

Sinaiticus



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WORLD PRESS REPORTS ON PLIGHT OF SAINT CATHERINE'S MONASTERY AND THE BEDOUIN

SAINT CATHERINE FOUNDATION APPEALS FOR HELP

Egypt remains in a state of emergency, and the security situation in North Sinai continues to cause concern. Government advisories warn against travel to the north, and many fewer tourists are visiting South Sinai this year. The local economy was already in severe decline when the monastery was forced to close for three weeks in August and September. The consequences were immediate, as recent press reports make clear (Guardian, 5 September, 'Mount Sinai monastery latest victim of Egypt's upheavals: Closure of St Catherine's monastery due to security concerns has devastated tourist trade of nearby town named after it'. Washington Post, 4 October, 'Ancient monastery has few visitors amid Sinai unrest, but Bedouin neighbors protect it').



Jebeliya children at home in St Katherine. *Photo Hilary Gilbert*

Close to 1,000 Bedouin families live in the vicinity of Saint Catherine's, many of them at or below the World Bank's absolute poverty standard of US\$1 per person per day. The poorest are now going hungry, and they cannot feed their camels and animals. Many of them have appealed to the monastery for help, and the Fathers are doing what they can to provide assistance, but the monastery's resources are very limited.

The Bedouin of today continue to protect the monastery, just as their ancestors did in Justinian times. In recognition of their role as guardians of the monastery, the Saint Catherine Foundation's boards in London, New York and

Geneva have allocated funds for distribution by the monastery to the most needy. A total of \$24,000 will be disbursed over the coming winter, an amount that should provide relief to the most desperate families. The foundation is appealing for donations to augment these funds, and the proceeds of Christmas card sales will go entirely to the Bedouin.

This issue of *Sinaiticus* features an article on the Bedouin of South Sinai by the British anthropologist Dr Hilary Gilbert (see page XX). Resident for part of the year in the town of St Katherine, named after the monastery, nearby, Hilary Gilbert well understands the precarious existence of the Bedouin. She makes an emotional plea for help for this beleaguered community. 'The monastery is an integral part of the fabric of their lives and history: they love it; they are proud of it and want to protect it. If ever help was needed to support this community, and to keep intact the historic ties of mutual care and obligation that span 1,500 years, now is the time'.

SOUTH WING RENOVATION BEGINS AT ROOF LEVEL

The monastery is proceeding cautiously with the planned renovation of the library building. Work began in December 2012 under the sure supervision of Father Theoktistos, aided by local Bedouin helpers. Father Justin's blog on pages 4 - 6 shows how much has been achieved this year. The roof has been stripped of covering materials and insulation down to the concrete slab. The slab itself has been reinforced with steel plates and bracing rods, and superficial cracks in the concrete have been reinforced with epoxy resin grouting. The surrounding parapet wall has been rebuilt.

The work is all the more necessary in these uncertain times, as the renovated library will offer a more secure environment for the storage of the manuscripts, scrolls and early printed books.

PREVENTIVE CONSERVATION PROTECTS HISTORIC CHAPELS

**John and Mary Manley fund the work in memory
of their son Charlie**

Three chapels within the South Wing were at risk of damage during the planned renovation of the library: the Chapel of the Archangels, Chapel of the Prophets Moses and Aaron, and Chapel of St Nicholas. Construction work could have destabilised these historic structures and the wall paintings, plasterwork and timber elements they contain. A team of conservators from the Greek Lithou Sintirissis consultancy travelled to Sinai to evaluate the condition of the chapels and take precautionary measures. They made two visits of one week each, in May and June 2013.

The barrel-vaulted Chapel of the Archangels contains painted decorations from the sixth century, including bird and plant motifs and imitation stone veneers and pilasters. The image of the Virgin in the domed Chapel of the Prophets Moses and Aaron probably belongs to the Late Byzantine period, while the figures of the prophets there are predominantly recent (1950s).

Inspection of the paintings revealed problems of powdering, discolouration and loss of pigment, cracking and internal voids, and infills with a variety of mortars and plasters. Conservators dry cleaned surface deposits, applied grouting and filled internal voids.

The Chapel of St Nicholas is noteworthy for its plasterwork decoration and the graffiti written on it—the names of pilgrims inscribed over centuries, some with the date of their visit to Mount Sinai. The sixth-century space was converted to use as a chapel in Middle Byzantine times, when the plasterwork was created and the icon and wooden chandelier installed. Straightforward consolidation and cleaning work was needed here. The conservators have strengthened the plasterwork and reattached fallen sections, while protecting the graffiti against damage. The stone floor was consolidated and cleaned as well.

