

Conclusion: The Nag Hammadi Codices from a 'Textual Community' Perspective

It is now time to put the different material aspects of the Nag Hammadi texts into a wider context and draw broader conclusions from the explorations above. How are we to understand the many different applications which the material aspects of the texts reflect? To address this question, this concluding chapter gathers the findings of the previous chapters to present a thicker description of a possible social context for daily practices involving the Nag Hammadi texts. In line with anthropological theories about the importance of pedagogy and ritual for identity formation, it will be argued that the texts could have served several roles within a 'community of practice'.

Previous studies have often focused on the individual histories and hypothetical origins of the many different texts before they were translated, copied and placed in a codex in the collection. Since they differ from one another in form, content and origin, many scholars have found it difficult to imagine that they could have been read for spiritual edification within a single community, particularly an orthodox one. But what if we envisage the Nag Hammadi texts within a framework of a community of practice wherein a large number of people depend on each other and work towards common spiritual trajectories, a group with different roles but common goals? One perspective which could cast light on the function of such a disparate collection as this comes from viewing texts as a vital element of 'textual communities'.¹ Texts were,

¹ Brian Stock, *Listening for the Text: On the Uses of the Past* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1990); Jane Heath, 'Textual Communities: Brian Stock's Concept and

without question, at the heart of early Christian communities; leaders administered the education, interpretations and social regulation of a community by referencing texts. They were not just carriers of information and knowledge, but social tools in the work of authority, identity-making and socialisation. But what was the role of texts that did not become Scripture, or those that some within the community viewed as containing potentially heretical or damaging content? It is this question which the following summary of the previous chapters addresses.

In Chapter 1, I discussed various obstructive paradigms and ideological set-ups that have threatened to obscure study of the Nag Hammadi texts. As many previous scholars have made clear, the term ‘Gnosticism’ and its attachment to the collection has had a detrimental impact on their study and views of their application and origin. Association with the term has led to pejorative and misleading conclusions, as they have been approached as strange and speculative, representing something other than Christianity. However, on the basis of actual content, it must be concluded that the Nag Hammadi collection comprises mostly Christian texts, while those that are non-Christian were considered relevant by the Christian owners.

Chapter 2 discussed how reception of the collection has been affected by Western prejudices of the Eastern ‘Other’. The texts have been romanticised and – again, by way of the concept ‘Gnosticism’ – attached to preconceived notions regarding the existence of an a priori ancient wisdom narrative. As such, the texts have been subjected to Orientalising interpretations, being portrayed as speculative and contaminated (compared to ‘pure Christianity’ or ‘pure philosophy’). At the other extreme – and equally influenced by Orientalising tendencies – the texts have been celebrated by scholars and contemporary spiritual seekers as

Recent Scholarship on Antiquity’, in *Scriptural Interpretation and the Interface between Education and Religion*, ed. F. Wilk (Leiden: Brill, 2018), 5–35.

containing pure and unmitigated spiritual truths with which the 'West' has lost touch. Thus, the reception of the Nag Hammadi texts follows well-known patterns of responses to 'Eastern' religions in the 'West' since the nineteenth century. However, some attempts to approach the texts without preconceived notions regarding the nature of the 'Eastern Other' have spilled over into assessment of the find story attached to the discovery of the texts, which has come under unwarranted critique of late. Some scholars have gone so far as to reject aspects of the find story as Orientalising fiction, including those that tie the texts to the vicinity of early monasticism, which are being questioned on weak grounds and disregarded as a result of overzealous employment of postcolonial theory.

The existence of extracanonical material in a text collection – some of which could have been banned as heretical – does not mean that it could not have been used by people considering themselves representatives of mainstream Christianity. Even though the association with Gnosticism has influenced the portrayal of the history of these texts in erroneous ways, the texts' relation to heresy cannot simply be ignored. Chapters 3 to 7 revealed that those material aspects that were explored all support the hypothesis that the texts were part of a monastic context, most likely a Pachomian one. A study of the texts' history should be informed by negotiations over orthodoxy and the dynamics of Christian identity construction. Throughout history Christians have considered it important to take action against texts considered to contain erroneous views. The need to reject an opponent's thought is especially acute if the views of intra-Christian opponents are similar enough for an outsider to confuse their positions and texts with one's own;² texts play important roles in negotiating and strengthening group identity. However, we should not be surprised that it is in the monastic context – one that contributes key factors to creating a strong sense of group identity – that texts could be read which were written

² Linjamaa, 'Gnosticism as Inherently Syncretistic?'

by *others*, without risking the authenticity of the reader's group identity. At the same time, the Nag Hammadi texts would most likely not have been mandatory reading for their monastic owners, and probably not even part of most Pachomian monks' reading lists. Reading and studying them, therefore, would have gone some way towards strengthening the feeling of one's individuality within a context where so many aspects of what creates individuality were regulated by the monastic rules.

