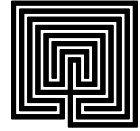


Revisiting the Chartres Labyrinth: A Journey Through Time



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Chartres Cathedral Labyrinth with walkers. Photo: J.K.H. Geoffrion

Over the past thirty-five years, a substantial body of scholarship – both in French and English – has developed around the labyrinth of Chartres Cathedral. These studies have explored not only its historical evolution but also its relevance to contemporary interpretation and practice. This article aims to synthesize the insights offered by this diverse scholarship, evaluate the reliability of the available evidence, and present the findings in a way that encourages further investigation. It considers both established facts and widely accepted hypotheses, while also acknowledging unresolved questions and articulating the authors' critical perspectives. Our goal is to offer a balanced account of the labyrinth's multiple interpretations, providing a solid foundation for future research and the development of new evidence-based perspectives.

Contemporary discourse on the Chartres labyrinth often presumes a singular, enduring interpretation of its significance. However, to move beyond such reductive accounts of its meaning and associated practices, it is essential to engage critically with the historical texts and visual representations through which the labyrinth has been understood over time. The assumption of a fixed identity must be relinquished in favour of a more nuanced, historically grounded approach.

Scholarly interest in the Chartres labyrinth spans a wide range of perspectives. Some researchers emphasize its liturgical dimension; others explore its calendrical or temporal-computational functions. Still others focus on its geometric characteristics and its potential role in establishing key reference points within the cathedral's architectural framework. Each of these approaches offers valuable insights into the layered historical contexts that have shaped – and continue to shape – the labyrinth's evolving significance.

The original medieval builders at Chartres situated the labyrinth within a conceptual and symbolic framework rich in theological, liturgical, and cosmological significance. As history unfolded, subsequent generations reinterpreted its meaning in ways that reflected their own cultural and religious paradigms. During the Classical period (spanning the 17th and part of the 18th centuries), for example, theologians often displayed a marked detachment from the labyrinth's earlier spiritual resonance. In the modern and postmodern eras, both clergy and laypeople have continued to reimagine the labyrinth at Chartres, sometimes in ways that would likely have been unintelligible to those who originally designed it.

It would be naïve to assume that the Chartres labyrinth has maintained a fixed identity or function over the course of its eight-century history. On the contrary, its meanings and uses have evolved significantly across time, shaped by shifting theological, cultural, and institutional contexts. To engage seriously with its historical trajectory, scholars must adopt a diachronic approach, analysing the labyrinth period by period – and, when warranted, century by century. Without such a temporally nuanced framework, one risks flattening the labyrinth's rich and complex history into a static and reductive narrative.

The 13th century master mason who designed the labyrinth at Chartres did so within the specific context of the cathedral – a sacred space intended to embody the theological and cultural values of the time. The labyrinth, in this context, was not merely a decorative feature, but a symbol woven into the spiritual and liturgical fabric of the cathedral. However, these original theological and symbolic meanings differ significantly from how later generations, particularly the clergy, viewed the labyrinth. In subsequent centuries, the labyrinth became a source of concern for some priests, who found the act of walking or running through it distracting and disruptive. So much so, in fact, that some called for its removal.

Consider, for example, Jean-Baptiste Souchet, a 17th century Doctor of Theology and priest at Chartres Cathedral, who dismissed the labyrinth as an *amuse fol* or place for meaningless activity [1866 copy of 17th century manuscript, 220]. How, then, would Souchet interpret the work of an eighteenth-century illustrator who chose to depict the labyrinth with the words of the *Miserere* (Psalm 51) – a psalm of repentance and cleansing – inscribed from the entrance to the centre [Copy of Challine, Chartres BM Ms. 1518, 186r]? This juxtaposition of symbolic interpretations raises the question of whether any common ground exists between contemporary writers and labyrinth practitioners, who often describe the Chartres labyrinth as a “path of life,” and the medieval monks who used similar labyrinth designs in manuscripts to illustrate theological dangers and errors [Doob 1990, 145-191].

These examples make clear that the meaning and use of the Chartres labyrinth have been far from static. It is also important to recognize that the perspectives of clerical elites—who approached the labyrinth through symbolic, doctrinal, and liturgical frameworks – likely differed from those of the laity, whose interpretations were probably shaped by more personal and everyday concerns. This potential contrast between clerical and popular viewpoints highlights the labyrinth’s historical complexity and the potentially diverse ways it has been understood over the centuries.

