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16 Pilgrimage progress?

Jan N. Bremmer

The appearance of the present book is a welcome addition to the vibrant modern research into pilgrimage.¹ The attention to this subject is relatively new for the ancient world,² but since the early 1990s studies have proliferated. Yet we cannot fail to note that there is no lemma ‘pilgrimage’ in the index of Walter Burkert’s *Greek Religion* (1985) or Robert Parker’s *On Greek Religion* (2011) and neither do we find any reference to Roman pilgrimage in the 2007 *A Companion to Roman Religion*, edited by Jörg Rüpke, which is the closest to a comprehensive modern study of Roman religion that we have. Pilgrimage does make a fleeting appearance in another collection on Roman religion,³ but it seems fair to say that at first glance pilgrimage is not a relevant topic of Greek or Roman religion. Yet despite these absences, we have had a number of studies in the last twenty years that argue that pilgrimage was an important part of ancient religion.

Undoubtedly, the pioneer of the modern studies on pilgrimage in the ancient pagan world is Jaś (in the earlier 1990s still John) Elsner, who initiated this new interest with a fine study of Pausanias. Elsner was fully conscious of the fact that he applied a basically Christian concept to the pagan ancient world. Not that all of his arguments for doing so were immediately convincing. He started off by postulating that Pausanias was a pilgrim because ‘When visiting the cave of Demeter Melaine at Mt. Elaius, Pausanias tells us that “it was mainly to *see* (my italics) this Demeter that I came to Phigalia” (viii.42.11)’. Important here for Elsner is that Pausanias’ viewing ‘was as much about perceiving the (in this case invisible) presence of the holy as it was about looking at art’. Unfortunately, the Greek text of the passage does not mention ‘seeing’ at all, which is not surprising as Pausanias knew very well, as he tells us, that there was nothing to see: the famous statue had long disappeared.⁴ On the other hand, Elsner is much more persuasive when he analyses Pausanias’ visit to Eleusis as a pilgrimage. There can be little doubt that for foreign initiands the journey to Eleusis was a ‘real’ pilgrimage, and as such Eleusis is rightly discussed in this volume by Inge Nielsen. But was this also the case for a native Athenian? This poses a problem to which we will return shortly.

There are two more important aspects of pilgrimage touched upon by Elsner. First, he notices that ‘A religious tourist visiting sacred sites is not simply a tourist: he or she is also a pilgrim’ (8). As a sweeping statement, this can hardly be true. For a start, religious tourists can visit sacred sites of other religions or churches without

therefore being pilgrims. For example, in the summer of 2015 I visited the sacred site in Konya of Mevlana, the founder of the whirling dervishes, which contains a room with a casket containing hairs from the beard of Muhammad. Being a Dutch Reformed tourist I was not suddenly transformed into a Sufi or Moslem pilgrim. But it is clear that especially today the borderlines between the two categories, pilgrims and tourists, have become rather fluid with the rise of non-confessional pilgrimage and spiritual tourism. In fact so much so, that we have a new journal studying the two categories together.⁵ But the same must already have been the case in antiquity. A foreign visitor to Athens for the Eleusinian Mysteries will surely have looked around the city also.

A second aspect stressed by Elsner is that of Pausanias providing a civic identity for his readers. He further elaborates on this element in a subsequent exploration of the pilgrimage theme in a 1995 book co-authored with an anthropologist.⁶ According to Elsner, the celebration of local festivals such as the Athenian Great Panathenaea or the Argive festival of Hera occasioned making journeys 'home', by citizens, colonists and allies abroad. In that way, these journeys defined the membership of a citizen group and thus strengthened local identities. Similarly focused on identities is the 1997 book on Greek pilgrimage by Matthew Dillon that combines under the umbrella term of 'pilgrimage' all kinds of festivals, such as the women's festival of the Thesmophoria, the Mystery cult of Andania, the oracle of Delphi and the Olympic Games. But does that make their visitors into pilgrims? Once again, we will return to this shortly.

