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Pilgrimage: Pagan Journeying

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The word 'pilgrimage' tends to evoke certain images. They may be of medieval penitents walking foot-sore to Canterbury or Compostela, Muslims on the *Hajj*, or Hindus washing in the Ganges. Some may remember heartily singing "to be a pilgrim" in school assembly. Usually associated with the major organised religions, pilgrimage is something Pagans do too.

But what is pilgrimage? Is it the same for Pagans as for Christians or Muslims? Or is it just New Age tourism?

In fact, it is as old as humanity's spiritual strivings. Ancient places of sanctity have always attracted people to them. Pilgrimage was big in ancient Greece and Rome. It is another thing that Christianity adopted from existing Pagan practice.

Pilgrimage is more than tourism. A visitor is not the same as a pilgrim, neither is a holidaymaker. Pilgrimage is transformative. The American Jewish novelist Cynthia Ozick writes:

"A visitor passes through a place; the place passes through the pilgrim. A visitor comes either to teach or to learn, or perhaps simply and neutrally to observe; but a pilgrim comes on purpose to be taught renewal."

Medieval Christian pilgrimage had an emphasis on penitence, abstinence and suffering on the journey. These things can be the beginning of transformation – as of course can their opposites – but to assume they have to be part of pilgrimage is to confuse the transformation with the process.

Transformation occurs on many levels. It may not require spiritual breakdown and reintegration. Equally, such profound transformation can be found on the alchemical quest, without setting foot out of doors.

How, then, does pilgrimage differ from the quest? Pilgrimage is more likely to be religious, devotional and ordered, a physical journey in the outer world, to a definite geographical destination, often in the company of others and returning with physical tokens.

The quest, on the other hand, tends to be magical, self-developmental and unpredictable, an imaginative journey in the inner worlds, open-ended and with an uncertain destination, usually alone and returning with inner gifts.

But these are not hard and fast. The words are labels applied to a spectrum of ideas that merge and overlap. Pilgrimage and quest are two sides of the same coin, presenting different facets of the same journey. Indeed, John Bunyan's *The Pilgrim's Progress* is very much an inner journey, a spiritual quest for eternal life, as conceived of by the 17th century non-conformist Christian. It is interesting to note that the original words of his famous hymn, 'Who would true valour see', speak to people of many religious perspectives, not only Christians.

The idea of a journey is of course closely tied to spiritual progress. Solar deities ride chariots or sail barques across the sky and through the night-world, leading souls to new life. Bridges and ladders link the mundane world with that of the Gods, who walk Middle Earth and create human life.

Metaphors such as path or way are commonplace, and we all know what is said to be paved with good intentions! To Bunyan, pilgrimage was a metaphor for the journey through life and into the next.

Bunyan was an iconoclast, breaking away from the perceived idolatry of the established Church, so his interest in pilgrimage could hardly be expected to be in the physical journey to shrines. Yet people today visit Bedford to see the traces of his life there. Would he be saddened, or pleased that people still take an interest in what he had to say?

I once found myself walking a path in Bedfordshire that is promoted as the John Bunyan Trail. A swallow, my first of the year, swooped by and followed the hedgerow into the distance. One of the epic migrations, the life of the swallow is a pilgrimage. Perhaps that is where it all started, with the honouring of local spirits and traditions at the stations of an annual nomadic round.



Aquae Sulis, Bath – still a place of pilgrimage.
Picture: Chris Wood.

Some Australian Aborigines still manage to practise the traditional rituals at sacred places on their seasonal migrations, places where the inner life-force of the land is most potent. They feel the continuity across the years, across generations, right to the Dreaming.

Pilgrimage demands a genuine openness to the landscape through which one is moving. It is through meditative awareness that one observes and hears the wisdom of the deities and the spirits of the land. On pilgrimage, the landscape is usually unfamiliar, which helps, as synchronicities are more readily found where not looked for. This observant, contemplative state can only be achieved and maintained whilst moving slowly, in contact with the land.

Walking is perfect. The pace is slow and connection with the land is total. Cycling and horse-riding are also good; one has to be aware of the behaviour of horse or bicycle, and of traffic, but the pace still allows the contact to be made. Driving is problematic due to the combination of speed, concentration on the road and being enclosed in a vehicle.

