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Posted Date: 22 October 2024

doi: 10.20944/preprints202410.1648.v1

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Article

# The Romea Strata Route Between History and Heritage. A Spiritual, Diverse, and Interreligious Project from the Baltics to Rome

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**Abstract:** This article is dedicated to critically appraising the current knowledge and advancements in rediscovering a thematic religious and cultural route that traverses European continental territories, from the Baltic regions to Rome, known as Romea Strata. This spiritual, diverse, and interreligious project combines two approaches: the historical and heritage fashioners. The article assesses secondary sources that clarify a scientific background, discussing the historicity of Romea Strata's direction from Tallinn to Rome, through European capitals and minor localities. Mobility in space motivated by culture and faith is a human phenomenon. Historical knowledge of this phenomenon constitutes an important theme for understanding the different potentials of intercultural dialogue, as a strong awareness of the heritage capabilities motivates communities to collaborate on a sustainable development project.

**Keywords:** cultural itinerary; heritage; history; Baltics; Rome

## 1. Introduction

This article outlines the current knowledge and advancements in rediscovering a thematic route that spans European continental territories, from the Baltic regions to Rome. The *Romea Strata* route is a project of geo-territorial and spiritual recomposition. It does not represent a single pilgrimage route but rather unites and represents different communication routes historically used over the centuries by European travelers and pilgrims heading towards the city of Rome from various areas of Central and Northeastern Europe. The historical and cultural significance of the Romea Strata lies precisely in its ability to connect different geographical, cultural, and religious realities, showcasing to the importance of travel inspired by faith, culture, authorities and/or power, and commerce. All these motivations have contributed to building bridges between the peoples of Europe from ancient to medieval times and from modern to contemporary times. Today, the result of the historical-geographical stratification and the project of a single pilgrimage route constitute the basis for the transborder routes connecting culture, religious diversity, and faiths in the unique Via Romea Strata.

Mobility in space motivated by culture and faith is a human phenomenon whose historical knowledge is an important theme for understanding the different potentials of intercultural dialogue (Vidal-Casellas et al., 2019). The analysis of religious motivations for travel, or the study of ancient and new pilgrimage routes, is now established and has had an unprecedented global and euro-continental expansion, especially in the last decades (Olsen & Trono, 2018; Bielo & Ron, 2023; Lopez, 2023; Meneghello, 2024). Rome, Santiago de Compostela, and Jerusalem constitute the fulcrum of these historical studies, which have shaped some European itineraries such as the Camino de Santiago, the *Via Francigena*, and the *Via Germanica*, to mention those recognized as Cultural Route of the Council of Europe. These routes have their historical roots in medieval and premodern times, with much attention paid to the connection between the countries of Central-Western and Northern Europe, Rome, and the routes to Jerusalem, due to the wealth of itinerary sources present in the medieval pilgrims' guides (Birch, 1998) and in accounts of Renaissance and pre-modern travellers (Reilly, 2019).

The proposal of the founding group of the *Romea Strata* Route is a synoptic reading of the *peregrinationes maiores* to Rome, Jerusalem and Santiago de Compostela in a single spiritual aspiration of interreligious and intercultural dialogue (Sinibaldi, forthcoming), rediscovering the fourth one. “Romea” and “Strata” are the Latin terms chosen to distinguish this pilgrimage route, on one hand, “romea” is the adjective that stands for Rome that is the effective destination of this route, strong for its real and aspirational values; on the other hand, “strata” means the Roman road, a system of superimposed layers typically realized in the Roman Republic period, inspiring the Romea Strata as a metaphor of millennia of history that uniquely defines this route.

Religious complexity and historical and political stratification are core challenges of this project. The approach presented here aims to assess what Lowenthal (1998) differentiated when he opposed history and heritage fashioners treating historical evidence following two different principles. The historian is moved by the concern of proof and inspections of their sources (Ginzburg, 2000), while the heritage fashioner, even if reliable, plans their understanding of historical facts to enhance the economic and social benefits of the communities (Lowenthal, 1998: XI). This first critical appraisal of secondary sources will provide a scientific background, where the historicity of the Romea Strata’s direction from Tallinn to Rome, through European capitals like Riga or Wien, bigger towns like Kraków, Brno, or Padua, and all the smaller towns contribute to this ongoing project.

