

## NORDIC LABYRINTHS

There are two types of historical labyrinths in the Nordic countries

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1) First, stone constructions built mainly in the coastal areas, some inland

-time of the construction covers about 900 years in the Nordic countries; approximately from the 10<sup>th</sup> to 19<sup>th</sup> century, although it has been argued that labyrinths were still being constructed in the 20<sup>th</sup> century

-the majority of the labyrinths were made in the Middle Ages; that is up to the 16<sup>th</sup> century

2) another group of labyrinths that I'm dealing with today is that of painted labyrinths in medieval churches, dating from around the 15<sup>th</sup> century

## STONE LABYRINTHS

I'll start from the stone labyrinths.

-they have many names and geographic locations: in the Nordic area there are labyrinths in Finland, Sweden, Norway, Russia, around the Baltic Sea, the Barents Sea area, and so on

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-there are about 140 remaining labyrinths in Finland, around 300 in Sweden, the exact amount is difficult to say

-they are unicursal in form, constructed using hundreds of stones

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-these stone constructions have many names: Jungfrudans, Trojaborg, Troytown, just to mention few

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-in Finland they are usually called jatulintarha, meaning the enclosure of the Jatuli

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-what is jatuli, then:

-traditionally, jatuli has been thought to have been a mysterious tribe that inhabited Lapland, they were powerful witches and large in size, the notion of the size has resulted to the notion that the jatuli may have in fact been giants

-the word jatuli is also very similar to the Scandinavian word jotunn or jötunn, omnipresent in Norse mythology, meaning a giant

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-also the word jatuli means a giant - thus there seems to be a fairly deep-rooted conception that the jatuli means giants

-this may be only folklore but jatuli can refer to actual people or an actual tribe:

-there are two different suggestions of where the name jatuli may refer to:

1) -the jatuli can be a reminiscence of Vikings or other Scandinavian tribes, if Vikings it could refer to Viking raiders who levied taxes on the Samí people in Lapland,

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2) the name jatuli can merely be a general name that doesn't mean anything special, this could mean that the name jatulintarha was not the original name for these constructions, given only after the original name had disappeared

-the Scandinavian equivalent to jatulintarha is Trojaborg, basically meaning Troytown which is the name of the construction in the British Isles

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-one explanation is that the word "Troja" might derive from the old Norse word "dreje" and thus refer to the many turns in the labyrinthine pattern

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-traditionally, the name Troytown presumably refers to popular legend about how the walls of the city of Troy were constructed in such a confusing and complex way that any enemy who entered them would be unable to find his way out

-the association with labyrinths to cities such as Jericho, Jerusalem, Babylon, Niniveh in the Middle Ages

-the seven-walled city of Biblical Jericho was often imagined as a form of a labyrinth

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-Jungfrudans, on the other hand means a “maiden’s or a virgin’s dance” and refers to a spring time game of walking or dancing the labyrinth: a maiden is placed in the centre of the Trojaborg labyrinth, and then it was the young man’s task to enter the labyrinth and rescue her

SLIDE: go back!

## FUNCTIONS OF THE STONE LABYRINTHS

-there is no information on how they were actually constructed: no objects or other remains have not been found inside the labyrinths in archaeological excavations that could give clues on what these constructions were actually used for

-thus the suggestions about the historical uses of stone labyrinths are mainly based on tradition, folklore and myths

-there undoubtedly was many ways to use the labyrinth in historical times and it is impossible to pinpoint just one or two functions

-the uses and functions of the Nordic labyrinths have also changed during the centuries

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- navigation system
  - John Kraft, Swedish researcher of religions, has interpreted the coastal labyrinths as part of maritime navigation system in the Middle Ages that was connected to organising the pilot system in the sea, according to Kraft the labyrinths signalled seafarers where to get maritime pilot services
- Coastal labyrinths can also be connected to rituals aiming at providing good fortune in fishing and seafaring: Fishermen probably used labyrinths for protection against the perils of the sea, and probably also to increase their catch
- magical uses:
  - Lapps and shepherds Lapps used labyrinths for protecting their reindeer from wolves and wolverines
  - labyrinths have also been used as protection against as a remedy for mental illnesses
  - some were used in order to scare evil gnomes and to give protection against the “evil”

