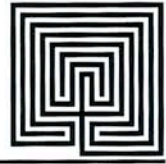


The Petit Labyrinth Graffito of Chartres Cathedral



Jill K. H. Geoffrion & Alain P. Louët

Some 800 years after the completion of the thirteenth century pavement labyrinth in nave of Chartres Cathedral, France, a “little sister” labyrinth graffito has been identified in the cathedral.¹ The fact that a second labyrinth has existed in the cathedral, whether since the thirteenth century, or a much more recent time, will come as a surprise to most people.²



*Figure 1: the “Petit Labyrinth” wall graffito, Notre Dame de Chartres, France.
Photo: Jeff Saward, September 2010*

Location and description of the labyrinth graffito

The labyrinth graffito in Chartres Cathedral is found around the corner from the door leading to the north tower, at the end of the north side aisle. It is located in an area that is currently staffed by the French Historical Monuments. Approximately one meter (39 ¼ inches) above the floor, it is 85 cm (approximately 33 ½ inches) from the west end of the tower wall.

The petit labyrinth is engraved in the thin *enduit* (render) that coats the stone underneath. The labyrinth graffito, which is smooth to the touch, has twelve circular lines (and therefore eleven circuits) engraved in its top half, but only seven circular lines (six circuits) completed in the lower half. Its diameter is approximately 9 cm (3 1/2 inches) from the top line to that on the lower edge. Its centre, which is slightly wider at the bottom than the top, measures a maximum of 1.4 centimetres (approximately 1/2 inch) in diameter.³ Turn dividers are clearly marked as straight lines in the upper section of the design, but are much less visible on the sides of the graffito. Two turns can be easily identified in the top of the lower right quadrant, while those on the top of the lower left quadrant are visible, but harder to perceive. The design lines are not spaced evenly; the labyrinth appears to have been drawn by hand. No visible traces can be found below the seventh lower line; it seems as if the complete (eleven-circuit) labyrinth graffito was never finished.

As one studies the graffito, it seems most likely that the centre of the labyrinth was drawn first, followed by the turn dividers in the upper section and perhaps the pathway to the centre, and afterwards, circular arcs were extended downwards towards the sides and lower edge of the design.

The surface of the wall render on which the labyrinth graffito is found is uneven. Several seemingly unrelated lines and other markings traverse the labyrinth pattern. Other graffiti of various sizes and shapes can be found higher on the same wall.⁴

Figure 2: west end of north aisle, Chartres Cathedral, France. The position of the labyrinth graffito marked with an arrow. Photo: Jill Geoffrion



Relationship of the graffito to the floor labyrinth in Chartres

There is a clear relationship between the pattern of the floor and wall labyrinths in the Chartres Cathedral. Although lacking approximately half of the lower circuits, the shape and pathway pattern (as far as it can be discerned) of the smaller labyrinth are similar to its larger counterpart, see figure 3. The proportion of the centre to the rest of the design is significantly smaller on the wall labyrinth (1:6 if there were 12 lines on both the top half and the bottom half) than the floor labyrinth (1:4). In addition, the level of detail is markedly different: the wall labyrinth lacks the central rosette, the peripheral ornamentation and the rounded turn markers found on the floor labyrinth in the adjacent nave.⁵



*Figure 3:
designs of the
floor labyrinth
and the
labyrinth
graffito,
Chartres
Cathedral,
France.
Graphics:
Jeff Saward*



Relationship of the Chartres graffito labyrinth to other church wall labyrinths

The petit labyrinth at Chartres can be understood as both a graffito and a wall labyrinth. Unlike medieval stone carved labyrinths set into church walls, such as those found in Lucca, and Pontremoli, Italy,⁶ or church wall and ceiling fresco labyrinths, such as those found in Scandinavia,⁷ or at Alatri in Italy,⁸ it does not appear to be the product of communal forethought. Graffiti labyrinths are by nature generally far more personal than other types of wall labyrinth.

