

Egyptian Gnosticism from Its Cradle in the Alexandrian Quarters of the Second Century to Its Jar Tomb in the Upper Egyptian Town of Nag' Hammadi

Introduction

The aim of this study is to try to interpret the fate of Gnosticism in Egypt through a simple investigation of places where texts were found and the historical material available. Our knowledge of the provenance of these texts is not always found in external sources such as historical records or archaeological excavations but extends to internal textual evidence such as the dialect of the text and indirect evidence found in the literature. In addition, one should keep in mind that not all the Nag' Hammadi texts were Gnostic, but belonged to a Gnostic community, and not all Gnostic texts were found in Nag' Hammadi.

The Original Language of Gnostic Texts

According to James Robinson, the Nag' Hammadi texts, being the largest cache of Gnostic texts found, were translated one by one from Greek into Coptic (Robinson 1990: 2). Many factors justify this view, such as the Alexandrian origin of the texts, [Clement](#)'s writings against them, and the presence of fragments from the Gospel of Thomas among the papyri fragments of the Middle Egypt Greco-Roman city of Oxyrhynchos. However, Gilles Quispel advanced the premise that the earliest Coptic Gnostic texts to be discovered, Codex Askewianus and Codex Brucianus, were originally written in Sahidic Coptic in [Thebes](#) or modern-day Luxor (Quispel 1991: 1148). On the other hand, Bentley Layton in the introduction of his work *The Gnostic Gospels* stresses the point that all Gnostic works discovered were not originally written in Coptic, but Greek (Layton 1987: xxvii).

Ancient Manuscripts and Their Provenance

The list below includes only texts of a Gnostic nature or those that were found in the same corpus as such texts. They are listed in order of discovery.

- *Codex Brucianus*: Papyrus, Sahidic, ad 300—500, discovered in the eighteenth century near Luxor and eventually deposited in the Oxford Bodleian Library in 1769, currently known as OB.Bruce. Ms.96.
- *Codex Askewianus*: Parchment, Sahidic, ad 350—400, discovered in the eighteenth century near Luxor and eventually deposited in the British Library in 1773, currently known as BL.Add.5114.
- *Akhmim Codex*: Papyrus, Sahidic, ad 400—500, discovered in a cemetery in Akhmim and bought by [Carl](#) Schmidt for the Berlin Library in 1896, currently known as P.Berol.8502.
- *Oxyrhynchus Papyri*: Papyrus, Greek, third-century ad, fragments discovered by B.P. Grenfell and A.S. Hunt and first published in 1897. They are now deposited in three different libraries:
 - Oxy.1 in the British Library, London;
 - Oxy.654 in the Bodleian Library, Oxford;
 - Oxy.655 in Harvard Houghton Library, Cambridge, United States.
- *Nag ' Hammadi Papyri*: Papyrus, Sahidic, and Lykopolitan, before ad 350, discovered in a cave in 1945 and currently deposited in the Cairo Coptic Museum.
- *Codex Tchacos*: Papyrus, Sahidic, the first half of the fourth-century ad, discovered circa 1978 about sixty kilometers north of al-[Minya](#) in Middle Egypt. Was first kept in Switzerland, but it has been reported that it will be returned to the Coptic Museum after the conservation process is completed and its display to the European public has concluded.

The area of the provenance of these codices and fragments begins in the north at the city of Oxyrhynchos and ends in Luxor in the south. With the exception of the Nag' Hammadi codices, the manuscripts are medium to

small in size and were most likely to have been discovered in Greco-Roman cemeteries. This meant they were privately owned and did not belong to a large community. The Nag' Hammadi codices were larger in size, however, which suggests that they belonged to a library of an organized community. The dates are only estimates and they span from ad 300 to 500, though that of the community-based collection of Nag' Hammadi seems to be prior to ad 350 according to Layton (Layton 1987: xxvi).

Events Affecting the Birth and [Migration](#) of the Gnostic Texts

The beginning and the effective end of Gnosticism in Egypt were significantly affected by a few historical events in Egypt. The following is a brief overview of these events:

1. *The end of the Jewish [wars](#) in Alexandria:* In ad 115, a general revolt began among the Jewish communities in various parts of the Middle East as claims by some to be the Messiah circulated. The revolt was very [violent](#) on both the Roman and Jewish sides. The eventual outcome in ad 117 was the decimation of the once vibrant and strong Jewish community in Alexandria. This resulted in the emergence of two competing Christian communities that had been hidden behind the strong presence of the larger Jewish community there. One was the Orthodox group that was founded by the preaching of St. Mark, and the other was the eclectic group that is now commonly known as the Gnostics.
2. *[Clement](#) of Alexandria versus the Gnostics:* This late second-century Alexandrian philosopher spearheaded the resistance to 'Gnostic' teachings, employing similar philosophical logic to counteract their own. He claimed the title of 'Gnostic' for Christians (Barnard 1991).
3. *The Melitian Schism:* This early schism in the Church of Alexandria began innocently when Melitius, bishop of Lykopolis (Asyut), objected to the terms set by St. Peter I, bishop of Alexandria and martyr, for the readmission of lapsed Christians during the Great Persecution of

the early fourth century (Timbie 1991: 1584). Both Peter and Melitius were imprisoned. Peter was imprisoned and exiled twice, ending in his martyrdom, while Melitius was imprisoned once and sent to the mines. This difference in the outcome of their lives made the view of Peter the orthodox one and Melitius the heretic, as Tim Vivian argued (Vivian 1988: 38).^[1] This schism in effect severed Lykopolis from the Orthodox Church in Alexandria. It set Lykopolis up as a rival to Alexandria's ecclesiastical preeminence in Egypt.^[2] As a result, it became a haven for every person who had issues with the Church of Alexandria.

