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The Arts and Rituals of Pilgrimage



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GEORGIA FRANK

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Egeria's "Panoramic Now":

Time and Temporality in Late Antique Pilgrimage

Abstract

Focusing on the late fourth-century travel account produced by a woman known today as Egeria, this article asks how her somatic, interpersonal, and sensory experiences and feelings shaped her understanding of time, or temporality. The various ways she experiences time in both parts of her diary are considered: her descriptions of travels to holy places and people in Palestine, Egypt, Syria, and Mesopotamia, followed by a detailed description of Jerusalem's Lenten, Holy Week, and Easter rites. Taken together, the two parts of Egeria's travel diary reveal diverse ways of measuring and feeling time. It is argued that her feelings – frustrations, excitement, joys, and sorrows – shape her experiences of the biblical past, whether through its availability or grief at its loss. The *itinerarium* and liturgy provide many ways to engage biblical time, whether topographically, liturgically, or calendrically.

Keywords

Egeria; pilgrimage; temporality; liturgy; biblical past; late antiquity

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Sometime in the early 380s, a woman set out on a journey east. Over the next three years, her travels would take her through Constantinople, Asia Minor, Egypt, Syria, and Palestine, as well as on a multi-year sojourn in Jerusalem. Her story of that journey survives in a fragmentary manuscript from the eleventh century, now housed in Arezzo, Italy.¹ Rediscovered in the nineteenth century, what remains of this Latin manuscript consists of two parts: the first part describes her travels to biblical holy places and martyrs' shrines in Egypt and Syria and some monastics she met along the way; the second part recounts the church rituals and special feasts she witnessed in Jerusalem over the course of the three years she spent there.



Readers interested in the current state of research on this text will be well served by the introduction and bibliography in McGowan and Bradshaw, as well as bibliographies curated by Devos ("Egeriana"), Janeras, Starowieyski, and <https://users.ox.ac.uk/~mikef/durham/egebib.html> (last accessed January 2023).

2. Holy places and relics: Hunt, *Holy Land*; Maraval, *Lieux saints*; worship: Baldovin; J. Z. Smith; the poetics of pilgrims' writings: Elsner; Bowman; Hunt, *Holy Land*; Leyerle, "Landscape as Cartography"; and Frank, *Memory of the Eyes* 102–33; eadem, "Pilgrimage").

3. For scholarship on female pilgrims and travellers in late antiquity, see Talbot; J. A. Smith; Elm; Laato; Falcasantos, "Wandering Wombs"; Stafford. On debates concerning the gender of the Bordeaux pilgrim, see Douglass.

Egeria, as this pilgrim is now called by modern scholars,² witnessed several innovations in late fourth-century Jerusalem, a heyday for religious innovation in the aftermath of Christianity's legalization. She participated in emerging networks of holy places, the growing circulation of relics, a burgeoning ascetic movement, and mobile worship interlinking holy places and sacred events from the Bible. What Egeria produced is arguably the earliest surviving account penned by a female Christian traveller.³ Like an earlier account from the 330s by an unnamed pilgrim from Bordeaux, Egeria provided an *itinerarium* of distances between stops along Roman road systems and sought out physical traces of biblical events. More so than other pilgrims, Egeria paid special attention to the sights and sounds, the crowds, and the feelings of actual worship. In her own words, she conveyed enthusiasm, wonder, devotions, and eagerness. Although much about her identity remains debated, her writings reveal her fervent quest for lost time.

Time is important for understanding Egeria. The modern conception of fixed time (Birth 1–3), measured in dates, in calendars, and by clocks, have led historians to date her travels to sometime between 381 and 384 CE. Less well understood, however, are her attitudes towards and feelings about time: the ways time has been culturally constructed and historically conditioned by religion and culture. 'Temporality' – or, more precisely put, 'temporalities' – captures the social, religious, economic diversity of how humans experience time in various settings.

This article asks how Egeria's somatic, interpersonal, and sensory experiences and feelings shaped her understanding of time, or temporality. In what follows, I consider the various ways she experiences time in each part of the work, first at the holy places she visited, then during the liturgical festivals she witnessed in Jerusalem. Her feelings – frustrations, excitement, joys, and sorrows – shape her experiences of the biblical past, whether through its availability or grief at its loss. The *itinerarium* and liturgy provide many ways to engage biblical time, whether topographically, liturgically, or calendrically.

