

Article

Micro Pilgrimages: A New Post-Secular Trend?

Anne E. Bailey

Faculty of History, University of Oxford, Oxford OX1 2JD, UK; anne.bailey@history.ox.ac.uk

Abstract: The word “micro” or “mini” is increasingly appearing in relation to pilgrimage. A *Guardian* article in December 2021 described a guided pilgrimage walk in Sussex as a “micro pilgrimage”; in the spring of 2022, six “micro pilgrimages” took place in southern England. However, what is a micro pilgrimage, and what has prompted its sudden surge in popularity? This article explores this seemingly innovative practice, focusing on Britain, where it is particularly prevalent. It shows how and why micro pilgrimages became particularly prominent during the COVID-19 pandemic, and discusses their continuing popularity today. A micro pilgrimage is usually understood as a pilgrimage which is completed in one day or less, an idea—the article argues—which has arisen from assumptions that short pilgrimages are a departure from the norm. The article challenges this notion by showing that, throughout Western history, long journeys have been in the minority. However, while arguing that micro pilgrimages have been with us since the Middle Ages, the article also recognizes that there is much which is indeed new about modern forms of the practice.

Keywords: pilgrimage; religion; Christianity; COVID-19; Roman Catholic; history; medieval; Britain



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1. Introduction

The word “micro” or “mini” is increasingly appearing in relation to pilgrimage. A *Guardian* article in December 2021 described a guided pilgrimage walk in Sussex as a “micro pilgrimage” (Smith 2021); in the spring of 2022, six “micro pilgrimages” took place in southern England (Parsons 2021). Before this, in 2019, faith commentators were already discussing the topic. A presenter of BBC Radio 2’s *Pause for Thought*, Sheridan Vosey, published a blog entitled, “Why and How to Do a Mini Pilgrimage” (Voysey 2019), and the *Catholic Herald* featured an article praising the “Many Blessings of a Mini-Pilgrimage” (Pittam 2019). Recommendations for mini/micro pilgrimages proved prescient in 2019, because the following year brought an unexpected global crisis—the COVID-19 pandemic—which greatly precipitated the uptake of this seemingly new kind of pilgrimage. In 2020, even Pope Francis was described as making a “mini pilgrimage” (Wooden 2020), in an unprecedented use of the term.

This article examines the micro-pilgrimage phenomenon with a particular focus on the British Isles, where post-secular culture, with its emphasis on eclectic forms of spirituality, has widened interest in pilgrimage beyond its traditional Christian roots. It asks what are “micro” pilgrimages, discusses the reasons behind their sudden surge in popularity, and demonstrates how and why they became more prominent during the COVID-19 pandemic. Micro pilgrimages are usually understood as pilgrimages shorter in time and length than the norm, an idea based on the assumption that standard pilgrimages are long, arduous journeys. What follows questions whether short pilgrimages are, in fact, new. By turning to historic precedents, as well as to contemporary Roman Catholic practices, it argues that, in all but name, micro pilgrimages have been with us for some time.

This article takes a wide-ranging humanities approach, and employs written sources with a chronology spanning the Middle Ages through to 2022. It draws on a variety of texts, including online newspaper articles, social media commentary, medieval documents, and secondary sources, focusing on medieval and early modern history. These are

supplemented by the author's own observations made while participating in organised pilgrimages around the United Kingdom.

2. What Is a Micro Pilgrimage?

A pilgrimage is most commonly understood as a journey to a sacred place, and a “micro” or “mini” pilgrimage is typically conceived as a “short” version, usually completed in one day.¹ The six “micro-pilgrimage events” referred to in the Introduction range from four and a half miles to eight miles, and include visits to medieval churches and other sacred places. As we will see, most micro pilgrimages follow this model and might be thought of as pilgrimage day excursions.

Adding the epithet “micro” to a word which usually requires no qualifying prefix suggests that these short pilgrimages are a departure from a “standard” form of pilgrimage, and the notion of the “micro” pilgrimage is indeed predicated on the modern expectation that traditional pilgrimages are long, and often physically challenging, journeys. This is a concept which has recently gained added traction with the increased publicity given to long-distance pilgrimage routes, such as the Camino de Santiago (a network of walking trails running through Europe to Santiago de Compostela in Spain) and the Via Francigena which extends from Canterbury to Rome. Both are based on medieval antecedents, giving these Council of Europe “cultural routes” ([Council of Europe n.d.](#)) historical authenticity in the eyes of modern pilgrims.

