

CAERDROIA

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CAERDROIA

THE JOURNAL OF
MAZES & LABYRINTHS

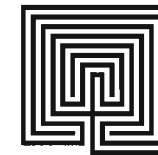


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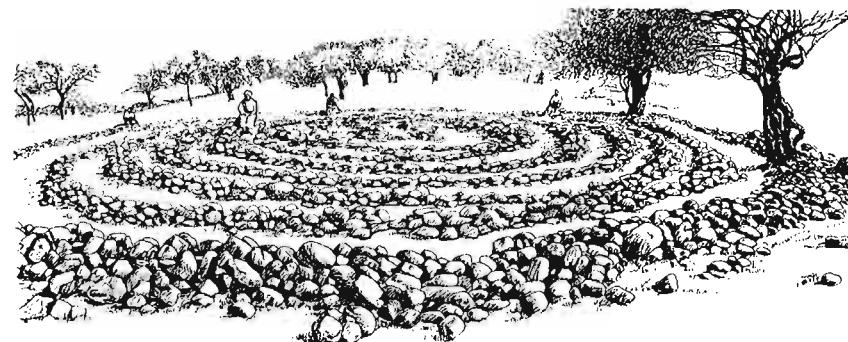
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Welcome to the 36th edition of Caerdroia, after the delays with the last edition, relatively hot on its heels, at least by the standards of Caerdroia! With the production schedule once again back on track, this edition contains several items that I have long been looking forward to publishing. For many years there has been considerable discussion about the little known labyrinths to be found in India, and following the note about the newly discovered prehistoric labyrinth petroglyph in Goa in the last edition, this time we have news of recent labyrinth fieldwork in the south and west of India. Evidently, more discoveries await in the Indian sub-continent, and new chapters on the history and distribution of labyrinth in this region will also need to be written.

Beginning in the Spring of 2007, Kimberly and I will be editing and publishing a new annual publication from the Labyrinthos stable. Provisionally titled *Labyrinth Pathways*, it will focus on labyrinths in the fields of Spirituality, Health, and the Arts. Further details and submission guidelines will be posted on the Labyrinthos website in due course and copies will be available from both Labyrinthos and The Labyrinth Society. The Caerdroia and Labyrinthos website is also in the process of being extensively updated and revised, so look out for that sometime early in 2007 also. Meanwhile, on with Caerdroia 36...

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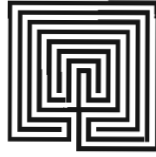


The former stone labyrinth at Sitimani, Karnataka, India (see page 60)

Erratum

A quirk of file formatting between different versions of software inadvertently deleted the numbers of the rules laid out in Tristan Smith's paper "A Daedalus for the 21st Century" in Caerdroia 35. Consequently, readers should insert the numbers 1, 2 and 3 before the second, third and fourth paragraphs in the section marked "Terms and notation" on p.27, the number 4 before the second paragraph on p.30, and the number 5 before the two paragraphs beginning a) and b) directly below. My apologies go to Tristan, and to readers who were in any way confused. My version of MS Word has been suitably reprimanded!

Kota Labyrinths in Southern India



Klaus Kürvers

In 1982 the first edition of the standard work on labyrinths, by the art historian Hermann Kern, documented an “incised drawing in a Kota village in the Nilgiris,” that represented a game. The accompanying illustration shows the “Ariadne’s Thread,” the line representing the course of the path that leads into the centre of a classical or “Cretan” labyrinth, similar to those on the Cretan coins, but drawn differently around a central circle. Kern reproduced this drawing from an essay by the English anthropologist John Layard, published in 1937, with the following comment:

“Ariadne’s thread of a Cretan-type, seven-circuit labyrinth, incised on the wall of a house in a Kota village, Nilgiris. The game is called Kōtē, ‘fortification,’ and the object of it would seem to be to reach the centre.”



The Kota labyrinth as depicted by Layard and Kern.

The drawing remains puzzling. Is the path of the labyrinth incised, or its encircling rings – the walls? Is the concentric form an abstraction by the artist, or is the labyrinth really like this? Which wall and house, and where exactly is this carving? What about the game, who plays it and what does the fortress symbolise? Is it identified as the entire labyrinth or does it lie in the centre, surrounded by the seven paths?

