ASCETICISM AND HOSPITALITY AS PATRONAGE IN THE LATE ANTIQUE HOLY LAND: THE EXAMPLES OF PAULA AND MELANIA THE ELDER

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To the modern mind, late antique Jerusalem frequently appears to be at the centre of a vortex of people and ideas, with pilgrims and saints being inexorably drawn to its holy places from around the Roman world. This article aims to provide a snapshot of three trends of late antique society that all converged on the Holy City in the late fourth and early fifth centuries, namely the ancient tradition of elite guest-friendship, the emerging tradition of Christian asceticism, and the new enthusiasm, among the elite and commoners alike, for Holy Land pilgrimage. I will limit myself to the examples of two women, Melania the Elder and Paula, who, as contemporaries in the Jerusalem area from ca. 372 to 410, transplanted to Palestine the traditions and trends of Rome, but also engaged in a new form of patronage: pilgrim hospitality.¹

Friendship and kinship ties were central to how people – mainly the upper classes – moved about the Roman world. The roots of the practice are pre-classical: Homer’s epics are full of examples of xenia, the extension of hospitality to strangers that transcends generations.² Xenia, frequently translated as guest-friendship, became common practice throughout the Mediterranean. In the Roman world, claiming shared social status and mutual friends could be sufficient for an invitation to hospitality. The practical implications of this system of hospitality meant that there were many ways in which one could make use of one’s social connections to aid one’s travels. First, and most simply, one could hope to


reach one’s destination by visiting one’s friends en route and being housed with them or on their estates. One could also impose on friends’ positions and privileges for ease of passage. Pliny the Younger, for example, supplied his wife with a diploma for the public highway, the *cursus publicus*, contravening the established laws for the issue of such documents, so that she might visit her family. Libanius was stymied on his trip to Athens by the fall from power of the friend who was to supply him with a diploma for a part of the journey. This recalls the famous boast made by Trimalchio in Petronius’s *Satyricon*, that one day he hoped to be able to travel from the Italian peninsula to North Africa without ever stepping off his own land. On a more modest scale, Cicero was able to do this for his own properties between Rome and Formiae on the Adriatic coast, and even maintained lodges (*deversoria*) where he might put up overnight.

For the late antique period, Scott Bradbury has argued, based on the geographic dispersal of Libanius’s correspondents throughout the Eastern Empire, that the restructuring of the systems of provincial government during the Tetrarchy saw increased opportunities for men of status to take up positions outside their native province, rarely staying in one place very long. With this increased geographic mobility, networks of influence also expanded, and, by extension, networks of hospitality. Libanius himself rarely travelled, but had he done so, he would probably never have lacked a place to stay. This is evident also in the way in which Jerome sent and received letters. His letters were often delivered by hand by a mutual acquaintance; therefore, the movement of his letters corresponds to the movement of people, and implies that hospitality was extended to the letter-bearer.

Relying on the hospitality of friends and family was by far the preferred way to travel. Commercial places of accommodation had a — probably deservedly — bad reputation as dens of licentiousness and iniquity. They were considered offensive, therefore, not only to the refined tastes of the upper classes, but also to the moral decorum of the pilgrim — and especially to women in each group. For both classes, alternatives had to be sought, and in the homes and monasteries of the Christian elite, we see the possibilities for adequately housing both types of traveller.

At the end of the fourth century, Rome and Constantinople were centres for much aristocratic asceticism. Visible Christian piety played an important role in the identity of the Theodosian elite; the role of the emperor became ideologically linked with the Church under Theodosios I, and the members of the extended imperial family and other aristocrats followed suit. However, although joining the clergy might increasingly have appealed as a viable alternative to the traditional *cursus honorum*, it was still fairly uncom-

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7 See, for example, Ep. 68, in: Labourt (cit. n. 1), III, pp. 188–190. Augustine’s brother Alypius carried letters to and from Jerome (Ep. 56.1, ibid., pp. 49–50). In an effort to reconcile with Rufinus, Jerome sent copies of letters to anyone he thought Rufinus might encounter in the West: Ep. 81.2, in: Labourt (cit. n. 1), IV, p. 112. See also Paulinus of Nola’s praise of Victor, the bearer of letters to and from Sulpicius Severus, Ep. 28.1, in: Walsh (cit. n. 1), pp. 93–94.

