Aisthesis

Citation: Restuccia, F. (2025). Pilgrimage and the Prehistory of Landscape. *Aisthesis* 19(1): 25-41. doi: 10.7413/2035-8466040

Pilgrimage and the Prehistory of Landscape

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Abstract. According to Joachim Ritter, aesthetic sensitivity to landscape arose in the modern age as a response to and a remedy for the objectivation of nature and its alienation from subjectivity. The appreciation of a landscape would compensate for the loss of the holistic relationship with nature that characterized the ancient theoretical worldview. Although Ritter's theory allows us to account for both elements of continuity and discontinuity in the transformation of our relationship with nature, the way he refers to an indeterminate conception of the totality of the Universe, valid from Antiquity to the Middle Ages, is questionable. This article suggests that, prior to modernity, a non-instrumental approach to nature could be found in the practice of Christian pilgrimage, thanks to its experiential dimension. The origin of landscape could be identified in the secularization of the Franciscan experience of nature as a figure of heaven.

Keywords. Ritter, Auerbach, Francis of Assisi, secularization, compensation.

One of the major points of discussion in the debate about landscape aesthetics is its historical character (D'Angelo [2014]: 30-40). Some believe humans have always taken some pleasure in contemplating nature and that this can be explained by evolutionary behavior (Appleton

[1975]); others believe that sensitivity to landscape is strictly modern. According to the second position, people have always found interest in nature – whether for practical and economic reasons or moved by a religious, spiritual or metaphysical sense of wonder – but landscape as an object of disinterested contemplation presupposes the birth of aesthetics. In other words, the debate on the historical character of landscape can be traced back to two issues. The first is whether landscape is considered something that has objective features (e.g., a piece of land with a certain balance of open views and hilly reliefs, or a certain balance between wilderness and domesticated nature), or a way of experiencing nature which involves subjective and cultural aspects. The second issue is whether aesthetics is considered a universal aspect of human life or it is itself culturally and historically determined: there is no appreciation of landscape in a culture that did not develop an aesthetic culture.

Among landscape theorists who assert its historical character, Joachim Ritter (1963) is the one who most systematically linked it with the birth of aesthetic culture in early modern Europe. Moreover, his theory benefits from considering both elements of continuity and discontinuity in the relationship with nature from the ancient world to the present: the experience of landscape would have emerged in the early modern age as *compensation* on the aesthetic level for the loss of the theoretical conception of the totality of nature, typical of ancient metaphysic and medieval religious cultures. Ritter, however, seems to flatten the Christian conception to the ancient one and conceives of the experience of nature in a rather abstract way, without referring to any specific context. Building on Ritter's perspective, this article aims to investigate the hypothesis that landscape sensitivity arises from compensating for the loss of a relationship with nature that was not the ancient one, but one that developed in the context of Christian pilgrimage, especially in the Franciscan sense.

1. *Ritter, Petrarch, and the birth of landscape*

Ritter's reflection begins with an analysis of Petrarch's account of his ascent of Mont Ventoux in 1336, which he described in a letter to Dionigi da Borgo San Sepolcro (*Familiares* IV, 1)[1]. Burckhardt (1860) already considered this account the first example of landscape appreciation in the Western world. What makes it so interesting is Petrarch's own awareness of the particularity of his excursion, which he recognizes in his motive. Petrarch's ascent is devoid of

1 It has been said that the letter, probably written much later, is fictitious, an allegory rather than the description of a real experience (O'Connell [1983]: 507; Agamben [2014]: 124). I believe that whether or not it describes an actual excursion, it still shows that such an experience was conceivable.

any practical, economic or strategic interest: he is moved only by the *desire to see* a place famous for its height («sola videndi insignem loci altitudinem cupiditate ductus»). The toil he voluntarily underwent seems significant to him, as he conceives of it in analogy to the toil we undergo to attain a more spiritual life. The mountaintop is as high as the blissful life; in both cases, the path leading there is narrow. Although Petrarch himself describes his experience by comparing it with a Christian model, he also seems to realize that it no longer fits there. When he reaches the summit, he is moved by the vast spectacle he sees («spectaculo liberiore permotus») and as he admires the single elements of the view one by one («que dum mirarer singula») he decides to read a passage from Augustine's *Confessions*, which he always carries with him. He happens to read precisely a page in which Augustine comments on those who go to admire mountains, seas and rivers and forget themselves[2]. Reading this passage causes a crisis in him: he feels now ashamed and angry with himself for his admiration of earthly things («iratus mihimet quod nunc etiam terrestria mirarer»). Petrarch perceives a conflict between the desire that drives him to contemplate the earthly dimension and his belief in the superiority of the spiritual and inner dimension, thought not only by Augustine, but even by the Pagan philosophers.

