CONJUNCTIONS AND DISJUNCTIONS BETWEEN ANCIENT PILGRIMAGE ROUTES AND PRESENT-DAY VIRTUAL CHURCH ROUTE: EXAMPLE OF THE THETRIS PROJECT

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Summary

THETRIS is an international project implemented through the Central Europe Programme. The focus of the project is sustainable preservation of local churches and sacral monuments in eight Central European countries by developing a transnational church route, elaborating joint strategies and testing innovative solutions to preserve churches in order to support development of rural areas. The transnational church route is based on eleven regional church routes. Different pilot actions using innovative technologies have been implemented and tested in order to stimulate preservation of church heritage: audio guides in some churches, usage of social media and development of smartphone apps. In this paper, the aims, tools and processes of the construction of the present-day transnational Central-European (virtual) church route are juxtaposed with the aims and historical processes of the establishment of the past and current terrestrial pilgrimage sites and routes.

Keywords: transnational church route, pilgrimage route, virtual route

1. INTRODUCTION

THETRIS (**THE**matic **T**ransnational church **R**oute development with the **I**nvolvement of local **S**ociety) is an international project implemented through the Central Europe Programme, which is co-financed by the European Regional Development Fund. The focus of the project is sustainable preservation of local churches and sacral monuments in eleven partner regions of eight Central European countries by developing a transnational church route, elaborating joint strategies and testing innovative solutions to preserve churches in order to support development of rural areas. In European rural areas, cultural heritage has an important value in regional development and can be one of the main protagonists in economic and social development. In this paper, I will present the process of the construction of the transnational church route in the framework of the European project in comparison with past

The European Pilgrimage Routes for promoting sustainable and quality tourism in rural areas
International Conference, 4-6 December 2014, Florence - Italy
Paper Code: "[inserted by organizing committee]"

and present Catholic Church encouragement of folk devotions and contemporary endeavours of revitalization of ancient pilgrimage routes.

2. METHODS

In the frame of the project, partners first analysed strengths and weaknesses of their regions and then developed a common strategy for sustainable preservation of the churches and sacral cultural heritage. Some partners tested innovative methods and solutions of cultural heritage management and shared their experiences with other partners. In the last phase, the partners selected the transferable elements of other partners' good practices and developed plans for sustainability of the project's results. (1)

At the beginning of the project, each partner formed a regional working group which consisted of different local stakeholders involved in church heritage management (e.g. representatives of local governments and communities, priests, institutes for the protection of cultural heritage, regional development agencies, tourist associations, NGO's, museums, universities, etc.), prepared a list of good practices of the management of sacral heritage in the region and elaborated a regional SWOT analysis of four main focus areas: a) socio-economic context and entrepreneurship, b) routes and location, c) heritage and preservation, and d) local identity and commitment. Each partner identified common strength points, such as richness of cultural heritage sites (museums, castles, fortresses, heritage buildings and archaeological sites), attractiveness of landscape and local environment, and presence of a strong cultural identity and lively local traditions (festivals, races, plays, gastronomy events and concerts). Tradition-based cultural initiatives and environment-friendly tourism are seen as opportunities for development. What they recognized as weaknesses was poor marketing strategies, lack of local awareness of the importance of promoting regional cultural heritage, inadequate tourist information and low standard of tourist services. They also pointed out a potential threat of shortage of funding for preservation of cultural and historical sites. (2)

In order to find new and effective ways of how to overcome the difficulties connected with stimulating sustainable development, seven pilot actions were implemented on how to preserve local cultural heritage and make churches in rural areas more attractive for local residents and tourists. They tested various new innovative solutions of sacral heritage preservation. The aim of the "Accessibility Model" and "Cultural Tourism" pilot actions was development of cultural tourism infrastructure, i.e. establishment, mapping and signposting of bike routes using the available infrastructure of river banks and introduction of an audio guide system and a GPS-based visitor guide. (3) The third pilot action "Setting up a local network" aimed to establish a network of local stakeholders and create a map for stamps (collection). (4) The pilot action "Revitalization package to Novalesa Abbey" aimed at revitalization of heritage objects through raising awareness of the value of cultural heritage of the local community, preparing a feasibility study on revitalization of cultural heritage objects and fostering social integrations and sustainable economic development by using cultural heritage. (5) "Governance model" aimed to identify, promote and implement new governance models and marketing solutions on cultural heritage management by developing an interactive website and a Facebook profile and by creating an association that would work towards and assure sustainability of the project. (6) IT solutions were exploited also in the framework of the pilot action "The Golden Cathedral", which developed a smartphone application which aimed to involve the youth in the management of the already existing pilgrimage routes and churches. (7) The last pilot action "Management trainings" aimed at upskilling of stakeholders

The European Pilgrimage Routes for promoting sustainable and quality tourism in rural areas
International Conference, 4-6 December 2014, Florence - Italy

Paper Code: "[inserted by organizing committee]"

involved in sacral heritage management through trainings and training materials. (8)

Fig. 1. Golden Cathedral smartphone application. Photo: Diocese Graz-Seckau (© Thetris, 2014).

