

The Aesthetic Appeal of Labyrinths and Mazes

Janet Kahl

Introduction

The inspiration for this article was the installation of a Chartres-style labyrinth at Westmead Children's Hospital in Sydney, Australia (Figures 1 and 2). Labyrinths and mazes are of themselves a puzzle, as are their origins and use. Existing since the ancient world their popularity has fluctuated over time, waxing and waning depending on gardening styles and fashions of the period. There are a number of different types and styles and they are to be found in a variety of settings including gardens, churches, and parks. Literature and the arts make many references to the labyrinth or maze. The twentieth and twenty-first centuries have seen the revival of both labyrinths and mazes, which have piqued the interest of New Age philosophies. They are used in the modern world for a variety of purposes: fun, pilgrimage, meditation, reflection, and the alleviation of stress-related issues.

Labyrinths and mazes are defined in many different ways. They may be seen as essentially the same and interchangeable, or they may be viewed as entirely separate forms. Penelope Rees Doob suggests that the current general consensus that mazes are different from labyrinths is a modern interpretation and that "the modern idea of a labyrinth is curiously limited".¹ This interpretation contends that labyrinths have a continuous path that can be followed, with twists and turns drawing the walker to the centre, and then leading back the same way. Mazes, however, form a puzzle, have paths that cross, obstructions to be negotiated, and choices made as to which path to take. The single pathway is known as unicursal

Janet Kahl is an independent scholar from Sydney. Please note that the copyright of all photographs in this article belongs to the author.

¹ Penelope Rees Doob, *The Idea of the Labyrinth from Classical Antiquity through the Middle Ages* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1990), p. 3.

Labyrinths and Mazes

(one possible route) while the format of multiple pathways is multicursal (more than one possible route).



Figure 1 – The Labyrinth at Westmead Children's Hospital.



Figure 2 – Walking the Labyrinth at Westmead Children's Hospital.

This single pathway may facilitate and enable reflection or meditation on issues such as decisions, problems, health, and life, as there are no obstacles. The maze on the other hand requires actively choosing different paths, and may involve challenges and forces the walker to make decisions

while within the maze. The labyrinth having one path may perhaps be interpreted as spiritually superior, but may also be interpreted as inferior as it permits no options.² Mazes may lead to frustration but can, nonetheless, have spiritual meaning and “through junctions [are] representing decisions and wrong turnings representing the mistakes we make”.³ Both the maze and the labyrinth are present in the ‘Archbishop’s Maze’ at Greys Court [United Kingdom] where Christian symbols are a major feature and pathway choices need to be made.⁴

A Short History of Labyrinths and Mazes

The earliest labyrinth is said to have been located in Egypt within a series of buildings connected to Amenemhet III,⁵ which was recorded by Herodotus, Strabo and Diodorus Siculus.⁶ There is also a Greek legend that involves a labyrinth built by Daedalus for King Minos of Crete in which to imprison the Minotaur, half-man, half-beast. Theseus, son of the Athenian King Aegeus (who was required to give an annual tribute of young men and women to Minos to be victims of the Minotaur), went to Knossos in order to battle and defeat the Minotaur, assisted by the golden thread of Ariadne, daughter of Minos. This legend is the basis of the notion of the centre and the use of the labyrinth for ritual purposes.⁷ Further, the word ‘labyrinth’ is derived from “the ritual double-headed axe of the Minoan civilisation on Crete during its zenith around 1700 BC.”⁸

Labyrinths in northern Europe are purported to have their origins in the Bronze Age,⁹ as a development from cup and ring drawings. Nigel

² Benjamin Radford, ‘Labyrinths: Mazes and Myths’, *The Skeptical Inquirer*, vol. 28, no. 5 (2004), p. 52.

³ Penny Granger, ‘Religious Symbolism in Mazes’, *Caerdroia: The Journal of Mazes and Labyrinths*, vol. 29 (1998), p. 11.

⁴ Crispin Paine, ‘Greys Court’, *Sacred Places: Spirit and Landscape* (London: National Trust Enterprises Ltd, 2004), p. 54; Jeff Seward, *Magical Paths: Labyrinths and Mazes in the 21st Century* (London: Mitchell Beazley, 2002), p. 97.

⁵ William H. Matthews, *Mazes and Labyrinths: A General Account of their History and Development* (London: Longmans, Green and Co, 1922), Kindle edition.

⁶ Doob, *The Idea of the Labyrinth*, pp. 23-25.

⁷ C. N. Deedes, ‘The Labyrinth’, in *The Labyrinth: Further Studies in the Relation between Myth and Ritual in the Ancient World*, ed. S. H. Hooke (London: The Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge, 1935), p. 27.

⁸ Adrian Fisher, *Mazes and Labyrinths* (Botley: Shire Publications Ltd, 2004), p. 5.

⁹ Frithjof Hallman, ‘The Labyrinth’, *Mankind Quarterly*, vol. 21, no. 3 (1981), p. 299.

Labyrinths and Mazes

Pennick, however, states that “the Classical labyrinth is found nowhere in the British Isles as an indisputably prehistoric carving.”¹⁰ Early cave paintings have also been located in Italy and are estimated to date from 3,000 BCE, but again doubt arises as to whether the shape is that of a labyrinth.¹¹ It may be that these early drawing were the precursor to later, more developed forms. Pennick has suggested that Scandinavian cultures may have already built or were building labyrinths during the same period as the Cretan and Egyptian labyrinths and mazes.¹² The earliest known labyrinth within a church may be that in Algeria, which is said to date to the fourth century CE.¹³ This labyrinth is based on a square Roman mosaic that is divided into quarters, and has a linear path that twists and turns before proceeding onto the next quarter.¹⁴

Labyrinths have experienced fluctuations in popularity. Some labyrinths have been destroyed; for example, the cathedral labyrinth at Arras may have been removed during the French Revolution.¹⁵ The medieval labyrinth in Reims Cathedral was removed because services were interrupted by children using it for play.¹⁶ The labyrinth at Amiens was destroyed, but was rebuilt in the nineteenth century.¹⁷ John James theorises that some church labyrinths were destroyed in the eighteenth century because of their possible pagan connotations, but also argues that Christianity had overridden the pagan overtones of the labyrinth and had taken on an importance in the medieval world only surmounted by relics and the actual building.¹⁸ More recently church labyrinths have been a

¹⁰ Nigel Pennick, *Mazes and Labyrinths* (London: Robert Thales, 1994), p. 22.

