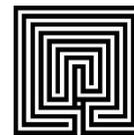


Labyrinths in Pagan Sweden

John Kraft



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The vast majority of stone labyrinths in the Nordic countries do not date from prehistoric times. They must be less than 1000 years old, indeed some are as late as the 18th, 19th or even the 20th century. There is however a small group of stone labyrinths in Sweden that might be of more impressive age. Unfortunately there is no real evidence showing them to have been built in Pagan times, but there are several clues pointing in this direction. From necessity, these conclusions have largely been based on guesswork.

In southern Sweden there are 17-18 labyrinth sites which seem to belong to this oldest group. Some still exist, others have been destroyed long ago, and some are only indicated by place names. In contrast to the large group of more recent labyrinths, these apparently old ones are not usually situated along the coasts, but in the heart of the oldest farmland. They are as a rule solitary, while the coast labyrinths are usually found in dense groups.

These older labyrinths are usually built on high ground, for example, on top of small hills close to important river crossings, or on top of eskers created by the gravel of rivers flowing beneath the glaciers that covered Sweden 10,000 years ago. The entrances of these labyrinths are often orientated towards the west. In seven cases, they are situated in prehistoric grave-fields. At four places they are found very close to churches dating from the early Middle Ages. Five are situated at places where towns developed in the early Middle Ages.

The Goddess in the Labyrinth

The pattern of distribution provides us with an interesting clue. These labyrinths seem to be spread very evenly over the oldest settled parts of Sweden. In the most densely populated areas they appear at a distance of 20-40 km from each other. It seems as if they reflect a system of old communities, where each pagan tribe had a labyrinth and most of the inhabitants lived within one day walking distance from it.

It is probable that labyrinths played an important role in the pagan cult of such prehistoric communities. They were used in spring for religious games or ceremonies. Surviving lore from different countries indicated that on these occasions a girl played the role of the mother goddess and took her place at the centre of the labyrinth (= nether world). One or two men played the roles of the sky god who would liberate or abduct the mother goddess from her prison castle of the netherworld. When she had been abducted from the labyrinth she probably joined with her liberator in a spring wedding (see my discussion in *The Goddess in the Labyrinth*, Åbo Akademi, 1985).

These small prehistoric communities were probably ruled by sacral chieftains ('kings' or 'queens') who based much of their authority on their roles as priests and priestesses. Most of these petty kingdoms disappeared long before Sweden was Christianised. They were united into larger provinces, so-called *landskap* and *langsagor*. However, some of the very old territories survived as fairly independent communities into the early Middle Ages (Värend, Finnveden, Tjust and Dala) and the names of a couple of others have been preserved (Rek and Tör). But the rest of Sweden's old petty kingdoms have so far remained a mystery.

The places with labyrinths give some idea of where the petty kingdoms had their pagan cult centres. This is not enough to reconstruct the map of pagan Sweden, but it gives us a starting point.

The Sacred Places

Much valuable information can be gained from place names which indicate a use as pagan cult places. In these place names, well-known gods from the Viking Age like Oden, Tor, Frej and the goddess Freja are combined with words like 'vi' (sanctuary), 'harg' (cairn or altar), 'lunda' (grove), 'vin' (meadow), 'åker' (field), 'tuna' (enclosed area or fence), 'berga' (hill), 'ö' (island), 'sjö' (lake). These elements form place names like Odensåker, Torstuna, Frösvi, Fröberga, etc.

There are also traces of a group of even older and more obscure gods among the Swedish place names. "Ull" was presumably a sky god and "Njörd" was probably identical with the mother goddess "Nerthus", described as *terra mater* by the Roman historian Tacitus (ca. 100 CE). This divine couple of a sky god and a mother goddess from the early Iron Age has attracted a lot of interest from the experts. They had discovered long ago that the cult places of Ull and Njard often appear together in pairs. Another group of place names may come from the cult places of an old goddess, "Skädja" (Skadevi, Skädharg, etc.) but this interpretation has been met with more scepticism amongst place-name experts.

I have compared these place names with the labyrinths, and I have come to the conclusion that the cult places of Ull and Njard can usually be combined with those of Skädja and with the oldest labyrinths. Together they form groups of cult centres, each containing one labyrinth and at least one cult place of each of the gods and goddesses, Ull, Njard and Skädja.