mon for men of aristocratic standing to abandon home and duty in favour of an exclusively monastic life. They might eventually retire into a religious life, as did Paulinus of Nola, for example, or Paula’s son-in-law, Pammachius. Despite professing their Christian devotion, most men continued to hold office and engage in secular government, expressing their piety through acts of patronage and sponsorship instead. Flavius Rufinus could be considered the exemplar of the pious nobleman: he built on his palace grounds at Chalcedon a martyrium containing the relics of Peter and Paul, and also constructed a monastery attached to it, and invited a community of monks from Egypt to reside there. His own baptism, which coincided with the consecration of his martyrium, was presided over by bishops from throughout the East, all while Rufinus himself was serving, first as consul in 392, and then as praetorian prefect of Constantinople.

In this environment of expressive piety, the asceticism of noble women was especially celebrated. From the late fourth and early fifth centuries we have entire catalogues of women who all followed a similar practice of disavowing their social positions and the expectations of rank, sometimes even renouncing their families, in the pursuit of an ideal Christian life. They converted their homes into quasi-monastic establishments, which became centres for prayer and scriptural learning. What may have vexed their families the most was how they dispersed their fortunes through charity and the founding of monasteries. The two women who are the focus of this article, Paula and Melania the Elder, both belonged to a group of such women in Rome, whose central figure was Marcella. Marcella’s home on the Aventine was in part a monastery (her sister lived as a hermit in part of the complex), but it was also where the discussions of scripture in which Paula and Melania participated took place, and where the circle was eventually introduced to Jerome, who served as tutor and mentor to the group, and who was to be Paula’s companion and partner in the Holy Land.

What is noteworthy is that most of these women who participated in Marcella’s group, or who turned their own households into venues for domestic asceticism, were in fact widows. The status of widowhood gave women a degree of independence in the form of control over their own destinies and wealth which they could then distribute as charity or give to the church as they chose. Conversely, women without personal wealth and no male heirs would often turn to the church for assistance, becoming recipients of its charity, as opposed to donors. Widowhood also gave women with pious aspirations a chance to redeem themselves spiritually in a religious environment where virginity was prized and marriage reviled. Jerome, for example, ranked the married state as the lowest for women, valuing, in descending order, virginity, widowhood and marriage, in contrast to most Latin and Greek au-

9 See M. WHITTOW, Ruling the Late Roman and Early Byzantine City: A Continuous History, in: Past and Present, 129.1, 1990, pp. 3–29, esp. p. 29, for a discussion on the social transformations in late antique elite society and especially the role of the church.
11 The life of Flavius Rufinus is recorded in the Vita s. Hypatii, see MATTHEWS, Western Aristocracies (cit. n. 8), pp. 134–135 for summary; also PLRE, I, Rufinus 18, pp. 778–781.
12 See SWAN, The Forgotten Desert Mothers (cit. n. 1), for biographies. KELLY, Jerome (cit. n. 1) suggests that, in Rome at least, this phenomenon of aristocratic domestic monasticism was restricted to women; see p. 139. See also K. BOWES, Private Worship, Public Values and Religious Change in Late Antiquity, Cambridge 2008, pp. 96–103, who emphasises the sponsorship of theologians such as Jerome and Rufinus and their writing as an act of patronage.
thors, who placed widows at the bottom of the hierarchy below martyrs and virgins, and excluded married women completely.\(^{15}\)

Given the typical age difference between a bride and her husband, women tended to be young when widowed – Melania, for example, was only twenty-two. Many younger widows experienced pressure to enter into a second marriage; Melania and Paula may have been partially exempted from this by the fact that both had produced healthy male heirs, and two of Paula’s daughters had made marriages that had further strengthened the family’s ties among the nobility. Their jobs as wives and mothers were fulfilled, and as a consequence they had attained what Elizabeth Clark calls “ascetic freedom”.\(^{16}\) This freedom, which was completed by the voluntary renunciation of family ties, enabled widows to devote themselves to asceticism, donate all their money to the church, take off on a tour of the holy places, or even, as Melania and Paula did, remain in the region permanently. In Palestine their money was spent much as that of their friends in Rome, on the construction and furnishing of their monasteries, on charity, and on extending hospitality to their visitors.

