New Discovery of Stone Labyrinths in Western Maharashtra, India

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Abstract

Stone labyrinths have recently been discovered at four new localities in parts of the Sangli District of Maharashtra in the western-central region of India. Three, situated in Walwa Tehsil and a fourth in Kavtemahankal Tehsil, throw light on an ancient trade route between the early historic settlements and trade centres of Kolhapur and Karad, as well as between Kolhapur and Ter. These suitable routes are discussed in cultural, historical, archaeological, geological and geomorphologic points of view.

The authors argue that these labyrinths, in the south-central Deccan plateau region just after the Sahyadri escarpment, were constructed alongside ancient trade routes in the early historic period, and were used by travellers following them and visiting the Buddhist caves along the roads. The stone labyrinths were constructed at the junctions and passes along these ways.

Introduction

The labyrinth is one of the oldest contemplative devices known to humankind, and dates back more than 3000 years. In India, the labyrinth has been recorded from Harappan to colonial periods in different forms, from many different locations. These labyrinths are depicted as rock paintings and carvings, as images and pavements in temples, and constructed of stones laid on the ground.

Behind the design, drawing, and construction of these labyrinths lie hidden meanings which vary from place to place. Most of the time, they are connected to the history of that area and well-known stories from Indian literature and mythical epics. The labyrinth was used to illustrate the strategic formation used in warfare known as *chakravyuh*; in ancient epics as *manaschakra,* a symbol used in personal and spiritual growth; as *rangoli*, a symbol used in traditional folk art and in mythology as *yamadwara*. It may also have served as a mark of significance for confusing places and passes on ancient trade routes and the stone labyrinths may be seen as a landmark in these places.

Maharashtra, west-central India.
Map: Google Maps

Study Areas

The study areas of Aitawade Budrukh and Vashi are situated in the middle reaches of the Warana river basin and politically in Walwa Tehsil of the Sangli district of Maharashtra, west-central India.

The Labyrinths

i. The Aitawade Budrukh Labyrinths

The first labyrinth, 11.7 metres in diameter and of 7-circuit classical form, is situated 2.2 kilometres northeast of Dhagewadi, the nearest settlement, on rocky ground in the hilly, scrub forest of the Peth Forest Reserve, on right side of the cart road, near the Khandoba Temple that is located around 25 meters northwest of the labyrinth. Latitude: 16.993755 N, Longitude: 74.206457 E.

Fig. 1: The first labyrinth (Aitawade Budrukh 1) 2.2 km NE of Dhagewadi and a plan view of the labyrinth

The second example, 9.2 metres in diameter and also of 7-circuit classical form, is located 1.75 km NE of Dhagewadi and 0.5 km south of the previous labyrinth, in the Aitawade Budrukh reserve forest area, along the south side of the bullock cart road near the Pavatka temple that is located around 20 metres southwest of the labyrinth. Latitude: 16.987677 N, Longitude: 74.207794 E.

