

## THE STRANGE STORY OF SANTIAGO DE COMPOSTELA

R. Calvert Rutherford  
October 11, 1993

About this time last year, we were planning a trip to Spain, to be centered around spending Holy Week in Seville. Having never been to Spain, we got all sorts of advice from various and sundry people who had been there, and several people whose taste we highly respected insisted that we must by all means visit a place called Santiago de Compostela. I had never even heard of such a place, but at my friends' insistence I went, I saw and I was conquered. I became fascinated with the story of Santiago de Compostela, and this paper is the result of a burning desire to learn more of one of the strangest and yet most significant chapters in European history. This place I had not heard of, even throughout my seminary career, was, during the Middle Ages, the third holiest place in all of Christendom, and without a doubt Santiago de Compostela changed the course of European history, and perhaps the world, in the most profound way.

The location of Santiago de Compostela is most unpropitious. Located in the northwest corner of Spain, it is very near a spit of land named Finisterre, which was, indeed, the end of earth for Europeans - at least until Christopher Columbus made his world-changing voyage. To reach it, one must cross a forbidding mountain range, which is continually lashed by fierce rain storms, and the Santiagenas, themselves, take great pride in their abominable climate, which allows them perhaps 30 sunny days a year. I thought it was a rather trying trip on a paved four lane highway, and yet at the height of its eminence, from the eleventh to the seventeenth century, a flood of pilgrims estimated to have peaked at half million a year made their tortuous way on foot through hostile terrain and equally hostile weather to earn merit by visiting the remains of St. James. Santiago drew far more pilgrims than the other two holy places of Christendom - Jerusalem and Rome. In fact, the pilgrims to Santiago were compared with the clouds of stars and galaxies we call the Milky Way, and indeed, that wondrous stream in the heavens became known as El Camino de Santiago, of which Dante speaks in the Convito. Chaucer's Wyfe of Bath had made the pilgrimage, and Shakespeare, in All's Well that Ends Well, wrote of the pilgrimage to the "Great St. Jaques".

The question is how did this obscure site in Galicia become the powerful lodestone which drew the faithful of Europe in such vast numbers, and why did it have so profound an impact on the history of Europe. Santiago de Compostela came into being in the ninth century with the discovery of the bones of James the Greater, Apostle and Martyr, and one of those closest to Jesus. But before we examine the intriguing story of how St. James' bones were found in such an improbable place, we must first set the historical stage, for it was the timeliness of the discovery which caused the influence of Santiago to be of monumental proportions.

Dominating the political scene in Europe in the eighth and ninth centuries was the terrifying advance of a militant Islam. Christian Europe was threatened in the East and from the South by massive invasions of the all-conquering Islamic hordes. From the death of Mohammed in 632, the nomadic Bedouin tribes, with no history of

empire building or of sustained warfare, had created a military nation with an extraordinary record of conquest. In 636 Syria fell, in 642, Egypt, in 650 they were occupying parts of Sicily, by the close of the seventh century they had taken over the former Roman colonies of North Africa, and in 711 they invaded the Iberian Peninsula in force, and quickly occupied practically all of what is now Spain and Portugal. In less than a century after the death of the Prophet, they were knocking at the doors of Vienna, besieging Toulouse and advancing past Bordeaux in the direction of Paris.

The key feature of this extraordinary Islamic upsurge was not so much military prowess or the immeasurably superior civilization behind the military machine, but the intense purpose and unwavering confidence of a burning religious faith. The Moslems were not simply invaders like the barbarians who had harassed the Romans and their successors in Southern Europe. Theirs was a religious crusade, inspired by their founder and prophet, Mohammed, and it was their all-consuming zeal which united an unlikely aggregate of Arabians, Yemenites, Berbers and Syrians, and swept aside the forces of Christendom. The Moors successfully united religion with warfare and established an immense empire. The forces of Christian Europe had nothing to match the unifying faith and terrible religious intensity of their foe. Theirs was not a Church Militant, but it soon would be! It was Islam that unwittingly taught European rulers the notion of a "Holy War", and European Churchmen the binding power of a militant faith. All that was needed was a rallying point, the tinder against which the spark of religious faith would burst forth in the flame of battle. Enter Santiago Matamoros! St. James, Moor-Killer!

In the year 813, far northern Spain, known as the Kingdom of Asturias, was a weak outpost of Christianity whose king was Alfonso II. In that year, according to an Eleventh Century document, a pious hermit monk named Pelagius saw an exceedingly bright star hovering over a giant oak tree, and this sight was accompanied by celestial music. The vision was repeated for several nights, and Pelagius went to his Bishop, Theodomir, to report these strange events. Theodomir at once discerned the hand of God at work, and accompanied by an entourage of clerics and notable citizens, the good bishop discovered in a deserted spot some twelve miles from his cathedral a stone tomb containing three bodies. These were immediately pronounced to be the remains of St. James and two of his disciples. Alfonso II visited the site and declared that St. James was henceforth to be worshipped as the patron saint of Spain. He authorized the building of a church at the spot of the tomb, and a town grew up around the shrine, which came to be known as Campus Stellae, field of the star.