If we question Kern’s source, an essential observation emerges; it is established that Layard did not report from his own experience. He describes the drawing thus:

“...labyrinths carved on the stone walls in front of houses among the Kota of the Nilgiris. One such... is recorded by Breeks as having been seen by him incised on a stone wall in front of a Kota house.” (Layard, p.175)

Therefore, the labyrinth is apparently not on the walls of a house, but on a stone wall in front of a house. Although Layard is given as Kern’s source, he does not reference the description of James Wilkinson Breeks, from 1873, from which the drawing derives. The report of Breeks is therefore the only one based on viewing the location:

“On several of the stones, forming the wall in front of the rows of houses in Kuruvōje (Padugula), I found that lines had been chiselled for the games of Hulikutē and Kotē. The former is played with pieces, two of which represent tigers, and the remainder sheep; the latter is a kind of labyrinth, the problem being to get into the centre.” (Breeks, p.41)

The Kotē labyrinth therefore is located, together with a Hulikutē petroglyph, on different stones of a wall in the village of Kuruvōje (Padugula), in front of a row of houses, and both figures are understood to be games. The possibilities of the existing literature are apparently exhausted, but Hermann Kern added to his documentation of the Kotē, drawn by Breeks, another remark that takes us further:

“The labyrinth continues to play an integral role in the lives of the Kota; Jean-Louis Bourgeois, who travelled throughout India in search of labyrinths, found numerous labyrinth petroglyphs there, as he reported to me in letters of 19 March and 9 May 1979.”

Kern also reproduces two photographs by Carollee Pelos, conveyed to him by Jean-Louis Bourgeois, the American architecture historian, in 1979. They were taken in the “Kota village of Padugula” and show a stone partially overgrown by grass, incised with a seven-circuit labyrinth 16.5 cm in diameter. The path that leads into the centre stands in relief and a small hollow is carved before the entrance of the labyrinth. Based on correspondence from Bourgeois, Kern describes the surroundings of the stone as:

“A shrine (temple) in the shape of a small dolmen is located in the immediate vicinity and measures 40.6 cm x 101.6 cm x 109 cm. Four additional small labyrinth petroglyphs are within a 10 m. radius of the temple.” (Kern 2000, no.620-621, p.291)

The age of this structure is difficult to assess. Megalithic structures like these have been built since the South Indian Iron Age, 1st millennium BCE, and are still erected by the Kota to the current time.



Photographs of the Padugula labyrinth inscription taken by Carollee Pelos, 1979.



The labyrinth design photographed by Pelos at Padugula corresponds quite exactly with those found on the coast of Galicia in northwest Spain, in Cornwall and Ireland, as well as in the Caucasus, certainly in construction and style. Dating these stone carvings is extraordinarily difficult and often based on supposition alone or nearby finds and comparisons. The creation of the Galician petroglyphs is given by Kern as approximately 900-500 BCE, the age of the two carvings in Cornwall as 1800-1400 BCE and the example in the Caucasus as from the end of the 2nd millennium BCE (Kern 2000, p.67-72). More exact studies of the locations often lead to very different datings. For instance, Abegael Saward in her examination of the famous labyrinth petroglyphs of Rocky Valley in Cornwall, gives convincing reasons for their formation not in the Bronze Age, but approximately 200 years ago in the 18th or 19th century (Saward, 2001). The function and meaning of these labyrinths in Europe are also largely unknown.

The two photographs, first published by Kern, have been reproduced many times and appear in many more recent books on labyrinths as proof of the world-wide spread of this symbol. However, a more detailed report by Bourgeois and Pelos about their discoveries is not included in the bibliography, and apparently has never been published. Questions also remain whether the village of Padugula is the same location that Brecks visited more than 100 years earlier.

In Search of Padugula

The labyrinths of the Kota in Southern India are interesting not only because of their distance from those in Europe, but above all, because they seem to have preserved until modern times an active relationship and meaning for the villagers where they are found. In order to learn more about these petroglyphs, I undertook, together with the photographer Jürgen Hohmuth and our well-informed local guide and interpreter Nova Thomas, a trip into the mountain region of the Nilgiris, also known as the "Blue Mountains," from Cochin in Kerala in November 2004. We equipped ourselves with copies of the old photos and detailed geographical maps of the Nilgiri District to help in our search. Ooty (also known Ootacamund or Uhagamandalam) is the central town of this district, in the northwest of the state of Tamil Nadu and sits on a plateau at 2,268 meters (7,440 feet) above sea level, at latitude 11° north and 77° East. It was here that J.W. Brecks (1830-1872) lived as "ridge escort to the British colonial administration of the Nilgiris High Commissioner" and his book, from which we owe our knowledge of the labyrinths of the Kota, was written during his ethnological exploration of this region.

At the Tribal Research Centre at Palada (near Ooty), the museum and documentation centre for the native cultures of the region, the stone-carved labyrinths of the Kota were unknown. In our search for the village of Padugula, that was not to be found on any of our maps, we drove first to the small town of Kotagiri, 28 km east of Ooty, which we had learned was still occupied by members of the Kota tribe. At the local police station, we learned that Mr. K.M. Shanmugkampakattan, the secretary-general of the Tamil Nadu Adhivasi Welfare Association would know about these things. Belonging to the Kota tribe, he acts as a speaker for the tribal peoples of the Nilgiris, and therefore knows the villages in the region very well.

