

The Sacred Way Langobardorum

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Summary

The Via Sacra Longobardorum is a medieval route that connects Mont Saint Michael (France) to the shrine of St. Michael the Archangel of Monte S. Angelo (Foggia), which owes its name to 'apparition of the Angel in the fifth century B.C. Around the shrine of St. Michael the Archangel was built first a castrum, then a thriving city that for centuries has exceeded 20,000 people. The Via Sacra Longobardorum is a way of communication representing a clear historical example of the influence that can have a pilgrimage route on the development of local communities. Nowadays, another example is represented by the development of S. Giovanni Rotondo (Foggia) in consequence of pilgrimage from all over the world towards the tomb of Saint Pio. The author wants to analyse the way of the Via Sacra Longobardorum regarding Foggia's area and in particular its several hermitages that in the Middle Age supported the pedestrians, the riders, humble people, crusaders, dukes, popes and saints, all devotees of the Archangel Michael and, therefore, directed to the Holy Cave. Further, the state of the ancient hermitages, the hiking trails and the most important landscape aspects will be described.

Keywords: Pilgrims' routes; Langobardorum routes; St. Michael the Archangel of Monte S. Angelo (Foggia)

1. Foreword

Pilgrimage Routes developed with the spreading of the Christian religion and provided a decisive impulse for cultural exchanges among peoples; therefore, they represented an essential common ground for religious, spiritual as well as artistic, economic and social unity. In such context, Pilgrims' routes, frequented by people belonging to all walks of life, took on

the role of a vehicle for encounters, experiences and exchanges of traditions, knowledge and folklore: these are all elements of progress and rapprochement, a prelude to the formation of Nations and Confederations among States.

The aim of this paper is to describe the stretch of the Sacred Way Langobardorum closer to the Shrine of S. Michele Arcangelo on the Gargano Promontory. This place would be visited by crusaders asking for the Saint's protection before setting out to fight in the Holy Land, but also by pilgrims who, for merely devotional reasons, would visit the Shrine in which S. Michele appeared.



Foto Tardio

Pilgrims walked the Sacred Route Langobardorum for centuries, up until the 1960s: every year in the month of may, close to the day when S. Michele's apparition is celebrated (May 8th), countless processions of revelling pilgrims, with propitiatory chanting, on foot, reached the Gargano promontory to visit the Shrine, to expiate for their sins and keep faith to a vow, beg S. michele arcangelo for a miracle, for protection and thank him for the "good things" they thought the saint had granted them.

Nowadays such an influx of walking visitors very seldom occurs along the Sacred Way Langobardorum; more often it takes place along more ordinary routes with cars and coaches on visits arranged by religious and civil associations and they usually also pay a visit to the tomb of S. Pio (tomb and Basilica located in San Giovanni Rotondo FG), to the Shrine of S. Michele Arcangelo (located in Monte Sant'Angelo - FG). Other pilgrimage destinations are the hermitages of S. Maria di Pulsano (Monte S. Angelo), S. Leonardo (Manfredonia - FG) and the Shrine of the Madonna Incoronata (The Crowned Lady) (FG).

Along such routes, hermitages, villages, churches and towns have sprang up and over the centuries they have provided shelter to people who for different reasons covered the distance. Now they represent potential itineraries, ideal for forms of alternative tourism and sustainable valorisation of the territory. Nowadays along this route one might quite often encounter tourists who, either on foot or horseback, and where possible even mountain bikes, visit ancient places of devotion, historical monuments and towns which have marked the culture of this region.

The Sacred Way Langobardorum.

The middle ages inherited from the Romans the main communication ways that had allowed for the conquest and following rule over a very vast empire. The sacred Way Langobardorum exemplifies one of these routes: it is connected to the *Via Appia* and to the *Via Traiana* which run through Benevento and have Brindisi as their final destination.

After Benevento and for a short stretch the sacred route follows the *Via Traiana* as far as Equum Tuticum heading then towards Buonalbergo, Casalbore and Civitate (the ancient Teanum Apulum, today S. Paolo Civitate). Thanks to this diversion from the *Via Traiana*, the Sacred Route Langobardorum connects to the coastline from the North where the latter bends towards Larino and Vasto to then conjoin in Civitate.



