

‘Peregrinatio’ as Spiritual Formation in the Letters of Augustine

Introduction

In late antiquity, travel was becoming more frequent than in any preceding period of classical antiquity. Alongside the increasingly complex processes of the political, military, and civil system, those staffs were often summoned by their senior colleagues to councils and assemblies. The increase in travel involves, of course, the Church. Having ministered to the people in Hippo Regius as a Christian bishop of the ecclesiastical province of Numidia, Augustine was obliged to express an interest in the rural hinterland that was separated far from the Mediterranean coast by the high plains and valleys and often travelled to the synods and councils in Carthage and Numidia. Augustine himself was averse to travelling, with which he frequently linked the image of wet and stormy weather and the burden of indefinite labour. However, Augustine resigned himself to travelling in his middle ages, partly because sometimes he planned to travel with his old friends to distant cities. Those journeys could renew his friendships during long conversations.

Christian pilgrimage had been widespread in the later fourth century. Although this interest in pilgrim was not to be compared with the devotional practices in the late Middle Ages, the pilgrimage phenomena had already existed over the generations and captured many in Christian societies. We find, for example, a distinct increase of pilgrims from North Africa in the fourth and fifth centuries. Some of those who set for Palestine were close to Augustine. Hence, it is quite understandable to detect a considerable number of the terms as *peregrinatio* and *peregrinor* in Augustine’s writings. Since the *peregrinatio*—the word for living abroad and travelling about—came to denote the ‘pilgrimage’, some scholars naturally assume that when they are told a journey in late-antique Christian texts, it must be a ‘pilgrimage’. However, if some interpreters have already seen that Augustine makes extensive use of those terms in his major writings, it would be misleading, I suppose, to adopt such translation systematically. In a recent article¹, Gillian Clark claims that Augustine’s use of *peregrinatio* would make explicit the meaning of feeling foreign and ‘being away from where one wants to be’². Moreover, a *peregrinus* is not a pilgrim travelling purposefully to their heavenly Jerusalem, but someone wandering away from where one belongs. Here the purpose of this paper is to understand of the use that Augustine makes of these terms. Although his concern would be prominent in those main works, I shall focus on the terminological varieties in his

1. ‘Pilgrims and Foreigners: Augustine on Travelling Home’, Ellis, Linda and Frank L. Kidner (eds.), *Travel, Communication and Geography in Late Antiquity: Sacred and Profane* (Hants, Eng., 2004) 149–158.

2. Clark, ‘Pilgrims and Foreigners’, 149.

letters. Then, I shall indicate how Augustine comes, over some forty years in which he wrote many letters, to connect more and more of his essential idea to it.

1. Mutability and Travelling

Augustine's earliest use of these words is *Letter 2*. Augustine is showing as its starting point for philosophical inquiry that nothing pertaining to the corporeal senses exists. 'The true and divine philosophy'³ admonishes the mind to control its desire for these things, 'in order that, ... it may by its whole self be borne toward and ardently desire those things, that always exist without change and are not pleasing because of a transient beauty'⁴. The different desires are distinguished by their objects, the most disastrous kind being where temporal reality is the object of corporeal senses. Augustine uses the phrase such as 'transient beauty' in a definite way as to the mutability of these objects. Although the word *peregrinus*, namely, the locative meaning of *ager* compounded with the prefix *per* denoting the spatial 'through', signifies something which is abroad and away from the place it belongs, the point he is making in this passage would seem a problematic tension of the mind between engagement and disengagement with this world of temporal things. Hence, in the case of this letter, the classical viewpoint turns to his understanding of what is passing away in time but not in place. As we shall see, this interpretation would lie beneath his view of sojourning on earth.

