

# The Route of the Franks: The Journey of Archbishop Sigeric at the Twilight of the First Millennium AD

Cristina Corsi

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To Frank

The most amazing journey is the one I took with you



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## Acknowledgments

In the first 25 years of my career, one of the dominant research interests has been the study of roads and communication networks in the Roman world, in late antique Mediterranean, and in medieval Italy. Trained in the methodologies of ancient topography, I recently applied the whole panoply of instruments for the newly defined 'archaeology of roads'. However, although my hope is to have contributed to a growth in knowledge concerning road axes and mainly road stations, with a shift in my interest towards the theme of 'mobility', my attention has been diverted to travel-related aspects, in Antiquity as well as in the Middle Ages. The modalities, the practicalities and the motivations of a journey of the past have engaged me in the exploration of the many factors that played a role in the planning and undertaking of a long-distance transfer, and the effects that interaction with an unknown environment would have had on the traveller. Those ideas took shape during a post-doc fellowship that I enjoyed at IMéRA, the institute of advanced studies of Aix-Marseille Université. I will be forever grateful to the scientific and administrative staff of the institute and to the fellows who shared that wonderful experience with me and from whom I received many stimuli.

The idea of promoting a different perspective on the renowned journey of Archbishop Sigeric was developed together with Elisabetta De Minicis, with whom I co-authored a book devoted to the study of a segment of the *Via Francigena* north of Rome. That study, embedded in the theoretical framework and methodological approach of the archaeology of roads, a branch of landscape archaeology that has been shaped by Elisabetta De Minicis' contribution, disclosed the many possible readings of a medieval itinerary and showed us a multitude of paths to follow. The project that we designed together, then, wishes to tackle the many features of that journey, destined – on the basis of the brief report of its stages – to become the template for one of the most important cultural itineraries of Europe. Our hope is to complete the framework of that project shortly through the publication of a second and final volume in the series. This will focus on the southern segment of the itinerary, from Switzerland to Rome, and on methodological issues regarding the archaeology of roads. The number of things I learnt from Betta is only inferior to the pleasure I had working together and my esteem for her.

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# Introduction

This book has a twofold goal. On the one hand, it presents a scientific study of the journey that Archbishop Sigeric of Canterbury undertook at the end of the first millennium of our era from the British Isles to Rome, in particular the segment included in the territory of modern France. The archaeological survey is rooted in the tradition of landscape archaeology and medieval topography, and tries to reconstruct not only the route that Sigeric followed within modern France but also to take an archaeological snapshot of the urban and architectural developments of the centres that he crossed at the twilight of the first millennium AD.

Sigeric's journey, undertaken for reasons connected to his office, is framed within the historical context of the contemporary Anglo-Saxon world. The special relationship joining Rome and Canterbury during the Early Middle Ages is also analysed and an archaeological overview of the archbishop's town is attempted.

On the other hand, drawing on my long experience in the 'archaeology of roads' and in the analysis of communication networks in Roman times and in the Middle Ages, the experience of Sigeric is framed in the historical context of medieval journeys from England to Rome and the Holy Land. Building upon hodeporics (travel literature and culture) and travel-narratives, an analysis of the modalities and practicalities of travel in the Middle Ages is attempted, together with an overview of the many other possible routes across France and of the reasons which determined Sigeric's choice. It has been decided, then, to extend the historical framework for post-classical France to a longer period, which comprises the phases of the deconstruction of the Roman empire and the formation of the new barbarian kingdoms. This will allow the contextualisation of many of the journeys included in this narrative.

This contextualisation leads to a third topic: the conceptualisation of travel in the past, the study of how it affected the identity of the traveller, how individuals and groups interacted in the peculiar framework of displacement, therefore including a sociological and an anthropological perspective. For this analysis, the chronological range will also be stretched to include medieval visual representations of travel itineraries. Despite the time that elapsed between Sigeric's journey and this figurative production, it is considered very indicative of the mentality and perception of travel that a scholar might have had in that historical period.

The fourth part of this book seeks to radically innovate the study of mobility in the past, by trying to apply theoretical frameworks developed in the

fields of geography, social sciences, anthropology, environmental behavioural studies, phenomenology, spatial analysis, ICTs and cognitive studies, laying emphasis on how movement affects the perception of landscapes and how mobility patterns socio-cultural phenomena.

