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# Walking to be Some Body: Desire and Diaspora on the St. Olaf Way<sup>[1]</sup>

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In 'Walking to Be Some Body' Matthew R. Anderson uses the example of North American Scandinavian-background pilgrims walking Norway's St. Olaf Way to parse the yearning of contemporary diaspora pilgrims who walk repristinated routes along ancient paths toward real or imagined homelands. These travellers literally incarnate contemporary tensions between the religious and the non-religious, the journey and the destination, and between the rootlessness of modern global tourism and the rootedness longed for in community and patrimony.

**Key Words:** St Olaf Way, St. Olav's Way, Pilegrimsleden, Gudbrandsdalsleden, Nidaros, Olaf, Norway, diaspora, journey pilgrimage, destination pilgrimage, walking pilgrimage, tourism, immigration, hyphenated identities, identity, Scandinavian Canadians, Norwegian Canadians, homeland, liminality, ex-pat, Camino, displacement, Canada .

## Introduction: The St. Olaf Way

The St. Olaf Way, called in Norwegian *Pilegrimsleden*, is a medieval Scandinavian pilgrimage route that was rediscovered from the 1970s to the 1990s, waymarked in 1997, and promoted to tourists and pilgrims beginning in the final years of the twentieth century.<sup>[2]</sup> Its main foot-trails consist of two long-distance paths to the city of Trondheim, in north-west Norway. The main route, the ancient *Gudbrandsdalsleden*, leaves from Oslo and heads north, traversing roughly 500 km over some of the highest mountains in the country. A second begins in Sweden. It passes Skanstugan in Jämtland, the last stop before entering Norway, and continues west, eventually reaching the martyr's death site in Stiklestad and ending at the Nidaros Cathedral - Nidaros being the historic name of the church and of the city itself. One other major route is by water, the *Kystpilegrimsleia* or The Fjord Pilgrim Route.<sup>[3]</sup> This route reflects the fact that at the time of the establishment of the pilgrimage, and for many centuries after, the ocean was the most convenient,

common and often safest route for long-distance travel, particularly in the north Atlantic and Baltic Sea regions.<sup>[4]</sup>

The Saint Olaf<sup>[5]</sup> in question was born Óláfr Haraldsson in 995 CE. His father was a descendent of Harold Fairhair, the first 'king' of Norway.<sup>[6]</sup> At the time, local chiefs were the norm; at the turn of the first millennium Norway was just beginning to experience the political and military centralisation required to support kingship.<sup>[7]</sup> As a teenager, Olaf travelled with

4. For a good visual representation of the main and peripheral routes, see Tomasz Duda, 'The St. Olav's Way: The Origin, Nature, and Trends in Development of Pilgrimage Activity in Scandinavia,' *Peregrinus Cracoviensis* 27/1 (2016): 31.
5. The spelling of the saint's name is variable. The Norwegian name can be either Olaf or Olav. Olaf = *Olaf* – Old Norse, Olav = *Olavus* – Latin. The *Passio Olavi*, the official hagiography of the saint, was written in Latin. In Norwegian the routes to Nidaros are collectively called *St. Olavsvegene*, since the Norwegian word for 'way' is *veg*. Unless citing a Norwegian source, English-language spelling is used throughout.
6. The story of Óláfr Haraldsson is found in the Icelandic Sagas of Snorri Sturluson, especially the *Heimskringla*, or the Saga of the Norse Kings (<http://omae.org/Heimskringla/haraldson1.html>). For the complicated English-language translation history of the sagas, see Raju, *Pilgrim Road*, 260. The other ancient source dealing with St Olaf is his hagiography, the *Passio Olavi*, written by Archbishop Øystein of Nidaros.
7. See Julian D. Richards, *The Vikings: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 45, and Gwyn Jones, *A History of the Vikings* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1968; rev. 2001), 66–67.

1. An early form of this paper was presented at a Pilgrimage Conference hosted by the Dept. of Theological Studies, Concordia, and supported in part by funds from the Concordia University Part-Time Faculty Association (CUPFA).
2. Alison Raju, *The Pilgrim Road to Trondheim: Oslo to Nidaros Cathedral* (Trondheim: Museumsforlaget, 2015), 25–26. The path was declared an official European Cultural Route in 2010.
3. <http://kystpilegrimsleia.no/the-fjord-pilgrim-route/541/>

Figure 1 : Dovrefjell Trail Marker



Photo by Author

Viking warriors to England and took part in fighting there. He also went to Normandy, where he was baptized in Rouen. In 1015, spurred on by a dream,<sup>[8]</sup> he returned to Norway where he declared himself king. This put him into a difficult relationship with the more powerful King Canute of Denmark, who also had claims to Norway and was in the process of consolidating them.<sup>[9]</sup> By 1029, Olaf, perhaps because of his growing importance, had fallen out with Canute, who in the same year invaded Norway and deposed him, with the help of Norwegian nobles<sup>[10]</sup> who were bristling under Olaf's reportedly brutal governance. After a brief exile in Kiev, Olaf, again inspired by a dream, attempted to regain power. He was killed in the Battle of Stiklestad on July 29, 1030, very likely by a peasant army of Norwegian Christians<sup>[11]</sup> opposed to his political ambitions.<sup>[12]</sup>

8. For Óláfr Haraldsson's dream and the account of his kingly ambitions see the *Heimskringla*, chapter 17.

9. *Heimskringla* <http://omac1.org/Heimskringla/haraldson5.html>, chapters 139–40.