- Finnish researcher Petteri Pietiläinen has suggested that the labyrinths defined property rights to a certain area: labyrinths may have been used in defining the limits of an area
  - since they tend to be in relatively remote areas where it was sometimes difficult to define the borders of a certain piece of land and hence they may have been disputes on who owned what, a labyrinth might have operated as an observation point where you could see the area under possession
  - labyrinths in the border of communities
  - Kraft has suggested that especially in pagan Sweden they could have also reflected a system of old communities, where each tribe had a labyrinth and most of the inhabitants lived within one day walking distance from it

- uses in various rituals

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-probably the most famous one is connected to rescuing a girl from the centre of the labyrinth: Surviving lore from different countries indicated that on these occasions a girl played the role of the mother goddess and took her place at the center of the labyrinth (=nether world). One or two men played the roles of the sky god who would liberate or abduct the mother goddess from her prison castle of the netherworld. When she had been abducted from the labyrinth she probably joined with her liberator in a spring wedding

- some labyrinths are in burial grounds (Sweden)

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-in Tibble the the labyrinth was situated together with innumerable grave-mounds  
 -also, in Finnmark in northern Norway labyrinths were associated with burials (1200-1700 CE), also in Sweden especially some of the inland labyrinths have been built on a pre-historic burial ground

-according to Bjørnar Olsen, the Finnmark labyrinths may be understood as material symbols expressing and mapping the structure of life-crises rituals, in this case burial rites: by walking into the labyrinth the shaman symbolically expresses the separation of the dead individual from this life. Being inside the labyrinth marks the physical separation from the living social world, when the individual is contaminated and dangerous. The ceremony terminates with the

shaman leaving the labyrinth as a symbolic manifestation of the dead individuals incorporation into a new state.

-the idea of journeying: the passage from life to death, to the underworld, is considered difficult and long, the labyrinth form, with its waves and long detours, fits well with this idea, the long route winding inside the labyrinth gives a concrete social reality to the scenario of the shaman guiding the soul through the difficult passage from life to death

## LABYRINTHS IN MEDIEVAL CHURCHES

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-there are painted labyrinths in about 25 medieval churches in Finland, Sweden, Norway and Denmark

-they are mainly from the 15<sup>th</sup> century, usually painted on the walls or in the vaults

-they are mainly in the coastal churches, except the ones in Norway, and if you remember that the stone labyrinths are also mainly in the coastal areas

-> it seems that there is definitely some connection between the labyrinth and the sea also in the case of the church labyrinths

-there are twelve labyrinths in Denmark

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-there are a couple of interesting details such as the circles at the corners

-the labyrinth in Roerslev has been composed using two colours

-there are nine labyrinths in Sweden of which two in southern Sweden used to be part of the medieval Denmark

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-out of this nine, five labyrinths are situated in the island of Gotland, including three executed in the form of graffiti, only one of the church labyrinths on Gotland is a painting

-a very interesting characteristic of this group is that the labyrinth painting and two of the graffiti are located on the dark ground floors of church towers

-one of the labyrinths has been placed on a highly exceptional place: it has been inscribed on a bell, there is also a text “Help Mary”, referring to Virgin Mary

-another interesting labyrinth, inscribed on a shield sculpted in the vaulting of the burial chapel of the Fleming family, Sorunda church

-there are two labyrinths in Norwegian churches, they have been outside the churches, adjacent to doorways

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-the location of both of these labyrinths might suggest that they served some kind of apotropaic or protective purpose

-in Seljord church, the entrance of the labyrinth is in the top left, but with an unusual spiral centre

-the curious look of this labyrinth can be explained by the way the designer has started to connect the cross, angles and dots

-the conventional way of drawing is to begin with a connecting arc between one of the arms of the central cross and the closest angle, but in this case the drawing has begun with a connecting arc between a dot and its adjacent angle, resulting in the spiral at the centre.

