Egeria's Norman Homeland

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In the century since its discovery, the text of the so-called *Itinerarium Egeriae* has intrigued not only philologists, among whom Einar Löfstedt still holds pride of place, but also liturgists, ecclesiastical historians, and Biblical archaeologists. The combined labors of all these savants now constitute a bibliography so immense that from its sheer size alone a neophyte could plausibly conclude that nothing important remains in doubt about either the text or the woman who wrote it. There is, then, some irony in the fact that, despite the researches of legions of scholars over more than a century, many basic questions still await a conclusive answer. Indeed, even the name of the authoress is not entirely certain, not to mention such other enigmas as the date of her voyage, her social status, the quality of her education, or the nature of the Christian community to which she appears to have belonged. Concerning her country of origin as well, the verdict remains *non liquet*, to quote Christine Mohrmann writing in 1975. To this question, however, the following pages propose a solution that will justify, it is hoped, a judgment of *satis liquet* at least concerning Egeria’s provenance.

In 13.1, en route to the site of Job’s tomb, Egeria visits a certain *vicus grandis* called Sedima. In 13.3 she describes as follows the hill, called variously a *monticulus* or *colliculus*, which rises in the middle of this town:

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In eo ergo vico, qui est in media planitie positus, in medio loco est monticulus non satis grandis, sed factus sicut solent esse tumbae, sed grandiæ. Ibi ergo in summio ecclesia est, et deorsum per girum ipsius colliculi parent fundamenta grandia antiqua . . .

One may reasonably wonder what Egeria means by tumbae, a word that she uses only here. Latin tumba is not attested until the second half of the 300s A.D., when it first appears in Prudentius and Jerome. Subsequently, however, it becomes both widespread and tenacious. Thus, tumba and its derivatives still survive in eleven Romance languages and dialects, including French, Provençal, Italian, Catalan, Spanish, and Portuguese, as also in non-Romance languages like Middle Greek, Bulgarian, and Serbian.3 Most Romance descendants of tumba, moreover, refer in some fashion to burial, and hence they remain close to the meaning of the Latin word, which seems always to have meant exclusively “grave,” “tomb,” or “burial mound.”4

In the passage above, however, tumbae can hardly mean “tombs” in general, or even “tumuli” (a word Egeria does not use) in particular. Circular tumuli were erected in large numbers in the northern and northwestern provinces, and, if Egeria lived in this region of the Empire, she would surely have been familiar with them. She would have seen not only Roman examples dating to the first two centuries A.D., but also pre-Roman tumuli built during the Bronze Age. Nevertheless, even in those regions where tumuli are most numerous—namely, in Britain (ca. 100 surviving examples), in Belgium (ca. 340, most of them north of the Meuse), in the vicinity of Trier (ca. 145 Roman tumuli), in parts of the Danubian provinces, and in Thrace—even colossal tumuli could not compare in magnitude with the hill at Sedima, which is, as Egeria herself observes, a monticulus large enough to accommodate a church. In contrast, the largest tumulus in Britain, for example, is 45 feet high and ca. 144 feet in

3 W. Meyer-Lübke, Romanisches etymologisches Wörterbuch3 (Heidelberg 1935) s.v. tumba.
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diameter; the largest in Belgium, 40 feet high and 145 feet in diameter. Even such abnormally large tumuli as these, moreover, are too few to be included in Egeria’s generalizing plural tumbae, and too large for so routine an adjective as grandes (better pergrandes, ingentes, infiniti). In short, even the largest tumuli ever seen by Egeria would yet have been much too small to stand comparison with a monticulus large enough to serve as the site of a church.  

5 The factual data in this paragraph are drawn from J. M. C. Toynbee, Death and Burial in the Roman World (Ithaca 1971) 179–188 (“Provincial Tumuli”).

6 This fact alone renders unlikely the identification of the hill at Sedima with Tell er Ridghā (Tell Shalem in Hebrew) in the Jordan valley, for which see John Wilkinson, trans. and ed., Egeria’s Travels to the Holy Land, rev. ed. (Jerusalem and Warminster 1981) 221 and the sources cited there (to which add N. Zori, The Beth Shean Valley [Jerusalem 1962] 163–164 [in Hebrew]). According to data very kindly supplied by Mr. Joseph Patrich of the Institute of Archaeology at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem, Tell er Ridghā measures 80 by 100 M. in plan and in elevation is only some 4 M. higher than its immediate surroundings. But so low a hill is also inconsistent with other details, e.g., Egeria’s reference to the “summit” (13.3, 13.4) of the hill at Sedima, not to mention qui nos . . . duxerunt suso ad ecclesiam (14.1), or cum ergo descendissemus . . . de ecclesia deorsum (14.2), with reference to the same hill.

