The Perspective of the Four Caminos

Essay written for the symposium

"The Future of the Camino" on the occasion of the 40th anniversary of the NGSJ,

Utrecht, November 7, 2026

Paul Post

I. Introduction

The Camino is changing…

The Camino is changing. That is what you hear in all kinds of circles on and around the Camino in 2026. Sometimes it is stated simply as an observation, but more often with an undertone of concern. Where is it headed? And indeed, all sorts of things are changing, shifting.

First and foremost, of course, the numbers. There has been a massification for some time now; we have now surpassed 530,000—and that is just the number of people officially registered in Santiago. The actual number of pilgrims on the various routes is many times higher, perhaps even approaching 900,000.

There is also great diversity among pilgrims. In terms of origin, the group is now entirely international, though Spaniards still make up a large proportion (around 43%). There is also diversity in terms of age, gender, and education. But what stands out most is how people make the pilgrimage has become so diverse. Pilgrims no longer walk (or bike) from home to Santiago (and very occasionally back again), but instead there are all kinds of ways to travel a variety of routes. A part each year, or alternating between walking part of the way as a pilgrim and staying in *refugios*, and covering other parts by bus or taxi and sleeping in hotels; carrying luggage on their backs or having it transported from stop to stop; or from one Camino to the next—the true "Camino junkies."

There have been major changes in equipment and infrastructure: clothing, footwear, roads, signage, accommodations, and travel agencies specializing in the Camino. Nor can one ignore the role of digital media in staying in touch with loved ones and fellow pilgrims, making reservations, and planning the route.

There is now a vast amount of information available about the Camino in all sorts of ways: the internet, of course; numerous pilgrim accounts; route descriptions; various agencies and coaches; and, of course, the Dutch Society of St. James (NGSJ) with its working groups, publications, and website.

There have also been changes in terms of motivations. Although this remains a dangerous area—especially when it comes to hard numbers and labels—there are no longer dominant institutional religious motivations, but rather a colorful mix of searching for meaning, taking a moratorium on life's journey, a break, a reset. Above all, for many it seems to be a challenging walking route featuring nature, culture, and encounters. St. James rarely comes into the picture anymore.

It should also be noted that attention is now being paid to the downsides of the modern Camino: the significant environmental impact caused by the masses of walkers, the extensive commercialization, and the heavy strain on villages and towns. We also hear reports of women being harassed, theft, and vandalism.

Forms of Ownership

Many of these downsides touch on various forms of ownership that have emerged along the Camino. I borrow the concept of ownership from the influential French social scientist Pierre Bourdieu (1930–2002), who distinguished between economic, cultural, social, and later symbolic and linguistic ownership or possession (he spoke of "capital"). This can be applied, by extension, to the Camino. Who does the Camino actually belong to? To the pilgrims (who, with often shameless arrogance, assume that everything along the route is laid out for them)? Or does the Camino primarily belong to the organizations, the many institutions—regional, national, international, the EU, UNESCO?

It is telling how the EU seems to have positioned itself in recent years as a key player on the Camino. Some time ago, an image was circulated from Brussels showing Ursula von der Leyen performing the well-known ritual gesture of "the St. James hug," accompanied by a combination of the EU logo and the Camino shell symbol (both in the familiar colors of yellow and blue). I do not know if she was actually there or if it is an AI-generated image, but the image speaks volumes: European identity is being linked to that of the Camino.

Or does the Church, in all its branches of parishes, churches, abbeys, and monasteries, hold the rights? Is not the office of the Cathedral of Santiago ultimately the deciding factor? It determines who does and does not receive a certificate; surely, it sets the rules of the game.

Or perhaps the now-booming tourism industry?

And what about the local population, who see those masses of pilgrims passing by every day—which certainly brings benefits, but also a great many burdens? In fact, the people of Santiago have already taken to the streets with slogans like "Pilgrims and tourists: go home!"—it's literally becoming too much for them.

In short: the Camino is changing, and that raises all sorts of questions. Where is it headed? Which changes also pose a threat? Questions, in other words, about the future of the Camino.

One Camino?

But what we hardly consider is the underlying assumption that there is a single, uniform Camino. That continuity is assumed—a ritual tradition, "the time-honored path to St. James."

My question today is: Is that really the case? Is there actually a continuous Camino tradition? My thesis today is that this may not be the case at all—that there are different Caminos—and that we are often unaware of which Camino we are actually talking about when we discuss changes and the future.

And I am not talking about the fact that there are many routes to Santiago, both historically documented and those that are not. Or that everyone walks and experiences their own Camino, as people like to say. No, I mean that there may well be very different Caminos, that instead of continuity in a Camino tradition, there is discontinuity, contingency, and breaks. That our entire talk of "THE Camino" is a construct, or to put it in terms of Hobsbawm and Ranger's well-known concept: that it is an "invention of tradition."

More specifically, I see four different Caminos.

Scope and Structure

This perspective on four Caminos is the scope of this contribution and determines its structure. I present these four Caminos relatively briefly, focusing primarily on highlighting them. I characterize them and sketch the context of each Camino. After a brief summary, I then formulate some

critical perspectives—notes that attempt to say something about the future. A brief bibliography serves both to offer sources and to offer suggestions for further reading.

