

OPPORTUNITIES FOR CROSS-BORDER CULTURAL ROUTES ALONG THE MESTA / NESTOS RIVER

Abstract: The notion of cultural routes has been discussed since the 1960, but the first institutionalized international platform appeared in 1998 with the launch of the European Institute of Cultural Routes. Since then, the concept has been gaining increasing importance as tool for preserving and appreciating cultural heritage in its entirety. The present paper examines the opportunities for establishing cross-border cultural routes along the Mesta River and valorizing them through tourism.

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Introduction

There are a number of reasons why cultural routes are gaining more and more popularity. Firstly, this is one of the best ways to appreciate the cultural heritage in its entirety and hence is the most suitable tool to promote shared cross-border heritage. At the same time, however, cultural routes are also a form of heritage presentation, which is among the most difficult to manage, mainly because of the need for joint efforts and coordination of many stakeholders, often based in several countries. The present study is part of a larger project aimed at the conservation and sustainable use of wetland areas in cross-border regions, based on pilot activities in four regions: the Mesta / Nestos River basin, the Vardar / Axios River basin, the region of Thessaly in Greece, and the Vjosa / Aoös River basin. Given the complex nature of sustainable tourism development, the assets of the region should be taken in their integrity – in the case of heritage both natural and cultural heritage should be incorporated into tourism policies. This study is the first step towards the elaboration of a tourist guidebook presenting the cross-border regions as attractive destinations for cultural and eco tourism. It will be followed by incorporating nature-related sites and activities to the thematic routes.

The concept of cultural routes

In 1987, the Council of Europe launched the "Cultural Roads" program, which aims to preserve the diversity of Europe's cultural heritage, while allowing it to be appreciated in its entirety, regardless of national boundaries. The first certified route was Santiago de Compostela, a network of roads extending all over Europe, which unite at their endpoint at the grave of apostle James (Santiago in Spanish) in the namesake city in northwestern Spain.

In 1988, the European Institute of Cultural Roads, a non-profit organization, was set up to administer both the roads certified so far and to support the technical creation and maintenance of new networks, especially in Central and Eastern Europe (EICR, nd). The Institute set the following objectives for its activity:

- support project initiators,
- provide political and cultural missions,
- establish partnerships,
- conduct research,
- prepare and conduct various exhibitions and others.

The Council of Europe defines cultural routes as “a cultural, educational heritage and tourism co-operation project aiming at the promotion and development of an itinerary or a series of itineraries based on a historic route, a cultural concept, figure or phenomenon with a transnational importance and significance for the understanding and respect of common European values”¹. (CoE, 2010)

By 2018, a total of 33 European cultural routes have been certified, covering the whole continent, as well as parts of Africa and Asia. The last additions are Via Charlemagne, ATRIUM (Viable Habsburg Architecture) and Via Habsburg. Bulgaria is crossed by three cultural routes - The Iter Vitis Route (2009), ATRIUM - Architecture of Totalitarian Regimes (2013), and The Roman Emperors and Danube Wine Route (2015).

In order to be certified as a European cultural route, each project must meet several basic requirements. Firstly, it should be organized around a leading topic or subtopic. In addition, in institutional and organizational terms, there must be a long-term potential for stimulating research, emphasizing the common European heritage, enriching the cultural knowledge of the young population. The project should be proactive and contribute to the sustainable development of cultural tourism. A particularly important condition is that the project is managed by a body specifically formed for this purpose.

Another international organization that focuses its activities on cultural routes is the International Council of Monuments and Sites. In 2008, The International Scientific Committee on Cultural Roads to ICOMOS prepared a charter² according to which the cultural route has the following characteristics:

- traditional road, materially determined historic route;
- the cultural route corresponds to a certain historical function and purpose;
- the cultural route includes tangible and intangible cultural phenomena.

Considering the diversity that cultural routes may adopt, ICOMOS suggests the following classification framework³:

1. According to their territorial scope: local, national, regional, continental or intercontinental;
2. According to their cultural scope: within a given cultural area or extended to different geographic areas that have shared or continue to share the process of mutual influence in the formation or development of cultural values;
3. According to their purpose or function: social, economic, political or cultural;
4. According to their duration in time: those that are not used for a long time and those that continue to develop under the influence of socio-economic, political and cultural exchange;
5. According to the structural configuration: linear, round, cross, radial or grid;
6. According to their natural environment: by water, by land, mixed, and so on.

