

Introduction

Stone labyrinths, or “Trojaborgs” as they are commonly called in Sweden, are found widely throughout the Nordic countries of Sweden, Norway and Finland, particularly around the shorelines of the Baltic Sea. Formed of stones and boulders laid on the ground, the majority are situated next to fishing stations, natural harbours, and the remains of seasonal settlements, particularly on offshore islands, although a few in southern Sweden are found inland, often alongside prehistoric grave fields. Over 600 stone labyrinths have been recorded, and a considerable number survive, but to date no complete catalogue has been compiled.



The Trojaborg at Galberget, Visby, on the island of Gotland, Sweden

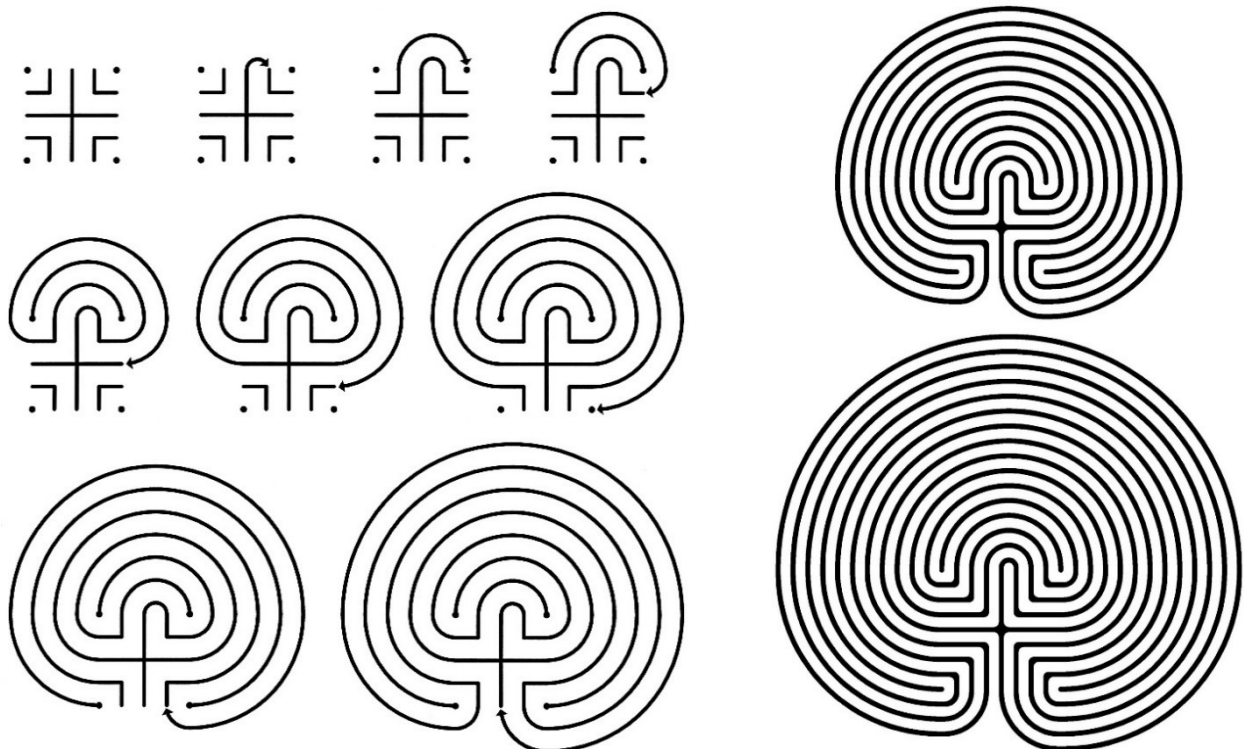
Stone labyrinths can also be found in Iceland and Estonia (presumably introduced by Nordic fishing and trading settlements), around the White Sea and Kola peninsula in Arctic Russia (where Pomor traders likely spread the idea), and as far away as the Scilly Islands in southwest England (where the son of a lighthouse keeper is credited with the construction of a labyrinth in the early 1700s). While the majority of Scandinavian labyrinths are built from rocks, they are also found as wall and ceiling frescos (and occasionally as graffiti) in more than twenty medieval churches in the south of the region, including Denmark and Finland.

When were they made?

