

# Sinaiticus



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## SOUTH WING BUILDING WORK APPROVED

The South Wing Project has received a green light from Egypt's Supreme Council of Antiquities, and plans to renovate the Saint Catherine's library are going ahead. Permission has been granted to expand the library and create new facilities on the second floor of the South Wing, including a reading room, conservation workshop, digital photography studio and library for modern books. Approval has also been given to change the layout of the existing library and provide the additional space needed to accommodate extensive shelving and boxed storage for the monastery's scrolls, bound manuscripts and early printed books.

The planning permission extends to the exterior of the South Wing, although intervention here will be more limited than originally envisaged. Necessary repairs to the façade can be made and the outside of the building can be painted.

The work to clean, pack and store the contents of the library began in May 2009. This complex task is described overleaf in words and pictures. Meanwhile, competitive bids for the construction work are being solicited. A main contractor should be selected by the end of summer 2009, with groundbreaking anticipated in the autumn.

Funds towards the construction costs have been pledged by Mr Samih Sawiris, who will make a total of \$500,000 available.

Father Justin, the librarian of Saint Catherine's, will be reporting on the renovation work as it proceeds. Look for his updates on the foundation's website.



Packing the books at Saint Catherine's: the conservation team during their mid-morning break with Father Justin and Father Ignatios.

[www.saintcatherinefoundation.org](http://www.saintcatherinefoundation.org)

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The Saint Catherine Foundation and its related associations in Switzerland and the United States support conservation work at the Monastery of Saint Catherine. The monastery's Library is the present focus of conservation activities. To safeguard this historic archive, the foundation is raising funds for the renovation of the Library building and for the conservation and boxed storage of the manuscripts and early books.

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## CONSERVATORS BEGIN CLEANING AND PACKING THE BOOKS

The time has at last come to pack and move the approximately 11,000 books out of the library in advance of the building work. Although this may seem to be a simple task, the delicate condition and value of the books and the consequent need to protect them against damage during the move and the months of storage that lie ahead, and to track them through the process for security, mean that the work must be carefully planned and executed by an experienced team.

The foundation therefore asked Caroline Bendix, who has specialised for many years in the on-site treatment of historic libraries and has been responsible for packing many of them, to plan and manage this work. For many months, including two short visits to the monastery, she has been collaborating with Nicholas Pickwood and Thanasis Velios to work out how to do this as safely and efficiently as possible, to identify the material and equipment required and to get everything on site at the right time. This has proved a complex task, especially as it was important to source as much of the material as possible locally, to keep the costs to a minimum. This took an unexpectedly long time, and the final weeks before the work started proved to be rather tense, but with the help of all involved, everything was either in the monastery or on its way from Cairo by the time we arrived.

We have assembled a team of eight conservators to work under Caroline's direction, two of them, Maria Argyrou, from Greece, and Marco di Bella, from Sicily, long-time team members from the survey, and three others, Esra Göknil P'Anson, from Turkey, Andrew Megaw, from Ireland, and Konstantinos Hatziantoniou, from Greece but currently working in Qatar, had also taken part in the survey and therefore know their way around the monastery and its way of life. New to the monastery are Evangelia Biza and Georgia Gkouliavoudi, both from Greece, and Maria-Novella Giannini from Italy.

An advance party of Caroline Bendix, Maria Argyrou, Marco di Bella, Thanasis Velios and Nicholas Pickwood arrived on 6 May to set everything up before the arrival of the rest of the team on 8 May. Key to the security of the operation was the barcoding system that is being used to track the books as they are cleaned and wrapped and will then log them into the plastic crates in which they are to be stored and finally into the storage rooms to be prepared for the books in June. This process was designed by Thanasis Velios, who has received very useful assistance from Father Ignatios, recently arrived from Mount Athos, who has been assigned to help Father Justin with our work. Together they have managed to set up the scanners to connect directly to a server (one of the project computers from the survey), which in turn can be accessed from London, so that Thanasis can check that everything is working and help to correct any problems that may crop up.



Caroline Bendix gets to grips with a barcode scanner.

Working in two teams, the eight conservators take the books, which are brought to the work-tables by Father Justin, through a tightly controlled production-line process. The first stage, supervised by Father Justin, who brings the books to the work-tables, is to insert in each book a slip with its shelfmark in the form of a barcode (these were

all printed in London in advance of the trip). The books are then dusted by two team members using two special extra-quiet vacuum cleaners, after which they pass to the next table where a few important details are recorded on the barcode readers: the language (the books are arranged by language), their dimensions and whether they will need additional protection when they are returned to the new



The team at work in two parallel production lines.



Konstantinos Hatziantoniou and Esra Göknil P'Anson using the extra-quiet Nilfisk vacuum cleaners.

shelves. The two latter pieces of information will be used to calculate the shelf space required in the new library, as the protective enclosures, when required, will add two to three millimetres to each book. Four team members do this work.

When this information is recorded, the final two team members wrap the books in acid-free tissue (with bubble-wrap outside to cover any metal clasps or bosses and protect neighbouring books in the crates from damage). The barcodes are taped to the outside of the package. When the crates arrive, the books will be logged into them, each crate with its own barcode; and when they are moved into the storage rooms, they will be logged in as they go through the door. By these means we hope to keep track of every book throughout the project.



Marco di Bella, Maria-Novella Giannini, Maria Argyrou and Andrew Megaw measure and scan, while Esra Göknil P'Anson, in the background, wraps.

As I write, on Saturday morning, 9 May, the team is working on the printed books, in order to clear the floor level of the library prior to bringing the manuscripts down from the gallery, and Father Justin is delighted to see what is there in those parts of the collection which have not been used in recent years. At the end of the process he will have a complete count of all the books in the collection, and each will have been cleaned and will be ready to be placed in the new library. To help the team survive – it is hard work to bend over a bench all day – they will swap roles every hour or so to allow them to recover from one position as they take another. In the morning session, from 8.30 am to 12.15 pm, there is a short break, with tea and coffee brought to the gallery outside the library by Nabil, but the team works straight through the evening session, from 5.30 to 8.15 pm. Already, thanks to Caroline Bendix's careful planning, the team is on target to deal with 600 books per day – well beyond the planned target.

*Nicholas Pickwood*

## **\$500,000 PLEDGE RECEIVED**

Mr Samih Sawiris of Cairo, Egypt has pledged funds to a total of \$500,000 towards the construction costs of the reconfigured South Wing. Thanks to Mr Sawiris, the foundation can embark on the next phase of the library project with greater confidence. The foundation and monastery are grateful to Samih Sawiris for his commitment to the conservation of the Saint Catherine's library.

## **NICHOLAS PICKWOOD WINS PLOWDEN MEDAL**

Professor Nicholas Pickwood is the recipient of the Royal Warrant Holders Association's 2009 Plowden Medal in recognition of his contribution to the conservation profession. In granting the award, the association notes, 'Pickwood is unusual in that he is both a practical conservator and an academic who has an innate ability to produce solutions for a wide range of problems.