Instances revealing how Augustine refers to those locative languages would be taken from some of his letters. In *Letter 29* addressed to Alypius, Augustine writes how he carefully preached against the practice of the *laetitia*, which took place on the feast of St. Leonitus of Hippo, because the African custom of banquets for the dead has allowed his congregation to indulge in excess of drunkenness and wantonness. He also considers the case of St. Peter's in Rome, in which, despite the papal ban on funeral banquet frequently renewed, there is a crowd of 'travelers, when they first arrive there, retain that custom with more insistence, the more ignorant they are'⁵. So too, in *Letter 54*, Augustine calls to mind Ambrose's advice for Monica, who was perplexed by the fact that her habit of fasting on Saturdays was not followed in the Milanese church⁶. As he thought back on Ambrose's guidance of respecting the local custom, Augustine tends to confirm a group of like-minded people who finally think nothing correct except what

3. Aug. *Ep.* 2; WSA 2.1, tr. Roland Teske (2001) 17: 'vera et divina philosophia'.

4. Aug. *Ep.* 2; WSA 2.1, tr. R. Teske (2001) 17: 'ut se toto animus, etiam dum hoc corpus agit, in ea quae semper eiusdem modi sunt, nec peregrino pulchro placent, feratur atque aestuet'.

5. Aug. *Ep.* 29.10; WSA 2.1, tr. R. Teske (2001) 99: 'peregrinis praesertim, qui novi subinde veniunt tanto violentius, quanto inscitius illam consuetudinem retinentibus'.

6. Aug. *Ep.* 54.2.3.

each of them does, although ‘he has become more learned the further he is from home in his travels’⁷.

Such is the way Augustine describes the travellers as those apart from their homes facing unfamiliar surroundings. There are some that he considers a positive contribution to knowledge with the travels, but there is another element in them. Although Augustine asserts the existence of someone who was leaving his country⁸ or experienced in travelling⁹ and of the sort of ‘utterly foreign’ problems his correspondent would not encounter in his native land¹⁰, some avoidance does remain in his view. Indeed, Augustine’s statement of these words was always negative, focussing on hardship and isolation. His attitude is evident from the tone of a letter in which Augustine fully understands the need to comfort his old friend in his ‘living abroad and laboring in the affairs of the state’¹¹. Furthermore, a so-called Divjak Letter 20* also describes a young bishop’s travel as ‘destitute’, whom she welcomed and helped ease with her pious goodness¹². Indeed, the fact that Augustine regards the travel and aliens in terms of distress and restlessness, inferior to various modes of life which commonly passes as daily life, indicates that he is adding another dimension to those locative usages as the framework for his view.

2. *Sojourning and Labouring*

But, what did he consider to be its essential characteristics? Most basically, the sustained use of these terms in his letters, not even so much as the space that Augustine gives them in his major writings, attests that these expressions would be one of his most effective schemes for clarifying the idea of wandering as a metaphor for the pious life. Although he uses these terms, he means principally the sojourning believers, who are residing now in a foreign country and will later dwell in their proper abode, Augustine feels no need to emphasise on the returning place where they belong. In *Letter 55*, while explaining how the Sabbath symbolises our eternal rest in heaven, Augustine writes, ‘that first life that is restored to those returning from exile and receiving their original robe is

7. Aug. *Ep.* 54.2.3; WSA 2.1 tr. R. Teske (2001) 211: ‘alibi vidit et peregrinatione sua quo remotiorem a suis, eo doctiorem se factum putans’.

8. Aug. *Ep.* 31.7.

9. Aug. *Ep.* 166.1.2.

10. Aug. *Ep.* 118.2.9.

11. Aug. *Ep.* 151.1; WSA 2.2, tr. R. Teske (2003) 381: ‘tantum virum in peregrinis positum, curisque publicis laborantem’.

12. Aug. *Ep.* 20*.2.

symbolized by the first day of the week.¹³ The theme of returning to the native home in heaven occurs again in *Letter 187* when Augustine writes, ‘to whom we shall be gathered and made equal when, after the end of our pilgrimage, we receive what God has promised!’¹⁴. Here Augustine reveals a clear preference for what the wanderers would receive after their *peregrinatio*.

