

Unicursality

Description

The traditional unicursal maze has no forking paths but leads directly to its centre. As a drawing or ornamental pattern you imagine the lines are walls and trace your finger through the opening. You eventually arrive at the centre, through a series of left and right turns. There's just one path through the intestines of this maze structure. The OED describes something that's unicursal as "Having, traversing, or being on one course or path."

Nigel Pennick's seminal book on mazes and labyrinths provides a detailed compendium of major examples throughout history, and their attendant derivations, narratives, myths and theories.

According to Pennick, some traditions treated the path as a metaphor for life — from perdition to salvation: life's goal seems within your grasp only to be lost and found again along the journey. The maze's path as traced takes you close to the centre, and then further away, only to return eventually to the centre.

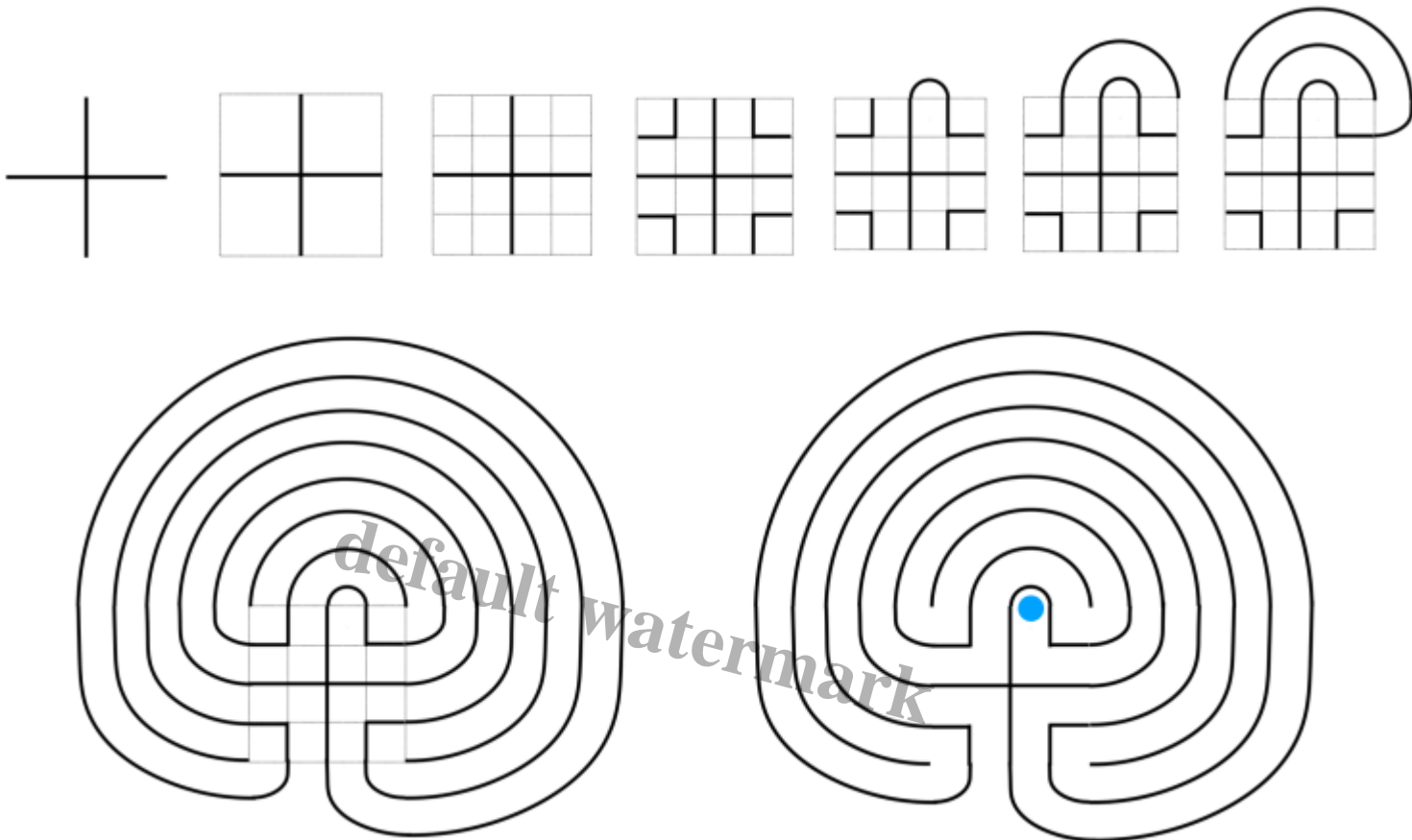
The path also serves as an image of the macrocosm, in particular the movement of the sun as it passes over the four cornered earth. The sun rises somewhere in the east and sets in the west, but it drifts over the months and seasons in a kind of spiral pattern, particularly pronounced in northern (or southern) latitudes. The maze traces this spiral motion as you follow it, but also as you try to draw the maze.