Yet books and texts also played important roles in the broader context in terms of the changes that took place in the religious landscape of late antiquity, partly reflected in the way books were used for new purposes. As Chapter 1 made clear, taking a broader perspective on early Christian scribal and reading practices indicates that the Nag Hammadi collection must have been produced by and for the direct use of a small educated societal minority, people who were not only literate but also educated and involved in detailed theological deliberations restricted to an intellectual elite. Chapter 3 narrowed this broader reflection by pointing out several untoward features in Nag Hammadi Codex I which indicated that it was produced with elements of impulsiveness and carelessness and which rules out its being a commercial product; it was, rather, copied by and for the direct use of the reader him/herself. The scribal context which makes most sense is that of a monastic one in which a monk without much scribal experience, or one who did not prioritise the assembly of a carefully copied codex, produced the codex while at the same time interacting with what was being copied. These findings support the arguments made by Lundhaug and Jenott³ that the most viable context which fits these external material features is that of a monastery consisting of readers with eclectic and diverse interests.

In Chapter 4, some of the aspects of the texts that the scribes of Codex I and Codex VIII found of particular interest were elucidated

³ Lundhaug and Jenott, *Monastic Origins*.

through an analysis of the scribal markings made in the margin of the texts as they were copied. The short sentences marked out with *diple* and *coronis* signs in the two codices do not deal with one and the same topic, nor should we expect that; but they all deal with topics that a Christian participant in the burgeoning Egyptian monasticism of the time would have found of interest. A Pachomian context is a particularly good fit, as indicated by comparing the topics prominent among Pachomian monks in *The Letter of Ammon*, which contains the themes that are highlighted in the two Nag Hammadi codices with markings in the margins. The marked-out passages deal with the nature of the godhead, the salvific nature of self-knowledge, the differences existing among the peoples on earth, calls to spread the word of God without fear in the world and, lastly, the role some take on by *imitatio Christi*: suffering in an ephemeral body for the sake of teachings about eternal truths.

In Chapter 5, the Pachomian connection was strengthened through an overview of the magical vowel features of the Nag Hammadi texts. Examining the vowel constellations from a material and visual perspective would indicate that they were chiefly used for reference by those who produced and owned them, as they are not highlighted in a manner facilitating access or legibility in a ritual context (as in PGM), which would have suggested that the monks used them as ritual manuals. Pachomius sought to transcend the 'shadow of the exterior world' and used magical letters both in his private spiritual explorations and in the way in which he organised his monasteries. Thus, monks belonging to the monasteries founded in the tradition of Pachomius would undoubtedly have found text carrying vowel magical features of great interest.

Exploration of how the Nag Hammadi texts were used concretely by their monastic owners is continued in Chapter 6 by examining the occurrence of sacred symbols in them. The structured way the *nomina sacra* were employed in the Nag Hammadi library indicates

that the monks behind the texts were part of the same scribal network; thus, the texts were not produced in separate scribal contexts, only to be brought together at a later time. Even if the codices were not copied in the same monastery, their scribes were most likely in close contact with each other. This is indicated by the fact that the scribes/translators follow similar scribal practices in their use of *nomina sacra*, refraining from abbreviating specific words like God which are usually shortened in Coptic translations from other scribal contexts.

Some of the monks who copied the texts, most notably Scribe A from Codex I, placed considerable stock in the power of the sign of the cross. Coupled with the preoccupation with spiritual combat that is reflected throughout the texts, the sign of the cross makes a strong argument for the claim that these texts were used by monks as protective artefacts. The cross provided the monks with protection, a sense of firmness in the chaotic company of demons whose presence was amplified in the cold and empty desert.

In the last analytic chapter, Chapter 7, a final practical implementation of these eclectic texts was explored from the perspective of monastic pedagogic practices, a setting in which we know texts played key roles. This was done by analysing the appearance of duplicates and triplicates in the collection. There were several pedagogical purposes for producing and keeping duplicates in a monastic library, the most obvious benefit being that they can be read by more than one person at a time. Considering the size of Pachomian monasteries – especially the concentration of them around the area of the find site, each housing several hundred monks at a time – and considering that reading was obligatory for Pachomian monks, it is not unreasonable to imagine that more than one copy of a text was produced to meet a growing demand for a particularly popular work. Most of the texts kept in several copies by these monks were clearly in demand during the fourth century; all of them (except *The Gospel of Truth*) have also been discovered elsewhere, in other Coptic or Greek manuscripts. Given that monks

in all likelihood spoke to each other about what they read (at least to those belonging to the same Pachomian letter group), interest would have spread, leading to copies, redactions and new editions with additions and modifications. In short, it would have been handy to keep more than one copy, especially of particularly popular texts.

