

Pilgrimage and Relics

In medieval Catholicism, people believed that when you died there were three paths that you could follow.

1. If you had lived a perfect life (had no sin) you'd go directly to heaven
2. If you didn't repent/confess your sins, you'd go directly to Hell
3. Most people were somewhere in between – they had repented and confessed their sins and as a result went to Purgatory on the way to Heaven. In purgatory their soul was cleansed until it was pure enough to go to Heaven. How can you reduce the amount of time you spend in purgatory? Indulgences, pilgrimage, or other special religious duty

What is a pilgrimage? A religious journey

Why did people in the Middle Ages go on pilgrimages?

1. People felt a need to see holy places – it made religion more real – even better, if you could touch something connected to a holy event
2. Penance – when you commit sin, you must confess and do something to make up for your wrongdoing (penance); pilgrimage was a form of penance – the more serious the sin, the longer the journey; Murders might have to carry the murder weapon tied around their neck as an outward sign of their sin
3. Healing – saints/relics performed miracles and improved health
4. Obtain indulgences – like merits that reduce time in purgatory
5. Professional Pilgrim – someone wealthy might hire someone else to pilgrimage for them
6. Tourist – often this was the only chance for people to travel (the word pilgrim literally means stranger); travel in groups for safety; some places, like Jerusalem, had groups that organized travel, food accommodations and guided tours for pilgrims; tourists could buy postcards, badges, luxury goods

Some pilgrims left behind graffiti to show where they'd been

Some people went on pilgrimages to visit relics. There are two types of relics:

- A. Ordinary objects that come in contact with holy people or places (could find or make your own – rub a piece of cloth on a tomb, dust from the Holy Land); often carried in small containers called reliquaries and hung around pilgrims neck to show dedication to God
- B. Actual part of a saint – piece of bone, hair, head – it was believed that the spirit of a saint stays alive in their remains

Thieving and Faking

- As more people started visiting relics, the business of trading relics made it hard to verify their authenticity
- To minimize theft they displayed relics in special boxes called reliquaries
- Pilgrims were expected to leave or offer as much money or jewels as they could (or there could be consequence)

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Before the Journey

- Going on pilgrimage in the Middle Ages was not a decision to be taken lightly and required preparation. Aside from saving money, before they left, pilgrims were required to pay all their debts, write a will, make apologies and settle arguments. If one was undertaking the journey as an act of penance, she had to make a full confession before departure. Finally, she needed the blessing of a local priest. In front of the priest, a person would vow to complete her journey or face excommunication. The priest would then bless her and her pilgrimage accoutrements.

Clothing

- Medieval pilgrims had a uniform they wore to identify themselves as pilgrims. This was important because being a pilgrim gave you, theoretically anyway, right of passage, allowed you to sleep and eat in monasteries for free and protected you from being robbed or attacked. Of course, this wasn't always the case, but nevertheless, all pilgrims donned an identifiable pilgrim's outfit that was blessed by the priest before they departed. This included a wide-brimmed hat, a staff, a scrip or purse to carry money and food and a robe called a scapular.

On the Journey

- During the course of the journey, aside from stopping at monasteries or hostels to eat, pray and spend the night, pilgrims would also stop at smaller shrines to make prayers, view relics and receive blessings. Particularly devout or serious pilgrims undertook constant prayers as they walked "The Way," as the route to Santiago de Compostela was called, referencing specific prayer books for this purpose and carrying portable altars.

At the Shrine

- Once the pilgrim reached his destination shrine, the design of the cathedral itself dictated how he would worship and what he would do. Pilgrims walked along the aisles to an ambulatory, or pathway that circled the perimeter of the church, which was lined with chapels that the pilgrim would stop and pray at before honoring the central relic. This was so the pilgrims didn't disturb regular services. Before leaving, the pilgrim received a small, cheap lead badge to prove he had completed his journey. From Jerusalem, he would receive a palm; from Rome, a set of keys; and from Santiago de Compostela, a shell. The last was pinned on the pilgrim's hat as he set off for home.