Landscape and Perception: The Medieval Pilgrimage to Santiago de Compostela from an Archaeological Perspective

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Introduction

Margery Kempe of Kings Lynn, Norfolk, had a colourful life. During her lifetime, which covered the last decades of the 14th century and the first decades of the 15th, she bore fourteen children, suffered bouts of ill health, and travelled to all the most important pilgrim shrines in Medieval Christendom. Driven by faith and an unswerving devotion to God, she covered thousands of miles by land and sea to visit not only Rome, Jerusalem and Santiago de Compostela in northwest Spain, but countless more minor shrines along the way.[1]

The account of Margery's life and adventures is the earliest surviving autobiography composed by an English woman, and clearly she would make a splendid subject through which to explore the culture of travel in the Middle Ages. However, this paper will consider her no more. I introduce her merely to illustrate that she is an exception: we know something about her life and experiences as a woman, a mystic, and a pilgrim.

In contrast, the vast majority of the millions of pilgrims who travelled to the famous shrines of the medieval world are nameless, faceless and uncountable. We know little about them; they are anonymous, fleeting inhabitants of past landscapes who, for the most part, have vanished from history. Yet at the same time, these are the people who stand at the heart of my enquiry. I believe that the archaeology and the landscape of the pilgrim routes tell a story, and that through the perspective of current archaeological theory it is possible to trace something of the experiences and life worlds of the medieval pilgrims who made their way by foot and pack animal across Europe in search of salvation.

Today, the main pilgrim route-way across northern Spain that leads

[1] *The Book of Margery Kempe*, trans. by B.A Windeatt (London: Penguin, 1994).

to Santiago de Compostela is a popular destination for keen walkers and cyclists from all over the world (Figure 1). However, amid the newly constructed tarmac paths, encouraging signposts and council refuges, it is still possible to encounter narrow stretches of medieval road, robust bridges of the 12th and 13th centuries, the ruins of pilgrim hospitals, and vast cavernous churches designed to accommodate throngs of pilgrims. Many of the towns along the route owe their success to the trade and bustle associated with the passing pilgrim convoys.

For this, after all, was one of the most famous devotional journeys of the Middle Ages. During the eleventh and twelfth centuries, the great era of popular pilgrimage, thousands upon thousands of pilgrims travelled westward in order to fulfil penitential sentences, expiate sin, and partake in the divine blessing promised by the miraculous presence of the Apostle James's earthly remains. How did pilgrims conceive of and experience such an arduous and long journey? How did they imagine an expedition that would take them far from their homes and, in their view, literally to the ends of the earth? Moreover, what was their experience of travelling hundreds of kilometres through foreign lands, over imposing mountains, arid plains, marshes, strange towns, villages and cities? The terrain of northern Spain contained all of these extremes.

