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# Signature Events: The Role of Representative Major Events for the Branding of Catholic Pilgrimage Sites (Germany)

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A new trend in destination marketing has been emerging for several years. Instead of many small events, locations rely on one brand-strengthening Signature Event that draws attention to the destination through its uniqueness. Because pilgrimage is arguably the oldest form of mass tourism, places of pilgrimage may have invented such Signature Events to attract devout travellers. If so, signature events at pilgrimage sites are valuable research objects for investigating their success factors. Not only are they the prototypes in which the DNA of Signature Events can be studied, but in many cases, they also had centuries to optimise their experience. Using the example of the most visited Catholic pilgrimage sites in Germany, this research examines whether there are signature events, what common structures they have, and what can be derived from these findings for destination marketing.

**Key Words:** signature events, destination marketing, place branding, religious tourism, pilgrimage

## Introduction

In the 1980s, events became a popular tool for location and tourism marketing. By the 2000s, however, they became increasingly rare. It was even questioned whether their benefits exceeded their disadvantages (costs, effort, conflicts, etc.). For a few years now, a new trend is rising. Many destinations no longer rely on an abundance of small events, but on one special event that communicates the message of the destination. Therefore, these signature events are useful for place branding.

Signature events are large, mostly regularly recurring events that are significantly associated with a destination. They even often become a brand themselves; in any case they serve the brand of the destination. In many places of pilgrimage there is also a religious ritual once a year that has a special connection with the local sanctuary and often attracts thousands of pilgrims and visitors. The basis is usually a narrative that is staged through symbolic actions and thus receives attention.

There are also other big events with many visitors in German pilgrimage sites. Since many of them have a long history, these events have been optimised over centuries. Such religious events are a worthwhile subject of research to study the nature of signature events. Using their example, basic structures, requirements, and success factors can be analysed. This contributes to a significant advance in the scientific examination of the young research subject of signature events.

Using Germany as an example, this essay examines whether there are signature events in Catholic pilgrimage sites. And if there are such signature events that have been around for a very long time: What are the reasons for their lasting success?

## What are Signature Events?

Following Chappelet (2015), Jones (2008:1-2) first introduced the concept of a signature event in 2008. He defines them as ‘one-time or more likely recurring events developed primarily to enhance the image and cultural identity’ of the place in which they are held. Jones considers such events an important part of the Welsh Government’s events policy. Two years later, signature events were an integral part of the Welsh strategy for major sporting events developed by the Communities and Culture Committee:

*Signature Events are typically recurring events which enhance the image and cultural identity of Wales [...] and provide a high quality experience for visitors. They are either unique to Wales or distinctively Welsh in flavour, and reflect our culture, traditions and values. Successful Signature Events continuously reinvigorate and replenish their audiences (National Assembly for Wales, 2010).*

Whether the signature event is really a Welsh invention is controversial. Following the success of the Sydney 2000 Olympics, for example, Tourism New South Wales

(Australia) was already planning a strategy ‘of managing, developing and marketing a portfolio of regular ‘signature event’’ (Strokes & Jago, 2007).

In any case, between 2000 and 2010 the term ‘signature event’ became an instrumental concept of the visitor economy. For example, the Austrian capital Vienna recognised the importance of signature events at this time. The city wanted to position itself more strongly with (a few) ‘high-quality signature events’, which inherently convey an image and a message. The Vienna Tourism Strategy then described a signature event as a ‘key event that becomes a brand in itself and conveys messages, images or values of the destination’ (WienTourismus, 2009).

According to this understanding, signature events are a few, high-quality events which communicate an image and thus sustainably strengthen the destination brand. Signature events are therefore representative of the destination. They stand for everything that defines the destination in the eyes of potential visitors. They bundle the image in a single event. They are the essentials of the brand message. The destination cannot be experienced anywhere else or at any other time more intensely. That is why the Cannes Film Festival (France), the Carnivals of Venice (Italy) and Rio de Janeiro (Brazil), the Munich Oktoberfest (Germany) or St. Patrick’s Day in Dublin (Ireland) for example, are such brand-defining events with global impact, even if they have a different status for the local population.

