



Saint Michael's Way - Rural territories and ancestral cultures

General theme

Rural areas represent the backbone of diverse European communities and a driving force of our economy. **Rural regions are a fundamental part of the European way of life**, accommodating 137 million people (almost 30% of the population) and covering 80% of the EU's territory. These areas are crucial for food production, natural resource management, landscape protection, and tourism. The diversity of cultural traditions and heritage is one of Europe's most distinctive and valuable assets. However, globalisation and urbanisation are altering their role, raising concerns regarding infrastructure, services, and employment opportunities.

The EU has addressed this topic on several occasions: in November 2023, the Council of the EU adopted **conclusions on a long-term vision for the EU's rural areas**, urging interventions to promote the prosperity, resilience, and social fabric of rural areas and communities. These conclusions underscored their role in ensuring sustainability and food security, as well as in preserving the **cultural heritage** of local communities.

Prior to this, European Commission Communication COM(2021) 345 final promoted a long-term vision for stronger, connected, resilient, and prosperous rural areas by 2040.

Furthermore, for centuries, particularly in the Continent's rural areas, the cult of Archangel Michael has endured in Europe. He is an undisputed protagonist of shared veneration across the three monotheistic religions – Judaism, Christianity, and Islam.

Michaelic devotion spread initially in Italy and subsequently throughout Europe by the Byzantines and Lombards, acquiring a biblical-warrior connotation. Simultaneously, however, the **cult was integrated into an agro-pastoral world** where the request for protection against evils threatening crops, flocks, and human life was deeply rooted and recurrent. The significant presence of toponyms, depictions, and architectural elements such as rupestrian or hypogeal churches and sanctuaries scattered across various **European regions makes it a profoundly 'territorial'** religious phenomenon: the Archangel, through his apparitions in natural settings, sanctifies space, imprints his footprints on rocks, establishes sanctuaries in caves far from inhabited areas, and lends his name to springs, rivers, valleys, and mountains.

Now, since prehistory, **the ancient peoples inhabiting Europe faced the necessity of migration** when local resources became depleted. **The survival or extinction of the group depended on the chosen direction.** Skilled explorers were dispatched to find answers: hostile or hospitable populations, water availability or harsh conditions, fertile or inhospitable areas.

The final decision, however, after extensive consultation, was always entrusted to the deity: through obscure rituals, individuals dedicated to sacred cults would interpret the omens from the initiatory signs the deity sent to the worshipping people, thus providing the definitive response.

Directly from the East, with the spread of Christianity **starting from the 5th century**, the **cult of St. Michael** propagated throughout Europe. It gradually replaced numerous pagan rites deeply rooted in pre-existing religious traditions, particularly in rural areas.

From that distant time and throughout our history, those movements continued with the alternation of seasons, no longer towards the unknown, but in the perennial search for abundant water and food. Within the traditions and rural culture that still survive in Europe despite technological advancements, **the custom of seeking divine protection endures, immutable beyond time.**

These premises form the inspiration for the idea of connecting the rural territories and the ancestral culture that characterises all European countries with the cult of Saint Michael and the Path that traverses Europe lengthwise, with the aim of extending it breadthwise as well, in a dense weaving that binds these territories together.

Definition of the cultural route

St. Michael's Way: Rural territories and ancestral culture is a thematic network of routes, places, and experiences. Originating from the St. Michael Line, it connects territories across Europe, from North to South and East to West, where the cult of the Archangel remains vibrant and traces of ancient identity-forming cultures endure.

The objective is to unify, around the Path and under the 'aegis' of St. Michael, the rich tapestry and diversity of Europe's Material and Intangible Heritage of rural tradition, which has stratified over centuries. This aims to create a cultural **and tourist experience system that is, for the first time, interconnected, virtually explorable, and traversable in every direction.**

The protagonist is thus the territory itself – the precious chest containing the richness of its history and the people who inhabit it, within a complex interplay of elements that the Romans termed *Genius Loci*. This potent energy represents the deep soul and most significant resource that permeates and influences the customs of the inhabitants, shaping the landscape. **The Path becomes a compendium**, a grand work that narrates a cultural universe, describing its

significant diversities, distilled over centuries, yet leading to the discovery of a unique commonality. This uniqueness is linked to humanity's **capacity to find equilibrium with the territory in which it lives, developing specific cultivation methods, and creating suitable products and tools in perfect dialogue with nature and the passage of time in that precise location.**

The St. Michael's network primarily leverages the **web**. Participating territories are organised to present themselves on a single portal composed of various digital 'rooms,' one for each territory, thereby becoming part of the Archangel Michael's Way experience. **The objective is to create a large, vibrant, dynamic, and continuously expanding virtual repository on the Rural History of Europe and its Territories - a Material and Immaterial Heritage that continues to regenerate, with numerous secular traces interacting with present-day transformations.** The virtual network gathers information through the participation of all – under a single direction but within a framework of 'democratic' sharing of tools, methods, and knowledge. What is presented is **a real, evolving network on the ground**, gradually populated by interconnected and interwoven paths, by routes through nature, and by cultural, popular, historical, and religious traces across Europe, all under the shadow of St. Michael's sword.

