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Finisterre: being and becoming a myth-related tourist destination

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ABSTRACT

The phenomenon of travelling to myth-related places has had a revival in recent decades, warranting an investigation of how such places are perceived by today's tourists. While established myths and the specific places they are associated with have been extensively researched, there is as yet relatively little research on how tourists appropriate and rework conventional myth-based place meaning and identity. The aim of this article is to contribute to wider debates on place, meaning and identity in tourism studies particularly as regards myth-related tourist destinations. Relying on theories of place and identity, we highlight how mythical places and their identities are appropriated and consumed by and made part of individual tourists' experiences. Drawing on qualitative interviews with tourists journeying to Finisterre in Spain, this article shows how tourists rework the classical symbolism surrounding mythical places and imbue these with new meanings and identities. Based on Finisterre as a case, our study found out that myth-related places have become tourist-driven attractions: at present it is tourist flows that shape traditional myth destinations.

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Introduction

Tourism is known as a constantly changing social phenomenon, and studies of tourism have accordingly a long research tradition that examines tourist destinations from a variety of perspectives and dimensions (see Butler, 1980; Harrill, 2009; Morgan & Pritchard, 1998; Nepal, 2009; Quinn, 2009; Shields, 1991). Tourism as a social phenomenon and tourists as actors characterise contemporary society, and these aspects have become even more important. The zeitgeist therefore largely determines which places are regarded as attractive tourist destinations at a specific time. Having said that, contemporary tourist destinations are in a way constantly being (re)made and there is little to suggest that this is a passing trend. A great deal of effort is consequently invested into profiling new areas and sophisticated attractions that would draw tourists to a certain place (Blom & Nilsson, 2000; Swarbrooke & Page, 2012). It is not always possible to determine where a tourist attraction originates, since the process does not always involve the constant creation of new attractions; outdated attractions that have been available for a long time in different forms are often repackaged for a new generation of tourists.

Narratives about places have gained prominence in tourism, and some of these narratives are based on mythical events. Studies of tourism show that individuals organise their experiences through myths (Hennig, 2002; Shields, 1991). Myths have also been shown to play a significant role in attracting tourists to specific destinations, something which has contributed to a growing body of studies in the area of myth-related tourist destinations (see Ateljevic & Doorne, 2002; Buchmann, 2006; Butler, 2013; Laing &

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Crouch, 2009; Selwyn, 1996). Loch Ness (Scotland), Roswell (USA), Santiago de Compostela (Spain), Lourdes (France) and Fátima (Portugal) are all examples of famous myth-related places that are, in the context of tourism, associated with extraordinary events and narratives connected to specific locations. On the one hand, an individual who does not believe in these myths may view Loch Ness as simply another Scottish lake, Roswell as a city in New Mexico, Lourdes as a city at the foot of the Pyrenees, Santiago de Compostela as a university town with a cathedral in northwestern Spain and Fátima as a town in central Portugal with a Catholic shrine. On the other hand, from a believer's perspective, Loch Ness is associated with a lake monster, Roswell with UFOs, Santiago de Compostela with James the Apostle and Lourdes and Fátima with Marian apparitions. Believers are attracted by such place-related phenomena in a way nonbelievers are not (Mazumdar & Mazumdar, 2004). Knowledge about the myth and its constructed visibility at the place allow visiting tourists to relate to the myth. Irrespective of our belief or lack of belief, a visit to a myth-related tourist destination is shaped by that myth. Of course, attracting tourists through mythical narratives is not a new phenomenon but during recent decades there has been increased tourist interest in myth-related places,¹ particularly with religious associations as highlighted by scholars such as Cohen (2010), Collins-Kreiner and Wall (2015), Nilsson (2016a), Light (2016), Chen and Chen (2017) and Peng (2017).

