



THE FATIMID MOSQUE IN SAINT CATHERINE'S MONASTERY (ARCHAEOLOGICAL STUDY)

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Abstract

The religious significance of Sinai is due to the command of Moses, perhaps, this important religious position of Sinai made it a refuge for hermits, devotees, fleeing Roman persecution, and the new religion in which they found a dangerous competitor.

Among the places where hermits and monks resided are: Mount Moses, Wadi Ferran and Wadi al-Hamam, north of the city of At-Tur, where there is safety from the brutality of the Roman soldiers, and there are fertile areas, where water springs are needed for their cultivation, as well as their residence near the holy areas mentioned in the Bible. Christian hermits began residing in Sinai since the middle of the third century AD, and then it became a place of pilgrimage since the fourth century AD.

In (372-374 AD) a Spanish noblewoman visited the monks there, and established two churches on Mount Sinai and a third on the side of the bush. At the beginning of the sixth century AD, there were several monasteries and churches in the Wadi Ferran region, and the Byzantine Emperor Justinian (527-566 AD) built a fortress to prevent attacks from them. The Bedouins built the current monastery in this place, considering it a holy place.

The research deals with two axes: the first is the history of St. Catherine's Monastery and the stages of construction, and the second deals with the architectural description of the monastery and its architectural elements.

Keywords: Monastery, St. Catherine, Emperor Justinian, St. Catherine's Monastery Mosque, Abu Al-Mansour Anushtakin, Caliph Al-Amir Bi-Ahkam Allah, St. Catherine's Monastery documents.

First: The History of St. Catherine's Monastery

St. Catherine's Monastery[1] is located in southern Sinai below Mount Catherine, the highest mountains in Egypt, near Mount Moses. It is said to be the oldest monastery in the world. It was built on the order of Empress Helena, mother of Emperor Constantine, but Emperor Justinian actually built it in (545 AD), to contain the relics of Saint Catherine, who lived in Alexandria.

And in (372-374 AD), a Spanish noblewoman visited the monks there, and established two churches on Mount Sinai and a third on the side of the bush. At the beginning of the sixth century AD, there were several monasteries and churches in the Wadi Ferran region, and the Byzantine Emperor Justinian (527-566 AD) built a fortress to prevent attacks from them. The Bedouins built the current monastery in this place, considering it one of the holy places. There are two stone panels at the top of the entrance to the monastery, one of them in Arabic, which reads: He established the monastery of Tour Sinai and the Church of the Poor Mountain Communion with God who seeks forgiveness from his master, the polite king of the Roman sect (Justinianus) in memory of him and his wife (Tawadura) on the passage of time until God inherits the earth and those on it, and he is the best of inheritors, and it was built thirty years after his reign and he appointed a chief for him named (Dhulas)[2].

The monastery includes within it a group of main buildings, and another set of accessories, the major church is the most important building of the monastery because of its treasures and ancient mosaics. Around it are some small shrines that open their doors to the church, which is named after the apostles and saints. It was not known by the name of the Virgin or by the name of St. Catherine; rather, it was known during the reign of Justinian as the Church of the Transfiguration. The monastery contains a group of annexes such as an olive press, winery, granaries, dining halls, two mills, a kitchen, a library famous for its rare manuscripts, wells, and an exhibition of skulls, bones and skeletons, in addition to the Fatimid Mosque (fig. 1 pl.1).

Since the Islamic conquest of Egypt, the monastery has enjoyed care and protection that has been reiterated throughout all Islamic eras, and the monks have enjoyed protection, as well as the tribes sent by Justinian to protect the monastery, and who were known later as the Jabaliya in relation to Mount Moses, and they were known as the boys of the monastery because they were in his service, and they converted to Islam in Early period in the Islamic era.

