

The Labyrinthine Path of Pilgrimage

by Tessa Morrison, School of Architecture and Built Environment, The University of Newcastle, Australia; Tessa.Morrison@newcastle.edu.au

Within many of the great Gothic cathedrals such as Chartres Cathedral, San Michele Maggiore, Pavia, and San Vitale, Ravenna, lay large floor labyrinths. Most of these face the altar as the dominant feature of the nave, and are either round or



Figure 1
Plan of the Chartres Labyrinth

octagonal in shape. They vary in size from cathedral to cathedral. In France, some measure a massive twelve and half meters in diameter, large enough to walk on, following the path into the center. (Figure 1) The geometric structure that appears in the architectural labyrinths¹ also appears in *computus* manuscripts, which feature calendar computations, astronomical computation, and cosmological texts. This article will examine

how pilgrimage became embodied in the concept of the labyrinth, beginning with the earliest known use of these medieval floor

labyrinths, the Auxerre pelota ritual and its possible predecessors, then it will investigate its connection to Easter and its embodiment in ecclesiastical dance that reflected the harmony of the spheres and the tripartite dance of the angels.

The earliest surviving *computus* manuscript that uses a labyrinth in an illustration is dated 806-22.² It features an ancient Cretan-style labyrinth.

(Figure 2) In contrast, the oldest surviving depiction of a church-style labyrinth is found in a tenth-century *computus* manuscript, contains a calendar, Easter cycles, and annuals. (Figure 3)



Figure 2
Italian Computus Manuscript 9th century AD

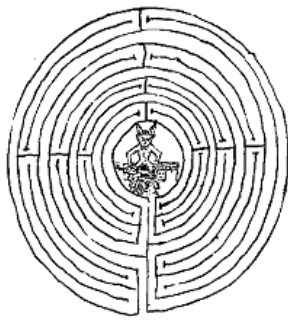


Figure 3
A Church Labyrinth Style in a Tenth-century
Computus Manuscript

hundred years earlier than the floor labyrinths in the European cathedrals.³

The labyrinths on the cathedral floors became known as “the path to Jerusalem,” a symbol of pilgrimage. This is reflected in etchings and drawings of the eighteenth and nineteenth century, which show members of the congregation sedately walking on the paths of the labyrinth, while other drawings show monks praying on their knees demurely crawling around the path of a turf labyrinth. (Figure 5) These images of the contemplative



Figure 5
Monks Praying on a Turf Labyrinth

walker of the labyrinth have remained in the public mind, inspiring a contemporary growth in the popularity of church labyrinths and groups walking labyrinths. Unfortunately, there is no evidence that these meditative walks around the path of the labyrinth occurred prior to these eighteenth and nineteenth century images.

In the eighteenth century many labyrinths were removed from cathedrals, including that at Reims Cathedral which was removed in 1778 on the orders of Canon Jacquemart, who claimed that the noise of the children playing on the labyrinth disturbed the divine service. The Canon found the noise so distracting that he paid 1,000 livres out of his own pocket to have it removed.⁴ The labyrinth at Sens Cathedral was also removed, so the existing labyrinth is a

Figure 4 depicts a cathedral-style labyrinth, dated 1072, which was inserted in a text on how to calculate the date of Easter. The diagram on the upper right-hand side bears the inscription *Quattuor haec sunt bona: spernere mundum/ nullum / sese/ sperin*, “these are the four excellences / to despise the world/ to despise nobody/ despise oneself or for oneself to be despised.” These representations of the church-style labyrinths date two-

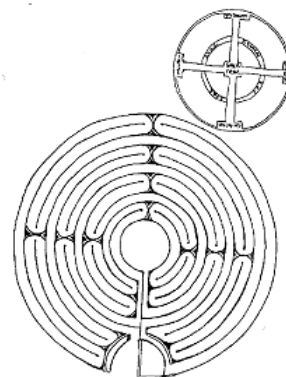


Figure 4
A Cathedral Style Labyrinth in a Computus
Manuscript dated 1072

reconstruction. The original was destroyed in 1768 again because of the noise of the children playing on it. Whatever the reason for this destruction, they were no longer held in reverence that their position in the nave implies. They had lost their original meaning and were reduced to a place for children to play games.

