

CAERDROIA

THE JOURNAL OF
MAZES & LABYRINTHS



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CAERDROIA 54

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The Journal of Mazes & Labyrinths

Contents

Cover : detail from the Watts Chapel altar, Compton, England, ca. 1898. Photo: J. Saward

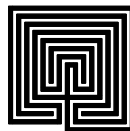
- 1 **Frontis** : The Chequers Labyrinth drawing. Photo: James Furse-Roberts, 2024
Reproduced with the kind permission of the Chequers Estate Trustees
- 3 **Editorial** : a note from the editor, Jeff Saward
- 4 **The Chequers Maze: A New Discovery and Synopsis** : James Furse-Roberts presents the newly discovered evidence for the former *Druid Maze* in the grounds of this famous English house
- 9 **Tracing the Shoemakers' Race** : Jonathan Mullard documents a former turf labyrinth in Shrewsbury, England, unfortunately destroyed in 1796
- 13 **Pimperne: The Oddest Historical Turf Labyrinth?** : Thorn Steafel looks at the unusual design of this former turf labyrinth in Dorset
- 20 **Revisiting the Chartres Labyrinth: A Journey Through Time** : Alain Pierre Louët and Jill Kimberly Hartwell Geoffrion consider both established facts and widely accepted hypotheses about the famous labyrinth in Chartres Cathedral
- 39 **The 19th Century Maze in Piazza's Garden in Padua** : Roberto Milazzi digs out the details of a long-lost Italian garden maze
- 44 **Two Labyrinths Rediscovered in Salem, India** : Libish Murugesan visits two stone labyrinths preserved in Tamil Nadu, Southern India
- 46 **The Giant's Castle Stone Maze Restored** : Teân Roberts reports on the restoration of an overgrown labyrinth on the Isles of Scilly and discovers the story of its original construction
- 49 **The Labyrinth of Signs** : Rolf Johansson examines a curious hand-drawn labyrinth
- 52 **Labyrinth Typology: A Century of Fascination** : Yadina Clark and Jeff Saward discuss various attempts to categorise unicursal labyrinths over the years
- 58 **Notes & Queries** : Auction House Reports: three antique labyrinths and a maze from India; the Labyrinth Society & Labyrinth Locator
- 60 **Caerdroia** : submission details, subscriptions, etc.

Caerdroia 54 was produced during September and October 2025 by Jeff and Kimberly Saward at Labyrinthos HQ. Opinions stated by contributors are not always those of the editors, but *Caerdroia* welcomes open discussion to provide a forum for all who are lured by the labyrinth.

Editor & Publisher: Jeff Saward – **Associate Editor:** Kimberly Lowelle Saward, Ph.D.

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Editorial – Caerdroia 54



Jeff Saward, Thundersley, October 2025

Welcome to the 54th edition of Caerdroia, as always, an edition with a wide range of articles covering labyrinths and mazes from around the world, some lost, rediscovered or restored, and others quite familiar but still with details waiting to be resolved. Some answers remain hidden in dusty cupboards and libraries, waiting for someone to open the doors or take an item off the shelf to check the contents. The increasing availability of documents and hard to obtain books and journals via digital archives has revealed a wealth of previously overlooked resources for today's researchers, now easily in contact with fellow workers worldwide. Of course, the study of mazes and labyrinths has benefitted greatly from these advances, and as I approach 50 years of searching for clues to the story of the labyrinth, I marvel at just how many new discoveries have been made in recent years.

The Labyrinthos and Caerdroia website – www.labyrinthos.net – contains a wealth of material, including downloadable digital PDF files of Caerdroia 33 through 53, and selected articles from earlier editions, along with some of the many photos and graphics from our extensive photo library and archive. This edition of Caerdroia is also available on the website for subscribers at: www.labyrinthos.net/c54pdf16102025.html

As explained previously, while I will still be printing a few copies of Caerdroia, primarily for library distribution and legal deposit, the digital version of the journal will continue to be issued on an annual basis, much as before, and distributed via the Labyrinthos website - <https://labyrinthos.net/caerdroia.html>

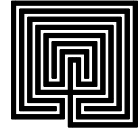
With the switch to digital delivery, we have reduced our subscription to £6 per edition, to cover the cost of producing the journal in digital form and the maintenance of the website for its delivery and promotion. I trust you will consider the modest cost of our annual publication still worthy of your support going forward.

Our next edition, Caerdroia 55, is scheduled for publication in the autumn of 2026. As always, if you have a paper or shorter article you wish to submit for inclusion in the next edition, send it to me as soon as possible, along with the usual labyrinthine snippets and curios that help fill the pages.

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The Chequers Maze: A New Discovery and Synopsis



James Furse-Roberts

Chequers in Buckinghamshire, England, is best known as the Prime Minister's country retreat, a role it has fulfilled since 1921. However, there has been a house and gardens on the site for centuries. It is fortunate that there are several estate plans and maps, from 1629 until present day, that give a series of insights into how the gardens have changed over time. Most of what these depict is understood; however, there are a couple of features that still need more explanation. One of these is the 'Druid Maze,' which is located approximately 330 metres north-west of the house in the field adjacent to an area of woodland known as Crows Close. This is an elusive feature, referred to initially as 'The Maze,' that appears, disappears and then reappears on the maps and plans of the estate. It is present on the earliest estate map from 1629 (Figure 1), then on the 1739 estate map and on the 1779 estate map. It is not present on the 1805 tithe map nor the Ordnance Survey maps from 1877, 1897 and 1921. However, it reappears on the 1960 Ordnance Survey map where it is marked as 'Druid Maze.'

Figure 1: Detail from the 1629 estate map of Chequers, with the maze shown adjacent to the bowling green

Photo: courtesy of the Buckinghamshire Archive: D_138/13/1; Map by Henry Lily of the manors of Ellesborough, Chequers and Mordaunts



It would seem that little in the way of written accounts of the maze were either ever created or have come to light. Gilbert Jenkins (1967) references a letter from Dr Charlett, Master of University College, Oxford, written on 18th October 1709 in which he says that “*The next time I come to Chequers I will try my legs at the Maze.*” The next reference to it is from 1921 when Lord Lee, in “A Short Guide to Chequers,” mentions that “*A few hundred yards away to the north-west of the Rookery may be seen the faint traces in the turf of a circular Druid Maze, the date and use of which are matters for conjecture.*” Finally, for a short report in the 1989 edition of *Caerdroia* the editor contacted the Chequers Estate about the Druid Maze and was informed that it was no longer visible.

As is demonstrated in the descriptions below, on each of the maps that show the maze, it is represented differently. It is not clear to what extent this reflects actual changes to the maze or whether the illustrations were meant to be more symbolic rather than accurate mapping of what was there.

Henry Lily’s 1629 map of the estate shows a feature comprising of approximately 12 concentric circles with four radial lines quartering these circles arranged on bearings of 70° and 160° respectively. This is shown as being 15 perches in diameter, which is 247 feet or 75 metres.

Stone’s 1739 plan of Chequers shows the maze, labelled as ‘The Maze,’ as a square feature measuring approximately 50m by 53m aligned parallel with the bowling green feature also shown on the plan. Within this square, there are five circular features, four arranged in a square at approximately 25m centres, with the fifth in the centre. These have what appear to be trees at the centres.

The 1779 estate map shows the maze as being square but much reduced in size, measuring approximately 12m by 13m. It is labelled as ‘The Maze’ on this plan.

The Ordnance Survey 1960 1:10,560 scale map illustrates the maze as three concentric dashed circles measuring 55m in diameter. This feature is assigned the name ‘Druid Maze.’ On this map, the maze is positioned across a field boundary that was the northern edge of the bowling green. Based on the historic plans, this location would appear to be inconsistent.

As part of a recent exercise to analyse the changes in the Chequers landscape, the various estate plans have been digitised and overlain, using LiDAR to verify the positions of the features. While the LiDAR did reveal a number of historic features, it did not reveal any features that would relate to the maze. However, the process does allow the approximate positions of the mazes illustrated on the various plans to be shown in relation to each other (Figure 2).

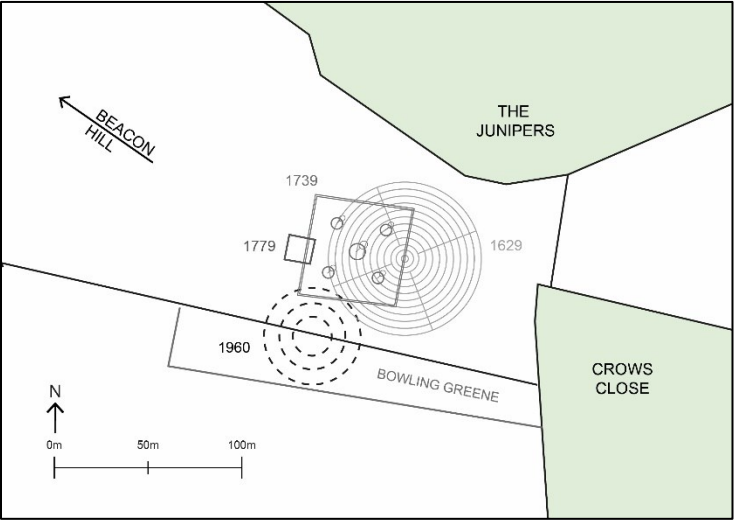


Figure 2: Relative sizes, positions and configurations of the mazes shown on the various maps and plans.
J. Furse-Roberts
2024

This was believed to be the extent of the knowledge of the Chequers maze until recently when the Chequers staff found a drawing in the archives that is titled ‘Labyrinth at Chequers executed in Turf.’ It appears to be a technically competent hand-drawn architectural drawing with a scale and north arrow (Figure 3). Unfortunately, however, there is no date on the drawing to indicate when it was created. It might have been drawn by someone who saw the maze in one of its original forms or it might have been drafted after the maze had grassed over, using just the shadow of the earthworks to divine the original form. Hugo Chapman, the Simon Sainsbury Keeper of Prints and Drawings at the British Museum, suggests that, based on the handwriting, the drawing is mid-to-late 18th century (Pers. Comm. 2024a).

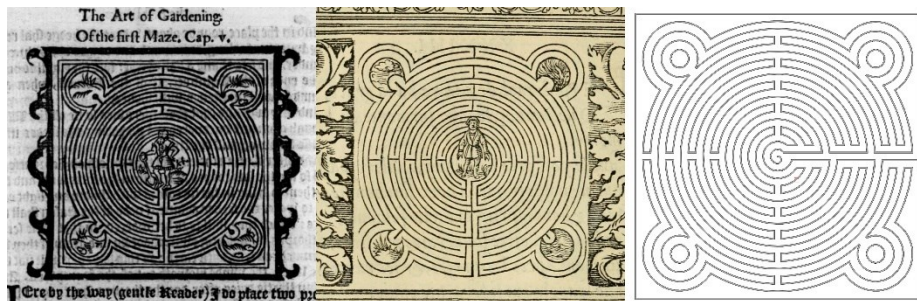
Figure 3: Photo of the recently discovered Chequers Maze drawing. Photo: J. Furse-Roberts (2024). Reproduced with the kind permission of the Chequers Estate Trustees

In the drawing, the maze is approximately 17 inches across. Given the stated scale of ‘10 feet to one inch,’ this equates to the maze being 170 feet or 52 metres square. This is similar to the dimensions of the maze as depicted on the 1739 estate plane, which also shows five circles that would match the layout shown in the drawing. If the recently found drawing is aligned parallel with the bowling green, as shown on the 1739 plan, the north arrow, as depicted on the drawing is incorrect. The alignment of



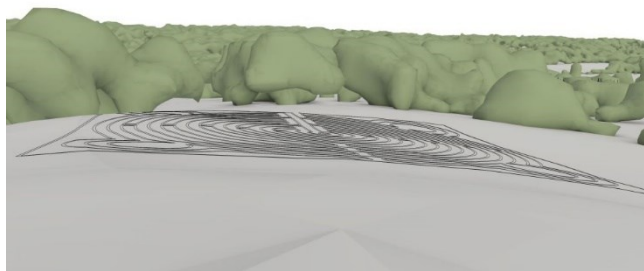
the four radial elements of the central spiral are shown as being aligned north-south and east-west. This is the same orientation as seen on the earlier 1629 plan, when compared with its compass rose. However, the compass rose on the 1629 plan appears to be misaligned by 16° when compared with modern maps. When the orientation of the 1629 maze is looked at in relation to other map features, it can be seen that the radial elements are at 45° to the orientation of the bowling green boundary. This begs the question, are these inconsistencies the result of mapping errors or was the maze perhaps re-cut with a different design at some time between 1629 and 1739?

The largest extant turf maze in the UK is the one on Saffron Walden Common, in Essex, which measures 27 metres in diameter (Saward 2012), meaning that at 52 metres the Chequers Maze would have been significantly larger. The drawing suggests that the path was within the gully created by removing the turf. According to Fisher (2009), the common practice was for the path to be on the raised ridges; although he does mention other examples with the paths in the gully. The layout of the Chequers Maze is similar in design to that of the Saffron Walden Maze. Saward (Pers. Comm. 2024b) postulates that the Saffron Walden design is based on an illustration in Thomas Hill’s *The Profitable Arte of Gardening* (1586), itself copied from Guillaume de la Perrière’s book *Le Théâtre des bon engins, auquel sont contenuz cent Emblemes moraux*, published in Paris in 1539 (Figure 4).



**Figure 4:- Left - Labyrinth illustration in *The Profitable Arte of Gardening*.
Middle - Labyrinth illustration in *Le Théâtre des bon engins, auquel sont contenuz cent Emblemes moraulx*.
Right - *Chequers labyrinth illustration*, J. Furse-Roberts, 2024**

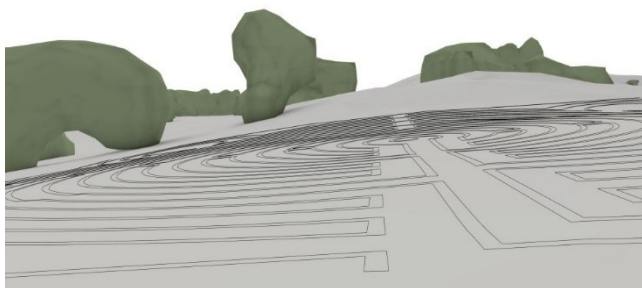
If the maze location shown on the 1739 plan is assumed to be accurate, the centre of the maze would have sat on the ridge of the hill. Given the topography and the size of the maze, it would have been difficult to have clearly seen the maze in its entirety; although, a better view would have been achieved from slightly higher up the ridge, towards Beacon Hill. The following figures approximate the view from positions around the maze (Figures 5 and 6).