From Petrarch's account, Ritter draws two main conclusions, which lead him to develop his theory. First, both Petrarch's motivations and the way he describes his experience offer analogies to the contemplation of nature in the ancient world. In particular, Ritter notes how the disinterestedness of Petrarch's action echoes the classic metaphysical belief that contemplation of nature is worthwhile for its own sake and must be devoid of any practical interest. The same attitude is found in the religious experience and practice that dominate the medieval worldview. In contrast, the modern age, beginning with Renaissance humanism, is characterized by instrumental reason, which will lead to the birth of modern science. The economic approach to nature, which in antiquity characterized only labor, in the modern age is found in the field of knowledge as well. Ritter also notes how Petrarch's language recalls that of ancient philosophy, particularly that belonging to the tradition of *theoria tou kosmou*: the contemplation of nature conceived according to an order, a unity (see also Ritter [1953]).

The second conclusion Ritter draws is that no matter how similar Petrarch's conception may appear to the ancient one, it is no longer part of that horizon. Petrarch himself seems to be aware of this when he expresses his inner conflict

2 Agamben (2014) mentions this passage as proof that contemplation of landscapes was common in the ancient times too; Cuniberto (2016: 31) answers to this objection distinguishing between aesthetic contemplation and scientific, theoretical or metaphysic forms of contemplation.

between his aspiration for the earthly world and the intellectual conviction that only the spiritual world is worthy of being desired. According to Ritter, contemplation of nature in the ancient world implied the possibility of ascending from the sensible to the supersensible. Petrarch himself refers to this when he writes of the analogy between a physical and a spiritual ascension, but when he reaches the summit, he is faced with his own failure: he is stuck in contemplation of the sensible world. Through a distorted and specifically modern interpretation of Augustine[3], made possible by the extrapolation of the passage from its context, he becomes convinced that the only access to spirituality is in interiority and not through the external world.

Petrarch's appreciation of the landscape, therefore, must be understood both in continuity and in rupture with the tradition of contemplation of nature. On this basis, Ritter formulates his paradoxical hypothesis: sensitivity to landscape can only arise when the theoretical relationship with nature has broken down. Following Schiller, Ritter states that in antiquity human beings passively welcomed the sensual world: they were one with it; in the modern age, however, they become legislators, subjects who make nature their object. In this way, a split (*Entzweiung*) is produced between objective reality and subjectivity (Griffero [2021]). On the one hand, this split is the condition for modern freedom; on the other hand, it implies the loss of nature as totality, which, unlike the objective world, is not accessible through science. Aesthetic experience must be understood in this context as a compensation for this loss[4]. Through art, and aesthetic experience in general, society gives form to what it is forced to expel by reifying the world. It is no coincidence, according to Ritter, that modern science and aesthetics came into being more or less simultaneously. The aesthetic appreciation of nature as landscape can be understood as a response and a remedy to the objectivation of nature. The totality of nature, once conceived theoretically, is now approached aesthetically. The experience of the landscape is the only chance we have left to grasp nature in its totality.

3 I had the opportunity to discuss this issue with Daniele Guastini, who in his forthcoming book (Guastini [forthcoming]) offers an extremely interesting reading of Petrarch's *Secretum*. In this fictional dialogue between Petrarch himself and Augustine, the latter is portraited as a moralist who only quotes Roman-Hellenistic philosophers and condemns any interest in the earthly, sensible world. On the contrary, the real Augustine believed in a typological conception of the world, according to which the sensible things are precious, as they are considered figures (*figurae*) of the supersensible. The opposition between inner and outer dimension, spiritual and sensible world, is specifically modern, as also noticed by Benjamin (1928).

4 Ritter does not employ systematically the term «compensation», which was introduced by Odo Marquard (1989), part of the so-called Ritter school.

2. *The limits of Ritter's theory*

However, when we appreciate a landscape, do we really and always experience the totality of nature? Ritter's theory is overall quite convincing and has had a great impact in this debate, but some aspects of it have been criticized. According to Martin Steel, for example, when we experience a landscape, we appreciate its particularity and diversity and not nature in its totality (D'Angelo [2014]: 38). Ritter refers to the ancient conception of nature as *kosmos* but is rather general when he has to describe the specific contexts in which nature was experienced. When he cites examples of landscape in the modern world, however, he always refers to experiences that occur in the context of an excursion (Petrarch's ascent, Schiller's *Spaziergang*) or a journey (Hirschfeld). The landscape he has in mind is *temporally* framed by the practice of leaving one's home, city, or homeland and accessing a place perceived as foreign (however familiar it may be), as opposed to what we might call architectural landscape, which is *spatially* framed, for example by a window, terrace, or buildings in the perspective view of a street.

