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The Baetylus – from Greek Mythology to Early Islam

The concept of sacred stones and their worship is found in various cultures and religions around the world. Different stones may hold religious or spiritual significance for many reasons, often related to their shape, colour, rarity, or perceived connection to a deity or natural force and it is a captivating embodiment of the intricate interplay between nature, spirituality, and human creativity. Depending on a multitude of global sacred stone traditions, this study navigates through the origins, significance, and contemporary relevance of this age-old ritual. Through a multidisciplinary approach, we unveil the deep-rooted connections between geology, anthropology, and theology, offering a comprehensive perspective on the origin of Sacred Stones. As we explore the mystical elements of this practice, this abstract invites reader to immerse themselves in the captivating world of sacred stones and the harmonious fusion of ancient and modern beliefs.

Keywords: *Baetylus, Omphalos, Elagabalus, Dushara, Meteorite, al-Ka'ba*

I The Roots of the Stone Worship in the Greek Mythology

The holy stone or *Baetylus* was sometimes a natural rock, of striking form or position, in situ; sometimes a prehistoric megalith; more frequently a rude block set up for the purpose. It was most commonly of oblong shape, roughly circular or rectangular in section, rounded or pointed at the top.¹ The tapering rectangular block was often fashioned

¹MOORE (1903: 198).

to an obelisk or a pyramid; the round one, to a cone 'meta' or *omphalos*. In some places the steps of the further development to rudely iconic forms, and finally to the statue as a work of art, can be traced. On the other hand, the holy stone may grow into an altar on which offerings are made.²

Stone worship, or Litholatry³, is not a prominent feature in Greek mythology when compared to other elements of ancient Greek religious practices. However, there are some references to stones and rocks being venerated or associated with deities and myths in Greek culture. There is an example for this kind of practices in the Greek tradition which is the story of omphalos of Delphi.⁴

The Omphalos was a roughly oval-shaped stone, often interpreted as a type of altar or offering table. It was typically adorned with intricate carvings and inscriptions, pilgrims and visitors to Delphi would come to see this stone, which was situated in the sanctuary of Apollo, one of the most important Greek gods.⁵ Legend has it that this omphalos signified that Delphi actually occupied the physical centre of the earth, certainly it was in many ways the spiritual centre of the ancient world. Zeus was said to have released two eagles who flew from opposite ends of the earth and met exactly at the site of Apollo's sanctuary—a spot marked out for all to see by the stone omphalos with two birds perched on either side.⁶ The second stone at Delphi was said to have been the one that Cronus, the Titan, swallowed, it was thought to be Zeus himself in his symbolic, or *baetylic*, form.⁷ According to *Eusebius*, (*Eusebius. Praep Evan.* I, 37) *baetyli* were believed to be stones endowed with souls and

²MOORE (1903: 198).

³The noun Litholatry is defined in the Oxford English Dictionary as: *stone-worship* see OED (1933: 345).

⁴DONIGER ed. (1999: 106).

⁵DONIGER ed. (1999: 106).

⁶MORFORD—LENARDON (2003: 231).

⁷DONIGER ed. (1999: 106).



Figure 1: The omphalos in the museum of Delphi.

created by Uranus, hence, *Baetylus*, when personified, is called a son of Uranus and Ge, and a brother of Ilus and Cronus. Traces of the veneration paid to such stones are found among the Hebrews and Phoenicians, no less than among the Greeks.⁸

⁸SMITH ed. (1867: 453).



Figure 2: Temple of Apollo in Delphi

II Stones Worship in the Early Judaism

The Jewish narrative is not far from the Greek myth but it is more dramatic. The story of Jacob's Ladder in Judaism is that ladder leading to heaven that Jacob saw in his dream when he was travelling from *Beer-Shaba* in south of Palestine to *Haran* in the north of Syria. He found a place to stay all night, and he took one of the stones in the place and put it under his head to prepare himself for sleep, then he saw the following dream:

A ladder set up on the earth, and the top of it reached to heaven: and behold the angels of God ascending and descending on it. And, behold, the lord stood above it, and said, I am the lord, the God of Abra-



