
AlmaTourism

Journal of Tourism, Culture and Territorial Development

Cultural Routes and Networks of Knowledge: the identity and promotion of cultural heritage. The case study of Piedmont

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ABSTRACT

The European project called “*PER VIAM Pilgrims’ Routes In Action*”, funded by the European Commission in 2012, is a significant opportunity of cultural and economic development for the whole Europe and also for the territory of Piedmont Region. The certainty of the need for transnational cooperation, which should create a network amongst the different territories in a perspective of working together and exchange of traveling, economic and cultural experiences – as well as best practices - nowadays calls for implementation tools such as European projects supported and sought for by the local authorities.

The Piedmont is nowadays crossed by various cultural itineraries, many of which are certificated by the European Council: Via Francigena, the Route of the Cistercian Abbeys, the Transromanica, the itinerary of the historical thermal cities and the Saint Michael's way. Starting from a survey on the meaning of "cultural itinerary" expressed by the different European institutions (i.e. ICOMOS, UNESCO, Council of Europe and European Commission), this essay is proposing an analysis of the current status of such territory, highlighting the public policies in progress, the role and activities of the local

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associations and the valorisation of implemented projects as related to those itineraries which have already been recognized by the Council of Europe.

This paper presents some significant experiences and best practices in the study of religious tourism, as they have been defined on the regional territory throughout the last few years, which can contribute to the debate and to the overall awareness on management and valorization of sustainable tourism.

Keywords: Cultural itinerary, Piemonte, Cultural Heritage, Cultural Routes.

1. Introduction

The analysis of Cultural Routes as a tool for the development and promotion of the local area is one of the topics of most recent interest for the scientific community, in line with the evolution of the concept of cultural heritage as discussed at a national and international level within organisations such as ICOMOS, UNESCO-WHC, the Council of Europe and the European Commission (Richards, 1996, 2007; Robinson, Picard, 2006; McKercher, Cros, 2002; Martorell Carreno, 2003; ICOMOS, 2004; Zhiu 2005; Majdoub, 2010; Missikoff, 2010; the WTTC, 2011; *Routes Touristiques*, 2012; Lombardi, Trisciuglio, 2013).

In recent years, there has been a growing focus on Cultural Routes in Italy as well, as shown by the creation of the Consulta Nazionale degli Itinerari Culturali (the national committee on Cultural Routes) and large-scale investment (both in financial terms and in terms of public policies), particularly in the Via Francigena (Rizzi, Onorato, 2011; Berti, 2012)¹. The Italian Regions crossed by this route (and work done by Tuscany, Lazio and Emilia-Romagna particularly stands out) have launched several projects in their areas aimed at promoting alternative routes in line with concepts such as sustainability and *slow tourism* (Bramwell, Lane, 1993; Dallari, Mariotti, 2005; Sala, Grandi, Dallari, 2007; Hamele, 2004). The fragmentary nature of Cultural Routes, due to regional responsibilities in this field, has contributed to creating a decidedly uneven situation as regards Cultural Routes and their actual power to affect the areas they cross (Dallari, Mariotti, 2011). A common national policy could identify general guidelines for developing themes, delegating their implementation to local authorities (Carta, 1999; Madau, 2004; Dallari, 2007; Mariotti, 2012).



Via Francigena (Italy)

2. Experience and best practices as regards Cultural Routes

The Piedmont's Region features some different Cultural Routes, many of which have been recognised by the Council of Europe: the Via Francigena, the European Route of Cistercian Abbeys, the Transromanica, the European Route of Historic Thermal Towns, the St. Martin of Tours Route, Casadean sites and Les Chemins de Saint Michel (Beltramo, 2012).²



European
Historical Thermal
Towns Association.
<http://www.ehtta.eu>

The Via Francigena is one of Europe's most important Cultural Routes and, thanks also to its geographic location, it lies at the centre of a network of ancient roads that crossed Europe. Ever since medieval times it has attracted travellers (pilgrims, merchants, soldiers) from all over the world and has connected the artistic, historical and cultural heritage of Europe capable of attracting a significant number of tourists. The Via Francigena is the medieval pilgrim way from Canterbury to Rome, the destination of one of the three *peregrinationes maiores*, along with Santiago de Compostela and Jerusalem.

