

20-9-2023

## Fearless Women Travellers: Religion and More

Antonietta Ivona

University of Bari Aldo Moro, antonietta.ivona@uniba.it

Donatella Privitera

University of Catania, Italy, donatella.privitera@unict.it

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### Recommended Citation

Ivona, Antonietta and Privitera, Donatella (2023) "Fearless Women Travellers: Religion and More,"  
*International Journal of Religious Tourism and Pilgrimage*: Vol. 11: Iss. 5, Article 10.

doi:<https://doi.org/10.21427/ONT1-DR30>

Available at: <https://arrow.tudublin.ie/ijrtp/vol11/iss5/10>

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## Fearless Women Travellers: Religion and More

### Cover Page Footnote

While the paper is the result of a joint work, Sections 1 and 4 are attributed to Donatella Privitera, Sections 2 and 3 to Antonietta Ivona.

## Fearless Women Travellers: Religion and More

### Antonietta Ivona

University of Bari Aldo Moro, Italy  
[antonietta.ivona@uniba.it](mailto:antonietta.ivona@uniba.it)

### Donatella Privitera

University of Catania, Italy  
[donatella.privitera@unict.it](mailto:donatella.privitera@unict.it)

The term ‘pilgrim’ is derived from the notion of pilgrimage. Historically a pilgrim was as a person who walked to a shrine or holy place out of religious motivation. Also, the experience of pilgrimage embodies the pilgrim’s desire to seek or manifest his or her identity and value as a person. Using gender as a lens, women in all cultures, sometimes even without the ability to read or write, have found ways to travel in spiritual ways of knowing. The testimonies of women travellers go back a long way in the centuries; there are many who have challenged the risks and social conventions of their times to satisfy their most disparate needs for knowledge and experience. The oldest surviving female testimony comes from the traveller Egeria who in the 4th century set out from Galicia to the Mediterranean to reach the Holy Land, using the Bible as a guide. Later, in the late ninth century, Gudrid Thorbjarnardottir travelled from Iceland to multiple destinations including Rome on a pilgrimage. Often, however, the religious motivation of women travellers was also a search for their own interiority as in the case of Alexandra David-Néel (1868–1969). The article discusses women’s lives as a religious traveller to explain that the choice of travel destination can be seen as a manifestation of spiritual awareness of the notion of life’s journey (religious or not) and can be a means of expressing one’s personal or social identity, or a search for or reaffirmation of one’s identity.

**Key Words:** freedom, knowledge, travel, religion, adventure

### Introduction

Women are creative, they take initiative, they are open to change and innovation and they enliven the social life of the community. Their role has often been marginalised due to an unequal distribution of power between men and women, and rigid social and family roles.

Women of all cultures, sometimes without literacy, have found ways to travel for spiritual and knowledge motives; they lived these journey as a cognitive experience which brought significant changes on a personal and social levels. Due to historical and cultural reasons, those women, guardians of civilisation, developed a careful way of observing the reality that surrounded them and developing a constant interest in the world (often hidden from the world) even extending outside their own reality.

This gender culture, only briefly mentioned, is similar to the system of values that guide the pilgrims’ experience:

both are rooted in knowledge of territory, in collective memory, in the ability to face uncertainties and fear, trusting in one’s own abilities and in those of human communities.

Pilgrims’ journeys were not simple crossings of places but a deep desire to understand their intrinsic and hidden aspects, trace the signs anchored in their history, preserve the emotions given off by cultural heritage such as ancient churches and frescoes; and while the pilgrim moves away from their own village or city, often ‘in the company of only [their] own shadow’ (Leed, 1992: 19), they develop a new sensitivity towards the earth, the woods, the rivers, the valleys. The pilgrim rediscovers patience and the ability to renounce the superfluous, trusts in dialogue, in the welcome of ancient tradition, but knows they are facing a sense of insecurity and precariousness.

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As Leed points out, 'to do' and 'to fear' have the same etymological root and have the same experiential foundation in the journey.

*The fear, the loss of security implicit in the journey made without comfort, represents a gain in availability and sensitivity to the world* (Leed, 1992: 20).

The women, the pilgrims, and the authentic traveller seem, then, united by an implicit conviction: for all of them, the journey is an experience that coincides with the sense of one's own inner and/or shared freedom.

But in the past were women able to travel in search of themselves and places of the soul? Were they pilgrims?

In the past, to travel on pilgrimage there were two categories of women: the aristocrats and those of humble origins. The first could do so because they were adequately assisted, the second because they were accustomed to living on little, and free from all kinds of ties. The latter included 'the tertiaries and the bizzoche'<sup>1</sup> (Mazzei, 2009:5). The tradition of pilgrimage, born in the early centuries of Christianity (the main destination of religious itineraries was Jerusalem as the Bible inspired) is documented by a travel writing of singular value: the diary of Egeria (382 ca. AD). Egeria left Galicia to reach the East, accompanied by devout men and escorted by soldiers to cross the most dangerous parts of the journey (Mazzei, 2009).

