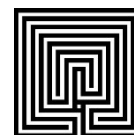


The Rocky Valley Labyrinths

Abegael Saward



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The two small labyrinth petroglyphs at Rocky Valley in Cornwall, SW England, have never been securely allocated to a particular period. These finely executed examples of the classical labyrinth motif have been commented on, but never seriously studied by academics, since the official announcement of their discovery in the pages of "The Illustrated London News" of 1954. More recently they have found dubious fame among members of the "New Age" movement, and other mystically inclined writers. The carvings were actually found in 1948 by a local man, Mr. S.J. Madge, who wrote a guidebook on the area. The book suggests some interesting walks along coastal paths, the investigation of which no doubt led the author to discover the carvings. Madge notes (1950, p. 23):

Two mysterious, symbolic, ring-marked carvings (seen by the writer in September 1948 and 49) are on the rock at the back of the mill. As they were covered by vegetation they had escaped notice previously.

From the earliest report of the discovery, it was suggested that the Rocky Valley petroglyphs represented the direct diffusion of Mediterranean people, not just the motif, to prehistoric Cornwall (A. Gibson, 1954; Schuster, 1988), but there is no material evidence for this. The idea is unsurprising as it reflects the theoretical climate of this time, much influenced by the work of V. Gordon Childe on diffusion of cultures (Johnson, 1999, p. 18-19), and based on migrations and the "diffusion" of ideas as the driving force of cultural innovation. As such, the Mediterranean area has usually been regarded as the "centre" of the diffusion of the labyrinth motif. The early theory has persisted. Indeed, the plaque accompanying the carvings states, "Labyrinth carvings probably of the Early Bronze Age (1800-1400 BC)."



Above: Close-ups of the two Rocky Valley labyrinth petroglyphs

Below: The Rocky Valley Labyrinth Petroglyphs. Photos: Jeff Saward

The carvings are often compared with other Bronze Age or Iron Age rock art that includes the motif (Pena Santos, 1979, p. 32-39), for example, at Pontevedra in NW Spain and Val Camonica in Alpine Italy. However, many features of the Rocky Valley petroglyphs suggest that a link with the Atlantic tradition is unlikely. Cornwall, and indeed the whole of SW England, has few examples of prehistoric rock art. Those local to Rocky Valley consist of cup marks from Bronze Age barrows, some of which are in uncertain and disturbed contexts. These cup-marked slabs, such as those at Tregulland and Tregilla Common barrows, bear no resemblance to the fine carvings at Rocky Valley (Beckensall, 1999).

Before the carvings of Rocky Valley can be considered for serious research they need to be divorced from the accumulated stigma of New Age interests and theories. One book comments as to the state of current knowledge: "Rocky Valley [has] been called Bronze Age, but may in fact be from any century up to the last one" (Hutton, 1991, p.317). I hope to stimulate research into this fascinating site with a fresh assessment of the evidence.

Context

Rocky Valley is about a mile from Tintagel in Cornwall. The valley is reached by way of Trevillet Mill, now a trout hatchery. The carvings (OS Ref. SX 073893) are situated on a smooth outcrop of relatively soft shale, and sit beside a small stream that leads directly to the sea. The stream provided the power for the 18th century Trewethett Mill, which stands between the carved rock face and the water. The valley is steep and has many similar outcrops, though none with such a sheltered face as that on which the carvings are found. The line of the incision is very fine, and both labyrinths appear to have been carved with a similar tool, if not the same one - most likely iron or steel rather than another stone. Also, the condition of the carvings is very good when it is considered that the surface has been exposed to running water and root action for many years. The shale that they are carved into is soft and tends to split when weathered.

Directly in front of the carvings stand the ruined remains of Trewethett Mill. Fortunately, a survey of the history and architecture was recently performed by Anthony Unwin (1999), in preparation for the restoration of the building by the current owner. The mill has two phases of development, which Unwin dates as 1750-1800 and 1800-1850. The primary building was small and was extended in 1813 to include another mill of greater size. Local records state that the mill produced yarn. Factories would mostly have superseded this small-scale production by this stage, but Tintagel and Boscastle are so isolated that Trewethett mill continued to make cloth and yarn until 1861.



