

CHRISTIAN PILGRIMS AND HOLY MEN IN LATE ANTIQUITY

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Pilgrims were an integral component of Christian culture in the third, fourth, and fifth centuries C.E.

Their writings offer a unique glimpse of the period even if seemingly embellished or fabricated. This era – Late Antiquity – witnessed a fascinating rise of holy men and holy places throughout the ancient world; subsequently, pilgrims traveled to observe and experience the holiness associated with this developing tradition. At first, the relationship between pilgrims and their venerated destinations seems only complementary. Yet, by closely exploring pilgrims of this period, a complex and interdependent relationship between the traveler and the journey's end is unveiled. This relationship often exists despite denials from the most pious of holy men. Pilgrims satisfied their desire for a renewed spiritual closeness with God through seeking holy men and holy places. The relationship between pilgrims and holy men demonstrates their combined effect on the cult of the saints. In this, one may assert that pilgrims and holy men engaged in a co-dependent relationship that benefitted pilgrims and holy men alike. Together, they thrived, enlarged the influence of Christianity, and promoted the lasting importance of the cult of the saints beyond Late Antiquity.

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Pilgrims were not an anomaly on the desert landscape. Masses of Christians committed some portion of their life to visit a holy person or holy place. Exact numbers are impossible to identify, but writings from the period offer some insight. In *The Life of St. Simeon Stylites*, Theodore of Cyrrhus described the crowds of the fifth century: “As they all came from every quarter, each road is like a river, one can see collected in that spot a human sea into which rivers from all sides debouche.”¹ This natural symbolism encourages readers to envision roads of perpetual movement, in which travelers felt congested by the masses as they sought spiritual encounters. According to Athanasius, Antony was visited in the desert at the Inner Mountain “[by] great numbers from all over the world and all the different nationalities rejoiced to see this man fighting so valiantly against the devil.”² Athanasius’ account emphasized that the crowds visiting Antony appeared not only large but also originated from distant lands. As many accounts highlighted, droves of pilgrims abandoned their mundane lives to embark on a

1 Robert Doran, “The Syriac Life of Saint Simeon Stylites,” in *The Lives of Simeon Stylites* (Kalamazoo, MI: Cistercian Publications, 1992), 75.

2 Athanasius, “Life of Antony,” in *Early Christian Lives*, trans. Carolinne White (London: Penguin Books, 1998), 65.



Figure 1. Landscape view of 6th century church in Syria. Source: “North Church (561 A.D.), general view from southeast,” Howard Crosby Butler Archive. Department of Art and Archaeology, Princeton University.

taxing journey. This undertaking demanded a high level of motivation in order to form small or large pilgrimage groups.

The word “pilgrim” derives from the Latin word *pereгри*, which translates loosely to “a traveller [sic] in a foreign land.”³ The modern era provides a more explicit definition: “someone that travels to a sacred place for religious reasons.”⁴ Neither definition properly represents the essence of Christian pilgrims of Late Antiquity.

The vague phrase “religious reasons” fails to capture the emotion and passion Christian pilgrims associated with

³ Webster’s *Unabridged Dictionary*, 2nd ed., s.v. “pereгри.”

⁴ Ibid.

the concept of religious journeys, particularly those of the third, fourth, and fifth centuries. The motivation for individuals to embark on a lengthy journey, in order to seek the intangible, becomes difficult to explain without accepting a broad goal. Pilgrims hoped to experience the holiness of the biblical past and a supernatural closeness with God that seemed impossible in the routine of everyday life.⁵ While contemporary knowledge may question the factuality of pilgrim explanations regarding their motivations, studying pilgrims requires an acceptance of their determination at face value. Supernatural experiences described by pilgrims may seem unlikely from an outsider's perspective, but it was these very events that inspired spiritual journeys.

In *The Memory of the Eyes*, author Georgia Frank identified the motivations of pilgrims. According to Frank, pilgrims sought destinations to satisfy a curiosity of the marvels of distant lands (exoticism), perceived divine presence through visual cues (sensory engagement), and participated in traditions or sacred moments of the Bible's past (Biblical Realism).⁶ Pilgrims viewed their uneventful village life as an impediment preventing a powerful closeness with God.⁷ Curiosity and visual cues proved significant. Active religious engagement with the sites demonstrated that the pilgrim and travelogue readers transformed holy sites and holy men into a tool for approaching God. Divine presence transformed objects of no significant intrinsic worth into relics.

