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Bartered Bodies: Medieval Pilgrims and the Tissue of Faith

Cover Page Footnote

This essay could not have been written but for the help of three adept research assistants from William & Mary: Robert Bohnke, Emma Kessel, and William Plews-Ogan. While all errors are mine alone, much fresh insight emerged from their contributions. Prof. Miguel Taín Guzmán of the Univ. of Santiago de Compostela supplied several of the images.

Bartered Bodies: Medieval Pilgrims and the Tissue of Faith

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In 'The Bartered Body,' George Greenia disentangles the complex desires and experiences of religious travellers of the High Middle Ages who knew the spiritual usefulness of their vulnerable flesh. The bodily remains of the saints housed in pilgrim shrines were not just remnants of a redeemed past, but open portals for spiritual exchange with the living body of the visiting pilgrim.

Key Words: pilgrimage, medieval, Christian pilgrimage, body, danger, Middle Ages, relics, shrines

Introduction

Medieval Christian pilgrims were nothing without their bodies. All the sacred debris that they ferried and fondled – all the gifts they carried outbound, the relics and souvenirs they clutched upon their return – were mere accessories. The human form that set out on a sacred journey was accessorized to take on a new identity. The journey disciplined and dirtied the body, exposed the travellers to danger and death, and denied their normal comforts. To sustain their worthiness, pilgrims scrupulously cleansed their bodies before entering sacred precincts, and emblazoned themselves with badges and even tattoos for the return home. Fleshly forms were tabernacles of devotion, a traveller's best offering on arrival, and body transformed into relic upon return.^[1]

This article surveys generalized themes over a broad landscape of medieval cultural practices and changing situations. It seeks to identify some of the background commonalities one might ascribe to devout sojourners in distinction from vagabonds, itinerant mercenaries, monastics making the rounds of their abbeys, the messengers and scouts of nobles and kings, herdsmen moving flocks over long distances, ordinary merchants, and the many other travellers who shared the same roadways and sought shelter in the same taverns and way stations when night overtook them. Not all were pilgrims.

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**A religious tending the feet of a pilgrim to Santiago at
Musée de l'histoire de Lyon**



Musée Gadagne, Lyon, France

Modes of travel altered medieval pilgrims' senses of their body in motion. Those who walked to Rome or Santiago – or countless other shrines in Western Europe, tombs and chapels that took them either a few hours away or several years absent from home – felt every step they took. Pilgrims' intimacy with exhaustion, injury, exposure, and hunger would extend to their beasts if they took any, and certainly to the human companions who shared their provisions, apprehensions, illnesses, and lice.^[2] A common tongue was hardly guaranteed, although Western Christendom could fall back on the universality of Latin in all

2. Diana Webb records the 1474 bequest for the construction of two 'soul baths' to help pilgrims delouse themselves before visiting the shrine at Aachen. *Pilgrims and Pilgrimage in the Medieval West* (London: I. B. Tauris, 1999), 91.

**Reliquary of St Oswald, c 1185-89,
restored partially 1779**



Photo by Karl Steel at www.flickr.com/photos/medievalkarl/10005491294. Creative commons attribution non-commercial sharealike 2.0

matters liturgical and diplomatic; the differentiation of Romance tongues from village to village morphed into an increasingly strange patois as sojourners advanced and increasingly struggled to make themselves understood. Those who ventured to the Holy Land travelled the furthest but ironically spent long weeks at sea immobilized as human cargo on trading ships.^[3] Their sense of befuddlement was all the more acute since they often landed in a recurrent war zone where even fellow Christians, including Byzantines, Syrians, and Copts, spoke and prayed in completely unfamiliar tongues.

Above all, medieval pilgrims perhaps felt more keenly than their modern counterparts that they were taking their sinful bodies to visit holier bodies. The relics of the saints were not just the residue of a redeemed past. Pilgrims seem to have believed that their prayers could flow up towards heaven with the intervention of friendly agents, and blessings could be drawn downward by the same influential members of the heavenly court. Pilgrims' bodies waded in the slipstream of an upward torrent of requests and a

downward flow of benefits. The paths of pilgrimage served as a watershed in another sense, since, according to Christian theology, no one in the Christian polity ends up completely dead. The living who walk on earth visited the enshrined bodily remains of those now living more fully in heaven, and earthly travels were frequently dedicated to assisting those enduring a time of purification after death. Not only did those suffering in Purgatory benefit from these transactional travels, but pilgrims could even offer prayers of petition for offspring yet to be born, not to mention the bodily cures and healthy harvests needed right then by those enduring trials on earth.

Medieval travellers seem to have been mightily aware of the spiritual usefulness of their flesh. They were conspicuous travellers who prompted everyone they encountered on the trail, and even those back home who knew of their absence, to make accommodations for their passage through this world. Travellers who died *en route* to a holy shrine were promised heaven, and even the indigent and anonymous among fallen pilgrims were routinely guaranteed burial in sacred ground.

In the pages that follow I deal with Western European pilgrimage in general, but especially the Camino de Santiago, because of my own familiarity with the route and the explosion of contemporary research its resurgence has prompted. My consideration here of the significance of the pilgrim's body cannot be exhaustive. Other areas that deserve detailed studies would include the gendered body, the economic/consuming body, the clothed body, and the aging body, to name only a few possibilities.

