

**George Pennington**

# **The Tables of Chartres Cathedral**

## **Part 1**

**This is the first chapter of George Pennington's Book on an archaic European meditation technique. It was published in Germany in 1994 by Walter, Düsseldorf.**

**This translation of the introductory chapters is made available on the web to draw some attention to this remarkable tradition. Until now we have not been able to find an English or US publisher. We hope this web-publication will raise some interest.**

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**George Pennington**  
**The Tables of Chartres Cathedral**  
The ancient meditation of the French gipsies

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# The Tables of Chartres Cathedral

## Introduction

Unnoticed by the ever-increasing group of people interested in spiritual matters, French gypsies have succeeded in keeping alive over many centuries a unique meditation practice which is at the same time an aid to enhancing visual awareness: the tradition of the Tables of Chartres. It was not until the Seventies that they permitted Pierre Derlon - a non-gypsy whom they had admitted into their circle - to write about the Tables of Chartres; at least by means of allusion.

The description I shall give in this book is much more extensive than that by Derlon. It is founded on my own experiences and those of many others who have literally learned to see anew. When I speak of seeing, I mean seeing in every way, also in the most profound sense of the word.

I have waited many years before publishing because I wanted to be sure that in doing so I would not be carried away by my own enthusiasm, but approach the task with the degree of maturity appropriate to the Tables. And such maturity can only evolve with time. Only when the challenge, which such traditions present, turns into many years' experience is it possible to write in a truly responsible and respectful way. Now, explaining how to use the Tables in detail for the first time, I do so with the utmost respect for this tradition and for those who managed to safeguard it in secret for centuries right up to the present day, - the gypsies.

Ever since I first became acquainted with the Tables of Chartres in 1978, I have tried to shed light on the cultural, mythological and historical background of this tradition. The chapters in this book are the measure of my success until now. I hope very much that others, stimulated by this first publication, will gather further pieces of the mosaic, which holds the solution to the mystery of the Tables.

The essence of the Tables is not, however, their history or the mythological symbolism in which they are embedded. Their intrinsic value lies in practice, in one's own experience when sitting before the Tables which, when done in the right spirit, leads to an inner vision of the utmost clarity. No text, however interesting it might be, can ever be a substitute for this personal experience. This is why I consider the chapters on the practical use of the Tables to be the most important in this book. It is my hope that they will prompt many readers to sit in front of the Tables themselves and experience their magic.

Meditation practice with the Tables of Chartres embraces two essential aspects, which are very closely related in many points:

1. visual learning
2. developing inner vision, which is not restricted to using one's eyes but encompasses the whole of human consciousness.

The fact that a large part of the text deals with the aspect of visual learning should not distract from the realization that the Tables teach us, most of all, to develop our inner vision. There is more to it than our two physical eyes: for those who use the Tables in this sense, they open up a third, an inner eye. In doing so, the division between inner and outer perception is overcome: seeing becomes vision. That is the true potential of the Tables of Chartres.

This inner vision is in-sight in the proper sense of the word. I regard the type of insight which comes from inner experience - as it is possible with the aid of the Tables - to be the only genuine source of empathizing action and intelligent thought. No acquired knowledge can match this source of learning; acquired knowledge too draws its vitality from this source.

One must distinguish between acquisitive learning, by which one gains knowledge, which comes from without, and learning from inner experience and insight. In the first instance, with regard to the Tables of Chartres, it is sufficient to read this book. It will make you "knowledgeable". Those, however, who seek more than to be knowledgeable, will find the practical use of the Tables, for which this book is intended to be a guide, far more significant than the book itself.

From past experience I know that only few are really prepared to take this path of inner vision. When the fascination of the first visual experiences subsides and the path begins to lead through the inner wastelands, many do not realize that this is the moment when something really new is beginning to emerge. They give up and start for a new toy to stimulate their enthusiasm, some new object of fascination. Or, possibly even worse, they turn it into a new cult. There is, therefore, always the danger that valuable instruments for training one's awareness may degenerate into esoteric playthings or collectors' items if they are used or taught in a superficial manner, causing their essence to be lost.

