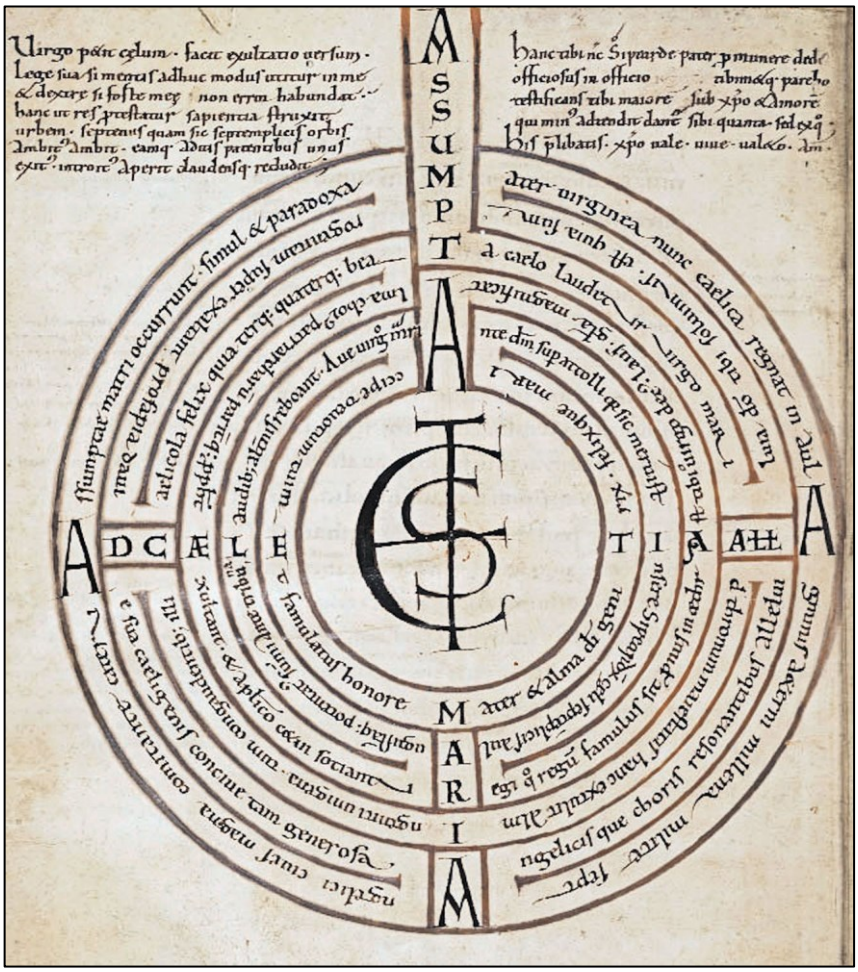
Siweard's Labyrinth

Jeff Saward

Originally published in Caerdroia 24 (1991), p.27-28
Revised and updated 2025

The labyrinth symbol is found in Christian contexts from the 4th century CE onwards. While some of the earliest examples occur as mosaics or inscriptions, many are recorded in hand copied books, texts and manuscripts, often dealing with philosophical, liturgical and educational matters, that circulated around the Christian monasteries and royal courts of Europe during the early Mediaeval period. As early as the 6th century, Boethius, in his influential *De Consolatione Philosophiae* [1] (Consolation of Philosophy), widely read by students and scholars alike, was referring to the "labyrinthine argument from which I cannot escape." Later copies of this and similar works are often accompanied by drawings of a labyrinth to illustrate these philosophical complexities to the reader.

An especially elaborate example, rendered in red and black ink, is found in an early 11th century copy of Boethius, probably produced at Abingdon Abbey, near Oxford, England, and now in the collection of Cambridge University Library (Kk.3.21).[2] It contains a full-page illustration of a six-path, seven-wall labyrinth, the paths of which are filled with a poem, *Assumpta est Maria ad Caelestia, Alleluia!* (Mary is assumed into Heaven, Alleluia!), executed with considerable skill as it can be read in either of two ways: by following the path of the labyrinth, which gives one arrangement of lines, or according to the circles, which gives a different combination.



The labyrinth illustration contained within an 11th century copy of* De Consolatione Philosophiae *by Boethius, now in the collection of Cambridge University Library (Kk.3.21).

Photo courtesy of Cambridge University Library.

