

6 | The Sacred Symbols in the Nag Hammadi Codices: Books as Weapons in Demonic War

The people who owned the Nag Hammadi texts were Christian.¹ That is beyond any doubt. We can debate how one best defines what constitutes a Christian in the fourth and fifth centuries, but there is no question that the owners and makers of the codices here studied viewed themselves first and foremost as Christians. There are several indications of this. Apart from the fact that many texts deal with the question of the salvific power of Christ, scribal markings throughout the texts and the covers, along with other material aspects, reflect the Christian identity of the owners.² The codices are full of *nomina sacra* and the colophons inscribed on many codices and flyleaves leave no doubt of the Christian provenance of the codices. But can something be said regarding how the texts were used from these aspects of visual identity?³

As has been elucidated in the previous chapter, the letters of the alphabet carried great potential; however, the power imbued in letters and words was not only applied in pursuit of spiritual development. In Roman antiquity, magical words, symbols and spells were often inscribed on an amulet or charm and used as powerful tools that were beneficial for humans in many practical ways. Almost any object would suffice: a piece of bone, wood or

¹ This chapter is partly based on a previous article of mine, 'Nag Hammadi Codex I as a Protective Artifact and an Accidental Multi-Quire Codex'.

² This has also been pointed out by others; see, for example, Jenott and Pagels, 'Antony's Letters', 560–562.

³ For the use of *nomina sacra* in early Christian manuscripts as signs of the scribes' religious affiliation, see Hurtado, *The Earliest Christian Artifacts*, chapter 3.

metal or, preferably, something made for writing such as papyrus or parchment, which could easily be folded up and carried upon one's person, or buried at the location where the protection (or curse) was desired to take effect.⁴ Amulets were carried for all sorts of reasons, for healing and protection from sickness, to increase one's chances in the pursuit of love or business and, for those engaged with spiritual matters, as weapons or armour in the war against evil spirits. Christians were no different from pagans in their reliance on amulets and powerful charms when the situation called for it.⁵ As Harry Gamble has noted, quoting John Chrysostom, Christians used books in which the word of God was inscribed as protective artefacts:⁶ 'the devil will not dare approach a house where a Gospel-book is lying'.⁷ In this chapter, we shall survey the occurrences of powerful signs, words and formulae appearing on and in the Nag Hammadi codices and discuss what these material features can tell us about how they were used.

The *Nomina Sacra* in the Nag Hammadi Codices: Artefacts, Scribes and Contexts

A *nomen sacrum* is an abbreviated form of a holy word or name, and the type of words being shortened indicated that this was not only for the purpose of saving space. *Nomina sacra* were holy names

⁴ For an overview of amulets and magical papyri from Egypt and in Coptic from the time the Nag Hammadi codices were produced, see Marvin Meyer, Richard Smith and Neal Kelsey (eds.), *Ancient Christian Magic: Coptic Texts of Ritual Power* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999).

⁵ David E. Aune, *Apocalypticism, Prophecy, and Magic in Early Christianity* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2008); Theodore de Bruyn, *Making Amulets Christian: Artefacts, Scribes, and Contexts* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017).

⁶ Gamble, *Books and Readers*, 237–241.

⁷ John Chrysostom, *Homilies on John* 32. Trans. Harry Gamble, in Gamble, *Books and Readers*, 238.

and words imbued with power.⁸ This feature of ancient writing was predominantly a Christian practice – to such an extent, as Larry Hurtado notes, that its use in a manuscript is usually taken as an indication of the Christian identity of the scribe/owner/text.⁹ *Nomina sacra* occur in all the Nag Hammadi codices, but not all the texts. The words that are abbreviated are chiefly Greek holy words and names (infrequently, as with the name Jerusalem, with Jewish provenance). I will not give a full list of the numerous instances of the occurrence of *nomina sacra* in the Nag Hammadi texts, only note the patterns. One feature that strikes one immediately is that Coptic words are not converted to *nomina sacra*, not even in cases like $\chi\omicron\epsilon\iota\varsigma$, which in other Coptic manuscripts of similar provenance is abbreviated.¹⁰ Codex I is a good representative of which Greek words are usually abbreviated, often (but not always), with a superliner stroke over the abbreviation:

The Prayer of the Apostle Paul

$\overline{\text{IHC}}$ $\overline{\text{XC}}$ = Jesus Christ (A:13)

$\overline{\text{PNA}}$ = spirit (A:23)

The Apocryphon of James

$\overline{\text{CWP}}$ = Saviour (1:23, 2:17, 2:40, 16:25)

$\overline{\text{IHC}}$ = Jesus (2:23)

$\overline{\text{CTPOC}}$ = cross (5:37, 6:4, 6:5–6)

$\overline{\text{PNA}}$ = spirit (5:22, 12:2, 14:34, 15:25)

$\overline{\text{THLA}}$ = Jerusalem (16:9)

⁸ Ludwig Traube, *Nomina Sacra: Versuch einer Geschichte der christlichen Kurzung* (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1967 [1907]); Hurtado, *The Earliest Christian Artifacts*, 95–134.

⁹ Hurtado, *The Earliest Christian Artifacts*, 96.

