

LE PUY

THE VIA FRANCIGENA : AN EARTHLY ROUTE TO ROME AND AN AXIS BRINGING TOGETHER THE JACOBIAN ROUTES IN ITALY

The birth of the Via Francigena is not without its connections to the beginning of large-scale communications which began to appear in the West from the second half of the 7th century onwards, under the impulsion of an entirely spiritual phenomenon: pilgrimages. This followed on from the ever increasing number of pilgrims who were moving to attain the main 'loca sacra' of Christianity, that the interregional routes showed to be necessary. We are referring above all to the Roman pilgrimage, which was fed especially during this era by the newly converted populations of the British Isles, as Paolo Diacono reminds us: 'His temporibus multi Anglorum gentis, nobiles et ignobiles, viri et feminae, duces et privati, Divini Amoris instinctu de Britania Romam venire consuerunt' (*Historia Langobardum*, Lib.VI, Cap.37, 1-3). But we must not neglect the influx of Germanic pilgrims who came to show their devotion to the Archangel St. Michael, who were the source of success, in the Apulia region, of the Garganic sanctuary, constructed near the cave where the warrior archangel appeared.

The pilgrims of the Archangel St. Michael, in the first part of their route, used the same routes as those who were going 'ad limina Beati Petri', and it was the same for those who undertook the longest and most tiring pilgrimage to the Holy Land, given that as a general rule, the starting points for the pilgrims going to the Holy Sepulchre were in one of the ports of Apulia. The routes followed by the pilgrims who followed what we could call the 'grand tour' of the late Middle Ages, which stretched across all of Italy, created the Via Francigena, considered as a cluster of routes and the fruit of a veritable 'collage' of different portions of old consular paths that remained in use, and new routes made up of vicinal paths, placing it at the level of one of the most important communication routes.

Such a route, with such a long journey, hardly distinguishes itself, at least the first time, from the routes that we used for local traffic: the definition of a major artery in the late Middle Ages was in fact not based on road quality but on the intensity of the transits that developed, which implied the setting up of structures for reception and assistance all along the route. It was not by chance that, at the beginning of the 13th century, the Lombard sovereigns followed, in a kind of communications policy, the construction of a collection of abbeys, lengthening the route of the future Via Francigena, which stopped at the borders of their 'Regnum'. Beyond the religious aims that were pursued, the monasteries founded by the Royal Court of Pavia served not only as resting places for pilgrims, but also solid points of support along the route.

With regard to the aspects of the routes, the oldest documented testimonies, even though they are laconic, attest to how the Via Francigena takes the same form as the 'Itinerarium Sancti Willibaldi' (723-726) and the 'Itinerarium Bernardi monaci Franci' (867). But it is above all thanks to the memoirs of the Archbishop of Canterbury, Sigeric, that the Via Francigena became known in the 10th century (990). It became, from then on, a well-defined route in its basic path and found itself at the head of a succession of localities, all provided with structures of assistance and hospitality.

The first mentions of the name 'Via Francigena' and its equivalent 'Via Francesca' go back to the 9th century. The denomination 'Via Francesca' seems to be older as it appears to have been mentioned for the first time in a parchment dating back to 876 'actum in Clusio', coming from the diplomatic archives of the abbey of San Salvatore on the mountain of Amiata. The document first referring to the other denomination, the 'Via Francigena', goes back to 1024 and is called 'Privilegium Baiulorum Imperialium' it describes the limits of the territory of Troy. Other than the denominations, we can still clearly identify the origins of the route which starts beyond the Alps, in other words in France, as Du Cange reminds us: 'ita et italis, quicumque transmontani francigenae appellabantur' (*Glossarium mediae et infimae latinitatis*, vol.I, p.591).

