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WHO WAS EGERIA?
PIETY AND PILGRIMAGE IN THE AGE OF GRATIAN

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It has been customary to identify the author of the *Itinerarium Egeriae* (*It. Eg.*) as a nun or a “grande dame” from one of the western provinces of the later Roman empire—Spain, Gaul, or even Italy.¹ Yet, a reexamination of the evidence suggests the possibility of a different solution regarding not only the author’s religious affiliation and status in society but also her geographical origin. The newly proposed identification is linked with major developments of Christianity in the West, in particular with its spread within urban milieux and with the receptivity of contemporary society to the idea of pilgrimage.

In the seventh century, the Spanish monk Valerius (ca. 680) wrote a letter to members of a Galician monastery exhorting them to follow the example of a woman’s untiring devotion to God.² Although the name of the woman appears in several forms in the extant manuscripts, there is hardly a doubt that the author of the *It. Eg.* and the subject of Valerius’s letter are one and the same person.³

Before evaluating Valerius’s testimony it is necessary to examine the aim and structure of the letter. The first part unfolds Valerius’s purpose, to deliver an admonitory exhortation to his monks about the way to achieve the kingdom of

¹ The basic edition is in CCSL 175. 27–90. The quotations here are from the edition of H. Pétrel, SC 21. There is a new edition by Pierre Maraval, SC 296. ET: G. Gingras, *Egeria: Diary of a Pilgrimage*, ACW 38. John Wilkinson, *Egeria’s Travels to the Holy Land* (Jerusalem: Ariel, 1981), a revised ed. of idem, *Egeria’s Travels* (London: SPCK, 1971); Patricia Wilson-Kastner, “Egeria: Account of Her Pilgrimage,” in idem, ed., *A Lost Tradition: Women Writers of the Early Church* (Washington: University Press of America, 1981). One controversial item is here omitted, namely, the date of the pilgrimage. It is assumed that Devos’s dating of the journey to 381–383 is correct; Paul Devos, “La date du voyage d’Égérie,” *AnBoll* 85 (1967) 165–94.

² The text of Valerius’s letter was recently edited by M.C. Diaz y Diaz in SC 296, 323–349 with an introduction. All the quotations are from this edition.

³ *Ibid.*, 327.

heaven.⁴ As an example of the toil and love needed for such an achievement, he mentions the story of Egeria. Then Valerius refers in vague terms to the date of Egeria's pilgrimage, which he connects with the arrival of Christianity in Galicia, Valerius's homeland, at the same time mentioning the scope of Egeria's travels.⁵ The bulk of the letter is devoted to a selective account of the sites visited by Egeria.⁶ According to Valerius, her first major visit was to Egypt, the second stage of the journey covered the Sinai, the point where the present *It. Eg.* begins, and the third part of Egeria's travels was devoted to climbing a series of mountains including Mts. Nebo, Faran, Tabor, Eremus, and the Mt. of Elijah. Valerius ends his abstract of the *It. Eg.* at this point. There is no mention of the most important and lengthy part of the pilgrimage, the sojourn in Jerusalem. The letter ends by extolling Egeria, her devotion, piety, and courage, as an example to the monks.⁷

Valerius had a tendency to generalize and to exaggerate, two rhetorical characteristics that probably stemmed from the aim of his letter. In one place, he claimed that Egeria had visited nearly all the lands on earth.⁸ He concentrated on the mountains that Egeria had climbed, though climbing mountains had not constituted the sole focus of the journey. They were obstacles that, in spite of a feminine fragility so lovingly dwelt upon by Valerius, she had surmounted through her devotion and piety.⁹ One part of the journey in particular fired Valerius's imagination—Egeria's visit to the Sinai, the description of which occupies most of his letter.¹⁰ And though Egeria herself refers to the precise length of her pilgrimage, Valerius merely mentions a journey which took many years.¹¹

In his concluding paragraph Valerius adds that Egeria came from the most remote shores of the western sea; in other words, the Atlantic.¹² In view of

⁴ Valerius *Ep.* 1.1–7.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 1.8–19. On Christianity in Galicia see below, n. 33.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 1.19–3.21.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 4.1–6.24.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 3.1–2: “denique super quod universi paene orbis terrarum lustravit confinia.” What, in fact, did a monk in Visigothic Spain know about the lands of the earth?

⁹ *Ibid.*, 1.4: “feminea fragilitatis”; 2.22–23: “feminea fragilitate”; 5.3–4: “femineam fragile sexum.” Note also Valerius's exclusive concentration on locations relating to the New Testament, though Egeria herself devoted large parts to Old Testament sites (Diaz y Diaz, 325).

¹⁰ Valerius, *Ep.* 2; *It. Eg.* 1–3, but not a single word in Valerius on the large portion of the *It. Eg.* describing the liturgy in Jerusalem.

¹¹ *It. Eg.* 17.1; Valerius *Ep.* 1.25: “per multas annorum spatia peregrinando proficiscens.”

