

The Spiritual Inheritance of Sinai - 2

[Ξένες γλώσσες / In English](#)



The Arab Conquest

According to tradition, the brotherhood of the monastery sent a delegation to Medina in 625 A.D. to ask Mohammad for political protection. Mohammad approved the request and wrote the famous *achtiname*, [“capitulation”] which bears a representation of his palm, in which he declared that Muslims should protect monks[1]. A copy of the *achtiname* is on display today in the monastery’s gallery. It is reported that Mohammad visited the monastery in the course of his commercial activities, which is probably why the Koran mentions the sacred sites of Sinai. So when the Sinai peninsula came under Arab rule in 641 A.D., the monastery continued its normal life without disturbance, though the number of monks began to drop and, at the beginning of the 9th century, a mere thirty remained. Many Christians in Sinai renounced their faith and became Muslims, while others left. The mosque, which stands to this day and is in use as a museum, was probably built in the 11th century, in difficult times for the monastery.



The Crusaders

The presence of the crusaders in Sinai (1099-1270) was a bright interlude for the monastery, which now became accessible to European pilgrims. A special company of Sinaite Crusaders undertook the protection of the monastery and its financial support, whenever this was necessary. The wooden door to the narthex of the main church of the monastery and the Latin inscriptions in the old refectory are historical remnants from this period.

The Ottomans

After a difficult period under the Mamelukes, the Ottoman conquest of Egypt and Sinai by Sultan Selim I in 1517 A.D. brought the monastery a new protector. The Turkish authorities respected the rights of the monastery and its Archbishop enjoyed particular honour. The Christian kings of Europe followed the Sultan's example and expressed particular interest in the monastery, contributing sums of money and assisting with the upkeep of the monastery's properties in various countries of the world. In the 17th century, the monastery fostered considerable cultural and educational activities even outside the Sinai peninsula: in Turkish-occupied Greece, for example, there was the famous School of Letters and Arts in Irakleio, Crete, where some of the greatest men of the time were educated. And in other countries, too (Egypt, Turkey, Palestine, Romania, Russia, India etc.), dependencies of the monastery developed into real spiritual centres.

Napoleon

When Napoleon conquered Egypt (1797-1804) he also took the monastery under his protection and granted it the “Document of Security”, which can be seen in the monastery’s gallery. He also undertook the reconstruction of the north wall of the monastery, which had collapsed in 1798, following torrential rain.

The latter half of the 19th and first half of the 20th centuries were not favourable times for the monastery, because it lost all its possessions in Russia, Romania, Turkey, Cyprus and elsewhere. Nevertheless, it managed to sustain its charitable and spiritual activities. In 1966, it celebrated the 1400th anniversary of its foundation, in the presence of representatives of all the Orthodox Churches, and of the then King of Greece, Constantine.

The Fortress of Justinian

The wall of the monastery was built by Justinian’s architect, Stefanos Ailios, to protect the monks who lived near the bush in flames from the attacks of barbarians and robbers. The wall to the north suffered repeated damage from precipitation and, in 1798, the outside part collapsed completely after torrential rain and was rebuilt in 1801 by the occupation forces of Napoleon. The height of the wall varies from 10 to 20 metres and its thickness at certain points is as much as 2-3 metres. On the western side of the fortress is the ancient entrance which is no longer used. Above this is an observation post so that events outside could be monitored and, if necessary, defence could be organized against attack.

Today, the entrance used is another, narrow, one, also ancient, which is secured by three iron gates. Along the length of the façade of the fortress, the cells of the monks and various other structures were built. Within the walls there are now twelve chapels and within the main church another nine. In order to level the uneven and sloping ground, powerful arches and cylindrical domes were constructed, on which the floors of the cells and chapels rested. More than 20 domes and 40 arches still remain in this historic fortress. In 1951, on the foundations of the south side of the wall, the new wing of the monastery was built, which houses the library, the gallery, the new refectory for the monks and the apartments of the Archbishop. Along the façade of the western side of the wall, the monastery’s guest-quarters were built.

The Main Church

At the same time as the walls of the monastery, the church, too, was built in the

north-eastern corner of the fortress, by the same architect, Stefanos Ailios. The foundations were laid in 542 A.D. and it was finished in nine years. The church of the holy bush was incorporated into the building. The main church is made of granite, in the style of a three-apsed basilica, with a narthex, main church and sanctuary. The walls, the columns and wooden roof, the mosaic and the inscriptions are from the time of Justinian. The ancient roof is now covered by a horizontal wooden superstructure dating from the 18th century. The icons date from as far back as the 6th century onwards. The interior decoration of the sanctuary and the main body of the church, the iconostas and the floor are from the 17th and 18th centuries.

The carved wooden doors are original, from the 6th century. Above them is an inscription: "This is the gate of the Lord, the righteous will enter through it" (Psalm 118, 20). They are carved from cedars of Lebanon, on which there are depictions of flowers, fruit, and the animals in paradise. The doors of the narthex were made in the 11th century by the crusaders. Inside the body of the church are 12 columns which are made from single pieces of granite, covered with a later investment and with granite capitals, on which are depicted crosses, lambs (the symbol of Jesus Christ), plants and fruit. On each column there is an icon which depicts the saints of a particular month and lower down, in a recess in the granite, signed with the cross, there are relics of the same saints. Along the length of each nave, there are three chapels and a sacristy. On the two sides of the apse of the sanctuary there are another two chapels and, behind it, the chapel of the holy bush.

[1] The text of this remarkable document is as follows: "This is a message from Muhammad ibn Abdullah, as a covenant to those who adopt Christianity, near and far, we are with them. Verily I, the servants, the helpers, and my followers defend them, because Christians are my citizens; and by Allah! I hold out against anything that displeases them. No compulsion is to be on them. Neither are their judges to be removed from their jobs nor their monks from their monasteries. No one is to destroy a house of their religion, to damage it, or to carry anything from it to the Muslims' houses. Should anyone take any of these, he would spoil God's covenant and disobey His Prophet. Verily, they are my allies and have my secure charter against all that they hate. No one is to force them to travel or to oblige them to fight. The Muslims are to fight for them. If a female Christian is married to a Muslim, it is not to take place without her approval. She is not to be prevented from visiting her church to pray. Their churches are to be respected. They are neither to be prevented from repairing them nor the sacredness of their covenants. No one of the nation (Muslims) is to disobey the covenant till the Last Day (end of the world)".