¹⁰ This has been noted previously by Terry Miosi in a paper delivered at the 2013 Annual Meeting of the Canadian Society for Coptic Studies: ‘*Nomina Sacra* and the Nag Hammadi Library’. See, for example, *The Gospel of Mary* 10:11–12 and *Acts of Peter* 131:13, and in BG the word is abbreviated at several places (for example 90:15).

The Gospel of Truth

ⲧⲏⲥ ⲭⲣ̅ⲓⲥ = Jesus Christ (18:16)

ⲧⲏⲥ = Jesus (20:11, 20:24, 24:8)

Ⲙⲧⲣ̅ⲟⲥ = cross (20:27)

ⲡⲏⲛ̅ = spirit (24:11, 26:36, 30:17, 31:18, 34:11, 42:33, 43:17)

ⲭⲣ̅ⲓⲥ = Christ (36:14)

The Treatise on the Resurrection

ⲧⲥ and ⲏⲏⲥ = Jesus (48:19, 50:1)

The Tripartite Tractate

ⲧⲏⲥ = Jesus (117:12)

ⲭⲣ̅ⲓⲥ, ⲭⲣ̅ⲓⲥ and ⲭⲣ̅ⲏⲥ = Christ (87:9, 132: 18, 132:28, 134:13, 136:1)

ⲧⲏⲥ ⲭⲣ̅ⲓⲥ = Jesus Christ (117:15)

ⲡⲏⲛ̅ = spirit (58:35, 63:36, 64:9, 66:27, 72:2, 72:18, 73:2, 101:4, 101:7, 101:16, 103:15, 103:18, 106:6, 106:22, 107:28, 118:21, 118:31–32, 119:16, 122:31, 127:32, 128:8, 138:24).

The most common *nomina sacra* in early Christian manuscripts of Greek provenance, Θεός and Κύριος, do not occur in the Nag Hammadi codices. This is most likely because the translators opted to replace these words (and likely many others) with the Coptic equivalents ⲡⲟⲩⲧⲧⲉ and ⲭⲟⲓⲉⲓ, and, as we mentioned above, the team of scribes behind the Nag Hammadi texts did not abbreviate Coptic words into *nomina sacra*. This is a strong indicator that the texts were copied within the same scribal milieu wherein certain practices concerning the use of *nomina sacra* were prevalent. The most frequent *nomen sacrum* in the Nag Hammadi texts is without a doubt ⲡⲏⲛ̅, for the word ⲡⲏⲛ̅ⲩⲁ. What is curious about this fact is that Hurtado categorises ⲡⲏⲛ̅ⲩⲁ among those words that are less likely to be abbreviated in early Christian manuscripts.¹¹ The pattern that emerges for the use of *nomina sacra* indicates that the scribal team as a collective were tied to specific writing or copying practices; however, other facts

¹¹ Hurtado, *The Earliest Christian Artifacts*, 134.

regarding the use of sacred symbols in the Nag Hammadi codices reveal that scribes also applied their own signatures to the texts.

The Power of the Cross in Codex I

The symbol of the cross was imbued with great power among many early Christians, and it seems to have a particular function in Nag Hammadi Codex I. At the end of the flyleaf, page B, we find the title *Prayer of the Apostle Paul* followed by ‘In peace’ (see Fig. 6.1). Below this are scribal decorations, two Latin Crosses, one (most likely two) *cruces ansatae* and the words ο χ ριστος, that is, the Greek nominative singular article, a *Christogram* representing the word $\chi\rho$ (ι)στ(ο)ς and the word ἅγιος, forming the words ‘Christ is Holy’:



Figure 6.1 The flyleaf of Codex I, page B. Photo by Basile Psiroukis. Image courtesy of the Institute for Antiquity and Christianity Records, Special Collections, Claremont Colleges Library, Claremont, California.

ΠΡΟΣΕΥΧΗ ΠΑ[ΥΛΟΥ]
 ΑΠΟΣΤΟΛΟΥ
 ΕΝ ΕΙΡΗΝΗ

Prayer of Paul
 The Apostle
 In peace

We also find several *staurograms* – at least four are visible in the facsimile of Codex I¹² – as well as *cruces ansatae* (e.g. at the end of Part I of *The Tripartite Tractate*, at 104:3).¹³ Hurtado has argued that the *staurogram* was most likely a sign of the importance attributed to the crucifixion, but not all the texts in Codex I assign such importance to it.¹⁴ The longest text, *The Tripartite Tractate*, does not even mention the crucifixion. Thus, the text's content cannot have been the only reason for the importance placed on the cross in Codex I; rather, it is more likely that the use reflects a specific scribe's preferences and practices.

Closer examination of the facsimile of Codex I also reveals a curious use of one of the Coptic letters, the one which is written as the Latin cross, *ti* (†), which seems to have been enlarged, making it stand out when one observes the pages of the text

¹² According to Francis A. Williams, who translated and transcribed *The Apocryphon of James* for the Coptic Gnostic Library project, on page 5, line 17, there is a *rho* superimposed on a *tau*, symbolizing the word *cross* (which together with *eipe* becomes crucifixion). See *Nag Hammadi Codex I*, ed. Attridge, 34. However, this line is fragmented in the facsimile edition and neither the word, the *nomina sacra*, nor the *staurogram* are clearly visible. See Robinson, *The Facsimile: Codex I*, 9.

