

2 | The Find Story and the Ethics of Postmodern Manuscript Archaeology

This chapter analyses the find story attached to the discovery of the Nag Hammadi texts, a topic of much scholarly debate of late. Some of the early researchers engaged with the elucidation of the texts' discovery have been accused of Orientalism, which has ultimately begun to affect the way the texts' ancient background and use has been interpreted. In this chapter the find story is revisited, and it is argued that the accusations of earlier scholars' Orientalism are exaggerated; furthermore, this is a much less problematic aspect of Nag Hammadi scholarship than the contemporary romanticisation of Gnosticism.

Following the Evidence

Recently, a new and much welcomed perspective has developed within the field of early Christian materiality. Several large projects are currently focused on tracing the modern history of ancient manuscripts with the aim of investigating the question of how best to deal with those appearing on the black market without a clear archaeological provenance.¹ Brent Nongbri, one of the pioneers of this new perspective, highlights the importance of being aware of the

¹ Two Oslo-based projects are currently studying this question: *The Lying Pen of Scribes: Manuscript Forgeries, Digital Imaging, and Provenance Research* (a new RCN-funded project with the PI Liv Ingeborg Lied), and a project led by Brent Nongbri: *EthiCodex*, aiming to develop a new methodology and ethics for manuscript studies (this, too, is RCN-funded).

modern history of the manuscripts we study in order to avoid labouring under preconceived notions when pursuing their ancient contexts² – a precept I follow here.

Since very few ancient texts are discovered or exhumed by professional archaeologists, with most turning up on the black market in antiquities, it is worthwhile retracing the steps of a manuscript's discovery and trying to ascertain the details surrounding it; finding the discovery site can, understandably, provide clues to the historical background of a text. There are, however, several circumstances that face anyone who ventures to establish the facts surrounding an ancient text's modern discovery. Nongbri sums up the difficulties as follows:

[There are] several reasons why the exact details of a discovery of ancient books can be very difficult to reconstruct after the fact: Finds of books can be divided almost immediately upon discovery and dispersed among those present. Books can be further subdivided by intermediaries. News of a discovery can quickly attract antiquities dealers from out of town who can purchase and further scatter parts of a find while at the same time mixing the materials from the new discovery with their existing inventories. The fear of confiscation by the government can lead to the suppression of accurate information and the production of false stories.³

Enormous efforts have been made to retrace the steps of the Nag Hammadi texts' discovery and how they ended up on Cairo's black market for ancient artefacts in 1945. Ultimately, although the texts' likely discovery site has been narrowed down to the general area adjacent to the southern Egyptian town that has given the text collection its modern name, we will probably never be sure of the exact circumstances in which they were found or even if all of the books that were discovered have yet been accounted for (see Fig. 2.1). Many different stories have been told by the people

² Nongbri, *God's Library*, throughout.

³ Nongbri, *God's Library*, 90.

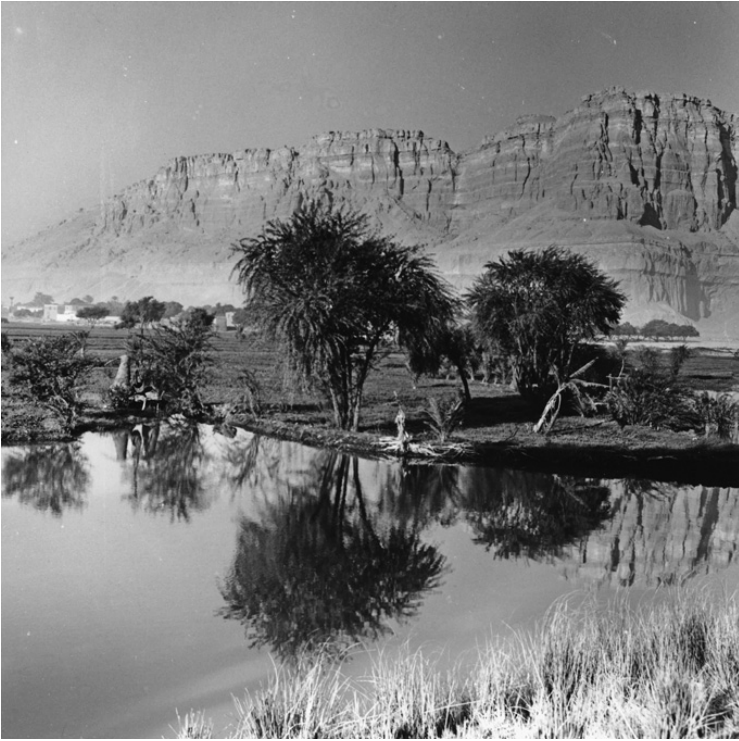


Figure 2.1 Scenic shot of desert lake oasis with Jabal al-Ṭarif cliff in background. Buildings can be seen against the backdrop of the mountains (description by Claremont Colleges Library). Photo by Douglas Kuylenstierna. Image courtesy of the Institute for Antiquity and Christianity Records, Special Collections, Claremont Colleges Library, Claremont, California.

