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Pilgrims to Tourists: Evolution of Travel in South Sinai in the 19th and 20th Century

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ARTICLES

We are continuing our publication of selected papers from the 2015 ASTENE conference at Exeter. In this issue, Daniele Salvoldi gives an extensive account on Sinai Travel in the 19th and 20th century. As the article is substantial in length, part 1 is below, and part 2 will be published in the Autumn Bulletin.

Pilgrims to Tourists: Evolution of Travel in South Sinai in the 19th and 20th Century

Part 1

Introduction

Since Late Antiquity, South Sinai has been an attraction for travellers. For centuries, the fortune of the region had laid in its holy character for both Christianity and Islam. It is only in the 19th century that other motivations arose and what was a traditional pilgrimage turned often into leisure travel. In the words of Joseph Hobbs: "All who travelled overland to Mount Sinai emphasized the hazards along the way. From the early 19th century such obstacles became an attraction in themselves, a reason to travel."[1]

The main difference between pilgrims and travellers was the motivation: "Pilgrimage for most was necessity, penance, exile, suffering in unpleasant lands; travel for most was choice, leisure, participation, and acceptable discomfort in enchanting places."[2] According to this definition, travellers and tourist were not very different either, but "tourism is a mass phenomenon while nineteenth- and early twentieth-century travel involved movement of small numbers of people."[3]

Since the 1973 Arab-Israeli conflict, tourism in Sinai has completely changed: Jabal Musa still being an attraction for a Sinai journey, the seaside locations on the east coast such as Nuwayba, Taba, Dahab, and Sharm al-Shaykh have become among the most successful vacation destinations in the world. One travels to South Sinai for its sandy beaches and pristine coral reefs, and only as a second instance gets a chance to visit the holy places on a one-day trip.

Explorers

Changes at the turn of the century were instrumental in the shift of interests: the Napoleonic campaign of Egypt (1798-1801) opened the way for more travellers in the country, while there is no doubt that the rise of Mehmed ʿAli Pasha as *wali* of Egypt in 1805 gave a greater impulse for further travel and exploration. From this period on, political control of Cairo over Sinai increased significantly, as the Pasha signed a series of deals with the Sinai tribes: exemption from military service was exchanged for Bedouin responsibility over the security of the peninsula.[4]

Pilgrims were now joined by men with specific scientific interests. Nevertheless, the monastery of St. Catherine remained the focus of all Sinai travels and the travellers always performed the devotions required from pilgrims.[5] In any case, even scholars well into the 20th century were particularly interested in Biblical history, which received new impulse by the introduction of scientific methodology in archaeology.

Among the most important scientific accounts of the Peninsula we certainly number those by Coutelle and De Rozière, who in 1800 were the first to publish within the *Déscription de l'Égypte* the results of their observations on Sinai. The German geographer Seetzen visited shortly after in 1807. Johann Ludwig Burckhardt, who visited in 1816, produced one the most interesting accounts. His work was regarded as an indispensable tool for a visit to Sinai along with the works of Seetzen and Niebhur.[6] Burckhardt also inspired the travel of British traveller William J. Bankes, who was interested in Nabataean inscriptions and Greek manuscripts, particularly from the library of St. Catherine's monastery, whence he took a few volumes.[7] Bankes later funded the journey of John Hyde (1819) and Alessandro Ricci with Linant de Bellefonds (1820). Linant's map of Sinai, unfortunately unpublished, is the first relatively precise map of the region.[8] Only in 1826, Eduard Rüppel finally published a precise map of Sinai, correcting the widespread idea that the Gulf of Aqaba had two bays.[9] After the one drawn by Leon Delaborde, a new detailed map of the peninsula was

published by C.W. Wilson and H.S. Palmer only in 1868-69.

In the following years, Egyptological research concentrated its efforts on ancient Egyptian sites such as Maghara and Sarabit al-Khadim (Lepsius in 1843, Petrie in 1905-06), while Biblical research focused on the route of the Exodus (Robinson and Smith, 1841; Palmer, 1871).[10] Geographical, geological, and botanical expeditions were carried out during the whole 19th century and first quarter of the 20th. As pointed out by Hobbs, following Batanouny and Said, "there were darker unstated motives for travel and research in Sinai. The peninsula's global crossroads location made it a focus of strategic, commercial, and ideological interests." [11]

The importance of these early explorations for the history of tourism is multiple. In the first instance, the published accounts would serve as guides for subsequent travellers. Secondly, the discoveries and scientific achievements of the first explorers enriched the chapters of later tourist guidebooks with correct historical and environmental information. The first Baedeker guide to Egypt and Sinai was published in 1878 with the help of Egyptologist Georg Ebers; in the paragraph dedicated to Maghara, for example, he included the recent research of Egyptologist Richard *Lepsius* and geologist Carl F.H. Credner.