Left: Figure 5: Computer modelled view of the Chequers Maze looking south-east from further up the hill. J. Furse-Roberts 2024

Below: Figure 6: Computer modelled view of the Chequers Maze looking north-west from just before the entrance to the maze. J. Furse-Roberts 2024

When the author visited the area in September 2024, no change in topography that might be attributed to the maze could be seen. It is possible that with different conditions, a hot summer, close grazing and low light, it might become visible in the future. However, the absence of any features showing on the LiDAR survey suggests that any remnants are either very slight changes in topography or that what was being seen by Lord Lee was differences in vegetation growth caused by changes in soil fertility as a result of the earthworks. It is worth noting that there are also no obvious topographical features associated with the location of the bowling green, the area now being sloped.



While the recent discovery of the drawing has increased our understanding of this feature, there are still many unanswered questions. It is hoped that further research, including further dating for the drawing, will continue to contribute to our knowledge of this feature.

Dr James Furse-Roberts, Director FRLA Ltd:
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Note

While the author is sure that no subscriber to *Caerdroia* would trespass on private property to visit a maze, readers are cautioned that for the security of the Prime Minister and their family and guests, the Chequers Estate, including the location of the maze, is covered by the Serious Organised Crime and Police Act 2005, which makes trespass a criminal act, rather than a civil matter.

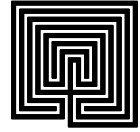
Acknowledgements

The author would like to thank the staff and trustees of Chequers for their support and hospitality while researching this paper. A special thanks is due to Chequers' Head Gardener, Katie Duffield, for sharing her knowledge of the garden and her enthusiasm for this research.

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Tracing the Shoemakers' Race



Jonathan Mullard

Over 40 years ago, in 1983, I published a small booklet, *Caerdroia Salopia*, covering my research on the lost turf mazes of Shropshire. During these investigations I uncovered a number of field names in the county associated with mazes. 'Troy Meadow' at Shawbury, perhaps the only example of this name in the county, is the most obvious of these. There was also a field called 'Mazerdine' near Worfield and the field map of this area, drawn up in the 1820s, locates it half a mile north of the village church. The third site is the field known as 'The Race Piece' near Wem. According to the 1842 field map this too was located about half a mile north of the town centre. (Foxhall 1980). None of these fields survive today in their historic form, with Troy Meadow now sadly under the southern end of the runway at RAF Shawbury. The station being first used for military flying training in 1917. Both the potential locations at Wem and Worfield have been heavily ploughed, so no physical evidence is likely to have survived on the ground.

To my great surprise, however, I found that there was a Shropshire maze for which definite documentary proof existed, and which had been completely overlooked by researchers; the Shoemakers' Race on Kingsland in Shrewsbury, which was once unenclosed common land. Indeed, it is one of the most interesting of the recorded, but lost, turf mazes of Britain. Kingsland was formerly an area of Crown land (hence King's land) that was given to the town corporation by a Royal grant from William I. Here, on what was once the ancient common 'waste' of the borough, were a number of feasting houses, or 'arbours,' connected with the trade guilds associated with Shrewsbury Show. Of these arbours 'the most curious and ancient' was that of the shoemakers which, unlike the others, was octagonal, being composed of a timber frame and lattice work. (Auden 1947-8).

At the time I was researching the history of the county the Shropshire archives were housed in several different locations, while the Grade I listed library building in Shrewsbury was completely reconstructed. The collections were united again in 1983, the year I published my booklet, but it took several more years for them to be properly catalogued and indeed, in some respects, the work is still continuing. My attempts to locate a plan of the Shoemakers' Race were therefore unsuccessful. Since the shoemaker's arbour differed from all the others in being octagonal, I suggested in my booklet that the maze might also have been octagonal. Recent research has shown though that this was not the case.

To date no ground plan of the Shoemakers' Race has been located. It is very likely that the Company of Shoemakers had such a plan, to ensure accurate recutting, when necessary, but it does not appear to have survived. Charlotte Burne in *Shropshire Folklore* noted that 'The old charters and records of the companies are dispersed, some at the Shrewsbury Museum, some at the Town-Hall, many probably lost' (Burne 1883). Indeed, a recent search of the archives confirmed that there are unfortunately no surviving documents relating to the Shoemakers' Guild. I was excited to find, however, that a small sketch of the maze and its surrounding hedge, with a 'public style,' can be found on a map of Kingsland belonging to

the Burgesses of Salop, which was surveyed by Thomas Ansell in 1759. The scale is in Chains, a Chain being 66 feet or 20.1 metres. From this it is possible to estimate the size of the maze, which was slightly under one Chain across, perhaps 60 feet or 18.3 metres. The maze is roughly circular with a flattened side to the southwest, where the entrance seems to be indicated, and there is a single tree shown in the centre of the maze. Unfortunately, the actual route of the maze is very sketchily indicated but there seem to be at least five, possibly six, circuits. The drawings on Ansell's map are not entirely accurate, however, since while the sketch of the nearby shoemakers' arbour shows the ornate stone entrance gateway, the octagonal building itself is not illustrated.



*Fig. 1: Thomas Ansell's map of Kingsland in 1759, with detail of the Shoemakers' Arbour (K) and the Shoemakers' Race (N), surrounded by a hedge and accessed through a gate.
Copyright: Shropshire Archives, X3790/7/452*

Trees at the centre of turf mazes are a reoccurring feature. For example, the maze at Saffron Walden once had a large ash tree at its centre. Elsewhere in Europe, the lime tree was the species most often associated with mazes. There appears to be no record of what tree stood at the centre of the Shoemakers' Race but it could well have been an ash. Ash trees have their own place in British folklore and, in some districts, ash twigs were used as charms and ash sticks as a protection against witches.

The Shoemakers' Race was destroyed in 1796 when a large brick windmill was built on part of its site by the directors of the House of Industry, the Shrewsbury workhouse. Why the shoemakers offered the site of their maze to build a windmill remains a mystery, especially after all the years of careful maintenance. It is clear, however, that as a result of various inclosures, by 1796 there was little unoccupied land left on Kingsland and there may have been no other available space. The windmill was subsequently sold for £200 in 1828 but became derelict later. It was still marked on a Tithe map in 1844 and finally demolished in 1861.

A later map of Kingsland dating to 1780, only 16 years before the destruction of the maze, again shows the maze and the nearby harbour. It is disappointing that neither of the two mapmakers thought the design of the maze important enough to record in detail, despite it being over 200 years old at the time. The design though may have been similar to that of the Shepherd's Race, another medieval turf maze which formerly existed in the deserted settlement of Boughton Green, Northamptonshire. Changes to the path were not uncommon, however, when mazes were recut.



Fig 2: Detail from a map of Kingsland in 1780 with another sketch of the Shoemakers' Arbour (2) and the Shoemakers' Race (3). Copyright: Shropshire Archives, Anon. 18th Century; SA6001/199, 85

From Thomas Ansell's map and a map showing the harbours and windmill around 1840, it is possible to calculate the approximate location of the maze. The site appears now to be occupied by The Headmasters House, 17 Ashton Road, Kingsland, immediately opposite the main buildings of Shrewsbury School. No trace of the windmill, or indeed the maze, remains today. In August 1880 part of the mound of the shoemakers' arbour was still preserved in the garden of one of the new houses that had been recently built in the area, that occupied by the Rev. C.J.S. Churchill, which is now the boarding house known as 'Churchill's.'

Fig 3: The Headmasters House at 17 Ashton Road, Kingsland now occupies the site of the Shoemakers' Race and the windmill which subsequently replaced it in 1796.

Photo: Jonathan Mullard



Since all the remaining open land on Kingsland is now occupied by the playing fields of Shrewsbury School, and there is a house on the actual site of the Shoemakers' Race, recutting the maze in its original location is obviously impossible. As the stone

gateway of the Shoemakers' Arbour is now located on the opposite side of the River Severn, in Shrewsbury Quarry (the town park), where there are large areas of closely mown turf, I am currently investigating whether a new maze could be cut here to commemorate the past glories of Kingsland and Shrewsbury Show. Next year, 2026, two hundred and thirty years after the Shoemakers' Race was destroyed, would provide a good opportunity for celebration.

For much more information on the Shoemakers' Race and the guild's link with turf mazes please see my recent article, *That Great Antique Curiosity: Shrewsbury's Lost Turf Maze*, in the *Transactions of the Shropshire Archaeological and Historical Society* Volume 99 2024.

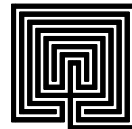
Jonathan Mullard, Hexham, England; August 2025

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Pimperne: The Oddest Historical Turf Labyrinth?



Thorn Steafel

The Odd Duck

One of the most curious and mysterious historical English turf labyrinths was that formerly in Pimperne, Dorset, at what is now the site of Blandford Cemetery,¹ of uncertain creation date but destroyed around 1730, as we know from the 18th century Dorset rector and antiquarian John Hutchins (Hutchins 1774, p.101). A single original plan of it exists (Figure 1), made by John Bastard, the Georgian benefactor of neighbouring Blandford (which Pimperne had subsumed, at the time of the labyrinth); he executed the plan in 1758 and added the inscription:

This laberinth vylgerly called mizmase was on the North side of the road betwixt Blandford and Pimperne but is now Annialated. Supposed to be the work of the Muncks of Old But to keep the world in ignorance they said itt was the work of the Faierys whom used to dance there.²

It was this plan which subsequently appeared redrawn in the third edition of Hutchins' *History and Antiquities of the County of Dorset* (1861, p.293), and the pattern ever since has remained a staple of 'cooky labyrinths from history' image grabs. Now for labyrinthologists, when a sole picture survives as testimonial to a vanished pattern, we are required to take that single image on trust as for its accuracy – and that's rather a large ask in Pimperne's case, because the labyrinth pattern is radically without peers stylistically.

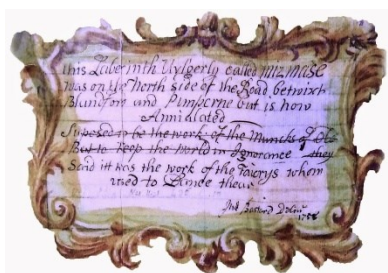
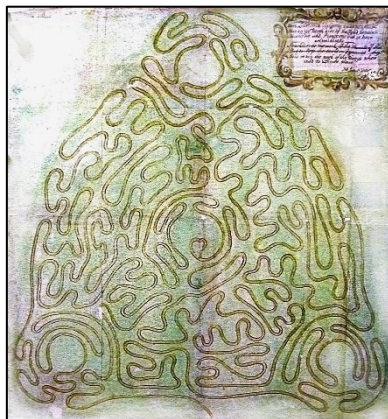


Figure 1: The turf labyrinth of Pimperne.
Top: Bastard's original 1758 plan, painted on silk,
Middle: the inscription adjoining the plan
(both courtesy of Blandford Town Museum),
Below: Plan of the maze with colour zones added

And yet, although unconventional, it is certainly a labyrinth; meeting Herman Kern's definition by having with entrance and centre, a convoluted pathway between the two, and a path looping back and forth upon itself, and also filling all space between periphery and centre [Kern, 2000, 23]³ After that, though, it springs many surprises:

- having an atypical number of bastions (three),
- being composed entirely of u-turned pathways (rudimentary rebounding paths) that do not clump into anything more complex like meanders,
- having a lack of axial symmetry, beyond its broad triangular shape,
- having that unique, rather saccharine heart-shaped centre,
- and seeming divorced (after Kern's basic criteria is met) from the two families that dominate historical turf labyrinths, the Classical and Medieval.⁴

Many questions jump to mind. Was its triangular shape dictated by the acre of land it stood inside, or by its creator's whim? Were the three bastions the locations of trees in the original 'Maze Field,' informing the design? Are the path's many curving turns evidence of degradation over time from a tighter and more angular layout (e.g., as probably occurred with the Winchester Mizmaze⁵)?

Sadly, to such questions we have no answers, as this baroque pattern has little documentation.⁶ So this short essay considers the pattern alone, to ask if – using only the plan – we can decide if Pimperne's freehand irregularity was the product of naivety (i.e., the plan shows an original unmodified layout, made by a creator unaware of the contemporary turf labyrinth 'conventions' that would usually transmit through the copying of extant examples as created elsewhere or as published in books) – or whether the pattern might be called post-modern (in the sense of emerging from a designer savvy with turf labyrinth 'rules,' if we may back-project such a concept, who deliberately discarded them).

Is the Plan Accurate?

The pattern – like a giant's fork of spaghetti, mid-air – is so unlike other historical turf labyrinths that we might wonder if Bastard drew it correctly. I am inclined to think that he did, given that John Bastard was a noted surveyor-architect in the district with an interest in local historical artefacts; his illustration (in the archives of the Blandford Town Museum) is done with care and precision. While this can't, of course, rule out that a neat version was redrawn from something done in the field which was sloppier and perhaps held errors, Pimperne's design is so far removed from any other labyrinth example, that this 'botched sketch' argument makes little sense to me. It is so stylistically out there that one struggles to imagine what more conventional pattern it could have been botched *from*.

The Bare Bones

In Figure 1 I have colour-zoned the pattern, so that we may keep an eye on its components, and if we now strip away successively the pattern's extraneous path-ribbons, we can distil the pattern to its simplest motion, as it were – and perhaps detect hints of descentance from a Classical or dumbed-down Medieval pattern.

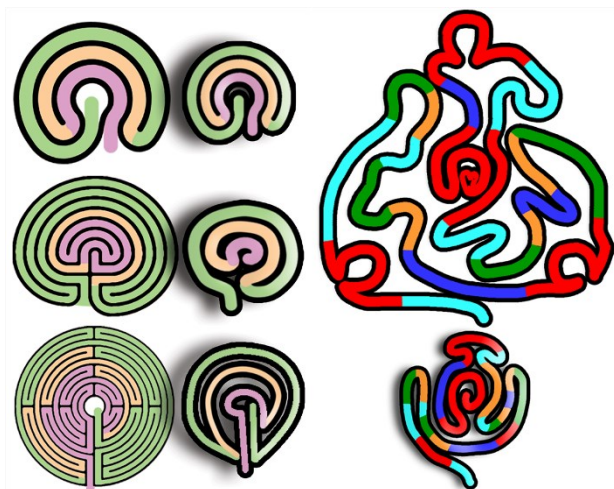


Figure 2: Distilling to simplest motion. Left (from top down): Greatly simplified movement within two-fold Classical, fourfold Classical, and Medieval labyrinths. Right: Within Pimperne labyrinth

But once stripped, it's hard to read in Pimperne a deformation of (or mutation from) the Classical/Medieval canon. On the left are what I'd offer as the most simplistic distillations of movement within of two Classics and a Medieval labyrinth. In contrast, Pimperne's distilled form (bottom right) has two outermost limbs reaching up for an axis north of centre, as opposed to the Classical's southern axis line; and even if that feature is disregarded, the innermost section – though at first glance suggestive of meandering Classical movement – is really the motion of a simple rebound labyrinth (i.e. one without meanders). Thus, Pimperne is as freeform when reduced to bones as when fleshed out.

