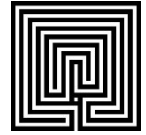


The Labyrinth in Ireland

Jeff Saward



In a country so steeped in history and with an artistic heritage famously decorated with swirling and spiralling art forms, from the time of the earliest Neolithic rock art through to the Celtic masterpiece of the Book of Kells, it might seem logical to find the labyrinth symbol also abundant in Ireland. Instead there are only a handful of historic examples known, most in connection with churches and monastic locations, but each is quite unique and a good example of their use as a multi-faceted symbol.

A Historical Aside

The story of how the labyrinth symbol came to occupy the grand naves of the greatest Christian monuments of the Middle Ages and gain acceptance with the Church is long and tortuous. It took nearly a thousand years for this episode in the history of the labyrinth to unravel.

The first example of a labyrinth in an obviously Christian setting is to be found in Algeria, North Africa, and provides an illuminating insight into how the labyrinth may have been visualized by the early Christian mind. It is a mosaic pavement labyrinth of typical Roman style, but laid in the floor of the Basilica of St. Reparatus, founded in 324 CE in the Roman town of *Castellum Tingitanum* (modern-day Chlef). At its centre is a word square comprising the words “Sancta Ecclesia” (Holy Church) repeated over and over. Such word squares, or letter labyrinths, were popular with the Romans, and this example, enclosed within a physical labyrinth, has been interpreted by scholars as a depiction of the Civitas Dei (City of God, i.e. the church) surrounded by the Civitas Mundi (city of the world), as later outlined by St. Augustine in his *De Civitate Dei*.

A labyrinth graffito on a piece of tumbled masonry among the ruins of the Roman town of Knidos, in south-west Turkey, provides another interesting example of early Christian usage of the labyrinth. Accompanied by an inscription in Greek text, KYRIE BOETHEI (Lord help (us)), it may be an appeal for protection from a threat at the time; but could also be a prayer for the soul. The labyrinth is surrounded by depictions of crosses, the style of which dates the carving to the 6th or 7th centuries CE, a palm tree and a twining plant issuing from a pot. This fascinating combination of the labyrinth and other Christian imagery suggests that the walls of the labyrinth may have been viewed as providing the protection that the unknown carver of the inscription was seeking.

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 instrumental in the acceptance of the labyrinth within the early Christian Church. 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, despite its pre-Christian origins.

From the 9th century onwards, labyrinths begin to appear frequently in manuscripts, produced at monasteries and scriptoriums throughout Europe, attesting to the obvious acceptance of the labyrinth into early Christian symbolism. Surprisingly, perhaps, at first the majority are of the ancient Classical design, the form that could be carried around in the mind without recourse to instructions for their construction. The development and introduction of the familiar medieval design, epitomised by the labyrinth in the nave of Chartres Cathedral, did not take place until the 10th century and it did

not appear in churches as an architectural feature until the 12th century. This 'Christianised' form of the labyrinth symbol subsequently entered popular use throughout Europe, not only in ecclesiastical settings, but also cut into the turf or formed of low hedges in late mediaeval gardens. It would go on to become the root of the hedge puzzle mazes that are recognized almost universally today, whenever the word maze, or labyrinth, is mentioned.

The Labyrinth in Ireland

As the Romans never colonised Ireland, there are no mosaic labyrinths, widespread elsewhere in Europe, to be found. Likewise, despite the abundance of prehistoric rock art, which in Spain and Italy contains labyrinths amongst their circular and spiralling forms, to date, no example of the symbol has been reported in this context in Ireland. However, there are several important historic examples of the labyrinth, surviving or recorded, in Ireland which deserve attention.

The Hollywood Stone, Co. Wicklow

On current evidence, the earliest example of the labyrinth symbol known in Ireland could be the Hollywood Stone, a large boulder decorated with a classical labyrinth design, 29 inches (73 cm) in diameter, discovered in 1908 at Lockstown Upper, near Hollywood, County Wicklow, by a group of men chasing a stoat. When they turned over the boulder, under which their quarry had hidden, it revealed the carving on the underside. Soon confidently identified by the archaeologists of the time to be of probable Bronze Age origin (Bremer 1926), and therefore in line with contemporary dating of other prehistoric rock art in Ireland, the stone was removed in 1925 to the National Museum in Dublin, where it was on display alongside other Neolithic and Bronze Age artefacts and carvings until the late 1980s, before being placed in storage. Removed from its original find location, its purpose and origin were thus difficult to appreciate and few questioned the original interpretation of its origin, made at the time of its discovery, until relatively recently.

