

# Medieval Manuscript Labyrinths

## Presentation for the Labyrinth Society Annual Gathering



Chantilly, France  
Musée Condé,  
Ms. 724/1596, fol 21r.  
Kern #193



A woman with short grey hair, wearing a blue patterned top, is seated in a library. She is holding an open book with both hands. The book's pages are aged and yellowed. The top page features a circular diagram with concentric lines and text. The background shows wooden bookshelves and other people working at tables.

This presentation was created  
by the Rev. Jill K H Geoffrion, PhD

[www.jillgeoffrion.com](http://www.jillgeoffrion.com)

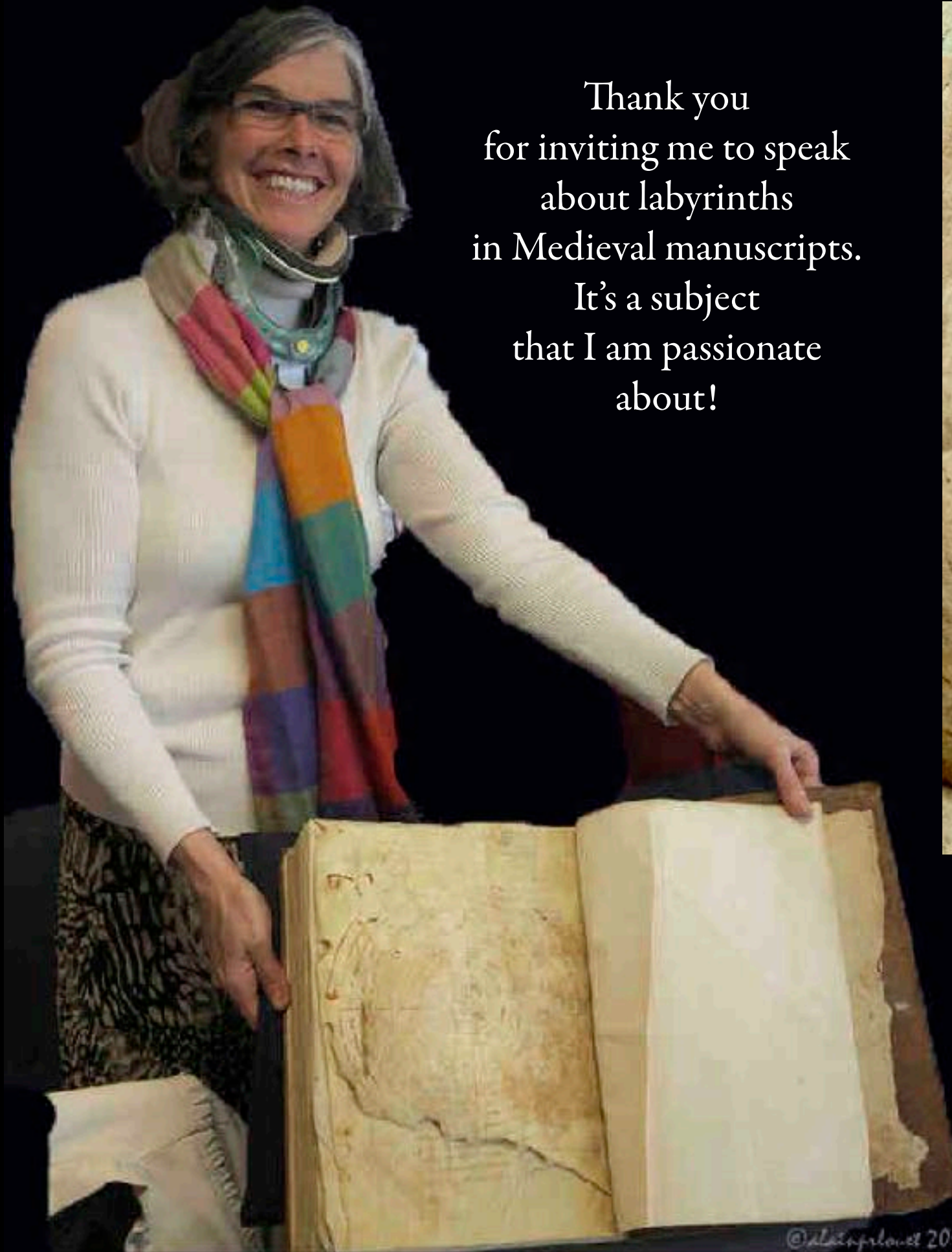
Paris, France,  
Bibliothèque Nationale de France  
Greek 2055, fol. 53v.  
Not in Kern  
1401-1500



Thank you  
for inviting me to speak  
about labyrinths  
in Medieval manuscripts.  
It's a subject  
that I am passionate  
about!

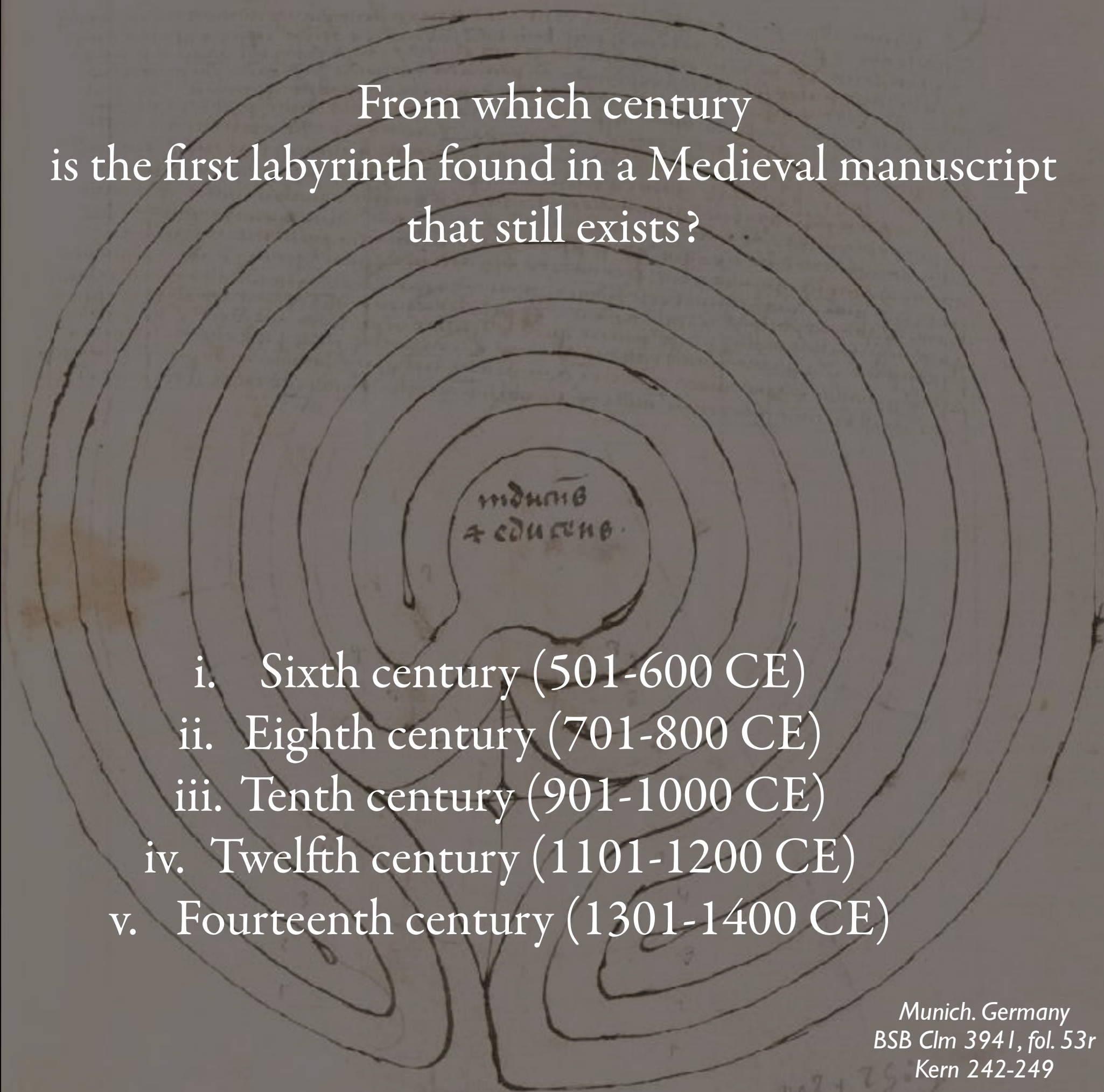


*Orléans, France  
Bibliothèque Municipale  
Ms. 16, fol. 252v.  
Not in Kern*



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From which century  
is the first labyrinth found in a Medieval manuscript  
that still exists?

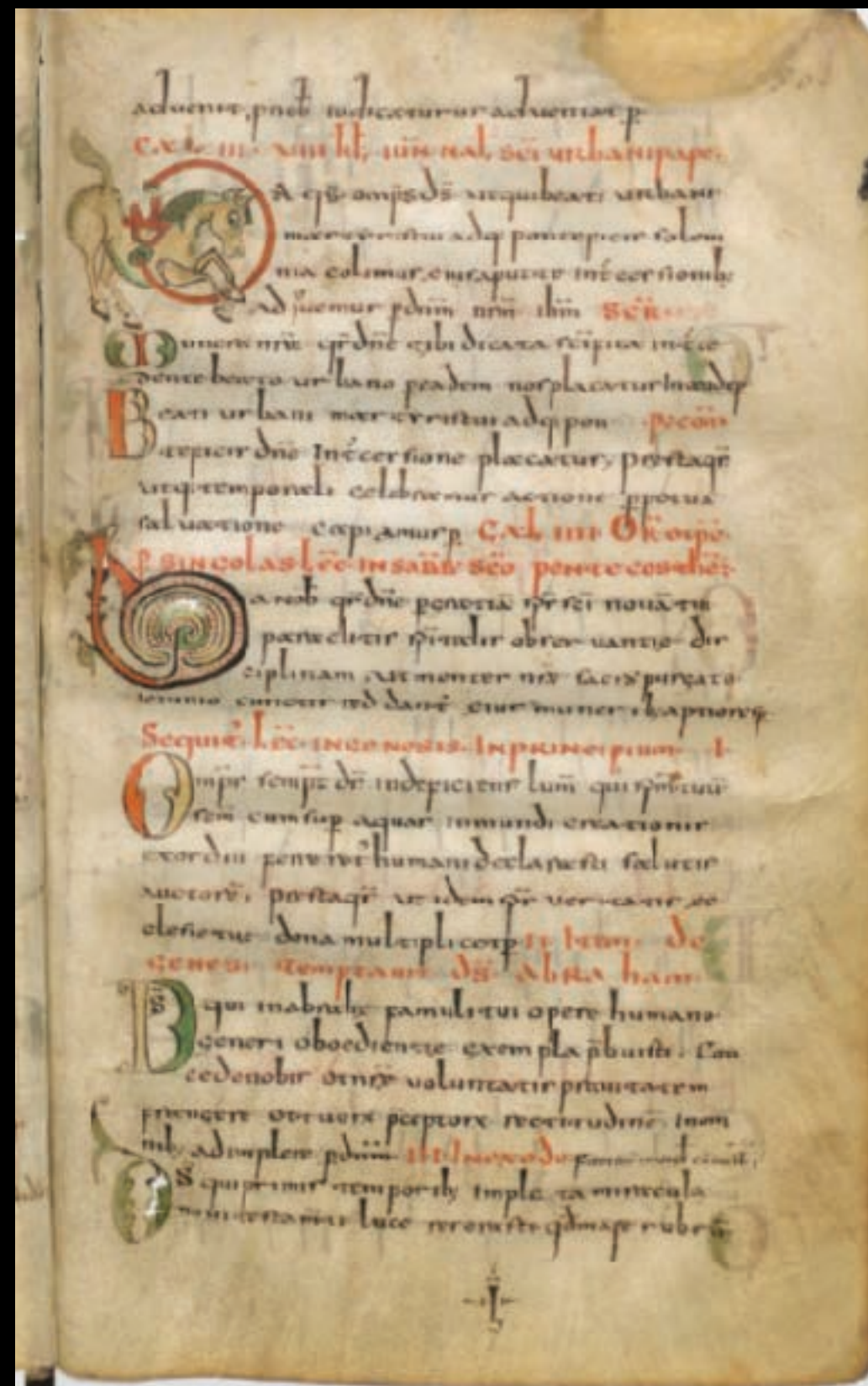
- i. Sixth century (501-600 CE)
- ii. Eighth century (701-800 CE)
- iii. Tenth century (901-1000 CE)
- iv. Twelfth century (1101-1200 CE)
- v. Fourteenth century (1301-1400 CE)




# The Eighth Century



Paris, France  
Bibliothèque Nationale de France,  
Lat. 12048, fol. 80r.  
Not in Kern  
780-800







Medieval manuscripts  
are documents written by hand  
mostly on vellum.  
Many contain illustrations.





Handwritten Latin text in a medieval script, likely a recipe or historical account, visible on the right page of the manuscript.

Handwritten Latin text at the bottom of the page, likely a recipe or historical account, starting with "vnde uald' suauē et clarū. et sic spissū sic utū solet ē. et cū admuni-".

Can you guess what the handwritten Latin words on this page describe?

A love poem

A warning about red-headed women

Historical data about a queen who was imprisoned

A recipe for chicken pot pie

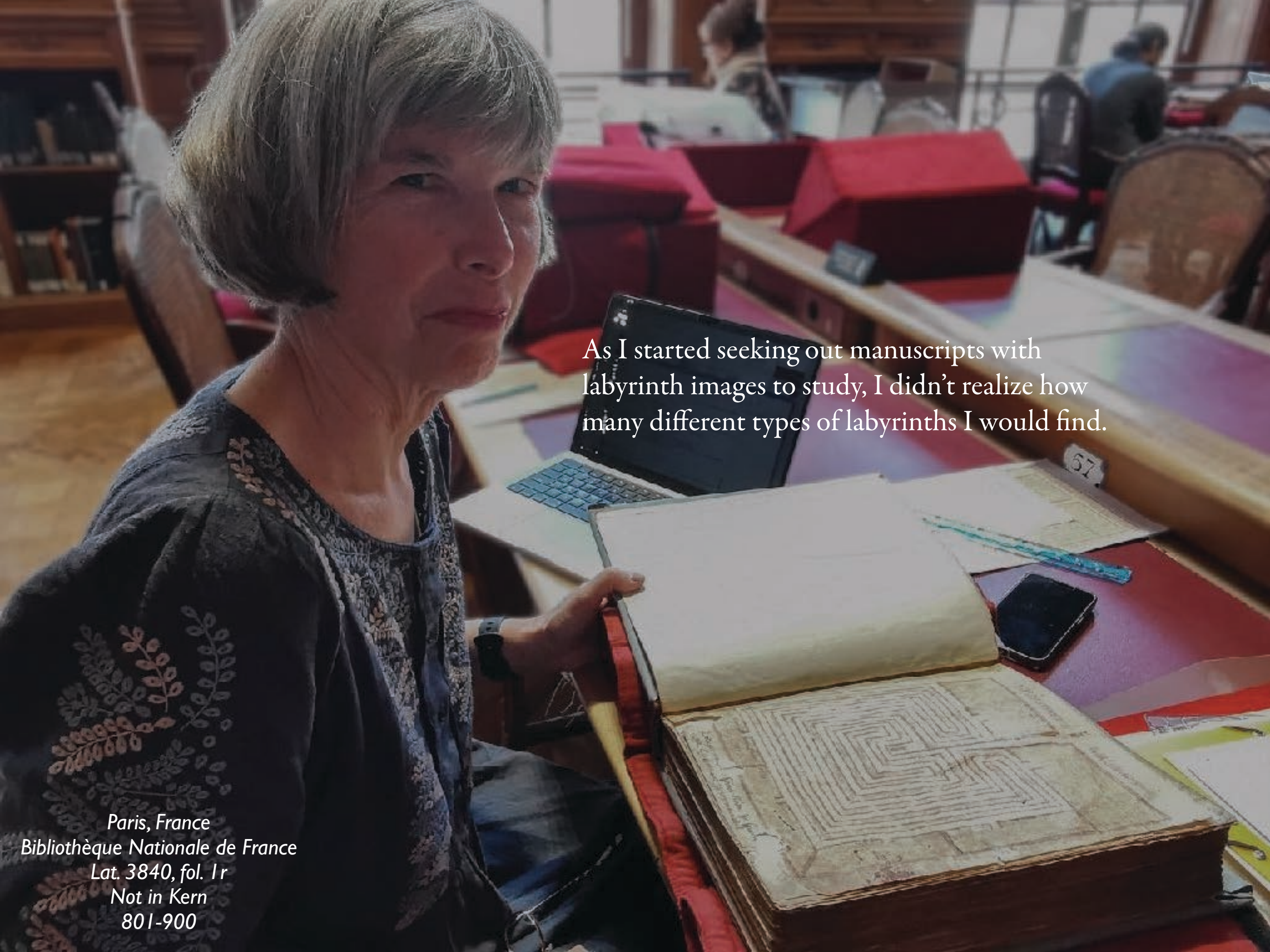


A recipe for chicken pot pie!



Chantilly, France.  
Musée Condé  
Ms. 0328, fol. 080v  
Not in Kern  
1201-1300

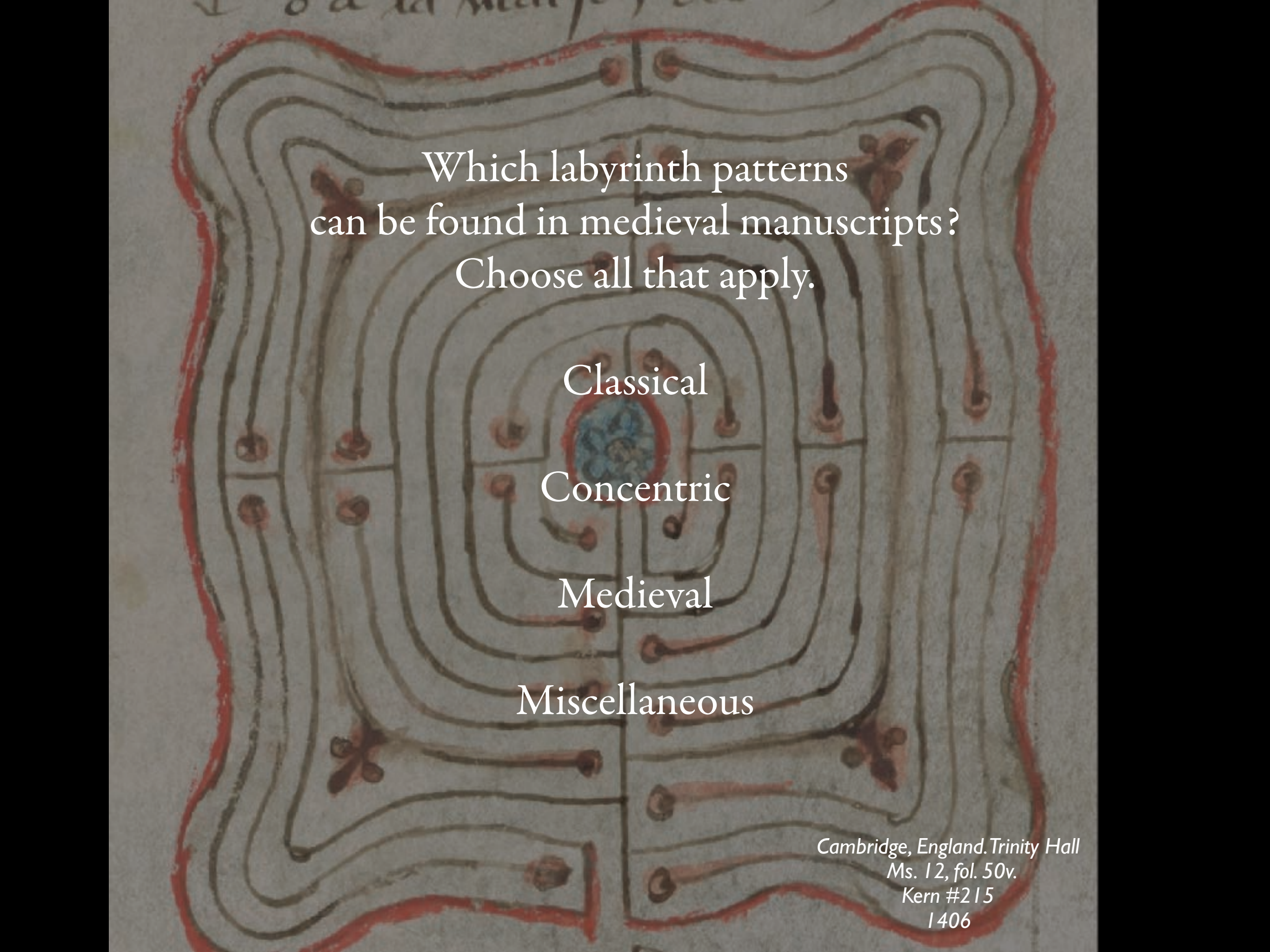


A woman with short grey hair is seated at a desk in a library. She is looking towards the camera with a slight smile. On the desk in front of her is a large, open manuscript. The bottom page of the manuscript features a complex, multi-layered labyrinth drawing. To the left of the manuscript is a laptop. To the right is a smartphone and a blue pen. The desk is covered with a red cloth. In the background, other library tables and chairs are visible, with some people working. The lighting is warm and indoor.

As I started seeking out manuscripts with labyrinth images to study, I didn't realize how many different types of labyrinths I would find.

Paris, France  
Bibliothèque Nationale de France  
Lat. 3840, fol. 1r  
Not in Kern  
801-900





Which labyrinth patterns  
can be found in medieval manuscripts?  
Choose all that apply.