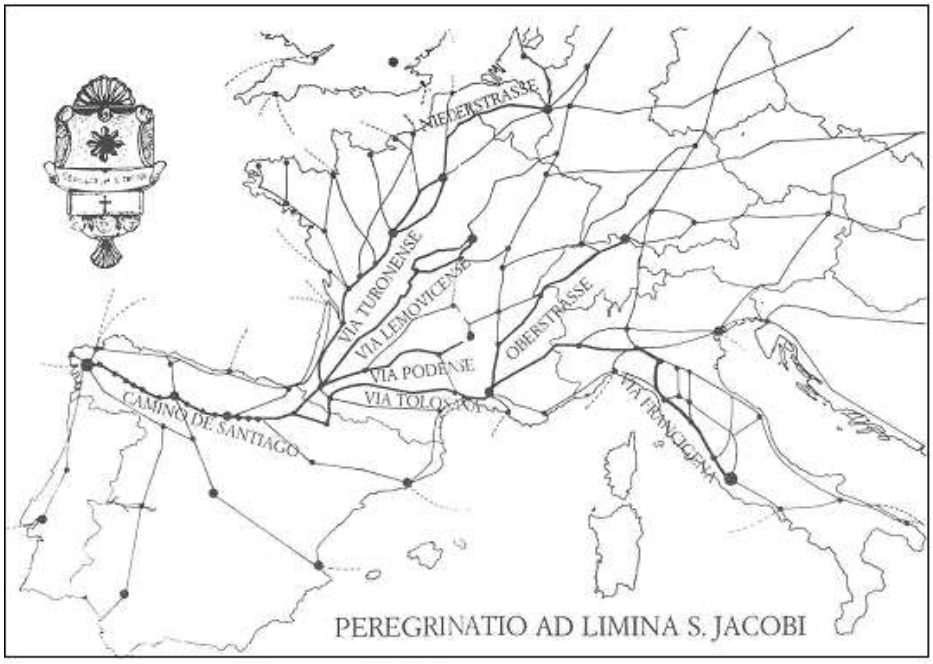

Figure 1: Map of the main routes across Europe to Santiago de Compostela[2]

In this paper, I focus on one question. How did the landscape of the pilgrimage route shape the experience of those travelling through? This means attempting to discover how certain places may have been perceived and understood by the pilgrims as they journeyed towards Compostela.

In undertaking this study, I draw upon the ideas of geographers, anthropologists, and archaeologists in order to set out a way of conceptualizing 'place' and 'landscape' in the past.[3] They show that the act of dwelling and the rhythms and nuances of life are geographically situated within localities that range from elaborately constructed monuments to features of the natural landscape devoid of physical embellishment. Their

[2] Reproduced from Arturo Soria y Puig, 'El camino y los caminos de Santiago en España', in *La Europa del Peregrinaje,* ed. by Paulo Caucci von Saucken, (Santiago de Compostela: Lunwerg, 1993), p. 210.

[3] *Archaeologies of Landscape: Contemporary Perspectives*, ed. by W. Ashmore & A.B. Knapp (Oxford: Blackwell 1999); Edward S. Casey, 'How to Get from Space to Place in a Fairly Short Stretch of Time: Phenomenological Prolegomena' in *Senses of Place*, ed. by S. Feld and K.H. Basso (Santa Fe: School of American Research Press, 1996) pp. 11-52; Tim Ingold, *The Perception of the Environment* (London: Routledge, 2000).

work demonstrates that, rather than a mere passive backdrop to our lives, the landscape is part of us. All those things that make us human, like memory, emotion, social identity, notions of morality, faith and everyday routines, can be understood to be woven among places. Here, a Canadian woman describes her feelings and actions upon arriving at some impressive ruins on the Isle of Skye, home of her ancestors:

> by putting my cheap ring inside the walls, I felt I was giving a humble offering, asking, almost begging to be part of it forever [...]. I wanted to leave a part of 'me' there. I did not know this before that moment, nor had I planned to do so. But when I did it, I felt extremely good, extremely relieved.[4]

In the archaeological world, projects are increasingly designed to engage with entire landscapes, and to utilize diverse sources of evidence in order to unpeel and decode layers of meaning accumulated in places, signs of the tangled relationship between humanity and locality. Therefore, when conceptualizing the route to Santiago de Compostela, we can do so with the refreshing realization that it is so much more than a line on a map which links dots signifying individual 'sites' or landmarks along the way.[5] We begin to understand that there is no such thing as 'empty space', and can envision the route-way more as a sequence: a sequence of places, unfolding through space and time. The process of moving through the world thus involves a succession of experiences: of sights, smells, remembrances and associations that come to mind via the walking body within a dynamic, resonant landscape.

An archaeological approach

Using this perspective in an applied and practical way is, of course, no easy

[4] Paul Basu, 'Route Metaphors of "Roots-Tourism" in the Scottish Highland Diaspora' in *Reframing Pilgrimage: Cultures in Motion,* ed. by Simon Coleman and John Eade (London: Routledge, 2004), p. 197.

