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Peregrinatio: A Never-Ending Pilgrimage to an Unspecified End

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To most modern-day thinkers a pilgrimage entails a journey to a sacred place. Thus, the primary purpose of the voyage is to reach a locale that holds special meaning for the pilgrim. Typically, the end destination is a place where a significant familial, historical or religious event has occurred. In contrast to this contemporary understanding of pilgrimage, some Irish Christian monks of late antiquity undertook sacred journeys of an indefinite duration with no express terminus in mind. Furthermore, these monastic sojourners exiled themselves from their homeland vowing never to return to kith and kin. This working paper explores the practice of self-exile and ceaseless wandering—called *peregrinatio*—and pays particular attention to the potential motivations behind the actions of these early Irish pilgrims.

Key Words: peregrinatio, pilgrimage, Irish, monks, wandering, self-exile

Introduction

Arguably the most commonly held view of pilgrimage is that of a physical journey which entails a tangible starting point, movement towards a sacred location, and a return trip home. For most, the goal of this practice is to leave behind daily concerns and think about more existential matters like the meaning of life and the prospect of an afterlife. Countless early Christian pilgrims chose the Holy Land for their pilgrimage destination: Jesus' birthplace and the site of his death and resurrection. Others opted for Rome—the resting place of the apostles Peter and Paul—as their pilgrimage target. Finally, for those inhabiting the furthest reaches of Christendom, and without the means to travel afar, regional pilgrimages took them to places associated with local saints.

Given the popular image of pilgrimage as described above what are we to make of the early Irish Christian monks, the so-called *peregrini*, like Saint Columba (d. 597) and Saint Columbanus (d. 615)? They eschewed the conventional destination-centric pilgrimage and embarked on sacred journeys without a stated terminus and with no intention of returning home. Can their practice be aptly considered pilgrimage? The academic works examined for this working paper—from Rodney Aist (2017), Brouria Bitton-Ashkelony (2005), and Katja Ritari (2011)—suggest that *peregrinatio* can indeed be regarded as a type of pilgrimage: one in which the *peregrini* took themselves away from their habitual environment in response to, and in the hopes of, encountering the divine. For them, the sacred was not necessarily located in a specific geographical site,

it could be found anywhere by putting themselves in situations that facilitated encounters with God. In other words, instead of a literal voyage to an externally recognizable holy site, *peregrinatio* may be seen as a journey that set the stage for an internally identifiable encounter with the sacred. From these observations it appears that our modern characterisation of pilgrimage is somewhat narrow. Therefore, to avoid the risk of overlooking a range of religious experiences, I propose that we expand our understanding of pilgrimage to include the practice of *peregrinatio*. My primary interest in studying this topic is to ascertain the role of the Irish *peregrini* in the overall development of Christianity. This paper represents my initial foray into the subject matter, consequently, it is neither broad nor deep, it is merely a starting point.

Before delving into the potential motivations behind *peregrinatio*, I am obliged to say a few words about a key challenge in studying this subject: that is the dearth of extant Irish literary sources from late antiquity. Because of this difficulty we often rely on Latin hagiographies typically produced during the medieval period to theorise about the religious practices of the earlier era. There are several pitfalls in using this approach. Firstly, hagiographical texts describe events that usually occurred centuries beforehand, consequently their non-contemporaneous nature casts doubt on their veracity. Secondly, the texts are written in Latin and therefore they may not reflect the socio-cultural context as accurately as if they had been written in the indigenous Irish language. Thirdly, the

authors sometimes present historical figures in an embellished fashion to advance a specific ecclesiastical or political agenda important to the authors' generation. Finally, writers and audience (me included) may unwittingly introduce anachronisms in the composition and reading of the hagiographical texts by projecting contemporary customs and attitudes into the past. By remaining vigilant of the drawbacks in relying on these literary sources and by corroborating assumptions with data from other fields—such as history, theology and archaeology—we may cautiously speculate about the phenomenon of *peregrinatio* as practiced by the early Irish monks (and some nuns) in late antiquity.

The subsequent sections of this paper touch on prominent modern theories about pilgrimage as well as contemporaneous concepts that may have influenced the *peregrini* in undertaking this practice. It is possible that all these ideas were at play in pilgrimages of late antiquity but to varying degrees. Further investigation will be required to determine the extent to which these diverse notions of pilgrimage motivated the early Irish monks to embark on *peregrinatio*. That is a subject for future consideration in another paper.

