

Captain R. F. Burton, who has recently visited it, says that the people of 'Akabah call it simply *Jebel el Kūlat* (Mount of the Fort). It has had a puzzling variety of names attributed to it—variations of the words *El Kurey* and *El Kureiyeh*, meaning "the village," or "the ruin." Laborde calls it *El Graie*. It is a grey granite rock, dyked with decaying porphyritic trap, and everywhere veined with white and various coloured quartzes. The shape is a long oval of about three hundred and forty by one hundred and fifty yards, and it consists of two stony mounds united by an isthmus. The northern peak is the higher, and rises about a hundred yards above the sea-level. It is encircled with barrier reefs of coraline. At the extreme north there is a tower, and on the northern mound, which is scarped here and there, stands the castle keep, defended by an enceinte. In the highest part there is a carefully cemented underground cistern, in which there are two pointed arches divided by a tall column. Below there is a small harbour, and the pier leads to a covered way enabling the garrison safely to circulate round the base of the island. The southern knob supports similar but inferior constructions.

Captain Burton, from whose account the above description is gleaned, says: "The castle is evidently European, built in the days when the Crusaders held *El 'Akabah*; but it probably rests upon Roman ruins, and the latter, perhaps, upon Egyptian remains of far older date. The Saracenic buildings may date from the reign of *Salâh-ed-Dîn* (*Saladîn*), who drove out the Crusaders in 1167 A.D." In the year A.D. 1182 the island was unsuccessfully besieged by *Raynald of Châtillon*, and in the time of *Abulfeda* (about 1300) the island was already abandoned and the governor transferred to the castle on the mainland—*Kūl'at el 'Akabah*; thus all the important structures must have been erected prior to that date. For centuries it has been either utterly deserted or used as a place of refuge or abode by pirates and fishermen.

THE CONVENT OF ST. CATHERINE.

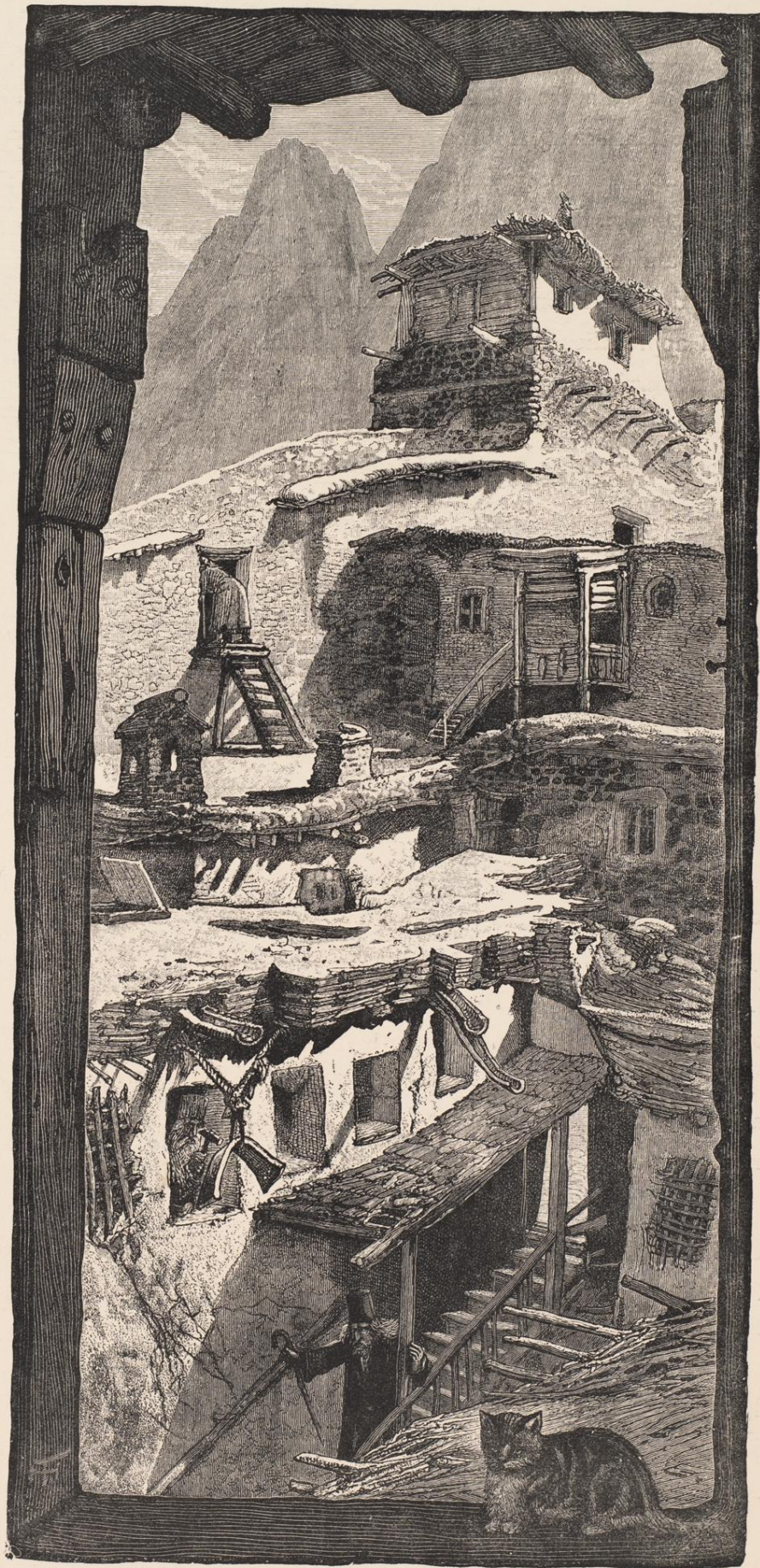
THE Caravan or Hajj route of Christian pilgrims from Syria and Palestine to the Convent of St. Catherine and the "holy places" in its neighbourhood, runs from the Valley of the 'Arabah round the head of the Gulf of 'Akabah, and winds along its western shore. Travellers who approach the Sinaitic peninsula from the north-east, instead of from Suez, usually follow the same route, traversing the shell-strewn sands at the foot of a mountain wall of grey granite intersected at intervals by stony wādys strewn with gravel.