¹² Valerius *Ep.* 5.7–8: “que extremo occidui oceani litore exorta, Orienti facta est cognita.” Note the rhetorical antithesis. Elsewhere Valerius refers to Galicia as *occiduae plage extremitas* (1.9–10). There is a striking and hitherto unnoticed resemblance between these and a passage from Hydatius, another Galician, in his chronicle (sub a. 411): “Gallaeciam Vandali occupant et Suevi sita in extremitate oceani maris occidua.” Note that Hydatius, unlike Valerius, does mention Galicia by name and clearly implies that the Suevi received only part of the province. If Valerius indeed meant

Valerius's origins, his evidence has been taken to indicate a similar Spanish (Galician) origin for Egeria, though Aquitaine, another province along the Atlantic, cannot be excluded.¹³ Yet nowhere does Valerius mention Galicia or Spain specifically, and his vague reference to Egeria's geographical origin echoes that of the bishop of Edessa in the *It. Eg.* itself.¹⁴

Still, we must consider the possibility that Valerius had a fuller if not complete version of Egeria's letter, whence he might have derived information about Egeria's homeland. Where, precisely, would such information have been included? There are two possible places: the address at the very beginning of the letter, and the description of the journey itself. Egeria wrote what we may call an open letter to a group of women who were evidently her very close friends. Nowhere did she call them by name but invariably used a series of affectionate titles that indicate the close relations existing between Egeria and her circle of women-readers.¹⁵ Under such circumstances, the address at the beginning of the correspondence was most likely very brief, and their home address would have been altogether omitted. It would be difficult to produce an example of late Latin epistolography where the author, writing to a close friend, used anything more than the name of the addressee.¹⁶ Valerius, then, is unlikely

Galicia, why did he not say it more clearly? Is it possible that he deliberately used a phrase that could be construed to mean Galicia in order to strengthen his basic argument?

¹³ According to John Wilkinson (personal communication), if Valerius chose to write about Egeria, she may well have had some local connection with him. But this is not necessarily true, for as already noted, Valerius never specifically designated Galicia as Egeria's homeland. If she were Galician, it would have enhanced the value of his arguments considerably. In this case, therefore, the argument from silence is a valid one. Also, Valerius's compilation includes mostly texts written outside the Iberian peninsula, and local connection was by no means the criterion for inclusion. On the nature of the compilation, see Diaz y Diaz, 324–25.

¹⁴ As correctly noted by P. Devos, "Une nouvelle Égérie," (review of SC 296) *AnBoll* 101 (1983) 54, referring to *It. Eg.* 19.5: "ut de extremis porro terris venires ad haec loca." Once more, the antithesis between East and West. Diaz y Diaz, 326 n. 8, likewise expresses doubts concerning this phrase which is a typical rhetorical antithesis not to be taken as a guarantee of Egeria's Spanish origin. Cf. this also with a similar rhetorical definition of a pilgrimage as an east-west journey in Sulpicius Severus *Dial.* 1.2 (CSEL 1, 1886).

¹⁵ "Dominae venerabiles sorores, affectio vestra, dominae venerabiles, dominae sorores, dominae lucem meum." In themselves not an indication of a monastic audience since as late as 470 the adjective *venerabilis* was applied to both clerics and laymen (Sidonius Apollinaris *Ep.* 6.2.1). On the meaning of Christian letters in Christian life, W. G. Müller, "Der Brief als Spiegel der Seele (Zur Geschichte eines Topos der Epistolatheorie)," *Antike und Abendland* 26 (1980) 138–57 discussing Paulinus of Nola's and Jerome's correspondence but not the *It. Eg.*

¹⁶ True for both secular letters (Ausonius, Symmachus, Sidonius) and those with religious contents (Jerome, Augustine) if they were informal.

to have derived any information regarding the origin of Egeria or her circle from the opening of the *It. Eg.*¹⁷

The likeliest source of information regarding the origin of the author of the *It. Eg.* would have been a fuller description of the stages of the journey from the West to the East, if indeed Egeria, like the pilgrim of Bordeaux, described her pilgrimage from the very start to the return home. But did she? One may doubt whether Egeria set out to write a conventional description of a pilgrim's progress like the *Itinerarium Burdigalense* of 333.¹⁸ Hers was not an ordinary guidebook merely containing information about the best route to follow. The *It. Eg.* is a highly personal document with an exclusive focus on the "pilgrim's time."¹⁹ All else was irrelevant. A comparison between the *It. Eg.* and the narrative of another pilgrimage, the one now known as the *Historia monachorum in Aegypto*, which survived intact, may substantiate my point.²⁰ There, the narrator unfolds a pilgrimage undertaken only a decade after Egeria's with one aim only, to visit the holy and famed monks of the Egyptian desert. Neither in the prologue nor in the epilogue is the origin of the pilgrims disclosed. Not even the narrative includes this information. The fact that the travelers had set out from Jerusalem is revealed by chance in the course of a dialogue between the pilgrims and John of Lycopolis.²¹ This dialogue consists of questions which aimed to establish the identity of the visitors, and it is more than likely that Egeria herself was subjected to the same inquiry wherever she went. Yet nowhere in the present *It. Eg.* is such a dialogue recorded.²²

We may then conclude that, like ourselves, Valerius was in no position to infer from the *It. Eg.* the pilgrim's precise origin, more complete though his version might have been. It may also appear that he was hardly in a better position when it came to identifying Egeria's place in contemporary society. He speaks

¹⁷ Or, for that matter, from the end of the letter, since the part about the actual journey was compiled and sent from Constantinople (*It. Eg.* 23.3).

¹⁸ The text of the *It. Bu.* and other accounts of pilgrimages were assembled in *Itineraria et alia geographica* (CCSL 175). For a general introduction and translation of select passages, see John Wilkinson, *Jerusalem Pilgrims Before the Crusades* (Warminster, England: Aris & Phillips, 1977).