With the next important publication on ancient pilgrimage, David Frankfurter's 1998 collection of studies on Coptic pilgrimage, we move into a different part and time of the ancient world. Without any mention of Elsner, but with plenty of references to anthropological pilgrimage studies, Frankfurter seeks in his volume to comprehend pilgrimage 'as an expressive attitude and act in Egyptian history'. It is a '*regional* (his italics) approach to Christianity', but also 'an *example* of pilgrimage in the history of Mediterranean religions' (6). In his lengthy introduction, Frankfurter takes a rather generous view of pilgrimage as comprising even a journey to 'the center of one's city, or down an alley' (18), but he usefully pays attention to the problem of the catchment areas, the relationship between central and peripheral shrines (18–24) and the role of holy men (24–26). In the end, though, his introduction falls short of a proper discussion of Coptic pilgrimage because he is more interested in local cults, especially their supposed continuity with the pagan past, than the phenomenon of pilgrimage itself.⁷

In 2005 Elsner returned to pilgrimage, now in company with Ian Rutherford, in a collection of studies on pilgrimage in Graeco-Roman and early Christian antiquity. In their introduction, they present a typology of pilgrimage, in which they distinguish twenty different types of pilgrimage – fourteen Greek, four Roman types, one Jewish and one Christian – ranging from civic delegations to festivals in other cities to the yearly festival of Diana at Lake Nemi to visits to Christian icons. They also approached the problem of conceptualising pilgrimage head-on by prefacing their analysis with a quote by Fritz Graf: 'The label pilgrimage does actual harm'.⁸ This is indeed a very important point, yet they nowhere make clear

what is gained by calling all these very different rituals 'pilgrimage'. To what extent does such a label help to improve our understanding? What progress does their book constitute?

What about the present book? There can be no doubt that the focus of the collection is much better and much more helpful than previous works. By placing material culture in the forefront, the editors provide another example of 'the material turn' in religion, which derived from the so-called 'cultural turn'. This recent development, which has been advanced in particular by scholars such as Birgit Meyer and Carolyn Walker Bynum,⁹ also sharpens our insights into ancient religion, in this case by focusing on the architecture and artefacts of sites connected with pilgrimage. Yet the editors also cannot escape the subject that has bedeviled all previous scholars of pilgrimage: what do we understand by that term?

It seems to me that we have to start with the emic terminology of pilgrimage. In other words, which terms did the Greeks and Romans use for what the various editors call 'pilgrimage'? It is rather surprising that none of the editors and authors of previous volumes have thought this necessary. Yet if we want to understand the terminological problem we cannot do without a *begriffsgeschichtliche* investigation. Such an analysis will enable us to understand the notions used by the Greeks and Romans for rituals nowadays called 'pilgrimage' but will also make us aware of possible differences from our own notion of 'pilgrim'. The space allotted me for this Epilogue does not suffice for such a vast undertaking, but we can make a few observations to help us on our way.

In Greek, two terms in particular have been claimed in connection with pilgrimage. The first one, *theôria*, has no Greek etymology but its general sense is 'observation'. Apparently, the *theôroi*, sacred delegates on behalf of their cities to festivals elsewhere, were primarily spectators rather than participants. Other meanings, such as 'to attend a festival, even in one's own city', easily derive from this prime meaning. Given our observations above on the connection between pilgrimage and tourism it is interesting that in later texts *theôros/theôria* can also mean 'sightseer/sightseeing'.¹⁰ In any case, originally the term also referred to the political sphere, as the sending of the *theôroi* depended on a decision of their city.¹¹ Our second term is rather different and limited to Egypt. A couple of centuries after they had settled in Egypt, the Hellenistic Greeks introduced the term *proskynema*, 'act of adoration', for brief inscriptions left in sanctuaries visited. The term is virtually limited to the Egyptian epigraphic record, occurs rarely in literary texts outside Egypt and is clearly a regional term. It is regularly combined with the term ἦκω or ἦλθον, 'I have come', thus stressing that the goal of the pilgrimage has been reached. Rather strikingly, these inscriptions seldom display signs of piety and when so, only concisely. They do not help us when searching for the motivation of the pilgrimage.¹²