In *Letter 55*, Augustine writes quite clearly of both the aspect of our present life and our expectations for life to come:

For we have now been grasped by God in fear through faith, but we shall then grasp him in love through vision. *For, as long as we are in the body, we are away from the Lord. We now, after all, walk by faith, not by vision.*¹⁵

This view of the relation between being resident in the body and being away from God is a fundamental aspect of Augustine’s view of sojourning in this world. When we look at some letters where he discussed this essential text (2 Corinthians), it is clear that it is often connected with other Biblical texts such as 1—Paul’s acknowledgement that he has not yet grasped God at Philippians, 2—Christ’s promise of the newness of life at Romans and 2 Peter, and 3—the direct vision of God as the ultimate goal of the Christian identity at 1 Corinthians, along with Matthew. Moreover, in *Letter 130* to Proba, in which Augustine asserts that ‘while we walk by faith and not by vision’¹⁶ the Christian soul ought to devote itself to pray, he writes that the soul ought to regard itself destitute in this world, wandering away from the Lord¹⁷, and that ‘it should learn to turn the eye of faith to the words of the divine and holy scriptures’¹⁸. So too, those who are sojourning do indeed participate in the life of this world: they use the goods of this earthly life, for they are gifts from God. This also emerges from images often used by Augustine. The current life and the life to come are sharply contrasted as trouble and calm, toil and rest, thirsty and satiety, darkness and day-star. The simple instruction derived from these passages that the *peregrinus* should walk by faith, thus labouring in this world, has shown

13. Aug. *Ep.* 55.9.17; WSA 2.1, tr. R. Teske (2001) 224: ‘Illa autem vita prima, quae de peregrinatione redeuntibus, et primam stolam accipientibus redditur, per unam sabbati, quem diem dominicum dicimus, figuratur’.

14. Aug. *Ep.* 187.5.16; WSA 2.3, tr. R. Teske (2004) 238: ‘quibus aggregandi et coaequandi sumus, cum, finita peregrinatione, quod promissum est sumpserimus!’.

15. Aug. *Ep.* 55.14.26; WSA 2.1, tr. R. Teske (2001) 229: ‘Apprehensi enim sumus modo in timore per fidem, tunc autem apprehendemus in caritate per speciem. *Quandiu enim sumus in corpore, peregrinamur a Domino: per fidem enim ambulamus, non per speciem*’.

16. Aug. *Ep.* 130.2.5.

17. Aug. *Ep.* 130.14.30.

18. Aug. *Ep.* 130.2.5; WSA 2.2, tr. R. Teske (2003) 186: ‘et Scripturarum divinarum sanctorumque sermoni discat tamquam lucernae in obscuro loco positae fidei oculum intendere’.

us a clear direction in his letters. What Augustine stresses together with these testimonies is that the *peregrinus* would be the temporal and even perishing being. His stay is only temporary. Therefore, not only their expectation of divine vision should be emphasised, but also the idea of labouring on earth. The path to the heavenly home is long and thorny. So too, a Christian's life ought to be trained in travelling.

With regard to his thought of the pilgrim church, *Letter 55* is the only reference that makes concrete what the images Augustine signifies. He uses the Colossians and Ecclesiasticus texts to connect the theme of the eschatological community as the true *ecclesia* with still living like a pilgrim, thus expecting the final fulfilment of the promises made to it. The correlation between the meaning of the church's continuity and its mortality is made explicit in his exposition of the Ecclesiasticus, in which Augustine confirms that a passage, '*the fool is changed like the moon*'¹⁹ refers to Adam in whom all have sinned, thus the universal church is 'in pain and labor on a journey away from that Jerusalem'²⁰. And it is 'found on the pilgrimage of mortality'²¹, and 'groans amid many injustices'²². The church is a provisional institution, so too, something essentially of the present notwithstanding, it 'awaits at the end of the world what has already been revealed in the body of Christ'²³. For Christ's body is the church. It is expected to belong to the future, in which the final consummation of God's intention will be realised.

