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Secular pilgrims on sacred paths: A processual model of modern pilgrimage on the Carian Way

Sedat Degisgel [1]*

[1] Marmaris Tourism Vocational School Mugla Sitki Kocman University Sivritas Cd; Email: sedatdegisgel@mu.edu.tr; ORCID: 0000-0002-5937-4934

*Corresponding author

Abstract

This article contributes to ongoing debates on the relationship between pilgrimage and tourism by examining the lived experiences of walkers on the Carian Way, a secularised heritage trail in Turkey. Drawing on 22 in-depth interviews, this phenomenological study identifies a four-stage experiential process involving ritualistic separation, embodied engagement, the emergence of secular communitas, and moments of personal transcendence. The study proposes a process-oriented interpretation of modern pilgrimage, suggesting that its defining characteristic may lie in the experiential sequence of the journey rather than in belief or destination. This perspective contributes to ongoing discussions about authenticity, spirituality, and meaning-making in contemporary travel. Furthermore, the paper contributes to research on cultural and sustainable tourism by exploring how sacred heritage landscapes are reinterpreted as secular pilgrimage experiences.

Keywords: modern pilgrimage; secular spirituality; heritage tourism; communitas; authenticity; Carian Way.

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1. Introduction

The 21st century has witnessed a remarkable surge in the popularity of long-distance walking trails, a phenomenon that transcends cultural and geographical boundaries and signals a significant shift in touristic practices and motivations. Routes such as the Camino de Santiago in Spain and the Appalachian Trail in the United States attract hundreds of thousands of individuals annually, who voluntarily subject themselves to physical hardship and prolonged journeys on foot (Kim & Brown, 2021). This global trend is not merely a niche activity but reflects a broader societal turn towards what has been termed the "experience economy," where consumers increasingly seek transformative and memorable activities over material goods (Pine & Gilmore, 1999). It is also intertwined with the rise of "slow tourism," a conscious move away from the accelerated pace of mass tourism towards more immersive, meaningful, and environmentally responsible forms of travel (Dickinson & Lumsdon, 2010). In an era of hyper-connectivity and digital saturation, these trails offer a rare space for disconnection and introspection, making them potent sites for contemporary meaning-making.

This burgeoning form of tourism, however, presents a significant conceptual challenge to the foundational literature of the field. For decades, tourism studies have operated on a functional, often rigid, dichotomy between the "pilgrim" and the "tourist" (Cohen, 1979; Smith, 1992).

In classical tourism and anthropological literature, pilgrimage has often been conceptualised as a journey towards a sacred centre involving phases of separation, liminality, and reintegration (Turner, 1974). At the same time, tourism scholars such as MacCannell (1976) interpreted modern tourism as a search for authenticity in response to the perceived alienation of modern life. While these perspectives provided influential foundations for understanding travel motivations, subsequent research has increasingly questioned the rigidity of the pilgrim–tourist distinction.

Erik Cohen's (1979) typology further differentiated tourist experiences along a spectrum between novelty and familiarity. However, contemporary scholarship increasingly emphasises that the relationship between pilgrimage and tourism is better understood as fluid and overlapping rather than as a rigid binary. Recent studies highlight that travellers often combine leisure, cultural exploration, and personal or spiritual reflection within a single journey (Collins-Kreiner, 2010; Andrade Suárez *et al.*, 2024; Tsironis, 2022).

Scholars have increasingly emphasised that the boundaries between pilgrimage and tourism have become blurred in contemporary travel contexts (Collins-Kreiner, 2010; Norman, 2012). Travellers frequently combine leisure, cultural exploration, and personal or spiritual reflection within a single journey, making the traditional distinction between pilgrim and tourist increasingly difficult to sustain (Badone & Roseman, 2004; Heelas & Woodhead, 2005). While this growing body of research has significantly advanced our understanding of hybrid travel experiences, most studies still focus on established religious pilgrimage routes such as the Camino de Santiago. Less attention has been given to heritage trails where sacred infrastructures persist historically but are detached from contemporary religious practice. Examining such contexts can provide further insight into how pilgrimage-like experiences emerge in largely secular travel settings.

This theoretical tension is particularly evident in the context of rediscovered or reconstructed ancient trails, which form a distinct category from established pilgrimage routes. While a substantial and rich body of literature has explored the motivations and experiences of walkers on globally recognized routes like the Camino de Santiago, these studies often focus on a context where a historical religious framework, however diluted, still provides a dominant narrative for participants (Terzidou, Scarles, & McCabe, 2017). Similarly, research on wilderness trails like the Pacific Crest Trail often emphasizes themes of self-reliance, physical challenge, and communion with nature (Bennett & Gebhard, 2018). A

significant research gap, however, persists concerning heritage trails that are saturated with sacred history yet are functionally decoupled from contemporary religious practice. The Carian Way, an 850-kilometer network of paths traversing the rich historical and cultural landscape of ancient Caria in southwestern Turkey, represents a prime case for exploring this gap.

Unlike the Camino, which retains a well-defined Christian pilgrimage framework, the Carian Way follows routes that once connected sacred sites and temples dedicated to a pantheon of gods long absent from public worship. The individuals who walk its paths today are largely secular, following in the footsteps of ancient pilgrims but without their belief systems. The trail is a palimpsest, a landscape written over with layers of history, where the sacred is encountered as cultural memory, as aestheticized ruin, and as heritage to be consumed rather than as a focus of living faith. This unique setting provides an analytical lens for interrogating the nature of meaning-making in a post-traditional world. It raises critical questions: What motivates a secular individual to undertake such an arduous journey on a path devoid of its original religious function? How is meaning constructed in a landscape where the sacred has been transformed into heritage? What forms of transcendence or transformation, if any, are experienced in the absence of a shared religious narrative?

