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From life to death and back to life.
The Labyrinth archetype and the Knossos Palace in Crete

Abstract

This contribution aims at reflecting on the relationship between the constructed work and its original form, referring to the case of the Palace of Knossos in Crete as an archaic and original architecture, an ancestral place where the cultural practices related to death and rebirth found their stable and evocative form. The archetype of the Labyrinth, as well as the space of the cave, constitute the thematic poles around which the discourse on the Palace of Knossos is articulated, a constructed work to host the rites of passage between life and death, reified in the impeded wandering and in the meanders, in their intimate relationship with a nucleus that guards the *mysterium tremendum* and that opens to the idea of the infinite continuation of life through death.

Keywords

Knossos Palace — Labyrinth — Cave

The Palace of Knossos in Crete, the original, archaic place where the ancestral foundation of the West began with the conception of Europe, is a paradigmatic case of the relationship between ritual and architectural forms: it stages the fundamental opposition between life and death, light and shadow, oblivion and remembrance.

The construction of the second palace, dating back to 1600 B.C., took place on the ruins of older buildings, attesting to the foundation of a complex located mainly on the west side, overlaid by the work of Daedalus, the mythical author of the Labyrinth: master of the τέχνη, an Athenian devoted to the cult of Apollo who found himself in the service of Dionysus, he was induced to construct, through artifice, the deception aimed at the man who challenges Minos.

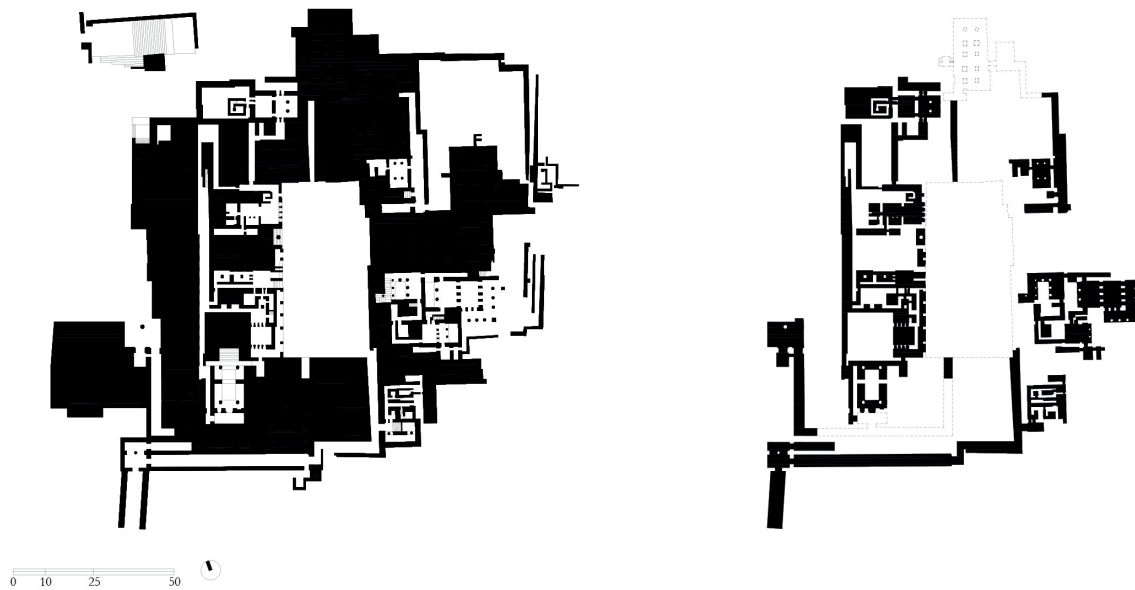
In fact, the construction is based on geometric principles that mark its course and directions, modulating the tangle of possible deviations. Daedalus therefore «configures a «rhythm» that is given by the alternation and combination of knots and corridors, by their order, their syntax, and also by the continuous change of direction, by the acceleration and stasis, by the form of movement that Ariadne's thread materialises» (Ugo, 1993, p. 159). As Michelangelo Cagiano de Azevedo, (1958, p. 29) observes, the myth of Theseus, Ariadne and the Minotaur, as well as the figure of Daedalus, are “Attic nationalistic enrichments”, since the foundation of the first Palace can be dated to 2400 B.C. and its reconstruction, over a millennium later, is another thousand years distant from the Periclean age proper. In addition, Minoan culture, particularly that of the proto-Palazial period (2800-1900 BC), presents substantially different cultural characteristics compared to Greek and even Mycenaean culture: if forms of collective, artistic and religious life can be identified that herald Greek civilisation, they are based

