

Pilgrimage

by Helena Guzik

A pilgrimage is a devotional practice consisting of a prolonged journey, often undertaken on foot or on horseback, toward a specific destination of significance. It is an inherently transient experience, removing the participant from his or her home environment and identity. The means or motivations in undertaking a pilgrimage might vary, but the act, however performed, blends the physical and the spiritual into a unified experience.

Origins

The origins of pilgrimage are difficult to determine, but deliberately visiting powerful sites is a practice that predates antiquity. Pilgrimages have long been a common feature of many world religions, including Christianity, Judaism, Islam, Buddhism, Hinduism, and Shinto.

Motivation

A believer might undertake a pilgrimage in fulfilment of a vow, as atonement for sins, as a gesture of thanks for positive events, or as a means of intercession, among other reasons. Prior to the age of exploration in Europe, pilgrimage was a primary impetus for travel, especially among non-elites, and played a significant role in local economies and the transmission of culture.

Christian pilgrims

In the Christian pilgrimage tradition, the practice revolves around visiting either sites significant in the Bible — particularly those concerning the life of Christ — or in the lives of saints, or paying reverence to holy relics.

The three main destinations of Christian pilgrimage are Jerusalem, Rome, and Santiago de Compostela, and for most

pilgrims throughout history reaching these sites was a prolonged and possibly dangerous endeavour. However, smaller and more local pilgrimage sites — such as Canterbury Cathedral in England or the Holy House of Loreto in Italy — also enjoyed great popularity.

Although the twelfth century is largely considered to have been the golden age of Christian pilgrimage, it remained a devotional practice throughout the following centuries.

Pilgrimage persists

Evidence of pilgrimages throughout history still surrounds us, if one knows where and how to look. In art, pilgrims are often recognizable by their attributes: staff, cloak, large-brimmed hat, small satchel (a "scap"), flask, worn boots, and the scallop shell. Many museum collections also include the types of small, personal items that a pilgrim would have brought back from his or her journey, such as badges, or flasks (called "ampullae") filled with holy water or oil.

Pilgrimages still enjoy great popularity today, although the definition of what constitutes an 'authentic' pilgrim is debated. The modern pilgrimage, while still a strictly religious exercise for many, has also been embraced as a more fluidly spiritual experience, open to all participants, regardless of their beliefs.