

1 Introduction

1.1 About This Element

Egeria's *Itinerarium* is a unique document from the time of the early church.¹ It is one of the few surviving works from antiquity written by a woman and is one of the first Christian travelogues depicting a pilgrimage to the Holy Land. In her *Itinerarium*, Egeria describes – in a fascinating way – not only her travels but also the practices of pilgrimage and the liturgical life in Jerusalem at a time when both of these were developing rapidly. As a pilgrim, Egeria came to the east from “the far western coast of the ocean,” as the seventh-century monk Valerius of Bierzo put it, and Egeria explained for her western readers what she had observed and experienced during her travels. Egeria's *Itinerarium* has been studied extensively but, to date, her role as a communicator between the eastern and western traditions has received less attention. Therefore, this Element focuses on that particular topic.

Christian pilgrimage to Jerusalem and the Holy Land had increased rapidly after the journey made by Emperor Constantine's mother, Helena, to Jerusalem in 326, and by the end of the fourth century the number of pilgrims from all over the empire and even outside its borders was already significant.² In Jerusalem, and at pilgrimage sites in the Holy Land, innovative liturgical and devotional practices emerged.³ At the same time, even the topography of the Holy Land was changing: The emperor Constantine had begun great building projects in Jerusalem and Bethlehem; elsewhere in the Holy Land new churches, monasteries and even an infrastructure for the growing number of pilgrims were being built and pilgrimage sites and routes developed.⁴ The new edifices and the altered layout of the city and the landscape, together with the new practices, such as public processions accompanied by singing and the carrying of candles, made Christians visible and audible in the Holy Land in a completely new way. The character of Jerusalem was, thus, being changed into a Christian city.⁵ Nonetheless, during this century, in many areas in the Holy Land, the Jews still formed a majority of the population and even pagans were well represented, especially in the cities.⁶

¹ *Itinerarium* is henceforward abbreviated “It.” Edition: Maraval, *Itinerarium*. The English translation used in this volume is McGowan and Bradshaw, *The Pilgrimage of Egeria*. All the English quotations come from this translation.

² For an overview of the development of the Christian pilgrimage to the Holy Land, see Hunt, *Holy Land*; Bitton-Ashkelony, *Encountering*.

³ For an overview of the development of the liturgy in Jerusalem and the Holy Land, see McGowan and Bradshaw, *The Pilgrimage of Egeria*, 68–101.

⁴ For the changes in the Holy Land during the fourth century, see Stemberger, *Jews and Christians*; Tabbernee, *Early Christianity*.

⁵ See Laato, “Egeria's *Itinerarium*,” 184.

⁶ For the population in the Holy Land during the fourth century, see Stemberger, *Jews and Christians*, 17–21.

Egeria made her pilgrimage to the biblical sites in 381–384 CE, and during her pilgrimage she wrote detailed notes on what she observed, experienced and learned.⁷ These notes are written in the form of a travel diary, addressed to her friends at home, that is, some kind of community of Christian women. Egeria enthusiastically described her route, the places she visited, the people she met and her impressions of the nature and landscape, but, above all, she focused on the practices of the local Christians and the pilgrims. Egeria's explicit goal in her travel narrative was to communicate her observations and thoughts to her friends who were expected to be interested in these things in particular, and she "was sure" that her readers wanted to know about the things she was going to write about (It. 24.1). She compared the practices in Jerusalem with those at home and explained to her readers how things were done differently "here" (*hic*) in Jerusalem than "among us" (*apud nos*) in the west (It. 27.1). Although Egeria primarily focused on practical matters, and doctrinal theology is not the mainstay of her text, she did transmit information about the contents of faith, too.

Egeria, and other early Christian travel writers, operated in a world where there were some linguistic and cultural differences between the eastern and the western parts of the Roman Empire.⁸ Cultural influences had mostly spread from the east to the west, which even the Romans had admitted earlier,⁹ and this same trend continued even in Egeria's time: Information concerning the liturgical innovations of the church in Jerusalem, the practices of pilgrimage and the different forms of asceticism spread to the west with the pilgrims as they returned home or in their sending of letters. The western pilgrims brought impulses with them to the east, too, but very few traces of these remain in the sources available to us today. Egeria, in spite of enthusiastically reporting on the pilgrimage practices and liturgical innovations in the east, never suggests to her readers that they should imitate the eastern practices, even if we know from other texts that this did indeed happen.¹⁰

As traveling from the west to the biblical places required time, money and effort, not everybody could embark on such a journey. By means of letters and

⁷ For the date, see Wilkinson, *Egeria's Travels*, 237–239 and Section 2.2.3 in this Element.