¹⁹ Pierre Maraval, "Le temps du pèlerin (IV^e–VII^e siècles)," in *Le temps chrétien de la fin de l'antiquité au Moyen Âge* (Paris: Centre national de la recherche scientifique, 1984) 479–85.

²⁰ Greek text edited by A.-J. Festugière, *Subsidia Hagiographica* 34. ET: Norman Russell, *The Lives of the Desert Fathers: The Historia Monachorum in Aegypto* (London: Mowbray; Kalamazoo, MI: Cistercian Press, 1981) with an introduction by Benedicta Ward.

²¹ *Hist. mon.* 1.18–19: "Where are you from, my children? Which country have you travelled from to visit a poor man?" (trans. Russell, *Desert Fathers*). Cf. Palladius *Historia Lausiaca* 21 for similar identifying questions which appear to have been the custom. (Cuthbert Butler, *The Lausiaca History of Palladius* (2 vols.; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1898–1904); ET R. T. Meyer in ACW 34.

²² Cf. also Postuminus's account in Sulpicius Severus *Dial.* 1.1–23, where he only mentioned boarding a ship in Narbonne and landing in North Africa (*Dial.* 1.3).

of her as a nun, though she herself never refers to any monastic connection.²³ In her letter she repeatedly refers to her “sisters,” a title that possibly misled Valerius into thinking that she was a nun writing to other nuns in her community.²⁴ Yet in the fourth century, as Valerius surely was unaware, this mode of address was applied without distinction to Christians and pagans alike,²⁵ and while this in itself does not exclude the possibility of a monastic circle in Egeria’s case, it can hardly serve as a decisive proof of institutional affiliation.

In addition, the religious context of an undertaking like a pilgrimage, which is reflected in Egeria’s stress on praying, probably led Valerius to assume a formal religious vocation, for his general ignorance and lack of attention to detail, as revealed in his letter, did not make him sensitive to the nuances in the *It. Eg.*²⁶ Moreover, what did he know about late Roman pilgrimages? He was surely in no position to have realized that the majority of western pilgrims in the fourth century were, in fact, lay persons with a deep sense of Christian piety rather than people belonging to religious orders.²⁷ We cannot, therefore, accept

²³ Valerius *Ep.* 1.11: “beatissima sanctimonialis.”

²⁴ Valerius may have also been misled by Egeria’s use of the word *frater* which she applied to monks in a manner suggesting that the term had various meanings. For her general indiscriminate use of ecclesiastical terms, see Wilkinson, *Egeria*, 35. Cf. the use of *domina soror* in *Passio Perpetuae* 4, where a brother is addressing his real sister (H. Musurillo, ed., *Acts of the Christian Martyrs* [Oxford Early Christian Texts; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1971] 106–31).

²⁵ Maraval, SC 296, 25. A good example of the wide application of the term “sister” is its use by the pagan Symmachus *Ep.* 9.40 (reference in Peter Brown, *Religion and Society in the Age of St. Augustine* [London: Faber & Faber, 1972] 171, reprint of idem, “Aspects of the Christianization of the Roman Aristocracy,” *JRomS* 52 [1961] 1–11) where this form of address is an expression of polite conventions. The information about monastic profession of women in Gaul involves two types of affiliation: that of *virgines devotae*, women devoted to perpetual chastity who exercised asceticism at home; and members of a *monasterium puellarum* first attested by Sulpicius Severus towards the end of the fourth century. R. Metz, “Les vierges chrétiennes en Gaule au IV^e siècle,” in *Saint Martin et son temps* (Studia Anselmiana 46; 1961) 109–132; Élie Griffe, *La Gaule chrétienne à l’époque romaine* (Paris: Picard, 1964) 371–73; J. Fontaine, *Vie de Saint Martin* (SC 134) 2. 877–83 (commentary on *Vita Martini* 19.2). In either case physical mobility would have been limited.

²⁶ See Maraval, “Temps du pèlerin,” 483 on prayer as the central theme of pilgrimage so well described by Egeria’s own definition of her travels *gratia orationis* (*It. Eg.* 23.10 *passim*).

²⁷ In general on pilgrimage, see Bernard Kötting, *Peregrinatio Religiosa: Wallfahrten in der Antike und das Pilgerwesen in der alten Kirche* (Münster: Regensburg, 1950); Wilkinson, *Jerusalem Pilgrims*; Herbert Donner, *Pilgerfahrt ins Heilige Land* (Stuttgart: Katholisches Bibelwerk, 1979); F. Parente, “La conoscenza della terra santa come esperienza religiosa dell’occidente cristiano del IV S. alla crociata,” in *Popoli e paesi* (Spoleto: Centro Italiano di Studi sull’Alto Medioevo, 1981) 231–316, a fine study on the central place of the Holy Land and Jerusalem in a new theological interpretation of a geographical reality which emerged as a result of pilgrimage; E. D. Hunt, *Holy Land Pilgrimage in the Later Roman Empire AD 312–460* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1982) (the pages here refer to the paperback edition of 1984); Pierre Maraval, *Lieux saints et pèlerinage d’Orient. Histoire et géographie des origines à la conquête arabe* (Paris: Cerf, 1985). Although there is no specific study devoted to the origins of pilgrims, the general picture points to the more secular char-

Valerius's testimony regarding either Egeria's homeland or her status in society with any great confidence.

