

Hugo Lundhaug and Lance Jenott, *The Monastic Origins of the Nag Hammadi Codices*, Studien und Texte zu Antike und Christentum, 97 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2015). Hardcover. XVIII + 332 pp. ISBN-13 978-3-16-154172-8. € 89.

The Monastic Origins of the Nag Hammadi Codices holds no surprises for readers, since the title maintains its promises to the full. From the first lines of the volume what the two authors intend to demonstrate is crystal clear:¹ the Nag Hammadi codices have been produced and have circulated not in an urban or private library belonging to an erudite person or coterie, but in a monastic context. Moreover, the admirable systematic structure of the ten chapters comprising the volume, each ending with a sort of summary that functions as a ‘temporary conclusion’, accompanies the reader step by step to the subsequent phase, which argues that the most probable monastic milieu to be associated with the Nag Hammadi library is the Pachomian one, a theory that, as is well known, is not new, but that is here systematically corroborated by a careful re-examination of the available data.

The architecture of the volume is based on two axioms. On the one hand, there is the need to demolish the ‘misleading caricature of the Nag Hammadi Codices as a kind of ‘Gnostic Bible’ standing in opposition to the Christian Bible’ (p. 84), while on the other there is the aim of demonstrating that the contents of the Nag Hammadi Texts are compatible with early Egyptian monasticism.

The first chapter (‘The Secret Books of the Egyptian Gnostics?’) is dedicated to a general overview of the matter, including the problem of the dating of the codices and the place of their discovery. The different theories concerning the possible owners of the famous papyrus codices are analyzed briefly (but they are dealt with again in the following chapters), specifying that they can be summarized as follows: the library belonged either to 1) a Gnostic community (Jean Doresse, Alastair Logan, among others), or 2) to a wealthy individual (Alexandr Khosroyev, Martin Krause, Armand Veilleux, Nicola Denzey Lewis and Justine Ariel Blunt) or lastly 3) to Christian monks,

1 ‘The purpose of the present study is to critically examine the arguments against the theory of the Nag Hammadi Codices’ monastic origins, as set forth by Khosroyev and others, and to demonstrate by a thorough examination of all the available evidence, the plausibility that they were produced and read by Egyptian monks’ (p. 4); ‘[...] the monks who owned the Nag Hammadi Codices need not to be regarded as Gnostics’ (p. 7); ‘We intend to demonstrate that a monastic setting provides the most compelling explanation of the available evidence, including the location of their discovery, the scrap papyri used to stiffen their leather covers, and the terminology used by the scribes in the colophons’ (p. 8).

whether Pachomian or not (Torgny Säve-Söderbergh, Frederik Wisse). It is immediately clarified that the category of Gnosticism will be abandoned by the authors in favour of a more nuanced reading of the real data.

The description of what we know about the discovery is very accurate, although in my opinion it remains rather implausible that *sebakhin* could have found the jars containing the codices in a tomb cut into the cliff rock, where certainly there was no *sebakh*.² The story of the finding remains unconvincing, but of course these mysterious aspects of the discovery do not depend on the authors of the volume. However, it cannot be ignored that this uncertainty in identifying the place of discovery makes it more difficult to evaluate the context of production and circulation of the codices.

The second chapter ('Monastic Diversity in Upper Egypt') surveys the different forms of monasticism of fourth to fifth century Egypt and in particular those documented, literally and archaeologically, in the Thebaid and above all in the so-called Dishna plain. The results of the excavations carried out by James Robinson in the Gebel el-Tarif, in the supposed area of the discovery, are also taken into account.

In the third chapter ('Gnostics?') the authors discuss and criticize in greater detail the conceptual and religious categories of 'Gnosticism' and 'Gnostics', demonstrating how everything seems to suggest that there were no Gnostic groups at all in the fourth to fifth centuries, since such a cult movement is never referred to by any of the main authors (Athanasius, Theophilus, Discorus, Shenoute) who polemicized with heterodox groups.

In the fourth chapter ('Contrasting Mentalities?') the attention shifts to monasticism in an attempt to prove that the 'syncretistic mentality' (Doresse) and the 'semi-philosophical character' (Khosroyev) of the Nag Hammadi texts do not necessarily lead to a urban intellectual middle-class owner, but rather may be referred to early, though not necessarily Pachomian, monasticism whose orthodox character in the fourth to fifth centuries was still in formation and where therefore, for different reasons (donated books, themes compatible with orthodox *forma mentis*, works collected in order to criticize them, etc.), there might have been space for readings of this kind.