4. *Patriarch [Dioscorus](#) of Alexandria's anti-heretical crusade, circa ad 445*: Shortly after St. [Dioscorus](#) of Alexandria succeeded St. Cyril of Alexandria, he waged a crusade against the heresies that were allowed to flourish farther away from Alexandria during the time that the Church was involved in defending itself against foreign heresies from Constantinople and elsewhere. He enlisted St. Shenoute the Archimandrite, the Church of Alexandria's de facto ambassador in Upper Egypt, in combating these local heretical groups, as observed in his treatise *Contra Origenistas*, published by Orlandi (Orlandi 1985). The target groups also included Gnostics (Orlandi 2006: 542). According to Stephen Emmel, his influence extended from Hermopolis and Antinoopolis (around al-Minya) in the north to the first Nile Cataract in the south (near Aswan) (Emmel 2004, vol. 1: 12), and so they would have been within his domain.
5. *The demise of the Pachomian federation in the sixth century*: The Byzantine imperial installation of Proterius in place of the exiled [Dioscorus](#) as bishop of Alexandria, following the Council of Chalcedon of ad 451, was much resisted by the residents of Alexandria and elsewhere. According to Edward R. Hardy, Proterius's support base outside of Alexandria was ten to twelve bishops and the Pachomian monks of Canopus, the famous monastery near Alexandria (Hardy 1952:115). This Pachomian monastic support increased due to pressure by the emperor Justinian in the sixth century, which

eventually led to the ouster of its federation archimandrite from its headquarters in Pbow (near Nag' Hammadi), Abraham of Farshut (Goehring 2012: 60). Archeological remains of the great basilica of that monastery do not give any clear evidence of the survival of the monastery after the end of the sixth century (Goehring 2012: 62).

The Flight Southward

Now that we have reviewed the manuscript and historical evidence available, we can begin to reconstruct the flight path of the main Gnostic community from Alexandria to Nag' Hammadi as follows:

1. The writings of the community and its early teachers, Valentinus and Basilides, in Alexandria are attested in Greek shortly after the fall of the Jewish community in Alexandria in ad
2. The early third-century philosophical victory of [Clement](#) of Alexandria and the conservative nature of the [episcopal](#) tenure of Demetrius of Alexandria (ad 189—231) probably hastened their departure from Alexandria.
3. The presence of Greek fragments from the third century in the Greek city of Oxyrhynchos shows that there was a Gnostic presence there at the time, although not for how long. But the limited quantity found does indicate at least that the Greek writings did not last beyond the mid-fourth century, when we have evidence of their translation into Coptic. The [history](#) of early Christianity in Egypt does not support an organized campaign against the group until the time of St. [Athanasius](#) in the first half of the fourth century.
4. The Coptic Gospel of Judas, discovered along with other Gnostic and non-Gnostic texts in al-Minya, shows that at some time in the early fourth century some individual translations for private individuals were made from a Greek original. The lack of similar dialectal variants in the Nag' Hammadi Codices leads one to believe it was from a Greek original rather than copied from the Coptic ones of that community. The small size of the manuscript is indicative of private

ownership. In any case, it does reveal that there was a philosophically-minded, bilingual Copt in that region who read such texts. The lack of existence of another Gospel of Judas in the Nag' Hammadi community may indicate that the community was more conservative-minded than that individual owner and would not accept a work with such a provocative label. Therefore, the al-Mmya manuscript represents the first occurrence of a Coptic Gnostic text. Coptic translation was probably a way to mask such texts from the agents of the Alexandrian ecclesiastical authorities, who would obviously be looking for a Greek text, at least at the beginning of the pursuit.

5. Moving southward, we have a clear indication that these texts, probably in Greek, were moved along with what was left of the community to Lykopolis (Asyut). There, they were translated into Coptic. This is clear from the very significant influence of the Lykopolitan Coptic dialect in the Nag¹ Hammadi texts. One can assume that the anti-Alexandrian-authority environment of that city, the home of the Melitian Schism, would have provided the necessary haven for translating all the texts into Coptic to shield them from their pursuers and to build a community among the free-thinking residents of the region. Such a peaceful existence would have been possible toward the middle of the fourth century. The large dimensions of the Nag* Hammadi manuscripts indicate that these texts belonged to a significant organized community and not just a random group of individuals.
6. The presence of privately owned copies of Gnostic texts in Akhmim and farther south in Luxor by the middle of the fifth century shows that the influence of the community must have extended somewhat, at least to individuals farther south of their Lykopolitan haven, as observed in the Berlin Akhmim Codex, Codex Brucianus, and Codex Askewianus. However, the private nature of these manuscripts, based on their small sizes, does not indicate the presence of an organized group.
7. The anti-heretical campaign of Patriarch [Dioscorus](#) in cooperation with St. Shenoute would definitely have spoiled what would have

