Holy Places

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How Pilgrimage Changed the World

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INTRODUCTION: A WORLD OF PILGRIMAGE

In the winter of 1171, King Henry II of England was travelling through Wales on his way to Ireland when he decided to embark on a short pilgrimage. His Irish journey was purely political, as several of his Norman lords based in Wales had recently conquered parts of Ireland, and Henry needed to see them in person to stamp his authority on their actions. There was little other reason for the king to visit remote Pembrokeshire, but now that he was there it was the perfect opportunity to complete a pilgrimage to the country's most important religious site, the small cathedral of St David's. Fifty years before, the pope had declared that two pilgrimages to St David's had the same spiritual value as one to Rome, so it was an attractive proposition. And as Henry was about to embark on a winter crossing of the Irish Sea, it was also wise to pray for a safe passage, something he had done on previous occasions when sailing to his lands in France. While he was there, he also made a gift to the cathedral of two choral capes and some silver – just to ensure that his appeal was heard. His pilgrimage may have had a third motive: the king had recently quarrelled with the Welsh prince of the area, Rhys ap Gruffydd, and a pilgrimage was a sign that he intended peace, something the king needed the local ruler to believe while he was away overseas.

The following year, Henry returned from Ireland and landed at St Justinian's Bay just under two miles west of the cathedral.

This time he came 'dressed as a pilgrim, on foot and leaning on a staff', and went to St David's to pray. This visit was more overtly pious than his outward pilgrimage, as he came without his household (they had been sent on ahead to the more southerly port of Milford Haven), and the king timed it so that he would be there just after Easter. When Henry arrived he was warmly welcomed by the cathedral's canons (though not by a local woman who prophesied his death) and went into the cathedral to pray, thereby earning the spiritual reward that came with completing his second pilgrimage. He may have felt he needed it. In December 1170 his former friend and archbishop Thomas Becket had been martyred in Canterbury cathedral, allegedly at his instigation, so the need for absolution may have been very much on Henry's mind.[1] The small scale and remoteness of St David's cathedral belied its significance. As a pilgrimage destination, the king believed it had the potential to aid with his safety at sea, his relationships with other rulers and his immortal soul. Even simply reaching it was a sign of his power, as South Wales was not always welcoming to English kings.

Across the world and for millennia, people have taken to the road on pilgrimage to seek the help of their gods, saints and spirits when they needed protection, wanted to ease their troubled souls, sought cures or gave thanks, or wished to make some sort of political statement. For some, this meant undertaking a journey of thousands of miles over months, if not years, to reach a holy site. For most, it probably meant a local pilgrimage which could be completed perhaps in a day. Many pilgrims, like Henry II, went on pilgrimage time and again, visiting places with varying motives in mind as each holy place had something different to offer.

As a religious practice undertaken within most of the world's

faiths, pilgrimage has always reflected contemporary events whether conducted by adherents of major religions, small sects or no set faith. For a Muslim who is able to do so, visiting Mecca at least once in their lifetime is an obligation. For Christians, pilgrimages are a voluntary but much-practised expression of faith. Hindus and Buddhists are encouraged to go on pilgrimage, while for the Native Americans of the Plains or the Romani people of Europe it is a major milestone and an integral part of their lives. But the hows, whens and whys have varied over time, and from place to place, affected by everything from warfare to the weather. In turn, pilgrimages have been undertaken for all manner of reasons, from personal healing and spiritual growth to seeking approval for political decisions or gaining support for imperial rule. Today, pilgrimages are primarily seen as opportunities for contemplation or to promote faith or well-being, but many of the oldest mixed the spiritual and the earthly in ways that could not be separated. The ancient Greeks regularly consulted oracles for advice on politics and war; the ancient Chinese sought the sanction of the gods of folk religion for dynastic change; medieval kings sought out spiritual support for their wars and gave thanks when they were victorious at pilgrimage sites. How might history have been different if pilgrimage had not been part of the political world? And on a personal level, pilgrimages were equally important. In the days before mass medicine, what would the thousands of pilgrims who sought cures at shrines and wells or international cult centres have done? Where would they have turned in desperate times?

Some pilgrimage places have endured for thousands of years, like the mountains revered in China, or the rivers and wells venerated all around the world. Others have come and gone, perhaps due to competition, as new centres promote their attractions and outclass them. More miracles, more powerful gods

and larger buildings all sway pilgrims to adopt new holy places, while those sidelined struggle to survive the loss of income from the decline in traffic. Some pilgrimages died out because the places that attracted pilgrims in the first place fell into decay, or simply disappeared. Throughout history, the shrines and tombs of saints have been destroyed by natural events, hostile rulers or invading forces. It is sometimes simply that they are collateral damage, but when pilgrimage sites are central to the sovereignty of a place, attacks may be targeted and political. Political concerns drove the destruction of Sufi and ʻAlid shrines in Iran and central Asia in the Middle Ages, and the temples of India during the era of colonial rule. Changing beliefs and ideologies have destroyed pilgrimage sites and even banned pilgrimage itself. The Reformation in Europe swept away shrines in Britain and the Netherlands; thousands of buildings were locked up, statues, reliquaries and images were broken up or melted down, and pilgrimage was effectively criminalised as Catholicism was suppressed.

New destinations are created too, as we'll see. Everything from caves to sacred groves, the bodies of saints to paintings have been adopted by people seeking a closer connection to the divine. Emerging religions have developed pilgrimage places, using sites associated with their founders and their lives to build new centres of faith in the same way that established religions have. The Church of the Latter-Day Saints, or Mormons, a nineteenth-century religion born out of American Christian revivalism, does not include pilgrimage as part of its official doctrine, yet that hasn't stopped its members from joining in with the growing enthusiasm for pilgrimage. Sites associated with Mormonism's founder, John Smith, like the temple where he had his first vision and the places he and his followers stopped on their three-month trek to Utah, are increasingly drawing the

devout. Similar developments can be found around the world, the reasons for their creation as diverse as the new beliefs that underpin them.

