

SOLVITUR AMBULANDO IT IS SOLVED BY WALKING

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For some time I was an active member of a small church group in Lake County. We enjoyed non-traditional services and one Sunday we gathered at the edge of a labyrinth in Painesville. I had lived in Painesville for forty plus years and never, until that Sunday morning, knew of the existence of a labyrinth. After some preliminary remarks we each, in turn, started to walk the path of the labyrinth. To say that it was a profound experience probably overstates the case but I clearly recall being moved by it, intrigued by it, feeling a sense of peace and calm as I walked. While on private property it was open to the public at that time and I returned several times in the ensuing weeks and months. Often I took others to experience the labyrinth.

The second impetus to my interest occurred just over a year ago while I did a volunteer stint in a rare book library. There among the ancient volumes I found a book not so ancient, in fact very recent in relation to its 15th and 16th century neighbors. It was: Mazes and Labyrinths, A General Account of their History and Developments, by W.H. Matthews. The Matthews book was published in 1922, apparently a small run, original copies still available but far beyond my book buying budget. It was not republished until 1970 by Dover Publications, an edition also hard to find but still reasonably priced. The Dover edition includes all of the over 150 Illustrations included in the earlier Matthews edition.

Matthews devotes no less than three chapters to what is arguably the most famous labyrinth of all, the supposedly original and doubtless mythical labyrinth designed by Daedalus, of wax wing fame. This labyrinth is located at Knossos, on the island of Crete in the Mediterranean Sea. Since my wife and I had plans to spend a week on Crete in the very near future and certainly planned to visit the ancient ruins of the palace at Knossos, labyrinths again captured my imagination.

A small digression into Greek Mythology is warranted here. The Minoan kingdom on Crete was the powerhouse of the Eastern Mediterranean before mainland Greeks got themselves organized. Much of what we understand about the Minoans is riddled with mythology, especially the fabled King Minos and his erstwhile wife Pasiphae. Minos "...had a wife and couldn't keep her" as the rhyme goes. She was enamored of and seduced by Zeus, king of the gods, who appeared to her in the form of a

bull. Pasiphae prevailed on Daedalus, the court artificer, to construct a huge effigy of a bull in which she and Zeus could carry out their liaison. As a result of this dalliance Pasiphae delivered a monster, the Minotaur (half man-half bull) among whose more objectionable habits was the dietary predilection for human flesh.

To contain the Minotaur Minos again called on the skills of Daedalus who fashioned the most famous and mythologically speaking, original so called labyrinth a construct so complex in its twisting and turning pathway that, once in, the unfortunate traveler could never find his/her way out. The Minotaur's lunch would simply be shoved into the front door (the Minotaur preferred tender young flesh) where he/she wandered about in the labyrinthine passages until they encountered the Minotaur and were promptly devoured.

To keep the Minotaur supplied with his grisly groceries Minos picked a fight with Athens on the mainland and emerging victorious demanded as periodic tribute seven young men and seven young women. These were duly sent to Crete and one by one fed into the labyrinth for the Minotaur. As tribute time approached you can imagine that Athenian parents grew steadily more nervous lest their adolescent be selected.

Arriving in Athens at about this time is Theseus, alleged son of Aegeus, King of Athens. Theseus had been raised elsewhere by his mother who eventually sends the unruly lad, by prior agreement, to his father in Athens. On his way to Athens, Theseus has a series of encounters with monsters, some human, some not and emerges each time victorious having slain his adversary. On hearing of the tribute required of Athens Theseus says to his father "...send me and I will slay the Minotaur." King Aegeus is reluctant to do this but relents and soon Theseus and his sacrificial companions set sail for Crete.

On arrival they disembark and Theseus meets Ariadne, the beautiful daughter of King Minos. They promptly fall in love (or at least Ariadne does!) (remember this is a fairy tale!). When it is Theseus' turn to enter the labyrinth Ariadne, at the suggestion of Daedalus, gives Theseus a ball of golden thread and a magic sword. Theseus unwinds the former as he wanders the turns of the labyrinth (a definite improvement over bread crumbs) and on meeting the Minotaur slays same with the magic sword. Turning about he simply follows the golden thread (an early gps!) and to the astonishment of all emerges from the labyrinth intact, unscathed, and victorious.

