

## Origins and Ideals

### *The Steps of the Master*

It is a striking paradox that the most celebrated tomb visited by pilgrims in the Middle Ages was empty, the tomb, once prepared for Joseph of Arimathea, in which the dead Christ had lain for three days and then risen from the dead. The pilgrimage to Jerusalem had a longer history than any other, and it remained throughout in a class of its own. Time brought to the Holy Places most of the abuses which popular enthusiasm had already created in the west, but the Jerusalem pilgrimage was nonetheless consistently the most spiritual pilgrimage of the Middle Ages.

For the first three centuries after the death of Christ there was very little to see in Jerusalem. Most of the city which Christ had known was utterly destroyed by Titus in A.D. 70. Christian travellers were chiefly interested in its remarkable library which made it, by the end of the second century, a meeting place for the foremost scholars of the first age of Christian philosophy. Melito, bishop of Sardis (d. c. 190), visited Palestine in order to copy out extracts from the Old Testament. At the beginning of the third century, bishop Alexander greatly expanded the library, which was visited by Origen and

Fermilian of Caesarea. It was in this library that Eusebius gathered the materials for his great *History*.

Few mediaeval pilgrims to the Holy Land were scholars, and yet they shared with these early travellers a desire to recreate in their imagination the scenes of Christ's ministry and passion. Origen declared that he had come to 'walk in the footsteps of the Master'. At the close of the fourth century Paulinus of Nola wrote:

'No other sentiment draws men to Jerusalem than the desire to see and touch the places where Christ was physically present, and to be able to say from our very own experience "we have gone into his tabernacle and adored in the very places where his feet have stood" (Ps. CXXXII. 7)...Theirs is a truly spiritual desire to see the places where Christ suffered, rose from the dead, and ascended into heaven....The manger of His birth, the river of His baptism, the garden of His betrayal, the palace of His condemnation, the column of His scourging, the thorns of His crowning, the wood of His crucifixion, the stone of His burial: all these things recall God's former presence on earth and demonstrate the ancient basis of our modern beliefs.'

The deeds of the Old Testament prophets and the events of Christ's life, so remote from the medieval minds, took on a thrilling immediacy when they were recited on the very soil which they had trodden. It was a common practice amongst the early pilgrims to read aloud passages from the Scriptures in the places to which they related. 'Etheria', the remarkable Spanish lady whose travels at the end of the fourth century took her as far afield as Sinai and Edessa, had read not only the



Scriptures but the *Ecclesiastical History* of Eusebius and the Acts of the more important Christian martyrs. Coming to the cave of Moses in the side of Mount Sinai she and her party paused to read out the passage of Exodus (33:22): '...and it shall come to pass...that I will put thee in a cleft of the rock and cover thee with my hand while I pass by.' With the Old Testament in her hand she was able to follow, as she thought, the exact route of the Israelites in their flight out of Egypt. At the shrine of St. Thecla near Seleucia she had the *acta* of the saint read to her. It was a feeling for the Holy Places compounded of imagination and romanticism, an attempt not merely to read the Scriptures but to relive them in her own actions.

The services held at Jerusalem during Holy Week were designed to reinforce this feeling. On each day of the week the congregation met at the site of the events which had occurred on that day in the first Holy Week. Most of these sites were now covered by churches and the crowds moved from one to the other while the relevant passages of the Gospels were recited to them. Thus on the Wednesday they met in the Garden of Gethsemane, where a deacon read from the Gospel of St. Matthew the account of the betrayal. On Good Friday, the climax of the pilgrim's journey, the relics of the Passion were displayed and the account of the crucifixion read to the crowd, together with passages from the Old Testament foretelling it. When Etheria was there in c. 382 'every one present was overwhelmed by emotion and the strongest men there could not contain their tears.'