¹³ My gratitude to René Falkenberg for calling my attention to this.

¹⁴ Hurtado, *The Earliest Christian Artifacts*, chapter 4. In NHC I, the *staurogram* occurs where we find the *nomen sacrum* ⲥⲧⲣⲟⲥ, for the Greek σταυρός, 'cross'. Three of the instances appear in *The Apocryphon of James* 5:35–6:7, which reads: ⲡⲬⲌⲈⲒⲐ ⲙ̀ⲠⲠⲠⲤⲈⲦⲈⲐ ⲈⲠⲠⲠ ⲙ̀ⲠⲠⲤⲧ(ⲈⲦ)ⲠⲠⲟⲥ ⲙ̀ⲠⲠ ⲠⲠⲟⲩⲦ ⲠⲠⲠⲠ ⲠⲠⲠⲠⲟⲩ ⲙ̀ⲠⲠⲠⲠⲕ. ⲙ̀ⲠⲠⲕⲟⲣ[Ⲧⲱ]ⲟⲩⲃⲏ ⲠⲬⲌⲈⲒⲐ ⲠⲬⲌⲈⲒⲐ ⲕⲈ ⲒⲈⲠⲙ̀ⲠⲠⲠ ⲠⲬⲌⲈⲒⲐ ⲙ̀ⲠⲠⲠⲕ ⲠⲠⲠⲠⲠ ⲕⲈ ⲙ̀ⲠⲠ ⲈⲠⲈⲦⲈ ⲠⲈⲠⲟⲩⲕⲈⲒⲈⲒⲈ ⲈⲠⲙ̀ⲠⲠⲧⲒ ⲠⲠⲠⲠⲤⲧ[ⲈⲦⲈ] ⲈⲠⲠⲠⲤⲧ(ⲈⲦ)ⲠⲠⲟⲥ ⲠⲠⲠⲧⲈⲠⲠⲠⲤⲧⲈⲦⲈ [ⲠⲬⲌ]ⲠⲠⲠⲤⲧ(ⲈⲦ)ⲠⲠⲟⲥ ⲧⲠⲟⲩⲟⲩ ⲧⲈ ⲧⲙ̀ⲠⲠⲧⲈⲠⲟⲩ ⲙ̀ⲠⲠⲠⲠⲟⲩⲧⲈ. 'Lord, do not speak to us about the cross and death, for they are far from you. The Lord answered and said: Verily I say to you, none will be saved unless they believe in my cross. For those who believes in my cross, theirs is the kingdom of God.' Text and trans. Francis A. Williams, modified, in *Nag Hammadi Codex I*, ed. Attridge, 36–37.

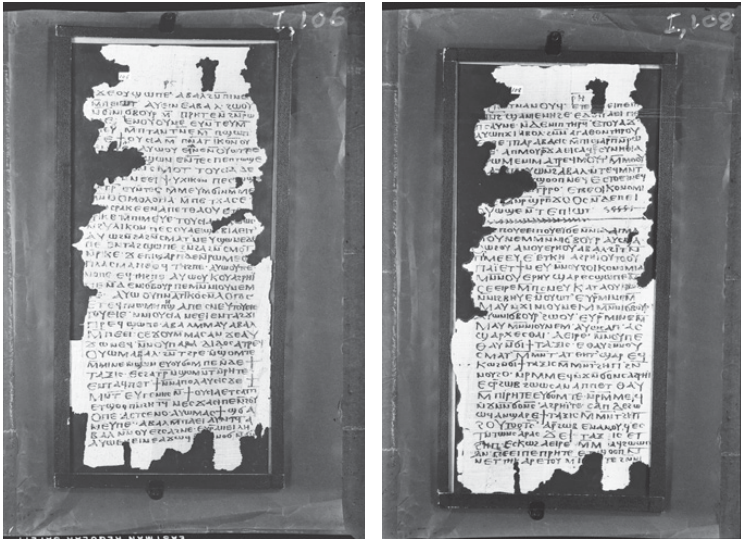


Figure 6.2 Two examples of pages from Codex I with enlarged *ti* (†). Pages 106 (left) and 108 (right). Photo by Jean Doresse. Images courtesy of the Institute for Antiquity and Christianity Records, Special Collections, Claremont Colleges Library, Claremont, California.

from afar (see Fig. 6.2). These three pages are just a few examples where *ti* (†) is presented in this manner.¹⁵ (For more examples, see Fig. 3.2.)

The contents of the pages do not give us many clues, unfortunately. Most of them do not discuss the cross, or even mention it. There does not seem to be a pattern in the topic being discussed in the pages where *ti* (†) is enlarged. So why would a scribe, other than for a purely decorative reason or inexperience, enlarge the letter *ti* (†) in this manner? I suggest that it has to do with the similarity that this letter has to the symbol which would become the very sign of Christians around the world: the cross.