Timber elements in the chapels have been affected to a greater or lesser extent by wood-boring insects, notably the elaborate polychrome and gilt altarpiece in the Chapel of the Prophets Moses and Aaron. Pending further treatment, the altarpiece has been carefully removed and wrapped for storage during construction work.

The project to protect the chapels was undertaken with the generous support of John and Mary Manley. It is dedicated to the memory of their son Charlie, who loved churches, and Sinai.



caption

‘THE MONASTERY IS OUR HISTORY’ - DEVELOPMENT, CHANGE AND CONTINUITY FOR ST KATHERINE’S BEDU

HILARY GILBERT, UNIVERSITY OF NOTTINGHAM

I had been explaining to a former British diplomatic couple that my husband and I live and work for part of each year in St Katherine. During a tour of duty in Egypt in the early 1960s they had visited Mount Sinai. Then, the great fortress monastery was the sole building in a biblical landscape dotted with Bedouin tents, flocks and gardens. ‘So do you stay with the monks?’, they enquired in surprise. In their recollection no other accommodation was possible. The modern St Katherine we live in was beyond their imagination – a bustling Egyptian town where government streetlights, stucco villas, hotels and neon-lit shops increasingly eclipse the modest stone homes of the Bedu. The Israeli Occupation following the Six-Day War of 1967 saw the onset of development in South Sinai, and the emergence of St Katherine as an administrative centre and Bedouin settlement. With the return of Egyptian rule in 1982 that development accelerated rapidly, but the mass tourism industry that grew up was serviced not by Bedu but by incoming Egyptian workers. The prosperity created by South Sinai’s tourism has left most Bedu behind. St Katherine’s resident Jebeliya tribe, who have made their lives here for 1,500 years, are dismayed by the changes of the past half-century. ‘There are too many people in St Katherine now,’ an elderly sheikh told me. ‘There is no oxygen. We cannot breathe.’

Since 1986 my husband, his colleagues and students have studied the unique ecology of the St Katherine Protectorate, including the iconic Sinai Baton Blue – the world’s smallest butterfly - and the complex interactions of fauna and flora in wadis surrounding the monastery. His recent work vindicates Bedouin herding practice, long blamed for destructiveness, and paves the way for radical changes in conservation policy. Meanwhile, nearly three years’ living in Egypt sparked my anthropological interest in the Bedu. I started to study the impacts of the rapid development we had observed at first hand.¹ As our understanding grew of the entrenched disadvantage experienced by Bedu in modern Egypt, it felt clear that research alone was not enough. I explain below how, working with Egyptian and Bedouin partners, we established a community foundation for South Sinai to support and encourage local people to improve their quality of life. How social and ecological changes have come about in St Katherine, and how the Bedu can be helped to negotiate their impacts, is now the subject of our integrated programme of research and practice. However, integrated approaches to living are of course nothing new in St Katherine.

Monks and shepherds: an abiding partnership

Saint Catherine’s Monastery and its treasures are so intrinsically absorbing that it is easy to overlook the social

partnership that has permitted its continuous occupancy for 1,500 years. However, many people with an interest in the monastery will know the story of the Jebeliya tribe, ‘the Mountain people.’ They are held to have been sent from Wallachia, in modern Romania, by the Emperor Justinian around 529CE to serve and protect the monks. Gradually they established themselves as a distinct tribe among other South Sinai Bedu, eventually converting to Islam. However, until the eighteenth century some held to their Christian origins, and Bedu of Arab descent refused to marry them, describing them scornfully as *ruumi* (‘Byzantine’, hailing from the Greek world). But why should Justinian have sent the desert fathers help from so distant and dissimilar a place? It can be deduced from early sources that the founding members of the Jebeliya tribe were in fact Vlachs (from which the name ‘Wallachia’ is derived): hardy, mountain-dwelling shepherds, soldiers and traders from across the Balkans and northern Greece. Supporting this argument, Vlachs have traditionally served and protected the Orthodox monasteries of Greece, including Mount Athos. It is not clear whether Justinian exported an existing trend or established a new one, but a pattern of interdependence between religious and pastoralists took shape in Sinai and still shapes its human geography. The new arrivals (*sebiya*, ‘servant’) were quartered near the monks in what is still the settlement of Wadi Esba’iya; their other settlement, known in oral tradition as ‘Hrazim,’ is likely to be modern Kharazein, north-east of the monastery. Genetic research by our group confirms the social isolation of the Jebeliya, demonstrating that their gene pool is among the most restricted of any people on earth. While some genetic studies have cast doubt on the European origins of the tribe, much research remains to be done. The existence in one of the tribe’s founding clans of a small, specialist vocabulary said to date back to its Latin origins is a further research strand waiting to be unravelled.

