

## **MOUNT SINAI MONASTERY OF SAINT CATHERINE**

A fortified monastery built in the sixth century by the Byzantine emperor JUSTINIAN I. It lies in the Wadi al-Dayr below a shoulder of Mount Sinai and near the center of the Sinai Peninsula. To the west is the Plain of al-Raha, the traditional campground of the Israelites while Moses communed with God on the summit of the mountain. Since the fourth century, this mountain, Jabal Musa, has been generally accepted as the veritable Mount of the Decalogue.

Likewise, the spot where the monastery now stands has been revered since that time as the site of the burning bush, out of which God had called to Moses and had given him the mission to lead hither the children of Israel after God had delivered them from pharaoh's power. Until the Middle Ages, a growing bush firmly believed to be the original one stood in a small courtyard adjoining the apse of Justinian's church. But by the thirteenth century, the growing bush had been replaced by a [marble](#) plaque on the floor of a new chapel that replaced the small courtyard and perpetuates the traditional sanctity of the spot.

Prior to the construction of the monastery, a loosely organized laura of hermits inhabited nearby caves and tended the bush in a garden with an adjoining church. They also welcomed pilgrims attracted to so sacred a spot. Since the construction of the monastery, the hermits have been superseded by a strict monastic organization under the rule of an archbishop-abbot, which occupies a carefully articulated architectural complex designed to accommodate monks and pilgrims to the bush, within a frontier fortress of Justinian's empire. According to a contemporary historian, PROCOPIUS OF CAESAREA, its purpose was to prevent the barbarian peoples in that desert region from making "inroads with complete secrecy into the lands of Palestine proper."

The monastery is a key monument in the history of early Byzantine military and religious architecture. Its outer wall can be traced through

its entire perimeter, under later remodelings and superstructures, and on three sides it rises to its original height. In many places, its original battlements are still in position. Its surface is enlivened by decorative carved panels, also from the sixth century, which are set above slit windows.

The main entrance, which was located at the center of the northwest wall, was a double one consisting of a large and imposing portal, now closed in. A postern to the left of it is now preceded by an eighteenth-century porch. The portal was crowned by a flat arch and must have been closed by a massive door.

In the part of the monastery that is to the right of its main portal as one enters, an open space may have been reserved as a courtyard. No trace of early structures is found in that area. As a [pilgrimage](#) center, the monastery was in part a caravansary and may well have included within its sheltering walls an open area for all the multitudinous activities of arriving and departing groups of pilgrims. The area is now occupied by more recent buildings largely of a service nature, and by irregular courts.

Relative to neighboring structures, the [church](#) appears to be sunk deeply in the ground. Actually, the ground level within the monastery, unlike the level outside its walls, has changed little. The site of the bush, in the lowest corner of the monastery, determined the floor level of the church, nearly 13 feet (4 m) below the portal of the monastery. A flight of steps leads down to the narthex of the church.

As originally planned, the [church](#) was to be entered through three small doors opening into the nave and aisles. During construction, the narthex was added and the center door was widened on one side, so as to afford a full view of the nave from the narthex. The nave retains its simple monumentality in spite of later additions (pulpit, chandeliers, ceiling panels and coves, crucifix, icons, iconostasis, episcopal throne, [marble](#) floor, and furniture).

The ceiling panels conceal the original thirteen roof trusses, previously visible from the floor. The unique preservation of these trusses, which formerly carried a lead roof, is due to the dry climate. Their sixth-century date is proved by carbon-14 tests. Three of their horizontal beams bear inscriptions on the vertical sides, which were originally visible from the floor but are now concealed by the later panels. They are invocations on behalf of Justinian, his empress Theodora, and the architect of the church, Stephanus.

Since the first inscription implies that Justinian was still alive, and the second indicates that Theodora was already dead, the [church](#) was commissioned between the years in which each died, that is, between 548 and 565. The bottom surfaces of the beams, not being covered by the later panels, remain visible from the floor. These surfaces retain their original sixth-century carvings of floral ornament and of animals, river scenes, and sea creatures, all of them rendered realistically and with animation.

On one beam is a Nilotic scene with men rowing a boat, a threatening crocodile, an enraged bull and, surprisingly, two tritons swimming with crosses in their arms. Similar carvings of floral ornament and animals appear on the great wooden door that opens from the narthex into the nave. They all formed part of the original decor of the church, as do the two [marble](#) panels flanking the main altar on each of which is carved a cross between two deer confronted in a heraldic composition.

To the right and left of the sanctuary are original bronze doors opening into two large chapels, which flank the apse and give access to the medieval Chapel of the Burning Bush. It replaced the small courtyard on the same spot wherein grew a bush, believed by earlier pilgrims to be the original.

They would have visited this goal of their [pilgrimage](#) by passing outdoors through a formal doorway at the north end of the narthex and thence

along the north flank of the [church](#) to its far end, where grew the bush in the small courtyard, probably enframed by a chancel rail, perhaps supporting a small colonnade, like the choir enclosure in a church. After construction of the new chapel closed the circuitous outdoor route, pilgrims would have passed from the narthex along the aisles of the church and through the bronze doors into the former chapels, converted from their original liturgical purpose to antechambers of the new chapel.