¹¹ Marguerite Rigoglioso, ‘The Oldest Labyrinth in the World? The Polyphemus Cave Paintings’, *Caerdroia: The Journal of Mazes and Labyrinths*, vol. 29 (1998), pp. 14-22.

¹² Pennick, *Mazes and Labyrinths*, p. 14.

¹³ Colum Hourihane (ed.), *The Grove Encyclopedia of Medieval Art and Architecture* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press 2012), p. 3.

¹⁴ Adrian Fisher and George Gerster, *The Art of the Maze* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1990), p. 35.

¹⁵ Pennick, *Mazes and Labyrinths*, p. 118.

¹⁶ Tessa Morrison, ‘The Labyrinthine Path of Pilgrimage’, *Peregrinations*, vol. 1, no 3 (2003), p. 2.

¹⁷ Pennick, *Mazes and Labyrinths*, p. 118.

¹⁸ John James, ‘The Mystery of the Great Labyrinths, Chartres Cathedral’, at www.studiesincomparativereligion.com/public/articles/The_Mystery_of_the_Great_Labyrinth-Chartres_Cathedral-by_John_James.asp. Accessed 30/10/2016.

decorative feature, referencing past cathedral labyrinths, but largely stripped of the medieval meanings.¹⁹

Frithjof Hallman has suggested that as mazes are no longer religiously important they are now found in the grounds of castles and stately homes.²⁰ It was during the Renaissance that mazes became an extension of the house and involved formats that referenced Roman villa architecture.²¹ Gardens in the fourteenth to sixteenth centuries were constructed with low hedges in intricate patterns, which may have been based on labyrinths. In France such garden techniques were termed *Dedales*, referencing Daedulus the builder of the labyrinth in the Minos legend.²² This low hedge style was superseded by the introduction of the tall hedges commonly seen in modern garden mazes.²³ One of the oldest and most well-known hedge mazes can be found at Hampton Court Palace (c. 1700), which survived the eighteenth century popularity of less formal gardens that saw the destruction of many garden mazes.²⁴ The late Victorian era saw a renaissance of garden mazes that later fell victim to new ideas in garden design.²⁵ Around the time of the two World Wars labyrinths and mazes were often destroyed or neglected due to changes in gardening styles, and the costs and labour required to maintain hedge mazes.²⁶ This occurred at Saffron Walden in 1949, although this labyrinth was restored and reopened in 1991.²⁷ Similarly, in Belair National Park (South Australia) a labyrinth constructed in 1902 was no longer in existence after World War II²⁸ and another, constructed in the mid-1880s, suffered from the harsh Australian weather conditions.²⁹ The late twentieth

¹⁹ Seward, *Magical Paths*, p. 27.

²⁰ Hallman, 'The Labyrinth', p. 301.

²¹ Barry Long, 'Mazes Labyrinths', *Australian Garden History*, vol. 12, no. 3 (2000), p. 5.

²² Pennick, *Mazes and Labyrinths*, p. 138.

²³ Long, 'Mazes Labyrinths', p. 6; Pennick, *Mazes and Labyrinths*, p. 141.

²⁴ Pennick, *Mazes and Labyrinths*, pp. 148-149; 'The Maze', *Historic Royal Palaces*, at www.hrp.org.uk/hampton-court-palace/visit-us/top-things-to-see-and-do/the-maze/#gs.n_Daa3A. Accessed 29/10/2016.

²⁵ Pennick, *Mazes and Labyrinths*, p. 156.

²⁶ Long, 'Mazes Labyrinths', pp. 6-7.

²⁷ 'Saffron Walden Mazes', at <http://www.visitsaffronwalden.gov.uk/Mazes.aspx>. Accessed 31/10/2016.

²⁸ Long, 'Mazes Labyrinths', p. 7.

²⁹ Pam Tambllyn, 'For public purposes: The Government Farm and Belair National Park, 1840-1920', in *Valleys of Stone: The Archaeology and History of Adelaide's Hills Face*, eds

Labyrinths and Mazes

century has witnessed a revival in maze construction and popularity. This can be seen at Blenheim Palace where a garden maze was opened in 1991 that incidentally revived the use of aspects of the building within the maze design.³⁰

There are also stone and turf mazes that are believed to be much older than hedge mazes. Turf mazes also suffered by being neglected, ploughed over, built on, or removed. The fluctuations in survival, restoration and maintenance may mean that the style, size and shape may have changed over time, and for this reason it can be very difficult to date them.³¹ These were generally built in public places like village greens, and their antiquity is demonstrated by examples like that at Alkborough, Lincolnshire where “[t]he entire area of pathways and gullies lies well below the level of the surrounding land as a result of repeated scouring out of the gullies over the years.”³²

Types of Labyrinths

Labyrinths are found in a number of styles and types, with each having variations. The ‘Classical’ is the style of the Crete legend involving Theseus and the Minotaur; and these are present in Europe, in particular Scandinavia and England. The ‘Rad’ type of labyrinth, also found in Scandinavia, has two entrances³³ and two paths, both leading into the centre and returning to the outside. Contrary to the accepted definition of a labyrinth, this design could be labelled multicursal. The ‘Roman’ labyrinth is a mosaic, square in shape with linear, regimented pathways proceeding from one quarter to the next. Such labyrinths, built during the Roman Empire, were located near entryways to buildings perhaps as “a protective device, to confuse unwelcome visitors, whether from the real or spiritual world.”³⁴ While circular Roman labyrinths have been discovered the square format is the more common. The Roman labyrinth did, however, evolve into the medieval cathedral labyrinth that is particularly prevalent in

Pam Smith, F. Donald Pate and Robert Martin (Belair, South Australia: Kopi Books, 2006), pp. 218-219.