The ruins of Trewethett Mill. The labyrinths are carved on the rockface directly behind the mill. Photo: Jeff Seward

Past and Present Interpretations

In more recent years, the site has attracted much attention in guidebooks to magical and mystical sites in Cornwall (e.g. Bord, 1976), and from the journal *Meyn Mamvro: ancient stones and sacred sites in Cornwall*. This often features articles by enthusiastic amateurs on the labyrinths and their origins. These range from a theory of Classical settlers bringing a cult of Ariadne and Dionysus (Ellis, 1999) to the use of labyrinths as a tool by local witches to induce altered states of consciousness (Ellis, 1992). At the nearby witchcraft museum in Boscastle, another classical labyrinth can be found on a rock plaque, and though cited in support of a tradition of local witches the plaque is of dubious provenance.

Labyrinth inscribed stone slab in the Witchcraft Museum, Boscastle.

Photo: Jeff Saward



Unfortunately, this attention is now damaging the site as visitors feel compelled to leave a token of their presence, often in the form of coins hammered into cracks in the rock face or scratched messages. The site is in danger of even more severe damage if this continues.

Further up the valley where the labyrinths rest is St Nectan's Glen, an early Christian hermitage with a spring nearby. To some, this suggests that the labyrinths are connected to this site and period (Straffon, 1994). Cited in support of this is the Hollywood Stone, the only other labyrinth petroglyph of any significant antiquity in the British Isles. Discovered near the well-preserved St Kevin's Road in Ireland, it is thought to be connected to this pilgrim's track of early Christian date, but this is not certain (Harbison, 1991). Due to lack of any secure context, the Hollywood stone cannot be used to any effect in support of an Early Christian origin for the Rocky Valley labyrinths.

The carvings are often compared with other Bronze Age or Iron Age rock art that includes the motif (Pena Santos, 1979, p.32-39). Kern (2000, p.67) suggests that Bronze Age tin miners made the motifs, and represents "a magical assurance" of a safe return to the surface when seeking ore. Though this is an attractive theory, Spanish archaeologists have more recently reviewed the Atlantic tradition. Fresh thinking indicates that the rock art of Galicia originated from the late Neolithic period, before tin was a commodity to be sought out. The society of this period seems to have revolved more around following migrating game than acquiring precious metals. The rock art of Galicia is more usually located on higher ground, commanding views into valleys rather than being in the depths (Bradley, 1997, p. 178). The position of the petroglyphs at Rocky Valley is unlike those of the Atlantic tradition, being at the bottom of a small valley, and the type of rock on which they are carved (a soft shale) means that the chances of survival over 4000 years in such excellent state is infinitesimal. All in all, the SW area of England has no Bronze Age rock art more complex than a ring mark, the majority being simple cup marks (Beckensall, 1999).

The Classical Labyrinth in 16th-19th Century Britain

The recent survey of Trewethett Mill has provided invaluable evidence for the provenance of the Rocky Valley carvings. The position is suggestive, as the labyrinths are about three feet from the ground, and are directly opposite the door of the first phase building, which is around six feet from the cliff. This area between the mill and the rock-face was even roofed over at one point, forming an extension to the house. Unwin (1999) suggests that this may have protected the carvings, but would only have sheltered them for a tiny fraction of their prospective lifetime if the age posited by the plaque was proved to be correct. I would go further than

Unwin, and suggest that the labyrinths were actually carved by one of the tenants, perhaps even during the period when the rock-faced formed an interior wall of the mill building. This is supported by the tenant's practice of carving various names and dates on the walls of the mill. It is unsurprising that the carvings sat unseen for a long time. Unwin (1999, p. 3) discovered that "Trewethett mill was abandoned as isolated and inaccessible in the new age of steam, and by 1883 had become totally derelict." Until people began to establish popular walks for tourists, nobody would have had reason to approach the site.

There are several dates carved into the stonework of the mill. This has aided the dating of the building, as initials often accompany the dates. Some of these correspond with the historical records of the tenants, for example:

W. T. 1779 - William Taylor; the earliest date identified so far.

D. R. 1794 - D. Rogers.

T. B. 1797 - Thomas Brown.

G. B. 1813 - G. Blewett; this date marks the extension of the mill.



The initials H.G. and the date 1803 carved on a stone in the wall of Trewethett Mill. Photo: Jeff Saward

Since there was an established tradition of marking the change of tenancy by carving dates and initials on to the actual building, it is not unreasonable to suggest that somebody decided to take this practice a little further. The use of the Classical labyrinth is by no means unheard of in this period in history, nor is the knowledge of it confined to Classical scholars or the educated classes.