He immediately recognised the stone in the photo, knew that it was the Kotē symbol and was sure that this stone was to be found in his home village of Kil Kotagiri (Little Kotagiri), previously known as Padugula. He also remembered having seen similar petroglyphs in other Kota villages, but besides the name, he knew nothing of their meaning. He was rather astonished that we were asking about this ancient and almost forgotten thing, and the long journey we had undertaken to get here.

In the company of Mr. Shanmugkampakattan we drove to Kil Kotagiri. However, we were unable to locate the rock and the dolmen photographed in 1979. Several inhabitants of the village, including the oldest person in the village and the priest, remembered the stone and the dolmen, which should have been set in a lawn within the grounds of the Shiva temple, to judge from the old photos. The Shiva temple lies on a grassy hillside, facing north, opposite the Parvati temple. Even if the Kota consider themselves Hindus, they still practice their old nature religion. Shiva corresponds to Aynor, the sun god, Parvati to the moon goddess Ammnor. The temples, which can only be entered by adult men, are surrounded by grass lawns, which can only be stepped on barefoot.

The village priest of Kil Kotagiri standing on the rock with a pentagram and a tiger game board. Photo: Jürgen Hohmuth



"Some years ago," the two temples were the subject of a state program of village redevelopment and were replaced by new buildings. To judge from the 1979 photographs, the stone with the labyrinth has become completely overgrown and presumably the dolmen was removed at that time. Another stone that still juts out from the lawn surface has different inscriptions, similar to those we would later find in other villages: a pentagram and four diagonally crossed squares filled with a triangular line structure, used as a board for the Tiger Game, "Puli Attam."

The houses of the village were linked to the temple hill by a wall, also replaced during the redevelopment. Several petroglyphs of labyrinths are supposed to have been on some of the stones of this wall. We found some of the stones from the old wall scattered around the village, but none with a labyrinth inscription. But on one of these stones, two linear figures, which were explained as game boards, were incised. One consisted of ten squares, arranged in two rows, and the other was the tiger game we had previously seen at the temple. According to the villagers, most of the rocks that previously formed the temple wall were re-used in 1997 to build a new embankment for the village stream and washing place, and are now buried beneath a blanket of cement.

In Kil Kotagiri, the labyrinth symbol is known as Kotē and it is remembered that it was connected with the Shiva temple. However, its function and meaning were unclear. Some inhabitants had heard from their grandparents that it was supposed to be a game, whose rules were forgotten. The temple priest thought it was a magical emblem for the protection of the village, above all from the members of the local Kurumba tribe who had special powers at their disposal. The disappearance of the stones left him indifferent - their protective function is required no more - he explained to us that the police manage this today. However, we were undecided in the circumstance whether this answer had to do with the presence of our leader, who functions as a mediator between the villages and the police!

The village of Kil Kotagiri, before the local infrastructure was improved was known as Padugula. Since then, it has been regarded as a suburb of Kotagiri. Padugula is the Kota name for a trackless or wild place and there was another village known by the same name, now called Sholur Kokkal. The old Kota name of the village was Kurgoj, and it was this village that was visited by Brecks. It was there, and in two further villages of the Kota, that we would find labyrinths in the following days.

The Seven Villages of the Kota

In the Tribal Research Centre we had discovered that the 1999 census recorded 1,984 individuals belonging to the Kota tribe, living exclusively in the Nilgiris. Living alongside the Irula (350,000), the Badaga (300,000), the Kurumba (250,000) and the Toda (1,000), the Kota are natives of this mountain region. Each of these five tribal groups speaks their own language, all belonging to the Dravidian, and therefore to the Indo-European language family, but nevertheless they are clearly distinguished from each other. The agreed “lingua franca” is the Bagada language, although Tamil is increasingly spoken and also English, which every child now learns in primary school.

The Kota are above all craft persons, and live together in a working symbiosis with the other groups, in seven far-scattered villages. These all lie in the proximity of a village of the other tribes, but nevertheless strictly apart from them. Apart from the somewhat larger Kotagiri, the Kota villages consist of two or three streets of houses, called “keri,” of 30 to 60 houses in rows. They marry only within their own tribe, and live in extended family units. Along with their Anglicised Badaga placenames, there are also Kota names, (shown below in brackets), and the seven occupied villages, some containing only a few families, are named as follows:

Gudalur Kokkal (Kala:c); Trichigadi (Ticga-l); Kotagiri (Porga-r); Kil Kotagiri (Kina-r), Padugula, Sholur Kokkal (Kurgo:i); Padugula, Kollimalai (Kolme-l) and Kunda Kotagiri (Me-na-r).

The spelling of the village names is not uniformly regular, and only a few are noted on maps or street signs; without a local guide it can be difficult to find them.