Per Viam - Pilgrims' Routes in Action is a European project coordinated by the European Association of Vie Francigene (EAVF), funded by the European Commission as part of a call for proposals entitled *Promotion of trans-national thematic tourism products in the European Union as means of sustainable tourism development* (DG Industry) in 2011, which ended in 2013. The European consortium responsible for the project included (apart from the EAVF, which acted as group leader) Canterbury's city council, the Italian Ministry for Cultural Activities, Regione Toscana (Tuscany's regional government), SiTI (the Higher Institute on Territorial Systems for Innovation), the University of Bologna, the European Institute of Cultural Routes (Luxembourg), the organisations responsible for the networks of Cultural Routes of pilgrimage certified by the Council of Europe (such as the Pilgrim Centre in Trondheim, Norway, Les Chemins

de Saint Michel Association in France, the European Cultural Centre of St. Martin of Tours in France, the French Federation of the Associations of the Camino de Santiago) and many European universities involved in this field.



The Pilgrimage's Ways in Europe
(www.camminideuropeie.com)

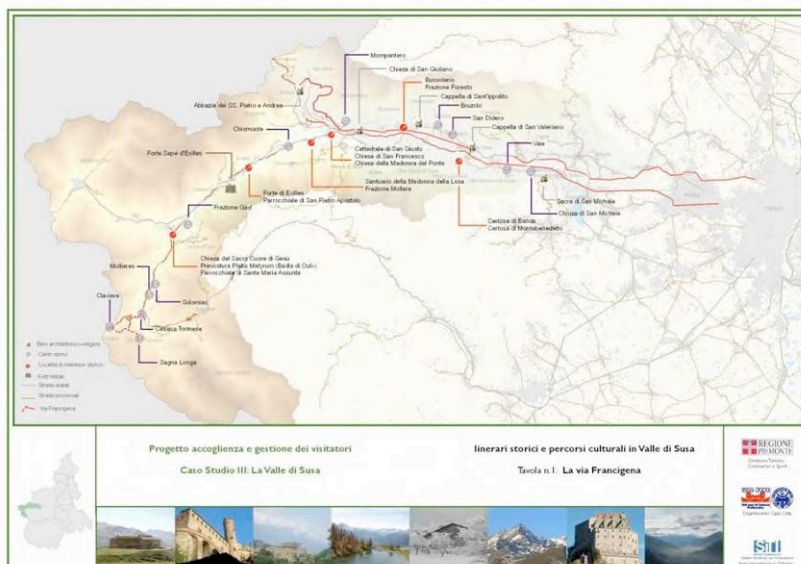
The project has seen joint action taken by European partners involved in promoting pilgrim routes certified by the Council of Europe in the hope of improving communication, raising their profile and improving access to the Via Francigena and other historic religious routes such as the Camino de Santiago, Chemins de Mont-Saint-Michel, St. Olav's Way and that of St. Martin of Tours. The *PER VIAM - Pilgrims' Routes In Action* project's work focused on creating a European network of the main pilgrim routes recognised by the Council of Europe, thanks to the involvement of ten European countries and the strengthening of political and institutional ties along the Mediterranean's north-south axis. Communication played a pivotal role in the project, used to develop and consolidate the network of both public and private institutions working on pilgrim routes, so that the Via Francigena's governance model could become an example of best practice for the Council of Europe's other 23 Cultural Routes as well. The different institutional levels involved are asked to communicate with each other, encouraging the online network of contacts and activities already underway, with a view to standardising and sharing future projects by involving ministerial departments, regional governments, councils, universities (the European Universities Network of Knowledge, EUNeK)³, local authorities and associations.

3. The creation of a Network of Knowledge and tourist development for Piedmont

The *Per Viam* project's first meeting, held in Turin in April (2012), also offered the chance to update the results of work carried out by the various different authorities and associations operating in Piedmont in a roundtable discussion entitled *Piedmont: the role of local authorities and associations in European Cultural Routes*. The meeting, organised by SiTI (the Higher Institute on Territorial Systems for Innovation) - Politecnico di Torino, set out to share the experience gained over the years as regards the topic of pilgrim routes in order to create a local network that can cooperate on future promotional and research projects (Beltramo, 2012). The following organisations attended and contributed significantly to the debate and to the discussion: Regione Piemonte's Department of Culture, Tourism and Sport, the provincial government of Turin's Tourism and Sporting Activities Planning and Management Service, the Turismo Torino e Provincia ATL (local tourism agency), Alessandria & Monferrato's ATL (local tourism agency), the Via Francigena di Sigerico Association of Ivrea, the Amici della Sacra di San Michele association, the Vita e Pace cultural centre in Avigliana, the Associazione Via Romea Canavesana non-profit organisation, Giaveno city council, the *Ivrea's Morenic Amphitheatre: landscape and culture* integrated promotional plan, the Custodi della Via Francigena di Chivasso association, the Osservatorio del Paesaggio per il Monferrato and Transromanica.