Older religions, transported around the world through trade, colonisation or conversion, have always constructed new churches and shrines so that they have somewhere to go close at hand. This is what happened in Goa when Jesuit missionaries from Portugal built a church to house the remains of their founder, St Francis Xavier, who had died on his way to China in 1552. This beautiful church, the basilica of Bom Jesus, sits in the heart of the Portuguese district in Old Goa and is one of the seven wonders of the Portuguese colonial world. It is a testament to how missionaries and colonisers spread pilgrimage and religion by creating new focal points, but it is also just one of the hundreds of places around the world where the creation of new pilgrimage places was used by people of all faiths to settle, convert and make new communities. Where important sites grew, so too did wider networks of other pilgrimage places, and these were all incorporated into a place's local if not national identity.

Access to pilgrimage places has also been subject to change, and the global history of pilgrimage is also one of political and population control. During the Second World War, for example, pilgrimages were harder to take part in because of the disruption to everyday life and travel, but this was also a time when many people sought the comfort of faith, so pilgrims found ways to carry on, one way or another. Pilgrimages were used, unsurprisingly, to pray for peace and for help against the enemy, while access to pilgrimage places was blocked by occupying forces as a way to strip the conquered of their identity and deprive them of the comfort brought by the communal nature of pilgrimage. The German occupiers of the district around the

Black Madonna's shrine in Częstochowa, known as the Queen of Poland, renamed the road approaching the shrine usually thronging with pilgrims Adolf Hitler Allee to give the area a more Germanic feel.[2] More recently, pilgrimages have been used to exert political and secular control in times of peace. In late 2020 the Chinese authorities introduced a ban on 'personal' pilgrimages to Mecca by Uyghur Muslims. The London *Times* carried the headline CHINA BANS HAJ FOR MUSLIMS WHO FAIL PATRIOTISM TEST, as plans were unveiled to subject potential pilgrims to a programme of education and testing before allowing them on an accompanied journey to Saudi Arabia.[3]

Over the past century, pilgrimage has increasingly been used as a term to cover all kinds of journeys which are considered to have some sort of meaning: protest marches over unemployment or demanding the vote; holidays to the homes of famous figures like Elvis; journeys of remembrance and mourning to the Western Front or the Second World War internment camps created by Japan. The relationship between pilgrimage and tourism, something which has always existed and always been contentious, is pushed to the fore with 'pilgrimage' being used as a term to market escapes from the pressures of modern life, time spent in nature or opportunities to be together as a family. This seems like a story of secularisation, but religious pilgrimage continues to go from strength to strength too. In a world where many of the driving forces for pilgrimage appear to have changed, it is sometimes surprising to see that so much of what drives pilgrims to travel remains, and that it continues to have an impact on the world today.

This book explores the global history of pilgrimage through nineteen places, examining their role in world history and looking at how the activity of pilgrimage and the sites themselves have

shaped society, culture and politics from the ancient world to the present day. It starts in the east with two of the world's great natural pilgrimage sites in the ancient cradles of civilisation, Tai Shan in China and the Ganges of India, before moving west to Delphi, home of the oracle that advised politicians and generals in the ancient Greek world. Then come four cities at the heart of several of the world's greatest pilgrimage traditions: Jerusalem, a place of pilgrimage for three of the world's major religions; Mecca, Islam's holiest site; Rome, the seat of Catholicism; and Istanbul, a city that has been under the control of Catholics, Orthodox Christians and now Muslims.

From there we move on to two places which reflect more local and personal pilgrimage traditions, albeit in different ways. Iona, a small island off the west coast of Scotland, was originally a medieval pilgrimage site important to the Kings of the Isles but is now a place of ecumenical faith and the international home for the members of the Iona Community. Karbala, by contrast, is the site of the largest Muslim pilgrimage in the world, but has the same intimate feel as Iona in that it is a pilgrimage of family and community.

From there we move to Chichén Itzá in Mexico and Bear Butte in the USA, both Native American religious sites with practices alien to the Europeans who encountered them. In contrast the invaders and colonisers were responsible for the foundation of Muxima in Angola, where they set up a church where enslaved people were forcibly baptised, a legacy which is problematic and hard to reconcile with the site's message of peaceful pilgrimage. Around the same time in northern India, a new pilgrimage centre was developed in Amritsar, not through enforced settlement and colonisation, but through the purchase of land to create a holy space for pilgrims.

The last six chapters cover a range of pilgrimages – from the

internationally famous to the obscure and arguably profane. What ties them together is that they reflect modern ideas of what pilgrimage is and the variety of forms it can take. Lourdes and Saintes-Maries-de-la-Mer are two shrines dedicated to women in the south of France, but they could not be more different. The first is dedicated to the Virgin Mary and is the epitome of orthodox Catholic pilgrimage, the sick supported by priests, nuns and volunteers in an act of faith; the other is where Roma and Gypsy pilgrims meet to play music and celebrate into the night in ways that shock their more orthodox counterparts in Lourdes, and to revere Black Sara, a figure not recognised by Rome. The next two pilgrimages, to Rātana Pā in New Zealand and Buenos Aires in Argentina, celebrate twentieth-century figures revered both during their lifetimes and after their deaths who, despite considerable controversy, have continued to attract pilgrims. These pilgrimages are intimately entwined with the politics of their respective countries, participation being both a way to gain political support and to make a statement of resistance. The final chapters cover two of the world's great pilgrim routes: the 750-mile circular Shikoku pilgrimage in Japan and the 490-mile Camino Francés (French Way) to Santiago de Compostela in northern Spain. Though both are set routes, they are undertaken in different ways, the relative importance of walking, riding, cycling or driving a continual part of the debate over what it even means to be a pilgrim.

