

Rethinking the Origins of the Nag Hammadi Codices

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The famous find-story behind the Nag Hammadi codices, discovered in Egypt in 1945, has been one of the most cherished narratives in our field. Yet a close examination of its details reveals inconsistencies, ambiguities, implicitly colonialist attitudes, and assumptions that call for a thorough reevaluation. This article explores the problematic moments in the find-story narrative and challenges the suggestions of James M. Robinson and others that the Nag Hammadi codices were intentionally buried for posterity, perhaps by Pachomian monks, in the wake of Athanasius's thirty-ninth *Festal Letter*. We consider, rather, that the Nag Hammadi codices may have derived from private Greco-Egyptian citizens in late antiquity who commissioned the texts for personal use, depositing them as grave goods following a practice well attested in Egypt.

The Nag Hammadi codices, discovered in 1945, have perhaps the most compelling find-story of any ancient Egyptian book cache. When Mohamed Ali al-Samman, both the hero and the antihero of this story, discovers that his brother has found a jar while digging for fertilizer, he immediately takes control of the operation. Taking the jar into his hands, the moment is tense. Should he open it? He is a cautious, superstitious man, clearly pious and afraid of *jinni*; yet he also loves gold, and as in those old Arabian nights tales, his curiosity gets the better of him and he smashes the jar, only to find—is it gold?!—pieces of golden papyrus, flying through the air. Little does Mohamed Ali know, when he takes them home and tosses them into the little barn attached to his mother's home, that he has discovered thirteen books of more than fifty “lost Gospels” representing a Gnostic library

of heretical documents, carefully secreted away in the increasingly theologically oppressive atmosphere of late-fourth-century Egypt.¹

But what if this famous story, which has become the canonical genesis for scholars of Gnosticism, is merely a fiction? Even the earliest and most direct versions of the story reveal unsettling inconsistencies. Elements are unstable, and the key witness, Mohamed Ali, himself recants and changes his account.² While we may speculate on the reasons for these inconsistencies, it becomes difficult to believe Mohamed Ali at all, not to mention the orientalizing fantasy of his encounter with a papyrus-filled jar somewhere in the geese-grazing territories of Chenoboskion. Indeed, two prominent Coptologists, Rodolphe Kasser and Martin Krause, long ago went on record to distance themselves from the “official”—that is, much publicized and disseminated—find-story.³

We begin by reexamining different accounts of the find-story, noting the central instability of its narrative. We take this starting point because it matters whether this story is true: from it, scholars of Gnosticism have built up fifty years of work based on the assumption that back in the late fourth century, the codices were secreted away together in a jar in order to preserve them for “posterity.” We argue here that this was unlikely to have been the intention of those who buried the codices. Rather than parts of a Pachomian library that had been intentionally hidden by monks to avoid persecution by the emerging Alexandrian orthodoxy, we suggest that the Nag Hammadi codices could just as plausibly have been private productions commissioned by late ancient Egyptian Christians with antiquarian interests. The books were later deposited in graves, following a late antique modification of a custom known in Egypt for hundreds of years. Furthermore, we

¹The details here come from Marvin Meyer’s version of the story, which he credits to James M. Robinson in a chapter called “Fertilizer, Blood Vengeance, and Codices” in his book *The Gnostic Discoveries: The Impact of the Nag Hammadi Library* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 2005), 13–32.

²See James M. Robinson, “The Discovery of the Nag Hammadi Codices,” *BA* 42 (1979): 208–13.

³*The Facsimile Edition of the Nag Hammadi Codices*, vol. 1, *Introduction* (Published under the auspices of the Department of Antiquities of the Arab Republic of Egypt. In conjunction with the United Nations Education, Scientific and Cultural Organization; Leiden: Brill, 1972), 3 n. 1 offers a lengthy disclaimer: “Kasser and Krause and others who were involved do not consider as assured anything more than the core of the story (the general location and approximate date of the discovery), the rest not having for them more than the value of stories and fables that one can collect in popular Egyptian circles thirty years after an event whose exceptional significance the protagonists could not at the time understand. R.K. and M.K.” An English publication that also casts suspicions on the find-story is C. Wilfred Griggs, *Early Egyptian Christianity: From Its Origins to 451 C.E.* (Brill Scholars’ List; Leiden: Brill, 2000), 217: “The doubts and concerns expressed by this author are similar to those held by Rodolphe Kasser and Martin Krause.” Very recently, the veracity of the find-story has also been raised by Mark Goodacre, “How Reliable Is the Story of the Nag Hammadi Discovery?” *JSNT* 35 (2013): 303–22. We thank Mark Goodacre for making this article available prior to its publication, and for our discussions on the topic.

contend that their eventual placement in graves may not have been coincidental; the arrangement of certain volumes reflects eschatological as well as antiquarian interests, meaning that at least some volumes may have been intentionally crafted as funerary deposits, Christian “Books of the Dead” that only made sense in the context of late antique Egypt.

I. FIND-STORIES AND SUSPICIONS

A full thirty years after the initial appearance of the Nag Hammadi codices on the Cairo antiquities market, James M. Robinson traveled to Egypt to survey the area and to see if he might track down the person who initially made the discovery.⁴ Robinson’s efforts yielded a vastly entertaining account of the codices’ discovery and brief sojourn in a “modern” Upper Egyptian village; riveting details included the burning of an unspecified number of papyrus leaves by Mohamed Ali’s mother (horrors! how could they not have known their value?) and his family’s acts of murder and cannibalism. In this modern, Western recounting of 1940s *fellaheen* life, we have not come far from W. Robertson Smith’s 1889 *Religion of the Semites* (where the “birth” of Judaism comes from a primordial act of sacrifice and collective consumption of a tribe’s totem animal in the desert),⁵ a text much beloved by Freud, who transmuted Smith’s postulated sacrifice and consumption of the totem animal into a communal act of parricide in his *Totem and Taboo* (1913).⁶ Like Smith’s account of primordial religion and Freud’s revisioning of it with an Oedipal cast, the Nag Hammadi find-story is one more appropriate for fantastic literature, with parts surely lost in translation, other parts surely fabricated.⁷

⁴Robinson, head of the UNESCO-funded project to generate critical editions and translations of the Nag Hammadi codices, published numerous accounts of the find-story: see James M. Robinson, “From the Cliff to Cairo: The Study of the Discoverers and Middlemen of the Nag Hammadi Codices,” in *Colloque international sur les textes de Nag Hammadi (Québec, 22–25 août 1978)* (ed. Bernard Barc; Bibliothèque copte de Nag Hammadi, “Etudes” 1; Québec: Les presses de l’Université Laval, 1981), 21–58; idem, “The Coptic Gnostic Library Today,” *NTS* 14 (1968): 356–401; and idem, “Discovery of the Nag Hammadi Codices,” 206–24.

⁵Smith, *Lectures on the Religion of the Semites: First Series, Fundamental Institutions* (London: A. & C. Black, 1889); 2nd ed. [posthumous], edited by J. S. Black (1894), repr., New York: Meridian, 1956; 3rd ed., introduced by S. A. Cook (1927); later edition with introduction by James Muilenburg (New York: Ktav 1969).

⁶Freud, *Totem und Tabu: Einige Übereinstimmungen im Seelenleben der Wilden und der Neurotiker* (Leipzig: H. Heller, 1913); published in English as *Totem and Taboo: Some Points of Agreement between the Mental Lives of Savages and Neurotics* (trans. James Strachey; New York: Norton, 1952).

⁷The sole scholar to have manifestly criticized the overtly colonialist and orientaling aspects of the Nag Hammadi find-story is Maia Kotrosits, “Romance and Danger at Nag Hammadi,” *Bible and Critical Theory* 8 (2012): 39–52.