He invented the concept of the "bookshoe", nearly thirty years ago, and, later, invented and marketed a portable board-creasing machine. This is in addition to his work for the National Trust and the monastery of St. Catherine. This award recognises Pickwood's craftsmanship, scholarship, innovation and work as a teacher in the field of book conservation. He has been a formative influence on book conservation and conservators for more than thirty years and has recently established the "Ligatus" project in conjunction with the University of the Arts to provide a research unit into the study of historic bookbinding.

Richard Watling, Chairman of the Plowden Committee, comments, "We are delighted to present the Royal Warrant Holders Association's 2009 Plowden Medal to Nicholas Pickwood. His innovative work, born out of an in-depth knowledge of bookbinding combined with a scholar's understanding for the conservation of the book and historical library, has had a fundamental effect on current practice and will stand as a reference point for future generations of conservation professionals".

## **REVIEW**

### **'BYZANTIUM 330-1453' ROYAL ACADEMY OF ARTS, LONDON 25 OCTOBER 2008 - 22 MARCH 2009**

SEBASTIAN BROCK

Over the last ten years or so London has been host to a number of exhibitions dealing with one or other aspect of Byzantine art; not least of these was 'Sinai, Byzantium, Russia at the Courtauld' (Courtauld Institute, 2000), with which the Saint Catherine Foundation was very closely involved. The foundation has likewise played a significant role in certain aspects of the organisation of the present magnificent exhibition whose scope is much broader.

Although a number of the exhibits are old friends from quite recent exhibitions, such as 'Byzantine Art from British Collections' (British Museum, 1994), many others will be unknown to most people, and perhaps the most enduring impression of the exhibition as a whole is of the superb artistic quality of the great majority of the exhibits. This applies above all to the ivories, jewellery, miniature mosaics and manuscript illustrations. The one area, however, where the Byzantines seem to have failed to rise to such heights is pottery; this is perhaps all the more surprising if one thinks of the wonderful contemporary Islamic pottery. Indeed, the contrast can be seen within the exhibition itself if one compares the exhibits of pottery from the Byzantine Empire with those (with Christian motifs) made in Syria and Egypt.

The inclusion of a section 'Beyond Byzantium', with an entire room devoted to it, was an excellent idea. Here items from Serbia, Georgia, Armenia, Syria, Egypt and elsewhere

are to be found. Particularly striking are the carved wooden doors from the Church of the Virgin in Old Cairo (one needs to go down on one's knees to appreciate the lower panels properly!).

A fitting climax to the exhibition is provided by the last room, devoted to icons from the Monastery of Saint Catherine. On entering the room one is greeted by the wonderful, almost life-size, icon of Moses standing before the Burning Bush, while flanked on the left is a whole wall given over to the large-scale icons of the Archangels Michael and Gabriel, along with St Peter and St Paul.

The superbly illustrated Catalogue, edited by Robin Cormack and Maria Vassilaki contains, beside the catalogue proper, a series of fine essays by leading scholars on different aspects of Byzantium and its arts, the last of which (by the two editors) is devoted specifically to the Monastery of Saint Catherine. As the Prime Minister points out in his Preface to the Catalogue, the present exhibition falls exactly half a century after the Edinburgh and London one directed by David Talbot Rice, which effectively brought the world of Byzantine art to the attention of the wider public for the first time in Britain. Although the number of exhibits and of foreign lenders has not increased enormously in the present exhibition, it is very noticeable that among the lenders Greece was very poorly represented in 1958, whereas now that country, and above all the Benaki Museum, has been a major contributor. Another big difference lies in the size of the Catalogues: that of 1958 has only 93 pages plus 15 black and white photographs, whereas the Catalogue for the present exhibition runs to nearly 500 pages, a great many of which are given over to excellent full-page colour illustrations of individual exhibits.

## EVENTS

### RAPPORT D'ACTIVITÉS 2008 DE L'ASSOCIATION SUISSE DES AMIS DE LA FONDATION SAINTE-CATHERINE



Le dîner

L'Assemblée générale s'est tenue le 9 avril 2008 au Château de Coppet. Le professeur Nuccio Ordine, professeur de littérature italienne à l'Université de Calabre, a donné à cette occasion une conférence remarquée sur « Giordano Bruno: une philosophie en comédie », qui a été suivie d'un dîner dans la salle de l'Ancien Pressoir Vigneron du Château. Les réunions du comité ont été régulièrement suivies aux dates fixées dans le prestigieux Cercle de la Terrasse à Genève, les 3 mars, 9 juin, 15 septembre, 13 octobre et 24 novembre.

Les membres de l'Association ont été avertis des possibilités qui leur étaient offertes d'être accueillis pour une visite privée de l'exposition « Byzantium 330-1453 » à la Royal Academy.

Durant l'hiver, le professeur Yves Christe a rédigé sa conférence sur sainte Catherine en l'église de Montmorillon près de Poitiers et réuni le matériel iconographique nécessaire à sa publication qui interviendra cette année. La fin du dernier trimestre 2008 a été consacrée à la recherche et à l'invitation d'un conférencier dont l'intérêt se portait sur le monastère de Sainte-Catherine, ce qui a été le cas avec la venue du professeur Jean-Michel Mouton, directeur d'études à l'École Pratique des Hautes Etudes à Paris, au début de l'année suivante sur le thème: « Le sultan, les moines et les bédouins: le monastère de Sainte-Catherine du Sinaï et les musulmans au Moyen Âge ». La tâche que s'est fixée le comité est de publier la série de conférences de haut niveau qui ont été données ces trois dernières années.

*Charles Méla*



Madame Madeleine Kogevinas et Madame Maria Embiricos



Des membres du comité avec le Professeur Nuccio Ordine

### EVENING AT VINTNERS' HALL, LONDON ST CATHERINE'S DAY 25 NOVEMBER 2008

The Saint Catherine Foundation and the Anglo-Hellenic League joined forces to celebrate the Feast Day of St Catherine on 25 November. The two charities organized a gala at historic Vintners' Hall in the City of London. His Royal Highness Prince Michael of Kent GCVO honoured the event with his presence.

The evening began with a champagne reception in the Court Room, followed by dinner. The guest speaker was the former MEP, environmental campaigner and author Mr Stanley Johnson. There was an auction comprising one special lot, a lithograph of 'The Terrace, Highgrove House' by HRH The Prince of Wales. The raffle featured four attractive prizes: a stay at the Athens Hilton, including Aegean Airlines flights; a holiday at the Blue Palace Resort and Spa at Elounda; a pendant by Elena Syraka; and an icon from the Andipa Gallery in London. The substantial net proceeds of the evening were shared by both charities and went towards the Saint Catherine Foundation's conservation work and the Anglo-Hellenic League's charitable causes, including the Greek charity 'Heart Doctors'.

