



Few symbols of antiquity are as universally familiar as the labyrinth - the maze created by the Athenian mastermind Daedalus to house the Minotaur, illicit offspring of the Cretan queen Pasiphae and a bull. No one who entered the labyrinth could ever find the way out, until the hero Theseus, aided by King Minos' daughter Ariadne, killed the man-eating monster and made his escape.

The origins of this haunting tale are lost in time. Some scholars suggest that the myth of the labyrinth was inspired by the multi-chambered "Palace of Minos" at Knossos, in whose maze of rooms early Greek visitors might well have got lost. The word "labyrinth" has been connected with "labrys", the two-headed axe which sometimes adorned Minoan architecture. The wall paintings of bulls and the stylized bulls' horns in the Palace of Minos might have suggested to the Greeks a taurine purpose for the maze. In fact, the "horns of consecration" on the parapets of Knossos, like the human-headed bulls (Minotaurs in reverse) at the entrance to Assyrian palaces or the lions on the gate of Mycenae, may have been "apotropaic", intended to ward off enemies. Entrances to towns and restricted areas were often guarded by fierce creatures, such as the sphinx at Thebes, Cerberus at the gates of the Underworld, or the griffins which guarded the gold

mines of Scythia. Indeed the labyrinth or maze was itself apotropaic, designed to confuse and disorient potential aggressors. The double walls of Mycenaean Tiryns formed a sort of ring maze, and an enemy who penetrated its outer defences could not easily find the entrance to the inner.

The concept of the labyrinth fascinated the Romans as well. For the Romans, a "labyrinth" floor pattern not only provided a conversation piece in one's home, but performed an apotropaic function. By sympathetic magic, a maze mosaic at the entrance to a house might confuse burglars or evil spirits trying to break in. For added protection, the labyrinth could be enclosed by a wall with towers and gates to make it extra formidable. Examples of this type of labyrinth are known from a Late Republican mosaic at Pompeii (see Figure 1) and a mosaic of about A.D. 300 from Thuburbo Maius in Africa (Figure 2), the centre of which depicts Theseus slaying the Minotaur.

What could confuse malefactors could also intrigue children. The elder Pliny informs us that mazes also figured in children's outdoor games. How these worked is unclear; perhaps a large maze was scratched in the dirt and the child had to find a way to the exit without stepping over any lines. We do know that Roman boys mounted on horseback used to play the "game of Troy", a mock battle in which the two opposing forces would ride round each other (one group clockwise, the other

counterclockwise) in concentric circles like the rings of a maze. No one knows how this sport got its name, but Virgil cannot resist tracing it back to the Trojan boys in the company of Aeneas, who performed the manoeuvre at the funeral games of Anchises. "Once upon a time," he explains, "the Labyrinth on lofty Crete enclosed a path concealed by blind walls, with dangerous deceit in its thousand ways, whose meandering course, which could not be discovered or escaped, left no clues to follow" (*Aeneid* 5.588-91).

Was the Minoan labyrinth round or square? The uncertainty of this problem is reflected in the coinage of Knossos itself in the Late

Republic. The labyrinth was this city's logo and claim to fame, but the coins inconsistently show it as round (Figure 3) or square (Figure 4). Even in the round maze the artist is careful to use a right angle where the first corridor branches off from the entrance. If the unfortunate victim ever found his way back to that corridor, he would see a wall at the end of it and assume it was a dead end.

The labyrinth seems to have been a widespread design in the Roman world. A child's graffito from Pompeii, inscribed "Labyrinth: The Minotaur lives here" (Figure 5), bears a striking resemblance to one of the Knossos coins. In mosaics the labyrinth is regularly divided into four equal sections of maze (Figures 1-2) but these are sometimes simplified and stylized. This trend reaches its ridiculous extreme in a mosaic from Conimbriga (Portugal), where the artist is so obsessed with making the quadrants symmetrical that he has provided four entrances, making escape easy. Only the symbolic bull's head in the centre assures us that the mosaicist had the Minoan labyrinth in mind.