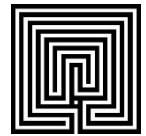


# The Story of the Labyrinth

Jeff Saward



**Labyrinths and Mazes have a history that can be traced back some 4000 years...**

The earliest examples, found carved on rocks, all have the same design - the classical labyrinth symbol...

*Prehistoric labyrinth petroglyph, Mogor, Spain*



This design was taken by the Romans and new forms were created for use on mosaic floors...

*Roman Mosaic labyrinth, Paphos, Cyprus*

Further developed during medieval times, the labyrinth design then appeared on the floors of churches and cathedrals in Europe, on village greens and hilltops, on remote coastlines and islands in Scandinavia, up to the Arctic Circle and beyond...



*Pavement labyrinth, Chartres Cathedral, France*



*Stone labyrinth, Zaiatsky, Arctic Russia*

And the labyrinth symbol is also found throughout India, as far away as Sumatra and Java and in the American Southwest, although many questions remain around when it first appears and how it spread to many of these regions...

*Man in the Maze Basket, Arizona, USA*





During the late medieval period, the labyrinth design was adapted further, and developed into the familiar puzzle mazes of tangled hedges we know today from parks and gardens...

**Hedge Maze, Hampton Court, England**

Fashionable again in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, in the late 20<sup>th</sup> century their story takes another dramatic turn as first mazes, then labyrinths, found a new acceptance. Now in the 21<sup>st</sup> century they are more popular than at any time throughout their tortuous history...



**Modern Ceremonial Labyrinth, Atlanta, USA**

Each of these episodes has created new forms, new designs, new meanings and purposes...

**Labyrinths** have been a potent symbol in many cultures for thousands of years. When Theseus killed the Minotaur he defeated the beast at the heart of darkness - and created a myth that is still vibrant and evolving today. Roman mosaics often depicted labyrinths as fortified cities, while in medieval Europe they symbolised the one true path to Christian salvation. They have been used as ceremonial pathways, protective sigils, traps for unwelcome spirits and for games and dancing. Found at different points in time, in places as diverse as Brazil, Arizona, Iceland, across Europe, in Africa, India and Sumatra, this symbol and its family of derivatives have been traced back 4000 years or more; but its origins remain mysterious.

**Mazes**, synonymous with confusion, are of more recent origin, evolving from the earlier labyrinths around five hundred years ago - they have been exercising our feet and minds ever since. Modern puzzle mazes, however complex their form, are but the latest episode in this labyrinthine story, a story that is as long and tortuous as their plans suggest...

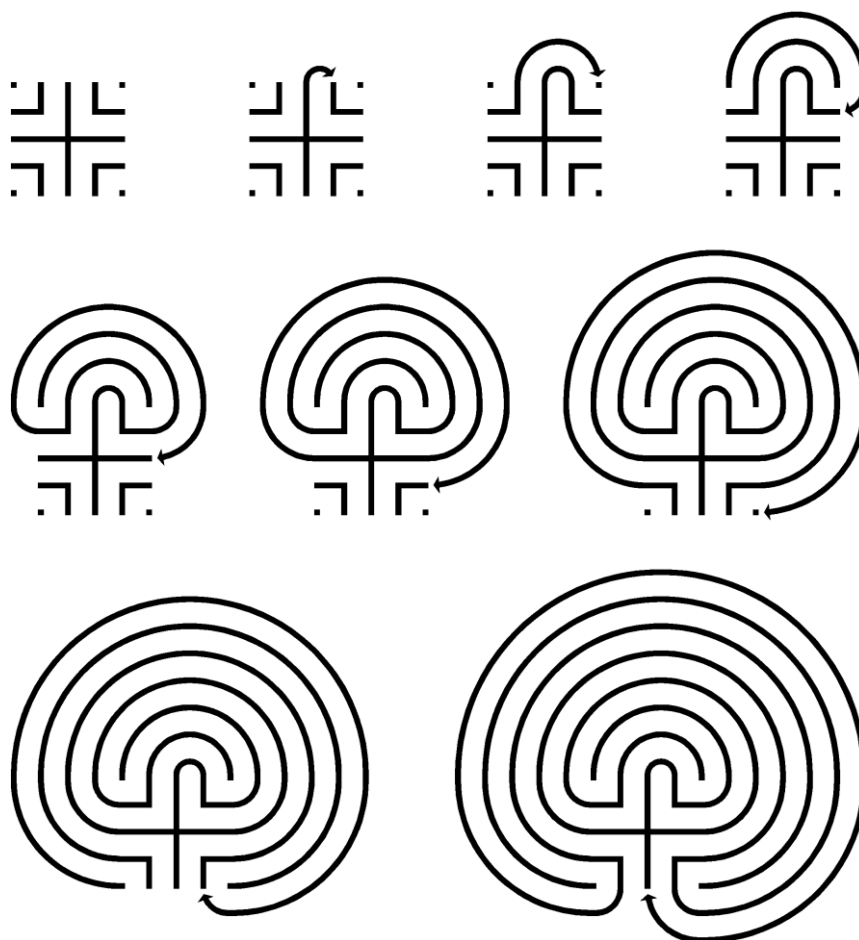
Mention mazes and most people think of Hampton Court or some other famous hedge maze. Puzzle mazes in gardens and theme parks are all multicursal - many pathed - to entice and confuse the visitor. Mention labyrinths and some may recall the legend of Theseus and the Minotaur, and increasingly some will know the unicursal - single path - labyrinth symbol, which occurs in different cultures, at different points in time, in places as diverse as Brazil, Arizona, Iceland, Crete, Egypt, India and Sumatra. The true labyrinth has no false pathways or dead ends to deceive the explorer. Instead it consists of a single meandering pathway which leads inexorably from the entrance to the centre, and on occasions back out again. This symbol and its family of derivatives has been traced back some 4000 years; its origins are still mysterious.