Greater awareness of transnational pilgrim trails has been much aided by the popular 2010 film *The Way*, starring Martin Sheen as a pilgrim on the Camino Frances, and by the BBC documentary series, *Pilgrimage*—now in its fourth season ([BBC Media Centre 2022](#))—along with numerous popular books written as first-person pilgrim narratives. Partly as a result of the Camino's cultural influence, other pilgrimage-themed routes have been established across Europe, including the 1864-mile-long St Olav Ways in Scandinavia ([St Olav Ways n.d.](#); [Kollandsrud 1998](#)), the St Martin of Tours Cultural Route linking forty-five countries ([Saint Martin de Tours n.d.](#); [Afferni and Ferrario 2018](#), pp. 63–65), and the newly developed St Sigfrid's Way spanning over 760 miles from northern England to southern Sweden ([St Sigfrid's Way n.d.](#)).

This emphasis on long-distance travel comes with the assumption that a physically and mentally challenging journey brings religious, spiritual, or emotional rewards. The mantra “no pain without gain” seems especially apposite for pilgrims on the Camino de Santiago, who struggle on through the agony of blisters, shin splints, tendonitis, and tired muscles in the belief that this is a routine aspect of the pilgrim experience. In her book, *Pilgrim Stories: On and Off the Road to Santiago* ([Frey 1998](#)), Nancy Frey discusses the qualities which Camino walkers deem essential for “real” pilgrims. To be considered a “pilgrim”, as opposed to a “tourist”, it was considered necessary to travel for at least a month, to live frugally, and to suffer discomfort ([Frey 1998](#), pp. 50, 53, 128). The longest journeys, of between one and four months, were thought to be the most authentic ([Frey 1998](#), p. 134).

Such assumptions are obviously not helpful for those promoting short pilgrimages. However, and as we will see, attitudes are beginning to change. Advocates of micro pilgrimages, who felt it necessary to stress that “it is not always necessary to travel long distances at great expense to enjoy the spiritual benefits of a pilgrimage” ([Pittam 2019](#)), are finding their views reaching an increasingly receptive audience. As this article discusses, there are many reasons for this change in attitude, but a major contributing factor was the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic in the early months of 2020.

3. The Emergence of the Micro Pilgrimage

Micro pilgrimages began to take shape before the COVID-19 pandemic, principally as a way of encouraging wider participation in pilgrimage. In a broad sense, the concept of the micro pilgrimage is one of many stratagems used by churches, heritage professionals, and tour operators to sell the concept of pilgrimage to those deterred by preconceived ideas that pilgrimage entails a long, physically punishing journey. In a bid to make the

practice more attractive and accessible, many time- and labour-saving schemes have been devised. These range from luggage transfer and luxury accommodation on the Camino (Stewart 2022) to the instalment of virtual reality stations at the foot of Croagh Patrick in Ireland, to enable those with mobility issues to experience the pilgrimage without the physical exertion of the three-and-a-half-hour climb (Farrell and de Vaal 2021).

Shortened pilgrimages, then, might be thought of as another way to soften the pilgrimage experience, making it more appealing and accessible. This was certainly the case at Station Island in Lough Derg, County Donegal, when the “One Day Retreat” was introduced to boost pilgrim numbers at a time when the traditional three-day pilgrimage—involving an arduous routine of prayer, fasting, vigil, and barefoot rounds of the outdoor stations—was in decline (Griffin 2007, p. 22). More recently, another famous Roman Catholic pilgrimage destination, Our Lady of Lourdes in France, has initiated a similar scaled-down pilgrimage project. The “Pilgrim for the Day” programme offers an alternative to the usual five- or six-day pilgrimage traditionally undertaken by Catholic tour groups. It instead caters for independent visitors, providing them with a mini taster of the site and its pilgrim rituals (Winston Nicklin 2021).

However, it is walking pilgrimages which are more usually associated with micro pilgrimage. Unlike the two examples above, walking pilgrimages focus on the journey rather than on the destination, and in recent decades have become popular with people from a wide range of Christian denominations, as well as those with no religious affiliation who enjoy walking for spiritual, wellness, or cultural reasons (for example, Jørgensen 2020; Nilsson and Tesfahuney 2016; Moulin-Stozek 2019). As we have seen, pilgrimage walks tend to cover a lot of ground and, as well as demanding a heavy commitment of time and money, they also require a certain level of physical fitness. It is unsurprising, then, that shortened versions should prove popular with those attracted to the idea of pilgrimage walking, but for whom a lengthy, time-consuming hike poses practical or physical difficulties.

A common form of micro pilgrimage is the cut-down version of a longer pilgrimage. These are often taken along sample sections of a long-distance trail, such as “two-day mini pilgrimage experience on the Via Francigena”, organised as part of the Green Pilgrimage Interreg Europe project in 2017 (Green Pilgrimage Interreg Europe 2017), and the “Bodmin Way Mini-Pilgrimage”, a thirteen-mile walk which took place in October 2021 (Churches Together in Cornwall 2021).