³⁰ *Blenheim Palace* (Norwich: Jarrold Publishing, 1993), pp. 60-61.

³¹ Pennick, *Mazes and Labyrinths*, pp. 18, 102.

³² Fisher, *Mazes and Labyrinths*, p. 12.

³³ Pennick, *Mazes and Labyrinths*, p. 16.

³⁴ Seward, *Magical Paths*, p. 21.

France³⁵ and in early medieval churches in Italy.³⁶ Still divided into four, the square became circular³⁷ with the pathway leading to the centre in a circuitous, unregimented fashion, with a cross dividing the turns. Contemporary labyrinths are generally new designs created due to the current trends surrounding the labyrinth.³⁸ The modern, twenty-first century labyrinth is found in hospitals, churches, gardens, and in portable forms on carpets, on canvas and as finger labyrinths.

Pennick proposes that the largest extant labyrinth may be Glastonbury Tor (Figure 3). There have been a number of theories regarding the ancient pathways that proceed up the tor to St Michael's Chapel at the top, that include farmed terraces and animal tracks. The shape and direction that the pathways take are suggestive that the Tor's pathways are a labyrinth. However, due to the enigmatic quality of Glastonbury Tor and the town's connection to King Arthur the area is full of stories mystical in nature, fairies and Celtic traditions.³⁹ It may be that this speculative meaning is overlaid onto the Tor, rather than actually being a feature of its design.

Turf labyrinths, also known as turf mazes, are generally to be found in Britain, with some examples in Germany and northern Europe.⁴⁰ Turf mazes are, as indicated by their name, cut into the turf with either the ditches or the turf left behind being the pathway. They are unicursal and possess a single pathway.⁴¹ Turf maze designs resemble medieval church labyrinths, and Hermann Kern suggests that the church labyrinth influenced the turf labyrinth. Difficulties with dating turf mazes could, although unlikely, suggest a reverse influence.⁴² One of the most well-known turf labyrinths is situated at Saffron Walden, a pretty town near Cambridge that

³⁵ Pennick, *Mazes and Labyrinths*, pp. 16, 105.

³⁶ Ingrid D. Bloos and Thomas St James O'Connor, 'Ancient and Medieval Labyrinths and Contemporary Narrative Therapy: How Do They Fit?', *Pastoral Psychology*, vol. 50, no. 4 (2002), p. 221.

³⁷ Fisher and Gerster, *The Art of the Maze*, p. 35.

³⁸ 'Labyrinths - The Major Categories', *Labyrinthos*, at www.labyrinthos.net/tpolab01.html. Accessed 30/10/2016.

³⁹ Pennick, *Mazes and Labyrinths*, pp. 172-173; Saward, *Magical Paths*, pp. 129-131.

⁴⁰ Doob, *The Idea of the Labyrinth*, p. 116; Hermann Kern, *Through the Labyrinth: Designs and Meanings over 5,000 Years* (Munich: Prestel, 2000), p. 167.

⁴¹ Jeff Saward, 'Historic Turf Labyrinths in England', *Labyrinthos*, at <http://www.labyrinthos.net/turflabuk.html>. Accessed 31/10/2016.

⁴² Kern, *Through the Labyrinth*, pp. 167-168.

Labyrinths and Mazes

also features a famous hedge maze. The seventeen-circuit circular turf maze is reputedly the largest of the “eight surviving turf mazes in England”.⁴³ It is almost forty metres wide and the paths are almost a mile in length.⁴⁴



Figure 3 – Glastonbury Tor showing the pathways which may be indicative of it being a labyrinth.

In the modern world mazes are tourist attractions and can be made from a wide variety of materials including hedges, mirrors, wood, and stones.⁴⁵ They can be made of water such as the maze developed at Hever Castle in 1997, which both contrasts and complements Hever Castle’s older hedge maze that dates from 1905.⁴⁶ Mazes are now built with gates that can be

⁴³ ‘Saffron Walden Mazes’.

⁴⁴ Fisher, *Mazes and Labyrinths*, p. 11.

⁴⁵ Long, ‘Mazes Labyrinths’, pp. 6-7.

⁴⁶ Saward, *Magical Paths*, pp. 43, 66.

moved to change the experience⁴⁷ and they can be found all over the world, large and small, in a widening variety of shapes, sizes and situations. The most famous hedge mazes are those to be found at Hampton Court and Saffron Walden. One of the oldest mazes still in existence in Australia, dated to the mid-1880s, is found in Belair National Park (South Australia). It is made of hawthorn trees and has of late been undergoing some restoration.⁴⁸

The Purposes of Labyrinths and Mazes

The reason and purpose of labyrinths and mazes is largely unknown, although there are many speculative theories. For example, in northern Europe the labyrinth centre may have been designed to capture the sun's energy and then release it at springtime.⁴⁹ Kern believes many of the myths and legends such as this are perhaps not supported by any evidence.⁵⁰ However, the labyrinth has played a role in cathedrals in Europe at Easter and in dances in northern Europe, Germany and Austria when spring arrived.⁵¹ Many activities such as dances, precision horsemanship and games use the labyrinth as a tool.⁵²

Others have been found at mine sites and may be a symbol of protection for miners when entering the earth, guaranteeing a safe return.⁵³ Those found in Scandinavia are often situated near the sea and were perhaps constructed by seamen for good weather, a good catch of fish, and to avoid storms.⁵⁴ Scandinavian labyrinths are also found in the form of a standing circle,⁵⁵ made of stone, and primarily located near the sea. A small number of northern European labyrinths are to be found inland, situated on hills; these have a westerly orientation.⁵⁶

⁴⁷ Peter Booton, 'Maze Designer Adrian Fisher', *Dorset Magazine*, http://www.dorsetmagazine.co.uk/people/maze_designer_adrian_fisher_1_4180318. Accessed 06/09/2016.