Geographical and chronological limits will be extended, even considerably when there is a need to find information that is missing for the phase in question. Although I am aware that this information cannot be automatically projected onto an earlier period, I believe that both Antiquity and the early modern period can provide us with useful data to complete the picture.

In summary, this book aims to offer an insight to the conceptualisation of the journey and to the different approaches used to investigate it (chapter 1). It reviews the other scattered testimonies and sources that describe similar journeys undertaken before and after the journey of Sigeric, providing an overview of medieval roads and infrastructures, and analysing all the above listed aspects of the medieval journey (chapter 4). This quest is interspersed with a brief historical framework (chapter 2), an outline of the figure of Sigeric and of the relationships between the Churches of Rome and Canterbury, and a presentation of the short text reporting the itinerary (chapter 3). The final chapters are devoted to an account of the topographical and monumental data available for the places where Sigeric and his retinue stopped along the journey (chapter 5), attempting the reconstruction of the stretches of roads that separated them, and finally endeavouring to depict the landscapes and townscapes that appeared before Sigeric's eyes (chapter 6).

## Clearing the ground. Archaeological research vs merchandising and branding

The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle entry for year 989 (to be corrected to 990), reports an event that, although memorable enough to be recorded, would have not attracted the attention of such a large audience were it not for the connection with another manuscript.<sup>1</sup> The record concerns a high-ranking prelate named Sigeric or Siric, just elected archbishop of Canterbury, the mother church of the Angles and the one that boasts the closest umbilical relationship with Rome. Canterbury was soon to become a pilgrimage destination itself with the tomb of Saint Thomas Becket, as memorably told by Geoffrey Chaucer in the *Canterbury Tales*. The passage mentions that Sigeric undertook the long journey from the seat of

<sup>1</sup> Anglo-Saxon Chronicle *ad a.* 989 (= 990), p. 82.

his see to Rome, where he received the *pallium*, a woollen cloak worn as an ecclesiastical vestment embodying his role and symbolising the special bond with the city of the Apostles, from the hands of the pope himself. We do not know the details and the whereabouts of this journey or its modalities. We do not know how many people made up the archbishop's retinue, what means of transport were used, how long the journey was expected to last under normal conditions, how the stops were organised and what resources were deployed to complete the undertaking. Moreover, this trip would have remained unnoticed by posterity if someone from Sigeric's entourage had not taken the care to record the list of the churches visited by Sigeric in Rome and the stops made on the return journey *de Roma usque ad mare*, from the capital of Christianity to the Channel, enumerated as 79 *submansiones*, and if this text had not been fortuitously preserved in the British Library in London.

In brief, the document sketches what seems a standard route connecting Rome through Tuscany (via the Lombard 'capital' Lucca), across the Apennines by the Cisa Pass to the main towns of Lombardy such as Piacenza and Pavia, across Piedmont via Vercelli and northward to the Alps via Aosta and the Great St Bernard Pass, skirting Lake Geneva (Lac Léman), and across the Jura to Besançon and Langres. It further runs through the region of Champagne through Reims and approaches the Channel via Arras and Thérouanne.

As anticipated, the journey of Sigeric would have been counted among the many hundreds of this kind, by people – monks, prelates, pilgrims, traders, kings, queens and any other sort of political or military leaders, intellectuals, relics hunters, artists and adventurers – who undertook a trip from northern countries to Rome and the Holy Land, and his name would be unknown to most. Then again, the activity of philologists and historians who, between the mid-nineteenth and the beginning of the twentieth centuries, published and commented on the brief record of the itinerary followed by Sigeric's group at the end of the first millennium, raised a growing interest. Two articles describing the author's journey following in Sigeric's footsteps were published by D. Hill in *Popular Archaeology* in May 1985 and December 1985/January 1986. The approach of the thousandth anniversary of the journey and the nearing of the Jubilee of the year 2000 turned the spotlight on this document and made it the milestone on which a phenomenal cultural and media interest was built. Indeed, the concept of *Via Francigena*, literally the 'Route of the Franks', attracted growing interest in the scholarly environment as well as among amateurs. Especially in Italy, a broad interest has invested the simplified itinerary described by Sigeric and later any sort of pilgrimage itinerary. In a short space of time, the term *Via Francigena* has become

familiar to the public, the idea of a European cultural route has gained popularity, and the 'branding' of many itineraries has spread in every region of the Continent and southern Britain, to the point that there is almost no hill or mountain top, no crossroads or trail where the ubiquitous road signs do not direct walkers to a 'tamed' pathway.

