Pilgrimages: Journeys of the Spirit

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_The Canterbury Tales_ is a collection of stories written as if they were told by pilgrims on their way to a holy site. The following selections describe what it was actually like to travel on a pilgrimage in Chaucer’s time and also reveal why this ancient tradition still thrives today. As you read, consider how the information in these selections enhances your understanding of the characters in _The Canterbury Tales_.

**Skill Focus: Synthesize**

Whenever you put together facts, ideas, and details from different sources to form your own understanding of a topic, you are **synthesizing**. You can usually gain deeper insight into a topic by synthesizing from several sources than by just reading one source.

Here is a process you can use to synthesize details about pilgrims and pilgrimages:

- Create a chart such as the one shown here.
- Skim through “The Prologue” of _The Canterbury Tales_, looking for information about pilgrims and pilgrimages. Add to the chart any information that would help you answer the questions provided.
- Read the selections that follow, and add any additional information about the topic to your chart.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Source</th>
<th>The Canterbury Tales</th>
<th>A Distant Mirror</th>
<th>“In the Footsteps of the Faithful”</th>
<th>“Pilgrimage Sites” Map</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>What kinds of people go on pilgrimages?</td>
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<td>Why do they go?</td>
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<td>What is the journey like?</td>
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<td>How does the pilgrimage affect them?</td>
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In *A Distant Mirror*, historian Barbara Tuchman describes the hardships, including the difficulties of travel, faced by people of all classes in 14th-century Europe.

**A Distant Mirror**
Barbara Tuchman

Travel, "the mother of tidings," brought news of the world to castle and village, town and countryside. The rutted roads, always either too dusty or too muddy, carried an endless flow of pilgrims and peddlers, merchants with their packtrains, bishops making visitations, tax-collectors and royal officials, friars and pardoneurs, wandering scholars, jongleurs and preachers, messengers and couriers who wove the network of communications from city to city. Great nobles like the Coucy, bankers, prelates, abbots, courts of justice, town governments, kings and their councils employed their own messengers. The King of England at mid-century kept twelve on hand who accompanied him at all times, ready to start, and were paid 3d. a day when on the road and 4s. 8d. a year for shoes.

The voyage from London to Lyon took about 18 days and from Canterbury to Rome about 30 days depending on the Channel crossing, which was unpredictable, often dangerous, sometimes fatal, and could take anywhere from three days to a month. One knight, Sir Hervé de Léon, was kept 15 days at sea by a storm and, besides having lost his horse overboard, arrived so battered and weakened "that he never had health thereafter." It was no wonder that, according to a ballad, when pilgrims took to sea for the voyage to Compostella or beyond, "Theyr heres begin to sayle."...

Travellers stopped before nightfall, those of the nobility taking shelter in some nearby castle or monastery where they would be admitted indoors, while the mass of ordinary travelers on foot, including pilgrims, were housed and fed in a guest house outside the gate. They were entitled to one night's lodging at any monastery and could not be turned away unless they asked for a second night. Inns were available to merchants and others, though they were likely to be crowded, squalid, and flea-ridden, with several beds to a room and two travelers to a bed—or three to a bed in Germany, according to the disgusted report of the poet Deschamps, who was sent there on a mission for the French King. Moreover, he complained, neither bed nor table had clean linen, the innkeeper offered no choice of foods, a traveler in the Empire could find nothing to drink but beer; fleas, rats, and mice were unavoidable, and the people of Bohemia lived like pigs.

Given the hardships and the length of time consumed, people journeyed over long distances to an astonishing degree—from Paris to Florence, from Flanders to Hungary, London to Prague, Bohemia to Castile, crossing seas, alps, and rivers, walking to China like Marco Polo or three times to Jerusalem like the Wife of Bath.
Many people today still go on pilgrimages, often walking for long distances along ancient routes. Canadian writer Taras Grescoe writes about his journey to one of the most famous European pilgrimage sites.

In the Footsteps of the Faithful

Taras Grescoe

Little by little, the road to Santiago de Compostela was changing me. When I started off on the Camino Francés—a 1,200-year-old route across northern Spain to one of Catholicism’s holiest shrines—I was unprepared for the camaraderie this pilgrimage fosters. Since A.D. 813, when the bones of St. James the Apostle were discovered in a cave at the western tip of Galicia, devout pilgrims from all over Europe have tramped hundreds of miles across the snow-streaked Pyrenees and the sun-baked plains of Castile in a quest for absolution and spiritual growth. Beginning the walk in the French town of St. Jean-Pied-de-Port, I was part of this rare band of travelers for three weeks.