In fact, Melania’s and Paula’s actions represented an extreme version of a fairly wide-spread trend. In 390 a law was passed forbidding women under the age of sixty (i.e., women of marriageable and child-bearing age) to become deaconesses of the church, or to under the cover of religion dispose of their property to the church at the expense of their family.\(^{17}\) While this law was quickly repealed, it points to an issue of concern at levels of society high enough to provoke legislative action.\(^{18}\) Beggaring themselves through almsgiving and indiscriminate charity had become the modish way for Christian ladies to demonstrate their piety.

Some of these aristocratic widows undertook pilgrimages to Palestine and Egypt, bestowing largesse here and there. Melania the Elder is, however, one of the earliest to have actually made her home there. Arriving in Jerusalem sometime after 372, she founded two monasteries on the Mount of Olives, one for women run by herself, and the other for men, under the leadership of her spiritual mentor and companion, Rufinus of Aquileia. Their monasteries soon became noted for their lavish and generous hospitality – all paid for by Melania.\(^{19}\)

Despite the ostensible renunciation of her social status through the dispersal of her wealth and her adoption of ascetic habits, Melania nevertheless remained linked to the highest aristocracy from which she sprang.\(^{20}\) She was not so cut off from her family that she did not rush back to Rome to intercede on behalf of her granddaughter’s own ascetic aspirations.\(^{21}\) Nor did she renounce her aristocratic ties, but happily provided hospitality to various members of the Constantinopolitan elite who were travelling through the Holy Land on pilgrimage. For example, among the guests housed at the Mount of Olives was Bacurius the Iberian, who, in ad-

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\(^{16}\) E. A. Clark, Ascetic Renunciation and Feminine Advancement: A Paradox of Late Antique Christianity, in: Ascetic Piety and Women’s Faith: Essays on Late Ancient Christianity, Lewiston, NY 1986, p. 184.


\(^{19}\) Palladios, Historia Lausiaca 54, ed. Butler (cit. n. 1), p. 146: Τριακοστὸν μὲν γὰρ καὶ ἐβδομὸν ἐτὸς ξενιτεύσασα ἰδίως ἀνελώμασιν ἐπήρκεσε καὶ ἐκκλησίαις καὶ μοναστηρίοις καὶ ξένους καὶ φυλακαῖς, χορηγούντων αὐτῇ καὶ τῶν πρὸς γένος καὶ αὐτότου τοῦ οὐδα καὶ τῶν ἰδίων ἐπιτρόπων τὰ χρήματα.

\(^{20}\) See Murphy, Melania the Elder (cit. n. 1), pp. 61–65, on her forebears.

dition to being a devout Christian, was a favourite of the emperor, held the rank of *comes*, and was, for a time, *dux Palaeastinae*. Another guest was Evagrios Pontikos, who had close ties to the imperial court, and whose relationship with Melania was deep and profound, possibly even filial in its affection. There was also Palladios himself, who eventually produced the compendium of holy lives (from which much of our biographical knowledge of Melania derives) for his patron, Lausos, the *praepositus sacri cubiculi* in Constantinople. Other high-ranking friends included Silvia, sister-in-law of the aforementioned Flavius Rufinus, with whom Melania undertook a journey from Jerusalem to Egypt. David Hunt also suggests that the noblewoman Poemenia, who, having travelled extensively in Palestine and Egypt, might have stayed with Melania while her church on the Imbomon on the Mount of Olives was being constructed. Certainly the proximity would have given the patroness an ideal vantage point to keep an eye on her building project. In Palladios’s description of life on the Mount of Olives, Melania is a commanding presence, managing her nuns, participating in ongoing theological debates, maintaining correspondence with guests who had moved on and acting as hostess to her guests. She is also described as playing a principal role in interceding in matters pertaining to local monks and local clergy.

