

## Asterion — Asterios

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Asterion and Asterios are names we encounter in ancient Cretan tradition. A single late notice gives the latter as a cult-title of Zeus at Gortyn<sup>1</sup>), while two figures of myth bear the former: 1) the aboriginal Cretan king<sup>2</sup>), son of Tectamus, who married Europa and adopted the children she had borne to Zeus, who had abducted her and consorted with her in the form of a bull; and 2) the Minotaur<sup>3</sup>), i.e. *ταῦρος Μίνω*, the child sired by the bull which Poseidon had sent to King Minos out of the sea, born with a bull's head to Pasiphae, the King's wife.

The element common to these names is the bull-motif. Ancient Cretan bull-games, some sort of athletic exploit, *are* known from Minoan frescoes<sup>4</sup>), as are scenes of bull-hunting, and a bull-dance in Crete may possibly be attested much later as well<sup>5</sup>). Though the Zeus Asterios of Gortyn can surely be discounted as a late invention<sup>6</sup>), the Cretan king and the Minotaur, who remain, have clear connections with the bull; the king is the surrogate for the divine bull in the role of Europa's consort in the myth, and the Minotaur the bull-headed son of another bull of divine origin and the stepson of Minos, son of the bull. Thus the root *aster-* in these names is connected with one aspect of a bull-theme prominent on Crete.

It is likely that the bull-motif derives from the Orient. The Minotaur, we know today, goes back to the middle of the second

<sup>1</sup>) George Cedrenus 1.217 (Migne CXXI p. 251) says Menelaus went to sacrifice to this god while Paris was being entertained in Sparta. Cedrenus fl. c. 1100, probably.

<sup>2</sup>) Hes. fr. 140 MW, fr. 56 Bgk (both from Σ AB Hom. M 292); D.S. 4.60.2f.; Apollod. 3.1.2.1, 3.1; Nonn. D. 1.353, 2.693; EM 588.24.

<sup>3</sup>) Lyc. 1301 and Tz. ad loc.; Apollod. 3.1.4.3; Paus. 2.31.1.

<sup>4</sup>) Cf. esp. the Taureador Frescoes from the palace at Knossos and the West Porch frescoes as well in A. J. Evans, *The Palace of Minos* (Oxford 1935) 2.304ff.

<sup>5</sup>) Luc. *Salt.* 49, where the bull from the sea and the Minotaur are listed as possible subjects for pantomime. It is not likely that this is a survival of Minoan bull-dancing, though cf. *ibid.* 53, the dream of Medea, and A. M. Harmon's note *ad loc.* (LCL 1955).

<sup>6</sup>) U. v. Wilamowitz-Moellendorff, *Der Glaube der Hellenen* (Berlin 1931) 111. In fact, to judge from Apollo "Daphnaïos", who appears alongside Zeus "Asterios" in Cedrenus' account, the epithet would be poetical and of Hellenistic date, at the earliest.

millennium in Crete<sup>7)</sup>, and is found even earlier in Egypt. For Greece, including Crete, the proximate source could be Phoenicia. Now this view has been widely accepted<sup>8)</sup>; only Eduard Meyer<sup>9)</sup> claimed Phoenician influence was too slight at the time, an objection which seems of little substance<sup>10)</sup>. At the root of the Phoenician hypothesis, as originally formulated, lies a comparison: the man-eating Minotaur corresponds to the brazen bull of Phalaris of Acragas in which men were burnt alive, and Phalaris' bull in turn corresponds to the Phoenician-Canaanite Tophet where children were sacrificed<sup>11)</sup>. Acragas was a Rhodian colony, and Phoenician influence on Rhodes can be demonstrated. The Minotaur, in terms of this comparison, is a metaphor for the cult of a bull-god involving human sacrifice in Minoan Crete. Nilsson, however, doubted there existed any important bull-deity or bull-cult in ancient Crete<sup>12)</sup>, and Pendlebury saw no archaeological evidence for any such thing<sup>13)</sup> Wilamowitz, Nilsson's teacher, refusing to accept the late notice of Zeus Asterios, must reject any comparison between the Minotaur and the Tophet. He was left with the assumption of a mythical tradition, probably of Athenian origin, concerning a man-eating Minotaur named Asterion<sup>14)</sup>.