It is different in Latin. Perhaps not surprisingly, the Romans did not have a term for something resembling pilgrimage. As inhabitants of the most powerful city of the ancient world, they clearly had no need to coin a term for visiting sanctuaries in other towns. It is even rather striking how late we find a term equivalent to our 'pilgrim' in Latin. It is well known that the modern term 'pilgrim' derives from Old

French *pelerin*, *peregrine*, ‘pilgrim, crusader, foreigner, stranger’, via Late Latin *pelegrinus*, dissimilated from Latin *peregrinus*. The latter belongs to a semantic field that is also covered by the noun *peregrinatio* and the verb *peregrinor*. When we look at the *Thesaurus Linguae Latinae* s.v., we find as their main meanings ‘wandering’ and ‘moving about’ (especially outside one’s fatherland, but never travelling to a sanctuary), and ‘to be a stranger’, in a Christian sense also being a stranger in this world. The wandering is not aimed at a specific goal as is the case with modern pilgrims; typically, the famous pilgrimage of Egeria never uses *peregrinor* and related words but often the verb *ire*, ‘to go’, without an indication of a specific direction.¹³ In earlier Medieval Latin we find (in addition to a few examples of our ‘pilgrim’, which do not antedate the ninth century) mainly meanings such as ‘crusade’, ‘military expedition’, ‘to go into exile’, ‘migration of birds’, ‘living away from one’s earthly or heavenly fatherland’, but also ‘journey without fixed goal’ (for spiritual perfecting), ‘mission’, ‘this earthly life’.¹⁴ To be a stranger and wandering do seem to be the core meanings of this group of words.

From this brief survey, I would conclude that neither the Greeks nor Romans, nor even the earlier Christians, had felt the need to create a word that comes even close to the meaning of our modern ‘pilgrim’ or ‘pilgrimage’. But emic meanings are of course only one side of the coin. There is in itself nothing against the introduction of an etic term if that is useful for a better understanding of the ancient evidence. But what does it profit us to call a brief journey to a sanctuary or participation in a yearly festival a ‘pilgrimage’? Nothing, I submit, only misunderstanding. It introduces into our appreciation of the ancient evidence notions such as holy places, wandering, specific religious goals and life-transforming experiences, which are simply absent from many ancient rituals claimed as pilgrimages. It will be clear that I do not favour bringing into our equation nomadic feasts (McCorriston), local Mystery cults such as that of Andania (Nielsen), local women’s festivals such as the Thesmophoria (Friese) or visits to graveyards (Stevens) – let alone Frankfurter’s alley (above). To be a meaningful etic category, pilgrimage should comprise the elements of religious motivation, journey, religious site and life-enriching experience.

This plea for a *stricto* (or perhaps *strictiore*) *sensu* usage of the terms ‘pilgrim’ and ‘pilgrimage’ does not mean that a comparison with Christian usages, as presented in this book, cannot be useful. I would not even mind going further to say that there are clear family resemblances between the Christian practices that have given us our present terminology and Greek, albeit much less Roman, rituals such as, for example, the Mystery cults of Eleusis and, especially, Samothrace.¹⁵ In fact, we know that Cyril of Alexandria founded a new sanctuary in Menouthis in honour of SS Cyrus and John in order to combat the pilgrimage to the neighbouring healing sanctuary of Isis.¹⁶ That is why I would like to conclude with a closer look at two pilgrimages discussed in this book, one Greek, the Mysteries at Samothrace, and one early Christian,¹⁷ the complex of Thecla at Meriamlik. My question will be especially: what does the archaeological approach as advocated in this book contribute and what are its deficits, if any? Does the approach help us towards a more holistic analysis of the pilgrimages so that we can acquire a

better picture of what an ancient pilgrimage entailed? Let us start with the Mystery cult of Samothrace.