A signature event represents a destination and gradually becomes an important date in the local calendar (Chappelet, 2015). Mass awareness of the signature event can be equal to or even greater than brand awareness of the destination itself. In any case, a signature event

*highlights your brand, builds and delivers great content, and guarantees consistent attendance. It is visually appealing, has extraordinary attention to detail, and creates tremendous value* (Jones, 2020:93).

Incidentally, this is not solely due to the size of the signature event, which distinguishes it from a ‘mega-event’ (Roche, 2000).

It becomes clear that a signature event primarily serves the brand. It not only pursues its own purpose, but also significantly supports the perception of the destination.

*Clarifying your goals will make all the difference between a mediocre occasion and a marvellous signature event that people will be talking about long after it’s over* (Jones, 2020:42).

In addition to the image effects, Rivera and Croes (2011) emphasise the economic benefits of signature events. Walter (2012:240) also recognises the close connection to economic issues:

*European destinations such as Barcelona, Vienna and Paris etc. all have a signature event that draws in revenue and builds on the economic profile for those respective locations.*

Critical voices (e.g., Jones, 2005), on the other hand, argue that the effects of signature events are overestimated or assessed too one-sidedly:

*Signature events create a visible spike in a tourism economy, but do not generally provide the entire means for sustainable economic development* (Cultural Tourism Action Committee, 2007:12).

In fact, signature events rarely generate funds for a travel destination, but rather consume funding and resources. Studies conducted by the Travel Industry Association of America (TIA) have also allegedly demonstrated that no single signature event can sustain the entire tourism economy of a destination (Cultural Tourism Action Committee, 2007).

These different perceptions lead to the question why people stage such events (Laing & Frost, 2016). This is a subject that can be very controversial, especially in places of pilgrimage, because numerous motives can be brought to the fore here.

### Major Events in Christian Pilgrimage Sites

Pilgrimage sites have always been destinations for pious people, which is the reason why pilgrimages are

#### Signature Events

Signature events are rare but recurring, few, big, unique, high-quality events that represent a destination. These important dates in the local calendar enhance and communicate the image of a destination. Signature events bundle the uniqueness of a destination in a single event, sustainably strengthen the destination brand and often become a brand themselves. Thus, they convey messages or values of the destination.

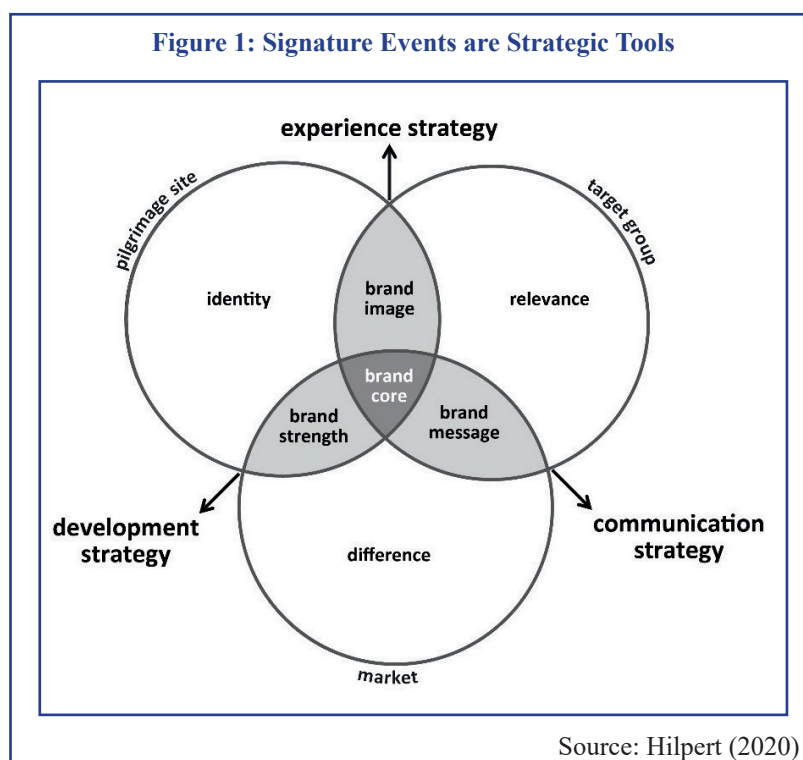
the ‘oldest form of mass tourism’ (Imkamp, 2010). Therefore, pilgrimage sites are the oldest examples of place branding, because the message they communicate has always attracted devout travellers. Therefore, it is worth studying the image-building major events of pilgrimage sites, because in many cases they have had centuries to optimise them. Maybe pilgrimage sites have invented and developed the prototype of the signature event, from which we can try to research and understand the DNA and the genetic code of this activity. In any case, they offer numerous examples of well-known, persistent, mass-attracting, and effective events.

