

The Saint Catherine Area (Egypt)

No 954

Identification

<i>Nomination</i>	Saint Catherine Area
<i>Location</i>	Governorship of South Sinai
<i>State Party</i>	Arab Republic of Egypt
<i>Date</i>	30 July 2000

Justification by State Party

The Sinai Peninsula, joining the continents of Africa and Asia, has played an unsurpassed role in human history. It is well known that many peoples and cultures have passed across it in both directions, bringing with them different cultures and different ways of viewing life. Moses and Christ travelled across it humbly, radically changing the views of those who followed, and as a result monasteries and churches were built at certain isolated places. The Arab leader Mar Ibn Al-Ass led the Muslim army to Egypt, and from there Islam spread to the rest of Africa.

What may be less well known is that most of the plants and animals that had been domesticated by man in the Middle East were exchanged between the two continents and underwent local adaptation in various countries, spreading from there all over the world.

Southern Sinai is particularly rich in religious monuments, which are highly venerated by followers of the three monotheistic religions. Most prominent of these is the Monastery of St Catherine, founded in the 5th century AD, together with its satellite monuments. All this gives the region a special importance as a cultural heritage site of international value.

There is no comparable Christian Byzantine monument in the world that had been in continuous use for fifteen centuries. The buildings, and the sacred works of art and the famous library which they house, are in a remarkable state of conservation, despite the inherent difficulties of the desert environment.

The historic buildings within the site are of outstanding universal value from the point of view of history (the oldest surviving 4th century Byzantine architecture) and art (the many icons which escaped the Iconoclast destruction).

Criterion i

The monuments represent a remarkable and unique interchange of human values, being respected and revered by followers of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, more than one-third of humanity.

Criterion ii

They are unique cultural testimony to the peaceful co-existence and mutual respect of the three great monotheistic religions of the world which sprang up in the Middle East.

Criterion iii

They are outstanding examples of Byzantine buildings, only rarely to be found elsewhere on Earth.

Criterion iv

Notes

- 1 This property is nominated as both natural and cultural heritage. Only the cultural aspects are covered in the ICOMOS evaluation.
- 2 This is an abridged version of the text in the nomination dossier.

Category of property

In terms of the categories of cultural property set out in Article 1 of the 1972 World Heritage Convention, this is a *site*. It is also an *organically evolved cultural landscape*, as defined in paragraph 39 of the *Operational Guidelines for the Implementation of the World Heritage Convention*.

History and Description

History

Despite its hostile environment and harsh climate, the southern part of the Sinai peninsula has attracted human occupation for many millennia. The remains of the simple dwellings of the ancient inhabitants known to history as the Amalekites date from the Early Bronze Age (3000–2800 BCE), but earlier settlements of Late Mesolithic or Early Neolithic date have also been found.

From the 1st to the XXth dynasties (c 3000–700 BCE) turquoise was being mined from the Sarabit Al-Khadem, where a temple was erected to Hathor, the goddess of turquoise. This is a very significant site, since it was here that Semitic workers helped their Egyptian masters acquire their own alphabet (known as Proto-Sinaitic). The Wadi Maghara was another important source of turquoise for the Egyptians.

The dominant power from the 4th century BCE onwards were the Nabataeans, from the region around Petra. They dominated the trade routes across Sinai (including the rich overland routes that brought luxury goods from Africa, India, and China into the Mediterranean world). This is evidenced by thousands of Nabataean inscriptions all over Sinai, along with caravan tracks, mining sites, and dwellings (*nawawis*). However, with the destruction of Petra by the Romans in 106 CE Nabataean influence waned and the survivors became nomads, the present-day *Jabaliya*.

The Sinai region, known to the Romans as *Palestina Tertia*, became a savage wilderness, and as such attracted early Christian anchorites. Following the departure of the Romans in the second half of the 4th century the general lawlessness eventually drove the monastic communities to seek help. This was supplied by the Byzantine Emperor Justinian I, who sent teams of architects and masons to build a fort below the rocky eminence identified by the monks as Mount Sinai, with the dual purpose of protecting the community and securing the road from Aqaba to Suez. The wall built to protect the monks and the military garrison survives to the present day.