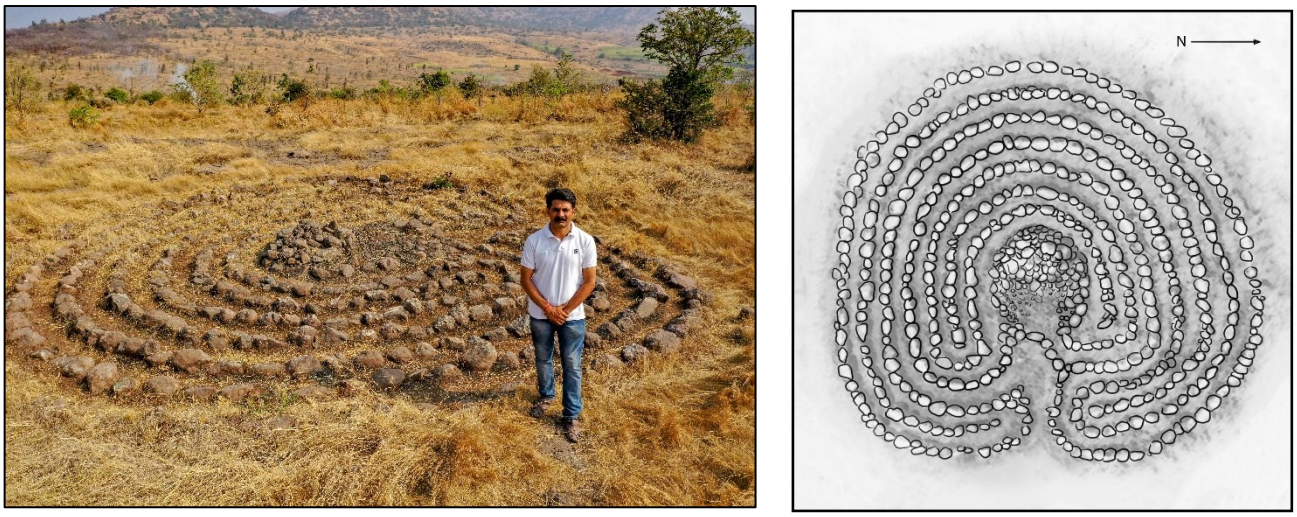

Fig. 2: The second labyrinth (Aitawade Budrukh 2) 1.75 km NE of Dhagewadi and a plan view of the labyrinth

ii. The Vashi Labyrinth

The third labyrinth is located 3.0 km east of the first two labyrinths, 1.1 km SSE of the village of Shivpuri, the nearest settlement, and stands on a rocky surface in a pass in between two hillocks, near the boundary of the Kameri forest reserve. This location is at the remote northern boundary of the Vashi village landholding. The outermost circuits of this labyrinth are somewhat damaged, but the design was originally of 7-circuit classical form. Its current diameter is 10.8 metres, but it would originally have been around 13.5 metres. Latitude: 16.988316 N, Longitude: 74.236290 E.