St. Jerome, who lived at Bethlehem for the last thirty-five years of his life, was the foremost exponent of this scholarly attitude to the Holy Places. He could not conceal his contempt for those pilgrims who supposed that their souls would benefit by

the mere fact that their bodies were in Jerusalem. In a famous and often quoted letter Jerome observed that a pilgrim should 'not merely live in Jerusalem but live a holy life there'. It was at Bethlehem that Jerome made his great translation of the Bible, and in pungent letters to admirers in the west he asserted that only in Palestine was a true understanding of the Scriptures to be had. To study the Bible anywhere else was like learning Greek at Lilibaeum or Latin in Sicily. 'One may only truly understand the Holy Scriptures after looking upon Judaea with one's own eyes.' Jerome himself lyrically described the emotions of his protégée Paula when she visited the Holy Places for the first time:

'She threw herself down in adoration before the cross as if she could see the Lord himself hanging from it. And when she entered the tomb, she kissed the stone which the angel had rolled away.... What tears she shed there, what sighs of grief, all Jerusalem knows.... After this she came to Bethlehem and entered the cave where the Saviour was born; and when she looked upon the inn, the stall, and the crib... she cried out in my hearing that with the eyes of her soul she could see the infant Christ wrapped in swaddling clothes and crying in the manger.'

Paula's pilgrimage was a constant effort of imagination, a mystical experience as intense in its own way as that of St. Francis at La Verna. But before long this mystical adoration of the Holy Places had crystallized into a naive and literal view which attached the greatest importance to the physical survival of relics of the Passion. The practice of collecting soil from the Holy Land, already common in the time of St. Augustine, was



a popular echo of the words of the psalmist, 'we have adored in the places where his feet have stood.' Augustine's contemporary, Paulinus of Nola, commended it on the ground that 'we must not ignore the simple and literal sense of this passage, even though it may contain a deeper one as well.' Indeed, Paulinus believed that the footprints of Christ were physically preserved in the ground at the point whence He had ascended into Heaven 'so that we may adore the imprint of the divine feet in the very dust trodden by the Lord, and then we may truly say that "we have adored in the place where his feet have stood."' At the end of the seventh century the Gallic traveller Arculf observed these footprints exactly as Paulinus had described them, and reported that pilgrims took pinches of dust from them as souvenirs of their visit.

The veneration of the Holy Places as a living and visible commentary on the Bible did not, of course, die with the generation of St. Jerome, any more than did the tradition of meditation on the Passion which these early pilgrims had inaugurated. Arculf, for example, was described by a contemporary as 'learned in scripture'. At Bethany he was able to follow in the synoptic Gospels the very path of Christ and the apostles. In later times, the mendicant orders, who ultimately acquired control of the Holy Places, encouraged meditation on the Scriptures, and on the Passion in particular. A Franciscan novice who visited the Holy Land in the middle of the thirteenth century remembered how, reading his Bible in the Holy Places, he had felt as if he was witnessing with his own eyes the tortures inflicted on Christ. At the end of the fifteenth century the Dominican Felix Faber remarked that experienced Biblical exegetes were regularly confounded by the arguments of those who had been to the Holy Land.

The growing emphasis on the humanity of Christ in the spiritual literature of the eleventh and twelfth centuries found its reflection in the behaviour of pilgrims in the Holy Land. The pilgrimage of Richard of St.-Vanne to the Holy Land in 1026-7 followed a prolonged period of meditation on the Passion and death of Christ. What the Holy Places meant to this man is indicated by his actions in Jerusalem in Holy Week:

'It is not for me', his biographer wrote, 'to describe the anguished tears which he shed when at last he reached those venerable places. When he saw the pillar of Pilate in the Praetorium he witnessed in his mind's eye the binding and scourging of the Saviour. He thought of the spitting, the smiting, the mocking, and the crown of thorns. Then, on the place of Calvary, he passed through his mind an image of the Saviour crucified, pierced with a lance, reviled and mocked by all around him, crying out with a loud voice, and yielding up his spirit. And meditating on these scenes, he could no longer hold back his tears, and surrendered to the agony which he felt.'

Richard's experience was not uncommon. St. Silvinus, according to his ninth-century biographer, stood on the mount of Calvary and 'although he could not see God with his bodily eyes he could nevertheless see Him with his spiritual eyes, standing in the very place where He had saved humanity from the power of Satan by the shedding of His precious blood.' The twelfth-century ascetic Rayner Pisani used to pray so fervently on Mount Tabor that he would actually see Christ with Moses and Elias, exactly as Peter, James and John had once seen Him.



