Introduction

The Provenance Controversy

In the year 1945, near the town Nag Hammadi in Upper Egypt, a farmer found a collection of very old books as he was, purportedly, digging for fertiliser. By the end of the 1940s, the books had ended up on the Egyptian black market for ancient texts. When scholars finally got their hands on them, it was quickly discovered that the books were fourth-century papyrus codices. Unofficially named after the town near where they were discovered, the collection comprised twelve individual codices containing a total of fifty-two texts,[1] all written in the last of the ancient Egyptian languages: Coptic (see Fig. Int. 1). Most of the texts were Christian in nature, with a few philosophical and Hermetic tractates, and most were Coptic translations of earlier Greek versions; some had never been heard of before. Early Christian scholars had received a very welcome influx of sources from a period which had left few original manuscripts behind. But ever since the discovery, their background has caused debate. Many conflicting suggestions as to their provenance have been proposed over the years; however, there is still no broad consensus about what sort of fourth-century people had actually produced and owned the Nag Hammadi codices and how they had been used.

[1] At the end of the chapter the contents of each codex are presented. The number fifty-two should be viewed as an estimate, although probably the most commonly adduced figure for the number of texts the collection includes in total. Yet one can easily end up with a different sum, depending on the principles applied when distinguishing one individual text from another.

Figure Int. 1 The Nag Hammadi codices in the home of Maria Dattari, a private antiquities collector in Cairo, Egypt. On the left, leaves from Codex I, with page 50 on the top. Beneath on the right are leaves from Codex XII, with page 28 furthest to the right. The extant leaves of Codex XIII are in the centre beneath the bound codices, with page 50 on top. The cover between the two stacks is that of Codex XI. The stack of bound codices on the left includes, from top to bottom, Codices II, VII, VIII and III (from which the leaves had already been removed; the cover is padded with newspaper to provide the appropriate thickness for the photograph). The stack of bound codices on the right includes, from top to bottom, Codices V, IX, VI, IV and X. Absent are the cover and most of the leaves of Codex I, which were at the time in the possession of Albert Eid (description by Claremont Colleges Library, modified).

This photograph was reproduced with the caption 'Les manuscrits de Khénoboskion' between pages 14 and 15 in Jean Doresse, *L'Évangile selon Thomas ou les paroles de Jésus: Les livres secrets des gnostiques d'Egypte* (Paris: Librairie Plon, 1959), and with the caption 'The manuscripts of Chenoboskion' facing page 238 in Doresse, *The Secret Books of the Egyptian Gnostics: An Introduction to the Gnostic Coptic Manuscripts Discovered at Chenoboskion*, trans. Leonard Johnston (London: Hollis & Carter, 1960 [1952]). Photo by Jean Doresse. Image courtesy of the Institute for Antiquity and Christianity Records, Special Collections, Claremont Colleges Library, Claremont, California.

This study approaches the background and ancient use of the Nag Hammadi texts from several understudied perspectives: namely, the manuscripts' paratextual, visual and material aspects. By studying how the makers and readers of the texts actually handled them, the reading aids and editorial features they used, and how they were put together and relate to each other, we can gain important clues about who the owners really were and how they were actually read. The scholars who first worked with them in order to facilitate transcriptions and translations of the manuscripts noted many of these features, sometimes offering explanations as to their use. These comments are, however, few and far between, and no studies have hitherto been devoted to analysing the texts' paratextual, visual and material aspects in light of the texts as a collection. Nag Hammadi scholarship has chiefly focused on the individual texts and seldom refers to their material features, something most likely partly due to the way modern editions of ancient texts are produced. In the laudable effort to present accessible translations and transcriptions, material features, such as scribal signs and visual effects, are often 'lost in transcription'. The aim of the present study is to trace the uncharted aspects of the materiality of the Nag Hammadi texts and map the context which they reflect.[2]

Since the discovery of the Nag Hammadi codices, they have been associated with various Christian heresies, chiefly with the somewhat elusive concept of 'Gnosticism'. By approaching previously understudied aspects of the materiality of early Christian texts that

[2] The terms 'Nag Hammadi codices', 'Nag Hammadi library/collection' and 'Nag Hammadi texts' are used interchangeably throughout this chapter. There are, however, important nuances to these terms and we shall have occasion to revisit the usage of them in later chapters. These have to do with the fact that the different texts within the codices – in almost all cases – had a *Sitz im Leben* before they became part of the collection associated with the name 'Nag Hammadi'. What I explore in this book is the context and textual setting pertaining to the texts within the codices and not their 'original' or previous background before they were copied into the fourth-century manuscripts we possess today.

have been viewed as containing questionable teachings, we stand to gain important insights into the formative period of early Christian history when the boundaries of orthodoxy and heresy were slowly becoming established.

