

Dylan Michael Burns and Almut-Barbara Renger, eds. *New Antiquities: Transformations of Ancient Religion in the New Age and Beyond*. Sheffield: Equinox, 2019. vii + 311 pp. ISBN: 9781781795040. \$100.00 / £75.00.

While the last few decades have seen the increased popularity of historical reception studies, such work has generally focused on philosophy and cultural products rather than the wealth of material to be found in religious practices, which, almost without exception, situate their origins in a more or less imagined past. The fruit of a 2014 conference of the same name held at the Institute for the Scientific Study of Religion of the Freie Universität Berlin, this collected volume marks an important step towards correcting this oversight. Four of its twelve chapters (ch. 2–5) take as their theme Goddess worship in modern Paganism, while a further four focus on Gnosticism (ch. 8–10, 12), with a remaining three on other topics – the worship of Antinous (ch. 6), modern Essenes (ch. 7), and ceremonial magic (ch. 11).

The first chapter, “From Aphrodite to Kuan Yin’– ‘The Tao of Venus’ and its Modern Genealogy” (14–49) by Almut-Barbara Renger, takes as its starting point an article published in an acupuncture journal in 2004, leading us on a careful examination of the threads that lie behind its promiscuous blend of New Age thought. The second and third chapters, Meret Fehlmann’s “Ancient Goddesses for Modern Times or New Goddesses from Ancient Times?” (50–75) and Caroline Tully’s “The Artifice of Daidalos: Modern Minoica as Religious Focus in Contemporary Paganism” (76–102), shift from a North American context to Greece, and specifically its reception as the site of an ancient matriarchal cult of the Goddess. Both use as one of their central case studies Carol P. Christ (b. 1945), an American religious studies scholar who abandoned the field to promote feminist spirituality, organising biannual pilgrimages in which women rediscover the sacred past. As they demonstrate,

this idealised reception of the Greek (and specifically Cretan) past, made possible by early archaeologists such as Arthur Evans, has since been problematised by more recent scholarly work. The last paper focusing on Goddess traditions is Kathryn Rountree’s “Transforming Deities: Modern Pagan Projects of Revival and Reinvention” (103–26), which explores the way in which the international (but originally North American) Goddess movement can be contrasted with more geographically and ethnically specific movements around the Mediterranean — Hellenism in Greece, Celtic-inspired paganism in northern Italy, and the creation of a new national goddess for Malta. Her discussion of the conflicts between Hellenists and archaeologists for access to and interpretative authority over ancient Greek sites leads to one of Rountree’s most important interventions — the different, and often irreconcilable, epistemological and discursive assumptions of religious practitioners and scholars, and the need for both to recognise the nature of their different claims.

Ethan Doyle White’s “Archaeology, Historicity, and Homosexuality in the New Cultus of Antinous: Perceptions of the Past in a Contemporary Pagan Religion” (127–48) focuses on cult of the “gay god” Antinous, the lover of the emperor Hadrian who died ca. 130, and whose worship ended in the fifth century before being revived, apparently independently, by several individuals from the 1980s to 2000s who have since formed multiple small communities using the internet. White’s article explores the tensions inherent in understandings of religious revival as creative production rather than pure reproduction, and specifically here on the question of Antinous’ “gayness,” an academically problematic concept in the wake of Michel Foucault’s work on the nineteenth-century “invention” of homosexuality. Yet, as White notes, whatever he was in life, Antinous has certainly been *received* as gay.

In “Reading History with the Essenes of Elmira” (149–74), Anne Kreps examines the Essene Church of Christ, one of many modern movements which claim the mantle of the ancient Jewish group. As Kreps points out, all of

these modern groups are, paradoxically, Christian, due to the Essene's modern scholarly reception as the forerunners of Jesus, a more spiritual alternative to Pharisaic Judaism. Kreps notes that this Church, though eclectic, claims a more explicitly, though largely superficial, Jewish identity than most of its competitors, a result of the influence of the discovery of the Dead Sea Scrolls as filtered through the media.

