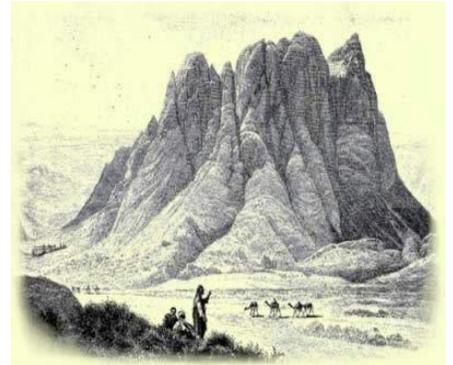


## History of St. Catherine's Monastery

The [Monastery of St. Catherine](#), also known as the Monastery of the Transfiguration, is located in a triangular area between the Desert of El-Tih, the Gulf of Suez and the Gulf of Aqaba in the [Sinai](#). It is situated at an altitude of 4854 feet in a small, picturesque gorge. It is a region of wilderness made up of granite rock and rugged mountains which, at first glance, seems inaccessible. In fact, while small towns and villages have grown up on the shores of the two gulfs, only a few Bedouin nomads roam the mountains and arid land inland. Well known mountains dominate this region, including [Mount Sinai](#) (2,285 meters), Mount St.Catherine (2,637 meters), Mount Serbal (2,070 meters) and Mount Episteme.

While grazing his flocks on the side of Mt. Horeb, Moses came upon a burning bush that was, miraculously, unconsumed by its own flames. A voice speaking out of the fire (Exodus 3:1-13) commanded him to lead his people out of bondage in Egypt and return with them to the mountain. Upon his return Moses twice climbed the mountain to commune with God. Regarding the second ascent, Exodus 24: 16-18 states: And the glory of the Lord abode upon [Mount Sinai](#), and the cloud covered it six days; and the seventh day God called unto Moses out of the midst of the cloud. And the appearance of the glory of the Lord was like devouring fire on the top of the mount in the eyes of the children of Israel. And Moses entered into the midst of the cloud, and went up into the mount; and Moses was in the mount forty days and forty nights. During this time on the mountain Moses received two tablets upon which God had inscribed the Ten Commandments, as well as precise dimensions for the Arc of the Covenant, a portable box-like shrine that would contain the tablets. Soon thereafter, the Arc of the Covenant was constructed and Moses and his people departed from Mount Sinai.



The Arc of the Covenant and its supposedly divine contents are one of the great mysteries of antiquity. According to archaic textual sources the Arc was a wooden chest measuring three feet nine inches long by two feet three inches high and wide. It was lined inside and out with pure gold and was surmounted by two winged figures of cherubim that faced each other across its heavy gold lid. Some scholars believe that the Arc may have contained, in addition to the Tablets of the Law, pieces of meteorites and highly radioactive rocks. In the ensuing two hundred and fifty years, between the time it was taken from [Mount Sinai](#) to when it was finally installed in the temple in Jerusalem, the Arc was kept for two centuries at Shiloh, was captured by the Philistines for seven months, and then, returned to the Israelites, it was kept in the village of Kiriath-Jearim. During this entire time it was associated with numerous extraordinary phenomena, many of which involved the killing or burning of often large numbers of people. Passages in the Old Testament give the impression that these happenings were divine actions of Yahweh, the god of the Hebrews. Contemporary scholars, however, believe that there may be another explanation.

Some have suggests that the Arc, and more precisely its mysterious contents, may have been a product of ancient Egyptian magic, science and technology. Moses, being highly trained by the Egyptian priesthood, was certainly knowledgeable in these matters and thus the astonishing powers of the Arc and its 'Tablets of the Law' may have derived from archaic Egyptian magic rather than the mythical god Yahweh. However, it should be noted that this comes from an alternative school of thought.

On the peak of Jebel Musa stands a small chapel dedicated to the Holy Trinity. This chapel, constructed in 1934 on the ruins of a 16th century church, is believed to enclose the rock from which God made the Tablets of the Law. In the western wall of this chapel is a cleft in the rock where Moses is said to have hidden himself as God's glory passed by (Exodus 33:22). Seven hundred and fifty steps below the summit and its chapel is the plateau known as Elijah's Basin,

where Elijah spent 40 days and nights communing with God in a cave. Nearby is a rock on which Aaron, the brother of Moses, and 70 elders stood while Moses received the law (Exodus 24:14). Northwest of Elijah's plateau hardy pilgrims visit Jebel Safsaafa, where Byzantine hermits such as St. Gregory lived and prayed. Beneath the 2168 meter summit of Ras Safsaafa stands the Plain of ar-Raaha, where camped the Israelites at the time Moses ascended the mountain and where Moses erected the first tabernacle.