Luckily the number of people who are taking their path to learning and insight seriously and who are grateful to find a really helpful instrument in the Tables of Chartres is increasing today. I hope that this book will assist them and encourage the respectful and conscientious investigation, preservation and communication of this truly wonderful tradition.

## **The Tables in the legends of the Holy Grail**

In the Middle Ages the Church successfully expended great energy keeping at bay any doctrines of salvation whose paths did not pass through Rome. If it was not possible to attain this objective simply by ignoring them or by means of gentle persuasion, the Inquisition put a rapid and frequently extremely bloody end to any erring of souls causing such grievance to those in high places.

One of the traditions that sank into utter oblivion at that time, not least of all because the Church maintained complete silence about it, was the legend of the three Tables of the Holy Grail. According to tradition there had been in the course of history three Tables, one after the other. They were traditionally considered to be directly associated with the innermost mystery of Christ, the secret of the way, the truth and life itself.

In the case of the first Table, this connection is unmistakable. It is the (rectangular) Table of the Last Supper known to us all from the New Testament. Jesus is supposed to have celebrated the Last Supper at this Table with his disciples.

According to tradition the second Table was erected by Joseph of Arimathea and was square. The Romans had locked Joseph away in a dark tower because they suspected him of having stolen the dead body of Jesus. In the tower Jesus appeared to him, handed him the cup of the Last Supper and told him "to look at these three forces and make them into one as often as he desired or needed".<sup>2</sup>

Jesus ordered him to take his family across the sea and set up the second Table for the Grail. To the absolute astonishment of the Romans who had in the meantime forgotten him in his tower, with the help of the Holy Grail, which had become an inexhaustible source of strength in that dark hole, Joseph had survived his time of incarceration.

Upon liberation, Joseph did as Jesus had told him: he traveled with his family across the sea and set up the square Table. Its color was silver and the people who gathered around the Grail which stood on the Table "were immediately touched by the sweetness and fulfillment of their hearts" <sup>3</sup>. This is reported by Robert de Boron, who was not himself there, but claimed that "he would not dare to say or describe, nor could he have done so, even if he had wanted to, if he had not had the great book in which the stories are documented, told and written which contain the great secrets we call the Grail". <sup>4</sup>

Today we are more familiar with the third Table of the Grail than with the second. It was established by King Uther Pendragon on the instructions of Merlin, the Magician. His son, Arthur, gathered the "Knights of the Round Table" about it before they set forth in search of the lost Grail. <sup>5</sup>

The legends show quite clearly that from one Table to the next more and more is lost of the original mystery. This means that there is a hierarchy of the Grail Tables, which we shall encounter once more in the ground plan of Chartres cathedral. In the Early and High Middle Ages the circle of legends around the Holy Grail experienced a last literary zenith through the pens of Robert de Boron, Chrestien de Troyes and Wolfram von Eschenbach. The Church never gave any official comment. There is no trace of the Grail in the literature of the later Middle Ages.

## **The Tables in the gothic cathedrals**

The gradual disappearance of the legends of the Grail as the Middle Ages progressed coincides with the building of the great gothic cathedrals. Seen from today's historical perspective, one might say that architecture became the home of the Tables of the Grail instead of literature. For they played an extremely significant, though hidden role in the cathedrals.

The master builders who worked on the cathedrals would appear to have considered the Tables much more important than one would assume in view of their diminishing popularity. The cathedrals of Chartres and Lausanne are two examples which illustrate this point.

## **The Cathedral of Chartes**

The three Tables of the Grail feature in the ground plan of Chartres cathedral. In order to better understand this, one has to be familiar with the way in which the master builders conceived the position, alignment, and length of the nave. In my description I adhere closely to that given by Louis Charpentier, which explains the surveying, phase very clearly.