The Body at Risk

A pilgrim's body during the Middle Ages experienced a variety of threats, some imposed by the terrain and others by people met along the way. The lands through which Christian pilgrims trekked included bustling cities and ports thronging with merchants, but also wilderness tracts barren of shelter and with few inhabitants to sell provisions or point the way. Many travellers struggled through difficult mountain passes where sheltering monasteries eventually replaced ancient hermitages along the footpaths. In the Holy Land, for instance, the deserts surrounding Mount Sinai were notorious for their dangers and there was a pressing need for reliable guides.^[4] Medieval

3. The dangers of seafaring were as great as travel by land; see Wendy R. Childs, 'The Perils, or Otherwise, of Maritime Pilgrimage to Santiago de Compostela in the Fifteenth Century' in *Pilgrimage Explored* (ed. J. Stopford; Woodbridge: York Medieval, 1999), 123-43.

4. H. F. M. Prescott, *Once to Sinai: The Further Pilgrimage of Friar Felix Fabri* (New York: Macmillan, 1958), 51.

Traveller devoted to Virgin Mary is accused of treason

Stoned, stabbed with a lance, and throat cut, he does not die until he is allowed to make a final confession. In further proof of his innocence his beard continues to grow and no scavenger touches his corpse. Eighty-eight of the Alfonsine miracle tales, over 20% of the narrative songs, involve pilgrims and pilgrimage to various shrines:

see the Oxford database of the *Cantigas de Santa Maria* of Alfonso X el Sabio (1221-1284). *Códice Rico*, Cantiga 124, panel f

guidebooks report hostile locals and poisonous rivers from which neither water nor fish were safe to consume.^[5] Pilgrim 'roads' were often mere rough beaten tracks leading from village to village or the ordinary byways of commerce and travel for troops, merchants and cattle.

The many risks of medieval travel included murderous thieves, predatory animals, and deadly weather conditions. The death toll is impossible to calculate, but the most common feature of pilgrimage trails after churches and shrines are their adjoining cemeteries. Such threats were mitigated somewhat by the prudent habit of those pilgrims who set out as a company which at times must have looked like an expeditionary force. Joining up with a band of one's countrymen, or at least with those whose language one understood, was shrewd and probably lifesaving. Pilgrims felt the danger daily, and prayed for safety obsessively.^[6]

Protecting oneself against the perils of pilgrimage also meant other practical contradictions of the ostensibly 'gentle' pilgrim mission. For all the spiritual significance bestowed on walking staves – a third supporting walking limb, the rod of Moses, the flowering staff of Joseph – pilgrims' walking sticks were also defensive weapons. Robbers were common, and so were wolves and wild dogs. Ungarrisoned soldiers and mercenaries foraged the land and appropriated the property of any passersby they encountered. Such attacks frequently occurred without respect for the documents of safe passage that prudent and well-connected pilgrims carried with them.

The farther pilgrims were from home, the more vulnerable they became, and not just to overt dangers. The gullibility of some pious travellers made them especially good targets for unprincipled locals who might offer them 'blessed' ampules (flasks of lead or clay flattened to nest against the body) and proffer fake relics of all sorts which were purchased even by the sceptical, just in case. Locals often saw pilgrims as part of a reliable, self-renewing stream of clients no matter how badly treated. Pilgrimage meant exposing oneself to risk, especially since many travellers to sacred sites were unwell before even stepping out of their homes. It

5. Peter Speed, ed. *Those Who Prayed: An Anthology of Medieval Sources* (New York: Italica, 1997), 181.

6. Braulio Valdivielso Ausín, *Aventura y muerte en el Camino de Santiago* (Burgos: La Olmeda, 1999), especially 'Dificultades humanas: guerras y asaltos (71-106)' and 'Los albergues y hospitales ante la muerte' (107-150).

seems that if something could have gone wrong, at some point it most certainly did.^[7]

The waning years of medieval sacred travel were marked by mistrust, resentment, and fulminations about how the activities of the unscrupulous were ruining the experience for all.^[8] Ferry drivers could not always be trusted to carry their passengers safely across rivers, sometimes trying to extort extra fees midstream.^[9] The most insidious and common threat was the very person to whom pilgrims had to entrust their sleeping bodies, the widely despised innkeeper. Along isolated routes, owners of public houses preyed on vulnerable and exhausted strangers, overcharging them for essential food and lodging and picking over their personal effects while they slept. Pilgrims were commonly fed rotting provisions and their maladies were occasionally treated with toxic potions in the hopes that they would die, so that their property could be seized. Routinely, there were no local authorities to whom to report such crimes. If there were, they might be told simply that the innkeeper had accepted the deceased's clothing and supplies in payment for charges incurred.

Supranational benevolent organizations emerged in the form of Knightly Orders. The protection of pilgrims along their patrol routes was their ostensible, but arguably, not their most important, aim.^[10] As a highway patrol they were hardly disinterested, and many of the brotherhoods represented organizations that had devolved into camaraderies of warriors under unsympathetic commanders. The Knights Templar, Knights of Malta, and the Knights Hospitaller of St. John arose from the Crusades, and tried to lend order and discipline to the precarious exposure endured by Christian troops encamped far from home in an enemy theatre of combat. The knight-monks of the Order of

A dead pilgrim is laid before the altar of St. James in Santiago.



Miracles of St. James, Master of the Legend of St. Godelieve, Flemish, ca. 1500.

Indianapolis Museum of Art, Wikimedia Commons

Santiago, for their part, were famed for their mounted sweeps of unsettled tracks between kingdoms and villages along the Camino de Santiago. They too were a guild of noblemen whose charitable activities were conducted in the course of consolidating a military powerbase that gave them collective strength against willful barons and kings.

