

The Finding of Hidden Texts in Esoteric and Other Religious Traditions: Some Notes on “Discovery Narratives”

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ABSTRACT

This article deals with a motif that appears repeatedly in the history of the Western traditions of esotericism and alternative spirituality. The motif is an essentially simple one: a person claims to have discovered an older, previously hidden text containing sacred knowledge, and he then duly circulates that knowledge to the world. The term “discovery narrative” may be used to describe this phenomenon. Perhaps surprisingly, discovery narratives have generally been neglected by scholars of esotericism. This article traces occurrences of the motif through history and examines both the drivers behind its usage and the tensions which appear to be inherent within it.

Keywords: Esotericism; hermeticism; neopaganism; pseudepigraphy; scriptures

This article deals with a motif that appears repeatedly in the history of the Western traditions of esotericism and alternative spirituality. The motif is an essentially simple one: a person claims to have discovered an older, previously hidden text containing sacred knowledge, and he then duly circulates that knowledge to the world. The term “discovery narrative” may be used to describe this phenomenon, although other terms can also be found in the literature, such as “find story,” “*Fundbericht*,” and “pseudo-documentarism.”

Perhaps surprisingly, discovery narratives have generally been neglected by scholars of esotericism.¹ We will trace occurrences of the motif through history, and examine both the drivers behind its usage and the tensions that appear to be inherent within it.

1. However, they are known to scholars of textual forgery more generally. See, for example, the references to religious and secular discovery narratives in Grafton, *Forgers and Critics*, 9, 18, 23, 33–4, 44–5, 57–8, 95–6, and 103.

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As our point of departure, we may take one of the best-known and most recent discovery narratives of the modern occultic and pagan revival: Gerald Gardner's discovery of the "Wica." Gardner's story first appeared in print in 1954, in his book *Witchcraft Today*. In short, Gardner purported to describe an esoteric pagan witch religion that had survived from the Stone Age into 1950s England, having absorbed influences on the way from the Celts, the Graeco-Roman mystery cults, and the ancient Egyptians. Gardner undertook to describe the beliefs and practices of the witches whom he had discovered. But he did not merely claim to be recounting his own subjective observations or passing on a fluid oral tradition. He gave his readers something more solid and direct. He had *texts*. He quoted from apparently authentic witch documents, including a version of the key Wiccan liturgical text known as the "Charge of the Goddess," which is regarded by Wiccans as a self-revelation of the goddess of the witches. In 1959, Gardner repeated his claim to have discovered an ancient witch religion in a further book entitled *The Meaning of Witchcraft*. In an appendix, he repeated one of the texts from *Witchcraft Today*, a mythological narrative that he called the "Magical Legend of the Witches" (this is better known today as the "Legend of the Descent of the Goddess").

In the meantime, Gardner had been busy disseminating copies of another text among his network of initiates: the religious and ritual document known as the "Book of Shadows." Though mutable in form, the Book of Shadows still remains central to Wicca, the nearest thing that it has to a scripture. Gardner also found time to circulate a mysterious text known as the "Old Laws" or "Ardanes." He claimed that this was a traditional set of rules for members of the witch-cult. The Ardanes appeared in 1957, at a time when Gardner was engaged in a dispute with his collaborator and pupil Doreen Valiente over the rules to be followed by coven members. Commentators since Valiente herself have regarded the appearance of this text with some suspicion.²

2. See, for example, Heselton, *Doreen Valiente: Witch*, 98–100. It is only fair to note that some Wiccans have argued that this suspicion is misplaced: on the debate, see Oakseer, "Gerald Gardner."

Gardner presented himself not as a religious prophet but as an anthropologist with secular academic credentials. The foreword to *Witchcraft Today* was written by Margaret Murray, a recognised Egyptologist and scholar of witchcraft, whom Gardner seems to have known through the eminently respectable Folk-Lore Society. Gardner claimed that his knowledge of the witches' texts and activities came from his having stumbled on a coven in the New Forest area in 1939.³ Yet Gardner's discovery narrative was challenged almost from the outset. Valiente was not shy about letting Gardner know that she had spotted that his ritual texts had been put together from well-known and public sources.⁴

The development of Gardner's texts has been examined and discussed in some detail by scholars, as has the early history of Wicca more generally.⁵ In particular, successive studies have traced the Book of Shadows back to a manuscript entitled "Ye Bok of Ye Art Magical," which was created by Gardner no earlier than the 1940s. To take the specific example of the "Charge of the Goddess," this text can be shown to have been largely constructed out of material drawn from Aleister Crowley and from Charles Leland's curious little book *Aradia* (which we will return to later).⁶ It bears mentioning that Gardner knew Crowley personally and had several meetings with him in 1947; there has even been a false report that he paid the "Great Beast" to compose his Wiccan material.⁷

It is now generally acknowledged that the true progenitor of Wicca was Gerald Gardner himself. He created a new initiatory tradition by fusing together elements of two related streams of counter-cultural thought and practice: esotericism and neo-pagan religiosity. Very little of his work was original. Precisely

3. The canonised narrative is set out in Gardner's authorised biography (Bracelin, *Gerald Gardner: Witch*) and need not be repeated here.

4. See Hutton, "Crowley and Wicca," 301.

5. The standard treatments include Hutton, *Triumph of the Moon*; Heselton, *Witchfather*; and Kelly, *Inventing Witchcraft*.

6. See, for example, Heselton, *Doreen Valiente: Witch*, 82–86, Serith, "The Charge of the Goddess," and Dearnaley, "The Influence of Aleister Crowley."

