

Research Seminar
The Connected Sea:
Migration and Mobility in
the Ancient Mediterranean
 | Faculty of Arts

Travel and Tourism in Late Antiquity

Aspects of the Rapid Development of Christian Religious Travel in the 4th Century A.D.

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‘People travelled for numerous reasons,’ so J.W. Drijvers submits at the beginning of his piece on travel and pilgrimage literature.¹ Be it ‘commerce, government affairs, religion, education, military business or migration,’ people ‘made use of the elaborate system of roads and modes of transport such as wagons, horses and boats’ to traverse the far-reaching stretches of the Roman Empire. And for 4th century Christians in particular, participating in religious festivals as well as interaction with

holy sites, sacred artifacts and clergymen had become greater a reason to travel still. Motivation to travel, in other words, was aplenty. But what exactly allowed for Christian religious travel in the 4th century AD to develop as quickly as it did?

At its core, travel and (religious) tourism only ever thrive depending on whether there are popularized places for tourists to travel *to*. And as Drijvers notes, considering the development of Christian religious travel a speedy process may be done on the basis of such facts as the considerable increase in ‘holy sites in the Holy Land’ that can be observed from emperor Constantine’s Christianity-

¹ Jan Willem Drijvers, “Travel and Pilgrimage Literature,” in *A Companion to Late Antique Literature*, eds. Scott McGill and Edward Jay Watts. Part of series Blackwell Companions to the Ancient World (Hoboken, New Jersey: John Wiley & Sons, 2018), 360.

favourable policies and onwards.² But besides ‘a passion for linking biblical places to geographical locations’, Drijvers adds that imperial interest too, had an impact on the increase in Christian religious travel.³ In a way similar to how a certain particularly Italian-looking man of great fame might stimulate Nespresso-sales, emperor Constantine and his mother’s interest in and visit to the Palestine region may have served as a testimonial of sorts to Christian pilgrims.

Other such ‘testimonials’ that might excite the ancient Christian tourist to visit places that allow for them to—experience what some call the *numinous* or the *transcendent*—bridge the divide between the worldly and the divine, were known as *itineraria*. One such itinerarium was that of a pilgrim who departed for the Holy Land from Burdigala in 333 AD.^{4,5} The anonymous, presumed denizen of present-day Bordeaux lists, city by city, the route he has taken, where he has stopped on the way and what notable curiosities and attractions he has

encountered both on his way to, as well as in the Holy Land itself. Much like contemporary travel folders informing Christian pilgrims from around the world of what to expect on their way and at their arrival at the sacred Grotto of Massabielle in the Sanctuary of Our Lady of Lourdes, our anonymous pilgrim’s itinerary tells of a fountain near the mountain of Syna that bestows upon women the gift of parthenogenesis upon contact with the water.⁶ And in the vein of a true tour guide, he further describes similar places of biblical renown like the healing waters to be found in Jerusalem or the sacred spring near mount Sion. But also Pontius Pilate’s home and, of course, ‘on [your] left hand’ the very hill of Golgotha ‘where the Lord was crucified’.⁷ Playing even further into promises of awe and wonder, he goes on to provide fellow travelers with the location of such places of interest as a field near the city of Stradela where David supposedly slew Goliath, as well as a place a mile out from the village of ‘Bethel’, where Jacob saw his vision and was attested to have wrestled an unnamed angel.^{8,9} It goes without

² Drijvers, “Travel and Pilgrimage,” 362.

³ Drijvers, “Travel and Pilgrimage,” 363.

⁴ Aubrey Stewart, *Itinerary from Bordeaux to Jerusalem: the Anonymous Pilgrim of Bordeaux (333 A.D.)*, part of series Palestine Pilgrims’ Text Society 1 (New York: AMS Press, 1971).

⁵ Also known as the *Itinerarium Burdigalense*.

⁶ Stewart, *Itinerary from Bordeaux*, 23.

⁷ Stewart, *Itinerary from Bordeaux*, 28.

⁸ Stewart, *Itinerary from Bordeaux*, 24.

⁹ Genesis 32:22–32.

saying that if man's general curiosity about faraway places wasn't enough, travel journals such as these would certainly have contributed to lowering the threshold for Christians to commit to making the journey to the Holy Land.