[5] Francisco Pellicer Corellano, 'Valoración estética del paisaje en el Camino de Santiago (Tramo Aragonés): Criterios de objetivacion' in *Los Caminos de Santiago y El Territorio,* ed. by M. de Torres Luna, A. Perez Alberti and R.C. Lois González (Santiago de Compostela: Congreso Internacional de Geografia, 1993), p. 179.

matter. Three study areas located on the route of the Camino in topographically distinct areas of northern Spain form the testing ground for this research and provide the examples cited in this paper (Figure 2). For now, I just want to propose one potential method of discovering some of the meanings accommodated within the medieval landscape of the Camino de Santiago. I suggest that it is possible to identify certain places that could have functioned as boundaries along the route, and which marked some kind of transition from one type of place to another. Such points of transition could include entering a town or village, sacred space, monastic estates, and the crossing of topographic boundaries. By focusing on the material culture that exists around such points and drawing upon historical data, it becomes possible to reconstruct some of the associations that were attached to such places. These associations bring us nearer to the experience of pilgrims journeying through the landscape.

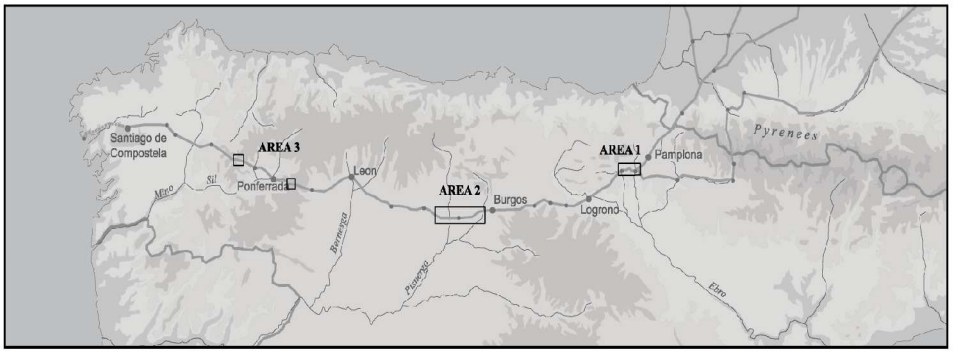

Figure 2: A Map of Northern Spain showing the Camino de Santiago route and the location of my study areas.

Entering a town or village

One of the most obvious transitions of space occurred when the pilgrim entered a city, town or village. During the central Middle Ages, urban spaces were growing in size and architectural elaboration, with walls and gateways becoming recognized components of the townscape. Until recently, they have only been discussed in terms of their defensive capabilities, but, by shifting the gaze, we can start to think about how this kind of boundary

worked from a more experiential perspective.[6] Imposing walls and gates constrained movement, controlled movement and sent a clear message to outsiders. You were not free to go where you wanted to; you had to play by the rules.

The town of Puente la Reina is a case in point (Figure 3). Located in Navarre in the first of my study areas, it is the town where pilgrims would have converged after following different routes over the Pyrenees. Two large, square towers flank the gap where a gate would have signalled the entry point into a narrow, five-metre wide street. This street, La Calle Mayor, extended 453 metres within the enclosed zone of the town, and presumably then, like today, remained largely in shadow from the buildings on either side.[7] As a pilgrim, you would have been easily observed, and possibly charged a toll to pass (the authors of medieval accounts frequently worry about their vulnerability to unscrupulous toll-gatherers).[8] Once inside the gate, there would certainly be locals eager to sell you things, to get your money as you walked through the narrow street. At the end of the main street, you would emerge from the dark, narrow, enclosed space up onto the high, six-arched bridge that was built over the River Ega in the late 11th century under royal sponsorship specifically for the pilgrim traffic. The sense of space and light on the bridge, in contrast to the gloom, noise, confinement, and tunnel effect of the town, marked another transition as the pilgrim continued on his or her way.

So, whatever good things a pilgrim could find in a town, the architecture of gateways, designed for observance and control, possibly made the experience of arriving into urban space very much a confrontational one, while the urban layout could have accentuated a feeling of antagonism.

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[6] Ross Samson, 'Knowledge, constraint, and power in inaction: the defenseless medieval wall', *Historical Archaeology,* 26, 3 (1992), 26-44.

[7] Jean Passini, 'El espacio urbano a lo largo del Camino de Santiago' in *El Camino de Santiago y la articulación del espacio hispanico: XX Semana de Estudios Medievales en Estella*, ed. by José Ignacio de la Iglesia Duarte (Pamplona: Gobierno de Navarra, 1994), p. 251.

