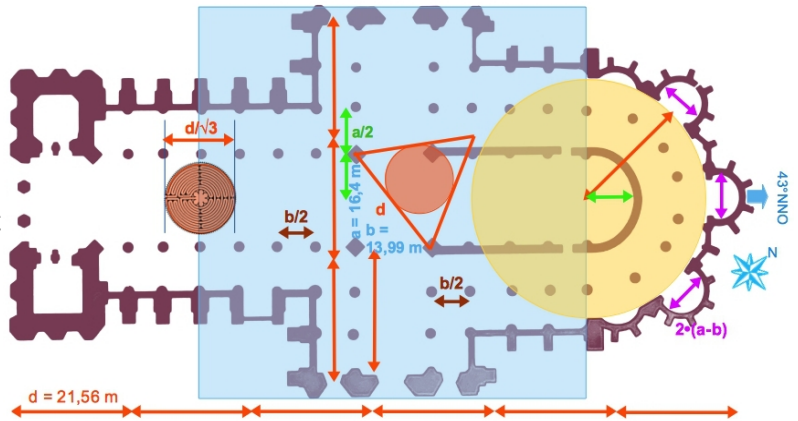


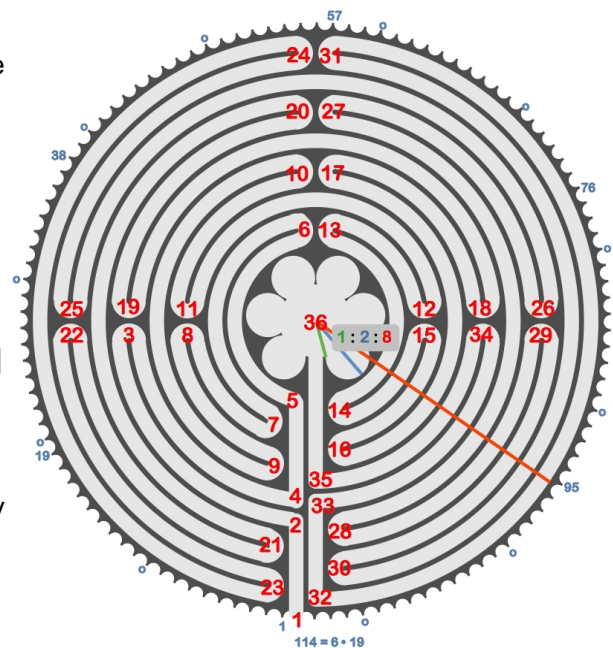
The Chartres Labyrinth, Mandala of Christian Mysticism  
(expose)

Rolf Monnerjahn

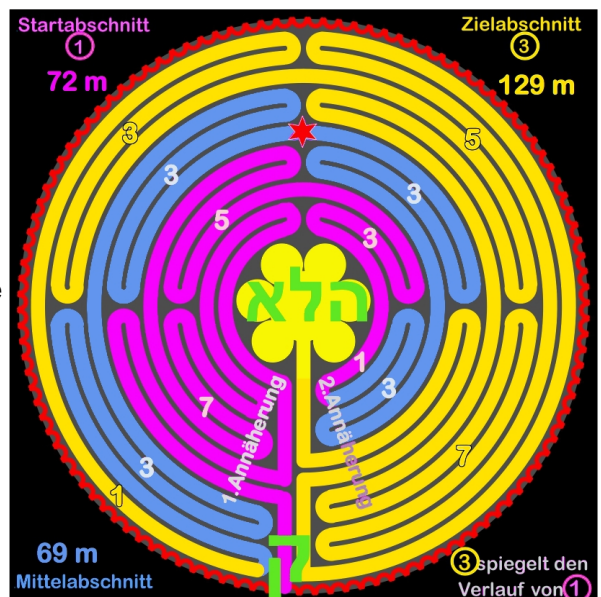
From the architect of the Cathedral of Chartres, built after the city fire of 1198, we have no name, but he has not been forgotten by history. He is artistically significant and was certainly close to the school of Chartres, which was one of the leading centers of learning in the 12th century. Thus, he was a Platonist and a Pythagorean, meaning he considered number as the essence of everything that was created and would be created. He developed the floor plan of the cathedral solely from the transept of the predecessor building, just as all multiplicity arises from unity: lengths of the nave and transept, dimensions of the bays, extent and position of the labyrinth, size and height of the western rose above the ground... Most likely, he was also the designer of the labyrinth, which he adorned with a variety of significant numerical references after choosing the proportions and turning points of its winding path to the center. I have four theses on the significance of the labyrinth.



Thesis 1: The labyrinth represents the path of life, the journey from conception to birth, the path from birth out of the maternal womb to birth into eternal life, the journey of the soul seeking God until its birth in mystical union with God. The path to the center consists of 273 bright stone slabs. The number 273 roughly corresponds to the number of days between conception and birth (from the Feast of the Annunciation on March 25 to the Feast of the Birth of Christ on December 25: 275 days). The labyrinth is both a symbolic and a concretely realized challenge to seek God within oneself. "Do not go out [but] return to yourself, for the truth lies within the inner person" (Aurelius Augustine, De vera religione 39, 72). The cross, as an immaterial symbol defined only by the spaces between pairs of turns (28) of the path, repeatedly prompts the pilgrim to repent: "Μετανοεῖτε! Turn [your mind]! Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is near!" (Preachings of John the Baptist and Jesus, Matthew 3:2; 4:17).



