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## Santiago de Compostela

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## Chapter 50

# Santiago de Compostela

GEORGE D. GREENIA

SANTIAGO de Compostela, the most fabled city in the autonomous region of Galicia in north-west Spain, is the fulcrum of our imaginative trajectory from Palermo to Tunis, but paradoxically an end point for most late medieval travelers, the place where they turned around and went home again. The medieval pilgrimage route had as its goal the purported relics and tomb of the apostle St James the Elder, supposedly long forgotten in Spain where James had preached before his martyrdom in Palestine in 44 CE. When an ancient crypt—a Roman-style mausoleum from the first centuries of Christianity—was discovered in the early ninth century, an increasing number of pious travellers made it their destination of choice. The village and then thriving urban complex that grew up around the grandiose structures built to honour the saint took his name: ‘Sanctus Jacobus’, successively transformed into ‘Sancti Yagus’, ‘Santi Yagüe’, and finally ‘Santiago’, the ‘Compostela’ part most likely a reminiscence of the Latin *compositum tellus*, a ‘handsomely disposed terrain’ or perhaps just ‘burial plots’.<sup>1</sup> Folk etymologies and myth would insist for centuries that the true meaning of the name lay in the pilgrims’ trek westward following the Milky Way in the night sky toward the site where a play of lights on a hillside had first revealed the saint’s resting place. The journey to the primitive sepulchre as an earthly ‘Field of Stars’, a *campus stellarum*, made the long series of manmade chapels and sanctuaries along the route a reflection of the signposts in the heavens.<sup>2</sup>

The trajectories of peoples and the arts they crafted along these paths define cultural trajectories for the period in question and for much subsequent European culture. The oddity is that Santiago de Compostela and its legendary pilgrimage are today wildly

<sup>1</sup> The most comprehensive studies are still found in Vázquez de Parga, Lacarra, and Uría Ríu (eds), *Las peregrinaciones a Santiago de Compostela*. See also Suárez Otero, ‘A Quintana de Paaços’.

<sup>2</sup> The *Gran enciclopedia del Camino de Santiago* has multiple entries on the discovery of the tomb and aspects of the growth of its cult, while Márquez Villanueva, *Santiago: trayectoria de un mito*, and Domínguez García, *Memorias del futuro*, examine the ideological underpinnings of the Santiago cult across time. Though now dated, a reliable starting point for Santiago studies of all sorts may be found in Dunn-Wood and Davidson (eds), *Pilgrimage to Compostela*.



**FIGURE 50** Pilgrims' cross near the ancient hospital at Roncesvalles en route to Santiago de Compostela.

Photo: George D. Greenia.

popular, but the true history of pilgrimage on the Camino de Santiago in the last three centuries before its eclipse, *c.*1200–1500, has yet to be written. One of the ironies of contemporary celebrations of Romanesque Santiago and the modern pilgrimage revival is the inadvertent erasure of this late medieval phase of maturity, the very point of these volumes and this chapter.

Many of the cultural artefacts generated by the selfless piety and self-interested industry of the pilgrimage route share a common heritage along the Camino de Santiago and its thousand feeder trails from as far away as Canterbury, Paris, Oslo, Danzig, Moscow, Budapest, the Balkans, and Rome. Most of these byways coalesced at the Pyrenees and became the now iconic Camino francés, but Spain itself boasted multiple venerable routes dating to the earliest years of episcopal and royal validation of Santiago as a site of true devotion to the Apostle, the only member of the Twelve interred in Europe other than Peter and Paul in Rome. Spaniards and other faithful arriving from elsewhere in Christendom coursed along the *Vía de la Plata* up from Seville, skimmed the northern Cantabrian coast, came down through the rugged mountains of León along the Camino Primitivo, and trekked the eponymous Camino

inglés starting at the preferred British port-of-call in La Coruña.<sup>3</sup> And by sanctifying those paths of faith and commerce, the vast web of *caminos* to Santiago generated a rosary of shrine sites whose holy edifices, those associated with St James or entirely independent from his cult, benefited from the swelling tide of passers-by heading to the north-west corner of Iberia.<sup>4</sup>

By the height of its fame and popularity in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, when the modern cathedral's glorious and astonishingly intact Pórtico de la Gloria was built by Master Mateo, some calculate that every year over a hundred thousand or more pilgrims were making the journey to the westernmost point of Europe—a Finisterre not in Brittany but in Galicia—where they gathered a scallop shell to prove the completion of their journey.<sup>5</sup> This signature adornment was soon the badge of the whole mission both coming and going and, as a recovered grave good, shells rival in numbers the tin and silver pilgrims' badges mass produced for scores of alternate destinations and unearthed in countless burials of pious Christians from that epoch. Those who once lived as pilgrims hoped to enter heaven as pilgrims, too.<sup>6</sup>

The literature and cultural heritage generated by medieval pilgrimage to Santiago de Compostela rivals that of journeys to Jerusalem or Rome. For much of the Middle Ages, the Jacobean route was less risky and less overtly military than the trip to the Holy Land, but more taxing than the (even in the Middle Ages) potentially luxury vacation to Rome. And Santiago's marginal position in the political geography of medieval Europe<sup>7</sup> may actually have favoured it as a destination for disinterested pilgrims.