II. Four Caminos

I see four Caminos, each with its own profile and context, that have more or less taken on a life of their own without us always being aware of it. I will briefly outline them below. I will draw on their profiles and contexts by referring to several recent publications in which I, along with others, described the history of the Camino and its central aspects.

"Camino 1": The Medieval Camino

First and foremost, of course, there is the medieval Camino ("Camino 1"). That "original Camino" casts a long shadow over all three other Caminos. In a specific cultural, social, religious, and political context, a place- and person-centered cult took root in northern Spain around the rediscovered relics of Jacobus beginning in the early ninth century. A founding myth emerged, featuring a miraculous transfer of the apostle's body. This cult gave rise to a heavily visited pilgrimage site: Santiago de Compostela. Its heyday spanned the 11th through the 15th centuries, after which Santiago came to be counted among the most important European pilgrimage sites, alongside Rome and Jerusalem.

St. James is the central figure here. The city of Santiago and the route leading to it—the Camino—exist by his grace. During this period, a series of established routes to Spain emerged. Many sources attest to a vibrant and influential pilgrimage culture centered on St. James in and along the route to Santiago de Compostela. This rich culture includes architecture, infrastructure such as bridges and roads, monasteries, inns, guesthouses, and brotherhoods. The *Codex Calixtinus*, compiled in the mid-12th century, offers a fascinating glimpse into that pilgrimage culture through a pilgrim's guide, songs, liturgies, and legends.

We are also familiar with the phenomenon of imposed or penitential pilgrimages, in which Santiago played an important role during the period from approximately 1300 to 1550.

A Different, Strange World

Above all, however, we must acknowledge that there is much we do not know about the medieval Camino. For us, it is primarily a different and unknown world. This applies, for example, to the pilgrimage routes in the Netherlands. On maps—which are generally reconstructions based on source material—our country is blank. We simply do not know which routes pilgrims took to Santiago. However, based on the Brotherhoods of St. James and their hospices, we can hypothetically draw lines for the 15th century, as Jan van Herwaarden did on a map.

But we are even more in the dark when it comes to the experiences of medieval pilgrims. What motivated them? How did they experience the journey? To what extent was their pilgrimage an individual or collective endeavor? This, in turn, is closely tied to the broader cultural and religious context of that period. In my view, it is important to realize that we have virtually no access to that world. It is, to a large extent, a different and foreign world.

Supplicating, doing penance, and giving thanks

We can, however, draw some very general conclusions. The Camino was part of a quest for salvation and healing in which religion, through rituals, saints, and relics, served as a mediating force. In the Middle Ages, pilgrimage became a journey sustained by supplication, penance, and thanksgiving. The means of attaining salvation were always concrete and material: relics, a specific location, insignia, and blessed objects. And all of this took place in a world where disorder, threat, and

chaos defined life. The Camino to Santiago never stood alone; it was part of a complex network of many other pilgrimage sites throughout Europe. Pilgrims also liked to visit as many of these sites as possible along the way. On the one hand, routes were partly determined by this network of pilgrimage sites; on the other hand, these sites themselves arose precisely because of those routes. Thus, in the Middle Ages, linked to trade and transportation routes (waterways and roads), there existed a complex sacred geography and topography.

I find a miniature in a French *pontificale* kept in Reims, dating from the late 15th century, to be fascinating. This book compiles the liturgical rites that a bishop performs as part of his duties. Among them is the rite of sending off pilgrims. This rite, which has a prophylactic and apotropaic purpose—to protect against and ward off misfortune along the way—includes, as one of its elements, the blessing of the pilgrim's staff and travel bag. We see the bishop in full regalia, wearing a miter and holding a crosier, pronouncing the blessing over two bags and walking sticks with the familiar pommels lying on the altar. The two pilgrims stand modestly beside him. A procession of assistants—deacons with tonsures—stands behind the bishop. The holy water font with its tassel is held at the ready. This is, of course, no ordinary daily rite. The fact that a bishop performed the ritual indicates a special situation. The pilgrims themselves might have been special, but often the bishop would step forward on special occasions—for example, when a large group from a city or region went on a pilgrimage under special circumstances (such as a disaster or calamity) or on a special feast day.

Decline

The medieval Camino began to decline due to internal and external factors starting in the 15th/16th centuries. Externally, wars, famines, and epidemics made travel—especially for mass pilgrimages—more difficult or downright impossible. Internally, the veneration of saints went off the rails as relics and indulgences became exploited and commercialized. Criticism of pilgrimages also grew precisely because of this abuse. After the Council of Trent (1545–1563), nearby pilgrimage sites were recommended. Consequently, the Camino de Santiago attracted fewer and fewer pilgrims. After about 1550, there were no longer any penitential pilgrimages to St. James in our country; from the 16th century onward, the Camino declined and fell into oblivion by the 19th century. We can hardly imagine that now, with the Camino so ubiquitous, but at that time it had virtually disappeared—both as a practice and as a memory. It had evaporated and been forgotten.

"Camino 2": The Reanimated Camino

I call the second Camino ("Camino 2") "the reanimated Camino," a term I borrow from Nancy Frey. One could also refer to it as the "Spanish Camino." This new Camino emerged as part of a long and complex process that spanned from the late 19th century to the 1950s and 1960s—though its influence continues to the present day—as efforts were made to breathe new life into the medieval Camino. This process is little known here, and that is especially true of the Spanish side of the story.

