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The Sinai Landscape in Cretan Icon-Painting (Fifteenth-Sixteenth c.)

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Abstract This paper investigates the association of the monastery of St. Catherine at Sinai with Venetian Crete. Drawing on documentary evidence in the form of commissions preserved in the Archivio di Stato di Venezia, it examines Cretan icon-painting and traces the development of the iconographic theme of the Sinai landscape as an independent composition on Cretan icons and triptychs. Finally, it highlights the essential role played by fifteenth- and sixteenth-century Cretan painters, such as Andreas and Nikolaos Ritzos, as well as Georgios Klontzas and Domenikos Theotokopoulos in shaping the iconography of the Sinai landscape.

Keywords Sinai. Venetian Crete. Sinai landscape. Cretan icon-painting. St. Catherine.

Sinai, associated as it is with well-known events narrated in the Old Testament,[1] became the ultimate holy place, a *locus sanctus* as it is usually called. It was at the foot of Mount Sinai that Moses saw the Burning Bush and heard the voice of God asking him to remove his sandals, while he was tending the flock of Jethro, his father-in-law. It was also at Sinai that God appeared to Moses and delivered the

1 According to the Book of Exodus (3,1-5), it was on Mount Horeb and at the foot of Mount Sinai that Moses while tending the flock of his father-in-law, saw the Burning Bush and heard the voice of God asking him to remove his sandals. Later in the same book (24,16) God appeared to Moses at Sinai, again on Mount Horeb, and delivered to him the tablets of the law with the Ten Commandments. Therefore, it is reasonable to find in the book Exodus (24,16) the phrase: *The Glory of the Lord settled on Mount Sinai.*

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Tablets of the Law to him. A fortified monastery dedicated to the Virgin was built by the Emperor Justinian in the mid-sixth century at the foot of Mount Sinai, on the site of the Burning Bush.[2]

Sinai – already an Old Testament *locus sanctus* – also became the repository of St. Catherine's body. After the saint was decapitated in Alexandria, her body was transported by angels and buried at Sinai. We can't be certain when the relics of the saint were discovered at the top of the mountain named after her. Once discovered, they were transferred to the monastery's main church, the *katholikon*, and placed in a marble sarcophagus on the south side of the sanctuary, where they started miraculously to exude oil.[3]

At Sinai, the landscape and the monastery itself both signify the holiness of the site and thus become inseparable **[fig. 1]**. This paper explores how and when the Sinai landscape was visually transformed from merely serving as a background to Old Testament events associated with the region into an independent pictorial composition. In this context, my aim is to investigate the role played by Cretan icon painters in the formation of themes of Sinaitic iconography, with particular emphasis on the Sinai landscape itself. First, however, it is necessary to examine the circumstances that enabled Cretan painters to produce a remarkable number of icons and triptychs for Sinai.

The monastery of Sinai maintained strong connections with Crete because it owned a large number of properties on the island: villages, vineyards, mills and churches. These possessions were of such importance to Sinai that, soon after the Venetians arrived in Crete in 1210, the abbot of Sinai, Symeon, appealed to the doge in Venice to confirm the monastery's ownership of these properties. In March 1212, the doge of Venice, Pietro Ziani, issued a decree guaranteeing Sinai's rights over its Cretan possessions and granting the monastery exemption from various export duties.[4] One of Sinai's most prestigious dependencies in Crete was its *metochion* in Candia, the capital city of Venetian Crete. This complex included a church dedicated to St. Catherine, built in 1555, which survives to this day. The church of St. Catherine in present-day Heraklion houses an important collection of icons.

The decree of 1212 clearly demonstrates, on the one hand, Venice's desire to maintain close and amicable relations with the Sinai monastery and, on the other, the importance of the Cretan dependencies to the monastery at Sinai. The close connection between Sinai and Crete is reflected in the considerable number of Cretan

2 Grossmann 1990, 29-40; Koufopoulos, Myriantheos 2024, 41-105.

3 Ševčenko 2006a, 118-37; Ševčenko 2006b, 130-3.

