

PILGRIMAGE
AN IMAGE OF
MEDIAEVAL RELIGION

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'There are three acts in a man's life which no one should advise him either to do or not to do. The first is to contract matrimony the second is to go to the wars, and the third is to visit the Holy Sepulchre. These things are all good in themselves, but they may turn out ill, in which case he who gave the advice will be blamed as if he were the cause of it.'

THE SANCTUARY

The pilgrim was greeted at his destination by a scene of raucous tumult. On the feast day of the patron saint a noisy crowd gathered in front of the church. Pilgrims mingled with jugglers and conjurers, souvenir sellers and pickpockets. Hawkers shouted their wares and rickety food stalls were surrounded by mobs of hungry travellers. Pilgrims hobbling on crutches or carried on stretchers tried to force their way through the crush at the steps of the church. Cries of panic were drowned by bursts of hysterical laughter from nearby taverns, while beggars played on horns, zithers, and tambourines. The noise and vulgarity which accompanied a major pilgrimage changed little from the fourth century, when Augustine of Hippo spoke of 'licentious revels', to the fifteenth, when the French preacher Olivier Maillard demanded an end to these sinful carnivals.

The practice of holding fairs outside churches on the feast days of the saints was too deeply engrained to be eradicated by a handful of moral reformers. Any annual gathering of large crowds was certain to attract merchants and itinerant salesmen. Many of them were selling guide-books, lead badges, or candles. In the eleventh century one merchant expected to make his fortune by selling wax for ex-voto offerings outside the abbey of Conques, and many of those who bought official monopolies of the sale of candles or badges did make fortunes. Every kind of wares was sold outside church doors. Deorinan, a rich London merchant of the late twelfth century, used to bring his entire stock of silks and spices to Bury on the feast of St. Edmund. Some visitors came solely on account of the fair, like the servant-boy mentioned by Reginald of Durham, who attended the celebrations of St. Cuthbert's day in order to find a good price for his horn. Others had both purposes in mind, and thus, remarks Reginald, they were able to atone for a day of usurious commerce simply by crossing to the other side of the cathedral square. The fairs, and their attendant jollifications, were viewed by the clergy with mixed feelings. Augustine had uncompromisingly condemned them, but his contemporary and friend, Paulinus of Nola, permitted

them with reluctance on the ground that misguided piety was better than no piety at all. On the whole it was the latter view which prevailed. Indeed the fairs were often held with the permission of the clergy on land belonging to the church. The monks of St.-Denis drew considerable revenues from the Lendit fairs, which were timed to coincide with displays of the abbey's relics. So long as this remained a typical arrangement there was little point in the constant complaints of ecclesiastical synods against the pollution of churchyards on feast-days by 'games and competitions, rowdy singing, loose women, and lewd songs'.

The inside of the church was almost as noisy as the outside. Here the scenes of mass enthusiasm were reserved for the vigils of the saints, when pilgrims passed the entire night in the nave or by the shrine. The sick were carried in on litters or stretchers, and it was during vigils that most miraculous cures occurred. Vigils were always held on the eve of the saint's feast-day, but in some churches they occurred more often. At the shrine of St. Wulfstan in the Norman abbey of Fontenelle, there seems to have been a vigil every Saturday night. Evesham too had vigils on Saturdays, and scarcely a Saturday passed when some unfortunate was not freed from the bonds of sickness. Except on official 'vigil-days', no one was permitted to watch by the shrine at night. At Mont-St.-Michel not even the night watchman was allowed into the basilica before the morning bell had rung, and at Santiago the doors were locked at sunset. When Pontius de St.-Gilles and his companions arrived in Santiago at night, only a miracle enabled them to enter the cathedral.

The atmosphere which enveloped the shrine of a saint was at its most intense during the vigil of his feast-day. 'Let us prostrate our bodies before their relics,' urged the Canterbury monk Eadmer; 'let us bend our knees to the ground and throw ourselves before them in supplication. What saint in God's court could fail to be moved by such devotion?' At the end of the eleventh century a rich man whose son lay dying came to light a candle at the altar of St. Egwin at Evesham.

'Humbly inclining his head to the ground, he made his offering, adored his God, and prayed with great intensity to St. Edwin for his son's recovery. With tears in his eyes he passed the whole day and the following night in vigil and prayer. Candle in hand, he knelt on the ground, beating his breast until morning came. Then he returned to see his son.'

