



The 30th anniversary of the certification of the Via Francigena as "Cultural Route of the Council of Europe" (1994-2024)

The route known today as Via Francigena (VF for short) originated in the 6th century due to the strategic need of the Lombard populations to connect the capital Pavia with the central-southern Italian duchies surrounded by Byzantine territories. The need to use a safe route led to the choice of an itinerary that crossed the Apennines at today's Cisa Pass and after the Val di Magra turned away from the coast towards Lucca. This route took the name 'Via di Monte Bardone', from the ancient name of the Cisa Pass: *Mons Langobardorum*. From the end of the 8th century, after Charlemagne's descent into Italy and the annexation of northern Italy to the Kingdom of the Franks, the route began to be known as the VF, or 'road originating from the land of the Franks'. The first definition of the Via Francigena is found in a parchment dated 4 May 876 kept in the museum of Abbadia San Salvatore on Monte Amiata. Over the centuries, the VF became the main axis of connection between northern and southern Europe along which merchants, armies, pilgrims, and ideas travelled; a decisive channel of communication for the realisation of the cultural unity that characterised Europe in the Middle Ages. The fact that the VF linked the richest regions of the time (Flanders and Italy, passing through the fairs of Champagne) determined its increasing use as a trade route, leading to the exceptional cultural and economic development of many centres along the route.

Throughout the Middle Ages, pilgrims made their way unceasingly to the three *peregrinationes maiores*: Rome, site of the martyrdom of Saints Peter and Paul; Santiago de Compostela, the place where the remains of the apostle James are said to lie; Jerusalem and the Holy Land, places where Jesus lived and died. These routes have left a deep imprint on the history and traditions of the places and suggest today many reflections on environment, society, landscape, culture, as well as on the theme of travel and slow rhythms of life. The VF, or rather the Vie Francigene, or 'romipete' as the historian Renato Stopani defines them, have therefore always been travelled northwards by pilgrims heading for Santiago de Compostela and southwards by 'palmieri', that is, pilgrims heading for Jerusalem and those heading for Monte Sant'Angelo. This is why the VF is a Roman road, a Jerusalem road, a Compostellan road, a Micaelian road and a Nicolaeian road.

Today's VF route derives from an exhumation of English archbishop Sigeric's 990 pilgrimage from Canterbury to Rome to receive the bishop's *pallium* from Pope John XV. Sigeric's manuscript, preserved in the British Library in London, describes the route back to Canterbury, listing the 79 '*submansiones (stages) de Roma usque ad mare*'. A route that, in modern geography, crosses Latium, Tuscany, Emilia, Liguria, Lombardy, Piedmont, Valle d'Aosta in Italy, the cantons of Valais and Vaud, the regions of Bourgogne-Franche-Comté, Grand Est and Hauts-de-France, to cross the English Channel and finally reach the city of Canterbury, in the county of Kent. A route of over 2,200 kilometres, in 2019 extended from Rome to Apulia in the direction of Jerusalem, through southern Lazio, Campania, and Apulia, thus totalling 3,200 km. The extension of the route is historically based on the travel diary '*Itinerarium Burdigalense*' by an anonymous pilgrim from 333, which describes the journey from Burdigala (Bordeaux) to Jerusalem and back.

Modern pilgrimage is therefore an intelligent way of recovering and investigating memory, authenticity, spirituality, common values, identity, social participation, inclusion, and of developing a sustainable economy. All of the territories crossed by the VF are at the centre of a European enhancement project that has aroused the interest of regional and national governments and European institutions, seizing the momentum of small and large municipalities (over 700) located along the VF. The VF is therefore a way of history, a way of culture, a '*bridge between Anglo-Saxon and Latin Europe*', according to Jacques Le Goff's definition. Moreover, to walk, as David Le Breton writes, '*means to open oneself up to the world*'; to travel along ancient paths is a



stimulus to leave our particular sphere and return enriched. The VF leads back to the ancient '*Journey of the soul*', the pilgrim's guiding thread, but also a factor of social and economic growth, of sustainable tourism for places untouched by mass tourism.

With the approach of 1990, the thousandth anniversary of Sigeric's pilgrimage, several scholars and pilgrims - true pioneers in their own right - reconstructed the exact itinerary, retracing it, stage by stage, from Canterbury to Rome, and several publications were issued on the subject.