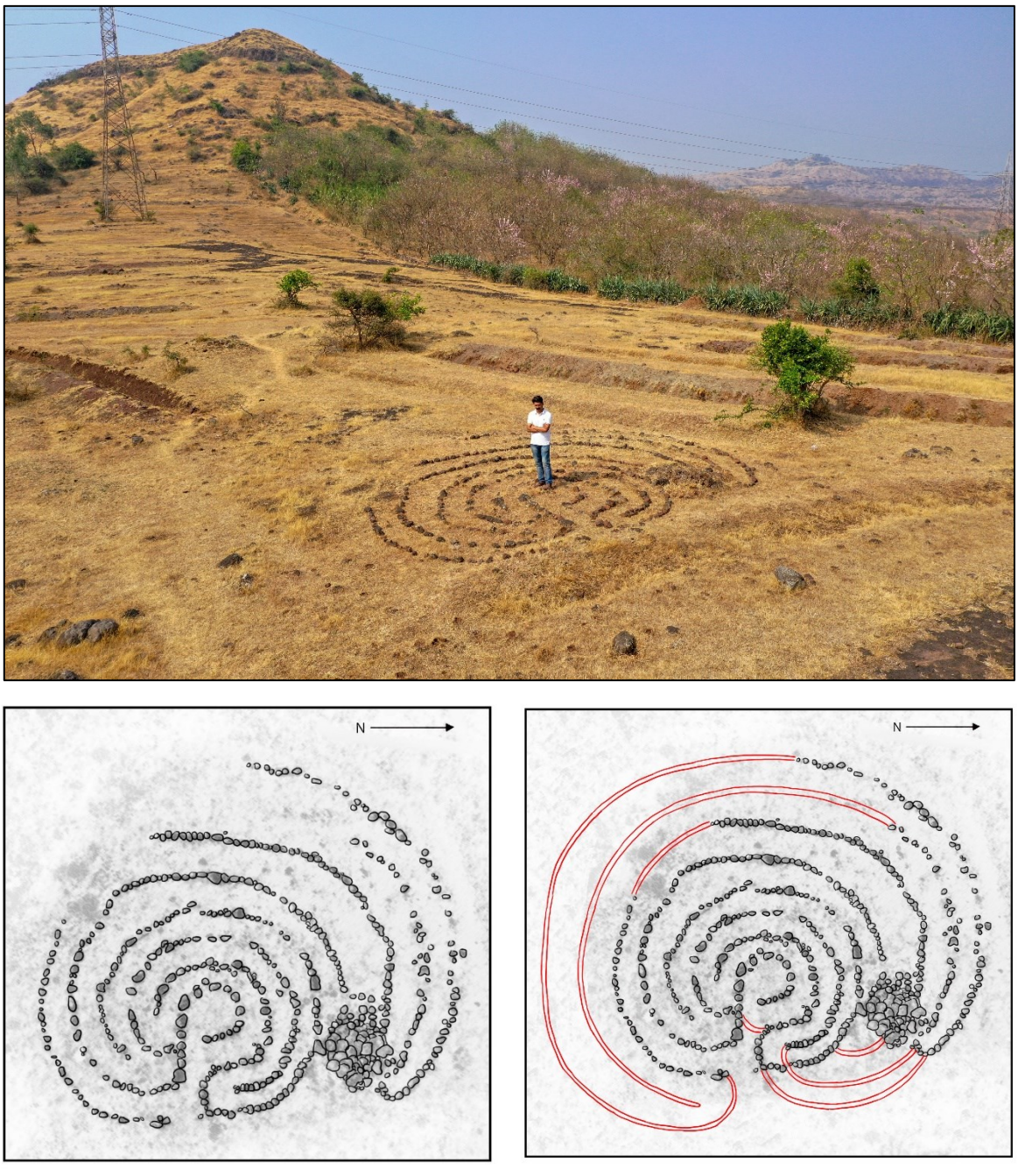

Fig. 3: The third labyrinth (Vashi) 1.1 km SSE of Shivpuri, and plan views of the labyrinth as currently preserved and with the missing circuits reconstructed

This area is bounded by Retharedharan (to the NW); Shivpuri (N); Kameri (NE); Jakraiwadi (E); Ladegaon (SSE); Aitawade Budrukh (S); Dhagewadi and Karve (SSW). It is mapped on the Survey of India toposheet map 47 L/1, 1:50,000 scale.

iii. The Malangaon Labyrinth

The other study area of Manerajuri is situated in the Agrani river basin and politically in Kavathemahankal Tehsil of the Sangli district of Maharashtra, west-central India, just over 50 km to the east of the other three labyrinths described above. The fourth labyrinth is situated on a rocky hillock area 4.5 km southwest of Malangaon village, in the area known as Kodyacha Maal, on the north side of the express roadway between Sangli and Solapur, via Kumathe, and under the jurisdiction of Manerajuri, the nearest large village, to the west. The shape and form of this labyrinth is slightly irregular, but is clearly of 7-circuit classical form and 9.9. metres wide. A modern enclosure has been built around the labyrinth to protect it. Latitude: 17.020806 N, Longitude: 74.747338 E.

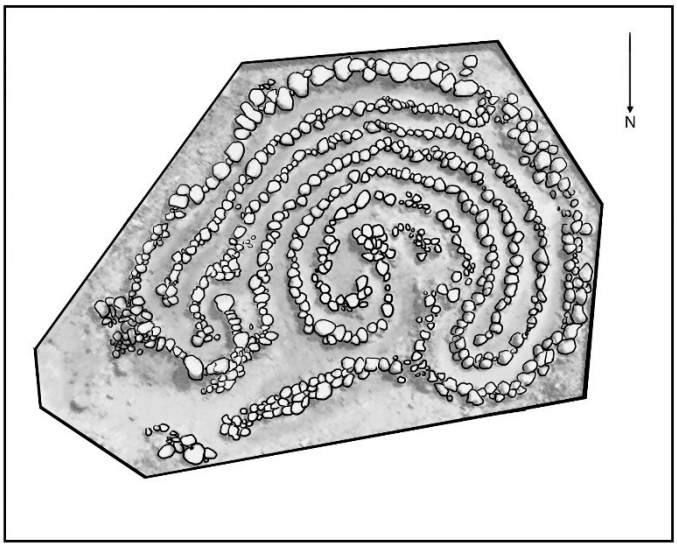

Fig. 4: The fourth labyrinth (Malangaon) 4.5 km SW of Malangaon, and a plan view of the labyrinth

This area is bounded by Bhosalenagar (to the NW) and Manerajuri (W); Yogewadi (SW); Boargaon (E); Malangaon and Gavahan (NE).