7. See Crowley, *Secrets*, 142–46.

the same may be said of the discovery narrative that he employed to explain the sudden appearance of authentic witch texts in the placid world of postwar England. The motif of newly discovered hidden documents is far too old to be seen as an innovation of Gardner, or even of any historically recent movement such as romanticism. The Western esoteric and pagan traditions provide a long line of precedents for what Gardner did in putting forward his fictive narrative. He was very far from being the first spiritual entrepreneur to present his innovations as a rediscovery of an older order, brought about through the tangible medium of pseudepigraphical texts. Nor is he likely to be the last.

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Gerald Gardner was identifiably a product of the ritual magic tradition, parts of which duly ended up becoming embedded in Wicca. In particular, his life was lived in the afterglow of the activities of the most famous magical fraternity of all, the Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn. This highly influential group was founded around 1888 by Dr William Wynn Westcott, Dr W. R. Woodman and Samuel Liddell MacGregor Mathers. It broke up in confusion in the early 1900s, but not before it had permanently made its mark on the history of Western esotericism.

The discovery narrative attached to the foundation of the Golden Dawn is quite well known.⁸ By 1887, some mysterious papers written in an old cipher had come into the hands of Dr Westcott. The origin of these papers has proven to be something of a mystery. Different versions of the story report that the cipher MS was found lying somewhere around Victorian London: the most romantic version traces it to an anonymous bookstall on Farringdon Road. Researchers have pointed to internal evidence that the document cannot have been written long before its supposed discovery. It has plausibly been suggest-

8. See, for example, Howe, *Magicians of the Golden Dawn*, 1-25; Regardie, *The Golden Dawn*, 3-6; Godwin, *The Theosophical Enlightenment*, 223-24; Küntz, *The Complete Golden Dawn Cipher Manuscript*, 11-15; Cicero and Cicero, *The Essential Golden Dawn*, 48-51; and McIntosh, "'Fräulein Sprengel' and the Origins of the Golden Dawn."

ed that it was originally composed by the occultist Kenneth Mackenzie for a forerunner group of the Golden Dawn known as the “Society of Eight.”⁹ Fortunately, we are not required to decide precisely where the MS came from or how it reached Westcott. For our purposes, the most significant thing is not what its origin *was* but rather the fact that its origin came to be *obscured*.

Among the leaves of the cipher MS was a paper containing the address of a Rosicrucian adept: a certain Fräulein Sprengel of Landsfelt, near Nuremberg in Germany. At some point in the story, Fräulein Sprengel acquired the forename Anna.¹⁰ No such person as Anna Sprengel has ever been traced; but this did not stop her from exchanging a series of letters with Dr Westcott. This correspondence, along with the original reference to Sprengel found among the cipher MS, was almost certainly forged by or at the behest of Dr Westcott.

So it was that a set of documents of questioned and questionable origin was used to create a kind of Malinowskian charter myth for the Golden Dawn. The cipher MS became the basis of the ceremonies of the order, while the link with Anna Sprengel gave it a lineage. Like Gerald Gardner, the founders of the Golden Dawn could claim to be carrying forward older traditions which they had stumbled upon rather than creating something new; and this claim was mediated through obscurely sourced and “rediscovered” texts and rituals.

As noted, the elusive Fräulein Sprengel was said to be a member of the Rosicrucian movement. So, in real life, were all three of the Golden Dawn’s founding fathers, and the order that they formed was certainly Rosicrucian in character. Perhaps they had read the Rosicrucian-themed novel *Zanoni* (1842) by the writer and politician Edward Bulwer-Lytton, in which the narrator claimed to have come by certain mysterious cipher MSS through a London bookseller.¹¹ In any event, the Golden Dawn founders

9. See Gilbert, “Provenance unknown”; “Supplement to ‘Provenance Unknown’”; and also “From Cipher to Enigma,” 214–15.

10. The forename probably came from the Victorian esotericist Anna Kingsford. Sprengel’s supposed magical motto, *Sapiens Dominabitur Astris*, appeared on the title page of Kingsford’s edition of Valentin Weigel’s *Astrology Theologized*, which was published in 1886.

11. [Bulwer-Lytton], *Zanoni*, 1: iii–xxii. Bulwer-Lytton’s narrative was inspired in turn by the

had previously been members of the Societas Rosicruciana in Anglia, or SRIA. This body was founded in or around 1867, although it bore the influence of an earlier German society, the Orden der Gold- und Rosenkreuzer. The SRIA is still in existence today. It is interesting to note that the grade system in the Golden Dawn cipher MS seems to have been copied from the SRIA's structure.

Like the Golden Dawn, the SRIA had an unusual relationship with secret and fortuitously discovered documents. A leading light in the SRIA, Robert Wentworth Little, was said to have taken the order's rituals from documents that he had found in Freemasons' Hall, where he worked.¹² Another SRIA member was Kenneth Mackenzie, whom we have already mentioned as the likely source of the Golden Dawn cipher MS. He may have been the true father of the SRIA; but, as it happens, he ended up rejecting the organisation. He claimed that he had been initiated as an authentic German Rosicrucian and that he had the real, secret Rosicrucian rituals in his possession.¹³ This claim may have had some truth to it; but that is not really the point. The interesting thing is that such a claim – a claim to superior legitimacy backed up by hidden documents – was made at all.

Going back in time, it is well known that Rosicrucianism itself consciously set out to present itself at its inception as a vehicle for newly rediscovered knowledge. According to the canonised narrative, the Fraternity of the Rosy Cross was founded by a German mystic known as Frater C. R. or C. R. C. (Christian Rosenkreuz), who lived between 1378 and 1484. The founder's tomb was supposedly rediscovered in 1604, and this was followed by the publication of the three original Rosicrucian pamphlets between 1614 and 1616.¹⁴ These mention various mys-

real-life occult bookshop run by John Denley (1764–1842) in Covent Garden. He may also have been influenced by the discovery narratives that were used by the authors of contemporary divinatory texts such as *Napoleon's Book of Fate* and the *Royal Book of Dreams* (see Owen Davies, *Witchcraft*, 138; and Perkins, *Reform of Time*, 67–69).

