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## Romanian treasures in the monastery of St Catherine, Mount Sinai

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# *Romanian Treasures in the Monastery of St Catherine, Mount Sinai*

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During my first trip to St Catherine Monastery on the Sinai Peninsula, in March 2003, I kept wondering how long it took the ancient travellers to journey from and to the Romanian lands, because I knew from literature that the Danube provinces have had a connection with Mount Sinai for more than five centuries. With the means of transport available, for example, in the sixteenth century, how long would it have taken to transport the Romanian treasures to the monastery?



Fig. 1. View of St Catherine Monastery, fragment of a destroyed picture from Les Musées d'art et d'histoire, Geneve

The *katholikon* (the main church) of St Catherine Monastery was built some time between 548 and 565, during the last years of the reign of Justinian the Great (527–565), on the ruins of a small chapel dedicated to the Burning Bush. It is certain that the construction work began after the death of Theodora in 548 because on the original timber beam of the roof (preserved) there are carved inscriptions attesting it,<sup>1</sup> as well as revealing the identity of the architect, Stephanos (presumably from Constantinople). Traces of eremitical life dating from the first centuries of Christianity exist in the area, and the pilgrims of the time mention the existence of buildings in the fourth century; the ruins of the Tower of Saint Helen are still there today.<sup>2</sup> (Among these pilgrims was the well-known Egeria – Aetheria, a noble Spanish or French lady who, supposedly, in the fourth century reached Mount Sinai with her companions.) Here is Kurt Weitzmann's explanation of the foundation of St Catherine Monastery: 'In the sixth century the monks who had settled there and formed a loose community and who were being harassed by the local Bedouins sent a Petition to Justinian, asking to have a monastery built for them. The emperor, interested as much in the security of the outer frontiers of the empire as in propagating the faith, granted their request and built a monastery with the stability of a fortress'.<sup>3</sup>

If one judges Weitzmann's explanation based on how harmonious the relationship between the monks and the present-day Bedouin is, one would not believe that hostility was the reason for such a building to be in existence. But Weitzmann also has an explanation for the current good relations between the two groups of people living around the Monastery of St Catherine today. He affirms that after the building of the monastery, Justinian settled a colony of mercenaries around it for protection. They intermarried and a new ethnic group resulted: the tribe of Djebeiyeh. People of this tribe have become Muslims, but still serve the monastery, and literally receive their daily bread from the monks, continuing a tradition the origin of which cannot be established.

Weitzmann quotes Justinian's court historian, Procopius, who in his book *De Aedificiis*, mentions the Sinaite monks: 'A precipitous and terribly wild mountain, Sina by name, rears its height close to the Red Sea [...] On this Mount Sina live monks whose life is a kind of careful rehearsal of death, and they enjoy without fear the solitude which is very precious to them [...] Emperor Justinian built them a church which he dedicated to the Mother of God so that they might be enabled to pass their lives therein, praying and holding services'.<sup>4</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Actually, what the inscription attests is the fact that Justinian alone is the founder. Before the construction of this monastery, he and his wife, Theodora, used to make donations together and to have their names recorded accordingly. Since on the roof beam of the Monastery of St Catherine only Justinian's name is mentioned, the scholars assume that Theodora was dead when the monastery was built.

<sup>2</sup> *The Glory of Byzantium at Sinai. Religious Treasures from the Holy Monastery of St Catherine*, [Exhibition], 17 September–24 October 1997, Benaki Museum, Athens 1997.

<sup>3</sup> K. Weitzmann, Introduction, in: J. Galey, *Sinai and the Monastery of St. Catherine*, Cairo 1985, p. 12.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibidem*, pp. 12–13; Procopius, *De Aedificiis – Buildings*, trans. H. B. Dewing and G. Downey, Cambridge MA vol. 7, 1961, pp. 355, 357.