Where to sleep then, and where to die? If public lodging was perilous, religious shelters must have seemed paradise. The refuges run by monastic orders and charitable fraternities provided free lodging, gifts of food, medical attention (if more often than not inept and unsanitary), and a relatively secure place to spend the night without fear of theft or assault. Pious establishments sprang up in precisely the sites of greatest danger. Notable examples on the route to Santiago include the hospitals founded by Santo Domingo de la Calzada or his disciple San Juan de Ortega, who chose to build in unpopulated stretches where brigands were the most savage. The monks sheltered pilgrims from attack and abuse, and if a

7. Susan Signe Morrison, *Women Pilgrims in Late Medieval England* (New York: Routledge, 2000), 58-59.

8. Ana Arranz Guzmán, 'Pecados en torno al peregrino,' *El Camino de Santiago, la hospitalidad monástica y las peregrinaciones* (ed. Horacio Santiago-Otero; Salamanca: Junta de Castilla y León, 1992), 194-209, uses a wide variety of sources – medieval legislation from diverse parliaments, canon law, city codes, royal decrees, chronicles, pilgrims' guides, literary works – to show that 'sins' along the pilgrimage routes included 'lechery, robbery, deceit, false pilgrims, ruffians,' and other less serious offenses.

9. Brett Edward Whalen, ed., *Pilgrimage in the Middle Ages* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2011), 254.

10. María Luisa Ledesma Rubio, *Las órdenes militares en Aragón* (Zaragoza: Caja de Ahorros de la Inmaculada, 1994), offers a helpful survey of military Orders for medieval Aragón.

weakened traveller expired, his possessions could be entrusted to his companions to return to his family or redistributed among the needy who arrived the following night. Those who died in the shelter of the church assisted by the prayers of their spiritual kin, were considered to have completed their pilgrimage and were buried in holy surrounds.^[11]

The Weary and Diseased Body

Ailing pilgrims ignited a culture of hospitality and care, the kind-hearted tending exhausted bodies out of pious obligation. They also participated in a sort of spiritual commerce, material assistance repaid with mystical merits generated by the travel itself. Maureen Flynn observes:

Care for pilgrims was one of the most popular charitable works in medieval times, when pilgrimages were taken by nearly everyone as acts of penitence, expressions of devotion, and especially as means to seek relief from sickness and disabilities. ... Care was given by individuals and by corporate bodies such as 'urban confraternities [which] exercised their pious activity through freeing prisoners from local jails and paying their debts or defending them in court ...'^[12]

Consistent throughout history was the physical toll of the journey: foot travel made for weary feet and lives at risk. While most medieval pilgrims trudging through long stretches of difficult terrain were desperate for whatever uncertain nutrition they could secure, a few subjected themselves to voluntary fasts to intensify their penances and commitment. Traditions of monastic asceticism prescribed restraint in food and drink while on pilgrimage, especially for wealthy travellers accustomed to fine dining. Like so many bodily experiences interpreted as spiritual, fatigue and even exhaustion frequently laid the foundation for tasting the transcendent in a pilgrim's diet.

11. The absence of any form of international citizenship – the notion had not been invented yet – constituted a threat in itself. If taken prisoner, ransom could only come from one's family, which might only learn of that need too late, after one's companions completed their own journey and returned home. By the time a payment arrived, months may have elapsed. But sequestration was rare on the roads to Rome and Santiago, and only an appealing option for major powers wishing to despoil major players. Highwaymen robbed and fled, never to be located again. Pilgrims could rely on no physical protection from any form of citizenship recognized among distrustful neighbouring kingdoms.
12. Maureen Flynn, 'Charitable Ritual in Late Medieval and Early Modern Spain,' *The Sixteenth Century Journal* 16/3 (1985): 339; 342.

Leper holding a bell to warn others of his presence



British Library, Pontifical (c.1400), BL Lansdowne MS 451, f. 127. Wikimedia Commons

Medieval pilgrimage was a concentrated exposure to a world of broken limbs and diseased flesh. It was axiomatic in the Middle Ages that the rich had doctors and the poor had pilgrimage, so the stream of travellers struggling to reach their shrines was often a spectacle of suffering that evoked both pity and revulsion. At the entrance to many major towns were hospitals dedicated to Saint Lazarus, charitable leprosaria that isolated travellers who were barred from entering the city. That disease in particular brought a double burden since it had no known cure or treatment and was widely and erroneously presumed to be a venereal infection. A cure through the intervention of a saint – an outcome rarely documented in the Middle Ages – was a leper's only hope.^[13]

13. Robert A. Scott, *Miracle Cures: Saints, Pilgrimage, and the Healing Powers of Belief* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2010), 68.

Libro del Caballero de Dios (Caballero Zifar).

BN-Paris MS 36, f. 97v, ca. 1472. A diagnostician holds a matula, a flask for examining urine samples from his patients.

