

# **Pilgrimage tourism in Hungary**

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## **Introduction**

Hungarian culture is extremely rich in sacred values. The National Tourism Development Strategy highlights nearly 4000 sacred places, among which 227 are deemed both religiously and tourism-wise relevant for development. These values are located in 5 major tourist regions: Budapest and its surroundings, Tokaj and Nyíregyháza, Balaton, Mátra-Bükk, Pécs-Villány. The highlighted values can be categorized into four groups: 1. Places of worship, pilgrimage sites, churches, and other prayer locations. 2. Monasteries, retreat locations. 3. Pilgrimage routes and thematic paths. 4. Other sacred values. It is evident that these heritages can appeal to multiple target groups, including culturally inclined tourists interested in religious heritage, those seeking solitude and spiritual introspection, and pilgrims.

After several centuries, walking pilgrimages have been becoming popular in Hungary again: each year hundreds of people leave towards Compostela while others walk in Hungary, on one of the six domestic pilgrimage routes.

## **History and tradition of pilgrimage sites in Hungary**

During the time of the Hungarian conquest, Christian peoples had been living in the west and southwest for centuries, and Roman and Byzantine missionaries had also visited the Carpathian Basin. The worldview of shamanism was not unfamiliar to the conquering Hungarians, who made sacrifices to groves, trees, and waters. After the adoption of Christianity, King Saint Stephen and Saint Ladislaus prohibited pagan rituals in law, but the syncretism of ancient beliefs and the new religion, the merging of ancient cult elements and the new faith, did occur. Many sacred places, for example, developed near springs. One of our important pilgrimage sites today, Máriaverebély-Szentkút, has a legend that traces back to Saint Ladislaus's horse causing a spring to burst forth with its hoofprint. The painted trees along the pilgrimage route and the holy images hung on trees in Andocs or on the oak trees in Makkosmária remind us of the ancient cult.

Many Hungarian pilgrims arrived to the most significant pilgrimage sites of Christian civilization (Rome, Jerusalem, Aachen, Compostela) already in the Middle Ages, and the Hungarian Monarchy ensured the safety of the land trip of the crusaders and other pilgrims to the Holy Land in its territory.

Pilgrimages were already established during the foundation of the Hungarian state. The three major universal destinations were the Holy Land, Rome, and Santiago de Compostela. King Saint Stephen, who embraced Christianity, not only focused on eliminating pagan customs

and building the country's ecclesiastical organization but also extended his attention to creating the possibility of pilgrimage. He made the passage through the country safe for pilgrims heading to Jerusalem. The route led along the line Győr-Fehérvár-Tolna-Baranyavár-Valkóvár-Nándorfehérvár, and Hungarian pilgrims also walked on it. Saint Stephen even built a pilgrim house in Jerusalem (Pusztai, 2004).

Domestic pilgrimages had already developed in the 11th century. The tombs and reliquaries of the saints of the Árpád dynasty became pilgrimage sites. The basilica founded by Saint Stephen in Fehérvár, the destroyed burial place of the Árpád kings, including the resting place of Saint Stephen and his son, Prince Imre, became an important pilgrimage site. Relics of Saint Stephen were kept in many pilgrimage sites: in Zalavár, on Saint Martin's Hill in Pannonhalma, and in Pécs. In Várad (Oradea, now Romania), the basilica was destroyed, and pilgrimage did not resume after the expulsion of the Turks. The tomb of Saint Ladislaus became one of the country's most important sacred centers. Several Hungarian kings pilgrimaged to the "Hungarian Compostela." During the Reformation, fanatical Protestants destroyed the tomb, and in the 17th century, the Turks who occupied the city also destroyed the remaining church decorations and statues. The cult of Saint Ladislaus lives on in the legendary "water spurts." Healing springs emerged from the strokes of his sword, ax, and spear, which became pilgrimage sites: Mátraverebély-Szentkút, Debrőd, Csíkszépvíz (Romania), Nyitra (Slovakia).

Saint Margaret, the daughter of King Béla IV, was already revered as a saint during her lifetime. The Dominican nun living in the monastery on Margaret Island was honored as a saint during her lifetime, and seriously ill people found healing at her tomb. Pilgrimages approved by Pope Gregory XII to her tomb only began in the early 15th century. The condensed history of the tomb and earthly remains of Saint Margaret illustrates the destruction and devastation that history could inflict. Her tomb was destroyed by the fanatics of the Reformation and the Turks. Her bones were taken to Pozsony (Bratislava, now Slovakia), and they were revered until the 18th century. Her relics were destroyed during the time of Emperor Joseph II.