The main Church of the Transfiguration was built in the 560s, around the time of Justinian's death. Its first dedication was to the Virgin Mary, but this was later changed to the mid 3rd century martyr St Catherine, whose head and hand are preserved as relics within the church; they were brought there for safe keeping in the 10th century.

Mount Sinai is also identified by Muslims as Mount Moses (hence its Arabic name, *Jebel Musa/Gabbal Moussa*), and for them, as for Christians, this is the place where God made a covenant with his people, handing down the Tablets of the Law to Moses. The Christian communities of St Catherine's Monastery have always maintained close relations with Islam. In 623 a document signed by the Prophet himself, known as the *Actiname* (Holy Testament), exempted the monks of St Catherine's from military service and tax and called upon Muslims to give them every help. As a reciprocal gesture the monastic community permitted the conversion of a chapel within the walled enclosure to a mosque during the Fatimid Caliphate (909–1171). It was in regular use until the period of Mameluke rule in Egypt in the later 13th century. The mosque remained in a desolate condition throughout the Ottoman period, and was not restored until the early 20th century; it is still used on special occasions by the local Muslims.

Description

The nomination is of an area of 601km², located within the 4300km² St Catherine Protectorate [= Protected Natural Zone].

The St Catherine area has an arid climate (mean annual rainfall c 60mm), with cool winters and hot summers. The water resources are poor, from shallow aquifers.

- The Monastery complex

The Monastery is completely surrounded by a massive *wall*, 2.5m wide and averaging 11m in height. It is constructed of massive dressed granite blocks; however, the upper sections were restored on the orders of Napoleon using smaller, undressed stone blocks. The wall is decorated in places with carved Christian symbols, such as crosses, monograms, etc. The original main gate, on the west, has been blocked: access now is through a smaller gate (also original) to the left of the main gate.

The main structure within the enclosure is the *Church of the Transfiguration* (the Katholikon), which is the work of the Byzantine architect Stephanos, who also erected the defensive walls of the Monastery starting in 527. It is built in granite, in basilical form, with a broad main nave, two side-aisles defined by massive granite columns with capitals composed of Christian symbols, an apse, and a narthex. Each of the aisles has three chapels, and there is one on either side of the apse. Next to the main altar is a sarcophagus which allegedly contains the remains of St Catherine. The ceiling, beneath the original roof, dates from the 18th century, as do the marble floor and the elaborately iconostasis. The carved cedar doors at the entrance are contemporary with the main structure; those of the narthex were made by Crusaders in the 11th century.

Behind the apse is the holiest part of the Monastery, the *Chapel of the Burning Bush*, which incorporates the 4th century chapel built by the pious Empress Helena, mother of Constantine the Great, and dedicated to the Blessed Virgin Mary. The altar is situated above the roots of the bush itself.

The bush itself was transplanted to permit the construction of the altar and is now to be found a few metres from the chapel itself.

The neo-Classical *Bell Tower* is the work of one of the monks, Gregorius, and was built in 1871. It houses nine bells, presented by the Tsar of Russia.

The rectangular *Old Refectory* (also known as the *Crusaders' Church*) has a Gothic vaulted roof, the arches decorated with the arms and other symbols of Crusader knights. There are murals on the walls, from the Crusader period and the 16th century. The main feature within the room is a long table with fine carvings, brought from Corfu in the 18th century.

The famous *Library* is the most ancient in the Christian world, and is considered to be second only to that of the Vatican, in terms of both the number and the value of its collection of more than 3000 manuscripts. In addition it houses more than 5000 early religious books. The Monastery also has an outstanding collection of more than 2000 *icons*, displayed in a special gallery. These represent almost every school of Byzantine iconography from the 6th to the 18th century.