Let me give an example from my home town of Västerås, which is situated close to such a group of pagan cult places belonging to a prehistoric community. Close to the town, at Tibble in Badelunda parish, is a large stone labyrinth preserved on top of an esker. Earlier there was also an extensive prehistoric grave field on the same spot, now destroyed by gravel extraction. Only 800 metres north of the labyrinth lies Anundshög mound (probably the largest in Sweden), 12 metres high and 60 metres diameter, that has traditionally been the site of 'ting'-proceedings. Adjacent to the mound are several impressive grave fields with stone settings in the shape of large ships; altogether the complex contains more than 230 visible prehistoric graves. 1 km to the east of the labyrinth is a farm called Närlunda (the goddess Njörd's grove) and some 4 km SE of Närlunda lies a farm called Ulivi (Ull's sanctuary). In the same concentrated area, at Tuna, less than 1.5 km east of the big mound, was a very interesting grave field (86 graves) with one unusually rich grave of a woman from ca. 300 CE, and 8 boat graves, also for women, from the Viking Age (ca. 800-1070 CE). One theory is that these women were local priestesses. Some distance away, 10 km west of the labyrinth is a parish called Skärike, the modernized version of Skädharg (Skädja's cairn).



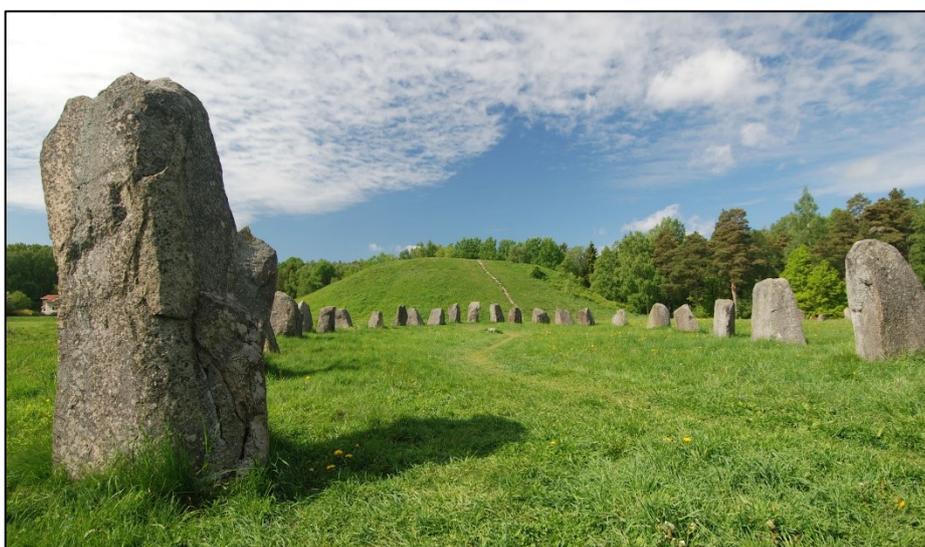
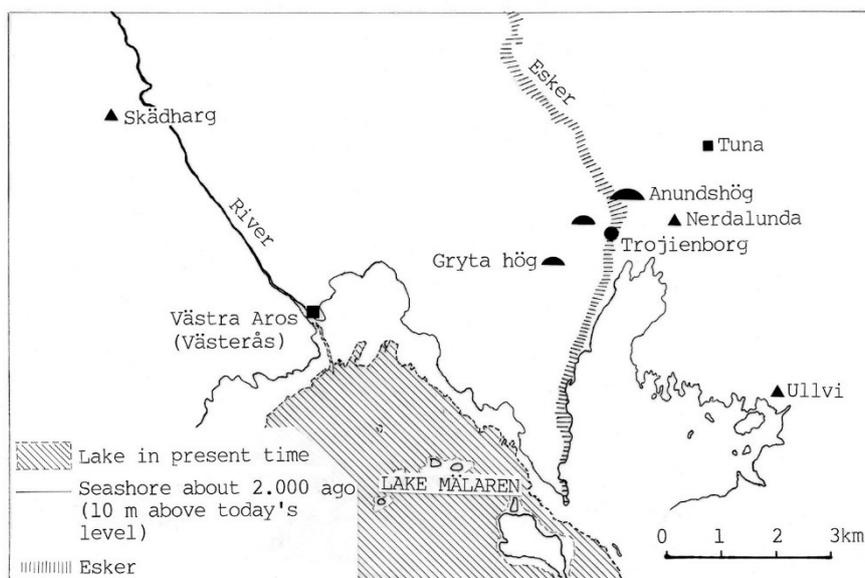
The labyrinth at Tibble, Badelunda parish

Drawing by John Kraft, 1980

Map of the Västerås area with the Trojienborg labyrinth at Tibble in Badelunda parish.

