

An Introduction to the Pilgrim Route

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Santiago de Compostela is located in the extreme north-west of Spain near Iria Flavia, the ancient capital of Galicia. It became arguably the third most important place of pilgrimage in medieval Christendom after the Holy Land and Rome. In the 11th and 12th centuries thousands of pilgrims took the route to Santiago stopping at Saints' shrines along the way. The pilgrim's guide in the Codex of Callixtus gives four routes from the north-east, centre and north-west of France. These became two, one passing through the Pyrenees at Roncesvalles and the other at Somport. They converged at Puente la Reina and then a single route, the Camino Francés flowed westward through Logroño, Santo Domingo de la Calzada, Belorado, Burgos, León, Astorga, Ponferrada, Villafranca and Mellid to Santiago.

Pilgrims journeyed this route for a variety of reasons. Many devout travellers were driven to the shrines of their saintly heroes and heroines by a desire to expiate sin, to beg favours, to give thanks for blessings or deliverance from danger, or in search of a cure for some malady. Some were sent on pilgrimage by ecclesiastical courts and others seemed motivated by the desire for adventure. Many walked for six months, clothed only in a pilgrim's cloak and hat with an open pouch to prove their willing acceptance of deprivation. They carried only a gourd and a staff to protect them. Others, such as those described by Chaucer, travelled with suites of servants. All shared a belief in the power of saints to act from beyond the grave to influence events of this world through their relics, for in the Middle Ages people perceived palpable links between the realm of the spirit and the terrestrial world.

Relics were housed in precious reliquaries within great churches. They were collected by Emperors and kings and by churchmen whose shrines would thus attract pilgrims and wealth. These shrines were decorated with rich sculptural programs telling the stories of Christ and the saints, depicting moral and allegorical tales, or terrifying pilgrims with Apocalyptic visions. Power issued from controlling a relic and its availability. Ecclesiastical and secular leaders monopolised these potent objects in order to control and manipulate subject populations. The magnificent churches built to shelter these holy possessions proclaimed not only their mystical power but also the hegemony of those who monopolised them. It is for these and other reasons that France and Spain possess some of the most beautiful edifices in Christendom with a wealth of sculptures, stained glass, and precious objects associated with pilgrimage. Relics also protected their devotees from, and assisted them against, their enemies.

In 711 Arabs and Berbers had invaded the Iberian Peninsula. In 756 the Emirate of Córdoba was established, controlling most of what are now Spain and Portugal. By the 9th century a number of tiny Christian kingdoms in the far north of Iberia were poised to begin a slow, faltering succession of campaigns of conquest which culminated in the taking of Granada by Ferdinand of Aragón and Isabella of Castile in 1492. During this long history of Christian territorial acquisition a martial spirit developed amongst Spaniards which drew strength from the person of St James the Greater whose body was purported to have been borne by angels to Galicia soon after he was executed by Herod. This story of spiritual transfer emerged fortuitously at that moment in their early histories when Aragón, Navarre and León had need of a spiritual protagonist against the Muslim hegemony. King Alfonso III (the Great) built a basilica over the remains of the Saint in 896 and it became one of the three great pilgrimage centres of the Middle Ages under King Alfonso VI (1072 - 1109).

St James was first depicted as a pilgrim but, after appearing above the Christian armies during important

battles, came to be pictured as a medieval knight, 'matamoros' - 'slayer of Moors'. The development of pilgrimage to Santiago is therefore intimately inter-twined with that of the struggle for hegemony in Iberia. Promulgation of pilgrimage generated wealth for the small Iberian monarchies and drew more powerful nations like France into their theatre of war. It attracted the attention of powerful Orders such as Cluny and the Cistercians. French pilgrims were persuaded to remain in Iberia and so populated newly won territories, making them economically viable and defensible.

This tour examines the architecture, sculpture, painting and culture of the four major pilgrim routes through France to Santiago de Compostela. It explores the development of the great pilgrim churches and their sculptural programs, as well as a myriad other, smaller monuments. We stay in Paradores in Santo Domingo de la Calzada, León and Santiago, three of the most magnificent hospices of the pilgrim route, and visit shrines, hermitages and monasteries, pilgrim towns and their hospices and inns, bridges, pilgrim crosses, market places, as well as important museums. We chronicle the story of pilgrimage, analyse the history of monastic orders and medieval monarchies and explore the literary culture which developed on the Camino de Santiago. We shall discover the geography of pilgrimage - a landscape rich in mystical meaning - of French valleys and Spanish mesetas, isolated shrines and picturesque mountain passes which once terrified pilgrims. In the sculpture and stained glass of French and Spanish churches we read the stories of Christ and the Saints, salvation and damnation in images which are majestic, realistic or ethereal. At Vézelay, Christ is spiritual and otherworldly; at Autun, terrifying; at Chartres, serene; at Moissac, regal; at Conques palpable and at Compostela, welcoming. We follow the restless medieval imagination away from central sculptural themes to byways inhabited by mermaids, fabulous beasts and demons. We trace how the Apostle James emerged as a poor pilgrim with staff, pouch, tunic, gourd and a hat pinned up by his symbol, a shell, and his transformation into a medieval knight slaying Moors when pilgrimage became entangled with the "crusade" against Islam in Spain. Our study of the genesis of pilgrimage is set against an investigation of the struggles between Islam and Christianity for hegemony in Iberia and the use of the person of St James as Christian protagonist.