Further, even within a specific time or place, a single object often serves multiple functions. Consider, for instance, a keystone, such as the one positioned high above the labyrinth. Would a historian limit their study to its architectural role in bearing and distributing the weight of the vault? Or focus solely on its liturgical use, such as facilitating the scattering of flowers or the release of doves during ceremonial acts? Would they consider only its practical utility in enabling necessary maintenance of the cathedral? Of course not. A comprehensive analysis would account for all these functions – and more.

The tension between fixed certainty and evolving hypothesis, between historical analysis and imaginative interpretation, compels us to reexamine the writings and illustrations of the Chartres labyrinth through the lens of different historical periods. Only through such a careful re-evaluation can we begin to uncover a deeper understanding of this remarkable structure, revealing its layers of meaning as they have shifted, adapted, and expanded over time.

To illustrate our desire for greater clarity and accuracy we will consider two important subjects related to the Chartres labyrinth: its location in the cathedral and the round plaque that once occupied its centre. Many other related subjects await similar analysis, and we hope to continue this discussion in one or more future articles.

The Placement of the Labyrinth

Let us now situate the labyrinth within the Chartres Cathedral. The significance of its placement can be understood in many ways. The largest design element in the cathedral [James, 1989, 232],¹ the labyrinth was laid in the floor, an area that medieval theologian Durand de Mende, a significant medieval liturgist and longtime dean of the Cathedral of Chartres, identified as representing the foundation of faith [13th century, republished 1996, 40]. Its placement in the nave assured its visibility to all, both clergy and laity alike. The Chartres labyrinth is situated between the third and fourth bays of the nave, as was the labyrinth installed the Reims Cathedral in 1290.² Some scholars have explored the symbolic significance of these numbers, although no definitive interpretation has yet emerged.

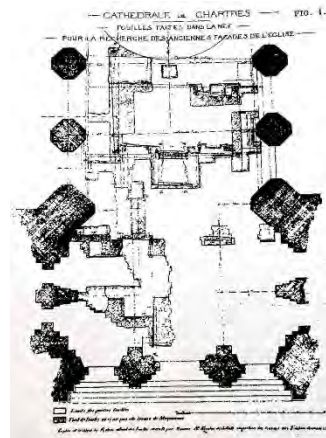
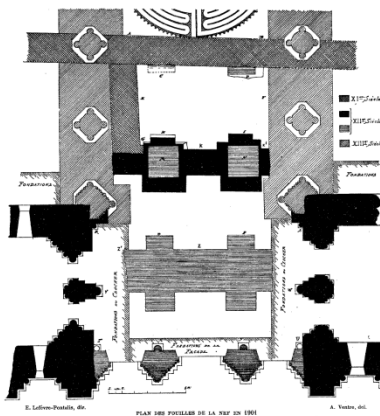
In the second bay of the nave, not far from the threshold of the labyrinth, there is an ancient cross first painted on the ceiling vault between 1200-1220 and repainted in dark red after 1260. Modern scholars, including those related to the recent restoration of the cross, have suggested that it marks the location of the entrance to the labyrinth.³ The idea of an “entrance” in French allows for a wide range of positions – whether the cross is 50 centimetres (20 inches) further down the nave, or three meters (ten feet) away, to the left or to the right, it is acceptable to say it is related to the entrance. Yet the interpretation is far from certain. Perhaps the cross refers to the labyrinth or its entrance in some way, but there is no original documentation that can confirm this or that can clarify what

correspondent meaning it might have held. Does this mean the cross was never perceived as being related to the entrance? On the contrary, it is entirely possible that it was interpreted and experienced in this way for centuries. Should we limit ourselves to this interpretation? Certainly not.



A small painted cross in the vault of the second bay of the nave, during and after restoration-circled for increased visibility

On the floor roughly below the cross are two metal remnants embedded in the stone. The first is roughly 87 centimetres (34 inches) from the outer edge of the threshold stone. The surrounding wear patterns suggest they once held a metal ring. Prompted by popular beliefs that the stone beneath these remnants might conceal a hidden chamber, Eugène Lefèvre-Pontalis conducted an excavation on February 9, 1901.⁴ During this investigation, the west façade of Fulbert's cathedral, constructed in 1020, was uncovered. Remarkably, the current labyrinth lies precisely tangent to this façade, aligning so exactly that coincidence seems insufficient as an explanation. The labyrinth extends over the wall by no more than 20 centimetres (approximately 8 inches) [1901, Lefèvre-Pontalis, 1-48; 1902, Mayeux, 414-23; 1904, Lefèvre-Pontalis, 434-483].



