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Hospitalités dans l'Antiquité méditerranéenne : sources, enjeux, pratiques, discours

Accommodating Female Pilgrims in the Late Antique Holy Land

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From as early as the fourth or fifth centuries AD, we can name as many as a dozen women who undertook pilgrimage to the holy sites of Palestine and Egypt – and can make note of the dozens more nameless ones who are mentioned in the saints' lives of the times. It is far from surprising that pilgrimage became a popular form of religious expression for Christian women – journeying in search of a cure or divine intervention had been popular among women for centuries, as the fourth century BC cure lists from Epidauros in Greece demonstrate. However, it becomes clear from some objections registered by prominent Church leaders, that the religiously charged environment in which pilgrimage took place did present pious women with obstacles in their quest for their objective. These obstacles presented themselves both on the journey itself and at the destination, and were especially concerned with issues of accommodation.

Objections

One of the most famous objections to pilgrimage was expressed by Gregory of Nyssa (c. 335–c. 395) from Cappadocia. In his letter *On Pilgrimages*, he denounces

pilgrimage to the Holy Land partly on the grounds of the sordidness of the journey itself.

For instance, it is impossible for a woman to accomplish so long a journey without a conductor; on account of her natural weakness ...whether she leans on the help of a stranger, or on that of her own servant, she fails to observe the law of modesty; and as the inns and caravansarays and cities of the east are so free and indifferent to vice, how will it be possible for one passing through such fumes to escape without smarting eyes? (*Ep. 2*, trans. Silvas 2007, 119)

A similar objection is raised by the monk Evagrius of Pontus in an effort to discourage a deaconess named Severa from making the journey from Jerusalem to his monastery in Nitria in Egypt.

I do not see what she will gain from such a long walk over such a laborious route; whereas, with the help of the Lord I could easily demonstrate the damage she and those with her will suffer...I wonder how, travelling over those distances, they can avoid drinking the water of Gihon, either in their thoughts or in their deeds. Such behaviour is misguided for those who live in chastity. (Trans. Elm, 1994, p. 277)

While it is important not to decontextualize these arguments from their original debates (for more on this, see Bitton-Ashkelony, 2005, esp. Chapter 1, and Elm, 1994, pp. 279–83), it is interesting that both authors focus on the difficulty of the journey itself as the main detriment in travelling for alleged spiritual benefit. Both these letters date to the 380's before the expansion of pilgrimage infrastructure that took place in the fifth and sixth centuries. We may see an echo of this lack of infrastructure in Egeria's extensive pilgrimage, also dated to the 380's. She makes frequent references to residing in *mansiones*, which is a term typically reserved for the overnight lodgings of the Roman imperial transport network, the *cursus publicus*.

Although Gregory and Evagrius directed their concerns at women, the concerns over security and sanctity on the journey were not necessarily gender-specific.

These concerns, combined with the drive for Christian charity to include hospitality and the concomitant increase in the number of monasteries attached to holy sites meant that Christian communities were better placed to provide institutional hospitality to pilgrims. This led to the creation of what E.D. Hunt has designated as an “alternative system of Christian hospitality” (Hunt, 1984, p. 65) which provided accommodation at intervals similar to secular travel networks. (Whiting, forthcoming) This made it possible to travel long distances without, in theory, having to rely on anything other than Christian institutions for accommodation. However, there was one problem that this system of accommodation did not resolve, and that was the issue of accommodation for female pilgrims.

Obstacles of access and accommodation

I have discussed elsewhere ([Whiting, 2016](#)) the paradox that existed between the ideal of monastic seclusion and the Christian duty of charity and hospitality. This paradox was especially pronounced along gender lines. Women were customarily forbidden entry to male monasteries, and vice versa. This could be especially problematic at pilgrimage sites that formed around a holy man during his lifetime or after his death, where the structure of the monastic regimen predated the popular appeal of the site.

