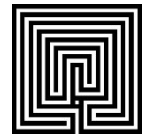


# Labyrinths in Estonia

John Kraft & Urmas Selirand



*Originally published in Caerdroia 23 (1990), p.32-37*

Estonia has at least five, and maybe as many as nine, historic stone labyrinths documented. They are all situated on islands along the coast, in those parts of Estonia that were colonized by Swedish speaking farmers and fishers during the mediaeval period. This pattern of distribution can be compared with Finland where most stone labyrinths are also found along the coast in areas where Swedish speaking farmers and fishers settled in the early mediaeval. The most reasonable interpretation of this pattern is that the idea of building and using stone labyrinths was part of the cultural heritage brought in from the west by Swedish settlers.

Karl von Löwis of Menar mentioned an Estonian labyrinth situated at Tahkuna, on the northern tip of Dagö, in 1912. In 1925 A.M. Tallgren mentioned two labyrinths: the one at Tahkuna and another on the little island of Viirlaid. Peeter Mey wrote an article in the Estonian newspaper *Päevaleht* in 1931, where he mentions that there was a partly preserved labyrinth on the island of Aegna near the Estonian capital, Tallinn. Mey also mentions that there were labyrinths on the islands of Aski and Prangli in the same area.

The next important step in Estonian labyrinth research was taken by two enthusiasts in Tartu, Mart Rahi and Tonu Viik, who searched the archives, visited the locations and looked for people who still knew about the labyrinths. Their results were published in an article in 1978. Rahi and Viik have continued with their fieldwork since 1978 but have not published further. Through letters and on visits to Sweden they have kept John Kraft informed of the results of their continued work. Rahi and Viik mention a couple of labyrinths at Kootsaare on northern Dagö, one of which was probably preserved and another that had been destroyed not long ago. They were also able to publish more information about the labyrinths on the islands near Tallinn. On the island of Aski there were two labyrinths, which they made drawings of, while on Aegna there was one. The labyrinth (or labyrinths) on Prangli, mentioned by Peeter Mey in 1931, were not known by the local population on the island.

A local farmer told Urmas Selirand, director of the local museum on Dagö, about the labyrinths at Kootsaare in 1984, and Urmas excavated one of these labyrinths in 1986. In 1989 Urmas made contact with John Kraft, which led to an exchange of information and plans for a joint "expedition"

to excavate the second Kootsaare labyrinth during the summer of 1990. This project was favoured by the political development in Estonia. Earlier Dagö was closed territory, but since 1989 has been open to visitors with a special permit. This opened the gates for the joint Swedish-Estonian excavation in July 1990.

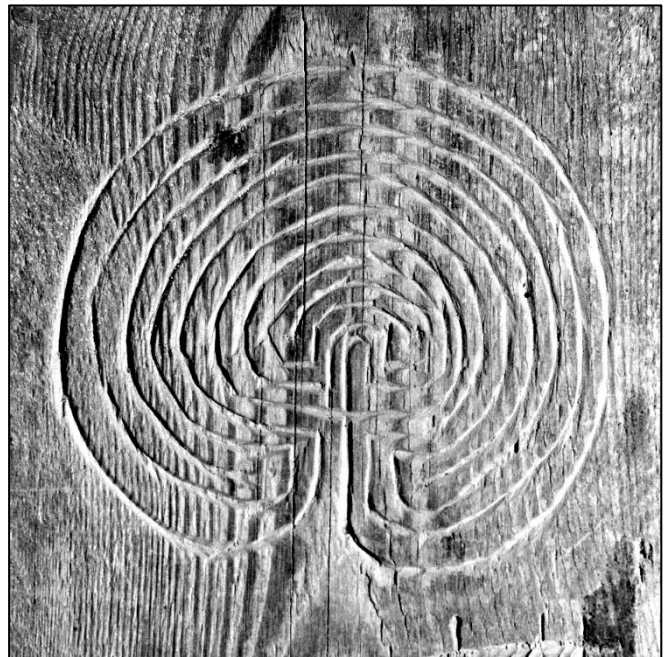


*The labyrinth at Kootsaare, excavated by Urmas Selirand in 1986*

The work at Kootsaare was carried out on July 17th-21st 1990. The local farmer, Oskar Kaibald, who had shown Urmas the location of the first labyrinth which was excavated in 1986, had also told him that there had been three labyrinths altogether at this place. He pointed out a place for the second labyrinth about 100 metres southeast of the first labyrinth. Unfortunately he could not say where the third labyrinth was situated. There were no visible traces of an intact labyrinth at the spot shown by Oskar Kaibald, but the area was obviously very rich in stones of a suitable size, while there were hardly any stones at all in the surrounding area. When the turf was removed, a large number of stones were uncovered, but there were no preserved traces of the stone "walls" of a labyrinth, on the contrary the stones had been piled up into a couple of small "cairns" which must have been man-made. The fact that Oskar Kaibald had pointed out the place as the location of another labyrinth and the fact that here was a remarkable concentration of stones obviously arranged strongly indicates that this is the location of a destroyed labyrinth.