Some studies have problematised the assumption that early Christian manuscripts were generally copied by Christians, rather than professional scribes uninterested in what they copied.[3] This is a focal topic of scholarly disagreement over the Nag Hammadi texts. In this study their ancient background(s) is approached by looking at what their material and visual features can say about how they were read and by whom. Previous studies have explored some of these material features, such as the texts' codicology, cartonnage and colophons,[4] but the present study aims to fill in some of the gaps provided by previously uncharted aspects of their palaeography and codicology. These include paratextual elements and scribal features such as *diplai* (>) and *diple obelismene* signs (>—), *nomina sacra*, copying techniques, visual features including symbols, and material comparison of the texts. While previous studies of the materiality of the Nag Hammadi texts have often focused on what these features can say about who owned the texts and when and where they were copied, this study will also approach the question of what the material features can tell us about *how* the

[3] The assumption is questioned by, for example, Alan Mugridge, *Copying Early Christian Texts: A Study of Scribal Practice* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2016). For the argument that early Christian texts were mainly produced by Christians for their own use, see Kim Haines-Eitzen, *Guardians of Letters: Literacy, Power, and the Transmitters of Early Christian Literature* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000).

[4] These studies will be discussed below. A pioneer in applying material research perspectives to the Nag Hammadi codices is Hugo Lundhaug, whose work has inspired and is closely related to my own. For example, see Hugo Lundhaug, 'Material Philology and the Nag Hammadi Codices', in *The Dead Sea Scrolls and the Nag Hammadi Codices*, ed. Dylan M. Burns and Matthew J. Goff (Leiden: Brill, 2022), 107–143. Lundhaug himself credits Karen King and Stephen Emmel with being the first to advocate approaching the Nag Hammadi texts from the perspective of manuscript culture (Lundhaug, 'Material Philology', 109 n. 8).

texts were used and for what purpose. This includes exploring the everyday utility of the texts in light of their material features.

The Rifts in Current Scholarship

At the time of the discovery of the Nag Hammadi codices, it was argued that they could have been related to the Egyptian monastic movement, which had its beginning, both chronologically and geographically,[5] in the area where the texts were found.[6] Developed by Pachomius the Great – often identified as the founder of Christian cenobitic monasticism – the movement would give rise to a handful of monasteries, datable to the same time as the approximate production of the Nag Hammadi texts, and within a day's walk of the general area of their discovery.[7] Thus, there is

[5] For a brief overview of the history of scholarship, see Hugo Lundhaug and Lance Jenott, *The Monastic Origins of the Nag Hammadi Codices* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2015), 4–7; for an updated and highly pedagogical overview of how the Nag Hammadi texts can be dated and contextualised, see Hugo Lundhaug, 'Dating and Contextualising the Nag Hammadi Codices and Their Texts: A Multi-Methodological Approach Including New Radiocarbon Evidence', in *Texts in Context: Essays on Dating and Contextualising Christian Writings of the Second and Early Third Century*, ed. Jos Verheyden, Jens Schröter and Tobias Nicklas (Leuven: Peeters, 2021), 117–142.

[6] There has recently been some debate concerning the validity of the find story. For an overview of the debate and a much-needed argument against the hypothesis that the Nag Hammadi texts were Christian Books of the Dead, used as grave goods among Christians, see Paula Tutty, 'Books of the Dead or Books *with* the Dead?', in *The Nag Hammadi Codices and Late Antique Egypt*, ed. Hugo Lundhaug and Lance Jenott (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2018), 287–326. This topic is discussed in more detail in Chapter 2.