Da Tardio modificata

From this “station”, at sufficiently regular distances, there is a successive series of structures which have stood as many logistic points for pilgrims travelling to the shrine of S. Michele Arcangelo. They are monasteries, sometimes hermitages, often with an annexed "hospital" for the hospitality to pilgrims. We would like to remember some of the sites we can find along the stretch between S. Paolo Civitate and Monte S. Angelo and they are as follows: San Giovanni in Piano, Sant'Agostino, Santa Maria di Stignano, San Matteo, Sant'Egidio al Pantano, San Michele, S. Maria di Pulsano.

This way is the ancient road covered by pilgrims, crusaders, kings, popes and saints who, coming from the northern regions travelled to the Shrine of St. Michele on the Gargano, meant as the final destination of their pilgrimage, at times on their way to and from the Holy land. The history of the Shrine of St. Michele is closely intertwined with the history of the Longobards first and of the Normans later and then lastly with the history of the Suedes and Aragonese. The Sacred Route Langobardorum also collected the influx of pilgrims covering the *Via Appia* and after Benevento it headed towards Buonalbergo, Cella S.Vito and Troia (the ancient Aeca). From here the pilgrims going to the Gargano promontory would cover the road first towards Lucera, a town which was already known in Roman times (we can find there an amphitheatre of the augustan age - Piemontese 1999), and then towards Apricena.

The first stage of the Holy Route in Terra di Capitanata (the province of Foggia) was located near Civitate, not far from Teanum apulum, an outpost of roman origin, situated in a strategic position for the control of a ford over the Fortore river and for the control of the sheep track which from L'Aquila heads towards the Tavoliere (a Plain in the province of Foggia) and

viceversa, and finally for the control of the transit to and from the coastline. Today this station is completely destroyed, including the ancient walls of Byzantine origin, a cathedral, of which just a few ruins remain, a church and a monastery dedicated to S. Angelo: all of these were built by the Normans.

The following stage traverses a landscape completely dominated by farmland, testimony to the importance that the Tavoliere delle Puglie (an extensive plain in the province of Foggia) already had in Roman times. It is the ancient monastery of San Giovanni in Piano, dating back to the middle ages; today it is all part of a farm very badly kept and made even uglier by a mountain of rubble from the quarries of the Apricena Stone.



S. Giovanni in Piano can be reached from Apricena both towards the provincial road to San Paolo Civitate and from the area north of the quarries of this little town. It is an old monastery dating back to the 11th century when these places hosted a chapel dedicated to San Giovanni Battista. Later on Count Petrone of Lesina funded the building of a monastery still standing today, though reduced to ruins, which was first entrusted to the Benedettini, then in the 13th century to the Celestini. It is said that this monastery accomodated Pietro da Morrone, (who ascended the Holy Seat under the name of Celestino V) when he travelled on a pilgrimage to S. Michele Arcangelo. Legend has it that even S. francesco dwelled in the hospital of San Giovanni in Campo on his way to San Michele on the Gargano (in the church there is an altar dedicated to the Saint's visit). In 1221 Federico II granted to the monastery the possession of the lands it had acquired in the past.

The next stage towards The Shrine of San Michele is called "Posta dei Colli" and it is situated between Apricena and San Marco in Lamis. Unfortunately, of this station, used by pilgrims in the Middle Ages, nothing remains. We do know from historical sources that in the Middle Ages in this place there used to stand the church of San Pietro in Veterano with a little monastery.

