

# Boissonnas in Egypt

# Boissonnas in Egypt

---

Edited by  
Oriana Baddeley

---



ISBN 978-1-906908-47-8  
copyright 2017 © The Saint Catherine Foundation, London

This publication accompanies the exhibition **Boissonnas in Egypt**  
The Royal Geographical Society  
November 2nd -30<sup>th</sup> 2017

# Acknowledgements

The Swiss photographer Fred Boissonnas (1858-1946) was invited to Egypt by King Fuad I in 1929 to work on a major book commission and he returned in 1933 to embark on a photographic expedition to Sinai. Following the route of the Israelites as recorded in the book of Exodus, he photographed the traditional biblical sites that he encountered on his journey. However, the key outcome of his time in Egypt was the book, *Égypte*, which wove a diplomatic path through the complex histories of the newly formed 'modern' state based on Britain's unilateral declaration of Egyptian independence on the 28<sup>th</sup> February 1922; the creation of Fuad's own monarchical role in 1922; and the Egyptian Parliament's Constitution of 1923.

The second expedition was expected to lead to another publication *Au Sinaï* but this remained unfinished at the time of the photographer's death in 1946. Boissonnas had prepared for his second journey by doing extensive research on Sinai in the Geneva public library, where he consulted books on archaeology, Biblical scholarship and literature, as well as early travel books. It was a project at once quasi-scientific, cultural and very personal and became the culmination of a lifetime's study of the ancient civilizations of the Mediterranean.

This project to explore the Egyptian photographs of Fred Boissonnas has encompassed a variety of interdisciplinary approaches that are evident in the essays contained within this book. Firstly, I would like to thank the scholars who have contributed to the publication: Kathleen Brunner; George Manginis; Ahmed Shams and Estelle Sohier. They all responded with great generosity to the themes raised by the project. Earleen Brunner applied her eagle eye to the editorial process and pulled together the diverse approaches to the subject that have made this publication possible.

Ewelina Warner has worked tirelessly to bring both the book and the exhibition to fruition. I owe her a great debt of gratitude. Ramsay Cameron and Dorothy Latsis also made very helpful comments on the text and helped catch those little errors that so easily slip by the most experienced proof-reader.

The curator Nicolas Schätti of the Centre d'icographie de la Bibliothèque de Genève kindly allowed for the reproduction of key images. Thanks are also due to Heather Ravenberg, who facilitated my access to the Roussen Collection of Boissonnas's Sinai photos housed at the Saint Catherine Foundation London. The images in the book and the exhibition benefitted immensely from the detailed digital conservation work of Richard Keenan. The designer Anastasia Belyukova worked at great speed to help us reach our very tight deadlines.

The project would not have happened without the support of the trustees of the Saint Catherine Foundation, particularly Dimitri Dondos and Jenny Richardson. This publication was only possible because of the encouragement and generosity of Dr Péricle Petalas at the EFG Group. I am also extremely thankful to the University of the Arts London for supporting the work on the *Boissonnas in Egypt* project through a research sabbatical. At the Royal Geographical Society, Christine James and Alasdair MacLeod have been supportive and helpful from our first contact through to the project's completion.

The essays in this publication formed part of the conference *Boissonnas and Egypt* held in the Ondaatje Theatre on the 2<sup>nd</sup> of November, to accompany the exhibition *Boissonnas in Egypt* at the Royal Geographical Society 2<sup>nd</sup>-30<sup>th</sup> November 2017.

Oriana Baddeley

	5	Acknowledgments
	7	Contents
Ewelina Warner	8	<b>François Frédéric Boissonnas (1858-1946)</b>
Oriana Baddeley	12	<b>Boissonnas, Modernity and the Aesthetics of the Wilderness</b>
Estelle Sohier	24	<b>'L'Égypte' by Fred Boissonnas (1932): A Photographic Monument for the Egyptian Nation</b>
George Manginis	38	<b>'Into Cheltenham'— On the Way to Mount Sinai</b>
Ahmed Shams	48	<b>A Swiss Photographic Journey: Egypt's Landscapes from Alexander's Desert Temple to Mount Sinai and Beyond</b>
Kathleen Brunner	60	<b>Boissonnas's Return to Egypt: The Unfinished Sinai Project</b>
	76	Catalogue 'Boissonnas in Egypt'
	130	Chronology
	137	Publications by Fred Boissonnas
	138	Contributor Biographies

# François Frédéric Boissonnas (1858-1946)

Ewelina Warner



Fred Boissonnas,  
*Self-portrait*, 1900,  
Bibliothèque de  
Genève.

François Frédéric Boissonnas, to be known as **Fred Boissonnas**, was born in Geneva on 18<sup>th</sup> June 1858 into a family of professional photographers. He was educated at the Ecole Privet and later attended the Collège Calvin. He was interested in photography from his early years and in 1879, at the age of 21, he started working in his father's photographic studio at the Quai de la Poste. He completed an apprenticeship in the studio of Hermann Brandseph in Stuttgart, following which he went to work in Budapest at the Kohler Studio and in 1880, he returned to work in his father's studio.

In 1890, he married Augusta Magnin, with whom he had nine children. During the early years of his marriage he worked making photographic portraits using theatrical props or scenes in Impressionist or Realist styles, which were very fashionable at the time.

Over the next few years his interest in landscape photography grew, and in 1900 he won the Gold medal at the Paris World Fair. In 1901, he purchased a well-equipped photographic studio in Paris, at 12 Rue de la Paix. Over the next years he expanded and set up studios in Reims, Lyon, Marseille and Saint Petersburg.

Pursuing his passion for landscape photography he travelled to Greece in 1903 on a photographic expedition accompanied by the Swiss art historian Daniel Baud-Bovy. They subsequently returned to Greece in 1905 using the photographs from their trips to publish the photographic album *En Grèce par monts et par vaux* (1910) which proved a very successful publishing venture. In 1907, he visited Egypt for the first time in the hope of expanding his business to a studio in Cairo.

In 1911 Boissonnas and Baud-Bovy embarked on a further trip to Greece, this time to the Cyclades and Crete. This expedition provided material for an exhibition at the Musée Rath in Geneva and was to form the basis for another publishing project, although it did not appear until 1919, their *Des Cyclades en Crète au gré du vent*. In 1912, he travelled around the Mediterranean with Victor Bérard and in 1913 Boissonnas travelled to Greece once more, visiting Epirus and climbing Mount Olympus. In 1914, he travelled to Tunisia with historian Louis Bertrand, following in the footsteps of Saint Augustine.



Fred Boissonnas,  
*Self-portrait with mirrors*, 1896,  
Bibliothèque de Genève.

The outbreak of World War I interrupted his work as a travel photographer, putting his business in serious financial difficulties. However, after the war Boissonnas resumed this work, visiting Macedonia, Serbia and Mount Olympus, taking photographs and developing numerous publications. In 1918-1919 the Greek government commissioned Boissonnas to provide photography, to accompany plaster casts of ancient sculpture and other artefacts, for an international exhibition of 'Images of Greece' initially for a venue in Paris but which also toured in the USA in 1920.

From 1921 he again started having financial troubles and in 1923 he was forced to close down his publishing company and let out his villa in Geneva, moving to Paris where he was able to find work with his Swiss compatriot Le Corbusier. However, in 1928, he began receiving new assignments and travelled to Mount Athos, which he revisited in 1930, at which point spending several months documenting monastic life.

The last great project was to emerge in 1929 when he was commissioned to work on a lavish publication for King Fuad I, photographing modern Egypt and the ruins of its past. With his co-author Paul Trembley, he travelled the country for eleven months, spending time exploring the Sinai, attempting to follow the route of the Israelites. The outcome of the collaboration, the lavish volume *L'Égypte*, was published in 1932. When Boissonnas returned to Egypt in 1933 it was to take photographs for a new publication he hoped to call *Au Sinai*. Though working on it for several years he never managed to find the funds to publish it, leaving it unfinished when he passed away in 1946.



Fred Boissonnas,  
*Family portrait with his wife  
and children*, 1899,  
Bibliothèque de Genève.

# Boissonnas, Modernity and the Aesthetics of the Wilderness<sup>1</sup>

Oriana Baddeley

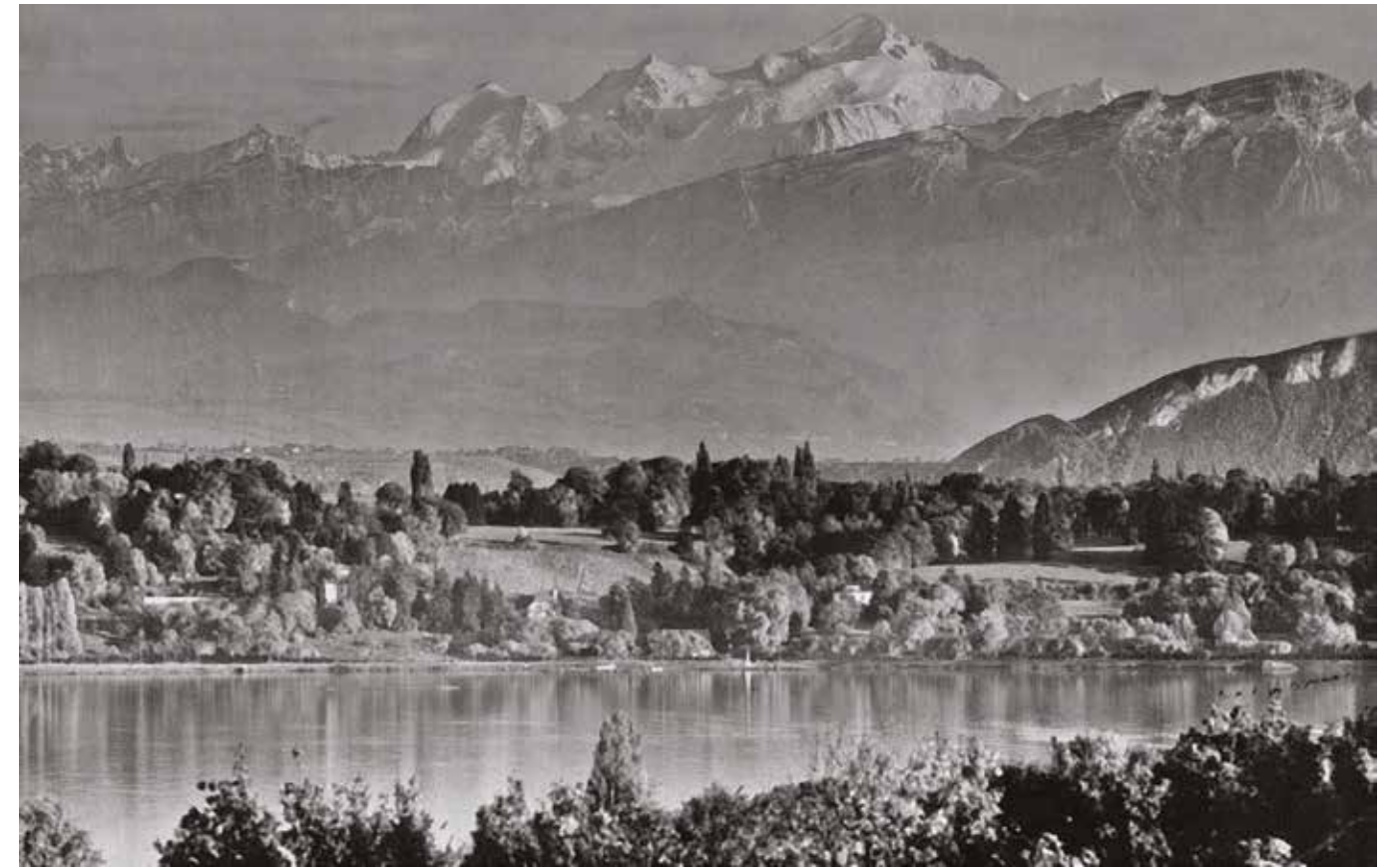


fig 1.1 Fred Boissonnas, *Mont Blanc*, 1892, Bibliothèque de Genève.

Many artists in their later years find ways to bridge the multiplicity of approaches to their chosen medium to which their longevity exposes them and Fred Boissonnas was no exception. This essay is concerned with the last stage of a great career and the ways that a lifetime of skill and professional knowledge can co-exist with the youthful desire for the excitement of new ideas. His work as a photographer spanned an enormous period of change within the medium and he persistently pursued innovation and recognition for his contribution to 'progress' and 'culture' within the hard business of photography. After four decades building a career in photography; of using his camera to capture the novel and unique in buildings, people and places; Fred Boissonnas began his Egyptian project.

Boissonnas was born into a family of photographers and photographic innovators. His father Henri-Antoine Boissonnas (1833-1889) had turned to photography to escape an economic crisis in watch making during the 1850s and had set up his studio in Rue de la Cité, Geneva, in 1860. Fred's younger brother Edmond-Victor (1862-1890) was a talented chemist who gained recognition for his orthochromatic plate system at the Vienna World Fair

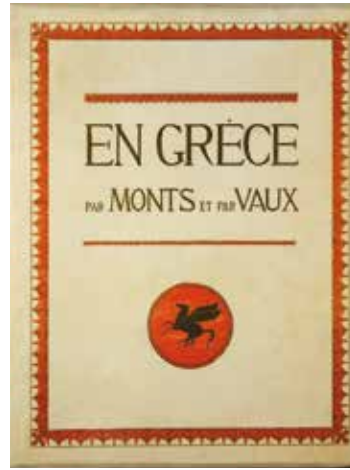
of 1882. Fred himself was awarded a Gold medal at the Paris World Fair of 1900 for his iconic and technically advanced photographs of Mont Blanc (fig 1.1).<sup>2</sup>

Photography in the 19<sup>th</sup> Century was a difficult business, constantly dependent on balancing the expense and technical demands of the medium with the whims of the client, both strands of activity that were subject to constant change. Notwithstanding such difficulties, it was in this challenging world that the Boissonnas family business established an international reputation (fig 1.2). Boissonnas expanded the firm's activities to include studios in Paris, Lyon, Marseille, Reims, and St Petersburg and he had also established his own publishing firm.

Throughout this long and successful career the aspiration to be recognized as an artist continued to be interwoven with the career demands of the entrepreneur, and although he was often searching for a new technical advantage or a profitable publishing venture, it is clear from his photographic work that Boissonnas remained closely involved with the international debates around the aesthetics of the medium. Success and recognition might represent financial stability and security for his family but



**fig 1.2**  
Advert for the Boissonnas photographic studio, Geneva, 1907.



**fig 1.3**  
Front cover of the book *En Grèce par monts et par vaux*, Daniel Baud-Bovy and Fred. Boissonnas, 1910.



**fig 1.4**  
Front cover of the book *Des Cyclades en Crète au gré du vent*, Daniel Baud-Bovy and Fred. Boissonnas, 1919.



**fig 1.5**  
*Vers une architecture*, Le Corbusier, Paris, 1923.

he was also keenly interested in securing praise for his role as a scholar and artist.

Brought up within the stricter conventions of 19<sup>th</sup> century commercial photography and with the need to appeal to his local clientele for the survival of the family business, Boissonnas had to balance complicated demands in his choice of exhibition work and publishing projects. It was through travel and the capturing of the sense of place that Boissonnas found his true métier. This was first to be found in the exploration of his own Swiss landscape, complemented by his love of climbing and fed by the 19<sup>th</sup> century Romantic's admiration of all things Alpine. It was, however, in the new century that this aspect of his career really developed with explorations further afield of Greece and the Balkans. Following an inspiring and convivial visit to Egypt with friends in 1907 he embarked on almost yearly visits to Greece up until 1913. While there he took hundreds of photographs and developed what were arguably to become his most important publishing projects.

In the collections of photographs and descriptive texts from this period there runs a recurring fascination with the ways the past can be manifested within contemporary life; with the contrast between the ephemeral and the eternal; the modern and the ancient. It can perhaps be found in his earlier depictions of the idyllic Swiss pastoral or his fascination with the shape of the Pyramid of Cheops rising out of the desert, as a constant wonderment as to how the work of man and nature had coexisted. This aspect of his photographic aesthetic can best be seen in his great works on Greek landscape and culture: *La Grèce par monts et par vaux* of 1910, (fig 1.3) which he published with his long-time collaborator Daniel Baud-Bovy,<sup>3</sup> or his *De Cyclades en Crète au gré du vent* of 1919 (fig 1.4). In these impressive books<sup>4</sup> he explored the genre of the travel album with consummate skill, informing his photographs with knowledge of the customs of the region and his understanding of architectural and geological scholarship. The aesthetic concerns of the skilled artist are al-



**fig 1.6**  
Fred Boissonnas, *Parthenon after the storm*, 1908.

ways visible but there is also the discernable fascination of the ethnographer and historian embedded within his choice of subject and composition.

It was not surprising therefore that it was his photographs of the Acropolis of Athens that his Swiss compatriot Charles-Édouard Jeanneret (1887-1965), better known as Le Corbusier, turned to when publishing his key work of 20<sup>th</sup> century architecture *Vers une Architecture*<sup>5</sup> of 1923 (fig 1.5). In this book, it is photographs by Boissonnas, such as the famous *Parthenon after a Storm* (1908) (fig 1.6) that clearly illustrate the connection between the classical roots of the modernist aesthetic and visually evoke the architect's interest in the co-existence of the past and the present. The ruins of Ancient Greece so masterfully captured by Boissonnas's camera become the evidence of a conceptual continuity between the aesthetics of the classical world and the purity of Le Corbusier's visions of the future.

This ability to find the abstract purity of shape and form within the messy realities of the real worlds he was

encountering on his journeys is one of the identifying characteristics of Boissonnas's personal aesthetic. As an approach to architectural form, it found a particular coherence in the work Boissonnas undertook for Le Corbusier while in Paris in 1926. His photographs of the interior of the Maison La Roche<sup>6</sup> (fig 1.7) show a distilling of this interest in geometric form in relation to light and shade. The stripping back of detail and focus on volume and proportion intrinsic to the architecture itself appears a liberating factor for Boissonnas, whose traditional predilection for grouping the man with the manmade, to create scale and pinpoint the viewer's ability to read his compositions, was unnecessary in the context of Le Corbusier's mathematical precision.

The windows and viewing points serve to delineate the progressive stages of the building, with the doorways suggesting their relation to the human form. The use of the angled planes and the points of bright light, both reflecting off the interior and opening outwards to the exterior, show an eye for the abstract qualities of 'drawing with light' that





**fig 1.7**  
Fred Boissonnas,  
*Maison La Roche*, 1926,  
Collection Fondation Le Corbusier  
© FLC/ ADAGP, Paris and DACS,  
London 2017.



**fig 1.8**  
Fred Boissonnas,  
*Maison La Roche*, 1926  
Collection Fondation Le Corbusier  
© FLC/ ADAGP, Paris and DACS, London 2017.

is very much part of a modernist photographic sensibility not usually associated with Boissonnas. The well-travelled and scholarly aspect of Boissonnas's character indicates a man involved with the debates around him, and it would seem unlikely that he did not keep up with the changing styles and approaches to artistic composition current amongst Parisian circles. Other photographs (fig 1.8) by Boissonnas of the *Maison La Roche* interior show works by Braque, Ozenfant and Lipchitz, pointing to an awareness of the Modernist aesthetic which was transforming 20<sup>th</sup> century art and design. From the early years of the century onwards there had been a concerted attempt by photographers, artists and writers to embrace the formal relationships between painterly and photographic composition, particularly in avant-garde circles operating between Paris and New York. This shared set of debates was made most visible in publications such as *Camera Work*<sup>7</sup> and the work shown at the 291 gallery<sup>8</sup>.

Photography as a medium was also undergoing a dramatic shift in the balance of emphasis of form over content. Not only journals, galleries, lectures but also special interest 'camera clubs' spread the new thinking with remarkable rapidity across national boundaries. A collection of Boissonnas's photos of Greece had toured the United States in 1920,<sup>9</sup> and his reputation as a photographic pioneer was well established internationally even earlier in his career through prizes and awards at international expositions. His familiarity with the Parisian avant-garde, not only through the connections with Le Corbusier but his own wide reading and circle of contacts, is rarely discussed in accounts of his work. There remains a tendency to see his contribution in a vacuum disconnected from the wider histories of 20<sup>th</sup>-century photography; a self-contained body of work frequently dominated by his Greek expeditions and the specifics of his chosen subjects.

It is in Boissonnas's Egyptian photography that this element of a new-found modernist aesthetic emerges most clearly. His traditional fascination with the pictorial and the atmospheric is still present but the geometric abstraction and emergent tonality of the medium of photography, the way light and shade are continually calibrated to create form, become key elements. When in 1929 the seventy-one-year old Boissonnas returned to Egypt to work on the book *Égypte* (fig 1.9) he was a very different artist to the one who on his 1907 visit had jokingly commissioned his own portrait in faux 'Egyptian dignitary' style (fig 1.10) complete with elaborately fake decorations and *tarboosh*. In his travels across Egypt, he endured discomfort and setbacks that would have troubled someone half his age, but he also found a different and more direct approach to composition, expanding and condensing his interest in oblique angles and dramatic light conditions. In some of his interiors of the monastery of St Catherine in the Sinai, it is hard not to get a fleeting glimpse of the sleek lines of the *Maison La Roche* (figs 1.11, 1.12) that he had captured for posterity just a few years earlier. The role of the whitest of light streams in defining the monastery's architectural volumes creates an underlying abstraction, closer to the surface than in Boissonnas's earlier work. Context and ethnographic detail remain important, but something else appears to have entered his visual vocabulary, a more conscious play on the extremes of light and darkness to construct the photographic image.

If one closely compares the work of Boissonnas to that of the more recognized exponents of the modernist photographic aesthetic such as his near contemporary Alfred Stieglitz (1864-1946), their shared concerns are immedi-



**fig 1.9**  
Front cover of the book *Égypte*,  
Paul Trembley and Fred  
Boissonnas, 1932.



**fig 1.10**  
Fred Boissonnas, *Self-portrait with tarboosh*, 1907, Bibliothèque de Genève.

ately visible. In describing one of his most famous images, *The Steerage* of 1907, Stieglitz recounted his fascination with the underlying geometry of the image:

**A round straw hat, the funnel leaning left, the stairway leaning right, the white drawbridge with its railing made of circular chains – white suspenders crossing on the back of a man in the steerage below, round shapes of iron machinery, a mast cutting into the sky, making a triangular shape...I saw shapes related to each other. I saw a picture of shapes and underlying that the feeling I had about life.**<sup>10</sup>

We are told that all these 'pictures of shapes' took their compositional eloquence from the tonal variation emanating from the central white dot of an upturned straw hat (fig 1.13). Such accounts of the underlying determinants of the art of photography are indelibly linked to the status of

works such as *The Steerage* as a modernist work. When published by Stieglitz in a 1911 issue of *Camera Work* it was to be seen along-side Cubist drawings by Picasso who had reportedly praised the collage like characteristics of the photograph.

In Boissonnas's photograph *The Well of Moses* (fig 1.14) that focal point is the cloth falling from the hand of the priest in the near distance, which starts a complex interplay of curves and squares; shadow, line and solid. It is an image that announces its formal concerns above the need to describe the context of the photographic subject. The 'pictures of shapes' turn the interior of the monastery into a lit stage, its human protagonists caught in movements that will remain frozen in time. The variation from dark to light creates a rhythmic play of reflection and shadow that echoes the complex layering of architectural detail within the interior itself.

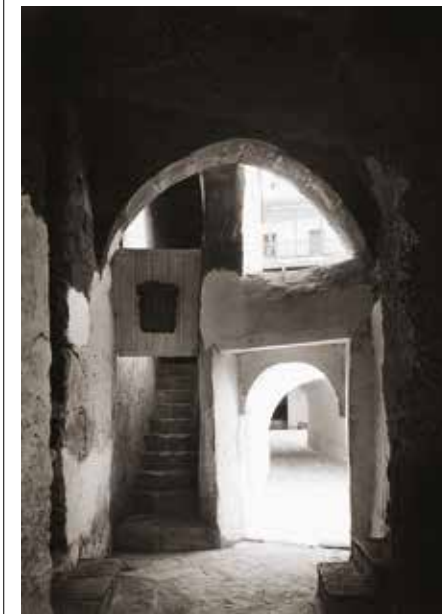
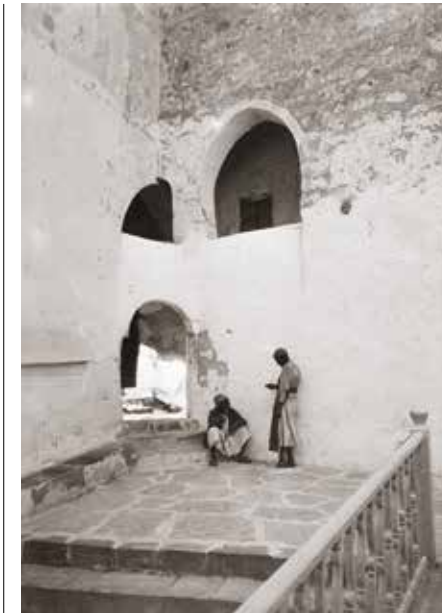
The understanding of the play between the shapes created by man and the hidden geometries of nature clearly

interested Boissonnas. In 1929 on arriving at the entrance to the valley of Wadi ed Deir in the Sinai and seeing the monastery of St Catherine in the distance, this sense of imposed order:

**That tiny parallelogram, that geometric form, small as it is, suddenly gives this lunar landscape a profound meaning, the presence of Pascal's 'thinking reed', man, who dominates disordered Nature, imposing himself on the material world...<sup>11</sup>**

By the time of his return to the Sinai in 1933 he appears to have chosen to approach 'disordered nature' rather differently. The search for evidence of the role of man in imposing order on disorder, so long the underlying theme of the landscape artist, gave way to a fascination with the order of nature itself. During this visit, he began to take photographic vistas more akin to the work emerging in San Francisco by photographers associated with the *Group f/64*, such as Ansel Adams (1902-1984) and Edward Weston (1886-1958)<sup>12</sup>.

Within the canon of the history of photographic modernism it is often claimed that it was the work of *Group f/64*, and in particular Weston and Adams, that transformed the role of the photographer 'from printmaker to selector'. The process of photography itself, the mechanical capacity of the camera, was seen to be the key element of this approach. As with other art forms caught up in the debates around the nature of modernity, photography began to lay claim to the pre-eminence of process over representation. The images captured by this new generation of photographers refused to be judged in terms of content but attempted to highlight the camera's ability to find order in na-



**fig 1.11**  
Fred Boissonnas,  
*Sinai. Stairway leading to the library*,  
19.04.1929, Roussen Collection  
B.cat: 6649.

**fig 1.12**  
Fred Boissonnas,  
*Saint Catherine. Library stairway*,  
20.04.1929, Roussen Collection  
B.cat: 6666.



**fig 2.13**  
Alfred Stieglitz,  
*The Steerage* 1907.

**fig 2.14**  
Fred Boissonnas,  
*Saint Catherine. The Well of Moses*,  
22.04.1929, Roussen Collection  
B.cat: 6684.

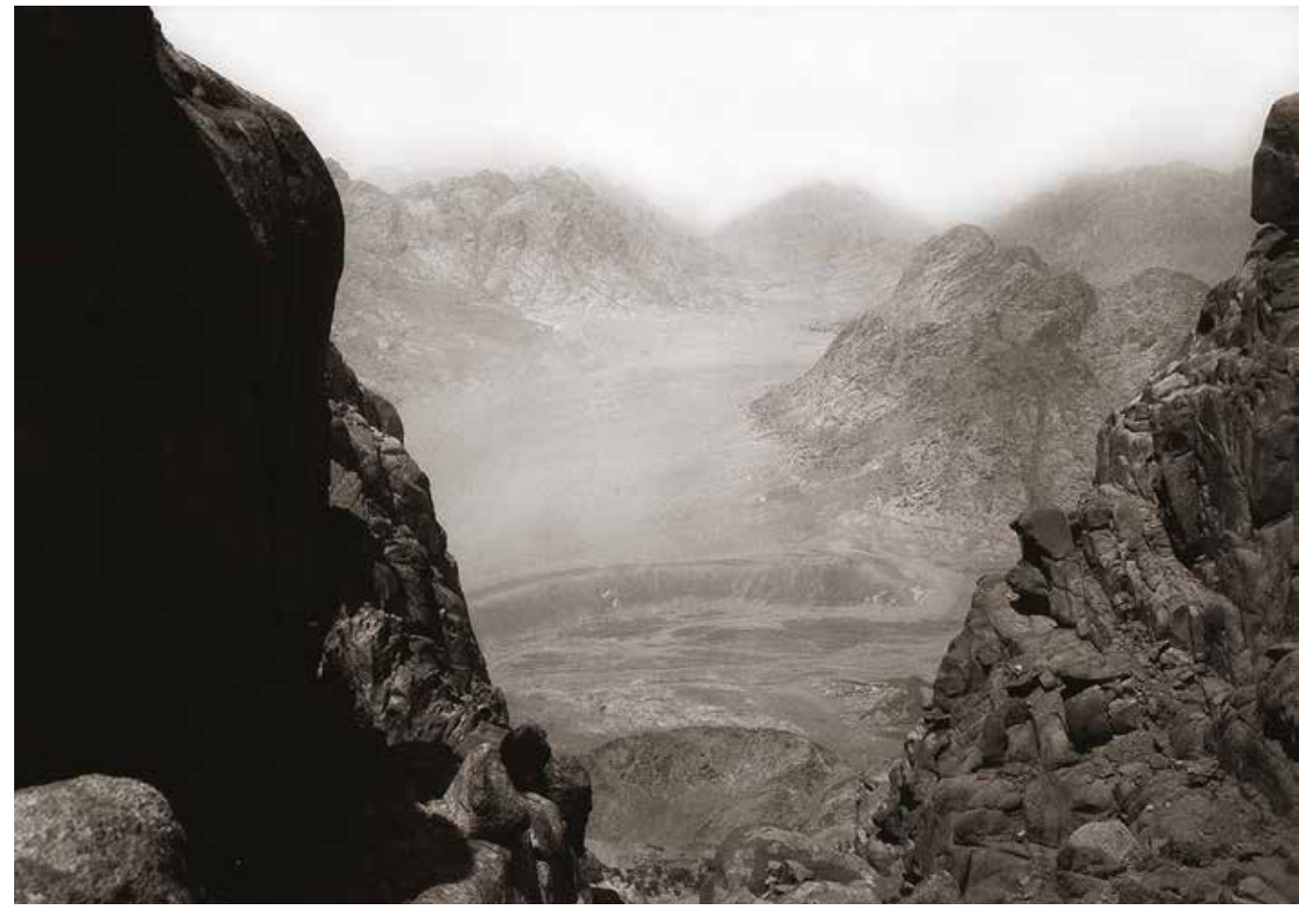


**fig 1.15**  
Anselm Adams, *Marion Lake Southern Sierra*, From *Parmelian Prints of the High Sierras*, 1927.

ture's chaos, as their manifesto states: "Pure photography is defined as possessing no qualities of technique, composition or idea, derivative of any other art form",<sup>13</sup> essentially photography for photography's sake. In the early work of Adams (fig 1.15) such as the prints contained within his portfolio *Parmelian Prints of the High Sierras* of 1927,<sup>14</sup> nature is presented as uninhabited and yet ordered. Textures interplay with the perspective and depth of field to produce a sense of the enduring nature of Yosemite; it is there whether seen by man or not. It is hard to not see a similar sensibility at work in Boissonnas's breathtaking 1933 *View of St Catherine's Monastery* (fig 1.16) in which the monastery has ceased to be even discernible as a 'tiny parallelogram', shrouded as it is in a dusty mist. It is the lunar landscape of the Sinai mountains that becomes the subject of the image as they visually shift between incredible solidity and ephemeral nothingness, as light and

weather play with the camera's ability to capture nature. The relationship of two such images is not direct; rather it suggests that similar thought processes were at work and that the aligned involvement with the problematics of the photographic process was leading to shared conclusions.

