

St James and Irish Pilgrimage to Santiago de Compostela

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St James the Apostle

Pilgrims have been attracted for centuries to the reputed burial place of St James in Santiago de Compostela in Spain. St James and his brother St John the Evangelist, sons of Zebedee, were among the apostles of Jesus Christ. St James was termed ‘the Greater’ in order to differentiate him from another apostle of the same name, St James ‘the Less’. The gospels record that soon after Jesus had called Peter and Andrew to follow him as ‘fishers of men’, he similarly summoned James and John, whom he had encountered in a boat mending their net.

Jesus nicknamed James and John Boanerges, meaning ‘Sons of Thunder’, which it has been suggested was a reference to their hot temper and impetuosity. On one occasion when a Samaritan town declined to welcome Jesus, James and John suggested that he should call down heavenly fire to destroy the place. Jesus is reported to have declined, declaring, ‘The Son of Man came not to destroy souls but to save’.¹

After Jesus’s death, James was the first of the apostles to suffer martyrdom, being beheaded in Jerusalem about 44 AD on the orders of King Herod Agrippa I. The accounts of the lives of early Christian figures in the gospels tended to be amplified in succeeding centuries. Thus by the fifth and sixth centuries James’s principal persecutor was identified as the High Priest Abiathar, who in response to the saint’s promotion of Christ’s message had him imprisoned on charges of sedition. Having been found guilty by Herod, James heals a cripple on the way to his place of execution, which so impresses one of his captors, Josias, that he converts to Christianity. The story then has both men being beheaded together.²

A remarkable embellishment of the legend was to follow, with James transported from the Holy Land and given a special sphere of operations in Spain. By the eighth century James was being portrayed in church writings as the evangeliser of Spain, the one who had brought Christianity to the country. Furthermore, James was described as preaching in Spain, then returning to the Holy Land and after martyrdom being brought back to Spain and buried there.³

A detailed account of the transport of James’s body evolved, whereby in the wake of his execution some of his followers placed his remains in a boat which sailed via the Mediterranean to Spain, landing on the north-west coast. After various adventures James’s body was placed in a tomb in Galicia, but for centuries its location was forgotten. About 814 AD Bishop Teodemiro of Iria, guided by angels it was said, found the site of James’s tomb, had it cleared and built a church and monastery, around which there grew a small town. The legend named the place where James was buried as Campus Stellae, the ‘field of the star’, although it has also been suggested that the name was a corruption of the Latin *compositum*, indicating a place of burial.⁴ This element was combined with the Galician abbreviation of St James, Santiago, to give the name Santiago de Compostela.

1 Herbert Thurston and Donald Attwater, Editors, *Butler’s Lives of the Saints*, vol 3, Burns & Oates, London 1956 Edition, page 182.

2 William Melzer, Editor, *The Pilgrim’s Guide to Santiago de Compostela*, Italica Press, New York 1993, pages 8-9 (a scholarly edition of Book 5 of the Codex Calixtinus or ‘Book of St James’).

3 Same, pages 12-13.

4 T D Kendrick, *St James in Spain*, Methuen & Co Ltd, London 1960, pages 17-19.



St James in pilgrim dress (statuette by Gil de Siloe, 16th century, Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York)

Santiago de Compostela

The story of St James in Spain now becomes tied up with the Reconquista, the campaign to recover the country from the invading Islamic Moors of North Africa. The Moors invaded Spain in the early eighth century and succeeded in conquering most of the country, but portions of the mountainous north remained outside their control. In or about the year 834 AD the Spanish reputedly decisively defeated a Moorish army at Clavijo. At a crucial point in the battle, St James himself was claimed to have appeared in person, dressed as a knight and mounted on a horse, proceeding to lead the Christian forces to victory with great slaughter of the enemy. As a result St James received the somewhat gory title of Santiago Matamoros, 'St James the Moor-Slayer', being seen not just as a saintly follower of Jesus but as a militant defender of Spain against its enemies.⁵

This 'crusading' aspect of St James only manifested itself in the mid-twelfth century, when Santiago de Compostela was asserting its position. Primarily because of its claim to be the burial place of St James, Compostela developed as a pilgrimage site on a par with Jerusalem, Rome and Canterbury. Compostela also benefited from the promotional skills of Diego del Gelmirez, its bishop and then archbishop between 1100-40. The Codex Calixtinus or 'Book of St James' dates from this period, being an illuminated manuscript which features an account of St James's miracles, sermons, hymns and a famed 'Pilgrim's Guide'.⁶ The Codex was stolen from Santiago Cathedral in 2011 but fortunately was later recovered intact.