In the second half of the nineteenth century, the alleged remains of James were (re)discovered in the cathedral and recognized as "authentic" by the Roman Catholic Church in 1884. Around this, an ever-growing cultural-historical interest—focused primarily on the Middle Ages—emerged. Here we see what Peter Raedts describes in his excellent study on the reception and appropriation of the Middle Ages: an image of the medieval Camino is created and constructed based on various ideologies and agendas. Raedts rightly speaks here of the creation of an illusion. Romanticism, (church) politics, nationalism: they are all at play here. The common factor is always the cultural-historical interest, the search for sources of

the ancient Camino. In 1886, Padre Fidel Fita discovered the aforementioned *Codex Calixtinus* in the archives in Santiago. It was then transcribed and studied (in the 1920s and 1930s). Researchers and enthusiasts also formed associations—such as the "Friends of the Camino" in Spain, as well as in France and later in Germany. In this way, the Camino certainly became part of Spain's cultural and historical heritage. Franco appropriated St. James—particularly his role as a conqueror of the Moors—as a role model and protector of Spain. St. James certainly played that role until Franco's death in 1975, though traces of it can still be seen today. Research programs on the Camino, book series, and exhibitions began to emerge. Interest in the medieval Camino grew increasingly international.

And it is not just about interest sparked by research and publications: the Camino itself is also being revived. Santiago is literally being put back on the map. Spaniards are visiting the city again. Tourist and economic motivations also play a role here. A day trip to Santiago by car with family or friends was very popular among Spaniards in the 1950s–1970s.

Cocktail

The revival of the ancient Camino is thus a blend of cultural-historical interest, politics, tourism, economics, and ecclesiastical strategies, all set against the shared backdrop of perceptions of the Middle Ages in general and the Camino in particular. This revival extends not only to Santiago and classic Camino routes such as the *Camino Francés*, but is spreading ever wider to include architecture, churches and monasteries, art, iconography, and the like—not only in Spain, but throughout Europe.

Much comes into focus with this reanimated "Camino 2"—sometimes too much, I think. Take pilgrim accounts, for example. Throughout Europe, people are discovering old accounts written by Camino travelers. These are a unique source of information about the medieval "Camino 1." But can they all really be classified as Camino accounts? Many of these accounts belong more to the genre of travel writing, which became popular starting in the 17th century.

The traveler who writes the account also follows old Camino routes and visits historic pilgrimage sites such as Santiago, though not exclusively. People often choose to focus on those Camino routes and refer to the account as a Camino pilgrimage report. One example is the beautiful, detailed travelogue by Domenico Laffi, a clergyman from Bologna, who traveled throughout Europe in the second half of the 17th century ("journeys to the West") and made at least four trips to Santiago. His account, which summarizes three journeys (between 1670 and 1673), was published in translation with extensive annotations in collaboration with the *Xunta de Galicia* as a Camino/pilgrimage account. But upon closer inspection, it becomes clear that only the sections leading to Santiago were included, while passages describing journeys along entirely different routes were omitted. Through the lens of the revived "Camino 2," one thus examines a more general historical travelogue.

On the Road

An important step in the gradual revival of the Camino was the fact that, starting in the 1970s, people actually began walking the old Camino routes. It was not just about reconstructions or the publication of source materials and guidebooks—no, people actually set out on the trails.

Two French journalists, Pierre Barret and Jean-Noël Gurgand, were pioneers who had a major impact; in 1977, they walked the historic route from Vézelay to Santiago to experience what medieval pilgrims went through. Their account, published a year later, was a bestseller (a Dutch translation was also published). Incidentally, in that very same year, one of the first Dutch pilgrims, Hans Annink, also walked to

Santiago from Twente, and his account likewise makes clear just how strongly that fascination with the historic medieval Camino served as an inspiration.

Current and Relevant

The reanimated "Camino 2" serves as the foundation for many Camino initiatives and institutions and remains topical and relevant to this day. Consider, for example, the major *Europalia* exhibition in 1985 at St. Peter's Abbey in Ghent, as well as the founding of numerous Camino and St. James societies—in Flanders in 1985 and in our country in 1986. Think of well-known historians in the Netherlands such as Mireille Madou and Jan van Herwaarden. All of them are primarily rooted in cultural history. Consider also the publication of the *Pilgrim's Guide* and the facsimile edition of the *Codex Calixtinus*. I see that dominant cultural-historical perspective above all in all kinds of international Camino forums. A striking example are the various advisory committees of experts that were established when the Camino was designated as cultural heritage in all its dimensions.

Take, for example, the *Xunta de Galicia's International Committee of Experts on the Way of St. James*. It has 21 members. Its composition is revealing if we look solely at the fields of expertise: medieval art history: 4 members; medieval history: 5; historical literature and philology: 5; early medieval music: 2; archivist: 1. In addition: heritage studies: 1; computer science: 1; tourism studies: 1; economics: 1. Seventeen of the 21 are cultural scholars with a focus on the medieval Camino, "Camino 1."

Retrospective Perspective

It is also important to note that the perspective in this reanimated Camino is primarily backward-looking. The source of inspiration is the vanished medieval Camino.

I just mentioned one of the first Dutch pilgrims to Santiago, Hans Annink. The title of his account is "*A Late Pilgrim on the Milky Way.*" He thus situated himself within the long tradition of medieval pilgrims as a late pilgrim—as a late representative of the medieval "Camino 1"—rather than as the beginning of a new phase in the Camino tradition. Just like the two French journalists, he wanted to follow in the footsteps of those medieval pilgrims.