Figure 3: Jacob's Dream, oil on canvas painting by the Spanish painter José de Ribera. 1639.

ham thy father, and the God of Isaac: the land whereon thou liest, to thee will I give it, and to thy seed; and thy seed shall be as the dust of the earth, and thou shalt spread abroad to the west, and to the east, and to the north, and to the south: and in thee and in thy seed shall all the families of the earth be blessed. And, behold, I am with thee,⁹ and will keep thee whithersoever thou goest, and will bring thee again into this land; for I will not leave thee, until I have done that which I have spoken to thee of.¹⁰

Jacob woke up from his sleep and said: God is here, how dreadful is this place, here is the house of God and the gate of heaven. Later he took the stone that he had put under his head, and set it up for a pillar and poured oil upon the top of it and called that place a *Beit-El* 'House of God'. This dream was explained in many ways by the Jewish believers

⁹ RYLE (1921: 292–294).

¹⁰ RYLE (1921: 292–294).

in the later time, one of these explanations says that the ladder represented the expulsions which the Jewish people would suffer before the coming of the Jewish messiah 'Exile of Babylonia'.

Another interpretation is that the place at which Jacob stopped for the night was Mount of Moriah, the future home of the Temple in Jerusalem, which was supposed to be the bridge between heaven and earth. A hilltop towering over the Israeli territory of *Beit-El* in the north of Jerusalem that is believed by some to be the site of Jacob's dream is a tourist destination during the holiday of *Sukkot*.

Another story related to this stone has been found in north-western of Europe, the Stone of Scone or the Stone of Destiny is an oval fragment of red sandstone that was used in the coronation of the monarchs of Scotland then the coronation of the monarchs of England and Great Britain, this stone also known as Jacob's Pillow Stone.¹¹ Numerous theories about the stone history but one of them placed the origin of stone in the Bible time and identified it as the Stone of Jacob taken by the prophet Jeremiah¹² to Ireland in the ancient time. There is an inscribed cross on one surface of the stone, and an iron ring on each end. The monarchs used to sit on the stone itself until a wooden platform was added to the coronation chair in the 17th century AD. On 3rd July 1996 the British Prime Minister, John Major, announced in the House of Commons that the coronation stone, also called the Stone of Destiny, the oldest symbol of the Scottish kingdom, was to return to Scotland.¹³

¹¹ GLOVER (1881: 43).

¹² Jeremiah 650–570 BC: Known as the weeping prophet, was one of the major prophets of the Hebrew Bible, he prophesied the siege of Jerusalem and Babylonian exile as consequences for disobedience.

¹³ ROGGE (2014: 226).



Figure 4: The Stone of Scone or Stone of Destiny

III – The Cult of Elagabalus ‘*Sol Invictus*’

The cult of Elagabalus, also known as the *Elagabalium*, was a short-lived but fascinating religious and political phenomenon that emerged during the reign of the Roman Emperor Elagabalus 204 – 222 AD, who was one of the most controversial and enigmatic figures in Roman history, and his attempt to impose the worship of *Elagabal* on the Roman people marked a dramatic departure from traditional Roman religious practices. This cult centred around the worship of the Syrian sun god *Elagabal*, and it had a profound impact on Roman society and politics during the early 3rd century AD.

The origins of the cult of Elagabalus can be traced to the city of *Emesa*¹⁴ in the Roman province of Syria. *Elagabal* was a local deity wor-

¹⁴ *Emesa*: known as Homs city, it is in western Syria and 501 metres above sea level and



Figure 5: Elagabalus Statue in Palazzo Nuovo Museum, Rome, Italy.

shipped there and was associated with the sun. *Elagabal's* worship was under the form of the conical black stone, which, as it was universally believed, had fallen from heaven on that sacred place.¹⁵

When Elagabalus became a Roman Emperor in 218 AD at the age of 14, he was already a high priest of the cult of *Elagabal*, and he brought the worship of this Syrian god to Rome.

It may therefore be assumed that the term *Gabal* in Aramaic and *Syriac* was used to indicate high places. Thus, the god *Gabal* may have been the god of high places, of the heights. His cult and his principal symbol, a conical black stone are in complete agreement with those of

is located 162 kilometres north of Damascus. The city is located on the Orontes river, and also it is the central link between the interior cities and the Mediterranean coast.

