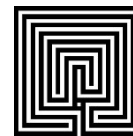


Siweard's Labyrinth

Jeff Saward



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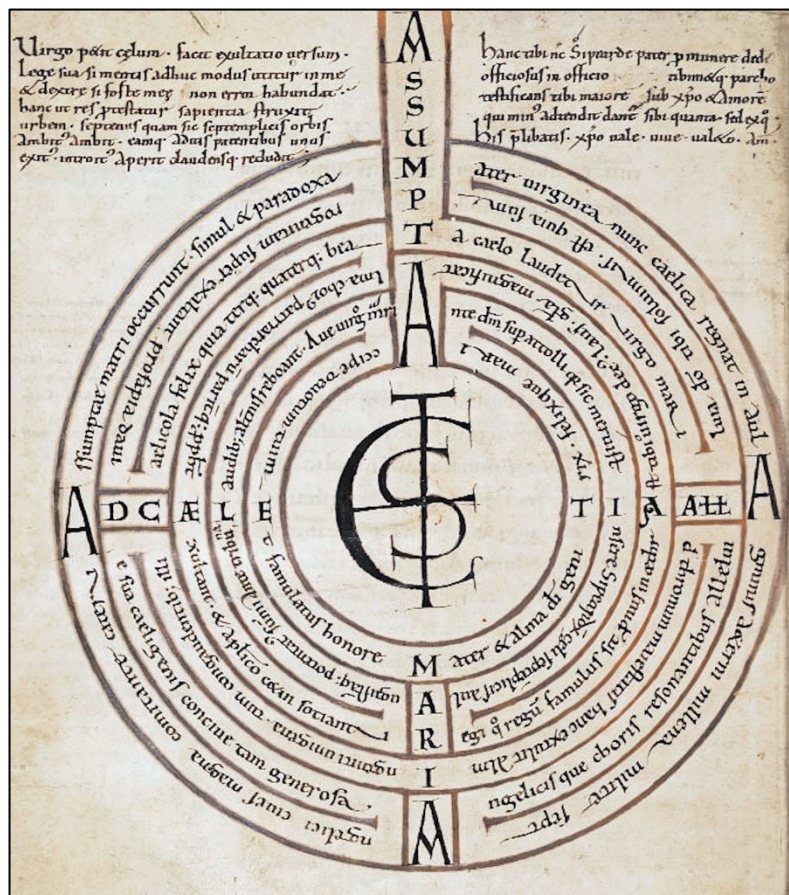
The labyrinth symbol is found in Christian contexts from the 4th century CE onwards. While some of the earliest examples occur as mosaics or inscriptions, many are recorded in hand copied texts and manuscripts. Often dealing with philosophical, liturgical and educational matters, they circulated widely around the Christian monasteries and royal courts of Europe during the early Mediaeval period. As early as the 6th century, Boethius, in his influential *De Consolatione Philosophiae* (Consolation of Philosophy),¹ was referring to the "labyrinthine argument from which I cannot escape." Later copies of this and similar works were often accompanied by drawings of a labyrinth (certainly from the 8th century onwards) to illustrate these philosophical complexities to the reader.

An especially elaborate example, rendered in red and black ink, is found in an early 11th century copy of Boethius, produced at Abingdon Abbey, England, and now in the collection of Cambridge University Library (Kk.3.21).² It contains a full-page illustration of a six-path, seven-wall labyrinth, the paths of which are filled with a poem, *Assumpta est Maria ad Caelestia, Alleluia*, which can be read in either of two ways: by following the path of the labyrinth, which gives one arrangement of lines, or according to the circles, which gives a different, but equally coherent prayer, translated, from its concentric reading, as:

MARY IS ASSUMED INTO HEAVEN, ALLELUIA!

The virgin mother now reigns in the court of heaven, surrounded by a thousand soldiers of the eternal army. The angel citizens, with the accompaniment of a great throng, meet the mother after the assumption and at the same time exalt the marvellous offspring above the race of David, with dwellers in heaven and angelic choirs re-echoing alleluia for their fellow citizens, so noble is she. We say alleluia to you, O God, because she is assumed. Assumed into heaven, let the virgin Mary be praised! The only-begotten son of the kindly unbegotten one has raised her to the throne of majesty: then, amid their rejoicing there, you are a happy inhabitant of heaven, because threefold, fourfold blessed. The kindly chorus of patriarchs and likewise the prophets exult and join the apostolic gathering. At which let your servant kneel to the king of kings in heaven, but to you, O glorified virgin, let there be honour, praise and glory, you who have thus deserved to be raised up before God. Introduce Siweard into the hall of the sevenfold heaven. Before the tribunal of the highest majesty they [laud] the august one with alternate praises, re-echoing "Ave, virgin Mary." Accept your devoted servant and the honour of service to you, mother and kind mother of God and happy Mary.³

The Abingdon Boethius
Cambridge University Library Kk.3.21
Photo courtesy of C. U. Library



Of particular note is a line in the poem that prays for the acceptance of “Siweard into the hall of the sevenfold heaven.” Siweard, to whom the book was gifted, was the Abbot of Abingdon from 1030 until 1044, when he was temporarily appointed as Archbishop of Canterbury by Edward the Confessor. The labyrinth must therefore date to this time, or perhaps 1048, when Siweard resigned his position due to ill-health and returned to Abingdon shortly before he died. The dedication of the prayer to Mary, the patron saint of Abingdon, and as such protector of its inhabitants, as well as a popular figure of reverence throughout the mediaeval Christian world, would have been an obvious choice for such exalted praise.

Above the labyrinth is a further text added by the unknown artist that translated reads:

The Virgin seeks out heaven; exaltation inspires my verse. If mental control still exercises its law in me, and if, perchance, my right hand does not err excessively, as the facts bear witness wisdom has structured this city, which a sevenfold circle surrounds, and one and the same exit and entrance opens it with open approaches and closing, closes it again. To you, father Siweard, I have given this as a gift, I, dutiful in my duty to you, and I shall obey you, bearing witness to you my greater love under Christ, who does not attend to how much is given but from where. These things having been said, rejoice, live and rejoice in Christ. Amen

The labyrinth on the page of the Abingdon Boethius is both unusual and unique amongst the variety of designs in such works. With only seven walls – and thus symbolising the sevenfold heaven of the prayer – it is simpler than the 11-path, 12-wall designs that were becoming popular and widespread in manuscripts at this time. Examples of this more complex type first appear in manuscripts during the 10th century and are then employed in the 12th century on the floors and walls of churches and cathedrals in Italy, including the example on the wall at Lucca, in the Gothic cathedrals of Northern France during the 13th century and subsequently as turf labyrinths (often called turf mazes) throughout England from the 16th century onwards. Indeed, adaptations of this design were also used for the construction of the first garden mazes around the same time.

Jeff Saward, Thundersley, England; 1991
(Revised, February 2020)

Notes & References:

- 1 Written ca. 520 CE, this work was widely copied and distributed during the mediaeval period, and often has labyrinth illustrations added to its text, but as all early copies were hand-drawn the labyrinths vary considerably.
- 2 My thanks to Cambridge University Library for permission to reproduce this item, and also to Bob Trubshaw for initially bringing it to my attention.
- 3 Clayton, Mary. *The Cult of the Virgin Mary in Anglo-Saxon England*. Cambridge University Press, 1990. p. 106-108. Translations are from this excellent source.

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