There are numerous examples of this in the hagiographies. In principle, adherents of the religious life were expected to avoid the company of the opposite sex. This created problems of access, especially for consulting a holy man living within a monastic community. For example, women were forbidden from entering the enclosure where St Simeon the Elder Stylite lived atop his column. This prohibition even extended to his own mother. This obstacle of access could persist even after a saint’s death if his shrine lay within the confines of the monastery. This is made clear from an episode in the *Life of Euthymius* in the Judean Desert, of a woman from a local village who came to pray to St Euthymius for a cure.

Since no woman enters within, the woman remained for three days and nights in front of the monastery, fasting and praying continuously; each evening she took holy oil from the tomb of the saint and drank the liquid from his inextinguishable lamp. In

consequence, she was freed from the demon by the saint appearing to her in the third night and saying, ‘See, you are well! Return to your home.’ From then on she returned in gratitude each year to the monastery, to give thanks to God and to the saint; she would kiss the jambs of the main entrance and, as an expression of her thanks, provide a festal meal for the fathers of the monastery. (Ch. 54, trans. Price, 1991, p. 74)

This remains the practice even to the present day at the monastery of St Sabas, also in the Judean Desert. There women assemble at the gates but are forbidden to enter the monastery itself, and thus prevented from worshipping directly at St Sabas’ tomb.



Women at the entrance to the monastery of Mar Saba in the Judean Desert (c)Ross Burns/Manar al-Athar

This restricted access was not universal, however. Some Syrian holy men were willing to minister directly to women, as described by Theodoret of Cyrrhus in the *Historia Religiosa*. However, given the climate of the time that Theodoret was writing, dominated by doctrinal disputes and clashes over ecclesiastical authority, it is possible that this may have been a means of subverting the

religious authority of the ecclesiastical hierarchy, rather than representative of cultural norms.

Furthermore, in the accounts of famous female pilgrims, like Paula and the two Melanias, and even Egeria, we see that these women also had a high degree of access to the holy monks at the sites they visited, and were received hospitably. There are several possible explanations for this. First, it is possible that regional differences (reflected in doctrinal differences) may account for different attitudes towards women. Second, the status of the women themselves may be the determining factor. The degree of access could result from these women being themselves adherents of the religious life (in the case of Paula and the two Melanias, being represented by their biographers as holy women in their own right), and this placed them on a more equal footing with male monastics. Beyond this, there is their status as members of the aristocracy. They were well-connected to powerful families and to influential clerics and central figures of Christian learning. Also, their wealth and demonstrated willingness to act as patronesses of churches and monasteries may also have opened doors.

From the obstacle of access follows the obstacle of accommodation. This concern is particularly acute for shrines that are in the desert, like the Judean Desert examples above, or at more remote shrines enclosed within monasteries, located over a day's return journey from settlements. In areas close to cities or settlements, there would be more options : commercial inns (of the sort Gregory of Nyssa warned against), and a greater availability of church-run hostelries, women could stay in hostels attached to the church, or in the porches of the church itself. There is also the possibility at monasteries which possessed a hostel which was physically separate from the monastery enclosure, that women and men could both be discreetly lodged in the same building. We must also not assume that purpose-built structures were necessary. It is possible to sleep out in the desert, in tents or in caves, and the discovery of graffiti bearing women's names on a cliff face in the Judean Desert suggests that this might have been where female pilgrims camped.

Potential Solutions

Let us now turn to examine some of the solutions for accommodating female pilgrims described in the sources. For the most part they are contingent on the

pilgrim's own status, whether members of the religious life, members of the aristocratic class, etc.

It appears that the greatest flexibility and access was granted to fellow adherents of the religious life. One of the earliest accounts of female pilgrims to the Holy Land is contained within a letter of Athanasius of Alexandria (“Letter to Virgins who went and Prayed in Jerusalem and Returned”), dating to the third quarter of the fourth century.

As you were leaving this holy Bethlehem, you travelled quite rightly in many tears from your heart's distress because you recalled that beautiful way of life... because you were leaving these pearls, you were sorrowful. Hence, as you were saying farewell to your sister virgins, upon your breasts the tears of each of you mingled with those of her companion. (Trans. Brakke, 1995, p. 292)

This letter clearly indicates that while in Bethlehem, the nuns from Alexandria resided with the nuns there, and that this arrangement was acceptable and even beneficial thanks to their shared status in the religious life.