10. *Heimskringla* <http://omac1.org/Heimskringla/haraldson6.html>, chapters 166, 178, and especially 192.

11. *Heimskringla* <http://omac1.org/Heimskringla/haraldson8.html>, chapter 228.

12. Raju, *Pilgrim Road*, 15.

That Olaf was a factor in the Christianisation of Norway (and of Iceland)<sup>[13]</sup> is without doubt.<sup>[14]</sup> That he was as much of a factor as his sainthood attests is unlikely. As others did elsewhere during that time, it appears that Olaf used Christianity as a tool to support his imperial and centralizing ambitions. In a similar way, Olaf's sainthood was a tool that his son, Magnus the Good,<sup>[15]</sup> in turn was able to use in his own quest to centralize authority and to provide an ideological framework and backing for his dynasty.<sup>[16]</sup>

13. In addition to the Icelandic emissaries to King Olaf, often named in Sturluson's Sagas, it is a little-known fact that Rudolf, the Anglo-Saxon Bishop who accompanied Olaf to Stiklestad, within a year of the King's martyrdom had established the first monastery at Baer, in Iceland. In 2016 the author of this article walked with a group of Icelandic pilgrims from Baer in Borgarfjörður, to Skálholt, an early Bishop's seat.

14. Sturluson's Sagas, while hardly objective, still make Olaf's role clear. <http://omac1.org/Heimskringla/haraldson5.html> chapter 133.

15. *Heimskringla* <http://omac1.org/Heimskringla/magnus.html>, chapter 8.

16. *Heimskringla* <http://omac1.org/Heimskringla/magnus.html>, chapter 11.



**Figure 2 : King Olaf's Death Painting**

Photo taken by the author in Rennebu, Sør-Trøndelag, Norway, on June 30, 2013

After a high point as the most popular northern pilgrimage destination following Olaf's canonization in 1030, and despite the importance (and income) that the cult of St Olaf brought to Nidaros,<sup>[17]</sup> in subsequent centuries, the St. Olaf way gradually declined in importance.<sup>[18]</sup> The advent of the so-called Black Plague in Norway, about 1349, brought restrictions to pilgrimage and a fear of pilgrims and travellers in general.<sup>[19]</sup> About the time of the Reformation, with the Lutheran suppression of the cults of martyrs and saints, official pilgrimage ceased completely,<sup>[20]</sup> and St. Olaf's shrine was removed in 1537 by royal decree.<sup>[21]</sup> His

bones were taken from their box and subsequently lost both to the cathedral at Nidaros and to history.<sup>[22]</sup>

### The Desire to be Some Body

So much for the history. Now for the theory:

That there is no longer a sainted body at the end of the repristinated St. Olaf Way might - for a pilgrimage - seem a drawback. However, it is actually an advantage. The absence of Olaf's bones allows the twenty-first century walk to be what it will be in any case: an excellent example of contemporary, touristic, journey <sup>[23]</sup> pilgrimage. Without a St. Olaf at the end of the St. Olaf Way, the focus of the walk shifts more easily, and without apology, from one body (the saint's) to another (the pilgrim's). The contemporary pilgrim is not so much walking *to* a body, but walking *to be* some body. <sup>[24]</sup> It has become an almost commonplace assertion about walking pilgrimages such as the Camino, that the

17. Owain Edwards, 'Somebody's Telling Stories: The Medieval Legend of St. Olav' *Edda: Nordisk Tidsskrift for Litteraturforskning* 108 (2008): 34.

18. Brita Hardeberg and Øystein Bjørdal, eds. *Pilgrimage to Nidaros: a Practical Pilgrimage Theology* (2<sup>nd</sup> ed.; Trondheim: Church of Norway Liturgical Centre, 2003), 13.

19. Hardeberg and Bjørdal, *Pilgrimage to Nidaros*, 14.

20. Margareth Buer points out that the law officially banning pilgrimage in Norway, instituted at the Protestant Reformation, was only rescinded officially in 1997. Margareth Hana Buer, 'The Man who (almost) Got his Sight Back..., and Other Narratives of Miracles, Pilgrimage and Healing in the Passio Olavi' (paper presented at the International Medieval Congress, U.K., 2015), 7.

21. Hardeberg and Bjørdal, *Pilgrimage to Nidaros*, 14.

22. Hardeberg and Bjørdal, *Pilgrimage to Nidaros*, 14

23. Janice Poltrick-Donato's distinction between 'journey' and 'destinational' types of contemporary pilgrimage is a helpful clarification. See her article in this issue.

24. The move from organized, institutional religion to personal, experienced spirituality in the global north is well-discussed and documented. See Lisbeth Mikaelsson, 'Pilgrimage as Post-secular Therapy,' *Scripta Instituti Donneriani Aboensis* 24 (2014): 259.