If the landscape Ritter is thinking of is the one we experience on a hike or a journey undertaken to have that very experience, can we think of a similar context in antiquity? Ritter's reference to Greek *theoria* might help, but only if we understand it in its original meaning, which Ritter seems to overlook. He notes that the term was often used in reference to a religious festival, but does not investigate further. As Andrea Wilson Nightingale (2004) has noted, the term *theoria* was originally used to refer to a civic pilgrimage to religious festivals: the *theoroi* were delegates who embarked in a journey to a sanctuary to represent their city and attend the festival, contemplating the spectacle, and then returned to their hometown to report what they had seen. The notion of theory, as understood in the philosophical tradition, was first introduced by Plato in the *Republic* with a metaphor: the philosopher is like a *theoros* who makes a pilgrimage (*theoria*) to the supersensible world to contemplate the spectacle of truth and then returns to report what he learned to his fellow citizens.

Classic civic pilgrimage was focusing on religious celebrations and not directly nature, but through the study of this practice we can realize one thing: pilgrimages, however short, were the main kind of travel in the ancient world characterized by the lack of economic or strategic interest. In other words, if we are looking for the antecedent of those modern excursions and trips whose main motive is the aesthetic experience of landscapes and landmarks, we will find it in pilgrimage.

However, and herein lies the second main problem with Ritter's hypothesis, can we really assume that the world of *theoria* survived until the late Middle Ages simply because both Pagan philosophers and Christian theologians believed that the sensible world was a gateway to the supersensible world? According to Auerbach, a theorist who gave one of the most complete overviews on

the history of Western (literary) culture, the rupture between Pagan and Christian worlds was much deeper than that between the Medieval and Modern ages (Auerbach [1946]; see also Guastini [2021]). The continuity-discontinuity relationship between the late Middle Ages and the early Modern age can be explained in terms of a secularization of Christian models that are shifted out of their original religious context, but whose logic is preserved[5]. On the contrary, the transition from the Hellenistic-Roman to the Christian world must be understood as the replacement of one logic with a new, incompatible one, however much the same cultural references are retained[6]. On this basis, Ritter's hypothesis may still be useful in researching the origins of modernity, but only if one understands compensation as a reaction to the secularization of medieval Christian models. The same applies to the specific case of travel and pilgrimage: if modern travel as an aesthetic experience can find its antecedent in pilgrimage, it is medieval Christian pilgrimage and not Greek *theoria*.

If we think back to Petrarch's ascent to Mount Ventoux from this perspective, we can find several elements that might confirm this hypothesis[7]. If we learn not to trust Petrarch's many scholarly references to the ancient Pagan world, we will notice that the model of his excursion is the Christian pilgrimage. Not only does he conceive his ascent in analogy with the quest for a blissful life, but he explicitly calls it pilgrimage (*peregrinatio*)[8]. Even the seemingly unusual action of reading a passage from Augustine once he has reached the summit can be understood in this context: pilgrims used to read a passage from the Bible related to the place that they were visiting.

3. *Early Christian pilgrimage and sacred places*

How did Christian pilgrimage differ from the Pagan one and why is this significant for the study of the aesthetic experience of the landscape? This has mainly

5 Still in Shakespeare, for example, we can find the same contamination between humble and sublime, comedy and tragedy that we first find in early Christian narrative (such as the Gospel of Marc) and in Dante. This *Stilmischung* would be unacceptable in the ancient logic of ontological correspondence between reality and representation, according to which a serious topic can only be represented with a sublime style.

6 Guastini mentions the examples of Pagan models, such as Orpheus, that are retained in the Christian iconography of the catacombs but with a radically new typological meaning, guaranteed by the humble, kenotic style of the representation (Guastini [2021]: 426).

7 A reading of Petrarch's ascent in continuity with Medieval culture was already offered by Bertone (1999).

8 «On the summit is the end of everything, it is that end toward which our pilgrimage is headed» (Petrarch, *Familiares* IV, 1). It is true that in early Christian times other terms were used to refer to pilgrimage (*orationis causa*, *itinerarium*, *passagium*), but around the age of Petrarch the term *peregrinatio* was already used with this meaning, although not systematically.

to do with the relationship between space and the sacred. In the Pagan tradition, the sacred is localized, belonging to some places and not to others: one must travel to access the sacred (Saggioro [2014]). Sometimes the presence of the divine is known by an established tradition – it is the case with sanctuaries, oracles and festivals – sometimes it is individually revealed to someone in a dream (Petsalis-Diomidis [2005]). Some of these pilgrimages are even obligatory, at least in the form of a civic delegation. The journey itself may be important as part of the rituals of preparation and purification for access to the sanctuary, but it is the actual physical presence in the sacred place that allows a participation in the divine, which may lead to the acquisition of knowledge or another benefit such as healing. The beauty of the location could have been a sign of its holiness, but the experience of it did not play a direct role in access to the sacred.