Many women, with less opportunity than Egeria, could only move with other pilgrims, but despite this companionship

*continually were exposed to the risks of otherness that not infrequently had the face of street violence* (Ohler, 1996:211).

The belief that pilgrimage was not a journey for women has long dominated:

*many voices were raised in reproach of women who set out and exposed themselves to the constant danger of being raped* (Corsi in Mazzei, 2009:25).

1 'Bizzochi' is a 13th and 14th centuries term for men and women, generally belonging to the Franciscan, Dominican and Augustinian orders who led devout and poor lives as a protest against the luxury of the high clergy, with or without vows of poverty and chastity.

Women travelling to holy places were also considered a danger to men because they were the object, for the latter, of temptation. Examples of this culture are the numerous paintings of the devil disguised as a pilgrim seducing a monk, still visible today in some churches or shrines along the pilgrimage routes. Yet, many women at different times embarked on a journey in search of elsewhere, leaving evidence in travel literature (Silvestre & Valerio, 1999; Mazzei, 2009); sometimes these women changed the status quo and led a group of people (Santos, 2019).

Despite the risks of aggression to which they were subjected and that increased when war reigned, in ancient and medieval ages women travelled to the places of the passion of Jesus. In fact women constituted a large group in the continuous flow of pilgrims to Jerusalem, to other European shrines or, finally, to traditional places of devotion such as Rome and Santiago de Compostela (Corsi, 1999; see also Volume 11(iii) of this Journal which focuses on Family Pilgrimage, particularly Rucquoi, 2023).

## Geography Gender and Pilgrimage

Notwithstanding the restrictions imposed during those historical periods, women made pilgrimages to sacred places near and far (Webb, 2007; Craig, 2009); the intersections and mutual influences between geography and gender are deep and several.

Each is, in profound ways, implicated in the construction of the other: geography in its various forms influences the cultural formation of gender and gender relations; gender has been profoundly influential in the production of the 'geographical'. There is an extensive literature according to which place and space are not only physical attributes, but also gendered meanings (Massey, 1994; McDowell, 1999), and from the mid-1990s onward we also see a geographic literature analysing the relationship between gender and tourism (Pritchard & Morgan, 2010).

Geography's interest in new forms of spatial enjoyment has gradually grown toward the experience of religious travel, understood as that particular experience that in movement carries together a strong human, cultural and environmental component. But as a science of the

territory, it also studies religious tourism as a driving and returning phenomenon of economic circulation, as a lever of territorial recompositing and local development. The relevant development of religious tourism destinations, in recent years, has allowed pilgrimages to regain the notoriety of the past and religious itineraries to recover their role in uniting peoples and nations (Collins-Kreiner, 2010).

In this perspective, the religious journey becomes a paradigm of a different way of understanding the travel experience, between contemplation and perception of the cultural and environmental context, but also an existential and experiential mode, becoming a metaphor for the very meaning of the human and the quality of the inner and manifest world (Cohen, 1992). In fact, the term pilgrim is derived from the notion of pilgrimage: historically, a pilgrim was a person who walked to a shrine or holy place for religious reasons (Rinschede, 1992). Moreover, the experience of pilgrimage embodies the pilgrim's desire to seek or manifest his or her identity, and value in the social dimension.

From the other point of view, the issues addressed by gender geography have been different, as well as the approaches adopted: in any case, gender is relevant as an interpretative analytical category where

*places constitute the contexts of material and immaterial interactions and are the theater of relationships between subjects. Their function and value change according to the meaning that is attributed to them and according to the experience gained in the life of the individual: this is why places acquire relevance also in the construction of gender identities (Cortesi, 2007:9).*

Gender studies are a way of approaching women and men as inseparable parts of a functioning system based on a relational approach to sexes. Each of them assumes determined socially constructed patterns, mainly characterised by their opposition and complementarity. Since their beginning, feminist geographies have been committed to point out differences between men and women in terms of work, pay, and societal roles. Moreover, it is relevant to consider that gender relations are also space-determined, in that the social construction of space depends on behaviours and power relations

within it. In spite of the latest achievements, gendered differences have not disappeared, and work is still one of the most evident fields of this different gender treatment. Still today, women have to struggle to get a good position.

This paper discusses the importance of travel, particularly religious travel, inclusive and full of equal opportunity to all and not instead only for women; in some historical periods women have not been free, in mind and in deed, to be able to carry out their own travel, including religious travel, without constraints, thus affirming their own interiority. The choice of destination in a woman's journey can be seen as a manifestation of religious spiritual awareness, as a means of expressing personal or social identity (Liutikas, 2017), or as a contribution to the understanding of women's mobility issues in the past (Rossi, 2005).