[7] For a recent overview of the evidence, see Christian Bull, 'The Panopolis Connection: The Pachomian Federation as Context for the Nag Hammadi Codices', in Bull, Christian. 'The Panopolis Connection: The Pachomian Federation as Context for the Nag Hammadi Codices', in *Coptic Literature in Context (4th–13th Cent.): Cultural Landscape, Literary Production and Manuscript Archaeology*, ed. Paola Buzi (Rome: Edizioni Quasar, 2020), 133–147. For a study of the geography of early Pachomian monasticism, see Louis Théophile Lefort, 'Les premiers monasteres Pachomiens: Exploration topographique', *Le Museon* 52: 379–407; and for a discussion of how Pachomian monasteries relate to the find site of the Nag Hammadi codices, see Lundhaug and Jenott, *Monastic Origins*, 22–55.

nothing strange about the fact that one of the first provenances suggested for the texts was that they were somehow connected with Pachomian monks. The Swedish Egyptologist Torgny Säve-Söderbergh, who was involved in the UNESCO project cataloguing the codices (led by James Robinson), suggested that the Nag Hammadi collection could have been used by monks to familiarise themselves with their theological opponents, that is, 'Gnostic' groups.[8] The texts constituted a reference library of heresy, he argued. Some scholars, including Clement Scholten, Michael Wallenstein and Frederik Wisse, among others, even suggested that the monks could have produced the texts, and not only that, they could have studied and drawn inspiration from them.[9] The monastic hypothesis has been promoted by many scholars over the years, a Pachomian setting being a frequently proposed scenario.[10] But other suggestions have also been made.

Another early view was that the Nag Hammadi texts, since they include considerable apocryphal material, had begun to lose their relevance and, after Athanasius' thirty-ninth festal letter was sent to Christians in Egypt banning apocryphal writings in 367, the texts

[8] Torgny Säve-Söderberg, 'Holy Scripture or Apologetic Documentation? 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. J. E. Menard (Leiden: Brill, 1975), 3–14.

[9] Michael Waldstein and Frederik Wisse (eds.), *The Apocryphon of John: Synopsis of Nag Hammadi Codices II,1; III,1 and IV,1 with BG 8502,2* (Leiden: Brill, 1995), 1–11; Frederik Wisse, 'Gnosticism and Early Monasticism in Egypt', in *Gnosis: Festschrift für Hans Jonas*, ed. B. Aland (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck and Ruprecht, 1978), 431–440.

[10] John W. B. Barns, 'Greek and Coptic Papyri from the Covers of the Nag Hammadi Codices: A Preliminary Report', in *Essays on the Nag Hammadi Texts: In Honour of Pahor Labib*, ed. Martin Krause (Leiden: Brill, 1975), 9–18; Charles W. Hedrick, 'Gnostic Proclivities in the Greek Life of Pachomius and the "Sitz im Leben" of the Nag Hammadi Library', *Novum Testamentum* 22:1 (1980): 78–96; Clemens Scholten, 'Die Nag-Hammadi-Texte als Buchbesitz der Pachomianer', *Jahrbuch für Antike und Christentum* 31 (1988): 144–172. For a more detailed history of the scholarship on the Nag Hammadi codices, see Lundhaug and Jenott, *Monastic Origins*, chapter 1.

were ultimately hidden away by their (possibly monastic) owners.[11] Whatever the relation between Athanasius' letter and the subsequent preservation of the Nag Hammadi texts, many have found it difficult to believe that monks owned them, much less read them for edification. Some have suggested instead that they belonged to one or a few wealthy, learned individuals or that a heretical 'Gnostic' group lay behind them.[12] Jean Doresse, the French archaeologist who was commissioned by the Coptic Museum in Cairo to investigate the discovery of the texts, made the suggestion that they must have belonged to religious fringe groups who treated them as their sacred text collection.[13] This view soon gained traction and has often been repeated since the texts were discovered.[14] The scholars supporting the view that they could not have belonged to proponents of the mainstream Christian Church are perhaps most clearly

