Constructing the Late Antique Desert

In a revealing passage, Daniel of Raitho suggested that while the seventh-century saint John Climacus lived in Saint Catherine's monastery 'by the visible nature of the place itself, he was impelled towards the invisible God'.[1] Such sensitivity towards environment is typical of Late Antique architecture, especially the monasteries whose inhabitants sought in the desert the opportunity to strengthen their faith. However, studying these monuments with maps and plans, which often lack details of topography and surrounding features, can make it hard to visualise the interplay of built and natural elements. Photographs curated by Manar al-Athar allow this relationship to be elucidated, giving insight into how premodern understandings of the natural world manifested and evolved.

Saint Catherine's monastery, established in the Sinai in 565, can only be truly understood in its topographic setting. A pilgrimage destination and the heart of a monastic community, its inhabitants lived out their lives in the desert, according to the historian Procopius, in 'careful preparation of death'.[2] Its location had religious significance, marking the location of Moses' burning bush, and beneath the mountain where he received the Ten Commandments. But geography also made the site perfect for a monastery (Fig. 1). The surrounding mountains offered monks a dramatic prospect from which to contemplate the vastness of creation. These mountains also sustained the community, allowing rainfall to accumulate inside the valley and watering a modest garden (Fig. 2). Eking out an unlikely existence, dependent on trickles of water from the mountainside, in Saint Catherine's one was well placed to learn humility, self-sufficiency, and fear of God.

The monastery's structure reflected the community's complex relationship with the landscape. Recognising the desert's spiritual power, they knew that surviving it required years of training and occasional mental respite. Such respite might be found within the monastery's enigmatic fortified walls (Fig. 3). Though Procopius indicates that they offered defence against raiders, recent historians argue that they added little to the defence already afforded the monastery by the terrain.[3] I suggest instead that they provided mental, rather than strategic, fortification. For those in desert cells, a glimpse of the smooth walls amid the rugged landscape would have been a reassuring reminder of human life upon which to fix their gaze (Fig. 4). The walls would also have kept much of the sand and animals out of the structure, allowing the monks to enjoy some measure of comfort deep in the desert. The monastery served as a spiritual fortress, protecting its inhabitants from the full force of nature and stiffening their resolve to struggle on.

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[1] White, B., & Evans, H. (2004). Saint Catherine's Monastery, Sinai, Egypt: A photographic essay. Metropolitan Museum of Art: New York p. 7

[2] Forsyth, G. (1968). The Monastery of St. Catherine at Mount Sinai: The Church and Fortress of Justinian. *Dumbarton Oaks Papers, 22*, p. 4

[3] Forsyth, 'Monastery of St. Catherine', p. 4

Figure 1: Saint Catherine's Monastery, nestled below Mt Sinai.

Figure 2: Saint Catherine's and its garden.

Figure 3: The walls of Saint Catherine's.

Figure 4: Saint Catherine's in the snow.

Figure 5: Qasr al-Hayr al-Sharqi.

← **Figure 6:** A subterranean aqueduct in Qasr al-Hayr al-Gharbi.

→ **Figure 7:** Floral design on the entrance of Qasr al-Hayr al-Gharbi.

← **Figure 8:** Entrance of Qasr al-Hayr al-Gharbi.

This attitude to nature finds its antithesis in the early Islamic 'desert palaces', constructed by the eighth-century Umayyad rulers as places to relax and receive client tribesmen. While Saint Catherine's is situated below mountains, these later structures stand on the open Syrian plains, visible for miles around (Fig. 5). More conspicuous still were the extraordinary environments created around them. Around Qasr al-Hayr al-Gharbi in Western Syria, for example, was an enclosure a kilometre across, watered by a monumental underground irrigation network. An aqueduct 18km long (Fig. 6) connected it to a reservoir at Harbaqa which was created behind the world's largest surviving premodern dam.[4] Not only did the palace's enclosure support crops and livestock, remains of a mill and ornamental water features indicate that it served as a garden. By making the open desert bloom rather than living like the monks on what the landscape naturally provided, Umayyad engineers demonstrated the Caliph's power over nature itself.

While Saint Catherine's walls firmly demarcated between natural and built environments, we see no such division here. Whereas Saint Catherine's walls were stark, floral patterns adorned those of Qasr al-Hayr al-Gharbi (Fig. 7). Playfully elidinwordg nature and artifice, its texture would have mirrored the lushness of the surrounding garden, as its gateway does in its present setting at the entrance of the National Museum of Damascus (Fig. 8). Though resisting the natural world created a sense of security in the monastery, the Umayyads did so just as effectively by creating a space within the complex where the desert was controlled. With natural features incorporated into the complex' design, the decorated fortifications and irrigated landscape of Qasr al-Hayr al-Gharbi embodies a mindset which saw the desert less as an emanation of God's power, than a blank space in which to exercise one's own.

Comparing photographs of these structures, one appreciates how differently they interact with their surroundings. This gives a sense of the contrasting relationships their inhabitants had with nature: while Saint Catherine's monks used the desert for spiritual training, Qasr al-Hayr al-Gharbi's builders saw it instead as an engineering challenge. Hypotheses can be proposed for what drove this shift. Perhaps Christian and Islamic conceptions of desert space differed. Perhaps the buildings' different functions – one religious, the other palatial – explains it. Perhaps the relative ease with which the Syrian steppes were remodelled, compared to the unforgiving Sinai, instilled confidence in a builder's power over nature. Here I simply suggest that photographs allow new questions like this to be posed, and end with the hope that photo archives like Manar al-Athar might answer them too.

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[4] Genequand, D. (2012). Les Établissements des Élites Omeyyades en Palmyrène et au Proche-Orient. Institut Français de Proche-Orient: Beirut. p. 257