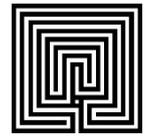


# The Labyrinth as a Printer's Device

Ivor Winton



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*Caerdroia* 17 introduced its readers to the use of the labyrinth figure as a printer's device in cinquecento Italy. Since this byway in the labyrinth's story has gone almost unnoticed, some brief comments may be in order.

The device or mark in question belonged to Johannes Jacobus de Benedictis (Gian Giacomo Benedetti) an obscure figure active in Bolognese publishing circles in the years around 1500. Nothing is known of his life and work save such scraps as may be gleaned from the books which bear his imprint – a legacy numbering perhaps fifteen titles. Thus we first catch sight of him early in 1492, when he co-published two works in Bologna. Evidently he had business connections – and perhaps kinship ties? – to the prominent de Benedictis publishing family in that city. As late as 1503 and 1508 he was still at work in Bologna.

Of particular concern here are the occasional publishing efforts of Johannes de Benedictis in other cities along the north-eastern fringes of the Apennines. Within the space of a few months in 1495, acting in concert with Paulus Gaurinus of Forli, he introduced printing first to Cesena (a single book only), then Forli (four titles). Each of these latter works has the labyrinth figure as a printer's device.

More than a decade later, de Benedictis returned to Forli to publish the *Constitutiones Marchiae Anconitanae* (December 10<sup>th</sup>, 1507), again in partnership with Guarinus, and again with the distinctive labyrinth trademark.<sup>1</sup> Our last glimpse of him is in Camerino, further down the peninsula: during 1523-24 he published three books in that city, each bearing the labyrinth design. In all, then, at least eight works in his modest oeuvre are distinguished by such a device.

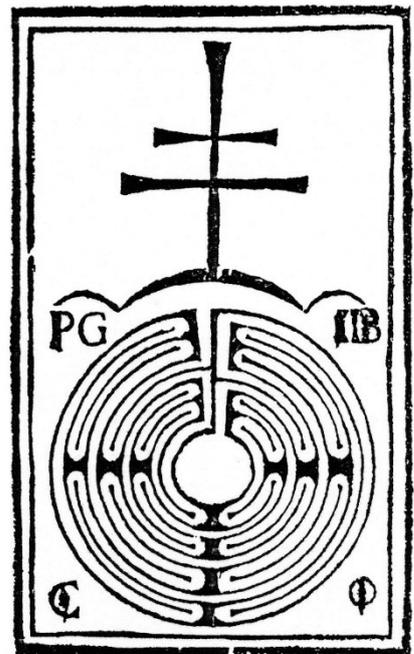
Against this capsule 'biography' must be juxtaposed another. In December 1495, a second printer operating in Bologna, Johannes Jacobus de Fontanesis of Reggio, published a volume of poetry, styling himself in its colophon "Ioanne(s) Iacobu(s) de Fontanetis de Regio Cognominato de Laberintis." De Fontanesis, in other words, had adopted the labyrinth as sobriquet! Subsequently he too would employ a labyrinth figure as device in at least one publication.

The parallel with de Benedictis is striking; so striking, that researchers have long wondered whether these two individuals were actually one and the same. Proponents of this view can point beyond the coincidence of iconography to a common association with the de Benedictis firm and demonstrable typographical links.

Less familiar perhaps is the fact that a now extremely rare document, the *Bulla indulta ac privilegia concessa civitati forliviensi*, was published by Johannes Jacobus de Fortanesis and Paulus Gaurinus at Forli on January 1<sup>st</sup>, 1508 – which is to say, a mere three weeks after Johannes Jacobus de Benedictis and Gaurinus had collaborated on the *Constitutiones* at Forli. That both Bologna printers should have worked with Guarinus in Forli at almost the same time takes some swallowing.<sup>2</sup> All things considered, a credible – if circumstantial – case can be made for the identity of the pair.

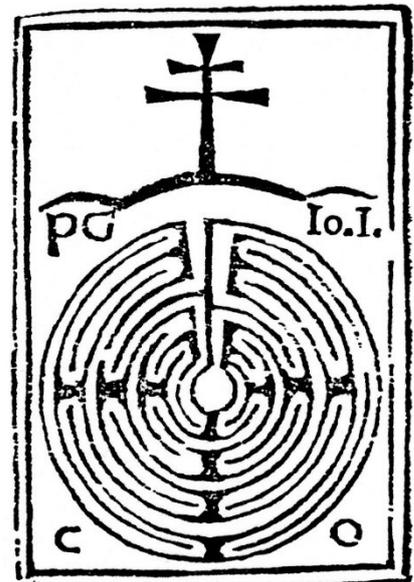
Now to the labyrinth device itself; or devices, if you will, since the basic design underwent minor modifications over the years. Its earliest form (1495) presents a circular figure, characteristically medieval in plan, with a conspicuous blank centre (figure 1). Above, on an arching base line, stands a large cross of the patriarchal type dear to early printers. An inscription reads "PG IIB / C O." While the first line clearly acknowledges Gaurinus and de Benedictis, Just what the letters "C O" intend is problematical. They have been thought a reference to Camerino, but nearly two decades would pass before de Benedictis practised his trade there; that they signify *cognominato* in allusion to the labyrinth figure seems more promising.<sup>3</sup>

*Figure 1: the device of Gaurinus & de Benedictis, 1495*



A later form of the device appears in the *Constitutiones* of 1507 (figure 2).<sup>4</sup> Although fundamentally the same, the labyrinth has been drawn with less care here and with a much smaller centre. Also reduced in size is the accompanying cross. For its part, the inscription now runs "PG Io.I. / C O," as if de Benedictis had judged his surname dispensable.

*Figure 2: the device of Gaurinus & de Benedictis, 1507*



The device used at Camerino in 1523-24 recasts the inscription one more time: only the initials "C O" remain (figure 3). De Benedictis, no longer in partnership with Guarinus, may by then have considered the distinctive labyrinth figure identification enough. Otherwise, the device is essentially unchanged from that of 1507.

*Figure 3: the device of de Benedictis, 1523-24*



Unfortunately, I have not seen the labyrinth mark adopted by de Fontanesis in at least one publication. Described as a “close copy” of de Benedictis’ 1495 design, it comprised “a maze (i.e., a labyrinth) with the printer’s Christian names and the letter R (‘Regiensis’).”<sup>5</sup> An earlier device favoured by de Fontanesis had carried the inscription “Joa-nes Jac-bus” and the letter “R.”<sup>6</sup>

On motivation there is little to say. Precisely why de Benedictis should have turned to the labyrinth symbol for a printer’s mark – indeed, for a badge of identity – remains quite uncertain.<sup>7</sup> Without evidence from sources other than his published works, we may never know.

Ivor Winton, Minneapolis, USA; July 1987

### References:

1. To which attention was drawn in *Caerdroia* 17, p. 30.
2. This argument added by Norton, p. 36.
3. Camerino thesis: Kristeller, p. 20. Cognominato thesis: British Museum, 7:1120.
4. Illustrated in *Caerdroia* 17, p. 30, from a Sotherby’s catalogue for a sale of antiquarian books, April 2<sup>nd</sup> 1985.
5. British Museum, 6:838.
6. Haebler, 2:10.
7. Vaccaro, p. 105, if I read her correctly, supposes some connection to Neoplatonic doctrines. She offers not a shred of evidence.

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