Her granddaughter, the younger Melania, eventually came to assume a similar position on the Mount of Olives, extending hospitality to members of the nobility and prominent clergymen. The connection between Melania the Younger and the court of Theodosios II is made clear by the reciprocal hospitality enjoyed by Melania and her entourage in Constantinople, and by members of the imperial court in Jerusalem, such as the Iberian prince-turned-monk, Peter, and, of course, the empress Eudokia herself.

Paula, with her daughter Eustochium, having left behind her young son, arrived in the Holy Land under the guidance of Jerome around 385. Like Melania the Elder, she undertook a tour of the holy places, including Egypt, before electing to make her home in Bethlehem. There she built two monasteries, one for herself and her female companions, and one for Jerome and his monks, as well as a roadside hostel. Our knowledge of Paula’s role in the Bethlehem community is, however, completely overshadowed by Jerome’s descriptions of his own activities.

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29 Kelly, Jerome (cit. n. 1), describes the relationship between Paula and Jerome as co-dependent (p. 97), and questions the degree to which Paula’s appearance of independence and control over her own decisions and body is the product of hindsight and redaction. A. Cain, *The Letters of Jerome: Asceticism, Biblical Exegesis, and the Construction of Christian Authority in Late Antiquity*, Oxford 2009, pp. 111–114, discusses Paula’s family’s disapproval of their relationship. Even in later years, at Bethlehem, Palladios describes with pity the noble woman who looked after Jerome, but whose holiness was overshadowed by his temper and his envy. Palladios, *Historia Lausiaca*, 36, ed. Butler (cit. n. 1), p. 108.
Paula as an aristocratic woman also had strong family ties to the nobility, and was connected by blood or through the marriage of her children to many of the prominent Roman senatorial families of the time. Despite these ties, the guests who came to Bethlehem were either family of Paula (her granddaughter was sent to be raised as a consecrated virgin) or Jerome (his younger brother, Paulinianus, dwelt for a number of years in Jerusalem), friends of his from his student days, or recipients of his correspondence. Bishop Epiphanios of Salamis was in turn repaid for the hospitality he had extended to Paula and Jerome on their way to Palestine. This has led Hunt to characterise the hospitality of the Bethlehem monasteries as reflecting "the loyalty and cohesion of a close-knit fraternity, in contrast to the widespread and influential circle of visitors who came and went on the Mount of Olives."

Male guests would naturally have stayed with Jerome in the men's monastery. Of visitors who might have been entertained in Paula's nunery, far less is known. Jerome makes references to a few female guests who visited the area. Jerome and Paula jointly extended an invitation to a couple in Rome (either husband and wife or brother and sister), to come visit the holy places and partake of their society. If this pair did in fact make the journey, then it is probable that the couple would have lodged apart while in Bethlehem: Desiderius would have likely resided with Jerome, while Serenilla would have been the guest of Paula. Jerome, again writing on behalf of Paula and her daughter, composed an eloquent invitation to Marcella to join them in the Holy Land. She declined, but had she come, she too might have stayed with Paula.

One lady who is known to have made the journey to Bethlehem was Fabiola, another friend from Rome. She travelled to Palestine with her companion Oceanus, apparently with an eye to establishing a permanent home there, possibly a dual monastery like Paula's or Melania's. Upon their arrival, they may have stayed with Paula and Jerome respectively, but their sojourn was brief: Jerome mentions that he undertook to find them a place to live, and the theft of Jerome's manuscript is said to have been from their lodgings. It is likely that Fabiola remained only briefly in Bethlehem because she was looking to set up a monastic foundation of her own in the Jerusalem area, including a hostel for travellers such as she eventually established at Portus in Rome.

