

The “Whole Thing”: Perceptions of Time, Distance, and Completeness among Pilgrims on The Camino De Santiago

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Abstract

When travelers recount their experiences of a route-based pilgrimage such as the Camino de Santiago (Way of St. James) in Spain, they often field a series of questions regarding the distance traveled and/or the time taken to complete the ritual: “How long did it take?”, “How far did you walk?”, “Where did you start?”, “Did you do the whole thing?”. Aside from the pragmatic curiosities of interlocutors, these questions (particularly the final one) reveal a fundamental misunderstanding of the pilgrimage ritual, presupposing an artificially restricted path travelled by pilgrims. In practice, pilgrimages routes -- their trajectories and distances -- were unique to each traveler, beginning and ending at one’s doorstep. The questions also expose an implicit value judgment in which greater distances traveled as part of the ritual, a faster pace or more time spent, and a sense of the journey’s “wholeness”, make a pilgrimage somehow better and more authentic. As regards the ritual of pilgrimage, how do pilgrims (and others) value dimensions of distance, time, and completeness? How have perceptions of these dimensions shifted over the centuries? To whom are these dimensions of the ritual important, and for what reasons?

Keywords: Camino de Santiago, pilgrimage, distance, time, pace, embarkation point, completion

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My presentation today explores the following questions: As regards the ritual of pilgrimage, how do pilgrims (and others) value dimensions of distance, time, and completeness? How have perceptions of these dimensions shifted over the centuries? To whom are these dimensions of the ritual important, and for what reasons?

I come to this topic as a practitioner of pilgrimage, and more recently as the director of a college program that invites students to walk the Camino de Santiago --

though, notably, not “the whole thing”. As my students repeatedly encountered questions from fellow pilgrims about the temporal and spatial dimensions of their journey, they reported feeling judged by the questioners, and it was a challenge for them to resist the feeling that their pilgrimage, a 270 kilometer journey on foot from Astorga to Santiago de Compostela with all of its concomitant struggles, was somehow “less than”, somehow incomplete.

As I am still processing my personal experiences with these questions, and as my research on the topic will continue beyond this conference, I will appreciate your thoughts, suggestions, and questions during the Q&A session.

Where to begin the journey, which path to follow, expectations as to distances and time required traveling those same paths — these vital details were provided in the earliest guide texts to pilgrimage routes, such as book V of the 12th century *Liber Sancti Jacobi*. This same information was equally likely to pass between past and future travelers by word of mouth. In many cases, then, these details served a pragmatic purpose, allowing a ritual initiate to repeat the steps that an experienced pilgrim successfully took before them.

Among contemporary scholars, this sort of measurable information also may be exchanged for purposes of replication, though in a different sense. Take for example the study published by kinesiologists Harris and Wolf, “Cardiovascular Disease Risk Following a 758 km Pilgrimage” (2013). Here, specifying the distance traveled (758 km), the consecutive days of activity (30), and the average daily distance covered by the participants (25k/day) makes perfect sense given the intention of the research: to uncover the measurable impact of a particular physical activity on health risk factors. If the researchers failed to make plain any one of these dimensions of the study, the value of their results would be diminished as they could not be reliably replicated.

Still others who inquire as to the distance traveled or time spent by a pilgrim may intuit that the geographical and temporal aspects of the ritual do seem, at least theoretically, to have an impact on the ritual’s transformative spiritual potential. Victor and Edith Turner write in their seminal work *Image and Pilgrimage in Christian Culture* that “The point of it all is to get out, go forth, to a far holy place” and that along the way the “trials of the long route will normally have made the pilgrim quite vulnerable to” the transformative effect of pilgrimage (1978, pp. 7, 11). Turner and Turner define a pilgrim as “one who divests himself of the mundane concomitants of religion--which become entangled with its practice in the local institution--to confront, in a special ‘far’ milieu, the basic elements and structures of his faith in their unshielded, virgin radiance” (Turner and Turner, 1978, p. 15). Turner and Turner’s use of scare quotes around the word ‘far’ indicates an ambiguous use of the word, an opening of its meaning to interpretation beyond the literal.

One might ask, given this theoretical framework, what constitutes ‘long’? How ‘far’ is far enough? As part of a ritual such as pilgrimage one must travel long

and far enough from home to become what Turner calls a liminal entity, one who is temporarily removed from customary norms, rights, and responsibilities during the ritual period (Turner, 1969, p. 95). The distance traveled to achieve liminality is not so much physical or geographical as it is social and spiritual, so as to remove oneself from the structure of everyday life and relationships.

Those familiar with the distance decay function from geographical studies of human movement--that there tends to be greater movement and interaction between closely situated places than between far-away places--may note that travel associated with pilgrimage both adheres to and deviates from theoretical expectations. As Robert Stoddard and Alan Morinis note, "On the one hand, ...traveling is undertaken merely to get to a sacred place and long distances deter many potential travelers... On the other hand, when movement itself is regarded as a form of worship or sacrifice, the role of distance may differ from the usual distance decay function. Distance is no longer regarded as a hindrance to travel, but instead, it becomes an opportunity because movement is something valued" (Stoddard and Morinis, 1997, p. x).

