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Some Issues Related to Resources on Pilgrimage, from the Holy Land to the Via Francigena

Vanni F.*
Centro Studi Romei (Italy)

“The same concept of source has enormously expanded, extending itself to the nature of the terrain and its transformations, to metallurgical techniques, to experimental researches for the study of great climatic phenomena (palynology, dendrology), to work tools and their evolution, and so on; so that even the number of auxiliary sciences has expanded considerably, even to include many natural sciences.”

Cinzio Violante 1979.¹

Those who decide to devote themselves to the study of pilgrimage in the Middle Ages have at their disposal a considerable quantity of material, beginning from material concerning the main destination of pilgrimage since the Late Ancient era: Jerusalem. Because, make no mistake, pilgrimage would not exist, or at least not in the massive and universally diffused forms with which it was realised, if Jerusalem had not become the centre of interest very early on, the "immobile motor" at the centre of the then known world, for the flow of pilgrims. Jerusalem, already numinous for the Old Testament, becomes the meeting point between heaven and earth in the New Testament: here the tree of Jesse plants its roots, here the tree of life retakes its shape in the Cross of the Passion, under which peeps out the skull of Adam, the first sinful man and, for this reason, the trigger of the expulsion of the whole human race from Paradise.

It is evident that the formation of medieval religious pilgrimage goes hand in hand – it is difficult to establish cause or effect however – with the formation of Jerusalem as the centre of the world, and this before the mother of emperor Constantine, Elena, had herself accompanied to the Holy Land in 326, in that reconnaissance, which is also research, recovery, sacred theft, propaganda, rescue, and that became the ideal archetype for all pilgrimages carried out after her. Suffice to scroll through the two volumes of Tobler and Molinier,² in which data is collected chronologically on journeys

* E-mail address: postmaster@centrostudiromei.eu

to Palestine in the centuries preceding the Crusades, to understand that the issue of sources on pilgrimage is extremely complex and far more articulate than one may think.

The organisation of the matter in Tobler and Molinier is emblematic of the difficulties encountered: the first volume is classic in its simplicity: it collects the main odeporic religious sources, and only those, from the Burdigalian pilgrim (333) to Bede the Venerable (circa 720), who never moved from England, and perhaps not even from his monastery, but who has accurately described the Holy Places based on the sources already available to him. These are texts collected chronologically, without an index, but which speak for themselves, for what they recount: the list of stages of approach, the mirabilia of the Holy Land and, if there is one, the return journey. Only then did Tobler and Molinier realise that the image of pilgrimage that emerged from this first volume was not entirely real: for example, the journey from Bordeaux of the anonymous pilgrim of 333 was not born from nothing, but came to integrate itself in an already organised flow; and it is for this reason I believe the second volume of their important source-collection work is born. Indeed, in the second volume the sources multiply, including indirect sources, the occasional citations of third parties that tell, even incidentally, of a pilgrimage which occurred or a trip to the Holy Land; and so it transpires that already in the first two centuries of the Christian era the signalling of people in some way attracted to those which would become the Holy Places of Christendom was constant and growing. And that the scrupulous documentation of the two scholars is anything but erudite, but substantial and meaningful.

And we have reached the first key point: is it permissible; is it licit to strictly **circumscribe** the scope of the documentary sources on pilgrimage, even following a cogent logic? Even if they were limited to the first volume of their work, Tobler and Molinier would not have been able to be accused of anything: they would have offered an anthological essay with odeporic sources on the Holy Land before the Crusades; a worthy and useful work even a century and a half since the edition was published. But it is only with the second volume that they give us a reliable picture of the "progressive" dimension of early medieval pilgrimage, of its growth, of word of mouth that spreads and multiplies throughout the Christian *ecumène*.

It is therefore not at all easy, and perhaps not even useful, to circumscribe the concept of "documentary sources" because, as I have experimented in the different versions of the "Bibliography on the Via Francigena",³ it is difficult to establish when the citation of a term becomes relevant: if, for example, Ernesto Sestan cites the Via Francigena in passing, for many it becomes relevant; also because it should be considered a precursor in that branch of studies.