12. See, for example, Waite, *The Secret Tradition in Freemasonry*, 2:227; Lewis, *Rosicrucian Questions*, 127–29; and Küntz, "From the Ashes," 16.

13. See McIntosh, *The Rosicrucians*, 98–99.

14. That is, the *Fama Fraternitatis* (1614), the *Confessio Fraternitatis* (1615) and the *Chymical Wedding of Christian*

terious texts, including the “Book T” (variously interpreted as “Testamentum,” “Thesaurus,” and “Torah”), which is described as “our greatest treasure next to the Bible”; and the “Book M” (possibly signifying “Mundi” or “Magicon”).¹⁵ Like Gardner’s books, the Rosicrucian pamphlets explicitly claimed to be uncovering and publicising a much older tradition of wisdom that had fallen into obscurity; but in fact they were recent compositions that are best understood in the context of contemporary religious politics.¹⁶ In an interesting variant of the usual pattern, the Rosicrucian author(s) referred to texts whose existence had newly come to light, but did not directly publish their secrets. The hidden knowledge is rediscovered, and yet not so; it remains just out of reach.

Beyond early modern Rosicrucianism lay the venerable old Western esoteric tradition, which went back to Graeco-Roman times. Discovery narratives are not difficult to find in this tradition. Indeed, the motif of discovering a hidden esoteric text was so well known by the late eighteenth century that it could be satirised by Christoph Martin Wieland in his short story “The Philosopher’s Stone” (1786), which was subsequently turned into an opera by a team of composers who included Mozart. Some years previously, the French priest Jean Terrasson had published his best-selling novel *The Life of Sethos* (1731), which dealt with secret quasi-Masonic initiations in ancient Egypt. This text claimed to be a translation of an ancient Greek MS found in a foreign (i.e. non-French) library. It is also worth mentioning in this regard a popular contemporary book of moral advice entitled *The Oeconomy of Human Life* (1750). This was composed by the English writer Robert Dodsley, but it claimed to have been translated from an Indian Brahmin MS found in the Dalai Lama’s temple in Tibet.

Rosenkreutz (1616). A modern edition of the texts is available in Godwin et al., *Rosicrucian Trilogy*.

15. On which see further, for example, Yates, *The Rosicrucian Enlightenment*, 185; Churton, *Aleister Crowley*, 308; and SantaColoma, “The Book M,” which links it to the Voynich MS (another example of a mysteriously found text). The manifestos also speak of another text known by a letter, the “Book H,” which is believed to be John Dee’s *Monas Hieroglyphica*.

16. See, in general: McIntosh, *The Rosicrucians*, 42–52; Yates, *The Rosicrucian Enlightenment*, 60–62; and the editorial material in Godwin et al., *Rosicrucian Trilogy*.

One of the more obvious places to look for esoteric discovery narratives is in the texts of the grimoire tradition: grimoires being perhaps the foremost examples of secret documents which purport to disclose hidden and dangerous knowledge. It is no surprise that we duly find such narratives in this body of material. For example, the following passage appears in the seventeenth-century *Lemegeton*: “These Bookes were first found in the Chaldean & hebrew tongues at Hierusalem, by a Jewish Rabbi, & by him put into the greeke Language, & from thence into y^e Latine, as it is said &c.”¹⁷ Similarly, the introduction to the *Key of Solomon* tells of how the treatise was buried with the king and subsequently re-discovered by “certain Babylonian Philosophers,”¹⁸ while a grimoire attributed to St Cyprian was supposedly found in a village priest’s bookstall after the text was personally revealed by Lucifer.¹⁹

Esoteric discovery narratives go back all the way to classical antiquity. Among the earliest is an account found in a highly influential Greek alchemical treatise known as *Physica et Mystica*. This treatise, which dates from around 300 CE, was ascribed to the early Greek philosopher Democritus and drew on the work of the Pythagorean writer Bolos of Mendes (c. 200 BCE). The narrative describes how the work was discovered in a broken pillar in a temple in Egypt, with the assistance of the spirit of the great Persian sage Ostanés.²⁰ Democritus also had other esoteric works ascribed to him: somewhat ironically, for a philosopher who is often seen as a father of the rationalist tradition. Some of these works apparently claimed to have been based on writings recovered from the tomb of the legendary character Dardanus.²¹

17. Peterson, *The Lesser Key of Solomon*, 6.

18. See Mathers, *The Key of Solomon the King*, 3–4. The treatise was then reburied and, presumably, rediscovered subsequently a second time before being disseminated.

19. See Stratton-Kent, *The Testament of Cyprian the Mage*, 1:11–14.

20. See Diels and Kranz, *Die Fragmente der Vorsokratiker*, 68 B 300 and Bidez and Cumont, *Les mages hellénisés*, Ostanés A 6. We may note here that the earliest religious discovery narrative in Graeco-Roman literature may have been fashioned by the pioneering Greek historian Acusilaus (sixth/fifth century BCE), who claimed as the source of his mythographical writings some bronze tablets which his father had found.