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An arduous journey of this sort could only be fruitful with a planned travel route and destination. Certainly, while many pilgrims began journeys without a *specific* person or place in mind, these types of journeys were inspired by their final destinations, which inevitably brought pilgrims to particular regions. Pilgrimages acted as passageways from the present into the biblical past. These pilgrimages became the tools by which a pilgrim might achieve a spiritual encounter, and seemed to hold a special power.

Frank refers to those pilgrims unable to physically embark on a journey as “armchair pilgrims.”⁸ While unable to travel, armchair pilgrims still absorbed stories about the saints written by conventional pilgrims on their travels. Through vicarious pilgrimages, these individuals sought the same goals as their traveling counterparts. Spiritual renewal could be found in the readings because ultimately, the destination—not the journey—served as

⁵ Georgia Frank, *The Memory of the Eyes: Pilgrims to Living Saints in Christian Late Antiquity* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000), 29.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Ibid., 4.

the source of the pilgrims' inspiration. Therefore, in order for a spiritual awakening to occur, one needed only to imagine a holy man or holy place. This concept satisfies Frank's aforementioned outline of pilgrims' motivations. Despite the armchairs' inability to travel, their curiosity and the visual cues provided by journeyed travelers proved strong enough to affect their spirituality. For pilgrims and armchairs alike, the encounter with holy men and holy places superseded the actual journey.

Pilgrims zealously pursued holy men who were believed to bridge life on earth with heaven. Like timeless biblical personalities, a strong belief existed that holy men possessed the ability to communicate directly with God.⁹ During this communication, witnesses legitimized the holy man by validating his connection to heaven. The perception that these ethereal individuals resisted the temptations of Satan served as a source of encouragement and inspiration for others. The magnetizing personalities of the "spiritual athletes"¹⁰ pulled the pilgrims closer to the holy men to view firsthand the "evidence of contact with the supernatural world."¹¹ Forms of legitimizing the spiritual leaders included performing miracles and demonstrating the pious discipline of an ascetic lifestyle. Jerome referred to holy men as "the heavenly family upon earth."¹² The common perception of a holy man was that he lived the life of an angel with "unceasing prayer, prophecy, healing, and exorcism."¹³

The writings of pilgrims fueled this fascination with holy men and inspired more pilgrimages through their own narratives. In fact, according to Frank, "some men and women became so deeply attracted to this world that they set out to see the living saints [holy men] for themselves."¹⁴ While one might question the factual validity of these stories, their content included interesting narratives, embellished or otherwise. For example, the story of St. Simeon Stylites, a man willing to stand on a sixty-foot pillar for thirty-seven years, certainly served as an alluring read.¹⁵ Another example illustrates Antony's survival while enduring relentless physical beatings from the devil and his demons. Other writings, such as the tale of demoniacs healed with mysterious oil on an island

9 Gérard Vallée, *The Shaping of Christianity: The History and Literature of its Formative Centuries (100–800)* (New York: Paulist Press, 1999), 135.

10 "Athlete" is an interesting term used to characterize ascetic holy men who typically fasted and lived in isolation from society. In the *Ammonius Report* holy men are described as "exceedingly pale" and "incorporeal" (2). By modern definitions it is certainly inaccurate. However, Christians of Late Antiquity consistently referred to those that resisted temptation as "athletes" through various texts, i.e. Fourth Maccabees (6:10, 17:15, 17:16), Theodoret's *Religious History* (13), and *The Syriac Life of Saint Simeon Stylites* (1).

11 Vallée, 135.

12 Frank, 1.

13 Vallée, 135.

14 Frank, 2.

15 Vallée, 135.

eleven miles out to sea, surely piqued the curiosity of potential travelers.¹⁶

Holy sites provided a spiritual encounter by placing pilgrims in the footsteps of their biblical heroes. The importance of holy places is too great to overlook. However, much of the spiritual encounter associated with holy places required holy men to supplement the experience. Some holy places would have been unknown without the presence of holy men to provide a location, a story, and a spiritual encounter to enhance the pilgrims' visit.