The Road to Compostela was from the ninth century onward an established itinerary, although never endowed with the population base or facilities for secular traffic found on the diffuse feeder routes leading to the Eternal City. Many of the Jacobean way stations were hardscrabble byproducts of charity in the wilderness. Hospitals like those at Roncesvalles in the Pyrenees, Santo Domingo de la Calzada, San Juan de Ortega, and countless hamlets across the Spanish *meseta* or in the hills of Galicia itself provided essential shelter and little more. The round trip to Santiago could take anywhere from two to twelve months depending on time of year, material resources of the traveller (unless foot travel was a chosen or imposed condition of someone's

<sup>3</sup> See Bullón-Fernández (ed.), *England and Iberia*, and especially its chapter by Echeverría Arsuaga, 'The Shrine as Mediator'.

<sup>4</sup> Santiago fought a powerful battle with Toledo for ecclesiastical primacy of the Spanish Church, a cause eventually lost: see Fletcher, *St. James Catapult*.

<sup>5</sup> Estimates vary widely because while the carrying capacity for the land was not great the routes were far more diffuse, actually broad swathes with many feeder trails. We know that in 1189 1,500 European crusaders came to Santiago on their way to the Holy Land, while in 1394 800 English pilgrims disembarked in La Coruña, and in 1395 there were some 2,000. In 1456 Englishman William Wey affirmed that he saw 84 ships from various northern European ports in the harbour at La Coruña (*Gran Enciclopedia*, 18,193–4).

<sup>6</sup> Singul, *El Camino de Santiago*, provides a generous panorama of the social landscape of pilgrimage in this era.

<sup>7</sup> Similar considerations might have helped inspire pilgrimage for far-western and remote Lough Derg (Chapter 24).

penance), and distance from starting point. It required no small measure of exertion and exposure, but at least there were no standing armies of infidels in one's path through northern Spain, and few opportunities to forge strategic alliances at one's final destination. The motley gamut of the well-heeled or bedraggled who longed to kneel in Santiago became legendary in the Middle Ages: 'To this place go the poor, the happy, the ferocious, the knights, the infantrymen, the satraps, the blind, the crippled, the aristocrats, the nobles, the heroes, the princes, the church leaders, and the abbots. Some go with bare feet, some without their own goods, some bound in irons for the sake of penitence.'<sup>8</sup>

The literature of the Camino de Santiago contains elements both perfectly canonical (devotional texts and ecclesiastical histories) and others necessarily elusive because of their oral and popular nature. Embattled by apparently irresistible Muslim armies to the south, Iberia was necessarily conservative in its Christian culture, but the Camino opened it to new theological, monastic, and artistic influences especially through the spread of enterprising Cluniac foundations that assumed the care of crucial junctures at Nájera, Burgos, Palencia, and Sahagún. Gregorian chant and the Roman missal replaced Mozarabic rites in the chapel, and participated decisively in the creation of modern musical notation, liturgical tropes, polyphony, and descant. In the noble courts of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, Galician-Portuguese lyric entered into dialogue with the troubadours of the courts of Castile and southern France. The *Cantigas de Santa Maria*, the greatest musical, lyric, and Marian compilation of the thirteenth century, celebrates numerous sites along these highways of faith and features not a few pilgrims among its protagonists. St James himself shows up in song and in multiple illustrations of the royal codices of Alfonso X, el Sabio, from the 1260s–1280s, although routinely in subservience to the Blessed Virgin.

The greatest volume in honour of Santiago as apostle, proto-missionary, and eventually patron of all Spain was the master anthology commonly called the *Codex Calixtinus* after a spurious attribution to Pope Calixtus II (1119–24), a twelfth-century miscellany now more accurately re-titled the *Liber Sancti Jacobi*. It brings together a curious epistle on the pre-eminence of St James, sermons for his feast days, hymns in his honour, and an account woven from legends explaining the unlikely translation of the saint's body from Palestine to Galicia. The *Codex* also contains a suite of his better-known miracles. Since the time of the early Church Fathers—Jerome, Gregory of Nyssa, Augustine—short *libelli* had been composed to document the wondrous lives of holy men and women and validate their posthumous miracles, compositions that in time provided set pieces for sermons for feast days, and the *Liber Sancti Jacobi* provides a master set for St James.<sup>9</sup>

For modern students of pilgrimage the most important piece in the anthology is the now endlessly circulated 'Pilgrim's Guide' commonly associated with one Aimery

<sup>8</sup> Coffey et al. (eds), *Miracles of Saint James*, 19.

