EDITORIAL

New Antiquities: Part 2

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This special issue continues the objective—began in IJSNR 8.2—of exploring the varied and enduring effects of Mediterranean antiquity by examining what we have called “Transformations of Ancient Religion in the New Age and Beyond.”

Again we present article that engage the ancient sources on their own terms as well as in the context of their modern reception, in order to examine what precisely religious actors and movements are transforming and creating, and how. Here, the ancient sources under consideration shift to those of the ancient Near East: Israel-Palestine, Egypt, and Syria.

Anne Kreps’s contribution studies the written record of a modern Essene movement based in the United States. This church is built upon an unusual merging of New Age practice, Christian fundamentalism, and ancient history. While the movement emphasizes a spirituality rooted in theosophical writers, the Essene Church of Christ also reaches for ancient para-biblical sources and modern Dead Sea Scroll scholarship to support its doctrine. By harkening back to the mystical religions of the ancient Mediterranean, the modern Essenes are able to engage in syncretistic practices and claim the authority usually given to traditional religions. This paper also examines how these Essenes read modern scholarship about ancient Essenes to legitimize their own practices and theology, and, conversely, considers how scholarship has renewed interest in ancient esoteric movements and driven their revitalization as New “Antique” Religious Movements.

Of the several attempts by contemporary religious innovators to revive ancient Gnosticism, the Ecclesia Gnostica, headed by Los Angeles-based “bishop” Stephan Hoeller, has the most visible presence online and in print. Olav Hammer examines the ways in which Hoeller has attempted to create a Gnostic message appealing to a modern audience. In particular, how has a very diverse set of late antique currents, whose doctrines were phrased in a mythic language unfamiliar to most moderns, and whose rituals are only sketchily documented in the sources, been transformed into Gnosticism in the singular, a form of lived religiosity that purportedly has a timeless and universal message? The answer lies in Hoeller’s conviction that one particular form of Gnosticism, Valentinianism, represents the most authentic representation of Gnostic teaching, and that its true message can be revealed by reading Valentinian myths through the perspective of Jungian psychology. Hence, Hoeller’s neo-Gnosticism is not so much a revival of something ancient, as an original “bricolage,” i.e., a synthesis of religion and psychology, constructed from diverse source materials.

On the other hand, Matthew Dillon analyzes the impact academic discourse on Gnosticism and its deconstruction have had on contemporaries that self-identify as “Gnostic.” Using a case study of the Apostolic Johannite Church, one of the largest Gnostic Churches in North America, and Jeremy Puma, a former ecclesial Gnostic, this article elucidates how closely academic and religious discourses can be intertwined. Influenced by the Dutch Patrologist Gilles Quispel, the Apostolic Johannite Church founds its identity upon a phenomenological definition of Gnosticism that legitimizes its practice as the latest flowering of a spiritual undercurrent in Western culture that began with the ancient Gnostics. In contrast, Puma responds to academic deconstruction by himself abandoning “Gnosticism,” reconstructing a Gnostic worldview and practice based largely upon the Sethian texts of the Nag Hammadi Codices.

The reception and transformation of other Coptic Gnostic material—the Askew and Bruce Codices—are taken up in the following two essays. Franz Winter addresses a special case of appropriation and integration of an ancient Gnostic text within an important Neo-Gnostic, esoteric movement, namely the interpretation of the *Pistis Sophia* by the influential Latin American writer and spiritual teacher Víctor Manuel Gómez Rodríguez (1917–1977). Commonly known by his self-given name “Samael Aun Weor,” he was the founder of an important Neo-Gnostic movement with various offshoots, some of which are still active. Following the discovery of the *Pistis Sophia*—the text of the so-called Codex Askewianus—in the eighteenth century, this rather convoluted and difficult treatise became widely known as one of the few

extant “original” Gnostic texts. Weor’s commentary, *El Pistis Sophia Develado* (*Pistis Sophia Unveiled*), was published posthumously in 1983 and adds to an already long history of interpretations of this work by esoteric writers. Winter provides a comprehensive religio-historical framework which encompasses both Samael Aun Weor and his teachings, as well as the importance of the *Pistis Sophia* in esoteric movements antedating Weor, whose handling and interpretation of this ancient text lends us insight into how a modern esoteric movement approaches a single piece of classic “Gnostic” literature. While Weor is typical of many authors commonly classified as “esoteric,” since they share an interest in a perennial, hidden knowledge permeating all ages and cultures, his interpretation of the *Pistis Sophia* consistently bends the text to fit his own highly specific and particular modern views.

Jay Johnston, meanwhile, reminds us that in the Late Antique Mediterranean, a variety of corpora were employed by diverse faith communities to enact supernatural protection, to attract and repel others, to ensure chastity and arouse lust. This includes ritual handbooks that contain text and instructions for ritual spells and creation of amulets, often alongside numerous images of spirit beings and designs that incorporate text, including ring-script. These images and design elements are no longer perceived as of secondary importance to the textual content, but rather take a central role in the “agency” of the spell or ritual. Johnston’s study investigates the “re-use” of such image and design elements in contemporary magical practice, with a particular focus on “The Theban Magical Library” and *The Books of Jeu* (Codex Brucianus MS Bruce 96). In considering this practice, both the logic of “magical agency,” concepts of embodiment and relation between image and text will be examined.

Appropriately enough, Europe and the “East” meet, in the final essay, in the Balkans. Dylan M. Burns and Nemanja Radulović examine how scholarship on the Bogomils—the medieval, dualistic arch-heresy of Southeastern Europe—led some writers of the twentieth century to identify their own beliefs as “Bogomil,” leading to the formation of two modern, “Neo-Bogomil” groups: the Universal White Brotherhood, founded by Petăr Konstantinov Dănov in Bulgaria, and the Balkan Bogomil Center, founded by Ioann Bereslavski in Croatia. Significantly, these writers and their followers do not only appropriate popular ideas about Bogomilism in formulating their own beliefs and practices; they also appropriate popular ideas about ancient Gnosticism, refracted through deeply Theosophical teachings. Although Dănov and Bereslavski have sharply diverging views on a number of theological and historical questions, their motivations for their transformations

of ancient “Bogomilism” and “Gnosticism” are alike insofar as they are both of a very regional and contemporary nature, strongly phrased in terms of South-Eastern European religious and ethnicnational identities formulated in the later nineteenth century.