## OBITUARIES

**John Penrose Barron**  
(27 April 1934 – 18 August 2008)



*The Saint Catherine Foundation mourns the loss of Professor John Barron, member of the Board of Trustees from 2003 until his death. Dr Eugenie Richardson pays tribute to John, her former professor, fellow Board member and friend:*

John Barron was my tutor when I came to England from Paris to continue my archaeology studies. At the time, the department at University College London, where I was reading for the two-year diploma in Classical Archaeology, consisted of Prof. Peter Corbett and John as Reader in Archaeology, and it was under his benevolent and inspiring guidance that I started this course. I was assigned to him for the course in Ancient History, Numismatics, Epigraphy and, not least, Ancient Greek. Weekly sessions on translating Thucydides – not one of the easiest ancient authors to deal with – were my *bête noire!* I remember distinctly John's room, with bookcases all round the walls and a huge window overlooking a passageway which led

outside the college to Dillon's bookshop, directly opposite. John would sit majestically in a very comfortable leather armchair, with the pupil facing him in trepidation, to go over the weekly essay – the floor littered with open books of all sizes which had been consulted in the course of the tutorial. I have just re-read some of my essays with amazement, both at his comments in the margins and the encouragement and praise at the end, so that you would always try harder the next time. John wrote on one of my very first ones, on the Lelantine War, 'good material but rather confused construction'. How generous! Upon rereading it, I would have marked it B-, but then the actual 'war' was even more confusing.

The highlight of our tutorials was going across the road for tea, in the Institute of Archaeology. On the sixth floor was the sacrosanct, famous tea room where all scholars, visiting and others, pupils and tutors met in the most congenial atmosphere, never to be found again in the course of my academic career. That is where John introduced me to Nicholas Richardson, who was working for a short spell in the Library on his thesis, and who became my husband in 1968. When we moved to Oxford, Nicholas to become tutor in Classics at Merton and I to continue my studies under the supervision of the late Prof. Martin Robertson, my relationship with John of tutor/pupil shifted to one of deep affection and friendship. Throughout my career, he would always advise, listen and give constructive criticism.

We saw a lot of John and Caroline while they lived in London, and when their first daughter Katie was born, we were both greatly honoured to have them ask Nicholas to be her godfather. This brought our families even closer. So when John was elected Master of St Peter's College, he rang to tell us the marvellous news – unofficially as yet – with great excitement and joy. His voice on the phone sounded elated. He would finally be able to fulfil all his ambitions and, above all, put St Peter's on the map. Looking back at his work of restructuring, and fostering the academic standards of the college, one can only be full of admiration for his achievements, through patience, diplomacy and sheer hard work. John was one of those Heads of College who put the excellence of his students above all other considerations. He was a father figure to a very large and diverse family, and he took pride in everyone's endeavours and achievements individually. So it came as no surprise to us, who knew him well, when St Peter's voted to extend his period as Master of the College.

It was just about the time of his retirement (2003) that he was asked by the Saint Catherine Foundation to join the Board of Trustees. Having myself been one of the founding Board members, I was thrilled to have John with us. His experience and valuable advice on all matters was a prime asset, but particularly on the Library. He knew a lot about the running of committees with all their intricacies and *prima donnas*, but with his calm and benevolent manner he was able to steer us into tranquil waters before a tempest had time to rise. John remained a staunch supporter of Saint Catherine's throughout his later years,

never missing a Board meeting or a function, particularly the fundraising events.

The last time I saw him was during one of those events, a wonderful exhibition of manuscripts on 13 May 2008, which John (in his capacity of Chairman of the Library Committee at Lambeth Palace), together with the Camberwell team, helped to organise in the Great Hall of Lambeth Palace to launch 'Ligatus', the new research unit of the University of the Arts London. He was there with Caroline. They had just been to Vancouver, where she gave a lecture. John was always full of admiration and pride for her achievements, and we talked for a while around that topic. Two months later, on 16 August 2008, John died.

He was a family man with strong beliefs and principles, most probably inspired by his dual upbringing, with a West Yorkshire father and a Cornish mother. He was always devoted to Cornwall and especially proud of his Cornish roots. His other great love was for Greece and its people. John was a real philhellene, not just in a romantic way, but with a genuine and deep understanding of *philotimo*, *philoxenia*, and *philia*, which are the sentiments which most characterize the people of Greece, today as in the past.

*John Penrose Barron, classical scholar: Assistant Lecturer in Latin, Bedford College, London University 1959-61, Lecturer in Latin 1961-64; Lecturer in Archaeology, University College London 1964-67, Reader in Archaeology and Numismatics 1967-71; Professor of Greek Language and Literature, King's College London 1971-91, Head of Classics Department 1972-84; Director, Institute of Classical Studies, London University 1984-91; Master of St Peter's College, Oxford 1991-2003, married 1962 Caroline Hogarth (two daughters).*

### **Claudine Pereira (née Kalachnikoff) (Died 19 December 2008)**

Claudine Pereira's death just before Christmas last year came as a sad blow to her friends at the Saint Catherine Foundation. With her husband, Jorge Pereira, and her sister and brother-in-law, Nadine Kalachnikoff and Lars Bolander, Claudine supported the foundation as a benefactor from the time of the St Petersburg cruise onwards. They made a popular and lively group, known for their great enthusiasm for Orthodox culture in general and Saint Catherine's in particular. They went on their last Saint Catherine's trip together in October 2007, little more than a year before Claudine died. The picture of Claudine reproduced bottom right is a reminder of happy times aboard the *Turama* on the Library Grand Tour.

A keen philanthropist and a devout Orthodox Christian, Claudine gave help where it was needed most, from monasteries like the Meteora in Greece to the sick and old of Switzerland's Saanenland. She and Jorge and some of their friends founded the Friends of the Hospital of Saanen, which provided the hospital with a new wing and equipment, and they went on to set up a related organisation, the Friends of Saanenland.

Claudine will be remembered for her strong personality and generous spirit. She was a leader and a giver, beloved by her family and friends.



## A SEAT IN THE LIBRARY: EPHESUS, 130 AD

JOHN PENROSE BARRON

Professor Barron gave this talk on board the *M/V Turama*, during the Library Grand Tour organized by the Saint Catherine Foundation in 2007.



Main façade, Library of Celsus, Ephesus: ‘...father began it as a monument to his father, our grandfather Caius Julius Celsus Polemaeanus...’.

*Kyrioi kai kyriai, kalos elthete eis ten bibliotheken hemon:*

Gentlemen and ladies, welcome to our library. It is so good to see you all here in Ephesus.

My name is Julius. I’m really *delighted* that you have come to see our new Library of Celsus. I think it’s the finest building in Ephesus. I know that must seem a bit of a boastful claim, in a city which we all call ‘The First and Greatest Metropolis of Asia’. It is the capital of the Roman province of Asia, after all, and we are not short of distinguished buildings – starting with our great temple of Artemis, three and a half times the size of the Parthenon in Athens – I’m sure you’ve seen that. Ours has been on the list of the Seven Wonders of the World for the past four hundred years, ever since those pedants in Alexandria started making up lists of that kind, rather than doing

anything creative of their own – apart from that clever lighthouse, of course. Our library is tiny by comparison with the temple, but I still think it’s the loveliest building you’ll see in all Ephesus. Of course, I’m prejudiced. My father Caius Julius Aquila began to build it twenty years ago, half-way through the 226<sup>th</sup> Olympiad – the same year that those troublesome Christians in our midst call the 110<sup>th</sup> year after the birth of their so-called Christ – why can’t anyone think of a sensible, straightforward way of reckoning dates? Well, as I say, father began it as a monument to *his* father, our grandfather Caius Julius Celsus Polemaeanus: there’s a mouthful of a name! And grandfather is still here, lying in his lead coffin in a sarcophagus in the basement, for all the world like one of the ancient heroes in his shrine – right under that statue of the wise Athena in the apse over there.



