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## MONASTARY OF ST. CATHERINE

The Monastary of St. Catherine is one of those anomalies that provide a fascinating detail of history. The monastary has been an island of tradition and belief and a sanctuary for various archetectural literary, and artistic treasures for about 1500 years. While the world was passing through times of peace and war, building and destruction, while men and powers had risen and fallen, and great works of men's hands and minds had for the most part been destroyed or long since decayed, the monastary lived in almost complete solitude and preservation. With each passing century then, she enriched herself with some artifact of that era but did not experience the periods of unrest that would takes these acquisitions from her. As a result, she is not only an interesting detail of history but enriches history in turn.

Early Christians were much concerned about where God worked his miracles. Old Testament as well as New Testament sites were venerated and the sites which were believed to be found often turned into a gathering place for monks and hermits. There is not proof that when the hermits settled in the shadow of what they believed to be Mt. Sinai, that there was any tradition then existing that this was indeed the place of the Ten Commandments and the burning bush. Tradition in this respect dates no further than Justinian.<sup>1</sup> When the hermits first began settling in this stark but beautiful area of Sinai is not known for sure. It is known that Egypt was one of the first countries to witness the persecution of the Christians. Toward the end of the second and the beginning of the third centuries, people were fleeing into the deserts and wilderness. Possibly then Christians from Egypt and other Roman provinces were came to this area during this period.<sup>2</sup> St. Helena, mother of emperor Constantine the Great however, is said to have visited the area in A.D. 337 in her search for holy sites. At this time she ordered the building

of the chapel of the burning bush. The early hermits none-the-less, lived in a primitive state scattered in the mountains and vallies around the area of Jebel Musa (Mountain of Moses) but their existence in the caves of the wilderness was precarious. Eutychuis, writing in the ninth century said that the hermits hearing how Justinian "delighted to build churches and found convents, made a journey to him and complained how the wandering sons of Ishmael were wont to attack them suddenly, eat their provisions, desolate the place, enter their cells and carry off everything; and how they also broke into the church & even devoured the holy wafers."<sup>3</sup>

The Byzantine emperor conceded to build them a sanctuary but his reasons were apparently not due entirely to religious piety. Justinian had recently lost the city of Petra in what is now Jordan to the Arabs. He had no defence therefore against the arabian tribes between Jerusalem and Memphis. A legate (official emissary) was sent to the hermits to build for them a fortress-monastery which was begun in A.D. 535. The story goes that the fortress was to be built upon the summit of the peak but the legate instead built the structure against one slope of a steep-sided wadi, because of lack of water upon the peak. The change of plans irritated the emperor and the poor legate lost his head.<sup>4</sup> The fortress-monastery was completed first though in A.D. 545.<sup>5</sup> Constantine also had built at the site, a basilica in commemoration of his wife Theodora which includes the chapel of the burning bush. This ~~Bastion~~ in the wilderness was not at first known as St. Catherine but was called the Cathedral of the Transfiguration. It was not until the ninth century that the legend of St. Catherine had its association with the monastery.

Catherine was a patrician maiden of Alexandria who sought refuge from the persecutions of Maximus II but was unable to escape and was taken back to Alexandria to suffer martyrdom. Later her body was taken by angels to Gebel ~~Catherina~~ by angels so the legend goes. There her body layd until

centuries later her bones were found and moved to the convent. All that remains of her now is a skull and hand since it seems devoted pilgrims made off with bits and pieces of her as talismans having supernatural properties. The skull and hand, covered with jewelled rings are kept out of reach of the general public in silver boxes in the basilica.

Another legend had much to do with the continued existence of the monastery. It is said that Mohammed while still a camel driver in Arabia, wandered by was of the monastery before it was not yet a century old. He was befriended by the monks and ~~after the~~ Arab conquest of Egypt in A.D. 640, the prophet granted the monks a covenant whereby their lives and property were safe under Muslim rule. <sup>7</sup> This story of Mohammed, though old, is most likely untrue but true or not, it worked, for down through the centuries various Sultans (probably not knowing whether the story was true or not either), followed their predecessor's example. Numerous manuscripts in the monasteries give evidence to these continued grants of protection. Where is the original covenant? Tradition has it that it was taken from the monastery by Sultan Selim I after the Ottoman conquest of Egypt in 1517. But the Sultan gave the monks a copy of it. <sup>8</sup> Whether forged or real, it is still to be seen in the library.

