

A note on the mountains of Sinai

J. C. Hawksley

In the S of the Sinai Peninsula there lies a range of mountains with a character of its own. In days gone by this range was seen from ships going E through the Gulf of Suez or returning homewards, but since the Suez Canal was closed very few have had the chance to see it. Travellers have been excluded since Sinai became a military area, though this does not apply to Israelis if they can get permission. I do not know whether any climbing is going on there now, but excavations of historic interest are, as, for example, those recorded in 'God's Wilderness' by Beno Rothenburg in 1961. The Sinai Mountains have not attracted many climbers; in its 110 years of publication the 'Alpine Journal' has only contained about half a dozen articles about them, together with two book reviews. The first, however, is in Vol 1 where in Notes and Queries there is a brief account of the first ascent to the summit of Jebel Om Shaumer, the beginning of the urge in those parts for other purposes than pilgrimage. The mountains and the district around them have, however, a considerable literature which dates from the beginning of history. The Egyptians were mining at Serabit and Maghara from early dynastic times, leaving hieroglyphs on the cliff and walls of the buildings they made. According to Eckenstein the earliest use of the word Sinai for this part of the world occurs in the Song of Deborah: 'The Mountains melted from before the Lord, even that Sinai before the Lord God of Israel'.

I must not use up space on the general history of Sinai here, a number of books having dealt with this already amongst which I have found Lina Eckenstein's 'A History of Sinai' (1921) and Raymond Weill's 'La Presqu'île du Sinai' (1908) particularly useful. Both these authors were in Sinai with Flinders Petrie's Egyptological expedition at the beginning of the century, and Petrie's book 'Researches in Sinai', published in 1906 contains much of general interest, such as the organisation of travel, transport, and supply. Although Sinai is the background against which the Exodus is described in the Old Testament, there is nothing in the Biblical account that defines any event in terms of present day geography, and tradition alone would seem to have selected the present Mount Sinai (Jebel Musa), not without challenge from some dozen other mountains. The history from these times until the 19th Century has been pieced together mostly from the records of pilgrims whose reverence and mysticism led to the handing down of opinions that have perforce been designed to fit biblical teaching to local geography or more often vice versa. H. J. Beadnell ('The Wilderness of Sinai' 1927) wrote 'The early literature on the country is extraordinarily voluminous. A bibliography by Raymond Weill includes the names of over 450 historians, travellers, and authors who have contributed to our knowledge of the peninsula, besides many anonymous maps and manuscripts'. Others writing in and since the 19th Century have regretted the almost complete lack of information

MOUNTAINS OF SINAI

except the reiterated fitting of the geography to suit the accounts of the Exodus.

Briefly, few visits were made to the mountains until the 19th Century apart from the important fact that Bedouin tribes had lived amongst them from prehistoric times. These included Egyptian miners, priests and temple builders and their military protectors, the Israelites of the Exodus, the whereabouts of whose wanderings is problematic, and then after a gap of some centuries hermits escaping persecution and monks and priests who at one time composed a moderate sized population in fertile valleys such as Feiran. To preserve them from the predations of Bedouin, the monastery of St Katherine was built in the 6th Century by the order of Justinian. Pilgrimage was for many centuries undertaken to the Holy Mount, to the burning bush (miraculously the same one from which God spoke to Moses) now enclosed within the convent walls, and to the top of Mount St Katherine (Jebel Katrin) where this saint's remains were discovered after miraculous transportation from Alexandria. These pilgrimages were difficult and dangerous because of attacks by Bedouin. A number of crusaders also made the pilgrimage, and accounts of the journey to Mount Sinai and back continued till a new type of traveller with critical faculties and an eye for geographical facts began to replace the earlier visitors who had seemed unable to learn anything that had not for centuries been recorded in the form of repetitions from earlier accounts. Let Ritter speak from the pages of his 'Palestine and Sinaitic Peninsula' (1866, translated by Gage):

'Only by a thorough scientific examination made in person can sound knowledge be gained about any group of mountains, and here such an

