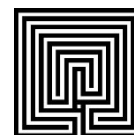


# The Volterra Lectern Labyrinth

Manuela Mastrigli



*Originally published in Caerdroia 35 (2005), p.6-9*

We first heard of this labyrinth thanks to Jeff Saward, who found it quoted in a paper by the French mathematician P. Rosenstiehl. Unfortunately, Rosenstiehl mentions a labyrinth at Volterra (between Livorno and Siena, in Northern Italy), but gives no other information. Furthermore, the labyrinth is not quoted in Hermann Kern's work, nor in other popular books dealing with this subject. Hence, some questions were opened about the exact location of the labyrinth, its author, type, age and state of preservation.

The first answers came thanks to Dr. Umberto Bavoni at the Guarnacci Museum, Volterra, who ensured us of the existence of the labyrinth: it is a wooden inlay on the lectern of Volterra Cathedral and is now kept in the diocesan museum of Volterra. Bavoni has also reported a recent study of the labyrinth made by Alessandra Angeloni in her paper: "Il labirinto di Volterra, Il leggio trecentesco della cattedrale di Volterra" published in *Rassegna Volterrana* 73-74, (1996-1997), pp.149-167, photos on p. 211.

The lectern was originally placed in the middle of the choir, in the cathedral's apse, and was designed to hold the heavy prayers books. It consists of two oblique panels with wooden inlays of three different colours, two bars for holding the books and two triangular shaped lateral panels made with darker wood and decorated with foliage and volutes in relief. It is double-sided: the books could be placed both on the side showing the labyrinth and on the opposite side.

The lectern is supported on an octagonal wooden stand and has an iron 'weathercock' for holding a lamp. The height is 208 cm without the weathercock; the panels are 98 x 62 cm, the base of the lateral panels is 53 cm, the height of the weathercock is an additional 140 cm.



*The lectern on display in the Volterra Diocesan Museum – all photos: M.Mastrigli & F.Pompili*

Both the panels are decorated with wooden inlays: on one side is the labyrinth; the other is a geometric plait generated by eight circles



*The two sides of the Volterra lectern*

The labyrinth is square in design, with sides of 35 cm. It has an 11-circuit structure, the same design as Chartres and Lucca. The path is dark and the “walls” are marked in lighter inlay. A rampant figure is placed in the centre. Its identification is quite hard because of its small size and inaccurate realisation. It could be a lion or a centaur.



*Detail of the labyrinth on the Volterra lectern. 35 centimetres square and of the familiar and widespread ‘medieval type’ with 11 circuits, the central goal is occupied by a rampant lion or centaur.*

Both the labyrinth and the circular motifs on the other panel are placed side by side with complex geometric decorations. The whole is surrounded by a frame of small arches with trilobate endings. An inscription with uncial letters, placed along the top side of the panel with the labyrinth, reveals us the names of the authors:

*HOC OPUS FECERUNT ANDREOCCIO ET ANTONIO DE SENIS*

i.e. “Andreoccio and Antonio from Siena made this work”. Unfortunately, we only have information about the first named artist, Andreoccio di Bartolomeo. He was born at Siena, in the mid-fourteen century, he worked at Pisa and mostly at Volterra, where his activity from 1373 to 1427 is well-documented by his works in the most important buildings of the town.

There are two further inscriptions on the lectern. One of them is written with capital letters and is placed along the top side of the other panel. It concerns the restoration works done by Paolo Mariani in 1828 on the lateral panel and the octagonal stand:

*HOC OPUS ET CHORUM A.D. MDCCCXXVIII PAULUS MARIANI RESTAURAVIT*

The other inscription is an incision on the weathercock:

*HOC OPUS FECIT MAGISTER HENRICUS DE ALAMNIA MCCCCIII*

reminding us that this was made by Enrico di Ormanno, a German artist, in 1404.

The lectern was part of the cathedral’s wooden furniture. The cathedral was first consecrated in 1120 but only finished in 1254. The transept was then modified in the following century with the building of the terminal chapels and choir. The earliest information about the choir can be found in a deed dating back to 1388:

