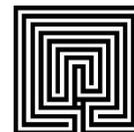


# The Palatine Labyrinth

## Was it built in the 1<sup>st</sup> or 20<sup>th</sup> Century?

Staffan Lundén



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### Introduction

In the ruins of the Imperial palace on the Palatine hill in Rome, Italy, is a large octagonal labyrinth constructed of low brick walls (figs.1-3).<sup>1</sup> The labyrinth is located in a peristyle (peristyle F) that was excavated in 1912-14 by the archaeologist Giacomo Boni.<sup>2</sup>

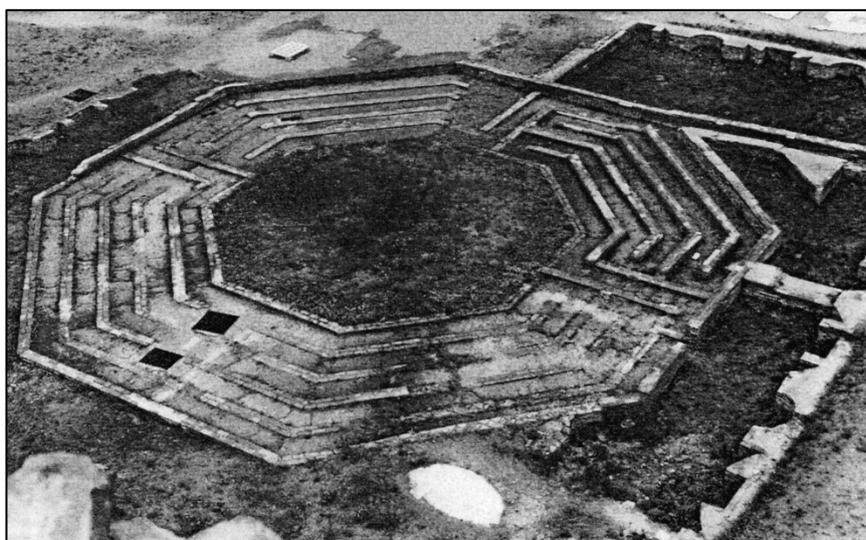


**Left: Fig 1. The peristyle with the labyrinth, viewed from the south. Photo: Palatine and Forum Antiquarium**

The labyrinth, as we see it today, appears in various photographs, plans and reconstruction drawings (e.g. figs.4 and 5) produced in the years after the excavation.<sup>3</sup>

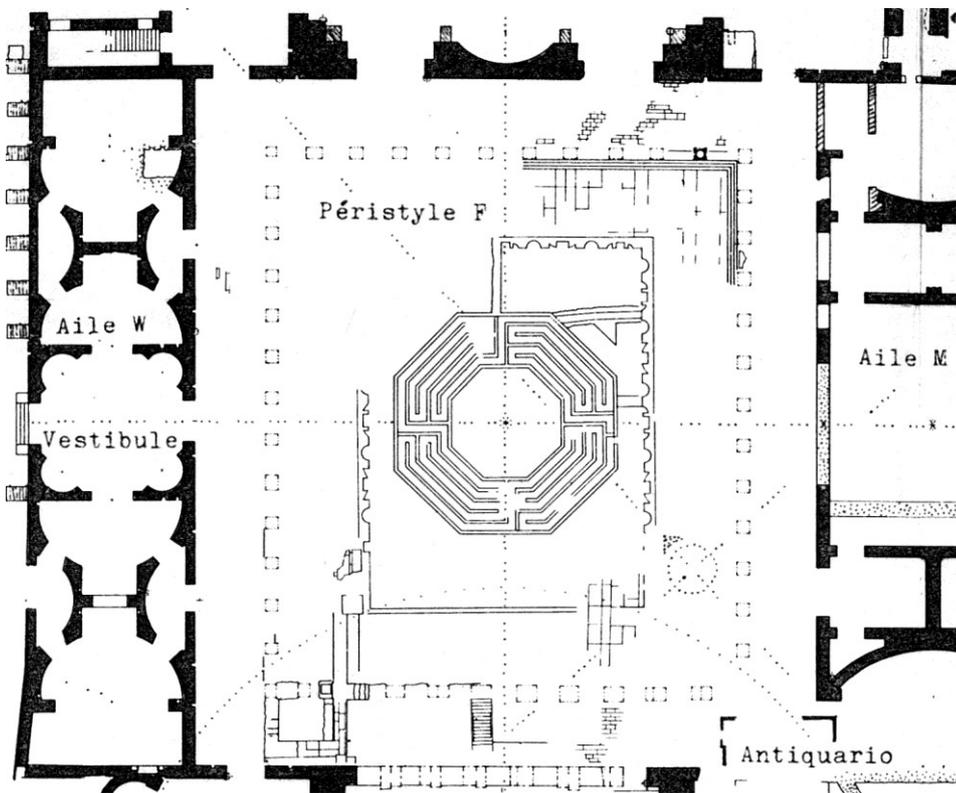
**Below: Fig. 2a.  
The labyrinth.  
Photo: Finsen 1969, 16, fig. h**