Testimonies of women travellers go back a long way in the centuries; many of them have challenged the risks and social conventions of their times to satisfy disparate needs for knowledge and experience. Women in all the world have gained valuable and divergent practical experiences in the creation of freedom to travel also with religious aims, which differ throughout the regions of the EU and even more so in non-EU countries. Therefore, here this experience will be collected, analysed, and systematised, thus, obtaining a better understanding of the functioning system of women-travellers. Considering these premises, our case studies refer to three fearless and curious women: Egeria who in the 4th century set out from Galicia to the Mediterranean to reach the Holy Land, using the Bible as a guide; Gudrid Thorbjarnardottir who, throughout her life, travelled from Iceland to multiple destinations including Rome on a pilgrimage and Alexandra David-Néel (1868–1969) who was also in search for her own interiority. The study begins with a review of studies on religious travel and gender differences in this type of travel.

Through a genre lens and a reflection on the meaning of religious travel, this article aims to outline the role of women as a response to the continuing significant signs of gender inequality and discrimination indicated by the difference for men and women in wages, political power, knowledge and education still current. From a methodological point of view, the objective is evaluated

by combining qualitative methods using a case study approach and the study of original documents for textual analysis. Particularly, the paper is based on data collected through biographical details of the three women analysed, a research method that is built around the participants' personal narrations together with interpretative narrations of their religious travel experiences. The methodology provides a typology for understanding and analysing the different stories of these women involved in spatial-religious conflicts where the decision adopted might be perceived as endangering identity and sense of freedom.

The research contributes to the study of the evolving female role in the history of spiritual activities, and of the real and potential female role in religious tourism.

### **Pilgrimage Studies, Religious Tourism and More**

A pilgrimage is a journey, often to an unknown or foreign place, taken by a person seeking new or expanded meaning about him or herself, others, nature, or a higher good. As such, it can lead to personal transformation (Collins-Kreiner, 2010). The concept of religious travel has ancient roots; it was the first type of tourism to be practiced, with religious purposes. The search for spirituality, divine, religious support and inner health are among the most remote reasons for mobility. Religious travel was practiced by 'tribal societies of all continents' and in the first civilisations of history (e.g. the ancient Sumer civilisation of Mesopotamia), religious and political power were closely connected, and cities attracted thousands of pilgrims visiting both sacred places and to representatives of power (Battilani, 2009:65). Over time, the religious journey has taken on a double meaning: feeling attracted to the divine and meeting the divine through a path of faith where the sky remains a spatial point of reference.

The term 'peregrinus' indicated those who lived outside the cities and in precarious living conditions. Since the Middle Ages, the need to travel for religious reasons has been interpreted in different ways; as a need to live an experience of personal and spiritual growth; as an encounter with different cultures or, again, as a moment of departure from one's lifestyle with a strong mystical connotation and even gender affirmation (Lopez & Lois

González, 2017). Particularly in the early Middle Ages, the term took on a new meaning that is also the current one, referring to one who makes themselves a stranger, enduring the labours and risks deemed as necessary conditions to be able to obtain privileges of a spiritual nature such as salvation and forgiveness, or to encounter the sacred in a faraway place.

In the Christian world, the two different forms of pilgrimage, devotional and penitential, later became integrated, highlighting the deep and spiritual nature of pilgrimage (Rocca, 2013). Today, religious tourism and pilgrimage are key motives for the movement of people to destinations around the world (Griffin & Raj, 2017). Some suggest that pilgrims can also travel for reasons other than religious ones, and pilgrimage can be a type of cultural journey contributing to increasing awareness of the common heritage of humanity. In these instances, the so-called 'pilgrims of modernity' (Rocca, 2013: 470) and the 'sacral landscape', or the sacralisation of territory, offer a key to interpret religious symbols or cultural messages transmitted by restoring to local communities the sense of belonging of places (Barilaro, 2001:217).

Scholars direct their attention to the movement of different travellers through time and place, and the practitioners involved relate these movements to the socio-economic, cultural and political contexts of their origins and destinations (Harrison, 2017). People visit shrines, religious places, and walk paths for and with different motivations: because of faith; because one pursues the essentials of life, inner peace or spiritual salvation; to attend events, sacred music performances (Getz, 2007); for an experience, an involvement, a curiosity towards cultural and historical heritage, alluding to different cohabitations in sacred places (Lois González & Lopez, 2015). Considering the proliferation on the web of blogs and travelogues pilgrimage can take place through the images of virtual itineraries, so that for some dimensions we are facing a 'new' sacred space (Lopez, 2013) that goes beyond what is officially sacred (Collins-Kreiner & Wall, 2015).