⁸ See Boatwright, *Peoples*, 66–77.

⁹ Boatwright, *Peoples*, 84–96. The most famous example of the Romans admitting the Greek influence is given by Horace, who famously wrote: *Graecia capta ferum victorem cepit*, "Conquered Greece defeated its savage conqueror" (Hor. Ep. 2.1.156) meaning that even if the uncivilized Romans managed to conquer Greece, the Greek civilization later conquered Rome.

¹⁰ Augustine in his letter to Januarius (ep. 54) gives advice on how to answer people who have seen new practices abroad and want to adopt them in their home churches. Ambrose's famous quote "when in Rome" is found in this letter (ep. 54.3).

travel diaries, however, even those who remained at home not only could obtain information about the biblical places and ecclesial practices in the Holy Land but also had the opportunity to participate in the spiritual journey the writer was experiencing. Egeria's travelogue is one of the earliest examples of communication between a Christian pilgrim to the Holy Land and her community back at home in the west.¹¹ It is so lively and thorough that the readers did not need to make a similar journey themselves.

Egeria's travel journal reveals that she acted as a communicator not only through her travelogue but also orally between Christians she met on her journey. She describes her encounters and the exchange of information with both local Christians who stayed at a particular site, such as the ascetics living on Mount Sinai, and other pilgrims who, like her, traveled to the different holy sites (It. 13.1; 20.5; 23.2–4). This network of pilgrims communicated information about the practices of local Christians and pilgrims as well as theology.

When reading Egeria's text, one gets the impression that she feels at home everywhere and that she always seeks out the company of local Christians. Wherever she goes, she participates in the liturgy and the Eucharist and prays together with local Christians and other pilgrims. This notwithstanding, she describes events, groups and people also from an outsider's perspective, as a reporter, and for example while she writes in detail about the singing, she does not mention whether she herself sung or not. Thus, she belongs to three distinct communities: the community back home, the local Christians in the Holy Land and the group of pilgrims who, like her, were traveling to the biblical sites. Through her texts and through her discussions with others she acts as a communicator.

1.2 Previous Studies

As Egeria's *Itinerarium* is a rich text, dealing with many topics, it is no wonder that it has been studied extensively and from various angles.¹² There are several editions,¹³ and the text has been translated into at least twenty-five languages and to many of these several times.¹⁴ It is an important source for the study of

¹¹ The most important Christian pilgrimage descriptions before Egeria are Eusebius' text about the journey of Helena in 326 (Eus. *Vita Constantini* 3.42–47) and The Pilgrim of Bordeaux in 333 (*Itinerarium Burdigalense*). From about Egeria's own time there are Jerome's letter 108 and Paula and Eustochium's letter, which is preserved as Jerome's letter 46, and Melania the Elder (d. before 410) whose travel is depicted in Palladius' *Historia Lausiaca* 46.

¹² Excellent bibliographies on the editions and studies on Egeria's *Itinerarium* are found in Janeras, "Bibliografia," 353–361, and "Edizioni," 175–186; McGowan and Bradshaw, *The Pilgrimage of Egeria*, 209–213.

¹³ Janeras, "Edizioni," 175–186; McGowan and Bradshaw, *The Pilgrimage of Egeria*, 209.

¹⁴ Janeras, "Edizioni," 175–186.

the practices and theology of the early Christian pilgrimage in the Holy Land;¹⁵ Christian topography and geography;¹⁶ the development of the liturgy and ecclesial life in Jerusalem;¹⁷ early ascetic and monastic life;¹⁸ the Christian views on sacred spaces and edifices;¹⁹ the roles and the possibilities of Christian women in antiquity;²⁰ the use of the Scriptures in Jerusalem and the pilgrimage sites;²¹ and the development of the Latin language in late antiquity.²² In this Element, the views of the scholars are presented and discussed in connection to each of the particular topics.

1.3 The Goal and the Structure of This Element

This Element focuses on a topic which, to a large extent, has not yet been studied in spite of it being central to understanding Egeria's *Itinerarium*: Egeria as a communicator between eastern and western traditions. Egeria came from the Latin-speaking west and for three years participated in the liturgical life in the Holy Land, where Greek and Syriac were the main languages. In her travel diary, she shared information about the practices and theology in the east with her western readers. In this Element, both the contents of her text, namely *what* she wanted to communicate, and the techniques she used to mediate her experiences and learning to her friends at home, that is, *how* she chose to communicate, are scrutinized.