This search for form in nature so characteristic of early modernist photography is probably most clearly expressed in the minimalism of Edward Weston's iconic series of photographs taken at the dunes in Oceano, Northern California in 1936. Weston famously captured the ways the wind and elements transformed the dunes (fig 1.17), so that the very nature of their changeability becomes the focus of his images. With the exclusion of any sense of time and space, Weston makes it hard to grasp even the scale of the desert landscape. The wilderness shifting and changing on a scale outside of a human time-frame is also the subject of Boissonnas's *Sinai: Desert*



**fig 1.16**  
Fred Boissonnas, *Saint Catherine, view of the monastery*, 28.05 1933 Roussen Collection B. cat: 7520.

*and Cliffs* (fig 1.18). While many elements of the changing approach evident in the work of the younger generation of photographers can be found in this image, it retains a rootedness in place characteristic of the traveller in Boissonnas. The air, the rocks and the sand are very much of a particular geography, yet they have become subjects in their own right. The interwoven shapes and folds moving in gradated waves from light to dark create a place that is both specific and generic. The 'Egypt' of Fred Boissonnas ends up revealing as much about the photographer as it does about the places he visited. In the final instance his photographs show a recognition of the difference between looking for something expected and finding something new.



**fig 1.17**  
Edward Weston, *Dunes. Oceano*, 1936.

**fig 1.18**  
Fred Boissonnas, *Sinai. Desert and cliffs*, 11.06.1933, Roussen Collection B.cat: 7613.

<sup>1</sup> This exhibition and publication project developed from a paper given at an interdisciplinary study day devoted to the work of Fred Boissonnas organized by Jean-François Staszak and Estelle Sohler, at the University of Geneva on the 3rd December 2011.

<sup>2</sup> The award at the Paris World Fair of 1900 for his iconic and technically advanced photos of Mont Blanc was just one of many such international signs of recognition. In London in 1892 his unique approach to long distance photography and ability to capture the drama of mountain landscapes had been awarded a medal by the Royal Photographic Society, and Lord Napier offered to fund a visit to Greece, initially to photograph Parnassus, although it was to take him another decade to accept the offer. (see: Brulhart, Armand 'Fred Boissonnas: A Genevan and International Photographer' in *Images of Greece: Boissonnas*, Demos, J (ed) Rizarios Foundation, p.27).

<sup>3</sup> Daniel Baud-Bovy (1870-1958) was a writer, scholar and curator at the Musée Rath. From 1908 to 1919 he was Director of the School of Fine Arts in Geneva. The collaboration with Boissonnas was a fruitful one for Boissonnas. They worked together on nine publications and numerous projects (for a list of their joint works see: <http://www.notrehistoire.ch/medias/21013>).

<sup>4</sup> Frédéric Boissonnas, Daniel Baud-Bovy, *En Grèce par monts et par vaux*, Genève Boissonnas & co., 1910; *Des Cyclades en Crète au gré du vent*, Genève Boissonnas & co., 1919.

<sup>5</sup> Beatriz Colomina makes the point that the photographs of Greece by Boissonnas that Le Corbusier published in *Vers une*

*architecture* were taken primarily from their earlier publication in Maxime Collignon's *Le Parthenon and L'Acropole* of 1914. See: "Le Corbusier and Photography" *Assemblage*, No. 4, Oct.1987, pp. 6-2.

<sup>6</sup> Maison La Roche is a house in Paris, designed during 1923-1925 by Le Corbusier and his cousin Pierre Jeanneret. It was built for Raoul La Roche, a Swiss banker and collector of avant-garde art. The photographs taken by Fred Boissonnas were commissioned by the architect and are in the collection of the Fondation Le Corbusier, Paris.

<sup>7</sup> Camera Work was a photographic quarterly published in New York by Alfred Stieglitz from 1903-1917. The entire run of the magazine can be found in the online project *The Modernist Journals Project*: ([http://library.brown.edu/cds/mjp/render.php?view=mjp\\_object&id=CameraWorkCollection](http://library.brown.edu/cds/mjp/render.php?view=mjp_object&id=CameraWorkCollection))

<sup>8</sup> 291, originally titled 'Little Galleries of the Photo-Secession' was the internationally renowned space used by Stieglitz and his collaborators to introduce American audiences to new movements in European art. Many key 20<sup>th</sup> century artists were shown in the lifetime of the gallery from 1905-1917 including: Henri Matisse, Auguste Rodin, Henri Rousseau, Paul Cézanne, Pablo Picasso, Constantin Brâncuși, and the Dadaists Francis Picabia and Marcel Duchamp.

<sup>9</sup> Winslow, Leon Loyal "The collection of photographs of Greece by Frédéric Boissonnas which the American Federation of Arts is circulating as a special exhibit this season arrived the first week in December after several weeks' delay in transit from Switzerland, the distinguished photographer's home, and was immediately placed on

exhibition in the Museum of the Rhode Island School of Design" *The American Magazine of Art*, Volume XII, February, 1921, Number 2, p. 50

<sup>10</sup> Stieglitz, Alfred (1942). "How *The Steerage* Happened", *Twice A Year: A Book of Literature, The Arts, and Civil Liberties* (8-9): 175-178.

<sup>11</sup> Boissonnas, Fred *Sinai - 5<sup>ème</sup> conférence, Genève*, unpublished lecture notes by Boissonnas in the Roussen Collection, (trans. Kathleen Brunner).

<sup>12</sup> *Group f/64* was a coming together of photographers (Ansel Adams; Imogen Cunningham; John Paul Edwards; Sonya Noskowiak; Henry Swift; Willard Van Dyke and Edward Weston) all interested in giving greater prominence to the medium of photography as a form of creative expression in its own right. Their first group exhibition was at the De Young Museum, San Francisco on November 15<sup>th</sup> 1932. (see: Heyman, Therese Thau, ed. *Seeing Straight: The f.64 Revolution in Photography*, Oakland Museum, 1992).

<sup>13</sup> *Group f/64* Manifesto 1932, De Young Museum, San Francisco.

<sup>14</sup> *Parmelian Prints of the High Sierras* (San Francisco: Jean Chambers Moore, 1927) is a portfolio of 18 silver gelatin photographic prints made by Ansel Adams. It was the first publication of a portfolio of his prints, produced not long after he decided to become a professional photographer. The 18 photographs show landscapes of Yosemite Valley, Upper Merced Basin, High Sierras, Southern and Central Sierras.

# L'Égypte by Fred Boissonnas (1932): A Photographic Monument for the Egyptian Nation

Estelle Sohier

Fred Boissonnas's stay in Cairo in the spring of 1929 facilitated the establishment of an agreement with the Egyptian government. On 4 April, shortly before leaving for Sinai, the photographer signed a contract with Mohamed Zaki El-Ibrachi Pacha, the director general of King Fuad's private bank, and the publisher Paul Trembley.

Then aged 70, the photographer agreed to produce a 'luxury' volume on *Egypt* that would follow the format he had made so popular two decades before, that of the monumental *In Greece: Journeys by Mountain and Valley* (1910). The new book would be 'more perfect still than the previous work'. Published under the official patronage of the king, to whom the first copy of the limited edition would be delivered, the book would 'give an accurate and vibrant picture of Egypt and its thousand-year history', thanks to the accompanying texts written by various specialists on the country's history, archaeology and geography and, above all, the illustrations. The contract stipulated the inclusion of 200 photographic reproductions printed using the rotogravure process, at least 40 of which would be presented as individual plates. The photographer and publisher would be given 18 months in which to produce a comprehensive and definitive portrait of Egypt<sup>1</sup>. Drawing on new archival material, this study examines the inception and objectives of the *Egypte* commission, focusing on the progress across Egypt of a photographic campaign of many months and on the nuanced reception of the work that resulted, published in 1932 at the height of the world economic crisis<sup>2</sup>.

## Background of the commission: towards a post-colonial 'Description de l'Égypte'

Although Egypt had been a favoured destination for photographers from the time the medium was invented, Fred Boissonnas had little knowledge of the country when he received the commission to photograph it *in extenso*. He had only been to Cairo once, in 1907, with two associates, for commercial purposes: having already established, or taken over, studios in Paris, Lyon, Marseille, Reims, and St Petersburg, he proposed to open another in

the Egyptian capital, followed by still others in Algeria and Tunisia<sup>3</sup>. While these plans came to nothing, he returned to Egypt in 1929, not as a studio photographer and entrepreneur, but as a photographer and publisher of international renown, lauded for his work on Greece<sup>4</sup>.

Bolstered by his publishing successes of 1900 and 1910, Fred Boissonnas, now in his eighth decade, was pursuing international collaborations for both vocational



fig 2.1  
Fred Boissonnas, *Portrait of King Fuad with his children*.  
From the collection of the  
Centre d'Iconographie,  
Bibliothèque de Genève.



**fig 2.2**  
Fred Boissonnas, *Abdine Palace. The Royal Guard*. Collection of the Centre d'Iconographie, Bibliothèque de Genève.

and financial reasons, attempting as he was to save the family business from bankruptcy. Technological changes affecting the production and consumption of photographic images meant that the prestigious studio in Geneva, a legacy of the previous century, was experiencing serious financial difficulties that not even the revenues of the business in the Rue de la Paix, Paris could offset. Two associates supported and encouraged the photographer's new projects in Greece and Sinai: a certain Tricoglou, a successful businessman who had taken on the role of sponsor, and Paul Trembley (1885-1974), an engineer by training and the former director of a publishing house and advertising company<sup>5</sup>, member of an influential Geneva family, who played the role of impresario from 1927 onwards. Trembley would serve as the intermediary between the photographer and political and business figures in Greece, for whom Boissonnas had already worked

frequently, and in Egypt. Other governments also seem to have been approached, notably in Persia<sup>6</sup>.

Although Trembley had lived in Egypt for many years and knew the country well, contacts with the Egyptian government were made by his brother Ernest Trembley (1876-1967), a businessman and the director of the Swiss Commission, a commercial body founded in 1917 to encourage trade between Switzerland and Egypt. King Fuad was a bibliophile who admired, and possessed a copy of Boissonnas's monumental *In Greece: Journeys through Mountain and Valley*. In 1927 Ernest Trembley suggested that the king commission the photographer to produce a similar album dedicated to Egypt, with Paul Trembley as publisher. The proposal was approved by the Egyptian crown on 4 April 1929, after two years of negotiations. The king's private funds were used to underwrite 50 copies of the book at a cost of some 1,000 Swiss francs per

copy, payable in three instalments. The important sum of 667 gold Egyptian pounds was remitted on signature of the contract.

The contract set out the form and contents of the prospective book, emphasising the prestige of the commissioned work: a 'luxury' edition of 300 copies, 'in folio (40 x 50 cm), on Holland paper or handmade *papier d'Arches*, numbered on the press from 1 to 300', with 'a fine binding in full parchment with gilt boards and spine'. The photographer discussed all the terms of the contract with Mohamed Zaki El-Ibrachi Pacha: 'As representative of the king, he was responsible for all the editorial matters, and I was obliged to explain to him in detail all the intricacies of publishing, what Holland paper and *papier d'Arches* are like, what an insert is, what heliography involves, the number of illustrations, etc<sup>9</sup>.' The sponsor retained the right to make decisions regarding form and contents, according to Article 1 of the contract, which stipulated that the names of the experts proposed to edit the texts and captions must be submitted first for approval by His Majesty the King<sup>10</sup>.

Although the bibliophile king had been the principal interested party associated with the project from 1927 onwards, this publishing endeavour also had a decided political and nationalist dimension within an uncertain post-colonial context: the British protectorate had come to an end only a few years before, and the country had yet to gain full independence. The book would serve as an instrument of cultural diplomacy and an international propaganda tool of the kind proven effective since the 19<sup>th</sup> century<sup>11</sup> and already made use of by the Egyptian authorities. This type of book has a particular significance for Egypt, a country associated, from the early modern period onwards, with monumental publications like the celebrated volumes of the *Description de l'Égypte*<sup>12</sup>, symbolizing admiration for Egypt but also a foreign intellectual influence on the country and its past.

As for the Boissonnas book, the list of the other subscribers, after the king, demonstrates the extent to which it can be viewed as a form of transnational propaganda. Large companies ordered copies, as well as Egyptian ministries, foreign diplomats and book collectors. The second subscriber was the Misr private bank, founded in 1920 by Talat Harb, the nationalist entrepreneur who wanted to modernise Egypt and replace foreign with local businesses. His acquisition of the book was a consequence of his work towards Egyptian independence. The collective order transmitted to Fred Boissonnas formed part of a movement by which Egypt's elite laid claim to the Western tradition of large-scale publications. This re-appropriation



**fig 2.3**  
The official pass of Fred Boissonnas (*firman*). Collection of the Centre d'Iconographie, Bibliothèque de Genève.

**fig 2.4**  
Fred Boissonnas, *Street scene, Cairo*. Collection of the Centre d'Iconographie, Bibliothèque de Genève.



**fig 2.5**  
Fred Boissonnas, *Cairo, Khan-Khalil, city gate and bazaar*.  
Collection of the Centre d'Iconographie,  
Bibliothèque de Genève.

**fig 2.6**  
Fred Boissonnas, *Khargah, covered alley*.  
Collection of the Centre d'Iconographie,  
Bibliothèque de Genève.

belonged to a wider nationalist movement through which an Egyptian national identity would be forged, based on a western model of modernity and a break with the Ottoman transnational model<sup>13</sup>.

The large-scale format and gilt decoration on one side, the contents of the commissioned book echo the way in which the writing of history and geography served Egyptian independence during the decade of the 1920s. An historical overview was required, the contract stipulating that one chapter be dedicated to each (or almost each) period in the country's history (the Ottoman period being covered in brief, and the British colonial period not at all): the pharaonic period, so important for the Egyptian nationalists in the 1920s<sup>14</sup>, but also the Greek, Roman, Copt and Byzantine periods, the mediaeval period – golden age of Islamic culture in Cairo – and the contemporary period. This overview provided the government with a means

of re-appropriating the country's history and its narration, and the country's heritage and its appreciation, while laying claim to Egyptian nationhood, in theory and in fact. Geography was then a national priority for Egypt, Fuad having been named President of the Egyptian Geographical Society in 1915, shortly before becoming sultan in 1917<sup>15</sup>. The society was used to promote his reign and the dissemination of Egyptian culture internationally, and to implement an ambitious programme of publications in French on the history and geography of Egypt. *L'Égypte* was an integral part of this cultural and intellectual politics, as shown by the support given to the project by the diplomat and advisor to the king, Hassanein Bey. Initially a member, and then the director, of the Royal Geographical Society of Egypt, he was in favour of Trembley's proposal from the beginning<sup>16</sup>.

## Firman for a National Photographic Mission

The king was highly knowledgeable about photography, and he seemed to have very definite expectations of the project, as this letter with advice from Fred Boissonnas to his son Paul, the proprietor of the Geneva studio, would suggest:

**I asked Fuad for a portrait for the frontispiece. It is possible that this portrait will be made while he is in the Geneva area [...] where he has rented a villa for the summer. Should this happen, please be prepared. He has very definite ideas. Refrain from making any objections if he wants to adopt a certain pose – you must say 'Yes, Your Majesty' and act with utmost tact to arrive at the required pose. If he is happy, it could be a lucrative business, several hundred large portraits, as they are in all the offices, ministries, monasteries, mosques, railway stations, etc<sup>17</sup>.**

The complicity between Orientalist photography and the colonial project has been pointed out by many scholars. In Egypt, as elsewhere, photographers had prepared the ground for 19<sup>th</sup>-century colonialism by showing places that seemed backwards, frozen in time, full of fascinating landscapes, devoid of inhabitants and ready to be conquered<sup>18</sup>. The commission is inscribed within another history of power relations in play within the international exploitation of the image and the visual in Egypt during the colonial period; it benefitted from the interest in photography shown by the Egyptian elites since the time of Mohammed Ali<sup>19</sup>, members of the royal family having been regular commissioners of portraits and reportage photography by professionals. Fuad himself had used several different photographers, among them Hanselman (active between 1900 and 1930), who made the more famous portraits; Riad Chehata; and Mohammed Al-Ghazouly<sup>20</sup>. The mission conferred on Boissonnas was truly an affair of state.

In addition to the photographic session organised for the frontispiece of the album in the gardens of the Koubbeh Palace, in the shade of the ficus tree (fig 2.1), a display of Egyptian military power was orchestrated at the beginning of the project, on 8 May 1929 (fig 2.2), Boissonnas exulting at the welcome: 'Incredible! I will be given my own private tour of the royal guard tomorrow!<sup>21</sup>' The contract provided for a *firman*, or royal edict, that would facilitate access to the rest of the country and open doors – 'even the most rebellious' – to the photographer (fig 2.3). This official pass provided Boissonnas with the logistical support of officials and others throughout the country, as confirmed by the photographer's correspondence during the journey.

**Yesterday I had proof of the importance that ministers gave to the execution of the album. Not only are all the mudirs [local governors] of all the districts in the kingdom ordered to bend over backwards to help us, to give us supplies and look after us, but also all the Sheikhs [...] in all the mosques [...]. We have been given a unique opportunity to go everywhere<sup>22</sup>.**

All heads of museums and monuments were instructed to open the doors of their institutions to the mission; only Tutankhamun was out of bounds, 'restricted because of contracts made with Carter and his publishers'<sup>23</sup>. This collective support allowed the photographer to present a visual overview of the country and gave the mission a sense of exploration, or at the very least a sense of visual exploration commensurate with the ambitions of the principal interlocutor, Hassanein Bey, who was himself well known as an explorer, photographer and writer<sup>24</sup>. By facilitating the photographer's movements and logistical needs, the authorities opened the country to his vision.

The geographic range of the mission was large: the photography was carried out over the course of a year in many trips departing from Cairo. Trembley assisted Boissonnas with the logistics and formalities, thanks to his command of Arabic. The capital was photographed in March and April of 1929, before the first trip to the Delta and Upper Egypt in May. Photography resumed in the autumn with a second trip of more than two months to Upper Egypt, from the end of September to the beginning of December, followed by a trip to the Suez Canal and Red Sea in the winter of 1929-30. All the principal historical and religious sites were photographed. The temples of ancient Egypt were methodically documented: Ghizah, then Saqqarah, Beni Hassan, Abydos, Deir El Bahari, Dendera, Karnak, Luxor, Thebes, the Valley of the Kings and the Valley of the Queens, Tophium (the present-day village of El Tôd), Kom Ombo, Philae and Abu Simbel, as well as the Roman ruins. Cairo's emblematic ancient mosques were, of course, fully represented<sup>25</sup>, while churches, monasteries, cemeteries, tombs and other sacred places were also included. The cities of Cairo and Alexandria were photographed systematically (panoramic viewpoints, street scenes, city gates and squares, general views and more detailed close-ups of certain ancient and modern buildings) (fig 2.4 and 2.5), as well as the villages encountered the length of the Nile, from the Delta to Abu Simbel (figs. 2.6, 2.7, 2.8).

Leaving behind areas frequented by tourists, the two collaborators travelled to oases then rarely visited by foreigners (Fayoum, but also Siawah, Dakhla, Khargah, Lakeita), photographing desert valleys on the way (fig 2.9). In the east, they went to the Suez Canal and Red Sea coast (Kosseir), as well as the monasteries of Saint Paul and Saint Anthony in the desert. They took special care to photograph the vegetation en route, but also the modern infrastructure: roads, dams, factories and refineries (fig 2.10). The map of Egypt published in the book highlights the geographical extent of the mission, and the key to the map distinguishes Fred Boissonnas's expedition from the trips of the tourist-photographers who had been travelling through Egypt for the last hundred years. The symbols chosen demonstrate, not only the scale of the journey, but also its complexity, by showing the different forms of transport taken – motor car, boat, train and camel<sup>26</sup>.

The photographic mission was indeed wide-ranging, but also very carefully executed, attention to detail having been a hallmark of the Boissonnas photographic studio from the 19<sup>th</sup> century onwards, and the quality that justified the commission. The financial backing of the king allowed the photographer to carry out his work without material constraints, even if Boissonnas deplored in letters the sustained pace imposed by Trembley. The negatives were sent for processing to the studio in Geneva as they went along. Paul Boissonnas received them and returned the proofs to Egypt for evaluation<sup>27</sup>. The result

could be improved if necessary, thanks to a precise system of numbering and detailed technical notes: the time of day, material, exposure time, lighting, result<sup>28</sup> and often a caption to describe the scene were recorded in a notebook<sup>29</sup>. A variety of cameras was used, among them the telephot.<sup>30</sup> Invented by the Swiss Auguste Vautier-Dufour and patented in 1901, it facilitated long-distance photography without the need for unwieldy equipment. Fred Boissonnas helped to market the camera, which he had been using for several decades to photograph landscapes and monuments<sup>31</sup>.

A total of 3,400 views were numbered and described, with one, two or three variations retained for each. The collection today comprises around 4,000 black-and-white contact prints in formats of 6 x 9 (approximately), 9 x 12, 13 x 18, and 18 x 24 centimetres, mostly negatives on paper but also negatives on glass plates, as well as a hundred or so autochromes and 934 slides in black and white and colour<sup>32</sup>. The choice of medium and size depended on the purpose: of the contact prints, the smallest format was reserved, for example, for the street scenes captured spontaneously for reproduction as vignettes in the book, while the larger formats were used for subjects reproduced as individual plates. The slides, kept in cases, and the autochromes were used to promote the book and for the various lectures given in Egypt, Switzerland and France at the end of the project.

Like other photographers of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Boissonnas became a 'writing-subject'<sup>33</sup>, explaining his practice and subjective point of view in the long inaugural text of the book<sup>34</sup>. His associate and impresario, Trembley, contributed to this effort by taking more than a thousand photographs of the Egypt mission with his own Leica camera. Forty or so of Trembley's pictures show Fred Boissonnas at work: in the middle of the Nile, on the bonnet of a car, under the black cloth of his tripod, on a ladder, even seated on a camel (fig 2.11).<sup>35</sup> These photographs were used to promote the book at the lectures organised for the launch, and a selection forms part of the collection of slides. Trembley's pictures document the heavy equipment the photographer carried with him and the work he did with a view camera, work that set him apart from his contemporaries, who travelled with much lighter equipment from that time forwards. Trembley's photos bear witness to Boissonnas's expert eye and his mastery of composition, as well as his highly professional, even elitist, technical approach. From the 1890s onwards, Boissonnas had defended the artistic status of the medium: faced with its immediacy, he advocated time and patience, and faced with the simplicity of the new cameras, he continued to rely on the use of heavy professional equipment inherited from the 19<sup>th</sup> century, even in the middle of the desert.

At the same time, the contract explicitly stipulated that the most modern photographic techniques and printing processes should be used, in an effort to surpass the art book of reference, *In Greece: Journeys by Mountain and Valley*. In addition to lantern slides, colour images were to be included in the book<sup>36</sup>, which would have represented a technical coup. While this ambition was not realised, the book shows the great effort made, on every level of the project, to create a unified whole, apparent not only in the methods used, but also in the contents: a synthesis of technical and stylistic means; an historical, geographical and social synthesis of the country photographed, but also a synthesis of the points of view presented.



**fig 2.7**  
Fred Boissonnas, *Dakhla, Rachda village*.  
*Women sorting grain and making butter*.  
Collection of the Centre d'Iconographie,  
Bibliothèque de Genève.

**fig 2.8**  
Fred Boissonnas, *Rachda village*.  
*Extraordinary vegetation. Orange trees  
20 metres high*. Collection of the Centre  
d'Iconographie, Bibliothèque de Genève.





**fig 2.9**  
Fred Boissonnas, *Khargah, Moving sand dune*. Collection of the Centre d'Iconographie, Bibliothèque de Genève.

## Towards a visual overview of Egyptian history, geography and society

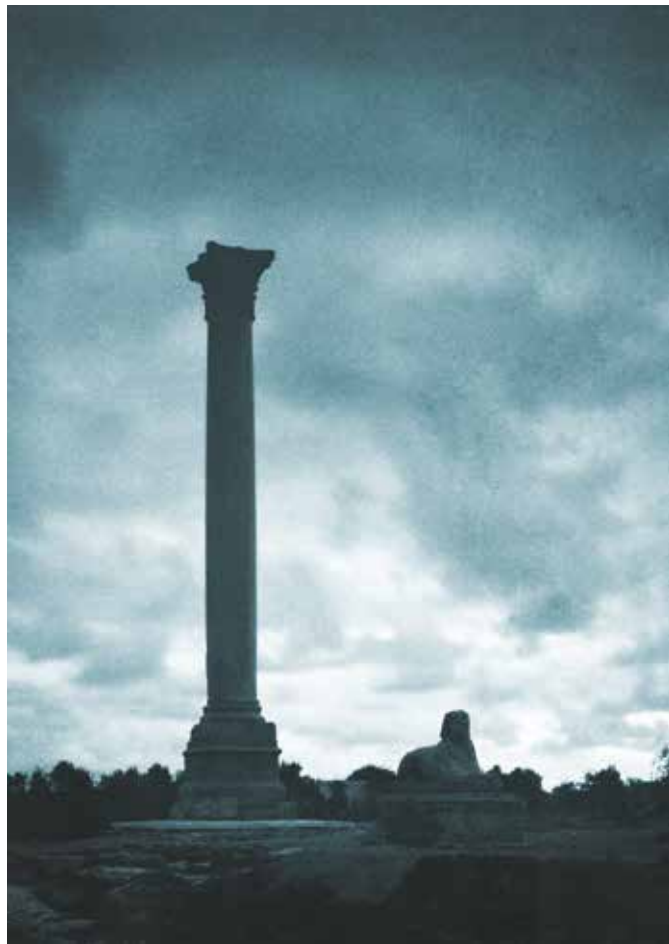
Responding to suggestions of the royal court and Trembley's relations, the project's main characteristic was the thematic, historical and geographical overview presented, an overview encompassing, to a large degree, all the ambitions of the adepts of photography since the 19<sup>th</sup> century<sup>37</sup>. The scope of the commission required the photographer to draw on all his various practices: portraiture, landscape photography, the photography of architecture and works of art. To create the portrait of a country he knew little, if at all, Boissonnas had no doubt referred to the work of past and contemporary photographers. He proposed an overview that would take into account different ways of looking at the country, but also a stylistic overview at the intersection of various influences and references: while many of the plates in the book, as well as the first chapter, reveal a decidedly Pictorialist tendency and show strong



**fig 2.10**  
Fred Boissonnas, *Upper Egypt. Haouamdieh. The refinery and the Nile*. Collection of the Centre d'Iconographie, Bibliothèque de Genève.

Orientalist influences, subjects like roads or railways symbolic of the country's modernity are portrayed in a much starker manner. Specialist of the mountain landscapes he had been photographing since the 1880s (evident in his many images of rocky terrain, on the road to Sinai for example, and the quarries (Plate XV), tombs and temples clinging to mountainsides, such as Plate XVI), Boissonnas found in the more sober lines of the desert a means of renewing his approach to landscape.

Establishing a coherent view of the nation demanded an inclusive approach in terms of heritage, references to identity and landscape, but also social groups. To provide the society he was portraying with a sense of unity, Boissonnas resorted to a visual device: from the king to the fellah, men and women were often photographed against a background of vegetation (evocative of the painted backdrops of 19<sup>th</sup>-century photographic studios and one of the factors behind the success of the Geneva studio) like the majestic, overhanging foliage in Plates I, II, and III of the book, for example). The photographer transcends class, cultural and religious differences to find in nature a common denominator and photograph it in monumental style<sup>38</sup>.



**fig 2.11**  
Paul Trembley, *Boissonnas at work during the photographic campaign*. Collection of the Centre d'Iconographie, Bibliothèque de Genève.

**fig 2.12**  
Fred Boissonnas, *Pompey's Column*. Collection of the Centre d'Iconographie, Bibliothèque de Genève.

## In search of new approaches

One of the main difficulties of the mission was the need to take an original and personal approach to a part of the world described as the 'natural home of photography'<sup>39</sup>; a place that had already been photographed 'from top to bottom'<sup>40</sup> by amateurs and professionals alike. Boissonnas is distinguished from other photographers by the technical quality of his images, but also by the way he handled certain subjects, using practices inherited from Pictorialism to devise carefully constructed scenes featuring men and women in the landscape. Backlighting views – difficult to realise technically – were one of his specialities (fig 2.6 and 2.7)<sup>41</sup>. The presence of an architectural feature in the foreground, a door frame for example, showed, on one hand, his technical skill and, on the other, his mastery of framing. This formal device reinforces the sense of revelation that photography offers and highlights the role of the camera as a gateway to other worlds. Boissonnas made use of original viewpoints and the atmospheric elements and lighting effects so dear to the Pictorialists in his treatment of the most photographed subjects, among them the Sphinx, taken from below, and excluding from the frame such contextual features as the paws emerging from the sand:

**I am very happy, I think I have succeeded with this very difficult bit, the Sphinx, difficult in the sense that it is photographed and painted every day by hordes of tourists, and you see it everywhere. You have to find a way to show it in a new and different light. I think I have succeeded. There was a thick fog as far as the pyramids when we left this morning at 7 am [...] It was a golden opportunity, because when you say fog and sun in Egypt, you are talking about the battle and victory of the light. In fact, after a 20-minute wait, shivering at the feet of the Sphinx, there was the first tear in the curtain, one of the pyramids burst through it and appeared to sparkle against the blue sky – like the Matterhorn on a sea of fog [...] I exposed my two dozen plates in three positions. It would be truly extraordinary if I didn't get a sensational effect<sup>42</sup>.**

The fog allowed him to bring an inanimate subject to life and fill the scene with a sense of drama. He repeated this approach with Pompey's Column, photographed several times in the rain (fig 2.12) and referred to in several

letters, notably this complaint addressed by the photographer to the engravers Leblanc and Trautman in Paris, who were producing the plates for the book a year and a half later:

**It is a disaster. [...] The effect of this plate depends on the treatment of the sky. Look at my photo. It is transparent, airy, the central effect of the light, violent and focused, is joined to an extreme softness, a subtle gradation of tones, you follow the light in the shadow that surrounds the clouds on the right, in front of these clouds you see others, in short it's a miraculous composition and to achieve it, I sacrificed three dozen plates and three full days in bad weather. [...] Notice, too, on the shaft of the column, two streaks of light that are barely visible, spreading across the polished marble in a kind of luminous vibration<sup>43</sup>.**

This note, in which Boissonnas is speaking 'from one artist to another'<sup>44</sup>, testifies to the care taken not only in the execution of the photographs but also in their production and printing, as well as in the execution of every aspect of the book, as demonstrated by the credits on the final page.