Why would the body of St. James be buried in so unlikely a spot? Although all we can know for sure of the history of James is the account in the Book of Acts that he was beheaded in Jerusalem at the order of Herod in AD 44, legend has it that James travelled to Spain to spread the Gospel, remaining there some years, and that after his return to Jerusalem and his martyrdom there, his body was returned to Spain for burial. Some accounts have his body, with detached head, returned to Spain by some of his disciples, while others say that he mysteriously returned there without human assistance. The tale of his disciples' attempts to effect his burial is replete with a wicked queen, dragons and many miraculous happenings. At any rate,

after great difficulty, St. James was finally laid to rest, and for some seven and a half centuries, remained undisturbed, until the proper time for him to emerge and become the rescuer of the Spanish and one of the most powerful symbols the Christian world has ever embraced.

The medieval world was one of credulity and superstition, when faith ran riot, and life glowed with fancy. In such a milieu it was inevitable that relics would abound and miraculous events be commonplace. In the burgeoning religious fervor of the medieval world the claims of relics became ever more bizarre and improbable, apparently without straining the credulity of the believers. One of the illustrious pilgrims to Santiago de Compostela, the Empress Matilda, daughter of Henry I of England, and mother of Henry II, was given a hand of the apostle, which was enshrined at Reading Abbey. In addition to the hand of James, the Abbey was the proud owner of the foreskin of Jesus, once the property of the Emperor Constantine, acquired in the Holy Land by his indomitable mother, Helena. Other prized relics of the time included a vial of the breath of Christ, milk from the Virgin, the cloth with which she had wiped tears from her eyes, bits of Aaron's rod, fragments of the rock which Moses struck, and innumerable pieces of the Holy Cross. In fact, there was a rule that no cathedral could be built without a relic. Relics were graded in their efficacy in magical powers, and a relic of an apostle outranked those of other saints, and the more complete the relic the better. The entire body of James was therefore of much greater benefit to his followers than the mere arm of Mohammed, which the Moors had enshrined at Cordoba. However, unlike the myriad relics spread across Christendom, which were known to heal the sick, absolve sinners and work other miracles, the cult created around Santiago was unlike anything else in Christendom, resulting in enormous changes in the political, cultural and economic realities of the entire Western World, including our own hemisphere not yet discovered.

The point is not the authenticity, or lack thereof, in evaluating the importance of Santiago for Spain, for Europe, and for the world. There is no real evidence to substantiate the bones found in Galicia as being those of James. The only evidence is a document written three hundred years after the fact, containing a forged letter purporting to be from the hand of Leo III, pope at the time of the discovery. Even the etymology of the name Compostela is suspect. Rather than being Campus Stellae, Field of the Star, it was probably derived from the Latin "Compostum", meaning burial ground. A Christian necropolis in the vicinity of the great cathedral of Santiago was discovered during renovation and rebuilding. Nor is there any reliable evidence that James ever went to Spain prior to his martyrdom.

And yet St. James is after all the patron saint of Spain, and no Spaniard of the Middle Ages would have believed that his country could have been liberated from the Moors without the sword of Santiago Matamoros. His fame and power as rescuer of the faithful date from the probably legendary Battle of Clavijo, in which Santiago appeared to the king of Galicia, as the Moors were about to triumph, and so heartened the Christian troops with his appearance and his flashing sword that they routed the superior forces of the Moors. It is in this guise that we see Santiago in the churches of Spain, in painting and sculpture, on horseback, sword aloft, crushing the forces of Islam beneath his feet. After Clavijo in the Ninth Century,

the warrior apostle appeared at Simancas in the Tenth, at Coimbra by the side of El Cid in the Eleventh, in the breakthrough to Andalucia in the Thirteenth; altogether at least forty appearances are reported by the Seventeenth Century. He even took his white steed and deadly sword to the new world, becoming Santiago Mataindos, St. James, Indian-Killer.

Amidst all the legends of Santiago de Compostela, there is one undeniable truth. Santiago was the heart of Spain and the dramatic figure providing a unifying force among the rival kingdoms of the Iberian Peninsula. The Knights of Santiago came into being in the twelfth century, their motto being, "Rubet ensis sanguine Arabum", "Red is the sword with the blood of the Moors". By the fifteenth century the order had become immensely wealthy and influential, and Ferdinand the Catholic in 1493 became Grand Master. Whether St. James ever appeared or not, it is arguable that without him the reconquest of Spain might never have happened. If one might indulge in a flight of fancy, we could argue that without the discovery of the remains of the saint who was to become the epitome of the Spanish warrior, Spain would have remained under Moorish governance, and then who would have discovered the new world, and under what flag?