Women praying at the Church of the Nativity, Bethlehem (c)Emilio Bonfiglio/Manar al-Athar

Another option was to rely on friendship and kinship ties. This is particularly in evidence among the elite pilgrims mentioned above, among whom the practice of reciprocal hospitality was a cultural norm (Whiting, 2013). Thus the noblewoman Paula, when breaking her journey to the Holy Land in Cyprus, stayed with bishop Epiphanius of Salamis, receiving in turn hospitality which she had granted him in Rome.

However, this convention could also be subverted in the interests of Christian asceticism, as when Paula turns down an invitation to stay with the proconsul of Palestine in Jerusalem, opting instead for “a humble cell”. (Jerome, Ep. 108.9)

Similarly, Melania the Younger chose to remain in the pilgrim hostel attached to

the Holy Sepulchre upon first arriving in Jerusalem, to highlight her commitment to the ideals of asceticism and poverty. (Gerontius, *Vita Sanctae Melaniae*, 35, Gorce, 1962, p. 193-5)

Of course there was the majority of women who did not have this kind of access. We know that male pilgrims from the laity could lodge at monastery hostels, but what became of the women who also appear frequently in the sources? We might expect a parallel network of female monasteries to have been established to facilitate female pilgrimage. However, with the exception of Egeria's autobiographical account, all our pilgrim tales are written by men. This takes on significance, as the texts regarding female monasticism appear to focus on tales of extraordinary behaviour: extreme seclusion, or crossdressing infiltration of male monasteries. The gendered authorship of the sources throws into question whether female monastic communities really were more secluded than male ones and less likely to provide hospitality, or whether they preserve a fascination with aberrant female behaviour.

It becomes clear that double monasteries were crucial for accommodating female as well as male pilgrims. Double monasteries – where male and female communities are set up near each other but not intermingling – were established e.g. by Paula at Bethlehem and by the two Melanias at the Mount of Olives. Even when not explicitly mentioned in the sources, it seems likely that women would be travelling with men, be they family members, slaves, or guides. Double monasteries provided opportunities for accommodating mixed groups in an appropriate way. An exceptionally clear indication of this is provided by the story of the soldier from Gregory of Nyssa's *Life of Macrina*. The soldier and his wife travelled to visit Macrina to pray for a cure for their daughter's illness. Once there, the family is obliged by convention to separate.

When we came within that divine abode, I and my yoke-fellow separated according to sex during our visit to the philosophers in that place. I went to the men's quarters, governed by your brother Peter, while she entered within the virgins' quarters to be with the holy one...

When the feasting came to an end and we had finished the prayer, the great Peter having entertained us and cheered us with his own

hands, and the holy Macrina having sent off my yoke-fellow with every courtesy one could wish for, we then returned along the same road cheerfully and delightedly, each telling the other what had befallen us as we made our journey. (Ch. 40.3-41.1, trans. Silvas, 2008, 146-7)

From this it becomes clear that double monasteries were crucial for all family members to participate in the pilgrimage. Communication – the sharing of stories – was the key to translating the experience.

Many factors need to be considered when trying to puzzle out the *realia* of women's pilgrimage. There is the gendered nature of the sources : are we reading about real female behaviour, or a male perception or idealization of female behaviour ? Geographic distinctions play a role, as do doctrinal differences, e.g., between the Chalcedonian monks of the Judean Desert and the mainly Monophysite monks of Syria. There is the pilgrim's own status to be considered and changes over time reflecting the development of infrastructure. The sources discussed here present a picture of segregated women's and men's accommodation, but not of a segregated travel environment. From what we can see, gender does not seem to have had a major impact how women travelled compared to men, or their choice of destination. But it did have an impact on where they lodged, and potentially how they worshipped and structured their encounter with the sacred.

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