21. See Pliny, *Natural History*, 30.2; also Lucian, *Philopseudes*, 32.

There is no lack of other discovery narratives from ancient esoteric circles. A writer from the Roman imperial period, pretending to be the Egyptian priest Manetho, asserted that his work was derived from inscriptions carved by Hermes-Thoth.²² A manual of divination known as the *Oracles of Astrampsychos* or *Sortes Astrampsychi* (dating from the second or third century CE) claimed that it was originally composed by Pythagoras and that it was found in a temple; as the title attests, it purported to have been discovered by the legendary Persian sage Astrampsychos. We are further told by late antique sources that the prophet Bitys, or Bitos, found a book by Hermes Trismegistus in a sanctuary at Sais.²³

One could go on. Another Hermetic work which declares itself to be a discovered text is the collection of magical treatises known as the *Kyranides* (the nucleus of which took shape in the fourth century CE, although its origins may go back to the first century CE). The *Kyranides* claimed to have come from God through Hermes Trismegistus, and to have been originally inscribed in Syrian characters on a column of iron.²⁴ In similar vein, a text known as the *Compendium Aureum*, which was transmitted with the *Kyranides*, claimed that it had been found in the grave of King Kyranos at Troy.²⁵

The discovery narrative motif also found its way into the Arabic branch of the Hermetic tradition. One of the central texts of the tradition, the *Emerald Tablet* or *Tabula Smaragdina*, has fairly typical discovery narratives attached to it. One such narrative appears in an Arabic treatise dating from between the sixth and eighth centuries CE, which is known as the *Mystery of Creation* and is attributed to one “Balinus” — a mangled form of the Greek holy man Apollonius of Tyana. According to the narrative, Balinus undertook to dig under a statue of Hermes located in his home town of Tyana. He ended up discovering an underground vault. His attempts to enter the vault were initially frustrated, as winds kept blowing

22. See Copenhaver, *Hermetica*, xv.

23. See Iamblichus, *On the Mysteries*, 8.5, 10.7; Zosimus, *On Apparatus and Furnaces*, fr. 230–35.

24. See Ní Mheallaigh, *Reading Fiction with Lucian*, 164–65.

25. See Speyer, *Bücherfunde*, 73–74.

out his lantern. But he was rewarded for his efforts with a supernatural dream that explained how he could overcome the problem. Once inside the vault, he found not only Hermes Trismegistus himself, sitting on a golden throne, but also the two texts from which he gleaned his supernatural wisdom: the *Emerald Tablet*, which Hermes held in his hands, and the *Mystery of Creation*, which lay at Hermes's feet.²⁶

Discovery narratives persisted in the Arab Hermetic tradition. The mediaeval *Book of the Treasure of Alexander* is said to have come to light when the Caliph al-Mu'tasim (794–842 CE) and his men found a golden book in a chest in the wall of a monastery. It had supposedly been hidden there by the Hellenistic monarch Antiochus I (324–262/1 BCE). Like Balinus in the story of the *Emerald Tablet*, the Caliph was assisted in this discovery by a supernatural dream.²⁷ The *Book* itself claims to contain information which was entrusted to Alexander the Great by Aristotle, and which ultimately went back to Hermes. Another discovery narrative, probably from the ninth century CE, is found in the *Book of Crates*. This slightly confusing story features up to three books of esoteric wisdom, the first one being found by the narrator in a temple treasury and the final one being seen in a vision in the possession of Hermes Trismegistus.²⁸

It would be wrong to close this section without mentioning the most recent sighting of the discovery narrative motif in esoteric literature. I refer, of course, to Dan Brown's 2003 novel *The Da Vinci Code*. Brown's *magnum opus* is based on a (slightly) older story about a secret society called the Priory of Sion, which was also known, in good Rosicrucian style, as the *Ordre de la Rose Croix Veritas*. As is by now widely known, the secret of this society lay in its claim to preserve the bloodline of Jesus Christ. Yet it is also now known that the Priory was established no earlier than 1956 by a French hoaxer by the name of Pierre Plantard. An important part of the story is that Plantard and his accomplices took care to provide the public with spurious "rediscovered" texts, including the so-called *Dossiers Secrets* that were deposited in the French Bibliothèque Nationale.²⁹

26. See Weisser, *Das "Buch über das Geheimnis der Schöpfung,"* 74–75 and Faivre, *The Eternal Hermes*, 91–94.

27. See Ruska, *Tabula Smaragdina*, 73–77.

28. See Ruska, *Arabische Alchemisten*, 1:16–18.

29. For a good summary of this interesting case, see Introvigne, "Beyond 'The Da Vinci Code'" and "The Da Vinci Code FAQ."

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The second tradition that Gerald Gardner represented was that of pagan religiosity, as refracted through the lenses of the modern neo-pagan revival. The best-known discovery narrative from this tradition was published by Charles Godfrey Leland in 1899 in his book *Aradia*.³⁰ As we have noted, Gardner himself was quite familiar with this work, as he drew on it when composing his own witch texts.

Aradia was a small book that made some big claims. Along with some other Italian folkloric material, Leland revealed to the world what he claimed was the *Vangelo*, or gospel, of a witch religion that had survived into nineteenth-century Italy. He thought that the text might be a translation of a mediaeval or even an ancient Roman work. As to its contents, it featured the Aradia of the book's title: a supernatural female figure who was the daughter of the goddess Diana and served as a kind of pagan messiah. The *Vangelo* also had a socially radical bent, as it was opposed to the Catholic Church, the feudal class system, and conventional sexual mores.

Unlike Gardner, Leland appears not to have written his source material himself. The character of Aradia had a genuinely old pedigree in Italian folklore.³¹ The passages of Italian that Leland quotes bear telltale signs of having been transcribed imperfectly from genuine oral recitations. And the pre-publication drafts of *Aradia* seem to show that he treated the *Vangelo* as a special, discrete text: one that he did not attempt to revise and rework as he did other material.

Yet there are problems with taking Leland's little book at face value.³² Leland claimed that he received the *Vangelo* in 1897 from an informant named Maddalena. There is corroborating evidence that Maddalena existed (her full legal name was Margherita Taluti),³³ but the same cannot be said of her witch

30. The best current edition of the work is Pazzaglini and Pazzaglini, *Aradia*.

31. She was ultimately derived from the biblical character Herodias, the woman who brought about the death of John the Baptist. See further Magliocco, "Who Was Aradia?"

