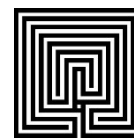


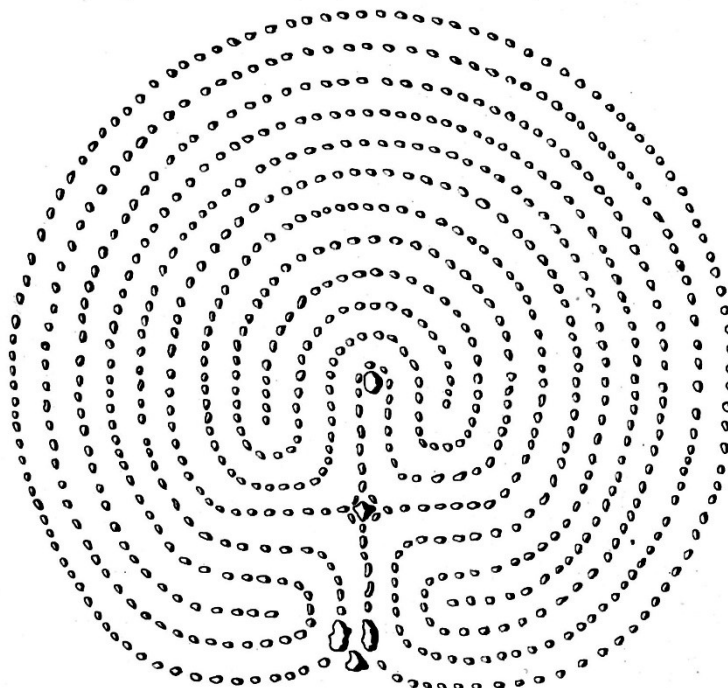
A Maiden Called Troja

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Sweden has a considerable number of old labyrinths, but one of them is particularly outstanding. The Trojaborg (*Troy town*, or more precisely: *Fortress of Troy*) at Visby, on the island of Gotland, is not only one of the largest (19 x 18 metres, with the entrance in the northwest), built of unusually large stones and with exceptionally wide paths, but it also has more labyrinth folklore associated with it than any other labyrinth in Scandinavia. The first mention of this labyrinth on a map from c.1740 also provides a hint that it is older than many of the other labyrinths on Gotland.



The Visby Trojaborg

The Gotland researcher Per Arvid Säve (1811-87) gave a description of how the Visby Trojaborg was used in his time:

“During the summer the youth assembles in the afternoon at the Trojaborg, in order to play the old games on the green. Of all the youngsters no one neglects to run the Troja-borg (Swedish: *ränna Troja-borg*), all the way from the entrance to the central resting-stone (*hvilstenen*), where they may sit down a short while before they run out of the labyrinth the same way back to the entrance, that completes the tour.

But when doing this you are not allowed to “steal pork” (*stjåla fläsk*), that is to say, make some forbidden jumps over the stone walls from one path to another – that is not correct and compels one to start again from the beginning.

All people run the Troja-borg: children who can barely walk, as well as some very old women who slowly walk the Troja-borg, setting a dignified example for the young ones.

Sometimes there are some twenty people running at the same time in high speed, seemingly encountering each other, sometimes really doing so.

On Sunday afternoons the Trojaborg is seldom empty of people. Many come there, particularly on the first of May and on Midsummer Eve, when the children often bring something to eat and drink. On those occasions there are many merry people swarming around the old Troja-borg.” (Säve R 623:1, p.74)

Säve's reference to May-celebrations might have a connection with the traditional burning of a bonfire on 30 April (the evening before May Day) on the nearby Gallow's Hill (*Galgeberget*), a rock escarpment at the foot of which the labyrinth is situated. In different notes, Säve describes the labyrinth as both *Trojaborg* and *Tråjaborg*, and other forms of the name, mentioned in various sources, include *Tröjeborg* (Sjögren, p.582) and *Tröborg* (Koppmann, p.9). C.J. Bergman likewise uses the forms *Trojaborg* and *Tröborg* (p.45).

During his time, Säve collected and wrote down a number of versions of the local legends about the labyrinth. My references are to his manuscripts, now housed in the library of Uppsala University. I published these in Swedish in 1983 (Gotländskt Arkiv 1983, p 59-89), but they have to my knowledge never been published in any other language before, so I think it is about time to make them accessible to the readers of *Caerdroia*.

1. Säve tells a story of a maiden, daughter of a pirate, who has committed a terrible crime, for which she is sentenced to death and all her property is confiscated:

“But then she offered, for the sake of saving her life, to build the remarkable Trojaborg, the design of which she showed on a drawing. This was accepted by the judges, and she should only add one stone a day to the figure. But when she had completed half the Trojaborg it pleased the judges so well that she was pardoned and was given a cross as a reward. It is told that she was the first one to have carried such a cross. After that she completed the Trojaborg and got back all her riches and was finally honoured and respected again as before.” (Säve, R 623:1, p.74)

2. “It has been told that a maiden was abducted by rogues and brought to a robber's den in the Gallow's Hill. Her sentence was to build the Troja-borg but it had to be completed in one night, which the robbers thought was impossible. But she made it, and was set free.