The monastery of Sant'Agostino is located not far from S.Marco in Lamis in a broad valley along which still today there are places which were inhabited by hermits. According to Tardio (2007) the majority of hermits in Western Gargano did not belong to any order or religious congregation. They were mainly "included monks", meaning clergyman who wanted to lead a strict and secluded life and asked to hide in solitude, both in monasteries and outside. " *after spending a period of hard trial they were admitted with a special ceremony into the hermitage which they could no longer leave except for going to church; neither could they leave without the superior's permission, hence the name "included", almost as saying "secluded". The hermits were well known to the local peasants who very often fed them and*

asked for their advice, blessing and miraculous intervention. In turn, the hermits welcomed lost passing travellers and pilgrims and showed them the right route.” Today the monastery of Sant’Agostino is completely dilapidated. Its history dates back to the Romanic period and only the walls and some frescoed ceilings are still standing. Besides providing shelter to pilgrims, probably once this structure stood as some sort of citadel to defend visitors from the perils of the time.



Foto Centola

The Shrine of S. Maria di Stignano is in perfect conditions (Image by Tardio 2007) and still today is not lived. It represents the gate to the Gargano promontory for pilgrims from the north. The current structure dates back to the 15th century and was commissioned by the lord of Castelpagano in the place where, according to legend, the virgin Mary appeared in 1350. The position is once again strategic for the control of the underlying road which winds along the Iana Valley in a spiritual setting where we can also find some caves already inhabited by hermits. The setting of this shrine differs slightly if compared to previous “stations”: the shrine here dominates over a harsh landscape with surfacing lime crags, oak woods, meagre pastures and small plots farmed on slopes structured as terraces. This is the type of landscape that will dominate the entire Sacred Mountain.



Not far from S. Maria di Stigliano we find the Convent of S. Matteo, an imposing fortified edifice which probably was already a “hospice” for pilgrims in Longobardian times. The early constructions, still standing, date back to the X-XI century and are known as the Monastery of S. Giovanni De Lama, a religious community of Benedettini. The community was so very rich that at that time it raised Federico II’s interest who confiscated their whole property. The current denomination derives from the translation of a relic of S. Matteo. From that moment on the fate of the monastery, which in the meantime had been entrusted to franciscan monks, changed radically thanks to the unceasing support of the believers. Together with S. Maria di Stigliano, it is the best preserved edifice on the Sacred Way. Today there still is a very laborious religious community mostly taking care of the religious cult, the assistance to pilgrims and several cultural activities. S. Matteo’s Library is thought to be the richest in volumes in the entire Capitanata.



Foto Centola

Before getting to S. Michele's Shrine pilgrims could still rely on two convents, both very well equipped for spiritual and material support: **S. Egidio and S. Nicola a Pantano**. Unfortunately today only a few ruins remain of what the Benedettini monks coming from Cava Dei Tirreni had built between the IX and X century. The ruins of the two are only a few kilometres away from each other, the latter almost at the beginning of the plain with a little reserve of stagnating water (hence the name Pantano, meaning "marsh"); luckily it is now being reclaimed. The former is located on the route to Monte Cornello and was built by the same religious order a few centuries later. And this goes to show the importance these structures had for the influx of pilgrims.