Left: Plan of the excavations in the nave in 1901. The labyrinth of the 13th century cathedral touching the edge of Fulbert's façade from the 11th century [Lefèvre-Pontalis, 1901, 5]

Right: The small square at the centre of the ancient wall just beyond the edge of the labyrinth (top circle) marks the stone where the metal remnants of a ring are located [Mayeux, 1902, 446]

The cross was positioned above the wall of Fulbert's earlier cathedral façade. Such placement is significant, as it likely evokes either the memory of the earlier structure or the consecration of the current cathedral. If the latter is the case, the cross may have been part of the dedication rite, since marking sacred space with a series of crosses was a common liturgical practice in the thirteenth century.⁵ Does this mean these two views of the cross must be opposed? Not at all. The origin may lie in the reality of a cross painted in memory of the previous cathedral or marking the dedication of the new cathedral and, as memory faded over time, it came to be understood in relationship to the labyrinth entrance below.

Let us now consider the relationship between the labyrinth and the west façade of the earlier cathedral. Most scholars agree that the labyrinth was set into the floor of Chartres Cathedral by 1221 [Saward, 2003, 2]. It is regarded as an integral element of the cathedral whose reconstruction began in 1194. How, then, can we explain the clear spatial and symbolic connection between this "new" labyrinth and the earlier cathedral of Fulbert? One possibility is that the labyrinth served an apotropaic function. While possible, this explanation alone is likely insufficient. Some have proposed the existence of an earlier labyrinth in Fulbert's cathedral, but the absence of large-scale, walkable labyrinths on the floors of French cathedrals during the 12th century casts serious doubt on this hypothesis [Joly, 1999, 221].

By adopting a diachronic perspective – one that acknowledges both the labyrinth and the scholar as products of their respective historical contexts – and by rejecting the notion of the Chartres labyrinth as a fixed, unchanging entity, new avenues of inquiry become possible. John James, for instance, has already investigated the relationship between the geometric practices of medieval builders and the architectural layout of cathedrals. Building on this line of inquiry, we propose that the circular area of the labyrinth may also have originally been used to establish key construction alignments not discussed by James or Villette [1991]. In this capacity, it could have functioned during the building process as a site marker, a coordinate, and/or a guiding layout (*tracé*), even if the precise details of its original use remain beyond recovery. Once these foundational elements were established – and precisely because the location held such importance – the area may have been repurposed into the labyrinth as we know it today.⁶ This remains, of course, a hypothesis, but one that may help explain why the labyrinth appears to belong – both symbolically and architecturally – to the earlier cathedral and the present structure alike.

The labyrinth occupies a specific and intentional location, maintaining meaningful relationships not only with its original architectural contexts but also with its liturgical environment. One illustrative detail is that the pathway of the labyrinth begins with a turn to the left. Symbolically, this orientation aligns the labyrinth with both the crypt and the medieval Chartrain principle of sacred movement. The *Chartres Ordinaire* of the 13th century explicitly states that all processions must proceed from north to south [39]. Practically, this means that any liturgical movement – any walking or any pilgrimage – should take place with the sun on one's right. This rule underscores the symbolic primacy of the north, particularly in matters concerning the origins of the world and the organization of sacred space. The movement toward the sun serves to express cosmic harmony. In this way, every procession was intended to reflect and imitate on earth the ordered motion of the heavenly bodies, understood as the imprint and manifestation of divine presence and will.⁷

Scholars must resist the all-too-common tendency to overlook contextual factors when studying the Chartres labyrinth. Although the labyrinth clearly maintains meaningful connections with its architectural and liturgical environments, a fuller understanding of its significance requires attention to other key elements of the cathedral. The relationship between the labyrinth's placement and the surrounding imagery in the stained glass as well as the presence of altars dedicated to specific saints that were placed on the pillars surrounding it are but two areas of study that should be pursued.

History and Problems Concerning the Central Plaque of the Labyrinth

Using the same interpretive lens – one that seeks to understand how the Chartres labyrinth has been shaped by historical context and evolving meaning – we now turn our attention to one of its most enigmatic features: the central plaque that once occupied the heart of the design. The content, function, and even the continuity of this plaque remain subjects of considerable scholarly debate. Exploring this topic invites us to confront both the gaps in the historical record and the multiple, often conflicting, interpretations that have emerged over the centuries.

Let us briefly review the work of historians who have attempted to understand the identity and function of the labyrinth in Chartres Cathedral. We begin with the earliest known depiction of the Chartres labyrinth, Villard de Honnecourt's 1230 sketch, which reverses the pathway and with a centre which appears empty

Villard de Honnecourt. 1230. Paris: Bibliothèque Nationale de France, Français 19093, fol. 7v.