Figure 3 : St Olaf Woodcut

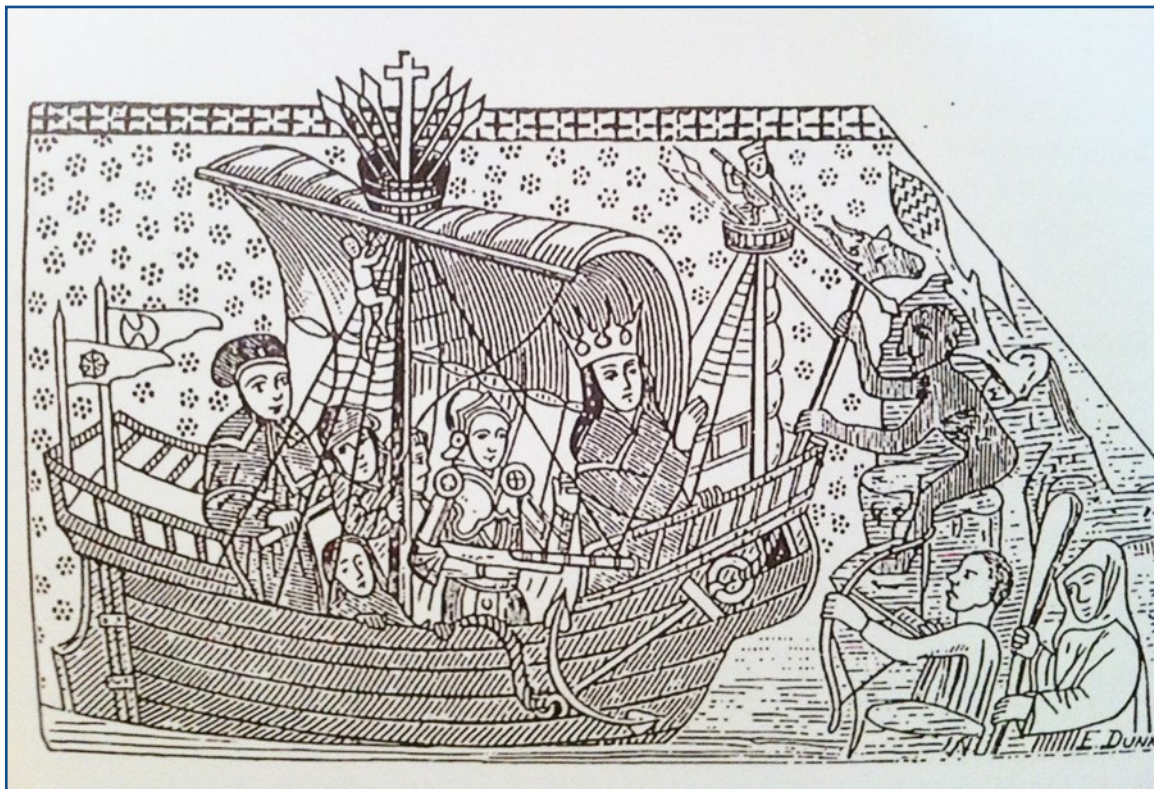


Photo taken by the author in Rennebu, Sør-Trøndelag, Norway, on June 30, 2013

destination, for most pilgrims, is less important than the trek towards it. In such a walk, the category of the 'sublime,' particularly as seen in the mountains and horizons which Norway offers, becomes key. The spiritual is defined and measured by its numinous, aesthetic qualities<sup>[25]</sup> while paradoxically the walk itself, and the physical exertion necessary for it, also become crucial to the narrated experience of the pilgrim. By contrast, what is remarkable about much medieval Christian pilgrimage literature, including in the *Passio Olavi*, is how *little* attention is paid to the journey.<sup>[26]</sup> The nature, history and public marketing of the contemporary St. Olaf trail support this thesis in several ways.<sup>[27]</sup>

25. See Charles Lock's excellent discussion of the 'Protestant optic' in 'Bowing Down to Wood and Stone: One Way to be a Pilgrim,' in *Pilgrim Voices: Narrative and Authorship in Christian Pilgrimage* (ed. Simon Coleman and John Elsner; New York: Berghon, 2003), 110–132.

26. Buer, 'The Man,' 4.

27. Raju's guide, the only full guide in English, cautions the pilgrim that 'it is the making of the journey that is the pilgrim's principal concern.' Raju goes on: 'The arrival in Nidaros is only a conclusion. If you bear this in mind, it will help you not to feel ... that reaching your destination has been something of a 'let down,'' *Pilgrim Road*, 69.

Firstly, although it is perhaps obvious, it is worth underlining that the St. Olaf pilgrimage was not reinstituted for the sake of the saint or any particular devotion to him. Rather it was the simple fact of an ancient and therefore in some undefined sense, *authentic* trail, rather than its original goal, that was of interest to contemporary authorities.<sup>[28]</sup> Secondly, when the paths were reposted at the very end of the twentieth century, the material culture that centuries ago accompanied the pilgrimage - physical shrines, letters of indulgence or pardon, pilgrim ampullas, and badges - was not considered important enough to be reinvented with it. If they wish, St. Olaf pilgrims can be given a 'pilgrim's passport' for stamping at businesses and institutions along the way. Upon completion of the trail (and payment of a modest fee) at the Pilgrim Centre in Nidaros they receive an 'Olav's letter' or certificate attesting to their walk. Duda has compiled statistics from 2010–2015 of those

28. The criterion of 'authenticity,' in postmodern pilgrimage, is no less strong for its lack of precise definition, but an ancient path, once walked by medieval pilgrims, is an important first step in such validations. In 2018, church authorities in Heresford, UK unveiled a new trail, complete with a website stating: 'inspired by a real medieval pilgrimage.' <http://thomasway.ac.uk/explore-the-way/>



Figure 4 : Nidaros Pilgrim Centre



Photo by Author

who started the trail and the smaller number of those who have collected the certificates.<sup>[29]</sup> Although there were medieval European roots for both passport and certificate, these two particular items are precisely those that are most popular on the Spanish Camino. The impetus for their use almost certainly derives not from a Norse past but a commercially-successful Spanish present.