This article contributes to ongoing discussions on contemporary pilgrimage and tourism by examining the lived experiences of long-distance walkers on the Carian Way. Adopting a phenomenological approach that prioritises the subjective meanings individuals attribute to their experiences, the study explores how walkers interpret and construct meaning throughout their journeys. Rather than positioning these experiences strictly within a religious framework, the article interprets them as forms of secular pilgrimage emerging through embodied engagement with landscape, history, and social interaction. In doing so, the study offers empirical insight into how pilgrimage-like experiences may develop in contemporary heritage trails that no longer function as active religious pilgrimage routes.

Accordingly, this study is guided by the following research questions:

RQ1: What motivates secular walkers to undertake long-distance journeys along the Carian Way?

RQ2: How do walkers construct meaning while engaging with a landscape where the sacred is primarily encountered as cultural heritage rather than as living religious practice?

RQ3: To what extent do these journeys generate experiences of transcendence or personal transformation among participants?

To address these questions, this study adopts a qualitative, phenomenological approach, drawing on in-depth interviews with long-distance walkers on the Carian Way.

By de-centering formal belief systems and focusing on the experiential process itself, this study contributes to the reconceptualization of pilgrimage in the context of contemporary tourism. Furthermore, this paper contributes to the growing body of research on sustainable and cultural tourism by examining the transformation of sacred heritage into secular pilgrimage experiences in Europe. The article proceeds as follows: First, we critically review the literature on the pilgrim–tourist dichotomy and the rise of secular spirituality in travel. Second, we outline the phenomenological methodology employed for the study. Third, we present our findings, organized around the key themes that emerged from the walkers' narratives. Finally, we discuss the implications of these findings, proposing a more fluid, processual framework for understanding the modern search for authenticity and meaning through travel.

2. Conceptual Framework

To understand the complex motivations and experiences of walkers on the Carian Way, it is necessary to move beyond traditional tourism typologies and engage with a more nuanced set of theoretical tools. This study is positioned at the confluence of three critical streams of thought: the reappraisal of the pilgrim-tourist relationship, the role of secular ritual and spirituality in modern society, and the phenomenological turn towards embodied experience in tourism studies. This framework allows us to deconstruct the journey not as a simple act of leisure, but as a multifaceted process of meaning-making.

2.1. The Pilgrim-Tourist Continuum: A Critical Reappraisal

The foundational literature in the anthropology and sociology of tourism has long been structured around the conceptual dichotomy of the "pilgrim" and the "tourist." In this classic formulation, the pilgrim is defined by the sacredness of their quest. Drawing on Arnold van Gennep's work on rites of passage, Turner (1969, 1974) conceptualised pilgrimage as a liminal journey in which individuals temporarily step outside everyday social structures and may experience communitas—an egalitarian social bond that fosters reflection and transformation. The tourist, conversely, has been theorized as a quintessentially modern figure. Dean MacCannell (1976), in his seminal work *The Tourist: A New Theory of the Leisure Class*, portrayed the tourist as a kind of secular pilgrim, searching not for God but for authenticity in a world perceived as increasingly alienated and superficial. Yet, this search is often frustrated, as the tourist is presented with a "staged authenticity" curated by the tourism industry. While Smith's (1992) and Cohen's (1979) typologies offered more gradations, the underlying assumption remained: the pilgrim seeks meaning, the tourist seeks pleasure.

However, the realities of contemporary travel have rendered this rigid binary increasingly obsolete. Scholars have compellingly argued that the motivations of modern travellers are rarely so clearly demarcated, leading to a necessary blurring of these categories (Collins-Kreiner, 2010). Recent research further demonstrates that the boundaries between tourism and pilgrimage are increasingly blurred, as travellers frequently combine leisure, cultural exploration, and spiritual reflection within the same journey (Andrade Suárez *et al.*, 2024; Tsironis, 2022). Similar dynamics have also been discussed in studies of contemporary pilgrimage routes, where post-secular meanings and hybrid travel motivations emerge among modern walkers (Blom, Nilsson, & Santos, 2016).

This very problematization remains a central and active area of academic inquiry. Recent studies continue to re-examine the contemporary links between tourism and pilgrimage, confirming that modern travellers often embody hybrid, "polysemic" identities that blend spiritual seeking with leisure (Andrade Suárez *et al.*, 2024). This hybridity has only intensified; recent scholarship notes that even traditional religious routes are often approached as forms of cultural mobility and heritage-oriented tourism rather than as strictly devotional acts (Tsironis, 2022).

This has led to the proposal of a pilgrim-tourist continuum, where individuals can be placed along a spectrum based on their motivations. While this continuum offers more flexibility than the initial dichotomy, it still often presupposes a religious framework as the ultimate anchor for "pilgrim-like" behaviour. Our study contends that in a context like the Carian Way—a path rich in sacred history but devoid of a living religious tradition—the pilgrim–tourist continuum alone may not fully capture the dynamics of experiences emerging in such secular heritage routes. It is not about how "touristy" a pilgrim is, or how "pilgrimy" a tourist is; rather, it is about identifying an entirely different modality of travel that generates meaning outside of this traditional axis.

2.2. Secular Rituals and the Quest for Spirituality

The declining authority of institutionalized religion in many Western and secularized societies has not led to an absence of meaning-seeking, but rather to its relocation. As sociologists like Grace Davie (1994)

have noted, many people are now "believing without belonging," crafting personalized spiritualities outside the confines of traditional dogma. This shift from "religion" to "spirituality" prioritizes individual experience, personal growth, and immanent connection over transcendent, doctrinal belief (Heelas & Woodhead, 2005). Within this context, tourism and travel have become significant arenas for the performance of secular rituals and the pursuit of spiritual fulfilment (Norman, 2012).

