

Medieval Monasteries in Europe and Pilgrimage: The Translation of the Travel as Usual into A Spiritual Quest and Meaningful Self-Exploration, or: Travel as a Learning Experience



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Abstract

Tourism and leisure are some of the most common forms of private entertainment especially today which allows the individual to leave his/her ordinary life behind for a short period and to return refreshed and reinvigorated. There is nothing wrong with relaxing for a short time, to enjoy the small (or big) luxuries in life, to visit major tourist sites, and thus to have a really good vacation, having learned much about the foreign world and its infinitude of people and hence cultures. Beyond that, however, as true travelers know only too well, a different dimension is waiting for hardy and curious individuals who are not interested in remaining just outside observers but really want to engage with new people, new cultures, new ideas, and new cultural and historical conditions. The European landscape is littered with medieval sites that invite the visitor in for very new experiences. This brief article examines why the Middle Ages as a cultural and historical period proves to be so attractive in that regard and will outline succinctly what future travelers might want to consider in their endeavor to transform their usual travel plans into true cultural transformations.

Keywords: Medieval travel; Monasteries; Cathedrals; Pilgrimage; Spirituality

Introduction

All societies develop throughout history and leave traces behind. Those mirror the material and the spiritual culture, and if we are interested in the past, we must never ignore either one of those two aspects because we would not be able to comprehend the full picture and would thus always remain blind in at least one eye. The European Middle Ages, my topic here, deeply speak to us today because we are the direct heirs, having derived our philosophy, ethics, religions, aesthetics, morality, and worldview from there, though we live today in quite a different and very modern, highly technological world. The same can be said about other parts of the world, such as Western Africa, Japan, India, China, or Peru, where we can find similar manifestations of spiritual experiences whatever religion might have sustained them.

But Europe continues to be one of the central points of attraction for travelers from all over the world, probably because

the medieval world left behind so many powerful symbols of people's quest for spirituality. We are far away from those cultures altogether today, but the attraction of medieval religiosity, as manifested in chapels, churches, cathedrals, and then pilgrimage sites, has never waned and is, so it seems, today more important for modern seekers of truth, whatever that might entail, than ever before. In a previous article, I have already outlined particular travel routes that lend themselves especially well for those who are on a quest and need inspiration, whether religious, spiritual (slightly different), or philosophical and embrace the history and art of the Middle Ages as a field of investigations and explorations [1].

Here, I want to dive more deeply into the religious aspect characteristic of that medieval past and illustrate some of the most fascinating and meaningful approaches to that historical culture for the modern traveler. As a premise for the entire discussion, we would have to accept that all quests require a deep personal

commitment and a willingness to accept hardship, struggle, at times even frustration, and exhaustion as the pre-conditions for the true accomplishment of travel as a spiritual walk through life. There are many reasons why we travel, many simply serving entertainment or business purposes. The true or more sophisticated travel, however, only begins when the individual intends to expose him/herself to a new learning experience and thus to grow individually through and by travel.

The Middle Ages knew countless pilgrimage sites, and people either chose local churches to pray at the grave of a saint or to partake in a Mass celebrated by the priest focused on the relics of a saint buried underneath or in the altar. While Muslims are supposed to go on a pilgrimage to Mecca in modern-day Saudi Arabia at least once in their lifetime (or Medina, or Jerusalem), Christians had primarily three major goals, Rome, Santiago de Compostela, or Jerusalem. Santiago as a pilgrimage site was a medieval invention as part of the Spanish Reconquista, i.e., the reconquest of the Iberian Peninsula from the Muslim powers. In ca. 830 C.E., Bishop Theodomir of Iria Flavia allegedly discovered the relics of Saint James on the banks of the Ulla River in Galicia, and he thus created a cult of worship that has transpired throughout the Middle Ages and is alive and well until today. James had been martyred in 44 C.E., and there are various fanciful reports about how his relics reached the Spanish shore. At any rate, Santiago soon turned into a major pilgrimage site attracting ever growing numbers of pilgrims especially from north of the Pyrenees. There are until today four major pilgrimage routes across Europe, especially France, where the abbot of Cluny promoted this endeavor with greatest effort, and then, the real Camino de Santiago. This one begins in Northeastern Spain and takes the traveler/pilgrim across a rather rough and mountainous terrain along the coastline of the Iberian Peninsula ending in Galicia in the Northwestern corner facing the Atlantic [2].