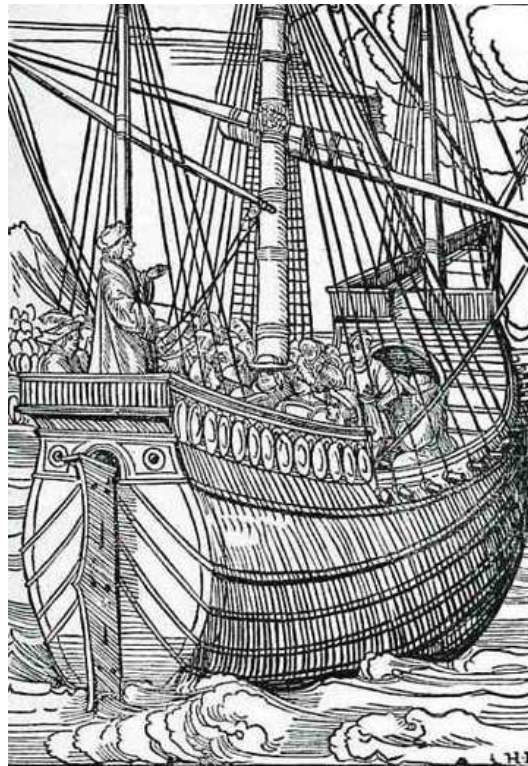
The medieval pilgrims who travelled the Camino de Santiago, or 'Way of St James', came from all sections of society, ranging from royalty, nobility and clergy, through

⁵ Kendrick, *St James in Spain*, pages 19-24.

⁶ Diana Webb, *Medieval European Pilgrimage c700-c1500*, Palgrave, Basingstoke and New York 2002, pages 13-16, 23-24; Melczer, Editor, *Pilgrim's Guide to Santiago de Compostela*, pages 28-35.

merchants and artisans, to peasants and the poor. Before his death in 1170 Thomas Becket himself is said to have recommended the Compostela pilgrimage to a woman allegedly possessed by the devil.⁷ The motivations of the pilgrims varied, some wishing simply to venerate St James. Others sought forgiveness of sins, to fulfil a vow, do penance or secure an indulgence, while many, possibly a majority, hoped for a personal benefit, in particular recovery of health. Of course the secular or non-religious motivation of desire for adventure and a break from routine, akin to that found in modern tourism, must be taken into account as well.⁸

The extent of the commitment which a pilgrimage to Compostela necessitated is demonstrated firstly by the time involved to travel there and return home, taking about six to nine months, progress being especially slow for the substantial numbers of sick and aged pilgrims. Then there were the remarkable distances to be covered, about 1,000 kilometres if starting in the south of France, up to 3,000 kilometres if starting in Germany or northern Europe and even longer if coming from eastern Europe. Attacks by thieves and bandits were a constant hazard for pilgrims and travelling in groups afforded some security against these.⁹



**Pilgrim ship, showing holy man preaching
(*Navicula Penitentiae*, Augsburg 1511)**

The departure to Santiago de Compostela, the arrival there and the return home were key moments in the pilgrimage marked by special rites and ceremonies. Before setting out the pilgrims visited their churches to confess their sins, receive Holy Communion and be blessed

7 Constance Mary Storrs, *Jacobean Pilgrims from England to St James of Compostela*, Confraternity of St James 1998, page 42.

8 Melczer, Editor, *Pilgrim's Guide to Santiago de Compostela*, pages 36-44; Webb, *Medieval European Pilgrimage*, pages 44-71.

