CHAPTER 17

PILGRIMAGE AND FESTIVALS

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DEFINITION, THEORY, APPROACHES

This section discusses key definitional and theoretical issues in the literature on ancient pilgrimage and festivals, outlining key approaches and discussions. The section argues in favour of broad concepts as a necessary prerequisite for cross-cultural comparison, and suggests avenues for theoretical development, especially with regard to spatiality theory.

Issues of Definition

The research interest for the subject of pilgrimage and festivals is vibrant in several disciplines, although relatively new for the ancient world with major studies appearing especially from the 1990s onwards (Bremmer 2016: 1). While understandings and definitions of pilgrimage and festivals differ within the disciplines, discussion of theory and definitions is crucial and constitutive within the perspective of the comparative history of religions, the disciplinary basis of this chapter, as it is for any cross-disciplinary discussion. First, this chapter will discuss relevant theoretical understandings of pilgrimage and festivals, and then it will survey the most prominent types of pilgrimage and festivals in the ancient Mediterranean ritual world from ancient Near Eastern examples, Graeco-Roman forms, to Jewish and early Christian types.

The conceptual and definitional problems involved in gathering together a cluster of ritual phenomena known from a vast area and several centuries, and studied across the disciplinary boundaries of ancient history, classical philology, biblical scholarship, church history, anthropology, and the history of religions, and which involves big questions of continuity and change in religion between ancient polytheisms, Judaism, and Christianities, are legion, and have sparked heated discussions over definitions and disciplinary boundaries. Pilgrimages and festivals are, moreover, religious practices
with fuzzy borders to tourism, warfare, migration, and trade (Coleman 2015), and some prefer precise definitions while others focus on continuities between related phenomena. In classical studies in particular, the concept of pilgrimage has been criticized and it has been suggested that the terms pilgrimage and pilgrim are not apt, perhaps even harmful, for the periods before Late Antiquity, also in the absence of emic terms (Graf 2002; Bremmer 2016). Against this, it can be argued that the continued discussion and refinement of cross-cultural comparative concepts are essential not only for historians of ancient religions (indeed, religion in any form), but also for cross-disciplinary conversations. We need concepts to analyse, experiment, and compare, and thereby gain a deeper understanding of the cultures we study, and of the general, human phenomenon of ‘religion’. Even when those concepts fail or fit less well, we need them in order to discuss and refine our approaches, as also stressed by Bremmer (2016).

Pilgrimage and festivals designate a set of ritual practices with fuzzy boundaries, both placed at the intersection of religion, space, and travel (Harland 2011: 5). This contribution understands pilgrimage as a ritualized journey by a person or persons to a destination ascribed religious power (e.g. a place, an object, a person) (see here Frank 2008: 826–7), often involving a bodily performance of devotion for religious purposes and the bringing home of religious objects or souvenirs. The religious purposes of the journey may be summed up as ‘orationis causa’, for the sake of prayer, meaning that participation functions, and is performed as, a medium of access to religious power; e.g. for the potential effectiveness of prayer, for healing, protection, salvation, or changes of identity and status, often bolstered by fantastic narratives (Feldt 2012a). Religious festivals may be understood as an umbrella term covering a variety of larger, ritual events in the ancient world, encompassing the performance of rites for the duration of at least one day, and involving a large number of participants, often travelling guests, from a catchment area (Harland 2011: 3–6).

Both pilgrimage and festivals demonstrate the key role of materiality and the senses in religion, as well as the ever-central roles of the body and narrative. Previous definitions of pilgrimage have stressed ‘religious motivation’ and ‘life-enriching experience’ as key in understanding pilgrimage (Bremmer 2016), that pilgrimages are journeys involving the seeking of a ‘sacred destination’ and an ‘experience of the divine’ (Whalen 2011: xi), or that the pilgrim travels to ‘a place or state that he or she believes to embody a sacred ideal’ (Morinis 1992: 4), or have simply understood pilgrimage as ‘sacralized mobility’ (Coleman 2015). Yet, motivation, intent, belief, and experience are difficult terms to use in analyses of sources for ancient religions, while sacralized mobility as a term may be found too broad. On the one hand, the definition of pilgrimage and festival participation suggested above indeed stresses the importance of noting the continuities and fuzzy boundary areas between forms of religious travel at different scales—from brief visits to the local shrine, or participation in local festivals, to major, transformational journeys to places of religious power or festivals with large catchment areas—and between pilgrimage and ancient religious festivals as ritual events. Yet, on the other hand it agrees with those scholars who find too strong a stress on the beliefs, motivations, and religious purposes of an individual problematic (Elsner and Rutherford 2007: 3–5).
While it is often productive to keep the boundaries fuzzy, the analytical value of the concepts must still be demonstrated vis-à-vis the sources in each case.

