Elie Wardini (ed.)

Built on Solid Rock

Studies in Honour of Professor Ebbe Egede Knudsen
on the Occasion of his 65th Birthday April 11th 1997

Novus forlag – Oslo 1997

Instituttet for sammenlignende kulturforskning
The Monastery of St. Catherine and the New Find

Bo Isaksson,
Uppsala

Introduction
The present paper was mainly written after a visit to St. Catherine’s Monastery at Mount Sinai in June 1994. Despite its ecclesiastical character, this monastery is an important scientific institution in the field of Semitic philology. As a library of manuscripts from the ancient Middle East it is second to none except that of the Vatican.

Since its foundation some time in the middle of the 6th century,1 the Monastery of St. Catherine, situated in the southern part of the Sinai peninsula, has been lucky enough to enjoy an unbroken tradition. For most of its existence it has been a Christian enclave within Islamic territory and although it has suffered occasional persecutions it has been able to maintain ties with the Latin West, the Greek, Georgian, Melchite, Syrian and Slavic orthodox Churches as well as with the patriarchate of Jerusalem. Syrian, Arabic, Georgian, Latin and Slavic monks have exercised their ascetic lives at Sinai together with the Greek majority of monks, especially in the earlier centuries of the order. This variety of nationalities at the Monastery is reflected in its library. There are for example bilingual prayer books in Greek and Arabic among the manuscripts.2 During its history the library has also been enriched by sumptuous gifts from emperors and tsars wishing to assume the role of protectors of the orthodox church. However, unlike many other famous monasteries receiving their share of such gifts, the Monastery of St. Catherine was never destroyed3 and its treasures have been kept intact to this day. Interestingly, new finds of manuscripts are still being made, one of which as late as 1975.

History
Shortly after the persecution of the Christians by the Roman state ceased in the beginning of the 4th century AD eremites and anchorites began to exercise their

3) Manafis (1990), 24.
lonely lives in the vicinity of the places where tradition holds Moses to have encountered God in the burning bush and received his ten holy commandments. The place was crouched between the granite mountains and the desert of the southern Sinai peninsula. The first monks lived in caves and tents and were totally unprotected from the raids of nearby Arab Bedouins. The eremites are several times reported to have suffered attacks from the peninsula’s Bedouin inhabitants as well as by invasions from the outside.

In about 400 AD an aristocratic lady from Galatia, St. Sylvia, is reported to have visited the holy places in Sinai. At that time the area had peace and she tells of a small church on the summit of Mt. Sinai and another, in the vicinity of a beautiful garden, next to the place where tradition locates the Holy Bush. Our information about this early stage of life at the Sinai Monastery is very limited, and nothing remains today of the small church in the valley of the Burning Bush.4

The main history of the Sinai Monastery begins with the foundation of the imposing church and the building of strong fortification walls by the Byzantine emperor Justinian (527-565). In response of the appeals from the monks at Sinai the Emperor raised a church and a strong fortification with a garrison of 200 soldiers with their families. His goal was to protect the monks who felt unsafe amongst the tribes of the desert. A second reason, of course, was to secure communication between Egypt and Palestine and to deter any attack on Palestine. Thus, there was a military reason to fortificate the site of the monks at the foot of Mount Sinai. The building of the church and the walls must have been completed some time between 548 and the death of the Emperor in 565.

The protected position under the Emperor established the Monastery’s reputation far and wide and 570 it is reported to hold many monks and three abbots, and distinguished men became its leaders, such as Longinus, Anastasios (later Patriarch of Antioch), and the famous writer John Climacus5 who wrote the “Ladder of Heaven”,6 of which there are nearly contemporaneous copies in the monastic library.

Life at the Monastery of Sinai remained under Byzantine administration for only a short time. Very early the Islamic forces invaded the Sinai peninsula, and the Monastery was subjugated. Not only the Arabs of the peninsula were converted to Islam but also the Christian inhabitants in the vicinity of Mount

4) For this and some other historical data I am indebted to Manafis (1990).
5) Τὸ ἃναξ ὀ τῆς Κλίμακος, dead 579.
6) Κλίμακ τοῦ Παραδείσου.
Sinai. Only the Monastery itself and its monks remained a stronghold of Orthodox Christianity in the midst of other creeds.

