Remarks on the Labyrinth at Side

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Sarah Coles (*Caerdroia* 21, p. 10) directs our attention to the labyrinth discovered in the ruins of Side, once the chief port for the Roman province of Pamphylia. Brought to light during excavations by the University of Istanbul in 1949-50, this handsome carving deserves a wider audience, both by virtue of its unexpected artistic context and because it is perhaps the only incontrovertible instance of an early labyrinth design from the land we now call Turkey.[1] Coles' account has sent me back to my files on Side, for we see this labyrinth with rather different eyes.

First, a word or two on sources of evidence. Never having visited Side (today's Selimiye), I owe my knowledge of its labyrinth to the reports of Arif Mansel, principle excavator at the site, in *Archäologischer Anzeiger* 71 (1956): 34-120 and *Türk tarih kurumu, Belleten* [Ankara] 22 (1958): 211-40. For her part, Coles has drawn upon George Bean's *Turkey's Southern Shore* (1968; 2nd ed. 1979), whence presumably the photograph reproduced in *Caerdroia*. Dependence on different sources may be significant, since Mansel's photograph of the carving (fig.1), taken at a less oblique angle than Coles', allows a more direct - and surely more revealing - view. Neither archaeologist, by the way, identifies or addresses himself explicitly to the labyrinth, which may well have languished, undiscussed, until now.

Figure 1:
the labyrinth carving at Side (Selimiye), Turkey

Photo: **Archäologischer Anzeiger 71**

Side's labyrinth is carved on a ceiling block from room in a public building of uncertain function. It belongs to the late Roman period. The labyrinth figure as such needs little comment: its plan or geometry has numerous counterparts among mosaic labyrinths in diverse parts of the Roman Empire, and we may confidently assign it to the same broad iconographic tradition. What catches the eye is rather the far from traditional choice of motif at the centre of the winding pathways. Here, over the identity and significance of this unaccustomed element, Sarah Coles and I part company. According to Coles, the anonymous artist has fashioned fruit at the labyrinth's hub, seemingly the pomegranate (Greek: σιδε) from which Side takes its name. I can distinguish neither fruit in general nor pomegranate specifically; in fact, until *Caerdroia* 21 appeared, it had never crossed my mind that the central motif was other than a simple flower, its petals opened. Viewing it anew only reinforces this impression.[2]

Fruit or flower? Or something else again? Ultimately, the question may be for those versed in late Roman provincial art to decide. Which is not to say, however, that present discussion should remain at the level of conflicting perceptions. Instead, we might profitably look to iconographic precedent, the presence or absence of kindred labyrinth imagery in comparable cultural-historical settings. Such a strategy brings small comfort to the fruit hypothesis. That the occurrence of fruit within an ancient labyrinth design would be a *hapax legomenon* ought to give pause; that the pomegranate types so common on coins from Side bear but slight resemblance to the present 'pomegranate' is again discouraging.[3] The conjunction of labyrinth and flower fares somewhat better, because here we can point to a parallel case: at the heart of the well-known mosaic labyrinth from Harpham, Humberside, England, lies a small quatrefoil pattern traditionally taken for a stylized flower.[4] Slender evidence, to be sure. But for what it is worth, our prior experience of ancient labyrinths might dispose us to expect flower before fruit.

Thus far from the issue of identity. Inseparable from identity, however, is significance, for rarely do images within labyrinth designs have decorative value only. Competing diagnoses – fruit and flower – can therefore be put to the test of significance. In essence, Coles has this to say: if the central motif does represent a pomegranate, it likely symbolizes the city of Side; and in that event, the encircling labyrinth "may be performing one of its oldest functions, protecting the city." More assumptions lurk here than meet the casual eye. One in particular may go unnoticed or at least unexamined – the claim that labyrinths played some role in the protection of ancient cities. We would do well to ask whether this was indeed the case.[5]

Belief that the labyrinth figure once bolstered city defences turns on the celebrated account of the Trojan Game, ancient Italy's equestrian labyrinth drill, in *Aeneid* 5. 545-603. Having described the bittersweet performance on Sicily in memory of Anchises, Vergil adds that Ascanius later revived the exercise in Latium at the founding of Alba Longa (line 597: *Longam muris cum cingeret Albam*, "when he ringed Alba Longa with walls"). Much has been made of this laconic remark, perhaps too much.[6] Does it really sanction visions of labyrinth ritual safeguarding the city of old?

Consider, first, the presumption of prevalence. The late Hermann Kern put it this way: "According to Vergil, the Trojan Game with its labyrinthine riding tracks was celebrated when cities were founded – to be more precise, when their walls were erected."[7] Vergil, be assured, says no such thing. In the main, *Aeneid* 5. 545-603 tells of event rather than custom – a specific performance of the *Troia* to honour Anchises, another at the birth of Alba Longa.[8] The normative or generalizing dimension in Kern's statement is his own, not Vergil's; nor can any other ancient author be adduced in support.[9] Questions of historicity aside, all we can legitimately say is that labyrinth ritual attended the founding of one city, Alba Longa.