The other target for our efforts was the labyrinth at Tahkuna, mentioned by Löwis in 1912 with the remark that he had no detailed knowledge about it. Would we be the lucky ones to find it? Could a labyrinth have been preserved and hidden here on the northern tip of Dagö for such a long time without being reported and described? We spent a day searching a large area from the lighthouse in the north to the ruins of a coastal battery from World War II in the south, but we found no trace of the labyrinth.

This was all that came of our expedition, but Urmas had a little surprise that compensated for much of the disappointment at Kootsaare and Tahkuna. One of his friends, Vello Pohia, who had been working on a film crew, had recently been allowed into one of the windmills at the large open-air museum at Rocca al Mare, near Tallinn. On one of the walls he discovered a labyrinth, so far the only known labyrinth carving in Estonia. According to the records kept by the museum the windmill was built in 1748 on Ormsö, an island with a Swedish-speaking population. It was later moved to the village of Sutlepa in Noarootsi parish on the mainland, which was also inhabited by Swedes. Finally the windmill was moved from Sutlepa to the museum in 1958. Its history confirms the general impression that the labyrinths in Estonia were limited to the small areas dominated by Swedes.



*The labyrinth carving in the Ormsö windmill*  
*Photo: J.Röömus*

Some interesting labyrinth names are known in Estonia. The inhabitants of Prangli used to call one of the two labyrinths on Aski island *Türgi linn* (Turkish city). The preserved labyrinth at Kootsaare was called *Jerusalem*. Peeter Mey mentions in his 1931 article that *Jerusalem linn* and *Türgi linn* made of stones were common among the coastal population in the old days. School children used to play *Jerusalem mäng* (game of Jerusalem) on the blackboard, but Mey does not explain how it was played. These names fit perfectly into the widespread pattern of describing labyrinths as famous cities or fortresses. Several labyrinths in Sweden and Finland have borrowed their names from Jerusalem, but the name *Türgi linn* is unique to Estonia. Could it refer to Constantinople?

On Dagö there are a couple of Estonian place names that might have some kind of connection with old labyrinth lore. One is the place name *Neitsikoppel* (virgin enclosure) at Korgessaare, which is mentioned by Rahi and Viik. The other is *Neitsisäär* (virgin leg) at Kopu, which Urmas Selirand has found in an old local tale. Both places are situated in an area that was under Swedish influence until 1781, when most of the Swedes on northern Dagö were deported to the southern Ukraine. Unfortunately it is no longer possible to find out exactly where these two places were situated.

Some of the labyrinths in Estonia are connected with local folk traditions explaining their use and how they were built. Mart Rahi and Tonu Viik mentions a report in the Estonian Museum of Literature (ERA II, 229, LA3) where it is told that the Kootsaare labyrinth was believed to have been built by a shipwrecked seaman who had managed to survive. Oskar Kaibald has told Urmas Selirand the same story and added that one could easily enter the labyrinth but never get out again. Jörgen Hedman from Stockholm was told in 1990 by Viljam Greis on Dagö that his grandfather's sister, Greta Greis (born 1866), said that the labyrinth at Kootsaare was built by shipwrecked soldiers who had landed there.

Oskar Kaibald also told Urmas Selirand that seamen used to play in the Kootsaare labyrinth before going out to sea, in order to have good winds and a good trip. In his article in 1931 Peeter Mey mentions an old fisherman who remembered that it was possible to allay bad weather and storms by using a labyrinth. These stories fit perfectly into the pattern of labyrinth folklore in Sweden. The story of a shipwrecked seaman has many parallels, but such stories have probably been connected with labyrinths by people who did not know about their original use and purpose. The two stories from Estonia with hints about wind and weather magic are probably much closer to the truth. They also have many parallels in Sweden and magic seems to have been the real purpose for fisher-folk to build labyrinths.

### **Catalogue of Historic Stone Labyrinths in Estonia**

#### **Tahkuna**

Karl von Löwis of Menar first mentioned the labyrinth at Tahkuna on the northern tip of Dagö in 1912, in a speech which was published in 1913. He had obviously not seen it himself and he remarks that he has no details about it. No further information has subsequently been added about this labyrinth.

