



# Splendor in the Sinai:

Saint Catherine's Monastery  
in Late Antiquity and the Middle Ages

ESSAY #9

Nestled on the slopes of Mount Sinai, on ground considered sacred by three religions, the Orthodox Christian monastery of Saint Catherine is considered by the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) to be the oldest continuously operating Christian monastery still intact and used for its original function.<sup>1</sup> It is a UNESCO World Heritage site and has been a site of pilgrimage for Christians for over a millennium. Housing thousands of ancient manuscripts and incredibly preserved examples of Byzantine art and architecture, Saint Catherine's played a crucial role in preserving Christian culture in North Africa during Late Antiquity and the early Middle Ages, and it continues to be an invaluable resource to scholars and researchers to this day.

Located some 239 miles southeast of Cairo, Saint Catherine's sits at an elevation of approximately five thousand feet<sup>2</sup> in the Wadi ed-Deir<sup>3</sup> ("The Valley of the Monastery") in the foothills of Mount Sinai, a site revered by Christians, Jews, and Muslims alike. Known to the western world as Mount Sinai, the mountain is referred to by Muslims as Jebel Musa (the Mountain of Moses), and similarly, is alleged by many Hebrew scholars to be the Mount Horeb referred to in the Old Testament. The spot where the monastery sits has long been revered as the site of Moses' encounter with the Burning Bush<sup>4</sup> referred to in the Biblical Book of Exodus.<sup>5</sup>

Prior to the construction of the monastery, Christian hermits had dwelled in the wilderness of the Sinai since at least the end of the second century C.E., many of them having fled into the deserts during periods of Roman persecution. Following the Edict of Milan, the Emperor Constantine's mother Helena is alleged to have visited the region between 337 and 342

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<sup>1</sup> Saint Catherine Area – UNESCO World Heritage Centre, <http://whc.unesco.org>

<sup>2</sup> Weitzmann, *Illustrated Manuscripts at St. Catherine's Monastery on Mount Sinai*, pg. 5

<sup>3</sup> Galey, *Sinai and the Monastery of St. Catherine*, pg. 49

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

<sup>5</sup> cf. Exodus 3:2-4

C.E.<sup>6</sup> and constructed the Chapel of the Burning Bush where the Saint Catherine's stands, today (the church still exists, although it has been incorporated into the Monastery).<sup>7</sup> During the next two centuries, a loose community of Christian hermits and ascetics formed around the Church. (In the fifth century, the pilgrim Etheria visited the hermits of Sinai and made note of their lifestyle in her *Peregrinatio*.)

As time went on, however, the monks began to be harassed with increasing frequency by bands of nomadic marauders, eventually prompting the monks to appeal to the Emperor Justinian for aid.<sup>8</sup> Justinian answered their petition by ordering the construction of a fortified monastery that would allow the monks sufficient protection from marauders, though it is possible that Justinian's decision may have also been a tactical move to help deter hostile Saracen forces from passing through Sinai and into the Levant undetected.<sup>9</sup> Although the exact timeframe for construction of the monastery is debated, based on inscriptions at the site, it seems likely that it was completed sometime between the death of Justinian's wife, Theodora, and the death of Justinian himself, probably sometime between 548 and 565 C.E.<sup>10</sup>

Interestingly, it seems that the Monastery was originally dedicated to the Virgin Mary, not to Saint Catherine,<sup>11</sup> and the main church inside the Monastery was originally referred to as the Cathedral of the Transfiguration.<sup>12</sup> It was not until several centuries later that the Monastery came to be associated with St. Catherine of Alexandria. Although the authenticity of her existence is debated (as is the case with many early Christian saints), according to legend, Catherine was a fourth century Christian martyr from Alexandria who defied the Emperor Maxentius (according to some accounts, he wanted her for a consort and she refused him) and

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<sup>6</sup> There are conflicting accounts with regards to the date of Helena's visit to the Sinai. cf: Gotch, *Three Caravan Cities*, pg. 14 and Atiya, *The Monastery of St. Catherine in Mount Sinai*, pg. 15

