



The Rock as Center

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Sure thing, the rock or stone was, as we have already mentioned, an important symbol of the center. René Guénon in his **Le Roi du Monde** devoted an entire chapter to it,¹ stressing that the name *Beith-El* ("house of God") was applied not only to the place, but to the stone itself, and when we talk about the "cult of stones," which was common to many ancient people, we must understand this cult not addressing the stones, but the Divinity for whom they were residence. Such special stones illustrated the center manifested as temple, even though, in time, they became "idols," like the stones of the pre-Islamic Arabs.²

The rock is present in the Judaic and Christian traditions, alluding to the symbolism of the center: "He shall cry unto me, Thou art my father, my God, and the rock of my salvation"³; "I will liken him unto a wise man, which built his house upon a rock"⁴; "And I say also unto thee, That thou art Peter, and upon this rock I will build my church."⁵ It is only normal to see the symbolism of the rock maintained in the Islamic tradition and the building of the Dome of the Rock should be perceived as a profound act of spiritual recognition of the rock as a center.⁶ All the traditional data regarding the rock in the

¹ *L'omphalos et les bétyles*.

² For example: Manat was a large stone worshiped in the territory of the Hudhail tribe (between Mecca and Medina), demolished by Saad in the eighth year of Hegira; Allât was a rectangular stone and the "idol" of the tribe of Thakîf, having a temple in Nakhlah (the idol was demolished by Muhammad's unbending order; its loss was perceived by the tribe in a similarly way as the Trojans perceived the loss of their *palladium*); in some cases, the divinity was identified with a particular part of a natural rock. There were other "idols," mentioned in the **Qur'an**, of antediluvian origin, worshiped under the form of a man (Wadd), a woman (Suwâ), a lion (Yaghût), a horse (Yaûk), and an eagle (Nasr); we see the similarity with the Mesopotamian gods, with Ezekiel's tetramorph, and with the symbols of the four Christian Evangelists, which shows how the people's mentality, in accord with the situation of the cycle's evolvment and the spiritual influences' presence or absence, makes a stone or a rock to become an "idol." Gaudefroy-Demombynes mentioned that in the pre-Islamic pilgrimage each station (*wuqûf*) was marked by a stone or a mountain (**Le pèlerinage à la Mekke**, Librairie Orientaliste Paul Geuthner, 1923, p. IV).

³ **Psalms** 89:26.

⁴ **Matthew** 7:24.

⁵ **Matthew** 16:18.

⁶ The symbolism of the Rock as center is stressed also by the cave that exists under it, connected to a well; as Burckhardt said, "the cave under the rock is like the heart or innermost conscience of man" (**Art of Islam**, p. 10). The symbolism of the rock is present in the **Qur'an**: "And when Moses asked for water for

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center of the Dome are sustaining this reality: this is the rock where Abraham was willing to sacrifice his son Isaac; this is the rock where Jacob dreamed about the heavenly ladder; this is the “foundation-stone” upon which the Ark of the Covenant was placed in the Holy of Holies⁷; this is the place from which Prophet Muhammad ascended to Heaven⁸; this Rock under the Dome was the first praying direction for Muslims before Mecca.⁹ What is impossible to understand from an exoteric point of view, appears, from the esoteric perspective, as a shining and immutable truth: the human factor imposed upon the Rock various clothing, as it imposed upon any other images of the center, while, in reality, the essence of it is one and only, reflecting the one and only Tradition and the one and only Principle; therefore a mosque could be transformed in a church, or a church into a mosque; therefore the same rock could be veiled with “myths” belonging to different traditions, serving the same invisible purpose.¹⁰

