

THE "VIA FRANCIGENA" AND THE ITALIAN ROUTES TO SANTIAGO by Paolo CAUCCI VON SAUCKEN (Italy) 1988

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The relationship between Italy and Santiago de Compostela dates back a very long way. Suffice it to point out that four of the 22 miracles described in Book II of the "Liber Sancti Jacobi" expressly concern Italian pilgrims. This shows that there was an interest in Santiago in the first half of the 12th century, and that specific links existed. Moreover, the frequent contacts between the Bishopric in Santiago de Compostela and Rome, many of which existed as a result of the pilgrims that went to one or other, are recorded in "Historia Compostellana", which also bears witness to the existence of Italian brotherhoods of former pilgrims as far back as 1120. It records that, on the occasion of a trip he made to Rome, to obtain the rank of Archbishopric for the bishopric in Santiago de Compostela, Bishop Porto was accompanied and supported by, " ceteri quam plures Ecclesiae beati jacobi confratres, qui Beatum jacobum-olim adierant, et seipsos ipsi apostoli subjugaverant. Propterea ecclesiam Beati jacobi usquequaque diligebant et eius Episcopum."

Further proof of the strong links between Italy and Santiago, in the time of Gelmirez is provided by the fact that the sole relic of the apostle from Santiago cathedral was sent, after lengthy, voluminous correspondence, to Italy, there it prompted the establishment of a major centre of worship of St. James in Pistoia. Furthermore, as research into Italian involvement in pilgrimage to Santiago de Compostela progresses, new information testifying to the existence of increasingly complex, intricate relations is constantly emerging.

Numerous problems arose in connection with this early wave of interest in St. James in Italy. One of the key problems was to find routes to Santiago, especially for Italy, which had to take account of the elongated shape of the peninsula, the Alpine pass and the need to cross France. Because pilgrimage to Santiago de Compostela is such a long established tradition, we have concrete information from which to identify what came to be called "the true, direct road to St. James" and the other main routes, though there are still unanswered questions concerning the routes taken by Italian pilgrims during the earliest pilgrimages.

The purpose of this paper is to reconstruct the development of the oldest of the Italian roads to Santiago, the so-called "Via Francigena", and identify its route. The name refers to one of the oldest roads of the Italian late Middle Ages, and the first one that attempts were made to rebuild after the fall of the Roman Empire, for the sake of continuity and for reasons other than just local traffic. The road was in fact originally built for the strategic and military purposes of the Lombards for use against the Byzantines. To understand why the route is so tortuous, it is necessary to bear in mind the political situation in Italy in the 7th and 8th centuries. Once the Lombards came to power in Italy, they set up a series of duchies in various parts of the peninsula, but these did not succeed in forming a united kingdom. The main centres were the Duchy of Pavia and Trento in the north, the Duchy of Tuscia in the centre and the Duchies of Spoleto and Benevento in the south. The Lombards' power was countered by that of the Byzantines, who controlled the peninsula's coastlines, most of the Apennine passes at the Adriatic end, and the entire Flaminian Way, which connected Ravenna with Rome.

In order to keep in contact with Rome from Pavia and the southern duchies, the Lombards therefore had to choose an inland route far from the coast, and one that they could defend. That is why, in the High Middle Ages, a route linking Pavia with Tuscany and Rome developed. Moreover, when choosing a route, the Lombards had to take account of the remains of the Roman road network. When the Empire had fallen, the upkeep of the consular roads, organised on the basis of the system of "municipia", had virtually stopped. Most of the roads had been abandoned. Bridges were not repaired, flooded areas turned into swamps, and population centres in the valleys were abandoned and re-established on hillsides in sheltered places that were easier to defend. The result was that huge stretches of the main Roman roads became impracticable. The possibility of using the few remaining sections was also to affect the choice of route.

So the Lombards, both in order to avoid the areas controlled by the Byzantines and in order to use parts of the old Roman roads, chose for crossing the Apennines a pass far to the north, which the Romans had already used between Parma and Lucca. In doing so, they were able to re-use part of the Roman road network and to avoid the Byzantines in Liguria and Romagna. The second natural barrier to the route was the Arno. They found a passage across it near the mouth of the Valdelsa, which provided a quick route to Siena. From there it was easy to reach the Lombard castle of Radicofani, through the Arbia and Orcia valleys, and then go down the Paglia valley and, near the lake of Bolsena, rejoin the old Via Cassia, which was fairly well preserved, and follow it via Viterbo and Sutri to Rome.

