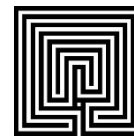


# A Labyrinth in the Centre of Rome

Manuela Mastrigli & Fulvio Pompili



Originally published in *Caerdroia* 30 (1999), p.10-16

## Introduction

This article arises from a photograph taken by Chris Mount who, during a visit to the Castel Sant'Angelo in Rome, noticed a labyrinth in a room that was closed to the public but visible from its entrance. The photograph was passed to Jeff Saward, who contacted us in order to verify the surprising existence of an unknown labyrinth in one of the most ancient and well-known monuments of Rome, the city where we live.

## Castel Sant'Angelo

The Castel Sant'Angelo is situated on the right bank of the River Tevere, near the Vatican. The photograph opposite shows the Castel Sant'Angelo (bottom right) and the basilica of St. Peter (top left).



**Fig.1: Castel Sant'Angelo from the air (lower right)**

It was built as sepulchre for the emperor Adriano (117-138. A.D.) and for his relatives and successors. During the following centuries it was subjected to many structural modifications that deeply changed its original aspect. Owing to its strategic position near the Tevere, it was transformed in a fortress during the Middle Age. When it became the stronghold of the Popes new fortifications were added and sumptuous apartments were built inside. Afterward, it became the political prison of the Church State and then it was transformed in a barracks during the French occupation (1849-1870). The first restoration works begun only at the end of XIX century.

Today, Castel Sant'Angelo is surrounded by a big square boundary wall with corners reinforced by bastions; the square tower formerly emerging from the main cylindrical body is now placed side by side with two Renaissance buildings, forming together a single rectangular block (see fig. 1).

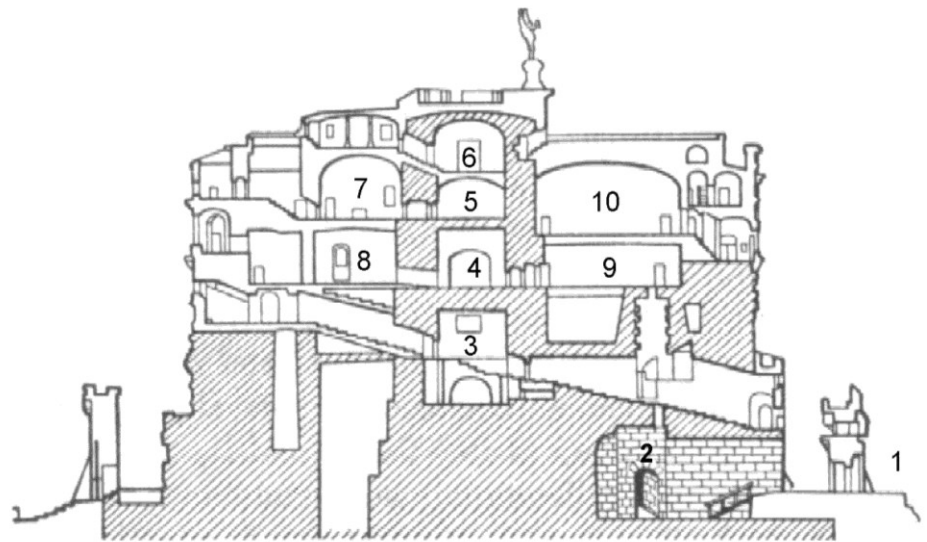
## The Labyrinth

The labyrinth is situated in the so-called *Treasure Room*, a little circular room inside the square central tower. This tower was formerly circular, and it was a single high room. In the XIII century it was divided into the actual two stacked rooms, the *Treasure Room* and the *Flags Room* (see figure 2).

**Fig.2: Castel Sant'Angelo  
cross-section**

**Key**

- 1. Main entrance**
- 2. Helical gallery**
- 3. Funerary cell**
- 4. Justice Room**
- 5. Treasure Room**
- 6. Flags Room**
- 7. Library Room**
- 8. Clemente VII's Room**
- 9. Apollo's Room**
- 10. Council Room**



Between 1542 and 1548, the *Treasure Room* was incorporated in the apartment of Pope Paolo III Farnese, built in those years.<sup>1</sup> Owing to its central and inaccessible position, the room was used to keep the revenue and the archive of the Vatican State until the end of XVIII century: this is the reason why it is still called the *Treasure Room*.

