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This volume presents a complete edition of the correspondence exchanged from 1947 to 1970 between Jean Doresse (1917-2007) and Henri-Charles Puech (1902-1986), drawing on the archives of James M. Robinson (for Puech's letters to Doresse) and Michel Tardieu (for Doresse's letters to Puech). The transcription and editing of the letters was done by Eric Crégheur, in tight collaboration with Robinson and Tardieu. The letters are preceded by an analysis of the “socio-cultural positioning” of the correspondence by Tardieu, which also includes a comparative chronology of the letters and details regarding the people, organizations (public/private and French/Egyptian/European, including museums, academies, research institutes and universities), and written sources (scholarly journals, popular articles, collections) mentioned in the correspondence. Doresse and Puech were deeply involved with the Coptic Nag Hammadi texts, both in terms of their discovery and their early diffusion; the correspondence between these two pioneers thus sheds light on the period before the publication of photographic editions of these works, when access to them was restricted to a fortunate few, and where the privileges of viewing them was surrounded by controversy, in France as elsewhere.

This collection shows vividly the tempestuous intellectual life on the north and south shores of the Mediterranean at the end of the colonial period, full of confusions, complications, mis-steps and false claims; it shows us the people, institutions and networks in action at the end of the colonial period. Although the gnostic Coptic manuscripts were, certainly, used and understood in “orientalising” ways by Doresse and Puech (and not a few of their colleagues), these same manuscripts were also reclaimed and used as identity-builders by members of Coptic and Muslim communities in Egypt. This interaction is not the smallest of the paradoxes at play in the correspondence between these two scholars.

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