None of authors of scholarly works on the labyrinth who saw the central plaque before its removal in 1793 wrote a detailed description or an produced an accurate drawing of the centre. In 1850, Marcel-Joseph Bulteau – an influential figure in the study of Chartres from the 19th into the early 20th century – adopted the view that the labyrinth symbolized a pilgrimage to Jerusalem [112-115]. He did not mention the labyrinth in his 1855 *Manual for Pilgrims to Notre Dame de Chartres*. In a short monograph published in 1872, he reiterated his earlier interpretation and added the possibility that indulgences may have been granted to those who completed the labyrinth's path [7-9]. His most comprehensive and final treatment appeared in 1887, where he once again referred to the labyrinth as the "path to Jerusalem." In that work, he also advanced several hypotheses – cautiously and tentatively – which have nonetheless been taken seriously by many subsequent scholars.



Bulteau explored the question of what might have been depicted on the plaque at the centre of the labyrinth: “What did that decorated (*historiée*) plaque represent? Was it a horseman entering the city of Jerusalem, as Mr. Raymond Bordeaux seems to believe? Was it the donor of the labyrinth, as in Reims and Amiens? Or was it the Minotaur being fought by Theseus, as seen at the centre of the pagan labyrinths of Pompeii, Strasbourg, and elsewhere [1887, 210]?” Relying on the surviving metal attachment points, he proposed a hypothetical reconstruction. His depiction of Theseus, the Minotaur, and Ariadne is highly speculative (and thus we will not reproduce it here). Given that his reconstruction was based solely on the positions of the tenons which he claimed, “whose outline shows, on one side, a quadruped and, on the other, several standing figures [210],” it is likely that he had never seen a replica or accurate rendering of the original central plaque.

This presents a significant contradiction: how can a path said to lead to Jerusalem end with an image that bears no apparent connection to that sacred destination? Bulteau does not resolve this inconsistency. Furthermore, it is important to note that the existence of such a scene with Theseus, Ariadne and the Minotaur in the centre of the labyrinth has never been definitively established.

Other historians also addressed the question of what once appeared on the round plaque at the centre of the labyrinth. The earliest known historian of the Chartres Cathedral, Rouillard, makes no mention of the labyrinth at all [1609, Parthénie]. The first known reference to the Chartres labyrinth in the written record appears in the work of Raoul Boutrays [1624, 41, 62-63]. He does not speak of the centre. Jean-Baptiste Souchet [around 1654, 22] is the second known to have written about the Chartres labyrinth but he also offers no details regarding the central motif.⁸ Charles Challine, a 17th century historian, was among the few to study the cathedral of Chartres with genuine scholarly rigor. Challine’s contribution is especially significant: he was the first to mention the labyrinth and to provide an illustration of it [1640]. His unfinished manuscript drew renewed interest during the 19th century revival of medieval studies. Unfortunately, modern historians have only had access to 18th century copies of his work, as the original manuscript is believed to be lost.

A descendant of Challine, seeking to make his *Research on Chartres* accessible to a wider audience of enthusiasts, prepared and annotated the texts for publication. This edition was first published in 1918 and reissued in 2006 [Roger Durand]. Upon carefully reading the 2006 edition, the authors of this article were struck by several passages, including a brief reference to the labyrinth. On page 141, the text notes that the centre features the theme of Theseus and the Minotaur. Naturally, one might expect the accompanying illustration to reflect this theme. However, although the paragraph is followed by a drawing of the labyrinth, there is no visual reference to the Greek Myth. Instead, the image depicts the words of the *Miserere* (Psalm 51), inscribed along the path from the entrance to the centre, where the text spirals inward.⁹

*Durand, 2006, 142. With Psalm 51 (Miserere)
written on the path and in the centre*



This inconsistency prompted us to consult the known copies of the Challine manuscripts directly. These investigations seemed significant, as several authors since the nineteenth century have relied – at least in part – on Challine’s 17th century work to support the hypothesis of a *minotauremachy* (a depiction of Theseus and the Minotaur) at the centre of the labyrinth – a centre that most likely featured a metal, perhaps copper, plaque removed during the French Revolution.¹⁰

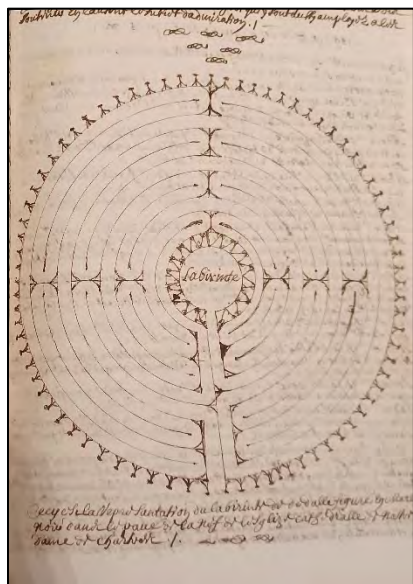
In what follows, we examine the extant manuscripts attributed to Challine to clarify the historical evidence. Five known copies of the manuscript survive. Four are housed in the municipal library of Chartres (Chartres BM 1076, an additional manuscript at Chartres, was destroyed during the bombing raid of 1944), while the fifth is preserved at the Bibliothèque Nationale de France in Paris.¹¹