Even if it is diminutive in sense no less than in form (so Innocenzo Mazzini, “Tendenze letterarie nella Peregrinatio di Egeria: l’uso del diminutivo,” Prometheus 2 [1976] 275–277), monticulus nevertheless denotes a hill of some considerable size. This is clear from the only other occurrence of the word, in 19.11, where it is used of the hill from which the city of Edessa once drew its water supply. The noun collis occurs only twice (in 23.2 and 23.4, with reference to a sizable hill at Isaurian Seleucia), but the diminutive colliculus six times. Of these six occurrences, half fall in chapters 13 and 14, with reference to the hill at Sedima. In two other passages (2.6 and 3.8) the mountains around Mt. Sinai are said to be so low by comparison that they seem colliculi permodici. Finally, in 7.5, colliculus is used of Biblical Succoth (Exod. 13:20), beside which the Israelites pitched camp. Modest size is thus a distinguishing feature of Egeria’s colliculi — in 2.6, permodici redundantly stresses this aspect — but only Succoth, which is also called a clivus modicus, could conceivably be imagined as having dimensions comparable to those of Tell er Ridghā.

It also bears mentioning that, according to Egeria (15.1), the hill at Sedima was 200 paces from the spring called Aenon. If the latter is to be identified with the spring Ain ed Deir ("spring of the monastery") that is located 7½ miles south of Bethshan, then Tell er Ridghā, lying ca. ½ km. from this spring, is at a distance irreconcilable with that given by Egeria. For the identification of Aenon and Ain ed Deir see Clemens Kopp, The Holy Places of the Gospels (New York 1963) 134–137. For information about the distance between this spring and Tell er Ridghā I am again indebted to the kindness of Joseph Patrich.
Since even a large tumulus could not compare in size with the *monticulus* at Sedima, some translators have rendered Egeria’s words as if she were comparing tumuli and the *monticulus* only in respect of their shape. Gingras\(^7\) translates “with the shape that tombs, large ones, usually have”; Wilkinson,\(^8\) “shaped like a big tomb.” Interpreting the passage in the same say, J. T. Milik\(^9\) imagines a hill “qui par ses formes régulières rappelle à Egérie les grands tombeaux ronds des Romains.” What Egeria says, however, is this: “a *monticulus* not very large, but constructed the way *tumuli* usually are, only large ones.” There can be no doubt that thereby she means to equate *tumuli* and the Sedima hill in respect of their size no less than their shape. The qualification *sed grandes* requires this, for, in respect of shape alone, large *tumuli* are exactly the same as *tumuli* in general. The expression *solent esse* leads to the same conclusion, for the shape of tumuli is not usual but universal. Indeed, a circular plan and conical cross-section are the distinguishing features of tumuli.

The context in 13.3 requires that *tumuli* denote not burial mounds per se, but particular geological formations that resemble burial mounds. As Egeria uses the word, *tumba* is analogous to *tumulus*, which refers to earthen mounds in general as often as it signifies burial mounds in particular.\(^10\) Similarly, a type of flat tableland common in the American Southwest takes its name (mesa) from the object that it resembles. For *tumba*, to be sure, the lexica give no such meaning. The Greek noun τύμβος, of which *tumba* is probably a borrowing,\(^11\) also appears to be connected exclusively with burial. Thus *tumba* = *monticulus* must have been a strictly local usage, referring perhaps to a particular sort of geological formation that was common in, if not confined to, Egeria’s homeland. Nevertheless, localized though it may


\(8\) Wilkinson (above, n. 6) 110.


\(10\) The same is true of tell, the Arabic word for the sort of hill that Egeria saw in Sedima. I am indebted to my late colleague, Prof. Denis Baly, for this Semitic parallel.

have been, this sense of *tumba* was well-known to Egeria and her correspondents. This is clear not only from the generalizing plural *tumbae*, which implies their familiarity, but also from the phrase *solent esse*, which implies a norm. It is also noteworthy that *tumbae* requires no gloss. On the contrary, it conveys to Egeria’s correspondents so exact a meaning that she is obliged to add *sed grandes* in order to avoid being misunderstood.

Though missing in the lexica, *tumba* denoting a type of *monticulus* can in fact be paralleled. Mons Tumba is the name given to Mont St. Michel before 708, when the basilica of St. Michael was dedicated there. In this connection, moreover, *tumba* is not a proper name referring, as such, to Mont St. Michel exclusively. That the same word was used to denote other *monticuli* having the same conical shape is clear from *Tombelaine*, the name of a rock 60 feet high and 2 miles distant from Mont St. Michel. Descended from the diminutive of *tumba*, *Tombelaine* may even suggest the relative dimensions of *tumbae* and *tumbellae*, Mont St. Michel itself being 257 feet high and some 3,000 feet in circumference. Together, Mont St. Michel and Tombelaine were once called Duae Tumbae, and the basilica atop the former, Ad Duas Tumbas. Here, then, is explicit confirmation of the equation between *tumbae* and *monticuli* that we have suggested is implicit in Egeria’s sole use of *tumba* in 13.3.

*Tumba* referring to Mont St. Michel is first attested in the so-called *Revelatio ecclesiae sancti Michaelis*, in which an anonymous author, writing sometime around 850, briefly narrates the foundation legend of the cult of St. Michael on Mount Tumba. The relevant passage of this text, in section 3, has more to offer than a parallel for Egeria’s use of *tumba* = “cone-shaped hill,” and hence deserves to be quoted in full:

12 Stem of *tumbella* + suffix -ānus = *tumbellāna* → *tombelaine*. Cf. mountain from the same suffix added to the stem of *mons*. See Lewis Thorpe, “Le Mont Saint-Michel et Geoffroi de Monmouth,” in Foreville (above, n. 11) 382.