When Egeria met the bishop of Edessa, that venerable man greeted her as a traveler who had come from a remote end of the earth.²⁸ We have seen that Valerius and some modern scholars take this phrase to mean Galicia, while others assumed Aquitaine. But to an inhabitant of Edessa, and most likely one who had never traveled outside the confines of his own diocese, any western province would appear remote enough to be described as in this greeting.²⁹ One should remember that, though western pilgrims may have been fairly numerous in the fourth-century Orient, the majority, as before, continued to be local pilgrims, that is, easterners.³⁰ Neither Galicia nor Aquitaine, then, has any special claim to be Egeria's homeland on the evidence of the bishop's words alone.

What remains is the sole allusion to a western site in the entire narrative. On reaching the Euphrates, Egeria compared the river with the Rhone in words that seem to imply that this river was familiar to her.³¹ This comparison is unlikely to have been a mere literary device, for Egeria's familiarity with the likely sources of such a comparison, namely, the pagan classics, has never been established.³² It is also well to remember that one is usually inclined to draw comparisons with what is most familiar and what immediately comes to mind. On the basis, then, of this lone geographical allusion, Gaul rather than Spain appears the most likely claimant to being Egeria's homeland. And if one wishes to narrow it down, the region of the Rhone has to be considered.

acter of western pilgrims, while the majority of eastern pilgrims appear to have had some form of ecclesiastical affiliation.

²⁸ *It. Eg.* 19.5.

²⁹ Cf. the scope of Augustine's travels after his ordination as the bishop of Hippo. He made only two sea-voyages in his career, both before his ordination. Othmar Perler, *Les voyages de saint Augustin* (Paris: ÉtAug, 1969) 57–81 on his sea voyages; 205–405 on his voyages as bishop which were entirely confined to Africa and mostly between Hippo and Carthage. Note also Egeria's own remark on the small number of bishops in Jerusalem, *It. Eg.* 49.2.

³⁰ As rightly emphasized by K.G. Kolum, "Review of Hunt," *CP* 80 (1985) 379, above, n. 27.

³¹ *It. Eg.* 18.2: "perveni ad fluvium Euphratem, de quo satis bene scriptum est esse 'flumen magnum Euphratem,' et ingens, et quasi terribilis est; iter enim decurrit habens impetum, sicut habet fluvium Rhodanus, nisi quod adhuc maior est Euphrates."

³² Egeria's culture appears wholly confined to Christian basic readings. According to Valerius, Egeria knew the Bible very well: *Ep.* 1.20–21: "Cuncta igitur Veteris ac Novi Testamenti omni indagazione percurrens volumina." This is corroborated by the extensive use of biblical quotations in the *It. Eg.* as well as by questions like those which Egeria asked the bishop of Charran (*It. Eg.* 20.9–12). She also appears to have certain familiarity with apocryphal writings like the Passion of St. Thecla, L.M. Starowreyski, "Les apocryphes chez les écrivains du IV^e S.," *Miscellanea Historiae Ecclesiastica* 4 (Congrès de Varsovie 1978; Brussels: Nauwelaerts, 1983) 1. 140. She was surely unfamiliar with Ausonius's *Ordo* 10.19 where the Rhone is described as *praecipos*.

The most difficult part is to place Egeria within a more precise milieu. Did she come from an urban or rural background? Which type of environment was more likely to produce Christians like Egeria and her female audience? Moreover, which world in the fourth century, the rural or the urban, would have been open to the idea of pilgrimage to the Holy Land? Egeria's complete ignorance of paganism, literature, and religious practices alike, point to a surrounding where Christianity had made a considerable advance by the middle of the fourth century, and this alone excludes Galicia.³³ And while the activities of Martin in the region of Tours proved what an energetic and zealous bishop could achieve in the countryside, the general picture of the Gallic rural world by the end of the fourth century is that of adherence to the old gods.³⁴ On the other hand, a vast network of urban episcopates existed from the middle of that century, as the proliferation of ecclesiastical buildings within the cities demonstrates.³⁵

Of the cities along the Rhone, Arles in particular may have a valid claim to be Egeria's homeland. With Narbonne, Arles was the major Gallic port of the Mediterranean.³⁶ Its central position as a trading center is well attested through the importation of marble from Asia, Greece, and Italy, of African pottery, and of oriental luxury items.³⁷ Ausonius ranked Arles as the second most important city in Gaul and the tenth in the empire.³⁸ The author of the *Expositio totius*

³³ Valerius *Ep.* 1.7–10; P. de Palol, "La conversion de l'aristocratie de la peninsule iberique au IV^e siècle," *Miscellanea* 47–69, esp. 68–69, above, n. 32, where the archaeological evidence excludes Galicia from the zone of early conversion to Christianity.

³⁴ C. E. Stancliffe, "From Town to Country: The Christianization of the Touraine 370–600," *Studies in Church History* 16 (1979) 43–59.

³⁵ *Premiers temps chrétiens en Gaule méridionale: antiquité tardive et haut Moyen Age* (Lyon: Musée de la Civilisation Gallo-Romaine de la Ville de Lyon, 1986) 3–108, with references to the most recent Christian archaeology in the cities.

