THE SIGNS—AND BELLS—OF MASS PILGRIMAGE

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[T]he lower church was so much cramped by its narrowness that, on the hour of the Holy Sacrifice, the brethren partaking of the most holy Eucharist could not stay there, and that they were oftentimes unable to withstand the unruly crowd of visiting pilgrims without great danger.

(Abbot Suger, *Ordinatio*, ca. 1140/41)

And it was the most remarkable thing that ever was seen, that during the whole year there were in Rome, besides the Roman people, 200,000 pilgrims, not counting those who were coming and going along the roads … and I can bear witness, for I was there and saw.

(Giovanni Villani, *Nuova Cronica*, 1300)

In the year of our Lord 1450, that is the Holy Year … on the 19th of December … there was a great crush on the Ponte Sant’ Angelo … two hundred people and three horses were drowned, and [a panicked] mule and many people fell into the river. Some of the dead were taken to Santo Cello and part to the Campo Santo, where eighteen cartloads full of dead people were carried.

(Stefano Infessura, *Diario della Città de Roma*)

In the year after Christ’s birth 1475, in the weeks following the feast day of St. John the Baptist, there was a strange occurrence in the lands of Thuringia, Franconia, Hesse and Meissen. Young people, boys and girls between twenty and eight years of age, even small children, ran to the

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Holy Blood [Wilsnack]…. The authorities in Erfurt decreed that such people should not be allowed to enter the city gates.…

(Konrad Stolle, Memoriale)⁴

I remember very well, that we rode so hard that we passed—so we estimate and so we heard—more than 50,000 people, and I also believe that more than 18–20,000 men and women who had not made it to Düren on time that day for the showing [of St. Anne’s head] slept in the woods and corn fields that night.

(Philipp de Vigneulles, Gedenkbuch, 1510)⁵

As the various eyewitness accounts extending from the mid-twelfth to the early sixteenth century vividly illustrate, pilgrimage in the Middle Ages was a mass phenomenon touching, indeed infecting people of all social strata. Despite the risks and dangers inherent to travel in those times, medieval pilgrimage was, for the most part, long-distance pilgrimage, as opposed to the more local pilgrimage of the seventeenth to eighteenth centuries.⁶ Scholars estimate that at its peak, up to 25% of the European population was on pilgrimage at one time. Chronicles, eyewitness accounts similar to those quoted above, contemporary account books from numerous pilgrimage goals, charters and other written sources attest to a remarkable religious mobility in the Middle Ages.

Mass pilgrimage posed challenges not only to the infrastructure at the cult centers and cities involved, but also to the infrastructure en route: the roads leading to and from the pilgrimage goals, the bridges themselves, as well as those institutions providing hospitality and catering to the pilgrims’ needs, such as monastic guest houses, hospices, inns, taverns, and hospitals. One of the greatest mass pilgrimages of the High Middle Ages is recorded for the year 1349,