

Meaning and Usage of the Word “Francigena”

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There appears to be a fair amount of misinformation around regarding the term “Francigena”, so I thought I'd submit a little article on it.

1. Usage

I'm aware of two countries where the term *Via Francigena* is known to have been used, both with a similar meaning. In Spain, Santiago had a *Via Francigena* as well as a *Porta Francigena* (now the *Puerta del Camino*); the North Door of the cathedral (now the *Puerta de la Azabachería*) was also known as the *Porta Francigena*. According to the American art historian Georgiana Goddard King, Astorga too had a *Porta Francigena*, though I've not been able to confirm this. I'm not aware of any *Porta Francigena* in Italy, but the roads were often referred to as "*Via Francesca/Francisca*" or "*Via Francigena*". (Of course, going the other way, Paris still has a *Porte d'Italie*.) It's very possible that Spanish documents similarly refer to what is now called the *Camino Francés* with the Latin equivalent, but I've not come across any research into this.

2. First records

Santiago's *Porta* and *Via Francigena* are referred to in the final book of the mid-twelfth-century *Codex Calixtinus*, the so-called "Pilgrim's Guide", so the term was in use by that time.

According to Renato Stopani,⁽¹⁾ who has extensively researched the usage of these terms in Italy, “*Via Francisca*” seems to be the older term,⁽²⁾ first appearing in a contract, “*Actum in Clusio*”, in 876. This contract was part of the records of the abbey of San Salvatore on Monte Amiata in Tuscany, and is now in the State Archives in Siena. The first record of “*Via Francigena*” dates from 1024, in a document known as the “*Privilegium Baiulorum Imperialium*,” in a description of the confines of the territory of Troia. This document forms part of the *Codice Diplomatico Barese* in Bari.

Of course, these first records don't mean the term wasn't used elsewhere prior to that date, just that no record of such usage survives.

The records also don't mean that was the term used by local people. Most medieval documents, at least until the later Middle Ages, were in Latin, so the Latin term is what has survived. In the absence of documents in the vernacular, it's impossible to know how this referred to roads, etc. A note in the Fita edition of the "Pilgrim's Guide" gives the *Porta Francigena* as “*Puerta de Francos*,” but this is clearly a later Castilian term/translation.

3. Meaning

The terms have a similar meaning, “*Via Francisca*” being much the same as “*Camino Francés*.” The “-gena” suffix in “*Francigena*” has the additional connotation of “coming from” or “originating in.”

It seems that the word “*francigena*” was also used in English documents to distinguish the Normans and their successors (*Francigenae*) from the indigenous English.

In all cases, the terms refer to “*Francia*.”

4. Meaning of “*Francia*”

The word “*Francia*” ultimately derives from the Franks, specifically the empire created by Charlemagne. This did not long survive his death, and was split among his three grandsons at the Treaty of Verdun in 843. The middle section soon splintered into various other parts, such as Lorraine and Burgundy. Although the Franks originated in German territories and the Ottonian kings continued to style themselves “*Rex Francorum*,” the territories in the eastern part of Charlemagne's empire ceased to be called Frankish, and became Teutonic or *Deutsch*. The part which retained the Frankish name was West Francia, which became “*France*” and its people “*français*.” According to Larousse, the first record of the word “*France*” dates from 1080. In modern Spanish and Italian, the word for “*France*” remains “*Francia*.”

The area covered by medieval *Francia*/*France* was however much smaller than the *France* we know today, its eastern border being roughly along the Rhone-Saone corridor, a border which remained surprisingly constant until the expansion of *France* in the seventeenth century. Even within those borders, except for the crown domains in and to the north of Paris, effective power lay not with the king but with the provincial overlords, and much of the territory was disputed, particularly in the later Middle Ages with the Angevin kings of England. So even west of the Rhone-Saone corridor, there was no fully united “*France*” until the fifteenth century.

5. Usage of “Francigena”

Despite this, in both Italy and Spain, the Francia-related terms seem to have been used as a generic term for the people in the area beyond the mountains, Alps and Pyrenees respectively. Stopani quotes from Du Cange's *Glossarium mediae et infimae Latinitatis*,⁽³⁾ itself referring to a document from Monte Regale in Piedmont: “ita et italis, quicumque transmontani francigenae appellabantur,” so those coming from beyond the mountains were called “francigenae.” However, the term occurs in widely different parts of the country, many a long way from “France.” This is particularly true of the usage in Sicily, from 1089 onwards, which Giuseppe Arlotta has researched. Most of the records in Italy refer to roads that “francigenae” would have used to get to Rome and beyond to the ports of Apulia; many of these will have been pilgrims. But it's hard to see how numbers in Sicily would have been high enough for the roads to be called “French.” Perhaps in this case “francigenae” refers to the ‘Normans’, as in England? (The Normans also occupied Sicily.)

In the final book of the *Codex Calixtinus*, the term “Via Francigena” is used twice, both in the chapter on Santiago itself: once for the road in Santiago, and once describing the monastery of San Pedro just outside the walls as being on the *Via Francigena*. Elsewhere, with one exception, the *Codex* refers to the country as “Gallia,” not “Francia.” The usage is, though, inconsistent, generally using “Gallia” to mean everything north of the Pyrenees, but in one section distinguishing between the original crown domains and areas to the south. The exception is the description of Louis VI as “Rex Francorum,” though this sentence is apparently a later addition in a different hand. It's entirely possible that the difference in usage is due to the chapter on Santiago which contains the term “francigena” being written by a different person, a local, and/or at a different time from the others, which would seem to be French in origin, in one sentence with a reference to “we French.” Nevertheless, although the word “francigena” is not used for the whole road from the Pyrenees, here too the word is clearly a general term for “French,” those from beyond the mountains.