Unfortunately, Boni, like many other archaeologists working on the Palatine before and after him, never published the results of the excavation. Moreover, Boni, again like his predecessors and successors, carried out extensive restoration work during his excavations. This combination of inadequate documentation and heavy restorations sometimes makes it difficult to distinguish ancient remains from modern restorations on the Palatine.



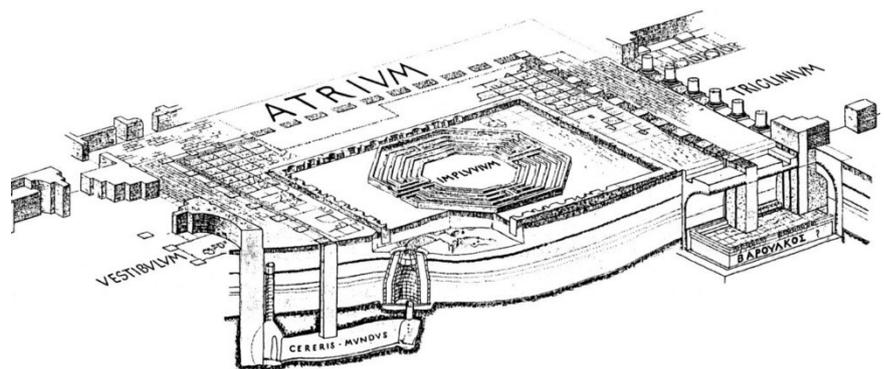
The part of the palace (*domus Augustana/Augustiana*) in which the labyrinth is located was built during the reign of the Emperor Domitian (AD 81-96).<sup>4</sup> In the scholarly literature the labyrinth is often assumed to be contemporary with the palace.<sup>5</sup> It is the purpose of this article to discuss the date of this labyrinth. The evidence that will be considered is Boni's own account of the results of the excavation, a photograph taken during the excavation, the physical appearance of the labyrinth today and references to his discoveries in Boni's personal correspondence. It will be argued that the labyrinth is largely, perhaps entirely, a creation of the early 20th century.

**Fig. 2b. The labyrinth.**  
**Photo: Zeta Eastes,**  
**1972**



**Fig. 3. Plan of the peristyle.**  
**Plan: Finsen 1969.**

**Fig 4. Isometric drawing of the peristyle with earlier subterranean structures. View from the north, after La Rocca 1994, 122, fig. 125**