The connections of the Monastery of St Catherine to the Romanian lands go back many centuries. Heintz Skrobucha, listing the properties of the monastery in the Middle Ages, affirms: 'The monastery of St. Katharine possessed rich endowments in land and rights of property not only in Sinai itself (Pharan, Raithu) but, in the thirteenth century, also in Cairo and Alexandria, in Wadi Musa near Petra, in Jerusalem [...] and in later times in Kiev, Bessarabia, and Romania, where Sinaia, the later summer palace of the Romanian kings, belonged to the Monastery until the Rumanian government confiscated the estates'.<sup>5</sup>

Konstantinos A. Manafis also shows that in the sixteenth century the Archbishops of Sinai travelled 'in the East and even to the Principalities of Wallachia and Moldavia (modern Rumania) and to Orthodox Russia'.<sup>6</sup> During that period Romanian princes offered financial help to the Monastery of Saint Catherine. In 1540 Radu VII Paisie, Voivode of Wallachia, offered through one of his chrysobull 10,000 aspers per annum to the monastery.

In the eighteenth century many of the Archbishops there were Cretans as, for example, Marthalis Glykys (1728–1747), Constantinos (1748–1759), and Cyril of Crete (1759–1747). During their period in office, 'special relations were developed with the princes of Wallachia and Moldavia'.<sup>7</sup> The Monastery of Saint Catherine received *metochia* in Romanian principalities, and princes Basil Loupos [Vasile Lupu], John Constantine Basharaba (Ion Constantin Basarab), Michael Cantacouzenos (Mihai Cantacuzino), and others offered substantial help to the monastery. In the nineteenth century (during the Anglo-Egyptian rule) the *metochia* in Romania (as well as in Russia) ceased to function because of the complicated international political situation.

The oldest item coming from the Romanian lands to the Monastery of St Catherine is a Panagarion engraved, cast, filigree silver gilt. Moldavian workshop, c. 1500 (Inventory number in the museum 30.8, Fig. 9 below). I will present further in some detail donations from that part of the world, including this *panagarion* – it has never been published before, as is also the case of a Gospel cover, donated in 1636 by Matei Basarab of Wallachia and his wife, Helena (Fig. 7). In the Monastery of St Catherine's museum I found on display only *some* of these donated objects. I will introduce in chronological order those items described in literature, and at the end of the article I will add the two objects which I have seen in the museum but which are not mentioned in any material consulted in order to write this article. (The museum has its own system of classification; I have written their inventory number between parentheses where I had it.)

The next oldest item which I have seen in the monastery's museum, after the *panagarion*, is a silver church-shaped casket. This is mentioned and has its photograph

<sup>5</sup> H. Skrobucha, *Sinai*, trans. G. Hunt, London–New York–Toronto 1966, p. 91.

<sup>6</sup> *Sinai. Treasures of the Monastery of Saint Catherine*, ed. K. A. Manafis, Athens 1990, p. 16.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 16.

reproduced in Manafis' book (Fig. 2), but I have not seen it in the museum.<sup>8</sup> It is probable that the monks in charge of the museum have a system of rotating the objects on display in place.

This casket (*kibotion*) in a shape of a church with five domes, was donated to the monastery by the officials of the Court of Wallachia: the Great Komis [Marele Comis], Badea Zălbău,<sup>9</sup> the Great Dvornik Jupan Coadă, and his sons Jupan Theodosius and Jupan Staiko.

Manafis describes it in the following terms: 'Its figurative decoration includes prophets, bishops, soldier saints and hermits, range side by side in rectangular panels, a characteristic of the Wallachian workshops of the period. The iconographic programme continues with the Sinaitic subject of the Transfiguration, the *Deesis*, the pillars of the Church, Peter, Paul and Andrew, other Apostles and seraphim. The decoration is completed by the interlacing, with Ottoman subjects and Late Gothic embellishments, which penetrated from the Dalmatian coast to the workshops of Herzegovina and from Transylvania to the Danubian provinces and remained in the Balkans until approximately the middle of the 18th century, together with other styles, sometimes employed side by side in the same object, as here'.<sup>10</sup>

Manafis sees a similarity between this casket and the works done by Dmitar from Lipova in the Sișatovac Monastery (1550–1551), but he does not think that the casket in the Monastery of St Catherine was made by Dmitar because 'the execution differs in the detail' and also the work is inferior in quality in the Sinaite case. However, both objects have the characteristics of sixteenth century works.