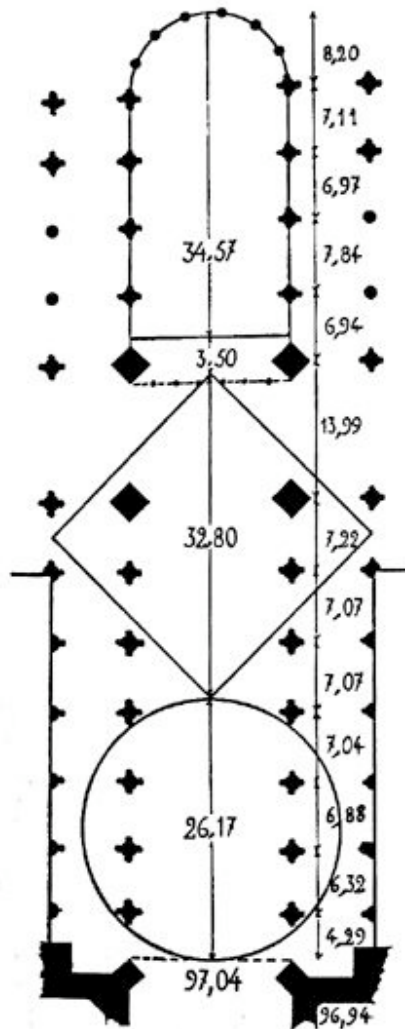
The exact place where the cathedral was later to stand was determined by geomancers, experts with a great sensibility for "power places" and archaic cult sites. The tradition of geomancy is still very much alive in Japan today: geomancers are consulted before the foundation stone is laid for any major building project.

The geomancers chose the site which telluric radiation made particularly suitable for a sacred building. Today we can only engage in academic conjecture as to the criteria upon which they based their decision. The geographical position in relation to other cathedrals, the topography of the land and its firmness may have been considered just as important as subterranean water and ethereal vibrations which might reinforce the sacred character of the building planned. There are many interesting theories on the aspects considered by geomancers for determining the location of buildings, and French cathedrals in particular,

but we shall not go into those more profoundly in this context. What interests us is the moment when the location is set and the real surveying work begins.

If one follows Charpentier's line of thought, the Geomancers first of all determined a central point, which was fully in accord with their criteria and placed a stake there. Going by the shadow caused by the stake at dawn on the first day of spring a certain length was measured (in the case of Chartres 11.25 meters). This measure formed the basis of the rectangular Table, later the cathedral apse, which was marked on the ground on the basis of this shadow.

This rectangular Table was so dimensioned that its width was exactly 20 and its length 40 measuring units. The measuring unit itself originated from the Temple of Solomon and had a length of 82cm.



Ground plan of Chartres showing the three Tables

The entire nave of the church was positioned in accordance with the direction of the rectangular Table, in the case of Chartres, an inclination of 47 degrees.

The rectangular Table, with its sides at a proportion of 1:2, formed the apse. The three Tables were laid out in a row, all with the same surface area: first the rectangular Table, then the square and, finally the circular Table. The square and the round Table together formed the church nave. The apse, being the place of the true mystery, was originally separated from the nave by a mighty wrought-iron railing (in Chartres the railing was removed in the 18th century). The portal was built where the round Table came to an end. It would not have made sense to elongate the nave beyond this point, for the search for

the Grail begins with the Round Table; prior to that, one is on profane ground, i.e. outside the church area. It is, therefore, evident that in Chartres the entire ground plan of the cathedral was based on the three Tables of the Grail. The symbolism is obvious: whilst in the legend the original mystery of the Grail was becoming increasingly dissipated on the path from the rectangular Table of the Last Supper via the square Table of Joseph of Arimathea to the Round Table of King Arthur, the path to salvation begins again at the 'Queste', the round Table at the church portal, and ends at the place of the true mystery, the rectangular Table, i.e. the apse.<sup>6</sup> The ground plan of the cathedral therefore reflects a distinct path to salvation or initiation which believers should walk, symbolized by the three Tables of the Grail.