### Religious and Touristic Bodies

Like the Camino, and almost all other Euro- or Anglo-American publicly-supported pilgrimages, St. Olaf's Way is an ancient route that has been re-purposed and repackaged. Publicity for the trail rarely mentions Olaf. The byline on the English-language welcome page for the website<sup>[30]</sup> reads: 'European tradition, Nordic history, Norwegian culture, and at the same time, a very personal experience.' One page of the website is devoted to an historical overview of St. Olaf and another to a brief description of the history of

European pilgrimage. However, the emphasis of the website and of the official literature is clearly on the pilgrimage as a wilderness experience, albeit one with psychological and spiritual benefits. This emphasis is reflective of the pilgrimage's organizational structure: the St. Olaf Way falls under the jurisdiction of the National Pilgrim Center, which has offices in Trondheim, Oslo, and four other regional centres. In turn, the National Pilgrim Center is organized under the Directorate for Cultural Heritage and the Ministry of Environmental Affairs of the Norwegian government. An important document in the linking of public and private interest in the trail was the report titled *På livets vei Pilegrimsmotivet: et nasjonalt utviklingsprosjekt*, written in 2008 and presented in 2009 to the Norwegian Ministry of Cultural and Church Affairs.<sup>[31]</sup>

The recovery of the St. Olaf trail can be traced to three main factors: 1) beginning in the nineteenth century, a renewed interest in St. Olaf as part of Norwegian

29. Duda, *The St. Olav's Way*, 36.

30. <http://pilegrimsleden.no/en/>

31. [www.regjeringen.no/globalassets/upload/kkd/kirke/pilegrim/pilegrimsrapport\\_uddu\\_11feb2009.pdf](http://www.regjeringen.no/globalassets/upload/kkd/kirke/pilegrim/pilegrimsrapport_uddu_11feb2009.pdf)

Figure 5 : Refugium sign



Photo by Author

nationalism<sup>[32]</sup> and of pilgrimage as a new expression of traditional long-distance walking;<sup>[33]</sup> 2) from the 1970s and onward, a general interest in pilgrimage in Europe and in the commercial, cultural and touristic example of the Camino de Santiago pilgrimage in Spain as a mechanism for local business development, European cultural reaffirmation<sup>[34]</sup> and contemporary tourism;<sup>[35]</sup> and finally, 3) dating especially from the mid-twentieth century, the increasing interest of churches, including Protestant churches, in pilgrimage as a mechanism for mission, devotional expression, self-identity<sup>[36]</sup> and ecumenical encounter.<sup>[37]</sup>

It is difficult to separate the many threads that seem to have gone into the specific recovery of the St. Olaf Way, but certain individuals and influences may be identified.<sup>[38]</sup> In the 1970s, pilgrimage was 'in the air' in Europe.<sup>[39]</sup> Torgeir J. Havgar, a former dean of the Cathedral, wrote a brochure about the cathedral of Nidaros, its pilgrimage history, and its windows, and led some early pilgrimages, especially within the cathedral itself. At the same time Eivind Luthen, very much inspired by his 1979 visit to the not-yet-popular Camino in Spain,<sup>[40]</sup> was writing articles on pilgrimage

32. Hardeberg and Bjørdal, *Pilgrimage to Nidaros*, 15.

33. Suzanne Österland-Pötzsch 'Walking Nordic: Performing Space, Place and Identity,' *Performing Nordic Heritage: Everyday Practices and Institutional Culture* (ed. Peter Aronsson and Lizette Graden; Burlington: Ashgate, 2013), 44.

34. Mikaelsson, 'Post-secular Therapy,' 262.

35. Buer, 'The Man,' 8, notes that one of the visions of the 2008 Ministry of Cultural and Church Affairs report ironically matches one of its founding goals, namely to 'turn Trondheim/Nidaros into one of the most important pilgrimage goals in Europe by the year 2030.'

36. Mikaelsson 'Post-secular Therapy,' 261.

37. Hardeberg and Bjørdal, *Pilgrimage to Nidaros*, 9: 'As clergy within the church of Norway, serving near the historical religious centre of Norway, we ... have observed that pilgrimage and the traditions of St. Olav contribute genuine and important values to many people, and we wish to use this potential in our ministry.'

38. Throughout this section I am indebted to Hardeberg and Bjørdal's 2003 historical overview, *Pilgrimage to Nidaros*, 14–18.

39. Nancy Louse Frey, *Pilgrim Stories: On and Off the Road to Santiago* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998), 73, 137.