¹⁵ GIBBON (1845: 186).



Figure 6: Coin from the time of Caracalla, a hexa-style temple of Emesa containing baetyl of Elagabal flanked by two parasols and surrounded by balustrade, dated 216 – 217 AD.



Figure 7: Coin of Elagabalus dates: 218 – 219 AD. the black stone 'baetyl' of Elagabal on a magnificent chariot drawn by four horses to Rome.

the high places mentioned in the Old Testament. The sun god *Elagabal* must therefore have had his places of worship in the mountains before he was worshipped at *Emesa*, in the valley of the Orontes.¹⁶

¹⁶ HALSBERGHE (1972: 624).



Figure 8: A relief from Palmyra stand in the entrance of Ba'al temple.



Figure 9: A coloured relief from Palmyra stand in the entrance of Ba'al temple.

Whatever the origin of *Sol Invictus Elagabal* may have been, as the paramount god of Syria he was worshipped in the form of a black, conical meteorite bearing mysterious signs symbolizing the sun. This stone belonged to the meteorites that occupied an important place in the Syro-Phoenician religion.¹⁷

In Emesa, on the Orontes, Sol Invictus Elagabal had a six-pillared temple which, as was often the case in Eastern countries, was ornamented with gold and jewels. This beautiful temple, the eagle-the bird of the sun-on or beside the sacred stone, or the handsome altar on which the priests performed sacrifices to him, were frequently represented on the coins of Emesa.¹⁸

The future Roman Emperor Elagabalus had the name *Varius*, but later he was called Elagabalus because he was priest of this god whom he afterwards brought with him from Syria to Rome, founding a temple for him on the site of an earlier shrine of Orcus. Finally, when he received the imperial power, he took the name *Antoninus* and was the last of the *Antonines* to rule the Roman Empire. Magie. *His Aug.* II, 107.

The triumph of the god of *Emesa* over all the religions of the earth, was the great object of his zeal and vanity; and the appellation of Elagabalus 'for he presumed as pontiff and favourite to adopt that sacred name' was dearer to him than all the titles of Imperial greatness.¹⁹

When Elagabalus had to depart *Emesa* to Rome, he could not resist taking his beloved god with him to the capital of the Empire. The voyage was undertaken without delay, but progress was difficult and slow. Not only the requirements of the sumptuous imperial court had to be taken into consideration, but also those of the divine dignity of *Sol Invictus*, who, in the form of the celebrated con-

¹⁷ HALSBERGHE (1972: 64).

¹⁸ HALSBERGHE (1972: 64).

¹⁹ GIBBON (1845: 186).

ical black stone, accompanied the cortege on a magnificent chariot.²⁰ He brought the sacred stone of Elagabalus to Rome with him and built two temples for the god, one on the Palatine, the so-called *Eliogabalium* and the other in the suburb known as *Ad Spem Veterem* east of the city, near the modern *Porta Maggiore*.²¹

The *Elagabalium* temple was only of medium size but its ornamentation was exceptional. With the Eastern carpets and precious stones of every kind and colour, this building rivalled that of *Emesa*.²²

For the emperor, its location near the palace was the most suitable and convenient possible, since as the high priest of *Sol Invictus Elagabal*, he had to sacrifice to the sun god every morning.²³ He scarified there hecatombs of bulls and a vast number of sheep. These he places upon the altars and heaped up spices of every kind, he also set before the altars many jars of the oldest and finest wines, so that the streams of blood mingled with streams of wine. Elagabalus dances around the altars to music played on every kind of instrument, women from his own country accompanied him in these dances, carrying cymbals and drums as they circled the altars. The entire senate and all the knights stood watching, like spectators at the theatre. The spices and entrails of the sacrificial animals were not carried by servants or men of low birth, rather, they were borne along in gold vessels held on high by the praetorian prefects and the most important magistrates, who wore long-sleeved robes with a broad purple stripe in the centre, robes which hung to their feet in the Phoenician style. On their feet were linen shoes customarily worn by the Eastern prophets. It was obvious that Elagabalus was paying the highest honor to those associated with him in the performance of the sacred rites.²⁴

²⁰ HALSBERGHE (1972: 65).

