

# »Eager to Go to the Desert«: Ambiguous Views on Ascetic Women's Holy Travels in Late Antiquity

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Starting with the fourth century, when religious travels to the Holy Land had gained popularity, Greek and Latin male Christian writers expressed their views on pilgrimages by women. While some of them advised their spiritual daughters to focus rather on the internal spiritual journey towards the Jerusalem of the heart, others acknowledged the merits of physical presence in holy places. The aim of this paper is to contextualize these views in order to explain why they varied.

*Keywords:* pilgrimages, nuns, Gregory of Nyssa, Evagrius of Pontus, Jerome, Melania the Elder, Marcella, Paula, Eustochium

## **Introduction**

As early as the second century, Christians used to embark on religious travels to the Holy Land.<sup>1</sup> The fourth century brought an increase in these travels with the conversion of Constantine and the trip which his mother, Helena, undertook to the Holy Land, where she supposedly discovered the tomb and the cross of Christ. From the fourth century on, many writers cited Helena's trip to Jerusalem as an example of female religious devotion.<sup>2</sup> According to

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This article is part of the themed section *Movement and Mobility in the Medieval Mediterranean: Changing Perspectives from Late Antiquity to the Long-Twelfth Century* published in *Medieval Worlds* volumes 13 and 14. To read all related articles, please access: [dx.doi.org/10.1553/medievalworlds\\_no13\\_2021](https://dx.doi.org/10.1553/medievalworlds_no13_2021) and [dx.doi.org/10.1553/medievalworlds\\_no14\\_2021](https://dx.doi.org/10.1553/medievalworlds_no14_2021).

- 1 Melitus of Sardis's journey is the earliest account. An indirect testimony of this story has survived, through the pen of Eusebius of Caesarea. In the fourth book of his *Ecclesiastical History*, Eusebius quotes a lost letter from Melitus, addressed to a certain brother, Onesimus, with the purpose of providing explanations about the books of the Old Testament; see Eusebius, *Ecclesiastical History*, 4.26, ed. and trans. Lake, 392. In this letter, according to Eusebius, Melitus wrote: »when I went East and was in the place where these things were preached and practiced [i. e. the events accounted for in the books of the Old Testament – my note], and after I had learned the books of the Old Testament accurately and had set down the facts, I sent them to you.« For a newer English translation, from which the previous quote is provided, see also Eusebius Pamphili, *Ecclesiastical History* 4.26, trans. Deferrari, 266.
- 2 Although there is no evidence for her as the discoverer of the cross on which Christ was crucified, a legend of this supposed discovery was created about sixty years after Helena's death. Among the authors and texts praising Helena for this event, one can count the composer of the *Life of Peter the Iberian*, or the *Novellae* of Justinian. Helena is praised as a pilgrim to the Holy Land by Eusebius, Ambrose and Cyril of Jerusalem; see Hunt, *Holy Land Pilgrimage*, 28-49.

the sources that have survived, travel to the Holy Land, motivated by a desire to see biblical places and interest in the study of the Scriptures,<sup>3</sup> increased so much in the fourth century that writers such as Ammianus Marcellinus complained bitterly of the afflux of pilgrims using the imperial carriages and the fuss created around them.<sup>4</sup> Many of these travelers were women, as the accounts inform us.<sup>5</sup> For ascetic women, Jerusalem could have been either a travel destination or the proper location for a monastic foundation which would offer shelter for future pilgrims.<sup>6</sup> But travel by women over long distances was seen as problematic. On the other hand, the evolution of the monastic movement coincided with a greater variety in pilgrimage destinations. Ascetics, men and women alike, were not only interested in treading in the footsteps of the biblical characters, but they were eager to meet »living saints«, not only in Palestine, but also in Egypt.<sup>7</sup> Interest in pilgrimages from both men and women is illustrated in various stories, increasingly demanded by the so-called »armchair pilgrims«, who enjoyed reading them.<sup>8</sup> For a man or a woman dedicated to asceticism, such religious travels were supposed to provide an impetus for their ascetic progress. However, was such a journey, albeit a religious one, compatible with the ascetic ideal itself? By traveling abroad, were consecrated women not giving up on their commitment, which first and foremost required stability? The focus of this article is to analyze several late antique testimonies which reacted to ascetic women undertaking pilgrimages to the Holy Land. These testimonies were chosen so as to reflect the points of view of influential spiritual fathers, Greek and Latin, especially concerned with their spiritual daughters' ascetic progress.<sup>9</sup>

Scholars have largely discussed the late antique pilgrimage accounts from various perspectives, from the narrative strategies of the travelogues to the plausibility of the reports. However, very few of them, and then only to a very limited extent, have analyzed the positions of the authoritative Church Fathers on the matter of religious travel<sup>10</sup> in general and on the question of the difference between their views on men's and women's journeys in particular. Alice-Mary Talbot has scrutinized some of the Church Fathers' views concerning ascetic women's religious travels in Late Antiquity and Byzantium,<sup>11</sup> and some reflections on this particular topic can be found in Georgia Frank's monograph, *The Memory of the Eyes. Pilgrims to Living Saints in Christian Late Antiquity*.<sup>12</sup> Kenneth G. Holum discusses

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3 Williams, *Holy Land*, 21-25.

4 »And since throngs of bishops hastened hither and thither on the public post-horses to the various synods, as they call them, while he sought to make the whole ritual conform to his own will.« See Ammianus Marcellinus, *Rerum Gestarum* 21, 16, trans. Rolfe..