The spatial boundary between pilgrimage and tourist experience has thinned to amalgamate the blending of knowledge, faith, the inner spirit, the curiosity to travel and to learn about peoples and territories. A sort of



integration of faith where the beauty of historical and artistic heritage such as sanctuaries, churches, places of prayer and therefore territories make the pilgrim similar to the tourist looking for the deep roots of themselves, the encounter with God and with the magic and mystery of places (Collins-Kreiner & Wall, 2015). Consequently, pilgrims cannot be differentiated from tourists. Both types of travellers may be justified in taking trips and seeking religious experiences to add meaning to their life.

Furthermore, tourism of religious heritage due to the cultural and historical-artistic component is also a key that contributes to the economy of the territories and adds attractiveness to cities, villages, natural areas as well as increasing sustainability (Trono & Oliva, 2013). According to gender studies and therefore the transmission of these concepts to women, pilgrimage is the first reason that allowed a woman, while still taking risks, to leave home. Allegri's studies (2012) suggest that women, especially the noble and powerful, taken by a religious fervor, for example in the first centuries of Christianity, travelled (never alone) to religious destinations. Later, in the Middle Ages, only two categories of women could leave: nuns and widows. The former by choice of life, the latter because they were temporarily free from family ties, could enjoy this glimmer of freedom. These women joined groups of pilgrims, as moving alone was too dangerous. The search for faith or the fulfilment of a vow for a penance or to be missionaries, to go to holy places or to attend celebrations, or even for personal circumstances is the storyline of the lives of adventurous women. Sometimes they were motivated by the need to overcome traumatic events by managing to do what very few men were able to do at the time. The advantages of the gendered approach have been to highlight religious travellers besides missionaries, viewing the women both as travellers themselves, as well as people who facilitated contact between other people and other regions or the intersection of heterogeneous religious connections (Luckhardt, 2013).

## On the Trail of Exemplary Women: the Case of Egeria, Gudrid and Alexandra

### *Egeria: One of Christianity's First Female Pilgrims*

Accounts of women travellers go back many centuries; there are many who defied the risks and social conventions of their time to fulfil their most diverse needs for knowledge and experience. The oldest surviving testimony comes from the Egeria who in the 4th century set out from Galicia to the Mediterranean to reach the Holy Land, using the Bible as a guide. Egeria made a pilgrimage to the Holy Land between 381 and 384. She left her impressions, descriptions and experiences written in the *Itinerarium and Loca Sancta*.

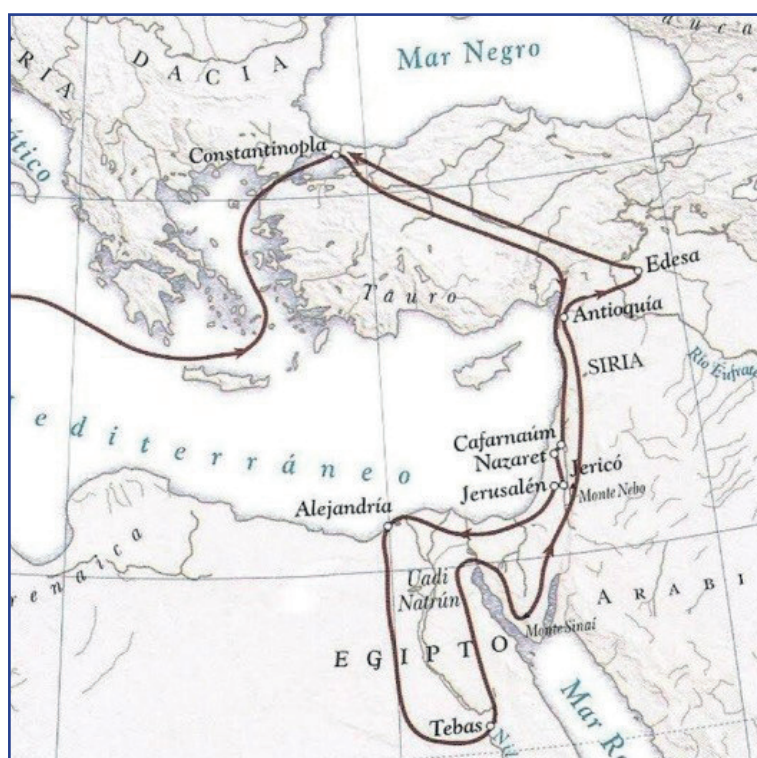
This travelogue has become an incomparable description of the Roman Empire of the 4th century A.D. and the way of traveling of the time; but it is also a direct vision through the typically female gaze of the Holy Land of the time. Furthermore, Egeria described in detail the liturgical celebrations in Jerusalem during the liturgical year. In this way, the *Itinerarium* is not only a text of travel descriptions but a book with a global vocation that illustrates the pilgrimage and liturgical practices of the early Church.

In an era like Egeria's, in which the vast majority of women had a marginal role in almost all aspects of life, a figure like her helps to highlight a more than necessary feminine gaze, even in ecclesiastical and religious domains.