Time and Temporality

4. This section draws from helpful definitions provided in Gribetz and Kaye, *Time* 138–40; cf. Elias and Burges. On theories of the human experience/construction/fabrication of time, see Goldhill 1–6; Darbo-Peschanski; Bender and Wellbery 1–18.

Before turning to Egeria's diary, it would be helpful to clarify the temporal vocabulary employed in this article.⁴ Time is the "idea of continual change", whether a point in time or a duration of time. Time may appear stable and universal: today, a minute lasts a minute in any time zone, with the advent of the world clock. Temporality, however, calls attention to the fact that time can also be understood as "constructed, relative, and local" (Gribetz and Kaye, "Temporal Turn" 339). If 'temporal' refers to "anything related to time" in specific contexts, temporality takes many forms. Temporalities may be differentiated by religion, culture, memory, economics, society, gender, and history. To study temporality involves considering the assumptions and dispositions towards various temporal phenomena, i.e. concepts and behaviors that reveal an attitude or disposition towards time. Temporal phenomena may include memory, clocks, calendars, commemoration and reenactment, souvenirs, and monuments. Whereas modern historians seek a past that is over (Lowenthal 289–301; Hartog), temporality does not presuppose the past's absence. Temporality attends to the ways experience – sensory, affective, embodied – allows a subject to traverse, absorb, erase, or animate more than one temporality. Temporalities take many forms. Some are linear, as the past is over, such that prior events cannot be reversed or revisited. Some temporalities, however, are cyclical, as they revisit or repeat an earlier event.

To delve into the temporal phenomena described in Egeria's diary requires reuniting the "two Egerias" many modern scholars have created: the traveller and the liturgical witness who described Jerusalem rites held between Epiphany and Pentecost. This article focuses on her encounters with a variety of temporal phenomena, particularly her experience of time as mediated by the people she visits, the people from the Bible, the people who worship alongside her, and the people whom she addresses in her writing. These human connections reveal a variety of temporalities. Egeria's writings reveal the fluidity of time and the blurring of tidy separations between past and present. Her descriptions suggest the affective pull to people who lived before her and grief when traces of their lives are lost to her. Thus, her wording may reveal an awareness not of timelessness or eternity,

but more of colliding or converging times, what some have called *heterogeneous* temporalities, when “past and present appear in the *now* simultaneously” (Dinshaw, *How Soon Is Now?* 5–7, 70). Unlike *achrony*, the absence of time, or anachronism, which cannibalizes the now and leaves its subject stuck in the past (Dinshaw, “Temporalities” 108), *heterogeneous* temporal phenomena produce “a capacious *now* constituted of multiple times and attachments” (Dinshaw, *How Soon Is Now?* 107). This temporally diverse vocabulary might refine interpreters’ ways of describing temporal experiences that have been conventionally considered to be “timeless”, “mystical”, or beyond time, as in “biblical realism” (Frank, *Memory of the Eyes* 29–33, 106–07).

Egeria’s Travel Temporalities

Egeria’s writings reveal powerful desires and attachments propelling her to various sacred places. Many temporal frameworks are absent: there is no mention of dates or genealogical time, whether her age, kinship, or status. She does not mention being anyone’s daughter, wife, widow, sibling, or mother in the pages of the manuscript that survive. Moreover, natural or seasonal time is conspicuously absent from Egeria’s account: not a fallen leaf, a new bloom, or even birdsong suggests that Egeria is aware of nature’s seasons (Spitzer 244; cf. Day 555). Time, for Egeria, is measured by roads and places, as she records some distances (e.g., 6.1); the stages on her journeys (e.g., 7.2); and sometimes the duration of a rest (6.1) or a stay (e.g., 9.1; 20.1; 21.1). Like other travel writers in late antiquity, Egeria provides an *itinerarium*, a list of cities, staging posts, places of interest, and distances between them.⁵ These cartographic points are not just spatial; they also chart the temporal spans of her travels.

s. Cassibry 17–62; Kolb 235–37; Johnson 30–34; Elsner 187–88; Coogan 342 (with valuable insights from Michel de Certeau’s distinction between an itinerary and a map). Stages, according to some estimates, required a day’s travel (McGowan and Bradshaw 24).

