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Labyrinths in medieval churches: An investigation of form and function

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The University of Arizona, 1992
LABYRINTHS IN MEDIEVAL CHURCHES:
AN INVESTIGATION OF FORM AND FUNCTION

by
DeAnna Dare Evans

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This thesis analyzed the designs of a select group of labyrinths set into the pavements of Gothic churches in northern France. The designs of these labyrinths and their possible meanings and functions were examined. Existing information on the labyrinths, including oral traditions associated with them were considered. A study of earlier medieval church labyrinths and illustrations of labyrinths in medieval manuscripts was made. In addition medieval philosophy and history were considered. The various meanings and functions scholars have proposed for the labyrinths were critically reviewed. It was possible to draw some conclusions as to the labyrinths' original meanings and their functions and to trace the evolution of these meanings and functions during the Middle Ages.
INTRODUCTION

The labyrinth is a widespread motif that has been in existence since prehistoric times. This thesis will focus on the labyrinths of a specific time and place, those set into the pavements of Gothic churches in northern France. The designs of a select group of these labyrinths and their possible meanings and functions will be considered.

DEFINITIONS

One general definition of a labyrinth is "a geometric figure, with a round or rectangular external border, that makes sense only when regarded as an architectural plan, from above." An entrance in the figure's border leads to the center, but a series of twisting and turning paths occupying the entire interior space must be negotiated before it is reached. Eventual understanding of a labyrinth comes if one has access to a diagram of its structure or can physically place oneself above it, thereby gaining an overview of the labyrinth in its entirety. Regardless of whether

a labyrinth is a drawing, engraved or incised on stone, or an actual three-dimensional structure, once one begins traversing the labyrinth, either by following it with the eyes, tracing its path with a finger, or physically entering it, one becomes "lost", unaware of one's location within the overall configuration.

There are two basic labyrinth types. The unicursal type consists of a single winding path leading to the center. There may be many changes of direction, but, if one perseveres the center will be reached. A multicursal labyrinth contains numerous branching paths. This forces the individual attempting to reach the center to decide which way to go and there is no guarantee that the paths selected will lead to the center. Thus, the possibility of never reaching the desired end, and of becoming hopelessly lost, is always present. The multicursal labyrinth is more correctly called a maze, while the unicursal type is a true labyrinth. However, the two terms are often used interchangeably to refer to either of the two types. French Gothic church labyrinths all fall into the category of unicursal labyrinths.
HISTORICAL SURVEY OF LABYRINTHS

Numerous examples of prehistoric labyrinths (dating from approximately 4500 to 2000 B.C.) in the form of spiral configurations, either scratched or carved on rocks, or created by placing stones on the ground, still exist in the Mediterranean area and in northern Europe. According to Bord and Knight, these spirals often functioned as maps of the underworld and were associated with death and resurrection. When placed in close proximity to burial sites they symbolized the return of the dead into the life-giving earth. The death and subsequent resurrection implied by the labyrinth's form could be of a spiritual nature; consequently labyrinths were often used in initiation ceremonies. Once initiates entered a labyrinth, they were effectively separated from the exterior mundane world. After much effort, following a path which often appeared to come close to the center but then drew away, they finally reached their

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2 For illustrations and a brief overview of these labyrinths see Janet Bord, Mazes and Labyrinths of the World (London: Latimer New Dimensions, 1976).


goal, and in a sense, died. In order to exit the labyrinth, initiates were compelled to retrace their steps. The complete turnaround in direction required to emerge from the labyrinth marked a severance from the past and rebirth. The constant changes in direction from left to right and back again in the labyrinth also conveyed the idea of death and resurrection. Shifts to the left symbolized movements against the sun and death. Movements to the right symbolized the live-giving path of the sun. It was believed that initiates had a greater sense of self-awareness and knowledge of the "mysteries" after traversing the labyrinth.\(^5\)

Scholars have also proposed that ancient labyrinths conveyed the idea of exclusion, in the sense that they were difficult to negotiate.\(^6\) Only those who possessed the requisite knowledge and ability could successfully navigate them. It has been suggested that labyrinths were placed near the entrances of buildings as apotropaic devices for this reason.\(^7\) Since evil spirits were capable of traveling only in straight lines, they would be unable to follow the twisting and winding turns of the labyrinths and it would be impossi-

\(^5\) Bord, p. 10.


\(^7\) Bord, p. 11.
ble for them to enter the buildings. During the Roman period, for example, labyrinths in the form of floor mosaics may have been placed in the vestibules of houses in order to protect their inhabitants from malefic forces and death.\textsuperscript{8} Scholars have cited the woven, traced, or scratched "thread mazes" used for protective purposes in Great Britain well into the nineteenth century as evidence that labyrinths could perform an apotropaic function, and maintain that this was a continuation of an ancient practice which survived into more modern times.\textsuperscript{9} Labyrinths placed on tombstones may also have functioned as apotropaic devices, guarding the deceased's soul from the dangers of the afterlife so that it could safely reach paradise.\textsuperscript{10}

Several classical writers mentioned specific ancient


\footnote{10 Daszewski, pp. 95-96.
For example, Herodotus described a labyrinth in Egypt which formed part of a pharaoh's funerary temple complex. Pliny the Elder wrote about a tomb built by an Etruscan general named Lars Porsena in the sixth century B.C. that included an extensive underground labyrinth. Homer described a labyrinth engraved on Achilles' shield in the Iliad.

Virgil wrote about a ritual game performed over a labyrinthine course. This game, known as the Trojan dance, had its origins in Asia Minor. It involved the execution of maze- or labyrinth-like formations by armed men on horseback, and was enacted when the foundations of a town were laid or when the walls of cities were erected. Some scholars believe that such a ritual was intended to reinforce the protective and defensive nature of the walls and strengthen the city against attack. The rite would also "mark" the

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13 Hildburgh, pp. 188-189; Rykwert, p. 127.
community, setting it apart from the outside world.\textsuperscript{14} Since the Trojan dance had a protective function it was often performed at funerals, possibly in order to contain the spirits of the recently deceased and prevent them from harming the living.\textsuperscript{15} This ceremony and others similar to it were common in the Mediterranean region on into Roman times, although it is possible that by this time the dance had lost its apotropaic function and simply become a spectacle or a game.\textsuperscript{16} We do know that in some cases labyrinths were used in games: in his discussion of labyrinths Pliny the Elder mentions mazes in fields upon which children played games.\textsuperscript{17}

The connections in myth and folklore between mazes, labyrinths, and the name Troy perhaps stem from this widespread dance ritual.\textsuperscript{18} According to Knight and Hildburgh, the Troy of Homer's \textit{Iliad} derived its name from the Trojan dance because of the city's strong defenses which were

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{14} Kern, p. 60.
\item \textsuperscript{15} Rykwert, pp. 127, 129.
\item \textsuperscript{16} See John L. Heller, "Labyrinth or Troy Town?" \textit{The Classical Journal}, 42, No. 3 (1946), pp. 123-139 for a discussion of the two traditions.
\item \textsuperscript{17} Matthews, p. 41.
\item \textsuperscript{18} Hildburgh, pp. 189-190; Rykwert, p. 148.
\end{itemize}
complicated and exceedingly difficult for the Greeks to penetrate. Many labyrinths of turf and stone in Britain and Scandinavia were known until a relatively recent date by such names as "The Walls of Troy" and "Troy-town." Kern has proposed that during the Roman period the Trojan dance itself as well as the labyrinth often symbolized the city or town. Numerous Roman floor mosaic labyrinths depict this ritual and also include a representation of a fortified city. These square unicursal labyrinths are always divided into four distinct parts corresponding to the Roman quadratal, the traditional basic form of Roman cities. Kern argues that the city was considered as a microcosm of the world or universe; consequently, the labyrinths could refer to a city, the world and/or the cosmos. Illustrations in medieval manuscripts and post-medieval alchemical treatises demonstrate that the idea of the labyrinth as a model of the world and/or the universe continued on into later

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21 Kern, p. 62.

The labyrinth built by Daedalus in Crete for King Minos was probably the most famous of the ancient labyrinths. It was long considered to have been the earliest of the ancient labyrinths, and the Hall of the Double Axes in the palace at Knossos in Crete was thought to have formed part of the labyrinth. For this reason, some scholars believed that the word labyrinth came from the word \textit{labrys}, which means "double ax." Other scholars have suggested that both words are derived from \textit{lapis}. Consequently, labyrinth would mean "a place of stone" and \textit{labrys} would mean "stone ax."\footnote{See Bord, p. 9, and Knight, "Myth and Legend," pp. 109-112, for a discussion of the relationship between the words \textit{labyrinth} and \textit{labrys}.}

The labyrinth in Crete was constructed to imprison the Minotaur, a half-man half-beast monster. This labyrinth was an important element in the Greek myth of Theseus and the
Minotaur. On one level, the myth is one of resurrection and regeneration. Those who entered the labyrinth faced certain death at the hands of the Minotaur. However, Theseus entered the maze, and was able to kill the Minotaur in the center of the maze, and re-emerge from the labyrinth because of the sword and the ball of red thread provided by Ariadne, the daughter of King Minos. The dance performed by Theseus and his companions on the island of Delos during their return to Athens was a reenactment of his adventure in the labyrinth and celebrated their salvation. This mythical dance was adopted in Greece and spread westward, appearing in various forms throughout Italy and northern Europe.

On another level, the myth illustrates the process of self-discovery. The Minotaur represents the self's dark side, or the unconscious, which must be subdued and harmoni-  


25 Rykwert, p. 151.

26 Graves, p. 342.


28 Centeno, pp. 33-36.
ously integrated with the rest of oneself before one's full potential can be realized. However, it is impossible to achieve this without some assistance or guidance. Ariadne provides the necessary guidance in the myth.

The *Iliad* and the myth of Theseus contain yet another theme: that of the ancient heroical quest. The hero must penetrate labyrinthine devices which function as magical defenses. Upon reaching the protected inner area of the labyrinth he is rewarded with a princess, who symbolizes fertility. For example, Ariadne is the princess in the Theseus myth and Helen functions as her counterpart in the *Iliad*. However, the hero always requires some assistance in order to succeed in his quest, such as a red thread or a Trojan horse.

As mentioned above, the Romans produced numerous floor mosaics in which labyrinths figured prominently as a motif. A representation of the Minotaur or of Theseus fighting the Minotaur often appears in the labyrinths' centers. These mosaics are found throughout the former Roman world, including northern Europe. Presumably, one function of these labyrinths was to illustrate the myth of Theseus, although

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30 Kern, *Labyrinthe*, pp. 112-137, provides illustrations and descriptions of these labyrinths.
it is also possible that such representations were primarily decorative motifs.

In conclusion, it is clear that the ancient labyrinth with its associated rituals and myths was a complicated symbol, not always reducible to a single meaning. Labyrinths possibly functioned as maps of the underworld, symbolizing death and resurrection. They may have been used in initiation ceremonies as a means of increasing self-awareness and gaining knowledge of the "mysteries." Labyrinths were possibly apotropaic devices, protecting individuals or communities. During the Roman period, they may have symbolized the town or the city and/or the cosmos or illustrated the myth of Theseus.