Pilgrimages to 'Land's End' in Finisterre in Galicia, Spain provide a concrete example of how a mythical place developed into a tourist destination. Pilgrimages are nothing new in this part of the world; the classic Camino de Santiago pilgrim route has a centuries-old history. Santiago de Compostela has its sacred roots in the myth of St James, dating back to the ninth century (Slavin, 2003). There is consequently a long tradition of travellers wishing to journey to a holy place to manifest their faith and doing so in the context of organised religion. Places connected to holy narratives, as such, are seldom questioned by the visitor. Instead, the journeys made by particularly Catholics, in the case of Santiago de Compostela, serve to confirm the value of the place (Frey, 1998). Today, Finisterre has increasingly become the final destination of many pilgrims who earlier ended their journeys at Santiago de Compostela, despite the fact that it has not been sanctioned as a sacred place by any religious denomination (Blom, Nilsson, & Santos Solla, 2016; Lopez, Guilarte, & González, 2017).

The aim of this empirical article is to contribute to wider debates on place, meaning and identity particularly as regards myth-related tourist destinations. This article studies how present-day tourists understand a mythical place that has historically attracted pilgrims and how they choose to relate to the classical symbolism surrounding the place and its specific identity. We therefore examine Finisterre as a specific place that is characterised by the position it occupies in the borderland between being and/or becoming a tourist destination. Drawing on qualitative interviews, we primarily examine the focus on the place and its becoming a tourist destination.

The tourist–pilgrim relation has been and still is a topic of discussion in tourism studies (see Eliade, 1959; Cohen, 1979, 1992; Rinschede, 1992; Collins-Kreiner & Wall, 2015; Nilsson, 2016a). Cohen claims that being a tourist is multifaceted and cannot be captured in a single definition. He therefore identifies five modes for categorising and highlighting the complex experiences of a tourist (recreational, diversionary, experiential, experimental and existential), and the last mode, the existential, includes the modern pilgrim's search for 'meaning at someone else's centre' (Cohen, 1979:183). According to Cohen, the general difference between pilgrims and tourists is their destinations: pilgrims journey in the direction of their sociocultural centres, while tourists travel in the opposite direction (Cohen, 1992). However, Badone and Roseman go a step further when they claim that the distinctions made in concepts like tourism-pilgrimage and tourist-pilgrim no longer are relevant 'in the shifting world of postmodern travel' (2004:2). The differing intentions of tourists in relation to the pilgrim trail and its significant identity are thus, in our view, an important research area.

Interviews conducted with pilgrims from Europe and North America outside a shelter at Finisterre in September 2014 form the empirical basis of this paper. Group and individual interviews were conducted in English. Interviews were conducted face to face and included

biographical questions. Each interview was recorded and transcribed in full. In all, 26 respondents were interviewed and all were offered anonymity. None of the respondents indicated that they were there for religious reasons connected to a specific denomination. Twelve women and 14 men between the ages of 23 and 69 were interviewed. Interviewees were randomly selected and interviews of between 15 and 40 min were conducted until data saturation was reached (see Nilsson, 2016a).

Place as a space of consumption and experience

Let us initially focus on the importance of a place for our identity. The place has been central in our self-representation for a long time. We form our image of and identify with the specific place on the basis of our own experiences. We also allow ourselves to be confronted with places with which we have had no or insignificant previous relation, thereby creating an image and identity for ourselves without always being aware of its objectives. From the point of view of tourism, there are usually different categories of tourists with different intentions regarding the development of a place on the basis of existing identity. Furthermore, there is social interaction and culture in the place. The group of tourists visiting possess different kinds of resources (human capital) and occupy different positions of power. The tourists are linked together and are, to varying degrees, interdependent through complex social and cultural relations. Each actor also has an activity space with a specific range, which in its turn encroaches on and overlaps the activity spaces of other actors in a complex manner. The activity spaces of the different actors contribute to the creation of the unique culture of the place (Gupta & Ferguson, 1997; Jansen-Verbeke, 1998; Blom and Nilsson, 2001). However, we do not always seek attractions as such but also the feeling and the identity a place creates for us (Frew & White, 2011; Pitchford, 2008; Rose, 1995). We therefore often seek a total experience allowing all of our senses to interact. Nash (1995), followed by Selännemi (1999) and Pearce (2011), points out that most theories on the behaviour of tourists are based on the fact that tourists travel because they are interested in the destination and because they seek variation in their lives through visiting environments outside their ordinary living spaces. Crompton (1992), Crompton and Ankomah (1993), Bolan and Williams (2008) as well as Horner and Swarbrooke (2016) have in a number of articles illustrated the reasons for our desire to consume and the consumer choices made in the area of tourism. In general, the prospective tourist makes three choices during the process and this results in a final decision. During the first phase of the process, the prospective tourist is about to select a destination. The next phase entails discarding alternatives. These may be alternatives which the individual finds uninteresting, too expensive or too far away. During the third and final phase, when the prospective tourist decides which destination to visit, the outcome is largely related to the extent to which the tourist has actively gathered information about the different destinations. The more effort and resources prospective tourists feel that they have invested in contacting representatives of the destination to obtain further information, the greater the likelihood that that destination will be the final choice.