This is not the only evidence. In Chartres there is another visible sign of the symbolism of redemption: the famous labyrinth in the main nave of the church near the portal, laid into the floor in blue-black stone slabs. It is circular, a good deal smaller than the Round Table in the ground plan because the columns set certain limits to the dimensions of a labyrinth through which one might walk. The rounded edge of the labyrinth towards the apse is exactly at the point where, in the ground plan of the cathedral, the Round Table ends and the Square Table begins.

Up to the 12th century, church labyrinths were to be found only in Italy (Pavia, Piacenza, Lucca and Rome). With the exception of the labyrinth in Lucca they were all made in the classical tesserae technique, and the symbolism of the Minotaur in the center shows strong classical influences. These labyrinths in Italian churches were not designed to be walked. They were small and, as a rule, formed part of some other figurative depiction.

In Chartres, for the first time, the labyrinth was given a central place in the main nave of a Christian church. The labyrinth was already depicted (the wrong way round) in the Masonic Book of Villard de Honnecourt ('Bauhüttenbuch', completed in 1235).<sup>7</sup> This book served to document details of the finished building as a kind of collection of samples, so the labyrinth must have been an integrated part of the decoration of the central nave right from the beginning. Until the nineteenth century no chairs were used that might have impeded access to the labyrinth which lay open in the church interior. It invited visitors not only to contemplate upon it but, indeed, to walk through it.

We can still see today the bolts in the middle of the labyrinth in Chartres where a metal plate was fixed which must have got lost or been removed at some time. There are conflicting opinions as to what may have been depicted on that plate. Hermann Kern believes it may have been some kind of memorial to the cathedral builders as in Amiens.<sup>8</sup>

By contrast, Marcel Joseph Bulteau is convinced that it was one of the usual depictions of the *minotauromachia* (the legend of Theseus' fight with the Minotaur) which were typical of the time, showing the Minotaur, half man, half beast on the one side, and on the other Theseus with his sword and, at his side, Ariadne with her thread. The legend of Theseus was very well known at that time and it may be assumed that the builders of the cathedral knew that their labyrinth was related to the one built by Daedalus in Crete at the order of King Minos, where the Minotaur had resided, destroying any who dared to venture into it. In Lucca there is a small labyrinth in the outer wall of the cathedral of S. Martino (Ø=50cms) of the same type as in Chartres although somewhat older (end of the 12th century). The inscription beside it reads:

HIC EST LABYRINTHUS  
QUEM CRETICUS EDIT DAEDALUS  
DE  
QUO NULLUS VADERE QUIVIT  
QUI FUIT INTUS NI THESEUS GRATIS ARIANE  
STAMINE IUTUS

Here is the labyrinth built by  
the Cretan Daedalus,  
from which no-one, having entered it,  
ever escaped,  
except Theseus, who found his way out  
with the aid of Ariadne's thread

Irrespective of whether the story of the Minotaur was depicted in the heart of the labyrinth of Chartres in an explicit way or not, we may assume that those who built the cathedral of Chartres were fully aware of the link they were forming between the hidden symbolism of redemption represented by the three Tables of the Holy Grail and the symbolism of the legend of Theseus. The symbolism of redemption in the form of the labyrinth in the center of the cathedral was intended not only to be seen, but, indeed, to be passed through.