## Ceremony at the Geographical Society of Cairo: celebrating the nation in images

In his correspondence, Fred Boissonnas describes in detail the presentation of the book to the king on 17 March 1933, and the sovereign's accolades:

**From the first plate of my chapter, His Majesty sighed, 'Oh, how beautiful it is'. And with each successive page, he showed renewed surprise and satisfaction. 'Bravo! Bravo! You have outdone yourself!' [...] Of the Sphinx, His Majesty exclaimed, 'Amazing, magnificent! That's something I have never seen! You stood right at the base? Only you are able to renew the most overworked subjects!' [...] Fayoum filled His Majesty with wonder. [...] The felucca enchanted him. The mourners left him speechless, thoughtful, he murmured, 'It's more beautiful than I expected.'<sup>45</sup>**

The approval of the king was confirmed by the book's elaborate official launch at the Geographical Society of Cairo. The king charged his administrators to ensure that the 'great amphitheatre would be filled with all the authorities, notables, members of official bodies, ministers, presidents, diplomats, members of academic societies, institutes, Jesuits, Copts, high Palace officials, dignitaries of the army, the border department, Residences (the English) and princes, the bibliophile pachas, subscribers to the book, and important foreigners... in short, some five to six hundred invitations to be sent by the Palace secretaries'<sup>46</sup>. The organisation of an event assembling members of the government and representatives of different religions, academic societies and

foreign governments demonstrates that the undertaking was intended to unite the representatives of the nation around this visual and literary project promoted by the crown. The king encouraged the dissemination of a pluralistic image of the country with its geographical, historical and cultural diversity, a characteristic given coherence by Boissonnas in the book and magnified by his lens.

An inaugural lecture on the 3<sup>rd</sup> April attracted a crowd of 300, including a member of the royal family, all the government ministers, many dignitaries and foreign diplomats<sup>47</sup>. Paul Trembley presented a slide show and told anecdotes about the journey. The 40 plates included in the book were exhibited in the rooms of the Society, and 800 photographs were delivered to the organisation. Of the 50 copies of the book acquired by the king, some were presented to ministers<sup>48</sup> and others no doubt served as diplomatic gifts.

It is generally acknowledged that the practice of photography has since the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century influenced the conception of space and favoured the emergence of a collective sense of identity<sup>49</sup>. The capacity of photography to aestheticise the real and stir emotions and affect,

combined with its representational dimension, made photography the ideal means of reinforcing a feeling of collective belonging<sup>50</sup>. If the spread of the written word in Egyptian society from the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century onwards contributed to the formation of a national culture in Egypt, the elitist character of Boissonnas's book limited its influence to the political and economic Egyptian elite, and to foreign circles.

In Europe, however, the work was not as well received as *In Greece: Journeys by Mountain and Valley*, which had sold out quickly two decades before. It was difficult to enlist subscribers in Switzerland, in spite of the connections of the two collaborators,<sup>51</sup> and the many lectures organised to promote the 'luxury volume', such as that at the Geographical Society of Paris on 24 March 1934, achieved little, the global economic crisis having put a limit to extravagant spending. But even though the collaboration with Paul Trembley did not succeed in saving the Boissonnas business, it did allow the photographer, in his later years, to create a collection of images of postcolonial Egypt of unequalled breadth and exceptional quality.

<sup>1</sup> The book was digitised by the Bibliotheca Alexandrina as part of the 'Memories of Modern Egypt' project, 'in spite of the disagreements that could arise over some of the opinions expressed by the author' (from the foreword to the 2013 digital edition): [https://www.bibalex.org/Attachments/Publications/Files/2016102610294378024\\_Egypte.pdf](https://www.bibalex.org/Attachments/Publications/Files/2016102610294378024_Egypte.pdf)

<sup>2</sup> I would like to thank Cléo Borel, Gad Borel, Nicolas Schätti and Cécile Dobler for their help in consulting these documents. My thanks also go to the Centre d'Iconographie of the Library of Geneva (BGE) for allowing me to reproduce the illustrations in this article.

<sup>3</sup> Letter from Fred Boissonnas to Paul Boissonnas, Cairo, 6 April 1929. From the Boissonnas-Borel Collection at the Centre d'Iconographie (BGE).

<sup>4</sup> A bibliography of works illustrated, written or published by Fred Boissonnas can be found in *Usages du Monde et de la Photographie*, Fred Boissonnas, Estelle Sohier and Nicolas Crispini (eds.), Geneva: Editions Georg. Collection Patrimoine genevois, 2013.

<sup>5</sup> Jean Troesch, 'Paul Trembley' (obituary), *Journal de Genève* no. 58, Monday, 11 March 1974.

<sup>6</sup> Letter from Fred Boissonnas to Paul

Boissonnas, Paris, 18 January 1929; letter from Fred Boissonnas to Paul Boissonnas, Cairo, 2 April 1929. Boissonnas-Borel Collection, Centre d'Iconographie (BGE).

<sup>7</sup> Claudia Koch, *La colonie suisse au Caire. Contribution à l'histoire de l'émigration suisse outre-mer de la fin du 19e siècle au milieu de 20e siècle*. Master's thesis, University of Geneva, 1995.

<sup>8</sup> Contract between HE Mohamed Zaki El-Ibrachi Pacha, Fred Boissonnas and Paul Trembley, Cairo, 4 April 1929, Article 1. Boissonnas-Borel Collection, Centre d'Iconographie (BGE).

<sup>9</sup> Letter from Fred Boissonnas to Paul Boissonnas, Cairo, 4 April 1929. Boissonnas-Borel Collection, Centre d'Iconographie (BGE).

<sup>10</sup> Contract, Cairo, 4 April 1929, Article 1.

<sup>11</sup> Claude Hauser, Thomas Loué, Jean-Yves Mollier, François Vallotton (eds.), *La Diplomatie par le livre. Réseaux et circulation internationale de l'imprimé de 1880 à nos jours*, Paris, Nouveau Monde éditions, 2011.

<sup>12</sup> Anne Godlewska, 'Map, Text and Image. The Mentality of Enlightened Conquerors: A New Look at the *Description de l'Égypte*', *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers, New Series*, vol. 20, n. 1 (1995), pp. 5-28.

<sup>13</sup> Israel Gershoni, 'The Evolution of National Culture in Modern Egypt: Intellectual Formation and Social Diffusion, 1892-1945', *Poetics Today*, vol. 13, n. 2 (Summer, 1992), pp. 325-50.

<sup>14</sup> See Israel Gershoni, James P. Jankowski (eds.), *Redefining the Egyptian Nation, 1930-1945*, Cambridge University Press, 2002.

<sup>15</sup> Donald Malcolm Reid, 'The Egyptian Geographical Society: From Foreign Laymen's Society to Indigenous Professional Association', *Poetics Today*, vol. 14, n. 3, Cultural Processes in Muslim and Arab Societies: Modern Period I (Autumn, 1993), pp. 539-72.

<sup>16</sup> Letter from Fred Boissonnas to Augusta Boissonnas, Cairo, 29 March 1929. Boissonnas-Borel Collection, Centre d'Iconographie (BGE).

<sup>17</sup> Letter from Fred Boissonnas to Paul Boissonnas, Cairo, 6 May 1929. Boissonnas-Borel Collection, Centre d'Iconographie (BGE).

<sup>18</sup> For instance James R. Ryan, *Picturing Empire. Photography and the Visualization of the British Empire*, London: Reaktion Books, 1997; Eleanor Hight, Gary Sampson (eds.), *Colonialist photography: Imag(in)ing Race and Place*, London: Routledge, 2002; Gregory Derek, *Emperors of the Gaze: Photographic*

*Practices and Productions of Space in Egypt, 1839-1914*' in: Joan Schwartz, James Ryan (eds.), *Picturing Place: Photography and the Geographical Imagination*, London; New York, NY: I. B. Tauris, 2003, pp. 195-225.

<sup>19</sup> Maria Golia, *Photography and Egypt*, Cairo: the American University in Cairo Press, 2010, pp. 14-15.

<sup>20</sup> Golia, op. cit., pp. 64-93.

<sup>21</sup> Letter from Fred Boissonnas to Paul Boissonnas, Cairo, 7 May 1929. Boissonnas-Borel Collection, Centre d'Iconographie (BGE).

<sup>22</sup> Letter from Fred Boissonnas to Paul Boissonnas, Cairo, 6 May 1929. Boissonnas-Borel Collection, Centre d'Iconographie (BGE).

<sup>23</sup> Ibid.

<sup>24</sup> See Hassanein Bey, *The Lost Oases*, Cairo: The American University in Cairo Press, 2006 (first published in 1925).

<sup>25</sup> For the extensive photographic coverage of the monuments of Cairo prior to Boissonnas's mission, see especially the work carried out under the direction of Mercedes Volait: *Le Caire dessiné et photographié au XIXe siècle*, Paris, Picard, 2013.

<sup>26</sup> On the order of Paul Trembley, who simplified the journey in one red line: 'They think that we travelled the length of the Nile by train like some [Pierre] Loti or that we've gone everywhere by car, even driving to Abu Simbel, which is impossible. It also shows more clearly where we haven't been'. Letter from Paul Trembley to Fred Boissonnas, Val d'Illeze, 20 Boissonnas-Borel Collection, Centre d'Iconographie (BGE)

<sup>27</sup> 'Thank you for your two letters and the prompt dispatch of the photos [...] I am happy with the first proofs, some of which are beautiful. On the other hand frittering away Kodak [film] is hardly desirable; barely one in ten is of interest. [...]'. Letter from Fred Boissonnas to Paul Boissonnas, Cairo, 6 May 1929. Boissonnas-Borel Collection, Centre d'Iconographie (BGE).

<sup>28</sup> With the help of terms like: too short, accurate, too long, a little blurred, passable, hazy, shutter problem, burned out, burned out and spotted, a little overexposed, excellent, perfect, too much shadow, etc.

<sup>29</sup> 'The most urgent will be what I am taking at the moment, the interior of the mosque in 18 x 24. I will put a label on the parcel. I would like to have the proofs on my return from Upper Egypt at the end of the month. Mark on the back of the proofs my pencilled negative numbers so I'll know the exposure time'. Letter from Fred Boissonnas to Paul Boissonnas, Cairo, 6 May 1929. Boissonnas-Borel Collection, Centre d'Iconographie (BGE).

<sup>30</sup> Letter from Fred Boissonnas to Paul

Boissonnas, Paris, 3 March 1929. Boissonnas-Borel Collection, Centre d'Iconographie (BGE).

<sup>31</sup> In order to market the camera, the inventor established a limited company in Geneva with Boissonnas in 1904 known as VEGA, Société Anonyme de Photographie et d'Optique. There was an exhibition about the camera at the French Musée suisse de l'appareil photographique. in Vevey, Switzerland in 2017, 'Auguste Vautier-Dufour and the Téléphot'.

<sup>32</sup> Many thanks are due to Cécile Dobler for her help and for these details. A total of 1,177 slides have been catalogued, of which 243 have been identified as missing. On this subject see Elisa Murcia Artengo, Master's thesis, University of Geneva, MAS, 2015. An undetermined number of autochromes are held in private archives. See Christophe Mauron, Nicolas Crispini, Christophe Dutoit's *Fou de Couleurs. Autochromes, les premières photographies couleur de Suisse (1907-1938)*, Neuchâtel, Alphil, 2015, pp. 134-41.

<sup>33</sup> François Brunet, *La naissance de l'idée de photographie*, Paris, PUF, 2000, p. 339.

<sup>34</sup> Fred Boissonnas, 'Picturesque Egypt' in *L'Égypte*, 1932, pp. 10-38.

<sup>35</sup> The photographer appears in 47 of the 1,162 photographs listed.

<sup>36</sup> Crispini, op. cit., 2015, p. 135

<sup>37</sup> Marta Caraion, *Pour fixer la trace. Photographie, littérature et voyage au milieu du XIXe siècle*, Genève, Droz, 2003, p. 276.

<sup>38</sup> As highlighted by Oriana Baddeley, 'The Sinai Expeditions: Travel Photography as Pilgrimage', in Fred Boissonnas: *The Sinai Expeditions 1929-1933*, Chambésy, Geneva, 2011, p. 9.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid.

<sup>40</sup> 'Egypt has been photographed literally inside out', Golia, op. cit., 2010, p. 7.

<sup>41</sup> For the technical details, see Ewelina Warner, 'The Photographic Techniques of Fred Boissonnas', in Fred Boissonnas: *The Sinai Expeditions 1929-1933*, Chambésy, Geneva, 2011, p. 85.

<sup>42</sup> Letter from Fred Boissonnas to Augusta Boissonnas, Cairo, 27 December 1929. Boissonnas-Borel Collection, Centre d'Iconographie (BGE).

<sup>43</sup> Draft of letter from Fred Boissonnas to Leblanc et Trautman, 20 May 1931. Boissonnas-Borel Collection, Centre d'Iconographie (BGE).

<sup>44</sup> Ibid.

<sup>45</sup> Fred Boissonnas, Diary (typescript), Cairo, Saturday 18 March 1933, Boissonnas-Borel Collection, Centre d'Iconographie (BGE).

<sup>46</sup> Fred Boissonnas, Diary (typescript), Cairo,

22 March 1933. Boissonnas-Borel Collection, Centre d'Iconographie (BGE).

<sup>47</sup> Fred Boissonnas, Diary (typescript), Cairo, 4 April 1933. Boissonnas-Borel Collection, Centre d'Iconographie (BGE).

<sup>48</sup> The copy digitised by the Bibliotheca Alexandrina was part of King Farouk's private collection, kept in the Ministry of Tourism's library: [https://www.bibalex.org/Attachments/Publications/Files/2016102610294378024\\_Egypte.pdf](https://www.bibalex.org/Attachments/Publications/Files/2016102610294378024_Egypte.pdf)

<sup>49</sup> Schwartz, Ryan, op. cit., 2003.

<sup>50</sup> Costanza Caraffa, Tiziana Serena (eds), *Photo Archives and the Idea of Nation*, Berlin, Munich, Boston, 2015. Fig 6: Fred Boissonnas 'Khargah, covered alley'. Centre d'Iconographie (BGE).

<sup>51</sup> 'The situation is terrible and catastrophic here. Never have I had such lamentable results... just one single subscription in Bern by an acquaintance of my brother. I don't expect more than a single subscription from all the libraries together here'. Letter from Paul Trembley to Fred Boissonnas, from Zurich, 8 December 1931. Boissonnas-Borel Collection, Centre d'Iconographie (BGE).

# 'Into Cheltenham' - On the Way to Mount Sinai

George Manginis



fig 3.1  
Francis Frith, *Inscriptions on the granite rocks in Sinai*, 1858. The Miriam and Ira D. Wallach Division of Art, Prints and Photographs: Photography Collection, The New York Public Library.

The year 1862 saw the publication of a sumptuously produced 'scholarly' essay on ancient inscriptions found in, or associated with, the Sinai Peninsula. It was written by the Reverend Charles Forster (d. 1871) and bore the (deceptive) title *Sinai Photographed or Contemporary Records of Israel in the Wilderness*.<sup>1</sup> However, there was not a single image taken *in situ* among the expensive reproductions included in the volume. It is probable that Forster, an eccentric clergyman with a surprisingly devoted public following, wished to attract interest to his work by combining in its title two of the foremost obsessions of the Western European and American scholarly communities in the 1860s: photography and Sinai studies.

The nascent technology of photographic reproduction, newly adapted for mass reprinting, had already inspired the documentation of far-away travels in albums. Two of the earliest included views of the mountain wilderness of Sinai: *Cairo, Sinai, Jerusalem, and The Pyramids of Egypt: A Series of Sixty Photographic Views* and the larger-for-

mat *Egypt, Sinai, and Jerusalem: A Series of Twenty Photographic Views*.<sup>2</sup> Both works were first published in 1860, but the photographs had been taken a few years earlier, in the winter of 1857–58. The intrepid artist responsible was the Englishman Francis Frith (1822–98), a pioneer of the genre of travel photography for commercial circulation. His Sinai views include inscriptions carved on natural rock surfaces, with the occasional human figure included for scale (fig 3.1), and desert landscapes with or without human vestiges (figures, tents, buildings): flatlands, distant mountains, wadis, trees. (fig 3.2),

The subject matter of Frith's photographs reflects the main interests of his audience: Sinaitic epigraphy and the 'Mount of the Law controversy.' The authorship of the so-called 'Sinaitic inscriptions' (recognised as Nabatean in 1840 but attributed to wandering Israelites until as late as the 1920s) had enthused and divided specialists since the 1740s (among them, Forster). The location of the 'actual' biblical Mount Sinai was first questioned in the 1820s



**fig 3.2**  
Francis Frith, *The Summit of Gebel Moosà*, 1858. The Miriam and Ira D. Wallach Division of Art, Prints and Photographs: Photography Collection, The New York Public Library.

**fig 3.3**  
David Roberts, *Summit of Mount Sinai shewing the Christian and Mahometan Chapels*. Lithograph on paper. Private collection.

and commanded widespread interest by the 1850s, an interest that, in one way or the other, survives to this day.<sup>3</sup> The popularity of both issues with scholars and the public must have been encouraged by the beauty of the arid Sinai landscape as it was recorded dozens of times since its earliest surviving depiction in a sketch, executed in 1335 by Jacopo da Verona. Mass-produced engravings first illustrated Sinai landscapes in 1486 in the first edition of Bernard von Breydenbach's narration of his 1483 visit; they reached an aesthetic and technical peak with David Roberts's sublime views of the mountain, the Monastery of Saint Catherine and its clerical inhabitants (made in 1839).<sup>4</sup> Twenty years later, photographs by Frith offered a new take on the landscapes and the buildings, but much less on the people, since only two Bedouin, one figure in European attire and no monastics appear in them.

The new medium was fascinating for scholars since it gave those unable to make the distant journey the ability to experience a 'more objective' glimpse into the much-coveted and debated desert. However, views such as those in Roberts's lithographs, for example *Summit of Mount Sinai shewing the Christian and Mahometan Chapels* (fig 3.3), *The Monastery of St. Catherine* (fig 3.4), and *Chapel of the Convent of St. Catherine on Mount Sinai*, could not be replicated with the lenses and chemicals available to Frith – indeed, the first two cannot possibly have been photographed at all since they are imagined framings taken from more than one point of view and assembled by the draughtsman. Furthermore, the candid and exotic portraits enlivening some of these printed scenes could not easily be included in the photographic versions due to the long exposure times necessary. The technical limitations of the new medium were still too considerable to inform the visual narrative of Sinai in a significant way (fig 3.5).

When the second systematic photographic record of the area of Saint Catherine's Monastery was made by Sergeant James M. MacDonald (1822–85), the agenda was less commercial and more scholarly. MacDonald accompanied the Ordnance Survey of the Peninsula of Sinai (1868–69), an expedition organised by the Palestine Exploration Fund with the aim of elucidating once and for all the 'Mount of the Law' controversy.<sup>5</sup> The Ordnance Survey examined all of the summits proposed by various travellers and authors as candidates for the biblical summit and concluded in favour of Mount Sinai, the mountaintop above Saint Catherine's and the traditional site of the Mosaic theophany. MacDonald captured an ample perspective on Wadi el Deir (fig 3.6), and even attempted a panorama from a mountaintop (fig 3.7), albeit from Mount Sirbal rather than Mount Sinai. However, his view

of the Monastery (fig 3.8), is almost identical to that taken by Frith more than a decade earlier (fig 3.9), perhaps signifying that the two men stood on the same vantage point, probably a standard viewpoint suggested by a ciceroni.

The oeuvre of the two main Victorian photographers of Sinai's landscape was inspired by the attraction of the desert for armchair tourists and opinionated Bible-readers and was informed by the work of earlier artists employing pencil and watercolour. It exemplifies the timelessness for which the monastic fortress had been famous since the early modern period, the stillness of the rocky plains, the clarity of the cloudless skies and the imperviousness of the granite walls. In the words of Benjamin Bausman (1824–1909, visited Sinai in 1861): 'If there is a place on our planet calculated to give one an idea of the awful results of Almighty power in full blast, this ought to be it.'<sup>6</sup>

Visitors were not always happy with the landscape. Visiting in 1839, the British traveller John G. Kinnear employed his aesthetic communion with the landscape (or lack of) as a criterion for rejecting its Old Testament credentials: '...it is not the view I expected to see from the summit of Mount Sinai.'<sup>7</sup> A few years later, William Henry Bartlett (1809–54, visited in 1845) added: 'Artistically speaking, the scenery on this excursion disappointed me: it is indeed dreary and savage, but neither noble in form, nor picturesque in outline.'<sup>8</sup> Perhaps this 'artistic' sensibility was informed by Protestant religious belief, as the hymn-writer and cleric Horatius Bonar (1808–89, visited in 1856) implied: 'There is too much of tinsel here. A high, large, bare, rocky hall would have satisfied our idea of a chapel for Sinai.'<sup>9</sup> In the end, it was the sublimity of Roberts's lithographs or the wide-angle photographs of Frith and MacDonald that helped bring together the religious imagination and the denuded, unforgiving place.

All the while, the landscape and the monastery, venerable in their antiquity, were inhabited by living men who were often deemed by their visitors as unworthy of their surroundings, penurious and illiterate. The monks were derided in many of the narratives, and they seem to be absent from early photographic records, although a few painters, notably Roberts and Bartlett, included them in their views. Again, it was the intense religiosity of most visitors that encouraged their criticism of the monks, sometimes evolving into an outright attack.<sup>10</sup> Painters and photographers, in their turn, preferred expanses of rock and walls of granite unsoiled by humanity, embodying the 'great and terrible wilderness' narrative (Deuteronomy 8:15). Tellingly, the most populated work of art situated in a contemporary Sinai desert setting



**fig 3.4**  
David Roberts, *The Monastery of St. Catherine*. Lithograph on paper. Private collection.



**fig 3.5**  
David Roberts, *Principal Court of the Convent of St. Catherine*.  
Lithograph on paper. Private collection.



**fig 3.6**  
James M. McDonald, *Wady Ed Deir and the Plain of Er Ráhah from  
Jebel Muneijáh*, 1869. The J. Paul Getty Trust 84.XO.1248.3.1.29.

is John Frederick Lewis's *A Frank Encampment in the Desert of Mount Sinai, 1842–The Convent of Saint Catherine in the distance* (1856); it is a veiled critique of the stance of one such dismissive traveller, languidly and thoughtlessly embracing his Oriental fantasy while ignoring the dignity of the Bedouin sheikh standing in front of him (fig 3.10). For European and American audiences, Mount Sinai was probably best depicted frozen in Exodial time, as in John Rogers Herbert's *Moses Bringing Down the Tables of the Law* (1872–77, National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne, accession number p.306.4-1). This gigantic work (measuring 3.4 by 6.3 metres) accurately captures the scale, shape and hues of the Sinai mountains, probably thanks to early photography and coloured lithographs, but it is pullulating with prophets and wandering Israelites, rather than heterodox monastics and Bedouin.

The result of the Ordnance Survey, published in 1871, resolved the Mount Sinai controversy for most people, and no more extensive photographic records were compiled in the decades that followed. For example, Abbé Raboisson's *En Orient* (1886), Mrs. R.L. Bensly's *Our Journey to Sinai* (1896) and Count Jean de Kergorlay's *Sites délaissés d'Orient* (1911) include snapshots taken by the authors which sometimes follow the books' narratives and sometimes depart from them to embrace the iconic or the mundane, walking once more in the steps of 19<sup>th</sup>-century painters and photographers.<sup>11</sup> Easier access to cheaper and more portable camera equipment made views of Sinai less the privilege of the professional and more the province of the tourist. Sets of photographs reproduced on the modest scale of the above publications were not meant to be visual records of the Sinai experience, in which image took precedence over text (as in the case of the albums by Roberts and Frith); this would be the ambition of Frédéric Boissonnas (1858–1946) for the series of photographs the book at hand showcases, taken during two trips in 1929 and 1933.

The changes that occurred in the 60 years between the Ordnance Survey and Boissonnas's visits indelibly injected the dimension of time into the 'timeless' Sinai experience. Egypt had become a dependency of the British Empire in 1882 and gained (conditional) independence in 1922; the First World War and the Russian Revolution had also occurred. These events affected the demographics of visitors to the Monastery of Saint Catherine, by now accessible by car and acknowledged as a treasure house of Christian artwork and manuscripts thanks to the acquisitiveness of Constantin von Tischendorf (1815-74) and the regular scholarly expeditions of Agnes Smith Lewis (1843–1926) and Margaret Dunlop Gibson (1843–1920).



A statistic of visitors between 1860 and 1925, cited by Agamemnon Zachos in 1937, listed 1,935 visitors, out of which 341 were Indian and English military. Of the remaining 1,594, there were 633 English, 190 Americans, 220 Russians (a surprising statistic for the largest Orthodox nation, undoubtedly connected to the Russian Revolution), 154 Germans, 153 French and 59 Greeks, among the most populous national groups.<sup>12</sup> But most of all, it was mass tourism that changed the experience of Sinai. The guidebooks of Baedeker and Thomas Cook's services for travellers rendered the 'wilderness' much less 'terrible'.<sup>13</sup> Rather than seeking inscriptions documenting Moses's passage, camel- or motorcar-riding sportsmen hunted ibex and partridges, among them members of the Buxton family, Arthur W. Sutton (1854–1925) and Major C. S. Jarvis (1879–1952), Governor of Sinai.<sup>14</sup> Postcards (fig 3.11), magic lantern slides (fig 3.12) and stereoscopic photographs featured widely recognisable mountain slopes and desolate expanses; the sublime was rendered mundane.

All the while, a new sensibility was emerging. The great debates of the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century subsided and scholars focused on early Greek, Syriac and Arabic manuscripts, Crusader graffiti and Byzantine icons, among them the erudite and aristocratic Duke of Sachsen (1869–1938), who visited in October 1910, and M. H. L. Rabino.<sup>15</sup> Visitors started looking for scenes situated in place and anchored in time.<sup>16</sup> Sinai became picturesque, as in the views by de Kergorlay, in which human figures have either grown in scale and dominate the picture frame (fig 3.13) or have been placed in pivotal positions, around which the natural or man-made background revolves (fig 3.14).<sup>17</sup> This new sensibility bore the imprint of a modern, early 20<sup>th</sup>-century spirituality, and its foremost exponents in image and word appeared in the interwar period: respectively, Fred Boissonnas and Louis Golding (1895–1958).

The narrative of Golding's visit in his 1937 book *In the Steps of Moses the Lawgiver* could serve as the text for Boissonnas's uncompleted photographic album. Unlike dozens of earlier visitors, Golding had some modern Greek and could communicate with the monks; more importantly, he was eager to listen to them and show (critical) respect for their way of living and being within their ancient abode. One feels that the way of life at Saint Catherine's Monastery gained importance for these latter-day pilgrims, and the fact that the charnel house and the 'sardonic proprietary' cats were recorded by both corroborates this feeling.<sup>18</sup> They both visited Pachomios the icon painter and made portraits of him on film (*Father Pacomios seated in front of his icons*, 6 June 1933) and in prose:



**fig 3.7**  
James M. McDonald, *Jebel Serbal from  
Jebel Tahuneh*, 1869. The J. Paul Getty  
Trust 84.XP.728.47.

**fig 3.8**  
James M. McDonald, *Convent of  
St. Katherine, with Jebel Músá in the  
Background*, 1869. The J. Paul Getty  
Trust 84.XO.1248.3.1.28.

**fig 3.9**  
Francis Frith, *The Convent of Sinai*.  
Negative 1858; print 1862. General  
Research Division, The New York Public  
Library.



fig 3.10

John Frederick Lewis, *A Frank Encampment in the Desert of Mount Sinai. 1842–The Convent of St. Catherine in the Distance*. Watercolour, 1856. Yale Center for British Art, Paul Mellon Collection, New Haven, Connecticut, U.S.A.

fig 3.11

*Les montagnes de Sinai. Sinaïgebirge*. Postcard. Sent on 23 December 1906. Private collection.

I saw an old monk bent over a table with his spectacles pushed up against his forehead, a thin large folio volume before him, and a watercolour brush poised delicately in his right hand. I knew at once, before the objects in the room had emerged from the half-darkness that shrouded them, that I had not found my way into Byzantium, but into Cheltenham. At the moment, he was filling with pink paint the minims and semibreves in an early missal. The proceeding seemed to give him some sort of ghostly pleasure. There were a number of little pieces of rug on the floor. The place was littered with whatnot tables, as it would be impossible not to call them. [...] The walls were completely plastered over with eikons, some being glossy colour-prints, very harsh and primary, the rest being watercolour eikons painted by himself, pale blue and pale pink and pale yellow, like the spare-time work of a devout maiden lady in charge of a mission club for girls.<sup>19</sup>

Even Pachomios's cat merited a description:

Then he [Dmitri] pointed out a dingy blacky-gray cat named after a more illustrious sovereign. She was descending a wooden stairway from a first-storey cell. 'Look!' he said. 'Cleopatra! The cat of Pachomios!' Cleopatra and I already knew each other. I had thrown a shoe at her at least twice. She had stolen from our stores the lovely lump of salami I had been saving up so

carefully. Cleopatra stared at me for one moment as if I were not even a sardine-tin, and continued her progress down the stairs.<sup>20</sup>

One is tempted to match Cleopatra with one of the cats in Boissonnas's *Courtyard of the painter Pacomios* of 25 May 1933.

Nevertheless, the Holy Book remained a strong incentive during the interwar period, and the modern-day journeys of both the author and the artist were meant to reflect that of the Old Testament prophet. Boissonnas photographed his way along the route of the Exodus and Golding, a British Jew, wove Talmudic- and Biblical-inspired descriptions into the humorous and perceptive narrative of his own desert perambulation.<sup>21</sup> It almost seemed as if the biblical and physical landscapes were inseparable, as if they should be inseparable. Golding's frustration at not finding the illumination he was hoping for was perhaps not expressed with such overt clarity as Kinnear's disappointment, but he reiterated the same expectations for a prophetic revelation, a transcendent vision denied him by the presence of a loquacious guide and a vagabond rodent. In that, Boissonnas was more successful. His views brim with life but, 80 years later, seem just as pertinent to the 21st-century visitor, having achieved their own timelessness. This is indeed 'Sinai Photographed.'

I am grateful to Dr Melanie Gibson for her thoughtful comments on this text.



fig 3.12

*Mount Sinai and Convent*. 'Magic lantern' slide published by Newton & Co., 3 Fleet St., London. Before 1912. Private collection.

fig 3.13

Jean de Kergorlay, *Au sommet du Sinai se voient les ruines d'une chapelle*. Photograph. Spring 1906. Private collection.

fig 3.14

Jean de Kergorlay, *Ce monastère donne plutôt le sentiment d'être un conte de fée qu'une réalité*. Photograph. Spring 1906. Private collection.

<sup>1</sup> The Rev. Charles Forster, *Sinai Photographed or Contemporary Records of Israel in the Wilderness*, London 1862.