The criticism that may be levelled at this type of relatively stereotypical classification is that it by and large fails to capture the complexity of real life. For example, no account is taken of the degree to which the individual's feelings have influenced the choice of destination and factors such as low involvement, passively searching for information, nostalgia and day-dreaming are also ignored (Decrop, 2000; Wang, 1999; Wickens, 2002). In order to address these shortcomings, Schouten (2007) has launched the term 'transcendent consumer experience', a combination of experiences that encourages a high level of satisfaction, intense emotional answers, a sense of novelty and escapism, self-awareness and personal renewal. However, Wearing, Stevenson and Young (2009) and Rickly-Boyd, Knudsen and Braverman (2016) find it essential to start with place interpretation and its various meanings irrespective of which inhabited place we focus on. We would nevertheless emphasise the importance of the degree to which we as consumers become involved in learning about and associating visiting experiences with specific places in order to realise our own tourist experiences. Given this line of reasoning, we can divide the classical driving forces behind travel into two classical main types, namely push or

pull factors, terms which were originally used in migration theory. Push factors, in this case, refer to the individual's need to flee from everyday life to experience something different, while pull factors refer to the attraction exerted by various destinations and activities (Pizam & Mansfeld, 1999; Blom and Nilsson, 2001; Page & Connell, 2006; Tribe, 2009). Contemporary society is characterised by high mobility, and therefore traditional views on the reasons for travelling have to be reconsidered. Larsen highlights this by emphasising that tourism also takes place in what the tourist views as 'ordinary tourist places' where he/she prioritises social relations above seeing and experiencing only 'new' places. In today's society, mobility is part of our everyday lives and tourism should no longer be regarded as something distinct, as it has been traditionally (Larsen, 2008). In simple terms, our need to travel is a function of the fact that we are interested in something which is inaccessible to us here and now.

The art of attraction

Generally, there needs to be some form of attraction if tourists are to deem places interesting and appealing. It is therefore not surprising that Gunn (1972), Lew (1987) and Pigram and Wahab (2005) all stress the fact that attraction is the fundamental structure in all tourism. In other words, according to them, if there is no attraction there is no tourism. Still, it is difficult to formulate a definition of an attraction, to list the components of an attraction or to explain the importance of an attraction from the standpoint of the individual in general terms. Nonetheless, MacCannell (1976) try when he defines an attraction as a relation between a marker (travel brochures, adverts, signs, etc.), a sight and a tourist, where the markers form the bridge between the tourist (consumer) and the site, as well as the place with its various actors. MacCannell argues that 'a touristic symbol is a conventionalized sight → marker → sight transformation' (MacCannell, 1976:130) which shows how he views the relationship between symbol, sight and marker in the context of tourism. We do not either intend to make a distinction between sight, marker and sight transformation but unite these three concepts in the term symbol.