The picture that emerged from this meeting was extremely interesting and highlighted the many activities and projects, both completed and ongoing, concerning pilgrim routes and Cultural Routes in Piedmont.

Regione Piemonte, Turismo Torino and Turin's provincial government have proposed, supported and obtained certification from the Ministry of Cultural Activities for the Susa Valley's Monginevro–Moncenisio–Rivoli part of the Via Francigena, the ancient road linking Rome and Santiago de Compostela (Beltramo 2011a, 2011b).



The Francigena's Way in Susa Valley (Beltramo, 2001a)

The role of Piedmontese associations involved in pilgrim and Cultural Routes is particularly active and widespread throughout the entire area. The Via Francigena's route in Piedmont is supervised and protected by several associations: the Via Francigena di Sigerico association, the Custodi della Via Francigena di Chivasso, the Amici della Via Francigena of Santhià and the Amici della Via Francigena of Vercelli, the Susa Valley is home to active associations such as the Amici della Sacra di San Michele, the Vita e Pace cultural centre in Avigliana and Tesori d'Arte Alpina, while in the Canavese region there are Via Romea Canavesana and the "Anfiteatro Morenico di Ivrea: paesaggio e cultura" (*Ivrea's Morenic Amphitheatre: landscape and culture*) integrated promotional plan, as well as local town councils.

The promotion of a historical and cultural understanding of European churches dedicated to St Michael the Archangel is one of the aims of the Amici della Sacra di San Michele Association, which joined *Les Chemins de Saint Michel* association in 2006. Among the other projects it runs, it hopes to establish a network in partnership with other bodies involved in St. Michael's Way, to identify a local map that can be followed on foot (or not as the case may be) of tourist and cultural value, to set up stations along the way with information on low, average and high-priced accommodation and to provide pilgrims with guides containing all the necessary details.

The European Way of St Michael aims to be a religious trail and a tourist path that will act as a spark, setting off a positive chain of events that in times of economic crisis can prove advantageous for the local area, connecting religious sites dedicated to St. Michael, from Mont-Saint-Michel in Normandy to the shrine of St Michael in the Gargano area (Puglia, Italy).



The European Way of St Michael
<http://www.lescheminsdumontsaintmichel.com>

3.1 Cultural and tourist promotion projects on a local scale

Apart from the European promotion of Cultural Routes, projects of undisputed interest regarding the topic of local cultural itineraries were chosen as part of the Compagnia di Sanpaolo foundation's call for proposals (2012) entitled "Le risorse culturali e paesaggistiche del territorio: una valorizzazione a rete" (*The cultural and landscape resources of the region: a network approach to promotion*). The call for proposals intends to support the promotion of cultural and landscape heritage scattered throughout Piedmont and Liguria by promoting schemes designed to publish information on cultural assets on the Web. The aim is to encourage civil, cultural and economic development through projects based on the integration of all the area's resources (Persi, 2002). Given the current recession, the conservation and promotion of cultural heritage needs to be organised into networks able to integrate activities, expertise and resources (Madau 2004; Santagata, Trimarchi 2007).

Among the projects funded by the call for proposals is the *Cultus Loci Cura Animi* scheme proposed by the Frutteto di Vezzolano association, which focuses on the area of Asti, associating the network of Romanesque churches of the Monferrato area with the historical landscape that surrounds them⁴. The project aims to organise conservation work on cultural heritage and the landscape as well as review and integrate the system of access and accommodation, implementing original ways of interpreting the landscape and experimenting with new ways of describing its historical heritage.

To this end, the promotion and the proposal to develop Cultural Routes at a local level are designed to encourage an innovative rediscovery of the area located on the axis between Vezzolano and Passerano, as well as trails heading towards other Romanesque churches in the area that link up to the Transromanica on a European scale: *Itinéraires de l'art roman en Europe*, recognised as a Major Cultural Route in 2007 by the Council of Europe.

The development of a strategy for tourism and cultural promotion requires a shared commitment to bringing about a change with a view to defining a new development scenario. Consensus from the local community must be secured via a commonly shared identity, made up of traditions and elements from the past accepted as elements founded by society. An area's ability to unite increases its effectiveness towards the outside as well, strengthening its role compared to the competition (Salvarani, 2005). These are the basic conditions of the promotional project entitled "Identità culturali

delle terre del Monviso” (*Cultural Identities in the Lands of Mount Viso*), presented and chosen during that same call for proposals by the Sassi Vivaci cultural association⁵.

