

# THE LEGACY OF DAEDALUS

by

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## The Legacy of Daedalus

You all know the story. Athens was condemned to send seven youths and seven maidens each year to Crete where they would be fed to the Minotaur, a horrible monster, who prowled the mazes of the great labyrinth at Knossos. The hero Theseus volunteered to become a member of the group. With the help of Ariadne he was able to slay the Minotaur, escape from the labyrinth, and return to Greece.

The complete story involves more than heroism. It is a story tangled out of the deepest passions of our history, full of brutality, sex, perversity, and above all, betrayal of trust. Because it has implications that resonate down to the present, it deserves closer scrutiny.

Zeus had become entranced with the beauty of the nymph Europa, daughter of Phoenicia. Taking the form of a bull, he carried her off to Crete where she bore him three sons, Minos, Rhadamanthys, and Sarpedon. Later, she married Asterius, King of Crete, who adopted the three boys. When Asterius died Minos claimed the throne.

Androgeus, the son of Minos, was a celebrated athlete. As a young man he visited Athens and won every contest in the All-Athens games. Partly out of jealousy, and partly out of fear that he was in league with the rebellious sons of Pallas, King Aegeus of Athens arranged to have him ambushed and killed. Minos mounted an expedition, captured Megara, and begged Zeus to bring famine and pestilence to Athens. The Athenians consulted the oracle, who told them to accede to the cruel demand of Minos: the sacrifice of seven youths and seven maidens each year to the Minotaur.

Theseus had come to Athens from his birthplace Troezen by the

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dangerous overland rout, emulating on the way many of the feats of his cousin Heracles whom he worshipped. He had killed the Cretan bull that had claimed hundreds of victims, hunted and destroyed a monstrous wild sow that had killed many, vanquished the wrestler Cercyon who crushed travelers in his arms, and killed Procrustes who stretched or cut his guests to fit his infamous bed.

Theseus was filled with pity at the plight of the victims who would be destined for the Cretan labyrinth. Disobeying the pleas of his father, he offered willingly to join their party. When the lots had been cast at the Law Courts to select the victims, Theseus led his companions to the Dolphin Temple where he offered Apollo a branch of consecrated olive bound with white wool.

To improve the odds on escaping, Theseus replaced two of the maidens with effeminate youths of proven courage, strength, and presence of mind. He told them to take warm baths, avoid the sun, and practice behaving like women. The fourteen mothers of the group brought gifts and provisions and told tales to hearten their spirits. On the sixth of April the group left for Crete in a thirty-oared ship.

The Crete that the group arrived at was a much different society than the still half-barbarous Athens that they had left. Thucydides tells us that Minos possessed a fleet, that he controlled most Greek waters, ruled the Cyclades, colonized them, installed his sons as governors, and cleared the sea of pirates. He created the first high civilization on European soil, a civilization with origins in the East, but peculiarly and unmistakably European.

In this new civilization the arts developed and flourished in a way never before seen in human history. Artists developed a confidence, an assurance, a suavity of style that would not be regained for centuries. Cretan metal work was preeminent and the finest of all Greek pottery was produced. Fresco paintings showed scenes from nature, flowers, birds, trees, processions of noble youths, scenes of public ceremony, sport and ritual, and always, harking back to the legend of Europa—the bull.

The historian, Chester G. Starr describes this flowering in his book, *The Origins of Greek Civilization*:

By the last century of the third millennium, Cretan civilization

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began to coalesce, and by the following Middle Minoan era (2000-1550 B.C.) it skyrocketed into one of the most extraordinary achievements of mankind. Here, and only here, in Aegean history down to the first millennium, true cities appeared beside the palaces of the kings. The citizens . . . enjoyed a rich urban culture of remarkable grace and polish . . . The thin, graceful vases must be seen to appreciate their delicate colors and sophisticated patterns. There are little nervous figurines in ivory and stone, superb frescoes on the palace walls.