Throughout the Element, I focus on the methods Egeria uses to communicate to her western readers what she experienced and learned in the east and the reasons for the choices she made. She did not report everything she saw and heard but made choices on what she told her readers and how she did this. According to her own words, her choices were based on her personal interests and what she thought were the wishes of her readers. Her personal competences and abilities impacted what she observed and wrote. Additionally, she certainly carried ideas pertaining to what was expected of a pilgrimage story. At the time of her writing, the art of writing Christian travel narratives was only just emerging; in antiquity, however, there had been other forms of travel writing and most probably Egeria was aware of these to some degree. In her travel journal, she writes about discussions with other pilgrims and local Christians

¹⁵ Wilkinson, *Egeria's Travels*; Palmer, "Egeria the Voyager," 39–53; Dietz, *Wandering Monks*; Laato, "What Makes," 169–199.

¹⁶ Wilkinson, *Egeria's Travels*; Laato, "What Makes."

¹⁷ Galadza, *Liturgy*; Day, "Ritualizing Time," 554–586.

¹⁸ Frank, *The Memory*; Dietz, *Wandering Monks*; McGowan and Bradshaw, *The Pilgrimage of Egeria*, 6–9.

¹⁹ Yasin, *Saints*; Laato, "Egeria's Itinerarium."

²⁰ Dietz, *Wandering Monks*; Laato, "What Makes." ²¹ Tafi, "Egeria e la Bibbia."

²² Väänänen, *Le journal-épître d'Egerie*; Ledgeway, "Late Latin."

who were used to meeting pilgrims and these oral traditions influenced her, too. Another important source of inspiration for her was the biblical texts.

In Section 2, Egeria and her travelogue are presented and placed within their context. While there is a scholarly consensus on many matters concerning Egeria's work, there are differing opinions on some things influencing her opportunities and ability to observe and communicate information to her readers: Egeria's status in the church and the society, the character of the group of her addressees and the level of her learning and her linguistic skills. There is discussion concerning whether she and her addressees were ascetic or not,²³ as well as different ideas of what can be said about her social class.²⁴ More importantly, while her familiarity with the Scriptures and her deep interest in liturgical practices have generally been acknowledged,²⁵ some scholars have suggested that she did not understand Greek or that she had only a superficial comprehension of theology and interpretation of the Bible; these deficits would explain her focusing on the practices she observed rather than the contents of the homilies and teaching to which she was exposed.²⁶ As both knowledge of Greek and Christian theology were necessary requirements for conducting proper observations about what was done in the liturgical and ecclesial life in the Holy Land, and for them to be reported correctly to others, it is important to study what Egeria's *Itinerarium* reveals of those matters.

In Section 3, Egeria's routes, the places she visited and people she encountered are examined. It becomes evident that she belonged to three communities: the group of her sisters at home, the community of Christian pilgrims and the Eucharistic community in Jerusalem and in the Holy Land.

Section 4 focuses on Egeria's expressions on the senses, emotions and experiences. It is typical for Egeria to comment on things she saw, heard, smelled, tasted and touched and how it felt to move around, for example to climb a steep mountain. Unlike some other contemporary pilgrims, Egeria does not write about the spiritual senses, such as seeing with the eyes of faith, but prefers to report on the contents of her perceptions.

In Section 5, I discuss Egeria as a mediator of theological and biblical traditions. Egeria is famous for her description of the liturgical life of Jerusalem and her familiarity with the Scriptures has generally been acknowledged. Egeria's account of the liturgy in Jerusalem is the most thoroughly studied topic in her diary; in this Element, it is examined from the viewpoint of the communication: What did she choose to describe in her travel journal and why? Her appreciation of the Scriptures is evident throughout her text. Which

²³ Sivan, "Who Was Egeria?"

²⁴ Palmer, "Egeria the Voyager," 43–45; McGowan and Bradshaw, *The Pilgrimage of Egeria*, 12.

²⁵ McGowan and Bradshaw, *The Pilgrimage of Egeria*, 13. ²⁶ Leyerle, "The Voices," 571.

biblical books she uses, how she uses them and what she writes on the use of the Scriptures in the catechetical instruction and the liturgical life in Jerusalem, and during the travels to the holy sites, are scrutinized. Her frequent use of the Scriptures and explicit comments pertaining to their use in the life of the church, and her detailed descriptions of liturgical feasts, show the centrality of this topic in her thinking.