¹⁵ See, for example, pages A, 4, 5, 6, 8, 9, 10, 16, 17, 22–23, 25, 26, 31, 35, 53, 56, 57, 59, 64, 68, 72, 75, 83, 84, 86–89, 92, 106, 107, 111, 116, 118, 123.

We know that in Greek, the letter *tau* (τ) was associated with the cross among Christians.¹⁶ In the *Epistle of Barnabas*, the rescue of Lot and his crowd of 318 people (Gen 14:14) is explained by reference to gematria. We are told that the number 318 corresponds to the Greek letters *tau*, *eta*, *iota*, referring to Jesus on the cross. The *tau* represented the cross and *iota* + *eta* represented Jesus.¹⁷ Justin Martyr also associated the letter *tau* with the cross, as did Tertullian.¹⁸ The reason for this, of course, was that the letter *tau* looked like a cross. The Coptic letter *ti*, in comparison to the Greek *tau* which lacks the vertical line above the horizontal line of the letter, is also reminiscent of the form of the cross, if not more so than the Greek *tau*.

The cross was not solely used to indicate the Christian identity of an artefact or individual, it was also thought to have protective attributes¹⁹ and was used in the battle against demons, as Athanasius' version of *The Life of Antony* states:

(Antony) rose and saw a monster resembling a man as far as the thighs, but having legs and feet like an ass. Antony simply made the Sign of the Cross and said: 'I am Christ's servant. If you are on a mission against me, here I am.' But the monster with its demons fled so fast that its speed caused it to fall and die. And the death of

¹⁶ Hurtado, *The Earliest Christian Artifacts*, 147–148. See Gunnar Samuelsson's, *Crucifixion in Antiquity: An Inquiry into the Background and Significance of the New Testament Terminology of Crucifixion* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2011), which argues that the concept of a crucifixion in antiquity did not necessarily entail a person hanging with their arms outstretched, since the word σταυρός was also used for pole or stake. Any wooden pole could be used for crucifixion. This could suggest that the idea of the letter tau representing the crucifixion might have more to do with the way the word for crucifixion came to be abbreviated, with a tau (often in the middle), rather than a historical event. My gratitude to Joel Kuhlin for introducing this position to me.

¹⁷ *Epistle of Barnabas* 9:7.

¹⁸ Justin Martyr, 1 *Apol.* 55, 60; Tertullian, *Contra Marcionem* 3:22.

¹⁹ Larry Hurtado, 'The Staurogram in Early Christian Manuscripts: The Earliest Visual Reference to the Crucified Jesus?', in *New Testament Manuscripts*, ed. T. Kraus (Leiden: Brill, 2008), 207–226; Roy D. Kotansky, 'The Magic "Crucifixion Gem" in the British Museum', *Greek, Roman, and Byzantine Studies* 57 (2017), 631–659.

me your gifts, of which you do not repent, through the Son of Man, the Spirit, the Paraclete of truth. Give me authority when I ask you; give healing for my body when I ask you through the Evangelist, and redeem my eternal light soul and my spirit. And the First-born of the Pleroma of grace – reveal him to my mind!

Grant me what no angel eye has seen and no archon ear (has) heard, and what has not entered into the human heart which came to be angelic and (modelled) after the image of the psychic God when it was formed in the beginning, since I have faith and hope. And place upon me your beloved, elect, and blessed greatness, the First-born, the First-begotten, and the wonderful mystery of your house; for yours is the power and the glory and the praise and the greatness for ever and ever. Amen.

Prayer of Paul (the) Apostle.

In Peace.

Christ is holy.²²

ετεμακρ̄ ρτηκ [αραου] ρ̄ιτ̄η
 π̄ωρηε̄ μπρωμε [πεπνε]νμα
 ππαρακλητος̄ η̄ [τμεε]α [δ]† π̄ηει
 η̄ τεκζουσια [εει]ρ̄ διτ̄ῑ μ̄μακ̄
 μα† η̄νον [ταλ]βο̄ μπασωμᾱ
 ρωε̄ εειρ̄ διτ̄ῑ [μ̄μα]κ̄
 ρ̄ιτ̄η̄ πεγασ̄·σελιςτης [ησ]ωωτε
 η̄ ταψυχη̄ η̄ ουαειν [ωα]ε̄ η̄ η̄ρηε̄
 μη̄ παπ̄η(εγμ)ᾱ δ̄ αγω
 πω[ρη] [μ̄μ]η̄σε̄ μ̄πληρωμᾱ
 η̄ τ̄χαρι[ς] [βαλ]η̄ε̄ απανοοῡ
 ερῑ χαριζε̄ η̄ [τακ] μ̄πετε̄ η̄ πεβελ
 η̄ ασ̄·σελο̄ς [ηε]γ̄ αραε̄ αγω
 πετεμ̄(πε)μ̄εωχε [ηα]ρχων
 σατμεε̄ αγω πετε μ̄ [η̄]ε̄
 αρη̄η̄ ρ̄μ̄ φητ̄ η̄ πρωμε
 η̄ ταρ̄ωωπε η̄ ασ̄·σελο̄ς αγω
 κατᾱ μ̄π̄νοντε̄ μ̄ψῡ χικος̄
 η̄ ταρονη̄λασε̄ μ̄μαε̄ χη̄ η̄ ωαρ̄η̄
 ρωε̄ εοη̄η̄η̄η̄ μ̄μ̄ε̄ η̄ τ̄πιστικ̄
 η̄ θελ̄η̄η̄ η̄ σ̄ουωρ̄ α τοοτ̄
 μ̄πεκμεσε̄ θεος̄ η̄ ασ̄·απητος̄
 η̄ εκλε̄ κτος̄ η̄ εγ̄λοσητος̄ πωρη̄
 μ̄μ̄η̄σε̄ πωρη̄ η̄ σ̄ενος̄ μη̄
 η̄ μ̄γ̄στηριον̄ [η̄ωπη] ρε̄ μ̄ [η̄]
 εκη̄η̄ α [βαλ]χε̄ πωκ [η̄]ε̄
 πεμαρ̄τ̄ [ε] ᾱ [γω] πεαγ̄ αγω
 τεκζομ̄ [ο] λοση̄η̄η̄ μ̄η̄
 τ̄μ̄η̄η̄ [α]δ̄ ωᾱ ε̄ η̄ η̄ρηε̄ η̄ η̄ η̄ρηε̄