Early Christianity departed decisively from this tradition. Not only are there almost no records of Christian pilgrimages before the 4th century (Cozzo [2021]: 17-22), but even when this phenomenon began to spread after Helena's journey to the Holy Land, many Church Fathers advised against it (Bitton-Ashkelony [2005]; Frank [2008]: 830). This was mainly due to a theological issue: the Christian God does not dwell in one place on earth more than in others, «for we are the temple of the living God as God said, I will dwell in them and walk in them, and I will be their God, and they shall be my people» (2 Cor 6, 16). Gregory of Nyssa, for example, warned some monks not to travel to the Holy Land not only because the journey would be full of temptations, but especially because «to seek God at a distant place confines God to that place» (Gregory, *Ep*. 2). Good people can find God's grace anywhere, within themself, but if you are filled with evil thoughts, «even if you are on Golgotha and the Mount of Olives, and even if you are at the Anastasis, you are far from receiving Christ within you» (Gregory, *Ep*. 2, 16-17). Even Jerome, who had moved to Palestine, reminded Paulinus of Nola that «change of place does not bring us closer to God» (Jerome, *Ep*. 58, 3). Nevertheless, the Christian practice of pilgrimage developed anyway, despite Gregory's objections and the more temperate reservations of Jerome and Athanasius. It is evident, however, that those journeys were not aimed at reaching a place conceived as the only access to the divine, since that would have confined God to an earthly place. Why then did so many people decide to undertake such a perilous journey?

Based on the travel diaries of early Christian pilgrims, we clearly notice that the main purpose of these journeys was prayer and meditation. When Egeria reaches the summit of Mount Horeb, for example, her group follows a ritual that seems to have been well-established at her time: they celebrate the Eucharist, have a «particularly fervent prayer» and read a passage of the Bible related to the place they are visiting: «for this I greatly desired, that wherever we went, the relevant passage from the book of the Bible should always be read» (*Itiner-*

arium Egeriae 4, 3). Station after station, they pray and meditate on the episode related to their location. In other words, it seems that Egeria and the other early Christian pilgrims are making two journeys at the same time: a pilgrimage of the body and a pilgrimage of the mind. The outer pilgrimage appears to be an aid to a parallel inner pilgrimage[9].

The practice of the journey and the experience of the places related to the episodes of the Bible and to the life and death of Apostles and martyrs might put the traveler in a state of mind that is the condition for a spiritual encounter of the divine. While pilgrimage in the Pagan world almost always resulted in an acquired knowledge[10], which was revealed during the spectacles of the festival, by the oracle, or in a dream during the ritual of incubation, Christian pilgrims do not travel to learn something, as all the knowledge they need has already been revealed: they travel to obtain a certain emotional disposition, which in its turn can lead to an inner conversion and to experiencing the sacred[11]. This can be obtained everywhere, even at home, but the journey to the sacred places appears like an extraordinarily helpful exercise[12]. Early Christian pilgrims, at least until the beginning of the secularization of this practice in the late Middle Ages, only demonstrated interest for visiting the places they already knew of from the reading of the Bible, the Gospels and other Christian oral or written traditions, and almost completely ignored the rest. It has been thought that this was due to a lack of sensibility; in fact, this shows that the early Christian pilgrims were not driven by curiosity to learn, but by a desire to fill what they already knew with sensible impressions.

In some of these early Christian travel accounts, such as Jerome's letters on the pilgrimage of Paula, or Egeria's diary, we can find some remarks on what we would call today elements of the landscape. When Egeria describes her visit to Mount Sinai or to Moses' Spring near the Jordan river, she does so with

9 Natalucci writes of a continuous merging of inner and outer pilgrimage (Natalucci [2015]: 14).

10 This knowledge could have been theoretical or practical (for example in the form of therapeutical instructions), of collective or of individual interest, but in either case it had a cognitive character. When Plato introduces his philosophical *theoria* in analogy with civic *theoria*, he considers knowledge as the goal of both practices and prefers the first one as he believes it to guarantee a higher sort of knowledge.

11 Guastini (2021) convincingly proved how the centrality of knowledge in classic antiquity was replaced by the centrality of affect in Christianity. As an example, consider Aristotle's *Metaphysics* A («All men by nature desire to know») and 1 Cor 8, 2 («Knowledge puffs up, but love builds up»).