When we press at its contours, this famous and oft-recounted find-story of the Nag Hammadi codices becomes vexing because of its revisionist nature. It turns out, to begin with, to have been rather late in coming; the very first account of the codices' discovery came from the French scholar Jean Doresse, who, five years after the appearance of the codices in Cairo, traveled to the hamlet of Hamra Dum, close to Nag Hammadi and the actual location of the codices' provenance.⁸ Local villagers directed him to the southern part of an ancient cemetery at Qasr es-Sayyad. It was there, in the cemetery, that some had found the codices, secreted in a jar. Doresse writes,

Was it in one of these tombs that the papyri were found? Certainly, one cannot, even if one searches very far around, see any other place—any ruin or sepulcher—from which they could have come. The peasants who accompanied us ... showed us a row of shapeless cavities. Not long since, they said, some peasants of Hamra-Dûm and of Dabba, in search of manure, found here a great *zir*—which means jar—filled with leaves of papyrus; and these were bound like books. The vase was broken and nothing remains of it; the manuscripts were taken to Cairo and no one knows what then became of them. As to the exact location of the find, opinion differed by some few dozen yards, but everyone was sure that it was just about here. And from the ground itself we shall learn nothing more; it yields nothing but broken bones, fragments of cloth without interest and some potsherds.⁹

When Robinson returned to Hamra Dum twenty-five years later to pick up the trail, his persistence yielded more satisfying results. He came up with names and a more specific (and in fact, quite different) find-spot: Mohamed Ali al-Samman was out that day in December of 1945 on the Gebel al-Tarif, looking for *sabakh*, a natural fertilizer. He dug, according to Robinson, along a talus—a slope of debris along the cliff face and just beyond the area of Nile cultivation. There he found the jar. So let us start here with this puzzling detail. If the jar were embedded in alluvial soil at the base of a cliff, it is highly unlikely that a papyrus codex would have survived for sixteen centuries of Nile inundations and shifting soil at the base of the cliffs. And yet, if the jar had actually been found up higher, inside a cave along the Gebel al-Tarif, this is hardly the place to dig for *sabakh*. In fact, it is even debatable whether the base of the Gebel al-Tarif would have produced this *sabakh*, as the areas of cultivation around the Nile end abruptly and turn very quickly to desert, where nothing exists but sand. Whatever Mohamed Ali was doing that day, it is safe to say

⁸Doresse visited Upper Egypt three times in the lead-up to his 1950 investigations—in 1947, 1948, and 1949. See Jean Doresse, "Sur les traces des papyrus gnostiques: Recherches à Chenoboskion," *Bulletin de l'Académie royale de Belgique, Classe des Lettres*, 5th series 36 (1950): 432–39.

⁹Doresse, *The Secret Books of the Egyptian Gnostics: An Introduction to the Gnostic Coptic Manuscripts Discovered at Chenoboskion* (trans. Philip Mairet; New York: Viking, 1960), 133.

that he was not digging for fertilizer. It is entirely reasonable to suspect that he was searching for illegal antiquities: tomb robbing. The jar—one of the only details on which Doresse and Robinson agree—is equally mysterious; as the NT scholar Mark Goodacre noted recently, it grows in size from 20 cm to 3–4 ft in height, depending on who is telling the story.¹⁰ At any rate, the jar no longer exists.¹¹

A quick cross-referencing of various versions of the story reveals many such shifting details. In one account, a “party” of *sabakh* gatherers find the jar at the foot of a cliff sheltered by a large boulder.¹² The number in this party appears to change; sometimes it is Mohamed Ali and his brother Khalifah Ali and/or another brother Abu al-Magid;¹³ sometimes Mohamed Ali is alone;¹⁴ sometimes more are present.¹⁵ Sometimes Mohamed Ali finds the jar; sometimes it is Abu al-Magid. Bart Ehrman retains the detail that Abu al-Magid (unnamed in his account) digs and finds a skeleton first, then a “large earthenware jar”;¹⁶ curiously, most modern versions of the story omit the detail of the corpse found alongside.¹⁷ However, if we are searching for a “smoking gun” to prove that the Nag Hammadi codices were deposited

¹⁰ Goodacre, “How Reliable Is the Story of the Nag Hammadi Discovery?” 305–6. According to Robinson (“Discovery,” 214), the jar was 60 cm tall, with an opening of some 20 cm. He includes Ali’s discovery of the jar on p. 212.

¹¹ Robinson reports that, although the jar was smashed, Mohamed Ali’s brother, Khalifah Ali, kept the small bowl that he says sealed the mouth of the jar, affixed with bitumen (Robinson, “Discovery,” 218). A photograph of it remains in Claremont’s archives. It is a fairly standard piece of fourth- or fifth-century pottery of the sort that litters the Thebaid, fully intact, and we remain skeptical that the artifact in Khalifah’s possession once sealed the jar.

¹² J. W. B. Barns, G. M. Browne, and J. C. Shelton, eds., *Nag Hammadi Codices: Greek and Coptic Papyri from the Cartonnage of the Covers* (Coptic Gnostic Library; NHS 16; Leiden: Brill, 1981), 1.

¹³ Mohamed Ali and one brother: James M. Robinson, *The Nag Hammadi Library in English* (New York: Harper & Row, 1977), 21.

¹⁴ See, for instance, the Border Television documentary produced in 1987 entitled *The Gnostics*, in which Gilles Quispel interviews Mohamed Ali, who reports that he was all alone when he found the jar, later returning alone to break it open, and finally returning with six others. “So I took it to the ministry over here and he told me, well we really don’t need it.” The antecedent of “it” is unclear. *The Gnostics* was written by Tobias Churton and produced and directed by Stephen Segaller. It was aired on UK’s Channel 4 in November 1987. For a “transcript” of the interview (which, strangely, varies from the videotape version), see Tobias Churton, *The Gnostics* (New York: Barns & Noble, 1999), 9.

¹⁵ Bart Ehrman (*Lost Christianities: The Battles for Scripture and the Faiths We Never Knew* [Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995], 52) says that seven people were present, following Robinson (“Discovery,” 213), which lists three brothers and four camel drivers. *The Facsimile Edition* (p. 5) lists eight camel drivers. Robinson (“From the Cliff to Cairo,” 37) mentions that ten people were present (three brothers and seven camel drivers).

¹⁶ Ehrman, *Lost Christianities*, 52.

¹⁷ The skeleton is mentioned in Barns et al., *Nag Hammadi Codices*, 2, where it is dismissed as “modern.”

with a burial, here indeed is one, with Mohamed Ali's insistence that the jar was next to a corpse with oddly elongated fingers and teeth.¹⁸

The "afterlife" story of the codices' discovery, trapped as they were in a sort of fugue state that was neither the protective dry soils of Egypt nor a proper museum conservatorship, points to a Western collector's mentality that perdured in the field of Egyptian archaeology. The reported incident of Mohamed Ali's mother tossing some of the ancient papyrus folios into the fire proved to Western minds that peasants—native Egyptians—could not be trusted with their own antiquities; only enlightened Europeans knew their true value. The story has a remarkable parallel in Constantin von Tischendorf's "rescuing" of the Codex Sinaiticus from St. Catherine's Monastery in Sinai in 1845. Tischendorf reports that the monks charged with caring for the precious manuscript tossed papyri leaves into the fire for warmth.¹⁹ The message was clear: native Egyptians could not be trusted to care for their own antiquities, which required "rescuing" by scholars and collectors in the West. A similar colonialist meme emerges in the story circulated at the end of the nineteenth century concerning the Cureton manuscript, a fifth-century biblical manuscript discovered by Western travelers in a monastery in Nitria: apparently William Cureton found ancient papyrus folios being used as coverings for the monk's butter jars.²⁰ Concerning the Scottish explorer Agnes Lewis's 1892 discovery of a precious Syriac NT manuscript at St. Catherine's in Sinai, the rumor also emerged that it was (mis)used to cover butter dishes at the monastery, although Lewis herself notes that in fact the manuscript there was safely under lock and key.²¹

But let us return to the Nag Hammadi find-story. Its details—particularly salacious moments such as the blood vengeance scene and the ostensible tossing of the codices into the fire—dissemble; they deflect our attention from key questions: What were these texts doing together? Who could have put them there? What was the relationship of the books to the corpse lying nearby?²² Egypt has a rich

¹⁸Robinson, "Discovery," 213. Robinson writes that Mohamed Ali's brother denied the existence of a corpse, which makes some sense: Mohamed Ali's insistence that the jar and corpse were found together on what looked like a "bed of charcoal" certainly looks like grave robbing. Either the assemblage had been sitting out in the open at the base of a cliff when the brothers found it, or they were exploring a burial cave. They could not have dug down to the level of a jar buried in rubble and also noted what material it (and the skeleton) were sitting on unless they carried out some fairly sophisticated archaeological investigation to reach the ground level of the jar.

