

# Holy Monastery of the God trodden Mount Sinai

The formations of desert-like areas as well as inaccessible mountains are dominant amidst the triangle formed by the Gulf of Suez, the Gulf of Aqaba and the Sinai desert (desert Tih). In this barren peninsula impressive are the renowned Mount Sinai (2.244 m.), Saint Catherine's mountain (2.602m), Serbal, Um Somar and the mountain of Saint Episteme. Moses led the Israelites through this desert towards the Promised Land. Their goal was to overcome all obstacles and prevail over the Amalikites, their nomad enemies from Arabia, who constantly battled against them. According to the Old Testament, Moses received the Ten Commandments from God at the summit of Mount Sinai. In this forsaken place, man met with God again. "And he gave unto Moses, when he had made an end of communing with him upon mount Sinai, two tables of testimony, tables of stone, written with the finger of God"(Exodus, 31:18). So this arid and barren land becomes a holy and sanctified place for all mankind, highlighting great moral issues. At the foot of Saint Catherine's mountain lies the historic Holy Monastery of Sinai, founded by the Emperor Justinian, who built a magnificent church at the Sinai monks' request, a church he surrounded on all sides by a sturdy massive wall in order to protect the monks from the Agarene attacks. The church is a three-aisled Basilica with a broad main nave, two side aisles an apse and a narthex. It measures 40 metres in length and 19.20 metres wide, incorporating the chapels behind the Basilica (or Catholicon), namely the Chapel of the Burning Bush, that of Saint Jacob and of the Holy Fathers of Sinai. The interior of the main church of the Catholicon measures 25 metres in length and 12 metres wide. The ancient wooden roof of the Catholicon was covered with a horizontal wooden coffered ceiling in the 18<sup>th</sup> century, at the time of Cyril of Crete who was Archbishop of Sinai. The side walls are pierced

by two rows of windows, including eight double arched windows and seven rectangular ones. The level of the sanctuary (holy bema) is higher than that of the nave, separated from it by a temple with marble panels below and a wood carved iconostasis above. It was structured in 1612 at the Sinai's dependency (Metochion) of Crete at the time of Archbishop Lavrentios.

Exquisite are the wood carved gates of the main church made of cedar wood of Lebanon in the 6<sup>th</sup> century. The gates of the Narthex were made by the Crusaders of the 12<sup>th</sup> century. The names of Justinian and Theodora are commemorated on the preserved inscriptions, and it is confirmed that the wall and the Church were built in 577 A.D. after the death of the Empress. The inscriptions also witness that the architect of the defensive wall and the Catholicon was Stephanos Alistos from Aila, today's Eilat.

In the 7<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> centuries the Sinai monastery faced grave dangers and deep crisis due to the Arab conquest. It is mentioned that when Sultan Selim I conquered Egypt and Sinai in 1517, he saw the Actiname (Testament of Mohammad), took it with him and left a copy for the Sinai Fathers. From the 11<sup>th</sup> century onwards, a new era begins for the Sinai monks. The transferring of the relics of Saint Katherine to France increases the interest of the European Christians for the safety, independence of the monks and the worldwide protection of the monastery, in Egypt, Palestine, Syria, Crete, Cyprus and Constantinople (Istanbul). At the time of the Frankish Rule in Syria, the Crusaders founded a special Sinai decree in order to offer financial aid and protect the monastery. The Popes occasionally protected the rights of the monastery with various ordinances: Pope Onorios 3<sup>rd</sup> in 1217, Gregory 10<sup>th</sup> (1271-1276), Benedict 12<sup>th</sup> in 1338, Innocent 6<sup>th</sup> in 1360 and many more. The Doges of Venice adjust the way of conduct of the Dukes of Crete towards the Sinai Metochia, discharging

them from taxes and bringing justice in favour of the Sinai interests. Regardless the fact that Sinai was in an Islamic area, the contact and connection it shared with Constantinople was great and frequent. Emmanuel Komnenos, Mikhail Palaiologos and Patriarchs of the Ecumenical Throne of Constantinople showed a viable interest for matters that concerned the monastery. Moreover, the frequent communication between Sinai and the Empire with outstanding personalities such as Saint Georgios Arselas, Saint Ioannis of Sinai, the writer of the book of the Divine Ascend, Gregory of Sinai, reveal the spiritual bond which unites the two centres of the Orthodox world.

