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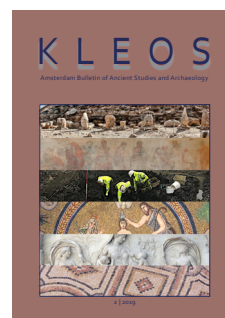
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# Women and Pilgrimage

## In the ancient and pre-modern world

UNIVERSITY OF AMSTERDAM. JUNE 8-9, 2018

### Marlena Whiting and Emilia Salerno

#### INTRODUCTION

This conference was organized as part of Dr. Marlena Whiting's NWO Veni research project "Gendering Sacred Space: Female Networks, Patronage, and Ritual Experience in Early Christian Pilgrimage", to encourage scholars working on the field of women and pilgrimage in different periods and different cultures to explore and share some of the methodological challenges and insights that their particular area of expertise has yielded. The conference was co-organized by Ms Emilia Salerno (MA), a specialist in gender and the Roman cult of Magna Mater.

The main question this conference sought to answer was: how did women's participation in religious travel contribute to their accessing and expressing social agency, religious authority, or power over their bodies within their communities? In the call for papers we identified four areas through which speakers might engage with the question:

1. Gender and "performance" in pilgrimage.
2. Power and agency in pilgrimage.
3. Methodological innovations for "recovering" women from the historical record, and potential contributions of other fields such as archaeology, epigraphy, art history, anthropology, sociology of religion, etc.
4. Material and economic aspects of women's pilgrimage.

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*Ms Emilia Salerno is a graduate student of the Vrije Universiteit of Amsterdam, specialised in Ancient Roman History.*

► *Programme*



## SUMMARY OF PROCEEDINGS

The conference was opened by Emily Hemelrijk, Professor of Ancient History at the University of Amsterdam, who welcomed the speakers and guests. Marlena Whiting gave an introduction to the topic, contextualizing the four main themes that the conference speakers would address in light of recent scholarship in pilgrimage and women's studies.

In the first paper, **Grace Stafford** (University of Oxford, "*Literary and material evidence for early Christian female pilgrimage*") delivered a re-examination of some of the key pilgrimage sites of Late Antiquity with a view to identifying spaces that might have been used or occupied by women. Stafford noted that while many of the Late Antique texts are biased towards elite women, archaeology offers the opportunity to understand the experiences of women across a broader spectrum of social class. Stafford presented evidence from the shrine of St Menas in Egypt (an "equal-opportunity" fertility saint, able to intercede not just in matters of fertility for women, but for livestock and the land as well), where she identified duplications of spaces - peristyles and baths known to have been in use at the same time - as possible evidence for segregated use along gender lines. Stafford's research marks a real leap forward in our understanding of the archaeological evidence for the gendered experience of pilgrimage attested in literary sources.

**Peter Stabel** (University of Antwerp, "*Between Mary and Magdalene: women and gender on the road*"), presented work from his forthcoming book on perceptions of the world by late medieval pilgrims. He analysed accounts of pilgrimages to the Holy Land from the Low Countries in 15<sup>th</sup> century as a source for writing social history. Although the preserved texts were all written by men, the stereotyping of women on the basis of class and ethnicity found in these accounts is revealing about attitudes to women at that time. In general, the women were presented either as "Maries" - devout caretakers enduring "invisible" suffering (like Christ), or as "Magdalenes" - seductresses, linked with debauchery but also a kind of sexuality without guilt. This was especially the case of the Venetian courtesans, whose identity as foreigners and "other" made them acceptable sexual partners for liaisons that would not have been permissible "at home".

**Paweł Nowakowski** (University of Oxford, "*Facing death abroad. Epitaphs from pilgrim shrines as a potential source for the study of women's pilgrimage in late antique Anatolia*") delivered a paper pushing the methodological boundaries of detecting

the presence of women on pilgrimage, by considering the potential of epigraphy, and funerary epitaphs in particular. His paper examined the funerary inscriptions found at known early Byzantine pilgrimage sites in Asia Minor: Euchaita, Heliopolis, and Germia. He found that women were not specifically identified as “pilgrims”, a terminologically murky concept prior to the Middle Ages anyway (although some expected terms might be *proskunetes* or *xenos*). Nevertheless, one way of identifying a pilgrim might be through the inclusion of “ethnics” signalling that the woman’s origins or homeland lay outside the immediate region of the shrine itself. The epitaphs do shed light on the range of connectivity of these pilgrimage sites and that their devotees undoubtedly included women.