At the mouth of the broad and barren *Wâdy Merâkh*, within sight of *Jezîrat Far'on* (see page 224), the traveller is compelled to change his escort, for here the territory of the *Haiwat* tribe of Arabs terminates, and that of the great *Tawarah* tribe commences. For some distance south of this point the road passes over high promontories stretching far into the sea.

The Land of Midian, on the opposite or eastern side of the gulf, can be plainly seen. Far inland, and tinged light blue by the distance, rise the sharp and saw-like crests of

El Sharâf, and a sandy plain (called by the Bedawin "Tihâmat Madyan") slopes from them towards the shore cliffs. The Hajj route to Mecca can be distinguished running diagonally in a south-easterly direction across the plain, from Hakl, a pilgrim station on the sea-shore, towards the distant mountains. The Christian Hajj road pursues its way southwards along the widening sandy shore, till at a short distance south of the great chasm of Wâdy Wetîr, and just opposite a brackish fountain surrounded by dwarf palm-trees, called 'Ain en Nuweibi'a, it turns abruptly from the sea-shore and enters the great mountain range by the picturesque ravine, Nûkb el Abweib (the little door). From this point the convent is about fifty miles due south-west, and the camel road approaches it in as direct a line as is possible in a land of mountains and precipices. After traversing the Wâdy Samghi, it issues out into a plain of sandstone veined with granite and deoderite, then it runs through wâdys and over steep slopes to another plain, El Ghor, soon passing near to 'Ain el Hüdhera, which probably represents Hazeroth (Numbers xi. 35). In its neighbourhood there are several connected wâdys called Mawârid el Hüdhera (paths to Hüdhera), indicating that it was once an important place. After crossing the Wâdy Mürrah, the road runs along the wide plain of Wâdy Sa'al. Here *seyal* or *tühl* trees (acacias) grow to a considerable size, with thin foliage and a multitude of thorns. From them gum arabic is sometimes gathered. The road now enters a narrow branch of Wâdy Sa'al, a gloomy valley shut in between high desolate mountains of granite, veined with porphyry and slate, and here and there crested with sandstone, all entirely destitute of vegetation; a few scattered shrubs and herbs, however, grow in the bottom of the valley. Emerging from this wâdy, the road rises over a rocky pass to the summit of a ridge, said by Robinson to be the water-parting "between the waters flowing to the Gulf of Suez and those running to the Gulf of 'Akabah." It presently descends to the Wâdy Suweiriyeh, in which there is a well with enclosed gardens near it, called Abu Suweiriyeh. This wâdy enters the broad Wâdy esh Sheikh (Sâleh), near to a Muhammedan wely, four thousand four hundred and seventy-nine feet above the sea, dedicated to Neby Sâleh (the prophet Sâleh), who is highly revered by the Bedawin. Like the generality of welys, it is a cubical structure covered with a dome and whitewashed. It contains a cenotaph with numerous votive offerings suspended above it, consisting chiefly of tassels, shawls, ostrich eggs, camels' halters and bridles. The Tawarah Bedawin (the Bedawin of Tûr, *i.e.* Sinai) regard Neby Sâleh as their ancestor; he was probably, however, the celebrated Muhammedan prophet of the same name, who at an early period was renowned for his eloquence, and who is extolled in the Koran as one of the most venerable of patriarchs (see Sale's Koran, chap. vii., called "El Araf." In the notes to this chapter will be found the curious legends concerning Sâleh).

Every May a great festival takes place at the shrine of Neby Sâleh, accompanied with sacrifices, feastings, and games, at which women are also present; and a smaller festival is held immediately after the date harvest. At the close of the proceedings all present ascend to the summit of Jebel Mûsa, and there offer sacrifices to Moses. From the shrine of Neby Sâleh

