ARCHAEOLOGICAL SITES

IN THE WADI EL-DEIR / SINAI

An archaeological and historical survey

Compiled by

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St Catherine's Monastery and its vicinity

The God Trodden Mount Sinai Holy Monastery (Saint Catherine's) is located at Mount Sinai, in a valley formed between Gebel Ed-Deir and Mount Choreb at 1.580 metres. It is the earliest surviving monastic foundation with an uninterrupted monastic life from foundation to the present. Moreover, it is home to treasured icons, manuscripts and heirlooms, which comprise an important religious and artistic world heritage.

The site where Moses saw the Burning Bush and was addressed by God (Ex.3), along with the spot where he encountered the daughters of Jethro (Ex. 2. 16- 17), are attested to as places of great veneration as early as the 4th century. In 383 AD, the pilgrim Egeria found a church at the site and monastic settlements as well. Tradition relates the construction of the tower to Saint Helena, the pious mother of Constantine the Great, whose interest in Christian pilgrimage sites is well-documented. Archeological evidence indicates that the tower, which is still preserved, was built sometime before the 6th century.

In the 6th century, in the years between 548 and 565, Emperor Justinian constructed the Katholikon of the monastery and fortified the site in order to protect the monks from invaders.

The walls enclosed the main pilgrimage sites of the area, i.e. the site of the Burning Bush and Moses' Well. After the 9th century, the veneration of the relics of Saint Catherine in the Katholikon of the Monastery became equally important as the earlier pilgrimage.

Christians have not been alone in respecting the holiness of the Sinai Monastery. Prophet Mohammed granted a Document of Protection (Ahtiname), respected by the entire Islamic world from that time forth.

The complex enclosed within the walls of the Sinai Monastery consists of the main church (Katholikon), various chapels, cells, the refectory and various secondary buildings.

In the vicinity of St Catherine' s monastery, in the Wadi El-Deir, there can be traced different sites of archaeological interest, connected to the monastic presence of the Greek Orthodox monks at St Catherine's, to the tradition of pilgrimage and to the history of the Bedouin people as well.

• **The lower part of *Siqqat Sidna Musa***

Siqqat Sidna Musa or *Path of the steps*, connects the Monastery of St Catherine to *Gebel Musa*, via *Farsh Elijah*.

The path itself dates back to the Justinian era, as part of the construction program of the Byzantine imperial activity at St Catherine's. At the lower part of the path, the *Main El-Gebel* (or *Shoemaker's Spring*) is frequently referred in the pilgrims' accounts in several medieval sources. Although no specific pottery was traced at the spot, the site itself is of great importance for the history of pilgrimage to Sinai.

• **Monastic (?) complex North to the Monastery of St Catherine**

This complex lies approximately 220 metres North to the monastery and about 90 meters higher of it, at the confluence of the steep "*Gully of the poplar*" and of a lesser gully to the West, and may have been a monastic settlement, one of the many of this kind in the vicinity of Sinai Monastery, with a small central building and a garden for the necessary supplies, profiting of the vicinity of the water at the *Gully of the poplar.*

At the higher point of the site, there lie the ruins of a bi-level building. Different walls form three parallel narrow rooms to the South-East, with two other smaller rooms to their northwest, while to the North, there are traces of an open court-yard. Another yard was formed some six meters to the South.

Among the few shards in the spot, some seem to be dated not later than 7th century.

• Site East of the Monastery Walls

To the East of the Walls of St Catherine's, ruins of constructions, indicating wider and premeditated building activity in the valley of the monastery, could be correlated to the «*phylacterion*» (=military camp), that was organized in parallel with the construction of the monastery, according to *Procopius* the historian, or –more precisely- to the settlement of families of soldiers sent by Emperor Justinian, according to the Patriarch of Alexandria *Eutychius*. If the identification is correct –the results of this first period of excavation seem to confirm this hypothesis- all this activity should be dated a little before the middle of the 6th c. AD, while the abandonment –according to Eutychius- should be related to the rule of Abd el Malik ibn Marwan (685-705 AD).

It has to be noted, that during a disastrous flood at the end of 18th c., earth and blocks of granite from the rocky slopes of the Safsafa Mountain fell on the site, destroying architectural remains. Recently, the Archaeological Mission of the University of Athens carries out excavation at the spot, which seems to be of the most important archaeological sites in *Wadi El-Deir*.

• The *Nabi Harun* area

Nabi Harun hill dominates the North-Western edge of the *Wadi El-Deir*. Different traditions, mentioned especially by medieval travelers, connect the site to the activities of Prophet Aaron, the brother of Moses. A 1911 chapel of Prophet Aaron dominates the hill, maybe a successor of some earlier edifice, which cannot be clearly traced. But scattered Byzantine and later pottery connects the site with intent activity. The active cemetery south to the hill, underlines the importance of the site for the Bedouin neighbors too.

To the North, on the other bank of the site, the geological phenomenon of erosion had as result the formation of a natural "relief", resembling to a calf, and thus connected to the story of the Golden Calf referred in the

Bible. The "calf effigy" is often mentioned in the medieval pilgrims' accounts.

• Monastic (?) Settlement North-West to the Monastery of St Catherine's

The ruins of an important settlement can be traced North-West to the Monastery of St Catherine's, at the lower slopes of Gebel Ed-Deir. Although roughly damaged, the complex constitutes of a main ("central") building and a few refuges-cells, all connected to a big yard and plots, profiting of the vicinity of the water at the nearby gully.

• The big monastery-garden.

The big garden of the *Wadi El Deir*, connected to the monastic community of the Sinai monastery is referred already in the 4th century, and afterwards constantly in the accounts of pilgrims and in descriptions of Sinai monastery. Its size has been increased through the ages, to afford the monastic community with the essential supplies.

The walls of the garden, especially the ones to the North, at the bank of the site, are well documented in the 18th c. gravures.

A main historical site in the monastery's garden is the monastic cemetery. Its presence is well attested in 6th-7th c. sourced, while 17th c. references provide detailed descriptions of this earlier construction. Although it was hardly damaged during a flood in the late 18th century, traces of it survived and were incorporated in the early 18th c. cemetery, a building reflecting interesting aspects of eclecticism in the Sinai desert.

• The Northern edge of *Wadi Shreich*

Wadi Shreich is a small narrow valley that extends around the south perimeter of *Ras Sufsafeh*. Many architectural remains are located there, especially to its North part. Among the ruins are included one Nabatean and some Early-Byzantine buildings/towers.

In the ruins there is an abudance of Early Byzantine utilitarian pottery sherds, including fragments of redslip North African pottery from the 5th to the beginning of the 7th c.