From the same esoteric perspective, the Islamic tradition, as the last revealed one, used the best terminology allowing us to express the universal and *principal* truth beyond any distinction and specific form. For this reason, René Guénon, when he described the Unity, could affirm: “This luminous spherical form, indefinite and not closed, with its alternations of concentration and expansion (successive from the viewpoint of manifestation, but in reality simultaneous in the ‘eternal present’) is, in the Islamic esotericism, the form of the *Rûh muhammadiyah*; this is the total form of ‘Universal Man’ that God commanded the angels to adore.”¹¹ For the same reason, the appellations “Islam” and “Muslim” have a universal essence, as any traditional man realizes their meaning, regardless of the traditional form he belongs to; “Related to this, we should recall that the proper meaning of the word *Islâm* is ‘submission to the divine Will’; hence it is said, in certain esoteric teachings, that every being is *muslim*, in the sense that there is clearly none who can elude that Will, and accordingly each necessarily occupies the place allotted to him in the Universe as a whole.”¹² For the same reason, when the great seer Ibn ‘Arabî declared that “the Christians and, generally speaking, all ‘the men of the scriptures’ do not change their religion when they become Muslims,” he referred to the

his people, We said: Smite with thy staff the rock. And there gushed out therefrom twelve springs (so that) each tribe knew their drinking-place” (2:60).

⁷ The “foundation-stone,” *Even ha-Shethiyah*, is “the rock from which the world was woven.”

⁸ Burckhardt, **Art of Islam**, p. 10.

⁹ In the Judaic tradition, the **Mishnah** affirms that the prayer should be made by directing the heart towards the Holy of Holies; sometimes it is said that this Holy of Holies belongs to the Heavenly Temple.

¹⁰ It was admitted that the Rock is a token of the close relation between Jewish, Christian and Muslim traditions, which does not mean that there are not continuous futile polemics trying to prove that the Rock was primarily a Christian symbol, or a Jewish one, or an Islamic one.

¹¹ René Guénon, **Le symbolisme de la croix**, p. 44. In accord with Guénon’s sayings, Michel Vâlsan wrote that in the Supreme Center of the Primordial and Universal Tradition reigns the primordial Muhammadian Being, who corresponds to primordial Manu and to Melki-Tsedeq (**L’Islam et la fonction de René Guénon**, Les Editions de l’Oeuvre, 1984, p. 178). Ibn Arabî calls the Supreme Center “the Sublime Assembly” and the Islamic community is its external form, similar to the Judaic tradition where Knesseth-Israel here on earth is the expression of the celestial Knesseth-Israel.

¹² Guénon, **Le symbolisme de la croix**, p. 135.

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doctrine of Unity, and in this sense we have to understand Charles-André Gilis' expression, "the universal spirit of Islam."¹³

"The doctrine of Unity (*Et-Tawhîd*), René Guénon wrote, that is, the affirmation that the Principle of all existence is essentially One, is a fundamental point common to all orthodox traditions," while "only in descending toward multiplicity differences of form appear, the modes of expression themselves then being as numerous as that to which they refer, and susceptible to indefinite variation in adapting themselves to the circumstances of time and place."¹⁴ The Islamic tradition, as the last orthodox tradition descended on earth before the end of times, affirms most openly and clearly that "the doctrine of Unity is unique,"¹⁵ that is, this doctrine is everywhere and all the time the same, unchangeable like the Principle, independent of any multiplicity and of all the changes that influence the contingent applications.¹⁶

With the decay of the cycle and the increasing distance that separates the world from the Principle (the distance from center to circumference), this truth is forgotten, mainly because human beings live in an extreme multiplicity, and therefore the most recent traditional forms have the duty to affirm as explicitly as possible the Unity.¹⁷ Moreover, even if we consider not various but one tradition, as the Islamic one for example, we will

¹³ Charles-André Gilis, *L'Esprit universel de l'Islam*, Al-Bouraq, 1998, p. 205. In the same way, the Jewish prophets envisaged the Temple at the end of times as a Temple for all nations; see, for example: "And it shall come to pass in the last days, that the mountain of the Lord's house shall be established in the top of the mountains, and shall be exalted above the hills; and all nations shall flow unto it" (**Isaiah** 2:2-4).

¹⁴ René Guénon, *Aperçus sur l'ésotérisme islamique et le Taoïsme*, p. 37.

¹⁵ *Et-Tawhîdu wâhidun*. As Guénon said, in Islam, the statement of Unity is expressed in the most explicit way and so adamant that it seems to absorb all the other statements. "Moreover, this tendency increases as one advance in the development of a cycle of manifestation because this development is itself a descent into multiplicity, and because of the spiritual obscuration that inevitably accompanies it. That is why the most recent traditional forms are those which must express the affirmation of Unity in a manner most visible to the outside; and in fact this affirmation is nowhere expressed so explicitly and with such insistence as in Islam, where, one might say, it even seems to absorb into itself all other affirmations" (*Aperçus sur l'ésotérisme islamique*, p. 39).