**Fig. 1**

Plan of the semi-hypogeum level and reconstruction of the first level of the Palace of Knossos, drawing by the author.

on different worldviews, even the idea of death appears different. Even the idea of death appears different. It is not presented as an oppositional term of life, but as its necessary continuation. For Diodorus Siculus, the ruins of the Palace are identified with the ‘foundations of the house of Rhea’, showing how the rites and cultic practices of the early Minoan civilisation were directed towards the cult of the mother earth: similar traditions can be found in other areas of the Mediterranean basin, as, for example, in the megalithic cult on the island of Malta. But the figure of Daedalus can take on a symbolic significance: as the builder of the Labyrinth and the *kopós* for Ariadne to dance on, as Homer’s famous passage testifies, he represents the intention to found a palace for Minos, the royal figure governing the island of Crete, thus indicating the conception of a work built for a specific purpose, not only as the political centre of the Minoan civilisation but also as its religious and cultic centre, a place where the worship of properly chthonic deities could be recognised and represented. The construction is mainly oriented to the interior and to the depths of the Earth: the Throne Room, for example, is set up as an evocation of a sacred cavern.

The Palace of Knossos, as we know it today, can be divided into an aerial, solar part, designed to host life, and a semi-hypogean, chthonic part, dedicated to death. There are two formal and constructive registers that work dialectically together: on the one hand, the continuous wall system that, with its knots and changes of direction, gathers a basement, which is contrasted by the openness of the upper fronts, characterised by the use of the Minoan column and the pilaster. The act of concealment and unveiling are thus staged, made evident by their coexistence in a selected space: the central courtyard. This constitutes the largest opening in the complex (54x27m), while the other courts are considerably smaller and provide air and light to the rooms. The zenithal openings, with the exception of the main courtyard, are configured as cavities, surrounded by columns, around which are articulated systems of ramps and staircases serving the different terraced levels. The entire Palace has a vertical distribution of this type. In plan, homogeneous parts of the complex can be identified, indicating an organisation in districts or sectors converging in a labyrinthine pattern towards the central courtyard. The central courtyard seems to offer itself as an unobstructed space around which two main sectors are arranged, west and east, offset from each other and homogeneous in the type of cluster.

**Fig. 2**

The labyrinth of the semi-hypogean level. In evidence on the left, in the western part, are the processional corridors, the central sanctuary, the throne room, the lustral basin to the north and its connections; in the eastern part, the double axe room and the lustral basin to the south. Right, inversion figure background, drawing by the author.

The western sector of the semi-hypogean floor consists of the storage rooms, arranged in a comb pattern, the central sanctuary, juxtaposed to the loggia, the Throne Room¹, in which there is the first lustral basin, and the northernmost complex, in which there is the second and largest lustral basin. These rooms are reached mostly through the central courtyard, which is accessed by means of three paths that converge in it, connecting the processional ways that wind outside in the north-west part of the complex. The western sector forms the architectural core of the entire palace, where cultural activities took place and it is possible to hypothesise that rituals associated with the Labyrinth, the fundamental, primordial, archetypal and denotative form of the palace itself, took place. In order to grasp the compositional aspects of the architecture of the Palace of Knossos, it is necessary to investigate the relationship between the built work and its archetypal root, the Labyrinth, by adopting a third term, which has already emerged from the previous considerations, the cave. As Paolo Santarcangeli (1967, p. 98) points out, the most important rooms are intentionally kept small: they are intended to reproduce the structure and spatiality of the cave, places dominated by rare entrances to light, which comes from aerial cavities rather than from courtyards. The lustral basins, as initially defined by Arthur Evans, are the most expressive points of this formal conception, since they are narrow, semi-hypogean spaces that can be reached through meanders and dark halls, and constitute the cultic nucleus destined for female initiation rites or, more generally, those connected with fertility, practised by the Cretan civilisation as early as the Neolithic era, but also found in the myth of Persephone through the return of the abducted woman: the same «return that was celebrated in Eleusis with the announcement of a birth in death» (Kerényi 2016, p. 36). The homological and non-isomorphic relationship² between the lustral basin and the space of the cave allows us to recognise the connection between the Palace and the archetypal form of the Labyrinth. In fact, there are three etymological roots to which the origin of the term can be traced: the first and most common is λάβρυς, the Greek name for the double-headed axe, a ubiquitous symbol in the Palace of Knossos that has constituted an authoritative hermeneutic basis in historical studies on the Minoan civilisation; a further root of the term can be traced back to λάβρα, originally indicating the cave or mine with