The Challine manuscripts are as follows:

1. **Chartres BM Ms. 1074** – contains no image of the labyrinth.
2. **Chartres BM Ms. 1140** – contains no image of the labyrinth.¹³
3. **Chartres BM Ms. 1318** – is considered a reference copy, according to Roger Durand, who used it in preparing the 1918 edition. It contains an image of the labyrinth with only a compass point in the central flower. There is also a note on the top of the page saying “This drawing (*figure*) is not accurate (*correcte*).” Indeed, the shape of the flower in the centre and the number of extensions beyond are both suggestive, but not accurate.¹⁴
4. **Chartres BM Ms. 1518, fol. 186r.** contains a labyrinth with the words of Psalm 51 (the *Miserere*) on the pathway, but not in the centre.
5. **Paris BNF Ms. Français 14583, fol. 56r.**¹⁵ contains a labyrinth with a unique centre featuring a circular decoration around circular (not floral) centre. The word *Labyrinte* is written across the centre.

Our analysis will therefore focus primarily on the three final manuscripts, as they are the only ones that include representations of the labyrinth. A few preliminary remarks are in order. First, a fundamental issue must be addressed: the version of the labyrinth published in both the first printed edition (1918) and the second edition (2006) of Challine’s work depicts a design that we have been unable to identify in any extant manuscript. The numbering of the verses of Psalm 51 are not found elsewhere, and its central motif with the final words of the *Miserere* spiralling inward differs from the one older manuscript with the *Miserere* drawn only on the pathway.

A second, and significant, observation must also be made. None of the labyrinths currently known in the Challine manuscripts features the theme of Theseus and the Minotaur at its centre. The Challine manuscript that was destroyed in the fire, Chartres BM Ms. 1076, or another unknown manuscript may have shown a *minotauremachy* in the centre; unfortunately, if they did, they no longer exist. We were not able to examine the entire text of the Challine manuscripts, but we did not find any references to Theseus or the Minotaur in the passages on the pages closest to the labyrinths. To be sure, this is an avenue for future study.



Above left: Paris, BNF MS Français 14583, image provided by BNF¹²
 Above right: Challine, (1701-1800) Chartres BM 1518, fol. 185r.

Right: Chartres, BM 1518, fol. 186r., Challine Labirinthe ou dédale. The accompanying text reads: *The Miserere Psalm has been placed in this labyrinth to guide the reader through it*

The Challine manuscripts present a twofold challenge for scholars. First, they offer no evidence to support the presence of an image of Theseus and the Minotaur at the centre of the Chartres labyrinth. Second, they point instead to a connection between Psalm 51 – the *Miserere* – and the labyrinth’s pathway, a link that has yet to receive sustained historical and textual analysis. This connection is particularly intriguing given the final verses of the psalm, which explicitly reference Zion and Jerusalem, thereby opening the possibility of a symbolic alignment between the penitential journey of the psalm and the spiritual geography of the labyrinth.



Historically, the mystery of the illustration in the centre of the Chartres labyrinth has been taken up by scholars who suggested a link with Jerusalem. In 1824, A.P.M. Gilbert interpreted the Chartres labyrinth as a symbol of the Temple of Jerusalem [60-61]. The Jerusalem theme reappears in the 1847 work of Arcisse de Caumont [202-203]. In 1865, Raymond Bordeaux envisioned a knight entering a city – perhaps Jerusalem – on the central plaque at Chartres [159]. In 1866, Alexandre Assier viewed the labyrinth as a representation of pilgrimage toward Jerusalem [100]. The same interpretation is found in Abbé Auber's *Histoire et théorie du symbolisme religieux*, written in 1870 [156-157]. Between 1867 and 1881, Paul Durand adopted a comparable view [17-18], as did Jules Clerval in 1905 [109-110]. Both nationally and locally, historians of the 19th and early 20th centuries largely agreed on this interpretation. For the principal historians of the cathedral, then, the theme of Jerusalem at the centre of the labyrinth remained a dominant and enduring idea.

However, an alternative local interpretation, previously mentioned, also gained traction in Chartres during the 19th century. Drawing from an unidentified 18th century document attributed to Courtois and supported by the testimony of Janvier de Flainville in 1747 [Doublet de Boisthibault, 1852, 441], some have proposed that the figures of Theseus and the Minotaur appeared at the centre of the labyrinth.