The monastery continued to survive through the centuries enjoying the protection of the Arabs and the support of various personalities of Europe. The benefactors of the monastery included popes, emperors, and kings. Pope Gregory the Great (592-604) was one of the early supporters in Rome. <sup>9</sup> Even the schism between Constantinople and Rome in the fifteenth century apparently had little effect on the relation of St. Catherine and Western Europe. <sup>10</sup> Envoys went out every year to collect donation from various Catholic states. Numerous monarchs would also send gifts. In 1411 Charles VI of France sent a chalice. Records in Paris tell us King Louis XI of France promised the monastery the sum of 2000 ducats to fulfill a vow. Contributions also came from Queen

from Queen Isabel of Spain (1481-1504), Emperor Maximilian of Germany (1493-1517), and Louis XIV of France (1643-1715) whose portrait once or still hangs on the wall of the old library. In 1798 a French expedition was ordered to contribute a tower and also to repair the walls so as to provide an outpost for Napoleon. <sup>11</sup> Of all the supporters however, the Czars of Russia were the most loyal.

Attention is now turned from the history of the monastery to the people immediately involved with it. It seems that ever since the early years of the Christian era, there have been monks living here in the midst of Sinai. As already said, they were at first a scattered brotherhood among the hills and valleys until they were gathered together due to the charity of Justinian. <sup>12</sup> The largest number of inhabitants reached 400 in the fourteenth century. Today their numbers are between ten and fifteen. The rule of the monastery is of St. Basil the Great (329-379). <sup>13</sup> They therefore lead a life of poverty and austerity but follow the rule of labor along with the principle of prayer. Each monk lives his life in his own cell and prepares most of his own food. The monks come together only for worship and prayer. Perhaps these were the same habits followed by the hermits before the monastery was built. The monks are of the Greek Orthodox faith and so are prohibited from eating meat but <sup>14</sup> were or are permitted to prepare araki, a potent liqueur made from dates. At 3:30 am, bells are heard for the monks to prepare for communal prayer. Fifteen minutes later thirty-three bells call them together. On Sundays and saints days this is followed by more bells, the beating of a wooden board in the large tower and the striking of a bar of iron. This announces the beginning of mass which lasts about five hours. The early morning hours are filled with bells, the chanting of monks, and the heavy, sweet smell of incense. <sup>15</sup>

Some characteristics of the monks have come to us from various writers. Antoninus Martyr found here three monks who spoke Latin, Greek, Syriac, Coptic, and Persian. The hermit Simeon who came into Europe about 1025 spoke

Egyptian, Syriac, Arabic, Greek, and Roman. The picture given by Dean <sup>St.</sup> Stanley closer to our present time in his book Sinai and Palestine is quite different. Of the monks he writes that they are "exiles from the mountains of the Greek archipelago, rebels from monastic rule at home, lunatics sent for recovery, they seldom remain more than two or three years; they are without knowledge of Arabic, with no call on their exertions and no check on their ignorance." <sup>17</sup> This could possibly be true to an extent now or at one time but no doubt there are many living at the monastery of sincerity, devotion and education as well.

In direct connection with the monastery are also to be found the Gebel-iyeh or mountain folk. They are descendants of the Roman slaves sent to the monastery by Justinian to care for the monks. One hundred in number with their wives and children were brought in from the Black Sea and another one hundred with wives and children from Egypt. <sup>18</sup> The settlement was at one time known as Deir Abid or monastery of the slaves. In dress and mode of life, they are not much different than the other inhabitants of Sinai though they still possess some physical characteristics of their European origin. They are also of the Moslem faith, having converted over in the seventh century by Caliph Abd el-Malik ibn Merwan. But a few remained Christians for a thousand years. The last Christian of the Jebel-iyeh, an old woman, died in <sup>19</sup> 1750. Surprisingly, the monks as far as we know, never attempted to teach these people the Christian faith. Evidently they felt their lives of poverty and prayer were all that was required of them to be good Christians and good monks. Though in almost every way the Jebel-iyeh are alike to other tribes, they are despised as Hiteim by the Arabs and the Arabs will not inter-marry with them. <sup>20</sup> Though more independent than they once were, the Jebel-iyeh continue to care for the monks by looking after their garden and performing various tasks as servants. To keep them loyal and devoted, the monks at various times have used trickery and coercion. The monks once

boasted that they had invented the foot-mark of Mohammed's mule nearby to gain the Jebeliyeh's devotion.<sup>21</sup> Almost fifty years ago, the monks in an attempt to ~~make~~ the tribe give up a garden, they had acquired, ceased the people's daily ration of bread which was a custom dating back to Justinian.<sup>22</sup> The Jebeliyeh complained to the government and a compromise was reached.