Classical

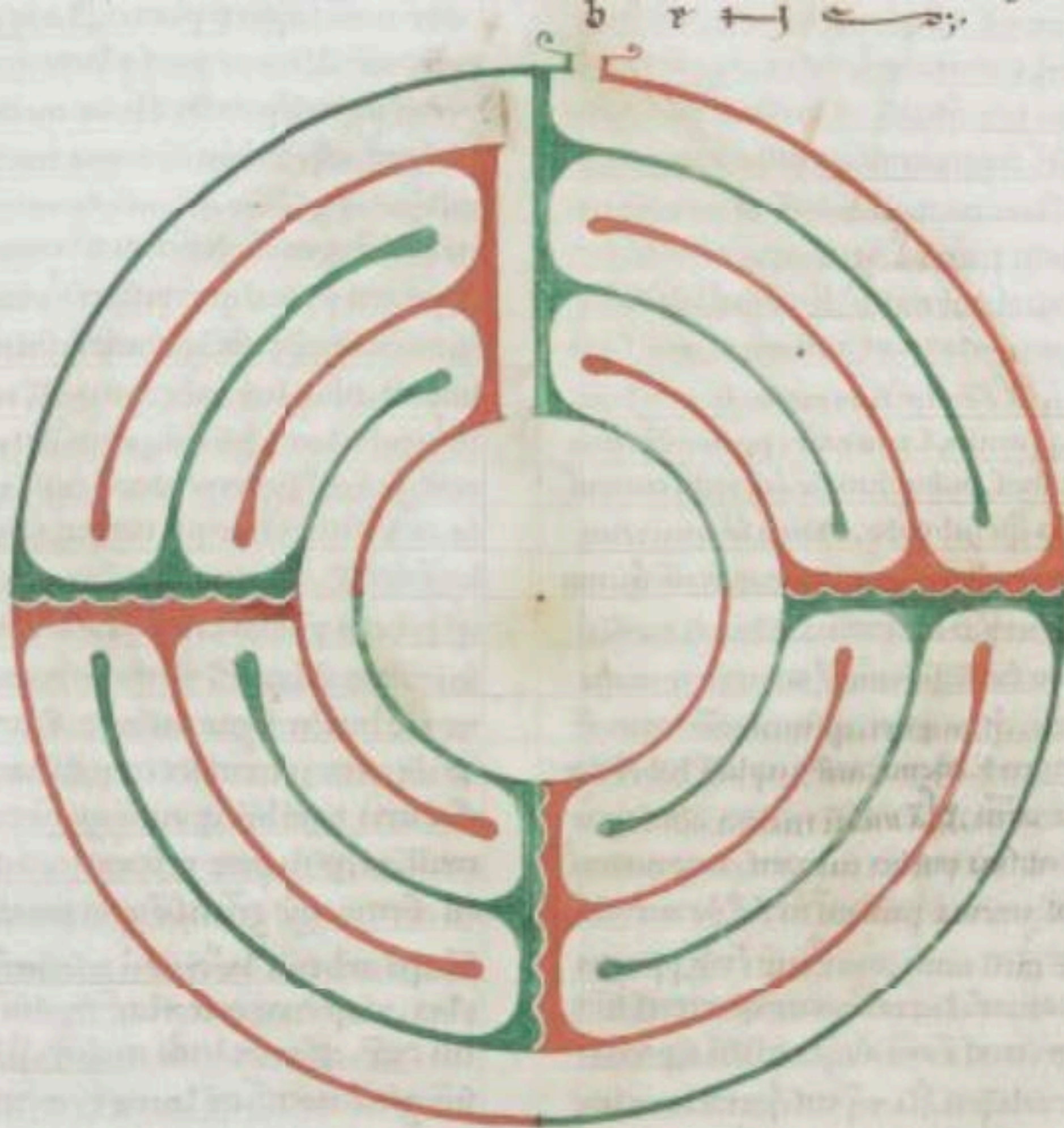
Concentric

Medieval

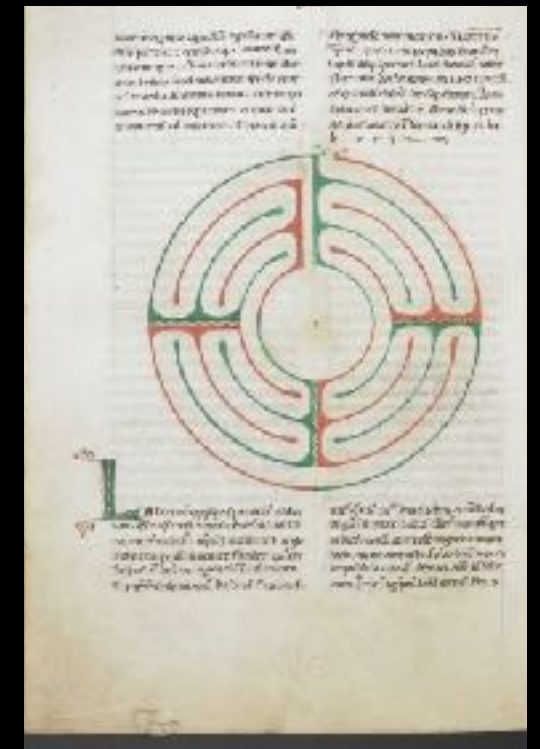
Miscellaneous

Cambridge, England. Trinity Hall  
Ms. 12, fol. 50v.  
Kern #215  
1406





All of them!  
Including  
this five-  
circuit  
medieval  
beauty!



London, England.  
British Library.  
Additional 15603, fol. 142v  
Not in Kern.  
1175-1200

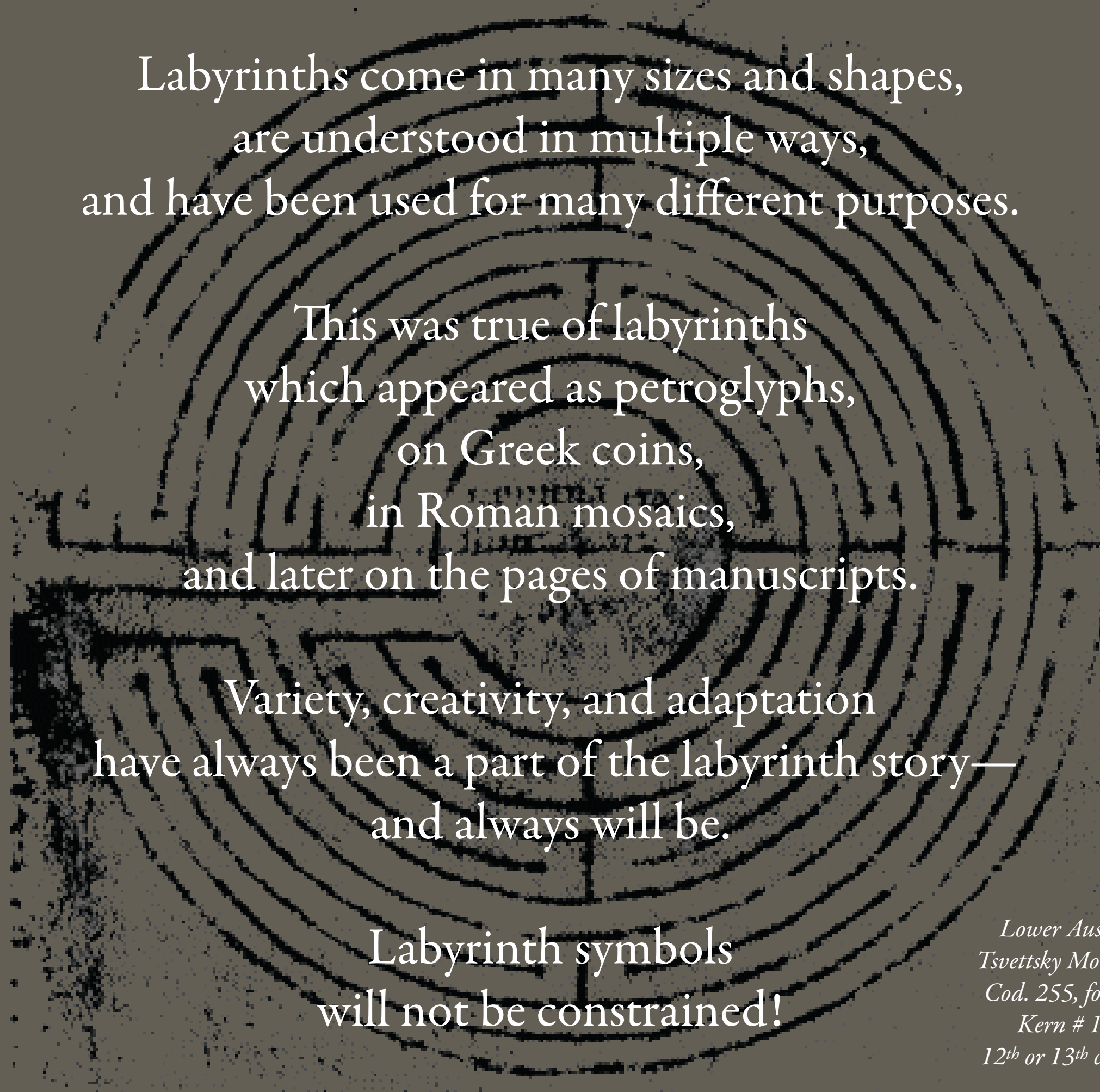


## Labyrinth History (abbreviated) before 1200: Dates and Materials

Date	Type	Place
15,000-18,000 BCE	Meander Pattern	Oldest: Figurine Ukraine
2,000 BCE (Approx.)	Petroglyphs	Northern Spain
1200 BCE	Clay table drawing	Pylos, Greece
8th cent. BCE	Labyrinth Myth with Ariadne & Minotaur	Greek
6th Cent. BCE	Written literature Theseus & Minotaur	Now lost works of Pherekydes
320 BCE- 1st cent. CE	Coins with labyrinths	Greek
165 BCE- 5th cent. CE	Mosaics, many for floors	Roman Empire/Area Around Mediterean Sea
701 CE and later	Manuscript illustrations	European Monasteries
1100 and later	Church labyrinths, visual and walkable	Europe, especially Italy, & France

*I would like to express gratitude to Jeff Saward for help with this table.*





Labyrinths come in many sizes and shapes,  
are understood in multiple ways,  
and have been used for many different purposes.

This was true of labyrinths  
which appeared as petroglyphs,  
on Greek coins,  
in Roman mosaics,  
and later on the pages of manuscripts.

Variety, creativity, and adaptation  
have always been a part of the labyrinth story—  
and always will be.

Labyrinth symbols  
will not be constrained!

*Lower Austria:  
Tsvettsky Monastery  
Cod. 255, fol. 12v.  
Kern # 184  
12<sup>th</sup> or 13<sup>th</sup> century*



Manuscript labyrinths  
were created thousands of years  
after the  
labyrinth petroglyphs  
found in Europe and Asia.



*Petroglyphs by the ocean  
Marin, Spain  
Kern # 84-85  
Estimated to be 3,000-5000 years old  
(Tourism of Galicia site)  
Probably Bronze Age (3,300- 1,200 BCE) Seward*







While most mosaic  
labyrinths  
from a much later  
period were also  
stationary,  
manuscripts  
with  
labyrinths  
could easily be moved  
and shared with  
others distant  
from where they  
were created.

*Pont Chevron ,France  
Mosaic Labyrinth  
Kern, 161  
150-100 BCE*



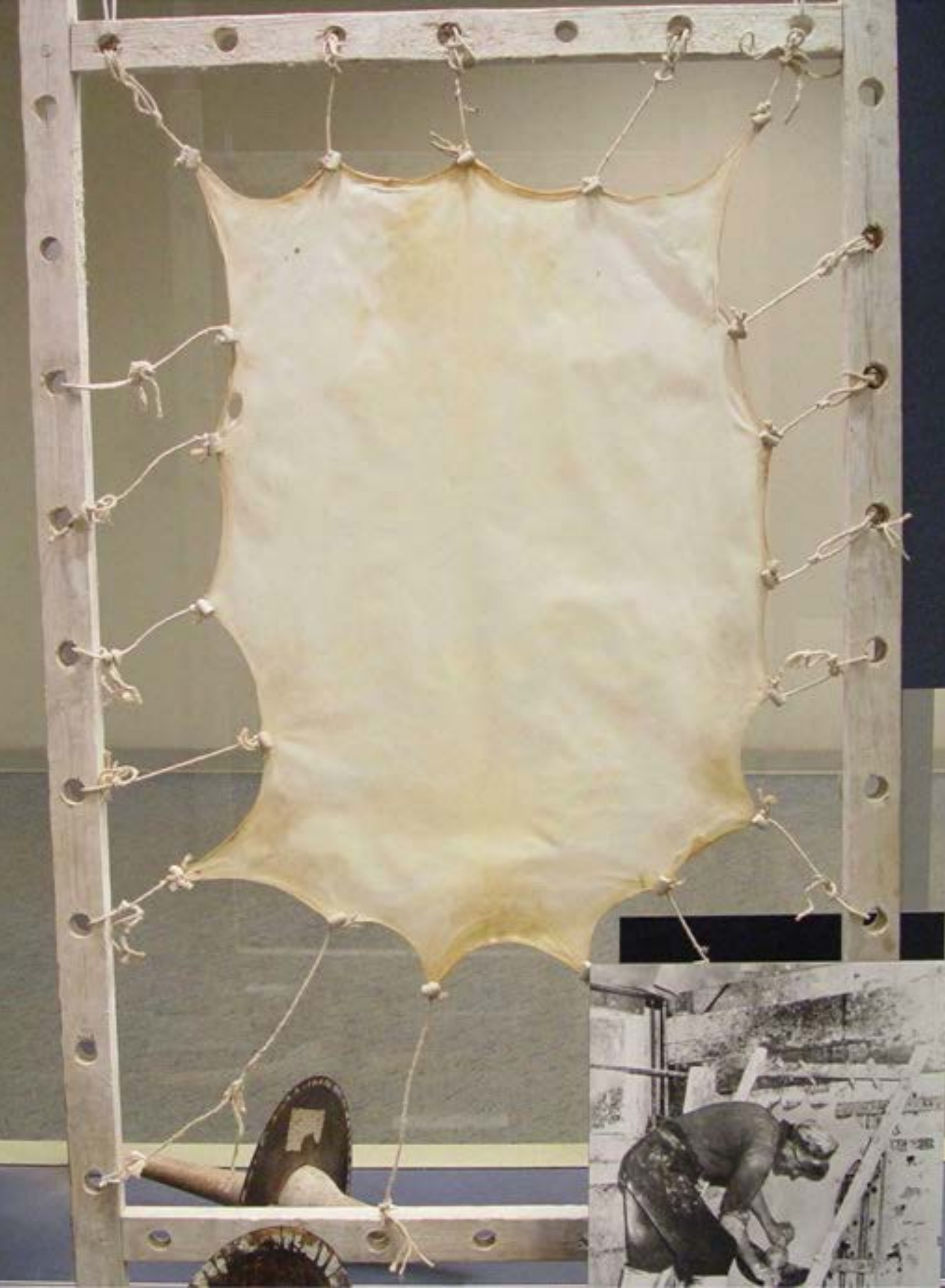


Creating and  
Illuminating Manuscripts  
in the Middle Ages



Ghent, Belgium. Ghent University Library, Ms. 92, f. 13r: 1060-1121  
Portrait of the author Lambert.  
The manuscript contains a labyrinth.





There was no paper in the west during the medieval period, so animal skins were used.

The skin, usually a cowhide (but some sheep were used) was prepared in a series of steps which few of us would relish since it involved soaking the skin in lye and lots of scraping.







What materials were needed to decorate the pages that were cut once the hide was ready to be used?

Choose all that apply:

Feathers

Silver

Pomegranate peels

Reeds

Butter

Oak galls

Gold

Crushed shells of dried insects

Minerals



A detailed illustration of a medieval manuscript illuminator. The man, with white hair and a beard, is shown in profile, wearing a light-colored, heavy robe. He is seated at a wooden desk, leaning over a large, open book. He holds a quill pen in his right hand, poised to write on a page of text. The background is dark, highlighting the illuminator and his work. The overall tone is historical and focused on the craft of book-making.

## All but butter!

Feathers (made into quills) to write with

Silver for illuminating/decorating

Pomegranate peels for color (red)

Reeds to write with

Oak galls (growths) for dark ink colors

Gold for illuminating/decorating

Crushed shells of dried insects for ink colors

Minerals (like lapis lazuli from Afghanistan for blue) for colors.





The manuscript labyrinths involved a conversation between animals whose skins were used, plants and rocks whose remains gave form to what was recorded, and people who desired to express what they deemed important.

This type of conversation was worth having in the Middle Ages and still is needed today!

*Avranches, France  
Bibliothèque Municipale  
Ms. 240, folio 8v.  
Kern # 187  
991-1009*



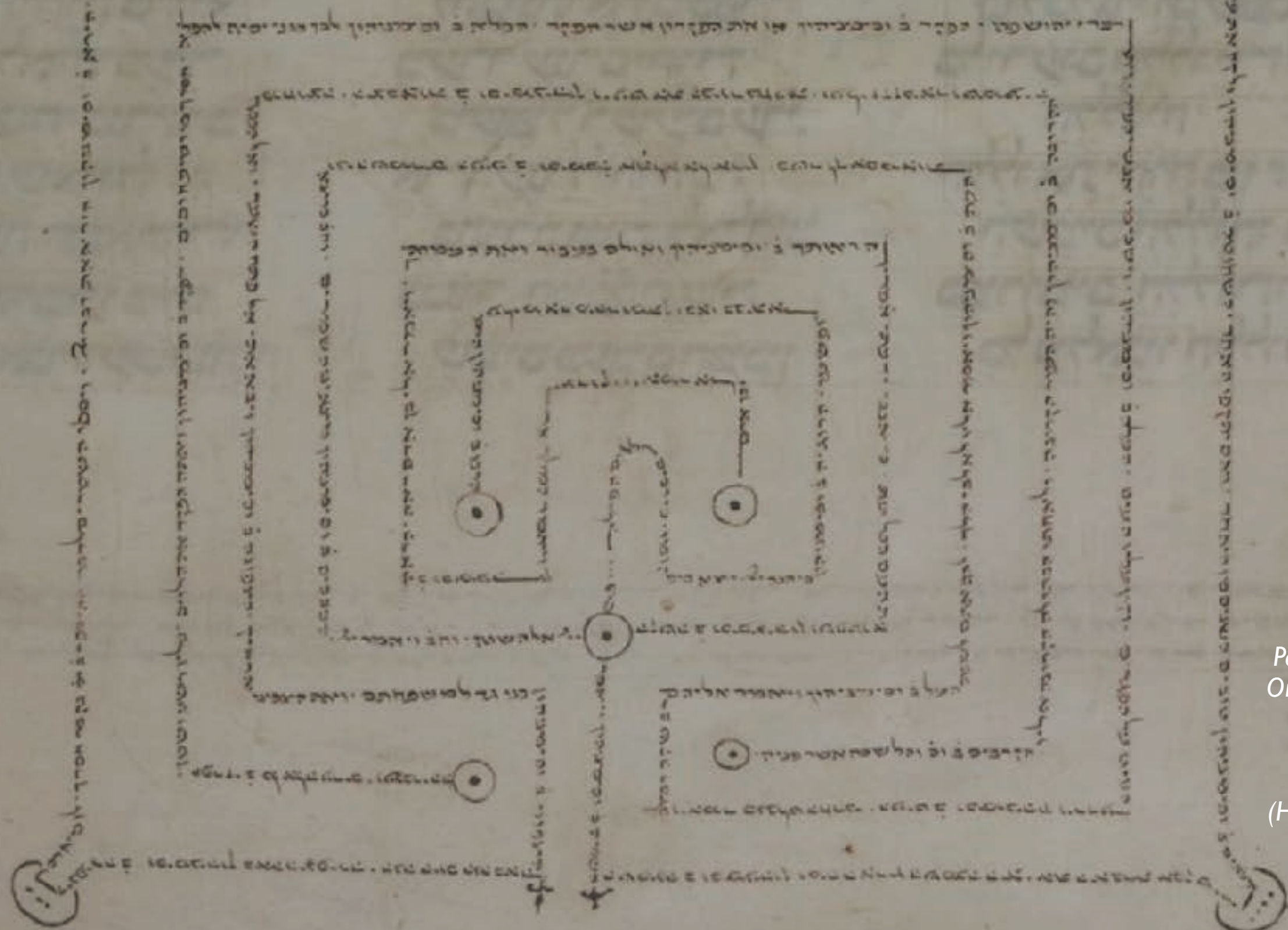
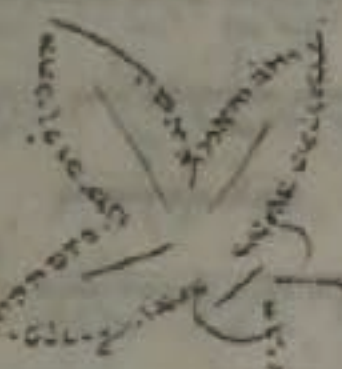


Don't you wonder,  
as I do,  
what made the labyrinth  
a useful choice  
as an illustration?

Paris, France,  
Bibliothèque Nationale de  
France,  
Ms. Fr. 20125, fol. 158r  
Kern #202  
1278



The image of a labyrinth is non-specific.  
It can and has represented many things.



Paris, France, (BNF)  
Orientaux Hébreu 9,  
Fol. 236v.  
Not in Kern.  
1304  
(Hebrew Year 5064)





...art makes  
order out of  
chaos all the  
time.

*Penelope Doob*

*Berlin, Germany  
Staatsbibliothek zu Berlin,  
Ms. theol. Lat. 356, fol. 11v  
Not in Kern  
801-1000.*





Drawing labyrinths gave the illustrators a chance to try something new—not always successfully on the first try!

St. Gall, Switzerland,  
Stiftsbibliothek,  
Cod. 825, p. 176.  
Kern # 213.  
1000-1050.





17

Probably the most common reason that labyrinths were used is that manuscript writers wanted to illustrate their texts in ways that would help clarify a subject being discussed.

*Paris, France.  
Bibliothèque Nationale de France  
Nouv. Acq. Lat. 2169, folio 17  
Kern #183.  
1072*





In which of these locations were  
medieval manuscript labyrinths  
NOT drawn?  
Pick four.

