



IT'S ABOUT TIME 2

In the first of a monthly series of heritage articles published by the National Monuments Service of the Department of Arts, Heritage and the Gaeltacht in conjunction with the Irish Examiner and Limerick Education Centre, we focus on the concept of pilgrimage, the archaeological and historical evidence of its development and its relevance today.

# Pilgrimages' progress traced from the past to present day

**P**ILGRIMAGE as a topic touches on many aspects of human experience. Why did people go on pilgrimages in the past? Were they purely religious journeys? Is pilgrimage a thing of the past or is it still relevant today?

Traditionally, pilgrimage implied a spiritual experience, an act of worship or veneration to give thanks or to pay penance. It involved a journey to see someone or something that had special meaning to a person. If you look closely at the pilgrims of our past, the journeys they went on, and their reasons for travelling, you will find that the traditional view of pilgrimage is not worlds apart from



Could a visit to Barcelona to see Messi play in the Nou Camp be considered a pilgrimage?

modern life and the different forms of 'pilgrimage' we go on today.

Pilgrimage is still very relevant to our lives. Take for example the football supporter who thinks Lionel Messi (above) is the best striker the world has ever seen.

Could a visit to Barcelona to see Messi play in the Nou Camp be considered a pilgrimage?

Similarly the music fan who travels to see their favourite band live in concert. Would you consider this a pilgrimage?

Both are travelling to see someone they look up to or have a connection with, just like the people who climb Croagh Patrick in Co Mayo to follow in the footsteps of St Patrick, or the pilgrims travelling to Santiago de Compostela (see panel below) in Spain to see the Shrine of St James.

In all major religions, pilgrimages



## THE CAMINO

To find out much more about The Camino visit Section 4 of Theme 1, Unit 3, lesson 2 and then see if you can trace the route using interactive mapping.

Are there other routes you can find?

to holy places are well established and many of the routes have been travelled for centuries; Jews visiting the Wailing Wall in Jerusalem, Muslims travelling to Mecca and Christians journeying to Lourdes.

## TOGHERS

Toghers are wooden trackways often found buried in bogs. In Ireland they are most commonly made from oak planks, hazel/alder/birch/willow rods, and sometimes gravel and stone is used as well. Toghers often made crossing a treacherous part of a bog safe for travellers (see picture below).

In Ireland, people have been tracing the footsteps of St Kevin to Glendalough since the early medieval period. There is also evidence to suggest pilgrimage paths such as Croagh Patrick were established in prehistoric times, with some routes later adopted by Christians to become the 'Christian Routes' or 'Patterns' which are familiar to us today.

If we go back in time to the 14th or 15th centuries in Ireland — to Galway and Kerry to be specific — archaeologists have revealed some very interesting



Don't forget your toothbrush! What are your travelling essentials?

See what's in a Pilgrim's backpack in Section 5, Theme 1, Unit 3, lesson 2.

evidence for pilgrimage between Ireland and Spain — but these Irish pilgrims were not going to the Nou Camp!

In 1986 during an archaeological excavation near the medieval cathedral in Tuam, Co Galway, a very unusual discovery was made. The burial of a man, dating to the 14th century, was uncovered — not an unusual discovery at a cathedral, but this was no ordinary burial — and he was no ordinary man. On his hip was a scallop shell which, archaeologists believe, had been attached to a badge or belt that could be worn in a prominent place for others to see.

The scallop shell was worn to set this man apart from others, and to make him readily identifiable (the way a club jersey stands out to other supporters). But what did the scallop shell tell people about him? The scallop shell is the emblem of St James the Apostle whose shrine at Santiago de Compostela in Spain has been a place of pilgrimage since the Middle Ages.

Interestingly, some years later during excavations inside the medieval cathedral at Ardferit in Co Kerry, a similar discovery was made in a 15th century stone-

lined grave. A skeleton was found buried with a scallop shell decoration, but this time it was a replica shell made of pewter, with a tiny gilded figure soldered onto it. The male figure, wearing a long tunic and a broad-rimmed hat, was carrying a satchel and a tall staff. This is known, from historical accounts, to be the typical dress of a medieval pilgrim, making them easily identifiable along their journey.

The discovery of the scallop shell 'badges' with these burials indicates that these were the skeletons of two pilgrims who had travelled to Santiago de Compostela. In fact, they probably purchased these 'souvenirs' at a stall, or from a street seller in front of the cathedral there — something we are very familiar with today.

Today, we can undertake our pilgrimages with relative ease. We all have access to cars and buses and our road network is well established, so it's not too difficult for someone to travel to Munster's home games in Thomond Park. However, for fans travelling to away games overseas, things are not so simple.