Other micro pilgrimages are run alongside a longer one, providing participants with a choice of distances. Adding an extra micro pilgrimage was an option taken by the Abbey Cwmhir Heritage Trust in Wales in 2022. For the first time, pilgrims wishing to participate in the Trust’s annual “Pilgrimage Walk”—a route which extends twenty-five miles “across the remote and rugged Cambrian Mountains”—were also offered a secondary, less demanding, substitute: a “mini-pilgrimage” of sixteen miles (Waters 2022). In another example, the thousand-year anniversary of the founding of the Abbey of St Edmund was marked in 2022 by two pilgrimages running in tandem. Supplementing the gruelling eighty-mile walk from St Benet’s to Bury St Edmunds was a “Day Pilgrim” alternative for those unable, or unwilling, to tackle the longer route (Green 2022).

In a few cases, the shorter walk is organised prior to a longer one, and functions as a gentle introduction to a more demanding event. The Diocese of Arundel and Brighton launched its first Ecumenical Walking Pilgrimage in the summer of 1975, and thereafter led sixteen-day annual pilgrimages to well-known Christian sites such as Glastonbury, Canterbury, and Walsingham (Diocese of Arundel and Brighton Ecumenical Walking Pilgrimage 2022). In 2019, however, the Diocese introduced its first “mini pilgrimage” from Guildford to Arundel, intended as a “taster” for the main pilgrimage later that year. It was an experiment repeated in 2022 (Diocese of York n.d.). The idea of using a micro pilgrimage as a springboard for a larger venture is one promoted by the writer and broadcaster Sheridan Voysey on his website. Advising his readers on “How and Why to Do a Mini

Pilgrimage”, he presents micro pilgrimages as “practice walks”, counselling pilgrims to “start small” by finding a meaningful destination close to home (Voysey).

Enticing hesitant members of the public to take up pilgrimage walking is the speciality of the British Pilgrimage Trust, an organisation founded in 2014 which “aims to promote pilgrimage in Britain” ([British Pilgrimage Trust 1 n.d.](#)). The BPT is particularly successful in introducing the concept of pilgrimage to novices with its “open to all” ethos and through its short, guided walks. Occasionally, these walks are advertised as “mini pilgrimages”. In November 2021, the “Mini Pilgrimage Experience: Canterbury in Four Hours” ([British Pilgrimage Trust 2021](#)) provided each participant with a “complimentary Pilgrim Scrip” and the opportunity to “experience ancient pilgrim rites”, including barefoot walking and lighting a candle at Thomas Becket’s shrine in Canterbury Cathedral. The promotional literature promised, “You will leave this experience having momentarily been drawn into the life of the pilgrim, equipped with special practices to bring you peace and comfort in your everyday life”.

One function of micro pilgrimages has been to encourage church and cathedral visiting. The British Pilgrimage Trust has been instrumental in this, collaborating with the Association of English Cathedrals to provide short, circular walking routes centred on each of England’s forty-two cathedrals ([English Cathedrals n.d.](#); [British Pilgrimage Trust 2 n.d.](#)). “Canterbury Cathedral Pilgrimage in a Day”, for example, is advertised on the BPT website as a “city circular pilgrimage route visiting all of Canterbury’s most significant holy places in a single day” ([British Pilgrimage Trust 3 n.d.](#)). On a slightly less ambitious scale, the Oxford-based Centre for Christian Pilgrimage has developed “Pilgrim Paths”, described as “day-long circular walks between churches” ([Centre for Christian Pilgrimage n.d.](#)). In a *Church Times* article, Sally Welch—an Anglican vicar and a veteran of long-distance pilgrimages—described the Pilgrim Paths project as “small pilgrim journeys” for the “time-pressed”. She likened short pilgrimages to “high-intensity interval training” to be “engaged with during the in-between times of life” ([Welch 2020](#)). For Welch, a shorter pilgrimage was not a substitute for an extended version, but a spiritual supplement for times when the “luxury” of a longer journey was unavailable.

Micro pilgrimages, then, are perceived as practices with a range of purposes and benefits. They can be used as rehearsals for more serious pilgrimages, they might be a source of spiritual nourishment between more substantial journeys, and they provide first-time pilgrims with a foretaste of the pilgrim experience. From a provider’s perspective, the micro pilgrimage’s condensed timeframe makes it particularly attractive to the public, with the additional possibility that they may even have an evangelising outcome, speaking to those “on the borders of faith” ([Welch 2020](#)). Above all, the advantage of these bite-size events is that they make pilgrimage more agreeable to those unable, unwilling, or reluctant to engage in what Sally Welch refers to as a “full-on pilgrimage” ([Welch 2020](#)).

