

Today I thought I would tell you a couple more stories from ANCIENT GREECE. These stories, like all the stories from Ancient Greece, are called MYTHS (pronounced 'Miths') because they never really happened. But they are still pretty entertaining, and we might be able to learn something from them. Both of the stories are about - like a lot of Greek myths - a dashing hero killing a monster. The hero in our first story is called PERSEUS (pronounced 'Per - see - oos') and the hero in our second story is called THESEUS (pronounced 'Fee - see - oos'). So both our heroes are young men, but as we will see, they both needed help from a really clever woman to kill the monster. And in both cases, the monster was in some way created by the Greek god of the sea, POSEIDON (pronounced 'Pos - eye - den').

## PERSEUS AND MEDUSA

So in our first story, there was a really beautiful girl called MEDUSA (pronounced 'Med - you - saa'). She was so beautiful that Poseidon fell in love with her and wanted her to be his wife. But she turned him down, and Poseidon was so angry, he turned her into a monster, with snakes growing out of her hair. She was so terrifying to look at, that if you just looked at her one time, you turned into stone. Now Poseidon wasn't the only god to fall in love with human beings. Poseidon's brother, ZEUS, was always falling in love with beautiful women, and the latest woman he had fallen in love with was a beautiful girl called DANAE (pronounced 'Dan - eye'). She was the daughter of a king who had been told that her grandson would kill him. So the king made really sure Danae wouldn't have any children by locking her in a tower. But that wasn't going to stop Zeus and he concealed himself in a shower of rain that covered Danae, and she ended up giving birth to a baby boy, Perseus.

Danae's father was horrified at this, and tried to get Perseus as far away from him as possible by putting Danae and her baby in a big chest and throwing the chest into the sea. After a long time bobbing around on the waves, the chest eventually landed up on the island of SERIPHUS (pronounced 'Sair - uh - foos'), and that's where Perseus grew up, turning into a very strong lad, just as you would



expect given that Zeus was his father. In time, the king of Seriphus fell in love with Danae and wanted her to become his wife. But Perseus didn't like the king and told Danae he didn't want her to marry him. In order to get Perseus out of the way, the king set a trap for him. He ordered everyone to give him a horse, knowing that Perseus had no horse to give him. Perseus said to the king, 'I've got no horse to give you, so tell me something else that you want - whatever you like, I will get it for you.' And the king said, 'Bring me the head of Medusa.'

Perseus was horrified - everyone knew about Medusa and how if you just looked at her, you

would turn into stone. But fortunately, Perseus had friends in high places - ATHENA, the goddess of wisdom, was Zeus' daughter, so she was effectively Perseus' half-sister. Perseus asked Athena for her advice, and she told him that to kill Medusa, he would need a sword to cut off her head, winged sandals to allow him to fly, a cape to cover him so Medusa couldn't see him, and a shield which was polished so beautifully, it was like a mirror. 'Why do I need a shield that works like a mirror? Won't any shield do?' asked Perseus. Athena said, 'You need the mirrored shield, silly, so that you



don't look at Medusa - instead you look at your shield, and when you see her reflection in your shield, you will know she is in front of you and you can cut off her head without looking directly at her.' 'That's a fantastic plan,' said Perseus, 'But where I am going to get these weapons from?' Athena told him he could find out where they were by visiting three horrible old sisters, who were so horrible they only had one eye between them, which they passed to each other whenever they wanted to look at something. Perseus went to see them to find out where to get the weapons to kill Medusa, but they wouldn't tell him anything - so he stole their eye from them, and made them tell, saying he would only give them their eye back when they told him where the weapons were.

Once Perseus had got his hands on the weapons, he flew to Medusa's cave, and put on the dark cape to hide himself, and inched his way into the cave, being sure always to look at his shield, and not at anything else. He could hear the snakes in Medusa's hair hissing away, but he couldn't see Medusa. But then he caught a glimpse of her in his shield, and he slashed out with his sword and cut off her head. But even with her head cut off, Medusa was still dangerous - if he looked at her head lying on the ground, he would still turn into stone. So keeping his eyes fixed firmly on his shield, he reached out and grabbed Medusa's head and put it safely in a bag. Now it was time to fly all the way back to Seriphus and give the king his present.

But while he was flying back, Perseus spotted a beautiful young lady tied to a tree on an island. Perseus landed on the island, and asked the lady, 'Who are you? And who left you on this island?' She replied, 'I am a princess - my name is ANDROMEDA (pronounced 'Anne - drah - med - ah'). My father the king left me on this island. He upset the sea god Poseidon, and Poseidon sent a big sea monster to our country, to eat up anyone who tried to go in the water. My father was told the only way to get Poseidon off his back was to allow the sea monster to eat me. So that's why I'm here.' Perseus had already fallen in love with Andromeda, and wasn't going to allow her to be killed by the sea monster, so he told her, 'Okay, I'll wait with you here, and when the sea monster turns up, I want you to shut your eyes very, very tightly.' Can you guess what he was going to do? Yes - that's right: as soon as the sea monster turned up, Perseus shouted 'Eyes shut!', and he shut his own eyes, reached

into his bag, and pulled out the head of Medusa. As soon as the sea monster looked at the head, it turned into stone and fell to the bottom of the sea.