Hic igitur locus *tumba vocitatur ab incolis*, qui, in morem tumuli quasi ab arenis emergens in altum, in spatio ducentorum cubitorum porrigitur.

It was suggested above that it may be because the usage was strictly local that *tumba* denoting a kind of *monticulus* is rarely attested, and missing entirely in dictionaries. The passage just quoted confirms this hypothesis: *tumba vocitatur ab incolis* proves categorically that *tumba = monticulus* was characteristic of the speech of those living near Mont St. Michel, and strongly suggests that the usage was confined to this area. Further allusions to the peculiarity of this usage occur in later references to Mont St. Michel, as in the following extract from the breviary text for the Feast of the Apparition of St. Michael on October 16th:

> in montis vertice qui, propter eminentiam, tumulus seu, *ut loquuntur*, tumba vocabatur

or in the *incipit* prefacing the *Revelatio ecclesiae sancti Michaelis* in Avranches manuscript 211, copied ca. 1000:

> Incipit revelatio ecclesie santi [sic] Michaelis archangeli in monte *qui dicitur* tumba, in occiduis partibus sub Childeberto rege Francorum et Auberto episcopo.

or in this passage from the breviary of N.A.L. 424 in the Bibliothèque Nationale, copied in the 1400s:

> In revelatione ecclesia beati Michaelis archangeli in monte *qui dicitur* tumba, in occiduis partibus, Childeberto rege Francorum et Auberto episcopo.

15 Quoted in Falc'hun (above, n. 11) 46.
Thus, in 13.3 Egeria treats as common parlance a use of *tumba* that is in fact very rare. Indeed, *tumba* referring to a cone-shaped hill would seem to have been virtually unknown beyond the vicinity of Mont St. Michel.\(^{18}\) If, then, Egeria adopts with striking nonchalance a use of *tumba* that was, as far as is known, unique to the region of Mont St. Michel, it follows that this is most probably the area where Egeria and her *sorores* lived. This conclusion is strengthened, moreover, by an additional correspondence between the text of 13.3 and the nomenclature particular to Mont St. Michel. Egeria’s distinction between different sizes of *tumbea* (*factus sicut solent esse tumbeae, sed grandes*) is also paralleled at Mont St. Michel, where *tumba* denoted the mountain itself, and the diminutive *tumbellana*\(^{19}\) the smaller rock nearby. These tantalizing correspondences impel us to explore how close a match exists between Mont St. Michel and the little that is known about Egeria’s provenance.

Three sources supply the evidence that is usually invoked concerning Egeria’s homeland. These are the text of the travelogue itself; a laudation of Egeria written in the form of a letter to monks in the Bierzo (Spanish Bergidum near Galicia) by an ascetic of that region, Valerius, who lived in the second half of the 600s; and the *Liber de locis sanctis*, completed in 1137 by Peter the Deacon, librarian of Monte Cassino, whose use of Egeria’s travelogue as one of his principal sources makes it possible to reconstruct the substance of some of the lost parts of Egeria’s text.\(^{20}\) Early in this century, the attempt was

\(^{18}\) In France, Belgium, and the vicinity of Trier there are several place-names that may derive from Latin *tumba* (Beaurepaire [above, n. 11] 72), but in all these cases *tumba* is likely to refer to the burial mounds that abound in those parts. In the Romance languages spoken in those regions that are most often proposed as Egeria’s homeland *tumba* survives, but the meaning “knoll,” “hillock” does not. Only in Macedo-Rumanian (including the Megleno-Rumanian variant thereof) is this meaning preserved, albeit as a secondary meaning, and in Friulian, where it has ousted all other meanings. Of course, it cannot be known whether *tumba* = “knoll,” “hillock” was current in these regions as early as the date of Egeria’s pilgrimage. See page 438 above for other Romance languages preserving Latin *tumba*; to those Logudoresic and Engadiniad could be added.

\(^{19}\) Also attested as names for this rock are the diminutives Tumbelania, Tumbalenia, and Tumbulana (Tatlock [above, n. 13] 88).

made to identify Egeria’s homeland philologically, that is, by tracing an affinity between Egeria’s Latin and the dialect of a particular region, but the results of this approach are generally agreed to have been unanimously inconclusive, and so they will not be considered here.

Five passages are usually adduced from the aforementioned sources, and all make reference to the geography of Europe and the Mediterranean, sometimes by name, but more often with excruciating ambiguity. To begin with places mentioned by name, in 18.2 Egeria tries to convey an impression of the swift current of the Euphrates by comparing it to a river with which her readers are presumably acquainted:

Ita enim decurrit [sc. flumen Eufrates] habens impetum sicut habet fluvius Rodanus, nisi quod adhuc maius est Eufrates.

Of course, even those who had never seen the Rhone might nevertheless have heard about its well-known momentum and velocity, which many ancient writers mention. But a casual reference to the relative size of the Euphrates as compared with the Rhone implies autopsy of the latter not only on the part of Egeria, who must have crossed it as she traveled east, but also of her correspondents remaining at home. Although familiarity with the Rhone does not require that Egeria and her sorores have lived beside it, it is at least more likely that they lived in Gaul than farther away from this river.