Others say that she should just add one stone every day and that she was allowed to live until the whole Trojaborg was completed. But after that she was pardoned. The work should have lasted a whole year and accordingly there should be 365 stones in the Troja-borg, but there are in fact many more.

Some say that the maiden, whose name was Troja, was tied to the mountain with an iron chain, during the work on Trojaborg, so that she could not escape from the robber's den. But the chain was long enough to allow her to put the stones where they are now laying.” (Säve, R 623:1, p.74)

3. “A maiden, called Troja, was abducted to the robber's den under the Gallow's hill at Visby. She could win her freedom back if she could build a road that was a quarter of a (Swedish) mile long, but all squeezed in on a carefully measured and rather limited space. She then built the Troja-borg. When the robbers saw it, they said it was not a quarter of a mile long, since one could jump over it with a few steps; but she said that ‘the stones represented houses and the paths between them were streets’. Then she was set free.” (Säve, R 623:3, p.223)

4. “An old woman had committed a crime and her sentence was to build a road which should be a quarter of a (Swedish) mile long, but only 6 elms (c. 3.6 metres) wide and not more than 6 elms long (that is to say in a rather limited space). When the work began, she added only one stone every day, this became the Troja-borg, and this way she saved her life.” (Säve, R 623:3, p.223)

There are also some variants of the legends about the Visby labyrinth which have been picked up in other parts of Sweden. For example, in 1933 Birgit Hamrin wrote the following in *Vestmanlands Läns Tidning*:

“I remember the legend about the well-known labyrinth at Visby. It is about a young girl, who was locked up in a mountain cave and guarded by a vicious ‘troll.’ The girl managed to escape but was soon discovered by the guardian. Fortunately the troll could not come out of the mountain without first running in a large number of twists and roundabouts. While the troll was busy doing this, the girl escaped to the consecrated ground of the church St. Göran (St. George), where she was beyond reach of the vicious persecutor. But the twists and bends the troll had to run through, are still there, visible for anyone who wants to see them.” (VLT 8.4.1933)

The following story about the Visby labyrinth was recorded in 1943 at Kimstad parish in Östergötland, Sweden:

“On a meadow on Gotland, just nearby a cave, called the maiden cave, was a Trojeborg. It is supposed to have been built by a maiden who had promised her soul to the devil. According to the legend the maiden was sitting with a silver stool beside her and with the head of a troll in her lap. A warning for all. Before she got her punishment she used to visit the meadow on certain occasions, every time adding a stone to a labyrinth, from which it was impossible to find the way out.” (EU 24694)

What conclusions can we draw from these legends? The many differences between the versions demonstrate the inventiveness of the story tellers. They have added or excluded details and twisted the general idea of the story, but still it is possible to discern what all the versions have in common, that is to say, what might be the remnants of an old basic labyrinth story or myth. The main character in all versions is a woman, as a rule a young maiden. She is often in trouble of some kind, she is a prisoner, abducted, or sentenced to a punishment, and is the one who builds the labyrinth. Somehow this helps her regain her freedom, and there is usually a happy end, that is to say, the maiden is finally set free.

There are many allusions to the famous city of Troy; we can see them in the name of the labyrinth (Trojaborg) and in the fact that the maiden is sometimes called Troja. In one of the versions it is mentioned that “the stones represented houses and the paths between them were streets.” This idea that the labyrinth represents a city or fortress is quite common in labyrinth lore in the Nordic countries and there are also many examples of it in Roman mosaics and medieval manuscripts. But the differences between the versions demonstrate how hazardous it would be to trust the details. Story-telling is an art that doesn’t follow strict rules.

Are there any other similar labyrinth legends from the Nordic countries? I have found one other example from Sweden that can be compared to the Visby legends. According to a 1934 report from Nordingrå parish in northern Sweden (and quite far from Visby), where labyrinths are commonly called *ringborgadestad* (ring fortress town), an old man said that he had heard that labyrinths were the homes of trolls (*trollhem*) and that the trolls had taken a girl, that they kept in the labyrinth. All the people of the village were brought together and they knew that there was a troll’s lair in the mountain. They walked to and fro seven times (i.e. this was a labyrinth with eight walls) before they could enter and inside they had to keep watch until the old troll fell asleep. After that they rescued the crying girl. (EU 6847)

Additionally, there are a number of examples from the Nordic countries of labyrinth games where a girl stands at the centre of the labyrinth while one or two boys try to reach her and bring her out of the labyrinth. I have described all of these examples in my study *The Goddess in the Labyrinth*. The legends from Visby and Nordingrå seem to fit fairly well together with those labyrinth games and together they give a vague idea of what is probably a very old labyrinth myth.

John Kraft, Malmö, Sweden; September 2011

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The Trojaborg stone labyrinth, Visby, Gotland. Photo: Jeff Saward, 1999

Editors Note: The Visby *Trojaborger* is situated 0.9 km to the northeast of the medieval walled town of Visby, on St. Göransgatan. A large hotel has recently been constructed directly opposite the site of the labyrinth, that rather changes the atmosphere of the location, but it remains one of the best preserved historic labyrinths in Sweden.

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