32. See generally Hutton, *Triumph of the Moon*, 141–48, and the essays in Pazzaglini and Pazzaglini, *Aradia*.

33. See Jacobs and Nutt, *The International Folk-Lore Conference 1891*, 454. Raven Grimassi first drew attention to this reference in an unpublished paper delivered at the 2008 Pantheacon conference.

religion. *Aradia* stands out as an eccentric text, not wholly unlike the Book of Shadows. Well over a century of further research into Italian folklore has failed to turn up a surviving pagan witch-cult or any other *Vangeli*. The content of *Aradia* very probably drew on authentic peasant traditions, but in its current form it has been put together and creatively elaborated by a modern hand, probably that of Maddalena. To put it another way, Leland was not merely bringing to light a scriptural text that he had received from an old witch religion: his discovery narrative belongs to the same category as that of Gerald Gardner.

Again, the roots of the motif lie deep in the past. Our earliest discovery narrative from the world of Western European paganism refers to events that allegedly took place in 181 BCE.³⁴ Numa Pompilius was the legendary second king of Rome, who was thought to have lived between 753 and 673, and was credited with being the founder of traditional Roman religion. In 181, a chest was found buried in the vicinity of the Janiculum Hill containing books that were alleged to have been written by him. The exact number of the books is disputed, and our sources cannot decide whether they contained material relating to Roman religious law and ritual or treatises on Pythagorean philosophy. It was reported that the authorities decided that the books were religiously subversive, and they were duly burned on the orders of the Senate.

It is difficult to know exactly how to read this strange little episode, and scholars have disagreed on what to make of it.³⁵ The discovery itself may well have really taken place, but no one believes that the books were actually written by King Numa. Our sources attest that forgery was already mooted as an explanation in ancient times (and they note that the books did not look very old). One popular theory is that the books were planted with the intention of proving that Numa had been a pupil of Pythagoras. The notion that Numa was taught by Pythagoras seems to have been quite popular in Rome, and it served to link traditional Roman religion to the prestigious world of Greek culture.

34. For a round up of the relevant ancient sources, see Briscoe, *Commentary*, 480–83.

35. See, for example, Stott, “‘Book-Find Reports’ in Antiquity,” 123–27; Stott, *Why did they Write this Way?*, e.g. 117–21.

An argument can also be made in the other direction, however. In 186 BCE, just a few years before the discovery of the books, the Roman authorities had taken action to suppress the Greek cult of Dionysus. The near-coincidence of these two events — the suppression of Dionysianism and the burning of Pythagorean books — may suggest an attempt to *distance* Rome from the Greek world. The physical act of discovery may not even have happened: it may be a nationalistic myth. If this is indeed the true meaning of the discovery narrative, it forms an exception to the usual pattern, as the narrative ends up *delegitimising* the discovered texts. At any rate, the one thing that we can say with confidence about the episode is that someone was making use of the discovery narrative motif in an attempt to establish a normative claim of some sort about Roman religion.

So much for Numa. It is also worth mentioning here a work known as the *Phoenician History*, which was composed in Greek by Philo of Byblos (c.70–160 CE) and which survives in fragmentary form through the work of the Christian historian Eusebius. Philo claimed that his treatise was based on the theo-mythological writings of a Phoenician priest by the name of Sanchuniathon, who allegedly lived as long ago as 1000 BCE. It seems that Sanchuniathon himself drew his information from the secret writings of “Taautos” (the Egyptian god Thoth or Tahuti), which were deposited in temples. It seems to be generally agreed that Philo cannot be taken at face value: his sources were probably relatively recent, and Sanchuniathon may not even have existed.³⁶ In other words, what Philo tells us about his sources is not so much a scholarly footnote as a variant on the discovery narrative motif. Interestingly, scholars have noted other parallels to the story that Philo tells, including Graeco-Egyptian magical papyri that claimed to be copies of documents found in temples.³⁷

Moving away from pagan religious milieux, discovery narratives also recur in the Judaeo-Christian tradition. The oldest and most celebrated discovery narrative of all appears in the Hebrew Bible: in 622 BCE, the scriptural narra-

36. See, for example, Baumgarten, *The Phoenician History*, 261–68; Attridge and Oden, *Philo of Byblos*, 3–9; and Bowersock, *Fiction as History*, 43–44.

37. See, for example, Baumgarten, *The Phoenician History*, 80.

tive recounts that a “Book of the Torah” was found by the high priest Hilkiah while he was taking money out of the treasury of the great Temple in Jerusalem. This mysterious document was full of religious laws that the people of Judah were failing to keep. When he heard the contents of the book, the devout young King Josiah tore his clothes in anguish. A careful reading of the biblical text has suggested to scholars that the “Book of the Torah” was in fact the first edition of the book of Deuteronomy. In any event, the importance of its discovery is difficult to overestimate. The discovery formed part of a religious reformation spearheaded by Josiah which pushed Judahite religion some way towards what became Jewish monotheism.

Not surprisingly, the story of the “Book of the Torah” has generated a significant scholarly literature. It has been interpreted in a number of different ways,³⁸ and precedents and parallels have been cited for it from elsewhere in the ancient Near East, including notably the case of Philo and Sanchuniathon.³⁹ Exactly what happened may never be known. Orthodox Jews and evangelical Christians take the story literally and accept that Hilkiah really did make an unplanned discovery of a sacred text of ancient authorship. Most scholars, however, have concluded that the purpose of the discovery narrative was to legitimise a monotheising reform programme that was essentially innovatory in nature. The book was hidden in the Temple precisely in order to be discovered; or else there was no book and the narrative is a construct to explain and justify the policies attributed to Josiah. In any event, we can add the Josianic reform to our lengthening list of religious novelties whose novel nature was obscured by means of a discovery narrative.