The age of the Scandinavian stone labyrinths has been the subject of much speculation. Early writers proposed dates as far back as the Bronze or Iron Age, but post-glacial (isostatic) land uplift rates prove that some coastal locations must have a more recent, possibly medieval, origin. During the late 1980s a breakthrough was provided by the application of lichenometry to these labyrinths, especially those around the northern shores of the Baltic. The scientific measurement of the slow growth of lichens on the lines of boulders that formed their patterns, confirmed that many of the labyrinths were constructed from the end of the 13th century onwards, with a notable peak in the 16th and 17th centuries, continuing up to the present day, with evidence that earlier examples were sometimes accompanied by later copies nearby. Labyrinths situated inland or at higher elevations continue to prove difficult, if not impossible, to date, and those adjacent to prehistoric grave fields may have earlier origins.

What are their designs?

Curiously, the vast majority of the stone labyrinths in Scandinavia are all of the same basic design, the so-called “classical” type, or simple variations of it. This design is found worldwide from prehistory onwards, and can be shared with others by means of a simple drawing technique, without the need for written instruction. The more complicated “medieval” labyrinth design, widely found elsewhere in Europe (especially in the medieval churches and cathedrals of Italy and France) is rarely found in Scandinavia, although the design is recorded once as a church fresco, at Grinstad in western Sweden, and also, surprisingly, as stone labyrinths in Arctic Russia. So-called “Baltic” labyrinths, with double spirals inserted at the centre to produce a separate entrance and exit, are also widespread, especially in Finland, and are connected with traditional folk customs and dances. While careless feet can easily damage the layout of a stone labyrinth, and similarly, thoughtless restoration can result in design changes, they are extremely durable, even without maintenance, particularly in barren, rocky landscapes with little vegetation.



Drawing an 8-wall “classical” labyrinth

12 & 16-wall labyrinths

Why are they called Trojaborgs?

Names associating the circuitous lines of the labyrinth with the almost impenetrable defences of the city of Troy (*Trojaborg*, *Trojeborg*, *Trojenborg*, *Tröborg*, etc.) are common throughout the region. As with the occurrence of this name (*Troy Town*) in the British Isles, where it is applied to similar labyrinths cut in turf, this may represent an ancient knowledge of the association of Troy with the labyrinth symbol that dates back into antiquity. However, the fame of the Troy legends during the medieval period, throughout Europe, provides a much later point of origin for this popular association. Occasionally the names of other famous cities are also used: *Viborg*, *Trondheim*, *Konstantinopel*, *Jerusalem*, *Ninive* (Nineveh) and *Vavilon* (Babylon) are all recorded. Some of these names, all clearly derived from reference to glorious or lost cities from the past, can be of surprisingly recent origin; a labyrinth known as *Lissabon* in southeast Finland, probably only acquired that name after news of the destruction of Lisbon in the earthquake of 1755 had reached the region.

What were they used for?

A number of fascinating traditional uses for these Scandinavian stone labyrinths can be found in old folklore. Until the early 20th century, fishermen would walk the labyrinths before putting to sea to ensure good catches and bring favourable winds - unwelcome winds would supposedly become trapped in the coils of the labyrinth. In Finland, the Lapp hunters and shepherds would walk the labyrinths to protect themselves and their reindeer from wolves and wolverines. In southwest Sweden, the local shepherd boys would walk the labyrinth to protect them from the attention of wolves, who were apparently confused by the winding paths. A particular example from Nederkalix in Sweden records that fishermen would walk the labyrinth there and the *smägubbar* (little people or trolls) would follow them into the labyrinth. The fishermen would then run to their boats and put to sea, leaving the trolls confused and trapped within the labyrinth and thus unable to follow them to cause bad luck. This notion that the circuitous walls of a labyrinth could somehow confuse or contain spirits, good or bad, is by no means confined to Scandinavia. Indeed it occurs wherever the labyrinth is found. While most of this folklore was first recorded during the 19th and early 20th centuries, it clearly provides an insight into the local beliefs in the magical and protective properties of the labyrinths.