A symbol is place bound; our associations as tourists are connected to the symbol that thus creates the attraction for us. A symbol provides the receiver of the image with associations to something specific (see also Blom & Nilsson, 2001). It is also possible to speak of personified immaterial symbols in that they describe a lifestyle, an ideology or a mindset accepted by many people (Cohen, Duncan, & Thulemark, 2015). The symbols we come into contact with becomes mental labels for our experiences and the expectations we have of a place and an attraction. If we have not been there before, we have certain preconceived notions of what the journey and the destination will mean. Phrases like 'worth a journey', 'worth a diversion' and 'worth a visit' are commonly used to note the importance of the attraction on a scale of values (Blom & Nilsson, 2000; Prebensen, Chen, & Uysal, 2017), mainly based on the secondary sources we typically choose to consult (Picard & Robinson, 2006). Such information could, for examples, include what others have told us, what we have read in brochures and literature, or what we have learned via the media.

To different degrees, the symbols we are faced with create a total experience in which all our senses participate and in which place and identity are central. By stimulating one or a few senses, we have an experience in which the place itself assumes a clear identity and significance for the individual (Blom & Nilsson, 2000). Rose (1995) emphasises that the same place with the same symbols is interpreted individually and means different things to different people. The feeling and identity that we associate with a specific place is therefore, according to Rutherford (1990) and McIntyre, Williams, and McHugh (2006), a combination of the social, cultural and economic context we live in (see also Blom & Nilsson, 2001).

The symbolic value per se has become an increasingly important tourist attraction with the main purpose of commodifying experiences and places. We would therefore argue that, despite varying individual interpretations, in general terms it is still possible to say that significant place-related interpretations are generated from a symbolic value. Related to our previous discussion of the symbolic value of a place, we would like to highlight perhaps an even more important aspect: the tourist's mental satisfaction needs to be seen both more broadly and as a deeper social experience. We are, of course,

aware of the pecuniary aspects of this argument; tourism relies on the idea that seeking experiences is the primary incentive for travelling.

Myth, a place-related mental experience

Myths originate from historical, cultural and societal circumstances and usually denote traditional narratives that we relate to imaginatively. Myth forms the basic framework of a narrative. In addition, a narrative also includes a character, which could be divine human or natural and the time and place of the event should also be determinable (Segal, 2011).

Myths are usually defined either from an anthropological or from a linguistic perspective. The premise of the anthropological view is that belief in myth is true. The function of myth is then to justify a social practice or belief (Hunter & Whitten, 1976). Literary scholar and semiotician Roland Barthes (1970), the foremost representative of the linguistic perspective, regards myth as a pronouncement and a system of communication which in itself wants to convey something. According to this view, myth is a social construction which has developed in a particular cultural context and serves a specific purpose.

Lévi-Strauss (1969) has a somewhat more restricted view of myth. He argues that myths should be seen as intellectual and emotional narratives that are more closely connected to the personal and the unique. Each individual who encounters a myth reads his/her own identity into the myth as it is abstract, rather than concrete. May (1991) underlines this logic by formulating that myths are formed on the basis of our interpretation of our 'selves' in relation to place. From this point of view, there is no truth or falsehood in the individual experience – it is only an individual experience. This individually personified process, taking an opposite direction to the pragmatism prevailing in the rest of our lives, is precisely what makes myths so compelling (Blom & Nilsson, 2001). In a social context myths can provide solutions on intellectual and emotional levels, Lévi-Strauss (1969) continues. He also makes a distinction between two different main types or categories of myths and mythologisation, depending on their origins. In the first place, there are myths that arise about people. This form of myth is often related to the individual's life and deeds and is often revitalised when the person dies. Myths can also develop about how and why the person in question died. Second, there is a type of mythologisation of events focusing on the place and time of the event. These myths are place bound, but can be regarded as improbable or bordering on the impossible.

The function of myth, in general, is to create a link between levels that are usually regarded as logically incompatible (Barthes, 1972). Accordingly, individuals' interpretations of myths largely correspond to their belief in its contents and its allegorical value. Still, according to Barthes (1972), myths play an important role in clarifying and classifying human experiences. There is particularly room for myths in areas in which no clear answers are available. Believing in a myth gives us the needed answers when they are nowhere else to be found, according to Häusel (2002). Tuan (1977) posits a similar argument in maintaining that a myth often differs from reality in those cases where knowledge has not developed further. Barthes also argues that 'myth is neither a lie nor a confession, it is an inflection' (Barthes, 1970:227). Barthes (1970) further holds that it is the tension between meaning and form that defines myth. Myths construct rather than distort reality, according to Barthes (1972), Lévy-Bruhl (1983) and Cassirer (2012), among others.