Long-distance walking, in particular, lends itself to being understood as a powerful secular ritual. This is not merely a modern phenomenon; academic interest in "sacred journeys" (Moufahim *et al.*, 2023) and "spiritual tourism" has grown significantly as scholars seek to understand non-institutional searches for meaning. Contemporary research increasingly defines these journeys less by their destinations and more by their experiential goals, such as achieving "inner transformation" (Chhabra & Kim, 2023) or restoring a phenomenological sense of well-being (Sørensen & Høgh-Olesen, 2023). In this context, a ritual can be understood as a structured, repetitive, and often physically demanding activity that separates individuals from everyday routines and facilitates a shift in perspective or status.

The act of walking the Carian Way for days or weeks—waking at dawn, packing a bag, following trail markers, enduring physical discomfort, and arriving at a new destination—thus constitutes a highly structured daily liturgy. This repetitive, embodied practice creates a liminal zone, analogous to that described by Turner, but its purpose is not dictated by a religious institution. Instead, the "sacred" is sought in personal achievement, in moments of aesthetic rapture viewing a sunset over a ruin, or in a profound sense of connection to nature and history. The journey itself becomes the sacred text, and the act of walking becomes the rite of passage, a voluntary ordeal undertaken to mark a life transition, overcome a personal crisis, or simply to create a space for deep reflection.

2.3. Embodied Experience and the Production of Meaning

Finally, to fully grasp the transformative potential of such a journey, we must move beyond a model of tourism as a primarily visual act—the "tourist gaze" those privileges sightseeing and the consumption of landscapes as scenery (Urry, 1990). Indeed, contemporary tourism theory has increasingly begun to rethink embodiment in order to challenge this visual dominance, focusing instead on the multi-sensory and affective dimensions of the travel experience (Yang, 2025). Long-distance walking is a fundamentally embodied practice. Meaning is not simply observed in the landscape; it is produced through the dynamic interaction between the moving body and the environment (Crouch & Desforges, 2003). The steepness of a path, the heat of the sun, the pain in one's muscles, and the rhythm of one's own breath are not mere inconveniences; they are central components of the experience itself. This phenomenological perspective emphasizes that the world is known not just through intellect, but through the lived body.

Recent work on modern pilgrimage supports this, framing the walk as a deeply phenomenological process of seeking well-being through corporeal engagement (Sørensen & Høgh-Olesen, 2023). Furthermore, the field of embodied cognition suggests that these physical experiences—such as exhaustion, pain, or the sensation of ancient stones underfoot—are not separate from the mind but actively shape the cognitive and emotional outcomes of the journey (Kock & Ringberg, 2019).

On the Carian Way, heritage is not a static object in a museum. An ancient Roman road is understood differently when its stones are felt underfoot for hours; the scale of an ancient city is grasped by the physical effort required to traverse it. This "haptic" engagement with history creates a powerful sense of connection to the past that is visceral and personal (Edensor, 2001). The physical struggle and the sensory immersion work together to quiet the "noise" of modern life, allowing for an internal journey to unfold in parallel with the external one. It is in this embodied encounter—where the walker's

exhaustion meets the trail's history—that the most profound moments of insight and transformation often occur.

Therefore, our conceptual framework posits that it is through the synthesis of these elements – the transcendence of the pilgrim-tourist binary (Andrade Suárez *et al*., 2024; Tsironis, 2022), the performance of a secular walking ritual (Chhabra & Kim, 2023; Sørensen & Høgh-Olesen, 2023), and the deeply embodied engagement with the landscape (Yang, 2025; Kock & Ringberg, 2019)—that a process of modern, secular pilgrimage can be truly understood.

2.4 The Research Setting: The Carian Way and Its Historical–Cultural Background

The Carian Way is situated in the historical region of Caria, located in southwestern Anatolia along the Aegean coast of present-day Türkiye. Caria emerged as a distinct cultural and political entity from the late Bronze Age onward and played a significant role during the Classical, Hellenistic, and Roman periods. Rather than constituting a unified empire, Caria was characterized by a network of cities, sanctuaries, and rural settlements connected through trade routes, sacred paths, and administrative roads. These routes facilitated not only economic exchange but also ritual movement between inland settlements and coastal centers, embedding mobility into the cultural and religious life of the region.

Many segments of what is today known as the Carian Way follow ancient paths that once linked major Carian cities such as Mylasa, Alinda, and Stratonikeia, as well as rural sanctuaries and coastal harbours. In antiquity, these routes served multiple functions, including pilgrimage to local cult sites, seasonal movement, military logistics, and everyday travel between urban and rural spaces. As a result, movement through the landscape was historically intertwined with both sacred and mundane practices, producing a layered cultural landscape in which walking functioned as a meaningful social activity rather than a purely instrumental one. The region reached its political and cultural zenith during the 4th century BCE under the Hecatomnid dynasty, a period that saw the expansion of sacred routes and monumental architecture that continue to structure the landscape encountered by modern walkers.

Officially opened in 2013, the contemporary Carian Way was developed in the early 21st century as a marked long-distance hiking route through the systematic documentation, mapping, and signposting of these historically embedded paths. The route extends for more than 800 kilometres and is composed of six main stages across the Muğla and Aydın regions (Gül & Küçükuysal, 2025). Initiated through heritage and cultural route projects, the trail was designed to reconnect dispersed archaeological sites, villages, and landscapes into a continuous walking itinerary. While the modern route does not revive an active religious pilgrimage tradition, it consciously draws upon the region's historical depth and material remains. As such, the Carian Way constitutes a setting in which ancient infrastructures of movement are reactivated within a contemporary context of cultural mobility, leisure walking, and experiential engagement with heritage.