Key Theoretical Approaches

Key theoretical approaches to pilgrimage and festivals have often followed disciplinary boundaries from history, cultural geography, and sociology, to anthropology and the comparative study of religions (Coleman 2015). Still, one of the most seminal works across the board is Victor and Edith Turner's *Image and Pilgrimage in Christian Culture* (1978), which provided the outline of a comparative, theoretical approach and key models, which have been widely used. They saw pilgrimage as sharing key characteristics with rites of passage in tribal societies by involving a removal of a person or a group from everyday social frames, a testing, liminal phase, and a readmission to the group with a new status or a transformation in identity. During the testing experience, the pilgrims enter the realm of *communitas* or anti-structure, relating to each other without the constraints of normal social relationships, thus enabling new identities, reflection, and status changes. Pilgrimage differs from rites of passage by commonly being voluntary, sharing this feature with cultural practices such as art, theatre, and sports, and by being related to a center ‘out there’. The analytical power of the Turners’ model has been widely recognized, but also criticized for being less applicable to local, routine forms of pilgrimage, for downplaying the control of religious authorities over the ritual activities, and for emphasizing ideals of unity and egalitarianism over contestation and conflicts observed in practice. Another key strand in research is represented by John Eade and Michael Sallnow, who have contributed with ethnographic case studies and important new understandings of pilgrimage sites as sites of contestation and negotiation between different perspectives, and of power struggles between groups with differing interests—laypeople, ritual specialists, locals, visitors, and different sub-groups within a religion (Eade and Sallnow 1991). Researchers have also called attention to how pilgrimage centres play a role in shaping regional identities. Thus, David Frankfurter (1998) has demonstrated how pilgrimage can function as a means to engage religious groups in the Christianization of a landscape. The literary qualities of pilgrimage writings, and their value as sources for religious imaginations, norms, and expectations, have also been a seminal and key topic of interest (Leyerle 1996; Elsner 2000; Frank 2000; Jacobs 2004). This research trend marks an important watershed for its stress on the literary sources for pilgrimage as performative media, which shaped audiences’ religious perceptions, rather than as straightforward descriptions of past events.

Avenues of Theoretical Development

More recent analyses of pilgrimage and religious festivals in the ancient world can connect with broader, theoretical research trends in the study of religion, anthropology, and
in studies of modern forms of pilgrimage, as related to media studies, migration, cognitive approaches, aesthetics of religion, spatial theory, and materiality studies (Knott 2005; Tweed 2006; Meyer 2008; 2012; Bynum 2011; Grieser 2015; Feldt 2016; 2017; Uro 2016). A deeper engagement between these research trends and ancient materials will no doubt prove fruitful. Steps in the direction of a more thorough engagement with material culture have been taken recently by Kristensen in his work on ancient pilgrimage (Kristensen 2012; Kristensen and Friese 2016). An engagement with cognitive theories of ritual remains to be developed, but the potential for analysis in terms of Whitehouse’s imagistic mode of religiosity (Whitehouse 2004), in terms of the idea of commitment costly rituals (Sosis and Alcorta 2003; Bulbulia and Sosis 2011), and in terms of the building-block approach to religious experience (Taves 2009), is clear to see. Insights from ritual theory, in combination with theoretical input from theories of aesthetics, spatiality, materiality, and cognition, will no doubt prove fruitful in further studies of ancient pilgrimage and festivals. Spatiality theory, with its distinctions between material space, designed space, and lived space can offer new analytical strategies for distinguishing between the geophysical aspects of pilgrimage and festival spaces, the ideal, imagined spaces involved, and the experiences of social space as lived and practised (Feldt 2016: 88–9). The aesthetics of religion is a new research trend which can aid our understanding of pilgrimages and festivals as multisensory events and highlight the work on the senses and the body, from the impact of colours, shapes, sounds, and flavours to space and kinaesthetic movement (Grieser 2015; Grieser and Johnston 2017). Comparative angles on, and comparative theoretical discussion of, the subject of ancient pilgrimage and festivals are vital today as a key part of the development of early Christian ritual studies as a field. As Risto Uro stresses, the role of ritual in the emergence of Christianity is a topic in need of more research, as ritual practices are key factors in the consolidation and transmission of religious ideology, values, and beliefs to new generations (2016: 1–2, 10), i.e. for the transmission of any religion across time. Material forms of mediation are also key in such processes (Meyer 2008; 2012), just as fantastic, titillating narratives about visions, healings, miracles, prayers, etc. (Feldt 2017) at the pilgrimage site are important factors in the maintenance of the status of the site. Narratives of pilgrimage and festival participation also influence religious identity formation and transmission across generations.