5 Frank, *Memory of the Eyes*, 7-9.

6 Elm, *Perceptions*, 220.

7 Frank, *Memory of the Eyes*, 102-104.

8 One of these stories has as its protagonist the virgin Litia of Thessaloniki. According to a Coptic translation of the *Lausiac History*, referred to in Georgia Frank's monograph, she was a »scribe writing books« who wished to visit Macarius of Egypt, about whom she had heard previously. Her interest might have been kindled by the stories about the saint, whom she herself copied; see Frank, *Memory of the Eyes*, 3-4.

9 There is an abundance of studies on the religious life of late antique ascetic women. One should mention especially the pioneering works of Elizabeth Clark; see, among other works, Clark *Reading*, 20-25.

10 I will avoid using the term »pilgrimage« since its equivalent, *peregrinatio*, exists only in Latin sources. As Alice Mary Talbot remarked, Greek does not have an equivalent term, but uses instead the word »proskynesis« (προσκύνησις), which represents the act of veneration of a saint's relics at his tomb; see Talbot, *Female pilgrimages*, 73-74.

11 Talbot, *Female pilgrimages*, 73-88.

12 Frank, *Memory of the Eyes*.

the presence of prominent Western women in the Holy Land,<sup>13</sup> while Dominique Montserrat mentions instances of women waiting to be cured at the tomb of Saints Cyrus and John,<sup>14</sup> and Ora Limor discusses the fashion among women of the late antique high aristocracy for traveling to the Holy Land.<sup>15</sup> In her monograph, Brouria Bitton-Ashkelony contextualizes various attitudes of Latin, Greek and Syrian Church Fathers with regard to pilgrimages.<sup>16</sup> Susanna Elm, on the other hand, analyzes the perception of pilgrimages to Jerusalem in two sources which mention such journeys undertaken by women,<sup>17</sup> while the rise and the fast decline of Western women's pilgrimages was discussed in Manon Williams's thesis.<sup>18</sup> Scholarship has yet to reflect on the antagonism of the views expressed by the ecclesiastical writers concerning men's and women's pilgrimages. Either those with real authority or influence, or those just aspiring to make their own voice heard more loudly, they took time to expound opinions on the matter. Thus, the purpose of this article is to make a contribution to the study of pilgrimages in Late Antiquity by shifting the view towards the Church Fathers who reflected on the women's religious journeys. In so doing, I will analyze several fourth-century examples which illustrate the divergences in their opinions and propose an explanation for them.

### *Are Pilgrimages Needed at All?*

Gregory of Nyssa, known as one of the Cappadocian Fathers, younger brother of the more famous Basil of Caesarea and supporter of his impressive episcopal and ascetical reforms, was one of the most vocal ecclesiastical writers concerning ascetic women's religious travels. He first stated his views on the matter in his *Letter 2*, where he clearly expressed his opposition to travel to Jerusalem and his negative impression about the city, in which heresy was widespread. He addressed the letter to a certain Kensitor (Κησῖτορ), who might have been a public magistrate (*censitor*), but, as Pasquali, an editor of Gregory's letter collection suggests, could also have been an abbot of a monastery.<sup>19</sup> The topic of this letter is the spiritual travels of monks, and those of nuns occupy a special place. Anna Silvas (who translated the letters into English and analysed the collection) supports the idea that »Kensitor« might have been a superior of a monastery in which not only monks but also nuns lived. This monastery's organization and arrangement could have been similar to that which developed in the community led by Macrina, Gregory's elder sister. This monastery, which evolved in Annisa, on the family estate and in the household of Macrina, also inspired some answers recorded in the *Asketikon* of Basil of Caesarea.<sup>20</sup> One cannot exclude the hypothesis that a »Kensitor« led a so-called »double monastery«, but sources do not offer too much evidence for supporting it. I suggest that one can assume with greater certainty that the addressee of the letter was a spiritual father of a group of nuns. Anna Silvas hypothesizes that, as a spiritual father

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13 Holum, Hadrian and St. Helena, 66-83.

14 Montserrat, Pilgrimage, 257-279.

15 Ora Limor, Reading sacred space, 1-16.

16 Bitton-Ashkelony, *Encountering*.

17 Elm, Perceptions, 219-223.

18 Williams, *Holy Land*.

19 Gregory of Nyssa, *Letters*, trans. Silvas, 115-117.

20 See the vast discussions of Anna Silvas in *Asketikon*, ed. Silvas, 20-37; *Macrina the Younger. Philosopher of God*, ed. Silvas, 1-53.

of nuns, he wrote a letter to Gregory, asking him for advice, since some nuns had taken the initiative to embark on a journey to Jerusalem. The supposed letter which »Kensitor« might have sent to Gregory has not been preserved, but the style of Gregory's *Letter 2* suggests that he was responding to a previously sent epistle.<sup>21</sup> Gregory answered in a negative tone. Even if a pilgrimage to Jerusalem has the potential to offer some spiritual benefits, those who have already chosen the perfect life, and the nuns in particular, do not need it. Instead, Gregory advised, ascetics should embark on an inner journey to the Jerusalem of their heart, for which the real Jerusalem is only a metaphor.