The following passage from Peter the Deacon’s Liber de locis sanctis is generally agreed to be based on the lost part of Egeria’s account of her visit to Mt. Sinai:

Mare autem Rubrum non ob hoc habet nomen, quia rubra est aqua aut turbulenta, sed adeo est limpidus et perlustris et frigidus ac si mare Oceanus. Ibi elesse nimmer saporis et suavitatis sunt. Omne autem genus piscium in eodem mare [sic] sunt tanti saporis ut pisces maris Italici.23

21 Most notably by K. Meister, “De itinerario Aetheriae abbatissae perperam nominis Silviae addicto,” RhM 64 (1909) 375–392. Meister concluded that Egeria was native to the neighborhood of Arles or Marseilles.

22 Citations in RE s.v. “Rhodanus,” 1 A 759 (1914), to which add Sen. Apoc. 7 (praerapidus), Luc. 1.433 (velox), and Sil. Pun. 4.61 (ferox). The putatively meager learning of Egeria and her correspondents does not rule out their acquaintance with a proverbial characteristic of a famous river.

23 CSEL 39:117 (Geyer). The Liber de locis sanctis can also be found in PL
It is not certain what body of water *mareItalicum* is meant to denote. What was *mare nostrum* to Italians would quite naturally have been the *mareItalicum* to others, and some have accordingly taken this name to refer to the entire Mediterranean. Others, however, have identified it only with that part of the Mediterranean lying off the south coast of Gaul, which Italians called the *mare Gallicum*. To refer to this body of water as the *mareItalicum* would have been more natural for a Gaul, to be sure, than, say, for a Spaniard, for whom it would have been the *mare Gallicum* no less than it was for an Italian. Thus, it is not known what body of water *mareItalicum* denotes; indeed, it cannot even be taken for granted that Egeria knew this name and used it. The most that can be said is that she had tasted Mediterranean fish, and this, in turn, has no bearing whatever on the question of her homeland. When Egeria and her *sorores* dined on fish from the Mediterranean they could have done so as visitors to those shores no less than as residents somewhere along them. Unfortunately, in the same passage, the nature of the reference to the Atlantic favors neither alternative. A native of the sunny South would have been no less disposed to call the Atlantic *fregidus* than would someone living on the northwest coast of Gaul.

So much for inferences. In 19.5 the bishop of Edessa refers directly to Egeria’s provenance:

> Quoniam video te, filia, gratia religionis tam magnum laborem tibi imposuisse ut de extremis porro terris venires ad haec loca . . .

Considered by itself, this need not be taken as literal truth. By the standards of the *Itinerarium Egeriae*, the bishop’s words of welcome are formal and grammatically complex, and hence, if *de extremis porro terris* were nothing more than rhetorical exaggeration, that would be

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24 The adjective *magnus*, however, is not necessarily symptomatic of this formality. To be sure, Egeria uses *magnus* only 4 times, but *grandis* 21 times, and thus her language reflects the ouster of *magnus* by *grandis* in Vulgar Latin. Nevertheless, in all but one of its four occurrences, *magnus* is combined with *tam*, which with *grandis* occurs only once (adjectival *tantis* occurs 13 times). In Egeria’s Latin, therefore, *tam magnus* already presents the appearance of the fixed expression from which evolved Spanish *tamaño*, Catalan *tamany*, Portuguese *tamanho*, etc. See Gabriel Sanders, “Egéria, Saint Jérôme et la Bible,” in *Corona gratiarum* (above, n. 2) 1.193–194 and the references cited there.
consistent with the bishop’s penchant for grandiloquence. At the beginning of his letter, Valerius—whose language, incidentally, is downright euphuistic compared to the bishop’s—repeats the substance of the bishop’s words thus:

Eadem beatissima sanctimonialis . . . inmensum totius orbis arripuit iter.25

Toward the end of his letter, however, Valerius states unambiguously that Egeria was native to the Atlantic coast. The relevant sentence (from chapter 5) reads as follows:

Quae, extremo occidui maris Oceani litore exorta, Orienti facta est cognita.

The bishop of Edessa, then, did not exaggerate the remoteness of Egeria’s homeland. She had in fact made “an immense journey over the whole world,” traveling to the Holy Land “all the way from the most distant lands.” But on what “farthest shore of the western ocean” was Egeria’s homeland located? Many have pronounced Egeria native to Galicia in northwestern Spain, and, since Zacarias García Villada’s arguments to this effect enjoy wide acceptance even today,26 these arguments warrant review.

For Valerius and his contemporaries, it is claimed, extremum occidui maris Oceani litus and similar phrases had the status of technical expressions referring specifically and exclusively to Valerius’ Galician homeland.27 In the writings of Valerius, to be sure, there are three passages in which he refers to Galicia in terms similar to extremum occidui

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26 Recently, for example, in E. D. Hunt, *Holy Land Pilgrimage in the Later Roman Empire* (Oxford 1984) 163–164, where Egeria’s Galician origin is termed one of “two assumptions, now generally accepted.” Nevertheless, a healthy degree of scepticism is expressed by Díaz y Díaz (above, n. 25) 326 n. 8.

27 García Villada (above, n. 24) 389 (“elle [the phrase in question] a . . . une signification fixe et technique”).
maris Oceani litus. One of these passages occurs in the sentence with which the letter in praise of Egeria begins:

Itaque dum olim . . . huius occiduae plagae sera processione tandem refulsisset extremitas . . .