If we then take the ambiguous word "**francigena**", for the Britons it simply meant "foreigner" and for the Italians nothing but "transalpine".⁴ Moreover, in medieval documentary sources we find that the term, when it does not mean "double-sided Frankish sword", when it is not the nickname of a person which then becomes a surname,⁵ is still a generic adjective that, when it comes to a road, means "supra-local route that leads beyond the Alps" and, for subsequent extensions, "a path of great importance". So we can find it in sources from Puglia, the Marche and even in Sicily ... And it is rather gruelling to think that from Trinacria we were worried about the road

that led to France. To be truly meticulous, the odeporic sources almost never speak explicitly of "Francigena" as such, even if they describe one of its paths.⁶ For most of the medieval quotes in which the word appears, we are rarely dealing with a road: the word almost always means "French" or sometimes even "the territory of the Franks".⁷ Therefore the problem of **spatially** delimiting the term would arise. The Via Francigena is substantially an Italian route, even if in the *Monumenta Germaniae Historica* the expression also appears referring to Burgundy.⁸ So, if in the early Middle Ages the three royal capitals of Burgunde, Lyon, Vienne and Arles cannot yet be considered "France", should we as scholars be much more ductile merrily calling all the routes that conclude in Canterbury "Via Francigena"? Ductile we could be, albeit with some obvious impatience. Those who are not at all ductile however, are the French of today, who refuse to call "Francigena" (on their road signs) the road that crosses a large part of their territory, including the Burgundians of course, which are now, if not more after the grandeur of De Gaulle, comparable to the "Franks".

The **relevance of the contents** must also be clarified: for example, Paolo Diacono in the *Historia miscella* cites the Via Flaminia only once in relation to the rock excavation of the passage of Pietra Pertusa. This involves just one paragraph. Is it to be considered a relevant documentary source? The answer for those involved in odeporic history is obvious, a little less so for everyone else. One thing is therefore to make an anthology of odeporic sources (which has already been done), another to make a taxonomy of a concept sought in the sources. Now however, it is no longer the case to challenge any competing search engine, because we will always be failures before the uncritical completeness of an algorithm, and then taxonomy can always become an alibi for an idle researcher who will lose incentive to look not only for the term, but also its synonyms, circumlocutions, and elsewhere, independently.

The sources then, taken individually, have a basic role to distinguish and identify the **reasons** for each journey. Unfortunately, there is a certain tendency – even in the scientific community – to generalise the concept of "pilgrim": in reality, only the direct reading of the sources makes us understand that Egeria is a true pilgrim, while the concept is not entirely suitable for Helena, mother of Constantine, who also had the purpose of recovering the signa and relics of the Passion of Christ and to make a politically relevant homage to the churches of Byzantium, the new Rome desired by her son. Even without concrete evidence, I suggested that an important part of Willibaldo's travels in the East (and his stay for so long) was focused on the study of the different monastic disciplines, to obtain a direct and comparative knowledge of functionality, strengths and weaknesses of each (Vanni, 2009). If the sources were not so ungenerous, sometimes decidedly reticent, we could even come to understand that pilgrimage is indeed a non-secondary component of the journey, but often it is not the only or the main motivation for the drive of a single medieval traveller.

Then there is the **temporal limit** to be given to research on pilgrimage: the writer has on several occasions tried to highlight a sort of caesura in medieval pilgrimage that – whether a decade more or less – took place roughly with the birth of the Jubilee rite (Vanni, 2016). If before pilgrimage was substantially individual in its motivations and

ascetic, afterwards it became collective, organised and naturally mystical (Vanni, 2000). One cannot avoid noticing certain differences of substance in the sources; however, this does not interest everyone: for example, our contemporary believers often tend to glide over these differences, emphasising the long duration of the pilgrimage that is relevant to this day. On the other hand, various aspects of discontinuity can be found even in the pilgrimage of Compostela, the long duration of which is scattered with interruptions and breaks even for long periods. This is very applicable to the Via Francigena, whose postmodern renaissance cannot boast of any continuity, even in scientific investigation, before the 1930s.

By additionally accepting this subdivision of the medieval pilgrimage – pre and post jubilee – where should we stop the search? With the discovery of America? Let us ask ourselves then if Martin Luther's trip to Rome, in 1510, must be taken into consideration or is it too "modern" for a medievalist? The journey to Rome by Martin Luther at the age of twenty-seven was interpreted as the triggering cause of the Reformation and, in sociological terms, as "the watershed between the mentality of the pilgrim and that of the modern traveller" (De Seta, 1982).⁹ Now, the modern Luther only had a disproportionate ego, albeit immensely self-critical. As for the rest, he was much more medieval than many of his contemporaries. Even the hypothetical anticipation of the "thieving Rome" of the first Lega Nord party supporters, attributed to him, has never convinced in depth. Rather, it seems that the casual cause of Luther's trip to Rome, which accompanied John Nathin, his teacher, was the controversy between two ideological orientations of the German Augustinians (Iserloh, Glazik, Jedin, 1993). It also seems however, that Luther's spiritual attitude was in all respects similar to that of a late medieval pilgrim. Rome is the mystical place where, through the sacrament of confession, the pilgrim Luther aspired to a sort of metanoia: he wanted to become a pious man (Boehmer, 1914).