3. Methodology

To investigate the nuanced experiences and meanings ascribed to walking the Carian Way, this study employed a qualitative research design rooted in an interpretive, phenomenological philosophy. Phenomenology, at its core, is concerned with understanding the lived experience—the *lifeworld*—of individuals and the essential structures of their consciousness (Moustakas, 1994). This approach was deemed most appropriate as the research objective was not to produce generalizable statistics or test a hypothesis in a positivist sense, but rather to achieve a deep, contextualized, and empathetic understanding of the secular pilgrimage process from the perspective of those undertaking it. By privileging the subjective narratives and embodied realities of the walkers, we aimed to capture the essence of their journey and how they construct meaning in a landscape rich with history but devoid of a contemporary sacred function.

3.1 Case Study Rationale: The Carian Way as an Empirical Case

The research was designed as an in-depth, single-case study. A case study approach is particularly useful for investigating complex social phenomena in their real-life context, especially when the boundaries between the phenomenon and its context are not clearly evident (Yin, 2018). The Carian Way was selected through purposive sampling as an empirically rich case that enables an in-depth exploration of contemporary meaning-making processes associated with long-distance walking and modern pilgrimage.

Unlike established routes such as the Camino de Santiago, which—despite increasing secularization—still operate within a powerful and continuous Christian pilgrimage framework, the Carian Way lacks an overarching, living religious narrative. Its significance is instead grounded in the material remains and symbolic legacy of the ancient Carian civilization, offering what may be described as a "sacred past" without an institutionalized "sacred present." This condition allows the study to examine how meanings emerge in the absence of a dominant religious authority or shared doctrinal framework.

At the same time, the Carian Way differs from long-distance wilderness trails, such as the Pacific Crest Trail in the United States, where experiential emphasis is often placed primarily on nature, endurance, and survival. The Carian Way constitutes a cultural landscape shaped by successive historical layers, requiring walkers to continuously negotiate between natural terrain and archaeological heritage. Finally, the route attracts a heterogeneous group of participants, including Turkish nationals engaging with their own cultural heritage and international walkers seeking alternative, less-commercialized routes. This diversity provides a valuable empirical context for exploring how different cultural backgrounds and expectations shape the interpretation and experience of the journey.

3.2 Data Collection and Sampling

Data were collected over a six-month period, encompassing both the spring (March–May) and autumn (September–November) hiking seasons to capture a diverse range of experiences and environmental conditions. A multi-method qualitative approach was adopted, combining semi-structured in-depth interviews with prolonged participant observation to enable data triangulation and provide a rich, multi-layered dataset.

3.2.1. Semi-Structured In-depth Interviews

The primary data source consisted of in-depth interviews with long-distance walkers. To ensure authentic expression and to capture cultural and linguistic nuances, interviews were conducted in the language in which participants felt most comfortable. Interviews with domestic walkers were conducted in Turkish. Interviews with international participants (primarily from the UK, Germany, and the Netherlands) were conducted in English, which functioned as a shared lingua franca among the group. All international participants demonstrated high proficiency in English and explicitly expressed a preference to be interviewed in English. All interviews were conducted directly by the researcher, who is fluent in both Turkish and English, without the use of interpreters, thereby minimizing potential loss of meaning or distortion in the data. Interviews were conducted primarily on-site along the Carian Way, including on the trail itself and in guesthouses located in trail settlements. Participants were recruited through a combination of purposive sampling on the trail and in guesthouses, and snowball sampling, where initial contacts facilitated introductions to other walkers. The criteria for inclusion were that the individual had walked for a minimum of five consecutive days on the trail, ensuring they had moved beyond the initial phase of a short-term hike and into a more immersive journey. This strategy yielded a diverse sample of 22 walkers (12 international, 10 Turkish; 13 male, 9 female; ages ranging from 24 to 68) until theoretical saturation was reached, the point at which new interviews ceased to generate new themes or significant insights.

Table 1. *Participant Profile.*

Category	Description
Total participants	22 long-distance walkers
Nationality	12 international, 10 Turkish
Gender	13 male, 9 female
Age range	24–68 years
Countries represented	Turkey, Germany, United Kingdom, France, Netherlands
Inclusion criterion	Minimum of five consecutive days walking on the Carian Way

The international participants originated primarily from European countries (including Germany, the United Kingdom, France, and the Netherlands), reflecting the dominant international user profile of the route.

All participants provided informed consent before the interviews, which were audio-recorded with their permission. The interviews, lasting between 45 and 90 minutes, were semi-structured in nature. The interview guide was designed to be a flexible tool that encouraged narrative storytelling. Instead of direct questions like "Why are you here?", prompts were framed phenomenologically, such as, "Can you tell me the story of what brought you to this trail?" or "Can you describe a moment on the trail that has stayed with you?". This approach allowed participants to articulate their experiences in their own terms, focusing on what was most salient to them.

3.2.2. Participant Observation and Reflexive Journaling

To complement the interview data and gain a deeper, embodied understanding of the walking experience, the lead researcher engaged in participant observation. This involved walking three distinct multi-day sections of the Carian Way, covering a total of 25 days and over 300 kilometres. The researcher adopted the role of an "observer-as-participant," fully engaging in the daily routines of walking, sharing meals, and staying in the same accommodations as other trekkers. This ethnographic approach provided invaluable insights into the non-verbal and corporeal aspects of the journey: the physical toil of ascents, the sensory experience of the landscape, the unspoken etiquette of the trail, and the spontaneous formation of communitas among strangers. Detailed field notes were taken at the end of each day. A reflexive journal was also maintained throughout the research process to critically examine the researcher's own positionality, assumptions, and emotional responses, and to track how these might be shaping the research process and interpretation.