At Rocamadour the sound of lamentations drowned the words of the Mass. At Canterbury, tears of sorrow and moans of gratitude mingled with the howls and the shrieks of the sick and the newly

healed. Crowds pushed forward to investigate as each new miracle was announced, and the clergy had to force their way through to examine the patient for themselves. At the back of the church the less devout pilgrims gathered in their national groups trying to sleep in spite of the noise and the close heat from thousands of candles. Some of them had brought bottles of wine with them, and as they became more inebriated they began to shout abuse at each other or broke into community singing. At Santiago on the eve of St. James's day 'all sorts of noises and languages can be heard together, discordant shouts, barbarous singing in German, English, Greek, and every other language under the sun.' The 'worldly songs' which so infuriated the clergy of Santiago were a familiar sound wherever pilgrims gathered in large numbers. At Conques the litany was drowned by 'rustic sing-songs', and a special chapter was summoned at the end of the tenth century to consider this 'absurd and detestable practice'. It concluded, very typically, that pilgrims should be allowed to express their devotion in the only way known to them, even though this might strike cultivated persons as 'inappropriate and rude'. Some sanctuaries, like Durham cathedral, employed muscular stewards to keep order. Others, especially towards the end of the middle ages, tried to suppress vigils altogether, or else strove manfully to impose some order on them. But the attempt was a failure, and disorderly vigils remained an inseparable part of the cult of the saints.

At dawn on the feast-day itself, the congregation was turned out of the church, and the pilgrims returned to their lodgings. Auxiliaries cleaned up the mess and prepared for the services of the day. At these services the crowds were larger still, for the pilgrims of the night before were joined by most of the local inhabitants. The simplest techniques of crowd control seem to have been beyond the clergy of the sanctuaries, and accidents were frequent. This was the reason given by abbot Suger for rebuilding the abbey church of St.-Denis in the 1130s.

'As the numbers of the faithful increased', Suger wrote, 'the crowds at St.-Denis grew larger and larger until the old church began to burst at the seams. On feast-days it was always full to overflowing, and the mass of struggling pilgrims spilt out of every door. Not only were some pilgrims unable to get in, but many of those who were already inside were forced out by those in front of them. As they fought their way towards the holy relics to kiss and worship them, they were so densely packed that none of them could so much as stir a foot. A man could only stand like a marble statue, paralysed, and free only

to cry out aloud. Meanwhile the women in the crowd were in such intolerable pain, crushed between strong men as if in a wine-press, that death seemed to dance before their eyes. The blood was drained from their faces and they screamed as if they were in the throes of childbirth. Some of them were trodden underfoot and had to be lifted above the heads of the crowd by kindly men, and passed to the back of the church and thence to the fresh air. In the cloister outside, wounded pilgrims lay gasping their last breath. As for the monks who were in charge of the reliquaries, they were often obliged to escape with the relics through the windows. When first, as a schoolboy, I heard of these things from my monastic teachers, I was saddened and conceived an earnest desire to improve matters.

It was the same in Jerusalem, where hundreds fainted in the airless crush outside the basilica of the Holy Sepulchre on Easter Friday. The author of the *Liber Sancti Jacobi* was present one day at St-Gilles when the crush developed into a riot between French and Gascon pilgrims resulting in at least one death. There were eighteen deaths when the head of St. Martial was displayed in the presence of the Black Prince in 1364. Such incidents were so common that the clergy of St-Gilles and Santiago received special permission to re-consecrate their church immediately with holy water, instead of following the usual elaborate ceremony.

Nor were these the only perils which threatened pilgrims as they stood squashed together before the shrine. There were few exits and fire precautions were non-existent. Thus, when fire broke out in the abbey of Vézelay during the vigil of the feast of St. Mary Magdalene, 1,127 pilgrims were burned to death. Pickpockets thrived. In a typical day at Worcester, one pilgrim lost sixteen shillings to pickpockets, another lost forty. At Fécamp a pilgrim standing on a box to police the crowd had his pocket picked as he did so. Large crowds were not only uncomfortable and liable to be robbed, but usually unable to see or hear what was going on. During the Canterbury Jubilee of 1420, the preacher had to repeat his sermon in four different places so that every pilgrim could hear it.

Public exhibitions of relics were rarer than vigils and, perhaps for that reason, provoked the most spectacular of all outbursts of mass piety. They generally marked moments of national or local crisis. Thus, when Philip Augustus departed on crusade in 1191, the royal abbey of St.-Denis exposed its relics on the high altar, where they were inspected by the queen mother, the archbishop of Rheims, and a cortège of dignitaries. Every serious epidemic occasioned a display of relics. When plague was decimating the population of Rouen in