From the point of view of Christianity, the legend of Theseus was of heathen origin. It may surprise us that heathen ideas in the form of life-sized labyrinths through which one can walk could take up such a central place in Christian churches. This must be attributed to the clever Christian re-interpretation of the original myth. Officially the Church regarded labyrinths as a symbol for the sinful world from which man could only be redeemed through the death of Christ (a re-interpretation of Theseus).<sup>9</sup> The serpentine path within the labyrinth led to the center, to the mystical rose, a symbol for redemption through Jesus Christ. The legendary thread of Ariadne was seen to be the belief in the dogmatic teachings of the Church, showing believers the (only) path to redemption. For this reason, the church labyrinths of the Middle Ages allowed only one path through the labyrinth, not offering any manner of dead-ends or other kind of choice as became customary in the labyrinths of later times.

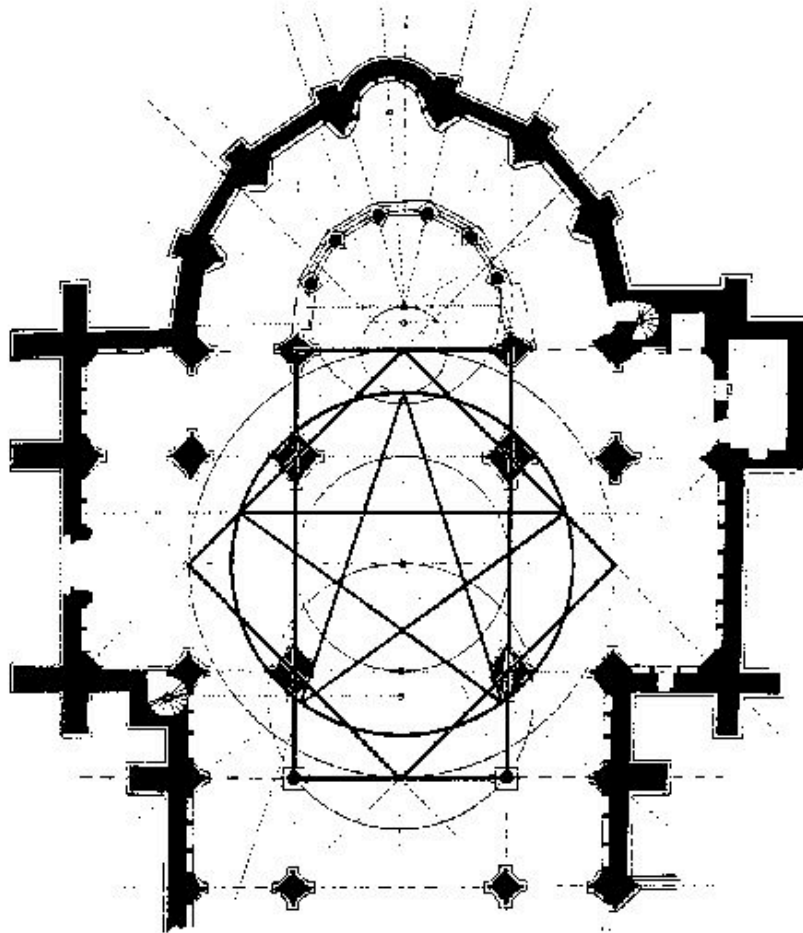
Such Christian re-interpretations certainly played an important part in tolerating heathen symbolism on the sanctified floors of cathedrals. However, it is doubtful whether the intentions of those who built Chartres were limited to the representation of Christian symbolism. The labyrinth was too evidently related to the Round Table of the Grail (hidden in the ground plan). Furthermore the three Tables of the Grail evidently have a significant role in the architectural geometry of other, similar buildings.

In my opinion, the builders of Chartres succeeded - before the very eyes of the Inquisition - in hiding right in the heart of the Church evidence of another path to Salvation, saving it in code form for future, more enlightened, generations. What they may have really meant is divulged to us by the tradition of French gypsies for whom the three Tables of the Grail have not only a symbolic meaning, but a very practical application which has remained secret until our times.

### **The cathedral of Lausanne**

A second example of the significance of the Tables of the Grail in the Middle Ages can be found in the geometry of the cathedral of Notre Dame in Lausanne. Here, too, the three Tables are not visible to the eye, but hidden in the architects plans. In this case I shall allow the plan to speak for itself without adding much comment.