A terminus *ante quem* for the letter is the year 381, following the Second Ecumenical Council, which Gregory presided over in Constantinople for a while. At that time, the Council entrusted Gregory to travel to Jerusalem and Arabia in order to reform the local churches. The theological context was not favorable for the Nicaean-Constantinopolitan dogma, since the supporters of Apollinarianism and of some problematic views regarding the cult of Virgin Mary were very influential.<sup>22</sup>

Gregory wonders rhetorically whether pilgrimages have any value for a life totally dedicated to Christ, as the life of monks and nuns should be. If for laymen, some facts might be tolerable, for those dedicated to monasticism this could not be the case:

Even if there were profit in the venture, nevertheless the perfect would do well not to pursue it. But when we learn from an accurate observation of the practice that it also imposes a harmful worldly preoccupation on those who have undertaken to lead the strict life, it is worthy not so much of a blessed zeal, as of the greatest vigilance if one who has chosen to live according to God is not to be infiltrated by any of its harmful effects (cf. 1 Tim 6.18).<sup>23</sup>

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21 In addition, the fact that this letter was lost is not surprising. Unlike the letter collections of Basil of Caesarea or Gregory of Nazianzus, Gregory of Nyssa's epistolary corpus has lost many of its letters throughout the centuries, so that it now comprises only 37 pieces. The explanations for this loss are many and complex and they are summarized in Anna Silvas' introduction to the translation of Gregory of Nyssa's letters (Gregory of Nyssa, *Letters*, trans. Silvas, 59-72) and in the article by Radde-Gallwitz, *The letter collection*, 102-109.

22 In 1608, the Jesuit Jacob Gretscher published a book with which he aimed to respond to the publication by the Calvinist Pierre de Moulin, who blamed Gregory of Nyssa for his opposition to pilgrimages, which, at that time, were much favored by the Catholics. Seven years later, Morell, the royal printer, did not include the second letter of Gregory at all in the edition which he published. However, in 1618, three years later, Gretscher published this letter and added to it an appendix with his own notes. He explained that Gregory expressed a negative opinion on pilgrimages in order to prevent moral decadence among the nuns and not because he disagreed with pilgrimages in general. See Gregory of Nyssa, *Letters*, trans. Silvas, 115-116.

Gregory mentions that he had been appointed by the Second Ecumenical Council in Constantinople to travel to Arabia and Jerusalem in order to settle conflicts within the Church. He also mentions the public carriages provided to him after Emperor Theodosius I mediated for this privilege. In fact, clergymen had become accustomed to travelling with the means provided by the political authorities. They were taking advantage of these to such an extent that Ammianus Marcellinus complained; see Gregory of Nyssa, *Letters*, trans. Silvas, 120.

23 Gregory of Nyssa, *Letters*, 2, trans. Silvas.

Further, Gregory explains the nature of the »harmful effects«, especially for nuns:

A mark of the philosophic life [τοῦ κατὰ φιλοσοφίαν βίου] is dignity. But this is accomplished by an unmixed and separate life, in which nature is not mixed up and confused. Neither are women bolting for the safeguards of propriety among men, nor men among women. But the necessities of a journey [ἡ τῆς ὁδοιπορίας ἀνάγκη] constantly break down exactitude in these matters and foster indifference to safeguards. For it is impracticable for a woman to pursue so long a journey [ἀμήχανον γὰρ γυναικὶ τοσαύτην ὁδὸν διαδραμεῖν] unless she has a conductor, for on account of her natural weakness she has to be put on her horse and be lifted down again, and she has to be steadied in rough terrain. Whichever we suppose, that she has someone known to her to fulfil this service or a hired attendant – in either case such conduct cannot avoid blame. Whether she leans on a stranger or on her own servant, she fails to observe the law of modesty. Moreover, as the inns and caravanserais and cities in the east are so free and indifferent towards vice, how will it be possible for one passing through such fumes to escape without smarting eyes? Where the ear is contaminated and the eye is contaminated, how is the heart not also contaminated by the unsavoury impressions received through eye and ear? How will it be possible to pass through such places of contagion without contracting infection?<sup>24</sup>

