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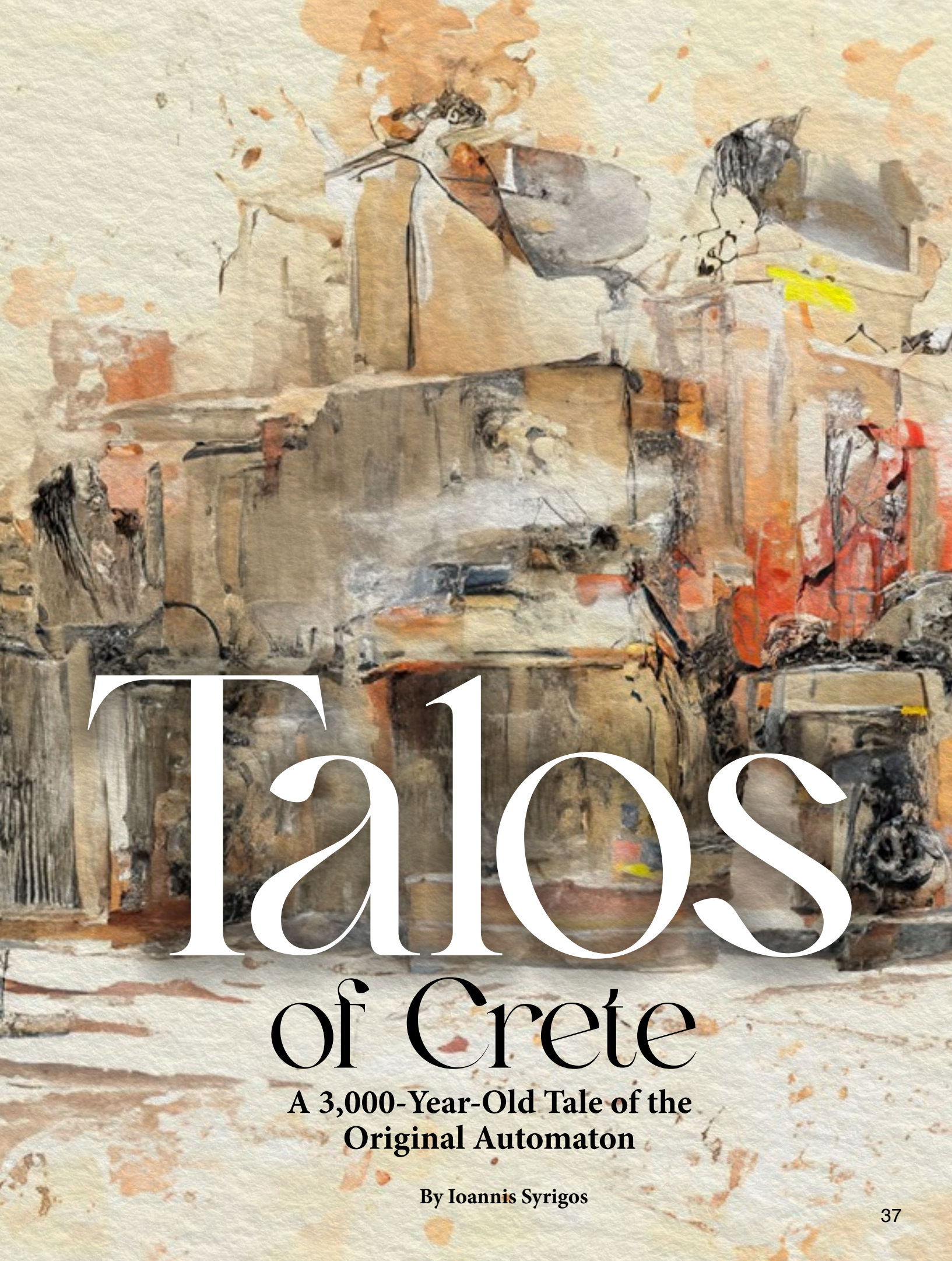
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UNCOVERING THE PAST

