

The Power of Place

Pilgrimage and the Allure of Sacred Sites

by Martin Gray



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Since the dawn of human time people have described certain places as being holy or magical, as having a concentrated power or presence of spirit. Ancient legends, historical records and contemporary reports tell of extraordinary, even miraculous happenings at these places - the sick are healed, deities appear, artists receive inspiration, prophets see visions and sages attain spiritual enlightenment. It is a curious fact, however, that these sacred sites, so significant to human culture are so little known beyond their own religious traditions. Of enormous importance, they have received only limited attention from social anthropologists, cultural geographers and religious historians. Why this remarkable omission of awareness and understanding?

The story of the sacred sites, and certainly its finer analysis, is a journey through mythic realms and a witnessing of things that can be felt but not measured. Such matters, beyond the limits of possibility agreed upon by the establishment scientific community, are marginalized and conveniently disregarded. Additionally, a truly comprehensive study of the holy places inevitably introduces the student to deeper levels of their own being, territories sometimes frightening for overly rational minds. Yet the holy places and their mysterious spiritual magnetism call us to a deep exploration for they contain knowledge of vital importance to the well being of humanity and the planet we live upon.

In this short article I will share some of the understandings I have gleaned from twenty years of intensively studying the world's pilgrimage traditions and sacred places. The vantage point I bring to these investigations is three-fold: I examine the sacred sites as an anthropologist, visit them as a pilgrim, and photograph them as an artist. This multi-mode, objective and subjective approach, practiced at more than 1000 holy places in 80 countries, has allowed me to penetrate to the core mysteries of one of the world's most compelling enigmas.

Why do human beings make pilgrimages to sacred sites? How do we account for the historical fact - evident in nearly every culture and era - that sacred places have been and continue to be the most visited places on the planet? Two answers sometimes suggested are the momentum of religious tradition (an old condition) and modern day tourism (a recent effect).

The reasons for visits by contemporary tourists are easy to understand but give little insight into the enigma of the sacred sites or their power of attraction on human beings. Tourists find themselves at the holy places, not usually because of any spiritual interest on their part or that of the managers of their tour agencies, but rather because so many of the great pilgrimage shrines are repositories of monumental architecture and beautiful art. Being the sort of photogenic places that look enticing in tourist brochures and travel guide books, many sacred sites quite naturally draw large numbers of recreational tourists.

By contrast, pilgrims journeying to sacred sites for religious reasons are a far more revealing focus of study. There are several questions we can ask of these pilgrims. What is the root cause of their pilgrimage tradition? What is the original generator of the spiritual magnetism of their holy sites? What do the earliest myths and legends of their sacred sites reveal? Seeking answers to these questions we discover that there are several distinct categories of founding legends associated with the sacred sites. The examples are fascinating:

Certain places were recognized by shamans and sages as manifesting or radiating a feeling of power, a sense of energy, a mysterious numinosity.

Spirits, elementals and angels were seen to appear and consecrate specific geographical sites.

Pilgrims reported miracles of healing and extraordinary answers to prayers.

Spiritual seekers attained sublime levels of metaphysical consciousness.

Among the rich collection of foundation myths there are several common denominators, a crucial one being that nearly all the myths indicate that something extraordinary was seen or experienced by human beings. Various social anthropologists and cultural geographers, such as Turner, Bhardwaj, Nolan and Morinis have done valuable work in cataloguing the variety of founding legends but have usually terminated their studies at that level. Seldom have the behavioral scientists looked more deeply into the myths and symbols of the holy places, to inquire into the nature of the extraordinary phenomena that gave rise to the founding legends. This is a key insight into the unstudied condition of this great global phenomena: the specific myths that could help solve the riddle of the sacred sites remain unexamined because they are dismissed as being just stories, as being nothing more than simplistic and fantastic imaginations of preliterate and/or non-rational minds. How wrong this notion is! The founding myths of the sacred sites are actually descriptive metaphors revealing to the insightful student the character, quality or power of particular places. The arcane legends passed to us from archaic times are siren calls to our minds and souls, calling us to a new science and a transformation of human consciousness.

The really important question then - the unasked one - is how do we explain these extraordinary reports about the sacred sites? What unknown power could be causing the astonishing phenomena reported at pilgrimage places all over the world? Are they really miracles or are they simply unexplored realities? St. Augustine once said that miracles do not happen in contradiction to nature but only in contradiction to what we currently know of nature. Here lies the problem: we have not yet looked deep enough to comprehend the nature of the holy places.

