New Light on Old Manuscripts, VB 45, 21–30

https://doi.org/10.1553/978OEAW91575s21

Hieromonk Justin of Sinai

The Sinai Palimpsests: Piercing the Mists of Time

An international conference was held at the University of Vienna from 25–27 April, 2018, with the title, *New Light on Old Manuscripts: Recent Advances in Palimpsest Studies.* The conference was organized to celebrate the successful conclusion of the Sinai Palimpsests Project, and indeed, there was much to celebrate. But the conference was not limited to the Sinai palimpsests only. Other important imaging projects are underway. It is by sharing our expertise, as scientists and as scholars, that we will continue to make progress, in both the technology, and in our understanding of these texts.

The Sinai monastery was a centre of scribal activity. But the remoteness of the site meant that it was often impossible to obtain a supply of fresh parchment. The solution was to take an older manuscript, erase the text, and use the valuable parchment a second time. This accounts for the high proportion of palimpsests at Sinai. A number of these underlying texts were known from the 19th century, identified from words and phrases that protrude into the margins. But the recovery of these texts was very difficult. It seemed they had been lost forever.

The scientists working on the *Archimedes Palimpsest* made important breakthroughs in multispectral imaging by combining their expertise in the fields of lens and camera design, lighting, and image processing.[1] It was courageous of this same team to accept the invitation to work with the palimpsests at Sinai. This required taking skills that had been acquired in working with one manuscript, and applying them to an entire collection.

We began the Sinai Palimpsests Project in 2011. The technology continued to advance through the course of the project. Also, we became better at detecting palimpsest text, so the number of palimpsests at Sinai also continued to expand. Thus, the photography of palimpsests at Sinai is far from over. But the results of the Sinai Palimpsests Project are startling: 6,800 pages imaged from 74 manuscripts, revealing 307 erased texts in 11 languages.

The conference provided the opportunity for scientists and scholars to speak about their research on the Sinai palimpsests, and about palimpsests from other collections. Many scholars were sharing the results of their research for the first time. The publication of the contributions given there is certain to be an important volume, making the proceedings of the conference available to a wider audience.

We are grateful to the Arcadia Fund, which generously supported the Sinai Palimpsests Project. The monastery's participation is due to the wisdom and foresight of Archbishop Damianos, who is committed to both protecting and sharing the treasures and the spiritual heritage of the Sinai monastery. Michael Phelps, of the Early Manuscripts Electronic Library, heroically coordinated the many people and institutions involved. And we are all grateful to Professor Claudia Rapp for her work at Sinai, creating the catalogue entries for the palimpsests, and overseeing the many scholars working on the project. Her appreciation of the significance of the Sinai Palimpsests Project, and of other work being done in this field, resulted in the international conference. We are grateful to all of these, to all who participated in this project, and to all who were present at the international conference.

THE FOURTH CENTURY

We have historical records for Sinai dating from the 4th century. In the year 383, Egeria travelled to Jerusalem, and attended services in the Church of the Holy Sepulchre. From there, she continued on to Sinai, a journey of twenty-two staging posts, as she travelled along the Mediterranean, down the west coast of the Sinai peninsula, and then east to Pharan and Mount Sinai. She ascended to the peak from the north side, where a venerable hieromonk celebrated the Divine Liturgy for the assembled monks and pilgrims. In the basin below the summit,

Hieromonk Justin of Sinai: Librarian of the Monastery of St. Catherine, Sinai, Egypt; sinaimonastery@gmail.com

[1] Netz *et al*. (eds.), *The Archimedes Palimpsest*.

she venerated the cave of the Prophet Elias, where she was diligent to read the appropriate scriptures from the Books of the Kings. The monks brought fruits from their gardens for the pilgrims, calling them *eulogiae,* a Greek word, 'blessings'. Only then did she descend to the opposite valley, and she writes, 'there are a great number of monastic cells of holy men there and a church in the place where the Bush stands. The Bush is alive to this day and sends out green shoots'.[2]

If the monks remain fairly opaque in Egeria's pilgrim account, we learn their names and details of their lives in the *Report of the Forty Martyrs of Sinai and Raithou,* by Ammonius of Canopus. A monk called Moses lived at the traditional Elim, an oasis near the coast of the Red Sea. The children of Israel had encamped at this location where Exodus 15:27 mentions twelve springs of water and 70 palm trees. Ammonius reports that he lived for 73 years in a cave in a hillside, practicing an austere ascetic regime. Refusing to eat bread, he contented himself with 'a few dates for nourishment, along with water to drink, and he made his clothes from palm fibres. He cherished tranquility more than anyone else, and kindly received anyone who came to him with questions about their thoughts'. From the many miracles that God wrought through him, all the inhabitants of Pharan had come to believe in the Holy Trinity, and received Baptism.[3]

Lest a diet of dates sound exotic, we recall here the words of Charles Doughty, who travelled in Arabia in 1877–1878, and witnessed what it was to subsist on such a diet.