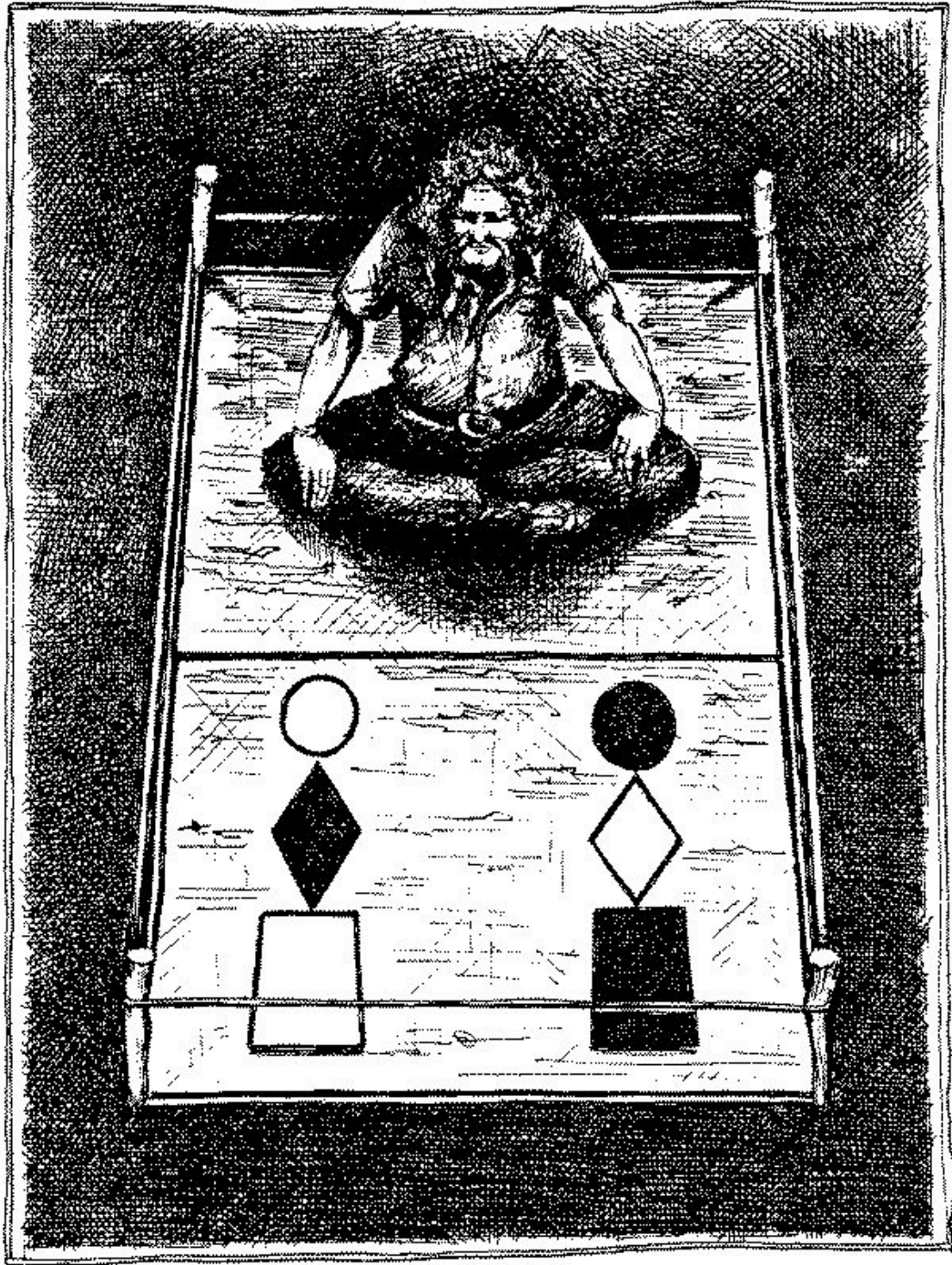
The ground plan of Lausanne with the three Tables