One other group of people must not be forgotten in connection with the monastery; these are the travelers, adventurers, and pilgrims who found in the monastery a cool and hospitable refuge in the heart of the Sinai. There is no doubt that this was one of the chief centers for pilgrimage though the route was a long and weary one and not without danger. Caravans of long ago would take eight days to reach the monastery from the Suez and six days from Akaba.<sup>23</sup> The vast number of pilgrims are attested to by the etchings which were left on the monasteries walls, buildings, and doors, not to mention the hundreds of scratchings in the rocks of the wadis along the routes to the monastery where a weary pilgrim would chance to rest. Most inscriptions are in Greek, Latin, Arabic, and Russian. Also present are many crusader arms and blasons.<sup>24</sup> Literary accounts are also left to us such as Peter-Rudolf von Suchem (1336), John Tucker (1479), and Felix Faber (1484) from Germany; Niccole di Frescobaldi (1384) and Niccole di Martoni (1395) were from Italy; Pero Tafur (1435) was from Catalan.<sup>25</sup> The Swiss traveller Burckhardt (1816) says that a caravan of 800 Armenians arrived one day from Jerusalem and another time 500 Copts from Cairo.<sup>26</sup> Today the monastery is visited by hundreds of people a year but usually not in the old roll of pilgrim and adventurer but as tourist with camera and air conditioned buses. A good part of many of the monk's duties are now taken up by spring for the tourist and acting as guides. This has proved to be a profitable and much needed source of income.

Now let us turn to the various structures and their contents to be found at St. Catherine.

The outside walls of the monastery are built of granite of which there is certainly no lack in this area. At intervals, the wall is strengthened by towers. Rather than a monastery, it has the look of a Byzantine fortress. Inside the walls is a labyrinth of narrow, winding passages that ascend and descend. It is a "jungle of architectural forms" including "ruined chapels, unused corridors, collapsed stairways, subterranean vaults choked with debris, rooms without doors and doors without rooms." <sup>27</sup> The buildings are remnants of various centuries; building added building with little apparent planning. The main buildings to be concerned with are the refectory, the bone house, the basilica, the mosque, and the library.

The refectory (dining hall) is situated south-east of the basilica and is a long, vaulted chamber about 55 feet long (17 meters), 16 feet wide (5 meters). It is not known whether it was originally built as a refectory or a chapel in the Byzantine period. It was however, later transformed into a dormitory for Latin pilgrims in the late middle ages. The walls contain frescoes of the Last Judgment (1573) and the "Apparition of the Trinity to Abraham" (1577). The room is also famous for many heraldic engravings as well as names of pilgrims from the fourteenth to the seventeenth centuries. <sup>28</sup>

The bone house is located on what is called "God's Acre". It is the burial place of the monk's and is exactly what the name implies, a house full of bones. When a monk dies, the corpse is laid out on an iron grating in the cellar until the flesh is decayed. When more room is needed because of the death of another monk, the bones of the corpse which has been in the cellar the longest are taken out, sorted and put on respective piles in the bone house i.e. the skull on one pile, the leg bone on still another pile, etc. Archbishop's bones however, are not separated but put together on shelves on the wall. One story having to do with two corpses is rather interesting. Anastasius described how two corpses, laid side by side on the grating were found frequently to have been moved or moved apart themselves. It was found



that one of the corpses was ~~atf~~<sup>at</sup>fallit. It seems he did not like the fellow  
next to him and continued to move away until told sternly not to do so.