-the eastern group consists of eight labyrinths in four Finnish churches

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-in Sipoo labyrinth there is a small figure in the centre, often has been connected to the folklore, also here two colours have been used

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-all the labyrinths represent the angle-type or classical labyrinth that is also the dominant form of the stone labyrinths, except the one in Grinstad church (Sweden) that resembles the Chartes-type labyrinth

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- the labyrinth has a number of design errors, which might suggest that it was copied from a poor sketch of an example from a European cathedral, or from an old manuscript

- as the church was originally built during the 13th century, it is possible that the labyrinth fresco is also from this period, the time when many labyrinths were being constructed in the Cathedrals of central Europe

## FUNCTIONS OF THE CHURCH LABYRINTHS

-when you begin to think about the function of the labyrinth in medieval churches, there are basically two things that you need to pay attention to:

1) the context: meaning that the labyrinth has been painted to a church

-this means that you have to take this into account and try to understand what it means

2) you have to take into account whether there are other paintings and if so, what do they depict

-in the medieval ecclesiastic context the labyrinth has been addressed with multiple meanings and thus the symbolism of the labyrinth is not necessarily easily opened up

-labyrinths built of stones and boulders were widespread in Scandinavia at this time and it is difficult to say to what extent the church labyrinths are modelled on the stone labyrinths, or vice versa

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- coastal connection: coastal churches, adjoining paintings referring to the sea (ships)
  - already mentioned with the connection of stone labyrinths that they could be a part of navigation system in the Middle Ages, perhaps the painted labyrinths are part of the same
- protective function: protect the building from evil forces
  - Norwegian labyrinths
  - compare to stone labyrinths: they could have also been used as protection against the perils of sea, of wolves, etc.
- the idea of journeying
  - a symbolic representation of the dangerous and labyrinthine voyage that twists and turns, or a symbol of life in general, a pilgrimage, a path to God, etc. (the cruciform centre of the labyrinth may invoke notions of the labyrinths as pathways in the quest of the sacred)
- masons' marks, social network?
  - spatial arrangements have sometimes been connected to social relations and communities (also the stone labyrinths)

- association with the Virgin Mary?

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-the Virgin Mary is mentioned alongside the labyrinth at Hesselager church in Denmark, and is also on the church bell from Horred, Sweden,

-in Finland, four labyrinths in the church of Maaria, Maaria meaning Mary and thus meaning that the church was dedicated to Virgin Mary, could perhaps imply a similar connection with the Virgin

-Sipoo: Jungfrudans, the “virgin’s dance” could have associations to the Virgin Mary

-there are other instances where the labyrinth seems to have a connection with a saint

-> this might not be enough to build any theory about a general connection between Nordic church labyrinths and the worship of Mary

BUT:

-a manuscript labyrinth created at the Abingdon Abbey in the early 11th century depicts a prayer to Mary, *Assumpta est Maria ad Caelestia, Alleluia!* (Mary is assumed into Heaven, Alleluia!) written along the paths which can be read in either of two ways: by following the path of the labyrinth, which gives one arrangement of lines, or according to the circles, which gives a different combination

➔ the use of labyrinths in prayer and meditation?

-but, as I said, you have to take into account the surrounding paintings

-here are a couple of examples on that

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-the labyrinth adjoins a depiction of St. Christopher, patron saint of travellers, Scandinavian folklore mentions the walking of labyrinths to ensure good conditions and catches before setting out to sea; perhaps this painting shows a link between the protector of travellers in Christian iconography with the traditional practices of fishing communities in medieval Denmark

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-combining the labyrinth with a warrior-like figure in Maaria (a reminiscence of the Theseus myth??)

- should they perhaps be understood in the context of an eternal combat myth where the warrior will defeat the forces of evil that lurk inside the labyrinth?
- or, is it the Christian soldier and his life journey to God/religious pilgrimage, etc?
- the rosette as a cosmic symbol (in other labyrinths as well, such as Chartres), also the labyrinth seemed to have some level of astrological significance and in manuscripts it was often placed next to calendar lists and zodiacal charts (= otherworldly aspects of the labyrinth)
- protective function

-the same interpretation does not necessarily apply to all of the Nordic church labyrinths, rather they may have to be treated as individual cases and then build up a deeper understanding of the meaning of a labyrinth in medieval churches

-there seems to be partially similar functions and meanings in both the stone labyrinths and church labyrinths (association with the sea, protective, ritualistic function, etc.) but Christianity has added new layers and provides the context in which to interpret the motif

-one of the reasons for the popularity of the labyrinth motif - whether a stone or other construction or painted - was that it was quite easy to draw if one knew the technique

-the form of the labyrinth may be one of the things that keeps appealing, the idea of the meandering pathway with an end and sometimes with several dead ends is highly susceptible to various symbolical and metaphorical applications

-thus, apart from its popularity in historical periods, there has been an increased interest towards labyrinths in recent years

-labyrinths are used in popular culture:

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- In 1980, the film *The Shining* was released, directed by Stanley Kubrick and starring Jack Nicholson. The film depicted a large labyrinth at The Overlook Hotel, in the form of a hedge maze. There was also a scale model of this hedge maze in the lobby of the hotel.