²¹ MAGIE ed. (1924: 110).

²² HALSBERGHE (1972: 74).

²³ HALSBERGHE (1972: 74).

²⁴ ECHOLS ed. (1961: 145–146).

In the suburbs of Rome, the emperor built a very large and magnificent temple to which every year in mid-summer he brought his god. He staged lavish shows and built race tracks and theatres, believing that chariot races, shows, and countless recitals would please the people, who held night-long feasts and celebrations. He placed the sun god in a chariot adorned with gold and jewels and brought him out from the city to the suburbs. A six-horse chariot bore the sun god, the horses huge and flawlessly white, with expensive gold fittings and rich ornaments. No one held the reins, and no one rode in the chariot; the vehicle was escorted as if the sun god himself were the charioteer. Elagabalus ran backward in front of the chariot, facing the god and holding the horses' reins. He made the whole journey in this reverse fashion, looking up into the face of his god. Since he was unable to see where he was going, his route was paved with gold dust to keep him from stumbling and falling, and bodyguards supported him on each side to protect him from injury. The people ran parallel to him, carrying torches and tossing wreaths and flowers. The statues of all the gods, the costly or sacred offerings in the temples, the imperial ornaments, and valuable heirlooms were carried by the cavalry and the entire Praetorian Guard in honor of the sun god.²⁵

This ritual acted out in the unbelieving environment of Rome, was presumably the standard ritual at the Temple of *Emesene Ba'al* in Syria. One can assume that the other great temples of the East demanded similar ritual processions. An inscription on the Temple of Zeus at *al-Dumāir* northeast of Damascus also makes a reference to a religious procession. Of course, religions elsewhere in the Greek and Roman worlds held sacred processions and even had processional ways—the concept is hardly exclusive to the East. But in the East, it was accorded greater importance and was expressed elaborately in architecture.²⁶

²⁵ ECHOLS ed. (1961: 147–148).

²⁶ BALL (2000: 260).



Figure 10: Nabataean betyl depicting a goddess, possibly al-'Uzza.

After the death of Emperor Elagabalus, the measures taken against the cult of *Sol Invictus* continued existence. The return of the cult symbol to *Emesa* guaranteed its survival, and its influence and attraction would continue to radiate from its original source. The black stone might equally well have been destroyed or defaced, as was the fate of so many distinguished monuments, as a testimony against *Sol Invictus Elagabal* and his *sacerdos amplissimus*, but this was not done. Under the protection of *Alexander Severus*, the usurpers *Uranius Antoninus* and *Sulpicius Antoninus* settled in *Emesa* and, as they were distant relatives of Elagabalus, assumed the hereditary function of the priesthood. The city of *Emesa* remained the celebrated place in which *Sol Invictus* continued to



Figure 11: Votive niches with four baetyles inside, Petra.



Figure 12: A gabled votive niche formed by pilasters.

be worshipped well into a much later period where the priestly family maintained the *sacerdotium* and held a certain amount of political power. The tenacity of the influence of the cult is shown by the fact that, fifty years later, Aurelian attributed his brilliant victory over queen Zenobia of Palmyra to the special intervention of *Sol Invictus Elagabal*.²⁷

The *Sol Invictus* continued to be worshipped in *Emesa* and the black stone was placed back from Rome to one of *Emesa's* temples at that time, there is evidence of practising this worshipped in *Ba'al* temple of Palmyra, the relief in the entrance of the temple tell the story of the holy stone before the Roman invasion. The carving described a farewell of the covered black stone placed on the top of the camel, surrounded by several women and some soldiers trying to protect the stone until they arrived at the destination, which probably was in the south of Palmyra and far from the Roman in the north and out of their control, it's the Nabatean kingdom where the same kind of worship was practising.