12 In addition to the experience of the pilgrimage destination places, several other aspects are involved in this regard, such as the fatigue of the travel and the fact of being far from home, which can be read as a spiritual exercise that helps Christians loosening the bond with their social background and learning how to be foreigners in this world: «For them, any foreign country is a motherland, and every motherland is a foreign country» (*Diognetus* 5, 5). All these elements are related to an emotional dimension, while the cognitive one is secondary.

great emphasis on the emotion she felt, despite the humble style typical of early Christian literature. She refers often, specifically, to the fulfilment of a *desire* to see – a desire so strong that it overcomes fatigue. Still, there is no interest for the observation of nature, neither in a metaphysical nor in a scientific sense. The description is strictly limited to the experience of religiously relevant landmarks: «scenery speaks of religious rather than geological formation» (Leyerle [1996]: 119). In Christian travelogues, almost every location is introduced by a phrase such as: «this is the place where this or that event occurred» (Ibid.: 122). However, this approach is exactly what makes these descriptions so interesting for a genealogy of the landscape. Nature is not observed as an object of knowledge but experienced for its (religious) significance for the subject. This significance is attributed by the pilgrim based on what Maurice Halbwachs (1941) called *legendary topography*. In his famous study on collective memory[13], he wrote that the localization of evangelical and biblical facts – which happened quite late, around the 4th century – had two main consequences. On the one hand, it allowed to use concrete places as *aide-mémoire* to topologically organize biblical memory; on the other hand, it projected value and meaning to those places. When collective memories settle on certain locations, these appear transfigured to the eyes of the pilgrims.

This is particularly evident in Egeria's description of her visit to Mount Sinai. She has been longing to visit it and she observes it from the standpoint of her previous expectations: some details of the sensitive aspect of the Mount appear significant to her.

> And although those [mounts] around are so high that I think I have never seen any equal, nevertheless the middle one, where God's majesty had descended, is so much higher than all the others […]. But the prodigious fact […] is that although the middle one, properly called Sinai […], is higher than all the others, yet it cannot be seen until you come to its very base, before you begin the ascent: when, on the other hand, if you have descended, having satisfied your desire, you see it as well in front, which was impossible before you ascended (*Itinerarium Egeriae* 2, 5-7).

Although her approach is not exploratory – she is not discovering something new –, she is neither simply projecting her beliefs on the land as it were an empty canvas. Rather, she observes it in search of something that might correspond to her previous knowledge and finds some *affordances* in what she sees. The height of the mount and the way it becomes completely visible only to those who already hiked it, appear to her in analogy with the glory of God, which is fully perceivable only by those who already believe in Him. This has been explained

13 See Feyles (2012: 123-153) for a discussion of the limits of Halbwachs' theory of collective memory.

using MacCannell's theory of sight-marker interaction (Leyerle [1996]: 127): when tourists visit a place, they first notice what they recognize. They already have an expectation, based on off-site markers (books, pictures, souvenirs) and on-site markers (brochures, guides, the behavior of other travelers). When they recognize a place, they connect the sight with the prior knowledge based on the markers and replace anticipated representation with experience. In this case, off-site markers would be the Holy Scriptures and the travel accounts of other pilgrims, while on-site markers would be the information given by the local monks. However, the specific experience of early Christian pilgrims cannot be totally reduced to a model designed for contemporary tourism.

4. *A typological approach to space*

The reference of a sensitive aspect (the height of Mount Sinai) to a spiritual one (the glory of God) could be understood using a theological category: that of *figura* (or *typos*). This term must be distinguished from allegory, as Auerbach (1939) suggests. The object, or event, interpreted allegorically has no concrete and historical consistence, it has no value for itself other than its spiritual meaning. If we understand an ostrich as an allegory of justice – the ostrich's feathers having all the same length, therefore being equal – we are not referring to any actual ostrich, living somewhere in a particular time and place. On the contrary, the object, or event, interpreted typologically is concrete and historical and at the same time it prefigures a future event which will fulfil it[14]. Jonah being eaten by the whale and emerging after three days is interpreted as a prefiguration of Jesus Christ's death and resurrection after three days: a *real prophecy* (Auerbach [1939]), a prophecy in flesh and bones, because those who propose this interpretation also believe that Jonah actually existed as a person who lived in a certain time and place. Although allegories can still be found in early Christian and medieval texts, according to Auerbach they must be considered as a legacy of Pagan culture, while only figures authentically reflect the Christian conception of the world.

At first, this exegetic practice only allowed to interpret historical concrete facts as anticipations other future historical concrete facts: mostly, episodes of the Old Testament prefiguring episodes of the New Testament. In the 4th century, starting at least with Augustine, typological interpretation would also allow to read historical facts as figures of their future spiritual condition. As Auerbach notices, this new enlarged conception would slowly lead Christian literature to

14 Georgia Frank (2008: 834) writes about a «typological» approach to pilgrimage, but she means scholars studying the different typologies of this practice. I use this term in Auerbach's sense, referring to the exegetic dispositif that saint Paul called *typos*, and Tertullian and Augustine called *figura*.

apply the typological approach to all sensitive reality and not only to the exegesis of sacred texts (Auerbach [1946]). The figural meaning of an event is what makes a story worth being told[15]. This is why Auerbach connects the dispositif of *figure* with the origins of realism in Western literature. If every aspect of sensitive reality, even the most daily and humble, is potentially a figure of truth, then, for the first time, all of reality is worth being represented.

