

## Wilderness House Literary Review 9/4

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### Solar Origins Of The Bullfight

In Seville, the Sunday afternoon bullfight on Easter Day is said to be a command performance for society. The arena is packed on this day, and there is a restless air of excitement spinning through the stands. The women wear mantillas in the old style, and traditional spotted frilled dresses, much make up, and gleaming hooped earrings, and carry elaborate Goyesque fans. The majordomos always arrange to get the best matadors for the Seville *corrida* as well as the wildest, most dangerous fighting bulls from the Miura or Romero farms. Water men pass around with pottery jugs of water; begging gypsies mill outside the Roman amphitheater with blood red carnations, and the arena is filled with the sound of brass bands playing off key over and over again the old bull fight favorites, such as El Gato Montes.

It's all a civilized and polite, and save for the bloody rituals soon to follow, a gentile sort of celebration. But it has ancient roots, tinted with sacrifice, death and rebirth out of a cold earth.

On Easter Sunday, inside the arena the restless crowds wait, the tension builds, the band plays on, and then, into the center of the arena, the gladiators appear, dressed for the occasion in their bright, "suits of light" as they are called, and holding high their weapons. They are followed by lank, padded horses and high-speared picadors, and the grand procession circles the arena, salutes the majordomo, and then retires behind the barricades. The procession has all the elements of some high church ceremony.

Just before the gates open to allow the bull into the ring, a quiet tension settles over the crowd. A silence descends and waits in the air like a crouched cat. And then, suddenly, out into the bright light of the bullring, the hunch-shouldered black Minotaur charges, his great spearpoint horns swinging, his coat glistening and his bright hoofs gleaming. He halts in mid arena, paws the sand, his eyes searching, his vast horned head turning left to right, looking for the enemy that has trapped him in the small corral over the past few days. He trots around the ring, sniffing the air, pawing and snorting, and then, as bulls will do, he selects one section of the open space, his so-called *querencia*, or favored site, which he will defend to the death.

Following this spirited entry, the sacrificial rites begin. Altar boys in the form of arena workers, or "wise monkeys" scurry here and there in their blue coveralls and red bandanas, the acolytes and monks, in the form of the light-footed banderilleros and the heavy horsed picadors, circle and dance, and then, the high priest himself appears, the trim, sword-bearing killer of bulls.

He walks with the grace of a cat. Straight backed, slippered, and gleaming in his suit of lights, a feminine, ballerina-like killer, light footed and deadly. He starts with the great red cape, tests his victim with nonchalance, as if he himself could never be killed by the snorting, horned Minotaur, who charges down on him again and again, head lowered to better hook his opponent.

Having tested his victim, the matador priest ends this act of the drama

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with a swirling flourish of his red cape and the acolytes move in to weaken and enrage the beast. The banderilleros place colorful barbed darts in the bull's shoulder, ducking and dodging his horns, as they do so. Then the horse-borne picador lances the bull's neck muscles as he charges again and again into the sides of the padded horse, occasionally lifting it off its feet. And then finally, with the beast prepared for sacrifice, his priestly nemesis returns, this time with the sword and the small cape called the *muleta*. There follows now the final dance of death. The bull continues to charge, continues to attempt to kill, until finally, standing side ways, his sword lined up on his arm, the killer priest, shakes the *muleta* and the bull charges in for the last time.

The matadores, the good ones, kill cleanly, going in over the horns and spinning away just before they are hooked. Once pierced, the dark Minotaur, staggers, sways, and then collapses in the sand in the yellow sun of the afternoon.

The crowd, if they are pleased with the sacrifice, will call for a reward. The altar boys cut the ears, sometimes even the tail, from the sacrificed beast, and then, still cool and collected, as if he had not himself faced death in the afternoon, the matador struts around the ring, bearing his awards aloft, and then exits, his work completed.

Little wonder that this primal rite has been the subject of much literature, not to say much outcry from animal rights agencies. .

The bullfight is now a much-despised ritual, a brutal, even barbaric, event in the eyes of the modern world, and I suppose, in the end, it's indefensible. But in my callow youth, I used to attend these rituals with an almost religious zeal. I was caught up, even then, in the richness of ancient rituals and old primal gods and goddesses, and I perceived the bullfight in historical terms.