At each of these incidents in time, the labyrinth symbol and the mythology that surrounds it has surfaced in a culture that has incorporated it into their lives in varying ways. Sometimes these episodes in labyrinth-time were short lived, often they flourished for hundreds of years and spread the concept far and wide. The mediums employed for its use have been many and varied - a simple symbol in a mythology, carved on wood or a rockface, woven into the design on a blanket or basket, laid out on the ground with water-worn stones in the desert or on shorelines, in coloured mosaic, stone or tiles on the floors of villas, churches and cathedrals, or cut into the living turf - to name but a few of the forms. Often the stories told of the labyrinth have been adapted to local use. Sometimes the design is altered or developed, but more often the symbol of the labyrinth is employed with no significant variation. The lines of contact between these widely spaced bursts of labyrinth consciousness are difficult to trace, and much remains to be discovered, but each represents one turn on the tortuous pathway of the labyrinth as it has danced its way around the world.

What then is the fascination hidden in this design that has transported it worldwide and through thousands of years, and to what purpose was it originally and subsequently put? The purpose and usage is relatively clear, for in many cultures the labyrinth has been used as a protective device, a symbolic and ceremonial pathway, the path of the pilgrim or as a dancing ground. The twisting, tortuous paths are sometimes seen as guarding the central goal from direct penetration, for here the spirits of the ancestors were thought to reside, barred from escaping and causing trouble in everyday life, but contactable once the labyrinths coils had been traversed. Likewise, young women would stand here as suitors would chase through the windings to seek out a potential bride.

As many stories are told as mythologies exist, but in all the labyrinth seems to symbolise the path to be followed, in daily and seasonal cycles, in life, death and in rebirth. The expanding and contracting circuits mimic the path of the sun in its travels across the sky, a recognition of the perpetual rebirth of the sun each morning and every year and beyond this may exist a cosmology, an ancient understanding of the cycles of time, all safely concealed within the labyrinth, locked up in numbers and movements.

Throughout the years the labyrinth has often been employed as a symbol for the omphalos or sacred city; the Romans enclosed their mosaic labyrinths within depictions of the walls that surrounded the fortified towns of the Roman Empire, the Akimel O’odham of Arizona refer to the labyrinth as Siuku Ki, the design symbolising the structure of the house of the founder of their tribe. Throughout Europe labyrinths are known as Troy Town, City of Troy or Walls of Troy, the legendary city of the ancient Pagan world, or as Jericho or Jerusalem in a later Christian context. Ariadne’s thread, the clew, was the means by which Theseus was able to enter into the legendary Labyrinth of Knossos, despatch the unfortunate Minotaur and retrace his steps unscathed, and indeed many clues remain to help unravel and understand the lure of the labyrinth design. One of the most important is the method of its construction - as simple as the design appears complex. It is as follows:



*The labyrinth “seed pattern,” employed throughout history and wherever they are found, to construct the design*

This process can easily be scaled up to produce a labyrinth large enough to use for practical purposes, for the surest way to experience the labyrinth's intricate pathway and feel the cunning blend of concealment and revelation as the path - always seeming to take you to the centre, only then to swing back out again, suddenly finds you standing at the centre, unsure how you arrived - is to go and walk, or run, one of these labyrinths. Alternatively of course, construct one of your own! The traditional designs are by their very nature adaptable to fit the location and area available; the materials employable for their construction are limited only by your imagination.

But not all of this is concerned with the past. During the last forty years or so, the labyrinth symbol and its attendant mythology has undergone a further rapid evolution, once again becoming a vibrant concept that has infiltrated into many aspects of public consciousness. It is highly likely that more labyrinths have been built in recent years than at any time in the past, the current fascination with the labyrinth as a contemplative and spiritual tool, a path to represent the course of life, an expression of soulful intent, is truly remarkable and has taken the concept worldwide, helped, of course, by modern technologies. The concomitant interest in its history and development has also seen a sharing of ideas and information, a gathering of practitioners and researchers, designers and creators, meeting together to share their knowledge and discoveries. At the same time the labyrinth has been appropriated by the media as a theme for computer games, financial chicanery, feature films and television alike. Alongside this is the current resurgence of the labyrinth in its many multicursal forms as a fundamental part of the leisure industry, likewise starting in the 1970s, with the construction of many hundreds of mazes, often large and complex, in parks and playgrounds throughout the world. The cornfield mazes of recent years are just the latest development of this art form. And the simple, unicursal labyrinth continues to spread yet further afield, sometimes alongside its complex multicursal cousins, and in recent years as a vibrant concept with its own momentum.

This current revival of interest - itself just another incident in the long history of the labyrinth - has created a new recognition of the dual concepts of amusement and amazement. The need for chaos in an ordered, explainable world. The temporary suspension of time and direction, an isolation from two of the most important principles by which the world and our life upon it are ruled, has always been attainable within the concealing walls of the labyrinth, be they of tangled yew branches, or of the simple circuitous lines cut into hill-top turf or laid in stones upon the shoreline.

Welcome to the latest episode in labyrinth time...

Jeff Saward; Thundersley, England  
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