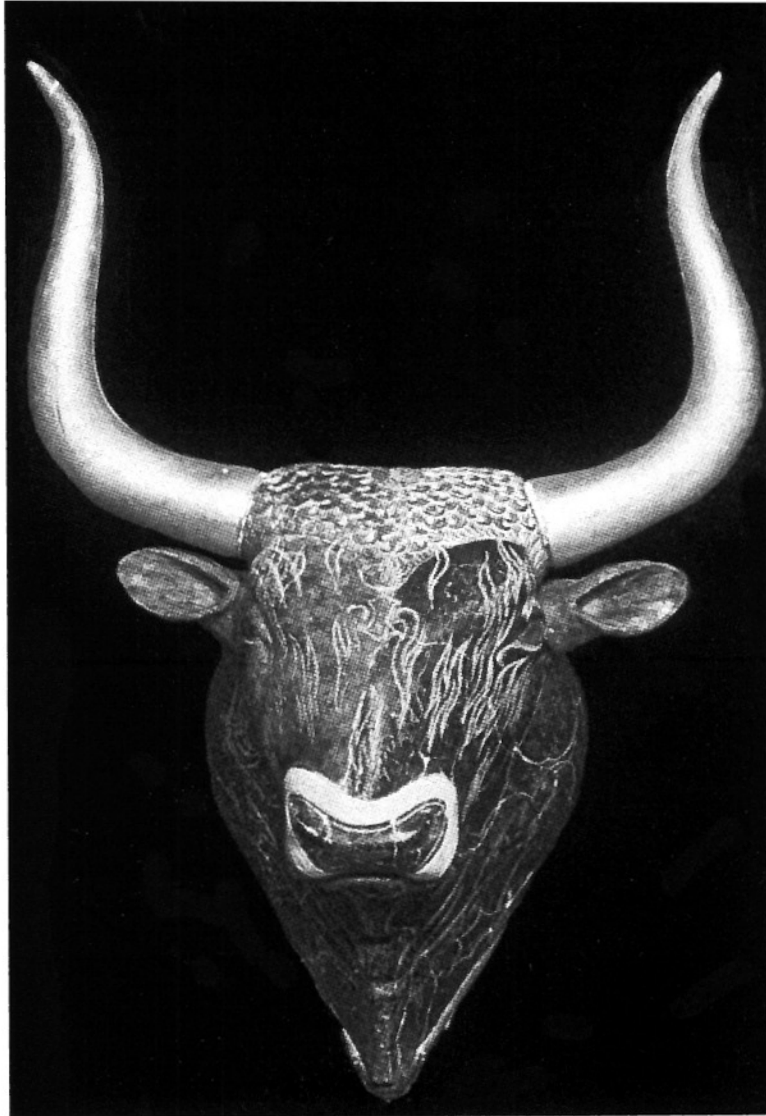
Part 3

Graeco-Roman Civilisation:

Homeric Culture



Cretan Bull

Chapter 6

Minotaur

Theseus and Ancient Crete

IN THE LAND OF CANAAN in Palestine there lived, according to legend, a son of the great sea god, Poseidon, named Agenor, who originally had come from Egypt. He had five sons and one beautiful daughter called Europa. Indeed, she was so fair that the father of the gods, Zeus himself, fell in love with her. Turning himself into a snow-white bull, he joined the herd of cattle belonging to Agenor and became so docile that Europa played with him and climbed on his back. He ambled gently down to the seashore and, to the amusement of his rider, into the shallow waves. Gradually, he edged outwards from the shore until he could swim, and then, as Europa suddenly realised her peril, the bull swam vigorously away to sea. Zeus took the captive Europa to the island of Crete, where she bore him three sons, of whom one was Minos, later King of Crete, whose name may be derived from the Egyptian Menes.