A Hungarian-origin Pauline Order's most important pilgrimage site was Budaszentlőrinc. Founded around 1250 by Blessed Özséb, the Pauline Order had monasteries in Transylvania and Croatia by the end of the century. In 1382, Prince László Opula founded another monastery in Czestochowa, Jana Góra, for 16 Marian monks. In 1381, King Louis the Great acquired the relic of Saint Paul the Hermit from Venice and placed it in Budaszentlőrinc. The monastery, known as "the Monte Cassino of the Pauline Order," became one of the country's most significant pilgrimage sites (Troeva & Hristov, 2017).

The tomb of Saint John of Capistrano in Újlak (Ilok, Croatia) at the Observant Franciscans monastery also held great importance. (Barna: Pilgrimage Zones) Although the Franciscan monk who played a crucial role in the victory over the Turks in July 1456 at Nándorfehérvár (now Belgrade) was only canonized in 1690, his tomb became famous for miraculous healings of the sick who visited it. Between 1458 and 1460, around 400 miracles were recorded, mostly related to long-term illnesses, with a few cases of fortunate escape from Turkish captivity. According to the records, people who experienced miracles came from 179 settlements, most of them from Újlak and its surroundings. (Bálint-Barna and <https://multkor.hu>) . His relics were taken to Nagyszöllős to escape the Turks, but Protestant nobles destroyed his tomb and bones.

We can classify pilgrimage sites into several types based on their nature, cult objects, and historical approach. The above-mentioned pilgrimage sites are associated with individuals. (Barna,2015). From the 14th century, pilgrimage sites of Eucharistic miracles attracted pilgrims across Europe. In Hungary, the most famous site of the bleeding host was in the Benedictine monastery in Bába, Tolna County, founded in 1185. The bleeding of the holy host began, and although the exact time of the miracle cannot be determined, records from the 1380s indicate that its cult had already formed. King Sigismund of Luxembourg and his wife Maria spent Easter in Bába in 1395, suggesting that the highest secular dignitaries wanted to celebrate in front of the relic of the Holy Blood. Bába was also one of the gathering places for the pilgrimage route leading to Santiago de Compostela. Due to the Turkish advance, the monks fled with the relic titled "Christ's Blood Relic," but it was lost nonetheless. The Turks destroyed the monastery. Records from the early 15th century mention that masses of pilgrims visited the ongoing construction of the cathedral in Košice (Kassa) to see the Holy Blood relic. In Vasvár, Vas County, there was a "Sacred Host smeared with miraculous blood," the origin of which is unknown (Foote et al.,2000).

In the 12th-13th centuries, during the medieval period, a strong cult of Mary developed, with monastic orders playing a significant role in its spread. People saw in Mary, the Mother of God, the mediator between themselves and Jesus. This explains the increasing awareness of local pilgrimage sites. In the 11th century, a church dedicated to the Virgin Mary was built over the tomb of Árpád, and by the 14th century, it became a well-known pilgrimage site. Máriagyűd was founded by King Géza II in 1148, and pilgrims have been visiting Mátraverebély-Szentkút since 1210. The Cistercian Abbey of BÉlapátfalva became a pilgrimage site from its foundation in 1232. The Marianka Pauline Sanctuary in Pozsony County was built with a donation from King Louis I. Mary's statue in the 14th century was one of the most visited pilgrimage sites in the country. King Louis the Great's daughter, Maria, Luxembourg Sigismund, Matthias Hunyadi, Leopold I, and Charles III all visited the Marianka site. Among the Observant Franciscan pilgrimage sites, the church in Szeged-Alsóváros should be mentioned first. They settled in the city in 1444, and their monastery operated during the Turkish period as well. They preserved two sacred images, the "Woman Clothed in the Sun" and the Black Madonna of Czestochowa. The plague of the 14th century left its mark on the Mary cult. Instead of the flourishing Gothic Madonna of the smiling centuries, people remembered the image of the Sorrowful Virgin mourning her son. The Franciscan church in Gyöngyös has been a pilgrimage site since the 1400s, and the statue of the Sorrowful Mother probably dates back to the 17th century. The third outstanding pilgrimage site is Csíksomlyó (Romania), which still attracts tens of thousands of pilgrims today (Fekete et al., 2023).