supposedly involved in the discovery (see Fig. 2.2). Even the fellah at the centre of the story, Muhammad Ali al-Samman, has provided varying versions at different times: the codices were found when digging for *sabkha* (fertiliser), in a jar, next to a body, behind a rock, in a tomb, in a cave. Was Muhammad Ali al-Samman alone, or accompanied by fellow camel drivers? Exactly where was the discovery made? How many books were found and what happened to them after the discovery?

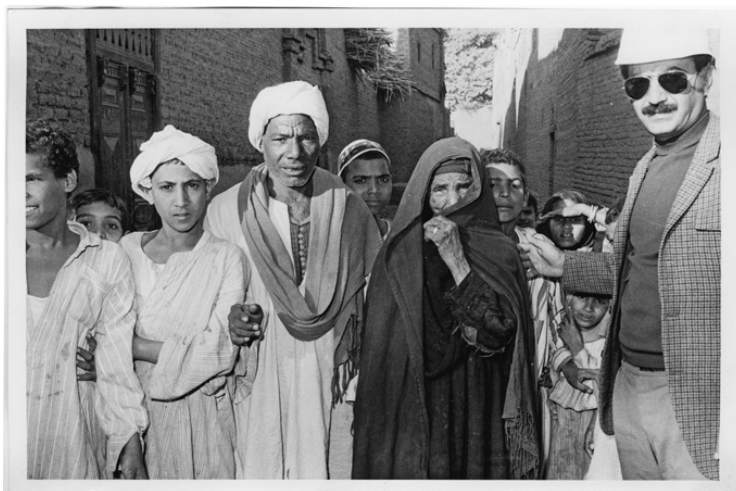


Figure 2.2 Muhammad Ali al-Samman and his mother. Unknown photographer. Image courtesy of Claremont Graduate University. Institute for Antiquity and Christianity, School of Religion.

The scholar first on scene to investigate the context of the finding was Jean Doresse, who travelled to Upper Egypt several times at the end of the 1940s and was told by his local guide that the texts were found hidden in a large earthenware jar by peasants digging for fertiliser. They were then sold to traders who took them onward to Cairo. Doresse had also been told that some of the texts, or parts of them, might have been destroyed by the peasants, who supposedly used them to kindle a fire. What is more, he learned that some of the protagonists had been involved in a revenge killing in close proximity to the time of the discovery.⁴ Years later, in the 1970s, James Robinson – director of the international translation team that subsequently presented the first modern editions of the texts – visited the site in order to find out more. He made repeated efforts

⁴ Jean Doresse, 'Sur les traces des papyrus gnostiques: Recherches à Chenoboskion', *Bulletin de l'Académie royale de Belgique, Classe des Lettres* 36:5 (1950): 432–439.

to locate the find site, interview witnesses and backtrack the codices' steps to the black market, retrieving many details which Doresse had omitted or failed to uncover.

Robinson's efforts were fruitful as he found the person who was said to have made the discovery, Muhammad Ali al-Samman. In one of the first versions of the find story he published, Robinson tells us that al-Samman discovered a large jar while out digging for fertiliser.⁵ Afraid that a jinni might be hiding inside it, he hesitated until, consumed by curiosity and the hope that it might contain gold, he finally broke it open, only to find old books. Disappointed, he took the books home and threw them in the courtyard, where his mother subsequently found them and used some of the papyrus to kindle a fire. He then forgot the books for a while because he was tangled up in a family feud, Robinson was told. Al-Samman's father had been murdered some time before and the alleged perpetrator, a man from a rival clan named Ahmed Isma'il, had disappeared, only to resurface around the time of the discovery. When al-Samman found out that his enemy was back, he took action and killed the man in revenge for his father's death and was placed in jail. Upon his release he returned home, found the books still in the courtyard where he had left them and subsequently sold them on.⁶

While some scholars have successfully deconstructed the reports conveyed by Muhammad Ali al-Samman, via Robinson, and included them in the scholarship about the text – strengthening parts of the story with new evidence while disregarding other less

⁵ This is a recapitulation of the events as described in perhaps the earliest of Robinson's depictions, found in James M. Robinson and Bastiaan van Elderen, 'The First Season of the Nag Hammadi Excavation: 27 November–19 December 1975', *Newsletter (American Research Center in Egypt)* 14 (1976): 19–21.

