

THE LABYRINTH AND ITS HISTORY: Excerpts from Various Web Sites

The word labyrinth may make you think of a bewildering puzzle or of a prison-like structure in an ancient Greek myth. Although both of these are often called labyrinths, they are more accurately referred to as mazes. A labyrinth is made up of a single winding path leading to a central goal. A maze, on the other hand, contains many paths, only some of which lead to the goal. Labyrinths lead you invariably to the center—or the labyrinth, of your self—and then lead you back out again. Mazes trap you into dead ends and send you on detours. Labyrinths have been used as spiritual tools for thousands of years; mazes, a much more recent development, are designed for entertainment and intellectual challenge.

Labyrinths have been around for at least four thousand years. Carved on rock faces, painted on pottery, etched into coins, woven into baskets, they have been found all over the world—in, for example, India, Sumatra, Peru, Egypt, Afghanistan, Sardinia, the American Southwest, and England. Usually the pattern is formed by seven interconnected concentric rings, or circuits, leading to the center.

In the Middle Ages, this same pattern was cut into turf or lined with stones to form labyrinths that were large enough to walk on. Many of these labyrinths were used for community ceremonies and processions, as well as for children's games and festivities. Over five hundred stone-lined labyrinths still exist in Scandinavia. There were probably hundreds of turf mazes in England, although only eight have survived.

Beginning in the Middle Ages, another labyrinth pattern became very popular, particularly in France and Italy. This is the eleven-circuit church labyrinth. First carved on church walls or pillars, soon it was laid in tile or marble in the pavement in the nave of the great Gothic cathedrals. The 41-foot-wide labyrinth at Chartres, laid down in the nave around 1220, is the most elegant—and one of the few that survives.

Although the seven-circuit labyrinth is also found in churches, the eleven-circuit labyrinth contains symbolism that is distinctly Christian. The overall shape of the turns of the path forms an equal-armed cross. In the center of the Chartres labyrinth is a six-petaled flower, which stands for a rose or a lily, the flowers associated with the Virgin Mary. Around the edge are cusp-like forms called lunations (some scholars believe that they were used as a lunar calendar to calculate the date for Easter). We also know that special Easter ceremonies were performed on some of these labyrinths.

Some church labyrinths were called “the road to Jerusalem,” with the center referred to as “the New Jerusalem” or “Heaven.” It is probable that the faithful walked these labyrinthine paths instead of going on pilgrimages to the Holy Lands—especially when the Crusades made a trip to Palestine a very dangerous proposition. Walking a labyrinth could have been experienced as a condensed form of pilgrimage, in which one walked a convoluted path to a sacred center.

The rediscovery of the medieval labyrinth is one of the most important spiritual developments of our day. Throughout human history, pilgrimage, the search for the holy, has been a recurrent movement. The Hebrew scriptures frequently represent God's people journeying, to a land of Promise, to Zion, to sacred places. The Psalms also bear witness to this yearning deep within the heart of the Covenant people. The first Christians were called “people of the Way” and they willingly followed the path Jesus set before them.

These early pilgrims walked the labyrinth as we do today, as a metaphor of our life's journey. Today labyrinths are being used in churches, in hospitals, in retirement centers, in parks, in prisons, and in retreat and conference centers.