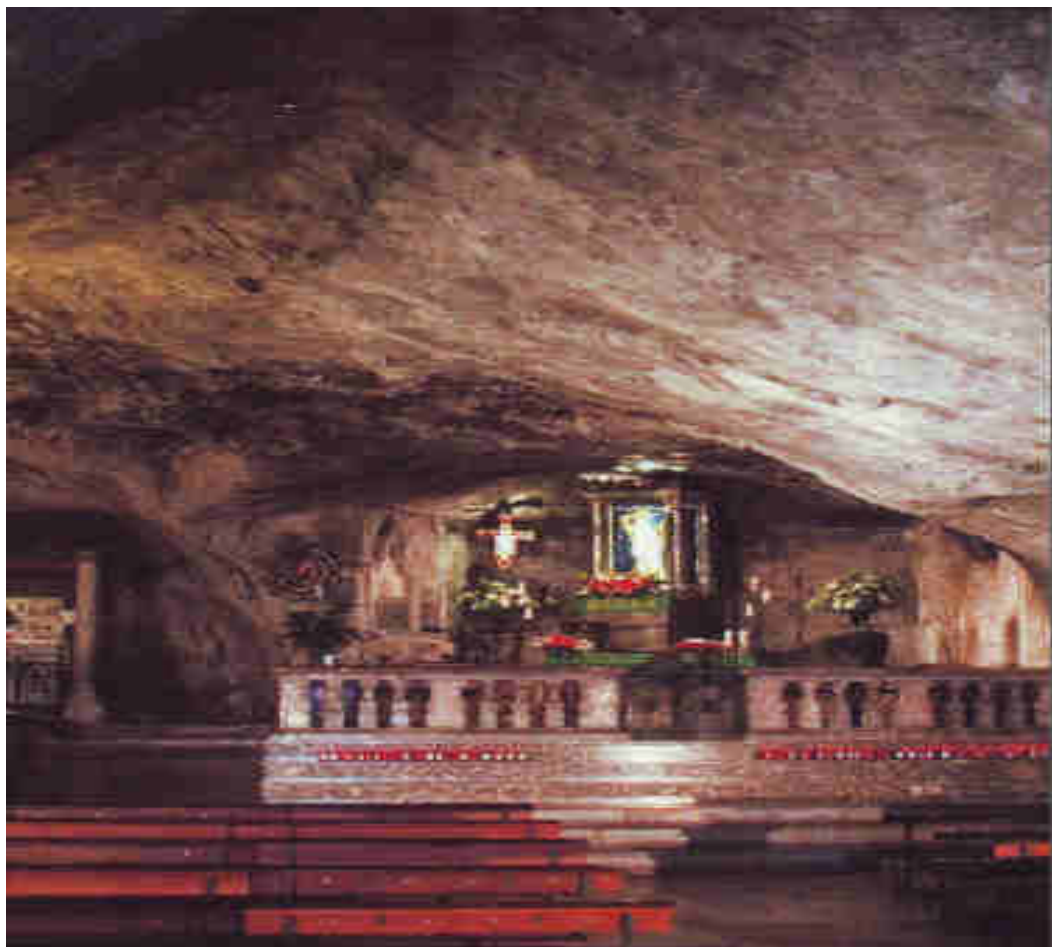
The Convento di S. Matteo and those of S. Egidio and S. Nicola al Pantano lie within a landscape dominated by oak woods where sheep farming was the main means of livelihood for the population who added to their income with rather poor mountain farming.. Furthermore, these two "stations" represent the last stage before arriving at the Grotta (cave) of S. Michele in Monte S. Angelo: more or less 5 hours away, the last few kilometres being uphill on ragged terrain.

The Shrine of S. Michele is the culminating point of the pilgrims' spiritual itinerary. It is here possible to find traces of the presence of the Byzantines, Longobards and Normans as well as of the suevians, Angevins and Aragonese (Piemontese). The prestige of the possession of this shrine, which is linked to the **Honor Sancti Michaelis**, has come down through the centuries to the modern age. The town of Monte S. Angelo was built around the shrine, first in the area of the hypogean houses and later came the Medieval district and then it gradually developed along the lines of a modern urban setting. The town has slowly been enriched with churches, monasteries and monuments. Monte S. Angelo has been the pilgrimage destination chosen by many popes, the first of whom was Gelasio I (492-496), then Agapito I, Leone IX, Urbano II, Pasquale II, Callisto II (1119-1124), Innocenzo II, Alessandro III, Gregorio X, Celestino V and lastly Giovanni Paolo II (John Paul II) in 1987.



San Michele- Monte S. Angelo (Foggia)

Many saints also visited the town: San Bernardo, San Guglielmo Da Vercelli, San Tommaso D'Aquino, Santa Caterina da Siena, San Francesco D'Assisi (who travelled there in preparation for Lent in 1221), San Francesco Antonio Fasani, Santa Brigida di Svezia with her daughter Santa Caterina di Svezia, San Pio.



The Sacred Way, also known as The Pilgrim's Route, has always represented a communication link between southern regions and central-northern Europe: so much so that along this axis many michaelic settlements have sprung up: to name but a few, Mont Saint-Michel in Normandy and the Abbey of San Michele in Valle di Susa (Turin).

