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Moving bodies and making place: rethinking pilgrimage in early Roman Latium

A little over a decade ago it was claimed that pilgrimage ‘seems to play a smaller part in Roman religion than in Greek’ (Elsner and Rutherford 2005, p. 24). Since then, studies of ancient pilgrimage have continued to expand and develop in new directions, broadening our knowledge of particular instances of pilgrimage, the locations involved, the journeys undertaken by individuals and groups, and the types of evidence that can be used to identify these. Nevertheless Roman Italy remains remarkably absent from these recent analyses, despite the existence of votive dedications attesting to the periodic presence of large numbers of people at a range of urban and non-urban sanctuaries. In this paper I will suggest that it is time to re-assess our understandings of ancient pilgrimage and its potential role in producing Roman religious knowledge and experience. Rather than attempting to isolate pilgrimage as a ‘special’ or ‘once-in-a-lifetime’ activity that was separate from ordinary lived religious practices, I will draw on two examples from Latium – the cult of Diana Nemorensis at Nemi, and the ritualised activities that took place in a cave just outside Lanuvium – to investigate what happens to our understandings of lived religion and religious place if we accept that essential pilgrimage behaviours such as mobility were in fact deeply embedded within traditional religious activities.