40. Email exchange between the author and Eivind Luthen, April 2016.



Figure 6 : Fokstugu Fjellstue



Photo by Author

for the magazine *Kysten* and the newspaper *Morgenbladet*, culminating in his book on the St. Olaf Way published in 1992.<sup>[41]</sup> From the Church of Norway side, the Bishop of Nidaros in 1992, Finn Wagle, set up a church committee to look at pilgrimage and its relationship to the St Olaf Way. Two years later, the Diocese established a pilgrimage project titled 'Renewal of the Pilgrim Tradition,' funded by a 'substantial donation from the directorate of Natural Resources'; indicative of the ways in which church and state were coalescing in their interest in the St. Olaf Way. The church appointed Arne Bakken as a priest to pilgrims from 1994–1997, and Bakken's 1997 book on the religious experience of modern pilgrims, and possible directions for the Church of Norway's interest in pilgrimage, remains influential.<sup>[42]</sup>

Although there had already been a number of pilgrimages along the route, on the eve of the 'Olsok' or St. Olaf saint's day celebrations, July 28, 1997, the trail - now counting as stakeholders local businesses, governments, the church and tourism boards, as well as

many 'volunteer enthusiasts' (*frivillige ildsjeler*) - was officially opened by Norwegian Crown Prince Haakon Magnus in a ceremony at Nidaros Cathedral. Not coincidentally, this event took place as part of Trondheim's millennium anniversary celebrations. In 1994 the Church of Norway began to establish full-time positions for 'pilgrim pastors,' eventually with one in Oslo and one in Trondheim. The present situation is that of a publicly-funded, secular trail that exists to serve both religious and secular pilgrims and the institutions that support them.

The interest of the Church of Norway is in using the pilgrim walk as a form of outreach, identity formation,<sup>[43]</sup> liturgical renewal, ecumenical engagement,<sup>[44]</sup> and pastoral care. Pilgrimage is commonly described by

41. Eivind Luthen, *I pilegrimenes fotspor til Nidaros* (Oslo: Cappelen, 1992).

42. Arne Bakken, *Pilegrim: Folk, Kirke, Kosmos* (Oslo: Nygaard Forlag, 1997).

43. Thore Nome, 'Pilgrimage Theology: A Theology for the Church of Norway?' *Pilgrimage to Nidaros: a Practical Pilgrimage Theology* (2<sup>nd</sup> edition; ed. B. Hardeberg and Ø. Bjørdal; Trondheim: Church of Norway Liturgical Centre, 2003), 188 ff.

44. Berit Lånke, 'Pilgrimage: a Journey Towards the Holy,' *Pilgrimage to Nidaros: a Practical Pilgrimage Theology* (2<sup>nd</sup> edition; ed. B. Hardeberg and Ø. Bjørdal; Trondheim: Church of Norway Liturgical Centre, 2003), 129–131.



many church leaders - certainly not just in Norway<sup>[45]</sup> - as a helpful metaphor for understanding the life of the Christian.<sup>[46]</sup> As 'embodied worship,' it offers a form of liturgical renewal specifically reconnecting a Protestant style of worship critiqued by some as being theoretical and lifeless back to the human body.<sup>[47]</sup> However, there is little evidence that even the religious interests involved in the St. Olaf trail's resuscitation wished to recover with the pilgrimage any historicized or romanticized role-play of medieval practice. An exception might be the ringing of the Angelus bell in Fokstugu Fjellstue, where the hosts welcome pilgrims with a devotional piety that echoes certain medieval traditions. However, for the most part, the trails - and the Norwegian countryside - have been left to speak for themselves. The church groups that use the trail tend to use devotional programs emphasizing individual prayer and meditation, eco- or creation-theology,<sup>[48]</sup> ecumenical engagement, or any number of expressions of auto-spirituality.<sup>[49]</sup> A lack of interest in the actual saint is reflected everywhere along the repristinated trail, where one looks in vain for much material about the person.

This is not to say that just because the saint is gone, spirituality is no longer present.<sup>[50]</sup> While for many pilgrims, faith may not play the explicit role in pilgrimage that it once did, it is often, in some form, a part of their self-description.<sup>[51]</sup> There are a number of chapels constructed along the route, in addition to spots being set aside for meditation and prayer. Local parishes use the trail for church activities.<sup>[52]</sup> St. Olaf's

name, the route's history, and its clear identification by both Norwegian church and state as a pilgrimage, allow for and even encourage the personal and existential questioning, reconciliations, and transformations<sup>[53]</sup> that are at the heart of contemporary religious experience. Given the difficult trail, these are very much experienced through the body, and may often be identified and felt as epiphanies. However, the tensions of the various groups interested in the St. Olaf pilgrimage are not easily reconciled: there is a national and historical interest in the legacy of St. Olaf as a saint and a national symbol that is not easily reconciled with the common pilgrim motivations of contact with nature, a test of exertion, and a quest for personal transformation.<sup>[54]</sup>

### No-Body's Home: Diaspora and 'Disemplacement'

Theorist of place and human geographer Tim Cresswell, citing Merleau-Ponty, notes that mobility 'as practiced, brings together the internal world of will and habit and the external world of expectation and compulsion. In the end, it is at the level of the body that human mobility is produced, reproduced, and, occasionally, transformed.'<sup>[55]</sup> What Cresswell denotes by words such as compulsion and expectation might also be termed 'desire.'

Desire, in its relationship to the body of the walking pilgrim, informs every aspect of the St. Olaf pilgrimage. This can take several forms: the body testing its mortality against difficult and mountainous long-distance trekking, the body seeking environmental and perhaps spiritual harmony with a spiritualized nature that in Norway's high mountains seems unusually immanent,<sup>[56]</sup> or the body seeking a resonance or identity in its blood and bones to a landscape, people, religion, and perhaps even time that were one's ancestors. These differing bodily desires are most often experienced by pilgrims not as conscious alternatives, but in some shifting combination.

45. For instance, pilgrimage was the World Council of Churches' designated theme for 2016–2017.

46. Dagfinn Slungård, 'Liturgical Pilgrimages from Past to Present,' *Pilgrimage to Nidaros: a Practical Pilgrimage Theology* (2<sup>nd</sup> edition; ed. B. Hardeberg and Ø. Bjørdal; Trondheim: Church of Norway Liturgical Centre, 2003), 51.

