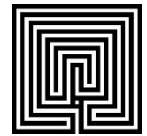


# A Life of Labyrinths

Jørgen Thordrup



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I saw my first labyrinth, while still a young man, in the open-air museum at Arnhem in the Netherlands in 1946. It was a *Doolhof*, a hedge maze, and in poor condition. This was understandable, as the war had just ended the year before. It wasn't until 1959 that I found my next labyrinth, when together with a friend in the peaceful Rocky Valley, near Tintagel in Cornwall, England, we found two classical labyrinths "from the Bronze Age" engraved in the slate rockface.<sup>1</sup> A notice on the door of the nearby café invited the visitor to inquire for further information from Mr. Ackroyd Gibson at Treforda Farm. We finished our teas first and then started climbing up through the narrow valley along an overgrown path, passing some fields, until we arrived and knocked on Mr. Gibson's door – could he tell us more about labyrinths? Seldom have I been greeted so warmly – "Do come in, please" – and then he spent the rest of the evening explaining and constructing labyrinths for us. Indeed, it was rather dark by the time we tried to find our way back down from the farm. I was initiated into labyrinths, and since that time I have been lost within them!

Three years later, in the summer of 1962, I visited Chartres Cathedral for the first time, and was disappointed – as so many are – the masterpiece in the floor was almost completely covered by chairs. It was difficult to form any impression of the labyrinth at all, but better luck would follow on subsequent visits in later years. Another three years later, on my next trip to France in the summer of 1965, I located and sketched the graffito inside the Cathedral of Saint Pierre in Poitiers. This "Ariadne's Thread," the course of the path of a Chartres-type labyrinth, is still to be seen incised on the north wall of the cathedral.<sup>2</sup> Over the following years I visited a number of different labyrinths in many diverse settings: the Hollywood Stone in the National Museum in Dublin, Ireland, in 1971; the floor labyrinth in Ravenna, on the wall at Lucca, on the rocks at Val Camonica and the Roman mosaic at Piadena, in Italy in 1972. In southwest Sweden the same summer, I visited the labyrinth at Ulmekärr near Grebbestad, north of Gothenburg, laid in stones. Next year, 1973, and the aim was to visit the Swedish island of Gotland, to see the famous *Trojaborg* at Visby, the fresco in Hablingbo Church and at Fröjel the stone labyrinth overgrown with grass in the churchyard, which was excavated and restored the following year - surely the only labyrinth with its own water pump.

During 1975 I began lecturing on the subject of labyrinths and mazes in my evening school adult classes, and together we built a *Trojaborg* stone labyrinth, 14 metres in diameter, in May 1976 on the property of two of my pupils from Tulstrup, to the north of Copenhagen. Between 1976 and 1995 we held 15 gatherings, for old friends and labyrinth enthusiasts alike, and successfully experimented with dancing the labyrinth with red ribbons around a Maypole. I am told we were the first people to practice this dance, and our original red ribbons are still used from time to time on other labyrinths in Denmark.



*Maypole Dancing on the labyrinth  
at Tulstrup, Denmark, May 1995  
Photos: Jeff Saward*

Also in 1976, my first article on labyrinths was published,<sup>3</sup> and several others soon followed, but it was not until 1998 that I held my first labyrinth exhibition, at the Vestjysk Kunstforening in Tistrup, West Jutland, Denmark. The next was in the charming town of Risør on the south coast of Norway in 1999, and a third exhibition was held at the Silkeborg Art Centre in Central Jutland, during October to December 2002, to coincide with the publication of my book *Alle Tiders Labyrinter* (Labyrinths of All Times). This was also the occasion for holding a small conference for labyrinth researchers – “Labyrinthologists!” – from Scandinavia, the UK, the Netherlands and Germany.

*Ilse Seifried & Jørgen Thordrup  
at the Tistrup exhibition, 1998*



I first met with *Caerdroia* through John Kraft of Västerås, Sweden, who was distributing the magazine for readers in Scandinavia. After a while I took over the distribution for Danish subscribers and soon added some readers in Germany, but we never found “Our Man in Norway!” Together with writing articles for *Caerdroia*, describing the mazes and labyrinths of Denmark, and the newly discovered labyrinth frescos in the small village churches, I have also built labyrinths here in Denmark, and elsewhere in Scandinavia and Northern Germany, during this time: at least 55 Trojaborgs, both permanent and temporary, of a variety of materials for all manner of different occasions.

By good fortune, Jeff Seward photographed one of these, the stone labyrinth, 17 metres in diameter, built in Valbyparken, Copenhagen, shortly after completion on a glorious sunny day in May 1995. The photos of this labyrinth have now been reproduced in many books and magazines, and it is now well known, worldwide. The largest of my creations you will find at the Labyrinthia activity park, south of Silkeborg, in Jutland, 22 metres in diameter, it was constructed from 1388 large boulders.<sup>4</sup>



*Valbyparken Labyrinth, Copenhagen, May 1995*

Dear friends, I admit, after all these years I am still suffering from labyrinthitis!