<sup>7</sup> Atiya, *The Monastery of St. Catherine in Mount Sinai*, pgs. 13-15

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

<sup>9</sup> Galey, pg. 50

<sup>10</sup> Weitzmann, pg. 5

<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

<sup>12</sup> Atiya, pg. 17

Some Orthodox scholars still refer to the Monastery by that name.

was put to death around the year 310 C.E.<sup>13</sup> According to these legends, Catherine was originally sentenced to be put to death on a spiked wheel, but before the execution could be carried out, the wheel miraculously broke and her executioners were forced to behead her, instead. It is from these accounts that we derive the term “Catherine’s Wheel.”<sup>14</sup> According to other legends, the body of St. Catherine was transported miraculously to the peak of Mount Sinai and that later, her relics were translated from the mountaintop to the Monastery by the monks and enshrined in the Cathedral.<sup>15</sup> These rather fantastic stories aside, however, it would seem that sometime during the eighth and ninth centuries the cult of St. Catherine began to be observed at the Monastery, with pilgrims coming to venerate her relics.<sup>16</sup> It was at this point that the monastery began to be referred to by its current title.

Since its foundation, the Monastery of Saint Catherine’s has been home to an autonomous (self-governing) branch of the Orthodox Christian Church known as “The Church of the Sinai.”<sup>17</sup> Traditionally, the abbot of the Monastery is also consecrated Archbishop of The Church of the Sinai by the Patriarch of Jerusalem. Despite the isolated location of the Saint Catherine’s, the Monastery was not without influence throughout the Orthodox Christian world. One of their abbots, Nectarius I, even went so far as to become Patriarch of Jerusalem in 1661.<sup>18</sup>

With the decline of the Byzantine Empire’s influence in the Sinai and the subsequent rise of Islam in the area, the monks of Saint Catherine’s Monastery were forced to deal with a new and possibly hostile civil authority in the region, especially following the Muslim conquest of Egypt in 640 C.E. Surprisingly, from the very beginning, the Monastery of Saint Catherine enjoyed fairly cordial relations with the early caliphs, despite the former’s association with the

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<sup>13</sup> Vann, *Lives of the Saints*, pgs. 30-32

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>15</sup> Gotch, pg. 15

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>17</sup> *The Church of the Sinai*, <http://www.oca.org/OCworldsinai.asp?SID=2>

<sup>18</sup> Stern, *Fatimid Decrees*, pg. 5

Byzantine Empire (and later, the Crusaders of the Latin Christian Church). Much of this is due, no doubt, to the Prophet Mohammed himself, who granted a Charter of Privileges to the Monks of Saint Catherine's in 628 C.E., guaranteeing them not only freedom from Muslim persecution and securing their right to property, but also promising them Muslim aid and protection.<sup>19</sup>

*“This is a message from Muhammad ibn Abdullah, as a covenant to those who adopt Christianity, near and far, we are with them. Verily I, the servants, the helpers, and my followers defend them, because Christians are my citizens; and by Allah! I hold out against anything that displeases them.*

*No compulsion is to be on them. Neither are their judges to be removed from their jobs nor their monks from their monasteries. No one is to destroy a house of their religion, to damage it, or to carry anything from it to the Muslims' houses. Should anyone take any of these, he would spoil God's covenant and disobey His Prophet. Verily, they are my allies and have my secure charter against all that they hate. No one is to force them to travel or to oblige them to fight. The Muslims are to fight for them... Their churches are to be respected. They are neither to be prevented from repairing them nor the sacredness of their covenants. No one of the nation (Muslims) is to disobey the covenant till the Last Day (end of the world).”<sup>20</sup>*

This remarkable charter set the tone for relations between the Monastery and the local Islamic authorities for centuries to come. This was especially true during the Fatimid Caliphate (910 – 1171 C.E.), during which time many successive caliphs reaffirmed their pact with the Monks of Mount Sinai. The monks faithfully retained the copies of the edicts they received from the Fatimid caliphs, and today, those documents are some of the only surviving documents of the

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<sup>19</sup> Atiya, pg. 17

<sup>20</sup> Prophet Muhammad's Charter of Privileges to Christians, <http://www.cyberistan.org/islamic/charter1.html>