• **The lower part of *Siqqat Shoeib***

Siqqat Shoeb is the path connecting *Farsh Shoeib* and *Sheikh Harun*, passing through a stiff ravine. As a part of the path system of *Gebel Sufsafeh*, it seems to have been of great importance for connecting the *Wadi el Deir* to the paths crossing the wadis ascending to *Gebel Musa*.

Its lowest parts, to the south of the modern police-station, are connected to scattered ruins of evidently Byzantine era. A cave nearby, which was transformed into a simple and severe place of worship at an unspecified time, is connected by the Bedouin people to Shoeib, whom they wrongly identify with the father-in-law of prophet Moses. The cave may have been the residence of a hermit, and Shoeib could be identified to some semi-mythical figure of the Bedouin history.

• ***Askeria***

The site, W to the Monastery of St Catherine, close to the modern police-station building, was used by the army of Abbas I (1813 –1854) during extended building activity in the area. The ruins consist of small consecutive rooms with low passages.

At Askeria there are preserved ruins of buildings and of a mosque. Some older walls can be detected nearby, possibly Byzantine, built of big rubble stones, and may have been delimiting a wide agricultural (?) plot. A few sherds of utilitarian pottery can be traced in the spot, Early-Byzantine, posthumus and modern as well.

St Catherine's Monastery

The God Trodden Mount Sinai Holy Monastery (Saint Catherine's) is located at Mount Sinai, in a valley formed between *Gebel Ed-Deir* and *Mount Choreb* at 1.580 meters. It is the earliest surviving monastic foundation with an uninterrupted monastic life from foundation to the present. Moreover, it is home to treasured icons, manuscripts and heirlooms, which comprise an important religious and artistic world heritage.

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In the 6th century, in the years between 548 and 565, Emperor Justinian constructed the Katholikon of the monastery and fortified the site in order to protect the monks from invaders. The walls enclosed the main pilgrimage sites of the area, i.e. the site of the Burning Bush and Moses' Well. After the 9th century, the veneration of the relics of Saint Catherine in the Katholikon of the Monastery became equally important as the earlier pilgrimage.

Christians have not been alone in respecting the holiness of the Sinai Monastery. Prophet Mohammed granted a Document of Protection (Ahtiname), respected by the entire Islamic world from that time forth. Likewise, due to the relation of the site with the history of the people of Israel, the adherents of the Jewish faith hold the Monastery in particularly high regard.

The complex enclosed within the walls of the Sinai Monastery consists of the main church (Katholikon), various chapels, cells, the refectory and various secondary buildings. The famous Katholikon is a three-aisled basilica, with the altar to the east and a narthex to the west. Moreover, a series of chapels line its north, east and south side. It was first dedicated to the Panaghia (Virgin of the Bush), later to the Transfiguration and was subsequently renamed after Saint Catherine. The Sinai Monastery, the artistic treasures that it houses and the surrounding area, were designated a World Heritage Site by Unesco, in 2002.

The Surroundings

In the vicinity of St Catherine's Monastery, in the *Wadi El Deir* and the nearby slopes , there can be traced different sites of archaeological interest, connected to the monastic presence of the Greek Orthodox monks at St Catherine's, to the tradition of pilgrimage an to the history of the Bedouin people as well. Most of them still have a certain role in the monastic life of the Brotherhood (active hermitages, chapels, etc), others could have been monastic settlements during the period monasticism flourished between 5^{th}-8^{th} c, while a few are connected to the Nabatean past and the Bedouin present of the area.

Gebel Munajah / Chapel of Saints Theodores

(28◦ 32ˈ 48,69ˈˈ N / 33◦ 59ˈ 15,74ˈˈ E)



Gebel Munajah: view from the Siqqat Sidna Musa path, close to St Stephen's gate.

Gebel Munajah ("Conversation Mountain" or "Mount of the Conference"), or Jethro's Mountain, a greenish hill 1,857 m high, predominates the *Wadi el Deir*, raising East / Southeast of St Catherine' s Monastery. On the peak rises a white chapel dedicated to Sts Theodores (Saint Theodore the General and Saint Theodore the Recruit).

Monk's tradition holds that it is connected with the life of Moses. As Nectarios, Patriarch of Jerusalem (1677), notes: "*To the south of the monastery there is a small and low hill, called 'the Mount of Prophet*

Moses' (!). It was on this hill where he was standing while shepherding the sheep of Jethro, his father-in-law, and saw the burning bush and said: 'I will go down to find out, what this great miracle means'".

Some other -but less documented tradition- holds that *Gebel Munajah* is the site where Jethro and his daughters were camped, when Moses first came to the Holy Mountain. According to a reference, in the fifteenth century monks told pilgrims that this is where Moses, Aaron and the seventy elders saw God standing on what looked like "*a sapphire pavement pure as the heavens themselves*," and where God invited Moses to come further up the mountain, but this last information may have been the result of a misunderstanding, since such an identification is not repeated in the known pilgrims itineraries or other sources.

The chapel is a single nave rectangular and barrel-vaulted building, externally white-washed. The apse of the altar is inscribed in the thick east wall.

The interior of the chapel bears simple geometrical decoration, due to the artistic activity of the Sinai monk Pachomius the painter (d. in the 1950ies), who decorated different chapels of the Sinai Monastery. The iconostasis of the altar is a 20th c. wooden artifact, nowadays bearing modern paper-icons.

There is no evidence for the date the chapel was constructed, but its form and technique of structure refer to a medieval date. There is no sufficient association between this chapel and the 16th c. processional icon of Sts Theodores kept in the monastery's katholikon, which could be determined as a proof for a terminus ante quem.

There are no references about any other construction or archaeological material on the spot.

Camel Path to the Holy Summit



The Camel Path between Gebel Munajah and Gebel Musa

The most important part of the path-system in *Wadi EL-Deir* and its environs is the so called Camel Path (or Camel Road), from the Monastery to the environs of *Farsh Elijah*, for further climb to the Holy Peak via the last part of the Stepped Path. The path starts from the East walls of the monastery, passes between Gebel Munajah and Mount Sinai, ascending via a perimetric route. At the foothill of *Gebel Munajah* smaller paths offspring: to the Hermitage "Garden of the Palm Trees" (see infra), to *Haghia Episteme* (or *Magafa*) Hermitage (both in *Gebel Ed-Deir*), to the Chapel of Sts Theodores, and to *Wadi Isbaiya*.

The path dates back to the time of Abbas Hilmi I Pasha, who was viceroy of Egypt between 1849–1854, and to his building activity in the environs of St Catherine's, the most important being the beginning of the construction of the palace at the peak bearing now his name: the Abbas Pasha Peak.