Most of the time the Moslems respected the Monastery, and this tolerance is commonly attributed to a proposed charter of protection by the hand of the Prophet himself. This document has been called the “Achtiname”\(^7\) of the Prophet Muhammed. The document by this name that was shown to me in the Library of St. Catherine is only a copy from the 16\(^{th}\) century. The original, if it ever existed, is supposed to have been taken to the Topkapi archive by the Ottoman sultan Selim I in 1517, after a visit to Cairo where he met some Sinai monks who showed him the document, eager to secure more privileges. If so, it has never been shown to the public since then. Be it as it may, the Moslems respected the document as the will of the Prophet and generally left the Monastery alone.

Early in the 8\(^{th}\) century, after the decline of Christianity in the peninsular and the abolition of the bishopric in the nearby oasis Fayrân, the Sinai Monastery was raised first to a bishopric and then to an archbishopric. This raising of the Monastery to archiepiscopal rank was necessary since its leader (Gr. \textit{begaúmenos}) was isolated in the desert under Moslem control, and was obliged to ordain deacons and priests by himself for the needs of the Monastery. Unfortunately, the Episcopal list is incomplete. It goes without saying, that St. Catherine's Monastery since the 8\(^{th}\) century has been the only archbishopric monastery, and as such at the same time the smallest autocephalous archbishopric and the largest monastery within the Orthodox Church.

The Monastery adopted its name St. Catherine after the alleged discovery of the relics of St. Catherine, a legendary woman saint who was reported to have been martyrazied in Alexandria.\(^8\) The tradition that the Monastery was the site of her relics developed during the 8\(^{th}\) and 9\(^{th}\) centuries and since the veneration of St. Catherine was widely spread even in the west, the Monastery of St. Catherine came to be held in even greater esteem. This tradition became the start of votive offerings being made to the Monastery by Western rulers, which enriched its treasures with precious manuscripts, icons and other gifts. The spread of the cult of St. Catherine helps explain why Venice protected the Monastery's interests in Crete and elsewhere, and why Portugal, Spain, France, Germany and other countries were always ready to offer it moral and material help. The ships

\(^7\) Probably from Pers. \textit{aštināme}, where \textit{ašši} = “peace treaty” and \textit{nāme} = “book” (communication by prof. Bo Utas).

\(^8\) A. P. Frutaz, “Katharina”, in \textit{Lexikon für Theologie und Kirche}, vol. 6, 60.
which raised the Monastery’s flag sailed without being hindered in the Mediterranean. The leaders of the Orthodox communions in Russia, Georgia, Moldavia and Serbia sent gifts to the Monastery, some times in response to requests by the monks and at others out of respect for the Saint. The Monastery was endowed with charters as well as wealthy subordinate monasteries, churches, and estates, which together with those already owned on Greek soil constituted the Monastery’s so-called metochia scattered throughout the East and the West.

Despite the alleged testament of the prophet Muhammed, life with the Moslems was not always easy, especially during the persecution of the Christians by the Caliph al-Hākim, the 6th Fatimid ruler of Egypt (996-1021). In the period 1101-1106 necessity dictated the conversion of an old Christian building, the refectory (apartment serving as dining hall), into a mosque. In this way, any threat, especially under the Mamelouks, was avoided.

Although located in the midst of a Moslem empire the ties with Byzantium were very strong. These ties not only consisted of links between the Monastery and the leadership of the Orthodox church, the Patriarchate of Constantinople, but there were also important links with the Byzantine political administration, although these links were mostly discreet and indirect in order that the Moslems would not be aroused. It has been proved that several emperors of the Byzantine empire assisted Sinai in various matters, e.g. John III Dukas Vatatzes (Batatze) (1222-1254) and Michael VIII Palæologos (1258-1282).