Two paths enabled access to Italy. They corresponded to the most popular alpine passages of the late Middle Ages, up until the 12th century: the Grand-Saint-Bernard and the Mont Cenis. The branches of the path led to two mountain passes: the first crossed Aosta and Ivree and the second crossed Suse and Turin. They converged at Vercelli, then continued in the direction of Pavia where the river Tessin was crossed by an old Roman bridge. The path continued on the left bank of the Po river which one could cross by using 'navalestri', a passage linking Corte Sant'Andrea to Calendasco, on the outskirts of Piacenza, and then took the via Emilia, taking the old consular route to Borgo San Donnino, which is now known as Fidenza. Here the route really went to the south, in the direction of the Apennines, climbing the Taro valley. After having passed Monterbardone (present day Cisa), one crossed the Apennine range to then descend towards the opposite Tuscan slope, following the Magra river almost to its mouth. After arriving in the port, which was found below the town of Luni, already a 'splendida civitas et curia', the route crossed the Versilia with a path halfway along which went towards Lucca. After leaving the Tuscan town, the path led to the straight hilly passage between the two ducal zones of Bientina and Fucecchio and enabled the crossing of the Arno by ford to arrive between Fucecchio and Borgo San Genesio. The following path took the routes offered by nature, from the ducal way of the river Elsa, passing through Sienna, to the Arbia and Orcia valleys. Once clear of the dividing of the waters between the valleys of Orcia and Paglia, and between the hill of Radicofani and the mountain of Amiata, the route reached Bolsena Lake, thereafter passing through the consular Cassia road, the route reached Rome.

In the continuity of the path to the south of Rome, the Via Francigena used the traces of the Roman roads which remained throughout the Middle Ages, at least as a directional axis for the traffic. The Via Appia (the original route leading to the variant of the path which is found at the foot of the mountain and which was created in the Middle Ages), the Via Latina and the Via Prenestina allowed all three to join 'Casilinum' (to-day Capua). From the latter, still following the Via Appia, one could go towards Benevento, the start of a long consular route: Appia Traiana, and follow the walking route via which one could reach the ports of Apulia, the embarkation points for the Holy Land, or even making a slight detour, arriving at the sanctuary of the Archangel St. Michael on Monte Gargano.

The aspect which distinguished the Via Francigena from other local routes was defined, according to what is said, by the sheer density of the hospitality and

assistance structures that could be found along the range of paths that formed the route. Furthermore, until the late Middle Ages, the churches of small towns, like monastic foundations, canonical communities, or even rural churches, never neglected their duty of hospitality and created places of assistance for pilgrims and passers by. Then, at the beginning of the 12th century, under the impulsion of the complex phenomenon of the Crusades, a new concept of assistance arose: the hospital orders offered a considerable contribution which enabled the expansion of hospices along the principal routes leading to the major pilgrimage destinations. The military orders (Templars, Knights of St. John, Teutons), born in the Holy Land after the conquest of Jerusalem, in a particular moment of ideological exaltation which had the principal objective of protecting the pilgrims and defending the faith, were particularly visible on the Via Francigena with their 'dwellings'.

As of the 11th century, another site was added to the main pilgrimage destinations of Western Christianity: Santiago de Compostela, born following the development of veneration for Santiago in the Galician region, where it was thought that the tomb of the Apostle was found.

The Via Francigena which was a common route for pilgrims who wished to go to Rome, San Michele Arcangelo sul Gargano and Jerusalem, became also the initial basis for all those who wanted to go from Rome to what Dante called 'barone per cui là giù si visita Galizia' (Paradiso, XXV, 18). The Jacobian pilgrims in fact made the path climb up to Mont Cenis in order to then reach the Toulouse road, the most southern among the French paths, which all converged at Ronceveaux and formed the path of Santiago. There was also a variant, partly maritime in nature, which still followed a large part of the Via Francigena. One could embark at the port of Luni, follow a coastal navigation, land in Provence, and finally reach the Toulouse road.

Even though well documented in Italy as early as the first decades of the 12th century, the pilgrimage of Santiago did not show significant traces of earlier routes until the 14th century. It is however, certain that the pilgrims travelled to Santiago by using the Via Francigena, as is shown to us by the documentation of the 14th and 15th centuries, as well as the oldest reference to the routes followed by pilgrims: the diary of the Icelandic abbot, Nikulas from Munkathvera, who arrived in Luni by following the Via Francigena in 1154, after his pilgrimage to Rome and Jerusalem. He observed that the town was the departure point from which 'one entered in contact with the routes of Spain and Santiago de Compostela.'