<sup>2</sup> Francis Frith, *Cairo, Sinai, Jerusalem, and The Pyramids of Egypt: A Series of Sixty Photographic Views by Francis Frith, with Descriptions by Mrs. Poole and Reginald Stuart Poole*, London 1860; Francis Frith, *Egypt, Sinai, and Jerusalem: A Series of Twenty Photographic Views by Francis Frith, with Descriptions by Mrs. Poole and Reginald Stuart Poole*, London 1860.

<sup>3</sup> George Manginis, *Mount Sinai: A History of Travellers and Pilgrims*, London 2016, 139–64.

<sup>4</sup> David Roberts, *The Holy Land, Syria, Idumea, Arabia, Egypt, & Nubia, from drawings made on the spot by D. Roberts* [...] *With historical descriptions by the Revd George Croly*, [...] (*Egypt and Nubia. With historical descriptions by William Brockedon*), London 1842–49.

<sup>5</sup> C. W. Wilson and H. S. Palmer, under the direction of Henry James, *Ordnance Survey of the Peninsula of Sinai*, in three parts, part I: *Account of the Survey (With Illustrations)*, part II: *Maps, Plans, and Sections*, part III: *Photographic Views* (I–III), Southampton 1869.

<sup>6</sup> Benjamin Bausman, *Sinai and Zion; or, A Pilgrimage through the Wilderness to the Land of Promise*, Philadelphia 1861, 132.

<sup>7</sup> John G. Kinnear, *Cairo, Petra, and Damascus, in 1839. With Remarks on the Government of Mehemet Ali, and on the Present Prospects of Syria*, London 1841, 88.

<sup>8</sup> W. H. Bartlett, *Forty Days in the Desert, on The Track of the Israelites; or, A Journey from Cairo, by Wady Feiran, to Mount Sinai and Petra*, London 1879 (fifth edition), 91.

<sup>9</sup> Horatius Bonar, *The Desert of Sinai: Notes of a Spring-Journey from Cairo to Beersheba*, London 1857, 219.

<sup>10</sup> George Manginis, ‘Pillar of Fire or Dust? Jabal Mūsā in the Nineteenth Century,’ in *Proceedings of the Multidisciplinary Conference on the Sinai Desert, Cairo 29–30 November 2014*, Cairo 2015, 66–83.

<sup>11</sup> L'Abbé Raboisson, *En Orient. Récits et Notes d'un Voyage en Palestine et en Syrie par l'Égypte et le Sinai. Première partie comprenant l'Égypte et le Sinai*, Paris 1886; Mrs. R. L. Bensly, *Our Journey to Sinai. A Visit to the Convent of St. Catarina. With a Chapter on the Sinai Palimpsest. Illustrated from Photographs Taken by the Author*, London 1896; Cte Jean de Kergorlay, *Sites délaissés d'Orient (du Sinai à Jérusalem)*, Paris 1911.

<sup>12</sup> *Ἀγαμέμνων Ζάχος, Σινὰ καὶ Ἁγία Αἰκατερίνη. Ἐντυπώσεις καὶ μελέται (μετὰ πολλῶν πρωτοτύπων εἰκόνων)*, Athens 1937, 34–35.

<sup>13</sup> K. Baedeker (ed), *Egypt. Handbook for Travellers*. Part First: *Lower Egypt, with the Fayûm and the Peninsula of Sinai*, Leipsic and London 1878, 492–509; Karl Baedeker (editor), *Egypt. Handbook for Travellers*. Part First: *Lower Egypt and the Peninsula of Sinai*, Leipsic and London 1895, 259–75; Thomas Cook, *Cook's Tourist's Handbook for Egypt, the Nile and the Desert*, London 1897, 310–18; Thomas Cook, *Cook's Tours in Palestine, Egypt, Moab, Sinai, Petra, etc. Programme of Arrangements*, London 1899, 75–77. On tourism to Sinai, see Manginis, *Mount Sinai*, 181–85.

<sup>14</sup> Edward North Buxton, Hannah Maud Buxton, Clare Emily Buxton and Theresa Buxton, *On Either Side of the Red Sea. With Illustrations*

*of the Granite Ranges of the Eastern Desert of Egypt, and of Sinai*, London 1895, 126–38; Arthur W. Sutton, *My Camel Ride from Suez to Mount Sinai*, London 1913, 90–112; Major C. S. Jarvis, *Yesterday and To-day in Sinai*, Edinburgh and London 1931, 201–24.

<sup>15</sup> Johann Georg Herzog zu Sachsen, *Das Katharinenkloster am Sinai*, Lepzig und Berlin 1912; M. H. L. Rabino, ‘Le Monastère de Sainte-Catherine (Mont-Sinai). Souvenirs épigraphiques des anciens pélerins,’ *Bulletin de la Société Royale de Géographie d'Égypte* XIX 1er fascicule (1935), 21-126, planches I-XX.

<sup>16</sup> Manginis, *Mount Sinai*, 169–73.

<sup>17</sup> Kergorlay, *Sites délaissés d'Orient*, plates 16 and 11 opposite pages 56 and 40 respectively.

<sup>18</sup> Louis Golding, *In the Steps of Moses the Lawgiver*, London 1937, 274–75, 288, 306, 314–16.

<sup>19</sup> Louis Golding, *In the Steps of Moses the Lawgiver*, 311.

<sup>20</sup> Louis Golding, *In the Steps of Moses the Lawgiver*, 309–10.

<sup>21</sup> On Boissonnas, see Kathleen Brunner, ‘Photography, Landscape and the Sacred,’ in Oriana Baddeley (ed), *Fred Boissonnas: The Sinai Expeditions 1929–1933*, Chambésy 2011, 13–15.

## Bibliography

Baedeker, K. (editor), *Egypt. Handbook for Travellers*. Part First: *Lower Egypt, with the Fayûm and the Peninsula of Sinai*, Leipsic and London 1878.

Baedeker, Karl (ed), *Egypt. Handbook for Travellers*. Part First: *Lower Egypt and the Peninsula of Sinai*, Leipsic and London 1895.

Bartlett, W. H., *Forty Days in the Desert, on The Track of the Israelites; or, A Journey from Cairo, by Wady Feiran, to Mount Sinai and Petra*, London 1879 (fifth edition).

Bausman, Benjamin, *Sinai and Zion; or, A Pilgrimage through the Wilderness to the Land of Promise*, Philadelphia 1861.

Bensly, Mrs. R. L., *Our Journey to Sinai. A Visit to the Convent of St. Catarina. With a Chapter on the Sinai Palimpsest. Illustrated from Photographs Taken by the Author*, London 1896.

Bonar, Horatius, *The Desert of Sinai: Notes of a Spring-Journey from Cairo to Beersheba*, London 1857.

Brunner, Kathleen, ‘Photography, Landscape and the Sacred,’ in Oriana Baddeley (ed), *Fred Boissonnas: The Sinai Expeditions 1929–1933*, Chambésy 2011, 12–17.

Buxton, Edward North, Hannah Maud Buxton, Clare Emily Buxton and Theresa Buxton, *On Either Side of the Red Sea. With Illustrations of the Granite Ranges of the Eastern Desert of Egypt, and of Sinai*, London 1895.

Cook, Thomas, *Cook's Tourist's Handbook for Egypt, the Nile and the Desert*, London 1897.

Cook, Thomas, *Cook's Tours in Palestine, Egypt, Moab, Sinai, Petra, etc. Programme of Arrangements*, London 1899.

Forster, the Rev. Charles, *Sinai Photographed or Contemporary Records of Israel in the Wilderness*, London 1862.

Frith, Francis, *Cairo, Sinai, Jerusalem, and The Pyramids of Egypt: A Series of Sixty Photographic Views by Francis Frith, with Descriptions by Mrs. Poole and Reginald Stuart Poole*, London 1860.

Frith, Francis, *Egypt, Sinai, and Jerusalem: A Series of Twenty Photographic Views by Francis Frith, with Descriptions by Mrs. Poole and Reginald Stuart Poole*, London 1860.

Golding, Louis, *In the Steps of Moses the Lawgiver*, London 1937.

Jarvis, Major C. S., *Yesterday and To-day in Sinai*, Edinburgh and London 1931.

Kergorlay, Cte Jean de, *Sites délaissés d'Orient (du Sinai à Jérusalem)*, Paris 1911.

Kinnear, John G., *Cairo, Petra, and Damascus, in 1839. With Remarks on the Government of Mehemet Ali, and on the Present Prospects of Syria*, London 1841.

Manginis, George, ‘Pillar of Fire or Dust? Jabal Mūsā in the Nineteenth Century,’ in *Proceedings of the Multidisciplinary Conference on the Sinai Desert, Cairo 29–30 November 2014*, Cairo 2015, 66–83.

Manginis, George, *Mount Sinai: A History of Travellers and Pilgrims*, London 2016.

Rabino, M. H. L., ‘Le Monastère de Sainte-Catherine (Mont-Sinai). Souvenirs épigraphiques des anciens pélerins,’ *Bulletin de la Société Royale de Géographie d'Égypte* XIX 1er fascicule (1935), 21-126, planches I-XX.

Raboisson, L'Abbé, *En Orient. Récits et Notes d'un Voyage en Palestine et en Syrie par l'Égypte et le Sinai. Première partie comprenant l'Égypte et le Sinai*, Paris 1886.

Roberts, David, *The Holy Land, Syria, Idumea, Arabia, Egypt, & Nubia, from drawings made on the spot by D. Roberts* [...] *With historical descriptions by the Revd George Croly*, [...] (*Egypt and Nubia. With historical descriptions by William Brockedon*), London 1842–49.

Sachsen, Johann Georg Herzog zu, *Das Katharinenkloster am Sinai*, Lepzig und Berlin 1912.

Sutton, Arthur W., *My Camel Ride from Suez to Mount Sinai*, London 1913.

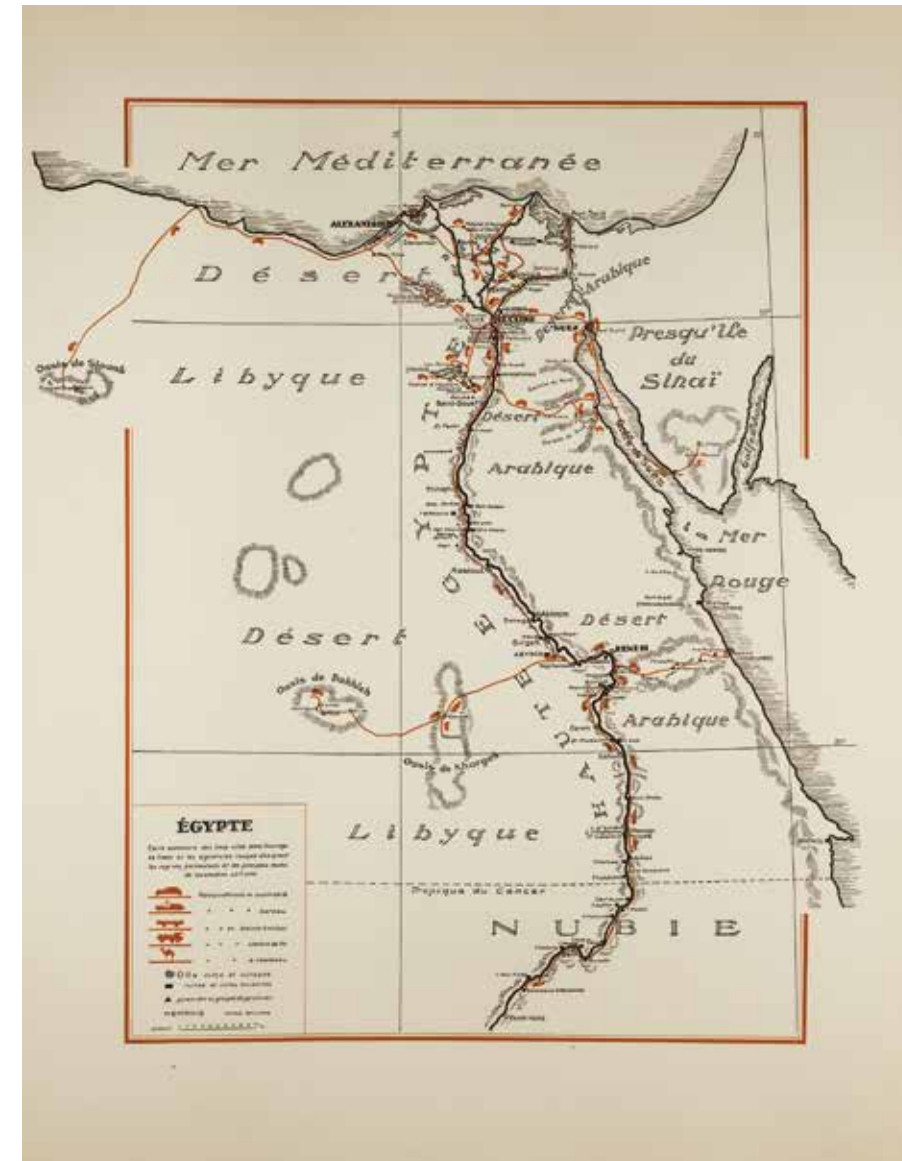
Wilson, C. W. and H. S. Palmer, under the direction of Henry James, *Ordnance Survey of the Peninsula of Sinai*, in three parts, part I: *Account of the Survey (With Illustrations)*, part II: *Maps, Plans, and Sections*, part III: *Photographic Views* (I–III), Southampton 1869.

Zachos, Agamemnon (*Ἀγαμέμνων Ζάχος, Σινὰ καὶ Ἁγία Αἰκατερίνη. Ἐντυπώσεις καὶ μελέται (μετὰ πολλῶν πρωτοτύπων εἰκόνων)*), Athens 1937.



# A Swiss Photographic Journey: Egypt's Landscapes from Alexander's Desert Temple to Mount Sinai and Beyond

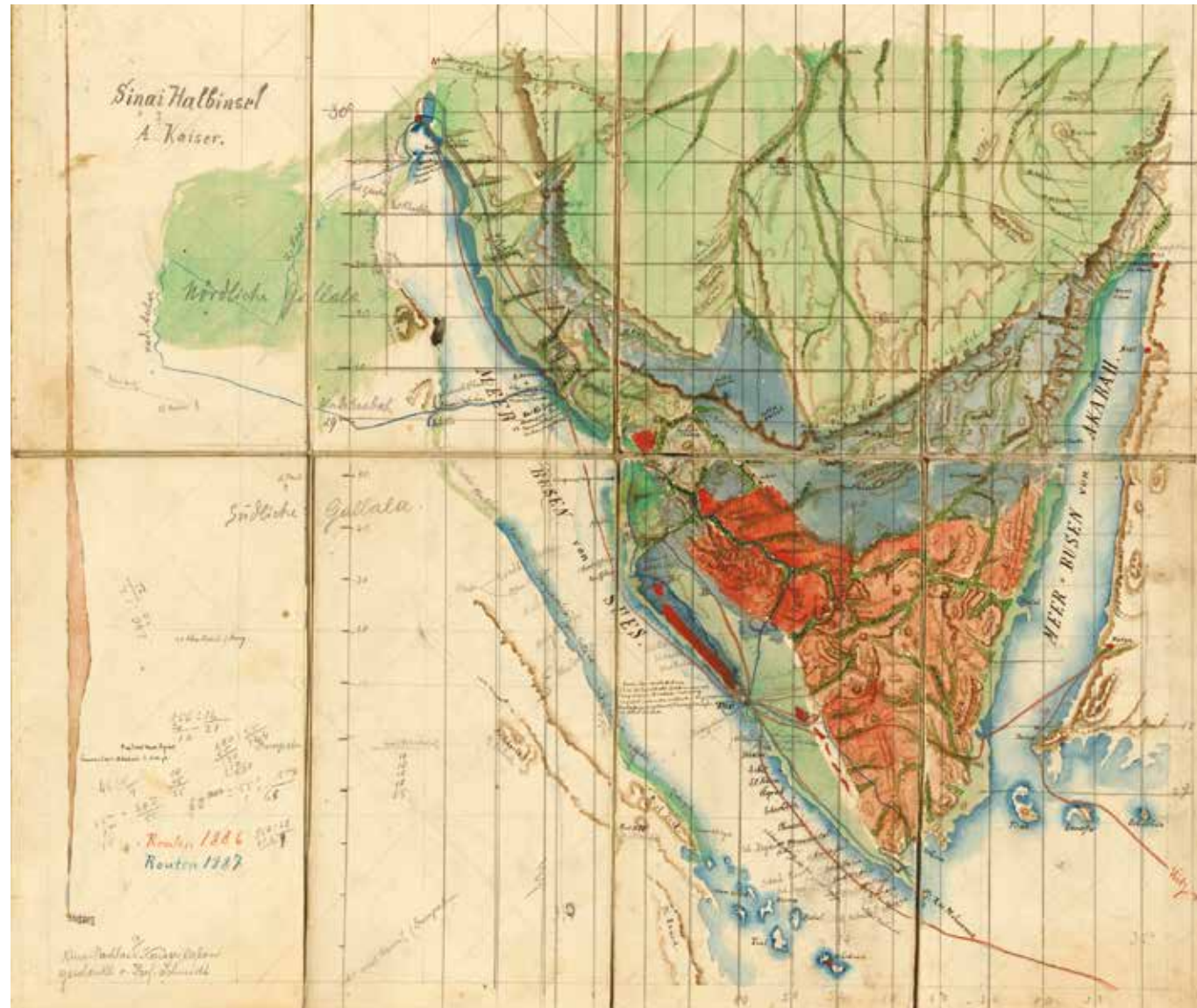
Ahmed Shams



**fig 4.1**  
Map of Egypt, showing the route of Boissonnas's journey, *L'Égypte*, 1932.

Fred Boissonnas travelled through Egypt in the interwar period, during the reign of King Fuad I. His photographic expeditions extended from the sand dunes and oases of the Western Desert to the Red Sea Mountains and Sinai Peninsula in the east and as far as Nubia in the south. In the spirit of an experienced traveller stepping into unexplored lands, Boissonnas, with his classical sensibility, introduced the landscapes and people of Egypt to the modern world.

His journey revealed a fascination with, and passion for, the desert and its communities. Much of Egypt's physical geography had been thoroughly mapped by the time of Boissonnas's visits, most recently by the Anglo-Egyptian Survey of Egypt after the Great War. Unlike earlier travellers, Boissonnas was able to traverse Egypt on an established railway network, by motorcar and steamship, as well as along traditional caravan routes, all of which were represented on an unusual hand-drawn map (fig 4.1). Boissonnas also ventured off the beaten path: many of his photographs disclose unconventional perspectives on the Egyptian landscape, while others portray with a critical and cultured eye typical scenes of the kind familiar to pilgrims and travellers.

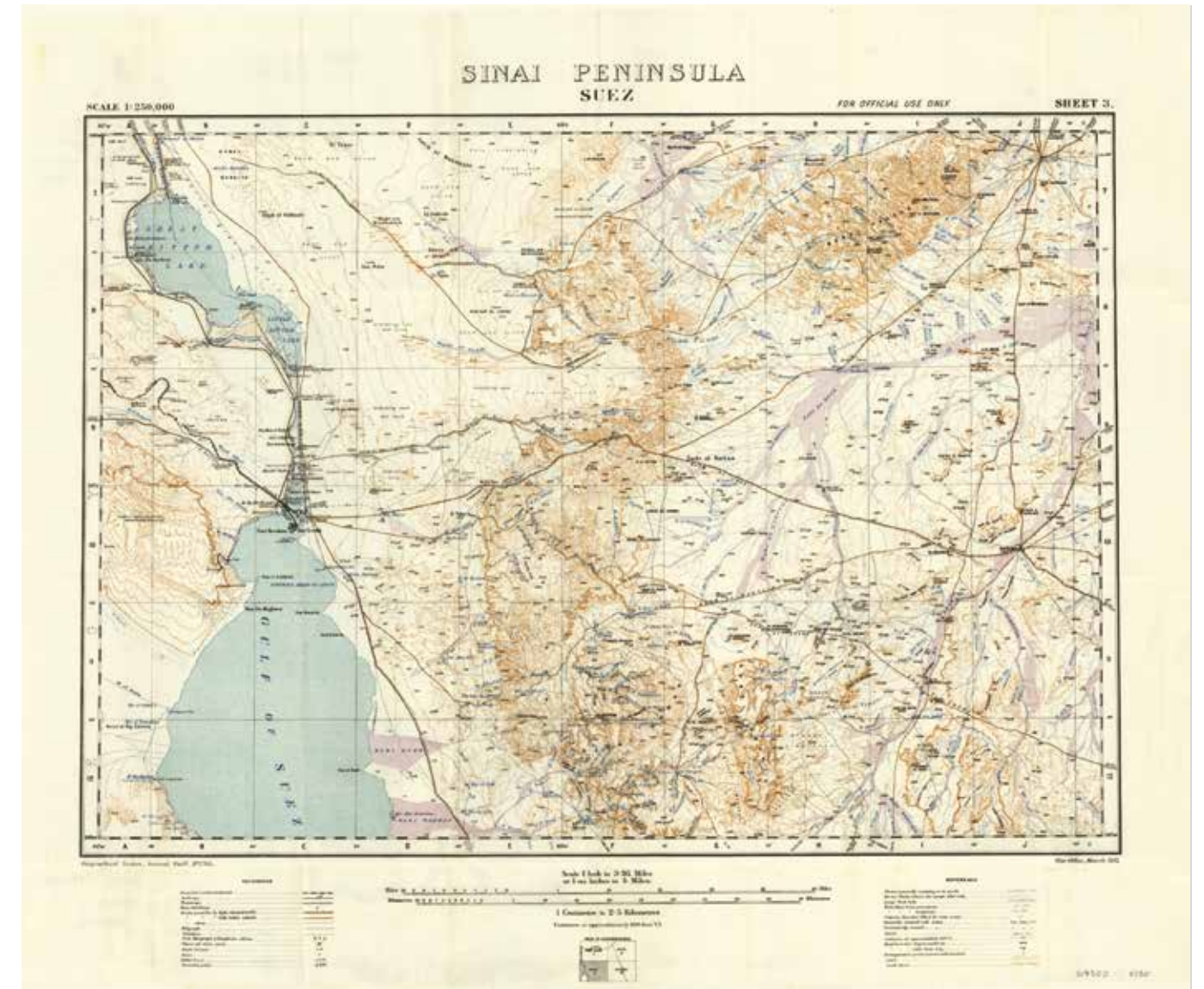


**fig 4.2**  
Alfred Kaiser: Map of Sinai, 1887, showing navigation routes and land routes across central and south Sinai and in the vicinity of Mount Sinai.

Boissonnas's glass plates provide an invaluable record of a disappearing world, bringing to life the Egypt of the late Twenties and early Thirties. Fortunately his glass plates survive, unlike some others, notably those of the Ordnance Survey of the Peninsula of Sinai from 1868-69, destroyed in World War II during the bombing of the Southampton Ordnance Survey headquarters – a reminder of the way in which so much of the heritage of the region has been lost.

Boissonnas based his journey on the accounts of 19<sup>th</sup>- and early 20<sup>th</sup>-century travellers, drawing on a widely circulated knowledge of the land and people that he would later depict cartographically. Between the wars, Egypt was in

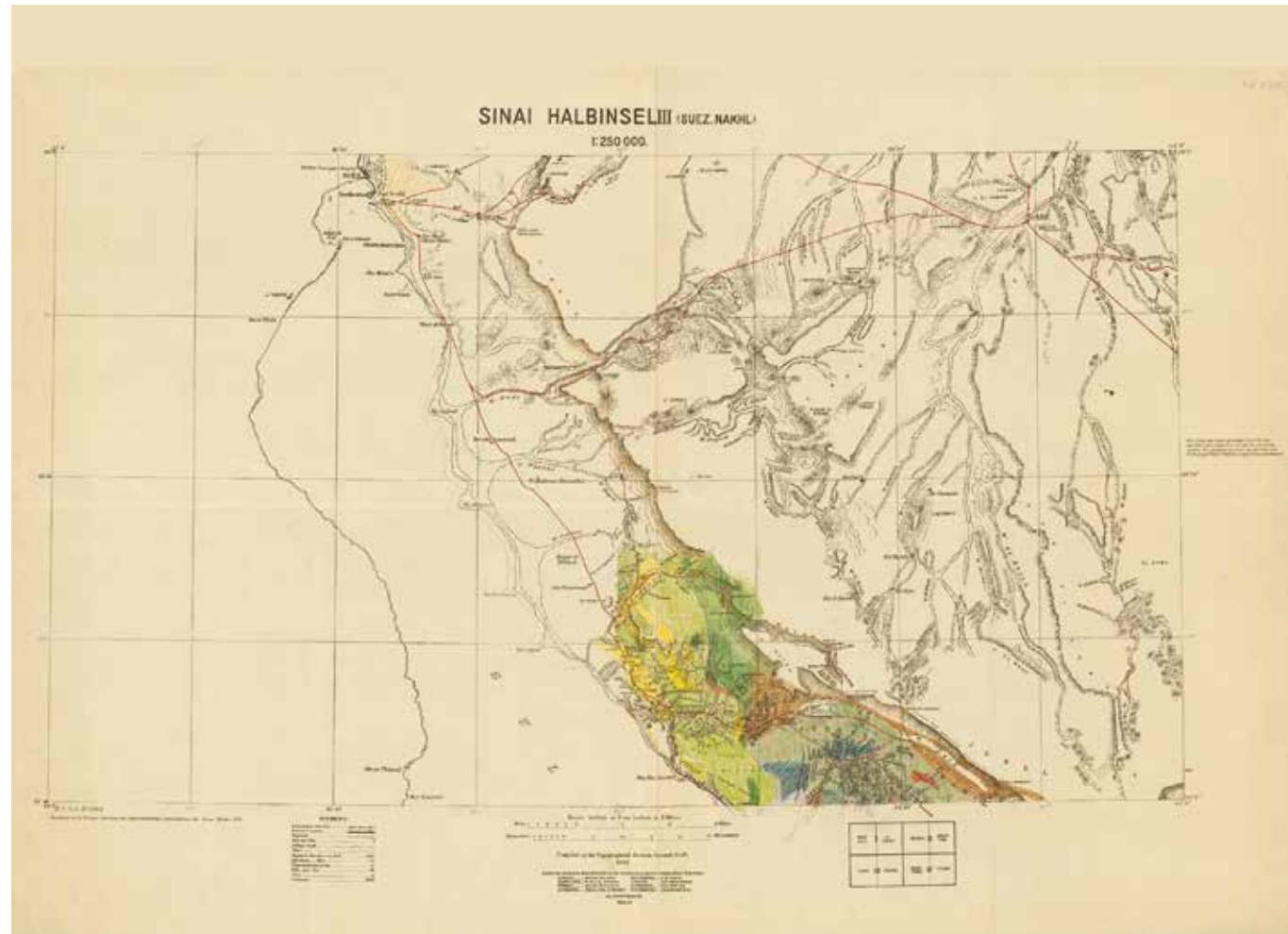
the midst of an unprecedented mapping and mapmaking project undertaken by the Survey of Egypt. The country was being surveyed scientifically, in particular the area of the Nile Valley, the Eastern or Arabian Desert, the oases of the Western Desert (the sand dunes of the Great Sand Sea were still being explored) and the Sinai Peninsula. The prevailing 1:250,000 map series produced by the War Office in 1907 and 1915 was regarded by the British military as inadequate, and the single-sheet maps of the main cities and towns were deemed to be unequal to the task of running a country in transition to independence and modernity under King Fuad I (1922-36) (War Office 'Sinai', 1907, 1915). A new 100,000 map series was in production and



**fig 4.3**  
Great Britain, Ordnance Survey: 1:250,000 Map of Sinai Peninsula, Suez, 1915.

would be released between 1933 and 1938 (Survey of Egypt 'Sinai', 1933-1938, Shams 2016g). At the end of this mapping and mapmaking project, *The Military Report on Egypt 1937* prepared by N. R. Ponwall, the Director of Military Operations and Intelligence (based on material supplied by the General Officer Commanding, British Troops in Egypt, and published by the General Staff, War Office in 1938) commented on the status of Egypt in cartographic terms:

**Maps and Mapping: From a military point of view, Egypt may be said to be satisfactorily mapped. There are two sources of supply for maps for military purposes: (a) The Survey of Egypt, (b) The War Office. Speaking generally, the maps produced by the Survey of Egypt are more up to date and therefore more in demand than the War Office publications.** (Ponwall, 1938).



**fig 4.4**  
Alfred Kaiser: Map adapted from map of Sinai Peninsula (Suez, Nakhl), 1915.

Boissonnas embarked on his journey under privileged conditions: he enjoyed the patronage of King Fuad I, and he had access to a substantial body of knowledge, including the writings of modern scholars and contemporary tourist information. Boissonnas arrived in Egypt at a time when travellers were typically equipped with one of the early guidebook series, such as Hall's *A Handbook for Travellers in Lower and Upper Egypt* (1907), or Baedeker's *Egypt and the Sudan: Handbook for Travellers* (1885-1914). This was the era of comprehensive publications on Egypt, exemplified by James Baikie's guide of 1932, *Egyptian Antiquities in the Nile Valley: A Descriptive Handbook*.

Also published in 1932 (in Geneva by Paul Trembley), Fred Boissonnas's *L'Égypte* is a record of a Swiss photographic voyage through Egypt's landscapes. In the first chapter, 'L'Égypte Pittoresque', written by Boissonnas himself, the photographs are presented in geographical order. Typically, 19<sup>th</sup>-century travellers visiting Egypt on the Grand Tour would begin their journey with the sites of ancient Egypt, traversing the Nile Valley from north to south and continuing through the deserts to east and west, following in the footsteps of Moses and Alexander the Great (Lister, 1993). Their published accounts invariably adhered to this itinerary. Later, more practical guidebooks appeared, containing maps and photographs of contemporary Egypt.

On 24 May 1816, Johann Ludwig Burckhardt, a Swiss scholar, was the first European traveller to climb Gebel Umm Shoumar, marking a new era in the ex-

ploration of the landscape surrounding the biblical Mount Sinai (Ritter 1866).

**The mountain of Om Shomar rises to a sharp-pointed peak, the highest summit of which, it is, I believe, impossible to reach; the sides being almost perpendicular, and the rock so smooth, as to afford no hold to the foot. I halted at about two hundred feet below it, where a beautiful view opened upon the sea of Suez, and the neighbourhood of Tor, which place was distinctly visible; at our feet extended the wide plain of El Kaa. The southern side of this mountain is very abrupt, and there is no secondary chain, like those on the descent from Sinai to the sea, in every other direction.** (Burckhardt, 1822)

A little more than a century later, describing his first breathtaking view of the vicinity of Mount Sinai, Boissonnas would echo Burckhardt's words: 'Behind the shoreline lies the Kaa Desert, and like a distant background, the Sinai mountain chains in a solid violet tone' (Boissonnas 1929). Still aboard ship, the photographer admired the mountain vista from the Gulf of Suez, while Burckhardt for his part looked out towards the gulf from the mountains. In the spring of 1929, Boissonnas had travelled from Suez to Sinai by steamship, disembarking at the port of Tor (ancient Qolzoum, or 'Agrud, now El Tur City in South Sinai). He took several photographs of the view from the sea, and later, from the Tor shoreline (Burckhardt 1822, Boissonnas 1929).