<sup>7)</sup> H. G. Buchholz and Vassos Karagheorghis, *Prehistoric Greece and Cyprus* (London 1973) 1401.

<sup>8)</sup> Cf. e.g. L. Preller and C. Robert, *Griechische Mythologie* (Berlin 1894<sup>4</sup>) 145f.

<sup>9)</sup> *Geschichte des Altertums* II<sup>2</sup> (Stuttgart 1935<sup>2</sup>) 118ff. Cf. PWRE XV 2 (1932) Minos col. 1932.

<sup>10)</sup> Apart from Apollo Amyklaios, most probably to be identified with Resēph-Mikal, and Zeus Atabyrios, whose name parallels that of Mt. Tabor, the story of Cadmus and Europa shows such influence, as has long been recognized. It seems not to have been inconsiderable. For archaeological parallels v. P. Demargne, *La Crète dédalique* (Paris 1947) 272–276, 286–298. Nevertheless, P. Faure, *Fonctions des Cavernes Crétoises* (Paris 1964) 159 claims that the Cretans owe nothing to the Semites besides perhaps certain images or artistic processes. The rest would be of common Aegean or Mediterranean origin.

<sup>11)</sup> According to Cic. *Verres* 4.73 a brazen bull like that attributed to Phalaris was found in Carthage in 146, and was probably used in human sacrifice in the Tophet. Hence this part of the comparison is valid. But in Crete Talos would be much closer to such a brazen bull than would the Minotaur, and the latter has little besides his bull's head in common with it.

<sup>12)</sup> M. Nilsson, *The Mycenaean Origin of Greek Mythology* (Berkeley 1932) 176.

<sup>13)</sup> J. D. S. Pendlebury, *The Archaeology of Crete* (London 1939) 274.

<sup>14)</sup> *Loc. cit.* (n. 6 *supra*). At Gortyn there is archaeological evidence for Zeus Welchanos and for Apollo Amyklaios, but none for Zeus Asterios.

All this has not affected the learned tradition of a Cretan bull-cult and bull-deity, it appears. Those who hold to it continue to maintain its origins are Phoenician, while generally ignoring human sacrifice. Thus, for example, most recently R. F. Willetts has written: "There is now much evidence to support the view that this cycle of mythology of a bull-god originated with the Babylonian Hymn of Creation (Enuma Elish) and that it came to Crete by way of Ugarit in the course of the second millennium B.C.<sup>15)</sup>" (The people of Ugarit were akin to the Canaanite-Phoenicians.) If there is such a cycle, it is possible to trace features that could serve as its origins, with a bit of imagination. What is more certain is Phoenician influence, even if no Cretan bull-divinity or bull cult existed.

The bull among the Canaanites or Phoenicians was an attribute of divinity, just as among the Greeks, in the Europa story, for example. As for the Minotaur, his cult connection with the sky-god Zeus, or with the Zeus of the Europa story, is open to question. A man-bull may be a figure of myth with no corresponding cult divinity in evidence. The bull represents power and fertility. Minoan Cretan bull-games aimed, no doubt, at mastering and acquiring just these forces, tremendous fertilizing power, great strength, and renewal of energy<sup>16)</sup>. This is an ideological complex common in the Greek area, moreover; the bull in Greece has connections with the phallus<sup>17)</sup>, with Dionysus<sup>18)</sup>, with rivers, and with Poseidon<sup>19)</sup>. In Phoenicia, too, as in the Near East in general, the same complex of ideas is associated with the bull.

The name Asterion applied to the bull-figure here is puzzling. If the root of the name is the Greek *astēr*, "heavenly body", we must posit an unparalleled type of transference to account for such a name being given to a bull-figure<sup>20)</sup>. Let us see why.

<sup>15)</sup> *Ancient Crete* (London, Toronto 1965) 121ff., esp. 126. V. also his *Everyday Life in Ancient Crete* (London, New York 1969) 167.