The term Cultural Corridor appeared for the first time in 1974 and refers to "the traditional territorial directions in the region through which cultural values, ideas and innovations are circulating in a constant continuity of connections, influences and interactions"⁴.

Professor Krastev defines the specifics of the cultural corridor (compared to the cultural itinerary or the cultural route) in the following way:

*"The cultural corridor, unlike the cultural route, can not always be identified with a specific, materially determined communication path that has a preserved historical path. The cultural corridor is rather a historical one, a territorial axis formed in the time when there is traditionally movement and exchange, a common space of dialogue between countries and regions. Typically, the cultural corridor arises on the basis of a real historical path..."*⁵

Regarding the development of the idea of preserving the cultural heritage of Southeast Europe (including through the promotion of cultural corridors), UNESCO's cooperation with the governments

1 Council of Europe (2013). Resolution CM/Res (2013) 67, retrieved from https://search.coe.int/cm/Pages/result_details.aspx?ObjectId=09000016805c69fe

2 ICOMOS (2008) The ICOMOS Charter on Cultural Routes

3 Ibid.

4 Кръстев, Т. (2009) Културно наследство: образование - наука - опазване, интегрирани в туризма, https://liternet.bg/publish25/t_krystev/istoricheski.htm

5 Ibid.

of the Southeast European countries dates back to 2002 when the conference "Strengthening South East European Cooperation". Three years later, the Heads of State of the region met at a Ohrid Regional Forum where they declare their desire for future joint actions aimed at preserving the region's shared cultural heritage. In the same year (2005), a summit held in Varna gave an official expression of the idea of the cultural corridors of Southeastern Europe. Thanks to the efforts of Prof. Kretev and his team, 9 cultural corridors of Southeast Europe were identified:

- Via Adriatica
- Via Anatolia
- Via Egnatia
- Via Pontica
- Diagonal Road / Via Diagonalis /
- Danube Road
- Western Trans-Balkan Road
- Eastern Trans-Balkan Road
- Sofia – Ohrid

As a lot of local routes are focused on natural heritage, some authors see them as a form of rural and eco tourism (Markov, 2002).

Methodology of the study

Establishing a cross-border cultural route is a complex process and requires a lot of efforts and the inclusion of various stakeholders. A proposed algorithm for the establishment of a cultural route adapted after the criteria of Council of Europe (Council of Europe, 2013) is as follows:

1. Defining a theme representative of the region
2. Identifying heritage elements
3. Defining the stakeholders which are part of the Route
4. Establishing partnerships
5. Co-ordinating common actions to encourage different kinds of cultural and scientific co-operation.
6. Encouraging cultural tourism and sustainable development.

This study is focused on the first step and has employed a qualitative approach based on content analysis. To identify possible common themes for cross-border routes along the Mesta River, a number of secondary sources were examined such as the Register of immovable cultural heritage of national significance in Bulgaria, tourist sites for the respective regions both in Bulgaria and Greece, as well as publications from previous projects on the topic.

Cultural themes along the Mesta / Nestos River

Mesta or Nestos (in Greek) is a river that rises from the Rila Mountain in Bulgaria, flows through the southwestern part of the country and enters the territory of Greece to flow into the Aegean Sea near Thassos Island. The total length of the river is about 230 km, of which 126 are in Bulgaria. The Delta of Nestos (21,930 ha) has been acclaimed a wetland of international importance, and is protected by the Ramsar Convention. Large areas of the basin have been designated as Natura 2000 sites, both in the Greek and in the Bulgarian part. The Mesta/Nestos basin boasts a great variety of breeding, passage and wintering water birds and raptors, including rare species such as the Yelkouan Shearwater (*Puffinus yelkouan*), Lesser White-fronted Goose (*Anser erythropus*), Slender-billed Curlew (*Numenius tenuirostris*), Greater Spotted Eagle (*Clanga clanga*), Dalmatian Pelican (*Pelecanus crispus*) and others⁶. The lowland riparian forest (~7,800 ha) of the delta is the largest of its type in the Mediterranean with willows (*Salix spp.*), alders (*Alnus glutinosa*) and ashes (*Fraxinus spp.*)⁷.