Another is found in Valerius’ life of St. Fructuosus:

Postquam antiqui mundi tenebras supernae veritatis nova inradiavit claritas . . . et huius occiduae plagae exigua perluceret extremitas. 28

The third occurs in a passage excerpted by St. Benedict of Aniane from a work of Valerius now lost:

Cum in ista ultimae extremitatis occiduae partis confinia . . . 29

If the nature of these citations proves anything about the specialization of extremum occidui maris Oceani litus, it is that this expression was not restricted to references to Galicia. So much is clear from the presence in all these passages of demonstrative híc or iste, indicating that Galicia was only one of several regions in the far West to which the phrase in question could apply. In other words, what points to Galicia is not the phrase itself, but rather the demonstrative, which would be otiose if extremum occidui maris Oceani litus per se signified Galicia.

Even if it is conceded, for the sake of argument, that for Valerius “the farthest shore of the western ocean” 30 could indicate only Galicia, three citations from a single author fall short of proving that the phrase denoted Galicia to others as well. In fact, from writers contemporary with Valerius, García Villada cannot cite a single instance of extremum occidui maris Oceani litus aut sim. applied to Galicia. Indeed, the following are the only parallels for this usage cited from writers of any

28 PL 87:459, where antiquas is read for antiqui.
29 Ibid. 87:420, 103:750.
30 If extremum litus here had its usual sense, “the edge of the shore” (as in Virg. G. 3.542, Livy 32.32.12, 32.35.7, etc.), its meaning would be “the edge of the West Coast” rather than “the westernmost coast.” For the latter see Tac. Agr. 10 (cited below) and the useful note ad loc. in R. M. Ogilvie and Ian Richmond, eds., Corneli Taciti De vita Agricultae (Oxford 1967) 171.
period, and all of these come from a single work, the *Chronicon* of Ida-
tius, written in Galicia in the 400s:

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{ut extremus plagae, ita extremus et vitae} \\
\text{intra extremam universi orbis}\textsuperscript{31} \text{Gallaeciam} \\
\text{Gallaeciam Vandalii occupant et Suevi, sitam in *extremitate Oceani maris occidua.*}\textsuperscript{32}
\end{align*}
\]

As García Villada emphasizes, Valerius’ contemporary, the Spaniard
Isidore, draws upon Idatius for geographical data relating to Spain, but
he nevertheless yields no reference to Galicia that is comparable to
*extremitum occidui maris Oceani litus.* And if parallels from *any* period
are admissible, then one cannot overlook such cases as the following, in
which a comparable phrase refers to a region other than Galicia:

Ab Oceani terrarumque ultimis oris (Livy 5.37.2, of Celts invading
from Gaul)

extremo iam litore (Tac. *Agr.* 10, of the northernmost coast of Bri-
tain)

de Oceani litore atque ultimis Galliarum finibus (Hieron. *Ep.* 121
*praef.*, of Apodemius traveling to the Holy Land from Gaul; the
correspondence between his name and the remoteness of his Gallic
home is stressed)

terra Morinorum situ orbis extrema, quam ... tundit Oceanus
(Paul. Nol. *Ep.* 18.4, of the Morini beside the English Channel; for
their proverbial remoteness cf. *extremique hominum Morini* in
Virg. *Aen.* 8.727)

\textsuperscript{31} Cf. Valerius’ *inmensum totius orbis iter* quoted above (446).

\textsuperscript{32} The three citations are from Idatius *Chronicon, praef.* 1 and 7 and chap. 49. Because
of a textual crux, however, the relevance of the third citation is questionable. The
manuscripts’ *sitam* was emended by Mommsen to *sita* (*Mon. Germ. Hist., Auct. Ant.* 11,
p. 18), which Alain Tranoy has adopted in his recent edition (Paris 1974). If *sita* is read,
the phrase *in extremitate Oceani maris occidua* refers, of course, not to Galicia as a
whole, but only to its litoral, controlled by the Sueves. See Maraval (above, n. 25) 21
n. 2.
ab ultima Hispania, id est ab Oceani litore (August. Ep. 166.2, of Orosius).

In sum, because Galicia is where it is, such phrases as *extremum occidui maris Oceani litus* can be expected to be used of that region as a matter of course, and especially by writers who are in some way connected with Galicia. Nevertheless, neither the literature of Valerius’ age nor that of earlier centuries gives any grounds for believing that the expression *extremum occidui maris Oceani litus*, divorced from any context, necessarily signifies Galicia. Indeed, compelling reasons prompt quite the opposite conclusion, that in the context in which it appears toward the end of Valerius’ letter, the expression is unlikely to denote Galicia. For example, even when Valerius’ periphrasis for Galicia appears in a different work altogether, that is, in his life of St. Fructuosus, it takes exactly the same form as at the beginning of his letter: *huius occiduae plagae extremitas*. It follows a fortiori, then, that if Valerius were in fact connecting Egeria with Galicia toward the end of a letter that begins with a reference to that region, he could be expected to use the expression *huius occiduae plagae extremitas*, and to use it verbatim. Conversely, the considerable discrepancy between this and the phrase referring to Egeria could in itself indicate that Egeria was not from Galicia. One particular of this discrepancy supports the same conclusion: Egeria’s homeland is a *litus*, but in all three of Valerius’ references to Galicia, this region is either a *pars* or a *plaga*. In short, Valerius chose the expression *extremum occidui maris Oceani litus* not because Egeria came from Galicia, but principally because he wanted to exploit the rhetorical effect of an antithesis between Egeria’s birth in the West (*extremo occidui maris Oceani litore exorta*) and her pilgrimage to the distant East (*Orienti facta est cognita*).

