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Written by the Body: Early Christian Pilgrims as Sacred Placemakers

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This paper uncovers how the journeys of the earliest Christian pilgrims constructed the very notion of sacred bodies and sacred place, consequently establishing the networks of pilgrimage routes that would be used by Western travellers from Late Antiquity onward.

Key Words: pilgrimage, early Christianity, early Christian pilgrimage, place, sacred space, fourth century, itineraria, Egeria, Melito of Sardus, senses, spatial practices, embodied religion, sacred geography, devotion, female pilgrims, gender

Introduction

The earliest Christian pilgrims travelled to places that they believed were associated with specific events, figures, and texts of the Jesus movement. Many of the places these early pilgrims visited would become monumental sites of pilgrimage, attracting the faithful for centuries. These sites eventually formed part of an established network that enjoyed both ecclesiastical and imperial patronage. The emperor Constantine is commonly credited with introducing to Christianity this place-based understanding. Through monumental building programs in Jerusalem, Constantinople, and Rome, his architectural marvels cemented particular places as important, as special, and as sacred. Not all believers saw this shift as a positive one, however. Many early Christian texts reflect a discomfort with the emphasis on place, and the claim that specific locales could afford tangible access to the divine. Still, by the Late Antique period, travel to specific sites was widespread, confirming that Christianity had, for some believers at least, become place-based.^[1] It is worth asking then, how the shift from a utopic to a locative conception of the sacred occurred in the centuries between the death of Jesus and the rise of pilgrimage.^[2]

In Christianity especially, there is a fundamental tension between these two attitudes toward sacred

space. On the one hand, the landscape of sacred pilgrimage destinations emphasizes the importance of particular places; on the other, the rejection of both Jewish and pagan temple traditions was an essential part of the process of differentiation and self-identification inside the developing Christian movement. Rather than locating the sacred in purpose-built structures, the collective body of Christ-confessing believers (especially as the *ekklesia*) was understood as a substitute for a physical temple.^[3] Pilgrims, however, seemed to occupy a position somewhere in between, both espousing spiritual ideals and gravitating towards places they felt would best facilitate the development of those ideals. This median position was sometimes worrying to church fathers, both for practical reasons (such as the dangers of mixing genders and a lack of regulation during pilgrimages) and for theological reasons (the divine cannot be contained in a particular place). Pilgrims were also admired by the church fathers, however, because of their extreme devotion and commitment to the church and to Christ.^[4]

While it may be argued that pilgrims were the product of a growing preoccupation with sacred landscapes, I suggest that pilgrims were also and actually producing those sacred landscapes through their peregrination. Pilgrimage was not simply a product of this move

1. Alongside the rise of pilgrimage was the explosion of the 'cult of the saints,' which also contributed to the locative nature of Christianity in the Late Antique period and thereafter. See Peter Brown's classic work, *The Cult of the Saints: Its Rise and Function in Latin Christianity* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981).
2. Utopian vs. locative are terms used by Jonathan Z. Smith to differentiate between these different notions of space and place in earliest Christianity. See *To Take Place: Toward Theory in Ritual*, especially Chapter Four, 'To Replace,' 75-96.

3. For example, Paul refers to the believers as a temple (*naos*) of God, as in 1 Cor 3:16-17: 'Do you not know that you are God's temple, and that God's spirit dwells in you?' Paul's choice of *naos*, or temple, to describe the ideological structure of the body of believers is a powerful one, given its association with sanctity in both the Jewish and the non-Jewish communities.
4. Jerome, for example, admires Paula for her dedication, and Gregory of Nyssa was himself a pilgrim. These examples will be discussed below.

towards a sacred landscape, but rather, an integral part of the process by which that landscape was formed. As an imminent eschaton retreated further into the Christian imagination, the radical piety of the pilgrims emphasized the essentiality of place in the here and now. Further, the pilgrim body acted as the primary vehicle through which the tensions of a transcendent ideal and a locative real could be resolved.

In this article, I will discuss the ways in which pilgrim bodies enacted this shift towards the particularity of place. In the first part of the piece, I will discuss some early Christian attitudes towards sacred space, which indicate a suspicion of place-based practices. Second, I will examine how the bodies of pilgrims acted not only as recipients of sanctity, but as authors of sanctity in the major pilgrimage sites of early Christianity. This authorship of sanctity was enacted through the embodied practices of the pilgrims, on both a sensual or experiential level and on a ritual one. Finally, using the example of Egeria (one of the first recorded Christian pilgrims), I will discuss specific ways that pilgrim bodies worked to bridge the gap between spirit and place. Before moving into these discussions,