However, regarding this retrospective nature of the revived "Camino 2," it should be noted that there is undeniably a contemporary dimension at play here as well. I already touched on this through Peter Raedts: it is all in many ways a construct, an invented image of the medieval Camino based on and with an eye toward current agendas. I will return to this later when we discuss the "heritagization" of the Camino.

For now, it can be said that the medieval Camino laid the foundation for the Caminos that will follow below. It has also been "sacralized" and serves as an icon of a constructed illusion.

In this context, the sketch provided by Dirk Aerts in a booklet about the Camino published by the Flemish Compostela Society is particularly apt; it appears in a chapter titled "Always those Middle Ages":

> "For most pilgrims, the Middle Ages are simply not a subject of study. They only turn to that era in the hope of finding what they seek—or, more accurately, to rediscover what they themselves had initially hidden there. Many pilgrims' view of the Middle Ages is not based on how people actually lived and thought during that time, but has rather grown out of their longing for a more harmonious life and for a comprehensive, meaningful system that they sorely miss in today's world." (AERTS 2010, 37s.)

The Middle Ages for the Modern Pilgrim

In a recent project examining contemporary pilgrim accounts (POST 2026), I explored—six to ten years after Aerts—how the medieval Camino is discussed in modern pilgrim's accounts. This yielded a remarkable result against the backdrop of

the Camino brought to life as outlined here. The medieval Camino plays a modest role, described in very vague and general terms. It mainly concerns the atmosphere of cities, churches, and monasteries that is referred to as "medieval." There is also some cultural-historical information about the past. However, the pilgrim does see himself as part of a long tradition; he follows in the footsteps of medieval predecessors and thus keeps a tradition alive. I also see how the modern pilgrim has many questions, especially when it comes to the Middle Ages. What was it like back then? How did pilgriming in practice work for those predecessors? What motivated them, and what were their experiences?

And what strikes me most of all is how Jacobus barely plays a significant role. He is part of the backdrop of the Camino, a somewhat vague figure who mainly comes into play when legends are discussed or when iconography is encountered along the way. It is not until arrival in Santiago that he briefly comes into focus, but even then….

That reading of modern accounts leads me to yet another, third Camino.

"Camino 3": The Long-Distance Path LDP) Turn

"Camino 3" can be characterized as the "long-distance path turn." Or, simply, "the LDP turn" (I am now using LDP (in Dutch: LAW) and also GR, *Grande Randonnée*, not strictly to refer to the red-and-white-marked and numbered routes, but as a hiking genre). Here I am again following Nancy Frey, who refers here as to a "turn." Researchers studying the development of the Camino emphasize that this turn actually came as a surprise. It took people and organizations involved in "Camino 2" by surprise. We saw that, starting in the 1970s, the routes—especially the *Camino Francés*—were not only studied but also walked, and that not only the city of Santiago in Spain had become a popular destination, but also historical routes. And then, quite suddenly, there was a massive influx of pilgrims, especially starting in the 1990s. The Holy Year of 1993 is often cited as a sort of turning point for this shift. There was no master plan behind this influx, no planned marketing.

By now, there is more to say about this than simply noting that it came as a surprise and is one of those signs of the contingency of historical processes.

Factors at Play

First and foremost, it seems to be related to the great popularity in Europe—and globally—of hiking culture, particularly that of long-distance hiking (hiking, trails). I like to think of this as a cross road, a convergence of paths: the culture of long-distance hiking intersects with that of pilgrimage routes, and this convergence appears to resonate deeply along the Camino. It also aligns with the trend of creating themed hiking routes and with the need to use hikes and trails—and now, through the Camino as well—to take a break from everyday life, a pause to seek a sense of renewal and transformation.

It is also clear that the media, in the broadest sense, are an important factor. The Camino experience is widely shared, among family and friends, but also more broadly through pilgrim accounts. The genre of the pilgrim account is booming thanks to the opportunities now available to many to edit, print, and distribute a book. Writers and media personalities also walk the Camino and share their experiences (Paolo Coelho, Shirley MacLaine). And there is a constant presence of Camino pilgrims in the media, both in words and images; there are numerous Camino documentaries and films (such as *The Way*). In addition, Camino travelers are followed via social media, blogs, and vlogs.

From the perspective of the Camino—and particularly the setting of the reanimated "Camino 2—one could refer to them as "lateral entrants (Dutch: *zij-instromers*)."

I want to emphasize that these are intersecting paths. The Camino is radically transformed by its encounter with the LDP/GR world, but it is not completely subsumed by it, nor does it merge with it entirely. Just as the LDP/GR world, apart from the Camino and pilgrimage routes, maintains its own dynamic and continues to expand globally. It is interesting to note that we see that this "LDP-turn-Camino" influences the development of LDP/GR routes, where more and more pilgrimage references are now playing a role following in the footsteps of the Camino (cf. the St. Olav Paths, the Martinus Trail, the Francigena).

Consequences

The consequences of this shift are significant. A different and new Camino profile has emerged—one that currently seems to dominate the general image of the Camino. The LDP turn "Camino 3" has become massively popular and entirely international, which has inevitably led to a search for a compromise between pilgrimage and hiking culture, and tourism as well.