Photo from facsimile edition by George Greenia

Since during the Middle Ages people often physically travelled *en masse* in order to mitigate the dangers of the road,^[14] the medieval style of travel created an inevitable vector for contagion. Random groups moved together sharing close quarters and infectious agents. In addition, armed pilgrimages such as the Crusades of the eleventh and twelfth centuries brought previously unknown illnesses to the European continent, such as novel fish tapeworms from the Western fortress at Acre.^[15]

Hospitals offered pilgrims lodging and care for those too weak to travel, but routinely exposed them to further sickness. Ergotism for example was widespread in northern Europe during the centuries of intense travel to Spain; it was caused by grain infected with a fungus triggered by damp weather. Sufferers found themselves cured along the roads to Santiago when

they started consuming fresher cereals grown in central Castile, a miracle they attributed to the good monks who fed them as they crossed the broad tableland of the Spanish *meseta*. These maladies were prevalent enough to have prompted the 'first huge, highly specialized European medical welfare system' as pious travellers found cures to their conditions which they then attributed to divine intervention.^[16] Moments of purgative exhaustion and cathartic hysteria at shrine sites combined with frequent near-death experiences to produce intense memories of brushing against the sacred in all its terror and finality.

The Legal Body

The threat of a violent end was really never absent for the sacred traveller. In an age without police, and in the absence of unambiguous jurisdiction by whatever authorities did exist, unemployed mercenaries and dispossessed tenant farmers could take to forested hillsides and live by preying on any traveller who wandered into their domains. All travellers, especially foreigners, could be seized, stripped, and murdered with impunity. Bodies were abandoned on remote hillsides and left as carrion. The roads that served the pious were also the de facto avenues of invasion and clash points for territorial disputes. It was not uncommon for able-bodied males on pilgrimage to be forcibly conscripted for involuntary military service if only to keep them out of the ranks of an enemy further down the trail who might do the same. A few safeguards did exist. Writs of safe conduct assured foreign authorities that the itinerant pilgrim was neither spy nor freeloader.

On the home front, the rights of absent pilgrims were regularly guaranteed – as were their obligations before departure. Even in a pious cause, no male could absent himself without providing for his family, securing his standing debts, and being formally excused of his feudal obligations. While away, his property was safeguarded by law and neither lands nor legal heirs could be alienated without his permission. This new class of absent body with legal rights – and spiritual rights in the case of death – encouraged the creation of new instruments to safeguard travel and stabilize the social order.^[17]

14. Joseph Patrick Byrne, *Encyclopedia of Pestilence, Pandemics, and Plagues* (Westport: Greenwood, 2008), 480.

15. Piers D. Mitchell, Evilena Anastasiou, and Danny Syon, 'Human Intestinal Parasites in Crusader Acre: Evidence for Migration with Disease in the Medieval Period,' *International Journal of Paleopathology* 1/3-4 (2011): 134.

16. James Brodman, *Charity and Welfare: Hospitals and the Poor in Medieval Catalonia* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1998).

17. For an overview and bibliography targeted for the Camino de Santiago, see Alejandro González-Varas Ibáñez, *La Protección Jurídico-Canónico y Secular de los Peregrinos de la Edad Media: Origen y motivos* (Santiago de Compostela: Xunta de Galicia, 2003).

Pious man giving alms to a pilgrim.

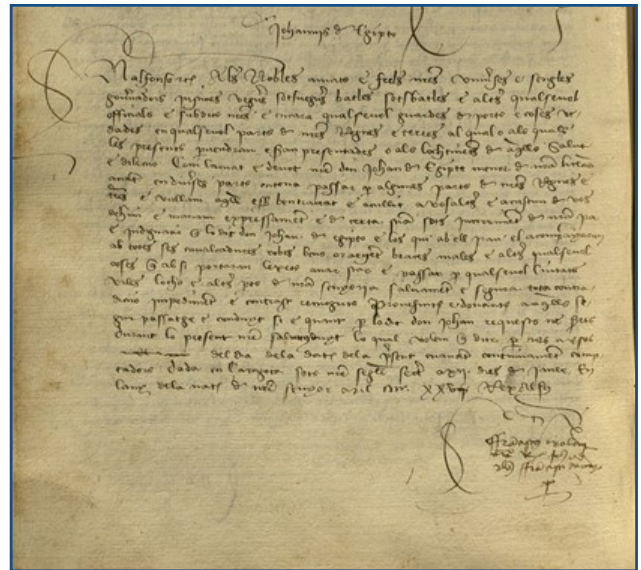


Cantigas de Santa Maria of Alfonso X el Sabio (1221-1284),
Código Rico, Cantiga 144, panel b

Because of social constraints and the dangers of travel, medieval pilgrims were overwhelmingly male, yet the women of that period who did make sacred journeys shared all of the bodily experiences described in these pages. There were some stark differences in the heightened risks of attack and not unrelated vulnerability to charges of sexual disrepute women endured. One curious aspect of the pilgrim's body before the law (and of canon law in particular) was the traveller's 'degendered' state:

Theoretically, women had the same right as men to engage in any devotional activity, since both doctrine and canon law held that the souls of men and women were of equal importance in the eyes of God. For this reason, the legal status of pilgrim was gender-neutral. Those who took up a long pilgrimage were 'distinguished from other men (sic) by a uniform and a solemn ritual of initiation.' Neither the uniform (a long white robe, a floppy, broad-brimmed hat, a traveller's bag or scrip, and a staff) nor the initiation ceremony distinguished between male and female pilgrims. Further, male and female pilgrims had the same legal rights ... in canon and, to some extent, civil law ... based in their classification as miserabiles personae ... [who] were owed the kindness and support of all Christians. Pilgrims could seek personal protection from harm, and hospitality from any bishop, abbot, or other churchman, and civil authorities were to refrain from taxing pilgrims or arresting them. Their property and service as vassals were also immune from claims, and 'there was no legal remedy to be had against a bona fide pilgrim, so long as he returned home

Safe conduct granted to the first documented 'gypsy' to have made the pilgrimage to Santiago.



