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### **Local System, Networks and International Competitiveness: from Cultural Heritage to Cultural Routes.**

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#### **ABSTRACT**

The analysis of cultural routes, as a development and environmental improvement instrument, is undoubtedly among the most interesting topics within the specific scientific community and, perfectly in line with the concept of cultural heritage expressed both on a national and international level within such organisations as INCOMOS, UNESCO, Council of Europe and European Commission. Cultural heritage sites are characterised by localised linear and radial-shaped thickenings within an Italian interregional urban network space configuration, whose local relational system or territorial networks can be dealt with by means of management policies aimed at enhance, on the whole, its use through meaningful and shared concepts such as cultural routes.

The present contribution purpose is therefore the analysis, through a systemic-geographic approach, of a number of central elements within environmental improvement strategies by means of cultural routes such as: urban scales, dimensional optimum and integration levels with the local system on the whole.

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**Keywords:** Cultural Routes, Territorial Recomposition, Sustainable Tourism, Local Development.

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## 1. Introduction<sup>1</sup>

Cultural routes are defined as new wide ranging cultural assets connecting diverse and homogeneous elements of the tangible and intangible cultural heritage and related to contiguous or far apart territories so as to create a new knowledge system (ICOMOS, 2005).

On this basis, over the last years, many local authorities and administrations have aimed at the implementation of thematic routes as strategies for promoting minor tourist destination, thus helping a growth of themes and destinations whose concrete economic contribution is still uncertain.

A central role is played by a few preliminary observations which prompt us to consider the boosting strategy between low-ranking cruxes in the national and European urban network.

Recent trend towards the endorsement of specific funding policies aimed at cultural routes (especially through European funds<sup>2</sup> or national policies<sup>3</sup>), seems to delineate a clear orientation towards economies of scale (or dimensional optimum), in terms of valorisation of local systems short-range networks and especially long-range ones.

This could for instance constitute a solution to our national context featuring a multitude of specific property assets (archives, libraries, galleries, museums, archaeological sites, monumental complexes, cultural centres, theatres, parks, historic gardens and environmentally important sites, churches, parishes etc.....), that still prove to be scarcely competitive due to limited integrated improvements at a local system level and within short and long-range networks and cultural tourism spinnerets.

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<sup>1</sup> Work partially carried out within a research conducted by the MiBAC-funded Italian Geographic Society entitled: "Enhancement, communication and utilization of the National cultural heritage within local systems, National networks and international competition. Assessment, analysis and appraisal of territorial permanent development models in Italy, detection and collection of best practises and guide lines".

<sup>2</sup> According to recent call issued by The European Commission's Directorate General Enterprise: "Promotion of trans-national thematic tourism products in the European Union as means of sustainable tourism development (12/G/ENT/TOU/11/411B)".

<sup>3</sup> With the establishment of the National Council of Cultural Routes and support to the Via Francigena-related activities, Council of Europe's Accredited Cultural Routes.

Cultural sites such as museums are still important attractions in most major cities (of over 100.000 inhabitants) traditionally tourist destinations since the 18th Century Grand Tour.

As far as such polarisation is concerned, it is worth noting that cultural sites are mostly widespread in settlements such as major cities, but also in small and medium-sized centres (-/+ 20.000), where museums assets meet poor attendance even within several tourist destinations.

Both national and non-national cultural heritage, chiefly made up by museums and similar institutions (cultural sites), represent such a valuable nationally widespread strategic asset that more than one Italian urban district out of 4 feature at least a museum or a cultural site (MIBAC).

It's mostly about a world of national, regional, provincial, local, ecclesiastic, private, academic and nationally widespread diverse expositive structures, in confirmation of the popular image as a museum that Italy has earned itself at international level.

What could the best improvement strategies for such a complex material heritage be? Especially as far as its immaterial environmental interrelations are concerned?

If, broadly speaking, the lack of a coherent and integrated public policy, as a civilisation instrument (in terms of education, civilisation and democracy), concerning the two core issues such as culturally-based tourist development and use of culture (as already mentioned among the others in Callegari; 2003, p.49) narrows down competitiveness on the national level it, nevertheless, allows the self-replication of cultural expertise and creativity that only a small or medium scale is able to express through local systems.

In particular, innovation and creativity and their ability to boost cultural production (even through such tools as cultural routes) can represent an alternative route to gain, within the international panorama and by means of a "creative culture" oriented approach (OECD 2009), a strong and dynamic cultural identity (although rather patchy) increasingly oriented towards local communities and visitors' involvement and participation.

## **2. From tangible cultural heritage to cultural routes: paths for local development**

Literature on culture and local development oriented cultural heritage is decidedly vast embracing scholars' contributions from several disciplines: from anthropology and geography to architecture and economy management.