Research on religious events basically has a long tradition. When the academic debate about events began in the 1980s, ‘scholars were very conscious of the role of religion in shaping how and why events were staged’ (Laing & Frost, 2016). This is probably also related to the fact that many events in history followed a ritual structure (Falassi, 1987) and emerged from seasonal, life cycle, and celebratory religious origin (Dowson, 2020a).

Religious events enable shared experiences in a faith context (Lee *et al.*, 2015). For this purpose, places of pilgrimage offer, for example, thematic events that follow the liturgical year or have a connection to a local feature (e.g., a relic or the commemoration of the local patron saint). In this way, events also contribute

to cultural wealth, community building, group identity and a heightened religious faith (Getz, 2012; Dowson, 2020b). Such events usually not only take place in the same way, but also at the same place of the pilgrimage site. The venue plays a crucial role in the event experience (Dowson, 2020) and some researchers are now speaking of ‘venuefication’ (Dowson & Lamond, 2017).

The Eventization of Faith (Pfadenhauer, 2010), especially the staging of large-scale mega-events (Dowson, 2017) always has external effects. The fact that events are part of the marketing mix (Crowther & Donlan, 2011) also often applies to religious staging (Pfadenhauer, 2010), because a regular program of convincing activities can effectively present values (Dowson, 2020b). Indeed, a lot of pilgrimage sites have at least one branded event in their pilgrimage calendar that presents the site in a special way. Such signature events are essential elements of place branding (see Figure 1). The question is how the (potential) target groups can best experience the uniqueness (identity) of the pilgrimage site (experience strategy). Signature events therefore always focus on the brand image and never on marginal topics. But, signature events are also important for the communication strategy because they concentrate the brand message and attract a lot of attention. Finally, signature events are also crucial to strengthen the brand. Accordingly, they play a supporting role in all development strategies.



Interestingly, there are numerous similarities between signature events at pilgrimage sites and modern marketing practice. For example, if you read the recommendations of the community event planner on the eventplanner.net website (2019) for the implementation of a signature event, one could believe that they are talking about religious events:

- **Create a compelling narrative:** Well-designed stories make people get together and connect to a bigger idea or vision. It's your job to inspire people to believe your mission.
- **Promote your event through marketing innovation:** Reach out to local influencers and get them to tell a story related to your mission. Build emotional messages that will pull at people's heartstrings.
- **Level up your event to a real movement:** Once you get an entire community behind your cause, you can grow your event into a real movement.
- **Make a real difference in the world:** One of the most exciting things about the events industry is the transformational power these gatherings have on people. What we can do is choose a cause we believe in and develop signature events that may eventually lead to a bigger local or international impact and make this world a little bit better.

These short excerpts are sufficient to show not only the linguistic, but also the intention similarities between event management and religious staging. One of the most important similarities is the message of the place of pilgrimage / destination, which is communicated by the signature event in a way that it can convince current and potential pilgrims / visitors. Such carriers of messages are for example the Solemnity of the Assumption (August 15) in Czestochowa (Poland) with around 100,000 pilgrims annually, the Medjugorje Youth festival (Bosnia-Herzegovina) with around 50,000 visitors each summer or the Way of the Cross Procession on Good Friday in the Old City of Jerusalem (Israel), where thousands of believers crowd along the Via Dolorosa. In sum, religious signature events seem to be relatively often aimed at a certain date, which has a special meaning in the calendar of the respective pilgrimage site - both for the site itself and for the believers. And that is ultimately what makes a brand successful: the message is transmitted from the sender to the recipient, who in turn internalises it. The brand message of the event determines the travel decision and controls the attendee's self-definition as a pilgrim.

The signature event of the pilgrimage site thus becomes the pilgrim's self-expression.