- Antarctica
- Afganistan
- Austria
- Brazil
- Canada
- Ethiopia
- France
- Germany
- Greece
- Israel
- Spain
- Syria
- Thailand





CANADA

BRAZIL

Antarctica

- Antarctica
- Afganistan
- Austria
- Brazil
- Canada
- Ethiopia
- France
- Germany
- Greece
- Israel
- Spain
- Syria
- Thailand

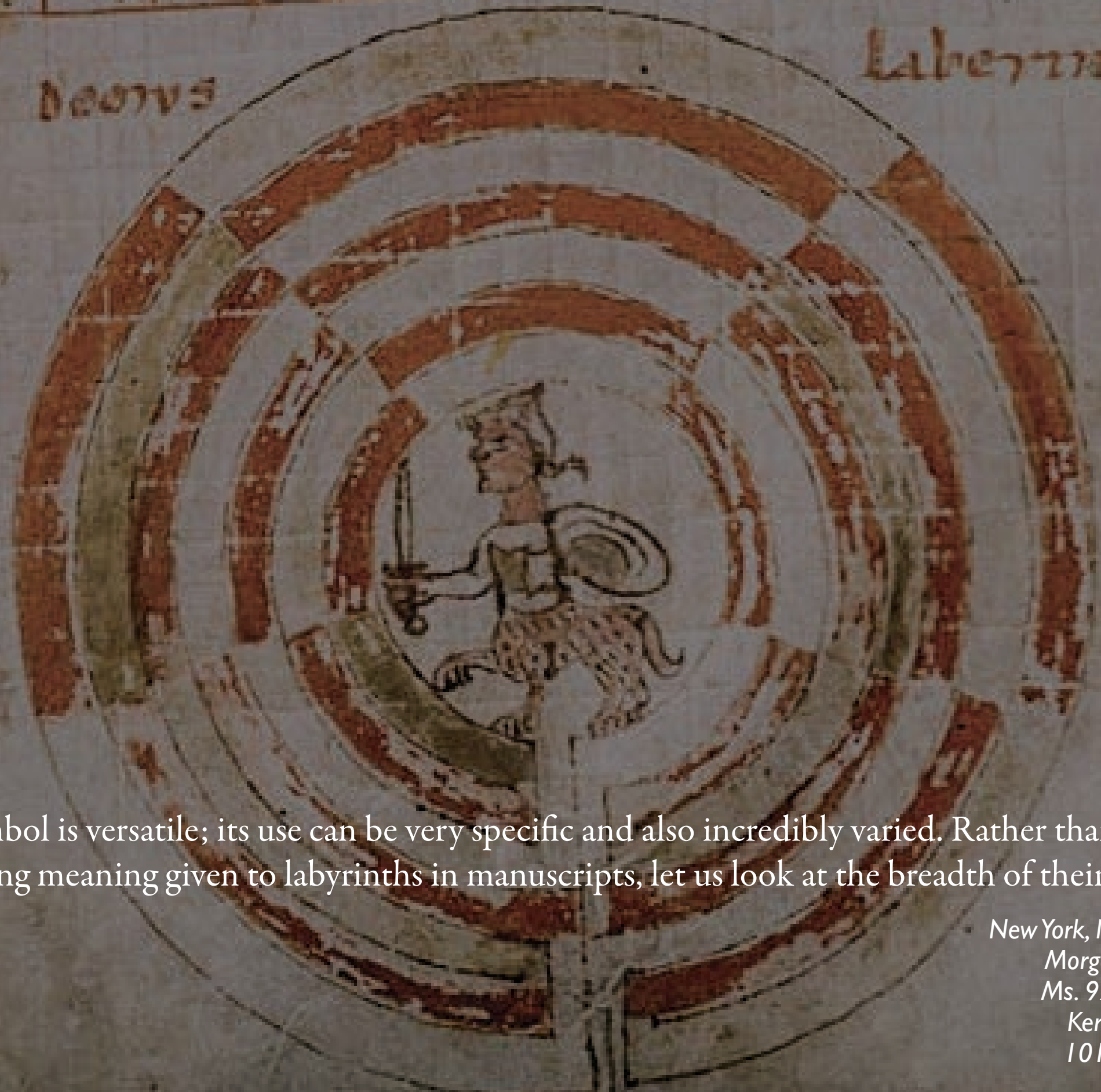






Medieval manuscript labyrinths, like many labyrinths before them, came from an area radiating from the Mediterranean region.





The labyrinth symbol is versatile; its use can be very specific and also incredibly varied. Rather than searching for a single unifying meaning given to labyrinths in manuscripts, let us look at the breadth of their uses.

New York, New York (USA)  
Morgan Library  
Ms. 925 fol. 12r  
Kern #182  
1018-1032



TRANSITVS IVNIO PER XVII SIGNA SEDEN EGYPTVS

A large grid table with Latin text, likely a calendar or astronomical table for calculating the moon's path through the zodiac. The grid is composed of approximately 12 columns and 12 rows. The text within the grid is arranged in a pattern that suggests a path or sequence of events, possibly related to the moon's movement. The text is written in a medieval script, and the grid is drawn with red ink.

Above this labyrinth is a table for calculating the course of the moon through the zodiac.

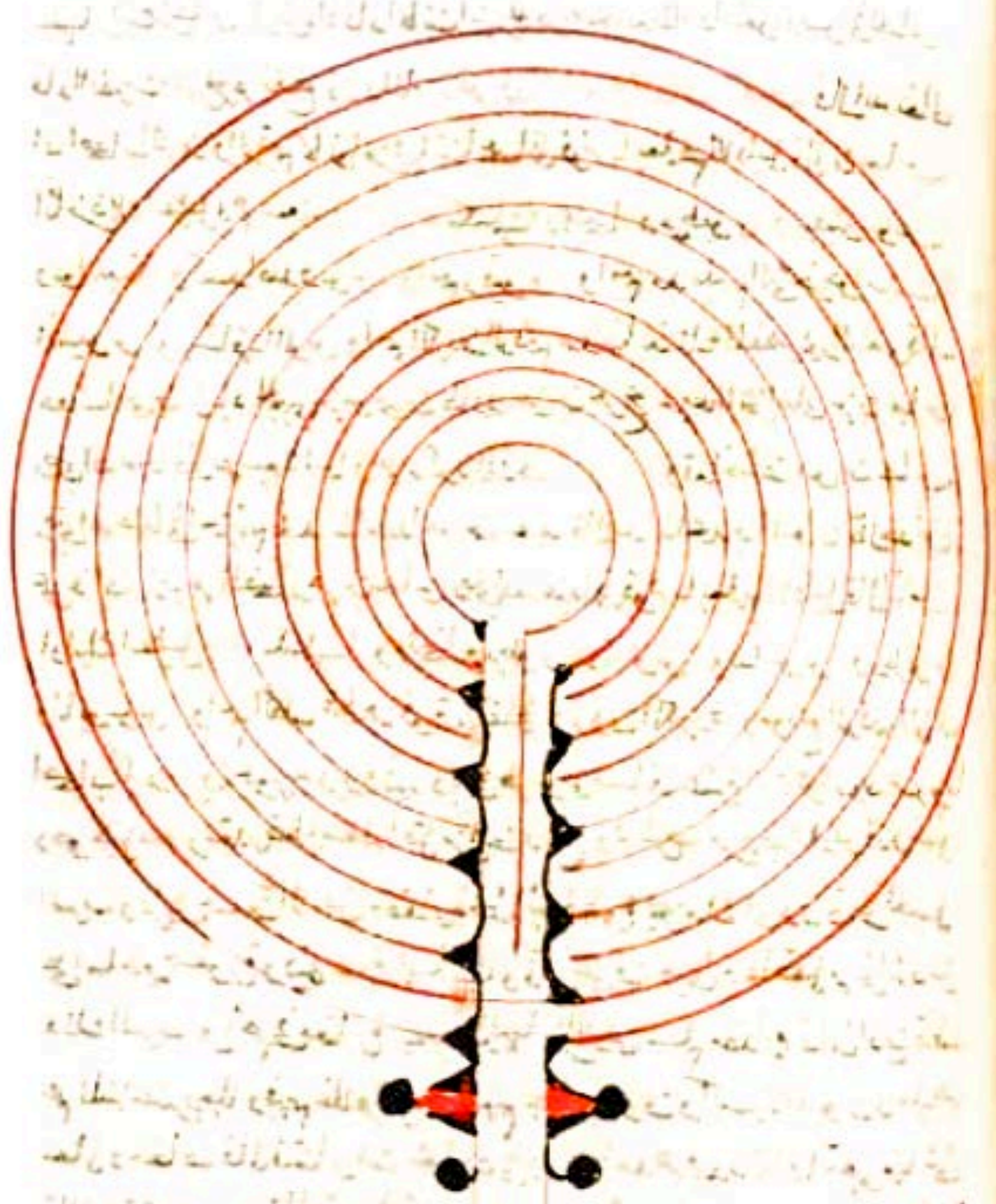
Note the pather-minotaur in Tegrimi Computus: miscellany containing computational and mathematical texts.

Deona Labyrinthica



New York, New York (USA)  
Morgan Library  
Ms. 925 fol. 12r  
Kern #182  
1018-1032





Geographical texts  
were often related  
to labyrinths in  
Arabic manuscripts.

London, British Library,  
Oriental 13315, f. 46r  
Not in Kern  
1117

*Ajā'ib al-samāwāt wa-al-arḍ.*





The labyrinth...represents the gateway,  
not only to the Land of Israel,  
and not only to the biblical text  
[starting with Joshua]  
but also to God's home on earth,  
the tabernacle or temple.

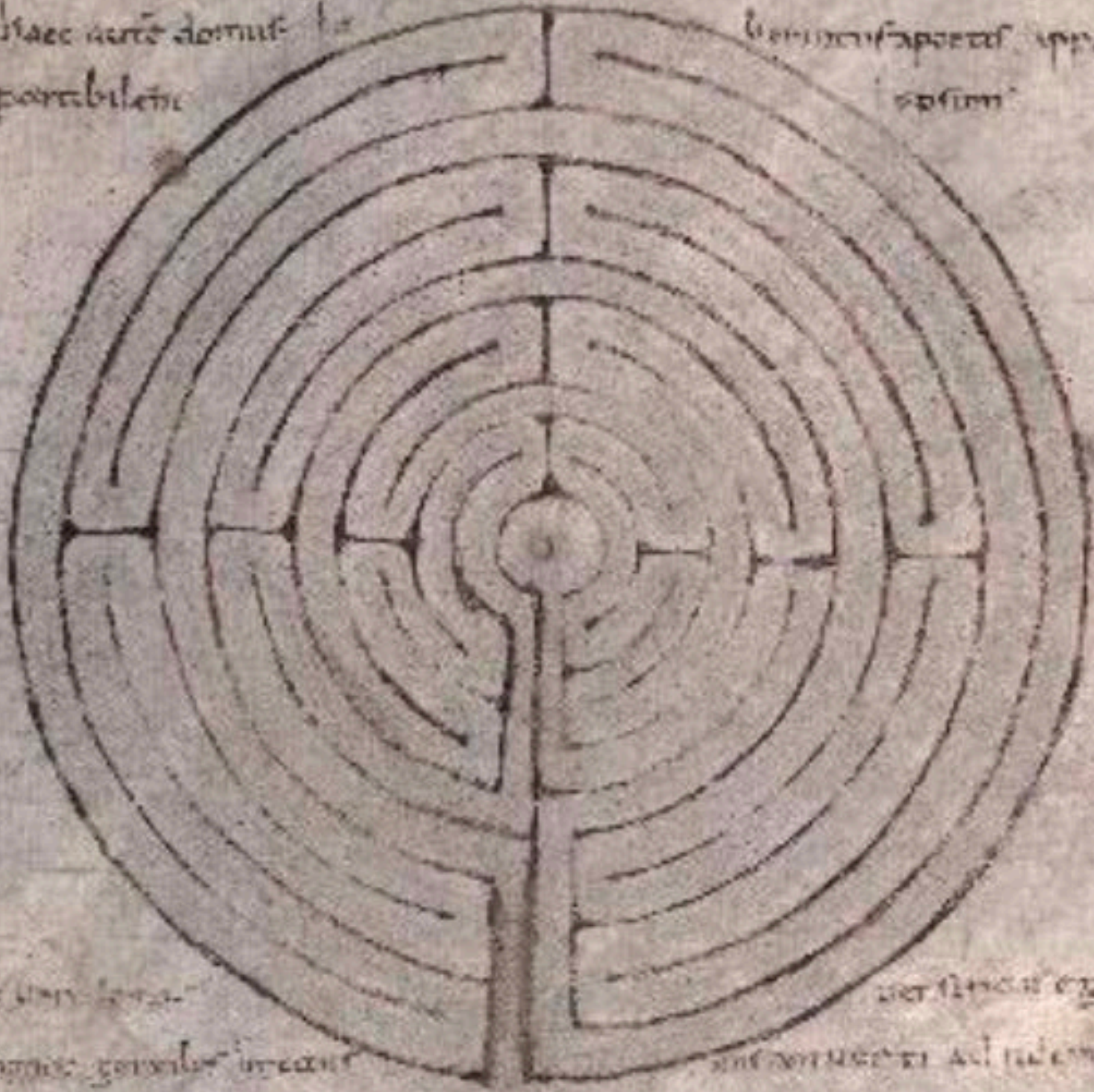
*Daniel Stein Kokin.  
The Jericho Labyrinth:  
The Rise and Fall of a Jewish Visual Trope.*

*Rome, Italy. Biblioteca Angelica,  
Ms. Or. 72, fol. 6v  
Not in Kern.  
1326*



—4<sup>o</sup> Hæc hæc dicitur  
in portabilem

Uenit in apertis  
apertis



Uenit in apertis  
apertis

Uenit in apertis  
apertis

This Christian manuscript focuses on history.

Labyrinths were also included in works of philosophy, geography, grammar, poetry, liturgy, law, and in encyclopedias—to name the most common subjects.

Montpellier, France.  
Section Médecine,  
MS H 360, fol. 136v.  
Kern #196  
901-1100





Montpellier, France.  
Section Médecine,  
MS H 360, fol. 136v.  
Kern #196  
901-1100

This manuscript provides a great example of why we want to go look at these labyrinths in person.

While the words and labyrinth on this page are easily legible, less obvious are the drawings that can be seen easily in person, but here only faintly. While they may be later additions, they may provide clues to how the labyrinth was understood—at least by those who used the manuscript at some point in its history.



This parchment manuscript with a labyrinth also contains among other things, a metric martyrology as well as poems about the seven planets, about the months and days of the year, and about the stars.

See Kern



Rome Biblioteca Apostolica Vatican  
Reg. Lat. 438, fol. 35v (above)  
fols. 34v & 35r (facing)  
Kern #180  
848







Adding a labyrinth to a manuscript took time, skill, and space. So why use a labyrinth image as an illustration?

For Christian monks and scribes drawing a labyrinth was a way of participating in the ongoing understanding of creation.

Just as God created, so they too were creating.

*God [Jesus] creates  
with the aid of  
a compass*

*Illustration,  
13<sup>th</sup> century  
French  
manuscript of  
Genesis*





For others, like the Persian [from Afghanistan] astrologer, geographer, and historian who drew this labyrinth in 1159, one could be shedding light on any number of concepts.

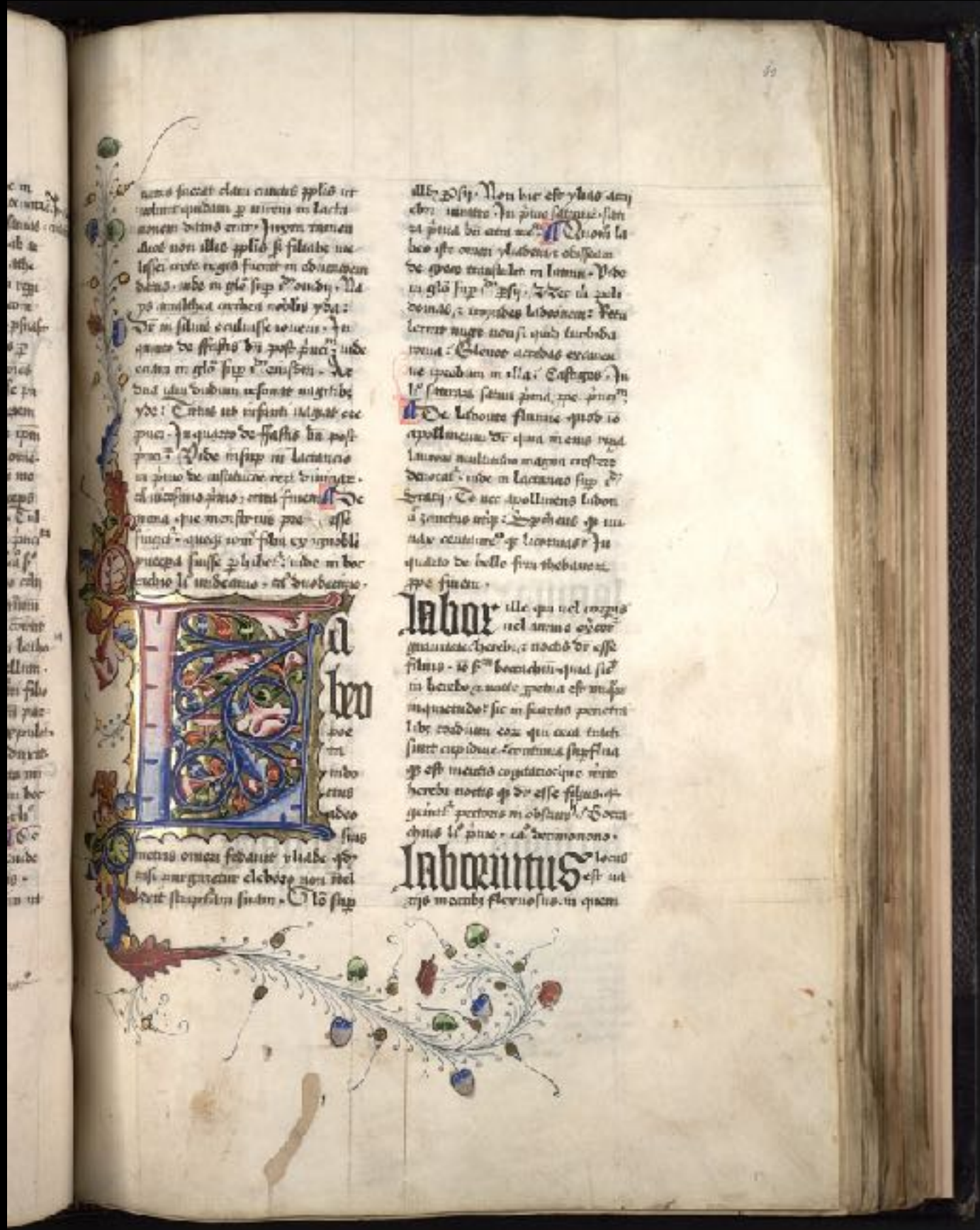
This is a depiction of the “cupola of the Earth,” the city of the demon prince Ravana, which was said to be located on the equator...

Ravana is said to have hidden in this labyrinthine castle...after abducting Sita, the wife of the God Rama.

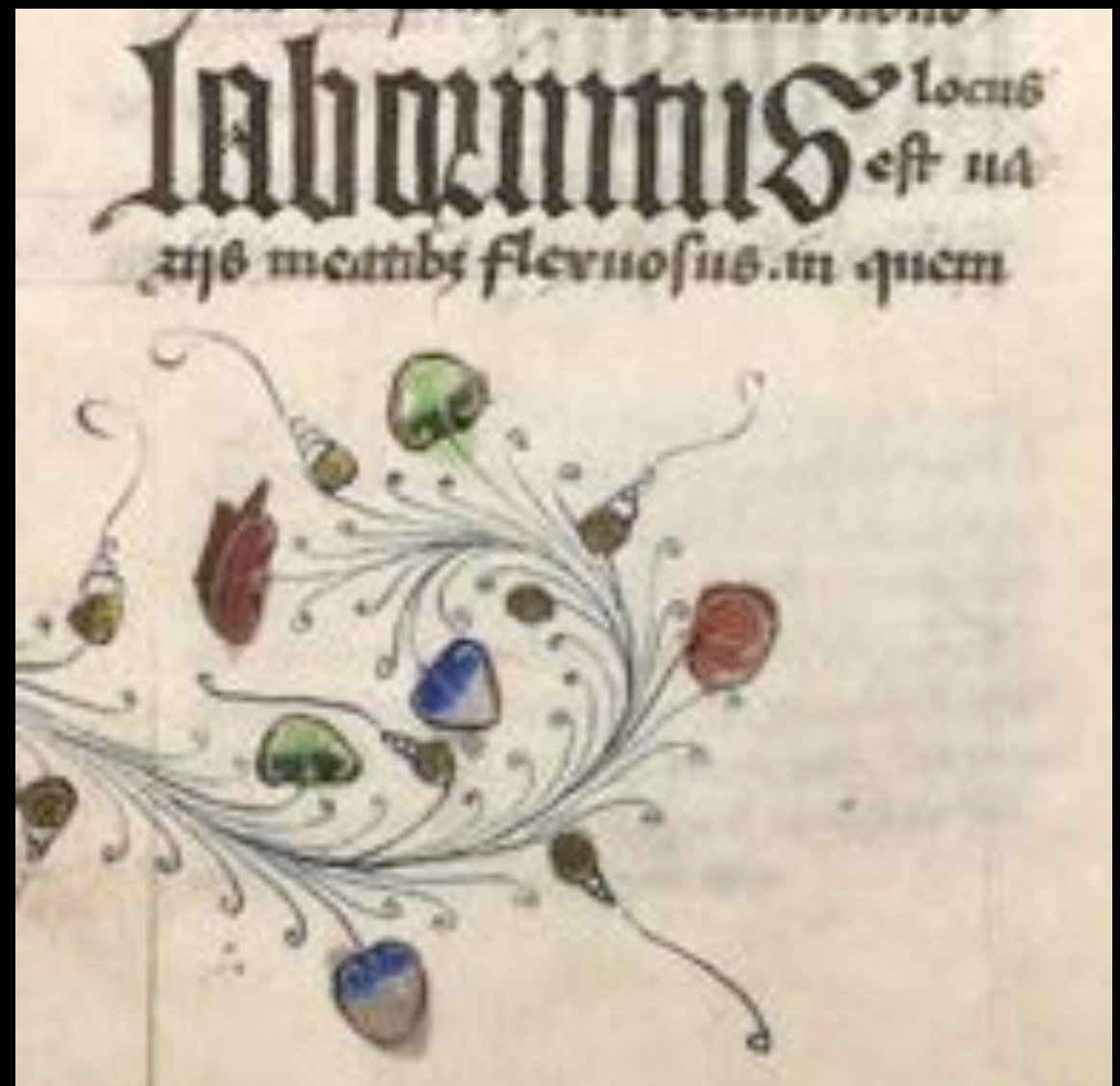
*Kern*

*Paris, France  
Bibliothèque Nationale  
de France  
Arabe 6080, fol. 79v  
Kern #613  
1159*





In a large compendium of history and classical literature, this page refers to Homer's 'Iliad,' and includes entries on 'Labor' (toil, hardship), who in ancient Greek mythology was the child of Erebus (Darkness), and 'Laborintus' (labyrinth).



