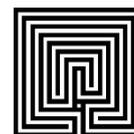


The Tomba del Labirinto, Luzzanas, Sardinia

Jeff & Kimberly Saward



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The labyrinth incised on the wall of a rock-cut tomb, popularly known as the “Tomba del Labirinto,” at Luzzanas on the Mediterranean island of Sardinia, off the west coast of Italy, has been the subject of some discussion ever since it was first ‘discovered’ and published by the archaeologist Ercole Contu in 1965.¹ Most notably this debate concerns the age of the inscription and the unusual additional lines extending from the entrance of the labyrinth. Whilst visiting Sardinia during February 2005, we resolved to find this little-visited labyrinth location, to study and photograph the inscription, and attempt to clear up at least some of the confusion.

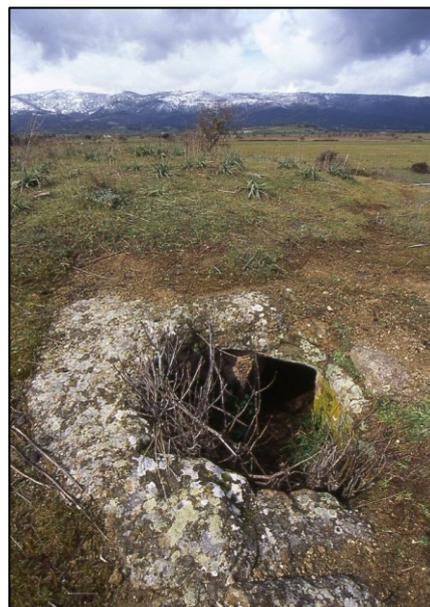
Finding this site is a challenge. It is not marked on even the most detailed of Sardinian maps, nor mentioned in any of the archaeological guides generally available on the island. To the best of our knowledge, the first written description of its location was given by David Singmaster in *Caerdroia* 30, subsequent to his successful visit in 1997, and without his notes and a detailed map of the area we would have struggled to find it.²



The labyrinth inscribed inside the Tomba del Labirinto, Luzzanas, Sardinia. Photo: Jeff Saward, February 2005

Luzzanas itself is a vaguely defined area of agricultural land to the south and east of the confluence of the rivers Mannu and Tirso, to the north of the minor road that leads between the villages of Bultei and Benetutti, approximately 20 km northwest of Nuoro. The nearest signposted landmark is the spa building at Terme Aurora, from where any attempt to find the site should begin. The tomb is situated about 1.2 km to the north of the spa, in open fields, on the southeast bank of the River Tirso.

To find the Tomba del Labirinto, we parked at the gates of a construction site, apparently another uncompleted spa building, at the end of the small road that leads off north, into the fields, opposite the Terme Aurora spa. We walked out through the field behind the construction site down to the riverbank and then headed upstream, to the northeast. Following the upper edge of the riverbank for around 600 metres, climbing over or round two field walls along the way, a few scrubby trees and bushes growing around the rock outcrop containing the tomb provides a clue to the exact whereabouts, about 150 metres before the river makes a sharp turn to the northwest. A small hole, around one metre deep, on the north side of the rock outcrop, leads down into the tomb. Fortunately there were no livestock in these fields when we visited, but as sheep flocks in Sardinia are usually guarded by ‘wild’ dogs, which bark and bite, we would advise considerable caution to anybody else attempting to visit this site. The tomb also contains a number of roosting bats by day, and efforts should be made not to disturb these, or the wasp nests on the ceiling!



The entrance to the Tomba del Labirinto, looking northwest. Photo: Jeff Saward, February 2005

The tomb itself is of a remarkable form, popularly known as a *Domus de Janas* (Fairy House), consisting of a series of chambers excavated with stone tools and picks directly into solid rock, usually the limestone that outcrops widely across the island, either underground or directly into a cliff face. Well over a thousand of these tombs are known in Sardinia, and they belong to the Ozieri (or San Michele) culture, an advanced society of hunters, herders and farmers who worked copper as well as flint, obsidian and ceramics, and flourished during the Neolithic period, between ca. 3400 to ca. 2500 BCE. Their tombs continued to be used for secondary interments through to the time of the Roman occupation of Sardinia, indeed a few were even re-used during the Early Christian period.