The Monastery of St. Catherine's Mosque is considered one of the unique structures among Islamic monuments, as it is the only mosque in a Christian monastery in a remote part of the Egyptian Sinai desert [2].



fig. 1. St. Catherine's Monastery



pl. 1. Saint Catherine's Monastery



It is reported that the mosque was built between the years 495-500 AH (1101 and 1106 AD), by order of Abu Ali Al-Mansur Anushtakin (495-524 AH / 1101-1131 AD), the minister of the Fatimid Caliph al-Amir Abi Ali Mansur bin Ahmed[3], specifically in the month of Rabi' al-Awwal[4]. The year 500 AH (1106 AD), and this refutes what was mentioned about its construction during the reign of Al-Hakim by the command of God. This evidence is a text engraved on the front and minbar of the mosque, written in Kufic script, and consists of six lines, and is dated 500 AH (1106 AD)[5].

The first archaeological evidence is the presence of a wooden candlestick chair inside the mosque on which is written a text from the construction era in which the name of the builder of the mosque is Abu al-Mansur Anushtakin al-Amiri in relation to the Caliph al-Amir bi Ahkam Allah, who built this mosque and three other mosques, one of them on Mount Musa, which is still located at an altitude of 2242 meters Above sea level and the other two in Wadi Ferran, one of them is above the Mill Mountain in Wadi Ferran, at an altitude of (886 m) above sea level.

He explained that the presence of two people by the name of Anushtakin was the cause of the historical confusion that made some historians attributes the construction of the Fatimid Mosque to the era of the ruler, not the commander. There is Anushtakin al-Tizbari, who moved from Baghdad to Damascus in 400 AH (1009 AD), so the commander Tizbar bin Unim al-Dimli bought him and gifted him to the ruler by the command of God in 403 AH (1012 AD), which resulted in some historians linking this prince and the ruler by the command of God, so they dated the mosque based on that.

As for Prince Anushtakin, whose name is on the menorah's chair, he is Prince Anushtakin al-Amiri, in reference to the one who ordered the provisions of God. Therefore, the establishment of the mosque, as the founding text shows, was in the year 500 AH (1106 AD) by Prince Anushtakin al-Amiri and during the era of the Caliph al-Amir bi Ahkam Allah, who assumed the caliphate between 494-523 AH (1101-1129 AD)[2].

The oldest Arabic documents preserved in the monastery, which are concerned with the monastery and its protection, are five documents dating back to the era of the Fatimid state. One of them was issued by Abu Ahmed bin Al-Sayyid Al-Afdal, the Emir of the Armies, Minister of Al-Hafiz, dated 524 AH (1129 AD), and the second and third were issued by Abu Al-Muzaffar Bahram Al-Hafizi, dated 529 AH (1134AD), and the fourth issued by the successful Caliph at the hands of the righteous vizier Tala'i, dated 551 AH (1156 AD).

We conclude from this that the mosque was built for the following reasons[2]:

1. The Muslims who were at that time serving and protecting the monastery prayed in it, as well as the Muslims who lived on the outskirts of the monastery and transported its supplies from the ports of Suez and Al-Tur, in addition to the presence of the 'Urban tribes that settled around the monastery area and who protect the monastery and guard it and guard its convoys. In addition to the servants of the monastery or its boys from the Jabaliya tribe who converted to Islam at an early period and continued to serve the monastery, and many of them owed obedience to the monastery without a suitable place for worship, so this mosque was built, in addition to two other mosques in "Wadi Ferran" and three on Mount Musa, and at the fortress of the coast next to "Eyla"[6-7].
2. The passage of Muslim pilgrims on their way to Hijaz through the Holy Valley on the way to the monastery [8] to seek blessings from it and to seek water, food and rest, which necessitated the presence of a mosque in which they perform prayers.
3. The Fatimids love for establishing mosques and shrines in blessed places.

As for building the mosque inside the monastery walls, it is clear that the area inside the monastery walls is safer and more urban, as the Arabs and the servants of the monastery

from the Jabaliyya Muslims resort to it throughout the day, in addition to the pilgrims who pass through the monastery on their way to or from the holy places[2].