[8] T*he Pilgrim's Guide: A 12th century guide for the Pilgrim to St. James of Compostela,* trans. by James Hogarth (London: Confraternity of St. James, 1992), pp. 18-19.

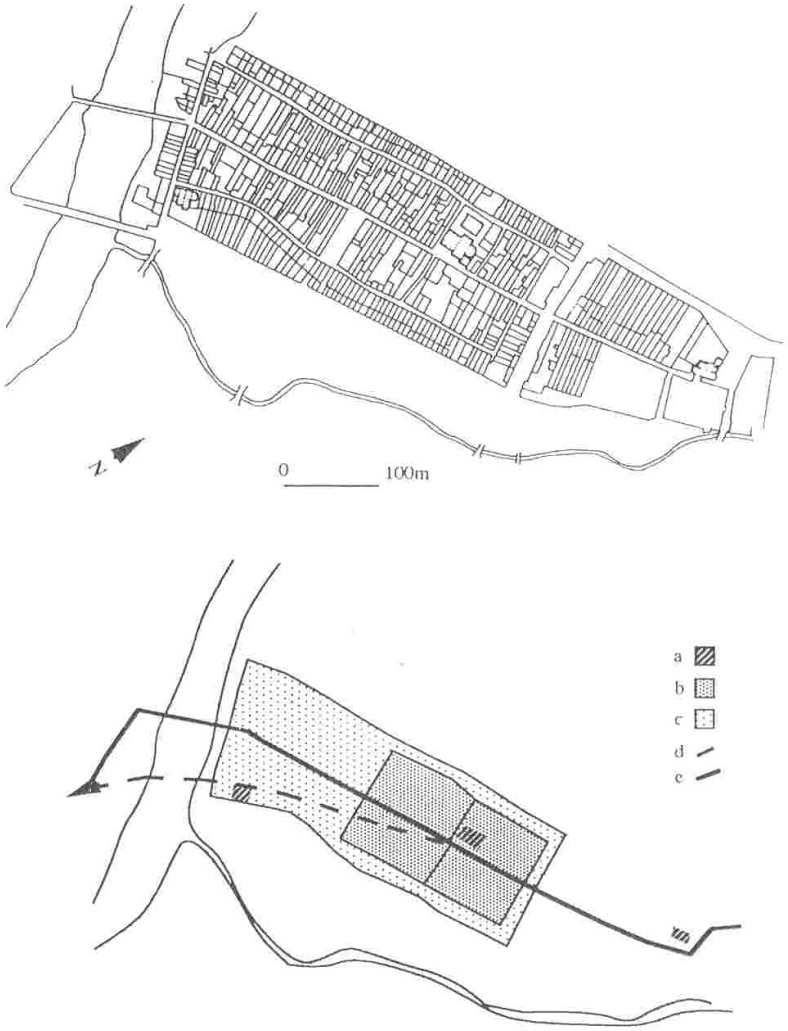

Figure 3: A plan of Puente la Reina, Navarre.
a: religious structures, b: the extent of the town in the 12th century, c: the area fortified during the 13th century, d: the trajectory of the Camino prior to the construction of the bridge, e: the principle route of the Camino subsequent to the bridge construction.[9]

In addition to the cities and towns that were dotted along the route, the Camino de Santiago passed through countless villages and hamlets. One such village is Hontanas, located in the second study area, west of Burgos.

[9] Reproduced from Jean Passini, p. 252.

In the seventeenth century, an Italian traveller described it as 'being hidden in a little valley so that you hardly see it'[10] and that is just how it is: you descend from a bleak upland plateau and suddenly, there is the village, with straw coloured mud-brick houses lining the central street, the route of the Camino (Figure 3). In archaeological terms, there is nothing so tangible or definite as a wall, or a gateway into the village, but I would suggest that there is a zone, defined by the downward slope of the hill, in which you come into view as you descend and approach the village. Stone walls defining agricultural plots signal the moment when you cross into the immediate territory of the village. Historical accounts from elsewhere acknowledge the existence of such places of transition; for example, in one region of Portugal, the old paths giving access to the villages were watched and controlled by the local community, effectively preventing the entrance of undesirables.[11] My personal experience of the Camino villages last year certainly corroborates this idea of controlled and monitored space; every time I wanted to explore a side street or alleyway, an old man or woman would appear out of nowhere, anxious and almost insistent upon redirecting me onto the 'correct way'. So while this track in Hontanas might be ostensibly public space, it does not necessarily imply liberty or freedom of movement. Walking down a public lane can feel very much like an intrusion into the private world of the village (Figure 4).