If I had been faced with the task of calling the attention of future generations to the tradition of the three Tables of the Grail (without giving myself up to the Inquisition) I could not have been inspired to a more beautiful, appropriate, dignified and cunning way of doing it than in the secret code of the hidden geometry of the cathedrals. I am sure that one can find the three Tables of the Grail hidden in a prominent place in many other cathedrals of that era. If they have not yet been found, it is because until now we did not know what we should be looking for.

### **The Tables of the Gypsies**

Grail literature is full of hints to the effect that the secret of the Holy Grail is not merely of a symbolic nature, but a very practical path to initiation. Not one of the authors, however, seems able or willing to give even a single piece of practical information about the nature of this path.

The only very concrete hint is to be found in Pierre Derlon's "Gärten der Einweihung" <sup>10</sup>. He describes a hitherto secret tradition of French Gypsies that seems to be merely a visual game at first sight, but on closer study reveals itself to be a very powerful meditation technique. Here we finally find the long lost path to the Holy Grail.



Gypsy meditating in a "Garden of Initiation"

For this meditation the gypsies use Tables that they contemplate in a rather unusual way. They use the word "Tables" for small geometric shapes they make from metal, cardboard or other suitable materials. Shape and proportions of these meditation Tables correspond exactly to those on which the ground plan of Chartres cathedral is based: one is round, the second one square and the third one is rectangular with the proportion 1:2. And they all have, just like in the cathedral, the same surface area. For the purpose of meditation the Tables are laid out in the same arrangement we found on the cathedral ground plan: the round Table lies closest to the viewer (who is virtually entering through the portal),

then follows the square standing on one corner, followed by the rectangle on the far side. The gypsies know very well about the origins of their Tables: they call them "The Tables of Chartres".

Setting aside the psychological symbolism and the philosophical implications of the Grail legends, this meditation of the gypsies with the "Tables of Chartres" seems to me the only really practical and comprehensible aspect of the Grail legends that still makes sense today/ that still remains relevant today. When I experienced the Tables myself it became very clear that I had no need to look any further: in this meditation the initiatory path of the three Tables of the Grail was laid out before me like an open book.

For meditation purposes two Tables of each shape are required, one red, the other blue. These six Tables are laid out in two rows next to each other so that the colors alternate like on a chessboard. The viewer is seated before them and crosses his eyes slightly, so that he (or she) sees a double image of the two rows of Tables (four rows). By adjusting the angle of his crossed eyes he can visually overlap the two inner rows (fusion). He will then see, framed by two rows of Tables on either side, a third row in the middle that appears - thanks to the unusual way of looking - as a virtual image. In the meditative contemplation of the Tables crossed eyes, familiar as a grievous handicap (strabismus), becomes an invaluable visual technique without which the Tables will not reveal their secret.

According to Derlon, the gypsies lay out their Tables within a rectangular area on the ground, framed with violet woolen threads attached to wooden pegs at the corners. To contemplate the Tables they sit in one half of the area, the Tables being laid out in the other. They call this arrangement a "Garden of Initiation".

What does this initiation entail? Derlon writes: "On the 17th of August 1957 I understood the meaning of the garden; on this day I was initiated into the secret of Nothingness.

I have come to know the "Secret of Nothingness" myself in front of the Tables of Chartres; I treated it explicitly in my "Little Handbook for Players of the Glass Bead Game". But how does one describe the richness that unveils itself in this nothingness? At the time I came to call it "not even nothing", but ultimately this experience cannot be communicated. It lies hidden in the nature of the Tables and contemplation of them: it unveils itself to some while remaining hidden to others.