⁴⁸ Long, 'Mazes Labyrinths', p. 7.

⁴⁹ Hallman, 'The Labyrinth', p. 296.

⁵⁰ Kern, *Through the Labyrinth*, p. 268.

⁵¹ Hallman, 'The Labyrinth', pp. 297-298; Doob, *The Idea of the Labyrinth*, p. 123.

⁵² Pennick, *Mazes and Labyrinths*, pp. 38-39.

⁵³ Kern, *Through the Labyrinth*, p. 30.

⁵⁴ Pennick, *Mazes and Labyrinths*, pp. 44-46.

⁵⁵ Deedes, 'The Labyrinth,' p. 38.

⁵⁶ Pennick, *Mazes and Labyrinths*, pp. 33-34.

Labyrinths and Mazes

Labyrinths have been found engraved on stones, on columns, roof bosses, on jewellery, coins and shields. They have been a tool against illness but at the same time associated with death and burial sites. Labyrinths have been found near sites connected to saints and near holy wells and near ancient circular religious sites.⁵⁷ Indeed Notre Dame de Chartres is reputedly situated upon such a site, which had a grotto and water from a well that is reputed to have curative powers (Figure 4).

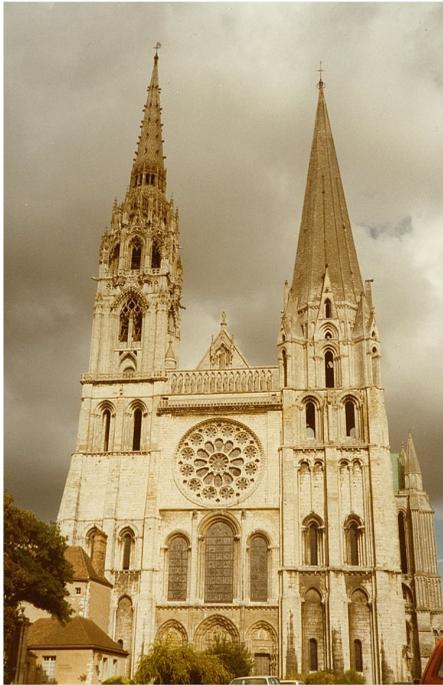


Figure 4 – Chartres Cathedral.

It may be that the labyrinth and adoration of the Virgin at Chartres had its roots in earlier Roman and Celtic ritual practices at the site.⁵⁸ Thus it is possible that labyrinths, originating in pagan cultures, were adopted by

⁵⁷ Pennick, *Mazes and Labyrinths*, pp. 47, 135; Hallman, 'The Labyrinth', p. 301.

⁵⁸ Robert Branner, *Chartres Cathedral* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1969), p. 71.

Christianity and subsequently incorporated as part of church floors and walls in great cathedrals such as at Chartres and Ely.⁵⁹ Indeed, the view of the Catholic Church is:

With a few exceptions, pilgrimage did not form part of the cultic life of the Church for the first three centuries of her history: the Church feared contamination from the religious practices of... paganism, where pilgrimage was much practised.

During this period, however, the basis was laid for a revival of the practice of pilgrimage with a Christian character: the cult of the martyrs, to whose tombs many of the faithful went to venerate the mortal remains of these outstanding witnesses to Christ, logically and gradually became a successor to the 'pious visit' and to the 'votive pilgrimage'.⁶⁰

The Global Spread of the Labyrinth

The labyrinth has been found in many cultures and geographical regions including Asia, the Middle East, the Americas and North Russia.⁶¹ Labyrinths in India were used as protection and stones inscribed with a labyrinthine pattern were used by women giving birth. Such stones may have had a similar function in Europe.⁶² Labyrinth shapes have been found on coins and seals on Crete and also in the middle east.⁶³ C. N. Deedes speculates that trade between Europe and the East enabled the movement of the labyrinth concept,⁶⁴ and it is possible the labyrinth was also transmitted via migration and invasion.⁶⁵ Labyrinths are found in Celtic areas where tribes migrated from mainland Europe to Ireland and Scotland, while Roman-style labyrinths can be located wherever the Roman Empire had a presence,⁶⁶ and may have moved from south to north with the Roman Army. The idea for turf mazes in England may have been brought by

⁵⁹ John James, *Chartres: The Masons Who Built a Legend* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1982), p.1; Hallman, 'The Labyrinth', p. 301.

⁶⁰ 'Congregation For Divine Worship and the Discipline of the Sacraments, Directory on Popular Piety and the Liturgy, Principles and Guidelines, Vatican City December 2001', at http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/ccdds/documents/rc_con_ccdds_doc_20020513_vers-direttorio_en.html#Chapter Eight. Accessed 01/11/2016.

⁶¹ Hallman, 'The Labyrinth', p. 299; Deedes, 'The Labyrinth', p. 10.

⁶² Pennick, *Mazes and Labyrinths*, pp. 26, 52.

⁶³ Deedes, 'The Labyrinth', p. 10.

⁶⁴ Deedes, 'The Labyrinth', p. 37.

⁶⁵ Kern, *Through the Labyrinth*, pp. 26-27.

⁶⁶ Pennick, *Mazes and Labyrinths*, pp. 23, 105.

Labyrinths and Mazes

visitors who had experienced the French cathedral labyrinths.⁶⁷ The name of the city of Troy appears in many labyrinth titles, and in Scandinavia and Britain labyrinths have been named Troyborg or Troytowns. This phenomenon may also indicate that trade brought the name.⁶⁸ They may be named for biblical towns, and North Russian labyrinths are known as “Babylons”.⁶⁹ Other labyrinth names may be indicative of their use; for example, activities such as dances and can be seen in names such as “Maiden’s Dance.”⁷⁰ Labyrinths thus appear to be representative of a range of human activities.