In Finland, where many of the labyrinths occur in areas with predominantly Swedish-speaking populations, many of the labyrinths are known as *Jungfraudans* (young girl or virgin's dance). This name also occurs in Sweden and, perhaps surprisingly, in Arctic Russia, which may point to the origin of some of the labyrinths in this seemingly remote area. The *Jungfraudans*, a game where a young maiden would stand at the center of the labyrinth while the boys would run the paths to reach her in record time is almost universal wherever labyrinths occur in Europe, and local folklore records this game taking place at a number of stone labyrinth sites throughout Scandinavia.

Gotland Labyrinths

The island of Gotland, in the middle of the Baltic Sea, provides an interesting example of the continuity of labyrinth construction, by people from all walks of life, over a considerable period of time. The earliest are difficult to date accurately – they may well be from the late mediaeval period, ca. 1250 - 1500 CE? – although it has been suggested that a few are earlier. The famous *Trojaborg* just outside the town of Visby, is situated below the rocky crag where the *Galgberget* gallows were located. Local legend records that the labyrinth was originally built by a young woman who was held prisoner in a cave nearby, placing one stone every day, until she was allowed to go free on completion of her task. First documented in 1740, but surely older, it had become a popular gathering place for the townspeople on the evening before May Day.

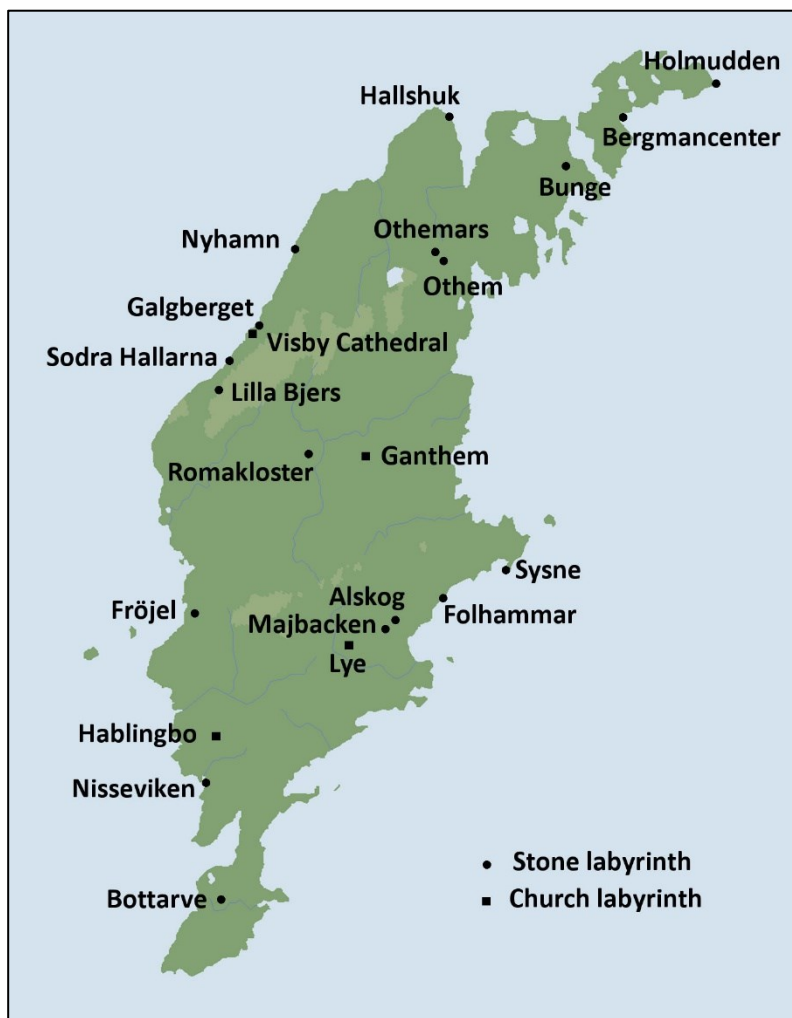
Another labyrinth excavated in the churchyard at Fröjel in 1974, and still preserved, is sometimes interpreted as a survivor from pagan times. The name *Fröjel* is derived from the “Sanctuary of Freja” the fertility goddess of pre-Christian Sweden, but there is no direct evidence that the labyrinth is also from this era. Another labyrinth near the farmstead of Ottes, at the far south of the island, is now overgrown but stands next to three ancient stone cairns; similarly it could also be of early origin.