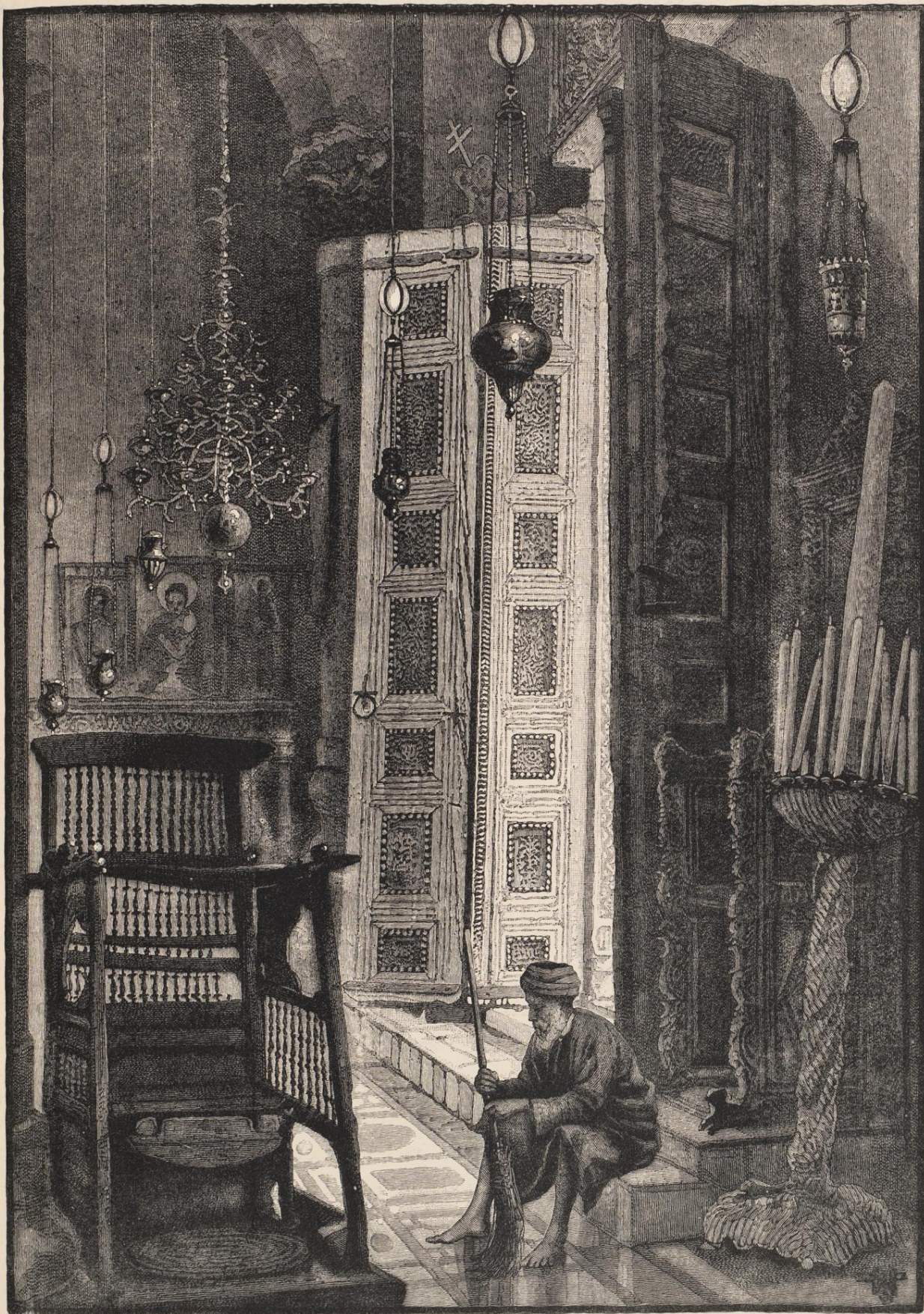


VIEW FROM THE NORTH-EASTERN GALLERIES.

Showing the lofty chamber of the south corner. A monk at a lower window is striking a piece of suspended iron with a hammer, to call the fraternity to prayers in one of the numerous chapels.

the heights of *Jebel Mûsa* are visible. The road gradually ascends as it traverses the *Wâdyesh Sheikh*, and finally turns into the *Wâdy ed Deir*, when suddenly the great convent is revealed to view; but from this point only its high north-western wall and its extensive gardens can be seen, as shown in the vignette on the title-page of this volume.

The convent is an irregular quadrangle, enclosed by lofty walls built of blocks of granite, except the upper courses, which are composed of a mixture of granite, sand, and gravel, cemented together by mud, which has acquired great hardness. The walls are protected by several towers, and the south-eastern wall is scarped. The valley in which the convent stands is so narrow at the bottom, that while its north-eastern wall runs along the water-course, the main body of the building is on the slope of the mountain, so that the south-western wall lies considerably higher than the north-eastern. In the north-eastern wall there is a wicket gate covered with a pent-house, about thirty



INTERIOR OF THE CHURCH OF THE CONVENT OF ST. CATHERINE.

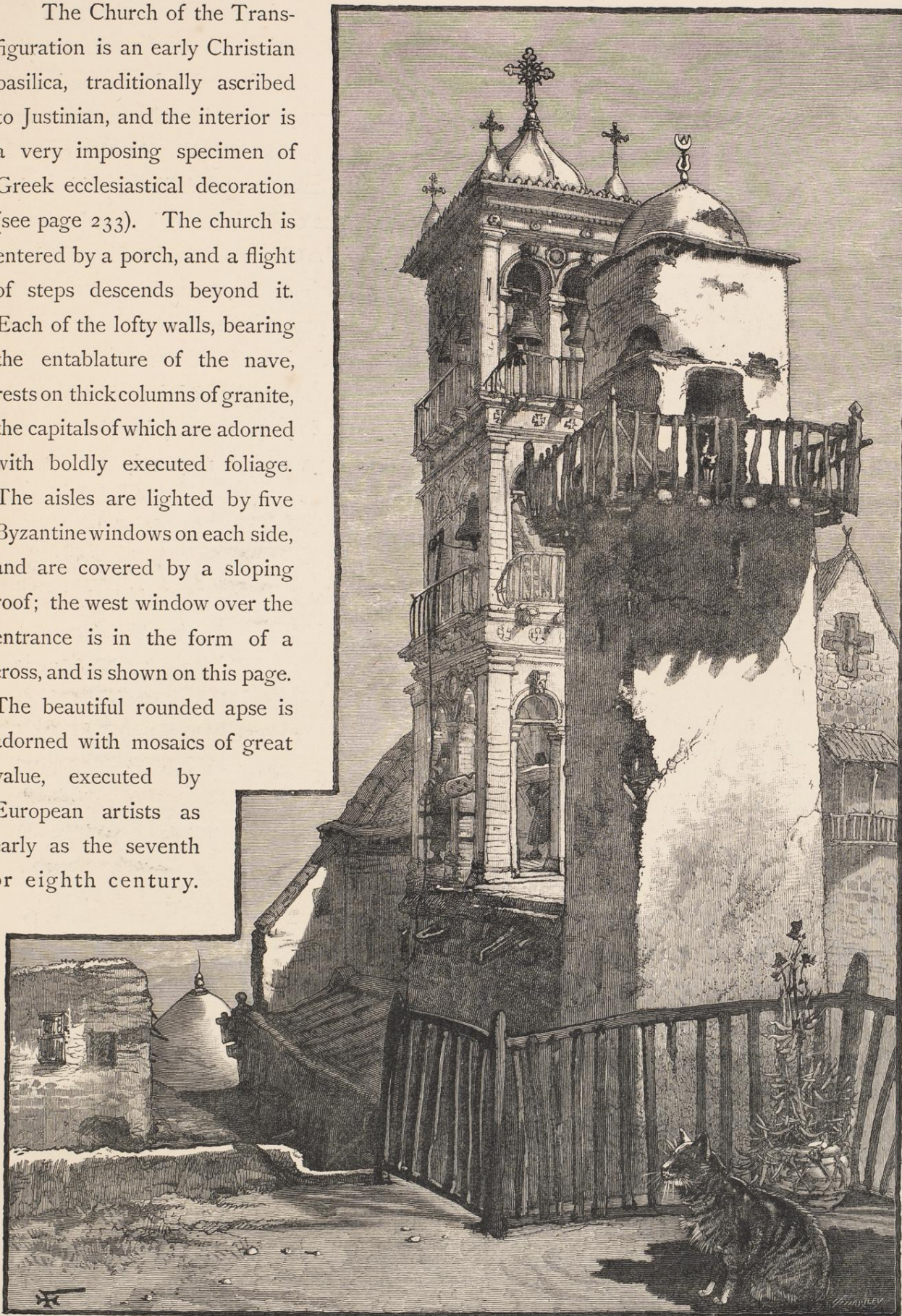
The framework of the door leading into the nave is richly decorated; its panels are embellished with enamels. From the ceiling hang numerous silver lamps and ostrich eggs, suspended by long cords.