Granted by king Alfonso the Magnanimous of Aragón to 'Juan de Egipto Menor' and his companions, their personal possessions and their merchandise for three months beginning on the date of issue, January 12, 1425.

Archivo de la Corona de Aragón, Real Cancillería, Registros, 2573, f. 145v

to face his adversaries within a reasonable time.' None of these protections were qualified by gender.^[18]

Pilgrims did enjoy certain exemptions from normal legal constraints and a unique if temporary status under the law, as well as legislative protections that theoretically shielded their bodies and persons from exploitation. Medieval canon law, especially between the eleventh and thirteenth centuries, afforded pilgrims codified legal protections and promises of peace while they journeyed. Secular bodies and Catholic synods such as the Council of Edham in 1009 and the Council of Rouen in 1096 decreed that pilgrims were not to be pestered or subjected to oppression, while the Toulouse Law of 1205 prohibited innkeepers from kidnapping pilgrims. The *Leges* of Henry I of England in 1115 allowed pilgrims travelling to Rome, Jerusalem, or other distant places to appoint an overseer of their possessions in their absence. They were also meant to

18. Leigh Ann Craig, "Stronger than Men and Braver than Knights": Women and the Pilgrimages to Jerusalem and Rome in the Later Middle Ages,' *Journal of Medieval History* 29/3 (September 2003): 157-158. Also J. A. Brundage, *Medieval Canon Law and the Crusader* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1969).

circulate in the reasonable hope of affordable lodging, safe passage through any jurisdictions, and freedom from most standard tolls.^[19]

Abuse of these protections was supposed to trigger swift and sure punishment. In 1412, a man named William Blakeney was brought before the Mayor, Sheriff, and Alderman of Guildhall in England and later found guilty for impersonating a hermit and a pilgrim. He had fraudulently claimed six years of devout pilgrimages to Jerusalem, Venice, Rome, and Seville.^[20] Widespread anxiety over enforcing these decrees is amply revealed by their insistent reappearance in code after code through the centuries.

The Bartered Body

Medieval pilgrimage was not infrequently undertaken as a penance imposed for sin, sometimes called 'penitential pilgrimage' but just as accurately dubbed 'penitentiary pilgrimage,' a practice imposed by civil authorities under the strictures and customs required by ecclesiastical practice.^[21] The terms and associations of fully religious penitential pilgrimage overlapped with judicial pilgrimage for several centuries. As a civil sentence, imposing a nominally sacred journey was a perfectly secular option. Here is where medieval pilgrims attempted to barter bodily movement to repay debts to God and outraged neighbours.

Penitentiary pilgrimage was imposed as a penance for special offenses, such as acts of adultery, arson, sacrilege, patricide, or other personal violence which

19. Birch notes that 'By the twelfth century pilgrims also seem to have been entitled to a suspension of legal proceedings during their absence' and that by a 'Toulouse law of 1205 ... innkeepers were forbidden to kidnap pilgrims off the streets ... nor could they lure them away from rival establishments,' Debra J. Birch, *Pilgrimage to Rome in the Middle Ages: Continuity and Change* (Woodbridge: Boydell, 1998), 86-87.
20. Hunt Janin, *Medieval Justice: Cases and Laws in France, England, and Germany 500-1500* (Jefferson: McFarland, 2004), 121.
21. The most recent synopsis of reasons for going on pilgrimage in the European Middle Ages is provided by Diana Webb in her article 'Choosing St. James: Motivations for Going to Santiago,' *La c ronica* 36/2 (2008): 39-57. Webb also discusses involuntary pilgrimage in *Medieval European Pilgrimage* (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2002) and notes that 'a short local pilgrimage was a form of public penance which exposed the offender to the scrutiny of people who knew him; a lengthier pilgrimage preserved something of the character of exile, and might be imposed where the offense was not merely severe but made it desirable to remove the offender from circulation for a prolonged period.' (50)

Queen Beatriz of Swabia, mother of Alfonso X, takes her infant daughter Berenguela to the monastery of Las Huelgas in Burgos hoping for a cure



The cure was granted and the daughter presented to the convent as a votive offering.

Cantigas de Santa Maria of Alfonso X el Sabio (1221-1284), Cantiga 122, panel e

outraged whole communities. Provisions in the civil side were somewhat ragged in terms of nomenclature and penalties, with only sporadic records about who could impose pilgrimage, or its civil predecessor, exile. Because pilgrimage was an overtly religious enterprise, civil authorities had to make their peace with religious authorities in sentencing the wrongdoer to that form of settlement for crimes committed. This implies both a certain insufficiency of secular, usually municipal, control over the sentences laid down, and also a distribution of this ostensibly religious penance by class. Mary C. Mansfield writes that

Northern French cities typically suffered from the lack of any public authority of unambiguous legitimacy. Not surprisingly, they suffered from organized and unorganized violence and ... public penance could be a convenient if inadequate solution when a more conventional punishment would have aroused more disputes than it settled.^[22]

Because of their mobility and financial resources, the middle and upper classes were the disproportionate recipients of judicial and imposed penitential pilgrimages. These inevitably displayed a measure of ritual shame. Mansfield again notes that

... public penance was a weapon most used against citizens of substance, not against the poor, either by the bishop or other bourgeois. It

22. Mansfield, *The Humiliation of Sinners: Public Penance in Thirteenth-century France* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1995), 251.