The examples discussed above mostly pertain to organised pilgrimage events but, of course, micro pilgrimages are particularly suited to those looking for an individualised, solitary spiritual experience without needing to travel far from home. Extolling the “many blessings of a mini pilgrimage” in a *Catholic Herald* article, Fr Matthew [Pittam \(2019\)](#) recounted the joys of treading self-invented routes around his parish, which he fondly referred to as “my local Caminos”. Pittam was writing before the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, but in describing “the spiritual benefits of a home pilgrimage”, he was unknowingly touching on a form of pilgrimage which would blossom the following year when lockdowns and travel restrictions meant that “home pilgrimages” were the only kind available to the vast majority of the world’s pilgrims.

4. The COVID-19 Pandemic and Micro Pilgrimages

Cases of COVID-19 (SARS-CoV-2) were first recorded in Wuhan, China, in December 2019, and infections swiftly spread around the world. On 11 March 2020, the World Health Organisation officially declared the situation a global pandemic and, soon after, most western European nations took drastic measures to curb the transmission of this potentially

fatal disease. These included tight restrictions on human movement and the introduction of rules forbidding citizens from leaving their homes except for essential reasons such as food and medicine provision. In Britain, as elsewhere, “lockdowns” continued on and off well into 2021, and overseas travel did not begin to return to its pre-pandemic level until the spring of 2022 (Bret 2022).

Along with tourism, the pilgrimage industry was impacted particularly badly by COVID-19 restrictions (Burger 2020; Mosier et al. 2020). Major Christian pilgrimage destinations, such as Jerusalem, Rome, and Santiago de Compostela, suffered drastic declines in numbers (Gilad 2020), and Israel only lifted its ban on foreign visitors from “red list” countries in January 2022 (Amundson 2022; Christian Media Centre 2022). Many shrines were closed to visitors, including Lourdes (Heneghan 2022), Our Lady of Fatima in Portugal (Vatican News 2020), Our Lady of Guadalupe in Mexico (Garcia and Fernandez 2020), and Lough Derg in Ireland (Irish News 2022). Some pilgrimages, such as the annual Good Friday Easter pilgrimage to *El Santuario de Chimayó* in New Mexico, did not resume until 2022 (Pollard 2022). Walking pilgrimages were also halted. In England, these included the Pilgrim Cross Easter Pilgrimage, cancelled for two years (Student Cross 2021), and the long-planned inaugural pilgrimage along the “Northern Saints Trails”, which was postponed in 2020 (Durham Cathedral 2020). Even after lockdowns were lifted, new COVID-19 quarantine and testing requirements for overseas travel meant that some people found the prospect of long-distance pilgrimage “daunting” (Roberts 2022).

In the first year of the pandemic, when people’s freedom of movement was most severely curtailed, many pilgrimage events went online, offering pilgrims the option of a “virtual” pilgrimage undertaken from home (Catholic News Agency 2021; McFarlan Miller 2020; Raj and Griffin 2020; Reuters 2020). One of the most successful was the livestream “E-Pilgrimage” at Lourdes in 2020 (Luxmoore 2020), a fifteen-hour event repeated in 2021 when the shrine remained closed for a second summer (Bockman 2021).

Later, as people emerged from their homes but were advised to stay local, another alternative form of pilgrimage came into its own: the micro pilgrimage. This was a part of a wider trend in which small, localised gatherings largely replaced major, crowded leisure activities, and continued to do so even when international travel was permitted. In an unpredictable world where the risk of further lockdowns seemed a worrying possibility, there was a reluctance to commit to long-term travel plans. Playing safe, event organisers decided to stay small and local. Micro events such as micro music festivals burgeoned in popularity (American Express 2019; Newton 2021), with a *Telegraph* writer explaining that “with big events like Glastonbury not COVID-secure, summer is all about tiny, boutique gatherings for families” (Garlick 2021). One event planner adapted to the pandemic by going entirely “micro”, advertising a number of “micro events”, including “micro weddings” and “micro parties” (Kismet Events 2022).

Pilgrimages were among the activities which shrunk in size and scope. In Frankfurt, Germany, the annual Ecumenical Charity Walk along the St Boniface Way was cancelled in 2021 and replaced with the “Boniface Trail Mini-Pilgrimage”, a shorter walk limited to the section of the route closest to Frankfurt (International English-Speaking Catholic Parish 2021). Similarly, in France, the cancellation of the 2021 Pentecostal Paris to Chartres pilgrimage resulted in small groups focusing on shrines in their own regions (FSSPX News 2021a). The perils of organising a long pilgrimage during a pandemic was evident even as late as April 2022, when the Lanark leg of the Annual Ecumenical Christian Easter Pilgrimage to Lindisfarne was disrupted when “a few” pilgrims tested positive for COVID-19 (NX Coordinator 2022).