Unsurprisingly, on the one hand, among the many possible routes undertaken by travellers from the British Isles to Rome, the one described by Sigeric grew to embody the *Via Francigena* 'par excellence'; on the other hand innumerable trails, roads and country paths have been ennobled with the title of *Via Francigena*. This definition is currently used in a wide variety of meanings to address any sort of pilgrimage route, with the peculiarity that even the sense of devotional path is often lost, overwhelmed by touristic interest.

A very large number of initiatives have been undertaken, at scientific, amateur and institutional level, to expand, disseminate and make the knowledge of different pilgrimage routes joined – sometimes improperly – under this denomination more accessible and attractive. In the last twenty years, hence, study initiatives on pilgrimage routes multiplied, many proposals for the recovery of the devotional itinerary were put forward, with a wide production of 'guides' of all kinds (for travellers, cyclists, nature lovers or gourmets, etc.),<sup>2</sup> and the brand *Via Francigena* has been intensively exploited for the promotion of tourist itineraries. Websites, sometimes 'official', occasionally superficial and sensationalist, peppered with inaccuracies and platitudes, proliferated to the point that even a strategy video game called *Sigeric: the travel* has been released by a British company, inspired by the account of the journey of the archbishop of Canterbury.<sup>3</sup>

The explosion of interest around the theme of the *Via Francigena* was universally recognised in 1996 with the launch of the project 'The *Via Francigena*: Great Cultural Route of the Council of Europe', which included, among other things, the publication of a Guide-*vademecum*, *Via Francigena*, in 2002. A milestone signalling the starting point of the route of around 1600km or 1000 miles has been placed in front of the south porch of Christ Church, Canterbury's cathedral (Figure 0.1), while arrows and road signs have been spread all over England, France, Switzerland and Italy to direct the growing crowds of walkers, cyclists and motorists.

<sup>2</sup> A good English language walking guide for the segment from Canterbury to the Great St Bernard Pass is A. Raju, *The Via Francigena Canterbury to Rome - Part 1: Canterbury to the Great St Bernard Pass*, republished several times in the series Cicerone Guides. For francophone readers the guide by G. Jean-Yves, *Via Francigena de Canterbury à Rome*, published by Édition Ouest France, can be a good starting point for tourist exploration.

<sup>3</sup> Entertainment Game Apps, Ltd., viewed 14 January 2022, <<http://egameapps.com/sigeric/>>.





Figure 0.1: Canterbury, Christ Church. The milestone indicating the start of the *Via Francigena* to Rome.  
Photo Author.

However, very few websites deserve the attention of a scientific publication as part of the ‘webography’: besides that of the Council of Europe,<sup>4</sup> which includes the link to the bilingual magazine *Via Francigena*,<sup>5</sup> also worth mentioning is the portal of the Association Internationale Via Francigena - AIVF.<sup>6</sup>

In France enthusiasm was more moderate, and most of the ‘local’ websites that can be listed have a focus on the reactivation of the devotional routes,<sup>7</sup> with the exception of <http://www.laviafrancigenaenfrance.fr/>, a page nested in a more general site <http://lesroutesduterroir.com/> (viewed 14 January 2022), aimed at touristic promotion of inland territories. By his own admission, the same blogger, Charles Myber, learned about the existence of the *Via Francigena* in Tuscany only in the summer of 2011. Since then, the site has been supporting a petition to award the UNESCO label to the *Voie des Français*.<sup>8</sup>

<sup>4</sup> Viewed 14 January 2022, <[www.viefrancigene.org](http://www.viefrancigene.org)>.

<sup>5</sup> Magazine *Via Francigena*, viewed 14 January 2022 <<http://www.rivistaviafrancigena.it/en/>>; hardly distinguishable from the website <<https://viefrancigene.com/>>, devoted to pilgrims and only in Italian. Viewed 14 January 2022.