The interest of the monks in the mosque

The mosque was built at the time of "Anba Zacharias", who was appointed by the commander as bishop of the monastery according to the circular issued in the year 496 AH (1103 AD)[9-10]. The monk Gregory explained that the monks took care of the mosque and used to restore it throughout the ages whenever it needed restoration, especially since the geographical distance and difficult access to the place did not allow specialists perform this task.

He was evidenced by what was mentioned in one of the documents preserved in the monastery archives[11], which probably dates back to the eighteenth century and contains fatwas of Al-Azhar jurists, and another document[12] dates back to the nineteenth century and gives a complete picture of the affection, solidarity and solidarity between monks and Muslims in this matter. Whatever the case, the Caliph al-Amir did good to the monks. When he ordered the construction of this mosque, he did not attack the other buildings of the monastery, but rather built it next to the Church of the Transfiguration[2].

Which dates back to the nineteenth century and gives a complete picture of the affection, solidarity and interdependence between monks and Muslims in this matter. Whatever the case, the Caliph al-Amir favored the monks. When he ordered the construction of this mosque, he did not attack the other buildings of the monastery, but rather built it next to the Church of the Transfiguration.

According to some, this mosque is called the Fatimid Mosque, and it is also known in the papers of the monastery as the Omari Mosque because they believe that it was built during the reign of Alhakim bi Amrallah (336-411 AH / 966-1021 AD), although we believe that they have confused between AlAmir and Alhakim bi Amrallah[13].

Second: Architectural description of the mosque

The Fatimid mosque[14] is located in the northwestern part of the courtyard of the monastery of St. Catherine, next to the cathedral and to the left of the interior of the courtyard and the corridor, near the tower of its church from the western side of the sea, about three meters away[6-15-16]. The vaulted corridor turns left, and finds a descending stone staircase that leads to the great church and the courtyard that passes next to the eastern wall of the mosque [17-18].



pl. 2. The Fatimid Mosque in Saint Catherine's Monastery



pl. 3. Minaret of the Fatimid Mosque in Saint Catherine's Monastery

Then it turns left behind the minaret (pl. 2-3) to reach a courtyard in front of the facade of the mosque, as its land is higher than the church grounds by about fifteen meters[9-19], yet its minaret is lower than the church tower. This mosque is one of the hanging mosques, its walls are built of granite, and clay material was used in construction, and the floor of the mosque was paved with luxurious tiles[2].

And in the courtyard (lanterns) are openings in the floor on which are installed gabled ceilings with windows with glass windows to illuminate the part below the courtyard, which is used as a press.

The facade of the mosque: The mosque has a northern facade, with the entrance in the middle, which is a rectangular opening whose width is 1.25 m from the outside, while its width is from the inside (1.55 m), as both sides of the entrance tilt outward, and the height of the entrance is 2.70 m. Its opening is topped by a flat wooden lintel, with a small rectangular window on its axis on its axis, on which is a newly rolled wooden curtain.

The entrance is surrounded by two similar windows, each of which is a rectangular opening (1.18 m wide), and it has a flat wooden lintel on which is a wooden curtain of sawn wood (newer). The façade ends at the top with a cornice made of three brick courses, with the upper part projecting from the lower. In the last renovations, the mosque was provided with metal gutters to drain rainwater down the end of the facade.

The mosque (fig.2), in terms of architecture and aesthetics, is a very simple building[15-16-19], the interior of the mosque is: the length of the eastern side (7.17 m), the maritime side (15.43 m), the western (7.40 m) and the tribal (10.12 m) and it has three windows, each of which is 150 m long and wide. It is about a meter open in front of the door, and the total height of the mosque from the inside is (5.66 m)[2].

