

S2_E42_CoronaBorealisMyths

Jordan: Hi, I'm Jordan.

Kit: And I'm Kit.

Jordan: Welcome to starry time, where stars plus lines

Kit: equal stories.

Jordan: Today we're going to be continuing our exploration of the constellation Corona Borealis, the northern crown, with a focus on the history and myths of this constellation.

Kit: As, we talked about last episode, this constellation is pretty vague in shape, so it's probably not a surprise that not every culture has associated this constellation with crowns.

Jordan: For example, in other cultures, it has been seen as a flower garden, a loose string of jewels, which is kind of similar to what I saw it as, a broken dish, which I can see as well. A council of stars, a boomerang, and this one I liked a lot, an eagle's nest.

Kit: So, unlike other times, where we only have the iconography of the constellation. Right, so we might know it was a flower garden, or we might know it was seen as a broken dish, We also have some records of the myths associated with this constellation from other cultures.

Jordan: For instance, we have one from the Shawnee people who have a myth about

these stars as sisters who come to earth every night to dance.

Kit: Yeah, I liked that one. But in the greco roman tradition, they associate this constellation with our very good friend, who we visited a lot this season, Dionysus, who is also associated with Corona Australis, the southern crown. But the southern crown myth usually relates to the story of Dionysus's birth.

Jordan: Shout out to our friend Semele, aka Smelly. We have seen a lot of Dionysus this season. Be sure to check out Corona Australis along with our Maenads asterism. For a little bit more about this background info.

Kit: Get into the back catalog. It's fun.

Jordan: Get into it.

Kit: But lucky for Dionysus, he's got lots of myths, that can be parsed out for various constellations. And for the northern crown constellation, we actually get to meet another quote unquote demigod hero of Greek mythology.

Jordan: Now it's time to talk Theseus, in particular, Theseus and the Minotaur. It's a long and winding path to get through this myth, but we will eventually return back to this crown. Just be forewarned, it's a bit of a, um, maze to get there.

Kit: Oh, a maze. Foreshadowing. Um, this, though, definitely seems like one of those constellations that the Greeks stole from someone else, and they just were, like, subsumed it and was like, this is now about this thing that it definitely is not about

Jordan: Or Kit they were very imaginative and loved symbolism. Either way, this story begins with Theseus, our, quote unquote hero. He is sometimes a demigod child of Poseidon. But Theseus' birth involves a whole other myth that involves the oracle of Delphi and Athena. So suffice to say, Theseus is obviously the child of a princess duh and has some kind of godlike parentage.

Kit: Yeah, it's kind of tough, for Theseus, family tree to figure out exactly what's going on there. And this, I think, does replicate some of what we've seen for other Greek heroes in the stars. This idea of being immortal or divine in some way, which we've discussed sort of at length in other episodes.

Jordan: So Theseus does, in fact, have a few other adventures which we could talk about, including our trip to the underworld, but we'll hold off on that one for now.

Kit: Another thing that's going on with Theseus is that he has some daddy issues related to his, alleged mortal dad, not his Poseidon dad. And he's got a hero complex. You know, long story short, there's a whole bunch of myth behind that, but that's not really the myth that matters. And we're already so far away from a crown that, let's just say Theseus, because of his daddy issues, ends up in Athens, and he super wants to prove himself.

Jordan: Unfortunately, Athens has a standing agreement to send seven girls and seven boys to King Minos of Crete every so often as a sacrifice, which is a totally normal arrangement. Makes sense.

Kit: So, apparently, this was due to King Minos' son dying

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Kit: or being murdered or killed in Athens, and King Minos getting so angry, waging a war on Athens, winning that war. And his condition was like, you send me, your youths to feed to our Minotaur.

Jordan: Theseus being the hero he is or wants to be, and now living in Athens around the time of the third sacrifice, decides, you know what? Maybe. Maybe I can put an end to this practice. Maybe I can slay the Minotaur.

Kit: Confidence, baby.

Jordan: Confidence, baby. He's trying to prove himself. And indeed, before we go on, let's talk about the Minotaur.

Kit: Buckle up, everybody. Get ready. Just. Just really sit down. and just get ready for this story.