The consequences of this escapade by the father of the gods were to be redeemed by a hero, Theseus, companion of Heracles and founder of Athens. He was born from an illicit union of Aegeus, King of Athens, and Aethra, a princess of Troezen, who brought him up discreetly in her own city, until he was old enough to be told about his father, the King. Aegeus had left a pair of his sandals and a sword under a huge rock at Troezen with instructions to Aethra that, if Theseus could lift the rock, he should bring the sandals and sword to Athens as means of identification. Theseus had little difficulty in lifting the rock, but, keen to emulate Heracles, he announced that he would travel to Athens along the coast road, which was beset with brutish men who murdered travellers, rather than travel by sea as his mother enjoined him.

The road proved a worthy challenge to the aspiring hero. Amongst those whom he encountered was Sinis, the pine-bender, whose practice was to bend two huge pines until he could affix a victim's arms and legs to them. When he released the pines, the victim was torn in half. Sinis was overcome by Theseus, the inventor of the art of wrestling, and tied to two bent pines and projected, like his victims, into a grisly death. Similarly, the more technically inclined Procrustes was punished by Theseus with his own cruel invention. His victims had been bound to a bed and made to fit it exactly by being racked or sawn into shape. The whole road from Troezen to Athens was cleared of such vile torturers, and the region of Attica thus prepared for its later emergence under Theseus as a prosperous city, grown rich on trade.

Crete, however, provided the greatest adventure, worthy of Heracles himself. Minos, son of Zeus, now King of Crete, married Pasiphae, daughter of Helios, god of the sun, and a nymph of the island. The sea-god Poseidon offered to Minos a beautiful white bull for sacrifice, but Minos made the mistake of keeping it for himself, whereupon Poseidon caused Pasiphae to become unnaturally infatuated with the bull, conceiving by it a monster with the body of a man and the head of a bull. King Minos, in his shame, sought the advice of the engineer Daedalus, who constructed an ingenious labyrinth in the city of Knossos as an underground prison for the queen's appalling offspring, the Minotaur.

This was not the king's sole cause of grief, for one of his sons was killed in Athens. In revenge, Minos invaded Attica, besieged Athens and, when it surrendered demanded as tribute that seven youths and seven maidens should be sent every nine years to be thrown to the Minotaur. When Theseus heard of this cruel demand, he volunteered to take the place of one of the youths, despite the entreaties of his father, Aegeus. Each nine years the ship with its mournful cargo had carried a black sail. Now Theseus stowed on board a spare sail, a white one, promising to hoist it on the return voyage, if he succeeded in killing the Minotaur. As he set foot in Crete, Minos' daughter, Ariadne, caught sight of this noblest of the seven youths and fell deeply in love with him. Contriving to meet him in secret, she gave him a ball of thread and a sword, the thread on the advice of Daedalus, and the sword because she knew the terrible power of her monster half-brother, the Minotaur.

Theseus entered the labyrinth, tied the end of the thread to the door and. unwinding the thread as he went, made his way to the centre where the Minotaur had his lair, amidst the bones of the dead Athenian youths. After a short struggle, the Minotaur was slain. Theseus followed the thread back to the entrance. He gathered his companions and the faithful Ariadne and set sail for home. At the island of Naxos they stopped to provision the boat and here Theseus first showed signs of human weakness, for he deserted the woman who had defied her father and risked her life to save him. Ariadne was left behind on Naxos, her love unrequited, even scorned. Perhaps Poseidon, who knew everything about Crete, punished Theseus for his pride, for the hero forgot to raise the white sail on his ship.

King Aegeus stood each day on the Acropolis at Athens looking out towards the sea from the high point on the south west corner - where much later would stand the little temple of Athena Nike - scanning the horizon for a sail. At last he saw one; it was black. Distraught with sorrow, his reason gone, he plunged over the cliff edge. The sea on which he had gazed so ardently became known as the Aegean.