9 Melczer, Editor, *Pilgrim's Guide to Santiago de Compostela*, pages 44-52.

by a priest. On arrival in Compostela the pilgrims would queue to enter the great Cathedral, confessing and receiving Communion again before touring the many chapels and altars and finally venerating St James's tomb.¹⁰ A sermon in the Codex Calixtinus describes 'the chorus of pilgrims keeping watch around the venerable altar of St James', with 'Germans on one side, French on another, Italians on another standing in groups, holding burning tapers in their hands, which illuminate the whole church as the sun or rather the brightest day'.¹¹

Pilgrims were expected to make offerings in the Cathedral and would be reminded if forgetful. After a stay ranging from a few days to a few weeks, the pilgrims would have received a certificate confirming that they had visited Compostela. Then the pilgrims would return home, no doubt with a sense of being spiritually cleansed and with many tales to tell, perhaps also to join a confraternity of St James, and when they died a scallop shell and other emblems of St James might be buried with them.¹²

Irish Pilgrims to Compostela

In addition to native pilgrimage sites such as Lough Derg and Croagh Patrick, the Irish were drawn to those abroad, including Santiago de Compostela. There is an ancient Irish legend that the sons of King Milesius of Spain, the 'Milesians', had been the first Gaelic invaders of Ireland. Given this supposed Spanish connection, the popularity of the Compostela pilgrimage and the fact that Spain aided Irish rebels against English rule, it not surprising that there was an attempt to link St James with Ireland. In the seventeenth century Fr John Lynch and Philip O'Sullivan Beare claimed improbably that St James, accompanied by his father Zebedee no less, had preached in Ireland.¹³

While most continental pilgrims travelled to Compostela by land, Irish and British pilgrims used sea routes. At first these pilgrims could travel on wine-importing ships bound for Bordeaux in south-west France, leaving them with a shorter land journey to Compostela. The increase in the numbers of pilgrims meant that there was profit in sailing directly to the port of La Coruña (A Coruña in Galician) near Compostela. It has been estimated that the total number of medieval pilgrims travelling by land and sea to Compostela could reach two million in a peak year, while in 1456 an English pilgrim counted 84 ships in the harbour of La Coruña.¹⁴ Ships bearing Irish pilgrims bound for Compostela sailed from Dublin, Drogheda, Wexford, New Ross, Waterford, Galway and other Irish ports.

The disadvantages of the long land journey to Compostela were its arduousness and the danger of attack and robbery as noted, but of course a degree of discomfort was considered part of the pilgrimage process. The journey by sea was certainly shorter but it brought its own difficulties, including seasickness, overcrowding, shipwreck and piracy. While wealthier pilgrims could enjoy some privacy in temporary cabins, the poorer might not even have sufficient room to lie down. In order to escape boredom pilgrims would play card and board games, others would read and some would play instruments and sing. Given the spiritual nature of the journey, religious men would also take the opportunity to preach to the passengers.¹⁵

10 Melczer, Editor, *Pilgrim's Guide to Santiago de Compostela*, pages 60-62.

11 Vincent Corrigan, 'Music and the Pilgrimage', Maryjane Dunn and Linda Kay Davidson, Editors, *The Pilgrimage to Compostela in the Middle Ages*, Routledge, New York and London 2000, page 62.

12 Melczer, Editor, *Pilgrim's Guide to Santiago de Compostela*, pages 62-63.

13 'Saint James the Apostle, Spain and Ireland: A 17th-century View', *Omnium Sanctorum Hiberniae*, <http://omniumsanctorumhiberniae.blogspot.com/2014/07/saint-james-apostle-spain-and-ireland.html>.

14 Roger Stalley, 'Sailing to Santiago: Medieval Pilgrimage to Santiago de Compostela and its Artistic Influence in Ireland', John Bradley, Editor, *Settlement and Society in Medieval Ireland*, Boethius Press, Kilkenny 1988, pages 397-98.

15 Same, pages 400-2.

While we have no detailed particulars of poorer pilgrims, the annals and other sources provide the names of some of the more prominent Anglo-Irish and Gaelic figures who undertook the pilgrimage to Compostela. In 1267 Fulk Basset (or de Sandford), the Archbishop of Dublin, went on pilgrimage to Compostela.¹⁶ Demonstrating the seriousness of a commitment to pilgrimage, a papal mandate had to be secured in 1320 via the Archbishop of Dublin to absolve Edmund Butler, his wife and their son James, from their vow to visit Compostela. The Butlers pleaded that they were unable to fulfil the vow ‘on account of the wars between the English and the Irish’.¹⁷ In 1428 Hugh Maguire died on the night of his return from Spain to Kinsale, ‘after cleansing of his sins in the city of St James’. The death notice of another Maguire, Thomas Oge, who died in 1480, recorded that he was a man of ‘the greatest charity and piety and hospitality’, who had been ‘once at Rome and twice at the city of St James on his pilgrimage’.¹⁸