Egeria's *Travelogue* provides an example of how holy men created a spiritual encounter for pilgrims. Egeria visited the Sinai region over the course of a month, from December of 383 C.E. to January of 384. A native of Western Europe, it is presumed she directed her narrative account to nuns.¹⁷ Egeria's account shows the significance of holy places for pilgrims, but more importantly, how holy men enhanced the spiritual encounter. Egeria, guided by holy men to Mount Sinai, traversed to a church built on the site "where the Law was given."¹⁸ She continued to the location where Moses received a second set of tablets after he destroyed the first in anger because of the sins of his people. Later, Egeria and the holy men visited the site of the burning bush, which she noted to be alive in the rocky landscape of the region. Each stop on her tour served as more than just an eyewitness account, it inspired a spiritual moment strengthened by the holy men that led her journey. Holy men created personal spiritual relationships along their route by reading from Exodus, making offerings to God, participating in earnest prayer, and offering communion. Egeria fondly recorded each stop in her journey and expressed her most sincere words to the holy men who served as her guides.¹⁹ Egeria understood that her expedition would have been fruitless without holy men directing her and fostering a spiritual encounter with God.

A cursory glance at the relationship between pilgrims and their destinations appears one-sided. Despite their desire to remain in solitude, holy men were constantly pursued by pilgrims who offered little in return other than perhaps glory and fame. Holy men provided services such as healing, prophecy, and wisdom, which were desired by pilgrims.²⁰ Even though it would appear to the contrary, holy men relied on the economic support

16 Presumably the mysterious oil referred to as "rock oil" in the text is petroleum, as noted in Daniel F. Caner's "Piacenza Pilgrim," in *History and Hagiography from the Late Antique Sinai* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2010), 261.

17 Egeria was most likely from Spain. Nuns are presumed to be the intended readers of her narrative, as she addressed her writing to "sisters." Egeria, "Egeria, Travelogue I-IX," in *History and Hagiography from the Late Antique Sinai*, ed. Daniel Caner (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2010), 211.

18 Ibid., 220.

19 Ibid., 225.

20 Frank, 4.

provided by pilgrimages.

As countless throngs of pilgrims relentlessly sought their divine intervention, holy men often retreated from the crowds. As an example, while on a mission to help the Outer Mountain inhabitants, Antony found himself simultaneously longing to return to his life of solitude.²¹ It is worth noting that Antony found the crowds to be “annoying” but ultimately he “*allowed*” [emphasis added] himself to be taken.²² The language of Antony’s account suggests that he could have resisted being taken to the Outer Mountain but chose not to do so. He desired solitude, but also accepted his burdensome role as a holy man.



Figure 2. Interior of 7th century church in Syria. Source: “Church dated 602 A.D., interior of east end from west,” Howard Crosby Butler Archive. Department of Art and Archaeology, Princeton University.

²¹ Athanasius, “Life of Antony,” 62-63.

²² Ibid., 62.

Holy men particularly benefitted from pilgrims through the replenishing of supplies. While most holy men labored to be self-sufficient, the nature of their isolation made the acquisition of basic necessities challenging.²³ The “Piacenza Pilgrim” account described a journey by an Italian man to various sacred sites throughout Egypt, Syria, Mesopotamia, and Constantinople.²⁴ In a mid-sixth century example, a pilgrim found a monastery near the city of Elusa. The pilgrim noted that while the nuns had a grindstone, they were dependent on Christian pilgrims to provide the grain needed to survive in the desert.²⁵

As in the above mentioned examples, most holy men pursued solitude. However, a closer examination reveals that holy men needed the pilgrims despite their insistence to the contrary. This relationship was co-dependent; each participant thrived in the presence of the other. The exemplary life of a holy man was wasted if not lived to influence others. Pilgrims projected the influence of the holy men beyond the desert. They accomplished this by spreading holy men’s fame, authoring pilgrim narratives, and supporting the monasteries economically. Athanasius suggested that what pilgrims received from Antony was valuable enough to be considered compensation for their journey.²⁶

