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God-Inspired Wanderlust— The Lady Pilgrim Egeria

IN 1884, the archaeologist Gian Francesco Gamurrini made an astonishing discovery in the Biblioteca della Fraternita dei Laici in Arezzo, Tuscany: a previously unknown manuscript from the *Codex Arentinus* in the Benedictine monastery of Monte Cassino, dating from the eleventh century and containing a fragment of a pilgrim's account. Gamurrini must have been all the more surprised when he realized from the salutation “loving sisters” that it was a woman who had written those lines, apparently for her spiritual community. The manuscript sat in the archive for seven hundred years.

The preserved notes lead researchers to the conclusion that the pilgrim did not just make a short detour to Jerusalem, but undertook a journey lasting almost four years, which took her to Constantinople, Egypt, the Sinai, the Jordan region, Jerusalem, Cilicia and even beyond the eastern Mediterranean as far as Mesopotamia. Once she arrived in Constantinople, she finally wrote her report in the first-person perspective.

The standard dating for her travels is that the journey took place between 381 and the spring of 384, when she returned to

Constantinople. At this time, a pilgrimage was not only a spiritual quest, it was the only way for women to leave their familiar surroundings and get to know other countries. The report, written in an unusual Latin reads as if the pilgrim, presumably called Egeria, always had the Bible at hand as a “travel guide”—it was newly translated by John Wilkinson (1971). And she even wrote that “the relevant passage from the Bible was always read” as she was visiting the physical landscape. She wanted to locate the biblical stories geographically and was particularly interested in the tombs of martyrs, as well as the places and landscapes hermits had retreated to. She applied the term “holy” to mountains, buildings, and people. In the hermitages, she prayed with the monks, recited psalms and received their blessings. Egeria saw herself as a traveller on behalf of God and wanted to feel close to him. We have to remember that she was a Roman citizen within a Roman and mostly pagan world.

She wrote about Mount Sinai, Mount Horeb, Mount Nebo, and the Tell of Sedima. Her narrative of the Sinai excursion ends with an expression of gratitude to God “that He has deigned to enable me, unworthy and undeserving, to traverse all the places which I did not deserve to see”. The report does not contain a description of Jerusalem and the West Bank, as these parts have unfortunately been lost, but there are notes describing the holy week—services and liturgical ceremonies—in Jerusalem’s churches and, in connection with this, references to the shape of the tomb building. This was consecrated as part of a church complex under Constantine on September 9, 335, thus about half a century before Egeria arrived—265 years after the destruction of the Second Temple by the Romans under Titus. According to Egeria’s notes, there was an outer and an inner room in the tomb, the latter of which she refers to as the “spelunca”. She also mentioned a lamp in the inner

room and bars. In Jerusalem, she met a woman whom she described as one of her best friends; she is the only one that she mentions by name in her report: “sancta diaconissa Marthana”. However, we don’t get a real feel for what it was like to be there at the time.

Egeria engaged the people she met in conversations about biblical topics. Foreigners, unless they are clerics and monks traveling with her, were only mentioned in passing: the nomadic Saracens traveling with camels, for example. Otherwise, there is an almost complete indifference to anybody or anything that was non-Christian in her report. However, she must have noticed them, but chose not to write about them. Her focus was simply on other things.

Gian Francesco Gamurrini initially assumed that the pilgrim must have been the Gallic noblewoman Silvia or Silvania, the sister of Rufinus of Aquileia, whose journey to the Holy Land is documented for the year 383. At the beginning of the twentieth century, a letter from Valerius of Bierzo, a Galician monk, dated to the seventh century, led to a new attribution. It mentioned an extremely enterprising nun who had come “right from the other end of the earth”. Since she compared the colour of the Red Sea with that of the “Ocean”, thus this can be understood as a reference to Galicia in the north-west of the Iberian Peninsula—and set out “with all her strength, undaunted in heart, on the immeasurable journey across the whole world” and was “braver than all the men of the century” (Férotin 1903).

As the original letter is not available, but has only been handed down through other manuscripts from the 10th to 13th centuries, her name appears in different but always melodious variations: as Egeria, Eiheria, Echeria, Heteria, Aetheria and Etheria, although there are several reasons in favour of “Egeria”, so that this name is usually used today.

The exact identity of this extraordinary lady pilgrim is still surrounded by questions that will probably never be fully resolved. Presumably she was of a high social status due to the considerable costs of such a journey, and her knowledge of Greek indicates an excellent education. It is also known that the Bishop of Arabia travelled to meet her and accompanied her with a military escort in the eastern Nile Delta, which, at the time, was considered a dangerous zone.

The question of whether she was really an abbess is doubtful: If she was, would it really have been possible for her to take a whole four years off from her responsibilities and duties? Also, there is nothing to be found which could substantiate her wish to return to the West. She wrote: “if I am still alive and able to discover further places, I will either tell you about them face to face, if God grant it, or at any rate will write to you about them if my plans change.” Did her correspondents at home ever see Egeria again? We just don’t know.

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