CHRISTIAN PILGRIMAGE DURING THE MIDDLE AGES

The Christian idea of pilgrimage was a journey to a holy place undertaken out of motives of devotion or as an act of penance or thanksgiving. The long tradition of pilgrimages to the Holy Land was instrumental in highlighting the importance of Jerusalem as the main goal of the Crusades from 1095 onward.

Origins of Pilgrimage

The sources of Christian pilgrimage lay in both Jewish and pagan practices of pilgrimage. Another source was the idea that the follower of Christ is a wanderer in this world, for whom life on earth is an unavoidable but distasteful preparation for the real life in heaven. This idea, rooted in the New Testament teachings of Christ and Saint Paul (Hebrews, 11:13–16, 13:14), was a part of the influential theme of "contempt for the world" (Lat. contemptus mundi) and accounted for the word "pilgrim" (from Lat. peregrinus, meaning "stranger" or "foreigner"). It was applied to believers who left all worldly affairs behind them to pursue their goal, ultimately the kingdom of heaven, thus becoming strangers to the material preoccupations of their environment.

Pilgrimage was undertaken as a pious deed, the pilgrim being a stranger to his family and social status for the duration of his journey. On his way he wore simple clothes, stayed at monasteries, and ate the food of the poor.

This idea inspired many ascetics in the early Middle Ages to commit themselves to a life of aimless and painful wanderings in an attempt to come closer to Christ. This kind of life was particularly popular among the Irish saints, missionaries, and scholars of the sixth and seventh centuries, such as Columbanus and Fursey.

An additional contributing factor was the cult of relics. From the second century CE, Christians venerated the physical remains of saints to show reverence for them, to gain their support, or out of the belief that the relics themselves retained healing powers.

From the 12th century, penitential pilgrimage was imposed also for less grave sins of the laity. In the 13th century, pilgrimage began to be used as an afflictive penalty, imposed by certain courts. These were initially, in the early 13th century, the courts of the inquisition in southern France, and later the urban courts of the Low Countries and Germany. These expiatory pilgrimages punished religious crimes but also crimes against the person and against property. They continued to exist until the end of the Middle Ages.

The Holy Land

Pilgrimage to the Holy Land declined only with the Muslim conquest of Palestine (638). During that period, as Paulinus of Nola wrote, the principal motive that drew people to Jerusalem was the desire to see and touch the places where Christ had been present in bodily form.

The Byzantine period was also a golden age of women's pilgrimage: never again during the Middle Ages did so many women visit Jerusalem as then. Many upper-class women are known by name, such as Saint Helena, Egeria, Saint Paula, Melania the Elder, Melania the Younger, and Eudocia, but there is also...
evidence that many women of other classes of society went on pilgrimage to Jerusalem as well.

**Pilgrimage to Rome**

The second great pilgrim destination in the early Middle Ages was Rome. The city's main attraction was the tombs of the apostles Saint Peter and Saint Paul. Another was its magnificent collections of relics, including the veil (Lat. *sudarium*) of Saint Veronica in St. Peter's Basilica and the heads of the apostles Peter and Paul in the Church of St. John Lateran.

Pilgrimage to Rome received a new impetus following the Muslim conquest of Palestine, which for a time closed Jerusalem to pilgrims from the West. Rome also benefited from the growing devotion in the West to Saint Peter, whose possession of the keys to paradise was believed to give his intercession added weight. The saint's shrine was regarded as a particularly suitable destination for criminals, and Peter acquired a reputation as a breaker of chains.

**The Crusades**

A new form of pilgrimage came into being through the preaching of the First Crusade (1096–1099). In 1095, the Council of Clermont decreed that whoever, for devotion alone, went to Jerusalem to liberate the church of God, could substitute this journey for all penance.

Pilgrimage to Jerusalem, hitherto a devotional or penitential act, was thus linked by Pope Urban II to offensive warfare designed to free the holy places from Muslim rule. There was no specific terminology to describe crusading activity in 1095, and the participants in the First Crusade often referred to themselves as pilgrims (Lat. *peregrini*) and to their expedition as the Jerusalem journey.

During the 12th century, the rituals for taking crusader vows were formalized, and crusaders were invested by a priest with a staff and scrip (satchel), the traditional emblems of pilgrimage. This aspect of crusading was more than a legal fiction, for crusaders were required to fulfill their vows by praying at the Holy Sepulchre before returning home. After 1187, when Jerusalem was in Muslim hands again (apart from the brief interlude of 1229–1244), this was not possible, but crusaders still needed to be dispensed from that obligation by the pope or his legate.

An individual might take a crusade vow as an act of private devotion, and a steady stream of such people came to the Latin East after 1099 to help to defend or to recover the holy places. Yet although all who came to the Holy Land as crusaders were, by definition, pilgrims, not all pilgrims who came there were crusaders.

The foundation of the Latin kingdom led to a huge increase in the number of Western pilgrims to the Holy Land. The great majority came by sea, particularly from the Italian ports, although some pilgrims, especially those from Central and Eastern Europe, took ship at Constantinople. The land routes through Anatolia were considered unsafe and were normally only used by crusading armies.

Because many pilgrims were noncombatants and were preyed upon by Muslim brigands in the early years of Frankish settlement, the French knight Hugh of Payns founded the Knights Templar in 1119 to patrol and garrison the main pilgrim routes, and their work proved very effective.

To meet the needs of the many destitute and sick pilgrims, the Latin hospital of Jerusalem, which dated from before the First Crusade, grew into the independent Order of Knights Hospitaler, whose primary duty, even after they had become partially militarized, remained the care of the poor and infirm. Their
hospital in Jerusalem was by the 1160s one of the largest in the Christian world, and they also founded smaller hospitals along the chief pilgrim routes of Western Europe and in other parts of the Latin kingdom.