Fig. 2. Pilot seminar in Rajbrot church, Malopolska region (Poland), 12th March 2014. Photo: Klára Mrkusová (© Thetris, 2014).

These pilot actions were presented to the partners at pilot seminars in order to be transferred, adapted and adopted in other Central European regions. For that purpose, transferability training was organised and regional and transnational transferability plans were prepared. (9) In order to assure sustainability of project results, regional and transnational sustainability plans with descriptions of concrete actions as well as policy recommendations were elaborated. (10)

The European Pilgrimage Routes for promoting sustainable and quality tourism in rural areas
International Conference, 4-6 December 2014, Florence - Italy
Paper Code: "[inserted by organizing committee]"

Fig. 3. Transferability training in Nova Gorica (Slovenia), 8th May 2014. Photo: Petra Kolenc (© Thetris, 2014).

3. RESULTS

The most important result of the THETRIS project is the development of the Transnational Thematic Church Route, which virtually incorporates the eleven Regional Church Routes from different partners from Central-European regions, namely the Szatmár Region in Hungary, the Prešov Region in the Slovak Republic, the Šluknov Region and the Bohemian Switzerland Region in the Czech Republic, the Małopolska Region in Poland, the Piedmont and the Veneto Regions in Italy, the Meissen District in Germany, the Styria Region in Austria and the Goriška and the Gorenjska Regions in Slovenia. The included churches differ greatly from one another in the aspect of art-historical and architectural styles, building material, the period of their origin, denominations, etc. (11) The transnational church rote includes parish, pilgrimage and cemetery churches as well as sacral monuments within monasteries, castles and fortified encampments, from small shrines to magnificent basilicas and monastery complexes. The variety of the churches bears witness to the rich cultural heritage of Central Europe. (12) Some churches stand out for their rich pilgrimage tradition which goes all the way back to the early mediaeval period. The church route of the Goriška region (Slovenia) consists exclusively of the pilgrimage shrines dedicated to the Holy Virgin Mary (13); there are also pilgrimage churches in the church routes of the Veneto (Italy) and Styria (Austria) regions. (14)

The transnational and regional church routes were presented in various media; the transnational virtual route was presented on the website by using the Prezi tool (15), so that the visitor can enjoy the descriptive, visual and even acoustic presentation of the churches. Furthermore, it was presented in the magazine and on the map. (16) The regional church routes were presented in brochures, on maps and different leaflets. Moreover, they were all signposted according to the requirements of the Central Europe Programme and national rules on signposting of the monuments of intangible cultural heritage. (17)
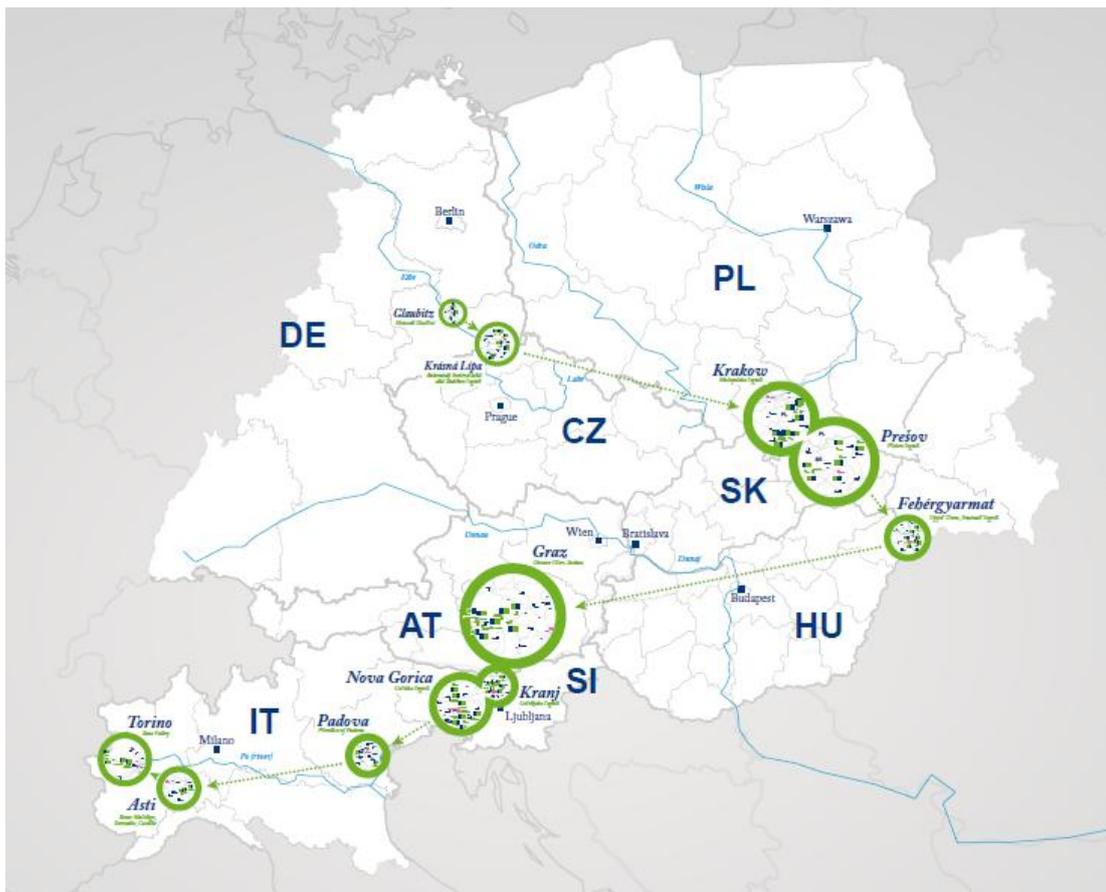
The European Pilgrimage Routes for promoting sustainable and quality tourism in rural areas
International Conference, 4-6 December 2014, Florence - Italy

