Chapter 2
Tracing Roots and Routes of Religious Tourism in Rural Areas of Greece: The Case of the “Footsteps of St. Paul”

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ABSTRACT

Greece is an Orthodox country, pretty much attached to its religious past and identity. This factor has had a decisive impact on its approaches to religious tourism so far. The model of religious pilgrimage, especially in rural areas, is based on excursions to particular religious centers on local saints’ days rather than on religious itineraries, as is the case in other countries where routes such as that of Santiago de Compostela or Via Francigena have been traced for a long time. On the other hand, the route along St. Paul’s travels in Greece is growing in international appeal, with various travel agencies active in the field. The chapter focuses on describing existing infrastructure along St. Paul’s route, on its possible linkage to various forms of tourism as well as to the development of a hiking route along Via Egnatia (partly covering St. Paul’s itinerary), and on the impact this will have on rural communities in terms of opportunities offered for local societies and economies to develop.

DOI: 10.4018/978-1-5225-5730-2.ch002
INTRODUCTION

The aim of this chapter is to contextualize religious pilgrimage in Greek rural areas and to assess its potential for alternative and sustainable touristic development through a case study based on the itinerary of the apostle Paul in northern Greece. The authors’ methodology is twofold: on the one hand, it is informed by history, archaeology, and cultural anthropology as to issues of cultural identity and social practice; on the other hand, it draws on studies dealing with pilgrimage and religious tourism, with a particular emphasis on pilgrimage routes planning as a lever for regeneration processes in rural areas.

The chapter has three sections. The first section discusses in length the historical and cultural premises for understanding social practices of pilgrimage and popular devotion in Greek rural areas and establishes links to—and deviations from—recent approaches on religious tourism and pilgrimage, especially in the context of the recent trend for the formation of cultural routes. The second section outlines the archaeological evidence together with the local—often invented—traditions related to St. Paul’s itinerary, and presents the various national and local initiatives for the development of modern pilgrimage and religious tourism in Greece based on the “Footsteps of St. Paul”. In this context, the authors argue that local planning for the development of sustainable pilgrimage tourism could help rural localities enhance their potential and attractiveness as cultural and religious tourism destinations, building on a combination of local traditions and archaeological/textual documentation of Paul’s missionary journey. The third section presents the results of the authors’ case study which focuses on two rural areas in northern Greece. The analysis is based on a survey undertaken in 2016 with the aim to ascertain the extent to which St. Paul’s itinerary is incorporated in touristic practices and regional planning in the respective rural areas; and to explore the potential of further planning towards this direction as a lever for sustainable local development. The results of this survey, together with subsequent research on the specific areas, are presented through an analytical grid focusing on four axes: accessibility, attractiveness, visibility, and planning/management. At the same time, the use of St. Paul’s journey for the formation and/or enhancement of modern itineraries is contextualized as a point of convergence between sociocultural identities, developmental strategies, and political choices. The authors argue that such contextualization should be integral in any planning analysis, in order for current and prospective tourism development projects to establish sustainable encounters between guests and host societies.

CULTURAL ITINERARIES, PILGRIMAGE, AND THE GREEK COUNTRYSIDE: PREMISES AND CHALLENGES

The development of cultural itineraries as part of a strategy for the touristic development of the Greek countryside has entered public discourse in the wake of the general shift of interest towards cultural routes, evident in the emergence of the “European Cultural Routes” under the auspices of the Council of Europe. The association of itineraries with religious pilgrimage, however, remains a vague idea for domestic visitors and local societies and is largely derivative, influenced by the increasing interest in the institution of pilgrimage routes in other European countries.

St. James’s Route (Via de Santiago de Compostela) in Spain and Via Francigena in Italy have shown that the potential of pilgrimage routes is not exhausted in religiously-motivated visitors. The numbers of participants in pilgrimage tours are steadily growing and have come to include travellers who may be interested in the cultural landscapes, in walking through a foreign land and enjoying an alternative tour-

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