¹⁹David C. Parker, *Codex Sinaiticus: The Story of the World's Oldest Bible* (London: British Library, 2010), 128–31.

²⁰"The Current," 1, no. 1 (Dec. 22, 1883): 348.

²¹Adina Hoffman and Peter Cole, *Sacred Trash: The Lost and Found World of the Cairo Geniza* (New York: Schocken, 2011), 5.

²²The corpse is a troubling detail, since tomb robbing has always been a serious problem in Egypt; see Pascal Vernus, *Affairs and Scandals in Ancient Egypt* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2003). In addition, the likelihood of the body being identified as Christian would have

history of books and corpses found together, and indeed all our other so-called Gnostic manuscripts—the Berlin Codex, the Askew Codex, and the Codex Tchacos—came from, or most probably came from, burial sites. Yet, for the Nag Hammadi codices, it is asserted that they were hidden for posterity by Pachomian monks, the result of Athanasius’s *Festal Letter* of 367.²³ This story is repeated again and again, as if it were not scholarly conjecture but rather a “believed” fact of early Christian history: as if it were hand in hand with the Donatist controversy, for instance, with letters, trials, and creeds to go alongside it. There are no letters or trials for our “controversy,” and so we must rely on what we can safely piece together from Pachomian monastic resources. The role of these monks and the presumed monastic *Sitz im Leben* for these texts deserve more attention.

II. THE NAG HAMMADI CODICES AND MONASTICISM: RETHINKING THE LINKS

Jean Doresse’s initial suggestion that what had been discovered near Nag Hammadi was a secret library of Egyptian Sethian Gnostics was fairly quickly abandoned. Torgny Säve-Söderbergh suggested an intriguing alternative: perhaps the Nag Hammadi “library” constituted a heresiological compilation of primary “Gnostic” sources from which heresiologists could draw their ammunition.²⁴ By

caused additional problems in the environs of Nag Hammadi, where tensions between Copts and Muslims historically run high.

²³See Robinson, *Nag Hammadi Library in English*, 19; idem, in *Facsimile Edition of the Nag Hammadi Codices*, 12:20; Meyer, *Gnostic Discoveries*, 30; Elaine Pagels, *The Gnostic Gospels* (New York: Random House, 1979), 120–21; Charles Hedrick, “Gnostic Proclivities in the Greek Life of Pachomius and the *Sitz im Leben* of the Nag Hammadi Library,” *NovT* 22 (1980): 93. The notion of the texts buried “for posterity” trickles down into popular literature: see, e.g., Lewis Keizer, *The Kabbalistic Words of Jesus in the Gospel of Thomas* (Kindle Book; Amazon Digital Services, 2009), 17; Jeffrey J. Kripal, *The Serpent’s Gift: Gnostic Reflections on the Study of Religion* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006), xi (Kripal also mentions the detail of the skeleton: “was the skeleton a monk?”); Louis A. Ruprecht Jr., *This Tragic Gospel: How John Corrupted the Heart of Christianity* (New York: Jossey-Bass, 2008), 132; Kenneth C. Davis, *Don’t Know Much about the Bible: Everything You Need To Know about the Good Book But Never Learned* (San Francisco: Harper, 1999), 344.

²⁴Torgny Säve-Söderbergh, “Gnostic and Canonical Gospel Traditions (with Special Reference to the Gospel of Thomas),” in *Le origini dello gnosticismo: Colloquio di Messina 13–18 Aprile 1966. Testi e discussioni* (ed. Ugo Bianchi; SHR 12; Leiden: Brill, 1970), 552–53; and, more developed, idem, “Holy Scriptures or Apologetic Documentations? The *Sitz im Leben* of the Nag Hammadi Library,” in *Les Textes de Nag Hammadi: Colloque du Centre d’histoire des religions, Strasbourg, 23–25 octobre 1974* (ed. Jacques-É. Ménard; NHS 7; Leiden: Brill, 1975), 9–17. Here Säve-Söderbergh argues persuasively that Pachomians had no reason to house the Nag Hammadi documents based on what we know about Pachomian attitudes toward heresy; therefore, if in fact Pachomians kept them, they must have been kept out of circulation and thus “to study them in

far the most popular theory, however, is that the codices found their home in a monastic setting, perhaps that of Pachomian monks whose sense of the orthodox/heretical divide may have been less well entrenched than elsewhere in Egypt or than it came to be after the middle of the fourth century.²⁵ The Pachomian theory emerges as early as Robinson's 1975 *Preliminary Report* on the excavation, which in fact establishes it as self-evident truth:

... since it is hardly conceivable that there would have been more than one orthodox monastic organization simultaneously operating in the same place, we should be justified in concluding, *even without further evidence*, that the Nag Hammadi material came from a Pachomian monastery.²⁶

The arguments for the Nag Hammadi codices having been housed in, if not created by and for, a Pachomian monastery are founded on two main circumstantial facts. The first is simply physical proximity of the find-spot to known Pachomian centers: Pabau was 8 km away; Tabennesi, 12 km; and Chenoboskion, 9 km.²⁷ At the same time, the physical environs of Hamra Dum and El Bousa and the tomb caves of the Gebel al-Tarif are better suited to the life of anchorites than coenobites.²⁸ They are also far closer; the grave site of the Sixth Dynasty Pharaoh Thauti is a mere 750 m

order to be able to refute them" (p. 12). If, however, the purpose of the Nag Hammadi codices were to serve as a compendium of heretical works, their arrangement in codices—including duplications of individual writings and organization across established sectarian lines—makes little sense; see Williams, *Rethinking Gnosticism*, 247.

²⁵ See, notably, F. Wisse, "The Nag Hammadi Library and the Heresiologists," *VC* 25 (1971): 220–21; see also his "Language Mysticism in the Nag Hammadi Texts and in Early Coptic Monasticism, I: Cryptography," *Enchoria* 9 (1979): 101–19. Compare James E. Goehring, "New Frontiers in Pachomian Studies," in idem, *Ascetics, Society, and the Desert: Studies in Early Egyptian Monasticism* (SAC; Harrisburg, Pa.: Trinity Press International, 1999), 185–86; and idem, "Some Reflections on the Nag Hammadi Codices and the Study of Early Egyptian Monasticism," *Meddelanden fran Collegium Patristicum Lundense* 25 (2011): 61–70. In a later article, Wisse appears to reverse his view somewhat, claiming that the books were in the hands of a variety of individuals: F. Wisse, "Gnosticism and Early Monasticism in Egypt," in *Gnosis: Festschrift für Hans Jonas* (ed. Barbara Aland; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1978), 438. A different, "closed stacks" theory is that the texts came from a Pachomian monastery where they were gathered for posterity but kept away from the monks; see Clemens Scholten, "Die Nag-Hammadi-Texte als Buchbesitz," *JAC* 31 (1988): 145–49.

