

**“RIGHT FROM THE OTHER END OF THE EARTH”
EGERIA’S PILGRIMAGE AND MONASTICISM**

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Egeria, a southwest European woman (presumably a nun) travels during the years 381-384 across the Roman Empire in the Middle East to participate lively and personally the Liturgy of the whole ecclesiastical year in Jerusalem as well as to visit the “holy places” – as many as possible – the monks and ascetics in their spiritual and personal surroundings. As the diary of the pilgrimage is divided into two parts, the first a commentary to the journey and another, second part as description of the holy liturgy in Jerusalem, Egeria mentions monks and ascetics in both cases in a different way.

Let us outline why her itinerary is worth reading: First, Egeria bears witness for her personal belief as a woman of 4th centuries’ Christianity. It is not only for that reason why we should pay her attention, she is also a female (!) pilgrim from West to East in Late Antiquity and therefore an important contribution to Patristics; She lets us know about the socio-geographical context of her time. And finally, the itinerary is an essential source for the description of 4th centuries’ liturgy in Jerusalem. The *Itinerarium Egeriae* is a highly personal document with an exclusive focus on the “pilgrim’s time” that demonstrates last but not least how pilgrimage enabled pious believers of different social classes to enjoy a singular freedom of movement.

Egeria’s interest into monasticism, asceticism and the religious life clearly seems to result from personal membership in a religious, female community. The letter of Valerius (c.650) calls Egeria *sanctimonialis* (nun) and *virgo* (virgin). But this is not enough to draw a reliable conclusion on her class. The financial background for such a journey and the freedom of movement are grounds for the assumption that she was a member of an religious upper-class circle, which were not unpopular in 4th century’s Roman Empire. Personally, Egeria is quite curious, as she let us know: *ut sum satis curiosa*. Her language is marked by the change of the Latin itself in the late antiquity. It goes without say-

ing and it is highly obvious that Egeria admires “her” monks, ascetics and bishops. For that, she is rather uncritical concerning information she gets by her “holy” travel guides.

The objective of this paper is to analyse the status of monks, ascetics and the early monasticism within this certain pilgrimage. I want to outline not only the historical development of monasticism as a background for Egeria’s description, but much more her personal view on monks and ascetics. For this, the paper is divided into two main sections. The first part focuses on the mention of monasticism within the description of Egeria’s Journey. Section two then moves on to consider the reference of monks and ascetics in the description of the ecclesiastical year in Jerusalem. Finally, the last conclusion offers some historical recommendations on the social status of monks and ascetics, the role they played in ancient society and a general historical development.

First Part: Description of the Journey

I. The travel to Mount Sinai

At the early beginning, Egeria’s mention of places as well as people is conspicuous: Hereby, on the way to “Syna”, or Sinai, it is not only the mount which is holy – “mons sanctus”- but also those guides – *deductores sancti* – who appear as extraordinary.

They guide this group of pilgrims, and they comment the route respectively. In this special case, they even suggest to follow an old tradition, which means they should pray at this location as “it is usual for people who come here”. Apart from the holy guides, the Bible is, as it refers to places, another travel guide. These *deductores sancti* led the pilgrims to each recognized biblical place, which was taken for granted. In this context, Egeria tells us they were guided “*cum hominibus Dei*”.

On the Saturday evening, Egeria and the group arrived at the mountain and discovered some cells, which she calls “*monasteria*”. The monks living there received them very hospitably, showing them every kindness. Further, she mentions a church with a priest. Together with the priest and the local monks, they set off to climb the mountains. A presbyter, the one appointed for the church, came out of his cell. Egeria describes him as a “healthy old man, a monk from

his boyhood and an „ascetic” . Several other presbyters met them too, and all the monks living near the mountain came if they were not prevented from coming by their age or their health. After departing from the church, they received from the presbyters so-called “blessings”, that means fruits which grow on the little soil of this mountain’s foot. These fruits are the result of the holy monks’ (sancti monachi”) own hard work, who harvest and plant shrubs, set out orchards or vegetable-beds round their cells (“monasteria”). After the “blessings”, the holy men willingly agreed to point them out all the different places. They showed them all the places they wanted to see, and also the ones they knew about themselves. But the holy men, *illi sancti*, showed and pointed out to them in detail.