#### **Viirlaid**

A.M.Tallgren mentions a labyrinth on the small island of "Viirlaid" in a book on Estonian archaeology in 1925. He adds a question mark in parenthesis to the name of the island, suggesting that this information was uncertain. Nobody has subsequently confirmed this labyrinth location. Mart Rahi and Tonu Viik have suggested that this ought to be the island of Viirelaid, situated between the large island of Saaremaa and the mainland, but another possible interpretation should also be taken into consideration. In one of the early classics of labyrinth research, from 1844, the Estonian natural scientist Karl Ernst von Baer describes a labyrinth on the small, uninhabited, island of Wier, approximately eight kilometres south of Hogland in the Gulf of Finland. "-laid" is an Estonian word for "small island." This means that the "Viirlaid" mentioned by Tallgren comes close to the island of "Wier" mentioned in 1844 by von Baer. Against the latter interpretation is the fact that Wier belonged to Finland, although it was situated close to Estonia. Tallgren came from Finland and he ought to have known this, but it is nevertheless possible that he made a mistake. In favour is that the island of Wier is situated in an area that is rich in labyrinths, while the island of Viirelaid near Saaremaa seems more isolated from other labyrinths and from Swedish settlements.

## Aegna

A partly preserved labyrinth on the island of Aegna, near Tallinn, was mentioned by Peeter Mey in his article in the *Päevaleht* newspaper in 1931. It is situated in the village of Eerikneeme. Mart Rahi and Tonu Viik have told John Kraft that this labyrinth was partly destroyed by fortification works in WW I. Heino Gustavsson could not find the labyrinth when he looked for it in 1977, but Rahi and Viik later rediscovered it, buried in the sand. [Editor's note: see below for more on the recent 'rediscovery' and excavation of this labyrinth]

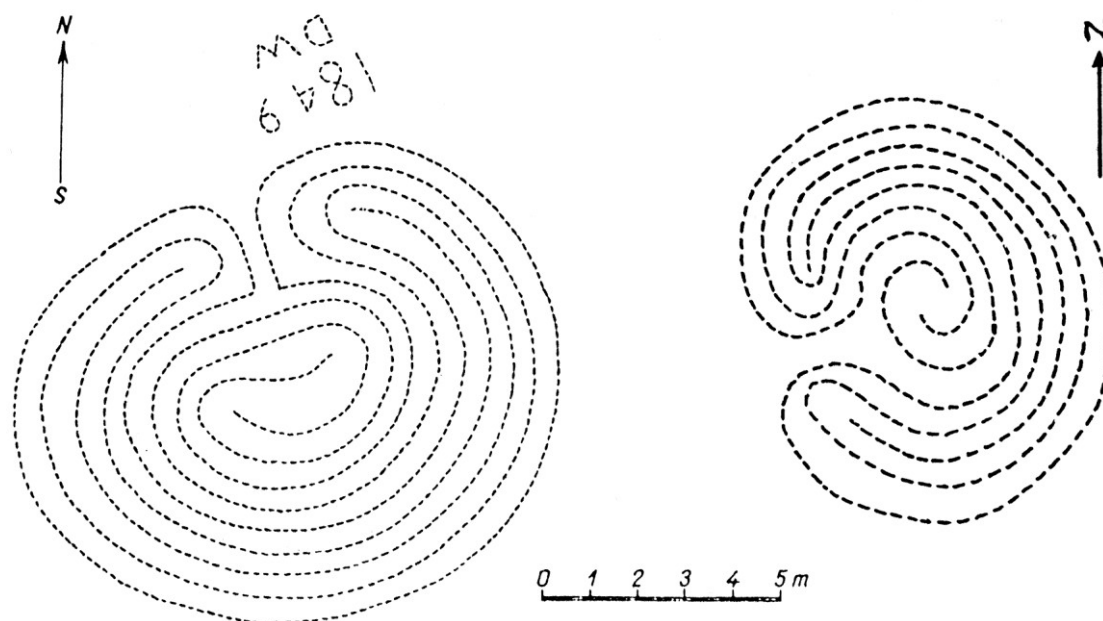
## Prangli

Peeter Mey mentions Prangli in 1931 as one of the islands with labyrinths. But Rahi and Viik say that the inhabitants on Prangli do not know of any labyrinths on their island.

## Aksi

Peter Mey also mentions Aksi as one of the islands with labyrinths and Heino Gustavsson has found and described two labyrinths on the island. Tonu Viik and Mart Rahi made drawings of them when they visited Aksi. According to local tradition, a young Swedish officer David Weckman, who came to Aksi when the Swedish fortress of Sveaborg at Helsinki surrendered to the Russians in 1808, built the oldest one. His initials "DW" and the figures "1849" are marked in stones close to the entrance of the labyrinth. It is generally believed that 1849 is the year when Weckman built the labyrinth.

