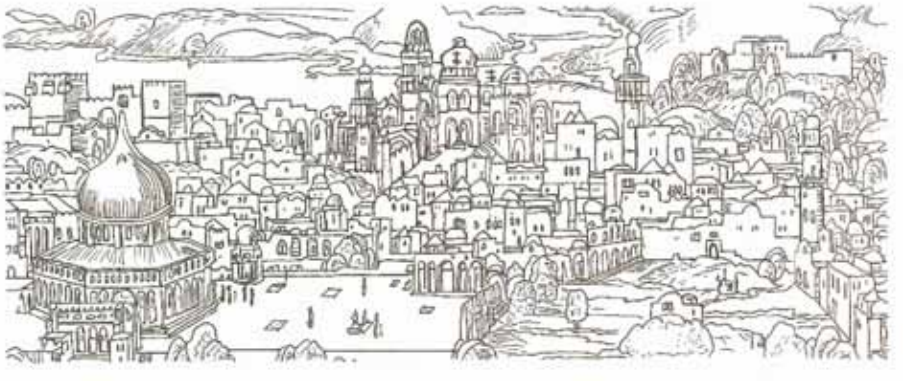


View of medieval Jerusalem, based on a manuscript illumination housed at Lambeth Palace.

CONSTRUCTING NARRATIVES

The Pilgrim's Distress: Narrating the Perils of the Journey to the Holy Land

Patricia Fann Bouteneff

The idea behind pilgrimages is a simple one: certain places are more spiritually powerful than others, and people benefit from going to them. The power of the place may be centered in a physical structure (such as the Holy Sepulchre in Jerusalem or Hagia Sophia in Istanbul), or the site may have attracted attention because a miracle happened there (anywhere that has a miracle-working icon qualifies, as the recent occurrence of myrrh-streaming icons in Hawaii demonstrates).[1] Like any voyage, a pilgrimage involves moving through time and space. A pilgrimage, however, is a ritualized "doubled" mission that pairs a real world journey with a symbolic one, at the end of which the traveler anticipates spiritual and/or social transformation.[2] The physical and spiritual hardships inherent to the journey are key to its transformative potential. As Dorothy Day writes, "Voluntary vulnerability and suffering bring us closer to God. Our precarity brings us to God."[3] Travelers are vulnerable to extremes of weather, disease, vehicle crashes or malfunction, bad food or water, and wild animals. They may meet with unscrupulous innkeepers, bandits, pirates, pickpockets, opportunistic guides, rapists, kidnappers, or political unrest. Crowded conditions at pilgrimage sites invite the outbreak of disease and fires in living quarters, as does simply the crush of crowds at particularly popular sites. There are other, less obvious risks, too. "The arduous journey, the substantial period of absence from home with its character-defining environment, the atmosphere of solitude conducive to introspection, and the intoxicating sense of freedom and adventure almost inevitably mean that the returning pilgrim is unlike the one who left to

[1] See http://www.orthodoxhawaii.org/icons.html.

[2] Jill Dubisch, *In a Different Place: Pilgrimage, Gender, and Politics at a Greek Island Shrine* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1995), 35.

[3] Quoted in Ken Butigan, *Pilgrimage through a Burning World: Spiritual Practice and Nonviolent Protest at the Nevada Test Site* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2003), 148.

[4] Linda Kay Davidson and David Martin Gitlitz. "Hazards of Pilgrimage," in *Pilgrimage: From the Ganges to Graceland* (2 vols.; Santa Barbara, California: ABC-CLIO, 2002), 1:231. A good, Kierkegaardian analysis of pilgrimage and the pilgrims who undertake it can be found in David Lodge's novel *Therapy* (Penguin: London, 1995), 304-305.

Illustrations by Elizabeth Bouteneff.

go on pilgrimage. Some, in fact, never go home at all."[4] It can also have serious consequences for those who are left behind.

To look more closely at what pilgrimage can mean, we might consider the way it fit in to the conceptual world of the Pontic Greeks, an ethnic group that once inhabited the eastern half of the Black Sea coast of what is now Turkey. Pilgrimage was a common venture in their lives, as it was for many of those of their fellow ethnic groups in the Ottoman Empire. This ritualized journey was an expensive and hazardous venture, especially in times before there was a reliable network of safe roads (the roads in the Pontos were regularly infested with bandits and other hazards). In the Pontos, as in the Ottoman Balkans generally, pilgrimage to Jerusalem was a way not only for Christians to achieve a religious goal, but also to raise their social standing, which they marked by adding the honorific title "Hadji" to their names.[5] (Using pilgrimage in this way was likely borrowed by Christians from their Muslim neighbors, who added "Hadji" as a permanent fixture to their names after a journey taken for religious reasons to Mecca, Haj.) The Pontic Greeks were exiled from their homeland in 1923 and now live in diaspora communities around the globe, but chiefly in Greece.