The Forgotten Game of Kotē

We visited all seven of the Kota villages and found stone-carved labyrinths, all with diameters of 15 - 25 cm, in three of them, Sholur Kokkal, Trichikadi and in Gudalur Kokkal, the oldest village of the Kota. With help from our guide and the copies of the old labyrinth photos, we questioned the villagers, and above all the oldest persons and priests, about the Kotē symbol. In all three villages, someone immediately recognized the design and led us to the stones or boulders with the engravings, usually after expressing astonishment over the reason for our visit. They were mostly hidden under a thin layer of rain-washed clay, and would have been hard to casually discover. After they were cleaned with water, one could clearly recognize the lines engraved into the stone.

In all three villages, several labyrinth carvings exist, always located within the grounds of the Aynor or Shiva temples, also known as “Surya” or sun temples. Except for the temple priest in Kil Kotagiri, who held the symbol as a protective device, the villagers were united over its function: it is supposed to have been a game, played only by high-ranking persons, but nobody knows the rules anymore. Most called it Kotē (fortress), but in Gudalur Kokkal, the name Kota attam (Kota game) was given. Some of the elderly assured us that their grandfathers would have known nothing more about this game. In all cases, when we were shown the labyrinths, they were traced by one of the men with their index finger, from the outside to the centre. The width of the path corresponds to that of a fingertip so exactly; one would like to assume that the Kotē were created expressly for this purpose. But what is so difficult about this game? Or was it purely a meditative, concentration or relaxation practice?

Gudalur Kokkal

Today, only a single extended family live in the oldest Kota village of Gudalur Kokkal, on the western edge of the mountain region. Here we found two labyrinths on the edge of a rock in the former Shiva temple grounds, together with a tiger game, the Puli attam. One of the two labyrinths is poorly drawn and not at all accomplished, however, the other is perfectly constructed, with the winding path defined by deeply carved lines.

The rock at Gudalur Kokkal, inscribed with two labyrinths and a tiger game board.

Photo: Klaus Kürvers, November 2004



Besides those on this rock, there are two other labyrinths on individual stones built into the traditional “Kalaval,” the meeting place of the men within the temple grounds. Each Kota village owns such a place, as with the Shiva and Parvati temples. It is the venue for village advice, the “Koot”, at which the oldest persons of the clans or extended families of the village, the “Keri”, meet under the leadership of the “Kokkal Gottukaran,” chosen by them. They discuss laws, determine the dates of holidays and decide the other issues involving the village community. Beside the village meetings, there is another meeting of the Kokkal Gottukaran of all seven villages, which meets in the village of Kollimalai, in order to discuss encroachment of tribal land issues. The temple district in Gudalur Kokkal is a historic place, but the Shiva temple was transferred to another site a long time ago, without the stone engravings being repositioned there.

Sholur Kokkal

In Sholur Kokkal, the wall that was mentioned in the 1873 description of the stone carvings by Brecks still exists. It belongs, as at Kil Kotagiri (where it has been torn down and rebuilt), to the sacred district of the Shiva temples and delimits this from the areas of housing. No temple stands in the area today; it was transferred to another place in the village “a long time ago” - exact dates are never certain from the conversations with the villagers. However, the former temple district remains sacred and the taboo, that it may only be entered barefoot by adult men, remains. The old stone engravings are only found in these places, not in the grounds of the newer temples - an indication of their considerable age.

On the flat upper side of a stone block set in the western wall of the former temple district, we discovered four incised designs. Two game boards, of similar form to those noted at Kil Kotagiri and Gudalur Kokkal, are located between two classical labyrinths with diameters of 21.5 cm and 15.5 cm, called Kotē by the villagers here. Besides these two labyrinths, we also noticed another on a single stone half buried in the temple lawn, however, from respect for the sacred ground, we gave up on attempting to dig it up.



Left: the carved rock at Sholur Kokkal, with two labyrinths and two game boards. Photo: K. Kürvers

Below: demonstrating the tiger game. Photo: J. Hohmuth



Above: the labyrinth-inscribed stone still buried in the temple lawn.

Right: tracing the Kotē labyrinth with a fingertip.

Photos: K. Kürvers



Both of the linear structures are variations of the Puli attam or Nay attam, the tiger or dog game. It is played by two individuals or groups, the tigers and the dogs. On the board, small stones mark the dogs; bigger stones symbolize the tigers. The smaller game, in which a triangle is overlaid by a rectangle, is played with 3 tigers and 10 dogs, the larger with 5 and 15. At the start of the game, the tigers have set home positions and the dogs are freely positioned, one at a time, on the intersections of the lines. The tigers can 'eat' individual dogs by jumping clear over them, but for the dogs the object is to hold the pack together. While they cannot 'eat' the tigers, through skilful manoeuvring, the pack can hold the tigers in place and stop them moving. The tigers win if all of the dogs are eaten; the dogs win if the tigers can make no further moves.