While its origins may never be perfectly clear, we know that as a people the Jebeliya have co-evolved in this hyper-arid climate with the monks, who in return for protection, labour and supplies have provided the tribe with bread and wages. Other tribes have historically shared the Jebeliya’s privileged position: today the ‘Awlaad Sa’iid share access to work, transport and escort rights, with conditions of service continually renegotiated, and guiding work systematically allocated to ensure fairness.

Traditional Bedouin livelihoods

This symbiosis produced a Bedouin way of life of which the key features varied little until the late twentieth century. Its core elements were semi-nomadic herding and a unique Byzantine orchard horticulture. These were supplemented by other occupations to earn money for goods not locally obtainable.

South Sinai Bedu traditionally relied upon mixed flocks of goats and sheep for a substantial share of their living. In early summer flocks would be moved up to summer grazing ranges, extended families moving frequently with their few material goods and easily dismantled tents woven by women from their own wool. Detailed knowledge of

1. For my PhD research at the University of Manchester, working with my Bedouin colleague Mohammed Abu Khedr al Jebaali, between 2007 and 2010, I interviewed in Arabic 122 individuals, mostly in their own homes in ‘urban’ St Katherine and its rural hinterland, and surveyed the household economics of 84 families.

different wadis and elevations, each with its characteristic vegetation and water supply, was used by Bedu to maximize benefits from their surroundings. Taking the flocks out to pasture was traditionally a job for women and girls, and the wadis around St Katherine would be filled, morning and evening, with the sound of bleating, chatter and laughter as the girls walked their charges to pasture.



A typical small mixed flock

Historically, South Sinai pastoralists grazed their flocks all year round, needing only occasional winter fodder. Their semi-nomadic way of life in this marginal terrain was formerly made possible by controlling access to its sparse resources. Small, highly dispersed groups travelled between sites, moving on before vegetation and water were depleted. Tribal agreements covered access rights to grazing land, seasonally restricting forage but allowing reciprocal use of pasture in times of need. Where abundant livestock left areas vulnerable to overgrazing, Bedu imposed controls, no grazing of summer pastures being allowed in winter on pain of a heavy fine. The Bedu call these regulations *helf* ('a pledge'); their rotation systems, still annually renewed by their sheikhs, ban grazing or fodder collection from entire wadis, thereby supporting the ecosystem.

Cultivating orchards is rare among mobile peoples, but in South Sinai Bedu probably learned horticultural techniques from the monks whose gardens they worked. They were cultivated chiefly by the Jebeliya, whose territory in the high massif supports fruit trees more usually found in northern climates. A typical mountain garden might include apples, apricots, almonds, quince, pears, grapes, plums, figs, walnuts and mulberries. The ripening of the first apricots at the lowest elevations would signal the time to move flocks up to higher mountain pastures. At lower elevations dates were cultivated by all tribes, chiefly in the oases of Wadi Feiran and Dahab, and wheat was grown where water permitted. Historically, orchard produce was transported by camel to markets in Suez, el Tur or Cairo. Underneath the trees, making best use of irrigation water, salad and vegetable crops were also grown. Although highly labour-intensive, some three-quarters of Jebaali families owned a productive garden.

Before 1967, Bedouin household economy relied on these traditional livelihoods. In addition to cash returns from sales, sheep and goats provided valuable protein from milk, cheese and (more rarely) meat. They provided wool for rugs and tent panels, hides for carrying water, and any number of practical daily uses. Livestock constitutes capital wealth for Bedu, so meat has never featured frequently in the traditional Bedouin diet, which consisted largely of vegetables, dairy proteins and staple starches. In the past most Jebeliya could expect a sparse but fairly nutritious diet: good quality water from the mountains, fresh milk in season, dried dairy proteins out of season and home-grown fruit and vegetables, fresh or preserved. Coastal tribes had dates, and supplemented their diet with fish. Cereals, as well as tea, coffee and sugar, oil and lentils, remain essential commodities which are not locally produced. While in times of hardship the monastery has supported local Bedu with a 'dole' of bread, purchase of other commodities required cash from labour or trading.