Samothrace is an island without natural harbours, and the strong winds from the north and those from its mile-high mountain made approaching the sanctuary and the city of Samothrace, which were both located on the northern side of the island, a rather dangerous business. To be a pilgrim to this island was a real choice, and it is therefore not surprising that the first pilgrims were sailors who visited the Mysteries for their salvation at sea.¹⁸ When the sanctuary had become prestigious, royal figures such as Philip of Macedon and Ptolemaic Arsinoë also chose to be initiated, and in the first century BC the island's connection with the Aeneas myth attracted several famous Romans, such as L. Calpurnius Piso, when proconsul of Macedonia, and the polyglot Varro. Obviously, motivations for the pilgrimage could widely vary, as they still do today. Aside from these famous people, the inscriptions show that the main catchment area of the Mysteries was the coastal cities of Northern Greece and those of Western Asia Minor: the sanctuary's pull was distinctly regional.¹⁹

From the inscriptions we know that men and women, enslaved and free, high and low status, made the perilous journey. They will have often travelled in a group given that initiates regularly came from one city as demonstrated by the inscriptions. This travelling together may well have promoted a certain feeling of *communitas* among the pilgrims as the anthropologist Victor Turner (1920–1983) famously argued.²⁰ Once arrived on the island, the initiands must have moved to the entrance of the sanctuary where, presumably, there was an official beginning of the initiation. Wescoat has rightly argued that the passage from the entrance to the building where the initiation took place must have shaped 'the pilgrims' kinaesthetic experience and visual perceptions, which, in turn, affected their state of mind'. She notes the original passage through a narrow entrance and a steep descent to the central valley. I would further suggest that these features also helped to create a feeling of togetherness and *communitas*, as in these circumstances the initiands would sometimes have been pressed close together before being able to proceed on wider and less steep roads. Moreover, the darkness of the evening and falling night must have made it wise to stay together, not knowing exactly where they were going, since they were following the priests, who held the lamps.

Did they chant hymns or sing praises to the gods while proceeding? There certainly were ecstatic dances and libations, and a certain tension and anticipation had to be built up. Unfortunately, our archaeological evidence largely deserts us at these points and has nothing to tell about the actual initiation. It has not even succeeded in identifying with any certainty the building in which the Mysteries were performed. Here we are thus confronted with the limits of the archaeological approach, perhaps more in pagan than in Christian cases, as in the latter we know a fair amount about the liturgy of the time and region and therefore can more easily fill in gaps in our knowledge regarding the ritual part. This lack of knowledge also prevents us from knowing if those initiands that returned for the second and higher degree of initiation, the *epopteia*, had to follow the same route so well sketched by Wescoat. In any case, the pilgrims will hardly have departed straight

for the harbour as Wescoat suggests. A number of dining rooms have been found, and also the late antique author Nonnos, who was well acquainted with the Mysteries, mentions banqueting. Given that the archaeological evidence has brought to light an altar and one ram's horns – the ram being the favourite sacrificial victim of the Mysteries – it seems plausible that the pilgrims dined on their sacrifices. Moreover, in his *Life of Lucullus* Plutarch mentions that one of Lucullus' naval commanders, Voconius, lingered on Samothrace after his initiation and celebrated a *panegyris*, 'fair', which was a traditional part of ancient Mysteries. Naturally, the booths of such a fair have not survived, but the excavations have produced rings which were given (sold?) to the pilgrims as a permanent souvenir of their initiation. The widespread popularity of later *Pilgerzeichen*, such as the famous shell of Compostela, illustrates that such a souvenir is a popular item in pilgrimage sites. Evidently, many pilgrims wanted to come home with a tangible sign of their initiation, of their closeness to the Samothracian gods. Here again we see the benefits of an archaeological approach.

Let us now move to a rather different site, that of Meriamlik, the pilgrimage site of St Thecla. Thecla emerges first in the Christian tradition around AD 200 in the so-called *Acts of Paul and Thecla*. Her name is occasionally mentioned in the subsequent centuries, but her sanctuary at Meriamlik is known archaeologically only from the fifth century. As Kristensen shows, Meriamlik, like Samothrace, was basically a regional complex which mainly attracted people from the neighbouring city of Seleukeia and province of Isauria. Unfortunately, there seems to be no graffiti that can tell us something about the origins of the pilgrims, such as we can observe in the Sinai, whose St Catherine's Monastery is well analysed in this volume by Ann Marie Yasin. She rightly pays attention to the routes to the Monastery, but does not mention the various graffiti that enlighten us, at least to some extent, about the origins of the pilgrims, who even at an early stage came from as far afield as Armenia, although the grand majority spoke Greek.²¹