In the neighbourhood of the labyrinth is a concentration of grave-fields from the Iron Age and three big mounds, one of them, Anundshög, is the largest in Sweden.

The town of Västerås (Västra Aros) belongs to a more recent period than the prehistoric monuments. It probably originated as a market place at an important ford, close to the mouth of a river which also served as a good harbour for deep-draft ships.



Anundshög, in the distance, and some of the numerous stones at Badelunda

Photo: Jeff Saward

The Recurrence Hypothesis

No one can fail to understand from the description of the neighbourhood of Vasteras that here was the centre of a prehistoric community, a pagan congregation, dating back to the early Iron Age (ca. 500 BCE - 400 CE). In this example, the pattern is unusually clear and easy to interpret. However it is possible to find similar combinations of labyrinths, ting mounds and cult places of Ull, Njård and Skådja at several other places and use them to reconstruct Sweden's earliest political map.

The key roles in this reconstruction are played by the place names including Ull, Njård and Skådja. They give us a fairly good idea of Sweden's territorial organisation in the early Iron Age. It is more difficult to select the labyrinths because we can usually not be quite sure of their age. The correct *ting* sites ('ting-mounds' or 'tingstad' type place names) are also difficult to select because in the sources at our disposal, they are mixed with a large number of ting sites used in the later territorial organisation of 'härader' and 'hundaren' (Viking and Middle Ages). There is no simple, reliable method of selecting the older *ting* sites from the later, but it reasonable to guess that ting-names, which have never, to our knowledge, been connected with the later territorial organisation, may belong to the older group. These *ting* sites usually have names of the type 'Tingstad' (stad=place) or 'Tingshög' (hog=mound).

Combining these elements, it is fairly easy to sketch the centres of the old communities. The cult places of Ull, Njård and Skädja are combined into groups which form skeletons of the old communities. The selected labyrinths and *ting* sites usually fit perfectly into the pattern. There can hardly be any doubt that this method leads us in the correct direction.

I call my method from the reconstruction of pagan communities the 'recurrence hypothesis.' The simple idea is that prehistoric labyrinths or place names belonging to pagan cult places do not recur in the same 'old' community. When you move from one place called Ullvi to another Ullvi you cross an old border, just as you cross the border between two Christian parishes when you drive from one church to another.

A Map of Pagan Sweden

The exact borders are difficult to determine. Borderlines in our sense of the word were unknown in these days. The different communities were often separated from each other by deep forests, marshes or other uninhabited area. In such cases it is often easy to determine the extension of the different communities. Another method is to borrow borderlines from later territorial units like the 'härad' and 'hundaren', in the hope that they have preserved something of the older territorial division. One way to check what is a reasonable guess is to measure the distances and presume that a farm usually belonged to the community offering the shortest and most convenient route to its cult places. With these tools it is possible to draw a map of pagan Sweden at the time when the gods Ull, Njård and Skädja were worshipped. There is no space here for a detailed description of the different communities. Let me only say that the cult places of the three oldest gods give a good picture of most of Sweden, except in the far south, where these kinds of place-names are missing, and Gotland where they are too few to give any reliable guidance (see maps below).

Borderline Labyrinths

A careful study of the later group of place-names referring to Oden, Tor, Frej and Freja confirms much of the older territorial division. Only in one case (Fjädrundaland) does it seem as if an older community was split into two pagan communities during the later period. In at least three cases (Närke, Östergötland and Gotland) it seems as if older communities were united to form larger units, with common cult-places for the worship of Oden, Tor, Frej and Freja. These steps towards larger religious units reflects the creation of Sweden's more modern territories, its 'landskap' or 'lagsagor.'

The distribution of the labyrinths seems to fit in better with the communities defined by the old gods Ull, Njard and Skädja than with the later units. This indicates that the labyrinths played an important role in the cult of the early Iron Age (ca. 500 BCE - 400 CE). Even so, some labyrinths are also situated on the (supposed) borders of the oldest communities which were later united to form larger ones (Vasby in Närke, Viby in Östergötland and Visby on Gotland). These examples of borderline labyrinths might be explained as later labyrinths, built for common use by two older communities which were now united and had created a new meeting place on the old border for their pagan cult.

It is probably safe to assume that labyrinths have a long history of pagan religious use, and have remained in use well into the early Middle Ages. Thus it is probably correct to guess that they still belonged to the pagan cult during the late Iron Age. But this little study of the old petty kingdoms of Sweden rather points to the Iron Age as the time when labyrinths played a crucial role in the pagan cult.