I could easily have chosen one hundred sites in one country alone and still been tortured by the ones I had left out. Hundreds of small churches, tiny springs and wells or remote mountain-top shrines are vitally important to those who live in their immediate vicinity, but have little impact beyond that. For every Mecca or Lourdes that draws pilgrims in their millions from around the globe, there are thousands of obscure

sites dedicated to people you will never hear about, but which are reliably visited by a clutch of pilgrims each year. For them, they are incredibly important; for us, they are mere curiosities. Equally, there are important sites with global reach which I have omitted as they tell similar stories to the places I have picked. Those are perhaps for another book. In this I have chosen sites based on what they tell us about the role of pilgrimage in global history – how it can make or break regimes, inspire millions to pray for healing, unite and create communities, inspire the construction of global infrastructure or embody the identity of a people. Many of them will no doubt be familiar – Rome, Jerusalem, Santiago, Shikoku – while others are less known yet still important to understanding the myriad ways in which people have performed pilgrimage, and the impact it has had on them, their societies and the wider world.

1

TAI SHAN

China

When China's currency was reissued in 1999, one of the most striking changes was to the design of the banknotes. Where the old notes had shown images of a range of Chinese people, all new denominations carried a portrait of China's former leader Mao Zedong on one side, painted by the famous artist Liu Wenxi. For the other, the authorities chose places they considered culturally or historically significant to the Chinese: the hundred-yuan note showed the Great Hall of the People in Beijing, the seat of government; the Three Gorges of the Yangtze River, an area of outstanding beauty, was chosen for the reverse of the ten-yuan note. On the five-yuan note, they selected an image of Tai Shan (Mount Tai), the most revered of China's sacred mountains.[1] Lying 300 miles south of Beijing, and rising over 5,000 feet above the city of Tai, it is the highest mountain in Shandong province. The contrast between Mao's portrait and the image of this mountain could not be starker. The first depicts the founding father of Chinese communism, an anti-imperialist who rejected traditional paternal authority and reverence for ancestors, and who promoted loyalty to the communist people and state above all else. The other is the symbolic site of the imperial power that communism rejected, and of the

Five-yuan Chinese banknote, issued in 2005. The new notes featured sites of national importance in China such as Tai Shan, which was chosen for the most common banknote in circulation.

filial piety – ancestor worship – which communism largely suppressed but which has dominated Chinese culture and society for thousands of years.

China has five sacred mountains: Hua Shan in the west, Tai Shan in the east, two Heng Shans, one in the north and one in the south, and Song Shan in the centre. They are the representatives of the Five Elements (earth, water, wood, fire, metal) which are believed to make everything in the universe.[2] All five are places of pilgrimage, and several are bigger, but Tai Shan is

the most important of them all because its position in the east means it is lit by the sun, bringer of life, before its fellow peaks. Indeed, ascending at night is a popular way to visit Tai Shan as this gives the pilgrim the opportunity to view the sunrise from its summit. It is probably the most climbed mountain in the world and has a history of worship dating back to the Neolithic era, though the earliest evidence of pilgrimage dates to 219 BCE when the first emperor went to the mountain's summit.[3]

In that time the mountain has attracted the greatest of China's leaders, its literati and philosophers, court officials, peasantry and the poorest of society. They come for myriad reasons determined by faith, philosophy and circumstance. For Taoists, Tai Shan is the home of a nature god, bringing much-needed rain, while its very size and presence are a reminder of stability in times of trouble.[4] For others, it is a source of life or a place where souls return, the god of Mount Tai overseeing life and death. Many deities are worshipped on Tai Shan, including the god of Mount Tai's daughter, Bixia Juanjun, but the mountain is also a god in itself, with great power over the fate of the people.[5] As a site of nature worship, a place where pilgrims seek help and where people go on pilgrimage to pray for children or the dead, Tai Shan has much in common with many places around the world. It has also attracted Chinese leaders for political reasons, including at least twelve emperors and over ninety of China's ancient kings.

Pilgrims reach the top by climbing around 6,700 steps from the North Gate to the summit, following a path dotted with small temples, shrines and sanctuaries, eleven gates and fourteen archways, past inscriptions commemorating the visits of previous pilgrims carved into the rock of the mountain itself. They have come from all over China, and from all of society's many levels. Writing in 1313, one official complained:

> nowadays gentlemen, farmers, artisans and merchants, and even runners, wrestlers, actors and whores … will, for the purpose of praying for fortune and repaying their vows, neglect their businesses but bring together money and goods, gold and silver, vases and plates, saddles and horses, clothes and silks, and from far and near congregate from all directions; the crowd has to be counted in the tens of thousands and the hubbub lasts for days on end … As there is such a crowd of simple and deluded people, there have to be cunning and evil fellows. It is not only bound to be a defilement of the divine intelligences, but also, we fear, will create all kinds of nuisance.[6]

The path up the mountainside was often packed with visitors, especially in the warmer months, a swarm so dense they have been likened to insects. Wang Shizhen, an official who visited three times in the 1550s, thought the lantern-carrying pilgrims who climbed this winding mountain path in the dark before dawn looked like 'a large collection of fireflies'.[7] The number of nameless pilgrims heading to the mountain summit was vast, and may have been as many as one million a year by the end of the century.[8]

Over time new sacred attractions have been added, like the beautifully named fifteenth-century temple of the Jade Maiden Pool, or the Han Dynasty cypress tree planted to commemorate the pilgrimage of Emperor Wudi (ruled 157–87). There are now so many that pilgrims are cautioned not to stop too often on the way up or they will never reach the top. Most pilgrims walk, though for centuries those who have been able to afford it have also paid to be carried by sedan chair or, at least since 1983 (and before the mountain's UNESCO status would have hindered such developments), go by bus and cable car.[9]

A thriving economy sprang up to cater for the great numbers of pilgrims to Tai Shan. The essayist and administrator Zhang Dai's seventeenth-century visit involved guides who organised accommodation, sedan-chair carriers, fees to access the mountain and, for those who wanted them, courtesans. Large banquets were laid on for pilgrims, accompanied by music and singing, which enabled the guides to profit considerably from the eight or nine thousand pilgrims Zhang Dai said came every day. In the space in front of the Tung-Yueh temple, seventeenth-century pilgrims could also enjoy cockfighting and wrestling, watch plays and listen to storytelling, or shop at the many stalls and stands.