Travel guidebooks

The first guidebook of Egypt, published in 1830 by Jean-Jacques Rifaud, included a chapter about Sinai. For the peninsula it was still a time when, in the author's words, "l'apparition d'un étranger est un accident qui étonne." [12]

In the space of a century, around two hundred guides about Egypt (mostly including Sinai) were to be published, at a rate of two every year. A hundred more guides were published in the following thirty years only. Among the guidebooks of Egypt considered by Volkoff for the period 1830-1964, only ten mention Sinai directly in the title; nevertheless, most of the guides dedicate a chapter to the travel in the peninsula.[13] All of them were published in the period 1858-1909: this must reflect a cultural shift as the peninsula was more and more considered part of Egypt.

The first guide entirely dedicated to Sinai was Daumas' in 1951,[14] followed a few years later by Bassili's (1957).[15] The prolonged period of war and political instability in the region in the 1960s prevented tourists from reaching Sinai; thus, no guidebooks were apparently published in those years. After the region returned to Egypt in 1982 and the Egyptian government implemented its plans for development, specific guidebooks reappeared.

Journey Organisation

In the early phase of Sinai touring, a traveller was required to engage a Bedouin shaykh and his camels for the entire trip directly at Cairo; the Tuwara Bedouins had a base in the capital, where a traveller could easily reach them.[16] Before the 19th century, the Bedouins of Sinai had complete control over the peninsula and its routes, and, according to Burckhardt (1822), "enjoyed the exclusive privilege of transporting goods, provisions and passengers from Cairo to Suez,"[17] whose they were considered the protectors. The situation changed quickly in the first quarter of the 19th century: "Since the increased power of the Pasha of Egypt, it [i.e. the route] has been thrown open to camel-drivers of all descriptions, Egyptian peasants, as well as Syrian and Arabian Bedouins; […] the Bedouins of Mount Sinai have lost the greater part of their custom, and the transport trade in this route is now almost wholly in the hands of the Egyptian carriers."[18]

Later on, when Suez became reachable by train, the camels could be engaged thence; still, as Baedeker warns: "All the preliminaries must be arranged at Cairo, where alone are to be found the necessary dragomans and the Shêkhs of the Tâwara Beduins, who act as guides and let camels during the travelling season. The first thing is to engage a good dragoman, who provides camels, tents, bedding, blankets, and provisions."[19]

Murray's guide, which was published only three years after (1888), offers another possibility: "Unless the traveller is anxious to spend a few days in crossing the desert from Cairo to Suez, […] he will save a good deal of expense by telegraphing or writing to the manager of the Suez Hotel a few days before he intends leaving Cairo, and requesting him to have some camels and guides ready by a certain date. If there should be none at Suez, three or four days will suffice to bring in any number from the desert."[20] On the other hand, it warns the traveller against venturing as far as al-Tur by water on the

Red Sea and engaging camels directly there, "as once there, the Arabs will ask what they like."[21]

Baedeker provides a contract sample for the use of travellers, specifying the many duties of a dragoman: "The Dragoman Y. shall provide a good cook, and a sufficient number of servants, and shall take care that they are always polite and obliging to Mr. X. and his party, and that they are quiet at night so as not to prevent the travellers from sleeping, and he shall also maintain order among the camel drivers, as well as the other attendants."[22]

The dragoman, then, was much more than a mere translator. Being in charge of the success of the travel, superintending all members of the caravan, managing meals and camping, making all arrangements according to the instructions received and paying all fees with the money the travellers entrusted him with, he was more like a modern travel agent.