²² NHC I, A1–B6. Trans. Dieter Mueller, modified, in *Nag Hammadi Codex I*, ed. Attridge, 8–11.

[ϪΛΜΗΝ] ΠΡΟΣΕΥΧΗ ΠΑ[ΥΛΟΥ]
 ΑΠΟΣΤΟΛΟΥ
 ΕΝ ΕΙΡΗΝΗ
 Ο Ϫ(ΙΣΤΟΣ) ΔΣΓΙΟΣ.

As we have seen above, this short text ends with a colophon, inscribed on the back of the flyleaf, clearly indicating the power this scribe attributed to the sign of the cross.²³

Not only do the flyleaf and the enlarged *ti* throughout the codex reveal the power assigned to the cross. Several texts in Codex I are also occupied with possession by demons and the struggle against lower material powers; some even mention the importance of the cross in this struggle.²⁴ In *The Apocryphon of James* we read the following:

<p>‘... remember my cross and my death, and you will live.’ But I (James) answered and said to him: ‘Lord, do not mention to us the cross and death, for they are far from you.’ The Lord answered and said: ‘Verily, I say unto you, none will be saved unless they believe in my cross. But those who have believed in my cross, theirs is the kingdom of God.’²⁵</p>	<p>ΔΡΙ ΠΜΕΕΥΕ Μ̄ΠΑΣΤΑΥΡΟΣ ΔΥΩ ΠΑΜΟΥ ΔΥΩ ΤΕΤ̄ΗΠΑΩΗϪ ΔϪϳ̄ΟΥΩΥϪ̄ ἸΛΕ ΠΑΧΗ̄ ΝΕϪ ΧΕ ΠΧΔΕΙϪ Μ̄ΠΩΡ· ΔΤΕΥΟ ΔΡΔΗ Μ̄ΠΣΤ(ΔΥ)ΡΟΣ Μ̄̄ ΠΜΟΥ ΝΕΙ ΓΑΡ ΣΕΟΥΗΟΥ Μ̄ΜΑΚ ΔϪΘ[ΥΩ]ΥϪ̄ ἸΘΙ ἸΧΔΕΙϪ ΠΑΧΕϪ ΧΕ ϪΛΜΗΝ †ΧΟΥ Μ̄ΜΑϪ ΝΗΤ̄Η ΧΕ Μ̄̄ ΛΑΛΥΕ ἸΔΟΥΧΕΕΙ ΕΙΜΗΤΙ ἸΣΕΠΙϪΤ[ΕΥΕ] ΔΠΑΣΤ(ΔΥ)ΡΟΣ ΝΕΝΤΑ[Ϫ]ΠΙΣΤΕΥΕ [ΓΑ]Ρ ΑΠΑΣΤ(ΔΥ)ΡΟΣ· ΤΩΟΥ ΤΕ ΤΜ̄̄Τ̄ΕΡΟ Μ̄̄ ΠΠΟΥΤΕ.</p>
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²³ For the use of *nomina sacra* in early Christian manuscripts as signs of the scribes’ religious affiliation, see Hurtado, *The Earliest Christian Artifacts*, chapter 3.

²⁴ NHC I, *The Apocryphon of James* 4:31–5:35. See also NHC I, *The Gospel of Truth* 19:27–21:25, 31:13–35; NHC I *The Tripartite Tractate* 120:29–121:14.

²⁵ NHC I, 5:34–6:7: Trans. Mueller, in *Nag Hammadi Codex I*, ed. Attridge, 36–37.

In the following text, *The Gospel of Truth*, there is an episode where Jesus steps down to earth as a living book in which all the names to be saved are written. As he descends, he is captured and nailed to a cross. This act, the nailing of the book/Jesus on the cross, announces the publication of the book of life to one and all.²⁶ Those people who hear and understand the message of the book on the cross are saved. Jesus is also described as having power over the evils of the world, able to disperse any sickness and make the torture of life on earth cease.²⁷

The following text, *The Treatise on the Resurrection*, is the only text copied by Scribe B and does not include enlarged uses of the letter *ti*, nor does it devote attention to the cross or how to protect oneself from demonic attack. *The Treatise on the Resurrection* is, rather, one long defence of the theological position that it is the soul that rises in the resurrection, not the body.