Gathering his remaining Athenian compatriots he sails off to return home taking with him the lovely Ariadne. Their first stop is the island of Naxos where they reprovision before setting out again inexplicably leaving Ariadne behind. This desertion is a lucky thing for Ariadne as she has her own adventures and new lovers, most notably Dionysus. Her exploits are recounted, in part, in the 20th century opera Ariadne auf Noxos.

Theseus stops next on the island of Delos where we will leave him but not before mentioning the entertainment he provides his shipmates. He recounts his journey through the labyrinth in a dance with complicated winding and twisting steps culminating in the

battle with the Minotaur followed by the torturous winding exit from the labyrinth. It is this dance, known through the ages as the Crane Dance that we will return to momentarily.

So we visited Knossos on the island of Crete paying particular attention to the basement, if you will, of the palace, the site of the fabled labyrinth. Only a small part of this area is open to the public which is a good thing as once you got tourists in there you'd never get them out! But this area in no way resembles a labyrinth. It looks more like a maze but examining the floor plan drawings that are available it fails to meet the requirements of a maze.

Knossos is only one of several sites on Crete that claim to be the original labyrinth. The caves of Gortnya are indeed more labyrinthine and have claimed the lives of more than a few adventurers who went in and could not find their way out. Gortyna tunnels under Mt. Ida on the southern shore of Crete. This site is rarely open to the public, the Greek government tiring of organizing rescue parties for lost spelunkers!

So what is a labyrinth and what is a maze. Last summer as I researched this I consulted five dictionaries scattered about our house and each one used the word labyrinth to describe a maze and maze to describe a labyrinth! A few weeks ago, just for fun, I looked at dictionaries in a large bookstore. This included one of those electronic gizmos and fared no better. A very condensed version of the OED said the same thing. Language is a very imprecise thing and obviously these words are used interchangeably. In the latter half of the 20th century a great renewal of interest in labyrinths and mazes has thankfully seen the emergence of more precise definitions, at least among aficionados. Jeff Saward is a 20th and 21st century scholar, writer, architect, and builder of labyrinths and mazes. His definition makes it clear. I quote:

“To qualify as a maze, a design must have choices in the pathway.” The maze is multi-cursal, i.e. many paths.

“To qualify as a labyrinth, a design should have but one path.” It is uni-cursal, i.e. one path.

There are other frequently found characteristics of each but it is dangerous to use them as defining for as soon as one cites a characteristic as being of a maze a labyrinth is found with the same features and vice versa. In a very general way one can say that mazes are more often built of organic material (hedges, wood, etc.) while labyrinths are more often fashioned of inorganic material (stone, metal, etc.). Mazes tend to be walled structures, you can't see the goal; the end is not in sight. Labyrinths tend to be flat surfaces where the goal is in sight from the beginning. This is true of labyrinth designs horizontal or vertical.

Mazes, with their intersecting pathways require you to choose between 2, 3, or more options for going forward. Usually, though not always, only one option is correct and soon you are faced with a dead end or another intersection and more decision

making. Most of us have entered mazes. They are standard fare at amusement park fun houses. Famous mazes are found at Hampden Court in England and at the governors Palace in Williamsburg. The botanical garden at St. Louis has a fabulous maze as have other gardens throughout the country. The Japanese are masters at maze construction having three dimensional mazes where a choice may entail ascending a flight of steps, traveling high above many pathways and descending at a far different point. There are interactive mazes where choices you make in the pathway, by some electronic gimmick, alters the future choices you will confront ahead as well as those you face if you turn around. Children love mazes and find seemingly endless enjoyment in the starts and stops of the pathways. Adults like them too, for about fifteen minutes when monitored subjects begin to show signs of increasing anxiety. One writer suggested that if an adult has not found his/her way out of a maze in forty-five minutes it is best to send in an experienced guide to get them out. Most of us cannot handle prolonged disorientation.

Labyrinths on the other hand are found to produce the opposite effect. There's no hindrance to sight or sound and you can see where you are going i.e. the goal from the getgo. Indeed, one of the current uses of the labyrinth is to achieve the calming, grounding, or meditative affect for the individual traveler. More on that in a moment.