That penetrating inquiry has been the passion of my life. Based on twenty years studying and visiting the sacred sites, I suggest that there is a definite field of energy that surrounds and saturates the immediate locality of certain pilgrimage places. Concentrated at particular holy sites is a subtle, multidimensional field of influence extending in space and continuing in time. How then may we explain the origin and continuing vitality of these site-specific energy fields? How is a power place a power place? What invigorates their undeniable spiritual magnetism? Thus far I have recognized twenty different factors that may contribute to the localized energy fields at the sacred sites. In the detailed writings on my web site, www.sacredsites.com, I classify and analyze those twenty factors according to the following four categories:

- 1) The influences of the Earth.
- 2) The influences of celestial objects.
- 3) The influences of the structures and artifacts at the sacred sites.
- 4) The influences of the accumulated concentration of a charged field of psychic power deriving from the focused intention, prayers and meditations of millions of pilgrims over long periods of time.

In the category of the influences of the Earth, there are the geophysical characteristics of the sacred sites, including localized magnetism, gravitational anomalies, geothermal activity, the presence of underground water, ionization, ultrasound and radioactivity. Paul Devereux and the Dragon Project, having conducted more than two decades of exhaustive studies of the geophysical anomalies at sacred sites, present striking evidence that ancient people recognized the powers of specific sites and utilized them for a variety of therapeutic, spiritual, shamanic and oracular purposes. How archaic humans discovered these power places was by an intimate exposure to the feel of the land and its subtle energies. With this sense they felt those particular places on the living earth that expressed a more highly charged vitality. These pagan ritual sites became the locations of the first shrines and temples. Over hundreds or thousands of years and the process of continuing construction at the sites, these places became the most visited and venerated sites on the planet: the great pilgrimage centers of Jerusalem, Compostela, Lourdes, Guadalupe, Bodh Gaya, Banaras and Mecca.

The second category of factors contributing to the power of place regards the influence of celestial objects on the local energy fields of the sacred sites. For reasons only little understood, certain power places demonstrate regular periods of increase in their emanations of geophysical energies that seemingly correspond to cyclical movements of the sun, moon, planets and stars. Many ancient peoples were concerned with the movements of the heavenly sphere and this evidence is particularly abundant at the

oldest holy places. Over the ages of people living at or near certain power places, it was observed that there were cycles of increase and decrease in the power of place and that those periods were linked to the movements of specific celestial bodies. These periods of energetic increase, for example the solstices, equinoxes and various lunar dates, became the first festival times of prehistoric peoples (I am speaking here of regularly occurring events as opposed to irregular celebrations of the hunt). These festivals were earth-spirit ceremonies that actually predate agriculture (and correspondingly predate the less ancient agricultural myths that would later be associated with the earth-spirit festival dates).

The young science of archaeoastronomy (astronomy itself being vastly older) has brought to light remarkable evidence that a large proportion of the pilgrimage sites of deep antiquity are topographically situated to be in precise alignment relative to the position and movements of particular astronomical objects visible from each site. The most ancient science of our species, only recently being rediscovered, was the interweaving of terrestrial astrology and sacred geography. There is a great galactic symphony of subtle forces playing upon our planet by virtue of the cyclical orbits and particular positions of numerous different celestial bodies relative to the earth. The power places, because of their profound energetic resonance with different celestial frequencies, are ideal portals where humans may access those forces. The times most suited to interdimensional access at these holy places are the particular dates encoded in each of their founding myths.

The third category of factors contributing to the power of the sacred sites concerns the design, construction and ornamentation of the structures that humans have placed at the sacred sites. A particularly fascinating example is the *Sacred Geometry* used in the construction of the pyramids, temples, mosques and cathedrals at the sacred sites. Sacred Geometry is the formulating geometry evident in many facets of the natural world, such as sea shells, crystal structure and musical intervals. Numerous early cultures, observant of the mathematically repeating patterns of nature, sought to encode those same patterns and proportions in the architecture they created at the sacred sites. Similar to how the mathematically precise shapes of musical instruments create and enable specific sounds, the purposeful shapes of some (not all) sacred structures assist in the generation of specific fields of energy and influence. Contributing to and amplifying these fields of influence, shrine builders also made use of sound, light, aromatic substances, jewel-encrusted icons and gold/silver-plated sculpture. The German philosopher, Goethe, once remarked that sacred architecture is frozen music; this is a palpable reality for many visitors to the great pilgrimage shrines.