The last and by far the longest of the texts in Codex I, *The Tripartite Tractate*, is largely occupied with explaining exactly how the cosmos is constructed and why different people react in different ways to the message of Jesus. We are told that before the Saviour's appearance there is no real knowledge; the different cosmic powers hold domination over humans as well as the earth. As Jesus appears on earth, some people gain true knowledge right away (about the nature of Jesus and the heavenly powers), some must be convinced, while others never get the message due to their material nature.²⁸ Jesus is then killed by the lower powers of the cosmos, but this has no effect on the salvation of humans.²⁹ The

²⁶ NHC I, 19:27–21:25.

²⁷ NHC I, 31:13–35.

²⁸ For a study of this text from the perspective of anthropology and ethics, see Linjamaa, *The Ethics of The Tripartite Tractate*.

²⁹ NHC I, 120:29–121:14.

Saviour gives humans the power to withstand evil demons and the destructive emotions with which they are associated.³⁰ Even though the cross is not discussed in detail in *The Tripartite Tractate*, the letter *ti* appears enlarged at many places within the text, in the same manner as it does in the other texts inscribed by Scribe A, and it is clear that it is only through the salvific message of Jesus that the destructive powers of the cosmos can be combatted.

I am not arguing that all who read Codex I used it as a talisman but suggesting, rather, that there were those (Scribe A being one such individual) who would recognise both the *ti* and the crosses inscribed on the flyleaf as protective symbols of the cross, which was thought to be effective against demonic attack, destructive emotions and sickness. The cross was effective through its reference to the salvific message of the death of Jesus. I also suggest that the curious use of the letter *ti*, particularly in *The Tripartite Tractate*, could have been a way to deal with the lack of references to the crucifixion in the text. Scribe A was obviously greatly invested in the sign of the cross and, thus, scattered the text with references to it.

Let us now turn to the question of the sort of context that would have called for the use of a charm made for combatting evil spirits, and what the power of the book would have given its carrier.

Resisting Desert Demons with the Cross as a Sign of Firmness

One feature that set the monks belonging to the emerging coenobitic monasticism of fourth-century Egypt apart from other Christians was their choice of garments and dress. Dressing in

³⁰ Linjamaa, *The Ethics of The Tripartite Tractate*, chapter 2.

a uniform way created a sense of community.³¹ Here follows section 81 of Pachomius' rules:

This is their equipment (*armatura*): two linen tunics (*lebitonarium*) plus the one already worn, a long scarf (*sabanum*) for the neck and shoulders, a small skin (*pellicula*) hanging from the shoulder, shoes (*gallicula*), two cowls (*cucullus*), a belt (*zona*) and a staff (*bacillus*). If you find anything more than this, you shall take it away without contradiction.³²

The cowls, or hoods, were at times ornamented with crosses.³³ Some monks wore a scapular which, according to an apothegm from the anonymous *Apophthegma Patrum*, signified the cross: 'The elders used to say: "The cowl is the symbol of innocence, the scapular of the cross, the girdle of courage. Let us then live in accordance with our habit, doing everything with diligence, lest we appear to be wearing an inappropriate habit."³⁴

What did the cross do for the monks? The cross was a powerful tool in the fight against demons.³⁵ Again, from the anonymous collection of *Apophthegmata Patrum*: 'The athlete boxes in contests; the monk, contending using reasoning, stretches out his hands to heaven in the shape of the cross, calling on God.'³⁶ And: 'So does he who seeks Christ the Lord-and-master, keeping the cross in mind

³¹ Ingvild S. Gilhus, *Clothes and Monasticism in Ancient Christian Egypt* (London: Routledge, 2021).

³² Trans. Gilhus, in Gilhus, *Clothes and Monasticism*, 50–51.

³³ Agnieszka Muc, 'Some Remarks on the Egyptian Monastic Dress in the Context of Literary Sources and Funerary Finds', *Studies in Ancient Art and Civilization* 13 (2009): 183–188.

³⁴ *Apophthegmata Patrum* (anonymous collection), 55. Trans. John Wortley, in Wortley, *The Anonymous Sayings of the Desert Fathers: A Selected Edition and Complete English Translation* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 50–51.

³⁵ *Apophthegmata Patrum* (anonymous collection) 12.

³⁶ *Apophthegmata Patrum* (anonymous collection) 143. Trans. Wortley, slightly modified, in Wortley, *The Anonymous Sayings*, 99. Wortley does not translate the word *logismoï*, which I here render as 'reasoning'.

without wavering, overcome every offence he encounters until he reaches the crucified one.³⁷

As David Brakke and other scholars have discussed in detail in recent years, one chief monastic occupation and concern was that of resisting demonic influence. It is no secret that the Nag Hammadi codices are bursting with material devoted to the perpetual combat between humans and demons. As has been discussed above, one way to resist demonic attack was to carry signs of God to fill oneself with the protective power of Christ. But what did the monks imagine were the practical benefits of carrying and making these signs against the demons?