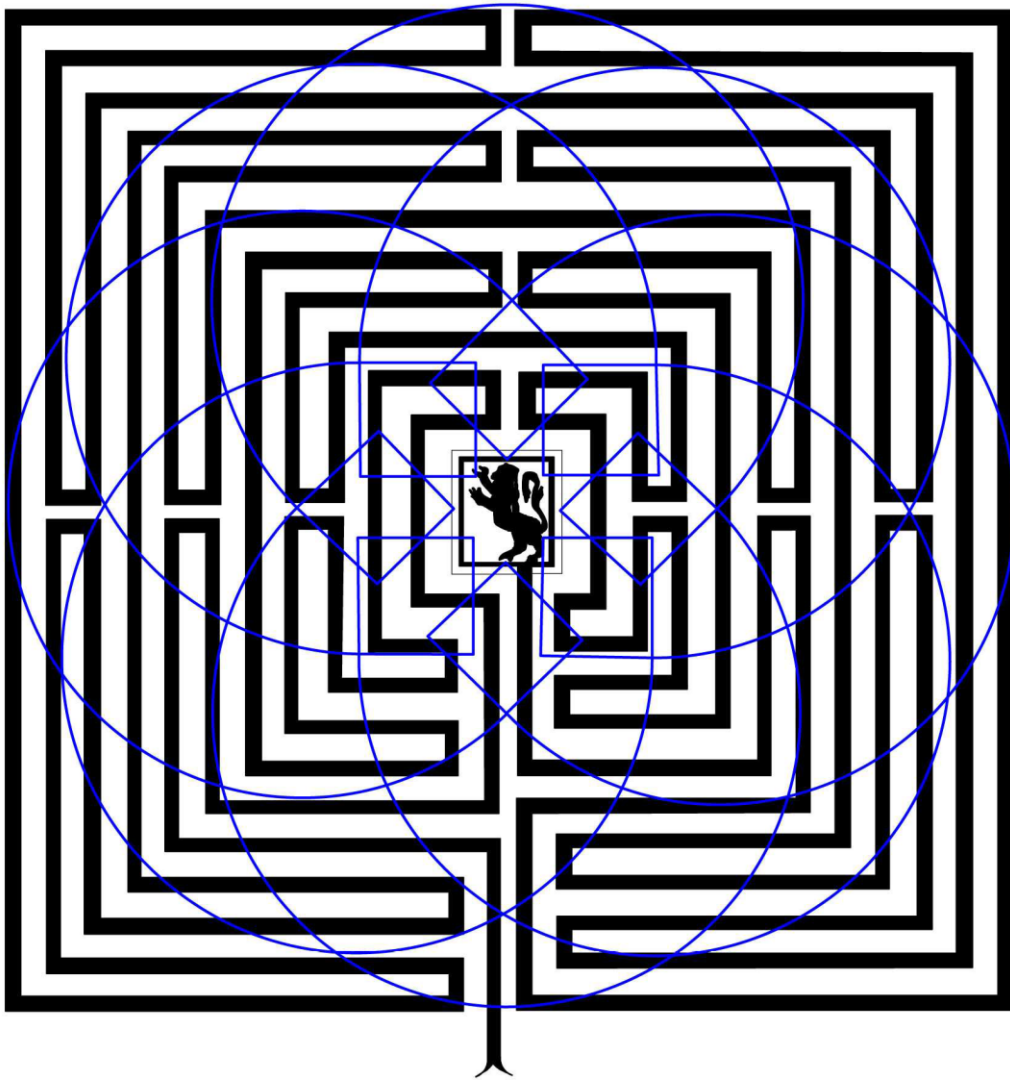
*“Actum Vulterris in maiori ecclesia vulterrana vidlicet in choro novo dicte ecclesie”*

Hence, it is very likely the lectern was produced in the period between 1388 and 1404. It was placed in the middle of the choral stalls of the cathedral and remained there until the 1930’s, when it was moved to the diocesan museum where it now resides. The reason given for this transfer was that, owing to the large size of the lectern, there was not enough room in the choir after the eighteenth-century reconstruction of the high altar.

Passing to an iconographic point of view, it is noteworthy that the choice of a labyrinth as a decorative motif for liturgical furniture is a unique example of this kind. Alessandra Angeloni points out that the labyrinth and the other decorations were completely hidden by the liturgical book for the duration of the prayer; only the reader would see them before the placing of the book. Therefore, the labyrinth could be a symbol that was to be internalized and contemplated before entering the sacredness of the prayer. Furthermore, it was probably intended only for the clergy, as the lectern placed in the middle of the choir, behind the high altar, is in an area usually forbidden for common people.

Alessandra Angeloni notices also that the labyrinth and the motif with eight interlaced circles on the other panel can be superimposed (see below). Hence, the “animal” at the centre of the labyrinth corresponds with the crossed square on the other panel. That could symbolize the contrast between the sin, which can be overcome through the “initiatory trip” in the labyrinth, and the redemption through Christ’s Cross.

Manuela Mastrigli, Rome, Italy; 1999



*The labyrinth and the interlaced circles overlaid - graphic: Alessandra Angeloni.*

*The text and illustrations in this reprint are © Labyrinthos/ Manuela Mastrigli 2026 as appropriate. Personal copies are permitted, but permission must be sought for any commercial reproduction: [www.labyrinthos.net](http://www.labyrinthos.net)*