1053, the body of St. Wulfstan was carried to the city from Fontenelle. The head of St. Martial was publicly exhibited in 1388, the reasons given being that Christendom was divided by the papal schism, that the harvest had failed, and that Limoges had just endured a close siege. The diary of a Parisian citizen in the first half of the fifteenth century reveals that relics were brought out of the churches almost every time that reverses on the battle-fields of northern France threatened the city's precarious food supply. In 1423, for example, the war was going badly and famine threatened. The bishop of Paris 'had processions made for forty consecutive days, praying that God might, by His grace, bring peace to Christendom and calm the weather which had prevented the sowing of the crops for four months past.' In the summer of 1427, when the Seine broke its banks, some five or six hundred people from the suburban villages wound processionally through the streets of the city, barefooted, singing hymns, carrying banners of the saints, and calling on God to have mercy on their vineyards. Lesser catastrophes were marked in much the same way. The monks of Durham used their relics to prevent fires in the town from spreading to the cathedral. Those of St-Gilles hoped to restore their depleted finances by displaying their relics, and proposed to commission an unusually costly reliquary for the purpose. Their hopes were disappointed in the event but they were by no means absurd, for exhibitions of relics could be relied upon to provoke enthusiasm degenerating at times into violence. The crowd which gathered at Bury one Whitsun was so impressed by the relics of St. Edmund that it forced the preacher to show them again. The preacher took this in good part, unlike the monks of Conques who refused to display the relics of St. Foy except at fixed intervals, thus causing riots outside their church. Urban II was asked to forbid the populace to display the relics of Conques without the consent of their owners.

In normal times, displays were rare. The head of St. Martial was displayed only once in seven years, as was the celebrated foreskin of Christ at Charroux. Other churches never displayed their relics. This surprising reticence dates from the beginning of the thirteenth century and was largely due to one of the pronouncements of the Lateran council of 1215. Faced with a number of impostors who claimed to have stolen relics while they were on public display, this council and its successors forbade the exhibition of relics except on feast-days, and then only in a reliquary. Amongst other things, this required a new kind of reliquary, like the one used at Limoges in 1388 with little doors in the side which opened to reveal the head of St. Martial. The legislation of the thirteenth century had been intended to prevent thefts, real or imagined. Its actual result was to

diminish the visual element of the cult of relics, and to invite doubts as to the authenticity or even the existence of some relics. An inquiry into the affairs of the abbey of Vézelay in the 1260s concluded that its revenues had declined owing to the failure of the monks to exhibit the relics of St. Mary Magdalene, thus reinforcing 'certain hesitations and scruples as to the authenticity of the said relics'. Arnold von Harff's doubts about the body of St. James were confirmed when the clergy of Santiago refused to lift the lid of the sarcophagus. 'Any one who does not believe that the body of St. James lies under that altar', they told him, 'will certainly go as mad as a dog.' By this time, however, most churches had abandoned their objections to regular exhibitions of relics. In 1424 Martin V permitted churches to show their relics to the faithful whenever they wished, subject to the characteristic proviso that they were not to do it merely to satisfy the idle curiosity of pilgrims. This was followed by a succession of well-attended public exhibitions, notably in Germany. The visual element was once more respectable.

ROME

When the emperor Aurelian rebuilt the walls of Rome in the year 271 he defined the outer limits of the city for sixteen centuries. The old walls, traditionally attributed to Servius Tullius, had long outlived their usefulness. From every gate of the city thin ribbons of houses, the slums of the poor and the residences of the nobility, had extended into the suburbs, defenceless against attack from outside. Now they were contained by walls eleven miles in length, which remained the principal defence of the city throughout the middle ages. Rome, like many mediaeval cities, occupied but a fraction of the space enclosed by its ancient walls. But although they no longer marked the true limits of the city, Aurelian's walls determined its spiritual geography. Roman law forbade the burial of the dead within the city. Because they believed in the resurrection of the dead, Christians found the practice of cremation repugnant, and they buried their martyrs in deep graves along the roads which led out of the city.

The tradition of the Roman Church held that St. Paul had been buried on the Via Ostia, and St. Peter in the pagan necropolis on the Vatican Hill, north-west of the city. In the reign of Constantine their obscure graves were covered by great basilicas. On the Vatican Hill a cruciform church arose with great speed, arranged (at the expense of all architectural convenience) on an east-west axis, such that the high altar stood directly above the remains of the apostle. It symbolized the triumph over paganism by obliterating part of the circus of Caligula, where many of the early martyrdoms had occurred. St. Paul's was built at a more leisurely pace, and was said to have been even finer. Both of them had broad naves with double aisles on either side. Despite the continual process of repair and reconstruction, they preserved this form throughout the middle ages. At the southern extremity of the city, Constantine donated to the Church a tract of land within the walls, which had once belonged to the Laterani family and was now part of the estate of his wife. It contained a decayed palace which was now reconstructed as the papal residence, and a cavalry school which was transformed into