The final part of Section 5 – “Egeria as a Theologian” – is more tentative than those which precede it, as Egeria does not explicitly express her doctrinal thoughts. I discuss some theological ideas that Egeria’s text witnesses more or less explicitly: the unity of the church, the connection between the earthly Jerusalem and the heavenly Jerusalem, baptism and water and Christology and the Trinity. I suggest that Egeria wanted to mediate to her readers the theological idea of unity and participation, both between Christians in different parts of the Roman Empire (and even outside it) and between Christians in the earthly and heavenly Jerusalem.

The concluding section summarizes the results. Egeria did not merely travel for fun or write a travel diary solely for herself but she did both these things with other people in mind. Her goal was to share with her friends those things she held most important. When writing to her dear sisters in the west, Egeria used several methods to translate what she had learned and experienced in the east into a language her readers in the west were able to understand. She was interested in very many things, ranging from the beautiful fish in Edessa to how catechetical instruction in Jerusalem was organized. Her attention was, however, not drawn to mysticism or doctrinal discussions, as is the case with some other pilgrims from the same time, but rather to how ordinary people participated in the liturgical life in Jerusalem and what the pilgrims experienced during a pilgrimage.

1.4 The Method of This Element

The method of this Element is close reading.²⁷ I also consider viewpoints brought to the fore by the study of lived religion in antiquity,²⁸ in particular

²⁷ For close reading, see Brummett, *Techniques*.

²⁸ For the concept of “study of lived religion,” see Ammerman, *Studying Lived Religion*, and McGuire, *Lived Religion*; for the study of lived religion in antiquity, see Gasparini et al., *Lived Religion*, 1–6; Frank, *Unfinished Christians*, 4–8. According to Gasparini et al., the study of lived religion in antiquity differs from that of today mainly as there is no possibility to gain a direct access to the object of the study, but it can be approached only through ancient literary or material sources. Common to these is the intent to reach not only, or instead of, institutional elite but also other religious agents. In addition of the doctrinal contents of the faith (such as creeds or liturgical texts) even experiences, movements and gestures, as well as the social contexts, such as belonging to different groups and communication within and between communities, are focused on. An important aspect to consider is the change in these matters.

the focus on the ways ordinary Christians lived their lives, the agency of actors other than the institutional elite and the leaders, the communication within and between communities, the expressions of emotions and the idea that sense perception, gestures and movements are an important part of a pilgrim's experience.²⁹

I do not limit myself to this vantage point only, however, because Egeria presents material which falls outside of the focus of the study of ancient lived religion, in particular her notions on the clergy and the contents of theology. The study of lived religion, also lived ancient religion, is often defined as not being interested in theologies and dogma but in “what people actually do, the everyday experience, practices, and interactions that relate to and constitute the religion.”³⁰ When it comes to the study of early Christianity, I agree with Georgia Frank, who opines that lived religion should not be separated from lived theology. She refers, further, to Averil Cameron who warns that when cultural history separates lived religion from theology it misses crucial dimensions of late antique Christianity.³¹ Even if the focus of certain texts – including Egeria's *Itinerarium* – is on the everyday life and practices of ancient Christians, I think it is natural that the same people would be aware of, and interested in, theology. Attention to ritual, material objects, experiences and sense perception does not exclude an interest in dogmatical matters, and, in fact, by describing them, an author can very well be expressing theological views, too. Reading Egeria's text from the perspective of lived religion helps us to see the ordinary, the bodily and the sensory features in her text.

Further, as the study of lived religion in antiquity focuses on the lives of ordinary believers rather than that of the religious or institutional elite, it is important to note that late antique pilgrims and ascetics – those who play a central role in Egeria's work – were not really quite ordinary Christians.³² Some of the pilgrims and ascetics also belonged to the clergy and, in one sense, even lay pilgrims and other kinds of ascetics can be counted as the elite because of their special status and expertise. Egeria herself wrote from the perspective of a pilgrim and might well have been an ascetic herself. However, when describing participation in the life of the church in Jerusalem, she rarely draws a difference between the local ordinary Christians and those pilgrims who had traveled there. She focuses on the viewpoint of the faithful, not the clergy, and thus she provides material for the study of ancient lived religion.

²⁹ For the study of sense perception in antiquity, see Smith, *Sensing*; Harrison, *The Art of Listening*; Day, *Hearing*.

³⁰ Frank, *Unfinished Christians*, 5.

³¹ Frank, *Unfinished Christians*, 7; Cameron, “Patristics,” 283–302.

³² Frank, *Unfinished Christians*, 8–14.