> The Arabians inhabit a land of dearth and hunger, and there is no worse food than the date, which they must eat in their few irrigated valleys. This fruit is overheating and inwardly fretting under a sultry climate: too much of cloying sweet, not ministering enough of brawn and bone; and therefore all the date-eaters are of a certain wearish visage … Where the date is eaten alone, as they themselves say, human nature decays, and they drink a lukewarm ground-water, which is seldom wholesome in these parts of the world.[4]

In the 4th century, there dwelt ascetics at Sinai and Raithou who were established in virtue, who had attained to the pinnacles of prayer and spiritual graces.

THE SIXTH AND SEVENTH CENTURIES

We also have historical records for Sinai from the 6th and 7th century. The Piacenza Pilgrim visited Sinai in the early 550s and explains: 'At the foot of the mountain is that spring where Moses saw the sign of the Burning Bush and at which he gave water to his sheep. The spring is enclosed within a monastery, and the monastery is surrounded by fortified walls. In it are three elders who are learned in several languages—I mean Latin and Greek, Syriac, Egyptian, and Bessan—as well as many translators of individual languages'.[5]

Procopius, in his work *On Buildings,* mentions that at the base of the mountain where Moses received the Laws from God, the Emperor Justinian built a very strong fortress, with a church dedicated to the Mother of God, to enable the anchorites who dwelt there 'to pass their lives therein praying and holding services'.[6] Many scholars feel that Procopius' *On Buildings* was completed in the year 554/5, though others have argued for the date 559/60.[7]

This reference is corroborated by inscriptions carved into the beams of the basilica. The seventh beam, counting from the west end, bears the following inscription:

† Ὑπὲρ μνήμης κ(αὶ) ἀναπαύσεως τῆς γεναμένης ἡμῶν βασιλίδος Θεοδώρας †
† For the memory and repose of our late Empress Theodora †

---

[2] Egeria, *Travelogue* I–IX (with Abridgements by Peter the Deacon), translated by Caner, *History and Hagiography from the Late Antique Sinai,* 223.

[3] Ammonius, *Report* 13, translated by Caner, *History and Hagiography from the Late Antique Sinai*, 156. See also 141–149 on the different versions of this text in other languages.

[4] Doughty, *Travels in Arabia Deserta,* 190.

[5] Piacenza Pilgrim, *Travelogue* 33–42: Jerusalem to Mount Sinai and Clysma, translated by Caner, *History and Hagiography from Late Antique Sinai,* 257

[6] Procopius, *On Buildings,* Book 5, Chapter 8.5.

[7] Cameron, *Procopius and the Sixth Century*, 9–11.

The eighth beam bears the inscription:

† Ὑπὲρ σωτηρίας τοῦ εὐσεβ(εστάτου) ἡμῶν βασιλέως Ἰουστινιανοῦ †
† For the salvation of our most pious Emperor Justinian †

The inscription on the one beam commemorates the Empress Theodora as having passed away, while the inscription on the other commemorates the Emperor Justinian as still living. We know that the Empress Theodora died in the year 548, while the Emperor Justinian died in 565.[8]

Rusticiana, a Roman aristocrat from Constantinople, visited Sinai towards the end of the 6th century, and Pope Gregory, who had met her when he was the papal representative to Constantinople, wrote to her in August, 594, mentioning her pilgrimage: 'Believe me, I would have liked to have gone with you, but certainly not to have returned with you'.[9] He wrote to the Abbot John of Sinai on September 1, 600, asking for his holy prayers. He sent him fifteen sheets, thirty blankets, fifteen beds, and funds for the purchase and transport of mattresses, to supply the infirmary of the monastery.

The most important book composed at Sinai is *The Ladder of Divine Ascent,* written by John, Abbot of Sinai, who is known as John Climacus, or St. John of the Ladder. He lived in the latter 6th and early 7th century. Taking the vision of the ladder that Jacob saw extending from earth to heaven as a paradigm of the spiritual life, he describes thirty steps as rungs on the ladder of spiritual ascent. The book is a compendium of the wisdom of the Desert Fathers. St. John is a shrewd judge of human nature, and his admonitions, born of personal experience, have been treasured by both monks and laymen ever since.

We do not know where he was born. We do know that he was only sixteen when he set out on the long and arduous trek to Sinai. He would have walked for many days south along the Red Sea, across vast expanses of sand and gravel, and then turned east, following narrow, rock-strewn valleys, the mountains around him soaring higher and higher, until he came at last to Sinai, the God-trodden mountain. As he followed literally in the footsteps of the Exodus, he set the example of the children of Israel before him. Love for God transcended love for everything in this world. St. John explains: 'Love of God is the foundation of ξενιτεία'.[10] The word ξενιτεία can be translated in two ways. It can mean 'sojourn in a foreign land', 'being a stranger, a wanderer', in a word, 'exile', used metaphorically of the saints on earth. It can also mean 'isolation from the world' as a spiritual person, in a word, 'solitude'.