**Similar Religious Practices**

Pilgrimage and festivals resemble other forms of ritual practices, religious forms of travel, as well as mysticism, meditation, and cultural practices such as tourism (Stausberg 2010). Many theorists of pilgrimage and festivals find it important to stress the continuities. The temporary release from everyday social frames is shared by several types of travellers—pilgrims, tourists, mystics, and participants in festivals. Some tourists may be strongly affected by places of cultural and social power, in ways similar to pilgrims, while others may visit large religious festivals of others for touristic purposes
only. Mystics may testify to travelling religiously without travelling physically in ways that may resemble some forms of pilgrimage, and some forms of natural space—for instance, wildernesses—may provide material anchors for new pilgrimage sites (Turner 2005). Yet, for all the materiality and physicality of pilgrimage and festivals, no pilgrimage or festival site can endure without the multitude of official and unofficial, authoritative and popular narratives of fantastic encounters, visions, apparitions, magic, and healings, which help build up, support, and sometimes contest and change, the fascinationary power, renown, and authority of a pilgrimage or festival site (Feldt 2012a).

A Survey of Forms of Pilgrimage and Festivals in the Ancient Mediterranean Ritual World

The Ancient Near East

As early as the third millennium BCE, in ancient Mesopotamia, we find examples of religious journeys and ritual gatherings for which the concepts of pilgrimage and festivals may be discussed. The account of Gudea of Lagaš’ famous journey from his home town to the temple of the goddess Nanše in Isin may be mentioned, just as the mythic accounts of the visits of deities to other deities in other towns, like that of the visit of the moon god Nanna-Suen to Enlil in Nippur and other Old Babylonian examples, may indeed plausibly reflect how statues of deities were taken, by kings, on sacred journeys to visit each other at special times (Bottéro 1987; Beaulieu 2004). During some forms of the Akitu festival, the deity at the centre of the celebrations was ritually re-located to a sanctuary outside the city walls, in the ideological location of the steppe. In the first millennium, the Akitu festival of Babylon involved the ritual travel of other deities, with their personnel, to Marduk in the capital, and would attract participants from a larger catchment area. The festival itself involved processions and the movement of both celebrants and deities over the course of its twelve-day duration (Bidmead 2004). In ancient Egypt, much of the ritual life in the temples was centred on the king as the son of the incarnated creator god Re. The king functioned as priest, landowner, and warlord. As in ancient Mesopotamia, the Egyptian temple was the home of the god, and the abode of the principal cult statue. Daily rituals for a god in its temple were carried out, and involved many ritual actions, but comparatively little cultic personnel. Special festivals were also held, involving some or all of the population of the cities and regions, during which the deities could be seen, when the statue of the god would leave the temple. For the festival of Opet, the statue and shrine of the god Amun-Re were transported from the Karnak temple, and transported by river to the Luxor temple, and later returned. Other, large ritual events of Amun-Re are recorded at the Luxor and Karnak temples, while the mortuary temple of Ramses III at Medinet Habu contains records of the festival processions...
of Min and Sokar illustrated in great detail (Lesko 2005). Among the Hittites, as in the other, polytheistic, ancient Near Eastern religions, the temple cult, with the statues of the deities at the centre, was important. Texts describing the cultic calendar show the detailed ritual practices revolving around the statues in the temples. The statues could be transported around. On festival days, the statue was adorned and transported to a meadow outside the city, where it was venerated and entertained. It was customary for the king to visit towns to take part in festivals in honour of various deities, and in some festivals the participation of the king was mandatory (Lebrun 1987). Knowledge of Canaanite/Ugaritic festivals (which does not rely on the negative evidence of the Hebrew Bible) and the yearly ritual activities and ritual calendar is not ample, but the Ugaritic texts do describe an organized temple cult under the patronage of the king, of a type well known from the ancient Near East, involving some larger ritual events. Some texts describe a major festival involving all of the people and elaborate rituals for the protection of the land from enemies (Hoffner 2005).