The important clue is the stone's original situation, located beside a branch of St. Kevin's Road, an ancient pilgrim's paved trackway, which starting at Hollywood, lead through the Wicklow Mountains to the famous monastery at Glendalough, founded by St. Kevin in the mid-6th century CE. While the age of the labyrinth carved on the boulder is difficult, if not impossible, to prove, the combination of the sharpness of the carving and its former location, strongly suggests that it was a marker stone for the long winding pilgrim's road through the rugged Wicklow Gap.



As such it probably dates from the early Christian or Mediaeval period, ca. 550 - 1400 CE, possibly toward the earlier end of this range (Harbison 1991). The choice of the labyrinth to decorate the stone was surely a commentary on the tortuous path that lay ahead for the pilgrims on the trackway. Had the stone been left where it was found the connection would be more apparent, but fortunately in 2005 it was returned to Co. Wicklow and placed on display at the Glendalough Visitor Centre, where its context is explained alongside other stones and finds from the complex of monuments at Glendalough.

St. Patrick's Cross, Cashel, Co. Tipperary

First noted in 1998 (Harbison 1998), the labyrinth carved on the north side of the base of St. Patrick's Cross at the monastic complex on the Rock of Cashel is also a contender for one of the earliest in Ireland. The labyrinth carving (now moved into the Hall of the Vicars' Choral for protection) is 29 inches (73 cm) in diameter and was originally interpreted as a series of concentric circles. Although badly weathered, especially on its lower half, with controlled lighting these circles can be seen to form the remains of a complex medieval-style labyrinth, probably originally of 15-circuit form, with the entrance to the left (Saward 2009).



A small carved figure at the centre of the design is surely a representation of the Minotaur. Assuming the carving is contemporary with the construction of the cross, a dating from somewhere in the early 12th century is likely, and therefore before the influential labyrinths were laid in the floors of the Gothic Cathedrals of France, but at the same time that they were appearing in Italian churches and cathedrals and in many manuscripts. Indeed, the form of this labyrinth at Cashel suggests influence from a contemporary copy the *Liber Floridus* of Lambert of St. Omer, likewise created in the early 12th century.

The Church of St. Lawrence, Rathmore, Co. Meath

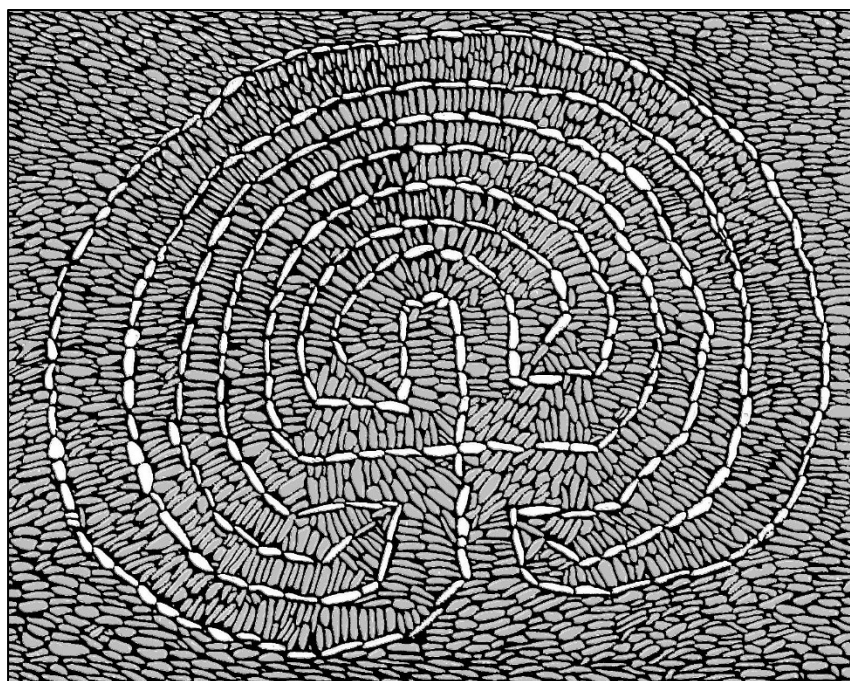
Another carved stone, but this time with the standard 11-circuit mediaeval design, commonly found in churches and cathedrals across Europe during the Middle Ages, is preserved in the ruined church of St. Lawrence at Rathmore in County Meath, alongside the road between Athboy and Navan.