**Fig.3: The labyrinth viewed from the door**

The pavement is completely decorated by a circular labyrinth whose external diameter is 5.94 metres. It consists of seven concentric circles around a central goal. It is unicursal, with the entrance facing the room's door.



The labyrinth is built with two kinds of terracotta tiles: yellowish for the path and reddish for the "walls." The yellowish bricks are 23 cm x 14 cm, the reddish ones are 14 cm x 8 cm (see figure 4).

**Fig.4: Detail of the brick construction**



The central goal is bounded by a circle built with 14 cm x 9 cm reddish bricks. Its average diameter is 1.51 metres. It is decorated with circular motifs: the inner circle is about 63 cm in diameter, while the four external circles are about 35 cm.



**Fig.5: The central goal**

The labyrinth was practically unknown to both the studios and tourists until few years ago, because it was hidden by three big coffers placed in the middle of the room and by a cross-shaped linoleum carpet runner datable to the 1950s.<sup>2</sup>

It was finally “discovered” only in the mid-1980s thanks to the restoration works led by Dr. Alessandra Ghidoli.<sup>3</sup>

The two small coffers were moved to the adjacent room (the *Library Room*) and replaced by two smaller cases, while the large coffer was moved toward the back of the room. The linoleum guide was then removed, allowing a better view of the labyrinth, although it is still partially hidden by the large coffer (see figure 6).

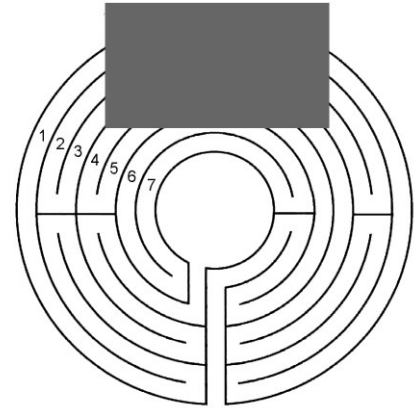


**Fig.6: The remaining coffer on the far side of the labyrinth**

## Path analysis

The study and even the simple observation of the labyrinth are not easy because the public is not admitted in the *Treasure Room* and the pavement is partially hidden by the coffer. However, most of the labyrinth is visible without entering the room, from the entrance.

The first question we have tried to answer was: “Is the path the same as the labyrinth at S. Vitale at Ravenna?” Unfortunately, the coffer hides a branch of the cross where the “walls” are arranged, so the answer is not trivial. However, using simple combinational arguments, it has been possible to find the real path without completely viewing it. Figure 7 schematizes the labyrinth. The grey rectangle is the hidden part (viewing from the door). Circles are labelled 1 through 7, going from the outside to the centre.



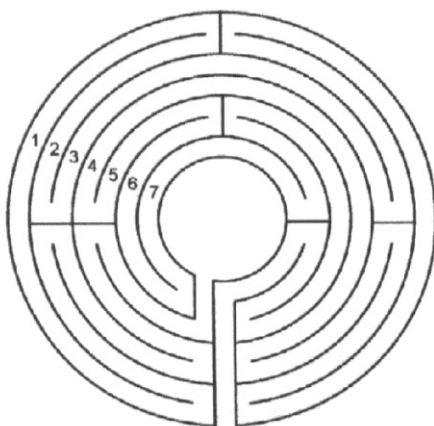
**Fig.7: The visible path arrangement**

Our purpose is to guess the correct disposition of the walls in the hidden branch. For the labyrinth to be unicursal, a wall is allowed to link only adjacent circles. Let us indicate with  $(n+1, n)$  a wall linking circle  $n$  and circle  $n+1$ . With this notation, the left branch of the labyrinth above, for example, has two walls:  $(5,4)$  and  $(3,2)$ . Now let us enumerate all the labyrinths we can create, putting 1, 2 or 3 walls in any allowed position for the hidden branch. There are four possible labyrinths with only one wall in the hidden branch, each one identified by the wall position, they are:  $(6,5)$ ;  $(5,4)$ ;  $(4,3)$ ;  $(2,1)$ .