In order to get a sense of how pilgrimage was regarded among these Greeks, however, we need to take an indirect approach, as we don't have written accounts of journeys by Pontic pilgrims. What we do have is a corpus of around five hundred folktales collected over more than a century, starting in the 1870s. They reside in several archival collections in Athens and Thessaloniki, and some three percent of them engage with pilgrimage as a motif. Although the Pontos had its own pilgrimage site—the monastery of Panagia Soumela,[6] located in the mountains south of Trebizond—the orientation in the folktales was always to Jerusalem.

In the folktales, as in real life, the usual pattern was for a man to take his wife and his sons with him. (Daughters were usually left at home so that their social status would not be raised too high for them to find marriage partners.)[7] Although virtually all Pontic folktale heroes—and many heroines—have to leave the village for the open road in the course of their adventures, the protagonists of pilgrimage tales come across as vulnerable in more ways than those undergoing more normal travel, where common villains—ogres (*drakoi*, *dev'*), witches (*maisses*), hairless men (*kioses*), or bandits—attack only the body. Most folktale protagonists have little interior life; pilgrims are an exception. Being on pilgrimage and thereby having an interior life redoubles a protagonist's vulnerability.

The simplest example of vulnerability caused by pilgrimage in the Pontic repertoire occurs in a type of tale in which all the characters are animals. One of the most frequently collected of all Pontic folktales, it is known as "Animals on Pilgrimage"[8]; the eleven variants come from Sourmena, Oinoe, and Kromni, among other locations.[9] Each version involves a number of farmyard animals—explicitly or implicitly on a ritual journey—putting their trust in someone who appears to be a spiritual elder (usually a wolf or fox) whom they met on the road. Having ushered them into his den, he

[5] For excellent analyses of pilgrimage among Ottoman Christians, see two articles by Valentina Izmirlieva: "The Title *Hajji* and the Ottoman Vocabulary of Pilgrimage," *Modern Greek Studies Yearbook* 28/29 (2012/2013), and "Christian Hajjis—the Other Orthodox Pilgrims to Jerusalem," Slavic Review 73, no. 2 (2014).

[6] It is said that a pilgrim who made the journey to Panagia Soumela seven times could claim the "Hadji" honorific. The site was abandoned in 1923 during the Greek-Turkish exchange of populations. Since the monks on their departure were forbidden from taking any property with them, they buried their famous icon under the floor of the monastery's St. Barbara chapel. As of 2012, the Turkish government is funding restoration work, and the monastery is enjoying a revival in pilgrimage from Greece and Russia.

[7] Izmirlieva, personal communication.

[8] ATU 20D, found throughout Europe and the Middle East. Hans-Jörg Uther, *The Types of International Folktales* (Helsinki: Academia Scientiarum Fennica, 2004).

[9] See http://www.cyberpontos.com/PHP/Folktales.

Pontic Greek girl at window of her house.

insists that they confess their sins to him. He judges each one guilty and devours them instead of granting absolution. (The final "sinner," often a hen, escapes by asking the "holy one" to close his eyes in prayer for her.) The very fact that these are animal fables is a hint that the animals will be double-crossed in the course of the story. One of the chief characteristics of Pontic animal tales is that the trust that one kind of animal puts into another kind is inevitably betrayed, whatever the pact they may have made with each other. This characteristic may reflect the challenges of living in an ethnically and religiously diverse region. Although the domestic animals are virtuous in that they seek absolution for their sins, all versions of this tale illustrate the peril of falling in with a charismatic stranger; in effect they allow their virtue to make them vulnerable.

