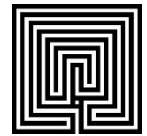


# The First Labyrinths

Jeff Seward



*One of the most frequently asked questions in the study of labyrinths is “Where are the earliest examples of the labyrinth symbol and when did they first appear?”*

Despite our ever-increasing knowledge and a wave of new discoveries in recent years, the answer to these questions remains as elusive and difficult to pin down as ever. The dating of many of the early examples is often difficult and sometimes controversial, but it is clear that the earliest reliably datable labyrinths are found in Southern Europe, and based on the current understanding of the evidence, the labyrinth symbol first appeared around some four thousand years ago. Throughout this region, the same ‘classical’ style of design – a series of seven concentric pathways, carefully connected and surrounding a central goal – is used in nearly all instances prior to the first few centuries BCE.

Those that have survived from this earliest episode of labyrinth history are for the most part scratched or painted on fragments of pottery, inscribed on old walls or carved on rock surfaces, materials that survive the passage of time, but there were surely many more examples, in forms that have not survived to appear in the archaeological record. However, accurate dating of these early labyrinths is often difficult, sometimes almost impossible, and a number of questionable and erroneous claims have caused considerable confusion in many early studies.

A labyrinth incised on the inner wall of a chamber in a Neolithic *Domus de Janas* underground tomb at Luzzanas, on the island of Sardinia, is often claimed to date to ca. 2500 BCE, but the carving style is quite unlike other decoration of that time in similar tombs. It is more likely to be Roman, or later, graffiti, not uncommon in such tombs in Sardinia, maybe scratched sometime during the first five centuries BCE or CE.

A similar age could well apply to the labyrinth decorated pottery fragments, parts of a small bowl, from Tell Rifa’at, Syria, often claimed to date to ca. 1200 BCE, but found in a disturbed archaeological context and also possibly from the first few centuries BCE.

Likewise, the labyrinth carved on the Hollywood Stone from County Wicklow, Ireland, often claimed to date to ca. 2000 BCE, is surely early Christian or even mediaeval, 6<sup>th</sup>-14<sup>th</sup> centuries CE and the Rocky Valley labyrinth carvings in Cornwall, England, often described as Bronze Age, probably date from the 18<sup>th</sup> century CE!



***Top: inscription, Luzzanas, Sardinia  
Middle: pottery, Tell Rifa’at, Syria  
Below: petroglyph, Rocky Valley, England  
Photos: Jeff Seward***

However, there are labyrinth petroglyphs of genuine prehistoric origin to be found in Europe, their antiquity proven by their association with other undoubtedly ancient inscriptions. The most intriguing of these are surely the collection of labyrinths and labyrinthine designs carved on rock outcrops in the provinces of Pontevedra and Vigo along the coastline of Galicia in Northwest Spain, and a newly discovered panel at Lucillo in León, some 200 km further inland from here.

Along with true labyrinth symbols, there are several rock art panels in this region with designs that are very labyrinthine - not perfect labyrinths, but close enough that they can be interpreted as failed attempts to construct a labyrinth, perhaps by somebody not totally familiar with the technique. Alternatively, they may represent “prototypes” in an attempt to establish the design. The association of a number of these Galician labyrinths with carvings of deer and other wild animals is also of considerable interest. Maybe these petroglyphs are hunter’s art, magical symbols for the hunt?

As with all prehistoric rock art, dating these inscriptions is fraught with problems. For many years the Galician labyrinths had been ascribed to early Iron Age, as the labyrinths were of the same design (and therefore presumably the same age) as those from Valcamonica in the Italian Alps. However, recent re-appraisal of the Spanish petroglyphs has plausibly suggested that the labyrinths of Galicia date to a much earlier time period. The discovery of rock art panels overlaid by other dateable features provided valuable clues and the analysis of depictions of distinctive types of tools and weapons that appear among the complex mixture of symbols on these stones also allows comparison to be made with similar objects found in securely datable burial deposits from the same region.

The outcome of this process is the realization that the majority of the rock art in Galicia belongs to the late Neolithic and the beginning of the Bronze Age, after which no further carvings were added to the stones, apart from some later graffiti. This dates these labyrinths to somewhere during the second half of the third millennium or the beginning of the second millennium BCE, (ca. 2500-1800 BCE). While further discoveries and research will hopefully refine the dating of these labyrinths, this would suggest that they are the earliest examples currently known, indeed they could be as much as a thousand years older than any labyrinth that can be confidently dated.