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Upon entering the bone house, one is confronted by Stephanos, the late porter of the monastery, whose skeleton sits in a glass and wood case, dressed in his vestments with rosary in one hand and staff in the other, just as he did thirteen and a half centuries ago. The bones can be seen in their respective pales but are now out of the reach of the tourist behind walls of wire mesh. Before this precaution there were many instances of bones disappearing. The reason the bones of the monks are treated in such a way is because the Greek Orthodox believes in a physical resurrection of the original body upon the arrival of Christ.

The basilica as mentioned earlier was built by order of Justinian "to the memory and rest of our late Empress Theodora".<sup>30</sup> It is a fine example of Byzantine ecclesiastical architecture. The floorplan is of a narthex (the room between the outer door and the nave) leading to the nave (central hall) and the nave is separated from the aisles by two rows of six granite columns with corinthian-type capitals (~~which are painted~~<sup>which are painted</sup> ~~in green~~<sup>in green</sup> white and the capitals green). The basilica has nine chapels, four on each side with the chapel of the burning bush behind the altar and below the ground level. Five windows are on either side of the nave. The entablature (upper part of the wall) of the nave rests on round arches which are supported by the green and white granite ~~columns~~<sup>columns</sup> and capitals. The roof is of cypress wood, covered with lead. The wood contains these inscriptions: "our holy king, Justinian the Great" and "Lord God, who didst appear on this spot, save and bless the slave Stephanos, the builder of this monastery from Aila, and Nonna (his wife), and give rest to the souls of their children, George, Serguis, and Theodora."<sup>31</sup> As usual, the altar is to the east underneath a beautiful mosaic from Justinian's time. The basilica is rich in art of Christian antiquity, having the richest collection of icons in the world and

having a rich collection of wood carvings of exceptional quality.

The door of the narthex is not very ancient being of only eleventh century Fatimid workmanship. What is interesting about it is the crusader coats of arms engraved upon it from medieval times. The next door is exceptional for it is of fourth century Byzantine workmanship. Carved upon it are beautiful animal, bird, and floral engravings.

The beautiful floor mosaic was torn up by Arab treasureseekers but replaced by Bishop Mastasius (1583-1592).

The exceptional mosaic above the altar dates to Justinian. The subjects are as follows: Christ is represented soaring heavenward with Elijah on one side pointing to him and Moses on the other side with his hand upraised; John and James are kneeling while Peter lays prostrate. The thirty medallions represent the twelve apostles, Paul, the superior of the convent and sixteen prophets. To the right above is Moses at the burning bush and at the left he is holding the tablets with the ten commandments. Below are two angels and two portraits, perhaps Justinian and Theodora. Below is written in Greek, "In the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Ghost, the work of this work was executed for the salvation of those who contributed towards it by Longinus, most holy priest, and superior." This Sinaitic work is most unique because it is one of the few remaining figure mosaics from the time of Justinian. Most of the other mosaics of this period were destroyed during the time of the iconoclasts (image breakers). This was a period when many believed the making of and figures in mosaic, paint, or sculpture was breaking the law of God forbidding the creation of graven images. As a result, this is one of the few remaining pieces of mosaic art from the time of Justinian. Furthermore it is one of exceptional quality. To gain more of an appreciation of the mosaic, it may be well to give a little background of mosaic art.

The Greco-Roman world used the mosaic to a great degree but their

mosaics were confined to floor decorations. It was not until the Christian era that mosaic art reached its peak when they began appearing on vaults, domes, and walls. The subject matter usually consisted of Biblical matters and these were most often from the New Testament. They served two functions. Mosaics naturally were used to beautify the interior of buildings but they were also used to provide a picture story for the many who could not read. This task was provided later on by the stained glass window in the cathedrals throughout Europe. A successful and excellent mosaic workshop did not exist by itself. It relied upon the tradition and complex skills of a prosperous society. For centuries, Constantinople dominated the world of the mosaic. Craftsmen would journey to various parts of the known world to beautify ambitious building projects. Covering vast areas of wall surface demanded efficient teamwork. A master artist would first sketch the scene, and then an assistant would make the cartoons which would give the basic line to be drawn upon the wet plaster. Then, according to the ability of each individual mosaicist, work would be done on the heads, draped garments, scenery and plain background. <sup>36</sup> The creation of a mosaic as at St. Catherine then was an ambitious and costly project.