"Spiritual intoxication," a less common pilgrimage-related ill, appears in a story that was collected only once, from the city of Kerasunta. Called the story of "Giannitson,"[10] its plot begins with a rich man's son asking his mother for a Gospel book (his parents have one lavishly covered in gold). When a monk comes to town, Giannitson arranges to go to the Holy Mountain with him. To get passage money, he takes the funds his parents have given him for entertaining his friends. Once on Mount Athos, he becomes a monk despite his young age. After three years he is so homesick that the abbot sends him back. He trades his clothes for an old man's rags and begs at his father's door. His father builds the "beggar" a little hut, which Giannitson inhabits without revealing his identity. When his death approaches, he sends his Gospel to his mother. Moments after his parents confirm his identity, he dies. His mother is struck dumb when she tries to shroud him in cloth of gold; once she dresses his body in his old rags, her voice returns. In "Alexios the Man of God," the saint's life on which this story is based, the main character takes to the road to escape an undesired marriage; in the folktale, the boy flees his parents' life of luxury. Giannitson's pilgrimage to Mount Athos fulfills his deepest spiritual desire; the hardships of the journey, of taking on the rigors of monasticism, and of the privations of begging are freedom compared to living in wealth. He returns home in such a way that he can't be recognized until it is too late for him to be pressured into resuming his old life. But the vulnerability associated with pilgrimage affects not only the pilgrim, but also the people he leaves behind; Giannitson's spiritual intoxication leaves his parents grief-stricken from the moment he boards the ship.

This susceptibility to danger of those left at home is not something often heard about in discussions of pilgrimage, but it is a clear theme in these traditional narratives. There is one type of folktale, known broadly as "The Innocent Slandered Maiden" (ATU 883A), in which it threatens the pilgrim's ability to return home fully, a man's honor, and a woman's very life.[11] "The Innocent Slandered Maiden" was a tale type told

[10] See http://www.cyberpontos.com/PHP/Folktales, or R. M. Dawkins in *Modern Greek Folktales* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1953), 384ff.

[11] See http://www.cyberpontos.com/PHP/Folktales.

throughout Greece and Greek-speaking Asia Minor. Five Pontic versions have been collected, from Sourmena, Imera, Stavrin, Ordu, and Kars.[12]

The merchant father of the Innocent Slandered Maiden believes that he has mitigated the risk to his family's honor and his daughter's safety by leaving her at home in the care of a trusted attendant (a family steward, a loyal servant, an uncle, or an imam). A typical version of the story comes from Kotyora; it is known in Pontic Greek as "Hadji-Velis" (which translates as "Devout Pilgrim") and looks like this: A wealthy landowner decides to take his wife and son with him on a three-year journey to the Holy Land and to leave his beautiful daughter to guard the estate. Her uncle begins to desire her, but she refuses to let him in the house. He tricks her into coming to a bathhouse, where he propositions her. She escapes by throwing soap in his face and hitting his head with a stone. Once he recovers, he writes to Hadji-Velis accusing the daughter of scandalous behavior in the streets with young men. Hadji-Velis sends his son home to deal with the situation. The girl persuades him to leave her on the mountain to take her chances instead of killing her. (In some versions of the story, her "guardian" ransacks the house at this point.) A prince discovers her and marries her, and they have three children. After some time, they decide to visit her parents, but the prince is called home along the way, leaving her to be attacked by his aide-de-camp, who kills her children in trying to rape her. She escapes him through a trick and makes her way to her parents' house disguised as a beggar. They hire her as a houseboy. When the prince comes to visit with his entourage, she is persuaded to tell her story, and the uncle and the aide-de-camp are executed.

An unusual stress on feelings is characteristic of these pilgrimage tales. Emotions are rarely made explicit in traditional folktales, which makes their emphasis all the more noteworthy here. Throughout "The Innocent Slandered Maiden," the family's emotional troubles are given even more weight than their physical ones. The girl is so traumatized by her uncle's actions that she refuses to let even her brother enter the house; she is so zealous of her virtue that she allows her children to be killed to protect it, yet she still finds herself falsely accused of promiscuity by her uncle and of murder by the aide-de-camp. The son is distressed by the order to kill his beloved sister. The father discovers that the house has fallen—metaphorically through scandal and literally through the loss of his possessions—despite his precautions. (The potential for rights and property to be usurped in a pilgrim's absence also appears in a humorous tale from Trebizond called "Don't Get Too Thin or Your Middle Will Break.")

Pilgrimage to the Holy Land forms a significant motif in a subset of Pontic folktales, and—true to life—its effects are recognizably different from those of other kinds of journeys. The differences have to do with the unique emotional and physical perils of the endeavor. The danger for men in most Pontic folktales is physical. In these pilgrimage tales, however, the danger they undergo is psychic. Giannitson suffers from conflicting desires to fulfill either his spiritual or filial needs. His journey, in fact, is more psychic than physical: little attention is paid to

[12] ATU 883A was found throughout Turkey, in Yemen, Iraq, Morocco, Afghanistan, as well as in Europe, French- and Spanish-speaking parts of the Americas, and in India. Hasan El-Shamy, in his studies of Arab tale-telling, finds that these stories are told primarily by women and reflect their sense of physical and reputational vulnerability when left inadequately protected.

his movement through space, while much more is paid to the feeling that cause him twice to board the ship. Hadji-Velis feels his honor impugned by the daughter he left behind. The women, on the other hand, suffer because their most secure haven—the house—is left vulnerable to invasion by the departure of their menfolk. Whether at home or forced out onto the open road, the daughter of Hadji-Velis is doubly vulnerable—in body and reputation. Giannitson's mother is struck by a double load of grief, first at the presumed death of her son, and then by his actual demise.