The construction of the great fortress at Sinai did not supplant the earlier tradition of monks living in very small communities and hermits living in solitude throughout the area, and it is to these that St. John turned, becoming the disciple of Abba Martyrius. The monks gathered on Sundays and feast days for the celebration of the Eucharist. But the greater part of his time would have been spent in solitary prayer. St. John writes: 'Exile is separation from everything in order to keep the mind (λογισμόν) inseparable from God.' (Step 3:3)[11] Through prayer and the practice of the virtues, and above all, through the grace of God, the νοῦς is renewed, and becomes illumined. The word νοῦς can be translated 'mind', or 'intellect', or, more imaginatively, 'the eye of the mind', or even 'the eye of the heart'. It is the apprehending perception by which we instinctively grasp spiritual insights. The νοῦς becomes the vigilant guardian of our thoughts. St. John writes with profound insight about ἡσυχία, 'quietude', spiritual vigilance, the recitation of the Jesus Prayer. Here we recognise the hesychast prayer of the heart, developed later in Constantinople and on Mount Athos, but already present at Sinai in the 6th century.

John Moschus (ca. 550–634), a monk of Palestine, travelled through the Sinai in the late 6th and early 7th centuries, recording the lives of saintly elders in his *Spiritual Meadow.* He witnessed the destruction of Jerusalem by the Persians in 614, and lived to see their defeat by the Emperor Heraclius in 627. Two years later, the Emperor travelled to Jerusalem in person to restore the True Cross to the Church of the Holy Sepulchre. John Moschus's disciple, Sophronius, became the Patriarch of Jerusalem in 634, and it was he, in April, 637, who surrendered the city to Caliph Umar, marking the Muslim conquest of the city.

---

[8] Sevcenko, The Early Period of the Sinai Monastery, 262.
[9] Gregory the Great, Letter IV.44, *To Rusticiana*, translated by Caner, *History and Hagiography from Late Antique Sinai,* 263–264.
[10] St. John Climacus, *Ladder of Divine Ascent*, 216, Step 26 Summary:3.
[11] St. John Climacus, *Ladder of Divine Ascent*, 194, Step 3:3, 63. Author's translation.

A generation after John Moschus, Anastasius of Sinai followed him in recording the lives of saintly elders. He describes Sinai as a place of austerity. Conditions there could be dangerous. But it was also a place where there dwelt holy anchorites. It was a place where remote chapels would suddenly become luminous in the presence of holy angels.[12] He also wrote a series of *Questions and Answers.* These deal with practical matters that one encounters in trying to live the Christian life. Several of his answers show Christians trying to cope with the new political situation of Arab rule.[13]

The early 9th century *Chronicle*, by the monk Theophanes the Confessor, contains entries describing the Arab invasion of Palestine, which included the Sinai peninsula, in 630–632.[14]

Eutychius became Chalcedonian Patriarch of Alexandria in 933. He composed a universal history, the first to have been written in Arabic. He describes a tower that existed at the place of the Burning Bush, where monks could hide in case of an attack, but it was not sufficient to ensure their safety. A delegation of monks from Sinai appeared before the Roman emperor Justinian with the following request: 'We ask you, O King, to build a monastery for us so that we can be protected in it'. The emperor granted their request, and ordered the governor of Egypt to assist them with funds, men, and supplies. One hundred men from the Balkans, and another one hundred from Alexandria, were also commanded to travel to Sinai, together with their wives and children, to live there and guard the monastery. They converted to Islam at the time of ʿAbd al-Malik ibn Marwan, the Umayyad caliph from 685–705.[15]

THE EIGHTH, NINTH, AND TENTH CENTURIES

We yearn to know what happened at Sinai in the 8th, 9th, and 10th centuries, but here our historians desert us. This is the dark period of Sinai's history. Pharan, for example, was the centre of ecclesiastical, civilian, and military authority on the Sinai until the Arab conquests, then it vanishes from record.[16] Today, all of its historical buildings lie in ruins. It is the same with the monastery of Raithou, an imposing complex in the 6th century, built of white limestone. Its walls survive to a height of one or two metres, enough to allow us to reconstruct the layout of the monastery. Who were the last monks of Raithou? When did they leave? We do not know. These ancient centres now only survive in the official title of the bishop, who is Archbishop of Sinai, Pharan, and Raithou.

In the absence of historical records, we must turn to the surviving material evidence for insights into the history of Sinai at that time.