However, there are records and descriptions of singing, dancing and ball-games in the late Middle Ages performed on the cathedral labyrinths. Medieval records reveal that the clergy danced on some of these labyrinths. The most extensive medieval records on ecclesiastical dance are those of the *Auxerre pelota* ritual. This dance was performed on the floor labyrinth at the Cathedral of St. Stephen, Auxerre, on Easter Monday Vespers.⁵ The Bishop of Mende, G. Durandus, late thirteenth century, mentioned that occasionally on Easter and sometimes at Christmas, priests and their clerks played ball games accompanied by songs and dances.⁶ The rules and a description of the ball-game dance are preserved in a decree of 1396.⁷

The Dean would gather the canons for Vespers on the floor labyrinth, the newly-elected canon would present the Dean with a ball that had to be large enough to be held in both hands. Holding the ball in his left hand the Dean performed a *tripudium* movement, a dance that considered of three movements: turn, halt, and counter-turn. While they danced, the monks sang the Easter hymn *Victimi Paschali laudes*. Meanwhile, the canons joined hands in a Chorea, and danced, *circa daedalum*, around the labyrinth. As the dance was being performed the Dean would throw the ball back and forth continuously. Unfortunately, how the dance was actually staged is unknown. The dance was described as *tripartite* and 'garland-like.'⁸

Unfortunately, the Auxerre labyrinth was destroyed for unknown reasons shortly before 1690,⁹ and as no drawing survives, the structure is unknown. However, it is thought to be similar or the same as the Chartres labyrinth. (Figure 1) There is some evidence that Easter dances were performed by clerics during Easter Vespers at Chartres,¹⁰ in the metropolitan church in Sens,¹¹ and Amiens Cathedral.¹² The bishops of both Auxerre and Chartres were subject to the Archbishop of Sens, and ecclesiastical rituals as well as iconographic architectural features like the labyrinth, would be shared among various church in the archdiocese.¹³

The *tripartite* structure of the dance of the clergy had an ancient foundation. To Plato (c. 428-347 B.C.), the heavens abounded with dance and music. The movement of the planets and the stars created or was the source of the choral dance of the heavens. The universe of Plato was constructed by two great circles, the circle of the Same and the circle of Other.¹⁴ The circle of the Same was the fixed stars, unchanging and constant. The circle of the Other consisted of the spheres of the seven planets that encircled the earth, with visibly different orbits. The motion of the Same was right to left, east to west. The motion of the Other was left to right, west to east.¹⁵ The circle of the Other appeared to travel, east to west. However, it actually traveled with the fixed stars east to west, which took a day to complete an orbit while the sun that traveled west to east took an entire year to complete its orbit.¹⁶ The planets moved to the right, while the fixed stars moved to the left around a stationary earth. The choric dance reflected this *tripartite* structure: turn to the heavens from east to west, counter-turn to the planets from west to east and halt, the stationary position of the earth.¹⁷ This choric dance was performed to the harmony of the spheres. A siren on each of the eight celestial spheres, that made up the circle of the Other, each siren uttering a single note while the fates, Lachesis, Clotho and Atropos sung from a distance to their music.¹⁸ This was an ancient dance that revealed the mysteries of the visible world.

In Plato's *Republic*, in the story of Er,¹⁹ Er traveled to heavenly spheres, in the afterlife to the music of the harmony of the spheres. Er then returned to Earth and related his experiences. This story was later replicated in Cicero's *Dream of Scipio*.²⁰ Traveling through the heavenly spheres was implicit in the work of Plato and Cicero. However, it was made explicit by the fourth century A.D., in Macrobius' *Commentary on the Dream of Scipio*. The assumption that the soul traveled through successive heavenly spheres as a vehicle of reincarnation belonged to the integration of Neo-Platonism.

The anonymous Neo-Platonic writer Pseudo-Dionysius (c. fifth-sixth century A.D.) used the concept of the illumination of God traveling through the angelic spheres. The hierarchy of the nine angelic spheres danced a *tripartite* dance.²¹ The purpose of the dance of the angels was to spread the illumination of God to the human hierarchy below. The head of the human hierarchy was the hierarch or bishop, whose main task was to mimic the angelic hierarchy. The hierarch preformed the Eucharist and the main purpose

of the Eucharist was to pass on the illumination of God.²² By the time the large labyrinths were built into medieval cathedrals, Pseudo-Dionysius' *Celestial Hierarchy* and the *Ecclesiastical Hierarchy* were two of the most influential books of their time.

