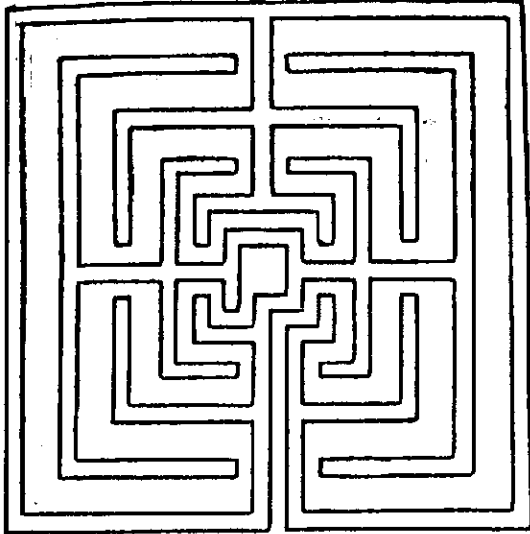


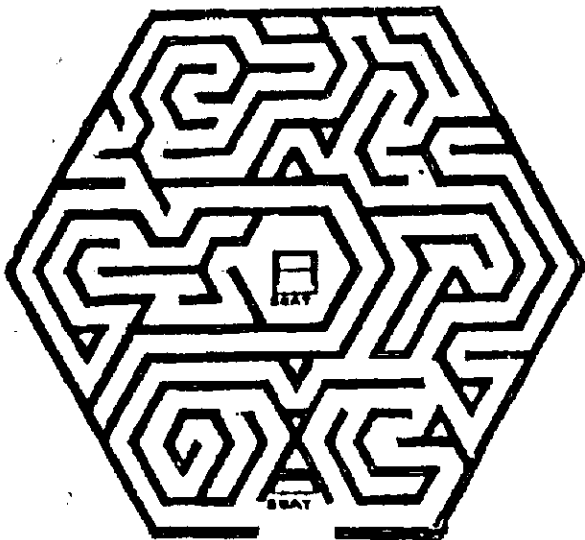
Paths that lead within...

By Barbara Gordon
Mistress Linnet Kestrel

M a z e s



A Unicursal Maze



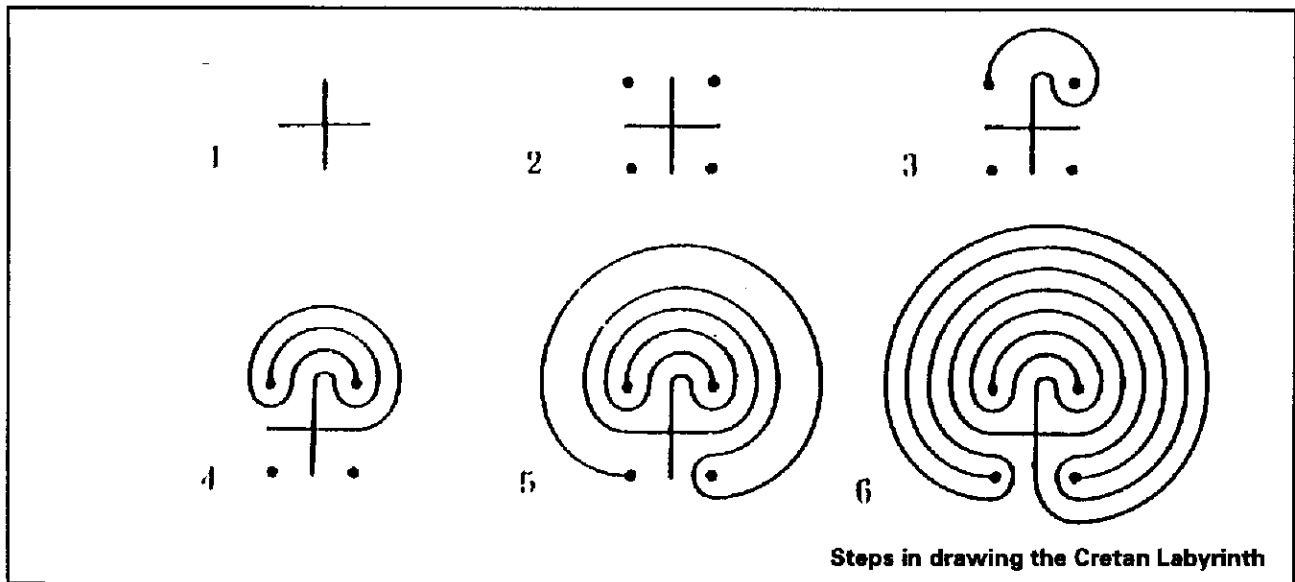
A Multicursal Maze

AT A SMALL, LOCAL EVENT, during the day tourney, I laid out a simple maze with rope. Some people walked it through, and their comments suggested that a short history of mazes might be of interest.