The other labyrinth, on the NW tip of Aksi, seems to be younger. Immediately north of the labyrinth are some letters built of stones: "EKA 1914." According to Viik and Rahi these are the initials of Ewald Konstantin Aksberg and the year when the labyrinth was built. Harald Aksberg, who comes from Aksi and later moved to Sweden, has told John Kraft that the labyrinth was built in 1915 and that children often played in it. The people living on Prangli used to call the oldest of the Aksi labyrinths *Türgi linn* (Turkish city). This labyrinth is situated only 50 metres from the seashore and 3-4 metres above sea level.



*Above: left, the older and right, the younger of the two labyrinths on Aksi, drawn by Rahi and Viik*

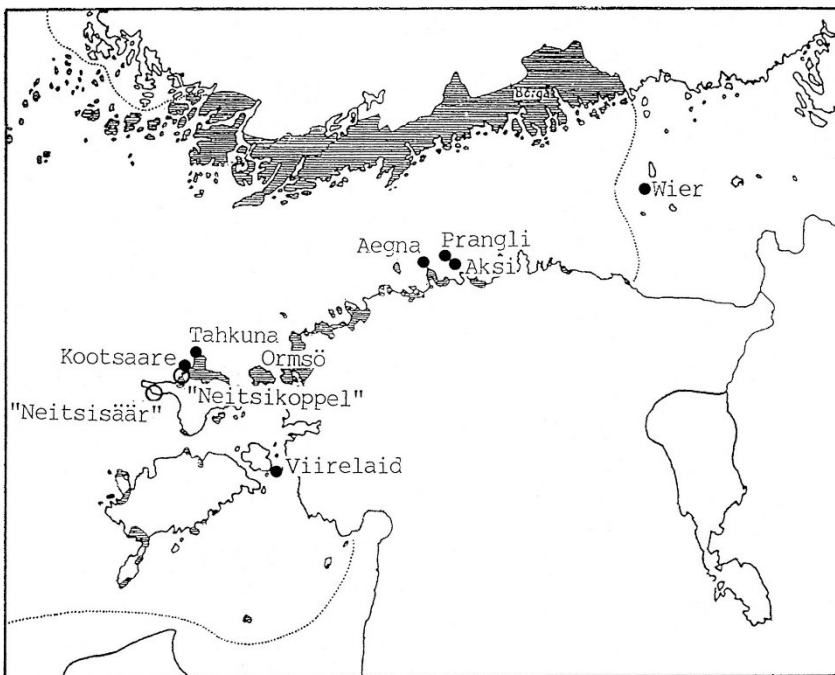
## Kootsaare

Up to three labyrinths have been reported at Kootsaare on the island of Dagö. Rahi and Viik mention Kootsaare in their article in 1978. In December 1982 they told John Kraft about a visit “last autumn” to Kootsaare where they met an elderly woman, who remembered that in her childhood (about 1900-1910) there were two labyrinths situated 200-300 metres from each other. One of these was found but she could not discover the other in the dense bush. Rahi and Viik described the labyrinth they saw as “destroyed,” they were unable to even determine its type. In 1984 a local farmer, Oskar Kaibald, told Urmas Selirand about the labyrinths at Kootsaare. Kaibald had settled in a farm close to the labyrinths as recently as 1946, but he had heard from an elderly woman in the neighbourhood about the labyrinths. According to Kaibald there were three: one “big,” which he had shown Selirand in 1984, and two smaller examples. Kaibald also pointed out the site of one of the smaller ones, but was not able to find the third. Kaibald told Selirand that according to the elderly woman the large labyrinth was called *Jerusalem*. Selirand excavated this labyrinth in 1986 and made a drawing of it. It has eight walls and is either of classical design with a central cross or opened cross at its centre. The labyrinth is eight metres in diameter and has the entrance to the north. Oskar Kaibald died in 1988. Two years later the other site he had pointed out at Kootsaare was excavated by Urmas Selirand and John Kraft (see description above).



*The labyrinth at Kootsaare, excavated by Urmas Selirand in 1986*

John Kraft & Urmas Selirand; 1990



*Map showing the Estonian labyrinths and the areas that were populated by Swedes in Estonia (shaded), based on the work of Paul Johansen, 1951*

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## Editor's Note:

For more recent discussion of the identification of Wier island, see: Kraft, John. "From Troy to Paris: Labyrinth Lore from an Easterly Outpost." *Caerdroia* 39 (2009), p. 4-10.