Shoehorning into Circuits

I instead wondered if Bastard's plan was suggestive that concentric circles could have once underlaid this pattern's design, like tree-rings about the heart-featuring centre – an idea reinforced by the concentric ringed paths about each bastion. This returns us to the 'degraded paths over time' hypothesis, wherein a once formal and ordered original design evolves, over years of foot-use and recuttings, into something more loopy and less regimented. I wanted to reverse this imagined degradation, by snapping Pimperne's curving U-rebounds into right-angled turns, and laying them over tree-ringed concentric circles around the main centre. Would this bring a whiff of the Classical or Medieval to light, to explain Pimperne's presumed 'later' form? After all, we've seen this elsewhere; degradation can not only change a pattern's route but also reduce/expand its number of circuits – see Pennick (1990) for his illustrated timeline of the Hilton Labyrinth's layout (Figure 3).⁷

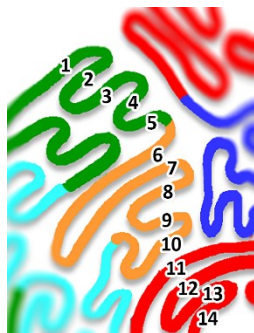


Figure 3: Hilton (top to bottom): Proposed original plan; 1858; 1892. After Pennick (1990) 70, Fig 2.4 (A-C)

Doing this to Pimperne is some task. But we can start by finding a relatively clear part of the pattern, letting us count how many circuits are needed for our tree-rings; I chose the northeast area (Figure 4) from periphery to centre. This gave fourteen circuits, so I then began fitting Pimperne over fourteen rings.

Figure 4: Circuits needed ranging from centre to periphery

Doing this reveals quite soon that Pimperne is not a degraded form of some more formal labyrinth pattern – our conceived end-product, a nice circular fourteen-circuit labyrinth with three bastions, is only in our minds. This is because of the following:



1. There are repeated problem-spots in ‘fitting’ the pattern this way, in which its squiggles could equally follow a circuit-ring round, or stab radially to the centre. Thus, personal choices of route must be made, that bias the end result; two people doing this, would create two different labyrinths. Despite this, though, as Figure 5 shows, Pimperne *generally* fits this template.
2. However, four areas (with dotted lines) indicate where fourteen circuits are too few for the pattern to fit.
3. And a fifth (beside a blank area, top right) indicates where fourteen circuits are more than is needed to host our labyrinth.

Points 2 and 3 therefore reject the idea that Pimperne’s original design exactly aligned to and filled a concentric circular pattern of fourteen circuits around a centre space which incorporated three bastions, which then over time degraded through recutting/abuse into the plan we have inherited from Bastard. As noted, the pattern mostly fits our template... but where it doesn’t, it *really* doesn’t.

Also this experiment pronounces how axially, whereas the Classical family has one axis of unbroken wall running south from centre to periphery, and the Medieval has the same plus three other partly-broken axes along its compass points, with Pimperne we must hunt to find any unbroken wall that could be a potential axis from centre to periphery and thus a hold-over from any more conventional labyrinth. I show opposite Pimperne’s sole unbroken wall in yellow.⁸



Figure 5: Pimperne with fourteen circuit concentric circle format applied

Worming to the Centre

So it's pretty clear that the Pimperne labyrinth was freeform, if its plan is accurate – and the more we tinker with the pattern, its very individuality gives less and less reason to think it was 'drawn wrong.' It doesn't adhere to a template of concentric circles or radial axes, as we're used to in other labyrinth families, but I'd go out on a limb and suggest it did *know* of other labyrinths. Such turf patterns did not arise in a vacuum, but within communities who could conceivably be informed from printed garden manuals (e.g. Thomas Hill) and awareness of other communities' (rival) turf labyrinth designs, of how labyrinths looked and what in essence they were meant to do (confuse and entertain). This seems a likely source for Pimperne's bastions, for example, and that Bastard notes the pattern was called a "mizmaze" also indicates awareness of a group name for turf labyrinths.

But I'm wary of back-projecting what we know about labyrinths today, onto that period and its occupants. Returning to the pattern alone, it must have been created in one of two ways:

1. With no pre-existing plan, designed on the spot by being staked out and cut, final form directed by the inspirations of those there, and the suggestions of the land.
2. With a pre-existing plan taken along to direct its staking out and cutting; a plan probably was very similar (if not identical to) that provided by Bastard.

To test which felt most likely, I created a temporary Pimperne on a beach, using a plan, which I was surprised to find took only 30 minutes (Figures 6, 7); not that the time taken raking it into sand compares to marking and cutting in turf. Interestingly, with foot-wide paths and 'reasonable' spacing between them, the pattern at its widest was about 35 feet (11m). I'd always wondered if Hutchins' given size (covering almost an acre of land, thus 209 x 209 feet or 64 x 64 metres), was either wrong, or referred to the size of 'Maze Field' rather than the labyrinth itself. Yet in practice (and this is not back-projection), my labyrinth, though walkable, was far from entertaining or pleasant; one endlessly stalled, stumbled, executed flow-stopping about turns that barely kept you on the path. From this, clearly Pimperne must have been larger than my example, say at the minimum twice my size, to be walkable, enjoyable, and to have survived at least fifty years (see below). Perhaps 'an acre' was correct.⁹



Figure 6 & 7: Rake-path Pimperne recreation by author, May 2025

Oddly, my experiment to sense if option 1 or 2 was more likely, left me more inclined towards 1. After the fiendish difficulty of creating it from a plan (with no general geometrical points in its pattern beyond the centre/bastion centres to help, and no internal symmetry – even after several days of practicing drawing it) I was surprised that method 1 seemed just as likely, if not more likely, than 2. This is a pattern that could easily be something put together, at the site, undrafted, on the day.

Conclusion

And this hunch about option 1 – whether you agree with it or not – highlights how important and unique the Pimperne labyrinth is. To us, today, the pattern seems original but may also seem random and amateurish. ‘Random’ in the sense of being unordered, unplanned and ‘amateur’ from its (over)use of rebounding curls instead of more complex stacked rebounds forming meanders. The crueller modern viewer might even observe that with an acre of land to create a labyrinth, not much was done with it.

But such charges from eyes versed in labyrinths unlocking like puzzles to provide internal symmetry and dangling like metaphysical carrots hints of sacred geometry, overshadow the remarkable fact that Pimperne’s pattern arose at all. Whether it emerged from a sketch or from digging willy-nilly in a field, it provides an astonishing instance in labyrinth history where someone created a labyrinth pattern with a very bold and original vision.

Was it successful? We must presume it was for almost fifty years – between Aubrey’s mention how ‘School-boys’ enjoyed it in 1689, to Hutchins and Trollope’s destruction date. But a pattern like this has its own destruction encoded inside it; how long a pattern this sprawling, complex and hard to locate yourself inside could be willingly maintained, must have been short. Neglected turf labyrinths can fast return to nature, and Pimperne’s asymmetrical loopiness offered the benign restorer no way to guesstimate (as we can inside a Classical or Medieval, say) of where a near-overgrown path ‘must’ have gone.

Why aren’t there more wholly original historical turf labyrinths like this? For the nearest ‘deviates,’ e.g. Boughton Green (= Medieval family) and Rockliffe Marsh (= threefold Classical) can be placed still into families, with none completely out of the family fold in the way Pimperne is. It’s hard to say; perhaps Pimperne was single flourish of originality, but we also have a very limited record of the hundred or so turf labyrinths England once had – perhaps other unique originals also arose, but died unrecorded.

Nonetheless, Pimperne holds a standout place in turf labyrinth history – for if labyrinths are experiential walkways that are to confuse and entertain, then Pimperne succeeded in both stakes. Indeed, judging labyrinthicity by the confusion factor alone, you could even say that Pimperne’s creator laid a pattern that was the most confusing ever seen that is recorded – thus, in turf, the most ‘successful’ labyrinth England has had.

Thorn Steafel, Ardler, Scotland; May 2025

Website: www.labyrinthmagic.com - Email: thornsteafel@yahoo.co.uk

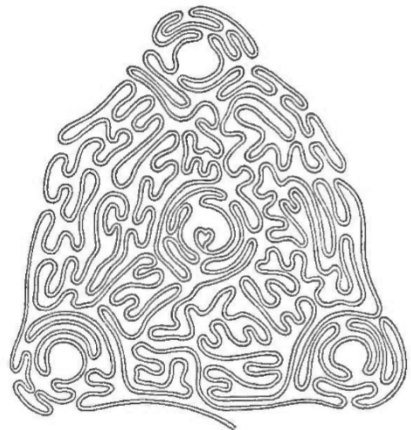
Notes

- 1 Location in cemetery from blogpost 'Blandford's Maze' dated 16.06.22, 'The Blandford Express,' <https://www.theblandfordexpress.com/2022/06/blandfords-maze.html> – accessed 23.05.25.
- 2 Bastard's original silk plan is held in Blandford Town Museum and may be seen online: <https://dorsetdorset.blogspot.com/2014/08/dorset-museums-blandford-museum.html>
- 3 How Pimperne's path loops back and forth meets Kern's criterion but isn't quite what he would have envisaged; he wrote with nice concentric rings of paths in mind, about a centre.
- 4 The idea of labyrinth families followed is that of Saward (2003, p.28-31).
- 5 Cf. Pennick (1990, p.63), Figure 2.2 (C and D) for comparison of mappings over time.
- 6 John Aubrey mentions it: 'on the downe between Blandford and Pimpern [sic] in Dorset, [was a labyrinth] which was much used by the young people on Holydaies and by y^e School-boies' (Aubrey, 1686, p.71) and Trollope refers to it, paraphrasing Hutchins (Trollope [1858] 226).
- 7 Pennick (1990, p.70), Figure 70 (A-G).
- 8 Pennick (1990, p.81) describes it being 'an irregular unicursal turf labyrinth of unusual form, being roughly triangular, though with turnings comparable with the typical medieval design,' but I cannot see this similarity to the Medieval Labyrinth, other than in the very loose move to the centre from bottom-right.
- 9 This point, the size, is for you to decide upon. Have a look online at the Willen Park Maze in Milton Keynes in Google Earth; it gives its size as 135 feet (41 metres) from bastion to bastion. Is a Pimperne that's about 1.75 Willen Park Mazes across, likely?

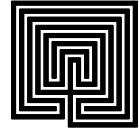
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The plan of the Pimperne Mizmaze published in the third edition of Hutchins' History and Antiquities of the County of Dorset (1861, p.293)



Revisiting the Chartres Labyrinth: A Journey Through Time



Alain Pierre Louët & Jill Kimberly Hartwell Geoffrion



Chartres Cathedral Labyrinth with walkers. Photo: J.K.H. Geoffrion

Over the past thirty-five years, a substantial body of scholarship – both in French and English – has developed around the labyrinth of Chartres Cathedral. These studies have explored not only its historical evolution but also its relevance to contemporary interpretation and practice. This article aims to synthesize the insights offered by this diverse scholarship, evaluate the reliability of the available evidence, and present the findings in a way that encourages further investigation. It considers both established facts and widely accepted hypotheses, while also acknowledging unresolved questions and articulating the authors' critical perspectives. Our goal is to offer a balanced account of the labyrinth's multiple interpretations, providing a solid foundation for future research and the development of new evidence-based perspectives.

Contemporary discourse on the Chartres labyrinth often presumes a singular, enduring interpretation of its significance. However, to move beyond such reductive accounts of its meaning and associated practices, it is essential to engage critically with the historical texts and visual representations through which the labyrinth has been understood over time. The assumption of a fixed identity must be relinquished in favour of a more nuanced, historically grounded approach.

Scholarly interest in the Chartres labyrinth spans a wide range of perspectives. Some researchers emphasize its liturgical dimension; others explore its calendrical or temporal-computational functions. Still others focus on its geometric characteristics and its potential role in establishing key reference points within the cathedral's architectural framework. Each of these approaches offers valuable insights into the layered historical contexts that have shaped – and continue to shape – the labyrinth's evolving significance.

The original medieval builders at Chartres situated the labyrinth within a conceptual and symbolic framework rich in theological, liturgical, and cosmological significance. As history unfolded, subsequent generations reinterpreted its meaning in ways that reflected their own cultural and religious paradigms. During the Classical period (spanning the 17th and part of the 18th centuries), for example, theologians often displayed a marked detachment from the labyrinth's earlier spiritual resonance. In the modern and postmodern eras, both clergy and laypeople have continued to reimagine the labyrinth at Chartres, sometimes in ways that would likely have been unintelligible to those who originally designed it.

It would be naïve to assume that the Chartres labyrinth has maintained a fixed identity or function over the course of its eight-century history. On the contrary, its meanings and uses have evolved significantly across time, shaped by shifting theological, cultural, and institutional contexts. To engage seriously with its historical trajectory, scholars must adopt a diachronic approach, analysing the labyrinth period by period – and, when warranted, century by century. Without such a temporally nuanced framework, one risks flattening the labyrinth's rich and complex history into a static and reductive narrative.

The 13th century master mason who designed the labyrinth at Chartres did so within the specific context of the cathedral – a sacred space intended to embody the theological and cultural values of the time. The labyrinth, in this context, was not merely a decorative feature, but a symbol woven into the spiritual and liturgical fabric of the cathedral. However, these original theological and symbolic meanings differ significantly from how later generations, particularly the clergy, viewed the labyrinth. In subsequent centuries, the labyrinth became a source of concern for some priests, who found the act of walking or running through it distracting and disruptive. So much so, in fact, that some called for its removal.

Consider, for example, Jean-Baptiste Souchet, a 17th century Doctor of Theology and priest at Chartres Cathedral, who dismissed the labyrinth as an *amuse fol* or place for meaningless activity [1866 copy of 17th century manuscript, 220]. How, then, would Souchet interpret the work of an eighteenth-century illustrator who chose to depict the labyrinth with the words of the *Miserere* (Psalm 51) – a psalm of repentance and cleansing – inscribed from the entrance to the centre [Copy of Challine, Chartres BM Ms. 1518, 186r]? This juxtaposition of symbolic interpretations raises the question of whether any common ground exists between contemporary writers and labyrinth practitioners, who often describe the Chartres labyrinth as a “path of life,” and the medieval monks who used similar labyrinth designs in manuscripts to illustrate theological dangers and errors [Doob 1990, 145-191].

These examples make clear that the meaning and use of the Chartres labyrinth have been far from static. It is also important to recognize that the perspectives of clerical elites—who approached the labyrinth through symbolic, doctrinal, and liturgical frameworks – likely differed from those of the laity, whose interpretations were probably shaped by more personal and everyday concerns. This potential contrast between clerical and popular viewpoints highlights the labyrinth’s historical complexity and the potentially diverse ways it has been understood over the centuries.