3.3. Data Analysis

Data analysis was a systematic and iterative process, following the six-phase guide to thematic analysis outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006), a method well-suited for identifying and interpreting patterns of meaning across a qualitative dataset. The analysis was largely inductive, meaning that the themes were derived directly from the data itself, rather than being strictly fitted into a pre-existing theoretical framework.

The process began with the verbatim transcription of all audio-recorded interviews. In the first phase, the researcher immersed himself in the data by reading and re-reading the transcripts and field notes multiple times. The second phase involved a line-by-line open coding of the entire dataset. In the third phase, these initial codes were collated into potential themes. The fourth phase involved a rigorous review of these themes, checking them against both the coded extracts and the entire dataset. In this

recursive process, some themes were combined, others were split, and some were discarded. In the fifth phase, the themes were refined, clearly defined, and named. The final phase involved the selection of vivid participant quotes to illustrate these themes, leading to the final write-up.

3.4. Rigor, Trustworthiness, and Ethical Considerations

To ensure the trustworthiness and rigor of this study, several measures were taken. Triangulation was achieved by constantly comparing data from interviews with observations recorded in the field notes. Peer debriefing was regularly conducted with a senior academic colleague who acted as a critical friend, challenging interpretations and helping to ensure that the emerging themes were well-grounded in the data.

Ethical considerations were paramount throughout the research. All participants were informed of the research purpose, the voluntary nature of their participation, and their right to withdraw at any time. To ensure anonymity, all names and identifying details were replaced with pseudonyms in the research findings. All data, including audio recordings and transcripts, were stored securely on an encrypted hard drive. In accordance with the ethical standards for non-invasive social research at the time of the study, informed consent was obtained from all participants, and their anonymity was strictly maintained throughout the process.

4. Findings and Discussion

The thematic analysis of the 22 in-depth interviews and extensive ethnographic field notes revealed a series of interrelated themes that collectively illuminate the lived experience of walking the Carian Way. In direct response to the study's research objectives, these findings are structured according to the three primary research questions: (1) the underlying motivations for the journey (RQ1), (2) the process of meaning construction through movement (RQ2), and (3) the experiences of transcendence and personal transformation (RQ3).

These themes trace a coherent experiential arc, from the initial ritual of separation to moments of profound personal insight. While presented sequentially for analytical clarity, they often overlapped and reinforced one another within the walkers' narratives, demonstrating the holistic and synergistic nature of the secular pilgrimage process. In the following sections, these empirical findings are presented alongside a discussion that engages with contemporary literature on secular pilgrimage and tourism experiences.

4.1. The Call of the Trail: Motivations for the Journey (RQ1)

The journey on the Carian Way was consistently framed not as a simple holiday, but as a deliberate and necessary ritual of separation from the perceived cacophony of contemporary life. This initial act resonates with the first stage of a classic rite of passage (Turner, 1974), a conscious severing of ties with the profane world of daily routine. Consistent with recent scholarship on "polysemic" travel identities (Andrade Suárez *et al.*, 2024), a primary driver for this ritualistic break was a profound sense of burnout—a state of emotional and physical exhaustion linked to the relentless pressures of modern corporate culture. As one walker, a 32-year-old marketing professional, articulated, the walk functioned as a form of self-prescribed therapy:

> *After ten years at an ad agency in Istanbul, I felt like I had hit a wall. Emails, meetings, presentations... I couldn't breathe anymore. My body was there, but my mind was gone. For me, the Carian Way meant 'pulling the plug.' The very idea of being somewhere my phone wouldn't ring, where my only job was to walk, felt like paradise. It wasn't an escape; it was a rescue mission for myself.* [Participant 3, Turkish, Female, 32]

This desire for disconnection extended powerfully into the digital realm, aligning with the growing academic discourse on "digital detox" tourism (Syvertsen & Enli, 2020). Participants described a deep fatigue with the curated and performative nature of social media. The trail offered a space of unmediated reality, where the value of an experience was measured not by its "shareability" but by its direct, personal impact. This aligns with what Tsironis (2022) describes as a shift toward "cultural mobility," where the traveler seeks authenticity away from institutionalized or digitized narratives. A 28-year-old international participant explained this contrast vividly:

> *I was tired of seeing how 'perfect' everyone's life was on social media. I wanted to do something real, something unfiltered, something that hurt a little. My aching muscles, the weight of the pack on my back, the dirt under my fingernails... these were more real than anything I'd seen on Instagram in years. This was my proof of life.* [Participant 14, International, Female, 28]

Beyond escaping these pervasive pressures, the walk was frequently positioned as a liminal activity undertaken during significant life transitions. For participants facing career changes or personal loss, the trail served as a protected space to process change. This reinforces the conceptualization of the Carian Way as a "secular sacred" space where meaning is constructed through the physical negotiation of the landscape rather than religious dogma. For a 55-year-old international walker, the trail was a space for reorientation:

> *The children grew up and left home. I'd reached the highest I could go in my career. The question 'So, what now?' was eating away at my mind. This trail wasn't about finding an answer; it was about finding a quiet enough place to finally hear the right question.* [Participant 8, International, Male, 55]

4.2. "Every Step is History": An Embodied Dialogue with Time and Place (RQ2)