Diversity in Pilgrimage

In recent history, the Western world has witnessed a surge in the popularity of Christian pilgrimages, along with a commensurate increase in pilgrimage studies. During the late 20th and early 21st centuries, prominent scholars in the field posited various theories about the practice. Edith and Victor Turner (1974; 1979) asserted that people generally experience similar phases when undertaking a pilgrimage: separation, liminality, and re-aggregation (Turner 1979: 466-67). Furthermore, the Turners observed that pilgrims traveling together tended to slough off their quotidian social status and interact in a more equitable fashion, experiencing a phenomenon they called a *communitas* (Turner 1974: 76-7). *Communitas* is oftentimes viewed as a foretaste of the peaceable, harmonious, and equal relations that can be expected in the heavenly realm.

However, John Eade and Michael J. Sallnow (2013) posited that holy destinations sought by pilgrims mean different things to different people thereby making the sacred a matter of contention. They asserted that—due to competing discourses and orthodoxies—diverse interpretations were in fact the essence of pilgrimage (Eade 2013: xii-xiii). Based on these findings, Eade and Sallnow concluded that there is no consistent meaning of pilgrimage and therefore no uniform

definition of the phenomenon itself (Eade 2013: xiii). Rather, they talk about constituent elements of pilgrimage being person, place and text (anything that carries meaning forward).

Simon Coleman (2002: 358-60) suggested that both the Turners' findings as well as Eade and Sallnow's observations can be in effect at the same time during a pilgrimage. He posits that pilgrims can experience the typical phases described by Turners as well as *communitas* even while disagreeing about the meaning and method of pilgrimage. Coleman's conclusion is supported by the scholarship reviewed for this paper, e.g., that there is diversity in pilgrimage even while there remain certain repeatable aspects.

Old Testament Allusions

In his article entitled *Pilgrimage in the Celtic Christian Tradition*, Rodney Aist acknowledges that, like the rest of Christendom, the Irish of the early middle ages were interested in the conventional destination-centric pilgrimage model. By way of example he cites Adomnan's eighth century *De locis sanctis*, a description of Jerusalem based on an eye-witness account from contemporaneous pilgrim bishop Arculf (Aist 2017: 7). However, Aist suggests that *peregrini* such as Columba and Columbanus can be seen to model the Abrahamic tradition of pilgrimage in terms of travelling to a foreign land at God's behest per Genesis 12:1-3 (Aist, 2017: 8). Key to this type of pilgrimage is the idea of being a perpetual 'stranger ... in the world,' in the same way that humans are considered sojourners on earth: in that their true homeland is in the spiritual realm of God's heavenly kingdom (Aist 2017: 4).

Aist (2017: 12) cites Philip Sheldrake (1995) in support of the notion that Columba wished to imitate Abraham by 'leav[ing] his own country and go[ing] in pilgrimage into the land which God has shown him.' Although, as Aist points out, some may argue that Columba's trip across the sea to Irish-controlled Iona and his subsequent evangelising amongst the Picts of Scotland did 'not exactly [amount to] living as a foreigner among foreign people' (Aist 2017: 13). Notwithstanding the debate about the quality of Columba's self-exile, once removed from Ireland would he be forever considered a *peregrinus* or were subsequent actions necessary to maintain this designation? Maybe Columba saw his mission to the Picts as a form of pilgrimage (in the style of Jesus' commissioning of the disciples, see the following section on this topic) or perhaps evangelising was a

fortuitous by-product of his *peregrinatio*. Without a first-hand account from Columba it is difficult to say with any certainty how he viewed his status as a *peregrinus* once he reached Scotland.

Unlike Columba, the quality of Columbanus' self-exile is not in question. He quit Ireland for the continent where he founded monasteries in France and Italy living the remainder of his life as an alien in a far-off land. Aist (2017: 12) quotes Jonas' *Vita Columbani* in asserting that Columbanus expressly desired to 'go into strange lands, in obedience to the command which the Lord gave Abraham.' Again, it is not clear if Columbanus' *peregrinus* designation was a result of him leaving Ireland or his subsequent actions in a foreign territory or both. He may have seen his monasteries as a collective in a static situation, experiencing what the Turners called *communitas*; places where earthly inhabitants purposely and continuously strove to overcome earthly concerns in preparation for a heavenly home.