Recently Guastini (2021) proposed to read early Christian visual culture through the lenses of the typological approach. In other words, he suggested that we can extend to images what Auerbach wrote about literature. Christians did not introduce images within their cult simply under the influence of Pagan culture, but as a result of their own specific conception of the sensitive world. The delay of around two centuries between the birth of Christianity and the first Christian images was often taken as a proof of the thesis of an external influence (Renan [1885]: 540-546); Guastini interprets it as an *incubation time* that Christianity needed in order to elaborate its own conception of visuality, different both from the idolatrous Greek-Roman one and from the iconoclast Jewish one. Just as Christians valued a *sermo humilis*, a humble language capable of rendering the most trivial aspects of reality, they also discovered something like an *imago humilis*. Although images are almost never defined as *figurae* in early Christian literature[16], the comparison between the exegetical-literary dispositif and early Christian iconology is legitimized by a similar logic. The linguistic representation of a historical event is advocated if it is recognized as a figure of a higher truth and so is its visual representation, if its style suggests the typological nature of its object. It is no coincidence that among the first Christian images are those of the episodes of the Old Testament that were already considered *figurae Christi* in the traditional exegesis, such as the story of Jonah.

Based on these premises, can we further extend the semantics of the typological approach to the experience of space? Auerbach convincingly argued that the use of this hermeneutical tool is linked to a new way of conceiving the relationship between the sensitive and the spiritual world; then, the same logic could be found in other areas of sensory experience. The same historical events are narrated in sacred texts, are represented in sacred images, and are settled in sacred places. Around the 4th century, right after the birth of a Christian practice of images, the cult of martyrs and relics starts being established, and with it the habit of pilgrimage. Although this public display of religiosity can be partly explained with the new freedom of Christians after Constantine, the fact that the sacred is to be found in the external world is also due to the theological elaboration men-

15 Frank defines Christianity as «a movement of storytellers» (Frank [2008]: 828).

16 Tertullian (*De idololatria* V, 3) refers to the bronze snake – fixed horizontally on a vertical stick – that God makes Moses build in the desert as a *figura crucis*, a prefiguration of the cross.

tioned above: the sensitive world is now a repository of potential figures. Icons, relics, *loca sancta* get their value from the spiritual dimension they refer to, their prototype; they are not idols that pretend to be valuable for themselves. At the same time, they are not simple allegories, pure inconsistent signs: they exist concretely and historically in the world, they can be experienced, visited, touched as material gateways to the spiritual world, anticipations of the Kingdom of God. «All pilgrimage is a prefiguration of the eschaton, with the pilgrim "experiencing proleptically the joys of worship amid the cultus of heaven"» (Pullan [2005]: 393). In sum, the places visited by pilgrims, where a collective memory of biblical events is sedimented, could be understood in a wide sense as *figurae veritatis*, figures of the truth.

In her essay on early Christian pilgrimage and landscape, Blake Leyerle notes that in the different travelogues from the 4th to the 6th century we see not only how the Holy Land changed, but also how the way it was experienced changed. At first, the Bordeaux pilgrim (around 330) was only interested in churches, monuments and landmarks: he did not go to Nazareth, for example, because «there was nothing to see». Egeria started being interested in natural elements, but she did not dwell much on their sensible aspect: she wrote what she saw but not what it looked like (Leyerle [1996]: 127). In Jerome the descriptions became more vivid: the terrain was conceived as a vehicle to evoke biblical history. In a letter to Marcella, he promised that she would see not only the places where scriptural events occurred, but indeed the events themselves (Jerome, *Ep*. 46, 13). Finally, «in the eyes of the Piacenza pilgrim […] the terrain, in all its variety, had become holy and potentially powerful, it had therefore also […] become visible. For the first time in this literature, we can see a real interest in local flora, fauna, and peoples» (Leyerle [1996]: 138).