There are six labyrinths with two walls:  $(6,5)(4,3)$ ;  $(6,5)(3,2)$ ;  $(6,5)(2,1)$  and  $(5,4)(3,2)$ ;  $(5,4)(2,1)$ ;  $(4,3)(2,1)$

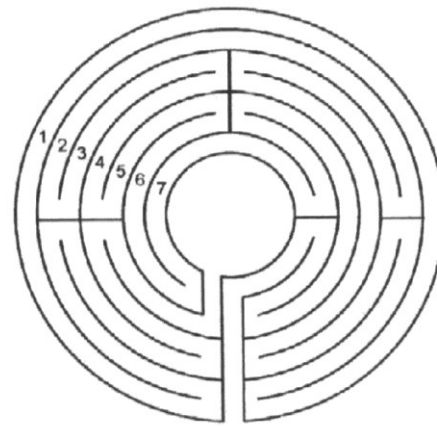
Finally, only one labyrinth has three walls:  $(6,5)(4,3)(2,1)$ .

Therefore, we have a total of  $4+6+1=11$  possibilities to place walls in the hidden branch and this seems not very useful. However, it is easy to check by direct inspection that most of them does not correspond to “real” labyrinths because their path is not complete, i.e. the centre can be reached without covering the full path. Only two possibilities survive:



$(6,5)(2,1)$

and



$(6,5)(4,3)$ .

The ambiguity was removed when it was possible to enter the *Treasure Room* and look behind the coffer. The emerging part of circle 1 and 2 showed the presence of the wall  $(2,1)$ . Hence, the labyrinth  $(6,5)(4,3)$  has to be discarded, and the “real” path was fixed to  $(6,5)(2,1)$ , the same as found on the labyrinth in the basilica of S. Vitale at Ravenna.

## Archive research

The research of historical information about the labyrinth has been carried out through the study of various publications regarding Castel Sant'Angelo and through archive research.

Some studies concerning the apartment of Paolo III Farnese, famous for the frescos painted by Perin Del Vaga and his apprentices, report the account records of the commissioned works (June 1544 - February 1550). They document that the mason Gerolamo da Milano was paid for laying the pavement in front of the treasury on 9<sup>th</sup> October 1546 and for the pavement of the treasury on 31<sup>st</sup> December 1546.<sup>4</sup> The room was mentioned as *lerario nuovo* i.e. new treasury, because it was to contain the money and the precious objects that formed the reserve of the Apostolic Chamber. These records allow us to exclude a dating before 1546 for the labyrinth.

The papers about Castel Sant'Angelo report no other information but the fact that in the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, during the French occupation, Castel Sant'Angelo was transformed in a fortress, and the Treasure Room was used as prison. The charcoal drawings and writings made by the political prisoners from the uprisings of 1849-50 are still visible inside the closets and near the window.

With the unification of Italy as a single State the castle passed to the Italian army. It was only at the beginning of this century that some areas of the castle were left by the soldiers, and restoration work could begin. The restoration of the papal apartment was led by Mariano Borgatti, an Engineer Corps officer. Not only were the frescos restored, but also many pavements which were damaged by soldiers or covered with asphalt and cement. Therefore, during the first decade of 1900, some pavements were completely re-laid in 16<sup>th</sup> century style.<sup>5</sup> Obviously, we have asked ourselves whether the treasury pavement was subjected to the same treatment or not. The published works give no details about this point.

Hence, we have begun to search the roman archives, especially the *Archivio di Stato* and the *Archivio Centrale dello Stato*. The former stores the documents of the central administration of the Church State<sup>6</sup> until 1860; the latter keeps the documents of the Central Administration of the Italian State since 1861, when Italy was unified.

In the *Archivio di Stato* we have not found any new information besides that yet published.<sup>7</sup> In the other archive we have consulted the document regarding Castel Sant'Angelo dated about from 1880 to 1958. The analysis of the records has led us to exclude that the pavement has been rebuilt during the restoration of the apartment of Paolo III. In the only note regarding the Treasure Room, Mariano Borgatti includes, among the works of 1905-1906, the good restoration of *some parts* of the treasury pavement and of the closets.<sup>8</sup> In the notes concerning other pavements, instead, he explicitly writes of reconstruction or rebuilding on the basis of the remaining fragments.<sup>9</sup>

## Conclusions

Owing to the account record mentioning the payment to the mason Gerolamo da Milano, we can date the pavement to 1546. Unfortunately, the records do not mention the labyrinth, and this is probably because they are payment acts and therefore not containing detailed descriptions of the works. Furthermore, we can exclude the pavement has been completely rebuilt because only the 1905-1906 restorations are recorded. The good state of the labyrinth is probably due to the fact that it is placed in a central area of the castle, not easily accessible, a kind of strong room where the Vatican archive and treasury were kept until the end of 18<sup>th</sup> century, when it became a prison.