Doublet de Boisthibault succinctly summarized the core issue by quoting Janvier de Flainville's uncertainty: "The figures in the middle are so worn that nothing can be identified" [141]. Roger Joly also suggested that Courtois relied heavily upon the earlier assertions of Challine [1999, 220]. If this is indeed the case, considerable caution must be exercised, particularly given the ambiguities encountered in the Challine manuscripts. Although the term "*dédale*" appears in the copies of the Challine manuscript, potentially evoking the Greek myth, this alone does not substantiate the depiction of a combat scene involving the Minotaur. Therefore, while Theseus might plausibly have been represented, any assertion of his definitive appearance at the labyrinth's centre remains problematic.

There is a deeper issue to consider: if the theme of Theseus and the Minotaur is assumed to have always been at the centre of the labyrinth, it becomes anachronistic when applied to the earliest era. Contemporary French scholars have emphasized that depicting Theseus and the Minotaur would render the Chartres labyrinth unique among medieval church labyrinths in France. André Peyronie [1997, 131], for example, described Bulteau's argument for a minotaumachy at the centre of the Chartres labyrinth as "not entirely convincing" (*pas complètement convaincante*), while Gratien Leblanc highlighted that there is "no definitive evidence" (*aucune preuve certaine*) supporting this theory [1971, 73].

A substantial body of literature has treated as fact what was, at most, a hypothesis – or perhaps a symbolic motif representing only one episode in the labyrinth's long and complex history. This leads to a rarely asked but critical question: If the central plaque did indeed depict Theseus and the Minotaur, to which century should such a representation be attributed?

Historians often begin with the year 1793 when the plaque was removed, as if the question of the plaque's origins were straightforward and self-evident. Many simply assume – without critical examination – that the plaque was present from the very inception of the labyrinth in the early 13th century. This represents a classic case of circular reasoning, and such a presumption warrants closer scrutiny.

The first and most tangible difficulty is this: a metal plaque placed in a high-traffic area such as the centre of the nave could not reasonably be expected to endure for centuries without significant wear. A copper¹⁶ plate subjected to constant foot traffic over the course of several centuries would inevitably deteriorate, particularly in terms of surface detail and legibility. This suggests a practical necessity for the cathedral's custodians to periodically replace the plaque. In doing so, they would have faced a choice: either reproduce the original image faithfully or take the opportunity to reinterpret or update the design. This possibility is reinforced by evidence from medieval manuscripts, where images of labyrinths often display erasures and modifications in the central area, indicating changes or reinterpretations over time.¹⁷

The placement of the plaque at the very centre of the cathedral nave—the area most frequented by the laity – also warrants consideration. Could a theme of obscure or ambiguous origin plausibly have been installed there in the 13th century? Would a medieval layperson have recognized or understood a scene depicting Theseus and the Minotaur? Both the context and the historical period appear ill-suited to a subject drawn from Greek mythology.

One might object that several manuscript labyrinths, dating from both earlier periods and the 13th century, feature central motifs related to Theseus and the Minotaur. These depictions, however, must be understood within the specific context of manuscript culture and its limited, educated audience. These manuscript labyrinths were designed and illustrated by monks and clerics and were intended for an elite ecclesiastical audience. By contrast, the central plaque of the Chartres labyrinth – though undoubtedly created under clerical supervision – was meant to be seen and most likely understood by all. The clerics of Chartres were educators who valued clarity and accessibility. Their authority and influence were rooted in their ability to communicate effectively to the laity.

Can we truly imagine a medieval farmer from the Beauce region possessing the cultural or mythological background necessary to interpret the story of Theseus and the Minotaur? It seems highly improbable. It is therefore unlikely that the original labyrinth featured a non-biblical theme that would have held little or no meaning for the faithful laypeople for whom this area of the church was designed. To underscore this point, we need to ask, what other examples of imagery taken from Greek mythology can found in the cathedral from the period of its construction?

Consider the medieval statuary of the cathedral: it is consistently legible and immediately recognizable, often employing well-established iconographic attributes. When ambiguity might arise, pedagogically minded clerics frequently added scrolls identifying the figures by name, ensuring clarity for all viewers. This supports the argument that if a central plaque once featured a scene from classical mythology, it was unlikely to have been part of the original design. It is far more plausible that the Theseus motif, if it ever existed, was introduced during the French Renaissance in the 16th century. In that case, it likely replaced an earlier plaque – or perhaps several over time – that conveyed themes more consistent with biblical or liturgical tradition.