At precisely this time, in Ireland, the owners of the recently built Bridgetown House in Castletownroche, Co. Cork, Ireland, in the 1790s commissioned a local workman to fill the cellar and lay a floor after the original boards gave way at a wedding party, dropping the guests into the basement (Saward, 1984, p. 8-9). The workman introduced a Classical labyrinth into the pattern of smooth stones. As a part of the craftsman's repertoire, this instance forms a parallel with the artisans of the ancient Mediterranean world who knew and used the motif.

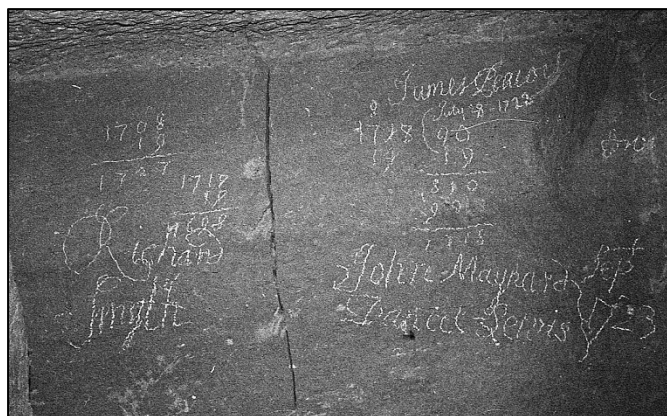


Labyrinth in pebble-paved floor, Castletownroche, Ireland. Photo: Jeff Saward

This pattern laid by Joe Knott at the Irish farmhouse was possibly inspired by the tradition of turf labyrinths, popular in "rustic festivities" (Harte, 1986) of 16th and 17th century Britain. Turf labyrinths were widespread as part of local May celebrations, often named "Troy Town". On the Scilly Isles, 28 miles SW of Land's End in Cornwall, is an example in stone rather than turf, like those found in Scandinavia. In Dorset, Devon and Cornwall dialects the term "Troy Town" was a byword for a confusing situation (Nance, 1923). Integration into the language indicates that the turf labyrinth was a widely recognised part of ordinary peoples' lives. Although turf mazes often have Christian influenced medieval designs, some, such as that at Somerton in Oxfordshire, retain the Classical pattern. Indeed, the period was something of a revival for the Classical labyrinth pattern, perhaps due to the decline in the power of the church to oppose the secular, non-Christian folk traditions.

Widespread knowledge of the Classical labyrinth during the 18th century is clearly demonstrated by the Chaldon Mine labyrinths. These chalked graffiti motifs are accompanied by dates and ages executed as a “sum”, for example:

1708 - Year of birth
19 - Age
1729 - Present year



Above: names and dates chalked in the Chaldon Mine, Surrey, England

Left: one of the five chalked labyrinth graffiti, Chaldon Mine

Photos: Jeff Saward

The assumed ages are all either teenage or early twenties, probably the work of boys from the local public school that was open in the area around 1700 (Sowan, 1980). The use of the labyrinth as a drawing game among children “who trace the maze on the sea-sand, or draw it on their school-slates” is described by the Reverend Trollope in 1858 (p.233). This is liable to be the Classical labyrinth, purely due to the ease with which it can be constructed from the simple seed pattern.

In Scandinavia, there is also extensive evidence that the Classical labyrinth was a part of folklore. Munch-Petersen (1996, p. 55) describes the games and stories that his grandmother taught him in Denmark, with trolls hiding in the centre.

Although the Classical labyrinth appears in churches throughout Scandinavia, associated images suggest that it is not a Christian religious symbol. Striking and unusual frescoes at St. Marie church in Turku, Finland are certainly not biblical. Along with labyrinths there are demons, mermaids, huntsmen, soldiers, and dogs. Ships are another frequent motif, as seen Seljord (Kraft, 1991). The stone labyrinths of the Swedish coast, such as the example at Rataskar, are associated with medieval sailing routes (Westerdahl, 1992). This suggests some link with sailors, perhaps as a good luck charm (Munch-Petersen, 1996). According to tentative recent research, this link between medieval fishing and sailing and the Classical labyrinth may also be seen on the shores of the White Sea, Russia (personal communication J. Saward). The stone labyrinths in many cases predate the phase of church building in which the labyrinth frescoes appear. In Scandinavia, labyrinths may be part of a more ancient tradition than in the British Isles, with some evidence of stone labyrinths distributed according to Iron Age chiefdoms (Kraft, 2000).

The practise of building stone labyrinths is also seen on the Scilly Isles. The first “Troy Town” on St. Agnes in 1729 set a trend for many more to be built from the plentiful beach stones (Saward, 1990). The stone labyrinth can be seen in the foreground of an 1885 photograph of the wreck of the “Earl of Lonsdale”, and has obviously been maintained or it would not appear so groomed. It even surfaces in a picture of a Royal visit to the islands (Nance, 1923).