47. Lånke, 'Pilgrimage: a Journey Towards the Holy,' 95.

48. Nome, 'Pilgrimage Theology,' 169–171.

49. Avril Maddrell 'Contextualizing Sacred Sites, Pathways and Shared Heritage: Local History, Ecumenism, and National Identity,' *Christian Pilgrimage, Landscape and Heritage: Journeying to the Sacred* (ed. A. Maddrell, V. Della Dora, A. Scafi, and H. Walton; New York: Routledge, 2015), 131. Also Mikaelsson 'Post-secular Therapy,' 269 on her survey of the magazine *Pilegrimen*.

50. See Mikaelsson 'Post-secular Therapy,' 259, on the links between traditional religious expression and post-modern spirituality in pilgrimage.

51. Skrbis expresses this well when he states: "sacredness" itself is a matter of interpretative intervention rather than a quality inherent in objects, events and processes.' Zlatko Skrbis, 'From Migrants to Pilgrim Tourists: Diasporic Imagining and Visits to Medjugorje,' *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies* 33/2 (2007): 316.

52. Österland-Pötzsch, 'Walking Nordic,' 42.

53. Katja Uusihakala, 'Reminiscence Tours and Pilgrimage Sites: Commemorative Journeys in Ex-Rhodesian Diaspora,' *Suomen Antropologi: Journal of the Finnish Anthropological Society* 36/1 (2011): 60.

54. I am indebted to Margareth Hana Buer for this insight.

55. Tim Cresswell, 'Toward a Politics of Mobility,' *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space* 28 (2010): 20. See also Tim Cresswell, *Place: An Introduction* (2<sup>nd</sup> ed.; Oxford: Wiley Blackwell, 2014).

56. Schaad notes that the 'unspoiled' nature of so much of Norway is part of a pilgrim's search for the 'authentic.' See Eric Schaad, 'Perceptions of Scandinavia and the Rhetoric of Touristic Stereotype in Internet Travel Accounts' *Scandinavian Studies* 80/2 (2008): 210.

**Figure 7 : Trail with Walkers**

Photo by Author

Some take the trail as part of an officially sponsored and led group, organized through the churches and perhaps led by that particular category of clergy who are known as 'pilgrim pastors.'<sup>[57]</sup> Occasionally individuals and small groups, normally housed and staying in one of the pilgrim centres, take the trail, or parts of it, as an alternative to incarceration, or as part of their prison terms.<sup>[58]</sup> There are long-distance solitary walkers, an increasingly numerous breed, similar to those who can be found on the Appalachian trail in the US, or one of the lonelier feeder branches of the Camino in Europe.<sup>[59]</sup> Related to this, among St. Olaf pilgrims are some who have experienced the Camino de Santiago in Spain and wish another

experience but one that is more physically demanding and isolated.<sup>[60]</sup> Some Norwegians, given the respected Scandinavian tradition of walking and skiing, take the trail - and often, also take care of the trail<sup>[61]</sup> - for reasons of national pride; in my interviews, some felt they were better Norwegians after this in-depth experience of a part of their national heritage.<sup>[62]</sup> Some St. Olaf pilgrims, such as was the case with a group I joined in 2013, are walking as the descendants of Norwegian emigrants.

57. <http://oslo.pilegrimsleden.no/no/pilegrimspresten/pilegrimsmesse/>

58. From the author's interview with pilgrim hosts at Fokstugu Fjellstue.

59. Mikaelsson 'Post-secular Therapy,' 264. The issue of 'authenticity' is most often linked in postmodern pilgrimage to physical rather than spiritual exertion, although a generalized spiritual motive is commonly also claimed.

60. The Confraternity of St. James, an international pilgrim organization that focusses on Santiago (thus the name) nonetheless encourages other pilgrimages as well. The Norwegian branch, founded in 1996, publishes its own magazine: *Pilegrimen*. The St. Olaf website markets the trail as a type of northern 'Camino': <http://pilegrimsleden.no/en/suggestions/caminowalks-vandring-i-gudbrandsdalen-sommeren-2016>.

61. See the 2008 report of the Norwegian Ministry of Culture and Church Affairs, titled *På livets vei Pilegrimsmotivet – et nasjonalt utviklingsprosjekt*.

62. Author's interview with pilgrim hosts near Meslogård. 2013. See also Österland-Pötzsch, 'Walking Nordic,' 47.



Figure 8 : CDN Pilgrims All



In 2013, together with five other Canadians of Scandinavian descent (either parents or grandparents born in Norway or Sweden), I set out from the midpoint of the north-south route, for a 250-km trek north on the *Gudbrandsdalsleden*. Even among the already relatively small number of long-distance walkers on the St. Olaf Way, diaspora pilgrims from North America form a minority. Yet such walkers are a precise match to the nature of the trail. The diaspora pilgrim's goal is identity. In a reprinted trail that has no body at the end, they (we) are the 'no-body' pilgrims, our own conflicted and uncertain identities matching the ambiguity, one form of liminality,<sup>[63]</sup> that attaches to the meaning of particularly this trail.

