

Spiritual Geographies: Pilgrimage, Sacred Space and Geopolitical Meaning

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Abstract: This article explores pilgrimage as a spiritual practice performed across geopolitical landscapes that are historically layered and ideologically contested. Based on a diachronic reading of three prominent travelogues representative of their historical contexts—Egeria's Travels (4th century), The Book of Margery Kempe (15th century), and Kathryn Harrison's The Road to Santiago (2013)—the article argues that pilgrimage persists not because sacred sites themselves remain stable in meaning, but because such places are continuously re-signified through the pilgrims' embodied movement and textual reconstruction. Across changing historical and geopolitical contexts, pilgrimage emerges as a performative practice that repeatedly re-writes space into meaning, negotiating tensions between spirituality, power and cultural identity.

Keywords: pilgrimage; sacred space; spiritual geography; travel writing; ideology

Introduction: Mapping Spiritual Geographies

When on a journey, one should occasionally lift one's gaze from the road to the horizon into which it fades—not in order to escape one's path, but in order to understand what kind of territory it charts. Travel writing, perhaps more than other literary forms, records not merely movement through space, but the articulation of meaning across landscapes that are always already inscribed and anticipated. The itineraries of travel writing thus point beyond

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geographical routes toward horizons shaped by intersecting cultural frameworks and shifting ideologies.

One of the oldest and most persistent forms of travel, pilgrimage seems to resist change as it reiterates meaning in/on apparently the same way. From ancient times to present day, pilgrims have walked similar routes and have written themselves into comparable accounts. Yet this continuity is only apparent. The sacred routes and sites of pilgrimage have never been neutral; they are historically layered and ideologically contested. As Jérôme Monnet noted, a place becomes symbolic not by virtue of its materiality, but because it mediates “the relationship between space, power and identity.”² Pilgrimage sites are therefore as much informed by configurations of power and ideology as they are by spiritual pursuits. Pilgrims’ routes do not simply cross territories; they symbolically organise them, connecting spiritual itineraries to historical configurations of religious, political and cultural authority.

Then, the persistence of pilgrimage calls for a more nuanced explanation than the endurance of sacred itineraries. This article argues that pilgrimage survives not because the sites remain stable in meaning, but because meaning is continuously reclaimed through the pilgrims’ embodied movement. Thus the emphasis shifts from place to performance. Pilgrimage is approached here as an interpretive performance that dynamically produces and reconfigures its meaning within changing historical and geopolitical contexts.

1. *Sacred Space as Performance*

The perspective assumed in this article is that space is not meaningful in itself but becomes so through processes of signification, as argued by Aurel Codoban among others.³ Places are thus understood as nodes within networks of meaning which are discursively constructed on an ongoing basis. Spiritual geography exemplifies this process: it emerges within a cycle of narratives and

² Jérôme Monnet, “The Symbolism of Place,” *Geographical Review* 101, no. 4 (2011): 652.

³ Aurel Codoban, *Semn și interpreta* (Cluj-Napoca: Editura Dacia, 2001).

practices that render certain places spiritually significant within given religious traditions.

In line with Michel de Certeau's distinction between place and space, according to which "space is a practiced place"⁴, pilgrimage can be understood as a practice that constructs space through embodied movement. The route becomes meaningful not because it exists, but because it is repeatedly travelled and narrated. Pilgrimage thus emerges as a re-enactment of inherited meanings, in new contexts. Such meanings are embedded in larger historical structures that regulate access, legitimacy and symbolic authority.

In this process, travel writing plays an essential role by specifically articulating the relation between space and self across historically configured landscapes. Travelogues do not merely record journeys; they textualise them into cultural and ideological meaning. As such, travel writing integrates personal and cultural-historical dimensions, enabling a subject-centered negotiation of identity and symbolic authority.

Travel writing as a genre constructs this room for negotiation through its double relation to reality or, in Lawrence Buell's words, its "dual accountability": to the world and to the imagination.⁵ By combining referentiality with literariness, travel writing is required to offer both external verifiability in its references to the outside world, and self-sufficient internal coherence and cohesiveness.

