

Gerstel, Sharon E. J. and Robert S. Nelson eds., *Approaching the Holy Mountain: Art and Liturgy at St Catherine's Monastery in Sinai*

Turnhour, Belgium: Brepols, 2010. Hardback; 609 pages; 182 black and white photographs; 6 plans; 24 colour plates; RRP \$189; ISBN 978-2-5035-3127-4

Mt Sinai is a place of awe and wonder, and this outstanding work certainly awes the reader with its visually-appealing collection of 19 articles and over 200 images. St Catherine's monastery is unique for its preservation of an enormous collection of ancient manuscripts and icons, and this book is a wide-ranging analysis of diverse aspects of spirituality and history. The monastery has been a pilgrimage centre almost since its founding and this means that it now holds treasures from a wide region and across seventeen centuries.

This engaging book emerged from the papers given at the *Icons of Sinai* symposium in Los Angeles in 2007, and almost every article is of a high quality. The range covers archeology, architecture, icon, manuscript, liturgy and place. Archbishop Damianos of Mt Sinai continues to open the monastery and enable scholars to draw from its depths of historic riches, and this work is certainly the richest to date.

Overall the book is broken up into five sections, and introduced by the editors. The two opening articles by Nelson and Christoforaki provide a good introduction to the history of Sinai studies and the significance of the holy mountain. Despite the past theft of valuable St Catherine's manuscripts, the monastery is revealed as a storehouse giving hospitable access to nearly 1700 years of continuous spiritual life.

The next group of articles develops this historical theme under the section heading of "Place". The location of Mt Sinai and its pre-Christian history is central to the St Catherine's icons, and the analysis by Elsner and Wolf is very good.

They discuss the unique role of icons at Mt Sinai, their reception and context, and the theological significance of the transfiguration icons.

Kalopissi-Verti and Panayotidi then present their findings from excavations on the holy summit especially the 6th century basilica. This is accompanied by useful pictures and diagrams, as is the following closely-related article by Koufapoulos and Myriantheos-Koufapouou, who unearth the foundations of this Justinian basilica. They show the original layout and how aspects of the original were included in its current form, and present a wonderful picture of the original building and environs.

Bolman brings insights into St Catherine's polychromatic decoration from research into the somewhat parallel Red monastery in Egypt. She explains many fascinating features of painting techniques that were used in both places and provides invaluable insights into how St Catherine's churches would have looked at different stages.

The following section on Liturgy has two excellent articles that highlight some unusual aspects of the St Catherine's worship. Taft's article demonstrates the connection between Christian worship and mountains and deserts, which is especially evident at Mt Sinai. He discusses lessons in the historical development of liturgy derived from St Catherine's sources, especially the unusual monk's communion. Lingas presents some excellent musicology in his analysis of the "Service of the Furnace", a service of the Orthodox church largely fallen out of use but well documented at Mt Sinai.

Manuscript is the theme of two good articles by Sěvcěnko and Sinaites. Sěvcěnko discusses the problem of accurate attribution given the quantity of Mt Sinai objects but paucity of clear evidence. She discusses the manuscripts that are almost surely from Mt Sinai, and the accompanying pictures are most evocative. The article by Sinaites jumps a little in places, but analyses well a specific manuscript- Sinai Greek Two. This Genesis-Exodus manuscript is unusual for its wide margins which are often filled with commentary on the text by

heterodox authors. Sinaites reviews the content, the use of Christ-Adamic typology, and the related St Catherine's iconography.

The next section on icons has 6 essays that range from excellent to anachronistic. Corrigan's article is an excellent introduction as she discusses the theological significance of the Mt Sinai icons and their historical contexts. Barber's addition fails to convince as he introjects post-modern notions of gaze that contradict the actual historical use of icons. He admits that the meaning of the John the Forerunner icon eludes him, and his analysis over-complicates the icon.

Chatterjee examines the life of icons at Mt Sinai, especially the narrative style of icon with its many details of the saints' lives. This is an insightful article with many examples and images to demonstrate key points. Subtle details show various aspects of how saints were imaged and remembered.

Parpulov's essay is another good analysis of icon styles, and his comprehensive many-angled appendix of 11th-14th century Mt Sinai icons is possibly worth the price of the book. Corrie excellently discusses the flow of Mt Sinai style back into Southern Europe, the resultant hybridity and political implications. This is well-thought-through history. Carr's article is a fascinating discussion and analysis of the Mt Sinai-Cyprus connection that leaves the reader wanting more.

The last 3 essays are headed "Space" but this label is misleading. Parpulov's inclusion is a good translation of the travel diaries of 3 Slavic pilgrims to Mt Sinai. This is rich in detail although sadly lacking in commentary. Dora's contribution presents the holy mountain as a ladder to heaven, showing how both Mt Athos and Mt Sinai were linked in iconography. This is another great analysis, but the last section of text is missing and there are a number of editorial mistakes. The final article by Stancioiu discusses iconographic standards related to Mt Sinai and their development and dissemination. He also covers the theme of journey and this is a good place to complete the journey through the book.

While many of the papers presented are rich in detail, none are boring. For such a technical work it is quite engaging. One sad omission a list of contributors,

which is especially strange given how comprehensive the text is in so many other ways, for example, the 182 black and white photographs are clearly listed and described. Aside of this, overall the book is exceptionally well-presented, and there is a comprehensive index and good footnotes throughout.

The one annoying aspect of the book is the use of the section heading of “Space”. None of the articles therein would have been out of place within the “Place” section. Indeed, given that the current focus of the “space” studies fad is identity and power, none of the three inclusions warrant their appearance here. That said, like many Brepols books this is an expensive resource, but well worth the cost. It is a gem in its depth and richness, and will be a treasured resource for many scholars of Mt Sinai, liturgics, St Catherine’s, Orthodoxy, iconography and related topics. *Approaching the Holy Mountain* is an absorbing book that is well worth climbing.

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