**Sari Katajala-Peltomaa** (University of Tampere, “*Creating the sacred – late medieval demoniacs in search for a cure*”) presented research from an ongoing Academy of Finland Centre of Excellence project “History of Experiences”, on the testimony of female demoniacs in Scandinavia and Northern Italy as part of canonization processes. These testimonies are part of the judicial assessment of a saints’ candidacy for sainthood, but they also provide rare first-hand insight into lay women’s own perceptions of their experiences being cured at shrines or by saints, and their understanding of what had happened to them. Katajala-Peltomaa noted that demoniacs were not necessarily social outcasts, and that many of the women made the choice themselves to seek the cure from the shrine. Instead, the bodily experiences of these women, especially the physical manifestation of the expulsion of malign spirits in the form of black smoke or spiders, were essential in the social processes through which sacred space was negotiated, constructed, and reinforced.

**Konstantin Klein** (University of Bamberg, “*Travelling Saints and Travelling Ideas: Melania the Younger and Empress Eudocia Revisited*”) offered a detailed re-examination of the church building activities of two famous late antique pilgrims travelling to Jerusalem: the aristocratic ascetic Melania the Younger, and the Byzantine Empress Eudocia. In AD 439, both these women were in Jerusalem, and involved in the translation of the relics of the protomartyr Stephen and the construction of the martyrion and churches to honor the spot where the relics were found, while Eudocia transported the relics themselves to Constantinople. The relationship between the two women has been presented as one of competition, even “cattiness”. However, Klein’s examination of the precise chronology suggests that there must have been collaboration, rather than competition, between the two women.

**Lilly Stammer** (Institute for Literature, Bulgarian Academy of Sciences, “*The Pilgrimage of St Parasceve of Epibatae to the Holy Land*”) took us into the world of Byzantine hagiography. St Parasceve lived in the 10<sup>th</sup> century, and her cult spread in the 11<sup>th</sup> century. In the earliest preserved Greek version of her *vita* from the 11<sup>th</sup>/13<sup>th</sup> century, her travels took her to Constantinople and the Holy Land, where she lived an ascetic life beyond the Jordan River. A later Middle Bulgarian version of the hagiography from the later 14<sup>th</sup> century changes her story: she travels only briefly to Constantinople, and references to Jerusalem and the Holy Land are omitted altogether. Stammer argued that the Middle Bulgarian version appears at a time when tales of travelling saints were popular, but all those saints were male. A woman travelling on her own (and against her parents’ wishes) would not have been considered an appropriate model of feminine behaviour, even if her journeys were pious ones.

**Helena Guzik** (University of Oxford, “*A Marchesa on the Move: The Pilgrimages of Isabella d’Este (1474–1539)*”) focused on Isabelle d’Este, Marchioness of Mantua. Although well-known as a patron of the arts, Isabelle d’Este’s religious activities have often been overlooked. In fact, she went on pilgrimage seven times in her adult life, as recorded in her letters, celebrating the birth of her children and their marriages. Guzik argued that these pilgrimages reflected not only Isabelle’s personal piety, but were also used as a public means of displaying her and her husband’s political authority and dynastic consolidation. As with the art she commissioned and collected, Isabelle d’Este used pilgrimage as a means of displaying morality and good governance.

**Sonya Beyo** (Bar Ilan University, “*Why Are You Going to Him Today – Neither New Moon nor Sabbath?*’ (2 Kings 4:23): *Women Pilgrims in the Bible*”) examined the Biblical episode of the Shunnamite Woman (2 Kings 4:8-37). Beyo noted that the episode, in which a woman actively seeks to venerate the prophet Elijah, and travels to him, is in notable contrast to other descriptions of pilgrimage in the Bible, which is emphasized as an activity in which only men take part (Exodus 5:1; 10:8-11). Furthermore, the Shunnamite woman travels to Elijah without her husband and without his permission, which is a further departure from expectations based on biblical descriptions of Jewish pilgrimage. Beyo proposed the possibility that the Biblical episode harks back to a historical reality in which a woman was responsible for initiating a local cult of Elijah, a peripheral cult in which women could participate directly.