Although various indications suggest worship of Thecla was already in existence,²² our first proper description of the site is by Egeria in her account of her pilgrimage to the Holy Land. Kristensen notes the existence of a wall around the Thecla basilica before Egeria's visit and suggests that 'Egeria's reference to this precinct wall firmly establishes it as an early feature of how the sacred space of Thecla's sanctuary was defined'. However, this is only one element of the wall's function, as Egeria suggests that the wall was built 'to guard the church because of the Isauri, as these are very malicious and frequently commit acts of robbery, to prevent them from making an attempt on the monastery which is established there'.²³ This does not exclude its also functioning as a sacred demarcation, but may not have been its main function. In any case, the wall must have been a clearly visible landmark and as such a very welcome sign for the arriving pilgrims.

What did the pilgrims do on arrival? This must have depended on the goal of the individual pilgrimage. Egeria tells us that on her arriving 'prayer was made at the martyrion',²⁴ and the whole of the *Acts of Saint Thecla* having been read'. From her text it is evident that the martyrion was in the church.²⁵ The term 'martyrium' is somewhat odd, as the *Acts* clearly tell us that Thecla had passed away normally,

not died as a martyr. However that may be, apparently the church contained the supposed grave of Thecla. This must have made burial in the church a precious commodity, and the *depositio ad sanctam* was sometimes contested, as Kristensen observes, although archaeology cannot uncover the politics behind burial. In addition to the prayer, Egeria read the *Acts of Thecla*. Did she bring a copy of this apocryphal writing or did the priests in the church have a copy ready for the pious pilgrims? In any case, as Kristensen notes, there must have been a literary production connected to the Thecla complex, as we have a series of miracles of Thecla that must have been written over a longer period of time.²⁶ For Egeria, the place clearly was an important *lieu de mémoire* of Thecla, and one can well imagine the emotion evoked by the reading of the *Acts*. For others, healing was perhaps the main motivation, and, as Kristensen suggests, incubation could have been practised here as well, as it was at the site of St Menas in Abu Mena (Yasin).²⁷ After the more religious part of their journey the leaving pilgrims will have visited the fair, where soap was sold (*Mir.* 42: to be used in the baths also?), but surely also other commodities.²⁸ Some pilgrims will have continued their journey, such as Egeria, others will have gone home straight away. We do not hear from the literary evidence of any souvenirs taken home, but this does not mean there were none.

Undoubtedly, both pilgrimages that I have discussed share a number of similarities, such as the sometimes perilous journey, the choreographed access to the actual shrine and the fair; in this respect the modern pleas for the use of the term ‘pilgrimage’ also for certain ancient ritual practices is fully justified. Moreover, a number of contributions to this book show the real progress in our understanding of the workings of a pilgrimage site, whether for healing in Greece (Frieze) or beyond the Alps (Grünewald),²⁹ for visiting a monastery (Blanke) or a stylite (Yasin, Hunter-Crawley),³⁰ for the importance of votives (Petsalis-Diomidis), for reconstructing a procession (Jürgens) or for detecting a multi-religious pilgrimage site (Drbal),³¹ for reconstructing the catchment areas,³² and for the impact the sites must have had on the arriving pilgrims. Naturally, archaeology is much less equipped to reconstruct the motivations of the pilgrims, the goings on at the *moment suprême* of the Mysteries or the liturgy in churches. In the end, both texts and artefacts are necessary to acquire a full picture of ancient and modern pilgrimages.³³

Notes

- 1 For good, up-to-date introductions to recent work on pilgrimage, see Mondragón *et al.* 2012, 11–26; Buitelaar 2015, 9–25. In my references, I will limit myself mainly to recent literature or studies to be added to the various chapters of this book, to which I refer by the names of the authors.
- 2 From the older literature, note especially Kötting 1950.
- 3 Woolf 2003, 39–54 and 47–48.
- 4 Paus. 8.42.11: Ταύτης μάλιστα ἐγὼ τῆς Δήμητρος ἔνεκα ἐς Φιγαλίαν ἀφικόμην, cf. Elsner 1992, 3–29; 8, 20–21 (quotations): 1995, 235–255. Before Elsner’s essay there are virtually no classical books or articles with ‘pilgrim/pilgrimage’ in the title, except for those focusing on the Holy Land. For a nuanced critique and positive evaluation of Elsner’s ‘pilgrimage’ contributions regarding Pausanias, see Pirenne-Delforge 2008, 98–101.