Only part of the *Itinerarium*, was rediscovered (Figure 1) in 1884, enclosed in an 11th century manuscript found in the library of S. Maria di Arezzo. It is divided into two main parts: the visit to biblical places such as Sinai, the land of Gessèn, Mount Nebo, Egypt, Indumea, the land of Job, the passage into Mesopotamia, and then Tarsus, Seleucia and Chalcedon, etc.; and the visit to the places linked to the life of Jesus, with the description of the liturgy practiced in the temples erected in these places and above all in the Basilica of the Holy Sepulcher.

The policy of the Roman Emperor Constantine I (306-337 AD), in fact, had propitiated the development and restoration of holy places by building basilicas and

**Figure 1: The Rediscovered Part of the *Itinerarium* of Egeria**



Source: <https://reliquiosamente.com>

searching for relics. During her wanderings, Egeria had the aim of knowing in depth the places described by the Bible, the places where the story of the origins of the faith she professed was told. Therefore, her journey had been prepared with great care. She knew perfectly what she had to see in each region (Bartolotta & Tormo-Ortiz, 2019).

When Egeria arrived in Jerusalem in 381-383, the Christian pilgrimage was a well-established practice. In the first three centuries of Christianity the movements of pilgrims moved from East to West, attracted by Rome the *Urbe Caput Mundi* where they could venerate the tombs of Peter, Paul, and other martyrs. From the fourth century the reverse phenomenon occurred: the escape from Rome, identified with the ephemeral values of the world, with the desire to return to the origins and simplicity. Thus, the journey changed direction from West to East, towards the Holy Land, the place where Jesus Christ was born, and took on the characteristics of a return journey, which found its geographical concretisation in Jerusalem and the promised land.

For many centuries Egeria was simply the name of one of the protagonists of a letter that the Abbot Valerio del Bierzo had sent to his monks, singing the praises of this woman, and making identifying her as the role model of a very devout Christian. At the end of the nineteenth century the name of the great traveling lady of the fourth century was finally known, when an anonymous manuscript was found; it told about a journey very

**Figure 2: Spanish Commemorative Stamp - XVI Centenario del Viaje de la Monja Egeria al Oriente Bíblico, 381-384**



Source: <https://www.sellosfilatelicos.com/2020/10/sello-de-correo-del-xvi-centenario-del-viaje-de-la-monja-egeria-al-oriente-biblico.html>

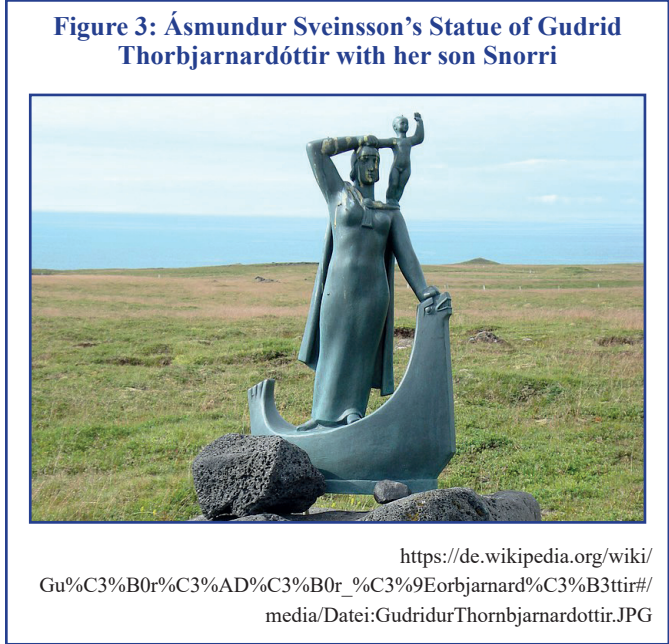


similar to that described by the Abbot Valerius. Studies carried out from the beginning of the twentieth century confirmed with almost absolute certainty that Egeria was the protagonist of that journey described by Abbot Valerio.