4 Tafel, Thomas [1856-57] 1964, 2: no. 233, 146-50; Ševčenko 2006a, 119-20; Maltezou 2023, 53-5; Tsougarakis 2026, 62-9.

icons produced for the monastery. Indeed, a remarkable number of Cretan icons and triptychs are found in the monastery. Some of these works bear the signatures of well-known Cretan painters. For example, an icon with St. John the Theologian dictating the text of his Gospel to his disciple Prochoros before a cave **[fig. 2]**, is the work of the most distinguished painter of Candia during the second quarter of the fifteenth century, Angelos Akotantos. The painter's original signature, ΧΕΙΡ ΑΓΓΕΛΟΥ, which presumably existed on the lower right side of the composition, was overpainted in the late eighteenth century.[5] An icon of the Deesis also bears the signature of Angelos, quite worn, beneath the footstool of Christ's throne.[6] At least five more icons in the monastery can be attributed to the painter Angelos, on iconographic and stylistic grounds.[7]

According to Angelos' will, drawn up in 1436, the painter had a close relationship with the Sinaitic *metochion* in Candia, to which he bequeathed a sum of money and, under certain conditions, part of his immoveable property. He also bequeathed to the Sinaitic *metochion* of Candia a tondo icon of St. Catherine, which was to be displayed annually on the saint's feast day in commemoration of him. The icon itself has either not survived or has not yet been located. However, a tondo icon of St. Catherine, formerly in Skradin, Croatia, and now in the Episcopal Palace in Šibenik, may be attributed to Angelos on iconographic and stylistic grounds.[8]

It seems that Angelos was not the only fifteenth-century Cretan painter to have connections with Sinai. Indeed, Andreas Ritzos (documented 1451-92) and his son Nikolaos (doc. 1482-1503), both active during the second half of the fifteenth century,[9] were also associated with the monastery. The central panel of a triptych surviving at Sinai **[fig. 3]**, which is divided into two registers, shows on the upper register Moses standing before the Burning Bush on the left side, Moses untying his sandals in the middle, and Moses receiving the Tablets of the Law on the right side.[10] On the lower register there is the Burial of St. Catherine. On the left wing of the triptych, also divided into two registers, St. John the Baptist and

5 Drandakis 1990, 127, fig. 80; Vassilaki 2021, 18-20, figs. 4, 5a.

6 Drandakis 1990, 127, fig. 77; Vassilaki 2021, 20, fig. 6.

7 These are, for example, the icons of the Presentation of the Virgin to the Temple, an icon of the Deesis, and one more icon of the Deesis with St. Phanourios instead of St. John the Baptist, and a tondo icon with the Embrace of the Apostles Peter and Paul. Drandakis 1990, 127, figs. 77, 78, 81; Vassilaki 2021, 20, 22, figs 6, 7.

8 Vassilaki 2021, 26-7, fig. 9.

9 Cattapan 1973, 238-82.

10 Nelson, Collins 2006, entry no. 58, 270-3 (Angela Volan); Constantoudaki-Kitromilides 2014, 5, fig. 2; Vassilaki 2021, 33-5, fig. 11.

St. James are depicted, while on the right wing, we see St. Andrew and St. Anthony. This triptych can be attributed, on iconographic and stylistic grounds, to the Cretan painter Andreas Ritzos, and is therefore dated to the second half of the fifteenth century. In this triptych the landscape of Sinai takes the shape of three mountainous peaks, which correspond to the actual landscape of the monastery: Mount Horeb or Mount Moses stands in the middle, the Mount of St. Catherine is on the right and the Mount of St. Episteme is on the left.

Andreas Ritzos can also be associated with additional triptychs of Sinaitic iconography preserved at Sinai, such as one (inv. no. 1566) showing the Burial of St. Catherine on the right wing of the front side and Moses untying his sandals before the Burning Bush on the right wing of the reverse **[figs 4-5]**.[11] Both the signature ΒΙΚΤΟΡΟϹ ΚΡΗ(ΤΟϹ) (by Viktor the Cretan) and the date ΑΧΝΑ (1651) were added in the eighteenth century.[12]

On a third triptych (inv. no. 1574), which can also be attributed to Andreas Ritzos, the right wing of its rear side is divided into two horizontal zones: the upper zone shows Moses before the Burning Bush, untying his sandals and receiving the Tablets of the Law; the lower one shows the Burial of St. Catherine **[fig. 6]**.[13] Once again, the signature of a sixteenth-century Cretan painter, Michael Damaskinos, was added in the eighteenth century.[14]

In all these examples the Sinai landscape has taken the shape of the three mountainous peaks, which correspond to the actual landscape of the monastery: Mount Horeb (or of Moses) in the middle, the Mount of St. Catherine on the right side, and the Mount of St. Episteme on the left. In these triptychs two new iconographic variations for the Virgin of the Burning Bush made their appearance. In the first, the bust of the Virgin with the Christ Child in a *mandorla* is reminiscent of the Virgin Platytera **[figs 5-6]**. In the second, the Virgin and the Christ-Child are shown full-length seated in a *mandorla* of heavenly light **[fig. 3]**, in the centre of a green bush surrounded by bright red flames.