Evidently the labyrinth fell into disuse as a motif during the Early Christian period as there is only a single extant example of labyrinth imagery from this time. A square labyrinth, approximately eight feet wide, was set into the floor of the nave near the entrance of the basilica in Orléansville, Algeria, during the first part of the fourth century. Its configuration closely resembled the typical Roman floor mosaic pattern. The center contained the words SANCTA ECLESIA.\(^3\) The labyrinth's placement near the church's entrance suggests that, in a continuation of a

\(^3\) Matthews, p. 54, fig. 42; Kern, *Labyrinthe*, p. 232.
pagan tradition, it functioned as an apotropaic device. However, in this case the Church was viewed as the institution which protected and guided believers during their earthly existence.

The labyrinth appeared frequently during the Middle Ages.\textsuperscript{32} Diagrams of labyrinths are in Carolingian, Romanesque and Gothic illuminated manuscripts. Several Italian churches, including those of the cathedrals in Cremona, S. Michele Maggiore in Pavia, and S. Savino in Piacenza, all of which date from the first half of the twelfth century, incorporate labyrinths in their overall configurations. Most of these labyrinths are relatively small (the largest measures about twelve feet in diameter) and are placed on walls or floors at or near the entrances to the churches, again suggesting that they functioned at least partially as apotropaic devices.

The configurations of these medieval labyrinths differ from the traditional Roman type. Roman labyrinths are square and divided into four distinct sections. The path to the center moves completely through one quarter before proceeding to the next one. In contrast, medieval labyrinths do have a four-part division, but it is not as obvious. In

\textsuperscript{32} See Kern, Labyrinthe, pp. 144-204, for descriptions and illustrations of labyrinths in medieval manuscripts, and pp. 206-241 for labyrinths in churches.
addition, they are more often circular or octagonal and the path to the center moves back and forth between the four sections of the labyrinth.

Large labyrinths were set into the floors of many Gothic churches in northern France and are the main subject of this investigation. Few Gothic churches outside France possessed labyrinths. However, turf mazes were constructed in Great Britain during the Middle Ages. And there are numerous examples in Scandinavian countries of labyrinths made of stones placed on the ground.\(^{33}\)

**DESCRIPTIONS OF FRENCH GOTHIC CHURCH LABYRINTHS**

The labyrinths in Gothic churches of northern France differ markedly from their earlier medieval predecessors in

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that they are generally much larger in size and consequently occupy a more prominent position within the churches where they are present. The labyrinths which form the subject of this thesis are listed and described in a rough chronological order which, at present, is insecure because the scanty evidence which currently exists makes it impossible to firmly date many of them. Most scholars in their discussion of the labyrinths have not even mentioned possible dates for them, beyond stating that they came from the Gothic period or date from the twelfth and/or thirteenth centuries. For the most part, suggestions as to the labyrinths' dates are derived from the churches' construction chronologies, and are based on the assumption that the labyrinths were placed in the churches during their construction or shortly thereafter.

**Sens.** The earliest known French Gothic church labyrinth was probably the one in the cathedral of Sens.  

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34 For a general overview of these labyrinths see Kern, *Labyrinthe*, pp. 206-241, and Matthews, pp. 54-70.

35 While the labyrinth at Sens is often included in lists of French Gothic church labyrinths or mentioned in general surveys of church labyrinths, very little has actually been written about it. Kern, *Labyrinthe*, p. 240 (ill. on p. 241), provides the most information on the labyrinth. Very brief notices, usually consisting only of a single sentence are in Xavier Barral I. Altet, "Les Mosaiques du pavement médiévales de la ville de Reims," *Congrès Archéologique de France*, 135 (1977), p. 98; Bord, p. 96, fig. 149; Marcel Joseph Bulteau, *Monographie de la cathédrale de*
Approximately thirty feet in diameter, the circular labyrinth in the nave was composed of eleven bands of lines incised in the pavement and filled with lead. The bands were arranged in such a manner that the circle was divided into four parts. The labyrinth probably dates from the second half of the twelfth century. It was destroyed


in 1768 or 1769 when the church's floor was repaved.  

Arras. The labyrinth in the nave of the cathedral at Arras was octagonal and slightly over thirty-four feet in diameter. It consisted of nine alternating bands each of yellow and blue stones with an octagonal slab in the center. It was destroyed at some point during the period of the French Revolution. The labyrinth most likely dates from

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37 Tarbe, p. 440, stated that the labyrinth was destroyed in 1768. According to Kern, *Labyrinthe*, p. 240, clerics destroyed the labyrinth in 1768 because of the noise made by children playing on it. The floor was repaved in 1769. Matthews, p. 61, wrote that the labyrinth was destroyed in 1769.

38 As is the case with the labyrinth at Sens, little has been written about the labyrinth at Arras; indeed, less has been written about this labyrinth than any of the others. Kern, *Labyrinthe*, p. 221, provides the most information. Very brief notices, usually consisting only of a single sentence, are in Barral I. Altet, p. 98; Cabrol and Leclercq, p. 980; L. Deschamps de Pas, "Essai sur le pavage des églises antérieurement au quinzième siècle," *Annales Archéologiques*, 12 (1852), p. 148; Lasteyrie, p. 248; Matthews, pp. 61-62; Louis Paris, "Notice sur le dédale ou labyrinthe de l’église de Reims," *Bulletin Monumental*, 22 (1856), pp. 542-543; Reusens, p. 196; Santarcangeli, p. 294; Trollope, p. 220; Villette, p. 5; M. Wallet, "Labyrinthe de Saint-Bertin," *Bulletin Monumental*, 13 (1847), p. 200. There are no illustrations of this labyrinth.

the late twelfth or early thirteenth century.40

Chartres. This labyrinth near the middle of the nave in the cathedral at Chartres measures forty feet in diameter.41 It is circular, constructed of eleven rings of

40 Kern, Labyrinthe, p. 221, believed that the labyrinth dates from the late twelfth century, based on the cathedral's construction chronology. Cabrol and Leclercq, col. 980, assign a date of the thirteenth century to the labyrinth.

lighter stones forming the labyrinth's path, which are separated by bands of darker stones. Its overall configuration closely resembles that of the labyrinth at Sens: the construction of the path to the center is nearly identical and the labyrinth is also divided into four basic parts. A six-petaled rosette occupies the labyrinth's center. A copper plate in the middle of this rosette was removed in the early nineteenth century and has since disappeared. The labyrinth probably dates from the early thirteenth century. 42

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42 Cabrol and Leclercq, p. 979, stated that the labyrinth dates from the twelfth century. Bord, pp. 91-92, believed that the drawing of a labyrinth which resembles the labyrinth at Chartres in Villard de Honnecourt's sketchbook, completed around 1235, was based on the labyrinth at Chartres and assigned it a date in the early thirteenth century. Kern, Labyrinthe, p. 226, and Villette, "L'Énigme,"
Auxerre. Little is known of the physical appearance of this labyrinth, originally in the nave of the cathedral, save that it was circular, and was said to have resembled the labyrinths at Chartres and Sens. It was destroyed around 1690. The date of this labyrinth remains uncertain; some scholars have assigned it a date of the twelfth or the

p. 12, also dated the labyrinth to the early thirteenth century based on the cathedral's construction chronology. Kern also cited the sketch in De Honnecourt's sketchbook as further evidence of the validity of this date. The construction chronology in Kimpel and Suckale, p. 513, also indicates a date of the early thirteenth century. James, The Contractors, II, p. 369, n. 2, assigned a date of 1200.


44 Kern, Labyrinthe, p. 221, and Matthews, p. 61.
first part of the thirteenth century.  

**St. Quentin.** The labyrinth in the parish church at St. Quentin is a little over thirty-four feet in diameter. It is an octagon composed of eleven bands of white stones separated by bands of black stones. Again, a division into four parts is implied by the arrangement of the path to the center. It was probably placed in the nave of the church in the early thirteenth century.

**Amiens.** This octagonal labyrinth of black and white stones in the cathedral at Amiens measures forty-two feet in diameter.

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45 Cabrol and Leclercq, p. 979, assigned this labyrinth a date of the twelfth century. Kern, Labyrinthe, p. 211, speculated that the labyrinth may date from the thirteenth century. The building chronology in Kimpel and Suckale, p. 504, suggests a date of the early thirteenth century.


47 Cabrol and Leclercq, p. 980. Kern, Labyrinthe, p. 239, also proposed this date based on the building history of the church. The chronology in Kimpel and Suckale, p. 538, also supports this date.
diameter and occupies the fourth and fifth bays of the nave.\textsuperscript{48} Its structure resembles that of the labyrinth at St. Quentin. The labyrinth currently in place in the cathedral is a late nineteenth-century reconstruction based largely on drawings and written descriptions of the original labyrinth, which was destroyed in 1824 or 1825 by ecclesiastics, annoyed at the adults and children who traversed

it or played on it during services. Only the badly worn octagonal gray marble center stone, now in the museum in Amiens, was preserved. The facsimile of the original stone in place in the cathedral contains an equal-armed cross. Four angels are placed at the top of each of the arms of the cross. The figures of Evrard, who was bishop when construction on the cathedral began, and three of the principle architects, Robert de Luzarches, Thomas de Cormont and his son Renaud, each holding an attribute of his profession, are set between the arms. An inscription briefly describing the building history of the cathedral runs around the outer edges of the stone. The text states that Renaud placed the inscription on the church floor in 1288. Therefore, most scholars have accepted a date of around 1288 for this labyrinth.

49 Caumont, p. 512, stated that it was destroyed in 1824. According to Matthews, p. 61, Cabrol and Leclercq, p. 980, and Herbault, p. 224, the labyrinth was destroyed in 1825.

50 This text was first transcribed at the beginning of the fourteenth century. See Erlande-Brandenburg, p. 259. For a transcription of the inscription see Santarcangeli, p. 294.

51 See Marcel Aubert, Gothic Cathedrals in France and Their Treasures (London: Nicholas Kaye, 1959), p. 74; Matthews, p. 60; Kern, Labyrinthe, p. 220; Santarcangeli, p. 294; Kimpel and Suckale, p. 503. A date of sometime in the thirteenth century is proposed by Bord, p. 93, and James, Chartres: The Masons who Built a Legend, p. 130.
Reims. The labyrinth in the cathedral at Reims was destroyed in 1778 or 1779, because, like the labyrinths at Amiens and possibly Sens, it disrupted church services. However, we have knowledge of its configuration from a

sixteenth-century drawing. The labyrinth was constructed of blue or black and white stones and was set in the third and fourth bays of the nave closest to the entrance. Its shape was octagonal, divided into four parts, with four smaller semi-octagons placed at the corners. Figures, representing some of the architects who worked on the cathedral, occupied the centers of each of these semi-octagons. A larger figure was in the center of the labyrinth. Inscriptions referring to the architects in the semi-octagons and indicating the parts of the cathedral for which they were responsible also formed part of the labyrinth. The earliest transcription of these inscriptions dates from the seventeenth century. By this time they were badly worn; hence the transcriptions are incomplete. We have no record of any inscription which may have accompanied the central figure, although most scholars have argued that it was either a representation of Aubert de Humbert, who was the bishop at Reims when construction of the cathedral began, or another master builder. Two small figures were placed outside the labyrinth, near its entrance. We do not know whether there


See Demaison, "Les Architectes," pp. 17-20, for both this transcription and another one made in the eighteenth century.
were any inscriptions for these figures; consequently, their identity and function is unknown. Some scholars believe that this labyrinth was constructed around 1240. However, other scholars assign a more likely date of 1290 or thereabouts to the labyrinth, based on the cathedral's construction chronology—or what they accept as its construction chronology, since its building history remains a matter of debate among art historians.