'Nearly every conception of diaspora features the idea of return to a homeland in some form.'<sup>[64]</sup> In addition, there is a 'critical role a pilgrimage site, understood as a second home or a return to one's true home, can play

in processes of identity formation and affirmation.'<sup>[65]</sup> Yet practically, the walk that I took with other Canadians of Scandinavian background through Norway showed that there was little concrete fact linking us to the land of our ancestry. Most of us could speak no more than a few, mispronounced words in the language. Our habits, tastes, and expectations, as we discovered, were markedly different from those of the Norwegian-born people we encountered. We started the trail thinking we were Scandinavian-Canadians but quickly realized that much of what we had in common with 'real' Norwegians were simply those things that all citizens of modern western consumer societies share. There was, at least for me, an element of disappointment in this, and what Wood calls a 'falling away' - a loss of the dream of a homeland inculcated by family narrative and reinforced by decades of repetition.<sup>[66]</sup> The physical geography of our

63. The concept of liminality is well-known and much over-used in pilgrimage studies.

64. Kevin Kenny, *Diaspora: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 61.

65. Michael Agnew, "Spiritually, I'm Always in Lourdes": Perceptions of Home and Away among Serial Pilgrims,' *Studies in Religion/ Sciences Religieuses* 44/4 (2015): 522.

66. James Wood, 'On Not Going Home,' *London Review of Books* 36/4 (2014): 3-8.

**Figure 9 : Troll Oppdal**

Photo by Author

displacement matched the human geography: most of our diasporic pilgrim group were raised on the Northern Great Plains of North America, a landscape very different from the mountains and alpine valleys we were crossing in Norway, the land of our grandparents.

The term diaspora originated as a way to describe those who are forced by violence from their homelands. It has only recently come to mean almost any emigrant community; however, it operates best as an effective definition for groups that maintain a myth or relatively common narrative of a homeland as well as a relatively common experience of acculturation to the new society. Clifford notes of diasporic groups: 'diasporas

67. James Clifford, 'Diasporas,' *Cultural Anthropology* 9/3: *Further Inflections: Toward Ethnographies of the Future* (1994): 309.

are dispersed networks of peoples who share common historical experiences of dispossession, displacement, [and] adaptation.'<sup>[67]</sup> Unlike the situation of so many others, my ancestors left Norway not because they had to, but because they wished to. They emigrated for economic opportunity - albeit during a difficult time when many Scandinavians were doing the same. They were, for the most part, unromantic about the land they had left behind. And yet, as immigrants do, they continued to speak the language of their youth, to uphold many of the customs they had learned in 'the old country,' and in many other, often subtle ways, to reflect the culture of the land they had left, even as they conformed to and adapted toward the new.

Unlike some other immigrant groups in North America, most Norwegian immigrants did not maintain active links, nor play an active role in the country that had given them birth. Communication with the homeland was made difficult not only because of the penury of many immigrants, but also because of the interruption of the two world wars, compounded by rapid changes in Norway, including changes in language and culture (especially urbanization) that further alienated those who had left before such changes took place. Most took little interest in the politics of a place where they had not advanced socially; their hopes for themselves and their children lay in Canada and the U.S. The child of such emigrants, when making a pilgrimage to the land of their ancestors, may well be more nostalgic for the 'old country' than were the ones who actually left it.<sup>[68]</sup>

Many Canadians, even to the second and sometimes third generation, self-identify by means of hyphenated labels. It is not unusual for a Canadian to call themselves 'Ukrainian-Canadian' or 'Lebanese-Canadian' or the like. The reasons for this are many and subtle. However, one explanatory factor may be found in the fact that from the beginning, European Canadians were either English or French, and that the presence of such a hyphenated self-awareness is in fact enshrined in the nation's culture and institutions. There is a kind of 'displacement' to being Canadian.<sup>[69]</sup> Added to the French-English foundational split is the perhaps repressed but nonetheless powerful feeling on

68. There are, of course, exceptions: Øyvind T. Gulliksen, 'Travel Narratives, Popular Religious Literature, Autobiography: N. N. Rønning's Contribution to Norwegian American Culture,' *Norwegian-American Historical Association* 33 (n.d.): 165.

69. See Edward Said, *Reflections on Exile and Other Essays* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2000).



Figure 9 : Pilgrim Shelter



Photo by Author

the part of many European-background Canadians that they live in a land that has been stolen from others, the First Nations.<sup>[70]</sup> Such a situation may help explain the rise of diasporic pilgrimage as a small part of alternative identity formation, a way of seeking roots outside of a land that fits at times uncomfortably, and is characterized by such newness and mobility. If home is defined as a place where there is an institutional capacity for memory, and where meaning-making, including nostalgic resonance, is reinforced,<sup>[71]</sup> the typical non-Indigenous Canadian home is often a battleground for conflicting meanings. In such a

situation, diasporic pilgrimage, and its telling and retelling, constitutes what Clifford calls a 'displacement discourse,'<sup>[72]</sup> as well as offering, in Agnew's words, a 'crucial touchstone for engagement with the natal homeland.'<sup>[73]</sup>

### Desire, diaspora, and description: becoming some-body

Four inter-related factors that make up a pilgrimage are land, mobility, body, and story.<sup>[74]</sup> The land - especially and impressively in Norway - is physical and empirically 'there.' One cannot argue its simple, and overwhelming, presence; Norwegians at least since the Romantic period consider nature to be a defining characteristic of their national identity<sup>[75]</sup> Yet

70. Such 'Settler guilt' is now a field of study. See, e.g. Matthew Anderson, 'Pilgrimage and the Challenging of a Canadian Foundational Myth,' *Pilgrimage in Practice: Narration, Reclamation, and Healing* (ed. I. S. McIntosh, E. Moore Quinn, and V. Keely; Boston: CAB International, 2018), 148–164; Paulette Regan, *Unsettling the Settler Within: Indian Residential Schools, Truth-Telling, and Reconciliation in Canada* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2010); Michael J. A. Wohl, Nyla R. Branscombe, and Yechiel Klar, 'Collective Guilt: Emotional Reactions when one's Group has Done Wrong or Been Wronged,' *European Review of Social Psychology* 17/1 (2006): 1–37.

