

“THANNE LONGEN FOLK TO GOON ON PILGRIMAGES”

(Chaucer: General Prologue to the *Canterbury Tales*, l.12)

They come, they come from all climates and nations of the world and even further away, French, Normans, Scots, Irish, Welsh, Teutons, Gascons, those from Navarre, Basques, Provincials, Anglo-Saxons, Britons, those from Cornwall, Flamands, Frisians, Italians, those from Poitiers, Danes, Norwegians, Russians, Sicilians, Asians, Indians, Cretans, Jerusalemers, Antiochans, Arabs, Moors, Lybians, and many others of all tongues, who come in companies or phalanxes and they all sing in unison to the Apostle.¹

The writer who was so impressed by the coming together of the nations to venerate the Apostle was describing the popularity, in the middle of the twelfth century, of the pilgrimage to Santiago de Compostela in Galicia to venerate the body of St. James the Great, one of the most important of the medieval pilgrimages, and one that can still be retraced by anyone interested in seeing for himself the nature of a journey that figures so prominently in medieval history and literature.

According to a relatively late tradition of the seventh century, based on a scribal error in an apocryphal list of St. James' mission-fields,² the Apostle had preached in Spain. Spanish scholars of the period, such as Isidore of Seville and Julian of Toledo, were either sceptical of the tradition or ignorant of it, but it was pursued by an eighth century Spanish theologian from the Asturias, St. Beatus, and his energetic insistence that St. James preached in Spain and was the Spaniards' protector and patron undoubtedly paved the way for the mysterious discovery of the body round about the year 810, during the reign of Alfonso II, king of the Asturias from 791 – 842. The body, buried in the place which was to become Santiago de Compostela, was revealed to some shepherds by a star, having lain there, forgotten, since two disciples of the Apostle had brought it back to Spain after his death at the hands of Herod Agrippa. The Bishop informed Alfonso, Alfonso informed the Pope, and with astonishing rapidity Santiago Matamoros (St. James the Moor-Slayer) became the rallying symbol for the Christian reconquest of Spain, and the shrine at Santiago an object of pilgrimage, so popular that by the twelfth century it rivalled those of Rome and Jerusalem.

No one knows how many made the pilgrimage each year before the Wars of Religion in France and the Reformation undermined its popularity, but in England in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries kings customarily licensed whole boatloads of pilgrims. In the Holy Years of 1434 and 1445, when St. James' Day (July 25) fell on a Sunday, Henry VI of England licensed 2,310 and 1,700 pilgrims.

Some went more than once, and some for reasons less than spiritual. Andrew Boorde in the sixteenth century went twice in a spirit of scepticism, on the first occasion coming to the conclusion that there was not a single hair or bone of St. James in Compostela, and on the second losing all seven of his companions, who died from eating fruit and drinking water from which Boorde self-righteously (and wisely) abstained. The most famous of literary pilgrims, the Wife of Bath, went three times hoping to find a husband. John of Gaunt made the journey mainly for military reasons. Louis VII's main concern was to discover if his second wife, Constanza, daughter of Alfonso VII, was illegitimate. And of course, there were vagabonds, thieves, outlaws, professional minstrels, pedlars, and beggars who took advantage of the charity offered to genuine mendicants.

Contemporary guide books were free with advice, not always encouraging, of how best to cope with life along the pilgrim road. The Poitevin, Aimery Picaud, from Parthenay-le-Vieux, is predictably chauvinistic about the quality of the wine. He is depressing about the quality of the rivers, most of which (especially in Spain) cause instant death in man and beast if drunk from, and as he moves south from Poitou through Gascony and Navarre, he finds very little good to say about the social and moral habits of the native population:

The Gascons are frivolous, talkative, full of mockery, debauched, drunken, greedy, dressed in rags and they have no money Sitting around the fire they have the habit of eating without a table, all drinking from the same cup. They eat an enormous amount, they drink wine without it being watered down and are very badly dressed. They have no sense of shame and the master and mistress lie down along with their servants on a pallet of mouldy straw.³

Those of Navarre are, if anything, even worse:

These people are badly dressed and they eat and drink badly; with the people of Navarre the entire household, servant and master, maid and mistress, all eat from the same cauldron in which all food has been thrown. They eat with their hands without using spoons and all drink from the same goblet. When one watches them eating one is reminded of dogs or pigs gulping gluttonously; and listening to them talk sounds like dogs barking [They are] full of wickedness, black in colour, with ugly faces, debauched, perverse, perfidious, disloyal, corrupt, drunkards, expert in all deeds of violence, fierce and savage, dishonest and false, impious and rude, cruel and quarrelsome, incapable of any decent sentiment and used to every vice and iniquity.⁴