feet from the ground, through which travellers were formerly drawn up into the convent. As the traveller approaches its walls, his Bedawy attendants hasten forward, and standing beneath the pent-house, shout out, "Ya Mûsa! Ya Mûsa!" ("O Moses!"), this being the name of the porter now in office. Presently a turbaned head peers out, then a rope with a basket attached to it is let down; in this the letter of introduction, or pass from a branch convent, is placed, and quickly drawn up (see page 225). The buttress near to this wicket was built by General Kleber, the commander of the French troops during their occupation of Egypt. A tablet let into the wall commemorates the restoration of the building by that commander.

Presently an iron gate, which leads into a courtyard between the garden and the convent, is opened, and the candidate for admission is welcomed by the *Æconomos*, or bursar of the convent, and probably received with an embrace and a kiss. His Arab attendants and camels are left outside to bivouac in the valley (see page 238), while he is led into the convent through a low door in the north-west wall near to an entrance, now built up, which was formerly used for the admission of high dignitaries, and called Bâb er Râs, or the Abbot's Gate. The space enclosed within the convent walls is cut up into a number of irregularly shaped small courts, by ranges of buildings running in all directions, forming quite a labyrinth of narrow winding passages ascending and descending (see page 228). In one of these courts there is a well with a few apricot-trees near it, in others a few flowers or vegetables are planted, and ancient vines appear in several places running over rude trellis-work. There are many isolated upper chambers approached by rickety wooden stairs or ladders (see page 232), and apartments are perched high up, projecting over the walls at the west and south corners (see vignette on the title-page). A long row of cells, half of which are reserved for the use of pilgrims and travellers, are built along the north-west wall, and open into a covered corridor or gallery constructed of wood and approached by two flights of stone steps (see page 229). The wall facing the top of the first flight of steps is pierced with loopholes, through which glimpses may be caught of the broad plain of Er Râhah (see page 238). In these are set the ordnance of the convent. Everything bears the mark of high antiquity, being apparently the patchwork of various bygone centuries.