Further news of the labyrinths, ancient and modern in Estonia was published in "Notes & Queries." *Caerdroia* 39 (2009), p. 52-53, and is reproduced below:

## Labyrinth News from Estonia

Urmas Selirand

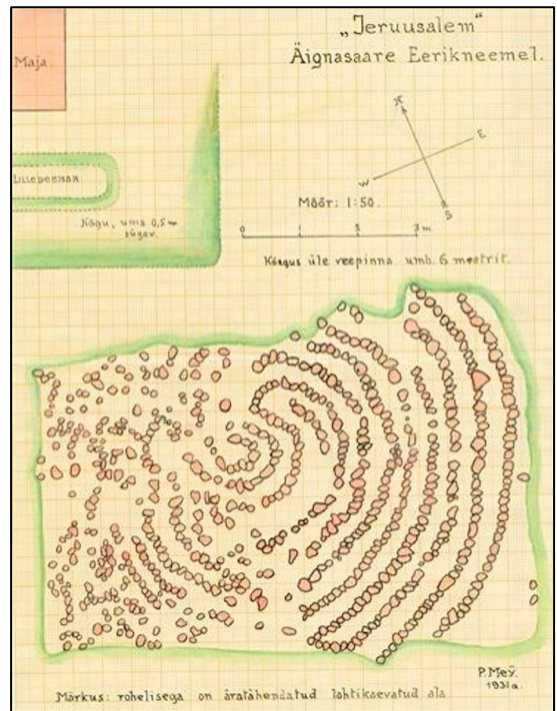
*Originally published in Caerdroia 39 (2009), p.52-53*

Hiiumaa (Dagö) is the second largest island on the coast of the Estonia, about 1000 km<sup>2</sup> in area. Thanks to Swedish settlers, who lived on the island from around 1300 until the end of the 1700's, Hiiumaa has a long tradition of stone labyrinths, first documented in 1844 by Karl Ernst von Baer, but largely forgotten until the late 20th century when a new tradition of labyrinth building developed on the island.

The first of these modern stone labyrinths was constructed in 1997 at Tahkuna, on the northernmost point of the island, the former location of an old labyrinth long since destroyed. Unfortunately, tourists spoil it by rebuilding the original classical labyrinth, 8 metres in diameter, into a vast spiral of stones. In 2006 the labyrinth was rebuilt with larger stones, close to the lighthouse. From the top of the lighthouse, 42 metres high, it looks very fine and is popular with visitors. Today there are around a dozen newly built stone labyrinths, of various different patterns, around the coast of the island, including some in private gardens built for healing purposes.

Early in 2009, an interesting discovery was made on the small island of Aegna, on the north coast of Estonia, not far from the capital of Tallinn. A stone labyrinth on this island, known locally as *Jerusalem*, was first documented in 1931 by Peeter Mey, who carried out an excavation of part of the labyrinth and deposited a plan of his work and photographs at the national archive. His notes record that it had been damaged during the building of adjacent artillery works in 1917 and subsequent to the partial excavation of 1931, despite the protective fence erected around it, it soon became overgrown again and was presumed to have been destroyed sometime in the late 1930's.

In January 2009, two residents on the island started a search for the site of the lost labyrinth and soon discovered the lines of stones still buried in the ground. With local assistance they started to excavate the labyrinth, although parts of it were obscured by the roots of several young pine trees that had grown on the site since Mey's initial excavation. Ten metres in diameter, it was clearly of the classical pattern with 12 walls, 11 paths, and made of large rocks, 12-20 kilograms in weight.



**Peeter Mey's 1931 photo and plan of the Jerusalem stone labyrinth on the island of Aegna, Estonia**

With much of the labyrinth uncovered, archaeologists from Tallin visited the site in May 2009 to complete the work and remove the encroaching trees. Despite some disagreement between the islanders and the authorities concerning plans to restore the labyrinth back to its original form, local residents have already gathered boulders from nearby beaches for the rebuilding of the labyrinth and it is hoped that it will soon be an attraction for visitors to the island. For the latest information visit: [www.aegna.ee](http://www.aegna.ee)

**Below: Archaeologists working on the labyrinth, and the cleared site, May 2009**



**Editor's note:**

The Aegna labyrinth was restored by the islanders in 2010. The original stones uncovered during the excavation were re-used and made up a significant part of the 960 rocks employed to build the 'new' labyrinth, 9.2 x 8.2 metres, on the same location.

Photos: courtesy of [www.aegna.ee](http://www.aegna.ee) website.



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