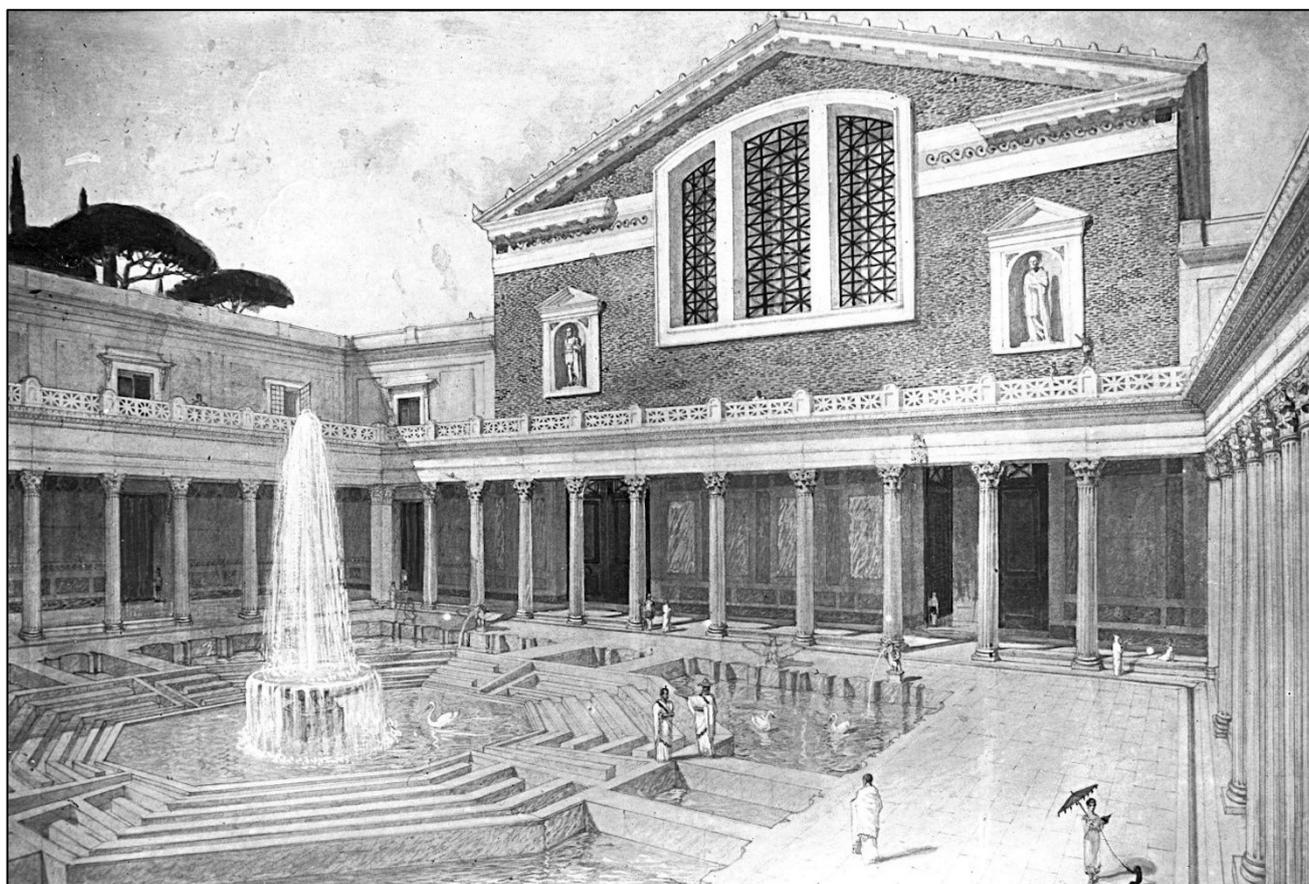
## Boni's Account

Although Boni never published a scientific report of the excavation, notes made by him have been preserved and subsequently published.<sup>6</sup> Boni writes that in the peristyle was uncovered a large rectangular basin surrounded by an edge with alternating semicircular, square and triangular niches. In the middle of the rectangular basin was a second, octagonal, basin that he describes in the following way:<sup>7</sup>

“The central octagon<sup>8</sup> is delimited by a low wall with rounded corners, and in correspondence with the inner sides of this, directed towards the corners of the central basin, are remains of pipes or water mains separated by low walls that make one believe that the inside of this basin was decorated with four groups of sculptures for water works with complicated jets.”<sup>9</sup>

This description of the octagon, in which the labyrinth is seen today, is rather obscure and open to many interpretations. It cannot be taken as evidence to confirm, nor contradict, that the remains of a labyrinth were discovered inside the octagon. Trying to reconcile the description with the labyrinth visible today, it could mean that inside the octagon were remains of pipes or water mains running parallel to those four sides of the octagon which face the corners of the rectangular basin. The “separating” walls would then be the concentric walls of the labyrinth.<sup>10</sup> Another possibility is that the “separating” walls are the walls directed towards the centre of the labyrinth, i.e. the walls dividing the labyrinth into four sectors.