Jordan: Love the Minotaur. The Minotaur is also known in Crete as Asterion, who was a mythical creature with the head of a bull and the body of a man, and sometimes, as well, the tail of a bull, who, unfortunately, eats only humans.

Kit: Yeah, of course, can only eat humans. That's the only form of sustenance for the Minotaur.

Jordan: And. All right, right now you're thinking, this is probably a child of Typhon or Echidna, sent to mess with King Minos and company for something they did wrong or

another. Right. That would make sense.

Kit: It would make sense. And you're sort of partially correct if you're thinking that. So, back when Minos of Crete was trying to become King Minos of Crete he asked Poseidon to send a white bull as a sign that he would be the chosen ruler of Crete. Poseidon agreed, but told Minos, after you become king, you have to sacrifice the bull to me.

Jordan: So. Sounds like a pretty easy arrangement. So he did that, right?

Kit: Well, he probably wishes he did that. So what King Minos does is sacrifice another bull, because the white bull that Poseidon sent was just too beautiful to be killed. So Poseidon, being a Olympian god, was like, um, you think that this bull is more important than me? And as punishment for this, Poseidon makes King Minos' wife fall in love with the white bull.

Jordan: Cool. Cool.

Kit: So the queen, now in love with this white bull, calls upon her favorite inventor, Daedalus to make a wooden cow for her to climb into in order to mate with the bull.

Jordan: That's how it works.

Kit: Yep. Which she did.

Jordan: Okay.

Kit: And then she becomes pregnant and births the minotaur. All right, so the minotaur is living in the castle until it gets, he gets too big and violent and bloodthirsty. And King Minos goes to seek the advice of the Oracle of Delphi, who basically said, well, have your inventor guy make a labyrinth to hold the Minotaur. You obviously can't kill it. so you just have to let it live.

Jordan: Apparently.

Kit: Right. You can't just can't kill it. So every so often, they need to send some food down there for the Minotaur, and that's where we are. The Minotaur is living in this labyrinth. It's needing to be fed every so often, and King Minos has decided to feed it Athenian children every so often.

Jordan: Theseus decides, okay, I'm gonna slay the baddie. He's not sure exactly how he's gonna do it, but he lucks out, because the overseer of the labyrinth is, in fact, King Minos's daughter, Ariadne and she instantly falls in love with our guy. Big t. Theseus

Kit: Love at first sight is a trope as old as time.

Jordan: Yeah. Ariadne can't help herself. He's so bold. But she gives him a sword and a ball of yarn so he can fight the Minotaur, hopefully win, and then follow his footsteps back out and escape the maze.

Kit: So Ariadne is really making a choice here. Doing so is a betrayal of her father and of her country.

Jordan: But it's okay. It works out. Because when Theseus kills, the Minotaur arrives

victorious from slaying this poor animal that never chose to be born, Theseus is grateful for Ariadne and they flee Crete and elope together.

Kit: Oh, this is like happily ever after.

Jordan: Such a happy ending. Except that's not the ending. The story isn't over. Theseus is grateful, but only grateful enough to leave Ariadne on an island alone. So, yeah, they go off to elope, and he leaves her alone on an island. And some accounts say

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Jordan: it was, you know, just an accident, you know, got a little lost. Uh-huh. Whoops. Others say it was due to a god. But either way, she's alone on this island, abandoned, when guess who shows up. Dionysus, who happens upon her sleeping. And then he falls in love instantly and marries her.

Kit: Ariadne's life is wild. It's a soap opera over here.

Jordan: So, yeah, she falls in love with Theseus instantaneously, doesn't work out. Dionysus falls in love with her instantaneously, and they go off to have children. And, Dionysus puts the northern crown into the sky as a symbol of her wedding crown.

Kit: Yeah, so that's how we get to the crown. The story's not quite over yet, though, because Ariadne is killed by either Perseus, using Medusa's head, or by Artemis or by her own hand. And either way, she dies. And Dionysus is like, no, no, I don't think so. And he goes to the underworld and rescues both Ariadne and his mother, Smelly, who

all become immortal goddesses. And then there is the end of our story. And somehow there's a crown sort of in there.