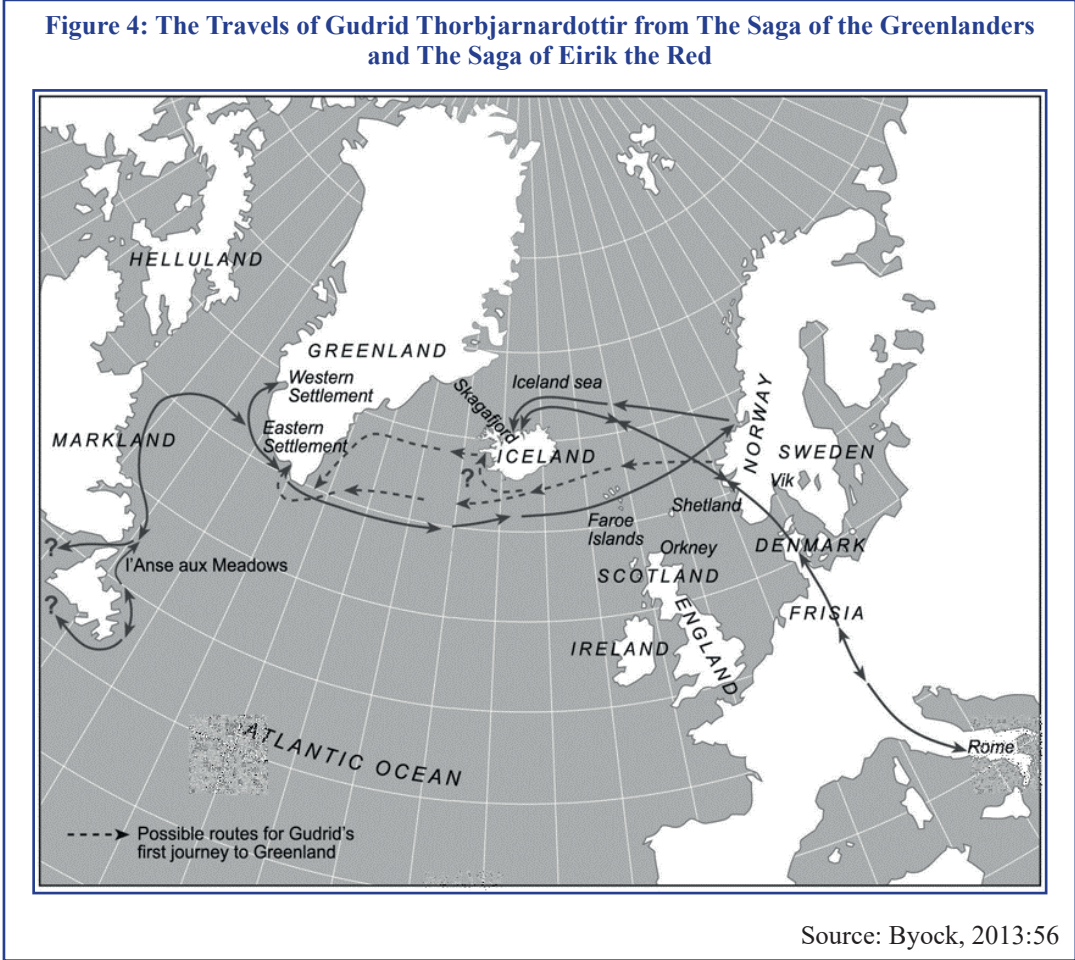
In 1984, on the 100th anniversary of the discovery of the *Itinerarium*, Spain printed the commemorative stamp ‘XVI centenario del viaje de la monja Egeria al Oriente Bíblico, 381-384’ (Figure 2), which celebrated the sixteenth centenary of the compatriot’s journey (Bartolotta & Tormo-Ortiz, 2019; Cardini, 1989; Giannarelli, 1992; Moure Casas, 2000).

***Gudrid, the Far Travelled from the Pagan and Christian Religion***

The history of Gudrid Thorbjarnardottir compared to that of Egeria is later by a few centuries. Her history comes from the far north of Europe and from dark and distant times but has been handed down through the Norse sagas. Gudrid was born around 980-985 A.D. in Laugarbrekka,



in the peninsula of Snæfellsnes, in the extreme west of Iceland where a statue has been erected that recalls the adventurous explorations (Figure 3) where she is known as *vidforla* or ‘she who has travelled far’. In fact, she is one of the best known travellers of the Viking Age.



Gudrid Thorbjarnardottir was an extraordinary traveller who in the Middle Ages travelled half the world. She had three husbands, and gave birth to the first known European born on American soil. Gudrid was still a child when she made her first journey with her family to move to Greenland. At the time it had a mild climate with better chances of life than the 'land of ice'. The expedition led by Erik the Red was meant to establish colonies in the 'green land' where they would thrive.

Although her story is suspended between history and myth within the pages of the so-called Sagas of Vinland, and more precisely in the Saga of Erik the Red and in the *Saga of the Greenlanders*, Gudrid really existed and there is plenty of evidence of her incredible life (Figure 4).

She travelled from Iceland to multiple destinations including Rome on a pilgrimage, throughout her life. She eventually decided to stop travelling and live again permanently in Iceland.

After various vicissitudes Gudrid returned to Iceland finding her country Christianised and, sometime later, Gudrid also converted to the new religion, deciding to make a pilgrimage on foot to Rome through all of Europe. At this point in her life Gudrid defined herself as a nun which in Icelandic translates as *einsetukona* literally 'woman who lives alone'. In fact, she never remarried and remained independent until the end of her days. She is a figure of particular interest in the Icelandic sagas. She is the widow of Leif Eriksson's brother, Thorstein, and wife of Thorfinn Karlsefni, who led the most ambitious attempt to establish a Norse colony in Vinland (present-day Newfoundland). Thus, she was the best-travelled woman in the Viking world, and possibly in the world at large at the time (Elphinstone, 2001; Brown, 2015).