After the first mountain, the pilgrims climbed up to another one, which is called “in Choreb”, “On Horeb” and has at its top a church as well. Hereon the holy men were kind enough to show them again everything. After arriving, according to the place, a Biblical passage was read to them. When they had made the Offering, they set off, accompanied by the presbyters and monks (presbyteris vel monachis).

According to Egeria’s description, the Burning Bush out of which the Lord spoke to Moses, was at the head of the valley with a church and (many) cells . Cum sanctis ipsis, the pilgrims ate together with them in the garden near the Bush, and stayed there for the night. The next day, the holy men (*sancti illi*) were showing them different places along the valley. For this route, especially the Books of Moses were used as travel guides. On the same day, they came across some more of the monks, who were very holy, but could not be with them when they made the Offering on the Mount simply through being too old and too weak. So, “they were most kind and courteous in the reception they gave us when we came to their cells”.

At this chapter, Egeria points out that after having visited the holy men who lived there, they can now go back to Faran. Egeria expresses her thankful emotions by saying “And I cannot do enough express my gratitude to all the holy men who so kindly and willingly welcomed so unimportant a person as me to their cells and, what is more, took me round all the biblical sites I kept asking to see”. Further, she tells us, that most of those holy men who lived at the Mount of God or near it, were good enough to escort them all the way to Paran.

It seems that all the way back, Egeria kept asking to see the different places mentioned in the Bible, which were all pointed out to her by the holy men – the clergy and the monks with them – *hoc est clerici vel monachi*. Arriving at the Heroe's City (Heroöpolis), which Egeria describes as a bigger village, a township (come, from the Greek word *κόμη/vicus*), and contains of a church, some martyria and many cells. The pilgrim altogether visited each of them to see the holy monks, as usual, travelling through the Land of Goshen.

The holy bishop of Arabia taught Egeria (and her pilgrims? “we”) about the so-called sycamore tree, which is the Dendros Aletheias (*dendros alethiae*). The bishop was so kind to meet them at Ramses. He kept them for two days. It was Egeria, who knew him quite well, as she says, since her time at the Thebaid. She describes him as “a man of some age, of a godly life since the time he became a monk, and an approachable man, who is very good at welcoming pilgrims and also very knowledgeable about God's Scriptures”, further “a holy man, a true man of God” – *sanctus et vere homo Dei*, “brought up in a cell since boyhood, and this is how he came to know so much about the Bible, and to live the faultless life”.

II. The excursion to Mount Nebo

From Jerusalem, one presbyter and a number of deacons as well as several brothers, monks, accompanied Egeria and her group. The local presbyter from Livias guided the group to an extraordinary place near Mount Nebo with a tiny church and many monks living there and “of the kind known here as ascetics”. Egeria describes them again as very hospitable and welcoming indoors. There they joined them in prayer, and following that, they gave the pilgrims their “blessings”, which is normal for them, after having welcomed people. After that, they went to the spring between the church and the cells for praying. Setting off for the mountain, the holy clergy and monks accompanied the group as well as a group of monks, living near the spring, did.

Thereon the holy guides led the group to the place of Moses tomb', who was buried there by angels themselves. The presbyters and monks pointed out the tradition which they took over from their predecessors.

III. The Travel to the Tomb of Job

Egeria points out that she “saw many holy monks from those parts (i.e. the land of Uz) when they came to Jerusalem on pilgrimage to the holy places” and they told her about Uz.