One effect of pandemic restrictions was that people’s geographical horizons considerably narrowed. Lockdowns created a localised mentality, evident on social media, where posts on Instagram and Twitter, for example, focused on the minutiae of everyday life lived close to home and reflected a new appreciation of local landscapes and nature (Deacon 2021; Lockdown Walk 2021; Walking Publics/Walking Arts n.d.). Daily exercise was recognised as a tonic for mental, as well as for physical, wellbeing (Everyone Active n.d.). The

ubiquitous “lockdown walk” became one of the defining features in the early part of the pandemic (for example, [de Lucia 2020](#); [Millen 2020](#)) as people took up new exercise habits ([Sport England 2020](#)). One British media commentator even suggested that the lockdown walk had “become a national hobby” ([Duncan 2021](#)). With long hikes and expansive countryside rambles no longer possible, the short, local lockdown walk became, in effect, the “micro” substitute. As well as introducing non-walkers to a new form of leisure activity, it made the idea of short walks appealing even for hardened, long-distance trail hikers.

An interesting aspect of lockdown walking was its frequent association with mindfulness ([Ayuda 2020](#); [Fleming 2021](#); [Warren 2020](#)). “Mindful” or “meditative” walking—introduced into lockdown routines as a way of reducing stress and anxiety—might be described as “[being] present, focused and aware of your internal and external landscapes in any given moment” ([Fleming 2021](#)). Prior to the pandemic, the public was more used to the idea of mindfulness as a static mental health exercise: the British National Health Service website, for example, explains “mindfulness meditation” as “sitting silently and paying attention to thoughts, sounds, the sensations of breathing or parts of the body, bringing your attention back whenever the mind starts to wander” ([NHS n.d.](#)). For many, taking the practice out on a walk was a novelty.

Mindfulness walking, however, has long been viewed as an important element of modern pilgrimage. In his essay entitled “Pilgrimage: A Distinct Practice”, Richard [LeSaur \(2018\)](#) includes among his “distinctive features of pilgrimage” ([LeSaur 2018](#), pp. 21–23) “moving through a landscape mindfully ... living consciously in the moment” ([LeSaur 2018](#), p. 21), and the European Green Pilgrimage Network heads its Seven Stages of Pilgrimage with “mindfulness” ([European Green Pilgrimage Network n.d.](#)). Academic scholarship has especially focused on the Camino as an important locale of mindfulness, where mindfulness is frequently coupled to therapeutic benefits such as personal growth, problem-solving, and emotional healing ([Genoni 2010](#), pp. 164–65; [Havard 2018](#), pp. 93–95). One researcher opined that a “central reason for walking” the Camino was “to engage in a meditative practice” ([Slavin 2003](#), p. 47). Nancy Frey sums up this practice by describing how pilgrims “connect meaningfully with themselves, others and the land, to feel their bodies and to use all of their senses, to see every blade of grass” ([Frey 1998](#), p. 28).

The sense of connectedness with the landscape and with oneself felt by Camino pilgrims is one which, as we have seen, was often experienced in lockdown walks. Cognisant of this correlation, and perhaps working with the suggestion that “our new pastime of lockdown walking should be a habit for life” ([Duncan 2021](#)), the British Pilgrimage Trust promoted the idea that lockdown walks could be “turned into pilgrimages” ([McFarlan Miller 2021](#)). Although cynics might interpret this as a ruse to promote the BPT’s guided walks—which, conveniently, all stayed on British soil—there was a sound logic here because, I would argue, there are many overlaps between the two. For those in Britain itching to return to pilgrimage walking as the country surfaced from lockdown, micro pilgrimages—with their similarities to lockdown walks—were the obvious choice, as well as being the first pilgrimage activities on offer from eager tour operators (for example, [Tuppen 2020](#)).

Some Catholic pilgrimage destinations have also responded to COVID-19 by offering shortened pilgrimage experiences. Most notably, the “Pilgrim for the Day” programme at Lourdes, mentioned above, was prompted by the financial impact of the pandemic. The sanctuary suffered an eighty-five percent drop in visitors in the first year of the pandemic and, in 2021, bore an estimated operating loss of EUR 5 million ([FSSPX New 2021b](#)). However, along with the absence of its traditional tour groups, Lourdes saw the arrival of a new kind of clientele. This comprised independent travellers who, instead of staying for the traditional six-day pilgrimage (see [Thomas et al. 2018](#), p. 441), just came for a fleeting visit. In response, and in an effort to encourage “visitor diversification”, the shrine introduced the “Pilgrim for the Day” scheme, offering the “new type of visitor with no knowledge of what to expect”, a guided tour, a Mass, and other attractions ([Winston Nicklin 2021](#)).