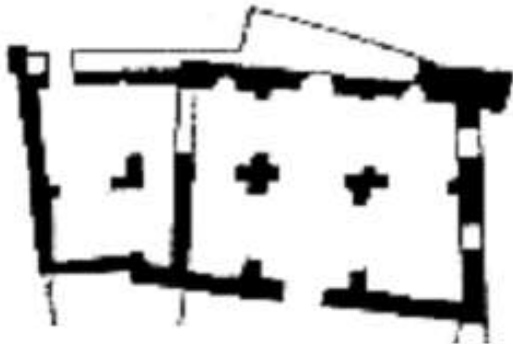


fig. 2. The Fatimid Mosque in St. Catherine's Monastery

In the middle of the mosque are two pillars, each with an orthogonal layout of carved granite, carrying three arches of carved granite parallel to the qibla wall and four perpendiculars to the qibla wall. The height of the arches parallel to the qibla wall from right to left are, respectively, (2.80 m), (2.53 m) and (2.47 m), and the height of the vertical arches on the qibla wall, the right ones, respectively are (2.68 m) and (2.75 m), and the left of them, respectively, (2.68 m) and (2.55 m). The building rises above the arches, to find a large rectangular window above each arch.

It was noticed when carrying out the last restoration process, during the repairs, and when removing the paint from the walls and the arches, that there were crosses with triangular arms carved in a prominent carving on the key of some of the arches of the mosque. In a building that is used as a mosque, but it is necessary to decide that this building was not used as a mosque directly, but rather comprehensive architectural works were carried out on it except for the arches and the supporting pillars, which were carried out by Fatimid architects and not the monks of the monastery who were forced to do so[2].

The mosque has three mihrabs, the main one is crowned with an arch with four centers, as is the case in the old part of the Al-Azhar Mosque, in the middle of the qibla wall. It is a semi-circular apse, its width (1.22 m), its height to the top of the arch (3.35 m), and the depth of the mihrab (0.95 m). Its cap is crowned by a Fatimid arch, and between the mihrab apse and the legs of the mihrab arch is a wooden frieze that extends the length of the wall. Three marble inserts are attached to the lower part of the mihrab apse.

As for the two side mihrabs that surround the main mihrab, they are devoid of decoration, each measuring 0.83 m in width and 0.50 m in depth. The right (western) mihrab is a semi-round apse crowned by a Fatimid arch from which radial ribs emerge that fill the mihrab cap, and the left mihrab is a semi-circular apse, crowned by a Fatimid arch, and at the bottom of its legs are the wooden frieze that is placed along the length of the wall.

As for the minaret, it is made of granite stone and is located in the northeastern corner. It is separate from it and is two meters away. It consists of two square floors, its height is about (12.0 m), and it contains (36) steps. The length of the side of the first floor is three meters and its height is three and a half meters. , and ends with a balcony that protrudes (0.50 m) from the wall that reaches a thickness of (0.75 m), and the first floor is built from below with untrimmed granite stone, and its western side is the entrance to the minaret. About wooden cables protruding from the walls of the four minaret surrounded by a wooden fence that was recently restored. It is noted that the construction of the first floor tends its walls inward as the building rises, while the second floor is square in shape, the length of its sides is two and a half meters and the thickness of the wall is (0.50 m).

As for the most important applied artifacts in the mosque, it is the minbar, which dates back to the month of Rabi' al-Awwal in the year 500 AH (November 1106 AD), the chair



of the menorah on which is the name of Prince “Anushkatin al-Amiri”, and the chair of the Qur’an, The chair and the minbar are preserved in the Museum of Islamic Art[2].

The height of the minbar (pl.4-5-6) is 2.47 m, the height of its door is 2.62 m, and the entrance is in a semi-circular and pointed shape, the minbar is made up of rectangular square fillings of vegetal motifs in relief.

There is a wooden panel that includes writing in six lines in Kufic script, which reads:

”بسم الله الرحمن الرحيم لا إله إلا الله وحده لا شريك له / له الملك وله الحمد يحيي ويميت بيده الخير وهو على كل شيء قدير / نصر من الله وفتح قريب / لعبد الله وولييه أبي علي المنصور الإمام الأمر بأحكام الله أمير المؤمنين صلوات الله عليه وعلى آيائه الطاهرين وأبنائه المنتصرين / أمر بإنشاء هذا المنبر السيد الأجل الأفاضل أمير الحرمين سيف الإسلام ناصر الإمام كافل المسلمين وهادي دعاة المؤمنين أبو القاسم شاهنشاه عَضَدَ اللهُ به الدين أمتع بطول بقائه أمير المؤمنين وأدام قدرته وأعلى كلمته، وذلك في شهر ربيع الأول سنة خمسمية أثنى بالله.”

