

THE LABYRINTH

Introduction: The labyrinth dates back to prehistoric time, and is perceived as sacred space. It seems to have been an integral part of many cultures, such as Celtic, Mayan, Greek, Cretan, and Native American.

History of the Labyrinth: Labyrinths have been known to the human race for over 3,500 years, conjuring up such images as the legend of Theseus and the Minotaur. They have been used in many different religious ways by many peoples, and as solar and lunar calendars. In Arizona and the American Southwest the Hopi use a form of the labyrinth in their religious symbolism, and the Tohono O'dham "Man in the Maze" is actually a "seven-circuit" labyrinth and is part of an elaborate creation myth.



The oldest existing Christian labyrinth is probably the one in the fourth-century basilica of Reparatus, Orleansville, Algeria. And while Christians used labyrinths on pre-Christian sites and modeled their own after ones used by earlier cultures, the development of the high medieval Christian seven circuit labyrinth was a breakthrough in design. Its path of seven circles was cruciform (shaped like the Cross) and thus incorporated the central Christian symbol. Use of these labyrinths flourished in Europe throughout the eleventh and twelfth centuries and beyond, especially in the French cathedrals of Chartres, Sens, Poitiers, Bayeux, Amiens and Rheims and in the Italian cathedrals at Lucca and San Maria-di-Trastavera in Rome.

Medieval pilgrims, unable to fulfill their desire to make a pilgrimage to Jerusalem, went instead to many pilgrimage sites in Europe or Britain. In many cases the end of their journey was a labyrinth formed of stone and laid in the floor of the nave of one of these great Gothic cathedrals. The center of the labyrinths probably represented for many pilgrims the Holy City itself and thus became the substitute goal of the journey.

The Chartres Labyrinth: The Chartres cathedral labyrinth, upon which Grace Cathedral's labyrinth in San Francisco is modeled, has a particular, though probably typical, history. The majestic twelfth-century Gothic church a few miles west of Paris was built on an earlier, pre-Christian religious site, and became an important pilgrimage goal for medieval pilgrims. The astrological and pre-Christian origins were never entirely lost at Chartres, but became incorporated into the symbolism of the cathedral -- and of the labyrinth.



Chartres, like most medieval churches, is a cruciform design. The labyrinth is located in the nave approximately where the thighs of the crucified Christ might have been in this symbolic representation.

THE LABYRINTH

One of the most famous aspects of Chartres Cathedral is the spectacular rose window over the great west doors. It has the same dimensions as the labyrinth and is exactly the same distance up the west wall as the labyrinth is laterally from the cathedral's main entrance below the window. An imaginary cosmic hinge located where the doors and floor intersect would, if closed, place the rose window directly on top of the labyrinth, thus the sparkling, colored light of the window and the darkness of the labyrinthine pilgrimage are combined.

The sacred geometry of the labyrinth involves the numbers four, seven and twelve, emerging out of the "paths" and "walls" themselves. The labyrinth is divided neatly into four quarters around a cross, standing in the medieval mind for the four gospels (Matthew, Mark, Luke and John) and also for the four stages of the Mass (Evangelium, Offertory, Consecration, and Communion). Labyrinth meditation might be based on one of these or some other set of four, assigning each quarter section to one, and so forth.

Seven is the number of 180 turns there are in each quarter of the labyrinth. This relates to the seven Liberal Arts of medieval education, the chakras of the human body, or perhaps the seven paths of the classic medieval cruciform labyrinths.

Twelve is the total number of the labyrinth's paths and center, thus relating it to the twelve-month calendar. The "lunations" around the outside of the labyrinth are a lunar calendar and can be used to determine, among other things, the date of Easter, which falls on the Sunday after the full moon that occurs on or after the spring equinox.

The six "petals" of the center of the labyrinth provide individual opportunities for symbolic representation and meditation. Moving clockwise from the entrance, they represent mineral, plant, animal, human, angelic and un-nameable properties. In the very center of the Grace St. Paul's labyrinth, three consecrated hosts, representing the three persons of the Trinity, are embedded in the concrete inside a metal pix.

Source: <http://www.findingstone.com/workshops/labyrinth/>