The Bedouin economy has always included paid work, judiciously combined with core livelihoods to provide not merely subsistence but an active strategy for minimizing risk. Herding and gardens were not merely an insurance policy for when unreliable paid work failed; maintaining both enabled Bedu to be an integral part of the wider market economy, and ensured a meagre or modest living for most. Various occupations are recorded in South Sinai, apart from guiding pilgrims and working for the monastery: for example charcoal manufacture, camel transport, and hunting and fishing in order to trade. When legal work faltered some Bedu turned to smuggling – and latterly growing – drugs. Involvement in narcotics has demonized the Bedu in Egyptian public opinion; however, we are consistently told that they resort to it from extreme need and would abandon it at once if alternatives existed. Our current research confirms that in many affected areas there is virtually no other work; one community of 80 houses, in 2013, had only four men in legitimate paid work. The knowledge that drugs are *haram* – forbidden in Islam – as well as illegal makes Bedu doubly reluctant to support their families in this way.

Development and its effects

In 1967 the Israeli Occupation of Sinai brought the peninsula into a modern, inflationary economy. While many aspects of development were welcome to the Bedu – schools, clinics and regular paid work – others led to irreversible changes in their way of life. Principal among these was sedentarization. Many jobs were at the coast or in Israel: to access transport and services, or work in administrative centres like St Katherine, Bedu had to settle. Natural grazing could not cope with the resulting pressure from their flocks. Bedu responded by de-stocking, but soon a typical flock had fallen well below the size needed to support a family, and required expensive bought-in fodder. Within ten years, herding became unviable. Meanwhile those employed as migrant workers were unavailable to dig wells and tend gardens, so a quarter of gardens were also

abandoned. Rapid inflation raised the cost of living between five and ten times, and families became entirely dependent on paid work.

Throughout the Israeli Occupation the supply of paid jobs outstripped demand. However, when Egyptian rule returned this changed. Like nomadic pastoralists everywhere, Bedu have always been viewed as suspicious – as ‘not really Egyptian’ – by Egypt’s settled population. As a result, the rapid commercial development of Sinai – until recently providing one-third of Egypt’s tourist revenue – was serviced by migrant workers bussed in from the Nile Valley. Mainland Egyptians regard the culturally and ethnically distinct Bedu as ill-educated and troublesome, and do not employ them: in 2002, of some 20,000 jobs created by hotels in Sharm el Sheikh, next to none were given to Bedu. In St Katherine, guiding pilgrims and tourists has always provided work for Jebeliya men: on average, twice as many interviewees in areas outside St Katherine had no work, rising to nine times in places. Women in St Katherine have had access to two handicraft projects, one supported by the Monastery’s Patra Musi. However, one project folded in 2013, and the apparent security provided by tourism has proved precarious: at present no tourists come to buy crafts or climb the Mountain. Stable, regular jobs for Bedu appear far-off. Asked at a public meeting in 2011 to improve their employment prospects, the Governor of South Sinai responded, ‘Jobs for Bedouin? How can I create jobs for Bedouin? What can *they* do?’

Three decades of such discrimination have resulted in poverty, both relative and absolute. While a few Bedu manage to adapt and do well, in 2007-08 more than 50 per cent of our interviewees were in casual jobs that typically paid 300 LE (\$50/£27.50/€32) per week or less *when they had work* – barely enough to keep a South Sinai household averaging eight members on US\$1 per person per day. At this level households may be ‘chronically hungry, unable to access health care, lack the amenities of safe drinking water and sanitation...and basic articles of clothing such as shoes². Especially where there is only one earner, living standards for the poorest families I visit could be described in just this way. Even using a generous estimate of eight months’ work per year, the household of a typical unskilled worker in the wadis was surviving on just 67 cents per person per day, well below the extreme poverty standard. The United Nations Development Program (UNDP)³ records just 5.3 per cent of inhabitants of Egypt’s desert areas as poor. Our data suggest that in South Sinai this underestimates the problem by a factor of ten. More than half our interviewees lived in poverty, unrecorded in the official statistics.

