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**MATERIAL METAPHORS AND HISTORICAL PRACTICE: A STRUCTURAL ANALYSIS OF STONE LABYRINTHS IN COASTAL FINNMARK, ARCTIC NORWAY.**

*Abstract*

Stone labyrinths in coastal Finnmark, attributed to the Saami and dated to AD 1200–1700, are discussed from a structural perspective. The author argues that the labyrinths were material metaphors of transitional rituals, linked to Saami burials. Their use was related to increased ritual communication of central cultural values due to external pressures.

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*Introduction*

The coast of Finnmark in Arctic Norway constitutes the northern termination of the European mainland. Some strange stone structures, shaped as labyrinths (or mazes), have been identified along this coast. Although some of these monuments are briefly mentioned in late 17th century written sources from the region (Knag 1932: 41), a time when they still may have been in use, no information regarding their meaning or function is recorded. Nor do we have any other written or reliable oral information on these matters. Thus, when trying to interpret these labyrinths, we cannot rely on any authentic witnesses or authorized voices from the past. What we *do* have at our disposal are the material remains themselves, some information regarding their local archaeological context, some ethnographic information on labyrinths from other parts of the world and, finally, some "general knowledge" regarding material culture and rituals. On the basis of these fragments I have written a story about the Finnmark labyrinths which attempts to deal with the major problems puzzling me: what possible meanings and social functions might these labyrinthine constructions have had?

In various forms the labyrinth symbol is known from different cultural and chronological contexts. Most famous, of course, is the Greek myth of the Knossos labyrinth, designed by Dae-

dalus to house the Minotaur, the monstrous and shameful progeny of Pasiphaë's intercourse with the Cretan bull. In Scandinavia, the labyrinth symbol appears in different prehistoric and historic contexts from the Bronze Age to the 19th century, and from rock art images to stone constructions on the ground. It is also known in the Mediterranean area (Crete, Rome and Pompeii), Great Britain, Germany, Iceland, Russia and Estonia. Outside Europe labyrinths of various types and age have been found in India, South-East Asia, Melanesia, Africa and America (Ringbom 1938, Hagen 1976, Krzak 1986). To illustrate its distribution in time and space: the labyrinth symbol appears on a clay tablet from Pylos, Greece, dated to 1200 BC (Heller 1961), as well as on 19th century pottery made by the Papago Indians in the Sonora desert, Mexico (Nabhan 1985).

Due to this wide distribution in time and space, any search for a common origin of the labyrinth symbol is, of course, fruitless. Rather than searching for an original centre from which this symbol could have diffused (cf. Ringbom 1938), its wide distribution may more fruitfully be regarded as a human capacity for making similar symbols in different contexts.

Rejecting the tracing of a labyrinthine "*Ur-heimat*" as a plausible strategy for finding the meaning of this symbol does not, however, imply that I regard the labyrinth as a totally free-float-