Regarding the road to Santiago de Compostela in the Middle Ages, Simon Coleman and John Elsner observe that "The fact that the area was difficult and dangerous to reach increased its attractions to those who regarded perilous journeys as meritorious" (Coleman and Elsner, 1995, p. 106). Linda Kay Davidson agrees, writing that "Pre-modern pilgrimage was an arduous spiritual journey to a holy place. Its arduous nature made it a sacrifice. ...For pre-modern pilgrims, suffering was an offering" (2014, p. 177).

To cover such distances, to remove oneself from that which is familiar, was in the middle ages as it is today "not a thing to be lightly undertaken" given the costs and risks associated with long-distance travel (Sumption, 1975, p. 175). For the medieval pilgrim, the road to Rome, Jerusalem, Compostela, or any other far-flung pilgrimage destination was "filled with hazards" (Stokstad, 1978, p. 29). For earlier pilgrims, dangers included bandits/thieves (or pirates, if a sea voyage figured into the equation), wild animals, unfamiliar and unmarked terrain, poor road conditions, the availability of food and potable water, unfavorable weather conditions, etc. A "longer" journey, then, meant "more" exposure to risk. Such is also true for the contemporary pilgrim, although the dangers we face today are fewer, and many are mitigated and/or managed by infrastructural entities. The longer journey also implies, just as they did during centuries past, greater financial cost when the expenditures required to make the trip are combined with one's lost income during the time spent away from home. Together, these considerations make long-distance travel not only a sacrifice, not only a show of bravery, but also a *privilege*, as the resources necessary to make the long journey were/are not available to all.

Concerning the dual factors of time and distance, the time required to cover a static unit of distance can vary greatly due to mode of transportation, the physical ability of the traveler, weather conditions and difficulty of the given terrain (Bailey,

2012, p. 300). Perhaps due to its stability, it is ultimately distance, not time, that becomes institutionally codified. In the early twentieth century, many pilgrims took motorized forms of transportation to the city of Santiago de Compostela, “walking only a short processional distance from the Plaza to the Cathedral. In 1915 and 1920, more than 90 per cent of the tallied pilgrims came from the Archdiocese of Compostela” (Davidson, 2014, p. 168). From this data, Linda Kay Davidson concludes that “[t]he journey had been devalued” by acknowledging a visit to the cathedral from any distance (2014, p. 168). By the late twentieth century, the Catholic Church decided to limit “the conferral of the Compostelana to only those pilgrims who has walked a minimum of 100 kilometers” and by further requiring that pilgrims provide proof of their journey on foot by presenting a credential with two official stamps per day of the journey (Davidson, 2014, p. 173). The fact that the Church felt it necessary to make such a distinction between the truly dedicated from the day-trippers serves to standardize and codify an otherwise highly individual and variable sacred journey.

Marilyn Stokstad writes that “By the twelfth century the land route of the pilgrims across northern Spain was well established. The pilgrims traveled through France on one of four major roads” (Stokstad, 1978, p. 18-19). Designated starting or entrance points in France were popularized in part by the account of Aymeric Picaud in his so-called *Pilgrims’ Guide*, book V of the *Liber Sancti Jacobi*. The text names particular towns in France from which a pilgrim may cross the Pyrenees into Spain, most likely to mark the safer, clearer paths to travel and the towns that would have accommodations for travelers (not because starting in any of these places was a requirement set forth by the Church or any other institutional power). The designation of certain embarkation points was then, and remains today, a matter of convenience. Prescribed routes, fashioned through way-marking and cartography, are designed to keep pilgrims from losing their way, keep them from crossing into private property, and keep them in proximity to businesses and resources which can meet their needs.

Picaud’s guide provides many helpful recommendations to the would-be medieval traveler to Santiago de Compostela (place names, sources of potable water, etc.), although the information given is highly biased and irregular. More importantly for the topic at hand, the *Pilgrims’ Guide’s* “geographical scope is inevitably limited”, not accounting for the starting-points of European pilgrims from beyond France, not to mention those who would have to (or would choose to) complete a portion of the journey by sea (Webb, 2002, p. 127). Furthermore, Diana Webb notes that the *Pilgrims’ Guide* “cannot and does not convey an adequate impression of the maze of side-roads and by-ways which pilgrims everywhere undoubtedly used opportunistically according to their individual places of origin and incidental purposes” (Webb, 2002, p. 127). Finally, we must remember that medieval roads were “obviously not changeless,” but rather complex and living phenomena at the service of their users (Webb, 2002, p. 133).

Nonetheless, the writings and traditions of medieval pilgrims are often used, deliberately or inadvertently, to establish patterns that are then followed by contemporary pilgrims. Recent Camino exemplars such Shirley MacLaine, Paolo Coelho, Hape Kerkeling, figures in the films *The Way*, *Six Ways to Santiago*, and most recently *I'll Push You*, all begin walking from St. Jean Pied de Port. Their accounts inspire countless readers and viewers, and are further reinforced by the best-selling guidebooks. In turn, these media messages are internalized by aspiring pilgrims like Phil Volker.

