

THE LABYRINTH OF THE MINOTAUR

A Myth Retold & Game Master's Compendium · The House of the Double Axe

*"They set a monster at the centre so the world would fear the centre.
But ask the bones in the corridors — it was never the bull that killed them.
It was the turning, and the turning, and the turning."*

ON THE NATURE OF THIS DOCUMENT

This is the second in a series that takes a famous labyrinth — from the real world or the mythic one — and renders it ready for the table. The first looked at the Egyptian maze of Hawara, a place that may have shaped the very idea of large-scale dungeon design. This one turns to the most famous labyrinth ever imagined: the maze beneath Crete, and the horned thing said to wait at its heart. Unlike Hawara, this one comes with a boss.

What follows is the myth as the ancient authors told it — Apollodorus, Plutarch, Ovid, Catullus — lightly modernised, their disagreements preserved; then the history beneath the legend; and finally the material to run the labyrinth as a living dungeon, long after its kingdom has fallen to dust. Marginal notes, added in a later hand, are printed in italics.



The House of the Double Axe, at its height. *The palace as it once stood — court folding into court, stair over stair, until the eye loses the way even from above. Now roof it over, put out the sun, let a thousand years of ruin settle on it — and give it something that walks the dark.*

THE TRIBUTE OF ATHENS: THE MYTH AS THE ANCIENTS TOLD IT

From the Library of Apollodorus, the standard telling, compiled c. 1st–2nd century CE.

Minos, king of Crete, prayed to Poseidon for a bull worthy of sacrifice, and a white bull rose from the sea. But the king found it too beautiful to kill and kept it for his own. In anger the god turned the heart of the queen, Pasiphaë, toward the beast; and of that union was born a thing with the body of a man and the head of a bull. They named him Asterion – the Starred One – though the world remembers only the name of his shame: the Minotaur.

Minos set the craftsman Daedalus to build a prison no prisoner could leave: a house of winding ways, passage folding into passage, turned so cunningly the maker himself scarcely found the door again – and shut the Minotaur within. Because Athens had wronged him, Minos laid a tribute on the city: every ninth year, seven young men and seven maidens, sent into the maze to be devoured. Twice it was paid; on the third, the prince Theseus went in with them – not as victim, but as hunter.

From Plutarch's Life of Theseus, c. 100 CE – who is honest that he does not believe all of it.

Some say, Plutarch admits, that the labyrinth was merely a prison and the Minotaur no monster at all, but a cruel captain named Tauros whom Theseus bested in funeral games; others kept to the older tale of the bull-headed thing in the dark. What every account shares is this: the maze was real, those sent in did not come out, and Ariadne, the king's own daughter, loved Theseus on sight – and betrayed her father to save him.

[Later hand: "Run whichever truth your table prefers."]

The Thread, and What It Was For

Before he went in, Ariadne gave Theseus two gifts: a sword, and a ball of thread. The sword was for the Minotaur; the thread was for the labyrinth – and it is the thread, not the blade, that the story remembers. He unwound it as he walked; then, having killed the beast at the centre, he did what no victim before him had managed – he followed the thread back out. Strip the gods from the tale and a plain truth remains, one every dungeon-crawler knows in their bones: defeating the monster was never the hard part. Finding the way home was.

As Catullus and Ovid sing of what came after.

The songs do not end in triumph. Sailing home, Theseus left Ariadne sleeping on the shore of Naxos and did not wake her – for reasons the poets cannot agree. She woke to an empty horizon; some say the wine-god Dionysus found her there and took her for his bride. Theseus fared little better. He had sworn to his father, old Aegeus, to hoist white sails if he lived, and he forgot. Seeing black sails crown the horizon, the old king believed his son dead and threw himself into the water – and the sea has carried his name ever since: the Aegean.



Victory's price, in three panels. *Ariadne wakes alone on Naxos; the black-sailed ship runs for home; and Aegeus, seeing those sails, throws himself from the cliff – giving the Aegean its name.*

DID THE LABYRINTH EVER EXIST?

For a dungeon-builder, this is the best question of all. No vast underground maze has ever been found beneath Crete — no monster's bones, no fourteen Athenian skeletons. What *was* found is, in its way, stranger. Beginning in 1900, the archaeologist Arthur Evans uncovered the Palace of Knossos: the heart of the Minoan civilisation, older than Classical Greece by a thousand years. It sprawls across acres — hundreds of rooms, stairs folding over stairs, storerooms, workshops, light-wells and ceremonial halls — a plan so confusing that visitors still lose themselves in it with a printed map in hand. To the Greeks who came centuries later and found it half-ruined, it is easy to see how the tale of an inescapable maze took root.