24 Gregory of Nyssa, *Letters*, 2, ed. Maraval, 106-123; trans. Silvas, 5-7: »ἴδιον δὲ τοῦ κατὰ φιλοσοφίαν βίου ἡ εὐσημοσύνη, αὕτη δὲ ἐν τῷ ἀμίκτῳ καὶ ἰδιάζοντι [βίῳ] τῆς ζωῆς κατορθοῦται, ὡς ἀνεπίμικτον καὶ ἀσύγχυτον εἶναι τὴν φύσιν, μήτε τῶν γυναικῶν ἐν ἀνδράσι μήτε τῶν ἀνδρῶν ἐν γυναιξὶ πρὸς τὰ παρατηρημένα τῆς ἀσημοσύνης ὁρμώντων. ἀλλ' ἡ τῆς ὁδοιπορίας ἀνάγκη ἀναιρεῖ τὴν ἐν τούτοις ἀκρίβειαν καὶ πρὸς ἀδιαφορίαν τῶν παρατηρημένων ἄγει· ἀμήχανον γὰρ γυναικὶ τοσαύτην ὁδὸν διαδραμεῖν, εἰ μὴ τὸν διασώζοντα ἔχει καὶ διὰ τὴν φυσικὴν ἀσθένειαν ἀναγομένη ἐπὶ τὸ ὑποζύγιον κάκειθεν καταγομένη καὶ ἐν ταῖς δυσχερεῖαις παρακρατούμενη. ὅπερ δ' ἂν ὑποθώμεθα, εἴτε γινώριμον ἔχει τὸν τὴν θεραπείαν ἀποπληροῦντα εἴτε μισθωτὸν τὸν τὴν διακονίαν παρεχόμενον, καθ' ἑκάτερον μέρος οὐ διαφεύγει τὴν μέμψιν τὸ γινόμενον· οὔτε γὰρ τῷ ξένῳ ἑαυτὴν προσαναπαύουσα οὔτε τῷ ἰδίῳ τὸν τῆς σωφροσύνης φυλάττει νόμον. τῶν δὲ κατὰ τοὺς ἀνατολικοὺς τόπους πανδοχείων καὶ καταλυμάτων καὶ πόλεων πολλὴν τὴν ἄδειαν καὶ πρὸς τὸ κακὸν τὴν ἀδιαφορίαν ἐχόντων, πῶς ἔσται δυνατόν τὸν διὰ καπνοῦ παριόντα μὴ δριμυχθῆναι τὰς ὄψεις, ὅπου μολύνεται μὲν ἀκοή, μολύνεται δὲ ὀφθαλμός, μολύνεται δὲ καρδία δι' ὀφθαλμῶν καὶ ἀκοῆς δεχομένη τὰ ἄτοπα; πῶς ἔσται δυνατόν ἀπαθῶς παρελθεῖν τοὺς ἐμπαθεῖς τόπους; τί δὲ καὶ πλέον ἔξει ὁ ἐν τοῖς τόποις ἐκείνοις γενόμενος, ὡς μέχρι τοῦ νῦν σωματικῶς τοῦ κυρίου ἐν ἐκείνοις τοῖς τόποις διάγοντος ἡμῶν δὲ ἀποφοιτῶντος, ἢ ὡς τοῦ ἁγίου πνεύματος παρὰ τοῖς Ἱεροσολυμίταις πλεονάζοντος πρὸς δὲ ἡμᾶς διαβῆναι ἀδύνατος; καὶ μὴν εἰ ἔστιν ἐκ τῶν φαινομένων θεοῦ παρουσίαν τεκμήρασθαι, μᾶλλον ἂν τις ἐν τῷ ἔθνη τῶν Καππαδοκῶν τὸν θεὸν διαιτᾶσθαι νομίσειεν ἢ περὶ ἐν τοῖς ἐξω τόποις· ὅσα γὰρ ἔστιν ἐν τούτοις θυσιαστήρια, δι' ὧν τὸ ὄνομα τοῦ κυρίου δοξάζεται, οὐκ ἂν τις τὰ πάσης σχεδὸν τῆς οἰκουμένης ἐξαριθμήσαιο [θυσιαστήρια]. ἔπειτα καὶ εἰ ἦν πλείων ἡ χάρις ἐν τοῖς κατὰ Ἱεροσόλυμα τόποις, οὐκ ἂν ἐπεχωρίαζε τοῖς ἐκεῖ ζώσιν ἡ ἀμαρτία· νῦν μέντοι οὐκ ἔστιν ἀκαθαρσίας εἶδος ὃ μὴ τολμάται παρ' αὐτοῖς, καὶ πορνεία καὶ μοιχεῖα καὶ κλοπαὶ καὶ εἰδωλολατρεία καὶ φαρμακεία καὶ φθόνοι καὶ φόνοι· καὶ μάλιστα γὰρ τὸ τοιοῦτον ἐπιχωριάζει κακόν, ὥστε μηδαμῶς τοιαύτην ἐτοιμότητα εἶναι πρὸς τὸ φονεῦν ὅσην ἐν τοῖς τόποις ἐκείνοις, θηρίων δίκην τῷ αἵματι τῶν ὁμοφύλων ἐπιπρεχόντων ἀλλήλοις ψυχροῦ κέρδους χάριν. ὅπου τοίνυν ταῦτα γίνεται, ποῖαν ἀπόδειξιν ἔχει τὸ πλείονα χάριν εἶναι ἐν τοῖς τόποις ἐκείνοις;«.

In the second half of the fourth century, it was well known that the taverns of the main ancient roads did not have a good reputation. Both Basil of Caesarea and Gregory of Nazianzus complained about the lousy character of the cities: »I'll chuck back at you hucksters and any other lousy thing that the cities offer.«<sup>25</sup> Gregory's warnings resemble Basil's remarks about people with unseemly behavior »loitering in taverns«.<sup>26</sup> It is plausible that Gregory was referring to such obstacles when he stated that pilgrimages are not part of a Christian's duty.<sup>27</sup>

Gregory concludes without equivocation:

Therefore, beloved, counsel the brothers to *quit the body to be with the Lord* [2 Cor 5.8], rather than quit Cappadocia to be in Palestine [συμβούλευσον οὖν, ἀγαπητέ, τοῖς ἀδελφοῖς ἐκδημεῖν ἀπὸ τοῦ σώματος πρὸς τὸν κύριον καὶ μὴ ἀπὸ Καππαδοκίας εἰς Παλαιστίνην], specially the nuns [ἐξαιρέτως τὰς μοναζούσας]. Indeed the virgins ought to refrain from public squares and all-night vigils [δεῖ δὲ ἐκ φόρων καὶ παννυχίδων ἀπείργειν τὰς παρθένους], for I know the resourceful craftiness of that serpent who disseminates his poison even through useful practices. Virgins should stay behind walls on every side and go forth from their house only a few times in a year, when their excursions are required and it is necessary.<sup>28</sup>

In spite of this firm recommendation in *Letter 2*,<sup>29</sup> in his *Letter 3* Gregory expressed more nuanced views. The context in which he wrote this letter may provide an explanation for his change of tone. Gregory composed it after his return to Caesarea in Cappadocia from his mission to Jerusalem, in the aftermath of the Second Ecumenical Council in Constantinople in 381.<sup>30</sup> Prior to the council, he had been in painful exile, due to a deposition in front of the vicarus of Pontus, Demosthenes, a close collaborator of the philo-Arian emperor, Valens.<sup>31</sup> The addressees of his third letter were three ascetic women whom he had met in Jerusalem. The supporters of Apollinarianism had been disturbing their community, and for

25 »ἢ καὶ ἡμεῖς σοι προσοίσομεν ἀντὶ τῶν πηλῶν τοὺς καπηλοὺς καὶ ὅσα αἱ πόλεις μοχθηρὰ φέρουσιν.« Grégoire de Nazianze, *Lettres*, 2, to Basil, ed. Gallay, 2; trans. Störin, 58.