No document or paper about Castel Sant'Angelo mentions the labyrinth, so we cannot explain with certainty the reason why it was built there. Maybe the circular shape of the room had facilitated the choice of such decorative scheme. The labyrinth could also be linked to the room's function, with the purpose of metaphorically prevent the access to the treasure placed in the centre, according to the classical idea of Theseus labyrinth, though this one is unicursal.

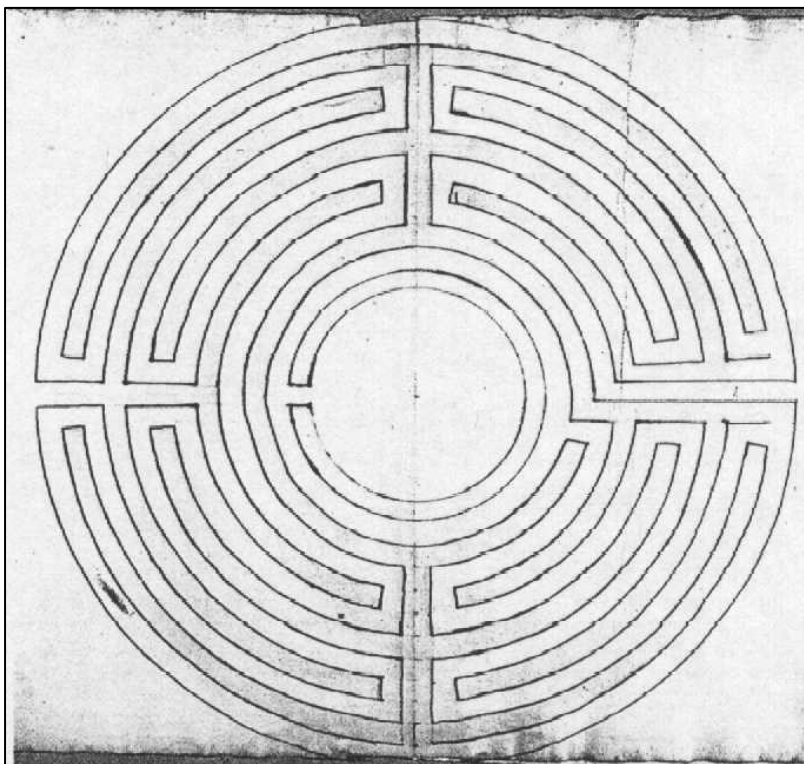
Our research has continued with the attempt of finding the cultural reasons behind the choice of a labyrinth as floor decoration for a room of the apartment of Pope Paolo III.

Jeff Saward hypothesizes that some similar sixteenth-century labyrinths could be arisen from a common source. The floor labyrinths of Ravenna, and those at Villa d'Este (Tivoli, Italy), Gaillon (France) and Theobolds (England) could be derived from the work by Sebastiano Serlio "*Trattato di architettura*" (Treatise on architecture) whose fourth book, printed in 1537, contains two labyrinths as layouts for gardens. The one on the left has the same path of the labyrinth of Castel Sant'Angelo, although its shape is squared.

We suggest another point of view. The floor labyrinths of the previous centuries were mainly located inside cathedrals and churches while, starting from XVI century, they are prevalently found in profane contexts as decorative element for rooms and noble palaces (for example, at Mantova in a painting of *Palazzo Ducale* and on the pavement of the Psiche's room in *Palazzo Te*) and for gardens (Villa d'Este, Tivoli). This could have a relationship with the particular taste for symbolism, typical of that century, which was evident, for example, in the books of emblems and devices and in the figurative decorations like grotesque paintings. Cardinal Alessandro Farnese (1520-1589; nephew of Pope Paolo III Farnese) was also keen on emblems, as some studies on the decoration of the papal apartment of Castel Sant'Angelo put in evidence, so it is possible that labyrinths were part of such passion.<sup>10</sup>

At last, looking for links between labyrinths and the Farnese family, we have found a surprising manuscript.<sup>11</sup> It is dated back to 1639 and contains the drawings for a dinner-set (probably never realised) for Odoardo Farnese (1612-1646), duke of Parma and Piacenza. Among the various decorative motifs there is a labyrinth! (illustrated here).