Buses and trains are in between, going at speed and preventing direct contact with the landscape, but not requiring concentration on the act of travelling. Interesting things can be glimpsed at least. By all means use a vehicle to travel the longer distances, but real benefit is gained by moving slowly through the landscape. Rushing to a sacred place by the quickest means is tourism, not pilgrimage.

Whether it is the pilgrim route to Compostela or Canterbury, the nomadic course taken by the ancestors, the Quest for the Holy Grail, or Bunyan's progress to eternal life, what is important is the journey. The pilgrim leaves the shrine to journey home, the nomad's path is a circuit, the Grail is always out of reach, and eternal life is a state of realisation, not stasis.

The end of every journey is the beginning of another.

References

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Appendix: The magic of souvenirs

It seems to be part of human nature to want to retain some physical object as a connection with a special place or event. Pilgrims have always left for home with souvenirs. Sadly, in the past as today, some are selfish enough to chip away pieces of stones, shrines or statues. It was this sort of vandalism that led to the appearance of the Medieval trade in pilgrims' signs or tokens in the 12th century.

Such signs, stitched to hats or cloaks, had practical value in offering genuine safe passage for pilgrims on their homeward journeys, even in times of war. They also gave prestige and proof that a person had actually done what they had set out to do. But, more than this, they were regarded as holy in themselves through having been in direct contact with the relics or tomb of a saint.

Where the focus of veneration was kept out of reach, often due to the pressure of numbers, the use of simple mirror magic appeared. People would catch the image of a relic in a mirror which would then be charged with some of its power, or the image would be reflected onto a token, or food to be eaten.

However charged, signs were used as amulets for protection on the way home and to bring healing and other blessings to pilgrims themselves and to their friends and families. They were often buried in fields or placed in wells to bring abundance or weed-free crops, and placed in the home as apotropaic devices. Healing remedies could be made by dipping signs in water or wine to be drunk.

The pre-eminent pilgrims' sign is the badge of the scallop shell, which began as the genuine article at the shrine of St James at Santiago de Compostela in Spain. Its form inspired countless other badges, usually made of low-grade pewter. Others portrayed figures of saints or symbols, such as the sword that killed St Thomas Becket.

It was Canterbury that made souvenir holy water containers popular. People have always gathered water from sacred springs and rivers, but this holy water, it was believed, contained an infinitesimal portion of the blood of the murdered bishop, thoughtfully gathered by the monks who discovered him. The water was believed to effect cures, and the practice soon spread to other shrines, although remaining a particularly English phenomenon.

The containers, called *ampullae*, were usually small, flat, bag-shaped, lead phials. Filled with holy water at the shrine and touched to the saint's tomb or relic, they were worn hung around the neck.

As well as being protective amulets, ampullae were a way of bringing direct healing to those sick at home or libations to the fields. Many of those found today are broken, opened in antiquity for their contents, as with the ampulla on the left in the accompanying picture.



Over time, the popularity of pilgrims' signs led to their imitation in other ornamentation, such as the pewter belt-studs shown. One is based on the scallop shell, the other on the symbol of the Jerusalem Knights of the Holy Sepulchre. As with all imitative ornament, a little of the power of the original is harnessed, according to the belief – or the magical charging – of the maker and wearer.

Today's Pagan pilgrim has many souvenir options available, from bought trinkets to found items. Any of these can be of value, although perhaps the best are natural objects. They are a real connection to a special place or time, and as such provide a solid link for effective inner journeying to that place.

Healing or other magical effect can be brought with such items, according to the pilgrim's intent. It is still widespread practice to gather water from sacred springs and even at Aquae Sulis, in Bath, where sanctity is officially played down, sealed bottles of "Bath Waters" can be bought.

However, one person's continued link with a place should not lead to its damage or depletion. Ask yourself and your otherworldly contacts if you really should take a found item. You will get an answer, one way or the other. When in doubt, take nothing but memories and, where appropriate, photographs.



**Collecting water at Chalice Well, Glastonbury.
Picture: Chris Wood.**

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