CHAPTER TWELVE

THE NAG HAMMADI EXCAVATIONS

1. Preliminary Visits to the Site of the Discovery

My First Visit to the Site of the Discovery

My first visit to the site of the discovery began when I was Annual Professor at the American Schools of Oriental Research, later renamed the Albright Institute, in Jerusalem, Jordan for 1965–1966, in whose Newsletter I made a first published report of my trip. It is here conflated with the part of a letter of 22 March 1966 to Claremont’s coptologist and librarian, Ernest Tune, which had to do with my visit to Nag Hammadi. The references in it to the literature available to me at the time have not been updated with more complete bibliographical information, since their function here is merely to indicate the sparse published material with which we began:

Readers of the Newsletter are probably well acquainted with a remarkable manuscript discovery in 1945–1946 at Nag Hammadi in Upper Egypt. A number of Coptic Gnostic Codices were found in an exceptional state of preservation; these are as important for the study of early Christian Gnosticism as the Dead Sea Scrolls are for Biblical scholarship. (For a survey of the story as known in 1952 see Victor R. Gold, The Biblical Archeologist, Volume XV, pages 70–88.) While in the Near East as Annual Professor at the Jerusalem School, I was determined to visit the place where the books were found. On 27 February 1966 I flew to Luxor, as a point of departure for a visit to Nag Hammadi.

In Luxor I visited one evening Dr. Nims, in charge of the Chicago House that has since 1920 (Breasted) been excavating Medinet Habu in Thebes on the West side of the Nile facing Luxor. Dr. Nims showed me maps of the Nag Hammadi region, which however contributed no relevant information beyond the map of Doresse Les livres secrets des gnostiques d’Égypte 1958 pp. 152f. (upon which van Unnik’s map, Evangelien aus dem Nilsand, seems to be based).

On my inquiry, Dr. Nims assured me that no Coptic Gnostic materials had been found in connection with the Chicago excavations at Medinet Habu,

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a Pharaonic temple complex at Thebes near Luxor which had been turned into a village (named Djeme) by the Copts. He had not been aware of the fact, however, that the first discovery of a Coptic Gnostic manuscript was at Djeme: Codex Brucianus, acquired by the well-known Scottish archaeological explorer James Bruce in 1769. This manuscript, now in the Bodleian Library, Oxford, consists actually of two Codices, the first containing the two books of Jeu, and the second usually referred to as an “unknown early Gnostic work” (cf. the third edition of Carl Schmid’s translation, revised by Walter Till, Koptisch-gnostische Schriften, Volume 1, 1959, published by the Akademie Verlag in the series Die grieschischen christlichen Schriftsteller der ersten Jahrhunderte).

I may add that Dr. Nims reported an important collection of Coptic papyri (not from his site) was shown to him in view of finding a purchaser, and that he sought to find funds, by writing an old Chicago hand, currently Vice-President of Emory University, E.C. Colwell, but received no further encouragement in terms of an American purchaser. You might inquire if Pomp [E.C. Colwell, then in Claremont] can find the letter of Nims in his files and get more specific information there.

Before leaving Luxor for Nag Hammadi, I went again to the Chicago House to find out whether there was any personal danger. For I had asked the local Coptic Evangelical pastor if he would accompany me as translator, and after consulting with a layman in his church he had declined, and recommended I not go, since the peasants in the region were hostile to foreigners. ... At the Chicago House I found Dr. Nims out, but was able to talk to Prof. Wente of the Oriental Institute Chicago. Dr. Nims had mentioned that Giversen had gone to Nag Hammadi after visiting the Chicago house some decade ago. Dr. Wente informed me he had accompanied Giversen, that there was no danger from the friendly peasants, Bedouin, but that there was not much to see at the site. He suggested, since I had neither guide nor interpreter, that I go to the police station at Nag Hammadi and ask their help. A girl had traveled all through Egypt using this procedure and had had no difficulties. ...

The next morning, 3 March, 5AM, I took the train from Luxor to Nag Hammadi. Although the train was a local, and stopped in Dishnā and Fāw, I did not get out at these places, since they are smaller, and probably would not have taxis. The Guide Bleu says one gets cars from Nag Hammadi. From about Fāw one can see from the train window the Jabal al-Ṭārif, to the North—the Nile is here running in a west-north-west direction, making a U-shaped curve around the Jabal al-Ṭārif—I took a good color slide from the train window, with lush green sugarcane in the foreground, palms and other trees behind, then the cream-colored Jabal al-Ṭārif behind, with the right (north-east) segment separate from the bulk, and it is in that segment, i.e. at the foot of it, that the site of the discovery is located2 (it lies 129 kilometers by road north-west of