As far as sacrifices go, especially when compared to the mass human sacrifices of the Aztecs and other Mesoamerican cultures to appease the sun god, this one was balanced. For one thing the sacrificial animal, while fated to die no matter what, still has a chance to defend himself and even do some damage to the priests and their acolytes.

For most of the twentieth century, it was believed that the Spanish *corrida* evolved from the bull cults of Crete, and the story of the Minotaur and the Cretan bull leapers. According to this history, originally promulgated in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century by the English archeologist Sir Arthur Evans, the Minoan culture was associated with the bull worship and part of the ritual associated with this veneration involved a dangerous dance of death in which young athletes, men and women alike, would leap over the horns of a charging bull, sometimes arcing over the horns and the bull's back in elaborate somersaults. Evans believed this ritual was associated with the story of Theseus and the Minotaur and the famous labyrinth at Knossos.

Of all the labyrinths and mazes of the ancient world, the most famous, and the one that has lent its name to many maze traditions, was the Minoan labyrinth at Knossos on Crete. The structure may have existed in some form as early as 2000 BC, and there is some indication that the Cretans may have borrowed the idea of a vast, internal, citylike maze from the ear-

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lier Egyptian labyrinth at Crocodilopolis at Lake Moeris. The Cretan maze was essentially a complex of winding paths deep in the interior chambers of the walled city. Here the Minoans practiced the sport of bull leaping, which was an important aspect of the Minoan bull cults of the period. Young men and women would leap over the horns of a charging bull as a part of one ceremony

The word labyrinth is derived from this palace; *Labrys* is a double headed ax, and the interior rooms where the bull cult ceremonies would take place was called the House of the Double Axes. Here captives were trained for the dangerous bull leaping sport that gave rise to the legend of Theseus and the Minotaur.

According to the Greek myth, the maze at Knossos was designed by the craftsman Daedalus. It was an elaborate and complex series of paths, and once you got inside, you could not get out without a guide. In the center, lived the Minotaur, a being with the body of a man and the head of a bull, or vice versa in some versions. In either form he had an insatiable appetite for human flesh. The Minotaur was the unfortunate offspring of the wife of Minos the King of Crete, Pasiphae, who, in one of those sweet revenges so common in Greek mythology, was tricked by Poseidon into coupling with a white bull.

The son of King Minos had been murdered by the Athenians and as retribution for this crime, every nine years, Minos decreed that a tribute of seven young men and seven maids must be sent to Knossos for sacrifice. The young people were then sent into the labyrinth constructed by Daedalus to be eaten by the Minotaur. The King of Athens at this time was Aegeus, whose son was the hero, Theseus. Early in his heroic career Theseus offered to join the troop of young people sent off to Knossos and vowed to slay the monster and put an end to the tribute. Over his father's objections, he sailed off, but before leaving Athens, Theseus told his father that when the ship returned, if he had been victorious, he would hoist a white sail. If he had lost, his crew would raise a black sail.

During the review of the sacrificial victims before the king at Knossos, Theseus was spotted by the king's daughter Ariadne and the two fell in love. Ariadne gave Theseus a sword and a ball of thread, and on the appointed day of the tribute, Theseus attached the thread to the entrance and entered into complex pathways of the labyrinth, working his way deeper and deeper through the dark hallways, spinning out the thread behind him. At the center of the maze he encountered the Minotaur and a great fight ensued. Theseus killed the Minotaur, followed the thread back out to the entrance and then fled Crete, taking Ariadne with him.

The story has the sad ending of many of these mythological tales, however. Instructed by a dream, Theseus deserted Ariadne on the island of Naxos and sailed for home. But as he entered the harbor, he forgot his promise to signal and sailed in with the black sail raised, the traditional color of the sails of Greek vessels. His distraught father, believing his son dead, threw himself from a cliff, thus giving his name to the Aegean Sea.