This game is both popular and widely known amongst the Kota and at the annual meeting of the seven Kota villages, a championship is held. The Puli attam is played not only by the Kota, but is widespread in India, with varying rules and game board layouts. One finds such game grids commonly at temples and also incised in moist concrete, or marked with a stick in the sand or clay ground, in mundane street areas. The anthropologist Siegbert Hummel has studied these variations of the tiger game, with wolves against goats and sheep, and also people symbolized by the gaming stones. He holds that all variations of this game have a prehistoric origin, probably in the regions where sheep and goats were first domesticated; therefore they probably originated and spread from the vicinity of the Hindukush, the Karakorum Mountains and the Pamir area (see Hummel, p.221). These strategic games of two unequal opponents are also widespread in Europe and are often similarly referred to as "fortress games". This connection between the tiger game and the Kotē labyrinth game, by its juxtaposition on the stones in the mountain villages of the Kota, has not been previously noted.

Trichikadi

In Trichikadi, the sacred district of the Aynnor temples is not bordered by a wall alone, but also by a road. On a rock, located on the Kalaval, the meeting place within the area, are five perfectly constructed labyrinths, one with two strange "tentacles" in front of the entrance. Another pentagram and a large and small tiger game, played with five stones, are also carved on the rock, along with two further small ornamental carvings whose meaning remains unclear. Here the stone engravings generally lie within the temple district, and cannot be touched by women and children. This temple district and the Kalaval are still in use today, unlike at Gudalur Kokkal and Sholur Kokkal, and three large upright stones slabs are located here, the "Mandhukal," which each man that wishes to speak before the Koot must touch and swear that he speaks the truth (see Chellaperumal).

The "Kalaval" (the men's meeting place) at Trichikadi; the inscribed stone is on the left side of the circular stone structure. Photo: K. Kürvers





*The inscribed rock at Trichikadi, with five labyrinths, tiger games and other geometric figures.
Photo: K. Kürvers*

To summarize our findings in these three villages, we determined that the labyrinths carved in stone, known as Kotē (fortress) or Kota attam (Kota game), are generally considered to be a long-forgotten game. They are always found in connection with the sun temple, and with the meeting place of the men. Considered the most important social place in the villages, this is also where the tiger game was played. The custom is apparently very old, because they are located not only in the oldest of the Kota villages, but also exclusively in the older temple districts, even when the location of the temple was subsequently moved to a new site. None of the villagers could ever remember a visitor asking about these engravings before our visit. Above all, the elderly hold that they are connected exclusively with the ancient tribal tradition of the Kota - when they learned from us that there is similar tradition of stone-carved labyrinths in Europe, they were confident that the Europeans must have inherited this idea from the Kota!

The tiger games are still played today as an entertainment. By reason of their situation, and the historic and ethnological research into the history of similar games, it can hardly be assumed that they were positioned specifically for this purpose. They could have had a function in the context of the administration of advice and justice that was practiced at these meeting places, and could have been used as neutral instruments for the judgment process or decision making (see Riemschneider 1959 & 1968; Hummel; Huizinga). The question of whether the “fortress game” labyrinths can be brought into context with such a judicial practice cannot reasonably be answered from this sparse tradition for the moment.

Dating the Kota Labyrinths

If one wishes to appraise the age of the labyrinth carvings in the Nilgiris, one must first ask about the age of the Kota villages and the settlement history of the region. Mr. Shanmugkampkattan, our Kota guide, informed us that the oral tradition of tribal history amongst the Kota tells that they settled here in the Nilgiri Mountains “a long time ago” to “escape from warlike Moslems.” Various anthropologists are of the same opinion (e.g. Reddy & Balaji Rao; Hockings 1980). Not only the Kota, but also four other tribes, are supposed to have settled here at different times. The first were the Kurumba, followed by the Irula. Later came the Kota and Toda, settlers from the northeast of Kerala and the plateaus around Mysore. Finally, the Badaga arrived, and their settlement story is precisely known through the long-time research of the American anthropologist Paul Hockings.

The Badaga also came from the plateaus of the former kingdom of Mysore, in the south of the present-day state of Karnataka, in several waves of emigration to the Nilgiris and have been settled here since the second half of the 16th century. The political and cultural starting point for the emigration of the Badaga is supposed to have been the conquest of the Hindu Vijayanagara Kingdom and the destruction of Vijayanagara (today known as Hampi) in the year 1565, by the unified Muslim Deccan Sultanate. The succeeding independent kingdom of Mysore, established under the Hindu dynasty of the Wodeyar, was again under the reign of Muslim conquerors, Hyder Ali and his son Sultan Tipu, between 1761 and 1799. Further movements of the Bagada into the rugged Nilgiris Mountains took place until this time, a process only finally halted during the English colonial period, when the kingdom of Mysore was re-erected, and formed the forerunner of the present-day federal state of Karnataka.