This state-of-the-art will consider only those countries relevant to the Romea Strata route and where there is historical evidence of a direct connection with Rome for religious purposes. The choice is intended to inspire further research in archives, travel literary sources, and history of art expertise.

## 2. The Context of the Romea Strata Route: An Overview

In recent decades, there has been a growing analysis of historical sources covering a vast territory that stretches from the Baltic Sea borders and extends to the Italian Peninsula through Central Europe. Recognising the significance of the mobility turn, some historians focused on travel and cultural relations of ancient, pre-modern, or modern, times expanding the critical apparatus of traces (Romano, 2020; Simiński, 2012). The late medieval anthological sources on travel and pilgrimage itineraries for crossing southern Europe in the direction of Rome and Jerusalem involved travellers coming from different areas of the European continent, from the most studied areas such as the itinerary from Canterbury to Rome and Jerusalem, to the more remote ones from Scandinavia (Stopford, 1994; Springer, 1950), to the continental ones which traversed in the direction of Santiago de Compostella starting from 11<sup>th</sup>–12<sup>th</sup> century.

The Romea Strata route’s extension through present-day countries such as Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, the Czech Republic, Austria, and Italy involves an effort to understand how Christianity has been, still is, and will be relevant and a harbinger of peaceful cultural and religious exchanges in the future. Various events in the 20<sup>th</sup> century had limited in-depth knowledge to the present day, but research is now increasingly promising. With the beginning of the papacy of John Paul II, he gave unprecedented impetus to study and gather knowledge on central and northeastern events related to Christianisation. At the occasion of the eighth centenary of the foundation of the Church of Livonia (1186-1986), two conferences took place at the end of the 1980s at the initiative of the Pontifical Council for Historical Sciences (Pontificio Comitato di Scienze Storiche). The first deepened the knowledge of the events of the beginnings of Christianity in Livonia-Latvia (*Gli inizi del cristianesimo in Livonia-Lettonia* 1989), the second the Christianization of Lithuania (*La cristianizzazione della Lituania* 1989). A third and previous big conference dove into the common Christian roots of Europe (*The Common Christian Roots*, 1982), where several themes, apart from the historical aspects, were discussed, covering several periods, disciplines, and countries. An important part is dedicated to Poland, as the initiative collaborated with the Catholic University of Lublin.

With the end of the Cold War, historiography further developed: in parallel, the historiographical debate of the last decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century crossed the issue of forced conversions, religious tolerance and human rights in Central-Eastern Europe (Christensen, 1997): the countries that the Romea Strata crosses and unites today have experienced a huge variety of cultures, religions, conflicts and political regimes. Unlike other routes, for example, the well-known pilgrim

guide Sigeric, in support of the *Via Francigena*, a single itinerary and a single historical source will never be able to exhaust the entire route. Romea Strata is thus structured from a geographical and temporal perspective (Meneghello, 2024). However, a selection of sources allows us to provide a direction in which the Romea Strata scientific committee will conduct research and solicit international experts for future scientific publications and conferences.

### 3. A Reasoned Account of Connections with Rome

#### 3.1. Romea Strata in the pre-Christian and Ancient Times

Over the centuries, this network of routes was a trade route: the amber, salt, iron, silk and postal routes. It has been known since 1600 BC as a commercial route for the transport of amber (Cellarosi et al., 2016), a fossil resin that was extracted on the areas bordering the Baltic Sea and transported to Alexandria in Egypt by the will of the pharaohs by land at the port of Metaponto in Basilicata and then by sea to Egypt. Later, the Romea Strata was used to transport salt and minerals from Poland to Italy through water infrastructures (Turchetto, 2023; Zanovello & Meleri, 2023). Finally, with the Roman Empire, it was assumed as an artery of communication, trade, and military campaigns.