The documents used as cartonnage for the bindings is the theme of the fifth chapter ('The Cartonnage'). A detailed survey is made of the different texts found in this re-used material (commercial documents, official accounts,

2 I think that, if the theory of the Nag Hammadi codices as *Books of the Dead* proposed by Nicola Denzey Lewis and Justin Ariel Blount is not acceptable, they are perfectly right to be suspicious with some elements of the narrative concerning the place and the modalities of the discovery. N. Denzey Lewis and J.A. Blount, 'Rethinking the Origins of the Nag Hammadi Codices', *Journal of Biblical Literature*, 133/2 (2014), 399–419.

possible imperial ordinances, private letters, and a fragment of Genesis). Much attention is dedicated, as is obvious, to the figures of Pachome and Pappoute mentioned in the cartonnage of the cover of NH VII, which the authors are inclined to identify with the famous abbot and his *oikonomos*. Lundhaug and Jenott are of course aware that if the cartonnage material comes from a (Pachomian) monastic milieu this does not necessarily mean that the codices too belonged to the same environment. Despite this awareness, they are inclined to connect the codices to the Pachomian environment, discarding the possibility that the cartonnage may come from the waste paper market, as for instance Ewa Wipszycka had reasonably suggested.³ Concerning the dimensions of the covers, interesting observations are made that perfectly correspond to those of the codices, suggesting that they were created for the Nag Hammadi codices and were not reused, a fact that would contribute to disqualifying the hypothesis that monks may have produced the covers—as the materials contained in the cartonnage may suggest—while the codices were created by somebody else.

The sixth chapter ('Apocryphal Books in Egyptian Monasteries') focuses on the profile of the fourth and fifth-century monks, about whose readings we do not know much. We have no idea of what kind of books were preserved in early monastic libraries, and therefore it is impossible to exclude the possibility that texts like those preserved in the Nag Hammadi codices were not read by coenobitic monks. The discovery of apocryphal texts in the libraries of mediaeval monasteries—albeit not exactly comparable to those of Nag Hammadi—demonstrates the long-lasting success of this kind of literature. Monks 'continued to read and copy such books long after Athanasius established his biblical canon' (p. 177).

The seventh chapter ('The Colophons') deals with the well-known scribal notes—a more appropriate definition than *colophons* in the case of the Nag Hammadi codices—that appear in NH II, NH III, NH VI, and NH VII. If the final note of the *Three Steles of Seth* in NH VII mentions a 'fatherhood' that may refer to a monastic milieu, the authors suggest that the strange additional note of NH VI⁴ is further proof of a context of literary exchange again compatible with early monastic environments.

3 E. Wipszycka, 'The Nag Hammadi Library and the Monks: A Papyrologist's Point of View', *Journal of Juristic Papyrology*, 30 (2000), 188–189.

4 'I have copied this one text of his. Indeed, very many of his (texts) have come to me. I have not copied them, thinking that they may (already) have come to you. For truly I hesitate to copy these ones since they may (already) have come to you, and the matter burden you. For the texts of that one which have come to me are numerous' (p. 197).

Chapter eight ('The Codices') provides a detailed codicological analysis of the Nag Hammadi manuscripts and of the sub-groups in which James Robinson has already divided them, leading to the conclusion that although they 'can be analyzed into sub-groups, the similarities among them are arguably more pronounced than the differences when compared to other codices' (p. 210). A section of the chapter is also dedicated to a very detailed and well-documented comparison between the Nag Hammadi Codices and a group of early biblical manuscripts (Codex Glazier, Codex Scheide, BL Or. 7594), in order to demonstrate that 'biblical manuscripts contemporary with the Nag Hammadi Codices do not necessarily display greater care in their manufacture, or greater dialectal 'purity'' (p. 223). The analysis of the so-called Dishna Papers and the association of them with the Nag Hammadi codices is, as we shall see, less convincing.

The ninth chapter ('The Monks') surveys the typologies of early monasticism and of those groups destined to be considered heretical, such as the Melitians and the Origenists. The authors maintain that some of the Nag Hammadi texts could have found reception among this last group, whose exponents, however, in the fourth and fifth centuries could be 'found in various quarters of Christian Egypt, including the Pachomian monastic federation' (p. 246).

The last chapter ('The Secret Books of the Egyptian Monastics') claims that until now the two main obstacles in associating the Nag Hammadi texts with early Egyptian monasticism were the *topos* of the illiterate monk, who would not have been able to understand such complex philosophical constructions, and at the same time the classification of the Nag Hammadi texts as gnostic and therefore 'somehow alien to 'authentic' Christianity' (p. 264).