To the right of the altar in the basilica under a domed canopy is a sarcoophagus containing two silver cases. One contains St. Catherine's skull wearing a crown of gold and precious stones, and the other contains her left hand with rings of gold and more precious stones. These are put on view to the public on Saint's Day (November 5). <sup>37</sup>

Behind the iconostasis are two large silver chests with images of St. Catherine worked in gold and precious stones. They were gifts of the Czars of Russia, Peter the Great (1688) and Alexander II (1860). They are used to store other invaluable donations received from royalty through the centuries. <sup>38</sup>

The chapel of the burning bush which can only be reached by the basilica, contains more treasure of accumulated chalices, trays, gold and silver crosses,

Bibles with heavy gold and silver covers and relics of other saints such as the skull of St. John Chrysostron, the arm of St Basil, and the lower jaw of St. Gregory of Nyssa. <sup>39</sup> As Moses took off his shoes at this site, so must the visitor. The original site of the burning bush is indicated by a silver plate. Earlier, the bush had been transferred to the east of the <sup>40</sup> basilica.

The monks and the Moslems have always gotten along admirably. This is exemplified by a mosque which lies next to the basilica. The foundations are Fatimid built in fulfillment of a vow of the vizir Abul Mansur Amush-takin in 1106 during the caliphate of Al Haair. This information is found in the kufic inscription on the minbar (pulpit). The mosque is a simple building 32 feet (10 meters) by 22 feet (7 meters), rectangular and solidly enforced by two pillars which carry the arches which carries the roof. The minbar here is of importance. It is of carved wood of traditional geometric foliage and dates to 1106. There are only two others like it in the Islamic world; in a town of Qus in upper Egypt and at the tomb of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob in Hebron. A local Jebeleyah family is entrusted with the keys of the mosque which is an inherited privilege.

Today there is a new library where things are well arranged and preserved. The old library was in what is now the two chapels of the holy virgin. The original state of the manuscripts were as Tischendorf relates. "In visiting the library of the monastery, I perceived in the middle of the great hall a large and wide basket full of old parchments, and the librarian, who was a man of information, told me that two heaps of papers like this, would-<sup>41</sup>ered by time, had already been committed to the flames!" Tischendorf discovered among this large heap of paper a large number of sheets from the Greek Old Testament. These sheets made up the Codex Fredericus Augustanus. In 1853 and 1859, Tischendorf made a second and third voyage to the east with the aid and protection of Alexander II, Czar of Russia. On February 4, 1859,

Tischendorf was invited to the cell of the steward of the monastery. The monk took a bulky book from the shelf and placed it before Tischendorf. In his own words we have, "I knew that I held in my hand the most precious Biblical treasure in existence-- a document the age and importance of which exceeded that of all manuscripts which I had ever examined during twenty years study of the subject."<sup>42</sup> The book was the Codex Sinaiticus - a fourth century Greek text containing large portions of the Old Testament and the complete New Testament. It is one of the oldest manuscripts of the Bible. Tischendorf received permission to borrow the manuscript and take it to St. Petersburg so to copy it as accurately as possible. There are two different accounts of what happened next. One account has it that the newly elected archbishop Callistratus offered it as a gift to the Czar of Russia and received in turn 9,000 rubels. The monks say the manuscript was never returned and the Czar gave them 9,000 rubels unwanted payment. And apparently they have a document to prove it. However, Codex Sinaiticus remained in the possession of St. Petersburg library until 1933 when the Bolsheviks, in need of foreign currency, sold it to the British Museum. The sum proved too much but Christians throughout the British Isles donated large and small sums to its purchase price of 100,000 pound sterling.<sup>43</sup> It is still to be seen in the British Museum.

Among the other documents in the library is the Codex Syriac, an incomplete text but the oldest known Syrian translation of the Bible which was probably taken from a Greek text of the second century.<sup>44</sup> Also there is a unique set of official documents or charters issued by Caliphs and Sultans of Islam of protection to the monks of the monastery. There are over two thousand in number which represent several Mohammedan dynasties from the twelfth to nineteenth centuries. The oldest dates from A.D. 1130. This set is the fullest known source on the evolution of Arabic court handwriting.<sup>45</sup>

Also included are an

number of historical, geographical, and philosophical

sources of great value. The total number of manuscripts is staggering. Greek manuscripts amount to 2250 and Arabic manuscripts around 600; several hundred volumes are in Syriac, Armenian, Georgian, Coptic, Ethiopic, and Slavonic. Some of the manuscripts are from Crete, Cairo, and Cyprus. <sup>46</sup> Two hundred names of scribes have been recorded as well. The total collection undoubtedly surpasses <sup>47</sup> 3000.