Further, even within a specific time or place, a single object often serves multiple functions. Consider, for instance, a keystone, such as the one positioned high above the labyrinth. Would a historian limit their study to its architectural role in bearing and distributing the weight of the vault? Or focus solely on its liturgical use, such as facilitating the scattering of flowers or the release of doves during ceremonial acts? Would they consider only its practical utility in enabling necessary maintenance of the cathedral? Of course not. A comprehensive analysis would account for all these functions – and more.

The tension between fixed certainty and evolving hypothesis, between historical analysis and imaginative interpretation, compels us to reexamine the writings and illustrations of the Chartres labyrinth through the lens of different historical periods. Only through such a careful re-evaluation can we begin to uncover a deeper understanding of this remarkable structure, revealing its layers of meaning as they have shifted, adapted, and expanded over time.

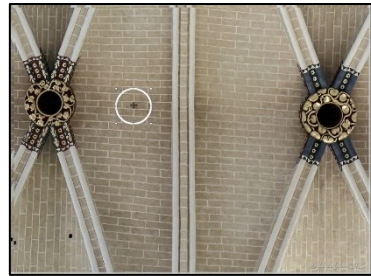
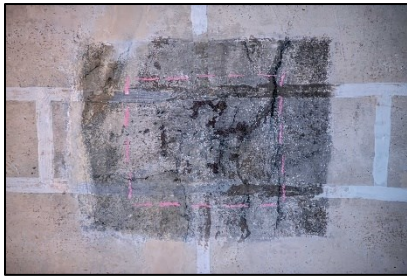
To illustrate our desire for greater clarity and accuracy we will consider two important subjects related to the Chartres labyrinth: its location in the cathedral and the round plaque that once occupied its centre. Many other related subjects await similar analysis, and we hope to continue this discussion in one or more future articles.

The Placement of the Labyrinth

Let us now situate the labyrinth within the Chartres Cathedral. The significance of its placement can be understood in many ways. The largest design element in the cathedral [James, 1989, 232],¹ the labyrinth was laid in the floor, an area that medieval theologian Durand de Mende, a significant medieval liturgist and longtime dean of the Cathedral of Chartres, identified as representing the foundation of faith [13th century, republished 1996, 40]. Its placement in the nave assured its visibility to all, both clergy and laity alike. The Chartres labyrinth is situated between the third and fourth bays of the nave, as was the labyrinth installed the Reims Cathedral in 1290.² Some scholars have explored the symbolic significance of these numbers, although no definitive interpretation has yet emerged.

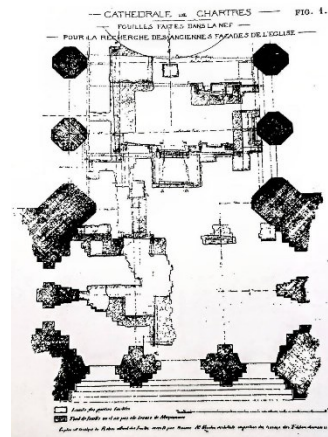
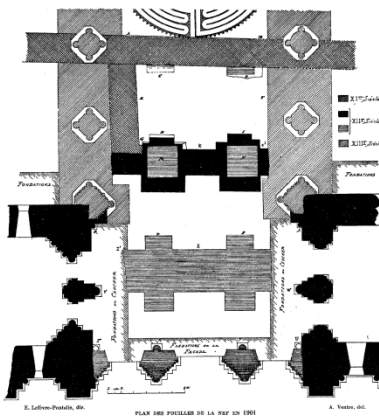
In the second bay of the nave, not far from the threshold of the labyrinth, there is an ancient cross first painted on the ceiling vault between 1200-1220 and repainted in dark red after 1260. Modern scholars, including those related to the recent restoration of the cross, have suggested that it marks the location of the entrance to the labyrinth.³ The idea of an “entrance” in French allows for a wide range of positions – whether the cross is 50 centimetres (20 inches) further down the nave, or three meters (ten feet) away, to the left or to the right, it is acceptable to say it is related to the entrance. Yet the interpretation is far from certain. Perhaps the cross refers to the labyrinth or its entrance in some way, but there is no original documentation that can confirm this or that can clarify what

correspondent meaning it might have held. Does this mean the cross was never perceived as being related to the entrance? On the contrary, it is entirely possible that it was interpreted and experienced in this way for centuries. Should we limit ourselves to this interpretation? Certainly not.



A small painted cross in the vault of the second bay of the nave, during and after restoration-circled for increased visibility

On the floor roughly below the cross are two metal remnants embedded in the stone. The first is roughly 87 centimetres (34 inches) from the outer edge of the threshold stone. The surrounding wear patterns suggest they once held a metal ring. Prompted by popular beliefs that the stone beneath these remnants might conceal a hidden chamber, Eugène Lefèvre-Pontalis conducted an excavation on February 9, 1901.⁴ During this investigation, the west façade of Fulbert's cathedral, constructed in 1020, was uncovered. Remarkably, the current labyrinth lies precisely tangent to this façade, aligning so exactly that coincidence seems insufficient as an explanation. The labyrinth extends over the wall by no more than 20 centimetres (approximately 8 inches) [1901, Lefèvre-Pontalis, 1-48; 1902, Mayeux, 414-23; 1904, Lefèvre-Pontalis, 434-483].



Left: Plan of the excavations in the nave in 1901. The labyrinth of the 13th century cathedral touching the edge of Fulbert's façade from the 11th century [Lefèvre-Pontalis, 1901, 5]

Right: The small square at the centre of the ancient wall just beyond the edge of the labyrinth (top circle) marks the stone where the metal remnants of a ring are located [Mayeux, 1902, 446]

The cross was positioned above the wall of Fulbert's earlier cathedral façade. Such placement is significant, as it likely evokes either the memory of the earlier structure or the consecration of the current cathedral. If the latter is the case, the cross may have been part of the dedication rite, since marking sacred space with a series of crosses was a common liturgical practice in the thirteenth century.⁵ Does this mean these two views of the cross must be opposed? Not at all. The origin may lie in the reality of a cross painted in memory of the previous cathedral or marking the dedication of the new cathedral and, as memory faded over time, it came to be understood in relationship to the labyrinth entrance below.

Let us now consider the relationship between the labyrinth and the west façade of the earlier cathedral. Most scholars agree that the labyrinth was set into the floor of Chartres Cathedral by 1221 [Saward, 2003, 2]. It is regarded as an integral element of the cathedral whose reconstruction began in 1194. How, then, can we explain the clear spatial and symbolic connection between this "new" labyrinth and the earlier cathedral of Fulbert? One possibility is that the labyrinth served an apotropaic function. While possible, this explanation alone is likely insufficient. Some have proposed the existence of an earlier labyrinth in Fulbert's cathedral, but the absence of large-scale, walkable labyrinths on the floors of French cathedrals during the 12th century casts serious doubt on this hypothesis [Joly, 1999, 221].

By adopting a diachronic perspective – one that acknowledges both the labyrinth and the scholar as products of their respective historical contexts – and by rejecting the notion of the Chartres labyrinth as a fixed, unchanging entity, new avenues of inquiry become possible. John James, for instance, has already investigated the relationship between the geometric practices of medieval builders and the architectural layout of cathedrals. Building on this line of inquiry, we propose that the circular area of the labyrinth may also have originally been used to establish key construction alignments not discussed by James or Villette [1991]. In this capacity, it could have functioned during the building process as a site marker, a coordinate, and/or a guiding layout (*tracé*), even if the precise details of its original use remain beyond recovery. Once these foundational elements were established – and precisely because the location held such importance – the area may have been repurposed into the labyrinth as we know it today.⁶ This remains, of course, a hypothesis, but one that may help explain why the labyrinth appears to belong – both symbolically and architecturally – to the earlier cathedral and the present structure alike.

The labyrinth occupies a specific and intentional location, maintaining meaningful relationships not only with its original architectural contexts but also with its liturgical environment. One illustrative detail is that the pathway of the labyrinth begins with a turn to the left. Symbolically, this orientation aligns the labyrinth with both the crypt and the medieval Chartrain principle of sacred movement. The *Chartres Ordinaire* of the 13th century explicitly states that all processions must proceed from north to south [39]. Practically, this means that any liturgical movement – any walking or any pilgrimage – should take place with the sun on one's right. This rule underscores the symbolic primacy of the north, particularly in matters concerning the origins of the world and the organization of sacred space. The movement toward the sun serves to express cosmic harmony. In this way, every procession was intended to reflect and imitate on earth the ordered motion of the heavenly bodies, understood as the imprint and manifestation of divine presence and will.⁷

Scholars must resist the all-too-common tendency to overlook contextual factors when studying the Chartres labyrinth. Although the labyrinth clearly maintains meaningful connections with its architectural and liturgical environments, a fuller understanding of its significance requires attention to other key elements of the cathedral. The relationship between the labyrinth's placement and the surrounding imagery in the stained glass as well as the presence of altars dedicated to specific saints that were placed on the pillars surrounding it are but two areas of study that should be pursued.

History and Problems Concerning the Central Plaque of the Labyrinth

Using the same interpretive lens – one that seeks to understand how the Chartres labyrinth has been shaped by historical context and evolving meaning – we now turn our attention to one of its most enigmatic features: the central plaque that once occupied the heart of the design. The content, function, and even the continuity of this plaque remain subjects of considerable scholarly debate. Exploring this topic invites us to confront both the gaps in the historical record and the multiple, often conflicting, interpretations that have emerged over the centuries.

Let us briefly review the work of historians who have attempted to understand the identity and function of the labyrinth in Chartres Cathedral. We begin with the earliest known depiction of the Chartres labyrinth, Villard de Honnecourt's 1230 sketch, which reverses the pathway and with a centre which appears empty

Villard de Honnecourt. 1230. Paris: Bibliothèque Nationale de France, Français 19093, fol. 7v.

None of authors of scholarly works on the labyrinth who saw the central plaque before its removal in 1793 wrote a detailed description or an produced an accurate drawing of the centre. In 1850, Marcel-Joseph Bulteau – an influential figure in the study of Chartres from the 19th into the early 20th century – adopted the view that the labyrinth symbolized a pilgrimage to Jerusalem [112-115]. He did not mention the labyrinth in his 1855 *Manual for Pilgrims to Notre Dame de Chartres*. In a short monograph published in 1872, he reiterated his earlier interpretation and added the possibility that indulgences may have been granted to those who completed the labyrinth's path [7-9]. His most comprehensive and final treatment appeared in 1887, where he once again referred to the labyrinth as the "path to Jerusalem." In that work, he also advanced several hypotheses – cautiously and tentatively – which have nonetheless been taken seriously by many subsequent scholars.



Bulteau explored the question of what might have been depicted on the plaque at the centre of the labyrinth: “What did that decorated (*historiée*) plaque represent? Was it a horseman entering the city of Jerusalem, as Mr. Raymond Bordeaux seems to believe? Was it the donor of the labyrinth, as in Reims and Amiens? Or was it the Minotaur being fought by Theseus, as seen at the centre of the pagan labyrinths of Pompeii, Strasbourg, and elsewhere [1887, 210]?” Relying on the surviving metal attachment points, he proposed a hypothetical reconstruction. His depiction of Theseus, the Minotaur, and Ariadne is highly speculative (and thus we will not reproduce it here). Given that his reconstruction was based solely on the positions of the tenons which he claimed, “whose outline shows, on one side, a quadruped and, on the other, several standing figures [210],” it is likely that he had never seen a replica or accurate rendering of the original central plaque.

This presents a significant contradiction: how can a path said to lead to Jerusalem end with an image that bears no apparent connection to that sacred destination? Bulteau does not resolve this inconsistency. Furthermore, it is important to note that the existence of such a scene with Theseus, Ariadne and the Minotaur in the centre of the labyrinth has never been definitively established.

Other historians also addressed the question of what once appeared on the round plaque at the centre of the labyrinth. The earliest known historian of the Chartres Cathedral, Rouillard, makes no mention of the labyrinth at all [1609, Parthénie]. The first known reference to the Chartres labyrinth in the written record appears in the work of Raoul Boutrays [1624, 41, 62-63]. He does not speak of the centre. Jean-Baptiste Souchet [around 1654, 22] is the second known to have written about the Chartres labyrinth but he also offers no details regarding the central motif.⁸ Charles Challine, a 17th century historian, was among the few to study the cathedral of Chartres with genuine scholarly rigor. Challine’s contribution is especially significant: he was the first to mention the labyrinth and to provide an illustration of it [1640]. His unfinished manuscript drew renewed interest during the 19th century revival of medieval studies. Unfortunately, modern historians have only had access to 18th century copies of his work, as the original manuscript is believed to be lost.

A descendant of Challine, seeking to make his *Research on Chartres* accessible to a wider audience of enthusiasts, prepared and annotated the texts for publication. This edition was first published in 1918 and reissued in 2006 [Roger Durand]. Upon carefully reading the 2006 edition, the authors of this article were struck by several passages, including a brief reference to the labyrinth. On page 141, the text notes that the centre features the theme of Theseus and the Minotaur. Naturally, one might expect the accompanying illustration to reflect this theme. However, although the paragraph is followed by a drawing of the labyrinth, there is no visual reference to the Greek Myth. Instead, the image depicts the words of the *Miserere* (Psalm 51), inscribed along the path from the entrance to the centre, where the text spirals inward.⁹

*Durand, 2006, 142. With Psalm 51 (Miserere)
written on the path and in the centre*



This inconsistency prompted us to consult the known copies of the Challine manuscripts directly. These investigations seemed significant, as several authors since the nineteenth century have relied – at least in part – on Challine’s 17th century work to support the hypothesis of a *minotaumachy* (a depiction of Theseus and the Minotaur) at the centre of the labyrinth – a centre that most likely featured a metal, perhaps copper, plaque removed during the French Revolution.¹⁰

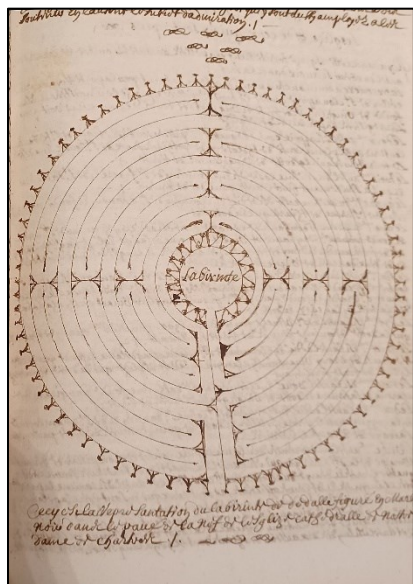
In what follows, we examine the extant manuscripts attributed to Challine to clarify the historical evidence. Five known copies of the manuscript survive. Four are housed in the municipal library of Chartres (Chartres BM 1076, an additional manuscript at Chartres, was destroyed during the bombing raid of 1944), while the fifth is preserved at the Bibliothèque Nationale de France in Paris.¹¹

The Challine manuscripts are as follows:

1. **Chartres BM Ms. 1074** – contains no image of the labyrinth.
2. **Chartres BM Ms. 1140** – contains no image of the labyrinth.¹³
3. **Chartres BM Ms. 1318** – is considered a reference copy, according to Roger Durand, who used it in preparing the 1918 edition. It contains an image of the labyrinth with only a compass point in the central flower. There is also a note on the top of the page saying “This drawing (*figure*) is not accurate (*correcte*).” Indeed, the shape of the flower in the centre and the number of extensions beyond are both suggestive, but not accurate.¹⁴
4. **Chartres BM Ms. 1518, fol. 186r.** contains a labyrinth with the words of Psalm 51 (the *Miserere*) on the pathway, but not in the centre.
5. **Paris BNF Ms. Français 14583, fol. 56r.**¹⁵ contains a labyrinth with a unique centre featuring a circular decoration around circular (not floral) centre. The word *Labyrinte* is written across the centre.