<sup>6</sup> Viewed 14 January 2022, <[http://francigena-international.org/en\\_GB/](http://francigena-international.org/en_GB/)>, recently merged with the Associazione Europea delle Vie Francigene (AEVF) to create the International Committee Via Francigena (CIViF). It includes the Swiss association IVS.

<sup>7</sup> E.g. *Le pèlerin* <<https://www.lepelerin.com/chemins-pelerinages/la-via-francigena/via-francigena-marcher-de-canterbury-vers-rome-sur-les-pas-de-sigeric/>>, viewed 14 January 2022.

<sup>8</sup> Incidentally, an inaccurate translation, since it should be more properly termed ‘la voie des Francs’: Les routes du terroir <<http://lesroutesduterroir.com/bons-plans/en-route/495-candidature-a-l-unesco-de-la-via-francigena>>, viewed 14 January 2022. Oddly, France is not joining the coordinated efforts of the other four countries involved (United Kingdom, Switzerland, Italy and the Holy See) for the nomination to the UNESCO World Heritage List (June 2020). The Board of Directors of the Italian National Commission for UNESCO has already endorsed the candidacy of the ‘Via Francigena in Italy’ in the National Tentative List (<<https://www.viefrancigene.org/en/>

Indeed, following the growing interest in European cultural routes, several segments of the French *Grandes Randonnées* (a network of long-distance footpaths and trails in Europe, situated mainly in France, Belgium, the Netherlands and Spain) have been accredited as sections of the *Via Francigena*.<sup>9</sup> Although sometimes based on effective walks, these reports, blogs and guides are almost exclusively targeted at practical or touristic aspects of the trail: lodging and food, pathways and their signage, local products and traditions, sight-seeing and leisure, outdoor activities and, last but not least, devotion and pilgrimage, ultimately the lay search for internal growth and selfhood, as already popular along the other major pilgrimage route of Europe, the Way of St James.

Somehow, this popularisation has implied an impoverishment of the topic, and at this stage it is hard to distinguish valuable contributions from promotional materials, chiefly since the testimony of Sigeric has been addressed as the most relevant source to reconstruct the *Via Francigena* (Jung 1904).

Among the many studies on Sigeric and his journey, a special mention is due to those by Francis Peabody Magoun (1940a and 1940b) and Veronica Ortenberg (1990), although the commentary of the latter ‘concentrates essentially on the elements of interest from the devotional point of view, which pilgrims would have come across in the various places they visited’, rather than on the practicalities and technical aspects of the journey (Ortenberg 1990: 206).

The works that have been more relevant for this research are rather older and newer essays on travels from the British Isles to Rome or other ‘southern’ destinations. They start with the essay of Wilfrid Moore centred on the Saxon pilgrims and their institutional hospitality in Rome (Moore 1937), via the extensive but not very systematic work of George Bruner Parks about English travellers to Italy, which covers the sources from the origins to the sixteenth century (Parks 1954). This is followed by the similar approach of Stephen Matthews (Matthews 2007) and ends with the essay by Christopher Loveluck and Aiden O’Sullivan (Loveluck and O’Sullivan 2016), passing by two short but informative papers by David Pelteret (2011 and 2014). The latter, although centred on the seaways from Ireland to Atlantic Europe, investigates, on the basis of new archaeological evidence, exchange between Ireland and continental Europe via the Channel and the principal river ‘transport corridors’ leading to the

UNESCO>), viewed 14 January 2022.

<sup>9</sup> E.g.: a segment of 130km of the GR 145° in the Department Haute-Marne has been officially accredited in 2012 as the segment of the *Via Francigena* across the region of Champagne-Ardenne, centred on the town of Langres.

Mediterranean basin between the fifth and eleventh centuries.

The work of Matthews has several contact points with this book, since it is focused on travellers from England to Rome in the period between the arrival of the Roman missionaries at Canterbury, at the end of the sixth century, and the end of the Anglo-Saxon era, in the course of the eleventh century, trying to determine 'the who, the why and above all the how of Anglo-Saxon travel to Rome' (Matthews 2007: 2). Matthews's book has the advantage of reporting – alas, almost invariably in English translation – the passages of medieval sources that report on these journeys, preserving their narrative for the reader's sake, and it is one of the first attempts to investigate what is there termed as the 'mechanics' of medieval travel. On the other hand, a predictable but still regrettable quasi-exclusivity of English language literature affects the completeness of the general picture, although the choice of delimiting the essay to a well define time span is uncontroversial.<sup>10</sup> Additionally, as much as my research of the last 25 years has been concerned with the modalities and practicalities of travel, and as long as I will also try to enquiry here whether Sigeric and his peers were informed about the 'right time' to take off and if they 'were aware of and prepared for the physical hazards of the journey' (Matthews 2007: 5), my questions are centred around other matters, such as orienteering and path finding, space and landscape perception.