Among the many constructions connected to the shrine of S. Michele we would like to recall the churches of S. Pietro (vi century), of S. Salvatore (vii century), of S. Apollinare and S. Antonio Abate (xi century). But also the Baptistery of S. Giovanni in Tumba and the adjacent church of S. Maria Maggiore (xii century). We must also remember the monasteries of S. Benedetto, which included the premises of the present town hall (xiii century), the monastery of San Francesco (xiv century), the one of the Clarisse (xv century) which hosted an enclosure monastery until the descent of Napoleon, and the Norman-Suevian-Aragonese Castle as well as the Angevin bell-tower. The current portal and steps of the shrine date back to the Angevin age. Before the said setting, the entrance to the shrine opened on the northern side through a route dating back to the Longobards, as documented by the archaeological excavation started by Mons. Quitadamo. The shrine of S. Michele has been a pilgrimages destination for popes and saints, kings princes and queens, but mostly for generations of believers.

Pilgrims travelling to S. Michele either returned back to their towns and villages following the reverse route or they carried on towards the sea with the aim of reaching the Holy Land. They used the hermitages of S. Maria di Pulsano, an abbey which was built in the vi century onto an ancient pagan temple. Recently restored, the abbey was located on the last crags before the

Gulf of Manfredonia, set in a steep and ragged environment with many caves and ancient dwellings which could offer shelter and spiritual support.

Around S. Maria di Pulsano there used to be the convent of Santa Bernabea and the monastery of Ruggiano, but today only some ruins remain. Other places of faith were S. Leonardo, the church of S. Maria di Siponto and the shrine of Madonna della Incoronata (Our Crowned Lady) in Foggia which was considered the last stage of the Via Sacra Langobardorum. It was also seen as a crossroads for shepherds and their flocks on their way from vast areas of Basilicata, from the entire area of the western subappennine, from central-southern Daunia and finally from Abruzzo.

Unesco has included the shrine of San Michele Arcangelo among its sites and The Via Sacra Langobardorum has been included in the Project "Unesco Italia Langobardorum - Centres of Power (568-774 A.D). This Sacred Route unites Mont Saint Michel in France to the Shrine of San Michele Arcangelo in Monte Sant' Angelo in the province of Foggia.

Conclusions

Pilgrims' routes stand out as an inerasable mark in the history of peoples and an invaluable cultural legacy which has influenced the spreading of knowledge, most of all during times when opportunities for transmitting knowledge were scarce. But most of all they can still be a potential vehicle of development, for tourism even, in many areas of our country. A very clear example is the current influx on the Via Francigena both of religious travellers and plain tourists exercising forms of alternative, health-oriented and eco-sustainable travelling. Both are attracted by the routes in themselves, by the landscapes and by the desire to experience a type of life in close contact with the surrounding territory, its natural resources and its traditions. In one word, they are fascinated by the richness in cultural and human connotations these experiences emanate.

For this to happen it has been necessary to devise a project involving territorial bodies at different levels, and very often also both religious and lay associations. It has obviously been necessary to find the funds for printing information material and for arranging the infrastructures to support pilgrims and excursionists by making the routes passable to an ever greater number of users.

For the valorisation of the **Via Sacra Langobardorum** commitment is needed as well as the type of action put into practice by the **Regione Toscana** for the stretch of the Via Francigena traversing its territory. First of all, it will be crucial to take care of signposting and making the routes safe for travellers. Where Sacred Routes develop themselves on roads with intense traffic, it will be necessary to find alternative or adjacent routes, considering the fact that many people travel in organised groups. There are plenty of testimonies from organised groups who enjoyed the hospitality offered by civil and religious bodies. However, if sustainable tourism is one of the goals, the promotion and realisation of adequate infrastructures is necessary to meet more spartan needs, or at least medium level type of comfort. The restoring of old monasteries and ancient posts for travellers would be desirable, and if and when this kind of accommodation turns out to be impossible, proposing duly signposted private facilities would suffice, obviously within a reasonable radius from the main route. The **Regione Toscana** has regulated through its own norms (see regional law 42/2000) the remuneration of all services offered along said routes.

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