5. The second-century philosopher, Melito of Sardis, is used both as an argument for and an argument against pre-Constantinian pilgrimage. The account of his travel east, found in Eusebius (*Ecclesiastical History* IV.xxvi.13-14), is woefully incomplete, and his impetus for travel seems scholarly, rather than spiritual. Many scholars of pilgrimage take issue with the characterization of Melito of Sardis as Christian pilgrim. See, for example, E. D. Hunt, 'Were There Christian Pilgrims Before Constantine?' in *Pilgrimage Explored* (Woodbridge: York Medieval, 1999), 25-40. See also Maribel Dietz, *Wandering Monks, Virgins, and Pilgrims: Ascetic Travel in the Mediterranean World, A.D. 300-800* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2005), 35. She also discusses Alexander, the Cappadocian bishop, and his trip to Jerusalem as described in the *Historia Ecclesiastica* of Eusebius, denying him the title of pilgrim, given that his motivation for travel seems to have been to begin his new job as co-bishop of Jerusalem (34-5). It should be noted, however, that the criteria used to determine the appropriateness of the label 'pilgrim' for these early adventurers is problematic. As Dietz points out (30-31), the criteria dictated by Victor and Edith Turner in their work, *Image and Pilgrimage in Christian Culture: Anthropological Perspectives* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1978), 1-39, has been nuanced and problematized in recent years, most famously by John Eade and Michael J. Sallnow (*Contesting the Sacred: The Anthropology of Christian Pilgrimage* (London: Routledge, 1991), 2-30). For more recent discussion of Turnerian terms, see Simon Coleman, 'Do you Believe in Pilgrimage: *Communitas*, Contestation, and Beyond,' *Anthropological Theory* 2 (2002): 355-68. More on the definition of pilgrimage will be provided below.

however, it will be necessary to articulate a few key points of background, including chronology, origins, and definitions.

My focus will be on the earliest substantiated examples of Christian pilgrimage - that is, the fourth-century *itineraria*. Given the paucity of early pilgrim accounts, Egeria's letters will naturally be given a good deal of attention. It should be noted, however, that earlier travellers, such as Melito of Sardis, were also active participants in the process of placemaking.^[5] While a number of studies of Christian pilgrimage focus on its origins and development from localized, regional practices to the more universally-practiced cult of the saints, I seek here to demonstrate the ways in which these early pilgrims contributed to a sense of location in Christian practice.

On the Origins of Christian Pilgrimage

Scholars debate the origins of Christian pilgrimage. By journeying to see the places of scripture, of glorious hero-saints, of the life and passion of Jesus, did Christian pilgrims create an entirely new mode of travel? Or was Christian pilgrimage an outgrowth of Jewish and other Greco-Roman practices, adopted and adapted by Christ-confessing travellers?^[6] I should state from the outset that I see Christian pilgrimage as having developed out of preexisting and contemporary practices of sacred travel in the Jewish and pagan traditions. Whether that development was conscious or unconscious, organic or purposeful, is beyond the scope of this discussion.^[7]

Regardless of the process of that development, it is clear that Christian pilgrimage had a relationship to similar practices in Judaism and other Greco-Roman religions. In Jewish tradition, the practice of travelling to Jerusalem for Passover is likely the dominant mode

6. While there are those who debate the validity of the term pilgrimage for certain types of pre-Christian travel (for example, the *polis*-based practice of sending *theoriai* to panhellenic festivals or indeed, any practice called *theoria*), a majority of scholars see sacred travel *qua* pilgrimage as having been practiced in Greco-Roman paganism and in Judaism. For a refutation of the term pilgrimage in relation to specifically Greek practices, see Scott Scullion, 'Pilgrimage' and Greek Religion: Sacred and Secular in the Pagan *Polis*, in *Pilgrimage in Graeco-Roman and Early Christian Antiquity: Seeing the Gods* (ed. Jas Elsner and Ian Rutherford; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 111-30. For a general discussion of the state of the question in this debate, see Jas Elsner and Ian Rutherford, 'Introduction,' in the same volume (1-40).

7. Many other pilgrimage scholars have addressed this question (*supra* n5).

of pilgrimage that would have been known to Christ-confessing travellers. There were also, however, prophetic and oracular journeys made by some Jewish faithful, as well as travel to burial sites of ancestors.^[8] In other religions of the ancient Mediterranean, travel to specific sanctuaries and other sacred destinations was widespread. These types of travel have been categorized by (although not limited to) the following broad types: journeys for oracular consultation; travel to healing shrines or deities; travel to games and festivals (including sacred delegations); and imperial pilgrimage. Many other types and sub-types have been helpfully gathered together by Elsner and Rutherford in the Introduction to their volume, *Seeing the Gods*.^[9] Certain practices, such as incubation, seem to have been adopted by Christian pilgrims from practices at Greek and Roman shrines. The sixth-century Piacenza Pilgrim recounts the practice at Baths of Elijah, saying,

Lepers are cleansed there . . . and sit in the tank all night. They fall asleep, and the person who is going to be cured sees a vision. When he has told it the springs do not flow for a week. In one week he is cleansed.^[10]

Indeed, that parallel practices of non-Christian travel were occurring alongside the development of Christian pilgrimage practice was likely a contributing factor to the anti-pilgrimage stance espoused by a number of fourth- and fifth-century church fathers, as will be discussed below.

Regardless of the origins of this practice, some church fathers saw pilgrimage as yet another worrying example of the ways in which Christian practitioners, left to their own devices, could adopt the place-based practices of their non-Christian contemporaries. I suggest that this worry was overcome through the success of the pilgrim in translating bodily practices into admirable acts of Christian piety. Pilgrimage became part of a confluence of ritual and liturgical development, asceticism and monasticism, and massive architectural building programs, all of which served to shift the view of place-based worship as problematic to preferable.

8. On Jewish pilgrimage, see Allen Kerkeslager, 'Jewish Pilgrimage and Jewish Identity in Hellenistic and Early Roman Egypt,' in *Pilgrimage & Holy Space in Late Antique Egypt* (ed. David Frankfurter; Leiden: Brill, 1998), 99-228; see also Simon Coleman and John Elsner. *Pilgrimage: Past and Present in the World Religions* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1995), 34-47.