was not a weapon in the wars between creditors and borrowers, employers and employees, landlords and tenants, although that war certainly sharpened the patriciate's sense of insecurity and thus fear of humiliations imposed by the clergy. While rarely suffering public penance themselves, the urban lower classes were often the intended audience for the humiliation of others.^[23]

Imposition of a penitential pilgrimage must have had an additional practical side. An egregious offense by a member of a village community might be handled by civil authorities, but their options were limited: execution, permanent or temporary exile, severe physical punishment or mutilation, or, if the transgressor had the means, a massive fine.^[24] Religious authorities could not apply these material penalties, only spiritual ones.^[25]

Banishment on a penitential pilgrimage was a sensible way to swiftly remove the criminal from the community to avoid further retaliatory violence and to give aggrieved clans or families distance from the emotional impact of the criminal act. Involuntary pilgrims would endure real hardships and a heightened danger of illness or even of violent death in foreign lands. The company of other, intentional pilgrims might help influence and unobtrusively reform such criminals. Participation in liturgical events and exposure to frequent moral instruction at the charitable shelters along the trail provided opportunities for rehabilitation through catechesis. Fellow villagers could reasonably hope that miscreants who returned home months later would come back changed and perhaps provisioned with knowledge or practical skills that would encourage their communities to reintegrate them, even if the returned criminals' contributions were mostly stories of the journey and professions of renewed faith.

Imposition of judicial or penitential pilgrimage was a formal aspect of public penance. Robert of Flamesbury and others from the early thirteenth century positioned it between solemn public penance and private

confession, absolution, and expressions of contrition.^[26] Part of the burden placed on wrongdoers sent off on pilgrimage was public scorn for a highly public offense. Condemned pilgrims were required to dress in a distinctive way and bear chains, ropes, iron bars or other distinguishing signs to mark them as shamed. But once on the road they may have achieved relative anonymity because voluntary pilgrims also took on themselves signs of humiliation, such as the Englishman who made the trip to Santiago naked, and whose exposure to the elements is recorded on the doors of the Hospital del Rey in Burgos.^[27] So, while many pilgrims started their journeys marked as sinners, they soon blended into the swelling crowd of walkers.

Nor were all judicial pilgrims lay folk. From the tenth century on, penitential pilgrimage was imposed on religious who, because of their canonical state, disallowed solemn public penance because they had already taken vows that were its equivalent. A sentence passed on three religious on March 12, 1259 at St. Victor-en-Caux in the diocese of Rouen is instructive in this regard:

On the authority of the late Pope, we impose the following penance on Girard of Montiauvoul, Roger of Montiauvoul, and Peter of Essarts, who killed a certain lay brother of Marcheroux: that, shoeless and with naked feet, clad only in trunk-hose, with halters tied to their necks, and bearing rods in their hands, they should walk in procession on Palm Sunday to the church of the place where they had committed the homicide; that, before the doors of this church they should be whipped by priests singing the Penitential Psalm, and should publicly admit their offence and declare the reason why such penance had been imposed on them; that they should do the same at Gisors on the octave of next Easter; the same at Chaumont two weeks after Easter; at Frênes, on the Sunday following. Item, that they fast every Friday for ten years, and visit the shrine of St. James before the feast of St. John the Baptist.^[28]

23. Mansfield, *The Humiliation of Sinners*, 252.

24. There were no prisons as standing institutions, so imprisonment was limited to the upper classes who were being confined indefinitely for strategic goals and not for calibrated punishment.

25. Webb, however, writes that 'a bishop, as 'lord of the manor' could impose pilgrimage, very often local ones, for poaching or similar infringements of his rights, and almost any temporal offence, from slander and trouble-making to homicide, could thus be punished.' Webb, *Medieval European Pilgrimage*, 50.

26. See Cyrille Vogel, 'Le pèlerinage pénitentiel,' *Revue des Sciences Religieuses* 38 (1964): 113-53, echoed by Elías Valiña Sampedro, *El camino de Santiago. Estudio histórico-jurídico* (Monografías de historia eclesiástica 5; Madrid: CSIC, 1971), 82-83.

27. Vázquez de Parga, 'Capítulo VII. La peregrinación forzada,' *Las peregrinaciones a Santiago de Compostela, Volume 1* (ed. Luis Vázquez de Parga et al.; Madrid: Consejo Superior de Investigaciones Científicas, 1948), 159, n. 15.

28. Odo Rigaldus, *The Register of Eudes of Rouen* (trans. Sydney M. Brown; ed. Jeremiah F. O'Sullivan; New York: Columbia University Press, 1964).

A medieval pilgrim makes a votive offering at a shrine



The body parts in wax represent ailing members or those that have been cured thanks to the intervention of the saint.

St. William window in York Minster. York Glaziers Trust, Corpus Vitrearum Medii Aevi, inventory no. 010667

The trouble is that to some extent *all* pilgrims assumed the public identity of sinners doing penance for offences committed. A great deal of the literature, including and sometimes especially the self-referential literature of pilgrimage, incorporates elements of the rhetoric of self-accusation and bearing the burden of one's errant past. There are a number of specific elements to this constructed identity that were shared by the rank and file devotees of the saints with their criminal, sometimes even murderous, travelling companions.

Even with pilgrims' mixed motives for journey, we can identify several overarching social constructs. First, pilgrims generally thought of themselves as sinners who hoped to disrupt their sinful habits as well as seek atonement for particular offenses. They prayed quite openly for a change of heart along with absolution for any misdeeds which prompted this particular journey.