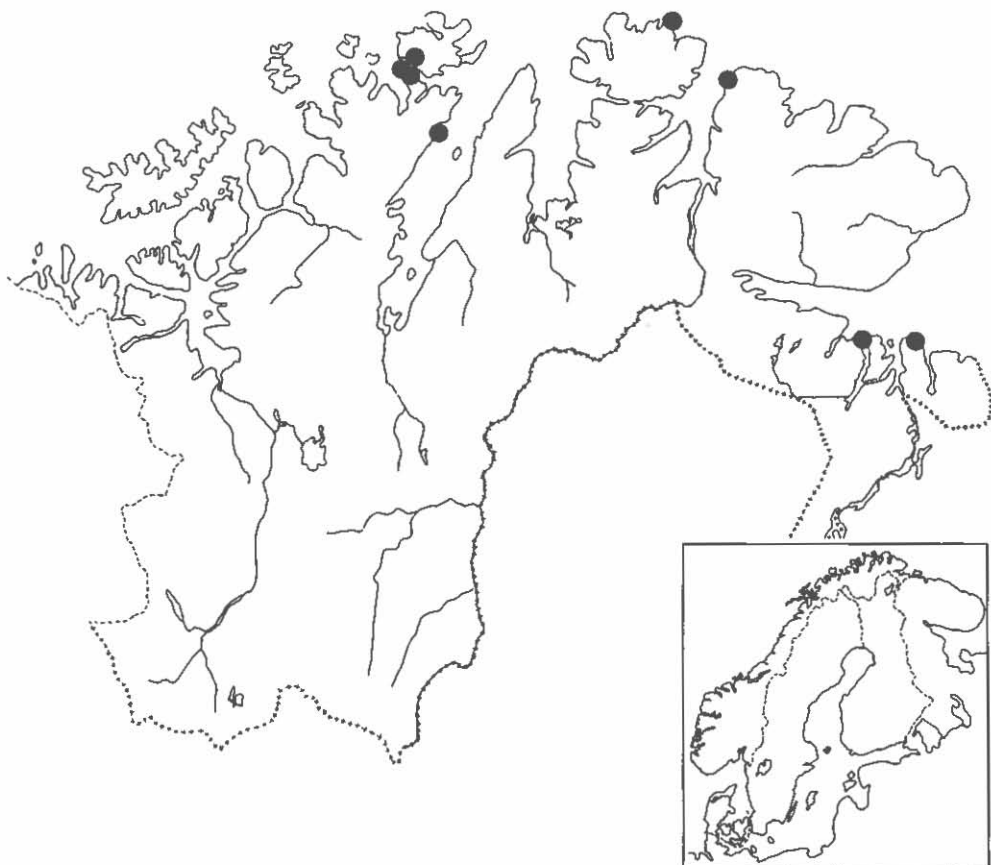


Fig. 1. Distribution of stone labyrinths in coastal Finmark, Norway.

ing signifier open to any meaning. It may well be the case that the labyrinth form poses constraints on the meanings which can be attached to it, and that there may even be some very basic "meaning-package" connected to its very form (cf. Krzak 1986). However, even if such a general meaning-package does exist, I still believe that the concrete meaning attached to the labyrinth will be relative, fragmented and adapted to its respective local context.

This problem of form and meaning will be dealt with in the first part of this paper. Here, I shall suggest how the form of this symbol may be "logical" in relation to its meaning. Although this meaning is assumed to be specific to the local cultural-historical context, it may still be related to general problems dealt with in most cultures in a mode similar to the way myths operate according to Levi-Strauss (e.g., 1979). After this analysis of form and meaning I shall try to explain why these labyrinth constructions ap-

pear in coastal Finmark at a certain period; in other words, I shall say a few words about their social functioning in the local society. However, before I turn to these tasks, I have to say a few words about the cultural and historical context of these symbols.

#### *Dating and context*

Today we know of only eight preserved labyrinths in Arctic Norway. There are, however, written records on additional ones which have been destroyed (or at least not identified during surveys). All these labyrinths are confined to the extreme outer coast of Finmark, the northernmost province in Scandinavia (Fig. 1). Here, in this rough coastal environment, they are always located on small islands or headlands. Another and probably more significant feature of their location is that they all are situated on

or near Saami burial grounds dating from the late pre-Christian period (e.g. before AD 1700).

Regarding their dating, there is ample evidence to suggest that they were constructed during the period AD 1200–1700. This is based both on local shoreline displacement chronology (some of the labyrinths have such low elevations above sea level that they would have been flooded before 1200 AD (Odner 1961)), and on their association with Saami burials dated to this period. Lichenometric dating of labyrinths in the Gulf of Bothnia, Northern Sweden, cluster within the same period (Broadbent 1987: 44), although caution should be used in transferring the dating of such a widely used symbol from one area to another. No excavations of these monuments have so far been undertaken in Finnmark.

Their ethnic affiliation is somewhat disputed. Although this is an indigenous Saami area, the outer coast of Finnmark was colonized by the Norwegians during the same period, and other nations traded here as well. This has led at least one scholar to suggest that these monuments were constructed by north-Russian traders, the so called Pomors, operating somewhat later in the area (Niemi 1986: 56). However, this explanation is hardly convincing, partly due to chronological discrepancy but mostly because of the lack of any arguments explaining why the Pomors should have brought these material symbols with them from the White Sea area. Rather than interpreting and explaining their meaning and function, such "explanations" tend to explain away the labyrinths, in this case across the Russian border. Ironically, when we turn to the White Sea area itself we find that similar explanations are used for their presence here, where folk tales ascribe the labyrinths to strangers visiting the area (Kraft 1982: 94).

