

and Sagittarius: the Gate of Cancer means Gemini. In fact, he states explicitly (1.12.5) that this 'Gate' is 'where the Zodiac and the Milky Way intersect.'<sup>5</sup>

How much clearer can it be? And what better confirmation? The spatial gateways are located with the intersection points of the ecliptic (i.e., the zodiac) and the Milky Way, which target the Galactic Center—Galactic Anticenter axis and are located in Sagittarius and Gemini. A correction thus must be made to Guénon's overgeneralized use of Capricorn and Cancer: the solstices are indeed the gateways within the yearly cycle, but the sidereal background location of the gateways is Gemini and Sagittarius. Furthermore, although the gates were observed rising heliacally on the solstices some 2,000 years ago, precise alignment between the solstice axis and the galactic gateways occurs in our own era. The Maya marked this occurrence with their 2012 end-date.<sup>6</sup>

Guénon was satisfied with a loose reference to Capricorn and Cancer, but both he and Coomaraswamy examined star lore and constellation mythology relating to the gateways, much of which points at Sagittarius rather than Capricorn. For example, the "mouth" of the Vedic *simsamara* crocodile "in Capricorn" may actually refer to the dark rift of the Milky Way near Sagittarius. We need to dig deep into the Traditionalist literature, and only in Coomaraswamy's unpublished essays will we find a compelling answer; but that must be saved for chapter 13.

Nevertheless, the doctrine of the celestial gateways involves the shifting solstice axis in relation to a background axis fixed to two important points along the zodiac. We might already suspect that the Pleiades and the Galactic Center serve as the crown and root of this sidereal framework.

## The Symplegades

The Clashing Cliffs (or Symplegades) in the story of Jason and the Argonauts, like the motif of the rotating island-castle in the Grail Cycle, suggests a fleeting time of great opportunity during which a cosmic portal is open. In initiatory stories, it presents a final obstacle or test through which one must pass without hesitation before the door closes. It evokes, again, the precessional alignment of solstice and galaxy, which, of course, is the case for only a limited time. The Symplegades in the story of Jason

are the treacherous Clashing Cliffs located in the Dardanelles. With the aid of a goddess the Argonauts slip through just before the rocks slam shut on the *Argo's* stern ornament. At the other end of the Mediterranean, the Pillars of Hercules conform to the Symplegades symbol in an especially profound way, which we shall explore later.

The Symplegades are a universal motif that Coomaraswamy suggests is older than the peopling of the Americas. In the Grail myth, the rotating island castle offers only occasional passage between the mundane and spiritual worlds. An Eskimo myth makes the Clashing Cliffs into icebergs that bar the seekers' way. Joseph Campbell, following Coomaraswamy, associated the Symplegades symbol with the parting of the Red Sea—the narrow passage opens briefly and the heroes can escape from the land of tyranny into the next realm. The "razor's edge," the "eye of the needle," and the "straight or narrow passage" are all related to the Symplegades symbol, and were explored individually by Guénon in his *Fundamental Symbols*.

Coomaraswamy's article on the Symplegades motif is, I believe, one of his most important. The motif occurs in geography and astronomy, but Coomaraswamy is concerned with its role in the quest for enlightenment. His esoteric interpretations draw primarily from celestial locations that are part astronomical, part metaphysical. In his interpretation, the "door in the sky"—that is, the north gate—is framed by the contrary "walls" of the Symplegades. In this sense, they guard the celestial gate from those who are unqualified to enter. The door to paradise is, in Coomaraswamy's words, the "Sundoor at World's End," and is always guarded by a being or a test that is meant to determine the spiritual attainment of the seeker. To get beyond the opposed grinding walls of the polarities that mark the "ends" of the manifest world of duality, one must transcend all notions of good and evil, of self and other. In the Christian tradition it is Saint Peter who has the key to the pearly gates; in the Hindu and Buddhist tradition, when one knocks on heaven's door and the voice bellows, "Who goes there?" the only worthy answer is: "It is you." In other words, to transcend this world of dualities, to exit the wheel of incarnation, all notions of selfhood and individuality must, so to speak, be left at the door. The soul thereby demonstrates its wisdom by merging with its infinite and eternal origin, and passes through the narrow gate of the contraries that bar passage to any unready interlopers.

meridian (directly south, opposite the North Pole). The Pole Star (or North Celestial Pole) is located at an altitude above the northern horizon equal to one's latitude of observation. For example, at the 15° north latitude of Izapa, the Pole Star is 15° above the northern horizon. Because of precession, the relationship between the altitudes of the Pole Star and the Galactic Center as viewed from any given location depends on the era in which the observations are made. A question arises: At what latitude will the Pole Star and the Galactic Center reach the same altitudes, one to the north and one to the south? Perhaps such a "balanced" relationship was noticed by ancient skywatchers, and perhaps the unique latitude we might identify is significant. This question will be answered, in chapter 14.