When considering the Chartres labyrinth graffito, it is helpful to note the existence and characteristics of other ecclesiastical labyrinth graffiti. A medieval graffito of the eleven-circuit classical design is found on a pillar at Santa Maria de Taüll in Barrurera, Spain.⁹ An eleven-circuit medieval labyrinth graffito that is undated, but with an origin no later than the eighteenth century, is found in the cathedral of St. Peter in Poitiers, France.¹⁰ Several other labyrinth graffiti dating from the 14th to the 16th centuries have been found in churches on the island of Gotland in Sweden.¹¹

When comparing the two French cathedral labyrinth graffiti, we discover that both are found on northern walls of western side aisles.¹² The eleven circuit pattern of each of these labyrinths is similar,¹³ although the graffito of Poitiers documents the path, leaving empty space all around it, while the labyrinth design at Chartres has a path that is clearly defined by “walls” on either side. Both the labyrinth graffiti at Chartres and Poitiers appear to have been drawn “freehand” without a compass.

*Figure 4: Wall Labyrinth, St. Peter's Cathedral,
Poitiers, France. Two areas where the design
differs from Chartres are marked.
Photo: Jill Geoffrion*



Areas for further research

Are there other church wall graffiti labyrinths that await discovery? We can hope that as enthusiasts and scholars pay renewed attention to the graffiti found throughout ecclesiastical buildings new labyrinths will be identified and studied.

We may never know whose hand was responsible for the petit labyrinth graffiti at Chartres, or why it was created. However, it is likely that when specialists are able to study it closely, they will shed more light on its possible age.

Why the labyrinth was started, yet not completed is just one of the many mysteries that come to mind as one stands before the petit labyrinth on the wall in Chartres Cathedral. Was there a relationship between the wall and floor labyrinth is another.¹⁴ If so, what was it?

For those who have come to appreciate the labyrinth in the nave of Chartres, this “little sister” labyrinth represents a new avenue for both research and wonder.

Jill Kimberly Hartwell Geoffrion and Alain Pierre Louët;
Chartres, France, November 2010.

Note to readers: The petit labyrinth graffiti is located in an area currently staffed by Monuments Historiques, consequently it is not accessible without authorization.

References:

- 1 Graffiti specialists at the cathedral have been aware of its existence for some time. Having no particular interest in labyrinths, they considered it as just one of the many graffiti that are found throughout the cathedral.
- 2 The wall labyrinth has not been dated. Specialists have found graffiti on the *enduits* in the cathedral from the thirteenth century, as well as from other periods, some as recent as the nineteenth century.
- 3 Thanks to Jeff Saward for visiting Chartres Cathedral with the authors to discuss the graffiti and confirming these measurements.
- 4 “*vive le roi*” (long live the king), *Louis 18*, and *JR* (58 cm, approximately 22 3/4 inches from the labyrinth graffiti), are all incised to the left of the petit labyrinth. A *fleur de lis* can be also be seen near these words (approximately 1.4 meters, 55 inches from the floor). All of these graffiti have significantly less dirt lodged in their grooves than the labyrinth. Furthermore, these graffiti, which seem related to the early 19th century (Louis XVIII’s reign lasted from 1814-24) political realities in France, are carved much deeper into the render than the petit labyrinth; it appears that different tools were used in the creation of the upper grouping from those employed to incise the labyrinth. Above the labyrinth and to the right (41 cm, 16 inches and 78 cm, 30 3/4 inches), there are at least two other obvious graffiti involving straight lines. Until more research is carried out, it is not possible to know if any of the graffiti found on the wall are contemporary to one another.

