CHAPTER TWO

THE FRENCH LEADERSHIP
IN EARLY NAG HAMMADI STUDIES 1946–1953

1. The French Leadership in Egypt since Napoleon

After his conquest of Egypt, Napoleon left behind a large staff of scholars, who continued their work long after the British had taken over and Napoleon was gone. Hence Egyptology began with the massive Napoleonic multi-volume *Description de l’Égypte, ou Recueil des observations et des recherches qui ont été faites en Égypte pendant l’expédition de l’armée française, publié par les ordres de sa majesté l’Empereur Napoléon le Grand*. The total work appeared in 29 volumes from 1809–1828. Edward W. Said evaluated it in retrospect as follows:

Yet the military failure of Napoleon’s occupation of Egypt did not also destroy the fertility of its over-all projection for Egypt or the rest of the Orient. ...

The *Description* became the master type of all further efforts to bring the Orient closer to Europe, thereafter to absorb it entirely and—centrally important—to cancel, or at least subdue and reduce, its strangeness and, in the case of Islam, its hostility. For the Islamic Orient would henceforth appear as a category denoting the Orientalist’s power and not the Islamic people as humans nor their history as history. ...

One might say that the *Description* is just a scientific, and therefore objective, account of Egypt in the early nineteenth century ... Napoleon’s is an ‘objective’ account from the standpoint of someone powerful trying to hold Egypt within the French imperial orbit ...

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1. This is the title of a volume given to me by the widow of the papyrologist John W.B. Barns, who was the first to examine the cartonnage for us. The subtitle read “État moderne, Tome premier.” It was published in 1809 “à Paris de l’Imprimerie impériale.” See now the updated one-volume work, *Description de l’Égypte ou recueil des observations et des recherches qui ont été faites en Égypte pendant l’expédition de l’Armée française publié sous les ordres de Napoléon Bonaparte*, with a Préface by Sydney H. Aufrère (Tours, France: Bibliothèque de l’Image, 2001), as well as the English volume by Franco Serino, *Description de l’Égypte: Napoleon’s Expedition and the Rediscovery of Ancient Egypt* (Cairo, New York, and London: The American University in Cairo Press, 2004).

The Description was followed by the first great French Egyptologists, Jean François Champollion (1790–1832), the decipherer of the hieroglyphs, and François Auguste Ferdinand Mariette (1821–1881), the founder of the Service des Antiquités, as well as by the Institut français d’archéologie orientale du Caire. Ever since, Egyptian archaeology has been led by French scholarship. At the time of the Nag Hammadi discovery, the Directeur général of the Service des Antiquités was a French Abbé, Chanoine Étienne Drioton (1889–1960), and the Directeur du Musée Copte a Copt who had studied under him in Paris, Togo Mina (1906–1949). Furthermore, the présence française gave the tone to international Cairene society on until Nasser. Still today, in Egypt the transliteration of Arabic names usually follows the French system.

Thus it is not surprising that the first contacts of scholarship with the Nag Hammadi Codices were French (see Chapter 1, Part 3 above): The antiquities dealer at the very British Shepherds Hotel was Mansoor Abdel Sayed Mansoor—he used as the sign on his shop this French transliteration as a matter of course. He telephoned to Jacques Schwartz at the Institut français d’archéologie orientale late in March, 1946, inviting him to come and see what can today be identified as Codices II and VII, both on consignment in his shop. The next morning Schwartz came with the Institute’s Director, Charles Kuentz, to carry on (unsuccessful) negotiations for their purchase. Schwartz reported to Doresse at the time:

The name of Seth recurred there rather frequently [in titles: Codex VII, 1:1; 2: 70,12; 5: 118, 25; 120, 17, 19; 124,15; 127,27]. In one there occurred the title Apocalypse of Peter [Codex VII]. The leather cover of another carried the image of a serpent [Codex II].

These three traits misled Doresse into speculating that two or three codices had been seen, an opinion made public in a presentation that Henri-Charles Puech gave to the French Académie des Inscriptions et Belles-Lettres (see Chapter 2, Part 3 below). Doresse himself published the view that three codices had been seen. Two traffickers, Zakī Basṭā and Bahīj ‘Alī, whom I

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4 Schwartz’ report to Doresse was published by Henri-Charles Puech and Jean Doresse, “Nouveaux écrits gnostiques découverts en Égypte,” CRAI 1948 (1948): 87–95: 89:

Le nom de Seth y revenait assez souvent; dans l’un se lisait le titre: Apocalypse de Pierre; la couverture de cuir d’un autre portait l’image d’un serpent.