The project aspires to create new momentum for rural areas through a 'Way of Ways' – specifically, St. Michael's Way, comprised of numerous individual paths. This aims to change the perception of rural areas and build new opportunities, giving prominence to communities that are an integral part of shaping Europe's future and that also play a fundamental role in implementing the 20 principles of the European Pillar of Social Rights, fostering a strong, fair, inclusive, and opportunity-rich social Europe. The intention is also to promote the resurgence of pilgrimage, particularly among young people across Europe.

The project is substantiated by the sharing and transfer to other European contexts of an operational format developed in Italy by the **Comitato Promotore San Michele Cammino di Cammini**. This Committee has traced and piloted the path in Italy, identifying the optimal route from Moncenisio and the magnificent **Novalesa Abbey** – historically a refuge for pilgrims, with its chapel dedicated to St. Michael – passing through the **Sacra di San Michele**, and reaching **Monte Sant'Angelo** and the Sanctuary of St. Michael the Archangel in Puglia, after traversing wooded and rural areas across 7 Italian regions. Priority was given to existing routes that are part of itineraries with strong Lombard historical references. The Lombards were among the first to express their devotion to St. Michael, just a few years after the first pilgrimage of the Bishop of Siponto to the Gargano cave in 492, subsequently spreading the Michaelic cult throughout Europe during the early Middle Ages. Furthermore, contacts have already been established with various institutions and entities in both Italy and Europe, particularly with Local Action Groups (LAGs) – the public-private partnerships that develop and implement local development strategies, especially in rural areas, within the framework of the European LEADER programme.

Historical and cultural context

The transversal nature of St. Michael's cult, present in the three main monotheistic religions, derives from its origin and spread linked to its capacity to address the primary needs of a world – the rural world – which is still alive and present across all cultures today. Michaelic settlements generally emerge in mountainous areas, near water sources, and in rugged locations, whose peculiarities are associated with areas dedicated to pastoral and agricultural activities. The presence of devotion to the Archangel is originally attested in Phrygia (present-day Turkey), home to the oldest and most renowned sanctuary. In this location, the Michaelic cult is combined with the miraculous faculties of water, a characteristic that would persist, eventually becoming one of the distinctive features of St. Michael's worship.

From Phrygia, the Michaelic cult spread across almost all of Asia Minor. In Egypt and along the Nile Valley, Archangel Michael is frequently venerated as the **patron of river waters, seafarers, and farmers**; elsewhere in Egypt, his function as **healer and warrior** is highlighted.

In the West, the cult of St. Michael arrived directly from the East towards the end of the 5th century. It appeared primarily in Gargano and Val di Susa and gradually replaced, in both Italy and Europe, a proliferation of pagan rites deeply rooted in people's hearts. In places where the Archangel is believed to have appeared, places of worship have been erected, from Skellig Michael (Republic of Ireland) to St. Michael's Mount (Cornwall – South-West England), from Mont Saint Michel (Normandy – France) to Sacra di San Michele (Val di Susa – Piedmont) and down to San Michele (Monte Sant'Angelo – Puglia). The devotion then extends through the Greek Dodecanese islands, where (on Symi, there is a monastery dedicated to the Archangel ideally leading to the Holy Land, specifically Mount Carmel, a sacred mountain behind Haifa (the Carmelite Monastery of Stella Maris, in its Byzantine origins, was a place of worship dedicated to Archangel Michael)). These great sanctuaries are positioned on a single straight line, but throughout Europe, places of worship dedicated to the Archangel are present, from Hamburg to Brussels, from Poland to Spain, and even to Scandinavia and Russia, indicating a devotion that still today prompts many to set out and rediscover ancient paths.

The success of St. Michael's cult is **attributed to its ability to adapt to the distinctly agricultural and pastoral civilization** that characterised much of Europe in the early centuries after Christ. The history of rural Europe is also a history of adaptation, transformation, and resilience, with an ever-evolving relationship between humans and the land. It is a journey through centuries of transformations, from subsistence farming to modern agriculture, influenced by social, economic, and technological changes. Rural Europe, in contrast to urban areas, has shaped the continent's identity, with its traditions, communities, and its relationship with the land. In the Early Middle Ages, rural villages developed, often characterised by strong social cohesion and community ties based on shared labour and resources. However, the life of the common individual was fraught with numerous uncertainties. **Health**, first and foremost, with plague being among the most feared diseases. In this context, the Archangel comes to the **aid of those in need**, and on multiple occasions, defeats the terrible scourge. Beyond physical health, he also **cares for the soul**, becoming the ferryman of souls in the Christian afterlife. From the Modern Age to the Industrial Revolution, demographic growth and agricultural innovations led to changes in the countryside, with greater work specialisation and the emergence of rural markets. Yet, the peasant's life continued to be extremely harsh, with sowing and harvesting severely jeopardised by nature's fury. To protect their labour, farmers

pledged devotion to St. Michael. Transhumant shepherds also elected the Archangel as their protector.

