



A JOURNAL OF ORTHODOX FAITH AND CULTURE

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CONSERVATION AND RESTORATION AT SINAI: TREATING A SPECIAL PLACE GINGERLY

As an introduction to the rich heritage of St. Catherine's Monastery on Sinai, the following address was given by Father Justin, the monastery librarian, at the Twenty-first International Byzantine Congress, held in London, August 21-26, 2006, as part of a panel dealing with issues of conservation within living communities in the Middle East.

From earliest times, the Sinai has been a place apart, isolated, severe. This is one of the world's driest deserts, a desert not of sand dunes, but of sheer granite cliffs and towering mountains. It was here that the holy Prophet Moses beheld the Burning Bush, and heard the voice of God saying to him, "the place whereon thou standest is holy ground" (Exodus 3:5). Christians settled here in the latter third and early fourth centuries, gathering at the site of the Burning Bush, beneath the God-trodden Mount of the Law. Egeria, writing in the latter fourth century, describes a flourishing monastic presence, and was herself even then following an established pilgrim route. Sinai was an extension of the Holy Land: pilgrims made their way to Jerusalem, and if they had the time, the resources, and the stamina, they continued on to Sinai, the most

Opposite: The monastery at sunset. The sunlight is reflected off the mountains to the north of the monastery, which is already in shadow.

remote of all Christian pilgrim shrines. As such, Sinai was a part of the Greek-speaking world. Remarkably, it has remained so to this day.

One of the defining moments in the history of Sinai took place in the early sixth century, when the Emperor Justinian ordered the construction of the great basilica and the high surrounding walls. But the great fortress walls



Ancient wall and window in the kitchen area before restoration.

enclosed earlier, more humble dwellings, and after the seventh century, the monks continued to build simple structures using locally available materials. Wood was scarce, and any sizeable branch might be used to support a roof. Walls were made of field stones, or simple bricks of sun-dried earth. These were

put in place by weary hands, as monks struggled to survive in this harsh wilderness, maintaining the cycle of daily services, cultivating the life of prayer. But the very constraints of isolation, limited building materials, and comparative poverty made for an integral harmony in these constructions.

Many institutions today lament interventions made in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, when access to remote sites became easier, and when a concern for architectural purism caused earlier monuments to be leveled and rebuilt. These forces were restrained at Sinai, both by the isolation of the site, and the concern of the monks to protect their heritage. In 1930, the cells along the south wall were demolished, and a three-storey structure built in their place, completed in 1951. This was done to provide better housing for the monastery's icons and manuscripts. All in all, Sinai has reached the modern world remarkably intact.

And yet, at this place, conservation is not an option, but a necessity. In recent years, fourteenth-century cells along the east wall became uninhabitable, with roofs and floors caving in, and walls disintegrating. An examination of the sixth-century mosaic carried out two years ago revealed that large expanses of tesserae had become detached from the wall and were in danger of collapse. This, in turn, was due to structural problems in the basilica, which can only be addressed when the mosaic has been consolidated. Many manuscripts in the library are in a very fragile state, and one hesitates to

open them, no matter how carefully. All of these issues must be addressed. But if this is not done with the greatest care, a heritage that has reached us remarkably intact could very easily be lost.

The fourteenth-century cells are being conserved, with every effort to retain original timbers and walls. It is the goal of the architect that when the work is finished, the cells will again be sound, but they will look the same as they did before. The mosaic is being consolidated by an experienced team, working under the direction of an advisory panel of distinguished conservators and scholars. And the monastery has embarked on an ambitious program for the renovation of the library building. It will be brought up to modern standards, after which the more fragile manuscripts will be enclosed in protective cases.



Use of branches and reeds in construction, from the scarcity of wood in the area.

In the conservation programs that are now in place, the principles that guide each project are remarkably similar. These may be summarized as follows: Find the most capable experts in the field, conservators of the highest principles, with years of experience. Let them use the latest technologies to analyze the problems at hand. Then, let them use completely traditional and reversible materials; and, often enough, let their interventions be quite restrained. Let them document everything they have done, and let them share this information with their colleagues. This benefits others, even as we ourselves have benefited from their experience. Much is done by way of conservation, which is to isolate and check causes of deterioration. Little is done by way of reconstruction, which is to introduce new materials into old structures. These principles hold true in our care of sixth-century mosaics and venerable manuscripts. Perhaps they hold somewhat less true for the cells. Here, discrete amounts of new building materials are introduced. Roofs of raw earth, for example, are replaced with insulation and topped with flagstones, retaining the original beams. This is done with complete respect for the original structure, and all modern materials will be concealed when the work is finished. (Of course, after such an extensive reconstruction, we must allow about two hundred years for the building to regain the patina that only age can bring.)