Once the ritual of separation was complete, participants described a profound shift in perception, moving beyond a purely visual consumption of the landscape—the classic "tourist gaze" (Urry, 1990)—towards a deep, multi-sensory and embodied engagement. This theme addresses RQ2 by illustrating how the corporeal act of walking transformed their relationship with history, nature, and their own bodies through what Yang (2025) identifies as the affective dimensions of the travel experience. A key dimension of this was a haptic engagement with the past, where heritage was understood viscerally. As a 62-year-old history enthusiast remarked, the trail collapsed the distance between the present self and the historical past:

> *You read about the Romans, you see their artifacts behind glass. But when your feet are aching from walking on the same flagstones their legions walked on, it becomes a part of your body, not just a story in a book.* [Participant 11, International, Male, 62]

These accounts illustrate how historical imagination and bodily effort were intertwined in walkers' narratives, reinforcing the embodied dimension of meaning-making along the trail. The physicality of the journey also functioned as a powerful form of secular meditation. The intense focus on the present moment—the breath, the next step, the immediate physical challenge—effectively disciplined the wandering mind. This process of "forced mindfulness" aligns with the contemporary blurring of boundaries between secular leisure and spiritual practice (Collins-Kreiner, 2010), where physical exertion serves as a catalyst for meaning-making. A 45-year-old manager explained:

> *Back home, my mind races a million miles an hour—deadlines, targets, emails. On the trail, after the first hour, it's just... the sound of my boots, my breathing, the next step. The pain in my legs is real, so the worries from the office suddenly feel less real. The body's reality crowds out the mind's anxiety.* [Participant 2, Turkish, Male, 45]

This deep immersion often led to moments of imaginative connection with past inhabitants, creating a powerful sense of temporal depth. By engaging with the "sacred past" of the Carian landscape in the absence of a "sacred present," participants constructed an individualized authenticity (MacCannell, 1976) that was rooted in the material remains of the trail. This temporal dialogue allowed walkers to situate their personal journey within a much larger human story, transforming the walk from a mere physical activity into a profound existential inquiry.

4.3. The Trail Family: Communitas and Social Transformation (RQ3)

While RQ3 primarily concerns personal transcendence, this section addresses the collective social conditions that enable such transformation. The journey on the Carian Way, while often undertaken in solitude, was paradoxically characterized by the formation of intense, albeit ephemeral, social bonds. This theme addresses RQ3 by illustrating how the dissolution of everyday social hierarchies contributes to participants' sense of personal transformation. This phenomenon is best understood through Turner's (1969) concept of *communitas*—a transient state of unstructured, egalitarian social relationship that transcends the hierarchies of everyday life. On the Carian Way, a secular form of *communitas* emerged as a central pillar of the experience, acting as a powerful social leveler. A 58-year-old CEO reflected on this dissolution of social structure:

> *In my normal life, I am always 'the boss.' There's a distance, a formality. On the trail, I am just a guy with a heavy pack and sore knees, the same as everyone else. Nobody cares what I do for a living. They care if I have enough water. For the first time in years, I felt like I was connecting with people as just... a person. It was incredibly liberating.* [Participant 19, International, Male, 58]

This egalitarian environment fostered a "moral economy of the trail," a culture of trust and spontaneous reciprocity that stands in stark contrast to the transactional logic of modern society. As noted in recent studies on secular pilgrimage (Tsironis, 2022), such "unmediated" social interactions are central to the transformative potential of the journey, allowing participants to rediscover a sense of collective humanity. The inherent challenges of the trail created a state of mutual dependency, as a 26-year-old solo female traveler recounted:

> *I had miscalculated the water I needed... I was starting to genuinely panic. Then I met two guys from Germany... they saw my face, stopped, and insisted I take one of their full water bottles. I never saw them again. You just don't forget that. There's a code on the trail, an unspoken law of looking out for each other.* [Participant 6, International, Female, 26]

Significantly, this sense of communitas extended to include interactions with the local inhabitants through the Turkish tradition of *misafirperverlik* (hospitality). These encounters, described as distinct from commercialized tourist-host relationships (Smith, 1992), reinforced the "polysemic" nature of the route (Andrade Suárez *et al*., 2024), where the traveller is welcomed not as a consumer, but as a guest in a living cultural landscape. This shift from "tourist" to "guest" represents a key stage in the participants' transformation, fostering a lasting sense of connection to the region and its people that persists long after the physical journey ends.

4.4. "That Moment": Experiences of Secular Sacredness and Personal Transcendence (RQ3)

The culmination of the walkers' journey—the physical effort, the historical immersion, and the social connection—frequently led to moments of intense emotional and psychological insight. As the final dimension of RQ3, this theme captures the peak experiences that facilitate lasting personal transformation. While devoid of a formal religious framework, these moments were often described in spiritual or transcendent terms, echoing the growing body of literature on secular spirituality in tourism (Norman, 2012). In this context, spirituality did not refer to institutional religious belief but rather to a

personal sense of meaning, reflection, and emotional intensity emerging through embodied engagement with landscape and journey.