Although the authors repeatedly affirm that the 'monastic hypothesis for the provenance of the Nag Hammadi Codices is not synonymous with the Pachomian hypothesis' (p. 55), it is clear that this is precisely what they think. At this point, it is opportune to clarify that I consider the monastic origin of the Nag Hammadi codices certainly a serious possibility and that the arguments used by Lundhaug and Jenott in support of it are very well documented. At the same time, however, I believe that all the elements used to substantiate this hypothesis are not strong enough to discard other options.

If it is true that we do not know almost anything about early monastic libraries and therefore we cannot exclude the possibility that texts similar to those of Nag Hammadi found a place on their shelves—and on the shelves of the Pachomian libraries in particular –, the same reflection is valid for urban libraries, where, above all in the fourth and fifth centuries several erudite individuals may plausibly have owned collections of books. We have a good

example of this kind of intellectual in the figure of Dioscorus of Aphrodito, whose library preserved his autograph compositions alongside the works of Homer and Menander, testifying to the classical education of this exponent of a well-to-do Upper Egyptian family. One could object that Dioscorus' library did not include works comparable with those of Nag Hammadi, but it is easy to imagine that two centuries before Dioscorus the phenomenon of private libraries belonging to a rich man of letters was even more widespread. It is plausible to imagine that these libraries also included heterodox texts. Moreover, despite the fact that the Nag Hammadi codices are few enough in number not to exclude the possibility that they belonged to a single owner, it is absolutely plausible that they could have belonged to a philosophical school or to a non-monastic community. In fact such a hypothesis would answer a series of unsolved questions posed by the two authors. In describing the activity of copying the Nag Hammadi texts by some monks, for instance, the authors ask themselves: 'What is less clear is whether this network was understood to be a completely legitimate one, or whether we are witnessing the 'underground' activity of people who were trying to pass under the radar of the monastic authorities' (p. 205).

The authors are certainly right when they say that 'Even if the individual codices or sub-groups were produced independently from each other in different workshops, as Khosroyev and Wipszycka maintain, it is not clear why this scenario would preclude monks, Pachomian or otherwise' (p. 211), but again this argument is not strong enough to exclude other possibilities. The same holds true for the sentence 'the small-scale collaboration between scribes is what one might expect in coenobitic monasteries like those of the Pachomians' (p. 213). Why should this not be true of urban erudite circles or Christian philosophical schools? And, even more importantly, why do we not find any trace of such texts in subsequent Pachomian production?

A weak point of the reconstruction by Lundhaug and Jenott is the simplistic way they deal with the so-called Dishna Papers or Bodmer Papyri, which, according to them, would represent 'some of the best comparanda for the Nag Hammadi codices', because they 'were discovered in the same region and might have belonged to the Pachomian federation headquartered at Pbow' (p. 231).⁵ Such an affirmation is based on the fact that the two authors accept Robinson's opinion and are therefore convinced that 'letters written by Pachomius and his successors Theodore and Horsiesios were found among them' (p. 224). However, they do not mention the still ongoing debate concerning

5 The authors admit however that 'There is considerably greater consistency in codicology and scribal styles across the Nag Hammadi Codices than there is, for example, across the various codices of the Dishna Papers' (p. 210).

the nature of this ‘library’ and above all its real composition. A large part of the scholars who have dealt with these manuscripts do not think that the Pachomian letters and documents are to be included in the library.⁶ Moreover, the materials re-used in the cartonnage of the covers of the Bodmer Papyri or Dishna Papers, mainly related to the environment of Panopolis, exclude a common origin with the Nag Hammadi codices, at least as far as this phase of the manuscript production is concerned. Lastly, there is no need to stress that the Bodmer Papyri include works, also in Latin, that by their nature and contents are very distant from what we find in the Nag Hammadi codices.

Personally, I find this un-nuanced description of the Dishna plain, where any communitarian phenomenon is attributed to Pachomian monasteries, unconvincing and unrealistic. The discovery of several groups of documents at a few kilometres from one another is not enough to relegate all of them to a single origin and milieu. The geo-cultural situation of an area such as the Dishna plain was certainly much more multiform. Lastly, even if we leave aside the complete deconstruction of the category of ‘Gnostics’ operated in the volume, which several scholars do not share, at least in these extreme terms (Manlio Simonetti and Christoph Marksches, among others), it is striking that the authors never mention the Manichaean community as one of the possible milieux in which texts like those of Nag Hammadi could have circulated.

These observations, however, do not affect the admirable work done by Hugo Lundhaug and Lance Jenott, who, thanks to an extremely accurate analysis and a meticulous re-examination of all the available data, will surely represent a new starting point in the study of the Nag Hammadi library, a fact we should all be very grateful for.

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6 For a *status quaestionis* of this debate see the theme section of *Adamantius* 21 (2015), 6–172, and in particular the contributions of Jean-Luc Fournet, Paul Schubert and Paola Buzi.