Alfred Kaiser, a Swiss naturalist recognised for his studies of the peninsula's flora and fauna, also came to know the area around Tor. He was the creator of a series of Sinai maps in which he brilliantly used old maps to produce new ones by adding modern cartographic information. He also made new maps of uncharted territory (fig 4:2). Kaiser established the El Kurum field station on the Suez coast, close to El Tur City, not far from the ancient seaport of El Kilani (south of Tur) and the oasis of Hammam Musa, or Spring of Moses (to the north) – sites visited by Boissonnas in the spring of 1929. Not long before, in 1926-27, Kaiser had made his last trip to Sinai, having spent shorter or longer periods there in 1886-87 (with the botanist Johann Andreas Kneucker), 1890-98 and 1904 (Batanouny n.d.; Nemeč and Nemeč-Jirak 2011).

In the first half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, most of the geographical knowledge about Sinai – then referred to as the 'Peninsula of Mount Sinai' – was derived from the accounts of pilgrims and travellers, featuring sketch maps dotted



**fig 4.5**  
Fred Boissonnas, *View of the Desert, Ras Al Safsafa (the Biblical Mount Horeb) and El Melga plain*, Roussen Collection B.cat: Glass plate 0826.

**fig 4.6**  
Fred Boissonnas, *View of the Desert*, Roussen Collection B.cat: Glass plate 0872.

**fig 4.7**  
Francis Frith, *Sinai*, 1857.



**fig 4.8**  
Fred Boissonnas, *Sinai. Mountain chain looking towards Saint Catherine's Monastery*, 05.06.1933 Roussen Collection B.cat: 7575.

in repetitive patterns with biblical names from the Book of Exodus. The founding of the Anglo-Palestine Exploration Fund (PEF) in 1865 marked the start of institutionalised map production, carried out by British Royal Engineers in 1868-69 under the auspices of the Ordnance Survey of the Peninsula of Sinai. Their cartographic achievement represented a considerable advance, and their work remained unchallenged. Alfred Kaiser continued to contribute to the development of the maps through his remarkable scholarship towards the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, an example of the Anglo-Swiss geographical collaboration that promoted greater understanding of the Sinai (fig 4.3). (Burckhardt 1822, Robinson 1841, Wilson and Palmer 1869, Holland 1869, Kaiser 1886a-c, 1887a-b, 1920(s) a-b, 1926a-d, 1927, Shams, 2011e, 2013b, 2016g).

Following his arrival in Tor in 1929, Boissonnas set out on the southern, fourth- to seventh-century Byzantine monastic and pilgrimage route to Mount Sinai, the historic heart of the peninsula. That route leads from Tor (Byzantine Raitho) through the gorge of Wadi Isla. Boissonnas's later expedition, in 1933, followed the traditional Exodus route of the Israelites: departing from Suez, at the tip of the Gulf of Suez, he traversed valleys and mountains known by the Biblical names that figure in the accounts of so many pilgrims and travellers – the Land of Shur, Uyun Musa (Spring of Moses), Ain Marah (Bitter Spring), Elim (Wadi Gharandel), the Land of Sin, Rephidim (the Palm Grove of Ba'al), Mount Horeb (Ras Al Safsafa) (Robinson 1841, Hoffmeier 2005).

Boissonnas's photographs of Sinai's high mountain landscapes are notable for a certain Alpine spirit, although he always appreciated the contrasts between Sinai and the Alps. In 1933, at the foot of Ras Al Safsafa, he wrote,

**The high mountain air is bracing. The fine grass is peppered with little flowers; you might think you are in our Alps. And yet, how different it is. The sharp peaks of Chamonix are covered in snow, they pierce the thick covering of the glaciers, they are veiled in mist and water streams from every side. Here, apart from a small spring, there is nothing but bare granite rock, it is dry everywhere and that gives the landscape an austere and terrifying grandeur.** (fig 4.4, 4.5). (Boissonnas 1935).

Between the 1830s and the late 19<sup>th</sup> century there was a shift in the way the Sinai was visualised, from paintings to photographs, and from canvas to glass plates. Travellers, however, continued to traverse the same terrain and represent the familiar scenery in the same picturesque style.



**fig 4.9**  
Fred Boissonnas, *Egypt, Western Desert*, 1929.

Ten established artists – out of some 335 known pilgrims, travellers and tourists – visited the vicinity of Mount Sinai and the Monastery of Saint Catherine between the second century and 1951, among them Léon de Laborde, in 1828, David Roberts, in 1839, and Charles Wilson, in 1868-69. Five artists worked in Sinai in the 1830s alone, making that decade a high point for artistic travel to Sinai. David Roberts's *The Holy Land, Syria, Idumea, Arabia, Egypt and Nubia*, published by F. G. Moon in London between 1842 and 1849, featured his widely circulated lithographs – an earlier version of Charles Wilson's well-known illustrated account, *Picturesque Palestine, Sinai and Egypt*, published by D. Appleton and Co. in New York in 1881 (Roberts 1849, Wilson 1881, Shams 2011e).

Five collections of black-and-white landscape photographs dominated the imagination of Western travellers to Sinai up to the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century and in the decades prior to Boissonnas's visit, all featuring scenes of the traditional Exodus route to Mount Sinai and Saint Catherine's: Francis Frith's *Sinai and Palestine Photographed* (London, William Mackenzie & Co., 1857), the Ordnance Survey of the Peninsula of Sinai (1868-69), the photographs of the American Colony of Jerusalem (1898-1946 [subsequently coloured, 1950-77]), Bernhard Moritz's views of 1910 (Dietrich Riemer, Berlin, 1916) and Underwood & Underwood's stereoscopic photographs (New York, Elmer and Bert Elias, 1913) (Frith 1859, Wilson and Palmer 1869, American Colony of Jerusalem Collection 'LoC' 2017, Underwood & Underwood Stereograph Cards Collection 'LoC' 2017). Between the 1830s and the start of mass tourism, more than 20 landscape series featured the Exodus route from the Gulf of Suez to the Gulf of Aqaba by way of Mount Sinai and Saint Catherine's, an area that was among the

first in the Sinai Peninsula to be mapped in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. A favourite subject of painters and photographers alike was the view of Mount Sinai (the Biblical Horeb) and the valley of the monastery from Gebel Muneiga (fig 4.6).

Boissonnas benefitted from the technological progress of his time, enjoying access to the area by motor vehicle, but above all, he profited from the royal patronage of King Fuad (Baddeley 2011). This allowed him to create an outstanding photographic archive comparable in size and subject matter to the photographic collections of the Ordnance Survey of the Peninsula of Sinai and the American Colony of Jerusalem, but characterised by a much greater aesthetic sensibility. Boissonnas's geographical curiosity led him to take one of the first photographs from Sinai's (indeed Egypt's) highest summit: Gebel Katarina, elevation 2,642m ASL (fig 4.7).

Boissonnas also photographed the landscapes to the east and west of the Nile, areas covered by the popular guidebooks of Murray and Baedeker. Each guide dedicated a section to 'The Desert East of the Nile', otherwise known as the Eastern Desert, or the Arabian Desert, and proposed a 'tour' comprising the turquoise-mining area of Serabit el-Khadem and the Temple of Hathor, Mount Sinai, the Eastern monasteries of Saint Anthony and Saint Paul, and the Red Sea. There was also a section devoted to 'The Desert West of the Nile', the oases of the Western Desert and Wadi el-Natrun, with a tour to the Oracle Temple of Amun (Alexander's temple) and the desert monasteries (Saint Macarius, or 'Abu Makar'; al-Suryan, Anba Bishoi and al-Baramus) (Hall 1907, Baedeker 1914, Mikhail and Moussa 2002).

The Temple of Amun in Siwa Oasis in the Western Desert had captured the imagination of 19<sup>th</sup>-century travel-

lers because of its connection with Alexander the Great (356-323 BC), who had travelled there to consult the oracle, and in an earlier period, with the Persian King Cambyses (600-559 BC), who sent an army to destroy the temple when the oracle predicted the imminent end of his rule in Egypt. One of the seven great oracles of the ancient world, the Oracle of Amun may have intrigued Boissonnas because of his earlier photographic excursions to oracle temples in Greece, such as the one at Delphi (Fakhry 1973, Girardin 1998, Curnow 2004).

On the journey to Siwa, Boissonnas followed Alexander's route west along the Mediterranean coast before heading south into the desert. At Siwa, he photographed the site of Aghurmi, where the Temple of Amun lies hidden among the mud-brick houses of the village (fig 4.8). (Fakhry 1973, Vivian 2008). He also visited the Dakhla and Kharga oases, southernmost of the five main inhabited oases of the Western Desert. In addition, there are more than a dozen small oases here, most of them uninhabited with little or no fresh water. These depressions are dotted with palm groves, springs, artesian water wells (some of which date back to the Greco-Roman period) and lakes formed by running water draining into small depressions within each oasis. Densely populated during the Greco-Roman period, they contain ancient temples, fortresses and rock-cut tombs, as well as hermit cells and small chapels, medieval mud-brick villages on flat land or hilltops, cemeteries, minarets and the tombs of sheikhs (Vivian 1998, Sidebotham *et al.* 2008).

Boissonnas's interest in monasticism led him to visit and photograph the two main Coptic monastic communities in Egypt, Wadi el-Natrun in the Red Sea Mountains, as well as the ruins of the pilgrimage town of Saint Menas (Abu Mena) to the west of Alexandria, not forgetting his stays at the Monastery of Saint Catherine in 1929 and 1933, and the many photographs he took there (fig 4.9).

Human development in the deserts of Egypt has not been independent of the Nile Valley since at least the Early Bronze Age (late third and early second millennium BC). Boissonnas focused not only on the ancient ruins and eternal landscapes of Egypt, but also on the daily life of the Egyptians he encountered on his travels and he took special notice of the annual floods that had shaped life on the banks of the Nile for thousands of years (Baines and Málek 2000). The new 100,000 map series of 1930s Egypt showed the extent of human occupation in the Nile Valley and, to a lesser degree, the extent of human activity in the deserts to the east and west (Shams 2016g). Egypt's agricultural land was divided between, and named after, its landlords; the 'Pashas' and the 'Beys'. The Egyptian middle-class lived mainly in Cairo and Alexandria in European-style buildings with an oriental flavour adjoining the historic districts, as well as in other cities across the Nile Delta, along the Nile in Upper Egypt and along the Suez Canal. These were modern cities with paved roads and railway connections, electrical and telecommunication lines, government services and commercial enterprises (fig 4.10). Agriculturally based industrial buildings with their smoking chimneys dominated the environs (Survey of Egypt, 'Sinai', 1933-38).

By contrast rural Egypt had remained unchanged for centuries. The way that rural Egyptians dressed, farmed the land, tended their animals, transported traditional goods, sailed the Nile and traded in the markets had not altered significantly by the time of Boissonnas's visit. Their lives complemented the ancient and medieval monuments around them; the majority lived in mud-brick



**fig 4.10**  
Fred Boissonnas, *Saint Paul's Monastery, near the Red Sea, 1929.*



**fig 4.11**  
Fred Boissonnas, *Egypt, Port Said and the entrance to the Suez Canal*, 1929.

houses, while only a few lived in modern houses. Boissonnas had a genuine affection for Egypt's rural population. His photographs did not reflect the country's contemporary reality so much as the Egypt of the past, the land of the Grand Tour and its picturesque representations. It is striking that, with few exceptions, Boissonnas's photographs in the final chapter of *L'Égypte*, 'L'Égypte Moderne, Notes de Voyage' emphasise the country's timeless, rural nature rather than the modernity of Cairo or Alexandria, where a traveller could have drawn parallels between Egypt and Europe in terms of governance, architecture, transportation and styles of dress (fig 4.11). Boissonnas's travels from Alexander's desert temple to Mount Sinai and beyond must be seen from this perspective.

For Boissonnas, the architecture of Egypt meant the monuments of the pharaohs, Greeks, Romans, Byzantines, Copts, Arabs and Ottomans. 'Transport' involved

animals – mules, camels and cows. 'Clothing' meant the traditional garments of the people who worked the land and the monks in the desert; and 'government' signified the rule of King Fuad, the royal patron of his journey. Boissonnas's lens captured the scenery and routines of daily life, the harmony of the inhabitants and their land. Boissonnas's grand aesthetic vision brought to life again the picturesque descriptions of Egypt that were familiar from the hundreds of accounts of 19<sup>th</sup>- and early 20<sup>th</sup>-century scholars and travellers. It is unlikely that Boissonnas knew James Baikie's *Descriptive Handbook*, cited on page 52, but there is little doubt that Boissonnas's photographs of Egypt complement Baikie's work and that of many similar authors before and after him.

## Bibliography

American Colony in Jerusalem Collection <Library of Congress 'LoC', 2017 <https://www.loc.gov/collections/american-colony-in-jerusalem/about-this-collection/> [accessed June 15, 2017]

Baddeley, Oriana, *Fred Boissonnas: The Sinai Expeditions 1929-1933*, Chambésy, Geneva, 2011.

Baikie, James, *Egyptian Antiquities in the Nile Valley: A Descriptive Handbook*, London: Methuen & Co. Ltd., 1932.

Baines, John and Járómír Málek, *Cultural Atlas of Ancient Egypt*, New York: Checkmark Books, 2000.

Batanouny, K.H., 'Botanical exploration of Sinai', *B. 'Qatar University' Science*, 5, 187-211, n.d.

Baedeker, Karl, *Egypt and the Sudan: Handbook for Travellers*, Leipzig: Karl Baedeker, 1914.

Boissonnas, Fred, Diary, London: Roussen Collection, 1929.

--- with Gustave Jéquier *et al*, *L'Égypte*, Geneva: Paul Trembley, 1932.

--- 'Sinai: Lecture IV', p. 21, London: Roussen Collection, 1935.

Burckhardt, Johann Ludwig, *Travels in Syria and the Holy Land*, London: John Murray, 1822.

Curnow, Trevor, *The Oracles of the Ancient World: A Comprehensive Guide*, London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2004.

Fakhry, Ahmed *Siwa Oasis*, Cairo: American University in Cairo Press, 1973.

Frith, Francis, *Sinai and Palestine Photographed*, London: William MacKenzie & Co., 1863.

Girardin, Daniel, 'Frédéric Boissonnas: Between tradition and modernity', *History of Photography*, 22, 3, 281-83, 1998.

Hall, H., *A Handbook for Travellers in Lower and Upper Egypt: Part I-II*, London: John Murray, 1907.

Hoffmeier, James K., *Ancient Israel in Sinai: the Evidence for the Authenticity of the Wilderness Tradition*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005.

Holland, the Rev. F.W., 'Notes on the Map of the Peninsula of Sinai', *The Journal of the Royal Geographical Society*, 39, 342-46, 1869.

Lister, W. B. C., *Murray's Handbooks for Travellers* [microform], Bethesda, MD: University Publications of America, 1993.

Mikhail, Maged S.A. and Mark Moussa, eds., *Christianity and Monasticism in Wadi al-Natrun: Essays from the 2002 International Symposium of the Saint Mark Foundation and the Saint Shenouda the Archimandrite Coptic Society*, Cairo: American University in Cairo Press, 2009.

Nemec, Vilem, and Jana R. Nemec-Jirak, *Twenty-Five Years in Africa: The Beginning*, Mustang, OK: Tate Publishing, 2011.

Ponwall, N.R., *The Military Report on Egypt 1937*, London: War Office, 1938.

Ritter, Carl, *Comparative Geography of Palestine and the Sinaitic Peninsula* (4 vols.), Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1866.

Roberts, David, *Holy Land, Syria, Idumea, Arabia, Egypt and Nubia* (6 vols.), London: F. G. Moon, 1842-1849.

Robinson, Edward and Eli Smith, *Biblical Researches in Palestine, Mount Sinai and Arabia Petraea: A Journal of Travels in the Year 1838*, Boston: Crocker and Brewster, 1841.

Shams, Ahmed, *Eight Years Wandering In The High Mountains Of Sinai Peninsula: A Tale Of Two Maps*, Cairo: Sinai Peninsula Research (SPR), 2011.

---, *Pocket Atlas Of The Sinai Peninsula: Discovering A Historical Landscape*, Berlin: Holtzbrinck Publishing Group - epubli GmbH, 2013b.

---, 'Mapping and Mapmaking in the High Mountains of Sinai Peninsula: A Review and the Revival of the 19<sup>th</sup> Century CE Practices', *Palestine Exploration Quarterly*, 148, 3, 188-210, 2016.

Sidebotham, Steven E, Martin Hense and Hendrikje M. Nouwens, *The Red Land: The Illustrated Archaeology of Egypt's Eastern Desert*, Cairo: American University in Cairo Press, 2008.

Underwood & Underwood Stereograph Cards Collection, Library of Congress 'LoC', 2017 <<https://www.loc.gov/collections/>

stereograph-cards/about-this-collection/> [accessed June 15, 2017]

Vivian, Cassandra, *The Western Desert of Egypt*, Cairo: American University in Cairo Press, 2008.

Sinai Peninsula Topographic Maps

1907. 1:250,000, London: War Office.

1915. 1:250,000, London: War Office.

1933-1938, 1941. 1:100,000, Cairo: Survey of Egypt.

Kaiser, Alfred, a. 1886, *Ordnance Survey of the Peninsula of Sinai*, Zurich: eManuscripta.

---, b. 1886, *Sinai*, Zurich: eManuscripta.

---, c. 1886, *Berg Sinai*, Zurich: eManuscripta.

---, a. 1887, *Sinai-Halbinsel*, Zurich: eManuscripta.

---, b. 1887, *Orientirungs-Karte vom Sinai*, Zurich: eManuscripta.

---, a. 1920(s), *Südliche Hälfte Sinai-Halbinsel*, Zurich: eManuscripta.

---, b. 1920(s), *Sinai Halbinsel*, Zurich: eManuscripta.

---, a. 1926, *Wadi Tarfa, Wadi Tebt und Wadi Sle*, Zurich: eManuscripta.

---, b. 1926, *Wadi el-Nasb, Lémlah, Gurra und Wadi el-Schêch* Zurich: eManuscripta.

---, c. 1926, *Wadi el-Kid und Wadi Ārta*, Zurich: eManuscripta.

---, d. 1926, *Talläufe, Quellen und Pfade auf dem Sinai*, Zurich: eManuscripta.

---, 1927, *Orientierungskarte (Entwurf) des beduinischen Pflanzlandes 'El Gebal' zwischen Gebel Katarina, Kasr el bascha u Hebran*, Zurich: eManuscripta.

Wilson, C. and H. Palmer, 1869, *Ordnance Survey of the Peninsula of Sinai: Part I-II*, Southampton: Ordnance Survey Office.

Wilson, C., 1881, *Picturesque Palestine, Sinai and Egypt, Vol. IV*, New York: D. Appleton and Co.

# Boissonnas's Return to Egypt: the Unfinished Sinai Project

Kathleen Brunner



**fig 5.1**

Fred Boissonnas, *Sinai. View from Mount Genesis*. 11.06.1933, Roussen Collection B.cat: 7614.

In May 1933, at the age of 75, Fred Boissonnas returned to Egypt on what would be his final photographic campaign, a second journey from Suez to Mount Sinai and Saint Catherine's Monastery. The images he produced – more than 500 black and white negatives, 35 colour plates and 9 Agfacolor negatives – would provide the material for a luxury publication similar to *L'Égypte*, provisionally titled *Au Sinai*.

This second Sinai trip grew out of a previous project undertaken with the collaboration of the Geneva publisher Paul Trembley and Paul Tricoglou, a Greek banker resident in Cairo. Through his connection with the Archbishop of Sinai, Tricoglou had arranged for Boissonnas to photograph the Monastery of Saint Catherine in April 1929, with a view to producing a luxury volume on the Orthodox world. Boissonnas went on to photograph Saint Catherine's,

as well as the monasteries of Mount Athos (1930), but the project was eventually abandoned. A short section on Saint Catherine's appeared in *L'Égypte*, published by Trembley in 1932, but Boissonnas was keen to do more with his photographs of Sinai. The outline of an ambitious book was forming in his mind.

He would follow the route of the Israelites from the Red Sea to Mount Sinai and establish the reality of the Exodus story on the ground. The March of the Israelites would serve as the architecture of a journey supported by the scientific findings of the day. He would take as his starting point the 'great miracle' of the Red Sea Crossing. With Paul Trembley, at the end of his 1929 trip, Boissonnas had viewed a site he believed could be the place where the Israelites crossed out of Egypt:



Thanks to the royal munificence of His Majesty Fuad I, we had, Mr. Paul Trembley and myself, the opportunity to travel through this region of the Suez Canal following our exploration of the Sinai Peninsula. I was already very interested in the march of the Israelites through the desert when, arriving at the summit of the small Geneffeh chain, we were able to contemplate the theatre of the great miracle at our feet, that flat and swamp-like expanse of the Bitter Lakes which the Suez Canal now crosses.<sup>1</sup>

In June 1933 Boissonnas would return to the Mount Geneffeh area to photograph this place of seminal importance for the Sinai book.

Following his first visit to Sinai, and in preparation for the second, Boissonnas studied a wide range of subjects, including biblical scholarship, geology and archaeology. This research, undertaken at Geneva's University and Public Library, formed the underpinning of the Sinai book. His aim was multi-dimensional, deviating from the traditional approach to Sinai as a Biblical land, although this was the initial impetus. A layman rather than a scholar, Boissonnas covered an enormous amount of material in a relatively short time. He commented that the task was 'laborious' and professed a profound lack of competence.

King Fuad I of Egypt took an interest in the Sinai project and again provided transport and an escort. Trembley accompanied Boissonnas on the trip and would have produced the book on Sinai if Boissonnas had obtained financial backing. But this was not to be. In the economic climate of the 1930s, there was no longer scope for expensive publications, and in any case the king became ill and died (1936). In the years after his trip, Boissonnas turned to lecturing, using his photographs to illustrate talks about Sinai. He gave a lecture at the Athénée in Geneva entitled 'The Red Sea Crossing' ('Le Passage de la Mer Rouge', 1934), followed a year later by a series of six slide talks (5-21 November 1935), a kind of travel diary interspersed with references to his research.

Although Boissonnas's 'Sinai' was never published, the elements of a magnificent book remain: the 57-page typescript of the 'Preamble to the work in preparation on Sinai' ('Préambule à l'oeuvre en préparation sur le Sinai') and photographs of great documentary and aesthetic value, dated 1929 and 1933. Important, too, are the lecture notes, comprising six 45-page, hand-written manuscripts ('Le Sinai: Six conférences, I-VI'). A fragmentary, ten-page typed manuscript with the title 'Draft copy to be finalised' ('Brouillon à réintégrer') contains impressions from a ship-



**fig 5.2**  
Fred Boissonnas, *Sinai. Mountain, sea and desert with canal in the distance*. 11.06.1933, Roussen Collection B.cat: 7615.

**fig 5.3**  
Fred Boissonnas, *Sinai. Watering Camels. Gharandel*. 10.05.1933, Roussen Collection B.cat: 7014.

**fig 5.4**  
Fred Boissonnas, *Sinai. Camel grazing*, 12.05.1933, Roussen Collection B.cat: 7424.

board diary kept en route to Port Said and dated 1934[sic]. The first page bears the heading 'In the Land of Jethro or In Sinai' ('Au Pays de Jéthro ou Au Sinai'), while the cover is inscribed with the phrase 'title to be decided', followed by the words of the heading, written by hand in ink and crossed out in part in a pencilled notation that makes clear the chosen title: 'In Sinai'. Boissonnas's unfinished Sinai project, a curiosity of independent scholarship without academic pretensions, is testament to an important era of the explorer-photographer and a valuable resource for scholars.

## Boissonnas's Methodology: after Professor Bérard

Boissonnas set off on his second Sinai trip in the same spirit in which he had embarked on a 1912 voyage around the Mediterranean with his friend Victor Bérard (1864-1931). The eminent French Hellenist and Homeric scholar was researching the final volume of *Navigations of Ulysses* (*Navigations d'Ulysse*, 4 vols, 1927-29), matching the references to place in Homer's *Odyssey* with actual landmarks. Boissonnas, by then equally renowned, took photographs of the sites Bérard identified<sup>2</sup>.

Bérard's methodology was based on his practical knowledge of marine routes and on his navigational skills, together with his multi-disciplinary approach to geography, informed by a broad knowledge of philology, archaeology, history and politics<sup>3</sup>. Bérard's research tools included a Hebrew dictionary<sup>4</sup>, travel guides and diaries, ancient and modern maps, and a camera. Boissonnas, the photographer of Greece par excellence, became an important collaborator for Bérard, as the close observation and recording of landscapes through photography was a key aspect of the professor's research. Bérard, in the introduction to the first volume of *Navigations d'Ulysse, Ithaque et la Grèce des Achéens*, gives full credit to Boissonnas:

**As a companion on this long voyage, I had my friend Mr. Fr. Boissonnas, whose photographic masterpieces all the Hellenists know; with him, I was able to follow Ulysses, from Calypso's cave to the palace of Alcinous, and some twelve hundred photographs have allowed me to review, word for word, all the descriptions and landscapes.**<sup>5</sup>

The two were certainly an ideal match, and Boissonnas had the opportunity to participate at first hand in Bérard's elaboration of his method.

Boissonnas had intended to dedicate his proposed Sinai book to Bérard. In his first attempt at an introduction to the text ('In the Land of Jethro or In Sinai'), Boissonnas abandons the subject of Sinai after a brief preface to reflect instead on Bérard, Homer and *The Odyssey*. He writes on board the *Maria Pacha* en route from Marseille to Port Said, sailing through the same waters he had traversed with Bérard some twenty years before.<sup>6</sup> As the ship crosses the Strait of Bonifacio, Boissonnas quotes the relevant verses of *The Odyssey* in French, Bérard having published a famous French version of the epic poem, *L'Odysée*, a classic of French literature<sup>7</sup>. Boissonnas perceives the Mediterranean coast photographically and literarily, mediated through Hom-





**fig 5.5**  
Fred Boissonnas, *Sinai. Bouderah Pass*, 13.05.1933, Roussen Collection B.cat: 7433.

er, by way of Bérard. Boissonnas also notes the activities of the coastal people, washerwomen by the shore and a boatman filling a keg with water. Like Bérard, he saw them as types, the same kind of people engaged in the same kind of activities as those who lived here long ago. Boissonnas writes:

**Such familiar scenes enchanted Bérard. For him it was equivalent to a nature film made on the outer reaches of prehistory. That is why he attached so much importance to the examination of places in the smallest detail.**<sup>8</sup>

Bérard named the practice of observation in situ the 'science of place', or 'typology' (*science des lieux*, or *typologie*). It allowed him to universalise his observations based on comparisons of the terrain visited and its population over mil-

lennia.<sup>9</sup>

Bérard's theory about Homer, contested at the time, was superseded by subsequent archaeological research, but his work has nevertheless remained the subject of scholarly analysis up to the present day. Bérard's thinking was avant-garde for its time, and Boissonnas had privileged access to the groundbreaking ideas of this eminent professor. Bérard's creative methodology set a challenge to scholars with no practical knowledge of the Mediterranean. Boissonnas took up the challenge as he set sail for Egypt on the culmination of his photographic career.

The Odyssean voyage of 1912 provided the template for Boissonnas's journey through Sinai. For his Sinai project Boissonnas adapted practical aspects of Bérard's methodology: he would carry out his research on site with the Bible as his text and the Baedeker as his guide.



**fig 5.6**  
Fred Boissonnas, *Sinai. Temple of Serabit el Khadem, western side, facing north*. 16.05.1933, Roussen Collection B.cat: 7448.

He would photograph landscapes with a view to making a record of the journey, as well as corroborating the descriptions of the places mentioned in Exodus and in the writings of scholars who had followed the Exodus route. He would document the journey by noting the time required to travel between each stage, from the Red Sea to Mount Sinai, and by visualizing the space needed to accommodate the Israelite multitude. The element of fiction or fantasy would be important to Boissonnas, as he imagines the biblical events taking place in the sites photographed.

The Sinai photographs, rugged mountain ranges and limitless deserts, take Boissonnas's exploration of the Mediterranean to its origins, from the Hellenic to the Hebraic, and from Judaeo-Christian heritage and the beginnings of monotheism to the prehistoric era when the Sinai terrain was being formed.

## The Red Sea Crossing (Le Passage de la Mer Rouge)

Out of his hundreds of Sinai photographs, Boissonnas selected a group of 123 prints, which he pasted on to 51 pieces of card, adopting Bérard's method for reviewing after a trip 'all the descriptions and landscapes'. Eighty of these prints were probably the images he projected during his slide lectures. The final photographs of the series, taken at the end of the trip, would have been central to the Sinai book: two views of the Bitter Lakes seen from Mount Geneffeh, also known as Mount Genesis (figs. 5.1, 5.2). They are confirmation of the purpose Boissonnas states in a few simple words:

**To demonstrate that the Red Sea Crossing by the Hebrews was influenced by the topography of the Isthmus of Suez in a very specific place at the foot of Mount Geneffeh, and that on the basis of the biblical narrative as a whole.<sup>10</sup>**

Writing at length in the 'Preamble', Boissonnas explains why he pursued the association of the Mount Geneffeh area with the Red Sea Crossing. He refers in particular to the work of Sir William Dawson (*Egypt and Syria: their Physical Features in relation to Bible History*, 1885) and R. P. Barnabé Meistermann (*Guide du Nil au Jourdain*, 1909). He covers the geological history of Sinai over aeons and wades into the controversies of Biblical scholars, creating his own narrative of Moses, interspersed with quotations from Exodus. He cites meteorological evidence in support of his thesis, surmising that, in the time of Moses, the violent equinoctial winds of the Khamsin whipping against the Geneffeh wall could have opened passages of dry land, facilitating the escape of the Israelites.<sup>11</sup> He suggests, too, that the area had undergone significant topological changes in recent millennia, that rock or 'ejects' from the limestone cliffs of the Geneffeh, an apparent barrier to the Crossing, had probably fallen on to the land below after Biblical times. All that was left for Boissonnas to do was to go, look again, and take photographs.

On 10 June Boissonnas and Trembley camped overnight near the Geneffeh railway station, 'lost in the dried-out swamp of the Suez-Ismailia line'. They awoke at dawn and observed the terrain from the railway embankment: 'an arid plain, an ancient lagoon, that ends at the foot of Mount Geneffeh, the goal of our expedition'.<sup>12</sup> They set out early for the Geneffeh summit, an ancient landmark and lookout point and the site of an altar to Baal Tsephon, God of the North Wind. The summit of Mount Geneffeh, a place of great significance for the whole area, would be the place from which Boissonnas would survey the landscape.