While ease of travel has improved greatly and flights are relatively cheap and easy to book, it can still be uncomfortable and stressful, with queues, delays and airport security. For pilgrims travelling in the medieval period things could get very dangerous indeed. Not only did they have to contend with the possibility of stormy seas and shipwrecks, but also with outlaws who preyed on weary travellers, so much so that pilgrims travelling to the Holy Land

in the 14th century had to have their own security.

They were escorted to their destination by skilled, armed protectors in the form of the Knights Templar. It makes travelling to Australia to see the Lions seem like child's play!

For the more adventurous and dedicated pilgrim, such as the journeymen from Tuam and



An example of a togher (wooden trackway) of the type used by pilgrims, at Kilmakill/Longford Pass, Co Tipperary. Picture courtesy of Margaret Keane, NIMS



Pilgrims carry a statue of the Virgin Mary in a candlelit procession in 2004 in Lourdes, France. Pope John Paul II arrived in Lourdes for a two-day pilgrimage at the Roman Catholic shrine; (left) Religious Jews cover themselves with prayer shawls during Passover festivities at the Western Wall in Jerusalem. Following tradition, observant Jews make a pilgrimage to the city three times per year for the ceremony; below, Muslim pilgrims at prayer in front of the Grand Mosque in Mecca. Some 2.5 million Muslim pilgrims descend on the holy city for the annual hajj, but many modern day 'pilgrimages' are of a secular nature and may include travel for sport and music events. Pictures: Getty Images



Ardferit, visiting the tomb of one of the apostles was an un-missable opportunity, a once in a lifetime chance to see something that meant so much to them. The challenge of getting there was part of the process.

## ENJOY A GOOD READ?

See a book called 'Gatty's Tale' by Kevin Crossley-Holland, it's the story of a young girl living in 13th-century England who gets to go on the trip of a lifetime - A Pilgrimage to Jerusalem.

The journey gave a sense of fulfilment and was a memorable part of the ritual, worthy of a souvenir.

Similarly, trying for hours to get concert tickets online and eventually making it on time to the venue makes all the effort worthwhile.

One of the most common reasons for pilgrimage was, and

often still is, to see a relic or a holy place.

Travelling to the Shrine of St James was time consuming and very expensive. There were, however, pilgrimage routes much closer to home. At the ancient monastery at Aghabullogue, Co Cork, the Shrine of St Lachtin's Arm — a highly decorated 12th century bronze relic — was revered and people travelled from all over Ireland to see it, believing that it contained the arm bones of St Lachtin.

In Lemanaghan, Co Offaly, archaeologists discovered part of a wooden crozier, possibly a pilgrim's staff, that had been lost along a wooden trackway (togher) built across the bog to St Manchin's Church, a well known pilgrimage route in early medieval Ireland.

The most common pilgrimages in Ireland were to holy wells on a saint's feast day. For example in Ardmore, Co Waterford, people visited St Declan's Well (pictured right) on his feast day of July 24.

Some holy wells were also thought to possess miraculous properties and many people visited them hoping to cure ailments.

Holy wells are still visited today and people tie rags on nearby trees as an offering or for good

This is the first in a series of articles published by the National Monuments Service of the Department of Arts, Heritage and the Gaeltacht in conjunction with The Irish Examiner and Limerick Education Centre aiming to supplement the recently revised second edition of 'Archaeology in Classroom, Time in Transition'. The resource offers a comprehensive range of engaging lessons across a series of three themes: Worship and Commemoration; Lifestyle and Living; Archaeology at Work. All the lessons are targeted (but not exclusively) at students who are undertaking the Transition Year Option. For a more complete picture of this article it should be read in conjunction with Theme 1, Unit 3, Lessons 1 and 2 of Time in Transition available on [www.itsabouttime.ie](http://www.itsabouttime.ie).

luck (visit [www.archaeology.ie](http://www.archaeology.ie) to find your local holy well).

It is easy to think that 'old' traditions such as pilgrimage are outdated and not very relevant today, but they are still hugely important to people around the world for many reasons.

Pilgrimages have a religious and spiritual purpose and they can represent important and memorable achievements in people's lives.

It could be said that pilgrimage today has also evolved into following and supporting people who inspire us. Whatever the reason, pilgrimage is firmly rooted in our past, and it does

not matter where you live or what religion you have, it is still as important and relevant today as it ever was. Whatever the reason, pilgrimage is an example of how the past firmly influences the present.

Why not make your own pilgrimage? You never know what you may discover.



IT'S ABOUT TIME 2



An Roinn  
Ealaíon, Oidhreachta agus Gaeltachta  
Department of  
Arts, Heritage and the Gaeltacht



Irish Examiner

Limerick  
Education  
Centre  
Ionad Oideachais Luimnigh