But an absolutely fatal objection was raised by García Villada himself.33 If *extremo occidui maris Oceani litore exorta* refers to Galicia, the homeland of both Valerius and the monks to whom he is writing, then the absence of *hoc* or *huius* is very difficult to explain. The cogency of this objection remains undiminished to this day. Also, as Meister observed,34 Valerius’ praise of Egeria is so extravagant that if

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33 (Above, n. 24) 388.
34 (Above, n. 21) 366.
she truly was native to his own and his correspondents’ obscure backwater, he would surely have made the most of that connection. Indeed, for Valerius it is difficult to imagine a more inviting topic. And then there is the matter of the tumbae in Egeria’s text. Whether these are taken to be tumulus graves or, rather, cone-shaped hills having the shape of such graves, neither alternative suits Galicia, since Spain as a whole is not among (or even near) those areas where tumulus graves are most common.35

It should now be apparent how tenuous is the thread of evidence linking Egeria with Galicia. Indeed, we have adduced several reasons for concluding that Galicia is likelier not to have been Egeria’s native land. Therefore, let us return to the question with which we began: how consistent is the vicinity of Mont St. Michel with the little that is known concerning Egeria’s homeland?

Certainly nothing rules out this locale. Not only could a pilgrim from the west coast of Normandy be said to have reached the Holy Land quite literally de extremis porro terris, but the remoteness of northern Gaul, and of Britain across the Channel, was proverbial throughout antiquity.36 Since Egeria was acquainted with the river Rhone and Mediterranean fish in the south of Gaul, she could well have lived in the north of the same province. The adjective frigidus is admirably suited to the waters of the English Channel, although the association of this quality with sea water in general37 prevents one from pressing this point very far. Finally, Valerius’ immensum totius orbis arripuit iter would apply equally well to a voyage to Jerusalem from either Normandy or Galicia. With the most precise statement that survives, however, concerning Egeria’s provenance—extremo occidui maris Oceani litore exorta—the vicinity of Mont St. Michel supplies a perfect match. Instead of creating a troublesome inconsistency with

35 See 438 above.

36 In Catullus, Virgil, and Horace alone, Britain and its inhabitants are called ultimi (Catull. 11.11–12, 29.4, 29.12, Hor. Carm. 1.35.29), remoti (ibid. 4.14.47), and penitus toto divisi orbe (Virg. Ecl. 1.66). For Gaul see the citations from Virgil, Livy, Jerome, and Paulinus of Nola given above (448).

37 The conventional association of frigidus with sea water is implicit in Plaut. Rud. 527 (which is apparently, however, the only attestation of frigidus applied to the sea): Neptune, es balineator frigidas. Quite a different matter is the association of ice with the sea, which is confined to northern tracts of ocean, e.g., in Varro Rust. 1.2.4, Pliny NH 4.104, Juv. 2.2, Amm. Marc. 31.2.1, Sulp. Dial. 1.26.2, and Prisc. Periheg. 287.
Egeria’s Norman Homeland

the words (pars and plaga) that Valerius elsewhere employs with reference to Galicia, litus applied to Mont St. Michel fits that locale exactly. It could be objected, to be sure, that the location of Mont St. Michel is as much northern as it is western, but, true though this may be in fact, a location in the far West would appear to have been commonly attributed to the place.38 Thus, in all three of the following passages from the Revelatio ecclesiae sancti Michaelis, the anonymous author mentions—and in one case stresses as significant—the western location of Mont St. Michel:

Inluminatis Christi gratia cunctis gentibus in orientalibus Romaniae partibus, accipe quibus sese indiciis manifestare idem beatissimus princeps civium supernorum voluerit praesuli occidentalium populorum39 (sect. 1)

Denique advertendum est quo mysterio locum mortalibus praeviderit in partibus occiduis ubi ex omni urbe confluit, veneranter angelicum imprecatura subsidium, religiosa multitudo fidelium (sect. 2)

Summi interea nuntii, repedantes, post multa itineris spatia, ad locum quo digressi fuerant, ipso die quo fabrica completa est in monte iam dicto in occiduis partibus, quasi novum ingressi sunt orbem, quem primum veprium densitate reliquerant plenum (sect. 9).

Since it is the function of an incipit to summarize the essentials of the text to follow, the incipit to the Revelatio in Avranches 21140 also implies the importance of the western site of Mont St. Michel:

Incipit revelatio ecclesiae santi [sic] Michaelis archangeli in monte qui dicitur tumba, in occiduis partibus. . . .

