

A History Of The Camino

Pagan Origins

The objective of most pilgrims following the *Camino de Santiago* is reach the city of Santiago de Compostela in Galicia, in the northwest corner of Spain. Some believe that the name of Compostela comes from Latin “campus stellae” meaning field of stars, others believe it comes from “compositum” - burial place. Disagreement about the origins of the city’s name aside, it is a proven fact that there was a pre-Christian necropolis on the site and also that the Path followed by the *Camino* existed long before the finding of St. James’ remains in the 9th century.

Up until then the route had been known as Via Finisterre (from Latin, the Way to Land’s End) and archaeological sites along it show that Celtic peoples travelled it 1,000 years before Christ in search of Land’s End and the Sun’s resting place, celebrating all sorts of ceremonies, as did other peoples before them-pagans travelling across northern Spain in a born-again ritual on a Megalithic path following the Milky Way. Therefore the origins of the Path are lost in time.

Some scholars believe that another clear antecedent to the Camino is the old “Callis Ianus” or “Via Janus” named after the god Janus, who occupied the highest rank among Etruscan-Latin divinities and represented the “Earth’s Axis”, the initiation to the Mysteries, the protection of life on Earth. Janus was the God of gods - the god of beginnings and transitions, thence also of gates, doors, passages, endings and time; the god of motion that caused the starting of action and change; and master of the four seasons and transformation. He is usually depicted as having two faces, since he looks to the future and to the past, to the sun and the moon, and holding a key that opened gates of the invisible world.



According to this belief, the Path follows the direction established by the terrestrial magnetic field in the Iberian Peninsula going East-West from the Temple of *Venus Pyrinea* (where the Pyrenees mountains drop into the Mediterranean Sea) to *Ara Solis* (Unconquered Sun) or *Finisterre* (Land’s End). The tetragram below, *Arkho Jano Quirico*, is the most frequently repeated stone symbol across Europe’s paths - and can be found in several sites along the Camino. We need to take into consideration that the magnetic pole has changed and in the old days Finisterre was the most western point in mainland Europe. For those knowledgeable about the mysteries of the cult to Janus, the Camino has specific characteristics left by the Masonic masters, by the toponymy of the places and by the old shrines that have protected pilgrims for centuries.



St. James & Early Days of the Pilgrimage

As to the Apostle St. James - “*Santiago*” in Spanish, legend says that he had preached for several years in Iberia, particularly in the northwest and after he was eventually beheaded in Judea by the Romans in AD 42, two of his disciples brought his body back to Galicia, where a crypt and small chapel were built. The tomb was forgotten for the next several centuries, during which time the peninsula was invaded by the Arabs or “Moors”. In the early ninth century (approximately 814 AD), on hearing reports of miracles in a forest inland from the coast, a bishop ordered the area inspected, and a chapel and sepulchre containing some human remains were discovered, which were concluded to be those of Saint James.

At that time Visigoth king Alfonso II the Chaste was reigning in Asturias—Galicia’s eastern neighbour. Asturias was the only region of the Iberian peninsula to never fall under the dominion of the Arabs and it was where Christian monarchs had taken refuge. So it was

from this mountainous, misty green land where the Christian Reconquest began. On hearing of the discovery, King Alfonso decided to visit the tomb to venerate the saint and seek his protection. Thus, this monarch, considered the first pilgrim to Santiago, made the journey from his court in Oviedo, modern-day capital of the principality of Asturias. On arriving at the spot, he ordered a hermitage to be built in honour of the saint. In the process, he gave the Christians an idol to defend, a myth to fight for, and a place to worship him. Indeed Santiago was to be invoked frequently during the Reconquest and is alleged to have appeared on a horse, sword in hand to aid the Christians in vanquishing the Moors on several occasions.

The Caminos & Evolution of the Pilgrimage

The Reconquest began to slowly push the Arab invaders southwards, but in these early days, initially only the very northern part of the country, protected behind the Cantabrian mountains (Galicia, Asturias and the Basque Country), was relatively safe for travel. This first established route followed by King Alfonso from Oviedo through the mountains via Lugo is known as the "Camino Primitivo" or "Original Way". Soon a route following the northern Atlantic coast (*Camino de la Costa* or *Camino del Norte*) came into use, using pre-Roman commercial roads, and the Church and kings of resurgent Christian Spain built new churches, hospitals, refuges, roads and bridges, and new towns sprung up along the way. Other pilgrims came by sea from the British Isles, Brittany and the low countries directly to points in Galicia close to Compostela (*Camino Inglés*).