The story of the woman who travelled an entire hemisphere still fascinates after centuries. She has been the subject of many books and she even appears in the modern 'manga' graphic novels of Makoto Yukimura - in the series called *Vinland Saga*.

### *Alexandra David-Néel and the Tibet, the land of the religion*

Another case study is that of Alexandra David-Néel, French writer and Orientalist; her religious motivation was also a search for her own interiority.

Louise Eugenie Alexandrine Marie David, known as Alexandra David-Néel, restless spirit, was an initiator of the relationship between Buddhism and the West. She travelled to Tibet on foot in 1924 after eight months of marching, crossing the paths of Central Asia and Mongolia and entering, at the age of 55, the city of Lhasa which was forbidden to foreigners by decree of the English colonisers.

A significant role in the formation of this Belgian-French traveller is certainly attributable to her friendship with Elisée Reclus, writer, geographer, and friend of her father whom she met in her early teens. Reclus opened the doors of his library to Alexandra who discovered all the works of the geographer in addition to publications on ethnology and geography, especially those concerning Asia. Encouraged by Reclus, she left for London to get to

**Figure 5: Alexandra David-Néel in Lahasa, 1924**



[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Alexandra\\_David-N%C3%A9el#/media/File:Alexandria\\_David-NeelinLhasa.gif](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Alexandra_David-N%C3%A9el#/media/File:Alexandria_David-NeelinLhasa.gif)



Figure 6: The Map of Asia at the Time of Alexandra David-Néel



Source: Foster &amp; Foster, 1998:9

know an oriental sect with which she had correspondence and to learn English. From there she moved to Paris where she approached the Theosophical society. The intense study of Sanskrit, the discovery of theosophy, occultism, esotericism, led to a profound crisis of consciousness, existentialism and identity in Alexandra. Subsequently, she developed her belief that Buddhism is not a religion but a philosophy of life as well (Brown, 2002; Guy, 1995). In those years she began her frequent travels to the East which produced a deep geographical knowledge but also a growing fascination with Buddhism and Asian landscapes, becoming a fervent religious activist.

To gain real economic independence, she took singing courses at the Brussels Conservatory and obtained the first prize for opera singing in 1889 when she was just eighteen. From that moment, she lived for fourteen years performing in various theaters in France and Belgium, then in Indochina, North Africa and Vietnam, under the pseudonym of Alexandra David or Alexandra Myrial. In 1894 she decided to embark on a boat trip from Marseille

towards Colombo. It was a period of great study for the learning of Sanskrit and the deepening of Hindu theosophy.

In 1911 Alexandra, now an adult, began a life of studies and travel that she always wanted; on 9 August of that year, she embarked on a steamer that would take her on a long journey (financed by the French Ministry) first to India, then to various Eastern countries, which lasted fourteen years. The first stop in the Asian period was Sri Lanka and immediately afterwards India. At that time and in that strictly English India, a European who hung out with the natives, studied sacred texts and dressed in an orange scarf was a phenomenon never seen before.

Before leaving, despite the period of great emotional fragility, Alexandra increased her collaboration as a writer-journalist with the magazines *La Fronde*, *Le Mercure de France*, *L'Etoile Socialiste* by writing novels which were then published. She distinguished herself above all for her articles in *La Fronde* that represented

her free, nonconformist and modernist personality. The newspaper was cooperatively run by women alone who fought for their self-determination and claimed rights for gender equality. The letters that Alexandra sent to her husband Philippe were numerous and he continued to provide her financial support. In 1912, in one of those letters, for the first time Alexandra expressed the idea of going beyond the forbidden borders of Tibet to reach Lhasa:

*Après tout, Lhasa n'est pas qu'à cinq cents kilomètres de Darjeeling (Gut, 2008: 9).*<sup>2</sup>

Without a moment's thought, in April she was in Darjeeling, in one of the monasteries where she tried Samadhi (a state of meditative consciousness), which she described as:

*Etat de concentration profonde avec perte de conscience du monde extérieur (Gut, 2008).*<sup>3</sup>

Two years later, in 1914, Alexandra converted to Buddhism and lived as a hermit in a Sikkim quarry. After that, she totally immersed herself in the mystique of those places practicing spiritual exercises together with the Tibetan monk Aphur Yongden, from whom she would never separate again. The monk helped Alexandra in the complex translations of Tibetan texts and was an unparalleled and courageous guide in the most inaccessible and dangerous places. He shared all the hardships of that complicated life and moved to Europe when conditions no longer allowed Alexandra to stay in Asia.

Alexandra and Aphur traveled through India, Nepal, Burma, Japan, Korea, China and finally clandestinely to Tibet (Figure 6). This was her main feat: the only Western woman to enter the holy city of Lhasa - which happened in February 1924. Before their arrival, Tibet was a mysterious space, full of cultural, social, and mystical meaning. The contribution of this traveller to the knowledge of the country was, therefore, precious and very original testimony in the narration of the history of that country, at least before 1950.