Throughout the ancient world it was the custom that victims condemned to be sacrificed should first be honored, feted, and entertained by the best that the society could offer. Theseus and his companions were bathed and anointed, garlanded with flowers, and taken to the great courtyard to view ritual games where skilled youths and maidens displayed remarkable skills by vaulting over the backs of charging bulls. In his book, *The Secret of Crete*, the scholar Hans Georg Wunderlich uses images from fresco paintings to imagine what this scene must have been like:

Already a tremendous crowd is assembled in the court. The athletic bodies of the Minoan men, steeled in sports and tanned by the glaring sun eagerly await the contest in which they will test their strength. The graceful ladies, their faces and breasts aristocratically pale from their habit of living in the dim underground parts of the palace, have donned their finest robes for the occasion, arranged their curly dark hair in artful coiffures, and emphasized their charms by no less artful use of rouge, powder, and eye paint.

Their precious, gay colored dresses modestly fall to the ground covering slender bodies down to delicate ankles . . . but their bodices are so cut as to expose their breasts . . . In a moment the snake priestess will step forth from the palace chapel . . . and with the sacred snakes in her raised hands, give the signal for the beginning of the games.

The games always began with a ritual dance. Homer describes one of these dances in *The Iliad*:

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And there were young men and young girls sought  
for their beauty.

With gifts of oxen, dancing, and holding hands  
at the wrist.

These wore, the maidens, long light robes, but  
the men wore tunics of finespun work and shining  
softly, touched with olive oil.

And the girls wore fair garlands on their heads  
while the young men carried golden knives that hung  
from sword belts of silver.

Among the Cretan women gathered together for the ritual dances and games was Ariadne, the daughter of King Minos. Homer describes her as "Ariadne of the lovely tresses," Appolodorus as "brown-haired Ariadne." The special mention given to her hair indicates that it must have been unusually beautiful. In any case she was a lovely young woman, dressed to display her charms to the full.

Ariadne gazed on the handsome young hero Theseus, his eyes found hers, and their hearts melted. For the rest of day they had eyes only for each other. That night she stole away to the cell where Theseus was imprisoned and bribed the guard to let her in. Before they parted next morning Theseus had promised to take her back to Greece and make her his wife. In return, she gave him secret knowledge about the labyrinth, a sword, and a ball of magic thread to find his way out of the maze.

Next morning when Theseus was put into the labyrinth he killed the Minotaur and found his way out using Ariadne's thread. In the meanwhile the two effeminate youths had killed the guards at the women's quarters and freed the maidens. Ariadne led the whole Athenian party to the harbor where they were able to put out to sea, after first disabling the Minoan vessels.

The metaphor of the labyrinth fascinates us because each of us carries a labyrinth in our head, the deep tangled mysterious country of our unconscious mind. Few have the courage and determination to penetrate very far into this maze, and those who do often encounter a monster. Whether we slay the monster or are devoured often depends on whether or not we have received the gift that Ariadne gave to Theseus, namely the gift of love.

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The monster at the heart of our unconscious is often born of sexual guilt, and this was equally true of the monster in the great labyrinth at Knossos. To understand how this came about we must return to events that occurred shortly after Minos seized power.

He had a dream. He saw that life was quickening over the whole eastern Mediterranean. People were losing their fear of others and reaching out. Ships no longer crept timidly along the shore but struck out across the water, beginning to make contact with other societies and laying the groundwork for valuable trading relationships. Minos saw that Crete was at the crossroads of almost all these developing trade routes. If he could control and dominate this trade, Crete would become immensely wealthy. To do this his power would have to be absolute. Above all, he must enjoy the favor and support of Poseidon, god of the waters.

Minos assembled his key advisors on the shore at the apex of a small bay circled by rocky cliffs. He poured a libation of wine on the sand, uttered the words of invocation, and spoke directly to Poseidon. He asked that the god support him in his endeavors in return for lifelong worship. He asked that Poseidon answer with a sign, sending some creature out of the sea which he promised to sacrifice in honor of the god. He then poured another libation of wine on the sand.

At once the sky darkened, the earth trembled, the seas rose in monstrous waves that crashed on the shore, winds howled in from all directions at once, and there was roaring sound that terrified Minos and his followers so that they threw themselves down and covered their faces in holy dread. Then the sea calmed and out of the water emerged a white bull.

This was such a bull as had never been seen by anyone. Perfect and unblemished he came out of the sea, holding his head high and shaking the drops of water off the horns that curved in a great black arc toward the sky. The powerful muscles of his shoulders and neck stood out, and his black hooves struck deep into the sand. He advanced until he stood at the edge of the awestruck men and waited for the fate that had been ordained.