It may not be necessary to choose definitively between the central themes of Jerusalem and the mythological image of Theseus and the Minotaur in the labyrinth at Chartres. We do not believe the hypothesis of a plaque depicting the Minotaur should be entirely dismissed. These two symbolic interpretations may represent overlapping popular traditions rooted in different historical periods.

Popular memory, which tends to preserve traditions long after their original context has faded, more often accumulates layers of meaning than it erases them. Philippe Ariès has noted similar developments in traditional practices, where ancient rituals or games were gradually transformed into folk or children's activities. Religious customs, too, evolve in comparable ways.¹⁸

Thus, rather than viewing these themes as mutually exclusive, it may be more accurate – and more historically responsible – to see them as part of a palimpsest of meanings layered across time. The Chartres labyrinth, like the cathedral itself, is best understood as a dynamic and evolving site of memory, where successive generations inscribe their own understandings onto a shared sacred space.

Conclusion and Suggestions for Future Study

The Chartres labyrinth resists simplification. Its specific location in the cathedral, construction, symbolic interpretations, and central imagery have all undergone significant transformation over the centuries. Rather than adhering to a single explanatory model, a more fruitful approach is to embrace the labyrinth's evolving identity – a convergence of architectural precision, theological meaning, devotional practice, and cultural imagination. Like the sacred space in which it is embedded, the Chartres labyrinth invites multiple readings.

Our research on the history of the Chartres labyrinth has led to explorations in many other areas, the fruit of which we hope to explore in future articles. Subject matter includes understanding the significance of the historical names used for the Chartres labyrinth, the changes in artistic depictions of the Chartres labyrinth over the centuries, the relationship of the Chartres labyrinth to the theological concepts of Jerusalem and the New Jerusalem, liturgical and pilgrimage practices in Chartres that may shed light on this contextual labyrinth, and how ideas of game and play (*jeu*) may enrich our understanding of this labyrinth. There is much more to study, including possible relationships between stained-glass imagery to the labyrinth and possible usages of the labyrinth by the renowned medieval School of Chartres. We implore scholars to continue to mine the known, and yet to be discovered, documents relating to this significant labyrinth and to share their learnings.

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Notes

1. The diameter of this labyrinth like the width of the nave was the largest in medieval France. Diameters for the largest decorative elements in the cathedral: Labyrinth: 43.32 feet or 12.9 meters; West rose 39.04 feet or 11.9 meters for the glazed area; North rose 34.4 feet or 10.5 meters; and South rose: 34.65 feet 10.56 meters.

2. The Chartres (1201-1220) and Reims (1290) labyrinths are found in the third and fourth bays of the nave. The labyrinth at Amiens (1288) was found in the fourth and fifth bay. At St. Quentin (1495) it is found in the first two bays. While numerological approaches (arithmology, sacred number theory, and mathematical symbolism) have indeed been central in past centuries, the topic remains open for further exploration.
3. We wish to extend our thanks to Irène Jourdeuil, the Heritage Curator at the Regional Directorate of Cultural Affairs (DRAC) for the Eure-et-Loir. Her confirmation of the dating about the cross and her reflections on its significance were very informative. Among other helpful comments, she explained, “The fact that it was repainted, perfectly superimposed, demonstrates its symbolic importance.”
4. No such chamber (*cache*) was found.
5. While scaffolding to paint the cross would not have remained in 1260 when the cathedral dedication took place, the cross could have been painted in anticipation of the dedication. See also: Didier Méhu. 2014. “Les marques lapidaires peintes de la cathédrale de Chartres.” In *Construire et restaurer la cathédrale Chartres XIe-XXIe S.*, édité by Arnaud Timbert. Lille: Presse: Universitaires du Septentrion, p.392.
6. For similar cases of such ground plans (*épure*) used in cathedral building, see Florence Claval. “Les épreuves de la cathédrale de Clermont-Ferrand.” *Bulletin Archéologique du comité des travaux historiques et scientifiques* 1984-1985: 20-21, 185-224. Another related but later example is a floor plan originally designed to assist with ceiling decoration that was later repurposed for the decoration of the floor itself at the chapel of the Château d’Anet in Eure-et-Loir (near Chartres).
7. This idea is closely related to the medieval notion of the harmony of the spheres. See: Peter Connolly, *The Harmony of the Spheres: A Sourcebook of the Pythagorean Tradition in Music*, (Inner Traditions, 1998).
8. How could a historian like Souchet, or a scholar and poet like Boutrays, have described the Chartres labyrinth as futile [Boutrays, 41, 62] or as a frivolous amusement [Souchet, 220], if a visible, clearly identifiable plaque depicting the theme of Theseus and the Minotaur had stood before them? Both were well acquainted with this classical motif, which carried religious significance in their cultural and intellectual context. At most, they might have lamented a particular practice or a lack of understanding among their contemporaries. But that is not what they did. Instead, they deplored the presence of the labyrinth itself in a “sacred” space, insisting that it did not belong there.
9. One can scarcely imagine that the practice of inscribing a psalm was ever applied to the stone labyrinth of Chartres. As we have noted elsewhere, Souchet (ca. 1590–1634) regarded the labyrinth merely as a decorative element. Given his stature as a historian with a doctorate in theology, his roles as notary, secretary of the Chapter of Notre-Dame de Chartres, and later canon of the cathedral, the presence of a psalm inscribed on the labyrinth stones could hardly have escaped his attention or interest. By contrast, it seems unlikely that Challine’s manuscript labyrinth accompanied by a psalm can be reduced to simple ornamentation or rhetorical flourish. The author clearly intended a practice and a theme that gave meaning to his graphic design. His aim is explicit: “*The psalm Miserere has been placed in this labyrinth in order to guide the reader.*” Challine (1596–1678) appears to reflect a contemporary devotional practice linking Psalm 51, the *Miserere*, to penitential exercises. To pursue this line of inquiry further, one might consider Nicolas Vignier of the Diocese of Chartres and his *Pratique de repentance ou Sermons sur le Pseaume 51* (Chartres: Gaucher Collas, 1631). Since Challine was not the only one to place a psalm within a labyrinth, future study of this subject might be