Fatimid Caliphate (most other local communities did not preserve any records of that nature) and a key resource for understanding the politics of the Caliphate.<sup>21</sup>

During this period, the Monastery enjoyed some contact with the European Christian world, and the Muslim caliphs were tolerant of the growing number of pilgrims making the trek through the desert to visit the monastery and venerate the relics of St. Catherine. This practice even continued during the reign of Saladin and throughout the Crusades, a time when Latin Christians were viewed with great hostility by most of the Arab world. Indeed, at no point is it recorded that the Monastery experienced any undue or sustained aggression from Muslim forces, be they that of the Fatimid Caliphate, Saladin, the Malmuks, or the Ottoman Empire.

One great curiosity from this period is that of The Mosque. In 1106, the monks allowed a small Mosque to be built inside the walls of the Monastery at the request of the Vizier, Abul-Mansur Aushtakin.<sup>22</sup> While some scholars believe it was built as a means of appeasing the local authorities, it still stands out as a remarkable moment of plurality and religious tolerance on the part of both peoples. Although the Mosque is not used, it is still maintained and a local Muslim family in the neighboring village is entrusted with its keys as a hereditary honor.<sup>23</sup>

In addition to their relatively peaceful relations with the Muslims, the Orthodox Christian monks also enjoyed very cordial relations with the Latin Catholics in the Western Europe. Prior to the schism between the Eastern (Orthodox) and Western (Latin Catholic) Christian churches in 1054, Pope Gregory I the Great had been an early supporter of the monastery.<sup>24</sup> Even following the schism, envoys from Saint Catherine's were still welcome in western Europe and were allowed to collect donations and annuities throughout Christendom. Numerous monarchs and dignitaries also sent tribute to the monastery, including Queen Isabella of Spain, Emperor

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<sup>21</sup> Stern, *Fatimid Decrees*, et al.

<sup>22</sup> Atiya, pg. 43

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, pg. 19

Maximilian of Germany and King Louis XIV of France.<sup>25</sup> The Crusades also helped increase public awareness of the monastery, resulting in a great increase of western pilgrims to Saint Catherine's, despite the schism. Making pilgrimage to Saint Catherine's was by no means an easy task in that era, as it was several days' journey on foot from the nearest city, over desolate and treacherous terrain.<sup>26</sup>

Although the Monastery enjoyed the respect of both the East and the West during the Middle Ages and throughout the Renaissance, it achieved a new level of recognition in the western world in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, when Europe began to take a renewed interest in the study of antiquities in general and the study of Egypt in particular. Scholars from across Europe began making their way to St. Catherine's (along with other sites throughout North Africa, Sinai, and the Levant), most notably Constantin von Tischendorf, who visited the Monastery in 1859 and made it famous with his discovery (and subsequent "borrowing") of *Codex Sinaiticus*,<sup>27</sup> a collection of over 346 fourth century manuscripts containing almost the entirety of both the Old and New Testaments, as well as the Epistle of Barnabas and the Shepherd of Hermas.<sup>28</sup> Along with *Codex Vaticanus*, the *Codex Sinaiticus* is widely regarded to be one of the preeminent source documents for textual criticism of the New Testament by modern day Biblical scholars.<sup>29</sup> According to von Tischendorf, after discovering the manuscripts at Saint Catherine's, he was given permission by the Archbishop to remove *Sinaiticus* from the monastery, with the understanding that it was to be given on loan to the Russian government.<sup>30</sup> When von Tischendorf presented the manuscripts to Tsar Alexander II, the monarch decided that *Codex Sinaiticus* should remain in Russia permanently, and is alleged to have sent the monks a

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<sup>25</sup> Ibid, pgs 19-20.

<sup>26</sup> Gotch, *Three Caravan Cities*, pgs. 10-12 Gotch noted the difficulties that even modern travelers encountered in visiting the Monastery.