A man travelling to Sinai was asked to bring everything from Cairo, as nothing could be purchased in Suez, al-Tur or in the Holy Monastery, except for (common) food. The list comprises tents, blankets, mattresses, umbrellas, scientific instruments, and books. The contract suggested in Baedeker lists even the menu: "The traveller's breakfast shall consist daily of eggs, with tea, coffee, or chocolate; lunch shall consist of cold meat (roast-meat, fowls, etc.), and fruit; dinner, at the end of the day, shall consist of … courses. The travellers shall be provided with oranges and dates whenever they desire. […] The dinner hour should always be fixed for the evening, after the day's journey is over."[23] Among the food provisions are also listed "good cocoa […] a supply of Liebig's extract of meat."[24] Wines and spirits were also to be supplied by the traveller prior to departure, even if some – of a lesser quality – could be found at the monastery.

A supply of tobacco and coffee would also prove useful to distribute to the members of the caravan as tips or to other Bedouins as presents of hospitality. Burckhardt states: "Trinkets and similar articles are little esteemed by the Bedouins; but coffee is in great request all over the desert; and sweetmeats and sugar are preferred to money, which, though it will sometimes be accepted, always creates a sense of humiliation, and consequently of dislike towards the giver." [25]

The relationship between the traveller and his Bedouin guides would be formalized under the term 'protection' and with the characteristics of an honour deal. If the times of plunder and assassination of caravan members of the early pilgrims were probably far, still venturing out of the territory of a certain tribe without proper guides could end up with some bloodshed, as it happened to Burckhardt on his way back from an attempted trip to Aqaba. Arundale warns: "The facility of travelling in Europe is daily increasing; every imaginable convenience is adopted to render a journey less fatiguing to the traveller, and cause his motion or rest to be attended with luxury and ease. […] It is not so in the East; […]. The traveller, therefore, would do well to conform entirely to the manners and usages of a people and country, the unvarying nature of whose habits, during so many centuries, will alone be sufficient proof of the necessity. […] It is only by doing that he can gain the friendship of those under whose protection he places himself." [26]

Part of the idea of "conforming entirely to the manners" was dressing the 'Oriental way.' This was absolutely required in 1830, according to Rifaud. In 1850, it was suggested as a possible option, but not a requirement. In 1870, it was advised against, unless the traveller would speak Arabic. Burckhardt, who converted to Islam, was known under the name of shaykh Ibrahim and spoke fluent Arabic, used to wear the Turkish dress. This allowed him to travel with more ease, but forced him to hide while taking notes, because "wishing to penetrate into a part of the country occupied by other tribes, it became of importance to conceal my pursuits, lest I should be thought a necromancer or in search of treasures."[27]

Itinerary, infrastructure, superstructure and time

Travellers heading to the monastery of St. Catherine would usually come from Cairo via Suez or from Jerusalem via Gaza. The first route was more common, as a traveller would habitually proceed from Egypt to Syria-Palestine. Baedeker recommends in the contract with the dragoman "to lay down the whole route very precisely, mentioning also the valleys which have to be traversed, but the stages must of course depend on the situation of the [water] springs."[28]

The typical pilgrim route would have been from Cairo to Suez with a first stop at Matariyya, now in the district of Heliopolis, northeast of Cairo. A stop to 'Ayun Musa is referred to for the first time

already in 1349. Then the traveller would proceed to Firan (probably as early as Egeria, and later undoubtedly in the Piacenza Pilgrim's account, mid-6th century). Despite not being on the way to the monastery, a stop to al-Tur is recorded as early as 1470, and a working Greek monastery there is mentioned in 1556. The nearby spring of Hammam Musa is referred as the Biblical Elim already in 1335. In the first half of the 19th century travellers would typically follow this route: Cairo (stopping not far from the city for the night), Agruda, Suez, 'Ayun Musa, Wadi Gharandal, Wadi Nasb, Wadi Firan, Wadi 'Aliyat, Wadi al-Shaykh, St. Catherine's Monastery.[29] A visit to Sarabit al-Khadim, and sometimes Maghara and Mukattab, was paid on the way back to Suez. Baedeker suggests two routes, one by land through Maghara, Mukattab, Firan, the monastery and back via Wadi al-Shaykh and Sarabit; the other route by sea, from Suez to al-Tur, and then back by land.[30] This second option was already picked by Henniker as early as 1820.

After the railway between Cairo and Suez opened in 1859, the journey speeded up and camels were required only from Suez on. The train journey would take only five hours and a half. Ten years later, in 1869, the construction of the Suez Canal forced travellers to take a boat and join the caravan on the other side of the canal or, more comfortably, directly at 'Ayun Musa.

