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Pilgrim Libraries: books & reading on the medieval routes to Rome & Jerusalem

A Leverhulme International Research Network. Principal Investigator: Professor Anthony Bale

Pilgrims as readers & writers: some reflections



Professor George Greenia

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Professor Anthony Bale shared a strong vision for our joint project on Medieval Pilgrims Libraries when we met in London December 9–10, 2016. We're all grateful for his leadership and helpful push in new directions and especially for bringing together researchers from such diverse fields. Here are some reflections based on our initial conversations.

Many medieval pilgrims belonged to lively lectoral communities. They carried their libraries with them on their way to Jerusalem, Rome or Santiago even when there were no books at hand. Memories of books read before leaving home were fondly rehearsed aloud among bands of sacred sojourners, texts that scripted the experience even while walking and sailing to distant shores. Some deliberately bade farewell to their books for a while as a personal discipline or as part of the acetic rigor of the trip, somewhat like foregoing bathing or haircuts. At opportune stops along the way they may have read or listened to the recitations of unfamiliar writings, purchased souvenir texts, or either made or commissioned copies of admired works to take home. Not a few pilgrims eventually composed their own travelogues as itineraries, diaries and guidebooks for subsequent travelers.



Professor Anthony Bale



English: A Naval Battle; Antwerp, after 1464, from the Roman de Gillion de Trazegnies, fol. 21. Lieven van Lathem (1430–1493), Getty Center

Complementing those who enjoyed full agency as readers – the ones who were personally literate – almost all pilgrims participated in ever rotating communities of secondary literacy. Many who could not read for themselves because of lack of education or failing eyesight listened to texts being read aloud and participated in their interpretation.[1]

Throughout Antiquity and the Middle Ages almost all reading was done aloud and routinely by young adults whose eyes were better suited for the task. Pilgrims probably carried few books with them and in any case one literate reader among any given travelers’ band would be enough.

Most importantly there was the internal library shared equally among the literate and illiterate, the vast oral stream they all grew up with. Medieval sojourners carried a rich imaginary of their journey spun out of their memory hoard[2] stocked by prior reading plus all their accustomed folk genres as they moved through their newly fluid discursive landscape. Some of their more pious texts they accessed “from within”: a common stock of Latin prayers and rituals, hymnody in Latin reliably re-encountered at hosting institutions, and vernacular devotional songs learned by heart back home and happily belted out along the trail or on arrival.[3] To lift their spirits and anticipate possible spiritual adventures there was the reverent recounting of hagiography and miracle stories associated with the shrine sites they visited.



‘The Author Hears the Story of Gillion de Trazegnies’ by Lieven van Lathem and David Aubert, after 1464. The J.

On the secular side were ballads and ordinary walking songs, and epic stories in prose or verse.[4] Some medieval travelers had their recollections of itineraries or topographical plans, but even without them all had mental maps that constituted a “consensus cartography” that fused sites and anticipated encounters. When their accounts of physical geography seem defective, they are probably reporting a traveler’s topography of significance and holiness.

Much of their remaining common oral culture was plainly utilitarian: medical knowledge and techniques (as distinct

Paul Getty Museum, Los Angeles.

from miraculous cures), guesstimates of diverse monetary exchange, knowledge of equivalents for local weights and measures, calculation of distances, seasons, climate, and folk tales and games to pass the time.[5] Any of these could end up in written records but the bulk of it churned through the living oral stream, the cultural “soup” everyone swims in without recognizing one’s conceptual environment always known from within.

The accounts that most attract our attention now – what pilgrims who made it home again wrote down and left unsystematically among family papers and local archives – are their own compositions in the form of itineraries and daybooks. Most are middle brow, repetitive in their sequence of places and sights, and doggedly anonymous.[6] This is probably not because generally poor writers took up the task. It would have been hard to actually compose anything serious while traveling in the Middle Ages. Toting reliable supplies of ink, quills and parchment or paper – much less wax tablets – is pretty much ruled out by the tiny satchels shown in most contemporary painting and sculpture.

Medieval travel accounts were likely put together after a return to a writerly environment and perhaps before the pilgrim company disbanded. For pilgrims returning from Jerusalem, the logic site would be on disembarking at Venice. A troop which had shared the journey could share the reminiscing and the most able scribe among them could stitch together what each individual agreed was true. That would help explain the depersonalized and often pedestrian accounts that come down to us. The stationers’ shops in Venice could also supply enough raw materials to make multiple copies for as many of the companions who wanted a set of reliable notes to embellish orally for family, friends and fellow parishioners. Producing a “corporate report” from a whole group of travelers usually makes for dull reading but would lend a certain weight and credence to the narrative.

Bands returning from Jerusalem enjoyed the advantage of a fairly stable party from start to finish, or at least from departure from Venice until their return there. Venice would have also marked a psychological “homecoming” even if individuals had started out from more distant parts of Christendom, and no other pilgrim node along the thousands of sacred routes in medieval Europe provided the same urban

nexus of launch point, site of return and time to linger. There are points of convergence along the trails to Santiago (Ostabat and St.-Jean-Pied-de-Port on the eastern slopes of French Pyrenees) and to Rome (certain Alpine passes on the descent into Italy) but none in an urban center that invited potential writers to linger and compose. Of course, Rome was the most heavenly and best provisioned writers' environment of all, but writers in residence on the Tiber did not routinely overlap with visiting pilgrims and they produce different sorts of works.

All these factors would have favored greater numbers of travelogues about the Holy Land, somewhat less so for Rome and relatively few for Santiago and other pilgrim shrines, and extant archival witnesses seem to corroborate this scenario.

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Notes

1. Linguistic anthropologists working in Chiapas, Mexico have observed how leaders of base Christian communities (*comunidades de base*) could be illiterate yet function as the most insightful and trusted commentators of scriptural and inspirational texts. (As reported by Vincent Barletta, now at Stanford, from field work in the 1990s during doctoral studies at UCLA. Personal communication.)
2. The phrase was coined by Mary Carruthers in her classic *The Book of Memory. A Study of Memory in Medieval Culture* (Cambridge, 1990).
3. The “Pilgrims Guide” in the *Codex Calixtinus* describes how various nationalities, clustered together in their respective corners of the tribune level of the cathedral in Santiago, would loudly compete as they sang hymns in their native tongues.
4. The earliest and one of the most intriguing prose epics about the adventures of Charlemagne and Roland in Spain is consecrated in the “Historia Turpini” of the *Codex Calixtinus*, the twelfth-century master compilation on the pilgrimage to Santiago de Compostela. The connection to Charlemagne’s supposed devotion to St. James and the saint’s instructions to have the French secure the pilgrimage route against the Muslim foe is tenuous in the narrative, entirely fictional in terms of history.
5. Folk tales contain many stories about the intervention of saints on behalf of their devotees. A version of hopscotch became the pilgrim game of Juego de la Oca or Goose’s Game, a modern version of which has been laid in the paving outside the church of Santiago the Elder in Logroño along the main route to Compostela.
6. Anxiously sincere personal narratives of travel along the Camino de Santiago have repopulated this genre in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, most of them just as artless as their medieval forerunners if more heartfelt.