On one of my visits to Sinai, in September 2006, I came across a rather unusual piece of work: a polyptych, in the form of a pentaptych (inv. no. 1578), with minute dimensions.[15] Each of its panels measures just 7.6 cm in height, and 5.4 cm in width. One wing of the polyptych is missing. Twelve Gospel scenes, from the so-called Dodekaorton,

11 Vassilaki 2021, 35, figs. 12-14.

12 Vassilaki 2023, 199, fig. 10.5.

13 Vassilaki 2021, 39, fig. 15.

14 Vassilaki 2021, 39, fig. 16; 2023, 201-2, fig. 10.6.

15 Vassilaki 2009, 746-8, pls 5-9; 2021, 40-7, figs 17-19; Constantoudaki-Kitromilides 2014, 7-8, fig. 3.

are to be found on the pentaptych's wings **[fig. 7]**. The front side of the central panel shows the Nativity of Christ, while the wings show the Presentation of Christ in the Temple, the Annunciation, the Entry into Jerusalem, the Crucifixion, the Ascension of Christ, the Pentecost, the Doubting of Thomas, and the Dormition of the Virgin. On the rear side of the central panel there is a representation of the three mountains of the Sinai landscape and this makes it very important for this paper **[fig. 8]**. This view of Mt. Sinai remains visible when the pentaptych is closed and this adds further importance to its representation.

The significance of this polyptych becomes even greater when considered alongside a contract drawn up by the Cretan notary Giorgio Cumno, and signed in Candia on 11 September 1499 between the painter Nikolaos Ritzos and Gerasimos Kypraios, a monk in the Sinaitic *metochion* of Candia.[16] The contract concerned twenty-four works in the form of icons, *panaghiaria*[17] and triptychs, presumably painted by Nikolaos Ritzos himself. Kypraios, who was about to travel from Crete to Mount Sinai, wanted Nikolaos Ritzos to safeguard them for as long as he was away. In the event of Kypraios' death, the painter was to deliver each of these works to monasteries in the Aegean (the monastery of St. John the Theologian on the island of Patmos), the Dodecanese (the monastery of St. Anthony on the island of Rhodes), the Ionian islands (the monastery in Strophades near Zakynthos), to Mount Athos (the monastery of Dionysiou), and most importantly to Sinai. In fact, seventeen works were to be delivered to St. Catherine's monastery at Sinai. The contract makes it clear that all these works had to be handed over in person to the monk Klimis or to the monk Janni Griparis, both of them monks at Sinai.

Although this contract is not a commission, it nevertheless documents an exceptionally close relationship between Nikolaos Ritzos and the Sinaitic *metochion* in Candia. It demonstrates not only that the *metochion* entrusted him with valuable works, but also that Sinai itself was a major recipient of his production. Though there is no concrete evidence, there is every reason to believe that the seventeen works intended for Sinai reached the monastery. Seen in this light, the survival of the pentaptych attributed to Nikolaos Ritzos at Sinai is entirely consistent with the documentary evidence. However, whether it can be identified with one of the seventeen works mentioned in the contract must remain an open question.

16 First published in Cattapan 1972, 213-14, doc. no. 9; also published in Cattapan 1973, 253, 265-6, doc. no. 27; Vassilaki 2009, 741-3, 746-8.

17 A *panaghiarion*, which owes its name to that of the Virgin (*Panaghia*), is a small liturgical paten with a representation of the Virgin, and is intended to carry the bread offered to the Virgin by monks during the liturgy. *ODB* 1991, 3: 1569.