You're probably a bit puzzled by our names – all called Julius. Actually, we're as Greek as you are, like practically everyone else in Asia – apart from the Jewish community, a handful of real Romans from Italy, and the odd immigrant from other parts of Emperor Hadrian's far-flung dominions. We all speak Greek, of course, though anyone who wants to make a success of their lives, as we have, I'm glad to say, will need to be able to understand Latin, and even write a little from time to time. The Romans are easily flattered by seeing a few words of their barbarous lingo: you probably noticed as you came in that we have labelled this the Library of Celsus in Latin as well as Greek. It's the Greek that matters. So we aren't all Julius because of some obscure or imaginary line of descent from Julius Caesar. It's just that when grandfather's great-grandfather was offered Roman citizenship and needed a Roman name – I can't remember whether it was in Emperor Augustus' time – or was it Tiberius? – it seemed a good idea to take the emperor's own name Julius, and it has stuck. And it has done us no harm. Father and grandfather both did well under the Romans. Both of them were given the honorary title of consul, Rome's top office in the old days when these things meant real power, father the year he started building the library, grandfather eighteen years before that, under Emperor Domitian. And how they hated *him!* He was assassinated four years after grandfather was consul, you know, but it did no harm to grandfather, who even became the Roman governor of Asia for a year – three or four years before father was consul, if I remember aright. Quite a pill for the neighbours to swallow here in Ephesus, I can tell you. And father was not going to let anyone forget it: hence this building.

So when father thought of building this library, he went to his Roman books for some ideas. It has to be confessed, there are some things the Romans are good at – mainly because they haven't much imagination, but do have the good sense to pick up the best ideas from Greece and elaborate them a bit. Architecture surely comes under that heading. So father reached down his copy of Vitruvius' architecture handbook, and – lo and behold! – there was a blueprint for a library. Make it face east, to get the morning light, set a niche or apse at the far end with a statue of Minerva – amusing to see how the Romans have tried to pass off their virago of a goddess Minerva as our wise and learned Athena – use a neutral colour for the floor and walls so as not to tire the eyes. And do not be tempted to go for the glittering luxury of a gold ceiling: that is *really* bad for the eyes. Father followed all that to the letter. But he did nonetheless want the library to have a monumental look: it was, after all, to contain grandfather's shrine. So it was his idea to build the library fifty feet high, with the book cupboards on three levels, ground floor and two galleries, all panelled with coolly restful marble. His idea, too, to cover the outside with eye-catching decorations. You'll have seen the result as you climbed up the nine steps to come in – nine steps for the nine Muses, of course – with statues of grandfather Celsus on the flanking wings of the stairs; then three great doors set back between four

projecting bays with statues framed by the supporting columns, some of Celsus' great qualities personified, and conveniently labelled in Greek in case you did not recognize them – Wisdom and Goodness, Intelligence and Learning – all just right for the hero of a library. Above all that, you'll have been struck by the grandeur of the second storey, with its great windows sheltered by projecting bays over the recessed doorways below – an ingenious touch, that – and all supported by Corinthian columns with three pediments over the top, a triangle between two curved ones. As I said, it really is very fine indeed: much finer than the pretty little temple Vedius has built to honour the divine emperor Hadrian, who came to see it the other day, bringing his toy-boy Antinous with him. He has decided that he is Olympian Zeus, he said, and was so pleased with his temple that he gave the city the coveted title of temple-warden to commemorate the visit. He asked us to build another, though, on a suitably Olympian scale. Just a touch pompous, I thought – but don't say I said so. No doubt we shall be expected to add a statue of Antinous, like those you have probably seen at Delphi and Olympia. He really seems quite besotted with the boy: I hear he even got the people of Buthrotum in Illyria to pay for another of those sugary marbles. Pretty undignified for an emperor, I reckon.

But enough of architecture, and enough of *us*. You have come to see the *library*, and that means the books. Luckily father still had money over after the building was paid for, and was able to leave 25,000 *denarii* for fixtures and fittings, book purchases, and library staff: they don't come cheap. However, you can do a lot with 25,000 *denarii*. Fortunately there are plenty of books for sale in the bookshops. Lots in Athens, of course, probably anything you might want, but they're mainly imported, and quite expensive. We decided to collect in the great writing-centres. The nearest is just up the road in Pergamum – did I hear one of you saying you hoped to sail on there tomorrow, if you can find a boat? But the best place for books is Alexandria. They have everything there, in the old royal library of the Ptolemies, so there is no difficulty in getting things copied. Luckily we don't much mind about the format; Greeks don't, on the whole. What we mind about is the contents. And, for a public library, we do have to think about durability, though I dare say we shall have to have a conservator on the staff, one of those talented repairers the Romans call a *glutinator*, the man with the glue-pot. I'm sure the Greeks have a word for it: we always do. But I can't quite think what it is – I'm still new to all this. Back to format. As you know, most books come in the Alexandrian style, rolls of papyrus-paper. But there was a time when the scribes in Pergamum could not get papyrus. The Ptolemies were jealous of the Attalids there, and would not let them have any, in case they put together a better library. So the Pergamenes had to use something else to write on, and remembered Herodotus' account of the early days when people wrote on animal skins for want of papyrus. Actually, the skins are stronger, and last longer, so the Ptolemies' meanness rather back-fired. In

Pergamum they will sell you your book in a much more convenient form, sheets of sheepskin folded in two and stitched together, between a pair of wooden covers. It's easier to find your place, and the book is much less likely to be damaged, pulling and pushing in and out of the cupboards. Some people stand them up vertically, but the trouble with that is that they pull the backs off when they take them down from the shelves. We treat them properly and keep them flat, in piles. The ones lower down don't get much disturbed, I can tell you! I shouldn't be surprised if the Pergamene type of book takes over in the end, and the bottom falls out of the Alexandrian market: serve them right! A funny thing: we Greeks call them all 'biblia', which is the old word for papyrus. But the Romans have separate words. The papyrus roll from Alexandria is a 'volumen' of 'paper', the animal-skin book from Pergamum is a 'codex' of 'pergamena' or 'parchment'.

