

COMPETING NARRATIVES BETWEEN NOMADIC PEOPLE AND THEIR
SEDENTARY NEIGHBOURS

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On the Methodology of the Reconstruction of the Ways of Nomadic Peoples

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In this paper I would like to propose and discuss the method for reconstructing the travel routes of nomadic peoples in the region, which usually fall outside the focus of researchers who study the steppe peoples of Eurasia, particularly in the west of the Eurasian continent. At the turn of Antiquity and the Middle Ages this region became the arena of large-scale migrations, in which the direct participants actually led a nomadic way of life.

The object of reconstruction is the way from Francia (Aachen) in the north-western part of Europe to Rome (Italy) and back. This path was used by the migrating German tribes and their allies who lived in northern Europe during the Migration Period (4th–6th cc.) and the early Middle Ages (6th–9th cc.).

The reconstruction is based on an analysis of *The Translation and Miracles of the Saints Marcellinus and Peter* by Einhard (9th c.) (Einh. 1888: 239–264), which has been insufficiently studied in this aspect, and the relevant itineraries (*Itin.* 1600; *Itin.* 1965: 175).

Actually, Einhard's text consists of four books, the first two of which have a narrative character, while in the last two hagiography prevails. The voyage in question was made in 827 by a group consisting of four persons and finished by them in October of the same year.¹ There were four participants of the enterprise: Deusdona, a trader of holy relics,² Ratleig (a servant of Einhard), a boy named Reginbald (Ratleig's servant), and Hunus the presbyter (a servant of the Abbot Hilduin)³ together with a pack animal [bat-mule].

1 There is a special record of this journey in the *Annales Regni Frankorum* (*Ann.* 1895: ad loc. 827).

2 Deusdona, a deacon of the Roman church, was the most famous trader of holy relics and head of a well-organized group of merchants in the 9th century. He and his companions are described not only in Einhard's text, but also in "The Miracles of the Saints in the Fulda Temples" (*Mirac. Sanct.*: 329–341). Deusdona's involvement in the trading of remains was not a singular or episodic event. In 835, he "delivered" to the Frankish customers the remains of 13 martyrs, in 836 – the remains of 8 martyrs, in 838 – of 13, following from the records left in Usuard's *The Life of the Martyrs* (Dubois 1965) and the *Itineraria* (*Itin.* 1965: 175).

3 Hilduin or Hildoinus – arch-chaplain of the Holy Palace under Louis the Pious (778 – 20 June 840) and the abbot of the monasteries of Saint-Denis, Saint-Germain-des-Prés and Saint-Médard-de-Soissons.

The motives of the voyage and the goal of its participants should be briefly described. The mission was organized by Einhard, who is now known better as the author of *The Life of Charlemagne* (Dutton 1998: 15–39; Petrova 2005: 50–151), and not as a royal courtier, statesman and missionary (Dutton 1998: xiv–xvi; Petrova 2005: 7–45). The prehistory of the journey is as follows. Einhard, having built his own church in the manor of Michelstadt (Einh. 1888: I, 1, 40; Dutton 1998: ad loc. I, 1, 40) given to him by Louis the Pious, was searching for holy relics to promote his parish. He also wanted to secure a steady income from his newly founded monastery in Upper Mulinheim.⁴ Apparently, he wanted to imitate Hilduin (whom he probably envied), who already possessed the relics of St. Sebastian,⁵ which had already brought to his parish – the monastery of Saint Medard in Soissons – not only great wealth, but glory as well. For this reason Einhard engaged Deusdona (Einh. 1888: I, 1, 5; Dutton (tr.) 1998: ad loc. I, 1, 5), the merchant of relics, who had come to the court of Louis the Pious for his own affairs.

Before 827 Einhard sent Deusdona and his own servant Ratleig, who had already decided to travel to Rome as a pilgrim, to obtain relics, in which enterprise they would ultimately succeed (*Ann.* 1895: ad loc. 827; Dutton 1998: xxv–xxviii; Petrova 2004: 289–295).