Currently there is no archaeological evidence that the granite peak of Jebel Musa [Mount Sinai](#) on the [Sinai Peninsula](#) is the actual Mount Sinai of the Old Testament and various scholars, such as Emmanuel Anati, writing in his comprehensive study, *The Mountain of God*, have proposed several alternative locations. The association of Jebel Musa with the Biblical Mount Sinai seems to have first developed in the 3rd century AD when hermits living in caves on the mountain began to identify their mountain with the ancient holy peak.

Monastic life started at a very early period in the region around [Mount Sinai](#). Christian hermits began to gather at [Sinai](#) from the Middle of the 3rd Century. St. Antony, who retreated into Egypt's [Eastern Desert](#), inspired many others to cast off their worldly possessions and many of them settled at the foot of Mount Sinai, along with other nearby mountains, especially Mount Serbal, where they led a life of strict spiritual and corporal discipline.

The life that these early hermits followed was neither easy or safe. The 4th and 5th centuries were particularly troublesome times, when Christians were not only persecuted, but suffered from barbarian assaults. The monk, Ammonius of Egypt, wrote a Discourse upon the Holy Fathers slain on [Mount Sinai](#) and at Raitho, and there is much other documentation of the massacre and martyrdom of the Holy Fathers of the Sinai and Raitho by the Hagarenes and the Blemmyes of Africa, particularly during the Roman reign of Diocletian. This nevertheless did not prevent the development of monasticism in the Sinai desert, nor did it prevent the fame of many of the hermits from spreading both East and West.

Small monastic communities formed very early in the [Sinai](#), particularly at Mount Horeb, thought to be the site of the Burning Bush and in the [Wadi Feiran](#) (ancient Pharan). The anchorites lived in caves, stone-built cells and huts. They spent their days in silence, prayer and sanctity.

Tradition holds that, in 330 AD, in response to a request by the ascetics of the [Sinai](#), the Byzantine empress Helena (St. Helen) ordered the building of a small church, dedicated to the Holy Virgin, at the site of the Burning Bush, as well as a fortified enclosure where the hermits could find refuge from the attacks of primitive nomadic tribes.



Now, the South [Sinai](#) became a place of pilgrimage that was visited by many from far away lands. In 1884, a manuscript was discovered that relates a visit to the area by Aetheria between 372 and 374 AD. She was a Spanish noblewoman who was accompanied by a retinue of clerics. She relates finding a small church on the summit of [Mount Sinai](#), another one on Mount Horeb and a third one at the site of the Burning Bush, near which there was a fine garden with plenty of water.

Her account clearly reveals the expansion of monasticism in the [Sinai](#) desert. In fact, by the 5th century, the growing population of hermits was apparently headed by a dignitary, mentioned as the Bishop of Pharan, who's office was eventually taken over by the Bishop of Sinai. With this development apparently came a request by the Sinai monks, to Justinian, the Byzantium emperor, for assistance. He thus founded a magnificent church, which he enclosed within walls strong enough to withstand attacks and protect the monks against nomadic raids, which today is known to us as the [Monastery of St. Catherine](#).

By the 7th century, the Monastery faced a dangerous situation and a grave crisis, mainly due to the [Arab conquest](#). Although information on this period is scant, one source tells that by the year

808, the number of monks in the monastery had been reduced to thirty, while Christian life on the [Sinai](#) peninsula had all but vanished. However, the monastery itself did not vanish.

According to tradition, and evident from indirect information, the Fathers of the Monastery requested the protection of Mohammed himself, who saw the Christians as brothers in faith. Apparently, the request was favorably accepted and the so called ahtiname, or "immunity covenant" by Mohammed instructed his followers to protect the monks of the Sinai. Though this document has been a matter of controversy, it is doubtful that the monastery could have survived without the protection afforded by Mohammed and his successors.