Geology and Geomorphology

The geology of the study area of the Aitawade Budrukh and Vashi labyrinths is a low elevation region with circumdenuded and isolated mesa-type features typical of the Deccan volcanic land present on the plateau region of Maharashtra, close to the foothill region of the Sahyadri escarpment. This moderate to deeply weathered hilly landscape with scanty vegetation of thorny plants and seasonal grasses is the source of the Mallikarjun hill stream, a minor tributary of the Warana river in its upper reaches. This hill also acts as a ridgeline separating the Warana basin on its right side and Krishna River on its left. Geologically, the study area belongs to the Southern Deccan Volcanic Province of the Deccan Traps formation of India. It is one of the largest volcanic provinces on the earth and was formed during the upper Cretaceous to lower Eocene period as a result of fissure type lava eruptions [Sabale 2008].

The Aitawade Budrukh labyrinths are located on sub-hillock plateaus aligned on the same hills, but on opposite sides of a valley divided by a stream, and along this gully a bullock cart road is present. This road was considered an important junction on an ancient short-cut route, which leads from the Konkan coast of Maharashtra and Goa to the west, linking Kolhapur and Karad.

Ancient trade routes and trading centres

During the Satavahana dynasty (late 2nd century BCE to early 3rd century CE) control of trade and points of exchange was a main source of revenue. The rulers were responsible for offering protection to the caravans on their journey and were entitled to a fee for the service [Gurukkal, p.264]. This dynasty owed their prosperity to trade, a view justifiably supported by most historians, according to whom the period witnessed a remarkable growth of inland as well as overseas commerce in the Deccan areas.

The Satavahana country was well known to the Greco-Roman geographers and navigators as a landscape full of forest goods and the Deccan Plateau was rich in forested mountain and wild animals. Consequently, there were several inland points of exchange acting as feeders for the Satavahana ports along west coast of India. The Greco-Roman merchant mariners were visiting these ports and bartering metals including tin and Italian bronze artifacts and also fine quality coral, as demonstrated by archaeological finds at the domestic site of Kolhapur, which is close to the study area. Karad and Kolhapur were important trade centres at this time, and the port of Dabhol-Khed connected to the Karad route through the Hatlot Ghat, so called because the slope of the ghat was so steep and difficult that the drivers of loaded carts had to get down to push the carts uphill (hatlot meaning hand pushing) [Hebalkar, p.27]. At Brahmapuri, located in vicinity of Kolhapur city, three bronze mirrors were excavated, one an authentic Roman import and two that may be Satavahana copies, along with a figure of Poseidon, the Graeco-Roman god of the sea and a clay bulla prepared from a Roman coin [Sankalia, p.9 & 97]. Similarly, two heavily corroded bronze mirrors, iron implements, bangles, Roman pottery, Satavahana and Roman coins were reported from another Satavahana site at Ter, lying to the northeast of Kolhapur [Suresh, p.127].

Figure 5: Poseidon, the Graeco-Roman God of Sea, a bronze statuette found at Brahmapuri (Kolhapur) during excavations in 1945-46