“In the name of God. The Most Compassionate, the Most Merciful, there is no god but God alone, He has no partner / his is the king and his is the praise. He gives life and causes death in his hand is good, and he has power over all things / victory from God and a close conquest / For Abdullah and his guardian, my father Ali al-Mansur, the Imam who commands the judgments of God, the Commander of the faithful, may God’s prayers be upon him and his pure fathers and sons the victors / commanded the establishment of this pulpit, the eminent, the best, the emir of the two sacred mosques, the sword of Islam, the Nasser Imam, the sponsor of the Muslims, and the guide of the advocates of the believers, Abu al-Qasim Shahanshah with him, may God sustain the religion, enjoy the longevity of the Commander of the Faithful’s life, and perpetuate his power and exalt his word, and that was in the month of Rabi’ al-Awwal in five hundred, I trust in God”[2].

This minbar is one of three complete wooden minbars from the first Fatimid era, namely the minbar of the Hassan bin Saleh mosque in Bahnsa and the second of the Omari Mosque in Qus. It is similar to the wooden minbar of the Badr al-Din al-Jamali Mosque, which dates back to 484 AH (1091 AD), which was transferred from Ashkelon to the Ibrahimi Mosque in Palestine.

As for the chair, it is in the form of a truncated pyramid, with two lines engraved on its sides in kufic script as well, and in which are the name of the builder of the mosque and his exploits in Sinai, the text of which is:

”بسم الله الرحمن الرحيم مما أمر بعمل هذا الشمع والكراسي المباركة والجامع المبارك الذي بالدير الأعلى والثلاث مساجد الذي فوق مناجاة موسى عليه السلام والجامع الذي فوق جبل دير فاران والمسجد الذي تحت فاران الجديدة والمنارة التي بحضر الساحل الأمير الموفق المنتخب منير الدولة وفارسها أبي المنصور أنوشتكين الأمري.”

“In the name of God, the Most Gracious, the Most Merciful, who commanded the making of this candle, the blessed chairs, the blessed mosque in the highest monastery, the three mosques above the Munajat of Musa, peace be upon him, the mosque above the mountain of the monastery of Faran, the mosque under the new Paran, the minaret that was present on the coast, the chosen prince, Muwafaq Munir al-Dawla, and its knight, Abi al-Mansur Anushtkin al-Amiri”.



pl. 4. The pulpit and the mihrab of the mosque of St. Catherine's Monastery



pl. 5. The pulpit of the mosque of St. Catherine's Monastery



pl. 6. Fillings from the pulpit of St. Catherine's Monastery Mosque

The mosque's mihrab also has a Sicilian alabaster stone on which some Muslim visitors' names are written, and the inscriptions recorded in red ink on the mosque's mihrab are written in Thuluth script.

Among those texts:



"هو حبي ومعيني ومغيثي في مقتني ومشهدي حضر في هذا الجامع المقدس المبارك العبد الفقير المعترف بالذنوب والتقصير، الراجي ربنا القدير، محمد بن مصطفى بن محمد بن عبد الله، الحقيق غفر الله تعالى له ولوالديه ولجميع المؤمنين والمؤمنات والمسلمين والمسلمات.. إلخ.

"He is my love, my helper, my helper in my mufti and my witness who attended this holy and blessed mosque, the poor servant confessor of sins and shortcomings, the hopeful of our Lord Almighty, Muhammad bin Mustafa bin Muhammad bin Abdullah, the despicable, may God Almighty forgive him and his parents and all the believing men and women, male and female Muslims.. "etc.

And the other text says [16]:

"بسم الله الرحمن الرحيم يا فتاح يا عليم أودعت في المكان المبارك شهادة أن لا إله إلا الله وحده لا شريك له وأشهد أن محمداً عبده ورسوله، كتبه رضوان الهوارى بن على الرافعي، كان الله له أين ما كان، وأين ما ولى بوجهه وغفر له ولوالديه....".