Paper Code: "[inserted by organizing committee]"

Fig. 4. THETRIS Transnational Church Route. Graphic layout by Bohemian Switzerland P. B. C. (© Thetris, 2013).

Fig. 5. Signposting of the churches. Left: Signpost at the church of Virgin Mary of the Snow in Nadavče (Slovenia). Photo: Špela Ledinek Lozej. Right: Signpost at the parish church of St. Anne in Jedlka (Czech Republic). Photo: Klára Mrkusová (© Thetris, 2013).

The European Pilgrimage Routes for promoting sustainable and quality tourism in rural areas
International Conference, 4-6 December 2014, Florence - Italy

Paper Code: "[inserted by organizing committee]"

4. DISCUSSION

The process of the transnational church route construction in the framework of the European project will be juxtaposed with the past and present encouragements of producing, using and revitalizing of ancient terrestrial pilgrimage routes. The most important European pilgrimage routes are closely connected with individual or group pilgrimage of devoted people to holy places. At first, Christian pilgrims went on a pilgrimage to the places of birth, life and crucifixion of Jesus, i.e. to the Holy Land. However, as the centre of the Christian Church moved further west and north, the Holy Land became a difficult place to visit, particularly after it had been overrun by Muslims. Other two important political centres of the time became important pilgrim destinations, first Rome and then Constantinople, but particularly Rome, with the supposed remains of St. Peter and St. Paul and other early martyrs. Once the supposed remains of James the Great were found in Galicia, Santiago de Compostela also became one of the most important pilgrim destinations. There were several other shrines which attracted pilgrims from far and near: in Monte Sant'Angelo and Mont-Saint-Michel, shrines were dedicated to the archangel Michael, in Assisi to St. Francis, in Cantenbury to Thomas Becket, in Tours to St. Martin, in St. Antoine l'Abbaye to St. Anthony, in St. Maximin and in Vézelay to St. Mary Magdalene, in Loreto to the Holy House and in Cologne to the Three Magi. There were also several shrines consecrated to the apparition of Holy Virgin, e.g. in Montserrat, Guadaloupe, Le Puy-en-Velay and Einsiedeln. Many of them could be visited en route to one of the major shrines. Leading to the main pilgrimage centres, many main (and side) pilgrim routes found their place on the map of Europe, such as the Way of St. James (El Camino), leading to Santiago de Compostela, Via Francigena or Via Romea, connecting Cantenbury with Rome, Via Regia between Santiago de Compostela and Moscow, and Via Imperi between Western Pomerania and Rome. Such pilgrimages to faraway places could take months or even years. Primary reasons for pilgrimages, such as penance for sins or fulfilment of vows were later joined by non-religious motives, such as wish to travel and trade. The routes were equipped with facilities for the spiritual and physical well-being of pilgrims: road shrines, accommodation, guesthouses, lodgings and signposts in the shape of shells, pictures and the like. Pilgrimages gained their utmost popularity at the end of the Middle Ages, when they were interrupted by the Reformation triggered among other things due to numerous speculations regarding indulgences and relics. During the Counter-Reformation, however, pilgrimages became a popular instrument of the Counter-Reformation and the Roman Catholic restoration, additionally fuelled by the threat of the plague and Ottoman invasion. Contrary to the mediaeval pilgrimages, the motive for pilgrims to visit holy places was to seek help for worldly worries, which created a need for pilgrim centres that could be reached in one day or in a couple of days. Consequently, the tradition of "peregrinationes majores" gradually died out and "peregrinationes minores" came to exist. (18)

