The study of Manichaeism is plagued by the complex nature of our extant sources about it, which range in geographical origin from North Africa and Western Europe to China and are preserved in concomitantly diverse languages. Even when dealing with isolated pockets of sources—sorted by region and language—students of Manichaeism are confronted with a range of difficulties regarding their provenance (often mysterious, understandably) and current status of scholarly edition, translation, and publication (also often mysterious, at least to the noninitiated). Such is the case with our voluminous and crucial Coptic evidence, made up of a set of seven fascinating and difficult papyrus codices discovered in 1929, at Medinet Madi, in the southwestern Fayyum region of Egypt. These codices contain the dogmatic compendium known as the Kephalaia, various Homilies (including the Sermon on the Great War), a collection of beautiful psalms, a work entitled the Synaxeis, a book of Acts, and Mani’s Letters. This Coptic Manichaean literature furnishes us with a gold mine of information regarding Manichaean myth, soteriology, ritual, ethics, martyrlogy, missionary activity, sheer poetry, and more, information that is utterly indispensable to the study of what is, after all, widely lauded as the first “world religion” and to the study of dualistic religions more generally.
Yet these sources are not particularly well-known—certainly less-so than their distant cousins, the Nag Hammadi Codices—and remain even today relatively unexplored by scholars outside of the hard core of specialists in Manichaean studies. A central (if hardly the only) reason for this state of affairs is the aforementioned complex nature of the provenance of and history of scholarship on these sources. If one wishes to engage works such as the Psalm-Book or the Kephalaia, for instance, one is immediately confronted with questions such as: Why are some parts of a manuscript at the Chester Beatty Library in Dublin and others in Berlin, and when were some parts in Copenhagen and why? Why on earth was the second part of the Psalm-Book published first (in the celebrated edition of Charles Alberry), so that today we are in the awkward position of citing a “Part II” for which there is no edited “Part I”? Whatever happened to the Synaxeis, the Acts, and the Letters, and where does one go to get reliable information about such matters?

Answers to these (and many other tangled questions these codices present) are already to be found in the scholarly literature on Manichaeism, but usually buried in footnotes, introductions to expensive volumes, and the like. This absence of an obvious, accessible account of the matter has contributed to the marginalization of the discipline. The central contribution, then, of James M. Robinson’s The Manichaean Codices of Medinet Madi is to present in a coherent, complete, and affordable book-length format what happened to the Manichaean codices of Medinet Madi, how it happened, and who was involved where and when. Indeed, the tale of the first generation of scholarly treatment of these works is at least as colorful as that of the Nag Hammadi texts, bringing us from Carl Schmidt’s chance encounter with the Kephalaia codex in an Egyptian antique dealer’s shop immediately after looking over Karl Holl’s proofs of Epiphanius of Salamis’s notice on the Manichaens (allowing Schmidt to identify the content of the codex in situ), to Hugo Ibscher’s country home, codices locked up in a bunker at Berlin’s Bahnhof Zoo, vanished book blocks in (or en route to) Leningrad, and more. Much of this story will be familiar to readers of RBL, as it has been related before in a variety of contexts and not always accurately, but Robinson’s introduction does a magnificent job of synthesizing the diverse and complex evidence behind it into a wild (but well-documented) yarn. (This introduction republishes an essay that originally appeared in 1992 and has long served as the standard reference in the field; its appearance now in an accessible format is welcome.)

1. Unfortunately, Professor Robinson passed away after this review was submitted but before it was published [editor].
This evidence itself—culled from interviews, notes, articles, and especially letters—is presented in the rest of the book in four parts. Part 1 deals with the acquisition and initial conservation (by Carl Schmidt and Chester Beatty) and editing (by Hugo Ibscher) of the codices, featuring further documentation of the complex relationship between Beatty, Ibscher, and the then-young Hans-Jakob Polotsky before the latter left Berlin for Jerusalem in 1933. Part 2 presents documents pertaining to the story of Rolf Ibscher’s attempted postwar conservation of the material in both the divided Germany and in Dublin. Part 3 turns to the evidence regarding the conservation and editing of the Berlin holdings, going all the way back to Beatty, Schmidt, and Polotsky, and up to 1989; part 4 does the same with the materials in Dublin. Robinson thus provides here what has remained a serious desideratum in Manichaean studies: a reference work that sorts out and publishes a wealth of often confused evidence surrounding the Medinet Madi discovery and conservation, in a complete but accessible, bilingual (i.e., with English translation facing German or French sources) format.

Robinson’s presentation is rich but concise (with many details relegated to where they should be, the footnotes), and its language is clear. One might, however, question its overall tone and presentation, which presumes both knowledge of and interest in the Medinet Madi find; for instance, Robinson informs us in the footnote to the first sentence of chapter 1 that he will assume his readers are already familiar with Schmidt and Polotsky’s classic account of the find (“Ein Mani-Fund in Ägypten” [1933]) and so shall not repeat any of its contents for neophytes. On the other hand, the volume begins with a very useful four-page overview (originally published in 1991) relating in brief the story of each manuscript—exactly what the nonspecialist needs from the book.

A serious qualification, however, is the fact—explicitly stated by Robinson in his preface (ix)—that one is reading essays and notes that describe the state of the field in 1989, as initially disseminated in 1991/1992. In other words, the book is over twenty-five years out-of-date. This produces jarring reading, for instance, when the book discusses in a very present and even future tense the activity of deceased Coptologists such as Søren Giversen and Rodolphe Kasser (e.g., 22). This volume must then be regarded as relating the history of the Manichaean Codices of Medinet Madi up to 1989 alone. While many of the old editions and translations are of such a high quality that they remain standard or at least useful, and the locations of the manuscripts themselves have not changed since Robinson’s writing, enormous progress has nonetheless been made regarding the editing and publishing of Coptic Manichaica. No single recent, comprehensive Forschungsbericht

regarding this progress is known to this reviewer, but a useful discussion of the present state of affairs can be found in Iain Gardner, “Introduction to the Chester Beatty Kephalaia Codex,” in Iain Gardner, Jason B. BeDuhn, and Paul Dilley, Mani at the Court of the Persian Kings: Studies on the Chester Beatty Kephalaia Codex (Nag Hammadi and Manichaean Studies 87 [Leiden: Brill, 2015], 1–12, esp. 3–5). An appendix or afterword summarizing the progress made in the field over the last thirty years would have been very welcome indeed.

Yet as far as the twentieth-century study and publication of these terrifically important and fascinating works goes, Robinson’s The Manichaean Codices of Medinet Madi is and will surely remain the definitive account. It belongs in every serious collection on Manichaeism, a prime resource for specialists in the field regarding their Forschungsgeschichte. Meanwhile, it will serve as an authoritative, affordable, and accessible introduction to the Coptic Manichaica for interested parties from fields such as biblical studies, early Christian studies, Nag Hammadi studies, and Islamic studies.