Even though we have identified the galactic level in Guénon's Hyperborean-Atlantean shift, another unavoidable facet of this cosmological framework involves precession. The polar tradition tracks the polar precession while the solar-galactic (Atlantean) would presumably track the Sun's precessional slippage backward through the zodiac, in relation to the Pleiades. Or, in relation to the opposite point in the zodiac, the Galactic Center. These opposed points thus might be considered to be gateways in the sky—dusk and dawn markers for the precessional night and day phases. Here we begin to understand the true anchor points of the Vedic *yuga* system, which define seasonal epochs in precession, a concept that is in fact well known in Vedic thought.

### The Solstice Gateways

We explored the Greek concept of the celestial gateways in chapter 7. It is an idea also found in the Vedic idea of dividing the year into ascending and descending phases. The ascending phase begins at winter solstice, which is called the *devayana*, or gate of the gods. The descending phase begins at summer solstice, which is called *pirriyana*, the gate of humanity: We can refer to the former as the portal of transcendence or ascension and the latter as the door to reincarnation or materialization. This model operates on smaller and larger levels of time. For example, the day "ascends" from midnight to midday (noon) and then "descends" through dusk to be reborn again at midnight. Likewise, the lunar month waxes and wanes in a period of 29.6 days. As noted, the solstices serve as the dividing line of the year into ascending and descending halves, and even

the precessional Great Year is divided by the solstice-galaxy alignment into ascending and descending phases, as revealed in Yuktaswar's reading of the Laws of Manu.

The larger temporal level of the precessional Great Year is mentioned by both Guénon and Coomaraswamy as the framework of the *yuga* doctrine, and they concur with early Greek writers that the solstice gateways are located in Capricorn and Cancer. Neither seems to recognize, however, that two reference points are indicated here: The first is the solstice axis, which constantly shifts with precession in relation to background features such as constellations; the second is the Cancer-Capricorn axis, which is a fixed sidereal backdrop. We should recognize that time is a factor in the manifestation of the "celestial gateways" when the larger "year" of precession is considered: the doctrine implies both a temporal and a spatial location for the gateways. Let's take a closer look at the sources of this idea.

In his essay "The Solstitial Gates," Guénon attributes to the Greek writers Porphyry and Numenius the placement of the solstice gateways in Capricorn-Cancer. It is important to note that Numenius was writing in the second century A.D., when the solstices were indeed in the constellations of Capricorn and Cancer. His statement was echoed in Porphyry's *Case of the Nymphs*, and must go back to an even earlier time, as the idea of the solstices as gateways is alluded to in Homer's *Odyssey*. Guénon goes to great lengths to identify which gateway is ascending and which is descending; but the relationship between the solstice axis (which shifts with precession) and the relatively fixed background of constellations is not clear. The truth is that the unquestioned placement of the solstice axis in Capricorn-Cancer really identifies a specific era of precession, one that was valid up until the time of Numenius. And that placement was important because the Greeks were interested in the constellation that visibly rose before the Sun on the solstices: as we explored earlier, these would have been Gemini and Sagittarius. Macrobius, a contemporary of Numenius, also wrote that souls ascend to heaven by the gate of Capricorn and descend into rebirth through the gate of Cancer. But since the Greeks observed the constellation rising *before* the Sun, might he really mean Sagittarius and Gemini? Confirming our suspicions, the authors of *Hamlet's Mill* clarify his intention for us: "Macrobius talks of signs; the constellations rising at the solstices in his time (and still in ours) were Gemini

in the *I Ching* to generate the sixty-four hexagrams. At some point in history, the meanings of these constellations were shifted to star groups along the ecliptic, and four more constellations were identified, to make the total of twelve constellations that constitute the zodiac. The Pleiades or Ophiuchus are sometimes considered to be a lost thirteenth constellation, as both are near the ecliptic. This transition in astronomical thinking indicates an emphasis on the solar path (the zodiac) over the polar center, thus, a polar-to-solar shift. However, when we look closely at Guénon's contribution to understanding this shift, a new factor emerges.