The Latin clergy, with the full support of the Crown and baronage, undertook an impressive building program. They carried out extensive new work at the Holy Sepulchre, where they incorporated the Byzantine rotunda into a new church, and, where necessary, they rebuilt the other Greek Orthodox shrine churches, many of which had fallen into ruins. They also identified many new holy sites, both in the environs of Jerusalem and elsewhere in Outremer, and endowed churches, and sometimes also monasteries, to serve them. These shrines were often embellished with sculptures, frescoes, and, more rarely, mosaics.

**The Golden Age**

The years 1099 to 1187 were a golden age for pilgrims visiting the Holy Land. They could travel freely to the holy places under Frankish control, which comprised the majority of sites mentioned in the Gospels, and on occasion they were able to venture farther afield.

For example, in the 1160s they could visit the monastery of Saint Catherine on Mount Sinai, which was then under Frankish protection, and in times of truce they were allowed to make a pilgrimage to the Greek Orthodox convent of Our Lady of Saydnaya near Damascus, which was said to possess a miracle-working icon.

The Latin population of the Frankish East was recruited in part from pilgrims, some of whom stayed there permanently. The majority, of course, returned to the West, taking with them a variety of relics and souvenirs.

The most prized of these were relics of the True Cross, but among other relics taken back from Jerusalem were pieces of stone from the Church of the Holy Sepulchre and Calvary, from the manger of the Nativity at Bethlehem, and from the rock on which Christ had stood at his ascension into heaven, as well as pieces of the Virgin's dress and strands of her hair.

Those who could not obtain relics took back souvenirs with sacred associations, such as water from the Jordan River and palm fronds commemorating Christ's triumphal entry into Jerusalem (John 12:12–15). As in the Byzantine period, small containers made of clay, glass, and lead or tin alloy were made in Jerusalem for relics of this kind. These relics helped to diffuse a knowledge of the holy places and devotion to them more widely throughout the Christian West.

**Other Pilgrimage Sites**

After 1187 some of the shrines, such as that of Saint John the Baptist at Sebastea, passed out of Latin control, while others, including those in Jerusalem, were only restored to Latin rule for brief periods. More crusades than ever before were launched to recover the holy places between 1187 and 1274, and a great number of people took crusade vows, but few of them were able to visit Jerusalem.

Similarly, large numbers of noncombatant pilgrims continued to come to the Holy Land throughout the 13th century because the ports of Syria and Palestine remained in Frankish hands, yet few of them visited Jerusalem, even though the Muslim authorities were often willing that they should do so. The papacy discouraged Christians from visiting the holy places while they were in Muslim hands in order to prevent
the Islamic authorities from making an economic profit out of Christian piety, although it does not seem to have been essential for Western pilgrims to obtain a papal dispensation in order to visit Jerusalem until the 14th century.

The majority of 13th-century pilgrims contented themselves with visiting holy places that were still in Latin possession, such as Mount Carmel. Because most of the religious communities that had served the holy places in the 12th century had retreated to Acre after 1192 and set up chapels there, that city became the focus of pilgrim devotion, and indulgences were granted to those who visited those shrines, which conferred spiritual privileges equal to those previously granted at the original holy places.

This attractive pilgrimage option came to an end when Acre and the other remaining Frankish strongholds fell to the Mamluks in 1291. Western pilgrimage to the Holy Land continued thereafter, albeit on a reduced scale, but it was directed once again to the city of Jerusalem and the other authentic holy places.

Another popular pilgrimage center by the 12th century was Santiago de Compostela in Galicia (northwestern Spain). Santiago de Compostela was brought into the front rank of medieval shrines by a combination of factors.

Shortly before 1095, the ancient see of Iria was transferred to Compostela, and that city became the center of the Christian activities against the Muslim rulers of Iberia. In the 12th century, the shrine of Saint James at Compostela began attracting large numbers of pilgrims. Its popularity was stimulated in part by a romantic association with the Reconquista (the reconquest of Spain from the Moors) and Saint James's role as a patron of this crusading movement. Compostela, however, was also considered a worthy alternative by those who were unable to reach Rome or who were disillusioned with it.

At Compostela as at Rome, the pilgrim could find a body of an apostle, in this case Saint James, who was portrayed as a protector of pilgrims and as a healer. On becoming bishop (1100), Diego Gelmirez set aside half the alms received in the basilica for the support of a hospice for pilgrims he had established previously. On his instructions, an aqueduct was built to supplement the city’s inadequate water supply. A massive rebuilding program was undertaken, including the construction of a new cathedral of Saint James.

**Jerusalem Tours**

Under the guidance of the Franciscan friars in the last two centuries of the Middle Ages, Jerusalem pilgrimage became a kind of guided tour of the Holy Land lasting from 10 to 13 days. The pilgrims, on arrival, spent one day each in Jaffa, Ramla, and Lydda (mod. Lod, Israel), and one day traveling to Jerusalem; the fifth day was spent at the stations of the cross, the sixth in Bethlehem, the seventh in the mountains of Judaea, while the eighth day was devoted to visiting various holy places in Jerusalem.

On the ninth day the pilgrim visited the place of the baptism of Christ at the Jordan; on the 10th day he visited Bethany; the 11th day was once again devoted to Jerusalem. On the 12th day the pilgrim returned to Ramla and on the 13th day to Jaffa. During this guided tour the pilgrim spent at least two nights in the Church of the Holy Sepulchre.

**Sylvia Schein**

**Further Reading**

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Entry ID: 1389790