Elsewhere on the island there is a labyrinth fresco in Hablingbo Church, probably painted during the 14th or 15th century, and also several labyrinth graffiti scratched by less reverent hands in dark corners of churches, presumably when nobody was looking. It has been suggested that these labyrinth depictions were inspired by the labyrinths at Visby or Fröjel, but this is arguably a chicken-or-egg question. Certainly the older stone labyrinths provided the inspiration for a number of newer labyrinths built by schoolmasters as educational exercises for their pupils in villages across the island during the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Surviving examples at Alskog, Majbacken and Othem are all from this period, as are the labyrinths at Hallshuk and Holmudden, both situated on headlands next to lighthouses.

This curious mix of labyrinths from a multitude of time periods continues with the recent addition of labyrinths constructed by holidaymakers, largely for the entertainment of children, often at popular seaside locations. Those at Nisseviken and Nyhamn are situated on the shoreline adjacent to summer holiday cottages, the complicated meandering labyrinth at Folhammar is adjacent to the rock formations at this popular destination. Mostly built within the last 50 years, those that prove popular have survived, receiving regular attention as well as visitors. In total some 50 or more labyrinths have been recorded on Gotland; of these around half remain and new ones continue to be created in such diverse locations as farms, museums, and nature reserves. This varied assortment of labyrinths, devotional, educational and recreational, surely provides one of the most fascinating examples of the enduring appeal of the labyrinth, across a broad spectrum of cultural contexts and interests, throughout a considerable period of time.

Jeff Saward, *Labyrinthos*
August 2016

***Labyrinths on the
Island of Gotland***



Stone Labyrinths

The following labyrinths are usually to be found in good condition at the time of writing (2016).

Alskog

Stone labyrinth, 16-wall, triple-angle type, 18 metres diameter.

Situated in woodland approximately 350 metres northeast of Alskog Church, beside Route 144, this labyrinth was previously overgrown, but has recently (2015) been restored by the local community. Documentation records that it was built in the 1860s by Mr. Lindgren, the local schoolteacher.

Bottarve Farm Museum

Stone labyrinth, 8-wall, single-angle type, 12 metres diameter.

Constructed in a small field known as Tottes Täppu in 2012, the labyrinth is part of the children's playground at Bottarve Farm Museum, midway between Burgsvik and Vamlingbo.

Bergmancenter, Fårö

Stone labyrinth, unusual 6 wall, double-labyrinth design, 12 x 7 metres.

This unusual labyrinth was originally built on the beach by Harald Ahlman in 1975 for a television program, but was re-laid in the grounds of the Bergmancenter in 2012. It is situated 35 metres southeast of the visitor centre.

Bunge

Stone labyrinth, 12-wall, double-angle type, 16 metres diameter.

The labyrinth is situated a few metres west of Route 148, opposite Bunge Church and adjacent to the entrance to the Bunge Museum, and is maintained in good condition. Constructed in the late 1970s in connection with the museum, it features large stones that mark the entrance and centre.



Folhammar

Stone labyrinth, 9-wall, spiral-shaped centre, with various additional small spirals and looping extensions, ca. 25 x 15 metres.

Situated near the limestone rock formations to the west of the footpath in open grass and amongst trees, this meandering labyrinth is regularly walked by tourists and is in good condition. Not mentioned in a 1930 survey, it was clearly constructed after this date. In 1977 it was recorded as a simple spiral 9 metres in diameter, but the design has been considerably extended by visitors since that time, and an additional section now winds around trees and bushes to the south, on the other side of the track.



Another stone labyrinth is situated 70 metres north of the larger labyrinth. An unusual 12 metre spiral with an angle-type centre and looping extensions wanders into surrounding rocks outcrops. Likewise not mentioned in the 1930 survey, it has obviously been constructed since that time. While clearly visible ca. 1980, it is now very overgrown and difficult to see.