¹⁶ Guénon, *Aperçus sur l'ésotérisme islamique*, p. 38. René Guénon was, in his whole work, a "servant" of this Unity (his Islamic name is *Abdel Wahed*, the "servant of the Unique"); he always tried to stress the common origin of the various traditional forms, instead to point out the apparent differences, as many are doing today ("what generates division must be banished and what unites must be preserved," **Franc-Maçonnerie**, II, p. 299). His illustrious predecessor, the greatest spiritual master Ibn 'Arabî, did the same thing: "rather than focusing on the external differences or apparent contradictions among various hadîth ... Ibn 'Arabî typically – one might say 'ecumenically' – concentrates on conveying the spiritual meaning and intentions implicit in each Prophetic saying, pointing to a level of understanding unifying what might otherwise be seen as differing or conflicting expressions. (This approach mirrors his more general attitude to the various Islamic sects and schools of law, and ultimately to the observable diversity of human religions and beliefs)" (**The Meccan Revelations**, I, p. 315, note of James W. Morris); Ibn 'Arabî's perspective also illustrates his profound understanding of the Universal Man, as integrating the non-manifestation and the manifestation, the divine and the human, with their characteristics.

¹⁷ Of course, at the beginning of the present *Manvantara*, there was no need to express the affirmation of Unity. On the other hand, today, the modern man, consumed by the reign of quantity, understands almost nothing of the doctrine of Unity; and even if he accepts the existence of three "monotheist" religions, he cannot understand that it is about the one and same Principle, beyond any duality, or that other traditions, like the Hindu or the Chinese one, are not "polytheist."

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find the human factor and the historic circumstances striving to conceal the essential reality. Apparently, the Caliph Abd al-Malik built the Dome of the Rock trying to attract the pilgrims from Mecca to Jerusalem during the conflict with his adversary Abdullah ibn al-Zubayr, and Jerusalem was closer to Damascus than Mecca¹⁸; he also wanted to challenge the Church of the Holy Sepulchre.¹⁹ In fact, the essential reason was to stress the symbolism of the unique center and to acknowledge that *Al-Haram El-Sharif* was indeed a “holy land” sheltering the center²⁰; regardless of any conjectural element, the Dome of the Rock was erected fundamentally to mark the Center and the House of God.²¹

¹⁸ Gaudefroy-Demombynes 27, Burckhardt, **Art of Islam**, p. 10.

¹⁹ The Prophet has warned about such rivalry: “And as for those who chose a place of worship out of opposition and disbelief, and in order to cause dissent among the believers, and as an outpost for those who warred against Allâh and His messenger aforetime, they will surely swear: We purposed naught save good. Allah beareth witness that they verily are liars” (**Qur’an** 9:107-108).

²⁰ Apparently, the fact that St.-Denis became the spiritual center of France, strongly connected to the royal power of the Capetians, and a very important pilgrimage site, was due to the Abbot Suger’s ambition to surpass the other holy sites of the West (like Compostela) (Simson 64, 81, 113); but the influence of St. Bernard on Suger suggests that, in fact, there is no question of rivalry or ambition, but that St.-Denis was indeed a representation of the center.

²¹ Since the Arabs, like the Jews, were nomads, the building of permanent sanctuaries required foreign craftsmen (Muslims or not), like in the case of Solomon’s Temple. Burckhardt considered that “the interior of the sanctuary [the Dome of the Rock] feels more Byzantine or Roman than the exterior” and “it is possible, and even likely, that the plan based on a star-shaped polygon is a Byzantine legacy which, in its turn, has a Platonic and Pythagorean antecedent in antiquity” (**Art of Islam**, p. 12). For Burckhardt, “there is no doubt that the builders of the Dome of the Rock saw in it an image of the spiritual center of the world; granted that this center is symbolized, for Muslims, by the Kaaba, nevertheless Jerusalem, and Mount Moriah in particular, has always been considered as an avatar of this same center” (**Art of Islam**, p. 12).