***The labyrinth in the 1639 manuscript of plates designed for Odoardo Farnese, the Duke of Parma and Piacenza (MS. Par. n.3712)***



Manuela Mastrigli & Fulvio Pompili, Rome; 1999

## Notes & References:

1. The pictorial and architectural works are documented in the accounting records which were found by Cesare D'Onofrio in the *Archivio di Stato* at Rome. See C. D'Onofrio, *Castel S. Angelo*, Roma 1971; E. Gaudio, *I lavori farnesiani a Castel S. Angelo*, "Bollettino d'arte," 1976, pp.7-127. The works in the Treasure Room were directed to a general modernisation: the old travertine jambs were replaced and the closets arranged all around the room were built (1545-1546); a frieze with unicorns and Farnesian lilies (attributed to Luzio Romano and apprentices) was painted at the base of the ceiling-cap (1545).
2. One of the coffers bears the inscription "18 April 1506" and the coat of arms of Pope Giulio II; the other two were ordered by Sisto V (1585-1590). The biggest one was made in 1586 by Domenico Fontana inside the room itself (F. Tomasetti *Le cassaforti di Sisto V*, in "Nuova Antologia", 1907, p.717; F.S. Tuccimei, *Il tesoro dei Pontefici in Castel Sant'Angelo*, Roma 1937).
3. A. Ghidoli led the closets restoration in 1989-1990. In her paper (*La sala del Tesoro in Castel Sant'Angelo: ambiente ed arredo. Note e riflessioni in occasione del restauro*, in "Studi su Castel Sant'Angelo. Archivium Arcis 3", edited by L. Pittarello, Roma 1991, pp.203-206) she announces a future restoration of the pavement, not yet begun at present.
4. The documents report: "lo amatonato avanti lo erario" (giust.291, 9 ottobre 1545) and "li amatonati che lui a fatto in le stantie nove del Castello et in lerario" (giust. 313, 31 dicembre 1546). They are published in C. D'Onofrio, *Castel S. Angelo*, Roma 1971, p. 252; E. Gaudio, *I lavori farnesiani a Castel S. Angelo*, in "Bollettino d'arte", 3-4 (1976), pp.238-239.
5. Borgatti himself wrote : "... the floors (which were barracks floors, made with asphalt and cement) were re-laid (for the most part) with reddish and yellowish bricks with drawings copied from pavement of the same period (Clemente VII, Paolo III etc.) in churches and palaces of Rome..." (M. Borgatti, *Castel Sant'Angelo in Roma*, Roma 1931, p.524).
6. The Church State included most of central Italy until unification (1861) and Rome until 1870.
7. Roma, A.S.R., Commissariato soldatesche e galere, b.15, ff.9 e10; b.19. C. D'Onofrio, *Castel S. Angelo*, Roma 1971, p. 252; E. Gaudio, *I lavori farnesiani a Castel S. Angelo*, in "Bollettino d'arte", 3-4 (1976), pp.238-239.
8. "Sala del Tesoro. Ristaurati e messi in buon ordine gli scaffali delle guardarobe; rimesse le serrature ecc. Riattato qua e là, a regola d'arte, il pavimento del secolo XVI" (Roma, A.C.S., Min.P.I., Div. I, 1908-15, b.535, "Stato dei lavori al 1° Luglio 1906 e lavori eseguiti nell'anno finanziario 1905-1906").
9. Roma, A.C.S., Min.P.I., III ver., II s., 1898-1907, b.720, fasc.1173; Div. I, 1908-1915, b.535.
10. A. Ghidoli, *Imprese ed emblema. Le immagini simboliche nel programma decorativo di Castel Sant'Angelo*, in "Gli affreschi di Paolo III a Castel Sant'Angelo 1543-1548", Roma 1982, pp. 39-46.
11. "Disegni de' piatti e tondi dei quali servivasi il Duca Odoardo Farnese alla sua tavola." Parma, Biblioteca Platina, Manoscritti Parmensi, MS. Par. n.3712. Edited by M. Dall'Acqua, *I gigli e le api. Saggio di disegni farnesiani inediti per un servizio da tavola di età barocca*, pp. 81-100, in "Nel segno del Giglio. Ceramiche per i Farnese", edited by R. Luzi, C. Ravanelli Guidotti, Viterbo 1993.

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