In the ancient Near Eastern polytheistic religions, the more important deities are town-gods. In the major urban centres of a region, particular deities ‘preside’ as lords and ladies of those towns or cities. The god of the capital city rules not only over his own city, but over the entire region—like Ptah in Memphis or Marduk in Babylon. Aspects of both unity and diversity, and a hierarchy of centre and periphery, are important in the political and geographical aspects of festivals and religious travel across ancient polytheisms, where some cult centres did attract periodical visits from the citizens of different towns and regions (Assmann 2004).

The Graeco-Roman World

The understanding of pilgrimage and types of festivals in the Graeco-Roman world is contested. Some scholars of ancient Greek and Roman religions argue that the concept of pilgrimage should not be used of short journeys to local shrines or the yearly participation in festivals (Bremmer 2016: 6), and perhaps not at all in Graeco-Roman contexts (Graf 2002). Here, I survey some of the principal forms of ritual practices which could fall under this heading as a guide to further discussion and analysis. A broad range of ritual types existed in different regions and times. The sources are mainly literary and epigraphical (Frankfurter 1998; Elsner and Rutherford 2007: 10–27; but see Kristensen 2012; Kristensen and Friese 2016, for discussion of archaeological evidence), and encompass both ritual travel with a large and a small catchment area (the entire Greek world, or a local area), ritual activities of special professions, once-off visits to sanctuaries and regular practices, the attendance of festivals, and the seeking out of supernatural assistance for healing or other purposes.

A variety of festivals involving gods attracted panhellenic and/or regional travelers (Rutherford 1998; Harland 2011: 1–26). A major form of religious travel in classical Greece was the state-delegation (theōria), which travelled between cities and witnessed or participated in ritual activities in the cities they visited. In Hellenistic times, theōriai
were sent to sanctuaries in other cities to participate in festivals, accompanied by private citizens, and some sanctuaries came to be panhellenic in scope (Elsner and Rutherford 2007: 12–14). For all periods of classical antiquity, oracle consultations were a common form of religious travel, sometimes involving incubation, and from the Hellenistic period (fourth century) onwards, religious travel to obtain healing is better attested (Elsner and Rutherford 2007: 14–17). Other forms of religious travel involved the participation in initiatory rites, e.g. at the sanctuary of Demeter and Kore at Eleusis (and elsewhere), visits to local shrines within a city-state, and visits to famous cultural landmarks such as battlefields (Elsner and Rutherford 2007: 17–21; Harland 2011: 7). Several interesting types of religious travel and festivals appear in Graeco-Roman Hellenistic Egypt, from visitors to festivals, more tourist-like travellers, to travellers seeking healing (especially from Asklepios) or guidance (especially from Apollo) (Elsner and Rutherford 2007: 22–4; Harland 2011: 8–11). Factual or fictional, literary narratives of religious travel or pilgrimage are another important source of information, which had important rhetorical functions for their readers, framing them as surrogate travellers or pilgrims (Elsner 1992; 1997). This is a genre which likely impacted the early Christian religious world in important ways. Less central for the topic of pilgrimage and festivals, but worthy of mention in relation to religion, space, and travel are travelling philosophers, holy men, cult founders, and other mobile figures who promoted their gods and a semi-ritualized, itinerant way of life (Harland 2011: 11–17).