9. Elsner and Rutherford, 'Introduction,' 1-40.

10. *Piacenza Pilgrim* 7.16-17; trans. John Craven Wilkinson, *Jerusalem Pilgrims Before the Crusades* (Westminster: Aris & Phillips Ltd., 1977), 81.

Defining Earliest Christian Pilgrimage

It is important to clarify what I mean when I use the terms 'pilgrim' and 'pilgrimage.' A definition is especially important when discussing the earliest pilgrims, since their practices were sporadic, regional, and varied, rather than universalized or commonplace. There was, before the early medieval period, no systematic practice or clearly-demarcated set of routes as yet; indeed, like the liturgy, the canon, and the ritual practices of nascent Christianity, pilgrimage was in flux. Still, there were already examples of religiously-motivated travellers in the Christian tradition. The term 'pilgrimage' has itself been analyzed, nuanced, and problematized extensively, especially with regard to the question of origins. Thus, I would like to suggest a definition of pilgrimage that allows for discussion of the earliest Christian travellers - no matter how sporadic their practices - in order to move forward with a discussion of pilgrim bodies and sacred topography.

The key element of pilgrimage is *movement* or travel. Another key element of pilgrimage is *impetus*. Examples of early Christian travellers reflect a broad range of reasons for making a journey to a particular place (especially Jerusalem and Palestine), including the acquisition of the following: greater knowledge or understanding - of God, of the Christian scriptures, of the geography described in scriptural texts; prestige; healing or other miracles; holiness or sanctity; blessings or *eulogiae*; and history (especially of the life of Jesus, but also of saints and ascetics, especially by the fifth and sixth centuries). Frequently, although not always, there is a specific interest in seeing and touching the 'holy things' and, of course in generally being in the *locis sanctis*.

Rejection of Sacred Place in Early Christian Writings

Early Christian texts which explore sacred places are focused predominantly on addressing the theological and ideological concerns of a new community's sense of place in the broader context of the Roman world. It seems to be a point on which many early Christian writers nurtured a divergence from their Jewish and other Greco-Roman precedents. Not all of the examples below refer specifically to pilgrimage, but they do reflect the Church's early position on the relationship between earthly place and heavenly expectation, an issue paramount to the practice of pilgrimage.

A number of these early Christian texts espouse a view that could be interpreted as an outright rejection of the sacred place. In the earliest examples, such as Paul's letters, this view may well have been related to the fact that Christians, meeting in house churches, did not yet have places of their own.^[11] That is, given that these earliest groups did not yet have access to dedicated, purpose-built places, they may well have self-consciously rejected that type of space. In other examples, rejection of particular places seems to be connected to differentiation between Christians and their contemporaries, as in Origen and Minucius Felix, below.

In his letters, Paul repeatedly refers to the assembly, not the building, as the locus of sanctity. In 1 Cor 3:16-17, for example, he says:

Do you not know that you are God's temple, and that God's spirit dwells in you? If anyone destroys God's temple, God will destroy that person. For God's temple is holy, and you are that temple.

Here, the body of believers is explicitly referenced as being holy. Clement, too, writing in the late second century, argues, 'I call not the place but the assembly of the elect the church. This is the better temple for receiving the great dignities of God' (*Stromata* 7.5).^[12] The use of the temple as metaphor for the collective body emphasizes both the sanctity of that body and the distinction between a new way of conceiving of the sacred, and the view of a temple being the dwelling place of a god.^[13]

11. See the following, for a selection of recent literature on the domestic nature of earliest Christian meeting places: David Balch, 'Rich Pompeian Houses, Shops for Rent, and the Huge Apartment Building in Herculaneum as Typical Spaces for Pauline House Churches,' *JSNT* 27 (2004): 27-46; Andrew Wallace-Hadrill, 'Domus and Insulae in Rome: Families and Housefuls,' in *Early Christian Families in Context: An Interdisciplinary Dialogue* (ed. David L. Balch and Carolyn Osiek; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003), 3-18; Michele George, 'Domestic Architecture and Household Relations: Pompeii and Roman Ephesos,' *JSNT* 27 (2004): 7-25; Jorunn Økland, *Women in Their Place: Paul and the Corinthian Discourse of Gender and Sanctuary Space* (London: T&T Clark, 2004); and Carolyn Osiek and Margaret MacDonald with Janet Tulloch, *A Woman's Place: House Churches in Earliest Christianity* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2006). Arguing against an exclusively domestic model for early Christian meeting places is Edward Adams, *The Earliest Christian Meeting Places: Almost Exclusively Houses?* (London: Bloomsbury, 2013), although Adams also suggests adapted, rather than purpose-built, structures as the main locus for early Christian ritual activity.

12. Trans. White, *Social Origins*, vol. 2, 52.

Other texts more explicitly note the danger of focusing on the built environment as locus of sanctity. In the *Octavius* of Minucius Felix, for example, Octavius argues with his interlocutor, Caecilius, about the reason for the lack of articulated worship space among Christian groups. It is not because the Christians are hiding away, as Caecilius suggests, that they do not have temples or altars that can be seen by everyone. Instead, it is because temples, as Minucius Felix claims, cannot contain God (*Octavius* 32.1-2). Octavius says, 'Shall I shut up the might of so great a majesty within one little building?' (*Octavius* 32.2) Origen argues similarly in *Contra Celsum*, associating the building of a temple with the containment of a deity. Origen asserts that one of the reasons why Christians do not need temples is because their god is omnipresent:

Even an uneducated Christian is convinced that every place in the world is a part of the whole, since the whole world is a temple of God (*Contra Celsum*, 7.44).^[14]

This rejection of temple architecture is at least partially tied up with a rejection of paganism. These writers (among many others) emphasize that it is the mind and heart that act as the dwelling place of God, and the spirit as substitute for the sacrifices of temple worship.