Meanwhile, food price inflation in Sinai rose by double the government’s estimate: an average 46 per cent, compared to 23 per cent across Egypt. Today, prices continue to rise while earnings fall or fail. Poverty of course directly affects nutrition. Many products which now have to be purchased – fresh produce, eggs, dairy and meat – were formally obtained from orchards and flocks without cash

outlay. Our household food survey asked people to assess roughly how much they spent weekly on different types of food. While most can now buy some non-staple products, people in poverty still buy only basics. Eleven per cent of St Katherine and 37 per cent of rural households generally buy only staples unless work brings in extra cash. A Tarabin father of four commented, ‘If I have money I buy food. If not, just flour for flatbread and a half-kilo of lentils. If there’s anything left at the end of the month I might buy a kilo of meat.’ In 2013 I have interviewed whole families subsisting on meagre quantities of bread, potatoes and tea. When compared to mainland Egyptians, Bedu experience almost double the rate of government-defined food poverty: 80 per cent, compared with 44 per cent.

Bedu are barred from the Armed Forces. Education is poor or non-existent: 44 per cent of Bedouin adults have had no education at all, compared with 7 per cent of Egyptians, and professional Bedu are almost unknown. Many lack electricity and accessible water. With healthcare poor, unaffordable or absent, and a heavy-handed security presence, Bedu feel with good reason that their country is failing them.

The Community Foundation for South Sinai: step by step towards change

The Government of Egypt does not census Bedu or assess their needs as a separate group. As a result, their experience is not reflected in published indicators of human development such as the Millennium Development Goals. Their inaccessibility to Cairo-based researchers means Bedu fall through the gaps of data-collection: for example, UNDP Human Development reports cite South Sinai as having the best provision of doctors outside Cairo. In fact, outside the main conurbations no healthcare at all is available to most Bedu, many of whom still rely on herbs and red-hot nails. This failure to record Bedouin needs means they are not addressed by policy makers or aid agencies: one major international charity told me they did not work in South Sinai ‘because the people aren’t poor enough.’ As a result, nothing changes. Yet to anyone who has visited South Sinai and talked to its people, their material need and lack of opportunity are self-evident. It seemed to us that the first step was to gather good evidence about the issues, giving rise to my PhD research. The next step was to create a suitable means to facilitate change.

We chose the community foundation model because I had seen, over many years of involvement, how effectively it can provide sustainable and inclusive community support. The past quarter-century has seen this model spread rapidly, from historic roots in North America, into every continent except Antarctica. A community foundation provides a vehicle through which donors with an interest in a geographical area can fulfil their philanthropic aims. By managing endowed funds, the foundation creates permanent income for grant making to causes chosen by donors, or that meet priority needs in its community. By allocating a percentage of annual income for administration, once it reaches a given size it can operate

2. Sachs J (2005) The End of Poverty p20

3. The UNDP periodically produces Human Development Reports tracking Egypt’s progress towards the Millennium Development Goals.

4. We suspect that families who maintain traditional livelihoods may be in a better position than those who have abandoned them: our current research investigates possible links between child nutrition and retention of flocks and gardens.

sustainably, independent of government or external funding constraints. This independence enables it to address issues considered too local or unpopular to appeal to other funders.

We realized that the key factors for a successful community foundation were in place in South Sinai: material need, available wealth, and a constituency of people committed to it for its unique religious, cultural and natural heritage. In 2006, after 18 months' consultation, the Community Foundation for South Sinai was registered in el Tur⁵ with a board including British, Egyptian and Bedouin trustees. It was the first community foundation in Egypt – *al mo'assessa-t-al ahliya lijanoub sina* (referred to in what follows as 'the mo'assessa'). The mo'assessa has grown slowly by design: using a natural simile that accords well with the outlook of those we work with, we say we have planted a seed, and are watering it slowly so it puts down strong roots. We trust it will grow in time into a shady tree that will outlive its founders and help many people.⁶



Father Michael joined us at the launch of the mo'assessa

Our aim was (and remains) to create a sustainable, endowed fund to support Bedouin communities through Bedouin-led activity. We take pride in our record of promoting Bedouin agency and participation; but fund development is proving more challenging in Sinai than in the socioeconomic climates in which the model evolved. Our initial plan to raise endowed funds has not been abandoned but deferred in recognition of a financial crisis that erodes endowment income, and a political crisis that exacerbates tensions between Egyptians and Bedu. Egyptian donors willing to invest in Bedouin development are thin on the ground; international donors are put on edge by negative media coverage of Sinai; and most Bedu cannot dream of donating at the level needed to build endowment. However, small-scale local donors are on the increase, and many more contribute in time and kind according to local norms, as happens in other poor communities. We therefore spend the limited assets we have, while remaining fully committed to rebuilding them in future.

