CHAPTER 48

History and Antiquity at French Pilgrim Shrines: Three Pyrenean Examples

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A capacious mantle of churches, chapels, and shrines dedicated to the Virgin Mary covered the kingdom of France in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Mary was the spiritual patroness and a defining symbol of early modern Catholicism. So it was not surprising that the major Marian shrines of Liesse, Ardilliers, and Le Puy became sites of Catholic and royal identity, rooting the king’s presence in a kingdom of diverse cultures and disputed sovereignties.¹ This was not solely a French phenomenon, but one widely shared across Catholic Europe. “There is hardly a city in Christendom where there is not some shrine” honoring the queen of heaven, wrote the Jesuit François Poiré.² Many Marian shrines were centuries old because, as Poiré noted, “no one can deny that this devotion is very ancient in the church.”³

Publishing was the lifeblood of early modern pilgrim shrines. The seventeenth century was a great age of Marian devotion in print. Poiré’s Triple couronne de la bien-heureuse Vierge Mère de Dieu (1630), Ferry de Locre’s Maria Augusta Virgo Deipara (1608), and Wilhelm Gumppenberg’s Atlas Marianus (1657–59) were but a few of the influential works published in Latin and the vernacular.⁴ A wealth of printed ephemera also appeared: prayers, devotional poetry and guides, and pilgrim memorabilia. Many Marian shrines, both large

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² François Poiré, La triple couronne de la bien-heureuse Vierge Mère de Dieu (Paris: Sebastien Cramoisie, 1630), 724.
³ Ibid., 710. Poiré refers to the veneration of Marian images in this passage, but includes shrines in his discussion.
and small, also had books published about them in the seventeenth century.² The shrine books are all in the vernacular, suggesting a French-reading and educated audience, but not necessarily a learned one. The books are not pilgrim guides in any obvious way, although their authors told stories about the shrines’ miracles and marvels and often included prayers, litanies, and sample vows.

Yet the shrine books differ from Marian atlases and theologies on the one hand and pilgrim guides on the other. The authors wrote only sparingly of the Virgin herself. Instead, they immersed their readers in history. They recounted legends and miracle stories, but increasingly they turned to history to build interest in the shrines. Ultimately the authors wanted to convince their readers that the shrines were ancient. In effect, they created old places by means of a text. As we will see, they were less successful at proving the ancient origins of these places than at spreading an aura of antiquity over them.

Yet old was in a delicate balance with new. New shrines were built and older ones substantially rebuilt, especially during the period of Catholic resurgence after the religious wars (1562–98). Old shrines and cults were the most valued, but recent miracles and marvels stirred up interest in news from the shrines. Authors routinely noted that they wrote to satisfy “the curious” who wanted to know about shrines and their marvels. Old tangled with new to create the impression that the shrines were both ancient and recently animated with sacred power.

The authors of shrine books researched, wrote, and published during a great age of historical scholarship, both secular or “profane” and ecclesiastical or “sacred.” While the authors of shrine books do not rise to the level of erudition displayed by ecclesiastical historians like Cesare Baronio, Antonio Bosio, or Gilbert Génébrard, their books show the tremendous variety of religious uses to which the past was put.⁶ The shrine books are not precisely histories of the

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