Preface

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The ambivalence of the title, hinging on the key word 'Mountain' and the interplay between singular and plural, evokes the central theme of this volume: the 'Mountain of God', the mountain of theophany and the Holy Mountain of Scripture, the Fathers, and so many ancient and medieval authors.

Yet, Scripture itself speaks of 'holy mountains': Sinai and Horeb, and then Tabor, the mountain of Christ's Transfiguration. The singular thus finds expression in the plural, as particular places give material, visible, and tangible form to the Mountain of God.

With the birth and flourishing of Christian monasticism, these places became the setting for a renewed theophany. It is hardly by chance that Sinai occupies a central place in this development, since monastic life had taken root there from a very early period.

The essays gathered here explore this theme as it emerges from ancient Christian and patristic literature and, above all, from the literature, history, and iconography of Byzantine and Eastern monasticism. Their geographical horizon extends from Sinai to Mount Athos and to the mountains of the Balkans and Asia Minor; their approaches, whether art-historical, iconographic, literary, historical, or archival, are independent but complementary.

Taken together, these different perspectives encompass much of the Byzantine millennium and reach beyond it into modernity, while ranging geographically from Sinai and Greece to medieval Bulgaria and Serbia. They also touch upon some of the great summits

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of literature and art, Byzantine and otherwise, among them the mosaics of the Sinai monastery, the *Ladder* of John Climacus, and the paintings of El Greco. Particularly striking is the recurrent presence of Sinai across more than a millennium and in several of the essays, as though, amid this plurality of sacred landscapes, it retained a singular status as the Mountain of God par excellence.

The essays are expanded versions of papers delivered at the conference held at the Fondazione San Carlo in Modena on 7-8 November 2025, an event that also marked the four-hundredth anniversary of the Foundation.

As this undertaking reaches its conclusion, we wish above all to thank the authors for their contributions, together with all those who, in various ways, made possible both the organization of the conference and the publication of this book.

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