The most accredited approach within economists is the interpretation of cultural heritage as a stock of resources (Mazzanti, 2002) worth being preserved.

This decidedly economic-oriented view is counteracted by the broader and better structured economy culture image (Grefe, 2003, Santagata, 2002, Trimarchi, 1996, Santagata, 2007, Valentino, 2003, Mazzanti, 2002) where the cultural heritage, instead of being interpreted as a stock, is viewed as an economic resource to be directly implemented on a local scale through tourism, whereas indirectly, as a collective source of well-being and, above all, as interrelational assets within a cultural ecosystem (Grefe, 2003).

In this respect the cultural heritage can't only be looked upon as a profit-oriented tool but, as a means to build an individual and collective relationship (Béghain, 1998) centred around mutual legacy and identity.

Within geographic science, culture and cultural emergencies have been dealt with on the basis of territorial contexts (Callegari et al., 2002) and specific roles (Persi, 2002) aimed at the construction of a territorial network, with special attention to local systems (Madau, 2004), where culture features as a key constituent element (see next paragraph).

As extensive seems to be tourism cultural literature and its contribution to economy development and competitiveness at different levels (Richards, 2006, Jansen-Verbeke et al. 2008).

Cultural heritage along with its bond with tourism (UNESCO/UNITWIN Network "Culture, Tourism, Development", 2008) represent a network of resources based on capital stocks capable of triggering innovative processes, organizational in nature or related to responsible tourism ethics.

We are therefore witnessing the rise of a relationship centred around places, culture and memory concerning values and stock patrimonialisation processes

where the archetypical cultural tourist talks about experiences and relationships.

Ashworth, in particular, (2008, 1997) has dealt with the cultural heritage building process (especially the immaterial one) and its impact analysis since the 1990's, in his "The Heritage Paradigm".

The cultural route concept is, in fact, based on the relationship between tourism and culture, both in terms of cultural assets and touristic use.

Cultural route interpretation varies according to the ultimate aim of the organisations promoting it:

- According to the Council of Europe, cultural routes are instruments aimed at demonstrating, through transverse paths other than space and time, that most countries' cultural heritage is, in fact, a mutual one ([www.coe.int](http://www.coe.int)). They are essentially communication mediums and tools for cultural exchange between nations and cultures, or better still, tools for strengthening European identity. They're also the object of a specific programme launched in 1987 and complete with two further resolutions (1998's n°4 and currently in force 2010's n°52) which define the "Council of Europe Cultural Routes" identification criteria. Since 1997 The European Institute of Cultural Routes has been in charge of carrying out a Council of Europe's programme by supporting the development of already selected routes and coordinating and providing technical support to the routes' partner promoters' networks, specifically in terms of development in central and eastern Europe<sup>4</sup>.
- cultural routes are instead perceived as a means for economic development utilized by Europe that through DG Enterprise's actions (the UE tourism sector depends on) has recently promoted a series of activities centered around this topic. Cultural routes were indeed the subject of the European Tourism Day 2010, during which, European institutions offered to help strengthen collaboration towards the promotion of Cultural Routes as driving force behind the establishing of sustainable forms of tourism in rural areas and small centres.

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<sup>4</sup> Currently 29 are the cultural routes accredited by the Council of Europe (CoE) that cross all CoE member countries, including new Balkan countries.

[www.coe.int/t/dg4/cultureheritage/culture/Routes/default\\_en.asp](http://www.coe.int/t/dg4/cultureheritage/culture/Routes/default_en.asp)

- UNESCO too, back in the early 1990's, launched a cultural routes related program making way for regional projects as "the slaves' route", "the silk route" or the "route des ksour". The approach used by such International organisation was the connection between migration streams and the way cultural exchanges allowed interaction and amalgamation among different societies. According to UNESCO, cultural routes are to be interpreted as "routes made up by tangible elements whose cultural meaning stems from multidimensional dialogues and exchanges among countries and regions, thus outlining people's steady and interactive flows along routes in space and time". (<http://whc.unesco.org/archive/routes94.htm>);
- The detection and development of cultural routes, has been entrusted by UNESCO to a Special ICOMOS Committee (CIIC: Cultural Routes International Committee), whose goal is the study and improvement of cultural routes in connection with monuments, buildings, archaeological finds, landscapes and cultural sites valorisation and preservation (<http://www.icomos-ciic.org/CIIC/CIIC.htm>). CIIC has therefore elaborated the ICOMOS Declaration of Cultural Routes, ratified on the 4th of October 2008 during the sixteenth Council General Assembly. Other than the definition "Cultural Routes", the Declaration features their classification, research methodology, valorisation, preservation, use and correct management.