Second, there was a presumption of commensurability: that the pilgrimage undertaken would cancel the sin committed or earn the favour requested. Measuring spiritual matters was one of the most persistent projects of the church in medieval times, and includes not only penances but bartered benefits like indulgences. Cyrille Vogel's phrase *pénitance tarifée* – 'tariffed' penance – aptly conveys the calculations applied to reforming one's life and conduct. The unpredictable hazards of

the road presumed to be imposed by the hand of God. This underlines the inherent penitential nature of pilgrimage travel: the inevitable sacrifices, discomforts, vulnerabilities, inconveniences, and indignities were part of the experience sought and not just incidental to the trip. The reckoning of grace and expiation was calculating on the part of church authorities, who could choose from any number of shrine sites both near and far as the offense warranted. But computational schemes for grace, either for the pardoning of earthly sins through suffering, or for gaining indulgences through voluntary pious works, amounted to a metrics for quantifying spiritual rewards – a commodification of grace – that proved disastrous for the church and eventually crippling for pilgrimage practice.^[29] In effect, the body was buying the soul's salvation.

Third, penitential and judicial pilgrimage also assumes a presumption of a divine application of distributive justice: requiring transgressors to risk uncertain hazards allows God to be the arbiter of the suffering each person deserves according to his or her sins. That does, at least, take schemes of retribution out of the hands of human judges, forcing it into God's. But when known criminals came home unscathed and unrepentant from their journeys, it must have weakened the faith of those who had hoped, however waveringly, for their reform.

Finally, the trip home was crucial to the formerly condemned pilgrim's new status. Liberated from the chains and iron bars sometimes imposed at the outset of pilgrimage, criminal pilgrims could now leave such markers behind at the shrine. Freedom from any outward signs of condemnation mainstreamed the former convict into the company of other pilgrims. The long walk home bearing the new status of a successful devotee of the saint was arguably the most potentially transformative aspect of the trip. The bartered body, unfettered in every sense, was now effectively marked 'paid' for all its spiritual and legal debts.

By the end of the Middle Ages, the personalized, psychological dimension of the judicial and forced penitential practice of pilgrimage was undermined by the steady commodification of diverse forms of civil compensation and remission of sins. Just as murder could be redeemed by payment, so other crimes normally punished with a judicial pilgrimage could be

29. See Matthew R. Anderson's article on 'The Pilgrimage That Ended Pilgrimage' in this issue, on the decline of pilgrimage during and after the Reformation period.

expiated by underwriting the costs of a substitute pilgrim who made the trip on commission. The spiritual benefits of pilgrimages themselves came to be a commodity of transferable value, so that a sinner might be required to perform *two* pilgrimages, one in punishment for a murder, say, and a second pilgrimage whose graces were formally reassigned as compensation to the surviving family. This practice quickly spread in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries to testamentary bequests which obliged heirs to perform a pilgrimage for the sake of the soul of the deceased. Thousands of these arrangements were apparently made and local records throughout Europe, from Spain to northern ranges like Germany and Scandinavian territories, give witness to the practice. These provisions for replacement pilgrims became so common that a Spanish proverb held that 'In life or death, everyone is bound to go to Santiago' ('*en vida o muerte, todos han de ir a Santiago*').^[30]

Despite the personalized experience that pilgrimage offered, travellers commonly believed that the spiritual rewards could be redistributed among others who could not make the trip themselves.^[31] This notion of vicarious or surrogate pilgrimage encouraged many to commission someone from a family, congregation, or town to undertake a pilgrimage for the spiritual benefit of the entire group whether the request was for protection from plague or war, relief from a drought, or forgiveness for the sins of a deceased kinsman.^[32] The pilgrim's body was a sort of emissary for the spiritual duties and desires of the more travel-reticent still at home. Pilgrims therefore recorded their experiences in narrative and guidebook format not only to aid other pilgrims, but also to offer those who were not able to make the physical journey the opportunity to share in the spiritual experience of the traveller's sacred body.^[33]

By the end of the Middle Ages, the availability to the pious and criminal alike of these forms of substitute pilgrimage proved that the element of rehabilitation had evaporated from temporary judicial exile, and the practice of spiritual travel itself rapidly disappeared from the scene, replaced by the rather depleted notion of vicarious pilgrimage. While it lasted, pilgrimage as a

non-violent sentence seems to have been a valuable and sociologically astute technique for healing wounded communities and forcing the recalcitrant into a pre-modern form of behaviour therapy.

The Sacred Body

Physically and spiritually, the pilgrim was tried, disciplined, and purified.^[34] The pilgrim was motivated by a visceral conviction that parting from the safety of home would be recognized and rewarded by a higher power, so the body of the medieval pilgrim acquired a heightened transactional value. It was the ultimate coin of offering that could be presented before the divine presence, and the vessel which received the blessings that God and the saints bestowed.

A body committed to a pilgrimage is one performing its beliefs, and a body cured or blessed is a powerful witness to a faith justified and enjoined on others. Such a body is already in contact with the divine simply by being on pilgrimage. The respect and care that others bestowed on the bodies of sacred travellers acquired a nearly sacramental function, encouraging others to participate in an economy of spiritual benefits commodified in the bodies of pious sojourners. Christians advancing toward Jerusalem in particular achieved the most palpable ascent toward the sacred, presenting their bodies to God where they believed that God had chosen to dwell in human form. For travellers from the Catholic West, flesh served as a living membrane which pulsed with life forces pressing from above and below, the eager human petitioner and the divine intercessor.