Fig. 2. Silver gilt, church-shaped casket (height 31,7 cm.), with relief figures, Ottoman type interlacing and Late Gothic ornaments. Offering of officials of the Court of Wallachia, 1542–1545 (Fig. 10 in K. A. Manafis, *Sinai. Treasures of the Monastery of Saint Catherine*, p. 285; caption, p. 284)

<sup>8</sup> In this article I describe some of the objects by using Manafis' captions from his book, *Sinai, Treasures...* In the case where the item does not exist in his book I use as captions the description of the respective item from St. Catherine's museum which I wrote down in 2003. In the case of Fig. 5. I have used the caption from the book *Sinai* by Skrobucha because this item is not mentioned in Manafis' book, and it was not in the museum during my visit.

<sup>9</sup> The name of the Great Komis does not appear in *Sinai. Treasures...*, probably because it is not certain. There would not have been enough space to inscribe another donor's entire name on the casket. Badea Zălbău was the Great Komis between 10 Sept 1539–April 1545 according to N. Stoicescu, *Dictionar at Marilor Dregători din Țara Românească și Moldova, sec. XIV–XVII*, Bucharest 1971, p. 30. Since we do not know certainly the date when the casket left Wallachia for Sinai, we are not absolutely certain that Badea Zălbău was the person who dedicated this object.

<sup>10</sup> *Sinai. Treasures...*, pp. 268–269.

There is another church-shaped casket which Manafis assumes might have been a part of a set (Fig. 3). He describes it as follows: 'The sides have cast plant decoration and, in two bands, the Greek dedicatory inscription. Three turrets with complex cast pierced Gothic architectural elements culminating in a plain finial and topped with a cross rise from the cover. The edge of the cover has plant decoration with Gothic crochets. The information which we have to date would place this casket as chronologically the first of a series with Late Gothic features, from the second half of the 16th century'.<sup>11</sup>



Fig. 3. Church shaped casket, offering of Ghorghie, Bishop of Rădăuți, Moldavia.

(In the museum: Inventory number 30.7; my notes from 2003).  
Caption in Manafis' book, *Sinai. Treasures...*, p. 288, describes it as a 'Silver gilt church Shaped (*sic*) casket, with Late Gothic features (height 27.2 cm). Offering of Giorgios of Radanti (*sic*) in Moldavia. 1569'; the figure [no. 15] is on p. 289 in that book

A censer (Fig. 4) was presented by Ruxandra, the widow of Alexandru Lăpușneanu of Moldova, and, at the same time, the guardian of his son Bogdan IV. It is interesting to notice that she presented this censer to St Catherine Monastery in the same year in which Bishop Gheorghe (Giorgios), also of Moldova, presented his church-shaped casket. (Were these two religious objects sent through the same messenger? If so, that would be an indication as how harmonious was the relationship between the Court and the Church of Moldova at that moment.)

Alexandru Lăpușneanu (1552–1561; 1564–1568) and his wife dedicated<sup>12</sup> this object to the monastery on Mount Sinai. They also offered the churches of Saint Paraschevi and Frumoas in Iași as *metohia* to St Catherine Monastery.<sup>13</sup> They were also benefactors of many monasteries on Mount Athos, and their votive portrait is in Docheiariou Monastery built in 1568 on the holy mountain.<sup>14</sup> Manafis describes the censer as

<sup>11</sup> *Ibidem*, pp. 269–270.

<sup>12</sup> To dedicate [*a inchina*] a monastery means to make it dependant on a larger 'mother' monastery, and consequently, directly dependant on the Patriarchate under whose jurisdiction the 'mother' monastery was. This practice of 'offering' a smaller monastery as a metochion, usually to monasteries from Mount Athos or Jerusalem, was a frequent phenomenon between the sixteenth century and the beginning of the nineteenth century. That way the dedicated monastery was protected from any attack, especially from Turks. In addition to founding monasteries in their own country, the Romanian princes, benefiting from internal autonomy, focused on helping Athonite monasteries. They did it either through occasional donations for the maintenance of those monasteries (which explains why the Romanian princes appear in votive portraits), or through acts such as the above-mentioned dedication.