In 1517 Egypt and Sinai passed into the possession of the Ottoman empire. The Monastery once again found itself part of a unified empire and consequently had immediate access to Constantinople and the other patriarchates of the east.

During Napoleon’s campaign in Egypt, the Monastery benefited greatly. Napoleon not only assisted in the rebuilding of the Monastery’s north wall which had collapsed in 1798, but he also issued a special decree in the same year by which the privileges of Sinai were confirmed and the monks received even more economic favours.

The head of the Monastery administration, the hegoumenos, who holds the office of archbishop, is consecrated by the Patriarch in Jerusalem. St. Catherine’s Monastery is, however, independent and has only spiritual ties with Jerusalem. At the same time its metochion in Cairo regulates any matters that might arise in relations with the Egyptian state. In sum, St. Catherine’s Monastery remains a 15 centuries old enclave of Hellenism and Orthodoxy in a very inhospitable and arid region on the Sinai Peninsula.
The Library
The Monastery preserves the oldest functioning monastic library in Christendom. About two thirds of the manuscripts are Greek, the rest, in Arabic, Syrian, Georgian, Slavonic, etc. throw light on the monks of various nationalities who at times served in the Monastery. Some of the non-Greek manuscripts are translations of works in Greek which are unknown in the original. It should be stressed that the monastic library primarily was kept to serve the monks’ spiritual and practical life.

A number of the Greek manuscripts date to the earliest Byzantine period, before the 8th century. The most famous is Codex Sinaiticus, dated to the middle of the 4th century and one of the most important text witnesses to the Septuagint. The greater part of this manuscript was discovered in 1844 by the German scholar K. Tischendorff and subsequently in 1859 stolen by him and presented to the tsar of Russia. Later it was sold to the British Museum. Happily, in the new find 1975, eight new pages of Codex Sinaiticus were discovered, complementing missing pages in the British Museum codex.

What is the contents of the library? First place is held by manuscripts of the Bible: the Old Testament, New Testament, Psalters, the Prophets, lectionaries, etc. Then comes various kinds of liturgical works (e.g. orders of the Eucharistic celebration and typika with rules and regulations of the Monastery), and books with ecclesiastical hymns (kontakaria). More than 300 manuscripts contain texts of the Church Fathers and Byzantine authors. Several manuscripts contain the Canons of the Church and historical works, especially ecclesiastical history.

The Sinai manuscripts are mostly written on parchment or paper. There are more than 400 parchment manuscripts. The papyri, however, are proportionately few. Most of the manuscripts are in book form, only about 150 items are scrolls, which nevertheless makes St. Catherine’s library one of the most important collections of scrolls in the world.

9) Manafis (1990), 349.
10) Catalog number B. Mus. Add. 43725.
12) Manafis (1990), 352. We may reckon with a scriptorium at Sinai from the end of the 10th century. The older manuscripts were either written at the various metochia of the Monastery and transferred directly to the Monastery, or were presented to the Monastery as gifts. P. Nicolopoulos states that “from the 10th century onwards, we should accept that there was a library of Manuscripts at the Monastery and even before that time”. 
The large number of Greek codices in majuscule script range in date from the 8th to the 11th century. For the Middle East scholar more important are the manuscripts in Semitic languages. The library before 1975 contained in total 3329 manuscripts in 12 languages:

- 2319 Greek MSS.
- 696 numbered Arabic (all Christian, mostly liturgical and patristic) MSS, of which 36 were missing in 1949, 59 actually are printed books, and one is in Persian, which means the Arabic MSS are 600 in number.
- 266 Syriac MSS.
- 3 Christian Palestinian Aramaic MSS.
- 6 Ethiopic MSS.
- 1 Persian MS, in earlier lists mistakenly held as Arabic.
- 1 Latin MS, a 10th century Psalter.
- 86 Georgian MSS.
- 1 Armenian MSS.
- 1 Coptic MSS.
- 42 Slavonic MSS.
- 1 Polish MS.