Most of us are familiar with two kinds of mazes – the puzzle maze on paper, and the hedge maze. Usually we think of a maze as a puzzle, as a place where one easily becomes lost. However, the earliest mazes were *unicursal*. That is, they had only one path, which doubled back and forth several times before reaching the center, or more rarely, through the center and out the other side. Unicursal mazes are sometimes called labyrinths, after the Cretan Labyrinth. The maze with dead ends or more than one path to the goal is *multicursal*, and seems to have developed later, perhaps in the 17th century. Mazes have been drawn in the sand, cut into the turf, laid out in tiles and mosaic, walled with stone or plants, and used as designs for stone, coins and manuscripts. Several design motifs, including the Greek meander pattern and Celtic interlacing, have been linked to winding dances performed in mazes. Maze designs are found all over the world, used for pastimes and for ceremonies of initiation, fertility, death and rebirth.

II. THE OLDEST MAZE: THE CRETAN LABYRINTH.

The legendary Cretan Labyrinth was designed by Daedalus as a pen for the Minotaur, the monstrous bull-man born to the wife of King Minos. (Like all Greek myths, this has immensely complicated prequelae and sequelae, and heroes you wouldn't want to be in the same room with.) Minos demanded a regular sacrifice of Greek youths and maidens to be thrust into the labyrinth as the prey of the Minotaur. The hero Theseus volunteered to be part of the sacrifice. Ariadne, daughter of King Minos, fell in love with Theseus and gave him a ball of thread so that he could trace his way through the labyrinth after killing the Minotaur. Which



he did. Ariadne ran away with him; he abandoned her on an island and sailed home where he accidentally caused the death of his father, the king of Athens (Typical Greek hero).

The Minotaur legend is thought to be based on the Cretan ritual sport of bull-jumping, and the Labyrinth may have been simply a prison where slaves and captives were kept for training. Which saves us from the question of why Theseus needed help to find his way out of a unicursal maze.

Much later, a unicursal maze pattern was used on the coins of Crete. It was called a labyrinth, supposedly after the *labrys*, a double-headed axe important in Minoan religion and connected with the cult of the bull. It has been suggested that the Palace at Knossos was the "House of the Double Axe," because it is decorated with the *labrys* motif, and in later years, after the fall of Knossos, the building may have been confused with the design. This basic maze may be rounded or squared. It can be made more elaborate by quartering, or by combining curved and straight paths. Until the 17th century, almost all mazes are recognizable as some variation on this pattern.

III. MAZES ON THE FLOOR: ROMANS AND CHRISTIANS

The Romans liked mosaic pavements, and the legend of Theseus was a popular motif. Roman mosaic floors with elaborate unicursal maze patterns survive throughout Europe and Britain (one in Susa, Tunisia, lasted until the 19th century). Often the center has a design of Theseus and the Minotaur locked in battle. The outer rim was sometimes embattled, or showed the towers and walls of a city. Although these were floor mazes,

most seem to be intended as decoration, the paths being too narrow to walk.

Somewhat later, in the Middle Ages, Christian churches in France, Italy, and as far afield as Algeria had tiled floors laid out in maze patterns, usually circular and always unicursal. Many of these were destroyed in later centuries by war, or by church officials who didn't like the noise that children made running the maze during services.

The relevance of the maze to Christian ritual and belief is unclear.



One theory holds that the maze symbolizes the perilous path of the Christian soul to salvation, another that it represents the cosmos. It has been observed that walking a unicursal maze can have a disorienting or hypnotic effect, and perhaps this

helped achieve a meditative or even ecstatic religious state.

There is evidence that mazes were used for seasonal rituals and processions; a *pilota* ball-game dance was performed by deacons and canons around the maze in Auxerre Cathedral until the 17th century. And also, for personal penance; in France church mazes were sometimes called the "Road to Jerusalem," and those unable to make a real pilgrimage may have gone

through the maze on their knees as a substitute penance. There is frustratingly little evidence surviving to tell what part mazes played in the religious life of the medieval community and individual.

IV. TURF AND STONE MAZES

Other forms of ground-level mazes were the turf mazes made in the British Isles by cutting the walls out of the turf (as the chalk figures of horses and giants were made) and the Scandinavian mazes, made by laying lines of stones out as the walls.