Guénon's primary argument for a shift from a polar to a solar framework involves the transfer of the seven stars or seven sages (*sapta rishah*) of the Great Bear to the Pleiades. Both constellations have (or had) seven stars, and the Pleiades resemble a tiny dipper. (The number 7 also refers to the seven stages or rungs on the ladder of the cosmic pillar that the soul passes while ascending to the highest heaven.) A relationship between the Great Bear and the Pleiades is found in many stories. For example, the Pleiades are still referred to as the seven sisters, but there are now only six Pleiads. The Greek legend tells that one of the Pleiads, Elektra, was kidnapped by one of the seven kings (one of the stars in the Big Dipper, Alcor) and now accompanies him as a binary star companion. This myth is associated with the fall of Troy, which, as we saw in chapter 7, symbolizes the "fall" of the Big Dipper out of proximity to the North Celestial Pole, signaling a new World Age around 2200 B.C.

The Pleiads or Atlantides were the daughters of Atlas, and were therefore the children of the new Atlantean tradition. In addition, in Egypt the Big Dipper was called the "thigh of the bull," while the Pleiades are located in Taurus, right on the bull's shoulder. Guénon brings in linguistic comparisons as well, but the point is clear: The Pleiades symbolically replaced the function of the Big Dipper. This equation is rich in implications, especially when one considers that the Pleiades mark the direction opposite the Galactic Center. The cosmological framework that once revolved around the circumpolar constellation Ursa Major was transferred to the north pole of the evolutionary axis that extends from the Galactic Center to the Galactic Anticenter. The Pleiades are not precisely on the ictic Anticenter, but then neither is the Great Bear precisely on the active pillars.

Guénon writes that these two symbolic frameworks map onto each other and share the same astronomical references, making it difficult to identify the true intention of a given symbol, but the hyperborean (northern) tradition is probably older. Generally, however, the same set of ideas regarding the "cosmic center" was applied, in two different eras, to two different parts of the sky. The first is the hyperborean polar symbolism. The second is the solar or sun-centered symbolism that Julius Evola refers to as Olympian and others call Atlantean. Both locations occupy the summit of a cosmic axis and serve as centering points. Notice that the Pleiades are only solar in the sense that they are near the ecliptic and the sun passes by them once a year. Their true function, above being a solar reference point, is that they indicate the direction of the Galactic Anticenter, the crown of the galactic axis. In this way we can amend Guénon's reconstruction and call it, with good justification, a polar-to-galactic shift.

In the polar-solar-galactic equation there are three cosmic frameworks:

	POLAR	SOLAR	GALACTIC
north	Great Bear/ North Pole Star	Cancer/June solstice	Pleiades
south	South Celestial Pole	Capricorn / December solstice	Galactic Center

When the "seven lights" of spiritual growth were shifted to the Pleiades, a new framework was identified that operates on the level of the galaxy. This galactic level embraces the tree or axis that starts at the Galactic Center (the *muladhara* chakra of creation), extends through Earth, and proceeds outward toward the Pleiades (the *sahasrara* crown of creation) in the direction of the Galactic Anticenter (in Gemini). The Galactic Anticenter is the topmost point in this new framework, because it is the direction out of our galaxy, into transgalactic domains. The Pleiades, like the Great Bear, are a short distance from the highest point of the system, but nevertheless they serve as a mythic and symbolic indicator. By this reasoning it follows that the Galactic Center is analogous to the South Celestial Pole, and has special affinities with the Southern Hemisphere. In fact, from the viewpoint of the Northern Hemisphere, the Galactic Center always arches through the southern skies, and its highest altitude at meridian transit is related to one's latitude of observation. Farther south, the higher its altitude will be when it crosses the southern

antecedent. The current pop-culture quest to trace fragments of compelling "evidence" back to some Atlantean Ur-civilization misses the point, and is evidence of the overliteral preoccupations of Western "modern" consciousness. The deeper truth of our search for lost "artifacts" is our desire to make visible a knowledge or mind-set that is more comprehensive and fulfilling. As with the legend of Shambhala, which faded into invisibility as humanity lost the ability to see it, the Primordial Tradition fades but reemerges in places conducive to rediscovering and appreciating its profound depth and wisdom. This explains how the ancient Maya, in their isolation, independently tapped into the same doctrines also found in ancient Vedic and Egyptian cosmology. Transoceanic voyages are not required for this simultaneous nonlocal emergence.

