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| Theseus  (THEE-see-us or THEES-yoos) |

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| **Who?**  AGreek hero, especially national hero of Athens; slayer of the Minotaur.  It was by lifting a boulder that Theseus, grandson of the king of Troezen, first proved himself a hero. Theseus was sixteen at the time. He had been raised by his grandfather and his mother, Princess Aethra. One day the princess called Theseus to her side. It was time, she said, that he learned of his father, who was ruler of a mighty kingdom. This was news to Theseus, who had been under the impression that his father was one of the gods.  "Before I divulge his identity," said the princess, "you must meet the challenge your father has set you."  Years ago, the king had hefted a mighty stone. Underneath he had placed something for his son to find - if he could lift the weight. Aethra guided Theseus to a forest clearing, in the midst of which was a boulder. Theseus proceeded to lift the stone easily, or so the myth-tellers generally assume. But like most myths, this one is vague about the details. According to one theory, Theseus would have had trouble with a task involving brute strength.  This theory was advanced by Mary Renault in her novel *The King Must Die*. It is based on the tradition that Theseus invented "scientific" wrestling. This is the discipline by which even a lightweight can beat a stronger adversary by fancy footwork, trick holds and using the opponent's momentum to advantage. Theseus would have had little cause to invent such tactics if he'd been capable of beating his adversaries by sheer physical strength. Therefore one may deduce that the hero was a lightweight. So when it came to lifting boulders, Theseus was at a disadvantage. Resourcefulness, another heroic trait, must have come to his aid. He would have looked for some mechanical means to multiply his physical strength.  **Do unto others as you would have them do to you**  Beneath the stone Theseus found certain tokens left by his father. His name, Aethra now revealed, was King Aegeus of Athens. Prompted by a sense of heroic destiny, Theseus set out to meet this parent he had never known. He determined to journey to Athens by land, although his mother argued for the safer route by sea. And in fact the landward route proved to be infested by an unusual number of villains, thugs and thieves. Theseus quickly adopted the credo of doing unto these bad guys what they were in the habit of doing to others.  Setting out from Troezen, his birthplace, the first community of any size through which he passed was Epidaurus. Here he was waylaid by the ruffian Periphetes. Periphetes was nicknamed Corynetes or "Club-Man," after his weapon of choice, a stout length of wood wrapped in bronze to magnify its impact upon the skulls of his victims. Theseus merely snatched this implement from Periphetes and did him in with it. Some say that this incident was manufactured to account for depictions of Theseus carrying a club like his cousin Heracles, one of a number of instances on Theseus's part of heroic imitation.  The next malefactor who received a dose of his own medicine was a fellow named Sinis, who used to ask passers-by to help him bend two pine trees to the ground. Why the wayfarers should have wanted to help in this activity is not disclosed. Presumably Sinis was persuasive. Once he had bent the trees, he tied his helper's wrists - one to each tree. Then he took a break. When the strain became too much, the victim had to let go, which caused the trees to snap upright and scatter portions of anatomy in all directions. Theseus turned the tables on Sinis by tying his wrists to a couple of bent pines, then letting nature and fatigue take their course.  Then, not far from Athens, Theseus encountered Sciron. This famous brigand operated along the tall cliffs which to this day are named after him. He had a special tub in which he made each passing stranger wash his feet. While they were engaged in this sanitary activity, Sciron kicked them over a cliff into the ocean below, where they were devoured by a man-eating turtle. Theseus turned the tables on Sciron, just as he had turned them on Pine-Bender.  Perhaps the most interesting of Theseus's challenges on the road to adventure came in the form of an evildoer called Procrustes, whose name means "he who stretches." This Procrustes kept a house by the side of the road where he offered hospitality to passing strangers. They were invited in for a pleasant meal and a night's rest in his very special bed. If the guest asked what was so special about it, Procrustes replied, "Why, it has the amazing property that its length exactly matches whomsoever lies upon it."  What Procrustes didn't volunteer was the method by which this "one-size-fits-all" was achieved, namely as soon as the guest lay down Procrustes went to work upon him, stretching him on the rack if he was too short for the bed and chopping off his legs if he was too long. Theseus lived up to his do-unto-others credo, fatally adjusting Procrustes to fit his own bed.  **Announcing his arrival as the king’s son**  When at last Theseus arrived in Athens to meet his father King Aegeus for the first time, the encounter was far from heartwarming. Theseus did not reveal his identity at first but was hailed as a hero by the Athenians, for he had rid the highway of its terrors. In honor of his exploits, he was invited to the palace for a banquet. Serving as hostess was his father's new wife, Medea.  This was the same Medea who had helped Jason harvest a crop of armed warriors and steal the Golden Fleece out from under the nose of the dragon that guarded it. Jason had eventually abandoned Medea, and she had grown understandably bitter. Now she sized up Theseus and decided that he was a threat to her own son's prospects of ruling Athens after King Aegeus. In fact, Medea's magic disclosed the identity of Theseus. Years before, she had aided Aegeus, who was desperate for an heir. It was Medea's power that ensured the birth of Theseus to Princess Aethra of Troezen. Though he left instructions with Aethra should a child be born, Aegeus had either forgotten the incident or despaired of a birth.  Now Medea played on the king's insecurity. Surely the stranger at the banquet was too popular for the good of the throne. With the people behind him, he might well seize it for himself. Medea persuaded King Aegeus to serve Theseus poisoned wine. And the hero, unawares, would have drunk it had he not paused first to carve his dinner. This, at any rate, is the prosaic version of the myth. Romantics claim that Theseus drew his sword not to mince his boar's meat but because he had chosen the dramatic moment to reveal his identity.  