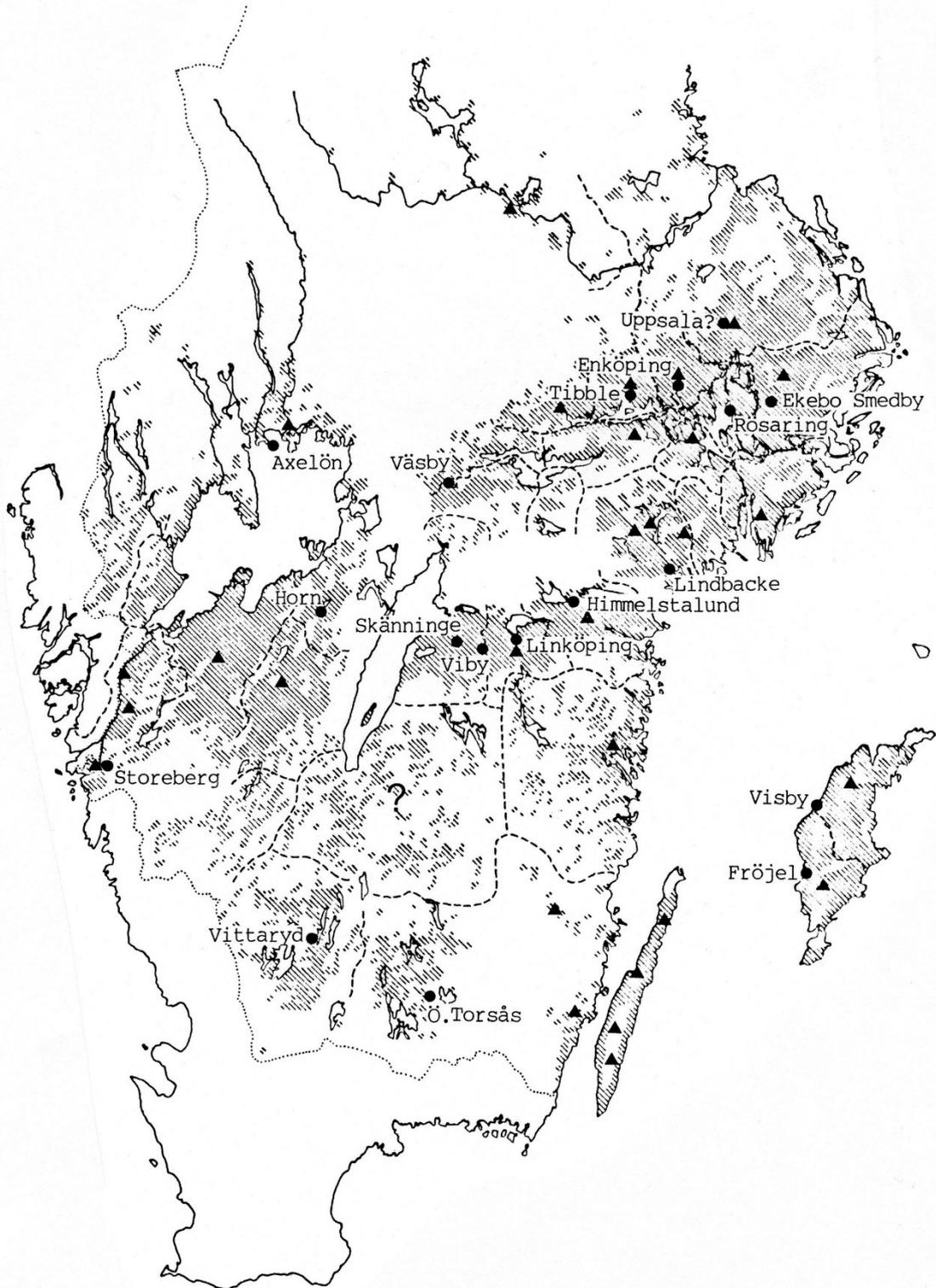
John Kraft, Västerås, Sweden; April 1987