There is, as noted above, no absolute truth to myth. Instead, we see myth as something people choose to believe. There is no right or wrong myth; individuals make their own choices and interpretations based on their individual experiences. Myths can therefore not be tested scientifically to determine their validity; their meaning and significance is determined by the individual. At the same time Barthes (1972) shows that myth is dynamic, insofar as the myth itself and its concepts are mutable over time. We are free to understand a myth based on its 'ideological' premise or to start from our own personal interpretation. A place may, because of its mythical connotations, acquire a shared set of beliefs, ideas, understandings and values that all show that it represents something more, corresponding to a faith (Maddrell, 2009; Urry, 1995). A myth is

primarily evaluated from two perspectives: what the symbol represents and the extent to which the symbol meets our cultural needs. The myth has to be accepted and has to interact with a reality, but simultaneously a reality has to be related to the myth and its different cultural values and meanings (Fiske & Hartley, 1978).

How a myth is to be interpreted and understood therefore depends on who the observer is and in which context the myth is considered. Lee (2012) has for instance compared different imaginary narratives and finds that those involved have to reflect on imaginary geographies themselves in order to arrive at their desired experience. Based on this reasoning, we argue that there always has to be a clear narrative or an 'original myth' about myth-related places that both includes dynamics and rationality, as well as an imaginary level giving the individual room for interpretation based on his/her own experiences. Myths are thus socially mediated representations which are connected to a place and which interact with a tourist's own fantasies and prior knowledge to create meaning and an understanding of the place in question. Assigning a narrative, and particularly a mythical narrative that does not need to be verifiable but leaves room for interpretation, strengthens the branding of a specific place and highlights its uniqueness.

The role of myth in creating the place identity of a tourist attraction

Myths that are clearly related to a place are often used in the tourism industry to describe or reinforce the identity of such places. The identity of places is generally negotiable. Tuan (1977) and Massey (2005) illustrate this by saying that places should be seen as open and in close association with narratives about them. Keith and Pile (2004) take this further by arguing that the myth-related identity of a place is created through collective memory. In collective memory, fantasy and reality meet each other and the place is endowed with value. Together, these for the moment shared memories create an understanding of a place, which also functions as a premise for understanding the event. The myth becomes a means of creating an idea of the place through creating meaning for someone who comes in contact with the place and its myth (Collie, 2011). The unicity of the place as experienced by the individual is the result of the fact that the myth is believed as a unique narrative which is also interpreted on an individual basis. The individual's recognition of the relation between the myth and the place at the same time leads to an awareness that gives the place its specific identity and which later attracts new tourists (Nilsson, 2016b). Chronis (2015) has noted that the narrative determines whether an otherwise unobtrusive space has the potential of developing into a tourist destination. Johnston (1990) also emphasises this by showing that narratives create tourist destinations where we through exposure to the myth also learn about the place and its history, which in turn adds additional value during a visit.

In the interaction between the place, the myth and the individual, the myth functions as a lens through which the place gains depth invisible to the naked eye. The imaginary significance of a myth serves, at least, two functions: additional meaning is created for the place, and the product develops based on tourism (Salazar, 2012), because it is interpreted individually. Furthermore, Mazumdar and Mazumdar (2004) argue that narratives are important in the socialisation of the place and help to teach about, explain and clarify the significance of a specific place. According to them, there are also (hierarchical) relations in the category of myth-related places, just as there are regarding other places. They argue that a mythical narrative with sacred elements increases the possibilities of creating a total experience involving all the senses. A believer sees the holy places, hears the holy sounds, brushes past holy artefacts, eats special food and smells particular smells (Mazumdar & Mazumdar, 2004). Lee (2012), drawing on Hutcheon (2003), describes the (mythical) narrative as a script in which the tourist decides on the angle and perspective adopted in his/her understanding of the place. An individual understanding therefore frequently leads to something partially new. At the same time, it is slightly surprising that expectations of and ideas about places are influenced by what has happened or is said to have happened at a specific place, based on a mythical narrative. Accordingly, having historical origins and a clear connection to a specific

place are important factors if the myth is to stand the test of time. Myth-related places may be regarded as examples of what Massey and Jess (1995) mean when they argue that an understanding of a place does not result from present conditions, but from the past.