Boissonnas concludes the 'Preamble' with a description of the site and the event that he suggests took place here:

**A hard climb and soon we are on its stony ridge, hovering over the blinding expanse of sand and water confounded in the golden mist, dried-out swamp, shimmering Bitter Lakes, distant deserts, while at our feet black carapaces stretch out like gigantic crocodiles. Is this the theatre of the great drama of Exodus, the place that saw Pharaoh's army swallowed up? For some sixty kilometres, from Ismailia to Suez, a sense of doubt persists. When will it end? On the day of the sensational discovery of some six hundred chariots buried in the mud? The sun climbed. Before our eyes the immense landscape vanished in the blinding light. The Bitter Lakes were like mirrors of molten metal. Blazing gusts of wind seemed to animate the undulations of the plain, and one could imagine seeing, way over there, beyond Suez, on the sands of the Fountain of Moses, swirls of erratic vapours, immaterial forms, hallucinations evoking the frenetic farandola of the women of Israel dancing around the prophetess Miriam, waving sistrums and tambourines in the clamour of the canticle of deliverance: 'I will sing unto the Lord, for he hath triumphed gloriously: the horse and rider hath he thrown into the sea'. [Exodus 15.1]<sup>13</sup>**

For Boissonnas, the Geneffeh photographs would serve a documentary purpose. They would record the significant features of the place where, he believed, the Israelites crossed from Egypt into the desert. In Boissonnas's photographic practice, the time of day of a photograph is significant. He takes the Geneffeh photographs at mid-day, the time of day, he says, geologists favour:

**Noon, a terrible hour, when shadows die [...]. The light is everywhere; it rules implacably. This is when geologists choose to take their monotonous photos, without contrast, without annoying shadows, because they need documentation, not the picturesque.<sup>14</sup>**

In the Geneffeh photographs, the ejects – 'black carapaces [...] like enormous crocodiles' – figure prominently. All the elements of the image – cliffs, ejects, sand, gravel, water, sky – are defined. The image is flat, stripped down. The Geneffeh photographs are 'far from images in the style of Gustave Doré', to quote Boissonnas, 'or the outsized built scenery of Hollywood',<sup>15</sup> no doubt a reference to Cecil B. DeMille's *The Ten Commandments* (1923). Boissonnas's documentary purpose notwithstanding, the photographer as artist is also in evidence. He frames the 'denatured', 'fossilized' landscape, presenting it in tones of grey and black.

The objectivity of the Geneffeh photographs belies the photographer's subjective experience of the scene. He sees a 'blinding expanse of sand and water confounded in the golden mist...'. The effect of bright sunlight on his vision causes the features of the landscape to vanish. Boissonnas's words encourage the viewer to see what he sees: the shimmering lake surface, the wind animating the sand. The noonday light has a hallucinatory effect on the photographer. By revealing the past that lies hidden in the landscape, Boissonnas presents us with his 'proof' of the Red Sea Crossing. Yet the photographer himself wonders whether the only acceptable proof would be the sensational discovery of the remains of Egyptian chariots.



**fig 5.7**

Fred Boissonnas, *Sinai, Valley with large rocks. Campsite*. 22.05.1933, Roussen Collection B.cat: 7236.

**fig 5.8**

Fred Boissonnas, *Sinai. The Safsafeh*. 23.05.1933, Roussen Collection, 7328.

**fig 5.9**

Fred Boissonnas, *Sinai. Encampment and Wedding*. 23.05.1933, Roussen Collection B.cat: 7279.



**fig 5.10**  
Fred Boissonnas, *Sinai. The Monastery in the valley*. 19.04.1929, Roussen Collection B.cat: 6662.

## Through the Sinai Labyrinth: Suez – Mount Sinai – Tor

On 9 May Boissonnas and Trembley began the Sinai journey by road, travelling the 135 kilometres from Cairo to Suez in a convoy comprised of a military lorry, a small boxbody and three camels. The party was led by Attaïg, the non-commissioned officer who had accompanied Boissonnas on the *Egypte* campaign. The convoy skirted the Suez area – Boissonnas would return to take photographs on the final day of the journey – and passed by the Fountain of Moses, continuing through the ‘desert of three days without water’ of Exodus. At Gharandel, the oasis corresponding to the ‘twelve springs and seventy palms

of Elim’ (fig 5.3), they met their caravan of nine camels and six Bedouin. From here they crossed the Desert of el’Markha, or the ‘desert of manna and quail’, also known as the Desert of Sin, and proceeded into the mountains. They touched on Maghara, the valley of the caves, and spent a couple of days at Serabit el Khadem, site of the pharaonic turquoise mines. By 23 May, they reached the foot of Mount Sinai and the Monastery of Saint Catherine.

As Boissonnas travels through what he terms the ‘Sinai labyrinth’, his journey unfolds in photographs, the dramatic images bolstered by his text. The visual and the aesthetic predominate as the rugged terrain comes to the fore and the Exodus story seems to recede in importance. Boissonnas brings the landscape to life on a very physical, and also a psychological level. The caravan travels from sunrise to sunset. There is heat and thirst and a search for shade, water and a propitious place to set up camp every evening. Snakes lurk in the sand and wild animals

are in evidence. The camels, their only transport, have principal roles: Boissonnas describes at length their habits and moods, and they are the subject of many photographs. The Bedouin accompanying him feature too: Boissonnas, at times patronising, never fails to convey their dignity and austere life.

## Tertiary Landscape

As they leave the oases of the Red Sea coast – the ‘vegetal’, as Boissonnas calls it – to cross the hyper-arid Sinai deserts – the ‘mineral’, he writes – the photographer comes across a ‘Tertiary landscape’ (fig 5.4):

**Here there is a primitive landscape, a landscape that in its desolation evokes the times of legend when our mother the Earth was giving birth to all the monsters whose enormous skeletons, inordinately large teeth, claws and horns astound us in museums. The camels, out of their harnesses, bring to life this Tertiary Eden.<sup>16</sup>**

Boissonnas refers, albeit in a very popularizing manner, to the Tertiary Era, one of a number of mentions of geological periods (Cretaceous, Quaternary). Boissonnas recognises that the March of the Israelites unfolds in a place that took millions of years to form. Some of the themes of his photographs become apparent: the age of the earth, the harshness and hardness of the landscape of rock and sand, the pure ‘mineral’ world. Boissonnas begins to work through symbol and allegory, as the themes become universal. Light and darkness are in opposition: sunset and sunrise are ‘bloody’, ‘blinding’, ‘fiery’, while the night symbolizes ‘chaos’, the ‘abyss’, ‘gloom’, ‘the lugubrious’, the ‘sinister’, ‘a funeral veil’. We experience the physicality of the journey in the constant ascent and descent, negotiating the gorges and the defiles of this scarcely inhabited land, breaking pathways over loose rock and skirting enormous boulders rounded by water erosion.

## Bouderah Pass, South Sinai

During the earlier part of the journey Boissonnas took a view of South Sinai from the top of the Bouderah Pass (fig 5.5). For Boissonnas the photograph, no doubt of documentary importance, offers a glimpse of the effect of volcanic eruptions during the Cretaceous Era. Boissonnas describes this extraordinary view by quoting from the renowned Egyptologist Raymond Weill’s *Le presqu’île du Sinaï*, 1908, a study of geography and history that the photographer had consulted during his research:

**The whole of the southern part is an inextricable tangle of mountainous massifs crossed with gorges and sinuous valleys that overlap one another in such a way that the eye cannot at first recognise the dominating lines. These mountainous massifs of the South make up a formidable group of crystalline rock, granite and porphyry. There is no sedimentary layer on the higher part, but lower down metamorphic rock appears, shale of a varied type and large sandstone formations in irregular bands.<sup>17</sup>**



**fig 5.11**  
Fred Boissonnas, *Sinai. Caravan in the Desert of Sand (on the coast of Aqaba, near Dahab)*. 01.06.1933, Roussen Collection B.cat: 7544.

Boissonnas provides evidence of the great volcanic rupture that took place in the Cretaceous Era, which turned the Sinai Peninsula into 'a small geological island', as Weill put it. Boissonnas's photograph records the geological features of the terrain, while recognizing its austere beauty.

## Serabit el Khadem

The plateau of Serabit el Khadem is the site of the ruins of the Temple of Hathor, the Lady of Turquoise, an Egyptian goddess in the guise of a cow. Boissonnas describes the temple site on the high plateau (fig 5.6):

**The Serabit site is very beautiful, but it is extraordinarily desolate. As far as the temple is concerned, it is no more than a pile of stones with a few steles.**<sup>18</sup>

Boissonnas records his complete experience of the site in words that supplement the photographs:

**The valley path rises and the summits appear lower; the pink sand is scattered with pale-green, bluish and silvery-grey clumps of bushes, which let off a strong aroma at the slightest touch. On a large block of red sandstone, the figure of a camel crudely carved by miners of another era. We arrive**

**at the base of the Serabit el Khadem massif, the stratified, crumbling walls of which go round the bottom of the valley. It is a maze of potholed stone paths, crossed by deep gorges that require long detours.**<sup>19</sup>

Boissonnas recalls those who visited the plateau in the past, and specifically the archaeologists Léon de Laborde (*Commentaire géographique de l'Exode*, 1841), Edouard Naville (*The store-city of Pithom and the route of the Exodus*, 1885) and Sir William Matthew Flinders Petrie (*Researches in Sinai*, 1906). According to Flinders Petrie, burnt sacrifice was offered in this place, evidenced by a layer of an estimated 50 tons of ash. As Boissonnas was photographing, a fiery stream of light struck the crest of the Tih mountains in the distance. With the appearance of the first rays of the sun, he says he understood why this isolated high plateau became an altar to the divinity. The earliest worshippers, predating the worship of Hathor, were probably nomads of the area, he goes on to explain, giving an idea of the Semitic religion that existed before Hebrew monotheism evolved here. As he visualizes the events that took place on this site, Boissonnas recites passages from Numbers 19, in which the Lord orders Moses and Aaron to slaughter a cow as part of a purification rite, suggesting a connection between the Egyptian worship of Hathor and the Hebrew religion.

## Mount Sinai

As Boissonnas ascends the Pass of the Wind towards Mount Sinai, the Safsafeh of the Bedouin, he takes photographs along a footpath strewn with enormous boulders and monstrous stones. The Bedouin set up camp for him by a large boulder, the mountain visible in the distance (fig 5.7). The following day, Boissonnas photographs the Safsafeh summit head-on, from below (fig 5.8). He describes the scene:

**The high mountain air is bracing. [...] Here, apart from a small stream, there is nothing but bare granite rock. It is dry everywhere and that gives the landscape an austere and terrifying grandeur.**<sup>20</sup>

From the inordinately broad plain at the base of the mountain, called el Rahah in Exodus – 'a vast arena accommodating 100,000 spectators' – the view is overwhelming, both visually and emotionally.<sup>21</sup> Boissonnas imagines the Israelite encampment. He sees Moses high on the mountain, wrapped in a cloud of fire, communing with the divinity. He meditates on these transformative scenes, 'the most grandiose in human history'.

Boissonnas's photographs of Mount Sinai document the appearance of the mountain, which dominates the Sinai chain and the broad plain below, an area large enough to support the encampment of a multitude. Boissonnas notes that this fits the Exodus narrative, citing the work of Sir William Dawson (*Modern Science in Bible Lands*, 1892). Boissonnas also speaks about the impression the mountain would have made on the indigenous people, with its three red granite peaks rising to an altar-like summit. He is struck by the mountain's association with the worship of pagan gods. The worship of the moon and the Babylonian cult of Sin may have been practiced here, he says. He recalls that Mount Sinai is at the centre of a region of violent cyclone activity and must

have known worship of the god of weather, clouds and storms, perhaps Baal Tsephon, the Lord of the North, said to be the god of the Phoenicians, associated not only with Mount Sinai but also with Mount Geneffeh, as we have seen.

## Bedouin Wedding

Not far from Mount Sinai, Boissonnas came across a large group of Bedouin from the local Djebeliyeh tribe celebrating a wedding with some 90 guests under a number of tents, the women separated from the men (fig 5.9). Boissonnas and Trembley were invited to the celebration, including the sacrificial meal. Boissonnas captured the event as it unfolded throughout the day. He took some forty photographs, an enormous number for him, as they sacrificed the goat and cooked the feast. The Bedouin in their traditional dress eating, seated on the ground under the shelter of the tents, is the type of 'picturesque' scene that Boissonnas so often includes in his books. At the feast he goes into a reverie of the Biblical past and we realise the value of these images for him, and how he shapes the way we view the images through references to his biblical research. The hours he spent as a guest of the tribe reminded him of the tribe of Jethro, the father-in-law of Moses, and a scene in Exodus 18 in which Jethro, a Midianite priest, returned his daughter Sephora, Moses's wife, and their two sons, to Moses at the Israelite encampment at Mount Sinai. Moses bowed in front of his father-in-law and kissed him, a custom repeated in the greetings Boissonnas observed in this tribal family. Describing the Bedouin as 'living outside civilization, responding to the same needs as their distant ancestors...', Boissonnas claims that 'Jethro would have felt at home in this reunion of his descendents'.<sup>22</sup>

## The Monastery of Saint Catherine

Having arrived at Mount Sinai, Boissonnas goes on to the Monastery of Saint Catherine. He and Trembley were received as pilgrims and accommodated in cells within the monastery. Boissonnas had taken many photographs of the monastery for the Orthodox world project during his 1929 stay. On the 1933 trip he continued to photograph the monastery's interior, especially the apse mosaics in the church, and he took views of the surrounding moun-

tains from the monastery. Among these there is nothing like the iconic photograph of April 1929 in which the monastery is seen at a great distance from the Pass of the Wind (fig 5.10). Boissonnas described the view in retrospect for Lecture V, the lecture about the monastery, and he no doubt would have included it in his Sinai book:

**From the top of the pass the Monastery of Saint Catherine can barely be distinguished in the lower part of the small valley, the ouadi ed Deir, in the middle of a confusion [chaos] of rocks, as if crushed between enormous walls of granite that point towards the sky. That tiny parallelogram, that geometric form, small as it is, suddenly gives this lunar landscape a profound meaning, the presence of Pascal's 'thinking reed', man, who dominates disordered Nature, imposing himself on the material world.<sup>23</sup>**

An empty wilderness spreads out before Boissonnas as he descends from the top of the pass. The monastery is at the centre, with a flaming sunset on the distant mountains and darkness encroaching from below. The word 'chaos' appears time and again in Boissonnas's descriptions of the Sinai landscape. He focuses on the chaos, disorder or disarray of nature, which opposes the world constructed by man. Boissonnas experiences a sense of the 'sublime', an overwhelming feeling of awe and terror in this landscape, in which man seems infinitesimally small. He is reminded of the 'thinking reed' from a famous quotation by Pascal, the seventeenth-century French philosopher and mathematician.

What makes this photograph iconic is the sense of space, the position of the monastery between opposing groups of mountains, the last rays of the sun glowing on the mountains to the right, echoing the darkness on the slopes to the left. Boissonnas plays on these sorts of contrasts in his work, both in words and images. By photographing at this time of day, he captures the greatest contrast of light and dark.

**4.30 pm: A beautiful light appears. The contrasts bring the landscape to life. Darkness gathers in the hollows of the valley, and the light takes refuge, concentrating on the surfaces. Unusual details become evident; strange forms emerge from the depths. The land takes shape, contours stand out; the shadows lengthen and merge into a funereal tide. They leap to attack.<sup>24</sup>**



fig 5.12

Fred Boissonnas, *Sinai. Caravan around a campfire at night*. 02.06.1933, Roussen Collection 7562

The play of light and darkness lends an air of mystery to the landscape and a poignancy to the image of Saint Catherine's Monastery, a feature of this remote part of Sinai for nearly 1,500 years.

## Dahab Oasis, on the coast of Aqaba

After a trek of three and a half hours the landscape suddenly changes. As Boissonnas and the caravan pass from the desert to the Aqaba coast, a huge vista opens. (fig 5.11)

Before them lie the sea, a distant oasis and the blue-tinged Arabian mountain chain on the opposite shore. After a hard journey, they experience a moment of elation. Boissonnas compares the expanse of sand on the long alluvial plain before him to an oriental carpet. 'Only a painting on enamel' could do justice to the bright colours of the scene, he says.<sup>25</sup> He places before the viewer a landscape formed long ago by the upheaval of volcanic rock, leaving a layer of small alluvial stones in a thousand colours – quartz, sandstone, porphyry, ba-

salt and granite from the Sinai mountains. Through words, Boissonnas injects colour into the landscape, but this is not the landscape we see.

The contrast between Boissonnas's poetic words and the austere image is striking. It is in the image that Boissonnas really shines. He takes the picture from above, seated on his camel. The plain slopes gently downwards. The line of the caravan, just ahead of him, points towards the horizon, giving a sense of arrival. The date is 1 June. It is 9.45 in the morning. The sky is luminous at this time of day and the 'overheated' air is almost visible. Boissonnas and the caravan halt near the shore. They set up camp near the Dahab oasis, the most important on this part of the Aqaba coast and a place of great beauty, with lush vegetation, beautiful seascapes and marine life, especially coral. The oasis is serene, Boissonnas tells us, until the violent winds of the Khamsin blow for hours in the early morning.

From Mount Sinai Boissonnas and Trembley had travelled for three days to reach Dahab, a possible winter encampment of the Israelites, Boissonnas suggests. He speculates that this could be the site of Midian, which was known to have been situated on a coast. Boissonnas recalls the meeting of Jethro, a Midianite, and Moses at Mount Sinai and imagines the interchange between their closely related Semitic tribes. The proximity of Mount Sinai to Dahab suggests to Boissonnas the possibility of a seasonal movement between the mountains and the coast, as the Israelites prepared themselves over years for the conquest of Canaan. Once again Boissonnas evokes a primordial place, in which the story of the Israelites, as well as his own journey of discovery unfolds.

## Campfire at night

Towards the end of the journey, seated around a desert campfire with the Bedouin and their camels, Boissonnas expresses contentment with the 'complete success of our expedition' (fig 5.12).<sup>26</sup> They had set up camp in a magnificent site, Boissonnas writes. It was a beautiful

evening. The men and the camels were very relaxed. The light of the campfire was mesmerising. It reflected on to the seated figures and the surrounding rock, the result of some photographic 'magic': Boissonnas had thrown magnesium powder on to the campfire to create a flash, startling the Bedouin, the camels for their part remaining impassive. The next day he and Trembley would return to Saint Catherine's. They would continue on to Tor to pick up the military vehicles and escort for the drive back to Suez, where Boissonnas would take the final photographs from Mount Geneffeh.

In the years to come, publication of his Sinai photographs and text would remain elusive. Boissonnas would wrestle with the elements of the Sinai book for the rest of his life. It remained a work in progress, one that he would return to time and again.

Boissonnas and Trembley continued to discuss the Sinai project on their return to Switzerland. They drew consolation from the knowledge that they had 'done something worthwhile that will endure'. As Trembley writes to Boissonnas:

**It is not without regret that I send you this account, which puts a semi-final end to almost eight years of wonderful collaboration and so many hopes. But finally, if in financial terms we have not reaped the benefit of all our work, at the very least for you, we can tell ourselves that we have done something worthwhile that will endure as a testament to our collaboration and the time we spent in the land of the sun. Let this sun of the Nile, of Nubia, of the desert, of the flaming peaks of Sinai warm our hearts in spite of the glacial cold of our present circumstances.<sup>27</sup>**

<sup>1</sup> Fred Boissonnas, 'Sinai: Lecture I', p. 1, Roussen Collection, London, 1935.

<sup>2</sup> Two decades later Boissonnas would publish the photographs with captions as a tribute to Bérard on his death: *Dans le sillage d'Ulysse, album odysseén*, Armand Colin, Paris 1933.

<sup>3</sup> See Estelle Sohier, 'Ré-imaginer la Méditerranée avec l'Odyssée, la carte et la photographie. Victor Bérard, un géographe sur les traces d'Ulysse'. *Annales de géographie*, 2016, vol. 3, no. 709-10, p. 336-38.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid*, p. 338. Bérard theorized that the Odyssey was based on the tales of Phoenician sailors (presumed to be Semitic), and that the places in the Homeric poems corresponded to actual places on Phoenician trade routes. Bérard attempted to establish the Semitic origins of the Greek names with the help of a Hebrew dictionary. His important theory of the Semitic origins of Greek culture developed out of this research.

<sup>5</sup> Victor Bérard, *Navigations d'Ulysse, Ithaque et la Grèce des Achéens*, Armand Colin, Paris, 1927, p. 19.

<sup>6</sup> Fred Boissonnas, 'In the Land of Jethro or In Sinai', manuscript, typed and hand-written in ink, Roussen Collection, London, 1934 [sic].

<sup>7</sup> *L'Odyssée: Poésie homérique d'après Homère*, tr. Victor Bérard, 3 vols in 8, Les Belles Lettres, Paris 1924.

<sup>8</sup> Fred Boissonnas, 'In the Land of Jethro or In Sinai', manuscript, typed and hand-written in ink, Roussen Collection, London, p. 3, 1934[sic].

<sup>9</sup> Sohier, pp. 337-38.

<sup>10</sup> Fred Boissonnas, '*Préambule à l'ouvrage en préparation sur le Sinai. Conférence sur le Passage de la Mer Rouge*', Roussen Collection, London, p. 10, 1933-34.

<sup>11</sup> Fred Boissonnas, 'Préambule', p. 49.

<sup>12</sup> Fred Boissonnas, 'Préambule', p. 53.

<sup>13</sup> Fred Boissonnas, 'Préambule', p. 53.

<sup>14</sup> Fred Boissonnas, Sinai: Lecture VI, p.1, Roussen Collection, London, 1935.

<sup>15</sup> Fred Boissonnas, 'Préambule', p. 50.

<sup>16</sup> Fred Boissonnas, 'Sinai: Lecture I', p. 34, 1935.

<sup>17</sup> Fred Boissonnas, 'Sinai: Lecture II', pp. 14-15, 1935.

<sup>18</sup> Fred Boissonnas, 'Sinai: Lecture III', Avant-propos, B, 1935.

<sup>19</sup> Fred Boissonnas, 'Sinai: Lecture II', p. 42, 1935.

<sup>20</sup> Fred Boissonnas, 'Sinai: Lecture IV', p. 21, 1935.

<sup>21</sup> Fred Boissonnas, 'Sinai: Lecture IV', p. 22, 1935.

<sup>22</sup> Fred Boissonnas, 'Sinai: Lecture IV', p. 38, 1935.

<sup>23</sup> Fred Boissonnas, 'Sinai: Lecture V', p. 6, 1935.

<sup>24</sup> Fred Boissonnas, 'Sinai: Lecture VI', pp. 3-4, 1935.

<sup>25</sup> Fred Boissonnas, 'Sinai: Lecture VI', p. 18, 1935.

<sup>26</sup> Fred Boissonnas, 'Sinai: Lecture VI', p. 37, 1935.

<sup>27</sup> Letter from Paul Trembley to Fred Boissonnas, 4 May 1935, Centre d'iconographie (BGE), Geneva. Special thanks goes to Cécile Dobler at the Centre d'iconographie for her help in consulting the Boissonnas archives.

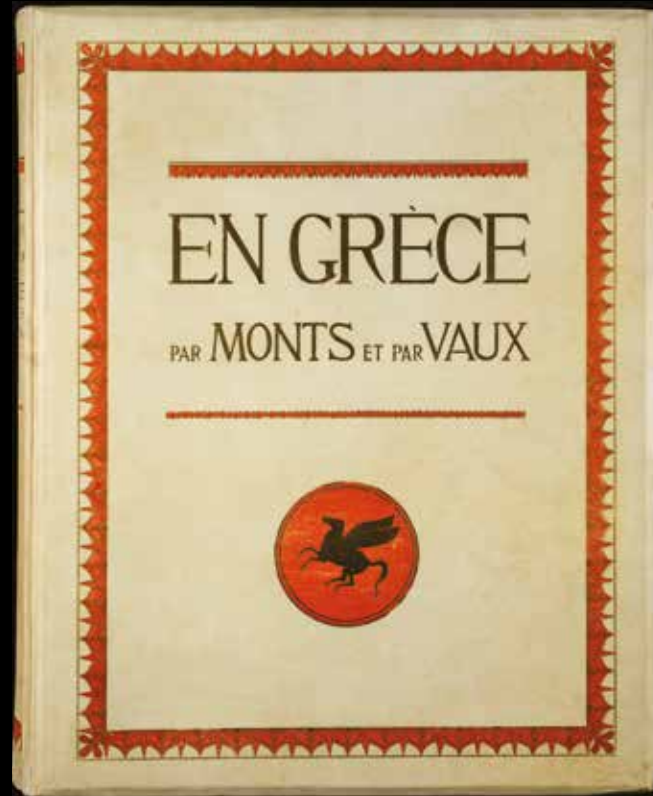
Catalogue of works  
**Boissonnas in Egypt**

\*Catalogue of Boissonnas works  
exhibited at the Royal Geographical  
Society November 2017 (Roussen  
Collection)



**cat. 1.1**  
*Parthenon After the Storm*  
1908.





cat. 1.2  
Front cover of the book  
*En Grèce par monts et par vaux*,  
Daniel Baud-Bovy and Fred  
Boissonnas, 1910.



cat. 1.3  
Front cover of the book  
*Des Cyclades en Crète au gré du vent*,  
Daniel Baud-Bovy and  
Fred Boissonnas, 1919.



cat. 1.4  
Front cover of the book  
*Égypte*, Paul Trembley and  
Fred Boissonnas, 1932.

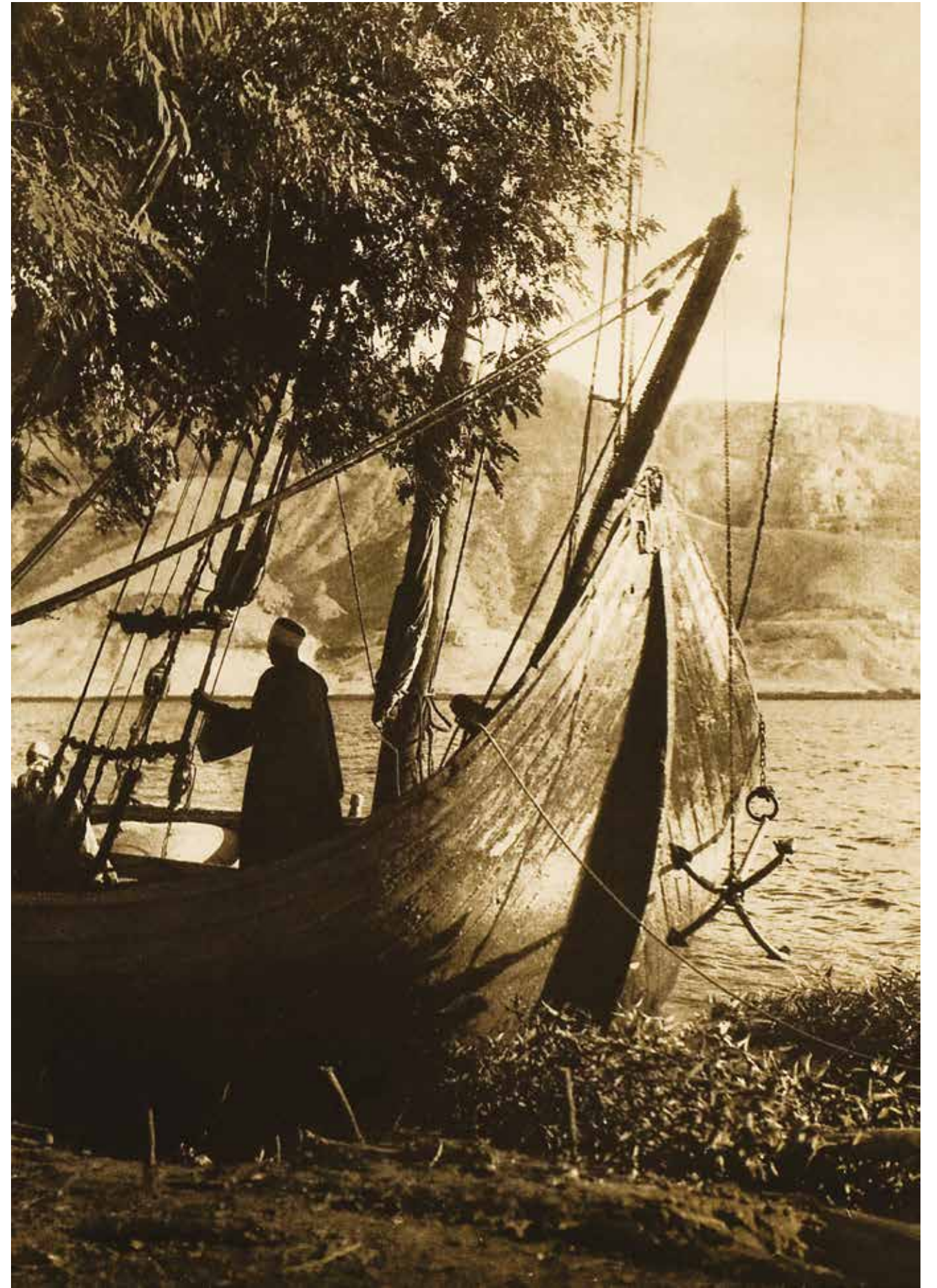
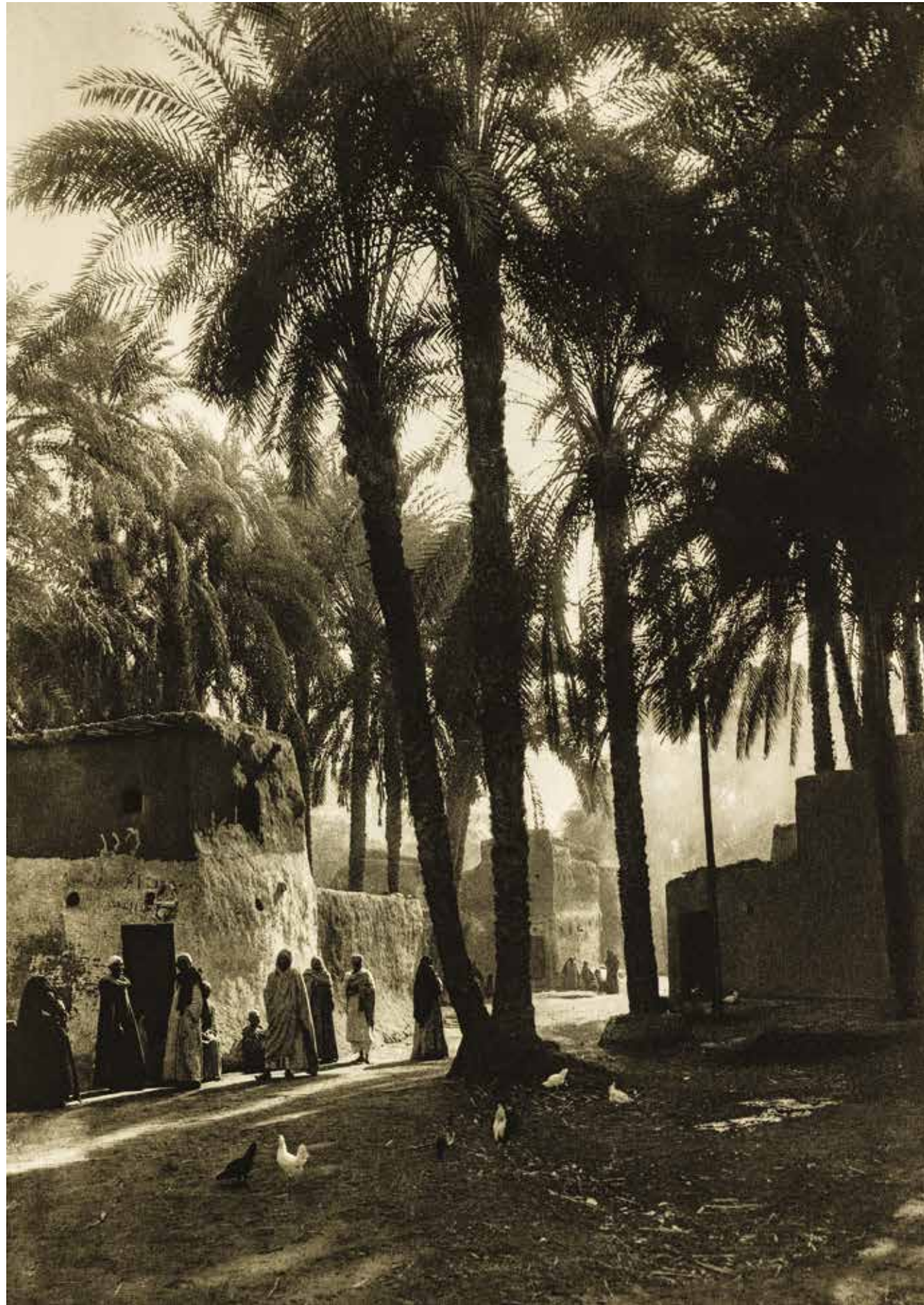
---