IV – The Nabatean Stones Worship

The Nabataeans observed what is called 'aniconism' in the veneration and representation of their deities. Aniconism means that rather than using figural images as objects of worship, symbolic forms such as standing stones are taken as representations of the deity.²⁸ The most common aniconic representations of deities are 'standing stones'. These can be categorized according to their function as memorial, legal, commemorative, and cultic stelae *betyls*. The Nabataeans used two main types of stelae: the *betyl* meaning the representation of a deity, and the *nephesh*, memorial mark for the dead. The features described point to round or spherical, red or black meteorites that were especially venerated as sa-

²⁷ HALSBERGHE (1972: 106–107).

²⁸ WENNING (2001: 79).



Figure 13: A small wall niches designed to hold figures or representations
baetyls of the main Nabataean god, Dushara.

cred stones in the Roman East. The most famous *betyl* is the meteor of the *omphalos Elagabal-Ammudates* from *Emesa*, which were transferred to Rome.

The Nabataean *betyls* rather than round, black stones, are stelae or shaped slabs raised in relief. But since they too are aniconic sacred stones, in modern research the term *betyl* is associated with these types of monuments. Nabataean inscriptions include two terms for *betyls*: *nsyb* and *msb'*. Both terms are related to the Semitic root *ysb* and describe an erected/standing stone/stela. *Betyl* types and shapes do not indicate any difference between the two terms.²⁹

The first systematic classification of the Nabataean *betyls* was published by Dalman 1908.

²⁹ WENNING (2001: 80).

These classifications were based on the shapes of the *betyls*, plain *betyls* can be subdivided into the following types: rectangular slab, high rectangular slab with a rounded top, semi-circular or hemispherical slab and dome-shaped spherical *betyl*. In addition, there are the Eye *betyls* and the Face stelae.³⁰

Betyls are found in groups of two, three, four, six, and ten in various combinations, they appear of the same size, or different sizes, in different arrangements, set above each other, or set into each other; one *betyl* can be raised in relief, the other shaped as a negative space; a rectangular slab can be paired with an eye *betyl*, and these are the most common combinations.

Besides all of these shaped stones, there are hundreds of votive niches at Petra, they are cut into the rock as simple or framed recesses and are characterized by an upright rectangular outline. Besides the rectangular shape, we also find simple arched or gabled recesses. In some cases, the recess represents the *betyl* as a negative space. An even more simple type is created when the niche is cut into a sloping rock. The recess is hewn at a right angle so that the niche is deeper at the base. The frames of the niches show great variety, usually, the frame is raised in relief. However, in some cases, frames were added in materials such as stucco. The simplest frame is shaped by strips all around, indicating beams or battens. Generally, the lower strip is missing, and the base of the niche is used as its lower boundary.

Most frames are shaped by pilasters. In a few cases, we can also find engaged columns, pillars, and/or standards with the crescent moon instead of the capital.³¹

In two petroglyphs the *betyl* is framed by palms depicting a sanctuary. The place of the Niches and the interpretation of the *betyls* as well

³⁰ WENNING (2001: 85).

³¹ WENNING (2001: 88).



Figure 14: The clan leaders and Muhammad in the middle, placed the black stone into Ka'ba.

involve the question of where the niches were placed. The votive niches at Petra are cut into the rock faces of steep cliffs, sloping and dome-shaped rocks, fallen rocks and into the walls of quarries. They are also found in the walls of rock-cut *cellae*, triclinia, and tomb facades. They belong either to places of assembly of worshippers or to funeral complexes '*marzh*'. Niches are found along the paths to sanctuaries and high place on the top of the mountains, as in the case of those associated with the Great High Place.³²

V – The Black Stone of *Ka'ba* in Mecca

When we move to the south of Petra in the Arabian Peninsula, there is a small city called Mecca, the holy city of all Muslims around the world since the *al-Harrām* Mosque and the *Ka'ba* in the centre of the Mosque, *al-Ka'ba* holds the Black Stone in the north-eastern corner, which is probably the most respected rock in the entire world, but its lithological nature remains unknown.

³² WENNING (2001: 90).