The 16th century saw two defining events: the growing threat of the Turks and the Reformation. In the fight against the Turks, the cult of Mary strengthened. Mary was seen as the celestial supporter of the fight against the Turks. The iconographic symbol of this was the "Woman Clothed in the Sun" (*mulier amicta sole* - Apocalyptic Woman). Mary is surrounded by a mandorla of sun rays, her feet stand on a crescent moon, referring to Islamic symbolism, and the snake alludes to the Turks. The 150 years of Turkish rule caused great devastation in the church, also setback the pilgrimage. Exceptions were made if a pilgrimage site was spared by the Turks. Among the exceptions were Andocs in Somogy County or the aforementioned Gyöngyös with the statue of the Sorrowful Mother. The Greek Catholic Basilian Monastery in Munkács was also spared by the Turks. Due to the Reformation, the culture typical of medieval religion nearly perished. Churches, monasteries, and holy sites disappeared, and pilgrimage receded. In the 17th century, the rule of Protestant Transylvanian princes

reinforced this process. Fanatical Protestants punctured the image of the Virgin Mary in Kátóc, a Rusyn village, and destroyed the miraculous Mary image in the Franciscan church in Nyírbátor, similar to the fate of the miraculous Mary image in the Cistercian Abbey Church in Pásztó. The pilgrimage sites of Lőcse (Levoca, Slovakia), Lucenec (Lucenec, Slovakia), and Brasov (Brasov, Romania) were completely destroyed by the Reformation.

The Reformation brought an end to the universality of medieval religiosity, and Europe's religious unity ceased to exist. The Catholic Church responded to this new situation through the Council of Trent held between 1545 and 1563. The cult of Mary gained new momentum, with the Council of Trent placing Mary at the center of religious attention, alongside the Franciscans and the emerging Jesuit order. The 25th session of the council addressed indulgences, saints, and emphasized the veneration of images, reinforcing these practices against Protestant teachings. Devotion was directed not to the images themselves but to the depicted saints (Hajdú, & Pál, 2021). During this era, the Loreto Madonna also gained significant cult status in Europe and Hungary, especially due to the Jesuits. Grassalkovich Antal founded the Marian pilgrimage temple in Máriabesnyő, and Prince Esterházy established the Chapel of St. Elizabeth in Kismarton in her honor. Notable symbols against the Turks included Mariahilf of German origin. Important pilgrimage sites included Solymár, Bodajk, Vértessomló, Tótszentkút, and the chapel of Krasznahorka Castle in Slovakia.

The early 17th to 18th centuries witnessed Marian images shedding tears. The most famous weeping Mary icon, attracting thousands of pilgrims to this day, is the one in the Máriapócs church in 1696. In Füzesmikolá, the Romanian Orthodox church's Mary icon wept for nearly a month in 1699, and the Mary image in Nagyszombat (Slovakia) attracted twenty thousand pilgrims annually around 1730/40 (Hajdú, & Pál, 2021).

In the 18th century, there was a shift in pilgrimage patterns. Due to the cost and dangers of distant pilgrimages caused by wars, local pilgrimage sites within small attraction zones gained prominence. Pilgrimage sites in Andocs, Csatka, Bodajk, Celldömölk, Bakonybél, Máriakálnok, Mártaverebély, and Búcsúszentlászló were renewed. The nature of the central object of worship also changed. While in the Middle Ages, pilgrims were drawn to saints' tombs and relics, in the 17th-18th centuries, they also flocked to authentic copies of images. There was also a shift in the veneration of saints, with different religious orders putting various saints at the center of their cult. The Franciscans emphasized St. Francis and St. Elizabeth, while the Jesuits focused on St. Ignatius Loyola. The general veneration of St. Joseph and the Holy Trinity remained unchanged. However, the devotion to Mary persisted. The Regnum Marianum concept is linked to St. Stephen, who dedicated the country to Mary on the day before his death, stating that Hungary has been under the dominion of the Virgin Mary since then (Misóczki, 2008).

The Enlightenment's cult of reason, enlightened absolutism, and especially the ecclesiastical policies of Emperor Joseph II, who issued the Edict of Tolerance, acted against monastic orders and pilgrimages. In 1772, during Maria Theresa's rule, a decree was issued that prohibited all pilgrimages, both within and outside the country, that extended overnight stays. The pilgrimage to Vienna-Marizell was the only exception. A year later, individual pilgrimages abroad were also banned. Following his mother's example, Joseph II started acting against monastic orders from 1782. He dissolved contemplative orders such as the Camaldolese, Capuchins, Carthusians, and Clarisses, deeming them not useful for the benefit of society. The Benedictines of Pannonhalma, Cistercians of Eger, Premonstratensians of Jászó, and the Paulines were not spared either. The Franciscan monastery in Buda was given