Andromeda fell in love with Perseus, and they flew together to Seriphus. And Perseus pulled the same trick again. He told his mother and Andromeda to shut their eyes, pulled Medusa's head out of his bag (making sure not to look at it himself), and as soon as the king saw it, he and everyone around him turned to stone. Perseus went on to lead a very exciting life with Andromeda, filled with lots of adventures - and one of their descendants would be another child of Zeus, and the strongest many who has ever lived: HERCULES (pronounced 'Her - cue - lees'). And I will tell you about him some other time. But now let's move on to our next story - about Theseus. (But before I do you may be wondering - what happened about the prediction that Perseus would kill his grandfather? Unfortunately, it came true - Perseus and Danae went to visit Danae's homeland and her father the king, and Perseus accidentally killed him with a discus (a flat circular stone that athletes would compete to throw long distances).)

## THESEUS AND THE MINOTAUR

Theseus was the son of AEGEUS (pronounced 'Ah - jee - oos'), who was the king of ATHENS. At that time, Athens was just a village (it would become much more powerful later on), and the most powerful king in Greece was KING MINOS (pronounced 'My - noss'), who ruled over the island of CRETE. Poseidon had helped Minos to become king, but Minos had upset Poseidon (Poseidon got very upset A LOT) because he had refused to sacrifice a beautiful white bull to Poseidon, to thank Poseidon for all his help - instead Minos wanted to keep the bull, and sacrifice some other animals to Poseidon instead. So Poseidon said, 'Okay - if you love the bull so much, you can keep it. But it's only fair that your wife should love the bull as well' and he made Minos' wife fall in love with the bull. And she fell in love with it so much, she ended up having a baby with it! But having a baby with a bull never works out well, and the baby was born with the head of a bull and body of a human being - it was a monster! The baby was named THE MINOTAUR (pronounced 'My - know - tour'). Minos didn't want to kill the baby, but he knew he had a serious problem on his hands when the only thing the baby would eat was human flesh. So the baby grew up, and while it was growing up, Minos had the inventor DAEDALUS and his son, ICARUS (who I told you about on June 21 - that story was about how they escaped from Crete after they finished working for Minos) build a hugely complicated maze beneath his palace. Minos' plan was that as soon as



the Minotaur was a few years old, he would take it into the maze, and the Minotaur would never be able to find its way out - that's how amazingly complicated the maze was. And that's exactly what Minos did.

But Minos didn't want to kill the Minotaur, so he had to figure out how to feed it. He had the idea that if he could get young men and women to go into the maze, they would get lost in the maze as well, and eventually they would meet the Minotaur, and the Minotaur would...well, you know what the Minotaur would do - I don't need to go into details. But where would he get the supply of young men and women to go into the maze? After all, no one would volunteer to do this. So Minos would pick on a weaker Greek city - once a year - and tell them, 'Unless you send six young men and six young women to come to Crete to be sacrificed to my son, the Minotaur, I will burn your city down and kill everyone in it.' Faced with a threat like that, the Greek city felt it had no choice but to send the twelve young people to Crete, knowing they would never see them again.



And one year, Minos sent his messengers to Athens, to tell them to send six young men and six young women to be sacrificed to the Minotaur. Like every other king who had faced this demand, Aegeus felt he had no choice to agree and set up a lottery to pick which young people would go to Crete. But Theseus told Aegeus, 'Send me as one of the twelve young people. I will kill the Minotaur and save the others from being killed by it.' Aegeus said, 'No, my son. It is far too dangerous.' But Theseus insisted and Aegeus eventually agreed. But before Theseus sailed off with the other eleven young Athenians, Aegeus said to him, 'I think this is the last time I will see you. But if it's not and you do manage to escape the Minotaur with everyone else, when you sail back to Athens, make sure you put WHITE sails up on the ship. I will see them and know you are safe. But if the ship comes back with the BLACK sails that it's currently using, I will know that you failed and the ship is coming back empty.'

Theseus sailed off without much idea as to how he would kill the Minotaur. But when the ship arrived in Crete and he stepped off the ship, he caught the eye of King Minos' daughter ARIADNE (pronounced 'A - ree - ad - knee') and she instantly fell in love with him. (People fall in love with each instantly a lot in Greece.) Knowing what was going to happen to him, she got a servant girl of hers to slip Theseus a note saying, 'When you enter the maze, look to your left and you will find a big sword for killing my brother, the Minotaur, and a huge ball of string. Fasten the string to the handle of the door of the maze, and unroll the ball as you go into the maze.



When you kill the Minotaur, you will be able to follow the string all the way to the entrance

of the maze. I will be waiting there to let you out, and we can all go back to Athens together. But in return for me helping you, you have to marry me.’ And things turned out exactly the way Ariadne had planned.

When Theseus and the other eleven Athenians entered the maze, Theseus picked up the sword, and told the other Athenians to stick by him. He got one of them to start unrolling the ball of string as they moved into the maze - and eventually they met the Minotaur. Theseus made short work of him with the sword, and he and the other Athenians were able to follow the string all the way back to the entrance to the maze, where Ariadne was waiting for them. They all then rushed quietly to the harbour where the Athenian ship was moored, and sailed off back to Athens. But Theseus wasn't too happy with the idea of marrying Ariadne. He was still young, and wasn't ready to settle down and get married. So when the



ship stopped off at an island called NAXOS to get some supplies, Theseus encouraged Ariadne to go for a walk and stretch her legs - and when she was gone, he quickly sailed off without her. But without smart Ariadne around anymore to remind him, Theseus forgot to change the sails on the ship from black to white. So when the ship sailed into the harbour at Athens, Aegeus saw the black sails, and his heart broke at the idea that his son was gone forever. And he threw himself out of the tower where he had been keeping watch for the ship, and died. And that's how Theseus became king of Athens - and under his rule Athens became a proper powerful and rich city, and never had to worry about any demands from islands like Crete ever again. As for Ariadne, she got to marry a Greek god called DIONYSUS (pronounced 'Die - oh - nigh - soos'), so things worked out for her in the end.