**Dženita Karić** (Oriental Institute in Sarajevo, “*From fiqh*

*manuals to travelogues: Sources for the study of female pilgrimage in premodern Islam*") pointed out the lack of systematic study of gender and Islamic pilgrimages (the *hajj* to Mecca and *ziyara*, local pilgrimage to shrines and tombs of saints), especially in the early modern period. Karić noted that women's pilgrimage had long been a topic of debate in *hadith* (a record of the sayings of the Prophet Muhammad): can a woman go on *hajj* alone, if she does is it valid; can a woman go on *hajj* if she is menstruating, etc. Karić observed that these were abstract legal exercises, not likely to have been reflective of lived experience. Other writers, like 14<sup>th</sup> century geographer Ibn Battutah or 17<sup>th</sup> century Evliya Çelebi, were able to confirm the presence of women on *hajj*, but their descriptions were very much tinted by the male gaze. Ibn Battutah commented on the beauty of Meccan women and their perfume, while Celebi commented negatively on women's perfume, saying it distracts holy men. For the most part, however, the sources focus on visible, privileged elite women, such as the women of the Ottoman royal family.

**Päivi Miettunen** (Finnish Institute in the Middle East, "*The role and agency of Bedouin women in pilgrimage and visiting holy sites in South Jordan*") shared the results of her many years' anthropological field work studying the folk religion and associated customs and rituals of the Bedouin of southern Jordan. She found that many of these rituals played an important role in women's agency over their own lives and that of their families. Miettunen also observed that among the Bedouin, elements in the landscape, such as rocky outcroppings, could be ascribed a feminine spirit, who could be invoked to help women with issues concerning their daily lives.

The second day of the conference began with **Emilia Salerno** (Vrije Universiteit) presenting on *The Travelling Mother: the summoning of Cybele to Rome and women's role in her cult*. The focus of this paper was to assess whether women had a specific role in the Magna Mater cult, which is attested in Rome starting from at least the 3<sup>rd</sup> century BC. Salerno explained that two feminine types were attached to the cult. On one hand, elite women, such as *matronae*, priestesses, and empresses, were representatives and actors of the "official" version of the cult. On the other hand, satirical accounts take aim at some female worshippers of the Magna Mater for their attachment to the most lascivious and exotic aspects of the cult, the castrated priests, the *galli*. These largely mysterious attendants of Cybele were not only deemed to encourage superstition, but were also despised for their effeminacy and their lack of defined gender.

**Rianne Hermans** (University of Amsterdam, “*Female deities, female worshippers, female concerns? Gender-specific ritual practices in the cults of Latium Vetus*”) examined the religious experiences of women in the sanctuaries of Juno at Lanuvium and Diana at Nemi. Modern interpreters have identified these two cults as particularly appealing to women. The hundreds of terracotta anatomical votives found on the sites (representations of uteruses, breasts, swaddled babies) seem to confirm this reading. Hermans critically examined the supposed femininity of the cult practices in Latium Vetus, by noting that modern scholars tend to give preferential attention to votives related to the female anatomy, often at the cost of votives of more neutral body parts such as feet or arms that could have been left by men, and noted the preponderance of men’s names in the inscriptions from the sites.

