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Monteriggioni and the Heart of the Francigena. The Reasons Behind a Tuscan Record

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When, in 990, the Archbishop of Canterbury, Sigeric, travelled the road from the English town to Rome, never could he have imagined that his journey would become linked to the name of a road, the Via Francigena, which enjoyed an acclaimed and fortunate history, as we are reminded by Dalena (2014). Indeed, for a long time, the Via Francigena was part of the itinerary which, departing from Canterbury, entered Italy via the Gran San Bernardo or Moncenisio, passing Piacenza, crossed the Monte Bordone pass (now known as the Cisa pass), and then headed south towards Lucca and Siena, reaching its destination in Rome, where the travellers worshipped the reliquaries of the apostles Peter and Paul, along with the shroud of Veronica from 705. With the onset of the modern age, these pilgrimages died out, taking with them the memory of this Via Francigena within the communities. While there were many historical documents which bore witness to the past presence, in geographic reality only one place name remained, Via Francigena, in Val d'Orcia, and nothing more. Much is owed to the Council of Europe, with its recognition of the Way of Saint James (Camino de Santiago) in 1987, as a European pilgrimage. This also activated other cultural itineraries, like the Via Francigena in 1994 and the European Association of Vie Francigene in 2001.

Today, the Via Francigena has become a combination of meeting places and passages, a route which brings together the essence of living territories which have always been travelled and experienced. Particularly for the Tuscany Region, within the space of two decades, the Via Francigena has become an authentic model of a renewed institutional relationship with the territory, within which an enhancement system has been set up, mainly to promote the routes and make them safe, and shared among the local authorities. A model, or perhaps more of a good territorial practice, which can be

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implemented and can function at national and international level. The Via Francigena is not just the recovery of an ancient road; it's also the perfect example of sustainable and inclusive tourist development, capable of enhancing a renewed relationship between visitors and communities. The relationship between the two goes way beyond merely providing information to tourists, so much so that it has become a solid link between the receiving of visitors and exchanges with the communities of the areas that they visit. In this context, Monteriggioni has been the first Tuscan municipality to interpret the enhancement of this ancient itinerary, excelling to the point where it has become considered as the example of territorial excellence and of a strong and authentic cultural and formative identity. Indeed, the signing of a framework agreement between just six municipalities in Tuscany, three in the province of Siena (Monteriggioni, San Gimignano and Colle di Val d'Elsa, the second of which is a UNESCO World Heritage site) and two in the province of Florence (Gambassi Terme, Castelfiorentino, Montaiione), for the implementation of a project for "the enhancement and promotion of the Via Francigena as travelled by Sigeric", dates back to the 16th of December 2008. Eight years on, we can state that the Tuscan part of the Via Francigena has become a reference model, as has the Region of Tuscany.



Figure 1: Monteriggioni landscape
Photo by A. Migliorini

Having always been a place of culture and innovation in relation to tourism, Tuscany can be classed as leader for its policies developed specifically for cultural itineraries. The fact that it targeted the "quick usability" of the route, envisioned "strong governance" at all levels (local, provincial and regional), favoured "pilgrimage hospitality programmes" with businesses supplying accommodation suited particularly to walkers, all created a shared political action. This has continued to make the Via Francigena a system of places well-matched with a new idea of cultural tourism that focuses on the slow discovery of numerous areas which are sometimes peripheral, lying outside the box of modern tourism. Places that are off the beaten track, always

characterised by deep historical and cultural values spread throughout the regional programmes, starting with its landscapes and its numerous medieval towns and villages. Here we encounter an ecologically sustainable and culturally advanced tourist; someone distant from the logic of consumerism and the masses, capable of going beyond the niche of the pilgrims to meet motivated, responsible tourists in search of experiences and contacts with the territory. The first great role of coordination in recent years has been played by Regione Toscana which, in its consolidated strategy of cultural policies, has invested 16 million euros within the scope of the operational plan for 2012-2014 dedicated to the Via Francigena: these resources have made it possible to make the 380 km of the Tuscan stretch from the Cisa pass to that of Radicofani open for use. Today, the tourist route is completely safe and signposted, and it takes just 15 days to cross the whole of Tuscany on foot along the "Francigena", taking each of the 15 easy-to-travel legs one at a time.

If the Via Francigena is Europe's second most important historical pilgrimage, the stretch of Francigena that crosses the province of Siena can be rightfully considered the jewel in Tuscany's crown, and consequently of the entire 1,800 km route that departs from Canterbury and travels down England to Dover and then from Pas de Calais, crossing France and Switzerland to reach Italy and then the holy destination of Rome. The Francigena travels through 12 municipalities in the province of Siena and this itinerary has been validated by the Scientific Committee of the Council for historical, cultural and religious itineraries set up within the Ministry for Cultural Heritage which, following a careful technical check on the route, has defined it an itinerary that can be used safely. The Provincial and Regional Authorities planned the securing of the safety of the 120 km, in compliance with the Ministry project. They also worked with the municipalities which the Via Francigena does not pass through, to ensure that all the cultural itineraries present in our territory are promoted and incorporated into the project. In 2010 – 2011, the province of Siena succeeded, thanks to the Master Plan of the Via Francigena, in attracting over 1.6 million euros, of which almost 500,000 euros of funding for the Municipal Authorities, supervised by Provincia di Siena. These resources financed 20 operations by the Provincia and 34 by the Municipalities concerned. With successive tenders, in 2012 and 2013, Regione Toscana issued over 1.5 million euros of financial grants for 11 operations to secure the safety of the route and the pilgrims, as well as the promotion of tourism and hospitality, with the installation of road signs and the recovery of public buildings to provide accommodation for pilgrims. Thanks to this work, the north stretch of the Via Francigena, between the municipalities of San Gimignano, Colle di Val d'Elsa, Monteriggioni and Siena, and the links between the municipalities of Monteroni d'Arbia, Buonconvento, Montalcino, San Quirico d'Orcia, Castiglione d'Orcia, Radicofani and San Casciano dei Bagni, have been completely secured. The 120 km of the Via Francigena on the Siena side are now open to locals and visitors, with two fully operational hostels ready to welcome them in Monteriggioni and Radicofani, as well as other forms of hospitality for pilgrims, made available by public bodies and private