Anyway, to get down to details, we had to have Homer. That's twenty-four rolls of *Iliad* and twenty-four of *Odyssey*: not cheap. And you have to be sure to get the best Alexandrian text, for there are so many fraudulent versions about, interpolated with fake references to one town or another. These epics are, after all, our earliest history, 1400 years ago, and reputations today still turn on the possession of a glorious past, none more glorious than to have taken part in the war for Helen of Troy. So there's a great deal of wishful thinking and lots of fakes. And we had to have all the other epics about the Trojan War. The *Iliad* after all, only covers about three weeks in the tenth year of the siege, and the *Odyssey* tells of the homeward journey of only one of the heroes who took part. I always enjoy the rest of the story – how Zeus provoked this bloody war to relieve Mother Earth of the terrible weight of over-population, or the blood-curdling tale of Agamemnon's homecoming only to be murdered by his wife Clytaemnestra and her lover, caught in a net in his bath. Father used to read that to me at bed-time when I was little, and I still shudder every time I think of it. Then we particularly wanted old Eumelus' story of the Argonauts, the only other epic Homer actually mentions. We still haven't found a copy, though: I don't suppose any of you have come across it? We could have had the modern version, which Apollonius the Rhodian wrote in the Library at Alexandria. But even the librarian Callimachus dismissed it – 'long book, great bore', he said – and I must say I rather agree with him, though you have to admire the research that went into it. We did have a great piece of luck in Alexandria: to go with Homer, we managed to find a complete Hesiod – not just his book on the origins of the world and the gods, and the book on agriculture – charming but obsolete; we paid over the odds for his famous book on legendary women and their offspring, a veritable Who's Who of early Greece. Though I must say, when I read it I rather suspected the whole thing was a fraud, not by Hesiod at all. Still, we had to have it: people are always coming in asking for it, hoping to trace their own family history back to some great heroine. We bought all the Athenian drama we could lay our hands on. It's good to read, not just to watch, and the best plays are still studied in

our schools. But the schools have a very narrow repertoire – just seven each of Aeschylus and Sophocles – and we managed a complete set. Did you know that Aeschylus wrote at least seventy plays, and Sophocles a hundred and twenty? We managed some rarities, too. We found all nine rolls of Sappho, and all seventeen of Pindar. We didn't just buy poetry, of course: all of Plato and Aristotle, a pretty heavy investment; and lots of war-books – nine rolls of Herodotus on the Persian Wars and eight of Thucydides on the great Peloponnesian War between Athens and Sparta, which Pericles led the Athenians into – his only misjudgement, but fatal for Athens; and Xenophon, and Demosthenes' speeches and other people's speeches against him, and Polybius and more or less everyone you have ever heard of, and a great many more, I bet. We're not a vast library like the Ptolemies' own library in Alexandria, which they say has half a million volumes, or even the Attalid library at Pergamum with about 200,000. But it is a highly respectable public library for the capital city of Asia, and a very prestigious resting-place for grandfather Celsus. Emperor Hadrian certainly said he admired it when he was here the other day – when he could take his eyes off Antinous.

Well, you must go and look at the cupboards which interest you. My own favourite is the local history section, for we have every reason to be proud of ourselves here in Ephesus. The place turns up right at the beginning of literature, in the second roll of Homer's *Iliad* where he lists the forces on the Greek and Trojan sides, and compares the loud kaleidoscope of all those soldiers bustling round the plain of Troy with the noisy water-birds out there wading, jostling and fishing in our own River Kaystros:

And as migrating birds, nation by nation,  
wild geese and arrow-throated cranes and swans,  
over Asia's meadowland and marshes  
around the streams of Kaystros, with a giant  
flight and glorying wings keep beating down  
in tumult on that verdant land  
that echoes to their pinions, even so,  
nation by nation, from the ships and huts,  
this host debouched upon Skamander plain.

Actually, we Greeks had not yet settled here by the time of the Trojan War: they say it was still a Hittite outpost called Apasa. But after the war Greece found herself invaded by northerners, and our bit of the coast of Asia was settled by those who got pushed out, a mass migration co-ordinated by the sons of the last king of Athens, who died trying to resist the invaders. We were led by his eldest son, Androclus, who was shown our marvellous site by a passing wild boar, so they say. You can see the scene on a relief carving at the temple of Hadrian, along with other exciting episodes of our history. There seems to have been a bit of a dark age after that, but it wasn't as dark over here in the new territories as it became back in old Greece. Positively benighted, they were, invaders and Athenian survivors alike. Still, they caught us up in the end.

Now where is that volume of Callinus, whose poetry inspired us to resist the great northern invasion nearly eight hundred years ago? They tried to take over the riches of Asia for themselves but were at last sent packing by the Lydians up-river from here, whom they had hoped to destroy. And here is Herodotus, who tells of our own brush with the last Lydian king Croesus, richest of the rich – how we tied the town walls to our little temple of Artemis in the hope that she would work the miracle which we could not. And she did, for his hostile intentions gave way to good will, and he helped us to build a huge temple to her, 375 feet by 180, with a double colonnade all round and relief-sculpture around the bottom of the front columns. In size it is second only to the temple of Hera in Samos across the Straits – second, because the engineer we employed was a Samian who had just built there the largest temple of all, and wasn't going to have it overtaken. Still, his foundations have lasted to this day – he advised us to build in the marsh as a cushion against earthquakes, and then put in a damp-proof course of fleeces and charcoal – though we now have a new temple on the old foundations. The old one was burned down by some arsonist the same day that Alexander the Great was born, as we later calculated. And I am glad to say that when we rebuilt an even grander one on the old foundations, this time with a *triple* colonnade across the front and even better sculpture on the columns, one of the Seven Wonders of the World, we were able to decline Alexander's offer to pay for it, and found the enormous cost ourselves. A proud day for Ephesus; and the story's all here in the library, in the local history section. Thank the goddess that the arsonist, Herostratus I think was his name, did not manage to destroy the bronze statues of warrior Amazon women which stand about the temple enclosure; fortunately, because they are by far the most famous statues we have from the great days before Alexander and his Macedonians came this way. The Amazons, of course, were the original founders of our worship of their virgin goddess Artemis, which is why the city held a sculpture competition for the best statue of a wounded Amazon. Polyclitus won, with a rather manly girl, I always think, and Phidias came second with a more pitifully sympathetic female. And there was a consolation prize for Cresilas, whom you will know best for that portrait of the helmeted Athenian Pericles which every city seems to have a copy of. We certainly could not have afforded to lose our Amazons to Herostratus' lunacy. You see marble copies of them all over the world: I even saw one in Spain not so long ago, and Rome is full of them. I certainly hope the temple authorities here get a fee for every copy made! I doubt it, though. I did hear that an enterprising sculptor from somewhere near Naples – Baiae, I think – managed to persuade the poor innocents here to let him make plaster moulds to take home. I should think he has set up a factory by this time, turning out Amazons by the score, and no fees paid.

But I have run on ahead again. We were glad when Croesus built the great temple, even if he did insist on carving his name all over it, but less pleased when he made

us move the town to a new site. The trouble is our River Kaystros. It keeps silting up, and since we depend on being a port for our prosperity, we either have to follow it westward and rebuild on the new shore-line or else keep a channel dredged, which is a huge expense. So Croesus, who needed Ephesus to be *his* port, moved the town to the west, to a foothill opposite the temple, and after Alexander the Great his successor Lysimachus made us move across to the south side of the delta, which had a better natural channel, and here we are. But already the sea is retreating again. I expect we shall still have to dredge. But I have heard that the estimate for that is 20,000 *denarii*, and no one is prepared to pay.