Over the last fifty years or so, this pilgrimage route has gained in international popularity, taking the individual pilgrim or traveler roughly from Barcelona and Girona to Pamplona, Burgos, Valladolid, Leon to Santiago de Compostela (for much more detail, see https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Camino_de_Santiago; for the various routes, see https://kvk.bibliothek.kit.edu/?kataloge=BVB&kataloge=NRW&kataloge=HEBIS&kataloge=HEBIS_RETRO&kataloge=KOBV_SOLR&kataloge=DDB&kataloge=STABI_BERLIN&digitalOnly=0&embedFulltitle=0&newTab=0). Every year, ca. 200,000 to 300,000 people embark on this strenuous track, whether they are Christians or not. It is the pilgrimage itself which proves to be most important for most of those travelers. This means, they make their own way, whether on foot or by bike, car, bus, or plane. It has become a sign of honor to have earned the pilgrimage badges along the road, and having reached the holy site in Santiago thus constitutes an extraordinary achievement everyone is proud of once the pilgrimage is completed [3]. No one, however, sets a specific goal or requirement; some people cover only a short distance, others travel the entire route, some rush

through it, others take their time. The path itself is the goal, as many report (for the concept of the trail as a symbol of life [4]). (for the concept of the trail as a symbol of life [4]).

Northern Spain itself proves to be a huge challenge and opportunity. From the time the Reconquista had begun there, the traveler can find many medieval castles along the way, such as Castillo de Lloarre between Huesca to the East and Pamplona to the Northwest. Some of the most remote monasteries from the Middle Ages also beckon somewhat north of Lloarre, such as the Monasterio Nuevo de San Juan de la Peña. It is difficult to reach, even by car or bus, but its rustic setting and its stunning early medieval aesthetics make the visit absolutely worth it (https://es.wikipedia.org/wiki/Real_Monasterio_de_San_Juan_de_la_Pe%C3%B1a).

It might be a valuable exercise to discuss many of the major sites on the way toward Santiago, but each traveler can and should discover by him/herself those monuments, artworks, or sculptures that exert the most appeal for each individual. Attention to details, to local conditions, and to smaller but often ignored buildings always proves to be worth it. In Barcelona, where many tourists might start, there are so many important and popular sites, such as the Familia Sagrada or the Gothic cathedral, but the true jewel which mostly remains hidden proves to be the oldest medieval monastery, Sant Pau del Camp (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sant_Pau_del_Camp), just a little set off of the bustling tourist attractions and shopping areas. It is, despite, or rather just because of its simplicity, truly charming, tranquil, and meaningful for anyone looking for a location of peace in the middle of this major bustling Mediterranean harbor city. Similarly, in famous Pamplona, there is, of course, the highly advertised Running of the Bulls, but the pilgrims arrive on the northern end of downtown and hike up the hill through a medieval tower and gate. Many other medieval sites dot the urban landscape and invite the visitor to rest and to study more attentively, especially the barrio called La Navarrería, where the cathedral is also located (<https://visitnavarra.info/visitnavarra/en/pamplona-medieval/>).

But sometimes the royal splendor such as in the cathedral of Burgos can overwhelm the tourist or the pilgrim especially when his/her interest is focused on spiritual matters. And in Santiago de Compostela itself, it quickly proves to be truly worth searching for some of the medieval churches a bit further away from the city center and thus to leave the majestic cathedral behind, such as the twelfth-century Church of Santa Maria la Real del Sar somewhat below the main part of the center near the Sar River. The combination of the small and often overlooked sites with the major cathedral (<https://www.packing-up-the-pieces.com/camino-de-santiago-cathedrals-churches/>) during one's visit of this amazing pilgrimage center promises to transform the touristic endeavor into a true learning experience. One can focus either on the architectural dimensions or the artistic features, and then one is also invited to search for the encounter with the spiritual elements contained in all those monuments out of stone, and this

even irrespective of one's own religious orientation, if any.

Another major example confirming the value of travel predicated on the desire to enter a different world and to find oneself just there would be the little German town of Wismar on the Baltic Sea, just half an hour east of the major city of Lübeck. Irrespective of the size, both cities belonged to the Hanseatic League that existed until the late sixteenth and early seventeenth century [5]. While Lübeck is not off the beaten path, Wismar certainly seems to fall by the wayside, but a truly curious and historically interested traveler would greatly enjoy a visit there.

Apart from the fact that the harbor was one of the inspirations for the famous movie "Nosferatu" by F. W. Murnau (1922), based on Bram Stoker's Dracula novel from 1897, the medieval and early modern city center prides itself with charming architecture from the various centuries. Throughout the city, the visitor can explore numerous medieval churches (St. Nicholas, St. George, St. Mary; cf. https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/Churches_in_Wismar) many of them displaying outstanding artworks. Most interesting and valuable proves to be the Hospital Church of the Holy Spirit (hospital church dedicated to the Holy Ghost) with outstanding interior ceiling paintings (foundation in the thirteenth century, fully developed only hundred years later) and a most intriguing Deo-Gracias-Fresco consisting of a painted board of 99 squares with letters inscribed in them. The phrase 'Deo Gracias' (thanks be to God) can be read in 504 different ways, demonstrating the intellectual power of combinatory skills. It is, as far as we can tell, the only one in Germany, if not in Europe [6]. The visitor also finds him/herself confronted with numerous other historical artworks (stained glass windows, the pulpit, choir stalls, etc.) of extraordinary quality. Brick stone buildings characterize the old cityscape, and many houses originate also from the post-medieval periods, which makes this little and at first unassuming town to an urban pearl on the coast of the Baltic Sea. Extensive restorations everywhere after the reunification of the two Germanies in 1990 and so also in Wismar have preserved much of the historical architecture; hence, the tourist can expect to be pleasantly surprised about this extraordinary opportunity to dive into the pre-modern past in religious, historical, architectural, and artistic terms. Commerce and spirituality worked hand in hand in this community, very similar to many other cities belonging to the Hanseatic League.