to a German-origin nursing order named after St. Elizabeth. The confiscated assets of other orders went to a newly established Religious Foundation, which supported priest training and parishes. The ecclesiastical policy remained unchanged under the subsequent emperors Leopold II and Francis I (Katus 529-538). This drastic change led to a sharp decline in the attendance of pilgrimage sites. Except for Mariazell, pilgrimages to foreign destinations disappeared permanently, severing centuries-old connections. Important places like Aachen, so significant for the Hungarians, were unreachable for Hungarian pilgrims. Domestic pilgrimage sites also became depopulated, with the assets of the maintaining orders and the pilgrimage sites confiscated. Thus, Mátraverebély-Szentkút lost its accumulated tangible heritage over the centuries, a loss that extended to many other valuable items. St. Margaret's relics also disappeared. Relics from the Nyulak Island were confiscated, brought to Pozsony, and later to Buda. The silver reliquary statue containing the saint's bones was melted, and the bones were burned. Devotional objects were available at public auctions. It was an irreplaceable loss for Hungarian church and cultural history.

In the 19th century, the church's situation somewhat eased, but it had to face an increasingly secularized world. The ideas of the Enlightenment influenced part of the clergy, who saw the persistence of superstitions and misconceptions attached to them in pilgrimages over the centuries. This led to a detachment of pilgrimages from the clergy, moving more towards popular religiosity. The leaders of pilgrimages were no longer licentiates (leading Catholic parishes with episcopal permission in the 16th-17th centuries and performing functions that did not require priesthood, including leading pilgrimage groups) but pilgrimage leaders and singers. The social composition of pilgrims also changed. While in the Baroque era, all layers of society participated in pilgrimages, in the 19th century, the populist nature of pilgrimages strengthened. Alongside secularization, opportunities arose that reinforced pilgrimages. From the mid-19th century, a multitude of booklets containing sacred images and pilgrimage songs were sold at indulgences and pilgrimage sites. These strengthened the dynamics of pilgrimage sites, expanded, and reinforced the areas around them (Barna, 2001).

A 19th-century religious revival was invigorated by Lourdes. In the last third of the century and at the beginning of the 20th century, numerous reports of Marian apparitions emerged. Some of these became famous, sparking pilgrimages to places like the cemetery chapel in Tallós (Tomasikovo, Slovakia) or the spring at Krasznahorka-Várhosszúrét.

During the 18th and 19th centuries, Hungary's sacred-cultic-spiritual unity was restored, drawing from roots dating back to the Middle Ages and the Baroque era, nourished by the Regnum Marianum concept. The spiritual unity of Hungarian Catholicism embraced the entire country. The cult of Mary as the Patrona Hungariae, along with the veneration of the Árpáadian saints, was prevalent everywhere. This unity was disrupted by the Treaty of Trianon. Ecclesiastical life and pilgrimages adapted to the frameworks of the new states. In many cases, the new states marginalized the cult of the Árpáadian saints or even prohibited pilgrimages to certain pilgrimage sites. This occurred in Máriaradna, which lost a significant portion of its sending areas as a result (Barna, 2001).

### **Pilgrimage tourism in the era of communism in Hungary**

After the conclusion of World War II, Hungary underwent a period of "liberation" by Soviet forces, leading to the establishment of the Communist political and social system in 1947. The Church emerged as a major adversary to the Communist regime, facing various punitive

measures such as property confiscation, the takeover of schools and institutions, and persecution of politically active clergy, including the cardinal (RomsIcs, I. 2005). The Communist dictatorship banned religion, suppressing the Church's influence until the political shift in 1989 following the fall of the Berlin Wall, allowing the Church to reclaim its authority.

Hungarian pilgrimages have faced various challenges throughout history, and sanctuaries disappeared without a trace due to events such as the Ottoman rule, the Reformation, the enlightened absolutism, and the consequences of the First World War. After the Second World War, the new world order in Central Europe had a devastating impact not only on pilgrimages but also on religious practices. Visiting a sanctuary took on a secular character, and in the 1960s, Hungarian pilgrims appeared at the Gyűd pilgrimage in Czechoslovakia. Such excursions provided an opportunity for religious experiences, family reunions, and even visits to the Harkány thermal baths. This phenomenon serves as a good example of the intertwining of pilgrimage and tourism.