After Croesus we kept our heads down, and managed not to play any great part in the Persian Wars against Darius and Xerxes, or in the Peloponnesian War, apart from paying our imperial dues to Athens while at the same time allowing the Spartan navy to use our harbour when they needed to. Not very heroic, I am afraid. But we still had leisure to listen to learned physicists and astronomers. We had a rather distinguished one of our own called Heraclitus – here is his book, I think. People remember him as a kind of caricature for two remarks in particular: 'everything flows' and 'no one steps into the same river twice'. I remember at school someone combined them,

Heraclitus, as everyone knows, said of the ice-age,  
'Everything's floes.'

His final words as he trod on the ice: 'Nobody steps in  
the same river twice.'

Not great poetry, I know, but it does help you to remember that he wasn't the physics professor who said that everything is made of fire, or water, or was forever wanting to race Achilles against a tortoise. In fact, if you read the book you will see that his thoughts on the constant movement of matter, in the context of the origin of the universe, were pretty deep, and actually rather impressive for that time. He thought the over-riding principle was 'logos', reasoned argument. It is ironical that the Christians apparently took the same line – or so I've heard some old greybeard called John used to say, when he lived here in grandfather's day. They say this John claimed to have been the best and closest friend of the Christ, whom the Christians worship instead of the emperor, and that he even brought the impostor's mother here to live with him when things got too hot for them in Jerusalem. After she died he turned to writing, and produced a book they call *Good News*. It was bad news for Ephesus, though, and has caused nothing but trouble wherever people have read it. And that's not in this library, I'm glad to say.

I could go on and on, the local history collection is such a joy to me. And it is a wonderful complement to what you can read in the city archives and see on all the stone inscriptions about town – to say nothing of the history embodied in all the buildings you can see here in the city centre. They are mostly of the years since we displaced Pergamum as the capital of Asia. They start, really, when

the empire started with Augustus and Tiberius, and we first took the name Julius. That's the date of the portico next door – though the notice forbidding its use as a public convenience is a later addition: I don't know what we are coming to, people have no respect any more. But the best buildings are of our own days, since Trajan and Hadrian took over the empire. I have to admit that the grandest – we are the *finest*: that's different – the grandest apart from the temple is the theatre, and that's older than the empire. It went up not so long after Lysimachus moved the city over to this side of the river, and it was built as a theatre for plays, like any other, though larger than most. But we have spent sixty or seventy years on one modification after another till we now have a multi-purpose auditorium 450 feet across and 100 feet high, holding 25,000 people, with a machine for pulling a great awning over it in hot weather. I remember grandfather Celsus telling me of the time in *his* father's day when some Christian missionary – Paul, I think grandfather said his name was – came ranting in the theatre among the scaffolding. He must have been effective, because he started quite a riot, led by a man called Demetrius who made silver offerings for people to leave in the temple of Artemis, and could see that he would be out of a job if Paul made many more converts. He got the crowd barracking for hours, drowning Paul out with cries of 'Great is Artemis of the Ephesians', till the town clerk got on to the stage and quietened them, threatening intervention by the Roman police. He was quite brave actually, telling them that this Paul had done nothing illegal, and that if he had, the courts were the place to settle it. Apparently it's all in some book called *The Acts of the Apostles*. But we would never have that kind of book here,



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of course, nor the reminiscences of his friend John. It horrifies me, I can tell you.

Well, do have a good look round – but I'm afraid you can't take the books out. And enjoy your time here in Ephesus. I must get on with my reading. Officially the library closes at lunch-time. But as the family built it, we have the keys and can come and go as we like. I usually stay on until dusk - too dark to read, and we don't allow candles: fire regulations. Then I shall walk a little way up the hill to our brick house on the right of the main street, opposite Hadrian's temple. It is a fine house, like the library. And it has lots of space, and under-floor central heating. We have such a comfortable, civilized life here. Last night I was strolling home at the end of the day's work in the library, and I even heard nightingales singing along the way: they must have ventured into someone's garden from the hill that slopes up behind the houses – I call it Nightingale Hill, though its real name is Coressus. 'That's it,' I said to myself: 'nightingales.' And when I came down here this morning I went straight to the Alexandrian poetry cupboard and got out Callimachus' lament for his friend Heraclitus, not our Heraclitus, of course, but another of the same name, from Halicarnassus down south:

They told me, Heraclitus, they told me you were dead;  
 They brought me bitter news to hear, and bitter tears  
 to shed.  
 I wept, as I remembered, how often you and I  
 Had tired the sun with talking, and sent him down  
 the sky.  
 And now that thou art lying, my dear old Carian guest,  
 A handful of grey ashes, long long ago at rest,  
 Still are thy pleasant voices, thy NIGHTINGALES, awake.  
 For Death, he taketh all away, but them he cannot take.

*Aedones*, the nightingales that go on singing their song long after the listener's life is over. That's what the library does: it lets the nightingales go on singing. The dead speak to the living, and wisdom becomes immortal. That's why our civilization depends on books.

PROFESSOR JOHN BARRON was Master of St Peter's College, Oxford (1991-2003). He was previously Professor of ancient Greek in the University of London and Director of the Institute of Classical Studies there.

'Our library is tiny by comparison with the temple, but I still think it's the loveliest building you'll see in all Ephesus'.

## PREPARING THE LEAVES AND FRAGMENTS OF THE CODIX SINAITICUS FOR DIGITISATION

NICHOLAS PICKWOOD



George Boudalis arranging detached fragments of a leaf before recording them on a sheet of polyester film.

In conjunction with the British Library's Codex Sinaiticus Project to digitise the world's oldest bible and make it accessible online, a team consisting of Professor Nicholas Pickwood, Christopher Clarkson and Dr George Boudalis travelled to Sinai in May 2008 to prepare the leaves and fragments at Saint Catherine's for transcription and photography. Dr David Cooper was already in the monastery and had worked with Father Justin and Lawrence Pordes of the British Library to set up the digital camera and new cradle ready to image the treated fragments.

The team set up a makeshift workshop in the bishop's apartments at the western end of the top floor of the south range of the monastery. The working conditions were cramped, busy and dusty, with the need for the photographers to move constantly backwards and forwards through the room to work the digital camera. The relative humidity (RH) levels in the room remained at approximately 20 per cent for the entirety of the visit, creating extremely difficult working conditions.

A humidity chamber was constructed from sheets of expanded polystyrene, with humidity supplied by an ultrasonic humidifier. This allowed an RH of up to 70 per cent to be created in the chamber, but in practice it

was found that 40 to 50 per cent was enough to allow the fragments to be opened up. The fragments were left in the chamber for about 10 to 15 minutes on pieces of Bondina (a non-woven polyester web), and when brought out of the chamber on the Bondina, were placed on a dampened blotter in an attempt to slow down the rate at which they dried out in the ambient RH levels.

The fragments were manipulated by Chris Clarkson and George Boudalis (with assistance from Nicholas Pickwood when required) with fingers and folders to open fold-overs and curling, working from one side to the other and using weights to hold treated areas in place. Once opened out, the leaves were placed between blotters and boards under light weights to dry out. The full leaves and the bound 'quire' were given local treatments to try to ease out some of the worst cockling and distortion to improve legibility and access by the camera.

