

## **The Camino and Manuscripts**

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The Camino offers so much to pilgrims. It never ceases to amaze me how generous the pilgrimage is in terms of fond friendships, breathtaking vistas, awe-inspiring architecture, copious comestibles shared selflessly with good cheer of all kinds when we are worn out and travel weary. For me, personally, one of the things I love most about Spain is the treasure of books going all the way back to the Middle Ages. In fact, the birth of the Spanish language and texts that were written in that language parallels that of the growth of the popularity of the Camino. This is no coincidence. You see, the Cistercian and Benedictine monks coming from France into Spain built monasteries along this ancient thoroughfare to the sea and devoted considerable time and effort to cultivating a literary tradition. They recorded oral histories and traditions on sheep-skin vellum well as miracle tales of the Virgin Mary. Some of the most famous legends were about Santiago, the Moor-slayer, himself and his intervention in behalf of the Christian defenders of the peninsula. While many manuscripts are housed in Special Collections at University and National libraries, there are accessible samples and facsimiles of some of the most beautiful works on display in monasteries and museums today as priceless works of art. Many of these centers for learning and repositories of knowledge still stand today and are often overlooked by pilgrims who are too weary to stand any longer than is needful at the end of our 6-8 hour daily hikes. However, for those who still find reserves of energy for further enlightenment, the following sites stand out as unforgettable stops for a bibliophile along The Way of St. James:

1) The Monastery of Yuso at San Millán de la Cogolla, just south of the route between Azofre and Santo Domingo de la Calzada. La Rioja is known as the preeminent wine country of Spain, however there is a little place that King Felipe and Queen Leticia like to escape to nestled in the storied hills. San Millán was a hermit who lived in the caves of this lush landscape, but Gonzalo de Berceo is the one who truly brought fame to this monastery known as the birthplace of the Spanish language. It was here that the first evidences of what was to become Castilian Spanish are found. In what are known as the Glosas Emilianenses, monks scribbled notes in the margins and between the lines of an 11<sup>th</sup> Century Latin manuscript in a language they could understand. Any visitor can approach the display and clearly discern words in Spanish. There are also notes written in the Basque language, Euskera including a version of the Lord's prayer. For a linguist, seeing these texts and (many others housed in this beautiful monastery) is akin to an anthropologist seeing the first tools and implements used by homo-sapiens in the steppes of Asia. (See <http://www.monasteriodesanmillan.com>)

2) La Biblioteca Jacobea in the Monasterio of San Zoilo on the western edge of Carrión de los Condes is truly a hidden pearl. This little-known library claims to house every book, article, movie or musical CD written or recorded about the Camino de Santiago de Compostela. If they don't have it yet, they want to acquire it. Situated perfectly at the half-way point between St. Jean Pied du Port and Santiago de Compostela, it is also the site of many scholarly colloquia that if you are lucky to time your visit just right, you will be pleased to hear some of the world's renowned scholars expound upon the mysteries of Xacobeian lore. (See <http://www.bibliotecajacobea.org>)

3) The Templum Libri exhibit in the Castillo de los Templarios in Ponferrada is appropriately named as the "Temple of the Book." Many people have never even heard of the city of Ponferrada much less the Region of Bierzo where this paragon looms majestically over the Sil river. The Templar Castle is a gem in and of itself, but a part of the castle is set aside as a museum devoted to the most beautiful manuscripts ever published. From books of hours to early copies of the King James Bible, it even contains pages from Dante's Divine Comedy and early Picasso sketches of Guernica. (See <http://www.ponferrada.org/es/temas/servicios/templum-libri-paginas-bellas-conocimiento>)

4) The Cathedral in Compostela is more than just a place to celebrate mass and embrace the Apostle. While many pilgrims are either behind schedule and rushing on, those who stay to relish in the third most important shrine in Christendom find their visit richly rewarded. You may have seen facsimiles or copies of the Codex Calixtinus at any of the sites previously mentioned, but the Cathedral in Santiago houses the real deal. Recovered and restored after enduring a Dan Brownesque adventure in 2011-2012, it is *sans doute* both the foundational and crowning manuscript of the Camino. Written in the 12<sup>th</sup> Century and perpetuated as a travel guide with advice and even songs for the medieval sojourners, it contains some of the stories that explain how the Camino came to be and why it holds such a spell upon the souls of those who venture there up to the present day. Just as fascinating and less known by the common visitor is the Breviary of Miranda – a jewel of calligraphy and illustration. (See <http://www.catedraldesantiago.es/en/node/470>)

This is just a thumbnail sketch of what these sites contain and there are yet many more sites that deserve mention such as the Panteón de los Reyes in León with its 10<sup>th</sup> Century Mozarabic Bible commissioned by San Isidro himself. This is the same place that also claims to hold the one true Holy Grail. (See <http://www.museosanisidorodeleon.com>)

Just outside of Burgos is the Monastery of San Pedro de Cardena (<https://www.monasteriosanpedrocardena.com>). Not far from the Cathedral in downtown Burgos is the Church of Santa Gadea - principal in the legend of the Cid where Rodrigo Diaz de Vivar (El Cid) made Alfonso VI swear he did not kill his brother, Sancho. Of course, Roncesvalles is spoken of as the battle-ground of the famous confrontation described in the *Chanson de Roland* between Charlemagne's greatest warrior and the Basque forces in the 9<sup>th</sup> Century. The Spanish version of the event – though only 100 lines long can be found here. If you can't see all of these places the first time you walk the Camino, it will be just one more reason calling you back for your return trip.