Chastened no doubt by his singular adventures, Theseus duly became king of Athens. Once in office, he laid the basis for future greatness: the settlements of Attica, which were little more than villages, were united under the leadership of Athens, an act of foundation later celebrated in the annual festival of the Synoikia, dedicated to Athena. Each village gave up its law court and self-government in return for access to the law courts and administration in the city of Athens itself, but the promise of self-government in the greater unity of Athens was held out for all the people of Attica, when peace and order prevailed there. Strangers were invited to settle in the enlarged city, for Theseus anticipated the future reliance of Athens on a broad commerce and a generous outwardlooking foreign policy. With a similar intention

he introduced money coinage, stamped with an ox, and began the Isthmian Games in honour of Poseidon, the god upon whose favour Athens would ever depend. Most important of all, he divided the people of Athens into three groups, similar to the castes of the Silver Age; a class of nobles charged with the highest duties of government, law and religion, providing education and protecting what was sacred; husbandmen, caring for the land and responsible for the material wealth of the state; and thirdly, the majority of the people, who were artificers of all kinds, living by the work of their hands. Though this hierarchy was based upon ancient law, it did not preclude a democratic tendency in the state, as indicated by Homer's reference to the uniquely "sovereign people" of Athens. On the eighth day of each month the Athenians paid homage to Theseus, along with Poseidon, because eight is the number of stability, the cube of the first even number, for he built for them a foundation as immovable as the vast oceans of the god.

Theseus is a legendary figure, presented as living some time before the Trojan war which brought the Bronze Age to an end. In fact, Crete had been a relatively obscure backwater to the mainstream of eastern Mediterranean civilisation during the third millennium BC, though its villages were well developed and its artefacts skilfully made. Copper came into common use and the olive was cultivated. Egyptian influence was present in the manufacture of fine jewellery and seals in gold and ivory. Immigration from Asia Minor brought a new strain into the native population and probably gave rise to a creative fusion of blood and of cultures. To the north, the islands of the Cyclades experienced similar immigration and a related culture, specialising in marble and stone vases, so that this whole maritime area acquired a potential for new development based upon Egyptian and Asian influences, but enlivened by the spirit of independence of sea-going peoples. Indeed, just after the beginning of the second millennium a completely new culture arose in Crete, centred upon the building of palaces, most significantly at Knossos and Phaistos, and characterised by the smelting of bronze, the use of the rapier sword, and a pictographic form of writing, soon to become a linear script.

The earliest palaces were destroyed by earthquakes, but finally, at Knossos in particular, the height of the palace culture was reached soon after 1600 BC. For two hundred years Knossos became the lodestone of the Mediterranean, drawing to itself traders and diplomats from Egypt and Syria, exporting fine ware, food and timber, creating dependencies in the Cyclades, at Miletus on the Ionian coast and on the island of Cythera, close to the Peloponnese. The sea-lanes from the Aegean to Egypt passed through the ring of Cretan dependencies and, since Crete was a maritime power capable of defending itself entirely by its naval forces, its prosperity was assured. Envoys carrying gold and silver vessels are portrayed in an Egyptian tomb in Thebes, and an inscription there reads "the coming in peace of the Great Ones of Keftiu and of the Isles in the midst of the sea", probably referring to Crete as Keftiu. Egyptian subject matter - cats and papyrus, for example - were used as motifs by Cretan artists in frescoes and on pottery.

The strong connection with Egypt and Syria explains the origin of some elements in Cretan society, in particular the central place of the king and the palace. The great palaces at Knossos, Phaistos, Mallia and Zakro, similar in form to those in Syria and on the Euphrates, were each the hub of a local economy. At Knossos, for example,

huge jars, or pithoi, were used to store wine, olive oil and cereals - possibly twenty-five thousand litres of olive oil - with an elaborate accounting system in operation. The splendid throne room at Knossos with its wavy backed throne of alabaster and frescoes of proud griffins was the seat of royal administration and justice. Above all, the palaces were the centre of the prolific artistic output of this late type of a bronze age culture.

Cretan art was not imitative of the Egyptian, though it borrowed a few of its themes. Indeed, it displayed a buoyant originality in every form it utilised. The architecture of Knossos makes creative use of light wells, which penetrate the two or three storeys of the palace and send a mellow sunlight through the rooms and staircases. Even the columns are curiously inverted in shape, the thickness at the top producing a rather squat effect, unlike the upward-tapering columns of mainland Greece. In layout, the palace is a strange cross between careful design and a gradual accretion of rooms as occasion demanded, with the final result of labyrinthine complexity. To a stranger, from mainland Greece, for example, it would indeed have appeared as a labyrinth. A real labyrinth, if there were one, may have been modelled on the huge Egyptian labyrinth in the Fayum west of the middle Nile to which Herodotus refers,[1] but the word itself could also have come from the Carian word 'labrys', meaning a double-axe. The palace at Knossos contained many carvings of this ritual emblem.