Southern Sweden with regional borders from the beginning of the Middle Ages



Labyrinths and Tingstads in Southern Sweden

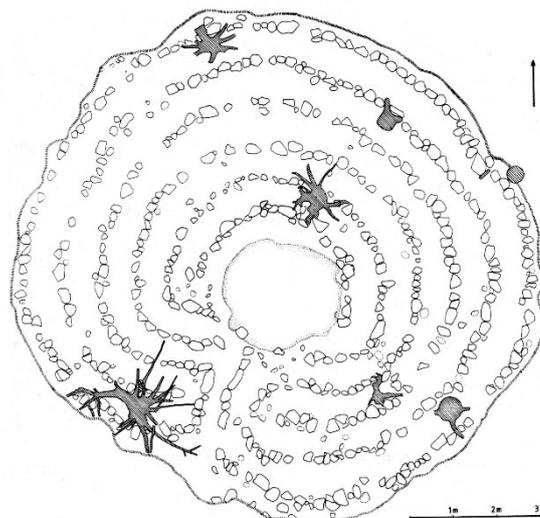
- ▨ Settled areas at the end of the pagan time (1070).
- Presumed borders between pagan communities in the early Iron Age.
- Labyrinth
- ▲ Ting mound or other place name indicating old ting place (Tingstad).



Catalogue of Labyrinths which were probably in cult use in the pagan communities of Sweden

Storeberg, Gothenburg, Västergötland

The labyrinth has 8 walls and the entrance is orientated to SW. It lies together with 5 stone settings, probably in a small grave-field, on top of a large forest-covered hill in Gothenburg. The partly damaged labyrinth was mentioned in a report of 1916-18 but could not be found again until 1982 when I discovered and excavated it together with staff from the archaeological museum in Gothenburg. The museum later restored the labyrinth and cleared the vegetation around it (editor's note: it has recently (2007) become obscured again beneath fallen trees).



The labyrinth at Storeberg. Drawing by John Kraft, 1982

Horn, Västergötland

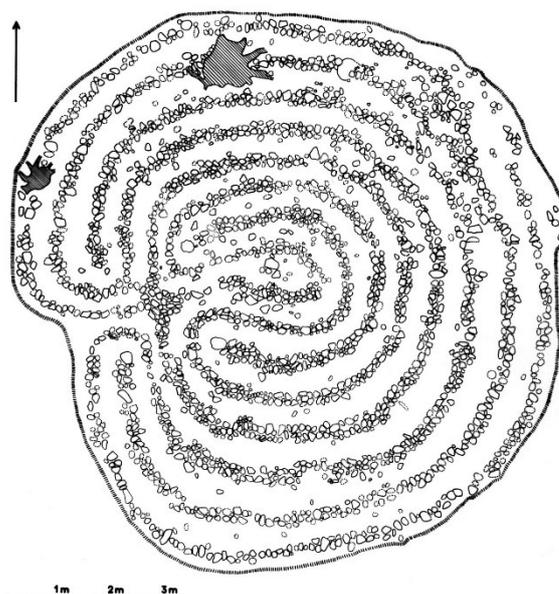
Close to the church of Horn were two labyrinths, one with 12 and the other with 8 walls, both were destroyed in the latter part of the 19th century. The entrances were probably orientated toward the south. The labyrinths were situated on a small hill, together with a grave-field with about 70 graves from the pre-Roman Iron Age (ca. 500-0 BCE). The grave field has been excavated by archaeologists, and the hill was later destroyed when its gravel was exploited.

Axelön, Värmland

Four preserved labyrinths and two partly destroyed are situated on an island in the large Lake Vänern. In a description from the early 18th century only two labyrinths are mentioned, one with 12 walls and the other with 8 walls. It is very difficult to guess how old these labyrinths are, some are probably of later origin, but it is possible that one or two are of prehistoric origin because the island lies close to the old central farmland of this province with a concentration of place-names indicating pagan cult places. It is also obvious that islands were used in pagan cults in the neighbourhood. Another island, 2.5 km north of Axelön, is called Onsön (Oden's island).

Vittaryd, Småland

At Johanneshus in the parish of Vittaryd is a labyrinth called Trelleborg. It has 8 walls and the entrance is oriented to the west. It is situated at the southern edge of a grave-field with 7 cairns and 47 small mounds, probably dating from the late Iron Age. Only a few decades ago it was still possible to find old people who remembered how they used to walk in the 'Trelleborg' when they were young.



*The Trelleborg labyrinth at Vittaryd
Drawing by John Kraft, 1980*

Östra Torsås, Småland

In 1925 the archaeologist Johan Alin mentioned a large grave-field with stone settings and erected stones “in the neighbourhood of the parish of Östra Torsås”. He says that “among the stone settings is also a labyrinth”. A labyrinth at Östra Torsås is also mentioned by the author Mårten Sjöbeck (1953). But it has not been possible for me to find it, neither the local population nor the archaeologists seem to know anything about this labyrinth.