**Alessandro Crispino** (Aldo Moro University of Bari, “*Egnazia, a layover for pilgrimage in Late Antiquity*”) presented the results of the excavations of Egnazia on the southeast coast of Italy. Due to its location connecting the Balkans and eastern Mediterranean with Rome and Western Europe, Egnazia played a strategic role in all sorts of journeys, including pilgrimages. Furthermore, women’s religiosity had a place there, as there were shrines to Magna Mater and possibly also the Syrian goddess Atargatis. From the end of the fourth century AD until the sixth century the urban landscape changed dramatically, showing the rise of the bishop’s influence not only in promoting the construction of religious buildings but also in encouraging local productions and trade. The site also presents evidence of female pilgrims: fragments of *eulogiae* (“blessings”) engraved in necklaces, pendants, glass vases and ceramics, and a magnificent golden ring in the shape of the Aedicule in Jerusalem, for which a known parallel was found in a burial of a woman at Grez-Doiceau in Belgium.

The final panel focused on the writings of Egeria, the fourth century AD author of a pilgrimage diary to the Holy Land. In his paper *Egeria’s journey to the Middle East*, **Vincent Hunink** (Radboud University of Nijmegen) presented an insightful analysis of the linguistic and stylistic features of the text. Hunink made the surprising observation that, although Egeria’s stated aim is to provide descriptions of holy places to allow her readers to visualise them, her actual descriptions are too vague to be adequate for this purpose!

**Nienke Vos** (Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam, *The Riddle of Religious Roles: Autonomy and Community in Egeria’s Travel Journal*) revisited the ambiguities relating to Egeria’s religious

identity, and her relationship to her "sisters" (*sorores meae*) to whom her work is addressed. Some scholars argue that Egeria was in a role of leadership (an "abbess") and others assume Egeria received spiritual direction from the women to whom she wrote. Vos was able to make a convincing argument, based on comparisons with other literature of the fourth century AD, that Egeria's use of specific phrases, including *luminæ meae* to describe her "sisters" denoted a hierarchical relationship with Egeria looking up to these women as her spiritual - and possibly also social - superiors.

Finally, **Hugh Bonsey** (King's College London, *Women and Pilgrimage in the Fourth Century: Helena and Egeria*) examined the two case studies of Helena, Emperor Constantine's mother, and Egeria to analyse the crucial role women had in the establishing of Christian pilgrimage in the fourth century. By asserting their individual authority and having access to their own financial resources in the context of safe and reliable transportation, these two women demonstrated a newfound freedom, which opened the way to further Christian pilgrimage.

## SYNTHESIS

### *GENDER AND PERFORMANCE*

Several papers addressed the issue of gender and performance. Sari Katajala-Peltomaa's paper on cured demoniacs stressed the highly public and performative nature of their illness and their cures, and how this performance was essential for constituting the *communitas* of the shrine. The performance of gendered behaviour relating to the Magna Mater cult (by the castrated priests, and by Roman women in processions) challenged deep-seated gender and cultural norms in Rome and was a source of great anxiety, as shown by Emilia Salerno. Several papers touched on stereotypes of womanly behaviour: for instance, Peter Stabel's contribution on the women that pilgrims from the Low Countries encountered on pilgrimage to the Holy Land and the strong stereotyping into "Maries" and "Magdalens". Lilly Stammeler's paper demonstrated that a female saint's hagiography reflected less the "historical" person and was recast as a model of appropriate female behaviour.

Several papers also touched on gender bias in modern scholarship. Konstantin Klein's paper belied the stereotype of women's friendships as competitive and "catty" that had persisted in modern scholarship by showing that the historical sources speak to mutual support and collaboration. However, the most significant challenge to scholarly stereotyping of "womanly" interests came from Rianne Hermans' analysis of the cults of Juno

Sposita and Diana Nemorensis. She demonstrated that modern scholarship, by focusing on votives of female body parts from these shrines to female divinities, had upheld a structuralist interpretation of female/male interests for ancient religion, and obscured male participation in the rites to the goddesses.

#### *POWER & AGENCY*

Several papers discussed how the performance of pilgrimage could be converted into political capital by elite women. Hugh Bonsey discussed Empress Helena's involvement in pilgrimage in these terms. Helena Guzik's paper demonstrated how Isabelle d'Este's very gendered performance of pilgrimage as a new mother, or mother-of-the-bride, was used to consolidate the political power of her family by displaying dynastic successes. Dženita Karić made a similar argument for the women of the Ottoman royal family, whose pilgrimages and patronage were juxtaposed with the *hajj* to make a political statement promoting the power and legitimacy of the Ottoman state.