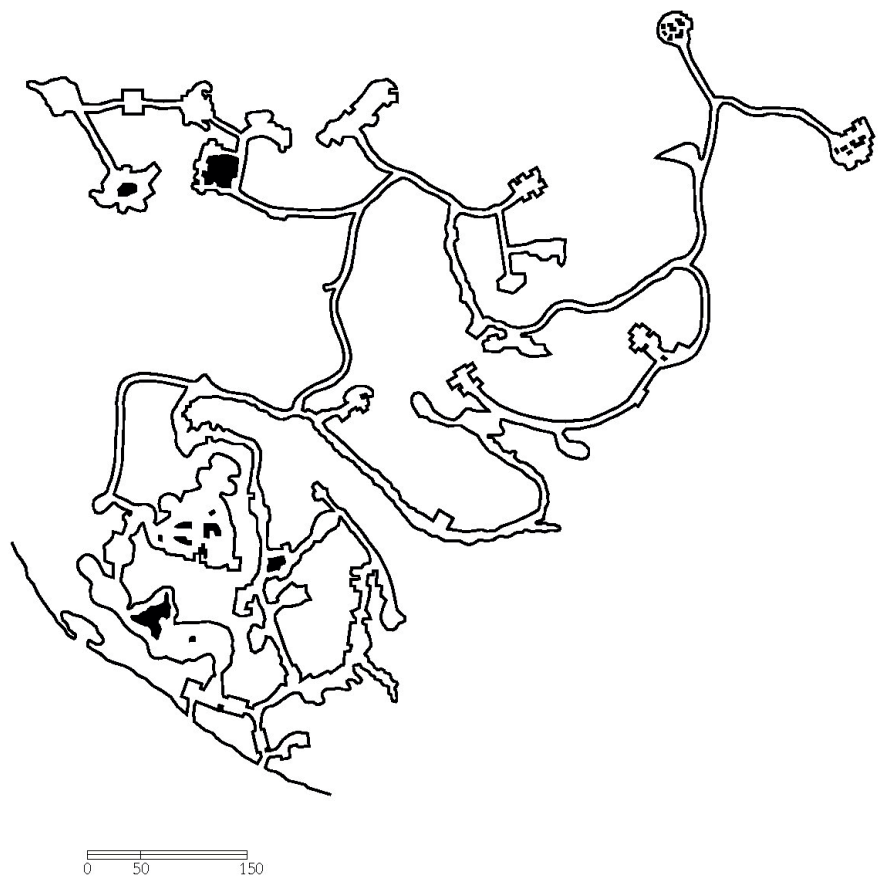
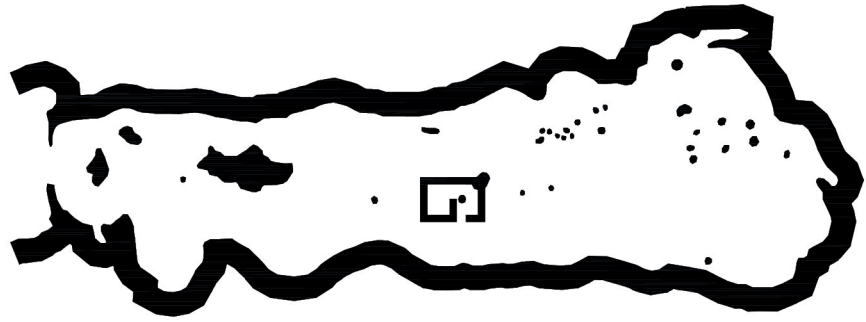