Discovery narratives continued to play a role in early Christian literature. The best-known example is found in the *Apocalypse of Paul*, in which the story proceeds as follows. The date is around 388 CE. An angel appears to a noble-

38. For a survey of the scholarship, see e.g. Droge, “The Lying Pen of the Scribes’: Of Holy Books and Pious Frauds”; Henige, “Found but not lost”; and Stott, *Why did They Write this Way?*.

39. See e.g. Römer, “Transformations,” 7–9; Stott, “Finding the Lost Book of the Law” and Na’aman, “The ‘Discovered Book,’” 49–53.

man who is living in St Paul’s old house in Tarsus. The angel overcomes, rather forcibly, the man’s initial reluctance and makes him dig among the foundations of the house. The man finds a marble box, which ends up in the hands of the Emperor Theodosius, and is discovered to contain an account of the heavenly visions of the Apostle. Already in antiquity this story was subject to doubts; it was investigated by the Christian writer Sozomen and found to be baseless.⁴⁰ Another, more prosaic example of the discovery narrative motif is found in the prologue to an account of Jesus’s passion known as the *Acts of Pilate* (or the *Gospel of Nicodemus*). The supposed author, one Ananias, claims that he discovered the original Hebrew version of the *Acts* in the Jewish archives, and that he then translated the work into Greek. To these patristic-era forgeries we may add a forgery of a patristic text to which a discovery narrative was attached. The Renaissance scholar Erasmus composed a work entitled *De Duplici Martyrio*, which he ascribed to St Cyprian and claimed was discovered in a library.⁴¹

Apocryphal texts dealing with the early history of Christianity have continued to be “discovered” in more recent times. These include the *Unknown Life of Jesus Christ* (which supposedly came from the Tibetan Buddhist monastery at Hemis); *The Crucifixion, by an Eye-Witness* (from a Greek monastery in Alexandria); the *Letter of Benan* (from a tomb in Saqqara); and the twenty-ninth chapter of the Acts of the Apostles (from the Ottoman archives in Constantinople).⁴² It may also be noted that the American prophet Joseph Smith provided a very traditional discovery narrative for his *Book of Mormon* (1830): an angel called Moroni showed him the location of some golden plates which were buried in a stone box.⁴³ It has been suggested that Smith was showing direct esoteric influence here: the prophet had Masonic connections, and there is a legend in Royal Arch

40. Sozomen, *Ecclesiastical History*, 7.19. The narrative is found at *Apocalypse of Paul*, 1–2.

41. See Grafton, *Forgers and Critics*, 44–45.

42. See generally Goodspeed, *Strange New Gospels*.

43. This is the account given in the Mormon scriptures: see *Pearl of Great Price*, Joseph Smith – History, 30–52.

Freemasonry in which Enoch records sacred teachings on a golden plate which is left in a stone vault.⁴⁴ A few years later, in 1842, Smith produced a further scripture, the *Book of Abraham*, which he again claimed to have translated from an ancient text. In this case, he identified as his source a set of Egyptian papyri, which his fledgling church had acquired a few years previously.

The example of Mormonism illustrates a point on which larger new religious movements (NRMs) tend to differ from smaller ones in their handling of discovery narratives. It seems to be the case that larger NRMs are able to insulate themselves from the consequences of their narratives being empirically discredited. When the papyri from which the *Book of Abraham* was allegedly translated were rediscovered in 1967 and found by scholars to be standard pagan funerary texts, a major crisis in Mormonism ought to have resulted. But the episode seems to have had little or no effect on the close-knit Mormon community. The Mormon Church acknowledges the discrepancy, but addresses it by seeking to redefine what “translation” means.⁴⁵ More broadly, Mormon scholars have sidestepped rationalist challenges to their scriptures by drawing on ideas from postmodern subjectivism: a very unusual move for religious conservatives.⁴⁶ By contrast, real problems were caused in the Wiccan and Golden Dawn communities when the discovery narratives promoted by Gardner and Westcott started to come apart, and most modern adherents have had to accept that the narratives are simply false. But it seems that larger NRMs are likely to have sufficient social capital and scholarly resources to stop matters from reaching that point.⁴⁷

44. See Brooke, *The Refiner's Fire*, 157. One theory of how Smith produced the *Book of Mormon* is that he took it from an unpublished novel by one Solomon Spalding. It is interesting that a surviving novel MS composed by Spalding contains the motif of the narrator stumbling across ancient documents hidden in the ground: see Spalding, *The “Manuscript Story,”* 11–14.

45. See Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, “Translation and Historicity,” which redefines the concept from a “literal rendering of the papyri” to a process of “meditation, reflection, and revelation” on Joseph Smith’s part, for which the physical documents merely provided a starting point.

46. See Introvigne, “Book of Mormon Wars.”

47. Another illustration of this point is provided by the *Unknown Life of Jesus Christ* referred to above. It is believed that Mirza Ghulam Ahmad, the founder of the Islamic NRM known as

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Discovery narratives are seductive things. Even when we do not believe them, we may feel that we *wish* that we could do so. They are exciting and mysterious. They announce the disclosure of hidden secrets. In some cases, the drama is heightened by the presence of overtly supernatural elements. In any event, they offer us the irresistible chance of accessing a past that is otherwise lost, and the “thrill of making a fragile connection with something distant and unusual.”⁴⁸ They are compelling, as Eva Mroczek has argued, on a prerational level: “Although the past is at risk of loss... its recovery might always be around the corner. The world is full of hidden writing, including dangerous words from long ago, waiting to unleash a secret power that comes from ancient times and other worlds.”⁴⁹

A discovery narrative works, in essence, by harnessing this prerational force for the purpose of increasing the value of the text to which it is attached. The basic purpose of a discovery narrative is to substitute the text’s true but mundane origin for a false but more valuable one. The psychological motivation is no doubt a conviction that the text’s contents are so important that they deserve to be validated in a suitably out-of-the-ordinary manner. From this point of view, inventing a discovery narrative is not so much an act of deceit as a means of communicating a higher truth. The closest we have to a confession in this regard is a letter from Salvian, a Christian priest from fifth-century Gaul who forged a document in the name of the apostle St Timothy. In a letter to his bishop (in which he chose to write about the forger in the third person), he presented his deception as a white lie that served a greater good:

As the document itself shows, the author had such devotion and love for God that he thought that nothing should be put before God... And so when the writer saw that sin was to be found amongst almost everyone... zeal for the Lord was ‘put into his heart like a blazing fire,’ as the scripture says.⁵⁰

Ahmadiyya, drew on this text when he claimed that Jesus visited India; but his followers seemed not to care when the text was exposed as a hoax.