38 The same is true of Britain across the Channel, for which see n. 42 below.
39 This implied contrast between the cults of St. Michael at Monte Sant’Angelo and Mont St. Michel resembles the antithesis in Valerius’ letter between Egeria’s western provenance and her eastern destination.
40 See n. 16 above.
We may assert, therefore, that Egeria’s use of *tymbae* in 13.3 points to a provenance that matches perfectly Valerius’ description of the site of her native land.

It remains to consider how plausible it is in historical terms to suppose that Egeria was native to the vicinity of Mont St. Michel. Even if, by the late 300s, the Holy Land was already receiving Christian pilgrims from Gaul, the question remains whether so remote a region as the Cotentin peninsula was yet sufficiently Christianized to have yielded pilgrims of its own. Now it is clear from many contemporary sources that in the period when Egeria undertook her voyage Gallic Christians were already embarking for the Holy Land in large numbers. Indeed, in the letter (Hieron. *Ep.* 46) in which the Roman aristocrat Paula and her daughter Eustochia list in detail the countries of origin of the pilgrims then to be seen in Palestine, Gaul is one of only two regions of Europe that are mentioned, the other being Britain. Spain is conspicuous by its absence. In this letter, written from Bethlehem, probably in 392/3, the relevant passage (sect. 10) reads as follows:

Nec hoc dicimus quo renuamus regnum Dei intra nos esse, et sanctos viros etiam in ceteris esse regionibus, sed quo hoc asderamus vel maxime, eos qui in toto orbe sunt primi hic pariter congregari. Ad quae nos loca non ut primae sed ut extremae venimus, ut primos in eis omnium gentium cerneremus. Certe flos quidam et pretiosissimus lapis inter ecclesiastica ornementa monachorum et virginum chorus est. Quicumque in Gallia fuerit primus hic prosperat. Divisus ab orbe nostro, Britannus, si in religione processerit, occiduo sole dimisso, quaerit locum fama sibi tantum et scripturarum relatione cognitum. Quid referamus Armenios, quid Persas, quid Indiae et Aethiopum populos isamque iuxta Aegyptum fertilem monachorum, Pontum et Cappadociam, Syriae Coelen et Mesopotamiam cunctaque Orientis examina?

From other sources it is possible to identify some of the faces in the crowd of Gallic pilgrims. The earliest surviving diary of a pilgrimage to the Holy Land, the so-called *Itinerarium Burdigalense*, was written by an anonymous pilgrim who traveled overland from Bordeaux in 333. Later in the century, another Gaul, Justus, bishop of Lyons, resigned his office, sailed from Marseilles to Egypt, and took up an
ascetic’s life in the desert. Jerome, after settling in Bethlehem in 385, received two Gallic pilgrims who can still be identified. One was a certain Apodemius, who came de Oceani litore atque ultimis Galliarum finibus. The other was Postumianus, a friend of Sulpicius Severus who spent six months with Jerome and, in all, three years in the Orient. In his first Dialogue, written in 404, Severus preserves his friend’s account of his often fantastic experiences in the East.

The identification of specific Gallic pilgrims thus confirms what the letter of Paula and Eustochia implies, that at the time of Egeria’s voyage no western province surpassed Gaul as a source of pilgrims going to the Holy Land. For Egeria herself, therefore, no provenance in the West is more plausible than Gaul. But what of the specific region of Gaul to which we have proposed to trace her origin? Had Christianity, by the late 300s, penetrated far enough into the Gallic hinterland for a pilgrim like Egeria to have emerged from so remote a region as the Norman coast near Mont St. Michel?

In the Middle Ages, the introduction of Christianity into Gaul became the subject of legends that were subsequently mistaken for true history. Thus, according to a tale invented and promulgated by the monks of the abbey of Vézelay in Burgundy, the new faith was brought to Provence in the first century by Martha, Mary Magdalene, and Lazarus, of whom the last, it was said, became bishop of Marseilles. This legend, though apocryphal, is yet not wholly at variance with the truth, for in fact there were Christians in Gaul at an early date, and probably first in Marseilles, which was no less accessible to foreign cults than it was to foreign cargo. Nevertheless, except for a grave marker from Marseilles that may commemorate the martyrdom of two Christians ca. 175, Lyons yields the earliest concrete evidence of Christians living in Gaul. There a group of Anatolian Greeks, which included Irenaeus, established a Christian cadre sometime in the second

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42 Above, 448. The phrase is reminiscent of Valerius’ choice of words concerning Egeria, extremo occidui maris Oceani litore exorta. It is also noteworthy that in the passage from the forty-sixth letter Britain is located in the far West (occiduo sole dimisso), as it is in Catullus (29.12: in ultima Occidentis insula). Thus, Valerius’ words would not exclude a British origin for Egeria.
half of the 100s. In 177 this small community was devastated by an edict of Marcus Aurelius condemning to death its leader, St. Pothenus, and forty of its members. Escaping this carnage, Valerian and Marcellus fled to Tournus and Chalon-sur-Saône respectively, but later they too were martyred for proselytizing. Benignus, another refugee from Lyons, settled in Autun, accompanied by Andochus and Thyrsus. He too was martyred, but not before converting St. Symphorian, the celebrated martyr of Autun. His brothers in the faith, Andochus and Thyrsus, were martyred at Saulieu.

