

## NEWS IN BRIEF

### NEW PILGRIMAGES IN NORWAY

**Hannah Kristine Bjørke Lunde.** *Pilgrimage Matters: Administrative and Semiotic Landscapes of Contemporary Pilgrimage Relations in Norway.* Department of Culture Studies and Oriental Languages, University of Oslo, 2022. 382 pp.



In her thesis in cultural history, defended at the University of Oslo, Hannah Kristine Bjørke Lunde highlights the innovation of trails of pilgrimage, pilgrimages and pilgrimage centers that, starting in the 1990s and on into the 2000s, emerged in Norway. This is something new that at the same time dates back to medieval Catholic time.

In Norway, the Holy Olav played a great role after being killed in the battle of Stiklestad on July 29, 1030. He became a symbol of Christianization in Norway. Pilgrimages to the cathedral in Nidaros, today Trondheim, were numerous in the Middle Ages.

Similar pilgrimages also took place to the island of Selja on the western coast of Norway, to celebrate the memory of Saint Sunniva. She is said to have been a daughter of an Irish king. She fled to Norway and together with her entourage lost her life on Selja Island in the 990s due to the collapse of a stone shack. She is the oldest Norwegian saint and the only woman among Norwegian saints. The pilgrimages came to an abrupt end though, because of the implementation of reformation in Norway in 1537. Thus, it was almost 500 years until they reappeared in Norway in our time.

The main objective in the thesis is to track how the reintroduction of pilgrimage trails and pilgrimages has successively grown. The issue of cultural heritage appears next to the religious dimension that dominated in the Middle Ages. This aspect, toned down in pilgrimage contexts in present-day Norway, is still front and center in pilgrimages in Catholic South Europe with Santiago de Compostela in Spain as the focal point. I could personally experience this as the international congress of the International Society for Ethnology and Folklore (SIEF) was held there in the spring of 2019. In Santiago de Compostela, the destination for the pilgrims is to reach the grave of Saint Jakob. In present-day

Norway, the trails by themselves have become as important as the destination in Trondheim or on the island of Selja. The present-day pilgrimages, taking place in the summer with predominantly somewhat elderly participants, are supposed to be performed at a slow pace. They are linked to similar catholic activities in the sense that both the pilgrims and those planning the current trails in Norway, called pilgrimage agents, all to a large extent have been on a pilgrimage to Santiago de Compostela. This way they have collected ideals that they are bringing back home to Norway. At the same time, the present-day pilgrimage agents connect back to the Middle Ages that thus becomes an 'absent presence'. This expression is borrowed by the author from cultural geographer Kevin Hetherington. Thus, there is a flexibility between catholic present-day European and medieval Norwegian role models/ideals. That way, the pilgrimages become somewhat different from regular tourist travelling for recreational purposes only. The pilgrimage agents have experienced some difficulties to find appropriate locations for the medieval trails in the current landscape. The trails of Olav are land-based, while the trails of Sunniva to Selja are mostly carried out by boats over water.

The thesis uses a combination of a number of sources in the analysis. Printed sources are newspaper articles, maps, brochures, and guide leaflets but also hagiographic sources showing the saint cult and saint legends in the Middle Ages. The author has also been able to get plenty of information from the internet sites such as [pilegrim.no](http://pilegrim.no), [pilegrimsfelleskapet.no](http://pilegrimsfelleskapet.no), [pilegrimsleden.no](http://pilegrimsleden.no), and [sunnivaleia.no](http://sunnivaleia.no). These have more focus on the trails than on the pilgrimage destination. At the destination, the participants present their pilgrimage pass holding stamps received along the pilgrimage route, and get their final stamp upon arrival. To receive the St Olav letter at the Trondheim destination, the participants are required to have been hiking the ten last Scandinavian miles (100 km) on foot or covered the last 20 miles (200 km) by bike. Specific ceremonies at the pilgrimage destination take place at Olsok in Trondheim on July 29 and at a service on Selja Island on July 8. The July 8 ceremony is held in the memory of Saint Sunniva.

The author herself participated in parts of pilgrimage hiking tours both to Trondheim and Selja in 2019–2021. The COVID19-pandemic in 2020 and 2021 did somewhat hamper the field studies, though. And so they had to be postponed, thus deviating from the original plan. After careful consideration, the author has been more of an observer than a participant. "I carried no visual signifiers making me recognizable as a pilgrim," she says (p. 294). As a scientist, she wanted to keep a certain distance from the individuals being studied. I myself have taken a similar approach in field studies of folklore movements, although

a field worker can never be totally neutral. The scientist's interest in the field is an important driving force.

Alongside the observations, the author has interviewed a number of pilgrimage participants, both Lutherans and Catholics, primarily Norwegians, but also foreign participants, about their thoughts and experiences. This way a number of individual experiences are revealed rather than common views in the narratives. One individualistic trait stands out. The aspect of the experience regards the so-called inner journey versus the externally observed, dealing with, for example, the hiking rod, hat, and a pilgrimage logo on the backpack. Most of the author's interviews were with pilgrimage agents that had been planning the pilgrimage trails and centers. These interviews were mainly of an administrative kind.

