



INTERNATIONAL COUNCIL ON MONUMENTS AND SITES – I.C.O.M.O.S.
THE OFFICIAL TECHNICAL ADVISOR OF UNESCO

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HELLENIC NATIONAL COMMITTEE

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PRESS RELEASE

Subject: THE SAINT CATHERINE MONASTERY IN THE SINAI PENINSULA

ICOMOS Hellenic expresses its strong concern regarding the ownership and the confiscation of the assets of St. Catherine's Monastery in the Sinai Peninsula, such as stipulated by a recent decision of the Egyptian judiciary. The monastery was founded in the mid-6th century by the Emperor Justinian I, and is the oldest monastery that has been in continuous operation for 15 centuries, remaining Orthodox. The Monastery and its surroundings have over time become a sacred place for 3 religions, Judaism, Christianity and Islam, remaining largely unscathed by major interventions until the beginning of the 21st century.

In 2002, the monastery and its surrounding area of 60,100 hectares was recognized by UNESCO as a World Heritage Monument. In addition, the area has been declared a natural ecosystem reserve, which includes rare specimens of geological formations and rare species of plants and animals. In the last decade, in this area, the implementation of a colossal-scale tourism development program has started, called Great Transfiguration Project. This project, before it is even completed and operational, has already changed the look and character of the place.

UNESCO's World Heritage Committee (WHCommittee) has asked the Egyptian authorities to respect the conventions in force for World Heritage Sites: to stop construction works on the site until detailed studies are carried out, including studies on the impact of their implementation on the Outstanding Universal Values of the World Heritage Site, and management plans. The Egyptian authorities do not seem to have any intention of stopping the work.

The problem that has emerged with the decision of a long-standing court case concerning the status of the monastery is not an isolated one. It is part of a global network of policies and actions that are inextricably linked to the recent escalation in the eastern Mediterranean, which is rapidly bringing about radical changes in the political, economic and ecological balances of the region.

The assurances of the Egyptian authorities that the religious and liturgical character of the Monastery will be preserved do not negate the effective confiscation of its property. The impact "on the preservation of the monastic mode of operation of the Holy Fraternity and its pilgrimage character"; will be irreversible, resulting in the desolation of the Monastery and the annexation of the local population in the context of the Great Transformation. The Monastery will be preserved as a tourist attraction, without any substantial religious content. There is no reference to the immense wealth of the monastery, precious documents and works of art, which have been kept for centuries in its buildings, and are included in both the tangible and intangible heritage and which, by implication, are protected as an integral part of the Outstanding Universal Value of this World Heritage Site, designated by UNESCO as the "Saint Catherine Area".

The publication of the Egyptian court's decision has highlighted one of the major and complex problems in the management of World Heritage, in the broadest sense of the term management of the World Humanitarian Heritage, at the cultural and social level. In the Sinai Peninsula and Palestine, monuments and shrines associated with the origins of three major religions are "crowded" together. The prospect of exploiting these monuments and shrines and their natural resources for tourism is attracting the interest of economic giants, who do not hesitate to destroy essential cultural and humanitarian heritage values, which they claim to do the best of. In such a context, even in the best-case scenario, monuments become objects of a virtual historical-cultural-humanitarian reality without any real content.

The Hellenic ICOMOS is deeply concerned about the future of the Monastery of St. Catherine in the Sinai Peninsula, and believes that the governments of Egypt and Greece, UNESCO, the ICOMOS National Commissions, the UN and the European Community must take steps to annul the decision of the Egyptian court, so that efforts for the proper management of this World Heritage Site can be intensified.



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We also consider it appropriate that the World Heritage Committee of UNESCO, at its forthcoming session in July 2025, to register the Monastery of St. Catherine in the Sinai Peninsula to the List of World Heritage in Danger, in order to take enhanced measures for its protection.

On behalf of I.C.O.M.O.S. Hellenic National Committee

The President

Anastasios Tanoulas



The Secretary General

Anastasia Stasinopoulou