Confined at first to Provence and the Rhone valley, Christianity penetrated farther into Gaul in the next century. Between the years 236 and 250 Pope Fabian dispatched missionaries to Narbonne, Béziers, Arles, Toulouse, Limoges, Tours, Clermont, and Paris. By 250 there were bishops in Paris, Rheims, Vienne, and Tours, and perhaps elsewhere. In the late 200s and early 300s, Christians were martyred at Toulouse, Agen, Arles, Vienne, and Paris (St. Denis, one of the missionaries sent by Pope Fabian), and, near Paris, at Soissons, Beauvais, Amiens, and Vermand. In the West, Donatian and Rogatian were martyred at Nantes, and in Bordeaux, during the same period, Christians were meeting on the site where the church of St. Stephen’s was later built.

Until 313, when the Edict of Milan decreed an end to the persecution of Christians, Christianity in Gaul was confined to the large cities. The countryside was still mostly pagan, and so it remained until, beginning in 375, St. Martin undertook to eradicate paganism and establish the Church wherever his travels took him. Unfortunately, wide-ranging though these travels were, Sulpicius Severus, his contemporary and biographer, has little to say about the precise locales of St. Martin’s missionary work. It would be helpful to know, of course, whether Martin or his disciples ever reached the neighborhood of Mont St. Michel. In fact, however, it is not even known whether they reached northern Gaul at all, though some infer that they did from the legend that while en route through Paris, the saint cured a leper with his kiss. Even less is known about the missions of Victricius, who is perhaps a likelier candidate than St. Martin for the honor of having Christianized the Cotentin peninsula. Not only was he bishop of Rouen, the see of the archdiocese that included the Cotentin, but in the eighteenth letter of Paulinus of Nola, written in 398 or 400, he is credited with success-
ful missions in the land of the neighboring Morini, *situ orbis extrema, quam . . . tundit Oceanus.*

Obscure though the circumstances of their conversion must remain, Christians were beyond all doubt living near Mont St. Michel by the turn of the fifth century. This is proved by the list of Gallic episcopal sees known as the *Notitia Galliarum,* which dates to the first few years of the 400s. Among seven episcopal cities that this document assigns to Lugdunensis Secunda, one, Abrincatum (modern Avranches), lies only eight miles distant from Mont St. Michel. Indeed, it is closer to The Mount than any other city worthy of the name. If Abrincatum had its own bishop by 400, this is tantamount to proof that its population already included Christians by the time, presumably some two decades earlier, when Egeria embarked on her travels. In a city, moreover, that afforded fine prospects of Mount Tumba rising in the distance, any resident would have known from personal acquaintance what Egeria had in mind when she compared the hill at Sedima to a large *tumba.*

In summary, Egeria uses the noun *tumba* in a sense that implies a provenance on the northwestern coast of Gaul. This conclusion corresponds in every detail with the little that is known about her homeland. If she came, moreover, from the vicinity of Mont St. Michel in particular, that would be consistent with the presence of a bishop in Avranches as of 400 or shortly thereafter. Writing perhaps in that very year, Paulinus of Nola refers to the nearby land of the Morini as *situ orbis extrema, quam . . . tundit Oceanus.* In their letter to Marcella of 392/3, Paula and Eustochia write of pilgrims leaving Britain across the Channel *occiduo sole dimisso.* It would hardly be surprising, then, if Valerius had the Cotentin peninsula in mind when he wrote that Egeria was *extremo occidui maris Oceani litore exorta.* Indeed, when

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44 Above, 448. See E. A. Thompson, “Christianity and the Northern Barbarians,” in *Paganism and Christianity in the Fourth Century,* ed. Arnaldo Momigliano (Oxford 1963) 66 and the sources cited in n. 1. In the *Notitia Galliarum* of the early 400s the *civitas Morinorum* (modern Thérouanne) is listed as one of twelve episcopal cities in Belgica Secunda.

45 For Abrincatum see sec. 2.4 of the *Notitia Galliarum.* At Mont St. Michel itself the first monks did not appear until ca. 550–575, when two monastic chapels were founded, one at the base and the other at the summit, for the use of monks on retreat from the monastery at Astériaic. For a reconstruction of the earliest history of the monastery at The Mount, see Dom Jacques Hourlier, “Le Mont Saint-Michel avant 966,” in Laporte (above, n. 17) 13–28.
Jerome received Apodemius _de Oceani litore atque ultimis Galliarum finibus_, it could be that this pilgrim with the significant name had almost literally followed in Egeria’s footsteps.46

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46 While preparing this article for the typesetter, I learned Hagith Sivan’s “Who Was Egeria? Piety and Pilgrimage in the Age of Gratian,” _HThR_ 81 (1988) 39–72. With Professor Sivan, to whose kindness I owe a copy of the page proofs of her article, I find myself in agreement on these particular points: (1) Egeria’s familiarity with the Rhone makes Gaul a likelier provenance than Spain; (2) the words of the bishop of Edessa need not be taken at face value; (3) nothing in Valerius’ letter connects Egeria with Galicia; (4) the location of Egeria’s homeland must harmonize with what is known about the spread of Christianity in Europe as of 400. Not to mention the coincidence of two studies of the same question appearing under the same university’s imprint in the same year, it is remarkable (and perhaps significant) that similar lines of reasoning have independently brought Professor Sivan and me to the same general conclusions.