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The Via Francigena became the 'backbone' of the road system of Western Europe in 58 B.C, when Julius Caesar opened this "Road of the Sun"; the shortest route between the North Sea and Rome. This route partly coincides with the Celtic Tin Route, which connected Cornwall with Switzerland and Marseilles, and with the European network of Roman roads.

Following the Muslim domination of Jerusalem (640 AD), Rome remained the main destination for Christian pilgrimages until the tenth century and the veneration of St James of Compostella in Galicia.

During the Early Middle Ages in Italy, the route followed Roman and Longobard roads, becoming known as Iter Francorum from 725, and as Via Francigena, for the first time, in 876.

Over the centuries the Via changed its name according to the provenance of its users: it was "Via Francigena-Francisca" in Italy and Burgundy, "Chemin des Anglois" in the Frankish Kingdom (after the evangelisation of England in 607) and also "Chemin Romieux", the road to Rome.

In 1154, the Icelandic monk Nikolaus de Munkatvera, noticed the passage of Franks, Flemish, English, Germans and Scandinavians through Vevey and heading for Rome. The Via Francigena was also of service to popes, emperors, bankers, merchants and highwaymen, and from 1300, with the proclamation of the Holy Years, it was travelled by thousands of wayfarers per year, but as a Pilgrim's Way, the road fell out of fashion around the XVIIth century.

However, in 1985 the Italian road archaeologist, Giovanni Caselli, retraced the itinerary as described in 990 by Archbishop Sigeric of Canterbury who came to Rome to receive the pallium from Pope John XV. The 80 stages on the route (submansiones) recorded by the Saxon Archbishop, are the fixed points on the network of roads which over the centuries became known as VIA FRANCIGENA.

Conspicuous Roman and medieval remains of the Via Francigena still in existence in Italy, Switzerland, France and England, and the Via Francigena Project has as its aim the reconnection of these traces of history, of art and European economy.