Another aspect, in the most widespread iconography, depicts the Saint slaying Lucifer not as a warrior. There is no tension in his face; we are presented with a small archangel defeating a powerful seraph. This brings to mind the story of David versus the giant Goliath, conveying the idea that even **for the humble, a day of redemption will come.**

Rural areas face challenges such as climate change, biodiversity loss, global market competition, and demographic decline, but they also possess development opportunities linked to rural tourism, organic farming, and the valorisation of cultural heritage. Sustainable agriculture, environmental respect, and the enhancement of the rural landscape have become central themes in the development of rural Europe and are topics of utmost attention within the Promoting Committee's project.

European values

(Values of the Council of Europe)

The primary value conveyed by the project lies in studying the past for its understanding, transmission, and sharing, which are essential for building a shared future and promoting democracy in Europe. This particularly concerns young people, to whom St. Michael's Way is specifically addressed, proposing a transversal interpretation not only from a religious standpoint but, crucially, from a historical perspective focusing on the roots that form the foundation of the territory and its inhabitants.

Knowledge is also the prerequisite for respect, and the recognition of a common root can facilitate inclusion and sharing, even among minorities. As indicated in the previous section 1.2 'Historical and cultural context of the route's theme,' Saint Michael has, over centuries, represented and accompanied various communities in their **capacity to adapt to territorial conditions**. Furthermore, he is also the protector of **health**, both of body and soul, who rushes to the **aid of the needy**, and who conveys the idea that even the **humble are entitled to their place in the world**.

Saint Michael is often depicted with a sword and scales, symbols representing his role as a warrior and judge: Michael holds a significant role as an equilibrator. The sword he wields represents the power of **change** and **liberation**, but also the capacity to discern and distinguish between good and evil. The scales symbolise **justice**, **balance**, and **harmony**.

(Principles expressed in the following Conventions: The European Human Rights Convention, the European Cultural Convention, the Faro Convention, the European Landscape Convention, the White Paper on intercultural dialogue, the UNESCO Convention concerning the Protection of the World Cultural and Natural Heritage and the UNESCO Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage).

In line with the aforementioned Conventions, the project aims to safeguard **common European culture**, particularly its **rural** dimension, and the values it represents, as cited in the previous section. This is intended to foster mutual understanding among peoples and, simultaneously, to appreciate their cultural diversity.

The project promotes **equality for all** by constructing and advocating **access to inclusive cultural and memory routes**, centered on the landscape – that is, natural and cultural heritage of universal value.

Furthermore, it focuses on **safeguarding intangible heritage**: the practices, representations, expressions, knowledge, and skills that communities and groups recognise as part of their cultural heritage. Human **creativity and the capacity to adapt** to the characteristics of the territory are at the core of these roots, which merit **protection and preservation**.

Research and Development

The cult of Archangel Michael has profoundly influenced peasant culture, often intertwining with pre-existing traditions and practices. Scientific studies in this field analyse how Michaelic worship, with its symbolisms of combating evil and providing protection, became integrated into rural contexts, influencing rites, festivals, and the very perception of space and time. Key points emerging from these studies include:

- 1 **Religious Syncretism:** In many instances, the cult of St. Michael absorbed elements from pre-existing pagan or earlier cults, creating a blend of beliefs and practices.
- 2 **Places of Worship:** The connection between St. Michael and physical locations is very strong, with sanctuaries and churches dedicated to the Archangel often situated in strategic positions or places of particular importance to local communities.
- 3 **Festivities and Rituals:** Patronal feasts dedicated to St. Michael, such as those celebrated in Gargano, are moments of strong social and religious cohesion, featuring processions, offerings, and rites linked to agricultural life and crop protection.
- 4 **Iconography and Symbolism:** The iconography of St. Michael, often depicted as a warrior or victor over the dragon, has been interpreted in a local key, taking on meanings related to combating adversity, protection from evil spirits, and the fertility of the land.
- 5 **Intangible Cultural Heritage:** The cult of St. Michael represents a significant element of intangible cultural heritage, encompassing oral traditions, songs, prayers, and stories passed down from generation to generation.