In Picaud's eyes, the terrain through which the pilgrim passes is no more inviting than the people. In Spain there are the mountains; in France, the Landes, for which the following advice is necessary for those crossing in summer:

Do be careful to protect your face from enormous flies which abound here, and which are called wasps or gadflies; and if you are not careful with your feet you will find yourself almost up to the knees in a sort of marine sand which invades the place.⁵

And throughout the journey, adding insult to injury, the pilgrim is plagued with corrupt toll and tax collectors '[who] should be consigned to the devil'. Only near Santiago itself do things begin to improve, for:

The people of Galicia are, above all the other uncultured races of Spain, those who are closest to our French race in their customs.⁶

But even Galicia is not perfect. The people are, he continues, 'inclined to anger and chicanery'.

The Englishman William Wey, who made the journey three hundred years later, in 1456, had a more practical outlook, recommending that the pilgrim should take a small saucepan, a frying pan, dishes, cups, and other domestic necessities.⁷

A few years later there was another guide, written by Arnold von Harff of Cologne as part of his description of a grand pilgrimage through Italy, Syria, Egypt, Arabia, Ethiopia, Nubia, Palestine, Turkey, France and Spain, undertaken between 1496 and 1499. He was sceptical about many of the relics he was shown and about the tales of miracles he was told, he complained continuously about the tolls and taxes, the poor quality of the inns, the high prices, the lack of Christian spirit, the general perfidy of the people, and the barbaric justice of the country:

Item in Spain they administer very strong justice. The evil doer is bound against a lofty pillar sitting on a wooden stick with eyes uncovered, and they mark his heart by a piece of white paper. Then the criminal's nearest relation has to shoot first then the other next of kin, with a cross bow until he is dead. Further they hang women criminals by the neck on a gallows or a tree. The clothes are tied below the knee. We saw many such hanging beside the roads after this manner.⁸

But he, too, has a practical interest, and provides a list of Basque 'tourist words and phrases': numbers 'one' to 'ten', words for 'innkeeper', 'bread', 'wine', 'water', 'meat', 'cheese', 'salt', 'oats', 'straw', and useful, everyday phrases such as, 'Who is there?', 'How much is that?', 'God give you good morning [evening]', and 'Beautiful maiden, come and sleep with me.'⁹

If the pilgrims chose not to sleep with beautiful maidens, they could take refuge in the pilgrim hostels, some of which, such as Alfonso VIII's Hospital del Rey just outside Burgos, or the Hospital de los Reyes Católicos, founded in Santiago by Ferdinand of Aragon and Isabella of Castile, are still standing today, the latter having been converted to a

luxury hotel. Alternatively there were the monasteries that were established along the routes, and sometimes shelter even in the precincts of the church itself, as in the little Romanesque chapel at Eunate, near Puente la Reina, where the pilgrims probably sheltered under the now roofless exterior gallery. Those who were sick could be tended, and for those who died there were funerary chapels along the way, such as those at Eunate and Torres del Río on the Castile-Navarre border.

But there were restrictions. In order to control the demands of untrustworthy beggars who tried to take advantage of the system, various hostels and monasteries imposed limits on the length of time pilgrims could stay. The Hospital del Rey in Burgos, one of the largest and wealthiest, imposed a limit of two days, and a daily ration of 20 ozs. of bread, 12 ozs. of meat with bone or 10 ozs. off the bone, 16 ozs. of red wine, along with certain other food such as chick peas and bacon. Not every hostel was as generous, and staying at the Hospital del Rey was not without its dangers. A fifteenth century visitor reported seeing a pillar erected to mark the spot where a prior was killed by arrows after poisoning one hundred pilgrims.¹⁰

The routes themselves were fairly well defined, particularly, of course, in northern Spain, where they converged just before pilgrims entered the town of Puente la Reina, where one of the main streets still follows the line of the pilgrim way and leads one past the church of Santiago and over the cobbled, hump-backed, eleventh century bridge, built for the pilgrims by Doña Mayor. From here the pilgrims went westwards through Estella, Logroño, Sto. Domingo de la Calzada, Burgos, Castrogeriz, Frómista, Carrión de los Condes, Sahagún, Mansilla de las Mulas, León, Astorga, Ponferrada, Villafranca del Bierzo, El Cebreiro, Sarria, Puertomarin, Mellid, and Santiago. Common detours took the pilgrim south to San Millán de la Cogolla near Sto. Domingo de la Calzada, and to Sto. Domingo de Silos near Burgos,¹¹ and for those who found it convenient, from the thirteenth century onwards, there was an alternative, though never very important, route to Santiago along the north coast, joining with the main route near the end of the journey.