St. Bertin. The labyrinth in the abbey church of St. Bertin in St. Omer was destroyed in the late eighteenth century, again because it apparently disrupted services.

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55 The identities of the labyrinth's figures have been greatly debated among art historians because it has not been possible to conclusively match the individual figures to names mentioned in the inscription. See for example, "Séance du 19 mai," pp. 196-202; Aubert, "Les Architectes," pp. 123-125, and Branner, pp. 18-25.

56 Caumont, p. 510; Matthews, p. 60; Santarcangeli, p. 294; Trollope, p. 221.

57 Barral I. Altet, p. 97; Demaison, "Les Architectes," p. 22; Demaison, "Séance du 10 décembre," p. 238; Lambert, p. 273; Saint-Paul, p. 299. Kern, Labyrinthe, p. 237 assigned a date of sometime in the late thirteenth century. Ravaux, p. 54, wrote that the major portions of the cathedral were completed around 1275, which would also support a date of the later thirteenth century for the labyrinth.

58 Wallet, p. 199. For additional information see Barral I. Altet, p. 98; Bord, p. 95 (includes ill.); Cabrol and Leclercq, p. 980; Caumont, pp. 511-512 (includes ill.); Deschamps de Pas, p. 150; Enlart, p. 814, n. 5; Kern, Labyrinthe, pp. 238-239 (includes ill.); Lasteyrie, L'Architecte-
However, both a written description and a drawing of the labyrinth from the eighteenth century have survived. The square shape of this labyrinth, constructed of yellow and black or blue stone cubes was rather unusual, as was the distinct cross shape placed above its center. With the exception of Amiens with its cross in the center stone, none of the other French Gothic church labyrinths of which we have knowledge contained overt Christian motifs. Its placement in one of the transepts near the principle side door also distinguished it from the other labyrinths. It is likely that the labyrinth was placed on the floor of the church around the middle or the end of the fourteenth century, since construction on the church in which it is located probably did not begin until the second quarter of that century.

Bayeux. Unlike the other French Gothic labyrinths discussed here, this badly worn labyrinth is not in a church

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59 See Matthews, p. 63; Paris, p. 543; and Trollope, p. 225, for information on this document.

60 Saint-Paul, p. 322, dated the labyrinth to the middle fourteenth century. Kern, Labyrinthe, p. 239, assigned a date of the late fourteenth century.
or cathedral but on the floor of the cathedral's chapter house.\textsuperscript{61} (Plate VII) It is much smaller than the cathedral labyrinths, measuring only twelve feet in diameter. It consists of ten circular bands of enameled tiles decorated with shields, griffins and fleur-de-lis, separated by smaller bands of black tiles. The path formed by the bands is arranged so that the labyrinth is divided into four parts. A date of the late fourteenth century has been proposed for the labyrinth, based in large part on the presence of a mosaic brick pavement next to it which dates from this period.\textsuperscript{62}

In sum, one can detect changes over time in the form and placement of French Gothic church labyrinths. The earliest of these labyrinths, those at Sens, Chartres, and possibly Auxerre, resembled the types of labyrinths seen in earlier medieval illuminated manuscripts and Italian church-

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\textsuperscript{62} Kern, \textit{Labyrinthe}, p. 222; Villers, p. 86.
es, consisting of a circular form, composed of eleven bands, and containing a four-part division, with the path to the center moving back and forth between these four parts. What sets most of the French labyrinths apart from their earlier medieval predecessors in churches is their much greater size and their location in the naves.

The labyrinths at Arras, St. Quentin, Amiens and Reims were all octagonal rather than circular. With the exception of the labyrinth at Arras, which was possibly contemporary with the labyrinth at Chartres, these labyrinths were constructed at a later date, and so perhaps represent a later development in labyrinth configurations.

Significantly, the most recent labyrinths, those of St. Bertin and Bayeux, show the greatest deviations in terms of their shape and location. The labyrinth in St. Bertin was unusual because of its square shape and the prominent placement of a cross within the overall labyrinth design. The labyrinth at Bayeux is circular, but is much smaller than the other French Gothic church labyrinths. The locations of these labyrinths—the one in St. Bertin was in one of the transepts, and that of Bayeux in the chapter house—are also different and represent a shift away from the earlier placement of labyrinths in the naves of churches. This may indicate that the labyrinth became a less important element in later Gothic churches, or that its meaning and function
MEANINGS AND FUNCTIONS OF THE CHURCH LABYRINTHS

The scholarly effort to document and understand the labyrinths in French Gothic churches began in the nineteenth century and was part of the systematic effort sponsored by the government to record the patrimony of France. An understanding of the labyrinths' original meaning and purpose has been difficult to determine due to the fact that no known medieval documents specifically mention them. Historians have, for the most part, attempted to explain the labyrinths by relying on oral traditions, many of which were not recorded until the nineteenth century. It is difficult to determine whether these traditions are based on actual medieval practice and belief, or reflect those of later periods. However, the oral traditions associated with the labyrinths as well as their physical configurations must be considered. An examination of earlier medieval church labyrinths and illustrations of labyrinths in medieval manu-

63 This does not mean that there is no extant medieval documentation for these labyrinths. Many French cities and towns possess large quantities of medieval documents which have not yet been thoroughly examined. It is possible that some of these documents mention the labyrinths.
scripts, as well as a review of medieval philosophy and history, is necessary. The use of such sources will provide a greater understanding of the possible meanings and functions of the labyrinths.

With this in mind, what follows is a critical review of the various meanings and functions scholars have proposed for the labyrinths. This review will consider the sources traditionally cited by art historians, as well as additional evidence from the other sources cited.

Decorative motifs

Jean Adhémar, who studied the antique "influences" in medieval art, believed that the Middle Ages simply appropriated the labyrinth for use as a visual decorative motif with no understanding of its original antique meaning.\(^\text{64}\) He argued that no writers of the medieval period mention the church labyrinths, that there is no overt Christian imagery attached to these labyrinths, and that there are no labyrinths in Early Christian art. Any Christian meanings possessed by the labyrinths were assigned after the Middle Ages. Adhémar proposed that Gothic French church labyrinths

were adapted from the numerous Roman mosaic floor labyrinths which still survived in medieval France during a period when there was a revival of interest in classical antiquity, the twelfth and thirteenth centuries. The abstract nonrepresentational nature of the Roman labyrinths allowed them to be more easily modified for medieval use because they were not overtly pagan in their imagery. However, as noted above, French Gothic church labyrinths do not exactly correspond in their structure to the square Roman labyrinths with their strict quadrantimensional division. Instead, they more closely resemble the labyrinth types seen in earlier church labyrinths in Italy and illuminated manuscripts.\(^65\) The occurrence of the labyrinth in medieval illuminated manuscripts and the existence of medieval labyrinths in turf and stone indicates that a visual tradition of labyrinths, to which certain meanings were surely attached, existed before the Gothic period, and that Gothic French church labyrinths continued this earlier medieval tradition.

Panofsky and Saxl demonstrated that the Middle Ages was

\(^{65}\) For manuscript illustrations see for example the labyrinths in the Rabanus manuscript from Montecassino of 1023 or the labyrinth in Lambert's Liber Floridus of 1120, both illustrated in Fritz Saxl, "Illustrated Medieval Encyclopedias," In Lectures (London: Warburg Institute, 1957), I, plates 165a-165b. An earlier illustration of this labyrinth type is in a ninth-century manuscript from Saint Gall. See Heller, pp. 124-125.
interested in classical myths, which despite their non-Christian nature, were viewed as prototypes of biblical events, possessing moral truths. In the early fifth century Macrobius wrote that it was acceptable to use classical myths if a moral lesson could be drawn from them. Consequently, the Middle Ages moralized myths to illustrate Christian doctrine and presented them as allegories. One example of this process is the Ovide moralisé, a collection of classical myths and some of the writings of Ovid, given Christian interpretations.

Some earlier church labyrinths in Italy, including those in the cathedral at Lucca, and San Michele in Pavia, included references to or illustrations of the Theseus myth. In addition, documentation exists indicating that the miss-


68 See Lester K. Born, "Ovid and Allegory," Speculum, 9, No. 4 (1934), pp. 362-373, for an overview of the use of Ovid in medieval allegory. See the section of this thesis entitled The path to salvation for a fuller discussion on the Ovide moralisé as it relates to labyrinths.
ing central plaque of the labyrinth at Chartres contained a representation of the Theseus myth. So what emerges from the work of Panofsky and Saxl is the probability that French Gothic church labyrinths referred visually to a classical myth, that of Theseus, and were more than mere decorative designs. These labyrinths accordingly belonged to a tradition which, although christianized, had its roots in classical antiquity.

Apotropaic devices

Other scholars suggested that French Gothic church labyrinths functioned as apotropaic devices. Schnapper, Kern and Bord based this interpretation in large part on the possible use of ancient labyrinths as protective devices. The placement of many of these labyrinths near the entrances of churches, ostensibly to protect the churches, is cited as proof of their apotropaic function.

Hildburgh and Bord suggested an additional apotropaic

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69 See James, The Traveler's Key, pp. 76-77.


71 See the section in this thesis called Historical survey of labyrinths for a fuller discussion of this idea.
use of the labyrinths. They believed that while the labyrinths protected churches from evil, they may have also been used to protect individuals as well, who would have ritually traversed the labyrinths in order to protect themselves against misfortune or evil. Hildburgh and Bord based this assumption on the use of ancient labyrinths in protective ceremonies, which they believed continued into the Middle Ages.

However, no known documentation from the period exists to support assertions that the church labyrinths functioned to protect either buildings or individuals. In addition, while the labyrinths were most often placed in the nave, relatively close to church entrances, it seems that if they were intended to ward evil spirits away from the churches, they would have been placed directly outside or at the churches' entrances (as is often the case with the labyrinths of Italian churches). So, based on existing evidence, this proposal does not satisfactorily explain French Gothic church labyrinths.

**Symbols of sin and error**

The circuitous configurations of the labyrinths led

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some scholars, including Matthews and Bord in their general studies, to suggest that labyrinths may have functioned in part as a symbol of sin, which entrapped and entangled the unwary.  

Some illustrations of labyrinths in medieval manuscripts do appear to convey this meaning since the texts they illustrate are works on heresy. In her discussion of these illustrations, Doob argued that they served as visual representations of erroneous, sinful beliefs. Those who held these beliefs were entangled, unable to find salvation.  