Only in 1926 the camel was replaced, for the first time, by a car.[31] The roads available were only two: a main axis from Suez to al-Tur, and an offshoot to Firan and the monastery; no fuel could be found in the entire peninsula at the time.[32] In the 1950s, a truck from Suez would carry passenger to St. Catherine as a regular service. The road network was improved only much later: in 1971 the Israeli administration opened a paved road from Eylat to Sharm al-Shaykh, while a branch leading up to the monastery was added in 1977.[33] In 1980, a tunnel was built under the Suez Canal and the Egyptian government paved the road through Wadi Firan and Wadi al-Shaykh. This changed the traditional access road to the monastery, which used to be through a southernmost path in Wadi 'Aliyat and al-Raha plain. Buses would run from Cairo to St. Catherine four times a week in 1982 and daily already in 1986.[34]

The Israeli administration built a military airbase right after the occupation, adding a passenger terminal in 1976; according to Hobbs "in the late 1980s Air Sinai began to carry passengers between the St. Katherine and Cairo airports twice weekly."[35] In the last thirty years, with the development of coastal resorts, especially on the East side of the peninsula, people would reach the monastery from there. The International Airport of Sharm al-Shaykh – originally an Israeli air base built in 1968 – in a way disconnected Sinai from Egypt and international tourists can reach the peninsula without seeing Cairo.

It seems a couple of hotels were running in Suez even before the railway reached the city. *The Handbook for India and Egypt* (1841) lists M. Hill & M. Raven's, with a limited number of rooms, and M. Waghorn's hotels.[36] Accommodations in St. Catherine were first built in the late 1960s and grew over time to a lodging capacity of more than a thousand beds in 1993.[37]

Travelling on camels, the journey from Cairo to St. Catherine would typically last about ten days,[38] plus a period of stay at the Holy Monastery of around three days.[39] After the train line between Cairo and Suez was built, the journey would take seventeen to twenty days. With the improvement of carriageways in the 1950s, a car would have joined St. Catherine from Cairo via al-Tur in fifteen hours only. In Bassili's *Sinai and the Monastery of St. Catherine* (1957) "mention is made of a five-day excursion to Sinai offering travel from Cairo and return, with three days in the desert."[40]

(Continued in Bulletin 73)

Footnotes

1 Joseph J. Hobbs, *Mount Sinai* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1995), 251.
2 Ibid., 241.
3 Ibid., 242.
4 George W. Murray, *Sons of Ishmael. A Study of the Egyptian Bedouin* (Cairo: Farid Atiya Press, 2012), 41.
5 Frederick Henniker, *Notes during a visit to Egypt, Nubia, the Oasis, Mount Sinai, and Jerusalem* (London: John Murray, 1823), 229.
6 Francis Arundale, *Illustrations of Jerusalem and Mount Sinai* (London: Henry Colbrun, 1837), 18.
7 Patricia Usick, *Adventures in Egypt and Nubia. The Travels of William John Bankes* (1786-1855) (London: The British Museum Press, 2002), 29-30.
8 Dorset History Center, D/BKL, XXI.C.5.
9 How this belief came into being is hard to assess; ancient geographers such as Claudius Ptolemy perfectly knew about the real shape of the Gulf of Aqaba.
10 Edward Robinson, and Eli Smith, *Biblical Research in Palestine, Mount Sinai, and Arabia Petraea* (London: Palestine Exploration Fund, 1841); Edward H. Palmer, *The Desert of the Exodus: Journeys on Foot in the Wilderness of the Forty Years' Wanderings: Undertaken in Connexion with the Ordnance Survey of Sinai, and the Palestine Exploration Fund* (Cambridge: Deighton, 1871).