Over the centuries the route up Tai Shan has acquired numerous hawkers and businesses catering to pilgrims.[10] Zhang Dai was particularly unimpressed by the poor who lined the route, begging for money, and by the inscriptions that covered the mountainside. 'The beggars exploited Mount Tai for money,' he moaned as he was carried by sedan chair past their outstretched arms, 'while the victors exploited Mount Tai for fame.'[11] The beggars were still there in great numbers when the American painter Mary Mullikin went on pilgrimage in the 1930s. One lived in a purpose-built bed at the side of the route, while another had a stuffed dummy of himself made to sit beside a begging bowl while he went about his other business. Sitting in the middle of the path, the beggars were impossible to ignore.[12]

What makes Tai Shan so important is what it symbolises. Mountains define pilgrimage in China. Unlike many other parts of the world, in China pilgrimage centres tend not to develop in cities but around natural sites. In fact, in Mandarin Chinese there is no equivalent to 'pilgrimage'. Instead, people refer to *chaoshan*, 'to have an audience with the mountain', or *jianxiang* (or *chin-hsiang*), 'to offer incense', a common devotional activity

of mountain pilgrims.[13] Mountains were, and are, important in many of the faiths practised in China – Taoism, Buddhism, Confucianism, folk religions – as is the practice of offering incense to the gods, so much so that it is common to see incense burners for sale across China in the shape of mountain ranges or peaks. Though each faith might worship a different god or goddess in these places, or believe that they are responsible for varying aspects of their lives, what matters is the mountain itself. As the French historian Édouard Chavannes put it: 'The mountains are, in China, the divinities.'[14]

Pilgrimages of Duty

One of Chinese society's defining beliefs is the importance of filial piety, a key tenet of Confucianism and Taoist philosophy. Filial piety encompasses a wide range of acts and attitudes, but most enduring are reverence for, and obligation towards, one's ancestors, care of one's parents and providing male heirs to continue the family line. It is common to almost all Chinese beliefs and has been for several thousand years. So central has filial piety been in Chinese history that under the Tang dynasty (sixth to tenth century) it was illegal to abandon your parents or mourn insufficiently, while China's more recent one-child policy prompted cases of sex-selective abortion, infanticide and abandonment as parents desperately tried to have a longed-for son. Filial piety is about more than one's own family though. Loyalty to ancestors was considered synonymous with loyalty to the empire, so for much of China's imperial history filial piety was expressly promoted.[15]

Filial pilgrimages were so popular that they appeared in poems, plays and novels from the Middle Ages onwards, usually as cautionary tales about the importance of true filial

observance. According to these beliefs, the living had a responsibility to honour their male ancestors through offerings and prayer, and in return the dead would help the living in times of need. Pilgrims could appeal to the dead at Tai Shan because the mountain was a gateway to them; the Chinese believed that the souls of the dead went to a small hill at the foot of the mountain, and there were judged by the god of the mountain. This made Tai Shan the perfect place for communicating with ancestors as they could be more easily reached there. Indeed, the mountain is so strongly associated with death and ancestry that some shaped the tombs of their dead like mountains. Little surprise that 'going to Tai Shan' became a euphemism for dying.[16]

An unbroken family line was necessary so that the living could pray for the dead and be safe in the knowledge that in years to come their descendants would in turn pray for them. This meant that a pilgrimage to Tai Shan was about both ancestors and descendants, as in addition to honouring the dead, men might also pray for a son to carry on family obligations after they no longer could. To fail to have a son was to fail one's ancestors.[17] From the thirteenth century onwards, women started to climb Tai in the belief that it would bring them and their family a male heir. Childless women had no real place in Chinese families, so the birth of a son was essential to give them a place in the family line and security within the home during their lifetimes. Royal princesses and imperial consorts appealed for a son on the mountain, asking Tai Shan to give them an heir 'to ensure the substantiality of the state'.[18] Elderly women with bound feet went to pray for male grandchildren and wives for sons, burning offerings in the hope they would be helped. They primarily prayed to Bixia Juanjun, daughter of the god of Mount Tai, who had (and still has) a particular role as a fertility goddess and a reputation for granting pregnancies to heirless couples.

Even though the influence of filial piety on Chinese society has diminished in the modern age, women still climb the hill in the hope that they or their children will conceive boys, burning paper money and incense as they have done for centuries.

Women pilgrims have long been regarded with some suspicion in China, perhaps because they have often used pilgrimage to escape from the strict and limiting confines of Chinese social mores. In the middle of the seventeenth century, a magistrate called Huang Liu-hong composed a popular guide for his fellow judges in which he claimed women used pilgrimages as a cover to travel and engage in decidedly irreligious activities, and warned that they 'seek liaisons with dissipated youths in secret passages of monasteries'.[19] He complained of orgies in Tai Shan's holy temples. Suspicion of women pilgrims is a common theme in the history of all kinds of faiths, and Huang Liu-hong's anger probably says more about him than about the actual behaviour of Chinese women on pilgrimage. Nevertheless, his accusations were widely accepted, and the Chinese were keen to enact laws that explicitly prohibited female pilgrimage, though these laws had little effect.[20]

Imperial Pilgrimage

The earliest recorded imperial pilgrimage to Tai Shan was conducted by China's first self-declared emperor, the brutal and tyrannical Qin Shi Huang (221–210 BCE).[21] He was making a clear statement: he had unified China to create an empire, and he ruled over it all without question. He is probably better known for the Great Wall of China, and for his burial in the mausoleum guarded by the 8000 soldiers of the Terracotta Army, but his assumption of the title 'emperor' when before China had only had kings was his real crowning glory. He was a

Reaching the top of Tai Shan involved climbing thousands of steps. Emperor Qin Shi Huang attempted the ascent in his chariot, while some modern pilgrims opt for the cable car.

man clearly at home with grand display, so it is little surprise that accounts of his pilgrimage describe him scandalising the scholars who advised him by completing his ascent of the mountain not reverently on foot, as they recommended, but racing up in the imperial chariot. His pride was punished, as the disrespected deity sent a storm as punishment which forced him to abandon his chariot on the downhill journey.[22]

While on pilgrimage Qin Shi Huang carried out the *feng* and *shan* sacrifices, rituals performed in honour of heaven and earth respectively.[23] The specifics of the ceremonies are unclear, but they involved making offerings to the god of Mount Tai at the foot of the mountain (the *shan* sacrifice), and then at the top (the *feng*), where emperors may have buried jade tablets inscribed with their successes, and burned offerings to the Jade Emperor in heaven, ruler of the world, whose grand temple stood nearby. Successful completion of *fengshan* was a sign that a ruler had received the mandate of heaven, a seal of approval on his reign as the Son of Heaven.

