... Alice had not a moment to think about stopping herself before she found herself falling down a very deep well.

—Lewis Carroll, Alice in Wonderland

From the moment I entered the majestic Plaza del Obradoiro in Santiago de Compostela, I was surprised to see that far from having disappeared with the Middle Ages, the pilgrimage was alive and well. I could immediately recognize the modern pilgrims, who represented a mixture of the present and the past. Their backpacks and bicycles were adorned by the pilgrim’s scallop shell, and many carried walking sticks. They ambled in the plaza—some alone, others in groups, all ages and nationalities—while some appeared to know where they were going, others seemed to be in their own private worlds. Their faces, tanned by many days of sun, registered a combination of joy, tears, disappointment, and fatigue. They seemed to be perfectly integrated into the animated scene. Occasionally a tour bus pulled up and middle-aged men and women got off, visited the plaza, and then moved toward the cathedral’s double staircase. At the base of the granite stairs three or four women gathered, their arms laden with silver charms and souvenirs, while former members of the tunas (university student singing groups), their long black capes flowing in the wind, tried to vend their music. In the plaza’s center a group of ten teenagers flopped down to rest on top of their packs and staffs. A pair of cyclists, with shells tied to their handlebars, stopped in the middle of the square, looked at the cathedral’s baroque facade, and hugged each other. Passing by them were what appeared to be businessmen and an occasional black-robed priest or nun. In the air was a combination of church bells and the sweet sound of a flute reverberating across the stone of ages.
Figure 1. Plaza del Obradoiro and cathedral, Santiago de Compostela.
As I sat on one of the granite benches that line the plaza taking in this scene, a young woman with a camera approached and asked me to take a photo of her and her boyfriend with the cathedral as the backdrop. I asked if they were pilgrims, noting the shell she wore on a cord around her neck. With a smile they nodded and said that they had begun in Roncesvalles, on the border of Spain and France, and had walked for a month to reach Santiago in the northwest corner of Spain, a journey of 750 kilometers. I was impressed and asked them what it was like to arrive. They replied that they were disappointed the journey was over. They felt strong physically and hoped to come back next year. We spoke for a few more minutes, and then they said they needed to go. I asked them where they were going now. “To the cathedral,” they replied. Did I want to come? Finding myself more and more curious about the modern pilgrimage, I agreed. They picked up their backpacks effortlessly (practice, I thought), and as we crossed the plaza, they explained that this was their honeymoon, that they both had made the Camino de Santiago (Road of Saint James) before but wanted to begin the marriage with a strong foundation forged by sharing the natural and human beauty of the Camino. I began to feel a bit confused.

It was noon, and the Pilgrim’s Mass was starting. We sat down. The young woman caught someone’s eye, and they exchanged a warm smile and small wave. It seemed that at least twenty other pilgrims were at the Mass. The backpacks mounted at the base of one of the massive Romanesque pillars probably belonged to the teenagers who now filled several of the wooden pews instead of the plaza. I recognized older northern Europeans: white hair, polypropylene clothing, bright colors. I found I could not listen to the sermon for the overwhelming impact of what I was seeing and feeling. After the Mass we left by the south entrance to the horse fountain plaza where the young couple rejoined some friends from the trip. With clear regret they said good-bye to their companions from the journey. They had to get the Compostela (the cathedral’s certificate of completion, they explained) and then rush off to the train station. Both had to be at work the next morning in Barcelona.

I found myself with two other walkers who invited me to join them for a pilgrim’s gastronomic tradition: lunch at Casa Manolo where the food was cheap and abundant. As we walked I was surprised at their openness to my questions. They did not seem to mind, and in fact one seemed to need to share his stories of the journey. He had walked out his front door in southern Germany two months previously, feeling an inexplicable loss and hoping that in walking things would become clear. Despite having had the trip of his life he was a bit worried about returning.
His companion, a Basque, felt energized and eager to return to his family and work. I did not have time to ask why, because we arrived and three other friends from the Camino were already in line—two men (one Spanish, the other English) and a Dutch woman.