48. Hansen, “Strategies of Authentication,” 314.

49. Mroczek, “True Stories,” 21.

50. Salvian of Marseilles, *Letters*, 9, 170A, 171B–C. Salvian did not use a discovery narrative in his

The principal reason why a discovery narrative confers a higher value on the text to which it is attached is that it signals a link with past times. Gerald Gardner correctly intuited that his Wiccan material would not have been taken as seriously if he had admitted that it had been created more recently than *Casablanca*. Karen Ní Mheallaigh has written in this context of “the power of antiquity to confer authority.”⁵¹ That we instinctively revere cultural products that are old is a truism of human nature generally; and it applies all the more in esoteric circles, where age carries a particular cachet.

A claim of age can be used to validate an esoteric text in two distinct ways. First, the supposed connection with the past may come via a recent link in a longer chain. The Golden Dawn is an example of this: Dr Westcott claimed not that Anna Sprengel was a figure from the past, but that she stood at the head of a *tradition* which offered access to the past. The notion has tended to prevail among esotericists that legitimacy depends on establishing a lineage of this kind. This phenomenon is well established and can be traced back past the Golden Dawn and the various Rosicrucian and Masonic networks to the mystery cults of ancient Greece. The notion that initiation into a lineage serves as the appropriate channel for the transmission of sacred knowledge was included by Antoine Faivre as one of his well-known six characteristics of the esoteric tradition.⁵² A discovery narrative taps directly into this concern with lineage as a guarantor of legitimacy. Ideally, it offers a lineage that is just about plausible and slightly beyond the reach of verification; this has been referred to informally as the “girlfriend in Canada” syndrome.

Second, a discovery narrative may connect with the past by offering us a direct conduit into a single lost past moment — or even more than one such moment. The discovery of the *Book of the Treasure of Alexander*, for example, opened a door directly into the Hellenistic era, and indirectly into the time of Hermes Trismegistus himself. This recalls the venerable esoteric motif of a *prisca*

forged document, but his psychological motivations are readily transferable to the present context.

51. Ní Mheallaigh, “Pseudo-documentarism,” 424.

52. See Faivre, *Access to Western Esotericism*, 14–15.

theologia: a pure, primaeval divine wisdom that was vouchsafed to Hermes Trismegistus, Orpheus, Zoroaster, and even Adam. This notion became an integral part of Western esoteric thought during the Renaissance. It doubtless seemed a natural and intuitive idea in the context of an essentially premodern world in which the notion of progress had not yet taken hold.⁵³

The conduit into the past which a discovery narrative offers us may well lead not only to a specific past time but to a particular *person*, sometimes via the discovery of the relevant text in their tomb (as with, for example, Dardanus and Christian Rosenkreuz). This phenomenon has been termed “celebrity association” in the literature.⁵⁴ Salvian has something to teach us here. He admitted that he chose to ascribe his work to St Timothy because using his own name would not have won a hearing for the important things that he had to say:

[The forger] rightly inserted another individual’s name into his composition, no doubt in order that the smallness of his person should not detract from the authority of the salutary things that he wrote; for everything that is said nowadays is thought to have the same worth as the person who said it... So the writer wanted to withdraw and hide himself by all means possible, so that a piece of writing which in itself was very wholesome should not happen to be diminished because of the name of its author.⁵⁵

Sometimes, there is an interesting variation of this motif. Discovery narratives may claim that texts have been discovered in temples: Josiah’s “Book of the Torah” is exemplary here. A temple might be considered to be the obvious place for a religious or esoteric book, but there seems to be another notion at work here too. The text is conceived as emanating from a physical locus of sanctity. The temple itself is speaking.

53. On this and related ideas, see Hanegraaff, *Esotericism and the Academy*, esp. 7–12. Cf. also the words of Frances Yates in *Giordano Bruno and the Hermetic Tradition*: “The great forward movements of the Renaissance all derive their vigour, their emotional impulse, from looking backwards... [T]he search for truth was... of necessity a search for the early, the ancient, the original gold from which the baser metals of the present and the immediate past were corrupt degenerations.”

54. Hansen, “Strategies of Authentication,” 307.

55. Salvian of Marseilles, *Letters*, 9, 172B–C.

It should further be noted that, as well as harnessing the inherent power of age and lineage, a discovery narrative serves to explain the absence of the text that has allegedly been discovered.⁵⁶ If the text is so important, why have we never heard of it before? If the ideas contained in it are so good, why are they only now being brought to light? The answer must be that the document was lost or concealed. The *Apocalypse of Paul* must have been left buried on Paul's old property. The Book of Shadows must have been kept hidden from the witchfinders.

So much for the purposes of discovery narratives. Our survey would not be complete if we did not also recognise that discovery narratives have anomalies and tensions embedded within them. This is illustrated most clearly by the juxtaposition of the themes of age and lineage with that of new revelation. A discovery narrative announces that the information in the text to which it is attached is new and yet not new. Something that was always there has now been revealed, and things will not be the same again.