Labyrinths and Pilgrimage

One of the most well-known church labyrinths is found at Chartres Cathedral. A popular theory regarding the origin of the church labyrinth is that they were used in place of going on pilgrimage to, for example, Jerusalem and the Holy Land; indeed the church labyrinth was often known as the “Chemin du Jerusalem”.⁷¹ Medieval pilgrimage involved spending a great deal of time away from home and was expensive, so pilgrims may have sought out alternative methods. This theory is enhanced by the idea of pilgrims completing the labyrinth walk upon their knees. Crispin Paine considers there to be no evidence for use of the labyrinth as a pilgrimage substitute, and in particular on the knees.⁷² This is supported by Australian scholar Tessa Morrison, who considers that artistic depictions of labyrinth walking date from the eighteenth century, and do not indicate that this activity took place before that time.⁷³ There were many great cathedrals built in Europe from the twelfth to the fourteenth centuries, fuelled by “religious enthusiasm.”⁷⁴ Chartres was rebuilt in the new Gothic style following a fire in the twelfth century.⁷⁵ Notre Dame de Chartres Cathedral

⁶⁷ Kern, *Through the Labyrinth*, p. 167.

⁶⁸ Deedes, ‘The Labyrinth’, p. 37; Hallman, ‘The Labyrinth’, p. 297.

⁶⁹ Pennick, *Mazes and Labyrinths*, p. 35; Hallman, ‘The Labyrinth’, p. 299.

⁷⁰ John L. Heller, ‘Labyrinth or Troy Town?’, *The Classical Journal*, vol. 42, no. 3 (1946), p. 127; Pennick, *Mazes and Labyrinths*, p. 35.

⁷¹ Kern, *Through the Labyrinth*, p. 148.

⁷² Paine, ‘Greys Court’, p. 55; Pennick, *Mazes and Labyrinths*, p. 134.

⁷³ Morrison, ‘The Labyrinthine Path of Pilgrimage’, p. 2; Kern, *Through the Labyrinth*, p. 148.

⁷⁴ James, *Chartres: The Masons Who Built a Legend*, p. 1.

⁷⁵ Branner, *Chartres Cathedral*, p. 74.

was an important pilgrimage centre in Europe in its own right, as it housed the relic of the Virgin Mary's tunic and was part of a route to Santiago de Compostela in north-west Spain.⁷⁶ For the Catholic Church:

[Shrines] are often dedicated to the Holy Trinity, to Christ our Saviour, to the Blessed Virgin Mary... The term shrine signifies a church or other sacred place to which the faithful make pilgrimages for a particular pious reason... the original and essential quality of pilgrimage: a pilgrimage, or 'journey to a shrine', is both a moment in and parable of, our journey towards the Kingdom.⁷⁷

Doob also rejects the idea of the labyrinth being used as a replacement for pilgrimage to Jerusalem as an interpretation from the nineteenth century "despite the utter lack of supporting medieval evidence" and the use of the labyrinth as a pilgrimage tool came after the Renaissance period.⁷⁸ Rather, she proposes that the Cathedral was a symbol of grand design and architecture and this extended to the floor, including the intricate and complicated flooring with its labyrinth. For Doob there are three interpretations of the labyrinth: first, architectural achievement; second an indication of hell; and that the path of Christ must be followed and third indicative of God as master of the universe. Doob considers cathedral labyrinths "generally celebrate the triumphs of divine artistry and human ingenuity in the service of God."⁷⁹ Each section of a cathedral built in the medieval age was designed to "have a symbolic purpose, or at least an appropriate symbolic interpretation."⁸⁰ Jeff Saward, however, argues the Chartres labyrinth must have been made for walking: "why else would it be installed at such a size, filling the entire width of the nave?"⁸¹ While architectural historian John James comments: "It must have had an important religious significance, otherwise why install it? Why make them so large? And why always use the same design?" but also notes the lack of

⁷⁶ James, *Chartres: The Masons Who Built a Legend*, pp. 1-2, 138.

⁷⁷ 'Congregation For Divine Worship and the Discipline of the Sacraments, Directory on Popular Piety and the Liturgy, Principles and Guidelines, Vatican City December 2001', at http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/ccdds/documents/rc_con_ccdds_doc_20020513_vers-direttorio_en.html#Chapter Eight. Accessed 01/11/2016.

⁷⁸ Doob, *The Idea of the Labyrinth*, pp. 119-120.

⁷⁹ Doob, *The Idea of the Labyrinth*, p. 117.

⁸⁰ Doob, *The Idea of the Labyrinth*, p. 118.

⁸¹ Jeff Saward, 'The Chartres Cathedral labyrinth - FAQs', *Labyrinthos*, at <http://www.labyrinthos.net/chartresfaq.html>. Accessed 01/10/2016.

Labyrinths and Mazes

written evidence: “As with the masters [of Chartres] the documents are silent.”⁸²

The rose windows are a major design feature of Chartres Cathedral, and are also connected to the Virgin Mary.⁸³ Saward disagrees with theories that the size of the Rose Window almost exactly matches the labyrinth and that if “hinged down along the length of the nave, would exactly overlay the pattern... onto the labyrinth.”⁸⁴ He estimates the difference in size to be approximately one metre and additionally that the distance and height from the hinge point “would seem to amount to approximately 3 metres.”⁸⁵ This would create a highly dramatic symbolism to the labyrinth if it were so.

The Symbolism of the Labyrinth

Throughout antiquity and the Middle Ages symbolic properties were associated with numbers and shapes and covered all areas of medieval life, led to the “Ultimate Truth” and made it possible to understand the universe.⁸⁶ For Morrison “to understand number symbolism was to transcend the realm of the corporeal and enter the realm of the incorporeal.”⁸⁷ The square has been important in building, for example the pyramids, and with its ability to be divided into eight is representative of sacredness in many religions.⁸⁸ The number eight was important as it symbolised “rebirth and resurrection”.⁸⁹ Early churches built using the square changed to include octagonal structures with flooring which reflected the architecture⁹⁰ as can be seen in the labyrinth at St Quentin in France.