New Testament Understandings

In her book *Encountering the Sacred: The Debate on Christian Pilgrimage in Late Antiquity*, Bitton-Ashkelony (2005: 29) explains that the New Testament 'did not impose [the religious practice of pilgrimage] on believers.' In fact, she contends that the New Testament discouraged the 'idea of holy places' in response to 'Judaism's idolization of the Temple in Jerusalem' (Bitton-Ashkelony 2005: 21). This may be supported by Jesus foretelling the destruction of the temple in Matthew 24:1-2 and Paul promulgating the notion of the Christian body as God's temple in 1 Corinthians 3:16. She posits that without this impetus pilgrimage was not a widespread Christian practice during the Apostolic Age. Instead, Bitton-Ashkelony asserts that Christian pilgrimage grew along with the cult of the saints. This phenomenon saw the faithful pursuing divine intercession at the tombs of martyrs and desiring to model their lives on those of the holy men and women they visited. It is under these circumstances that Bitton-Ashkelony says the idea of sacred space began to materialise in the Christian tradition.

For some biblical scholars, Jesus' commissioning of the apostles (Matthew 28:19 and Mark 16:15), is seen to support the notion of *peregrinatio pro Christo*. In these passages Jesus instructs his disciples to spread the good news by *going into the world* and sharing it with *all the nations*. This appears to be what Saint Patrick (d. 493) did when, after escaping enslavement

from Ireland, he later returned to the island to evangelise amongst the indigenous population.

Patristic Views

Bitton-Ashkelony (2005: 17) describes a theological debate about pilgrimage that arose near the end of the 4th century CE. She claims that it was centred on the 'choice between [visiting] the earthly and heavenly Jerusalem.' The former—pilgrimage to the earthly Jerusalem—slaked early Christian curiosity about the locales where significant scriptural events occurred. Bitton-Ashkelony refers to this as *textual pilgrimage* and she cites Egeria's voyage to the Holy Land as an example. The latter—pilgrimage to the heavenly Jerusalem—entailed a virtual journey to the prototypical heavenly realm as described in Hebrews 12:22 (a place where people live in perfect peace and harmony with one another and God). This holy site could be accessed by envisioning the setting *in situ* through prayer and ascetical practices and thus did not require a voyage to a physical location.

Bitton-Ashkelony (2005: 21) explains that one reason some Church leaders may have dissuaded the faithful from visiting the earthly Jerusalem is that 'early Christian[s] ... sought to develop a universal religion of the whole *oecumene* without geographical boundaries.'

Monastic Considerations

In her article *Holy Souls and Holy Community: The Meaning of Monastic Life in Adomnan's Vita Columbae*, Ritari (2011: 134) explains that Adomnan presents the monastic life itself as pilgrimage. In several instances, she notes that Adomnan repeats the notion that Columba left Ireland *to be a pilgrim* and, in another instance, Columba welcomes an exile 'living in pilgrimage in Britain' (Ritari 2011: 134). Based on this evidence, Ritari posits that for Adomnan, pilgrimage was in fact a *state of being* (rather than a transient practice). Furthermore, she contends that the monk's movement was primarily an effort to go away from a specific location (Ireland) as opposed to a movement toward 'a specific place on earth' (Ritari 2011: 134).

Bitton-Ashkelony highlights the tension between stability and mobility inherent in monastic wanderings. On the one hand, monks were expected to renounce earthly existence and live a spartan life free from worldly encumbrances: a state more easily achieved by taking oneself away from society. On the other hand,

monks were expected to completely submit to their monastic leaders. Consequently, if the abbot forbade the monk from leaving the monastic community then the monk was obliged to find another way to achieve his objectives.

Conclusion

At first glance the Irish *peregrini* appear not to have practiced pilgrimage in the popular sense of the word. By foregoing recognisably sacred destinations and declining to return to their homeland, they seem to have undertaken an aberrant type of pilgrimage. Given our temporal distance from late antiquity and our propensity for anachronising, I suggest that it is our modern-day comprehension of pilgrimage that erroneously leads us to this conclusion: in that our conception is not broad enough. Whether they were emulating Abraham and the Apostles in answering the divine call or they were modelling the heavenly Jerusalem in their monastic communities, the early Irish monks understood themselves to be on pilgrimage (or rather their hagiographers portrayed them as such). In my opinion it is our responsibility to interrogate the historical and theological landscape of that era to ensure that we comprehend this phenomenon in its original context before we dispute the manner in which they self-identify.

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