

The Monastery of Saint Catherine, Sinai

Pierre Evald

A small chapel was constructed about 330 at the site of the burning bush where Moses heard the angel of the Lord, according to the book of Exodus. And hovering over this secluded setting is Mount Sinai (Gebel Musa) where the tablets of The Law were handed over to Moses. So from an early date ascetics and later small communities gathered here, until raids from nomadic bedouins made emperor Justinian construct a fortification around the new church and the older installations about 550. Ever since, the monastery in Sinai has been a favorite place of pilgrimage only surpassed by the Vatican in Rome and Jerusalem,



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This isolated outpost of Christianity obtained a charter from the Prophet Muhammad, thus securing the lives and property of the monks. Some doubt this charter is genuine, but the fact remains that it has been respected as the will of the Prophet by the Arabs as well as the Turks. An authenticated copy of the charter stamped with the hand of Muhammad is still in the library of the monastery.



The **Library**, by function the oldest monastic library in Christendom, is now located in a large new wing, built in fireproof concrete in 1951 on the south-western side of the monastery. It's over ten meters wide by fifteen meters long and its precious codices and manuscripts are stored and shelved on the upper floor.



The library represents one of the richest monastic collections in the world, containing over six thousands volumes and manuscripts. As an organized entity in a specific area the library may not date back to the founding, but naturally the early manuscripts must have been kept somewhere. In the 13th century books were kept in the lectern of the basilica, and from 9th century onwards a scriptorium for the illumination and copying of manuscripts has been in operation. Not until 1761 an organized library is reported by a westener, Vitaliano Donati:

"In this Monastery I found a huge quantity of parchments manuscripts, many of which had been placed in a library, others tossed into a filthy cupboard. Almost all are of parchment, and most of them are Greek." (1761)

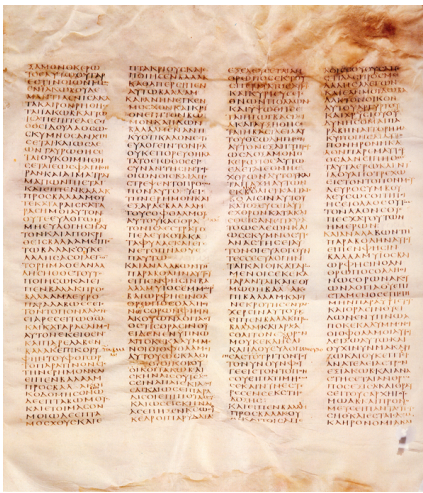
Nikephoros Marthalis Glykos, archbishop of Sinai 1706, was much in favour of the improvement of the library facilities and he completed a new library building and drew up the first catalogue of the collection:

"After seeing the manuscripts I found scattered about and neglected, some in cupboards, others in niches and cells, my conscience stabbed me and I put them into the care of the overseer of books, the most learned of holy teachers....who after much labour and care gathered all the books up from every corner, listing them in proper order, and arranging them as seemed best in a library, according to the judgement of..., and after much reflection on the matter by....and all the brothers." (1734).

A great quantity of manuscripts were discovered in 1975 while work was in progress on restoring the north wall. At least 1.100 separate manuscripts appeared, fragmentary or complete, maybe those mentioned by Donati in 1761, hidden and thrown in a filthy cupboard next to those shelved in Marthalis new library from 1734.

The library houses more than 3.000 Greek manuscripts, as well as 700 Arabic and a few more hundreds Syriac, Georgian, Slavonic texts and a handfull of Armenian, Latin, Persian, Polish, Ethiopian and Coptic manuscripts. The broad selection of languages is rather unique and reflects the widespread influence of the monastery. The manuscripts are mostly written on parchment or paper, some 400 are on papyri. Most are in book form, but more than 150 are scrolls making the collection one of the most important collections of scrols worldwide. It makes sense that the isolation and inaccessibility of the monastery have promoted the monks use of books and manuscripts. In times of danger books and manuscripts were hidden, often carried away in big baskets with lid, like the one still on display in the small museum.

Codex Sinaiticus, dated to the middle of the 4th century, this codex is with Codex Vaticanus one of the two earliest copies of the whole Greek Bible, Septuaginta. The codex was in 1859 'borrowed' for copying and later taken to St. Petersburg by Konstantin von Tischendorf, a German scholar who cheated the monks of their valuable manuscript. Today the codex is in The British Library, sold by The Soviet Union to the UK for £100.000 in 1935. Nevertheless, the monastery still claims it back to where it belongs.



The Archive contains documents, letters and files mainly in Greek but also in Arabic. Only few documents are preserved from the Byzantine period as contact with Constantinople was cut during the occupation of the peninsula from the 7th century. During Napoleon I's campaign in Egypt 1798-1801 he assisted in the rebuilding of the collapsed northern wall of the monastery. Further Napoleon issued a special decree on December 8th, 1798, confirming the privileges of the monks.



25. French document, no. 241, paper (41.1x26.3 cm., p. 1). Decree assuring the Monastery's rights and privileges with the personal signature of Napoleon Bonaparte. 1798.

References.

Sinai. Treasures of the Monastery of Saint Catherine / Konstantin A. Manafis (editor). Athens, Ekdotike Athenon,1990. 400 pages.