Debris and insect dropping accretions over text areas were removed by softening with 50/50 isopropyl alcohol and water applied with Q-tips. The debris was not removed from blank areas of parchment, so that it can be investigated further if required. Temporary bridging repairs to secure dangerous tears and detached fragments were



Chris Clarkson (seated) with George Boudalis and Nicholas Pickwood, discussing the treatment of a fragment. The end of the humidity chamber can be seen to the right.

carried out with Japanese Kozo tissue by Hasegawa (within the text areas 0.045 and some peripheral repairs using 0.09) using wheat flour paste.

Fragment 15, on very thin parchment, was extremely difficult to work on, as the short drying times in low humidity levels meant that the humidified parchment was moving rapidly as it dried, and its complex folded and crumpled state meant that relating it to the 'before' images as it was opened up became increasingly difficult. However, all the leaves were treated, greatly increasing the amount of visible text and revealing several more smaller fragments which were folded into some of the larger fragments.

All the leaves and fragments were imaged before any treatment took place. The imaging of the treated fragments proved impossibly difficult, as the dry conditions meant that the fragments would not lie flat on the cradle platen, and curled more powerfully than the vacuum pump could control. It was therefore decided to use bone-points to hold the leaves down where possible, and, for the smaller and more difficult fragments, to use a sheet of polyester film (Melinex) over the fragments on the platen to keep them flat. The images thus taken, while adequate for record purposes and for the transcribers, are not of sufficient quality for the publication and CD and were retaken earlier this year, when the treated leaves had had a chance to equilibrate. The larger fragments have been placed between sheets of Melinex sewn together around the edges, and the smaller fragments in polybags, to allow them to be read without removing them from their enclosures.



Chris Clarkson at work on one of the fragments.

PROFESSOR NICHOLAS PICKWOOD is Director of the Ligatus Research Unit at the University of the Arts London and Leader of the Library Conservation Project at the Monastery of Saint Catherine, Mount Sinai.

## A FURTHER CATALOGUE OF THE 'NEW FINDS' OF MANUSCRIPTS

SEBASTIAN BROCK

Catalogues of the 'New Finds' of the manuscripts discovered in 1975 have been steadily progressing over the years: the first to appear was that of the Christian Arabic (1985), followed by the Slavonic (1988), the Syriac fragments (1995), the Greek (1999), the Georgian (2005), and now (2008) the main collection of the Syriac 'New Finds'. The publication of Mother Philothée of Sinai's *Nouveaux Manuscrits Syriaques du Sinai* by the Mount Sinai Foundation in Athens is an extremely important event, since Saint Catherine's Monastery has preserved over the centuries by far the largest and oldest collection anywhere of Syriac manuscripts of Orthodox provenance, Syriac having continued, alongside Greek and Arabic, as a liturgical language in the Patriarchate of Antioch right up until the seventeenth century. As far as content is concerned, the manuscripts fall into three groups, biblical, patristic and liturgical. Each group provides some very exciting new discoveries. Among the biblical manuscripts, the presence of a palimpsest where the undertext contains parts of the Old Syriac Gospels is of particular importance, since this very early translation is otherwise only known from two other manuscripts (one of them being another palimpsest in the Monastery's Old Collection). The upper text of this fragmentary manuscript is also of great interest, since it contains Evagrius' Treatise on Prayer, 24-119, a work preserved in Greek under the name of Nilus.

Among other translations from the Greek Fathers there are further important texts, some not surviving in their Greek original; thus there are works by Basil (in particular, his *Asceticon*), Hippolytus, John Chrysostom, John Climacus and others. For the first time in Syriac there are Lives of St Sabas and St Symeon the Younger. Native Syriac writers are represented by Ephrem, Jacob of Serugh, and surprisingly by some authors of the Church of the East from the sixth/seventh century, notably Babai the Great. Thanks to the generous provision of photographs and transcribed samples, several further identifications can be made: especially gratifying is the presence of several folios of the unique manuscript containing the Book of Perfection by Martyrius (early seventh century), all the rest of which is today to be found divided up between four different European libraries. Thus, as in the case of the famous Codex Sinaiticus, the 'New Finds' have provided folios still at the monastery of manuscripts that had otherwise found their way into Western libraries.

The liturgical manuscripts are equally of great interest. Hitherto only a very few liturgical scrolls in Syriac have been known, but the 'New Finds' provide no less than 24 new ones. Several liturgical manuscripts are bilingual, and one even trilingual (Syriac, Greek and Arabic). Given that Syriac liturgical manuscripts with musical notation are exceedingly rare, the presence of one provided with neums is of great significance.

Quite a number of the manuscripts can be identified as belonging to incomplete manuscripts of the Old Collection, or to manuscripts now located in other libraries. Also included in Mother Philothée's catalogue are some manuscripts, mostly fragmentary, in Christian Palestinian Aramaic, a dialect for which very few written texts are preserved; these have been described by Alain Desreumaux, an authority on this dialect.

Dating Syriac manuscripts is an exceedingly difficult task, and some of the early dates suggested seem over optimistic and may eventually need revising; this applies in particular to a manuscript of Genesis, which is said to date from 355. If this were correct, it would be most exciting, since the manuscript would then be the oldest dated biblical manuscript in existence in any language, antedating the next oldest (also in Syriac) by over a hundred years! The matter hangs on an unclear reading at the end of the manuscript, which could be taken as either [3]55 or [8]55. Since it is normally the Seleucid era that is indicated in Syriac manuscripts, then the latter figure (which is actually given in the transcription which is provided) should be read, in which case the manuscript in fact dates from (December) AD 543.

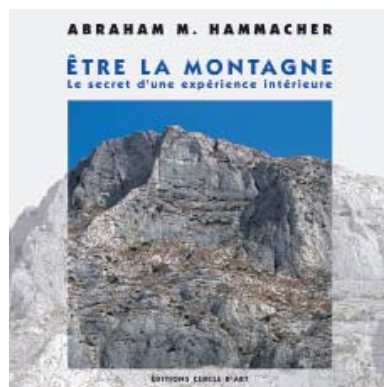
Since most of the manuscripts are incomplete, such information giving a precise date is only rarely preserved. A particularly interesting case concerns the manuscript with the History of St Symeon the Younger: besides telling us that he finished copying the text in 933 on the Black Mountain (near Antioch), the copyist also informs us that the work had been translated from Greek in 828 by a certain Theodosius at the instigation of Niketas, Abbot of the Monastery of St Symeon the Younger (also near Antioch) during the patriarchate of Job. It is only very occasionally that we are provided with the exact date of a translation. The scribe of another manuscript copied on the Black Mountain, but over a century later, in June 1057, tells us that he wrote it 'in the days of the believing Empress Theodora': evidently the news of her death at the end of August the previous year had not reached him! This seems to be the only Syriac manuscript written during the time of the Byzantine reconquest of north Syria where the Byzantine sovereign is mentioned by name. Another dated manuscript, probably of 1272, was written at the Monastery of St Catherine, and gives the name of its bishop, Arsenios; if the date is correct, then this is the earliest known mention of him.