The *tripartite* dances of the clerics at Auxerre on Easter Monday were danced on a labyrinth that consisted of twelve concentric circuits. These twelve circuits of the medieval labyrinths may have represented the medieval concept of the universe. (Figure 6)



Figure 6
The Medieval Concept of the Universe

The medieval universe was depicted as twelve spheres; the four elements (earth, water, fire, and air) in the center, then the Moon, the Sun, the five visible planets, and the fixed stars. These twelve spheres were the spheres of *computus* used to calculate the date of Easter. In the *computus*

manuscripts the cathedral-style labyrinths are only shown in their round form, while the octagonal labyrinths were preserved for the floors of the cathedrals. Indeed, this was the shape of many baptisteries and baptismal fonts of the period.

The canons and the Deans danced the *tripartite* ceremonial ball dance around the labyrinth at Auxerre Cathedral. To follow the pattern of these large labyrinths is to encircle the labyrinth, halt and then encircle the labyrinth in opposite direction, to move through the labyrinth is to turn – halt – counter-turn. The medieval cathedral labyrinths have a *tripartite* structure to the center. The medieval cathedral floor labyrinths and the dance of the clergy were the earthy representation of the *tripartite* dance of the angels, which spread the illumination of God, as described by Pseudo-Dionysius. This Easter ceremony was the path of pilgrimage of the soul to receive the illumination of God to seek the understanding of Perfect. Through the performance of this dance, the Christian mysteries could transcend the mere natural and enter into the realm of the incorporeal through the symbols of the corporeal realm. 🕊

Endnotes

¹ Tessa Morrison, "The Geometry of History: 03217658," *Vismath* 3/4 (2001).

² Hermann Kern, *Through the Labyrinth* (Munich: Prestel, 2000), p. 131. This book is an excellent pictorial reference for labyrinths. However, I believe that Kern's interpretations are not always completely accurate.

³ A fourth-century floor labyrinth from the Cathedral of Algiers survives, but it is a square Roman-style labyrinth.

⁴ Kern, p. 160; Keith Critchlow, "Chartres Maze: A Model of the Universe," *Architecture Association Quarterly* 5/2 (1973): 11-21. On p. 12, Critchlow mistakenly states that the Amiens labyrinth was destroyed by Canon Jacquemart. The date the destruction is also incorrect.

⁵ Penelope B. R. Doob, "The Auxerre Labyrinth," *Paper presented at the Myriad Faces of Dance*. (University of New Mexico, February 15-17, 1985), p. 140.

⁶ E. K. Chambers, *The Mediaeval Stage* (London: Oxford University Press, 1903), pp.128-29.

⁷ Chambers, p. 67.

⁸ Chambers, p. 67.

⁹ Kern, p. 150.

¹⁰ Kern, p. 147.

¹¹ E. Louis Backman, *Religious Dances in the Christian Church and in Popular Medicine* (London: George Allen & Unwin Ltd, 1952), p. 75.

¹² Penelope Reed Doob, *The Idea of the Labyrinth* (London: Cornell University Press, 1990), p. 123.

¹³ Doob, 1985, p.134.

¹⁴ Plato. *Timaeus*. Translated by R. G. Bury. (London: William Heinemanns, 1952), 36c.

¹⁵ Plato, 36d.

¹⁶ Plato, 36c-37c.

¹⁷ Lillian B. Lawler, "Cosmic Dance and Dithyramb" in *Studies in Honour of Ullman*, edited by Lillian B. Lawler (St Louis: The University of St Louis Press, 1960), p. 12.

¹⁸ Plato. *Plato's Republic* Translated by G. M. A. Grube (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 1994), 617b.

¹⁹ Plato, 617b.

²⁰ William Harris Stahl, *Commentary on the Dream of Scipio* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1952).

²¹ Pseudo-Dionysius, *Pseudo-Dionysius: The Complete Works* Translated by Colm Lubheid (Mahwah: Paulist Press, 1987).

²² Pseudo-Dionysius, *The Ecclesiastical Hierarchy*, 425c.