"In the name of God, the Compassionate, the Merciful, O Fattah, O All-Knowing, I deposited in the blessed place the testimony that there is no god but God alone without partner, and I bear witness that Muhammad is His servant and Messenger, written by Radwan Al-Hawari bin Ali Al-Rafi'i. face and forgive him and his parents...".

We often find in the monastery documents references to the monks [14], restoration and repair of the mosque more than once as a donation from them, after they were given permission to do so, as well as the decree of Sultan Inal (1453-1465 AD) that the monks set up a muezzin for the mosque as per their custom [20], and in the decree of Sultan Qaytbay (1468-1496 AD)) The monks were required to provide for the mosque all it needed from fuel oil, lighting and cleaning the mosque, and supplies for the muezzin, in addition to setting up a new muezzin whenever the muezzin dies, and the muezzin in turn protects the monks. I found documents confirming the monks' support for the mosque and its care for its servants and visitors [2].

Conclusion

- The establishment of churches in Sinai dates back to the year (372-374 AD) a Spanish noblewoman visited the monks there, and established two churches on Mount Sinai and a third on the side of the bush.
- The monastery was built on the order of Empress Helena, mother of Emperor Constantine, but Emperor Justinian was the one who actually built the building in (545 AD), to contain the remains of St. Catherine who used to live in Alexandria.
- The Mosque of St. Catherine's Monastery is considered one of the unique structures among Islamic monuments, as it is the only mosque existing inside a Christian monastery in a remote area in the Egyptian Sinai desert.
- The mosque was built between 495-500 AH (1101 and 1106 AD), by order of Abu Ali Al-Mansur Anushtakin (495-524 AH / 1101-1131 AD), the Minister of the Fatimid Caliph al-Amir al-Ahkam Allah Abi Ali Mansour bin Ahmed, specifically in the month of Rabi' al-Awwal in the year 500 AH. (1106 AD), and this refutes what was mentioned about its construction during the era of Alhakim bi Amr Allah. This evidence is a text engraved on the front and minbar of the mosque, written in Kufic script, and consists of six lines, and is dated 500 AH (1106 AD).
- The first archaeological evidence is the presence of a wooden candlestick chair inside the mosque on which is written a text from the construction era in which the name of the builder of the mosque is Abu Al-Mansour Anushtakin Al-Amri, in reference to the Caliph Al-Amir Bi Ahkam Allah, who built this mosque and three other mosques, one of them on Mount Musa, which is so far at an altitude of 2242 meters above sea level



and the other two in Wadi Ferran, one of them above the Mill Mountain in Wadi Ferran, at an altitude of (886m) above sea level.

- The oldest Arabic documents preserved in the monastery, which are concerned with the monastery and its protection, are five documents dating back to the era of the Fatimid state, one of which was issued in the year 524 AH (1129 AD), the second and third were issued in the year 529 AH (1134 AD), and the fourth was issued in the year 551 AH (1156 AD).
- The mosque was built for the Muslims who were serving and protecting the monastery at that time to pray, as well as the Muslims who lived on the outskirts of the monastery, in addition to the presence of the Orban tribes that settled around the monastery area and who protect and guard the monastery, as well as the monastery's servants or its boys, and Muslim pilgrims heading On their way to Hijaz, the Fatimids loved to establish mosques and shrines in the blessed places.
- The monks' interest in the mosque was confirmed, and they restored it throughout the ages whenever it needed restoration and at their expense.
- It was noticed when performing the last restoration process, during the repairs, and when removing the paint from the walls and arches, that there were carved crosses prominently on the key of some arches of the mosque, which suggests that the construction, especially the arches, is older than the construction of the mosque, which confirms that this building was not used as a mosque directly, rather it was built on it. Architectural works that are almost comprehensive, with the exception of the arches and the pillars bearing them, were carried out by Fatimid architects, not the monks of the monastery who were forced to do so.

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