As a signifying practice, travel writing transforms spatial movement into textual meaning – and vice versa. In pilgrimage accounts, this double movement becomes particularly visible: itineraries are structured by pre-existing narratives that designate specific routes as sacred, while the travel account re-enacts and confirms that designation. Pilgrimage accounts thus foreground the relation between physical and symbolic movement, as well as the tensions inherent in interpretation and the spiritual quest.

⁴ Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, trans. Steven Rendall (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984), 117.

⁵ Lawrence Buell, *The Environmental Imagination: Thoreau, Nature Writing, and the Formation of American Culture* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 1995).

In *The Sacred and the Profane*, Mircea Eliade conceptualises sacred space as constituted through hierophany, that is the manifestation of the sacred in the world. Such manifestations transform homogeneous space into a structured and meaningful cosmos.⁶ In this framework, pilgrimage appears as a movement toward established sites of meaning, a return to the center. Where sacred space is given, the role of the pilgrim is to partake of a pre-existing meaning.

This perspective, which apparently accounts for the persistence of pilgrimage, presupposes a stability of sacred space that is nevertheless challenged by pilgrimage accounts, which show spiritual practices to persist even in contexts where religious belief or a sense of transcendence is no longer acknowledged. Such “post-secular” perspectives focus on the displacement of the spiritual from sacred sites to lived experiences.⁷ In this light, pilgrimage does not constitute a movement toward stable centres of meaning but a practice through which spiritual meaning is continuously pursued or reinscribed.

Then, what appears as fixed could rather be understood as repeatedly stabilised through performance. Spiritual geographies persist precisely because they are continuously reinscribed.

2. *Early Pilgrimage: Egeria and the Scriptural Space*

One of the earliest preserved accounts of Christian pilgrimage, *Egeria's Travels* or *Itinerarium Egeriae* (4th century) illustrates a form of pilgrimage structured by the interdependence between text and space. Egeria's journey to the Holy Land is guided by Scripture, which functions as the sole framework for interpreting the traveled landscape.

Egeria's pilgrimage unfolds within the colonial geography of early Christianity under the late Roman Empire. The identification of sacred sites across politically and culturally fragmented territories simultaneously produces a symbolic

⁶ Mircea Eliade, *The Sacred and the Profane: The Nature of Religion*, trans. Willard R. Trask (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1959), 21.

⁷ Jürgen Habermas, “Notes on a Post-Secular Society,” *New Perspectives Quarterly* 25, no. 4 (2008).

mapping of Christian authority onto Eastern lands, transforming Scripture into an ideological framework for reading space.

A recurrent pattern in Egeria's account consists in the identification of a site followed by the reading of a relevant passage from the Bible: "And so we came to the place where the Lord ascended into heaven... and there we read the passage from the Gospel."⁸ Spatial arrival is immediately followed by textual confirmation, suggesting that the site only becomes meaningful through its correlation with Scripture. In other words, spiritual geography is dictated by Scriptural authority.

This correlation is explicitly articulated elsewhere: "Everything that is written in the holy books we saw fulfilled in those places."⁹ The journey unfolds as a ongoing process of confirmation, in which geography validates the authority of the text and the text, in turn, validates the travel experience; together, text and place confirm the spiritual identity of the pilgrim. Pilgrimage thus becomes an act of Scriptural reading.

At the same time, the constant need to identify and confirm sacred sites suggests that meaning is not self-evident. The landscape requires interpretation, and this interpretation is mediated by prior textual knowledge. Spiritual geography is not simply encountered but actively constructed through pilgrimage.

Egeria's account also foregrounds the collective dimension of pilgrimage. The traveler's constant use of the first-person plural and the explicit address to a community of sister readers suggests that pilgrimage is embedded in shared practices of meaning-making. Writing extends the communal dimension, confirming spiritual geography as a collective construct within an institutionalised narrative.

3. Medieval Pilgrimage: Margery Kempe and Internalised Space

The Book of Margery Kempe (15th century) illustrates a shift in the understanding of pilgrimage, placing emphasis on embodied, affective experience. While Kempe follows established routes to the

⁸ Egeria, *Travels*, 3rd ed., trans. John Wilkinson (Warminster, UK: Aris & Phillips, 1999), 23.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 45.

sacred sites of Christianity, the account is less concerned with identifying place than with expressing emotional effect. In this sense, sacred space becomes internalised as experience.