Thus, Boni may have been looking at walls which once formed a labyrinth. Yet, his account is not clear enough to rule out other interpretations of the remains he had uncovered. For example, he may equally well be describing the vestiges of a design with four separate sectors, each of which had a meandering channel that was not interconnected with the channels in the other sectors.

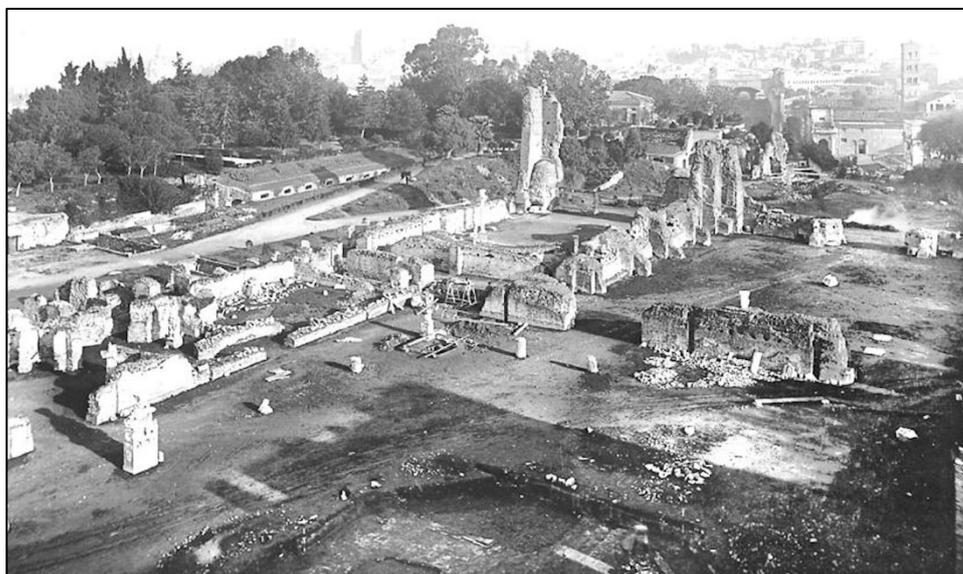


**Fig. 5. Fanciful reconstruction drawing of the peristyle, viewed from the south.  
Photo: Palatine and Forum Antiquarium 36 DF/SDF**

## The Photograph

A part of the area inside the octagon shows on a photograph from the excavation of the peristyle, shown here as fig.6.<sup>11</sup> Apparently the octagon was excavated before the rectangular basin, and the photograph was taken during, or after, the excavation of the octagon, but before the excavation of the rectangular basin had started. The photograph shows the edge of the octagon, but there is no sign of the edge of the rectangular basin. In the photograph it is difficult to discern what has been uncovered inside the octagon, but clearly there are no substantial remains of walls forming a labyrinth. To the right, there might be a wall (which could possibly correspond to wall 3 on fig.7, below). Slightly to the left a light oblong patch could perhaps be second wall. However, apart from these two faint indications there are no signs of walls inside octagon. Of course, the evidence of the photograph is not unambiguous. It does not show the whole area inside the octagon. It is also vaguely possible that it was taken before the excavation had reached the full depth of the octagon.