On her way to Uz, she passes a village called Sedima (Salem), the town of King Melchizedek. The holy presbyter and clergy of the place kindly came to meet them. The first one, Egeria describes as follows: “He was an oldish man with an excellent knowledge of the Bible, and had been in charge of the place from the time when he was a monk. Later on we came to know a good many bishops who spoke highly of his way of life, and said that he was certainly the right man to be in charge of this place [...]”. Further she asked him for the description of the way to the place where Saint John baptized. The holy presbyter continues: “A great many brothers, holy monks from different parts, travel here to wash at this place”. Even this presbyter gives some “blessings”, apples from St John Baptist’s orchard, as well as the monks living in it, do.

Travelling through the Jordan valley, Egeria mentions the cell of a brother, a monk. Inquisitive as Egeria was, she asked for the reason to settle down here for building a cell. It is the valley of Cherith, in which the holy prophet Elijah the Tishbite stayed in the reign of King Ahab.

IV. The Travel to Syrian Mesopotamia

From Jerusalem to Antioch

God moved Egeria with a desire to travel to this country - “The holy monks there are said to be numerous and of so indescribably excellent a life that I wanted to pay them a visit”. Next, Egeria mentions the city of Batanis, which has a church with a “really godly bishop who is both monk and confessor” and several martyria. In Edessa Egeria went straight to the martyria of holy Thomas. There she visited the monks, of which some lived among the martyria, while others had their cells further away from the city where it was more private. The holy bishop “was a truly devout man, both monk and confessor”. He welcomed her generously and offered her to show “all the places Christians wish to see”.

The next stop is Charra with another “very godly man”, monk and confessor as bishop. It seems to be the same procedure: The bishop took them to church (out-

side the city), he guides the group, celebrates a little liturgy consisting of prayer, reading, psalm and second prayer as well as the final blessing. This time they are in front of the fundamentals of Abraham's house. There is also a martyrium, which is the tomb of a certain holy monk called Helpidius. The 23rd April is his martyrium day, to which "all the monks of Mesopotamia have to come to Charra, including the illustrious ones called ascetics who dwell in the desert." Egeria now gets to see there holy and "truly dedicated" monks of Mesopotamia, "including some of whose reputation and holy life we heard long before we got there". Egeria heard that those monks never leave their places in the desert while fulfilling great things, except at Easter and the feast of this martyr. They were "far kinder than I deserved, greeting me warmly, and having conversations". Finally, after this day, there was not a monk to be seen. Further, apart from a few clergy, no Christians live in this city, not any holy monks.

She gets in contact with the local bishop, who has another open ear for her and tells her: "Tell me what it is, my daughter, and if I know I will tell you". Egeria asked the bishop for the well where Jacob watered the animals which were being fed by Rachel. The bishop offered Egeria to accompany her to this place, if she wants to visit them. According to the bishop, "there is a holy church there and a great many monks, ascetics and very godly men". Further, as Egeria comments, the other holy bishops and holy monks told always about God's Scriptures, the deeds of holy monks, "whether it was a miracles done by those who had already passed away, or the deeds done today by those ,still in the body' , especially the ascetics". Following Egeria, the monks' conversation is always either about God's Scriptures or the deeds of the great monks. Afterwards, the bishop took the group to the well of Jacob, where meanwhile a church has been built nearby. The only people there were the clergy of the church, and some monks "who had cells nearby". The bishop told Egeria some amazing happenings about the way of their life. After a prayer in the church, they went round with the bishop to visit the holy monks in their cells. Not only were they "kind" and welcomed Egeria entering their cells, but also "entertained" her with "the kind of conversation which befits monks". Afterwards, they gave Egeria and the people with her "blessings", as it is their custom. After having seen all the relevant places, the group had to wave goodbye to the holy bishop as well as to the holy monks, who kindly escorted them so far.