Kempe's pilgrimage reflects the mapping of religious authority within medieval Christendom, signifying the pilgrim's participation in a transnational religious order. From Jerusalem to Santiago, Kempe's routes connected distant places across geographically fragmented territories into a shared symbolic geography, reinforcing the institutional authority of the Church. At the same time, Kempe's confrontations with clerical suspicion illustrate the extent to which access to pilgrimage routes was mediated by religious legitimacy, class and gender.

The intensity of the pilgrim's emotional responses comes against social expectations, foregrounding a tension between religious fervor and the communal standards regulating the practice. Kempe's description of her own behavior is telling: "She cried and roared so loudly that many people wondered what ailed her."¹⁰ Pilgrimage becomes an affective process that may disrupt social norms and highlight tensions between individual devotion and institutional expectations, allowing "a release from the obligatory norms" of social structure.¹¹

The pilgrim's experiences are frequently framed as direct dialogue: "Our Lord said to her, 'Daughter, why weepest thou so sore?'"¹² The passage suggests a form of authority that is based on self rather than place, though occasioned by the latter. Thus pilgrimage is less a confirmation of sacred space than a site of interior transformation.

At the Holy Sepulchre, Kempe writes: "Then she wept full bitterly, beholding our Lord's precious body lying before her."¹³ The site is identified, but its significance derives from the pilgrim's own reactions and ecstatic experience. Spiritual meaning is

¹⁰ Margery Kempe, *The Book of Margery Kempe*, ed. Barry Windeatt (London: Penguin Classics, 2004), 52.

¹¹ Victor Turner and Edith Turner, *Image and Pilgrimage in Christian Culture: Anthropological Perspectives* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1978), 35.

¹² Kempe, *The Book of Margery Kempe*, 89.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 134.

apprehended through embodied response. Kempe's consistent use of the third person singular points to a narrative distance suggesting that the spiritual experience requires textual mediation even at the level of self-reference.

Kempe's internalisation does not eliminate sacred space; it reconfigures it. The routes and sites remain relevant, yet their meaning is no longer derived solely from their association with Biblical events. Instead, they function as a background for a personal and highly emotional experience, which becomes the primary locus of spiritual meaning.

4. Contemporary Pilgrimage: Kathryn Harrison and Secular Engagement

Kathryn Harrison's *The Road to Santiago* (2013) revisits pilgrimage within a contemporary, post-secular context marked by personal engagement. Post-secular does not imply the absence of spirituality, but its detachment from institutionalised religious belief. Harrison's journey along the *Camino* is informed by an awareness of its historical and religious significance, yet it is also marked by critical distance and self-reflection.

The *Camino* reflects the contemporary transformation of pilgrimage routes into transnational cultural corridors shaped by heritage politics and tourism. Harrison's pilgrimage unfolds across a spiritual geography that has become institutionalised and commodified as cultural heritage. Sacred space is absorbed into a sort of a European cultural project, promoted through transnational policies. The pilgrimage routes are mapped and marketed as part of a shared European heritage that symbolically reconnects regions otherwise fragmented by linguistic, cultural and political differences.

The contemporary pilgrim reflects on her motivation for the journey: "I walk because others have walked, because the road is there, because I want to know what it means."¹⁴ The statement invokes the tradition of "others", the materiality of "the road" and

¹⁴ Kathryn Harrison, *The Road to Santiago* (New York: Random House, 2013), 7.

the interpretation of “meaning”, highlighting the layered nature of her contemporary pilgrimage.

Harrison frequently acknowledges the presence of previous pilgrims: “Every step I take feels borrowed.”¹⁵ This introduces a trans-personal dimension to her undertaking; the route becomes a palimpsest, shaped by accumulated past meanings that inform present experiences.

The spiritual experience of pilgrimage is phrased by distinguishing between belief and engagement: “I do not know if I believe, but I know that I am moved.”¹⁶ The contemporary pilgrim is “moved” – displaced, challenged, engaged. Spiritual meaning emerges through this layered movement rather than through adherence to an established path.

Harrison also notes: “We walk together, but not for the same reasons.”¹⁷ This plurality of motivations that bring contemporary pilgrims along the *Camino* indicates a shift from shared belief or quest to individual pursuit. Spiritual geography becomes an individual performance sustained by a sense of heritage, foregrounding a pilgrimage culture supported less by doctrinal coherence than by temporary communities of practice.