The association of labyrinths with heretical beliefs or doctrines began in the Early Christian period. For Ambrose, the multicursal labyrinth symbolized sin. In a discussion of Psalms 119:59 ["I thought on my ways and turned my feet unto thy testimonies."], he wrote of those who do not follow God's commandments, but deliberately "follow some shortcut. Leaving the public road, they often

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73 Matthews, p. 67, and Bord, p. 14. Santarcangeli, p. 282, suggests this as a possible function of the labyrinths, although he believes that they most likely symbolized life's complications and difficulties which the Christian must overcome in order to achieve salvation.

74 See Doob, p. 139, for a discussion of these illustrations.

run into labyrinths of error and are punished for having
left the road, until after much labor they try to find the
path they had left."

Augustine did not specifically mention mazes or laby-
rinths. However, the image that comes to mind when reading
his writings in which he attempted to demonstrate the errors
of pagan philosophy is precisely that of the maze or laby-
rinth. Christians follow "the straight path of sound doc-
trine" rather than the "circuitous paths discovered by
deceiving and deceived sages." Those who believe in wrong
doctrines are "entangled in these circles" and "they find
neither entrance nor egress...since they cannot penetrate
the inscrutable wisdom of God.""

In an article on labyrinths, Kern mentioned that,
during the Middle Ages, the number eleven symbolized sin or
imperfection. Many of the French Gothic church labyrinths
(those at Sens, Chartres, St. Quentin, Amiens, Reims, and
possibly Auxerre) have or did have eleven bands or circles.

76 Doob, p. 75, discussing Ambrose's *Expositio Psalmi.*

77 Doob, p. 81, discussing Augustine's *De Civitae Dei,*
12.13/15.

78 Kern, "Labyrinths," p. 62, cites *Patrologia Latina,*
vol. 125, sp. 351 ff., as proof for the existence of this
medieval belief.
So it is possible that these labyrinths were visual representations of sin and warned Christians against heretical beliefs.

However, it is questionable whether all medieval labyrinths would have functioned in a negative sense merely as symbols of sin or error—especially those in churches, given their prominent location. No multicursal labyrinths appear in medieval art; unicursal labyrinths are always used even when the intent appears to be to illustrate mazes, as is the case with some of the illustrations of labyrinths in medieval manuscripts. It appears that two traditions existed in regards to labyrinth meanings, one literary, in which labyrinths more often had negative connotations, and the other visual, where they took on different, and as we shall see, more positive meanings.

The path to salvation

Another proposal which was first presented in the mid-nineteenth century and has since been accepted by many later scholars is that French Gothic church labyrinths symbolized the path to salvation, which, although fraught with complications and difficulties, must be successfully negotiated by Christians in order to achieve salvation and
gain admittance to Paradise. The labyrinths referred back to the pagan myth of Theseus and the Minotaurs, which was moralized and given a Christian interpretation by the Church. Just as Theseus, without the guidance of Ariadne's thread, would have been entangled in the labyrinth at Crete, hopelessly lost, facing certain death, so Christians would become entrapped and lost in this world, unable to attain salvation, without the divine grace extended by Christ. This grace was the thread by means of which the faithful negotiated their way through a sinful, perilous world, ultimately triumphed over evil, and reached Paradise, symbolized by the defeat of the Minotaur in the myth and by reaching the centers of the church labyrinths.

A related suggestion, posited by Villette for the labyrinth at Chartres, is that the labyrinth was a "key" to

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80 J. Durand, p. 125.
the overall architectural construction of the cathedral. Villette believed that during the Gothic period cathedrals were viewed as earthly representations of the celestial Jerusalem or Paradise, and that they also functioned as symbolic reminders of the earthly Church's authority. By virtue of its physical location the labyrinth is a simplified abstracted blueprint, revealing the basic structure and proportions of the cathedral. The labyrinth's location in the nave divides the nave's seven bays into two sections, one consisting of four bays, the other of three. Divisions into three or four or multiples thereof, are repeated throughout the cathedral. For example, the choir consists of four bays and each transept is composed of three bays. Three large chapels and four smaller ones surround the choir. Each of the three rose windows are divided into twelve parts. Consequently, Villette argued that the labyrinth, in its role as the key to the cathedral's structure, implied that the means of reaching Paradise was through the Church's guidance.

John James also believed that the labyrinth was an important key to understanding the cathedral's structure.

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Based on an analysis of the cathedral which involved a careful measurement of its parts, he argued that the cathedral is centered around a simple geometric figure—a large diamond bordered by two smaller diamonds—and that all the cathedral's component parts are mathematically related to this figure. The points of the large diamond are marked by the labyrinth and the main altar. The labyrinth functioned as a symbol of the path to salvation and the altar was the focal point of the cathedral, where the most important Christian rite—that of the Eucharist, reenacting Christ's sacrifice which made salvation possible—was celebrated. According to this analysis, the labyrinth not only functions in and of itself as a symbol of the path to salvation but is a vital component of the cathedral which, by virtue of its configuration, physically embodies and manifests the concept of salvation.

Expressions such as "maison Dedalus" and "dédale" used to refer to the labyrinths at Chartres and Reims, were surely intended to recall the original labyrinth at Crete and the myth of Theseus. Presumably, a connection was made between this myth and its christianized meaning. However, we do not know when these expressions were first applied to the labyrinths. In the case of Reims, the earliest solid date in existence for the use of this term comes from the inscription accompanying a drawing of the labyrinth by Jacques
Cellier from the late sixteenth century which referred to the labyrinth as "le dedalus." 83

In some instances the labyrinth's center was called "ciel." 84 Usage of such a term may have been intended to refer to the heavenly Jerusalem or Paradise which Christians reached on their deaths. 85 The expression "chemin de Jérusalem" given to many of the labyrinths may have signified that the labyrinth symbolized the Christian's path to the celestial Jerusalem. 86 It must be kept in mind that we do not know if this term was employed during the Middle Ages. The earliest written evidence that exists for this expression being applied to labyrinths dates from the eighteenth cen-


84 Critchlow, Carroll, and Lee, p. 12; Trollope, p. 225; Matthews, p. 60.

85 Trollope, p. 225; Cabrol and Leclercq, p. 973.

86 According to Cerf, p. 78, this was a general name given to all the French Gothic church labyrinths. See also Deschamps de Pas, p. 147; Soyez, p. 19; Bulteau, p. 51; Matthews, p. 67; Bord, p. 14. For the term as applied specifically to Chartres see Matthews, p. 60; Villette, "L'Énigme," p. 7; Demary, p. 23, n. 4. Santarcangeli, p. 292, states that this was a later name given to the labyrinth, but does not provide any dates. For this expression as applied to Reims see "Labyrinthe de la cathédrale de Reims," p. 112; Viollet-le-Duc, p. 152; Paris, p. 549; Demaison, "Séance du 10 décembre," p. 244.
ry, when a drawing was made of the labyrinth of St. Bertin in St. Omer which included the inscription "Entrée du chemin de Jérusalem, autrefois marqué sur le carreau de l'église de St. Bertin."  

All of these terms, while different, appear to ultimately possess similar symbolic meanings, all of which relate the labyrinths in some manner to the celestial Jerusalem.

It is possible that the labyrinth was not only a visual symbol of the way to salvation but that certain rituals were performed to symbolically enact this idea. For example, some scholars had the notion that the labyrinths were traversed on the knees as a symbolic acting out of the earthly life and the trials which accompany it. By reaching the center, Christians in effect reached heaven and affirmed their salvation. However, it must be emphasized that no concrete proof exists to support this notion.

Only one labyrinth has been extensively analyzed with these ideas in mind, that of the labyrinth at Chartres. John James examined the labyrinth's physical structure and noted that if one includes the center of the labyrinth along with

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87 Verbrugge, p. 83; Villette, "L'Énigme," p. 9

88 Cabrol and Leclercq, p. 973; Cowen, p. 98.
its eleven concentric bands, there are twelve parts. James believed that the labyrinth contains references to the twelve signs of the zodiac and played an important role as a type of spiritual pathway for pilgrims. According to this scheme, on entering the labyrinth pilgrims turned to the left and entered directly into the realm of Scorpio where they gained a sense of their individuality. This is also the point at which they made the choice between life and death. In Christian terms, this meant that one would choose between Christ or Satan. The pilgrims continued moving left and entered Libra, an area that emphasized the importance of self-awareness. Pilgrims needed self-awareness in order to understand the higher and more complicated meanings present further on into the labyrinth. They then moved to the inner rings which represented zodiacal signs symbolizing the universe's creation. Pilgrims armed with this knowledge returned to the area of Libra, to regain a sense of themselves as individuals. They then passed through the outer rings on the opposite side of this area and afterwards returned to the sphere of Libra for the third time. At this point, pilgrims lost their individual egos. In a cleansed state, they finally entered the area of Virgo, symbolizing

89 See James, *The Traveler's Key*, pp. 74-77, of which the following paragraphs are a summary.
the creation of humanity. By this means they finally gained access to the labyrinth's center, the area of Aries, regained their sense of individuality, and were symbolically reborn into Paradise.

The missing central plaque, which James believed depicted Theseus, the Minotaur and Ariadne, represented an individual's path here on earth back to God. Theseus was the pilgrim, the Minotaur the pilgrim's sinful nature, and Ariadne the Virgin Mary. By following the labyrinth's path, pilgrims symbolically searched out and destroyed their sinful natures, guided by the Virgin, who also led them back out of the labyrinth. Completion of the labyrinth's course demonstrated the worthiness of pilgrims to proceed further on into the cathedral. So the labyrinth functioned as a means of purification and as a mechanism illustrating the steps one must take in this life to reach God.

While his analysis is intriguing, James offered no evidence to support his assertions. One wonders how much of his interpretation is derived from certain contemporary philosophical and religious beliefs, which he applied to a medieval monument. Perhaps either for this reason, or because of the relatively recent date of his speculations, published in 1986, no other scholars have commented on this aspect of his work on the labyrinth at Chartres.

However, most historians have accepted the tradition
mentioned by James, based on a statement of Charles Challine in his *Recherches de Chartres*, written in the seventeenth century, that the plaque in the labyrinth's center contained a representation of Theseus and the Minotaur. Writing in the mid-eighteenth century, Janvier de Flainville cited a manuscript from Courtois (date unknown) which mentioned such an illustration, although Janvier wrote that when he went to Chartres and saw the labyrinth the engraving was too worn to make out the figures. If the labyrinth's center did contain this representation, it probably referred to the Christianized version of the Theseus myth.

Bulteau mentioned a paving stone in front of the labyrinth's entrance which contains a circular imprint. Evidently a metal ring was at one point set into this stone. Bulteau also stated that a red Maltese cross was painted on the vault, directly above the paving stone. This cross disappeared in 1960, when restorative work was performed on the nave's vaults. Fresson proposed that the ring referred

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92 Bulteau, p. 54.
to Ariadne's thread. In support of this assertion, he cited a sixteenth-century Italian painting in the Louvre which depicts the combat of Theseus and the Minotaur. Ariadne is seated at the entrance to the labyrinth. A metal ring, to which the guiding thread she furnished Theseus was presumably attached, is set into the labyrinth's entrance. Fresson argued that the metal ring placed in front of the labyrinth at Chartres acted as a reference to Ariadne, who in turn symbolized the Church, whose guidance permitted believers to achieve salvation. The cross painted on the ceiling above the metal ring also symbolized the Church. Consequently, according to Fresson, the ring and cross reinforced the idea of the labyrinth as a symbol of the way to salvation, reached by following the Church's guidance.