<sup>13</sup> N. Iorga, *Bizanțul după Bizanț*, Bucharest 1971, p. 136.

<sup>14</sup> *Sinai. Treasures...*, footnote 87, p. 391.

follows: 'The censer rests on a cylindrical foot on a six-lobed base. On the shallow hemispherical bowl virtually the sole decoration is the dedicatory inscription in Slavonic. The high cast cover, on three levels, in the form of a church, with its complex pierced Gothic architectural decoration is in contrast with the austere lower section. The plain multi-faceted finial at the top serves to create a balance between the impression given by the decorated and undecorated surfaces. The four-sided part of the handle, in contrast to the whole, has fine Ottoman flower ornaments'<sup>15</sup>

The Sinai censer belongs to a series of similar works known to date from the sixteenth (mainly) and early seventeenth centuries, also reproduced in the paintings of the time. This was inspired by the censers of the wide-spread Gothic style, all of them having an austere structure and clearly-marked characteristics. But even though the features of the sixteenth century are to be seen in it, the St Catherine censer does not match in quality the better examples of its kind, the censer of Banja Monastery at Priboj, for example, on which the latest view is that its probable origin is a workshop in Transylvania.

The next object, a Gospel, is described in St Catherine's museum as a 'Lectionary cover, offering of the Prince of Wallachia Mihnea II. Leather, embossed, chased, and engraved silver gilt, 1577;' (Inventory number 32.1, Fig. 5a, b). Manafis affirms that 'The memory of the piety and generosity of the Voevod of Wallachia Alexander II Mircea, his wife Ekaterini and their son Mihnea is perpetuated at the monastery not only by the commemoration of their names as founders of the Chapel of St John the Baptist, but by their depiction as suppliants on the reverse of a valuable cover for a Greek manuscript of the 11th century'.<sup>16</sup>

Manafis goes further by describing the main scenes on the boards: the Crucifixion and the Transfiguration. These scenes are framed by rectangular panels containing busts of prophets, Evangelists, saints and anchorites. There are similar book covers in the monastery, but this particular cover 'has the characteristics of a group of works from Wallachian workshops of the 16<sup>th</sup> century: the lining up of the severe, inflexible, schematic forms, without mass, around the central scene, and low relief on the ring-punched

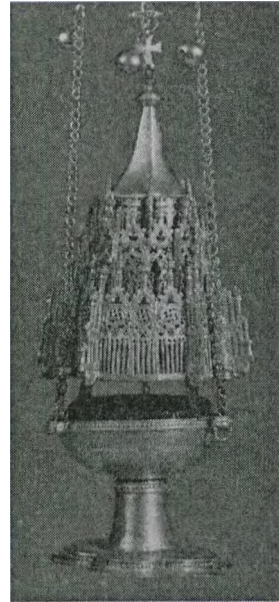


Fig. 4. Silver gilt censer (height 31 cm.) with Late Gothic features. Offering of Roxandra (Ruxandra), widow of Alexander (Alexandru) Lăpușneanu, Voevod of Moldavia, to the Chapel of St. John the Baptist, 1569, Manafis, Sinai, *Treasures of the Monastery of Saint Catherine*; both figure [14] and caption, p. 288

<sup>15</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 269.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibidem*.



Fig. 5 a, b. Manafis' caption for this image [fig. 11 in that book] describes it as 'Gospel cover (height 39 cm), with a depiction of the donor, Alexander II Mircea, Prince of Wallachia, and his family. Wallachian workshop. 1568–1577.' *Sinai. Treasures of the Monastery of Saint Catherine*; both figure and caption, p. 286. Figure 12 on page 287, represents 'The reverse side of the Gospel cover in fig. 11'