It was a memorable lunch. Story after story in a mixture of Spanish and English tumbled out of the pilgrims. The Basque man had initially been accompanied by a friend who developed severe tendonitis and had to leave at Burgos, where he met the German. Shared moments and different versions of the same instances caused argument and frequent laughter. They asked about others on the way. What happened to the Frenchman with the donkey? This man, apparently, was also famous for his snoring, which they all recalled ruined a good night’s sleep a week earlier in Cebreiro. Two were going to continue to the coast to Finisterre, the medieval end of the earth, the next morning by bus. They did not want to stop yet. I realized that the group had formed by chance; although they had started out alone, they had become friends as they walked. I mostly listened. As I had seen them all at the Pilgrim’s Mass I assumed they were Catholic, but one explained that it was an ecumenical road, that one’s religious beliefs were irrelevant. I was not a part of this group of “pilgrims,” but I could see that I wanted to be. And so it was. The next summer I readied my backpack and took off for the Camino with two American professors and five other students. We also walked 750 kilometers. In 1994 I returned for thirteen months to study and live the pilgrimage for my doctoral dissertation in anthropology.¹

When faced with the complexity of the contemporary Camino, the categories “pilgrimage” and “pilgrim” seem to lose meaning. Usually the words, especially in English, are associated with a religious journey, faith, or devout seekers, or for Americans, the Thanksgiving Day school plays that re-create the Mayflower’s journey. The monopoly on confusion on this point, however, is not limited to the American side of the Atlantic. Before going to Santiago to study a young Italian woman was told that Compostela was similar to the Catholic healing shrine of Lourdes in France. Believing that she would find only “rain and religion,” she was surprised by the inaccuracy of this stereotype.² Although the Santiago pilgrimage has a religious foundation based in Catholic doctrine regarding sin, its remission and salvation, in its contemporary permutation these religious elements endure, but they also share the same stage with transcendent spirituality, tourism, physical adventure, nostalgia, a place to grieve, and esoteric initiation. The Camino can be (among many other things) a union with nature, a vacation, an escape from the drudgery of
the everyday, a spiritual path to the self and humankind, a social reunion, or a personal testing ground. It is “done” and “made” as a pilgrimage, but what does that mean now? The glue that holds these disparate elements together seems to be the shared journey, the Camino de Santiago.³

ROAD MAPS TO DISCOVERY

What is now commonly referred to as the Camino de Santiago is really a network of routes, many of Roman origin, extending throughout Europe that have been used regularly by pilgrims since the eleventh century to reach Santiago de Compostela.⁴ The various caminos are based on other historical pilgrimage roads to Santiago. The camino inglés (English way) led British pilgrims arriving by sea at La Coruña south to Santiago, the camino portugués (Portuguese way) brought pilgrims north, and the vía de la plata (silver way) was used by pilgrims from the south and center of the peninsula to join the camino francés (French/Frankish way) at Astorga.

The “Camino” now generally refers to the camino francés because it is and was the most popular for its infrastructure of pilgrims’ refuges (hospitales, or hospices) and cities as well as monasteries, hermitages, and churches. The early medieval pilgrimage played an important role in the Christian repopulation of the peninsula fostered by the reigning political forces: kings of Navarre, Castile, and Galicia eager for control of lands and ecclesiastical powers seeking to expand reformed monastic orders south of the Pyrenees. The repopulation brought merchants and artisans, particularly Frankish ones, the development of an extensive infrastructure of villages, bridges, roads, and the construction of Romanesque and Gothic churches. Many elements of Spanish medieval art, literature, music, and architecture can be traced to Frankish influences of the same period, and vice versa. Much of this artistic traffic occurred along what was, by the thirteenth century, a well-developed pilgrimage and economic exchange route that touched all of early Europe. This route and the camino del norte (north way) along the Cantabrian coast brought pilgrims from the rest of Europe to Santiago. After crossing the Continent by one of the four French routes (Paris, Vézelay, Arles, Le Puy) pilgrims reached the natural frontier created by the Pyrenees.⁵