Luni for a long time preserved its privileged status as the normal embarkation point for Jacobean pilgrims, even when the increasingly notorious consequences of the hydrological conditions of the littoral territory, which eventually led to the disappearance of 'portus Lunae' and the formation of the San Maurizio port (on the outskirts of Bocca di Magra), made themselves felt.

However, in the 14th century, due to the progressive process of silting-up of the entire littoral, there was a change in the departure point for those who wished to take the 'sea route' of Santiago. One would no longer embark in Lunigiana but at Pisa, which was linked to Lucca using a slight detour in the route of the Via Francigena. However, Pisa, or rather the port of Pisa, already constituted an embarkation point replacing the port of Luni, since at the end of the 12th century, on the road that served

to link Pisa and the Via Francigena, the hospice of St. Jacopo 'de Podio' was built, under the encouragement of St. Bonne of Pisa, who was particularly loyal to the apostle Santiago, so much so that the hagiographers reported that she completed the pilgrimage to Santiago at least 10 times!

In the middle of the Middle Ages, the Via Francigena, at least in Italy, constituted a meeting and linking place for the routes of these 'peregrinationes maiores'. A kind of sacralization of space therefore took place along these routes, scattered with marks, messages and symbols of pilgrimage, and whose traces remain through architectonic and iconographic testimonies, in dedications to saints and in toponomastics, etc..

The route also made up a formidable instrument for economic growth for the town and regions which were along the path. It was in fact thanks to the Via Francigena that the two major trade sites of the Middle Ages began to communicate: that situated on the Mediterranean and that stretching along the North Sea, which met at the celebrated fairs of the Champagne region. The economic factor thus placed itself at the side of the religious factor, even becoming the principal cause for the increases in traffic flows, chosen between the possible routes, due to the fact that centuries of transit had made the axis very well equipped.

The intensification of this long distance commerce and the general growth of productive forces, in the determination of a greater articulation of the road network and the diversification of the routes, are the elements that favoured the proliferation of the paths of the Francigena and the Francesca routes. These two denominations became synonymous with major communication routes and defined, in Italy, all of the paths that crossed the Alps in one way or another.

Simultaneously, following the Christianisation of the populations of central and eastern Europe and the changes in the composition of the flows of pilgrims, other routes to Rome began to appear. The 13th century sources about routes, in addition to the passages crossing the eastern Alps, always made reference to mountain passes such as Sempione, San Gottardo and Brennero. These, by linking Padania (the generic name given to the collection of the northern regions of Italy, around the Po valley) with the Germanic area, enabled one to take a shorter route to the lands of the east of Renania. To the south of the Apennines, Florence became the largest centre of economic and political life in central Italy during the 13th century, and with Rome, captured the principal communications axis, imposing a direct link with the world of Padania, by crossing the foothills of Mugello.

The important cultural unity of Europe in the Middle Ages was made possible thanks to the existence of the paths, like the Via Francigena, which enabled the spreading of the models created by the cultural centres of Christianity across the West. With the movement of men and merchandise, the Via always acted as a vehicle for ideas, for example facilitating the diffusion of new forms of monastic spirituality expressed by the Benedictine orders formed by Cluny and then by Cîteaux. The cult of certain saints spread and presented figures and personalities linked to the 'chansons de geste' of the pilgrims, as models of defenders of the faith. In a special way, the route contributed to the enrichment of expressions of local artistic culture and the eclecticism of architectonic expressions, during the Roman period, in the places which found themselves at the crossroads of the medieval traffic system which, basing itself

on the pilgrimage routes, had its origins in the Via Francigena as well as the 'path' of Santiago.

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Incontro Europeo

"I Cammini di Santiago di Compostela e gli Incontri all'Hotel-Dieu"

Puy-en-Velay (Francia), 27-30 Settembre 2007