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## Labyrinth of Egypt

### historic accounts

The colossal Egyptian temple was named “Labyrinth” by the Greeks after their legendary complex of meandering halls designed by Daedalus for King Minos of Crete (wherein the Minotaur dwelt). Herodotus wrote of the labyrinth after his visit of the building in the fifth century Before Common Era. [Herodotus](#) describes the labyrinth as a grand monument for the twelve kings (dodecarchs), surpassing even the pyramids. According to [Manetho's](#) Aegyptiaca, preserved in an epitome of the early 3rd century CE, the Labyrinth was the tomb of king Lachares. For [Diodorus Siculus](#) (1st century BCE) the enormous collective tomb of the twelve kings was built by Mendes, alias Marros. Following a different tradition he reports that king Menas built a square pyramid and the labyrinth. [Strabo](#), who visited Egypt in 25-24 BCE, gives an accurate topographical description, locating the labyrinth and the pyramid in a trapezium shaped area. He also mentions a nearby village. In Strabo's view the labyrinth was a palace, a place for assembling, speaking justice and bringing offerings for the nomes of Egypt. Pliny's Natural History (ca. CE 70) ascribes the great labyrinth to king Petesouchos or Tithoes. His contemporary [Pomponius Mela](#) attributes it to Psammetichus. In [Aelius Aristides](#) (CE 117-181) book “Aigyptios” the labyrinth is a mere rhetorical topic illustrating the greatness of Egypt (Aigyptios 48, 1). According to the Historia Augusta (written early 4th century CE), the Roman Emperor [Septimius Severus](#) visited the labyrinth site during his journey in Egypt in 199-200 CE. The state of preservation of the building at that time is not clear, but its symbolic meaning and fame have remained (Historia Augusta 17, 4).

[Herodotus](#) (ca. 484-430 BCE): One passage in Histories, Book, II, 148.

In the second book of his History, the Greek writer Herodotus gave the following account of the Labyrinth:

148. Moreover they (the *12 kings*) resolved to join all together and leave a memorial of themselves; and having so resolved they caused to be made a labyrinth, situated a little above the lake of Moiris and nearly opposite to that which is called the City of Crocodiles. This I saw myself, and I found it greater than words can say. For if one should put together and reckon up all the buildings and all the great works produced by the Hellenes, they



would prove to be inferior in labour and expense to this labyrinth, though it is true that both the temple at Ephesos and that at Samos are works worthy of note. The pyramids also were greater than words can say, and each one of them is equal to many works of the Hellenes, great as they may be; but the labyrinth surpasses even the pyramids. It has twelve courts covered in, with gates facing one another, six upon the North side and six upon the South, joining on one to another, and the same wall surrounds them all outside; and there are in it two kinds of chambers, the one kind below the ground and the other above upon these, three thousand in number, of each kind fifteen hundred. The upper set of chambers we ourselves saw, going through them, and we tell of them having looked upon them with our own eyes; but the chambers under ground we heard about only; for the Egyptians who had charge of them were not willing on any account to show them, saying that here were the sepulchres of the kings who had first built this labyrinth and of the sacred crocodiles. Accordingly we speak of the chambers below by what we received from hearsay, while those above we saw ourselves and found them to be works of more than human greatness. For the passages through the chambers, and the goings this way and that way through the courts, which were admirably adorned, afforded endless matter for marvel, as we went through from a court to the chambers beyond it, and from the chambers to colonnades, and from the colonnades to other rooms, and then from the chambers again to other courts. Over the whole of these is a roof made of stone like the walls; and the walls are covered with figures carved upon them, each court being surrounded with pillars of white stone fitted together most perfectly; and at the end of the labyrinth, by the corner of it, there is a pyramid of forty fathoms, upon which large figures are carved, and to this there is a way made under ground.

149. Such is this labyrinth; but a cause for marvel even greater than this is afforded by the lake, which is called the lake of Moiris, along the side of which this labyrinth is built...

[Manetho](#) Aegyptiaca (2, frag. 34) (3rd century BCE):

Short fragment from his list of Egyptian kings.

“Fourth King. Lamares, eight years. He built the Labyrinth in the Arsinoite Nome as a tomb for himself.”