As we have seen, the adjectives “micro” and “mini” are used interchangeably to describe a pilgrimage usually lasting one day and based on the commonly held expectation that “ordinary” pilgrimages are traditionally much longer activities. The second half of this article challenges the presumed novelty of this recent phenomenon, and puts micro pilgrimages into a wider context. It argues that, although the terms “micro pilgrimage” and “mini pilgrimage” appear to be little more than a decade old, the concept of the short pilgrimage has a much longer history.

5. Micro Pilgrimages and Roman Catholicism

The term “micro pilgrimage”, then, has emerged in recent years from the popular idea that pilgrimages are traditionally long, protracted journeys full of difficulties and challenges. However, how true is this supposition, and are there any earlier precedents for shorter pilgrimages?

To answer this question, we must go back in time to the Middle Ages and to what is recognised as the golden age of Western pilgrimage. As we might expect, the most prominent, and celebrated, pilgrimages in the Middle Ages were indeed long ones. The majority of first-person pilgrim narratives extant from the period document the trials and tribulations of Western pilgrims travelling to Rome and the Holy Land (for example, [Birch 1998](#); [Wilkinson 1988, 1999, 2002](#)) and, from the eleventh century, to Santiago de Compostela ([Lomax 1985](#)). These were the main, once-in-a-lifetime, sacred destinations, although some intrepid pilgrims—such as the indefatigable mystic and traveller Margery Kempe, and her near contemporary and compatriot, William Wey—expressed their piety and endurance by tackling all three ([Kempe 2004](#); [Wey 2010](#)).

Accounts of pilgrim adventures to far-distance lands have gained much interest; however, their prominence in historical records tends to obscure the fact that long-distance journeys were only part of a range of pilgrimage options in the Middle Ages. For the majority of medieval men and women, long expeditions were geographically, financially, and physically out of reach. Most pilgrims in the Middle Ages did not set off on body-punishing long-distance treks, but focused their devotions on local saints’ shrines closer to home. The most common medieval pilgrimage experiences were likely to be an outing to a nearby church to honour a local saint, a visit to a holy well, or routine attendance at an annual festival. The diocesan cathedral, containing the shrine of a famous regional saint, was often the limit of a pilgrim’s reach.

Miracle collections, which record pilgrimages to healing shrines during this period, illustrate just how localised many of these journeys were. More than half the pilgrims documented visiting St William’s shrine at Norwich Cathedral in the mid-twelfth century, for example, came from the city of Norwich ([Bailey 2021](#), p. 22). Examining the distances travelled by pilgrims to six other twelfth-century English shrines, Ruth Slater calculated that well over half of recorded pilgrims were “local”—meaning that they set out from places under twenty miles away—with the greater majority travelling fewer than five miles. Only a fraction journeyed more than a hundred miles, with a mere handful coming from overseas ([Salter 2021](#), p. 125).

Many of these pilgrimages, in other words, would have been day outings, although a usual scenario for major pilgrimage festivals was for pilgrims to arrive the preceding evening and spend the night in vigil at the shrine. From the twelfth century onwards, local shrines proliferated and, by the late Middle Ages, local shrine visitation had become so numerous and frequent that Eamon Duffy described pilgrimage as “not so much like launching on a journey to the ends of the earth as of going to a local market town to sell or buy geese or chickens” ([Duffy 2002](#), pp. 165–66).

After the Reformation, when pilgrimages of all lengths were outlawed in Protestant countries, the history of short, local pilgrimages diverged in two directions. In Catholic Europe, where pilgrimage was often encouraged as an active, visible rebuff of Protestantism ([Tingle 2020](#), p. 17), local shrines continued to increase in number with, for example, a resurgence of local pilgrimage taking place in seventeenth-century France in places won

back to Catholicism after the wars of religion (Reinburg 2019). Localisation became one of the features of Early Modern pilgrimage (Tingle 2020), especially in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries when long-distance travel was particularly hazardous, and France and Spain were restricting cross-border journeys (Tingle 2020, p. 79). There was a dip in all forms of pilgrimage practices in the eighteenth century, but the late-nineteenth and twentieth centuries saw a pilgrimage revival which, in many places, has continued to this day.

Although the Holy Land, Rome, and Santiago de Compostela were among the beneficiaries of this modern revival, it was the local or regional festival-day pilgrimage which saw the greatest resurgence. Still popular today in Catholic Europe and Latin America, these pilgrimages are distinguished from longer ones by their terminology (Nolan and Nolan 1989, pp. 13–14). *Romerías* (Spain, Portugal, and Latin America), *pardons* (Brittany), and *wallfahrten* (Germany) denote a saint's feast day celebration and combine piety with secular activities such as fairs, markets, feasting, drinking and revelry. In their modern form, they usually include colourful public processions, regional costumes, music, and the carrying of religious icons and parish banners; many have become popular tourist attractions (for example, Badone 2012; Pin and Travel 2020).