In 1935, the Colt expedition recovered three papyri in the ruins of Nessana in the Negev desert. The first lists the purchases and receipts of a caravan that operated between Nessana and Mount Sinai. The two others are letters in the same hand, requesting guides to Mount Sinai. Both were issued by a provincial governor named Abu Rashid to a Nessana administrator named George. They are dated to the 12th indiction, suggesting a date of 683/4. These provide evidence for continued travel to Mount Sinai fifty years after the Muslim conquest.[17]

The numerous inscriptions carved on rock through the Sinai desert are further evidence that this traffic of wayfarers and pilgrims continued under Arab rule.[18]

Additional material evidence for Sinai after the 7th century is provided by icons. St. Catherine's Monastery possesses an unparalleled collection, the most important of which have been dated to the 6th century. They are painted in the encaustic technique, and based on the heritage of classical forms.

The emperors of Constantinople pursued a policy of iconoclasm from 726–843. Sinai, already outside the Byzantine empire, was not affected by this, and a number of icons can be dated to the time of iconoclasm. These icons show a development away from Hellenistic naturalism, and the emergence of a style that is more decorative, more linear, and thus more abstract.

---

[12] Caner, *History and Hagiography*, 174–175.
[13] Anastasios of Sinai, *Questions and Answers*, 173.
[14] Theophanes, *Chronographia*, AM 6121, tr. Mango, 462.
[15] Eutychios of Alexandria (Saʿīd ibn Baṭrīq), Annals: On Justinian's Constructions at Mount Sinai, tr. Caner, *History and Hagiography*, 280–282.
[16] Caner, *History and Hagiography*, 15.
[17] Caner, *History and Hagiography*, 266–267.
[18] Dahari, *Monastic Settlements in South Sinai*, 164.

One of the most significant is a panel icon depicting the Crucifixion. It has been dated to the 8th century on the basis of its many similarities with a fresco at Santa Maria Antiqua in Rome that can be dated to 741–752. And yet, it also has important differences. Earlier icons invariably portray Christ before death, with his eyes open. The Sinai icon is the earliest known to depict Christ with his eyes closed and bearing the crown of thorns, features that serve to emphasize his humanity. The importance of depicting the reality of Christ's death had earlier been noted by Anastasius of Sinai, in his *Hodegos* ('Guide'), written in the 680s.[19] This, and several stylistic details, make it possible that the icon was painted at Sinai.

As Kurt Weitzmann observes:

> The Arab conquest in the seventh century neither interrupted the flow of icons to Sinai nor prevented their production at Sinai itself. But it did apparently stop the influx from Constantinople and, if we are not mistaken, the majority of icons here attributed to the seventh and eighth centuries came from regions that were at that time already under Muslim domination.[20]

But it is the manuscripts that provide the most abundant evidence for Sinai at this time. The Old Collection has 201 manuscripts that have been dated from the 8th through the 10th centuries. They are in Greek, Syriac, Arabic, Georgian, and Latin.

The number of these early manuscripts was considerably increased with what are collectively known as the New Finds. These are the dilapidated texts that had been set to one side when the manuscripts were stored in the tower of St. George. They were recovered in 1975, in the course of repairs to the tower. Few of them are complete, but they have proved to be of the greatest interest to scholars because of their antiquity.

And to these manuscripts have now been added the palimpsest texts recovered through multispectral imaging. This could be considered the last frontier of the Sinai library.

GREEK

From the 4th century, Sinai was a part of the Holy Land, the far reaches of the Holy Land. Pilgrims to Jerusalem who had the time, the means, and the stamina, would continue on to Sinai. And the monks of Sinai looked to Jerusalem as their spiritual centre. As such, Sinai was also a part of the Greek speaking world. The community at Sinai has been predominantly Greek throughout its history. Of the 201 manuscripts in the Old Collection dating from the 8th, 9th, and 10th century, 98 are in Greek.

Greek letters flourished in Palestine in the 7th and 8th centuries, with the contributions made by St. John Damascene, Andrew the Jerusalemite (who became bishop of Crete), Cosmas of Maiuma, Stephen the Sabaite, George Syncellus, Michael Syncellus, and Theodore and Theophanes the Graptoi.[21] The Sinai palimpsests are evidence that Sinai was an intrinsic part of this flourishing of Greek letters in the 7th and 8th centuries. These manuscripts speak of continuity at Sinai after the 7th century, as Greek remained the language of conversation, study, and prayer.

Leontius of Damascus composed a life of Stephen the Sabaite (who died in 794) shortly after 807. In it, we catch a glimpse of conditions in Palestine at that time. He mentions two women who regularly travelled unaccompanied to Jerusalem, from where they would continue on to Mount Sinai.[22] But such tranquility was not to last. Anarchy broke out following the death of Harun al-Rashid (809–813). Monasteries were sacked, and many of these scholars left for Constantinople. Michael Syncellus and his two disciples Theodore and Theophanes became disciples of Theodore the Studite, and assisted him in his refutation of iconoclasm. Other refugees headed south where they found asylum in the desert and the inaccessible mountains of Sinai.[23] Sinai, more remote, was distant from the turmoil in Palestine. Greek letters continued to flourish there in the 9th century, and later.

---

[19] *PG* 89.197.B9–C10. See Belting and Belting-Ihm, Das Kreuzbild im Hodegos des Anastasios Sinaites, 30–39.