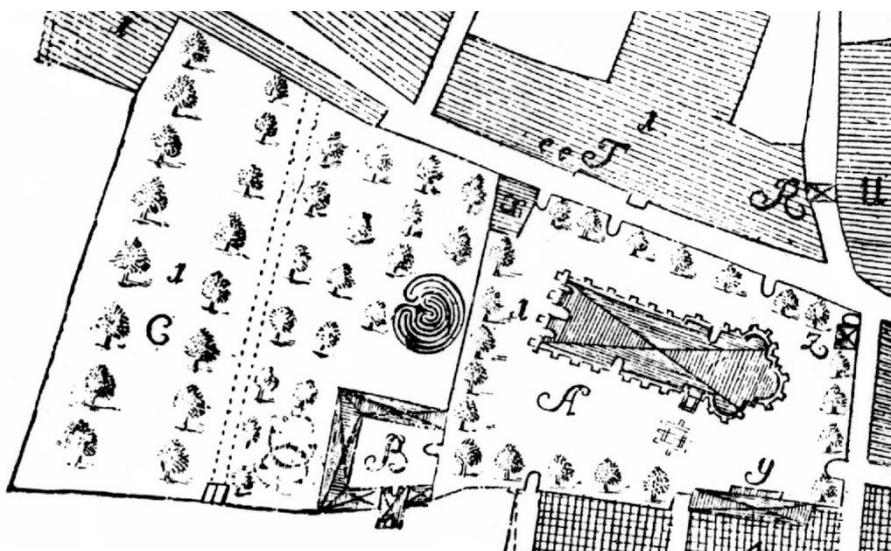
Skånninge, Östergötland

The little town of Skånninge was once an important market place in the province of Östergötland. A ‘Troienborg’ made of stones on a hill at Skånninge was mentioned on two reports from the late 17th century by Johan Hadorph, who was a pioneer of ‘modern’ antiquarian research in Sweden. Hadorph says that the labyrinth was still (1678) used by the children of the town to run in during the summer. He also presumes that this was a place where the ancestors practiced their games and worship in pagan times. The labyrinth must have been destroyed shortly afterwards. Only place names have survived and they indicate that the labyrinth was situated west of the town, in my opinion probably at Vädervarnsbacken (Windmill Hill),

Linköping, Östergötland

A labyrinth in the centre of the town of Linköping is shown on a couple of maps from the 18th century (1734 and 1750). It was situated at a high level less than 50 metres west of the main entrance of the cathedral, in the garden of the bishop's castle. The map from 1734 shows that it had a classical design with 8 walls and the entrance orientated to the west. According to the map of 1750 it was called ‘Trojaeborg.’ No later sources have revealed any information about this labyrinth, and no traces are visible on the site. It has been suggested that this was a garden labyrinth, but I find it more probable that a labyrinth with this design would be of the stone-built type.

Detail of the 1734 map of Linköping, showing the labyrinth adjacent to the cathedral



Himmelstalund, Östergötland

At Himmelstalund, just outside the old town of Norrköping, is a hill called ‘Trojenborg’ and ‘Trojenborgs Berg’ (berg=hill). On a map from 1691 it is called ‘Troiiensbergh’. It is reasonable to assume that this is the site of an ancient labyrinth, although no other traces of the name have been recorded. Himmelstalund (known earlier as ‘Lunden’ = the Grove) is well known for its spring, which might have been a sacred place in pagan times. In the 18th century a famous spa was built at this spring. In the 19th century it was a custom among people in the town to celebrate midsummer at the spa. Himmelstalund is also famous for its numerous rock carvings from the Bronze Age.

Lindbacke, Nyköping, Södermanland

At Lindbacke, close to the old town of Nyköping, is a labyrinth of the classical type with 8 walls. Its entrance is orientated towards the east. It is situated at the base of a hill, about 150 metres east of a round stone setting and about 400 metres east of a grave field with 45 graves. This labyrinth has not been built on high ground; it lies only about 9 metres above sea level, which means that it must have been close to theseashore 2000 years ago. Close to the labyrinth is a spring, belonging to the god Frej. In the neighbourhood was also a grove called 'Freylunden' (Frej's grove). The name Lindbacke is obviously amodernization of an older name 'Lundbacke' (lund = grove, backe = hill). The field near the labyrinth was called 'Freyangen' (Frej's meadow) or 'Fruängen'.