Among the scholars and institutions that have explored the relationship between peasant culture and the cult of Saint Michael are: Giorgio Otranto, Francesco Paolo Fischetti, Giuseppe Sergi, Pierre Bouet, Sofia Boesch, Ada Campione, Carlo Carletti, Mario Sensi, André Vauchez and Catherine Vincent, Rudolf Steiner, Axel Munthe, Charles Kovacs, Zdzisław Józef Kijas, and others.

On academia.edu, one of the platforms collecting scientific documents, there is a dedicated section (https://www.academia.edu/Documents/in/Archangel_Michael) currently featuring 123 published papers.

Universities in Italy:

- **University of Bari:** The Department of Humanities at the University of Bari has a series titled "Bibliotheca Michaelica." The Centre for Michaelic and Garganic Studies, directed by Immacolata Aulisa at the University of Bari, is dedicated to the study of the apparitions and cult of Archangel Michael. Aulisa has published works addressing the hagiographic legends associated with the sanctuaries of Saint Michael.

- **University of Florence:** Franco Cardini, a renowned medievalist and professor of medieval history at the University of Florence, has written on Archangel Michael, notably in his book "San Michele, l'Arcangelo armato" (Saint Michael, the Armed Archangel).

Universities in Europe:

- University of Oxford (United Kingdom)
- University of Cambridge (United Kingdom)
- University of Leuven (Belgium)
- University of Warsaw (Poland)
- University of Amsterdam (Netherlands)

Eventi

International Conference 'Shepherds' Paths, Pilgrims' Ways': This event was held from 10 to 12 June 2025 at the Sanctuary of San Michele Arcangelo in Monte Sant'Angelo. Organised by the 'Giorgio Otranto' Centre for Michaelic and Garganic Studies of the University of Bari Aldo Moro and the International Association for Sanctuary Research (AIRS), the conference explored the connections between transhumance and pilgrimage, two practices that have shaped the cultural and economic landscape of Mediterranean Europe.

Michael Festival: This festival, which celebrates the cultural, spiritual, and natural heritage linked to Archangel Michael, is held annually in Monte Sant'Angelo. The 2025 edition took place from 7 to 10 May and included a series of cultural events, such as multimedia exhibitions and presentations of musical albums dedicated to the Archangel.

European memory, history and heritage

The theme is representative of European memory inasmuch as the Way, stemming from the cult of Archangel Michael – venerated across the Old Continent from the spread of Christianity in Europe to the present day – highlights and valorises characteristic rural territories throughout all European states. These territories showcase historical-archaeological, artistic, and landscape testimonies, as well as customs and popular traditions linked to the cult of the Saint, in profound connection with the territories and their *Genius Loci*. This extends beyond mere history and memory, terms which by definition often refer to something that no longer exists and must be remembered. The *Genius Loci* is what remains, beyond and regardless of the flow of events; it is the ancient spirit which, dormant amidst the folds of a hyper-technological world, seeks to be revitalised, defended, and protected.

Youth involvement

The backdrop to the Path comprises the values it represents: roots and the tree they nourish, both figuratively and concretely; love and respect for nature, understood not merely as landscape, but as 'that which is natural,' inherent in the environment where it manifests, that which has always been and (we hope) always will be. It is what remains when all seems lost or destroyed; it is the soul of a territory, of a people. Young people are the primary recipients of this message, as these values are future-oriented, and they represent the future. They need

to be educated in the desire for knowledge and exchange, because without knowledge, there is no tolerance or respect.

Proposals will primarily target young people and schools through 'exploration proposals' of the living environments of their peers in other countries. The banner for the slogan 'I know you so that you may know me' can be easily championed by a figure like Archangel Michael, with whom young people can readily identify: an adolescent, a combatant, a defender of good and justice.

Cultural tourism and sustainable cultural development

The theme easily lends itself to promoting an alternative form of tourism, blending the sacred and the profane while offering flexibility in how the route is experienced and 'interpreted.' Its transversal appeal lies in its capacity to unveil the most genuine aspects as yet untouched by the contamination of modernity, speaking a common language through a universally recognised and beloved figure. The proposal of experiencing an agricultural world, its rural landscapes and forested areas, with the possibility of embarking on a journey not only to a physical place but also of the spirit, represents the antithesis of mass tourism and overbooking. It offers an alternative for sharing the journey differently, united by an idea yet sufficiently distant to enjoy a beautiful landscape, perhaps pray in a place of worship or simply appreciate its beauty without excessive crowds, savour scents, taste ancient flavours – in essence, a journey through time and space within a sustainable context.

Tourism products

For the most comprehensive and continuously updated information, we kindly invite you to visit our official web portal: [<https://www.stmichaelsway.eu/>]. This platform serves as our primary dynamic resource, reflecting our ongoing developments and activities in real-time.