There was more to come, though. The enraged Minos had Daedalus and his son, Icarus, imprisoned in his own labyrinth. Here, the ingenious Daedalus constructed wings with feathers and wax and the two flew off

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to freedom. But, even though he had been warned not to fly too high --- or too low --- the ecstatic young Icarus, with typical teenage exuberance, soared ever higher and came too close to the sun. The heat melted the wax that held the wings together, and he crashed into the sea and drowned.

Arthur Evans freely interpreted the wall paintings of bull leapers he uncovered at Knossos as evidence of these legends, attributing the story and the bull cults to the indigenous Cretan culture with no influence from contemporary Greek or Egyptian ideas or myths. But the newest argument, most recently put forth by the archeologist J. Alexander MacGillivray is that the bull images on the palace of Knossos have to do with the sun and are in fact images of the constellations, and the bull leaping frescoes represent Orion the Hunter, confronting the constellation Taurus, which contains the Hyades and the seven sisters, the Pleiades. The leaper, MacGillivray argues, is the hero Perseus. He somersaults over the back of the bull to rescue Andromeda who had been chained to a rock to be sacrificed to a sea monster. According to MacGillivray, the configuration of stars described on the walls would occur at the end of the agricultural year in ancient Egypt, Greece, and Crete. The images of the bull leapers served to recall the astral calendar and were used for both time keeping and navigation. Furthermore, the recurring image in the Cretan art of two rising steep peaks which Evans interpreted as the horns of the sacred bull were a known contemporary symbol for the horizon in Egypt. MacGillivray argues that both the Greeks and the Egyptians strongly influenced the Minoan culture, and that the horn imagery is actually a solar calendar. The twin peaks mark the two solstices and the valley marks the equinox. Furthermore, the famous double ax symbol that occurs throughout Cretan art symbolizes, according to MacGillivray, the equinox. The vertical shaft, in the center of two equilateral triangles represents the equality of day and night.

Actually there is an even earlier solar interpretation of the bull cults and the story of the Minotaur. In 1905 a German scholar, basing his theory on his translations of early Greek place names, believed that the Minotaur was a stand-in for the sun, and the monster's mother, Pasiphae, was the moon. To trace the wanderings of the stars astrologers used the labyrinth in which the famous Theseus story plays out.

Whatever the origins, the tradition of bull leaping, as did so many Cretan customs, spread from Knossos and was adopted by other European cultures.

During the eight centuries of the Spanish War of the Reconquest (711-1492 A.D.), the knights, Moors and Christians, weary of killing one another, would occasionally allow themselves a respite; but in order to avoid boredom, and also to release their pugnacious instincts, they would compete in hunting wild-life existing in the Iberian lands. Deer and other equally docile animals were easy prey, and while a cornered bear or boar would occasionally put up a fight, it was never a challenge for such valiant knights. However, the scenario changed every time they faced the Iberian bull. This beautiful and awe-inspiring beast, with its unique noble bravery would, when provoked, rather die fighting than flee - in essence, transforming the hunt into an avid exchange in which the bravest warriors

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could bring to light their courage. Perhaps a nobleman with an entrepreneurial spirit thought about capturing several of these horned beasts, taking them to the village, and recreating the thrill of the hunt so that the knights could demonstrate their skill and win the admiration of their subjects. Thus, in a remote corner of Medieval Spain, the beginning of what today is the national Spanish spectacle of bullfighting was created.

The first historic bullfight took place in Vera, Logro, in 1133, in honor of the coronation of king Alfonso VIII. From that point on, history is full of instances in which kings organized corridas to commemorate important events and to entertain their guests. After the Spanish War of the Reconquest, the celebration of corridas expanded throughout Spain and became the outlet where the noblemen demonstrated the zeal that allowed them to defeat the Moors. Even the Emperor Charles I in Valladolid in 1527, and later King Philip IV took part in the lancing of bulls in the bullfighting arenas, or plazas de toros.

The spectacle is still with us today in diminished form. But generally speaking, the ancient pagan roots are forgotten or overlooked. Better not to consider the fact that in Catholic Spain the most important of the Christian holy days is celebrated by the ritualistic killing of a bull in order to assure the smooth workings of the cosmos.