³⁶ The history of Arles in late antiquity has yet to be written. The basic study up to that period is A. Constant, *Arles antique* (2 vols.; Paris, 1921). There are useful insights in Paul-Albert Février et al., *La ville antique des origines au IX^e siècle* (Histoire de la France urbaine 1; Paris: Seuil, 1980) passim; in G. Conges, "L'histoire d'Arles précisée par les fouilles archéologiques," *Archeologia* 142 (1980) 9–23 on private architecture of the fourth century. Paul-Albert Février, "Arles aux IV^e et V^e siècles, ville impériale et capitale régionale," *XXV corso di cultura sull'arte ravennate e bizantina*, marzo 1978 (Ravenna, 1978) 127–58. For its maritime position, see M. Christol, "Les naviculaires d'Arles et les structures du grand commerce maritime sous l'empire romain," in *Arles et le Rhône, Provence historique* 32 (1982) 5–14.

³⁷ Gustav Haenel, ed., *Corpus Legum* (Aalen: Scientia, 1965) 238 no. 1171 (constitution of Honorius on Arles, 418 CE); F. Benoît, *Arles dans la civilisation méditerranéenne* (Union generale des Rhodainiens; Tain-Tourmon, 1931) 34–37; *Premier temps*, 182–83, for map and commentary on importations.

³⁸ *Ordo* 10.2.

mundi mentions Arles with Trier as the two most important commercial centers by the middle of the fourth century.³⁹

Christianity had been introduced to the valley of the Rhone as early as the second century, if not before, and a church council had already taken place in Arles in 314.⁴⁰ From the time of Constantine, the city played a prominent role in imperial and ecclesiastical politics. By the 380s, when Egeria set out on her pilgrimage, Christianity played a dominant role in the life of the citizens, as the Christian sarcophagi of the city amply attest.⁴¹ These sarcophagi, with their exclusively Christian themes, demonstrate not only the size but also the economic power of the Christians, who declared their new creed on monuments dedicated to the dead. Within this urban milieu, imbued with Christian practices and open to Italy and the East, Egeria may have conceived the idea of embarking on a pilgrimage to the Holy Land.

That Egeria was a member of a middle rather than an aristocratic class seems likely when her educational background is compared with that of aristocratic female pilgrims like Melania and Paula. From Egeria's prose style, with its frequent repetitions, disregard for rules of classical grammar, and clumsy syntax, it is clear that her education was not what aristocratic Roman ladies received. Theirs was a classical education not unlike what men enjoyed. Both Paula and Melania the Elder knew Greek and Latin well, and possibly Hebrew.⁴² Even their Christian erudition appears deeper than Egeria's. For while her readings included the Bible and a few apocryphal writings, Melania was familiar with

³⁹ *Expositio* 58 (ed. J. Rouge; SC 124. 199): "quae ab omni mundo negotia accipiens."

⁴⁰ On Christian Arles, see Griffe, *Gaule chrétienne*, 1. 191ff., passim. Also useful is P.-A. Février, *Le développement urbain en Provence de l'époque romaine à la fin du XIV^e siècle: archéologie et histoire urbaine* (Paris: Boccard, 1964) 49–74, on the religious topography of the early Middle Ages with many references to Arles. For the council of 314, see C. Munier, *Concilia Galliae 314–516* (CCSL 148) 3–24.

⁴¹ Fernand Benoît, *Les cimetières suburbains d'Arles dan l'antiquité chrétienne et du moyen âge* (Rome: Pontificio istituto di archeologia cristiana, 1935); idem, *Sarcophages paléochrétiens d'Arles et de Marseille* (supp. to *Gallia*; Paris: Centre national de la recherche scientifique, 1954). P.-A. Février, "Sarcophages d'Arles," *Congrès archéologique de France*, 134 session (Paris, 1976) 317–59.

⁴² On education in general see H. I. Marrou, *Histoire de l'éducation dans l'antiquité* (Paris: Seuil, 1948) 451ff. On female education, see Elizabeth A. Clark, *Jerome, Chrysostom and Friends: Essays and Translations* (Studies in Women and Religion 2; New York: Mellen, 1979) 71ff. Proba is the best example of the aristocratic woman's familiarity with the classics and their writing ability: Elizabeth A. Clark and Diane E. Hatch, *The Golden Bough, the Oaken Cross: The Virgilian Cento of Faltonia Betitia Proba* (AARTT; Chico: Scholars Press, 1981). For Paula's excellent knowledge of Greek and Hebrew, see Jerome *Ep.* 108.27, though admittedly, Paula and Eustochium were the exception rather than the rule. Egeria may have had some knowledge of Greek. The case is unclear and opinions range from "the fragmentary Greek of a tourist" (Hunt, *Holy Land Pilgrimage*, 153) to "an abundant Greek vocabulary" (Maraval, SC 296) 53. She herself refers to the presence of interpreters in Jerusalem (*It. Eg.* 47.3–4), but not to her use of them.

Origen, Gregory, Basil, and other theologians. She and Paula could even combat heretics in verbal debates.⁴³ Egeria also falls short of Jerome's educational perception for a young girl of good birth and Christian upbringing.⁴⁴ For Jerome's recommendations include, in addition to the Psalter, the book of Proverbs, Acts and Epistles, Prophets, Heptateuch, book of Kings, Chronicles, Ezra and Esther, Song of Songs, and the writings of Cyprian, Athanasius, and Hilary. He is emphatically against the introduction of a young Christian woman to apocryphal writings. Jerome's program was decidedly beyond the scope of Egeria's education.