The International scientific community has therefore, in turn, make use of either approaches, at times overlapping the two, depending on the empiric research object it has tried to get the category fit into. Some basic issues also emerge from a detailed analysis of the topic-related writings: first and foremost, the awareness of interdependence of cultural routes as a dynamic feature, rather than a static one They therefore don't merely represent a simple sequence of objects (i.e. museums or archaeological areas), as the central thread of an intrinsic urban or territorial-scaled cultural trait (Dallari et al., 2010). Cultural routes can also be viewed as the most effective tool to overcome the underlying dilemma, especially on a small-medium urban scale, existing between "heritage preservation" and "development" (Al-hagla, 2010),

in that their absence require an interpretation of material and immaterial heritage related to social transformations and cultural landscapes, so as to avoid static “museumfication” processes connected to the need of ensuring visitors’ tourism experiences a certain quality level.

Finally, as already stressed by Majdoub (2010), cultural routes can be properly analysed through a multidimensional approach, inclusive of their intrinsic scale, and interpreted both as cultural consumption goods and as global tourism experiences.

Short and long-range networks: looking for competitiveness

Born out of the industrial districts experience, the consideration on the local development topic had the merit of leading researchers to think in terms of Territorial Local Systems (SLoT) , (Dematteis, 2001) as a template for a better “sustainable” endogenous development in a long-term perspective (perennità). SLoT not only as far as productive economy is concerned, but also in terms of territorial development. As, within the regional and international frame, it is widely believed that the future of any community relies, not much on enterprises or enterprise networks, as on territorial and regional systems; and that competitiveness on such topics features massively on international level.

Despite the lack of strength both on the National and International panorama, “human resources” and “things” (or where man establishes a relationship with nature) have the ability to merge with the territorial local system phenomenon. Culture-based tourism proves therefore to be of such importance, as to become a strategic element within local and regional scaled construction and resetting processes.

This is all the more true within a competing international global setting in order to meet the increasing demand for new forms of tourism, even in the form of cultural routes.

The longstanding notion of SLoT (Local System of Tourism Supply), as well as all new territorial aggregation forms potentially capable of strengthening vocations, amenities and touristic services, is perceived on the basis of union processes and public-private associations; it’s basically about defined spaces (sites, locations, areas) providing visitors with integrated and well-structured supplies through unique tourism hospitality systems capable of enhancing resources and local culture.

We are not at the moment able to answer the question of if or in what cases cultural routes

can be similar and operate as local systems of tourism supply, but this seems to be the final purpose of the political will at international level: to operate both long and short-range networks of cultural and tourism actors so as to enhance the efficiency and competitiveness of the companies locally involved and, ensure dwellers' better quality of life and awareness as European citizens (Council of Europe, 2010, CIP, 2011).

As for our country's reach cultural heritage, the best strategy would be to hypothesize innovative and effective routes integrated into places of culture and territory in order to start or strengthen development processes (directly or indirectly) and, within the international scene, win back a leadership position as in the past; such goal also proves to be crucial in the tourism field in response to the increasingly important internationally culture-related demand, above all for a country still contributing to its reputation as "Bel Paese" (landscapes and locations) since the Renaissance, both in terms of cultural heritage and most popular tourist destination.

In terms of International and National geographic research, the cultural heritage is looked upon not only as a number of philological-conservative cognitive actions, but also as a political-geographical synthesis of often immeasurable diverse elements whose representation of a complex environmental reality is rarely univocal.

Surely, "it has increasingly been establishing itself as a key factor in welfare as well as an economic growth factor ....thereby....allowing culture and art (in an increasingly globalised society) to develop new environmental competitive strategies and recover territorial identity and city-dwellers' well-being.

The city-tourism relationship is turning into a city & culture urban heritage one<sup>5</sup>, as suggested by Urban-Audit 2000-2005 project indicators. It involves most European cities by adding, to the traditional city-related tourism performance indicators (number of places – beds available) others such as number of screenings, theatre set-ups per city-dweller, or number of concerts per year.

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<sup>5</sup>An example is offered by the roman white nights cultural events, capable of merging into the cultural specificities of the places through extraordinary sensorial approaches based on a temporarily spectacular and suggestive use of the places.

But the main indicator of the ability of a city to draw tourists still remains the number of museum visitors per years.

Consequently, due to great urban transformations over the last 40 years we've been witnessing a radical cultural change, in that, cultural heritage in contemporary society "having become central to territorial policies, represents a privileged cornerstone within a reterritorialization process that is typical of post-industrial societies" (Dallari, 1996, p. 89).