The Arabic manuscripts at the Monastery nearly all contain Orthodox Christian texts. They form the largest and oldest collection of manuscripts with an Orthodox Christian subject matter in Arabic. Mostly, they are translations from Greek originals. Together with the new find in 1975 (cf. below) the Arabic collection consists of more than 700 parchment and paper codices, the oldest one dated 859. In a palimpsest there are even traces of a 8th-century cufic script. The Arabic manuscripts originate from various monastic centres in Syria, Palestine, Sinai, and Egypt, and they include books of the Bible, liturgical texts, saints’ lives, martyrdoms, chronicles and medical texts.

13) The numbers that follow are taken from Kamil (1970), unless otherwise stated.
14) Kamil (1970), 60; Clark (1952), VII, mentions 2291.
17) Kamil (1970), 145. From 1470 AD.
19) Thus Kamil (1970), 147. Clark (1952), VII, says 40, but Kamil discovered some new items.
20) Kamil (1970), 146. From the 18th century.
21) The New Collection, parchment cod. no. 16.
22) The Old Collection, no. 504.
23) Manafis (1990), 357 f.
The Syriac manuscripts of the Monastery form the only large collection of Syriac manuscripts of Orthodox provenance. They date from the 5th to the 15th centuries. The earlier manuscripts contain biblical books and writings of Syriac and (translated) Greek church fathers. Most of them are written in north Syria and Mesopotamia. Many of the later, however, have been produced in the Monastery itself. The later manuscripts, from the 10th century and onwards, are almost entirely liturgical. The most famous Syriac manuscript is the Codex Sinaiticus Syrus. It is a palimpsest, the underwriting of which is made in the 5th century and preserves a text of the earliest Syriac translation of the Gospels, known as the "Old Syriac", originating from the third century.

The Library also possesses a large proportion of all surviving texts in the dialect known as Christian (Syro-) Palestinian Aramaic. Almost all are fragmentary and date from the 6th to the 13th century. They are translations from Greek originals and comprise monastic writings, lectionaries and liturgical texts.

To this list may be added 1072 Arabic scrolls of which 29 are parchment and 1043 paper. In addition, there are 607 Turkish scrolls, all on paper. Those scrolls, both the Arabic and the Turkish, are administrative and legal documents of various kinds. They do not belong to the library proper but to the archive of the Monastery.

New Discovery of Manuscripts

In 1975 a store-room of ancient manuscripts was discovered at St. Catherine's Monastery. Till then the room had been walled-up with more than 70 boxes of discarded fragments. During repairs in an old section of the northern Justinian

24) The other large collections—in the British Library and the Vatican Library—originate from a Syrian Orthodox (Jacobite) Monastery in the Desert of Sketis; Manafis (1990), 358.

25) Among the native Syriac Fathers we find St. Ephraim, John the Solitary, Jacob of Serugh, Isaac of Antioch, and St. Isaac the Syrian.

26) Peshitta, from about 400, is a revision of this translation, Manafis (1990), 393 n. 2.


28) Manafis (1990), 359.


30) Eight more pages of Codex Sinaiticus, the famous Bible manuscript in Greek,
wall, building workers demolished a wall and unexpectedly discovered a little room which appeared to be a storeroom full of chests. When the chests were opened they were found to be filled with papyri, parchment manuscripts, and very old written documents of all kinds. Cleaning, sorting, and conservation work was necessary. The news of the find spread in some inner circles, and the Greek Government decided to take positive steps towards preserving, classifying, and microfilming the discoveries. It is reported that professor Nicolopoulos, the director of the Department of Manuscripts of the National Library in Athens, and two other Greek scholars devoted several months of research to the preliminary stages of cataloging and microfilming.

A third of the find turned out to be complete codices and there were no less than 120 scrolls. The dates range from the 4th to the 18th century. Most sensationally, there were also in the store-room some leaves of the already mentioned Codex Sinaiticus, and also some leaves of a 9th century manuscript with the first five books of the Iliad.

The new find turned out to contain a large number of papyri besides the old collection of 42 text and 12 fragments. It added once in a while 83 texts and 10 fragments. Most of these new papyri are in Greek and Latin, some as early as the 6th century, contemporary with the foundation of the Monastery.