These ascetics and visionaries saw themselves as reliving the life of Christ. They often referred to their pilgrimage as an *imitatio Christi*. By re-enacting in their own lives the sufferings of Christ they felt that they were performing an act of personal redemption just as Christ, by His death, had made possible the salvation of all people. On Maundy Thursday 1027, Richard of St.-Vannes knelt down in the square in front of the Holy Sepulchre, and washed the feet of the poor. Rayner of Pisa fasted for forty days on Mount Tabor in remembrance of Christ's forty days in the desert. All pilgrims who could baptized themselves in the Jordan at the point where John the Baptist was believed to have baptized Christ. Some, like St. Bona of Pisa (d. 1207), spent several months following the exact path of Christ's ministry, beginning at the Jordan and ending at the place of Calvary. Others, like Fulk Nerra, count of Anjou, flagellated themselves before the basilica of the Holy Sepulchre, and in the latter half of the twelfth century it was common for pilgrims to have themselves flagellated at the very pillar preserved in the church of Mount Sion. One contemporary went so far as to describe Henry II's visit to Canterbury in July 1174 as an *imitatio Christi* for, like Christ, he allowed himself to be beaten with scourges; 'save that Christ did this for the remission of our sins whereas Henry did it for the remission of his own.'

At its highest level, a pilgrim's life in Jerusalem was conceived as a continuously repeated drama of the life of Christ. The rituals which he performed, more than a mere passion play, had something of the regenerative qualities of the celebration of the Eucharist. In this idea lies the distant origin of the modern liturgical practice of the Roman Catholic Church known as the 'stations of the Cross'. Already in 1231 the exact

route which Christ was believed to have followed from Pilate's prison to Calvary was marked out in the streets of Jerusalem. Some seventy years later Ricoldo of Monte Croce 'followed the path which Christ ascended when he carried the Cross', which took him past the house of Pilate, the place where Simon of Cyrene was made to help him, and thence to the Golgotha chapel in the basilica of the Holy Sepulchre. The sire d'Anglure followed the same route in 1395 with a few stations added, 'a thing which every pilgrim who makes this journey can and ought to do.' The journey of the ideal pilgrim could be presented, as Franco Sacchetti presented it at the beginning of the fourteenth century, as an elaborate allegory of the life of Christ from the Nativity to the Resurrection. The pilgrim's entry into a roadside hospice was likened to the incarnation in the womb of the Blessed Virgin. The dangers of the route found their counterpart in the Passion of the Lord. The pilgrim may be betrayed and killed by his companions as Christ was betrayed by Judas and killed by the Jews. He may be betrayed and killed by his host, as Christ was welcomed into Jerusalem by those same Jews who later killed him. Robbers may waylay and despoil him just as the soldiers divided Christ's belongings amongst themselves. It is a naïve, anti-Semitic picture which must have been offered to countless groups of pilgrims departing to the Holy Land. Yet it conceals one of the profoundest sentiments of an age which reduced all spiritual ideas to images. At a popular level people sought to associate themselves with the life of the Saviour, to express literally their conviction that he had saved them by his death. They wished to tear down the barrier of remoteness that separated a person of the thirteenth century from the events of the first. At the highest levels of Christian mysticism they sought, like St. Francis, to 'enter into



the mind and body of the crucified Christ and take on Christ's sufferings in their own persons'.

### *The Rejection of the World*

Contempt for the society which they left behind was at least as important to the followers of St. Jerome as their longing for the promised land. His entourage at Bethlehem saw in their pilgrimage an act of self-denial, of voluntary exile whose object was to take them away from Rome and thus from the 'damnation to which the rest of the world is destined'. Equally negative were the motives of the younger Melania, who left Rome in 410 allowing the wind to take her ship where it would; it took her not to Palestine but to north Africa, where she passed seven years before setting eyes on the Holy Places. 'Depart from the midst of Babylon', Jerome urged a friend who had stayed behind in Rome, 'for it is the house of Satan, the stronghold of iniquity and sin.'