Jordan: There's a lot to think about with this myth Kit, aside from, you know, how long it got us just to get to the part where there's a crown, you know, in the night sky and why.

Kit: Yeah, basically just this seems like an excuse to get a Theseus story up in the night sky. But I do think it's interesting that the crown itself is actually more a symbol of Ariadne than it is of Theseus, which I think is a bit surprising. It's more about her than it is about Theseus,

Jordan: Especially since we have this whole third act where he abandons Ariadne which kind of doesn't make me more, uh, endeared to Theseus. He seems pretty cruel and manipulative, and it calls into question whether he actually took advantage of her and her attraction for him.

Kit: Yeah. So there are some iterations of the myth where Dionysus demands Theseus abandons her. And you can sort of see that as a way that the storytellers are using to sort of keep his hero status pure. But the fact that there is still a strong abandonment, this idea that he just sort of casts her off gives his character some, um, added nuance and villainy that I think is kind of interesting to think about when we think about these heroes.

Jordan: So I think in breaking down this myth, we should roughly follow the chronology of it, starting with, of course, the origin story of the Minotaur.

Kit: Well, I mean, I think, why tell a story right about, like, the birth or the origin of the

Minotaur? I think it's about the consequences of not honoring your commitments. So King Minos makes a commitment to Poseidon, and he breaks it. Um, and the consequences, of course, with the gods are always leveled up.

Jordan: And don't make the gods angry, or there will be consequences, in fact, monstrous consequences that you'll be paying for. And there's also this undertone of arrogance from King Minos, you know, acting as though he could trick him or deceive him by killing the wrong bull or somehow that he knew better than Poseidon, and that's promptly punished by Poseidon.

Kit: Yeah. And then we have the placement of the Minotaur into a labyrinth. And this definitely reminded me of this sort of human desire to, like, hide away things that we don't want to think about or see. This idea that the Minotaur isn't allowed to be killed for whatever reason, but also is not allowed to exist. Right. It has to be put into the labyrinth where no one can. No one can see it. And it sort of reminds me of this sort of very human desire to hide away those kinds of things, whether it's people or parts of ourselves or, um, other kinds of things.

Jordan: Yeah. We have a tendency as humans to lock away those things that we consider ugly or abnormal, or things that will make us feel uncomfortable. And labyrinths themselves are seen in literature and myth quite often. They can represent a journey rather than a beginning or end, or they can also be a symbol of disorientation or complexity. In some instances, it has been argued that the palace in Minos was very large and labyrinth like, and thus was a sort of source for this myth. This has since been discredited and found to be untrue. But it's a good reminder of how we translate

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Jordan: odd or out of place or unusual things into myth.

Kit: I did read a really interesting article about mythology and monsters and labyrinths, so I'll be sure to post that over on our socials for anybody who wants to dig a little deeper into the labyrinth of it all. When we get to Ariadne we get a timeless reminder that love or lust, in this case, can cloud your ability to make decisions. There's not really any version of this myth where Ariadne is deceived or where she's, like magicked into helping Theseus. It is just this idea that she is overcome. She's making a bad decision because she's so in love or in lust or thinks she's in love with Theseus. And she knows by helping Theseus, she's going to garner the wrath of her father and the people of Crete

Jordan: In the short term, she pays a consequence of this by leaving her home and then being promptly dumped by Theseus

Kit: Though then she's kind of. Then she's saved by Dionysus. And so I'm a little bit, like, confused in the myth the extent to which she was, like, happy or unhappy being with Dionysus. So in some versions of the myth, she's heartbroken about Theseus. In some version, she seems very happy and in love with Dionysus. And so I don't really know what to do with that in terms of thinking about consequence or thinking about betrayal and how her story works out.

Jordan: I mean, it seems kind of hard to tell what the actual result is for her. But I don't think it's a mistake that it is Dionysus, of all gods, who would be the one who decides to marry Ariadne. You know, get married to a mortal who he eventually turns immortal. As we discussed at the beginning of our season, now you have a whole season to look back on, Dionysus, he was also known to push boundaries.

Kit: Yeah. Dionysus is a really interesting figure in that way. And I think that, overall, what we have throughout this whole myth is a lot of different layers.