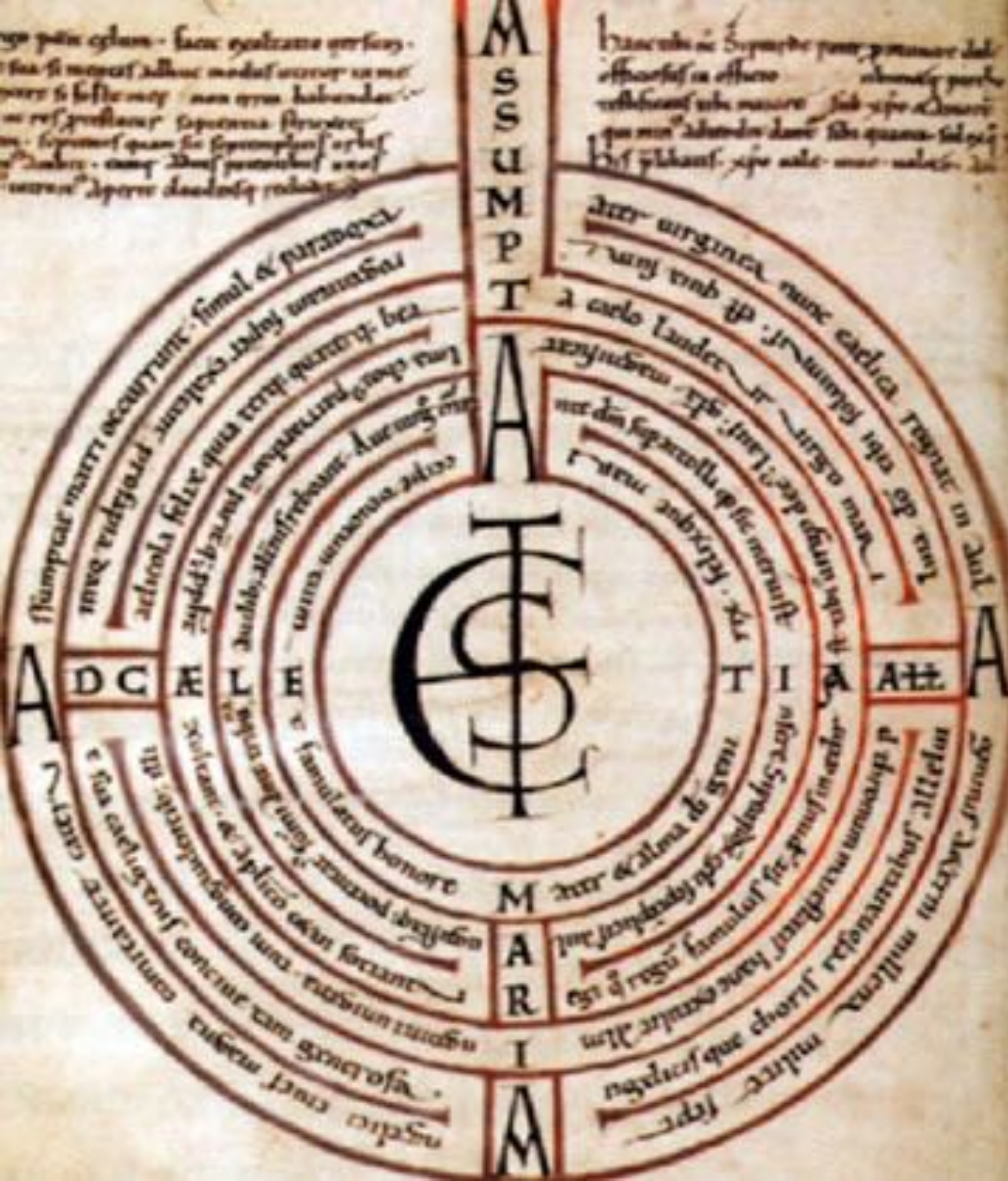
laborintus

The richness of possible interpretations for this ambiguous symbol is astounding.

Labyrinth can be understood as images that are positive, negative, or mixed and sometimes paradoxical.

London, England,  
British Library  
Add Ms. 26764, folio 60v  
Not in Kern.  
1430



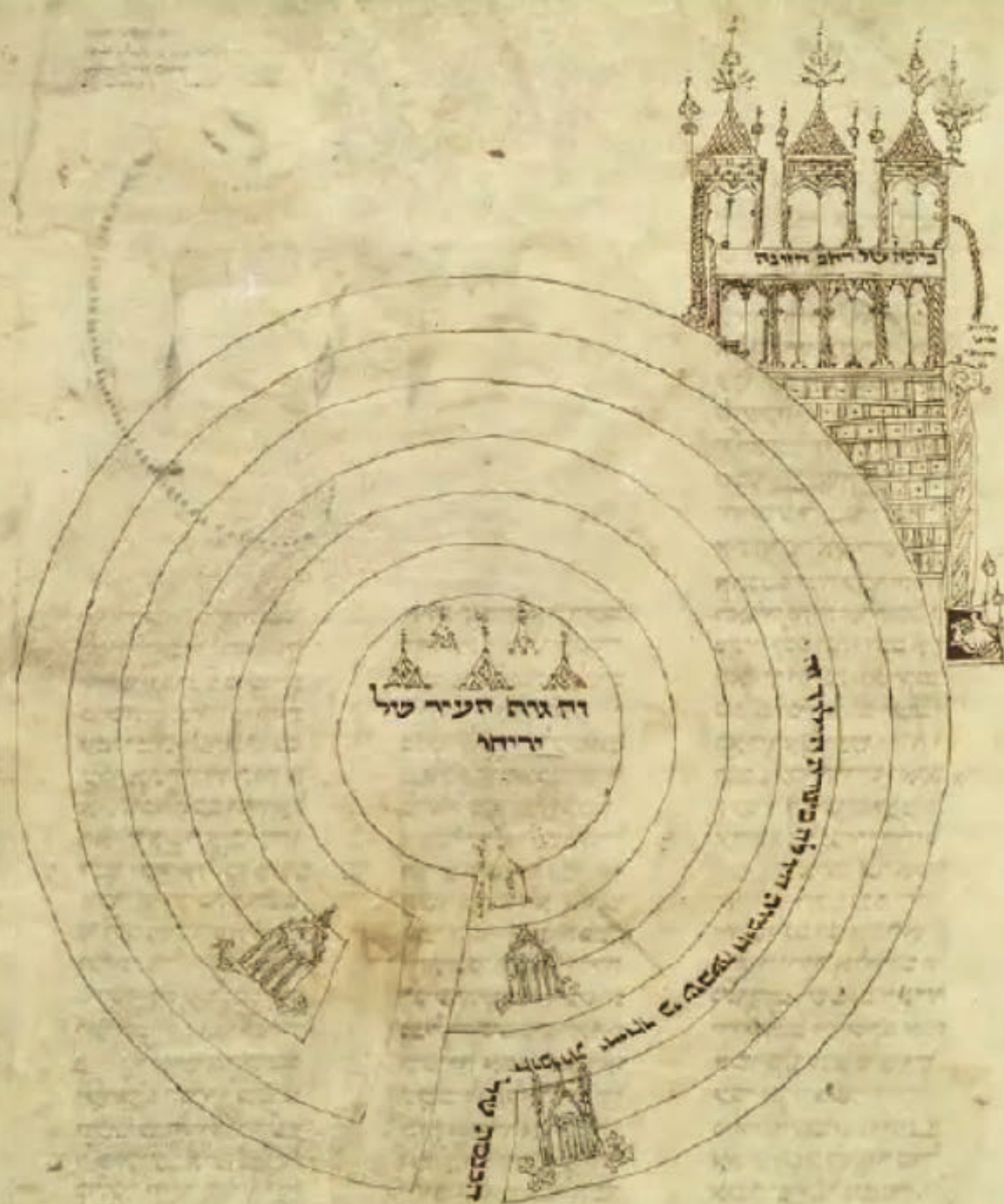


This is an example of positive imagery.

This labyrinth features a 6-circuit Chartres-type pattern, with a joyous poem winding through the paths, announcing Mary's assumption into Heaven.

Cambridge, England  
University Library,  
Kk 3.21  
Kern Addendum, figure A  
1001-1040





The Jericho labyrinths  
can be understood  
as both positive  
and negative.

New York, New York (USA)  
New York Public Library,  
Spencer Collection,  
Hebrew MS I, fol. 1 r of Part II  
Kern, #225  
1294





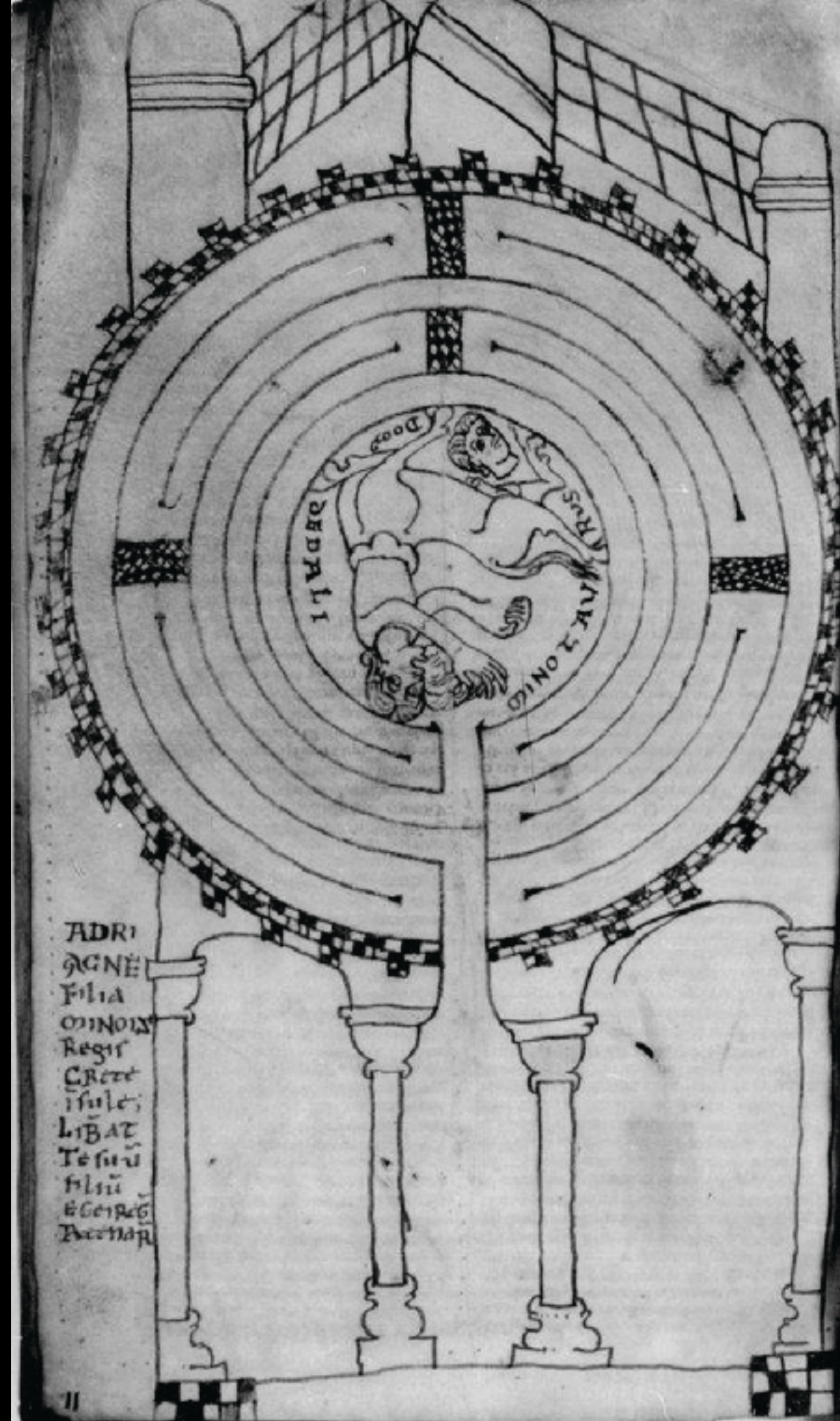
As can this 11-circuit  
labyrinth  
with multiple divisions  
in the Esslingen Mahzor,  
a festival prayer book  
for Yom Kippur and Sukkot.



*Amsterdam Netherlands,  
Rosenthaliana Amsterdam  
University Library,  
Ros. 609, fol. 127v.  
Not in Kern.  
1290*



Labyrinths with centers featuring the Minotaur clearly contain a negative message, but they also imply Theseus's victory over the Minotaur which is positive.



Text in center:

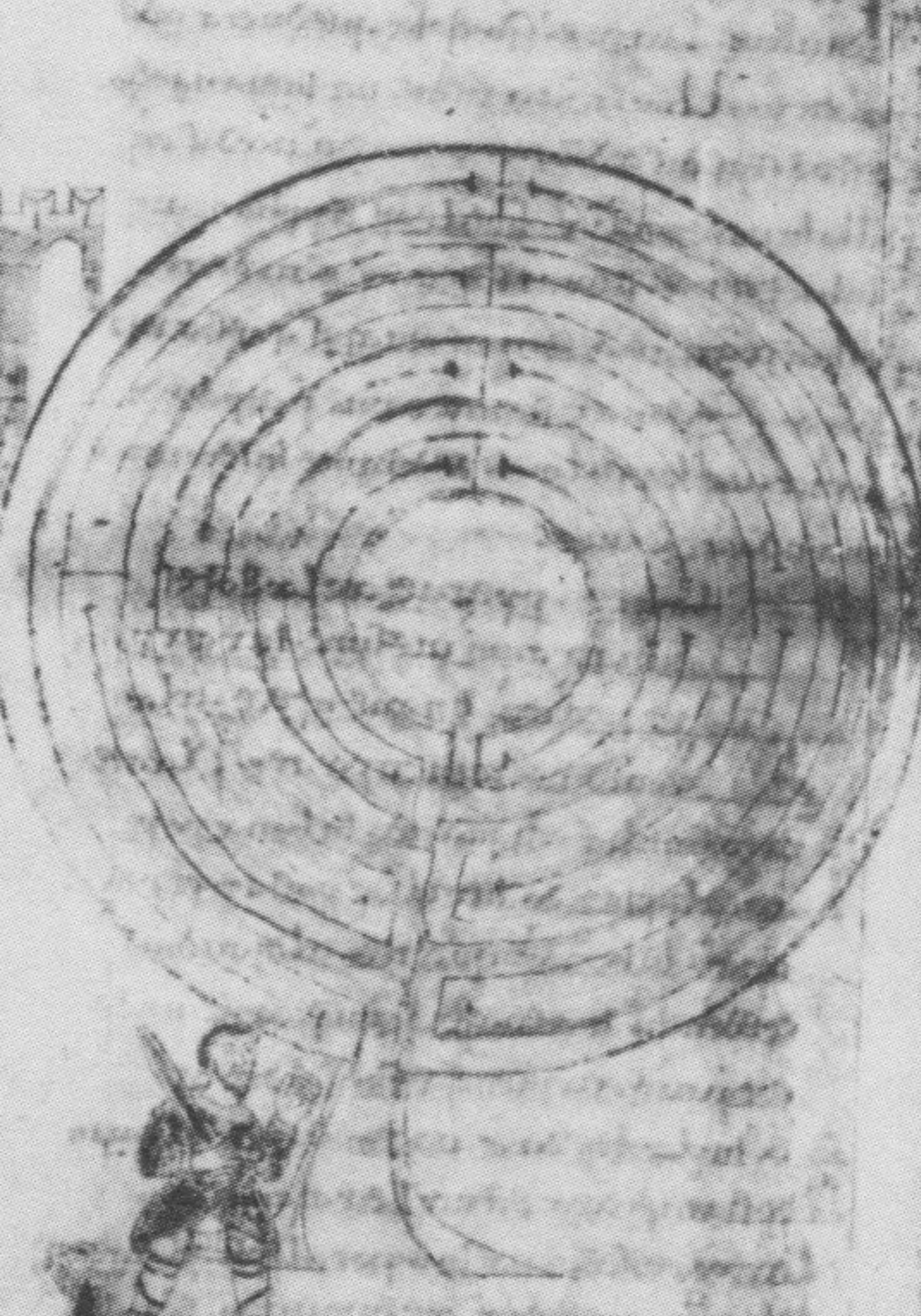
Domus (???)  
Dedali  
Minotaurus

House of Daedalus  
Minotaur

Text on left:  
Ariadne, daughter of King Minos  
of the island of Crete, liberates  
Theseus, son of the Athenian king,  
Aegeus

Paris, Bibliothèque  
Nationale de France Latin  
12999 folio 11r. Kern #237.  
1126-1150





In the eleventh century Theseus began to appear near or in a labyrinth in some manuscripts.

While this gave a hopeful emphasis to the drawing, the dangerous nature of the labyrinth was still implied.

*Monte Cassino Cod. 132, p. 348.  
Provenance Monte Cassino, Italy. In  
Kern #188.*

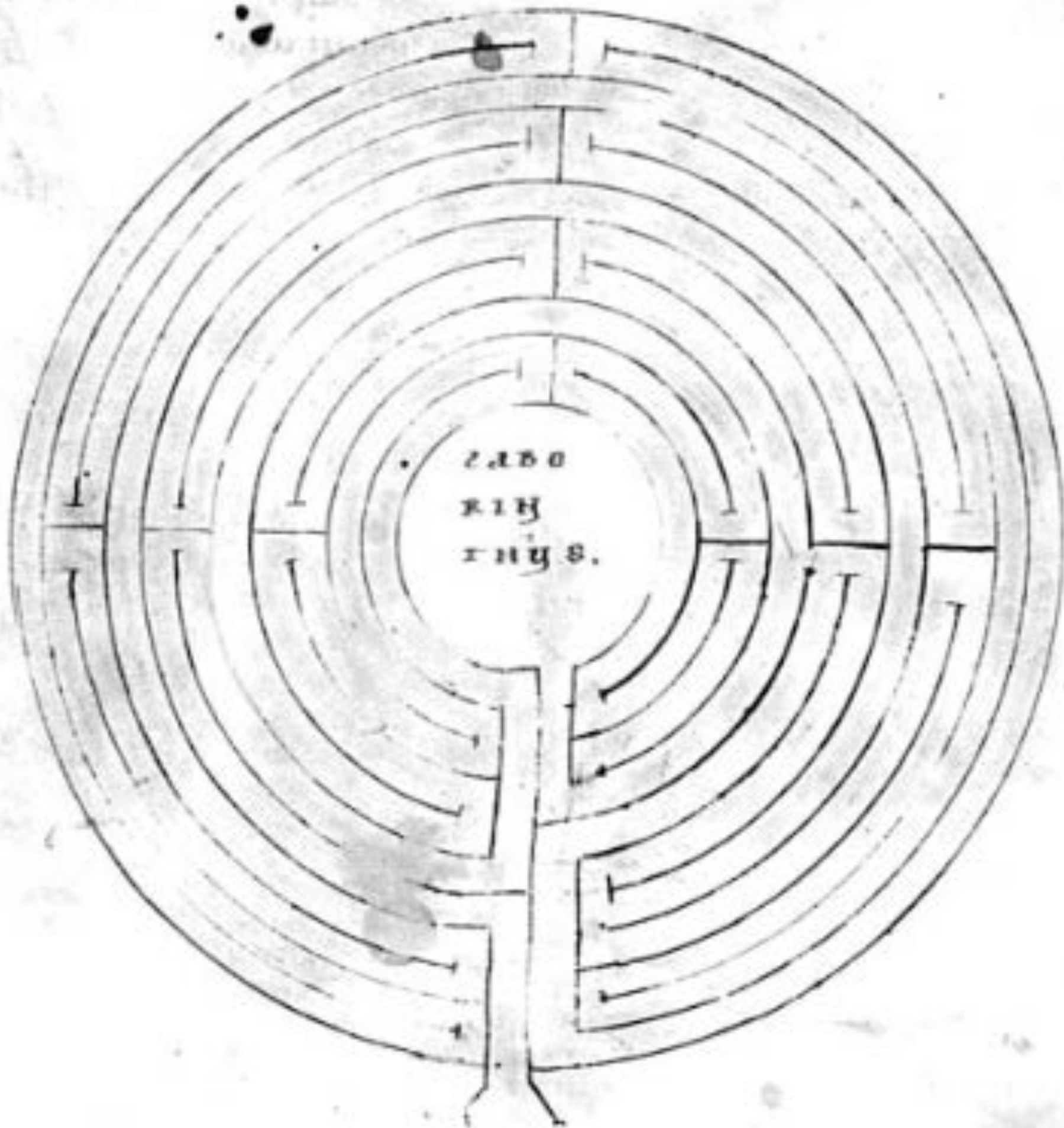




Theseus did not need to be present for the labyrinth to symbolize fear, combat, and victory.

Hereford England.  
Hereford Cathedral  
Mappa mundi  
Kern #199  
1276-83





A potential mixed message given by labyrinths involves the numerous examples where they have been placed on either the first or last page of the manuscript.

Labyrinths potential power to ward off evil and bring protection to something that was as immensely valuable as a manuscript, reminds those who use these books of the fight between good and evil.

Munich, Germany,  
BSB Clm. 174093, fol. 1v.  
Not in Kern.  
1241





This image on the first page of this 10<sup>th</sup> century manuscript is reminiscent of the many faces found on the outside of Romanesque buildings. They were placed there to keep those inside safe by repelling evil on the outside.

Paris, France  
Bibliothèque Nationale de France  
Latin 13013, fol. 1r.  
Provenance : St. Germain des Prés, France.  
Computational. Kern #181.  
901-1000





Others labyrinth images  
were clearly  
negative in tone.

This image contains two  
elements of danger  
and extreme negativity.

A monstrous dog head  
guards the threshold  
and the Minotaur  
is eating a child  
in the center.

Paris, France.  
Bibliothèque Nationale de France  
Latin 4416, folio 35r.  
Not in Kern.  
801-900





Arab images of labyrinths that illustrated prisons were clearly negative.

“The city of Rome...

As for the people saying it has seven walls, so that should one enter it, one would not know how to leave, there is no foundation or truth to these words. Rather, it contains a prison the construction of which is in the form of a snail from which a prisoner would not know how to escape.

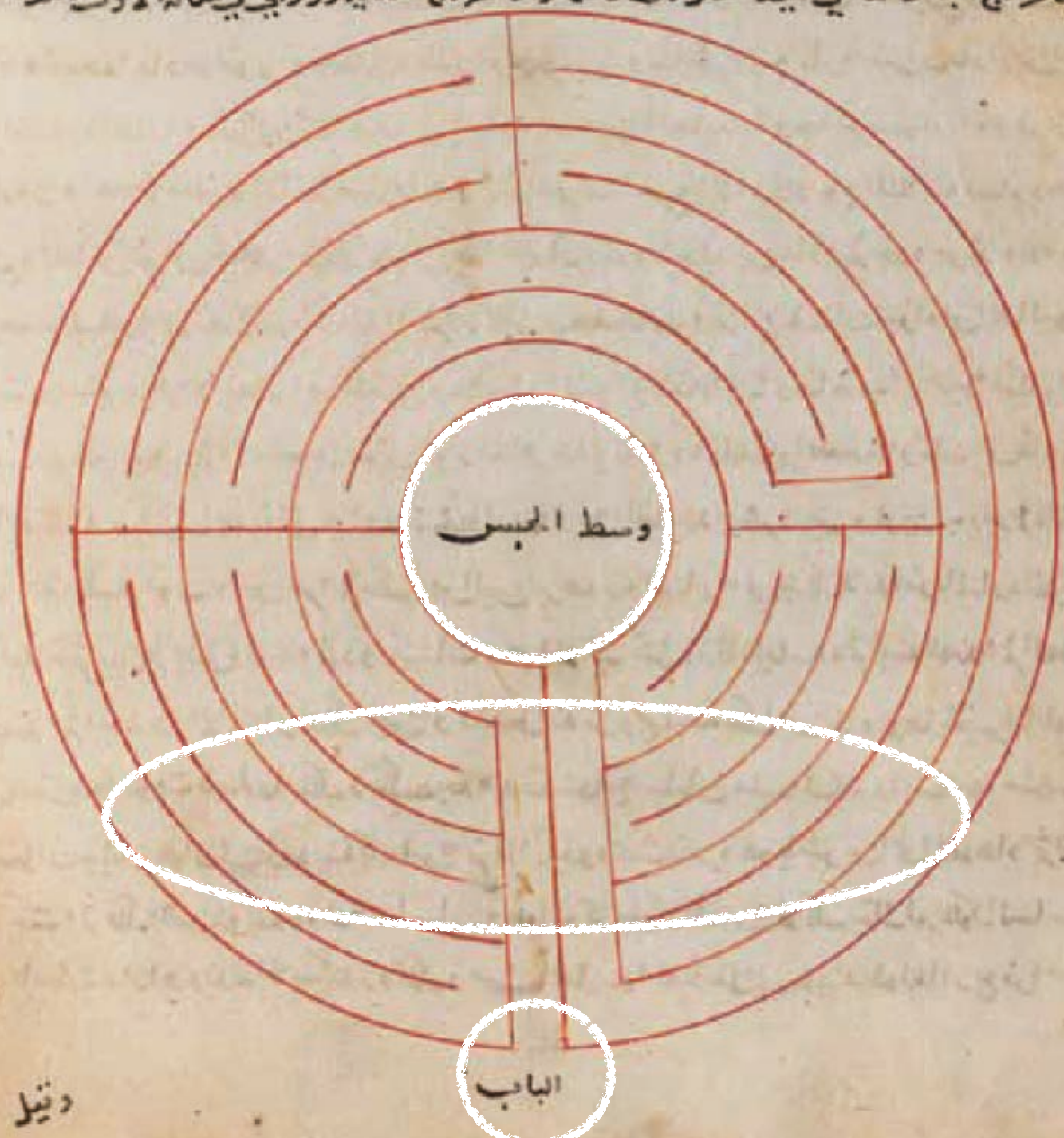
This is a picture of it.”