<sup>16)</sup> The word *tauros*, despite its similarity to Semitic words for the bull, seems to derive from the I.-E. root *\*tu-*, "to be large, strong".

<sup>17)</sup> Cf. Otto Jahn, "Über den Aberglauben des bösen Blicks bei den Alten", *Ber. d. k. sächs. Ges. d. Wiss. zu Leipzig* 7 (1855) 58, n. 116; Taf. V 4, 5.

<sup>18)</sup> Hiller-Crusius, *Carm. pop.* 5, from Plut. *Mor.* 2.225.

<sup>19)</sup> For rivers cf. Timaeus *ap. Σ Pind. Pyth.* 1.95, and *e. g.*, a silver tetradrachm of Catana by the Aetna master from 461 with a river-bull on the obverse in the British Museum. For Poseidon, aside from the myth of Minos and the bull from the sea, *v. Athenaeus* 425c.

<sup>20)</sup> Presumably in order to meet this difficulty there was formulated a theory deriving "Asterios" from "Ashtoreth". Cf. A. H. Sayce, *Hastings*

# GLOTTA

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A taurine figure in the sky is found among Near Eastern religious conceptions, but not in connection with the stars or any heavenly body. It functions as a bringer of water, that is, as one who presides over the storm or other sources of water. On the principle of  $\delta \tau\rho\acute{\omega}\sigma\alpha\varsigma \lambda\acute{\alpha}\sigma\epsilon\tau\alpha\iota$ , the same figure may cause drought too, as in the Gilgamesh epic where the Bull of Heaven, who is the power of Nergal, the god of plague, symbolizes drought and famine. His breath is the hot wind of the desert. Gilgamesh and Enkidu slay him and offer his heart to Shamash<sup>21</sup>). The bull's horns worn by the Phoenician god Baal on his helmet<sup>22</sup>), belong to the same complex. So does the chariot of the Hittite storm-god Teshub, to which bulls were yoked<sup>23</sup>), and so does the Talmudic angel in charge of rain and flood, whose epiphany is in the form of a calf<sup>24</sup>), in Babylonia again, but almost two millennia later, as does the bull-slaying Mithra of Iranian origin as well.

Nor do we find any star-deity as a bull in the religion of Ugarit, the most ancient "Canaanite" cult we know of, where heavenly bodies were worshipped expressly<sup>25</sup>), but we do find Il, the father of the gods, as a bull, no doubt in view of his fertility, and Baal, too, again<sup>26</sup>). In the same general area, much later, in Palmyra, we find many of the gods fitted out with bull's horns<sup>27</sup>), but the most prominent of these is Aglibol, the moon-god, whose horns merge into the form of the crescent moon<sup>28</sup>).

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*Enc. of Religion and Ethics* I (1951) s.v. Bull (Semitic) p. 888. Aside from the difficulty of showing any fertility features of the Minotaur to match those of the goddess, this theory too is based on the equation Minotaur = Tophet; for the goddess is related to the bull chiefly through her spouse, one of the Baalim worshipped in rites of human sacrifice.

<sup>21</sup>) For the water-bringing bull cf. M. Eliade, *Patterns in Comparative Religion* (Cleveland, New York 1963) 83ff., as well as H. C. Rawlinson, *The Cuneiform Inscriptions of Western Asia* (London 1891<sup>2</sup>) iv 43, who brings a Sumerian hymn to the bull, "offspring of Zu", who "makes the field luxuriant". For the Bull of Heaven v. Gilgamesh epic, Tablet VI 94ff.

<sup>22</sup>) John Gray, *Near Eastern Mythology* (London, New York 1969) 72.

<sup>23</sup>) H. G. Güterbock, "The Hittite Version of the Hurrian Kumarbi Myths", *AJA* 52 (1948) 125, n. 18.

<sup>24</sup>) *Bab. Talmud, Tract. Taanith* 25b.

<sup>25</sup>) Detlef Nielsen, *Ras Šamra Mythologie und Biblische Theologie* (Leipzig 1936) 46; cf. also p. 44f.

