

## Modern Pilgrims in Ancient Landscapes

Christian pilgrimage is often thought of as something which lies in the past. This project, led by Avril Maddrell, studied contemporary forms of pilgrimage to Christian sites, and asked about the meanings for participants today.



*Metéora (literally 'suspended in the air') in Thessaly, Greece, one of the pilgrimage sites investigated*

Three sites were selected for study: Metéora in Greece, a complex of Orthodox monasteries and shrines; the Subiaco monastery in Italy which encloses the cave (Sacro Speco) where St Benedict lived as a hermit; and the Keeils (ruins of early Celtic Christian chapels,) around the Isle of Man. The researchers, conducted interviews with visitors, organisers, clergy and locals, undertook participant observation and consulted archives and other materials, such as visitors' books and souvenirs on sale. In the face of concerns from organisers that questionnaires would be too intrusive, the project innovated by distributing self-addressed postcards to visitors which they could then complete and return at their leisure. This method of data collection yielded a high return rate at all three sites.

A major focus of the project (led by a geographer) was on the significance of landscape in pilgrimage experience. The striking beauty of all the sites suggests that landscape 'aesthetics' have always been important in pilgrimage in these locations; and many participants' accounts highlighted the significance of the landscape to their experience of these pilgrimages. In both past and present the landscape may be overlaid with other sacred meanings, including national and historical ones (still found to be important in relation to all the sites), religious and personal ones. A spirituality focused around relics and saints and traditional rituals is still important for some, but in the contemporary context a reverence for 'nature' and resonances with personal spiritual beliefs are equally or more important for some visitors and pilgrims. For some at each site, their only focus was on worship e.g. prostrating before the icons at Metéora, for others, the embodied experience of walking, fellowship and prayer within the landscape was inspirational, as in the Isle of Man.

The dimension of time and history also emerged as very important in the pilgrimage experience, with the sites serving as a bridge between the past and the present. A perceived continuity of spiritual experience was important for some pilgrims, as was a sense of learning from the past, and engaging with national heritages. Landscape, heritage and embodied experience of walking and/ or rituals all played a part in attracting non-believers to take part in these pilgrimages. Subiaco also attracted scholars and cultural visitors making a secular 'pilgrimage' to the home of Italy's first printing press.

In short, these modern Christian pilgrimage experiences are shaped by the landscape, the religious milieu, the locality and its history, as well as individuals' expectations and beliefs.

## Find out more...

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- Visit the project's web page: <http://www.bris.ac.uk/geography/news/2009/136.html>
- Watch a video about the project presented by Alessandro Scafi on YouTube: [www.youtube.com/watch?v=yUahZ9V2f5s](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yUahZ9V2f5s)
- Listen to Avril Maddrell discussing researching pilgrimage walks on the Isle of Man as part of a workshop on 'new spiritualities' supported by Religion and Society: [http://www.religionandsociety.org.uk/publications/podcasts/show/new\\_spiritualities\\_workshop\\_d1\\_avril\\_maddrell\\_mini\\_presentation](http://www.religionandsociety.org.uk/publications/podcasts/show/new_spiritualities_workshop_d1_avril_maddrell_mini_presentation)
- Read Avril Maddrell's paper on the research in *Landabréfið*, the Journal of Icelandic Geographers: [http://landfraedi.is/landabrefid/2011/Landabrefid\\_2011\\_AM.pdf](http://landfraedi.is/landabrefid/2011/Landabrefid_2011_AM.pdf)
- Keep an eye for the special issue the *Journal of Culture and Religion* on 'Landscapes and Spaces of Renewal' Avril and project co-investigator Veronica Della Dora have been invited to edit.

## You might also be interested in...

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- The 'everyday urban spiritual project' led by Chris Philo (Glasgow) and also funded by Religion and Society: [http://web.me.com/jennifer.simmonds/Everyday\\_Urban\\_Spiritual/Welcome.html](http://web.me.com/jennifer.simmonds/Everyday_Urban_Spiritual/Welcome.html)
- Listening to more from the new spiritualities workshop, which was organized by Chris Philo's project: [http://www.religionandsociety.org.uk/research\\_findings/featured\\_findings/workshop\\_on\\_new\\_spiritualities](http://www.religionandsociety.org.uk/research_findings/featured_findings/workshop_on_new_spiritualities)
- Reading about the findings from a Religion and Society-funded project investigating shared shrine spaces in Punjab: [http://www.religionandsociety.org.uk/research\\_findings/featured\\_findings/shrines\\_in\\_india\\_and\\_pakistan\\_demonstrate\\_shared\\_practices\\_of\\_sikhs\\_hindus\\_and\\_muslims](http://www.religionandsociety.org.uk/research_findings/featured_findings/shrines_in_india_and_pakistan_demonstrate_shared_practices_of_sikhs_hindus_and_muslims)
- The Programme conference 'Sacred Practices of Everyday Life' in May 2012 in Edinburgh at which the project is presenting: [http://www.religionandsociety.org.uk/events/programme\\_events/show/sacred\\_practices\\_of\\_everyday\\_life](http://www.religionandsociety.org.uk/events/programme_events/show/sacred_practices_of_everyday_life)

## Award Title

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**Landscape aesthetics, meaning and experience in Christian pilgrimage**

## Team

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**Principal Investigator:** Dr Avril Maddrell (University of the West of England)

**Co-Investigator:** Dr Veronica Della Dora (Bristol)



Arts & Humanities  
Research Council



**Co-Investigator:** Dr Alessandro Scafi (University of London)

**Co-Investigator:** Dr Heather Walton (University of Glasgow)

University

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University of the West of England

Award Type

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Phase 3 Small Grant

Key terms

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space, place, Greek Orthodoxy, Roman Catholicism, Ecumenism, spirituality, Italy, Greece, Isle of Man, keeill, monastery, pilgrimage