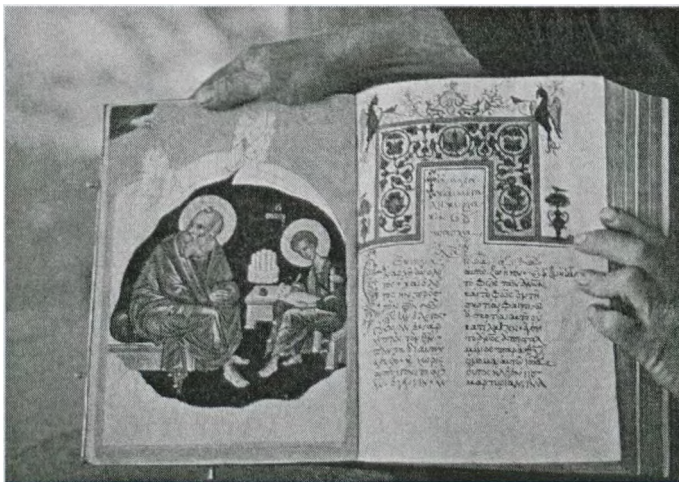


Fig. 6. In H. Skrobucha, *Sinai*, the caption on p. 105 describes this image (on the same page) as 'Pair of pages from a manuscript in the library of St. Katharine's monastery: miniature with John the Evangelist and Prochorus, and opening page of St. John's Gospel.' Evangelium (Gospel-book) of the Rumanian Prince Jeremias Movila of Moldova, 1598





Fig. 7. Gospel cover, offering of Matei Basarab, Prince of Wallachia, and his wife Helena. Copper alloy cast plaques and enamels, 1636 (Inventory number 32.5). Photograph taken by the librarian of the Monastery of St Catherine, Father Justin, in May 2005 especially for this article

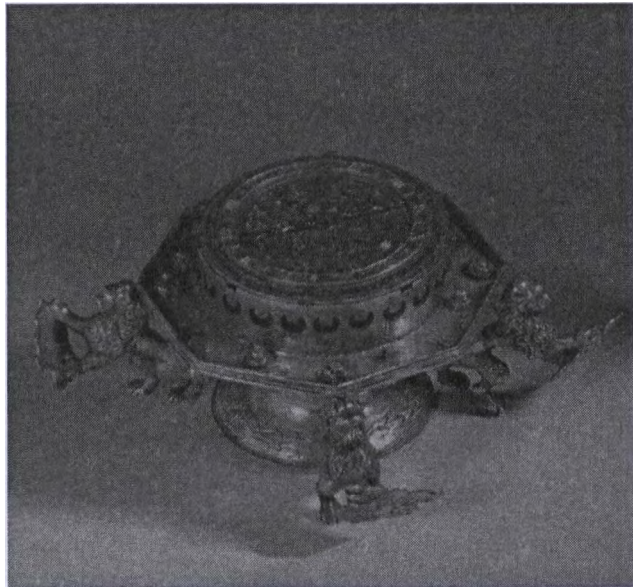


Fig. 8 a, b. Sanctification cross with a clock in its base. Carved wooden core, silver gilt, enamels, stones, pearls. Braşov (Transylvania), 1660 (Inventory number 30.15). In Manafis, *Sinai. Treasures of the Monastery of Saint Catherine*, the caption for this image [fig. 27 in that book] describes it as a 'Combined clock and cross (height 23.5 cm), with mounting covered with painted enamels. Property of the Abbot Ioasaph. From a Transylvania workshop. A little before 1660.' The caption for Fig. 29 (the clock) in Manafis' book says: 'Detail of fig. 27. The clock, the work of Michael Renner, in its case. From a Braşov workshop.' Both images and their captions are on p. 298 in that book

background, which is decorated with schematic plant forms, to a greater or lesser degree influenced by Ottoman models'.<sup>17</sup> Another book (Fig. 6) is described by H. Skrobucha as a 'Gospel cover offering of the Prince of Moldavia, Ieremias Movilă, and his family. Embossed silver gilt, 1598;' (Inventory number 32.4).