Our information on the literacy of women in general, and their ability to write in particular, is severely limited. Few figures stand out: Proba and her Cento, Therasia, who together with her husband, Paulinus of Nola, was the cosignatory and possibly coauthor of several of their letters. Some of the correspondents of Jerome, Marcella for example, could obviously write, and so could Melania the Elder. They all belonged to the highest class of society. Egeria is as far removed from this circle as her style is from that of Proba.

Egeria appears, then, in the light of a follower rather than a colleague of these pious aristocratic women who decided to leave their society of origin to embark on a pilgrimage to the East. Like these aristocrats, she manifested great devotion through climbing mountains, long journeys, and partaking in lengthy liturgical rites, albeit with one conspicuous difference. Asceticism, the hallmark of Melania, Paula, and other noble ladies, appears altogether absent from Egeria's perception of a pilgrimage. Nowhere in Egeria's description does one get the impression of an ascetic woman on the road.⁴⁵

If we turn to Egeria's religious affiliation, several factors have to be accounted for. Devos has adduced a number of arguments to support his description of her as "une vraie religieuse appartenant à une vraie communauté religieuse."⁴⁶ According to Devos, Egeria's expression of humility, "mea parvitas" (*It. Eg.* 5.12), is not that of a "grande dame" but one more appropriate to a nun. But such expressions in themselves are clearly not enough to decide the question of Egeria's religious affiliation. On the one hand, a great Roman lady

⁴³ On Egeria's reading, see above, n. 32. For Melania see Palladius *Hist. Laus.* 55.3.

⁴⁴ Jerome *Ep.* 107.12. That this was not a mere recommendation can be seen from the example of some of his correspondents: Fabiola could discuss with Jerome fine points of biblical exegesis (Jerome *Ep.* 77); Marcella was involved in religious disputes and in refutations of heresies (Jerome *Ep.* 127.9–10). Two Gallic women, Hedibia and Algasia, solicited from Jerome long commentaries on scriptural questions (*Eps.* 120–21).

⁴⁵ On the behavior of Paula and Melania in the course of their pilgrimages, see Jerome *Ep.* 108.15; Palladius *Hist. Laus.* 46.3. To Egeria even the word "ascetic" appears new (*It. Eg.* 20.5). Could we see in her behavior an echo of a general Gallic antagonism to asceticism? J. F. Kelly, "The Gallic Resistance to Eastern Asceticism," *StPatr* 17 (1982) part 2, 506–10.

⁴⁶ "Une nouvelle Égérie," 55–57 whence the following arguments are derived.

such as Paula, who went on pilgrimage to the Holy Land, could display a humility greater than Egeria normally does.⁴⁷ On the other hand, in one passage Egeria speaks of herself as specially blessed by God with none of her customary reservation that her luck is undeserved.⁴⁸

Egeria paid particular attention to the monastic history of the bishops she met. They called her *filia*. Can these two facts support the theory of monastic affiliation, as Devos claims? The combination of monastic affiliation and official ecclesiastical post was virtually unheard of in the West up to the time of Martin of Tours. It was surely striking for a western observer to note this unusual trait in eastern bishops.⁴⁹ If they called her "my daughter," this appellation hardly supports a monastic origin in the case of the pilgrim herself. It was customarily used by bishops as a sign of spiritual bond and perhaps even as a mark of their superiority in the family of the church at large.⁵⁰

The visit to Edessa was primarily undertaken on account of the monks of the area rather than to see Thomas's tomb. Hence, concludes Devos, she must have been a nun herself.⁵¹ But there were several reasons to visit Edessa, not the least among them to see the palace of Abgar and the martyrdom of the apostle Thomas.⁵² The order in which Egeria named the goals of her excursion did not necessarily reflect her personal order of priorities. In fact, it seems that the only time she did undertake an excursion for the sole purpose of visiting monks was

⁴⁷ Jerome *Ep.* 108.9 on Paula's tears and groans. Ascetic women made a point of displaying excessive modesty and humility which was in sharp contrast to their real social status. See *Vie de Sainte Mélanie* (ed. D. Gorcé; SC 90) 53 on Melania's torn cloths. See Jerome *Ep.* 46.10 on the humility of pilgrims in general as a feature of pilgrimage.

⁴⁸ *It. Eg.* 20.6 For another example of Egeria's formulaic humility, see *It. Eg.* 23.8: "Agens Christo Deo nostro gratias, quod mihi indignae et non merenti praestare dignatus est tantam gratiam, id est ut non solum voluntatem eundi, sed et facultatem perambulandi et reverendi denuo Constantinopoli."

⁴⁹ I wonder whether this form of "episcopus . . . et monachus" (*It. Eg.* 19.5) could not be a formula. Cf. inscription from Mt. Nebo dedicated τῷ]δε κλη[ρικῶ και μο]καχῶ (Sylvester J. Saller, *The Memorial of Moses on Mount Nebo* [Jerusalem: Franciscan Press, 1941] 1. 259). In fact, the most common adjective used by Egeria to describe a bishop is *sanctus* (*It. Eg.* 8.4; 9.1; 19.5).

⁵⁰ Surely *filia* did not mean a nun in the fourth century. Augustine in *De cura pro mortuis gerenda* refers to a woman as *filia* ("scripsisti per homines filiae nostrae religioissimae Florae"), though she was clearly not a nun but a widow who recently lost her son; see John Matthews, *Western Aristocracies and Imperial Court AD 364–425* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1975) 144. The recipient of this communication from Augustine, Paulinus of Nola, added yet another meaning to the word *filia*: in C. 28.181, the word means a slip, a metaphorical way of regarding grafting as *coitus* or *adoptio* (R. C. Goldschmidt, *Paulinus' Churches at Nola: Texts, Translations, and Commentary* [Amsterdam: Noord-Hollandsche Uitgevers Maatschappij, 1940]) 183.