From the retrospective autobiographical testimonies, which could also be ascribed to rationalisations, it seems that the main reason for the discomfort towards the vertex city of Christendom was the ideal image that it had become, not so much for the corruption of the clergy, but for the doctrinal incompetence and the naivety of the many confessors available to the pilgrims of Rome. At the time, Cardinal Pietro Bembo was there to build the reading of Luther's Romfahrt as an illumination of the moral cloaca of the centre of Christianity. It is undoubted, however, that the idea of Rome as "new Babylon" is a much later ideological construction, connected and justifying the rupture and radical alterity of his preaching and his understanding of the Reformation.

As you can see, confronting with **all-round** sources does nothing but multiply issues, and there are many more questions that unfold than those that can be solved. But we must do it. Even just to give a fancy name to the umpteenth Roman diverticulum that passes under our home. It is sad to note how it is too easy to invent the name of a street today: giving it the name of an emperor (with all due respect to the scholars who have dedicated entire volumes to the countless and changeable movements of this or that medieval sovereign)¹⁰ or that of an intermediate place, hoping that it is really topical, to reach the absurd conclusion to bring together two generic and universal

terms such as "romea" and "strata" to give presumed recognition to a single precise post-modern path ...

The fact is that – let us admit it as historians who analyse their role – the managers and discoverers of the post-modern Via Francigena do not care much about the sources: it is already very important that they do not give the neo-pilgrims the ending of a frog under the wheels of a truck, to ensure that they find a shower, a hot meal at a fair price and a clean bed at the end of the long walk.

Yet it would not cost much to make a phone call or write an email to some expert before making a decision that can have consequences in the medium and long term. One example, which I believe to be significant is if the name of the Via Francigena had been "**via Romea Francigena**", a considerable number of long-lasting advantages would have been obtained:

- a. We would have moved the emphasis to the destination of the journey, Rome; which would not have been unwise. The proverb states that 'All the roads lead to Rome', and the collection of roads that have this goal have their own specificity that deserves to be highlighted and safeguarded without privileging any route.
- b. We would have made the problem of the other "terminus" inconsistent, which is not only Canterbury, because not many of the pilgrims from the British Isles headed (and head today) to this city to depart for Rome.
- c. We could also have convinced the French to define the road for them too, because "Francigena" becomes a simple indication of origin in the expression "via Romea Francigena".
- d. We would have left the field open to the (non-competitive) rediscovery of all the other *vie romeae*, which existed in the Middle Ages, and which now should be re-evaluated, thus expanding the offer and the associative potential of that collection of roads that reached the *Sedes Petri* (*via Romea* of Chur, *via romea teutonica*,¹¹ *via romea ungarica* (Vanni, 2012), etc.), also realising for Rome what *naturaliter et intelligenter* was made *ab ovo* for Santiago de Compostela.¹²

In hindsight, the pits have been filled, but it is legitimate to suspect that to experts the multiform costs of the lacking recourse have been much greater than the savings.

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¹ Citation from "Gli studi di storia locale e le Società di Storia Patria" / Cinzio Violante. - In : «Bollettino della Società Pavese di Storia Patria» Anno LXXIX, N. S., vol. XXXI, 1979.