Pilgrimage centers have emerged in the 21st century and have distributed information in the form of maps, brochures, and guidebooks. A national pilgrimage center has been established in Trondheim and also additional twelve centers along the pilgrimage trails. The Selje regional pilgrimage center was opened in 2020, as well as a corresponding center in Bergen. Both of them focus on the coastline trail to Selje, which was installed by Queen Sonja at the Selja-service on July 8, 2018. This trail has a special logo in the form of a Celtic cross with sea waves underneath.

During the field studies, the author recorded interviews, kept a field diary and was an active photographer. The photos taken have also been used for the scientific analysis and not just as illustrations. A digital list of questions, 2068 Pilegrimsvandringer, was produced by the Norsk Etnologisk Gransking (NEG – Norwegian Ethnological Research) archive in Oslo and was published on the website *minner.no*. This way 18 answers were collected.

The author has presented her methodological considerations and choice of methods in detail in her qualitative investigation – a so-called bricolage method or pluralism method based on a number of different categories of sources. The author has been well aware of the ethical aspects when gathering field material. Keeping interviewed individuals anonymous is common practice today. However, the author has, with the informants' consent, decided to make the names of the pilgrimage agents public. The reason for that was based on the idea that these individuals are already well known due to their public work in the pilgrimage communities. The pilgrimage hikers, on the other hand, are kept anonymous as are also those answering questions on the NEG's list of questions, 2068 Pilegrimsvandringer.

In her analysis the author carefully relates to the theoretical role models she is referring to in the introduction. Among those are, for example, anthropologists

Victor and Edith Turner, folklorist Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett and sociologist Erving Goffman and his concept of “frame”. The author takes great care to discuss definitions of the concepts she is using. The connection between theory and empirics in the thesis stands out.

The author can be considered to have carried out pioneering work in Nordic ethnological pilgrimage research regarding the recent development over the past decades. Sweden has undergone development parallel to that in Norway which remains to be investigated. This involves, among others, pilgrimages to Vadstena Monastery where the Holy Birgitta (Bridget of Sweden, 1303–1373) resided and where a present-day pilgrimage center can be found. Local pilgrimage trails have been established in Sweden in several places, using Olav’s logo. The logo was approved in Norway in 1997 as a symbol for St Olav’s hiking trails running towards Trondheim. Such trails also exist in Sweden, crossing the country border into Norway. In 1997 the pilgrimage trail between Olso and Trondheim was opened, when the latter celebrated its 1000th anniversary. In 2010 the St Olav’s trails received status as one of the European cultural trails because of the fact that they run also outside Norway to the other Scandinavian countries such as Sweden and Denmark. In Sweden I have studied modern-day pilgrimages in the charismatic Oas Movement that was established in the 1980s. These journeys have taken to Israel and to places related to St Paul the Apostle’s New Testament journeys in present Turkey.

In German-language ethnology, investigations into pilgrimages in the Catholic areas in southern Germany, but also in Switzerland and Austria, go way longer back than in the North. In particular, ethnologists Wolfgang Brückner in Würzburg and Helge Gerndt in Munich, who I have been able to follow to investigated pilgrimage places, can be mentioned. The author of the thesis could have mentioned this research. Possibly the German language has presented a barrier for her, though.

To me, reading about hiking tours and journeys to the island of Selja with its church and monastery ruins is of special interest. I have vivid memories of an excursion which took place during the Nordic ethno-folklore congress in 1975 in Nordfjord, Norway, located around 60 kilometers away from Selja. The excursion participants were fascinated by the stories about Selja and Saint Sunniva told by the excursion guide, professor of folklore in Oslo, Olav Bø. He himself had presented his doctoral thesis on Saint Olav in 1955, based on the way this individual is pictured in Nordic narrative tradition. Thus, our excursion in 1975 took place long before the pilgrimages to Selja started in the 2010s.

The text in the thesis is significantly detailed, resulting in quite a few reiterations. Nothing is left to chance in the argumentation, pointing to the

carefulness of the author. The thesis was originally written in Norwegian and then translated into English. The text reads easily and effortlessly. The author has gone the extra mile to help Norwegian readers to do a critical review by providing notes in Norwegian of translated Norwegian citations. The thesis has an extensive number of notes, also including discussions, which is unusual today in doctoral theses in Nordic ethnology / cultural history.

I would also like to mention a formal aspect regarding readability. Presenting notes in small-size letters and with a single line spacing comes across as a disadvantage. It could give the reader the impression that what is stated in this hard-to-read style is of less importance. A thesis is primarily written for a scientific audience, so all that is written is equally important for the critical reader.

In summary it can be said that it was inspiring to read this deliberately written thesis, and it can be recommended as an important research contribution to cultural history and ethno-folkloristics.

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