plus How State-of-the-Art Tech Discovered Thonis-Heracleion





Talos

of Crete

**A 3,000-Year-Old Tale of the
Original Automaton**

By Ioannis Syrigos



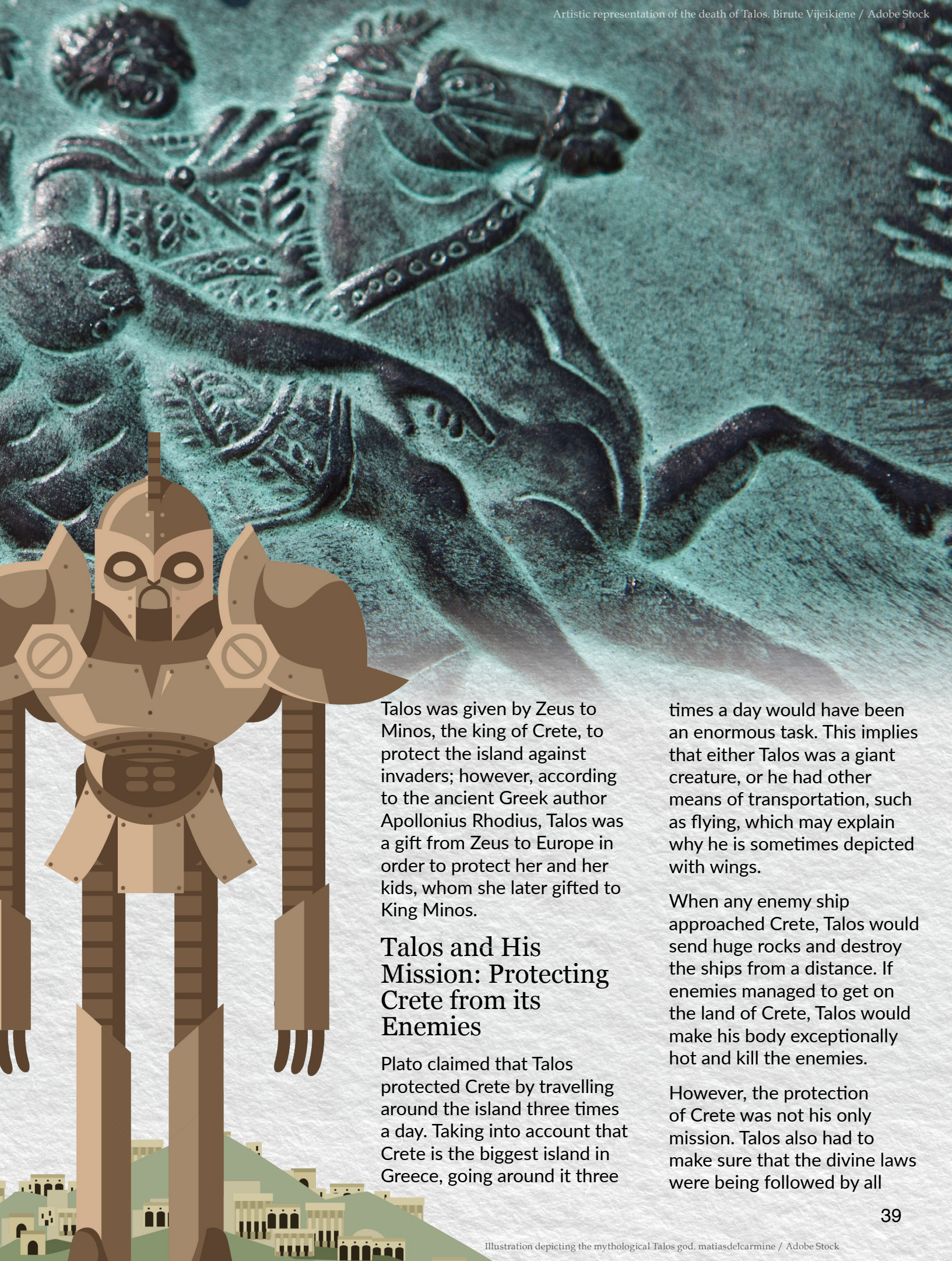
Believe it or not, but ideas related to automata were alive and well within Greek mythology almost 3,000 years ago. While the Greeks didn't actually invent robots per se, and it's pretty unlikely that they could see into the future, they did create a plethora of stories which explore the idea of artificial intelligence, automata-like creatures, and synthetic beings. These stories are illustrative of the timeworn fascination people have had with the concept of creating life-like machines. They've also influenced the perception of robots in contemporary Western culture.