fruitful. The practice of linking psalms and labyrinths extends across several centuries and appears in remarkably diverse contexts and traditions – from Chartres to Russia, including Jewish communities and the Moravian Brethren.

10. There is an 1801 reference to the Revolutionary use of local copper, which might be related. It was written by Vincent Chevard, the Mayor of Chartres. He described a copper covering on the tomb of Henri de Grez, the bishop of Chartres who died in 1246 at the Jacobin Church in Chartres. He notes, “Their images (figures) were engraved on a large sheet of copper that was removed during the Revolution and, along with several others made of the same metal, was used for the casting of two cannons for the defence of the city.” Vincent Chevard. 1801. *Histoire de Chartres et de l’ancien pays chartrain avec une description statistique du Département d’Eure et Loir*. Vol. 2. Chartres: Durand-le-Tellier. 63. See also Villette, 23 and Joly, 213.
11. For details on the destruction of Chartres Library manuscripts during World War II, see: Jean-Pierre Babelon, *Chartres: Histoire et patrimoine* (Paris: CNRS Éditions, 1995), 214. See also: Georges Lelièvre, *Chroniques de la Bibliothèque de Chartres* (Chartres: Archives Municipales, 1947), p.58-59. See also the archival notice in: *Bulletin de la Société Archéologique d’Eure-et-Loir*, vol. 43 (1946), p.37-40. No visual record or description of MS 1076 survives.
12. With thanks to Mme. Maffre in the Département des Manuscrits who answered our questions and provided us with an image of the labyrinth from the Challine manuscript that has not yet been digitized.
13. Manuscript 1074 and 1140: Archives of the Bibliothèque municipale de Chartres. Catalog descriptions in: Henri Jadart, *Catalogue des manuscrits de la bibliothèque de Chartres*, 2 vols. (Chartres: Imprimerie Garnier, 1899), vol. 1, p.152-161.
14. Roger Durand, *Préface à l’édition des recherches de Charles Challine sur la cathédrale de Chartres* (Chartres: Imprimerie Garnier, 1918), v–vii. Durand explicitly refers to MS 1318 as the principal manuscript used in his editorial work.
15. See Paulin Paris, *Catalogue des manuscrits français de la Bibliothèque nationale*, vol. 5 (Paris: Imprimerie Nationale, 1866), 317-319. This manuscript has not been digitized.
16. Most authors speak of the plaque being copper. The history of this claim could be a fruitful avenue of future study.
17. See Geoffrion and Louët. 2020. “Medieval Marvels: Fifty-Three Eleven-Circuit Manuscript Labyrinths.” *Caerdroia* 49, p.8-27. See also: Louët and Geoffrion. 2015. “The Beast Within.” *Caerdroia* 44, p.10-23.
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Cover : detail from the Watts Chapel altar, Compton, England, ca. 1898. Photo: J. Saward

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Caerdroia 54 was produced during September and October 2025 by Jeff and Kimberly Saward at Labyrinthos HQ. Opinions stated by contributors are not always those of the editors, but *Caerdroia* welcomes open discussion to provide a forum for all who are lured by the labyrinth.

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