This leads to a second crux of interpretation, the motive for executing the *Troia* in said context. By common consent, Ascanius sought magical protection for his new-built city.[10] Or in Kern's words: "When the labyrinth figure was performed by equestrians upon the completion of the walls, the defensive function of these walls was supposedly strengthened with magic." I am sceptical. Such a reading lacks ancient warrant – a shortcoming all the more inconvenient when the very brevity of Vergil's allusion suggests a practice familiar to his audience, a practice of which we might reasonably hope to catch some glimpse. True, certain investigators have seized on Plutarch's description of the game as *hiera hippodroma*, "sacred ride", finding therein the requisite textual support, but *hieros* is far less hospitable to magical interpretation than has been supposed.[11] Keep in mind, too, that what we already know of city founding in ancient Italy (e.g., Varro *De lingua latina* 5. 143; Dionysios of Halikarnassos *Roman Antiquities* 1. 88; Ovid *Fasti* 4. 819-36; Plutarch *Romulus* 11; *Roman Questions* 27; Festus s.v. *Urvat*; Servius *ad* Vergil *Aeneid* 5. 755) accords no role to the *Troia*, which indeed would

seem out of place among lustration ceremonies rooted in agricultural life.[12] The conventional wisdom thus has little to recommend it.[13]

To make matters worse, it appears to have been adopted uncritically, with no sign that other solutions to Vergil's meaning have been weighed and found wanting. Yet in their embrace of the Trojan Game as *instrumental* ritual, the means magically to confer security, researchers have overlooked a rival possibility – the Trojan Game as solemnizing ritual, observance celebrating the founding of a key city in Roman mythistory. This latter, I am persuaded, is what the poet had in mind. After all, it tallies nicely with the historical reality of the *Troia* as spectacle suited to the inauguration of important architecture in Rome. Performances are recorded at the dedication of the Templum Divii Iulii in 29 BCE (Cassius Dio 51. 22. 4), at that of the Theatre of Marcellus in 13 BCE (Dio 54. 26. 1), and on one or two subsequent such occasions.[14] It is hard to conceive that Vergil, or indeed the circle for whom he wrote, would have been unaware of so visible a ceremonial role. Accordingly, Ascanius's purpose in reviving the *Troia* on Latin soil can be explained well enough in terms of recorded practice – as inaugural celebration – without recourse to a preternatural gloss. That strikes me as a welcome step forward![15]

It is time to take stock. Bluntly put, Vergil has been misconstrued. His brief lines on the *Troia* at Alba Longa in no wise justify the prevailing interpretation, a congenial fiction achieved by distorting certain data and ignoring others. I would go further: stripped of its Vergilian credentials, the notion that the labyrinth somehow safeguarded ancient settlements founders for want of any credible evidence whatever. Armed with this verdict, we can now return to the labyrinth at Side. Coles' account of its significance is badly compromised by the conclusions just reached – that much is clear.[16] A sound rationale for the alleged fruit at its centre remains to be found.

Comes, then, the inevitable question: does a flower set within the labyrinth figure make any more sense? Those who have discussed the Harpham pavement are noticeably silent on the significance of its floral component. Daszewski, ranking authority on mosaic labyrinths, observes only that this "rosette" signals the Humberside composition's independence from the main focus of labyrinth iconography in Roman times, the myth of Theseus in the Labyrinth at Knossos.[17] I wonder... recall for a moment that the Greeks named the flower *theseion* for the Athenian hero. So: Theophrastos *History of Plants* 7.12.3; Timachidas *apud* Athenaios *Deipnosophistae* 15. 684f.; Pliny *Natural History* 21, 107 & 22. 66; Hesychios s.v. *Theseion*; and Etymologicum Magnum s.v. *Theseion*.[18] Timachidas would even have it that Ariadne's crown was woven from strands of the plant. Granted this, we must reckon with the possibility that a flower given pride of place within an ancient labyrinth may allude emblematically to Theseus. Such iconographic 'shorthand' was certainly employed on occasion, as in the diminutive mosaic at Avenches, Switzerland, whose central motifs of club and horn plainly substitute for Theseus and the Minotaur.[19] On the same principle, Side's carving can perhaps take its place in the mainstream of ancient labyrinth symbolism.[20]

Few things are so easy as misreading the past, few aspects of the past so elusive as bygone symbolism. We can never be certain what went through the mind of a sculptor in Roman Pamphylia. Even so, I would venture that the interpretation just offered may come close to the mark. Straightforward and economical, it has the added virtue of accounting for the Side labyrinth in mythic terms – no mean consideration when all the signs agree that the Greco-Roman world knew the labyrinth design primarily – perhaps exclusively – as an image of the Minotaur's fabled prison. And for lagniappe, of course, this proposal may illuminate a minor obscurity in the iconography of Roman mosaic pavements.

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Notes:

1. A severely weathered petroglyph at Iscehisar, near Afyonkarahisar, in west-central Anatolia also comes to mind, but does not admit of proof. See Röder, 288, 291, fig. 37.