In Roman Italy, many types of festivals were celebrated, from torch races, games, dances, theatrical shows, to processions, sacrifices, ‘holy journeys’, and banquets. Some of these included participants from a regional catchment area, although numbers are difficult to gauge (Rüpke and Schilling 2005; Brandt and Iddeng 2012; Rüpke 2012). Several centres of religious travel are known, e.g. the Alban Mount, Lake Nemi, Fregellae, the grove of Helernus, and others, but ‘pilgrimage’ (if applicable) seemingly plays a lesser role than in Greek religion (Elsner and Rutherford 2007: 24), and the Romans did not have a term for religious travel resembling pilgrimage (Bremmer 2016: 5). The forms of Roman ritual travel, which can be discussed under the heading of pilgrimage, have been catalogued by Elsner and Rutherford (2007). In the late third century BCE, some Roman interest in sanctuaries in Greece and elsewhere begins. Elsner and Rutherford count also the symbolic pilgrimage of emperors, a complex form of intellectual pilgrimage by members of the elite in the period of the Second Sophistic, and new forms of religious regional and ‘panhellenic’ travel (Elsner and Rutherford 2007: 23–6), as well as, in the Hellenistic period, forms of regional pilgrimage (Elsner and Rutherford 2007: 26–7). The status of Rome as one of the most powerful urban centres of the ancient world must be taken into account when considering the Roman evidence. Roman festivals were extraordinary events, but their purpose was the maintenance of pax deorum and the support of the gods, and so they played a part in the maintenance of cultural and social order. The interaction between the realms of the religious and the political, between the sacred and the secular, is relevant in several ways. Changes in the way Roman festivals were celebrated, and the introduction of new elements or cults, can regularly be connected to the political and social transformations of Rome. Spectacles, fairs, and
entertainment were also fundamental to most festivals, and yet the reverence for deities and rites was great, and the interaction with entertainment and politics evidently strengthened devotion (as suggested in the contributions by Burkert, Bouvrie, and Rüpke in Brandt and Iddeng 2012).

The Hebrew Bible and Judaism in the Second Temple Period

The Hebrew Bible mentions several local sanctuaries, to which pilgrimages were made (Bethel, Gilgal, Shilo, Dan, Beersheba, and Jerusalem), and several texts contain references to pilgrimages (1 Sam. 1; 1 Kgs. 17; Hos. 4:15; Amos 4:4; 5:5), but the pilgrimages to the temple in Jerusalem, or the Jerusalem festivals in which participation is required according to the Torah (Exod. 23:14–19; 34:18, 22–3; Lev. 23:4–44; Deut. 16:1–17), are by far the best known: The festival of maṣṣot or Pesah in the spring in connection with the barley harvest (Passover); Šāvuôt in connection with the wheat harvest (Pentecost), also in the springtime; and Sukkôt (Tabernacles) in connection with the harvest of fruit and the New Year in the fall (Bokser 1992; Wilken 1992: 105–8). According to the Torah, all Jewish men were obliged to attend these festivals in the temple in Jerusalem, and special psalms (šîrēy hammamāthâlôt) were connected with them. Even if this obligation was only partially fulfilled, pilgrimage would have factored importantly in the local economy. According to 2 Kings 23, the historicity of which is questionable (Davies 2014), King Josiah cleansed the Jerusalem temple of ritual objects and types of worship which he deemed illegitimate, and he desacralized a number of sanctuaries elsewhere, in order to raise the status of the Jerusalem temple and enhance its power, as the only place in which Yahweh could be worshipped. Even if, according to Jer. 41:4–6, the temple of Jerusalem maintained its status as a centre of pilgrimage also after the fall of Jerusalem to the Babylonians in 587, the more likely scenario is that the large pilgrimage festivals to Jerusalem were fully developed after the exile, in the Second Temple period, and that all festivals involved animal sacrifice. According to Philo of Alexandria, pilgrims travelled to Jerusalem from many regions by the late Second Temple period. Other sources reveal that forms of sacred travel were not limited to Jerusalem in the Second Temple and rabbinic periods, as pilgrimage to centres in Egypt like Elephantine and Heliopolis, as well as to synagogues, are attested (Kerkeslager 1998). In addition to the Elephantine evidence, the Samaritan and Qumran communities also attest to Jewish festivals in the Second Temple period. The Samaritans offered a Passover sacrifice according to the stipulations of Exod. 12, but adapted to the Deuteronomic centralization, which they took to refer to Mount Gerizim, and observed the festival with pageantry. References to Jewish festivals are also found in The Wisdom of Solomon, Philo, Josephus, and Pseudo-Philo. Philo and Josephus focus especially on the celebratory nature of Pesach as a form of national thanksgiving, and mention a multitude of pilgrims to Jerusalem, the great number of sacrifices, and the music (Bokser 1992). In addition to the pilgrimages stipulated in the Torah, Jewish pilgrimages to the tombs of the patriarchs, the prophets,
or other biblical sites, are attested in the Second Temple and early Christian periods (Maraval 2002).