The desire to renounce civilization as contemporaries knew it was a powerful spiritual impulse of the late classical period. Born in the deserts of Egypt in the third century, it remained until the twelfth a strong element of Christian piety. Its inspiration in Jerome's day was the *Life of St. Anthony* by Athanasius. The decisive moment of Augustine's 'conversion' had come when he had heard of two ordinary soldiers who had abandoned the world to live as hermits after reading the *Life of St. Anthony*. Jerome's friend Marcella had had a similar experience in Rome. During his three years in Rome between 382 and 385 Jerome gathered round him a self-conscious group of ascetics, most of them women, who felt that the Christian society of the city had compromised with paganism, come to terms with the world and the flesh. They saw them-

selves as an elite corps, besieged on every side by flabby worldliness, forced by the ordinary necessities of life to descend to the level of those around them. The true spirit of Christianity they saw in the communities of hermits in the Egyptian desert, and it was these communities, as much as the Holy Places, that drew western pilgrims to the east. Paula, who visited Egypt in Jerome's company in 386, 'threw herself at the feet of these holy men and seemed to see the Lord himself in every one of them.' The elder Melania spent five years in Egypt in the 370s before proceeding to Jerusalem. Etheria would not return home until she had visited the Egyptian monasteries, and the younger Melania returned to Egypt after only a few weeks in the Holy Land 'in order to learn about the perfect life from her spiritual superiors, the desert hermits.'

Pilgrimage in the early Church was very often motivated by a purely negative rejection of urban values. Jerome spoke of himself as 'forsaking the bustling cities of Antioch and Constantinople so as to draw down upon myself the mercy of Christ in the solitude of the country.' It was a process of self-exile, of social and physical isolation. To Jerome, a pilgrim was not a vulgar tourist, an audience for the lying guides who plied their trade in the Holy City. He was a monk. His place of exile did not matter; how he lived was more important than where, and even the sites of the Crucifixion and Resurrection were of no intrinsic spiritual value unless the pilgrim was ready to carry the cross of the Lord and be resurrected with him. St. Anthony, whom Jerome intensely admired, had never seen Jerusalem.

Jerome was well aware that his austere views were visibly rejected by most pilgrims of his own day. But they are worth dwelling on, because Jerome bequeathed a tradition to mediaeval Christianity, and his works were on the book-lists of serious



pilgrims for ten centuries after his death. The monastic ideal remained for many years inseparable from contemporary notions of pilgrimage, though Egypt lost its fascination for western pilgrims after the fifth century. During the monastic revival of the eighth century, pilgrims regarded Rome in much the same light as they had once seen Egypt and Palestine. Four Anglo-Saxon kings retired to die there in the space of fifty years. The Lombard king Ratchis walked to Rome with his wife and children in 749 and accepted the monastic habit at the pope's hands. Just as in the fifth century the empress Eudoxia, estranged wife of Theodosius II, had exiled herself to Jerusalem to escape her enemies, so in the eighth century Pippin's brother Karloman left the Frankish court and settled in a Roman monastery on Monte Soracte.

Jerome's attitude to pilgrimage as an escape from civilization was unconsciously revived by the Irish. Their distinctive contribution to the spiritual life of the 'dark ages' was the idea of the aimless wanderer whose renunciation of the world was the most complete of which man could conceive, far more austere than the principles of Benedictine monasticism. In the wandering Irish hermits of the sixth and seventh centuries, western Europe came as near as it would ever do to those 'athletes of Christ', the desert fathers of Egypt and Syria in late antiquity. By wandering freely without destination, the Irish hermit felt that he had cut himself off from every material accessory to life. In his eighth sermon St. Columban dwells on the transitory nature of life, and declares: 'I know that if this earthly tent of mine is taken down, I shall get a new home from God made by no human hands. It makes me sigh, this longing for the shelter of my heavenly habitation...for I know that while I am in my body I am travelling away from God.' The