V. Return to Constantinople

On her way back to Constantinople, Egeria called on a bishop, after arriving at the city of Seleucia of Isauria. She describes him as “a very godly man who had been a monk”. Not very far from the city, there was holy Thecla’s on a small hill. Round the holy church, there was a “tremendous number of cells for men and women”. There she met her dear friend, who she knew since her stay in Jerusalem, the holy deaconess called Marthana. “She was the superior of some cells of apotactites or virgins”. There are many cells on that hill, in the middle a great wall round the martyrion itself. Egeria spent there two days seeing “all the holy monks and apotactites, the men as well as the women”.

Second Part: The Description of the Liturgy in Jerusalem

Within this part of Egeria’s diary, she mentions “monazontes and parthenae” firstly in the context of the vigils. The deacons take turns with the monazontes in speaking the prayers between the hymns and antiphons. At another passage, it is the monazontes’ duty to go back to the Anastasis church to sing psalms and antiphons until daybreak directly after the departure of the bishop. Just a few lay men and women like to stay on there until daybreak as well, but as a result of this, it is the monazontes’ task foremost. Another responsibility of the monks is to accompany the bishop from one church to another, such Egeria describes after the morning Eucharist in the basilica of Martyrium on Gologta to the Anastasis church: “When the dismissal has taken place in the church [...] the monazontes lead the bishop with singing to the Anastasis”.

Next, Egeria describes the whole liturgical year in Jerusalem, starting with Epiphany. In this context, she mentions monazontes on a procession back to Jerusalem, on which the whole group of believers has to go slightly slower regarding the monks. After the service with the bishop at the Anastasis, the monazontes stay longer again and remain until the daybreak reciting hymns. Another context is the Octave of Epiphany in Bethlehem. The local clergy, the priest and further the monazontes as well, celebrate this feast of joy. During that season, the bishop must celebrate the festival in Jerusalem. Therefore, at night, every-

one, apart from the monks, returns with him to Jerusalem. For the monks in Bethlehem, it is their responsibility to keep vigil in the church, sing hymns and antiphons until the day.

On the background of fasting, Egeria emphasizes the apotactites. She highlights that those “people known here as apotactites as a rule have only one meal a day not only during Lent, but also during the rest of the year”. An exception is the time between Easter and Pentecost, during which absolutely nobody fasts, even if he is an apotactite. Even during the Octave of Easter, the apotactites accompany the bishop, the newly baptized people and all the other believers to ceremony in the Eleona church. For the Sunday after Easter, Egeria claims that all people and apotactites take the bishop with singing to the Anastasis for the Lucernar. After Pentecost, they are portrayed again, as they are mentioned as present at cock-crow. Finally, at the festival of the church’s consecration, Egeria underscores monks and apotactites again. At this time, it is usual to celebrate eight days. Therefore, monks and apotactites come “not only from the provinces having large numbers of them, such as Mesopotamia, Syria, Egypt, and the Thebaid, but from every region and province. Not one of them fails to make for Jerusalem to share the celebrations of this solemn feast.”

Conclusion

When in 1884 Italy the middle part of a late antiquity’s pilgrimage diary written by a woman was found, it was a single one. Already in 372, Melania the Older accompanied by Rufinus and in 383 Melania the Younger travelled to Palestine. Palestine had already been visited by Christians, but it is doubtful whether one can call these visits ‘pilgrimages’ as such. The Christian visitors prior to the fourth century were educated men (and sometimes women), often scholars, who came out of scholarly interest. But, Christian pilgrimage is much more than mere Christian travel or scholarly investigation. A pilgrim goes to a specific ‘holy’ site in order to recall events that took place there and pray. The experience is much more emotional than intellectual, and lays great store on the site’s imbued aura of sanctity and importance. Finally, the unique of Egeria is that she wrote her diary on her own, in contrary to the others, whose diaries wrote other people. Concerning the time of the event, we have a possible timeframe between 363 and 540.