A further factor distinguishes pilgrimage folktales from others: no one gets rewarded as they would in conventional tales. Reacting to the rumor of a daughter's dishonorable behavior, a father kills the victim rather than the villain. Giannitson's mother rejects the "beggar" who will be revealed as her long-lost son. The animals are not rewarded, even though they are traveling "safely" in a group and searching for wisdom. Hadji-Velis's daughter does everything a virtuous girl should throughout the course of her adventures, yet until the very end, she receives far more injustice than reward. The hen merely escapes with her life, Giannitson is buried in the shadow of his parents' home, and Hadji-Velis's daughter is avenged. Spiritual rewards go unmentioned; social rewards are nearly nonexistent. The pilgrimage tales violate one of the rules of magical adventure folktales, which end with the hero or heroine in a revised and elevated version of his or her original state. Nobody gets what would normally be expected; rules/norms are upended.

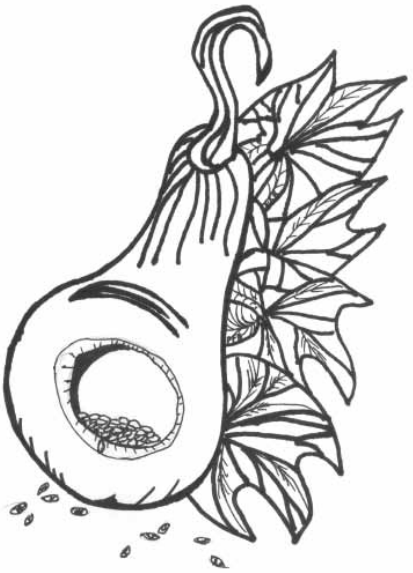
Postscript

In real life, a pilgrimage is a double journey of body and soul. Pilgrimage folktales are true to that reality, by presenting characters who have physical and interior lives, both of which are at risk from the dangers they encounter. Pilgrimages take people outside not only their comfort zones, but outside of the karmic rules of life, and the pilgrim—and his family—may pay a heavy price for the spiritual grace and prestige that he might acquire. Even though such journeys can be as fraught in reality as they were in the folk imagination, people, including Pontic Greeks, continue to make them. While there is no way to know how many Pontic Greeks are among those who flood Jerusalem year by year, they have been returning to visit the ruins of the great monastery of Panagia Soumela for religious and ethnic reasons since 1933. In that same year, the Turkish government permitted the monastery's miracle-working icon to be unearthed by a monk named Ambrosios, who removed it to the Benaki Museum in Athens. By 1952, the Pontic Greeks had acquired land in the Macedonian village of Kastinia, between Kozani and Veria. The church they built there now houses the icon, which to this day is visited by pilgrims who arrive to venerate it and attend the liturgy, ethnic festival, and icon procession with full military honors that take place every August 15. ❋

Sailing the Black Sea.

A Hapless Priest:
A Pontic Tale

Translated by Patricia Fann Bouteneff



Lent arrived. There was a priest in one village who did not know how to calculate how many days there were until Easter, so he took an empty gourd and put forty-eight seeds inside it. Every day he would take one of the seeds out, intending to celebrate Easter when he ran out of seeds. One of his neighbors realized what he was doing, however, so he started putting a seed back into the gourd every day. So forty-eight days passed, then fifty, sixty, eighty, but the number of seeds just kept increasing and never decreasing. The poor villagers started to complain, and asked the priest, "So when are we going to have Easter? When are we going to have Easter?"

After a good while longer, the priest also could be heard complaining, "According to my gourd calendar, we won't be having Easter this year at all!" ❋

Patricia Fann Bouteneff, a former academic and corporate chief of staff, is an independent scholar who specializes in folklore and Pontic Greek studies. You can find her translations and studies of folktales at cyberpontos.com. Baptized at a metochi of Simonopetra in Thessaloniki, she has been active in church communities in Greece, England, Switzerland, and the United States, and at present sits on the parish council of Holy Trinity Orthodox Church in Yonkers, New York.

Illustration by Elizabeth Bouteneff.