<sup>27</sup> Weitzmann, *Illustrated Manuscripts at St. Catherine's Monastery on Mount Sinai*, pg. 7

<sup>28</sup> Eastman, *Bible Dictionary*, <http://www.plainbible.com/dictionary/34.htm#3443>

<sup>29</sup> *Codex Sinaiticus*, [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Codex\\_Sinaiticus](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Codex_Sinaiticus)

<sup>30</sup> von Tischendorf, *When Were Our Gospels Written?*, <http://rosetta.reltech.org/TC/extras/tischendorf-sinaiticus.html>

sum of 9,000 rubles as compensation.<sup>31</sup> In 1933, the Russian National Library is said to have sold the manuscript to the British Museum for the astounding sum of £100,000.<sup>32</sup>

Although *Codex Sinaiticus* is notable for having been removed from the collections of Saint Catherine's, the documents that remain are equally notable. During Kenneth W. Clark's expedition to Mount Sinai in 1949-1950, Clark noted over 3,300 manuscripts in eleven languages, many of which were microfilmed for UNESCO and the Library of Congress.<sup>33</sup> While most of these manuscripts (over 2,000) are in Greek, at least six hundred are in Arabic, many of them having come from the aforementioned Fatimid Caliphate. The expedition also cataloged and microfilmed<sup>34</sup> an additional 1,284 illuminations and 1,742 firmans.<sup>35</sup> With the exception of the Islamic firmans, the majority of these documents are either biblical or liturgical in nature. There are numerous Lectionaries (including one of the best examples of illumination during the "Macedonian Renaissance" of late tenth and early eleventh centuries)<sup>36</sup> as well as several early codices of John Climacus' *Scala Paradisi*<sup>37</sup> and an eleventh century codex of Cosmas Indicopleustes' *Christian Topography*.<sup>38</sup> Saint Catherine's collection of early codices and illuminated manuscripts is one of the largest in the world, second only to The Vatican Library in Rome.

Saint Catherine's is also renowned for their collections of artwork. In addition to the illuminated manuscripts housed in the library, the monastery is a wealth of mosaics, frescoes, and iconography. They are perhaps best known for their extensive collection of icons, which date back to the sixth century and continue uninterrupted up until the modern era. Saint Catherine's possesses some of the world's only examples of early encaustic (hot wax) iconography –

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<sup>31</sup> *Codex Sinaiticus*, [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Codex\\_Sinaiticus](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Codex_Sinaiticus)

<sup>32</sup> *The Development of the Canon of the New Testament*, [http://www.ntcanon.org/codex\\_Sinaiticus.shtml](http://www.ntcanon.org/codex_Sinaiticus.shtml)

<sup>33</sup> Clark, *Checklist of Manuscripts in St. Catherine's Monastery*, pg. VII

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>35</sup> Royal Islamic decrees, presumably, by and large, from the Fatimid Caliphate.

<sup>36</sup> Weitzmann, pg. 14

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, pg. 18

<sup>38</sup> Gale, pg. 157



elsewhere in the Byzantine world, most examples of encaustic iconography were destroyed during the period of Iconoclasm in the Byzantine Empire.<sup>39</sup> There are more than two thousand icons stored at the monastery,<sup>40</sup> including the literally hundreds of icons that adorn the iconostasis and walls of the cathedral. There is also a rich diversity of Byzantine, Latin and Levantine architecture throughout the monastery. Although portions of the cathedral and other buildings have been rebuilt over the years, much of the architecture dates back to the foundation of the monastery, as do many of the inscriptions on the buildings.<sup>41</sup>

The world has changed much since the foundation of the monastery. Gone are the Byzantines, the Fatimid Moslems, the Crusaders, and the Turks. The modern age has brought electricity and automobiles to the gates of Saint Catherine's, and yet the essential character and the function of the monastery have remained unchanged over the past fourteen centuries. The monks of the monastery still pray and worship as they have for centuries, and pilgrims come from around the world to visit this shrine on "The Mountain of Moses." Today, Saint Catherine's is considered a World Heritage site by UNESCO in recognition of its cultural significance and rich legacy. For over a millennium, Saint Catherine's has preserved and safeguarded Byzantine culture and history. It is to be hoped that Saint Catherine's, this place of splendor in the midst of the barren expanse of the Sinai Desert, will continue to be a resource for historians for centuries to come.

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<sup>39</sup> Galey, pgs. 89 - 91

<sup>40</sup> Ibid, pg. 99

<sup>41</sup> Ibid, pg. 43

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