Here we should point to the fact that in the Middle Ages the authenticity of the relics was usually confirmed by the very fact of their theft. Since, according to the Ordinance of 813 of the Cathedral in Mainz, it was forbidden to transfer relics from place to place without the permission of the king or abbot and the Cathedral itself (*Conc.* 1906–1908: 272), there was no way to obtain relics by fair trade, through buying and selling. Due to this prohibition, acts of theft and robbery of holy relics became a common practice.⁶ For instance, Einhard himself asked Deusdona to help him in acquiring *authentic* relics, which implies the existence of *counterfeit* ones. It is not a coincidence therefore, that Einhard's servant Ratleig, on his own initiative, finally obtained genuine relics, which means that he stole them.

So, Einhard found himself in a difficult situation. On the one hand, he had to prove the authenticity of the relics by confirming the fact of the robbery. On the other hand, by admitting the fact of robbery he put at risk his career of caretaker of relics. In any case, there is no doubt that Einhard described the process of stealing the relics, and the persons mentioned by him are the company of thieves (Dutton (ed.) 1998: xxv–xxviii; Petrova 2004: 289–295).

In Einhard's book the route from Francia (Aachen) to Italy (Rome) is only briefly mentioned. On the contrary, the return way from Rome to Upper

⁴ Later this place was known as Seligenstadt.

⁵ The translation of the remains of St. Sebastian from Rome to the monastery of St. Medard in Soissons occurred in 826. The relics were brought to the church and placed there on Sunday, December 9th, of that year (*Ann.* 1895: ad loc. 826).

⁶ According to P.J. Geary (Geary 1991: 149–156) there were more than 50 such cases from 800 to 1100. But the researcher does not claim that the list, compiled by him from hagiographic sources, is complete.

Mulinheim (Seligenstadt) is described in sufficient detail (as the road by which the envoys sent on an important mission moved).

Here we propose a reconstruction of their itinerary, indicating the approximate distances between places and providing modern naming of cities and locations (Fig. 1).

The Route

A. From Francia (Aachen) to Italy

1) Aachen – Soissons, approximately 283 km. At present, the road goes from Germany to France (via Belgium).

2) Soissons – Villeneuve (Head of the Lake), appr. 495 km. At present the road goes through France to Switzerland.

3) Villeneuve – Monastery of Saint Maurice, appr. 24 km. At present it is in the territory of Switzerland.

4) The Monastery of Saint Maurice – Great St. Bernard Pass, appr. 56 km.⁷

5) Great St. Bernard Pass – Aosta (Italy), approximately 40 km. Currently, the route goes along private roads and is possible by car (50 minutes).

6) Aosta – Pavia, appr. 155 km. The road goes through hilly terrain (491 m up, 892 m down).

7) Pavia – Rome, appr. 617 km. The road runs through hilly terrain (5421 m up, 5475 m down), along the ancient Roman roads (Via Flaminia, Via Cassia, Via Aemilia).⁸

8) Part of the path passes along ancient Roman roads.⁹

B. From Italy (Rome) to Francia (Seligenstadt)

9) Rome – Pavia – Villeneuve (Head of the Lake) – see above, items 3 - 8.

10) Villeneuve (Switzerland) – Aarau (Switzerland), appr. 168 km. The road passes through hilly terrain (1238 m up, 1225 m down).

⁷ This is a pass in the Alps, through which since the times of the Roman Empire the main route connecting the north of Italy with central Europe led. The height of the pass is 2469 m above sea level, which makes it one of the highest in the Alps. Since it is impossible to walk straight through St. Bernard's pass in winter, there are two bypasses within St. Bernard's pass. The northern route ends at the Swiss city of Martigny. The ascent to the pass is 41.5 km in length with an average gradient of 4.8% (maximum up to 10%) and a height difference of 1980 m. This ascent is considered one of the most difficult passes in Europe. The southern bypass ends in the Italian city of Aosta. This path is as difficult as the northern one; snow usually lies on its slopes. The ascent to the pass is approximately 33.1 km in length with a constant gradient of 5.7% and a height difference of 1874 m [Pospelov: 1998: 75-76]. We may assume that Einhard's men walked along the Northern bypass.