In pre-Islamic times, Mecca was *Haram* or sanctuary area, it was the object of an annual pilgrimage centre and marketplace. On the other hand, it was inviolable, no bloodshed being permitted within it. It was thus apt to attract settlers and visitors all the year round.³³ Mecca became the repository of the various idols and tribal gods of the peninsula and the destination of an annual pilgrimage. The pilgrimage also entailed a period of truce, which served not only for religious worship but also for the arbitration of disputes, the settlement of claims and debts, and, of course, trade. The Meccan fairs gave the Arabian tribes a common identity and gave Mecca moral primacy in much of Western and Central Arabia. These fairs were the origin of Mecca's commercial interests. The people called the *Quraysh*, who took control of Mecca in the 5th century AD, became a skilled retailing population. In the 6th century AD, they found a place in the spice trade as well, as difficulties with other international trade routes diverted traffic to the overland Arabian route.³⁴ Traditional Muslim sources have told the story of the black stone as a stone dropped from heaven in the time of Adam. Afterwards, Abraham, the father of Isaac and Ismail, got a command from God to build a house in Mecca. Abraham built the house, then appointed it as the house of God and placed the black stone in it. Since then, the people in Arabia have venerated this stone and the *Ka'ba* itself as the house of God since they used to visit Mecca to practice their worship every year. The story of Muhammad's involvement with the Black Stone is connected to the reconstruction of the *Ka'ba* which had fallen into disrepair over time and required rebuilding during Muhammad's lifetime. As the tale goes when it was time to reconstruct the *Ka'ba*, various tribes, in Mecca eagerly sought to partake in placing the Black Stone at its designated spot. To prevent disputes and potential conflicts it is said that Prophet Muhammad devised a solution. He suggested that

³³ CRONE (2004: 168).

³⁴ LAPIDUS (1988: 16–17).



Figure 15: The fragments of black stone of Ka'ba covered by a bracelet of silver.

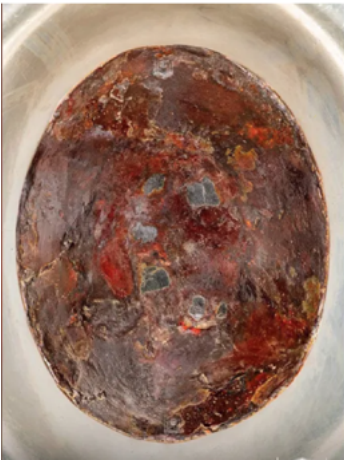


Figure 16: High resolution photos have been revealed for the first time of the black stone 2021

each tribe select a representative who would collectively lift and position the Black Stone where it belonged, Ibn Hishām. *Al-Sirah*. 1, 209–210.

Admittedly, God or 'Allah' is associated with a black stone, and some traditions (Ibn Hishām. *Al-Sirah*. 1, 209–210) hold that originally this stone was sacrificial, this suggests that it was stone rather than the

building around it, which was *Bayt-Allah*, the house of god, and this gives us a perfect parallel with the old Testament bethel. The cult of the Arab god *Dusares* '*Dhu-Shara*' also seems to have centred on a black sacrificial stone. A similar arrangement is met in a Nabataean inscription from Petra that speaks of sacrificial stones *nsyb* 'belonging to 'the lord of this house' and *al-* '*Uzza*'. If we assume that *bayt* and *Ka'ba* alike originally referred to the Meccan house as a pagan God or *Allah* worshipped in conjunction with a female consort such as *al-* '*Uzza* and/or other 'daughter of god'. This would give a genuinely pagan deity for *Quraysh* and at the same time explain their devotion to goddesses.³⁵

The black stone originally was one rock placed in the north-eastern corner of *Ka'ba* and is 1.5 meters above the ground but over time and because of the many conflicts in Mecca between the Muslims, it has transformed into multiple pieces that are now held together by cement. The fragments are themselves made up of smaller pieces which have been combined to form the seven or eight fragments visible today. These pieces are enclosed within a frame and secured to the outer wall of the *Ka'ba* using silver nails.

In the 10th century, the historian Muslim *Muhammad ibn Nafi* '*al-Khuzai*' saw the stone completely exposed during the rebuilding of the *Ka'ba* and stated that the portion of the stone covered by the wall is white and the length of the stone is one cubit.