Our analysis will therefore focus primarily on the three final manuscripts, as they are the only ones that include representations of the labyrinth. A few preliminary remarks are in order. First, a fundamental issue must be addressed: the version of the labyrinth published in both the first printed edition (1918) and the second edition (2006) of Challine’s work depicts a design that we have been unable to identify in any extant manuscript. The numbering of the verses of Psalm 51 are not found elsewhere, and its central motif with the final words of the *Miserere* spiralling inward differs from the one older manuscript with the *Miserere* drawn only on the pathway.

A second, and significant, observation must also be made. None of the labyrinths currently known in the Challine manuscripts features the theme of Theseus and the Minotaur at its centre. The Challine manuscript that was destroyed in the fire, Chartres BM Ms. 1076, or another unknown manuscript may have shown a *minotaumachy* in the centre; unfortunately, if they did, they no longer exist. We were not able to examine the entire text of the Challine manuscripts, but we did not find any references to Theseus or the Minotaur in the passages on the pages closest to the labyrinths. To be sure, this is an avenue for future study.



Above left: Paris, BNF MS Français 14583, image provided by BNF¹²
 Above right: Challine, (1701-1800) Chartres BM 1518, fol. 185r.

Right: Chartres, BM 1518, fol. 186r., Challine
Labyrinthe ou dédale. The accompanying text
reads: The Miserere Psalm has been placed in
this labyrinth to guide the reader through it

The Challine manuscripts present a twofold challenge for scholars. First, they offer no evidence to support the presence of an image of Theseus and the Minotaur at the centre of the Chartres labyrinth. Second, they point instead to a connection between Psalm 51 – the *Miserere* – and the labyrinth’s pathway, a link that has yet to receive sustained historical and textual analysis. This connection is particularly intriguing given the final verses of the psalm, which explicitly reference Zion and Jerusalem, thereby opening the possibility of a symbolic alignment between the penitential journey of the psalm and the spiritual geography of the labyrinth.



Historically, the mystery of the illustration in the centre of the Chartres labyrinth has been taken up by scholars who suggested a link with Jerusalem. In 1824, A.P.M. Gilbert interpreted the Chartres labyrinth as a symbol of the Temple of Jerusalem [60-61]. The Jerusalem theme reappears in the 1847 work of Arcisse de Caumont [202-203]. In 1865, Raymond Bordeaux envisioned a knight entering a city – perhaps Jerusalem – on the central plaque at Chartres [159]. In 1866, Alexandre Assier viewed the labyrinth as a representation of pilgrimage toward Jerusalem [100]. The same interpretation is found in Abbé Auber's *Histoire et théorie du symbolisme religieux*, written in 1870 [156-157]. Between 1867 and 1881, Paul Durand adopted a comparable view [17-18], as did Jules Clerval in 1905 [109-110]. Both nationally and locally, historians of the 19th and early 20th centuries largely agreed on this interpretation. For the principal historians of the cathedral, then, the theme of Jerusalem at the centre of the labyrinth remained a dominant and enduring idea.

However, an alternative local interpretation, previously mentioned, also gained traction in Chartres during the 19th century. Drawing from an unidentified 18th century document attributed to Courtois and supported by the testimony of Janvier de Flainville in 1747 [Doublet de Boisthibault, 1852, 441], some have proposed that the figures of Theseus and the Minotaur appeared at the centre of the labyrinth.

Doublet de Boisthibault succinctly summarized the core issue by quoting Janvier de Flainville's uncertainty: "The figures in the middle are so worn that nothing can be identified" [141]. Roger Joly also suggested that Courtois relied heavily upon the earlier assertions of Challine [1999, 220]. If this is indeed the case, considerable caution must be exercised, particularly given the ambiguities encountered in the Challine manuscripts. Although the term "*dédale*" appears in the copies of the Challine manuscript, potentially evoking the Greek myth, this alone does not substantiate the depiction of a combat scene involving the Minotaur. Therefore, while Theseus might plausibly have been represented, any assertion of his definitive appearance at the labyrinth's centre remains problematic.

There is a deeper issue to consider: if the theme of Theseus and the Minotaur is assumed to have always been at the centre of the labyrinth, it becomes anachronistic when applied to the earliest era. Contemporary French scholars have emphasized that depicting Theseus and the Minotaur would render the Chartres labyrinth unique among medieval church labyrinths in France. André Peyronie [1997, 131], for example, described Bulteau's argument for a minotaumachy at the centre of the Chartres labyrinth as "not entirely convincing" (*pas complètement convaincante*), while Gratien Leblanc highlighted that there is "no definitive evidence" (*aucune preuve certaine*) supporting this theory [1971, 73].

A substantial body of literature has treated as fact what was, at most, a hypothesis – or perhaps a symbolic motif representing only one episode in the labyrinth's long and complex history. This leads to a rarely asked but critical question: If the central plaque did indeed depict Theseus and the Minotaur, to which century should such a representation be attributed?

Historians often begin with the year 1793 when the plaque was removed, as if the question of the plaque's origins were straightforward and self-evident. Many simply assume – without critical examination – that the plaque was present from the very inception of the labyrinth in the early 13th century. This represents a classic case of circular reasoning, and such a presumption warrants closer scrutiny.

The first and most tangible difficulty is this: a metal plaque placed in a high-traffic area such as the centre of the nave could not reasonably be expected to endure for centuries without significant wear. A copper¹⁶ plate subjected to constant foot traffic over the course of several centuries would inevitably deteriorate, particularly in terms of surface detail and legibility. This suggests a practical necessity for the cathedral's custodians to periodically replace the plaque. In doing so, they would have faced a choice: either reproduce the original image faithfully or take the opportunity to reinterpret or update the design. This possibility is reinforced by evidence from medieval manuscripts, where images of labyrinths often display erasures and modifications in the central area, indicating changes or reinterpretations over time.¹⁷

The placement of the plaque at the very centre of the cathedral nave—the area most frequented by the laity – also warrants consideration. Could a theme of obscure or ambiguous origin plausibly have been installed there in the 13th century? Would a medieval layperson have recognized or understood a scene depicting Theseus and the Minotaur? Both the context and the historical period appear ill-suited to a subject drawn from Greek mythology.

One might object that several manuscript labyrinths, dating from both earlier periods and the 13th century, feature central motifs related to Theseus and the Minotaur. These depictions, however, must be understood within the specific context of manuscript culture and its limited, educated audience. These manuscript labyrinths were designed and illustrated by monks and clerics and were intended for an elite ecclesiastical audience. By contrast, the central plaque of the Chartres labyrinth – though undoubtedly created under clerical supervision – was meant to be seen and most likely understood by all. The clerics of Chartres were educators who valued clarity and accessibility. Their authority and influence were rooted in their ability to communicate effectively to the laity.

Can we truly imagine a medieval farmer from the Beauce region possessing the cultural or mythological background necessary to interpret the story of Theseus and the Minotaur? It seems highly improbable. It is therefore unlikely that the original labyrinth featured a non-biblical theme that would have held little or no meaning for the faithful laypeople for whom this area of the church was designed. To underscore this point, we need to ask, what other examples of imagery taken from Greek mythology can found in the cathedral from the period of its construction?

Consider the medieval statuary of the cathedral: it is consistently legible and immediately recognizable, often employing well-established iconographic attributes. When ambiguity might arise, pedagogically minded clerics frequently added scrolls identifying the figures by name, ensuring clarity for all viewers. This supports the argument that if a central plaque once featured a scene from classical mythology, it was unlikely to have been part of the original design. It is far more plausible that the Theseus motif, if it ever existed, was introduced during the French Renaissance in the 16th century. In that case, it likely replaced an earlier plaque – or perhaps several over time – that conveyed themes more consistent with biblical or liturgical tradition.

It may not be necessary to choose definitively between the central themes of Jerusalem and the mythological image of Theseus and the Minotaur in the labyrinth at Chartres. We do not believe the hypothesis of a plaque depicting the Minotaur should be entirely dismissed. These two symbolic interpretations may represent overlapping popular traditions rooted in different historical periods.

Popular memory, which tends to preserve traditions long after their original context has faded, more often accumulates layers of meaning than it erases them. Philippe Ariès has noted similar developments in traditional practices, where ancient rituals or games were gradually transformed into folk or children's activities. Religious customs, too, evolve in comparable ways.¹⁸

Thus, rather than viewing these themes as mutually exclusive, it may be more accurate – and more historically responsible – to see them as part of a palimpsest of meanings layered across time. The Chartres labyrinth, like the cathedral itself, is best understood as a dynamic and evolving site of memory, where successive generations inscribe their own understandings onto a shared sacred space.

Conclusion and Suggestions for Future Study

The Chartres labyrinth resists simplification. Its specific location in the cathedral, construction, symbolic interpretations, and central imagery have all undergone significant transformation over the centuries. Rather than adhering to a single explanatory model, a more fruitful approach is to embrace the labyrinth's evolving identity – a convergence of architectural precision, theological meaning, devotional practice, and cultural imagination. Like the sacred space in which it is embedded, the Chartres labyrinth invites multiple readings.

Our research on the history of the Chartres labyrinth has led to explorations in many other areas, the fruit of which we hope to explore in future articles. Subject matter includes understanding the significance of the historical names used for the Chartres labyrinth, the changes in artistic depictions of the Chartres labyrinth over the centuries, the relationship of the Chartres labyrinth to the theological concepts of Jerusalem and the New Jerusalem, liturgical and pilgrimage practices in Chartres that may shed light on this contextual labyrinth, and how ideas of game and play (*jeu*) may enrich our understanding of this labyrinth. There is much more to study, including possible relationships between stained-glass imagery to the labyrinth and possible usages of the labyrinth by the renowned medieval School of Chartres. We implore scholars to continue to mine the known, and yet to be discovered, documents relating to this significant labyrinth and to share their learnings.

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Notes

1. The diameter of this labyrinth like the width of the nave was the largest in medieval France. Diameters for the largest decorative elements in the cathedral: Labyrinth: 43.32 feet or 12.9 meters; West rose 39.04 feet or 11.9 meters for the glazed area; North rose 34.4 feet or 10.5 meters; and South rose: 34.65 feet 10.56 meters.

2. The Chartres (1201-1220) and Reims (1290) labyrinths are found in the third and fourth bays of the nave. The labyrinth at Amiens (1288) was found in the fourth and fifth bay. At St. Quentin (1495) it is found in the first two bays. While numerological approaches (arithmology, sacred number theory, and mathematical symbolism) have indeed been central in past centuries, the topic remains open for further exploration.
3. We wish to extend our thanks to Irène Jourdeuil, the Heritage Curator at the Regional Directorate of Cultural Affairs (DRAC) for the Eure-et-Loir. Her confirmation of the dating about the cross and her reflections on its significance were very informative. Among other helpful comments, she explained, "The fact that it was repainted, perfectly superimposed, demonstrates its symbolic importance."
4. No such chamber (*cache*) was found.
5. While scaffolding to paint the cross would not have remained in 1260 when the cathedral dedication took place, the cross could have been painted in anticipation of the dedication. See also: Didier Méhu. 2014. "Les marques lapidaires peintes de la cathédrale de Chartres." In *Construire et restaurer la cathédrale Chartres XIe-XXIe S.*, édité by Arnaud Timbert. Lille: Presse: Universitaires du Septentrion, p.392.
6. For similar cases of such ground plans (*épure*) used in cathedral building, see Florence Claval. "Les épreuves de la cathédrale de Clermont-Ferrand." *Bulletin Archéologique du comité des travaux historiques et scientifiques* 1984-1985: 20-21, 185-224. Another related but later example is a floor plan originally designed to assist with ceiling decoration that was later repurposed for the decoration of the floor itself at the chapel of the Château d'Anet in Eure-et-Loir (near Chartres).
7. This idea is closely related to the medieval notion of the harmony of the spheres. See: Peter Connolly, *The Harmony of the Spheres: A Sourcebook of the Pythagorean Tradition in Music*, (Inner Traditions, 1998).
8. How could a historian like Souchet, or a scholar and poet like Boutrays, have described the Chartres labyrinth as futile [Boutrays, 41, 62] or as a frivolous amusement [Souchet, 220], if a visible, clearly identifiable plaque depicting the theme of Theseus and the Minotaur had stood before them? Both were well acquainted with this classical motif, which carried religious significance in their cultural and intellectual context. At most, they might have lamented a particular practice or a lack of understanding among their contemporaries. But that is not what they did. Instead, they deplored the presence of the labyrinth itself in a "sacred" space, insisting that it did not belong there.
9. One can scarcely imagine that the practice of inscribing a psalm was ever applied to the stone labyrinth of Chartres. As we have noted elsewhere, Souchet (ca. 1590–1634) regarded the labyrinth merely as a decorative element. Given his stature as a historian with a doctorate in theology, his roles as notary, secretary of the Chapter of Notre-Dame de Chartres, and later canon of the cathedral, the presence of a psalm inscribed on the labyrinth stones could hardly have escaped his attention or interest. By contrast, it seems unlikely that Challine's manuscript labyrinth accompanied by a psalm can be reduced to simple ornamentation or rhetorical flourish. The author clearly intended a practice and a theme that gave meaning to his graphic design. His aim is explicit: "*The psalm Miserere has been placed in this labyrinth in order to guide the reader.*" Challine (1596–1678) appears to reflect a contemporary devotional practice linking Psalm 51, the *Miserere*, to penitential exercises. To pursue this line of inquiry further, one might consider Nicolas Vignier of the Diocese of Chartres and his *Pratique de repentance ou Sermons sur le Pseaume 51* (Chartres: Gaucher Collas, 1631). Since Challine was not the only one to place a psalm within a labyrinth, future study of this subject might be

fruitful. The practice of linking psalms and labyrinths extends across several centuries and appears in remarkably diverse contexts and traditions – from Chartres to Russia, including Jewish communities and the Moravian Brethren.