26 *Asketikon, Longer Responses*, 22, 23 trans. Silvas, 222.

27 Gregory of Nyssa, *Letters*, 2, trans. Silvas: »When the Lord invites the blessed to their inheritance in the kingdom of heaven [cf. Mt 25.34-36], journeying to Jerusalem is not listed among their good deeds. When he proclaims the blessed life [cf. Mt 5.3-12, Lk 6.20-22] he does not include any such object of zeal. *Let anyone who has understanding* [Rev 13.18] ask himself why a practice that neither renders us blessed nor directs us to the Kingdom should be made an object of our zeal?«

28 Gregory of Nyssa, *Letters*, 2, trans. Silvas.

29 Gregory is not the only one who expresses such views on ascetic women traveling to the Holy Land. Earlier than him, Athanasius of Alexandria had addressed a letter to the virgins who had been to Jerusalem. The letter was published in Syriac in *Le Mouséon* and accompanied with a French translation. The references to the original text are based on Susanna Elm's article on two fourth-century sources related to female pilgrims; see Elm, *Perceptions*, 220-221. See also Lebon, *Athanasiana Syriaca*, 169-216. In an attempt to comfort a group of ascetic women who were bitterly sad because their travel to Jerusalem had ended, Athanasius explains that physical presence in Jerusalem is not at all important. Instead, the quest for sanctity can become an internal journey, at the end of which the ladies attain a purified soul.

30 Gregory of Nyssa, *Letters*, 3, trans. Silvas, 123.

31 Gregory was arrested, summoned to a trial, and deposed, probably at the beginning of 385 (although the date is still debated). See, for details about the context of this trial, Basil's letters 225, 231, 232, 237, and 239 in the critical edition: Basil, *Letters*, trans. Deferrari. See also Gregory of Nyssa, *Letters*, ed. Silvas, 29-31.



this reason, the nuns wanted to move elsewhere. Gregory urged them to keep following the teachings of Basil, whom they knew as a spiritual father, and not to succumb to the Apollinarian doctrine, no matter how sophisticated the arguments might be. Visiting the holy places here occupies a secondary place, since Gregory's main purpose is to demonstrate the distinct and equal presence of the human and divine natures in the person of Christ. On this occasion, he seems to take a more favorable view of presence at the holy places:

The festival according to God is revealed to me from either side: both when I see the saving tokens of the God who gave us life [Rom 4.17, 1 Tim 6.13] and when I meet with souls in whom such signs of the Lord's grace are so spiritually discernible that one understands that Bethlehem and Golgotha and Olivet and the *Anastasis* are truly in the heart that possesses God [διὰ τοῦ ψυχαῖς συντυχεῖν ἐν αἷς τὰ τοιαῦτα τῆς τοῦ Κυρίου χάριτος σημεῖα πνευματικῶς θεωρεῖται, ὥστε πιστεῦειν ὅτι ἀληθῶς ἐν τῇ καρδίᾳ ἐστὶ τοῦ τὸν θεὸν ἔχοντος ἢ Βηθλεὲμ ἢ Γολγοθᾶς ἢ Ἐλαιῶν ἢ Ἀνάστασις].<sup>32</sup>

These places are not just key elements of the life, passion, crucifixion, and resurrection of Christ. In fact, the addressees of Gregory internalized their spiritual dimension. Not only were the three nuns living in the proximity of holy places, but their hearts became sanctuaries where God himself lived.

The idea of the Christian heart becoming the innermost sanctuary, where the secret liturgy is celebrated, similar to the Old Testament ἄδυτον, where the high priest could enter only after having purified himself, is not new in Gregory's writings. In his *Homilies to the Lord's Prayer*, Gregory described the offering of spiritual sacrifices inside the purified heart.<sup>33</sup> In the *Homilies on the Song of Songs*, he explained that »souls that have been purified are prepared for the reception of the divine.«<sup>34</sup>

32 Gregory of Nyssa, *Letters*, 3, ed. Maraval, 124-147; trans. Silvas.

33 See a commentary on this idea in Gregory of Nyssa, *On the Our Father*, trans. DelCogliano and Radde-Gallwitz 128-136. The Greek text was published in a new critical edition in Grégoire de Nysse, *Homélies sur le Notre Père*, ed. Seguin, Boudignon and Cassin; trans. DelCogliano and Radde-Gallwitz 128-129: »But when the spiritual lawgiver, our Lord Jesus Christ, strips the law of its corporeal veils and brings the types' hidden teachings into the open, he does not first select one person out of the whole to bring him alone into conversation with God, but bestows this dignity upon all equally, making the grace of priesthood available to those who want it. Then the priest's beauty is not contrived by any external make-up concocted from a dye and a weaver's tricks, but rather [Christ] clothes him with the adornment that is proper and connatural to him, coloring him with the graces of the virtues rather than with a many-colored robe. And he does not adorn the breast with earthly gold but rejuvenates the beauty of the heart with an unsullied and pure conscience. Into this guard he also inserts the gleams of precious stones; these are the brilliant rays of what the Apostle calls the holy commandments. Moreover, that part whose adornment requires this kind of garment is protected by the leg-band; for surely you are not unaware that the clothing of self-control is this part's adornment. And when he had hung intelligible pomegranates, flowers, and bells on the fringes of the life-style's garment – one might reasonably understand these to be the conspicuous elements of the virtuous life, which publicize this way of life – and so instead of the bell he attached to the garment-fringes the resounding doctrine of the faith, instead of the pomegranate the hidden preparation for the coming hope, covered by a strict way of living, and instead of the flowers the ever-blooming grace of paradise, only then did he bring the person into the priest's innermost sanctuary and its most interior part. Yet this innermost sanctuary is not lifeless nor built by hand but is his *mind's* [heart] secret chamber, provided that it is truly closed off to evil and inaccessible to wicked reasoning.« For a longer exposition about Gregory's conception of the ἄδυτον, see especially Daniélou, *Platonisme*, 182-189.