11 Hobbs, *Mount Sinai*, 244.
12 Jean-Jacques Rifaud, *Tableau de l'Égypte, de la Nubie et des lieux circonvoisins; ou itinéraire à l'usage des voyageurs qui visitent ces contrées* (Paris: Treuttel et Würz, 1830), III.
13 Oleg V. Volkoff, *Comment on visitait la vallée du Nil: "les guides" de l'Égypte* (Le Caire: Imprimerie de l'Institut Français d'Archéologie Orientale, 1967).
14 Jacques Daumas, *La peninsule du Sinaï* (Cairo: Royal Automobile Club of Egypt, 1951).
15 William F. Bassili, *Sinai and the Monastery of St. Catherine: a Practical Guide for Travellers* (Cairo: Costa Tsoumas, 1957).
16 Johann Ludwig Burckhardt, *Travels in Syria and the Holy Land* (London: John Murray, 1822), 458.
17 Ibid., 459.
18 Ibid.
19 *Egypt, handbook for travellers. Pt. 1. Lower Egypt, with the Fayum and the peninsula of Sinai* (Leipzig, London: Karl Baedeker, 1885), 470, accessed January 12, 2013, http://hdl.handle.net/1911/9163.
20 *A handbook for travellers in Lower and Upper Egypt* (London: John Murray, 1888), 330, accessed January 25, 2014, http://hdl.handle.net/1911/13077.
21 Ibid., 331.
22 *Egypt, handbook for travellers*, 471.
23 Ibid., 472.
24 Ibid., 473.
25 Burckhardt, *Travels in Syria*, 486.
26 Arundale, *Illustrations of Jerusalem*, 1.
27 Burckhardt, *Travels in Syria*, 518.
28 *Egypt, handbook for travellers,* 471.
29 Burckhardt, *Travels in Syria; Arundale, Illustrations of Jerusalem*; Daniele Salvoldi, "'Viaggi del dottore Alessandro Ricci di Siena fatti negli anni 1818, 1819, 1820, 1821, 1822 in Nubia, al Tempio di Giove Ammone, al Monte Sinai, e al Sennar.' Edizione critica e commento" (PhD diss., Università di Pisa, 2011).
30 *Egypt, handbook for travellers,* 474.
31 Armando Serra, *Pellegrinaggio al Monte Sinai dal IV s. al 2001* (Cairo-Jerusalem: The Franciscan Centre of Christian Oriental Studies, 2003), 60.
32 Hobbs, *Mount Sinai*, 253.
33 Ibid., 264.
34 Ibid.
35 Ibid.
36 *Handbook for India & Egypt* (London: Allen & Co, 1841), 258.
37 Hobbs, *Mount Sinai*, 265.
38 Serra, *Pellegrinaggio al Monte Sinai,* 59.
39 *Egypt, handbook for travellers,* 477.
40 Ragi Halim, "Gabal Musa safaris," *Al-Ahram Weekly On-line*, February 15-21, 2001, http://weekly.ahram.org.eg/2001/521/tr2.htm

Henry William Beechey

On the forthcoming 200th anniversary of the spectacular opening of the great temple at Abu Simbel by Giovanni Belzoni, on Augustus the first, 1817, I would like to draw special attention to the presence of Henry William Beechey.

Born circa 1789, died 4 August 1862. Beechey was a painter and explorer and a son of Sir William Beechey, RA, (12 December 1753, 28 January 1839). His first marriage was with Mary Ann Jones (1760, died, 1793). Beechey followed his father's profession. Some time before 1816 he had become secretary Henry Salt, the British consul-general in Egypt, and at the latter's request accompanied Belzoni in that and the following year beyond the second cataract, for the purpose of studying and making designs of the fine monuments existing at Thebes. In the laborious excavation of the temple of Ipsambul, Beechey took his share.

RDK 742
Abu Simbel, great temple, sanctuary

Beechey also copied the paintings, in the king's tombs in the valley of Biban-el-Muluk, which had lately been opened by Belzoni. In common with Salt, Beechey had much to endure from Belzoni's suspicious and jealous nature (see Life and Correspondence of Henry Salt, ed. Halls, volume ii.) About 1820 he returned to England, and the next year was appointed by Earl Bathurst, on the part of the colonial office, to examine and report on the antiquities of the Cyrenaica, his brother, Captain Beechey, having been detached to survey the coast-line from Tripoli to Derna. The results of this expedition, which occupied the greater part of the years 1821 and 1822, were chronicled in a journal kept by the brothers, to which Henry Beechey added numerous drawings, illustrative of the art and natural peculiarities of the classic region they were exploring, many of which were left out when the narrative came to be published in 1828.

Giovanni Finati spent time with Belzoni, Beechey and others and writes:

"After a continuance of these exertions and expedients during upwards of three weeks, a corner of the doorway itself at last became visible. At that very moment, while fresh clamours and new disputes were going on with our crew, and the attentions of all distracted, I, being one of the slenderest of the party, without a word said, crept through into the interior, and was thus the first that entered it, perhaps, for a thousand years". (Finati, p. 201)