*Pilgrimage Guide*

Paris, France  
Bibliothèque National  
de France  
Arabe 5975 (2), fol. 51a  
Not in Kern  
1297-1298



الذي الخروج ابد الا انه علي هيئة الحلزون وكلما اراد الخروج منه يدور ويجي في مكانه الاول وهذه صفة



دليل

No matter whether a labyrinth was symbolizing something neutral, positive, negative or paradoxically positive and negative, those who draw labyrinths all used the same features— a threshold (entrance/exit), a pathway, and a center.

Paris, France,  
Bibliothèque Nationale  
de France.  
Arabe 2212, fol. 23v.  
Not in Kern  
1539





In manuscript labyrinths, highlighting the passage from outside to inside and inside to outside occurs in many different ways—and often enough that we should take note.

*Leiden, Netherlands BPL 92A,  
fol. 182  
Not in Kern  
1100-1200*





Some labyrinths are drawn  
with actual doors  
that can open  
and close.

Vatican City State  
Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticana,  
Pal. lat. 291, detail of f. 170v.  
Kern #190.  
1425



*Explicit liber etymologiarum beati Ysaie  
dona hispalensis archiepiscopi.*



Others have more subtle  
yet still clear markings  
that help delineate  
outside and inside.

*Cambridge, England  
St John's College Library,  
H.11, fol.124v  
Not in Kern.  
1180-1200*





Some labyrinths  
have what look like animal feet.

*St. Gall, Switzerland  
Stiftsbibliothek,  
Cod. 197, p.122.  
Kern #195.  
ca. 900*



روز و سه روز صورت



جا بگناه ان و راي شهرها و حذر دانست نديك مشرقا لصيف جالك چندان در شكل  
عالم ظاهر كنون شده است و ميان ان جا نگاه و حذر غماد و دوروزن ناهست وان  
سلام الشرحمان روايست كه اميرالمومنين الواثق بالله در خواب چنان ديد كه  
سدن باجوع و باجوع گمان شده بودي س مران بود ما برك بسازم و ابجاگاه روزم

While others,  
especially Arabian labyrinths,  
have immense doorways,  
resembling a city gate,  
that can be opened and shut.

Berlin, Germany  
Berlin State Library  
Prussian Cultural Heritage;  
344, folio 167v  
Not in Kern.  
1350

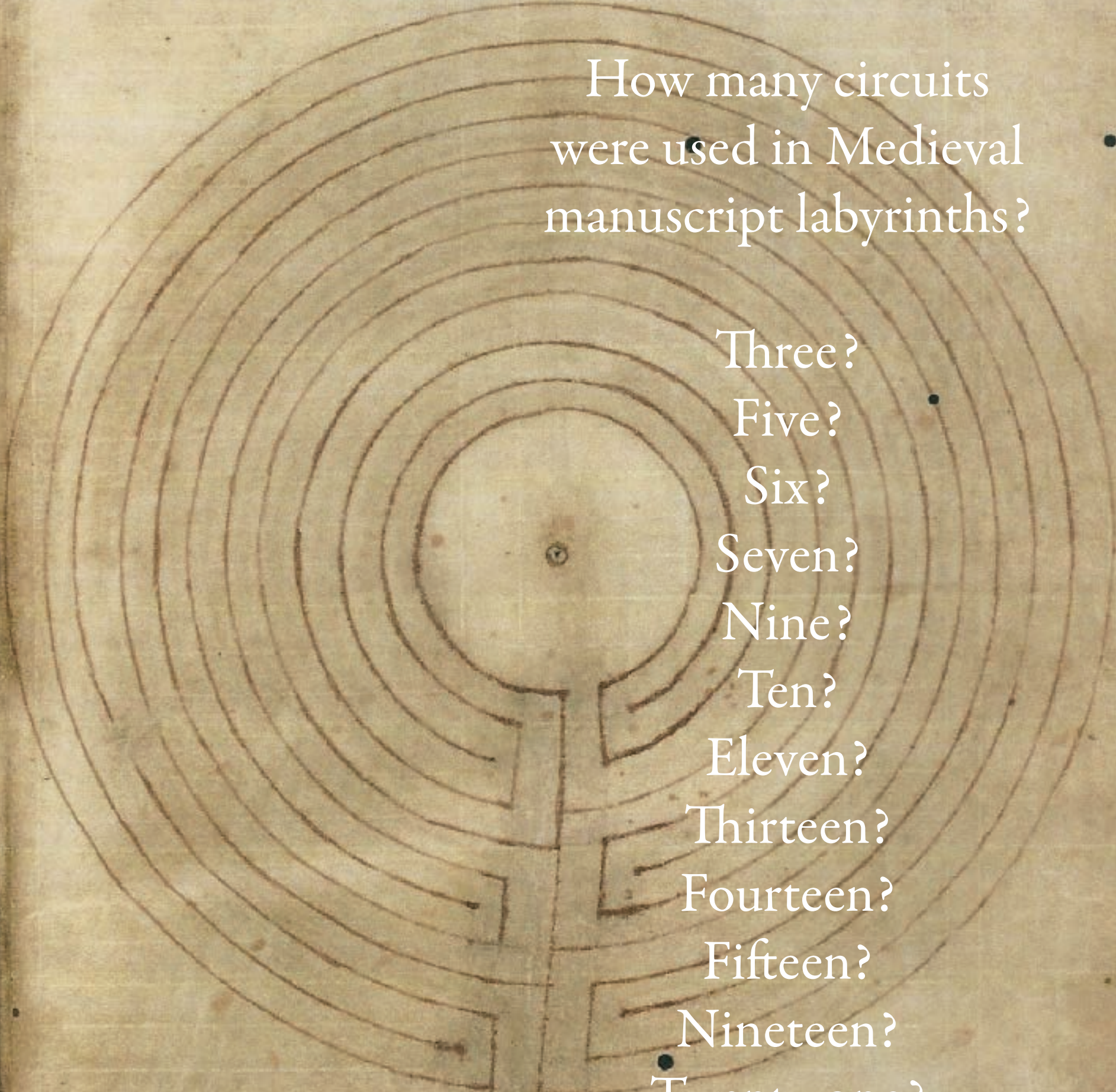




Viewers of this Syrian manuscript labyrinth would surely have understand that the threshold is a feature of labyrinths whose importance should respected.

Beruit, Lebanon.  
Lebanese National Library,  
University St. Joseph  
Ms. f Syr. no. 1, fol. 1v  
Kern #234  
1775





How many circuits  
were used in Medieval  
manuscript labyrinths?

Three?

Five?

Six?

Seven?

Nine?

Ten?

Eleven?

Thirteen?

Fourteen?

Fifteen?

Nineteen?

Twenty one?





~~Three?~~  
Five?  
Six?  
Seven?  
Nine?  
Ten?  
Eleven?  
Thirteen?  
Fourteen?  
Fifteen?  
Nineteen?  
~~Twenty one?~~

*Jericho Labyrinth  
Munich, Germany  
Bayerische Staatsbibliothek,  
Clm. 14731, fol 83r.  
Kern #222.  
1146-1155*



مصافح بر کردی و چون حرام گذشتی آید باز استادی و شکل را میباید  
سور صفح  
است



دگر مصافح و صبح

جا بجا آن و رای شهرها، حرز آنست نزدیک مشرق الصیف  
جانک حسد آن در سکر عالم ظاهر شدست و میان از جا بجا  
و حرز هفتاد و دور روز راه است و از اسلام الترحمان روایت

است  
سور صفح

All illustrators of manuscript labyrinths had to decide what type of pathway they wanted to create and how to draw (or erase) the turns.

Heidelberg, Germany  
Heidelberg University Library  
Ms. Persian Cod.  
Heid. Orient. 118, folio 197v  
Not in Kern  
1475



Qui omnes emigrit sanguinem eliser

153

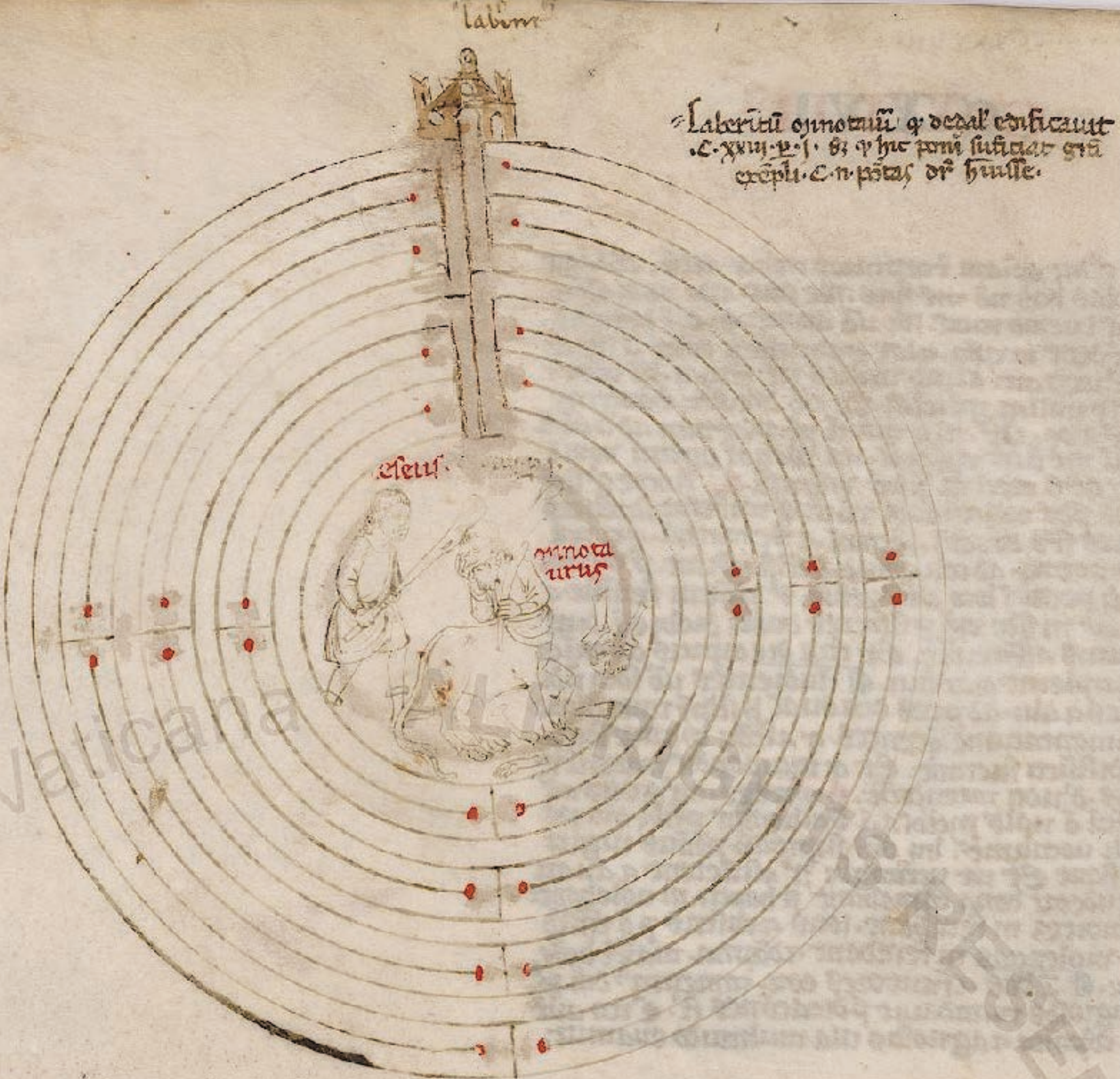
Omne homo dnm dz Amare suu



Creation of circular labyrinth drawings often involved the use of a compass. This is confirmed by the hole in the center of the page where the pointed compass arm rested as the circles were drawn.

Paris, France  
Bibliothèque Nationale de France  
Lat. 2809  
fol. 153r & 153v  
Not in Kern  
1270-1330





To make the pathway “work”, once the circles were created, turn areas were erased and reworked.

This is easy to observe in this labyrinth in a World Chronicle written by Paolino Veneto.

Vatican,  
Biblioteca Apostolica Vatican  
Vat lat. 1960, fol. 264v  
Kern #205  
1334-1339



Գողտչութեանն ատես եա Լ  
տալրաւ Գնու թիւն ար :

Քանզի ընդ այն իսկ անցա  
նեկ ոց եր :



Լմտեալ շրջիկ ընդ

բոև եկն իսեղ ին. Գայ

Some pathways were angular, like this Jericho labyrinth in an Armenian gospel book.

Vienna, Austria  
Mechitharisten-Congregation, Cod. 242, fol. 169r. Kern #226. 1330.





The coloring of the pathways  
and their edges  
varied from labyrinth to labyrinth.

Sometimes the only coloring  
was the parchment itself.

*Vienna Austria  
Osterreichischebibliothek  
Codex 2687, fol. 1r.  
Kern #176.*



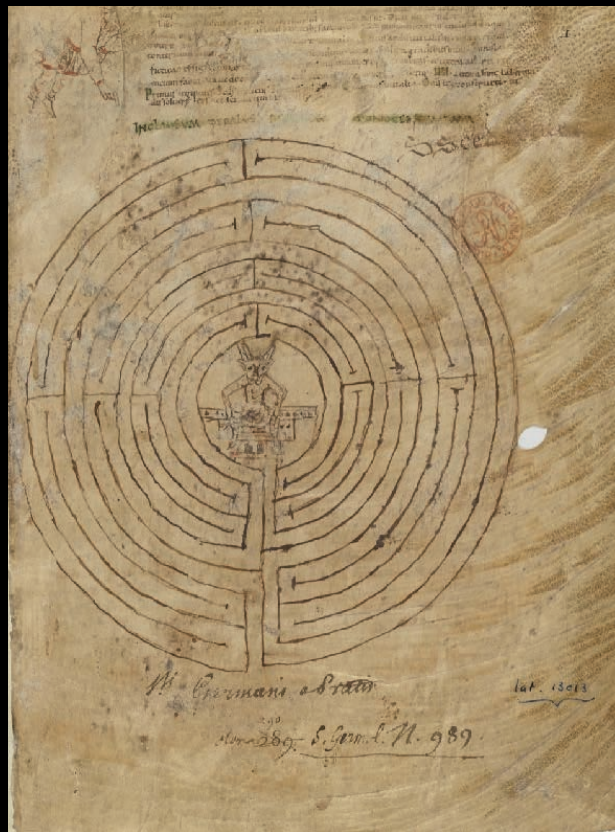


As we turn our attention to the center of the labyrinth, we remember that the greek myth involving the labyrinth included the imprisonment of a murderous Minotaur in its center. The creature with the head of a bull and the body of a man was to be feared, and his domain in the center of the labyrinth was described as a place of conflict, death, and victory.

Modern labyrinth walkers often can not relate to the negative aspects in this portrayal of the center, but looking at labyrinth history, it is abundantly represented.

*Minotaur  
Bull head and human body  
National Archeological Museum  
Athens Greece  
A Roman copy of a fifth-century B.C.  
Greek Minotaur sculpture by Myron  
on the Acropolis*





901-1000



1121



1126-1150

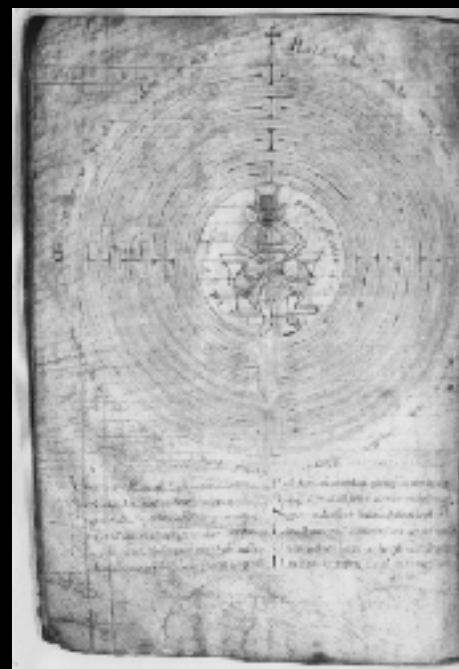


1150-1200

Minotaurs and later Theseus and the Minotaur are found in the center of many medieval manuscript labyrinths including but not limited to these.



1101-1200



1101-1200



1101-1200



1101-1200





Some of the labyrinths show the Minotaur with the head of beast (not necessarily a bull) and the body of man.

Munich, Bayerische Staatbibliothek,  
Cm 14731, fol 82v.  
Kern #198.  
1150-1200





Horns were not uncommon.





This “Minotaur”  
has pointy ears  
to emphasize  
his evil nature.

*Paris, France  
Bibliothèque Nationale  
de France  
Latin 5371 fol. 240v.  
Not in Kern.  
1101-1200*





During the Medieval period  
Ovid's *Metamorphoses* was  
widely circulated.  
It contained a description  
of the Minotaur  
as half bull  
and half man.

Wolfenbittel, Germany  
Herzog August Bibliothek  
Cod Guelf. I Gud. Latin  
(Catalog No. 4305)  
fol. 19v  
Kern #192  
1150-1200





Since Ovid didn't specify which half was bull and which half was man, drawings of the Minotaur with a man's head and torso on a bull's body appeared.

*Orléans, France  
Bibliothèque Municipale  
16, fol. 252v.  
1001-1200  
Not in Kern*





Obviously,  
this was a  
reversal  
of the original  
tradition.

Leiden, Netherlands,  
BPL 100 A, fol. 1  
Not in Kern  
(1150-1200)



iauoit puis q̄ passoit le premeiaín q̄ tot  
desueoient cil q̄ la dedenz estoient. ⁊ en cel  
le meson fu cil mostres endos



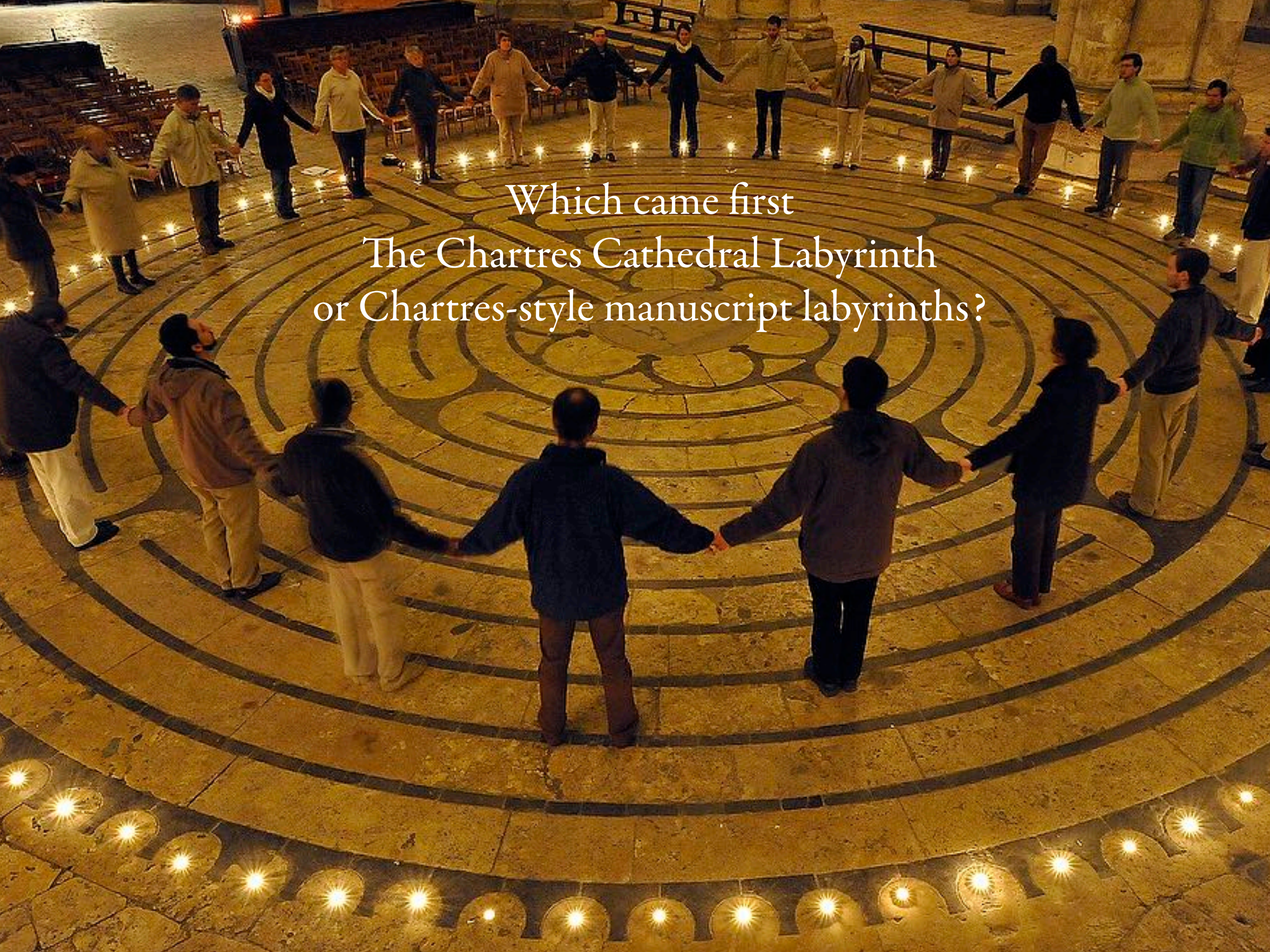
This portrayal, reminiscent of a Centaur, became an enduring alternative tradition.