#### 3.2. Pilgrims from Northeastern Europe and Their Connections with Rome

In some countries crossed by the Romea Strata route, religious heritage is not far from being sociologically apprehended as a “dissonant heritage” (Ashworth & Tunbridge, 1996). For some of the member States of the Romea Strata, religious heritage made of churches, monasteries, and their ruins belongs to minority groups rediscovering their historical legacies in the Christianisation process (cf. Estonia, Czech Republic, partly in Latvia). In some countries, religious heritage belongs to a majority that is culturally reappropriating the Christian roots (e.g., Lithuania) or re-expressing the intangible values of the spiritual appeal of walks in motivating people to visit smaller towns and villages (e.g., Poland, Austria, and Italy).

This dissonance somehow lies in the events that involved joining a Christendom (Hellman, 1989a & 1989b; Tamm, 2020; Ekdahl, 2014; Nielsen & Fønnesberg-Schmidt I., 2016; Srodecki & Kersken, 2022; Rimestad & Stünkel, 2023), but it is related to the military orders system (e.g. Teutonic and Brothers Sword: Rebane, 1989; Christensen, 1997) that governed almost the entire area of Prussia between the late Medieval Ages and pre-modern period. Crusades and pilgrimage are adjacent phenomena in the conception of the French anthropologist of religions, Dupront, who looks at the first crusade to the Holy Land from a semantic and mystical point of view (1987). The Crusades movement eclipsed other forms of spirituality in the 14<sup>th</sup>-15<sup>th</sup> centuries and transformed the medieval pilgrimage into another kind of experience (Lavarini, 1997; Dalena, 2017). In Tyerman's opinion (2004), an explicit alliance between crusades and conversion distinguishes the Baltic crusades from other similar enterprises of the Catholic Church.

Nevertheless, the spread of Christianity in the Baltic areas extending into present-day Central and Eastern Europe constitutes an important historical fact for determining the relationship between Rome and the various countries crossed by the Romea Strata route today. In terms of historiography, the events of Christianity in the Baltic area began to be known in the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century with the publication of several primary archival sources that focused on the relations between Germanic and Slavic populations (Bombi, 2013). Today, historiography has been considerably enriched with non-German-language materials, even if this continues to be the most plentiful, e.g., the impressive two-volume project recently edited by Brüggemann *et al.* (2018 and 2020). However, many sources and various materials are available in English, the most accessible language at the level of scholarship but not the one exhausting the extremely rich research field, which will be greatly augmented by the national languages of scholars recently involved in the Scientific Committee.

Reviewing the volumes of the *Pontificio Comitato di Scienze Storiche* (see par. 2), the historian R.C. Rowell (1990) notices important information for understanding the events in the area: “It is perhaps worth recalling that throughout the Teutonic Order's 'crusade' in Livonia and Lithuania western crusaders were termed pilgrims rather than *crucesignati*” (p. 401). This is not a very common

knowledge for non-specialists, and it is worth underlined in this overview because it supports the earliest importance of pilgrimage for the spread of faith and religious diversity.

#### 4. Some Specific Sources of the Connection Between the Romea Strata Bundle of Routes and Rome

##### 4.1. Medieval Periods

The ancient lands between present-day Latvia and Estonia are known in medieval historical sources as Livonia. Medieval Nordic routes testify of a direct connection through the Germanic lands and the major Alpine passes of access to the Italian peninsula, the Brenner Pass *in primis*.

Expansion of Christianity to Baltic tribes, especially the Livonian mission, began after 1150 when traders and bishops from Saxony sought closer contact with Slavonic (Wendish) and Baltic peoples (Maccarrone, 1989; Samsonowicz, 1990). Origins would be several monasteries of canons regular, including that of Segeberg, from which came the first known missionary, Meinhard, who sailed along the Lower Duna with some German merchants from Lübeck and Gotland from 1182 and founded the first church in Ykeskola (Uexküll), perhaps in 1184, not far from the river. The Romea Strata route traverses Uexküll in the actual territories of Latvia.