Mesta has been a transport artery for millennia – it used to be a navigable river in Antiquity, with some sources reporting transportation of goods by water from the Middle Nestos down to its

⁶ BirdLife International (2018) Important Bird Areas factsheet: Nestos delta and coastal lagoons. Downloaded from <http://www.birdlife.org> on 09/12/2018

⁷ Zaimes, George & Gounaridis, Dimitris & Fotakis, Dimitris. (2011). Assessing riparian land-uses/vegetation cover along the Nestos River in Greece. *Fresenius Environmental Bulletin*. 20. 3218-3225.

mouth⁸. A network of pre-Roman and Roman roads also developed along its valley. Two of the most significant ancient roads were the Druma, connecting Via Diagonalis and Via Egnatia⁹, and the West Trans Rhodopean Roman road connecting Philippopolis and the Rhodopes with the Mesta River valley and the North Aegean coast¹⁰. There was also another ancient road that

The Valley of Nestos/Mesta has been inhabited since ancient times – the first evidence dates back as late as the Paleolithic Age¹¹. Through the centuries, a lot of cultures left their traces, and nowadays, the river is a specific bond between the territories of the two modern countries – Greece and Bulgaria. Looking at the wealth of tangible and intangible heritage in the region, we are able to identify for prominent themes that could be used for developing cross-border cultural routes.

Religious sites

The Mesta/Nestos River Valley boasts a number of orthodox churches and monasteries, both in the Bulgarian and the Greek part. The most significant of these are:

In Bulgaria:

- ▶ Old Church "St. Teodor Tiron and Teodor Stratilat" - Dobarsko
- ▶ Monastery "St. Georgi" - Hadzhidimovo
- ▶ Church of St. Nicholas - Kovachevitsa
- ▶ St Demetrius Church - Dolno Draglishte
- ▶ St. Demetrius Church with a school - Teshovo village
- ▶ Holy Trinity Church – Bansko
- ▶ Church Virgin Mary – Bansko
- ▶ Church Assumption of Virgin Mary - Bansko

Most of these are cultural values of national significance in Bulgaria, the only exceptions being the Monastery "St. Georgi" - Hadzhidimovo and the Church of St. Nicholas – Kovachevitsa.

In Greece:

- ▶ Rock Church of St. Theodores
- ▶ Holy Church of Saint Demetrius
- ▶ Holy Church of Dormition of Holy Mary
- ▶ Holy Church of Entrance of Holy Mary
- ▶ Monastery of the Transfiguration of the Christ
- ▶ Monastery of the Ascension of Christ
- ▶ Monastery of Panagia Faneromeni (revealed) Vathyrryakos
- ▶ Church of the Archangels
- ▶ Monastery of St. Nicholas, Porto Lagos

Ancient cultures

The sites included in this group pertain to different periods and different culture, but are all representative for the common ancient history of the region. The most important ones for the Bulgarian part are:

- ▶ Antique City "Nicopolis ad Nestum" – near the village of Garmen;
- ▶ Gradishte, near the village of Dolno Dryanovo;
- ▶ Late Antiquity and Medieval Fortress "Kalyata" – near Yakoruda;
- ▶ Fortress Momina Kula, near Gotse Delchev;
- ▶ Thracian settlement in Kozluka, near the village of Koprivlen.

Only two of the sites are socialized and easily accessible for tourists – Nicopolis ad Nestum and Gradishte.

⁸ Petrova, S. (2016) Nicopolis ad Nestum and Its Place in the Ancient Road Infrastructure of Southwestern Thracia, BULLETIN OF THE NATIONAL ARCHAEOLOGICAL INSTITUTE, XLIV, 2018 Proceedings of the First International Roman and Late Antique Thrace Conference "Cities, Territories and Identities" (Plovdiv, 3rd – 7th October 2016)

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Madzharov, M. () The Central Rhodopes region in the Roman road system, retrieved from: <http://www.thrabyzhe.com/wp-content/uploads/2013/12/Mitko-Madzharov-EN.pdf>

¹¹ Petrova, S. (2012) Nicopolis ad Nestum / Mestum, in Roman cities in Bulgaria, ed. Rumen Ivanov, Prof. Marin Drinov Academic Publishing House

Nicopolis ad Nestum, meaning the city of victory at the Mesta River is a Roman city founded in 106 AD by Emperor Trajan that survived until Byzantine times.

Gradishte is a megalithic complex covering an area of about 20 acres, consisting of imposing anthropomorphic and zoomorphic rocks and rock sanctuaries.