A rich contribution to this study comes from the literature investigating medieval travel. In addition to what is referred to in the following chapters, I wish to mention here the seminal book edited by Arthur Percival Newton as part of *The History of Civilization* series (Newton 1926).

A very relevant part of the state of art on research on ancient roads in France is taken by the so-called school of archaeogeography, a branch of landscape archaeology heavily influenced by geography (Robert 2011). For the part that we are concerned with here, its methodology for the study of pre- and post-Roman roads highlights the role that the protohistoric network had on the development of late-republican and imperial roads, and their legacy in the post-classical communication system centred on those nodes regardless of modifications due to the rise of new centres (Robert 2009). Thanks to a large scientific production concentrated between the last decade of the twentieth and the first decade of the twentieth-first century, the idea that there was a rupture between ancient and post-classical communication systems has been progressively abandoned in favour of

a deeper understanding of the gradual 'sedimentation' processes (*infra*, pp. 2, 54-57) that led to a continuity that was occasionally broken only at the beginning of the second millennium AD, when a new polarisation followed the definition of the high medieval habitat, including the parcel system. The remodelling of the post-classical landscape and especially of the road network appears, therefore, heavily imprinted by the former parcelling of the land.

As anticipated, in Italy the *Via Francigena* turned into a media phenomenon and it is impossible to provide even a superficial review of what has been published in the last twenty years. Suffice it to mention the many publications (and re-editions) by Renato Stopani<sup>11</sup> and the papers collected in the journal *De strata Francigena* edited since 1993 by the Centro di Studi Romei. Essays are concentrated on Tuscany and Lazio. The research which I published with Elisabetta De Minicis is focussed on the latter,<sup>12</sup> worth mentioning because we aimed at framing the methodological issues related to the analysis of road networks in post-classical times following the practice of the 'archaeology of roads', a branch of topographical studies and landscape archaeology characterised by a strong connection between landscape and mobility. This research also tries to clarify the difference between the 'materiality' of medieval roads and the 'immateriality' of pilgrimage routes, between the 'Route of the Franks' of medieval sources and the many *vie Francigene* or *Francischi* which up to the threshold of the modern age appeared in the documentation to indicate long-distance or simply main roads, not necessarily linked to devotional destinations (Corsi and De Minicis 2012: 21-26).

Other scholars have extended the study of the *Via Francigena* to the whole route travelled by Sigeric, but most of them remain in the range of publications halfway between tourist guides, travel blogs and journalistic reportage. Such can be considered the work of Giovanni Caselli, starting from the first report of his pedestrian survey of the route from Canterbury to Rome on the steps of Sigeric (Caselli 1990), followed by other scattered papers, of which English versions are available in the repository Academia <www.academia.edu>, although they lack bibliographic coordinates.<sup>13</sup>

The *Via Francigena* has predictably also attracted the interest of scholars applying digital technologies such as GIS analyses but, besides the unpublished master dissertation by Andrea Patacchini,<sup>14</sup> the work of Alessio

<sup>10</sup> As expected in an academic work, I checked all the sources in their original language. When not explicitly indicated, the translation is that of the Author.

<sup>11</sup> E.g.: Stopani 1986, 1988, 2006.

<sup>12</sup> Corsi and De Minicis 2012.

<sup>13</sup> E.g.: *Discovering the 'Via Francigena'*, largely, but not entirely, an English translation of the introduction to the book of 1990, and *The Resurrection of the Saxon's Way from Canterbury to Rome*.

<sup>14</sup> Entitled *Predittività, postdittività e viabilità: la via Francigena fra Italia e Francia*, Dissertation University of Siena 2014-2015.