The most important art-historical site in medieval German might well be Wienhausen, a little village near Celle, in the Brunswick district. But it is not well known even among German travelers although the artworks produced there in the Cistercian women's monastery are most stunning and have always evoked greatest respect and admiration. During the age of the Protestant Reformation, the territorial Duke Ernest of Brunswick-Lüneburg forced the nuns in 1531 with military might to convert to the new religion, but he allowed them in turn to preserve their community, so we face here a great anomaly, a Protestant 'convent.'

Still during the Middle Ages, the nuns created some of the best paintings and textile art north of the Alps, especially the nuns' private chapel (Nonnenchor) in which every spot on the walls and in the ceiling is covered with paintings depicting scenes from the Old and the New Testament, often called the 'Sistine Chapel north of the Alps.' Moreover, the nuns created, sometime in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, stunning tapestries, some of which show an image of world history and one the story of Tristan and Isolde, best told by Gottfried von Strassburg in ca. 1210 [7] (for practical information, see <https://www.kloster-wienhausen.de/index.php?id=2>). Subsequent to the visit of Wienhausen and the exploration of all this religious art, the visitor can enjoy the nearby town of Celle with its stunning center dominated by half-timbered houses, a city hall, and a variety of churches.

From here, we could easily investigate countless other medieval sites all over the European continent. The tourist does not need to acquire academic expertise to enjoy them and can simply view them on site, whether in Portugal or in Lithuania, whether in Norway or in Greece. But wherever we look, we discover a unique aspect, that is, a direct challenge for the visitor to take a deep dive into the Middle Ages through a close study of historical buildings, spaces, sculptures, and countless artworks that have survived until today. As in my previous study, I can only recommend to look up smaller towns, remote castles and monasteries, to walk the path of medieval pilgrims, to climb up to the very top of the towers of Gothic cathedrals, to examine the hidden treasures in the various churches or city halls, and thus to look into a historical mirror that may shed more light on ourselves in that process.

Traveling to expose oneself to those medieval sites, objects, texts (manuscripts, often illuminated), and images opens many gates not only toward the foreign world/s, but also those toward an inner dimension lived by our forebears. The encounter with the Middle Ages or the early modern age certainly deepens and strengthens one's own quest for spirituality, whether one is religious or not. Pilgrimage has always been of high value for those with an open mind and a desire for the growth of one's own self in spiritual terms.

I do not want to dismiss many of the glorious medieval cities or castles such as Heidelberg, Tübingen, Marburg, Bamberg, Bremen, or Goslar. In fact, one can find much medieval art also hidden in modern cities, such as Bochum and Essen, Koblenz and Freiburg, and then in virtually all other European countries. All I am suggesting here is to reflect more profoundly on the meaning of travel and its actual purpose because it represents, in its ideal manifestation, an enormously important vehicle for self-exploration and the discovery of new dimensions resting deep inside of us.

Similarly, we can expect parallel experiences when the traveler embarks on a visit to Japanese or Indian temples, Moroccan or Egyptian mosques, and also when one goes on a tour of the

world-famous Machu Picchu, the 15th-century Inca citadel in the southern Peruvian Andes. The discovery of unique sites where our predecessors had already striven to get into touch with their God promises to yield far-reaching spiritual realizations, whether we think of Stonehenge in England or the stave churches in Norway. The same might happen today when we tour the late medieval Indian settlements in modern-day Arizona or Colorado which the Sinagua people had to abandon around 1450 due to the lack of water [8]. The experience possible there is deeply associated with authenticity and cultural identity.

In this sense, it would not matter if we searched out a Buddhist temple in Nepal and Bhutan or a Cistercian monastery such as the Abbaye Notre-Dame de Sénanque in the southern Provence. As attractive as touristic cruises might be that crisscross the entire globe, especially because they come along with extensive comfort and pleasure, the true traveler is, of course, well advised to look for the local culture, the people in the rural locale, the mountain dwellers, the monks and nuns, the Gothic artists and architects, and thus to discover on his/her own a world that was often intimately engaged with the quest for the divine, and thus existed at the threshold between the material and the spiritual. A visit to the Middle Ages thus promises to result in a personal transformation, a growth in heart and mind. A sensitive traveler will hence never return home the same way s/he had left. A new person comes back, infused with the exposure to another culture, language, religion, aesthetic, and ways of life. The experience with

the medieval world always promises to serve as a catalyst for the individual maturation process and possibly also the development of one's own spirituality, however one might conceive of it.

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