[20] Weitzmann, *The Monastery of Saint Catherine at Mount Sinai*, 5.

[21] Mango, Greek Culture in Palestine after the Arab Conquest, 149–150.

[22] De S. Stephano Sabaita, Thaumaturgo Monacho in Laura S. Sabæ prope Hierosolymam (ch. 133), 557.

[23] Blake, Greek Literature in Palestine in the Eighth Century, 373.

Of special interest are the early and significant Greek medical texts copied in this period that have been recovered from the Sinai palimpsests. We recall the provisions for the monastery infirmary that Pope Gregory sent to the Abbot John at the beginning of the 7th century. Later in that same century, Anastasius of Sinai was responsible for the νοσοκομεῖον, the 'sick bay'.[24]

When Peter Grossmann was carrying out excavations at Pharan, in the spring of 1987, he uncovered the foundations of a church in the form of a small three-aisled basilica. An adjoining building seemed to be a kitchen. The reason for this juxtaposition became clear when he unearthed an important Greek inscription: the church was dedicated to Sts. Cosmas and Damian, the Unmercenary Healers. It was a church where prayers could be said for the sick, and where they could also have special foods prepared, to sustain them in their illness, and to aid them in their recovery.[25]

SYRIAC

Classical Syriac was the language spoken in upper Mesopotamia. In the Late Antique world, Syriac-speaking villages stretched from the Mediterranean to the foothills of the Zagros, and from Antioch to Ctesiphon, the Persian capital. When the Piacenza Pilgrim visited Sinai in the early 550s, he found monks fluent in Syriac. The Old Collection at Sinai contains 26 manuscripts in Syriac written in the 8th, 9th, and 10th centuries.

Many important works of Greek philosophy, literature, and medicine were translated from Greek into Syriac. A leaf of the Sinai palimpsests contains text from Galen's treatise *On Simple Drugs,* translated in the 6th century by Sergius of Rēš ʿAynā.[26] Translations were also made from Syriac into Greek. Patrikios and Abramios, monks of the Monastery of Mar Saba, near Jerusalem, translated the *Ascetical Homilies of St. Isaac the Syrian* at the end of the 8th or beginning of the 9th century.[27] Sinai has a manuscript of the *Ascetical Homilies* in Syriac dated to the 9th century, showing the type of text from which they would have made their translation (Sin. syr. 24).

CHRISTIAN PALESTINIAN ARAMAIC

Numerous Sinai palimpsests preserve texts written in Christian Palestinian Aramaic, the language of Western Aramaic speaking Christians in the Levant. CPA NF frg. 12 contains text from the Psalms in Christian Palestinian Aramaic, dating from the 6th to the 8th century, with an overtext also of the Psalms in the same language, dating from the 9th or 10th century. The upper text also has Greek annotations, written in an inclined majuscule.

ARABIC

Syria, Palestine, and Egypt came under Arab rule in the early 7th century. By the 8th century, Christians were expressing themselves in Arabic, combining engagement with the Islamic present and loyalty to their own past.[28] The oldest scribal signature in the Sinai library is found in Sin. gr. 32 (*Diktyon* 58407), an 8th-century manuscript of the Psalms and Odes, concluding with the Beatitudes. Having written the entire manuscript in a confident majuscule Greek, the scribe added his own name in Arabic. He wrote: 'May God help you, my brother, and give you understanding. Remember me, my brother, for the sake of God', and below, 'The Psalter has been written in the place of God, Mount Sinai, by the sinner Michael, the disciple of Abba Philotheus'.

Sin. gr. NF MG 2 (*Diktyon* 61040) contains the Epistles of St. Paul, written in parallel Greek and Arabic. It is a palimpsest, with the underlying texts in Greek. Rubrics for readings from the Epistles on feast days were included by the original scribe, and other rubrics for readings during Great Lent were added in a second hand. The manuscript points to a time when there was a need for both languages.

---

[24] Anastasios of Sinai, *Questions and Answers*, 10.
[25] Grossmann, *Ἡ Ἀρχαία Πόλη Φαράν*, 83
[26] Kessel, Membra disjecta sinaitica I, 469.
[27] *The Ascetical Homilies of Saint Isaac the Syrian,* lxxxv.
[28] Brown, The Great Transition.

A colophon in Sin. ar. 151, containing the text of the Acts and the Epistles, gives the name of the scribe, Bishr ibn as-Sirri, who translated the texts from the Syriac, completing the work in Damascus in the year AD 867.[29] Colophons such as this allow us to identify manuscripts that reached Sinai from Palestine and Syria.

GEORGIAN

There is evidence for Georgian monks at Sinai as early as the 6th century, but this reached a zenith in the 10th century. Georgian scribes copied out manuscripts of the Scriptures, lectionaries, and other liturgical books, as well as lives of the saints, homilies, and ascetical writings. Some of these were important translations made at Sinai. There are seven Georgian manuscripts in the Old Collection dating from the 8th and 9th centuries, and no fewer than thirty-four dating from the 10th century.