**Early Christian Pilgrimage and Festivals**

The beginnings and key characteristics of early Christian pilgrimage are difficult to survey. As seen in the New Testament, the Jesus followers also went to the Jerusalem temple to pray, attend major festivals, and to worship (Acts 3:1; 21:6). However, traces of a critique of the sacralization of places as unnecessary in the new movement can also be noticed (Matt. 23:29; John 4:21; Acts 7:47–9). In the second and third centuries, especially in the Greek-speaking world, the tendency to see Christianity as a religion not requiring temples, altars, or other places of worship is found in some Christian writers, who also frame it as differing from Judaism and polytheistic religions (Maraval 2002: 64). Also, later Christian writers wrote vigorous attacks on the practice of pilgrimage, warning against dangers en route, from moral mischief to sexual misconduct (Coleman and Elsner 1995: 80). In other sources and other strands within early Judaeo-Christian groups in the second and third centuries, we find traces of a reverential interest in places of memory, as in the stories of the tomb (Mark 16:6), in references to the Mount of Olives and the site of Jesus’ birth in Bethlehem (Maraval 2002: 65). With the growth of the cult and mythology of the martyrs in the second and third centuries, clearer signs of more profound changes towards the sacralization of places and persons are seen. The martyr’s tombs gradually become the sites of extended rituals and funerary banquets, and the bodily remains of the martyrs were venerated. In the late second century, Christian leaders from Asia Minor travelled to places associated with biblical events (Hunt 1999; Whalen 2011: 1–44). Apart from such traces of earlier beginnings, Christian pilgrimage was fuelled by the authorization and promotion of Christianity in the fourth century and flourished primarily afterwards (Frank 2008: 827; Whalen 2011). Constantine and his mother actively promoted Christian sacralization of space at sites connected with Jesus’ life, and soon the growth of an industry of hostels, hospices, and monasteries along the route of sites is attested. Traditional sacred centres of healing also attracted Christians and some were rededicated to Christian saints (Maraval 2004: 275; Frank 2008: 827).

As defined by Georgia Frank, early Christian pilgrimage involved travelling to a place for the purpose of obtaining access to sacred power, whether that power was ascribed to spaces, persons, or objects. The motivations varied, but Christian pilgrims can be distinguished from other types of travellers (teachers, prophets, healers, etc.), because they travelled for healing, prayer, guidance, intercession, oracles, etc. (Frank 2008: 826). In other words, pilgrims travelled to obtain benefits from the other world. The ability of a site to draw participants from a wider area for purposes of prayer, blessings, healings, etc., like the sites associated with the Bible, or with martyrs’ shrines, is key in Christian pilgrimage. It is worth noting that early Christians did not self-identify as pilgrims, for Greek and Latin lack terms for the phenomenon (Frank 2008; Bremmer 2016).
The general meaning of *theôria* is ‘observation’, while *proskynema* means ‘adoration’ (Bremmer 2016). The Latin cognate of our modern word pilgrimage, *peregrinatio* (cf. *The Oxford Latin Dictionary*, 1335b; the *Thesaurus Linguae Latinae* s.v.) means to travel abroad, to wander, move about, or be a stranger. Instead, the terms used by early Christians of their travels speak of travelling for the sake of prayer or of travelling in order to venerate (*orationis causa, euchesthai, proseuchesthai, proskunein*) (Frank 2008: 826–7; Bremmer 2016).

Among the key sources for early Christian pilgrimage we find male and female pilgrims’ letters, diaries, and travel writing from the fourth to sixth centuries. One of the earliest texts relating a pilgrimage to the Holy Land is an itinerary by a pilgrim from Bordeaux from ca. 333 (Elsner 2000). In the 380s or 390s, the female pilgrim known as Egeria travelled from Gaul to pilgrimage in Egypt, Palestine, Syria, and Asia Minor. Her diary relates details of Christian architecture, how scripture was read aloud to her at sacred sites, the blessings she received along the way, as well as the church and monastery officials she met. Egeria visits both places known from the Old Testament, places known from the gospels, and famous monasteries and healing centres (Frank 2008: 827–8). Pilgrimage to famous ascetics about whom fantastic stories of marvels, magic, and miracles circulated have been the topic of a number of recent studies (Frank 2000), which demonstrate how certain spaces, persons, and objects were invested with religious power and exoticized. The ancient writer Jerome’s descriptions of the visits of his friend Paula to sacred sites in Judea and to monasteries in Egypt mention the power of these special places to evoke visions. He and Paula wrote several letters exhorting Roman aristocrats to go on pilgrimage to the Holy Land. In the fourth century, pilgrimage became a literary motif in biographies of Christian heroes (Whalen 2011: 26–32), while the above-mentioned criticism of pilgrimage and the dangers associated with it appear in writers such as Gregory of Nyssa and Athanasius (Brakke 1998: 292–302). The latter probably reflects power struggles and efforts to preserve ecclesiastical control (Bitton-Ashkelony 2005; Frank 2008: 830), for the pilgrims’ diaries emphasize the value of seeing and touching religiously powerful sites and objects. In the centuries to come, further attention is spent on the material splendour of the sacred centres and a new sensibility towards the land of biblical events.