However, the escape of the Badaga “before the Moslems” was a different event to that of the Kota, they were already living in the Nilgiris when the Badaga arrived. The emigration of the Kota, also from Mysore, has been linked to the end of the Hoysala Dynasty (1040 to 1345), and the destruction of their capital Dvarasamudra (modern-day Halebid) in the year 1327 at the hands of Sultan Muhammed Tughluk. The dynasty of the Hoysala was subsequently replaced by the kings of Vijayanagara (Hampi) in 1345. During the Hoysala Dynasty, the well-known temples at Belur and Halebid were erected. On our journey, we also visited Halebid, in order to see two labyrinths that are carved, along with many other figures, on the stone facades of two temples. We also searched in vain, with help of a local guide and an archaeologist from the Indian Antiquities Authority, for a third labyrinth, which should be on a later, unfinished temple. However, a casual remark by the archaeologist that the destruction of the city in the year 1327 clearly interrupted work on the building site has bearing on the oral tradition of an earlier Kota village on the site.

The Kota tradition of escape “from the warlike Moslems,” is coupled with the main professions of the Kota that live in the Nilgiris today; above all they are craft persons and artists. The women master weaving and ceramics, the men work as musicians, instrument and toolmakers, carpenters and smiths. They still have command of an ancient knowledge of metal extraction and specialization of the smith’s craft, from fine gold and silverwork to the production of iron tools. At Halebid and Belur, such experienced craft persons were supposed to have lived and worked on the temple building sites, before their exodus into the mountains. Gudalur Kokkal lies 200 km (125 miles), a four-day march, southeast from Halebid. As for the dating of the earliest Kotē labyrinths in the Nilgiris (probably those at Gudalur Kokkal), a possible date in the first half of the 14th century would seem well founded, however, the labyrinth symbol was probably already well known to the Kota.

The Chakra-Vyūha Labyrinths at the Halebid Temples

The Hoysaleswara temple in Halebid (Dvarasamudra), was started in about 1121 by the architect Kedaraja and completed during the reign of Narasimha I (c.1142 – 1173), the sixth of the Hoysala kings. It is a double installation, two linked temples dedicated to Shiva and his spouse Parvati. The facades are decorated with stone carved friezes, approximately 30 cm high, including a pictorial representation of the Mahabharata, one of the oldest of the Indian oral folk-epics passed down over the centuries and already written down before the 4th century AD. The description of a battle that lasts for 18 days, between the rival dynasties of the Kauravas and the Pandavas, is an essential part of this story. On the 13th day of the battle, Drona the magician and the Kaurava General arrange their army into a complicated circular formation called “Chakra-vyūha.” Followed only by Bheema, his father's brother, Abhimanyu, a youthful prince of the ultimately victorious Pandava, succeeds in penetrating the unconquerable formation with his chariot and kills a number of the Kaurava troops. But the plan that Bheema should secure the retreat fails, and the Chakra-vyūha becomes a trap in which Abhimanyu is killed. This tale reminds one of the tiger game and its variations, where it also about the fight of unequal opponents, strategic formations, killing and obstruction. The Chakra-vyūha battle formation is displayed on two temple facades in Halebid, and takes the form of a labyrinth which has the inner section drawn as a spiral.

The sculptors here at Halebid were faced with the task of creating a pictorial representation of the Chakra-vyūha, previously only verbally described. It is the earliest known depiction of this battle formation, although it is doubtful whether the strategic military formation actually took the form as given here, or whether it was really a labyrinth as shown. Possibly, the sculptor had fallen back on his knowledge of the Kota attam as the solution to the problem put to him, since the form in the text is only described as a complicated ring formation. The possibility that the sculptor had contact with the toolmakers of the Kota, or may have been of that tribal group, remains a possibility.

The spiral modification of the inner circuits of the labyrinth could be explained as technical necessity, in view of the task of depicting numerous warriors and chariots, and the battle formation, within a limited field on a frieze, only 30 centimetres (12 inches) high. A second, similar, but somewhat more roughly worked Chakra-vyūha is located on the smaller Kedareshwara temple, built approximately 50 year later for King Viraballala II (1173-1220).

The Chakra-vyūha friezes from (above) Hoysaleswara, and (below) Kedareshwara, Halebid. Photos: K.K.



The Stone Labyrinth near Kundani

In connection with our sightseeing at the temples in Halebid, and the discovery of an unexpected possible connection between the temples and the Kota, until now not mentioned in the literature, we also went in search of a labyrinth-shaped stone installation, also documented and illustrated by Layard in 1937 essay (Layard, p.175). We found this in Tamil Nadu, 67 kilometres southeast from Bangalore, north of Krishnagiri. This is some 237 kilometres (148 miles) southeast from Halebid and 219 kilometers (136 miles) northeast of Gudalur Kokkal. Apart from a similar stone installation in the federal state of Orissa (Kern, no.619) this is possibly the single walkable labyrinth known in India. It resembles the Trojaborg labyrinths from Scandinavia, however, as with the Chakra-vyūha carvings on the temples in Halebid, the inner part is formed as a spiral.