47 The mountains of Sinai. This and next photo: Israel Government Tourist Office



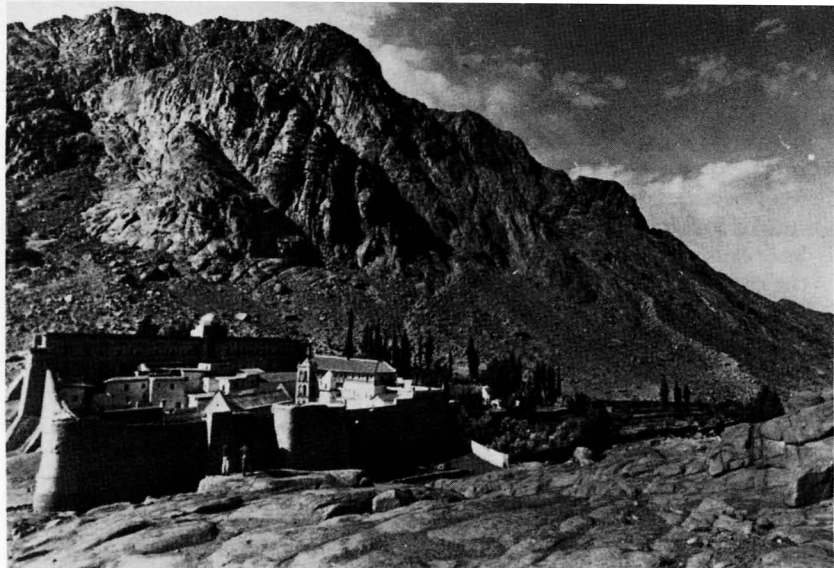
examination is utterly wanting—it has never been made. Those who have visited the region which we are about to study have had to follow the caprice of ignorant Bedouins, or have had to accommodate themselves to the exigencies of necessity. The deep recesses, the stern rocks utterly destitute of soil, have thus far compelled travellers to avoid wide detours, and have caused them to fix their gaze upon one, and but one desired object—the convent of St Katherine. . . . And what a contrast to the old reports of travellers who never enquired, and whose exercise of the mind was a wondering adoration, are the results given us by' . . .

and here Ritter goes on to give the names of a number of recent travellers who have given objective accounts of the Sinai Mountains and laid the foundations of what is now known.

It needs to be remembered that Ritter, and most of those he refers to were religious men, willing for the first time to reconcile biblical writings with observed facts and the practical assumptions to be drawn therefrom. This was not always easy and it is no easier now than in Ritter's day. Robinson, an American scholar, was one of many whose objectivity at that time is singled out for comment. He was in part concerned with how the host of Israelites could have been accommodated round Mount Sinai, and does not contradict scripture but simply puts forward a new theory as to where they all were in his 'Biblical Researches', 1856. Finally, before turning to more recent events, mention should be made of a British contributor. 'Sinai and Palestine' (1864) by Arthur Penrhyn Stanley, Dean of Westminster, is an early attempt by a churchman of high standing to reconcile harmoniously geographical facts with biblical teaching. There are many more who need to be remembered during this period whose travels and writings have built up our present knowledge; reference to their work is made by the authors I have already quoted. The 'Ordnance Survey of Sinai' (1870-1) by Sir Charles Wilson and Captain Palmer is a landmark in the geography of Sinai.

Whilst chiefly concerned with the massif in the S, the central limestone plateau must be mentioned, a bleak empty, dry and very extensive area shelving N and W to the desert along the Mediterranean coast and the Egyptian frontier and ending abruptly to the S in a sheer wall of rock over 1000 feet high and stretching almost without break for a 100 miles. It falls into a sandy belt which soon gives rise to the mountain range of the S, plutonic rock, except for a small area of sandstone at its NW corner. Apart from the needs of surveying, it is not likely that any climbing has been undertaken on this limestone table-land, called El Tih, though a number of its peaks look as if they would offer good climbing were it not for their difficulty of access and the shortage of water. The highest peak is Jebel Jencina (1627 m). Beadnell (1927) has written a most interesting account of the surveying of El Tih.

Turning to the Alpine Club's contribution to the literature on Sinai, the half dozen or so articles in the 'Journal' already mentioned seems small. The reasons for this must be the relative inaccessibility and that climbers equate time, cost, and difficulty of getting to a place with its reputation for