The publication of the catalogue is a wonderful achievement on the part of Mother Philothée, all the more so since she had the misfortune of the original draft of her catalogue having been lost in the desert. It will not only be Syriac scholars who will be immensely grateful to her for her labours, but all who have an interest in the remarkable multilingual history of the Monastery of Saint Catherine and the wide cultural interests of its monastic community.

DR SEBASTIAN BROCK is an Emeritus Fellow of Wolfson College, University of Oxford.

## LA MONTAGNE SACRÉE

CHARLES MÉLA



Abraham Marie Hammacher, né aux Pays-Bas en 1897 et décédé en 2002 à Abano, fut directeur du Rijksmuseum et professeur d'histoire de l'art. Spécialiste de Van Gogh, il laissa un essai bouleversant publié en 2002, *Être la Montagne. Le secret d'une expérience intérieure*, consacré à trois montagnes magiques, le mont Ventoux, la montagne Sainte-Victoire et le mont Sinaï, autant d'expériences d'éveil qui, à travers Pétrarque, Cézanne et Moïse, touchent au point vif de la littérature, l'art et la religion. Nous en extrayons les passages suivants qui évoquent le mont Sinaï :

« Bien des années après la lecture du *Stundenbuch*, l'improvisation montagnaise de Rilke me revint en mémoire à l'occasion de l'impression inoubliable que produisit sur moi le massif du mont Sinaï, en me faisant comprendre comment la sensation d'« Être la Montagne » (*Berg-Sein*) avait pu agir de façon si pénétrante sur Rilke [...]. A la tombée de la nuit, nous nous tenions dans la fraîcheur du toit en terrasse, sans pouvoir rassasier notre curiosité. Le soleil s'enfonçait dans le grand espace ouvert à l'Occident, disparaissant presque complètement. L'obscurité montante de la nuit nous englobait rapidement. Expérience bouleversante pour nous, gens du Nord.

Il n'y avait aucune lumière artificielle, seul le ciel étoilé nous éclairait. Nous parlions doucement avec les moines, tout en tendant le cou pour admirer le spectacle de la voûte céleste, sans cesse traversé d'étoiles filantes, météores lancés à grande vitesse dans l'atmosphère. Aucun ciel du Nord ne peut se mesurer à ce mouvement d'étoiles et de planètes incandescentes dont l'éclat nous parvient estompé. L'étoile du Berger étincelle d'un rayonnement froid et maléfique comme un diamant [...]. Peu à peu l'idée s'imposa à moi qu'une influence irrésistiblement insolite conspirait puissamment à me faire découvrir l'essence de la création dans ces signaux célestes aux mystérieuses lumières, supraterrrestres au sens littéral du terme. Le caractère ancien, néolithique, de ce formidable paysage montagneux, à la fois hostile et attrayant, fait éprouver à l'être humain le sentiment d'une unité qui dépasse de très loin la raison. Je sentis là la proximité de nos origines. »

C'est sur le mont Sinaï et les hauteurs environnantes, dans la relation et le contact avec le divin, que Moïse reçut les lois destinées à son peuple. La montagne autant que le désert ont marqué l'expérience spirituelle du peuple hébreu.

Mais quels événements, se demande l'auteur, ont-ils pu donner aux débuts de la Chrétienté son rayonnement exceptionnel à ces montagnes? Du fait des icônes et manuscrits rassemblés, en ce lieu, se fit, en effet, très tôt sentir une influence toute spéciale, esthétique autant que spirituelle:

« Dans cet espace limité, serti dans un décor préhistorique grandiose, j'ai vu une collection exceptionnelle d'icônes, environ deux mille, les unes d'origine copte, les autres byzantines. Pour ma part, j'ai été frappé de l'importance remarquable, aujourd'hui encore, de l'élément grec. Longtemps ces icônes ont été soustraites à la vue du public. Elles étaient considérées comme un moyen d'intercession. L'icône était, et est toujours, un objet magique. Elle n'est pas représentation, mais « présence », elle manifeste la puissance et l'assistance surnaturelles qui permettent d'atteindre à l'amour sacré. »

On se convainc ainsi que le mont avait rempli une fonction particulière dès les débuts de l'ère chrétienne:

« Au cœur de cette histoire se trouve la mort tragique et violente d'une jeune femme de dix-huit ans d'origine syrienne. Avant sa conversion au christianisme et le martyre qui s'ensuivit, elle s'appelait Dorothee ou Damiane. Elle fut ensuite prénommée Catherine, en arabe « la sage ». Pour prix de sa conversion au Christianisme et de son refus d'abjurer, elle fut condamnée à la décapitation par l'empereur de l'époque, Maxence. Sans appartenir à ce que nous appellerions la classe intellectuelle, elle avait reçu une formation académique comprenant la philosophie et les mathématiques. Ceci explique qu'elle ait pu être considérée comme dangereuse par les détenteurs du pouvoir. Nous ne savons à peu près rien de ce qui advint d'elle ensuite, ni du transfert clandestin de sa dépouille au mont Sinaï, effectué d'après la *Légende dorée* par des anges. Elle avait exprimé elle-même la volonté de reposer sous la protection de la Montagne, afin d'éviter que son corps mutilé ne tombât aux mains de ses ennemis. En dépit de son aspect inhumain, dur et sauvage, la Montagne était donc considérée comme un lieu d'inviolabilité. »

L'autre personnage qui a joué un rôle déterminant dans ce scénario culturel en devenir n'est autre que l'empereur Justinien (527-565), « qui enjoignit à l'architecte Stephanos d'Aïla de construire au sommet de la montagne, à l'emplacement de la petite chapelle du IV<sup>e</sup> siècle, une église plus vaste, consacrée à la Sainte Vierge. Très tôt un certain nombre de moines chrétiens s'installèrent dans le couvent et y fondèrent une importante bibliothèque. La jeune martyre Catherine, connue aujourd'hui sous le nom de sainte Catherine d'Alexandrie, a inspiré l'apparition au sommet de ce mont, dans cette église et ce monastère, d'un florissant culte des saints, apparition inexplicable et reposant exclusivement sur une tradition légendaire. Autour des bâtiments conventuels enserrés entre deux parois rocheuses abruptes, comme dans un mouvement pétrifié, règne un étonnant silence. Voilà le couvent Sainte-Catherine, pris entre les plis d'un paysage minéral. Rien ne se passe, toute vie semble bannie. »

L'influence de ces deux figures, de la vierge martyre et de l'empereur byzantin, « a profondément contribué à donner forme à un christianisme juvénile et ardent, mais aussi à la douceur de la foi, au sein de la dureté hostile du Sinaï. » A la réflexion philosophique et religieuse à laquelle est liée l'histoire du Sinaï s'est ajoutée une dimension esthétique, dans le choix d'un lieu impressionnant qui lui confère son caractère mythique et magique.

*Note* : le livre d'Abraham M. Hammacher, *Être la Montagne. Le secret d'une expérience intérieure*, a été publié en 2004 aux Editions Cercle d'Art, à Paris.

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