An important perspective is that certain dimensions identified in the medieval "Camino 1" and the reanimated "Camino 2"—such as pilgrimage as a religious undertaking, the assumed continuous Camino tradition, and the role of St. James—are now being put into perspective. The Camino is becoming a path for individual experiences that we also see on other long-distance routes (enrichment of life, respite, reflection, experiencing the body, nature, and landscape, encounters, searching for what one is missing, transformation). It strikes me how modern Camino accounts resemble accounts of other major routes, such as the many stories from people who set out on the *Appalachian Trail*. Another similarity is that walking the route is viewed as a challenge.

"Camino 4": The Camino in the Footsteps of the Camino

The last and fourth "Camino" I have identified is the most recent offshoot of the "Camino" family. I characterize "Camino 4" as "the Camino in the footsteps of the Camino," or perhaps more accurately, in the plural: "Caminos in the footsteps of." As a short term, I choose "Camino-like," as is commonly used in international studies.

This Camino has been studied quite extensively under the term "caminoization." As the Camino Academy, we devoted a large part of our efforts to an extensive project on this topic during the COVID-19 pandemic. I also wrote a book about it that focuses primarily on the situation in the Netherlands (POST 2024/5). Literally following in the footsteps of the LDP turn "Camino 3"—and partly also the reanimated "Camino 2"—the new millennium, and especially after around 2013/5, saw a boom in hiking routes, both large and small, that branded themselves as "Camino." One could refer to these as franchise or satellite Caminos.

Three Types of Trails in the Footsteps of the Camino

We can distinguish three basic types of Camino-like routes. First, there are routes that are directly related—or claim to be—to the historical Camino (in theory, this refers to the medieval "Camino 1," but in practice it often refers instead to the revived "Camino 2" and the LDP turn "Camino 3"). See, for example, the recognized "historical" start trails in our country—routes that connect to the major routes through France to Santiago.

A second type is inspired by the Camino and is then developed in its own way into a route—often a loop, or a circuit. People often refer to these paths as a pilgrimage route or even a "Camino," but that is not necessarily the case.

A third form of "caminoization" involves rediscovered or newly developed

pilgrimage routes. Here, too, the enormous popularity of the Camino serves as the catalyst, but it translates into a more general trend of branding hiking trails as pilgrimage or devotional paths.

The Camino as a "Brand"

All three forms share the common feature that the Camino—or *chemin*—becomes a brand. Herman Vuijsje once remarked in this context that anyone can borrow the Camino concept. That reference to "the Camino" manifests itself through external elements such as a pilgrim's passport, stamping along the way (preferably in churches and chapels), accommodations called *refugios*, signs like a scallop shell, etc. But it is also evident in the profile of the trails themselves. Just like the Camino, it is all about the Way, about a certain spiritual dimension, about "walking with a plus."

In recent years, I have already compiled a list of more than 165 such pilgrimage trails in the footsteps of the Camino in our country. Recently, I was able to add two more that emerged as a result of the Camino exhibition at the Krona Museum in Uden: *Krona's Camino* and, for young people, the *Camino Xpress*. Well-known examples in our country include the *Jabikspaad*, the *Walk of Wisdom*, and the *Camino Brabant*. These routes were often developed by people who walked the revived "Camino 3" to Santiago and were deeply moved and inspired by the experience.

Here, too: Intersecting Paths

Here, too, the aforementioned aspect of a cross road of intersecting paths comes into play. The pilgrimage trails that connect directly or indirectly with the Camino are also part of the context of emerging (thematized) hiking routes, though in this case they are not primarily LDPs or GRs. In the wake of the Camino, pilgrimage routes are being rediscovered, made accessible, or created throughout Europe and beyond (South Africa, the U.S.). In a fascinating project, Fabienne Bodan cataloged these pilgrimage routes for the entire world and for Europe. And in the UK, the British Pilgrimage Trust is working on an extensive network of pilgrimage routes.

Copies

This process of "caminoization" is not entirely unknown in the history of pilgrimage. It is common for pilgrimage sites and pilgrimages to have a wide-reaching influence, leading to the emergence of branch sites. A good example is Lourdes. Directly inspired by Lourdes as a ritual center with a grotto dedicated to the Virgin Mary, a procession park, and candlelight processions, Lourdes's grottoes with procession parks where candlelight processions were held sprang up throughout the Catholic world during the late 19th and first half of the 20th centuries. In our country, many Catholic parishes, boarding schools, convents, and abbeys had a Lourdes grotto. Often, people had traveled specifically to Lourdes to take the exact measurements of the grotto and, if possible, to bring back a piece of the original rock. Some of these grottoes copies became pilgrimage centers in their own right, such as the grotto on the Cauberg in Valkenburg and the one in the Sacred Heart Church in Vinkeveen.

III. Summary and Outlook

Summary

I can now summarize my explorations of the four Caminos.

We see the medieval "Camino 1," the historic Camino as a distant past that is still eagerly referenced. Then there is the reanimated "Camino 2," which is driven by cultural and historical interest, but also by all sorts of other interests. That Camino continues to this day, and we encounter this pattern in many organizations in Germany, Spain, and France. And here as well. The LDP turn "Camino 3," a branch of "Camino 2," emerged relatively unexpectedly around

1990 from a widespread long-distance walking culture. This marks the origin of the massification and popularization of the Camino. And finally, "Camino 3" exerted such influence that a process of "caminoization" began after 2000. Branch or satellite Caminos sprang up everywhere. "Camino" became a brand that many capitalized on. Even more offshoots emerged as pilgrimage routes were discovered or created as themed hiking trails.