No report of the new find was actually published in the first years. The find did not come to public attention until 1977, and then, as it seems, only by way of an accident, an "indiscretion". A first report was published by the renowned scholar James Hamilton Charlesworth in 1981. Charlesworth's report was obviously unwished and unauthorized by the Monastery and the Greek scholars responsible for the find, and he published it in the hope to "encourage the relevant authorities to proceed with all speed to make the remaining 99% of the documents available in photographic reproduction." Of the 39 photographs of newly discovered fragments put at Charlesworth's disposal in the year 1979 proving that at the time of the Monastery's founding books were given to it antedating the time of Justinian. Galey (1980), 154. Charlesworth (1981).

32) Manafis (1990), 354.
33) Not the Egyptian government. Sinai was under Israeli occupation at that time.
34) Manafis (1990), 356.
35) D. N. Freedman in Charlesworth (1981), xi.
36) D. N. Freedman in Charlesworth (1981), xi f.
by an unknown photographer he did finally publish seven.

The first authorized report came from the Archbishop of the Monastery himself, His Eminence Damianós, who 1981 in the 16th International Congress of Byzantinists in Vienna proudly announced the discovery of all in all 1148 handwritten codices, of which 836 were Greek manuscripts, and in addition Arabic, Syriac, Slavonic, and Armenian MSS, 2 Latin MSS, 2 Ethiopian MSS, and 1 Hebrew MS (!). As stated above, the new find sensationally included some hitherto missing leaves from Codex Sinaiticus. Most of the manuscripts are religious in content, biblical texts, liturgical texts, prayer books, and so on. 37

A catalogue of the Arabic manuscripts in the new find was published in 1985 by I. E. Meimaris. 38 All in all there are 155 Arabic manuscripts in the new find, of which 70 on parchment and 85 on paper. The dated parchment manuscripts range between 859 and 980, the dated paper codices between 1001 and 1352. Few of them are complete, of course, and some are only preserved in a few leaves. They reflect the spiritual needs of the monks: the lives and martyrdoms of holy men and women, preachings of the church fathers, prayer books, liturgies, readings from the Old Testament, texts from the New Testament, and a few medical 39 writings. The Arabic Psalters are especially numerous, 40 but also the evangeliaria 41 and breviaries 42 together with the speeches, 43 sermons, 44 and homilies 45 of the Fathers, the dominating

37) Damianós (1982). I am indebted to professor Lennart Rydén, Uppsala, who kindly translated the document to me.
39) L a. paper codex no. 69 with references to the teachings of Hippocrates.
40) Sing. Ψαλτῆριον. Collections from the Book of Psalms for liturgical usage. There are four on parchment (none dated), and 12 on paper of which two are dated: 1278 and 1285-99 AD.
41) Texts from the Gospels (sometimes the complete text as in Parchment no. 6), together with lists of pericopes to read on specific days. There are eight on parchment (one from 901 AD), and two on paper.
42) Sing. Ἐρωτάγιον. One in parchment and sixteen on paper (of which two are dated: 1089 and 1280).
43) Arab. كتب الصوامع. Represented in fourteen parchment and eight paper codices, of which three are dated: parchment no. 9 (965 AD, cf. note ), paper no. 34 (1001 AD) and paper no. 51 (1015 AD).
44) Usually مقتطفات, sing. مقتطفة. Represented in two parchment and six paper codices of which three are dated (1001, 1247, 1250-52 AD).
45) Arab. مَمْرَ، pl. مَمْرَ. A loan-word from Syriac mēmrā (m'mr'), Graf (1954), 110. To be found in five parchment and eight paper manuscripts of which three contain hints of these datings: parchment nos. 46 (867 AD) and 70 (964-5, 972-3, and 980-1
The monastery of St. Catherine and the New Find - 137