Sin. geo. NF 19 is a manuscript of the hymnographic collection known as the *Iadgari*, written in 980. It is a palimpsest, with underlying texts in Greek and CPA. Some of the folia are made of smaller patches of parchment sewn together to make up the leaf, and in the colophon, the scribe Iovane complains about having to use 'this inferior and badly-sewn parchment'.[30]

LATIN

The Old Collection at Sinai contains a Latin Psalter written in the 10th century (catalogued as Sin. slav. 5). A number of aspects of the orthography, punctuation, and contractions are rather unusual in Latin manuscripts. But they would be natural to one versed in Greek and Syriac scribal practices. All of this points to a Latin writing centre in the East, where old Latin traditions survived and new ones were occasionally introduced.[31] Such a centre could have been in Jerusalem, or in one of the outlying areas.

To this evidence has now been added the Latin texts recovered from the Sinai palimpsests. The layers in a palimpsest may be considered as archaeological strata, allowing a more precise identification of time and place. It is our hope that this cumulative evidence will allow us to better understand not only the preservation, but also the production of manuscripts at Sinai.

THE FARTHEST REACHES OF CHRISTENDOM

Three palimpsest manuscripts reached Sinai from the very perimeters of the Christian world. Sin. geo. NF 13 + Sin. geo. NF 55 is a manuscript with various ascetical and hagiographical texts, written by a scribe named Mikael in the 10th or 11th century. The underlying text is in Caucasian Albanian, an ancient language once spoken in the Caucasus to the east of Georgia, in what is today Azerbaijan. Before the recovery of this text, the language had only survived in a few inscriptions carved on stone, and in one Armenian manuscript that listed the letters of the alphabet.

Sin. gr. NF M 90 (*Diktyon* 60917) is an *Horologion*, a 'Book of Hours', dated to the 13th century. It is a palimpsest, with the underlying text in Ethiopian.

Sin. ar. NF 8+Sin. ar. NF 27+Sin. ar. NF 28 is a manuscript of the Gospels written most likely in the second half of the 8th century, now broken up into three parts. It has underlying texts in Greek, Latin, Syriac and Arabic. A decorative initial is faintly visible on one leaf, and Latin can be read in the margin below. Multispectral imaging allows us to see the text more clearly. Michelle Brown in her contribution to the Sinai Palimpsests website has identified this as an Insular hand, a style of writing developed in Ireland that spread to England, where it flourished between 600 and 850. This was the age of Aidan and Cuthbert and Bede, the time of an unusual flowering of monasticism in England.

Azerbaijan, Ethiopia, the British Isles—these were the farthest reaches of Christendom in the 8th, 9th, and 10th centuries. Traversing vast distances at that time was unimaginably difficult, and scholars have assumed a great deal of insularity. And yet, manuscripts from these remote areas reached Sinai. They show us that monks

---

[29] Griffith, Catalogue Entry 35. Arabic Epistles and Acts, 62.

[30] Aleksidze *et al.*, *Catalogue of Georgian Manuscripts Discovered in 1975 at St. Catherine's Monastery on Mount Sinai*, 391–393.

[31] Lowe, An Unknown Latin Psalter on Mount Sinai, 197.

and pilgrims continued to come to Sinai, attracted by its austerity, its Biblical associations, and its reputation as an established centre of monasticism.

THE SPIRITUAL HERITAGE

We have two important monastic treatises from Sinai, composed during the time we have been considering. They were included in the *Philokalia,* a collection of texts on prayer compiled by Nikodemus of the Holy Mountain and Macarius of Corinth, first published in Venice in 1782. Hesychius the Priest, who lived around the 8th and 9th centuries, was abbot of the Monastery of the Burning Bush. He wrote an ascetic treatise, *On Watchfulness and Holiness*, in which he stressed the central importance of inner attentiveness, the guarding of the heart, and the unceasing invocation of Jesus Christ. He writes: 'Just as a man blind from birth does not see the sun's light, so one who fails to pursue watchfulness does not see the rich radiance of divine grace'.[32]

Philotheus of Sinai is known to us only from his work, *Forty Texts on Watchfulness.* He lived in perhaps the 9th or 10th century. In the twenty-third logion we read:

> Πάσῃ οὖν φυλακῇ τὴν καρδίαν ἡμῶν πάσῃ ὥρᾳ καὶ τὸ ἀκαριαῖον γοῦν τηρήσωμεν ἐκ λογισμῶν ἀχλυούντων τὸ ψυχικὸν ἔσοπτρον, ἐν ᾧ δὴ τυποῦσθαι καὶ φωτεινογραφεῖσθαι Ἰησοῦς Χριστὸς πέφυκεν, ἡ τοῦ Θεοῦ Πατρὸς σοφία καὶ δύναμις, καὶ ἔνδον καρδίας ἅπαυστα τῶν οὐρανῶν τὴν βασιλείαν ζητήσωμεν, τόν τε κόκκον, καὶ τὸν μαργαρίτην, καὶ τὴν ζύμην· καὶ τἆλλα πάντα μυστικῶς εὑρήσομεν ἔνδον ἡμῶν αὐτῶν, εἴγε τὸ ὄμμα τοῦ νοῦ ἐκκαθάρωμεν. Διά τοι τοῦτο ὁ Κύριος ἡμῶν Ἰησοῦς Χριστὸς ἔφη· "Ἡ βασιλεία τῶν οὐρανῶν ἐντὸς ἡμῶν ἐστι"· δηλῶν μένουσαν ἔνδον καρδίας τὴν θεότητα.[33]
>
> At every hour and moment let us guard our heart with all diligence from thoughts that darken the soul's mirror; for on that mirror Jesus Christ, the wisdom and power of God the Father, forms Himself and luminously inscribes Himself. And let us seek unceasingly within our heart the kingdom of heaven, as the mustard seed, as the pearl, as the leaven. Indeed, if we cleanse the eye of the *nous* we will find all things hidden within us. This is why our Lord Jesus Christ said, "The kingdom of heaven is within us", indicating that the Divinity dwells in our heart.[34]

Mirrors in the classical world were made of bronze. The metal had to be carefully polished to create a reflective surface. And it had to be kept polished, so that the reflective surface would not be dulled by oxidation.

We will not fully appreciate this reference to mirrors unless we know how mirrors were understood in the Greek world.[35] Plato, in the *Timaeus*, explains that mirror images are formed when the light from the eye meets the light from what is seen on the surface of the mirror, and these two sets of rays of light mingle there to form the image. Thus, in the classical understanding, mirror images actually exist, formed on the surface of the mirror.

When the Fathers speak of the soul reflecting the image of God like a mirror, they were using the analogy to explain how the soul is a real, though dependent, image of God. It was made to reflect His image. The image is true, though God and His image remain distinct according to nature. As the soul is purified, it more accurately reflects God's image. It becomes more truly that image.[36]

St. Philotheus takes this one step further when he writes that Jesus Christ forms Himself, He imprints Himself (τυποῦσθαι) upon the polished mirror of the soul. He luminously inscribes Himself. To express this, the saint had to create a new word, φωτεινογραφεῖσθαι, 'He writes himself with radiance' upon the polished mirror of the soul. This word is found in the printed edition. A 14th-century manuscript at Sinai that includes this work gives the title 'Chapter of Abba Philotheus, Abbot of the Monastery of the All-Holy Theotokos of the Burning Bush in Sinai: On Prayer and Watchfulness', but does not contain the word, nor does it appear to

---

[32] Hesychius the Priest, On Watchfulness and Holiness, 4, tr. Ware, 163.
[33] Philotheos of Sinai, *Νηπτικὰ Κεφάλαια Τεσσαράκοντα, Φιλοκαλία τῶν Ἱερῶν Νηπτικῶν*, 282.
[34] Philotheos of Sinai, *Forty Texts on Watchfulness*, 23, tr. Ware, 25, with alterations to the translation by the author.
[35] Papaioannou, Byzantine Mirrors.
[36] Louth, *The Origins of the Christian Mystical Tradition.*

be part of medieval Greek vocabulary, if a word search in the online database *Thesaurus Linguae Graecae* can be taken as a guide.[37]

Material evidence has shown us that after the 7th century, caravans laden with supplies and guides accompanying pilgrims continued to reach the monastery. Manuscripts and icons were created at Sinai, or brought there from Palestine and Syria. But the texts recovered by the Sinai Palimpsests Project have added immeasurably to our knowledge about the monastery during the 8th, 9th, and 10th centuries. They confirm that the monastery was an intrinsic part of the flourishing of Greek letters in Palestine in the 7th and 8th century. This continued to be the case at Sinai even after this period, as Greek remained the language of converse, study, and prayer. Sinai was also a centre where many other languages were spoken, and where important translations were made, transmitting to other peoples the spiritual heritage that had been preserved there. The miracle of Sinai is that the community was able to continue very much as it had of old. The link to the earliest Desert Fathers remained unbroken. And we now have manuscript evidence that Sinai, even then, drew to itself pilgrims from the farthest reaches of Christendom.

We turn with renewed appreciation to the spiritual writings of that time. They can now be set into a larger context. They no longer reach us as from a void.

REFERENCES

Aleksidze, Zaza, Mzekala Shanidze, Lily Khevsuriani, and Michael Kavtaria, *Catalogue of Georgian Manuscripts Discovered in 1975 at St. Catherine's Monastery on Mount Sinai* (Athens, 2005).

Anastasios of Sinai, *Questions and Answers*, translated by Joseph A. Munitiz (Turnhout, 2011).