The material culture of pilgrimage documents the key roles of spatiality and materiality in this religious practice, from large buildings to small souvenirs. Archaeologists have documented the structures of centres of pilgrimage, and how the inns, service buildings, and churches were added, or changed, at the centres and along the pilgrimage routes, and how they were transformed over the centuries (Frank 2008: 831–4; Kristensen 2012; Kristensen and Friese 2016). Some pilgrimage centres were equipped with baptisteries for Christian initiation, some acquired larger places of accommodation, some added stairs, arches, or other architectural features to guide pilgrimage traffic and the movement of many bodies. Some pilgrim churches kept relics in a crypt, others at the altar. Some pilgrims continued the ancient religious practice of leaving votive offerings at pilgrimage sites; some of these reveal the nature of the help sought—healing, protection, thanksgiving, etc. (Frank 2008). Pilgrimage sites were also sites of religious
pageantry and extensive and multiple forms of sensual stimulation in visual and other media. The exoticism revealed in literary sources documents an overlap with tourism; as does the practice of bringing home religious souvenirs, as objects of memory and veneration, and as a form of documentation of a change in status, while also demonstrating the need and wish to carry home some of the healing, marvellous, or protective qualities ascribed to the pilgrimage centre (Frank 2000). As seen from the exemplary practices mentioned by Frank (2008), widespread ideas of a magic of contagion is amply demonstrated in the production of ampullae and tokens at sacred sites, in order for the pilgrims to be able to carry home, in a concrete, material form, healing and protective power. Oil or water could be poured into reliquaries, and the substance collected in small flasks and distributed to pilgrims afterwards, or the ampullae could contain dirt, water, or oil that had otherwise been in contact with the special place, person, or object. Tokens stamped with an impression were also produced for pilgrims to take home, or pilgrims could access the ritual power of the saints by writing requests for protection or other prayers on small notes, and submitting them to the shrine (Frank 2008: 833–4).

These forms of religious materiality from souvenirs to amulets and votive offerings, etc., reveal much about pilgrims’ motives for travelling and about how the special power of the pilgrimage centre was understood, as well as about the crucial forms of interaction between the performances and experiences of excess and extraordinariness of pilgrimage and festivals and the social frames of everyday life.

**Conclusion**

In recent decades, theoretical reflections on place, space, and landscape have increased and undergone important developments in the fields of history, anthropology, and the study of religion. Scholars of spatiality pay attention to how space is produced, imagined, and lived, in addition to the more traditional interest in space as a geophysical ‘reality’ (Soja 1989: 124–6; Lefebvre 1991; Ingold 2000; Thrift and Whatmore 2004). Insights from spatiality theory may prove fruitful in future studies of ancient pilgrimage, as the distinctions related to different types of spatiality can offer new analytical strategies, as suggested earlier in the chapter. Distinctions drawn from spatiality theory for the analysis of social space can be supplemented with insights from narratology and used in analyses not only of the use of landscapes and/or urban spaces, but also of hagiography and other narrative or literary sources for ancient forms of pilgrimage. In human practice, the different spatial aspects cannot be fully separated, but in our analyses, we may distinguish between (1) *material space*, which concerns the concrete materiality of spatial forms, the geophysical, empirical realities described in a narrative and/or observed by the actors, in combination with external sources about the landscape or spaces in question; (2) *designed space*, which is imagined space, ideas and representations of space in culturally normative or authoritative forms; and (3) *lived space*, which designates the
experience of social space, space as lived, practised, and negotiated, building on both material space and designed space (Feldt 2016).