According to traditions, he selected this place for construction, after placing meat on the top of Mt *Sinai*, Mt *Katrin* and Mt *Tinya*, and it was here at the first one that the meat decayed later, suggesting a better environment and cleaner air. After that in the perspective of a palace to be built at Gebel Musa, soldiers and workers of Abass Pasha started building the present 'Camel Road"; but the pious Pasha drew back, after the monks pointed him that such a project was an ungodly matter. True or not, the palace itself was eventually built elsewhere, but the Camel Path was already built and is still in use –evidently the most overcrowded path in South Sinai.

This path is characterized –as the majority of the big mountainous paths in the area- for low retaining walls, consisting of big unhewn stones, and gutters for the pluvial water.

The path is preserved in a relatively good condition, due to repeated restorations, dictated by its importance as the most followed path to *Gebel Musa*.

Siqqat Sidna Musa path (Stepped Path to the Holy Summit)

This path is also called the "Path of the steps", ascending from St Catherine's Monastery to the Chapel of St Elijah. The path passes the Chapel of the Virgin of "*Economos*" as well as St Stephen's Gate and the Upper Gate.

This appears to have been the main path to the mountain during the Byzantine period; it consists of some 3.000 steps. The Byzantine construction was mostly of fieldstones, some of which were very large and heavy. It is obvious that great effort and planning were invested in

the building of the path. During later periods, mainly the Middle Ages and the 20th century, the path was repaired, so that it is in relatively good condition.

At about one third of the way up, there is a spring called the "*Spring of the Shoemaker*" or *Main El Jebel*, from which there are remains of a conduit which led water to the Sinai Monastery during the Byzantine period.

This path was widely described in the accounts of travelers. Nevertheless, the most accurate description derives from Nectarios, Patriarch of Jerusalem (1677), noting: "*Getting out of the monastery, walking a little to the south, you find the way up the mountain, consisting of rock stairs. From the beginning up to the so called Shoemaker's Spring, there are five hundred steps. This Spring gushed after the prayer of a shoemaker, a hermit monk, and thus it was named after him. From this spring, climbing one more thousand steps, you find the church of the Holy Virgin of the Economos ...*

From this chapel up to Saint Elias (=Farsh Elijah) there are five hundred steps; and from Saint Elias to the Holy Peak (=Gebel Musa) one steps; the whole being three thousand steps and more".



Siqqat Sidna Musa path: the Shoemaker's Spring

Robinson referring to 1839 gives quite the same information: "*The path leads for some time obliquely across the debris; and were it begins to grow seep, has been in part loosely laid with large stones ..., which serve too as a sort of steps. In some places likewise there are more regular steps, but merely of rough stones in their natural state. It is usually reported that there were once regular steps...; but this, like so many other stories, would seem to be only an exaggeration of travelers ... After twenty-five minutes we rested at a fine cold spring under an impending rock; the water of which is said to be carried down to the convent by an aqueduct".*



Siqqat Sidna Musa path: close to the Shoemaker's Spring



Siqqat Sidna Musa path: close to St Stephen's gate

The Complexes I, II and III ("Phylacterion"?)

The site, just in front of the easte walls of St Catherine's, was initially identified by M. Myriantheos and the then sacristan of the monastery fr Daniel in the late 1990's. Since the year 2000, the Hellenic Archaeological Mission of the University of Athens at South Sinai has been excavating the site under the direction of Professors M. Panayiotidi and S. Kalopisi-Verti.



The archaeological site east of the Monastery-Walls: eye-bird view from Magafa.

Since then there have been partly excavated three Complexes:

Complex I (28◦ 33΄ 16,81΄΄ **N** / 33◦ 58΄ 37,16΄΄ **E**)

is a huge and well-planned residential construction measuring possibly more than 50 X 50 m, a rectangular complex with a protective wall round it, and wings with rooms at its perimeter.

Complex II (28◦ 33΄ 16,02΄΄ **N** / 33◦ 58΄ 36,60΄΄ **E**),

located S. to *Complex I*, is characterized by its limited dimensions and its slightly different orientation, in comparison to *Complex I*, both characteristics being explained by the slope where the complex is located.

A smaller **Complex III** (28◦ 33΄ 15,91΄΄ **N** / 33◦ 58΄ 37,34΄΄ **E**) rises between the former ones, but is not yet sufficiently excavated.

All these constructions, indicating wider and premeditated building activity in the valley of the monastery, could be correlated to the «*φυλακτήριον*» (=military guard), which was organized in parallel with the construction of the monastery by Justinian, according to *Procopius* the historian, or –more precisely- to the settlement of families of soldiers sent by Emperor Justinian, according to the Patriarch of Alexandria *Eutychius*. If the identification is correct, all this activity should be dated a little before the middle of the 6th c. AD, while the abandonment –according to Eutychius- should be related to the rule of Abd el Malik ibn Marwan (685-705 AD).

It has to be noted, that during a disastrous flood at the end of 18th c., earth and blocks of granite from the rocky slopes of the Sufsafeh Mountain fell on the site, destroying and covering architectural remains.

Byzantine Cistern

(28◦ 33ˈ 17,81ˈˈ **N** / 33◦ 58ˈ 34,63ˈˈ **E**)



The Byzantine cistern between the Monastery and the "Phylacterion", view to the south

Between the *Phylakterion* site and the monastery, there is still in function a possibly 6th c. cistern, a barrel vaulted structure. Its construction, its place between two important residential areas flourishing at that time, the use of strong waterproof mortar, and its connection to a wider system of water supplying, may testify its construction before the 8th c.

In close vicinity to St Catherine's, there can be traced quarries, evidently dating back to the time of the construction of the monastery.

North Quarry – Sectors A and B

At the south slope of *Gebel Ed-Deir*, just out the north walls of the monastery there can be traced two sectors of the original quarries. There still can be seen the traces for the quarrying of granite blocks. The quarries may have been reused during the ages; most probably they were reused in the end of 18th century for the repair of the seriously damaged north walls.



Part of the North Quary

South Quarry – Sector C

Traces at the north slope of *Gebel Sina*, adjacent to the south wall of the monastery, may belong to a quarry which was providing building material for the construction of the monastery. This quarry could facilitate the process, profiting of the declination of the slope.

A nearby kiln, built of bricks, stands in ruins nearby and may belong to a much later –if not quite recent- period of the monastery's life.

Archbishop Kyrillos' Gate and Hostel

(28◦ 33΄ 21,10΄΄ **N** / 33◦ 58΄ 31,70΄΄ **E**)

Important building activity was reported in the monastery during the short and unfortunate leadership of the archbishop Kyrillos from Constantinople (1859-1867).