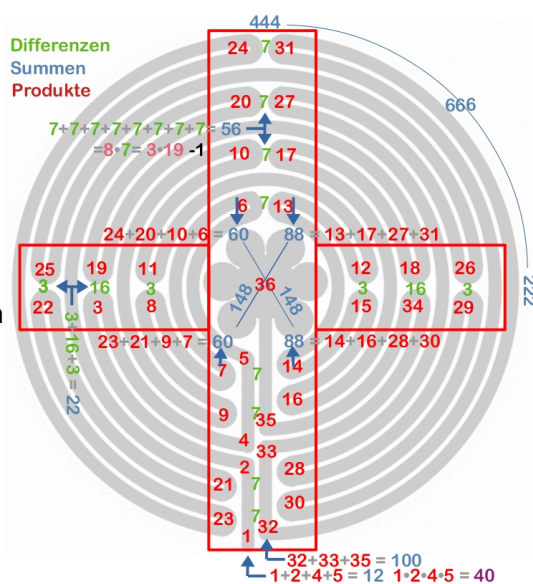
Thesis 2: The labyrinth is associated by its builder with ancient heroic tales: Theseus and the Minotaur (Theseus is replaced here by Christ as the liberator), Odysseus and his journey from Troy to Ithaca, his homeland. Like Odysseus to his homeland, the one who traverses the labyrinth quickly approaches the center twice, at the turning points with the ordinal numbers 5 and 14, only to be sent far out again to the arcs far from the center - just as Odysseus is driven far out into the Mediterranean by headwinds as he approaches Ithaca. Only at the ordinal number 36, a numerological metaphor for God (Eloah in Hebrew, אלה), does the pilgrim reach the center of the labyrinth.



Thesis 3: The architect has linked the West Rose to the labyrinth. "Exactly where the labyrinth is on the cathedral floor, the large rose window of the west or main portal is in elevation, of the same size." (Magdalena Lang, *The Sign Arts of Medieval Builders*, p.76) The distance from the center of the labyrinth to the base of the west façade is equal to the distance from this base to the center of the west rose. The Christ at the center of the west rose is the resurrected one showing his stigmata, who has conquered death and promises eternal life. His halo is green, and he is surrounded by a circular ornament with symbols of the tree of life. I believe that the heart of the labyrinth does not represent a flower but rather a Gothic window with six-part tracery (hexapetal), where the encounter with divine light takes place. After all, Gothic cathedrals are temples of divine light. In heraldry, there are no representations of flowers, especially roses with six petals, but always with five. The number six is closely connected to God (creation days). Six is the number of the Star of David, the ancestor of Christ. The division into six parts is also prescribed in the geometry of the Christ monogram  $\text{X}$ . The path of the labyrinth leads to the Christ the son of the living God in the window: "I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will not walk in darkness but will have the light of life." John 8:12 The pilgrim in the labyrinth when reaching its center has to turn around and change to another dimension, from horizontal to vertical and raise his eyes and his heart to Christ in the center of the West Rose.



Thesis 4: The arrangement of the windings of the labyrinth path and thus the ordinal numbers of its curves were consciously and thoughtfully chosen by its builder, so that, unlike the similar labyrinths of the cathedrals of Sens (preceding Chartres) and Reims, numerologically significant number sequences in the biblical/religious context appear in their connections. It is particularly striking that eight pairs of ordinal numbers facing each other on the vertical bar of the cross represent the difference of 7, and that precisely the 56th crenellation of the battlemented wall surrounding the labyrinth is located directly above the vertical bar of the cross ( $56 = 8 \times 7$ ). The total number of crenellations is  $114 = 6 \times 19$ , introducing the number 19 into the symbol of the labyrinth. The 19th letter of the Hebrew alphabet, Qoph(ק), carries the figurative meaning of "needle's eye." The designer thus refers to the words of Jesus: "It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich person to enter the kingdom of God" (Mark 10:25), directing the attention of the labyrinth pilgrim to the difficulty of reaching God and the necessity of practicing asceticism.



For the people of the Middle Ages at the time of the construction of the cathedrals, the number was a tool for knowledge and for establishing the order desired by God. For us modern people in the technologized world, the number has become more of a tool for the analysis and control of processes. However, it is interesting that in the field of particle physics, where the goal is to know "what holds the world together at its core," the number remains a tool to recognize the hidden order.

The labyrinth is both a symbol of Christ and of his followers: John 14:6 - "I am the way, the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me." Matthew 7:14 - "But the gate that leads to life is narrow, and the way is difficult, and only a few find it..." Overall, the Cathedral of Chartres is a proclamation of the Gospel in stone, glass/light, and number. In its labyrinth, one does not get lost but finds oneself.