Jørgen Thordrup, Bagsværd, Denmark; August 2005.

#### Notes:

1. See *Caerdroia* 33, p.18-19, for current thinking on this dating.
2. Kern, Hermann. *Labyrinthe*. Munich: Prestel, 1982, no.273.
3. Thordrup, Jørgen. “Fra Tranedans til Hækkeløb.” *ICO (Den Iconographiske Post)* 1-2, 1976, pp.23-36.
4. See [www.labyrinthia.dk](http://www.labyrinthia.dk) for details.

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## Editors Note:

The death of Jørgen Thordrup in December 2008 was a great loss to the world of labyrinths. Here (originally published in *Caerdroia* 39 (2009), p.48-49) we remember the contribution of the remarkable Jørgen Thordrup, Denmark's foremost labyrinth researcher...



### **Jørgen Thordrup : 1926-2008**

The death of Jørgen Thordrup on 8th December 2008, at the age of 82, was a great loss to the world of labyrinths. A great friend to many of his fellow researchers and colleagues, his tireless work from his small and rather cramped apartment in Bagsværd, Denmark, was a major influence in the documentation, preservation and revival of labyrinths and mazes in his native Denmark, and much further afield.

Growing up in Nakskov, Denmark, where his father worked for the local newspaper, he was educated in Hannover, Germany, where he obtained his fundamental knowledge of German language and culture. Always curious and keen to travel, on a visit to Switzerland, he was inspired to become a Rudolf Steiner teacher. After graduation, Jørgen worked as a teacher at the Vidarskolen School in Gentofte near Copenhagen. He then began teaching evening classes at the Folkeoplysningen (Peoples' Educational Association), lecturing on archaeology and historical monuments. Jørgen continued to travel every summer, always taking photographs and basing his evening classes on his slides and knowledge gained from his travels. Definitely a night owl, he was never pleased if someone called him on the telephone before noon!

Jørgen was a true enthusiast who lived for his ideas and ideals. He always wanted to share his knowledge with others and so it was with labyrinths, a subject he started to research following a visit to Rocky Valley in Cornwall in 1959. From the mid-1970's onwards, often in connection with his educational work, he started building labyrinths in Denmark, and performing dances and processions in them – and thus he created a new generation of labyrinth enthusiasts. Between 1976 and 2005 he built around a dozen permanent labyrinths in Denmark and at least 40 more temporary installations for specific events and festivals, often from his 'trade-mark' materials of strawberry boxes and candles, in his home country and also in Norway, Sweden and Germany.

In 1997, Jørgen heard about a wooden panel maze under construction at Rodelund, Denmark. Hurrying over to visit and speak with the owners, then busy in the construction process, about some weird labyrinths that they had never heard of before, he also insisted that they build a stone labyrinth to accompany the maze. At that time, too busy to cope with Jørgen's enthusiasm, they agreed to meet again later when the maze building project was complete. So it was that in 2000, Jørgen constructed an 11-circuit boulder labyrinth and helped in the process of making posters that explain the history of labyrinths and mazes at Labyrinthia. His help in those early years led to the evolution of the attraction into a labyrinth theme park. Now, the history of labyrinths, which meant so much to Jørgen, plays an important role at Labyrinthia. School classes are told about the ancient labyrinths before entering the park and in 2008 a new tradition of celebrating summer solstice by performing a maypole dance on the stone labyrinth, exactly as Jørgen taught, has been inaugurated. Since the owners had never heard about labyrinths prior to Jørgen's visit, his influence on the development of Labyrinthia is obvious. In just a few years, many ideas gained from his lifetime of labyrinth knowledge have been implemented and it is with honour that his collection of labyrinth-related books and notes, entrusted to and housed at Labyrinthia, can still be available to people with a particular interest in labyrinths and mazes.

Jørgen also had another, more scholarly, attitude to the subject. With restless energy he collected information on the history and use of labyrinths in Denmark, and the rest of the world. His first published article on the subject, in 1976, led to many others, in newspapers and journals, including a number of items in *Caerdroia*. Of particular importance was his documentation of the labyrinth frescos in Danish medieval churches and the early Danish hedge mazes, and he was always searching for place names which might reveal the places of old, now vanished turf labyrinths.

In 2002 he wrote up his findings and published it all in a book, *Alle Tiders Labyrinter* (Labyrinths of all Times, published in Silkeborg by Dixit), thereby handing over much of his life's work to future generations. Published to coincide with a major exhibition of labyrinth-related art and artefacts held in Silkeborg (which he helped stage and curate – yet another of his many diverse talents), it is a beautiful book, full of facts and information that were virtually unknown before he started his research work. As always, Jørgen put a lot of effort into his book, and he was as critical and reserved in this academic work as he was enthusiastic and warm-hearted when showing others how to play with labyrinths.

Jeff Saward, John Kraft & Ole Jensen