been a century of peaceful existence for the community in Lykopolis. It is not known how successful the campaign was, considering that the abbot fell ill at least by ad 451, which made him unable to go to Chalcedon at the time. Also, how effective he would have been after his recovery is still a mystery. What can safely be assumed is that sometime after this campaign, the community, with what was left of its members and their texts, moved south and probably west to get away from the hotbed of the orthodox zeal of the White Monastery federation of St. Shenoute in the Akhmim—Sohag area. The date of this move could be as early as the second half of the fifth century and as late as the mid-sixth century.^[3] What is also known is that, by the time they moved to the new location, the codices were in need of rebinding, as is evidenced by what was found in the cartonnage of the new bindings.

8. The next and final resting place for the community was the area near the modern-day town of Nag' Hammadi, southwest of Akhmim and north of Luxor. They settled in an abandoned Pachomian monastery near its federation headquarters in Faw al-Qibli, to the east. There they rebound their books anew using discarded papyrus fragments and scraps found in the area. If this abandonment of the monastery was due to the [Chalcedonian](#) controversy that arose in the middle of the sixth century at the time of Abraham of Farshut, then a mid- to late sixth-century date would be plausible for their presence there. The early support given to the newly imperially appointed Chalcedonian Proterius by the internationally known Pachomian monastery in Canopus may also have contributed to the abandonment of some of these smaller monasteries at a slightly earlier date. One can be certain of a date after the middle of the fifth century and before the end of the sixth century. In addition, one can be certain of its abandonment by Pachomian monks, Chalcedonian or non-Chalcedonian, before the settlement of this Gnostic community. Among the cartonnage in the codex covers of at least Codex VII of Nag* Hammadi, a fragment was found of a copy of a letter addressed

to St. Pachomius (Barns, Browne, and Shelton 1981: 139). It would not have been possible for such a document to be discarded by the Pachomian monks unless they were no longer there.^[4]

9. Eventually the community disbanded and the bulk of the library was deposited in a jar near a cliff. The probable reason would be, as Cornelia Romer writes: “The assumption is that these books were once part of a library for which Orthodox Christians were searching and they were therefore hidden from the searchers” (Romer 2009: 627). Also, they could have been kept hidden to preserve what could not be carried away, as happened with the biblical codices of the monastery of Apa Jeremias in Saqqara. Based on the Roman coins found there, Herbert Thompson estimated that they were buried as late as the first quarter of the seventh century (Thompson 1932: x). This would have corresponded to the combined administrative-ecclesiastical rule of Cyrus of Alexandria, who waged a great and indiscriminate persecution of the Copts just prior to the Arab invasion of Egypt. So, based on the type of burial and the political situation in Egypt, the first half of the seventh century would have been the last possible date for the settlement of the Gnostic community last seen in Nag* Hammadi.

Conclusion

Developing a [history](#) out of a literary corpus is a difficult task because such literature was designed to be ageless by its writers. A researcher is then left with clues from archaeology, history, paleography, and codicology to uncover its development. In the case of the Gnostics, a community on the run since presumably the third century, the task becomes much harder. From the evidence presented here, one observes an intellectual, eclectic community rising out of the ruins of the Jewish quarter in Alexandria after ad 117, losing the intellectual war in Alexandria by the early third century, and going on the run southward, away from the ecclesiastical authorities in Alexandria. In the process we find it changing the language of its texts to hide them from its pursuers;

this language conversion took place in Lykopolis (modern Asyut), as evidenced by the dialect influence of the area. The region's stance against the Alexandria ecclesiastical authority was the attraction to settle there, and eventually, the reason to move on as this resistance movement was overcome. Its final resting place was fittingly, as well as ironically, in a ruined Pachomian monastery that became ruined because of its federation alliance with the Alexandrian (Chalcedonian) authority at the time!

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[1] It seems that Melitius's first offense was the ordination of bishops in Egypt, contrary to the established tradition that the bishop of Alexandria alone had that authority. The reasons and circumstances are not entirely clear, but the controversy took on a life of its own and plagued the Church of Alexandria for centuries.

[2] The First Ecumenical Council of Nicaea in ad 325 put a stamp of approval on the pre-eminence of the Bishop of Alexandria over all of Egypt in response to this schism.

[3] When the Gnostic community would have felt the need to move from the friendly confines of Melitian Lykopolis within this time period depends on how strong the Melitian community was at the time. I would argue for a later time rather than earlier unless future archaeological evidence to the contrary is found. In any case, the move to Nag' Hammadi is predicated on the abandonment of the Pachomian monastery there.

[4] It should be noted that, based on my arguments above, I would side with those mentioned by Cornelia Romer who dispute the assumption that these books were once owned by Pachomian monks (Romer 2009: 627). The Pachomian monks' ownership was conjectured by such scholars as Elaine Pagels (Pagels 2005: xix).



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