Cautions Against Pilgrimage

There are also pilgrimage-specific concerns expressed in later patristic writings. Some writers bemoaned behaviour that included wild devotion to things and places, as well as other immoral actions. Gregory of Nazianzus, for example, when discussing the *panegyris* of the martyrs, complains that wanton conduct, including gluttony, is too common in the festivals he has witnessed. He says,

The belly lovers have made your worship into wantonness. You desire no sweet-smelling table nor cooks. But they honour you with belching rather than righteousness (Epigram 169).^[15]

13. Here, Paul is referring specifically to the Jerusalem Temple. The temple metaphor is also used elsewhere in early epistolary writings. Ephesians 2:21-22, for example, says, 'In him the whole structure I joined together and grows into a holy temple in the Lord; in whom you also are built together spiritually into a dwelling place for God.' Here again, the author locates sanctity in the believers themselves, rather than in a building.

14. Trans. Henry Chadwick, *Origen: Contra Celsum* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1953), 432.

15. Trans. W. R. Paton, *The Greek Anthology VII-VIII LCL*, vol. 68 (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2000): 474-75. See also Tertullian, *De Spectaculis* 8.

Basil of Caesarea also wrote of the licentiousness that arose during the festivals of the martyrs, including what he saw as improper behaviour on the part of women.^[16] While on the one hand Basil supported the *panegyris*, on the other, these church-sanctioned events were too easily polluted by the behaviour of men and women acting in a fashion unsuited to Basil's tastes.^[17]

Gregory of Nyssa, in his second *Letter* (ca. 380), writes clearly and strongly against the practice of pilgrimage to Jerusalem. He argues that women, for example, cannot travel a great distance without a guardian, lest they open themselves up to immodesty (6). In common with stereotypes of the time, he also sees the 'east' as being a place generally more 'free and indifferent towards vice,' evoking a landscape of temptation and contamination for one journeying through its lands (7). Gregory points to scripture to back up his argument that pilgrimage to Jerusalem is theologically problematic (2-3;10), and asks,

Is it that the Lord still lives in the body today in those places and has stayed away from our regions? Or is it that the Holy Spirit abounds among the inhabitants of Jerusalem, but is unable to come to us?'(8)^[18]

Here, Gregory is taking issue - much like the earlier writers discussed above - with the notion that God resides only in one place, rather than in universal, transcendent form. One notes, however, that he himself has undertaken the very journey against which he argues.^[19] His attachment to his own local cult of the martyrs in Cappadocia also reflects that his argument against sacred bodies and places is not necessarily universally applied.^[20] Similarly, although less virulently, Jerome reveals his preference for humble places, 'stress[ing] the simplicity of the grotto at

Bethlehem,' for example, in his description of the site.^[21] For these church leaders, as Wendy Pullan notes, 'the great desire for transcendence sometimes made it difficult to value the particularity of the places of pilgrimage.'^[22]

At the same time that they warned of the dangers of place-based sanctity, some of these authors found the attraction of pilgrimage too strong to resist. The Cappadocian fathers encouraged local pilgrimage and, as mentioned, Gregory of Nyssa was himself a pilgrim. Perhaps the most striking example of this ambivalence is found in the writings of Jerome, who, while expressing reservations about the glorification of place, also describes in great detail his own excitement at visiting the holy sites of Jerusalem and beyond. Further, he commends the piety and the ecstatic place-based experiences of Paula, with whom he travelled to the holy places in 385. He notes, for example, her great sacrifice at having left her children behind in order to travel to and reside in the holy places (*Epitaph* 6.2-5). Jerome reports on Paula's great powers of insight, but also her joy and fulfilment upon encountering the sites of the life and death of Christ, as well as those of the Hebrew patriarchs. Her intensity is described in detail. Jerome recounts that, 'as if thirsting for waters longed

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16. Bitton-Ashkelony discusses in detail Basil's distaste for these goings-on, referring specifically to *Homilia* 14. See Brouria Bitton-Ashkelony, *Encountering the Sacred: The Debate on Christian Pilgrimage in Late Antiquity* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005), 38.
17. See discussions in Bitton-Ashkelony, *Encountering the Sacred*, 37-40; Vasiliki M. Limberis, *Architects of Piety: The Cappadocian Fathers and the Cult of the Martyrs* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 9-52.
18. Trans. Anna M. Silvas, *Gregory of Nyssa: The Letters. Introduction, Translation, and Commentary* (Leiden: Brill, 2007), 119.
19. He rather defensively sets up an apology of his impetus and justifications for having done so. He also closes his defense by saying, '...let our counsel be all the more persuasive, because we counsel you on matters which we have ascertained with our own eyes' (14). Trans. Silvas, *Gregory of Nyssa*, 121.