But Minos did not sacrifice that bull as he had promised. He realized that such a perfect animal could greatly improve the quality of his herd. Thinking that Poseidon would not know the difference, he sacrificed a

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lesser bull of his own. When time passed and nothing much happened he thought that he had won his gamble. But the wrath of Poseidon was unappeased and he bided his time.

Minos had married Pasiaphaë. Now his days were completely taken up with the myriad problems of pacifying the rebellious mountain tribes, building his navy, planning the conquest of the Cyclades, negotiating with his new trading partners. In the great palace of Knossos, Pasiphaë walked through endless corridors and rooms, lonely and depressed. She tried to make friends with the serving maidens who attended her wants but found she had no point of contact with which to relate to them. Again and again she was drawn back to the balcony overlooking the pasture where the herd grazed, and where she could occasionally watch the great white bull as he mounted the heifers. This sight was so disturbing that she turned away and ran back to her room, where she tried to become occupied with her spinning. But she was always drawn back to that balcony and to the bull.

Finally, she sought out Daedalus who had a workshop deep in the lowest layers of the palace. He was the greatest smith and artificer of the ancient world, instructed in his art by Athene herself. He had been banished from Athens for a murder committed during a jealous quarrel, and had taken refuge in Crete, where Minos welcomed him and gave him many assignments. Pasiphaë found him at his forge, experimenting with a strange new metal called iron, a sample of which had been brought to him by visitors from Thrace. She explained her problem, and Daedalus made her an artificial cow, constructed of wood and covered with cowhide, so cleverly made that even close up it looked completely natural. The back and legs were open so that Pasiphaë could get inside, present herself, and be mounted by the bull.

This invention worked perfectly, as did all of Daedalus' inventions. Pasiphaë had several successful encounters with the bull, but in the end she became pregnant and gave birth to the monster, half human and half bull, that later became known as the Minotaur. The enraged Minos had Daedalus build the labyrinth and lock up the monster.

Daedalus should not have made that artificial cow, just as later on he should not have made those artificial wings that he used to attempt a



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flight to the mainland with his son, Icarus. They had left Naxos and Delos behind them on the left and were nearing Lebynthos when Icarus flew too near the sun, the wax supporting the feathers melted, and he fell to his death.

This was a completely predictable event. It is the nature of young men to test the limits of their powers. Ask any suburban father who has given the keys of the Porsche to his seventeen year old son on Saturday night. Daedalus would have known this if he had thought, but he did not think, and in this respect was the exemplar of a type that has since become very well known to us—the superb technician who gives little thought to the ultimate effects of his own technology.

The legacy of Daedalus lies all about us in a technology hurtling out of control, destroying the society that has fed it, and heading toward environmental catastrophe—a catastrophe created by the insatiable need to feed resources to the technological machine.

This was not what we were promised. We were told that technology would solve all our problems, free us from toil, and deliver an endless cornucopia of consumer goodies. For a long time it seemed that this was indeed true, but now the bills are coming due. The problem is that at no time were we told what these bills would be, or given the option of deciding whether a given technical development would be worth the cost. No debate took place. By our silence we gave tacit approval, even though there were voices of warning. In the 1940's Louis Mumford pointed out that the unlimited material goods that a technological society promises are "a magnificent bribe meant to get us to overlook what is lost in the bargain."

Was it a good idea to follow the path that we adopted in making use of sustainable nuclear reactions? The promise that it would result in "electricity so cheap that it wouldn't need to be metered" now seems like a cynical joke, while the deadly by-products that no one has yet found any way to dispose of continue to accumulate. Meanwhile, thousands of bombs with the potential for destroying all human life wait in their silos for the emergence of the next psychotic world leader.

Was it a good idea to develop television and then turn it over to the advertising agencies so that they could sell our minds and attention? Contrary to common belief the key problem in television is not the quality of the programs themselves, although obviously these could be

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improved. The problem results from a process of moving images electronically into a passive human brain, a process qualitatively different from previous methods of transferring information. The result is a population becoming progressively more passive and less able to deal with complexity and nuance, so that political debate is trivialized, entertainment is seen as coming from an external source with no need for personal effort, and a whole generation of children is being "dumbed down."