The dearth of NGOs in South Sinai⁷ has meant a further shift of approach, doing less grant making than a

'standard' community foundation and more hands-on development. Aiming for an evidence-based approach to practice, our activity and spending priorities have emerged from our research as well as constant contact with local people. Much of our spending has supported work to improve access to water in this hyper-arid desert region, primarily through building and improving wells. We give regular educational bursaries, permitting Bedouin children to attend school; pay medical bills for many people in hardship; deliver flood relief, veterinary care and food parcels in Ramadan; and undertake small-scale projects helping people improve their livelihoods, such as teaching women to make felt from their own wool and building a community olive oil press. We have started a livestock bank (a small flock is now managed entirely by congenitally deaf Bedu), and a women's chicken co-operative. This year we have helped people establish market gardens in two villages, and are currently investing in olive saplings for 200 hard-up young families across the region so they can provide for their children in future. Some of this work is funded from our own resources, some from funds raised by the board from both Egyptian donors and visitors to Sinai; and some from grants. This support has been critical in helping us to build capacity and professionalize our operation, so that, while we remain a very small body, we punch above our weight.

However, the 2011 Revolution also revolutionized the mo'assessa's operation, expanding our work and its impact. In the liberalized climate of the Arab Spring we ran community meetings in 75 locations across South Sinai, encouraging men and women separately to speak up about their priorities and needs, and informing them of their rights as citizens. We also held signed meetings attended by 400 deaf people, the first of their kind. Many Bedu were not registered as citizens, and, by stationing Bedouin volunteers in registration offices, we encouraged them to register. This entitled them to not only much cheaper subsidized food, but also to vote in Egypt's first democratic



Seventy families now use the mo'assessa's oil press

5. El Tur # 2006-02

6. In 2009 we established a UK-registered partner charity, the South Sinai Foundation (Registered charity number 1128955) to facilitate international operations.

7. Egypt is thought to have 16,000-18,000 NGOs, some 53 of which are registered in South Sinai. Most are inactive.

elections. Some 3,750 people attended our meetings, and 4,230 registered – around 10 per cent of the estimated Bedouin population. Twelve young people decided to stand as candidates, including three girls, and the election returned an unprecedented eight Bedouin MPS out of 12. This was civic participation on a fairly grand scale, in a population previously characterized by disengagement. How was it achieved? By being entirely Bedouin-led: ably managed by Mohammed Khedr, our Bedouin co-ordinator, the programme was run entirely by trained Bedouin facilitators – men and women – volunteers and signers. Bedu responded in their thousands.



All over South Sinai thousands of Bedu attended our meetings

We have now developed a network of 28 community link volunteers, who advise us and help us make funding and grant decisions across the region. In St Katherine, our co-ordinator, trustee and others have formed a small civic committee to relay people's concerns to the authorities – an unprecedented development in democratic engagement with the state. Perhaps the most significant outcome of our meetings has been a growth in confidence: since knowing they are entitled to consideration for government jobs,

dozens have applied successfully in St Katherine, including some girls. People are asking for the free primary healthcare to which they are entitled as 'sons of Sinai'. Young people are enrolling in distance-learning courses. This process may be slowed by the current crisis but will not be reversed. As Mohammed puts it, 'The people have woken up.'

The mo'assessa, then, has instigated change as well as charity. Like the Bedu themselves we have had to adapt, regularly reviewing our tactics while keeping our long-term goal always in mind: a Bedouin community in which people can make free choices to improve their lives according to their own norms and values. Our research programmes will continue to seek better understandings of the Bedu and their environment, while through the mo'assessa we work for a better, more equal future for all St Katherine's citizens. But through all this change, how remarkable it is that for 1,500 years one thing has proved constant: the symbiotic relationship between the 'people of the Mountain' and the monks. When the police stood down in the revolution, the Bedu took up arms to defend the monastery. Now, fearing sectarian violence, they are doing so again. 'The Monastery is our history,' says Mohammed. 'We cannot imagine life without it.' Meanwhile the Fathers, concerned for their protégés, strive to protect them from the coming hungry winter. *Plus ça change, plus c'est la même chose....*

DR HILARY GILBERT is Research Fellow in the School of Life Science, University of Nottingham. She is the only British anthropologist currently working with South Sinai Bedu.

Her husband DR FRANCIS GILBERT has led a research project investigating the ecology of the St Katherine Protectorate since 1986. Together with Bedouin and Egyptian colleagues, they co-founded the Community Foundation for South Sinai and its UK-registered partner organization, the South Sinai Foundation.

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Any not readily available may be obtained by contacting hilarygilbert@hotmail.co.uk.