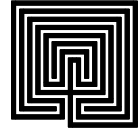


A Mysterious Medieval Maiden



Jill K. H. Geoffrion & Alain Pierre Louët

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

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

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

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

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

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

The labyrinth fresco from Sibbo, Finland

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



During medieval times, women were rarely held in the same regard as men and were often considered to be agents of Satan (Jean Delumeau, *La peur en Occident*. Collection Pluriel. Éditions Fayard, 1978, see chapter 10: Les agents de Satan III. – La femme, p. 398-449). Using makeup was strictly forbidden in the Middle Ages and seen as the work of the Devil because the human face was considered to be created in the image of God, thus altering its appearance was thought to be disrespectful of the Creator. In the centre of this labyrinth, we find a woman's face with painted lips and extra rosy cheeks. Her head is encircled with wavy reddish-orange hair that flows down her neck. The colour of her hair must be understood through the lens of medieval colour symbolism. Red was seen as the opposite of white which represented all that was good and pure. Thus, red was linked to all that was bad, including the Devil, demons, falsity, and betrayal. Yellow was also used to express negativity, and when red and yellow were combined to make orange the negative meaning of the colour was amplified. Orange was used to show the scandalous nature of a person and was thus linked with prostitutes whose reddish-orange hair identified them as such, Judas Iscariot, executioners, and all who were considered outsiders. (Michel Pastoureau, "Tous les gauchers sont roux" in *Le Genre Humain*, 1988/1-2, No. 16-17, p. 343-354.)

The symbol of evil in the centre of the labyrinth has a long tradition, as we discussed in our previous article "The Beast Within" (*Caerdroia* 44, 2015, see page 17 for a list of manuscript labyrinths with only the Minotaur in the centre). From the ninth through thirteenth centuries there are 12 manuscript labyrinths in which the Minotaur, symbol of danger and evil, reigns alone in the centre. That we would find a twist on that theme in the thirteenth century where the Minotaur has been replaced by the depiction of evil in the form of a woman would be unique, and to modern sensibilities disturbing. The understanding and depictions of the centre as a place of danger was later replaced in many manuscripts with images that showed it as a place of victory over evil. As a universal symbol, it is not surprising that the labyrinth's meanings cannot be reduced to a singular interpretation. (See: Geoffrion & Louët, "Medieval Marvels: Fifty-Three Eleven-Circuit Manuscript Labyrinths," *Caerdroia* 49, 2020)

Who or what does this female represent? If we look to context, we find a surprise unknown in other medieval labyrinth pages. The text surrounding this labyrinth, starting on the previous folio and continuing onto the page with the labyrinth is a recipe for a chicken pie. The link between the woman and this particular recipe is far from clear! The ambiguous identity and significance of this female in the centre of the labyrinth remains mysterious.

Folio 80v, Chantilly 0328.

Image courtesy of Musée Condé, Chantilly



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