Just out of the main entrance of the monastery, two structures are connected to him. The neoclassical gate of the garden walls, leading to the main entrance of the monastery survives, bearing a dedicatory inscription (1863). The same style is followed in a building –nowadays called the Kyrillos' Hostel- at the south side of the main external court of the monastery. This last building was originally supposed to house the monastery's mill, but its construction was interrupted after archbishop Kyrillos's dismissal. In the end of the 20th c. it was repaired and now houses the ladies' hostel for the monastery's pilgrims.

The Cemetery Chapel and Ossuary

(28◦ 33' 22,06'' **N** / 33◦ 58' 30,02'' **E**)



The Cemetery Complex, view to the NE



The chapel of St Tryphon in the Cemetery Complex

The cemetery complex in the monastery garden was built in its present form in 1888 as a good example of newclassical style. The whole complex is measuring 8,50 x 10,50 X 11 high.

The ground floor occupies the ossuary, consisting of two aisles running East-West, with an antechamber to the W. The first floor is occupied by the cemetery-chapel, corresponding to the south aisle of the ground floor ossuary. The chapel is dedicated to St Tryphon the martyr, heavenly protector of the gardeners (the chapel serves also as the worship target of the monastery gardens). In the chapel itself, a simple wooden icon-screen, with icons dating back to the same late 19th c. activity, should be mentioned. Most of the icons belong to the naif icon-painting style developed in Jerusalem during the 19th c. To the north of the building, there is extended the narrow cemetery itself, containing a few simple graves for the deceased monks.

In its enclosure there can be found the remains of some earlier phases: It concerns the remains of the east wall of an earlier cemetery chapel: the east wall of the altar, bearing three niches inscribed in the thickness of the wall with traces of wall-paintings.

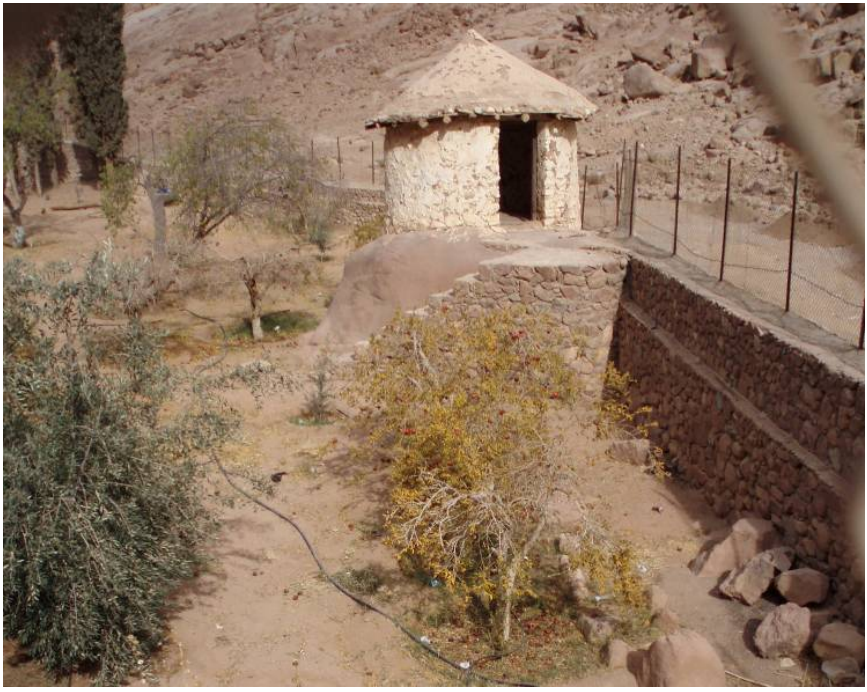
The ruins can be identified as the remains of the earlier chapel of the Holy Virgin, known from different post-Byzantine sources. From the 16th c. onwards, descriptions of the monastery give evidence for a small cemetery complex consisting of two vaulted rooms for interment, and the Holy Virgin chapel. An extended description is provided by the patriarch of Jerusalem Nectarios, former archbishop of Sinai (1677). According to him, the cemetery in the 17th c was still the original 6th century construction, a claim that seems to be true.

This original structure is referred as somehow altered in the beginning of the 17th c, and seems to have been destroyed during a ruinate flood at the end of 18th c.

The Kallistratos' Stucture

(28◦ 33' 29,65'' **N** / 33◦ 58' 21,96'' **E**)

The Monastery's garden is extended as a green triangle in the desert. At its westernmost edge, a probably 19th c. building stands, called "The Kallistratos'", probably after its founder name. The building is a primitive construction of some irregular round plan, plastered with earth mortar and bearing a timber roof. It could have played the role of shelter for the gardeners and other workers. The name Kallistratos (1867-1885) may refer to the archbishop of Sinai who succeeded Kyrillos from Constantinople, but such a simple and naif structure could be connected to his activity only accidentally.



The Kallistratos' Stucture in the monastery garden

Gebel Ed-Deir (=the "Mountain of the Monastery") is located to the north of the mountainous complex of *Gebel Musa* and *Gebel Sufsafeh*, across *Wadi El-Deir*. *Gebel El-Deir* is also known as Mountain of *Haghia Epistémé* (named after saint Epistimi, the holy woman martyr), *Gebel Magafa* (="across from", as it is opposite to St Catherine's Monastery), or *Gebel El-Selib*, after the crosses dominating its peaks.

Gebel Ed-Deir is characterized by a considerable number of archaeological sites, which could be divided into two groups: a) settlements on the southern slope, close to Sinai Monastery, and b) settlements in the valleys across its peaks. In our survey there were taken into account the sites of the first group, belonging to / or neighbouring to the *Wadi El-Deir*.

Starting from the East, there are references on the following sites:

Hermitage "of Father Moses" or "Garden of the Palm Trees"

(28◦ 33' 20,91'' **N** / 33◦ 58' 49,78'' **E**)



Hermitage "of Father Moses": view to the NE

Close to the Monastery, at the slope of *Gebel Ed-Deir*, there is located the hermitage of "father (abuna) Moses", named after the monk who rehabilitated it in the 1990's and resides there ever since. It is alternatively known as "Garden of the Palm Trees" and its chapel is named after Sts John the Confessor and Mary of Egypt.

Different cells/rooms and a cave-chapel, all dating in the late 20th c., form the hermitage-complex, along with terraces-orchards.

Continuity in the use of the hermitage as a garden left only a few traces of its past, mostly a mass of debris concentrated at the north-eastern part of the complex. Of more interest is a collection of shards picked by formation and cultivation of the hermitage's orchards. They are carefully kept altogether within the enclosure of the hermitage. The number of the shards witnesses for intense residential use of the site, while some of them are typical examples of early-Byzantine pottery, belonging to "close vessels", mostly amphoras, dating before the 8th c.