In Wales, the shepherds cut a simple Cretan-style maze out of the turf, and ran through it for a pastime. It was called *Caerdroia*, meaning "City of Troy" or possibly "City of Winding Paths." In England, turf mazes were more elaborate unicursal designs and had a variety of names: *Troy Town*, *Walls of Troy*, *Julian's Bower*, *Mizmaze*, *Shepherd's Race* or *Robin Hood's Race*. In Germany they were called *Trojaburgen*, (Troy cities).

In Finland, the stone mazes were called *Giant's Fence* or *St. Peter's Game*, in Norway and Sweden usually some variant of *Troy Town* or sometimes *Stone Dance* or *Maiden's Dance*. The stone mazes were often the familiar Cretan style unicursals, sometimes more unusual designs, but always unicursal.

What were they used for? We have records only from the time when folk customs became of interest to the literate. Before that is conjecture. We can guess that some were simply for running through as a pastime or race, as children may draw mazes in the sand to play in. Many were associated with dances or processions, as can be guessed from the names. They may have been used in seasonal fertility ceremonies, dances such as the *Horn Dance* and *Morris* dance, with similarly cloudy and intriguing backgrounds. There are many folk dances which have a circling or spiraling pattern to them that suggests a maze. Some spiral in and then out again, just as one must do when walking a Cretan style maze.

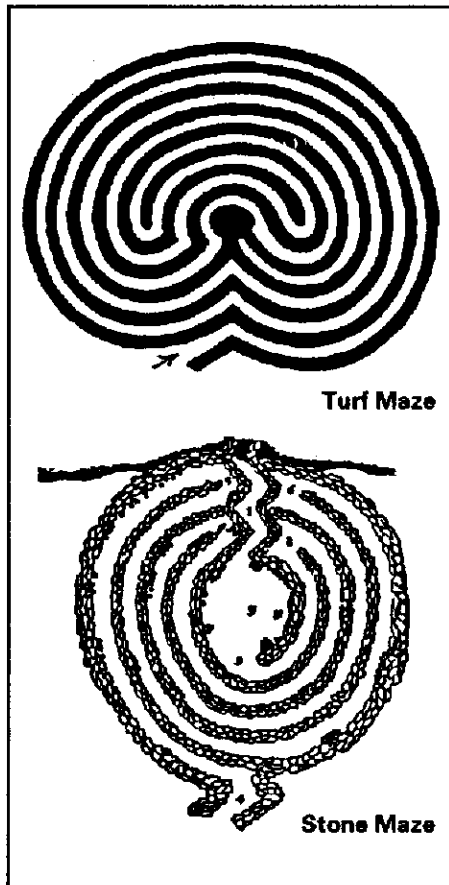
Robin Hood and Maid Marion are sometimes the names given to the last sheaves of grain collected at harvest time, made into figures and ceremonially burnt or thrown into the sea. The names given to mazes suggest some connection with ancient sacrifices to ensure or pay for a good harvest. Other names, such as *Maiden's Dance*, suggest fertility rituals, and the stone mazes in the 1800s, were still used for a children's game where a girl stood at the center and boys raced to her.

Some mazes in England are still used for May Day and Easter festivals, but commonly Oberon's words from "A Midsummer Night's Dream" apply:

“

*The nine men's morris is fill'd up with mud;
And the quaint mazes in the wanton green,
For lack of tread are indistinguishable.*

”



V. HEDGE MAZES AND KNOTS

RENAISSANCE AND Elizabethan gardens contained knots, mazes, parterres and wildernesses. Knots and parterres were complex patterns laid out in differently coloured low-growing plants, sometimes in coloured gravels, meant to be looked at from a higher point. Mazes and wildernesses were simpler patterns of paths laid out between taller hedges or among trees, and meant to be wandered through.

A wilderness was usually a collection of wandering paths without a specific centre or goal, but interrupted by open places furnished with benches, fountains, statues,

etc. Wildernesses were also described as labyrinths, though they did not resemble the Cretan labyrinth pattern at all. Of course, there was also very little wild about them.

It may have been the influence of the wilderness that led (finally!) to the multicursal maze in which one could actually become lost. In the late 1600s the first multicursal hedge mazes were planted. The most famous, and still surviving, is the *Hampton Court Maze*, dating from 1690, and possibly supplanting an earlier maze (probably unicursal).

(Continued on next page)

These early hedge mazes can be solved by the hand-on-wall method, which is simply to keep to either the left or right hand hedge wall (NOT to take consistently left or right turns). This will take you through the dead ends but eventually to the goal. The reason for this is that the wall hedges are connected to the perimeter hedge. In 1820 the Earl of Stanhope created a new kind of maze using separate "islands" of hedges as well, which could not be solved so easily.