The primary purpose of holy men involved bridging God with humanity. In his article, “The Rise and Function of the Holy Man,” Late Antiquity historian Peter Brown discussed how holy men made intercessions for mankind and presented God as an available and relevant part of everyday life. While God often appeared to be remote, the holy man was approachable. Brown wrote, “The holy man carried the burden of making such a distant God relevant to the particularity of human needs.”²⁷ Stories concerning St. Simeon Stylites support Brown’s assertion that the holy men were active intercessors with heaven. In one account of early fifth-century Syria, the villagers’ prayers for rain seemed to fall on deaf ears. When they requested prayer from Simeon Stylites, a different result occurred. With a drought choking the region, villagers approached Simeon and asked him to pray to God on their behalf. He responded, asking the people to “bring an offering to the Lord your God; turn away from evil and do good; then, turning, immediately he will have mercy upon you.”²⁸ When the people

23 The argument for the benefit of labor among monastics is well documented in Daniel Caner’s *Wandering, Begging Monks*.

24 Caner, “Piacenza Pilgrim,” 252.

25 Ibid., 254.

26 Ibid., 65.

27 Peter Brown, “The Rise and Function of the Holy Man in Late Antiquity,” *The Journal of Roman Studies* 61 (1971): 97.

28 Frederick Lent, “The Life of St. Simeon Stylites: A Translation of the Syriac Text in Bedjan’s *Acta Martyrum et Sanctorum*, Vol. IV,” *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 35 (1915): 140.

did as instructed, the rain began to fall, as expected for the season. The actual effectiveness of Simeon's response and prayer is debatable. However, through Simeon, the villager discovered an audible voice from God, which would not have been found by his or her own volition. To a pilgrim, this account solidified Simeon as a holy man because he directly related the practical needs of the people to an omnipotent God. Significantly, narratives of the event inspired praise for "God the sustainer," and recognized Simeon's part in producing praise for God.²⁹ Such stories created an impetus for pilgrimages and cultivated a desire to visit holy men.

In hopes of motivating others to obtain their own spiritual encounter, pilgrims documented their discoveries. This was especially effective for "armchair pilgrims," who trekked vicariously through these writings.³⁰ As larger numbers of pilgrims made these journeys, holy men such as Simeon benefitted from the increased opportunities. Narrative accounts also inspired additional spiritual encounters for pilgrims, such as healings. Furthermore, by performing these healings, holy men validated their connection with God. Pilgrims not only sought holy men for healing, but also to marvel at the healings of others.

As intercessors, holy men acted as agents of God while being careful not to take credit for the miracle of healing. In one example, a military officer had a daughter who was thought to be possessed and tormented by an evil spirit. Antony used this opportunity to turn the father toward God. Antony proclaimed: "Why do you ask me for help, you who are a mortal man? I too am mortal and share your weakness. But if you believe in Christ whose servant I am, go and pray to God according to your faith and your daughter will be healed."³¹ The father did as instructed, and his daughter was healed. Antony was sought for a specific purpose but claimed no divine power of his own. Rather, he used his role as a holy man to foster greater spirituality in the father. Such accounts inspired pilgrims to seek Antony for healing. Athanasius later wrote that Antony believed "[healing] does not belong to me or any other human being but to God."³² God healed the girl, but Antony was the destination for the father who felt unable to access God's power.

Holy men were more than just miracle workers. They were also ancient social workers providing services beyond their spiritual calling. For example, St. Simeon Stylites often served in a capacity that entailed far more

²⁹ Ibid., 179.

³⁰ Frank, 4.

³¹ Athanasius, *Early Christian Lives*, 38.

³² Ibid., 44.

than performing miracles of healing. In fact, many of his tasks were borderline petty and at best mundane. Robert Doran explored elements of St. Simeon's ability to provide social assistance. For pilgrims, Simeon's role as a social worker reassured his elevated status by proving he was an intercessor to God and confirmed that miracles could be seen in other forms besides healings. Simeon achieved widespread fame, most likely, because he became the face of a faceless God.

Pilgrims and villagers alike longed for Simeon's influence. In one account, a widowed father approached the pillar of Simeon to plea for assistance for his hungry children after thieves ravaged his fields. The father wanted more than justice; he wanted advice concerning his livelihood and his ability to provide for his children. Simeon restored the father's confidence and assured him that God would provide for his children by multiplying the remaining beans into abundance.³³ Another account described leather workers who petitioned for Simeon's help. These workers experienced unfair taxes on red dye, which affected their ability to provide for their families. Simeon became more than an intercessor between the workers and God; he was a mediator among the villagers. As a result of Simeon's efforts, the taxes on dyes were reversed.