That is fancy, indeed, but there is no gainsaying that the unending flood of pilgrims making their way from all over Europe to Santiago de Compostela and back had a profound impact on the economies and cultures of their respective countries. Millions and millions of people braved the elements, incredibly hostile terrain, the dangers of bandits and cutpurses, to make the long and hazardous pilgrimage. Why did they do it? Without a doubt there were adventurers and those who sought financial gain, but the vast majority were impelled by a fear of eternal damnation, which was preached relentlessly by the medieval church and eloquently reinforced by the sculptors and painters who decorated the churches with visions of the torments of the damned. The surest means of obtaining divine forgiveness and purification of the soul was by contact with the saints, who could intercede on behalf of penitent sinners. If the saints were martyrs, their influence was greater, and if the martyr were an apostle, better yet, and St. James was not only saint and martyr and apostle, he was one of the inner circle of disciples.

Some of the pilgrims were sentenced to make the pilgrimage as penance, and there were elaborate controls to be sure the pilgrimage was actually made. One of the more illustrious penitents to seek the intercession of Santiago was William X, Duke of Aquitaine and father of one the most redoubtable women of history, Eleanor, wife of two kings and mother of two more. William had lived a most scandalous life, flouting all the religious conventions and the authority of the Church, but he experienced a dramatic conversion at the hands of Bernard of Clairvaux, who ironically became an adversary of Eleanor. In penance for his past misdeeds William made the pilgrimage to Santiago in the company of Louis VI, King of France. William became mortally ill during his stay in Santiago and on his deathbed made Louis promise to wed his son to Eleanor. The marriage took place and soon after, Louis died and his son became Louis VII, a simple, pious man, ill suited to be the husband of the willful Eleanor. After she had borne him two daughters, they were divorced, and in order to protect her vast holdings, Eleanor married Henry Plantagenet, who was within two years of becoming Henry II of England. Two of

their sons became kings of England, Richard the Lion-Hearted, and the ignominious John, who frittered away the great Angevin Empire, and whose barons ran him to earth at Runnymede and extracted from his unwilling royal hand the Magna Charta, foundation and forerunner of democratic government. Now suppose we unravel all that history by hypothesizing that there was no Santiago for William's pilgrimage and the occasion for his extracting a pledge from his friend and liege on his death bed. How different might have run the course of history in France and England - and perhaps even our own United States?

Again, I have indulged in a flight of fancy, and perhaps the history of Europe would have run its course the same, without Santiago de Compostela. If Henry had not married Eleanor and sired John, democracy would have come to England by another route. And surely the Spanish would eventually have recaptured their peninsula without the inspiration and the sword of Santiago, and the New World would certainly have been discovered, and most likely by the Spanish and Portuguese. And yet, who knows? Without the dubious discovery of our fisherman turned warrior saint, we might have a Caliph in Cordoba rather than a King in Madrid, and the western hemisphere might be under the banner of the Crescent and Star.

We can only imagine the tremendous economic boon to the artists and artisans of Europe as they flocked to northern Spain and the pilgrim routes through France, where cathedral after cathedral was built along the *vrais lactee* where throngs of pilgrims starting from Paris, from Arles, from Vezelay and from Le Puy wound their way through Tours, Limoges, Bordeaux, Toulouse, becoming a mighty flood as they converged at the Pyrenees, occasioning the building of great cathedrals at Pamplona, Burgos, Leon, Astorga, Ponferrada. And in addition to cathedrals, there were hospitals built by the Templars, Cluniac monasteries, castles of the Knights of Santiago, and a myriad smaller commercial establishments to house, feed and exploit the unending river of humanity snaking its way across Europe to find absolution and favor from the great Santiago de Compostela. The exchange of ideas and customs between provincials from all over the western worlds must surely have opened the minds and broadened the horizons of a Europe just emerging from the dark ages, hastening the decay and downfall of feudal society. Perhaps more than any political consequences, real or imagined, of the warrior saint, this great exchange of people, of ideas, of art, has had the most lasting and profound and utterly unforeseeable impact on the western world, all stemming from a most improbable vision of an unlettered hermit in an obscure corner of the world more than a thousand years ago.

I close with a quote from the art historian Edwin Mullins, "The Romantics turned to the Middle Ages to indulge their dreams. Do we still? To say that St. James has been the stuff of dreams for more than a millennium is true enough: bad dreams, sentimental dreams, dreams of revenge, of salvation, of wealth, even dreams of truth. And yet how amazing and ironical it is that this legend, so improbable, so flawed, so disreputable, should have trodden a path through the history of western Europe that is flagged by some of the brightest achievements of our civilization. The road to Santiago is a monument to the creative strength of crude blind faith." Or in my own words, the legend of Santiago de Compostela is the triumph of belief over reality.