<sup>26</sup>) A. S. Kapelrud, *Baal in the Ras Shamra Texts* (Copenhagen 1952) 24, 93ff.

<sup>27</sup>) J. Hoftijzer, *Religio Aramaica* (Leiden 1968) 31ff.

<sup>28</sup>) *Ibid.*



The moon has a special connection with fertility<sup>29</sup>), and that, along with the horn, or horns, of the crescent moon, connect it with the bull. Proclus *Comm. in Hesiodi 'Egga* 767 (= Abel *Orphica* fr. 29) says the moon is called by Orpheus "the ox-calf with one horn". Similarly, in the Avesta the moon bears the epithet *gaočiθra*, "the seed of the bull", and the same idea reappears in the Bundahišn. Here we do have a heavenly body associated with the bull, but the Greek source is late, and may derive from the Persian, and the Minotaur has no further trace of a lunar nature. Furthermore the influence would be Persian, which is going rather far afield, and we are entitled to question a name which would point to the moon in particular, and not to heavenly bodies in general; for the moon is not called simply *astēr*.

In Palmyra again, in the late period, Bel appears as the master of the sun, moon, and stars<sup>30</sup>), and he has bull's horns. Hence to assume a connection between the bull and the stars would be wrong. The Lord, in LXX Nu. 23.22 and 24.8, is assigned aurochs horns as an attribute, and in LXX Neh. 9.6 we are told that the hosts of heaven bow down to him. We may not, on the basis of this, say that the host of heaven has aurochs horns, or that the aurochs represents the host of heaven. The same goes for the Palmyrene Bel, and also for the Cretan Zeus who carried off Europa in the form of a bull, and who appears on coins struck by Nero and Titus surrounded by a group of seven stars<sup>31</sup>), and for Jupiter Heliopolitanus of Baalbek, the Phoenician Haddad, depicted with bull's horns as well<sup>32</sup>).

Only in Egypt, relatively far from the Greek area culturally as well as geographically, do we find the bull identified with the stars and other heavenly bodies, though here too the identification is sporadic, not firm, and occasionally insecure. Indeed the Egyptian picture as a whole is less than clear. It seems unlikely that the term "heavenly body", as such, should be applied to a bull, as is claimed in the derivation of the Minotaur's name from the word *astēr*, on the basis of the Egyptian evidence. We do indeed find certain heavenly bodies identified as bulls here, because of their power, but no bulls called "heavenly body" or identified as such.

<sup>29</sup>) Eliade, *op. cit.* (n. 21 *supra*) Cap. IV, 154–187.

<sup>30</sup>) Hoftijzer, *ibid.* (n. 27 *supra*).

<sup>31</sup>) A. B. Cook, *Zeus* (Cambridge 1914) 1.547.

<sup>32</sup>) *Ibid.* 567f.

So the “eye of the sun” is a bull, and the Month-bull, identified with the sun through Month-Re, Lord of Thebes, is also a sun-god<sup>33</sup>).

The Egyptian goddess Hathor often has the form of a cow who bears the solar disk between her horns. Her name means the house of Horus, and hence it has been conjectured that she is originally the cow who lifted the sunchild Horus into Heaven. Like Mehet-uret (Methyer), her bovine nature stems from her nurturing role. She gives suck to the child and she is connected to the great flood, like the storm gods of Asia Minor and the Levant whom we noticed before. Finally, there is an Egyptian design of high antiquity which appears to represent a cow’s head ornamented with stars<sup>34</sup>). It may portray Hathor in an astronomical aspect, but that is mere conjecture. At all events it is little to go on in explaining the name of the Cretan Minotaur.

Heavenly bodies are termed “bulls” in Egypt, but Hans Bonnet writes: Gelegentlich wird die Bezeichnung Stier überhaupt nur als ein bildlicher Ausdruck für „Gebieten“ verwendet. (So schon Pyr. 276.) Von hier aus ist zu verstehen, wenn man die großen Gestirne als „Stiere des Himmels“ anspricht (s. Mond, Sonne) . . .<sup>35</sup>) The Egyptian evidence is no more adequate than other Near Eastern evidence to show the Minotaur’s celestial nature.