In the late twentieth century, as in the twelfth century, the camino francés enters Spain at two mountain passes, Roncesvalles and Somport. Both unite at Puente la Reina and continue via the stunning medieval stone bridge as one route that crosses Spain and a richly varied countryside—from the gentle mountains of the Pyrenees to the lush, rolling Navarrese
Pilgrimage routes to Santiago in Iberia and France
hills and the bull-running streets of Pamplona to the famous vineyards of La Rioja and the wild forests and ancient dwellings outside of Burgos through the often desolate, high plains of Castilian wheat (the *meseta*) to the slow-rising mountains protecting Galicia and finally through the verdant eucalyptus-lined paths that lead to Santiago’s door. The Camino also passes through large urban areas and villages whose formation and history coincide with its development. The pilgrimage routes are predominantly rural, open, and unpaved—just as modern pilgrims wish.

As I learned about the pilgrimage’s reanimation, I discovered that these historical facts are important; modern pilgrims often want to travel the same routes as the medieval pilgrims who first ventured to Santiago, and to experience them in the same way. The emphasis placed on the journey and how one reaches the shrine at Santiago struck me as marking an important difference between other popular western European pilgrimage centers such as Fátima in Portugal or Lourdes in France. With these other centers, whose devotion is centered on the Virgin Mary by a Catholic majority, the pilgrims’ essential ritual acts occur within the bounded sacred space of the shrine. The pilgrims’ mode of transport, or way of arriving, at the shrine is usually secondary or irrelevant. It surprised me that unlike the pilgrims at Fátima or Lourdes, these white, urban, European, middle-class men and women made the pilgrimage—from a week to four months—on foot, bicycle, and horse. Rather than a healing shrine of short-term visits, the contemporary Santiago pilgrimage is not confined to the city itself but consists of a long physical and often internal (spiritual, personal, religious) journey. In many cases making the pilgrimage becomes for participants one of the most important experiences of their lives. Pilgrims want to feel and live the road step by step (or pedal after pedal). Non-Catholics, agnostics, atheists, and even seekers of esoteric knowledge go side by side with Catholics and Protestants.

The Catholic Marian-centered shrines (with devotion focused on the Virgin Mary) also lack the long-term infrastructure and the sense of community that Santiago pilgrims develop by forming part of an informal society whose membership goes back a thousand years and includes such notables as Charlemagne, Saint Francis of Assisi, and King Ferdinand and Queen Isabella of Spain. Marking the popularization and desacralization of the Camino on a wide scale, actress Shirley MacLaine joined the ranks of the famous by making her spiritual journey on foot in 1994 (finding out I was American, Spaniards often remembered her and commented on her presence in their villages). The majority of the Marian-centered shrines (Lourdes in France, Fátima in Portugal, and Medjugorje
in Bosnia) are based on miracles or apparitions (Church-confirmed earthly visitations of the Virgin Mary to a seer or seers) that occurred after 1850. The pilgrimage to Santiago is based on a tradition said to reach back to the foundation of Christianity.\(^5\)

Beginning in the 1980s an infrastructure of pilgrim’s refugios (hospices or refuges), run by hospitAleros (volunteer attendants) and based on the medieval model of charity, sprang up on the route, allowing pilgrims to journey knowing that shelter is available and affordable. The routes are marked with bright yellow arrows or scallop shells. Signs along the route explain the pilgrimage’s numerous historical sites. Pilgrims also carry a credential, or pilgrim’s passport, that is stamped each day and, in Santiago, presented at the cathedral’s office of reception for pilgrims to receive the Compostela, a document certifying completion of the journey. Before or after the journey pilgrims sometimes join a confraternity of St. James or a Friends of the Camino association, found throughout Europe and with chapters in the United States and Brazil. The pilgrimage may begin with the decision to make the journey, but it rarely ends with arrival in the city.