<sup>9</sup> Coffey et al. (eds), *Miracles of Saint James*. The great *Codex* was stolen from the cathedral of Santiago in July 2011 but happily rediscovered nearby one year later.

Picaud, a French traveller of no special piety or for that matter much sympathy for the locals he met along the way. But he did craft the first travelogue for the Iberian route now known as the French Way (Camino francés), a report that is practical, unsentimental, and often quite opinionated. He describes the principal routes descending from his beloved France and all the stages that defined the route to Compostela. His comments on the terrain, food and wine, the detestable habits of some of the natives, monuments of note, and liturgical practices at the shrine site are invaluable, if rarely edifying.<sup>10</sup>

Picaud's 'Pilgrim's Guide' became the first of numerous first-person narratives of pilgrimage to Santiago. Extant accounts of travel to Compostela during the period of our concern, documents long scattered or disesteemed, have become the object of fascinating studies by García Mercadal (1952), and Herbers and Plötz (1998), but by few others at this stage of research. Ironically, perhaps, the genre was created by Egeria, a Galician who left north-west Spain in the late fourth century to visit the Holy Land. Her literary heirs for the late medieval period include English travellers William Wey of Eton (1456) and Margery Kempe of Lynn (1417), the former a self-effacing diarist who kept a colourless travel log like many of his pilgrim contemporaries before and after.<sup>11</sup> Kempe, who was forced to await shipping at Bristol for six weeks because all suitable vessels had been requisitioned for Henry V's second expedition to France, creates a true introspective narrative full of loud spiritual effusions, and by her own admission voyagers who fell in with her either admired and sheltered her or wanted to throw her overboard.<sup>12</sup> According to her *Book* the outward journey took one week and the return leg five days. She stayed for just two weeks 'in that lond, and ther had sche gret cher' (3645–50); she likely landed at La Coruña and made a rather quick trip down and back up the Camino inglés.<sup>13</sup>

Semi-secular historiography also played a major role in the literature of the Camino de Santiago. The *Historia Turpini* (more properly the *Historia Karoli Magni et Rotholandi*, after 1130), whose oldest extant witness is again in the late twelfth-century *Codex Calixtinus*, gives a dramatic account of Charlemagne's legendary withdrawal after his final incursion into Muslim Spain. In this account at least—much of the story is derived from legendary sources—the Frankish emperor has been induced to march into Iberia to secure the route of the Milky Way, as explained to him in a dream vision by the apostle himself. At the pass near Roncesvalles either Navarrese or Basques

<sup>10</sup> See Gerson and Melczer for accessible editions.

<sup>11</sup> Davey (ed.), *William Wey: An English Pilgrim to Compostela in 1456*.

<sup>12</sup> *The Book of Margery Kempe*, ed. Windeatt, ll. 3524–6.

<sup>13</sup> In their aggregate, these travel narratives mark a shift in European awareness of 'spatial history' (*Petrarch's Guide*, ed. Cachey, 5) that manifested itself in exploration of the Mediterranean and its eastern reaches, certainly by voyagers within Christendom (Ramón Llull, 1232–1315; Anselm Turmeda, 1355–1423), but also Jewish travellers like Benjamin de Tudela (traveled 1169–71) and Muslims like Ibn Battuta (traveled 1325–54). Sacred travel was already long-established in the Islamic world before the *hajj* to Mecca gave it canonical form as a centripetal quest. Muslim armies conducted forms of armed evangelization; Christian expeditions to Jerusalem became militarized pilgrimage.