Other “proofs” of the connection of the Minotaur with the stars are no more conclusive. His body is shown covered with stars on an amphora from Nola in the Museum Gregorianum<sup>36</sup>), but this late artifact is probably evidence for no more than a folk-etymology from the Greek *aster*, and isolated evidence at that. Nor have learned attempts to connect the bull with the stars been more successful. F. Durrbach has printed a Minoan seal showing the Minotaur, on which he claims that the dots around the monster’s head may represent stars; but these dots emerge, like bubbles or smoke, from a vessel he holds in his hand<sup>37</sup>). O. Gruppe, who rejected the evidence of the Nolan amphora, tried to use a com-

<sup>33</sup>) Hans Bonnet, *Reallexikon der Ägyptischen Religionsgeschichte* (Berlin 1971<sup>2</sup>) s.v.

<sup>34</sup>) W. M. Flinders Petrie, G. A. Wainwright, and E. Mackay, *The Labyrinth, Gerzeh and Mazguneh* (London 1912) Pl. 6.

<sup>35</sup>) Bonnet, *op. cit.* (n. 33 *supra*) s.v. Stiere, p. 752, col. 2.

<sup>36</sup>) For this v. Cook, *op. cit.* (n. 31 *supra*) 1.493f. Cook refers to Gerhard, *Auserlesene Vasenbilder* 3.36f., Pl. 160, for a picture of the vase, which he thinks can hardly show stars.

<sup>37</sup>) F. Durrbach, art. “Minotaure”, in Darembourg-Saglio, *Dict. des Antiquités* 3 (1933).

plicated construction based on the conjunction of the crescent moon and Venus every eight years (Minos is said to have reigned for nine years<sup>38</sup>), in which the constellation Taurus plays a role, to explain the Minotaur's connection with the stars<sup>39</sup>); but his far-fetched theory has not won adherents.

The chief evidence, it seems, for the astral connections of the Minotaur and of the bull in general remains the name Asterion. It is not hard to see here a classic case of *petitio principii*.

A different result emerges if we assume the bull's name derives from Phoenicia, as does the bull-figure in all probability. Johannes Friedrich and Wolfgang Röllig, *Phönizisch-Punische Grammatik* (Rome 1970<sup>2</sup>) § 45, p. 19, quote certain Phoenician plant-names from Dioscorides based on the Punic (Ἀφροί) word חצר (Hebrew חציר) ḥašir, "grass", "hay". Among the various forms this word takes on in Greek transliteration there appears next to 'atir', pronounced 'atsir', the metathesized form 'astir'<sup>40</sup>), which, with

<sup>38</sup>) This story is based on an interpretation of the word ἐννέωρος used to describe Minos in Hom. *Od.* 19.179. Cf. Apollon. *Lex.* 68.13. Eust. *Od.* 1861.32, *EM* 343.25f.

<sup>39</sup>) *Griechische Mythologie und Religionsgeschichte*, §§ 109, 110, p. 247ff. A. B. Cook. *loc. cit.* (n. 36 *supra*) is reduced to the apparent derivation of Asterios from *aster* "star", for proof of the Minotaur's celestial (solar) nature. Cook claims the identification with the sun is original, and that stars were brought into the picture on the basis of a false interpretation of the word *aster*.

<sup>40</sup>) I have been able to find the following forms in Dioscorides:

- 1) 2.126 ἀστιρκοκ· ἀρνόγλωσσον(?), "plantain",
- 2) 2.130 ἀτιρσιττη· κορωνόπους, "hartshorn",
- 3) 2.167 ἀτιρνοιχλαμ· δρακόντια μικρά, "arum",
- 4) 2.178 ἀσιρρικοει· ἀναγαλλίς ἢ φοινική, "pimpernel",
- 5) 2.186 ἀτιρτοππουρις· τηλέβιον(?), perhaps = τηλέφιον, "purslane",
- 6) 4.70 ἀστιρσμοννιμ· στρυχνός μέλας κηπαῖος, "black nightshade",
- 7) 4.136 ἀστιρχιλλοθ· Ἀχιλλεῖος "Achilles woundwort".