Although some of the specific details of these analyses of the labyrinth at Chartres are open to debate, they all share the same idea: the labyrinth at Chartres functioned as

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93 Fresson, pp. 16-18.

94 Labyrinths may have functioned at a later date (no earlier than the late thirteenth century) as devices commemorating a pilgrimage to Jerusalem or the Crusades. Since the Maltese cross was adopted by the crusaders it is possible that it was placed on a ceiling at a later date as well, if a connection between labyrinths and the Crusades did indeed exist. See the section of thesis called Substitute pilgrimages or penitential devices for a discussion of this possibility.
a symbol of the path to salvation, with its corresponding difficulties and complications, and also of the guiding forces which allowed Christians to negotiate this path and reach Paradise.

Evidence does exist from other sources to support the proposal that French Gothic church labyrinths possessed this meaning. The Ovide moralisé, consisting of writings by Ovid, as well as additional classical myths, all of which were given Christian interpretations, included the myth of Theseus. This work was very popular during the latter part of the Middle Ages. Theseus' traversal of the labyrinth at Crete was compared to the path of the soul through this life. Without the guiding thread of Ariadne, or, in a Christian context, Christ's grace, one would become hopelessly entangled in this sinful world and unable to attain salvation.95

Another passage in the Ovide moralisé recounts how Daedalus, who along with his son Icarus was imprisoned by King Minos in the labyrinth on Crete, escaped by fashioning wings and flying out of the labyrinth. A parallel is drawn

between the actions of Daedalus and Christians. If they wish to ascend to heaven and escape their earthly existence, an intense desire and the love of God is necessary. This desire and love will act as guiding threads, leading them out of the maze of this world and into heaven.⁹⁶

A Latin inscription in the museum of Lyons from a late medieval gravestone whose exact date is not known also indicates that the labyrinth at one time was a motif symbolizing the means of successfully overcoming the complications and difficulties encountered in this world and achieving salvation. The text of the inscription compares the course of a Christian's life to a labyrinth:

Hoc speculo, speculo legens quod sis moriturus;
quod cinis immo lutum quod vermitus esca futurus;
sed ta men ut semper vivas, male vivere vita;
XPM queso roga, sit ut in XPO mea vita;
me caput april, ex hoc Laberinto;
prebitum, doceo versu ma funera qnto Stephanus, fecit oc."

[Look on this mirror. In reading it, you will see that you must die, that you are dust, or rather mud, and that you will become food for worms. However, in order to have eternal life, avoid living in evil. Pray to Christ, I ask you, so that I may live in Christ. The beginning of April drew me from this labyrinth. I announce by the fifth verse my funer-

⁹⁶ Ovide moralisé, lines 1579-1708, 1767-1928. See also "Symbolisme des labyrinthes," Annales Archéologiques, 14 (1854), pp. 268-269, for a summary of this portion of the Ovide moralisé in relation to labyrinth symbolism.
al ceremonies. Stephen made this."

Earlier pre-Gothic church labyrinths also appear to have conveyed similar ideas. For example, the late twelfth or early thirteenth century labyrinth on a wall of the porch of the cathedral at Lucca had the following inscription:

"Hic quem Creticus edit Dedalus est Labyrinthus
De quo nullus vadere quivis qui fuit intus
Ni Theseus gratis Arianae stamine jutus."

[This is the labyrinth built by Daedalus. Once inside none could escape save Theseus, thanks to Ariadne's thread.]

By virtue of its placement this labyrinth and its accompanying inscription would presumably inspire a Christian interpretation of the classical myth. A labyrinth dating from the first half of the twelfth century at San Michele in Pavia depicts Theseus in combat with a centaur (centaurs were sometimes mistakenly substituted for the Minotaur in representations of the Theseus myth during the Middle Ages) in its center, along with the accompanying inscription: "Theseus intravit monstrumque biforme nacavit."

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97 This inscription is from J. Durand, pp. 126-127. It is also discussed by Trollope, p. 226; Matthews, p. 68; Santarcangeli, p. 283; Kern, Labyrinthe, p. 212.

98 This inscription is from Bulteau, p. 51.

99 Soyez, p. 13; Bulteau, p. 51, and Demaison, "Séance du 10 décembre," p. 244, all cite the labyrinth at Lucca in support of this interpretation of medieval labyrinths.
[Theseus entered and killed the monster.] This labyrinth and its inscription functioned as a metaphor of the Christian's ultimate triumph over evil and admittance into Paradise after death.\textsuperscript{100}

Additional proof that this interpretation did exist at this time appears in medieval manuscripts. For example, an eleventh- or twelfth-century manuscript now in Munich (Ms. 6394, fol. 164) includes a diagram of a labyrinth which accompanies verses comparing the world to a labyrinth where Christians are in danger from the Minotaur (Satan) and can be saved only by Christ.\textsuperscript{101}

French Gothic church labyrinths were carefully planned, and their construction was based on a rigid set of rules. Many of the labyrinths examined in this thesis—the labyrinths at Amiens, Auxerre, Chartres, Reims, Sens, and St. Quentin—consist of eleven bands or circles, along with a center area (Plates I-IV). It has been pointed out that during the Middle Ages the number eleven symbolized sin or

\textsuperscript{100} Bulteau, p. 51; "Extrait des procès-verbaux," p. 115; Verbrugge, p. 83.

imperfection. Therefore the banded or circular configurations of the labyrinths may have functioned as representations of the sinful world. The fact that the labyrinths were commonly placed on the west side of the church in the nave was also significant. West was where the sun set and therefore indicated death. However, the shape of the cross implied in the labyrinths' configuration by means of the placement of axes and semi-axes over the circular forms of the circuits symbolized the hope held by the Christian of salvation, as did the center representing Paradise. This could also explain the labyrinths' unicursal form which visually conveyed the idea that there was only one path to salvation and that although its course might be long and difficult, true believers would not become lost on their quest to achieve it and reach Paradise.

In conclusion, the labyrinths' very structure and placement suggest that they functioned as visual diagrams of the believer's "path through the sinful world toward salvation."


103 Cabrol and Leclercq, p. 973.

Cosmological models

Another possible medieval conception regarding French Gothic church labyrinths, which is related to the idea of the labyrinth as a symbol of the path to salvation, was that of the labyrinth as a model of the city or cosmos.

The biblical city of Jericho was sometimes depicted as a seven-ringed labyrinth in medieval manuscripts.¹⁰⁵ Doob noted analogies between the story of Jericho and the Theseus myth.¹⁰⁶ Rahab helped Joshua's spies escape from Jericho, lowering them by a red cord from the window of her house, located on one of the city's walls. This red cord later saved Rahab and her family when Jericho was destroyed by Joshua. Rahab is a biblical counterpoint of Ariadne, while Joshua takes on a role similar to that of Theseus. The city of Jericho, whose strong walls were encircled seven times by Joshua's forces before its walls collapsed, can be interpreted as a type of maze or labyrinth. Because of these analogies between the story of Jericho and the Theseus myth, Doob suggested that church labyrinths may have referred to the story of the city of Jericho as well as the myth of


Theseus. This story would have functioned in the same way as the Theseus myth. By aiding the spies, Rahab acted as a guide, ultimately enabling Joshua to penetrate Jericho. So the biblical story was another illustration of the idea that one needs guidance to successfully overcome difficulties. Joshua was also seen as an Old Testament prototype of Christ in his role as the harrower of Hell because he was triumphant over evil, represented by the city of Jericho, and saved the righteous, in this case Rahab and her family, who were the sole survivors from the city.107

Roman labyrinths, divided into four parts, corresponded to the Roman quadratal, the traditional basic form of the Roman city. The city in turn was felt to represent the world.108 Many of these labyrinths survived into the Middle Ages in France.

The use of labyrinths in some medieval manuscripts to illustrate the universe suggests that the Roman idea of the labyrinth as a symbol of the cosmos continued on into the

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107 See the section of this thesis entitled The path to salvation for a discussion of Christ in this role and the connection to the Theseus myth.

108 Doob, pp. 143-144.
medieval period. Therefore, Doob reasoned that French Gothic church labyrinths also symbolized the cosmos. However, such representations functioned as more than mere cosmological models: they also conveyed an important message to believers. Although the church labyrinths were very carefully designed and followed certain set patterns of construction, they appeared confusing to the casual observer or to individuals who traversed them. However, Christian believers with the proper understanding were able to discern the order in the labyrinths' designs. The world may appear confusing to those bound to it during their earthly existence. However, there is a perfect order to the world as well as the entire universe, which was created by God. Divine guidance is necessary in order for Christians to discern the order within seeming chaos, successfully extricate themselves from confusion, and follow the true path to salvation. Doob speculated that the medieval mentality would have reasoned that Christ is the guide through this complex, confusing, and seemingly disordered world, who will lead humanity to salvation and that the church labyrinths reminded Christians of this.


110 Doob, pp. 143-144.
Doob further argued that the rose windows found in many of the churches which also have floor labyrinths played an important role in conveying this idea.\textsuperscript{111} The churches in Sens, Auxerre, Chartres, Arras, St. Quentin, Reims and Amiens all possessed both rose windows and labyrinths. According to Doob, the windows themselves functioned as models of the perfect universal order, created by God. The ordered design of the windows more clearly manifested the order which was less obvious in the labyrinths. Hence, the windows reinforced the idea present in the labyrinths, that a divine order overlaid everything, an order which was more clearly perceived and understood by those who followed the teachings of Christ made available by the grace of God. It is significant that, if the west facade of the cathedral of Chartres were laid down in a horizontal position, its rose window would cover the area occupied by the labyrinth.\textsuperscript{112} The medieval notion of an anagogical progression leading upwards to heavenly truths is well illustrated in Gothic stained glass window programs and can be applied to the opposition of the circular forms of the labyrinths to the

\textsuperscript{111} See Doob, p. 137, for a discussion of this idea. See Cowen for an introduction to rose windows.

\textsuperscript{112} Cowen, p. 98.
rose windows which complement and reinforce each other.\textsuperscript{113}

John James' treatment of the labyrinth at Chartres as a spiritual pathway for pilgrims discussed above also included an analysis of the labyrinth as a representation of the cosmos in terms of number symbolism.\textsuperscript{114} The rosette center of the labyrinth has six sides. Six is a perfect number because all its factors add up to six. The turns in the eleven concentric rings that one takes to reach the center form a cross (although it is not readily visible) and also symbolize the four cardinal directions, as well as the four Gospels and the four rivers of Paradise. The number of rings used to construct the labyrinth also has significance.