From the perspective of tourism, it is therefore important to invest in the narrative connected to a place, since it is significant contributing factor in reinforcing the identity and unicity of a place, which in turn are expected to increase its attractiveness (Light, 2009). A visit also creates the opportunity to get a sense of the place and to enter into the world of its narrative (Herbert, 2001). Buchmann, Moore and Fisher (2010) emphasise that places with clear meanings give individuals room to create their own understandings of the place, based on their prior knowledge and experience. The meetings that take place at the place are seen as situations in which the individual's faith interacts with a specific place and its identity and with the myth acting as a catalyst in creating a total individual experience. A total experience may be said to originate in the interplay between the place, the expectations of visitors, their knowledge and fantasies; the myth is 'suddenly put into close contact with the present and shows it to be real' (Hiley, 2004:845) just by being there. The myth therefore enables the individual to experience a reality he/she finds authentic. Wang (1999) calls this existential authenticity. The imaginary therefore adds layers to the visible landscape; it presents an 'extension' of reality, as Saltman expressed it (Saltman, 1985). The myth can therefore be regarded as framing the history of the place, and it may develop as the result of individual experiences of the 'presence' of the myth. A tourist destination is more than a narrative; it has to be experienced on-site and with an open mind. Finisterre is an example of such a place.

Finisterre: the attraction of a borderland

Finisterre is a rocky cape jutting out into the Atlantic in northern Spain. This is one of several places in Europe called Land's End, and the name literally means 'end of the world'. At the furthest end of the cape, which also forms a type of geographical end to the Iberian Peninsula, there is a lighthouse that may be seen as a symbol for guidance. This stretch of coast is known as the 'Coast of Death', a name that together with the notion of the end of the world highlights the mythical and legendary associations with this place (Sánchez-Carretero, 2015).

Based on our reasoning on the role played by myth in tourism presented above, the example of Finisterre serves to illustrate the significance of the borderland as tourist attraction. One of the experiences described by visitors is sitting on the edge of the cliffs and watching the sunset over the Atlantic. Places like Finisterre form a type of borderland, which, according to Birkeland (1999), often become the subjects of narratives. Myths try to answer humanity's primary questions, such as why the world was created and where we come from (Birkeland, 1999). As a result, myths historically played and still play a role in explaining and imparting significance to current events; myths present an attempt to interpret the world systematically through narratives.

The narratives related to Finisterre frequently include mythical elements that enliven and reinforce the symbolism of the place as the end of the world. Already in ancient times, Finisterre was seen marking the end of the known world; it was where 'the sun died at dusk'. This historical association with the end has not been forgotten and is a recurring theme in the stories told by our respondents. Several of the interviewed pilgrims described the place as 'the end of the world, it's symbolic', clearly showing that the symbolism survives and needs no explanation. Other respondents chose a more pragmatic explanation, saying for example: 'of course I know that it is not the end of the world like in the Middle Ages', thus demonstrating knowledge about the myth as such, while being reluctant about relating the significance of the place to its mythical associations. Yet, it was clear that all respondents had some knowledge about the historical interpretation of the place as the end of the known world. Not all respondents referred to the end of the world; some preferred to formulate essentially the same sentiment slightly differently, saying there 'is nothing after this'. One of the respondents emphasised the traditional historical interpretation of the place, saying that 'you can't ignore the fact that this is the end of the world'. Another of the respondents said: 'Santiago did not felt like the end, instead it told me

to go further. I wanted to go to the end of the world [Finisterre].’ These words underline the extent to which the myth still survives and colours interpretations of Finisterre. The statement above more or less confirms the findings of Mazumdar and Mazumdar (2004) and Lee (2012), showing that when a visitor has knowledge about a myth related to a specific place, the mythical story becomes a type of script in their understanding of the place. Although the meaning of the place is not static, but individually negotiated, it is obvious that respondents had considerable knowledge about its historical significance as the end of the world.