**E** Quel Coment cil dathenes estoiet  
tens fugiet a cil de crete.  
estorent cil dathenes si fugiet au roi minos  
de crete q̄ li deuoient enuoyer chascun an  
vii. ualles ⁊ viii. meschines de triuagie ⁊

*Symbolic version of the Labyrinth in a text on ancient history with  
the Minotaur in the Center.*

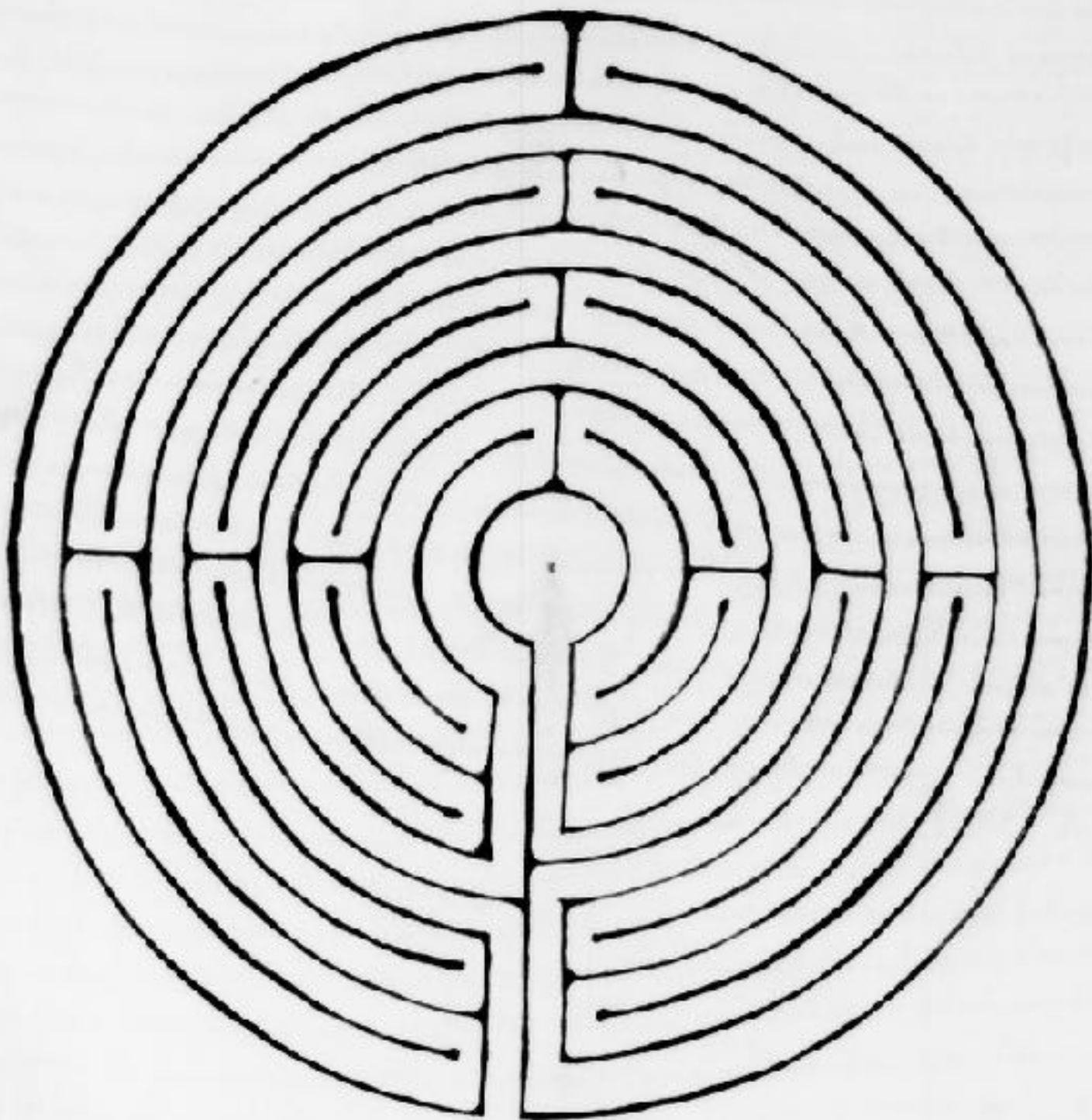
*Dijon, France  
Bibliotheque Municipale  
BM Ms. 562, fol. 115r.  
1250-1275*



A group of people are standing in a circle on a large, circular stone labyrinth. They are holding hands, and the scene is illuminated by small, warm lights placed around the perimeter of the labyrinth. The labyrinth is carved into the stone floor and features a complex, winding path. The people are dressed in casual winter clothing. The background shows a dark, possibly outdoor setting with some structures and a body of water visible in the distance.

Which came first  
The Chartres Cathedral Labyrinth  
or Chartres-style manuscript labyrinths?





Nineteen  
“Chartres-style”  
medieval  
labyrinths  
that were  
drawn before  
1200  
still exist.

*Paris, France  
Bibliothèque Nationale de France  
Lat. 1745, fol. 30v.  
Kern #178  
801-1100.*



**3. Manuscripts with a labyrinth containing words or images related to the Greek myth of the labyrinth, including images of a Minotaur in the center:**

**Words relating to Greek myth: domus Dedali (the house of Dedalus)**

1. St Gall, Stiftsbibliothek cod. 878, p. 277: *Domus*<sup>51</sup> (9th c.)
  2. Oxford MS Bodley Auct. F. 6..4 (S.C. 2150), folio 61av (13<sup>th</sup> c.)
  2. Oxford MS Bodley Auct. F. 6. 4 (S.C. 2150), folio 61bv<sup>52</sup> (13<sup>th</sup> c.)
- See 3.2 below: BNF Latin 12999 folio 11r (12<sup>th</sup> c.). *Minotaurus. Domus Dedali* (Minotaur. House of Dedalus)

See also 3.1b below: BNF Latin 5371, fol. 240v (12<sup>th</sup> c.): *Talia deus monstra/Patria depellat ab ista* (May the Lord remove such monsters from the homeland) see Wright, p. 126

**Minotaur Alone**

1. Minotaur (horned head of bull, body of human)
  - a. Seated with human on lap: BNF Lat. 13013, fol. 1r (10<sup>th</sup> c.)
  - b. Seated, playing a psaltery and a drum (cacophony)<sup>53</sup>: BNF Latin (12<sup>th</sup> c.), fol. 240v. There is an inscription around him.<sup>54</sup> (12<sup>th</sup> c.)
  - c. See C1 below: Admont Benediktinerstift, Stiftsbibliothek cod. 89, folio 1v (12<sup>th</sup> c.)
2. Centaur or Minotaur (Head of human, body of horse or bull)
  - a. Eating a person BNF Lat. 4416, folio 35 (9<sup>th</sup> c.)
  - b. Eating a human head, another head below: BNF Latin 12999, folio 11r<sup>55</sup> (12<sup>th</sup> c.)
  - c. Eating an arm and leg: Orléans BM 16, fol. 252v (10<sup>th</sup> c.)
  - d. With sword and shield: New York Morgan Ms. 925 fol. 12r (11<sup>th</sup> c.)
3. Horned head of a bull, torso of a human, body of a bull:
  - a. Holding a sword in his right hand, pointing outward with his left pointer finger: Ghent, University Library, MS 92, fol. 20r (12<sup>th</sup> c.)
  - b. Appears to be a copy of Ghent image above: Herzog August Bibliothek Cod Guelf. 1 Gud. Lat. Catalog 4305, 19v (12<sup>th</sup>-13<sup>th</sup> c.)
4. Unclear combination of bull and human  
Bull's body and a human or devil-like upper body<sup>56</sup> Munich, Bayerische Saabibliothek, Clm 6394, fol. 164<sup>57</sup> (9<sup>th</sup> c.)

**Battle Scene: Theseus and Minotaur**

1. Theseus with club holding on to the Minotaur who has a bull's head and a human body: Admont Benediktinerstift, Stiftsbibliothek cod. 89, folio 1v (12<sup>th</sup> c.)
2. Theseus with sword and shield fighting a Minotaur with an animal head and upright (human-like) body of a bull: Munich Clm. 14731, fol. 82v (12<sup>th</sup> c.)

Images relating to the Greek story of the labyrinth were found in the center of many manuscript labyrinths.

From "The Beast Within."  
Jill K H Geoffrion and Alain Pierre Louët.  
*Caerdroia* 44: 10-23. 2015.



Princeton, NJ (USA),  
Princeton University, Garrett  
Ms. 158, fol. 157r  
Not in Kern  
1471



There are also a number of manuscript labyrinths with no explicit symbol in the center.

## **1. Manuscripts with a labyrinth that has no explicit symbol in the centre:**

### **Blank**

1. Karlsruhe, Badische Landesbibliothek, cod. Aug. CCXXIX, fol. 61v. (9<sup>th</sup> century)
2. Monte Cassino, cod. 132, p. 348<sup>46</sup> (11<sup>th</sup> c.)
3. BNF NAL 2169, fol. 17r (11<sup>th</sup> c.)
4. Paris BNF Fr. 20125, fol. 158 (13<sup>th</sup> c.)

### **Coloured in**

1. BNF Lat. 12048, fol. 80 (8<sup>th</sup> c.)
2. Rome Biblioteca Apostolica Vatican Vat. Reg. Lat. 438, fol. 35v (The centre of the centre is coloured in<sup>47</sup>) (9<sup>th</sup> c.)
3. BNF Arabe 6080, folio79v (11<sup>th</sup> c.)

### **Centre point**

1. Vatican Lat. 4929, fol. 78r (9<sup>th</sup> c.)
2. Milan, Biblioteca Ambrosiana C. 74, sup., fol. 278 (9<sup>th</sup> c.)
3. BNF Lat. 1745, fol. 30v (9<sup>th</sup>-11<sup>th</sup> c.)
4. St. Gall, Stiftsbibliothek, cod. 197, p.122 (10<sup>th</sup> c.)
5. Montpellier, Biblio. Interuniversitaire, Section Médecine, MS H.360, fol. 136v (10<sup>th</sup>-11<sup>th</sup> c.)
6. St. Gall cod 825, p. 176 (10<sup>th</sup>-11<sup>th</sup> c.)
7. Avranches, Ms. 240, folio 8v (11<sup>th</sup> c.)
8. British Library Cotton MS Tiberius BII, f 248v (12<sup>th</sup> c.)
9. St John's College (Cambridge) Library H.11, folio 124v (12<sup>th</sup> c.)
10. BNF Français19093, fol. 7v (13<sup>th</sup> c.)
11. BNF Arsenal Ms. 8530, fol.175 (13<sup>th</sup> c.)
12. Hereford Cathedral, Mappa Mundi (13<sup>th</sup> c.)



LABERINTHUS

DE DALIDAMUS



Other manuscript labyrinths have specific symbols in their centers.

Unfortunately, the meaning of these has sometimes been lost.

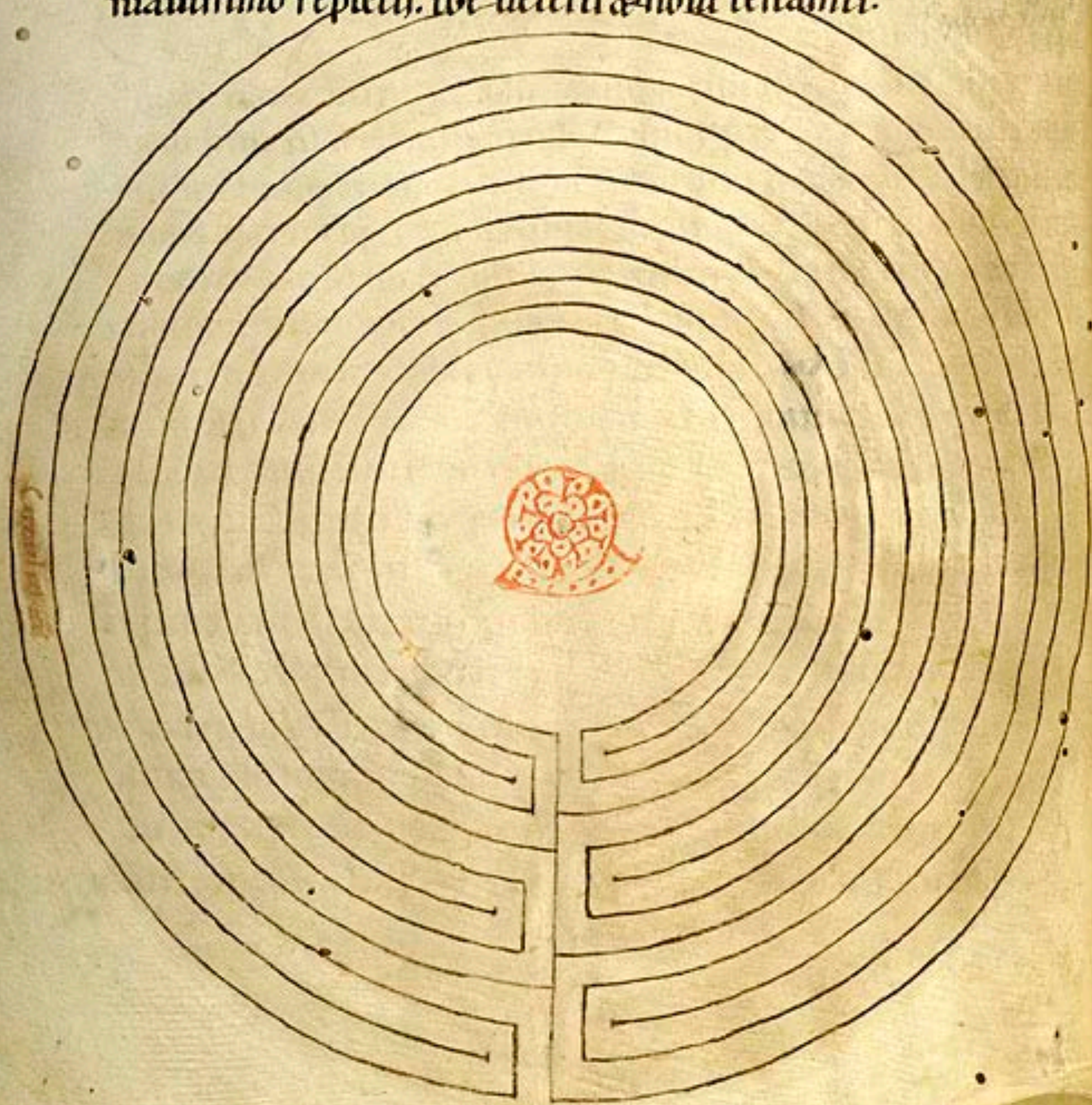
Carta...  
Reg. 3887

Lodge...  
Sancti Martini in Spania  
C...  
J...  
m...  
n...  
a...

Paris, France  
Bibliothèque Nationale de France  
Lat. 3840, fol. 1r  
Not in Kern  
801-900.



titur in uicium uia uic in uicium. uic uia uic uia uic uia uic  
in p̄stinū statū. Hec auis significat xp̄m. utriusq; alis odore  
suauissimo repletis. idē ueteris & noui testamti.



Here we find  
a flower,  
or a snail,  
or perhaps something else.

New York City, USA  
Ms. 832, fol. 10v  
Kern #236  
1101-1200





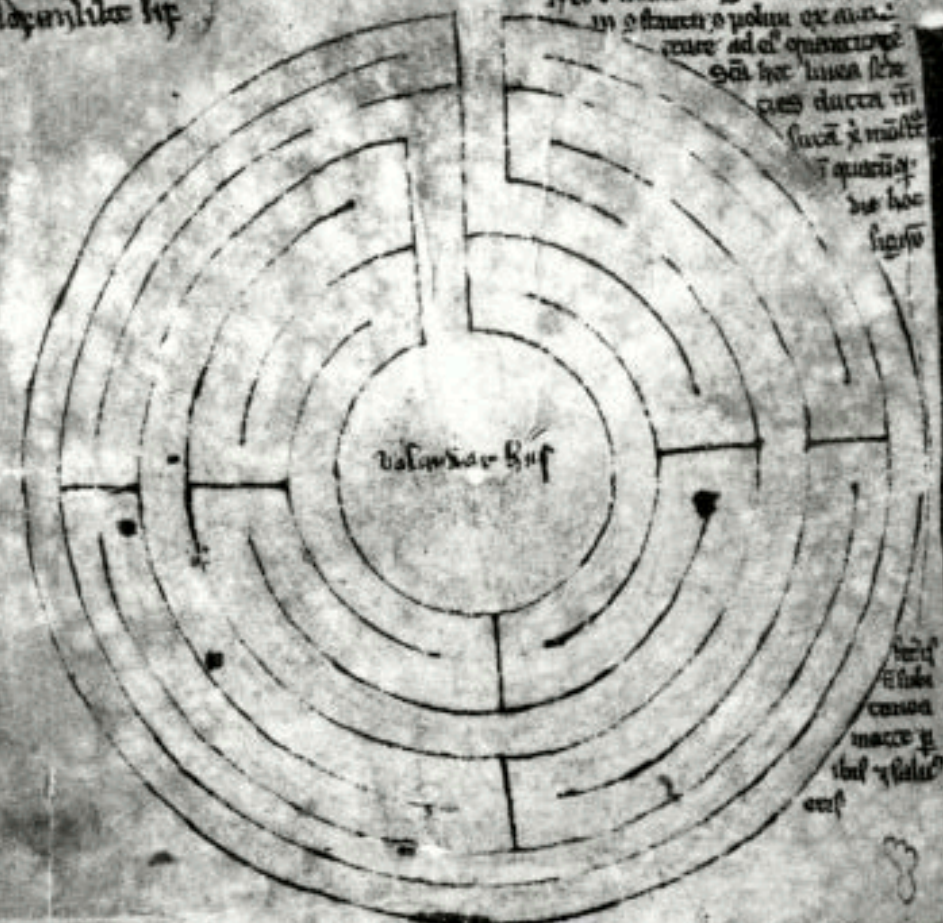
It has been suggested that the central red dot may represent the sun in this labyrinth that serves as the structure for a canon for three.

Berkley, California, USA,  
University Library,  
US-BEm 744, fol. 31v.  
Not in Kern.  
1375



... dadi er wilton huch ofter framkeoh heatre  
Ia rader med þu yngja vider þu heilagri islar, of mede snum  
kon... om ok þelrago um daga geogrus þu er hupdi oco lict ok  
lagunhite hif  
Her e muna longradund xii liara  
in o stanti o polum ex a-

111 13  
71 11



þessi lina er  
hij 26 hla  
af heð dng  
of i x ak þoreo  
hósa har h hla  
hþe veret a lik  
ams vaxer a  
hvum dng eda  
þeg þau þu þer þa  
þ angu þer þa  
monro ege þo  
beaðe ok c mco  
v huf gios þu  
e vdo þareð ok e  
titta o þa þ e vdo  
domo at huf þe  
is e þ mavv þo  
Ok e ok of þuh þ  
þau lupo þ augo  
þ a deo þa þon  
þu þe þu þu ad  
þe eupa hualt  
ok mlt þu þ þu  
þu þe þu þu  
þe þu þu þu  
þu þu þu þu

Utraque cogitationes bonae debent in deo habere. Cogitanda sunt de deo ut  
delectet in ipso. De passione dicit sancti passionem passio. De die iudicii.  
Quia rationes sunt videlicet non solum de operibus sed etiam de cogitationibus  
in quibus oculos de ipso ut tamen vixit vixit. De vicia etiam ut deus  
annus etiam etiam. In his cogitationibus etiam oia. **T**ertium de malum  
Septem sunt gradus sapientie. **I**ntelligere humiliter. **C**ogitare diligenter  
Credere firmiter. **O**perari humiliter. **S**equere fortiter. **I**ntelligere sequenter  
**D**iligere ardentius. **O**pus bonum perfectum  
**T**res sunt que ducunt homines ad regnum dei. **C**ogitatio scilicet. **V**erbum bonum  
**T**res sunt que ducunt homines ad infernum. **C**ogitatio maligna. **V**erbum nequam. **O**pus iniquum  
**T**ribus modis fit diabolica cogitatio. **P**rimo invidiose. **P**ostea delectationes  
**P**rimo suadente homini ut non faciat obsequium deum a seculo.  
et invidiosus est. **S**cilicet dicit. **A**lii peccaverunt etiam invidiosus. **T**ertio dicitur  
**T**ri peccata magna est. clementia dei indulget tibi. **P**ropter heretice scilicet mlti

lypum malna þeude  
byllta e þam us  
þrogoni þeum þu  
þadaz þengu dardate

Other labyrinths had words in the center,  
like this Icelandic labyrinth  
that was called Volundar's house labyrinth  
because of his name  
was written in the center.

Copenhagen, Denmark  
AM 732 b 4to, fol 7r.  
Kern # 580  
1300-1325



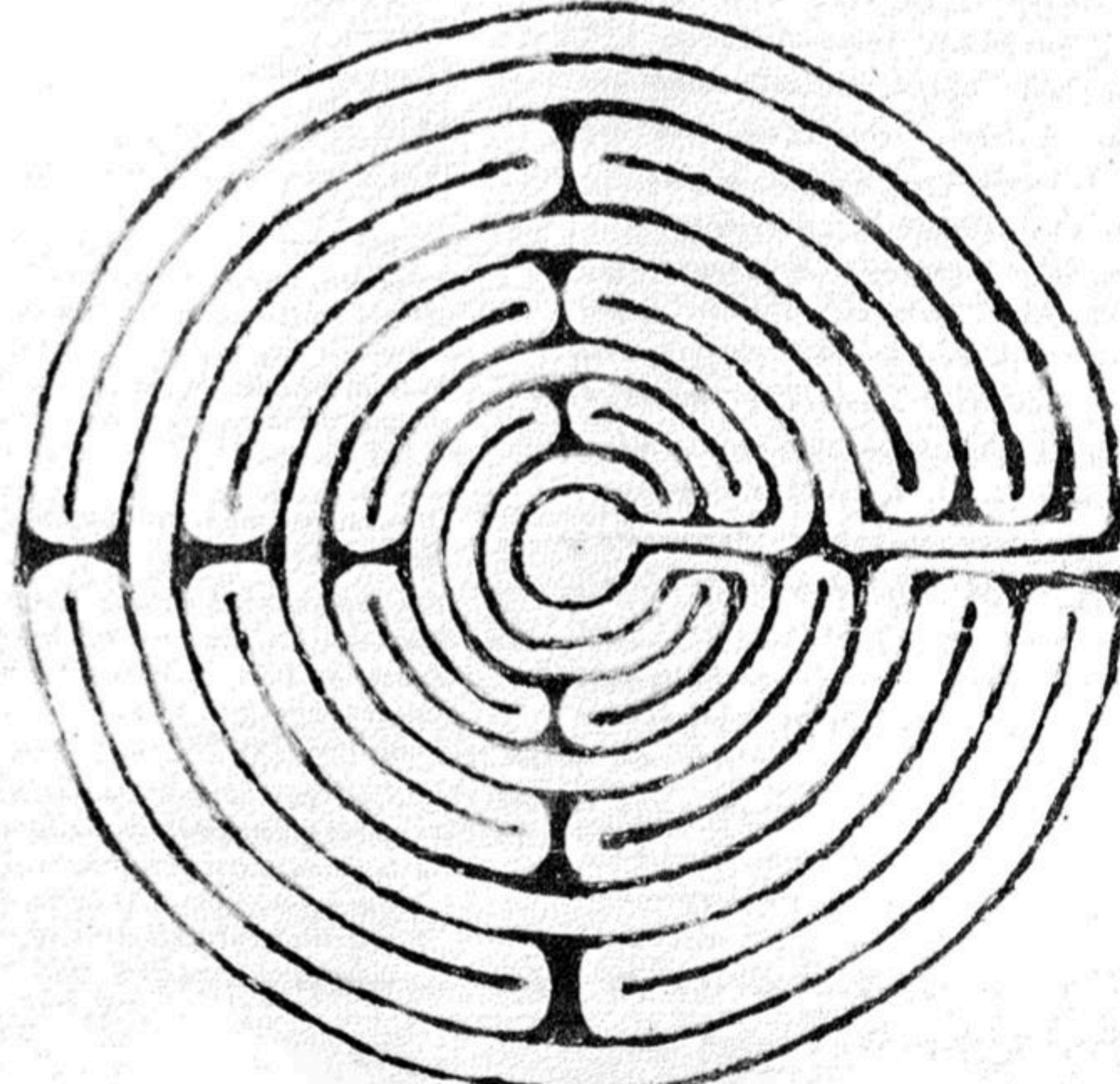


There are always lots of choices that need to be made when one decides to construct or draw a labyrinth.