In any case, Aegeus recognized the pattern on the sword's hilt. This was his own weapon, which he had left under a rock for his son to discover. Aegeus dashed the poisoned cup to the ground. Medea, meanwhile, stormed out and made her escape in a chariot pulled by dragons.  **The Minotaur**  Theseus was now the recognized heir to the kingdom of Athens. Thus he was on hand when King Minos of Crete arrived to collect his periodic tribute of young men and maidens to be sacrificed to the Minotaur. Because his son had died while in the safekeeping of the Athenians, Minos exerted the power of the Cretan navy to enforce this onerous demand.  The Minotaur was a monster, half-man, half-bull, that lived in the center of a maze called the Labyrinth. It had been born to Minos's wife Pasiphae as a punishment from the gods. Minos had been challenged to prove that he was of divine parentage, so he called on the sea god Poseidon to send him a sign. The god obliged, and a beautiful white bull emerged from the sea. Minos liked it so much that he neglected to sacrifice it to the gods, as he should have done. As a punishment, Poseidon caused the king's wife to fall in love with the bull. She had the master craftsman Daedalus build her a hollow cow in which to approach the beast. As a result, the Minotaur was born. The monster is generally depicted as having the head of a bull and the body of a man. But in the Middle Ages, artists portrayed a man's head and torso on a bull's body.  Some say that Theseus expressed his solidarity with his fellow citizens of Athens by volunteering to be one of the victims. Others maintain that Minos noticed the handsome young prince and chose him to be sacrificed. In any case, Theseus became one of the fated fourteen who embarked with the Cretan fleet.  Before leaving, Theseus told his father King Aegeus not to mourn, and that he would return with his ship after he had killed the Minotaur. If successful, he would sail a white flag. If he died, the sailors returning to Athens would hoist a black flag.  The sea upon which they sailed was the domain of Poseidon, who together with his brothers Zeus and Hades were the three most powerful gods of the Greek pantheon. They divided up creation, Zeus taking Mount Olympus and the sky, Hades the Underworld and Poseidon the sea. But there were other deities of the watery depths, notably the "old man of the sea", the god Nereus, with his fifty daughters, the Nereids. When Theseus was en route to Crete, he encountered one of these divinities.  As the tribute ship drew near to harbor, King Minos made rude advances to one of the Athenian maidens and Theseus sprang to her defense, claiming this was his duty as a son of Poseidon. (Theseus, of course, also claimed to be the son of King Aegeus, but a true hero could be inconsistent in such matters.) Minos suggested that if Theseus's divine parentage were anything but a figment of his imagination, the gods of the sea would sponsor him. So Minos threw his signet ring overboard and challenged Theseus to dive in and find it.  This Theseus did, being abetted indeed by the deities of the depths. Not only did he retrieve the ring from the underwater palace into which it had fallen, but he was given a jeweled crown by one of the Nereids, either Thetis or Amphitrite.  **A Little Help from the Princess**  It was not long after he arrived in Crete that the hero encountered Princess Ariadne, daughter of King Minos. She fell in love with him at first sight. It was Ariadne who gave Theseus a clew which she had obtained from Daedalus. In some versions of the myth it was an ordinary clew, a simple ball of thread. It was to prove invaluable in his quest to survive the terrors of the Labyrinth.  The maze had been so cleverly and intricately contrived by the master builder Daedalus that once thrown inside, a victim could never find the way out again. Sooner or later, he or she would round a corner and come face to face with the all-devouring Minotaur. This was the fate which awaited Theseus.  It is clear from the myth that the Labyrinth was a maze from which none could escape because it was so diabolically meandering. Hence the Minotaur was not just its monster but its prisoner. But how exactly this worked as a practical matter with regard to the victims is less clear. Some versions of the myth have it that they were "enclosed" in the Labyrinth, as if it were a box.  But surely if the procedure were simply to push the victims in and then slam the door behind them, they would have cowered by the entrance rather than proceed into the terrors of the maze. Even if the guards threatened them with swords, it seems likely that some would have preferred the known death to being devoured alive by a monster. Nor could the guards have escorted the victims deep into the maze without getting lost themselves, or risking a run-in with the Minotaur.  Maybe Daedalus built a roof over his invention, so that the victims could be dropped through a trap door into the very center. But perhaps on the whole it's better not to inquire too closely into the mechanics of the mythological.  When Theseus first entered the maze he tied off one end of the ball of thread which Ariadne had given him, and he played out the thread as he advanced deeper and deeper into the labyrinthine passages. Many artists have depicted Theseus killing the Minotaur with his sword or club, but it is hard to see how he could have concealed such bulky weapons in his clothing. More probable are the versions of the tale which have him coming upon the Minotaur as it slept and then, in properly heroic fashion, beating it to death with his bare fists. Then he followed the thread back to the entrance. Otherwise he would have died of starvation before making his escape.  **Broken Promises**  Theseus now eloped with Ariadne, pausing only long enough to put holes in the bottom of her father's ships so that he could not pursue. But Theseus soon abandoned the princess, either because he was bewitched by a god or because he had fallen in love with her sister Phaedra. Some say that he left Ariadne on the island of Naxos, but others maintain that such was his haste that he left her on the small island of Dia, within sight of the harbor from which they had sailed. The deserted and pining Ariadne has been a favorite theme of artists down through the ages.  As the ship bearing Theseus and his liberated fellow Athenians approached the promontory on which King Aegeus watched daily for his return, Theseus forgot the signal which he had prearranged with his father. The vessel's sails were to be black only if the expedition concluded as on all previous occasions, with the death of the hostages. In the exultation of triumph, or in anguish over the loss of Ariadne, Theseus neglected to hoist a sail of a different hue, and King Aegeus threw himself from the heights in despair. The sea into which he fell to his death is thus named after him, the Aegean Sea.  Theseus continued his adventures, now as the king of Athens. |