In their book, *Christian Pilgrimage in the Modern Western Europe*, Nolan and Nolan (1989) discuss another condensed form of Catholic pilgrimage, one made possible in the twentieth century by the arrival of motorized transport. This is the “day pilgrimage” which “originates in a city or large town and combines attendance at Mass at a rural shrine with an excursion into the countryside”. The Nolans add that these pilgrimages are usually undertaken by groups in chartered buses and are valued “as a temporary escape from the stress of urban life” (Nolan and Nolan 1989, p. 65).

It was this kind of “day pilgrimage” which became the dominant form in England and Wales when, in the late-nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, Catholic shrines were re-established after a four-hundred-year absence. Annual “national” pilgrimages to places such as Walsingham in Norfolk, Glastonbury in Somerset, and Holywell in North Wales continue to this day, heralded by the arrival of busloads of pilgrims comprising parish and youth groups. The day itself typically comprises a banner-bearing procession, a Mass at the shrine, and a picnic lunch. Similarly to the *romerías* of Spain and Portugal, they have a festive, communal atmosphere and, as with the “day pilgrimages” described by the Nolans, they encourage a holiday spirit induced by the “temporary escape” from ordinary life.

In the Catholic tradition, then, two forms of pilgrimage in terms of duration are not unusual. Although prolonged journeys to remote places have always been an important feature of Christian pilgrimage, there is also a less recognised variation which usually spans little more than one day. Unlike today's micro pilgrimages, these shorter pilgrimages are not seen as practice runs or substitute pilgrimages for long-distance walks, but are rather perceived as pilgrimages in their own right.

If one-day pilgrimages are not especially new, this begs the question of how the idea of the micro pilgrimage as a shortened walking activity has come about. To fully understand the cultural influences behind the recent emergence of micro pilgrimages, it is necessary to return to the Reformation and take up the story of pilgrimage through the Protestant side of history.

6. Protestantism and Post-Secular Spirituality

As is well known, pilgrimage was dealt a death blow in most northern European countries in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries through the revolutionary zeal of Protestant reformers. In countries such as Britain, pilgrimages and their religious foci—saints' shrines and relics—were condemned, in line with Lutheran and Calvinist teaching, and eliminated through legislation and the destruction of the physical structures and artefacts viewed as evidence of “popish superstition”.

Of course, Catholicism was never entirely eradicated, and some rural, hard-to-police places of Catholic devotion continued as illicit places of pilgrimage

(Walsham 2011, pp. 166–89). Nonetheless, for most people living under the cultural sway of Protestantism, memories of medieval pilgrimage began to fade in the centuries following the decisive split with Rome. They were gradually replaced with an ideology of pilgrimage which required no visits to forbidden holy sites and were characterised instead by their long duration. This was pilgrimage re-fashioned as a spiritual life journey.

The idea of pilgrimage as a metaphor for the good Christian life, with its ups and downs, and eventual goal of the heavenly Jerusalem, had been around throughout the Middle Ages, when it was expressed most famously in William Langland’s fourteenth-century *Piers Plowman* (c1377). However, the trope of pilgrimage as an interior life-journey really came into its own after the Reformation, much aided by the popularity of John Bunyan’s 1678 allegorical narrative, *The Pilgrim’s Progress*. This was a book which not only helped to turn pilgrimage into an endeavour of the soul, but which also implanted into the Protestant mindset the image of pilgrimage as a long, often tortuous, but ultimately rewarding, journey across a linear landscape.

When Protestant pilgrimage entered the physical, as well as the metaphorical, realm it was the journey which again came to the fore. The first Protestant pilgrimages were to the Holy Land (Ariel 2017; Kark 2020), further reinforcing the image of pilgrimage necessitating travel to far-distant lands. In the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, other cultural forces were at work, giving more weight to the notion of pilgrimages as long, landscape-traversing walks. This included romanticism. Its headline poets, William Blake, William Wordsworth, and Samuel Taylor Coleridge, for example, sought mystical transcendence while walking in the natural world, whereas artists and writers popularised Arthurian legends in which chivalric heroes embarked on long spiritual quests across extensive landscapes (Pazos 2020).

In the twentieth century, romantic sensibilities blended with “alternative spiritualities” (for example, Sutcliffe and Bowman 2000) as mainstream Christianity waned. The New Age movement, in particular, became associated with pilgrimage thanks, in part, to two best-selling books: *The Pilgrimage*, by the Brazilian writer Paulo Coelho (Coelho [1987] 2012), and *The Camino: A Journey of the Spirit* by the American actress, Shirley Maclean (MacLaine 2001). Both provided the Camino Frances with a New Age spin, as both writers re-imagined the journey along the medieval route as a spiritual quest walked for personal growth.