In his *Mystery of the Grail*, Julius Evola cites sacred rulership as one of the defining characteristics of the Primordial Tradition. Also known as sacred kingship, sacred rulership represents the fusion of what today we distinguish as the religious and political functions. Within the dimension of the Primordial Tradition, the king demonstrates his ability to rule with power and wisdom when he attains high degrees of initiation into universal gnosis. Sacred knowledge is won or achieved by undertaking visionary journeys up the World Axis to the cosmic center. A ruler, having thus become fused with the divine source and emanating power of life and wisdom, constellates the beings and objects of lesser degrees. He becomes the locus of worldly life through succeeding in the difficult task of integrating high degrees of initiatory knowledge into his or her consciousness.

This feature of the Primordial Tradition is alien to modern Western mores because the separation of church and state is the antithesis of sacred rulership. The pope and the president have two very different functions. The pope has little effectiveness in the political landscape, apart from mass appeal and token respect from political leaders. A president does not attain office through demonstrating a deep understanding of the processes that create and sustain nations, cultures, and people, but through financial contribution, propaganda, promises, and business alliances.

Sacred kingship is usually associated with the term *theocracy*, which, far from being taken seriously, is usually framed as a political style in which the king arbitrarily makes all the rules. This may have been king-

ship in its later degenerative phase, but it doesn't reflect the doctrine of divine self-election in its original form. In fact, this corrupt state of decay and sacred kingship can be seen as the degenerate expression of a tradition that was at one time, prior to its fragmentation, aligned with healthy, collectively beneficial intentions.<sup>2</sup>

The achievement of sacred knowledge allows one to become a natural leader of others. This achievement comes through direct experience (what we might call degrees of initiation). Experience itself, however, is not enough, for one must also cultivate understanding.

Islamic scholar Seyyed Hossein Nasr once wrote, "The traditional universe is dominated by the two basic realities of Origin and Center, both of which belong to the realm of the eternal."<sup>3</sup> Everything emanates from the center and source, located in the sky and emulated by a terrestrial counterpart. Sacred sites were designed to mirror the celestial center, so that the geometry and wisdom of sacred sciences could manifest on Earth. The Maya, for example, were interested in knowing where the sacred center in the sky was located, but they encountered at least three compelling possibilities: the polar center, the zenith center, and the Galactic Center. At Izapa and in the Mayan Creation myth, we find evidence that the early Mayan astronomers abandoned the old polar god and shifted their cosmological framework to a new orientation, one centered on the Milky Way's Galactic Center. Likewise, in the development of Old World astronomy (out of Middle Eastern and Vedic roots) a shift took place away from the polar center. René Guénon identified the evidence for this shift in his essay "The Wild Boar and the Bear," and he called it a polar-to-solar shift.<sup>4</sup> The shift also seems to have paralleled the persistent mytho-historical transition from a hyperborean (northern) tradition to the Atlantean era (solar and southern). We need to look closely at Guénon's argument to understand why this shift would be better understood as a polar-to-galactic shift in cosmological orientation.

### The Polar-to-Galactic Shift

The general idea of a historical shift in humanity's cosmic orientation is based in the knowledge that around the time of the *I Ching's* creation—roughly 5,000 years ago—there were eight constellations organized around the Pole Star. Each corresponded to one of the eight primary trigrams used

The challenge they both shared involved giving voice to the lost elements of the Primordial Tradition. Their work spans many fields of study and it is not possible to do justice or even to summarize here their respective monumental outputs. A little-examined area in the thought of Coomaraswamy and Guénon needs clarification, however, and it has to do with the timing of the end of Kali Yuga, a subject that threads its way through Guénon's writings. And the mythological motifs and astronomical references that come into play in this question are found in the most brilliant of Coomaraswamy's essays. Unfortunately, even though the *yugas* are related to precession and the solstices, and certain constellations are implicated, the precise timing mechanism of the *yugas* was never examined or even seriously sought, most likely because both Coomaraswamy and Guénon were more concerned with the metaphysical processes of spiritual transcendence—the dynamics to emerge during the terminal phase of Kali Yuga—than with pinpointing its precise astronomical timing. Perhaps the solution to the problem was too obscure for them; perhaps the astronomy involved was unclear. Still, Guénon wrote shortly before his death in 1951 that the end of Kali Yuga was not too far off, and another major Traditionalist writer, Fritjof Schuon, said in 1967 that it would be fifty or so years in the future—circa 2017.<sup>6</sup> The question is unanswered, and not central, in Traditionalist literature. Nevertheless, if it be deemed unwise to “predict” a precise year during which the dire events of the “end of the *yuga*” will unfold, we might at least be able to clarify the astronomical process involved, according to key motifs explored in Traditionalist thought, most notably: the Sundoor at World's End, the Clashing Cliffs, and the solstice gateways.