The appearance of multiple versions in the collection has been used as the basis for arguing that the texts were not produced in the same context. However, as we saw in Chapter 7, there were a multitude of benefits in keeping copies that went beyond merely allowing more than one person to read a particular text at a time, benefits having to do with the pedagogical ideals and practices attached to the textual culture of Pachomian monasticism. We have seen that the texts would have been suitable for comparison, for copying and translation practice, and for studying maxims and gnomic sentences; redactions were probably the response to the challenges of new theological trends.

As discussed in the introduction, the arguments claiming a Pachomian provenance for the Nag Hammadi texts have been put forward most recently and convincingly by Lundhaug and Jenott, and Bull.⁴ Lundhaug and Jenott also argued convincingly that it may be possible to prove that Pachomian monasteries contained a much richer textual array than merely Scripture, most notably apocryphal writings, a category in which the Nag Hammadi texts would most likely have been included. The present study supports their conclusions and has aimed at concretising their findings and offering suggestions as to *how* the texts would have been used. Life in a Pachomian monastery was strictly regulated. Rules meant to help the monks stay on the right path were implemented, and texts played a central part in the carefully structured life. Scripture was to be studied, memorised and

⁴ Lundhaug and Jenott, *Monastic Origins*, 234–262; Bull, ‘The Panopolis Connection’; Lundhaug, ‘Material Philology and the Nag Hammadi Codices’.

contemplated daily. Some monks were tasked with caring for the texts and producing new ones – that is, copying, translating and editing them – but all were called on to study and reflect, even those who did not read well enough to take on advanced tractates and navigate between complex philosophical and theological arguments. Everyone could memorise some passages and reflect on them. But those more intellectually inclined spent more time exploring spiritual pursuits by way of reading texts. It is in this context that the Nag Hammadi collection becomes relevant as theological material meant to be studied, to inspire and to help the monks develop their spiritual acumen. According to the rules of Pachomius himself, ‘the perfect’, spiritually developed monks, were allowed to study broadly and widely, which in all likelihood would have meant perusing texts such as those of the collection. One monk should not deny another who sought to develop himself spiritually through reading and study. This probably did not mean that there were no regulations. Spiritual guides could help guide less experienced readers. Some texts would have been emended and redacted, and new texts were produced – inspired by previous popular narratives – to meet the needs of new situations, such as changes in theological inclination or demographical transformations within the monasteries. Furthermore, texts were carried as protective artefacts in spiritual warfare against demons, and studied for esoteric and mystical content dealing with the hidden meaning behind sacred words, names and letter combinations. As such, the texts resonated with the hidden structures underlying and surpassing the material realm, a world that the monastic context regularly studied, interpreted and transcended.

In light of the findings of this study, it is not unrealistic to suggest that the Nag Hammadi texts were a very particular part of a much broader library, a section of texts reserved for the spiritual elite. As has been argued by Lundhaug, it is not at all unlikely that the Nag Hammadi codices and the Dishna Papers belonged to the same

group of Pachomian monks.⁵ As such, the Nag Hammadi texts would also have been accessible to only the spiritually mature. The broader part of the library, containing biblical texts, the writings of church and monastic fathers, and classical texts – all of which are found in the Dishna Papers – would have been accessed by a broader array of monks, while the Nag Hammadi texts, which, to a large extent, present a more uniform selection of topics – such as dealing with ‘demiurgical’ matters and the struggle against demons and hazardous spiritual ventures – were meant for those whose spiritual status had reached a maturity that could handle more perilous subjects. That the texts were read and produced by a smaller group within a much larger collective could explain the fact that the Nag Hammadi codices are much more uniform in terms of language, dialect and topic than the Dishna Papers.

This study has explored material aspects of a collection of heterodox texts within a Christian context often associated with orthodoxy. It has provided new contextualisation for the activities of Pachomian monks, as well as new perspectives on how texts with long histories retained their significance in new contexts. As such, this brief look into a ‘material history of heresy’ has demonstrated some ways in which popular texts and narratives could endure in new environments. The Nag Hammadi collection contains a variety of texts from different religious and historical backgrounds that were retained, brought together and reused for the purpose of developing the spiritual acumen of one and the same group of people. The texts’ content must have resonated better with the creative and intellectual approach that certainly characterised the

⁵ Lundhaug, ‘The Dishna Papers and the Nag Hammadi Codices’. Some scribal practices studies also support, for example, the specific usage of *nomina sacra*. As we saw concerning the Nag Hammadi codices, the Coptic word for ‘God’ or ‘Lord’ $\text{zoe}\epsilon\text{c}$ does not seem to be abbreviated as might be expected; see, for example, the Coptic version of Exodus preserved in the Dishna Papers (Codex XII, 11–15). Systematic comparisons still need to be made in order to draw any further conclusions about the relation between the scribal signs used in the Nag Hammadi texts and Dishna Papers.

Pachomian monasteries, as the approach outweighed the restrictions that other Christian communities might have placed on reading and using texts of this kind: communities which did not provide their members with a firm enough sense of communal identity to allow them to explore texts that might threaten the coherence of the group or the legitimacy of its leaders.