Discovered in 1931 amongst rubble on the floor, it is now set into the interior wall near the doorway into the church (Leask 1933). The labyrinth, 14 inches (36 cm) in diameter, is finely carved, but its original purpose and location within the church are unknown. It was surely a decorative item, possibly a corbel from high on one of the walls and clearly dates from the mid-15th century, when the church was built by Sir Thomas Plunkett, who lies buried with his wife in a tomb within the church.

Bridgetown House, Castletownroche, Co. Cork

Possibly the most unusual historic labyrinth in Ireland, but unfortunately no longer visible, was ingeniously formed from river worn pebbles, laid in a cobblestone floor of the kitchen at Bridgetown House, a large farmhouse to the south of Castletownroche in County Cork. Only 5½ by 4½ feet (1.68 x 1.37 m) in diameter, the walls of the labyrinth were created by laying larger, flattened, stones at an angle to the smaller stones that form the pathway. Its design was of the widespread classical type, with seven concentric paths surrounding the goal. Although quite unique in Ireland, similar cobblestone labyrinths are also found in the porticos of churches in Bizkaia in northern Spain (Juaristi & Gogiascoechea 2008), created during the 17th and 18th centuries.



The story of how this little labyrinth came to be created is quite remarkable. The farmhouse was built in 1782 and sometime in the 1790s a family wedding party was held at the house. At the height of the festivities, the assembled folk were dancing in the kitchen when the original wooden floor collapsed, sending everyone tumbling into the cellar beneath! Apparently nobody was seriously injured, but to avoid a repeat of this unfortunate incident, it was decided that the cellar would be filled in and a local paver, Joe Knott, was employed to lay a cobblestone floor. Presumably he chose the labyrinth motif as a good luck charm, or maybe as a way of commemorating the eventful dance and the circumstances that lead to the construction of the floor (Saward 1984). In recent years the original cobbled floor began to subside and in 1964 a new floor was installed, but fortunately the owners had the foresight to cover the cobbles with sand and polythene before the concrete was poured, to potentially preserve it for the future.

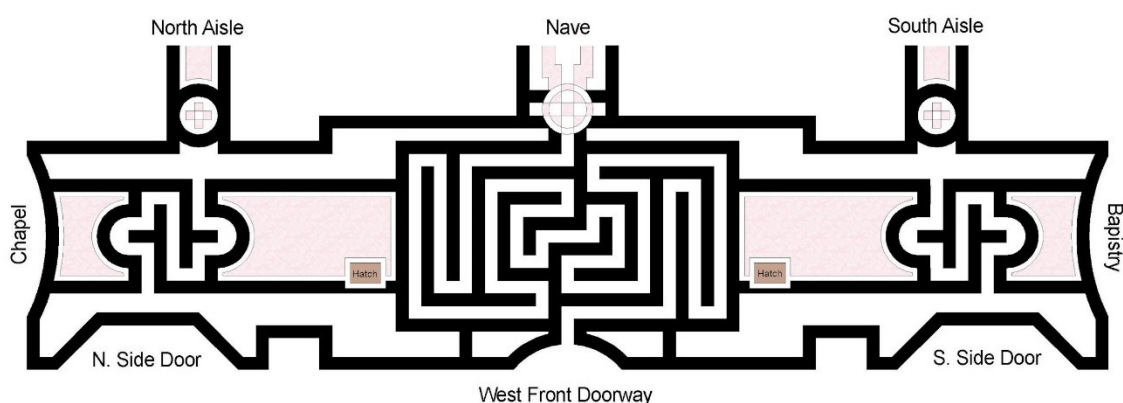
“Walls of Troy” Turf Labyrinth, Ballynavortha, Co. Wicklow

Formerly situated on farmland in the township of Ballynavortha, and certainly still visible in the late 1950s, this is the only confirmed record of a turf labyrinth in Ireland, although an unconfirmed record of two examples at an unspecified location in Co. Derry also exists. Known locally as the “Walls of Troy” and roughly square in outline - 79 x 86 feet (24.4 x 26.4 metres) - a single sketch of the overgrown paths made in 1957 is difficult to interpret, but it seems to have had six or seven circuits (Manning 2004). Its origin is uncertain, but it may have been constructed during the 18th or 19th century, originally as a landscape feature in connection with nearby Ballynavortha House.