The Chronicle of Henry of Livonia covered the first third of 13th-century events that occurred in that area when several forces of Christians, traders, crusaders, and military orders were confronting each other to govern the area (Kaljundi & Tamm, 2022; Tamm et al., 2011). The relations between Livonia, Lithuania and Rome have been studied through the figures of several popes who managed the missions in these remote lands through their letters and bulls. According to several historians (Bombi, 2016; Selart, 2014), Innocent III and Gregory IX were crucial for their involvement with crusading orders.

Tamm (2020), commenting on Henry's Chronicle on Bishop Albert of Riga's activities away from Livonia, explained that "he accompanied the Bishops Theoderic of Estonia (d. 1219) and Philip of Ratzeburg (d. 1214) on their journey to Rome, to the Fourth Lateran Council". From the Chronicle of Henry of Livonia, Selart (2015) mentions journeys by representatives (in Latin: *legati a latere*) of the Church of Riga to the pope (Alberzoni et al., 2014). For example, Theoderich, the Cistercian abbot of Dünamünde and later bishop of Estonia (+1219), went to the curia on at least six occasions, but his itinerary is unknown (Bourgeois, 2005).

There is an essential difference between Scandinavia and Livonia in the Middle Ages: whereas in Scandinavia, sources mention the participation of the lower strata of society in long-distance pilgrimages, all known cases in Livonia concern the social elite (Selart, 2013). Additionally, according to very qualified historians (Bombi, 2019; Selart, 2014; Maccarrone, 1989), diplomatic relations between the thirteenth and fourteenth Roman Popes and Livonian-Lithuanian areas and legates were what a contemporary expression would define a bottom-up movement. This was not in the sense of a movement from the bottom levels of populations but in the sense that local instances were brought to the attention of Rome in the sense of opportunistic conditions for an expansion phase for Catholic Christendom. Many religious and military orders instituted a house in Livonia.

Conversion in Lithuania led to the crown of Mindaugas by Innocent IV (Hellman, 1989b; Krahel, 1989). After events involving the said "options" (Giedroyč, 1989), the definitive conversion took place in 1386/87 with the accession of the Grand Duke of Lithuania Jogaila (Jagellon) to the throne of the Kingdom of Poland. Baptism and evangelisation of the Lithuanian peoples implied the creation of structures that were indispensable for the ordinary life of the Church: dioceses, cathedral chapters, and parishes (Rabikauskas, 1990).

#### 4.2. Pre-Modern and Modern Times

The Reformation spread throughout Europe in the 16th century, and the Romea Strata also traversed several of these territories, e.g., Poland, Czech Republic, Austria, and, partly, Italy. This is a major fact from the point of view of religious diversity, and its consequences on the religious landscape go beyond the scope of this overview dedicated to sources of connections with Rome. The situations of contact between traditions and their specific synchronic and diachronic effects have been the focus of a recent special issue edited by Rimestad and Stünkel (2023).

Focusing specifically on Central Europe, an important source for understanding the growing travelling society between pre-modern and modern periods are travelogues, better known as guides for travellers and pilgrims. These offer insights into the region's cultural, social, and political landscapes, traversed by various motivated people. These accounts, penned by explorers, merchants, diplomats, and scholars, provide vivid descriptions of the diverse landscapes, customs, and peoples encountered on their journeys (e.g., through the Czech Republic: Ferencova, 2018). No sources of information are available for the entire path of the Romea Strata, which traversed Central Europe. However, some sections are parts of larger ongoing projects, e.g., the Cyrillus and Methodius Cultural Route.

Once the Catholic Church was established in the territories, the connections with Rome were maintained through the travels of local delegates to the Roman Curia (Pawlikowska-Butterwick, 2014). An accurate example is Jurgis Radvilas's diary of his first trip to Italy in 1575, critically edited by Antanavičius in 2005 on a historical source already studied. The Lithuanian nobleman, later named Cardinal, left on the 11th of October and passed the Tarvisium pass to enter the actual Italian territories at the end of November. This diary shows several towns on the Romea Strata's actual path.