Jordan: Get a lot of lessons that, we've heard before, just, like, redone. Right. The lesson of, don't go back on your deals with gods. Love has consequences, especially when it means turning your back on your family and your people. Then we also get, men can do whatever they want because Theseus just abandons her.

Kit: Yeah. So, basically, we do have all these different lessons layered into a single myth, as opposed to in separate myths. So, in the end, even though the crown itself is minor and inconsequential almost to the story, it does make sense that the ancient Greeks would want to tell these stories. And in fact, as you said, we've heard a lot of these lessons before in other stories

Jordan: As we come to the end of the season, yeah, this is like the mashup of all the quests and curses. It's all coming together, and it created quite a maze of meaning and, ah, mythology. But let's take a quick break and see if we can make things a little bit more clear, perhaps with a, couple reconstallations of this myth. Welcome back. Back to our segment, reconstellation. In this segment, we reimagine, reboot, and revise the myths of our monthly constellation in hopes that we can modernize them, subvert them, or deepen their story. Sometimes it's the best we can do just to make them a little less cringy. Kit, would you like to start us off this week?

Kit: Yeah, I want to start, though, with some recommendations. There is a great recasting of Ariadne in the book *Herc* by Phoenicia Rogerson, which is a very excellent recentring story about Hercules, which also emphasizes his canonical queerness. And we also get a sprinkling of Theseus in. And Theseus is kind of, like a loser. Like a loser,

wannabe hero. And so that is a great book to check out. I really enjoyed it. And it's told not from Hercules perspective, but from the people all around him. A really enjoyable book. if you're looking for something.

Jordan: That's Herc by Phoenicia Rogerson. Excellent retconstellation

Kit: Yep. there's also a book called Ariadne by Jennifer Saint, which I haven't read, but is in the same vein as, ah, sort of Natalie Haynes A Thousand Ships, or In the Shadow of Perseus by Claire Heywood, which I've mentioned on previous episodes.

Jordan: So this is a myth with lots of retcons out there already as we went over just by telling it, there's a lot of different directions it goes in and therefore a lot of directions you can play with. So what'd you come up with?

Kit: Yeah, so with those, you know, other retellings aside, I decided to keep it simple this month. In my version, there's no Theseus.

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Kit: Just Theseus is gone. Let's just, you know, the crown's not even his. So in my version, Ariadne was sent to live in a rural castle on Crete after her father deemed her too rebellious and unladylike for court. So she grew up less like a princess and more like a farmhand, which made her crafty and strong. One day when she was out tending the animals, her old aunt, who she, of course, lives with in the castle, calls her into the house. Awaiting her is a contingent of her father's favorite soldiers, who order her to return to the city. But she doesn't want to go. She actually loves the countryside life. She considers trying to run, but she's on an island, so there's not really any place for her to

go. So she goes back to King Minos's castle in Crete and he tells her she is now in charge of the labyrinth because his favorite daughter, who held the sacred duty, has died. So that feels great, I'm sure. So Ariadne takes over, but when she's ordered to send in 14 Athenian children for the minotaur to eat, she just can't do it. Instead, she uses a secret hidden passageway that she found as a child and gets them out of the city. Deciding she can no longer allow her father to keep feeding the minotaur, she enters into the maze with a ball of string and a sword. She moves through the winding halls. She finds dead bodies littered throughout. And after hours, she's realized she's traversed the entire maze, and there never was and never has been a minotaur or any other monster in the maze.

Jordan: Huh? Huh?

Kit: Instead, her father was putting these children into the maze, where they would get lost and die due to exposure. She makes her way out of the labyrinth and hunts down Daedalus, confronting him about his role in this ruse. He breaks immediately.

Immediately, it admits there was never a minotaur just a cruel and sadistic king's punishment for others at the loss of his son in Athens. Ariadne next goes to her mother, who also admits there was not a minotaur. And frankly, the queen's a little upset everyone believed she had sex with a bull. So this trio, just a little. So this trio, Ariadne, Daedalus, and the queen overthrow King Minos, destroy the maze, and apologize to Athens. And Queen Ariadne goes on to become known as Ariadne the Just. And they remember her strength and bravery by commemorating her coronation crown in the night sky as Corona Borealis.