Another text of antiquity that might have contributed to religious travel and tourism becoming more of an accessible phenomenon to participate in, is the informative and adventurously written *fifth letter* of Synesius of Cyrene, telling us of his journey back to Cyrene from Alexandria in ca. 396 AD.¹⁰ Synesius' account of his voyage involves giving details on all sorts of aspects of sea travel that might be of interest to would-be travelers and tourists. From demographical information on the passengers aboard his ship, social activities they might engage in when in tranquil waters, the intricacies of navigating a vessel through the *Mare Libycum* to customs such as hanging one's gold around one's neck, so that in case of being shipwrecked 'the corpse from a shipwreck [would] carry with it a fee for burial'.¹¹ As the late writer H.P.

Lovecraft once said, 'the unknown', is what 'people fear most'. And for the cautious and hesitant traveler, detailed accounts of what a journey across sea or land in the Eastern Roman Empire might look like, could very well have been useful in building up the confidence to leave one's home and face the trials and tribulations of the Christian pilgrim traveling across the *oikoumenē*¹² to receive glimpses of some of Canaan's most famous tourist destinations.

And so too may the account of the woman Egeria and her pilgrimage to the Holy Land have inspired others to follow—quite literally—in her footsteps.^{13,14} Where Synesius details the experience of traveling at sea, Egeria goes into journeying over land—and more specifically, into the Holy Land. But rather than assuming the role of tour guide, Egeria writes¹⁵ from the perspective of *being* guided, telling us of 'holy guides' informing travelers and tourists of the custom to make prayer 'when from this place [the valley facing

¹⁰ Synesius of Cyrene, "Epistula 5," in *Livius.org* (2017), trans. E. Fitzgerald, <https://www.livius.org/sources/content/synesius/synesius-letter-004/>.

¹¹ Synesius, "Epistula 5," 3-5, 10, 19, 25, 28.

¹² Ancient Greek word likely to have had a primarily geographical meaning, referring to the 'known' or 'inhabited' world.

¹³ M.L. McClure and Charles Lett Feltoe, "The Approach to Sinai," in *The Pilgrimage of Etheria*, 1-18, part of series Translations of Christian Literature III (London: Society for promoting Christian knowledge; New York: The Macmillan company, 1919).

¹⁴ Egeria's account is also known as the *Itinerarium Egeriae*.

¹⁵ Read: is possibly responsible for having written.

mount Sinai] the mount of God is first seen'.¹⁶ In the same sort of tone as our traveler from Burdigala, Egeria points to various locales and places of interest in the Sinai area, telling us of 'the place where, while holy Moses was feeding his father-in-law's flocks, God spoke to him twice out of the burning bush'.^{17,18} Equally notable here, even moreso to the weary Christian traveler, Egeria gives a generous review of the monks that 'very kindly' received her and her companions in the monastery on their stop before their ascent of mount Sinai.¹⁹ Atop of which, 'the holy men immediately deigned to show us the various places'.²⁰ In fact all the way to such sites as the city of Rameses, Egeria continues to take us through local dos, don'ts and things-to-expect.

Quite apparent it would seem, is that such journals as that of Egeria or the Burdigala-pilgrim, do the job of 'mapping' the tourist experience in the 4th century AD through the lens of a Christianized world. As Drijvers maintains, 'Pilgrim's narratives (...)

functioned as guide books for others who made similar journeys'.²¹ And in the same way present-day TripAdvisor has had a positive impact on tourism²², itineraria (and indeed *períploi* and *periegeses*²³) are likely to have contributed to the *rapid* development of Christian religious travel in the 4th century AD.

¹⁶ McClure and Feltoe, "The Approach to Sinai," 1.

¹⁷ McClure and Feltoe, "The Approach to Sinai," 2.

¹⁸ Exodus 3.

¹⁹ McClure and Feltoe, "The Approach to Sinai," 3.

²⁰ McClure and Feltoe, "The Approach to Sinai," 5.

²¹ Drijvers, "Travel and Pilgrimage," 364-365.

²² Linda Kinstler, "How TripAdvisor changed travel," *The Guardian* (Augustus 2018), <https://www.theguardian.com/news/2018/aug/17/how-tripadvisor-changed-travel>.

²³ The first concerns documents that list ports, coastal landmarks and distances and the second refers to what you might call geographical surveys.

Notes — Bibliography

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