Labyrinth at Lindbacke. Drawing by Ivar Schnell, 1934

Tibble, Badelunde parish, Västmanland

At Tibble in Badelunda parish, close to the old town of Västerås, is a labyrinth with 16 walls. The entrance is orientated to the west. The stones of the labyrinth are relatively small and almost completely overgrown with turf. The labyrinth is situated on top of an esker which is now badly damaged. The landowners who have exploited the gravel have only left a 'pillar' of gravel just large enough to spare the labyrinth.

Before the esker was destroyed, there was a grave-field on top of it, around the labyrinth or very close to it. The antiquarian Richard Dybeck writes in 1874 that the labyrinth was situated together with innumerable grave-mounds of the smallest kind. Most of them had been 'excavated' 50-60 years earlier. One of these graves was excavated by Dybeck in 1843, but his descriptions of the artefacts does not allow us to draw any conclusions about its age. When the gravel of the esker later was exploited, several graves were probably destroyed. A ceramic vessel containing burned bones was salvaged in 1940, immediately east of the labyrinth, from a grave (probably in a destroyed grave-field) dating to the pre-Roman Iron Age (ca. 500-0 BCE).

About 800 metres north of the labyrinth is a complex of large grave-fields, a few large stone settings in the shape of ships and 'Anundshög' which is probably the largest man-made mound in Sweden (12 metres high, 60 metres diameter). The labyrinth at Tibble is shown on a local map of 1764 where it is called 'Trojienborg'.



*The labyrinth at Tibble
Drawing by John Kraft, 1980*

Enköping, Uppland

Close to the parish church of the old town of Enköping there was once a labyrinth with 8 walls (a drawing still survives). The orientation is unknown. The labyrinth was situated immediately north of the old churchyard on top of an esker, which meets the large Lake Mälaren at the place where Enköping was founded. The esker is well preserved but the labyrinth was covered with a one-foot layer of soil when the churchyard was enlarged in 1883. It has not since been possible to find any traces of it or its exact position. This church was probably the centre of an early Christian mission. It had a dean who was the religious leader of the province of Fjädrundaland, an area corresponding to one of the presumed ancient pagan communities of the early Iron Age.

The labyrinth at Enköping was destroyed in 1883. This drawing of the labyrinth by Hans Hildebrand was published 1872



Rösaring, Låssa parish, Uppland

At Rösaring, on top of an impressive, perfectly preserved esker (60 metres high) with a beautiful view of Lake Mälaren, is a labyrinth with 16 walls. Its entrance is orientated towards the west. The labyrinth is overgrown by grass and very difficult to trace. Nearby stand five large and two small cairns and one big mound. Recently a ceremonial (?) road, 3.3-3.6 metres wide, was found leading from the base of the mound straight north to a cairn or possibly a 'death house,' 540 metres away. On the east side of the road is a string of small pits 3-3.3m from each other and on the west side a ditch, 2-3 metres wide. Recent excavations reveal that the road was probably built during the early Viking Age (ca. 800-1070 CE).

The mounds and the cairns have not been excavated, but at least one of the cairns seems to be of Bronze Age type. One possible interpretation is that this was in ancient times a pagan cult place, which was later used as a funerary complex in the Viking Age. At the base of the esker are traces of a Bronze Age settlement and four later grave-fields with more than 200 visible graves, most of them mounds, some of which are quite large (23-28 metres across).

This labyrinth was first recorded in a report from 1672 where it is described as a 'Troyenborgh.' The antiquarian Johan Hadorph writes (probably in 1684) about the 'Troijenborg' and presumes that at this place there "has been much sacrifice to the gods in bygone days." Johannes Arenius, the son of the parish minister tells us in 1717 that that youths still used to gather at this place for games (or dances) in the summer.



*The labyrinth at Rösaring
Photo: Jeff Saward, 2007*

Ekebo Smedby, Hammarby parish, Uppland

On top of an esker at Ekebo Smedby was a labyrinth (type and orientation unknown). The labyrinth was probably destroyed about 1912-14 and its stones were used to build a boundary cairn. The probable site of the labyrinth (a flat area, of a size comparable to a football ground) was surrounded by three impressive grave-fields. The esker has been totally exploited and the only thing that remains today is a large, ugly pit, close to the big motorway north from Stockholm. But before this vandalism was completed, all the graves were carefully excavated in several campaigns during 1935-1961. As a matter of fact, this is one of the few places in Sweden where such a large complex of grave-fields has been completely excavated by archaeologists. Altogether about 150 graves were excavated. One grave-field with about 25 graves belonged to the Bronze Age. The other two contained graves from different periods of the early Iron Age. With one single exception there are no graves at all from the time after the Migration period (ca. 400-550 CE).