It is labyrinths that I wish to talk about, not mazes. Labyrinths are far more interesting to me in their history, uses, and universality. The earliest documented labyrinth was in Egypt. Its presence and design are reported by Herodotus. Subsequent writers suggest that he may have in fact visited a maze. Again we see the confusion of language. In researching my interest and for this paper I developed the habit of requiring a visual confirmation that any individual writer was discussing a labyrinth and not a maze. Their uses have doubtless evolved but clearly included dance, spiritual, theological, and some very practical applications. Their ubiquity is perhaps more puzzling. It is easy to see how the labyrinth design may have been carried along trade routes both maritime and overland. Not so easy is to account for their appearance in the pre Columbian Americas, both North and South or in ancient rock carvings in subSaharan Africa dated prior to the advent of Europeans. Asian examples may again be carried by traders but their appearance in no trade areas is mystifying. I suggest with neither confirming nor contrary evidence that the concept of the labyrinth design may have developed in various places independent of extraterrestrial or earth bound human contact.

Needless to say, the labyrinth was enormously popular in the Mediterranean countries. Examples abound in the ancient world from Greece throughout the Roman empire. Floor labyrinths were excavated in Pompeii and Herculaneum. The story of Theseus was popular and many mosaic, painted, and stained glass designs depict Theseus slaying the monster as the centerpiece. Much less sophistication is seen in labyrinths scratched on rock in areas populated by Celtic cultures in northwest Spain and south west France. In England labyrinths are so plentiful that they are added to the list of artifacts that must be preserved from obliteration by progress or neglect. Some found in western regions of Europe are thought to predate Roman examples. Dating artifacts scratched on stone is a tricky archeological business, I gather, so questions do exist as to relative

antiquity. Sometimes dating is based on associated rock art that may even overlap or obscure portions of a labyrinth. If the associated art can be dated the assumption is made that the earlier layer is of an earlier period. At any rate many examples found, usually on vertical surfaces predate the common era by several thousand years.

The style, shape, and size of labyrinth are as varied as the locale. Earliest examples (the palace at Knossos notwithstanding) are dubbed the Classical Pattern. Usually having seven circuits or paths it is seen in example 2 on the handout. The same basic design but with eleven paths is seen in example 8. In the Roman era the design took on an angularity not seen earlier, i.e. square, octagonal, or rectangular shapes as illustrated in examples 3,5,6, and 7. These are not Roman obviously but show designs copied from Roman walls and floor art. Not all labyrinth goals showed Theseus and the Minotaur. Many are simply clear space while others have rich geometric patterns. At least one Roman example has as its goal a couple in a vigorous act of copulation.

Perhaps it was the latter “pornographic” images or the fact that that the labyrinth was so prevalent in pre Christian art that caused the earliest church fathers to consider them pagan and banned their appearance or use. Whatever the reason it was lucky for posterity that the medieval church recovered from this combined prudery and bigotry. As often happens in the evolution of the great religious traditions earlier forms of art or activity are simply incorporated into the expanding repertoire of religious imagery and behavior.

In the Vatican library there is a drawing of a labyrinth dating to the mid 9th century. No example of this design has been found. The earliest known example of a medieval Christian labyrinth is found in Chartres Cathedral, France. See example #4. Much has been written of its mathematical and astronomical significance, its geometric symbolism, and its orientation to celestial bodies, etc. Indeed, the labyrinth began to appear all over Europe as far north as the Scandinavian countries. Labyrinths appear on church floors, walls, windows, coins, paintings, tapestry, in fact, in every conceivable art form including personal dress. Obviously they are not limited to churches but found in public buildings, private property, indoors and out.

Why? What was the fascination with this artifact? What is the fascination with this artifact that it has survived and inspired so many permutations throughout history and throughout the world? Not only did it survive but it appears to have spontaneously popped up in so many unrelated and disparate places. Perhaps the most far fetched reported use of a labyrinth comes from the lore of Scandinavia. Some knowledgeable writers believed the labyrinth to be a signaling device to alert ships at sea of dangerous rocks or shoals or, conversely, to guide them into danger as a form of land based piracy. Others suggest that as a fisherman went down to sea he would walk a labyrinth to center himself for the dangerous tasks ahead and to pray for a good catch. Enter the contemplative mode of labyrinth behavior.

In much of Europe the labyrinth was perceived as symbolic of our torturous path through life or to salvation. Again, an aid to contemplation. On certain church holidays

a priest or other officiant would lead the congregants in procession through the turning and twisting path of the labyrinth. I had a hard time envisioning this on a unicursal path as exiting the same way one entered seems a crowded and confusing operation. Lo, a labyrinth was designed that provided a separate path so that the procession could exit the labyrinth without intersecting the lines of those entering. An example of such a pathway is provided in the handout.