The representation of Mt. Sinai on the pentaptych, attributed to Nikolaos Ritzos, is of particular interest, as it constitutes the oldest surviving representation of the view of Mt. Sinai in Cretan icon-painting, in which the landscape becomes an independent composition. This seems to suggest that already by the end of the fifteenth century representations of Mt. Sinai, in the form of drawings or prints from woodcuts, were circulating in Venetian Crete. A very telling example is the print from a woodcut based on an on-site sketch by Erhard Reuwich **[fig. 9]**, a painter from Utrecht, who had accompanied Bernard of Breydenbach on his journey to the Holy Land and Sinai in 1483. The travel book by Bernard of Breydenbach, illustrated with woodcuts by Reuwich, was first published in Latin in 1486, and became so popular that between 1486 and 1522 it was reprinted twelve times and was also translated into German, Dutch, French and Spanish.[18]

In this pentaptych the landscape takes the form of a triple-peaked complex, placed against a blue background rather than a golden one, which is more typical in such a work. It is obvious that the landscape dominates the composition, while the sacred events are, by comparison, miniature in scale. In the middle is Mount Moses with Moses receiving the Tablets of the Law. Lower down and to the left Moses is standing before the Burning Bush. On the peak to the right, which is the Mount of St. Catherine, there is the translation of St. Catherine's body by angels from Alexandria and its burial at Sinai. There is also an oasis with trees in a narrow valley to the right. It's not clear whether the monastery of St. Catherine was also included in this representation.

The polyptych's iconography and style suggest that it was painted in Venetian Crete in the last decades of the fifteenth century. Furthermore, its miniature-like quality makes it highly possible that it was painted by Nikolaos Ritzos, the son of Andreas Ritzos. Nikolaos was active in Venetian Candia, in the last decades of the fifteenth century. There is only one icon known to bear the signature of this painter. It is in the Icon Museum of the Old Orthodox church in Sarajevo, Bosnia.[19] The icon shows the Deesis in the middle, ten Dodekaorton scenes and single saints on the border. The inscription on the Sarajevo icon gives the name of its painter, Nikolaos Ritzos, and also pays tribute to his father. It reads: ΧΕΙΡ ΝΙΚΟΛΑΟΥ ΡΙΤΖΟΥ, ΥΙΟC ΤΟΥ ΜΑΙCΤΡΟΥ ΑΝΔΡΕΟΥ (the hand of Nikolaos Ritzos, son of the master Andreas).

The contract discussed above, although not itself a commission to Nikolaos Ritzos, nevertheless demonstrates that the Sinaitic

18 von Breydenbach 1486; Jacoby 2006, 85, fig. 72.

19 Vocotopoulos 2005, 207-26.

metochion in Candia commissioned works from Cretan painters on a substantial scale. This would explain why painters such as Andreas and Nikolaos Ritzos developed a repertoire of Sinaitic themes to satisfy the monastery's demand.

It is this view of Mt. Sinai that also appears on the central panel of the rear side of the so-called Modena triptych, which is to be found in the Galleria Estense of Modena **[fig. 10]**. It bears the signature of Domenikos Theotokopoulos/El Greco ΧΕΙΡ ΔΟΜΗΝΙΚΟΥ (hand of Domenikos). The Modena triptych is dated between 1566 and 1569 depending on whether it was painted while Theotokopoulos was still in Crete, till at least the end of 1566, or after his arrival in Venice in 1567/1568. The Sinai landscape as it appears on the central panel of the rear side of Theotokopoulos' Modena triptych shows parallels with that in the pentaptych. Of course, we have to take into account that we're comparing two works of completely different dimensions. As already mentioned, the dimensions of each of the pentaptych's panels are 7.6 cm in height, and 5.4 cm in width. The dimensions of the panel depicting the Sinai landscape on the Modena triptych are 37 × 23.8 cm, which means it is about five times larger than the pentaptych's panel in both height and width.

In the Modena triptych the three peaks of Sinai are placed diagonally, and the monastery is placed at the foot of the central mountain, Mount Moses. A caravan of travellers approaches the monastery from the right and is welcomed by Sinai fathers. A second group of pilgrims approaches from the far left. An inscription on the upper part of the Modena triptych composition, written in gold letters, reads: ΤΟ ΑΓΙΟΝ ΚΑΙ ΘΕΟΒΑΔΙΣΤΟΝ ΟΡΟΣ ΤΟ ΣΙΝΕΟΝ (the Holy and God-trodden Mount Sinai), making reference to Mount Sinai alone and not to the monastery of St. Catherine.