These were rituals shrouded in mystery. When Emperor Wu of the Han dynasty (ruled 141–87 BCE), the ruler responsible for opening the Silk Road to China, conducted *feng* in 110 BCE, he only took one other person with him to the top of the mountain. A few days later, that man was dead, leaving the emperor the only one who knew what had taken place. Historians have speculated that he believed the ritual would transfer a secret illness to his attendant, or that he was seeking the immortality that he believed was bestowed on emperors who were blessed by the gods.[24] This belief may have inspired some other imperial pilgrims. According to an inscription written some two hundred years later, 'If you climb Mount Tai, you may see immortal beings. They feed on the purest jade, they drink from the springs of manna. They yoke the scaly dragons to their carriage, they

mount the floating clouds ... May you receive a never-ending span, long life that lasts for ten thousand years.'[25]

Pilgrimage to Tai Shan demonstrated imperial power and sacred approval of an emperor's rule. Guangwu (ruled 25–57 CE), the founder of China's Han dynasty, presumably waited so long after assuming power to complete his pilgrimage to Tai Shan because at the start of his reign he only ruled part of China.[26] It was only in 56 CE, after years of conquest and forcing local warlords to submit to his authority, that he could claim to rule the whole country and be worthy of completing the pilgrimage. At Tai Shan he would receive the mandate of heaven, a sign of favour and the legitimacy of his rule.[27]

The pilgrimage of Emperor Gaozong (ruled 649–83 CE) was about more than control over lands inside China's borders. By the 660s the emperor dominated his neighbours and was more powerful than his father, Taizong (ruled 626–49), had been. Taizong had never been to Tai Shan, despite the frequent urging of his courtiers, because he thought that 'his merits were not so glorious as to deserve the honor'.[28] The driving force behind Gaozong's pilgrimage was his wife, the much reviled but formidable Empress Wu. A former courtesan, Wu became Gaozong's second wife after his first proved childless. Wu was ruthless and ambitious, allegedly murdering her own daughter in an attempt to frame a love rival. From 660 onwards, following her husband's first stroke, she increasingly took control of the imperial court. She was quite literally the power behind the throne, sitting behind a pearl screen in council meetings so she could listen in and whisper instructions to her husband. She was the only woman in Chinese history to use the title 'emperor' – *huangdi* – in her own right, making this pilgrimage the only time a female emperor visited Tai Shan.[29]

Empress Wu came on the pilgrimage with her husband in

great style, the imperial couple accompanied by a train of followers sixty miles long made up of imperial princes and high officials of the court and military, soldiers and foreign dignitaries, as well as the hundreds of wagons carrying the food and tents the pilgrimage party needed. They set off in the closing weeks of 665 and arrived in Tai Shan the following year.[30]

Wu was interested in omens and symbols and knew how to use them to boost her power, demanding she be fully involved in the pilgrimage rituals. When the *fengshan* sacrifices were performed,[31] Empress Wu insisted that she be allowed to take part as a way of honouring previous empresses – filial piety being a good excuse – but also to show her power. Not only had she and her husband insisted on most of the court coming with them, they were also attended by representatives from Japan, India, Khmer, Khotan and three Korean kingdoms, and the exiled Persian court, whose leader served the emperor as one of his generals.[32] With an audience like that, not only did this pilgrimage show the dominance of the imperial family over China and its neighbours, it ensured the message of imperial strength would be carried across Asia.

Empress Wu's pilgrimage was about power, expansionism and her own status. The pilgrimage of the Song emperor Zhenzong (ruled 997–1022) in 997 was also a political act, but it appears to have inspired him to spread the wonders of Tai Shan to the people of China. His forty-seven-day pilgrimage, made in the first year of his reign, included the declaration of an amnesty and the announcement of a three-day bacchanal.[33] This was an interesting choice of celebration for a sacred journey, given that writers were highly critical of those who failed to undertake the pilgrimage with due solemnity, but then Zhenzong seems to have been a more generous and fun-loving emperor than many of his predecessors. Keen to promote Tai Shan and its spiritual

importance to his people, thirteen years later the inhabitants of the northern province of Shanxi were given permission to build temples dedicated to the mountain closer to home as the real thing was too far away to reach easily.[34] This was the spiritual accompaniment to his politics, as this emperor's rule was defined by both the strengthening of his dynasty and the consolidation of its power in China, two developments he could claim were the result of his acceptance as the Son of Heaven at the start of his rule.[35]

Emperor Kangxi (1662–1722), of the Qing dynasty, was China's longest-ruling and perhaps greatest emperor. He was also widely travelled, reviving imperial touring in the aftermath of a damaging civil war. Coming to the throne at the tender age of eight, the protracted Revolt of the Three Feudatories hampered his attempts to gain control of the empire. However, he was politically astute and realised the need to bring together his heritage – he came from the Manchu people – and the wider Chinese people. He had used his youth and the years of war to study Chinese and realised that the country's scholars and elite Han literati needed to be brought on board if he was going to succeed. He also understood that many of his subjects were reluctant to accept the new dynasty (he was only the second Qing emperor to rule China proper), adhering by habit as much as anything else to the Ming dynasty that had come before. To get them on his side, Kangxi would have to show that he had the backing of a higher power and that he had been accepted as the Son of Heaven. This was important given that, when the Manchus took power, they claimed that their predecessors had been defeated because their incompetence had lost them heaven's approval. The result was his eastern tour and pilgrimage to Tai Shan in 1684.[36]