St. Anne's Cathedral, Belfast, Co. Antrim

The labyrinth laid in the floor of St. Anne's Cathedral (Church of Ireland) in Belfast, Northern Ireland, is an unusual example of the ecclesiastic labyrinths built during the late 19th and early 20th century – the so-called Gothic Revival labyrinths (Saward 2016). The construction of the cathedral began in 1899 and by June 1904 the nave of the cathedral was complete and open for services. Originally designed by the Belfast architect Thomas Drew in Romanesque style, the construction work has continued ever since. The latest embellishment, the stainless steel "Spire of Hope," completed the roofline in 2007.

The marble floors that fill the nave of the cathedral were gifted by Sir John Milne Barbour (a prominent local politician) in memory of his wife Elise, and designed by the architect Sir Charles Nicholson in consultation with Cathedral Board. Constructed with Irish stone (black from Kilkenny and Galway, white from Recess, Dunlewy and Clifden and red from Co. Cork) by Purdey & Millard of Belfast, the floor was completed and dedicated on Ascension Day, 9th May 1929 by Dr. Grierson, the Bishop of Connor and Down & Dromore.



The designs inlaid in the floor at the west end of the nave are of particular interest. Most noticeable is the rectangular labyrinth, precisely 27 x 15 feet (7.01 x 4.57 metres), formed from marble slabs exactly one foot wide, occupying the floor space directly in front of the west doors. It has a very unusual meandering design with no close parallels; a single (white) path leads from the point between the doors and exits on the opposite side, directly onto the main aisle towards the altar. There are two further simple labyrinthine features in the floor, both 12 by 9 feet (3.66 x 2.74 metres), on either side of the principal labyrinth, this time set in front of the entrance doors leading into the north and south side aisles. The two designs are simple meanders with semi-circular protrusions, the mirror image of each other, and form a coherent flooring plan with the larger central labyrinth panel.

The purpose of the labyrinth in the floor of the cathedral was succinctly documented shortly after completion in a guidebook (Thompson 1930) where it describes how "the space opposite the west door is covered with an intricate maze in black and white, typifying the difficulties of the pilgrimage to grace." The text goes on to describe how the labyrinth represents the journey of life, the white path, representing virtue, leads the walker through the labyrinth, into the main aisle and on towards the altar; but the opposite (black) pathway leads nowhere.



The Church of St. Regnus, Burt, Co. Donegal

A final historic example of the labyrinth in Ireland, but from a more recent time, is to be found at the unusual church of St. Regnus in Burt, County Donegal. Built in the early 1960s and consecrated in 1967, this striking circular church is modelled on the plan of an ancient Iron Age hillfort, the Grianan of Aileach, which overlooks Lough Swilly and the village of Burt. The concentric defensive walls of the fortress, the legendary seat of the O'Neills, the Kings of Ulster from the 5th to 12th centuries CE, and destroyed in 1101 by Murtoogh O'Brien, the King of Munster, were restored in 1870 and the church is modelled directly on the reconstructed outer walls of the fortress.

The labyrinth appears several times within the structure of the church: as bronze door handles on the impressive copper-clad doors and on a plaque set into a wall in front of the church commemorating its dedication (Saward 1985). It is not clear why the architects who designed the church choose to use the labyrinth in this setting. Maybe they likened it to the concentric defensive walls of the fortress, a parallel that can be traced back to the stories of the Walls of Troy, first made apparent on an Etruscan vase from Tragliatella dating to the 7th century BCE, where a labyrinth inscribed with the name *TRVIA* (Troy) is depicted with horsemen and soldiers. However, there is no trace of a labyrinth carved on the stones of the fortress, and no explanation is given at the church. As with the earlier examples discussed above, an air of mystery surrounds even this most recent of additions to the fascinating collection of historic labyrinths to be found in Ireland.



Modern Labyrinths

Within the last twenty years or so a number of modern labyrinths have been constructed throughout Ireland, often as part of the recent spiritually-orientated revival of interest in this most ancient of symbols. While a number are on private property, some are situated at monasteries and retreat centres, the box hedge labyrinth at the An Tobar retreat house in Ardbraconn, Co. Meath (created 1998) and the turf and pavement labyrinth at St. Patrick's Purgatory on Lough Derg, Co. Donegal (2004) are notable examples, at art centres and other visitor attractions such as the turf labyrinth at the Glendalough Visitor Centre (2005). Many of these recent creations are listed on the Worldwide Labyrinth Locator website (www.labyrinthlocator.org) and undoubtedly more will follow. In years to come a selection of these will survive to become historic monuments and mark another chapter in the long history of the labyrinth in Ireland.

Jeff Seward, Thundersley, England; 2009, updated 2016.

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St. Patrick's Purgatory, Lough Derg, Co. Donegal

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