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Despite holy men's insistence that pilgrims were often undesirable and at times a nuisance, they depended on pilgrims to validate their commitment to God. Ironically, the holy man's detachment from society made him valuable to the masses.³⁴ The holy man became a fascinating marvel and served as an objective outsider to all people no matter where they resided. The line between holy man and wandering idiot is a fine one and subject to the interpretations of pilgrims. Travelers saw what they wanted to see, and were usually influenced by their prior readings.³⁵ However, witness recordings of their actions, such as unfailing discipline and the performance of miracles, proved essential to the holy man's authenticity. For the holy man's influence to travel beyond the village borders, he required a mobile audience. Pilgrims fulfilled this need.

Due to the pilgrims' verbal and written accounts, holy men were recognized throughout the Roman Empire. Athanasius observed the following about Antony: "The remarkable thing about this man was that he who lived in obscurity on the furthest edge of the world found favor with the emperors and was honored by the whole

³³ Doran, 9.

³⁴ Brown, 80-101.

³⁵ Frank, 37.

imperial court.”³⁶ Emperor Constantine sought out Antony through letters, yet Antony seemed uninterested in engaging the ruler simply because of his title. As a holy man, Antony’s allegiance followed Christ rather than the leader of the Roman Empire. At the urging of his brothers, Antony provided a perfunctory reply to Constantine. In his letter, Antony thanked Constantine and reminded him that Christ was the *true* king and encouraged him not to let his position be a distraction in serving God. Constantine seemed fascinated by Antony, and not vice versa, thus overturning the normal social hierarchy. Pilgrim accounts of Antony’s life spread both his fame and influence throughout the Roman Empire during the fourth century. Solitude may have been the longing of his heart, but surely the opportunity to direct an emperor to Christ was a notable accomplishment in his quest to honor God.

Author Stephen J. Davis characterized the cult of the saints as an accumulation of the social practices and institutions that accompanied them.³⁷ These social practices included radical asceticism or the display of images prominently in the home.³⁸ Pilgrimage offered another radical method for contributing to the cult of the saints. Pilgrims were active participants in the rise of the cult of the saints throughout Late Antiquity.

As part of the rise of the cult of saints, there was a strong desire to physically touch a religious object, or relic. By doing so, pilgrims hoped to enhance their spiritual encounters, and they satisfied this void by acquiring relics on their pilgrimages. The cult of the saints became widespread. By having touched a religious object, pilgrims developed a continued closeness with God after the holy man was gone. For example, the pillar of St. Simeon Stylites, that once stood sixty-feet tall, has been reduced to less than ten by pilgrims desiring to feel and possess a part of what made him unique. As such, the cult of the saints was given credence by the role of pilgrims. Relics ranged from utilitarian items, such as the bucket used by Christ to drink from the well of the Samaritan woman, to the bizarre, such as the head of John the Baptist in a jar.³⁹ Each example demonstrated a desire to physically clutch an object of holiness rather than relying on mere written words. By doing this, pilgrims were active participants in the cult of the saints and furthered the reach of holy men throughout time and space.

Pilgrims were the lifeblood of Christianity throughout Late Antiquity. Their actions helped encourage the spread of Christianity throughout the Roman Empire and the world. They traveled great distances to

³⁶ Athanasius and White, 59.

³⁷ Stephen J. Davis, *The Cult of St. Thecla: A Tradition of Women’s Piety in Late Antiquity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 4.

³⁸ Ibid.

³⁹ Frank, 119-120.

relive the biblical past and experience closeness with their God. Narratives of their journey invigorated others and emboldened future generations of pilgrims. This resulted in a near endless stream of travelers searching desperately for holiness. Ironically, their passionate pursuit of spiritual renewal needed more than observation of a site. Both pilgrims and holy men promoted Christianity as the religion developed. Pilgrims needed holy men for a destination, for guidance, and for validation. Holy men needed pilgrims to disseminate their message, persuade the masses, and spread their influence beyond the boundaries of their solitary existence. In fact, this co-dependent relationship transformed a region and, eventually, the world. Pilgrims and holy men became much more than just travelers and ascetics. They became reliant on one another, engendered the cult of the saints, and became each other's closest ally. ♦♦♦