Amongst these the myth of Talos ('Τάλως')—the first robot-like creature in mythology—is certainly a fascinating example. Its name is related to Zeus, as on the island of Crete, Zeus was also called *Talios*. In the ancient Greek dialect, *Talos* was the name of the Sun. The story of this giant automaton is mentioned by several classical authors, including Apollonius of Rhodes in his epic poem *Argonautica*, as well as in Hesiod's *Catalogue of Women*, and Pausanias' *Description of Greece*.

According to Greek legend, Talos was not a human being but an automaton made by Zeus himself. Nevertheless, some versions of the Greek

myth attribute his creation to Hephaestus, the god of fire and iron. Alternative retellings describe Talos as the son of Ceres and the god Hephaestus. Made by humans, rather than born of nature, the idea of Talos was first mentioned by Hesiod circa 700 BC.

Talos was the sun god of Crete and was supposedly constructed of bronze. A single vein, starting from his neck and running down to his ankles, carried his life-blood—liquid metal—and upon each ankle was bolted a nail to prevent the liquid metal from leaking out. Depictions of Talos on coins and within paintings vary, some portraying him with wings while others depict him without.



Talos was given by Zeus to Minos, the king of Crete, to protect the island against invaders; however, according to the ancient Greek author Apollonius Rhodius, Talos was a gift from Zeus to Europe in order to protect her and her kids, whom she later gifted to King Minos.

Talos and His Mission: Protecting Crete from its Enemies

Plato claimed that Talos protected Crete by travelling around the island three times a day. Taking into account that Crete is the biggest island in Greece, going around it three

times a day would have been an enormous task. This implies that either Talos was a giant creature, or he had other means of transportation, such as flying, which may explain why he is sometimes depicted with wings.

When any enemy ship approached Crete, Talos would send huge rocks and destroy the ships from a distance. If enemies managed to get on the land of Crete, Talos would make his body exceptionally hot and kill the enemies.

However, the protection of Crete was not his only mission. Talos also had to make sure that the divine laws were being followed by all

inhabitants of the island. To fulfil this duty, three times a year he would visit all the villages of the island carrying the metallic plates on which the divine laws were inscribed.

Talos protected Crete for many years until he was finally defeated by Jason and the Argonauts—not by using weapons, of course, but by trickery.

When Jason and the Argonauts approached Crete, the sorceress Medea distracted

Talos by talking to him and using spells, persuading him to remove the nails from his ankles. As a result, the liquid metal spilled out, and Talos died.

Reality Within the Myth of Talos

History has shown us that some myths, such as the story of Troy, have developed from real events that were incomprehensible and, perhaps, inexplicable to those who witnessed them.

One way for witnesses to pass on a record of such events was through the use of words and depictions consistent with their contemporary understanding of the world, knowledge, and beliefs. In that case, could it be that the account of Talos was, in fact, based on reality? And if so, what exactly was Talos?

Is it possible that Talos was actually a spacecraft, a mechanically created device, or even an extraterrestrial? Among

When any enemy ship approached Crete, Talos would send huge rocks and destroy the ships from a distance.

proponents of ancient astronaut theories, some have claimed that the descriptions of Talos are consistent with a mechanical flying device—made of bronze with wings, capable of circling a large land mass three times per

day, and equipped with the ability to fire some kind of weapon at enemy ships.