⁸ Great St. Bernard Pass – Rome (still functions now), 949 km.

⁹ The distance between the Great St. Bernard Pass and Rome (the existing workaround) is appr. 949 km and can be walked through in the warm season.

11) Aarau (Switzerland) – Strasbourg (France), appr. 165 km. The way passes through hilly terrain (1196 m up, 1437 m down).

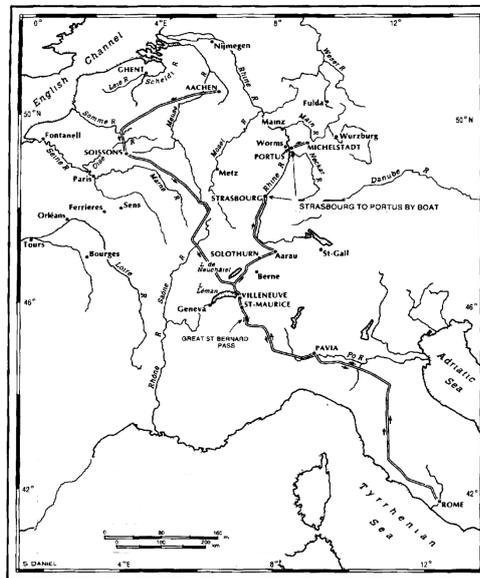
12) Strasbourg – Worms [Port] – by boat, appr. 145 km.¹⁰

13) Worms – Odenwald, approximately 53 km. The way passes through hilly terrain (858 m up, 653 m down). Currently there are private roads.

14) Odenwald – Michelstadt, appr. 7 km. The way passes through hilly terrain (50 m up, 157 m down).

15) Michelstadt – Upper Mulinheim (Seligenstadt), appr. 46.7 km. The way passes through hilly terrain (236 m up, 329 m down).

On the map below see the reconstructed route of Einhard's envoys from Francia (Aachen) to Rome and back to Upper Mulinheim, Francia (Dutton 1998: 74, with additions and changes).



The reconstructed route from Francia (Aachen) to Italy (Rome) and back to Francia (Upper Mulinheim [Seligenstadt]).

It can be concluded that the travellers walked about 1,670 km from Aachen (Francia) to Rome (Italy) and 1387 km on their way back from Rome to Upper Mulinheim (Francia), which makes 3057 km total.

¹⁰ There is an overland walking route from Strasbourg to Worms [Port], appr. 165 km long.

How many days would they have needed to cover this distance? It is hard to give a precise duration. Assuming that during 8 hours of daylight the travellers walked approximately 10–15 km per day on average, the whole journey might have lasted from 200 to 300 days. Taking into account social, economic, geographical, meteorological and temporal factors, as well as the physical and physiological capabilities of the travellers, it seems necessary to increase this value by a factor of 1.2, which makes appr. 240–360 days, i.e. almost a year. Since the return trip (from Rome to Francia) was the most important for Einhard, it was probably made during the warm season. It could have taken about 6 months, and was completed in October 827.

So, this is the reconstructed way, which in the Middle Ages connected Francia (and northern Europe) with Rome.

It seems that this way existed long before Einhard's time. This very route, given the changes in geographical situation and climatic conditions, could have been used by the nomadic, in particular, German tribes who lived in that region.

In order to trace the route in question and to reconstruct some others, it is necessary to use not only historical and hagiographic documents, but also other sources of various nature, including epistolary, poetic and legal writings. This method, in our opinion, can be applied to other cases and studies as well.

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