

CAPE SOUNION & TEMPLE OF POSEIDON

Lets follow the legend. Cape Sounion is the spot where Aegeus, king of Athens, leapt to his death off the cliff, thus giving his name to the Aegean Sea. The story goes that Aegeus, anxiously looking out from Sounion, saw in despair, a black sail on his son Theseus's ship, returning from Crete. This led him to believe that his son had been killed in his contest with the dreaded Minotaur, a monster that was half man and half bull. The Minotaur was confined by its owner, King Minos of Crete, in a specially designed labyrinth. Every year, the Athenians were forced to send 7 men and 7 women to Minos as tribute. These youths were placed in the labyrinth to be devoured by the Minotaur. Theseus had volunteered to go with the third tribute and attempt to slay the beast. He had agreed with his father that if he survived the contest, he would hoist a white sail. In fact, Theseus had overcome and slain the Minotaur, but tragically had simply forgotten about the white sail.

The earliest literary reference to Sounion is in Homer's epic poem the Odyssey, probably composed in the 8th century BC. This recounts the mythical tribulations suffered by Greek hero Odysseus in a gruelling 10-year sea-voyage to return to his native island, Ithaca in the Ionian sea, from the sack of Troy. This ordeal was supposedly inflicted upon him by Poseidon, to whom the temple at Sounion was dedicated.

We are told that, as the various Greek commanders sailed back from Troy, the helmsman of King Menelaus of Sparta's ship died at his post while rounding "holy Sounion, cape of Athens". Menelaus landed at Sounion to give his companion full funeral honours (i.e. cremation on a funeral pyre on the beach) The Greek ships were then caught by a storm off Cape Malea and scattered in all directions.

Archaeological finds on the site date from as early as 700 BC. Herodotus tells us that in the sixth century BC, the Athenians celebrated a quadrennial festival at Sounion, which involved Athens' leaders sailing to the cape in a sacred boat.

The original, Archaic Period temple of Poseidon on the site, which was built of tufa, was probably destroyed in 480 BC by Persian troops. After their defeat, the Athenian placed an entire enemy trireme (warship with three banks of oars) at Sounio as a trophy dedicated to Poseidon

The later temple at Sounion, the columns of which still stand today, was probably built in 440 BC. This was during the ascendancy of Athenian statesman Pericles, who also rebuilt the Parthenon in Athens.