Despite the rather common appearance of cathedral labyrinths of the medieval period there is scant mention of them in the very considerable body of ecclesiastical literature of the day. One exception to this silence is found in the “Chapter Rules” of a monastery near Auxerre, France written in 1396. The rules called for the dean of the chapter to celebrate Easter by the ritual “...dancing through a labyrinth to the tune of Easter hymns throwing a ball randomly to other clerics dancing on the outer perimeter.” The significance of this activity is not recorded but it returns us to the association of dance and labyrinths. As late as the 19th century certain central European cultures celebrated certain holidays by repeating their localized version of the Crane Dance (remember Theseus?) in an actual labyrinth.

In the British Isles there is evidence of Roman type labyrinths being introduced from the South and Nordic designs from the North. While some labyrinths are represented in cathedrals and other ecclesiastical settings the greatest number, over 1000 recorded examples, were scattered throughout the countryside near villages and towns. Matthews whom I have mentioned earlier was English which may account for the larger census of labyrinths on record in the British Isles.

The medieval Christian labyrinths of Europe and even the simpler classical designs of the Mediterranean were usually of closely fit stone varying in color to distinguish path from border and carefully constructed in an extremely craftsman like manner. This careful attention to construction detail may account for their survival to this day. In Northern Europe simpler materials were used in primarily classical labyrinth designs. Mere courses of unworked stone were laid out marking the path. A different form appeared in England, the so called “turf maze”. These mazes, really labyrinths, were called by a wide variety of names: Troy Towns, Trojan Walls, Julien’s Bower, and a host of others often reflecting nomenclature of local origin.

The construction here was simply sod lifted from the earth and piled along side to more clearly demarcate the path. The traveler walked on the hard packed earth between the turfs. These were easy to make, of simple design, and were literally strewn about all over the British Isles.

As one might expect this proliferation bred a wide variety of common usage both sacred and profane. Festivals celebrating whatever were held at the labyrinth’s edge and were the site of dancing, races, picnics, and very often said to be an aid to courtship. The twisting and turning of the path may again be symbolic of the torturous path of the swain to the hand and heart of his lady love.

The labyrinth has enjoyed a growing popularity in the U.S. Mazes have been around in many manifestations for a long time and are still with us today. Note the “corn Maze” seen in rural areas, a phenomenon unknown before the early 1990’s. The labyrinth proper has enjoyed a more recent uptick in appreciation and are found well constructed in sophisticated sites all over the country. Indeed, no less than a mile from where we sit, Trinity Cathedral has three labyrinths of different designs and styles, one a reproduction of the design from Chartes Cathedral near Paris. Another of this design is found on the campus of Ursuline College. The medieval Christian design seems to be favored in the U.S., especially among church groups. A large turf like construction in Bethesda, MD has on its perimeter a 4X4 plexiglass finger labyrinth of the Medieval Christian design so that the vision impaired can trace the path with fingertips that their sighted friends walk just a few feet away.

The given purpose of the labyrinth in the U.S. seems to favor the contemplative nature, a centering or calming tool. Ann Burger, Director of Pain Management and Palliative Care at the National Institute of Health returned from her own pilgrimage to France and sought to construct a full size replica of a Medieval Christian Labyrinth on hospital grounds. There was much opposition but she persisted and prevailed. The objective was to serve as a tool to reduce stress in patients. It was soon discovered that the labyrinth was used far more by staff than by patients. She writes: “The last place on earth one would expect to find a labyrinth is in the flagship hospital of one of the world’s leading institutions in conventional medical research.”

I conclude with a remark from Jeff Saward. Saward and Fisher whom I have quoted before are two of the foremost designers and builders of labyrinths today. Saward’s comment: “throughout the long history of mazes and labyrinths, whenever and wherever society is undergoing rapid change and development, the labyrinth, in one form or another, has blossomed. The expansion of worldwide tourism and growing leisure time has created an environment with many opportunities for mazes that are increasingly complex, whether symbolically, intellectually, or technologically, in order to entice and ensnare a new generation of visitors. Contrastingly, in these uncertain times, humanity is once again seeking the sure path of the labyrinth, reflecting as it does the journey of life in which one step is taken at a time, as the turns and setbacks of life in the modern world are negotiated.”

Solvitur Ambulando - It is solved by walking!