Time is primarily biblical for Egeria. If, as one interpreter has observed, “the agendum of the pilgrim-traveler is an agendum of moments of perception” (Campbell 20; cf. Elsner 192), then Egeria’s *desiderium* is to locate touchpoints with the biblical past in the terrain before her (Hunt, “Itinerary” 39–40). Egeria enlisted local clergy and monastics to feed this hunger for traces of the past. She implored them to “show us each one of the places mentioned in the Bible” (2.3; trans. Wilkinson 93) The location of a hermit’s cell prompted her to ask her guides what biblical event prompted the

monk to settle there. "I knew there must be some special reason", she explained to her "sisters" (16.3; trans. Wilkinson 111–12). As she suspected, she learned that the monk settled in the deserted Valley of Cherith, where the biblical prophet Elijah long ago sojourned, drank from its brook, and was fed by ravens (cf. 1 Kings 17:3–4). When present activities connected to biblical events Egeria could claim to "see completely (*pervidere*) all the places" of the Israelites' journey to the Red Sea following their liberation from enslavement in Egypt (7.1; trans. Wilkinson 100 [modified]; cf. 5.8, 7.3). Such synchronicity also prompted her to return to some places she had visited earlier on her journey, as when she returned to the land of Goshen and Tathnis to "learn more" (*ad plenum discere*, 9.6) about Moses' birthplace and the Israelites' journey to Sinai.

Rituals at the holy places immersed the pilgrim in biblical time. Hearing sacred stories read at the holy places where they had occurred thrilled Egeria. As she recalls, "when the whole passage had been read to us [at Sinai] from the Book of Moses (on the very spot!) we [...] received Communion" (3.6; trans. Wilkinson 94). She explains, "it was always our practice [*semper consuetudinis*] 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. By God's grace we always followed this practice [*consuetudinem*] whenever we were able to reach a place we wanted to see" (10.7; trans. Wilkinson 105–06). As these examples suggest, ritualized readings provided a point of entry into the events of the sacred past.

To be clear, Egeria differentiates between the time of her activities and events from the distant past. She uses the past tense when describing biblical events. Yet, when she says, "This is [the water] that Moses gave to the children of Israel when they were thirsty" (10.8; trans. Wilkinson 106), the water is ontologically co-equal. Even as it moves in a single direction – the present becomes past, but the past never becomes present – Egeria's deictic "this is" suggests it is the very same water, a vivid "now" that contains past and present.⁶ In Egeria's "now", traces of the biblical past resurface to greet her present.

6. On the deictic vocabulary as markers of emotional proximity, see the helpful analysis by Rijksbaron.

Time's heterogeneity, however, demands some erasure. For instance, Egeria makes no mention of contemporary Jews in the

landscapes she visits. In her quest for the "Old Testament dead", she ignores any trace of the "Jewish dead" (Jacobs 119). Thus, even as she differentiates between her present experiences and past events described in the Bible, some temporal distinctions blur in holy places. Her hosts and guides provide her with a layered past, viewed synchronically.

This present is where stories converge; a "timeless present" emerges when language "performs the effects of the past on the present" (Goldhill 163 (on Herodotus)). From the summit of Mount Nebo, Egeria listens as presbyters and monks instruct her to "pay heed and see (*attendite et videte*)" the places "that are written in the Books of Moses", as they point out "these places [...] that are visible (*loca haec, quae parent*)" (12.3; trans. McGowan and Bradshaw 125). She recalls her "delight" at the way story connects to place, like buttons for a light-up map. To illustrate this convergence of story and time, one panoramic description merits a longer quotation:

From the church door itself we saw where the Jordan runs into the Dead Sea, and the place was down below where we were standing. Then, facing us, we saw Livias on our side of the Jordan and Jericho on the far side of the Jordan, since the height in front of the church door, where we were standing, jutted out over the valley. In fact, from there you can see most of Palestine, the Promised Land and everything in the area of Jordan as far as the eye can see. (12.4–5; trans. Wilkinson 107)

Here, Egeria situates herself and the audience outside the church to behold a vast and simultaneous montage of the Israelites' vistas. Her pleasure in surveying this landscape might be likened to Aristotle's ideal of a plot that he describes as *eusynoptos* ("easily seen in one view").⁷ Like canon tables, the early church historian Eusebius' gospel apparatus for following parallel episodes, Egeria delights in creating a vantage point from which to preserve the narrative integrity of each episode, while seeing multiple episodes from the Bible at once (Coogan 339).

One event from the Bible – the destruction of the city of Sodom, from Genesis (chapter 19), as a punishment by God for the townspeople's violation of hospitality – stands out. On this occasion, the past does not rise up to meet Egeria's present. When she beholds "the whole country of the Sodomites and the ruins

7. *Poetics* 23.1459a30–4 discussed in Purves 24–65

of Segor (or, Zoar)", she presumes the "heaps of ruins" were the result of being "burned to ashes" in God's destruction of Sodom. Although instructed not to turn around, Lot's wife could not resist and, for doing so, was turned into a pillar (Gen. 19:26). Yet, Egeria found no trace of that pillar:

what we saw, reverend ladies, was not the actual pillar, but only the place where it had once been. The pillar itself, they say, was submerged in the Dead Sea – at any rate we did not see it, and I cannot pretend we did. In fact it was the bishop there, the Bishop of Zoar, who told us that it was now a good many years since the pillar had been visible. It used to stand near the sixth milestone from Zoar, but was now completely submerged by water. (12.7; trans. Wilkinson 107)

Time and water had engulfed traces of the sacred past and erected a barrier between the pilgrim and the events of the Bible. The site also recalls primeval divine intervention and anticipates future divine judgement. Yet, the missing pillar makes "Egeria's regret [...] palpable" (Leyerle, "Lot's Wife" 60). The ravages of time are both frustrating and poignant for someone who has come so far to behold a now lost past.⁸ The disappearance of the pillar deprives her of an expected marker from the sacred past. Egeria's disappointment – rare in this account – offers us a glimpse into her keen desire for a palpable past that withstands the passage of time. Such palpability is important to her experience and also that of her audience back home. As she explains elsewhere, her detailed descriptions of the holy places are meant to "help you, loving sisters, the better to picture what happened in these places when you read the holy books of Moses" (5.8; trans. Wilkson 97–98).

8. Her dismay might invite comparisons to "ecological grief", or "climate grief", an emotional response to changes caused by climate change (Barnett 4–23; cf. Marshall et al. 584–85). These feelings of loss also drive stories about those who survive cataclysmic change, only to feel a sorrow that one literary scholar has described as "belatedness" (Mehl 29–32) or "asynchrony" (Dinshaw, *How Soon Is Now?* 131–36).

9. Falcasantos, "Christian Religious Symbolism" 294; the significance of time for the reimagined Jerusalem would also be shaped by Christian preaching (Walker), hymnography (Shoemaker), and lectionaries (Stökl Ben Ezra).

Egeria's Jerusalem Liturgies

When Egeria reached Jerusalem, she plunged herself into a "treasury of typology", a layering of sacred events upon a navigable topography.⁹ If "ritual is a relationship of difference between 'nows'" (J. Z. Smith 110), Egeria straddled those nows in her observations of daily, weekly, and festal worship, particularly events from Christ's life, death, and resurrection. In the Jerusalem portion of her diary, cyclical or calendrical ritual feasts (Day 556–61) shape her experience of time. Egeria presents the Christian liturgical year as a series of recapitulations: every Sunday is Easter, just as Easter Sunday happens the same way every year. Each event has a fixed