Starting with the experience gained up to now, along with the *AltraMontagna* programme that the Sassi Vivaci cultural association has been running since 2008⁶, the *Identità culturali delle terre del Monviso* project envisages an in-depth analysis of topics considered to be fundamental for a project promoting the cultural and landscape resources of the area. These include: networking cultural and landscape resources online and improving tourist access to the area’s cultural assets; strengthening the identity of local communities through an understanding of the cultural heritage found throughout the area; supporting the revival of traditional economic activities, which will also result in new job opportunities, particularly for young people; encouraging the civil, cultural and economic development of projects founded on the integration of all local resources and players; interaction between promotional schemes closely tied to the cultural identity of the area; a strategic commitment, shared by all those involved in the network; facilitating access to information through a dedicated portal, the publication of studies and research on heritage and the enjoyment of the cultural network.

The *Identità culturali delle terre del Monviso* project intends to promote a sustainable development strategy based on the promotion of high-quality cultural heritage, creating an integrated tourism-focused cultural product that covers various areas and encourages the discovery of the most important places in the areas covered by the project, in the valleys of Mount Viso (Pellice, Po, Varaita) and the Saluzzo area, promoting them online and developing a coordinated programme for the active promotion and enjoyment of this heritage (integrating it with proposals tied to sporting activities and nature trails promoted by AltraMontagna).

Conclusions

Public authorities and research organisations, in partnership with local associations, are defining a network based on cultural routes and pilgrim routes as part of projects funded by the EU, so to develop and promote the cultural and tourism resources available and encourage the creation of new proposals in Piedmont (Valentino, 2003; Staines, 2003; Callegari, 2003; Dallari, 2008).

Starting from requests put forward by the European community and the detection of shortcomings such as those concerning the study and monitoring of pilgrim and tourist numbers along the axis of these routes, NECSTouR⁷ (a network of 28 European regions

and 30 university institutions and associations that, in different ways, tackle the issue of sustainable tourism) has produced a questionnaire on Cultural Routes, to verify the economic, tourism and cultural management activities of Cultural Routes. Future hypotheses for research and work on Cultural Routes will not be able to disregard the increase in studies and analyses of visitor categories and their needs in order to expand Cultural Routes in Piedmont as a tourist product on a European level⁸.

In line with the proposal put forward by Dallari and Mariotti (2011), innovation and creativity – particularly when organising cultural heritage and its marketing and communication (even through an instrument such as a Cultural Route) – can be the right methods for reconquering a position of strong and dynamic, though not uniform, cultural identity on the new international stage, in an approach of ‘creative culture’ (OECD, 2009) that is increasingly oriented towards the participation and involvement of the local community and visitors in general (Frey, 2009; Richards, Raymond, 2000; Richards, Wilson, 2006; Baldacci 2006; Briednhann, Wickens, 2004). Creative tourism associated with cultural heritage is now considered the most important form of development that cultural heritage can take, in terms of the international community, in order to promote the revival and growth of local and European identity.

According to Richards’s interpretation (2012), new cultural tourism will be characterised by “co-creation, increasing linkages between suppliers and consumers, increased contact with the local culture, increased emphasis on the everyday and intangible heritage, a shift towards events as a means of valorizing place, creative spaces, holistic, spiritual approaches, new grounds for authenticity (a move away from authority towards context and originality).”

The experience gained in creative tourism – a process now underway – can be considered a useful tool for promoting local culture and a greater awareness of tourism among communities (Ferrari, Morazzoni, 2012).

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¹ Static data concerning the number of tourists visiting Italian cultural routes is not yet available, information that is necessary in order to evaluate their impact on a national level.

http://www.ontit.it/opencms/opencms/ont/it/focus/focus/Il_turismo_culturale_in_italia (July 2013).

² European certification of the sites along St Michael's route was postponed in 2012, however the *Les Chemins de Saint Michel* association in France – in partnership with an Italian network coordinated by Italia Nostra, Jubilantes and the Politecnico di Torino – is working to regain Council of Europe recognition.

³ <http://www.turismo.unibo.it/Turismo/Attivita/EUNeK.htm> (July 2013).

⁴ www.fruttetodivezzolano.it (July 2013).

⁵ www.sassivivaci.org (July 2013).

⁶ <http://www.altramontagnamonviso.it/public/altramontagna> (July 2013).

⁷ www.necstour.eu (July 2013).

⁸ ETIS – the European Tourism Indicator System (ETIS),

http://www.surrey.ac.uk/shtm/events/launch_of_the_european_tourism_indicator_system_for_sustainable_management_of_destinations.htm (July 2013).