[11] Armand Veilleux, 'Monasticism and Gnosis in Egypt', in *The Roots of Egyptian Christianity*, ed. Birger A. Pearson and James E. Goehring (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1986), 271–306. Athanasius indicates several texts by name which are to be viewed as apocrypha and thus banned, such as those attributed to Moses, Enoch and Isaiah. Alberto Camplani has argued against the notion that Athanasius referred to the texts found in the Nag Hammadi directly in 'In margine alla storia dei Meliziani', *Augustinianum* 30:2 (1990): 313–351. However, it is not a far stretch to imagine that other texts would also have been included in the ban, texts such as those in the Nag Hammadi collection also termed 'apocrypha'. See James E. Goehring, 'New Frontiers in Pachomian Studies', in *The Roots of Egyptian Christianity*, ed. Pearson and Goehring, 236–257.

[12] This hypothesis has one central drawback: it does not explain how the texts ended up in Upper Egypt. Its proponents have suggested that these 'Gnostic' individuals or groups could at some point have visited the monasteries around the area of Nag Hammadi and brought their texts with them. For a survey of the early suggestions as to the background of the texts, see Wisse, 'Gnosticism and Early Monasticism in Egypt', 431–440.

[13] Jean Doresse, *The Secret Books of the Egyptian Gnostics: An Introduction to the Gnostic Coptic Manuscripts Discovered at Chenoboskion*, trans. Leonard Johnston (London: Hollis & Carter, 1960 [1952]).

[14] It was, for example, repeated by Martin Krause, one of the early members of the UNESCO team commissioned to preserve and translate the texts. See Martin Krause, 'Der Erlassbrief des Theodore', in *Studies Presented to Hans Jacob Polotsky*, ed. Dwight W. Young (East Gloucester, MA: Pirtle & Polson, 1981), 220–238.

represented by Russian scholar Alexandr Khosroyev. He argued that most of the evidence, including codicological evidence, indicated a heretical urban intelligentsia behind the codices, chiefly due to the 'anti-biblical', 'esoteric' and philosophically laden material they contain.[15] The manuscripts were commercial products, Khosroyev argued, made by professional booksellers, commissioned by urban religious group(s) with syncretistic tendencies, and they would not have interested monks.[16] Khosroyev advanced these ideas in his book *Die Bibliothek von Nag Hammadi*, which had wide impact, in which he claimed that the Nag Hammadi texts were 'non-canonical', 'bizarre", 'philosophical', full of 'anti-biblical concepts' and therefore not attractive material for the monasteries. After Khosroyev, the 'Gnostic' hypothesis seemed to gain the upper hand. Several prominent scholars on early Christianity as well as specialists on Egyptian Christianity – like Stephen Emmel, Alastair Logan, Ewa Wipszycka and Nicola Denzey Lewis – have at times presented Khosroyev's argument as having 'effectively demolished the edifice of the "Pachomian monastic hypothesis"'.[17]

[15] Alexandr Khosroyev, *Die Bibliothek von Nag Hammadi: Einige Problem des Christentums in Ägypten währden der ersten Jahrhunderte* (Altenberge: Oros Verlag, 1995). Khosroyev's perspective has, over the years, gained the support of many, including Alastair Logan, in *The Gnostics: Identifying an Early Christian Cult* (London: T&T Clark, 2006), and Ewa Wipszycka, 'The Nag Hammadi Library and the Monks: A Papyrologist Point of View', *Journal of Juristic Papyrology* 30 (2000): 179–191.

[16] Khosroyev, *Die Bibliothek von Nag Hammadi*, 10–13. This is mostly drawn from his analysis of Codex VI where we find a scribal note. Khosroyev is not alone in his view of the Nag Hammadi codices as commercial products; this is also the conclusion drawn by Eva Cornelia Römer in 'Manichaeism and Gnosticism in the Papyri', in *The Oxford Handbook of Papyrology*, ed. R. Bagnall (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 623–643; as well as Joseph Montserrat-Torrents, 'The Social and Cultural Setting of the Coptic Gnostic Library', in *Studia Patristica XXXI: Papers Presented at the Twelfth International Conference on Patristic Studies Held in Oxford 1995*, ed. E. A. Livingstone (Leuven: Peeters, 1995), 464–481.