However, most scholars who have dealt with the Finnmark labyrinths regard these as part of the Saami cultural complex (Simonsen 1975, 1982; Odner 1961, n.d.; Kraft 1982). I share this opinion, especially because of their systematic association with Saami burials (Olsen 1984, 1988). This is not to deny that knowledge of this symbol may have been introduced from outside, for example, from Northwest Russia. However, even if introduced from outside, it seems obvious that they were incorporated into a local cultural context, and thus given meanings relevant to this.

### *Form and meaning*

All of the Finnmark labyrinths seem to belong to what have been termed "the original Trojaburg-type" (Ringbom 1938: 69). They have a round or slightly oval form, normally 8–12 meters in diameter, constructed of head size stones (Fig. 2). In the outermost stone circle there is an opening to a passage system, through which long detours finally lead to the centre of the labyrinth. A common feature of this type of labyrinth is that they have no dead-end passages. If you follow it through you are automatically led to the centre, although the passage goes through long detours winding inside the labyrinth. Thus, on the route to the centre you are sometimes very close to the centre, almost there, but suddenly it runs out again. Instead of walking five or six meters directly to the centre you have to walk several hundred meters along a wavy and quite unpredictable route.

How then should we understand this symbol? Starting very generally, I shall say a few words about the role of material symbols, a silent discourse running alongside, sometimes complementary, sometimes contradictory, to speech and writings. Introducing a collection of essays by Gaston Bachelard, Colette Goudin writes that "material elements reflect our souls;...they fix the unconscious, they provide us with a sort of direct reading of our destiny" (1971: xv). Following his proposal of a "science of the concrete", Levi-Strauss (1972) stresses that empirical categories or natural articles can serve as conceptual tools when working out abstract propositions. Material symbols, environmental features, plants and animals constitute a metaphorical repertoire applied to materialize cognitive conceptions and to construct social and cosmological maps. They are implements good to think with, and function, as Geertz would say, as models *of* and *for* thought.

This concreteness of material symbols, their fixing of the unconscious, and their capacity for being models of and for thought, is the starting point for this structural analysis of the Finnmark labyrinths. How, then, to continue?

Since all of these labyrinths are located close to Saami burials, I find it reasonable to connect them to rituals concerning burial – the passage from life to death. Given this basic assumption, I shall move a step forward in this analysis by trying to show a possible structural correspondence between form and meaning, between the labyrinth and *rites de passage*.