start and stop time. She is attentive to the amount of light available in pre-dawn hours, whether artificial, in the number of lamps or candles (24.9; 25.7; 36.2), or how a twilight dismissal allows the average viewer to discern silhouettes of bodies. There are hourly markers, cock-crow, daybreak, and various hours of the day. Amid this precise account, there is also a remarkable degree of repetition. "On Monday, the next day, they do the same as in the rest of Lent" (32.1; trans. Wilkinson 133). "Tuesday is the same as Monday, but with one addition" (33.1; trans. Wilkinson 133). "If Wednesday is exactly like Monday and Tuesday from cock-crow through the day" (34.1; trans. Wilkinson 134), then "Thursday is exactly like Monday and Tuesday, and Friday is like Wednesday" (27.7; trans. Wilkinson 129). Even as it is challenging to differentiate days of the week, Egeria's days are interlaced by the sounds and rites repeated and anticipated in one another. She best conveys the cyclical nature of time in her use of the word *consuetudo*, "habit or use". There are over sixty uses of the word (Bastiaensen 26–31; Blackman and Betts 25–26), with more than two thirds in the Jerusalem section. For Egeria, repetition assures the fullness of the present and its imminent return.

Egeria's description of Good Friday readings captures the heterogeneous temporalities experienced in rituals and story during the three hours beginning at midday: the readings "are all about the things Jesus suffered: first the psalms on this subject, then the Apostles (the Epistles or Acts), which concern it, then passages from the Gospels. Thus, they read the prophecies about what the Lord would suffer, and the Gospels about what he did suffer" (37.5; trans. Wilkinson 137). "Having been hard at it all night" (36.5; trans. Wilkinson 136) – all while fasting – places an enormous physical strain on the worshippers, not to mention the fatigue from linguistic barriers (Leyerle, "Voices" 566–71; Väänänen 135–38), as it is unlikely Egeria understood much if any of the Greek spoken. Perhaps because of these linguistic barriers, Egeria is a keen observer of non-verbal cues, the gestures, emotions, and feelings she witnesses. As she reports,

It is impressive to see the way all the people are moved by these readings, and how they mourn. You could hardly believe how every single one of them weeps during the three hours, old and young alike, because of the manner in which the Lord suffered for us. (37.7; trans. Wilkinson 138)

Nor are such emotional outpourings confined to the day of Jesus' death. The day before at Gethsemane, the readings and hymns conclude with a gospel reading about Jesus' arrest. "By the time it has been read," she observes, "everyone is groaning and lamenting and weeping so loud that people even across in the city can probably hear it all" (36.3; trans. Wilkinson 136).

Good Friday's biblical readings were extensive and without a sermon. According to one estimate, it took some three hours to hear them all recited or sung (Sweeney, "Wailing" 124). Portions of psalms filled much of this time. A ritual instruction book (known today as the Armenian Lectionary) reflects some fourth-century Jerusalem rites. It lists the psalms and other scriptural readings Egeria would likely have heard on Good Friday (Renoux 281–95). The instructions, or rubric, for Good Friday includes verses from eight psalms. In addition, she would have heard all the gospel accounts of Jesus' crucifixion. The service is interlaced with psalmody, or more accurately, individual verses from various psalms sung as a refrain or response. The antiphons, as these one-verse refrains are called, span a wide range of emotions, often in a first-person voice.¹⁰ Over the course of the three hours, worshippers would sing along with words of these psalm selections. Several emotions resounded in this responsorial singing: fear and confusion ("When unjust witnesses rose up, they kept asking me about what I was not familiar with" (Ps. 34(35):11)); courage ("I am ready for scourges, and my pain is ever with me" (Ps. 37(38):17)); despair ("They divided my clothes among themselves, and for my clothing they cast lots" (Ps. 21(22):19)); equanimity ("Into Your hands I will entrust my spirit" (Ps. 30(31):6)); torment ("They gave me gall as my food, and for my thirst gave me vinegar to drink" (Ps. 68(69):22)); meekness ("I became like a helpless person, free among corpses" (Ps. 87(88):5)); and desperation ("O Lord, listen to my prayer and let my cry come to you" (Ps. 101(102):2)). Taken from psalms of dereliction and suffering, some of these verses would have also been familiar from gospel accounts of Jesus' agony and death (Attridge 101–02). To hear and sing these antiphons for several hours, without sermon or homily to interrupt or interpret them, left the congregation hearing Jesus himself in agony, "gruesomely suffering and even pleading for his life", as one recent interpreter astutely suggests (Sweeney, "Grief" 132). Worshippers, he explains, "heard these texts, on the

