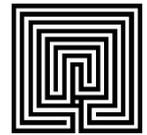


# Stone Labyrinth in Arctic Norway

Bjørnar Olsen



*Originally published in Caerdroia 27 (1996), p.24-27*

The number of labyrinths in Norway is not particularly impressive. To date, a total of approximately twenty stone labyrinths have been recorded. However, only eleven of these are known to survive. In addition, labyrinth wall-paintings are recorded in two medieval churches (Seljord and Vestre Slidre in southern Norway) and we also know a few labyrinthine motifs in the prehistoric rock art of Norway. Compared to the extremely rich material from Sweden and Finland, the low frequency of labyrinths in Norway is rather enigmatic.

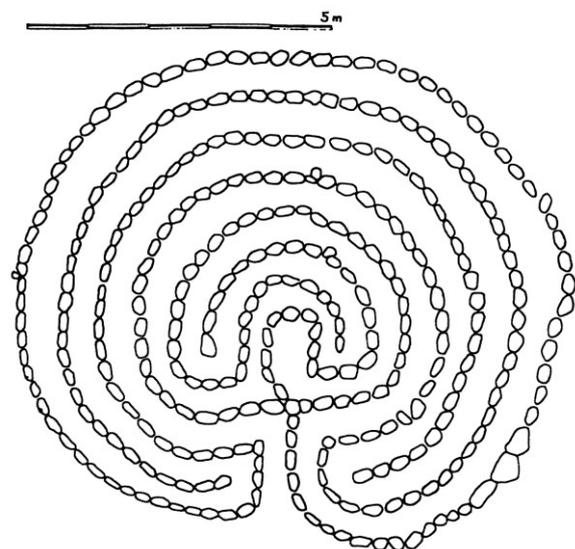
Another strange feature regarding the labyrinths of Norway is their very uneven distribution. A few are located in the Oslofjord area, while the vast majority are situated along the Arctic coast of Finnmark, the northernmost province of both Norway and Scandinavia. Eight of the eleven preserved labyrinths are located here (see fig.1). This northern group of labyrinths may be seen as a north-westerly offshoot of a larger group of labyrinths on the Kola Peninsula and the White Sea area of Russia. Here, the largest concentration appears on the Solovetski Archipelago in the White Sea, where more than 40 stone labyrinths are recorded.



**Fig.1: Distribution of stone labyrinths in coastal Finnmark, Norway**

In this paper I shall focus on these labyrinths in the extreme north of Norway, and try to interpret their meaning and possible social function in the local communities of the past. To do this, I have to say a few words first regarding their cultural and historical context. All the Finnmark labyrinths are confined to the extreme outer coast. Here, in this harsh environment, they are always located on small islands or headlands. Another significant feature of their location is that all are situated on or near Saami (Lapp) burial grounds. Regarding their age, there is ample evidence to suggest that they were constructed during the period 1200 to 1700 CE. This is based both on local shoreline displacement chronology, and their association with Saami burials dated to this period.

All of the Finnmark labyrinths have a circular or slightly oval form, normally 8 to 12 meters in diameter, constructed of head size stones. In the outermost stone circle there is an opening to a passage system, which through long detours, finally terminates in the centre of the labyrinth. A common feature of this type of labyrinth is that they have no dead-end passages.



**Fig.2: Stone labyrinth at Holmengrå, eastern Finnmark, Norway**

Various interpretations have been proposed for the labyrinths along this Arctic coast. Some researchers have seen them as magical symbols, functioning to tame the power of the sea and/or to produce success in fishing. Others have connected them to Pomor traders who operated here during the 17th to 19th centuries, who for some reason or other could have brought this symbol from the White Sea area during their trade here.

In this paper I shall propose a quite different interpretation of these stone structures at the northern tip of Europe. This interpretation suggests that the labyrinths served as a material metaphor to conceptualise the transition from life into death. Since the Finnmark labyrinths are always associated with burials, this has led me to believe that they played a symbolic role in this rite of passage.

Rites of passage are life-crises rituals dealing with the crossing of boundaries between one social category and another, such as puberty ceremonies, weddings, funerals and initiation rites of all kinds. Anthropologists and religious historians have proposed a three-phase structure for such rituals:

1. separation (stepping out of a secular time and space)
2. transition (an ambiguous area and period, the focus of adjustment to a new social role)
3. incorporation (the return of an individual to a social context, now in a new state)

A general feature of the transitional phase is that the individual concerned is in an abnormal situation, outside time or space. This makes the person sacred, but also ambiguous, contaminated and therefore dangerous. Consequently, he or she has to be separated from other members of the community, either by expulsion from the community altogether or by being temporarily housed in an enclosed space from which ordinary people are excluded.