Van Gennep analysed three phases in the

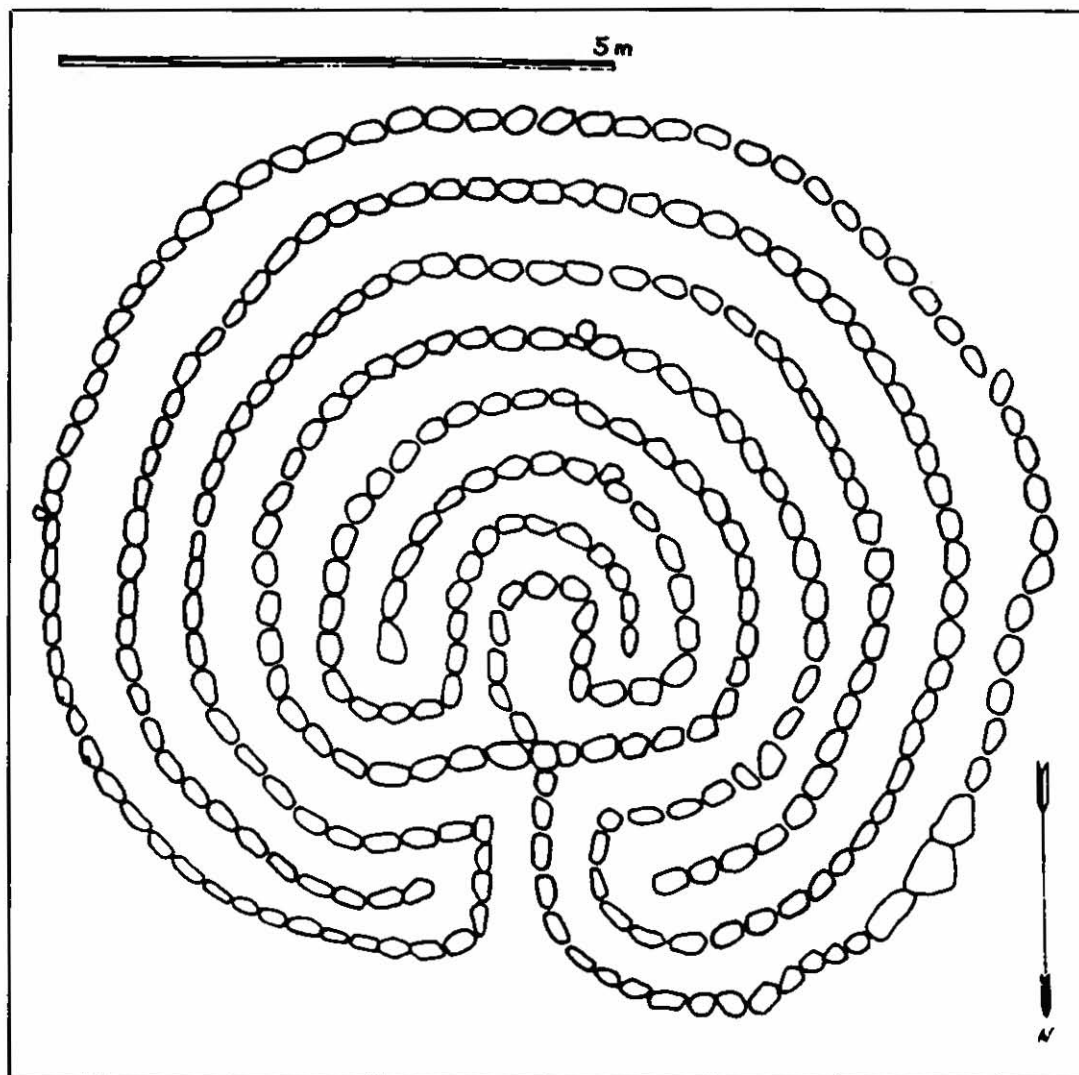


Fig. 2. Stone labyrinth at Holmengrå, eastern Finnmark, Norway.

passage of an individual through rituals dealing with life-crises; that is, rituals dealing with the crossing of boundaries between one social category and another, such as puberty ceremonies, weddings, funerals and initiation rites of all kinds (Doty 1986:84):

1. *separation* (stepping out of secular time and space),
2. *transition* or margin (an ambiguous area and period, the focal of adjustment to a new social role), and

3. *incorporation* or reaggregation (the return of an individual to a social context, now in a new state)

A general feature of the transitional or marginal phase is that the individual concerned is in an abnormal situation, outside time and space. This makes him or her sacred, but also ambiguous, contaminated, and therefore dangerous. Consequently, he or she has to be separated from other members of the community, either by being sent away from the community altogether,

or by being temporarily housed in an enclosed space from which ordinary people are excluded (Leach 1976: 77). For example, boys are kept isolated in the wilderness for longer or shorter periods during their initiation.

The physical portrayal of the marginal phase seems to play an important expressive role in transitional rituals. Analysing shamanistic initiation rituals, Mircea Eliade (1964: 41–52, 64) claims that *caves* are commonly used in the transition rites. Caves become both the concrete and metaphorical expression of the emptiness, darkness and closeness of the marginal period. By walking into the cave you "die" away from your former life and when you come out you are "born again" in a new social position. This material practice of separation, by penetrating such a physical enclosure, expresses and confirms the truth of the ritual and cultural (Odner, n.d.).

According to Eliade, labyrinths play a metaphorical role in transitional rituals similar to that of caves. Etymologically, the very term *labyrinth* suggests a connection with the cave, as the word comes from pre-Greek, *labra*, denoting a cave with many corridors (Krzak 1986: 135). As with caves, initiatory functions of labyrinths are well known from several parts of the world (Krzak 1985: 140 ff, Eliade 1969: 120), and Eliade makes the following claim:

"Then too, the cave and the labyrinth continue to have a function of first importance in the initiation rites of other archaic cultures... both indeed, are concrete symbols of a descent to the underworld" (Eliade 1964: 51)

Inside the cave, and inside the labyrinth, the individual is in an ambiguous and liminal state, outside time and society, transcending the borders of the normal and the fixed. It is worth noting that in the Theseus-myth, the centre of the Knossos labyrinth is inhabited by a dangerous and ambiguous being, the Minotaur, half man, half beast. The labyrinth as the home of an ambiguous being is also known from Papago Indian tradition, where a sacred cave, believed to have the form of a labyrinth, is the home of I'toi Ki: a coyote-like character responsible for the Papago emerging into this world (Nabhan 1987: 14; see Levi Strauss (1979: 224) regarding the ambiguous role of the coyote among North American Indians). Thus, the labyrinth space becomes the metaphorical representation of the marginal, the ambiguous and dangerous: the in-between.