Of these, 2), 4), 6), and 7) are quoted in Friedrich-Röllig, 2) and 6) in false forms. (I have not been able to check the occurrence of this Phoenician word in ps.-Apul. *Parabīlīum medicamentorum script.* ed. Ackermann 1780.) The forms from Dioscorides transliterate the 𐤃 three ways: (1) σ alone is the normal transliteration in the Septuagint; (2) τι represents *ts* or *tsi*, as in the form *TIAΔE* for the name of the letter after Ps. 119.136 in the Vatican MS of the Septuagint, or in the transliteration *Τίμουλα* (variant *Σίμυλλα*) in Ptol. 1.17.1-3 for the name of the Indian city चैमूला(का) Cemūla(ka) in Maharashtra (Where the च may have been pronounced *ts* in antiquity, as it is in Marathi today); (3) στ, i.e. (2) by metathesis, as in the Punic inscriptions from Tripolitania, where the barred S (𐤃) is a ligature of *st* and is used for 𐤃, as in the name Stiddin, according to note 2 to no. 58 in

*nisbe*, would assume the form \**astirios* in Greek; with dissimilation, or perhaps assimilation to the existing Greek word of this form, *asterios*. Pausanias tells us that this word meant 'grass' in Argos. It is not an improbable assumption that the Phoenician word was borrowed into Greek at an early period and survived in the Argolid, although it had been current in the Aegean and in Crete much earlier<sup>41</sup>).

Hence the name given to the Minotaur, and to the king-surrogate for Zeus' divine bull, may originally have signified "grass-eating", an epithet whose applicability to the bull can occasion no surprise<sup>42</sup>). 'Asterion' as the name of a stream, e.g. of the one near the Argive Heraeum, may have a similar meaning; "whose banks are covered with herbage"<sup>43</sup>). At all events we must take into account in Greek a meaning "grass" for the element *aster* in the respective names, as well as "star"<sup>44</sup>).

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J. M. Reynolds, *Papers of the British School at Rome* 23 (1955) p. 128, and G. Levi della Vida, *Oriens Antiquos* 2 (1963) 72. The same *στ* may occur in Nu. 26.17 in the Septuagint, where Swete's edition has *Ἀστρώων* for *חצרון*, according to Redpath's Supplement to Hatch-Redpath, *Concordance to the Septuagint*. A similar Semitic name is surely at the root of the name Asterion which appears in a Syrian inscription (Frey *CISud* 2.870): *εὐλογία πᾶσιν· θήκη Εἰσοῦ νεῖοῦ τοῦ μακαρίου Ἀστερίου*. I would like to express my gratitude to Prof. Richard Steiner of Yeshiva University in New York City his assistance with the material used here concerning the *𐤏*, especially the Punic evidence.

<sup>41</sup>) Paus. 2.17.2, concerning the river Asterion, which has the same name as "grass", for grass is surely meant and not a species of grass, as is shown by the absence of the word *τῖς*. The Phoenician influence on Greece, including Crete, was strongest in the early part of the first millennium, and it is here that we should most likely place the borrowing of the name of the river as well as the naming of the Minotaur and the Cretan bull-king. On the other hand, the era of Aegean-Egyptian commerce was some 750 years earlier, so that is much more likely that the name Asterion derives from "grass" and is Phoenician, than that a rather obscure Egyptian concept, that a star can be termed a bull, should have influenced the name of the Minotaur.

<sup>42</sup>) Cf. Ps. 106.9 (105.20).

<sup>43</sup>) That there is a flower called aster is not to the point here. The Minotaur would not be called after a flower, even had he been fond of flowers, like Ferdinand the Bull, or even of asters; such an assumption could not establish a link with the stars, in turn.

<sup>44</sup>) Asterios, son of Kometes, in the Argonaut story (A.R. 1.35f.) is Starman, son of Comet, clearly an astral figue.