the term altogether, or who accept its use only with reference to a very specific
and apparently small group in antiquity that was referred to as “the gnostikoi”,
and possibly even adopted that name as their primary self-designation (a topic
to which I shall return later).

7 To my mind, these wildly opposing ways of using
the terms “gnosis” and “Gnosticism” are another indication that they have little
or no informative value – they are terms that obscure and confuse our thinking
more than they provide enlightenment.

2 Reconstructing coherence

If we must conclude that “gnosis” and “Gnosticism” are unhelpful as general
categories because of their implicit essentialist and heresiological assumptions,
we are faced with the challenge of finding other ways to discern coherence in
the historical evidence preserved for us by the ancient heresiologists or redis-
covered in such finds as the Nag Hammadi Library. It can hardly be satisfactory
to regard the numerous theological ideas and positions attested in this material
as simply individual varieties of early Christianity. We must certainly give up
any ambition of characterising this material as a unit by means of essentialist
formulas. But it is equally unhelpful to treat it merely as an arbitrary jumble of
unconnected fragments. The deconstructive trend of the last couple of decades
needs to be counterbalanced by new attempts at reconstructive historical syn-
thesis that will detect coherence among a wider range of sources than current
specialised scholarship is often disposed to acknowledge.

A project that aims to reconstruct a logic of historical development – an
Entwicklungslogik – for certain clusters of ideas, even if restricted to parts of the
evidence previously classified as “Gnostic”, will first be confronted by the chal-
lenge of integrating the evidence of the patristic authors with that of the Nag
Hammadi Codices. As is well known, a major difficulty posed by the texts from
Nag Hammadi is the fact that these Coptic manuscripts, produced in the late
fourth century, provide few indications as to when their original Greek versions
may have been written. They do not supply the names of their human authors
nor do they inform us about the milieus in which they originated. A further
difficulty, to which we have now become increasingly sensitive, is the fact that
this literature was typically fluid – texts were revised, improved upon, rewrit-
ten, and plagiarised in ways that can be reconstructed only to a very limited

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7 E.g. Brakke, The Gnostics, following Layton, “Prolegomena”.
extent by means of source critical ingenuity. For these reasons, only the writings of the church fathers, which can be dated with relative accuracy, will provide us with fixed points of reference. Any attempt to create chronological order and to trace historical developments must therefore take the patristic evidence as its point of departure.

### 3 Valentinus and “the Gnostic sect”

The most important piece of evidence of all in this regard is the work of Irenaeus of Lyons. Written in the 180s, it is the earliest preserved account of ancient Christian “heresies”. Irenaeus’ treatise, whose precise title was *Exposure and refutation of the falsely called knowledge* (Ἐλεγχος και ἀνατροπὴ τῆς ψευδωνύμου γνώσεως), is also important because it, to a large extent, defined for posterity the category of “gnosis” and what it included. The main target of Irenaeus’ attack on those who falsely claim “gnosis” was the followers of Valentinus. This he states explicitly in his preface to Book I, and the first two thirds of that book are devoted to an extensive report on the doctrines and the ritual practices of the Valentinians (*Haer. 1.1–8; 1.11–21*). A long-term effect of Irenaeus’ perspective was that Valentinianism came to be perceived by scholars of the modern age as the prototypical example of “Gnosticism”.

However, Irenaeus’ notions about what constituted the Gnostic heresy are not unequivocal. On the one hand, he uses a wide concept of “gnosis” that includes much more than the Valentinians. In the final third of Book I he draws up a lineage of predecessors for the Valentinians, in which Simon Magus figures as the source and origin of all heresy (1.23–31). From this point of view, “the falsely called gnosis” of the Valentinians is just another manifestation of a larger heretical movement that began with the Samaritan heresiarch. The idea of this heretical movement was constructed by Irenaeus on the basis of two authoritative apostolic texts in particular: the account of the confrontation be-

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8 The dating of Irenaeus’ work was extensively studied by Harnack, *Geschichte der altchristlichen Litteratur*, I/1, 263–288. Harnack concluded that the work was written between 181 and 189. For further details, see Markschies, “Grande Notice”, 38 n. 33.

9 The title has been lost in the Latin manuscript transmission of Irenaeus’ work (of the orginal Greek version only fragments are preserved, as quotations in other authors), but it is cited by Eusebius and several other ancient writers. See RD I/1, 31–35. In referring to this work I shall use the conventional abbreviation *Haer.*

10 See in particular Brox, “Γνωστικοί”, especially 108–11.