34 »ἀφαγνισθεῖσαι αἱ ψυχαὶ πρὸς τὴν ὑποδοχὴν τῶν θείων παρασκευάζονται.« Gregory of Nyssa, *Song of Songs*, ed. and trans. Norris Jr., 78-79. Mateo-Seco and Maspero point out Gregory's sources on the use of the innermost sanctuary in Clement of Alexandria and Philo. See also Mateo-Seco, Maspero (eds.), *Brill Dictionary of Gregory of Nyssa*, 6. Further dimensions of philosophical ideas in these texts go beyond the scope of this paper. Many early Christian texts were heavily influenced by Neoplatonism, and texts about pilgrimage are, of course, no exception. On this aspect, see, for example, Frank, *Memory of the Eyes*, esp. at 122-124.

Why was Gregory so keen on denying the benefactions of pilgrimages and why did he not encourage spiritual travels at all? One answer might be, as Anna Silvas suggests, the idea that stability is indispensable to a monk's spiritual progress.<sup>35</sup> In the *Apophthegmata Patrum*, the idea of staying in one's cell was repeated by many of the fathers. Besides desert father Moses' famous sentence, »Go, sit in your cell, and your cell will teach you everything«,<sup>36</sup> the similar sayings of other fathers became very popular too.<sup>37</sup>

In addition, one has to note that Gregory's negative view on pilgrimages was not unique. Even though, in theory, pilgrimages were supposed to advance one's faith, some Church Fathers (such as John Chrysostom and even Jerome) claimed that, in fact, they could have the opposite effect. From this concern comes a cautious tone regarding pilgrimages. Exaggerations in this respect too, as always, were considered a danger, since they had the potential to become an abuse.<sup>38</sup>

I suggest that another reason was at the forefront of Gregory's negative attitude towards nuns travelling. Since the disarray in the churches of Jerusalem and Cappadocia was not easily manageable (Gregory himself complained in *Letter 3* that his mission in Jerusalem was not a success), travel to such places, which had the potential for spreading worrying theological views, was better avoided. Thus, the bishop's control would be better manifested too.

#### *Visiting the Heavenly Family on Earth*

Adopting a totally different tone, another Church writer, lacking in authority in spite of his erudition, gave his advice on women's travels. Jerome seems to approve of pilgrimages. Prior to his conflict with Rufinus of Aquileia, Jerome praised him: »I ... hear you are penetrating the secret recesses of Egypt, visiting the companies of monks and paying a round of visits to the heavenly family upon earth.«<sup>39</sup>

I suggest that Jerome's expression of an apparently positive view on religious travel in fact had a much deeper motivation. During that period, Jerome found himself at a turning point in his life. His protector, Pope Damasus, died in 384, and the new pope, Siricius, opposed the monks present in Rome at that time. In addition to these conditions, Jerome was accused of indecent relations with his female disciples, all members of the Roman aristocracy. Thus, he was forced to leave Rome in August 385, never to return. After travelling to Cyprus and Antioch, he went to Jerusalem.

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35 Gregory of Nyssa, *Letters*, trans. Silvas, 117.

36 *Sayings of the Desert Fathers*, Moses 6, trans. Ward, 139.

37 See also *Sayings of the Desert Fathers*, Ammonas 4, Evagrius 1, Herax 1, trans. Ward, 26, 63, 104; *idem*, Macarius the Great 1a, 27, 41 trans. Ward, 126, 133, 138; *idem*, Paphnutius 5, Serapion 4, trans. Ward, 203, 227.

38 Gregory of Nyssa, *Letters*, trans. Silvas, 116.

39 *Audite te Aegypti secreta penetrare, Monachorum invisere choro, et coelestem in terris circumire familiam*. Jerome, *Letters* 3.1, ed. Labourt, 11; trans. Fremantle, Lewis and Martley. Accessed on 10 November 2021: [www.newadvent.org/fathers/3001003.htm](http://www.newadvent.org/fathers/3001003.htm).



In the meantime, Paula and Eustochium, his rich spiritual daughters, went on a pilgrimage to Egypt and to the Holy Land, leaving in Rome the youngest son of Paula, Toxotius; a married daughter, Paulina; and an engaged daughter, Rufina, all disciples of Jerome. Using his rhetorical skills, Jerome presented his own unhappy episode as a much-desired spiritual journey to the holy places and his final arrival in Jerusalem as a return to his true homeland. In a letter sent to Asella,<sup>40</sup> another ascetic Roman lady whose spiritual instructor he was, Jerome confessed: »I myself clung to my long-settled abode in the East and gave way to my deep-seated love for the holy places.«<sup>41</sup> Moreover, he included in it the story of the pious aristocratic ladies, Paula and Eustochium, whom he presented as being eager to escape the social pressure of the Roman aristocracy for a total commitment to asceticism (thanks, of course, to his spiritual advice).