Participants often struggled to articulate these ineffable experiences, referring to them simply as "that moment"—a phenomenon that Tsironis (2022) identifies as the emergence of a "personal altar" within the secular journey. A 41-year-old walker described such a moment:

> *I had been walking alone for six hours. I reached the top of this hill just as the sun was setting over the sea. I was exhausted, sweaty, and completely alone. And I just sat there and cried. Not from sadness. It was... a feeling of pure perfection, a sense of being exactly where I was supposed to be in the universe. I'm not a religious person at all, but I guess you could call it a spiritual moment.* [Participant 18, International, Female, 41]

Crucially, these moments were not passively received but were perceived as having been "earned" through struggle. This reinforces the "embodied" nature of the experience (Yang, 2025), where transcendence is inextricably linked to the preceding physical hardship. The ordeal was not an obstacle but a necessary precondition for transformation. As another participant noted, this economy of effort distinguishes the experience from conventional leisure:

> *You don't get these moments on a beach holiday. You get them when you've pushed yourself to your limit. The view from the summit is only meaningful because of the climb. That feeling of 'I did it,' of overcoming something difficult on your own, that's the real magic. The struggle is the price of admission for the feeling.* [Participant 4, Turkish, Male, 36]

These narratives of "secular sacredness" powerfully demonstrate that in the context of the modern pilgrimage, transcendence is not necessarily located in a pre-defined sacred site, but is co-created by the walker through their reflective engagement with the world. The journey itself sanctifies the space, allowing for moments of profound personal meaning to emerge organically. This suggests that the "transformation" experienced by many walkers may be understood less as a change in formal belief and more as a shift in the individual's perceived relationship with the world, mediated through embodied engagement with the journey (Andrade Suárez *et al*., 2024).

These findings resonate with a growing body of research indicating that contemporary pilgrimage experiences often emerge in hybrid forms that combine leisure, cultural exploration, and personal reflection. Similar dynamics have been documented in studies of long-distance walking routes and contemporary pilgrimage practices, where participants often describe spiritual or transformative experiences independent of formal religious motivations (Collins-Kreiner, 2010; Norman, 2012; Andrade Suárez *et al*., 2024). The Carian Way case therefore reinforces the idea that pilgrimage-like experiences can develop within largely secular heritage landscapes.

5. Discussion

The findings of this study provide a rich, empirically grounded account of the contemporary long-distance walking experience on a secularized heritage trail. More than just a collection of discrete themes, the narratives of the 22 walkers on the Carian Way reveal a coherent, dynamic, and profoundly synergistic process of modern pilgrimage. This discussion moves beyond the descriptive presentation of the findings to interpret their broader theoretical implications. We argue that the synthesis of these findings not only challenges the foundational dichotomies within tourism studies but also necessitates a reconceptualization of pilgrimage itself—away from a destination-oriented, belief-centric act and towards an embodied, experiential, and transformative secular process that is increasingly central to contemporary mobility.

The journey, as narrated by the participants, is a phenomenological spiral that begins with a ritualistic separation ("Pulling the Plug"). This act of consciously severing ties with the profane world of work and digital hyper-connectivity is the foundational stage, creating the necessary liminal space for all subsequent experiences to unfold. It is within this self-created liminality that participants become receptive to a deeper, embodied dialogue with their surroundings ("Every Step is History"). This finding moves significantly beyond the classic concept of the "tourist gaze" (Urry, 1990). As contemporary theory urges scholars to "rethink embodiment" (Yang, 2025) away from the purely visual, our findings show the Carian Way is not a landscape to be viewed, but a medium to be moved through; its meaning is not consumed but co-created through the physical exertion and sensory immersion of the body. This aligns with theories of "embodied cognition" (Kock & Ringberg, 2019), where the physical struggle of the walk—demonstrated by participants' claims that the "body's reality crowds out the mind's anxiety"—is precisely what shapes the walker's cognitive and emotional transformation. The trail itself becomes a pedagogical tool, teaching through the language of aching muscles and the haptic sensation of ancient stones underfoot. This embodied knowledge is perceived as more "authentic" precisely because it is earned through struggle, standing in stark contrast to the effortless consumption of mass tourism.

This intense physical and mental immersion fundamentally collapses the pilgrim-tourist binary, a distinction that has structured tourism studies for decades (Smith, 1992; Cohen, 1979). Our findings empirically support recent calls (Andrade Suárez *et al.*, 2024) to move beyond this dichotomy, demonstrating the inadequacy of even a continuum model. The Carian Way walker is not a hybrid figure oscillating between two poles; they are an integrated whole. The "touristic" appreciation of beauty and the "pilgrim-like" quest for inner strength are not separate motivations but are fused into a single, unified experience. The hardship of the climb gives meaning to the beauty of the view; the historical curiosity fuels the determination to keep walking. Thus, our research suggests that for this growing form of travel, the pilgrim-tourist distinction is no longer a useful analytical tool but a conceptual relic.

Furthermore, it is this shared state of embodied struggle and liminality that fosters the conditions for the emergence of a powerful, secular communitas ("The Trail Family"). Our findings demonstrate that Turner's (1969) concept can flourish with remarkable intensity in a completely unstructured and secular context. This supports recent phenomenological work on modern pilgrimage which likewise identifies "community" as a core component of the "walking for well-being" experience (Sørensen & Høgh-Olesen, 2023). However, we also add a critical nuance: unlike traditional religious communitas which often serves to reinforce a collective identity and shared faith, the communitas on the Carian Way appears to function in service of the individual's personal journey. It is a support network that enables and validates the individual's quest for self-transformation.

The apex of this entire process frequently manifests in moments of "secular sacredness" ("That Moment"). These experiences of personal transcendence provide compelling evidence for the relocation of the sacred from institutional religion to personal experience (Heelas & Woodhead, 2005). Our findings align powerfully with recent scholarship in spiritual tourism, which foregrounds the pursuit of "inner transformation" (Chhabra & Kim, 2023) and personal meaning-making as a central goal. As one participant's "spiritual moment" attests, our findings suggest that in modern pilgrimage, the sacred is not a pre-existing quality of a place but is an emergent property of the walker's interaction with that place. The struggle sanctifies the summit; the solitude sanctifies the sunset. This points to a form of immanent transcendence, where meaning is found not in a divine external entity, but within the material world and the capabilities of one's own body.