20. See the excellent discussion in Bitton-Ashkelony, *Encountering the Sacred*, 30-64. She argues that, rather than negating the value of holy places altogether, what is actually at stake for Gregory was 'ecclesiastical power'; his acceptance of local holy places alongside his rejection of Jerusalem's superiority of place reveals 'a polemic against the claim for the superiority of Jerusalem based on the pedagogical role of its holy places' (62).
21. Wendy Pullan, 'Intermingled Until the End of Time: Ambiguity as a Central Condition of Early Christian Pilgrimage,' in *Pilgrimage in Graeco-Roman and Early Christian Antiquity: Seeing the Gods* (ed. Jas Elsner and Ian Rutherford; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 399. Pullan also points to the pilgrim as 'mediating between the earthly and heavenly cities' (409). Pullan's work emphasizes the ambiguity of the pilgrim, who is constantly negotiating between differing views and experiences of place. She notes, however, that 'the Constantinian building programme and increased pilgrimage did not alleviate the tension between the universality of the divine and the concreteness of place' (400). While this tension could not be resolved entirely, I argue that the pilgrim body - perhaps not as early as the early fourth century, but at least beginning in that period - did in fact act as the catalyst to resolve that tension, perhaps especially because it also exacerbated it entirely, I argue that the pilgrim body - perhaps not as early as the early fourth century, but at least beginning in that period - did in fact act as the catalyst to resolve that tension, perhaps especially because it also exacerbated it.
22. Pullan, 'Intermingled Until the End of Time,' 406.

for by faith, she passionately kissed the very place where the Lord's body had been laid' (*Epitaph* 9.2).^[23] He also notes that Paula, in the so-called Cave of the Saviour, has a vision of the nativity 'with the eyes of faith' (*Epitaph* 9.3). It is clear that Jerome has deep admiration for Paula's experience, demonstrating both his belief in the sanctity of these places and in her ability, as a dedicated pilgrim, to access it.^[24]

Meanwhile, in the midst of these debates, sacred places were proliferating under imperial patronage. Pilgrimages were becoming more numerous, as were the texts and oral traditions that encouraged them.^[25] Popular Christian imagination was finding its expression in sacred tourism. In order to understand the relationship between these parallel streams, it will be beneficial to explore the role of the pilgrim body.

The Sensual Pilgrim Body as Agent of Placemaking

The influx of pilgrims to popular sites had many prosaic outcomes, such as the development of an infrastructure to support their needs. Hostels or stopping-places sprang up, especially in those sites off the beaten track.^[26] In addition to lodging, other needs, including food, drink, and basic care, would have been met by communities that grew up around pilgrimage sites. There were also workshops, producing souvenirs to be blessed by proximity to the saints and taken back by the pilgrims. Worship needs were met by the construction of monuments, chapels, baptisteries, martyria, and large-scale churches. Thus, a site which may have begun as one lonely saint on a pillar could eventually become a bustling centre of activity. While early pilgrims may have found themselves alone at many points along their way, repetitive journeys would

eventually create pilgrim tracks, maps, and *itineraria* for other pilgrims to follow, formulating a geography of sacred places.

The formation of this sacred geography was achieved through the senses of the pilgrim body. There seems to be an overall prioritizing of *seeing* over the other senses. Egeria notes again and again that she is 'shown' the holy places. As one example among many, when Egeria reaches Sinai, she gives an extensive list of the things they are shown in that area, including the camps of the Israelites, the site of the golden calf's construction, the place where Moses saw the Israelites dancing, and so on, in dizzying detail (9).^[27] It is clear that to *see* the places is an integral part of being there. It is not enough to simply be in the vicinity; one must be shown and one must gaze upon these sites in order to take in whatever special character they may have.^[28]

There is also strong evidence for the importance of *touching* the sacred in particular places. For example, Egeria notes that, when they see the holy cross - that all-important relic 'discovered' by Helena, mother of Constantine - they process before it. They touch it first with their eyes but also with their foreheads, after which they kiss it (37). The popularity of bodily contact as an important element of encountering the sacred exploded in the centuries after Egeria's journey, with the veneration through touching and kissing of saints' bodies and their reliquaries.^[29]

The tactile experience of the holy is further evidenced by the popularity of material objects, such as *ampullae*, that is, small flasks or containers, brought back home by pilgrims. These souvenirs made far-off places real for those who were not able to go themselves. Further, they sometimes contained special elements, such as dust, stone, oil, or holy water, as well as bits of earth (from, for example, the Holy Sepulchre) or - if you were extraordinarily fortunate - a piece of the 'True Cross.' Egeria refers numerous times to the gift of *eulogiae* (gifts of blessed objects) that she and her fellow travellers are given. These *eulogiae* are

23. Trans. Andrew Cain, *Jerome's Epitaph on Paula: A Commentary on the Epitaphium Sanctae Paulae* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013): 53.

24. See also Wendy Pullan, 'Intermingled Until the End of Time,' 407-09, for a discussion of the difficulty experienced by Jerome and Gregory of Nyssa in their attempts to negotiate their attraction for and their worries about pilgrimage. Bitton-Ashkelony also discusses the complex relationship Jerome has to pilgrimage, arguing that, despite his reservations, Jerome 'reveals himself to be an enthusiastic pilgrim who values the intellectual and religious rewards to be derived from pilgrimage' (85).

25. Helena, for example, was often seen as responsible for starting the relic-hunting missions that would eventually develop into what Peter Brown has called the 'cult of the saints.'

26. For example, Abu Mina or Qal'at Siman, both extremely popular pilgrimage sites.

27. This same act of being shown or gazing at places (and at relics, such as the 'True Cross') occur many times throughout Egeria's text, including many sites related to Moses and the Israelites, and of course, sites of Christ's passion.