Hermitage "of Father Moses" to the left, with Sinai monastery low in the valley:

bird-eye view from Magafa

Ruined Hermitage (?) - Complex A

(28◦ 33ˈ 26,76ˈˈ **N** / 33◦ 58ˈ 41,34ˈˈ **E**)



Ruined Hermitage (?) - Complex A: general view from Wadi EL-Deir

This important complex, in very close distance from St Catherine's Monastery and to the north of it, has been recently excavated by the Egyptian Antiquities Organization, in 2007-8.

In fact it concerns two rather different sub-complexes, at two different levels.

Both follow the type of hermitages with a main central room and surrounding cells, in connection to orchards. At the higher level, a rectangular open cistern connected to a spring was obviously providing water for the orchards at the lower level. A well planned system of open conduits was selecting the overflow and rain water as well to reservoirs.

The quantity of the debris on the spot may indicate the existence of a second floor built of mud.

In the past, before excavation, there has been documentation of simple shards, not indicating with certainty a specific period of flourishing. Nevertheless, the type of the plan sketch, the quality of the construction, the careful provision for water supplies and the vicinity to the monastery make it sure that it was built and flourished during the first centuries of the Sinai monasticism, and may have been rehabilitated in later periods, according to the local circumstances.



Ruined Hermitage (?) - Complex A: the cistern at the higher level

Ruined Cell (?)

(28◦ 33ˈ 24,62ˈˈ **N** / 33◦ 58ˈ 37,74ˈˈ **E**)



General view of the slope of Gebel Ed-Deir with the "Ruined cell" to the left and the "Ruined Hermitage (?) - Complex A" to the right

A little lower than Complex A, at the same part of the slope there stands a ruined cell, incorporating a small niche / cave at its east side.

The cell was built of unhewn stones but carefully. Its plan, rectangular with the external part of the walls slightly inclining in-wards, testify that it is not an accidental construction, but may have played some role in the close vicinity of the monastery. Although the plan and walls remind

earlier Nabatean structures, the building seems to have been a Byzantine structure, probably an anchorite-cell.



The "ruined cell (?)"

The monastic (?) Complex of the "Gully of the poplar"

(28◦33ˈ 29,88ˈˈ **N** / 33◦58ˈ 37,81ˈˈ **E**)



Monastic (?) Complex of the "Gully of the poplar"". The ruins of the building (view from the East).

This complex lies approximately 220 meters north to the monastery at a height of 1616 m, at the confluence of the steep "*Gully of the poplar*" and of a lesser gully to the West.

At the higher point of the site, the ruins of a bi-level building have been studied by the Hellenic Archaeological Mission of the University of Athens at South Sinai. As a result of its dilapidation, a hill of earth and stones rises between the natural rocks of the gully. There were traced different walls of this construction. Some of them, that can be better observed, seem to form three parallel narrow rooms to the South-East, with two other smaller rooms to their Northwest.

Furthermore to the North, the traces of two long walls, forming a corner to the NW of the whole complex, may have supported an open court-yard, thus providing the complex with the necessary horizontal open space at the steep gully.

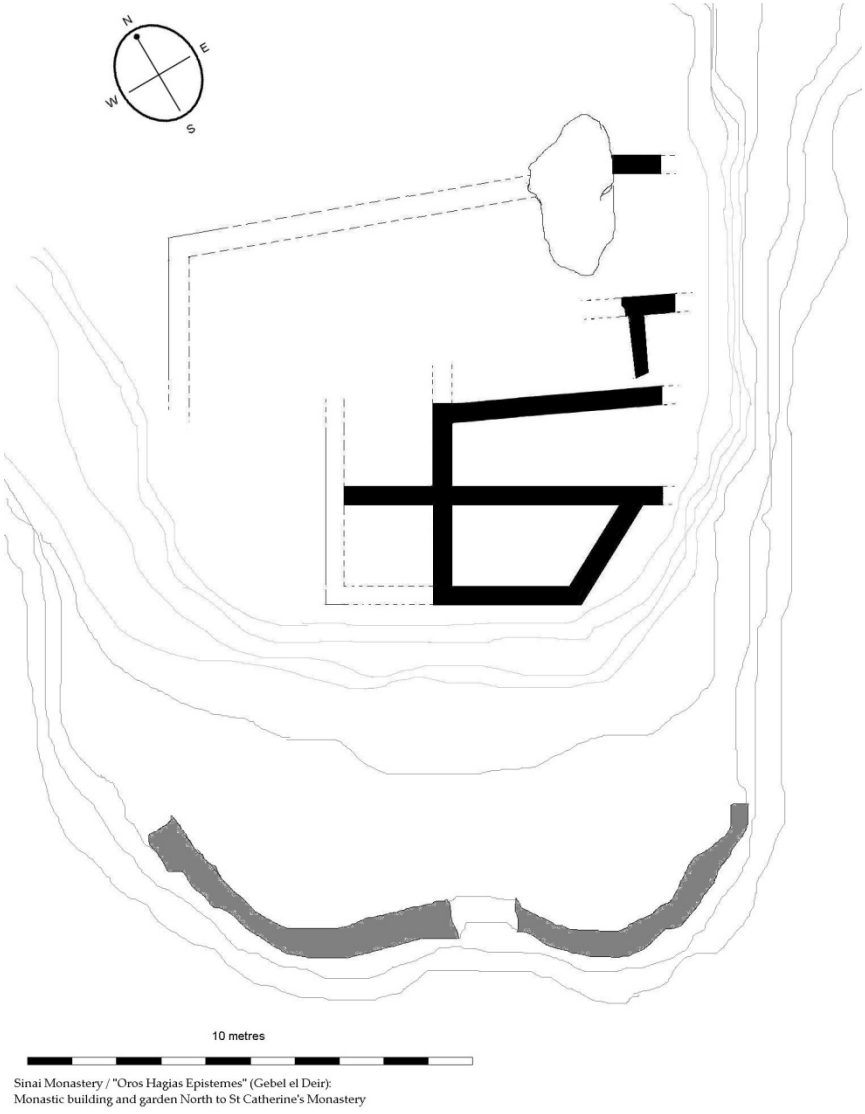
Some six meters to the South and at a much lower level, two sequential curved dry-walls, consisting of unhewn stones, built on the foundations of granite boulders, support a small yard, evidently a garden. Between them, an opening may have been an entrance to this yard.