In the shade of eucalyptus forests and olive groves, over tuna sandwiches and chocolate bars, I heard stories by turns touching and inspiring. A young mother—a Danish athlete—was alternately carrying and pushing her two blond-haired infants over the mountain trails and switchbacks, a feat of almost superhuman endurance. A 60-year-old man in disintegrating sandals and with a long white beard paused just long enough to tell me he’d walked all the way from Rome, 40 miles a day. Next to a purring stream, I came across a pilgrim who’d lost his right leg and was being borne to Santiago on his trusty mare Lorena—named after his daughter, herself only recently recovered from leukemia.
The Camino Francés, which wends past storks on the chimney stacks of Rioja and seagulls on the moss-covered church spires of Galicia, is a crash course in medieval European history, with daily seminars in Romanesque architecture and the arcane iconography of the Knights Templar. I found myself walking on the original paving stones of Roman roads, staining my shoes on the red earth of the vineyards of Rioja, and losing my way in the fog of the Pyrenees. In a little town outside Logroño, I joined the queue at an unattended tap at a stone wall, from which Navarran red wine flowed free of charge, a local winery’s gift to passing pilgrims.

As I walked, materialism and concern about self-image fell by the wayside; I divested myself of guidebooks and excess clothing, and sought only to fill my belly with nourishing food and to find simple lodgings each evening. I learned to expect the warm westerly wind that crosses the land just before sunset, the cool _mmontana_ from the north, and the afternoon breeze that sends iridescent ripples through the fields. I realized I’d never truly seen the world go by at this human pace, three miles an hour, hour after hour, day in, day out—nor understood that the quality of one’s travel experience is inversely proportional to the speed at which one travels.

I finally walked into Santiago in the midst of a record spring heat wave. Sweaty and unshaven, I approached the wildflower- and lichen-covered cathedral where the bones of St. James the Apostle rested—a fantastic barnacle-encrusted reef looming over waves of stone houses. As I strode up the last set of stairs before my goal, I was overwhelmed by a connection with all those who, over the ages, had risked losing home, family, and life to follow their faith to some marvelous shrine at the edge of the earth.

Step by step, the Camino had made me one of its own: a pilgrim.

Pilgrims stop to kneel along the main pilgrimage route from southwest France to Santiago de Compostela.
Medieval pilgrims visited holy sites throughout Europe and in parts of Asia. These sites continue to serve as important spiritual centers as well as popular tourist attractions.

SYNTHESIZE
Use the scale on the map to measure the distances between London and the pilgrimage sites, and notice the geographic features that a pilgrim would have to cross to reach these sites. How does the map enhance your understanding of what it was like to make a pilgrimage in Chaucer’s day?

PILGRIMAGE SITES

Reliquary At many pilgrimage sites, relics (personal items or body parts of saints) are kept in containers called reliquaries.

Stained Glass In this French cathedral window, Saint Mary of Egypt is shown on a boat full of pilgrims bound for Jerusalem.

Canterbury Cathedral Located 55 miles from London, Canterbury Cathedral became an important pilgrimage site after Archbishop Thomas à Becket was murdered there in 1170.
Comprehension

1. Recall According to Barbara Tuchman, what was sea travel like in Chaucer's day?

2. Recall During medieval times, how did the lodging offered to the nobility differ from the lodging available to members of other social classes?

3. Clarify How does Taras Grescoe feel about the slow pace of travel on a pilgrimage?

Critical Analysis

4. Analyze Author's Message Reread lines 83–89 of "In the Footsteps of the Faithful." What experiences have allowed Grescoe to form the connection he describes? Use details from the selection to support your answer.

5. Synthesize Information from Graphic Aids Examine the photographs on page 200. How do these images help you understand the appeal of going on a pilgrimage?

Read for Information: Draw Conclusions

WRITING PROMPT

In a paragraph, state and support a conclusion about one of the following topics:

- travel during Chaucer's day
- the benefits of making a pilgrimage

To answer this prompt, you will need to pick your topic and follow these steps:

1. Gather information about your topic from the three selections as well as from "The Prologue" of The Canterbury Tales.

2. Consider the main ideas and information you have collected. Ask yourself what conclusion you can draw from them.

3. Present your conclusion in a topic sentence, and support it with ideas and information from the texts.