As New Age ideas about spirituality and the “sacred” quality of ancient landscapes (for example, Palmer and Palmer 1997; Wildwood 2022) took root in mainstream culture, pilgrimage was more firmly viewed as an outdoor travel activity. As long-distance pilgrim trails have multiplied, so the walk, the journey, and nature-focused “mindful” spirituality have become major defining aspects of post-secular pilgrimage. With them has come the mental image of pilgrimage as a physical manifestation of the interior journey depicted in *Pilgrim’s Progress*: in other words, a long walk for spiritual rewards.

Given this Protestant-inspired worldview, it is unsurprising that short pilgrimages are seen as unusual, and marked out with a label signifying that they are “different” from a customary practice. The idea that long-distance walking is necessary for a “full-on pilgrimage” (Welch 2020) is still very much present, as recently illustrated by a British newspaper article highlighting the fact that the participants of a recent BBC pilgrimage programme “admitted” to being driven along some of the walking route from Donegal to Iona, leading to the BBC defending itself by “insist[ing] that none of the stars actually ‘cheated’” (Knox 2022). Nonetheless, and as we have seen, there is also now another strand of thought: the idea that pilgrimages need not always entail long journeys undertaken by foot.

7. Conclusions

The above discussion has shown that, in Western post-secular culture, a “micro pilgrimage” is understood as an abbreviated variant of a longer pilgrimage. Micro pilgrimages, I have argued, are distinct in nature from day-long pilgrimages in the Catholic

tradition which, although taking a number of forms, are best represented by one-day religious festivals.

The concept of the “micro”, or “mini”, pilgrimage seems to derive from a different source and might be traced to Protestant culture in which the standard pilgrimage practice is imagined as a lengthy foot journey. They tend to be presented as an easier variation of longer pilgrimages; thus, micro pilgrimages are always in danger of being construed as lesser or inferior, a viewpoint which—as we have seen—providers and advocates are keen to counteract. However, with the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, the popularity of lockdown walking, and the take-up of other “micro” events, shortened pilgrimages seem to be gaining more acceptability as well as frequency. For a wide range of individuals, including first-time pilgrims and those with time restrictions or limited physical abilities, the micro pilgrimage is an attractive alternative to a longer spiritual journey.

From a Catholic perspective, the adjective “micro” might be considered redundant: most one-day pilgrimages are simply referred to as “pilgrimages” (for example, [Chapel of St Peter-on-the-Wall n.d.](#); [Glastonbury Pilgrimage n.d.](#); [Kerton 2022](#)). This said, there are exceptions which indicate a subtle shift in Catholic thinking, or perhaps in terminology. We have already come across the innovative Lourdes “Pilgrim for the Day” programme, but there are also examples of some day-long Catholic events advertised as “mini pilgrimages”. One example is the “mini pilgrimage” undertaken by members of the Church of St Mary the Angel in Worthing to Chichester Cathedral and the shrine of St Richard in 2019. It reportedly included a tour of the Cathedral, prayers at St Richard’s shrine, a Mass at a Catholic church, and a picnic but, notably, did not include a walk, because the participants travelled from Worthing by train ([St Mary of the Angels 2019](#)).

In many respects, micro pilgrimages are less a change in practice than an adoption of new wording for religious activities which have been present since the Middle Ages. Nonetheless, their popularity comes at a time when, in the wake of a traumatic pandemic, the desire to find spiritual comfort in a pilgrimage of whatever length is keenly felt ([Irish Catholic 2022](#)). Whether practised by deeply committed Christians defying the pandemic ([Pollastri and Jeantet 2021](#)) or by the nonreligious experiencing pilgrimage for the first time, it could even be argued that this form of religious tourism has been boosted by the COVID-19 pandemic.

The beginning of 2022 saw record numbers of pilgrims walking the Camino de Santiago ([Manning 2022](#)), indicating a post-pandemic resurgence of one of the most popular forms of post-secular pilgrimage, long-distance walking. However, following in the tradition of centuries of Catholic practice, pilgrims from a variety of religious and non-religious backgrounds are also realising that pilgrimage need not entail a heroic, lengthy journey. Pilgrimage, many are discovering, can be just as beneficially experienced in and around “small pilgrim places” ([SPPN n.d.](#)) closer to home.

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Note

- ¹ Kevin Griffin and Razaq Raj define “traditional pilgrimage” as “a journey to some sacred place as an act of religious devotion” ([Griffin and Raj 2017](#)). However, and as their article shows, the definition of pilgrimage has become somewhat fluid in recent years.

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