⁸² James, *Chartres: The Masons Who Built a Legend*, p. 87.

⁸³ James, *Chartres: The Masons Who Built a Legend*, p. 67.

⁸⁴ Saward, ‘The Chartres Cathedral labyrinth – FAQs’.

⁸⁵ Saward, ‘The Chartres Cathedral labyrinth – FAQs’.

⁸⁶ Vincent Foster Hopper, *Medieval Number Symbolism: Its Sources, Meaning, and Influence on Thought and Expression* (New York: Cooper Square Publishers, Inc, 1969), pp. 93-99.

⁸⁷ Tessa Morrison, ‘The Art of Early Medieval Number Symbolism’, *Journal of the Australian Early Medieval Association*, vol. 2 (2006), p. 181.

⁸⁸ Nigel Pennick, *Sacred Geometry: Symbolism and Purpose in Religious Structures* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1980), p. 18.

⁸⁹ Doob, *The Idea of the Labyrinth*, p. 127.

⁹⁰ Morrison, ‘The Art of Early Medieval Number Symbolism’, pp. 174-176.

From the moment the pilgrim entered Chartres Cathedral they entered a building full of geometry and symbolism⁹¹ with its axes, position and lines:

the various characteristics of the Gothic cathedral were harmonized to create a whole which linked man the microcosm with the universe at large... the cathedral had to embody the doctrines of the faith and express the energies and geometries inherent in the site.⁹²

The pilgrim is then faced with the labyrinth, and for James the path of the labyrinth was indicative of the path to God; while for Saward it may be illustrative of the pilgrim's journey.⁹³ The pilgrim then proceeded onward through the Cathedral arriving at three chapels, the number three indicative of the Trinity. James also discusses in depth in his study of Chartres the geometry, numbers and symbols and their interactions with the labyrinth as well as other parts of the Church. His studies of Chartres have led him to find the cathedral is made up of geometric shapes with a major intersection at the centre of the labyrinth.⁹⁴

The number of circuits within a labyrinth may therefore be important.⁹⁵ The Classical labyrinth for example has seven circles and maybe indicative of the days of the week.⁹⁶ The labyrinth of the medieval period was circular and formed by eleven rings. James states that eleven was not symbolic in Christian medieval geometry but proposes if there was a central plaque then there would be twelve rings which then is aligned to the zodiac, months of the year and so on.⁹⁷ Kern, however, states eleven was indicative of "sin, violation, excessiveness... and incompleteness".⁹⁸

There are six 'petals' at the centre of the Chartres labyrinth. The circle has been important through the ages as a symbol of perfection and enables other shapes such as the square or triangle to be produced.⁹⁹ There are thus a number of possibilities as to the meaning of the central area. The six petals may represent the "six days of Creation, the Virgin Mary, the

⁹¹ Morrison, 'The Art of Early Medieval Number Symbolism', pp. 179-180.

⁹² Pennick, *Sacred Geometry*, p. 95.

⁹³ Saward, *Magical Paths*, p. 22.

⁹⁴ James, *Chartres: The Masons Who Built a Legend*, pp. 89-99.

⁹⁵ Radford, 'Labyrinths: Mazes and Myths', p. 52.

⁹⁶ Pennick, *Mazes and Labyrinths*, pp. 49-51.

⁹⁷ John James, *The Traveller's Key to Medieval France* (London: Harrah Columbus, 1987), pp. 75-77.

⁹⁸ Kern, *Through the Labyrinth*, p. 144.

⁹⁹ Pennick, *Sacred Geometry*, p. 18.

Labyrinths and Mazes

Holy Spirit, or simply enlightenment.”¹⁰⁰ Six is also a perfect number in medieval geometry. James considers that creating an entryway to the centre, thus disrupting the circular petal’s perfection, allows entry to the perfect centre by mortal humans.¹⁰¹ Lauren Artress believes “each petal has a vibrational quality to it” and gives each petal a different meaning, for example, animal, plant or angelic.¹⁰² The petals are also reflective of the shapes found in the great Rose Window at Chartres and may provide a link between the two.

A plaque said to have been at its centre, indicated by bolts in the floor, has been described as depicting Theseus, the Minotaur and Ariadne, the main participants in the ancient legends and was purportedly removed at the time of the Napoleonic Wars.¹⁰³ Kern rejects this theory as “untenable, however, for the position of the bolts does not indicate in any way what was engraved on the disc. Besides, northern French pavement labyrinths did not serve to perpetuate ancient traditions.” At Amiens the centre of its labyrinth was dedicated to the architect and Kern proposes that may have occurred at Chartres.¹⁰⁴ William H. Matthews notes that early church labyrinths do not contain Christian symbolism and “the writings of the chief authorities of these times give no support to any of the theories.”¹⁰⁵

Texts, Art, Architecture and Artefacts

In addition to the labyrinth and the maze being found in architecture they have been used to illustrate medieval manuscripts and have appeared in artworks.¹⁰⁶ The labyrinth has been depicted on rock walls, coins, stone crosses and stones.¹⁰⁷ Labyrinths have been mentioned widely in a variety

¹⁰⁰ Bessie Karras Katsilometes, ‘My Spiritual Journey: Circling the Spiral’, *Psychological Perspectives: A Quarterly Journal of Jungian Thought*, vol. 53, no. 2 (2010), p. 197.

¹⁰¹ James, *The Traveller’s Key to Medieval France*, p. 75.

¹⁰² Lauren Artress, *The Sacred Path Companion: A Guide to Walking the Labyrinth to Heal and Transform* (New York: Berkley Publishing Group, 2006), Kindle edition.

¹⁰³ Seward, ‘The Chartres Cathedral labyrinth – FAQs’; James, *Chartres: The Masons Who Built a Legend*, p. 87.