Following the pathway of the labyrinth, the text (and translation) reads:

Assumpta est Maria ad Caelestia Alleluia!	**Mary is Assumed into Heaven Alleluia!**
Assumpta caelo laudetur virgo Maria!	Assumed into heaven, let the Virgin Mary be praised!
Alleluia Deo tibi soluimus, est quia sumpta	Alleluia to God we sing, because she is assumed.
Mater virginea nunc caelica regnat in aula,	The virgin mother now reigns in the court of heaven,
Agminis aeterni millena milite septa.	surrounded by a thousand soldiers of the eternal army.
Angelicisque choris resonantibus alleluia.	Alleluia with angelic choirs resounding.
Ad thronum maiestatis hanc extulit almi	To the throne of majesty they kindly raised
Ingeniti unigena, tum congaudentibus illic,	the only begotten, then rejoicing there,
De sua caeligenis conciue tam Generosa,	from her heavenly companion so generous,
Angelici ciues, magna comitante caterua	angelic citizens, accompanied by a large throng,
Assumptae matri occurrunt, simul et paradoxam	meet the assumed mother, simultaneous and paradoxically
Progenitam super exaltrant prosapia Dauid,	exalt the marvellous offspring above the race of David,
Caelicola felix quia terque quaterque beata.	happy inhabitant of heaven, threefold, fourfold blessed.
Alma chorus patriarcharum pariterque prophetae	The kindly chorus of patriarchs and the prophets
Exultant et apostolico cetui sociantur.	exult and join the apostolic gathering.
Augustamque potentates summi ante tribunal	Before the tribunal of the august majesty
Laudibus alternis reboant: Aue, uirgo Maria!	they resound with alternate praises: Ave, Virgin Mary.
Accipe deuotum tuum et famulatus honorem,	Accept your devoted and celebrated honor,
Mater et alma di genitrix, felixque Maria.	Mother and mother of God, blessed Mary.
Ante deum super attollique sic meruisti.	in the presence of God you are so exalted.
Insere Siwaerdum caeli septemplicis aula!	Introduce Siweard into the hall of the sevenfold heaven!
Regi quo regum famulus sit pronus in aethre,	let your servant kneel to the king of kings in the sky,
Ast tibi, uirgo, decus, laus, Gloria magnificata est.	To you, virgin, honor, praise and glory is magnified.

Above the labyrinth is another shorter prayer that translated reads:

> The Virgin seeks out heaven; exaltation inspires my verse. If mental control still exercises its law in me, and if, perchance, my right hand does nor err excessively, as the facts bear witness wisdom has structured this city, which a sevenfold circle surrounds, and one and the same exit and entrance opens it with open approaches and closing, closes it again.
>
> To you Father Siweard, I have given this as a gift, I dutiful in my duty to you, and I shall obey you, bearing witness to you my greater love under Christ, who does not attend to how much is given but from where. These things having been said, rejoice, live and rejoice in Christ. Amen.

Of particular note is a line in the poem that prays for the acceptance of "*Siweard into the hall of the sevenfold heaven."* Siweard, to whom the book was gifted, was the Abbot of Abingdon from 1030 until 1044 AD, when he was temporarily appointed as Archbishop of Canterbury by Edward the Confessor. The labyrinth must therefore date to this time, or perhaps 1048 AD, when Siweard resigned his position due to ill-health and returned to Abingdon shortly before he died. The dedication of the prayer to Mary, the patron saint of Abingdon, and as such protector of its inhabitants, as well as a popular figure of reverence throughout the mediaeval Christian world, would have been an obvious choice for such exalted praise.

The labyrinth on the page of the Abingdon Boethius is both unusual and unique amongst the corpus of designs in such works. With only seven walls – and thus symbolising the sevenfold heaven of the prayer – it is simpler than the 11-path, 12-wall designs that were becoming popular and widespread in manuscripts at this time. Examples of this more complex type appear in the 12th century on the floors and walls of churches and cathedrals in Italy, including the example on the wall at Lucca, in the Gothic cathedrals of Northern France during the 13th century, and subsequently as turf labyrinths (often called turf mazes) throughout England from the 16th century onwards. Indeed, adaptations of this design were also used for the construction of the first garden mazes around the same time.

In 2008 a labyrinth of the design utilized in the Abingdon manuscript was created in the tiled floor of the Church of St. Michael and All Angels in Abingdon itself, and in recent years the design has taken on a new lease of life, in churches and other locations, where a traditional form coupled with smaller size has proved a popular choice.

Jeff Saward, Thundersley, England; 1991
(Revised and updated, February 2025)

Notes & References:

1. Written ca. 520 CE, this work was widely copied and distributed, and often has labyrinth illustrations within its text, but as all such illustrations were hand-drawn, the labyrinth design often varies considerably.
2. Described in detail in: Clayton, M. *The Cult of the Virgin Mary in Anglo-Saxon England*. Cambridge Studies in Anglo-Saxon England 2, Cambridge University Press, 1990, pages 106-108.

The tiled labyrinth (24 feet, 7.3 metres in diameter) laid in the floor of the Church of St. Michael and All Angels, Abingdon, Oxfordshire, England, in 2008. Photo: The Labyrinth Builders of Canterbury.

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