²⁶ Robinson, *Preliminary Report on the Excavation*, 12–13 (emphasis added). See further Goehring, who, while admitting that the evidence for the Pachomian provenance of the Nag Hammadi codices is "purely circumstantial," nevertheless feels that the amount of evidence is mounting (*Ascetics, Society, and the Desert*, 180). For more on the excavation, see Bastiaan Van Elderen, "The Nag Hammadi Excavation," *BA* 42 (1979): 225–31.

²⁷ So W. C. van Unnik, *Evangelien aus dem Nilsand* (Frankfurt: Scheffler, 1960); Robinson's estimations in *The Nag Hammadi Library in English* (p. 21) are slightly different (Pbow, 5.3 km and Chenoboskion, 8.7 km).

²⁸ So Hedrick, "Gnostic Proclivities," 78.

from the jar's ostensible find-spot²⁹ and the tombs of two more Sixth Dynasty pharaohs, Pepi I and II (2332–2184 B.C.E.) perched just above the talus where the jar was ostensibly uncovered.³⁰ Indeed, anchorites came to inhabit these burial caves, which were still decorated with painted red crosses and inscribed lines from the psalms in Coptic.³¹ They prayed in them; they also were buried in them.

The second piece of circumstantial evidence for a Pachomian provenance is the cartonnage of the codices. The first to have made this claim, papyrologist John W. B. Barns, died suddenly before all the cartonnage was fully analyzed. The team of papyrologists assigned to complete the task concluded, against Barns, that they could not think of a satisfactory single source for the wide range of documents contained in the cartonnage other than a "town rubbish heap."³² The conclusion of the team was unequivocal: there is no evidence that the codices were created in a Pachomian monastery.³³ Despite all the evidence to the contrary, the connections between the Nag Hammadi codices and Pachomian monasticism are still virtually assumed by a wide range of scholars, no doubt because of the surety with which an early generation of Nag Hammadi scholars asserted them in the first place.

III. THE CURIOUS CASE OF THE DISHNA PAPERS

The Nag Hammadi codices were not the only set of late antique Egyptian writings discovered in Upper Egypt. The Dishna papers, also known as the Bodmer papyri after their purchase by the Swiss banker Martin Bodmer, appear to have been found in 1952 (seven years after the Nag Hammadi discovery) in the Thebaid 7.5 miles from Nag Hammadi and a mere 5 km from the major Pachomian site of Pbow.³⁴ Now dispersed from Barcelona to Oslo with a substantial number in

²⁹ *Facsimile Edition*, 15:5; see also Robinson, "Discovery," 212.

³⁰ Robinson, *Nag Hammadi Library in English*, 21.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 22.

³² Barns et al., *Nag Hammadi Codices*, 11.

³³ *Ibid.*, 2. See also Ewa Wipszycka, "The Nag Hammadi Library and the Monks: A Papyrologist's Point of View," *JJP* 30 (2000): 179–91, who similarly demolishes the Pachomian provenance theory. More agnostic is Goehring in his unpublished paper "Some Reflections on the Nag Hammadi Codices and the Study of Early Egyptian Monasticism"; he maintains the same cautious refusal to reject the Pachomian theory in virtually all his publications. See Goehring, "The Provenance of the Nag Hammadi Codices Once More," in *Ascetica, Gnostica, Liturgica, Orientalia: Papers Presented at the Thirteenth International Conference on Patristic Studies Held in Oxford 1999* (ed. M. F. Miles and E. J. Yarnold; *StPatr* 35; Leuven: Peeters, 2001), 234–53; and *idem*, "Monastic Diversity and Ideological Boundaries in Fourth-Century Christian Egypt," *J ECS* 5 (1997): 61–84.

³⁴ The original circumstances of the find are hazy, since the seller of the hoard did not want to reveal his sources; thus, indeed, the story of the provenance of the Dishna papers seems to us to be as potentially suspicious as that of the Nag Hammadi codices. At any rate, they are curiously

Dublin at the Chester Beatty library, the original cache consisted of nine Greek papyrus rolls, twenty-two papyrus codices, and seven parchment documents, dating from approximately 100 to 699 C.E. The languages of the hoard show that its audience was multilingual, moving not just between Greek and Coptic but also between Greek and Latin. All told, we have in the Dishna papers an astonishing range of materials: nine classical texts, including parts of Homer plus its *scholia*, Menander, Achilles Tatius, Thucydides, and Cicero,³⁵ twelve papyri with writings from the Hebrew Bible; six with writings from the NT; three that include both. We also find a few apocryphal and pseudepigraphical texts, plus a great deal of liturgical and homiletic material.

Robinson, fascinated with the points of contact between the Nag Hammadi codices and the Dishna papers—both were found in jars in the same vicinity—hypothesized that the Dishna papers were buried for safekeeping following the imposition of Chalcedonian orthodoxy.³⁶ In effect, the case of the Dishna papers appeared to raise the likelihood that Pachomian monks, around 387 C.E., had engaged in a dramatic purge of their libraries, at the same time ridding themselves of their clearly heretical Nag Hammadi books.

And yet we should not make the mistake of assuming that the two book caches had the same audiences or were deposited for the same reason. Regardless of whether the Dishna papers were from the first Pachomian library at Pbow, they are far different from the Nag Hammadi codices in content. For example, the Sahidic Coptic Crosby-Shøyen Codex (ca. 250 C.E.) consists of fifty-two leaves written in a large bold Coptic uncial and contains three biblical texts (Jonah, 2 Macc 5:27–7:41, 1 Peter) plus two other texts for liturgical use: Melito of Sardis's *Peri Pascha* and an unidentified paschal sermon.³⁷ Another codex, now disassembled and scattered to various modern libraries, once contained the *Nativity of Mary*, apocryphal correspondence between Paul and the Corinthians, the eleventh *Ode of Solomon*, Jude, Melito's *Homily on the Passion*, a fragment of a liturgical hymn, the *Apology of Phileas*, Pss 33:2–34:16 from the LXX, and 1–2 Peter.³⁸ The Dishna papers and the

parallel. Furthermore, both accounts trace back to the research of Robinson. On the Dishna find, see James M. Robinson, *The Pachomian Monastic Library at the Chester Beatty Library and the Bibliothèque Bodmer* (Institute for Antiquity and Christianity Occasional Papers 19; Claremont, CA: Institute for Antiquity and Christianity, 1990).

³⁵ On Dishna's classical sources, see Harry Y. Gamble, *Books and Readers in the Early Church: A History of Early Christian Texts* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1995), 173; Juan Gil, *Hadrianus: P. Monts. Roca III*, 29 (Orientalia Montserratensia; Montserrat: Publicacions de l'Abadia de Montserrat y CSIC, 2010).

³⁶ Robinson, *Pachomian Monastic Library*, 28.

³⁷ R. Pintaudi, "Proprietà imperiali e tasse in un papiro della Collezione Schoyen," *ZPE* 130 (2000): 197–200; James E. Goehring, *The Crosby-Schøyen Codex MS 193 in the Schøyen Collection* (CSCO 521, Subsidia 85; Louvain: Peeters, 1990).

³⁸ Tommy Wasserman, "Papyrus 72 and the *Bodmer Miscellaneous Codex*," *NTS* 51 (2005): 140.

Nag Hammadi codices share no common texts. We will return presently to the significance of this point.