28. See Georgia Frank's discussion in *The Memory of the Eyes: Pilgrims to Living Saints in Christian Late Antiquity* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000), throughout, but especially 110 and her examination of the 'eye of faith' or 'interactive visuality' (172-3).

29. See Brown, *Cult of the Saints*, 4-5.

presumed by scholars to have been fruits, breads, or even texts. While these *eulogiae* are not specifically indicated as sacred by Egeria, the idea of a tangible blessing is something she hopes for in many of the holy places.^[30] Inherent in these material souvenirs of pilgrimage is the idea of ‘transferable sanctity,’^[31] the notion that the sanctity of a saint, a related place, or an object, can be at least partially captured, carried, and disseminated.^[32]

Theorising the Sensual Pilgrim Body

Through gaze, touch, and physical presence, the senses of the pilgrim body apprehend the sacred, sometimes even taking it away with them. In this way, the pilgrim body becomes a receptacle or conduit for sanctity. Each time the senses of the pilgrim body engage with the perceived sanctity at these sites, they also make demands on and develop the character of these places. This place-making is far from neutral or accidental. First, the senses formulate basic experience. They demand and enable the body’s survival, sending messages concerning the need for food, drink, and shelter. The senses are then ordered by and processed through the body.^[33] Second, the body orients the person, dictating the way that a person interacts with his or her space through what Michel de Certeau has called ‘spatial practices.’^[34] In other words, a body, through movement and pause, perceives and interacts

with its environment, making it ‘place.’ The constitution of place can be intentional and obvious, through the construction of roads, buildings and so forth. It can also be organic and less obvious, such as trespassing, or transgressing boundaries.^[35] As de Certeau argues, these spatial practices are often unconsciously enacted, but are no less powerful for being so.^[36]

In other words, bodies, far from being empty vessels or receptacles for sanctity, are agents in the work of place-making. Further, because the body is emplaced, the body is also the locus for the understanding and experience of space. As Edward Casey has noted, bodies are ‘always already in a place, never not emplaced in one way or another.’^[37] Because human beings are embodied, they are ‘never without emplaced experiences.’^[38] That is, there is no such thing as a purely intellectual experience. Experience is always sensed by, developed in, and marshalled through the body. This means that, regardless of how intensely some church fathers may have argued against certain bodily or place-based practices, the emplacedness and embodiedness of human experience worked against such polemics.^[39] As Casey asks, ‘Could it be that the body is *essentially*, and not just contingently, involved in emplacement?’^[40] The body, then, is essential in the formation of place.

At the same time, the physical and material world establishes some order through which the body moves. The body can impose its own will on the environment, sometimes acting in keeping with it, and sometimes in opposition to it. For example, the demands of pilgrim bodies would necessitate the construction of stopping-places on routes of growing popularity. While routes would sometimes be planned on the basis of

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30. There are debates over the content of these early *eulogiae*. Literally, the word simply means ‘blessings.’ It would certainly be incorrect to imagine that they were anything like the standardized, mass-produced pilgrim *ampullae* of the fifth and sixth centuries. They were likely more transitory items, like food and drink, an expression of the hospitality that travellers had come to expect on long journeys. See for example, John Wilkinson, *Egeria’s Travels to the Holy Land* (Jerusalem: Ariel, 1981), 25.
31. See Greenia’s article in this issue on the transactional quality of the pilgrim body.
32. This notion of ‘transferable holiness’ or sanctity was in large part responsible for the rising popularity of the cult of the saints.
33. Yi-Fu Tuan, humanistic geographer, notes the importance of the body in the construction of perception; the senses create a complicated framework of data to which the conscious and unconscious mind necessarily respond. Certainly the work of culture is also at play here; as Tuan notes, perceptions of high versus low, left versus right, front versus back, are all important spatial perceptions which can be dictated by the collective culture. See Yi-Fu Tuan, *Space and Place: The Perspective of Experience* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1977), 11-12. Cf. Durkheim, *Elementary Forms*, 13.
34. Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984), 96.

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35. De Certeau, *Practice of Everyday Life*, 98.
36. De Certeau, *Practice of Everyday Life*, 98.
37. Edward S. Casey, ‘How to Get from Space to Place in a Fairly Short Stretch of Time: Phenomenological Prolegomena,’ in *Senses of Place*, ed. Steven Feld and Keith H. Basso (Santa Fe: School of American Research Press, 1996), 17.
38. Casey, ‘How to Get from Space to Place,’ 19.
39. Arguments about bodily experiences are complex even within a context that values pilgrimage. In some pilgrim texts, the senses are hierarchized; seeing, as above, is prioritized over touching, and over simply ‘being there.’ But of course, the presence of the body in its being-there is not purely semantic; how can one see there without being there? See Frank, *The Memory of the Eyes*, for an excellent discussion of the hierarchization of the senses in the late antique literature (especially pp. 110-19).
40. Casey, ‘How to Get from Space to Place,’ 21; italics original.

preexisting resources, demands from travellers would eventually lead to a modification of the landscape, accommodating those who move through it. There is, therefore, a dynamic relationship between the body and its environment. Further, the combination of this emplacedness with the sedimentation of bodily practices - both prosaic and ritual - works to establish sacred place.^[41] With respect to pilgrimage, the sites may be preexistent, but it is the movement towards and the repetitive action at these sites which solidifies their status as sacred destinations.