## Methodology

There are Catholic Christians all over Germany. Because of history, there are regional differences in their proportion of the total population. Nonetheless, there are Catholics all over the country and therefore Catholic pilgrimage sites as well. The exact number of such sites is not even known to the German Bishops' Conference (author's request in January 2021), but including the small pilgrimage sites, their number is hardly countable.

The present study only selected the largest pilgrimage sites in Germany, because urban tourism shows as well that signature events from cities always requires a certain size and awareness of the destination. Therefore, only places of pilgrimage with at least 40,000 visits per year were included in the sample, regardless of whether they are pious pilgrims or profane tourists. The number of visitors is based on information from the pilgrimage directorates and is of course based more on estimates than on exact counts.

The sample was limited to at least 40,000 visitors due to the size-number ratio: below this limit, there is an almost unmanageable number of places of pilgrimage. But above this mark, the larger pilgrimage sites in the country clearly stand out from the many smaller pilgrimage sites. Therefore, the 25 largest pilgrimage sites in Germany are included in the sample. They all have over 40,000 visitors a year (before the corona pandemic). It is also worth mentioning that two of them are so-called places of prayer. These are shrines that have not (yet) been recognised as places of pilgrimage by the local bishop, but which are already regarded as such by the faithful.

In a first step, various information (location, history, infrastructure, etc.) was collected from the internet for the 25 units. In a second step, personal interviews (via telephone or video call) were conducted. The conversation partners were mostly the pilgrimage directors or their deputies. In the interviews, terms like 'signature event' or 'marketing' were of course avoided. The main focus was on the number of large religious celebrations, the number of visitors to these big events as well as the importance of these events for the place of pilgrimage. The aim of the interviews was to find out whether there are signature events in pilgrimage sites, what role they play for the destinations and whether there

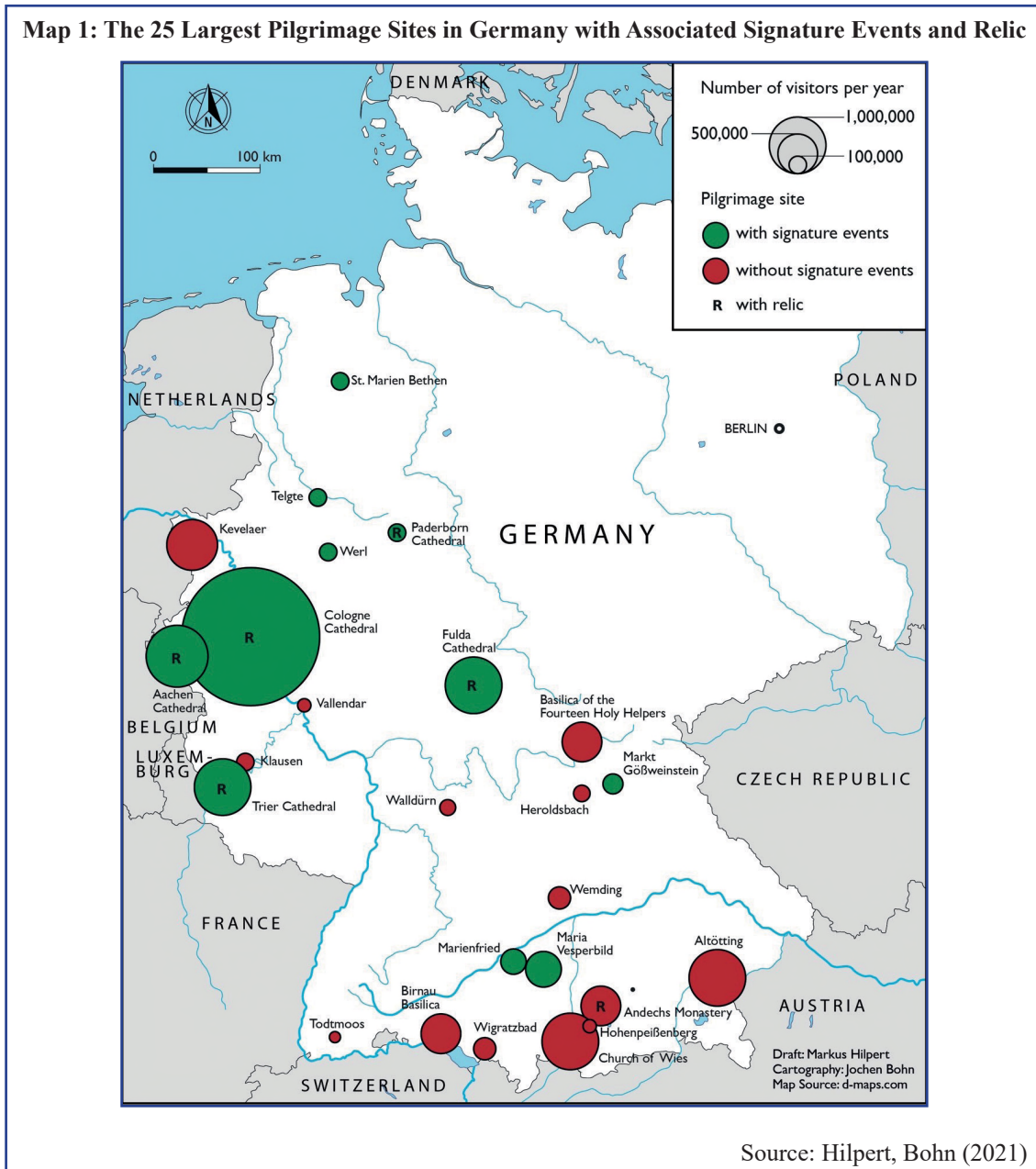
are differences between the pilgrimage sites and why. In a third step, all information was finally transferred to a database. Depending on the type of data, the information collected was then analysed quantitatively, interpreted in terms of content, or combined in a mixed manner.