Innocenti limits the application of GIS approaches to the production of maps linked to a database, mainly developed for touristic heritage management (Innocenti 2017).<sup>15</sup>

Although the widest possible number of publications on pilgrimage routes and pilgrimage in general have been consulted, it was decided not to present here the state of the art on the topic, since this study does not concern specifically pilgrimage but rather travel in a selected period between the Early and the High Middle Ages.

Furthermore, it is relevant to underline that the journey of Sigeric, as with those of his predecessors and many other members of the clergy, was not purely a 'pilgrimage' but rather was undertaken as a political and diplomatic act. Even the impressive tour-de-force that Sigeric seems to have endured during his short (?) stay in Rome, visiting 23 churches in two and a half days, gives the impression that devotion to the holy shrines was a parallel aspect and we cannot exclude a component of curiosity or cultural interest.<sup>16</sup>

On the other hand, we have to acknowledge the mixed nature of most of these journeys. Even when (ecclesiastical) politics or the delivery of payments from England to Rome (initially occasional alms, pious offerings and gifts, later regular fees paid to the Church), this was often intertwined with pilgrimage (Tinti 2020: 353).

As a matter of fact, even if pilgrimage is undoubtedly one of the phenomena that characterises late antique and medieval societies, all the routes leading to Rome or to other devotional destinations, like the Holy Land or Santiago de Compostela, were gradually established over a long period, in most cases incidentally or purposely generated by political inputs or economic needs. Pilgrims, like other travellers, made use of the existing infrastructure, from roads to staging posts, and only from the late Roman period onwards, a process of 'Christianisation' of travel is perceivable in the modalities of displacement (Corsi 2005, 2016a, 2016b). Yet, even if stops were planned on the basis of different criteria, and the certainty of finding staging posts along the Roman roads, in villages and at the periphery of towns was replaced by confidence in getting hospitality at ecclesiastical institutions of different kinds, the basic knowledge of the possible alternatives to get to the

same destination, the support necessary for orienteering and route-finding, the organisation of financial aspects, the measures taken for safety, the food and drink supply, and the maintenance of means of transport whether vehicles or animals, must have remained a constant concern.

The structure of the Route of the Franks dates back to the core period of the Lombard domination of Italy, and it is with the name of *strata Langobardorum*, the route of the Lombards, that we address the original stretch connecting the Po plain to the Lombard Duchy of Tuscany, via the Apennine pass of Monte Bardone. The latter, in fact, does not owe its name to the typical cane or walking stick that is considered one of the attributes of pilgrims (*bardone*), as is sometimes erroneously affirmed, but rather to a corruption of the toponym *Mons Langobardorum* (Corsi and De Minicis 2012: 23-25).

The growing links between the kingdoms on the two sides of the Alps would already have led, at the end of the Early Middle Ages, to the designation of a direct connection between Italy and France, named *Via Francigena* for the first time in a document of 876 (Corsi and De Minicis 2012: 23). As demonstrated by the fact that other travellers, before and after Sigeric, favoured other routes, the concept of 'route' has to be intended as generic if not blurred: many factors played a role in the choice of which itinerary was followed, ranging from security to seasonality,<sup>17</sup> from infrastructure for sustenance and access to hospitality to personal connections and interests. Again, the designation of *Via Francigena* for the route followed and registered by Sigeric is a fortuitous event, and we cannot guarantee that medieval travellers departing from the same region considered it to be the preferable way to reach Rome.

## Note

The personal names have been translated in English, the geographical names of places have been usually left in their 'local' form (e.g. Reims in French and not Rheims in English, Gent in Dutch and not Ghent in English) but when they are very common (e.g. Rome and not Roma). Names and dedications of churches and abbeys have been usually translated in English (e.g. St Stephen and not St Étienne) but when they are part of a composed toponym (e.g. Saint-Étienne-du-Mont).

<sup>15</sup> Countless contributions have been devoted to the possible exploitation of the cultural route for (sustainable) tourism and local development; several interesting papers are collected in the volume edited by Bambi and Barbari in 2015.

<sup>16</sup> As we will see later (chap. 3), given that the direct bestowal of the *pallium* may not yet have been mandatory, it is possible that Sigeric and a few of his predecessors were also moved by religious devoutness.

<sup>17</sup> The Great St Bernard Pass, for instance, was exposed to Saracen raids until a few years before it was chosen by Sigeric: *infra*, chap. 4.