The example at Luzzanas is of the underground type, carved into the limestone that outcrops in the field adjacent to the riverbank. The tomb consists of four or more interconnected chambers, which as they have never been excavated, are still partly filled with soil and debris. The northernmost chamber was flooded with water on the occasion of our visit in February 2005, although the central and western chambers were essentially dry, if a little damp and muddy.



The interior of the Tomba del Labirinto. Photo: Jeff Saward, February 2005

There is a small hole in the eastern side of the central chamber, which admits a little daylight, but it is difficult to determine if this was the original entrance. Currently, the central chamber, about 2.5 x 1.5 metres wide, is entered through a narrow carved doorway on the south side, from the base of the hole in the rock, which may once have been the original entrance, or a separate ante-chamber, the roof of which has collapsed. Another chamber, completely filled with debris, leads off from the opposite side of this small chamber, back into the rock outcrop.

Inside the tomb, the walls of the chambers are essentially plain, apart from the pick and hammer marks remaining from the original construction of the chambers. However, on the wall on the northwest side of the central chamber, to the right of the narrow doorway that leads into the western chamber, are a number of items of graffiti. By far the most prominent, is a labyrinth of 'classical' design, 30 cm wide and 33.5 cm high, the uppermost circuit of which almost reaches the ceiling of the chamber. The lines that form the labyrinth have clearly been carved by a confident hand with a sharp implement, probably a metal blade, as the groove is fairly consistent in width and is deeply incised (3 to 5 mm deep in places), although the line is shallower in places where the undulating rock surface has caused the carving tool to skip. As is common with incised labyrinth graffiti of this free-hand nature, the procedure for constructing the labyrinth design can still be discerned. The central cross has clearly been constructed first; the lines are somewhat bolder and more deeply incised. Then the arcs that mark the ends of the path loops have been inserted in the angles of the cross, and finally, four short strokes have been added to mark the ends of the 'walls' of the labyrinth - the familiar 'seed pattern' encountered worldwide, wherever the classical labyrinth symbol is found. In particular, the central 'seed pattern' of the Luzzanas labyrinth is remarkably similar to the much smaller example inscribed on the Tragliatella vase, although the Luzzanas labyrinth has the opening to the left rather than the right.

In addition to the labyrinth, there are a number of other marks on the rock surface, including a number of linear gouges and deep scratches that may have been made by either human or animal activity in the tomb over the years, especially lower down on the wall. To the left and partly overlapping the labyrinth are a number of modern characters and numbers, evidently drawn sometime in the early or mid-20th century, with a thick blue wax crayon, now thankfully beginning to flake off from the rock surface in places. It is known that the tomb was used, prior to its discovery by archaeologists, by local farmers as a shelter in bad weather.³

The wall with the labyrinth and other graffiti, and a hibernating bat! Photo: Jeff Saward, February 2005

Also to the left, and below the labyrinth, are a number of shallow scratch marks, vertical, horizontal and diagonal, that fail to form any obvious coherent pattern, but appear, possibly, to have been scratched in one single episode. Several of these shallow scratches impinge against the outermost circuit of the labyrinth, and two in particular meet at the line leading out from the entrance of the labyrinth. It is quite clear from their appearance and their shallow grooves, scratched with a sharp point, not deeply carved as is the case with the lines of the labyrinth, that these were surely added at a later time and clearly do not form part of the original labyrinth inscription.



This point is significant, as several authors have commented on these additional lines projecting from the lower edge of the design, assuming they are part of the labyrinth.⁴ Hermann Kern comments that the “guiding line... points left towards the door” to emphasize his point that the location of the labyrinth beside the entrance doorway into the adjacent chamber is “evoking a door or a threshold through which the deceased had to pass.”

This confusion is understandable, as the only photograph of the Luzzanas inscription commonly published is the one supplied by Rainer Pauli in the late 1970s to Kern, that was subsequently reproduced in his monumental *Labyrinthe* in 1982, and has been widely copied from this source ever since.⁵ However, this photograph has clearly been ‘doctored,’ the lines of the labyrinth have been inked-in to emphasize the design, including the incidental lines that touch the line below the entrance.