The complex may have been a monastic settlement, one of the many of this kind in the vicinity of Sinai Monastery, with a small central building and a garden for the necessary supplies, profiting of the vicinity of the water at the *Gully of the poplar.*

It is interesting to note that a few only shards were found at the site, probably as a result of numerous floods since its abandonment. Between, them a shard with characteristic red slip seems to be dated not later than 7th century, while other shards of utilitarian pottery may also be attributed to this period, to the golden age of Sinai monasticism.



Monastic (?) Complex at the "Gully of the poplar". The lower garden (view to the South).



Sinai Monastery / "Oros Hagias Epistemes" (Gebel el Deir):
Monastic building and garden North to St Catherine's Monastery

Monastic (?) Complex at the "Gully of the poplar

Workers Dwellings

(28◦ 33ˈ 24,69ˈˈ **N** / 33◦ 58ˈ 32,90ˈˈ **E**)

At the same south slope of *Gebel Ed-Deir*, a little to the west, but at a much lower level, close to the torrent and the monastery, there are humble buildings belonging to the monastery and serving as dwellings for the monastery's workers. The central room, characteristic for a support wall, may be the oldest of the complex. Based on testimonies of the 19th c., we could suppose that it was built in the beginning of the 19th c. This hypothesis requires more documentation than is possible with a survey without further investigation. The use of the building as dwellings has altered many of its characteristic features.

Hermitage, Monastic (?) Complex B

(5952015990 UTM)

It is located c. 100 m north of the main path to St Catherine's monastery and appr. 800 m. from the monastery itself. The complex is situated on a steep slope descending from *Gebel Ed-Deir* to *Wadi El-Deir*, and contains a central building with an adjoining orchard, three hermit-cells under boulders and an additional orchard, some 50 m above the central building.

The Central Building measures appr. 11 m from east to west and is 10 m wide. It is built of large fieldstones; the walls are preserved to an average height of c. 2 m. two large boulders are incorporated in the southeastern corner and the eastern wall. The interior plan is unknown, though the amount of collapsed debris indicates that there had probably been a second floor build of mud-bricks.

The orchard is somehow square, measuring c. 30 m long from east to west and c. 25 m wide from north to south. Due to its location in the flow path of a small tributary, which descends steeply from the mountain, the walls surrounding it are thick and sturdy. The orchard is located on a steep slope and is composed of four terraced agricultural plots, with an average of 2 m between the steps. An abundant amount

of soil was brought from the vicinity to create the orchard. The central building was built in the northwestern corner of the orchard, so that both elements may be viewed as part of a single complex.

Three hermit cells (?) were constructed under boulders, and each has one built wall. Two cells are located under the boulders incorporated in the eastern wall of the central building. The third cell is built several meters to the north of the central building.

The upper orchard, covering only c. 180 m, is located some 50 meters above the complex, in the same flow path.

The Complex could be defined as monastic based on the three hermit-cells. A part of the complex has been excavated recently, in 2008, by the Egyptian Antiquities Organization.



Hermitage, Monastic (?) Complex B : the site before recent excavation activity

Ruins at Wadi Shoeib and its environs



Siqqat Shoeib, general view to the south: The Garden and the huge rock covering the spring-basin

Siqqat Shoeib ascends from *Sheikh Haroun* to *Farsh Shoeib*, via a steep ravine full of boulders. At the bottom of the path near *Wadi El-Deir,* there are remains of different complexes. This path joins the path of the Prayer Niches, which traverses the length of *Gebel Sufsafeh* and ascends to *Nabi Musa*. It appears that it was a hallowed path, even with some importance for early pilgrims, used to ascend to Mt Sinai.

Siqqat Shoeib is often referred as the path used by Moses on his way back to the Israelites, after receiving the Law. Facing *Nabi Haroun*, which is generally connected to the idolatry of the golden calf (see infra), it was believed that it was via *Siqqat Shoeib* when Moses realized the idolatry of his people and broke the tablets of the law.

Egeria (4th c.) states characteristically: "*As we went along, we saw facing us a mountain peak, overlooking the whole valley, from which holy Moses saw the children of Israel holding their dances after they had made the calf. And they showed us an enormous rock, the place where holy Moses and Joshua, the son of Nun, were bringing the tables of stone down from the mountain, when Moses became angry and broke them*." Unquestioningly Egeria refers to *Siqqat Shoeib*. The same information is repeated -in different slight variations- by the medieval and more recent pilgrims. In 1844 Tischendorf gives the information that Bedouins had been digging around the rock in *Wadi Shoeib*, with the hope of discovering the rare fragments of the tables.

Wadi Shoeib seems to have been a place of great importance for the Beduin tribes nearby. The Beduin oral tradition replaces Jethro with Shoeib, identifying him to the father-in-law of Moses. Furthermore the spring under the above mentioned huge rock by the middle of *Siqqat Shoeib,* called *Maayit Shoeib*, is considered by them as the original spring, where Moses first met the daughters of Shoeib/Jethro. The same tradition identifies a cave –a little lower than the spring- as his dwelling, while Shoeib is also believed to be their ancestor. Different traditions, mixing of different beliefs, all these are connected to *Wadi/Siqqat*

Shoeib, revealing its importance in the history of Sinai and interpreting the archaeological traces.

The sites at *Wadi Shoeib* will be presented starting from the Wadi El-Deir upwards, as following:

Ruins of Abash Pasha Barracks or Askeria

(28◦ 33' 43,14'' **N** / 33◦ 58' 06,52'' **E**)

The site lies west to the monastery, just to the right of the modern street leading to the monastery and just before the police station)and the tourist centre nearby ("*Selsela*").

The complex, running east-west, consists of rooms in three wings round an open court, while the place of the fourth (east) wing is occupied by a small mosque. The whole complex, the mosque included, is ruined. Despite the bad condition of preservation, one can distinguish at least 6 rooms in the north wing, 3 in the west and 6 in the south. All seem to be simple rectangular spaces. The mosque seems to have been of the same simple shape but bigger in seize. Some additions seem to have been added at the east and west end of the complex.

The complex is characterized for its poor construction, with the use of extremely unhewn stones and pretty thin walls, which prove that it was built as a whole simultaneously.

The barracks date back to the time of Abbas Pasha I (1849 – 1854). They are connected to his building activity in the environs of St Catherine's and are generally considered to have once been the camp of the soldiers and workers who worked for the construction of the Camel Path.