Labyrinth illustrators from the Middle Ages remind us of how valuable it is to know why we are creating a labyrinth when we decide on features of the threshold, pathway with its turns, and center.

Cambridge, England. Trinity College Ms. 8530, fol. 175r.  
Not in Kern  
1301-1400





True or false:

Labyrinths in medieval manuscripts were sometimes used as “finger labyrinths”.

Venice, Italy.  
Biblioteca Nazionale  
Marciana,  
cod. marc. gr. Z. 299  
(= 584), fol. 102v.  
Kern 217.  
ca 1400.



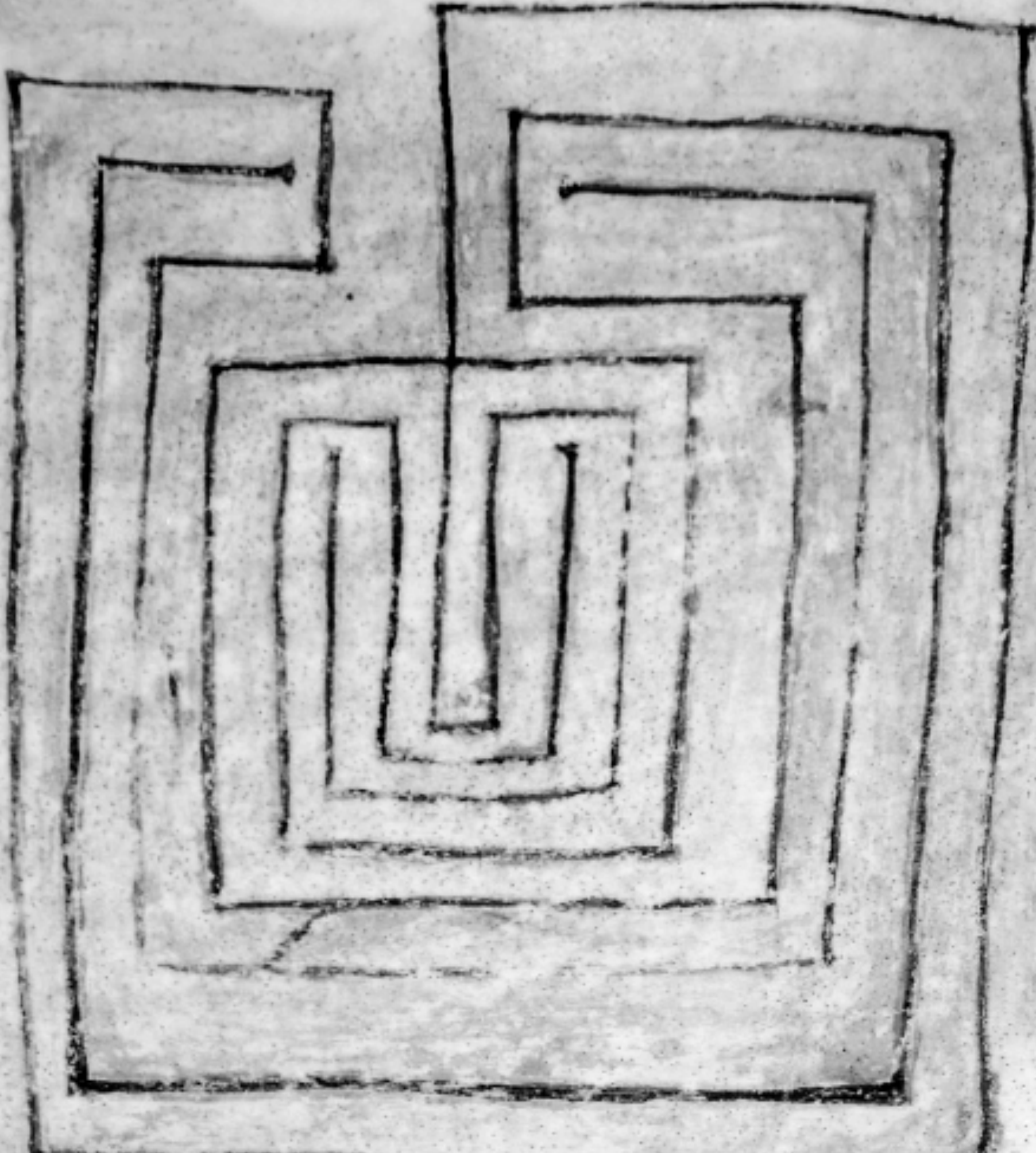


True.

This is one of them.

Karlsruhe, Germany,  
Badische Landesbibliothek,  
cod. aug. CCXXIX, fol. 61v  
806-822  
Kern #220





When you have time,  
use this labyrinth  
for a finger labyrinth exercise.

I highly recommend that you  
find images of  
manuscript labyrinths  
(googling manuscript  
labyrinths  
is a good place to start)  
and use them  
as finger labyrinths.

To get even more out of  
this exercise,  
find and use  
labyrinths with pathways  
you are not familiar with.

*Karlsruhe, Germany,  
Badische Landesbibliothek,  
cod. aug. CCXXIX, fol. 61v  
806-822  
Kern #220*





# Finger Labyrinth

(straightened and enhanced)

Karlsruhe, Germany, Badische Landesbibliothek,  
cod. aug. CCXXIX, fol. 61v  
806-822  
Kern #220



**DIMBOLINA MANABSTIV**

BYNOS REX

DEDAVS  
Arctifox

YEARNVS  
filii et:



in labyrinthis

*[Faint Latin text, likely a rubric or part of a larger text block.]*

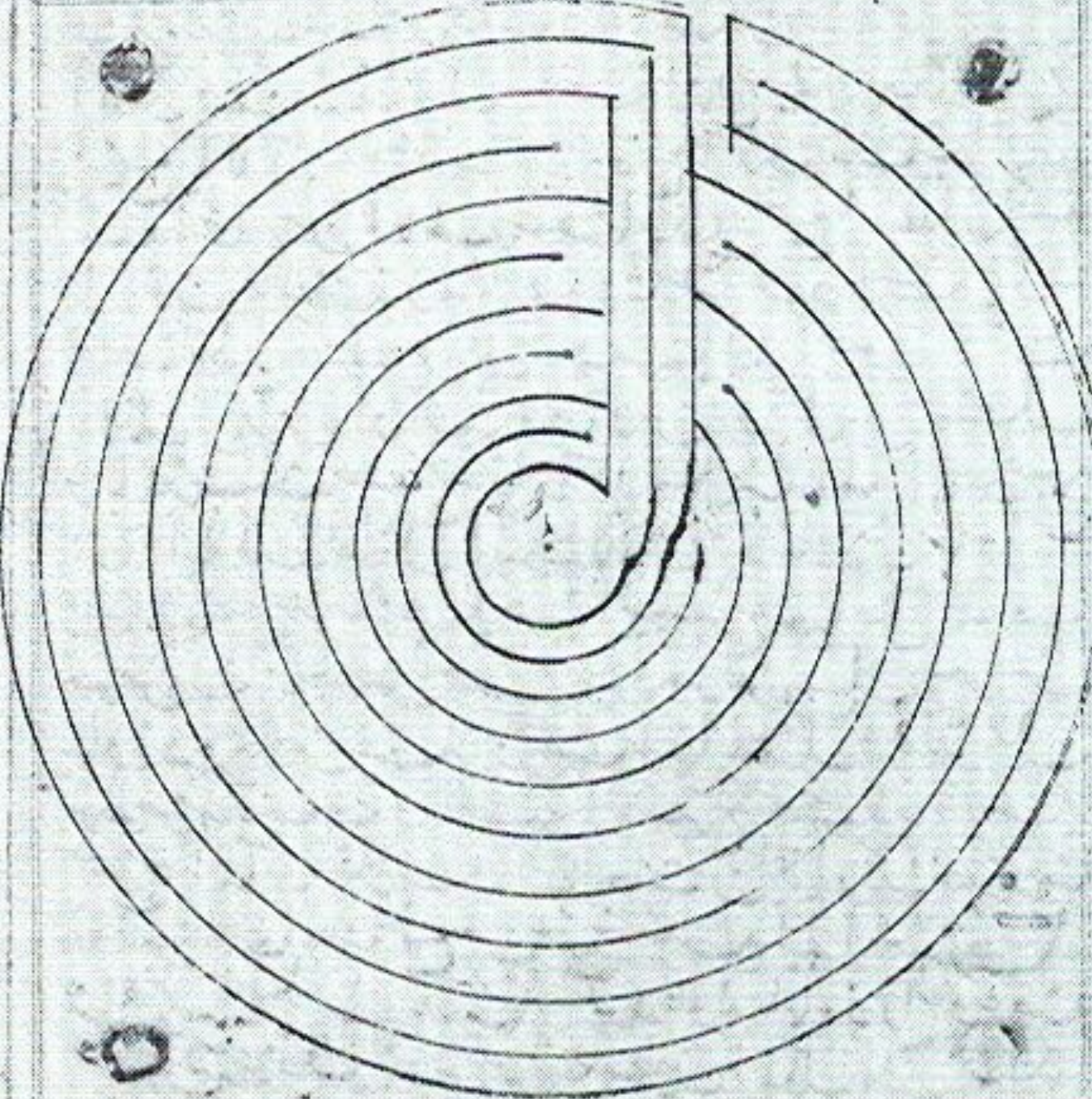
Try using labyrinths with centers that make you feel uncomfortable.

There may be hidden blessings lurking there.

Ghent, Belgium  
University Library,  
Ms. 92, fol. 20r.  
Kern # 191.  
1060-1121



تبتلها وتلا بعد ما والحكاية عن عظمها وحشا كثر عند صورها



والآن لم يبق على الملك الصورة لكنها مدسة عطمة  
بها فضر الملك يحك به سورد وقرته فذخ له

Using labyrinths  
from religious traditions  
that are not your own  
can be very fruitful.

Dijon, France  
BM Ms 562 (323), fol. 115r.  
Kern 200  
1276.

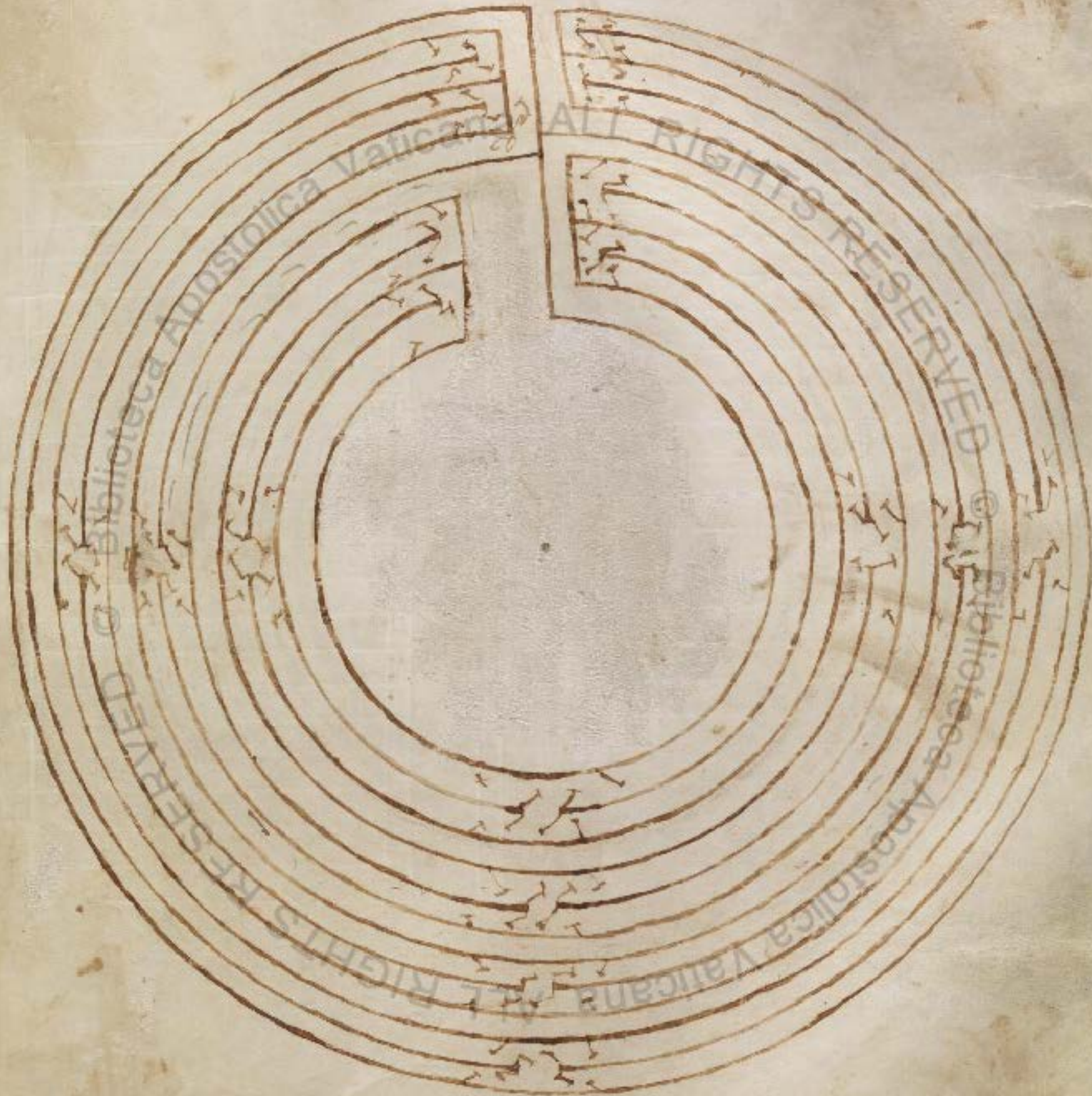




Rediscovering and examining  
labyrinth history  
can bring us courage,  
knowledge,  
and wisdom  
that will help us  
to expand our range of  
labyrinth creations  
and practices.

Paris, France  
Bibliothèque Nationale de France  
Syriaque 70, fol. 154r,  
Kern #221  
1059





We do not need to hesitate  
to try drawing and building  
new labyrinth designs.  
And to make corrections  
as needed!

*This labyrinth has been described  
as "a first attempt." (Kern)*

*Vatican City State  
Apostolica Vatican  
Latin 4929, fol. 78r.  
Kern #186  
860-862*



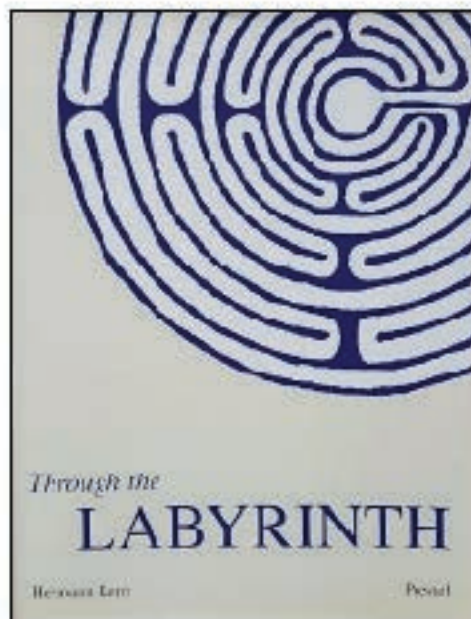
# Keeping Kern Current: Locating 'Lost' Labyrinths in Medieval Manuscripts



Jill K. H. Geoffrion & Alain Pierre Louët

## Introduction

First published in 1982, Hermann Kern's *Labyrinthe*, the catalogue of labyrinths which has become indispensable to scholars, devoted chapter seven to labyrinths found in manuscripts and noted 80 medieval examples. In 2000 an updated English language version of Kern's book, *Through the Labyrinth*, was edited by Jeff Saward and Robert Ferré, in which they included an additional four manuscript labyrinths. Since that time, many other manuscript labyrinths have been identified by scholars and others have been put on-line, either as part of library digital collections or used as illustrations in books or online articles.



Due to our interest in these labyrinths, we have searched out new examples both using the internet and in-person when possible. We now offer the fruit of these labours, the 38 labyrinths below, with the hope that others will be able to use these examples in their work and research. Whenever possible, we have included images of these labyrinths and links where more information about them can be found.

Below we present these 38 manuscript labyrinths, in approximate chronological sequence, along with a table of their essential details. A note on the terminology regarding the labyrinth designs is in order at this point. In Kern's original table (2000 edition, pages 107-109) he basically uses six categories to cover the majority of the labyrinths – Cretan, Cretan modified, Otrid, Jericho, Chartres and Chartres modified – plus a few that are correctly described as mazes. We have chosen to retain this basic system to allow direct comparison of the entries that follow with Kern's original catalogue.

Modern readers might be more familiar with the terms "Classical" instead of "Cretan," and "Medieval" rather than "Chartres," but we will leave that translation of terminology to the reader. We have added an occasional comment where Kern's system falls short of adequate description and have been consistent regarding the use of the term "Chartres-style" for those medieval labyrinths that have the same path arrangement as the labyrinth in Chartres Cathedral, and "modified Chartres" for those that have different path arrangements, likewise for "Cretan" and "modified Cretan." The number of circuits refers to the concentric paths arranged around the central goal.

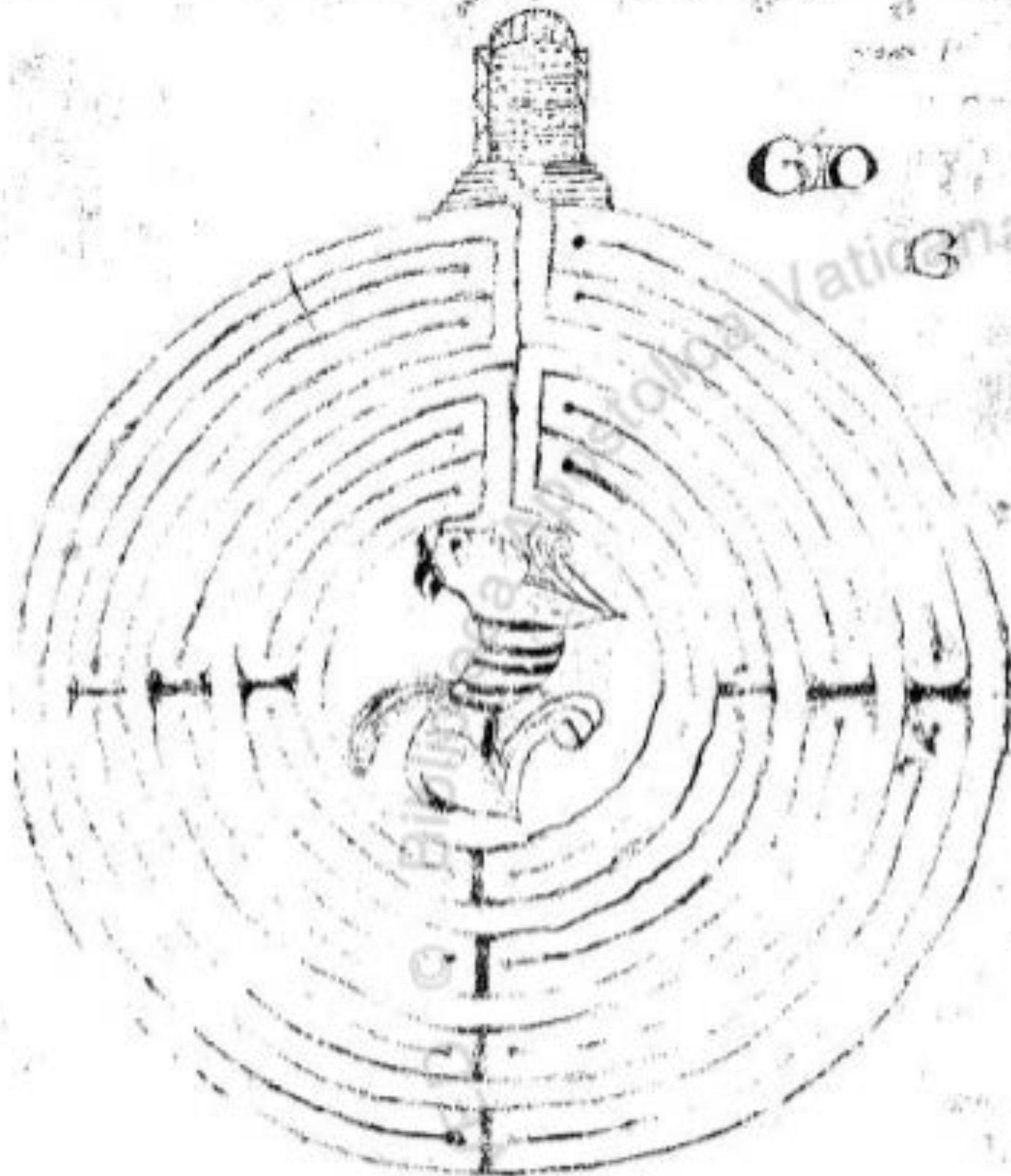
Let's all be on the lookout for manuscript labyrinths not known to our community.

Let's keep adding to the database of medieval manuscript labyrinths!

*Keeping Kern Current. Locating 'Lost' Labyrinths in Medieval Manuscripts.*  
Jill K. H. Geoffrion & Alain P. Louët.  
Caerdroia 50: 11-25. 2021.

*Images and descriptions of 38 manuscript labyrinths from archives*





Scholarship related to  
manuscript labyrinths  
is needed in just about  
every area  
you can think of!

Are you interested?