The interviews highlighted one important aspect of a visit, namely that visitors are there to re-evaluate, find answers and/or leave behind their prior lives in order to move on and meet new challenges. The place in itself is seen to inspire visitors and to help them figure out what they want from life. These respondents therefore chose to regard Finisterre as a place of departure, which in turn means that it is not seen as the end destination of their journeys (or the end of the world itself) but rather as the start of something new. This feeling is described by one of the respondents: ‘It didn’t feel like the end, you walk as long as you want. Finisterre is a departure point and any departure point is a choice.’ Finisterre has, from a geographical viewpoint, a clear border and is also related to a number of myths and it therefore seems to belong to a different reality in which thoughts flow more freely. A visit to Finisterre could therefore help to give the individual tourist new perspectives on his/her life. Tourists commonly see the place simultaneously as the end of a phase in their lives and as a symbolic new beginning. One of the respondents expressed the essence of this attitude by saying that ‘the place[’s] meaning is that it is the end for several things [in my life]. It is a changing point’. Most of the respondents highlighted this aspect in different ways in their narratives. Another respondent emphasised the meaning of arriving at a fork in the road, but saw the choice as being between starting a new life and returning to one’s old life: ‘It is a departure point to continue or to revert.’

The main reason pilgrims visit Finisterre today is because the place is seen by many as marking the end before ‘the new starts’. It is partially the end of a journey, and partially the start of something new and unknown. Finisterre is therefore not just a geographical place, but also a personal springboard expected to lead to some kind of change. According to tradition, pilgrims should burn the clothes they wore during the journey when reaching their final destination of Finisterre, thus physically reinforcing the symbolism of change. This tradition appears to have largely been abandoned, however, and instead the ocean has become the symbol of the religious purging involved in leaving the old behind and looking to the future. One of the respondents explained: ‘water is the symbol of cleansing after all the walking, sweating and the pain. It felt special and I guess it is a start [for the future].’

The interviews also clearly point to the communal aspect of a visit and socialising with other tourists. The communal is related to the spiritual and the place is characterised as a religious place. Urry (1995) and Maddrell (2009) highlight that although the interpretation of a myth is individual, there are common elements in how a place is understood that may best be described in terms of sacredness. One of the respondents highlighted the importance of ‘sociali[sing] with other people about their experience and what has happen[ed] but during daytime it was really to come to a spiritual and/or a religious space’. Another respondent expressed the religious significance in terms of sharing; it is a place where you share everything. The religious is to meet people and to share things. It is obvious that the symbolic meaning of the place is closely connected to something that the pilgrims regard as religious or spiritual. They describe their visits as imbued with a feeling of freedom and openness, and the lack of religious dogma. Most of our respondents’ narratives have a sacral dimension. We prefer using sacral in this discussion rather than religious, because it allows for a broader interpretation of an experience that does not necessarily have a religious basis, and more clearly captures the associations our respondents have with this place. This was a recurrent theme in the interviews, clearly expressed by a respondent who said ‘I’m not religious, spiritual, Yes! I believe in a high power, I believe in the universe, I believe things are going on. But I believe it is inside us, I don’t subscribe to an organised religion. This is a spiritual travel for me’. For most travellers, choosing Finisterre as their final destination means that they do not

want to associate their pilgrimage and visit with organised religion. Because of the association between Santiago de Compostela and the Catholic Church, many of them chose Finisterre as the final destination instead. There is a clear individualism in the narratives concerning how the respondents connect to spiritualism, which is contrasted to collective, organised religion. Such opinions were for example expressed in the interviews by saying that the journey is ‘...spiritual in the way you walk alone, you ... get in touch with yourself and your mind’ and ‘It has a spiritual meaning in that sense I guess spending time with yourself in nature and walking and doing something’. Although religious content remains, they repeatedly associated religion with organised religion or a specific denomination but with the express purpose of showing that this place represents something else. One of our respondents said: ‘Finisterre is the real end of the Camino, not Santiago, it’s the (Christian) church that created that [Santiago de Compostela]. The real end of the path is here.’ The discussion above is perhaps best summarised by one of the respondents: ‘I’m not religious, rather spiritual.’