#### 4.3. Towards Contemporary Times: Some Roots of Contemporary Paths

Lately, in Northern European countries such as Estonia and Latvia, there has been growing scholarship on archaeological evidence in the field of religious stratification to the extent of opening the hypothesis of an early Christianisation of the area (Jonuks & Kurisoo, 2013)

In Poland, actual itineraries are expressly designed to rediscover the pilgrimages to Rome (Mróz, 2017) but also through the peripheral areas (Rimestad, 2023). These have a long tradition dating back to the foundation of the first bishoprics in Polish lands in the 10<sup>th</sup> century. Initially, the clergy and representatives of the royal court mainly migrated from Poland to Rome. In the following centuries, representatives of the bourgeoisie, nobility, and the academic world started to appear among pilgrims. On their route from Poland to Rome, they took trade routes through Czechia, Germany, and Austria.

A similar dynamic of rediscovery of ancient pilgrimage routes is on the way in the Czech Republic, where religious tourism has become a niche tourism of some interest in regions like South Moravia (Horák et al., 2015). Despite widespread criticism during the Enlightenment, this dissuaded the manifestation of the Catholic faith: the golden age of Czech history was quite found in the non-Catholic era (Rája, 2017).

In modern Austria, pilgrimages and devotional paths have been a significant part of religious and cultural practice. It is a country rich in shrines and places of veneration, attracting worshippers from all over the country and beyond. One of the most famous pilgrimage sites is the Marian shrine of Mariazell, located in Styria (Frank, 2009). Founded in the 12th century, this destination has attracted pilgrims for centuries. The pilgrimage to Mariazell has been an act of religious devotion and an opportunity to explore the natural beauty of the Austrian Alps and attend local fairs and markets.

### 5. Discussion and Conclusions

In tracing the spiritual and historical trajectory of the Romea Strata, there are threads of faith, culture, and their mundane interconnections. This endeavor goes beyond a mere pilgrimage route; it embodies a profound synthesis of diverse communication pathways that have linked Central and Northeastern Europe to the city of Rome, through the Alps, across the ages. As we navigate through several historical periods, a rich mosaic of motivations propelled travelers along these routes—faith,

culture, authority, commerce—all converging to build bridges among peoples across epochs. From the medieval paths to Rome and Jerusalem to pilgrimage routes like Camino de Santiago, the Romea Strata stands as a witness to the enduring human quest for spirituality, faith, and cultural exchange.

This account just pointed at giving some insight into a phenomenon that involved those lands for several centuries, showing the early connection of such a significant portion of Europe with the city of Rome and the Catholic Church, despite a vaster knowledge of the events that occurred in other parts of Northern Europe, like German lands, Denmark, and Scandinavia. If the 19<sup>th</sup> century archive research opened the comprehension of the relationship between Slavic and German people during the medieval times, another research path could also concern the reverse process and study the presence of strangers in the city of Rome like in the work of Rehberg (2012).

The very essence of the Romea Strata lies in its synoptic vision—a harmonious convergence of the *peregrinationes maiores* to Rome, Jerusalem, and Santiago de Compostela, fostering an interreligious and intercultural dialogue ethos. Rooted in the Latin terms "romea" and "strata," signifying Rome and the Roman road respectively, this pilgrimage route embodies millennia of history, serving as a metaphorical artery of diverse civilizations.

Nevertheless, the Romea Strata is not without its challenges. It grapples with the intricate layers of religious complexity and historical stratification, a testament to the project's resilience and dynamism. The project aims to glean insights into the deep connections between the lands traversed by the Romea Strata and the city of Rome through meticulous scholarship and critical analysis to be built in the present and future. From the ancient trade routes of amber and salt to the medieval pilgrimages of the Teutonic Knights and Livonian missionaries, each step along this path could reveal a narrative of cultural encounter and transformation.

As the journey spans through the medieval chronicles and contemporary travelogues, historical sources illuminate the multifaceted tapestry of Central Europe's spiritual and cultural landscape. While the Romea Strata may traverse physical terrain, its true significance lies in the intangible bonds forged between peoples across time and space for an authentic dialogue.

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