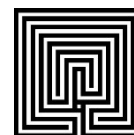


The Magic Labyrinth

John Kraft



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The vast majority of stone labyrinths in the Nordic countries are fairly recent in origin – not older than 900 years. This means that they were built in Christian times, but several stories connected with them reveal that their purpose and use had little to do with the new religion. On the contrary, they give us a taste of the old Pagan faith.

It seems as if people who were particularly exposed to the hazards of nature have continued to practice the old magic in the labyrinths. The traces of old fertility cults soon faded away, but in many areas in Finland and Sweden, labyrinths were still built and used by superstitious people who thought these twisting and winding paths would help them to overcome different difficulties. At several places these Pagan customs survived into the 20th century.

Fishermen probably used labyrinths for protection against the perils of the sea, and probably also to increase their catch. Lapps and shepherds have used labyrinths for protection against wolves and wolverines, and it seems as if labyrinths have also been used as protection against other threats and as a remedy for mental illnesses. In fact, they seem to have served a multitude of different magic purposes. In this article I want to present a number of examples indicating that labyrinths have certainly been used for magical purposes.

1... The local historian J.A. Udde, from Haparanda in northern Sweden, has told me that he has heard that labyrinths in the archipelago outside Haparanda, Luleå and further south were built to calm strong winds. If the labyrinths had “seven rounds” one should walk it “out and in” seven times. If it had “eleven rounds” one should walk it eleven times. Udde says that older people often found this walking tiresome and preferred to instruct children to do it.

2... Udde told me in 1982 about two brothers named Tano from the village of Mattila on the banks of the river Torne, north of Haparanda. According to reports from their neighbours, they used to walk in a nearby labyrinth before they examined their fishing nets. They often walked in the labyrinth. Udde, who heard of this in the 1950s, has the impression that it must have happened around the beginning of the 20th century.

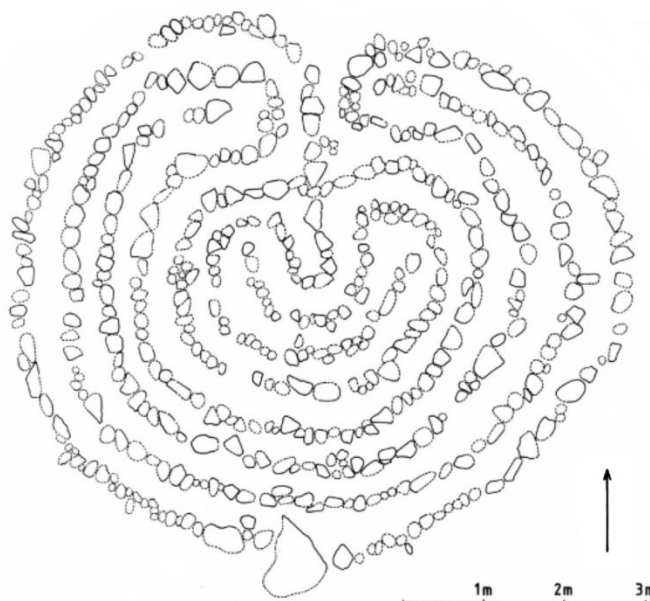


Fig. 1: Stone labyrinth at Revonsaari, on the bank of the River Torne in northern Sweden. Drawing by John Kraft, 1982

According to a local tradition it was built in the early 19th century by a man who was well known for his knowledge of sorcery. He used to walk in the stone-figure as a preparation before doing important things.

3... In 1952, the province-antiquarian of the museum of Umeå, Gunnar Westin, wrote in a book that he had recently heard that labyrinths were used to improve the fishing.

4... The Journalist Olle Wikström wrote in 1982 about an old fisherman of the parish of Nederkalix, who told him that in the old days, people thought there were “little people” (smågubbar) who could bring bad luck to the fishing, if they came along in the boats when the nets were examined. But, if one walked the labyrinth to the centre, then the “bad luck people” would accompany you. From the centre, one should run as fast as possible to the boat, and immediately put to sea and the smågubbar would be left behind still trying to retrace their steps out of the labyrinth.

5... Eva Eskilsson, a teacher from Härnösand, wrote in a newspaper article in 1973 that an old pilot had told her about sailors who used to build labyrinths when waiting in harbour, because of bad weather, The purpose of the labyrinths was that the wind should blow into the figure and get lost or be caught in it.

In another article for a newspaper in 1974, Eva Eskilsson refers to Otto Lundström, a local historian from the parish of Husum, who had heard from “old people” that the wind could be controlled if one built a labyrinth.