⁵¹ But see the different emphasis in P. Devos, "Égérie à Edess, S. Thomas l'apôtre, Le roi Abgar," *AnBoll* 85 (1967) 381–400, esp. 382 on the desire to venerate the tomb of St. Thomas.

⁵² On Edessa, see most recently D. J. Lane, "Pervenimus Edessam: The Origins of a Great Christian Center outside the Familiar Mediaeval World," *Florilegium* 3 (1981) 104–12.

her first tour of Egypt.⁵³ Nor, for that matter, can we infer from her interest in liturgy and her friendship with a deaconess, Marthana, that she herself was an abbess or even a nun.⁵⁴

Her interest in liturgy is a common feature of western pilgrimage. The liturgy of the holy places was developed within the context of pilgrimage and for pilgrims.⁵⁵ For, in addition to seeing places with one's own eyes, participation in the local liturgy enabled the pilgrim to create what Maraval calls the sanctified time of pilgrimage.⁵⁶ The differences alone between the liturgy in the East and West merited the pilgrim's attention. Liturgy formed the main component of the exclusive Christian environment in which Egeria appeared to move and which stands in marked contrast to realities in Palestine of the late fourth century. Egeria may also have been baptized in Jerusalem, an act that engendered the lengthy and detailed description of the liturgy there.⁵⁷

Lastly, Devos argues that her modest entourage would not have befitted a great lady but a nun. I cannot discover any clue in the entire text regarding the size of her entourage. It is certain that Egeria's party may not have matched that of Poemenia, which was a subject of abuse and ridicule.⁵⁸ The only reference in the *It. Eg.* to an escort of soldiers on the road clearly implies that this was a

⁵³ *It. Eg.* 71; 9.1.

⁵⁴ *It. Eg.* 23.3. On Marthana the deaconess, see Maraval, SC 296, 24 n. 3.

⁵⁵ On the work of Cyril of Jerusalem to develop the liturgy, see Parente, "La conoscenza," 232, tracing the liturgical dramatization of the Passion. On the reproduction of the historical situation in the ceremony of Holy Week and Easter, see E. O. James, "The Sources of the Christian Ritual and its Relation to the Culture Pattern of the Ancient East," in Samuel H. Hooke, ed., *The Labyrinth: Further Studies in the Relation between Myth and Ritual in the Ancient World* (London: SPCK, 1935) 237–60, esp. 241.

⁵⁶ Maraval, "Temps du pèlerin," 484: "un temps sanctifié."

⁵⁷ In the chapters devoted to a description of the prebaptismal teachings (*It. Eg.* 45–47), Egeria draws attention to the registration of foreigners (45.4), to the logic of the whole process (46.1), and to the participation of women (46.1). Though she stopped short of disclosing the instruction preparatory to the actual act of baptism, the *disciplina arcana*, her own participation cannot be excluded. Baptism was a hotly debated topic in the West, as Augustine's writings indicate (e.g., *De unico baptismo contra Petilianum*; *De baptismo contra Donatistas*); and the ceremony in the East differed considerably from the one in the West. After three required years of instruction it is not unlikely that Egeria ended her stay in the Holy City with her personal initiation (Edward J. Yarnold, "Initiation in the Fourth and Fifth Centuries," in C. Jones, G. Wainwright, and E. J. Yarnold, eds., *The Study of Liturgy* [London: Oxford University Press, 1978] 95–110).

⁵⁸ Palladius *Hist. Laus.* 35 (John of Lycopolis) with P. Devos, "'La servante de Dieu': Poemenia d'après Pallade, la tradition copte et Jean Rufus," *AnBoll* 87 (1969) 189–208; idem, "Saint Jerome contre Poemenia?" *AnBoll* 91 (1973) 117–20. Poemenia even had a bishop of her own in her retinue.

regular feature of a journey along dangerous roads. Soldiers accompanied all travelers, regardless of their social status.⁵⁹

In order to determine Egeria's religious affiliation and socio-economic status with greater precision, let us turn to the obvious. First, the length of her sojourn in the East. Egeria spent more than three years away from home, a fact that indicates either affluence or the existence of contacts within local financial circles, or possibly both.⁶⁰ She surely did not travel like a pauper, and never referred to problems of accommodation, which must have been considerable as the activities of the church, the imperial government, and even of private individuals demonstrate. Unless they intended to settle in the East, most western pilgrims, like the Bordelais of 333, would not have spent more than several months, at most a year, on the road.⁶¹

Moreover, Egeria moved with ease and leisure from place to place, never pressed to leave before or to stay beyond the time she had decreed for herself.⁶² She made frequent departures from her original plan, again without apparent regard for economic or time factors. When she finally reached Constantinople after more than three years on the road, she was in no hurry to return home. This singular freedom of movement, if nothing else, would probably exclude affiliation with an institution or establishment that would have required return within a fixed period. It is implausible that an abbess could have taken such long leave of absence from her duties, or considered the possibility of never returning to the West.