On arrival he ensured that he personally prayed so his

connection to the sacred mountain was not in doubt. Also important was the fact that he completed most of his ascent on foot, a sign of his respect for this holiest of Chinese places.[37] So far so simple, but there were other problems that Kangxi had to address on this pilgrimage. He had to keep the various ethnic groups within China happy, a tricky balancing act where it was easy to alienate whole sections of society with one ill-considered action, so Kangxi's pilgrimage wasn't quite like that of other emperors. Imperial pilgrimages were supposed to focus on worshipping the god of Mount Tai, but in 1684 Emperor Kangxi spent more time and energy praying to the goddess Bixia Juanjun.[38] This was probably designed to appeal to the general Chinese population. If going to Tai Shan satisfied the Han elite, and the preservation of Manchu cultural practices pleased his homeland, then praising Bixia, a goddess famed for her compassion to all, would be a popular move with the wider population of China.[39]

Compassionate rule was important to Kangxi, and he used his pilgrimage to show just how concerned he was for his people. He ensured that the revenue collected through the incense tax, instead of being sent to the central government, was reinvested in paying workmen to maintain the buildings on the mountain that the pilgrims had come to visit.[40] More important was his reaction to a site high up on Tai Shan that had long been known as Suicide Cliff, a place where some pilgrims jumped to their deaths at the end of their pilgrimages. They did this as an act of filial honour, perhaps giving their own lives for the return to health of a father or other relative. Previously, officials had tried to prevent this by renaming the place Love Life Cliff or Cliff for Loving Life, but the rebrand doesn't seem to have had much impact because it was still a suicide spot when the emperor visited.[41] The emperor was asked if he wanted to walk over to see the

cliff, but he was angered by the suggestion, saying that people had a responsibility to honour the mothers and fathers who had given them their bodies by looking after themselves. He felt that suicide flew in the face of filial piety. 'If children have already killed themselves,' he raged, 'they cannot care for their parents. The act of suicide is not filial ... What would be the purpose of seeing such a place!?'[42]

In an interesting contrast to Zhenzong's desire for some Chinese to have a reminder of the mountain and its imperial associations closer to home, Emperor Kangxi wanted to symbolically take possession of Tai Shan so that he controlled it even when he was not physically present on the mountain. He commissioned a work known as the *Chart of Mount Tai*, a map commemorating the pilgrimage of 1684. What the map meant was that, even when the emperor was not physically on pilgrimage at the mountain, he had its representation locked away in the archives of the Forbidden City's imperial administration, where he was amassing the largest art collection in Chinese history.[43]

A few years later, the emperor commissioned a series of decorated scrolls depicting his southern tour, including the pilgrimage to Tai Shan. They showed Kangxi as the ideal classical Chinese ruler, a permanent reminder that he had gained the authority from his pilgrimage to rule all of China.[44] He also went one step further to demonstrate that, though he was Manchu, he could derive power from Tai Shan just like any other Chinese leader. He composed an essay claiming that Tai Shan, though an ancient Chinese site of worship, had its roots in his homeland in the Changbai Mountains, which divide Manchuria from the Korean peninsula. Tai Shan, he argued, was the head of a dragon, whose body lay beneath the land and sea controlled by China, its tail extending to form the Changbai. He cleverly used the Han Chinese principles of feng shui to make his point,

claiming he had researched the facts thoroughly, demonstrating not just his connection to Tai Shan but his mastery of Chinese learning.[45]

Qianlong (ruled 1735–96), Kangxi's grandson and the last emperor to go on pilgrimage to Tai Shan, was very much following in the footsteps of his ancestor when he went there in 1748, the first of his nine pilgrimages to the mountain.[46] His was an imperial pilgrimage and an act of explicit filial piety in honour of his grandfather, whom he revered. When his longevity meant that his rule threatened to exceed that of his grandfather, Qianlong retired so that he would not eclipse Kangxi's reputation.

Qianlong had ruled China for a dozen years by the time he set out on his first pilgrimage, but he hadn't felt the need to visit Tai Shan before; the usual desire to cement a new rule by going on pilgrimage appears not to have been a concern. But 1748 was a particularly bad year for the emperor, who was in deep mourning following the death of his infant son Yongcong from smallpox, for which he blamed himself, and three months later of his wife the empress, the devout and virtuous Xiaoxianchun.[47] The emperor was subject to great rages, and in his grief he disinherited two of his sons for lack of respect and lashed out by punishing hundreds of officials he felt were not mourning his wife enough.[48] Some historians have seen these reactions as born of insecurity, and his subsequent public display of celebration at Tai Shan as a way to boost his self-esteem as he appealed to his imperial ancestors in his darkest hour, though there is no doubt that his grief over the death of his wife was real, as he composed over one hundred poems mourning her over the next four decades.[49] The deaths may also have been seen as signs of heaven's displeasure, the pilgrimage thus a way to reclaim divine favour.

Qianlong left his mark on the mountain by commissioning a twenty-metre-tall carving of a poem on a rectangle of light stone,

visible high above the city of Tai, the only man-made addition to the mountain that can be seen from the south of the city.[50] This was done to mark his first pilgrimage, the poem written by the emperor himself in commemoration of the event. It was also a sign of ownership, marking the mountain in much the same way as he had the contents of the imperial art collection stamped. In all, he commissioned more carvings on Tai Shan than any other emperor.

After the death of Qianlong in 1799, there were no more imperial pilgrimages to Tai Shan. In part this could have been because the emperors no longer needed to go; despite occasional internal problems and threats from the West, China's territory grew and stabilised to become the country we see today, and the Qing dynasty endured until the revolution of 1911 without needing to perform the *feng* and *shan* sacrifices.[51] It is also tempting to think that there were no more imperial pilgrimages because China's greatest emperors had taken symbolic possession of the mountain, depicting pilgrimages on works kept in the Forbidden City and leaving a permanent and highly visible mark on the mountain itself. Instead, in line with the more compassionate rule they tried to demonstrate to their subjects, the emperors ruled in the Confucian style of fair governors, and Tai Shan and its pilgrimages could be given over to the everyday people of China.