Fig. 3
Plan of the Gortyna Cave, drawing by the author.

many tunnels; a third root, instead of tracing the term Labyrinth to a possible Greek derivation, searches for the origin of the meaning in the sparse written evidence of the Minoan civilisation, we want to refer to Micheal Ventris' decipherment of the 'linear B a post-Palazzian tablet in which the Minoan and Mycenaean languages are mixed, "where the word "da-pu-ri-to-jo", in the tablets, stands for "labyrinth", and indeed appears associated with "po-ti-ni-ja", i.e. Potnia, the chthonic divinity" (Santarcangeli, 1967, p. 63). The lemma *daburinthos* is composed of two parts, where the first – *dabur* – properly indicates the sacred place marked by the meander shape, i.e. the Labyrinth, while the suffix *inthos*, of Mycenaean origin, indicates the complex of buildings of which the *dabur* is a founding part.

The third hypothesis appears to be the most convincing from an etymological point of view, also because at the time of the construction of the Palace of Knossos, generally recognised as the Labyrinth of the ancient Mediterranean, the term 'axe' was not translated as *labrys* but as *pe-le-ky* – *πέλεχυ* –, thus invalidating the first and most widespread hypothesis advocated by the discoverer of the palace itself, Sir Arthur Evans. The hypothesis that the Labyrinth coincides with the idea of a building for cultic activities is also supported by the theories of Cagiano de Azevedo and Carlo Gallavotti. The latter points out that the Labyrinth does not identify the complexity and grandeur of a building, but rather indicates the semi-hypogean quality of such a construction in the centre of which a sacred place is housed; Cagiano de Azevedo, on the other hand, traces the origin of the term back to the cave, to the place found or excavated in the depths of the earth. «An underground 'sacred' environment characterised by the presence of a sovereign fe-

**Fig. 4**

Plan of the Amnisos cave with the meander in the centre, drawing by the author.

male deity, a πότνια: this is therefore the typically religious significance of the Labyrinth. While it remains difficult to determine its location (Gortyna?), its cultic purpose is clear: the Cretan cult practised was that of a chthonic deity and, as such, naturally hypogean» (Petroli, 1990, p. 229). We would also like to report the position of Francesco Aspesi (2016), who identifies the *daburinthos* with a different place from the Palace of Knossos, namely the cave of Amnisos near the mouth of the *Karteros* River. The cave has a meandering enclosure surrounding two stalagmite formations, probably part of the cult of the goddess πότνια, which is similar in form to the northern lustral basin of the Palace of Knossos. Among the various positions currently held in the debate on the Labyrinth and its coincidence or not with the Palace, that of the actual relationship between the real building and its archetype is the most convincing from an architectural point of view: not only because of the homological relationship between the lustral basin and the sacred cavern, but also because of the actual structure of the basement floor. Particularly in the western sector, where the articulation of the paths, excluding the functional cores of the storage area and the rooms created between the massive foundations, produces a labyrinthine structure evoking the hypogeal spaces of Gortyna, where intersections and changes of direction connect the rooms used for cultic activities. This condition seems to be repeated also in the aerial part of the Palace, where the clustered aggregates elude any possible alignment between them, while renouncing the introverted character afferent to the semi-hypogeal plane. It can therefore be said that the idea of the Labyrinth is subject to the formal structure of the Palace, to its type, although it does not actually coincide with it. As Elémire Zolla states (1988, p. 57), « what we call an object is a set of constellated impressions, gathered into a unity by the archetype dominant in the moment, which gives the moment its relative unity». The archetype is therefore that which confers unity to the characters and forms of the type, positioning itself as ‘essential’, that is, which refers to the quality or essence of an order superior to the type present in the object under examination.