Perspectives

An important insight from this is that there is not just one Camino, but rather several. Of course, there are connections between these four—overlaps—but above all, they are distinct Caminos, each with its own character and context. Any suggestion of continuity when speaking about the "Camino" must therefore be qualified. There are breaks; there is no seamless tradition stretching from the Middle Ages to the present. Speaking about the Camino without this nuance leads to confusion and misunderstandings, and especially when it comes to the future or policy, we must be clear about exactly which Camino we are referring to.

I will give a rather arbitrary example of this multiplicity in the use of "Camino." A hiking guide featuring pilgrimage routes in our country, written by Mari Smits and published by the hiking publisher *Gegarandeerd Onregelmatig*, was recently released. The booklet includes a one-page introduction titled "Be a pilgrim for a day…"

I'll quote from that page and indicate with a number which Camino the text is referring to whenever the Camino and pilgrimage come up. An interesting exercise.

> Be a pilgrim for a day… [4]
>
> Pilgrimage is all the rage. Over the past few decades, the way to the ancient pilgrimage site of Santiago de Compostela [1] has become a real craze. [3] In the Netherlands, too, various St. James' Ways have now been mapped out [4] that connect to the four historic routes through France [1,2]. If you want to take a break from life, you walk the Camino for a few months [3]. For most people, it is not about the final destination, but about self-reflection and the atmosphere you share with fellow pilgrims along the way.
>
> The modern-day pilgrimage to Santiago [2,3,4] has strayed from the purpose for which pilgrims traveled to northern Spain in the Middle Ages [1]. They sought to come into contact with the sacred there—not only spiritually, but also with their bodies and all their senses. […]
>
> For many modern-day Camino walkers [3], religious motives hardly play a role. [..] However, pilgrims do indicate that they are on the trail for spiritual reasons, even if this spiritual motive is not interpreted in religious terms. Other pilgrims indicate [..] that they are on the trail for sport or cultural reasons. (SMITS 2026, 3)

So, here is my main message: make distinctions, just as in scholasticism—which was grounded in ancient scientific traditions—the "*distinctio*" was a core element of the craft of every analysis and reflection.

Following on from that, I will offer four more notes—critical observations regarding the four "Caminos."

(a) "Heritagization"

First of all, a critical note regarding, in particular, the reanimated "Camino 2." I argued that there is a strong cultural-historical impetus behind this revived Camino. I see that the Camino is becoming part of what is called the "heritagization" process.

A phenomenon, a ritual, a monument changes context, transforms in meaning, is isolated, lifted out of society, and sacralized. Kitsch, decor, and commerce are seen as the end points of that process. This process

involves subprocesses referred to by the buzzwords "musealization," "historization," and "aestheticization."

The phases that a devotional statue of Mary might go through serve as an example: from a medieval statue venerated in a chapel, to folklore, to a museum piece beautifully illuminated in a display case, and finally to a decorative element in a postmodern living room. See also Buddha statues at the garden center. I still find the anecdote about a German prelate who, on his deathbed, is handed a crucifix and then says, "Poor craftmanship, eighteenth century," particularly striking. Any sense of the tradition that the cross represents is absent; he dies just as he likely lived and resided—surrounded by cultural heritage, as if in a museum…

That same risk looms over our approach to the Camino as well. I point to the Camino's inclusion on UNESCO lists and the EU's cultural routes, and to how the Camino is increasingly serving as a decor for films, novels, thrillers, and video games. And, of course, I mention the commercialization. The Camino is a market. What about the start of next year's *Vuelta*—a Holy Year of St. James—from the steps of the cathedral in Santiago? And I also see kitsch on the rise. The Camino as an example of "living history"—pilgrims in medieval garb adorned with scallop shells, pilgrim monks livening up gatherings of Camino societies with "authentic" songs in "original" outfits. I would like to recall here the words of Han Voskuil, who, from his position at the Meertens Institute—the *Bureau*—always fiercely opposed this theatrical, kitschy approach to the past. For him, it is unthinkable that, based on this reality, one could even begin to grasp or present anything about the way someone experienced reality in the past:

> "The only thing you can try to do is use your brain to understand that things used to be different." (VOSKUIL 2026, 857)

Heritage and "Time Regimes"

I will elaborate a bit further on the theme of heritage because it is important in relation to the perspective of distinct Caminos and for policy regarding those Caminos. Heritage is, in essence, a way of engaging with the past. And that has long since ceased to be the exclusive domain of historians or heritage policymakers. Sociologists, cultural studies scholars, and the now-established field of critical heritage studies approach our engagement with the past through heritage critically via so-called "regimes of time." Key figures in this field include François Hartog and, in our country, Willem Frijhoff. I would like to cite a recent study by the German sociologist Andreas Reckwitz, who also works with these regimes of time. For him, engaging with the past—in our case, the medieval Camino—is always a dynamic interpretive process. It is always "doing past" through a selection of that past within new narrative frameworks.

He points out that there is always a tendency to directly evoke the distant past through experiences. You see this reflected in the Camino through the often-heard assertion that you can only come close to the original Camino pilgrim experience by walking it now. This suggests a certain direct relationship between the present and the past—a specific temporal regime—that essentially does not exist and cannot exist. See what I said earlier about this via Aerts and Voskuil.