⁶ This version differs in some details from later versions. Mark Goodacre, 'How Reliable Is the Story of the Nag Hammadi Discovery?', *Journal for the Study of the New Testament* 35:4 (2013): 303–322.

credible aspects⁷ – others have questioned the credibility and thoroughness of Robinson's reports of his ventures in Egypt, arguing that the find story should be altogether disregarded as evidence for the background of the texts.⁸ It is true that Robinson's accounts of his many and long explorations in Egypt are not without fault. Details of the find story have varied over the years, without a clear statement of the reasons for the changes (even if they were justified).⁹ Moreover, some scholars have recently accused Robinson of Orientalism, viewing his version of the find story – one that gained wide notoriety through Elaine Pagels' popular book *The Gnostic Gospels*, where it was retold – as a disturbing Western narrative full of prejudice. Mark Goodacre has presented the following analysis:¹⁰

⁷ One excellent example of how scholars have been able corroborate aspects of the story by reference to archaeological evidence from the context is reflected in the work of James E. Goehring and Hugo Lundhaug. Initial tales of the discovery included reports of a bowl used to seal the jar in which the codices were found, now purportedly housed in the Schøyen collection (Oslo/London). This was in fact one way that earthen jars were sealed during late antiquity in the area in question, and bowls other than the one now housed in the Schøyen collection have been found in Pachomian monasteries. See James E. Goehring, 'An Early Roman Bowl from the Monastery of Pachomius at Pbow and the Milieu of the Nag Hammadi Codices', in *Coptica – Gnostica – Manichaica: Mélanges offerts à Wolf-Peter Funk*, ed. L. Painchaud and P.-H. Poirier (Québec: Les Presses de l'Université Laval, 2006), 357–371; Lundhaug, 'Dating and Contextualising the Nag Hammadi Codices and Their Texts'.

⁸ See Goodacre, 'How Reliable'; Nicola Denzey Lewis and Justine Ariel Blount, 'Rethinking the Origins of the Nag Hammadi Codices', *Journal of Biblical Literature* 133:2 (2014): 399–419.

⁹ In early versions of the find story, as told to Robinson and Doresse, the texts are found in a jar. In Pagels' retelling of Robinson's story, she gets the size of the jar wrong. This erroneous size of the jar is repeated by Pagels in interviews for TV shows about the texts, now even further from the size actually reported (Episode 1: 'Knowledge of the Heart', in *Gnostics*. By Border TV, for Channel 4 (UK), 1987). The fact that Pagels obscures (inadvertently, I am sure) information locals told Robinson and Doresse at the scene is used by Goodacre to exemplify the overall unreliability of the story ('How Reliable', 304–305). It is, I would argue, somewhat unfair to discredit the accuracy of a scholar's work because other scholars fail to retell it correctly.

¹⁰ Pagels, *The Gnostic Gospels*, xiii.

It is a fantastic story, irresistible for introducing these amazing and important discoveries. The bloodthirsty, illiterate peasants happen upon an amazing find while out looking for fertilizer. They worry about genies but lust for gold, they have no inkling of the magnitude of their find, and their mother is as stupid as she is callous, burning valuable documents and then encouraging her sons to use the very mattocks that had broken open the earthenware jar now to murder a man. The narrative scarcely hides its moral, that important artefacts like this need to be wrested from the hands of those who cannot hope to understand them, and placed in the hands of responsible, Western academics.¹¹

Goodacre is not alone in levelling criticism at Robinson. Nicola Denzey Lewis and Justine Ariel Blount also viewed Robinson's story as Orientalist, maintaining that the texts were not found near the slopes of Hamra Dun, outside the modern city of Nag Hammadi, as Robinson's initial reports conveyed. Instead, they suggest that the books were found in graves because they were actually 'books of the dead' meant to guide the soul of the deceased to heaven. This hypothesis has gained few supporters. The article in which this position is advanced takes its departure in debunking previous interpretations of the find story and harshly critiques Robinson's story and all those who have promoted it. We should be ashamed of ourselves, they write, even to consider that people could act in the manner Robinson suggests for Muhammad Ali al-Samman. They go on to add, 'The narrative is a fine one for classroom telling, but it works less and less effectively as we become more sensitised 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.'¹² Denzey Lewis, Blount and Goodacre argue that the description of Muhammad Ali al-Samman in Robinson's version of

¹¹ Goodacre, 'How Reliable', 304–305.