**Fig 6. The peristyle during Boni's excavation, viewed from the south.**  
**Photo: Palatine and Forum Antiquarium, 4DF/AR, Neg.Ser. C, No. 420**



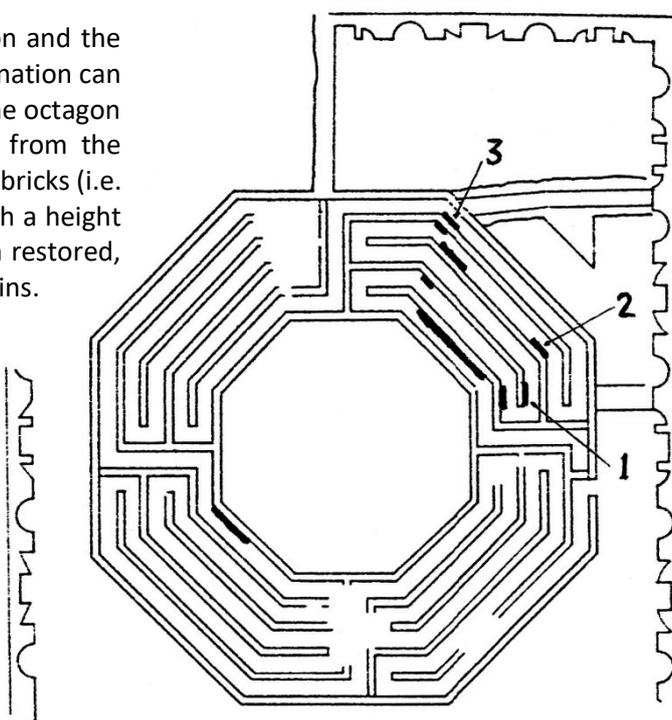
## The Labyrinth

When making restorations in brick on ancient ruins it has been a common practice to work over the surface of a restored brick wall with a pick-axe. In this way the bricks receive a rugged surface and, ideally, the restored parts of the wall can be distinguished from the ancient ones.

I have had the opportunity to examine the octagon and the labyrinth in some detail.<sup>12</sup> The results of this examination can be summarized as follows: In the wall that forms the octagon it is fairly easy to distinguish the restored parts from the ancient ones. In the wall of the octagon the ancient bricks (i.e. bricks without the rugged surface) sometimes reach a height of several courses. Although the octagon has been restored, these restorations are clearly built on ancient remains.

In contrast, the walls of the labyrinth inside the octagon are almost entirely built of bricks with a rugged surface. The location of the few stretches where there are bricks without the rugged surface are marked in bold on fig.7. The bricks only appear in the first (i.e. lowest) course of the wall, except in three areas (marked 1-3 on the plan).

**Fig. 7. The labyrinth with possible ancient walls marked in bold.**



Although these tiny patches of presumably ancient walls could be the remains of a labyrinth, the extent of preservation also makes other explanations possible. Moreover, in location 1-3 there are some bricks without the rugged surface *above* bricks with the rugged surface.<sup>13</sup> As ancient bricks should be below, not above, the new ones, one wonders whether all bricks without the rugged surface are necessarily ancient. It cannot be excluded that restorations may have been made without all the bricks being “marked” in this fashion.<sup>14</sup> If this has been the case, there is no clear evidence that any of the walls of the labyrinth are ancient.

Of course, I have only been able to look at what is visible above ground. Boni might well have excavated below the present ground level, and, possibly, the reconstructed walls of the labyrinth rest on ancient walls that today are below the surface. There is nothing in particular to suggest this, but the possibility should not be overlooked.

### Boni’s Correspondence

Boni was very interested in horticulture and designed a garden on the Palatine. In 1914 he planted an octagonal hedge labyrinth, which still exists in the garden (fig. 8).<sup>15</sup> In Boni’s correspondence to family and friends we get some glimpses of how his idea of creating a hedge labyrinth relates to his discoveries in the peristyle of Domitian’s palace. In a letter, dated 28 December 1914, he writes to a friend:

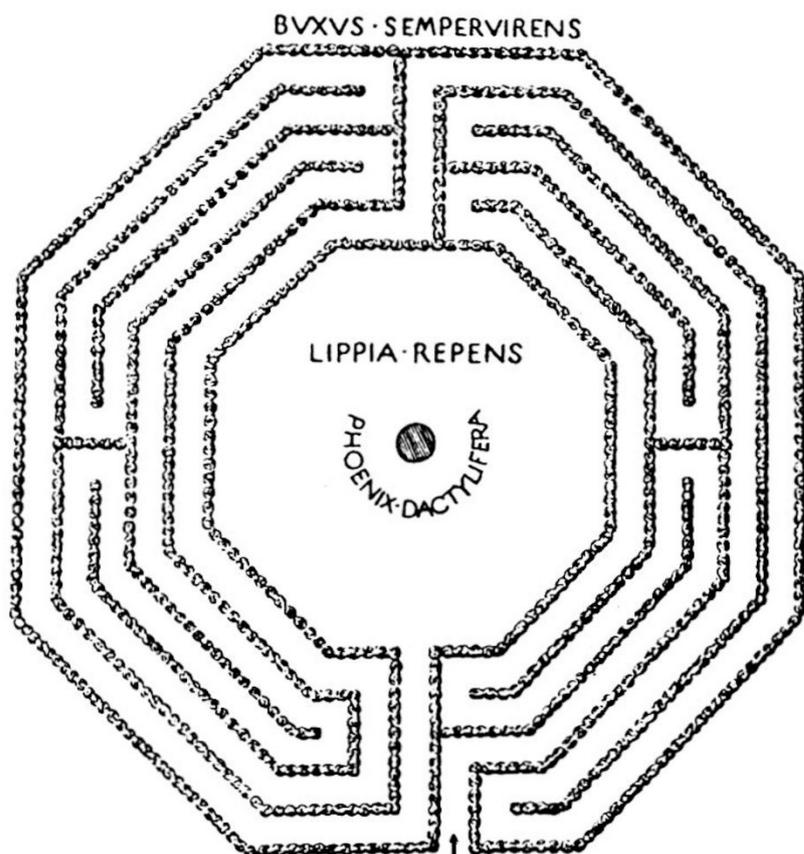
“Do you remember the octagonal basin in the Domitian impluvium<sup>16</sup> and the octagonal labyrinths in Reims, Amiens and S. Quintin. Do you remember the labyrinths used in the Roman gardening, imitated during the renaissance?”

... Not being able to reconstruct the water labyrinth in the impluvium, I have thought of planting a labyrinth in lattice work with the same dimensions (20 meter in diameter) ...”<sup>17</sup>

In another letter, dated 19 January 1915 he writes to his godson, about the hedge labyrinth he is planting:<sup>18</sup>

“The labyrinth is octagonal, like the basin in the Imperial atrium, which could have given the idea for the first fonts for baptism by immersion, octagonal like the labyrinths in the Nordic cathedrals, Amiens, Arras, Reims, Saint Quentin.”

Boni’s wording in these letters does not shed any light on what he actually found in the octagon. That he writes that he is unable to “reconstruct” the water labyrinth could be taken as an indication that he had found (or believed he had found) the remains of one in the peristyle.<sup>19</sup> On the other hand, when writing about the hedge labyrinth he is planting, he does not explicitly state that it is based on the labyrinth in the octagon, only that he borrowed the shape of the hedge labyrinth from the shape of the octagon.



**Fig. 8. The Palatine hedge labyrinth.**  
Plan: Cazzato 1990, 616, fig. 9.

## Conclusion

To sum up, it is far from certain that an ancient labyrinth ever existed in the octagon. According to Boni's account of the excavation, walls were found inside the octagon. Possibly, but not certainly, these walls are visible on a photograph from the excavation and they may have been built into the existing labyrinth. Although the remains of a number of (concentric) walls may thus have been uncovered inside the octagon, these walls were not necessarily part of an ancient labyrinth.

It is unclear why the present labyrinth was built. The walls inside the octagon may have suggested to Boni that it once contained a labyrinth. He may then have made his "reconstruction" using the design of a Roman mosaic labyrinth, but there is no way of knowing if his interpretation of these walls was correct or not.<sup>20</sup> Last, but not least, it might be noted that a three-dimensional brick labyrinth is entirely without parallels in the Roman period. To date, no structure similar to this has ever appeared in an excavation of a Roman villa or palace. The brick labyrinth on the Palatine should be treated with caution in any discussion on Roman labyrinths.