«The knowledge and preservation of central tracks in the territory conformation is tantamount to preserving place specificities. For this reason preservation and protection of "cultural heritage and historical territory related territorial marks" prove to be a strategic project where cultural assets develop a relational and communicative, as well as innovative and creative, territorial strategic function. In this respect, geography can reveal its planning aptitude thanks to its ability to describe new orders and contribute to the implementation of territorial micro-systems» (Dallari, 1996, p. 91).

The landscape in this way becomes an integral part of the approach, (being crucial to cultural routes and joining long-range networks together).

Nevertheless, are mostly physical places such as cities to play a major role, in that their dimension and urban framework prove to be directly proportional to their ability to draw cultural tourism.

This is also the case with urban systems, whose policies aim at the creation (in a post-modern setting) of a mobility-integrated system embracing small and medium centres on the basis of a short-range network approach.

Basically the goal is shifting from geographic cluster to local systems according to width categories and localised thickenings.

Urban networks have long since been present and formalised within the international scene thanks to European Union policies and constant planning. A phenomenon that, instead of favouring cultural heritage integration (museums, archaeological areas, etc.), is hardly witnessed ([www.romit.org](http://www.romit.org)); Cultural places display informal relationships at local and interregional level (juxtaposition and continuity networks).

If international networks made up by medium centres are less common and in progress, a first assessment of the urban dimension could be of help: millionaire cities with a population of over 1.000.000 inhabitants, together with large

centres (between 200.000 and 1.000.000), represent the strongest urban areas and the most affected by the most consistent intense polarization processes in the long run.

Conversely, Medium-sized centres (between 50.000 and 200.000 inhabitants) and small-sized ones (between 5.000 and 50.000 inhabitants), along with rural areas, constitute the weakest areas, although cultural heritage richness is more pronounced and widespread across them.

All this may suggest a new possible interpretation of the Italian tourism supply which naturally originating from natural vocations (sea, art, mountains, etc..) and overcoming the traditional interpretation by a point analysis (tourist towns), by a line analysis (Romagna Region or Amalfi's coastlines) or by a system analysis (Val Gardena, Val Pusteria, etc...) heads towards aggregation forms (the Routes?) to take on shapes and dimensions typical of the supply and capable of meeting the demand trends.

## **Conclusions**

As so far outlined and, by taking into account the well-structured topic of this brief report, we can suggest a few points bound to introduce some new research lines.

Over the last years, even in our country, we have witnessed an increasing interest towards cultural routes, as shown by the birth of the National Council of Cultural Routes and by the extensive investments (financial and political) on the Via Francigena ([www.viafrancigena.eu](http://www.viafrancigena.eu)), chosen as a case report for the aforementioned CIP analysis on small innovation and competitiveness of the medium-sized companies included in the Council of Europe's accredited cultural routes.

At European level, the European Association of Vie Francigene, which has recently set itself up as a GEIE, has been acknowledged by CoE as unique European reference model for the development and protection of the Vie Francigene, and has qualified as *réseau porteur* (leading network).

The Italian regions crossed by the Via Francigena (among them, in particular: Tuscany, Emilia Romagna and Piedmont) have developed across their territory a

number of projects to improve pedestrian alternative routes such as: horse lanes, bike lanes, with care for sustainability and slow tourism.

Despite the already mentioned policies at National level ([www.governo.it/GovernoInforma/Dossier/via\\_francigena](http://www.governo.it/GovernoInforma/Dossier/via_francigena)), the fragmentation caused by regional authorities' powers over this matter contributed to a decidedly patchy framework, due to the presence and cultural routes effective capacity to bear directly on the territories they affect.

The social, economic and cultural implications of cultural routes impact on territories certainly need to be analysed much more thoroughly and through specific research despite, presently, field studies seem to be lacking in a shared methodological direction.

The main difficulty lies, in fact, in the accuracy of data collection and thorough quantification of the routes several recipients and, of the accommodation and culture facilities as part of the routes.

If travel itineraries, hub and "travel gateways" still constitute key elements within tourism science research (Lew et al., 2002), determination and data collection remain a critical point.

As already mentioned in the second paragraph, the multidimensional aspect make way for interdisciplinary researches that, to this day, have failed to find their way into specific projects, despite the attention and exposure given to the matter of tourism and culture will be more extensive in the UE 's Framework Programme in the next five years.

It will be therefore interesting to carry out a number of empiric researches intended to answer a series of missing theoretical questions probably due to the multidisciplinary and multidimensional quality of the "cultural routes" topic: what could possibly be the connections, common links, synergies between Cultural Routes and Local Tourist Systems?

Which are, if any, the district related dynamics within part of the Cultural Routes networks and sub-networks? Can Cultural Routes be integrated into Local Tourist Systems? And if so, on what conditions and geographic scale?

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