Returning to a medieval scenario, when you consider that the pilgrim population, moving *en masse* across northern Spain, included lepers and people convicted of crimes such as murder, it becomes even more likely that local populations of villages were keen to monitor exactly who was coming into their midst. In addition to approximating a 'zone of transition' into the village, archaeological indicators such as the ruins of leper hospitals, located well outside the confines of villages like Hontanas and Hornillos del Camino, immediately to the east, further reinforce the idea that strategies

[10] Quoted in Millán Bravo Lozano**,** *A practical guide for pilgrims: the road to Santiago* (León: Editorial Everest, 1993), p. 130.

[11] Brian K. Roberts, *Landscapes of Settlement: Prehistory to the Present* (London: Routledge, 1996), p. 65.

involving space were commonly applied in order to deal with the constant influx of travelling pilgrims.

Figure 3: Descending into the village of Hontanas

Figure 4: The Camino de Santiago through the village of Hontanas

Entering sacred space

Another kind of space of paramount importance to the pilgrim was sacred space. Certain auspicious localities could be considered as extra holy, closer to the saints, closer to God and free from demons.

Wayside crosses, for example, physically denoted such places within the medieval landscape. Commonly erected on the spots where miracles were said to have occurred, they were subsequently used as places to commune with the divine through the sealing of vows. Margery Kempe describes such a scene as she travels from York to Bridlington on a hot day in 1413:

> and as they came by a cross her husband sat down under the cross, calling his wife to him [...]. Then she knelt down beside [the] cross in the field and prayed [...] with a great abundance of tears.[12]

Other markers, such as crosses on the edges of towns, villages and monastic lands, emphasized an actual transition into divine proximity, and could be read by the pilgrim as a sign that they were entering a protected and civilized area. A simple, crude cross stands at the entrance to the town of Estella, again in my first study area, and serves to mark the entry point into a zone dominated by several of the great churches of the town. Would the pilgrim have experienced a sense of relief here? Was there a sense of contrast as they entered an 'official' zone of divine presence?

[12] *The Book of Margery Kempe*, pp. 58-60.

Figure 5: A cross marks the entrance into the town of Estella.

A more obvious marker of the change into sacred space was the elaborate, monumental door of the church and cathedral. For a largely illiterate population, the carvings, sculptures, and stories of Christ rendered in stone could be read like a text, a text that emphasized and reminded them of the power of the past, the power of the church and the power of the divine. These places potentially made the pilgrim feel small, struck with awe, and perhaps ignorant in the face of strange motifs and stories. At the same time, the well-known biblical narratives could have potentially struck a chord of familiarity with pilgrims otherwise in a foreign 'wilderness'. Eliade stresses the importance of the threshold in denoting a sacred place,[13] and it does seem entirely possible that the transitions symbolized by such ornate thresholds were experienced by the pilgrims as resonant moments within the overall journey.

Entering monastic estates

Another interesting type of threshold pertains to monastic estates. At such

[13] Mircea Eliade, *The sacred and the profane: the nature of religion*, trans. by Willard R. Trask (New York: Harcourt 1959), p. 7.

places pilgrims could find shelter, prayer, and medicine for wounds and disease: nourishment for both body and spirit. The monastery of San Anton is located just east of Castrojeriz in the second of my study areas, and although it is largely in ruins, its soaring Gothic double archway still frames the road of the Camino de Santiago, and the immense western facade and narthex continue to dominate the immediate landscape (Figure 6). Founded in the twelfth century and largely rebuilt during the fourteenth, this place became famous for curing 'St Anthony's fire', a contagious skin disease that plagued medieval Europe. One modern guide states the tradition that when suffering pilgrims approached, the monks would go out to welcome them, singing, and present them with a scapular (a monastic cloth garment) marked with the *tau* of St Anthony (the nineteenth letter of the Greek alphabet).[14] A small clue to this history of pilgrim support is still evident in the fabric of the building: underneath the impressive arch and opposite the main church door, there is an alcove in which monks would apparently leave provisions for pilgrims who arrived after the gates had been locked.[15] So in one way, this kind of monumental architecture was akin to a beacon on the horizon, a symbol of comfort and hope to weary, sick, or demon-troubled pilgrims, who upon arrival would experience hope and a temporary release from the rigours of the road.