In France four main routes had been established by the mid-twelfth century, according to the Codex Calixtinus. The most westerly passed through Tours, Poitiers, Aulnay, Saintes, Blaye, Bordeaux, Saint Sever, Ostabat, Saint-Jean-Pied-de-Port, and crossed the Pyrenees by the Ibañeta Pass and Roncesvalles. There were variations, of course, notably at the northern end of the route. Pilgrims came from Paris, Rouen, and the Channel coast, and an even more westerly branch came from Mont-Saint-Michel, passed through Rennes, Angers, and Parthenay, and joined the main route at Poitiers. The more central French route began at Véze-lay and passed through Périgueux to Ostabat and Roncesvalles, and another began at Le Puy and passed through Conques and Moissac before meeting the other two at Ostabat. The most southerly route of all (St. Gilles, Montpellier, Toulouse) crossed the Pyrenees by the Somport Pass and joined the others just outside Puente la Reina.

English pilgrims, of course, did not always travel across France. Some went by sea to Soulac at the mouth of the Gironde, or landed farther up-stream at Bordeaux. Others, like William Wey, went direct to La Coruña. But the sea journey was not always an easy alternative. William Wey's crossing took eight days, and a fifteenth century poem graphically describes the extreme discomfort of the seasick pilgrims who crossed to Bordeaux. They could not eat, they could not cease groaning for their sickness and bad headaches, and they could not be separated from their sick-bowls. Furthermore:

... when that we shall go to bedde,
the pumpe was nygh oure beddes hede,
A man were as good to be ded
As smell therof the stynk!¹²

Even then, on arrival, they had spared themselves only the easier part of the overland journey. They still had to cross the Landes, the Pyrenees, the hot plain around Sahagún, the mountains of León, and the daunting Cantabrians, before reaching Santiago.

It is still very worthwhile today to travel the pilgrim route as I did this summer, following the Camino Francés, or Via Turoniensis, in common with those English pilgrims who chose the overland route. Of course it has changed, almost beyond recognition in parts. There are good roads in France and roads, though not good ones, in Spain. The Landes are forested; some villages of major importance in medieval times are now small and decaying, with only churches or castles, sometimes in ruins, as reminders of their former glory; some Romanesque cathedrals have been replaced by later, more flamboyant ones; churches have been altered, and villages have been overwhelmed by modern towns. But there are still more than enough churches and cathedrals, castles, bridges and medieval towns, wayside crosses and chapels, monasteries and hostels to give one a strong sense of the unity and continuity of the pilgrim route. And the difficult terrain through which one passes, especially in Spain, exacts unbounded admiration for the determination and courage of those who undertook the journey on foot, for whatever reason.

In France along the Via Turoniensis evidence of the pilgrim route is more scattered than it is in northern Spain and it appears to be less well supplied with great Romanesque churches and monasteries than the more central and southerly routes. The area suffered greatly, of course, in the Wars of Religion, and it may be that this route, presumably used only by some English pilgrims and those who lived in western France, was never as well endowed as the others. Even so, the importance of Poitiers, Melle, Aulnay and Saintes along the pilgrim route is testified by the number and magnificence of their Romanesque churches, and Picaud's own town of Parthenay still preserves a strong sense of its medieval origins and its connections with the Way of St. James. The thirteenth century Bridge and Gate of St. James by which pilgrims entered the town are still standing, and one can then walk, as they did, along the rue de la Vaux-St-Jacques between half-timbered houses that straggle along the foot of a hill dominated by the ruins of the medieval walled citadel.

There are comparable pilgrim villages still existing in Spain: Puente la Reina; Estella, known to pilgrims as 'Estella la Bella', a town which owes its very existence to the route, and where the street used by the pilgrims passes between the twelfth century church of San Pedro de la Rúa and the Romanesque palace of the Kings of Navarre; Villafranca del Bierzo, famous for its church of Santiago where, at the north door, facing the pilgrim road, those who were unable to complete the journey could receive the same absolution as if they had travelled the whole distance. And there are others where, although the sense of the completeness of the medieval village has been lost, several surprisingly grand Romanesque churches still show how important the town had been along the route. Such is Sahagún, situated by a river crossing on slightly rising ground in the hot plain, with its ruined monastery and many towering churches built of rose-coloured sun-baked bricks.

There are, of course, along the way, many other things to be enjoyed even by those who do not have a vivid historical imagination. León alone offers the eleventh century basilica of San Isidoro, famous for its frescoes, the old monastery of San Marcos, connected with the Order of Santiago since the twelfth century, and a Gothic cathedral noted for its sculpture and stained glass windows. And there is Santiago itself, with its narrow medieval streets, its churches and pilgrim cross, its hostel, its scallop shells carved on the walls of buildings and, dominating it all, encased in its huge Baroque shell, the great Romanesque cathedral, justly famed for Master Mateo's *Pórtico de la Gloria*, carved between 1168 and 1188, showing the Apocalyptic vision of Christ in Majesty and the serene figure of St. James at His feet, pilgrim's staff in hand, but seated at the end of his journey.