Fröjel Churchyard

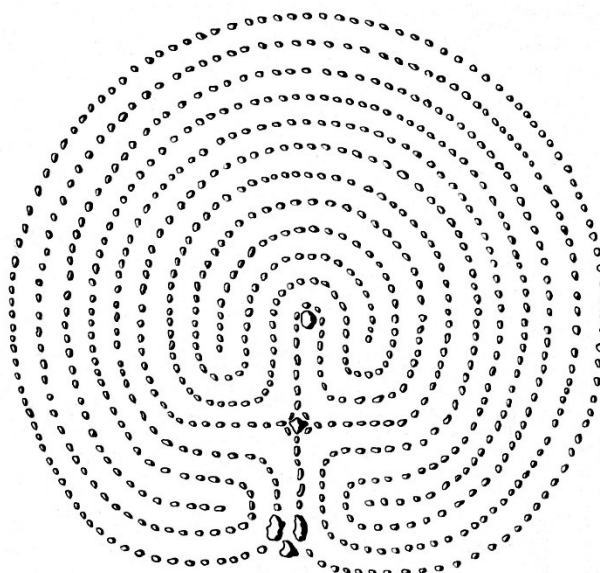
Stone labyrinth, 12-wall, double-angle type, 10 metres diameter.

Situated just inside the churchyard, 13 metres east of the church, the labyrinth was restored in 1976 and survives in reasonable condition. The outermost circuits on the southeast edge are partly obscured by the cement cap of a well with functioning hand-pump. Considered to be one of the oldest labyrinths on Gotland, the exact age is uncertain, but could be from the late medieval period.

Galgberget, Visby

Stone labyrinth, 12-wall, double-angle type, 18 metres diameter.

Arguably the most famous labyrinth in Sweden, the *Trojaborg* is situated on flat open grassland, beside St. Göransgatan, 180 metres north of the junction with Trojaborgsgatan, on the northern outskirts of Visby. Despite encroaching development, it survives in good condition. Considered to be one of the oldest labyrinths on Gotland, it was first documented ca. 1740, but is surely older, possibly dating to the late medieval period.



Plan of the Trojaborg

Hallshuk Lighthouse

Stone labyrinth, 16-wall, triple-angle type, 16 metres diameter.

Situated amongst bushes and small trees on the cliff-top overlooking Hallshuk harbour, 35 metres northeast of the track to the lighthouse, this labyrinth is believed to have been constructed in the late 1800s by the lighthouse keepers.



Holmudden Lighthouse, Fårö

Stone labyrinth, 16-wall, triple-angle type, 14 metres diameter.

Situated alongside the track that runs amongst the tree, approximately 10 metres south of the wall surrounding the lighthouse. The design is slightly confused, but regular visitors keep it in reasonable condition. Sten Sandelin, a local man, stated that he and other children built the labyrinth in 1917.

Lilla Bjers, Västerhejde

Stone labyrinth, 8 wall, single-angle, 7.5 metres diameter.

Adjacent to the 618 road leading to the village, the owners of Lilla Bjers farm built this small labyrinth next to the farm shop in 2014 to “honour the people that have been living on the site of the farm [for thousands of years].”

Majbacken, Garde

Stone labyrinth, 8-wall, single-angle type, 14.5 x 13.3 metres.

Situated in a stony field in an area known as Majbacken, alongside a minor road between Garde and Alskog. It survives in reasonable condition (2016), but bushes encroach on the west side. Known locally as the *Trojborg*, it is adjacent to a large Bronze Age mound, and there are other stone monuments nearby, but the labyrinth was probably built sometime after 1855, as it was not mentioned in a report written at that time.

Nisseviken

Stone labyrinth, 12-wall, double-angle type, 9 metres diameter.

Originally built in the 1930s by Mr. Gardell, a local schoolteacher and his pupils, this labyrinth was formerly situated adjacent to holiday cabins at the end of Marbodvägen, off the Nisseviksvagen road. The original location of the labyrinth was disturbed by new drains that were laid in 2011, so the stones were lifted and the labyrinth rebuilt 70 metres to the northeast of the original location, nearer the shore. Situated in grassland just above the beach, it is well maintained and is obviously much enjoyed by residents and visitors.



Nyhamn

Stone labyrinth, 8-wall, single-angle type, 7 metres diameter.

The labyrinth is situated half a kilometre south of the Nyhamn fishing huts, immediately east of the track along the shoreline. Constructed ca. 1970 by Anna Maria Denstedt, who was staying in the adjacent holiday cottage, it survives in good condition.



Othem

Stone labyrinth, 12-wall, double-angle type, 16 metres diameter.