¹⁰⁴ Kern, *Through the Labyrinth*, p. 153.

¹⁰⁵ William H. Matthews, *Mazes and Labyrinths: A General Account of their History and Development* (London: Longmans, Green and Co, 1922).

¹⁰⁶ Doob, *The Idea of the Labyrinth*, pp. 136ff.

¹⁰⁷ Pennick, *Mazes and Labyrinths*, p. 14.

of texts and Pliny, Herodotus and Strabo are some early historians who wrote of labyrinths.¹⁰⁸ Doob in *The Idea of the Labyrinth* explores a number of texts in which the labyrinth is utilised by authors including Chaucer, Dante and Virgil.¹⁰⁹ Many tales can be found which tell a similar story to the Cretan legend in England, the Middle East and Africa.¹¹⁰ There is a plethora of modern books and movies using labyrinths and mazes as a metaphor indicating danger, the need to escape, confusion,¹¹¹ as well as the idea of the quest. The film *Labyrinth*, for example, combines the properties of both the maze and labyrinth. This structure contains many features both modern and ancient: underground passages, hedges, stones, a choice of pathways, a range of moving walls, mystical creatures, and the necessity to find the way back. Above all is the quest of a young girl whose challenges end in the defeat of the power of the Goblin King (David Bowie).¹¹²

That labyrinths and mazes have retained their popularity in text is clearly demonstrated by that most famous of modern fictional characters, Harry Potter, who as part of a competition enters a maze with the central object of gaining a prize. Once there, Harry touches the prize, is transported and finds himself encountering Voldemort, resulting in a battle between them. This tale appears to have elements referencing the ancient legend of Theseus fighting the Minotaur.¹¹³

Revival and the New Age

Since the latter half of the twentieth century there has been a revival of both labyrinths and mazes. Jeff Saward, an author who edits *Caerdroia*, a journal focusing on labyrinths and mazes, argues that the revival, particularly of mazes, began to occur in the 1970s.¹¹⁴ Benjamin Radford in *The Skeptical Enquirer* considers this revival to be part of a “New Age fad [which] has quickly gone mainstream” in the 1990s due to Lauren Artress, a Canon at Grace Cathedral in Los Angeles.¹¹⁵ Artress took inspiration

¹⁰⁸ Doob, *The Idea of the Labyrinth*, pp. 20-24.

¹⁰⁹ Doob, *The Idea of the Labyrinth*, pp. 227ff.

¹¹⁰ Pennick, *Mazes and Labyrinths*, pp. 42-43

¹¹¹ Doob, *The Idea of the Labyrinth*, pp. 72-73.

¹¹² Jim Henson, *Labyrinth* (Culver City, CA: TriStar Pictures, 1986), film.

¹¹³ J. K. Rowling, *Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire* (Pottermore [www.pottermore.com]), Kindle edition. My thanks are due to my niece Chelsea Kahl for this reference.

¹¹⁴ Saward, *Magical Paths*, p. 7.

¹¹⁵ Radford, ‘Labyrinths: Mazes and Myths’, pp. 49-50.

Labyrinths and Mazes

from Chartres Cathedral and established a Chartres-style labyrinth in Los Angeles. She has used the church labyrinth to conduct walks, instructs in the use of labyrinths, and has produced guidebooks on walking the labyrinth. She has been instrumental in establishing a group called Veriditas, and a website, whose mission “is dedicated to inspiring personal and planetary change and renewal through the labyrinth experience.”¹¹⁶ Her great disappointment upon visiting Chartres was finding the labyrinth, being situated in the nave, is usually covered with chairs and cannot be seen.¹¹⁷ The Chartres labyrinth has become a modern popular style and has influenced the installations of labyrinths at Centennial Park, Sydney (Figure 5), and at the Westmead Children’s Hospital, also in Sydney.



Figure 5 – The Labyrinth at Centennial Park, Sydney.

There is no doubt that the labyrinth has taken on mystical properties. Radford also argues that Artress has espoused the idea that the labyrinth is recreating medieval religiosity, but he is critical of this view, stating “Artress provides no evidence that Medieval spirituality was all that great to begin with” and that “this sort of false nostalgia is common in today’s New Age circles.” Radford also sees Artress promoting the idea that a “lack of imagination” has the result of current trends away from religion while others see it as “serving as a kind of user-friendly spirituality.”¹¹⁸ Indeed, at

¹¹⁶ ‘Veriditas’, at <https://www.veriditas.org>. Accessed 01/11/2016.

¹¹⁷ Lauren Artress, *Walking a Sacred Path: Rediscovering the Labyrinths as a Spiritual Practice* (New York: Berkley Publishing Group, 2006), Kindle edition.

¹¹⁸ Radford, ‘Labyrinths: Mazes and Myths’, p. 51.

monthly labyrinth walks held in Sydney's Centennial Park participants utilise meditation, and unity with the surrounding park, as well as Buddhist and other non-Christian poems and texts.

New Age parallels have been made between seven circuit labyrinths and *chakras*. Each of the seven *chakras* are indicative of points in the body such as the heart and eyes, and each *chakra* may be superimposed on each path and guides the thoughts of the walker as the path is followed. The walker's thoughts are concentrated upon the *chakra* that corresponds to the spiritual, the divine, vision and emotions.¹¹⁹ Interestingly, the idea of *chakras* has also been proposed as existing at Chartres Cathedral. Here *chakras* are placed at intervals along the centre of the building with the sacral *chakra* lying at the centre of the labyrinth.¹²⁰ For Bessie Katsilometes numerical symbolism is highly significant in labyrinths such as Chartres, particularly the number one, with its meaning of "wholeness and unity of the cosmos."¹²¹ She also equates the labyrinth with the mandala. This, in her view, continues the medieval idea of unity while incorporating Jung's view of self and god.¹²² As Radford has suggested the labyrinth can be "in essence, anything the user wishes it to be."¹²³

Walking the Labyrinth

Chartres Cathedral has become the most well-known labyrinth and perhaps the one which is considered to be the "ideal" by modern labyrinth enthusiasts. The fact that many modern labyrinths being constructed are appropriating the Chartres design is a reflection of its perceived sacredness. By copying the Chartres labyrinth there is a type of ready-made, ancient sacredness built into the newly-constructed labyrinth. Indeed, Artress believes that modern labyrinth styles "will not carry the transforming power of the Classical Seven-Circuit, the Medieval Eleven-Circuit, or other archetypal patterns."¹²⁴

¹¹⁹ Jeanne M Peel, 'Labyrinth: An Innovative Therapeutic Tool for Problem Solving or Achieving Mental Focus', *The Family Journal*, vol. 12, no. 3 (2004), p. 289.