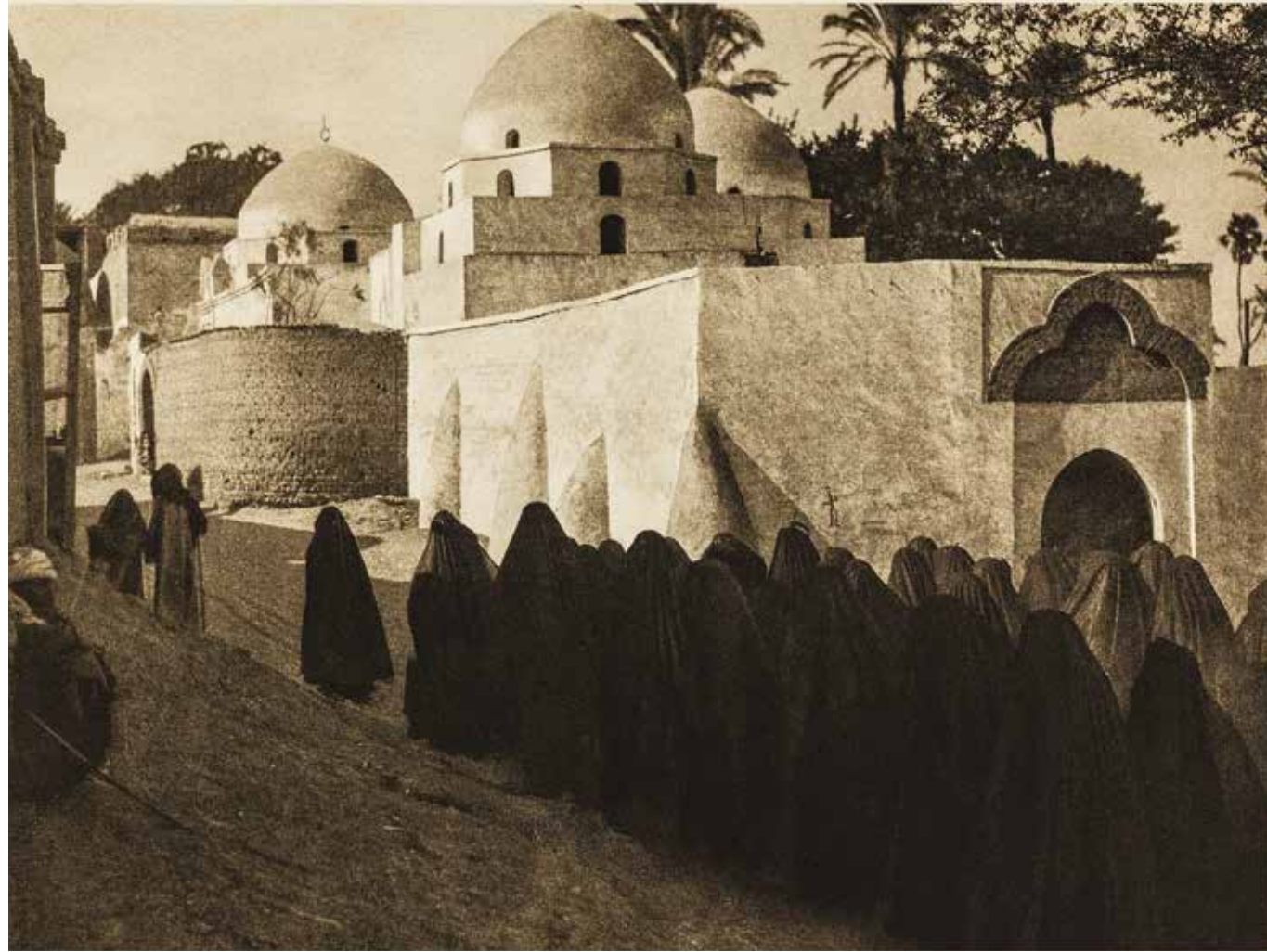
Page 82

cat. 1.5  
A deir maouas,  
*Égypte* plate II.

Page 83

cat. 1.6  
*Une felouque. En amont  
de nag Hamadi, Égypte*  
plate VI.





**cat. 1.7**  
*Les pleureuses. Au Cimetière  
 D'assiout, Égypte* plate VII.

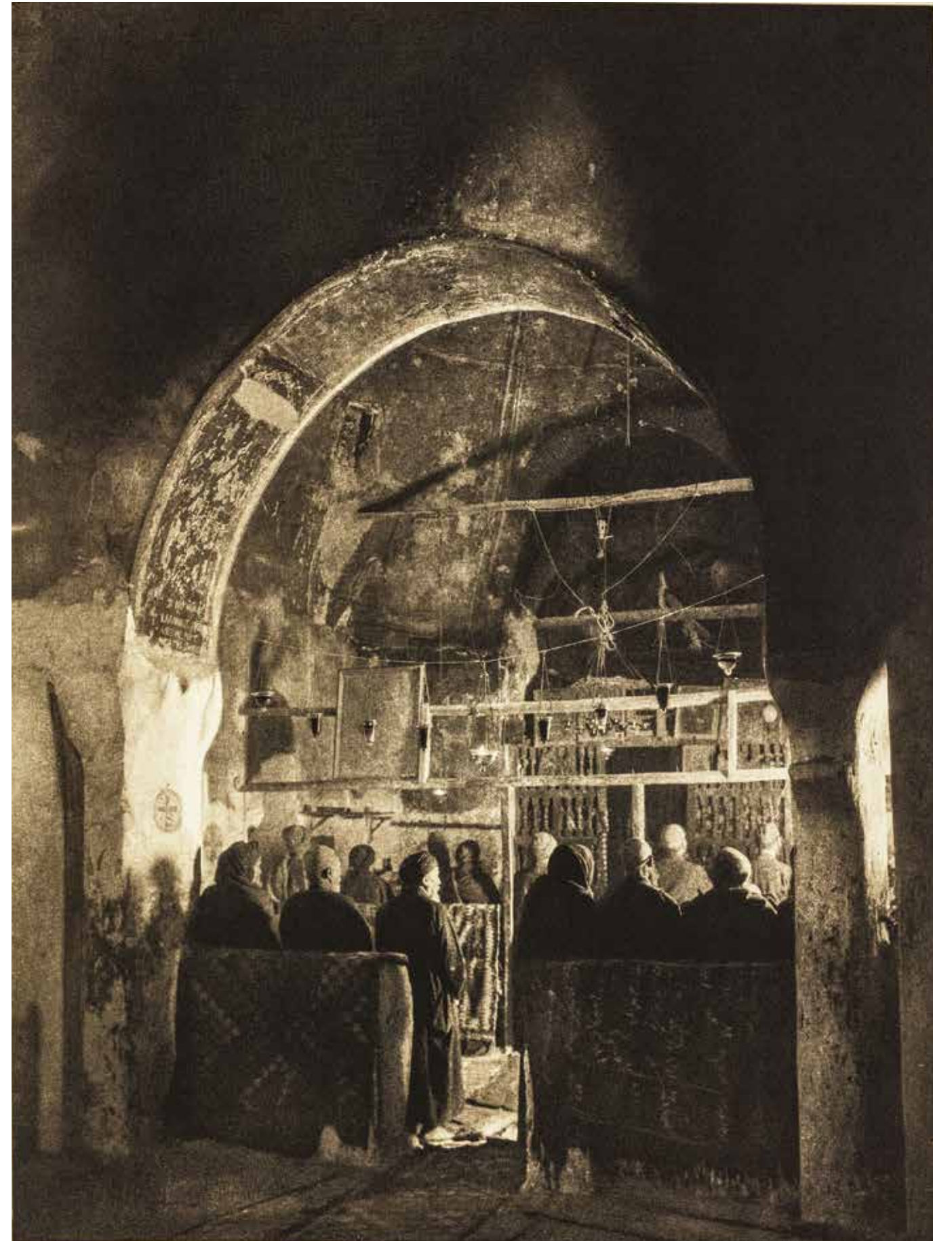
**cat. 1.8**  
*Église du Couvent de Saint-Antoine,  
 Égypte* plate X.

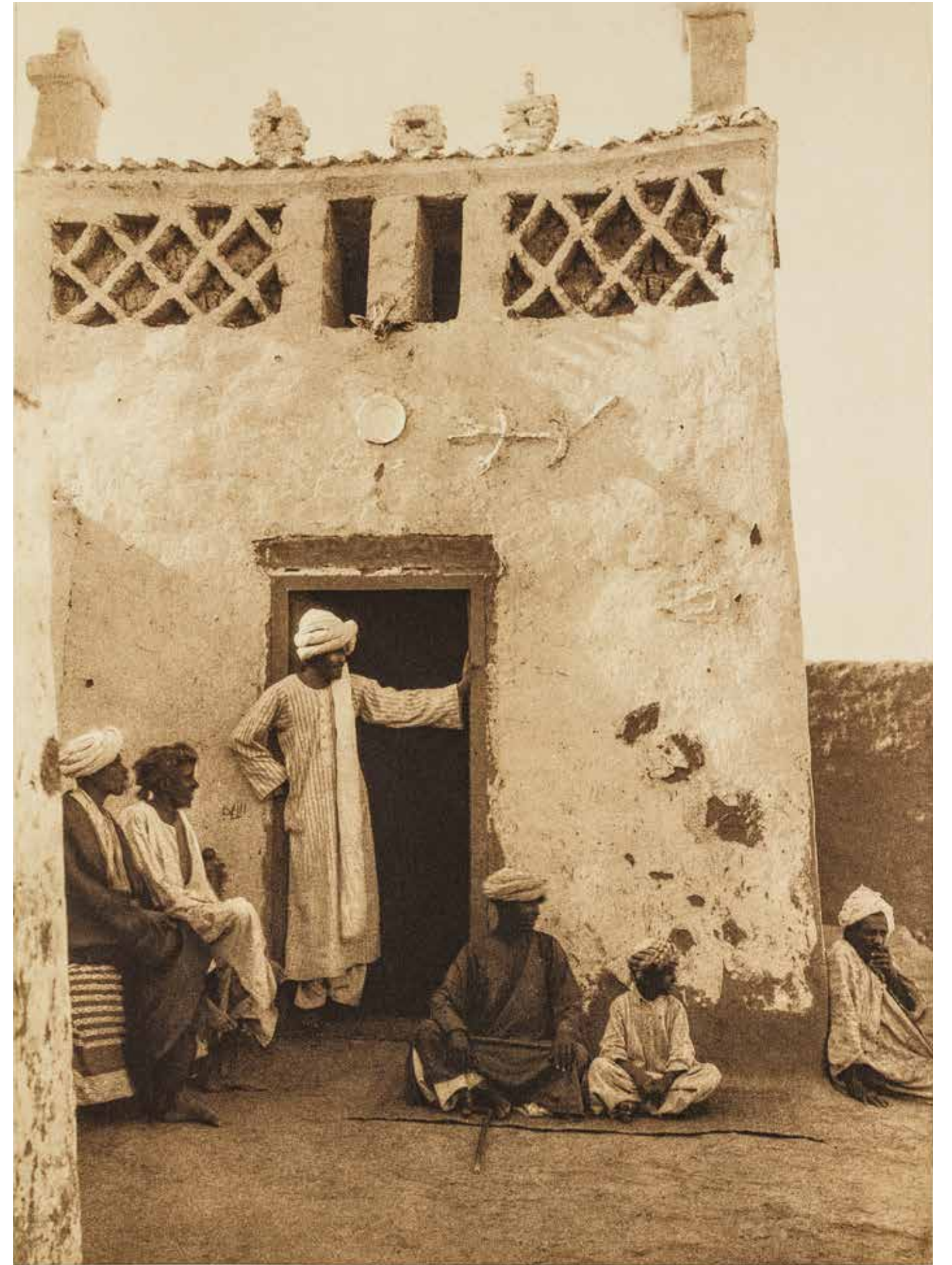
**Page 86**

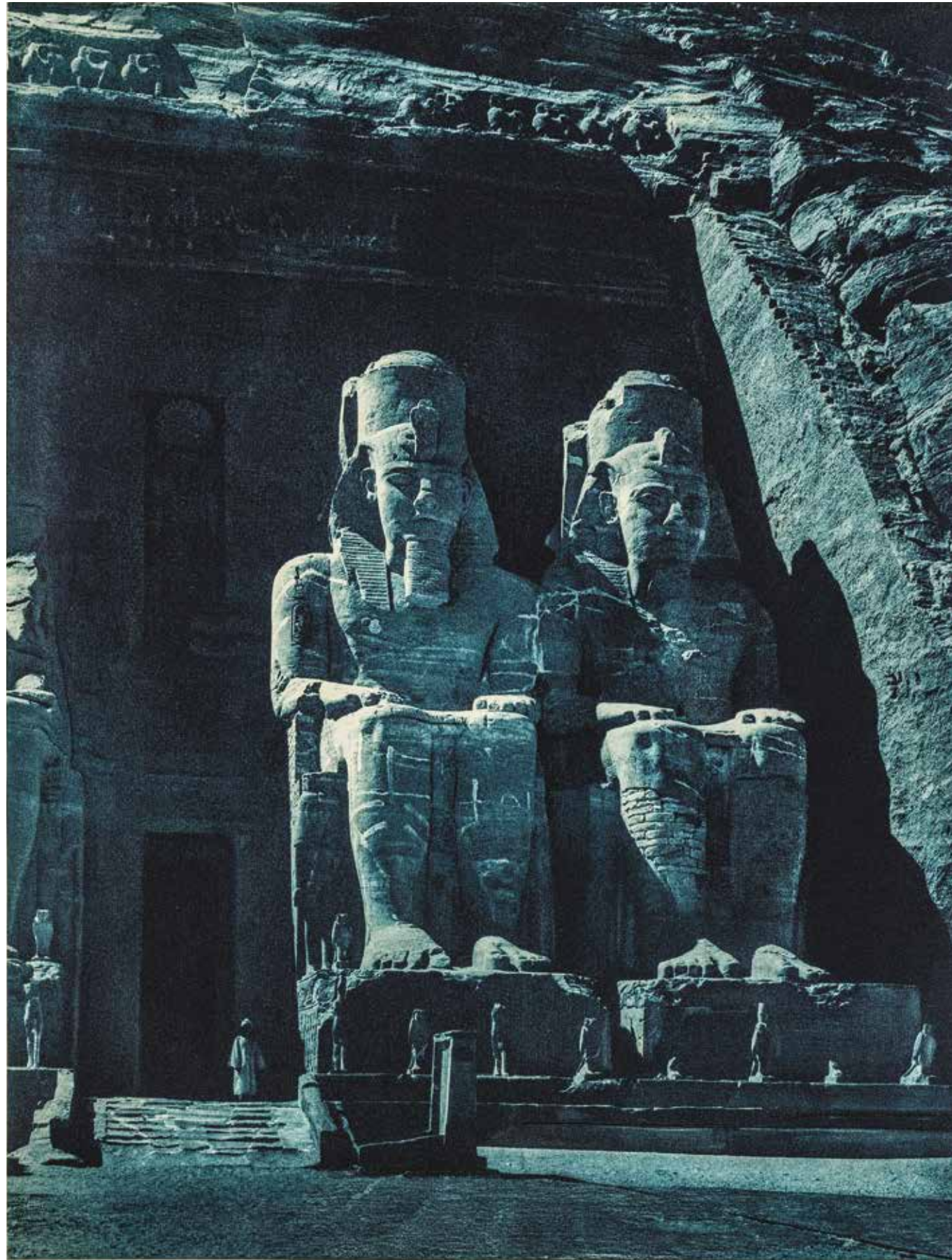
**cat. 1.9**  
*Une source. Oasis de Siouah, Égypte* plate XII.

**Page 87**

**cat. 1.10**  
*Au village Nubian de Dehmit, Égypte* plate XIII.







**cat. 1.11**  
*Les colosses d'Abou-Simbel au clair de lune, Égypte plate XIV.*



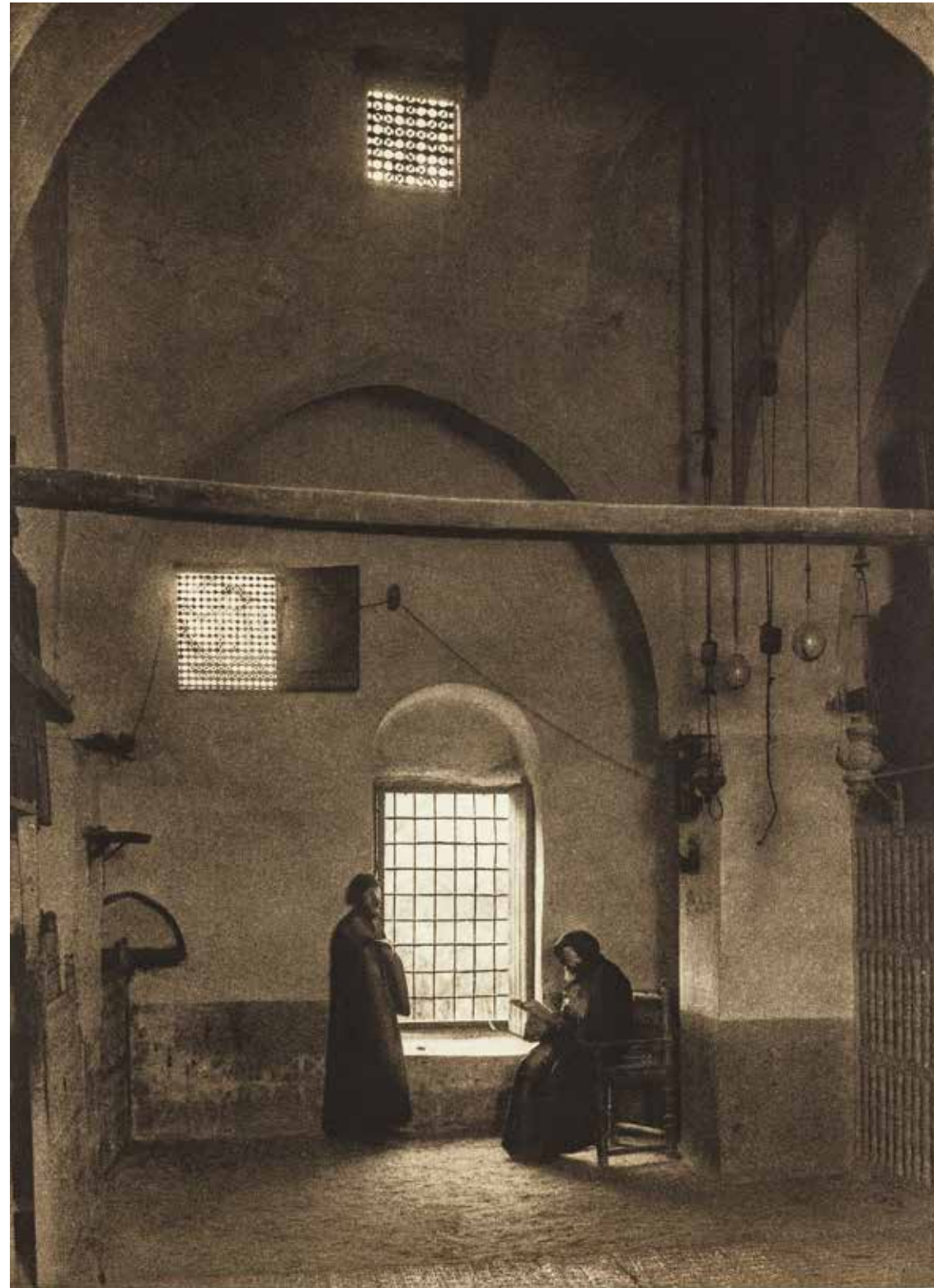
**cat. 1.12**  
*Carrières de Grés de Silsileh, Égypte plate XV.*



**cat. 1.13**  
*Les bélîers de Karnak, Égypte plate XVIII.*



**cat. 1.14**  
*Sala hypostyle de Karnak, Égypte plate XX.*



**cat. 1.15**  
*Le chapelle Saint-Michel au couvent de Saint-Paul, Égypte*  
 plate XXXI.



**cat. 1.16**  
*Moucharabiehs en encorbellement au Caire, Égypte*  
 plate XXXIV.



cat. 1.17  
Back cover of the book  
*Égypte*, Paul Trembley and  
Fred Boissonnas, 1932.





**cat. 2.1**  
*Sinai*, 17.05.1933  
Roussen Collection B.cat: 7094.

**cat. 2.2***Sinai*, 22.05.1933

Roussen Collection B.cat:7204.

**cat. 2.3***Sinai, Tor*, 02.05.1929

Roussen Collection B.cat: 6764.



**cat. 2.4**  
Roussen Collection B.cat: 6837.



**cat. 2.5**  
*Sinai, Tor*, 10.06.1933,  
Roussen Collection B.cat: 7389.



**cat. 2.6**  
*Sinai, Gharandel,*  
10.05.1933, Roussen Collection  
B.cat: 7412.



**cat. 2.7**  
*Sinai, 06.06.1933,*  
Roussen Collection  
B.cat: 7371.



**cat. 2.8**  
*Sinai*, 06.06.1933,  
Roussen Collection  
B.cat: 7582.



**cat. 2.9**  
*Sinai*, Roussen Collection  
B.cat: 6662.



**cat. 2.10**  
*Sinai*, 16.05.1933,  
Roussen Collection  
B.cat: 7448.

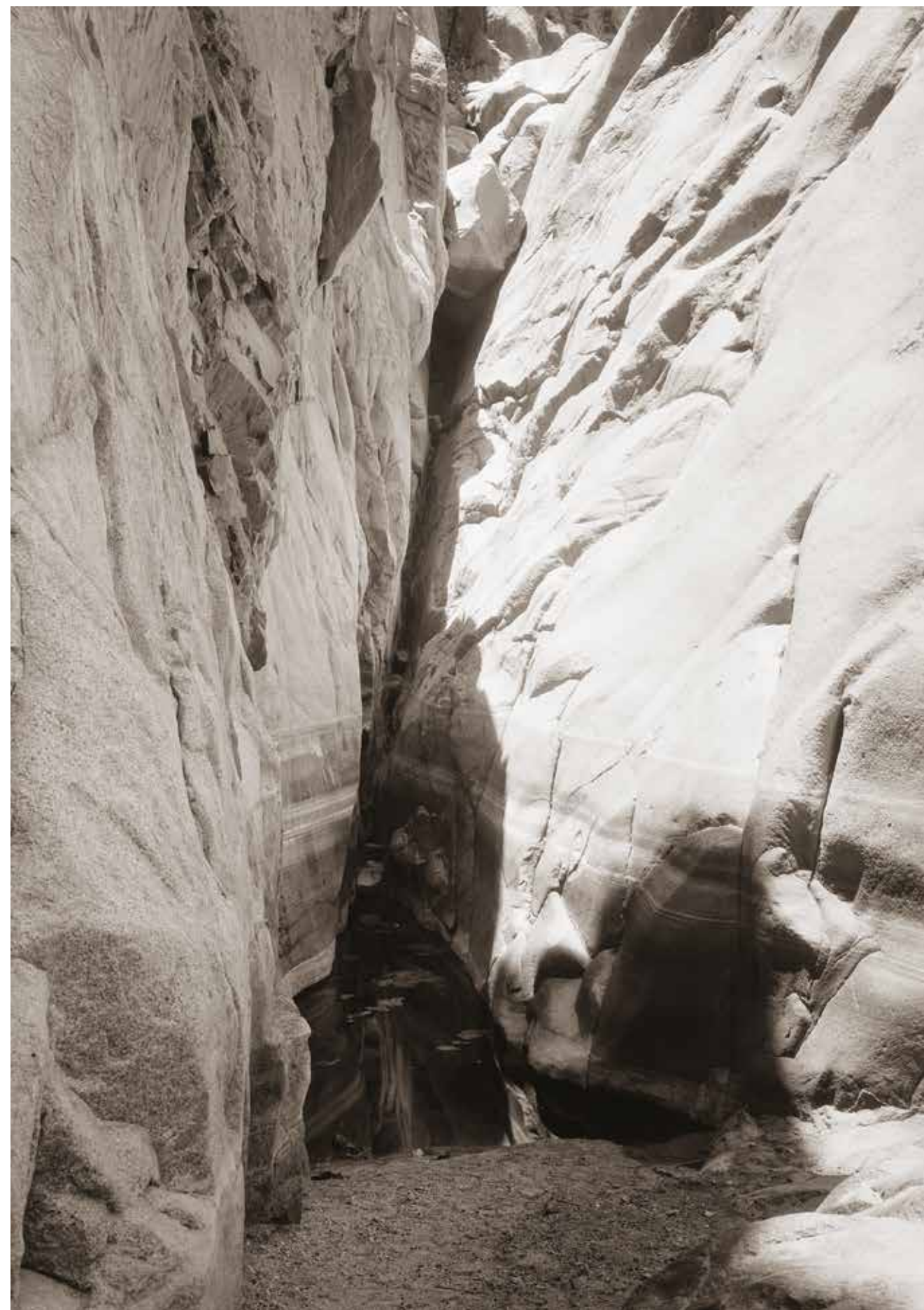


**cat. 2.11**  
*Sinai desert and cliffs*, 11.06.1933,  
Roussen Collection  
B.cat: 7613.



**cat. 2.12**  
*Sinai. Tlaa, Valley,*  
*Cosmas and Damian*  
*spring, 24.04.1929*  
 Roussen Collection  
 B.cat: 6934.

**cat. 2.13**  
*Sinai, 03.06.1933,*  
 Roussen Collection  
 B.cat: 7564.





**cat. 2.14**  
*Sinai*, 05.06.1933,  
 Roussen Collection  
 B.cat: 7575.



**cat. 2.15**  
*Sinai*, 11.05.1933,  
 Roussen Collection  
 B.cat: 7418.

---

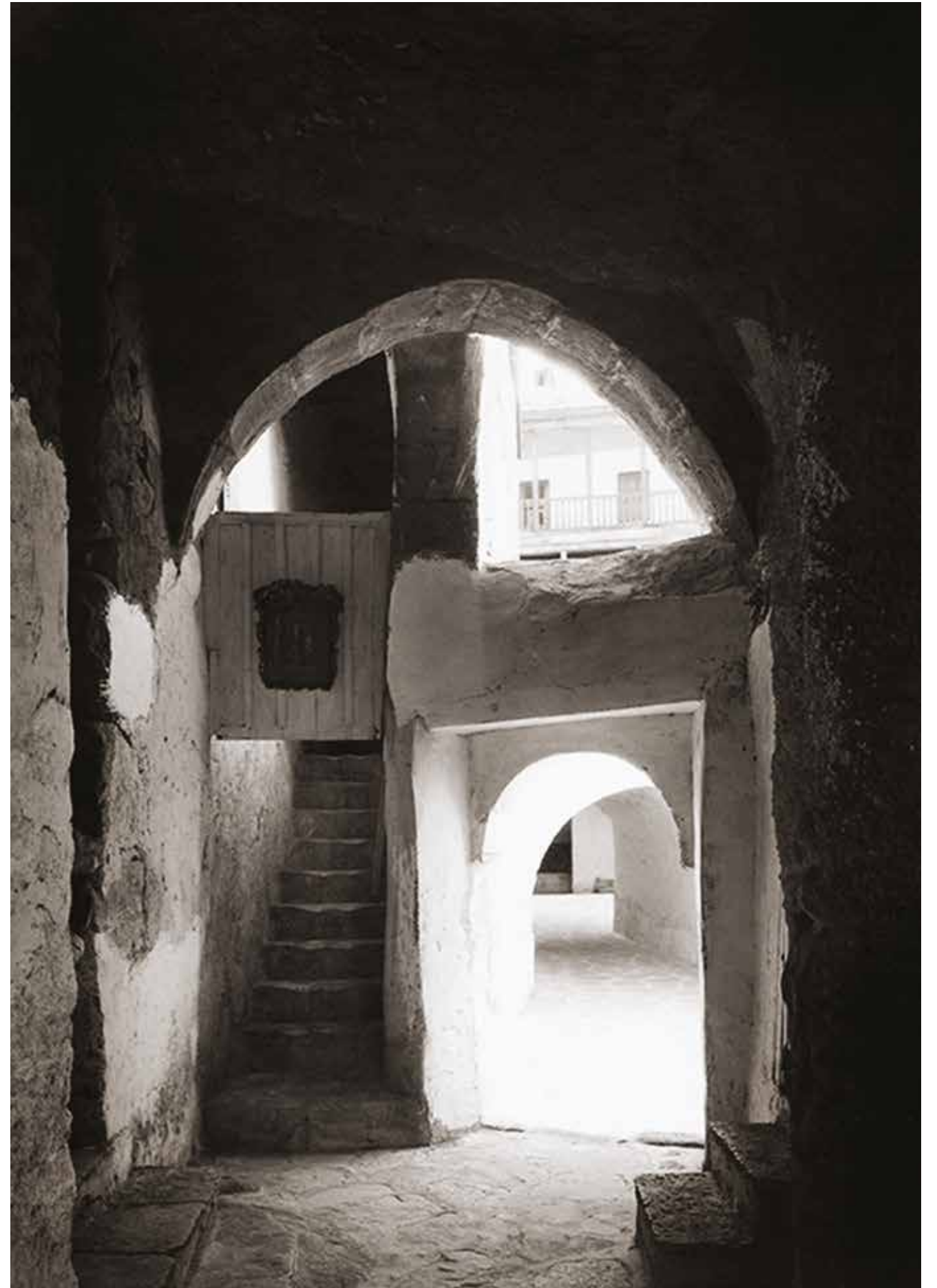
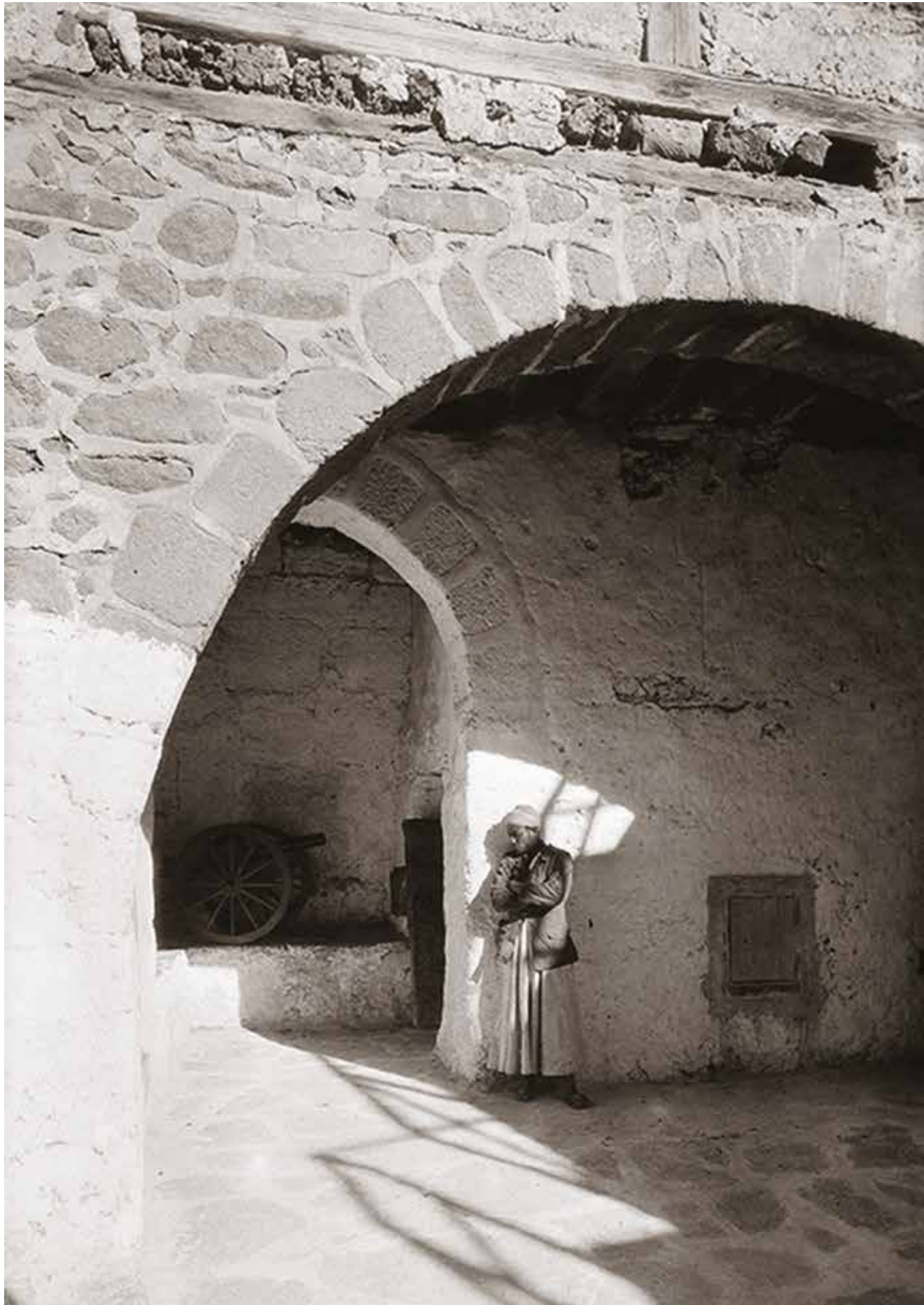
**Page 112**

**cat. 2.16**  
*Saint Catherine. Entrance to the  
 Monastery. Interior View*, 18.04.1933,  
 Roussen Collection B.cat: 6639.

