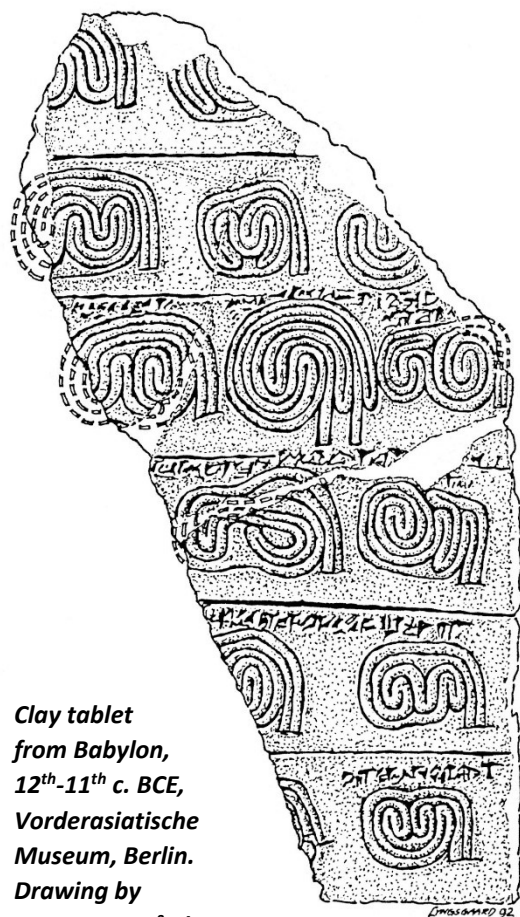


# The Babylonian Labyrinth

Hans Lyngsgård



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**Clay tablet  
from Babylon,  
12<sup>th</sup>-11<sup>th</sup> c. BCE,  
Vorderasiatische  
Museum, Berlin.  
Drawing by  
Hans Lyngsgård**

Some months after I constructed the SOLBO labyrinth at Silkeborg, Denmark (see *Caerdroia* 25, p. 31) I visited the Vorderasiatische Museum in Berlin, Germany, and by chance stopped at a little exhibition case to look at a little piece of clay from Babylon – upon it were a lot of small labyrinths. The museum had labelled it as a “clay tablet with drawings of different liver conditions, used for the purpose of prophecy.” It is dated to the 12<sup>th</sup> or 11<sup>th</sup> century BCE.

In my eyes the ‘liver conditions’ are very clear labyrinths with one path, but in contradiction to the classical labyrinth there is no centre and separate entrances and exits. These small labyrinths could have been models for the SOLBO labyrinth. I know that piety, cult and magic played an important role in ancient Babylon, and the priests would also have used the entrails of animals for their predictions, but in this work with oracles I guess that labyrinths had a certain role. But which?

Another indication points in the same direction. Studying labyrinth names we are familiar with the names of *Troy Town* and *Trojaborg*. But as Henning Eichberg has pointed out there are other groups of names, the *Jungfrudans* and *Babylon* types. The Babylon-type is to be found in Northern Europe as well as in Germany, and includes names like *Babylon*, *Babylonie*, *Jerusalem*, *Niniveh*, *Jericho* and others. Could this be an accidental coincidence? I think that the entrail labyrinths fit together with the labyrinth names, and that they form a special group of labyrinths.

Hans Lyngsgård, Skanderborg, Denmark; 1992

## Editor's Footnote:

Similar Babylonian clay tablets, often ascribed to divinatory purposes and bearing labyrinthine designs are documented, including several in the Schøyen Collection. While some of the designs are superficially similar to labyrinths of the ‘classical’ type (see illustration opposite), other, more complex designs, are somewhat more akin to the plans of puzzle mazes, although in most cases there is simply one path in to the centre and another path out.

Jeff Seward, September 2010.

***Small clay divination tablet from Mesopotamia (ca. 1800 BCE) inscribed with a pattern superficially similar to the classical labyrinth design.  
Photo: Jeff Seward, courtesy of Mark Wilson***



See also: Shelton, Richard Myers. “The Babylonian Labyrinths.” *Caerdroia* 42 (2013), p. 7-29.

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