Staffan Lundén, Göteborg, Sweden, 2004

## Notes & References:

For the preparation of this article I have been offered valuable assistance by Simon Malmberg, who kindly shared his knowledge of the Imperial palace on the Palatine and brought an important photograph [Fig. 5] to my attention. The staff of the Palatine and Forum Antiquarium is thanked for allowing me access to the Palatine labyrinth and for providing the photographs reproduced here as Figs 1, 5 & 6.

1. The labyrinth measures c. 19 m across. The height of the walls varies between 5-55 cm. The width of the walls of the labyrinth is c. 30cm., the width of the path between the walls is c. 60 cm. (Authors measurements).
2. For the appearance of the peristyle before the excavation, see the photograph in: A. Bartoli, *Il Palatino*, (Monumenti d'Italia 5), Roma 1911, 19, also reproduced in: *Archeologia in posa. Cento anni di fotografie*, ed. E. La Rocca, Roma 1994, 94, pl. 94.
3. The labyrinth is shown on the following plans and drawings:
  - A: Isometric drawing of the peristyle with earlier subterranean structures: La Rocca 1994, 122, fig. 125. La Rocca dates the isometric drawing to 1913 [Fig. 4].
  - B: Plan of the peristyle with earlier subterranean structures by Boni's draughtsman P. Pica: M. Marella Vianello, "Resoconto circa la ricomposizione del lavoro di scavo compiuto da Giacomo Boni nella zona della Domus Flavia (anni 1912-13-14) e l'ordinamento del materiale relativo nell'Antiquarium Palatino (1946-47)," *Antichità. Fascicoli di studi e notizie sul mondo classico* 1.3, 1947, pl. 8. On this plan the "labyrinth" is drawn as a number of concentric walls, where the paths between the walls are not interconnected.
  - C: Plan of the *domus Augustana/Augustiana* by W. Hough, fellow in architecture at the American Academy in Rome, 1914-17: *Memoirs of the American Academy in Rome* 2, 1918, pl. 3.
  - D: Reconstruction drawing of the peristyle by G. Mauri and G. Gatteschi, July 1921. Palatine and Forum Antiquarium 36 DF/SDP. [Fig 5]. The earliest photographs of the labyrinth I have seen date to the 1930's, see: La Rocca 1994, 130, no. 133, 139, no. 143.
4. For a bibliography on *domus Augustana/Augustiana* (sometimes called *domus Flavia* in the modern literature) see: L. Sasso D'Elia, "Domus Augustana, Augustiana," *Lexicon Topographicum Urbis Romae* 2, ed. M. Steinby, Roma 1995, 40-45. A plan of the *domus Augustana/Augustiana* is found in: H. Finsen, *La résidence de Domitien sur le Palatin*, (Analecta romana instituti danici 5. Supplementum), Hafniae 1969.
5. E.g. A. Bartoli, "Scavi del Palatino (domus Augustana) 1926-28," *Notizie degli scavi di antichità* 5, 1929, 5, pl. 2, H. Kern, *Labyrinthe. Erscheinungsformen und Deutungen*, München 1983, 117, no. 114 (86, no. 115 in the 2000 English edition of Kern), M. A. Tomei, "Nota sui giardini antichi del Palatino," *Mélanges de l'École française de Rome, Antiquité* 104, 1992, 917-951, 929. One of the few authors who have expressed scepticism about the labyrinth is T. Ashby in: *A topographical dictionary of ancient Rome*, eds. S. Platner, T. Ashby, London 1929, p. 160, n. 1. Ashby writes: "An octagonal maze has been reconstructed in the center [of the basin] from rather insufficient indications."
6. In Marella Vianello 1947.
7. At the side of the rectangular basin Boni found a base with a vertical perforation. He suggests that the base held a statue through which water was ejected and that several such statues were placed along the sides of the rectangular basin. During Domitian's successors the area between the edge of the rectangular basin and the octagon was filled up and covered with marble slabs. A number of walls and a channel projecting between the octagon and the edge of the rectangular basin belong to this phase.