In this way, discovery narratives bridge the gap between two radically different ways of validating a body of esoteric or religious ideas: the claim that the ideas in question partake of the wisdom and legitimacy of antiquity, and the claim that they are destined to bring about the dawn of a new spiritual era. These two lines of thinking – the *prisca theologia* and the New Age, as we might call them – are found more broadly in the esoteric tradition, both separately and in combination with each other. Florian Ebeling has written in this context *à propos* of the Hermetic tradition:

[T]he Hermetic writings harbored a lost primeval knowledge that had allowed antediluvian men to reach a happy old age. In the most recent past and the immediate present, this knowledge was largely inaccessible. Only by recovering the writings from the most distant past was it possible to regain the Golden Age of primeval times.⁵⁷

56. Cf. Grafton, *Forgers and Critics*, 57–58.

57. Ebeling, *The Secret History*, 46.

There is a further way in which discovery narratives attempt to have their cake and eat it. A discovery narrative purports, by its very nature, to announce the uncovering of existing information that has merely been temporarily hidden. Yet the moment of discovery around which the narrative turns resembles a moment of special, new divine revelation. The claim that a book has suddenly been rediscovered in, say, a temple archive has an emotional impact not unlike the claim that a book has just been revealed by God for the first time through the pen of a prophet. The common feature is the sudden disclosure of previously unavailable sacred truths under dramatic circumstances.

To change the metaphor, discovery narratives not only have their cake and eat it; they may in addition bite off more than they can chew. A writer who deploys a discovery narrative is taking a big risk, one that may undermine his whole enterprise. In writing down a text and adorning it with a story of this kind, the writer is permanently committing himself to an attackable position: a position, indeed, that positively *invites* scrutiny and challenge. *Scripta manent*. It may only be a matter of time before the deception is exposed: ironically, in spite of their habit of setting aside limitations of time, discovery narratives may be only temporary products. The author of the *Apocalypse of Paul* was already exposed in antiquity. Gerald Gardner's narrative has arguably posed as many problems for the legitimacy of Wicca over the years as it has solved; and more people have heard the dubious story of Anna Sprengel than have ever studied and learnt from the Golden Dawn texts themselves.

In the case of some discovery narratives, this tension between overtly asking for belief and implicitly inviting doubt may be more or less deliberate. To be sure, most discovery narratives seem to have been formulated in order to be believed.⁵⁸ There is unlikely to be much playful irony in, for example, the account

58. This poses an obvious ethical problem, which the present writer leaves to others to resolve. There is a wider debate – quite a lively one – on the ethical status of pseudepigraphy in religious writings: for different approaches, see e.g. Metzger, “Literary Forgeries,” 13–20; Droge, “The Lying Pen of the Scribes”; Ehrman, *Forgery and Counterforgery*; and Bautch, “Concealment.”

of Josiah’s “Book of the Torah.” This is probably why those narratives that were crafted after the Enlightenment (with the notable exception of Joseph Smith’s) tend to steer clear of the arresting supernaturalism of some of the earlier ones. Finding some papers in Farringdon Road is more plausible to a modern audience than being guided by the spirit of Ostanes to a scroll in a temple, even though what is going on in the two cases is essentially the same.

Yet when reading some discovery narratives, one might doubt whether (all) readers were necessarily meant to take them literally. Examples in this category might include those attached to the *Mystery of Creation* and Christian Rosenkreuz’s enigmatic texts. As we read the narrative, is the author smiling at us knowingly? Are we expected to recognise the deployment of a literary device? Was the preoccupation with lineage and legitimacy something to be played with, or even satirised? Tim Whitmarsh has observed: “At the same time as it purports to authenticate the narrative it buttresses...pseudo-documentarism also ironises it.”⁵⁹ How conscious the irony was in any given case may be debated; but certainly, the figure of the ironist or trickster is not unknown to the esoteric tradition.

As a final observation here, we may note that a discovery narrative might be thought to undermine itself by the very fact that it is attached to a written text. If one of the purposes of such a narrative is to confer legitimacy through lineage, is not that purpose undermined if anyone can initiate herself simply by reading the text? The implicit message is that lineage and tradition are not really all that important. This problem (if it is a problem) is well illustrated by the case of Gerald Gardner: the publication of Gardner’s texts has given birth to a proliferation of non-initiatory and book-learned forms of Wicca, not always to the approval of more conservative initiated Wiccans. More broadly, this issue strikes at the root of the very concept of esotericism. Esoteric knowledge tends to become rather exoteric once it is written down and disseminated in textual form. Maybe the Rosicrucians were well advised not to make it clear what was contained in the Book T.

59. Whitmarsh, *Narrative and Identity*, 86. It should be noted that Whitmarsh was writing in the context of secular literary works.

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This article has not purported to provide a comprehensive survey of discovery narratives, and it has restricted itself to the esoteric and religious spheres. Discovery narratives are not an uncommon phenomenon in Western literature, and a full survey of this extensive field would have to include many claimed discoveries of secular documents, from Dictys of Crete to Ossian to Umberto Eco's *The Name of the Rose* (1980). As Anthony Grafton writes in this context, “the same tales have been received with equal warmth and credulity in a dizzying range of times, places, and cultural settings.”⁶⁰ It should also be remembered that discovery narratives constitute just one motif that is found in connection with the emergence of new sacred texts. In other cases, texts are believed, for example, to have been channelled from higher powers (*The Urantia Book, A Course in Miracles*), or are accepted as having been consciously composed by a founder figure (L. Ron Hubbard, Claude Vorilhon (Raël), Li Hongzhi).

Nevertheless, it is hoped that some light has been shed on the role played by discovery narratives in Western occultic and religious history, their pervasiveness, the psychological drivers behind them, and the tensions inherent within them. This is currently a surprisingly under-researched area, and there is much scope for future inquiry: not least because it is only a matter of time before the next example of the genre makes its appearance.

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60. Grafton, *Forgers and Critics*, 58.

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