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Bonn Profiles – Press Reports

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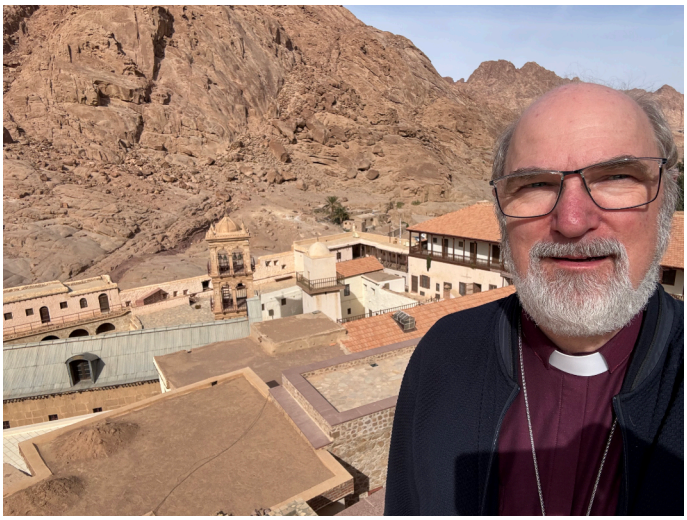
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Agreement on Saint Catherine's Monastery awaits signature

Schirrmacher looks back with concern on his 2024 visit to the Sinai monastery

Three photo galleries featuring the monastery: https://thomasschirrmacher.net/?p=24602, https://thomasschirrmacher.net/?p=24586, https://thomasschirrmacher.net/?p=24565

(Bonn, 17.11.2026) On 24 October, Archbishop Simeon, abbot of the Greek Orthodox Saint Catherine's Monastery in Sinai, announced that he would sign the framework agreement negotiated with Egypt. The agreement is intended to safeguard the monastery's religious character and clarify its legal status. Egypt's foreign minister, Badr Abdelatty, welcomed Simeon's assent. The abbot said he would arrange a date with the Egyptian authorities as soon as his health permitted. Recent press reports mention a planned signing in December.



Thomas Schirrmacher on the roof of St. Catherine's Monastery on Mount Sinai
© BQ/Schirrmacher

Simeon thus pre-empted the court's ruling in the current legal dispute, which was scheduled to be handed down in late October. The court has now postponed the announcement of the ruling until December 27, 2026, noting that this would allow time for the signing of the framework agreement, which would then likely render the court's ruling unnecessary.

Schirrmacher visited the UNESCO World Heritage site in November 2024 with Alexander Schick, a biographer of Constantin von Tischendorf. There he met Muslim scholars from Al-Azhar University. He later continued the interfaith dialogue, including in a meeting with Egypt's former grand mufti, Shawki Allam.

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A unique site in world history

Saint Catherine's Monastery in Sinai, a UNESCO World Heritage site, is the world's second-oldest surviving monastery, after Mor Gabriel Monastery, founded in AD 397 in Anatolia, in present-day Türkiye. It is also a unique meeting point of Christian, Jewish and Islamic traditions. The monastery was built in the sixth century under Emperor Justinian, who also settled the ancestors of today's Bedouin community there to protect it. It stands at the foot of Mount Sinai, where, according to Jewish, Christian and Islamic tradition, Moses encountered God in the burning bush. For centuries the Bedouin living nearby protected the monastery, and their role was crucial to its survival. Muslims also revere the area. Before President Sisi came to power, local Bedouin and security forces thwarted attempts by Islamists to destroy the monastery. The monastery is of immense importance to biblical scholarship and to the history of Christianity worldwide. Its library holds the second-largest collection of early Christian manuscripts after the Vatican, including the celebrated Codex Sinaiticus, which Constantin von Tischendorf discovered in 1844 and 1859 and made available to the world.



Hotel complexes threaten the monastery © BQ/Schirrmacher

The Battle for the Monastery

The difficulties date back at least to 2014, when the Egyptian authorities in South Sinai challenged the monastery's ownership rights. In 2024, a looming court ruling threatened to nationalise substantial portions of the monastery's property, including much of its land and the celebrated manuscripts in its library. Efforts by Archbishop Damian, then head of the monastery, and protests around the world led to negotiations between Greece, which acts as a protector of Greek Orthodox monasteries, and Egypt, which stressed its sovereignty over Sinai. After months of diplomacy involving international experts and UNESCO, the negotiations concluded in spring 2025. The proposal provided for joint administration, digitisation and protection of the manuscripts, offering a possible compromise between state control and monastic autonomy. Above all, it would have confirmed the monastery's ownership of its historic land, buildings, gardens and other property. Egypt repeatedly postponed signing the agreement, and it was ultimately never signed. On 29 May 2025, a court ruling effectively dispossessed the monastery. What had loomed in the summer of 2024 became reality less than a year later. The ruling still gov-

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erns daily life at the monastery. Many activities are simply blocked, and the monks are, in effect, guests in their own monastery. A major obstacle is that the Simeon, new archbishop and abbot has yet to receive Egyptian citizenship, so no one can currently represent the monastery officially before the Egyptian authorities or courts. The Egyptian state appears to be treating citizenship for Archbishop Simeon as a bargaining chip, to be granted only as part of a new framework agreement on the monastery's future.