At the end of their long journey, Paula and Eustochium met Jerome in the Holy Land, where together they founded a (double) monastery.<sup>42</sup>

Furthermore, one year after the establishment of the monastery in Bethlehem, in 386, Jerome wrote a letter in the name of Paula and Eustochium in which he invited Marcella, another noble lady of Rome, on a pilgrimage to their monastery. Marcella had been his spiritual daughter for a long time. In this lengthy epistle, he described the blessings that come from Christ, the apostles, the prophets, the martyrs and the saints, while refuting the idea that Bethlehem had always been a cursed place. He even emphasized the tradition of pilgrimages, by both monks and nuns, to the place.

He concluded:

Forgetting what is required of us, we are taken up with what we wish. Will the time never come when a breathless messenger shall bring the news that our dear Marcella has reached the shores of Palestine, and when every band of monks and every troop of virgins shall unite in a song of welcome? In our excitement we are already hurrying to meet you: without waiting for a vehicle, we hasten off at once on foot. We shall clasp you by the hand, we shall look upon your face; and when, after long waiting, we at last embrace you, we shall find it hard to tear ourselves away. Will the day never come when we shall together enter the Saviour's cave, and together weep in the Sepulcher of the Lord with His sister and with His mother?<sup>43</sup>

Jerome added to this undeniable invitation a promise to accompany Marcella in visiting the Mount of Olives, Samaria, Jordan, the caves of the prophets, Nazareth, Galilee, Cana, Tabor, Gennesaret, Endor, Nain, Capernaum, Shiloh, and Bethel.

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40 See also Maraval, Jérôme, 345. Jerome presents the tumultuous history of his wandering from one ascetic place to the other as a spiritual journey, and not as a situation that occurred due to the conflicts between him and other ascetics.

41 *Nos in Oriente tenuerunt jam fixae sedes, et inveteratum sanctorum Locorum desiderium.* Hieronymus, *Epistulae*, 77, ed. Hilberg; trans Fremantle, Lewis and Martley. Accessed on 10 November 2021: [www.newadvent.org/fathers/3001077.htm](http://www.newadvent.org/fathers/3001077.htm).

42 See also Rebenich, *Jerome*, 16-24.

43 *O quando tempus illud adveniet, cum anhelus nuntium viator apporet, Marcellam nostram ad Palaestinae littus appulsam: et toti Monachorum chori, tota virginum agmina concrepabunt? Obviam jam gestimus occurrere: et non expectato vehiculo, concitum pedibus ferre corpus. Tenebimus manus, ora cernemus; et a desiderato vix avellemur amplexu. Ergo ne erit illa dies, quando nobis liceat speluncam Salvatoris intrare? in sepulcro Domini flere cum sorore, flere cum matre?* Jerome, *Letters* 46, ed. Labourt; trans. Fremantle, Lewis and Martley 13.

However, as the first lines of the letter point out, Marcella did not seem to be eager to travel to the Holy Land, as she did not find this place more advantageous than her native Rome. Jerome justified the decadence of Jerusalem by stating that after the crucifixion of Christ, »all the spiritual importance of Judea and its old intimacy with God were transferred by the apostles to the nations.«<sup>44</sup> Furthermore, he attempted to anticipate all of Marcella's questions and objections with regard to the recent curse which shadows the city.<sup>45</sup>

Why was Jerome so excited about Marcella visiting him and the entire Holy Land? One of the main reasons, as Pierre Maraval observes, was Jerome's own competitive spirit in relation to the clergy of Rome. The apparent possible objections of Marcella, which he attempted to combat, were, in fact, criticisms supported by priests in Rome. In addition, Jerome drew a parallel between the holy places of Rome, where Marcella lived, and those in Palestine, where he would like her to come without hesitation. Rome, where the blood of Peter and Paul was shed, was not a better place than Jerusalem, where the blood of Christ was shed.<sup>46</sup> Besides, Palestine was the place where, according to Jerome's description, monasticism attained a superior degree, if compared to the same lifestyle in Egypt. For this reason, wrote Jerome, his venerable disciple Paula, almost accepted as one of them by the monks in Nitria, chose to continue her ascetic devotion in Bethlehem (under his guidance).<sup>47</sup> I suggest that Jerome's eagerness was also motivated by the idea of consolidating his own position in the competitive ascetic environment of the Holy Land. Marcella was a member of one of the wealthiest Roman families and her presence in the Holy Land would have brought with it economic support for the monks. Such a visit would have benefitted Jerome significantly. Besides a most welcome donation for his monastery (about which he testified to the need for support elsewhere),<sup>48</sup> Jerome would have gained increased authority and a strengthened position as spiritual leader, since it would have been on his initiative that one more aristocratic Roman lady turned to ascetic travels. In addition, Jerome feared that Marcella's staying in Rome and her refusal to embark on a journey in which she could have followed her spiritual guide would be perceived as a lack of trust in him. In order to combat a worsening of his reputation after the scandal which had forced him to leave Rome for good, in his letters Jerome publicly portrayed Marcella as the pillar of the urban monasticism that had developed in Rome.<sup>49</sup>

Otherwise, when circumstances were not so favorable to himself, Jerome was less positive towards the idea of pilgrimages. In a letter addressed to Paulinus of Nola in 395, nine years after the invitation written to Marcella, Jerome discouraged him from traveling to Jerusalem. He mentioned:

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44 Jerome, *Letters* 46, ed. Labourt; trans. Fremantle, Lewis and Martley,