With the concept of "heritage," a specific temporal regime has, roughly speaking, been introduced since the 1980s, in which the relationship between the past, present, and future is severed—a phenomenon we refer to using the aforementioned terminology of "heritagization." The past is reduced to something static; the goal is to preserve it as completely and "authentically" as possible. The past becomes almost sacred, untouchable, lifted out of the present, resulting in a rupture

between the past and the present—and thus also cut off from the future.

The impression is given that heritage is about preserving the past, but the opposite is happening: there is a process of structural forgetting. Hartog and Frijhoff refer to this as "presentism." Once placed on a UNESCO or EU heritage list, it no longer plays an active role; it is merely stored away. In this context, Reckwitz refers to heritage lists, museums, and archives as "the mortuaries of historical connections."

In response to this temporal regime, the aforementioned authors advocate for what they call "dynamic heritage": a temporal regime in which the past is evoked in the present with an eye toward the future. This is always "reinvention"—a presentation of the past in new contexts and new narratives.

In my view, these critical observations on heritage are relevant to current policy regarding the Camino, where the heritage agenda is often presented as the guiding principle. As a nearby example, I will mention the general objective of the *Camino Cultura Foundation* (SCC), established in 2024, which serves as a kind of management foundation for the NGSJ. I quote the general objective of the SCC (note the underlining):

> "To promote and protect the Caminos to Santiago de Compostela in Spain and France, recognized by UNESCO as World Heritage and Cultural Heritage sites."

(b) 'Strava'

A second note focuses specifically on the LDP turn "Camino 3," as well as the Camino-like "Camino 4." People rightly point out that the Camino is often associated with apps like *Strava*. *Strava* is a fitness app that allows you to track and optimize your running performance using data and training plans. The name comes from the Swedish word for "strive" (*sträva*). Is there indeed a risk here that the pilgrimage is turning into a sports bucket list item?

(c) Hybridization

A third observation concerns the Camino-like "Camino 4"—the far-reaching "caminoization" we are now witnessing. I am referring to that Camino as hybridization, to a complex and multifaceted palette of appropriations and fusions. Often these involve rather smooth transitions, but there are also ruptures and contestations. We see themed walking routes modeled after the LDP route "Camino 3" (pilgrimage trails, St. James's Ways, caminos, *camini*, little caminos), and we see pilgrimages "with a plus."

But we also see that "plus" being interpreted as walking with a mission, as a path to cope with grief, as a charity run, or as a walk for peace or for recognition of the LGBTI+ community. Currently, the *Peacewalk* is underway—"a journey of hope, connection, and resistance" launched in response to Israel's genocidal actions in Gaza. From various locations across Europe, groups are walking ("pilgriming") to Jerusalem, covering the entire route or sections of it in a sort of relay.

Part of this process of blending is the use of "Camino" and "pilgrimage" as metaphors. It would be worthwhile to examine "Camino" and "pilgrimage" as figurative or metaphorical language more closely. This topic has been added to the Camino Academy's list of themes by our aforementioned colleague Dirk Aerts.

However, even a critical examination of that process of hybridization is ambivalent, two-sided.

On the one hand, you might question this. The Camino is an empty vessel here. The emphasis can end up being on that emptiness. Kitsch lurks around the corner—the Camino as a backdrop for one's own supposedly unique experiences. Anything can now be called a "Camino" or a "pilgrimage," and those labels become so hollow.

On the other hand, this multitude of appropriations is actually positive; the Camino and pilgrimage are thus becoming deeply rooted in our culture. It becomes part of the aforementioned process of "reinventing," of a dynamic temporal regime in which past, present, and future remain connected.

(d) Recordar

A final note ties directly into that concept of time regime and concerns my conviction that *all four Caminos* deserve attention and appreciation, especially when it comes to the policies of organizations such as the NGSJ.

I would like to point out a common aspect in Caminos 2, 3, and 4: the perspective of a living, dynamic and "anamnetic" tradition—a commitment to keeping the tradition of the Camino vibrant and relevant, a living remembrance. In this context, consider the word for "to remember": in Spanish, *recordar*; in Italian, *ricordare*; derived from the Latin *recordari*. In Dutch: *her-inneren*. It conveys a dual movement: something from the past is retrieved from the heart (*cor*). In ancient times, the heart was seen as the place where the past is stored. And what is retrieved is also brought back into the heart, brought to life, made relevant. That same idea is embedded in "*her-inneren*." It is, therefore, always a process of "reinventing the Camino." And that is exactly what I see happening in "Camino 2, 3, and 4"!

Coda

I will conclude with lines of poetry by Antonio Machado: *Todo pasa y todo queda*…:

> Everything passes and everything remains,
> but our destiny is to go;
> to go and, as we pass, let paths
> emerge in the sea.
>
> [COENEN 2020, 68)]

Sources and Further Reading

D. AERTS: *Het eerste woord. Overwegingen voor Santiagogangers* (Mechelen 2010).

H. ANNINK: *Een late pelgrim op de melkweg* (Den Haag 1980).

P. BARRET & J.-N. GURGAND: *Priez pour nous à Compostelle. La vie des pèlerins sur les chemins de Saint-Jacques* (Parijs 1978); Ned.uitgave: *"Bid voor ons te Compostella" Het leven van de pelgrims op de wegen naar Sint-Jacob* (Beveren 1982).