Belting, Hans and Christa Belting-Ihm, Das Kreuzbild im Hodegos des Anastasios Sinaites: Ein Beitrag zur Frage nach der ältesten Darstellung des toten Crucifixus, in: Walter Nikolaus Schumacher (ed.), *Tortulae: Studien zu altchristlichen und byzantinischen Monumenten*, Römische Quartalschrift für christliche Altertumskunde und Kirchengeschichte, Supplementheft 30 (Rome, 1966) 30–39.

Blake, Robert, Greek Literature in Palestine in the Eighth Century, in: Scott Fitzgerald Johnson (ed.), *Languages and Cultures of Eastern Christianity: Greek*, Worlds of Eastern Christianity, 300–1500, vol. 6 (Surrey, England, 2015) 365–374.

Brown, Peter, The Great Transition, *New York Review of Books*, 10 May, 2012.

Cameron, Averil, *Procopius and the Sixth Century* (Berkeley, 1985).

Caner, Daniel, *History and Hagiography from the Late Antique Sinai*, Translated Texts for Historians 53 (Liverpool, 2010).

Dahari, Uzi, *Monastic Settlements in South Sinai in the Byzantine Period: The Archaeological Remains* (Jerusalem, 2000).

Doughty, Charles M., *Travels in Arabia Deserta*, vol. I (New York, 1936).

Griffith, Sidney H., Catalogue Entry 35. Arabic Epistles and Acts, in: Helen C. Evans with Brandie Ratliff (eds.), *Byzantium and Islam: Age of Transition (Seventh to Ninth Century)* (New York, 2012).

Grossmann, Peter, *Ἡ ἀρχαία πόλις Φαράν. Ἕνας ἀρχαιολογικός ὁδηγός* (Athens, 2002).

Hesychius the Priest, *On Watchfulness and Holiness*, translated by Gerald Eustace Howell Palmer, Philip Sherrard, and Kallistos Ware, *The Philokalia: The Complete Text*, vol. 1 (London, 1979).

Isaac the Syrian, *The Ascetical Homilies*, translated by Dana Miller (Boston, 1986).

John Climacus, *The Ladder of Divine Ascent*, translated by Archimandrite Lazarus Moore, revised by the Holy Transfiguration Monastery (Boston, 2012).

Kessel, Grigory, Membra disjecta sinaitica I: A Reconstitution of the Syriac Galen Palimpsest, in: André Binggeli, Anne Boud'hors, and Matthieu Cassin (eds.), *Manuscripta Graeca et Orientalia. Mélanges monastiques et patristiques en l'honneur de Paul Géhin*, Orientalia Lovaniensia Analecta 243 (Leuven, 2016) 469–496.

Louth, Andrew, *The Origins of the Christian Mystical Tradition: From Plato to Denys* (Oxford, 1981).

Lowe, Elias Avery, An Unknown Latin Psalter on Mount Sinai, *Scriptorium* 9 (1955) 177–199.

[37] Sin. gr. 465, f. 126v.

Mango, Cyril, Greek Culture in Palestine after the Arab Conquest, in: Guglielmo Cavallo, Giuseppe De Gregorio, and Marilena Maniaci (eds.), *Scritture, libri e testi nelle aree provinciali di Bisanzio*, vol. 1 (Spoleto, 1991) 149–160.

Netz, Reviel, William Noel, Natalie Tchernetska, and Nigel Wilson (eds.), *The Archimedes Palimpsest*, 2 vols. (Cambridge, 2011).

Papaioannou, Stratis, Byzantine Mirrors. Self-Reflection in Greek Writing, *Dumbarton Oaks Papers* 64 (2010) 81–101.

Philotheos of Sinai, *Νηπτικὰ Κεφάλαια Τεσσαράκοντα, Φιλοκαλία τῶν Ἱερῶν Νηπτικῶν*, vol. 2 (Athens, 1958).

Philotheos of Sinai, *Forty Texts on Watchfulness*, translated by Gerald Eustace Howell Palmer, Philip Sherrard, and Kallistos Ware, *The Philokalia: The Complete Text*, vol. 3 (London, 1984).

Procopius, *On Buildings*, translated by Henry Bronson Dewing, and Glanville Downey, Loeb Classical Library 343 (Cambridge, Mass., 1940).

De S. Stephano Sabaita, Thaumaturgo Monacho in Laura S. Sabæ prope Hierosolymam, *Acta Sanctorum*, July, vol. 3 (Paris, 1867) 524–613.

Theophanes, *Chronographia*, translated by Cyril Mango and Roger Scott (*The Chronicle of Theophanes Confessor*) (Oxford, 1997).

Sevcenko, Ihor, The Early Period of the Sinai Monastery in the Light of its Inscriptions, *Dumbarton Oaks Papers* 20 (1966) 255–264.

Weitzmann, Kurt, *The Monastery of Saint Catherine at Mount Sinai: The Icons*, vol. 1: *From the Sixth to the Tenth Century* (Princeton, 1976).