5. *Contested Landscapes: Pilgrim Ideologies*

If pilgrimage produces meaning through spatial and textual movement, it also participates in the symbolic organisation of geopolitical space. Pilgrims’ accounts reveal sacred landscapes to be historically and culturally layered; their meaning is often shaped by diverging religious narratives and conflicting cultural and political contexts.

Jerusalem and Santiago as centers of pilgrimage illustrate this contested condition. To the East, the holy city of Jerusalem stands as the segregated centre of overlapping religious claims; to the West, Santiago features the historical violence of politicised religion. In fact, pilgrimage cannot be separated from the

¹⁵ Kathryn Harrison, *The Road to Santiago* (New York: Random House, 2013), 56.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 112.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 89.

geopolitical conditions that define its sites and spiritual geography does engage with broader power structures and ideological configurations.

Pilgrimage accounts render such ideological configurations especially visible. In describing the expected and unusual sites on their itineraries, travelers confirm and/or refute previous texts and mainstream discourses, while shaping future expectations and responses. When travelers keep their silence, they eloquently signal divergent narratives and cultural gaps.

Pilgrims' travelogues foreground encounters with the immanent other. Even in places with shared religious and cultural traditions, descriptions of human encounters often highlight difference. And when sacred routes cross through contrasting/conflicting traditions, pilgrimage abounds in representations of the other—whether linguistic, cultural or religious. In the three pilgrimage accounts read above, the other takes a range of guises, from the external difference of the travelees in Egeria's Holy Land and the shared difference of Harrison's fellow travellers to the internalised alterity in Kempe's ecstatic journey.

Holding a mirror to their time, *Egeria's Travels*, *The Book of Mary Kempe* and *The Road to Santiago* foreground distinct regimes of meaning: Egeria privileges the textual authority of Scripture, Kempe favours the affective authority of mystical experience, and Harrison points to a reflexive authority of personal engagement. These shifts correspond to changing relationships between self, knowledge and narrative, highlighting broader ideological transformations. Against this background, pilgrimage emerges as a performative practice that palimpsestically reflects shifting historical configurations while re-inscribing space with spiritual meaning.

Conclusion: Meaningful Pilgrimage

This article has argued that the practice of pilgrimage persists not because sacred sites and routes remain unchanged, but because they are continuously resignified. Across pilgrimage accounts, sacred space reveals to be a dynamic construct shaped by the ideologically mediated interaction between self and space.

The accounts offered by Egeria, Kempe or Harrison each reflect (on) how spiritual geography is constructed as part of the larger networks of power and ideology. For Egeria, place makes sense according to Scripture; outside the holy text lies nothing worth inscribing. For Kempe, direct knowledge and internalised meaning are prioritised; paradoxically, no 'I' remains in her ecstatic experience. For Harrison, pilgrimage reads as heritage on the route of a shared yet individual quest.

The comparison of Egeria, Kempe, and Harrison's travelogues illustrates both continuity and transformation in the performance of pilgrimage. While the routes and resulting textual structures persist, the ideological frameworks through which they are interpreted change significantly. As these travelers reinscribe sacred space through their geographical and textual movements, they also rewrite (themselves into) narratives of religion, power, mobility and gender.

Across historical contexts, pilgrimage has also functioned as a subtle geopolitical practice. Sacred routes organise symbolic relations between centres and margins, between community and alterity. Egeria's Christian East unfolds within the geography of the late Roman Empire; Kempe's itineraries follow the institutional networks of medieval Christendom; Harrison's Camino reflects a contemporary European project of shared cultural heritage. In each case, pilgrimage reveals the extent to which spiritual geography partakes of larger historical configurations of power.

At the same time, pilgrimage negotiates between sacred space and shifting political realities. Spiritual geography persists precisely because it can be reinterpreted across changing ideological contexts. Pilgrimage routes survive empires, religious and cultural divisions and even secularisation because they are capable of accommodating new forms of meaning as geopolitical space itself is symbolically reordered.

By examining pilgrimage as spatial and textual practice, this article has also shown that travel writing provides a means for understanding how spiritual geography is constructed and maintained across shifting ideological landscapes, in an ongoing human engagement with space as a source of meaning.

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