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- 5 The wall graffito seems to be at the approximate height of a crouching adult. The two westernmost pillars of the nave obstruct the view of the floor labyrinth, but much of it is still visible from the location of the petit labyrinth.
 - 6 For more information on medieval wall labyrinths, see Kern, Hermann, *Through the Labyrinth. Designs and Meanings over 5,000 Years*. (New York: Prestel, 2000) and Seward, Jeff, *Labyrinths and Mazes of the World*. (New York: Lark Books, 2003). The stone and painted wall labyrinths seem to involve significantly more forethought, community involvement in the decisions of placement, precision and workmanship than their graffiti counterparts. These are much more likely to be the work of a single individual.
 - 7 See Seward, 108-11.
 - 8 See “The Alatri Labyrinth Fresco” by Giancarlo Pavat in this edition of *Caerdroia*.
 - 9 “The recently discovered graffito on a pillar in the church of Santa Maria de Taüll in Barruera is the only example so far recorded in Spain; it is unusual also for its classical design and twelfth-century date.” Seward, p. 107.
 - 10 The graffito’s origin and its relationship to the labyrinth that is believed to have existed in the nave at Poitiers are uncertain. Kern states (p.158), “Construction of the church began in 1162. No more is known of the floor labyrinth it is thought to have contained than that it has disappeared. All that remains is a 90 x80 cm graffito on the inner wall of the third bay of the northern aisle... incised in the surface. The age of this graffito is not known, but it is generally regarded as a depiction of the original floor labyrinth.” The graffito was cited in Chanoine Charles Auguste Auber’s *Histoire de la Cathédrale de Poitiers, Vol.1*, published in 1849. Based on his comments, it is clear that the labyrinth graffito already existed in the eighteenth century.
 - 11 The first, at Lye, is found on the inner wall of the church tower and dates from the 16th century, at Ganthem (undated) the graffito is found on a church pillar and a third example at Hablingbo (also undated) is in a dark corner of the southern tower of the church (see www.labyrinthos.net/nordchurch3.html for details). Like the graffito at Chartres, the Hablingbo graffito was started, but never completed. For more information on these Swedish labyrinths, see Seward, p.108-110. John Kraft, Swedish labyrinth expert, comments on the two Swedish church graffiti, which like the graffito at Chartres, have been found on the walls of bell towers, “...two of the graffiti are located on the dark ground floors of church towers. It would seem the artists had chosen places where the labyrinths could not easily be discovered and this might suggest that these labyrinths were not accepted as part of the original adornment of the churches.” See www.labyrinthos.net/nordchurch1.html
 - 12 In the Cathedral of St. Peter in Poitiers, the labyrinth is found in the northern side aisle of the third bay, one bay west of the transept. At Chartres, the graffito is found all the way at the western end of the north side aisle.
 - 13 There is an area in the Poitiers labyrinth where a “mistake” causes the path to head toward the center prematurely and then loop around. If the line had stopped in the center, and if the fifth and sixth lines from the center on the right side of the pattern between the upper and lower quadrants had included a turn area, the path would mirror that of Chartres exactly.
 - 14 The supposed existence of both a graffito and a floor labyrinth at Poitiers raises the question about the possibility of finding graffiti in other medieval cathedrals that housed floor labyrinths.
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Contents

- Cover : Minotaur & Labyrinth, original engraving by A. Bell, 1773, Labyrinthos Archive
- 1 **Frontis** : Daedalus and Icarus, Compiègne, France; photo: Jeff Saward, March 2011
- 3 **Editorial** : Jeff Saward reviews this issue, 30 years since the founding of *Caerdroia*
- 4 **The Petit Labyrinth Graffito of Chartres Cathedral** : Jill Geoffrion & Alain Louët announce a newly-discovered labyrinth in Chartres Cathedral
- 9 **The Alatri Labyrinth Fresco** : Giancarlo Pavat describes another remarkable new discovery in Italy
- 12 **The New Harmony Hedge Labyrinth** : Robert Ferré reports on the restoration of the labyrinth at new Harmony, Indiana, back to its original design
- 17 **How important is Context?** : Penny Granger debates the value of location
- 21 **Greys Court: an invitation to symmetry** : Richard Myers Shelton explores the symmetry inherent in certain labyrinths
- 36 **The Wongkot Labyrinth** : Serena Montironi & Reinoud Eleveld describe an unusual labyrinth encountered during their travels in Thailand
- 40 **Considering the Duality of Labyrinths** : Andreas Frei examines a hidden property of labyrinth designs
- 48 **Notes & Queries** : the Cliveden hedge maze restored; a new discovery at Lyveden New Bield; a swastika-pelta wall painting near Chaldon; the world's largest hedge maze?; Keeley's Garden Labyrinth, Los Angeles; the Heysham labyrinth petroglyph; The Labyrinth Society
- 54 **Labyrinth Reviews** : the latest maze and labyrinth books and publications reviewed
- 57 **Caerdroia** : submission details, subscriptions, etc.

Back cover : Pilgrim in the Maze; original engraving by Christoffel van Sichem, 1651, after Boetius van Bolswart, Labyrinthos Archive

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