As more lands further to the south progressively came under Christian control, the monarchs designed other routes to help repopulate the reconquered lands, and to develop the Camino into a route for military and commercial transport and for the spreading of Christianity. They took advantage of existing Roman roads running from the *Roncesvalles* in the Pyrenees westward to Europe's most western point - Finisterre (Land's End) in Galicia. A new main route to Compostela was established, (now known as the "Camino Frances" or "French Way") less arduous in terms of terrain and climate than the more northern variants and to this day remains the most popular route followed to Santiago de Compostela. In 1075 work was begun on the cathedral in Compostela. In 1122 Pope Calixtus II proclaimed that every year in which July 25 fell on a Sunday would be a Compostelan Holy Year. This was the golden age of the pilgrimages in the middle ages, from the 11th to the 13th centuries.

In the 15th century the pilgrimages began to decline and the Christian world started to forget about Compostela due to several factors: the Christian reconquest had pushed southwards and the important cities of the land came to be in the south, the discovery of America and the beginning of the Spanish empire directed attention overseas, the rise of Protestantism, and the division of the Catholic world, together with plagues, wars and hunger. In 1588 the archbishop of Santiago hid the saint's tomb, in fear that they would be robbed by the English pirates led by Francis Drake, and they were to remain hidden for the next 3 centuries.

Modern Times

In 1878 the tomb was re-discovered when some repairs were being done in the Cathedral, and Pope Leon XIII tried to promote the pilgrimage in his papal bull of 1884, but less than 50 pilgrims a year made it to Compostela until the mid 1960s, when a well-known Galician priest published his doctoral thesis about the Camino de Santiago, and worked to establish the first 'associations of friends of the Camino'. These groups began work diligently to promote the route and slowly the number of pilgrims increased.

In 1982 1,868 pilgrims received the "*Compostela*", the official certificate issued by the Catholic church on arrival in Santiago de Compostela, recognizing that one has walked at least 100 km. of the route. The various regions of Spain that the routes pass through began to improve the infrastructures - special pilgrims' refuges and hostels, signing along the route and the paths themselves. In the mid '80s, Santiago de Compostela was declared a UNESCO World Heritage City and more and more pilgrims began to arrive.

In 1985, 2,491 *Compostelas* were awarded. In 1987 the European Council declared the Camino de Santiago the First European Cultural Itinerary and in 1991 the number of *Compostelas* awarded had increased to 7,274. In the Holy Year of 1993, 100,000 persons received the *Compostela* and in total, some 4 million persons came to visit the cathedral in Santiago de Compostela. In 1999, the last Holy Year of the 20th century, over 7 million people visited the city, most of them as pilgrims of one kind or another. In the Holy Year of 2010, 272,135 pilgrims received the *Compostela*, nearly 70% were Spanish. In the year 2012, 192,488 people received the *Compostela*, nearly 50% were Spanish.

A Controversy Unbeknownst to Most

As a point of interest, a little-known controversy continues, as there are some who claim that the bodily remains at Santiago de Compostela belong to Priscillian, an ascetic mystic theologian from Roman Gallaecia (modern Galicia and northern Portugal), and first bishop of Avila, who preached about Christian wisdom in the 4th century. His Gnostic Christic thought was opposed to imperial Roman government and some elements of the orthodox Christian church. He came into conflict with powerful Church leaders, who felt that his influence among growing numbers of followers threatened their authority. His practices were condemned and he was eventually executed for heresy (he and six companions became the first Christian heretics to be put to death by the Christian Church) in the year 385 in Trier (modern-day Germany).

However despite the Church's efforts to stamp it out, [Priscillianism](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Priscillianism) doctrine continued to spread in Gaul and Hispania, and in particular, remained deeply rooted in the north of the Iberian Peninsula until at least the late 6th century. There, in fact Priscillian was long honored as a martyr, not heretic, especially in *Gallaecia* where his body was reverentially returned from Trier (a similar story to that of St. James!).