Lastly, the monastery is rich in icons or paintings of religious nature usually painted on a small wooden panel. When Islam conquered the area, the monastery became a Christian island in a Moslem world, severed from Byzantium. At the time of the iconoclasts, Byzantine emperors ordered the destruction of all images but the monks of St. Catherine chose to ignore the command since they were far from their authority. As a result, the monastery has the richest collection of icons in the world. Part of the value of the collection lies in the fact that it spans the history of this art form even during the eighth and ninth centuries when the making of images was forbidden.

With all this accumulated wealth of buildings, mosaics, manuscripts, and icons, the Monastery of St. Catherine is like glimpsing into the world of Byzantium and successive ages. Its narrow, windy streets, small courts, old buildings, covered passages and weathered walls are a patchwork of many periods and ages. Its mosaics glow with their original color with a jewelled excellence. Its paintings form a continuous bridge through the centuries that give a unique insight into the development of the icon, and its manuscripts are an invaluable source for research and reference, that date from many periods. And then too there are the people. The Jebeliah are still there, a pure stock of the original slaves and still fulfilling their original function. And the monks too fulfill their original purpose of poverty, prayer, care for the monastery and care for the visitors that journey from many lands. This the monks have been doing for over fifteen-hundred years making the Monastery of St.

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Catherine one of the oldest, active monasteries in existence.

Footnotes

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1. H.J. Beadnell, The Wilderness of Sinai (London: Edward Arnold and Company, 1927), p. 174.
2. Aziz Suryal Atiya, The Monastery of St. Catherine in Sinai (Cairo: Press Department, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 1950), p. 15.
3. Beadnell, The Wilderness, p. 167.
4. Lina Eckenstein, A History of Sinai (London: Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge, 1921), pp. 123-124.
5. Atiya, The Monastery, p. 17.
6. Beadnell, The Wilderness, p. 169.
7. Atiya, The Monastery, p. 18.
8. Ibid., pp. 18-19.
9. Ibid., p. 19.
10. Ibid., p. 21.
11. Ibid.
12. Ibid., p. 35.
13. Ibid.
14. Beadnell, The Wilderness, p. 169.
15. Atiya, The Monastery, p. 35.
16. Eckenstein, A History of Sinai, p. 131.
17. Beadnell, The Wilderness, pp. 172-173.
18. Eckenstein, A History of Sinai, p. 124.
19. Henry Field, The Faiyum: Sinai, Sudan, Kenya (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1952), p. 92.
20. Beadnell, The Wilderness, p. 12.
21. Ibid., p. 173.
22. Field, The Faiyum, p. 93.
23. Atiya, The Monastery, p. 25.
24. Ibid., p. 21.

25. Ibid., p. 23.
26. Ibid., p. 24.
27. George H. Forsyth, "Island of Faith in the Sinai Wilderness," National Geographic Magazine, January, 1964, p. 100.
28. Atiya, The Monastery, p. 53.
29. Eckenstein, A History of Sinai, p. 129.
30. Atiya, The Monastery, p. 41.
31. Eckenstein, A History of Sinai, p. 130.
32. Atiya, The Monastery, p. 41.
33. Eckenstein, A History of Sinai, p. 130.
34. Ibid., p.110.
35. Kurt Weitzmann, "Mount Sinai's Holy Treasures," National Geographic Magazine, January, 1964, pp111-112.
36. Ibid., 110
37. Atiya, The Monastery, p. 41.
38. Ibid.
39. Ibid. pp. 42-43.
40. Otto F. Meinardus, Cradels of Faith (Cairo: Al Arab Book Shop, 1966), p. 113.
41. Ibid., pp. 149-150.
42. Ibid., pp. 152-153.
43. Ibid.
44. Beadnell, The Wilderness, p. 169.
45. Atiya, The Monastery, p. 51.
46. Eckenstein, A History of Sinai, p. 132.
47. Atiya, The Monastery, p. 47.



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