The Turkish Sultans, Selim I and Suleiman the Magnificent issued privileges to Sinai which often helped the monastery to gain great financial power and establish tax exemptions. When Napoleon occupied Egypt in 1798, following the Sinai Father's request, he took under his protection the monastery and the surrounding area. With his "Insurance Document", he recognized former concessions, thus strengthening and securing the autonomy of Sinai and the surrounding area. Sinai became particularly known in Europe with the spreading fame and reverence towards Saint Catherine.

Significant was the role of Symeon the Translator in spreading the fame of the Saint, as he wrote in the 10<sup>th</sup> century the martyrdom of the Great Martyr of Christ Catherine. The wise daughter had studied all the sciences of her time, philosophy, medicine, rhetoric speech, maths, astronomy, music and physics. Her aristocratic origin, natural beauty and impressive knowledge as well as her moral values did not prevent her from knowing the "Bridegroom of the Souls" Jesus Christ, and to be baptised a Christian. During the time of persecutions, at the reign of Maximian in the beginning of the 4<sup>th</sup> century, the Saint publicly accused the Emperor for sacrificing to idols, and fearlessly confessed her faith. The Emperor commanded fifty wise men to enter into a public debate

with her in order to overturn her Christian claims. Their effort was foundered and many wise men, some from the Emperor's court, believed in Christ. When persuasion through words failed, Maximian resorted to martyrdom. He ordered to construct wheels and place nails and knife blades on them. Nevertheless, the Saint suffered willingly the atrocious martyrdom, and for that reason she was finally beheaded by a soldier.

In 1231 a marble sarcophagus was structured to host her holy relics. In 1688 the old marble sarcophagus was replaced by a silver one, donated by the Tsars of Russia, but her relics remained in the old one. The Holy Shrines of Sinai are preserved in ten manuscripts, distributed in six monasteries of Mount Athos as follows: Three in the Monastery of Iviron, the monasteries of Great Lavra and Koutloumousiou have two manuscripts each, while the monasteries Dionysiou, Xyropotamou and Doheiarion hold one each. The manuscripts are dated back on 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> centuries, they are small in size and characterized as composite codes with miscellaneous content. In their majority the texts of the Shrines begin their descriptions with the geographical establishment of Mount Sinai and its distance from the city of Jerusalem, as well as with the reference that it was the place where Moses saw the Burning Bush covered in flames but without being burnt. Subsequently they have a detailed description of the Sinai monastery which was built by the Emperor Justinian (527-565). They begin with the description of the granite roof of the Catholicon, which is based on twelve pillars and the Sanctuary with the exquisite mosaic of the Transfiguration of our Saviour Jesus Christ. The description continues with details of the Temple or Iconostasis where the following icons are preserved: a) Christ as the Great Archpriest, b) The Theotokos, c) Moses, d) Saint Catherine. The second part of the manuscript concludes with reference to the marble sarcophagus with the relics of Saint Catherine, which is placed at the right hand side of the Temple, gushing holy

myrrh and scent.

Furthermore, there is mention of the canticles of the Holy Table which represent the Burning Bush, as well as the miraculous icon of the Theotokos who spoke once to a monk, the chapel of Saint James either on the right or on the left of the Burning Bush, and finally the well of Prophet Moses, which is preserved outside the Catholicon. There is also reference of the six chapels which are incorporated in the Catholicon. In addition there is a description of the Holy Summit of Mount Sinai, with the stone steps that lead to it. Named also in sequence are the churches of the Forty Martyr Saints, the Holy Apostles, Saint Unmercenaries Kosmas and Damian, Prophet David, the stone of Moses and the cave of Saint John of the Ladder. Moreover there is a description of the desert of Raitho, which is at a "two-day distance" from Sinai. There is a description of the salty waters there, the twelve springs of waters and other sightseeing. Finally there is mention of a monastery on top of the mountain and the Sinai Metochion of Saint George. Further to the main narrations, in some manuscripts there are descriptions of various areas, towns and fortresses of Egypt. In other manuscripts there is reference to the cities of Jerusalem, Gaza, Lydda, and Joppa. In some others there are accounts of the miracles that have happened in Sinai. In the libraries of the afore mentioned monasteries as well as in other libraries of Mount Athos there are numerous other manuscripts referring to Mount Sinai which however do not describe it.

Hegoumen of the Holy Monastery of the God-trodden Mount Sinai is his Eminence the Archbishop of Sinai, Pharan and Raitho who is in command together with the Holy Assembly of the Sinai Fathers. "The Monks, members of the Assembly, do not have as their only goal the fulfilment of the monastic ideals. Together with the Monks of the Decree of the Holy Sepulchre, they are at the same time workers and guards of the Holy Shrine. The Archbishop is ordained in Jerusalem by the

Orthodox Patriarch of Jerusalem.