The assignation of a Pachomian provenance to the Nag Hammadi collection lies in part with its similarity to the Dishna papers. Yet this argument is largely circumstantial, based on (1) the physical proximity of the Dishna papers to the Nag Hammadi codices, on the one hand, and of both to Pbow, on the other; and (2) the circumstances of their deposition.³⁹ Papyrologists have argued, however, that the Dishna papers were apparently hidden in a jar during the Arabic conquest—long after Athanasius's *Festal Letter*. But we can also note some significant differences in the contents of the two collections. There are no overlaps across the collections; thus even the canons of apocryphal or pseudepigraphic writings on which the two sets of scribes drew appear to have been significantly different, with the Dishna collection being much closer to what we might tentatively call a "standard" list of apocrypha set apart from canonical writings but nevertheless in wide circulation. To put this differently, there are among the Dishna papers no so-called Gnostic writings. This is indeed remarkable, if one considers that a few of the Nag Hammadi writings do in fact appear in other ancient codices. The *Apocryphon of John*, in different recensions, can be found in Codices II, III, and IV but is also in the Berlin Codex (BG 8502). The *Sophia of Jesus Christ* is in the Berlin Codex as well as in Codex III; we also have this text in a complete Greek copy from Oxyrhynchus, *P.Oxy.* 8.1081.⁴⁰ The *Gospel of Thomas* of Codex II also appears in Greek fragments discovered at Oxyrhynchus. If, then, the Dishna hoard is a highly eclectic collection from a Pachomian library, the fact that it shares not a single tractate with the Nag Hammadi is curious. Conversely, the Nag Hammadi codices contain not a single fragment of Scripture or any monastic correspondence. In short, while the two collections appear to have shared a general provenance (and this is speculative rather than factual), this is all that the two collections share, and this ultimately reveals little about whether the Nag Hammadi library was truly Pachomian.

It should be said, finally, that not all scholars accept the Pachomian provenance of the Dishna papers. The case against it includes the high number of documentary and school texts preserved, including exercises in grammar, lexicography, and mathematics in three different languages including several dialects of Coptic.⁴¹ There is also a Greek–Latin lexicon for deciphering Paul's letters.⁴² Raffaella Cribiore argues that the collection derived from a "Christian school of advanced learning,"⁴³

³⁹ The case for the equation of the two is made by Goehring, "Monastic Diversity and Ideological Boundaries," 81–82.

⁴⁰ Cornelia Römer, "Manichaeism and Gnosticism in the Papyri." in *The Oxford Handbook of Papyrology* (ed. Roger S. Bagnall; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 631.

⁴¹ Gil, *Hadrianvs*, 29.

⁴² Wasserman, "Papyrus 72," 139.

⁴³ Cribiore, *Gymnastics of the Mind: Greek Education in Hellenistic and Roman Egypt* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001), 200 and n. 74. See, too, A. Blanchard, "Sur le milieu

perhaps even as examples of *paideia*, which experienced a revival in the second century and remained popular among elites until the sixth century.

In summary, the evidence for a Pachomian provenance for the Nag Hammadi codices is entirely lacking, as is any solid basis for their monastic setting. We are forced to concur with Stephen Emmel, who some time ago commented, "I—like many others—am not convinced that the Nag Hammadi Codices, as particular books, as artifacts, are the direct products of a monastic milieu."⁴⁴ Emmel follows the conclusions of Alexandr L. Khosroyev, who, through an intensive study of linguistic and codicological data, demolished the "Pachomian monastic milieu" theory in a 1995 volume that has not had the impact that it should have.⁴⁵

IV. ATHANASIUS AND THE BURYING OF BOOKS: DISPELLING A MYTH

The theory that the Nag Hammadi codices found their way out of their Pachomian setting in the wake of Athanasius's thirty-ninth *Festal Letter* (367 C.E.) has also recently been revealed to be unfounded. As David Brakke has convincingly argued, the heretical writings with which Athanasius was concerned were not "Gnostic" but Arian and Meletian.⁴⁶ The idea that the letter in any way effected the removal of the Nag Hammadi codices from a Pachomian library is merely scholarly conjecture too often taken as fact. If we admit that the Pachomian, or even generally monastic, context for the codices is entirely absent, then Athanasius's letter becomes irrelevant. We are still left with a final *Sitz im Leben* for which we do have clear evidence: the tomb sites of the Gebel al-Tarif. If the codices were not likely to have

d'origine du papyrus Bodmer de Ménandre," *ChrEg* 66 (1991): 211–20; J.-L. Fournet, "Une éthiopée de Caïn dans le codex des Visions de la Fondation Bodmer," *ZPE* 92 (1992): 253–66; R. Kasser, "Status quaestionis 1988 sulla presunta origine dei cosiddetti Papiri Bodmer," *Aegyptus* 68 (1988): 191–94. Some would retort that obviously not all Pachomians were unlettered; see Elizabeth Ann Clark, *Reading Renunciation: Asceticism and Scripture in Early Christianity* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999), 54; it is certainly possible that monks took their book collections with them into the monastery.

⁴⁴Emmel, "The Coptic Gnostic Texts as Witnesses to the Production and Transmission of Gnostic (and Other) Traditions," in *Das Thomasevangelium: Entstehung, Rezeption, Theologie* (ed. Jörg Frey, Enno Edzard Popkes, and Jens Schröter; BZNW 157; Berlin: de Gruyter, 2008), 36.

⁴⁵Khosroyev, *Die Bibliothek von Nag Hammadi: Einige Probleme des Christentums in Ägypten während der ersten Jahrhunderte* (Arbeiten zum spätantiken und koptischen Ägypten 7; Altenberge: Oros, 1995), esp. ch. 4, "Zur Frage nach dem vermutlichen Besitzer der Bibliothek." See, similarly, idem, "Bemerkungen über die vermutlichen Besitzer der Nag-Hammadi-Texte," in *Divitiae Aegypti: Koptologische und verwandte Studien zu Ehren von Martin Krause* (ed. Cäcilia Fluck et al.; Wiesbaden: Reichert, 1995), 200–205.

⁴⁶Brakke, "Canon Formation and Social Conflict in Fourth-Century Egypt: Athanasius of Alexandria's Thirty-Ninth Festal Letter," *HTR* 87 (1994): 395–419.

been buried by Pachomian monks for safekeeping, it is safe to say that the site of Gebel al-Tarif does not represent an extension of Pachomian monastic life and that Athanasius's letter was meant to address an entirely different phenomenon.

Brakke has examined the social contexts in which Athanasius wrote the thirty-ninth *Festal Letter*, pointing out that “teachers and Meletians” posed the greatest threat to Athanasius's authority as bishop and therefore were the target of many of his letters.⁴⁷ Brakke points out that “study circles,” an important feature of Alexandrian life since arguably the second century B.C.E., represented the source of fundamental anxieties confronted by early Christian bishops like Athanasius because to follow a charismatic teacher both undermined the emerging ecclesiastical authority and was dangerously like following Christ—or, the wrong Christ.⁴⁸ Indeed, Athanasius's thirty-ninth *Letter* is tremendously important to the formation of early Christianity for all of the reasons Brakke outlines, but if we are to read this letter as a warning against so-called heretics who read apocryphal literature (as the narrative of the fate of the Nag Hammadi codices is interpreted), the attack is rather innocuous. In fact, a close reading of the letter reveals an almost bureaucratic tone, as if Athanasius is sighing in the subtext, saying: “Must we go over this?”

Compare, for instance, Athanasius's list of canonical texts in the thirty-ninth letter to *Letter 40, To Adelphius*, where he fights tooth and nail against Arianism and for his own orthodox Christology: “Where has this evil of theirs erupted from?” and “We do not worship a creature. Never!”⁴⁹ These Arian “heretics” he calls “enemies of Christ ... urged on by their father the devil.”⁵⁰ This is the standard polemic for which Athanasius is known and that is markedly missing in *Letter 39*. In this letter, those who do not read the Scriptures according to the list are merely called “heretics and ... simple folk.”⁵¹ Here our argument is not much different from Brakke's. Athanasius was concerned with Arianism and the threats that such a belief posed to both his view of Christology and his right to authority. And regardless of whether the community for which the *Letter* was written accepted this authority, it is safe to say that those who did not—the Arians, Meletians, and other unnamed “heretics”—paid little attention to a list of canonical books.