Concluding Remarks

In this paper, I have examined Augustine's use of the *peregrinatio* and *peregrinus* in his letters. We have seen that his use falls into three sets of expressions. First, whatever is said of bodily things, that is, concerning the objects of corporeal senses, is said of temporal things according to its mutability, signifies the transient, thus a temporal mode of being. Second, these words indicate the travelling and the unfamiliar surroundings which someone apart from home encounters. We have seen that, despite his seeming reconciliation with travel, they are interpreted clearly as the representation of the destitute and instability. And third, we turned to the figurative usage and saw that it has a stronger sense of sojourning on earth, thus labouring between the travel, or of not merely awaiting for the future fulfilment, but struggling with temporal concerns, in the

19. Aug. *Ep.* 55.5.8; WSA 2.1, tr. R. Teske (2001) 219: '*stuitus autem sicut luna mutatur*'.

20. Aug. *Ep.* 55.6.10; WSA 2.1, tr. R. Teske (2001) 221: '*in ista mortalitate ab illa Ierusalem, cuius cives sancti Angeli sunt, in aerumnis et laboribus peregrinatur*'.

21. Aug. *Ep.* 55.2.3; WSA 2.1, tr. R. Teske (2001) 217: '*in peregrinatione mortalitatis inventa est*'.

22. Aug. *Ep.* 55.6.10; WSA 2.1, tr. R. Teske (2001) 221: '*obscura videtur Ecclesia in tempore peregrinationis suae, inter multas iniquitates gemens*'.

23. Aug. *Ep.* 55.2.3; WSA 2.1, tr. R. Teske (2001) 217: '*Hoc igitur universa Ecclesia, ... exspectat in fine saeculi quod in Domini nostri Iesu Christi corpore praemonstratum est*'.

case of the pilgrim church. It seems highly likely that his facile transition from its spatial aspect to the temporal path through labouring was facilitated by his contact with the Pauline epistles in 390's, in which a total reliance on human power in the accomplishing of the progressive ascent came to be replaced by the decisive stress laid on God's initiative in grace. Augustine would unfold the deep awareness of the human condition consequent on Adam's fall, which does not allow for the achievement of human striving for final repose. Thus, although the idea of ascent has disappeared, Augustine never stopped seeing human life as earthly labouring towards the heavenly *patria*, in which human yearning will be satisfied.

It can thus be seen how in Augustine's letters travel plainly categorised as a pilgrimage came to be notably silenced with hardly an exception rather than being highly advocated for his clergy or congregation. In *Letter 78*, addressed to the church in Hippo, Augustine discussed a dispute between the priest Boniface and other clerics. Since Augustine refused to mediate between their conflicting stories, he proposed that two men 'go to a holy place', namely the shrine of St. Felix of Nola, where 'awesome acts of God might more readily disclose the bad conscience of anyone'.²⁴ Although his advice was astonishing, because he realises that the tomb of a martyr serves as an earthly place of divine judgement, Augustine immediately passes on to his position, saying that 'God is, of course, everywhere, and he who created all things is not contained or enclosed by any place'²⁵. And his brief reference to Boniface's *peregrinatio* as a pilgrimage directs to the fact only to the extent that he is described as full of humility, not taking letters on his *peregrinatio* to ask for respect due to his clerical status. Hence, though his use has multiple meanings, Augustine's point was not that the *peregrinatio* was a purposeful journey towards the place wherever a traveller wants to be, but that someone wandering would be trained through it, expecting the incalculable event of returning, in short, the work of God.

24. Aug. *Ep.* 78.1.3; WSA 2.1, tr. R. Teske (2001) 305: 'ubi terribiora opera Dei non sanam cuiuscumque conscientiam multo facilius aperirent'.

25. Aug. *Ep.* 78.1.3; WSA 2.1, tr. R. Teske (2001) 305: 'Ubique quidem Deus est, et nullo continetur vel includitur loco qui condidit omnia'.