Is this enough to state that the modern aesthetic experience of landscape was born as a compensation for the loss of this specific early Christian approach to space? Although we can see some elements of continuity – such as the stress on the affective rather than the cognitive dimension, or the way an external, sensitive experience may trigger an inner one – there are still other aspects that prevent us from firmly asserting this hypothesis. First of all, early Christian pilgrimage seems to be characterized by a dialectic between two poles: the experiential dimension we described (the sensitive experience of the *loca sancta* as an occasion and a support for a meditation and an inner, spiritual experience), and a theophanic dimension (the miraculous power of relics and icons, which is not replaceable and is not accessible everywhere)[17]. During the Early Middle Ages, the

17 Guastini describes the icons of the Byzantine tradition as a *trinitarian* theophany, to distinguish it from the Pagan one (Guastini [2021]: 477-494). He emphasizes how, despite their grandiose elements, they are still in the groove of the Christian tradition of contamination and *kenosis*.

theophanic dimension becomes gradually dominant, as it can be noticed reading the description of the practices and beliefs of pilgrims of this time, which almost have a magical component[18]. Secondly, the memorial dimension of space might explain the interest we have for some places of great historical and cultural interest but cannot account for the aesthetic appreciation of landscape, which can potentially occur anywhere. In fact, the lack of a strong historical characterization appears as an essential element of the disinterested experience of the landscape.

However, there is a moment in the history of Christian pilgrimage when the experiential pole becomes predominant and the whole of nature, as creation, becomes relevant: the time of Francis of Assisi.

5. *The Franciscan turn*

In a recent book, Flavio Cuniberto (2016) suggests a connection between the origins of the landscape and Franciscan culture. Far from considering Francis of Assisi the beginner of modern aesthetic experience[19], he believes that the first real examples of landscape date from the 15th century. Sassetta's *Mystic Marriage of St. Francis* (1437), for example, would be the first painting in which a specific natural element is recognizable, in this case Mount Amiata[20]. Not only was this painting born in a Franciscan context (Sassetta's Altarpiece was painted for the church of San Francesco in Sansepolcro) and it portrays Francis himself, but it depicts a Franciscan land. According to Cuniberto, the fact that central Italy – in particular, southern Tuscany, northern Lazio, Umbria and Marche – is considered so picturesque and offers some of the landscapes we now consider ideal is also related to the fact that these are the lands crossed by Saint Francis. The way he saw and interacted with those places and the way those experiences and those wanderings were narrated might have had a role in the shift of perspective that later led to the discovery of the landscape, and of those landscapes in particular.

18 The magical aspect consists in the fact that the virtue of the relic was believed to pass by contact to another object. For example, water, dust or oil was poured on the relics, then collected and distributed to the pilgrims (Frank [2006]: 194). The Piacenza pilgrim, who traveled to the Holy Land between 570 and 580, reports many similar facts, such as the habit of drinking from the skull of a martyr.

19 Henry Thode (1885) was probably the first to suggest a connection between Francis of Assisi and the origins of the Renaissance, and therefore modern art. The main flaw in his theory is to flatten Francis himself within modernity, instead of considering different turning points. In this regard, Émile Mâle's theory (1908) – who conceived 15th and 16th century art in the light of the Franciscan worldview as the last episode of Medieval art, before the Reforms and the beginning of Modernity – seems more convincing.

20 Cuniberto is aware that in the same years, or even earlier, landscapes appeared in Flemish art, but he does not elaborate; Mâle's research on the Franciscan influence on Flemish art might be helpful in providing answers.

According to Francis' biographers, his relationship to the practice of pilgrimage was not limited to his journey to Galicia and much less to his trip to Egypt in the context of the Fifth Crusade; his entire itinerant life, with its tireless wanderings, can be conceived under the mark of pilgrimage. In his 1226 testament (*Test.* 24 / *Fontes Franciscani* 122) he writes that his friars should live as «foreigners and pilgrims» (*aduenae et peregrini*). On the one hand we can see a revival of the Augustinian idea of Christians as citizens of the heavenly Jerusalem who are resident aliens on the earthly one; on the other hand, these words appear having a new radical meaning: to lead one's life as a pilgrimage through God's creation.

As once again Auerbach notices, by considering all elements of nature, including the humblest and most detestable ones, as God's creatures, Francis extends the typological approach from the holy Scripture to the whole book of nature (Auerbach [1946]: 165-173; see also Valagussa [2021]: 26-27). Every single creature can be conceived as a figure of its Creator and therefore is worth being loved and experienced. This new worldview (which is nothing more than a radicalization of the early Christian one) leads him to a new practice of pilgrimage that does not prioritize memorial sites and places hosting relics. He fully believes that God can be found everywhere, but he has a predilection for some particular places. This predilection, however, is not based on authority and collective memory, but on personal experience.

> For though he knew that the kingdom of heaven was established in every place upon earth and believed that divine grace was given to the chosen of God no matter where, he had discovered from experience that the Church of St Mary of the Portiuncula was filled with richer grace than anywhere else and was visited by heavenly spirits (1 Cel 106).