Yet this is not the final point of our argument. We have attempted to remove the Nag Hammadi codices from a Pachomian monastic origin and place them in the hands of an Egyptian who commissioned them for private use. Once these texts are removed from the ecclesiastical struggles against “heresy,” they belong to a little explored history of fourth-century Egypt. For even if Athanasius's letter is meant to define a canon, what can be said of the Nag Hammadi codices if we venture to

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 398.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 398–99.

⁴⁹ Khaled Anatolios, *Athanasius* (Early Church Fathers; New York: Routledge, 2004), 236.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 236.

⁵¹ David Brakke, *Athanasius and the Politics of Asceticism* (Oxford Early Christian Studies; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995), 330.

say that they were *not* being read in a monastic setting? Like the Theban Magical Library, they exist beyond the reach of the episcopate. One of the purposes of this article is to suggest, or recall, that fourth-century Egypt was not a landscape dominated by ecclesiastical struggles. While such conflicts certainly played a major role in the formation of Egyptian Christianity, we argue that a significant portion of the Egyptian population was not concerned with these struggles. The reason they dominate the literature of fourth-century Egypt is because voices such as that of Athanasius are dynamic ones that live on in the orthodox world. So dynamic is his voice, in fact, that we often forget that he was banished five times during his career, his ecclesiastical authority called into question by many in spite of his victory over Arian theology. And so, while Athanasius remains a posthumous authority, his writings only reflect the politics of fourth-century Egyptian Christianity in proportion to his turbulent career. The archaeological record, not surprisingly, does not reveal the strict oppressiveness that scholars read into the literature of the era but instead reveals a fruitful desert of newly commissioned books of all natures: pagan, Christian, monastic, liturgical, classical, and magical.

V. BOOKS AND TOMBS

The Gebel el-Tarif, where the Nag Hammadi codices were discovered, was not a monastic site; it was (and had been for millennia) a vast ancient burial ground. In the fourth century, numerous caves and rock-cut tombs were still in use for burials. Twenty meters south of the Nag Hammadi find-spot, in Cave T1, excavators found bones and pottery remains; in T114, eight hundred meters away, excavators found a burial shroud that yielded a ¹⁴C date of the fifth century C.E.⁵² Robinson himself concludes, “at least the talus was used as a burial site at the time in question.”⁵³ Even Doresse’s earlier, unelaborated account of the find-spot places it in a cemetery, although in that case the cemetery was not a series of caves but a flatter plain.⁵⁴ Although Doresse believed the cemetery to have been pagan and thus earlier than the codices, there is some evidence that it was still in use by late antique Christians.

The concrete link between the Nag Hammadi codices and late antique graves has largely, if mystifyingly, been replaced by the unfounded assumption that monks intentionally *hid* the books for posterity. Is it not more likely that someone put them in a grave as a funerary deposit? One scholar to have proposed the tomb theory was the esteemed Coptologist Martin Krause, who, in an article from 1978, commented,

⁵²Robinson, “Discovery,” 213.

⁵³Ibid.

⁵⁴Doresse, *Secret Books*, 58.

Das Auffinden der Bibliothek in einem Grabe spricht für eine, und zwar wohl reiche, Einzelperson als Besitzer.... Es ist ein auch in christlicher Zeit noch nachweisbarer altägyptischer Brauch, dem Toten heilige Bücher ins Grab beizugeben.⁵⁵

Krause maintained—and we present a similar thesis here—that a private individual with eclectic and esoteric interests commissioned the collection, which was buried with him at the time of his death.⁵⁶

If indeed the jar containing the Nag Hammadi codices came from a burial cave rather than a ruined monastic library, it would be in good company. The Berlin Codex, which contains the *Gospel of Mary*, the *Apocryphon of John*, the *Sophia of Jesus Christ*, and the *Acts of Peter*, appeared on the antiquities market in 1896. Although the dealer claimed that the book had been found in a wall niche, the text's first editor, Carl Schmidt, assumed it had been taken from one of Akhmim's cemeteries.⁵⁷ The Codex Tchacos, which contains (among other so-called Gnostic texts) the *Gospel of Judas*, was discovered near El-Minya, in a family tomb by Gebel Qarara. At this late antique Christian burial site, the Codex Tchacos was only one of the books found in a limestone box that tomb robbers unearthed; the three others do not survive intact, having been divided up by antiquities dealers. However, we know that one of these was a fourth- or fifth-century papyrus codex containing a Greek version of Exodus.⁵⁸ The second, dating from the same period, was a Coptic translation of Paul's letters; the third, interestingly, was a Greek mathematical text called the *Metrodological Tractate*.⁵⁹ "If nothing else," comments April DeConick, their burial together

points to their privileged place in the life of an early Christian living in ancient Egypt, a Christian who seems to have had esoteric leanings. This ancient person buried with these books had no difficulty during his or her lifetime studying canonical favorites like Paul and Exodus alongside the Gnostic *Gospel of Judas*. As for the mathematical treatise, its burial along with these others should not be that surprising given that both the Hermetics and Gnostics studied mathematical theorems in order to understand and map their universe.⁶⁰

⁵⁵Krause, "Die Texte von Nag Hammadi" in Aland, *Gnosis: Festschrift für Hans Jonas*, 243. Armand Veilleux cautiously seconds the idea ("Monasticism and Gnosis in Egypt," in *The Roots of Egyptian Christianity* [ed. Birger A. Pearson and James E. Goehring; SAC; Philadelphia: Fortress, 1986], 278–83.

⁵⁶Krause, "Die Texte von Nag Hammadi," 242–43.

⁵⁷Schmidt, *Die alten Petrusakten im Zusammenhang der apokryphen Apostellitteratur nebst einem neuentdeckten Fragment untersucht* (TU n.F. 9/1; Leipzig: Hinrichs, 1903), 2.

⁵⁸The Greek papyrus now exists in pieces in private collections at the Schøyen Collection, Yale's Beinecke Library, and Ashland Theological Seminary.

⁵⁹Heavily illustrated, the codex was bisected, with half being purchased by Lloyd Cotsen and donated to Princeton University, and half to an anonymous private collector.

⁶⁰DeConick, *The Thirteenth Apostle: What the Gospel of Judas Really Says* (New York: Continuum, 2009), 64–65.

Thus, in the history of late antique Egyptian books, we have some intriguing commonalities between the Nag Hammadi codices and the El-Minya find: a Christian tomb site, a durable container, and a cache of books. In the case of the El-Minya find, we are clearly dealing with a private commission or collection of books, not a monastic library.