In 1987 - two years before the fall of the Berlin Wall (and five years before the Maastricht Treaty strengthening European cohesion) - the Council of Europe, an international organisation founded in London on 5 May 1949, launched the Cultural Routes Programme with the Declaration of Santiago de Compostela. An '*ingenious and far-sighted*' idea, Catherine Lalumière defined it, which aimed to demonstrate, with a journey through space and time, how the heritage of the different countries and cultures of Europe contributed to creating a shared and living cultural heritage. The VF represented and still represents a 'complex cultural asset' by means of which to build a Europe of peoples and cultures and thus advocate the European humanist values of peace, freedom, democracy and respect for human rights.

The VF project took a turning point in 1993 thanks to the work of the then Italian Ministry of Tourism in cooperation with the Regions of Valle d'Aosta, Piedmont, Lombardy, Emilia-Romagna (lead partner), Liguria, Tuscany and Lazio. The project was approved by the European Commission (DG XXII) within the framework of the Community Action Plan for Tourism and obtained recognition as a 'Cultural Route of the Council of Europe' in 1994 (protocol no. 459 of 4 May 1994) and later as a 'Major Cultural Route' (2004). The Scientific Committee (with professors Giovanni Cherubini, Lucio Gambi, Giuseppe Sergi, Pierre Toubert) and the Honour Committee (composed of representatives of the Council of Europe, UNESCO, the Pontifical Council for the Pastoral Care of Migrants and Itinerant People, and the World Tourism Organisation) contributed to the re-launch of the VF, in addition to the Italian regions crossed that formed a network. The work of the Scientific Committee flowed into a *dossier* and a popular volume entrusted to the *Italian Touring Club* and an appropriate cartography of the route.

The interest, at first limited to a few scholars and pilgrims, gradually extended to other people who, after having walked the Camino de Santiago, wished to reach Rome on foot and then Jerusalem, thus giving rise to a dense network of VF enthusiasts. Where possible, efforts were made to recover the original route, at other times paths and roads with less traffic were indicated. Already before the Jubilee of 2000, cultural and walking associations began to spring up in support of the VF: one of the first was the *Association Internationale Via Francigena*, based in Martigny in Switzerland, founded in 1997 by Adelaide Trezzini. In the Holy Year, there were a couple of thousand pilgrims walking the VF. On the Pilgrim's Way to Santiago, the phenomenon had already exploded and more than 100,000 could be counted. The post-Jubilee period did not record, unlike Santiago, a resumption of the flow of walkers to Rome, due to the lukewarm welcome in Rome, the poor usability of the route, the lack of infrastructures and the lack of interest on the part of the territories for a project whose potential was not seen.

It was some local institutions that became aware of the importance of making the Cultural Route known and revived, laying the foundations for restoring the ancient route and making it accessible to walkers. On 7 April 2001, the representatives of 34 local authorities (30 municipalities and 4 provinces) of the Italian VF signed in Fidenza (Parma, Italy) - accepting the invitation of the city's mayor - the Constitutive Act of what is now known as the European Association of Vie Francigene (EAVF) and to which 238 local authorities and regions of the four countries crossed belong. Over time, AEFV has consolidated an effective governance model, which earned it the Council of Europe's qualification in 2007 as a carrier network (*réseau porteur*) of the VF. This prestigious recognition makes AEFV the European reference body for the development, protection, preservation and promotion of the VF.



AEVF, together with the members of the countries crossed, friendly associations and partners, is working to make the VF known to a worldwide audience with the aim of making it popular. Together we still have a long way to go, which will prove successful if the territories know how (and want!) to believe in and work together on this European project of sustainable tourism and recovery of our roots. An ongoing dialogue involving public administrations and dioceses, associations and volunteers, cultural operators, economic and tourist categories.

The year 2024 will be the 30th anniversary of certification, a year in which to reflect on how far we have come and what lies ahead. In these thirty years, the world has changed radically, but the VF responds well to the signs of change: it is sustainable, it networks people and local communities, it enhances cultural heritage, it generates economy. In these thirty years, the VF has contributed to improving an idea of the world, showing that things can be changed and that the future is in our hands, in our actions, through our ideas and our actions. Jacques Le Goff writes in this regard: *'A road is not content to live in the past or even the present, it somehow sends a signal for the future [...]. A road like this lives in time, it combines slowness with longevity.'* The celebrations of thirty years are therefore intended to best represent the various facets that make the VF a perfect synthesis of many different souls, which combine to realise a single great project of cultural, social, sustainable tourism, a great project of peace.