Even stronger is the role of experience in his discovery of Mount Verna, where Francis receives the stigmata. It is extremely significant that his most intimate encounter with God did not happen in a place that was traditionally considered sacred, such as a sanctuary, a tomb of a martyr or a holy city: it happened in a countryside location that is distinguished from other natural places only by its sensible appearance[21]. Before receiving the stigmata, Francis had visited Mount Verna several times and had been impressed by the looks of the mount and of the land surrounding it. In the *Reflections on the stigmata* (*Fontes Franciscani* 984-988), the part of the mount found by Francis is described as very apt to con-

21 As Cuniberto notices (2016: 54), it is probably no coincidence that the spiritually most significant place for Francis is also one of the most geologically interesting places that he visited. As it has already been noticed (D'Angelo [2014]: 45), the concepts of *Stimmung* and attuned space might be useful to account for the interplay between objective affordances and subjective *Sinngebung*. Recently Pietro Montani reconsidered the relationship between salient affordances and the work of imagination in a way that could be applied to the experience of space (Montani [2022]).

template: there Francis paused to consider the lie of the land and the landscape («*la disposizione del luogo e il paese*»)[22].

6. *The Secularization of the Christian experience of space*

Of course, Francis' experience at Mount Verna cannot be considered an aesthetic experience of a landscape. What Francis was contemplating was the creation as a figure of the Kingdom of God. According to Auerbach, after Francis, the earthly pole of the typological relationship slowly became so prominent as to obscure the divine one. Dante, who started from a Franciscan perspective, would reach a balance point: after him, we should not speak of a «figural» or typological dimension, but of a «creatural» one. In other words, the Franciscan worldview, soon after it became prevalent in the Western world around the 13th and 14th centuries, underwent a process of secularization that at first did not eliminate the divine but pushed it to the horizon[23].

This is where we meet Petrarch again. While Francis of Assisi ascended Mount Verna and encountered the seraph, Francis Petrarch ascended Mount Ventoux in search for spiritual elevation, but only found an admiration for the sensitive world. He perceives his undertaking as a failure, or at least this is how he represents it, as a sort of justification. In this way, he feels allowed to say that he has no choice but to continue contemplating the sensible world.

What in Petrarch still happens in a dramatic way, as an inner contrast between a rational will and a sensory desire, in Montaigne, two centuries later, takes on the contours of peaceful acceptance. In a chapter of his *Essays*, «On Vanity» (III, 9), he compares his two favorite practices: writing and traveling. He recognizes that both practices are useless, having no theoretical or instrumental purpose, but he no longer apologizes for this vanity: he claims it. On his journey to Italy, in effect a secular pilgrimage, he is now able to appreciate the landscapes he passes through, between a stop at the Holy House of Loreto and one at Ariosto's Tomb[24].

22 The Italian term «paese», country, has been used to refer to the landscape until the 17th century, when «paesaggio» became established (D'Angelo [2014]: 15).

23 Although Petrarch anticipated some typically modern elements, the medieval, religious, typological worldview survived at least until the Counterreformation, as shown by Émile Mâle (1908: 526-541). This might explain why the aesthetic experience of landscape in the proper sense, even if anticipated by Renaissance Humanism, fully established only in the 17th century.

24 To explain the origins of the landscape experience, we have resorted to the Franciscan conception of nature; to account for the cultural dimension of travel we can still refer to what I called memorial pilgrimage, which also survived in secularized form.

If Petrarch witnessed the moment when the human dimension started exceeding the divine, Montaigne lived in the time when this process almost reached completion: «religious ideas were drawn away from their wrapping in the element of sense and brought back to the inwardness of heart and thinking» (Hegel [1835]: 103): the age of the Reformation, the threshold of modernity. Now what Ritter calls *Entzweiung*, the split between objective reality and subjectivity, is produced.

In the modern age, the sensitive world still appears interesting, valuable and meaningful, beyond its practical employability, but its meaning is now indetermined. The landscapes seen by the travelers appear meaningful to them, although they cannot relate them to any particular meaning, like a *typos* after the eclipse of its *prototypos*. In this logic, we can already see an anticipation of the classic Kantian idea that experience of beauty is grounded in «a purposiveness without an end» (Kant [1790]: 111).

The possibility to experience nature as a figure of the Kingdom of God is lost and this is the condition for the birth of the modern appreciation of the landscape: a compensation, but not for the loss of the Universe as *kosmos*, rather for the loss of a typological experience of nature as a figure of the Kingdom[25].

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25 «[La] grandiosa elaborazione di una perdita: non dell'universo come *kosmos*, secondo la confusa interpretazione di Joachim Ritter, ma appunto di quel pre-paesaggio o non paesaggio che è il Regno come natura originaria» (Cuniberto [2016]: 120).

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