[Diodorus Siculus](#) (1st century BCE): Two passages in his history, Book I 61.1-2 and 66.3-6.

“When the king died the government was recovered by Egyptians and they appointed a native king Mendes, whom some call Mares. Although he was responsible for no military achievements whatsoever, he did build himself what is called the Labyrinth as a tomb, an edifice which is wonderful not so much for its size as for the inimitable skill with which it



was build; for once in, it is impossible to find one's way out again without difficulty, unless one lights upon a guide who is perfectly acquainted with it. It is even said by some that Daedalus crossed over to Egypt and, in wonder at the skill shown in the building, built for Minos, King of Crete, a labyrinth like that in Egypt, in which, so the tales goes, the creature called the Minotaur was kept. Be that as it may, the Cretan Labyrinth has completely disappeared, either through the destruction wrought by some ruler or through the ravages of time; but the Egyptian Labyrinth remains absolutely perfect in its entire construction down to my time.

And seized with enthusiasm for this enterprise they strove eagerly to surpass all their predecessors in the seize of their building. For they chose a site beside the channel leading into Lake Moeris in Libya and there constructed their tomb of the finest stone, laying down an oblong as the shape and a stade as the size of each side, while in respect of carving and other works of craftsmanship they left no room for their successors to surpass them. For, when one had entered the sacred enclosure, one found a temple surrounded by columns, 40 to each side, and this building had a roof made of a single stone, carved with panels and richly adorned with excellent paintings. It contained memorials of the homeland of each of the kings as well as of the temples and sacrifices carried out in it, all skillfully worked in paintings of the greatest beauty. Generally it is said that the king conceived their tomb on such an expensive and prodigious scale that if they had not been deposed before its completion, they would not have been able to give their successors any opportunity to surpass them in architectural feats."

[Strabo](#) (ca. 64 BCE - CE 19): Three passages in his geography, Book 17, I, 3 and 37 and 42.

"... the total number of nomes was equal to the number of the courts in the Labyrinth; these are fewer than 30. In addition to these things there is the edifice of the Labyrinth which is a building quite equal to the Pyramids and nearby the tomb of the king who built the Labyrinth. There is at the point where one first enters the channel, about 30 or 40 stades along the way, a flat trapezium-shaped site which contains both a village and a great palace made up of many palaces equal in number to that of the nomes in former times; for such is the number of peristyle courts which lie contiguous with one another, all in one row and backing on one wall, as though one had a long wall with the courts lying before it, and the passages into the courts lie opposite the wall. Before the entrances there lie what might be called hidden chambers which are long and many in number and have paths running through one another which twist and turn, so that no one can enter or leave any court without a guide. And the wonder of it is the roofs of each chambers are made of single stones and the width of the hidden chambers is spanned in the same way by monolithic beams of outstanding size; for nowhere is wood or any other material included. And if one



mounts onto the roof, at no great height because the building has only one storey, it is possible to get a view of a plain of masonry made of such stones, and, if one drops back down from there into the courts, it is possible to see them lying there in row each supported by 27 monolithic pillars; the walls too are made up in stones of no less a size.

At the end of this building, which occupies an area of more than a stade, stands the tomb, a pyramid on a oblong base, each side about 4 “plethra” in length and the height about the same; the name of the man buried there was Imandes. The reason for making the courts so many is said to be the fact that it was customary for all nomes to gather there according to rank with their own priests and priestesses, for the purpose of sacrifice, divine-offering, and judgement on the most important matters. And each of the nomes was lodged in the court appointed to it. And above this city stands Abydos, in which there is the Memnonium, a palace wonderfully constructed of massive stonework in the same way as we have said the Labyrinth was built, though the Memnonium differs in being simple in structure.”