Pilgrim routes from Ireland to Santiago de Compostela

In 1483 James Rice, Mayor of Waterford, was granted permission to go on pilgrimage to Compostela, ‘according to a vow made before he took office’.¹⁹ Women too were pilgrims

16 Storrs, *Jacobean Pilgrims from England to St James of Compostela*, page 136.

17 W H Bliss, Editor, *Calendar of Entries in the Papal Registers Relating to Great Britain and Ireland*, HM Stationery Office, London 1895, vol 2, page 196. Another source recorded that in 1320 Edmund Butler actually travelled to England and ‘from thence to St James of Compostela’ (Richard Butler, Editor, *Jacobi Grace, Kilkenniensis: Annales Hiberniae*, Dublin 1842, page 99).

18 John O’Donovan, Editor, *Annals of the Kingdom of Ireland by the Four Masters*, vol 4, Hodges and Smith, Dublin 1851, pages 873, 1,113.

19 Richard Hayes, ‘Ireland’s Links with Compostela’, *Studies*, vol 37, 1948, page 328; Stalley, ‘Sailing to Santiago’, page 405.

and in 1445 it was noted that Margaret MacDermott ‘returned safe and sound’ from St James’s, but that Evelin O’Farrell, wife of Piers Dalton, had died in Spain.²⁰ In 1507 James Barry Roe and a party of notables including Donnell O’Fiaich were lost at sea while returning from their pilgrimage in Spain.²¹

There is an account of a pirate-style attack on a ship carrying Irish pilgrims in or about the year 1474. In 1477 Bartholomew Couper, a merchant of London, stated during legal proceedings that his ship the *Mary London* had transported 400 Irish pilgrims from New Ross to Compostela. Couper declared that when returning to the port of Waterford the ship was attacked by three other vessels containing pirates ‘to the number of 800’, which may indeed have been an exaggeration. The ship and pilgrims were taken to Youghal and Couper deprived of 140 marks and imprisoned for three years. The surnames of the pirate captains, Flemmyng, Foweler and Herrold, show that they were Anglo-Irish or English and not typical foreign sea raiders, but the incident does show the dangers to which pilgrims to Compostela were exposed.²²

Images and Emblems of St James

The way in which St James was portrayed in images altered over the centuries. In the earliest images he appears as a bearded figure in group portraits of the Apostles. As the Compostela legend developed James increasingly appeared in the guise of a pilgrim, carrying a *bordón* (staff) and *escarcela* (pouch), wearing a wide-brimmed hat decorated with a scallop shell and sometimes also with shells on his cloak. Additionally, the association of the saint with the liberation of Spain from the Moors saw him portrayed as a knight on horseback wielding a sword and slaying enemies, the classic Santiago Matamoros image.²³

The Indianapolis Museum of Art holds a fifteenth-century altarpiece in the form of a triptych (three folding panels) with twelve frames portraying various phases of the life of St James. Among the episodes featured are the miraculous transport of James’s body to Spain, his role as the ‘Moor-Slayer’, his arrest, trial and martyrdom and some of the miracles attributed to him. It has been speculated that the Indianapolis altarpiece ‘might well have served a pilgrimage church on the route to Compostela as a comprehensive indicator of the principal aspects of the St James legends’.²⁴



Scallop shell symbol of St James (detail, St James statuette, Metropolitan Museum of Art)

20 O’Donovan, Editor, *Annals of the Four Masters*, vol 4, page 944.

21 Same, vol 5, page 1,293.

22 Deputy Keeper of the Records, *Calendar of the Patent Rolls Preserved in the Public Record Office*, 1476-1485, HM Stationery Office, London 1901, pages 78-79; Stalley, ‘Sailing to Santiago’, page 397.

23 Melczer, Editor, *Pilgrim’s Guide to Santiago de Compostela*, ppages 63-70; Richard Stracke, ‘St James the Greater: The Iconography’, <http://www.christianiconography.info/jamesGreater.html>.