¹² Denzey Lewis and Blount, 'Rethinking the Origins', 418.

the find story mirrors how prototypical Oriental ‘Others’ are often portrayed by Occidental colonialists: murderous, superstitious and greedy. The story attached to the texts’ discovery only solidifies Western prejudices about the East as ignorant and immoral, unlike the civilised, rational and humane West.¹³

There are indeed aspects of Robinson’s reports of the events that one should be careful about accepting without qualification. Goodacre criticises Robinson for not employing the interview techniques that one would expect of an anthropologist and being less than transparent about the discrepancies in the find story he was told on different occasions. What is more, as mentioned above, he has presented different versions of the story without being clear which he favours and why. As Nongbri notes, the critique could have been avoided if Robinson had been more straightforward about his own doubts as, he too had reservations as to the validity of the find story, given the various versions he had been told.¹⁴ Nevertheless, it is my view that the accusations of Orientalism are ultimately unreasonable.¹⁵

I argue – and here I follow Nongbri and Burns¹⁶ – that Robinson was painstakingly meticulous and critical in tracing the books’ provenance. Muhammad Ali al-Samman was, for example, not able to identify the exact location where he found the texts, and changed his story at times about the details of the find, which is why

¹³ Goodacre, ‘How Reliable’; Denzey Lewis and Blount, ‘Rethinking the Origins’.

¹⁴ Brent Nongbri, ‘Finding Early Christian Books at Nag Hammadi and Beyond’, *Bulletin for the Study of Religion* 45 (2016): 13.

¹⁵ As Dylan M. Burns has also argued in ‘Telling Nag Hammadi’s Egyptian Stories’, *Bulletin for the Study of Religion* 45 (2016): 5–11.

¹⁶ Nongbri and Burns praise Robinson’s efforts, without which we would have known much less about the context of the discovery of the Nag Hammadi and other codices (like the Manichaean codices of Medinet Madi and the Bodmer papyri). Both view the find story for what it is: a serious and meticulous attempt to discover the origins of the texts, given the difficult circumstances associated with their find. As Nongbri has argued in *God’s Library*, a find story that is hard to confirm is to be expected given the circumstances that often surround ancient texts found in Egypt. Nongbri, ‘Finding Early Christian Books’; Burns, ‘Telling Nag Hammadi’s Egyptian Stories’.

Robinson conducted excavations at several sites. Despite these efforts, uncertainty about the precise location of the actual find site is not denied: ‘the excavation produced no archaeological confirmation of the precise site of the discovery’, Robinson states.¹⁷ In a monumental two-volume work, Robinson retraces the steps he took and those taken by his predecessors, an invaluable resource for those of us interested in the texts’ modern and ancient background.¹⁸ Robinson’s many years on the ground in Egypt should be applauded – few scholars of antiquity ever undertake such ventures – and I am unable to find any indications suggesting that he viewed and treated his Egyptian informants with anything but respect and recognition of their dignity. But intentions aside, is it still not Orientalism?

Goodacre’s and Denzey Lewis and Blount’s critiques of Robinson’s findings are attempts to apply to Nag Hammadi scholarship the many valuable lessons post-colonial theory has taught us about the violent and intrusive effect Western dominance has had on the lives of the Other. It is undeniable that the high price ancient texts command on the black market – the result of Western demand – has led to the unfortunate situation we see in Egypt and other places around the world, where looting of such artefacts is much too common. This leads to grey areas in the find stories (which also record a crime), as well as the mishandling and sometimes destruction of invaluable historical objects. It is indeed difficult to know whether one should criminalise the buying of ancient artefacts that are not from sanctioned digs, a course of action which poses the risk that those that have been dug up in suspicious circumstances and consequently remain unsold will be forever lost, deposited on the back shelf of some black market dealer’s shady inventory.

Pioneers in post-colonialism, like Edward Said, have contributed a great deal to our awareness of the way we reify the Other, and, like

¹⁷ Robinson and van Elderen, ‘The First Season’, 21.