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The 'enhanced' photo taken by Rainer Pauli in the late 1970's, published by Kern, 1982

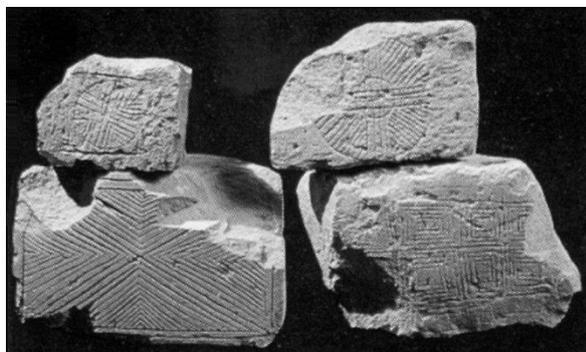


As photographed by Jeff Saward, February 2005

With this matter resolved, attention must now turn to the question of the age of the Luzzanas labyrinth. In his original description of the inscription, Contu simply regarded it as prehistoric, though he admits that it could be much more recent, even modern. Pauli ascribed it to the Early Nuraghic period of Sardinian history, when many of these Neolithic Domus de Janas tombs were re-used, dating the labyrinth to ca. 1500-1000 BCE, although he provides no evidence of Nuraghic activity at this location to support his dating.⁶ Kern on the other hand was clearly convinced that the tomb and the labyrinth on its wall were contemporary, and he gives an implied dating of 2500-2000 BCE, which like his illustration, has been widely and uncritically repeated ever since.

Staffan Lundén was probably the first to express serious concerns about these differing and rather arbitrary dates, and basing his reasoning on the apparent use of an iron knife blade to carve the labyrinth, suggested a date-range from around 850 BCE, when iron tools first appear in Sardinia, to as late as the 5th century CE.⁷ This later date is based on the virtual disappearance of the simple 'classical' labyrinth in the Mediterranean area after the Roman period. This would certainly seem to be a valid terminal dating, indeed a Roman origin for the Luzzanas labyrinth would seem quite likely, as other Roman labyrinth inscriptions and graffiti are known from around the Mediterranean and both the labyrinth legend and symbol were clearly widely known at this time.⁸ There was a considerable Roman presence in Sardinia and examples of apparent Roman or Punic graffiti are known in other prehistoric tombs on the island.⁹ It is, of course, possible that the labyrinth is relatively recent, but the damp conditions inside the tomb have already smoothed the edges of the carving, and the overlying later additions to the graffiti on the wall are certainly suggestive of a considerable age for the labyrinth itself.

While Lundén concedes that the labyrinth could have been carved with a sharp stone tool, rather than an iron blade, the notion that the labyrinth is contemporary with the tomb can be almost completely ruled out. While the majority of the Domus de Janas tombs are entirely plain, apart from the carved doorways between the interconnecting chambers, a small number have extensive carved decoration inside, including bull's heads and stylised bull's horns. A few are even carved to imitate the interior of contemporary wooden buildings, complete with doorways, windows and roof beams, but the key feature of these Neolithic decorations is that they are all carved in relief and in a very distinctive style; incised designs like the Luzzanas labyrinth are unknown in this context.¹⁰



*Carved blocks with geometric designs,
Nuraghe Nurdole, Sardinia*



Bull's horns decoration, Domus del'Elefante, Sardinia

Incised geometric designs are found, however, on ashlar blocks formerly decorating the walls of the late Bronze Age and early Iron Age Nuraghe towers and temples that form such a distinctive feature of the Sardinian landscape.¹¹ Although many concentric circular designs, coupled with rectangular and diagonal design elements, often very angular and precisely inscribed, are known on both stone and ceramic objects, to date no labyrinths have been reported amongst this Nuragic material, so the Luzzanas inscription would be quite unique if it were from this cultural context and timespan. There are also occasional incised carvings and graffiti found in association with the late Bronze Age Tomba dei Giganti (Giant's Tombs), including two inscriptions found at Rio di Palmis, near Sulcis, with depictions of people, animals and wheeled carts, which have been compared with the carvings of Val Camonica in Northern Italy - a location famous for its labyrinths, the age of which is a matter of some debate, but they are commonly dated to around ca. 700-450 BCE.¹²

We have already noted the apparent similarity between the construction technique of the labyrinth at Luzzanas and the labyrinth incised on the Etruscan Tragliatella vase, found on the west coast of Italy, and dating from ca .650-600 BCE. Another two labyrinths drawn alongside each other in a very similar fashion, albeit inverted, found at Gordion in Turkey, date to around 750 BCE.¹³ While it can be argued that the universal nature of the labyrinth construction technique might render these similarities no more than a coincidence, it is perhaps interesting that four examples, at three locations in the Mediterranean area, two of which are securely dated within a century or so of each other, should be so similar. Perhaps the Luzzanas labyrinth also fits within this timeframe, and this precise way of drawing a freehand labyrinth was the widespread technique in circulation at this time?