According to James, during medieval times, eleven was considered a non-Christian number, referring to sin or error, but Muslims believed that the number symbolized "Hu," the closest state possible to God. James suggested that this interpretation of the number was borrowed from the Muslims. He also believed that the eleven-ringed labyrinth replaced

\textsuperscript{113} For an explanation of anagogical thinking in medieval art, see for example Louis Grodecki's work on the stained glass windows at Saint-Denis. A good bibliography of Grodecki's work on this subject can be found in Erwin Panofsky, \textit{Abbot Suger on the Abbey Church of St.-Denis and its Art Treasures}, 2nd ed. (1946; rpt. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1979), pp. 268-269.

\textsuperscript{114} James, \textit{The Traveler's Key}, pp. 74-77.
the mandorla, which in earlier medieval art often symbolized the universe, and appeared less and less frequently beginning around this time. If one includes its center, however, the labyrinth has twelve parts and this number represents the idea of wholeness or completeness. So the labyrinth functioned in part as a representation of the universe.

A group of art historians also analyzed the labyrinth at Chartres in terms of its connections with the rose window.\textsuperscript{115} They cited a commentary on Cicero's dream of Scipio by Macrobius which they claimed was in the library of Chartres before the current cathedral was constructed. Thus manuscript contained a diagram of a Neoplatonic conception of the cosmos. Earth is at the center surrounded by other celestial bodies placed within eleven concentric circles. According to these historians, individuals were reenacting the reintegration of their souls into the universal whole when they traversed the labyrinth's path. They progressed through the cosmos, including the signs of the zodiac, in the process taking on the positive attributes associated with these signs. Walkers reached a crisis point at the center: the only way out involved retracing the path. But by doing this, the ego, which had been lost on the inward part of the journey, was regained. While retracing their steps,

\textsuperscript{115} Cowen, p. 98.
travelers repeatedly faced the rose window of the west facade. The window's division into twelve parts was a transformation into light of the labyrinth's twelve-part structure. The illuminated travelers were now free to continue eastward towards the main altar and its sanctuary. So again, both the labyrinth and the rose window play important roles in transmitting an understanding of the divine order present in the universe.

While some of the details of these historians' explanation of how individuals traversed the labyrinth is not based on any medieval evidence, but appears to depend on modern concepts of the zodiac, and is consequently difficult to fully accept, the similarities between the manuscript illustration they cited and the labyrinth at Chartres--assuming that the manuscript was indeed at Chartres at this time--is intriguing, and indicates that one function of the labyrinth was to symbolize the universe. Based on what we know of medieval number symbolism, James' analysis of the structure of the labyrinth at Chartres does make sense. So both these investigations at least partially support the view of labyrinths as models of the universe.

If French Gothic church labyrinths did symbolize the world or the cosmos, they also illustrated the need for divine guidance in order to successfully negotiate this world, to make sense of its apparent confusion and chaos,
and achieve salvation.

**Substitute pilgrimages or penitential devices**

Another proposal which gained widespread support among nineteenth-century scholars, and was also accepted by some twentieth-century scholars as well, is that the French Gothic church labyrinths were used to make substitute pilgrimages which replaced actual ones made to Jerusalem.\(^{116}\) We know of no written documentation from the medieval period to substantiate this claim. Scholars have cited the name "chemin de Jérusalem" given to these labyrinths to support this supposition.\(^{117}\) The labyrinths at Chartres, Reims, and St. Bertin were known by this expression.\(^{118}\) A related term, "la

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\(^{116}\) This was cited as a possible function at some point in time by the following scholars: Bord, p. 14; Bulteau, p. 51; Caumont, p. 510; D.C., p. 203; Demaison, "Séance du 10 décembre," p. 244; Enlart, p. 814; Deschamps de Pas, pp. 147-149; "Extrait des procès-verbaux", p. 115; Lasteyrie, p. 249; Matthews, p. 67; Paris, p. 541; Reinhardt, p. 76; Reusens, p. 195; Santarcangeli, p. 282; Schnapper, p. 358; Soyez, p. 19; Trollope, p. 222; Verbrugge, p. 83; Villers, pp. 86-88; Willemin, p. 54.

\(^{117}\) Bord, p. 14; Matthews, p. 67; Soyez, p. 19.

\(^{118}\) For Chartres see Demary, p. 23, n. 4; Matthews, p. 60; Santarcangeli, p. 292; and Villette, p. 7. For Reims see Demaison, "Séance du 10 décembre," p. 244; "Labyrinthe de la cathédrale de Reims," p. 112; Paris, p. 549; and Viollet-le-Duc, p. 152. For St. Bertin see Paris, p. 543, and Trollope, p. 226.
lieue de Jérusalem," was also given to some of the labyrinths, including that of St. Quentin. While we know that these designations were in use in the post-medieval period, it is not known if they were applied to the labyrinths during the Middle Ages. As we saw earlier, it is possible to argue that this expression referred to the celestial rather than the earthly Jerusalem.

The expression "la lieue" by which some of the labyrinths were known has also been cited as proof of the labyrinths' use in performing penance. Presumably, traversing a labyrinth would have taken about an hour to complete, which is about the same amount of time required to travel the French measure of distance known as "la lieue," which measures about 2,282 yards. However, such an interpretation remains entirely speculative since we have no knowledge of the types of prayers which would have been recited, and consequently, of the amount of time it would have taken to negotiate the labyrinths. In addition, due to their varying sizes, the length of the labyrinths' paths to the center varied. Furthermore, as Matthews pointed out, none of the


120 See for example, Soyez, p. 19; Trollope, p. 225.
labyrinths' paths comes even close to the distance of the French "lieue." For example, the path of the labyrinth at Chartres measures only about 150 yards.

Scholars have not agreed why the church labyrinths would have performed this pilgrimage function. Trollope proposed that labyrinths were originally used by persons who had vowed to go to Palestine and Jerusalem but had broken their vows. Matthews and Santarcangeli maintained that the labyrinths functioned as symbolic substitute pilgrimages for those who were too poor, sick or old to make the actual pilgrimage. Deschamps de Pas and Schnapper believed that this practice was widespread during the Crusades, when religious fervor was at a high pitch. This would have allowed those who were unable to go to Palestine a means of symbolically participating in the Crusades. Other scholars believed that the labyrinths performed this function

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121 Matthews, pp. 59-60.

122 Trollope, pp. 222, 235.

123 Matthews, p. 67; Santarcangeli, p. 74. Lasteyrie, p. 249, mentions this as a possibility but does not feel this is probable, due to a lack of concrete evidence. Schnapper, p. 358, states that the labyrinths were used for this purpose from the eleventh to the thirteenth centuries, but does not provide any evidence to support this assertion.

124 Deschamps de Pas, p. 148; Schnapper, p. 358.
near the end of the intense period of crusading, sometime after the fall of Jerusalem in 1244, when religious fervor had died down and lengthy pilgrimages were considered too demanding and dangerous due to the uncertainty or impossi­bility of having access to Jerusalem, and substitutes closer to home were selected.\textsuperscript{125} Consequently, labyrinths would have performed this function at a later date, beginning sometime in the latter part of the thirteenth century. Villers stated that this practice continued into the fif­teenth century but provided no evidence for his asser­tion.\textsuperscript{126} Still other scholars maintained that this practice did not occur until the fifteenth or sixteenth century, citing as evidence the fact that the labyrinths lack any explicit Crusader imagery.\textsuperscript{127} However, the lack of such explicit imagery in itself is not adequate proof that laby­rinths performed this function only at a later date, assum­ing that they ever performed it at all.

\textsuperscript{125} Caumont, p. 510; Matthews, p. 67; Schnapper, p. 358; Trollope, p. 222; Villers, pp. 87-88.

\textsuperscript{126} Villers, p. 88.

\textsuperscript{127} Demaison, "Séance du 10 décembre," p. 244, cites as proof for this contention the lack of any overt Christian symbols associated with the labyrinths. See also Bulteau, p. 51; "Extrait des procès-verbaux," p. 115; Paris, p. 544; Verbrugge, p. 83.
One historian stated at a meeting of a scholarly society of Chartres in 1865 that the practice of using the labyrinth at Chartres to make a symbolic pilgrimage to Jerusalem began upon the labyrinth's completion in the early thirteenth century and continued until the beginning of the sixteenth century.\textsuperscript{128} The center of the labyrinth was said to have originally contained a representation of a knight entering Jerusalem, which, if true, would appear to suggest that this labyrinth perhaps referred directly to the Crusades or served as a general symbolic representation of a pilgrimage to Jerusalem. However, the historian provided no evidence to support these assertions. And as for the nature of the representation in the labyrinth's center, the existing evidence, while somewhat tenuous, indicates that it is more likely that a plaque depicting Theseus and the Minotaur was in the labyrinth's center.\textsuperscript{129}

Paris and Bulteau, writing in the mid-nineteenth and early twentieth century, believed that the labyrinth at Reims was placed in the cathedral for use in making symbolic

\textsuperscript{128} " Séance générale publique du 27 mai 1865," p. 159.

\textsuperscript{129} See the section called The path to salvation of this thesis.
pilgrimages to Jerusalem. The bishop who commenced construction of the church in 1211, Aubert de Humbert, made a pilgrimage to Palestine in 1218. Hence, these scholars proposed that Aubert de Humbert is the figure depicted in the center of the labyrinth, and that he had the labyrinth built on his return from Palestine as a souvenir of his pilgrimage and as an object for use in making symbolic voyages to Jerusalem. However, this is not certain because the identity of the central figure remains controversial. Furthermore, this does not appear likely since the labyrinth was probably not constructed until much later, near the end of the thirteenth century.

A prayerbook published in Reims called Stations au Chemin de Jérusalem qui se voit en l'église Notre-Dame has been cited as proof of this function of labyrinths, whenever it took place. Although the earliest date that we have for the publication of this prayerbook is the eighteenth century, Bulteau stated that it was first published during the fifteenth or sixteenth century. However, this would still postdate the labyrinth's construction date by two or

130 Bulteau, p. 51; Paris, p. 544.

131 Bulteau, p. 51; Cerf, p. 78; Paris, p. 544.

132 Bulteau, p. 51.
three hundred years, and there is no way of knowing whether such a document would have existed earlier in manuscript form when the labyrinth was set into the cathedral's floor late in the thirteenth century. There is no proof that the stations of the book's title were associated with the labyrinth and it is more likely that this book was intended to be used in a stations of the cross ritual which had a different purpose and took place during the post-medieval period.\textsuperscript{133}

A related proposal offered by some scholars is that labyrinths were used as a means of performing penance for various sins committed.\textsuperscript{134} A labyrinth's course was traversed on one's knees while reciting prayers. The types of sins for which this penance would have been assigned remains unclear. One suggestion is that the labyrinths were used as substitutes for pilgrimages of penance. During the Middle Ages, especially during the Crusade period, it was common to impose as penance for serious sins a pilgrimage to sacred sites associated with the life of Christ. Since it was not always possible to carry out such pilgrimages, due either to the physical or financial circumstances of the

\textsuperscript{133} See the section of thesis called \textit{Stations of the Cross} for more information on this ritual.

\textsuperscript{134} Bord, p. 14; Soyez, p. 19; Trollope, p. 225.
penitent, or, if the pilgrimage site was Palestine, to its inaccessibility, substitute pilgrimages through labyrinths, performed while on one's knees to increase the difficulty, were employed.