These projects can include paradoxes. Four years ago, the monastery opened a treasury of nine rooms containing some thirty-five display cases, where visitors can see the most significant icons, manuscripts, vestments, and other ecclesiastical works in silver and silver gilt. Some members of the community were opposed to putting these items on display. We all know what happened to the treasures that Ezekias showed to Marodach Baladan, the son of Baladan, King of Babylon: is it not written in the Fourth Book of Kings? And if objects are put on display, one must consider questions of security, climate stability, and presentation. Opposition to the treasury was overcome when it was pointed out that, enclosed in high security, airtight museum cases, and illuminated discreetly by fiber optics lighting, the items would be in better environmental conditions on display, than if they were left concealed in traditional storerooms.

In a second paradox, the monastery has embarked on an ambitious program of manuscript photography using a high resolution digital camera. This also is seen as a part of our conservation program. Scholars wishing to study the manuscripts are given quality photographs; they do not handle the originals. In our efforts to preserve the manuscripts, we have also found a way to make them more accessible.

We should also mention here the conservation issues associated with the monastery's participation in museum exhibitions. No object had ever left Sinai for exhibition until 1997, when the monastery contributed nine icons and one manuscript for *The Glory of Byzantium*, at the Metropolitan Museum of Art. There are many reasons against such participation. Icons are, above all, devotional objects, and placing them in a museum removes them from this context. Also, what assurances are there that objects which have survived for centuries in the desert of Sinai can be sent around the world and return safely? The monastery consented to participate in such exhibitions on being assured that the icons would be displayed in a reverent manner, and that they would be sealed in display cases that replicate the humidity levels of Sinai. Also, members of the community, and Egyptian officials, accompany each shipment, and remain with the objects. All of these precautions make an exhibition of Sinai icons very costly. Undertaking such an exhibition is not for the faint of heart. But the monastery participates in such exhibitions, above all, as a way of sharing its spiritual heritage with others, something that it considers of the greatest importance, especially in these days.

Many superlatives can easily be applied to the remarkable treasures of Si-

nai. Sinai has the best preserved sixth-century mosaic in the world. It has the most remarkable collection of Byzantine icons, the oldest dating from the sixth century. The library is said to be second only to the Vatican in the number of Greek manuscripts, and is perhaps preeminent in the antiquity and importance of its Arabic and Slavic manuscripts, and in the number of intact early bindings. But I would venture to say that the greatest treasure of Sinai is the living community, which traces its history in unbroken continuity to the third and fourth centuries. The cycle of services, the ancient and distilled way of life, have been preserved to this day. This gives an added significance to each icon and manuscript at Sinai. Indeed, it is a reminder that the icons, manuscripts, and other ecclesiastical treasures were created for use in prayer and Liturgy, and they remain in this context even now.

It has been asked, "How can Sinai continue to attract novices and monks if they have nothing but ruins to live in?" This is true, but only to a point. The members of the community are, each of them, at Sinai because they value and respect the spiritual heritage of the place, and living there, they become a part of that heritage. Here is the basilica where Saint John Climacus stood in prayer. Here is the kitchen where Saint Gregory of Sinai laid the foundations, through his labors and obedience, for the spiritual illumination to which he later attained. Here is the very place sanctified by Saints Nilus, Anastasius of Sinai, Philotheus of Sinai, and by such a multitude of holy Fathers, most of whose labors and whose names are now known only to God. Ultimately, of course, this is the place where God spoke to the holy Prophet Moses at the Burning Bush, and it remains so, not just physically, but spiritually also. In this, one wants to see churches and chapels and cells and walkways that have remained intact for many centuries, that serve as daily reminders of this ancient heritage. It is the oldest and least restored parts of the monastery that one treasures the most. Sinai is a very special place, and must be treated gingerly, with everything subordinated to the spiritual aspects of the site.

But this places us in a dilemma, for it is precisely the oldest and least restored parts of the monastery that are at greatest risk of further deterioration. Truly, it requires much discretion to avoid, on the one hand, a neglect of objects until they become beyond repair, and on the other hand, an impulse to intervene that results in the loss of an object's historical integrity. But I think the temptation is rather to do too much than too little. ✠