And there is the matter of the name. *Labyrinth* may not come from any word for 'maze' at all, but from *labrys* — the double-headed axe carved throughout Minoan holy places. If so, the first Labyrinth was not a maze but a title: the House of the Double Axe. A temple-palace, remembered as a trap. The Minotaur is almost certainly a fiction; the palace is solid stone. Somewhere between the two, one of the most influential dungeons ever told was born — which is exactly the seam a Game Master works in.



The hero, the bull, and the double axe. Athens' owl-shield faces the beast while axe-bearers close in — and over it all presides the labrys, the double-headed axe that may have given the Labyrinth its true name.

Note for the Game Master: No monster was ever dug out of Knossos — that part was always left to the storyteller. Whether your labyrinth is the literal maze of the myth, the rambling ruin of a fallen palace, or whatever the two became after centuries underground, is yours to decide. Everything that follows assumes the kingdom is long gone — and the maze, the sunlit ruins above it, and the horned thing within are all still very much there.

Reading the Ruin as a Map

There is a gift here for the Game Master who likes to prepare. Real published floor-plans of Knossos make excellent, uncanny dungeon maps straight off the page — wings that don't quite connect, stairs that arrive where no stair should, storerooms stacked like cells. Trace one, smudge a few corridors into rubble, seal a door or two, and you have a Tier I that no player can metagame, because its logic is genuinely four thousand years old.

WHY ENTER THE LABYRINTH? — HOOKS FOR THE DESPERATE AND THE MAD

No sane person walks willingly into a maze built to kill. Here are six reasons that override good sense — each pointing at a different party and a different tone.

Hook	The Situation	Why the Party Goes
Rescue the Tribute	The old cycle has somehow begun again: a youth has been taken into the maze — a noble's child, a villager, or one of the party's own — and the clock is the Minotaur's hunger.	Get in, find them alive, get out. Simple to state, lethal to do. The maze, not the bull, is the timer.
Daedalus's Workshop	The maze's maker is said to have left his greatest work sealed at its heart: mechanisms, wax-and-feather wings, automata — and the only true plan of the labyrinth ever drawn.	Treasure and knowledge. A guild, a tyrant, or a scholar will pay a fortune for the plan alone — and kill to keep a rival from it.
The True Story	A patron is obsessed with what really lies at the centre. Was there ever a Minotaur? Bring back proof — a horn, a fresco, a confession scratched in stone.	A lore-hunt that turns deadly. The truth, once found, is worth more than gold to the right buyer — and dangerous to the wrong one.
Stop the Slayers	A rival hero-band was hired to <i>kill</i> the Minotaur. The party's patron needs it alive — because the beast is a living seal, or a bloodline, or because its death wakes something far worse.	A race and a sabotage job, deep in a maze that hates everyone equally. The other party may not be wrong — only first.
The Thread of Ariadne	The original thread is said to still hang in the dark — no longer mere cord, but a relic: whoever holds it can never be lost, in any labyrinth, anywhere.	A treasure that is also the perfect tool. Every faction in the maze wants it; some already died reaching for it.
The Maze in the Dreams	Someone close to the party wakes nightly from the same corridors, drawing maps they have never walked. A seer says plainly: the maze is calling its tribute again.	The dreams stop only at the threshold — or only at the centre. Entering may be a cure, a compulsion, or an invitation that was never refused.

INSIDE THE LABYRINTH: RUNNING THE MAZE

The Three Descents

- ◆ **Tier I — The Sunlit Ruins.** The fallen palace above the maze: roofless halls, faded frescoes, rival camps and cult shrines. Daylight, social play, the last easy air. CR 1-4.
- ◆ **Tier II — The Winding Ways.** The maze proper, where navigation itself is the hazard and the Thread is survival. Home to the Tribute-Born and to Daedalus's old, patient traps. CR 3-8.
- ◆ **Tier III — The Heart.** The Minotaur's lair, the bone-midden, and whatever the maker sealed deepest. The way out is as deadly as the way in. CR 7-14+.

The Maze Is the Monster

The Minotaur is the boss, but the labyrinth is the true antagonist. A bull in an open field is just a fight; the same beast in a maze that erases the way home is a legend. Let every wrong turn raise tension, and every dead end remind the party that the place itself wants them lost. The Thread rule on the next page makes that fear mechanical.

