On a dusty hot day in 1886, a group of French archaeologists excavating Cemetery A at al-Hawawis in the desert necropolis of Akhmim (ancient Panopolis) opened the long-sealed grave of a Christian monk. Within the tomb, the excavators discovered a book, an ancient codex, now known as the Codex Panopolitanus. Quickly and fairly artlessly bound—some of the pages were actually in upside-down—the Codex Panopolitanus has 33 leaves, or 66 pages bound between two boards, prefaced by a page bearing only a Coptic cross. It proved to be an anthology of three texts; it contains almost all of the so-called “Book of the Watchers” from the popular Jewish pseudepigraphical text, *First Enoch*, a portion of the apocryphal *Gospel of Peter* [pages 2–10], and about one-third of the Greek *Apocalypse of Peter*, preserved in Ethiopic. What ties this one Jewish and two Christian texts together—beyond their physical binding—is their preoccupation with death, resurrection, and the topography of the heavens. Thus the discovery of the Codex Panopolitanus sent a frisson of excitement through archaeologists and papyrologists worldwide. The archaeologists had discovered, so it seemed, a veritable Christian “Book of the Dead”—a compilation of texts detailing the otherworldly journey of the soul, all carefully packed away in the grave of a Coptic monk from perhaps the eighth or ninth century. Nearly a century later, a leading scholar of Jewish pseudepigrapha, George Nickelsburg, published an essay in which he reiterated the Christian Book of the Dead hypothesis, and it remains more-or-less unchallenged today.
I first heard about the Codex Panopolitanus from Birger Pearson at a paper he presented, many years ago now, at the Annual Meeting of the Society of Biblical Literature, where he referred to it as a “Christian Book of the Dead” and raised the possibility that there might be others among our known “Gnostic” manuscripts. I found this idea intriguing, and have indeed Professor Pearson to thank for starting me on my quest to learn more about Gnostic Christian Books of the Dead. My investigations have led me to the conviction that one productive way of re-theorizing Gnostic practice is to re-orient it around specific teachings of personal and universal eschatologies. That is to say, many of our so-called Gnostic documents provide explicit directions for the soul after death. Together, they indicate that robust, Greek-based thanatologies persisted from the second century CE until at least the end of the fourth—the point at which the Nag Hammadi codices were copied—and perhaps even later, as isolated examples such as the Codex Panopolitanus may indicate.

This essay follows Birger Pearson’s lead in considering seriously the Egyptian context—ancient and late antique—for the shaping of these Greek-based thanatologies. Seen with an attentiveness to Egyptian afterlife conceptions, it is little surprise that Greek-language apocalyptic texts with, apparently, a ritual component, found their final “home” in late ancient Egypt. There, a culture persisted which saw the cultural and religious value in creating and burying “books of the dead.”

Books and Tombs in Late Antique Egypt

The Codex Panopolitanus is far from the only example of an Egyptian Christian “Book of the Dead.” The Berlin Codex, which contains the Gospel of Mary, the Apocryphon of John, the Sophia of Jesus Christ, and the Acts of Peter, appeared on the antiquities market in 1896. Although the dealer claimed that the book had been found in a wall-niche, the text’s first editor, Carl Schmidt, assumed it had been taken from one of Akhmim’s cemeteries. Schmidt was correct in his skepticism that a book might have survived nearly two thousand years in a wall-niche; a durable container (as usually found in a grave deposit) is necessary to preserve a book intact. See Luijendijk 2010, 232, n. 50.

The Codex Tchacos, which contains (among other so-called “Gnostic” texts) the Gospel of Judas, was discovered near El-Minya, in a family tomb by Gebel Qarara. At this late antique Christian burial site, the Codex Tcha-