2

THE GANGES

India

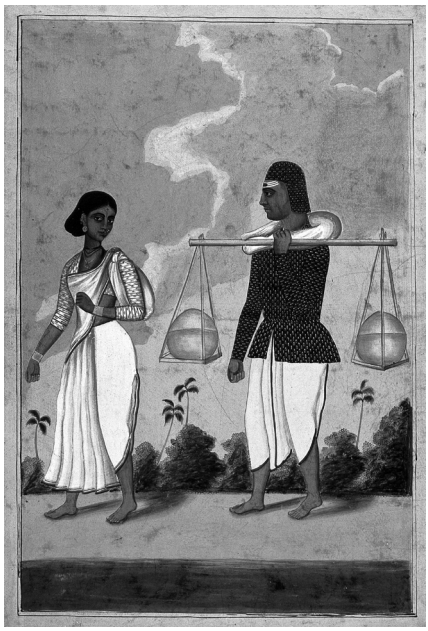
Ten thousand feet above sea level, high in the Himalayas, the twenty-mile-long Gangotri glacier slowly melts. The air up here is thin, the ground often covered in snow and ice. It is far from hospitable, yet people come here on pilgrimage because for many Hindus the glacier is the source of the Ganges, their holiest river, and because of a belief that the Himalayas are the home of the gods. Meltwater flows from Gomukh, the 'cow's mouth' of the glacier, and down through the foothills of Garhwal to the Gangetic plain, home to almost half a billion people. As the river passes through settlements which have themselves become major pilgrim sites because they are on the banks of the Ganges, it takes on more and more water from dozens of tributaries. After over 1,550 miles of meandering across northern India, the Ganges (or, as it passes through Bangladesh, the Padma) splits into channels criss-crossing the world's largest river delta, and discharges into the Bay of Bengal.

The River Ganges is the biggest and longest pilgrimage destination on earth. According to the *Upanishads*, an ancient Sanskrit text recounting the origins of the universe, the river was formed when one of Hinduism's principal gods, Shiva, calmed the power of the goddess Ganga by filtering her through his hair.

Where Ganga fell to earth, she was contained in the form of the river. As with most pilgrimage sites, the reasons for pilgrims to travel to the Ganges are myriad. Pilgrims visit the Ganges to absolve themselves from sin, believing the water is capable of washing it away. Some come to seek aid in business dealings or with a court case, to give thanks or to ask for healing, or for spiritual refreshment. As with many pilgrimage sites linked to death and rebirth, there is an old belief that a visit to the Ganges can help a woman conceive, and if she then meets with success, she has to offer her firstborn son to the river in return by throwing him into the water.[1]

The water of the Ganges gives knowledge, offers an entry point to the other world, holds the nectar of immortality and is still believed to be eternally pure. Its power extends well beyond the river itself. Rajendra the Great (1012–44), ruler of the Chola empire which covered southern India, was so determined to harness the sanctity of the Ganges that he sent his military commanders to collect jars of its water for him. After he conquered the lands around the Ganges, Rajendra built a tank in a temple dedicated to Shiva to hold Ganges water, and forced captives to bring water from the river. He called his capital city Gangaikondacolapuram, 'the city of the king who conquered the Ganges'.[2]

Akbar (ruled 1556–1605), one of the greatest of the Muslim Mughal emperors, insisted on having the river water brought to him wherever he was, as it was the only water he would drink and cook with.[3] This was popular among the Hindus he ruled over, so much so that both his son and grandson continued the practice. Three centuries later, the river water was used to swear on in court.[4] Water was diverted from the Ganges itself to create satellite pilgrimage centres, such as the tank at Manipura where well over a thousand years ago the river was channelled two miles to the so-called Gate of the Ganges, where pilgrims could bathe



The water of the Ganges was so spiritually potent that it was often transported across India by holy-water carriers or enslaved people. It was used in religious ceremonies, for washing, or to create bathing pools for pilgrimage and prayer.

and take advantage of the charity and free accommodation provided by the local rulers. More recently, at the annual Kanwar Mela festival in honour of Shiva, millions of pilgrims, most of them poor, take away containers of water from the Ganges to temples and homes all over India. This is seen as a way to reaffirm the link between the Hindu faith, India and the Ganges, and it has become more popular in recent decades in response to political changes and increasing consumerism as it continues to allow the poor to play an important role in Hindu society.[5]

Just one of the seven major Indian rivers that are considered goddesses, the Ganges is the most important and has been revered since sometime between 1700 and 1100 BCE. Evidence

of pilgrimage in early Hindu tradition is thin to the point of non-existence, and it looks like it took a while to get established as a practice in the religion; bar mentions in some third- to fifth-century texts, it does not start to appear frequently in the traditional texts on Hindu law until the twelfth century.[6] About 300 years later pilgrimage to the Ganges was regular and important enough for regulation, as codes that were probably written earlier in the Middle Ages were revised several times over. These works set out laws and expectations on how a pilgrimage to the Ganges (as well as other places in India) should be conducted.

By the middle of the sixteenth century, pilgrim traffic had increased considerably. The stability provided by Mughal rule meant it was safer to travel long distances.[7] Writing in the third decade of the century, the English cleric Samuel Purchas claimed that the Jesuit priest Emanuel Pinner had witnessed 4,000 pilgrims going to the Ganges at Varanasi, one of the most important cities along the river's length, and was informed by the governor of Bengal 'that there came thither sometime three hundred thousand or foure hundred thousand Pilgrims'.[8] He was one of many outsiders who reported on pilgrimages to the Ganges. Jean de Thévenot, a Parisian explorer who travelled the country in 1666–7, claimed that he had witnessed pilgrims throwing themselves into the river naked.[9] Two centuries later another traveller (for travellers are some of our best witnesses), John Matheson, claimed he saw a pilgrim praying atop a pillar standing in the river at Varanasi.[10]

Pilgrimage Cities of the Ganges

All of the Ganges is sacred, but particular places are crossing places between this world and the world of the gods. They are considered holier than other sites at certain times of the year.