- 5 In 2013, *The International Journal of Religious Tourism and Pilgrimage* (IJRTP) was founded by the Religious Tourism and Pilgrimage Expert Group and is published by the Dublin Institute of Technology (<http://arrow.dit.ie/ijrtp/about.html>). The combination is often studied today. For good introductions, see Post 2013, 135–149; Stausberg 2010.
- 6 Coleman and Elsner 1995, 10–29.
- 7 Frankfurt 1998, 3–48. The numbers in the text of this paragraph refer to this introduction.
- 8 Graf 2002, 193–196.
- 9 Bynum 2011; Meyer 2012.
- 10 Rutherford 2013, 4–6.
- 11 As is noted in a still valuable older study: Siebert 1973, 33–53.
- 12 For the *proskynema* inscriptions, see most recently Dijkstra 2008, 186–192; Tallet 2013, 10.5587–88 (with full bibliography).
- 13 Vermeer 1965, 1–6, 19.
- 14 *Thesaurus Linguae Latinae*, vol. X. 1 (1995) s.v.; *Novum Glossarium mediae Latinitatis*, vol. Pea-Pezzola (Copenhagen and Geneva, 1995–2000) s.v.; note also Albert 1992; De Gaiffier 1967, 31–61; Olivieri 2013; Plötz 1979, 103–134.
- 15 For the term, see Ginzburg 2004, 537–556.
- 16 Montserrat 1998, 257–279; Stolz 2008, 193–207.
- 17 For early Christian pilgrimage, see the useful introductions by Frank 2008, 826–843; Külzer 2015, 51–64. For early Christian critiques of pilgrimage, see Bitton-Ashkelony 2005.
- 18 Pace Wescoat (her note 13), the early evidence is crystal clear in this respect, cf. Bremmer 2014, 28–29; add Faraone 2005, 30–50. For a more detailed discussion of the Mysteries, I refer to my discussion, *op. cit.* 22–36, where the reader will find all the evidence for details mentioned here.
- 19 Linde 2013, 81–88.
- 20 For a good discussion, see Di Giovine 2011, 247–269.
- 21 Cf. Destephen 2014, 135–156, who also reconstructs the various pilgrim routes through the Sinai.
- 22 For the early worship of Thecla, see now Barrier *et al.* 2016.
- 23 Egeria, *Iter.* 23.4: *Propterea autem murus missus est ad custodiendam ecclesiam propter Isauros, quia satis mali sunt et frequenter latrunculantur, ne forte conentur aliquid facere circa monasterium, quod ibi est deputatum*, tr. M. McClure and C. Feltoe, slightly adapted. For the notorious Isaurian robbers, see Feld 2005.
- 24 For prayer and early Christian pilgrimage, see Maraval 1985, 138.
- 25 Egeria, *Iter.* 23.4: *ecclesiam, in qua est martyrium*, cf. Dagron 1978, 72f.
- 26 Bovon 2016; Dagron 1978.
- 27 Grossmann 2007, 125–140.
- 28 Dagron 1978, 78f.
- 29 For Grand, see also the extensive dossier in *Les Dossiers d'Archéologie* 162 (July/August 1991).
- 30 Note also Sodini 2012, 5–23.
- 31 This is still a normal phenomenon today, cf. Albera 2011, 109–129.
- 32 For an interesting analysis of pilgrimage routes based on the Menas flasks, see Lambert and Pedemonte Demeglio 1994, 205–231; add Escher 2005, 73–85; Martin 2006, 383–393.
- 33 For various references and ideas I am most grateful to Rolf Bremmer, Jitse Dijkstra, Tobias Nicklas and, last but not least, Ton Hilhorst, whose scrutiny of my text helped me to remove various blemishes and misunderstandings.

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