45 Jerome, *Letters* 46, ed. Labourt; trans. Fremantle, Lewis and Martley,

46 Maraval, *Jérôme*, 349-350.

47 Jerome, *Letters* 108, ed. Labourt; trans. Cain.

48 See Jerome, *Letters* 108, ed. Labourt; trans. Cain.

49 Cain, *Letters of Jerome*, 96-97.

What is praiseworthy is not to have been at Jerusalem but to have lived a good life while there. The city which we are to praise and to seek is not that which has slain the prophets and shed the blood of Christ, but that which is made glad by the streams of the river, which is set upon a mountain and so cannot be hid, which the apostle declares to be a mother of the saints, and in which he rejoices to have his citizenship with the righteous.... Nothing is lacking to your faith although you have not seen Jerusalem and ... I am none the better for living where I do.<sup>50</sup>

He ended his argument by stating:

Access to the courts of heaven is as easy from Britain as it is from Jerusalem; for the kingdom of God is within you. Antony and the hosts of monks who are in Egypt, Mesopotamia, Pontus, Cappadocia, and Armenia, have never seen Jerusalem: and the door of Paradise is opened for them at a distance from it.<sup>51</sup>

### *Laborious Route with No Gain*

Prior to Jerome's settlement in Bethlehem, Palestine received a visit from another rich Roman lady, of Spanish origin, the disciple of Rufinus, who soon became Jerome's fiercest enemy. Melania the Elder became widow at the age of 22 and, leaving her son, Publicola, in the care of a guardian in Rome, she visited Egypt, where she brought considerable gifts to the monks. In 377, she founded a monastery on the Mount of Olives, living there with about fifty women and supporting other monastic travelers during their stay in Jerusalem.<sup>52</sup> However, her travel was not fully supported by ascetic men.

Evagrius of Pontus wrote about her:

I praise her intentions but I do not approve of her undertaking. I do not see what she will gain from such a long walk over such a laborious route; ... Thus, I beseech your holiness to prevent those [women] who have renounced the world from needlessly walking around over such roads; ... Such behavior is misguided for those who live in chastity.<sup>53</sup>

In a letter which Evagrius addressed to Melania herself, he urged:

teach your sisters and your sons not to take a long journey or to travel through deserted lands without examining the matter seriously. For this is misguided and unbecoming to every soul that has retreated from the world. ... And I wonder whether a woman roaming about and meeting myriads of people can achieve such a goal.«<sup>54</sup>

However, Melania did not take account of this piece of advice. On the contrary, she traveled on an entire tour and, on the way back to Rome in 399, she visited the monastery of Paulinus of Nola, bringing her a precious gift: a cross which contained part of the relics of the Holy Cross.<sup>55</sup>

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50 Jerome, *Letters* 58, ed. Labourt; trans. Fremantle, Lewis and Martley,

51 Jerome, *Letters* 58, ed. Labourt; trans. Fremantle, Lewis and Martley,

52 See Moine, *Melania*, 3-79.

53 Dietz, *Wandering Begging Monks*, 123.

54 Dietz, *Wandering Begging Monks*, 123.

55 Moine, *Melania*, 3-79.

### Conclusions

The fragments commented on in this paper are just a few examples which illustrate the ambivalent positions of the fourth-century Church Fathers concerning ascetic women's religious travels. First, the very existence of such texts, sometimes repeated, shows that, even though only scarce sources authored by women which describe their own pilgrimages survive, women were, without doubt, frequent travelers. Not only did their journeys change the »ascetic landscape« of the fourth century, but they also had a significant social and economic impact.

I suggest that, in this context, the Church Fathers' positions on women's religious travels were determined by more than just theological reasons. When expressing their positive or negative thoughts about the undertaking of pilgrimages, they envisioned, on the one hand, the dynamics of the ecclesiastical arena both in the Holy Land and in other regions and the benefits or harm which could accrue to them from the travels of well-positioned and influential rich ladies. The church political context, the social standing of the ascetic leaders, as well as their own position, determined by the conflicts between different factions within the Church, were factors that shaped the way in which male attitudes regarding women's pilgrimages were expressed.

Indeed, Palestine could have been a »promised land« for spiritual growth. But Gregory of Nyssa, freshly returned to his diocesan see after a long exile planned by the neo-Arian supporters, and without the support of his brother Basil (who had died) in ecclesiastical matters, had to combat alone the ongoing challenges of the neo-Arian factions and to continue Basil's efforts at suppressing tendencies of extreme asceticism. Therefore, it is not surprising that he would not advise nuns to travel to Palestine, where they could corrupt their eyes with the indecencies of the caravanserais or defile their ears with the threatening heresy of the Apollinarians. Evagrius would not be eager to allow Melania the Elder and her nuns to travel continuously for fear that, in this way, such women would remain out of his ecclesiastical control. Thus, an internal pilgrimage to the celestial Jerusalem of the heart was preferable.

On the other hand, Jerome, who acquired his influence through the social position of his aristocratic spiritual daughters, was quick to praise their eagerness to visit the Holy Land and the holy men. The presence of these ladies (and of their donations) in his own *entourage* would give him the chance to strengthen his own authority against his contesters in Rome, by placing these women under his own influence.

### Acknowledgements

This research is co-financed by Greece and the European Union (European Social Fund – ESF) through the Operational Programme »Human Resources Development, Education and Lifelong Learning« in the context of the project »Reinforcement of Postdoctoral Researchers – 2nd Cycle« (MIS-5033021), implemented by the State Scholarships Foundation (IKY).



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