¹⁸ James M. Robinson, *The Nag Hammadi Story: From the Discovery to the Publication*, 2 vols. (Leiden: Brill, 2014).

most dynamic fields of research, even post-colonial perspectives have improved of late. For example, as pointed out by Richard King, the importance of indigenous peoples' portrayal of themselves to others must be recognised when discussing views of the 'East' in the 'West'. Let us take the category 'Hinduism' as an example. Said argued that this was an empty category forced upon a multitude of Indian religions by lazy Western scholars and British administrators in their efforts to assert control over what they did not understand. The efforts made by Indians themselves in adopting and implementing the category are ignored, missing the fact that many Indians could appreciate the benefits of having an umbrella term for the diverse religious practices on the subcontinent, which ultimately aided in the unification of its people against British dominance. It is not necessarily an expression of oppression if a people adopts categories and terminology that have been invented by outsiders. In fact, that is the way new categories are often conceived. Indeed, this is how the term 'Christian' was first constructed, coined by outsiders and only later adopted by Jesus-followers themselves.¹⁹ As Jean-Paul Sartre famously argued: becoming aware of the gaze of others is the first step toward becoming aware of our own subjectivity.²⁰

By ignoring the agency of the Other (yet again!), we risk ending up with a one-sided view of history.²¹ I argue that some of this

¹⁹ In Acts 11:26 we encounter the first reference to the term Christian, used by *outsiders* to designate Jesus-followers, and only later being taken up by group members themselves.

²⁰ Jean-Paul Sartre, *Being and Nothingness: An Essay on Phenomenological Ontology* (London: Routledge, 2003 [1943]), Part 3, chapter 1. This is no novel idea; Plato had already argued in *Alcibiades* that one only becomes truly self-aware when the subject dies, when we realise that we are *both* subject and object. Descartes' realisation *cogito ergo sum*, could be said to be based on a similar fundamental principle.

²¹ The French philosopher Emmanuel Levinas argued that the ethical way to approach 'the Other' was by letting 'the Other' assert itself as exactly that, something else. Emmanuel Levinas, *Entre Nous: On Thinking-of-the-Other*, trans. Barbara Harshav and Michael B. Smith (New York: Columbia University Press, 2000 [1993]).

narrowness of vision is reflected in the critique Goodacre, Denzey Lewis and Blount have levelled at Robinson, as well as indirectly by those who have disseminated his version of the Nag Hammadi discovery uncritically (including myself!). The unreasonableness of their accusations becomes evident in light of a four-part drama documentary called *Gnostics*, aired in 1987 on Channel 4 (UK). The Border TV production, written by Tobias Churton,²² offers the viewer basic information on so-called Gnostic literature, and the Nag Hammadi discovery is one of the central plots in Episode 1: 'Knowledge of the Heart'. A number of prominent scholars appear in the film, including Hans Jonas, Gilles Quispel, Elaine Pagels and James Robinson, and the viewer is invited to follow Gilles Quispel on an expedition to the village in Egypt near where the discovery of the codices was said to have been made. Quispel meets and thanks Muhammad Ali al-Samman himself for his efforts in bringing the texts to the world's attention. What follows is a short interview with Muhammad Ali al-Samman where he gets to tell the story, again; it is a word-for-word account of al-Samman's appearance in the documentary, as translated by the interpreter employed by Border TV productions:²³

MUHAMMAD ALI AL-SAMMAN:

I was digging for sabkha, for fertiliser, with my pick axe, and carrying it back to the fields on the camel. Then I came across this big earthenware pot which was buried in the sand. I had a feeling that there might be something inside.

The interview breaks off and a conversation with Robinson is inserted to give additional information on Muhammad Ali al-Samman. Robinson says the following:

²² Churton is currently a scholar at Exeter University specialising in Freemasonry and other esoteric currents.

²³ You can hear Muhammad Ali al-Samman's own voice in the documentary.

A colleague of mine, an Egyptian native speaker, can confirm that the translation is accurate. My thanks to Sameh Egyptson for his assistance in interpreting Muhammad Ali al-Samman's version.

He is from the al-Samman clan, which dominates many of the villages in that part. He was – is a peasant, illiterate, a Muslim. Worked as a camel driver for a middle-class Copt. And in his generation it was typical, the Copts were the white collars and the Muslims were the physical laborers.