<sup>2</sup> After all, Lhasa is only five hundred kilometers from Darjeeling

<sup>3</sup> A state of deep concentration with loss of awareness of the outside world

Tibet, a geographical entity with borders violated by foreign powers, poor and physically excluded in a fascinating but inaccessible area, was almost unreachable; moreover, it was socially characterised by forms of slavery, economically depressed and without resources for its citizens. However, Alexandra wanted to deliver a clear and profound message of an unknown world, mysterious but at the same time highly fascinating:

*La vérité apprise d'autrui est sans valeur. Seule compte, seule est efficace la vérité que nous découvrons nous-mêmes (Soriano, 2019).*<sup>4</sup>

The British closed Tibet in uncompromising isolation: in 1893 they only allowed a commercial outpost frequented by insiders. They occupied Lhasa in 1904 and were granted privileges and exploited the local resources, ensuring commercial and diplomatic exclusivity. Tibet was prey to the colonial ambitions of the powers of the time, from China to England, Russia and France, as well as Japan.

In her first approach to Eastern religions, Alexandra did not consider religious duties as a hypothesis of life that used all her energies. What she wanted was to practice and re-propose a Buddhism purified from myths, from the superstitions of ancient traditions based on magical rituals and witchcraft to the detriment of populations who ignored the darkness and unreliability of these artifices. Alexandra was above all far from the usual behaviour of Westerners who lived in those places, who spent time in embassies and lounges almost in a suspended dimension: she learned Sanskrit and Tibetan, she studied Buddhist and Hindu texts. She spent years of research, exploration, elaboration and living in and with nature, with the ever-keen desire to explore unknown places in search of intrinsic meanings (Braham, 1976; Foster & Foster, 1998).

Thus it was that after almost ten years of continuous travel (mainly but not exclusively) throughout the Chinese territory, finally in 1924, dressed and disguised as a Tibetan pilgrim, she managed to evade British controls and enter the city of Lhasa, completing her project of affirmation as free woman. She described this adventure

<sup>4</sup> The truth learned from others is worthless. The only thing that matters, the only thing that is effective is the truth that we discover ourselves



**Figure 7: Alexandra David-Néel's Book *My Journey to Lhasa*, published in 1927**



<https://pictures.abebooks.com/inventory/31371256127.jpg>

as the ‘Great Project’ in her travelogue *My Journey to Lhasa*, published in 1927. Alexandra returned to France almost permanently in 1925, enjoying unprecedented success, and became known as ‘the woman on the roof of the world’, since, at the time she was the only Western woman to enter the holy city.

### Conclusions

This research contributes to the study of the female role within the geography of pilgrimage but, also, in the Tibetan geopolitical context or as Egeria with the first religious journey in 385AD. The experience of pilgrimage embodies the pilgrim’s desire to seek or manifest his or her identity and value as a person and this is found in Alexandra’s travels. At the same time, Gudrid’s experience demonstrates how women, even with very different cultures, have found ways to travel

in search of spirituality and knowledge. Religion represents and influences, in many cases, the way of leading one’s life and the involvement of women in a cultural phenomenon such as pilgrimage has been studied by scholars via their narratives, letters, wills and other historical documents with the aim of restoring the role of women in the historical world (Geldsetzer 2007; Lopez & Gonzales, 2017). The term pilgrimage connotes a religious journey. Relationships between religion and tourism have a long history, are extremely varied and have many implications. Another perspective explored in this paper is the view that gender and mobility are inseparable, influencing each other in deep and often indirect ways (Hanson, 2010).

In the case studies analysed, the attractive force of religious tourism in all its components is particularly evident for Alexandra David-Néel. Her motivations were eminently religious and spiritual, together with the need to deal deeply with different cultures, perhaps in search of a new identity as a European woman of her time. Instead, religion as an excuse to affirm gender is evident in the case of Gudrid, the woman leader who thrived in Viking age society.

The journey is, therefore, a central and not a peripheral force in historical transformations; the creation of place, of mapping territory, in short, the territorialities of humanity, is an enterprise of mobility. Borders are made by those who cross them. Walls and doors are but a material manifestation of those procedures by which social groups include and exclude others, thus defining themselves. Religious, economic, and cultural centres are created by the arrivals and returns, of entire generations, by their numerous journeys (Leed, 1992: 29).

The history of travel allows us to see certain aspects of modernity and individuality, democracy, the fantastic transformation of violence with delimitation by means of borders, the separability of people from social structures between strangers, and even the anomie that constitutes the reverse of freedom. This separability as characteristics of certain societies shaped by mobility is to be found in the most ancient traveling societies as exemplified in the cases discussed in this paper (Leed, 1992:31).



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