### Empirical Findings from German Pilgrimage sites

Ten of the 25 most important pilgrimage sites (measured by the number of annual visitors) in Germany have a signature event (see table 1). Hence, a finding is that it is not uncommon for a larger pilgrimage site to have a signature event (according to the definition given above).

Signature events are therefore not the exception at larger pilgrimage sites but occur quite frequently.

This is more commonly the case with the larger pilgrimage sites: among the pilgrimage sites with at least 100,000 visitors per year, every second site has a signature event. The database shows an obvious correlation between the size of a pilgrimage site and the staging of a signature event. Pilgrimage sites without signature events have an average of 346,400 visitors annually (min. 55,000, max. 1,000,000), while sites with signature events have an average of 1,029,500 visitors (min. 100,000, max. 6,000,000). Even if Cologne Cathedral with its 6,000,000 visitors is not considered in this calculation, the pilgrimage sites with signature events still have an



average of 477,200 visitors annually. Based on the data collected, it is obvious that larger pilgrimage sites are more likely to have a signature event than smaller ones. Therefore, it is not surprising that places of pilgrimage with a larger (sometimes even international) catchment area tend to have a signature event more often than places of regional or local importance.

There are further correlations with the type of church and the reason for the pilgrimage. While there is no accumulation of signature events in the usual pilgrimage churches, all five cathedrals in the sample (which are also places of pilgrimage) have a signature event. The cathedrals have the largest signature events, which often last for several days. This could be related to the importance of the church on the one hand, but also to the

organisational capacities on the other. A third explanation could be the reason for the pilgrimage. For cathedrals often have relics, which are then also the occasion for the signature event. Even more: of the six pilgrimage sites with a relic, five have a signature event, and this relic is always the basis for the signature event. In other words: If a place of pilgrimage has a relic, it is very likely that it will have a signature event to glorify this relic; this relic is often the unique selling point of the site, defining its brand essence.

There is also a weak connection to the cult of religious idols: There is a signature event at three of the four pilgrimage sites where a saint is venerated. Where Jesus Christ or Mary are at the centre of worship, there are proportionally fewer signature events. The dedication