Nowadays, pilgrims tend to visit local, regional or European pilgrim centres. Moreover, in the 19th century, some new pilgrim centres were established, especially the ones devoted to St. Mary, such as Fatima, Lourdes, etc. while, on the other hand, the majority of the mediaeval pilgrim routes were abandoned. The second half of the 20th century saw a renewed interest in pilgrimage and other cultural routes. The Way of St. James (El Camino de Santiago) was declared the first European Cultural Route by the Council of Europe in October 1987. (19) It was also named one of UNESCO's World Heritage Sites in 1993 due to its historic interests, its role in the past cultural exchanges between the Iberian peninsula and the rest of Europe, its testimony to the power of the Christian faith among people of all social

The European Pilgrimage Routes for promoting sustainable and quality tourism in rural areas
International Conference, 4-6 December 2014, Florence - Italy
Paper Code: "[inserted by organizing committee]"

classes and from all over Europe and its preservation of the most complete material record in the form of ecclesiastical and secular buildings, settlements and civil engineering structures. (20) There were several other pilgrimage routes established progressively: the routes leading to Rome (Via Francigena) and those leading from Rome to Jerusalem, the Michaelic pilgrimages and the pilgrimages dedicated to St. Olav in the northern Europe. There were also several non-pilgrimage cultural routes established and certificated by the Council of Europe, such as maritime and trade routes (e.g. the Hansa Cultural Route, based on the historic and heritage brand of the powerful mediaeval league of cities in and around the Baltic Sea, Routes of the Legacy of al-Andalus, the Phoenicians' Routes, Via Regia), the cultural routes of industrial heritage (the Iron Route in the Pyrenees and the Iron Trail in Central Europe), cultural routes connected with landscape and civilisation (the Routes of the Olive Tree and the Iter Vitis Route) and with other common elements of cultural heritage (e. g. Transromanica, which brings together a number of regions across Europe that house monuments related to the Romanesque period, the European Route of Historic Thermal Towns, the European Route of Jewish Heritage, the European Mozart Ways, the Route of Don Quixote, the Route of the Castilian language). Today there are 29 certified cultural routes crossing the whole of Europe and many more other cultural routes developed in the framework of different programmes and projects. (21)

A major difference between past pilgrimage (and also trade) routes and today's cultural routes is the intention of the establishment process. The historical routes were designed and established through practice: pilgrims, traders/merchants and travellers walked the roads, slept in the nearby lodgings and traded on the way; the ways were only later mapped, documented, described and established as we know them today. They grew in an organic way rather than through strategic planning and investment. The process of the establishment of today's cultural routes (and also their revitalization), on the other hand, is quite the opposite: today's routes are first conceptualized and only then the process of strategic planning, management and investment begins. We could say that the historical ones were produced and the present ones are constructed. (22) Another big difference between past pilgrimage as well as trade routes and today's cultural routes that have been established upon the concept of the historical ones is that the past ones were actual and concrete paths and roads that connected places, while the present ones often (though not necessarily so, if we consider the number of pilgrims walking the Way of St. Jacob) only present a group of common cultural elements that together form a virtual route. (23)

5. CONCLUSIONS

Several disjunctions between past and present pilgrimage routes have been pointed out, namely different grounds, evolution and form. Despite these differences, however, there are also common elements to build on. They all help spread common heritage and history that contribute towards establishment of links in bringing different countries together. They also create interactions between monuments and the cultural and regional context. The THETRIS Transnational Church Route connects churches from far and near and their intangible heritage from different time periods, regions, denominations, partners and stakeholders into a virtual route within a time and space dimension. In the past, pilgrims understood life as a pilgrimage between the earthly life and the hereafter; just like pilgrimage routes linked different countries, groups, and individuals, so did the life link the earth with the heaven. Nowadays,

The European Pilgrimage Routes for promoting sustainable and quality tourism in rural areas
International Conference, 4-6 December 2014, Florence - Italy
Paper Code: "[inserted by organizing committee]"

however, the cultural routes between European countries, provinces, project partners and other stakeholders which have been established and managed according to a certain programme reflect our bureaucracy-governed life controlled by strategies, guidelines and recommendations that is more often led in the virtual than in the real world. Given the comparable spiritual and/or cultural elements, these (cultural) routes create simultaneous spatio-temporal dimensions of the European paradigm.

Acknowledgments

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The European Pilgrimage Routes for promoting sustainable and quality tourism in rural areas
International Conference, 4-6 December 2014, Florence - Italy

Paper Code: "[inserted by organizing committee]"

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The European Pilgrimage Routes for promoting sustainable and quality tourism in rural areas
International Conference, 4-6 December 2014, Florence - Italy

Paper Code: "[inserted by organizing committee]"

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