[17] The quote is from Stephen Emmel 's, '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 (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 2008), 36. The sentiment

More recently, however, Khosroyev's hypothesis has received considerable critique, with the monastic-origin hypothesis being reformulated by Hugo Lundhaug and Lance Jenott, who have criticised Khosroyev's thesis on several grounds and suggested that the codices were produced in monastic book-exchange networks and owned and read by monks.[18] They based their argument on, among other things, studies of the material aspects of the texts, and analysis of the cartonnage, scribal notes, colophons and content of the texts in light of monastic documentary material which, they argue, shows that monks did indeed read texts such as those found in the Nag Hammadi collection. Since Lundhaug and Jenott's book is a work which offers detailed analyses of topics that are of central importance for many of the arguments presented in this study, it is useful to introduce their work in greater detail and discuss how their arguments have been received in the wider scholarship on the Nag Hammadi codices. As my own study and its contributions are so clearly located on one side of the rift in scholarship, transparency is key if the arguments put forward here are to carry any weight.

The Monastic-Origin Hypothesis and the Contribution of the Present Study

The number of followers being gained by Khosroyev's work prompted Hugo Lundhaug and Lance Jenott to reformulate the monastic-origin hypothesis.[19] In their study *The Monastic Origins of the Nag Hammadi Codices*, Lundhaug and Jenott present the

has been repeated by Logan, *The Gnostics*; Wipszycka, 'The Nag Hammadi Library and the Monks'; Nicola Denzey Lewis, *Introduction to 'Gnosticism': Ancient Voices, Christian Worlds* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 8–9. Nevertheless, Emmel has of late been more inclined to support a monastic reading.

[18] Lundhaug and Jenott, *Monastic Origins*.

[19] Part of this section is based on my Swedish review of Lundhaug and Jenott's book, published in *Patristica Nordica Annuaria* 31 (2016): 143–147.

most detailed argument to date for the monastic origins of the library. Their book was structured with the overall aim of refuting Khosroyev's argument.[20] Almost half the study, the first four out of a total of ten chapters, is devoted to introducing Egyptian monasticism in the late fourth and early fifth centuries and refuting Khosroyev's arguments rejecting the monastic hypothesis.[21]

What makes Lundhaug and Jenott's study of particular relevance to this one is the fact that it explores previously unstudied material aspects of the texts, analysing the colophons and also fragments found in the codices' cartonnage identified as documentary material, such as correspondence between the monks – among them a letter from one Papnoute addressed to "my beloved Father

[20] Lundhaug and Jenott, *Monastic Origins*, 3–4.

[21] Chapter 1 is a brief history of Nag Hammadi research, followed (in chapter 2) by discussion of the Christian monastic movement in Egypt in the fourth and fifth centuries (based on documentary, literary and archaeological sources). In the two subsequent chapters, assumptions previously made about the Nag Hammadi texts are deconstructed. Chapter 3, dubbed 'Gnostics?', presents one hypothesis that there were Gnostic groups behind the texts, and another that the texts were owned by a Gnostic group within the incipient monastic system. Lundhaug and Jenott, however, show that there is not much basis for either hypothesis and suggest they have emerged in the wake of incorrect connotations of 'Gnosticism', which is a modern term associated with the ancient polemical term 'Gnostic' which was used to smear theological opponents. The latter refers to a loose 'world view' or mentality but is not a good analytical tool for addressing specific groups or movements, especially not some that can be convincingly linked to the Nag Hammadi codices. Chapter 4 shows the arguments that Khosroyev used for his hypothesis that the texts originated from a syncretistic Gnostic metropolitan environment, that they were owned by semi-intellectual elite groups and that they contain ideas contrasting with those found in monastic literature. Some of the claims that Lundhaug and Jenott explore are that the Nag Hammadi texts (1) contain contrasting material to what can be found in Christian monasteries; (2) are anti-biblical; (3) are philosophical and can only be understood by an intellectual elite; (4) may not have been read by Egyptian monks who were mostly uneducated or outright illiterate. Lundhaug and Jenott show that these assumptions, and many more, are either simply incorrect or very loosely based. They then move on to argue why the hypothesis of a monastic context for the production of the Nag Hammadi texts is in fact the most probable.