2. If the casual reaction of friends and colleagues is anything to go by, I shall likely not be alone in this perception. Thus far, virtually everyone to whom I have shown Mansel's photograph of the Side carving has (without prompting) pronounced it some kind of floral motif.

3. See Hill, 143-64 passim, 293-97, pls. 25-28, 43.

4. On the Harpham labyrinth: Collier 1903-5, 217, 218; 1905-6, 148, figs, 3-5; Sheppard, 68, fig. 1; Smith, 304-5, 308; Daszewski, 110, pl. 44a; etc. The central pattern is estimated variously as flower, rosette and suchlike. I know of no competing identification. Incidentally, one wonders whether the 'stars' that commonly accompany the labyrinth figure on Knossian coins may actually be intended for flowers, but I do not press the point. This has occurred independently to Daszewski, 35n.

5. For another assumption that may get overlooked, see note 16.

6. The vast secondary literature that examines the Trojan Game (*lusus Troiae*; *Troia*; etc.) need not be detailed here. Mehl provides an introductory survey of such material up to the early 1950s. The most important contribution since then is Weeber's revisionist article – ambitious, provocative, badly flawed.

7. Kern 1981a, 62. Likewise: Kern 1981b, 25, 26, 91; 1982, 11.

8. True enough, Vergil turns from event to tradition at lines 600-602, but in touching on the Troia's transmission he does not address the circumstances under which it was performed.

9. Kern, however, thinks to find support for his position in the distinctive design of Roman labyrinth mosaics. See Kern 1981a, 62; 1981b, 94, 97-98; 1982, 15. Unfortunately, he so fundamentally misjudges their iconography that a detailed refutation must be left to another day.

10. Among those who admit a magical rationale for the Troia at Alba Longa (or cities more broadly!) are: Knight 1932, 452; 1936, 87, 105; Fox, 88; Crutwell, 83 (if I read well his deliriously rococo prose); Levy, 249; Rykwert, 151; Kern 1981a, 62 (quoted in my text); 1981b, 26, 91, 93, 94, 98; 1982, 11, 14, 15. In tow, apparently: Eliade, 48-49.

11. The wish to translate *hieros* as 'magical' (see Knight 1932, 448-49; 1936, 79; Mehl, 891; Kern 1981b, 85n.) receives no support from the dictionaries (e.g., Liddell and Scott s.v.; Bailly s.v.; Gemoll s.v.) and rests on a too simple differentiation between *hieros* and *hagios*. On these terms, see rather Beneviste, 2: 192-207 passim.

12. On *lustratio* in general: Fowler; Boehm.

13. It scarcely helps to raise the issue of apotropaism. Consider Kern's position (1981a, 62; 1981b, 26; 1982, 11). Having explained the Vergil passage along orthodox lines, he promptly records several supposed examples of the labyrinth figure serving in a magically protective capacity – examples drawn eclectically from ancient Rome, medieval France, and pre-independence India. Evidently, the Trojan Game at Alba Longa is but a variant on a widespread theme. Whoa! Not so fast! Agreed, certain labyrinth designs do seem to have been employed apotropaically, but with rare exceptions the evidence is too circumstantial to count for much; that such a protective role was ever widespread remains to be established. And just why should this bear on how we read Vergil? None of the alleged instances of apotropaism that I am aware of involves anything so grand as a city. Very few hail from the same cultural-historical milieu as the Aeneid – classical antiquity. All in all, such 'testimony' lies too far off in time, space and social context to cast any reliable light on Vergil.

14. See also Cassius Dio 55. 10. 6 and 59. 7. 4.

15. There is, I find, ancient precedent for this interpretation. Donatus *ad* Vergil *Aeneid* 5. 597 (late 4th century) supposes that the *Troia* was held in joyful recognition of Alba Longa's founding: "intelligur tunc ludos habuisse propter laetitiam conditae civitatis."

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16. In fact, the wound goes deeper than I have suggested. Coles' position assumes not merely that the labyrinth protected ancient settlements but also that such a role would have been familiar to the Side sculptor – which is tantamount to saying, that it was broadly known. But if the evidence is too meagre to prove existence, it fails utterly to establish prevalence!

17. Daszewski, 33 (with n. 26), 57 (with n. 27), 63.

18. *Theseion*, whose bitter root was valued as a cathartic, has been variously identified in modern times.

19. On the Avenches mosaic and its labyrinth: Bursian, 58-59, pl. 30; Secretan, 40; von Gonzenbach, 48-51, figs. 71-73; Daszewski, 122, pl. 42a; etc.

20. We need not hesitate for a moment to suppose that a provincial artist in late antiquity would have been familiar with the labyrinth myth. But would he likely have known of Theseus's flower? Since all we have to go on are the five brief references to *theseion* mentioned in my text (but see note 4), this cannot readily be answered. It may be significant, however, that these five span a period of over a millennium. Moreover, both the very name of the plant and its role in the *materia medica* of antiquity would surely have drawn more than specialized attention to it.

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