Following these reflections I suggest that the Finnmark labyrinths may be understood as a

material symbol expressing and mapping the structure of life-crisis rituals, in this case burial rites. If we imagine a ceremony carried out by a ritual specialist, a shaman, the following may have happened. By walking into the labyrinth the shaman symbolically expresses the separation of the dead individual from this life. Being inside the labyrinth marks the physical separation from the living social world. In other words, a metaphorical representation of the marginality in the transformation phase. The ceremony terminates with the shaman leaving the labyrinth as a symbolic manifestation of the dead individual's incorporation into a new state. The meaning of the labyrinth may therefore have been to function as a metaphorical instrument to conceive of and to live rituals connected to life and death.

However, this does not answer why the labyrinth form is applied, since any enclosure could have suited these ritual requirements. Why should the transformational phase, the liminal zone between life and death, be represented by a long, curved and narrow passage, a route running in and out, sometimes close, almost there, then going out again, seemingly unpredictable and never ending?

In many shamanistic cultures (Altai, Goldi, Yuraks, Tungus, Saami) we find that the passage from life to death, to the underworld, is considered difficult and long. Thus, the shaman has to guide the soul along the difficult road from life to death (Hultkrantz 1978: 14–17). Because the shaman has travelled it many times himself, he is thoroughly familiar with the road to the underworld. The shaman becomes indispensable when the dead person is slow to forsake the world of the living; only he can capture the intangible soul and carry it to its new abode (Eliade 1964: 209). During these rituals the shaman often performs dances recounting the difficulties of the long road to the underworld. The labyrinth form, with its waves and long detours, fits well with this tradition of what takes place during the transitional period. The long route winding inside the labyrinth gives a concrete social reality to the scenario of the shaman guiding the soul through the difficult passage from life to death.

*En passant* it may be mentioned that this idea of the metaphorical role of the labyrinth as symbolizing the intricate road the soul had to cover to reach the land of the forefathers, does have some ethnographical support. Layard has recorded this function for labyrinths on some of the Melanesian islands, particularly in a myth



from the Malekula Island (Layard 1936: 241 ff, Krzak 1986: 139–140).

In my opinion it does not matter if the labyrinth was indigenous to Saami culture. Even if introduced from outside, which I do not find unlikely, it is my main point that the material reality of this symbol fitted well with the local mythical reality. The labyrinth supplied the Saami with an instrument with which was good to think and to perform life-crisis rituals. Perhaps this was coincidental, a historical accident corresponding to Sahlins' description of the confusion of mythical and historical reality following Captain Cook's arrival in Hawaii, an arrival which happened to take place precisely at the time of the year when the return of the god was expected (Sahlins 1981). Alternatively, it could be argued in a Levi-Straussian manner that it was a more universal structural correspondence, related to some deeper message communicated in the labyrinth form.

### *Social function*

Even if my guesswork regarding the meaning of the labyrinths seems to work, it does not answer another basic question: why do these symbols come into use among the Saami along the coast of Finnmark during the period from 1200 to 1700? We have to assume that transitional rituals/rites de passage were always performed in connection with burials, and the question to be answered is why such a material expression is confined to this particular period and area. What was the social function of these labyrinths and their associated rituals in late medieval Saami society in coastal Finnmark.

From about AD 1200 the local Saami communities of coastal Finnmark experienced a dramatic change in their contacts with the outside world. During the period AD 1200–1700 their interaction with the surrounding Scandinavian and Russian societies, as well as with foreign traders, rapidly increased through trade, taxation, missionary activity, and state expansion. The surrounding nation states, Denmark-Norway, Sweden and Russia were competing over the resources in the Saami area, and tried to gain political control over it. Finnmark was colonized from the south-west by Norwegians, from around AD 1200. From the southeast, the Russians were approaching the area by the so-called "monastery colonization", reaching the Arctic Ocean in the 16th century. Therefore, the labyrinths appear in an area and a period

marked by substantial social turbulence (Olsen 1984, 1987).