A Lombard military route thus developed, far from the coast and protected from possible Byzantine attack. Its function was eminently strategic, with the result that the first settlements served to maintain and defend the road. Fortifications were built, and defence systems were set up around the bridges and villages. The place names, in particular, bear witness to the presence of the Lombards in ancient times, a prime example being the main pass, Monte Bardone, undoubtedly derived from the "Mons longobardorum" we read about in documents, which refers to a Lombard settlement and check-point on the pass. In the earliest documents, in fact, the route is referred to as "Via de monte Bardonis".

As the Lombards strengthened their hold on Italy, the defence of the road network became part of a specific policy of expansion and consolidation based on a system of royal abbeys founded by Lombard princes and nobles on royal property. They were beyond the jurisdiction of the bishopric, to which, moreover, they were opposed, and sprang up at strategic points along the road and controlled the traffic along it, constituting, at the same time, the first hospices providing succour for travellers and the early pilgrims on their way to Rome. It was not yet a road with heavy traffic, but a dirt track with many byways. What little upkeep there was, was the responsibility, locally, of the abbeys, the fortified centres and the villages along the road.

The route became more important when the Lombards were defeated in 774 by the Franks, who needed, for the purposes of their imperial strategy and ever-closer links with the papacy, to improve communications with Rome.

The "Via Francigena" thus became the road which the Franks used to get to Rome - a road which, as its name indicates, originated in the Franks' territory. From Pavia it was extended northwards. This made it easier to cross the Alps, either via the Great St. Bernard Pass or via the Susa valley and the Moncenisio Pass, depending on the direction. By the

10th century it was already a main road, and there were many references to it in documents. The first pilgrims to Santiago de Compostela were to use it to go up the peninsula in the opposite direction to the pilgrims going to Rome. The Franks continued to take steps to defend and organise the route, and they too provided assistance to travellers by means of a network of fortified monasteries along the road, which added to the hospice facilities.

The emergence of an Order of St. James in Altopascio bears witness to the fact that the route was used, not least by pilgrims. The Order originated as a hospice for pilgrims who had to cross one of the most dangerous areas along the whole route - a marshy, wooded area around the bed of the Arno. The earliest records of its existence date back to the second half of the 11th century. In 1087 a certain Bono made a donation to the hospice, specifying that it should be used "ad susceptionem peregrinorum et pauperorum". The hospital then decided to organise itself as a hospice order and expanded to cover all the main pilgrim routes, as far as London and Paris. In Spain monasteries and hospices were opened in Tortosa, along the "Camino de Santiago", in Pamplona and in Astorga.

The first record of a link between the route now known as the "Via Francigena" and pilgrimage to Santiago de Compostela is to be found in the story of the travels of the Icelandic Abbot Nikulas from Munkathvera, which he wrote in old Norse between 1151 and 1154 on the occasion of his pilgrimage to Rome and the Holy Land. Having landed in Bergen, Norway, after seven days at sea, Nikulas first went to Aalborg in Denmark, and then to Mainz, up the Rhine Valley and over the Great St. Bernard Pass to join the "Via Francigena", which he followed as far as Rome. Reporting on the various stopping places, Munkathvera provides brief descriptions of the villages he goes through. Having reached Luni, near Lucca, he refers a few times to the Nordic saga of Gunnar, whom the king of the Huns had put to death in a snake pit; he talks of the area round Luni, with its wealth of settlements, and adds that it was there that it was possible to join the road to Santiago de Compostela. There are two possible interpretations: either the port of ancient Luni was still somehow in operation and he went by sea along the Ligurian coast and joined the road to Santiago de Compostela once he had crossed the Bracco mountains, or it was already possible, as it was in the 13th century, to cross this mountain chain, which was a virtually insurmountable barrier in the High Middle Ages, near the Ligurian coast. The first hypothesis is more likely, since the old "Aurelia" road, which followed the Ligurian coastline disappeared at various points, and crossing the coastal mountain chain was a real problem. Because of this natural barrier, it was convenient, at the time, for those who wanted to go northwards and for those who were going to Santiago de Compostela to use the Monte Bardone pass. The Abbots testimony is, in any case, valuable in that it identifies a place through which pilgrims going to Santiago undoubtedly passed. The "Via Francigena" flourished in the 12th century. It was still the main route for communications between Rome, and the North, and was used in both directions by pilgrims, merchants and armies. Towards the mid-thirteenth century, however, as Florence emerged as a commercial and political power, an alternative route developed. It was to be much used, and virtually replace the Monte Bardone pass. The route left the older "Via Francigena" at Poggibonsi, in the direction of Florence; it crossed the Apennines at the Osteria Bruciata pass and joined the Via Emilia at Bologna. At Fidenza it joined the original route again. In the "Annales stadenses", written between 1240 and 1256, a record of the routes which the Germans used to get to Rome still refers to their crossing the "Apennines at Monte Bardone, but

immediately afterwards there is a reference to the easier, more direct and by then better serviced Osteria Bruciata pass between Bologna and Florence.