Many scholars believed that indulgences were given to those who traversed the labyrinths. However these were most likely minor indulgences, and certainly would not have been as great as those given, for example, to actual crusaders, who in some cases were promised remission of all sins committed in exchange for participating in a crusade.

A related idea linking labyrinths to Jerusalem was that the labyrinths represented Solomon's Temple or the Church of the Holy Sepulcher, both in Jerusalem, probably because at one point it was believed that these structures had labyrinth-like plans. The designation "chemin de Jérusalem" by which some of the labyrinths were known also led some earlier historians to see the labyrinths as emblems

135 Enlart, p. 814; Matthews, p. 67; Paris, p. 540; Reusens, p. 195; Soyez, p. 19; Willemin, p. 54.


137 "Labyrinthe de la cathédrale de Reims," p. 112.
or symbols of the city of Jerusalem.\textsuperscript{138} Evidently this interpretation was widespread during the nineteenth century. However, Doublet de Boisthibault, writing in the mid-nineteenth century, mentioned this as a possibility, but stated that there was no evidence to support this idea. In addition, he noted that there was no physical resemblance between the form of a labyrinth and the original structure of these buildings.\textsuperscript{139}

Regardless of whether labyrinths were used as a means of making substitute pilgrimages or of performing penance, most scholars who proposed these functions for them agreed that participants traversed them on their hands and knees while reciting prayers.\textsuperscript{140} This would have added to the difficulty of negotiating the labyrinths and increased the penitential value of the ritual. However these scholars did not indicate what types of prayers were recited, or whether they were recited throughout the traversal, or only at certain points. They also failed to provide concrete evidence regarding this practice, beyond mentioning vague oral

\textsuperscript{138} See, for example, Paris, p. 541.

\textsuperscript{139} Doublet de Boisthibault, pp. 442-443.

\textsuperscript{140} Enlart, p. 814; Paris, p. 541; Santarcangeli, p. 74.
traditions which referred to this use of the labyrinths and which perhaps indicated a usage of the labyrinths occurring after the Gothic period.

In conclusion, it is possible that labyrinths were used to perform penance at some point in time, whether during the Gothic period or later. They also may have been used as a means of participating in a minor way in the Crusades or as a means of making a symbolic pilgrimage to Jerusalem. However, it also seems that merely traversing labyrinths on one's hands and knees while reciting prayers, even if performed a number of times, would hardly have proven commensurate to actually going on a crusade or making a pilgrimage to Palestine. Nor is it likely that traversing a labyrinth would have proven entirely satisfactory as a means of expiation for those who had committed serious sins. However, this does not rule out the possibility that they may have been used as a means of performing penance for more minor sins. For example, a rather vague tradition (presumably oral, although that is not made clear) stated that the labyrinth at Bayeux served in some way as a means of correction for canons who had committed transgressions.\(^{141}\) Its placement on the floor of the cathedral's chapter house does indicate that, unlike the labyrinths in cathedrals, it was available

\(^{141}\) Villers, p. 86.
to a limited select group, although it is not certain that it actually performed this function. This could also explain the unusual placement of the labyrinth of St. Bertin in one of the church's transepts. The labyrinth could have been used for performing penance, without disrupting major activities in the nave and choir. Both the labyrinths of Bayeux and St. Bertin were constructed at a later date than other French Gothic church labyrinths. St. Bertin probably dates from the late fourteenth century and Bayeux was probably constructed in the mid or late fourteenth century. If they were indeed used to perform penance, it is possible that this was a later function of labyrinths and not their original purpose. Those scholars who have suggested that the labyrinths performed this function have possibly been influenced by post-medieval illustrations of labyrinths that apparently depict penitential activities.

Stations of the Cross

Some nineteenth and early twentieth scholars believed that the labyrinths may have represented the route by which Christ was taken to Calvary after being sentenced by Pi-
This idea was also taken up by later historians to explain church labyrinths. Scholars proposed that the faithful traversed them on their knees while reciting prayers and that indulgences were given to those who successfully completed the course. Labyrinths with which this ritual has been associated include Chartres, Reims, and St. Bertin.

A prayer book from Reims called Stations au chemin de Jérusalem qui se voit en l'église Notre Dame has been cited as evidence of this function of labyrinths, because the designation "chemin de Jérusalem" was at some point applied to labyrinths. It is probable that the prayerbook

142 Boisthibault, p. 444; Bulteau, p. 53; Cerf, p. 78; Reusens, p. 195; Viollet-le-Duc, p. 152.

143 Aubert, Gothic Cathedrals, pp. 296-298; Lasteyrie, pp. 248-249; Matthews, p. 68; Santarcangeli, p. 283.

144 Lasteyrie, pp. 248-249; Matthews, p. 68; Reusens, p. 196; Santarcangeli, p. 283.

145 For Chartres see for example Villette, "L'Énigme," p. 9, who suggests this as a possibility, although he believes it more likely that the labyrinth symbolized the Celestial Jerusalem. For Reims see Soyez, pp. 23-24. For St. Bertin see Viollet-le-Duc, p. 152.

146 See the section of thesis entitled Substitute pilgrimages or penitential devices for references to this prayerbook.
referred to a Stations of the Cross ritual. This ritual, a practice dating from the fifth century which continues to be performed today, consists of moving through a church along a prescribed course, with stops at certain specific points to recite prayers and meditate on the Passion of Christ.\textsuperscript{147} So while the labyrinth may have been one of the stations employed in this ritual, it does not seem likely that the complete Stations of the Cross ritual would have taken place in it. It appears that the expression "chemin de Jérusalem" had more than one meaning. In the case of the church labyrinths it more likely referred to their function as symbolic representations of the celestial Jerusalem or their use in an entirely different ritual evoking a symbolic pilgrimage to the earthly Jerusalem.

\textbf{Commemorative devices}

In the mid-nineteenth century some scholars proposed that the labyrinths commemorated the architects who had

constructed the buildings in which they were placed. This interpretation was largely dependent on the labyrinths at Amiens and Reims, which included representations of architects in their configurations, and on the fact that these labyrinths were at one point called "dédale," an expression which presumably functioned as a reference to Daedalus, considered in the Middle Ages as the first master architect and as the creator of the first labyrinth. Medieval architects were compared to Daedalus and the labyrinths would have functioned as visual tributes to their skill in designing and building churches. Some scholars also believed that representations of architects similar to those at Amiens and Reims were in the missing center stone at Chartres. However, this assertion is not based on any concrete evidence and it appears that these scholars depend too much on the configurations of the labyrinths at Amiens and Reims in their attempt to reconstruct the center plaque at Chartres, or that they suggested this because it fits in with their interpretation of the meaning and function of the laby-

148 See Doob, pp. 121-123, for a fuller discussion of this idea. See also Boisthibault, pp. 49-446; Demaison, "Les Architectes," p. 16; James, The Contractors of Chartres, p. 472; Viollet-le-Duc, p. 152; Willemin, p. 14.

149 Reinhardt, p. 75; Viollet-le-Duc, p. 152. Meulen, Chartres: Biographie der Kathedrale, p. 198, states that this is a possibility, although by no means a certainty.
rinths. At any rate, as stated before, existing evidence supports the presence of a representation of Theseus and the Minotaur in the labyrinth's center.

One of the earliest nineteenth-century scholars to write about French Gothic church labyrinths was Viollet-le-Duc, who believed that the labyrinths functioned in part as a symbol of a school of lay architects or masons. According to Viollet-le-Duc, at the end of the twelfth century the building of religious structures, which had formerly been supervised by clerical builders, was taken over by guilds of stonemasons. These guilds were supported by certain members of the clergy and by the communes which had begun to form by this time. He cited as proof of the secular nature of labyrinths the fact that there were no overt religious signs associated with them. Any religious meanings possessed by the labyrinths would have come later. However, we know the central plaque at Amiens does contain a cross in its center and that a cross was a distinct feature of the fourteenth century labyrinth at St. Bertin. In addition, the cruciform shapes implied in all the church labyrinths due to their configurations indicates that some religious meaning was present.

Matthews, perhaps writing under the influence of

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150 Viollet-le-Duc, pp. 152-153.
Viollet-le-Duc, also proposed that labyrinths were symbols of the stonemasons. As such he believed that they indicated that the builders had as their purpose the erection of a building to the glory of God. However, other earlier scholars discarded this theory because it was predicated upon a rivalry between the clergy and lay architects or stonemasons which simply did not exist. The construction of churches was a cooperative venture on the part of clergy and builders. In addition, there is no evidence of organized guilds of builders at this time. While Amiens and Reims did have communes by the late thirteenth century, when the labyrinths in their cathedrals were constructed, there were none in the towns where the earlier French Gothic cathedrals with labyrinths were built. So the rivalry cited by Viollet-le-Duc in support of his interpretation of the labyrinths did not exist at this time.

However, although Viollet-le-Duc's theory was soon discounted, later scholars continued to believe that labyrinths functioned to commemorate architects. These scholars believed that the labyrinths were visual tributes to the architects which perpetuated their memory, praising their

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151 Matthews, p. 68, cites this belief held by scholars, without, however, providing any documentation.

152 Lasteyrie, p. 248.
knowledge and skills, which were employed to glorify God.\textsuperscript{153} They argued that if the cathedrals were viewed as earthly models of the Celestial Jerusalem (reflecting, albeit imperfectly due to their earthly nature, the Celestial Jerusalem) then those who were able to build such structure as an act of devotion would have been considered worthy of being commemorated.\textsuperscript{154} To support this interpretation for Reims, Reinhardt cited the fact that some architects were buried in the churches they had built, and that, unlike other medieval artists, we have knowledge of many of their names and dates of activity.\textsuperscript{155}

Some nineteenth-century scholars may have proposed this commemorative function of the labyrinths because it was popularly believed during this time that medieval architects were buried under the labyrinths.\textsuperscript{156} It is true that some architects were buried in churches. For example, Hue

\textsuperscript{153} Barral I. Altet, p. 102; Reinhardt, p. 76; Santarcangeli, p. 283.

\textsuperscript{154} Demary, p. 22; James, \textit{The Contractors of Chartres}, p. 472.

\textsuperscript{155} Reinhardt, p. 76.

\textsuperscript{156} Boisthibault, pp. 446-447; Jules Gailhabaud, \textit{L'Architecture du V\textdegree\, au XVII\textdegree\, siècle et les arts qui en dépendent} (Paris: Gide, 1858), IV, p. 7, n. 2.
Libergie was buried in the church of Saint-Nicaise in Reims. Pierre de Montreuil, who worked on the churches of Sainte Chapelle and Saint-Denis was buried in Sainte Chapelle. An architect named Guillaume, who constructed the thirteenth-century choir of Saint-Étienne in Caen, was buried in that church.\textsuperscript{157} However, as another scholar pointed out, excavations carried out at Chartres in the nineteenth century revealed no architects' remains under that church's labyrinth and there is no archeological evidence that they were placed under the labyrinths in other churches either.\textsuperscript{158}

In keeping with this notion of commemoration, there are examples in medieval illuminated manuscripts where labyrinths probably denote artistry. Diagrams of labyrinths placed at the end of manuscripts seemed to have functioned as visual celebrations of a well-constructed, intricate work, presumably because of the medieval association of labyrinths with Daedalus.\textsuperscript{159} So French Gothic church labyrinths could have functioned in a similar fashion.