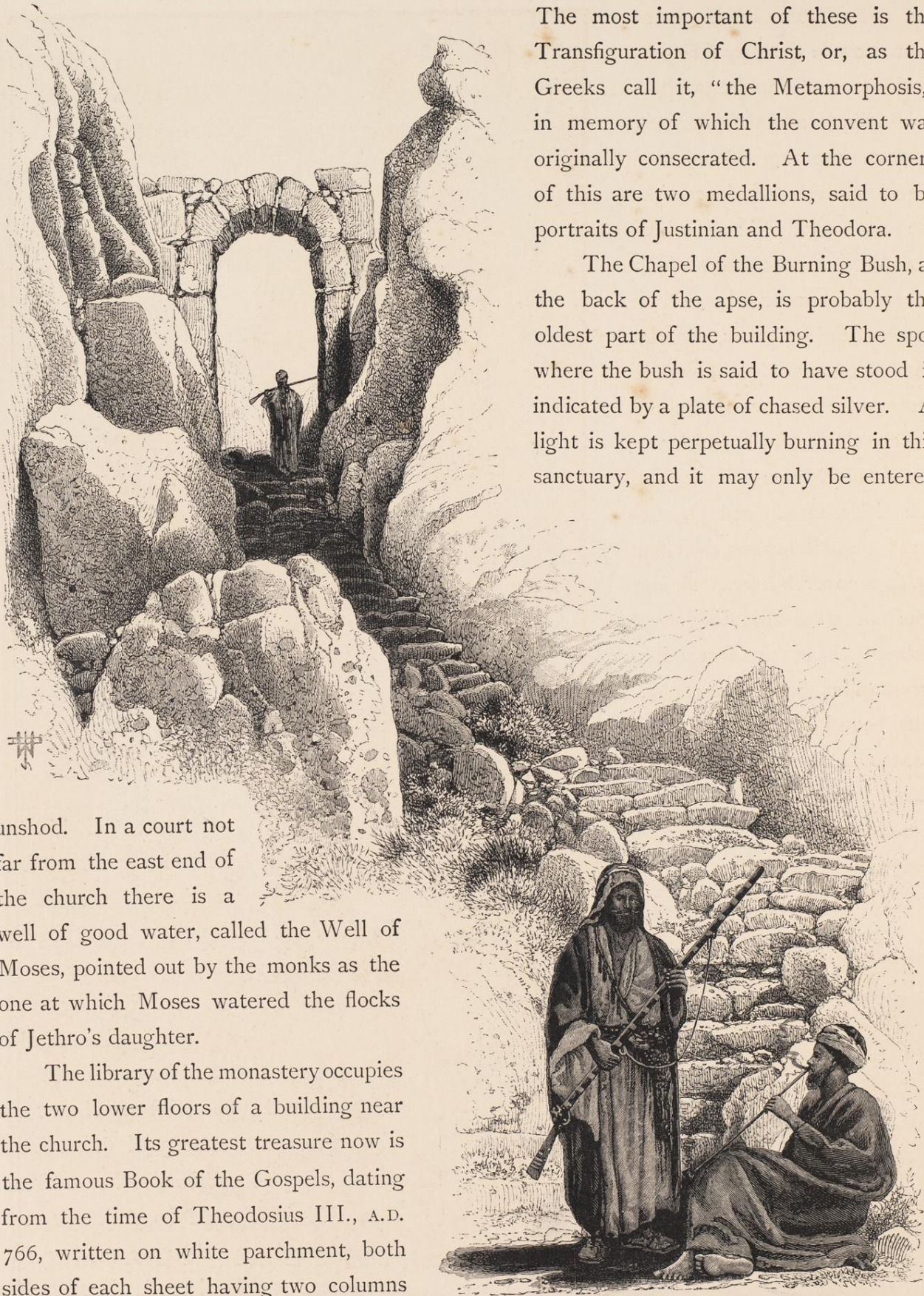
Besides the great Church of the Transfiguration which, with its handsome new bell-tower, stands in the midst of these buildings, close to a now rarely used mosque (see page 235), there are several small chapels or oratories dispersed over the convent, in which masses are occasionally said. The ordinary mode of calling the fraternity to prayers is by striking with a hammer a piece of iron, like part of the tire of a wheel, more or less bent, and suspended by ropes (see page 232). A flat piece of granite, thus suspended and struck with a wooden stick, serves the same purpose, producing a ringing sound. There is an example of this kind of bell hanging by the doorway of an oratory on page 228, and in the lower stage of the great bell-tower there is a long plank of wood which, on being struck, can be heard all over the convent. Bells are only rung on church festivals and occasions of rejoicing, or to show respect to some high dignitary.

The Church of the Transfiguration is an early Christian basilica, traditionally ascribed to Justinian, and the interior is a very imposing specimen of Greek ecclesiastical decoration (see page 233). The church is entered by a porch, and a flight of steps descends beyond it. Each of the lofty walls, bearing the entablature of the nave, rests on thick columns of granite, the capitals of which are adorned with boldly executed foliage. The aisles are lighted by five Byzantine windows on each side, and are covered by a sloping roof; the west window over the entrance is in the form of a cross, and is shown on this page. The beautiful rounded apse is adorned with mosaics of great value, executed by European artists as early as the seventh or eighth century.



THE CRESCENT AND THE CROSS.

The belfry of the church and the minaret of the mosque, standing so near to each other within the convent walls, produce a singular effect, and strange to say the former is of very recent construction, while the latter dates from an early period.



unshod. In a court not far from the east end of the church there is a well of good water, called the Well of Moses, pointed out by the monks as the one at which Moses watered the flocks of Jethro's daughter.

The library of the monastery occupies the two lower floors of a building near the church. Its greatest treasure now is the famous Book of the Gospels, dating from the time of Theodosius III., A.D. 766, written on white parchment, both sides of each sheet having two columns in golden uncial characters. It was at this convent that M. Tischendorf dis-

The most important of these is the Transfiguration of Christ, or, as the Greeks call it, "the Metamorphosis," in memory of which the convent was originally consecrated. At the corners of this are two medallions, said to be portraits of Justinian and Theodora.