The physical portrayal of the phase seems to play an important expressive role in transitional rituals, and in my opinion the labyrinth form may be a very suitable metaphor for this condition. In accordance with this idea I suggest that the Finnmark labyrinths may be understood as material symbols expressing and mapping the structure of life-crises rituals, in this case burial rites. If we imagine the ritual carried out by a shaman, the following may have happened: by walking into the labyrinth the shaman symbolically expresses the separation of the dead individual from this life. Being inside the labyrinth marks the physical separation from the living social world, when the individual is contaminated and dangerous. The ceremony terminates with the shaman leaving the labyrinth as a symbolic manifestation of the dead individual's incorporation into a new state.

However, this does not answer why the labyrinth form is applied, since any enclosure could have suited these ritual requirements. Why should the transformational phase, the liminal zone between life and death, be represented by a long, curved and narrow passage?

In many shamanic cultures we find that the passage from life to death, to the underworld, is considered difficult and long. Thus, the shaman has to guide the soul along this difficult road. Because the shaman has travelled the road many times himself, he is thoroughly familiar with it. The shaman becomes indispensable when the dead person is slow to forsake the world of the living; only he can capture the intangible soul and carry it to its new abode.

During these rituals the shaman often performs dances recounting the difficulties of the long road to the underworld. The labyrinth form, with its waves and long detours, fits well with this tradition of what takes place during the transitional period. The long route winding inside the labyrinth gives a concrete social reality to the scenario of the shaman guiding the soul through the difficult passage from life to death.

This interpretation does not answer why these symbols came into use among the Saami along the coast of Finnmark during the period 1200 to 1700 CE. We must assume that some kind of transitional rituals always have been performed in connection with burials, and the question to be answered is why such a material expression is confined to this particular period and area?

From about 1200 CE the aboriginal Saami communities of coastal Finnmark experienced a dramatic change in their contacts with the outside world through trade, taxation, missionary activity and state expansion and colonization. The surrounding Scandinavian and Russian societies were competing over the resources in the Saami area, and tried to gain political control over it. This rapidly increasing contact with the outside world

clearly represented a serious threat to basic social and cultural values in the Saami hunting societies, and it is likely to have generated a considerable stress within them. In such a context one might expect that the local societies mobilised a counter-active symbolic and ritual production in an attempt to reinforce key cultural values, and to communicate internal solidarity.

Such an increased ritual and symbolic communication is clearly recognisable in the Saami societies during this period, and it appears that to a large extent this production is channelled into the religious sphere. The emphasis on religious rituals and symbols may have been a result of the essential role played by Christian missionaries in the surrounding State efforts to incorporate the Saami into their respective political and economic systems. The locus of external pressure often seems to determine the selection of meaningful counter-symbols.

A record from 1589 mentions 17 Norwegian churches in use along the coast of Finnmark, and in the eastern area several Russian chapels and monasteries had been erected. In this context, where Christian churches and monasteries stood as persuasive symbols of the threatening power from the outside world, consolidation of Saami religious and social values may easily have taken the form of concrete ritual manifestations. Thus, the labyrinths may be regarded as part of a response from the Saami societies to the churches as Christian material symbols. Their association with burials seems reasonable due to the significant role attached to funerals in communicating tradition and continuity in a society.

The appearance of the labyrinths as part of a Saami expressive repertoire can then be related to the significant role played by material symbols, as well as rituals, in social practice. Both material and ritual discourse fixes the unconscious, gives to it a social reality that can be lived and acted on. In this sense, the labyrinths become, in a very concrete way, symbols in action.

Bjørnar Olsen, University of Tromsø, Norway; 1995.



Editor's Note: The above article is an English translation of "Labyrinter i Norge," reproduced with permission from issue 58 of *Historiska Nyheter*, produced by the Statens Historiska Mueum, Stockholm, Sweden, in connection with the *Labyrinth* modern art exhibition which opened at the Museum on 31 March 1995. Published in the format of a 24 page A3 sized newspaper, this edition was dedicated to labyrinths and consisted of a number of short articles, in Nordic languages, on the history and distribution of labyrinths, with particular emphasis on the stone labyrinths of Scandinavia.

**Labyrinth wall fresco,  
Slidre Church, Southern Norway  
Photo: Labyrinthos Archive**



The text and illustrations in this reprint are  
© Labyrinthos/Bjørnar Olsen 2017 as appropriate.  
Personal copies are permitted, but permission must be  
sought for any commercial reproduction:  
[www.labyrinthos.net](http://www.labyrinthos.net)