What about the vein running down the length of its body carrying Talos's so-called life-blood?

The myth claims that spilling this liquid caused Talos

to die. Some have argued that this was an ancient depiction of an extraterrestrial spacecraft powered by some form of liquid fuel. Proponents of these theories sometimes point to ancient myths like that of Talos as evidence of early encounters with advanced technology that could not have been created by the people of that time. However, these ideas are not supported by mainstream archaeology or historical scholarship.

Meanwhile, the idea of a giant automaton able to grow exceptionally hot, throw rocks at ships, and leak life-fluid has been explained by others as alluding to a volcanic eruption. For now, deciphering the true essence or inspiration behind Talos remains a tantalizingly elusive task. Nevertheless, regardless of the interpretation, Talos remains a fascinating and mysterious figure within Greek mythology, capturing the imagination of scholars and enthusiasts alike.





SYBIL
TAWSE

The story of Talos is not the only myth that explores the idea of artificial intelligence and science fiction. Such themes also appear in stories of the sorceress Medea, the craftsman Daedalus in Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, the gold and silver dog guardians described in Homer's *Odyssey*, the gold handmaidens forged by Hephaestus in Homer's *Iliad*, or even Hesiod's Pandora. This demonstrates that the concept of robotic creatures existed long before the technology capable of realizing them had sufficiently advanced.

“Myths reinforce the notion that imagination is the spirit that unites myth and science,” explained Adrienne Mayor in *Gods and Robots: Myths, Machines, and Ancient Dreams of Technology*.

“Myths reinforce the notion that imagination is the spirit that unites myth and science,” explained Adrienne Mayor in *Gods and Robots: Myths, Machines, and Ancient Dreams of Technology*. This refers to the role imagination has played in both the fantastical narratives of ancient mythology and empirical scientific investigation, which have facilitated the current surge in AI technology and automated systems. ■

POMPEII'S TECHNOLOGICAL SENTINELS:

EMBRACING ROBOTICS IN ARCHAEOLOGICAL SITE MANAGEMENT





The robot created by the Italian Institute of Technology. MIC - Pompeii Archaeological Park

Fast forward to the modern era and tales of the towering Talos no longer belong to the realms of mythology. In a narrative that evokes science fiction for many, robots and automated systems are now playing increasingly vital roles in archaeology, from surveillance and security to excavation and conservation.

One of the major challenges archaeologists face is protecting what has already been discovered. In 2022, the Pompeii archaeological site announced they had started testing an AI-powered robot dog called Spot as part a project to become the world's first Smart Archaeological Park. Spot was later replaced by a rover robot prototype capable of autonomous park on Pompeii's uneven terrain.

Unlike Talos, these robots do more than guard the site. Combined with AI, they were equipped with state-of-the-art cameras and sensors and tasked with wandering around Pompeii to look for any structural or safety issues. Spot was even sent underground to sniff out tunnels dug by tomb raiders in the past.

The Pompeii archaeological site is currently collaborating with the Italian Institute of Technology (IIT) to enhance the robot's stability and optimize image alignment for AI-driven damage detection algorithms. Additionally, drones are being utilized for aerial surveys to identify potential damage to rooftops and other exposed structures.

Moreover, in 2023 Pompeii announced the groundbreaking RePAIR project, funded by the European Commission. Designed to use AI and robotics, RePAIR aims to reconstruct ancient frescoes from shattered fragments, eliminating the labor-intensive task of physical reconstruction. By utilizing robotic arms and AI, this project saves time and offers new insights into Pompeii's history through the analysis and reconstruction of ancient artifacts.

As Pompeii undergoes a renaissance in archaeological research and conservation, it stands as a prime example of how innovative technological solutions are revolutionizing the way we explore and preserve ancient sites. Their modern-day Talos are paving the way for a future where the past is safeguarded with unprecedented precision and care through the use of new technology. ■