The incorporation in French church labyrinths of repre-


\textsuperscript{158} Bulteau, pp. 49-50.

\textsuperscript{159} See Doob, p. 138, for a discussion of these manuscripts.
sentations of or references to architects is not common—the ones at Amiens and Reims are the only ones we have. In these cases their inclusion clearly had a commemorative purpose. However, there is no way of knowing whether those labyrinths which have no direct references to architects also commemorated them. The relatively late date of the labyrinths at Amiens and Reims (both date from the late thirteenth century) could suggest that the inclusion of such figures in a labyrinth was a later development in labyrinth configurations. This development probably reflected the emergence of individual architects who were responsible for the construction of later Gothic churches, as opposed to the anonymity of the builders of earlier churches, including Sens and Chartres, whose identity remains unknown. Those scholars who believed that French Gothic church labyrinths were simply commemorative devices have perhaps been overly influenced by modern attitudes toward artists which differ from those held in the Middle Ages.

Labyrinths and the "jeu de balle"

It is likely that French Gothic church labyrinths were used in special processions or ceremonies. One proposal was that they were utilized in the consecration ceremonies that took place upon a church’s completion, although no evidence
is provided in support of this. But documentation from the Middle Ages does indicate that at least one special ritual was associated with labyrinths. Jean Beleth in his *Rationale Divinorum Officiorum*, written near the end of the twelfth century, discussed a ball game played in churches, including those of Amiens and Reims, after vespers on Easter. In addition, a document dated April 19, 1412, mentioned a "jeu de balle" performed each Easter after vespers at the cathedral of Auxerre. The dean performed a three-step dance in the labyrinth's center while holding a ball. Meanwhile, the canons held hands and danced a "circa daedalum." This term suggests that they either danced around the labyrinth or performed a dance with labyrinthine movements. Throughout the dance, the ball was thrown or passed to each of the participants, while they all sang the Easter hymn *Victimi Paschali Laudes*. This hymn celebrates Christ's

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160 Barral I. Altet, p. 101, n. 76.

161 Barral I. Altet, p. 101; Grenier, p. 387; Soyez, p. 29.

162 For a full description of the dance see Louis Backman, *Religious Dances in the Christian Church and in Popular Medicine* (London: Allen & Unwin, 1952), pp. 67-73. See also Bord, p. 95; Doob, pp. 123-127; "Lettre curieuse sur le jeu de la pelote," pp. 391-404; Santarcangeli, pp. 296-297. This dance was banned by parliamentary decree in 1538.
resurrection and his victory over death. After completing the dance, the participants celebrated with a feast.

This "jeu de balle" probably had its origins in a pre-Christian ritual, depicting the path of the sun—symbolized by the ball—throughout the year, its death during the winter and its resurrection in spring. In its christianized form, it became a ritual which symbolized Christ's harrowing of hell and his resurrection. The dance probably also referred to the Theseus myth as narrated in the medieval Ovide moralisé. When Theseus entered the labyrinth he had, in addition to his sword and the guiding ball of red thread given him by Ariadne, a ball of glue which he shoved into the Minotaur's throat so that it was unable to bite him. During the Middle Ages, Theseus was viewed as a prototype of Christ, and his excursion into the labyrinth at Crete was equated with Christ's harrowing of hell. Christian exegesis in the Ovide moralisé interpreted the ball of glue as Christ's humanity which led the devil to believe that Christ was capable of original sin and therefore was susceptible to death. However, since Christ was actually incapable of sin, his entry into hell meant that Satan lost his power over the righteous trapped there. Just as Theseus' ball of

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glue rendered the Minotaur defenseless, so did Christ's humanity overcome Satan. Theseus' ball of red thread is equated with Christ's divinity, which allowed him to safely enter hell and rescue the righteous.\textsuperscript{164}

Theseus and his rescued companions also performed a dance which reenacted his excursion into the Cretan labyrinth and celebrated his triumph over certain death and the salvation of his friends.\textsuperscript{165} So the "balle de jeu" dance performed by the canons not only celebrates Christ's harrowing of hell and his resurrection but also probably reflects this earlier dance of celebration.

In manuscripts, labyrinth drawings sometimes accompany a formula called the "computus" which used the phases of the moon to determine the correct date of Easter each year. Doob suggested that a connection was made between Theseus, who successfully negotiated the labyrinth at Crete, and Christ, who harrowed hell.\textsuperscript{166}

Doob also noted that two of the labyrinths associated with the "jeu de balle," those of Amiens and Reims, have

\textsuperscript{164} Doob, p. 126.

\textsuperscript{165} Hildburgh, p. 188.

\textsuperscript{166} Doob, p. 142.
octagonal shapes.\textsuperscript{167} Eight was a number associated with resurrection in the Middle Ages. Hence, Doob argued, these labyrinths were possibly given octagonal shapes to reinforce the idea of resurrection conveyed by the dance.

We have no way of knowing when the "jeu de balle" originated; however, the fact that it had its origins in paganism and that Beleth mentioned it in the late twelfth century suggests that it may have been enacted when the labyrinths at Auxerre, Amiens and Reims were first built. Indeed, these labyrinths may have been constructed partially for use with this ritual in mind, although they were by no means limited to this function.

CONCLUSION

As we have seen, scholars have proposed numerous functions and meanings for French Gothic labyrinths. Often they have merely repeated suggestions made by earlier scholars without really examining them critically. They have also tended to accept nineteenth-century oral traditions which do not necessarily reflect actual medieval belief and practice. However, an understanding of the chronology of medieval

\textsuperscript{167} Doob, p. 127.
labyrinths in French churches as well as an examination of other sources makes it possible to draw some conclusions as to the labyrinths' original meanings and functions and their evolution during the Middle Ages.

In the Gothic period, the labyrinths were not merely decorative motifs copied from classical designs, but were conscious visual references to a classical myth, that of Theseus. This myth was christianized by the Church so that the labyrinths were initiatory devices, symbolizing the path to salvation which would ultimately lead the believer to Paradise. This path was fraught with difficulties and complications, but could, with the proper guidance, be successfully negotiated by the Christian. It was believed that the necessary guidance was provided by the divine grace of Christ and the Church, who was Christ's representative on earth and whose teachings must be followed. Evidence from other sources indicates that the function of the labyrinth as a symbol of salvation preceded the Gothic period. Therefore, this meaning was probably one of the earliest meanings assigned to French Gothic church labyrinths.

Labyrinths were also cosmological models. As such they illustrated the perfect order of the universe, which was not always visible to believers because of their limited human vision. Christians needed divine guidance to discern this order and successfully extricate themselves from seeming
disorder, so that they could place themselves on the path to salvation. Therefore, the same idea—that guidance is necessary in order to achieve salvation—is present in the labyrinths, both in their roles as cosmological models and as illustrations of the path to salvation.

The labyrinths were ideal for suggesting this idea. The labyrinth motif served as a reference to the Theseus myth, which would have been interpreted in its Christianized form. In addition, medieval labyrinths were adapted from Roman labyrinths. While their four-part division is not as obvious as it is with Roman labyrinths, it is present, along with the unicursal form of the Roman labyrinths. The unicursal form of the labyrinths (as opposed to a multicursal form) conveyed the idea that there was only one path to salvation. The overall physical configurations of the labyrinths, which are actually very carefully ordered and logical in their designs, despite their apparently confused designs, perfectly illustrated the divine order, which included a plan for salvation. Both the large size of the medieval labyrinths and their prominent position within the churches where they are present indicate their importance as motifs of religious significance.

The use of the labyrinth in the "jeu de balle" ritual, which probably had its origins in a pre-Christian ritual, was most likely also an original medieval function of the
labyrinths. There is no reason why this function could not have existed simultaneously with that of labyrinths as symbols of the path to salvation, since this ritual illustrated both the Christianized myth of Theseus and the idea of Christ as the harrower of hell. It is possible that the function may have become even more important during the late thirteenth century, since the labyrinths at Amiens and Reims are specifically linked to this ritual.

Any other meanings possessed by French Gothic labyrinths were of lesser importance or were later developments. While labyrinths may always have been in part devices commemorating the architects of the churches in which they were found, the relatively late date of the labyrinths in which architects are actually depicted and mentioned by name, those of the churches of Amiens and Reims, which date from the late thirteenth century, would suggest that this function of the labyrinths took on added importance only later. This probably coincided with the rise of individual architects as builders, a development of the late Gothic period. Representations of builders had as their purpose the suggestion of salvation achieved by those depicted.

It does not appear likely that labyrinths were used as substitute pilgrimages to Palestine during the Gothic era, at least not in the sense that traversing them would have been commensurate to making an actual pilgrimage. It is
possible that they were traversed as a means of participating in a minor way in the Crusades. Any evidence we have of this possible usage comes much later and cannot be cited as proof that it existed during the Middle Ages.

Medieval works on penitence do not mention labyrinths in connection with penitential activities and at this point there is no way of knowing whether labyrinths were originally used as a means of performing penance. The unusual placement of the labyrinth at St. Bertin, as well as the location of the labyrinth at Bayeux in the chapter house, suggest that this may have been a function of the labyrinths which began in the late Middle Ages and possibly continued into the post-medieval period.

Lacking any convincing evidence it does not appear likely that labyrinths symbolized sin. Nor did they apparently function as visual references to the Temple at Jerusalem or the Church of the Holy Sepulcher. While some labyrinths were known by a name which was later related to a Stations of the Cross ritual, there does not appear to be any connections between the two. In addition, their physical placement in the churches does not suggest that they were merely apotropaic devices to protect churches.

In conclusion, French Gothic church labyrinths most likely functioned initially as representations of the path to salvation, either in the capacity of illustrating the
christianized Theseus myth or as a cosmological model. The "jeu de balle" ritual was also an original medieval practice associated with labyrinths. Any other functions or meanings either took on added importance at a later date or represent later developments.

Since labyrinths did function primarily as symbols of the path to salvation, their large size and prominent placement in French Gothic churches would indicate that this idea was especially important during the period of their installation. Beginning in the eleventh century there was an effort on the part of the Church to create a universal Christian order, which it directed and controlled and sought to extend into all spheres of life. The crusades were one manifestation of this effort. The earliest French Gothic church labyrinths may have been an attempt to convey this idea, that of the Church as the guiding force. Not by chance, this development coincided with threats to the Church's power. The existence of such heretical groups as the Waldensians and the Cathars, the evolution of states which were increasingly independent of the dictates of the papacy, and the rise of intellectual forces which questioned the Church's universal authority all posed threats. So the

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French Gothic church labyrinths reinforced the idea that the Church was the sole earthly representative of Christ as part of its attempt to maintain its hold over medieval society. Large-scale labyrinths, prominently displayed, served as the perfect vehicles to convey the idea that there was only one path to salvation, which involved following the teachings of Christ as interpreted by the Church.
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