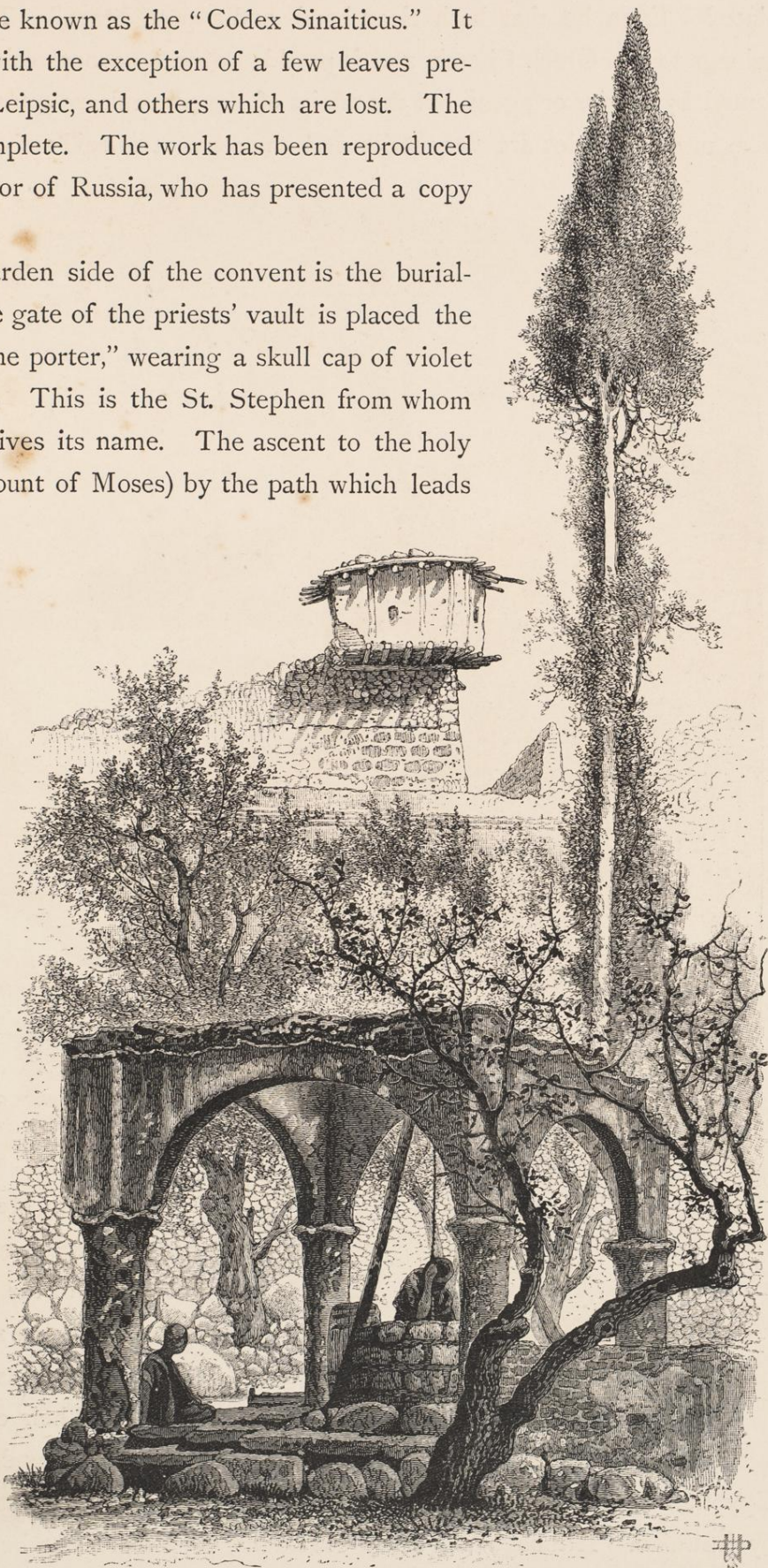
The Chapel of the Burning Bush, at the back of the apse, is probably the oldest part of the building. The spot where the bush is said to have stood is indicated by a plate of chased silver. A light is kept perpetually burning in this sanctuary, and it may only be entered

GATE OF ST. STEPHEN THE PORTER.

An archway on the ascent to Jebel Mûsa, where pilgrims formerly confessed before they visited the sacred heights.

covered the copy of the Bible known as the "Codex Sinaiticus." It is now at St. Petersburg, with the exception of a few leaves preserved in the University at Leipsic, and others which are lost. The New Testament is quite complete. The work has been reproduced at the expense of the Emperor of Russia, who has presented a copy to the convent library.

On the north-west or garden side of the convent is the burial-place of the monks. At the gate of the priests' vault is placed the skeleton of St. Stephanus "the porter," wearing a skull cap of violet velvet; he died in A.D. 1580. This is the St. Stephen from whom the archway on page 236 derives its name. The ascent to the holy places on Jebel Mûsa (the Mount of Moses) by the path which leads through this gate is said to be not very difficult, for its three thousand steps are kept in tolerably good repair. The first object of interest on the way is 'Ain Mûsa (the spring of Moses), which runs from beneath a great boulder. Higher up is the Chapel of the Virgin; at this point the road turns to the right, and, after a steep ascent, passes through a cleft in the rock spanned by the arch known as the Gate of St. Stephen the porter, for here it is said he used to sit (in the same attitude in which he now sits in the charnel-house), confessing pilgrims, and giving them passes to the sacred heights, so that they might proceed on their way chanting the words, "Who shall ascend unto the hill of the Lord? Who shall stand in His holy



WELL IN THE GARDEN OF THE CONVENT OF ST. CATHERINE.
This garden is north-west of the convent, and enclosed by a high wall. The lofty chamber at the north corner of the convent is shown above.

place? Even he that hath clean hands and a pure heart." The Convent of St. Catherine belongs to the Greek Church, and is presided over by a non-resident archbishop, who is represented by a prior or agent, but the affairs of the convent are actually managed by an intendant. The monastic rules are very strict, and the convent is said to be regarded as a kind of penal