The *Fatimid Mosque*, which is located to the south-west of the Basilica, is rarely mentioned in the available literature on the Monastery. It was in fact a new construction, on the site of a small Crusader chapel, and was built between 1101 and 1106 (495–500 H.). It is rectangular in plan (7m by 11m) and 7m high, with a small semi-detached minaret in the northern corner and a small courtyard in front, which forms the roof of the well restored ancient olive press and mill. The inner space consists of the six compartments with a flat wooden roof. Small windows are arranged axially in the inner walls above the level of the circular arches. Three *mihhrabs* are arranged in the *qibla* wall in the form of shallow niches. The main entrance is in the northern facade, which has two windows; there are also four in two rows in the eastern facade, but all the windows were blocked with brick some four decades ago.

A constant supply of fresh water is provided by the *Fountain of Moses*, which taps an underground spring. The *monks' cells* are disposed along the inner faces of the walls.

Outside the walls is the triangular *Monastery Garden*, created over many years by the monks, who brought soil here and made tanks to store water for irrigation. It contains many fruit trees, including olives, apricots, plums, and cherries, as well as vegetables.

Adjoining the garden is the *Cemetery and Charnel House*. After interment in the cemetery, the bones of deceased monks are disinterred and their bones are deposited in the Charnel House. The bones of archbishops are kept in special niches. This practice is necessary because of the problems of digging graves in the stony ground surrounding the Monastery. It also serves to remind the community of the inevitability of death.

- Mount Catherine and Mount Moses

East of the Monastery is a high hill, known to the monks as Mount Jethro, surmounted by a chapel. From this can be seen the two peaks of Mount Catherine and Mount Moses. The former, known as Mount Catherine (*Jebel Katrin*), is the highest peak on the Sinai peninsula (2642m above sea-level), and at its summit there is a chapel dedicated to St Catherine,

whose remains were, according to legend, discovered there, having been transported by angels from Alexandria, where she was martyred. The present chapel was built in 1905.

Mount Moses (2285m) is identified as Mount Horeb, where Moses received the Tablets of the Law. There is a mosque and a chapel at its summit. The chapel, dedicated to the Holy Trinity, was built in 1934 using the remains of the chapel built on the orders of Justinian (which itself replaced an earlier chapel built in 363). The remains of other chapels are to be seen along the main route to the summit, known as the Path of Moses (*Sikket Sayidna Musa*), along with two arches, the Gate of St Stephen and the Gate of the Law.

In addition to the Monastery and the other sites listed above, the nominated area includes archaeological sites from the Bronze Age, Egyptian copper and turquoise mines, small Nabataean settlements, and several ruined Byzantine and early Islamic sites.

The village or small town of St Catherine is included within the nominated area. It is located on the El Raha plain at some distance from the Monastery but in full view of it. It is an old settlement and a component of the historic landscape that has grown up around the Monastery. In recent years there has been considerable uncontrolled development of the town.

Management and Protection

Legal status

The St Catherine Area was declared a Nature Protectorate (Reserve) by Prime Ministerial Decree in 1988 under the provisions of Law No 102/1983. It achieved its present area of 4300km² by Decree in 1994. It was designated because of its rich endemic flora and abundant wildlife, its fertile agricultural area, with a large Bedouin population, and its importance to three major world religions.

Management

The Monastery is the property of the Greek Orthodox Church and belongs to the Archdiocese of Sinai. Under the hierarchical system of the Eastern Orthodox Church it is self-governing and independent, under the administration of the Abbot, who has the rank of Archbishop.

Ownership of the remainder of the area is vested in the Governorship of South Sinai. The Egyptian Environmental Affairs Agency (EEAA) is responsible for the maintenance of environmental values within the area, working through the St Catherine Protectorate administration.

Antiquities within the area are managed by the Egyptian Supreme Council of Antiquities, working through the South Sinai Regional Office of the Egyptian Antiquities Organization (EAO) at El-Tor. Management of the St Catherine Protectorate, which constitutes the buffer zone of the nominated property, is exercised by the Protectorate Administration, based in the town of St Catherine. For its work the Protectorate has a dozen rangers, 25 community guides recruited from the Bedouin Jebaliya tribe, and supporting staff.

