

According to Fisher and Gerster (*fn. 1*), ‘There is a correlation between the areas invaded by Nordic settlers during the Dark Ages and the places where turf labyrinths were created. Place names such as *Wing* [Old Norse *Vengi*], *Dalby*, *Asenby*, and *Brandsby* [the two latter close to Viking York] have Nordic origins.’



Figure 1: A classical seven-ring labyrinth

Functions of labyrinths

In pagan cultures, labyrinths seem to have had a variety of functions: as symbols of death and rebirth, they may have been used for religious ceremonies, initiations, and rites of passage; or they may have been used as a means of drawing upon supernatural powers, for example to seek fertility and ensure personal safety, or even control of the weather: Fisher and Gerster describe how fishermen walked labyrinths on the shores of the Baltic before setting out to sea, in the hope of ensuring a good catch and a safe return:

Fishermen believed they were followed everywhere by *smagubbar* – bad luck people – but you could lead them to the centre of a labyrinth, then run very fast out to the boat and put to sea, leaving the little people behind, stuck in the labyrinth.

This perhaps echoes a widespread belief that evil spirits cannot turn corners; labyrinths are still carved on doorway thresholds in southern India to ward off evil spirits.