Olav Hammer's "The Jungian Gnosticism of the Ecclesia Gnostica" (175-98) marks the shift in focus in the last third of the book to modern receptions of Gnosticism, focusing in particular on the Ecclesiastica Gnostica and its Los Angeles-based bishop, Stephen Hoeller. As Hammer notes, any reconstruction of Gnosticism faces considerable hurdles – the recent scholarly deconstruction of the term, the lack of evidence for it as a lived religion, and the strangeness of many of its key myths to modern readers. Hoeller's response is to use Carl Jung as an authoritative rediscoverer of ancient gnostic wisdom. Yet if Hoeller is dismissive of scholars who "quibble . . . over Coptic words" (192), Matthew J. Dillon demonstrates examples of much deeper engagement with scholarship in "The Impact of Scholarship on Contemporary 'Gnosticism(s)': A Case Study on the Apostolic Johannite Church and Jeremy Puma" (199-223). In the mid-2000s, a graduate student named Jesse Folks raised the problem of deconstructionist work on Gnosticism in the online message board for the Apostolic Johannite Church, beginning a debate in which both sides – one essentialist, one deconstructionist – deployed opposing scholarly perspectives in strikingly sophisticated and in-depth ways. A third, reformist, approach is demonstrated by the author Jeremy Puma, who instead seeks to reconstruct a more modest model of Sethian Gnosticism, using the work of scholars such as David Brakke alongside readings of the Nag Hammadi texts to (re)create rituals. While the Nag Hammadi codices are "celebrities" among the relics of ancient Gnosticism, Franz Winter reminds us that the first "Gnostic" text rediscovered by modern scholars was the *Pistis Sophia* of the Askew Codex, purchased by

the British Museum in 1785. In “Studying the ‘Gnostic Bible’: Samael Aun Weor and the Pistis Sophia” (224–53), Winter follows the story of its peculiar reception by the Colombian-born religious leader Samael Aun Weor (1917–1977), who understood the text in heavily psychologising terms; the discussion has a particular focus on the sexual practices advocated by Weor.

Jay Johnston’s “Binding Images: The Contemporary Use and Efficacy of Late Antique Ritual Sigils, Spirit-Beings, and Design Elements” (254–74) leaves Gnosticism largely – though not entirely – to the side to discuss the reception of the ancient world by three modern magical practitioners: Stephen Edred Flowers, who draws on the corpus of Greek Magical Papyri; Michael Ceccetelli, who uses Coptic sources including the “Gnostic” Books of Jeu; and Devo, whose Kemetic practice draws broadly on the symbolism of Pharaonic Egypt. Johnston’s work focuses on the intersection of sensory – and particularly visual – experience and the materiality of magical practice, as these authors interpret and recreate ancient images.

In the final chapter, “(Neo-)Bogomil Legends: The Gnosticizing Bogomils of the Twentieth-Century Balkans” (275–303), Dylan M. Burns and Nemanja Radulović discuss two Eastern European groups who locate themselves in the tradition of the medieval Bogomils, the nineteenth-century Bulgarian Universal White Brotherhood and the more recent Balkan Bogomil Council, which came to Croatia in 2009 after being founded in Russia in the 1980s. Assimilated to Gnosticism in perennialist models and their popular reflexes, the idea of the Bogomils takes on a particular Ethno-Nationalist inflection in the Balkans, allowing modern Eastern Europeans both to situate their mysterious predecessors within a long mystical tradition, and cast them as forerunners of phenomena as diverse as Marxism and Theosophy.

Many readers will have heard of some of the movements discussed in this rich work, but few will have heard of all of them, and they serve as excellent introductions to both modern and ancient historical questions. Yet despite their diversity, the chapters display recurrent concerns in the reception of ancient

phenomena: post-Christian responses to Christianity, gender relations and sexuality, psychologising approaches to religion, and the influence of modern esoteric writers (notably Helena Blavatsky and Carl Jung) – reminding us that religion is always a product of and response to its time and place. Similarly recurrent is the interaction between the religious groups and the academics with whom they share a claim to the past; the lack of a continuous tradition of interpretation connecting past and present means that scholars are often accorded authority in assigning meaning to archaeological remains (in the case of the Goddess groups) and texts (in the case of Gnosticism) (cf. Dillon p. 209), a fact which enables religious groups to draw upon academic reconstructions and authority, but which often leads to conflict as paradigms shift or religious groups try to assert their own legitimacy in a space demarcated by scholars. We also see that the passage between academic and religious spheres is not restricted to texts and theories, but also involves individuals, such as Carol P. Christ and Jesse Folks, who move between worship and academic study as their priorities change. For many people, including scholars, esoteric (or at least highly charged popular) interpretations of the past often serve as the initial spark which leads to an interest in history, and if the religious reception of the past is heavily conditioned by the scholarly works available to would-be founders (in their time, in their language), influence often flows in the other direction too, as the basic assumptions and research programmes of scholars are influenced by their pre-academic introductions to their fields of study. As an examination of this process, *New Antiquities* is an exemplary work, and it is to be hoped that future studies will apply its approach to an even broader range of ancient and modern phenomena.

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