In Greece the more important archaeological sites that are in close proximity to the Valley of Nestos are:

- ▶ The ancient city of Abdera, the birthplace of Democritus
- ▶ The ancient city of Topeiros
- ▶ The ancient Thracian town of Ismara
- ▶ Fortress Kalivas-Yoniko
- ▶ Philippi - UNESCO site

Philippi is by far the most preserved and most attractive of these sites – in 2016 it was inscribed in the list of UNESCO World Heritage Sites.

Abdera was a flourishing Greek city east of the Nestus river, founded as a colony of Clazomenae in 654 BC and reoccupied by colonists from Teos in the second half of the 6th century. Abdera was the third richest city in the Delian League, mainly due to its corn production, and to the fact that it was a port for the trade of inland Thrace and especially of the Odrysian rulers.¹² Most of the artifacts from the excavations can be found at the archaeological museums in Kavala and Komotini.

Vernacular architecture

Traditional vernacular architecture on the Balkans in its largest part developed in the 18-19th century, and the region of the Nestos / Mesta River valley is not an exception to this. By the term *vernacular* we refer to “the small scale buildings or settlement situations that have survived from the recent past, which were products of a process that involved empirical knowledge and handicraft and have the connotations of cultural identity”¹³.

In Bulgaria:

- ▶ Kovachevitsa
- ▶ Dolen
- ▶ Bansko
- ▶ Leshten
- ▶ Delchevo

While Kovachevitsa and Dolen have been included in the Registry of immovable cultural values of national significance, Leshten is also gaining increasing popularity as a tourist destination in recent years.

The Greek part of the cross-border region is not so rich in destinations that are recognizable for their architecture. Settlements that have preserved at least some of their architectural heritage include:

- ▶ Pagoneri
- ▶ Petrousa
- ▶ Xanthi (Samakov)

Masquerade games

The masquerade games typical for the region are an ancient pagan mummers' ritual, connected with the New Year coming and the newborn sun. Once it was practiced in the “dirty days” between Christmas and 6th January (Epiphany); now there are slight differences in the dates. In southwestern Bulgaria the *Babugeri* put on their masks and go out on the 1st January (Surva). The group traditionally consists only of men (though in recent years some women are involved too) who walk the streets, dressed in fur costumes made of goat's skin, with scary masks on their heads and large bells on their belts. They would enter each house on their way scaring the evil away and would then go to the town square to perform ritual actions for fertility. In the region of Petrich there are also groups of *stanchinari*, who are dressed in white clothes instead of the common fur costumes. The ritual is very suitable for organizing

¹² <http://oxfordre.com/classics/abstract/10.1093/acrefore/9780199381135.001.0001/acrefore-9780199381135-e-3>

¹³ Zographaki, S. (1986) *Neo-vernacular trends towards the recent past in Greece*, thesis submitted to the department of architecture in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of science in architecture studies at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology

festivals and a lot of towns have taken advantage of this (e.g. Razlog, Petrich, Simitli, Blagoevgrad). In the Greek villages in the region of Drama the ritual is performed between 6-8 January.

In the Bulgarian part of the river valley, the places where celebrations take place are:

- ▶ “Starchevata” – Razlog (first half of January);
- ▶ 31.12-01.01 – villages in the region of Bansko and Razlog

In Greece masquerade games are performed in the villages in the region of Drama and Xanthi, including:

- ▶ Petrousa – Babiden (6-8 January)
- ▶ Kali Vrasi – babougeri (6-8 January)
- ▶ Xanthi – carnival (in February);
- ▶ Stavroupoli - Jamal (the day before Lent)
- ▶ Volakas – Arapides (6-7 January)
- ▶ Pagoneri – Charapides (6-7 January)

Unlike the rite in Bulgaria, in Greece the celebrations usually last for three days, starting on 6th January and ending on 8th of January, but have a local character and still do not attract many tourists.

Conclusion

Although the cross-border region along the Mesta River has potential for tourism development, so far little has been done to develop common tourism products. The four themes for cultural routes that were identified in this study are a good basis for future action. The theme of religious sites is the most researched so far, and with the greatest number of sites. Heritage connected with vernacular architecture, on the other hand, is somehow unevenly distributed and sites of this type prevail in the Bulgarian part. The theme that is most difficult to exploit in tourism is the one related to intangible heritage – masquerade games. At the same time it has the potential to enhance the image both to the destinations and the whole region.

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