The Ritual Body as Placemaking Agent

The repeated acts undertaken at these sites are best understood as ritual action. Pilgrim bodies, through ritual practice, actively produce sacred place. Alongside the intended achievements of early Christian pilgrimage, whether they be the acquisition of the holy or the personal credibility associated with seeing places for oneself, is the creation and maintenance of a sacred geography. According to Catherine Bell, ritual is an event 'which actually effects change in people's perceptions and interpretations.'^[42] In other words, ritual is really *doing something*. The embodiment of the ritual actors is essential to the event, since rituals employ the physical and the sensual.

Ritual theories not only investigate the role of the body, but understand it as central to the ritual event. The bodies of participants, physically enacting the rites, reveal what the rites symbolize (in this case, that a place is the locus for the sacred). The ritual does not happen to the participants; the participants make the ritual happen. Much as de Certeau argues, concerning the effect of embodiment on space, so too Bourdieu and Bell argue for the structuring quality of the body's practice in ritual space. Indeed, part of the act of ritual involves the structuring of space. There are, Bell argues:

a series of oppositional schemes that are mobilized as the body moves through space and time; these schemes are generated by the gestures and sounds of the body and act to qualitatively structure the physical environment.^[43]

41. Yi-Fu Tuan discusses the ability of human practice to create place out of previously undifferentiated space. See his discussion in *Space and Place*, 85-100.

42. Catherine Bell, *Ritual: Perspectives and Dimensions* (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1997), 74.

43. Bell, *Ritual Perspectives*, 81. Consider David Seamon's notion of 'body ballet' as presented in Szporer's article of the present issue.

Further, ritual is built on the habitual and sometimes automatic nature of physical action.^[44] The actions of the ritual agent (the body) are constantly structuring and restructuring space, but it is not necessarily the active or stated *goal* of the ritual. Rather, the restructuring is a *product* of the ritual. Thus, the labour of ritual is the formal, standardized mode of bodily practice which constructs, reconstructs, and reformulates space.

The creative way that bodies structure space helps explain the rise of place-centred practice in Christianity. The repetition in pilgrimage of place-based rituals not only solidifies a given site as sacred, but further embeds this mutually-constituting dynamic of space and movement in the bodies of the pilgrims, who replicate that structure both at other sites and upon their return home from their encounters with the sacred. When pilgrims perform rituals at a site, they are not only apprehending the sacred; they are also creating it. The decision to travel to a far-off location already lends credibility to a site, via the effort required to make the body present there. But beyond that, the *ritual practices* of the body actually do the work of carving out sacred space. Where sacred places already exist (as in the case of Constantinian destinations), these practices strengthen, maintain, and more deeply inscribe sanctity on the site in which they are enacted.

Egeria as Pilgrim Body

Egeria is an illustrative example of the kind of pilgrim who participates in sacred place-making. Her travels take her to places she knows already, but also to new sites.^[45] She provides us with a painstakingly detailed account of the ritual activities associated with particular places, from saying prayers to accepting blessings to kissing holy relics. Her account demonstrates the pilgrim's reconciliation of both attachment to place and belief in the transcendence of place.

44. I am here following the work of Pierre Bourdieu, who focuses predominantly on a reworking of the notion of *habitus*, or the practice of the body over time. See Pierre Bourdieu, *Outline of a Theory of Practice* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1977), 78-79. Bourdieu's own development of the idea of *habitus* was based on previous work by Marcel Mauss, 'Techniques of the Body' [1935], *Economy and Society* 2/1 (1973): 70-88; and Max Weber, *The Sociology of Religion* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1963), 158-59. See Catherine Bell, *Ritual Perspectives*, 285n77, for a complete bibliography of the history of the term.

Clearly, Egeria does not reject the notion of sacred places, nor of regard for the built environment. She notes at Edessa that 'the church there is large and beautiful, and built in the new way - just right, in fact to be a house of God' (19.3).^[46] Her view on church architecture could not be further from the view espoused in the *Octavius*, for example. Discussing the church at Golgotha, she describes its adornments, including tapestries, gold, mosaic, and marble (25.8).^[47] Interestingly, however, she cuts short her descriptions of the buildings, and moves on to describe in great detail the services that take place in that great church (25.10-12). Egeria is awestruck by the glory of Constantine's building, but notes somewhat self-consciously that the liturgical practices comprise the main event.^[48] In fact, Egeria's formula 'for the sake of prayer' repeatedly proclaims her purpose for travel; it is partly to see the places she knows, but especially, she claims, to celebrate the liturgy there. She says on many occasions that rites are performed that are 'customary' in the holy places.^[49] These rites always include prayer, confirming that connection with the divine is also understood to be powerful and fundamental in those places.^[50] That her letter to her community outlines these liturgical practices in such detail reflects her attachment not just to places, but to practices as well.

Egeria is also preoccupied with seeing the locales wherein the stories in the scriptures she loves so well took place. Like many other pilgrims, Egeria engages in what Bitton-Ashkelony has called a 'textual pilgrimage.' Visiting these sites fulfills an essential longing in the pilgrims, whose concern includes 'verifying and interpreting the Holy Scriptures.'^[51] Egeria herself notes the importance of this connection, telling us, 'whenever we arrived, I always wanted the Bible passage to be read to us' (4.3). Thus, in addition to biblical readings being ritual or liturgical in nature, they also solidify the connection to the land and so deepen the lived experience of the scriptures.