individuals, not forgetting the welcome that has been offered by the province of Siena to cultural tourists since the days of the Gran Tour.



Figure 2: Monteriggioni landscape

Photo by A. Migliorini

In recent years, there has been a real boom in the flow of tourists linked to the Francigena. In 2015, about 29 thousand extra tourists visited the province of Siena, while there were 167 thousand more overnight stays. Arrivals reached just over 1.6 million (+1.8%), with just under five million presences (+3.5%), of which over two million were Italian tourists (+9.1%, equating to +173,000), while foreigners accounted for the almost 2.9 million remaining presences (-0.2%, in absolute terms -6000). It is worth highlighting that, in Monteriggioni there was a +13.09% (55,319) increase in arrivals, with +18.15% (157,498) in presences, well above the provincial averages. Particularly in places where accommodation is provided for pilgrims, the increase doubled (1300 pilgrims in 2013, compared to 3000 in 2014 and over 4000 in 2015). The increasingly evident trend shows that we are heading in the right direction and have chosen the right development policy for a desirable future linked to the model of a new sustainable life style, along with social and inclusive wellbeing. These figures show that there are important values behind the rediscovery of the itinerary, not just in spiritual terms, but also in relation to what the Via Francigena can represent as an economic asset in support of and in harmony with the social-ecological change indicated by the European Union for a sustainable and shared future.

The local community, represented by its public stakeholders such as Regione Toscana, which deserves recognition for its good governance and successful leadership, is convinced and fully aware of this. Monteriggioni invests in “Francigena Monteriggioni”, in an area of outstanding value for tourism, between Siena and Florence. This is a natural geographical hub of great wealth and potential, which serves as a place with a unique historical value and inestimable cultural wealth, a heritage which the

community has succeeded in bringing together and enhancing. The highest expression of historical sites, visited by travellers, of ancient routes and landscapes, pieced together in a mosaic of architectural and natural elements with a remarkable appeal and cultural identity, all set in the Tuscan countryside. In 2009, the municipal authorities of Monteriggioni, as part of a project coordinated with Provincia di Siena and Regione Toscana, launched a series of enhancement actions to make this ancient road suitable for use, restoring the itinerary and securing its safety, improving a system of drinking fountains to provide water, replacing the road signs, creating rest areas, opening a hostel with sleeping accommodation for 12 in the village of Strove, and a second hostel in the renovated Monastic Complex of Abbadia Isola, founded in 1001 by Countess Ava. Refreshments will also be provided on the premises, which are already operational as a location for cultural events. Last but not least, the pilgrim's rest point, (the only one in Tuscany), in the tourist office, where travellers can leave their rucksack and visit the area. Two legs of the pilgrimage touch Monteriggioni: the tenth (San Gimignano-Monteriggioni) and the eleventh (Monteriggioni-Siena), with a total distance of about 50 km, covered in ten hours, walking amidst Renaissance landscapes, in an area registered as UNESCO World Heritage.



Figure 2: Abbadia Isola
Photo by A. Migliorini



Figure 3: Abbadia Isola

Photo by M. Rohana

The international recognition of the value of the Via Francigena has to be able to continue. After being declared cultural itinerary by the European Council, the communities and the EAVF have set to work to obtain its registration on the UNESCO World Heritage list. It will be an extremely complex candidacy, but the Via has all the historical, artistic, territorial, spiritual and devotional elements to be the first cultural itinerary in Italy to be registered on the UNESCO list. This process hasn't just begun now though, being rooted in the committee set up at the Ministry of Cultural Heritage a few years ago. At that table, Provincia di Siena had presented its project for the candidacy of its stretch of the Via Francigena as a single area, which already contains four UNESCO sites. The process, which had come to a temporary halt, was recommenced and relaunched by Comune di Monteriggioni and by the author at a regional and national level on the occasion of the 2nd Forum of "Comuni in Cammino", held in Monteriggioni in January 2015. The importance of the proposal was recognised immediately by the representative of the Ministry and other mayors, such as the mayor of Fidenza, with whom Monteriggioni organised the first summit of municipalities and regions crossed by the Francigena. This Via definitely represents the combination of those values, which are at the base of a community, values which everyone has to defend, protect, safeguard and promote, starting from the Francigena, soul of populations, heritage of mankind.