From the 14th century onwards, the stretches of the "Via Francigena" that were most used were those between Rome and Siena, between Siena and Lucca and between Parma and the Alpine passes. The Monte Bardone pass was increasingly neglected in favour of the pass between Florence and Bologna and, later, further south, the Scheggia and Bocca Trabaria passes, which joined up with the old Flaminian Way, which communicated, via the Furlo pass, with the Franciscan parts of Umbria and continued along the banks of the Tiber to Rome.

The earliest records of pilgrimages to Santiago de Compostela show that pilgrims were also choosing the route along the Ligurian coast, which was open to traffic again along what remained of the old "Aurelia Romana". The "Via Francigena" remained in use, however, especially for pilgrimages. The main alternative, the "Strada regia romana", was undoubtedly used by pilgrims, especially those going Rome in holy years, but it originated and developed mainly as a trading and political route.

The "Via Francigena" served as a pilgrim route for longer, as is apparent from the firmly established signs of the pilgrim civilisation and culture; First and foremost, a dense network of hospices, a characteristic sign of pilgrimage. Hospices mushroomed in Piacenza, San Donnino, Sarzana, Lucca, Siena and Viterbo. In the relatively short stretch between Monteriggioni and San Quirico d'orcia Venerosi Pesciolini, there are 48 hospices, not counting those in Siena, where, according to Bartolomeo Fontana, a pilgrim who passed through it in 1538 on his way to Santiago de Compostela, there was "a very beautiful, rich and highly reputed hospital".

After the first facilities, provided by the Lombard abbeys and the Frankish monasteries there developed those offered by the hospice Orders. The first, as we have seen, was the Order of St. James of Altopascio. There followed the Orders originating in the Holy Land, from the Order of the Temple to the Order of St. John and the Order of the Holy Sepulchre. Lastly, there were brother-hoods that set up hospices dedicated to their own guardian saint, almost always in towns. Near these buildings there are also numerous landmarks along the route in the form of "mansio leprosarum et domus infectorum", which specifically provided health care and were generally dedicated to St. Lazarus. When the fear of the Great Plague spread, new houses for the sick, dedicated to St. Rocco and St. Sebastian, sprang up along the route. There were others dedicated to St. Anthony of Vienne, reserved specially for patients suffering from what was known as St. Anthony's fire. There are so many landmarks along the route in the form of hospices and similar facilities that the Arab geographer Al Idrisi says in his "Book of King Ruggero": "On the road we came across Christian churches serving as infirmaries for sick people of the faith; we were astonished at the care they received in such institutions" . In the middle of the 18th century these buildings were still standing along the "Via Francigena", according to the testimony of Nicola Albani, who took that route on his way back from Santiago. In Lucca, on showing the "Compostela", he received assistance as a pilgrim from "Santiago de Compostela" and was put up in a hospital known as the Holy Trinity, where, he said, there were "good beds and better food, better than any hospital in Italy; it was kept very clean, and help was provided by the brothers".

With the passage of time, the route became increasingly closely linked with the pilgrim culture, and not only pilgrimages to Santiago de Compostela but pilgrimage as such, since it was a route used by pilgrims generally. In Sutri, on the wall of an old Roman Mithraeum converted into a church, we find the entire story of San Michele. In Gargano, against a background of throngs of pilgrims on their way. In Viterbo the mediaeval quarters centre round the church of San Pellegrino. In a church in Acquapendente there is a reproduction of the Holy Sepulchre; in Cuno, shortly before Siena, there is a series of effigies of the pilgrim with the pitchfork and cock. In Castelfiorentino, one could see, and can still see, the corpse of St. Verdiana and an "azabache" which the Saint brought back from a pilgrimage to Santiago. Few people other than pilgrims entered the area, protected and served by the order of St. James of Altopascio, whence they could continue northwards or turn off at Pistoia to visit the important relic of the Apostle who was worshipped there. One could continue at length in this vein.

Eventually the "Via Francigena" became a proper main road, joined by pilgrims from other regions: in Rome there were those from the main "Via Appia" road; in Bologna and Parma, those from the Adriatic coast; in Piacenza, pilgrims from Veneto and the Slav country; in Pavia, the Germans who, travelling via the Brenner Pass and Milan, found the route more convenient than the Oberstrasse of Hermann Kiinig von Vach.

The Susa valley took them, all together at this point, along what Bartolomeo Fontana called "the direct road to St. James" to the Alpine passes of Monginevro and Moncenisio and from there, in one large band they went via Avignon, Aries and the Via Tolosona, to Santiago de Compostela, to the apostolic tomb of St. James, located at the edge of the world. Down there, as Dante said, one visits Galicia.