The stone labyrinth is situated beside the Baire Gauni, a natural feature developed into a water reservoir. This is on the Devarakundani malai, a sparsely overgrown, elevated rocky area not far from the temple of the ruined town of Kundani. The town was destroyed, according to the locals, by a fire, caused by lightning, “a long time ago.” The fire was interpreted as a sign from the Gods and a new settlement was built some kilometres from the temple.



The “Kota” stone labyrinth at Baire Gauni, Devarakundani malai, Tamil Nadu, India.

Photo: J.Hohmuth

The present-day inhabitants of Devarakundani belong to the Kurumba tribe, who also live in the Nilgiri Mountains. However, they told us that the Kota lived here before them. One of the oldest villagers, a former shepherd that we met at the temples and asked for directions to the stone setting, with help from a copy of the drawing published by Layard, immediately remembered the stone construction on the hillside.

He arranged for a young guide to lead us on foot to the location, half an hour away on the Devarakundani malai. He didn't have any idea, like all inhabitants we questioned, about the function or meaning of the stone setting, however the old shepherd could remember its traditional name - he called it “Kota,” the same name as the former inhabitants of Devarakundani. So, we discovered an unexpected example here, again not previously mentioned, of a connection with the Kota as the possible builders of this stone labyrinth.

*Right: The temple ruins at Kundani.
Photo: K.Kürvers*

There is little to be found in the literature about the temple ruins at Kundani, despite good documentation of temples elsewhere in Tamil Nadu. Some are cave-like and often overgrown, but nevertheless still used by the people living in the surroundings as temples. Much simpler and more archaic than those we saw at Halebid, they are only sparsely decorated. The names of the temples refer to the Mahabharata. One is dedicated to the five brothers of the Pandava, another to their mother Kunthi, the grandmother of Abhimanyu who was killed in the Chakra-vyūha of the Kauravas, indeed the name of the town, Kundani, derives from her. Around the Baire Gauni, the water reservoir on the Devarakundani malai, there are erected several dolmens, formed of large flagstones, three to four meters long, resting on rounded stone blocks. These megalithic constructions are similar to those in Europe, but if, as Layard reports, they were called "Pandava gudi" (Pandava temples), we cannot confirm this, as it is the temple ruins lying in the valley that are so-named; a specific name for the megalithic stone structures on the other hand appears unknown.



*Above: "Dolmen" on Devarakundani malai.
Below: The flagstone standing by the labyrinth.
Photos: K.Kürvers*

From the Kota labyrinth there is an extensive view to the far horizon. Over a wide river valley in the east, a mountain range approximately 6 kilometres distant has a prominent cut between two mountains, ideal to observe sunrise at the time of the equinoxes. Exactly to the south, a prominent dome-shaped mountain stands on the horizon and to the north of the labyrinth, a towering flagstone approximately two metres high stands before the entrance. This corresponds with the Mandhukal that we saw at the men's meeting places in the Kota villages. Behind it lies a small Shiva temple in the form of a stone box formed from large rock slabs, with an entrance in the east. Standing in the labyrinth and looking westward, our local guide explained that a long stone wall at the foot of the mountains was the border of the former Pandava territory.

The Kota labyrinth has a diameter of approximately 8.5 meters, with its entrance in the north, and is constructed from a multitude of small flat stones set in the ground. This place seems not to be generally known among the inhabitants of the surrounding villages and it was the shepherds who led us there. This place is puzzling for them; like the temples in the valley, they consider it to be ancient, but as for the meaning of the labyrinth, nothing more seems to be known.

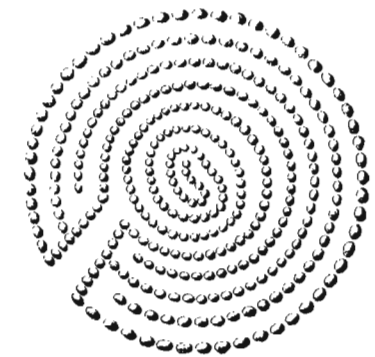
One suspects that that the area around Baire Gauni, with its upright flagstone and stone tables, as well as its location and altitude on the Devarakundani Malai, is an old meeting place of the former Kota settlement at Devarakundani, connected with the temple and town of Kundani. The spatial connection of the Kota stone labyrinth with this meeting place, as well as the nearby Shiva or sun temple, reminds one of the situation of the stone engravings in the Kota villages of the Nilgiris. The spiral-shaped variation of the inner area of the labyrinth, on the other hand, clearly reminds one of the Chakra-vyūha on the temple facades at Halebid. All three locations, approximately equally far from each other, have a reference to a settlement history by the Kota.

We are not able without further knowledge gained by archaeological or anthropological research to assess whether the temple ruins at Kundani are older or younger than those at Halebid. The archaic forms don't necessarily point to a greater age. It is possible that refugees created them after the destruction of Dvarasamudra, and merely reflects a decay of the craftsmanship. It would seem that a cult place of the Pandava was erected here at Kundani - a materialisation of the Mahabharata, to have lain at the base of its foundation - and it is possible that the archaic temple forms have been consciously historicised. The labyrinth-shaped stone setting on the Devarakundi Malai consequently could represent the Chakra-vyūha in which Abhimanyu was killed. While we don't know anything about the function of this stone setting, in view of its spatial situation, it is possible that it was used as dance place in the framework of a ritual performance of the Mahabharata.