Work began on the Development Project of St Catherine in 1996. The main objectives are the protection of the natural and cultural resource base for sustainable tourism and the development of an integrated management plan.

Most of the nominated area, and also of the Protectorate, is inhospitable mountainous desert. There is a population of more than 10,000 within the Protectorate, located in over fifty Bedouin settlements and the small town of St Catherine. Some of the Bedouin tribes are nomadic and others, such as the Jebaliya, live in permanent settlements. The main problems relate to St Catherine, where the infrastructure was recognized to be inadequate and there was no planning control over development. For example, a number of large modern hotels have been built, as well as public buildings which are of equally inappropriate scale. A master landscape plan has been adopted by the Protectorate and the Monastery working together, and as a first step a moratorium has been imposed on all new building projects.

Conservation and Authenticity

Conservation history

There has been intermittent conservation and restoration work at the St Catherine Monastery for many centuries. All interventions must now be approved both by the Monastery authorities and by the Egyptian Supreme Council of Antiquities. Local materials are used wherever possible in conservation projects.

Currently the Technical Office of the Monastery is working on a preliminary programme of conservation-restoration works, under the supervision of the EAO. Specialist consultants are assisting in the preparation of documentation and research, as well as certain technical matters relating to construction.

Authenticity and integrity

Because of its remarkable history, the Monastery has undergone a number of modifications over fifteen centuries. It preserves the authenticity of its different components to a high degree, to a considerable extent because of the reliance on local materials in successive buildings and restorations.

Having been in continuous use for its original function, that of a Christian monastery, St Catherine's has been carefully maintained so as to provide adequate housing for the monastic community and for pilgrims in a hostile environment. Its internal layout is still identical with that when it was founded.

The integrity of the Monastery and its surrounding landscape is also high, again to a large extent because of the hostile nature of the setting. The only discordant feature is the town of St Catherine, created as a centre for government agencies, and also for the growing tourism in the area.

Evaluation

Action by ICOMOS

An ICOMOS expert mission visited the property in September/October 2001.

Qualities

St Catherine's is the oldest Christian monastery in the world. It has retained its authenticity and integrity to an exceptionally high degree, owing partly to the fact that it has retained its monastic function continuously from its foundation in the 6th century and partly to its location in a

remote, desolate area. It contains some exceptional examples of Byzantine art, and also houses outstanding collections of manuscripts and icons.

Comparative analysis

The obvious comparison is with other groups of early Orthodox monasteries that are already on the World Heritage List – those on Mount Athos (inscribed 1988) and at Daphni, Hosios Loukas, and Nea Moni (inscribed 1990) in Greece and Ouadi Qadisha (inscribed 1998) in Lebanon, for example. However, St Catherine's Monastery stands out from these great sites because of its long continuous history, starting in the 6th century (none of those on Mount Athos was founded earlier than the 10th century), because of the remarkable way in which the original layout has been preserved intact, and because of exceptional quality of the buildings and their decoration.

ICOMOS recommendations for future action

- The Monastery

The conservation programme currently in progress at the Monastery is a comprehensive one. The ICOMOS expert mission identified a number of specific items requiring attention. These include in the Katholikon replacement of the corrugated iron roofing with lead sheet, conservation and protection of the original wooden elements, and measures against rising damp. Work is also needed on the walls and elsewhere in the complex. These and other projects were discussed in detail with the Technical Office of the Monastery.

Of considerable importance is the need to prepare a visitor management plan for the Monastery in view of the anticipated increase in pilgrims and tourists. The internal circulation of visitors needs to be rearranged, so as enable them to derive the maximum information during their tours. New exhibition and interpretation areas should be prepared in the basement areas of the sacristy and elsewhere. The present (modern) entrance should be remodelled and access to the Monastery improved.