It seems reasonable to suppose that the depiction of the Sinai landscape on the pentaptych derives from a larger composition, presumably also executed in the workshop of the Ritzos family. This, in turn, suggests that long before copperplate engravings of the Sinai landscape began to circulate in the final decades of the sixteenth century, representations of Sinai – whether in the form of drawings or woodcut prints – were already available to Cretan painters by at least the closing decades of the fifteenth century. If so, Domenikos Theotokopoulos would have been familiar with such representations before leaving Crete. His View of Mt. Sinai would therefore not have depended exclusively on Giovanni Battista Fontana's copperplate engraving, printed in Venice in 1569.[20] Perhaps both the Modena Triptych and Fontana's engraving were based on

20 Kühnel 1981, 171-4, figs 8, 10, 11; Dillon 1995, 236-7, fig. 7; Constantoudaki-Kitromilides 2014, 18-20, fig. 10.

an earlier representation of Mount Sinai that has not survived or has not yet been located.

El Greco was to paint the View of Mt. Sinai once again on a panel, housed today in the Historical Museum of Crete, in Heraklion **[fig. 11]**.[21] This is believed to be the panel mentioned on 31 January 1600 in the inventory of Fulvio Orsini, the librarian of Cardinal Alessandro Farnese in Rome. The panel was to be bequeathed to Cardinal Odoardo Farnese. In the inventory of Fulvio Orsini the panel is described as "having a walnut frame with a landscape of Mount Sinai, painted by the hand of a Greek disciple of Titian" (*Quadro corniciato di noce con un paese del monte Sinai, di mano d'un greco scolare di Tiziano*). Though the panel does not bear the painter's signature, its attribution to Domenikos Theotokopoulos has been generally accepted. It is known that Theotokopoulos lived in the palace of Alessandro Farnese between the years 1570 and 1572. In these years, it's believed that the panel with the View of Mt. Sinai was painted. The composition shows the Sinai landscape, the monastery of St. Catherine and small-scale scenes of pilgrims. In the left corner of the foreground, three Western pilgrims wearing short capes and hats are approaching. On the right side of the foreground three pilgrims are arriving on camels, while a fourth one has descended from a horse and is kissing the hand of a Sinaite monk, who is welcoming him to the monastery. Mt. Moses in the middle is scattered with small chapels (hermitages), and also includes the staircase that leads up to its peak, which survives to this day. The fortified monastery has been placed diagonally at the foot of Mt. Moses. There is no doubt that El Greco's composition relies heavily on Fontana's copperplate engraving, which, as already mentioned, was printed in Venice in 1569.

El Greco was not the only Cretan painter who depicted the View of Sinai during the second half of the sixteenth century. The Cretan painter Georgios Klontzas,[22] a contemporary of El Greco, also painted the View of Mt. Sinai and of the monastery in two triptychs, both of which bear his signature.

The first one, known as the Yorkshire triptych, is today in the collection of Marianna Latsis in Athens **[fig. 12]**.[23] The View of Mt. Sinai is on the reverse of the central panel. The three mountainous peaks are pulled back towards the background in order to leave more space for the inclusion of the monastery, of scenes from the everyday life of the Sinaite monks, and of Old Testament scenes. For the depiction of the monastery, Klontzas adopted an imaginary

21 Constantoudaki-Kitromilides 2014, 32-43 with all the previous bibliography.

22 On the Cretan painter Georgios Klontzas and his work, cf. Chatzidakis, Drakopoulou 1997, 83-96.

23 Fotopoulos 1996, no. 24, 96-111, esp. 105-7 (M. Kazanaki-Lappa).

architectural representation with a high bell tower and a wing with an arched two-storey portico in the background. The landscape is full of scenes of monastic life and also of the Old Testament scenes, such as the Crossing of the Red Sea in the foreground and the Worship of the Golden Calf.

The second triptych by Georgios Klontzas, known as the Spada triptych,[24] also shows the View of Mt. Sinai on the reverse of its central panel **[fig. 13]**.[25] Once again, the three mountainous peaks are pulled back towards the background offering most of the surface to scenes of monastic life and to the Old Testament scenes of the Crossing of the Red Sea and the Worship of the Golden Calf.

The Cretan triptychs with Sinaitic scenes that are preserved in the monastery of St. Catherine to this day were most probably commissioned by the monastery itself or were commissioned by individuals and offered to the monastery on the occasion of their pilgrimage to Sinai. The document of 1499, mentioned above in relation to the pentaptych attributed to Nikolaos Ritzos, can easily support the hypothesis of works commissioned by or for the monastery at Sinai and executed in Candia.