Because the pilgrim journey was regarded as spiritually cleansing, many pilgrims invented rituals to express and achieve purity. Many local traditions specified forms of symbolic cleanliness for those struggling forward; these included abstaining from sex, alcohol, foul speech, and grooming for vanity or attractiveness. It was common to find bathing sites near pilgrim destinations, including designated pools for final ablutions before entering the sanctuary precinct. Purged of their sins, pilgrims could present themselves with decorum before their spiritual patrons. Santiago de Compostela, for instance, retained a custom of burning articles of clothing worn out in the course of the journey, a tradition which played out on the roof of the cathedral where a small reliquary-

30. Sampedro, *El camino de Santiago*, 89.

31. Juan Atienza, *Los peregrinos del Camino de Santiago. Historia, leyenda y símbolo* (Madrid: Edaf, 1993), 49.

32. Sidney Heath, *Pilgrim Life in the Middle Ages* (Port Washington: Kennikat, 1911), 31-32.

33. Lia Scheffer, 'A Pilgrimage to the Holy Land and Mount Sinai in the 15th Century,' *Zeitschrift des Deutschen Palästina-Vereins* 102 (1986): 145.

34. Francisco Singul, *El Camino de Santiago: cultura y pensamiento* (La Coruña: Bolanda, 2009), 119.

Gothic statuette of St. James the Pilgrim with a tooth of St. James (the Younger?) presented by Gaufridus Coquatrix.



The inscription reads 'In hoc vase auri quod tenet ista imago / est dens b[eat]i iacobi / Ap[osto]li que Gaufridus Coquatrix ci-/vis par[isiensis] dedit huic ec-/clesie orate pro eo.' ('In this golden vessel held up by this statue, is a tooth of St. James the Apostle that Gaufridus Coquatrix, berger of Paris, gave to this church, pray for him.').

14th cent., gilt silver, 53 x 24 cm. Cathedral of Santiago de Compostela.

shaped enclosure adorned with liturgical symbols (a cross and triumphant lamb) provided a pyre for rags.^[35]

The traffic in the relics of the saints, for the purchasers at least, gave witness to their overwhelming desire to stay close to the bodily remains of the saints and martyrs. The expectation that a dead body might remain incorrupt through divine intervention harks back to biblical times when Christ raised Lazarus from the dead (John 11:38-44). His own resurrection with an intact and glorified body is the central tenet of the Christian faith (I Corinthians 15:14). Medieval pilgrims were anxious to visit the tombs of the saints but most burial vaults were kept closed. In Santiago the tomb of St. James was definitely known for its very

35. This practice continues today although not in Santiago but at the seashore at Finisterre where pilgrims who have trekked great distances burn or discard items that were companions on their journey.

Tomb of St. Isabel of Portugal dressed as a Pilgrim in the New Convent of St. Claire, Coimbra.



human fragments of bone which have never been displayed to the public, while the reputed hand of St. James kept in Reading, England is mummified, a halfway stage between corrupt and incorrupt.

Cynthia Hahn quotes John of Damascus who wrote that both shrines and their relics were 'receptacles of divine energy', and so were pilgrim bodies. The containers of water, sand or oil borne home in *ampullae* were talismans that were guarded more zealously than any other possession, and because their value was symbolic and spiritual they were probably at the least risk for theft. Hahn underscores how these vessels 'were incomplete until the pilgrim 'filled' them with his or her experiences – specifically, used them in a ritual blessing in which they were filled with holy oil or water and then sealed. They became, as it were, a personalized representation of the rebirth and sealing of the pilgrim.'^[36]

The desire to be close to the physical remains of saints could be overpowering. A story from late medieval Spain on the pilgrimage route to Santiago tells of a pregnant Queen Isabel who visited the tomb of San Juan de Ortega in 1478 to pray for a successful delivery of her first pregnancy. She insisted on viewing

36. Cynthia Hahn, 'Loca Sancta Souvenirs: Sealing the Pilgrimage Experience' in *The Blessings of Pilgrimage* (Robert Ousterhout, ed.; Chicago: University of Illinois, 1990), 91.

San Juan's body and over the protests of its custodians had the burial vault unsealed for the first time since the saint's death in 1163. A cloud of white bees reportedly flew out from the unlidded tomb, revealing an intact body which was supposedly sheltering the souls of infants yet to be born. When the lid of the tomb was restored to its normal place, the bees found their way back in through tiny apertures in the stonework. Isabel produced her son without difficulty - the future prince Juan de Asturias - and the shrine became a site where ordinary women came on pilgrimage to pray for fertility and safe childbirth.^[37]

The transactional nature of pilgrimage involved offering up one's body as the most intimate sacrifice possible, in exchange for an enduring connection with divinity. Indulgences measured out on earth in time off from purgatory, eventually to be tallied in heaven, merged with material pilgrimage souvenirs to give form to that supernatural transaction. The pardoners (that is, those who solicited offerings and granted indulgences along the way) often spelled out the extent of divine favour with remarkable specificity.^[38] After the climax of their journey, a spiritually transformed and cleansed body could start back towards home. Among the varied souvenirs pilgrims brought back as proofs of their accomplishments and boons for their communities, the greatest was their very bodies: this flesh was in the presence of that flesh, that tomb, that shrine, that spirit, and still bore that holy residue.

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37. Juan Ramón Corpas Mauleón, *Curiosidades del Camino de Santiago* (Madrid: Ediciones el País, 1992), 89.

38. Heath, *In the Steps of the Pilgrims* (New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1951), 259.

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