In the Monastery's museum there is also a 'Gospel cover, offering of Matei Basarab, Prince of Wallachia, and his wife Helena. Copper alloy cast plaques and enamels, 1636' (Fig. 7, Inventory number 32.5). Since I have not found any reference to it or reproductions of it in the material which I have consulted, the photograph was taken, at my request, by the librarian of St Catherine Monastery, Fr Justin, especially for this article, two years after my visit there. He did the same in the case of the *Panagarion* mentioned in the beginning of this article, and on which I comment further.

The use of a *panagarion* (Fig. 9) consists in carrying the loaf called *Panagia* in the Orthodox Church high above the monks' heads when it leads the monks from the church into the refectory, a ritual which takes place often. A *panagarion* can be anything from a simple tray to a large metal platter with a lid and staff underneath to hold the loaf. George Aquaro describes the ritual in which the *Panagia* and a *panagarion* are involved. 'The Lifting of the Panagia is a vestigial service, originating in the earliest eucharistic traditions in the Church [...] There is a definitive offertory act in the context of an Eucharistic meal, holding to the description in the Synoptic Gospels. [...] It is used in connection with the chalice. It is noteworthy to mention that some ancient monasteries, such as Sinai, continue the practice of having a cup of unconsecrated wine as part of the rite. Another frequent element is the [...] censer, often used to bless the particle taken by the individual from the loaf. This is a further consecratory act in addition to the offertory, implying that this is more than a symbolic act. The Lifting of the Panagia takes place, according to St Symeon of Thessalonika [...], during the 9<sup>th</sup> Ode of Matins, though the present context is in the meal directly following the Divine Liturgy'.<sup>18</sup> In the case of the Sinaite/Romanian example a platter with a lid forms the *panagarion*. On the platter the Mother of God and two saints are represented.

From the eighteenth century, in the Monastery of St Catherine's storage rooms there is also a silver brooch likely to have been made in Transylvania (Fig. 10), a 'buckle', used probably as an accessory holding up the priestly attire.



Fig. 9. Part of a Panagarion engraved, cast, filigree silver gilt, Moldavian workshop, c. 1500, (Inventory number 30.8).

Photograph taken by the librarian of the Monastery of St. Catherine, Father Justin, in May 2005 especially for this article

<sup>17</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>18</sup> G. Aquaro, 'The Lifting of the Panagia', article on <http://www.prospora.org/page41.html>.

Regarding the objects that have primarily made the Monastery of St Catherine known in modern times – the Orthodox icons – despite Skrobucha’s affirmation that ‘ikons came to the monastery as presents from all Orthodox countries’, sadly I was unable to find any Romanian icon in either the display of icons in the church of the monastery, or in its museum.<sup>19</sup> Nevertheless, since I found the objects described above, I have to agree with him that: ‘Russian, Georgian, Syrian, Serbian, and Rumanian pieces at any rate [,] most of the later periods [,] are to be found in the churches, chapels, and rooms of the Sinai district’.<sup>20</sup>

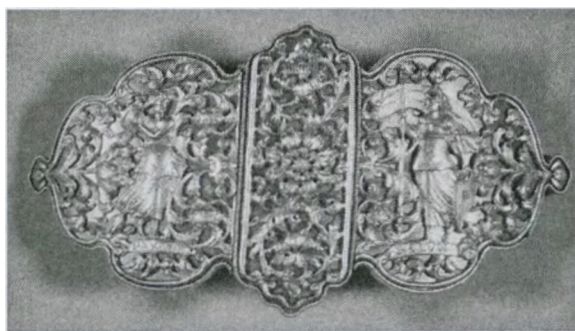


Fig. 10. Silver gilt buckle (length 23 cm.), with relief figures of Peace and War and decoration in the Floral Baroque style. Work of Stephan Weltzer II; Braşov; 1716. In Manafis, *Sinai. Treasures of the Monastery of Saint Catherine*, this is Fig. 40, p. 305; the caption with the above text, p. 304

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<sup>19</sup> I have donated one Romanian icon of Christ to the monastery in August 2006 when I met Fr Justin at the 21<sup>st</sup> International Congress of Byzantine Studies in London.

<sup>20</sup> Skrobucha, *op. cit.*, p. 108.