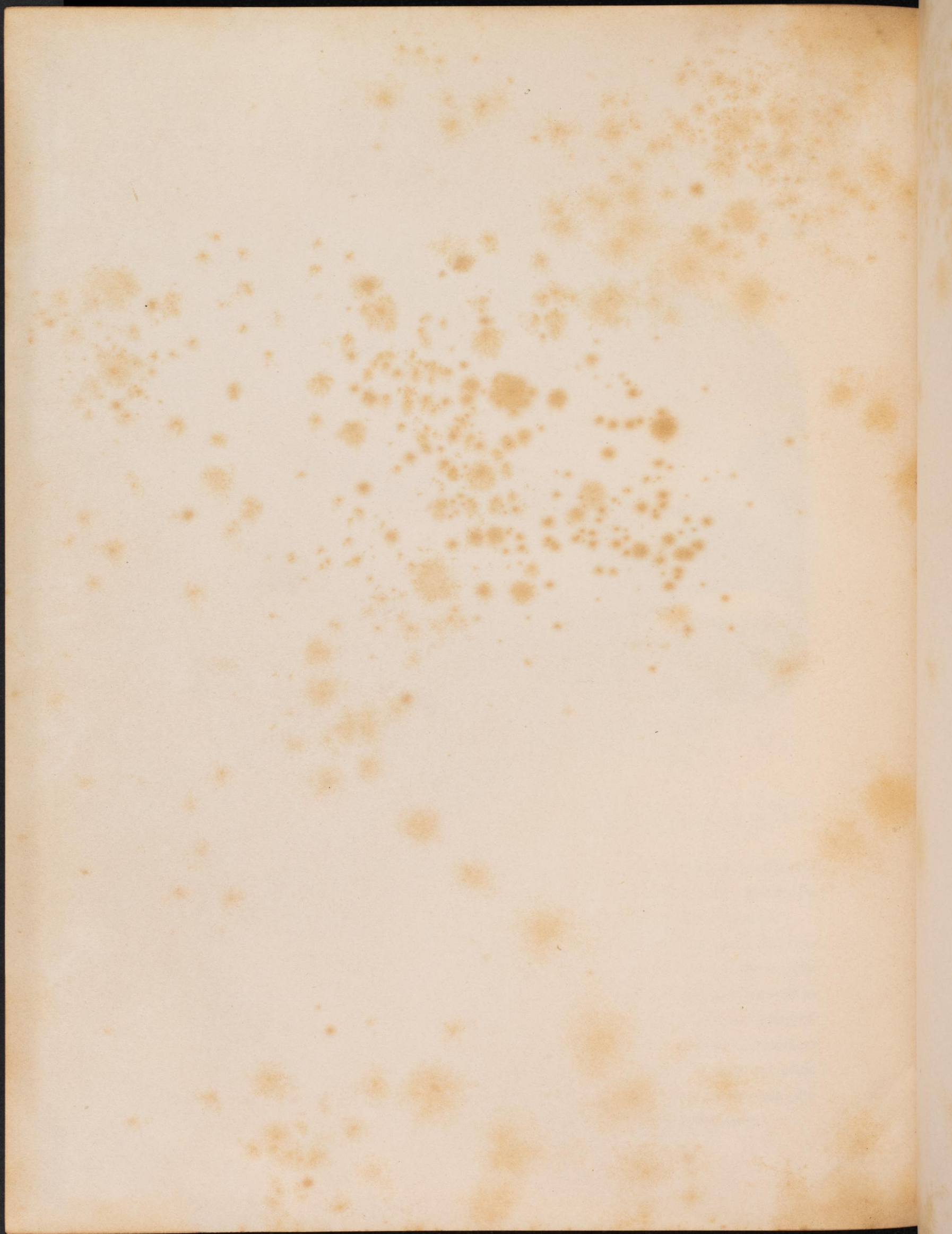


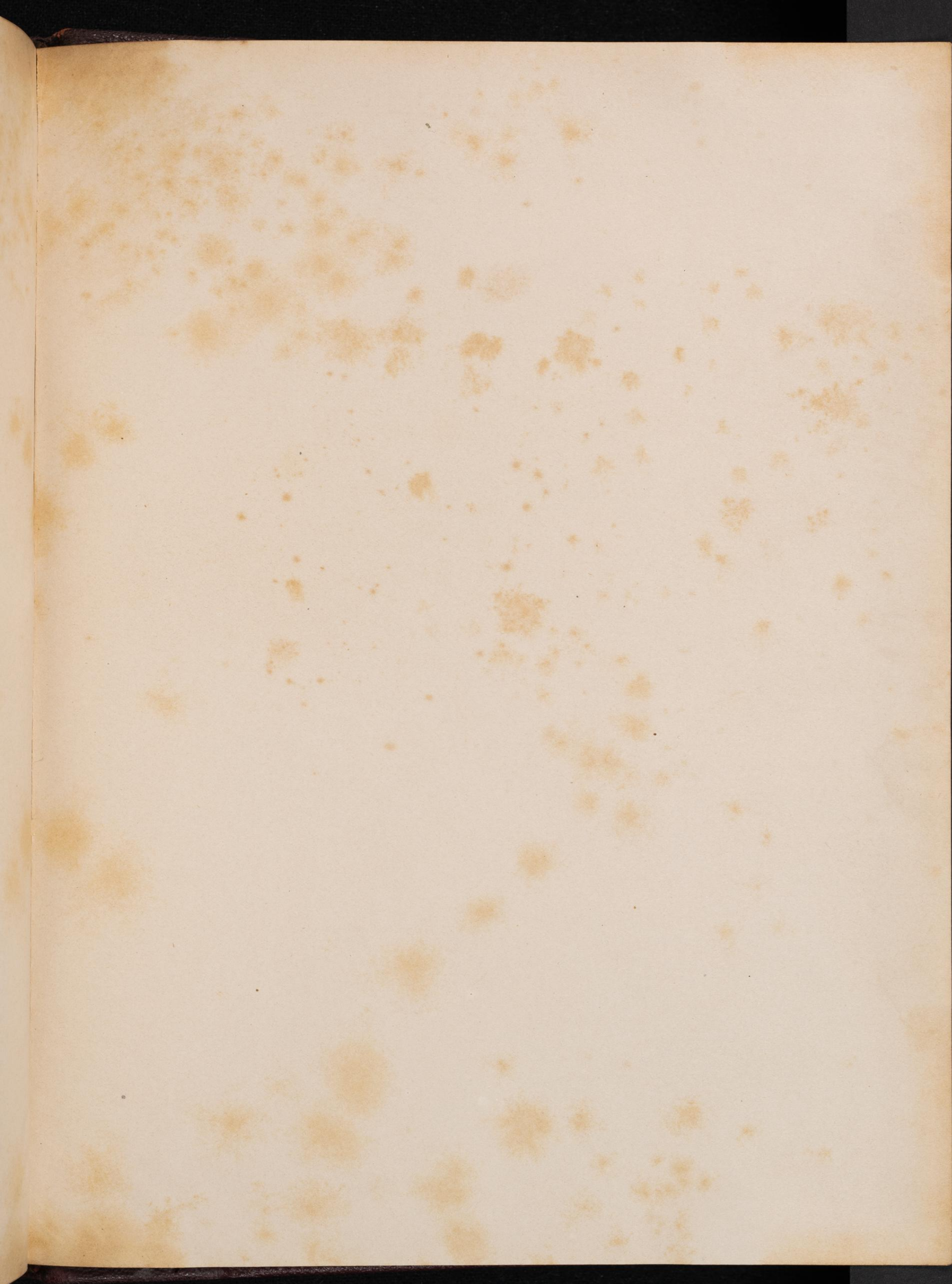
EASTERN TOWER OF THE CONVENT OF ST. CATHERINE,
And part of the convent garden, with the plain of Er Râhah and the
narrow pass called Nûkb Hâwy in the distance.