Rapidly increasing contacts with the outside world clearly represented a serious threat to basic social and cultural values in the Saami hunting societies, and it is likely to have generated a considerable stress within them. In such a context one might expect that the local societies mobilized a counter-active symbolic and ritual production in an attempt to reinforce key cultural values, and to communicate internal solidarity.

As a historical practice, it is well known that rituals play an essential role in maintaining social cohesion during critical phases of a society (although not necessarily intentionally). In this way, rituals are performed not only to celebrate an already present or guaranteed unity, but also (or perhaps primarily) to regain such unity when it is lost or threatened (Doty 1986: 88, Turner 1969). Similarly, as shown by various anthropological and archaeological studies, social stress may propel intensified symbol production (Cohen 1974, Hodder 1979).

Such an increased ritual and symbolic production is clearly recognizable in the Saami hunting societies during this period, and it appears that to a large extent this production is channelled into the religious sphere (Odner 1983). The emphasis on religious rituals and symbols may have been a result of the essential role played by Christian missionaries, both Lutheran and Greek-Orthodox, in the surrounding nation states' efforts to incorporate the Saami into their respective political and economical systems. The locus of external pressure often seems to determine the selection of meaningful counter-symbols (Spicer 1971: 798).

A record from 1589 mentions 17 Norwegian churches in use along the coast of Finnmark, and we also know that in the eastern area several Russian chapels and monasteries had been erected. In this context, where Christian churches and monasteries on Saami land stood as persuasive signifiers of the threatening power from the outside world, consolidation of Saami religious and social values may easily have taken the form of concrete ritual manifestations. Thus, the labyrinths may be regarded as part of a response from the Saami societies to the churches as Christian material symbols. Their association with burials and burial rituals seems possibly due to the significant role attached to funerals and burials in communicating tradition and continuity in society.

The appearance of the labyrinths as part of a



Fig. 3. Labyrinth constructed in the central courtyard at the University of Tromsø, Norway (photo: Aase Wynn, Tromsø).

Saami expressive repertoire can then be related to the significant role played by material symbols, as well as rituals, in symbolic and historical practice. Both material and ritual discourse fixes the unconscious, gives to it a social reality that can be lived and acted on. In this sense, the labyrinths become, in a very concrete way, symbols in action.

### *Conclusion*

In this paper I have argued that the labyrinths in coastal Finnmark were material metaphors of transitional rituals connected to Saami burials, and that their application and social function should be related to an increased ritual communication of key cultural values due to external pressure upon the local Saami communities.

The story could have ended here. However, living in a post-modern era where the end of meta-theories and meta-narratives has been proclaimed (alongside the death of the author), I have to fragment and pluralize my own story to protect my intellectual reputation. Other voices, other inter-textual fragments have to be allowed to speak before I write the end.

Visiting one of the Finnmark labyrinths in early August last year I met one of the local fishermen, cleaning and repairing his nets after the salmon fishing season. I talked to him about the labyrinth nearby, and asked about his opinion. He hesitated a moment, shook his head and asked me about my opinion. I told him what I have told you here, quite satisfied with my own answer. He shook his head again, more energetically this time, looked compassionately at me and replied: "I don't know very much about these things, but so much I know and so much has my father told me, that the labyrinth here has nothing whatsoever to do with that university rubbish you told me". I tried to ask him what he meant, but he refused and started to talk about the weather and the decreasing salmon population instead. After a while I gave up and left, somewhat bewildered, somewhat depressed.

However, the story didn't stop here either. Returning to my university in Tromsø, one week later I experienced another disturbing moment: a gigantic stone labyrinth (Fig. 3) had been constructed in the central courtyard of the university campus...

## Acknowledgements

The present paper is a somewhat reworked edition of a paper presented at the 2nd World Archaeological Congress in Barquisimeto, Venezuela, 1–7 september, 1990. While preparing this paper I had the opportunity to read an unpublished paper by Knut Odner from which I benefited greatly. During the revision phase I have received valuable information from John Kraft and Urmas Selirand. Bryan Hood read through the final version, unfortunately too late to remove anything but the worst language errors. Thus, for what ever remains of such errors, logical inconsistencies and weak arguments someone else has to take the blame.

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