A palace orientated culture was common to both Crete and the areas of southern Greece, especially in the Argolid, which were in the forefront of civilised life in the second millennium BC, notably at Mycenae. Yet the palace system certainly originated in Crete with the first palaces at Knossos and Phaistos in the period 1900 to 1700 BC, with the implication that Mycenae and the other mainland centres received the idea from the island. By 1600 they were rivals of the great Cretan palaces for trade and cultural influence throughout the Aegean and eastern Mediterranean, but even then Cretan preponderance in fine art, craftmanship and building methods was retained; Cretan pottery styles, for example, were superior and were adopted at Mycenae. Cretan script known as Linear B, constructed at Knossos about 1450 BC, almost certainly by Greek invaders with the aid of native Cretans who had earlier developed their own hieroglyphics (Linear A), was transmitted to the mainland, and at Mycenae and Pylos utilised for the elaborate accounting procedures of the palace economies on the lines laid down at the Cretan palaces. In all these features of the palace, Crete was the exemplar, if not the origin, of what became characteristically European.

The palace frescoes portray animated people and creatures: young boys gently boxing, Parisian style young women with pretty black ringlets of hair, an arrogant prince with a monstrous head-dress, fat comfortable porpoises and mammoth bulls over which lean young athletes of both sexes leap with unbelievable agility. Pottery, too, is rich with idiosyncratic design; patterns that curve round jars with natural spirals, octopuses that cling in all-embracing rotundity, harvesters with scythes, singing in noisy unison. Even the huge storage pithoi are decorated with indented wavy rings. Jewellery and small seals are intricate and made from fine materials: gold, ivory, faience and steatite. Probably most expressive of all is the rhyton, or drinking vessel, found in the palace at Knossos, made of black steatite with horns and eyes inlaid with shell and rock crystal, an image of the strange blend of religion and

entertainment embodied in the ritual bull leaping. Here in Cretan art is portrayed a new emotional attitude to life, almost romantic in its expressionism, distinctly not Egyptian, nor Asiastic, indeed recognisably European.

One dominant and distinctive feature of the art of the palaces was a love of natural forms, indicating an awareness of unity with nature and a joy in its movement and exuberance, which has been persistent in European culture into modern times. Unlike the serious and hieratic art of Egypt, Cretan art turned to the ever-present world of plants and animals, birds and fishes. In the early second millennium, Kamares ware pottery was decorated with marvellous patterns in emphatic colours - black, white, orange and red - which was not copied from nature, but reflected it in partially abstract shapes. Later, especially at Knossos, nature was represented directly, but still with an element of witty yet disingenuous abstraction; for example, in frescoes, which made no attempt to present a dimension of depth, but settled for an overtly naive flatness, akin in this respect to Byzantine art. The effect is to highlight the natural naivety of non-human forms of nature, the immediacy of trees and plants, the innocence of animals, the vacant weightlessness of fish, the airiness of birds. Humour was never far distant, as in the exquisite gold pendant of two wasps sipping a drop of honey.

When translated into the human form, this art showed a childlike simplicity; boys box without animosity, women preen themselves without guile, a prince struts without hiding his regality. It is a world devoid of the dualism of pretence - each is what he is - a natural world, touched with a memory of a Golden Age.