Another writer, *Muhammad Alī ibn Muhammad ibn 'Allān al-Bakrī* saw it during the remodelling of the *Ka'ba* at the time of the *Ottoman Sultan Murad* in 1630. He said that the black stone measures 1.5 x 1 x 0.33 yards with an inch or two being missing in various spots, he mentioned a bracelet of silver.³⁶

³⁵ CRONE (2004: 198).

³⁶ DIETZ-MCHONE (1974: 177–178).

One of the first orientalists the Swiss traveller Johann Ludwig Burckhardt visited Mecca in 1814, and provided a detailed description of the stone as an irregular oval, about seven inches in diameter, with an undulated surface, composed of about a dozen smaller stones of different sizes and shapes, well joined together with a small quantity of cement, and perfectly well smoothed; it looks as if the whole had been broken into as many pieces by a violent blow, and then united again. It appeared to me like a lava, containing several small extraneous particles of a whitish and of a yellow substance. Its colour is now a deep reddish brown approaching to black.³⁷

In the second half of the 19th century Sir William Muir has described the stone that is semi-circular, measures some six inches in height and eight in breadth; it is of a reddish-black colour, and notwithstanding the polish imparted by myriads of kisses, bears to the present day in its undulating surface marks of a volcanic origin.³⁸

The colour of the stone has been related in many religious and history books that this stone is white. In some stories it is described as whiter than snow, in another white as though it was silver, and in another, as whiter as yoghurt. So why it was named a black stone? The answer is that the Prophet Muhammad explained that the sins of man are what blackened it.

Some historians and religious scholars who went on the *Hajj* 'pilgrimage' to Mecca said they saw traces of whiteness. One saw a white dot visible to all, another saw three white spots, the largest being the size of a grain seed, and a third said that the amount of white was decreasing.

The origin of black stone has been described variously as a basalt stone, an agate, a piece of natural glass or a meteorite. However, the first analysis was published in 1857 by Paul Partsch³⁹, the curator of the Aus-

³⁷ BURCKHARDT (1829: 250).

³⁸ MUIR (1894: 27).

³⁹ PARTSCH (1856: 1–5).

tro-Hungarian imperial collection of minerals, who corresponded with Anton Ritter von Laurin, Austrian General Consul in Cairo, who was a friend of Egyptian viceroy Muhammad Ali. Ali showed Von Laurin what he claimed was the only fragment of the stone outside of Mecca, wrested from the fanatical *Wahābis* who had attacked the *Ka'ba* believing its contents to be idolatrous. Von Laurin noted the stone's black surface and finely grained silver-grey interior embedded with bottle-green cubes, a description consistent with some meteorites.⁴⁰

The second proposal was published in 1974 by Robert Dietz and John McHone, who said that the Black Stone was actually an agate, judging from its physical attributes and a report by an Arab geologist that the stone contained clearly discernible diffusion banding characteristic of agates.⁴¹

Elisabeth Thomsen of the University of Copenhagen proposed a different theory in 1980. She suggested that the Black Stone may be a meteorite glass fragment.⁴² Nevertheless, the black stone has never been analysed with modern scientific techniques and its origins remain the subject of speculation. But on the 4th of May 2021, the Saudi government agency announced a high-resolution photo had been revealed for the first time of black stone. The images are up to 49,000 megapixels in size and took more than 50 hours to photograph and develop.⁴³

Conclusion

The practice of stone worship holds a profound significance in various cultures worldwide, spanning millennia of human history till now. From ancient civilizations to contemporary societies, stones served as

⁴⁰ GOLIA (2015: 80).

⁴¹ DIETZ-McHONE (1974: 175).

⁴² THOMSEN (1980: 89).

⁴³ MCSWEENEY (2021).

symbols of divinity, protection, and reverence. Through their enduring presence and timeless allure, stones have woven themselves into the fabric of human spirituality, offering a tangible connection to the natural world and the mysteries of the universe. As we reflect on the diverse manifestations of stone worship across cultures, we are reminded of the universal human impulse to seek meaning and transcendence in the tangible and the sacred. In honouring the ancient tradition of stone worship, we not only pay homage to our ancestors' beliefs but also embrace a deeper understanding of our own spiritual journey and the enduring power of the natural world.

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