Vatican,  
*Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticana*  
Ot. Latin 3313, fol. 81v  
Not in Kern?  
1001-1100





- Belgium
- Denmark
- England
- Ethiopia
- France
- Iceland
- Israel
- Italy
- Germany
- Greece
- Lebanon
- Netherlands
- Russia
- Switzerland
- Turkey
- United States
- Vatican City State

When traveling to these countries, manuscript labyrinths can be viewed and studied.



Our understanding  
of the meanings  
of specific  
manuscript labyrinths  
will be deepened  
as scholars translate  
texts related to them  
and make that information  
available.

If you can work in  
other languages,  
please apply your knowledge  
and share your translations  
and findings!

*Hanover, New Hampshire USA  
Rauner Library of Dartmouth College  
290, fol. needed  
Not in Kern  
1400-1450*





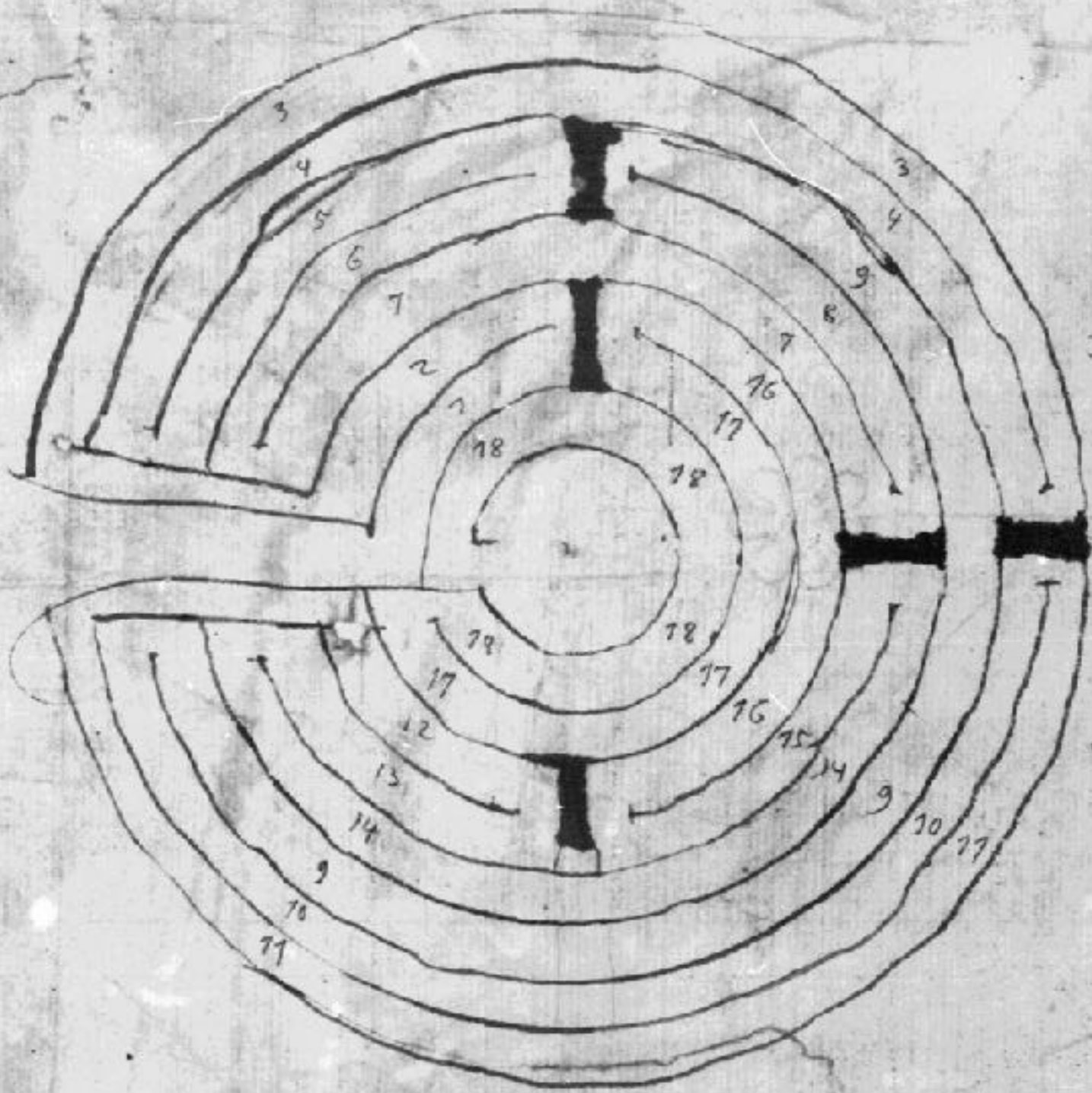
עַרְיָחוֹ נִצְוִיָּהּ וּבִשְׁעָה אַחַד יְשׁוּבָהּ וּמִפְנֵי בְנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל  
סוּגְרָהּ וּמִסוּגְרָהּ



Let's create more  
labyrinth  
installations  
using  
historical  
patterns  
found in  
manuscripts.

Jerusalem,  
Library of Rabbi  
Salomon David Sassoon,  
MS 368, p. 22  
1366-83  
Kern # 227





1 Labyrinthus.

Those who drew labyrinths  
in the Middle Ages  
have these words  
of encouragement  
for us:

Experiment.

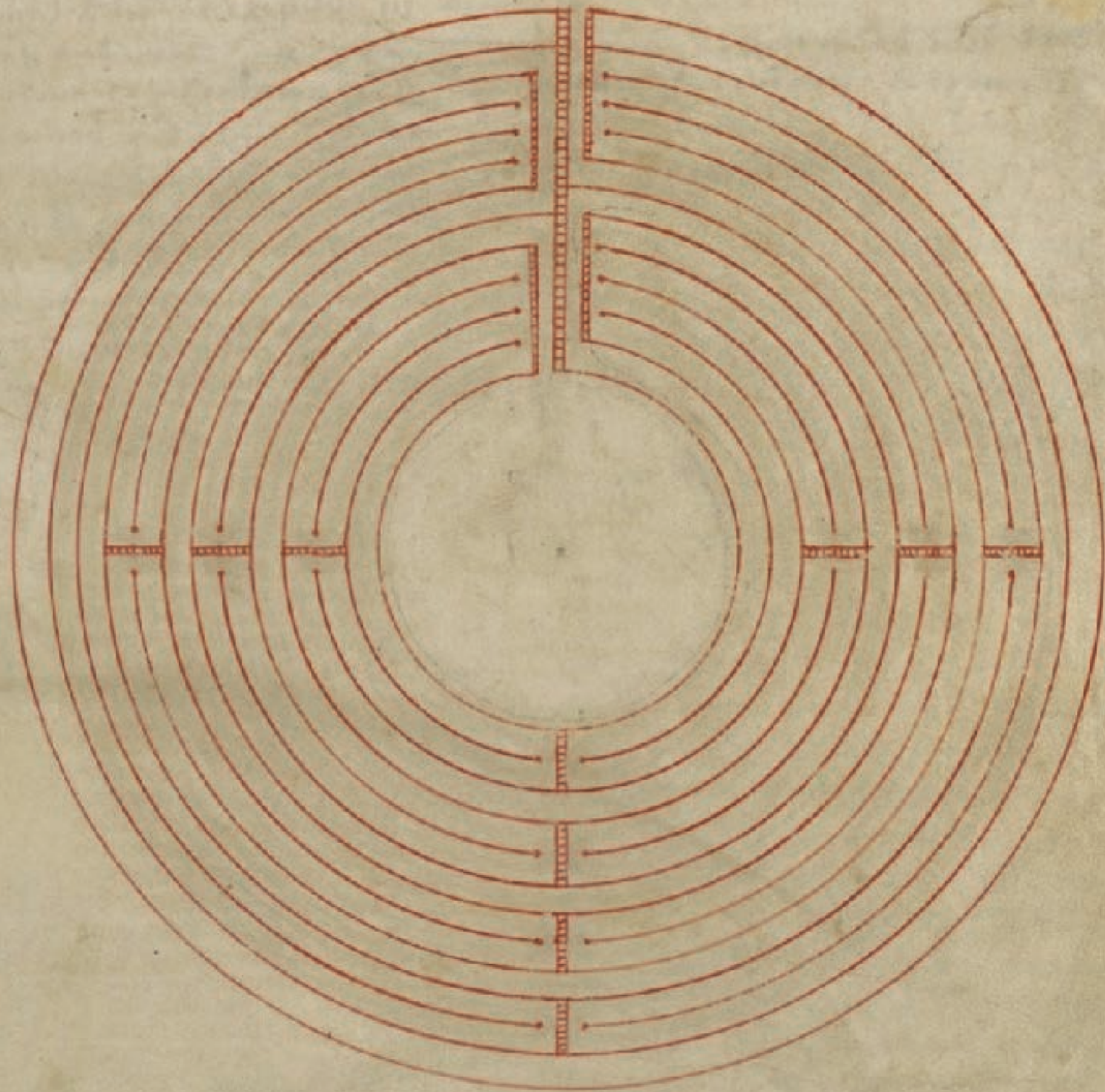
Innovate.

Explore.

Enter in!

Munich, Germany  
BSB Clm 209, fol. 323v  
Kern #216  
1462-1463





Thank you!

*Paris, France,  
Arsenal,  
Ms. 711, fol. C  
Not in Kern.  
1101-1300*



[www.jillgeoffrion.com](http://www.jillgeoffrion.com)

With gratitude to Alain Pierre Louët  
for © photographs of Jill  
studying manuscripts

*Amiens (France)  
Bibliothèque Municipale,  
Ms. 147, fol 1r.  
Kern #223.  
1101-1200*







For for further study :  
articles written by Jill  
and Alain Pierre Louët

ἡ ἐκείνη ἡμετέρα ἐλπίσιν ἡ καὶ ἐξ ἡμετέρας ἐλπίσιν ἡ καὶ ἐξ ἡμετέρας ἐλπίσιν  
ἡ καὶ ἐξ ἡμετέρας ἐλπίσιν ἡ καὶ ἐξ ἡμετέρας ἐλπίσιν ἡ καὶ ἐξ ἡμετέρας ἐλπίσιν  
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Paris, France,  
Bibliothèque Nationale de France  
Greek 2055, fol. 53v.  
Not in Kern  
1401-1500



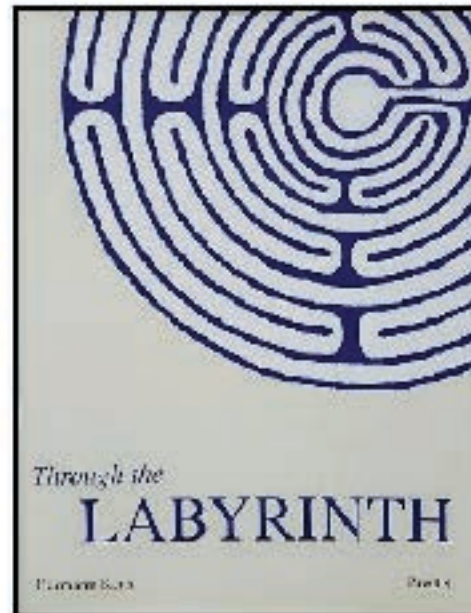
# Keeping Kern Current: Locating 'Lost' Labyrinths in Medieval Manuscripts



Jill K. H. Geoffrion & Alain Pierre Louët

## Introduction

First published in 1982, Hermann Kern's *Labyrinthe*, the catalogue of labyrinths which has become indispensable to scholars, devoted chapter seven to labyrinths found in manuscripts and noted 80 medieval examples. In 2000 an updated English language version of Kern's book, *Through the Labyrinth*, was edited by Jeff Saward and Robert Ferré, in which they included an additional four manuscript labyrinths. Since that time, many other manuscript labyrinths have been identified by scholars and others have been put on-line, either as part of library digital collections or used as illustrations in books or online articles.



Due to our interest in these labyrinths, we have searched out new examples both using the internet and in-person when possible. We now offer the fruit of these labours, the 38 labyrinths below, with the hope that others will be able to use these examples in their work and research. Whenever possible, we have included images of these labyrinths and links where more information about them can be found.

Below we present these 38 manuscript labyrinths, in approximate chronological sequence, along with a table of their essential details. A note on the terminology regarding the labyrinth designs is in order at this point. In Kern's original table (2000 edition, pages 107-109) he basically uses six categories to cover the majority of the labyrinths – Cretan, Cretan modified, Otfrid, Jericho, Chartres and Chartres modified – plus a few that are correctly described as mazes. We have chosen to retain this basic system to allow direct comparison of the entries that follow with Kern's original catalogue.

Modern readers might be more familiar with the terms "Classical" instead of "Cretan," and "Medieval" rather than "Chartres," but we will leave that translation of terminology to the reader. We have added an occasional comment where Kern's system falls short of adequate description and have been consistent regarding the use of the term "Chartres-style" for those medieval labyrinths that have the same path arrangement as the labyrinth in Chartres Cathedral, and "modified Chartres" for those that have different path arrangements, likewise for "Cretan" and "modified Cretan." The number of circuits refers to the concentric paths arranged around the central goal.

Table of Manuscripts

No.	Collection	Folio no.	Labyrinth type	Date
1	Paris	Lat. 12048, fol. 80	Cretan	780-800 CE
2	Paris	Lat. 4416, fol. 35	Cretan	9 <sup>th</sup> century
3	Paris	Lat. 3840, fol. 1r	unknown	9 <sup>th</sup> century
4	Berlin	Lat. 356, fol. 11v	Cretan	9 <sup>th</sup> -10 <sup>th</sup> century
5	Basel	AN IV 11, fol. 77r	Otfrid-style	11 <sup>th</sup> century
6	Orléans	Ms. 16, fol. 252	Chartres-style	11 <sup>th</sup> -12 <sup>th</sup> century
7	Leiden	BPL 92A, fol. 132	Chartres-style	12 <sup>th</sup> century
8	Paris	Lat. 5371, fol. 140v	Chartres-style	12 <sup>th</sup> century
9	London	Col. MS TB, BL, fol. 248v	modified Chartres	1110
10	St. Omer	Ms. 684, fol. 74	Chartres-style	1120-11140
11	Cambridge	Ms. H.11, fol. 134v	Chartres-style	1180-1200
12	Paris	Ms. 711, fol. 4	Chartres-style	12 <sup>th</sup> -13 <sup>th</sup> century
13	Leiden	Ms. 100A, fol. 1	Chartres-style	1150-1200
14	London	Adl. 15603, fol. 142v	unusual	1175-1200
15	Chantilly	Ms. 0528, fol. 080b	Chartres-style	13 <sup>th</sup> century
16	Genève	Ms. Gr. 44, p. 674	partial, uncertain	13 <sup>th</sup> century
17	Munich	Clm. 17403, fol. 13	Chartres-style	1241
18	Cambridge	Ms. 0.2.45, p. 001	Chartres-style	1248-1300
19	Paris	Lat. 2809, fol. 153r	modified Chartres	1270-1330
20	Amsterdam	Hs. Ros. 609, fol. 127v	modified Chartres	1290
21	Cambridge	Ms. 0.2.5, fol. 27r	Chartres-style	14 <sup>th</sup> century
22	Paris	Ms. 8530, fol. 175r	modified Chartres	14 <sup>th</sup> century
23	Paris	Ms. Or. Heb. 9, fol. 236v	Cretan	1304
24	Rome	Ms. Or. 72, fol. 6v	Cretan	1326
25	Berlin	Hs. or. 2371, fol. 157v	modified Cretan	1350
26	Berkeley	US-DE ex 744, fol. 31v	modified Chartres	1375
27	Hanover, NH	Taj Torah, 290	Jericho	1400-1450
28	Paris	Greek 2055, fol. 53v	Chartres-style	15 <sup>th</sup> century
29	Paris	FR 17001, fol. 2v	complex	15 <sup>th</sup> century
30	Paris	FR 17001, fol. 27r	complex	15 <sup>th</sup> century
31	Paris	FR 17001, fol. 33r	complex	15 <sup>th</sup> century
32	Philadelphia	LJS 226, note 1, side 2	Chartres-style	1410
33	Paris	Or. Per. 52, fol. 322v	Jericho	1410
34	Dublin	Per. 322, fol. 121r	Jericho	1420
35	Den Haag	KB 72 A 23, fol. 21v	modified Chartres	1460
36	Princeton	Ms. 158, fol. 157v	modified Chartres	1471
37	Heidelberg	Uod. Heid. Or. 11E, fol. 197v	Jericho	1475
38	Den Haag	KB 12B C4, fol. 40r	modified Chartres	1512

Jill Kimberly Hartwell, Geoffrion and Alain Pierre Louët.  
 "Keeping Kern Current. Locating 'Lost' Labyrinths  
 in Medieval Manuscripts." *Caerdroia* 50: 67-69. 2021.

Images and descriptions of 38 manuscript labyrinths  
 from archives.



# A Mysterious Medieval Maiden



Jill K. H. Geoffrion & Alain Pierre Louët

To find a woman's face and neck in the centre of a medieval manuscript labyrinth is most surprising. Yet, on folio 80v of the thirteenth-century manuscript known as Chantilly 0328 she is there, shown from the side.

*The woman in the centre of the labyrinth, Chantilly 0328, fol.80v. Image courtesy of Musée Condé, Chantilly*

Only two other historical labyrinths with women in the centre have been identified. The first is a Roman floor mosaic from the 3<sup>rd</sup>-4<sup>th</sup> century CE found in the Paphos Archaeological Park on Cyprus. Ariadne has been placed in the upper left watching the battle of Theseus and the Minotaur (Kern 2000, 142 & 143).

*Central panel of the mosaic from Paphos. Photo courtesy of Cyprus Museum*

The second is found in a fifteenth century fresco in a church in Sibbo, Finland (Kern #601) where a woman stands with half her body in the entrance to the centre with her arms and head in the bottom half of the eleven-circuit labyrinth's centre.

Other visual elements surrounding the women in these two labyrinths help with the interpretation of their presence. Ariadne's role in the labyrinth myth of the battle between Theseus and the Minotaur is well documented. Kern sheds light on the Sibbo woman, noting that below the fresco "a Jungfrudans," a maiden's dance, is shown. The Cretan-type labyrinth has 11 circuits, and a small female figure is depicted at the centre. She is clearly the maiden around whom the dance is centred." (Kern 2000, p. 281)

*The labyrinth fresco from Sibbo, Finland*

The question of the meaning of this medieval depiction of a pretty woman's head and naked neck in the centre of the labyrinth with her rosy cheeks and orange hair set against a blue background seems to hinge on the question, is she the personification of good or evil? To use labyrinth symbology, is she more of a Theseus or Minotaur figure?



Jill Kimberly Hartwell, Geoffrion and  
Alain Pierre Louët.

"A Mysterious Medieval Maiden."  
Caerdroia 50: 67-69. 2021.

*The examination of an unusual medieval  
manuscript labyrinth and its surprising  
inhabitant.*



# Labyrinth Doorways: Crossing the Threshold



Alain Pierre Louët & Jill K. H. Geoffrion

The threshold that one crosses upon entering and leaving a labyrinth is seldom emphasized in contemporary labyrinth discussions. While the pathway and centre are universally accepted as important components of ancient and modern labyrinth designs, the doorways of labyrinths have recently attracted far less attention than they did historically. When studying ancient labyrinths of all types, including those found on Greek calyxes, as Roman mosaics, in medieval parchment manuscripts from both the East and West, and etched or carved as stone church labyrinths from the same period, it is easy to see that literal and symbolic doorways were respected as integral elements that gave meaning to the whole. In this article we will consider the symbolism of thresholds, the doors and doorways found within labyrinth designs, and ways in which labyrinths can be understood as symbolizing passage. Implications for modern labyrinth discussion and practice will also be considered.



*Gated labyrinth in a Persian  
manuscript, c.1350*

*Photo: courtesy of the  
Berlin State Library - Prussian Cultural  
Heritage; 344, folio 167v*

*Jill K. H. Geoffrion & Alain Pierre Louët.  
"Labyrinth Doorways: Crossing the  
Threshold."*

*Caerdroia 45:11-31, 2016.*

*A consideration of the doorways  
of labyrinths depicted  
in medieval manuscripts.*





*Abstract: A consideration of the centres of labyrinths in medieval manuscripts, including the 10<sup>th</sup> century labyrinth in Orléans BM 16*

## Introduction

Why are Minotaurs found in the centres of medieval manuscript labyrinths? Studies of labyrinths found in these manuscripts exist,<sup>1</sup> but further consideration of the themes emphasized in the labyrinths drawn from the ninth through the thirteenth centuries is needed. While medieval manuscript labyrinths have three essential parts, the doorway, the path, and the centre, in this article we will focus principally on the symbolism represented in the centres of these labyrinths. More specifically, this article will focus on the Minotaurs depicted in the central areas, and the symbolic presence of evil that they represent. It will also introduce a previously unknown manuscript labyrinth from the tenth century that includes a Minotaur figure at its centre.

*Orléans BM 16*, a 10<sup>th</sup> century manuscript from the Benedictine Abbey of Fleury, is found today in the municipal library in the nearby city of Orléans, France. At the very end of the manuscript is a labyrinth whose centre is filled with a triumphant Minotaur eating the arm and leg of its most recent victim. The presence of this malevolent figure was the beginning of our serious study of medieval labyrinth centres. At first glance, the idea of the centre as a place where evil resides seems opposed to the post-Renaissance understanding of the centre of the labyrinth as a place imbued with positivity.<sup>2</sup> As one considers the labyrinths of the ninth through eleventh centuries, Theseus, symbol of all that is good, is absent. He only begins to make cameo appearances in twelfth century manuscripts.

The modern practice of labyrinth walking often presupposes the idea of the centre as a place of rest, peace, and safety. Even if many who study the History of Religions consider the centre as a place of ambivalence, including Mircea Eliade<sup>3</sup> who has written extensively about this, most current labyrinth walkers consider the symbol of the centre as one of positivity. Yet the medieval manuscript labyrinth centres tell a different story. Let us consider these images.

## Labyrinths in Medieval Manuscripts

Forty two known labyrinths exist in medieval manuscripts.<sup>4</sup> The five earliest, drawn in the 8<sup>th</sup> and 9<sup>th</sup> centuries all have seven circuit (classical) designs.<sup>5</sup> In the second half of the 9<sup>th</sup> century, an eleven-circuit quadrant labyrinth prototype<sup>6</sup> and two eleven-circuit labyrinths with sweeping paths and turns on only one axis, often called Otfrid-types exist.<sup>7</sup> Then, in the manuscripts from the 10<sup>th</sup> and 11<sup>th</sup> centuries, one finds five examples of eleven circuit labyrinths with four quadrants framed within a cross design, and a meandering pathway similar to the one later installed in Chartres Cathedral.<sup>8</sup>



*Figure 1: the Labyrinth and Minotaur depicted in Orléans Ms. 16*

2015. "The Beast Within."

Jill K H Geoffrion and Alain Pierre Louët.

Caerdroia 44: 10-23. (pdf). 2015.

*A consideration of the centers of labyrinths  
in medieval manuscripts,  
including the 10th-century labyrinth in Orléans BM 16.*