In an unsigned newspaper article from the same area in 1945, we learn that labyrinths were built in order to appease the weather – or the deities of weather – particularly the deity of the north-west winds. My research shows that this unsigned article was probably written by a chief pilot, Fridolf Engström from Haraskär. Otto Lundström confirmed for me that one of his sources, who had told him that labyrinths were used for magical wind control, was the father of Fridolf Engström. Eva Eskilsson died before I had the opportunity to check her sources, but I know that she had been in contact with Fridolf Engström, so it was probably to him she refers when she writes about “an old pilot.”

6... A number of other examples come from the archipelago east of Stockholm, Gösta Janssen, a photographer from the parish of Rådmansö, told me that he had heard that people used to walk the labyrinth when they laid their nets, in order to exorcise evil ghosts and to secure a good catch. The purpose could also have been to bring luck with the weather and to ensure good winds.

7... Ake Janhem, who has written books about the Stockholm archipelago for sailing enthusiasts, wrote about a labyrinth on the small island of Svenska Högarna in 1965:

It was important to follow the path of the labyrinth to the centre and out again. If one can manage that, it will bring luck and success, but bad luck will follow if one jumps over the stone walls.

8... The journalist Anders Öhman wrote the following in the newspaper *Dagens Nyheter* in 1977:

If one succeeds in finding the way to the centre without jumping over the stones, and after that finds the way out again, then one can expect luck and success, according to the local tradition among the people living in the archipelago.

This last account sounds very much like Ake Janhem’s report, published 12 years earlier, but Anders Öhman has told me that he heard it from his own father, who was a fisherman from the small town of Trosa. Öhman repeated:

If one walked the proper way through the labyrinth, all would go well. But if one walked the wrong way, things would go badly.

9... The author Einar Malm wrote about the labyrinth on the island of Svenska Högarna in 1952. He describes it as:

A stone labyrinth bringing magic happiness to anyone who succeeded in walking through the twisting path without displacing any of the stones.

I interviewed Einar Malm, but he could not remember the source of this statement.

10... When the labyrinth researcher Bo Stjernström was working on a labyrinth on the small island of Bergen, he heard from people living nearby on Ornö that according to “old people” the labyrinth was walked to bring luck for the fishing.

11... I have only a single similar record from Norway. S. Sörenson wrote in 1872 about a labyrinth called *Truber Slot*, at the mouth of the Oslo Fjord. According to local legend it had been built by a virgin, who in this way secured favourable winds for sailing.

12... Mart Rahi, of the University of Tartu in Estonia, told me that old Estonian fishermen remembered that it was possible to allay bad weather and storms using a labyrinth.

13... The most recent and exciting example comes from the small fishing village of Kuggören in northern Sweden. It seems that the old magical practices connected with labyrinths were still performed here in the 1950s. A fisherman from Södermöja, in the archipelago east of Stockholm already mentioned, told me that he sailed to Kuggören in his fishing boat in 1955. There he saw an old man running through a large labyrinth and at the same time spitting in his hand, or on something in his hand, and throwing it backwards over his shoulder. The purpose was to bring luck for the fishing; probably for his sons who were out at sea fishing at the time. It was obvious that the old man thought he was doing this in secret, without being discovered by anyone.

Unfortunately the old man died in 1963, several years before I heard of him and visited Kuggören. None of the inhabitants, would confirm for me that the old man had practiced magic in the labyrinth, but it is obvious that he was well known for his “sorcery”. He was often asked to help people when their animals were ill. He used “steel” [editor's note: the use of iron as a protective charm for humans and livestock is well known and documented in northern Europe] to cure diseases, and he could staunch blood. His daughter in law told me that before he died he wanted to teach his sons about his magic secrets, but they showed no interest. As a matter of fact, hardly anyone in Kuggören could understand why I was so keen on finding out about that old man – who might have been the last surviving labyrinth magician of northern Europe!