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- In 1986, the film *Labyrinth* was released, directed by Jim Henson, and starring David Bowie and Jennifer Connelly.

- In 2004, the film *Hellboy* was released, directed by Guillermo del Toro.

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- In 2006, the film *Pan's Labyrinth* was released, directed by Guillermo del Toro.

- In the 2010 movie *Inception*, directed by Christopher Nolan, the concept of the labyrinth was introduced on multiple levels. The maze-like dreams and experiences of the characters suggest an outcome that returns to the beginning.

-video games

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-they are used also by:

-artists and constructors

-writers and poets

-art educators, other educators, even therapists

-in educational and art educational projects, it seems, the labyrinth is an easily exploitable motif

-the idea is that labyrinths are *unicursal*, meaning a single course or path. Once you get on a labyrinth, you need only follow the path, with no dead ends or choices to make. Follow the path and you will arrive at the center. In comparison, a maze is *multicursal*, meaning that there are many ways out of it, many detours and it is generally thought of as a mental challenge, almost stressful. Maze can thus make you disoriented, you could lose your way, and you could be on the same path over and over again.

-community projects, other large group events

-projects for children

-recreational settings, parks

-within academic disciplines

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-the labyrinth at the University of Kent, was designed as a teaching and learning resource

-labyrinths in universities and in colleges provide a quiet reflective space for staff and students, and often for the wider community. But labyrinths are also being used in other creative ways, within and beyond academic disciplines: as part of teaching and learning, for staff and student development, and as the topic of research or to support the research process.

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1. Architecture, Construction, Horticulture, Landscape Design: The labyrinth lends itself to these disciplines as a creative project for design and construction, whether temporary or permanent, as a design exercise or a fulfilled commission.
2. Art: Students have used a labyrinth in a variety of ways, through working with the image, constructing a labyrinth as part of their project, or with exhibitions to accompany a labyrinth event.
3. Business Studies: A guided walk for MBA students, to foster reflection and a time to consider their own journeys through their degree programme and beyond.
4. Complementary Therapies and Healing: A labyrinth as a personal and clinical resource for students and staff, including researchers.
5. Continuing Education, Liberal Arts: Lectures, workshops and labyrinth walks within a range of programmes for the community, ranging from free lectures to short courses.
6. Law: A labyrinth to foster contemplation.
7. Psychology: Research on prayer; a Psychology department project to bring a permanent labyrinth to the university
8. Religious Studies: Using a labyrinth to explore symbology and history; to deepen spiritual practice; to build experience of meditation.
9. Teacher Education/Pedagogy/Mathematics: The image of a labyrinth has been used to foster interest in mathematics, amongst school children and students.

#### **In Wider University Contexts**

1. Graduation: The Counselling Service led a workshop with graduating students, a celebration of their journey through Higher Education and a time to build confidence for their future journeys.
2. Health, Sports Science and Wellbeing: events led by an academic department, or by other teams with a focus on well-being.
3. Revision and exams: Labyrinth walks to reduce stress and anxiety.

4. Counselling Service: for students and staff, including staff development events. (For work with counselling clients, see the Labyrinth Society web page on ‘Labyrinths in Counselling’).
5. Staff and research student development: a portable labyrinth as part of a series of lunch-time events to reduce stress and foster creativity, contributing to a creative programme for staff and research postgraduates.
6. Chaplaincies and spiritual development: Labyrinth walks held, once a month or at other intervals, as a quiet reflective space in the busy-ness of university life; labyrinth events to support and bring the university community together.
7. Arboretums and gardens: Labyrinths as a beautiful design, enhancing the campus: sometimes linked to departments of Horticulture or Art, and sometimes to medical centres, chaplaincies or other centres and services.
8. Networks and forums: A labyrinth at a new forum for teachers of English at all levels in the region, as a way of drawing colleagues together and celebrating connections.
9. Retreats and conferences: Some labyrinths have been built close to, or as part of, university conference and retreat centres. Others have been built as part of the process of a retreat.