Archbishop Thomas Schirrmacher with a delegation of Muslim scholars from Al-Ahzar University in Cairo in the Monastry of St. Cahtherine on Sinai © BQ/ Schirrmacher

The agreement was presented to the monastery for signature in early July 2026, with considerable pressure to sign. Under its terms, the monastery would agree to relinquish ownership of its property. One benefit would be that the monastery would gain legal personality under Egyptian law for the first time, with several favourable consequences.

The spring 2025 agreement would have done nothing to address the threat posed by extensive tourism development on Mount Sinai, aimed particularly at day-trippers from Hurghada on the Red Sea. Large hotel complexes are under construction within sight of the monastery, and a cable car up Mount Sinai is planned. The same appears to apply to the current agreement.

Alongside the legal dispute, the monastery underwent a change in leadership. The elderly, long-serving archbishop Damian was officially removed on grounds of age and health, though disagreements over how to respond to the 2025 ruling appear to have prompted his removal. And just recently, he spoke out with strong criticism of the current draft contract. The monastic community elected Father Simeon Papadopoulos as its new archbishop in September 2025, and he was formally installed in 2026. The archbishop and his monastery are autonomous within the Orthodox Church. The monks alone elect their head, but their choice must be confirmed by the Greek Orthodox Patriarch of Jerusalem, who consecrated Simeon as bishop at a service in Jerusalem. An experienced monk with a thorough knowledge of theology and monastic administration, Abbot Simeon has brought fresh energy to the monastery's leadership and championed initiatives such as the ongoing digitization of the archives. The change in leadership, however, had a devastating effect on the negotiations. The former archbishop held Egyptian citizenship, while his successor has so far been denied it.

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Schirrmacher is campaigning against nationalisation

Archbishop Schirrmacher was among those who worked behind the scenes to oppose nationalisation. He rallied Orthodox and Catholic church leaders, alerted the White House, the European Parliament and UNESCO, and drew the attention of senior Muslim clerics in Egypt to the implications for interfaith dialogue. A high point of these efforts was a visit to Saint Catherine's Monastery in November 2024 arranged by Alexander Schick, Tischendorf's biographer and a specialist in discoveries of early Bibles and manuscripts. Schick brought the monastery library valuable facsimiles of early Christian manuscripts and copies of letters and records relating to Tischendorf.



Thomas Schirrmacher and Alexander Schick examine remnants of the binding of the Codex Sinaiticus © BQ/Schirrmacher

At the monastery, Schirrmacher met a delegation of Muslim scholars from Al-Azhar University in Cairo. They also saw the small mosque that has stood within Saint Catherine's Monastery since the time of Muhammad and is still used occasionally. The dialogue continued after the visit. Schirrmacher also met Shawki Ibrahim Allam, who served as Egypt's nineteenth grand mufti from 2013 to 2024. A Sufi known for his moderate views and opposition to extremism, Allam issued fatwas on contemporary issues, criticised Islamic State and promoted interfaith dialogue. His successor has continued that policy.



The St. Catherine's Monastery on Mount Sinai, photographed from the mountain opposite, with the ascent to Mount Moses in the background © BQ/Schirrmacher

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At the monastery, Schirrmacher also met the director responsible for the site at Egypt's antiquities authority to discuss the preservation of the World Heritage site.

The monastic community gave Schirrmacher and Schick the rare privilege of attending the monks' evening service, photographing their former ceremonial hall from the Crusader era and viewing rarely displayed treasures of the monastery library with the librarian. The museum curator showed them objects kept off public display. They were also allowed onto the roof of Saint Catherine's Monastery, which is normally closed to visitors. From there they had a unique view of the maze of roofs and buildings dating from many different centuries and of the mountains surrounding the monastery. From the mountain opposite, they could see the monastery spread out below, with the path up Mount Sinai in the background. Schick and Schirrmacher were shown rare printed Bibles and pages of the Codex Sinaiticus that are closed to the public. These are the only surviving leaves that retain the original fourth-century thread binding. They were discovered in 1975 in a sealed-off room at the monastery.

Downloads and Links

- Photo 1: Thomas Schirrmacher on the roof of St. Catherine's Monastery on Mount Sinai © BQ/Schirrmacher
- Photo 2: Hotel complexes threaten the monastery © BQ/Schirrmacher
- Photo 3: Archbishop Thomas Schirrmacher with a delegation of Muslim scholars from Al-Ahzar University in Cairo in the Monastry of St. Cahtherine on Sinai © BQ/Schirrmacher
- Photo 4: Thomas Schirrmacher and Alexander Schick examine remnants of the binding of the Codex Sinaiticus © BQ/Schirrmacher
- Photo 5: The St. Catherine's Monastery on Mount Sinai, photographed from the mountain opposite, with the ascent to Mount Moses in the background © BQ/Schirrmacher
- Photo gallery "Archaeology and politics in Egypt on the way to St. Catherine's Monastery on Mount Sinai": https://thomasschirrmacher.net/?p=24602
- Photo gallery "Visit to St. Catherine's Monastery on Mount Sinai": https://thomasschirrmacher.net/?p=24586
- Photo gallery "Schirrmacher visits St. Catherine's Monastery on Mount Sinai": https://thomasschirrmacher.net/?p=24565

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