**Table 1: The 25 Largest Pilgrimage Sites in Germany with an Indication of an Existing Signature Event (SE)**

Pilgrimage site	Visitors per year	Origin of the pilgrimage	Devotion	SE / ME*
Cologne Cathedral	6,000,000	Relic	Saint	SE
Aachen Cathedral	1,220,000	Relic	Jesus Christ	SE
Altötting	1,000,000	Sacral image	Mary	ME
Trier Cathedral	1,000,000	Relic	Jesus Christ	SE
Fulda Cathedral	1,000,000	Relic	Saint	SE
Church of Wies	1,000,000	Miracle	Jesus Christ	---
Kevelaer	800,000	Sacral image	Mary	---
Andechs Monastery	500,000	Relic	Jesus Christ	---
Basilica of the Fourteen Holy Helpers	500,000	Apparition	Saint	---
Birnau Basilica	500,000	Sacral image	Mary	---
Maria Vesperbild	400,000	Sacral image	Mary	SE
Marienfried	200,000	Apparition	Mary	SE
Wemding	175,000	Sacral image	Mary	---
Wigratzbad	175,000	Apparition	Mary	ME
Göbweinstein	125,000	Sacral image	Mary	SE
Telgte	100,000	Sacral image	Mary	SE
Werl	100,000	Sacral image	Mary	SE
Paderborn Cathedral	100,000	Relic	Saint	SE
Klausen	100,000	Sacral image	Mary	---
St. Marien Bethen	100,000	Sacral image	Mary	ME
Heroldsbach	85,000	Apparition	Mary	---
Walldürn	80,000	Miracle	Jesus Christ	---
Vallendar	56,000	Sacral image	Mary	---
Hohenpeißenberg	55,000	Sacral image	Mary	---
Todtmoos	40,000	Apparition	Mary	---

\* SE = Signature Event; ME = Major Event

Table 2: Number of Visitors, Date, and Duration of the 10 Signature Events of the Sample

Signature Event	Pilgrimage site	Number of visitors to the Signature Event (approx.)	Date (frequency)	Duration
Libori Festival	Paderborn Cathedral	1.5 million	Saturday after July 23 <sup>rd</sup> (every year)	9 days
Holy Robe Pilgrimage	Trier Cathedral	500,000	Easter season (at irregular intervals)	4 weeks
Aachen Pilgrimage	Aachen Cathedral	125,000	June (every seven years)	11 days
Three Kings Pilgrimage	Cologne Cathedral	65,000	Around September 27 <sup>th</sup> (every year)	4 days
Telgte Pilgrimage	Pilgrimage church Telgte	40,000	June/July (every year)	2 days
Boniface Pilgrimage	Fulda Cathedral	8,000	Sunday around June 5 <sup>th</sup> (every year)	1 day
Feast of the Assumption of Mary	Place of pilgrimage Maria Vesperbild	4,000	August 15 <sup>th</sup> (every year)	1 day
Holy Trinity Sunday	Basilica of the Holy Trinity Gößweinstein	3,000	Sunday after Pentecost (every year)	1 day
Visitation of Our Lady	Werl Basilica minor	2,000	Saturday & Sunday after July 2 <sup>nd</sup> (every year)	2 days
Great Day of Prayer	Marienfried place of prayer	1,500	3 <sup>rd</sup> Sunday of July (every year)	2 days

of the pilgrimage sites to a saint (with the exception of the Blessed Virgin Mary) therefore, tends to increase the staging of a signature event. That may also be a reason why the date of most signature events is not based on the liturgical calendar or Christian solemnities (e.g. Easter / Christmas etc.). Much more often, the date plays an important role in local tradition, for example, the feast day of the local saint.

At first glance, the age of the pilgrimage sites does not seem to influence the staging of signature events. The origin of the sites in the sample varies between the 7th and 20th centuries. But, a closer look shows that, with one exception, all pilgrimage sites with signature events are older (founded between the 7th and 17th centuries).

A Holy Mass is of course at the centre of all Signature Events. However, this service is celebrated with special pomp (e.g., high mass) and usually led by a high dignitary (e.g., bishop or cardinal). In an interview, the church caretaker from Gößweinstein described the signature event there as

*the real pilgrimage highlight in the liturgical annual cycle* (Dörres, 2021, personal communication).

Most signature events last several days (see Table 2). Therefore, they always include several individual events (e.g. holy masses, processions, devotion, concerts, exhibitions), mostly for different target groups (pilgrims, children, families, sick people, married couples, etc.). It is also interesting for the public perception that some components of all signature event take place not only in the church, but also outside of it. Each of the ten examined signature events has at least one sub-event that is held outside. In an interview, for example, the head of the cathedral office in Paderborn said:

*Our Libori festival lasts for nine days and rocks the whole city every day during this time. Libori in summer - that towers over everything* (Liehr, 2021, personal communication).