The monk who is successful in fighting the demonic powers is described as having mastered his passions, leaving him firm, restful and immovable. Firmness in both speech and demeanour represented transcendence. The opposite was chaos, change and unruliness. This was the domain of demons. The Greek term *σάλος/σαλεύω* (*tossing* or *rolling*) is often used in the Septuagint to describe chaos and a shaking earth, the demeanour of the unjust and the enemies of God in his presence.³⁸ It was also the word used by the Greeks to describe the unpredictable and terrible sea. The contrast is *ἀσάλευτος*, firmness and immovability. It is this concept that the monk portrayed as an ideal, thus carrying with him the ideals associated with the philosophers of old.³⁹ As Michael

³⁷ *Apophthegmata Patrum* (anonymous collection), 203. Translation John Wortley, in Wortley, *The Anonymous Sayings*, 145.

³⁸ 1 Chr 16:30; Job 9:6; Ps 33:8, 46:6, 112:6; Prv 3:26.

³⁹ Other central terms and opposing concepts are *κίνησις/στάσις* change/firm and *χρόνος/αἰών* time/eternity, all used to depict the transcendent vis-à-vis the nature of life in the cosmos. Plato's distinction between *being* and *becoming* was what separated the nature of the transcendent world of ideas from the cosmic existence, subjected to time, materiality and perpetual change: a life in motion. Plato described the soul as being caused to *move about* by corporal fetters (*Phaedo* 79C). Great philosophers were portrayed as immovable and unaffected by the motions of cosmic life. Socrates was known for being able to stand for a whole day in deep and seemingly distant contemplation (Plato, *Symposium* 174A–B, 220C–D). We have similar stories of Pythagoras; during a voyage to Egypt, Pythagoras sat completely still for two days and

Williams has shown, St Antony is often attached to this ideal of immovability, facing demons with an immovable (ἀσάλευτον) mind.⁴⁰ An extreme example of this theme is seen in the practice of stylite ascetics: holy men living a life of literal immovability on high pillars in their quest to get closer to God.

As ample studies have shown,⁴¹ these themes are firmly rooted in the Nag Hammadi texts. This is most clearly demonstrated by Michael A. Williams, who investigates the mention of †ϯϷϵⲗⲉⲁⲉⲧⲉⲙⲁⲗⲕⲓⲙⲓ ('the immovable race')⁴² in Sethian texts in particular detail, connecting it to broader, late ancient philosophical and religious motifs of stability (ἵστημι) and unshakeability (ἀσάλευτος).⁴³ But as Williams himself makes clear, the ideal of stability is not restricted to the Sethian Nag Hammadi tractates. The use of the term ἄτον (rest) in the Valentinian Nag Hammadi texts is another example. The cross gave the monk firmness of mind, the very reason monks were the prime target for demonic attack. As we read in *The Letter of Peter to Philip* from Codex VIII:

three nights, not moving, eating or drinking the whole way. Pythagoras was also depicted as master of bodily impulses: he never got drunk and he avoided laughter, both typical signs of losing control and surrendering to one's passions (Porphyry, *Vita Pythagoras* 11–16; Diogenes Laertius, *Life of Eminent Philosophers* 8:19–20).

⁴⁰ Michael A. Williams, *The Immovable Race: Gnostic Designation and the Theme of Stability in Late Antiquity* (Leiden: Brill, 1985), 30–31.

⁴¹ Jan Helderma, *Die Anapausis im Evangelium Veritatis* (Leiden: Brill, 1984); Jan Helderma, 'Isis as Plane in the Gospel of Truth?', in *Gnosis and Gnosticism*, ed. M. Krause (Leiden: Brill, 1981), 26–46.

⁴² This race/generation is mentioned and connected to the recipients of *The Apocryphon of John* in NHC II, 2:20, 2:24; 25:23; 29:10; 31:31–32 and in BG 22:15–16, 65:2–3, 73:9–10, 75:20–76:1.

⁴³ Williams concludes in this study that the designation 'the immovable race' appearing in several Sethian works is not to be understood as a self-designation used by the race of Seth, nor should one think of a race of humans predetermined to be saved. Rather the term 'immovable race/generation' draws on a long religious and philosophical tradition using similar terminology to designate those who have reached a certain level of self-mastery and knowledge, likened in Sethianism with being awakened to one's true self (Williams, *The Immovable Race*, chapter 7).

I gave him authority in order that he might enter into the inheritance of his Fatherhood . . .

When you strip yourselves of what is corrupted, then you will become illuminators in the midst of mortal humans. And this (is the reason) that you will fight against the powers, because they do not have rest like you, since they do not wish that you be saved.⁴⁴

ΔΙΨ̅ ΝΑϞ ΠΝΟΥΕΞΟΥϞΙΑ ΧΕ̅ ΕϞΕΒΕΙ
ΕΞΟΥΝ Ε Ψ̅ΚΛΗΡΟΠΟΜΙΑ ΝΤΕ
ΤΕϞΜΝΤΕΙΩΤ̅ . . .