The film cuts into Muhammad Ali al-Samman again and the story continues:

I came back later the same day and I smashed the pot open. I broke it open exactly where I had found it. I thought there might be an evil spirit inside, a jinni. I had never seen anything like it before. I smashed the pot on my own and inside I found these books, then I brought the others over to see. They said: ‘We don’t want anything to do with these books, they belong to the Christians, the Copts.’ They said, ‘It’s nothing to do with us.’

Robinson is cut into the picture again and while the documentary films the courtyard and house of Muhammad Ali al-Samman, Robinson tells the story of how the books were brought back and some of them were burned. Again Muhammad Ali al-Samman is brought back to the scene and he is asked about this fact, and answers:

It was all just rubbish to us. Yes, my mother did burn some, in the bread oven.

After being presented with a publication containing his picture, Muhammad Ali al-Samman continues the story:

One of the people of the village of Hamre dun killed my father, so it was decided that I should kill his murderer, and revenge. I did kill him, and with my knife I cut out his heart and ate it. I was in jail because of the killing, and when I got out of jail I found that my mother had burned a lot of those old papers. Later on I sold one book, all the others had gone. I got eleven Egyptian pounds for it.

He is then asked by Quispel if he had any regrets about what happened when he found the books.

No, I don’t care. I don’t give a damn about them! It does not even enter my head to think about it.²⁴

Here Muhammad Ali al-Samman recounts a version of the find story that includes many of the details that Goodacre, Denzey Lewis

²⁴ Excerpts from 25:55– 29:50 in Episode 1, ‘Knowledge of the Heart’, in *Gnostics*. By Border TV for Channel 4 (UK), 1987.

and Blount have presented as unbelievable inventions and exaggerations by Orientalist Western scholars. The ambition to avoid colonial prejudices can only really be fulfilled if we contextualise the object of study, letting the Other appear on its own terms – by applying a Geertzian ‘thick description’²⁵ or through an alterity as suggested by Levinas²⁶ – rather than rejecting portrayals of foreign cultural practices as unbelievable or narrow-minded because they do not fit *our* view of moral or ‘rational’ behaviour.

Let us try to approach the find story from what we actually know of the cultural milieu with which we are dealing. Firstly, believing in jinn is – contrary to what Denzey Lewis and Blount seem to believe – widespread in rural Egypt and not a colonialist invention. Secondly, retaliating for perceived wrongdoings aimed at your family/clan is also quite understandable, a righteous act in shame–honour societies such as those in rural Egypt.²⁷ Nonetheless, there are aspects here that problematise the story of murder, but not for Orientalist reasons. There are no records of Muhammad Ali al-Samman’s having been officially accused of murder or convicted of the crime. If he committed the murder, as he claims, in the eyes of the law he would have been sentenced to a minimum of twenty-five years in prison, and not released shortly after the event, as he also claims. But this does not mean it did not take place. Assuming Muhammad Ali al-Samman’s clan and that of the murdered man followed the social patterns portrayed in anthropological studies of the area, there are scenarios which would have let al-Samman evade the

²⁵ Clifford Geertz, *The Religion of Java* (Chicago: Glencoe Free Press, 1960).

²⁶ Levinas argued for a new ethics which took its departure from viewing the Other as a teacher and our greatest resource for self-development. The Other should be allowed to appear on their own terms, not forced into a discourse with meanings alien to them. Levinas, *Entre Nous*, passim.

²⁷ Winifred S. Blackman, *The Fellahin of Upper Egypt* (Cairo: American University in Cairo Press, 2000 [1927]), 183–200, 129–134; Hamed Ammar, *Growing Up in an Egyptian Village* (London: Routledge, 2002 [1954]), 67–86.

authorities.²⁸ If the two families resolved the issue among themselves through the law of custom (*'urf*), the authorities could have been left out of the arrangement. If possible, dealing with the authorities is generally avoided for a multitude of reasons, including corruption, draconian police treatment, the uncertainty of outcome and the time-consuming nature of the bureaucracy.²⁹ If a death or killing takes place, one can seek to resolve the issue by asking the victim's family for forgiveness or requesting the aid of a so-called reconciliation assembly. These complicated processes involve a number of mediators and arbitrators. However, if a solution had been reached through a reconciliation assembly, one would not expect the party asking for forgiveness to act as Muhammad Ali al-Samman does in the interview, proudly and without remorse – even describing the act itself (and possibly grossly exaggerating it). He would have been expected to show remorse or at least humility. Furthermore, if the conflict had been resolved, Muhammad Ali al-Samman would probably have avoided dwelling on something that would risk reawakening a reconciled conflict and would not, in detail and with exaggerated wording, have described the act which had been resolved/forgiven. With these factors in mind, one can surmise that the conflict between Muhammad Ali al-Samman and the rival family was ongoing when Guilles Quispel met Muhammad Ali al-Samman in 1986. And if this were the case, Muhammad Ali al-Samman would have felt honour bound to cause harm to the other family and its reputation at any given opportunity. Thus, we should treat any information he provides about the incident with marked scepticism. Nevertheless, it is not *Orientalism* to take him at his word, as killings