The impressive number of Cretan icons and triptychs depicting Sinaitic subjects might suggest that at least some of these works were produced *in situ*. In other words, is it possible that some Cretan painters established themselves at Sinai? Appealing though this hypothesis may be, I find it difficult to accept it in the absence of convincing supporting evidence. Rather, I believe that very few, if any, Cretan painters travelled to Sinai during the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. The available evidence instead suggests that works were produced in Crete and transported to Sinai through the well-established network linking the Sinaitic *metochion* in Candia with the monastery of St. Catherine.

This paper tried to show the role played by Cretan painters in establishing themes of Sinaitic iconography. Moreover, it tried to show the role of Cretan painters in establishing the view of Sinai and turning it into an independent composition. What I find really interesting is the fact that the depictions of the View of Mt. Sinai – as it appears in the pentaptych attributed to Nikolaos Ritzos, in the Modena triptych by Domenikos Theotokopoulos, in the Blunt triptych today in the Marianna Latsis collection and in the Vatican triptych – all seem to have made use of a similar prototype. As we are absolutely certain that the pentaptych and the Blunt and the Vatican triptychs were executed in Crete, it is beyond any doubt that their painters had access to this prototype while living and working in

24 This triptych is now in a private collection in Washington D.C.

25 Petsopoulos 1987, no. 74, 88-95 (P.L. Vocotopoulos).

Crete. Rather than inaugurating the iconography of Sinai, Fontana's engraving may have drawn upon an established visual tradition that had already circulated for decades between Crete and the monastery of St. Catherine. Given this, I would like to conclude this paper by addressing the following question. Could this also be used as evidence for the painter of the Modena triptych? In other words, could Domenikos Theotokopoulos have painted the Modena triptych while he was still living and working in Crete?

Figures



Figure 1 St. Catherine's monastery, Sinai



Figure 2 Sinai, icon with St. John the Theologian and his disciple Prochoros by Angelos



Figure 3 Sinai, triptych with Sinaitic scenes



Figure 4 Sinai, triptych with Sinaitic scenes (front side)



Figure 5 Sinai, triptych with Sinaitic scenes (rear side)



Figure 6 Sinai, wing of a triptych with Sinaitic scenes



Figure 7 Sinai, central panel of a pentaptych. The Nativity



Figure 8 Sinai, pentaptych. View of Mt. Sinai

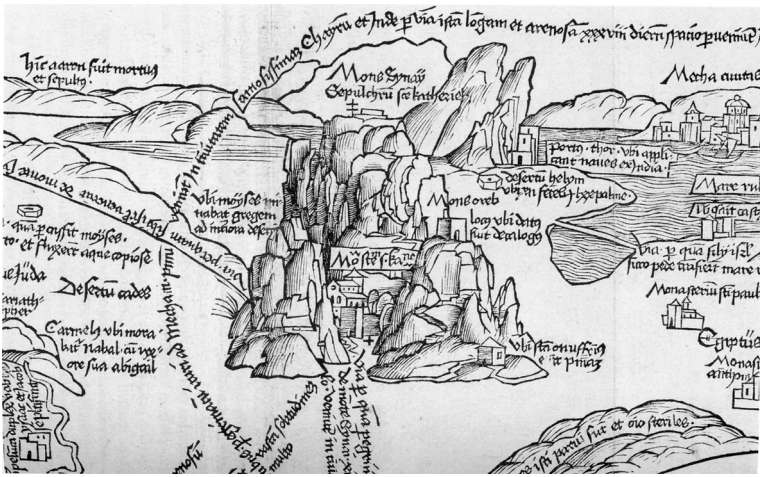


Figure 9 View of Mt. Sinai. Detail from a woodcut by Erhard Reuwich (1486)



Figure 10 Modena, Galleria Estense. The Modena triptych by Domenikos Theotokopoulos/El Greco



Figure 11 Heraklion, Historical Museum. Panel with the View of Mt. Sinai and St. Catherine's monastery



Figure 12 Athens, M. Latsis' collection. The Yorkshire triptych by Georgios Klontzas



Figure 13
The View of Mt. Sinai on the Spada triptych by Georgios Klontzas

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