Jordan: So many twists.

Kit: Oh, yeah. You like it?

Jordan: I love it. I love it. There's no minotaur.

Kit: Yeah.

Jordan: I mean, first of all, the removal of Theseus. Great. He is kind of a loser, and I do like, yeah, Uh, this is kind of like, it keeps the mystery element of the story, but without all the abandonment aspects and Dionysus aspects, it's certainly a lot simpler. and makes sense. I like this one a lot.

Kit: How about you, Jordan? Where did you go with this retcon?

Jordan: What I liked about yours was, again, you've laid out a whole plot. So in my retconstellation, Minotaur gets out and Minotaur's real, you know, object of ire and anger isn't Theseus. Never been Theseus. He gets out and he is P.O.ed at King Minos. So in my reconstellation, the Minotaur gets out of the maze, makes King Minos pay for this punishment, becomes king of Crete King Mino-taur a tour of Crete

Kit: Yeah.

Jordan: Takes over the throne and leads a wonderful, long reign of prosperity and peace. And because he was given this outcast status earlier in life, it gives him a perspective of the small folk of Crete that allows him to be compassionate in ways that King Minos and the royal family never could. So Corona Borealis is actually the Minotaur's crown, which is them, paying tribute to his years of service to the people of Crete.

Kit: I like this. I like that in both of our myths, we were, um, out on King Minos. And I like that these unexpected things about the Minotaur, whether the Minotaur doesn't exist or the Minotaur is actually

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Kit: this sort of person that's been imprisoned because of his differentness, but then rises out of that and is able to get free from that. I like that all better than this version of the myth, that's like, hero kills monster, abandons, you know, um, poor princess. I think both of them are more interesting.

Jordan: Now it's time to see where our oracle took this myth. In our segment, Oracle AI.

Kit: First, as always, we asked the oracle for an analysis of the myth's most problematic elements. They identified five problematic themes in this myth, including betrayal and deception by Theseus, sacrifice and human suffering related to the practice of human sacrifice to the minotaur, gender roles and limited female agency, noting that Ariadne is rescued by a man and then by a god, glorification of violence and finally otherness and marginalization of the Minotaur. So, as always, we then asked our oracle for a short retcon of the myth that addresses these problematic themes that it's identified.

Jordan: So saith the oracle: In a revised telling of the myth, King Minos seeks a peaceful resolution with Athens, ending the sacrifices and fostering mutual respect. Theseus, an Athenian prince, volunteers to confront the Minotaur, not to kill it, but to understand and help it. Ariadne a strong and independent woman offers her assistance willingly, not out of love, but out of compassion for all involved. Together, they navigate the labyrinth, where they discover the Minotaur's true nature. A, misunderstood being,

not a monster. Through dialogue and empathy, they find a way to integrate the Minotaur into society, ending its isolation. Ariadne then chooses her own path, exploring the world and forging her destiny free from male control, while Theseus returns to Athens, heralded for his wisdom and peacemaking rather than his violence. So there's some interesting things going on here, for sure. What were your thoughts?

Kit: I didn't hate this one. I didn't fully understand it. There seems like there's some things missing. You only have a paragraph. But I liked the idea, again of this, thinking about the Minotaur as an other or as something or someone, that's misunderstood, I think is an interesting idea, and I think it's something that's been discussed a lot, thinking about the symbolism of the Minotaur which is why we see it from the oracle. Again, this is a myth that's been retconned and thought about in a lot of different ways, and so it doesn't surprise me that this version of it sort of brings some of those things to the forefront.

Jordan: It gets the scaffolding of things right, but doesn't really have enough, like, individual details. It's done a great job of solving some of the problems that are in the original myth, but it's not done a very good job of offering a, compelling alternative.

Kit: And it hasn't mentioned the crown, so.

Jordan: That seems important in some way. This brings us to the end of our episode this week. Join us next week for the pop culture segment of our exploration of the constellation Corona Borealis.

Kit: This has been Kit

Jordan: And Jordan.

Kit: Sisters, lovers of stars and stories.

Jordan: And we'll see you next time

Kit: On Starry Time.

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