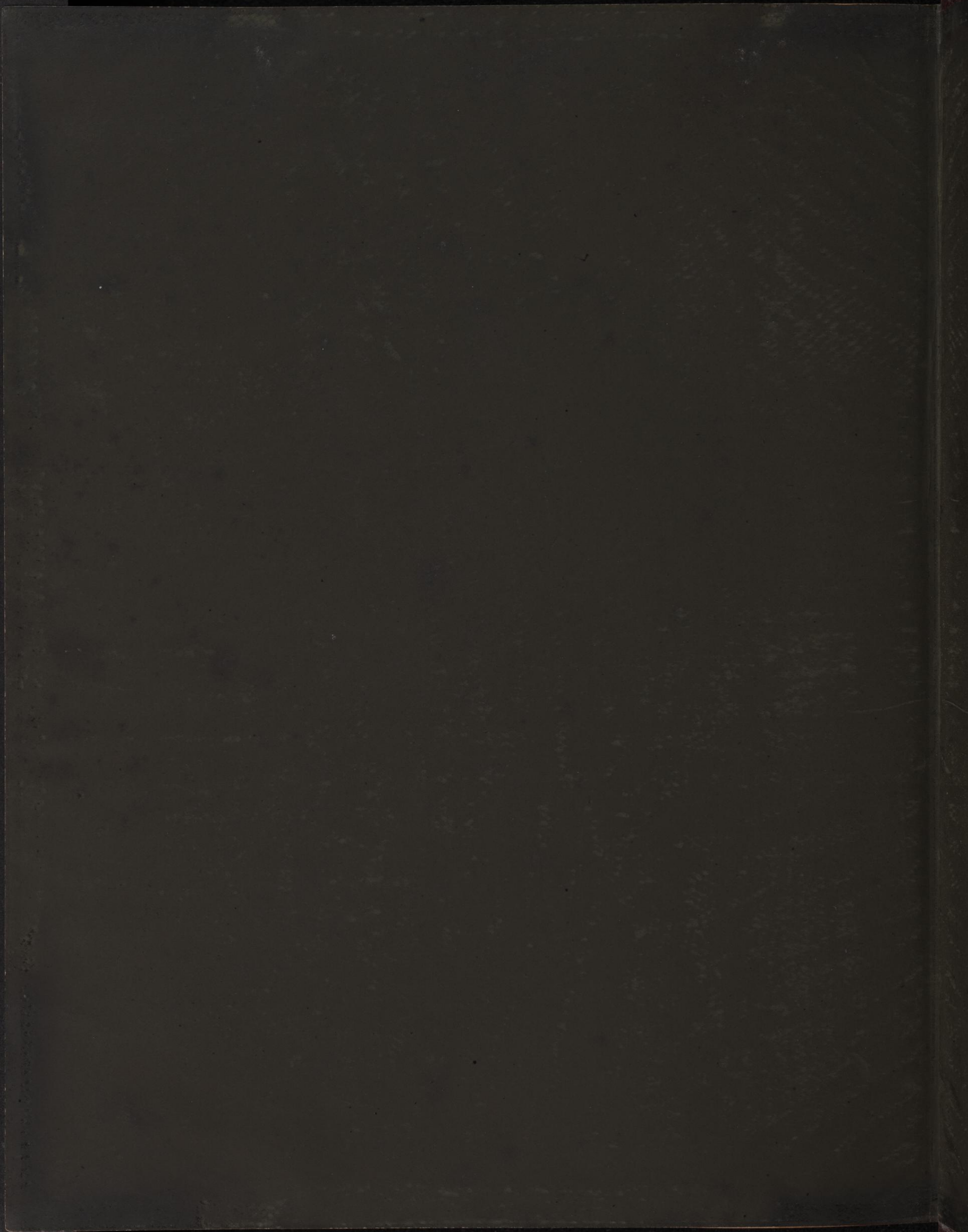
settlement. Most of the monks are uneducated men, and nearly every one practises some handicraft, but their tools are of the most primitive character.

The Arabs known as the Jebelîyeh have for centuries been employed as the servitors of the monks (see page 233). Their connection with the convent is very singular. They are said to be descended from one hundred Roman and one hundred Egyptian slaves, who, with their wives and children, were presented to the convent as retainers by Justinian. Although originally Christians, they could not be prevented by their monastic masters from embracing Muhammedanism, but they do not make much use of the mosque (see page 235), which was built in the fourteenth century to propitiate the rulers of the land.

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