The 11th century marked a new period for the monks of the [Sinai](#). There was a transfer of relics of St. Catherine to France, and the presence of Crusaders in the Sinai between 1099 and 1270 spurred the interest of European Christians for the security and independence of the monks and for the safeguard of the land properties (dependencies) owned by the Monastery in Egypt, Palestine, Syria, Crete, Cyprus and Constantinople.

The fact that a castle presupposes a military force accounts for the mention some authors make of a military order of St. Catherine, founded in 1063, which would thus antedate any other military order. No trace has been found, however, of the rule of any such order, or of a list of its grand masters. From the [Crusades](#) the [Monastery of St. Catherine](#) attracted many Latin pilgrims, who gradually formed a brotherhood, the members of which pretended to the knighthood. In return for a vague promise to protect sacred shrines and pilgrims, they were granted the coveted St. Catherine's Cross. The carved wooden portal giving access to the Narthex of the Katholikon (the earliest church in the monastery, built about the same time as the enclosure wall) and the various Latin inscriptions in the old Refectory date from those years. Interestingly though, the Monastery had a Muslim garrison during the same period, so the Fathers had to maintain a delicate balance between the Christians of the West and the Muslims of the region. In fact, to this day an ancient Mosque, dating from the 10th or 11th century, sits within the walls of the Monastery.



The Roman Popes at times defended the rights of the Monastery with various bulls and proclamations. Pope Honorius III in 1217, Pope Gregory X (1271-1276), Pope John XXII (1316-1334), Pope Benedict XII in 1358, Pope Innocent VI in 1360, all expressed in many ways their goodwill for the monastery, and interceded in favor of the Monastery's privileges in Crete, Cyprus and other places.

Others also came to their aid. The Doges of Venice regulated with official documents the attitude of the Dukes of Crete concerning the Monastery's dependencies on the island. They ruled in favor of the monks' interests, granted tax exemptions and sometimes permitted even the collection of funds to aid the monastery. The Venetians, as well as other Christians of the West, respected the monastery's ships, which sailed the seas flying the banner of St. Catherine with the Saint's monogram (AK).

Even though the [Monastery of St. Catherine](#), since the time of the Arab conquest of Egypt, has been situated in a mostly Islamic region, communication with Constantinople never stopped and the relations with Byzantium were close. A number of documents reveal decisions and actions on the part of a number of Byzantine emperors, extending financial assistance to the monastery. The official attitude and opinion of the Byzantines with regard to the Monastery and its prestige is expressed in a letter by the patriarch of Constantinople Gennadio (1454), addressed to "the most



honorable among monks, Kyr Maximos, by his worldly name Sophianos, and to all the most blessed hieromonks and monks practicing asceticism in the holy Monastery of [Sinai](#)". He calls the Sinai "our pride", indicating the great esteem and reverence in which the Orthodox held one of the worlds oldest Christian monasteries.

Even Turkish Sultans, in particular Selim I and Suleiman the Magnificent, at times issued favorable decrees exempting the Monastery from custom duties, which helped it attain great prosperity. On several different occasions, the Turkish Sultans defended the interests of the Monastery against the claims of powerful Jews on the [Sinai](#). At the same time, Christian kings of Europe and other important rulers gave financial assistance and presented the monastery with generous donations.

When Napoleon conquered Egypt in 1798, he placed the monastery under his protection. The documents confirming this status, and which recognizes older privileges granted to the monastery, are now kept in the monastery's gallery.

Through the 14th century, many thousands of pilgrims came annually to the monastery, even though the journey from Cairo took eight days by foot and camel. Following the Reformation, the popularity of Christian pilgrimage drastically declined until, during the mid 1900's, no more than 80 to 100 pilgrims made the arduous journey each year. In the 1950's the Egyptian government paved roads leading to oil fields and mines along the western [Sinai](#) coast and also developed a dirt track to the foot of Jebel Musa and the monastery, which allowed increasing numbers of secular tourists to travel in taxis from Cairo. The completion of a paved road further increased the number of visitors to Jebel Musa. Bus service to and from Cairo became available on a daily basis in 1986 and today it is not uncommon for a hundred or more pilgrims and tourists to visit the ancient sacred site in a single day. Currently Greek Orthodox monks tend the monastery and its extraordinary collection of Byzantine art and illuminated manuscripts.

It is not known when or how the monastery obtained possession of the remains of [St Catherine of Alexandria](#) and adopted her name. According to legend her body was transported thither by the hands of angels. The name, however, does not appear in literature before the tenth century.