10. There is an 1801 reference to the Revolutionary use of local copper, which might be related. It was written by Vincent Chevard, the Mayor of Chartres. He described a copper covering on the tomb of Henri de Grez, the bishop of Chartres who died in 1246 at the Jacobin Church in Chartres. He notes, “Their images (figures) were engraved on a large sheet of copper that was removed during the Revolution and, along with several others made of the same metal, was used for the casting of two cannons for the defence of the city.” Vincent Chevard. 1801. *Histoire de Chartres et de l’ancien pays chartrain avec une description statistique du Département d’Eure et Loir*. Vol. 2. Chartres: Durand-le-Tellier. 63. See also Villette, 23 and Joly, 213.
11. For details on the destruction of Chartres Library manuscripts during World War II, see: Jean-Pierre Babelon, *Chartres: Histoire et patrimoine* (Paris: CNRS Éditions, 1995), 214. See also: Georges Lelièvre, *Chroniques de la Bibliothèque de Chartres* (Chartres: Archives Municipales, 1947), p.58-59. See also the archival notice in: *Bulletin de la Société Archéologique d’Eure-et-Loir*, vol. 43 (1946), p.37-40. No visual record or description of MS 1076 survives.
12. With thanks to Mme. Maffre in the Département des Manuscrits who answered our questions and provided us with an image of the labyrinth from the Challine manuscript that has not yet been digitized.
13. Manuscript 1074 and 1140: Archives of the Bibliothèque municipale de Chartres. Catalog descriptions in: Henri Jadart, *Catalogue des manuscrits de la bibliothèque de Chartres*, 2 vols. (Chartres: Imprimerie Garnier, 1899), vol. 1, p.152-161.
14. Roger Durand, *Préface à l’édition des recherches de Charles Challine sur la cathédrale de Chartres* (Chartres: Imprimerie Garnier, 1918), v–vii. Durand explicitly refers to MS 1318 as the principal manuscript used in his editorial work.
15. See Paulin Paris, *Catalogue des manuscrits français de la Bibliothèque nationale*, vol. 5 (Paris: Imprimerie Nationale, 1866), 317-319. This manuscript has not been digitized.
16. Most authors speak of the plaque being copper. The history of this claim could be a fruitful avenue of future study.
17. See Geoffrion and Louët. 2020. “Medieval Marvels: Fifty-Three Eleven-Circuit Manuscript Labyrinths.” *Caerdroia* 49, p.8-27. See also: Louët and Geoffrion. 2015. “The Beast Within.” *Caerdroia* 44, p.10-23.
18. See Phillipe Ariès. 2014. *L’enfant et la vie familiale sous l’Ancien régime*. [Nouvelle éd.], *Points Histoire*. Paris: Éd. du Seuil. See especially 121 where he cites Jusserand. See also: Jusserand, Jean-Jules. 1901. *Les Sports et jeux d’exercices dans l’ancienne France*. Paris: Plon-Nourrit et Cie. See especially chapter 4: A Small Contribution to the History of Games.

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Page Numbers for passages related the Chartres labyrinth are included.

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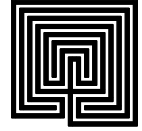
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The 19th Century Maze in Piazza's Garden in Padua



Roberto Milazzi

Many Italian labyrinth enthusiasts owe their first source of information to Paolo Santarcangeli's book *Il libro dei labirinti - Storia di un mito e di un simbolo*.¹ As the author himself recognizes, this study "born almost for fun" is strongly indebted to the work of W.H. Matthews' *Mazes and Labyrinths*,² to which he owes a conspicuous part of his iconographic apparatus. In an opening note, Santarcangeli thanks Matthews' widow and daughter for having made the original photographic plates and preparatory notes available to him, thus saving him "a good part of the tiring research work."

In his foreword to Santarcangeli's book Umberto Eco nods to the playful nature of this erudite research, not free here and there from some oversights evident to the most avid researchers. Among these we can certainly include Ettore Selli, who in fact in his book *Labirinti italiani*³ notes that:

Despite Paolo Santarcangeli [...] stating that "Due to laziness or disinterest, between the nineteenth and twentieth centuries there was no news of a labyrinth built in this era along the Peninsula" it appears that the great autumn of the labyrinths was instead interspersed with constructive flashes.

Selli gives substance to this objection by listing a dozen notable examples – from southern to northern Italy – that refute Santarcangeli's assertion and give us the portrait of a century in tension between nostalgia for the past and the adoption of new solutions characteristic of the so-called English or Romantic garden.

To be fair, Matthews had not been as categorical in describing the state of affairs regarding mazes in the 19th century, in fact he writes (p.137):

Towards the end of the eighteenth century the taste for mazes in private gardens had to some extent declined, but as an adjunct to places of public amusement the topiary labyrinth was still in great demand. "Pleasure gardens" of the Ranelagh and Vauxhall type were then greatly in vogue, not only in the metropolis but in most of the fashionable health resorts, and, although it is only in comparatively few cases that we have definite records of their having possessed a maze, there is no doubt that very many were in existence, though probably most have since disappeared.

The lost garden that is the subject of this article was not born as a public park, but the mere fact the owner was preparing an illustrated guide to it hints at his desired intention. It was located in the same neighbourhood where we have already seen the maze of the "very noble Papafava lords,"⁴ the so-called *Vanzo*. The land purchased by Antonio Piazza and transformed into a garden had largely belonged to the nuns of the convent of Santa Agata and Santa Cecilia, confiscated from them during the French occupation following the Napoleonic edicts and put up for sale in 1797. Before the Concordat of 1801

excommunication was a deterrent to the purchase of property confiscated from the Church, but this was ineffective against non-Catholics, for example Jews, liberals and freemasons. Several symbolic or philosophical gardens were created on these kind of properties (and for this kind of client) by the architect Giuseppe Jappelli, member of the local Napoleonic masonic lodge “La Pace” since 1806. Jappelli, under the direction of the cartographer Giovanni Valle, had been among those taking part – between 1779 and 1781 – in the drafting of the renowned map of Padua where the Papafava maze is visible. Another prominent personality that we find in those years and in that same lodge – as Orator, in 1808⁵ – is the Latinist of French origins, Luigi Mabil, who had participated in the debate on “the English garden”⁶ initiated by Ippolito Pindemonte since 1792 at the “Accademia di Scienze, Lettere e Arti” of Padua with his “*Dissertazione su i giardini inglesi e sul merito in ciò dell’Italia*” (Dissertation on English gardens and the merit of Italy into this matter) and closed six years later, in the aftermath of the fall of the Serenissima Republic.

I don’t think it’s too risky to ascribe this debate to the same tradition that saw the Papafava garden as a notable example of “Epicurus’ garden,” as outlined by Johann Christoph Volkamer in his 1714 *Continuation der Nürnbergischen Hesperidum*.⁷ However, at the end of this debate, in the creations of the architect Jappelli, as well as in the words of the elder Melchiorre Cesarotti, who as secretary of the belles-lettres class of the Academy drew the conclusions of the speeches of those whom had intervened up to that moment (Ippolito Pindemonte, Luigi Mabil, Benedetto Del Bene and Vincenzo Malacarne), the maze had ceased to exercise the function and role for which Volkamer had given us such a lively and passionate testimony:

[...] what can more vividly and authentically represent the confused dealings and performances of the world, together with the manifold deceptions and cunning seductions that go with them, than a labyrinth or maze? in which the intertwined passages can mislead the most cautious person and lead him astray to such an extent that he cannot find his way except after a long detour or with the guidance of an experienced guide?

As stated by Margherita Azzi Visentini in her 1988 book *Il giardino veneto tra Sette e Ottocento e le sue fonti*:⁸

The garden created at the beginning of the nineteenth century by the lawyer Antonio Piazza in the Vanzo area of Padua, despite being chronologically later than the examples considered above, has similar characteristics to them.

All “the examples considered above” were 18th century Venetian gardens and the main source available to us describing Piazza’s lost garden is the manuscript guide written by Piazza himself around 1842, of which three copies with slight variations have reached us. The main landmark within the western border of the garden is a medieval tower from which:

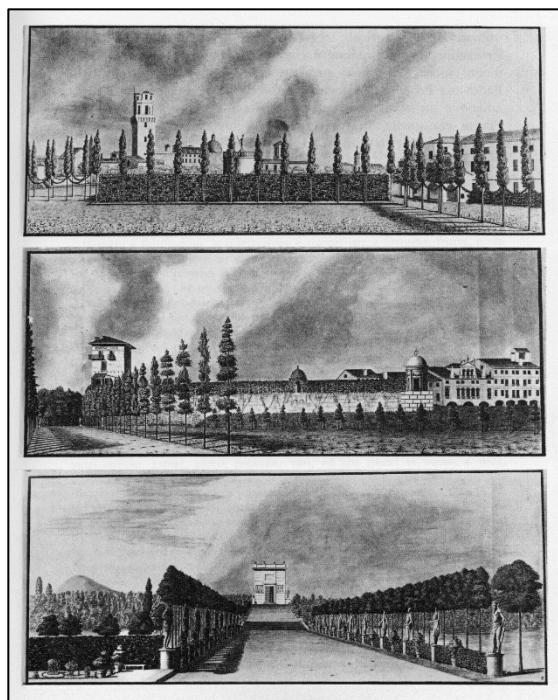
...an avenue lined with black poplars and vines brings to the hedge maze which is accessed via a stone bridge by an iron gate supported by two pillars that support two statues. In the middle of the maze stands a small tower surrounded by a spiral staircase protected by a railing. The tower is decorated with comfortable seats for those who reach the destination. On the front of the said small tower you can read the following inscription:

Entra né tremi il piè, qui non smarrito / Andrai del Minotauro orrendo pasto / Và, e le torte vie supera ardito / Nell'ambiguo difficile contrasto.

(Come in, don't let your foot tremble, here you won't be lost / Nor You will become the Minotaur's horrible meal / Go, and boldly overcome the twisted paths / In the ambiguous and difficult contrast.)

However, the guide remained only in draft form, due to Piazza's death in 1844.

The only images from the period testifying the existence of the hedge maze are engravings by the draughtsman Domenico Baroni (commissioned by Piazza to illustrate his guide) and a plan of the area drawn up by the engineer Giuseppe Sacchetto in 1872 (that's almost thirty years after the drafting of the guide and well after the death of its author).



The engravings by Domenico Baroni

View of the labyrinth and rustic house located in the place called Vanzo owned by the lawyer Antonio Piazza including the building of the Dimesse ladies, public observatory and city buildings; this prospect was taken from the column located in the middle of the alley of the hornbeams.

View of the tower, hanging vines and wood located in the place known as Vanzo owned by the lawyer Antonio Piazza, including a part of the buildings by the other side of the river on the Saracinesca road: this elevation was taken at the entrance to the maze.

(Caption translations by the author)

The third, lower engraving displaying another part of the garden has no caption.

In the neoclassical temple visible on the right side of the middle engraving, visually connected to the medieval tower by the hanging vines, there was a statue of Apollo coming from another lost garden where there was a hedge maze, that built by Angelo Querini in Altichiero, north of Padua and along the Brenta river.

I wasn't able to find much information about the lawyer Piazza until I could read Fabrizio Turetta's degree thesis on the subject.⁹ The fruit of two years of painstaking and passionate research, Turetta's work sheds light on a character who is almost unknown today and who played a pivotal role in the preservation and transmission of the literary, historical and artistic heritage of his hometown.

Antonio Piazza was born in Padua on 8th January 1772, son of one of the best lawyers of the town, Giovanni Maria. Giovanni Maria was an expert in ecclesiastical law and a scholar of Paduan history who wrote a text on the history of the monastery of Sant'Antonio, for which he also acted as defence lawyer. Since the late 18th century Antonio began to carry out his profession in defence of some important religious institutes in the city, and like his father, he was learned about the history of his city and an antiquarian.



A plan of the area including Piazza's Garden drawn by the engineer Giuseppe Sacchetto in 1872

The entire estate extended over twenty-nine “campi Padovani,” that is, more than eleven hectares (about twenty-eight acres). Its formation began with an act dated 6th July 1807 with which Antonio Piazza purchased from the State a plot of land comprising twenty-six “campi Padovani” with some buildings, coming from the suppressed monastery of Santa Agata and Santa Cecilia. The perimeter of the property then included a stretch of medieval walls and a tower to the north-west thanks to the purchase from the aristocrat Pietro Canal between 1813 and 1814. This last acquisitions set the conditions to follow Mabil's recommendations (expressed at first in 1796 and later re-published in Verona in 1817) about giving shape to a modern garden: that is as a synthesis between formal and informal garden, in accordance to the conditions on the ground: the flat part of the estate was organized by rectilinear avenues sided by trees, seats, statues, antiquarian fragments, while the most elevated part, where the medieval ruins were located, was enriched by a grove of tall trees and sinuous and irregular paths. Documents relating to works carried out on the property by various workers refer to the years between 1814 and 1841. The first autograph description of the garden dates back to 1817.

Antonio Piazza died unmarried and with no children: the estate was inherited by the son of his brother, who unfortunately – submerged in debt – found himself selling off the monumental collection inherited from his uncle and the garden. His antiquarian and librarian collections went mostly to the Civic Library and Civic Museum of the town, while the whole area – acquired by the municipality – was subject to subdivision in the years between the two world wars. Curiously, the lot corresponding to the labyrinth, recognizable on the cadastral maps by the central cylindrical tower, remained unbuilt until the end of the 20th century: I still remember when there was a garden centre there.

Roberto Milazzi, Padua, Italy; December 2024.

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*Detail of the maze in Piazza's Garden
from Giuseppe Sacchetto 1872 plan*



Acknowledgement

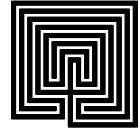
The author would like to thank Adriano Verdi for his research assistance and providing the map displaying the plan of the maze.

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Two Labyrinths Rediscovered in Salem, India

Libish Murugesan



The Ezhu Suthu Kottai stone labyrinths at Vembadithalam, Tamil Nadu, India

Two labyrinths, 17.5 metres apart, are located near the town of Vembadithalam, close to the tier-two city of Salem in Tamil Nadu, India. Locally known as *Ezhu Suthu Kottai* (Seven-Turn Fort or Seven-Turn Labyrinth), they are said to have existed for as long as living memory can recall. Village elders affirm that they were already ancient when their grandparents were children. News reports and oral accounts suggest that the formations may be more than a thousand years old “since Pandya times.”

The labyrinths consist of spiralling, circular stone patterns set on a low mound beside a lakebed. With striking resemblance to the circular labyrinths of the Greek coins from Knossos, they are both of standard ‘classical’ form. The stones neither erode nor shift, according to elders, and they have always been found intact in the same location. Unlike other ritual structures in the region, the labyrinths are not tied to an established temple tradition, though they are regarded with quiet reverence. Local belief holds that they are inhabited by spirits, and that disturbing them can bring misfortune.