The labyrinth is situated in open grassland just south of the minor road into the village, opposite the large barn, approximately 230 metres southwest of Othem church. Although the outermost two walls are damaged on one side, this labyrinth is otherwise in reasonable condition, if a little overgrown. Its origin is unrecorded, but it presumably dates from the late 1800s.

Othemars

Stone labyrinth, simple spiral design, 5 metres diameter.

This simple spiral labyrinth is situated on the limestone pavement, 35 metres north of the old quarry site, 0.7 km north of Othemars. First recorded in 2009, it is obviously modern, but potentially could survive for some time in such a barren environment.



Romakloster

Stone maze/labyrinth, 10-wall, concentric circles with breaks & dead ends, ca. 12 metres diameter.

Located behind the principal buildings of the Kungsgård, southwest of the ruined Cistercian abbey, this curious labyrinth is actually a simple maze with dead-ends and choices. Obviously fairly modern, but exact details are uncertain.

Sodra Hallarna

Stone labyrinth, single-angle type, 8 metres diameter.

Situated on the lower terrace of the cliffs at Sodra Hallarna Naturreservat, southwest of Visby, this modern labyrinth is on open stony ground approximately 130 metres west of the waterfall. Created by Ann Forsberg of *Solkristallen* in Visby on the spring equinox in 2008, it has been maintained and enhanced with further additions since that time.



Sysne

Stone labyrinth, 8-wall, single-angle type with additional loop, 8 metres diameter.

Situated beside the track, approximately 220 metres south of Sysne fishing harbour, this labyrinth is well preserved, but the path is a little confused, and there is a bush growing within the coils. Built c.1965-67 by Eva Bendelin, a local resident. Another labyrinth, c. 25 metres southeast of the example above, was created in the 1970's (probably by tourists), but is now almost completely overgrown.

Church Labyrinths - Frescos & Inscriptions, etc.

Ganthem Church

Inscription, 12-wall, double-angle type, 0.95 metre diameter.

Scratched into the wall plaster on the north side of the western arch, the labyrinth is very difficult to discern. The church itself dates to the 13th century, and although the age of the labyrinth graffiti is uncertain, it is probably from the late medieval period.

Hablingbo Church

Wall fresco, 19-wall, unusual triple-angle style variant, 1.56 metres diameter.

Situated on west wall of the church tower, this unusual and well preserved fresco of a labyrinth has a figure overlying the paths on the right side of the design. The tower dates to the 14th century, and similar labyrinth frescos in Scandinavia are usually dated from between the late 14th and early 16th centuries.

Inscription, central core (seed) of a 12-wall, double-angle type, 8 centimetres square.

Situated on the southern wall in the church tower, a partially drawn graffito of the central core of a labyrinth is preserved, but easily overlooked. This small graffito is difficult to date, but other adjacent graffiti includes a ship of 15th/16th century style.



Lye Church

Inscription, 12 wall, double-angle type, 0.25 metres diameter.

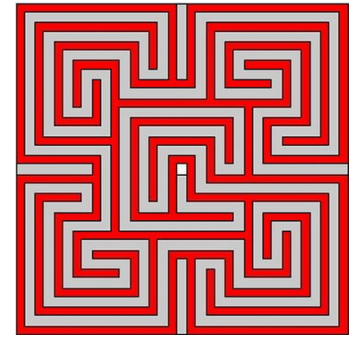
Situated in a tower on the south wall of the church, about a metre from the floor, this graffito can be difficult to view by the casual visitor. Alongside the labyrinth is a runic inscription reading *I am a poor, sinful man*, a sentence from the Lutheran confession that was first introduced into Swedish liturgy ca. 1540. Other similar graffiti nearby include ships and runes and another incomplete labyrinth – just the top ‘half’ of the design. The tower is dated to the 13th century, but the majority of the graffiti, including the labyrinths, are probably from the 15th or 16th century.



Sankta Maria Cathedral, Visby

Pavement labyrinth, unusual meandering design, 10.5 metres square.

Situated in the courtyard in front of the cathedral, the paved area is inlaid with a square labyrinth formed from red and grey stone blocks, and is surrounded by benches and plantings. Designed by Jerk Alton, the labyrinth was constructed 1985 when the pavement around the cathedral was renovated.



Further Reading:

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Trojborg, Majbacken

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