Some additional information and interpretation of their use derives from the diary of G. Lowth, who published his remembrances in 1855, just one year after the death of Abbas Pasha. On narrating his approach to the monastery, he recites: "*There had been continually for years so much squabbling between the monks of the convent of St Catherine and the Arabs of the Peninsula, by which travelers were put in occasional peril, that Abbas Pasha had placed here a small garrison of sixty men; and in the mouth of Wadi El-Deir –the valley of the convent- just in front of us at the edge of the plain, was their barracks a low six foot wall encircling a courtyard and some rude buildings consisting only of a ground floor. Just as we started to pay a visit to the convent, a party of twenty of these Egyptian soldier, with an officer at their head, marched up to our tents, ... and the Egyptian lieutenant announced that that he was come to take care of us.*" This account gives a vivid description of a living complex, justifying the presence of the army as safeguard for the monastery and its visitors.

Robert Stewart in 1857 gives some supplementary information: "*There lay between us and the convent a temporary barrack, occupied by a regiment of Egyptian soldiers, and a small village of mud huts containing their wives and other relatives, who usually migrate with them, though often exploded to sever privations and cruelties on the part of the authorities.*"

This account of a small village cannot be affirmed by archaeological testimony: the description of the village as consisting of mud huts, justifies its thorough destruction.

The information of William Matthew in 1906 that "*at the old barracks of Abbas Pasha's soldiery, near the opening of Wadi Ed-Deir into Wadi Er-Rahah, we measured the well they had dug, and found it thirty-three feet in water..*", is not clear to which of the existing wells in the area refers.

Monastic (?) Ruin A

(28◦ 33' 41,40'' **N** / 33◦ 58' 08,20'' **E**)

To the east of the barracks of Abbas Pasha there stand the ruins of a much smaller complex of the same type, i.e. consisting of small rooms round a central open court. More clearly can be traced the three rooms in the east wing, and three more in the west.

The complex was built using unhewn stones, but is of fairly better construction, in comparison to the neighbouring barracks. The stones were collected after a clearly better selection and the walls are more solid.

The type of the complex reminds the "*Kellia*" monastic complexes, as known from lower Egypt monasticism. This in addition to the comparatively relevant quality of construction seems to date the complex during the Byzantine era, identifying it as monastic. Nevertheless, it could have been rehabilitated when the barracks of Abbas Pasha were built. Unfortunately, there are no references on characteristic pottery, and more specific conclusions require excavation.

The ruin has been seriously damaged from the activities connected with the tourist activity nearby, and seems that a sufficient quantity of its material has been used for the construction of modern buildings nearby.

Monastic (?) Ruin B

(East complex: 28◦ 33' 41,43'' **N** / 33◦ 58' 06,75'' **E**; west complex: 28◦ 33' 42,15'' **N** / 33◦ 58' 04,83'' **E**)

To the south of the barracks of Abbas Pasha, there stand ruins belonging to different complexes, but seem to belong to the same structural unity.

They seem to form two "neighbourhoods", one to the east and one to the west with some small space between them.

Rectangular rooms of rather limited sizes constitute entities, in a way that is difficult to identify as uniform complexes. The quality of the unhewn stones used for their building is rather poor, but it is doubtful if they refer to the construction principles followed at the barracks of Abbas Pasha. There seems that some parts of the construction could date back to the Byzantine era, while others could belong to some later rehabilitation. Taking in mind the above mentioned testimony of Stewart (1858), about a village round the barracks, for the families of the soldiers, one wonders if his reference to "mud huts" is accurate.

Some part of the ruins (to the east) have been recently (2008) excavated by the Egyptian Antiquities Organization. The results have not been published yet, to profit of them. Complete excavation and detailed study of the pottery could determine the phases of the structures. Until it is achieved, it is safer to consider the ruins as monastic ones, which experienced later additions.

Chapel of St Demetrios and Monastic (?) Ruin C

(28◦ 33' 39,33'' **N** / 33◦ 58' 01,48'' **E**)



The Monastic (?) Ruin C: view to the east

In *Wadi Shoeib*, at a level slightly higher than the barracks, there stands the chapel of St Demetrios the great martyr. This late construction has been built in a rock cave. Its position is considered by the monastery's oral tradition as coinciding to an old hermitage. This claim cannot be proved or rejected now; nevertheless just a little higher there stands the "Monastic Ruin C", while the formation of the rock/cave that enfolds the chapel is typical to attract cave-living anchorites.

The "Monastic Ruin C" complex most probably consists of a rectangular room at a higher point of the slope, with 3 (?) other adjacent rooms around. The walls consist of unhewn stones and the building seems to follow the exact form of the Hermitage Complex B and the Hermitage at the "*Gully of the poplar*". The considerable amount of collapsed debris indicates that there had probably been a second floor build of mud-bricks. This has to be further determined by excavation.

Usually hermitages of this type included additional cells nearby, built under boulders; this seems to be the case of the possible hermitage/cell in the place of St Demetrios chapel.

Cave, garden and settlement at Siqqat Shoeib

(28◦ 33' 33,33'' **N** / 33◦ 57' 56,32'' **E**)

The above mentioned spring under the huge rock at Siqqat Shoeib, nowadays a simple built basin for the collection of the drops of water, is connected to a garden of the monastery, with a simple well/deposit, and different unidentified traces.

Most important seems to be the cave considered to be the dwellings of Shoeib/Jethro, according to the Bedouin tradition. The opening of the cave, under a rock, is walled, thus forming a somehow rectangular room, both internally and externally plastered. No marks of its antiquity can be traced in its present form. Initially it may have been a hermit cell (or some other holy-man-dwelling). Further examination is required, to provide more specific conclusions.



Siqqat Shoeib: The Cave/ shrine of Shoeib



Siqqat Shoeib: The spring



Siqqat Shoeib: The Garden

Ruins of Nabatean Houses

(28◦ 33ˈ 44,71ˈˈ **N** / 33◦ 57ˈ 54,22ˈˈ **E**)

To the west of St Demetrios chapel, between this last one and the "*Megalo Manna*" Garden (see infra), there stand two buildings of the type generally referred as 'Nabatean House".



Nabatean House: external view

As all structures of the same type, they resemble to towers; externally they slightly recall the shape of truncated pyramids, while the only opening is just a small and low door at one of the long sides. In the interior, the corners are not so clearly comprehensible, while "blind" openings in the walls may have been used as lockers.

Both buildings consist of fieldstones, considerably big at the lower parts, much smaller at the higher spots. Both buildings are preserved in an uncommon good state, especially the one of them, which seems to have lost just its plane roof.

Such structures are common in the nearby area: "Nabatean towers" of the same type are preserved quite intact in the neighbouring *Wadi Sredj*, and also at *Wadi Tlah*, not far from *Abu Sheila*.

Such buildings may have played different roles through the ages, as Nabatean or bedouin houses, as hermitages or refuges, according to their availability and the historical circumstances. Intensive excavation may give better results about the periods they were flourishing; nevertheless, it may hardly reveal their exact use.