*The larger of the two
labyrinths*

Photos by the author



Until recent decades, the area surrounding the labyrinths was wasteland (*porambokku* land owned by the government). The settlement now known as Kottaipudur, with around 50 houses, only formed in the past thirty years. Villagers recall that in earlier days, children would graze cattle nearby and play inside the labyrinths, sometimes tracing the full path, sometimes turning back halfway, treating it as a game.

While the labyrinths themselves do not have a formal religious role, they gained indirect significance with the construction of a Mariamman shrine about 23 years ago. The shrine's origin is tied to a series of dreams experienced by a local devotee (Aya) and other villagers, in which Mariamman and seven goddesses commanded the building of a temple. Guided by the village *Pandaram* (custodian priest), the shrine was established near the labyrinths on a small rise/mound. Since then, regular pujas have been conducted there, with the goddess believed to protect sincere devotees and punish those who act with false intent.

Folklore also associates the labyrinths with hidden treasure markers, though these claims remain unproven. What endures is the respect with which the local community continues to treat them. Even as surrounding villages and shrines have grown, the labyrinths remain undisturbed, preserved both by tradition and by the belief that the ancient is best left intact.

Libish Murugesan, Erode, Tamil Nadu, India; August 2025
Email: libish.1234@gmail.com



Vembadithalam labyrinth 1
GPS location: Lat: -11.5642° Long: 78.0034°
Diameter 10.34 metres, average stone size
15-20 cm., feldspar and calcite rocks

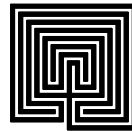


Vembadithalam labyrinth 2
GPS location: Lat: -11.5645° Long: 78.0033°
Diameter 11.80 metres, average stone size
15-20 cm., feldspar and calcite rocks

Acknowledgments

The author would like to thank Sachin Patil for his valuable assistance and Prof. Dr Pandurang for guidance on how to survey the site.

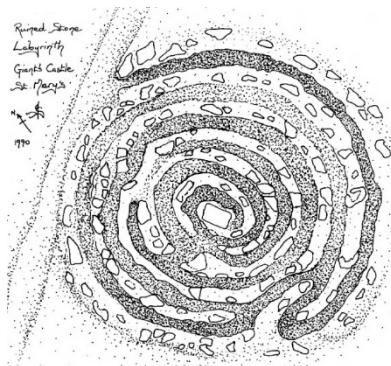
The Giant's Castle Stone Maze Restored



Teān Roberts

The Giant's Castle Maze is a small turf and stone maze¹ on the island of St. Mary's. It forms part of the long and winding tradition of labyrinth making in the Isles of Scilly. These islands, situated 28 miles from the Southwest tip of Cornwall, are home to the largest collection of pebble mazes in the country. Giant's Castle Maze, so named for its proximity to an Iron Age cliff fort of the same name, was a prominent part of my childhood growing up on Scilly. My family told me that it was built by the fairies and that when you reached the large white stone at the maze's centre, they would grant you a wish. Other than this fairy provenance the origin of this maze was uncertain. Elder locals could remember it appearing around the end of the Second World War and the general consensus was that it was likely built by bored servicemen stationed nearby.

When I moved back to the islands a few years ago, the maze had become very confused. The paths, which I guessed had once formed a unicursal labyrinth pattern, were now "proper mazed" and you could walk right to the centre stone. I could only imagine what the fairies of my childhood would make of the deterioration of their enchanted ring!



*The Giant's Castle Maze – a plan by Jeff Saward drawn in 1990 and its condition in early 2025
The white quartzite boulder at the centre has always been a prominent feature*

My partner Layan and I, both artists with an interest in archaeology, thought it would be brilliant to restore this maze. But we were cautioned by the controversy that accompanied the 1989 reconstruction of nearby Troy Town Maze on the island of St Agnes, when it was rebuilt by a team of dowsers. We did not want to run into the same accusations that they did: failure to properly survey the site and destruction of the islands' precious heritage – see *Caerdroia* 22 (1989) p.6-11 for more on this story, and *Caerdroia* 47 (2018), p.38-53 for more on the labyrinths on the Isles of Scilly in general.

We set about restoring the maze as a public arts project – generously supported by Arts Council England – and as part of this we undertook as many different survey types as we could think of: a traditional archaeological table top survey, a technologically sophisticated LiDAR and photogrammetry scan, an ecological survey by the head of the local Wildlife Trust and a dowsing survey of the energy lines at the site to honour the tradition of dowsing in Scilly’s mazy history. While we were learning about the maze’s makeup via these surveys, we sought for any evidence of who could have created the maze. Other than the vague suggestions – WW2 servicemen, kids on holiday, fairies – nobody seemed to know anything at all about it.

That was until one day in the pub I was approached by a local man who said that about ten years ago he had seen an elderly man having his photograph taken beside the maze. When asked why, the old man had replied that he and his sister had built the maze in the 1950s, when their father had been the tenant at a nearby farm.

I asked my grandad, now 91 and a font of all knowledge about the islanders of the past, who this tenant farmer would have been. He replied that it was an old army captain. I asked whether he had had any children, and he said yes, a son and a daughter, named David and Helen who had moved to the West Coast of Scotland when their father passed away. We eventually managed to track down David and Helen, who were both still alive and they confirmed they did indeed build the maze in the 1950s:

My sister Helen and I, ages ca. 11 and 13, made it one summer’s afternoon in around 1952. We would both have been familiar with the Troy Town maze. All the stones came from a large, excavated pile of ram² just up the Giant’s Castle slope. At that time the ram was free of vegetation. The stones were visible and could be easily rolled or carried down the slope to the edge of the path. After we had finished our work, we sat further down the slope to admire our creation. Much to our delight the first person to come along the path stopped and completed the maze!

They were pleased to hear we wanted to restore their maze and even encouraged us to get more “creative” with our plans and incorporate sea-worn pebbles to reshape the paths and to seem more “welcoming” for walkers. After presenting all our research to the island community for consultation, the overwhelming consensus was that they too thought it should be restored to a usable labyrinth once more.

After some test excavations we realised that the turf-and-peat banks of the maze were not hiding neat lines of stones, like Scilly’s other mazes. The peat banks that had built up over the years had been largely shaped by the passage of people’s feet, while the stones inside had been kicked about and were now placed quite randomly. This presented us with a conundrum – which maze to restore? David and Helen’s original design from 1952 or the “desire line” maze created by people’s feet in the years since then?

We decided that the collaborative aspect of Scilly’s mazes, which must constantly be walked and maintained if they are to survive, meant it was important to preserve as many of the existing foot-made banks as we could. We also felt that it was important to return this to a unicursal labyrinth again, so that all paths would erode at the same rate and give it a better chance of keeping its shape. And we felt that we should also try to make it into an interesting maze to walk, with paths that took the walker in and out again, rather than just spiralling straight to the middle.



*Layan Harman and volunteer Kate Hale restoring the Giant's Castle Maze, June 2025
and the completed design*

Eventually, after much laying of ropes and head-scratching, we came up with a redesign that achieved all these things, with any major alterations to the layout occurring in the areas which had suffered the worst erosion, minimised the impact of our changes, while making the labyrinth into an interesting unicursal shape. Where banks needed to be redefined, we decided to use sea-worn pebbles, as suggested by David and Helen, the original maze-makers. Then, together with a team of volunteers, we restored the maze over three days. When it was complete, we “reopened” the site with a labyrinthine pageant of music and dancing, reenchanting the site and bringing some of Scilly’s lost mazy folklore to life once more. If you’re interested in learning more about our Scilly Labyrinths Project and the restoration of Giant’s Castle Maze, please visit our website: www.scillylabyrinths.com

Teān Roberts, St. Marys, Isles of Scilly; September 2025

Email: scillylabyrinth.project@gmail.com

Notes

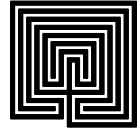
1. In the Isles of Scilly, the local word for the pebble labyrinths that litter the islands is “mazes,” so I use the words interchangeably. While most of these configurations usually begin as unicursal “labyrinths” they often become “mazed” very quickly, with a stone rolling aside, blocking a path or opening up a choice, therefore I think the use of these terms analogously is appropriate.
2. *Ram* is a local dialect term for the clay soil formed of decomposed granite found at the site.



*The restored stone
maze and Giant's
Castle, St. Marys,
Isles of Scilly*

The Labyrinth of Signs

Rolf Johansson



Charles Sanders Peirce (1839 – 1914) left behind many thousands of handwritten pages and drawings. He stated himself that he was thinking in diagrams and not in words. One of his drawings, now in the Harvard University Library, imagines a labyrinth.¹ It is not known when Peirce made this drawing called “the Labyrinth of Signs.”



Charles Sanders Peirce's representation of his notion of a Labyrinth of Signs. Photograph courtesy of the Harvard University Archives. MS Am 1632 (1537). Houghton Library, Harvard University

Peirce was very well read in ancient literature and mastered both Greek and Latin languages and it is obvious that his drawing refers to the Minotaur myth, even if the monster in the middle seems remarkably modest. The winding paths are complicated to the extreme; if the mythical labyrinth had this layout, for sure it would have been impossible to find a way out without guidance. Fortunately for us, Peirce has given direction. His Ariadne's thread is drawn on the back of the paper. It is mirrored; Peirce must have drawn it by holding his labyrinth drawing against a window.

The back of Peirce's drawing. Photograph courtesy of the Harvard University Archives. MS Am 1632 (1537). Houghton Library, Harvard University

The idea of a slow and winding hike to reach something desirable appears many times in Peirce's thinking. Already as a young boy he wrote a fairy tale where he "try to climb the hill of knowledge ... he goes on so slow & sure that there can be no doubt of succeeding ...". He later called this "step-by-small-step progress" to gain knowledge for "pedestrianism." [Brent 1998:42-43]. In 1908, six years before he died, Peirce wrote three essays for the journal *The Monist* called "Some Amazing Mazes" aiming to present his system of logics and metaphysics to the public.



In his metaphysics Peirce reduced and revised Kant's categories into three, and "Sign" is one of them. In his notion we live in a universe of signs. Signs can be anything that represent something. They "include pictures, symptoms, words, sentences, books, libraries, signals, orders of command, microscopes, legislative representations, musical concertos, performances of these" [MS 634:18]². Our thoughts develop by our interpretations of signs together with the objects they represent, and those interpretations constitute new signs, which are more fully developed. In my understanding, signs can be regarded as clues, which all together leads us to guessing – forming a hypothesis – of the full picture of what may be the case. This principle of logic which direct us to something of a new quality, is what Peirce calls "abduction." It is an act of informed guessing based on experience and sagacity. Sherlock Holmes, Dupin and Zadig are literary characters that show excellence in this practice.³



Peirce's labyrinth is understood as "a Labyrinth of Signs" referring to his complex theory of signs, his semiotics. This is itself an interpretation – the "interpretant" in Peirce's vocabulary – of the drawing as a sign, which is a new sign. References by Peirce to an understanding of the world we live in as navigating through a labyrinth are many. "We find ourselves in the vestibule of the labyrinth. Yes, The Labyrinth – in the vestibule only, but yet in that tremendous, only Labyrinth" [CP 2.79]⁴. We experience the world through interpretations of signs which together form a complex web of chains of signs, which are constantly reinterpreted and developed into new signs, in Peirce's worldview.

*The solution to the Labyrinth of Signs,
copied and mirrored by the author*

I have spent hours trying to figure out what the different places called A, B, C, and so on, in his drawing can tell me, but my attempts so far came to nothing; I get lost. In the long run I hope for a step-by-small-step progress in my mission. It is a comfort that Peirce claims that humans have a predisposition to guess right rather than wrong. This implies that there is a constant development towards more enlightened thinking when we guess at the riddle, time and again.

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Uppsala, Sweden; September 2025
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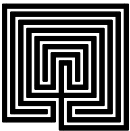
1. Harvard University Library has more than 100,000 of Peirce's working papers, lectures, drawings, essays and articles in their collection. They are publicly accessible.
2. MS refers to a manuscript in Houghton Library, Harvard University.
3. Authors Arthur Conan Doyle, Edgar Allan Poe, François Voltaire.
4. CP refers to Peirce (1931-35, 1958) and numbers to volume and paragraph.

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Labyrinth Typology: A Century of Fascination

Yadina Clark & Jeff Saward



Introduction

Although the words maze and labyrinth are often used interchangeably, a critical distinction can be made between them: unlike a puzzling, branching maze, a labyrinth typically has a single, continuous path that reliably leads to the centre, or in some cases through or past the centre. This fundamental multicursal/unicursal difference, first formally articulated about a century ago, has served as the starting point for a small but dedicated, international group of researchers and enthusiasts, leading to various attempts to develop a typology of non-maze labyrinths.

While labyrinths serve many purposes – from personal wellness and spiritual exploration to community building and celebration – their underlying structures also provide a fascinating field of study. This paper traces the development of labyrinth typology over the past hundred years, highlighting the key figures and concepts that have shaped our understanding of this domain of spatial figures.

Even as this field of study has progressed, the labyrinth community has experienced some confusion due to stylistic similarities and name issues, such as multiple names for a single labyrinth or the same name being used for different labyrinths. This problem has reinforced the need for a more systematic approach that separates a labyrinth's type from its style. A type is a specific pattern of movement – a mathematical topology that remains constant regardless of how it is expressed through different shapes, sizes, materials, orientations, artistic designs, decorative or symbolic embellishments, or general styles (Figure 1). According to **Phillips** (1992), two labyrinths are considered to be topologically equivalent if one can be changed into the other by a “*level-preserving deformation*,” which maintains the fundamental path while allowing the visual style to be altered.

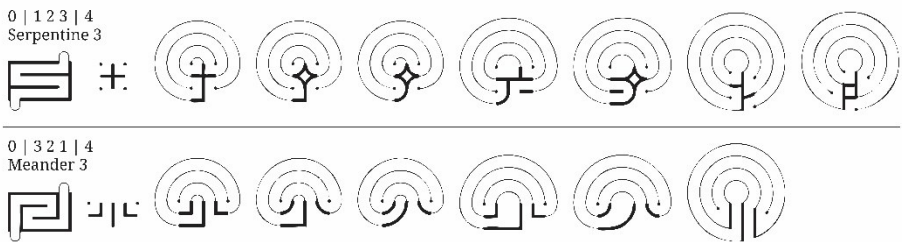


Fig. 1: 3-circuit Serpentine type and 3-circuit Meander type in a selection of general styles

Just as scientific plant names help clear up confusion from common names, a system for classifying labyrinth patterns based on their path topology can resolve the ambiguities created by common names and stylistic variations. This article will show how the focus of research has shifted over time, moving from historical cataloguing to a mathematical approach that clarifies the crucial distinction between type and style, and finally, toward developing a comprehensive system based on typological attributes.