Up to a certain point the experience can be paraphrased in images and parables. Derlon goes on: "At that time I did not know that these three hours (in the "garden") had brought me closer to the secret, and that I would one day go "traveling" in my own garden which would lead me to the prayer carpets of Islam, to the gardens of Zen and to the legend of the flying carpet. Here a special kind of extrasensory perception opens itself to man, that manifests itself outside the garden as mental energy; he is both bow and arrow, aim and target at the same time, and thus becomes an indestructible whole in this universe of deplorable elementary particles." <sup>13</sup>

This quotation shows that for the gypsies the Tables are an instrument of real initiation, an initiation into an unspeakable and timeless truth which is not tied to any particular faith but lives out of the personal experience /is born and continues to live out of personal experience in front of the Tables i.e. in the "garden". Derlon's image of the Unity of bow and arrow, of aim and target, places the meditation with the Tables side by side with the tradition of Zen, and rightly so, as I can corroborate/state from my own experience.

If in the chapters to come I describe the Tables as an instrument of visual practice it is certainly not my intention to instrumentalise the tradition of the Tables of Chartres, reducing them to the status of a method that can be learned or even mastered for a given purpose. I just want to point out how we can use it to sharpen our outer and inner vision and become receptive to other, more subtle levels of perception. It is a fact that the eyes benefit greatly from the meditation with the Tables and that in many cases they bring

about lasting improvements of chronic vision impairment, especially in the case of shortsightedness, weak sight and strabismus. However, to lower the value of the Tables to the profane level of "better vision without glasses" would be to fall far short of their true potential. The Tables of Chartres cathedral are and remain an instrument of true initiation, and their impact on the user is - and will remain, even after years of practice - a mystery.

## Notes

1 Derlon, Pierre: Die Gärten der Einweihung

2 *"Totes les foiz que tu voldras et tu auras besoing, A ces trois vertuz garderas, Qu'une chose ainsi creiras"*, Robert de Borron: Der Prosaroman von Josef von Arimathäa, 13th. Ctry.

3 *"eurent sans targier La douceur, l'accomplissement De leur cuers tout entièrement"* (ibd.)

4 Borron, Robert de: Die Geschichte des Heiligen Gral

5 see list of general Grail-literature

6 Batfoi, Severin: Symbolisme trinitaire des „Romans de la Table Ronde“

7 Hahnloser, Hans: Villard de Honnecourt, Kritische Gesamtausgabe des Bauhüttenbuches. Labyrinths can also be found in the cathedrals and churches of Sens, Reims, St. Omer, Amiens, St. Quentin, Orleans, Poitiers, Bayeux, Auxerre, Mirepoix, Guincamp and Genainville

8 Kern, Hermann: Labyrinthe, Erscheinungsformen und Deutungen, p. 225. Also: Bulteau, Marcel Joseph: Monographie de la Cathedrale de Chartres, III, p 49

9 The psychological implications of Ariadne's thread are the subject of a later chapter (p 93)

10 Pierre Derlon (who was not a gipsy himself) was initiated as the first „outsider“ into hitherto secret knowledge and later received permission to write about some of this knowledge in his books.

11 Derlon, Pierre: Die Gärten der Einweihung p 20

12 Pennington, George: Kleines Handbuch für Glasperlenspieler, 1981, (Little Handbook for Players of the Glass Bead Game (Element Books 1983)

13 Derlon, Pierre: Die Gärten der Einweihung p 22

**Note by the author:** I use the term "Table" (rather than "Tablets") because the three tables of the Holy Grail were indeed tables: the first on the occasion of the last supper, the second one set up by Joseph of Arimathea and finally the "Round Table" of King Arthur. In meditation practice the three tables are represented by the three geometrical shapes, which are also called "tables" in the book, mine as well as Pierre Derlon's.

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This is a translation of part 1 of George Pennington's Book "Die Tafeln von Chartres", published by Walter/Patmos (Germany) in 1994. Parts 2 and 3 remain to be translated.