Throughout her experiences of divine connection, intellectual development, and liturgical practice, however, Egeria is unapologetically and unequivocally interested in the material; that is, the physicality of the pilgrim experience. The *eulogiae* which Egeria receives are connected with holy men and the places where they enact their holy lives. She emphasizes her experience of seeing and occupying the built spaces that house the stories and objects of sacred history. She describes relics and their rituals, such as the kissing of the horn used to anoint the kings of Israel, and the gazing upon the ring of Solomon (37.1-3). She discusses the column where Jesus was scourged (37.1). Her description of the adoration of the relic of the 'True Cross' is detailed and reveals the popularity of the practice (37.3).^[52] All of these implement-related rituals prefigure the burgeoning fascination with relics and their places that would arise in later antiquity.

On the one hand, Egeria's focus on liturgical practice shows that she is in line with those church fathers who focus more on spiritual edification than on sacred geography. On the other hand, Egeria's very status as pilgrim reveals that she is deeply interested in the places themselves, at least as much as she is in their associated liturgies. She herself states that, even after travelling for three years, she continued on to

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45. The bishop of Edessa, for example, introduces her to 'all the places Christians should visit' in his city (*Egeria* 19.5), sites about which she had not previously heard. Other places she wishes to visit are already well-established in her imagination; for example, she writes to her 'loving ladies' her desire to 'make a pilgrimage to Ephesus, and the martyrdom of the holy and blessed Apostle John' (23.10). When she reaches Jerusalem, of course, the many stopping-points of Christ's passion are described in great detail, drawing for her sisters the connections between what they know so well from scriptures and what she sees, feels, and experiences for herself.
46. All translations of Egeria's writings John Wilkinson, *Egeria's Travels*.
47. Her descriptions correspond with those of Eusebius (*Life of Constantine* 3.25-39).
48. See Wendy Pullan, 'Intermingled Until the End of Time,' 398-99 for a discussion of this shift in Egeria's focus.
49. This formula is repeated so often in Egeria's letters that it is practically an *idée fixe*. On each site visit, Egeria notes the specific liturgical practices that are associated with that place. For example, after describing her visit to the plain where the Israelites were believed to have made encampments near the Araboth Moab, she says, '...it was always our practice when we managed to reach one of the places we wanted to see to have first a prayer, then a reading from the book, then to say an appropriate psalm and another prayer' (10.7).

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50. Indeed, Egeria's preoccupation with prayer demonstrates her willingness and desire to make divine connections. That she perceives her decision to go to Syrian Mesopotamia, despite her long absence from home, as the work of God, is another example (like that of Paula, as described by Jerome) of the divine experience often associated with pilgrims. The testing they undergo as pilgrims seems to afford them the ability to claim direct connection to God.
51. Bitton-Ashkelony, *Encountering the Sacred*, 10.
52. Indeed, by the time Egeria encounters the relic of the 'True Cross,' there are already legends surrounding it, such as the visitor who 'bit off a piece of the holy Wood and stole it away,' thereby necessitating its constant surveillance (37.3).

Mesopotamia, ‘moved...with a desire’ from God to go on searching out the holy places (17.1). Whatever Egeria’s stated purpose, her enacted purpose is fundamentally place-bound. Her body’s being-there is essential to her experience of the sacred. Further, the presence of her pilgrim body (and those of others), enacting specific rituals, gives holy meaning to places in a way that the edifices constructed on them could not on their own.^[53]

Some Conclusions

The story of Egeria is a clear example of the ways that pilgrims embodied both belief and practice. While Constantine had a powerful effect on the development of place-based Christianity, his acts of imperial patronage were not the sole means by which it was enacted or established. The many travellers who made their way across the Mediterranean basin to experience the holy places firsthand had a considerable impact on the development of a locative sanctity in Christianity. This impact was twofold. First, pilgrims experienced in their bodies the usual needs of the travelling life, while also experiencing the physical dimension of the sacred. Second, the ritual practices of the pilgrims cemented the importance of particular places through repeated, specific action. The gathering of pilgrims, of holy men and women, of catechumens, and of other travelers, lent validity to the sacred places by virtue of their being there.

Even though many early Christian writings rejected the notion of a sacred geography, or construed place-based Christianity as tantamount to the idolatrous attempt to contain a transcendent deity, the journeys of these pilgrims to particular places demonstrated an undeniable draw toward specific place. Further, because of their piety and commitment to Christianity, the practices of these travellers were not readily dismissed by the church fathers whose mission it was to emphasize the necessity of complete devotion to God. The tension between views on transcendent worship versus a growing fascination with sacred places was, in large part, resolved by the practices of pilgrim bodies. Certainly these practices were encouraged and articulated by the monumental building programs of Constantine and his successors. But it was the repetitive actions of the pilgrim body, both sensual and ritual, that were integral to Christianity’s move towards an understanding of a locative sacred. Pilgrims are perfectly situated to resolve this sort of tension, because a pilgrim lives out both sides of a seemingly contradictory debate. A pilgrim is, after all, radically embodied and emplaced. But a pilgrim is also radically spiritual, embarking on a journey of devotion to a place that ultimately slips the bounds of materiality.

53. Jonathan Z. Smith discusses the liturgical practices of Jerusalem and the Holy Land in great detail, with specific reference to Egeria, in Chapter Four of his work, *To Take Place*. He discusses the power that the liturgical rites have to overlay temporality onto spatiality, thereby establishing a ‘hierarchical significance that focuses the devout attention’ (90). While Smith is discussing the development of the stationary liturgy, not pilgrimage proper, his comments underscore the power of on-site ritual, both to sanctify place and to intensify the experience of those practising there.

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