

Early Pilgrimage Itineraries (333–1099)

As a rule, pilgrimage literature in Late Antiquity and the Middle Ages is marked by a deep religious aura, a lack of interest in the present, and casualness about space and time (unless it is sacred space and sacred time). In the majority of the descriptions – though not in all – human beings, fauna, and flora are virtually absent. An exception is the narrative by the Piacenza pilgrim. Otherwise, the texts mention only churches, monasteries, chapels, priests and monks as though the land were solely populated by them. There are a few exceptions to this rule, but they do not change the overall impression.

In late antiquity and the Middle Ages, *Itineraria* were mainly (although not only) a Western and Latin genre. Although the majority of pilgrims came to the Holy Land from Eastern countries, most of the itineraries and Holy Land descriptions were written in Latin. Our knowledge of Eastern Christian pilgrimage is derived mainly from other genres, such as hagiographic works (see also → Hagiography, Local History, Theology) that include short accounts of the hero's pilgrimage. This difference in literary traditions between East and West has not yet been sufficiently explained.

In setting down their travel experience in writing, pilgrims drew their sacred maps in words. Reading their descriptions chronologically enables us to trace changes in these “maps”, fix dates of churches and monasteries, discover traditions that were erased, new ones that were added, and to learn about the liturgy of the holy places, pilgrimage rituals, *eulogiae* and relics, as ways that pilgrims experienced the Holy Land.

Early pilgrimage literature can be divided largely into three types: First, accounts written in the first person and from a personal

point of view, either by the pilgrim himself or by another person who heard the pilgrim's story and took it down in writing; Second, Holy Land descriptions, written in the form of guides for pilgrims; Third, short tracts that dryly list holy places and traditions attached to them in condensed form. Most of these were anonymous.

Texts of the first type are the most interesting, as they tell not only about places but also about their impact on the viewer. In the period under discussion, they include Egeria's account of her travels (381–84), written in the form of a letter to a group of Christian women who were nuns or who belonged to some kind of religious sisterhood, and who had remained behind in her homeland; Jerome's description of Paula's pilgrimage (385–86), included in the obituary letter he wrote to her daughter Eustochium (letter 108); the pilgrimage of Peter the Iberian (fifth century), included in his biography written by John Rufus; the itinerary of the anonymous pilgrim from Piacenza known as Antoninus (c. 570); Adomnán of Iona's, *De locis sanctis*, based on the pilgrimage experience of the bishop Arculf; the itinerary of Willibald (c. 724–28), written by the nun Hugeburc and included in Willibald's *vita*; and the itinerary of the Frankish monk Bernard (c. 870). Some of these texts are written in the form of letters (Egeria, Jerome); others are parts of a fuller biography, in which the journey serves a hagiographic aim as an important chapter in saintly life, for example, the travel accounts of Paula, Petrus the Iberian, and Willibald.

The second type of pilgrimage literature – Holy Land descriptions – includes the account of the Bordeaux Pilgrim (333); Eucherius' *De situ Hierosolymae* (c. 444–449); Theodosius' *De situ Terrae Sanctae* (c. 530); The Armenian Guide (c. 625); the description of Epiphanius the Monk (c. 692); and Bede's *De locis sanctis* (c. 702); while the third type includes the *Breviarius de Hierosolyma* (The Short Description of Jerusalem), written c. 530, and the

Commemoratorium de casis dei, a report on Christians and Christian institutions in Jerusalem and other places, probably written for Charlemagne in 808.

The description of the Bordeaux Pilgrim is in fact the first surviving Christian account of pilgrimage, and is considered the inauguration of the genre. While full of very important information on the transition of Jerusalem to a Christian city, the text is dry and is devoid of any real voice, unlike the letter Egeria wrote to her “beloved sisters”, which is an itinerary *per se*. Egeria’s letter contains an accurate description of her travels as well as a detailed account of the Jerusalem liturgy. She describes her travels in precise language that reproduced the experience of traveling through writing.

Jerome’s letter to Eustochium describes a pilgrimage that he made together with Paula, and in spite of the spiritual and intellectual emphasis of his tour, this part of the letter, together with Letter 46 to Marcella (attributed to Paula and Eustochium), remains among the most important examples of early pilgrimage narrative. Pilgrimage is described in these letters as both an emotional experience and a means for gaining a deeper understanding of the Scriptures. The texts written by Egeria and Jerome describe journeys that use the Bible as a guide. Egeria read the Bible in a historical, literal sense, while Jerome looked for allegorical interpretations and for etymological meanings, but for both, the pilgrimage to the Holy Land was a “textual pilgrimage,” a pilgrimage to the Land of the Text.

As against the biblical-textual interest of Egeria and Jerome, the Piacenza pilgrim took special interest in the exotic and the exceptional, and listed many marvels and miracles he saw in the Holy Land, especially plants and objects with curative powers. He returned to his hometown Piacenza with a bag filled with *eulogiae* – relics and souvenirs. All of them were said to have wondrous virtues, and are recorded in his text, which itself becomes a catalogue of miracle-working items and of local pilgrimage customs, a faithful description of the pilgrim’s experience.

Adomnán’s and Hugeburc’s works, the first pilgrimage accounts that were written after the Arab conquest of the Holy Land, are exceptional within the *itineraria* genre since they are not written in the first person and do not report the events of the journey firsthand but are written by a person who had not made the trip but heard of it from the returned pilgrim. The itinerary as we have it today is the outcome of cooperation between the traveler and the writer to whom the story was told.