Gamla Uppsala, Uppland

No labyrinth has been recorded in the area around Uppsala, but there is reason to suspect that this well-known centre of the province of Tiundaland (and of pagan Sweden) also had its own labyrinth. One clue which should not be totally neglected are the absurd ideas of the Swedish professor Olof Rudbeck in the 17th century. Rudbeck thought that Sweden and particularly the area around Uppsala and Gamla Uppsala (Old Uppsala) was the home of the Trojans. In my opinion, Rudbeck might have been inspired by a local place-name of the Trojeborg type in the area around Uppsala. On Rudbeck's two maps we find the name 'Troja' west of the town of Uppsala and north of Uppsala on the way to Gamla Uppsala, with its three large famous mounds, large grave-fields and a ting-mound. The big esker which stretches between Uppsala and Gamla Uppsala would be the logical place for a labyrinth in this area, and the esker actually fits fairly well together with the Troja names on Rudbeck's maps. The most impressive part of the esker is 'Tunåsen' at Gamla Uppsala. No traces of a labyrinth can be found there today, but a source from the 17th century mentions Tunåsen as the place for a 'rännarbana' (tilt-yard) which was still in use at the time of King Karl IX (1600-1611). If this place once had a labyrinth it might explain why Gamla Uppsala became the centre of this province.

Fröjel, Gotland

At the church of Fröjel there is a labyrinth in the church yard. It has 8 walls and the entrance is orientated to the south. The labyrinth is situated 13 metres east of the choir of the church, touching the entrance road to the church. The labyrinth was partly damaged and difficult to discover, but was beautifully restored in 1974. In the church description of 1942 it is presumed that the church yard long ago was smaller, and that the labyrinth was originally situated outside the church yard. The name Fröjel indicates that this must have been a heathen cultplace. The 14th century spellings 'Fröale' and 'Fröyiale' combines the fertility goddess 'Freja' and 'al' (sanctuary).



Labyrinth at Fröjel. Photo: Jeff Saward, 2007

Visby, Gotland

Sweden's best-known labyrinth is situated immediately north of the old town of Visby. It has 12 walls and the entrance is orientated to the NW. There is no grave-field in the neighbourhood, but old sources mention a cairn about 25 metres south of the labyrinth, which was destroyed in the 19th century. The entrance of the labyrinth is also flanked by two small cairns, but they are probably not graves. The oldest written record of this labyrinth is on a map of 1740-41.

The astronomer Curt Roslund has pointed out that the entrance is orientated straight toward the part of the horizon where the sun sets into the sea about 1st of May according to the old Julian calendar, which was used in Sweden until 1753. According to local tradition May 1st was also, together with midsummer, one of the most important occasions when people used to play in the labyrinth. On April 30th the population of the town used to celebrate with fires on top of the Galgberget (Gallows Hill) overlooking the labyrinth. Visby has long been a pagan cult place, as mentioned in the oldest sources and the name Visby comes from 'Vi' (sanctuary) and 'by' (village).

*The Trojaborg labyrinth and Galgberget, Visby
Photo: Jeff Saward, 1998*



Viby, Östergötland

At the village of Viby, 15kmt west of Linköping, is an old farm-name which indicates that this is the place of a disappeared labyrinth. A piece of land called 'Tröiaborg' is mentioned in a document of 1421. Two farms in the same village are called 'Tröghiaborgh' in 1447 and 'Tröyaborgh' in 1500. It is probable that these place-names remind us of a long-since destroyed labyrinth in Viby. The village was unusually large and its name gives us a hint that here was once a pagan cult-place ('Vi' = sanctuary). The district (härad) is named 'Vifolka härad' which might come from a former cult place at Viby. This was simply the district of the people who worshipped their gods at 'Vi' or Viby.

Väsby, Kräcklinge parish, Närke

A labyrinth at Vasby was destroyed in about 1910-12 when the stones were used to build a cellar. Neither type nor orientation is known. The labyrinth was situated about 600 metres west of Vasby farm, on top of a dominating esker. No name or lore has been preserved. There are no prehistoric graves or grave-fields in the immediate neighbourhood.

Conclusions

These labyrinths have many characteristics in common. A particularly homogenous group consists of those on the northern side of Lake Mälaren: Tibble, Enköping, Rösaring and Ekebo Smedby. The last three examples, Visby, Viby and Väsby, are situated close to the suggested borders between old communities, probably dating from the early Iron Age. Their positions, on old borders between communities which were later united, give us a hint that these labyrinths may be slightly later than others.

John Kraft, Västerås, Sweden; April 1987

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