notion of a specific destination did not enter into Columban's thinking; his only destination was the heavenly Jerusalem. The spirit of Columban's teaching was precisely expressed by an Irish pilgrim of the twelfth century, who quoted with approval Jerome's strictures against 'Babylon' (i.e. Rome) and urged his hearers to 'be exiles for God's sake, and go not only to Jerusalem but everywhere, for God himself is everywhere.' The same conviction brought three Irishmen to the court of king Alfred in 891 'in a boat without any oars, because they wished for the love of God to be in foreign lands, they cared not where.' Only in the ninth century did some Irish begin to regard Rome as a place of special spiritual merit, and even then a marginal annotation in an Irish hymn-book informs us that 'going to Rome involves great effort and little reward, for the King whom you seek there you will not find unless you bring him with you.'

Bede has left us the spiritual portrait of an Englishman of his own day, the Northumbrian monk Egbert, who passed much of his early life in Ireland and became deeply imbued with Irish spiritual values. According to Bede's informant, Egbert had once suffered from a serious illness during which he became terrifyingly conscious of his own sinfulness. He persuaded himself that even the slender material ties which kept him in an Irish monastery were dragging him to perdition. He determined to become an aimless wanderer fulfilling in exile the daily rituals of the monastic life. 'He would live in exile and never return to his native Britain. In addition to the solemn psalmody of the canonical offices, he would recite the entire psalter in praise of God, unless prevented by illness. Every week he would fast for a day and a night.'

Religious wandering was recognized by contemporaries as



a peculiarly Irish practice. 'Why is it', asked the hagiographer Heiric in a letter to Charles the Bald, 'that almost the entire population of Ireland, contemptuous of the perils of the sea, has migrated to our shores with a great crowd of teachers? The more learned they are the more distant their chosen place of exile.' 'Wandering is an ineradicable habit of the Irish race,' observed a ninth-century monk of St.-Gall. The popularity of aimless pilgrimage in the seventh and eighth centuries on the continent can usually be traced to Celtic influence. Irish missionaries spread their ideas amongst the Anglo-Saxons, many of whom exiled themselves to monasteries in Ireland. St. Colman built a monastery in Mayo in 667 exclusively for their use, and Englishmen were still living there more than a century later. St. Cyran (d. 697), founder of the abbey of Lonrey, was converted to the wandering life by an Irish hermit whom he encountered. When the Norman monk Wandrille was commanded in a vision to abandon his home and friends, he made straight for the Irish monastery at Bobbio in northern Italy. Some Irish wanderers, like St. Cadroe at the beginning of the eleventh century, were joined by ever-growing bands of disciples as they trod their erratic paths across western Europe.

Isolated examples of this eccentric behaviour can be found in Germany well into the twelfth century, but as a way of life it had died more than two hundred years earlier. As the missions conquered paganism in central and northern Europe, formal Churches were established with the hierarchical organization familiar to older Christian lands. The wandering of priests across diocesan boundaries and the departure of monks from their monasteries were discouraged by St. Boniface after the 740s, and strenuously condemned by his successors. The reorganization of the monastic life in the ninth

century, which is associated with the name of Benedict of Aniane, reinforced the hostility of the authorities to wandering monks. A Frankish synod forbade them to go without permission to Rome 'or anywhere else' as early as 751. The same prohibition was embodied in the capitularies of Charlemagne, which rehearsed that these unauthorized wanderings were destructive of ecclesiastical discipline and instrumental in spreading 'unnecessary doubts' among the people. The spiritual ideals of the Irish thus found themselves in conflict with the tendency of the Carolingians to make use of Benedictine monasticism as a stabilizing force, a propagator of what one might call the 'cultural colonialism' of the ninth century. Henceforth renunciation of the world was to mean entering a monastery or a fixed hermitage. Itinerant clerics were to find themselves condemned even by such fierce ascetics as Peter Damian. When Everard de Breteuil, *vicomte* of Chartres, suddenly renounced the world in 1073, he became a hermit living a 'life of freedom', and earned his living by burning charcoal; he was persuaded, however, that the irregularity of his life was displeasing to God, and so entered the monastery of Marmoutiers.