The same problem of a long leave of absence would have applied had Egeria been an ordinary nun. How would such a journey have been authorized, or how would its expenses have been paid if not from her own pocket? Our knowledge of early Gallic monasticism is limited,⁶³ but such freedom of movement does

⁵⁹ *It. Eg.* 7.2 (soldiers); Hunt, *Holy Land Pilgrimage*, 59. Curiously there is no reference to nuns on the road or to laypersons.

⁶⁰ *It. Eg.* 17.1. Three years since her first arrival in Jerusalem or since her last excursion from the city?

⁶¹ There are several indications of the length of the journey from East to West. It took thirty days by boat from Egypt to Marseille and only five from Narbonne to North Africa (Sulpicius Severus *Dial.* 1.1.3; 3.1). Normally an East-West journey would take longer than the same in the opposite direction because of climatic factors (Lionel Casson, *Ships and Seamanship in the Ancient World* [Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1972] 272). It took Melania the Elder twenty days from Caesarea to Rome (Palladius *Hist. Laus.* 54.3), a figure which appears doubtful (N. Moine, "Melaniana," *Recherches Augustiniennes* 15 [1980] 43–44).

⁶² Cf. Paula's haste and eagerness to move forward, from one holy place to another: Jerome *Ep.* 108.12. Maraval claims ("Temps du pèlerin," 480–81) that the pressure of time is one of the characteristics of "pilgrim's time."

⁶³ Griffe, *La Gaule chrétienne*, 271–98 (on Martin); 366–80 (on ascetics and monks in general), esp. 371–73 on the so-called *virgines devotae*. F. Prinz, *Frühes Mönchtum in Frankreich: Kultur und Gesellschaft in Gallien, dem Rheinland und Bayern am Beispiel der monastischen Entwicklung* (Munich/Vienna, 1965) 19–46 (on Martin); 47–87 (on Lerins); 452–61 (on Tours and Lerins as

not appear to have been a feature of it. For once settled in a monastic community, the monk or nun was not likely to start wandering off to as distant a destination as the Holy Land, even on a pious mission.⁶⁴ If traveling was undertaken, it was usually, if not exclusively, for official church business. Even then the sojourn was limited. Pilgrimage, a costly enterprise for an unlimited length of time, was not likely to have been encouraged. Lastly, Egeria's lack of commitment to an institution is further reflected in her final decision to extend her pilgrimage to Asia Minor before returning home.

A comparison with accounts of pilgrims with well defined monastic backgrounds casts further doubt on such an affiliation in Egeria's case. The most striking resemblance between such accounts as the *Historia monachorum in Aegypto* and Postumianus's pilgrimage is their attention to the miraculous stories recited by and about the monks visited.⁶⁵ All the conversations transmitted in the two works center solely on such miracles. Such reports had various functions. In the case of Postumianus they served not only to spread the fame of the fathers of the Egyptian desert in Gaul but also to demonstrate the superiority of the local brand of monasticism, that of Martin of Tours. Cassian used his experiences in the desert to establish his own monastery in Marseille along the lines of Egyptian monasticism.⁶⁶ Rufinus and his colleagues wished to learn about monastic life in Egypt. Even if Egeria had different aims from those of the authors of the *Historia monachorum* and the *Dialogues*, her audience could have learnt precious little about the variety of eastern monasticism from her account. For though it faithfully recorded Egeria's meetings with monks, the *It. Eg.* transmits neither their miracles nor their edifying conversations.

In short, several considerations cast doubt on the hitherto accepted Spanish origins of Egeria and on her monastic or aristocratic affiliation. She is best perceived as a layperson, a member of a group of pious and devout women who decided to follow aristocratic precedents of pilgrimage to the East. Her undeni-

cultural and ascetic centers). R. Lorenz, "Die Anfänge des abendländischen Mönchtums im IV. J.," *ZKG* 77 (1966) 1–61. Owen Chadwick, *John Cassian: A Study in Primitive Monasticism* (2d ed.; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1968). If the idea of equality and communal property was dominant in the early phases of monasticism (*Vita Martini* 10), I cannot see how one nun would be given preferential treatment and allowed to set on a long and costly journey for an indefinite length of time.

⁶⁴ On the Gallic contempt for the "wandering monks" of the East, see J. J. O'Donnell, "Liberius the Patrician," *Traditio* 37 (1981) 55.

⁶⁵ Note, however, that like the *It. Eg.* Postumianus does not mention any monk by name. Was this anonymity a feature of western accounts of pilgrimage? Eastern accounts such as the *Hist. Mon.*, Palladius's *Hist. Laus.*, and the *Apoth. Patrum* (as well as Cassian's *Coll.*) never fail to mention a monk by name.

⁶⁶ Cassian, *Inst. and Coll.*, possibly the best summary of the "desert" way of life. Philip Rousseau, *Ascetics, Authority, and the Church in the Age of Jerome and Cassian* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1978) 183ff.

able affluence would point to a social class such as an urban bourgeoisie, for only urban wealth based on trade can plausibly account for what appear to be her contacts spread over the empire like a commercial network. Egeria serves as an example of the intensity of urban Christianity as well as of the spread of aristocratic fashions to other classes of society in late antiquity. Her case demonstrates how pilgrimage created a channel that enabled pious believers of different social classes to enjoy a singular freedom of movement while uniting them in a common enterprise.⁶⁷

⁶⁷ I am grateful for the comments offered by Elizabeth Clark, Debra Nails, and John Wilkinson, and above all for the kind help of Michael Grounds and Caroline White. This project was supported by the Vice Chancellor (Research) Special Fund of the University of the Witwatersrand.