Adomnán describes how he wrote *De locis sanctis*: Arculf “diligently” described his experiences for Adomnán, who recorded them on tablets and later wrote up his notes as a brief work on parchment. For the learned abbot Adomnán, who read extensively about the holy places in books, Arculf’s main importance was that he saw the places “with his own eyes.” Indeed, the text is a treasure of information about sacred traditions and sacred buildings.

As for Willibald, the story of his pilgrimage is part of his biography, written by his relative, the young nun Hugeburc. The chapters that describe the pilgrimage stand out within the framework of the biography. While all the other chapters are phrased in florid, convoluted language, the travel story is written in simple, direct Latin, and it is clear that this part was left almost untouched and unedited, Hugeburc leaving everything as Willibald told it. According to Hugeburc, the account of Willibald’s pilgrimage was committed to writing in June 778, some fifty years after it took place and told in the presence of witnesses, a unique testimony to the transition from oral transmission to written text.

Pilgrimage literature served as → guide-books for travelers. Several texts note distances and information about the location of stations (*mansiones*), post-stables (*mutationes*), guards, and other details. A few also include graphic maps. At the beginning of the fourth century, Eusebius of Caesarea wrote his *Onomasticon*, a small book that included Hebrew place names translated into Greek and arranged according to the books of the Bible, a map of Judaea, a plan of Jerusalem

and the Temple, and the distances between the various places (only the book of place names has survived). Travelers used such maps and the information on stations and hospices on the road. A list of this sort comprises the main part of The Bordeaux Pilgrim's account. Egeria tells us about the security arrangements in the Roman Empire, while Theodosius specifies exact distances from one place to another, and his text seems to reflect maps that he had in his possession. As for Arculf, he left Adomnán sketches of churches, which was very unusual for the time and constitutes a major contribution to scholarly investigation.

Important information about travel in the ninth century can be gleaned from the account by the Frankish monk, Bernard. He writes about permits, certificates, fees, distances, and travel arrangements. Bernard is also the first pilgrim to tell us of the miracle of the Holy Fire, the miraculous lighting of one of the lamps in the aedicule of the Holy Sepulcher which were extinguished the day before. This was and remains a major miracle of Christianity, renowned throughout the Christian world.

The writers differed in origin, rank, education, gender, and literary skills. The majority belonged to the clergy, either monks or priests, a fact that reflects the interest that the holy places held for this group, their didactic impetus and because for centuries they were the main literate group in western Christendom. Several writers belonged to the church elite of their time. First and foremost was Jerome, but the group included Eucherius of Lyon, Adomnán of Iona and the Venerable Bede. In contrast, Egeria's origin and fortune are totally unknown, and even her name is the result of scholarly investigation.

As for gender, the literature of pilgrimage reflects the great importance of the movement for women, especially in late antiquity, when female religious or lay women could move freely and safely on the roads, and before they were cloistered. Egeria, Paula, Melania the Elder and Melania the Younger are only a few of the many aristocratic Roman

women who made their way to the biblical holy places. The birth of the genre is connected to women, either as authors, like Egeria, or as protagonists, like Paula. Letter 46, probably written in 386 and addressed to a Roman lady, Marcella, a friend who had stayed behind in Rome, has been ascribed to Paula and Eustochium, yet most scholars today believe that it was written by Jerome himself. The gender of the Bordeaux pilgrim has also been questioned recently. In the second half of the first millennium, women's travels became rare, but their interest in pilgrimage can be gleaned from the excitement and admiration of the nun Hugelburc when writing about Willibald's travels in the East.

Pilgrimage literature is evidence of the flourishing of Christian devout travels, yet the number of surviving written works cannot be taken as solid proof of the dimensions of pilgrimage itself. In Eastern Christianity, itineraries, as a literary genre, never took root and thus cannot provide evidence for the dimensions of pilgrimage. (In general, pilgrimage by Eastern Christians has been a subject of much less research than the parallel Western phenomenon). As for Western pilgrimage descriptions, only a handful of early medieval treatises have come down to us, and it seems that even those pilgrims who were capable of writing seldom did so. Thus, while both Arculf and Willibald were educated, their travel stories were written by others. Recent scholarship indicates that, although its dimensions remain modest in comparison with the fourth to the eleventh centuries, travel to the Holy Land in the Carolingian era was much more important than previously recognized. Yet only a handful of written works – about one work per century – provide evidence of this. Moreover, Christian pilgrimage to the East grew considerably beginning in the late tenth century. From that time on, large groups of Western pilgrims made their way to the Holy Land. Among them were kings, princes and noblemen, both religious and secular, and from about 1020 onwards, there is hardly a year for which we do not have evidence of pilgrims traveling to

Jerusalem. In addition to famous individuals and to smaller groups of pilgrims, chronicles and hagiographies describe two large waves of pilgrimage, from France in 1026–27 (the pilgrimage of Richard, Abbot of Saint-Vannes in Verdun) and again in 1033, and another from Germany and France in 1064–65. Hundreds of pilgrims took part in the first wave, and several thousands in the second (7,000 people according to one source and 12,000, according to another). Strangely enough, these huge eleventh-century waves of pilgrims did not produce literary works, a fact that calls for explanation but also causes us to be wary of drawing conclusions about the extent of pilgrimage from the extant itineraries that describe it.

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