Either way, judging on the scant evidence for the dating of the Luzzanas labyrinth, it seems fair to say that it could be from almost anywhere between the early Iron Age, ca. 900-850 BCE in Sardinia, to the end of the Roman occupation of the island in the early 5th century CE. Unless future excavation of the Tomba del Labirinto provides some obvious evidence of the visitors that have entered the tomb over the years that can be linked to the labyrinth itself, we will probably never know more precisely than that.

Of course, the question of what the labyrinth on the wall at Luzzanas means is another matter. Contu, admitting the problems of interpreting the symbol, saw it as a symbol of initiation, life, death and rebirth, quite at home in the tomb. Kern saw it as a funerary symbol within the "womb of Mother Earth." Lundén conjectures that if there were evidence for Roman activity in the tomb, then it might be seen as serving an apotropaic, or protective purpose. If the labyrinth was carved by a casual visitor to the tomb, long after its original construction, as seems likely, then maybe this descent through a hole in the ground into an 'underworld' of gloomy interconnecting chambers reminded them of the Theseus and the Minotaur story, prompting the carving of the labyrinth on the wall. If this were the case, then an origin in the second half of the 1st millennium BCE or the Roman period, when these stories were well known in the Mediterranean world, would be all the more likely.

Jeff Saward & Kimberly Lowelle Saward
Thundersley, England, March 2005
(Revised, May 2006)

Notes & References:

1. Contu, E. "Nuovi petroglifi schematici della Sardegna" *Bollettino di Paletnologia Italiana*, Bd.74, 1965, p.65-122.
2. See Singmaster, D. "The Oldest Labyrinth in Sardinia" in *Caerdroia* 30 (1999), p. 17-21. Our thanks go to David for his original article, and the photographs and maps he provided, that allowed us to retrace his steps and find the tomb again. During the winter month of February 2005 there was considerably less vegetation obscuring the entrance to the tomb than when David visited in June 1997.
3. Contu, *ibid.*
4. The late Jacques Hebert had previously questioned the validity of the extra lines at the entrance - see his website www.labyreims.com - but he assumed a drawing error was responsible.
5. Kern, H. *Labyrinthe*. Prestel, 1982. See page 88, catalogue no.76. Kern, H. *Through the Labyrinth*. Prestel, 2000. See page 66 & 67, catalogue no.76.
6. Pauli, R. *Sardinien. Geschichte, Kultur, Landschaft. Entdeckungsreisen auf einer der schönsten Inseln im Mittelmeer. Feengrotten, Nauraghen und Kastelle*. Köln, 1978.
7. Lundén, S. "The Labyrinth in the Mediterranean" *Caerdroia* 27 (1996), p. 28-54.
8. E.g.: three labyrinths at Pompeii, Italy; and another at Kom Ombo, Egypt, probably of Roman origin.
9. A mosaic labyrinth pavement is also known from the Roman town of Nora, in the south of Sardinia; fragments of this mosaic are still visible near the theatre area.
10. Notable examples of relief carvings in Sardinian Domus de Janas tombs are to be found at Anghelu Riju, S. Andrea Priu, Puttu Codinu and La Domus del'Elefante. Public access is available to all of these sites.

11. Melis, P. *The Nuragic Civilization*. Sassari: Carlo Delfino Editore, 2003. p. 47-52. See also Lilliu, G. *La Civiltà Nuragica*. Sassari: Delfino, 1982. Particularly interesting geometric stone carvings have been found at the Nuraghe Nurdole, near Orani.
12. Guido, M. *Sardinia*. London: Thames & Hudson, 1963. See p.99-100. Margaret Guido's study of Sardinian archaeology remains a classic in the English language, although inevitably it has dated a little.
13. See Lundén, 1996 for further details of these labyrinth inscriptions, also Saward, J. *Labyrinths & Mazes*. Gaia/Lark Books, 2003, especially p. 36-49.



The entrance of the Tomba del Labirinto, Luzzanas, looking northwest towards the bend in the River Tirso, with the snow-clad hills above Bultei in the distance. Photo: Jeff Saward, February 2005

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