According to Homer, there were ninety cities in Crete at the time of the Trojan war. At Knossos and elsewhere cities attended upon the palaces, and substantial roads connected them with other centres. Viaducts and aqueducts bore further witness to the engineering skill symbolised by the legendary figure of Daedalus. Maritime trade was very extensive and ship-building, using the great timber resources of the island, was clearly an important industry. The economy relied upon an elaborate system of barter, involving the storage of large quantities of staple goods, like olive oil, wine and cereals, which itself gave rise to accounting recorded by means of the linear scripts (which utilised decimals). Material comfort was of importance to the Cretans; they had bath-rooms, and even lavatories, of a modern type, though no hot water systems. Secular life was attractive, and in no way inhibited by religion. Perhaps they even believed in romantic love, as the story of Ariadne suggests! In all this they were forerunners of Europe.

There is a marked absence of tokens of war in the remains of ancient Crete: few weapons, paintings of soldiers or their accountrements, no fortifications. King Minos certainly fought abroad in Greece, and a navy, probably recruited from merchant ships in time of war, guarded the coasts and kept open the sea-lanes, but on the island peace prevailed and an artistic culture could flourish undisturbed. Though Zeus himself was reputed to have been born on Mount Lasithi, near the greater peak of Ida - for his mother Rhea could only thus hide him from his dreaded father Cronos, who swallowed his children to prevent their usurping his power - Cretans worshipped especially a female goddess of nature, in accordance with many Mediterranean peoples. The benign influence of this mother goddess appears in both the peaceful nature of Cretan society and in the natural and gentle character of its art.

Nevertheless, war came to the Cretans and brought their fine culture to an abrupt end. It followed upon natural disasters. About 1450 BC, the great palaces, with the exception of Knossos, were destroyed. On the island of Thera to the north of Crete a huge volcanic explosion sent a great tidal wave southwards to flood the lower parts of Crete. Volcanic ash accumulated in thick layers on agricultural land. Only Knossos survived, though it was damaged. Some time after these calamities, Knossos was invaded, probably by Greeks from the mainland, perhaps from Mycenae. They built at Knossos their typical chamber tombs - the Cretans had little use for elaborate burials - and placed weapons with their dead, but most significantly they developed the new script. It remains a possibility that the final destruction of Knossos was carried out by a great raid of the "sea people" from the eastern end of the Mediterranean, those same raiders who would have invaded Egypt had not the pharaoh Rameses III stopped them in the delta. Either way, the collapse of Cretan society, from earthquake, flood or invasion was another symptom of the drawing to an end of the age of heroes.

The zenith of Cretan culture in the mid second millennium was an experiment. It was as though Zeus, in gratitude for his mother's courage in saving him from the wrath of Cronos, felt a nostalgic love for the island of his birth, for the rocky heights of Ida and Lasithi and the thick forests of cypress and cedar, pine and oak, and, thus compelled, brought there his beautiful paramour, Europa, to give birth to a new society of men, close to nature but artistic, with a zest for living and a contempt for war; as though in his intoxication he forgot the age of bronze and the fierce warriors, who soon would destroy themselves and their ethos in the fratricidal siege of Troy. And so he experimented with an idyll, an island of "sounds, and sweet airs, that give delight, and hurt not"; but this island, too, had its Caliban, for out of the mixing of the cultures of Egypt and Syria, that by now were becoming degenerate, came the strange monster of the Minotaur. The Egyptian God, Ptah, creator of all things by the Word, was now worshipped as a bull, the god Apis; and King Minos' queen, Pasiphae, daughter of the Sun-god, was corrupted by lust. The unnatural union of a woman and the white bull, offered by Poseidon, not for such uses, but for sacrifice, could yield only evil. The Minotaur was the degeneracy of the ancient civilisation of the Middle East. It had to be slain. The Cretan experiment had failed and must end.

Theseus was the hero who would pluck salvation from this nettle of corruption. He killed the Minotaur with the help of the love of an uncorrupted woman, Ariadne. The good that was still there, the seeds of language, the appreciation of beauty, the knowledge of kingship, were taken to the mainland to enter the palace culture of Mycenean Greece, but the evil, the depravity of mind which was leading the Egyptians to worship the bull and the ibis, had to be destroyed by reason, the sacred and golden chord which showed the way out of the labyrinth.

References:

1. Herodotus, *Histories*, trans. A. de Selincourt, Penguin, London, 1972, Book II, p. 188.