Laying the Groundwork

The scholarly foundation for labyrinth typology was laid in the early 20th century, moving beyond mere description, and the misleading conflation of labyrinth images with maze-related mythology, to a more formal analysis.

While people had been writing about labyrinths since the mid-1800s, the first person to truly categorize them was **W.H. Matthews** in his 1922 book, *Mazes and Labyrinths*. This work established a crucial starting point by providing a set of definitions and limitations for the words “labyrinth” and “maze” including the distinction between unicursal and multicursal designs.

Early attempts at building typologies were made by **L. Monteagudo** (1952), **John Heller** and **Stewart Cairns** (1969), and **Paul de Saint-Hilaire** (1977, 1992). However, most of these studies were restricted to specific types of labyrinths, or were very generalized, and have since become mostly outdated due to later research and developments.

In the 1970s and 1980s, Scandinavian researchers **John Kraft** and **Bo Stjernström** and Russian researcher **A.A. Kuratov** focused on classifying labyrinth types in Northern Europe, with a particular emphasis on variations found in stone labyrinth designs.

Other researchers were turning their attention to the classification of Roman mosaic labyrinths. **Wiktor Daszewski** (1977) proposed three general Roman types – meander, serpentine, and spiral – based on 54 examples, while **John Kraft** (1985) broke them down further into four distinct types, splitting meander types into simple and complex.

During this period, **Hermann Kern’s** 1982 book *Labyrinthe: Erscheinungsformen und Deutungen* debuted as a significant resource for the labyrinth community, providing a substantial catalogue of designs from antiquity and the medieval period. Although **Kern** focused on the historical development of labyrinths rather than a precise typology, his broad collection of examples provided the raw data that subsequent researchers would use to develop more rigorous classification systems.

Shifting to a Topological and Algorithmic Approach

In the 1980s, the study of labyrinth typology began to move from descriptive cataloguing to a more mathematical approach. In his 1983 essay (first published in French in 1982), **Pierre Rosenstiehl** asks the reader to “Suppose for a moment that we are geometricians only.” He proceeds to analyse the Saint Quentin pavement labyrinth and – emphasizing two topological rules: the “law of alternation” (systematic alternation of “turnabouts” and “straight runs” on the side axes) and the “law of doubling of the throat”¹ (a constant two-unit measure for turnabouts in the main axis, the “labyrinth’s operational center”) – he defines the “Dodécadédale,” a “universal single-line labyrinth type,” now most commonly

known as the “Chartres” type. By applying combinatory analysis and using parenthetical notation, Rosenstiehl demonstrates that this specific configuration is the unique solution that satisfied both laws, effectively establishing a formal, mathematical basis for classifying and understanding the stability of this ancient form.

Citing the numerous locations and stylistic variations of this type – such as Amiens, Poitiers, and Chartres – **Rosenstiehl** states that he used the Saint Quentin labyrinth as his example precisely because its style best illustrated the underlying laws, thereby contributing explicitly to the distinction between a labyrinth’s consistent type and its variable style. In 1985, **Rosenstiehl** highlighted the similarity between the “regular array” of the Chartres labyrinth’s thread diagram and the algorithmic patterns in the work of M. C. Escher, further marking the shift toward abstract, topological analysis.

As Rosenstiehl was illuminating the “stable form” of the “perfect” medieval labyrinth, **Anthony Phillips** was defining Simple Alternating Transit (SAT) labyrinths (2020), a subset of labyrinth types including the earliest known Classical labyrinths. Similar to Rosenstiehl’s topological laws, Phillips established three specific conditions that the path must satisfy to qualify as SAT. Building on the work of Daszewski and Kraft, **Phillips** (1992) also completed a study of 46 Roman mosaic labyrinths, detailing layout schemes, thread diagrams, level numbering, component stacking, and decomposition. He identified 25 distinct topological types and seven “elementary submazes.”

Richard Myers Shelton further explores this approach in regular *Caerdroia* articles, examining series of expandable patterns, base-dual-transpose-complement (BDTC) relationships, various aspects of symmetry, and the overall algebraic system of SAT labyrinths. **Erwin Reißmann** and **Andreas Frei** have also written extensively about various labyrinths, series, BDTC relationships, and other analysis details on their blog.

While some researchers were focused on algebraic systems and thread diagrams, others were experimenting with textual and graphical abstractions to represent labyrinth types. **Jacques Hébert** (2003; 2004) developed a “rhythmical notation method” and rules for “canonical” medieval labyrinths. In his work, Hébert mentioned both **Craig Wright**’s notation method and **Willem Kuipers**’ “cadence” graphs. **Herman Wind** (2017) later expanded on the cadence approach in his book. Additionally, **Niels Jensen**’s analysis incorporated “wave symbols.”

The development of computer programs further validated an algorithmic approach. **Walter Pullen**’s Daedalus maze and labyrinth generator, first released in 2001, and **Tristan Smith**’s (2005) program of the same name, allowed researchers and enthusiasts to explore and create new patterns based on established mathematical rules. This showed that the theoretical and algorithmic work of the previous decades had practical applications for analysis, discovery, and design.

Synthesizing the work of Rosenstiehl, Frei, Hébert, and Smith, **Ellen Galo** (2008) outlined a procedure for creating new labyrinths from medieval motifs and proposed a ranking system based on degrees of symmetry. This idea of quantifying symmetry is part of ongoing research efforts to develop an overall aesthetic measure² for labyrinth types.

Discussing Terminology amidst a Growing Community

While this mathematical and algorithmic work was progressing, a parallel effort was underway to address the ongoing challenges of inconsistent terminology and the growing international community. A collaborative effort to standardize terminology occurred in 1991, during a meeting following the Labyrinth '91 conference in Saffron Walden, England. **Jeff Saward, Sig Lonegren (1991), Alex Champion, Adrian Fisher, Lindsay Heyes, and Bo Stjernström** met to discuss naming and terminology issues, including “Cretan” vs. “Classical” (choosing Classical since the type predates Cretan associations) and the appropriateness of using “Chartres” as a type name. The term “seed pattern” was agreed on, and further work, particularly by Lonegren and Saward, led to the development of categories – Classical, Roman, Medieval, and Contemporary – based on historical and geographic occurrence for the early Labyrinth Society website (1999) and the Labyrinth Locator website (2004). While the typology information on these websites has occasionally been edited and updated, it does not yet reflect all the scholarship from the last 25 years.

The typology of labyrinths has evolved over the past several decades due in no small part to increased worldwide awareness and use of labyrinths in general, as well as international communication via newsletters, online discussion forums, social media, and teleconferencing. A pivotal moment in this evolution occurred in 2000, with the publication of the English edition of **Kern's** book, *Through the Labyrinth*, edited by **Jeff Saward** and **Robert Ferré**, which expanded the accessibility of Kern's resource to a global audience.

In the last two decades, the modern labyrinth revival and digital communication have facilitated the emergence of a wave of new labyrinth types. This is especially true of medieval variants, figurative types, and other designs that push the boundaries of what might be considered a labyrinth. This proliferation has highlighted the limitations of previous classification systems. As we outlined in our 2021 Labyrinth Society Gathering presentation, “Labyrinth Typology: Overview of Past and Current Research” (**Saward and Clark, 2021**), several challenges remain, including multiple existing classification schemes, inconsistencies within and among these systems, an overaccumulation of “other” or miscellaneous types, and differences in terminology that stem from independent development, personal preferences, and translation among different languages.

As **Frei** discussed in his 2015 “Type and Style” series, a need remains to address these inconsistencies in classification and terminology, and the lack of transparency in how types are classified in existing systems. There is a growing consensus among researchers that the distinction between a labyrinth's type (its underlying topology) and its style (its visual form) must be central to any new system, which must also effectively accommodate new variations and innovations as well as established historical types.

Ongoing Research for an Improved System

Over the past century, labyrinth typology has evolved from a descriptive, cataloguing-based approach to a rigorous, analytical one. The foundational work of a few key individuals including Matthews and Kern provided necessary distinctions and historical examples, while the mathematical turn led by Rosenstiehl, Phillips, and others initiated a more formal language for understanding the topological properties of labyrinths.

Building upon this foundational work, current research³ aims to establish a more robust, scientifically grounded framework for labyrinth identification. A comprehensive classification tree and conceptual model are being developed to offer a precise language for understanding labyrinth patterns beyond superficial appearances, addressing the limitations of previous approaches. By applying mathematical concepts such as permutations, open meanders, symmetry groups, and recursive algorithms, this research seeks to illuminate the pancultural topological features and algorithmic rules that govern these spatial figures. The aim is to create a cohesive system that is both consistent and comprehensible to the general public as well as to scholars.

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September 2025

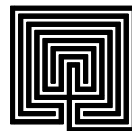
Notes

1. In Rosenstiehl's 1985 paper, he calls this the "law of height regularity."
2. The concept of aesthetic measure as a ratio of order to complexity ($M=O/C$) was formally introduced by mathematician George D. Birkhoff. He suggested that "the aesthetic measure is determined by the density of order relations in the aesthetic object." George D. Birkhoff, *Aesthetic Measure* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1933), 4.
3. This classification tree and conceptual model, as well as a labyrinth-specific aesthetic measure, are the focus of Yadina Clark's doctoral research.

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Our regular round up of matters labyrinthine brings together short contributions and notes from Caerdroia readers worldwide, also items from the Labyrinthos Archives that require further research, or simply deserve recording. Similar notes and queries are welcomed for future editions.

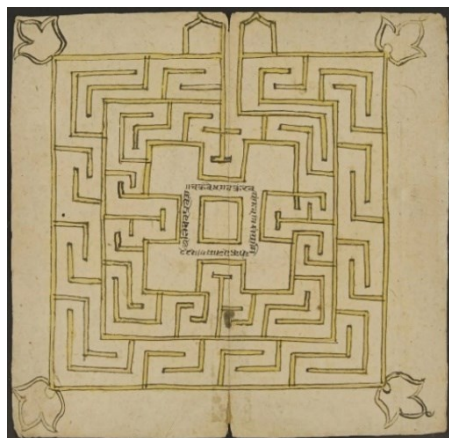
Auction Room Reports

Jeff Saward

A small flurry of interesting antique items featuring labyrinths and mazes and originating from India have recently been sold at auction houses in America and the UK.

The first item, sold by Hansons Auctioneers in Lichfield, England in May 2025, was a group of 18 scrapbook pages and items of paper, evidently created and collected by a British soldier based in India during the 1850s/60s, and included a pen and ink picture of a “Labyrinth in the Soldier's Garden. Lahore” (now situated in Pakistan) surrounded by ink cartoons and riddles. The labyrinth is in fact a fair replica of the famous maze at Hampton Court in England, somewhat unsurprisingly, as many copies were planted throughout parts of the world with British colonial influence, especially during the latter half of the 19th century. The collection of items sold for just over £900.

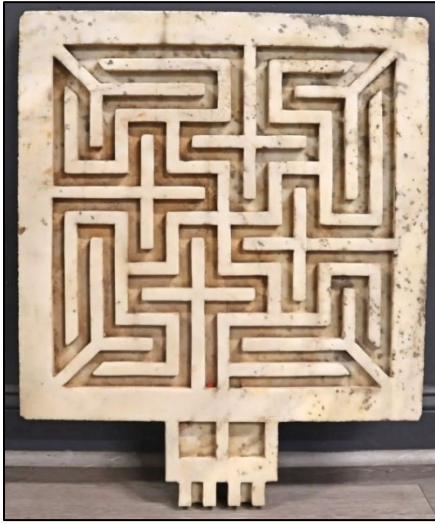
Labyrinth in the Soldiers Garden Lahore
Photo courtesy of Hansons Auctioneers



A group of Indian and Tibetan prints and watercolours sold by Revere Auctions in St. Paul, Minnesota, USA in September 2024 included a watercolour on paper painting of a labyrinth yantra with a rather unusual design, but linked to the swastika types found throughout India and Nepal, and occasionally elsewhere in Southeast Asia. The design also has a *hamsa* or lotus shape at each corner. Undated as such, it is probably from either the 18th or 19th centuries.

Labyrinth yantra, 18th or 19th century
Photo courtesy of Revere Auctions

Two Indian carved stone water labyrinths have also appeared for sale recently and sold for well over their initial estimates. Both were very similar and of an identical swastika type, and while sold without any specific details of their place of manufacture, others we have reported previously (*Caerdroia* 37, p.56) have been ascribed to Rajasthan in northwestern India.



*Above: Carved marble water labyrinth
Photo courtesy of Clarke Auction Gallery*

The first, approximately 75 x 63 cm, sold for \$3328 at Clarke Auction Gallery in Larchmont, NY, in January 2024 and was in good condition, despite general wear and a few minor cracks to the stone.

Another created of white marble, 72 x 61 cm, and dated to the 18th century was sold by Gorrings of Lewes, England in August 2025 for £2175.

These labyrinths allow a slow trickle of water to flow through the entire pattern via the small troughs along their lower edge, presumably while a seed or other small object would float along the pathway as an object for contemplation.



*Carved marble water labyrinth
Photo courtesy of Gorrings Auctions*

The Labyrinth Society & Labyrinth Locator

The Labyrinth Society, affectionately known as TLS, was founded in 1998 to support all those working with or interested in labyrinths. Although based in the USA, it is an international organization with members around the world. Membership in the Society not only connects labyrinth enthusiasts to a worldwide community, but also supports websites and other labyrinth projects that provide information and resources to the world at large, including the **Worldwide Labyrinth Locator** website that now lists over 6600 labyrinths, including a few mazes, worldwide: www.labyrinthlocator.org

TLS also holds an Annual Gathering in the USA and has an extensive website, for details and more about The Labyrinth Society, visit: www.labyrinthsociety.org



Submissions to Caerdroia

Caerdroia is always pleased to receive material for publication. Readers are urged to submit papers, shorter articles, notes, information, photographs – indeed, anything labyrinthine – for possible publication in future editions of Caerdroia. Articles and notes should preferably be sent as e-mail attachments in Microsoft Word .doc or .docx format (although .rtf and similar formats are acceptable).

Illustrations and photographs are preferred in .jpg or .tif format at 300 dpi resolution please, but please keep illustrations separate from text, and send as separate files, with position in text clearly marked. Photographs: colour or b&w prints and 35mm transparencies are also welcome if digital versions are unavailable. A preferred style guide for authors is available on the Caerdroia Submissions page on our website: www.labyrinthos.net/submissions.html

Because Caerdroia is a specialised journal for enthusiasts, no payment can be made for submissions, but any permission or reproduction fees incurred will be covered, and all significant contributors will receive a digital PDF of the edition in which their work is published. Deadline for inclusion in Caerdroia 55: July 2026 please, for scheduled publication in the autumn of 2026.



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