¹²⁰ Gordon Strachan, *Chartres: Sacred Geometry, Sacred Space* (Edinburgh: Floris, 2003), pp. 83-84.

¹²¹ Katsilometes, 'My Spiritual Journey', p. 194.

¹²² Katsilometes, 'My Spiritual Journey', p. 194.

¹²³ Radford, 'Labyrinths: Mazes and Myths', p. 50.

¹²⁴ Artress, *Sacred Path Companion*.

Labyrinths and Mazes

Walking the Labyrinth has become popular and this is demonstrated by once a month a group walks conducted at the Chartres style labyrinth in Centennial Park, Sydney (New South Wales). This non-religious based walk might commence with a short meditation where participants take some time to focus on the present and clear the mind. For the modern labyrinth the walk leader may use words of a Buddhist text or with a secular background. Walkers enter the labyrinth one by one and slowly walk the twists and turns. There are three stages including entering the labyrinth, arriving at the centre and then the return out of the labyrinth. This activity links into Victor Turner's theories of liminality, *communitas*, and the stages of being a pilgrim. Walkers have the liberty to proceed as they wish: as slowly as they like, following the paths, or utilising the lines between the paths. Whilst at the centre walkers may take a moment of meditation, some sit and meditate, some use the petals in the centre as a tool for mediation or maybe prayer. Walkers also use what are called 'lunations' on the outside of the circle to continue the meditation, stepping into each round section as a further meditation tool. Each walk will follow a different format with a different leader and different leadership style. Similar style walks can be regularly found at Kiama with the labyrinth drawn in the sand and in this respect mirrors a traditional custom in Scotland (Figures 6 and 7).¹²⁵



Figure 6 – Labyrinth on the beach at Kiama.

¹²⁵ Pennick, *Mazes and Labyrinths*, p. 100.



Figure 7 – Walking the Labyrinth at Kiama.

Medical and Psychotherapeutic Uses of Labyrinths

Increasingly labyrinths are being used as a tool in dealing with illness, depression and anxiety. The labyrinth is promoted as a tool with which “the soul finds healing and wholeness.”¹²⁶ The labyrinth is becoming a tool in family and marriage therapies providing each family member the opportunity to focus on issues and conflict and then after walking the labyrinth where they have had time to focus they can discuss. Each family member is required to permit unencumbered travelling on the labyrinth by others. The family can also create their own labyrinth at home for out of session use to resolve issues.¹²⁷

M. Kay Sandor and Robin D. Froman conducted a small study looking at the effects of walking the labyrinth on walkers, and remarked that “no studies testing the effects of the labyrinth walk appear in the [labyrinth] literature, though many have speculated about the effects of the labyrinth walk and how those effects occur.” Despite the limitations of the study in terms of size, it was only one walk rather than over a series of walks (and there were problems imposed by issues such as smoking), the authors concluded the results indicated further study would be useful and that walking the labyrinth may well be an inexpensive method for positive

¹²⁶ Artress, *Walking a Sacred Path*.

¹²⁷ Peel, ‘Labyrinth’, p. 290.

Labyrinths and Mazes

health outcomes.¹²⁸ This is supported by other research by other healthcare professionals.¹²⁹ However, labyrinth walkers cannot expect to be healed as a matter of course.

In adopting the labyrinth as a useful tool for positive health outcomes a Chartres-style of labyrinth has been established at Sydney's Westmead Children's Hospital. This labyrinth has been established in a garden at the hospital. The idea behind labyrinths in such situations is that it allows the walker to focus and meditate, enabling families, patients and staff to better face stresses involved with healthcare.¹³⁰

Conclusion

From ancient beginnings both labyrinths and mazes have developed into a popular spiritual tool. The meanings behind the origination of labyrinths and mazes are unknown and perhaps this has allowed them to grow in a variety of ways into a variety of philosophies. There is a plethora of magazine and journal articles, books and films, which explore labyrinths and mazes or use them as a device in which to set the story. By far the most popular style of labyrinth to be copied and used is the medieval, Chartres labyrinth and would appear to have its own ready-made sacrality as a result of its religious position within a cathedral which itself has been analysed for its magnificent architecture, its relics and its use for pilgrimage. Walking the labyrinth has become popular and enables participants to experience the *communitas* of the pilgrimage using a variety of non-religious components. Mazes on the other hand have not been limited by history and are consequently being built in a variety of shapes and sizes and from a variety of different materials. The number of theories and views of labyrinths and mazes are considerable and they range from the secular to the religious to the New Age and, as previously noted, they can be "in essence, anything the user wishes it to be."¹³¹

¹²⁸ M. Kay Sandor and Robin D. Froman, 'Exploring the Effects of Walking the Labyrinth', *Journal of Holistic Nursing*, vol. 24, no. 103 (2006), pp. 103-109.

¹²⁹ Bloos and O'Connor, 'Ancient and Medieval Labyrinths and Contemporary Narrative Therapy', p. 229.

¹³⁰ Anonymous, 'It's a roundabout Way to Relaxation,' *The Sydney Morning Herald* (6 July 2012), p. 3.

¹³¹ Radford, 'Labyrinths: Mazes and Myths', p. 50.