ΕΨ̅ΩΠΕ ΕΤΕΤΝΑΚΑΚ ΤΗΝΕ ΚΑϞΗΥ
ΜΠΑΪ ΕΤΤΑΚΗΟΥΤ̅ ΤΟΤΕ
ΕΤΕΤΝΑΨ̅ΩΠΕ ΝΞΕΝΦΩΣΤΗΡ ΞΝ
ΤΜΗΤΕ ΝΞΕΝΡΩΜΕ ΕΥΜΟΟΥΤ
ΠΗ Δ[Ε] ΧΕ̅ ΝΨ̅ΩΤΗΝ ΕΤΝΑΨ̅ ΜΝ
ΝΙΘΟΜ ΧΕ̅ Ν[Τ]ΟΟΥ ΜΜΝΤΑΥ
ΝΟΥΜΤΟΝ ΚΑ[ΤΑ] ΤΞΤΗΞΕ̅
ΕΠΙΔΗ ΝΞΕΟΥΨ̅ ΔΗ [Ξ]ΗΔ
ΝΤΕΤΗΝΟΥΞΜ.

The term ‘Fatherhood’ (τεϞμντειωτ) we encounter here is one attached to the monasticism of Egypt, as Lundhaug and Jenott have shown.⁴⁵ This passage encapsulates many elements which would have spoken to the preoccupation of monks:⁴⁶ for example, apart from referencing the authority of the abbot, it calls on the monk to be an example to others, and reminds him that the activity of demons must be addressed because they work tirelessly to distract and entice the monk to do evil.

The Ontology of Sacred Symbols: How a Book Becomes a Weapon in Spiritual Warfare

How should we imagine the use of books for protection to have been undertaken? To help us conceptualise the power of sacred

⁴⁴ NHC VIII, 136:26–137:13. Text and trans. Frederik Wisse, slightly modified, in *Nag Hammadi Codices VIII*, ed. Sieber, 242–243.

⁴⁵ Lundhaug and Jenott, *Monastic Origins*, 173–189.

⁴⁶ The fight against demons was, as David Brakke has shown, a central preoccupation in early Christian monasticism. See Brakke, *Demons and the Making of the Monk*.

symbols, we have a lot to gain by bringing in perspectives from ritual theory, as well as the sociology and anthropology of religion. As has been long recognised in these fields, material objects used in ritual and religious contexts cannot solely be approached as passive carriers of cultural meaning as, in such settings, objects otherwise viewed as inanimate become imbued with agency with performative qualities.⁴⁷ This is achieved not through the ‘beliefs’ of any individual, but through the cultural ontology of a collective. The sacred and protective symbols contained in the codices were scattered throughout the texts themselves, texts that relate a worldview corresponding to the broader early Christian monastic one wherein demons possessed real agency. The codices were kept and carried around by the monks in this environment, one in which the lurking presence of demons was always a reality. The protective power of the codex corresponded to the sacred words and symbols disseminated throughout its texts, protecting the monk when reading about topics featuring evil demons in central roles – just as the codex itself protected the monk as he/she walked through life, where a demon could appear at any time. Thus, both the sacred symbols and the codices as material objects played important performative roles as they were read and carried within the monastic milieu which produced them.

⁴⁷ There has been much research into this subject within the field of the anthropology of religion: for example, Anne-Christine Hornborg, ‘Objects as Subjects: Agency, and Performativity in Rituals’, in *The Relational Dynamics of Enchantment and Sacralization*, ed. Måns Broo, Tuija Hovi, Peik Ingman and Terhi Utriainen (Bristol, CT: Equinox), 27–44. For pioneering works on the way agency and the performance of objects can be viewed differently depending on the social and cultural context, see the study by Nurit Bird-David, ‘“Animism” Revisited: Personhood, Environment, and Relational Epistemology’, *Current Anthropology* 40 (1999): 67–79; Irving A. Hallowell, ‘Ojibwa Ontology, Behavior, and World View’, in *Culture in History: Essays in Honor of Paul Radin*, ed. S. Diamond (New York: Columbia University Press, 1960), 19–52.

Conclusion

First and foremost, the colophon, scribal signs and *nomina sacra* indicate that the scribes of the Nag Hammadi codices saw themselves as Christian. That is no longer a controversial issue for most scholars. The structure of *nomina sacra* in the Nag Hammadi library indicates that the people behind the texts were most likely part of the same scribal network, and that we are not dealing with codices produced in separate scribal contexts and only brought together at a later time. The above also shows that the sign of the cross was particularly important for Scribe A of Codex I, which indicates that there was plenty of room for individual preferences in the way one inscribed and adorned the texts, preferences that most likely were guided by the monk's engagement in spiritual warfare. The context where the Nag Hammadi codices were produced encompassed belief and practice in the protective power of the symbol of the cross. Even if a monastic context is not the only one in fourth- to fifth-century Roman Egypt where the power of the cross was held in high esteem, the preoccupation with spiritual combat in monastic environments – a topic reflected throughout the texts – makes a strong argument for the fact that these texts were used by monks as protective artefacts. The cross gave the monk firmness in the chaotic company of demons, whose presence was only amplified by the cold and empty desert.