24 David M Gitlitz, ‘The Iconography of St James in the Indianapolis Museum’s Fifteenth-Century Altarpiece’, Dunn and Davidson, Editors, *Pilgrimage to Compostela*, pages 113-30.

There was a thriving trade in souvenirs in Santiago de Compostela as pilgrims sought keepsakes of their visit. The most commonly available souvenir was the scallop shell, the archetypal emblem of St James which is plentiful on northern Spanish beaches. These shells were worn as hat or cloak badges or as bag decorations, and as noted were often buried with pilgrims when they died.²⁵ The discovery of scallop shells associated with burials as a result of archaeological excavations in recent times provides evidence of the latter practice in Ireland. In 1986 at St Mary's Cathedral, Tuam, County Galway, a scallop shell was found in the area of the hip of a skeleton, indicating that it may have been attached to a bag.²⁶ In 1992 a pewter scallop shell with a small figure of St James was found at Ardfert Cathedral, County Kerry, while in 1996 two burials featuring scallop shells were unearthed in Mullingar, County Westmeath.²⁷

More expensive souvenirs were carved from hard jet stone and were called 'azabaches' after the Spanish word for jet. These were carved as images of St James, crosses, medallions and in other forms. While no example of an azabache has been found in Ireland, a striking fifteenth-century jet carving of St James and a disciple, which originated abroad, is now held by the Hunt Museum in Limerick.²⁸



St James (Jacobus) the Greater, with pilgrim symbols, Kilcooley Abbey, Co Tipperary (TARA, Trinity College Dublin)

25 Stalley, 'Sailing to Santiago', pages 410-11.

26 Miriam Clyne, 'A Medieval Pilgrim: from Tuam to Santiago de Compostela', *Archaeology Ireland*, vol 4, no 3, 1990, pages 21-22.

27 Dagmar Ó Riain-Raedel, 'The Irish Medieval Pilgrimage to Santiago de Compostela', *History Ireland*, vol 6, no 3, 1998, page 17.

28 Relief Carving of St James of Compostela, MG 044, Hunt Museum, Limerick, <http://www.huntmuseum.com/collection/relief-carving-of-st-james-of-compostela>.

Images of St James are also found in Ireland carved on tombs and high crosses.²⁹ The tomb of the above mentioned James Rice, located in the Cathedral of the Blessed Trinity in Waterford, includes images of the twelve apostles, including James the Greater.³⁰ An effigy of St James, featuring a scallop shell on his hat and other pilgrim symbols, appears on the tomb of Pierce Fitz Oge Butler, who died about 1526, at Kilcooley Abbey, County Tipperary.³¹ While evidence has not been found to show that this Pierce Fitz Oge undertook the journey to Compostela himself, we have seen earlier in this article how important this pilgrimage was to members of the Butler family in the fourteenth century.

St James's Church, Dublin, and the Compostela Pilgrimage

Reflecting the popularity of his cult and pilgrimage, there are a number of churches of medieval foundation dedicated to St James in Ireland, including those in James's Street, Dublin, Dingle, County Kerry, Drogheda, County Louth, and Ballyhack, County Wexford.³² St James's Church in Dublin was founded between 1189-92 and was attached to the Abbey of St Thomas. The foundation charter has survived and records that Henry Tyrrell granted land to the clergy of St Thomas's Abbey for the creation of a church and cemetery dedicated to St James the Apostle.³³

Around the time of the feast day of St James, 25 July, celebrations were held in the vicinity of Dublin's St James's Church, accompanied by a great fair which lasted for a week. In the eighteenth century it was recorded that relatives liked to decorate the graves of their loved ones in St James's Graveyard, 'with flowers, cut paper, scripture phrases, garlands, chaplets and a number of other pretty and pious devices'.³⁴

The current nineteenth-century church building in James's Street, formerly a Protestant Church of Ireland place of worship, stands on the site of the old medieval St James's Church. Following meticulous restoration work commissioned by Dr Pearse and Mrs Deirdre Lyons, St James's Church now houses the Pearse Lyons Distillery.³⁵ A stained glass window portraying the pilgrimage to Santiago de Compostela, designed by Mrs Lyons, is located at the western end of the church (see illustration). Reflecting the divisions caused by the Reformation in the sixteenth century, a separate Roman Catholic Church dedicated to St James stands nearby in James's Street and is still in use for worship.