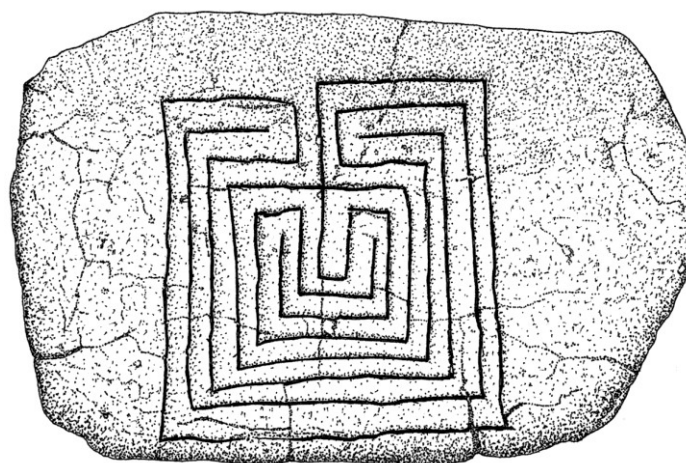
**Top: Mogor, Galicia, Spain**  
**Middle: Chan do Lagoa, Galicia, Spain**  
**Lower: Lucillo, León, Spain**  
**Photos: Jeff Saward**

The labyrinths that occur on the extensive rock art panels at Valcamonica in northern Italy are far better known than the examples in Galicia, especially due to the efforts of Emmanuel Anati, whose pioneering work to record the 15,000 or more carvings that decorate numerous rock outcrops along the sides of this Alpine valley started in 1956 and is continued by other researchers to this day. At least four true labyrinths have been found amongst this plethora of rock art and several further designs, close enough to suggest that they are labyrinth derivatives, have been recorded. These labyrinth petroglyphs are commonly attributed to the early Iron Age, ca. 750-500 BCE, although the complex juxtaposition of carvings on many of the rock surfaces in Valcamonica, ranging from the Neolithic (prior to 2000 BCE) to later Etruscan and Roman periods, often makes it extremely difficult to be certain of the carving sequences and the age of any specific elements.

The best-known example from Naquane, appears to have a pair of eyes pecked at its centre and is surrounded by a number of other interesting figures; crowds of fighting warriors surround other examples at Dos del Merichi and Luine. An interesting observation regarding these labyrinths from Valcamonica is that the majority appear to accompany groups of warriors indulging in battle, whether real or ritual. The spears, swords and shields wielded by these warriors are clearly from the late Bronze Age or the Iron Age. This is in marked contrast to the labyrinths from the rock art sites in Galicia, where most accompany depictions of wild animals. It would appear that they not only date from different times, but there is also a different perception, and possibly purpose, for the labyrinth in these two cultures, although in the absence of any written records from this time, any attempt to explain the meaning of these early labyrinth rituals remains highly conjectural.

Despite the apparent popularity of the labyrinth with the rock artists of Valcamonica and Galicia, the design has so far not been found elsewhere amongst the extensively documented rock art along the Atlantic seaboard of Europe. The occasional examples of labyrinths found as rock inscriptions in Scandinavia, and elsewhere in Europe (Ireland and Cornwall, for instance), are usually of much more recent origin. While the clearly prehistoric labyrinths carved on the rock faces provide tantalizing clues to the early origins and purposes of the labyrinth, they provide little in the way of dating evidence to place them precisely into a historical timeframe. We must turn instead to the work of archaeologists to find examples for which secure dates can be ascertained.

At the current time, the earliest example of the labyrinth symbol, for which an accurate and precise date can be determined, is on a Linear B inscribed clay tablet from the Mycenaean palace at Pylos in southern Greece. Accidentally preserved by the fire that destroyed the palace ca. 1200 BCE, the front of the tablet records deliveries of goats to the palace, the square labyrinth scratched on the reverse is clearly a doodle by the scribe. It is interesting that this was discovered at the traditional home of King Nestor, who with Menelaos, raised the fleet of 'long black ships' to assist in the siege and subsequent downfall of Troy (dated by most scholars to ca. 1250 BCE), as recorded in Homer's *Iliad*.



**Top: petroglyph, Naquane, Italy**  
**Lower: clay tablet, Pylos, Greece**  
**Photo/graphic: Jeff Saward**

The depiction of a labyrinth on an Etruscan wine jar from Tragliatella, Italy, dating from the late 7<sup>th</sup> century BCE, shows armed soldiers on horseback riding away from a labyrinth with the word TRVIA (Troy) inscribed in the outermost circuit. This popular connection between the labyrinth and the defences of Troy (and indeed other fabled cities) has continued throughout the history of the labyrinth, wherever it is found.



*Inscription, Tragliatella, Italy*

Other finds point to an early spread of the labyrinth symbol around the shores of the Mediterranean Sea. Two labyrinths scratched on a wall amidst the ruins at Gordion in central Turkey can be confidently dated to ca. 750 BCE and labyrinths recorded amongst rock art panels at Taouz in Morocco have been tentatively dated to ca. 500 BCE. Elsewhere, labyrinth graffiti and inscriptions have been found at Delos in Greece, in Egypt and Jordan, the majority dating from the first four centuries BCE and surely the result of Greek and Roman colonization and trading influences in the region. Several labyrinth inscriptions recently discovered during the excavation of a late Iron Age fort at Formigueiros in north-western Spain also show a continued use of the design on the Atlantic seaboard, and one of the labyrinths has an eleven-circuit form providing secure evidence of development of the labyrinth design some 2000 years ago.

