

There's a *What* in the Labyrinth?? Theseus' Accomplices

Before surviving literary accounts of Theseus' victorious confrontation with the Minotaur, Attic vases depicted the scene, in BF back to Lydos, as late as the RF Codrus Painter (mid-6th to late-5th centuries). The young hero has witnesses, often a helper. Who should help him? His fellow youths and maidens enclosed in the Labyrinth? His patron goddess Athena?

Prime candidate is Ariadne, who in literary accounts gives him a ball of yarn to unwind/wind retracing his steps into/from the Labyrinth (or a glowing crown to light his way: Brommer discounts this, yet one of his own plates shows a glowing crown!). Minos' disloyal daughter is surmised to have furnished the sword with which Theseus slays *semibovemque virum, semivirumque bovem*.

On vases Minotaur, almost always to the right with a stone in each hand, faces Theseus, left, who usually attacks him with a sword. Occasionally he plies spear or club, but sword may be present even when he attacks otherwise. Often with him are young Athenians whom he rescues from the beast. Sometimes one nearby female, with or without crown in hand, stands out who must be Ariadne. A BF cup in Munich, however, besides named young mortals shows Athena, also named. Holding a lyre, she stands behind Theseus; Ariadne, also named, backs her embarrassing half-brother. A BF lekythos in Taranto shows hero wrestling bull-man with hands only; they are flanked by Ariadne, standing behind the beast, far right, and Athena, leftmost behind her heroic protégé [illustrated only in the museum's catalog: I have a slide]. Sometimes two undifferentiated females flank the fight, of whom one should be disguised Athena, the other Ariadne. This may be a revisionist arrangement, where Athena begins to usurp the hero's-helper role, glorifying the Athenian national hero, reinforcing the parallel between Minotauromachy

and Heracles' First Labor. (Artists likewise proposed thematic parallelism between Heracles-Lion of Nemea and Theseus-Bull of Marathon.)

Clandestine collaborator with the Cnossian princess, Pallas gradually became his more important accomplice. Athena's position *behind* the hero suggests his unawareness of her, like Heracles' in countless scenes where she appears *to us*. On one RF kylix she stands, admiringly, behind Theseus—invisibly to him—as he drags dead Minotaur from a building. Contemporary kylix painters depict the “same” scene of triumph *without visible Athena*.

The Minotaur story evidently included Ariadne from very early, as Herter holds. However, Athenian revisionism came into play. A parallel may be found on the famous RF kylix representing Golden Fleece, snake-dragon disgorging Jason, and pitying Athena. There's no role here for Ariadne's counterpart Medea; only the Goddess of Athens was the hero's savior.

Signs abound of Athena's presence in the Labyrinth by *non-anthropomorphic* imagery, together with probable or possible Ariadne *or without*. Flying or standing *bird* (when standing, clearly owl), plant or *tree* (olive probable), or otiose *cloak* marks her presence. Cloth is folded over a stone Theseus bestrides, hangs in the tree's branches, or hovers “in the field” (that is, in thin air: no clothes-hooks!). Or Theseus' hat may float. *Suspension is a function of the goddess*. When Theseus wields spear or Heracles-like club, alternative indication of Pallas is at work, in objects to which, unlike plentiful swords, mythical mortal women lack access.

Where Ariadne *is* involved, *Athena* may prompt her to meet and love the handsome young *xenos* as the goddess does Nausicaa in the *Odyssey*. (In Apollonius' *Argonautica* she and Hera enlist Medea indirectly, through immediate agency of Aphrodite.)

Moreover, Apollo may also participate, in the sword (by whomever provided), a typical weapon of his, and occasional puzzling *lyre*. Theseus is frequently garlanded in Apollonian

laurel if it isn't olive. Devoted to the Delian Lord, he was also grateful: he visited Delos on his homeward voyage.

Athenian vase painters tended to glorify heroic feats, as Homeric epic did, by allying heroes with gods who, however, do *not* do the mortals' deeds for them, but rather provide tangible and intangible tools (courage, for one) that they seize upon and use. Athena would become Theseus' silent accomplice as she was to Heracles, Jason, and Achilles. The erotic motif would be played down; indeed we learn instead of Theseus' later marriage to Ariadne's sister Phaedra, as if Ariadne had done nothing for the Athenian or against their father Minos!

Sources

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[All images viewable in Beazley Archive and/or LIMC save Taranto inv. 52160]