The piety of pilgrims was satisfied by services said at the site of the bush, which had gained further reverence through its association with the Virgin Mary. The new routing also took them past the renowned tomb of Saint Catherine of Alexandria whose body, miraculously revealed to the monks on nearby Mount Saint Catherine, spread the fame of her monastery far and wide from the time of the Crusades.

Saint Catherine's tomb is on the south side of the sanctuary, adjoining the south aisle. The sanctuary itself and the apse are little altered since the sixth century. The great [marble](#) altar table stands at the center under an eighteenth-century domical structure. The apse retains its original veneer of matched marble panels encircling the marble throne of the abbot, which is flanked by a triple tier bench of marble (behind later marquetry) for the clergy.

Two panels of the original enclosure of the sanctuary are still in place (one below the tomb) and in the half-dome of the apse and on the wall above it are magnificent sixth-century mosaics, including the Transfiguration and Moses at the Burning Bush receiving the Law. On the flat [marble](#) surfaces that flank the apse were painted, at a somewhat later date and in encaustic, the Sacrifice of Isaac on the left and the Sacrifice of Jephthah's Daughter on the right (behind Saint Catherine's tomb). There is no [evidence](#) that the nave or aisles ever had any [figurative](#) decoration.

In plan, the core of the [church](#) is a normal three-aisled basilica with a

single eastern apse. Flanking that core is an alignment of six chapels plus a sacristy and a long room that may have been another sacristy or a treasury. These flanking elements are not later additions but are parts of the original plan and are incorporated into it like the outer aisles of a five-aisled church.

They have not been altered; their small apses with adjoining service niches are original; and they were roofed by continuous flat decks on both sides, just below the aisle windows. Such an organic incorporation of secondary chapels in this sixth-century plan appears to be a precocious example of a development in the Byzantine rite toward a “private” liturgy in addition to the traditional liturgy at the main altar. The two eastern chapels are also “private,” being connected to the [church](#) interior only by small entrances closed by bronze doors. These chapels originally may have had a liturgical function in relation to the burning bush relic accessible from both of them.

A notable feature of the [church](#) is the loftiness of its proportions. The vertical effect of its nave, originally enhanced by the openwork ceiling above it and by the abnormally high pitch of its roof, is exceptional in contemporary Byzantine basilical churches. It serves to offset the relatively inferior location of the church. The two original facade towers, which have no obvious practical use, may have had a similar intention of elevating the church’s silhouette.

Before the front entrance of the [church](#) stands another important structure, a three-story building that has been largely absorbed into more recent constructions but is contemporary with the church. Its middle story, which is at the level of the nearby portal of the fortress, consists of an entrance foyer opening into a reception hall of six bays separated by piers carrying great arches of a scale comparable to the arches in the church. Above this formal hall was a suite of six chambers, later destroyed.

Below it was another, smaller, arcaded room that connected with other arcaded rooms at the same subterranean level, so as to form a vast adjoining storage dungeon. Such a combination of a monumental reception hall suitable for official appearances, with a private suite of rooms above it suggesting an official residence, and with huge storage facilities below it as if to withstand a siege, resembles the keep of a fortress. This building was surely the headquarters of the military commander, in the tradition of the Roman *praetorium*. Its juxtaposition to the [church](#) completes the double Byzantine concept of a stronghold as equally under the protection of church and state.

In the Fatimid period the monks, in a fine show of religious amity, authorized conversion of the outmoded headquarters building to a mosque with minaret, for use of local bedouins who staffed the monastery. The bell tower on the [church](#) was a gift from Russia in 1871.

Most of the secondary structures necessary to maintain the complex practical functions of the monastery, so isolated and dependent on its own resources, can still be traced beneath later alterations. Along the outer wall on its southeast side and partly built on top of that wall is a long modern dormitory consisting of small single rooms behind a verandah that overlooks the nearby church. This dormitory is now occupied by monks. Since it adjoins a latrine tower, no longer used but of sixth-century origin, and since it is above an extensive complex of sixth-century kitchens and related storage rooms in the basement, apparently this eastern area of the monastery has always been reserved as the residence of the monks.

The opposite western area adjoining the main portal of the monastery was reserved for the military and for pilgrim guests. Above that portal is another modern dormitory with verandah, which is now allocated to guests and probably replicates a sixth-century guest dormitory at the same place. Along the inner face of the outer wall, on its northeast side, are the modern quarters of the head monks and an alignment of flimsy

modern service structures, partly destroyed in a fire.

Beneath them is an imposing sixth-century arcade that may be the ground floor of military barracks originally built against the outer wall and next to the storage dungeon and near to the military headquarters building. On the southwest wall of the monastery, there is a huge and ungainly domed structure erected in the 1930s as a dormitory for pilgrims. Since the sixth-century wall below it also has rows of windows in its outer face, although smaller, a sixth-century dormitory, whether monastic or military, probably preceded the present one.

Although located on Egyptian soil, the monastery does not much resemble contemporary Coptic monasteries. It has retained its Greek Orthodox character, as indicated by the design of its church, which has numerous features in common with contemporary Syrian and Palestinian churches but has little resemblance to contemporary Coptic churches.

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