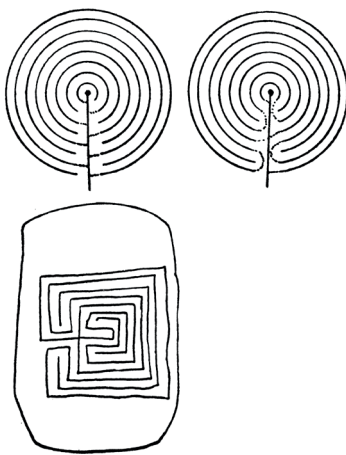


Fig. 5

Above, Derivation diagram of a labyrinth of the Cnossian type; below, Labyrinth engraved on the back of a golden tablet from Pylos; on the main front is the engraving of the Linear B deciphered by Ventris (from Santarocangeli, 1967).

The Labyrinth, symmetrical to the Apollonian enigma (Giorgio Colli, 1975), constitutes the cultic element of a Dionysian matrix that conceals and at the same time allows access to the world of the dead: the reverberation that this form produces in the built work its expression, manifesting the sacred nature of the building, its *raison d'être*³.

It can be said that the Palace of Knossos introduces the formal conditions emanating from the Labyrinth, its archetype. In doing so, even the aerial part is a particular declination of the original formal idea, in which the avoidance of any alignment produces a specific formal and typological quality in line with the idea of the cluster, thus conditioning a fragmentation of relatively autonomous parts aggregated around the large central courtyard. In fact, the ritual structure of the Labyrinth also remains in all the myths that evoke its form: the “impeded wandering”, or rather the challenge that must be taken up in order to reach the centre of the *mysterium tremendum*, is embodied in the meander, a place where an elementary hierophany is carried out with the unspeakable, sometimes consisting of chthonian gods or monsters, such as the mythical Minotaur who inhabits the Palace of Knossos. For Brede Kristensen, the form of the Labyrinth itself collides with the entrance to the underworld but, as Károly Kerény (2016, p. 32) observes, «wherever one finds it [...], the labyrinth is more connected with the world of ideas, more archetypal, more primordial – *urgestaltiger* – than the underworld (equally mysterious, but in itself completely amorphous). An explanation that sacrifices what has its own form to something that lacks it [...] overlooks what constitutes its fundamental element». As Kerény himself points out (2016, p. 34), it is the original form of the Labyrinth – *Urform* – that determines the different possible configurations – *Gestaltungen* – leading the elementary sign of the spiral – its form – to the figures – *Gestalt* – evocative of that spatial and ritual conception, a condition from which architecture cannot escape and which indeed becomes a way of eternalizing and transmitting a specific conception of the world.

From life to death and back to life, this is how the ritual structure associated with the archetype of the Labyrinth can be expressed, a form that is in itself open and infinite, allowing entry and leading, through a tortuous path, to salvation, to exit, in a continuous regeneration of the mystery or enigma that it poses to the attention of those who intend to tackle it.

Notes

¹ « In the throne room, to the west of the central courtyard, there is an excavation (also found in other palaces) whose use is unknown and which could be related to the cult of sacred snakes, whose presence is suggested in Minoan Crete by a whole series of findings. Now, the cult of serpents is associated, for obvious reasons, with that of the subterranean Powers, sometimes fecundating and therefore benevolent, and sometimes fearsome, since, according to their will, they ensure or destroy the stability of the world. How can we forget that Crete and the whole of the Aegean world are situated in a region of frequent and violent earthquakes, the results of which were often catastrophic for the island?» Santarcangeli P. (1967) – *Il libro dei labirinti*. Vallecchi, Florence, p. 105.

² On this subject, see the distinction between isomorphism, homology and analogy proposed by Tomás Maldonado; Maldonado T. (2015) – *Modello e realtà del progetto*. In: Id., *Reale e virtuale*. Feltrinelli, Milan.

³ Cfr. Monestiroli A. (2010), *La ragione degli edifici. La scuola di Milano e oltre*, Christian Marinotti, Milan.

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