(perhaps allied with Muslim warlords in Zaragoza) fall on the Frankish army's baggage train and slaughter its commander, a certain knight Roland. This colourful narrative of the death of France's most revered medieval epic hero occurred on what became the major pilgrimage avenue toward Santiago and helped established the iconic starting point of its eastern axis in Iberia. The celebrated skirmish of 778 also gave birth to what has become France's canonical epic tale, the *Chanson de Roland*. Although its earliest manuscript attestation is the famous Oxford Anglo-Norman version (copied 1130–80), the legend was constantly reworked in epic and chronicle throughout Europe in subsequent centuries.<sup>14</sup> The site of the massacre lay directly on the Camino's path over the low western Pyrenees and its chapel and open charnel pit were major tourist attractions in the fourteenth century, as now in the twenty-first. The chancy byways of pilgrimage doubled as avenues for armies, and even in times of peace as thoroughfares for tall tales of heroism and epic adventure. The churning oral tradition that celebrated the legends of the *Mocedades de Rodrigo*, the *Poema de Fernán González*, and Spanish versions of the *Song of Roland* all use parts of the traditional Camino de Santiago as their background and landscape.<sup>15</sup>

Another important historical source is the *Historia compostelana* composed to celebrate the tenure of Bishop Diego Gelmírez of Santiago (1100–40), a text continuously consulted for its claims of primacy for the see of Santiago. Authoritative ecclesiastical histories such as this inevitably shade off into secular annals—a veritable torrent from the heyday of the scriptorium of Alfonso X el Sabio (1221–84) onward—and innumerable royal legal instruments meant to shelter pilgrims from abusive practices or (even more common) private legal instruments meant to require pilgrimages as part of testamentary bequests or penitentiary sentences.

The 'literature' of our period, 1348–1418, also has to take account of the elusive but endlessly productive oral performing that intersected with the written record but enjoyed its own abundant life among the multicultural and polyglot stream of pilgrims, merchants, charlatans, and above all storytellers who inhabited the Camino de Santiago in every age.<sup>16</sup> They took popular accounts of miracles and transformed them into official hagiography, or just as likely repopulated them with stock characters they liked better. They brought their popular vernacular hymns and used them for walking songs along the trails and to accompany all-night candle-lit vigils within the cathedral of

<sup>14</sup> Pratt (ed.), *Roland and Charlemagne*; Farrier, *Bibliography*.

<sup>15</sup> See *Chanson de Roland*, ed. Duggan. The exploits of Charlemagne and Roland were known in Spain at least by the second half of the eleventh century, in a history from San Millán de Cogolla and in a single leaf of a Navarrese (romance language rather than Basque) epic poem from about 1270 that adapts classic versions of the French story in a highly original manner (Montaner, 'Medieval Spanish Epics', 352; Alvar and Alvar, *Épica medieval española*, 133–5). Early Iberian chroniclers often showed a significant anti-French reaction to these legends about Charlemagne's recovery of the pilgrimage route and could be quite critical of the legends suggesting that the northern king had much to do with securing Santiago for Christian pilgrims, or that he conquered Zaragoza and other Iberian cities. For the 'Spanish backlash' see Menéndez Pidal, *La Chanson de Roland*, 147–78.

<sup>16</sup> Moore and Spaccarelli (eds), *Road to Santiago*, contains an ample survey of current research areas and pertinent bibliography.

St James. They told jokes, composed idle ditties, and, with the portable musical instruments tucked within their cloaks, performed lyric compositions of their homelands for audiences in courts, convents, and corrals. And the prolific shared culture of sacred travellers inevitably diffused vast amounts of music, architecture, and art in and out of Santiago and along its endless routes of communication.<sup>17</sup> The constant surge of two-way traffic guaranteed that the most mobile forms of art (melody and lyrics), and the most immobile (architecture and sculpture), employed craftsmen and a self-renewing—sometimes volunteer—labour force that propagated popular forms along the entire length of the dense and interdependent network of avenues of faith and cultural exchange.

A dictum spuriously attributed to Johann Wolfgang von Goethe and widely repeated in pilgrimage circles offers the expansive pronouncement that Europe was born from pilgrimage, and that Christendom is its mother tongue.<sup>18</sup> This is problematic in our current context, given that fourteenth-century Iberia saw a good number of forced migrations, unholy pilgrimages as it were, particularly among its Muslim and Jewish populations. Christian pilgrimages to Santiago de Compostela did, nonetheless, cross many linguistic and cultural barriers, challenging those loyal to clan or village structures to recognize the sacred rights of strangers. The dictum was certainly right that sacred forms of migration put in motion not only people, but a justification for accepting and honouring strangers whose citizenship of faith could trump loyalties based on village or clan or language. When nationalism became triumphant, pilgrimage died. The literature produced during the crucial decades covered by these volumes has achieved new authority as massive waves of modern pilgrims take up their staffs and hope to replicate something of the original experience, many pondering the tales and texts of the late Middle Ages as their guides.

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<sup>17</sup> Ashley and Deegan, *Being a Pilgrim*, has the look of a coffee-table book, but its text and photos provide a judicious overview of pilgrimage to Santiago, its art forms and social history.

<sup>18</sup> The *Gran enciclopedia del Camino de Santiago* entry for Goethe resoundingly debunks the nostrum.



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