A PASSAGE TO SPAIN

A perplexing question haunts the pilgrimage: How did the northwestern hinterlands of the Iberian Peninsula become the final resting place of an apostle martyred in Jerusalem? Other than notes from apocryphal texts there is no evidence that James ever set foot in Iberia, yet by the twelfth century the number of pilgrims visiting his tomb rivaled that of Rome and Jerusalem. The answer leads one into a maze of legends, political intrigue, and religious belief in medieval Europe. The pilgrimage’s fame rapidly grew after the first millennium, drawing pilgrims from all walks of life and corners of the Christian world eager to be close to one of Christ’s inner circle.\(^7\)

Before becoming the fourth apostle of Christ, James the Elder (or the Greater) was a fisherman in Galilee with his brother John (the Evangelist) and his father, Zebedee. One day while they were mending their nets Jesus passed and called them to Him. They left the nets behind, took up their new work with a passion—they were given the nickname Boanerges, or Sons of Thunder, by Jesus—and became especially important among the apostles, appearing at moments crucial in the ministry of Jesus: the Transfiguration and the Agony in the Garden of Gethsemane. Because of their apparently favored position among the apostles, they (or their mother) had the audacity to ask to sit eternally on the right and left side
of God and for their impudence received a decisive lesson in humility from Jesus. James’s scriptural and mortal end comes swiftly in Acts: Herod Agrippa martyrs him (by beheading) in A.D. 44.8

At this point facts dry up and the rich legends begin. There is no mention of Iberia or James’s postdeath whereabouts in the Gospels, but according to later texts and eighth- and ninth-century documents, Jesus sent James to proselytize in the west, to the end of the earth—Finisterre.9 After achieving only marginal success, James returned to Jerusalem, and while en route the Virgin Mary appeared to him along the banks of the Ebro River in Zaragoza, bearing a jasper pillar. This apparition of the Virgin not only provided literal and symbolic support to his mission, it also helped give birth to the popular cult and shrine of the Virgen del Pilar.

After his return to Jerusalem and his subsequent beheading James made his second and, arguably, most important coming to the Iberian Peninsula. His remains (including his head), collected by two faithful disciples, were miraculously returned to the northwestern corner of the peninsula in a stone boat that had neither sail nor oars.10 The boat, with the disciples and their holy charge, moored on the banks of Iria Flavia near Padrón (16 km from Santiago). It was also in the return that the first miracle associated with his presence in Spain is invoked, linking him to the scallop shell, a key symbol of the pilgrim: “As the stone ship . . . neared the land at Padrón, a horseman riding on the beach was carried by his bolting horse into the waves. Instead of being drowned, however, both horse and rider emerged from the deep covered with scallop shells.”11 James’s body was transported inland to the mount that is present-day Santiago de Compostela after having received hard-won permission from Lupa, the local pagan queen (who subsequently converted), to bury the apostle.

Santiago’s tomb was forgotten for nearly eight hundred years until one day a religious hermit named Pelayo reported seeing a glowing light or star, which on cautious investigation revealed the apostle’s resting place. Compostela is thus said to have received its name from compos-tium, burial ground, or campus stellae, starry field.12 Pelayo went to Bishop Teodomiro, who immediately called an investigation and ordered the construction of a church on the site with the financial support of the Asturian king Alfonso II. Thus began Santiago’s patronage of Spain, his miraculous postmartyrdom presence in the Iberian Peninsula, the alignment of Church and civil authority, and the beginning of a thousand-year history of pilgrimage calling the faithful from the farthest reaches of the Continent.13

The ninth-century rediscovery of the tomb filled a political-religious