**Page 113**

**cat. 2.17**  
*Saint Catherine. Library stairway*,  
 20.04.1929, Roussen Collection  
 B.cat: 6666.

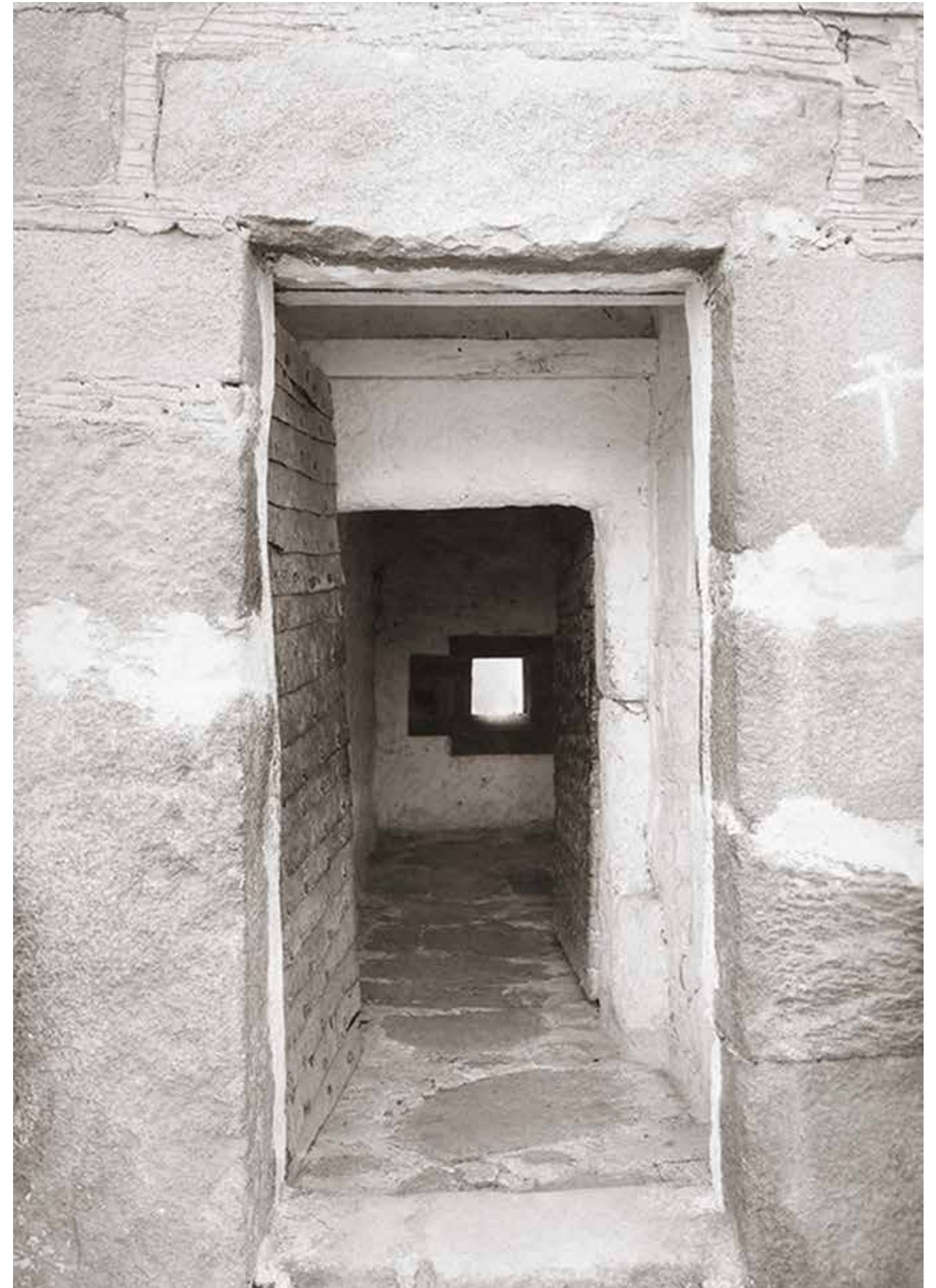






**cat. 2.18**  
*Sinai. Storm.* 21.04.1929,  
 Roussen Collection B.cat: 6669.

**cat. 2.19**  
*Sinai. Entrance to the Monastery,*  
 26.04.1929, Roussen Collection  
 B.cat: 6712.





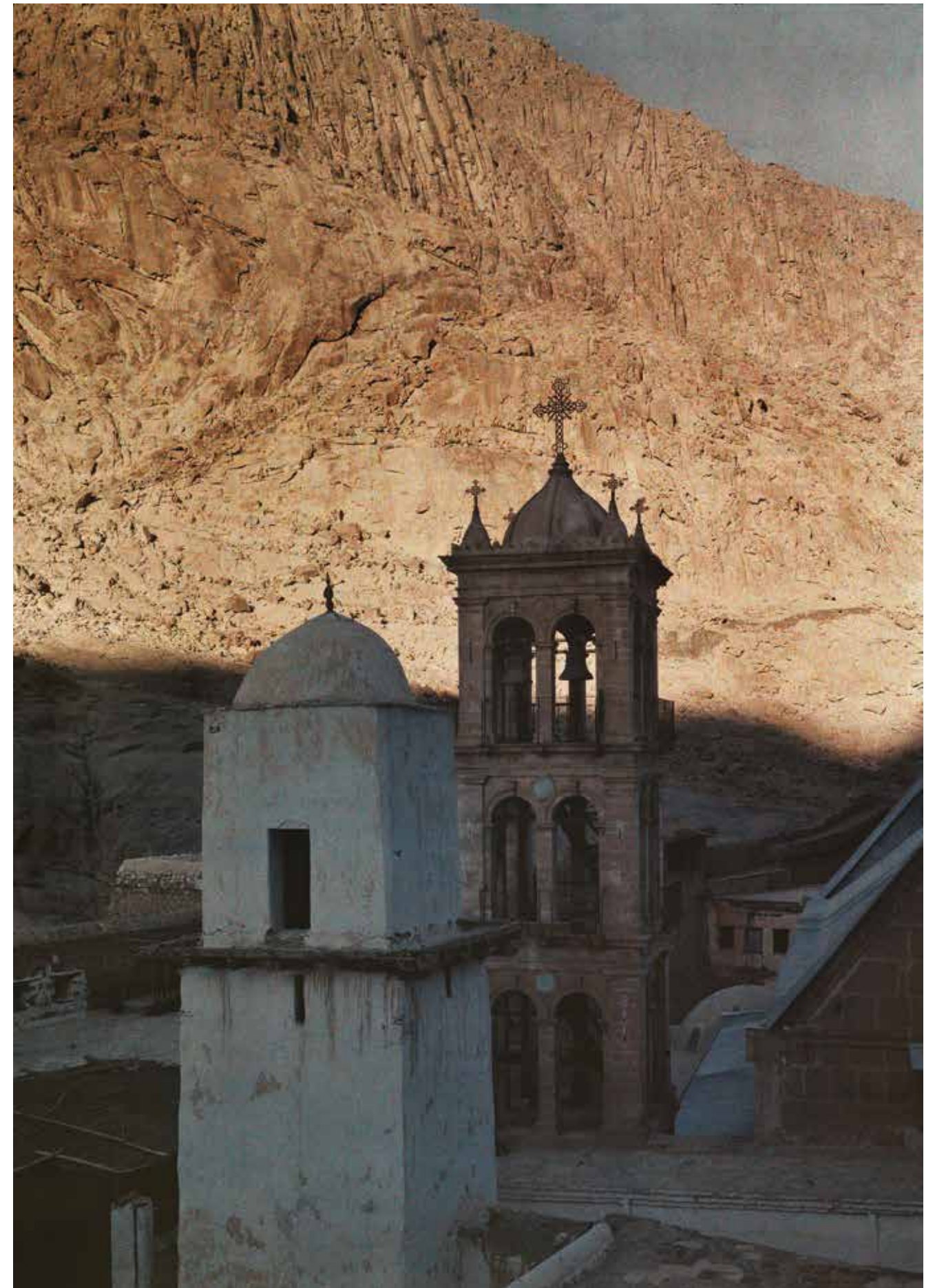
**cat. 2.20**  
*Sinai. Stairway leading to the library,*  
 19.04.1929, Roussen Collection  
 B.cat: 6649.

**cat. 2.21**  
*Saint Catherine. The charnel house,*  
 26.04.1929, Roussen Collection  
 B.cat: 6709.



**cat. 2.22**  
*Saint Catherine Monastery.*  
 Roussen Collection  
 B.cat: Glass plate 0001\_0814.

**cat. 2.23**  
*Saint Catherine. Monastery Tower*  
 Roussen Collection  
 B. cat Glass Plate 0001.





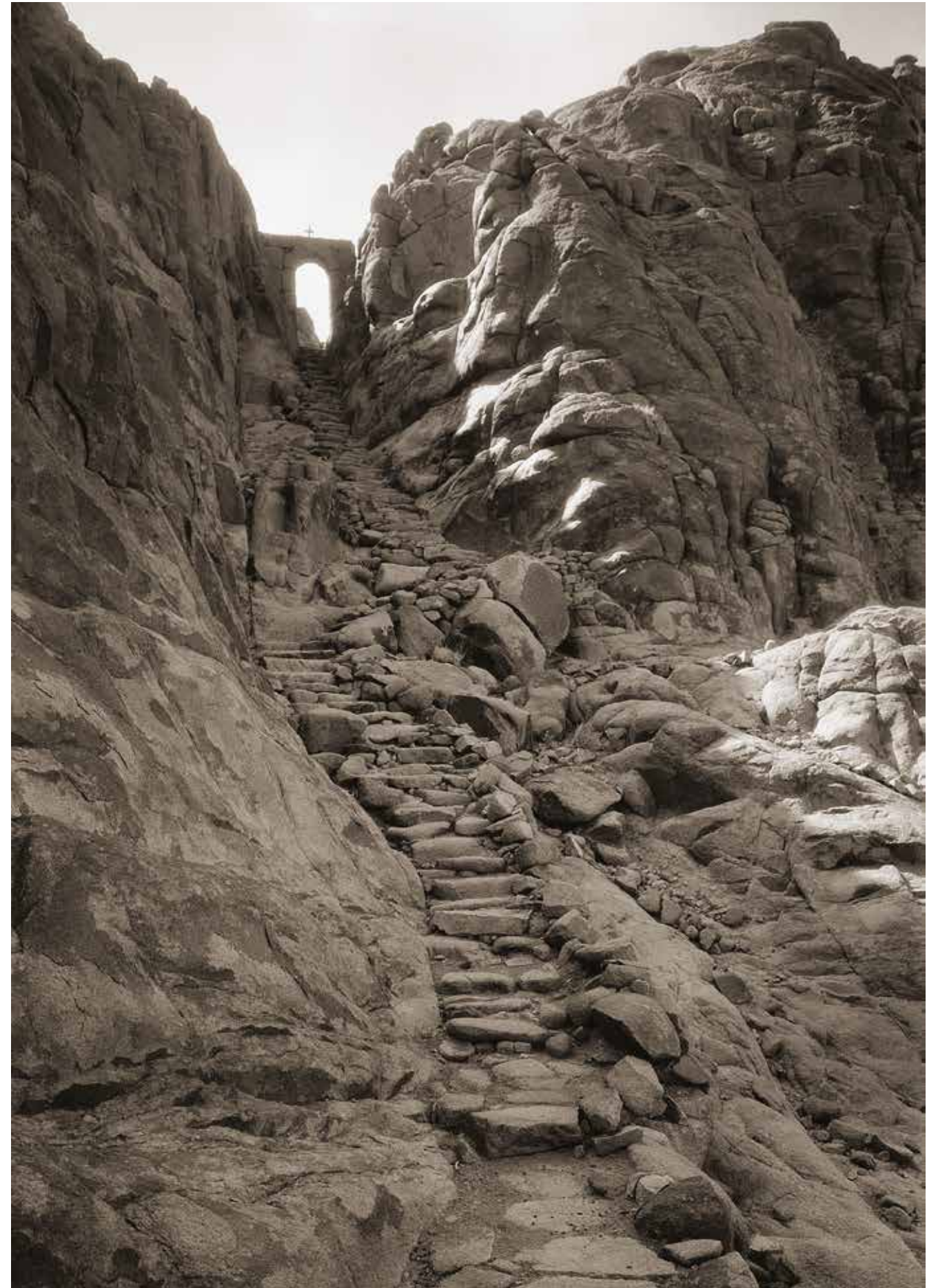
**cat. 2.24**  
*Saint Catherine.*  
*Illuminated manuscript page,*  
 Roussen Collection  
 B.cat: Glass plate 0001\_0834.



**cat. 2.25**  
*Sinai. Storm,* 21.04.1929,  
 Roussen Collection  
 B.cat: 6676.

**Page 122**  
**cat. 2.26**  
*Jebel Mousa. Chapel on the*  
*summit,* 25.04.1929,  
 Roussen Collection  
 B.cat: 6706.

**Page 123**  
**cat. 2.27**  
*Sinai. Stone stairway and*  
*Gate of Confession,* 28.05.1933,  
 Roussen Collection  
 B.cat: 7518.

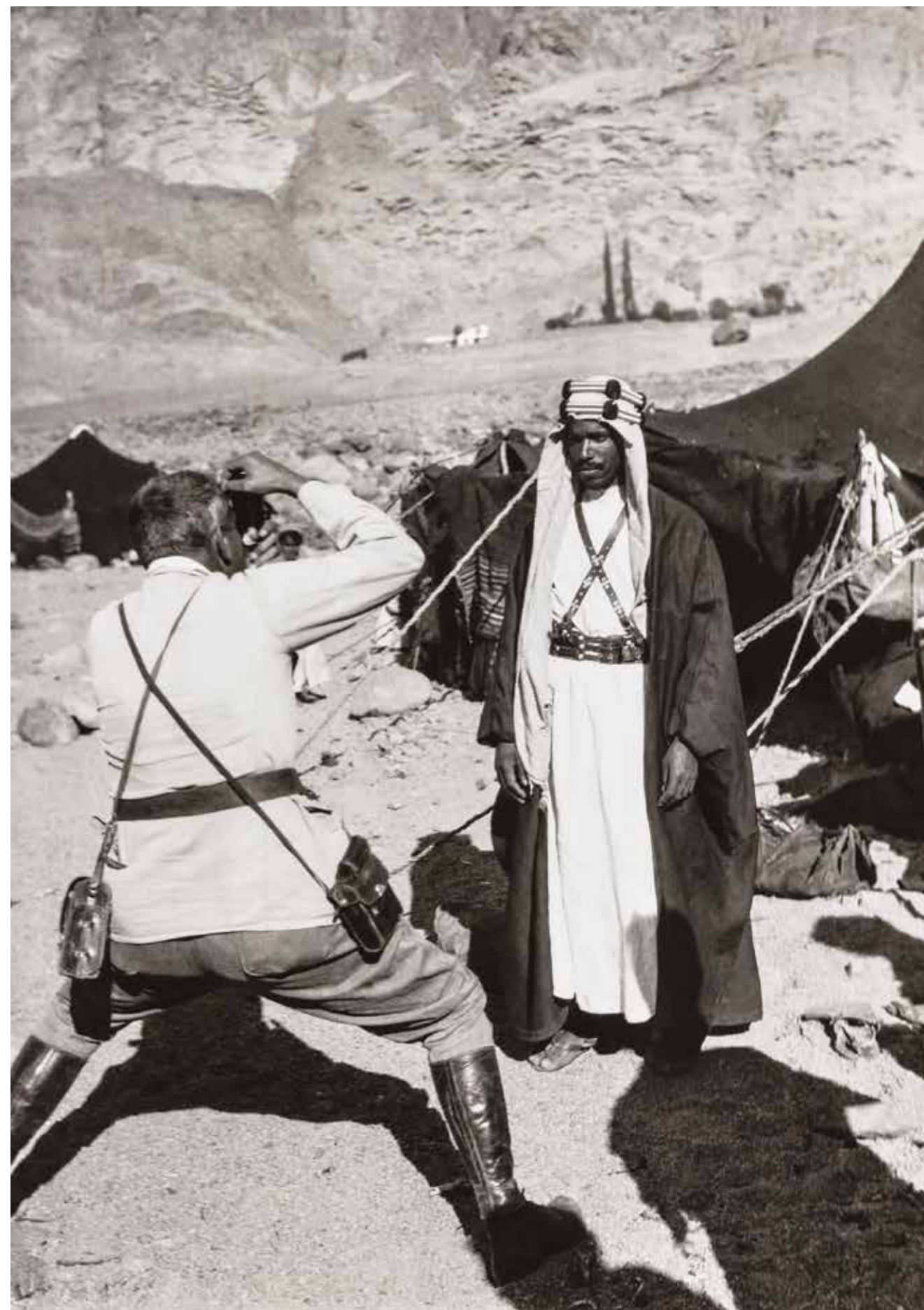




**cat. 2.28**  
*Sinai. Bedouin cemetery*, 23.05.1933,  
 Roussen Collection B.cat: 7295.



**cat. 2.29**  
*Sinai*, 23.05.1933,  
 Roussen Collection  
 B.cat: 7498.



**cat. 2.30**  
*Sinai*, 23.05.1933,  
Roussen Collection  
B.cat: 7286.





**cat. 2.31**  
*Sinai. Caravan around a campfire by night,*  
 02.06.1933, Roussen Collection  
 B.cat: 7562.



**cat. 2.32**  
*Sinai. Bedouins and camel heading*  
*towards the Rahat Plain, 06.06.1933,*  
 Roussen Collection  
 B.cat: 7373.

## Chronology



1858

Birth of Fred Boissonnas in Geneva, son of Henri-Antoine, an engraver of medals and watch cases.

1866

Henri-Antoine Boissonnas takes over the studio of the photographer Garcin, Rue de la Cité, Geneva.

1872

Commercial success allows the business to move to a purpose built studio, Quai de la Poste, Geneva.

1873

Jules Verne publishes "Around the World in 80 Days" in which there is a reference to the Boissonnas family.

Henri-Antoine participates in the World Fair in Vienna.

1878

Henri-Antoine participates in the World Fair in Paris.

Fred Boissonnas undertakes training with great European photographers: Friedrich Brandseph in Stuttgart, Germany, then with Caroly Kohler in Budapest, Hungary.

1887

Henri-Antoine hands the studio over to his son, Fred.

1889

The brother of Fred Boissonnas, the chemist Edmond-Victor, develops the Regularitas Orthochromatic plate process that improves the colour reproduction of photographs. The two brothers participate in the World Fair in Paris.

1890

Fred Boissonnas marries Augusta Magnin. They have nine children.

Edmond-Victor Boissonnas dies in the United States where he had been employed to develop the industrial manufacture of orthochromatic plates.

Fred Boissonnas starts to photograph the Genevan countryside using plates developed by his brother.

1896

Fred Boissonnas is the official photographer of the National Fair in Geneva.

1897

The studio's archive exceeds 100,000 plates and negatives.

1900

Participates at the World Fair in Paris where he wins the Grand Prize.

1901

Opening of Boissonnas studios in Paris, with A. Taponnier, and in Reims with M. Neumayer; acquisition of the Nadar studio in Marseilles.

## Chronology



1902

Takeovers of the studio of A Pasetti in St. Petersburg, Russia with F.Eggler, and of the studio of P. Bellingard, in Lyon with M. Magnin.

1903

First voyage to Greece with the art historian Daniel Baud-Bovy.

1904

Exhibition in Geneva of photographs of Greece and of "Magdeleine. Gesture in an hypnotic state"

1906

Participates at International Fair in Milan.

1907-  
1908

Travels to Greece, Egypt, Italy

1911

Boissonnas and Daniel Baud-Bovy travel in the Cyclades and Crete.

1912

Exhibition at the Musée Rath of photographs of Greece.

William II commissions photographs of the chateau of Haut-Koenigsbourg.

Travels in the Mediterranean with Victor Bérard in the footsteps of Ulysses.

1913

Travels in Epirus and Macedonia, during wartime, with Daniel Baud-Bovy.

First ascent of Mount Olympus, 1st August.

1914

Travels in North Africa with the writer Louis Bertrand.

1919

Contract between Fred Boissonnas and the Greek government. The Boissonnas publishing house on art and science founded.

Preparation of the exhibition "Visions of Greece" with 550 photographs, casts and costumes in Paris and New York, followed by exhibitions in cities across the United States (1920).

Travels in Greece accompanied by his sons, Henri Paul and Edmond-Eduard.

1920

Travels in Greece and Serbia. Working on a commission for the Serbian Government.

1921

Henri-Paul Boissonnas photographs the war in Asia Minor.

Fred Boissonnas becomes a Fellow of the Royal Geographical Society, London for his work on Greece.

## Chronology



1923

Financial crisis, bankruptcy of the Boissonnas publishing house. Takeover of the Chéri-Rousseau studio, rue d'Anglas, Paris.

1926

In Paris takes photographs of the Maison La Roche for the architect Le Corbusier.

1927

Climbs Mount Olympus. Fred Boissonnas directs a documentary for Pathé.

1929

Contract with the Egyptian government. Travels in Egypt, to Mount Sinai and to Mount Athos (Greece).

1933

Travels to Egypt for the official dedication of L'Égypte to King Fuad, and again to Sinai.

1937

Sale of the studio at Quai de la Poste, inauguration of the Paul Boissonnas studio at Passage des Lions, Geneva.

1939

Fred Boissonnas is honoured for a second time by the Greek government.

1946

Fred Boissonnas dies in Geneva aged 88.

# Fred Boissonnas

## Published Works<sup>1</sup>

- 1889 *Fête des vigneronns*, illustration Fred Boissonnas.
- 1894 *Le dessinateur en herbe*, illustration Fred Boissonnas.
- 1896 *Dans les roseaux. Scènes enfantines*, illustrations Fred Boissonnas.
- 1896 *Le village suisse*. Exposition nationale 1896, 2 vol., illustration Fred Boissonnas.
- 1896 *Ancienne Genève*, texte de J. Mayor.
- 1899 *La Campagne genevoise*, texte de G. Fatio.
- 1901 *L'ancienne école genevoise de peinture*, notice de Daniel Baud-Bovy.
- 1902 *Neuchâtel pittoresque*, texte de Ph. Godet et T. Combe.  
*Autour du Léman*, texte de G. Fatio.  
*Le château d'Avenches*, texte de Al. Naef.
- 1903 *Les peintres genevois*, 2 vol., texte de D. Baud-Bovy.
- 1905 *Fête des vigneronns*.  
*Art et hypnose*, texte d'Emile Magnin  
*L'album de Freddy*.
- 1906 *La maison de ville de Genève*, texte de Ch. Martin.  
*La route du Simplon*, texte de Fred Barbey.
- 1907 *Les Alpes vaudoises*, texte de Eugène Vautier.  
*La route du Loetschberg*, texte de J. Lagerlehner.
- 1908 *Chillon*, texte de Al. Naef.
- 1909 *La Savoie*, 2 vol., texte de L. Vaillat.
- 1910 *En Grèce par monts et par vaux*, texte de D. Baud-Bovy.  
 Edition et illustration de F. Boissonnas.
- 1911 *Les Alpes valaisannes*, texte de E. de la Harpe.
- 1914 *L'Acropole d'Athènes*, texte de M. Collignon.  
*Le Parthénon*, texte de M. Collignon.  
*L'Acropole*, texte de Ch. Picard.
- 1915 *Les Alpes bernoises*, texte de E. de la Harpe.
- 1919 *Des Cyclades en Crête au gré du vent*, texte de D. Baud-Bovy.  
 Edition et illustration Fred Boissonnas.  
*La Grèce immortelle, mélanges*. Ed. B. Grasset.  
*Berceau des Serbes*, texte de J. Feyler. Editions Boissonnas.
- 1920 *Campagnes des Macédoine 1916-17*, texte de J. Feyler. Editions Boissonnas.
- 1921-22 *Villes et châteaux suisses*. 8 vol.
- 1921 *Saint Augustin*, texte de L. Bertrand.
- 1924 *Champéry et le Dents-du-Midi*, texte de D. Baud-Bovy.
- 1927 *Académie nationale de musique et de danse*, texte de L. Laloy.
- 1932 *L'Égypte*, texte de P. Trembley et F. Boissonnas. Ed. P. Trembley.
- 1933 *Dans le sillage d'Ulysse*, texte de V. Bérard.

<sup>1</sup> Bibliography of main works illustrated by Boissonnas reproduced from *Boissonnas: Une dynastie de photographes 1864-1983*, Nicolas Bouvier, Payot Lausanne, 1983.

# Short Biographies

## Oriana Baddeley

Professor Baddeley is Dean of Research for University of the Arts London (UAL) and a trustee of the Saint Catherine Foundation in London and New York. She studied History and Theory of Art at the University of Essex where she completed her PhD on Ancient Mexican art and its re-discovery in the 19<sup>th</sup> Century. She has written extensively on transnational arts and is a member of the UAL research centre for Transnational Art, Identity and Nation. In 2011, she curated the exhibition *Fred Boissonnas: Les Expéditions de Sinai 1929-1933* at the Musée d'art chrétien, Chambésy, Genève.

## Kathleen Brunner

Kathleen Brunner is an independent art historian based in London. She holds a doctorate from the Courtauld Institute and specialises in 20<sup>th</sup>-century and contemporary art. Her particular interest is in early modernism and links between philosophy, literature and art. She is the author of *Picasso Rewriting Picasso* (2004, Black Dog Publishing).

## George Manginis

George Manginis is a member of the Executive Committee of the Benaki Museum and an Honorary Fellow of the University of Edinburgh. He holds a doctorate in archaeology and history of art from SOAS / University of London and has taught Byzantine, Islamic and Chinese Art at SOAS, the Courtauld Institute, University of Edinburgh and elsewhere. Since 2010 he has been a consultant on the Chinese art collection of the Benaki Museum, and in summer 2016 he curated their exhibition 'Ceramics from China.' He is the author of *Mount Sinai: A History of Travellers and Pilgrims* London (Haus Publishing Ltd) 2016.

## Ahmed Shams

Ahmed Shams teaches in MA International Cultural Heritage Management (ICHM) at Durham University, and is a member of the Palestine Exploration Fund (PEF). Dr Shams is the founder of Sinai Peninsula Research (SPR). His current cross-disciplinary research focuses on knowledge-making, mapping and mapmaking, landscape and land-use in the Sinai Peninsula and the Alps. He frequently publishes scholarly and press articles on the Sinai Peninsula. Drawing on 17 years of continuous field expeditions, Ahmed Shams has recently published a key scholarly paper in the *Palestine Exploration Quarterly* (PEQ), on the 150-year gap in mapping and mapmaking in the Sinai Peninsula and the Middle East.

## Estelle Sohier

Estelle Sohier is a lecturer in the department of geography and environment of Geneva University. Her research focuses on the history of photography and the notion of geographical imagination at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century and beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, at the crossroads of cultural history and cultural geography. Among other writings, she is the author of *Le roi des rois et la photographie. Politiques de l'image et pouvoir royal en Éthiopie sous le règne de Ménélik II* (Paris, publications de la Sorbonne, 2012), and co-edited *Usages du monde et de la photographie. Fred Boissonnas* (Geneva, Georg, 2013).

## Ewelina Warner

Ewelina Warner graduated from the University of Wrocław after studying theatre, as well as Czech literature and culture. In 2004, she was awarded a scholarship by the Polish Ministry of Education which allowed her to study for a Master of Philosophy degree at Glasgow University while teaching at Glasgow University's School of Modern Languages and Cultures. Since 2006 she has worked as a research assistant at the Ligatus Research Centre at the University of the Arts London, and on the Boissonnas *Sinai Project* from 2011, co-editing the catalogue to *Fred Boissonnas: Les Expéditions de Sinai 1929-1933*, Musée d'art chrétien.