10. All but one – "his heart gathered lawlessness to himself" (Ps. 40[41]:7) – were verses spoken in the first person. I cite the Septuagint (LXX) psalm and verse numbers and provide the Masoretic numbering in brackets. All translations of the LXX refer to the translation by Pietersma and Wright.

day of Christ's Passion, largely as a long monologue spoken by Christ himself" (Sweeney, "Grief" 132). Even if Egeria could not understand the words sung in Greek, she could intuit that she stood among the bereaved, viscerally reacting to a suffering saviour's words. It might come as no surprise that in any language, a hungry, exhausted, and devoted congregation did not shield their wailing laments and groaning.

The heavy use of the psalms' first-person voice achieves a temporal repositioning. Such intense and devastating displays of grief on Good Friday and at Gethsemane the day before thrust Egeria and audiences into the biblical event itself. The density of three hours' continuous psalms and readings thickened the *now* of Jesus' crucifixion, just as the prior veneration of the wood of the true cross had made the biblical event palpable. Audiences kissed the wood, heard Jesus' pleas in the psalms, and relived the gospel stories recited to them. Egeria experiences what for a later pilgrim, Margery Kempe, was "a *now* shot through with different times" (Dinshaw, *How Soon Is Now?* 153). That intense presence and wonder pulses through Egeria's travelogue. As she concludes her account, she "admire[s] and value[s] most [...] that all the hymns and antiphons and readings [...] are always relevant to the day which is being observed and to the place in which they are used" (47.5; trans. Wilkinson 146). The alignment of place and a vivid past trigger powerful and intense emotions. From the frisson of hearing a biblical passage read "on the very spot!" to listening to Jesus' pleas in the words of the antiphons on Good Friday, time's uncanniness unleashes a diverse range of emotions resonating with relived Bible events.

As this article has suggested, when we view both parts of Egeria's travelogue as a whole, her hunger for a biblical present pervades the entire work and stirs keen emotions. If, as one theorist of temporalities has claimed, "[t]he experience of time and the way subjects situate themselves within time is imbued with, if not defined by, emotions, and vice versa", then the strong affects Egeria witnesses situate her in a "porous present" in which the past is available once again (Pernau 3, 13). Past and present may be differentiated, but only by a very permeable boundary. The clergy, monks, and hosts Egeria meets set her sights on Bible stories, intertwined like skeins of a rope by which to tug that past up into

her present. So, too, in Jerusalem. The stories from the gospels and the voice of Christ she and other worshippers hear in the psalms infuse the present with agonized voices of the past. Such intense interest in the intertwined present and past allows little room for the future. Rather, Egeria is more attuned to the past making itself felt in the present. Her anticipation is liturgical, as a psalm or melody might echo or anticipate words or songs from a festival elsewhere in the liturgical year. Beyond this liturgical future, Egeria recasts home as a place where her "sisters" may soon experience the Bible differently thanks to Egeria's reports.

Thus, emotion plays an important role in how Egeria situates herself in this intersection between the present and the past. She feels the past in her present, imbued with emotions. Her emotions crackle whenever the sacred past reveals (or hides) itself in her present. And her knowing situates her as witness to biblical events and allows her to accompany Christ during his final days and hours on earth. Liturgy interweaves the past and the present. Worship back home prepared her for this journey, so that by the time she arrived in Jerusalem, its liturgy unleashed strong emotions (Krueger 130). Liturgy and sacred travel cracked open for Egeria a "capacious now", encompassing both a painful past and an eternal present. Egeria shows her sisters how they, too, may enact a kind of "temporal co-presence" and dwell in a vivid past (Dinshaw, *How Soon Is Now?* 65). Egeria's writings record not only movement in space, but always movement in time through "heterogenous temporalities" (Dinshaw, *How Soon Is Now?* 78; cf. 106). Through her embodied memories, her words generate an abundant panorama of the temporal possibilities, inviting others into that capacious now.

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