Dublin's medieval connection with St James's pilgrimage is well established, in that sometime between the years 1216-28, Archbishop Henry of Dublin founded a hospice in the city's port to accommodate pilgrims about to set sail for St James's shrine at Santiago de Compostela. The location of this hospice was near the Priory of All Hallows and adjacent to the Norse monument known as the Steyn or 'Long Stone'. The Steyn was at the junction of present-day Pearse Street and College Street and in medieval times was on the banks of the River Liffey, not then contained by walls. The site of the Steyn is today marked by a small

29 Stalley, 'Sailing to Santiago', pages 411-15.

30 E C Rae, 'The Rice Monument in Waterford Cathedral', *Proceedings of the Royal Irish Academy*, vol 69, section C, 1970, pages 1, 5, plates i, v.

31 'Kilcooley Abbey, Kilcooley, County Tipperary: Effigy of Pierce Fitz Oge Butler', TARA, <http://www.tara.tcd.ie/handle/2262/40611>; Non-Commercial, Share Alike Licence.

32 Damien McLellan, 'Reclaiming an Irish Way of St James', *History Ireland*, vol 24, no 3, 2016, <https://www.historyireland.com>.

33 John T Gilbert, Editor, *Register of the Abbey of St Thomas, Dublin*, London 1889, page 383; Sean J Murphy, 'Burying Poor and Gentry: St James's Church and Graveyard, Dublin, Twelfth to Twentieth Centuries', page 1, <https://www.academia.edu/37116458>.

34 John O'Keeffe, *Recollections of the Life of John O'Keeffe, Written by Himself*, vol 1, Henry Colburn, London 1826, pp 21-22.

35 Pearse Lyons Distillery, <https://www.pearselyonsdistillery.com>; the present article is based substantially on historical research carried out for Dr and Mrs Lyons.

representation of the old monument by sculptor Cliodhna Cussen.



Santiago de Compostela stained glass window at western end of Pearse Lyons Distillery, in restored St James's Church, Dublin

The Dublin hospice near the Steyn was stated to have been established for the benefit of 'the poor and pilgrims, those particularly intending to visit the shrine of St James the Apostle and awaiting at the seaside suitable wind and weather'. Here the pilgrims might 'have their wants supplied in food and beds', and furthermore, they were to be attended by chaplains and brethren, the former wearing 'a white surplice' and usual habit, the latter 'a black cloak with a white cross on the breast'. The hospice was to be financed with some of the revenues of the Diocese of Glendalough, then in the process of being united with the Diocese of Dublin.³⁶

Unfortunately we do not have contemporary documentation to confirm the connection between the church of St James in Dublin and Santiago de Compostela in the medieval period. However, some modern publications indicate that pilgrims departed for Spain from St James's Gate in Dublin as far back as 1220, but without citing a source.³⁷ While Archbishop Henry's hostel for pilgrims is well documented, as described above, this further claim is less so. Yet it can reasonably be inferred that in Dublin as in other cities, pilgrims to Compostela would have started their journey to Spain from the church dedicated to St James.

Reflecting revived interest in the Camino de Santiago, a Pilgrim's Passport may be obtained from the Camino Information Centre in Dublin's Catholic St James's Church in

36 Charles McNeill, Editor, *Calendar of Archbishop Alen's Register, c 1172-1534*, Royal Society of Antiquaries of Ireland, Dublin 1950, pages 55-56; Hayes, 'Ireland's Links with Compostela', pages 326-27.

37 Rev Maurice Dufficy, 'The Story of St James's Church, James's Street, Dublin', *Dublin Historical Record*, vol 29, 1975-6, page 66.

James's Street.³⁸ The Pilgrim's Passport may also be ordered from the Camino Society Ireland,³⁹ but many intending pilgrims still like to start their journey to Spain with a personal visit to a church dedicated to St James in their own area. Religious belief may have waned, yet St James's pilgrimage is once again in fashion, as representatives of many nationalities, including of course the Irish, throng the routes to Santiago de Compostela in northern Spain.

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38 Camino Information Centre, <http://stjamesparish.ie/camino-information-centre>.

39 Camino Society Ireland, <https://www.caminosociety.com/passport>.