After a cancer diagnosis initially kept him from walking the Camino de Santiago in Spain, he decided to recreate the journey in the form of hundreds of laps around a half-mile walking path on his 10-acre property in the Pacific Northwest of the United States. A sign on the path explains that Volker walked “909 laps to equal 500 miles *or the length of the Camino de Santiago in Spain*” (Barush, 2016, p. 71, emphasis mine). One is certainly struck by Volker’s remarkable commitment, and may also take note of the wording of the sign on his property. What authority dictates that the Camino de Santiago (as if there were only one) spans exactly 500 miles? The answer, of course, is none. Volker could have calculated and then walked the distance in miles between his home in the Pacific Northwest and the city of Santiago de Compostela, then *doubled* that number, which would have been more in keeping with the traditional notion of pilgrimage as beginning *and ending* at one’s doorstep (although he would have needed to account for the ocean journey as well, a further challenge).

The example of Phil Volker, and that of so many others, demonstrates that the pilgrim’s optimal route is not determined by customary “time-distance or cost-distance” analyses of human movement, but rather is defined by the perceived sanctity of the path (Stoddard and Morinis, 1997, p. x). Pilgrims from across the globe often choose to begin their pilgrimage to Santiago de Compostela in the French town of St. Jean Pied de Port, not for its convenience, nor out of obligation, but because it is what so many others have done before them in recent decades, those who wish to do “the whole thing.”

The last of these questions – “Did you do the *whole* thing?” – lacks the precise, quantitative character of the other questions relating to distance covered, time taken, and starting point. Rather than solicit the passing of measurable, functional information from one pilgrim to another, at best the question may indicate the enquirer’s awe of the traveler’s perseverance, his/her commitment to and achievement of a goal, or may reveal a desire to find common ground when asked by one experienced pilgrim of another; nevertheless, the question exposes a fundamental misunderstanding of the ritual of pilgrimage. The notion of completing “the whole thing”, to the extent that it refers to following a recognized route beginning from a designated starting point, presupposes a restricted path available to pilgrims and implies a singular or standard pilgrimage experience. Theoretically and traditionally, a pilgrimage route--its trajectory and distance--is unique to the traveler, beginning and

ending at one's most fundamental point of departure: home.

At worst, the question of “the whole thing” communicates a comparative value judgment that is likely inherent in the preceding questions: that greater distances traveled and/or more time expended as part of the ritual, and a sense of the journey's *wholeness* or completion, make a pilgrimage somehow better, more impressive, and/or more authentic. The question, like the others discussed in this presentation, could reveal a spirit of competition that often emerges in interactions between pilgrims. I have written elsewhere about the competitive spirit that the pilgrimage ritual can produce, to the extent that certain resources and benefits are perceived to be scarce: space on the road, food and lodging, seats in a house of worship, the kindness of locals, favor or respect in one's home community upon return, and even God's blessings conferred upon pilgrims. If these resources are (perceived to be) scarce, and if access to those resources is (perceived to be) earned, then questions that invite comparison between pilgrims may subconsciously seek to determine who is more entitled to the spoils of the endeavor.

According to Victor Turner in his foundational monograph *The Ritual Process*, rites of passage such as pilgrimage tend to deemphasize the importance of “distinctions of status, property, age, sex, and other natural and cultural differentiae” (1969, p. 189). One or several of these factors is likely to influence an individual traveler's starting point, distance traveled, and/or pace of movement, and thus ought to be deemphasized among participants in the context of the ritual. And yet, we persist in asking these questions.

The *de facto* understanding of the “whole thing” in the context of the Camino de Santiago has come to be the trail known as the *Camino Frances* departing from the French side of the Pyrenees in St. Jean Pied de Port and ending in Santiago de Compostela. Yet, such an assumption does not account for the infinite differences between each pilgrim's “whole” sojourn, all of the movements from the moment of their departure from home until their return. Simon Coleman and John Elsner describe each pilgrim's unique journey this way: “Imagine that reaching the goal of a pilgrimage is like attaining the summit of a mountain. The path of any one pilgrim treads only on a single slope and cannot but exclude the views of the other faces. Nor can the climber be fully aware of the other tracks mapped out in the same terrain by pilgrims of the past and future” (1995, p. 6). Absent an operational definition of the “whole thing” that makes sense for a majority of interlocutors, the question is an impossible one.

Should we strike the question from our repertoire, then, for its lack of precision and competitive undertones? Should experienced pilgrims reframe or recast the question when asked by the uninitiated, to provide a gentle correction to their understanding of pilgrimage in its purest sense? Or, should all pilgrims simply take the question at face value and give an honest answer? Have you traveled from home with the purpose of visiting a sacred site, reached that site and engaged in some sort of ritual behavior, and returned home again? If so, then no matter where you began

the journey, what distance you covered along the way, or how many days, weeks, or months it took you to get there, you have indeed done “the whole thing.”

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