[14] Anne Shaver-Crandell and Paula Gerson, *The Pilgrim's Guide to Santiago de Compostela : a Gazetteer* (London: Harvey Miller, 1995), p.164.
[15] Millán Bravo Lozano**,** p. 129.

Figure 6: The monastery of San Anton

On the other hand, it should not be forgotten that while the theological sentiment of these places was directed to helping and, to some extent, emulating the poor, these estates were profit-making organizations. They controlled and worked large portions of land, evident from the location of monastic estates on the very best, fertile land within an otherwise bleak and arid area. These estates not only held sway over the local population, but were also interested in controlling and regulating the traffic of pilgrims. During the rituals of welcome, pilgrims were often officially categorized according to social status, by a monk whose sole responsibility was to record and classify those passing through the doors.[16] As a pilgrim, there was no doubt that you were entering a regulated space, in which hierarchies within society were explicitly set out and reinforced.

It is therefore possible that the distant view of the robust buildings of a monastery could have inspired ambiguous and conflicting feelings for the medieval pilgrim, depending upon their position in society and state of health; beacon of support on the one hand, bastion of social control and management on the other.

[16] Michel Mollat, *The Poor in the Middle Ages* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1978), p. 47.

Crossing topographic boundaries

Finally, I would like to consider how elements of the physical landscape might have formed potential obstacles or frontiers for pilgrims journeying across northern Spain. Although the medieval landscape was not exactly a densely forested wilderness, the first upsurge in the Camino de Santiago's popularity occurred when the population of Europe was still relatively small, wolves still rife and the road network patchy. How did the medieval imaginations configure places such as mountains, rivers, and marshes?

Clearly, hard data on this subject is difficult to come by. We have some snippets of anecdotal information. This saying, for example, is preserved in two Camino villages of the Meseta, warning of a treacherous swamp:

> de Rabe a Tardajos, no te faltarán trabajos,
> de Tardajos a Rabe, libéranos, Domine.
> ('From Rabe to Tardajos, you'll have your work cut out,
> from Tardajos to Rabe, spare us, Domine').[17]

A few kilometres further on and the route of the Camino runs onto a muddy upland plateau known as *Cuesta Matamulos*, 'Mulekiller Hill'.

Meanwhile, a fear of rivers can be surmised from recorded tales. A twelfth-century 'guide' to the Camino dwells upon a horrifying incident, in which thieves loitering on the bank of the river Salado skin the author's horses, poisoned by the bad water of the river.[18] Other records mention catastrophes involving capsized boats. One Matilda de Brione of London, attempting an ambitious pilgrimage that was to include Rome, Jerusalem and Compostela, was fortunate to survive such an event on the river Rhône, and although she lost all her money, the other pilgrims lost their lives.[19]

[17] Millán Bravo Lozano**,** *A practical guide for pilgrims: the road to Santiago*, (León: Editorial Everest, 1993), p. 128.
[18] *The Pilgrim's Guide*, p. 13.
[19] Diana Webb, *Pilgrims and Pilgrimage in the Medieval West* (London: I. B. Tauris, 1999), p. 174.

The question here is whether a particular kind of material culture accompanies a particular kind of topography, and if it can indicate something about the experience or attitudes of pilgrims to the terrain that confronted them. With regard to rivers, it is possible that while the bridge-building projects of the Middle Ages removed the danger of fording water-courses by boat or other means, the resultant channelling of pilgrim traffic over specific points in the landscape made individuals vulnerable to other dangers, as exemplified by the horse-skinners quoted above. Could the presence of niches for statuettes in many bridges indicate a need for reassurance and a need to demonstrate that these great stone constructions should be associated with benevolence? Could the interment of saintly relics in the abutment of the bridge in Zubiri, Navarre, for example, be read as answering a popular need to witness a clear divine presence in such critical places?