Constructing the maze

The unicursal maze provides a simplified diagram of this movement. You start with a square aligned notionally with the points on the compass. You draw arcs connecting points on either side of the square, but asymmetrically. Both the drawing of the maze and its traversal follow this kind of back and forth spiral path.

I've drawn the derivation of the maze here with its origin in the ordinal cross and the four square grid (*double tetractys*). Pennick doesn't emphasise the grid in his derivation diagram (p.18), but I think it makes sense to relate the narrative to [Vitruvius's account](#) of the layout of the Roman city. Each of the turns that make this a maze occur at the grid. Vitruvius didn't write about labyrinths, though a

Google search reveals that plenty of writers have done so on his behalf.



Maze vertigo

If you move along the path of the maze as a pattern on the ground, either inside a building or outside, you are likely to feel dizzy. Hence, the maze is associated with a disordered state, or [vertigo](#).

The OED relates *maze* as a North Germanic and Scandinavian variants of *mase*: •exhausting labour, nagging, •whim, fancy, idle chatter, •trouble, bother, •to bustle, fuss about, strive, slave away, reiterate, pester, beg, •to wear oneself out, •to toil, to idle, dawdle, •to bask, sun oneself. •

In English, to be amazed is to be bewildered, astonished and perplexed. The term *maze* is often associated with a puzzle, involving forking paths, but it also implies exhaustion from the labour and frustration of traversing the length of the path and negotiation all those turns. It's a state that can usefully be described as vertigo • a symptom of spinning your body around.

Some traditional dance moves follow the pattern of the unicursal maze, as if to amplify the vertigo effect, and to release the apparent chaos of the heavens.

Seventh heaven

The maze structure also provides a means of relating the fourfold construction of the microcosm, the earth, to the seven planets of the pre-Copernican universe, the seven notes of the octave, and the seven levels of heaven. After all, the method of maze construction delivers seven concentric arcs or circuits.

According to another tradition, the centre of the labyrinth would be occupied by a young maiden. Any suitor that could navigate the dizzying curves of the labyrinth without stepping off the path would be worthy of the prize.

Maze security

The maze also served as a means of confounding access, as a rudimentary security system. The famous maze of Knossos was reputedly such a maze, impeding access to the mythical Minotaur and keeping the beast locked in. In any case, the winding paths would confuse entry and exit. For Pennick, according to this theory, the maze

is a means to arrest an intruder by means of confusion, whilst simultaneously it protects the centre from penetration by any intruder (39).

If there's a tower or summit at the centre then invaders are in full view while traversing the walled maze. They are vulnerable to archers or gunfire. The centre also provides a rewarding overview outside the confusion and entrapment of the maze's pathways. The centre symbolises the [aha moment](#) of prospect and clarity, the reward for the tortuous journey required to get there.

This unicursal maze has many variants, though it still retains a place as the model of all mazes. It turns up in ancient ornaments, coinage, graffiti, tilings, arrangements of stones and in paving, as well as built structures and hedged gardens. A maze as an adjunct to a formal garden would be called a *wilderness*.

Thinking about cities and their codes, the maze derives from the grid, and is not so far removed from the contemporary city, its structures, twists and security systems.

Reference

- Pennick, Nigel. 1990. *Mazes and Labyrinths*. London: Robert Hale

Category

1. Architecture

Tags

1. ciphercity
2. labyrinth
3. maze

Date Created

July 13, 2019

Author

rcoyne99

default watermark