²⁸ Ammar, *Growing Up in an Egyptian Village*, 42–67; Blackman, *The Fellahin of Upper Egypt*, 129–134.

²⁹ Sarah Ben Nefissa, 'The "Haqq el-Arab": Conflict Resolution and Distinctive Features of Legal Pluralism in Contemporary Egypt', in *Legal Pluralism in the Arab World*, ed. B. Dupret, M. Berger and L. al-Zwaini (The Hague: Kluwer Law International, 1999), 145–158; Barbara Driessens, 'A Cairene Way of Reconciling', *Islamic Law and Society* 13:1 (2006): 99–122; H. C. K. Nielsen, 'Négotiation et écriture: A propos du droit coutumier en Haute-Egypte', *Egypte/Monde arabe* 34 (1998): 155–165.

of the nature he describes (although the gruesome detail could well have been added to enhance his machismo) are anything but uncommon in family feuds.

Gnosticism and the Mystic East

While I am of the opinion that Goodacre's and Denzey Lewis and Blount's critique of Robinson's find story goes too far, there are some scholars who have gone even further. Maia Kotrosits, for example, writes that the find story connected to the Nag Hammadi texts 'represents and perpetuates the Orientalist epistemological tropes that have since been fixed onto the individual texts themselves'.³⁰ This is a bold statement and, if applied too generally, it is also problematic. Unfortunately, Kotrosits does not provide detailed discussion of the erroneous interpretations of the individual Nag Hammadi texts which she claims would be the result of Orientalism. And in my opinion there is little that supports the view that the find story has much to do with subjection of the texts themselves to Orientalising interpretations.³¹ We cannot ignore decades of studies of the mechanisms behind constructions of orthodoxy vis-à-vis heterodoxy, nor what we know about the heresiological genre.³² The early Christian authors who disqualified the forms of

³⁰ Maia Kotrosits, 'Romance and Danger at Nag Hammadi', *The Bible and Critical Theory* 8:1 (2012): 39.

³¹ Kotrosits' argument is that the Nag Hammadi collection has been the 'romantic and dangerous "East" to the Bible's domesticated and rational "West"' ('Romance and Danger', 39). In my opinion, there is not much that indicates that contemporary scholars of early Christian history have juxtaposed the texts of the Canon, the Gospel of Mark for example, with one of the Nag Hammadi texts on the basis that the former is a representation of 'Western' rationality while the latter, due to its association with the Nag Hammadi find story, is 'Eastern' (i.e. less 'true' or 'pure').

³² Burns has critiqued Kotrosits' arguments in 'Telling Nag Hammadi's Egyptian Stories', 9–11.

Christianity represented in the Nag Hammadi texts – judgements which influenced modern perceptions of the Christian/Gnostic dichotomy that have informed theologians since the end of the seventeenth century – did not do so on Orientalist grounds. Anachronisms of this kind would be an unfortunate result of post-colonial theory being applied inaccurately.

Although we should avoid generalising about the mechanisms of Orientalism, Kotrosits has a point, nevertheless. There have indeed been aspects of romanticisation that have impacted on the Nag Hammadi texts, but I argue that this has to do with the texts being attached to the notion of Gnosticism, rather than the story of the texts' discovery. As Dylan Burns has argued, the Nag Hammadi texts have been interpreted as containing 'Eastern' wisdom, more similar to Buddhism or Hindu philosophy than contemporary Christianity.³³ From this perspective, then, interpretations of the texts have been coloured by Orientalist preconceptions. Burns also calls attention to the fact that one can find what he calls 'auto-Orientalising' tendencies in the texts themselves; that is, they appropriate images of Egypt or other Eastern contexts or traditions as places of spiritual knowledge that is of greater purity than the much younger Hellenic wisdom (*Zostrianos* being just one example of a text that legitimises its content by attaching it to the ancient Persian sage Zoroaster).