Haridwar (also called Mayapuri, Gangadwar or Kapila), Prayag (Allahabad or Prayagraj) and Varanasi (Avimukta, Kashi or Benares) are the most important, but there were lots of smaller places which had and in some cases still have their own allure. According to a travel guide written in the first decade of the twentieth century, pilgrims came to Bandukpur in the winter to pour water from the Ganges over an image of Jageshwar Mahadeo in thanks or to seek favours. Kakora, near but not on the Ganges, benefited from a fair held in the month of Kartik because pilgrims came to trade after they had bathed in the river.[11]

Two of the most sacred cities on the Ganges are where the great Kumbh Mela is held. This is a religious festival that probably celebrates the Kumbh, the vessel carrying the nectar of immortality taken from an ocean churned up in a war between gods and demons. Where the Kumbh spilt drops of its precious liquid or, in other versions of the legend, where the pot stopped on its journey to paradise (at Haridwar and Prayag on the Ganges, and Ujjain and Nashik on other rivers), Kumbh Melas are held every twelve years or thereabouts, in January and February – the timing of the festivals to coincide with the movement of the planets does not result in perfectly regular repetitions. Pilgrims come to get a touch of that immortality and to enter the Ganges at a *tirtha,* one of those crossing places that bring them closer to the divine, as the time of the Kumbh Mela is considered particularly auspicious for bathing. So strong is the attraction that it even tempts hundreds of sadhus, religious mendicants who are usually reclusive, to venture on pilgrimage. There are also smaller Melas at other intervals, and at other places, which also bring pilgrims to the banks of the river.

Travelling down the Ganges from the Himalayas, the first major riverside pilgrimage centre and site of the Kumbh Mela

is the city of Haridwar, about a hundred miles from the river's source, where the Ganges meets the plains. One of the sites revered as a place where the gods spilt golden nectar, it is believed to be the doorway to the gods Vishnu or Shiva. Although often referred to as an ancient gathering, the origins of the Kumbh Mela at Haridwar are hard to discern. When Haridwar fell in 1399 to Timur the Lame (Shakespeare's *Tamerlane*) he massacred many pilgrims who may have conceivably been there for the Kumbh Mela, but the evidence isn't detailed enough to decide. The earliest certain reference to the festival in Haridwar is in the 1695 *Khalastatu-t-Tawarikh*, in which the city is called 'the greatest of all' the places on the river's banks and the fair held there is referred to as the Kumbh Mela.[12] This was certainly a large gathering, and it turned Haridwar from a small riverside settlement into a huge city, a thriving market which brought great riches through trade in salt and cloth, brass and ivory, looking glasses and weapons.[13] By the middle of the nineteenth century, Haridwar was 'a celebrated place of Hindu pilgrimage' where people came to bathe at one of the many ghats on the river's edge. These are large, wide flights of stone steps which lead down to the river, giving easy access to and from the water. The author of one guide of 1842 referred to the 'great fair' held there which attracted up to two million people and, crucially, the belief that the water was 'supposed to acquire additional sanctity every twelfth year; and the concourse of pilgrims is then always greatest'.[14]

Four hundred and twenty miles downriver as the crow flies is Prayag, known as *Tiritha Raja*, 'King of the Tirthas', a particularly sacred crossing place where the Ganges meets the Yamuna River. Just like the Ganges, the Yamuna is both a sacred river and the embodiment of a goddess. There is something elemental about the meeting of two rivers, and along the Ganges meeting places like these, *sangam*, are believed to be especially

Ghats are large flights of steps which give access to the water of the Ganges. Some are particularly holy to pilgrims, while others are popular sites for cremations and as a result often very crowded.

sacred. That at Prayag is most sacred of all because the Ganges and Yamuna are joined by a third river, the mythological and invisible Saraswati, and because it is the end point of an ancient all-India pilgrimage circuit. Because of its importance, another iteration of the Kumbh Mela is held here in the belief that, when it takes place, the three rivers flow with the nectar of immortality. The current form of the Kumbh Mela, formalised under the British, doesn't seem to be as old as the one at Haridwar but it is nevertheless ancient and was perhaps already long-established by the seventh century.

What Prayag's Kumbh Mela lacks in antiquity it more than makes up for in terms of scale. At the confluence of these three rivers over the course of about a month, tens of millions

of pilgrims move into a twenty-square-mile pop-up megacity constructed in just two months. The Kumbh Mela held in 2013 lasted for fifty-five days and attracted somewhere between 70 and 120 million pilgrims. The temporary settlement is so large that images sent from the CartoSat2 satellite to the Indian Space Research Organisation in 2019 showed it could be easily seen from space. It is about the same size as Exeter in England or Rennes in France and is a marvel of modern urban planning and civic management, as the permanent city of about one million expands into the land on the undeveloped flood plain next to the junction of the rivers. This settlement needs not just tents to house the pilgrims and festival personnel, and temporary ghats to give them access to the Ganges, but the sort of services needed in permanent settlements like healthcare provision, fire stations, police and food shops.[15] Divided into fourteen districts, each is equipped with these necessities. The city straddles the river, which is crossed by eighteen temporary pontoon bridges.

Bringing together millions of people in one place for a short period brings its own headaches, but it also brings opportunities. Many of these are for the people in Prayag itself, who cater to the needs of the pilgrims and find it a lucrative time of year. But the movement of so many people from across the Indian subcontinent also means that the Kumbh Mela has an impact far beyond the Ganges, and the people who travel to and from it bring information back to their homes from hundreds, if not thousands, of miles away.

Surviving evidence suggests that Prayag's first Kumbh Mela was probably held in 1870. The British then in charge of the city were faced with some of the same organisational problems as their modern counterparts, albeit on a smaller scale. The historian Kama MacLean argues that the city's Hindu community claimed the great (possibly assumed) antiquity of their Kumbh