[Pliny the Elder](#) (CE 23-79): One passage in his Natural History, Book 36, 84-89

“Let us speak also of labyrinths, quite the most extraordinary works on which men have spent their money, but not, as may be thought, figments of the imagination. There still exists even now in Egypt in the Heracleopolite Nome the one which was built first, according to tradition 3,600 years ago by king Petesuchis or Tithois, though Herodotus ascribes the whole work to Twelve Kings and Psammetichus, the latest of them. Various reasons are given for building it. Demoteles claims that it was the palace of Moteris, Lyceas the tomb of Moeris, but the majority of writers take the view that it was built as a temple to the Sun, and this is generally accepted. At any rate, that Daedalus used this as the model for the Labyrinth which he built in Crete is beyond doubt, but it is equally clear that he imitated only 100th part of it which contains twisting paths and passages which advance and retreat—all impossible to negotiate. The reason for this is not that within a small compass it involves one in mile upon of walking, as we see in tessellated floors or the displays given by boys on the Campus, but that frequently doors are buried in it to beguile the visitor into going forward and then force him to return into the same winding paths. This was the second to be built after the Egyptian Labyrinth, the third being in Lemnos and the fourth in Italy, all roofed with vaults of polished stone, though the Egyptian specimen, to my considerable astonishment, has its entrance and columns made of Parian marble, while the rest is of Aswan granite, such masses being put together as time itself cannot dissolve even with the help of the Heracleopolitans; for they have regarded the building with extraordinary hatred.

It would be impossible to describe in detail the layout of that building and its individual parts, since it is divided into regions and administrative districts which are called nomes, each of the 21 nomes giving its names to one of the houses. A further reason is the fact that



it also contains temples of all the gods of Egypt while, in addition, Nemesis placed in the building's 40 chapels many pyramids of 40 ells each covering an area of 6 arourae with their base. Men are already weary with travelling when they reach that bewildering maze of paths; indeed, there are also lofty upper rooms reached by ramps and porticoes from which one descends on stairways which have 90 steps each; inside are columns of imperial porphyry, images of the gods, statues of kings and representations of monsters. Certain of the halls are arranged in such way that as one throws open the door there arises within a fearful noise of thunder; moreover one passes through most of them in darkness. There are again other massive buildings outside the wall of the Labyrinth; they call them "the Wing". Then there are other subterranean chambers made by excavating galleries in the soil. One person only has done any repairs there-and they were few in number. He was Chaermon, the eunuch of king Necthebis, 500 years before Alexander the Great. A tradition is also current that he supported the roofs with beams of acacia wood boiled in oil, until squared stones could be raised up into the vaults."

[Pomponius Mela](#) (1st century CE): One passage in his chorographia, Book I, 9, 56.

"The building of Psammetich, the Labyrinth, includes within the circuit of one unbroken wall 1000 houses and 12 palaces, and is built of marble as well as being roofed with the same material. It has one descending way into it, and contains within almost innumerable paths, which have many convolutions twisting hither and thither. These paths, however, cause great perplexity both because of their continual winding and because of their porticoes which often reverse their direction, continually running through one circle after another and continually turning and retracing their steps as far as they have gone forwards with the result that the Labyrinth is fraught with confusion by reason of its perpetual meandering, though it is possible to extricate oneself."

### [papyri](#)

The village Hw.t-wr.t/Αὐήρις (= great temple) is attested 119 times in 62 documents between 292 BC and 141 CE. The concentration of documents in the 1st century BCE is due to the Hawara undertakers archives. The Egyptian labyrinth (Λαβύρινθος) appears 18 times in 16 papyri between 258 BCE and the reign of Hadrian (117-138 CE). All texts but one are Ptolemaic. Though the names Hw.t-wr.t/Αὐήρις and Λαβύρινθος disappear early from our records, archaeological finds show that the site was continuously occupied up to the 7th century CE. The Egyptian name Hw.t-wr.t corresponds to Greek Αὐήρις in several bilingual documents, e.g. P.Hawara Lüdd. III (233 BCE), P.Ashm. I 14 and 15 (72/71 BCE) and P.Ashm. I 16 (69/68 BCE). The aspiration at the beginning of the word shows in the phi in 'Αγουήρεως τῆς 'Ηρακ[λείδου μερίδος] (where 'Αγουήρεως stands for Αὐήρις) in SB XIV



11303. Greek ἄ for Egyptian hw.t is found in other toponyms as well (Clarysse-Quaegebeur 1982, p.78).