figure of which is John Chrysostom. In four of the Arabic codices there are texts of Ephraem the Syrian. Among the earliest of the dated Arabic manuscripts in the new find we note five parchment leaves of a book of the four Gospels from 859 AD, seven parchment leaves from 867 AD with a homily of the priest Baṣr ibn as-Sadi ad-Dimaṣqi about the ascension of the Lord to heaven and a homily of the patriarch Athanasius of Alexandria on Palm Sunday. There are also 105 leaves of a parchment codex from 868 AD containing six edifying speeches and narratives about 1. The martyrdom of the holy Šantuba and those who died with him; 2. The martyrdom of the holy Maccabean woman Salome and her seven sons; 3. The martyrdom of seven holy young men from the city of Ephesus; 4. The story of the fathers who were murdered on the Sinai mountain; 5. Benediction over God's holy mountain Sinai; 6. "Story about the destruction of Jerusalem and this is what Anba Asråt told us ... ."

Naturally, the main interest has been focused on the Greek manuscripts, although accounts of the Arabic and Armenian MSS have been published. However, in Spring 1996 His Eminence Damianos graciously invited me to examine the Hebrew manuscript in the New Find. The manuscript turned out to be a paper codex consisting of 144 leaves, which means there are 288 pages, of which about 280 have text. The language is Hebrew. The script type is Sephardic of the semi-cursive (Mashait) mode. This means that the manuscript has probably been written in Spain or Maghrib, or possibly—but less probable—in southern Italy. The script is similar to a Hebrew manuscript in Toledo from 1366, which first caused me to give a preliminary dating in the AD), paper no. 4 (1192 AD).

46) His writings are represented in seven parchment and four paper codices. The only dated one is parchment codex no. 9 from 965 AD, containing 1. A speech (Arab. qawl) of John Chrysostom about burial or tombs (qabr); 2. "A message (tadkira or tadbhara) about what happened with our Lord and God Jesus Christ in the holy city of Jerusalem in the days of Pontius Pilate"; 3. "A speech of the holy and blessed monk Anba Danil (or Daniel) about the interpretation of the twelfth psalm."

47) Parchment nos. 13 (with 30 al,aat, mayamir, and "izrat) and 15 (qawl of Mar Afräm about the thief who inherited the eternal life by way of only one word), paper no. 34 (from 1001 AD) and no. 40.

48) Parchment no. 16.
49) Parchment no. 46.
50) Parchment no. 1.
14th century. However, the watermarks point in another direction. I have identified most of the watermarks in the paper with reasonable security and they indicate a date rather in the first half of the 16th century. The codex is damaged by mice or insects. There is no title page, nor a colophon which could indicate a date and place of origin. The text on the first page begins abruptly. This together with the fact that the binding is in a bad state makes it likely that the codex once contained more leaves. In addition, the great number of different water-marks indicates that the codex was produced from paper of different producers. The size of the codex is 157 x 110 mm (H x W). On the beginning pages the text is a compilation of quotations from the Old Testament (some of which are not exact) together with a short commentary. Other parts of the codex contain exhortations of a religious kind that is not specifically Christian. The language in those parts is Medieval Hebrew.

Recently, a project has been initiated aiming at a complete photographic and bibliographic documentation of the library, including the most recent finds. It is directed by the aforementioned prof. Panayotis Nicolopoulos, director of the Department of Manuscripts at the National Library of Greece in Athens. There is no doubt that a sensational discovery has been made in St. Catherine's Monastery at Mt. Sinai. As has been mentioned, eight pages from Codex Sinaiticus have been recovered. The treasures will be of significance not only for specialists in Greek history, literature, and calligraphy, but also for biblical studies and Semitic philology. There are newly found manuscripts in Arabic, Ethiopic, Syriac and Hebrew. Let us hope that the remaining Semitic manuscripts will be catalogued and described in full in the near future and made available to the scholarly world. "All of us wait with eager anticipation to see what lies as yet unrecognized and still 'lost' among the thousands of leaves and portions of manuscripts."  

References

54) This is the supposition of the Fathers in the Monastery.
55) In his address to the congress in Vienna the Archbishop attributes prof. Nicolopoulos as the scientific leader of the whole documentation project in the Monastery; Damianos (1982).
The monastery of St. Catherine and the New Find - 139


Bo Isaksson