Apart from power (defined in masculine terms as political power), women could also use pilgrimage to achieve other forms agency, over their own religion or their own bodies. Päivi Miettunen explored mechanisms of agency available to Bedouin women through pilgrimage, for example as a means of protecting their family. Sofia Beyo's interpretation of the Biblical story of the Shunnamite woman demonstrated that pilgrimage could provide context for a woman's self-determination even in the face of objections by her husband. It is possible that this Biblical exemplar of "defiant pilgrimage" may form a prototype for women's pilgrimages in the early Christian period (for example in Jerome's *Life of Hilarion*).

#### *METHODOLOGICAL INNOVATIONS, FROM SOURCES TO "MATERIAL TURN"*

One of the main methodological challenges of studying women and pilgrimage is "recovering" women's experience from the historical record. Anthropologists rely mainly on interviews with subjects responding within a framework suggested by the scholars' research interests. Päivi Miettunen's presentation made use of such first-hand interviews and fieldwork among Bedouin women in modern-day Jordan. In the case of historical subjects, historians might rely on autobiographical sources, letters, diaries, etc. Dženita Karić drew on some of these sources for reconstructing women's participation in *hajj* pilgrimage in the early modern period. Isabelle d'Este preserved a first-hand account through her voluminous correspondence. Sari Katajala-Peltomaa's paper also demonstrated the potential for legalistic documents -

testimonials for the canonization processes - to reveal something about lived religious experience of women. The further back in time we go, of course, the fewer and fewer first-hand accounts by women remain to us. The autobiographical travel account by Egeria from the late fourth century is wholly unique - a much treasured and informative document, but sadly incomplete when it comes to information about the author. Through detailed textual and intertextual analysis, Vincent Hunink and Nienke Vos were able to flesh out a bit more about Egeria herself.

However, the majority of texts surviving to us from the medieval and ancient periods are by male authors, promoting a specific perception of womanhood in light of the male gaze, as demonstrated by Stabler, Stammler, and Karić. Ideally we should like to stay as close to direct testimony as possible, which means turning away from textual sources to consider other evidence. Paweł Nowakowski offered a novel means of understanding funerary epitaphs, in particular the use of ethnic designations, as evidence for women's pilgrimage. Finally, we have the contributions that archaeology and art history can make through the analysis of material culture, buildings, and artifacts. Pilgrimage studies is also enjoying a "material turn", with artifacts related to pilgrimage, particularly pilgrim tokens and votives being analysed not just from an art historical perspective for their iconography, but also for what they can tell us about the economics of pilgrimage. Alessandro Crispino's paper offered an excellent case study of how certain elements of pilgrimage archaeology remain the same despite religious context (for example the geographic location of Egnazia as a landing stage from the East Mediterranean on the way to Rome meant that it had shrines to eastern deities and was also a stopping point on the pilgrimage to the Holy Land from the fourth century onwards), and the possible presence of female pilgrims based on the types of artifacts recovered. Grace Stafford's analysis of known pilgrimage sites in light of a gendered reading of space, especially the duplication of facilities, is a methodological innovation that will hopefully have a major impact on the field. Finally, Helena Guzik also offered a new methodological avenue by suggesting we look at the art commissioned by Isabelle d'Este in tandem with her pilgrimages as a means of self-representation and personal expression.

## CONCLUSION

The conference succeeded well in its aim to bring together scholars of different fields. Employing a broad definition of pilgrimage as encompassing a range of forms of religious mobility encouraged interdisciplinary examination of the topic. We learned that pilgrimage is an important context in which women of different periods and faith traditions were able to enact agency on their own behalf, but also an important context for representing female behaviour. The speakers demonstrated not only the vibrancy of the field, but also the extent to which methodological innovations are taking place serve to increase our ability to reconstruct and understand women's religious experience in historical contexts. While there are no plans to publish the proceedings of this conference, we very much hope that we have planted the seed for future networking and research collaboration.

**Figure 1**  
*Contributors and organising committee (picture taken by Mauro Locati).*



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