71. On this, and the role of mobility as identity-formation, see: Agnew, 'Spiritually, I'm Always in Lourdes,' 518.

72. Clifford, 'Diasporas,' 302.

73. Agnew, 'Spiritually, I'm Always in Lourdes,' 522.

74. This four-fold description of pilgrimage comes from my collaborative work with Sara Terreault. However, as Basu and Coleman note: 'Within the past couple of decades or so, two powerful theoretical streams in the social sciences have emphasized mobility on the one hand, and embodiment on the other.' Paul Basu and Simon Coleman, 'Migrant Worlds, Material Cultures,' *Mobilities* 3/3 (2008): 322.

75. For more on this see Österland-Pötzsch, 'Walking Nordic,' 31.

**Figure 10 : Oslo Centre Santiago Sign**

Photo by Author

movement through terrain becomes pilgrimage and a space becomes a place only through narrative. Particularly for diasporal pilgrims, such narratives exist on several levels; the story of one's present identity exists in dialogue with national and local myths and history, and with the back-story of one's parents, told from childhood through food, drink, customs, and language. These create of the Norwegian terrain a place the diaspora pilgrim feels they should identify with; pilgrimage is part of a larger, generational struggle to embrace a putative home-land by embracing, through walking, its most potent national and cultural symbol, which is not the missing saint, but the very much present land.<sup>[76]</sup>

It seems inevitable that the growing interest in pilgrimage and the mobility and finances required for treks like the Camino should coincide with that particular branch of globalization that sees European governments reaching out to overseas populations of expatriate descendants for the purposes of increasing

tourism and trade. Yet in the case of the St. Olaf Way, there is no real destination. The Nidaros cathedral stands as a fixed goal. But St Olaf is no longer there, and neither church nor state seem to care, even as they politely dispute the relative importance of the various ways the Norwegian pilgrimage can be understood. Meanwhile the pilgrim herself is prodded by a nearly omnipresent natural landscape while exerting herself in a trial - the long walk over difficult mountainous terrain - that in some way is understood to 'prove' authenticity. Diasporic pilgrims are attempting to 'reterritorialize the imagination' that is operative in home and identity on a trail that is itself resistant to definition. Thus the pilgrim experiences the conflict between religious and non-religious, between journey and destination, and between rootlessness (tourism) and rootedness (in community, place and landscape), in part because their own desires - finding the homeland and finding themselves - are as ambiguous as the goals of those who have framed the trail.

76. This can be equally true of St. Olaf pilgrims who are citizens and in every way indisputably Norse.



Figure 11 : Allen Pondering



Photo by Author

### Conclusion: St. Olaf as Paradigm Postmodern Pilgrimage

The St. Olaf Way and the publicity surrounding it are understood, at least in their contemporary form, to facilitate not some medieval piety, but an entirely contemporary existential desire for contact with nature and a present-day spirituality focused, for the most part, on the individual. There is an explanatory irony in a pilgrim's desire to be some body, and to reconcile with one's own body in a strenuous trek, on a pilgrimage that in fact has no body to walk toward.

In this article I have attempted to identify three characteristics of the St. Olaf pilgrimage. The first is a feeling amongst contemporary St. Olaf pilgrims of disembodiment and un-belonging, a feeling which is characteristic of moderns. The pilgrims hope, through extreme effort, for a re-embodiment; that is, as on other long-distance pilgrimage trails they are 'walking to be somebody'. Secondly, I have attempted to show that the fact that the saint's body is missing at the end of the St. Olaf Way helps in a particular way to facilitate this psychological and spiritual desire on the part of walking pilgrims. With no body in Trondheim, the contemporary pilgrim can embrace the goal of most western long-distance walking trails, pilgrimages or not:

expressing various forms of embodied aesthetic desire through moderately difficult, but controlled, conditions of self-imposed hardship. Without any ambiguity towards an historical shrine containing bones or other relics, they can embrace their search for authenticity and personal healing.<sup>[77]</sup> Finally, this 'spiritual-not spiritual' ambiguity on the part of pilgrims is paralleled by the conflicting goals of those who have resuscitated and framed the St. Olaf Way, and who see it variably as a wilderness journey, an extreme trail, a devotional aid, an ecumenical encounter, or a therapeutic or culturally-prescribed communion with self and nature. These characteristics of ambiguity and multivalence are manifested even more clearly in the case of diasporic pilgrims who are walking St. Olaf for reasons of heritage and identity.

Foreign pilgrims following routes in their ancestral homelands, including the St. Olaf Way, highlight some of the most interesting aspects of the revival of western walking pilgrimage. Diasporic hikers find the liminalities of pilgrimage lived out in their own hyphenated identities and experiences. They walk this trail, uncertain in its own meaning, to become some body, even as their bodies are tested against a terrain and culture which are half-familiar and half-mythic.

77. Mikaelsson 'Post-secular Therapy,' 270.

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