No characteristic pottery has been traced in/round these two structures. Nevertheless, at the nearby *Wadi Sredj*, were the presence of such structures is more sufficiently documented, the Hellenic Archaeological Mission of the University of Athens at South Sinai has traced in the past pottery attesting a certain flourishing in the 6^{th}-7^{th} c.



Nabatean House: internal view

Prophet Aaron / Haroun chapel and "magaam"

(28◦ 33' 55,80'' **N** / 33◦ 57' 55,62'' **E**)



Nabi Haroun: overview from the Siqqat Shoeib

Nabi Haroun, a low hill between *Wadi Raha* and *Wadi El-Deir*, is of great importance for the pilgrim history of Sinai, traditionally connected to Haroun / Prophet Aaron and his activity in Sinai.

On the top of *Nabi Haroun* the earliest surviving building is the Bedouin "mausoleum" of Aaron. It is a primitive construction of some irregular round plan, plastered with earth mortar and bearing a timber roof.

In the shrine, a green shroud covers a box which resembles a grave. However, Aaron is not buried here (his burial place, another 'Nabi Haroun", being in Jordan, where it has been venerated from early Christian period); it is a standing place (*magaam*) marking the site where Aaron –according to the Bedouin traditions- supervised the building of the golden calf. Of course, nobody can reject the existence of a possibly real tomb in the shrine, connected with some ancestor of the Bedouin tribes. South of the shrine there is a hollow in the red granite which they regard as Aaron's footprint. The Bedouins venerate this holy site by pacing wormwood and other herbs in a ring around it.

A few meters to the east, there stands a chapel dedicated to Prophet Aaron, belonging to St Catherine's monastery. The present chapel was built in 1911. Initially it did not comprise an altar-apse to east. An apse, which was added later, collapsed after the earthquake in 1995 and is replaced by a square wall. It seems that there aren't any references in the sources for an earlier chapel at the same places, nor any visible traces. Nevertheless, this is not sufficient to reject any relevant supposition without excavating.

The hill is persistently mentioned in the sources, starting from Egeria (4th c.), although it seems that pilgrims were mixing different traditions –or the local traditions themselves were altered. Traditions recite that Aaron ordered the golden calf to be installed on or at the southern foot of the hill (where today there is a Jabaliya Bedouin cemetery), while another tradition suggests that Aaron was consecrated in the tabernacle which Moses erected on this summit.

Egeria herself saw *"where the calf had been made, where a large stone was set in the ground and still stands*". At least from the 14th-15th c onwards, pilgrims were shown an extraordinary feature about 500 m south of Nabi Haroun, close to the *"Megalo Manna* Garden": A granite formation there bears striking resemblance to the head and forequarter of a cow, and their guides explained this was the place of Israelite

heresy. As Gucci (15th c.) refers: "*You see something exactly like a calf which they say was the calf*".

Mixing of traditions is obvious in the diaries of later visitors. The anonymous American notes in 1851: "*On our left was a large insulated stone, rudely resembling a chair, called the chair of Moses, on which tradition says that Moses rested himself when he came up with the people of his charge; further on, upon a little eminence, are some rude stones, which are pointed out as the ruins of the house of Aaron, where the great high-priest discoursed to the wandering Israelites. On the right is a stone, alleged to be the petrified golden calf*".

According to the New American Cyclopaedia (1862), the Bedouins pointed out the "hill of Aaron", the "pit of korah" and the place the golden calf was made.

Meistermann in 1909 wrote: "*a hill called the Djebel Haroun, the Mount of Aaron, with a Moslem chapel, where once a year the Bedouins offer sacrifice to Aaron. According to tradition, Aaron built the golden calf on this site.*"

In fact, the official aspect of the monastery does not refer to the hill as the place of the idolatry (it's interesting to note that Egeria places idolatry at a site nearby), nor does it even mention the calf-shaped rock at the *Megalo Manna* Garden Nectarios, Patriarch of Jerusalem, in his detailed description of the valley (1677) generally places nearby the construction of the tabernacle.

It seems that this official tradition was narrated to Morison in 1697, who notes: "*Vis a vis de ce lieu et de l' autre cote de la plaine, est une coline fort basse au pied d' une montagne assez elevee, sur laquelle on tient qu' Aaron eleva son premier autel par l' ordre de Dieu, et ou il lui presenta le premier sacrifice, qui lui fut offert dans la solitude depuis la sortie d' Egypte. C' est pour cela que cette coline est encore aujourd'hui montagne d' Aaron* ».

Nabi Haroun and its Bedouin shrine played an important role in desert life. Until 1966 Nabi Haroun was the starting point for the local pilgrimage that linked the Bedouins and the Monastery in a ritual event.

The Gardens of "Megalo Manna" and "Mikro Manna"



The natural calf relief at the edge of the "Megalo Manna: garden

South to *Nabi Haroun*, at the edge of *Wadi Sredj*, there are extended two monastery's gardens, the "*Megalo Manna*" (28◦ 33' 46,25'' **N** / 33◦ 57' 50,38'' **E**) and the "*Mikro Manna*" (28◦ 34' 04,12'' **N** / 33◦ 57' 56,44'' **E**). Megalo Manna is enclosed with wire, while the Mikro Manna is a small garden with a characteristic palm tree, indicating its antiquity. Both gardens bear traces of ruined constructions, which may have been connected with the continuous use of the plots as gardens, and not with residential activity. Only excavation could help to identify the traces as buildings or not. In any case, these traces are connected to the

antiquities of Wadi Sredj, and should be studied with them as a whole at a future time.

Bedouin Cemetery

(28◦ 33' 50,93'' **N** / 33◦ 57' 49,27'' **E**)

At the western edge of Wadi El-Deir there lies the Bedouin cemetery. Although some of the graves have the form of simple "mausoleums", its date is uncertain. It is well documented in the late 19th c. by photographs of that time. It should be noted that, in the vicinity of *Nabi Haroun*, which may be a real mausoleum of some unknown Bedouin forfather, the cemetery could have been created in parallel to the *Nabi Haroun* shrine in the middle ages. Nevertheless, the installation of a guard by Abbas Pasha in the homonymous barracks by the mid 19th c., could logically be considered as a terminus ante quem for the the creation of the cemetery.

Bedouin Well of Nabi Haroun

(28◦ 34' 04,12'' **N** / 33◦ 57' 56,44'' **E**)



Northwest of the *Nabi Haroun* there is a Bedouin well, used by the Jabaliya Tribe. Taking into account that wells in the area usually date back to much earlier centuries, the well could be potentially but rightly considered as site with archaeological significance.

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