Who Walks the Dark

Inhabitant	What They Are
The Tribute-Born	Pale, half-feral descendants of youths who were never eaten — only lost, for generations. Tragic; not always hostile.
The Horn-Mad	A cult that feeds the maze, worshipping the Minotaur as a god. Fanatical, and certain the party is an offering.
The Lost Bands	Earlier adventurers — starving, broken, or worse — who never found the way out and stopped trying.
The Bull	The thing at the heart. Perhaps the last of a bloodline. Perhaps, by now, not the last.
Daedalus's Echoes	Automata and mechanisms still keeping the maze, obeying instructions no one living remembers giving.

THE THREAD — AN OPTIONAL RULE FOR GETTING LOST

Ariadne's thread is the oldest mapping tool ever recorded. This rule turns it into a resource the party must manage, so the table *feels* the labyrinth instead of merely hearing it described.

Carrying a Thread. A ball of cord, a bag of chalk, a sack of torn cloth — any deliberate trail. While the party trails a Thread, retracing their steps is automatic: they can always find the way back.

Without a Thread. Each time the party tries to backtrack or leave, the navigator makes a check (Wisdom or Survival, DC 13, rising by 1 for each tier they have descended). On a failure, the party gains a point of **Lost**.

The Lost Track. At 1–2 Lost, they are turned around — the next corridor is the GM's choice, not theirs. At 3, a wandering encounter finds them. At 4+, they surface somewhere they never intended: a tier deeper, or in another faction's territory.

Cutting the Thread. The Minotaur knows what the Thread means; so do the Horn-Mad. A severed Thread is not just lost cord — it is a death sentence the party may not notice for an hour.

Clearing Lost. Reaching a mapped landmark, stringing a fresh working Thread, or following a willing guide — a friendly Tribute-Born, perhaps — resets the track to zero.

RANDOM ENCOUNTERS IN THE WINDING WAYS (D8)

d8	The Encounter	Running It · What It Means
1	The Turning That Repeats. A corridor the party already mapped delivers them back to a junction they know.	Either the maze moved, or they did. Secretly decide which. A DC 14 Investigation spots the tell — their own chalk, a familiar scratch. Costs time, and may add a point of Lost.
2	A Thread Not Theirs. Another trail of cord or chalk crosses their own in the dark.	Follow it to a lifeline (a real way out) or a trap (it leads to the Horn-Mad, or to a corpse still clutching the spool). Trusting it is the gamble; ignoring it may be the mistake.
3	The Tribute-Born. Pale figures watch from a side passage — neither attacking nor fleeing.	The lost youths' descendants, frightened and half-feral, fluent in nothing but the maze. A fight is the lazy option; patience and a shared ration can buy a guide who clears Lost.
4	Bones With a Map. A long-dead adventurer, a half-finished map scratched into the wall beside them.	The map is right about Tier II and lethally wrong about the Heart. Genuinely useful — and a trap for anyone who trusts it past the point where the dead stopped drawing.
5	The Bellow. A roar rolls through the stone from no clear direction.	Not yet a fight — a dread timer. The Minotaur hunts by sound, and the maze carries it from everywhere at once. Light, loud speech, and combat all draw it a step nearer.
6	The Horn-Mad at Rite. Cultists, mid-ceremony, around a fresh offering.	Intrude (combat), slip past (a stealth gauntlet), or pass as supplicants (a nerve-test of bluff). The truly shameless can leave with allies instead of wounds.
7	The False Heart. A grand chamber that looks like the centre — a throne, a bull-altar, a drift of bones.	It is not the centre. Daedalus built more than one. Let the relief land, then the dread, as the party realises they are not done — and have spent their resources as if they were.
8	The Thread Is Gone. The party reaches for their trail and it is cut, burned, or simply not where they left it.	Trigger the Lost track at once. This was no accident — something in the dark understands exactly what the Thread is worth, and took it.

Connection to Lathmar

In the Lathmar campaign, the Cretan maze is one more place where the world folds wrong — a labyrinth whose corridors rearrange because the same corruption that gnaws Lathmar's mines has reached even here. A party that learns to read this maze learns, too late, that Lathmar's own deep halls have begun to turn the same way.

Campaign Note: *The Labyrinth of the Minotaur runs from a single tense delve to a full descent of 8–12 sessions, from Level 1+.* The Thread rule pairs naturally with Lathmar's guild system — rival guilds may sponsor competing expeditions, one paid to slay the bull and one paid to keep it breathing. For more about Lathmar and its own history and lore, visit [Lathmar: The Fallen Depths](#).