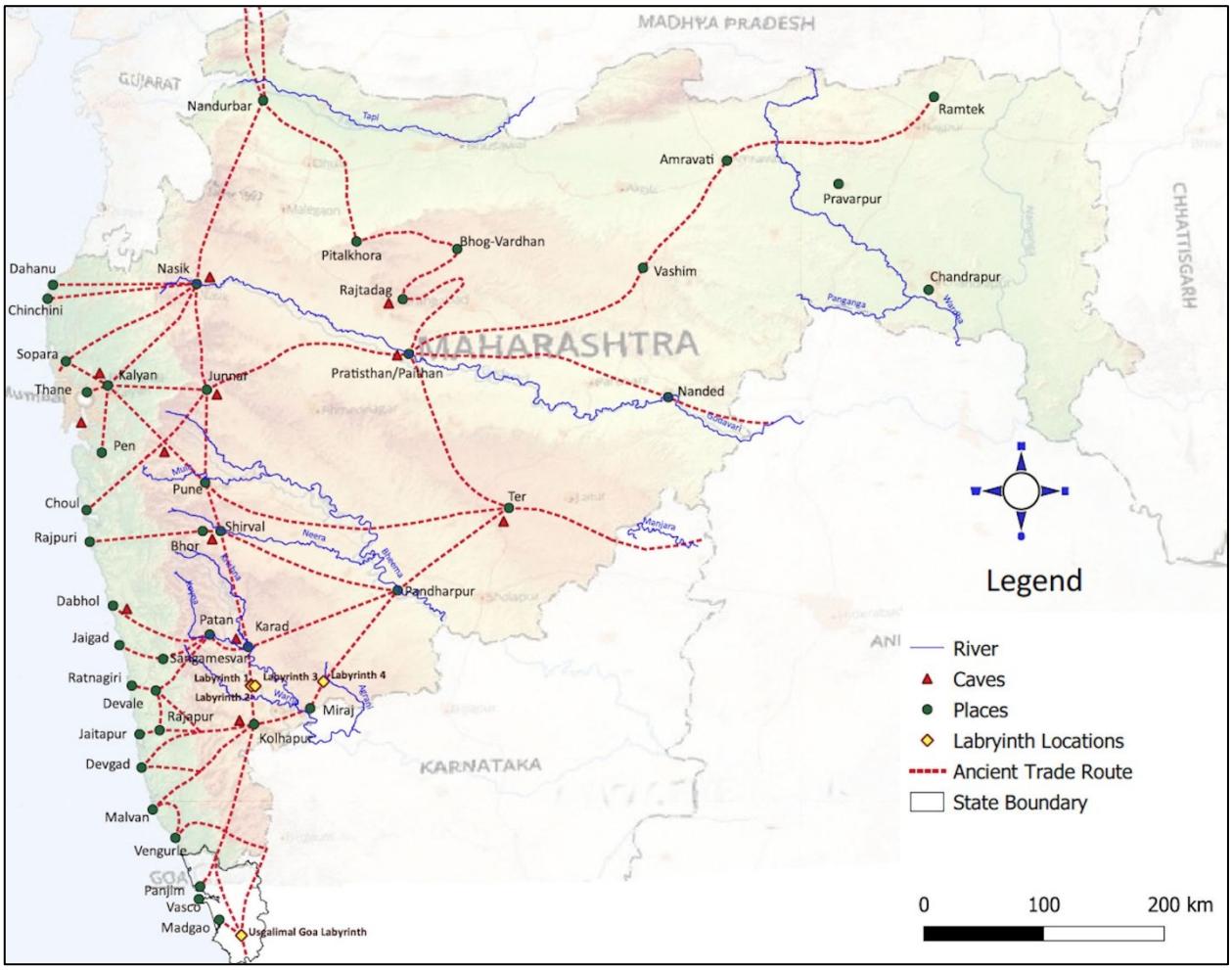

Fig. 6: Ancient trade routes in Maharashtra and the locations of the labyrinths

Discussion and Conclusion

To understand the relationship of these labyrinths with the surrounding culture, a detailed site catchment analysis was carried out. Through a systematic village to village survey in and around these locations, we explored a number of sites of different cultural periods. While further research work is required to understand the importance and function of these labyrinths in Maharashtra, as discussed above, the study area of the Aitawade Budrukh and Malangaon labyrinths is at a point where two ancient trade routes from Kolhapur divide, i.e., the one going to Karad and another towards Ter. The location of the labyrinths at Aitawade Budrukh was at a major junction below the upper shield land, on a medium elevated and dissected ridgeline. From this ideal location, both the sites are visible, accessible by good road connection, and nearly equidistant. Therefore, after looking at such suitable landform characters, it seems they may have selected this location for the establishment of these labyrinths. Likewise, the labyrinth at Malangaon is situated alongside the road linking Kolhapur and Pandharpur. As discussed above, goods from the Konkan ports were loaded on bullock carts and carried through the ghat section of the plateau region to different localities in various directions. Therefore, new travellers can select the proper road to reach their destination and the labyrinths at this junction give proper direction to the travellers to reach their destination. In this process, these four labyrinths in Maharashtra all played a very important role in guiding travellers along these roads. These newly described labyrinths will prove to be important evidence of ancient Indian culture and trade relations. Further research work is required to understand the importance and function of the labyrinths discovered in the region of Maharashtra.

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