Simultaneously, however, we should be careful not to jump to the conclusion that the medieval pilgrim cowered in the face of formidable landscapes. The route not only crossed the great mountain range of the Pyrenees, but also ascended the daunting Montes de León before coming into the rough hill country of Galicia in the north west. The lonely hamlet and monastic hospital of Foncébadon, founded by the 10th century near the high pass of this latter range, is testimony that pilgrims did not shy away from accepting the challenge of this mountain route. A few archaeological indicators in less dramatic circumstances shed further light on pilgrim attitudes to terrain. Just outside Castrojeriz in the Meseta, the route of the Camino runs determinedly westward up a steep, uncompromising hill, and then descends on the other side (Figure 7). A detour of just a kilometre or two via another village presents no difficult slope to climb. Why is it that the route avoids the naturally more easy and efficient path through the landscape? Seemingly the challenges presented by the natural landscape were accepted with a mind-set of penitence, one that dictated that spiritual merit was won by the hardship of the journey. This would fit in well with the overall penitential theme of the practice of pilgrimage.

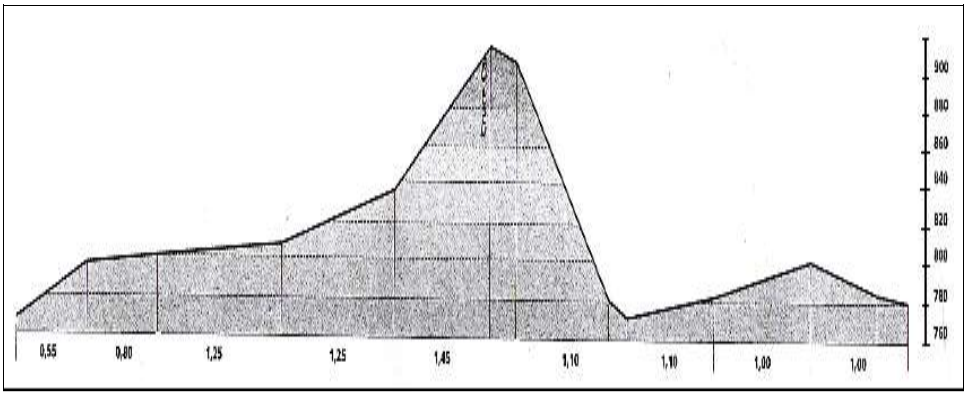

Figure 7: Profile of the Camino route to the west of Castrojeriz[20]

Conclusion

Accessing the mind-sets of people from the past is a tricky issue. This paper does not claim to deliver any assured, concrete facts about how pilgrims felt as they embarked upon their epic journeys. Hopefully, though, I have demonstrated that it is possible to begin to define something of the experience of pilgrimage by means of an archaeological perspective. By thinking about the various dimensions of the medieval landscape, and the meanings that were contained within, we can start to visualize how it must have been to walk through this landscape, and to encounter places that inspired sensations, fears, associations, memories or religious fervour.

One method of conceptualizing the journey is to consider how the process of travelling was punctuated by a succession of arrivals and departures, of places coming into sight, of places being left behind. Pilgrims were constantly negotiating boundaries, specifically demarcated places, zones of transition and topographic obstacles. By looking at the precise way in which these experiences could have been framed by prevailing attitudes and the dimensions of the material culture, a much wider arena of debate begins to emerge. Questions about freedom, control, identity, powerlessness, and popular conceptions of the divine come to the fore.

Today, many people talk about finding freedom on the road. I would

[20] Reproduced from Gonzalo Martiñez Diez, *El Camino de Santiago en la provincia de Burgos* (Burgos: Excma. Diputación Provincial de Burgos, 1998), p. 51.

argue that the culture of travel on the pilgrimage to Santiago de Compostela was less about freedom than confinement within social and religious structures that sought to control and regulate the traffic of the faithful across the landscape of northern Spain.

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