² Cfr. «Itinera et descriptiones Terræ Sanctæ» : Itinera latina bellis sacris anteriora / ediderunt Titus Tobler ; Augustus Molinier ; C. Kohler. - Genevæ : Typis F.-G. Fick, 1879-1885. - 8°: voll. 3 ; 24 cm. [Il primo volume riporta : Itinerarium a Bordigala Hierosolymam (333) - S. Hieronymus peregrinatio S. Paulo (404) - Paula et Eustochium, de Locis Sanctis (386) - S. Eucherius, de locis aliquibus sanctis (ca. 440) - Breviarius de Hierosolyma (ca. 530) - Theodosius, de Terra Sancta (ca. 530) - Antonynus martyr, perambulatio locorum sanctorum (ca. 570) - Arculfus, relatio de locis sanctis, ab Adamnano scripta (ca. 670) - Beda Venerabilis, De Locis Sanctis (ca. 720) - Sanctimonialis Heydenheimensis, Hodoeporicon S. Willibaldi (723-726) - Anonymus, Itinerarium S. Willibaldi - Bernardus Monachus Francus, Itinerarium (ca. 870)]. [Il secondo volume riporta: Itinerum bellis sacris anteriorum series chronologica occidentalibus illustrata testimoniis. 1: 30-600]. Il volume che dovrebbe elencare i viaggi in Terrasanta dal 601 al 1099 non mi risulta sia stato mai edito. Il Tobler da solo, nel 1874 a Lipsia, aveva già dato alle stampe le «Descriptiones Terræ Sanctæ ex saeculo VIII, IX, XII, et XV» che riportano il viaggio di San Willibaldo, il

Commemoratorium de casis Dei, il viaggio di Bernardo monaco, di due innominati, quello di Johannes Wirzburgensis, la Citez de Iherusalem, e il viaggio di Johannes Poloner.

³ After having extracted and given two successive versions of the via Francigena bibliography to print, in 1995 and 1998, now also on the internet, the work proceeded as it still does, expanded to all pilgrimage and travel in the Middle Ages, on the website www.centrostudiromei.eu, accessible to all, and downloadable with the limit of 50 titles per interrogation.

⁴ *Ad vocem* nel *Glossarium mediae et infimae latinitatis* del Ducange.

⁵ "...cuius regnum comes Uodo Francigena, filius sororis suae, invasit..." *Gesta Cuonradi imp.* Cap. XXIX in MGH SS rer. Germ. 511, S. 47.

⁶ One of the few that explicitly uses this is Donizone di Canossa, which aims to identify – with an obliged summary of who writes the verses – the traced route of Emperor Enrico IV Cfr. *Vita Mathildis liber II v. 227-228* : "...qui veluti per stratam dammula fugit / Francigenam, montes ultra rediens malus ospes" e anche *ibidem*, v. 1165: "Francigenam stratam tenuit rex, pace peracta". But the same Donizone, in other passages, uses the term with its original meaning, e.g. "Francigenamque loquelam" e "Francigenas partes Urbanus dum peragraret".

⁷ A curious territorial distinction between Franks and Francigeni is in Goffredo da Viterbo: "Item nota, quia inter Francos et Francigenas differentia est. Dicuntur autem Francigenae esse omnes qui habitant Parisius et Remis et circa Sequanam fluvium et circa Ligerim fluvium et quidam alii proximi eorum, qui omnes olim dicebantur Gaudini. Sed Carolo Martellus dux Francorum, avus Caroli Magni, subiugatos eos regno Francorum adiunxit et Francigenas appellavit, id est genitos a Francis." *Gotifredi Viterbiensis Memoria seculorum*, MGH *Monumenta Germaniae Historica Scriptores*. Band 22, Hannover, 1872.

⁸ After all, even Cassiodoro writes to the inhabitants of the province, reconquered by the Franks by Teodorico, congratulating themselves from having returned "*Romanae consuetudini*". Thus, the province was a significant part of romanità also for him, not yet France. Cfr. *Cassiodori senatoris Variarum / recensuit Theodorus Mommsen.* – Berolini : apud Weidmannos, MDCCCXCIV. - (MGH *Monumenta Germaniae Historica Auctorum Antiquissimorum Tomus XII*). - Liber III, 17. – Scil. p. 88.

⁹ Even if the context is more complex and the citation is accompanied by a "maybe" that inserts a doubtful aspect, the sylloge is too eager that a polemicist like the writer does not take advantage of it for his purposes.

¹⁰ One of the most famous texts in this sphere is that of Ferdinand Opll «Das Itinerar Kaiser Friedrich Barbarossas (1152-1190)». - Wien und *alibi* : Hermann Boehlaus Nachf., 1978.

¹¹ See the *collana monografica* «De strata Teutonica = Vom Romweg» of the Centro Studi Romei Reunion Firenze.

¹² Cfr. *Liber Sancti Jacobi = Codex Calixtinus. Liber V. Capitulum I* : "Quattuor vie sunt que ad Sanctum Iacobum tendentes,..."