There are other cases of manuscripts found in burial sites in late antique Egypt. The parchment Codex Panopolitanus, which contained a full Greek version of *1 Enoch's* Book of the Watchers, fragments of an *Apocalypse of Peter*, and the *Gospel of Peter*, was excavated by a French archaeological team in the winter of 1886–87; it was found in an eighth-century Christian grave in Akhmim.⁶¹ Interestingly, as in the case of the Codex Tchacos, the Codex Panopolitanus was found along with a mathematical treatise.⁶² Among non-Christian texts, the fourth-century Theban Magical Library—composed of both scrolls and codices—was, like the Nag Hammadi codices, discovered by *fellaheen* under suspicious circumstances, almost certainly tomb robbing in the Thebaid.⁶³

Our hypothesis here that the Nag Hammadi codices were intentionally deposited in a grave or graves rather than buried for “posterity”—the latter practice, in contrast to the former, not attested in Egypt—raises an inevitable question: what was the rationale for burying a book in a grave? Put simply, as a grave good, a book was a luxury item that marked the prestige of the grave owner.⁶⁴ It is helpful, perhaps, to think (as Emmel does) of the codices as *artifacts* rather than as books, where the primary importance is the social meaning of the object rather than its contents.⁶⁵ In this way of thinking, there is no need to connect the content of a book with the practice of depositing it with a corpse. This explains why a mathematical book would be deposited in a grave with the Codex Tchacos and the Codex Panopolitanus; it also helps us to make sense of other book finds from Egyptian graves. For example, W. M. Flinders Petrie reported having found a copy of the second book of the *Iliad*, in Greek, on a papyrus roll tucked under the head of an elite

⁶¹ Isaac H. Hall, “The Newly Discovered Apocryphal Gospel of Peter,” *Biblical World* 1, no. 2 (1893): 88.

⁶² George W. E. Nickelsburg, “Two Enochic Manuscripts: Unstudied Evidence for Egyptian Christianity,” in *Of Scribes and Scrolls: Studies on the Hebrew Bible, Intertestamental Judaism, and Christian Origins presented to John Strugnell* (ed. Harold W. Attridge, John J. Collins, and Thomas H. Tobin; College Theology Society Resources in Religion 5; Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 1990), 251–60, esp. 254.

⁶³ For more on the Theban Magical Library, see Jacco Dieleman, *Priests, Tongues, and Rites: The London-Leiden Magical Manuscripts and Translation in Egyptian Ritual* (Religions in the Graeco-Roman World 153; Leiden: Brill, 2005); and also Roger Bagnall, *Early Christian Books in Egypt* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2009). Both Dieleman and Bagnall note the interesting parallels between the Theban Magical Library and the Nag Hammadi codices.

⁶⁴ AnneMarie Lujendijk, “Sacred Scriptures as Trash: Biblical Papyri from Oxyrhynchus,” *VC* 64 (2010): 232 n. 50.

⁶⁵ Emmel, “Coptic Gnostic Texts,” 32.

woman in a grave at Hawara in the Fayyum.⁶⁶ The papyrus dates to the fifth century C.E. and was both well copied and well preserved. The practice of placing the roll at the head of a corpse in a sense continued the Ptolemaic practice of placing brief “Documents for Breathing”—the Greco-Egyptian form of earlier “Books of the Dead” written in Demotic, hieratic, and Greek—at the top of a mummy’s head at burial.⁶⁷

However, because of Egypt’s rich history of funerary texts, there remains the possibility that there was intended to be a connection between individual books’ contents and their function as grave deposits. The speculation that archaeologists had discovered a Christian “Book of the Dead” had already been made in the case of Codex Panopolitanus, with its apocalyptic, “heavenly journey” writings.⁶⁸ The Nag Hammadi codices are particularly interesting to consider from this perspective, for a few reasons. First, they are an apparently deliberate collection of documents that are overwhelmingly concerned with cosmology and eschatology. They contain no “secular” writings, no Scripture, no correspondence, and precious little homiletical, ethical, or paraenetic material, with the exception of (for example) the *Gospel of Truth* in Codex I and what remains (very little) of the *Interpretation of Knowledge* in Codex XI. Still, even these works are very far in tone and spirit from, let us say, Melito’s sermons and homilies, which we find in papyrus copies from late antique Egypt. Therefore, the Nag Hammadi collection as a whole is far from a random one, but seems to specialize in obscure cosmologically and eschatologically focused treatises with a liturgical dimension.⁶⁹

⁶⁶Petrie, *Hawara, Biahmu, and Arsinoe with Thirty Plates* (London: Field & Tuer, 1889), 24–28.

⁶⁷Werner Forman and Steven Quirke, *Hieroglyphs and the Afterlife in Ancient Egypt* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1996). These documents Quirke likens to “passports” held by the deceased to give them free access into the next world; they contained a sort of declaration by Thoth that the traveler was to be allowed to pass through the stomach of Nut through the circuit of the underworld. A standard line went, “O guardians of the Underworld, let me come and go.” The last secure date for a “Document for Breathing” included with a burial is late first to early second century C.E., from the family grave of Soter, a governor of Thebes.

⁶⁸For the site report, see Klaus P. Kuhlmann, *Materialien zur Archäologie und Geschichte des Raumes von Achmim* (Sonderschrift, Deutsches Archäologisches Institut, Abteilung Kairo 11; Mainz: von Zabern, 1983), 53, 62. The codex was published by U. Bouriant, “Fragments grecs de Livre d’Énoch,” in *Mémoires publiés par les membres de la Mission archéologique française au Caire* 9.1 (Paris: Leroux, 1892), 91–147, esp. 93–94. For additional manuscript information, plates, and the *editio princeps* of both the *Gospel of Peter* and the *Apocalypse of Peter*, see A. Lods, “L’évangile et l’apocalypse de Pierre: Le texte grec du livre d’Énoch,” in *Mémoires publiés par les membres de la Mission archéologique française au Caire* 9.3 (Paris: Leroux, 1893), 217–35 and plates 1–34. For the Christian “Book of the Dead” claim, see Nickelsburg, “Two Enochic Manuscripts,” 254.

⁶⁹Some may argue that the existence of the *Apocryphon of John* in four different copies argues against the obscurity of that text at least; the *Gospel of Thomas* is also present in multiple versions. See, however, the observations of Larry Hurtado, “The Greek Fragments of the *Gospel of Thomas* as Artefacts: Papyrological Observations on Papyrus Oxyrhynchus 1, Papyrus

VI. A NEW CONTEXT: EXPLORING THE POSSIBILITIES

Who, in late antique Egypt, might have been particularly interested in commissioning an eschatologically oriented collection of texts to deposit in a burial? There exists a range of possible suspects, from the Melitians to the class of monks Jerome called the *remnuoth* (Ep. 22.34).⁷⁰ Robinson has speculated that perhaps the codices belonged to a monk or monks who began in the Pachomian monastery but then moved out to an eremitic life.⁷¹ In support of this theory, Robinson cites the case of Hierakas of Leontopolis, a fourth-century monk of the Delta who was both a scribe and a biblical exegete. He was also a radical encratite—so radical, in fact, that he was declared a heretic for his views.⁷² The example of Hierakas, so far from the Thebaid, reminds us only that the lines between coenobitic monks, anchorites, and private citizens were fluid in the fourth century.

Our intuition is that the Nag Hammadi codices belonged to private (i.e., non-monastic) individuals who commissioned them for their own purposes. Whether the scriptoria that composed them were monastic or not we cannot tell, but private scriptoria certainly existed in the fourth century.⁷³ The “private individual” model requires that we break with our tendency to interpret the landscape of late antique Egypt as purely populated by monks, a perception largely influenced by Derwas J. Chitty’s highly influential *The Desert a City*.⁷⁴ These individuals may or may not have been Christians; if it was correct in any sense to call them “Gnostic,” they certainly did not ascribe to any sectarian Gnostic school.⁷⁵

Oxyrhynchus 654 and Papyrus Oxyrhynchus 655,” in Frey et al., *Das Thomasevangelium*, 23, on the total number of copies of Christian texts from late ancient Egypt.

⁷⁰ Veilleux first suggested the Nag Hammadi documents might have held special appeal for Melitians (“Monasticism and Gnosis in Egypt,” 10). See also Brakke, “Canon Formation,” 249: “while the nature of the apocryphal books accepted and used by the Melitians seems different from the texts found in the Nag Hammadi codices, the undecided nature of the canon evidenced in the debate suggests a period in which one can well imagine individual ascetics and ascetic groups involved in the sort of textual exploration that led to an interest in such texts.”