6. Via Francigena and Rome

The fact that the first record of “Via Francigena” in Italy is in Troia, in the east not far from the Monte Sant'Angelo shrine in the Gargano, makes it clear that the term did not in itself have anything to do with Rome (apart from in the sense that all roads lead to Rome!). It was rather a generic term for any route used by people from the other side of the Alps. In the case of Troia, they were probably pilgrims to the Holy Land heading for the ports of Apulia; it's likely they had journeyed via Rome, but not necessarily so, as someone who travelled down the east coast might still be “francigena.” A fourteenth-century document refers to the route south from Ravenna to the Marches as “stratam francigenam.”

“Via Romea” would be a more appropriate name for a road to Rome. The opposite to the “-gena” suffix is “-peta,” and “romipeto/a,” meaning “going to Rome,” is also used, for both road and person.

7. “The” Via Francigena?

In the case of Santiago, with some minor variations traffic from France was largely concentrated on one road, from the Roncesvalles pass, so it's not unreasonable to talk about “the” French road to Santiago - though of course many if not most of those who came from “beyond the mountains” over this pass were not pilgrims and were not going to Santiago.

In Italy, the case is different. Whilst a high proportion of those who came from beyond the Alps, whether pilgrims or not, were likely to be going to or via Rome, several passes could be used to connect with “Francia,” and the term ‘Via Francigena’ was used for several different roads. The “core” usage, what Stopani ironically refers to as the “canonical” *Via Francigena*, from Pavia and Piacenza over the Mons Langobardorum and on to Rome via Siena and Viterbo, was that described for Sigeric's journey - what is currently being promoted as “The Via Francigena.” Nevertheless, Sigeric's route is far from being the whole story. In his map of Compostelan routes in France, René de la Coste-Messelière labeled the *Via Domitia*, the road from Montgenèvre to the Rhone delta, as “Via Francigena.” This has its attractions as “The” *Via Francigena*, as it's the road linking the two shrines of Santiago and Rome, with the alternative papal city, Avignon, in the middle. However, the main route from the core territory of Francia, the Paris basin, was via the Mont Cenis pass, so this is the one with the best claim for being “The” *Via Francigena*.

8. Via Francigena and Canterbury

As with the Montgenèvre route, the idea of connecting the two important shrines and ecclesiastical centres of Canterbury and Rome is also attractive - especially to those of us who would like to start our journey to Rome in England. However, as a “Via Francigena” by definition starts in France, calling the road from Canterbury “The Via Francigena” is also well wide of the mark, as Canterbury is not, and never has been, part of France.

I'm not aware of any road in England being called “the French road,” but the *Willelmi Chronica Andrensis*⁽⁴⁾ the chronicle of the abbey of Andres near Guînes in the Pas de Calais (not to be confused with Ardres a few kilometres further east), does refer to the local highway as “stratam publicam a Francia tendentem in Angliam”.

This was the Théroouanne-Sangatte road, also known as the *Voie Leulène*, which had a fork from Guînes to Wissant as used by Sigeric. Although the actual word "francigena" is not used, this was a road from Francia and so a *via francigena*. Particularly after Becket's death in 1170, there were undoubtedly many pilgrims on this "via francigena" but they were more likely to be going to Canterbury than Rome.

On the English side, the road between Canterbury and Dover will also have been used by pilgrims to Canterbury. Those going the other way were just as likely to be going to more local shrines such as Notre Dame de Boulogne or Amiens as to faraway places like Rome.

9. Pronunciation

In Italy, the word is pronounced "fran-chee-gena" with the accent on the 2nd syllable. In modern Castilian, the soft "c" in Francia is pronounced as unvoiced "th," but I would doubt if this was used in Santiago at the time of the *Codex Calixtinus*. In the thirteenth-century *Cantigas de Santa Maria*, for example, in the Galician-Portuguese of the time, the country is França, so was an unvoiced sibilant, as in France today, and as I think most English-speakers would pronounce it. Even in Italy, I'm not sure the "ch" is universal, as a song I have in Piedmont dialect refers to the country as Fransa. Either way, when in Rome... be aware that "fran-chee-gena" is what you will hear.

References

⁽¹⁾ I originally took the quotes from Renato Stopani from an overview article of his on the web; however, this appears not to be available any more. Fortunately, a more detailed study of the usage appeared in his 2006 article "La diffusione degli odonimi medievali 'Via Francesca' e 'Via Francigena'" in the journal of the Centro Studi Romei, "De strata Francigena. Studi e ricerche sulle vie di pellegrinaggio del medioevo," issue XIV/1. My thanks to Fabrizio Vanni at the Centro who kindly sent me a copy of this. <http://www.centrostudiromei.eu/> (Issue XII/1-2 from 2004 concentrates on Italian pilgrims to Canterbury.)

⁽²⁾ There are more references to the occurrence of 'francigena/francisca' in an article by Giuseppe Arlotta, 'Vie Francigene, Hospitalia e Toponimi Carolingi nella Sicilia Medievale', available at http://www.edizionicompostellane.com/download/Arlotta-Via_Francigena_Sicilia.pdf

⁽³⁾ The Sorbonne has recently created a searchable online version of Du Cange's *Glossarium*: <http://ducange.enc.sorbonne.fr/FRANCIGENAE>

⁽⁴⁾ The Andres chronicles are in that treasure trove for all those interested in medieval chronicles, the Monumenta Germaniae Historica, *Scriptores in Folio*, 24. The road reference is on p708 http://bsbdmgh.bsb.lrz-muenchen.de/dmgh_new/app/data/tiff/bsb00000866/gif/bsb00000866_00720.gif