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BENE LEGERE
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ASSOCIATES](#)

- [The Centennial Campaign for the Renewal of The Bancroft Library](#)
- [St. Catherine's Library Conservation Project](#)
- [Campus Art Installations Feature "Flying Books" and Foam Balls](#)
- [The Sam Spade Test of Berkeley Scholarship](#)

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St. Catherine's Library Conservation Project

by Gillian C. Boal, Hans Rausing Conservator



St. Catherine's Monastery.

St. Catherine's Monastery lies toward the foot of Egypt's Sinai peninsula, a six-hour journey by road from Cairo. The drive takes you through the Sinai desert-stark and arid landscape, with only wadis to break up its rugged beauty. Ghostlike container ships glide eerily across the horizon as you tunnel under the Suez Canal. The monastery is situated on the lower slopes of "god-trodden" Mount Sinai. It is the oldest active Christian monastery in the world. It has endured for 1700 years, not least because the prophet

Mohammed himself declared St. Catherine's a holy place not to be desecrated. Mount Sinai is a site of pilgrimage for Christians, Jews and Muslims; besides a number of chapels in the monastery itself there are also a synagogue and a mosque. It is a holy place because Christians believe that God spoke to Moses through the "burning bush" (which still grows within the monastery walls). Many pilgrims come daily to re-enact the climb that Moses made to the top of Mount Sinai to receive the tablets.

As a result of its special place and the longevity of St. Catherine's in the history of Christendom and Middle Eastern antiquity, the monastery is home not only to a stupendous collection of icons, but to a stunning and priceless library of books and manuscripts. Among the treasures of the collection is the largest surviving corpus of Byzantine bindings in the world. Its most famous document is, of course, the world's oldest Bible, the Codex Sinaiticus, a Greek uncial manuscript from the middle of the 4th century, copied apparently by three different scribes. It was "borrowed" for transcription in the 1860s by the German scholar Constantin Tischendorf on behalf of the Russian Emperor, and not returned.

The British Museum later bought it from Stalin for one hundred thousand pounds sterling, and ever since then has, in the phrase of the Archdiocese of Sinai, "detained it." In 1975, a few leaves from the original codex were discovered to be still in the monastery. The British Library has recently embarked on a four-year project to create a high-resolution digital copy of the entire Codex (including the few scattered pages that remain in St. Petersburg, in Germany, and in Sinai) by means of a new technique called hyperspectral imaging, borrowed from medical diagnostics and invented at the Technical University in Crete. It works by looking at each image in very narrow bands of wavelength-specific shades of red, green and so on. However, the imaging spans

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more than just the visible part of the spectrum, going from the ultra-violet to the infra-red. Because both the ink used to write on the vellum and the vellum itself are transparent at various wavelengths, this technique will allow scholars to see all the layers of the manuscript, and so detect the various rewrites it has gone through.

The Codex Sinaiticus is only the most famous among the 3307 bound manuscripts belonging to St. Catherine's. St. Catherine's Library Research Project is administered by Camberwell College of Arts in London, with the support of the St. Catherine Foundation. Professor Nicholas Pickwoad is the project leader. The details of the project can be viewed at www.arts.ac.uk/research/stcatherines.



St. Catherine's Monastery Library.

In 2001, conservators were chosen from throughout Europe to begin a systematic survey of the entire contents of this remote and ancient library, whose remit is to report on the condition of all the materials in the library, with a view to future conservation. Our conservation team consisted of the Project Leader, Dr. George Boudalis and Maria Kalligerou from Greece, two members from Italy, Sarah Mazzarino and Marco Di Bella, Cedric Lelievre from France and Clare Prince from England. I was

very fortunate to be chosen to be part of this multilingual team that visited the monastery in February 2005.

The survey is designed to be comprehensive, compiling detailed information about the structure and state of each binding and textblock. Every item is scrutinized and the relevant data systematically entered in a 16-page protocol (one for each book) developed under the supervision of Professor Nicholas Pickwoad. The protocol is organized according to the following headings: bibliographical, page markers, text leaves, ink and pigments, endleaves, sewing and edges, boards and their attachment, spine, endbands, primary covering, secondary covering, fore-edge flaps and edge flaps, furniture and fastenings. I was particularly interested in the opportunity to study early Eastern paper-I was able to examine a large group of highly polished papers characteristic of Greek manuscripts of the period, from the 10th to the 16th century.

One hour is allotted, on average, for documenting each item-10-15 minutes to sketch the binding style on the insides of the front and back boards, and the balance for filling out the rest of the form. In addition, a photographic record of each book is made using Kodachrome colour slide film. The slides are to be digitized for inclusion in the database, currently under development at Camberwell by the project research assistant Thanasis Velios, which will hold all the survey information. Each survey visit, at the invitation of the fathers, is conducted by a team of six members, one of whom at least must be Greek-speaking, in order to facilitate communication with the monks-St. Catherine's being a Greek Orthodox monastery. The conservators work in pairs, for mutual aid, as a check on consistency, and to be able to confer over bindings when they

are difficult to interpret or assess. Sometimes the project leader is brought in for further consultation. This is occasionally necessary when a book or manuscript presents an anomaly that cannot be dealt with according to the routine categories. At first, surveying a book was slow going and took well over an hour. But gradually as one became more familiar with the form and the materials, in particular the binding styles of the Greek manuscripts, things began to speed up. The entire survey is expected to be completed by the beginning of 2006; however, the current five-year survey is merely preliminary. Ahead lies the treatment phase and the long task of conservation.

Our conservation team spent one month in the Sinai desert working at St. Catherine's monastery. By the end of our time there we had worked our way through three hundred and twenty items, all in the Greek manuscript collection, and for security every single page was counted by a father both before, and after, any handling by a conservator. We settled into our own version of a monastic regime, working 9-12 and 4:30-7:30, Monday to Saturday. We were hardly aware of the visiting pilgrims from Nigeria, Russia, and other parts of the world, or the windsurfing tourists, who come by the coachload from Red Sea resorts for an excursion to this holy site.

The month was soon over, and at the end of our time in the remote fastness of the Sinai mountains, we spent a day in Alexandria, visiting Egypt's other world renowned library.

The new library at Alexandria, a massive project personally supervised by the wife of the president of Egypt, lies within a few metres of the supposed site of the ancient bibliotheka, on the great crescent of the bay. It is a dramatic postmodernist structure of Norwegian design-the roof is an enormous canted disk, evoking Ra the ancient Egyptian sun god, and facing out across Alexandria's harbour, flanked by the faded glory of the corniche with its old British and French colonial hotels and salons de thé. The reading room is the largest on earth, a vast space, but still uncannily lacking in books. It is said to be able to house eight million books eventually-at the moment the collection amounts to just 260 thousand volumes, and other assorted objects including the deposed King Farouk's sunglasses.

From Alexandria we took the train back to Cairo, along the western edge of the intensively cultivated Nile delta. One-third of all Egyptians now live in the capital; perhaps twenty million inhabitants-nobody knows the true number-leading lives of heroic improvisation. "Land of contrasts" is a grisly cliché of travel brochures, normally deployed to avoid words like "poverty" or "apartheid." But for our small international crew of book conservators no greater contrast could be imagined than between Cairo, explosive and thrilling megacity at the crossroads of Africa, Europe and Asia, and the ascetic calm of the monastery in the desert and the deep silence of its ancient library.

My thanks to the University Library for granting me leave for this four week trip which allowed me the opportunity to experience the beauty and the history of St. Catherine's Monastery.

[\[top\]](#) [\[prev\]](#) [\[next\]](#)

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