### **Interpretation of the Via Maria pilgrimage route:**

The resurgence of the Catholic Church and the revival of faith, particularly in connection with Hungary's patron saint, Maria, underscore the significance of the pilgrimage tourism in Hungary. The Via Maria pilgrimage route spans 1,400 km, linking sacred and cultural heritage sites related to the Virgin in the Carpathian Basin. The Hungarian regions exhibit socio-economic and regional disparities (Kovács, Z. 2004), potentially influencing pilgrimage experiences along the route. The founders aimed to attract not only devout pilgrims but also tourists, presenting opportunities for sustainable tourism development. Situated mainly in forests and conservation areas away from urban centers, the route poses implications for the development of sustainable tourism. Pilgrimage, inherently linked to sustainability, promises both physical and spiritual well-being. The sacred site of Mátraverebély-Szentkút, for instance, relies on the holy well's material offerings believed to possess healing powers due to their sanctity.

The cult of Maria, originating in the 12th century, gained rapid prominence and exerted a profound influence in Hungary, where Maria is revered as the patron saint. Initially, Marian shrines featured relics such as hair, clothing fragments, and milk. Over time, these relics were replaced by statues of the Virgin as objects of devotion. The small Maria statue in Szentkút holds special significance, with devotees caring for its clothing and hair, believing in its ability to cure infertility in women. The devotion to Maria became localized in specific places, acknowledging the diversity of representations of the Virgin. Mary's feminine attributes, including motherhood, faith, tenderness, forgiveness, and hope, contribute to her widespread appeal. The establishment of the Via Maria pilgrimage route drew inspiration from the Camino towards Santiago de Compostela, yet the route's managers emphasize its uniqueness as a female pilgrimage route in contrast to the masculinity of the Camino.

### **The present era of pilgrimage sites in Hungary and their significance for today**

During the period pilgrimage destinations, in Hungary maintain their importance. Serve various purposes for individuals and communities. Although the nature of pilgrimage has changed over time these sites remain significant for cultural and historical reasons. Here are some key aspects of the present day pilgrimage sites in Hungary and why they matter;

#### **1. Religious Significance;**

Pilgrimage sites continue to be spaces where people can find solace reflect on their faith and establish a deeper connection with their spiritual beliefs. Many individuals visit these sites seeking healing and a sense of connection. Traditional religious practices such as prayer, rituals and participation in services are often observed at these locations.

#### 2. Cultural and Historical Heritage;

Pilgrimage sites often carry historical value as they represent the religious and cultural identity of the region. These places may house relics, artifacts and architectural marvels that serve as a link to the past while preserving traditions.

#### 3. Tourism Impact on Local Economy;

Pilgrimage destinations play a role in boosting economies by attracting tourists and pilgrims who contribute to increased economic activity, in nearby areas. The presence of tourists can greatly benefit establishments, like hotels, restaurants and souvenir stores leading to their growth.

#### 4. Community and Social Bonds;

Pilgrimages can foster a sense of community among participants, creating social bonds centered around shared beliefs and experiences. Events and festivals organized around pilgrimage sites may bring people together, promoting a sense of unity and solidarity.

#### 5. Educational and Inspirational;

Pilgrimage sites often serve as educational centers, providing historical and religious insights to visitors. They can inspire individuals to learn more about their faith, history, and cultural heritage.

#### 6. Personal Transformation:

Pilgrimages are viewed by many as journeys of personal transformation and self-discovery. The challenges and rituals associated with pilgrimages may lead to inner growth, mindfulness, and a renewed sense of purpose for participants.

#### 7. Interfaith Dialogue;

Some pilgrimage sites may attract visitors from various religious backgrounds, fostering interfaith dialogue and understanding. Shared experiences at these sites can contribute to mutual respect and tolerance among diverse communities.

#### 8. Environmental Stewardship:

Pilgrimage routes often traverse natural landscapes, promoting a connection with nature and environmental awareness. Some pilgrimage sites emphasize sustainable practices, encouraging pilgrims to respect and preserve the environment.

#### 9. Technological Advances:

In the modern era, technology plays a role in facilitating pilgrimages, with the use of navigation apps, online resources, and virtual tours enhancing the overall experience.

#### 10. Adaptation to Changing Trends;

Pilgrimage sites may adapt to changing societal trends, incorporating modern elements to attract a broader audience while maintaining their spiritual essence. Digital platforms may be utilized to engage a wider community and share the pilgrimage experience beyond physical boundaries.

### **Conclusion:**

In summary, pilgrimage sites in Hungary remain relevant and multi-faceted in the present era, serving as spiritual, cultural, economic, and communal hubs that adapt to the evolving needs of individuals and society.

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