8. i.e. "central" as it is in the center of the rectangular basin.
9. "L'ottagono centrale é limitato da muricciuolo a spigoli arrotondati, ed in corrispondenza ai lati interni di esso, rivolti agli angoli della vasca rettangolare, sono avanzi di condutture, o porta-tubi, separate da muriccioli che fanno credere esser stato questo bacino interno decorato da quattro gruppi scultori per giuochi d'acqua a getti complicati." Marella Vianello 1947, 6.
10. A translation of Boni's account would then read: "The central octagon is delimited by a low wall with rounded corners, and in correspondence with the inner sides of those walls which are directed towards the corners of the central basin, are remains of pipes or water mains separated by low walls that make one believe that the inside of this basin was decorated with four groups of sculptures for water works with complicated jets..."
11. The photograph is published in *La Rocca* 1994, 100, no. 101, but in this reproduction the photograph is too dark to show the octagon. *La Rocca* dates the photograph to 1912.
12. In the spring of 2001.
13. Or to put it more precisely: at 1 there are bricks without the rugged surface in the first course, as well as one in the third course; at 2 there is one brick without the rugged surface in the second course and two in the third course and at 3 there are three or four bricks without the rugged surface in the second course and three in the third course.
14. One reason for the lack of pick-marks, on the bricks in the lowest course, could simply be that it is difficult to work with a pick-axe that close to the ground.
15. For a photograph of the hedge labyrinth, see: Tomei 1992, 930, fig. 9. On the planting of the hedge labyrinth: V. Cazzato, "Giacomo Boni. Flora e ruine," in *Gli orti farnesiani sul Palatino*, (Roma antica 2), ed. G. Morganti *et al.* Roma 1990, 605-626, esp. 618f. A plan of the garden with the hedge labyrinth is found on p. 727 in the same volume. Boni's fascination with octagonal labyrinths also made him draw one on the wall of a hut ("the hut of Romulus") he erected on the Palatine. A photo of the hut is found in: Ch. Hülsen, *Forum und Palatin*, München 1926, 41.
16. In Boni's writing the rectangular basin in the peristyle is often referred to as the "impluvium."
17. "Ricorda il bacino ottagono nell'impluvium domiziano ed i labirinti ottagini di Reims, Amiens e di S. Quentin? Ricorda i labirinti del giardinaggio romano, imitati nel rinascimento? ... Non potendo ricostruire il labirinto d'acqua dell'impluvium, ho pensato di piantare un labirinto a spalliere di bosso, delle stesse dimensioni (20 metri di diametro)..." E. Tea, *Giacomo Boni nella vita del suo tempo*, Milano 1932, 353. Contrary to Boni's belief, there is no evidence that the Romans planted garden labyrinths.
18. "É ottagono il labirinto, come la vasca dell'atrio imperiale che potrebbe aver dato l'idea dei primi ponti (should probably read "fonti") ad immersione; ottogono, come i labirinti delle cattedrali nordiche, Amiens, Arras, Reims, Saint Quentin." Tea 1932, 359. Apparently, the octagonal shape intrigued Boni. In a later letter, from the spring 1915, after relating that the hedge labyrinth has been completed, he writes that he is on the track of the origin of the octagonal baptisteries. Tea 1932, 361.
19. It is puzzling that he states that he is unable to reconstruct the water labyrinth. Perhaps he had wished to re-create it with fountains and running water?
20. In the corpus of Roman mosaic labyrinths there are a number of examples where the existence of a labyrinth can be established, with a fair degree of certainty, from a small preserved portion. See, for example the labyrinth fragments at Solunto and Cirencester (Kern 1983, 134 f, no.164, 138, nos.124 a-b). (100, no.168, 90, no.126 f in the 2000 English edition of Kern). As to the Palatine octagon, the problem is that we don't know the basis for assuming that it housed a labyrinth.

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***"The hut of Romulus" erected on the Palatine by Boni,  
as figured in: Ch. Hülsen, Forum und Palatin,  
München 1926, plate 41 – see note 15 above.***