I would argue that the form of Eastern religion that the Nag Hammadi texts have been thought to represent, since they are understood to be representing 'Gnosticism', is not Eastern religion per se but, rather, contemporary views of Eastern religion invented to fit a Western context. Take Buddhism, for example. When exported to the West, Buddhism was packaged for

³³ For example, see Robert L. Segal (ed.), *The Allure of Gnosticism: The Gnostic Experience in Jungian Philosophy and Contemporary Culture* (London: Open Court, 1999). This volume contains several pieces attaching Gnosticism (and Nag Hammadi texts) to the mystical and 'Eastern'.

a Western audience in the religious language of Christianity.³⁴ Furthermore, it was not just any Buddhism that was exported, it was an intellectual, elite version, one that put more emphasis on introspection, text reading and meditation than practice, belief in spirits and 'unreflective' ritual activity. If the Nag Hammadi texts have been exposed to Orientalist preconceptions that determine how they are read, it is in a form that I would call 'backdoor Orientalism'. Gnosticism and the Nag Hammadi texts have not been likened to Eastern religions so much as Westernised versions of Eastern religions, and they have not been represented as containing hidden wisdom because they were found in the East (Egypt), but because they have been associated with heresy, subversion and counter-culture. Ironically, the 'backdoor Orientalism' to which the Nag Hammadi collection has been subjected is attached to the very same mechanisms that produced critical theories such as post-colonialism. The discovery of the Nag Hammadi codices coincided with a religious awakening in the West, particularly in America, with Indian gurus touring the West and famous popstars and intellectuals visiting the East. In popular culture, the East was associated with an ancient form of wisdom that represented all the ideals that the beatnik generation and the subsequent Flower Power era stood for: free love, pacifism, spirituality, contemplation, introspection and the attainment of higher truths and knowledge, as well as gender equality.³⁵

Thus, the Orientalism that has coloured modern conceptions of the Nag Hammadi texts has not much to do with the find story, as Kotrosits, Goodacre, Denzey Lewis and Blount would have it. There is something much more complex going on, which has to do with the texts' association with heresy and counter-culture. Owing to their often-misdirected association with the esoteric and subversive,

³⁴ David L. McMahan, *The Making of Buddhist Modernism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008).

³⁵ Paul Oliver, *Hinduism and the 1960s: The Rise of a Counter-Culture* (London and New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2014).

the texts have been interpreted in erroneous ways. The New Age generations were the intellectual heirs of the occult milieu and social movements taking form in Europe from the nineteenth century, while reception of the Askew codex in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries exemplifies mechanisms similar to the biases applied to the Nag Hammadi texts. The Askew codex was received as the Gnostic Bible and – although it did not fit squarely with how the Church Fathers had described the ‘Gnostic’ – it was made to represent the anti-establishment ideas popular at the time of its discovery.³⁶

There are, of course, points where Orientalist preconceptions intersect with counter-cultural ones; the fact that the East was considered mystical and dangerous is surely one of the reasons many famous occultists were drawn to China, India and the Middle East.³⁷ While modern interpretations of the texts are of less importance in this study than the Nag Hammadi codices’ antique context – and what we can learn of it by engaging with the codices’ material features – the post-colonial perspectives Burns regards as ‘auto-Orientalisation’ tendencies cannot be neglected in this regard.

Conclusion

The rest of this book is devoted to the material aspects of the Nag Hammadi texts. In light of this and the previous chapter, the methodological and theoretical perspectives that inform the study as a whole should, hopefully, have become more transparent. As we have seen, in their efforts to approach the Nag Hammadi texts without the preconceived notions attached to Western prejudices against the Eastern Other, some scholars have gone too far and

³⁶ Linjamaa, ‘The Reception of *Pistis Sophia*’.

³⁷ Nilsson, ‘As a Fire beneath the Ashes’.

rejected the find story altogether and, thus, been able to present alternative interpretations of the texts' ancient uses. The texts have certainly been romanticised and – by way of the concept Gnosticism – been attached to preconceived notions regarding the existence of a spiritual knowledge that has been passed down in an unbroken chain since antiquity. As such, the texts are still subjected to Orientalising interpretations, being portrayed by some as speculative and less genuine than 'pure Christianity' or 'pure philosophy', while others elevate them on the basis that they contain pure and unmitigated spiritual truths with which people of the West have lost touch. Thus, the reception of the Nag Hammadi texts follows well-known patterns familiar from the ways that Eastern religions have been received in the West since the nineteenth century.