The fourth factor contributing to the power of the sacred sites is the most mysterious, the least understood. This is the accumulated and concentrated power of human intention. As photographic film (a small piece of earth) can record the energy of light, and as audio tape (another small piece of earth) can record the energy of sound, so also can a sacred site (a larger piece of earth) record, remember or somehow contain the energy and intention of the millions of humans who have performed ceremony at the holy place. Within the shrines and sanctuaries, countless priests, priestesses and

pilgrims have gathered for hundreds or thousands of years. Dancing and chanting, praying and meditating, they have continuously charged and amplified the etheric fields of love and peace, healing and wisdom. The megalithic stone rings, Celtic healing springs, Taoist sacred mountains, Mayan temples, Gothic cathedrals, Shiite Islamic ziyarats, Hindu Jyotir Lingas, Buddhist stupas and Egyptian pyramids are repositories of the concentrated spiritual aspirations and attainments of all humanity. Here, too, are the places where Buddha, Jesus, Mohammed, Zoroaster, Guru Nanak, Mahavira and other sages and shamans awakened to the deepest realizations of spiritual wisdom.

The vast numbers of pilgrims visiting the sacred sites, both historically and in contemporary times, are not conceptually familiar with the different factors contributing to the power of the sites. They are not visiting for such reasons. They come because it is the momentum of their religious tradition that draws people to the holy places. Buddhists go to the four major places of Buddha's life; Lumbini, Bodh Gaya, Saranath and Kushinagar. Hindus visit sites sacred to gods and goddesses such as Shiva, Vishnu, Krishna, Saraswati, Shakti and Kali. Christians visit Lourdes, Rome, Jerusalem, Compostela and a host of sites associated with saints and the apparitions of angels. Taoists climb the sacred mountains of China; Muslims visit Mecca, Medina and the shrines of the Shiite Imans; and Jews go to the Western Wall and the shrines of great Rabbis.

Given my long fascination and familiarity with the power places, you might ask what is my philosophy regarding them? I believe it is highly beneficial for people to make pilgrimages to the sacred sites because of the transformational powers available at the sites. These legendary places have the mysterious capacity to awaken and catalyze within visitors the qualities of compassion, wisdom, peace of mind and respect for the Earth. The development of these qualities in more members of the human species is of crucial importance, considering the numerous ecological and social problems occurring in the world. At the root of all these problems may be found human ignorance. Human beings are out of touch with themselves (both their bodies and deeper states of spiritual consciousness), their fellow beings, and the Earth they live upon. The sacred sites and their subtle fields of influence can assist in the awakening and transformation of human consciousness and thereby in the healing of the Earth.

In closing, let me say a few words regarding what I have learned about how to approach and benefit from the sacred sites. The experience of a sacred place actually begins well before a pilgrim arrives at the site. First of all, choose an area of the world whose power places you would like to explore. Next, consult the categorized bibliography on my web site sacredsites.com which will give you the names of books (and other web sites) concerning sacred sites in the region of your interest. In the weeks or months prior to your journey, perhaps later in the evening when you are near dream state, read about the places you will soon visit and begin to journey to them in your imagination.

When you finally reach the immediate area or city of the pilgrimage place make the conscious mental effort to approach the shrine with the focused intention that you are going to plug into the power of place as you would plug an electrical appliance into a wall socket. This metaphor is very helpful to embody; it actually predisposes you to a more intense connection with the sacred sites. Then go to the site with a free and open mind. Maybe you will wander around first and then meditate or maybe it will be the other way around. Maybe you will take a nap or pray or play. There are no rules. Simply let the spirit of the place and your own being come into relationship and then let go to however that flows. If you want to learn a really effective way of plugging into the sacred sites and their energies, try the easy meditation technique shown on my web site.

The energy transference at the power places goes both ways; earth to human and human to earth. The wondrously magical living earth gives us tiny human beings subtle infusions of high octane soul food and as pilgrims we give the earth a sort of planetary acupuncture in return. True, the power places were mostly discovered in old times but they are still vital today, still charged and emanating a potent field of transformational energy. Open yourself to this power. Let it touch you and teach you while the planet is in turn graced by your own love.