## TWELVE

## The Sundoor at World's End and the Clashing Cliffs

W

hat is the Primordial Tradition? Aldous Huxley called it the “perennial philosophy,” an ageless wisdom that comes from a transcendent realm. Coomaraswamy preferred to call it *sophia*

*perennis et universalis*, the eternal and universal wisdom. It has come to be called simply the Primordial Tradition. Perennial means “eternally recurring or rebirthing.” Thus, even though the ancient wisdom may be forgotten, it will inevitably resurface, for it is a wisdom based upon universal principles that operate whether or not human beings are directly aware of them. The universal principles within the Primordial Tradition are those found in ancient sacred sciences; for example, the geometrical cosmology of the ancient Egyptians, based on the square-root principles of 2, 3, and 5.<sup>1</sup> The Pythagorean school adopted a similar approach, but the advent of rationalist Aristotelian philosophy signaled the dawn of a profane science that would be out of touch with its metaphysical (transcendent) roots. The Primordial Tradition is thus not something invented by human beings. Based in eternal universal principles, it has always been what it is, being left for human beings to discover and integrate as a guiding principle in the creation of social, religious, and political institutions. As it is today, modern civilization is out of touch with the Primordial Tradition; its institutions are based in man-made ideals, and derive from a degenerate process of increasing alienation from our transcendent origin. It is this devolution that removes us from the intimate vicinity of our source and center to an extreme wasteland of alienation called the Kali Yuga.

The Primordial Tradition is a state of mind rather than a distant Golden Age or ancient location. As such, the Primordial Tradition is accessible to any person or culture, at any time or place, without the aid of direct transmission through a particular lineage or Atlantean

unnecessary. In fact, the modern derivations could be seen as being essentially deceptive and misleading, evidence that the intellect in our modern age distorts truth.

Here we encounter the crux of Guénon's critique of Western civilization: Modern civilization has become divorced from the transcendent realm, which in former ages was consciously integrated into daily life. The modern world fails to understand the meaning of the word *transcendent* as well as the meaning of the word *intellect*. In the traditional usage—which corresponds to the Sanskrit word for mind, *buddhi*—*intellect* means the perception of transcendent realities, the faculty that can perceive the activity of the higher worlds. Notice that this doesn't correspond to the modern idea of being "intellectual" or "smart." We can see here that the intellect is a faculty for perceiving, directly, our relationship with higher realities rather than something someone acquires through study and schooling. It is ironic that modern civilization effectively erodes the original *buddhi* mind of pure intellection that is the birthright of everyone, even while it educates and indoctrinates us. In addition, the myth of progress allows modern civilization to masquerade as the most sophisticated in all of human history. For Guénon and the other Traditionalist writers, however, this is a reversal of the true situation: modern civilization is not the result of progress, it is the civilization of the Kali Yuga, the darkest age, in which humanity, obsessed with materialism, has been completely removed from a direct experience of connection with the higher source.

Martin Lings, translator of Guénon's *East and West*, writes that Guénon may have experienced some kind of direct intellectual illumination at an early age.<sup>2</sup> France was in tumult during World War I, Guénon was thirty years old, and he knew that the world was heading in the wrong direction. After the war, antireligious sentiment among the French intelligentsia indicated that new levels of decadence were imminent, and for Guénon this meant a further distancing of humanity from its traditional roots. After a stint teaching in Algeria, he returned to France, and in 1921 his first book, *Introduction to the Study of Hindu Doctrines*, was published, followed in 1925 by his classic *Man and His Becoming According to the Vedanta*. During this time he contributed essays to *La Gnose*, *Regnabit*, and *La Voile d'Isis*, as well as the journal that would eventually be called *Études Traditionnelles*. His collected essays were published after