In early Christian studies, the topic of pilgrimage looms large and is yet elusive. Pilgrimage is mentioned often in early Christian literature from the New Testament to patristic literature and beyond, and the topic is key in discussions of asceticism, holy men, saints, relics, churches and monasteries, and more. Pilgrimage is in many ways a ritual, traditionally connected to festivals and pageantry, and yet many of our sources for pilgrimage are narrative, and in some early Christian texts, pilgrimage also attains a symbolic value and comes to function as a broader metaphor. As is well known, Augustine begins his *City of God* (*De civitate Dei*) with the observation that the Christian is a ‘stranger among the ungodly’ (*Civ.* 1, pref.), framing the Christian life as a metaphorical pilgrimage. Early Christian pilgrimage was not a sacrament, and no explicit doctrines were connected to it. Even as it is very concrete and material, pilgrimage is connected to religious ideas of alienation and marginalization, to attempting to reach and breach boundaries, through religious practices of travelling, even as it is a technology for creating the sense of a presence of something ‘beyond’ by travel to a centre of religious power. It is a religious practice, which involves geophysical, material spaces, imagined spaces, as well as lived spaces. Early Christian pilgrimage is thus also an arena in which several important themes meet and interact, and wilderness mythology (Feldt 2012b) is one of these themes, which connects the topic of pilgrimage to the topic of asceticism. The destinations of pilgrims’ journeys were sometimes famous ascetic holy persons, or their relics, and both the pilgrim and the ascetic resided, temporarily or permanently, in an intermediate, liminal, boundary zone (the desert; the ‘wilderness’) of the religious imaginary, having left ordinary life behind, but not yet arrived at the destination. Let us, by way of conclusion, consider an example of a text which demonstrates the multiple aspects of spatiality, the move towards the metaphorical understanding of Christian life as a pilgrimage in this world, and the connection between pilgrimage and asceticism, while also offering pointers towards later, medieval developments.

As pointed out by Conrad Leyser and others, Athanasius’ *Life of Antony* functioned as a foundation myth of the Christian, ascetic pioneer, breaking open the wilderness for monasticism (Leyser 2006). It also became pivotal in spreading ascetic ideals. Through letters and narratives, the desert quickly became an important, and fetishized, part of the new Christian landscape. By the end of the fourth century, aspiring Western Christians sought out the wilderness experience by venturing out into the local forests, mountains, and islands. By the 420s, a group of Christians travelled to the island of Lérins, off the coast of modern Cannes, to live the ascetic, desert life. One of them, the later bishop of Lyon, Eucherius (ca. 380–450), wrote the letter *In Praise of the Desert* (*De laude eremi*; Pricoco 1965; Vivian, Vivian, and Russell 1999), to a fellow monk, Hilary. In this text, the concrete, material space of the island of Lérins with its bubbling springs, green grass, and flowers, is connected narratively to key aspects of the designed space of Christian desert mythology from Moses to Elijah, Jesus, and beyond, in order to frame the entire Christian existence as a wilderness life, a life of pilgrimage.
travelling towards the prize in the other world. The move towards assigning a metaphorical value to the desert or wilderness life or the permanent pilgrimage is seen in a statement such as ‘From the dwelling places in the desert, the road lies always open to our true homeland’ (De laude eremi 16), or ‘The prayer of a humble petitioner will more easily penetrate the clouds if it rises from the desert’ (De laude eremi, 26; Vivian, Vivian, and Russell 1999). Yet, the lived space of this particular text must be understood as firmly entrenched in elite, urban power struggles on the mainland, because it is well documented that many former monks from Lérins went on to play lead roles in contemporary public life on the mainland (termed ‘the ascetic invasion’ by R. Markus, cf. Leyser 1999). Eucherius may have written this particular letter in order to raise the authority of the stay in the wilderness, but also to mould it into a more figurative and thus more adaptable form, as a key prerequisite for the assumption of positions of power on the mainland (Feldt 2018: 215). The reputation of Lérins was the result of a literary movement, a literary circle of cultivated and politically active men, as Peter Brown has put it; and the group of monks from Lérins were treated as holy men by laypersons, who expected blessings in exchange for reverence and material support (Brown 2012: 412–14). This particular text is thus also a testimony of how dependent key developments in early Christian pilgrimage have been on literary culture and certain forms of media, and how bound up also the metaphorical understanding of Christian pilgrimage is with contemporary issues in ancient social life.

Works Cited


**Suggested Reading**