VI. PREHISTORIC ORIGINS?

IN KEEPING WITH A CRETAN-STYLE unicursal maze, this article now doubles back in time, perhaps passing tantalizingly close to the center.

It is impossible to prove what the original significance of mazes was. The Cretan style maze is found all over the world, as are spiral and meander patterns strongly suggestive of mazes and maze dances. Some have suggested that the Cretan style was spread by the Romans and later by the Norse, others that it is part of many cultures simply because it is easy to draw.

Others believe that the Cretan maze and spiral patterns are found worldwide because they have universal ritual meanings. In fact (or perhaps I should say, in theory) mazes have been linked with most of the major themes of ritual – birth, death, rebirth, spiritual rebirth, initiation, fertility, exclusion of evil influences, even divination. And none of these can be either proven or disproven. It's an academic's nightmare and a folklorist's dream.

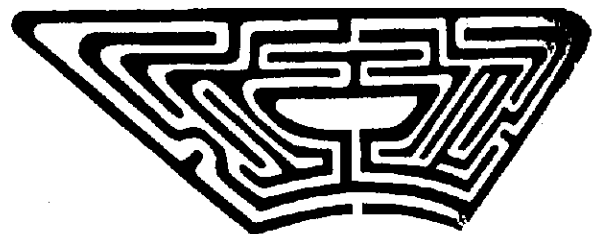
Rock carvings called *cup and ring marks* are found at Neolithic sites in Europe and Britain, as are linked spirals. Often these appear in tombs or tumuli, which strongly suggests connections with death and rebirth. The Cretan maze has been thought to be based on the *labrys* or double-headed axe. Christians have seen it as based on the *Chi-Rho*, symbol of Christ's name. Looked at from other eyes, it could be a stylised representation of female genitalia (as wells and caves are female symbols, obelisks and menhirs male symbols), more subtle than the *Sheela-na-gig*.

The association of turf and stone mazes with dances and seasonal rituals, often involving young men and women in a chase suggests ancient fertility rituals, as do names such as *Maiden's Bower* and *Robin Hood's Race*.

The field is wide open for theories. There is no proof to get in anyone's way. Anyone interested may want to look into the relatively unstudied subject of



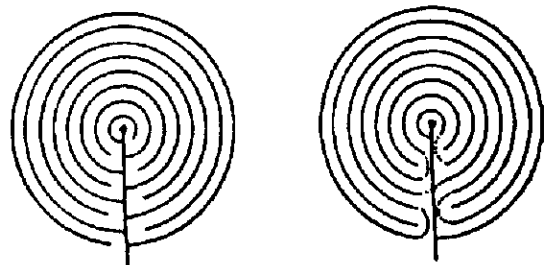
Plan of a Wilderness



Hedge Maze at Hampton Court



Cup and Ring Marks



Into Maze

designs cut into the ground all over the world, from mazes to chalk figures to the Indian bird and animal figures which were also walked like mazes. An interesting note on these figures is that both native people and an anthropologist who have walked them say that they are able to map the shapes afterwards, even though the complete figures can only be seen from the air.

VII. MAZES IN BOOKS, BOOKS ON MAZES: THE END

THE TRADITIONAL CRETAN maze had seven rings, so it is fitting that this article ends at part seven. Whether we have reached the goal at the center, I leave you to decide. Something that intrigued me as I studied mazes was how new the multicursal puzzle maze was, as an actual structure. The unicursal maze predominates. Yet literary references to mazes and labyrinths, from the earliest recorded, use the maze as a metaphor for a situation in which one becomes lost. And as noted before, the only way to become lost in a unicursal maze is to somehow forget which direction one was going and turn about. The only explanation I can come up with is that threading through a unicursal maze does cause a feeling of confusion and disorientation. If mazes were

used in initiation ceremonies, this would have been helpful. (On the other hand, Herodotus writes of a Labyrinth in Egypt, which seems to have been a huge building with many rooms, in which one becomes lost without a guide. However, it isn't clear whether that was the intention of the building.)

A more direct use of mazes in literature is the construction of a written maze, which one reads one's way through. Usually these contain spiritual advice (See below). If you would like a deeper knowledge of mazes than this brief history, see the following resources:

Matthews, W.H. *Mazes and Labyrinths: their history and development*. New York, Dover 1970 (reprint of 1922) **(Still the classic work on mazes.)**

Bord, Janet. *Mazes and Labyrinths of the World*. London, Latimer 1976 **(Mostly pictorial, an archive of maze pictures.)**

A Celebration of Mazes. by Randall Coate et al. Bristol, Minotaur Designs, 1986 **(By a company that designs mazes.)**