After the end of Roman persecution with the Edict of Tolerance by Galerius (311) and the Edict von Milan by Constantine and Licinius (313), Christian asceticism, although originally combatted, went the way of victory. Soon, monks and virgins became Christian ideals. Austerity, or *ἐγκράτεια*, was now appreciated as honourable gift. But, ascetic lifestyle is primarily defined in general as austerity within a marriage. But it became more and more popular, that unmarried young women (“virgins”) joined the class of widows. Generally spoken, with honouring the austerity more, marriage and sexual relation became more and more devalued. When Justinian gives monasteries for male and female same rules, this is an expression of equality. In ascetical context we do not find only the two models of Hermitism (the prototype is the life of Saint Antony) and the Coinobitism (with the prototype of Pachomios’ life, who founded bigger monasteries and gave them a steady rule), but a third one, the spiritual marriage. This extraordinary way of living a marriage in chastity seemed to be rather common during the first centuries. This ideal of brotherly and sisterly love evoked prohibition. It was charged with offending public decency. Immediately, “syneisacts” becomes a swearword.

In Egypt in the third century the great Origen knew of the impulse for “flight” (anachoresis) from the world, but observed that one could not flee one’s mind; his own struggles culminated in self-emasculation. Around AD 270 in Egypt, however, a charismatic 18-year-old Anthony renounced worldly wealth and family connections to pursue a spiritual path on the limen between Egyptian desert and city (Athanasius, Life of Antony). The generation that followed witnessed the appearance of significant numbers of ascetic individuals throughout the Christian Near East. The monk Pachomius (AD 292-346), whom I mentioned before, led both men and women to seek “a life in common” (koinobion) in Egypt under close supervision and guidance, establishing a pattern of community life that was to exert a powerful influence on Christian culture.

In general, why did the holy men (and women) come to play such an important role in the society of the fifth and the sixth century? Their popularity is explained as a product of the oppression and conflict that the social historian often tends to see as a blatant feature of East Roman society. However, such a view sees too little of the life of the holy men. Firstly, the dramatic interventions of holy men in the high politics of the Empire were long remembered. Secondly, it is a simple matter for the religious historian to use the literature of the ascetic world to evoke the feelings that crystallized around the holy man, who had con-

quered his body in spectacular feats of mortification and gained power over a world ruled by the demons. Lastly, the rise of the holy man to such eminence in later Empire has long been attributed in the derogatory perspective of many classical scholars to the decline of Greek civilization in the Near East. Foremost we must find our holy men. Undoubtedly, Syria was the great province for ascetic stars. This fact itself calls for explanation: Though, Egypt was the cradle of monasticism and the country in which the theory and practice of the ascetic life reached its highest pitch of articulateness and sophistication. Yet the holy men who influenced the ideal of the saint in society came from Syria, and, later, from Asia Minor and Palestine – not from Egypt. However, this lacuna has little to do with the isolation of Egypt under the Monophysite Patriarchs. Further, the holy men in Egypt did not impinge on society around them in the same way as in other provinces. Moreover, Egypt provided the first evidence for the formation of lay and clerical clientele around the holy men. In addition, Egypt was, contrary to Syria, a real desert and provided different initial situations.

Our findings can be summarised as follows: In fact, Egeria does not speak consistently about the different types of monasticism and asceticism. Somehow, the one turns into the other. A tentative conclusion at this point would be that she differs between the clergy (deacons, presbyters and bishops), monks (monachi, monachos and parthenae, virgins) and ascetics (male and female, anachorites). In addition, the monks' duties were the function as travel guides, storytellers, farmers, hosts and spiritual examples. What a monk makes so unique is his "holy" and "indescribable" lifestyle.

By way of conclusion, let me finally lay emphasis on the result, that we cannot deduct any deeper interest for Egeria in the how and the why of ascetic practices or the longing for imitation of these practices. The text definitely gives us no evidence for such supposition. But for Egeria, the pilgrimage itself was at least some kind of "spiritual nourishment".

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