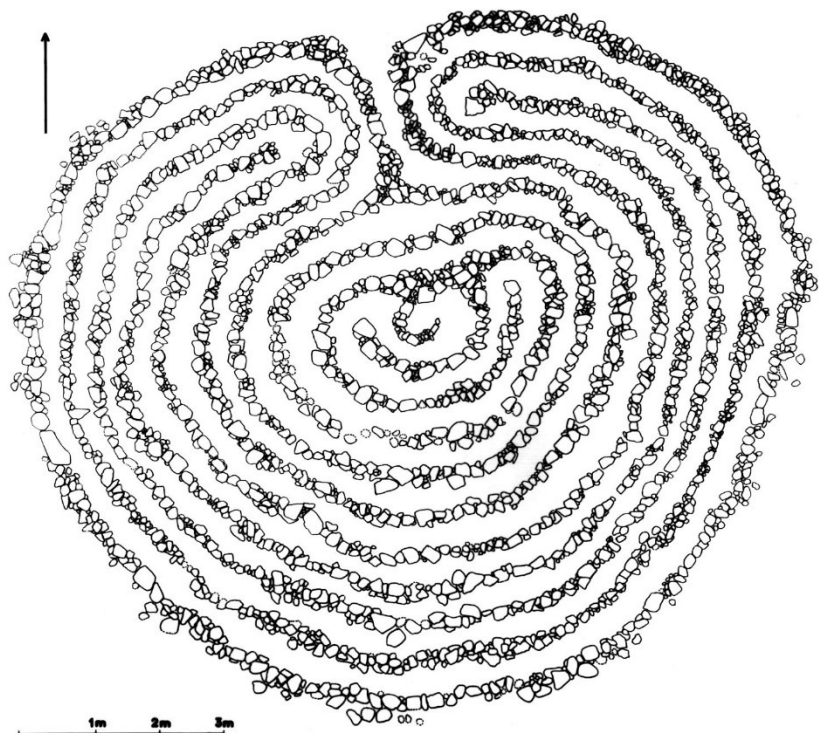


Fig. 2: The stone labyrinth at Kuggören
Drawing by John Kraft, 1979

Labyrinth magic has not only been practiced in relation to fishing. There are also a few examples of other types of use.

14... In the parish of Fridlevstad in southern Sweden is the labyrinth of Tvingelshed, quite far from the sea. It was probably built about 1870 -80. I have been told by a local historian, Rikard Svensson, that when he was a small child, at the beginning of the 20th century, he heard from an old man that the labyrinth had been used to cure mental illness and that it was not a place where children ought to be playing.

15... In a report from Skår, 5 km west of Alingsås in south-western Sweden, there is a description (with a simple sketch) of stone figures that were probably labyrinths. They have not since been located. In the report they are called *trollcirklar* (troll's circles) and it is mentioned that their purpose was to scare evil gnomes and give protection against the "evil."

16... At Hedared, near the town of Borås in south-western Sweden, I excavated a labyrinth which had been hidden under moss. An old farmer in the neighbourhood told me that his grandfather (born in 1832) had told him long ago that shepherd boys had used the labyrinth for protection from wolves. They thought that wolves were confused by the winding path. The labyrinth probably dates from the 18th or early 19th century.

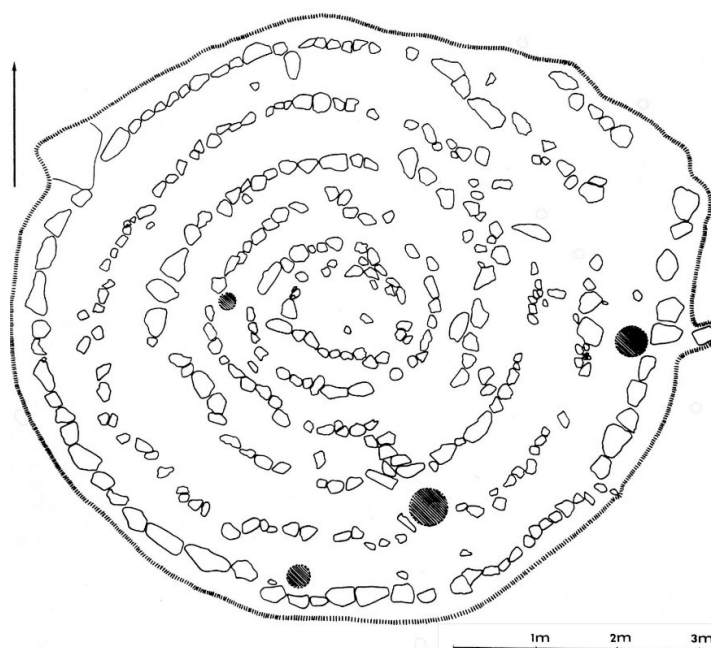


Fig. 3: The labyrinth at Hedared
Drawing by John Kraft, 1978

17... The Lapps also practiced magic in labyrinths. One report from Gällivare in northern Sweden mentions that three old Lapps talked about stone figures resembling labyrinths, situated in places the Lapps used for sacrifice or magical rites. They also made the following confusing remark:

The belief in prophecies within a "labyrinth-borg" was considered to have been strong enough to move other's reindeer over long distances.

18... Labyrinths among the Lapps are also mentioned in an old 18th century poem. One of these verses describes how the Lapps used labyrinths for protecting their reindeer from the ravages of wolverines.

John Kraft, Västerås, Sweden; July 1986.

These examples are all taken from a lecture given at a symposium on maritime history in Örnsköldsvik in 1982. It was published the same year (Kraft, John. "Labyrinter I magins tjänst." *Bottnisk Kontakt*, maritimhistorisk konferens Örnsköldsviks Museum, February 12-14, 1982, pp. 90-101 and 112. Örnsköldsvik 1982). This article, written in Swedish, contains all references to the sources mentioned.

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