New rules for old hospitality came into effect among the Christian elite. There are no references to anyone who was not a Christian staying at any of these monasteries, though many members of the senatorial classes in the fourth and fifth centuries were still pagan (including many of Melania's and Paula's in-laws). Nor are there references to anyone visiting purely on business, although this could be the bias of the

30 Paula the Younger: Ep. 107.13, in: Labourt (cit. n.1), V, p. 157. Paulinianus found himself at the epicentre of the controversies between the supporters and detractors of Origen when he was ordained deacon over the Bethlehem community by Epiphanios of Salamis in direct insult to the jurisdiction of John of Jerusalem: Ep. 51, a letter from Epiphanios of Salamis to John of Jerusalem, in: Labourt (cit. n.1), V, pp. 156–172; see also n. 7.
33 One must here acknowledge the lacuna in the epistolary corpus that spans the years 386–393.
34 Ep. 47.2, in: Labourt (cit. n.1), II, p. 115.
37 Ep. 77.8, in: Labourt (cit. n.1), IV, p. 49; Ep. 77.10, ibid., p. 50.
38 Cain, The Letters of Jerome (cit. n. 29); for Paula’s relatives, pp. 111–114.
Paula, on first arriving in Jerusalem, refused to stay in the residence of the proconsul of Palestine, an old family friend, as custom might have dictated, preferring instead a humble cell. Even among those who shared a religious vocation, it was important to share the correct religious vocation. When the Origenist controversy caused an acrimonious falling out between the previously friendly communities in Bethlehem and the Mount of Olives after 393, those arriving in Jerusalem had to choose sides, if they had not done so already.

However, no matter how well documented these elite cases might be, they represent but a small portion of the overall traffic to the Holy Land. To what extent might these politics matter to the ordinary people who could claim no personal acquaintance with the founders of these monastic precincts? For instance, would it have mattered to the masses of local pilgrims that these women were from the West? There is no indication that the Western origin of these women would have affected their reception in Palestine. As adherents to Nicene Orthodoxy, they would not have been considered heretical by the episcopal leadership of Jerusalem (Cyril and his successor John), whose principal concern while in office seems to have been to engage in diplomatic opportunism with an eye towards elevating the status of their see over Caesarea Maritima, which was the archepiscopal see.

Admittedly, these cordial relations were not to last. However, it should be noted that the controversy that flared up between the supporters and detractors of Origen was imported to the Holy Land from outside, and that the Western religious communities in Bethlehem and the Mount of Olives were protagonists in the affair, rather than reacting to a local dispute. Rufinus and Melania were in favour of Origen, which put them in line and on favourable terms with John, the bishop of Jerusalem. Jerome, on the other hand, being vitriocially anti-Origen, put both his and Paula's communities at a disadvantage – Jerome's monks were even for a time excommunicated for having tried to subvert John's authority. Whether Paula's nuns suffered similarly is not made clear. In the end, it was only Jerome's machinations further afield, winning over Theophilos of Alexandria, that swayed the scales in his favour and prompted the return (retreat?) to Rome of Rufinus and Melania in 397 and 399 respectively. The Origenist controversy, and the invective being hurled back and forth between the heads of the two most in-

39 For example, Bacurius, mentioned above, is described by Rufinus as a devout Christian, but Libanios in his Letter 1060 addresses him in pagan terms. See PLRE, I, Bacurius, p. 144; Libanios, Opera, ed. R. Foerster, XI, Stuttgart 1963, p. 183.
41 C. Mango, The Pilgrim's Motivation, in: Akten des XII. Internationalen Kongresses für Christliche Archäologie, Bonn 1991, pp. 6–7, states that while the elite travellers were trendsetters, they were in the minority, with the bulk of pilgrims belonging to lower classes, making short-distance journeys.
fluential Western monasteries in the area, had the effect of politicising Jerusalem pilgrimage, with sides being taken on doctrinal grounds, rather than on grounds of kinship and friendship. What is quite clear is that, during this time, decisions on where to be accommodated were not based on the loca sancta themselves, but rather on the identities and politics of one’s hosts.

The Western origins of these foundresses would have had greater significance to those who fled the West during the height of the barbarian threat. Jerome complains at that time of his peaceful monastery having given way to the bustle of a guesthouse, as members of the highest and noblest families sought succour in the monastery. Although the exact volume of refugees arriving in the Holy Land is impossible to quantify, the names of the individuals who are mentioned indicate that those who relocated there represented the same landowning aristocracy to which Paula and Melania belonged. For the poor who were tied to the land there was either no opportunity or no need to flee so far.