F. BODAN: *Guide des chemins de pèlerinage du monde* (Rennes 2018).

F. BODAN: *Guide des chemin de pèlerinage d'rope* (Rennes 2019).

M. BOWMAN, D. JOHANNSEN & A. OHRVIK (eds.): *Reframing pilgrimage in Northern Europe = Numen* 5-6 (2020) Special issue.

R. DE DOBBELAER: 'De camino in tijden van Strava: van pelgrimstocht naar bucketlijst item?', in *De Pelgrim* nr. 165 42 (2026) 37-41.

N. FREY: *Pilgrim stories. On and off the road to Santiago* (Berkeley/Los Angeles/London 1998).

W. FRIJHOFF: 'Herdenkingscultuur tussen erfgoed en ritueel. De verleiding van het presentisme', in *Yearbook for Ritual and Liturgical Studies* 28 (2012) 169-182.

B. HAAB: *Weg und Wandlung. Zur Spiritualität heutiger Jakobs-Pilger und Pilgerinnen* (PhD study, Zürich 1996).

B. HAAB: 'Pelgrimage: weg en beweging', in J. PIEPER, P. POST & R. VAN UDEN (red.): *Pelgrimage in beweging* (UTP-katern 22) (Baarn 1999) 13-37.

F. HARTOG: *Regimes of historicity. Presentism and experience of time* (New York 2015).

J. VAN HERWAARDEN: *Opgelegde bedevaarten* (Assen/Amsterdam 1978).

E. HOBSBAWM & T. RANGER (eds.): *The invention of tradition* (Cambridge 1983).

H. HOLTMAAT, P. POST & J. KOEDAM (red.): *De Camino de Santiago in 101 voorwerpen. Materiële sporen in heden en verleden* (Zutphen 2026).

D. LAFFI: *A journey to the West. The diary of a seventeenth-century pilgrim from Bologna to Santiago de Compostela*, translated, with a commentary by J. HALL (Leiden 1997).

ANTONIO MACHADO: *Gedichten. Herdicht door Erik Coenen* (Amsterdam [2020]).

R. MOOR: *Over paden* (Utrecht 2026).

P. POST: 'De Pelgrim en de Toerist. Verkenning van een topos', in *Nederlands Theologisch Tijdschrift* 67,2 (2013) 135-149

P. POST: *Kruisende wegen: over de opkomst van nieuwe pelgrimspaden in Nederland. Een veldverkenning* (Camino Cahier 5) (Utrecht 2021) https://www.caminoacademie.nl/camino-cahiers/camino-cahier-5-kruisende-wegen-over-de-opkomst-van-nieuwe-pelgrimspaden-in-nederland/ .

P. POST: 'Ritual Studies perspectives on pilgrimage,' in H. WARFIELD (ed.): *Multidisciplinary perspectives on pilgrimage. Historical, current and future dimensions* (Pilgrimage Studies 1) (Lausanne etc. 2023) 117-135.

P. POST: 'De pas van de pelgrim. Over het tempo in het landelijk gebied', in P. POST (red.): *Pelgrimeren en het perspectief van de marge.* (Camino Cahier 7) (Utrecht 2023) 36-62. https://www.caminoacademie.nl/wp-content/uploads/Camino_Cahier_Studiedag-CA-Pelgrimarge-2023_6_Post.pdf .

P. POST: *In het spoor van de camino. Nieuwe pelgrimspaden in Nederland* (Gorredijk 2024, 2e dr. 2025).

P. POST: *De magie van de Camino* (Gorredijk 2026).

P. POST & S. VAN DER BEEK (red.): *Onderweg met een missie* (Camino Cahier 1) (Utrecht 2017) 11-21. http://www.caminoacademie.nl/wp-content/uploads/2017/07/Camino-cahier-1-Post.pdf .

P. RAEDTS: *De ontdekking van de Middeleeuwen. Geschiedenis van een illusie* (Amsterdam 2011, 13e dr. 2021).

A. RECKWITZ: *Verlust. Ein Kernproblem der Moderne* (Berlin 2024); *Verlies. Een kernprobleem van de moderniteit* (Amsterdam 2025); forthcoming: *Loss: A modern predicament* (Cambridge 2027).

M. SMITS: *Op bedevaart. Twaalf wandelingen rondom heilige oorden* (Arnhem 2026)

R. SOLNIT: *Wanderlust. Een filosofische geschiedenis van het wandelen* (Amsterdam 2022, 5e dr.).

J.J. VOSKUIL: *Het zwijgen. Dagboek deel 7* (Amsterdam 2026).

H. VUIJSJE: *Pelgrim zonder God. Een voettocht van Santiago de Compostela naar Amsterdam* (editie Delft 2018, 1e dr. 1990) met een uitgebreide nieuwe inleiding 'Voortschrijdend inzicht', 11-36.

H. VUIJSJE: 'De weg naar Compostela: vijftien parameters, vier bedreigingen', in Werkgroep recreatie en toerisme, Landbouwuniversiteit Wageningen: *Weg van Compostela* (Wageningen z.j. [1994]) 21-57.

Colofon

© Paul Post
Published by the Camino Academy, 2026. All rights reserved.
Contact:
p.g.j.post53@gmail.com
https://www.caminoacademie.nl/