There is a buffer zone of 1300–1500m around the Monastery, but this is inadequate. The control point for visitors, which is at present located in the Wadi El-Deir Valley, should be moved further away, out of sight of the Monastery itself. The requirements of visitors should be met by the erection of good-quality contemporary buildings and the provisions of a large, organized, parking area. There should be facilities for the transfer of elderly or handicapped visitors to the Monastery by electric vehicles or camel.

- The town of St Catherine

ICOMOS commends the Egyptian authorities for having acknowledged the problems resulting from the uncontrolled development of St Catherine and the increasing visitor pressure. The 1998 sustainable development plan tackles these problems boldly: ICOMOS urges the State Party to implement this plan fully with the minimum delay.

- Monuments on Jebel Musa (Mountain of Moses, Mount Sinai)

ICOMOS commends the work done by the EEAA in organizing visitor access to the Holy Summit (and also to other valleys in the area) in producing written guidebooks, providing elegant carved stone signs, in establishing a system of guides recruited from the local Bedouin, regular maintenance of the paths (and the surrounding landscape), and the provision of services.

However, the condition of the monuments along the path and on the Holy Summit itself is far from satisfactory. There are many makeshift shacks offering food and bedding which are unsightly. These should be demolished and some of them replaced by simple structures in a style that accords better with the religious monuments.

The Holy Summit itself should be designated a protected archaeological site, which it unquestionably is, and an appropriate management, conservation, inventory, and research programme put into force without delay. All modern structures should be removed from the Summit itself. An entrance gate, which would serve to control and monitor access to the Summit, should be constructed on a plateau and out of direct visual contact with the Summit. Accommodation and other visitor facilities should be concentrated on the Prophet Elijah's Plateau, lower down the route to the Summit (where conservation and consolidation work is needed on the Chapels of Elijah and Elisha).

Brief description

The Orthodox Monastery of St Catherine is situated at the foot of the Mount Horeb of the Old Testament, where Moses received the Tablets of the Law, known and revered by Muslims as Jebel Musa. The entire area is sacred to three world religions: Christianity, Islam, and Judaism. The Monastery, founded in the 6th century, is the oldest Christian monastery still in use for that purpose. Its walls and buildings are very significant in the study of Byzantine architecture and the Monastery houses outstanding collections of early Christian manuscripts and icons. The rugged mountainous landscape around, containing numerous archaeological and religious sites and monuments, forms a perfect backdrop for the Monastery.

Statement of Significance

The St Catherine's area is of immense spiritual significance to three world monotheistic religions: Christianity, Islam, and Judaism. St Catherine's is the oldest Christian monastery in the world, and has retained its monastic function without a break from its foundation in the 6th century. The Byzantine walls protect a group of buildings of great importance both for the study of Byzantine and Crusader architecture and in Christian spiritual terms. The complex also contains some exceptional examples of Byzantine art and houses outstanding collections of manuscripts and icons. Its siting demonstrates a deliberate attempt to establish an intimate bond between natural beauty and remoteness on the one hand and human spiritual commitment on the other.

ICOMOS Recommendation

That this property be inscribed on the World Heritage List on the basis of *cultural criteria iii, iv, and vi*:

Criterion iii St Catherine's Monastery is an outstanding and very early example of a Christian monastic settlement located in a remote area. It demonstrates an intimate relationship between natural grandeur and spiritual commitment.

Criterion iv Ascetic monasticism in remote areas prevailed in the early Christian church and resulted in the establishment of monastic communities in remote places. St Catherine's Monastery is one of the earliest of these and the oldest to have survived intact, being used for its initial function without interruption since the 6th century.

Criterion vi The St Catherine's area, centred on the holy mountain of Mount Sinai (Jebel Musa, Mount Horeb), like the Old City of Jerusalem, is sacred to three world religions: Christianity, Islam, and Judaism.

It is recommended that the attention of the State Party be drawn to the "Recommendations of ICOMOS for future action" above, and also that the State Party should be requested to provide a report on the progress of implementing the conservation programme for its meeting in 2004.

ICOMOS, January 2002