The question, whether it was created after the model of the temple representations in Halebid, or was itself a model for the Mahabharata sculptors, must remain unanswered for the moment. The spiral-shaped distortion of the labyrinth could be explained as a technical necessity for the sculptor in Halebid, but if the stone setting near Kundani were supposed to have created earlier than the temples in Halebid, an explanation would be required for the spiral.

On the other hand, it must be remarked that this spiral-shaped transformation of the classic labyrinth form is not unknown, as it also appears in Northern Europe. In 1838 the zoologist and naturalist Karl Ernst von Baer (1792 - 1876) discovered a similar example on the uninhabited island of Wier in the Gulf of Finland, likewise with a walkable stone lined path. However, it seems at the moment unjustified to construct a connection between these exceptional forms on grounds of their formal similarity.

*"Stone Arrangement on the Island of Wier"
engraving by E. von Baer, 1844.*



Our expedition to enlarge our knowledge of the labyrinths of the Kota in the Nilgiris can justify the supposition that they have some connection with the labyrinths on the temple facades at Halebid, and also with the stone labyrinth near Kundani. The original function of these labyrinths, however, still remains unclear. Equally as uncertain, remains the connection between the classic labyrinth form found amongst the Kota, and those in the Mediterranean and Northern Europe. An invention, independent of each other, appears to be an improbable explanation in view of the complicated construction of the labyrinth.

For the labyrinth is Southern India, however, we can name a number of associations following the conclusion of our field research: sun temples, meeting and justice places, symbolic fortresses, battlefield formation and military strategy, protection magic, finger games and concentration exercises, an age-old strategy game connected with the domestication of sheep and goats for the protection of the herd and the Chakra-vyūha of the Mahabharata, an impregnable fighting formation that turned into a deadly trap for the opposing forces. Further detailed investigation of these individual labyrinths could possibly add more to these findings, which will make it possible to better understand the puzzling phenomenon of labyrinths.

Klaus Kürvers; Berlin, Germany, September 2006

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Mazes and Mysteries



David Ellis

Mazes and labyrinths have been linked with mystery and mayhem since the ancient legend of the Minotaur. Half-man, half-beast, this shameful monster was confined by the king of Crete in an elaborate enclosure built by Daedalus, the all-purpose artificer of the time. The Minotaur was killed by the Athenian prince Theseus, aided by a clew or clue - that is, a ball or hank of thread - that he attached to the entrance to the creature's lair and unwound to mark his way through its tortuous passageways. As well as demonstrating how evil and terror could be overcome by a resolute hero, this enduring myth established an association between mazes and labyrinths and dark secrets, hidden monsters and the threat of death. And Theseus's clue developed into the essential requirement for those aiming to penetrate mysteries as the word evolved to mean some crucial item, fact or circumstance pointing to the truth.

Whatever the labyrinth constructed by Daedalus may have been like; today most people's idea of a maze is probably a narrow twisting walkway between tall dense hedges.¹ In Britain such mazes appeared in the sixteenth century and over the years were increasingly to be found in the grounds of stately homes, country houses and public pleasure gardens. The most famous example is the one at Hampton Court Palace, southwest of London, originally planted between 1690 and 1695. Jerome K. Jerome recorded a disastrous excursion there by "Harris" in Chapter 6 of *Three Men in a Boat* (1889), a Victorian comic episode that reflected a contemporary perception of the hedge maze far removed from the ominous Cretan labyrinth, reinforcing instead the role mazes had acquired as places for innocent amusement.

Harris's day out is hinted at by M. R. James, the doyen of the ghost story, in his tale *Mr Humphreys and his Inheritance* (1911).² However, James summoned up recollections of the good humour of Jerome's anecdote in order to sharpen the contrast with the markedly different mood of the maze into which he led his own readers in this piece. For despite its setting in the East Anglian countryside around 1895, James's maze is not at all cosy or inviting:

"It was a yew maze, of circular form, and the hedges, long untrimmed, had grown out and upwards to a most unorthodox breadth and height. The walks, too, were next door to impassable. Only by entirely disregarding scratches, nettle-stings, and wet, could Humphreys force his way down them ... The dankness and darkness, and smell of crushed goosegrass and nettles were anything but cheerful."

This is a maze of mysteries. Why is it surrounded by a high wall? What is the significance of the motto above the padlocked entrance? And why is there a queerly engraved metal globe on the stone column at its centre? Adding to the general eeriness, Mr Humphreys happens upon a strange labyrinthine fable, complete with a reference to Theseus, in an antique book in his library.