5.1. Theoretical Contribution, Implications, and Future Directions

The sum of these findings necessitates a significant reconceptualization of pilgrimage in the contemporary era. While academic interest in "sacred journeys" (Moufahim *et al*., 2023) and the "authenticity" of spiritual tourism (Samarathunga *et al*., 2024) is high, much of the recent literature on pilgrimage and religious tourism remains focused on traditionally sacred contexts. Studies continue to examine, for example, the "Catholic pilgrimage site" (Han *et al*., 2024), "St. Paul's Route" in Greece (Tsironis, 2022), or the management of "religious tourism" in heritage cities (Mileva & Krachanova, 2024). While vital, this body of work leaves a critical gap in understanding meaning-making on routes that are saturated with sacred history but are functionally decoupled from contemporary religious practice.

Therefore, this study's primary theoretical contribution is to propose a processual model of modern, secular pilgrimage that specifically addresses this gap. In this context, the term 'model' is used heuristically, as a conceptual framework to map the sequence of experience, rather than as a predictive or statistically generalizable structure. We contend that the defining characteristic of this phenomenon is not the walker's belief system or their destination, but the transformative process itself, which comprises an interlocking sequence of: (1) intentional separation from everyday life (a secular ritual, as noted by Jenkins, 2023); (2) deep, embodied engagement with a challenging landscape (an embodied, phenomenological process of seeking well-being, as argued by Sørensen & Høgh-Olesen, 2023); (3) the formation of a supportive, temporary communitas; and (4) the potential for emergent, personally meaningful transcendent experiences. This processual model offers a more robust and flexible framework for understanding a wide range of contemporary travel practices that fall uncomfortably between traditional definitions of tourism and religion.

From a management perspective, these findings suggest that heritage planners and trail managers should prioritize the preservation of 'wild' and challenging trail sections, as these physical hardships are precisely what facilitate the transformative 'secular sacredness' sought by modern walkers. The findings hold practical implications for the managers and marketers of cultural heritage trails. Promoting such routes solely on the basis of their physical attributes (length, scenery) overlooks their most powerful draw: their potential as spaces for disconnection and transformation. Trail management could focus on preserving the "wild" character that enables these experiences, resisting the urge to over-develop or commercialize. Marketing narratives could shift from the language of "adventure tourism" to that of "transformative journeys," appealing to the deep-seated need for meaning that our research has identified.

This study, like all research, has its limitations. As a qualitative case study focused solely on the Carian Way, its findings are not statistically generalizable. Consistent with the phenomenological tradition, the aim here is not statistical generalization but theoretical refinement and deep experiential insight. The interpretation is also shaped by the researcher's own positionality, though this was mitigated through reflexive journaling. However, the study offers a high degree of theoretical transferability, providing a conceptual framework that can be applied, tested, and refined in other contexts.

This research opens several avenues for future inquiry. Quantitative studies could be designed to develop and validate a "Secular Pilgrimage Motivation Scale" based on the themes identified here. Highly valuable insights could be gained from comparative studies, for instance, by contrasting the Carian Way experience with that of the more established Lycian Way in Turkey or the spiritually-branded Kumano Kodo in Japan to reveal the influence of trail maturity and marketing on the walker's journey. Finally, longitudinal research tracking the long-term impacts on participants' well-being and life choices, alongside critical studies of socio-economic impacts on remote local communities, will be of paramount importance.

6. Conclusion

This study commenced with an interrogation of a conceptual impasse within tourism studies: the enduring inadequacy of the pilgrim–tourist binary to account for the complex motivations driving a growing number of individuals to undertake arduous journeys on ancient trails. We sought to move beyond this static typology by conducting a deep, phenomenological exploration of the lived experience of walking the Carian Way.

The findings have consistently revealed that this journey is far more than a simple trek or a recreational holiday. Rather, it constitutes a coherent and powerful transformative process—a modern ritual for a secular age that reactivates ancient infrastructures of movement within a contemporary context. Our analysis has illuminated the constituent stages of this process: a deliberate ritual of separation from the routines of modern life clears the perceptual space for a deep, embodied dialogue with the historical and natural landscape. This shared immersion, in turn, fosters a potent, secular *communitas*, creating profound bonds of solidarity. The culmination of this synergistic process frequently manifests in moments of personal transcendence—experiences of "secular sacredness" earned through physical struggle and reflection.

The primary theoretical contribution of this research is the articulation and empirical grounding of a processual model of modern, secular pilgrimage. This model offers significant analytical purchase by shifting the focus of inquiry from ontology (the "who" of the traveler) to phenomenology (the "how" of the experience). By de-centering formal belief systems and instead foregrounding the experiential sequence of separation, embodiment, community, and transcendence, we offer a new conceptual vocabulary. This framework transcends the limitations of long-standing dichotomies and provides a robust tool for understanding contemporary travel practices that fuse heritage, physical challenge, and a personal quest for meaning. Our study empirically demonstrates that pilgrimage can be liberated from its traditional religious moorings and understood as a fundamental human practice of seeking transformation through journeying.

Ultimately, this study of the Carian Way speaks to a broader condition of late modernity: a profound and unmet need for meaning and authentic connection in a world characterized by digital saturation and social fragmentation. Heritage trails such as this function as more than mere tourism infrastructure; they are critical "counter-spaces" or "therapeutic landscapes" for a secular age. The ancient paths of Caria, once designed to connect communities to their gods, now serve a new, urgent purpose: they connect individuals to their histories, to the natural world, to each other, and most profoundly, to themselves. Although geographically located in Türkiye, the Carian Way is deeply embedded in the shared Mediterranean and European cultural–historical landscape. In doing so, this study reaffirms that in an age of virtual realities, the simple, arduous, and deeply human act of walking remains a potent means of personal transformation and meaning-making in the modern world.

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