The signature events examined often show characteristics of an own brand. This was also seen in the interviews in this study. The event manager of the Diocese of Trier said:

*We conducted a survey of what people associate with the Diocese of Trier. The holy robe pilgrimage was mentioned very often. So, it seems to work as a brand with the guests* (Meyer, 2021, personal communication).



**Table 3: Narratives and How they can be Experienced**

Rank size	Signature Event	Narrative (as a category)	Experienceability
1	Libori festival	Legend of a saint	Showing the reliquary
2	Holy Robe Pilgrimage	Relic	Showing the reliquary
3	Aachen pilgrimage	Relic	Showing the reliquary
4	Three Kings Pilgrimage	Legend of saints	Visit to the shrine
5	Telgte Pilgrimage	Mary	Foot pilgrimage
6	Boniface pilgrimage	Legend of saints	Visit to the crypt
7	Feast of the Assumption of Mary	Mary	Candlelight procession
8	Holy Trinity Sunday	Holy Trinity (who crowns Mary Queen of Heaven)	Foot pilgrimage
9	Visitation of Our Lady	Mary	Candlelight procession
10	Libori festival	Mary	Candlelight procession

The pilgrimage director of Maria Vesperbild also sees his signature event as an own brand:

*People simply know that the Assumption of Mary is a big event for us. It is now a sure-fire success (Reichert, 2021, personal communication).*

Following the logic of faith, there are no earthly relics due to Mary's ascension to heaven. The Marian devotion therefore usually must do without haptic cult objects. Instead, all Marian signature events in the sample have processions and foot pilgrimages to add physical activity to the prayer (see Table 3). It is noticeable, however, that the larger signature events are based on a more tangible narrative. This is about the life of the a saint (and their relics) or other cult objects. These material objects can be shown, viewed, or even touched (see Table 3). This is a very crucial component of the experience strategy (see Figure 1) of the pilgrimage site. Measured by the number of visitors, it seems that more tangible and more visible narratives enable larger signature events.

In addition to the 10 pilgrimage sites with signature events, there are three more samples, which have a major event (ME, see Table 1) with a lot of visitors. However, these are not considered signature events because they are not originally associated with the pilgrimage site. For example, around 1,500 women make a pilgrimage to St. Marien (Bethen) every year. This women's pilgrimage is by far the site's event with the most visitors. The pilgrimage to the miraculous image began in 1915 when women prayed for their husbands during war. This custom continues to this day, even if the intention of the

women's pilgrimage has changed since then. However, the destination is chosen rather randomly. There is no direct connection between the message of the place of pilgrimage and the women's pilgrimage. Another example of a major event is the Pentecost pilgrimage in Altötting. With around 30,000 pilgrims, it is the largest event in this site. But, Altötting is a place of pilgrimage to the Virgin Mary and all in all the Marian festivals together have a lot more visitors. In any case, there is no substantive connection between Pentecost and the Marian pilgrimage site Altötting. But, it is noticeable, that all major events in the sample are at Marian shrines.

## Conclusion

There are signature events in many catholic pilgrimage sites. Especially the larger pilgrimage sites (above all cathedrals) stage signature events. Also, places where relics and saints are worshipped or that have a larger catchment area or that have a longer history tend to have a signature event. The core of the Signature Events is of course a Holy Mass, which is celebrated in a particularly solemn manner by a high ranking spiritual dignitary. In addition, there are other individual events which form part of the signature event (e.g., processions, worship, other divine services), which serve different target groups (pilgrims, families etc.), which is why most signature events last several days. In addition, for public awareness purposes, it is also important that some components of the signature events take place not only in the churches, but also outside of them.

In conclusion the success of signature events depends on the following factors: The signature event should take place every year, always on the same date, which is of the utmost importance for the destination. Its meaning should be derived from a unique local narrative, which at least in part is still physically preserved on site (or at least perceptible in some sense). It can stretch over several days and should have a central main event led by a well-known personality. In addition, there should be other different sub-events, for different target groups. Additionally, there should be an extensive and varied program. In order to be noticed outside of one's own community, the events may not only take place in closed spaces, but also in public areas or at other locations.

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