According to lichenometric dates, the custom of constructing these stone labyrinths continued in Scandinavia from at least the 13th to the 19th centuries. Indeed, the custom continues today on the Scilly Isles, as, inspired by the original labyrinth, tourists and locals build labyrinths and labyrinthine patterns from the plentiful smooth beach boulders. Perhaps this illustrates the pervasive popularity of making ones mark, in certain culturally determined ways, which has helped to keep the knowledge of the Classical labyrinth alive.

Two more recent examples in the British Isles support and underline the wide application of the Classical labyrinth motif in recent history. Both these examples are turf labyrinths in rural areas in the north of Britain. The first is at Dalby in Yorkshire, and the second is at Stuartfield in Scotland, both of these are known by the name “City of Troy” or “Walls of Troy”.

The Dalby labyrinth dates from at least 1860 on local knowledge, though the labyrinth had to be re-cut a little to the west due to damage from farm vehicles in 1900, where it can now still be seen (Mitchell, p. 8). The labyrinth may have been cut in its original position by a farmer named Thomas Dobson, and though local tradition maintains that the design had been copied from a motif on a barn door, the granddaughter of the aforementioned farmer states that the labyrinth was copied from a newspaper article.

The turf labyrinth at Stuartfield, on the hill of Dens, Scotland seems to have similar origins in the middle of the 19th century, if local memories are correct. Unfortunately the labyrinth was ploughed up in 1869. However, a resident of the area seems to have unearthed a plan for the labyrinth on cardboard (Perry, p. 13). One old man living in Stuartfield remembered seeing the labyrinth in 1851. Locals cut both of the examples discussed above, but it is unclear where the knowledge of the motif originated. This is no doubt due to the circulation of the motif from earlier in the 16th and 17th centuries, somewhat beyond the scope of local memory.

Conclusions

In the light of all these examples of the Classical labyrinth in secular culture of the 16th to the 19th century CE, where does Rocky Valley fit in? At the time that the mill was inhabited, the Classical labyrinth was well known to country folk and schoolboys alike. The labyrinth was a part of popular culture, with turf labyrinths even getting a mention by Shakespeare in “A Midsummer Night’s Dream” (act 2, scene 1), when Titania comments that “the quaint mazes in the wanton green, for lack of tread are indistinguishable.” In this context, it is very probable that a tenant of Trewethett Mill, as a more creative marker than a simple name and date, carved the Rocky Valley labyrinths. The contexts in which the Classical labyrinth appears in Britain certainly support Rocky Valley being a late example. Often found in remote areas such as in the hamlets of Stuartfield, Scotland and Dalby in Yorkshire, executed by farmers and artisans as a game for local people, the motif was in very wide circulation throughout all of the British Isles. Rocky Valley is similarly remote and has a long history of occupation by millers.

Whilst early reports of the Rocky Valley labyrinths sparked sweeping statements about migrations of Mediterranean people into Cornwall in Bronze-Age times (Gibson, 1954), nothing of this kind is implied by the correspondence of the contexts in which the motif is found. The motif seems to have come into use in Britain quite late, rather than being an old, pre-Christian tradition, although in Scandinavia the motif may have been of more ancient origin. The close proximity of the petroglyphs to the wall of the mill, and indeed the inclusion of the rock-face itself into the very fabric of the building at one point, all suggest that there is a close relationship between the labyrinths and the tenants. The narrow window provided by architectural features and the dates and names inscribed on the walls allow the possible date of the carvings to be restricted to between the late years of the 18th and the early years of the 19th century. The nature of the rock surface is friable and soft, and it is inconceivable that the carvings would be visible at all, let alone in such pristine condition, if they were really thousands of years old. If they are compared to the worn and rugged Galician, Scottish (Argyll) or Irish (Boyne Valley) rock art they seem delicate indeed.

The Rocky Valley carvings are still somewhat of an enigma. It is a shame that the site has been neglected for so long, and is now subjected to vandalism. As there is no way of directly dating them, I expect that the plaque stating their Bronze Age origin will remain in place indefinitely. Nevertheless, I feel that the site is, as commented by Beckensall (1999), worthy of academic study. With the evidence provided by the recent report on the mill, which has no bias towards proving anything about the carvings, the prospect of an ancient origin is looking more and more unlikely.

Abegael Seward, Bristol, England; September 2001

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