It is clear that Finisterre marks the distinction between that which is present and that which may be found beyond this place, although the historic myth still plays an important role in determining the significance of the place for respondents. Writers such as Tuan (1977) and Massey (2005) stress that places should be seen as open and negotiable, but as closely related to the stories told about them, something which is confirmed by the respondents’ narratives.

Conclusion

Tourist destinations should not be seen as prearranged phenomena just waiting to be discovered and consumed, but rather as the results of our own and/or others’ social constructions. The development of tourist destinations should therefore partly be seen as a result of their history, partly as a reflection of contemporary society and partly as the outcome of tourists’ expectations and experiences. This is not least highlighted by Massey (2005), when she argues that a place is relative; its significance depends on the memories and expectations of the individual, but also on historical narratives. Tourist destinations in general, and perhaps myth-related places in particular, should therefore be regarded as open constructions, as their representations and meanings are being renegotiated. In recent years, appeals have more frequently been made to research on myths and myth-related places. This demand for research about myth tourism may be interpreted as a direct response to the society we live in, a society showing increased interest in religion, especially spirituality, and that re-evaluates immaterial values (Bartolini, Chris, MacKian, & Pile, 2016).

In the case of Finisterre, present-day tourists mirror older traditions and rituals connected to the mythical narratives about the place. That Finisterre is seen as the end of the world, mainly because of its geographical location, is still a decisive factor in visiting. Even if tourists accept the traditional meaning of a place, our empirical study indicates that other meanings have also started to gain significant attention. Present-day tourists are increasingly being drawn by the symbolic value of the place and emphasise the fact that a visit may contribute to changing their lives. Although this is expressed in religious terms, there is a clear move towards spirituality as a way of countering organised religion. Relph (1976) argued that there is a power that shapes a place, the *genius loci* or spirit of a place. Blom (2000) continues this line of argument and holds that local traditions and tourists together create a more pronounced identity, as well as the impression of a place as a place of leisure. The identity of a place and its mythical connotations complement each other and connect what the place offers to individual experiences. In this case individual spirituality and myth emerged to become the power of this place. As tourists or visitors we are not only satisfied by experiencing a physical environment, on the contrary, existential proximity has an increasingly important role to play in the experience. The quest for a borderland therefore entices us to distance ourselves from something, while we are simultaneously searching for the new and as yet unknown. Myth-related places are in many ways examples of tourist places located in a borderland described by Edensor (2000) as isolated enclaves, experienced as set apart from the rest of the world. By visiting a physical place which in some way marks a divide, the individual may create the mental conditions necessary for changing his/her life, something which many of the tourists in Finisterre desire.

Our study illustrates that myth-related places, as shown by the case of Finisterre, primarily can be seen as a tourist-driven attraction created in a mutual bond between the place, myth and visitors. However, there is a hegemonic story about Finisterre. Yet, as our interviews indicated, a mosaic of different motives for visiting Finisterre has been added to this grand narrative, which in its turn increases its value as a tourist destination in the process between being and becoming.

Note

1. The number of pilgrims to Santiago de Compostela in Spain has for instance increased from 55,000 in 2000 to 278,000 in 2016 (<https://www.csj.org.uk/the-present-day-pilgrimage/pilgrim-numbers/>). During the same period, the number of visitors to Stonehenge has increased from 1 million to just about 1.4 million per year (<https://www.statista.com/statistics/586843/stonehenge-visitor-numbers-united-kingdom-uk/>).

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No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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