⁷¹ Robinson suggests this (*Nag Hammadi Library in English*, 18).

⁷² Robinson, *Nag Hammadi Library in English*, 18; Wisse, “Gnosticism and Early Monasticism,” 438–40.

⁷³ Although Pachomians had scriptoria and copied texts, the evidence is later than the fourth century. There is no evidence for fourth-century Pachomian scriptoria. For the earliest references, see Palladius, *Lausiac History* 32.12 (where working in the *kalligreiphon* is one form of Pachomian monastic labor) and John Cassian, *Institutes* 4.12 (which details how a Pachomian monk must stop writing immediately if called by a superior). We thank David Brakke for the references.

⁷⁴ Chitty, *The Desert a City: An Introduction to the Study of Egyptian and Palestinian Monasticism under the Christian Empire* (1966; repr., Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 1995).

⁷⁵ See the loosely affiliated Christian fellowships discussed by E. Wipszycka, “Les confréries

That the Nag Hammadi codices were commissioned by private individuals was the hypothesis of Krause, but also of Khosroyev, who systematically and painstakingly demolished the theory of Pachomian provenance and argued instead that the codices had been commissioned by urban intellectuals among whom they were copied and exchanged.⁷⁶ These intellectuals operated outside the reach of the developing orthodox Christianity and represented the religious complexity of their day, like their contemporary Zosimus of Panopolis or those who read and circulated the Theban Magical Papyri. Indeed, the concept of *paideia* once again comes to mind. If elite education meant to instruct even Christian theologians, like Basil the Great, in the reading of classical Greek mythology, it is not difficult to suggest that some Egyptian elites were interested in the cosmological and eschatological writings of the Neoplatonic era, during which *paideia* experienced a revival, thus necessarily including the so-called Gnostic writings of the second century in their learning in the fourth century.

Emmel has also cautiously agreed with Khosroyev's analysis, although he sees no reason to locate the Nag Hammadi codices in Egypt's major urban centers as products of life in the city. He posits, instead,

bilingual "Hellenized" Egyptians who grew up and remained in the largely Greek-speaking metropoleis of the Nile Valley, where they were in communication with like-minded members of the same "class" or "group" who shared an interest in this sort of esoteric and in some sense also erudite literature.⁷⁷

In a different article, Emmel suggests that to understand the codices in their context, we need to "reconstruct the reading experience of whoever owned each of the Codices," taking into full consideration the culture of Upper Egypt from the third to the eighth centuries and developing a "theory of Coptic reading and Coptic readers."⁷⁸ But Emmel raises a vital question: why are the Nag Hammadi Codices in Coptic (and often poor Coptic, at that)? Rejecting the idea that they could have been translated from Greek to Coptic for the benefit of those who could not read Greek (the tractates are unintelligible without an advanced knowledge of Greek language and culture), he proposes an intriguing hypothesis:

I think we have to do with the products of a kind of Egypt-wide network (more or less informal) of educated, primarily Greek-speaking ... philosophically and esoteric-mystically like-minded people, for whom Egypt represented (even if

dans la vie religieuse de l'Égypte chrétienne," in *Proceedings of the Twelfth International Congress of Papyrology* (Toronto: A. M. Hakkert, 1970), 511–25.

⁷⁶This is the central argument of Khosroyev, *Die Bibliothek von Nag Hammadi*.

⁷⁷Emmel, "Coptic Gnostic Texts," 36.

⁷⁸Emmel, "Religious Tradition, Textual Transmission, and the Nag Hammadi Codices," in *The Nag Hammadi Library after Fifty Years: Proceedings of the 1995 Society of Biblical Literature Commemoration* (ed. John D. Turner and Anne McGuire; Nag Hammadi and Manichaean Studies 44; Leiden: Brill, 1997), 34–43.

only somewhat vaguely) a tradition of wisdom and knowledge to be revered and perpetuated ... it is easy to imagine a kind of rush to create a new “esoteric-mystical Egyptian wisdom literature”—being “Egyptian” above all by virtue of being in Coptic rather than in Greek (even if the Coptic was sometimes barely comprehensible.⁷⁹

If Emmel is right, then it seems that Egyptian, rather than Greek, would be the “natural” language for these new Christian Books of the Dead. Even though the content of the writings betrayed Greek thought, the language connected those who commissioned such volumes with an archaic practice of leaving guides for the afterlife in Egyptian graves. In fact, seen in this light, the sometimes poor Coptic, the mishmash of writings (Valentinian and Sethian; Christian and non-Christian), and the theological inconsistencies that vex modern scholars were likely to have been of no concern whatsoever to a fourth-century elite who planned out in advance a “real, Egyptian” burial.

It is worth asking, in conclusion, what difference it makes if the Nag Hammadi find-story was, indeed, a scholarly fiction. To begin, we might do well to recognize its many colonialist, orientalizing elements as relics of a bygone era in Egyptian archaeology. The narrative is a fine one for classroom telling, but it works less and less effectively as we become more sensitized to our own Western prejudices and assumptions. Egyptian peasants do not fear *jinni* in bottles or rip out each other’s hearts and eat them on the spot—and shame on us for believing, even for a moment, that they do.

To those whose work has been in uncovering the second-century contexts of the various tractates contained in the Nag Hammadi codices, it may not matter at all whether the books derived from a grave or were secreted away by monks. On the other hand, the attention to the second-century, posited Greek “originals” of these writings has steered us down a path that virtually ignores the vital context of the writings in the only form in which they have survived, as if this real, fourth-century setting means nothing and only our reconstructed and imagined Greek “originals” have anything to teach us about the development of Christianity. To be suspicious of the find-story and the assumed Pachomian provenance is to allow these late antique codices to belong to a uniquely Egyptian archaeological context, placing them in a funerary tradition that began in the dynastic era and endured, arguably, well into the Muslim era. To think of the Nag Hammadi codices as fourth-century artifacts that may have been intentionally created, in some instances, as grave goods radically changes the way we think about late antique Egyptian Christianity, where studies have been divided between those who study monasticism and those who study documentary papyri. Yet what of the vibrant cultural life of the late antique Roman era, the systems of learning that fostered an interest in these second-century heritages, be they pagan or Christian, Roman or Egyptian? If we

⁷⁹Emmel, “Coptic Gnostic Texts,” 48.

group the Nag Hammadi codices with other similar products—namely, the Tchacos, Bruce, and Askew codices—we have a rather large corpus of late antique Egyptian books that stand in a class of their own and demand from us not only contextualization but also a deeper understanding of the diversity of the fourth-century Roman world.

Reevaluating the true provenance of the Nag Hammadi codices also means that we need to change the way we think about so-called Gnostic texts as being theologically marginal writings that really only had one century of good use before they became dangerous curiosities that some theologically suspect monks felt compelled to hide. Contextualizing the Nag Hammadi codices in the grave of a private citizen removes them from the background drama of fourth-century ecclesiastical politics. It has been difficult for scholars of Gnosticism to avoid the temptation to connect the Nag Hammadi codices with dominant figures such as Athanasius or movements such as Pachomian monasticism; however, such a connection situates our field of study conveniently within the narrative that Athanasius himself propagated: a community of unified Christians, loyal to their bishops, all together fighting groups of renegade monks and teachers who commission heretical texts and then, like demons, disappear into the night. Could there be any other way to understand the landscape of late antique Egypt? Yes, of course.

Our job has been to draw threads of connection, however tenuous, between one historical figure or moment and another. But if we sever these silken threads and admit to what we simply do not know about late antique Egypt, the true reason that someone saw fit painstakingly to copy the Nag Hammadi codices and carefully to preserve them becomes a compelling mystery we might begin to consider with a fresh set of eyes.

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