What about the automobile? It promised private transportation that was fast, clean, and independent. What we got was the paving over of the landscape at public cost, the release of clouds of cancer causing pollutants, the rapid depletion of world resources, more deaths than have been caused by all of our wars, and wars themselves as nations fought to hold or gain access to sources of petroleum. Surely, it would have been possible at some point to rethink this problem and develop a plan that would integrate the automobile into a complete transportation policy that would use all of the available modalities in an intelligent way. But of course this was impossible because it is virtually unthinkable to us that we have the right or ability to turn back or modify any technology.

A prime example of an apparently useful invention with disastrous social consequences was the cotton picking machine. In a remarkably short time this invention destroyed the traditional tenant farming system of the southeastern United States. A flood of impoverished rural people with little education and no skills for coping with the special problems of city living were displaced into the cities of the North, creating cancers that are destroying these cities from within.

There are signs of change as people become more aware of what this sort of thing is costing them. We now have an Office of Technology Assessment in Washington. But does anyone really think that this will have any genuine effect? Consider what might happen if there is a new technical development that promises vast profits and thousands of new jobs, but at the cost of serious social and health problems ten years down the road. Would any politician risk opposing it? Would the options even be opened up for debate?

And here we come to the heart of the problem. It is unrealistic to blame Daedalus, Enrico Fermi, Henry Ford, or the gentlemen at RCA or International Harvester for the results of their inventions. Plato saw this clearly twenty-five hundred years ago. He has Socrates tell Phaedrus

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the story of how Thoth brought the invention of writing to Ammon, Lord of Egypt. Pointing out its possible harmful effects, the latter told Thoth: "The parent or inventor of an art is not always the best judge of the utility or inutility of his own inventions . . . You who are the father of letters, from a paternal love of your own children, have been led to attribute to them a quality which they cannot have; for this discovery of yours will create forgetfulness in the learners' souls, because they will not use their memories. The specific which you have discovered is an aid not to memory, but to reminiscence, and you will give your disciples not truth, but only the semblance of truth; they will be hearers of many things and will have learned nothing."

With over three thousand years of hindsight at our disposal few of us would now agree with Ammon's analysis of the harmful effects of writing. But he was completely correct in saying that the inventor of an art is not the best judge of its utility, and he fulfilled his responsibility to his people by trying, to the best of his ability, to foresee all of the social consequences of a proposed course of action.

This is exactly what Minos failed to do, and the responsibility for what happened on Crete rests not on Daedalus or Pasiphaë but on him. Minos broke his solemn oath to the gods and with it his covenant to his people. He did this in pursuit of personal short-term goals, a failing not unknown to us in our own political leaders. Greed is the fuel that feeds the technological machine.

The vengeance of Poseidon was not long in coming. Sometime between 1400 and 1200 B.C. Crete was visited by a terrible earthquake and tidal wave. Shortly after, fierce mounted horsemen armed with iron-tipped lances swept down into Greece from the steppes of central Asia, destroying everything in their path. In the record room of the great palace of Pylos in the western Peloponnesus a tablet was found telling of efforts to strengthen the defense. It was in vain. The invaders swept through, and on to Crete which they destroyed utterly.

The rest is silence. Darkness descended on the eastern Mediterranean. On the Asiatic shore of the Aegean refugees kept the memories alive. About the year 900 B.C. a poet or poets whom we call Homer pulled these memories together and organized them, kindling a fire that has warmed and educated all of the societies of the West.

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Classical scholars and historians will find many nits to pick in my retelling of these old stories. I am well aware that I have done violence to the time scale, treating as one individual the persons whom we now know as Minos I and Minos II, and compressing events which, if they happened at all, occurred hundreds of years apart.

Well, *tant pis* as the French say. Every writer who has touched this story from Homer on has put his own spin on it. The bones of the story remain intact, and they still speak to us across the centuries if we will listen.

And Ariadne still lives in the night sky. If you stand at the edge of the water on a clear night at the right time you will see a circle of small stars near the constellation of Hercules. These are the gems in her golden crown. And if it is very quiet you just might hear the roaring of the Minotaur.

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