48 *St Katherine's Monastery*

climbing; there has been so much good climbing to be found nearer home than Sinai and in only one article in the 'Alpine Journal' does the writer (and his companion) seem to have travelled from England for the sole purpose of climbing. The first article is R. St John Tyrwhitt's short note on the first complete ascent of Om Shaumer by T. E. Yorke and T. J. Prout (Tyrwhitt being ill at the convent at the time). This ascent was in 1862 (AJ 1 205). Burckhardt's earlier attempt is mentioned. At this time Om Shaumer was regarded as the highest mountain in Sinai though that distinction belongs in fact to Jebel Katrin. Following this is an article by Geoffrey E. Howard, who describes an expedition that he made with J. E. C. Eaton in 1912 in 'Scrambles in Sinai' (AJ 27 13). They went by launch from Suez to Jebel Hammam on the Red Sea where a guide with attendants and camels met them. Their trip took them first into the limestone belt just S of the Tih at its W end and then through the sandstone mountains where they climbed several peaks, then on the Wadi Feiran from which they climbed Jebel Serbal before returning to their rendezvous on the beach. Next to appear is 'Mountains of Israel' by W. T. Elmslie (AJ 40 338) which after dealing with mountains in Palestine goes on to describe a short period in Sinai with the ascent of Jebels Musa, Katrin, and Serbal. Then follows 'Mountains of the near East' by John Hunt (AJ 57 203). This article includes a visit to the neighbourhood of the convent and the climbing of Jebel Musa and Jebel Katrin and the ridge on the E side of Wadi Safsa. These writers are united in their praise of the mountains of Sinai, the climbing and scenery. Their accounts differ. I like best Lord Hunt's '... you cannot quantify beauty; it is infinite and absolute.'

G. W. Murray wrote a comprehensive article on 'Egyptian Mountains' (AJ 42 226) much of which is given to Sinai. As he spent the years from 1907 to 1951 with the Survey of Egypt it can be accepted that few, if any, can have had a better knowledge of the Sinai mountains than himself. His 'Dare me to the Desert' (George Allen and Unwin Ltd. London 1967) contains a lot about travel and climbing in Sinai and he leaves the reader in no doubt about his love

of it—'a day out of Sinai is a day wasted'. He also reviewed very favourably the guide-book by Jacques Daumas 'La Peninsule du Sinai' (published by the Royal Automobile Club of Egypt) in AJ 58 546. Finally I contributed a short article on my trip with Daumas in 1943 written in a great hurry, in which we climbed Jebel Rimham—probably its first ascent, Jebel Om Shaumer by a new route, and crossed Jebel Katrin, stopping for the night in the little chapel on the summit where I saw the most glorious panorama in my life. Prior to these climbs Daumas and his colleague La Roche had got us—minus our camels and drivers—up Wadi Imlaha—a most desolate place, difficult to get into and out of and which no camel could hope to negotiate, without a helicopter. I also wrote a brief article in 1972 drawing attention to the enforced neglect of Daumas's guide book.

No doubt there have always been good reasons why so few climbers went to Sinai; now, and for the foreseeable future, none can. Apart from fine mountains the travel and camping are pleasant and the weather in the winter generally fine and cool. Transport, guidance, and help are needed from Bedouin sources. Cars can only go, at their peril, up main wadis, camels are built for the desert and wilderness and do not let you down, the local Bedouin are cheerful and friendly, and some climb rocks very well. All food has to be carried. Water is the critical problem, it is usually scarce, sometimes absent and local Bedouin are vastly more useful in finding it than maps made a few years back.

I saw these mountains for the first time in 1929, at which time I had totted up 2 alpine seasons; from the deck of a liner they looked remote, mysterious, and inviting. By the time I got amongst them in 1943 I had had 10 more seasons of climbing but the desire to get to Sinai had not diminished. For 3 years, stationed a few miles from Suez, I watched the sunrise over, and the setting sun glint on, the limestone plateau of El Tih nearly every day. It remained out of reach, neither time nor transport being available. Then in 1943 I was introduced to Monsieur Daumas and invited to join him on his next mountain trip to S Sinai. I could only get away for a fortnight and had to leave Daumas and his friend La Roche to get back to my unit before my leave ended. I have described all this before, and how Daumas was putting together his guide book to the Sinai mountains. I flew home for some leave 2 months later and my next posting was far from Sinai. However on both the outward and the home journey I again sailed past these Jebels and feasted my eyes on that medley of granite peaks. Sinai has ever since become my favourite subject for study. I am too old to hope to go that way again, yet the sunrise over El Tih and the fortnight with Daumas have given me a greater contentment than the Alps, Norway or the British Hills, not that the climbing is as good and varied, but rather because of the utter remoteness and feeling of awe to be found there. One day, perhaps, it will again be open to climbers, travellers, and naturalists; in anticipation of this I humbly suggest that the club obtains some copies of Daumas's guide book before impatience at its present lack of sales causes those in Cairo to regard the edition as no longer wanted and pulp the whole stock. It is worth a place amongst the best guide books on any shelf.