Those with architectural interests can observe the artistic unity of the route in the Romanesque churches and the affinities between the cathedral in Santiago and the great pilgrim churches in France: St. Martin in Tours, St. Martial in Limoges, St. Rémy in Reims, St. Sernin in Toulouse, or notice a different kind of unity in the tiers-point scalloped arch of the decorated portals, a detail derived from the Moors and transmitted along the Camino Francés so that it can now be seen in Estella, Cirauqui and Puente la Reina in Spain, and in the Saintonge and Poitou regions in France.

But whatever may be the main interest of the twentieth century traveller who retraces the pilgrim route, there is one characteristic of the Way of St. James which no one can ignore. From the French border almost to Santiago there are hills and mountain ranges with few valleys or fertile plains to encourage those on foot. The only respite pilgrims would have had, if respite it may be called, was the inhospitable hot and dry plain around Castrogeriz and Sahagún. For those who successfully crossed the Pyrenees by the Ibañeta Pass, the lower of the pilgrims' two mountain passes, and who then survived the mountains around León, there was worse to come in crossing the Cantabrians. Something of the loneliness of these windswept heights can still be recaptured along the pilgrim road above the Piedrafita Pass (1,099 m.) where, in an exposed position, perches the pilgrim village of El Cebrero, famed for its ninth century

mountain church and its low, drystone and thatched houses (pallazas) which go back in construction to ancient Celtic huts. It is no wonder that, while the modern road climbs to the head of the valley, quickly crosses the mountain top at Piedrafita, and immediately follows the steep valley road down the other side, repeating this pattern elsewhere as often as may be necessary, the pilgrim route, formed by those on foot, follows the mountain tops and between mountain and mountain loses as little height as possible.

It may well be, as the author of *Piers Plowman* suggests (C Text, Passus VI, 198–99), that many would have been better spending their energy on seeking Saint Truth at home than seeking Saint James in Galicia, and when one thinks of the Wife of Bath, or reads the medieval pilgrim guides, one cannot avoid seeing the pilgrims to Santiago as Western Europe's first tourists. But for whatever reason they went, they went in great numbers and for hundreds of years and left their mark on literature and history and on the countryside through which they passed, and it is still possible to rediscover for oneself what it was that those who longed to go on pilgrimages found when they went:

..... for to seken straunge strondes,
To ferne halwes, kowthe in sondry londes.
(Chaucer: General Prologue to the
Canterbury Tales, ll.13–14)

NOTES:

1. Translated from the Codex Calixtinus by T.A. Layton, *The Way of Saint James or the Pilgrims' Road to Santiago* (London, 1976), p.15. The Codex Calixtinus, or *Liber Sancti Jacobi*, was written in Latin in the mid-twelfth century. The fifth book (the fourth book in some MSS), the guide for pilgrims to Santiago, was written by Aimery Picaud, but the codex as a whole is associated with the name of Pope Calixtus because a letter by him, probably apocryphal, serves as a preface. For the sake of convenience, I have quoted from Layton's English translation throughout this paper.
2. V. and H. Hell, *The Great Pilgrimage of the Middle Ages: the Road to St. James of Compostela*, with an introduction by Sir Thomas Kendrick (London, 1966), pp.13–14. I am indebted to Kendrick's introduction for much of the information in this paragraph and the two following.
3. Layton, p.203.
4. Layton, p.204.
5. Layton, p.203.

6. Layton, p.205.
7. Layton, p.17.
8. M. Letts (ed.), *The Pilgrimage of Arnold von Harff* (Hakluyt Society: London, 1946), p.269.
9. Letts (ed.), p.267.
10. Layton, pp.123–24.
11. A worthwhile detour for the modern visitor is to Orense, south-east of Santiago, where the cathedral has a south door modelled on that of the *Pórtico de la Gloria* in Santiago. It has lost its tympanum, but it is remarkable in that it retains most of the vivid colouring of the Middle Ages. In most churches the colouring has been lost and one is accustomed to picking out sculptured detail only with difficulty. The door at Orense demonstrates how very much easier it was to see detail high above one's head when the colours guided the eye. The coloured capitals in the Romanesque churches of Poitou make the same point.
12. 'The Pilgrims Sea-Voyage and Sea-Sickness', ll.69–72, ed. F.J. Furnivall, *The Stations of Rome and the Pilgrims Sea-Voyage*, Early English Text Society, OS 25 (1867).

(Dr. Hill is Lecturer in Old English Literature at the University of Leeds.)