

# THE (UNOFFICIAL) HISTORY OF CROQUET: PART 3

## CROQVET MAXIMVS

**T**he relationship between croquet and the deity in ancient civilisations has been conclusively established by research carried out at the croquet court sites now known to have existed in the ancient world (see *The Unofficial History of Croquet: Croquet Gazette* - June 2023), but these are in general small in scale. This cannot be said of the Nazca Lines, a group of geoglyphs in the Nazca Desert in southern Peru, which feature a combination of straight lines and figures that can only be seen from the air and were undoubtedly meant to be viewed by the gods, so it is significant that one of the giant figures depicts a monkey god playing croquet (Fig. 1).

We know that croquet was considered to be the favourite game of the gods in Ancient Greece and references to it appear in several Greek myths. There was a god of croquet named Krocus (Crocus), who was also associated with longevity, possibly a reference to the length of the game, and several figurines depicting the ancient winged god holding a mallet and ball have been discovered at temple sites dedicated to him (Fig. 2). The Greeks played two versions, which were almost identical to those played today. They were called short and long croquet, the latter being described by Homer as lasting several hours and consequently not popular as a spectator sport. Temples dedicated to Krocus always incorporated the figures seven and thirteen in their dimensions, notably the number of spaces between the columns on the short and long sides of the temple, another reference to

the different versions played.

The most famous Greek myth involving croquet describes the ancient Cretan labyrinth at Knossos. A surviving mosaic from the palace of King Minos depicts the layout of the labyrinth, which includes seven chambers arranged in the pattern of the hoops and peg on a croquet court (Fig 4). The connection between croquet and the labyrinth is further reinforced by the discovery of a bronze figurine depicting the Minotaur holding a mallet and ball (Fig. 3). The myth describes seven Athenian youths and seven maidens being sent to be devoured by the Minotaur each year, before he was slayed by Theseus.

The Romans were avid croquet players. Its status can be deduced from the number of courts that existed at Hadrian's Villa, near Tivoli. These are now known to have been grass courts, which involved a high level of maintenance, hence their status. However, it was the Romans who elevated croquet to a spectator sport in huge arenas, notably in games played between gladiators (Fig 5). These could be quite violent, as disputes over faults often resulted in a fight to the death. There were also strict rules around timing, and games that went over time usually resulted in wild animals being released into the arena to determine the outcome. The large crowds attracted by gladiatorial croquet may not return to the modern game, but clubs could still improve their prospects by installing a shrine dedicated to Krocus.

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Fig. 1: Nazca Lines



Fig. 2: Krocus Figurine



Fig. 3: Minotaur - Bronze 520-500BC



Fig. 4: Labyrinth Mosaic



Fig. 5: Roman Croquet Arena