Only those who were able to convert their assets to movable wealth in sufficient amounts to pay for passage across the Mediterranean seem to have made the journey. Melania the Younger and her husband Pinian would have been representatives of this group; they fled from Rome to Palestine, liquidating their estates in North Africa as they went, and giving much of it away in charity. Jerome’s extensive network of correspondence meant that he was known either personally or by reputation to many; many Western refugees were thus drawn to the Bethlehem monasteries by claims of acquaintance. These included the bishop Orosius, who had left Spain and arrived in the Holy Land via North Africa with an introduction to Jerome from Augustine of Hippo. Women were among those who took to the Holy Land: Artemia was on pilgrimage in Palestine where she expected her husband Rusticus to join her from Rome when the invasion of 406 prevented his travelling. While the holy places themselves were the principal attraction for people arriving from abroad, the presence of Western monasteries headed by persons with whom one could claim an acquaintance might have lessened the sense of displacement of those who had fled their homes.

But even outside times of crisis, Paula’s and Jerome’s monasteries were overflowing with guests: Jerome frequently bemoans the volume of pilgrims that keep him from his writing.

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44 See n. 30.
45 It is possibly for this reason that Jerome desperately tried to dissuade Paulinus of Nola, whom he knew only through letters, from making a pilgrimage to Jerusalem, fearing lest he be bound by family ties and stay with his relative Melania in the den of heresy that Jerome felt the Mount of Olives monasteries had become, Ep. 58.4, in: Labourt (cit. n.1), III, pp. 77–78.
46 Preface to Ezekiel, Book 7, ed. J.P. Migne, S. Eusebii Hieronymi Stridonensis Presbyteri Opera Omnia, Patrologia Latina (PL), XXV, Paris 1845, col. 199: et monasterii solitudinem, hospitum frequentia commutamus; also Book 3, ibid., col. 75: quis crederet…ut quotidie sancta Bethlehem, nobles quondam utriusque sexus, atque omnibus divitiis affluentes, suscipieret mendicantes?
48 Gerontios, Life of Melania the Younger, 19–20, tr. Clark (cit. n. 27), pp. 41–43.
49 Jerome, Ep. 131.2, in: Labourt (cit. n.1), VIII, pp. 8–9.
51 Hunt, ibid., p. 268.
strains of housing guests eventually exhausted Paula’s financial reserves. She left her daughter deeply in debt when she died, and even before that, Jerome was forced to sell some of his family’s property in Italy and Dalmatia to cover costs. It is possibly therefore with bitterness tinged with envy that he decries Melania’s and Rufinus’s hospitality as frivolous and excessive: *hic bene nummatus, plus placebat in prandiis.*

Monasteries served as key providers of hospitality throughout the Christian world, and in the Holy Land in particular. There, monastics served as custodians of holy sites, and organised the accommodation that might be required by pilgrims. At sites of such enormous biblical importance as Bethlehem as the site of the Nativity and the Mount of Olives as the site of the Ascension, monastics would have played a crucial role. Paula’s double monastery was by no means the first at Bethlehem – she herself had stayed at the hostel of one there while she arranged for the construction of her own buildings, and a letter ascribed to Athanasios of Alexandria describes virgins extending hospitality to other virgins there in the 360s. The Mount of Olives and the hills between it and Jerusalem was home to a large number of small monastic communities and anchorites from the fourth century onwards.

The paramount importance of providing accommodation – not just to other monastics and fellow aristocrats, but also to random travellers – is made clear by the fact that Paula’s monasteries included a separate guesthouse at the side of the road, for which Jerome uses the word *mansio,* which is the same word used for an overnight stop on the Roman public highways. As he says, it was deliberately built, with awareness of Scripture, so that travellers could now find the welcome which Mary and Joseph had missed. There is a paradox inherent in the very concept of “monastic hospitality” which makes its implementation difficult. Monasteries were founded on the ideal of withdrawal from the world and the contemplative isolation of their inhabitants. The problem for monasteries then became how to embrace solitude while at the same time discharging philanthropic obligations of charity and hospitality. The solution was frequently the construction of a detached hostel where outsiders could come and go according to their need, but with minimal disruption to the lives of the monks and nuns of the monastery proper.