The famous labyrinth-decorated coins from Knossos, Crete, dating from the last three centuries BCE also show developments of the original seven-circuit 'classical' design, although in this case the tiny labyrinths on the reverse of the coins are sometimes depicted with less circuits. Issued by the Hellenic trading colony founded on the site, their designs surely allude to the legendary Labyrinth at Knossos, in which King Minos imprisoned the ferocious Minotaur, but long since destroyed by the time the coins were issued from around 300-70 BCE.



The Minoan palace/temple complex at Knossos, destroyed several times during its long history, but finally abandoned c.1380 BCE was excavated by Arthur Evans during the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, but no examples of the labyrinth symbol have been found within the structure, although fragments of complex labyrinthine designs were discovered on wall frescoes. Similar Minoan frescoes recently excavated at the site of the ancient city of Avaris in Egypt are dated to ca. 1550 BCE and provide fascinating clues to the early origins and spread of the Minotaur and Labyrinth stories.



The legend of Theseus and the Minotaur was evidently well known and popular with the Romans. Scratched on a pillar of a house at Pompeii, Italy, destroyed (and preserved) by an eruption of Vesuvius in 79 CE, is a labyrinth graffiti with an inscription reading LABYRINTHUS HIC HABITAT MINOTAURUS (the labyrinth, here lives the Minotaur). Possibly this was a reference to the disposition of the owner of the house!



**Top: petroglyph, Taouz, Morocco**  
**Middle: coin, Knossos, Crete**  
**Lower: Graffiti, Pompeii, Italy**  
**Graphics/photo: Jeff Saward**

The labyrinth symbol was also a popular subject for depiction in Roman mosaic pavements, as over sixty known examples attest. Dating from ca. 165 BCE to ca. 400 CE, they are found throughout the Roman Empire, from Portugal in the west to Cyprus in the east, from northern England to North Africa. Many of these excavated labyrinth mosaics are damaged or fragmentary, but a good number survive intact. Notable examples include four at Coimbra, Portugal; three at Pompeii, Italy; two at Paphos, Cyprus and the wonderful specimens displayed in Fribourg, Switzerland and in the museum in Vienna, Austria. A number depict Theseus and the Minotaur in the central goal, a tradition carried through into the pavement labyrinths laid a thousand years later in the cathedrals of mediaeval Europe.

Although a few Roman mosaic labyrinths are of the 'classical' type, the designs commonly employed appear quite different from the earlier labyrinths and represent the first significant changes to the original labyrinth symbol – itself already some 2000 years old. For the first time these labyrinth designs were too complex to be remembered by a simple mnemonic and while no examples survive, contemporary writers record that these mosaic designs were taken around the empire in copy books, usually of parchment or on papyrus rolls.

While some of the preserved mosaic labyrinths have remarkably complex designs, the majority were too small to have been walked, and would have provided contemplative exercise only, although the location of these devices near entrance doorways can sometimes suggest that they served an apotropaic or symbolic protective function. The Roman writer Pliny records that the labyrinth pattern was also used at this time for a "game played by boys in the Campus Martius." This is widely taken to refer to the *lusus troiae*, a labyrinthine pattern marked out on the ground, for riding on horseback as a test of skill – a practice possibly depicted on the wine jar from Tragliatella, some seven hundred years before Pliny was writing. The obvious popularity of the labyrinth symbol and its accompanying mythology throughout the Roman Empire took the labyrinth to North Africa, the near East and across southern and western Europe. We might then expect to find the labyrinth taking root in the native cultures of these regions and surviving long after the Roman colonizers had withdrawn to defend Rome and Byzantium. However, there is little evidence for such a direct continuation of the tradition, despite the overwhelming influence of the Roman Empire.



However, it seems likely that the preserved written works of Roman and, earlier, Greek authors, Pliny, Homer and others, which mentioned the legends of the labyrinth, were responsible for the later development of the labyrinth symbol in Europe. These writings, combined with the widespread recognition of Christianity throughout the Roman territories following the conversion of the Emperor Constantine and his hosting of the Council of Nicaea in 325 CE, allowed the labyrinth symbol to be absorbed into later Christian symbolism, philosophy and architecture. This more recent chapter of the labyrinth story which saw the labyrinth evolve into many more forms, to occupy the floors of cathedrals, grace the gardens of royal palaces and ultimately develop into the complex puzzle mazes of modern amusement parks, must await another opportunity to be told....

Jeff Seward, Thundersley, England;  
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**Roman Mosaic Labyrinth, Cremona, Italy. Photo: Jeff Seward**

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