This paradox may be reflected in the slightly different ways in which hospitality was extended at Melania’s and Paula’s monasteries, which is also a reflection of the different personalities of the two women, and their approach to the ascetic ideal. Melania comes across as forceful and imperious, and, by virtue of her great asceticism and learning, emerges as the ungendered equal of her male guests. Paula, on the other hand, comes across as far more reclusive, often in ill health from fasting, and utterly devoted to the nuns in her charge. Her focus on maintaining the spiritual purity of her virgins by isolating them from temptation, and her own habit of never taking a meal with a man, make her a less likely hostess than Melania. Nevertheless, as we have

54 Ep. 125.18, in: Labourt (cit. n.1), VII, p. 130.
seen, friends who shared her convictions were welcome to stay with her, and she continued to interact with local clergy and bishops up to the time of her death. However, the fact that Paula’s convent had a separate hostel is a testament to the importance she placed on isolation as part of the ascetic ideal; the criticism of excessively lavish hospitality levied at the Mount of Olives community by Jerome, and the fact that a similar arrangement is not recorded there, speaks of a different emphasis on Melania’s part.

That Paula’s and Melania’s monastic establishments were founded by women for women was, of course, immensely important to female pilgrims—it gave them equal access to the holy places. Segregation of the sexes was strictly observed on pilgrimage: women were not permitted to lodge at monasteries for men—in most cases they were not even permitted to enter. In the Life of Euthymios, it is described how a woman from Betaboudissae was cured by oil from the shrine of the saint, although she never set foot in the church. She stayed for three days and nights in front of the monastery, fasting and praying continuously. She returned annually to give thanks and provide the monastery with a meal—she would kiss the jambs of the main entrance.

It is likely that in such cases, women made makeshift shelters or camped out of doors. Yizhar Hirschfeld identified what he thought was a campsite for women near the monastery of Theoktistos in the Judean Desert: there were places for hitching up horses and graffiti including women’s names etched into the cliff. The sources make it clear that pilgrimage was popular among women of all classes: the wealthy and noble would travel from the West or Constantinople on a Grand Tour of the holy places, while their less exalted sisters would frequently take to the roads to visit local saints’ shrines to pray or seek out a cure for themselves or a family member. The popularity of pilgrimage among women belies the threat that they were under: the roads were not a safe place for travellers, and women were especially vulnerable. Wealthy pilgrims like Egeria and Paula travelled with large entourages including men as well as women. Women making local pilgrimages often travelled with female friends or relatives. However, as in the case of the woman of Betaboudissae mentioned above who travelled to the monastery of Euthymios with her husband, they could also be accompanied by male relatives. Gregory of Nyssa, in his letter On Pilgrimages, famously used the impropriety of women needing to rely on male servants and strangers while travelling as a disincentive for pilgrimage.

The presence of monasteries intended for women at such important pilgrimage sites as Bethlehem and the Mount of Olives therefore vouchsafed a bed, a roof and security, and the patronage of such noble and saintly women added an element of prestige. The fact that these sites had both women’s and men’s monasteries, with men’s quarters presumably not too far away, meant that women who were travelling with their husbands, male relatives or male servants could be lodged near their travelling companions, heightening the sense of a shared experience of the holy.

59 Ep. 108.28, in: Labor (cit. n.1), V, p. 198, records that the bishops of Jerusalem and of other cities, as well as numerous other clergy, were present at her death.
To conclude, these women transplanted to the Holy Land a form of domestic asceticism, which gave them the opportunity to participate in the ancient tradition of guest.friendship by entertaining friends and relatives, but also permitted them to provide hospitality within the emerging arena of Christian pilgrim hospitality, to which accommodation provided by monastic communities was vital.