

## Article

# Revitalizing Inner Areas Through Thematic Cultural Routes and Multifaceted Tourism Experiences

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**Abstract:** Cultural tourism can act as a driver for inner area development, bringing about a range of socio-economic benefits through economic stimulation, quality of life improvement, and cultural heritage preservation. Inner territories, set apart by geographic marginality and low population density, hold a rich cultural and environmental heritage that, however, remains off the radar and left behind. Guided by the principles of endogenous local development, this article seeks to contribute to the existing body of research by proposing potential strategies for local growth rooted in cultural tourism. From this perspective, we identified the Basilicata region (Southern Italy) as a proper test area. The region is rich in archaeological, monumental and museum evidence, but is characterized, except in a few areas, by a low rate of tourist turnout. Through a replicable, comprehensive, and flexible methodology—drawing on bibliographic research, analysis of archaeological, archival, erudite and antiquarian sources, and carrying out field surveys—the different points of interest in the region have been brought together under specific cultural themes. Results include the design of three detailed routes (Via *Herculia*, Frederick II's, and St Michael's cultural routes) useful for three different types of tourism (sustainable, emotional, and accessible). Possible scenarios for valorization and fruition are also proposed, paying particular attention to digital technologies. Thus, this research aligns with Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) 8 and 11 promoting cultural heritage valorization and preservation, shoring up economic revitalization, stepping up community engagement, and pushing forward environmentally friendly tourism practices. Research findings can attract the interest of a wide range of stakeholders such as tourism professionals, local authorities, cultural and creative industries, local communities and entrepreneurs, as well as academics and researchers. The methodological approach can be considered for the valorization and tourist enjoyment of inner areas in other countries, with particular focus on those falling within the Mediterranean region which is rich in cultural heritage, environmental value, and socio-economic potential.

**Keywords:** regenerative cultural tourism; inner areas; digital technologies; endogenous local development; cultural routes



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## 1. Introduction

Italy stands out in 'cultural tourism' thanks to the abundance, diversity and widespread distribution of its cultural heritage as well as long-standing tradition of travel as a means of gaining knowledge. This practice began in the 18th century with the "Grand Tour" and then built up over time [1,2]. The utilization of both movable and immovable assets with artistic, historical, archaeological, architectural, ethno-anthropological, archival,

and bibliographical significance, along with their associated contexts, stands out as one of the key drivers of travel. However, only by carrying out planned measures does travel turn into 'cultural' and bring about knowledge [3]. Getting to know the places visited, including their human, material, and immaterial components, is the goal and the central element of 'cultural tourism', where each object is made sense of in relation to its context. It is tied in not only with the presence of cultural institutions but also with the availability of experiential activities (e.g., performances, cultural events) that open up opportunities to explore the present heritage, dig into the local culture, and soak up local traditions [4].

The interest in cultural resources during a trip is one of the main points in the "Manila Declaration" [5] and was theorized in 1985 by the then World Tourism Organization (WTO) (nowadays, United Nations World Tourism Organization, UN Tourism). The latter identifies 'cultural tourism' as connected to the need to travel for cultural reasons, to learn, to experience and to live the cultural, material and immaterial evidence present in a site [6]. The meaning is reaffirmed by the "Committee on Tourism and Competitiveness" (CTC), in the twenty-second session of the General Assembly held in 2019 [7].

Looking through the international literature in the sector, it can be observed that there is no clear-cut and universally accepted definition of 'cultural tourism'. However, the interpretations of different researchers can be compared with each other. Crompton (1979) [8] argues out that the cultural motivations for travel are linked to the search for novelties and educational elements. McIntosh and Goeldner (1986) [9] define 'cultural tourism' as that type of travel in which it is possible to learn about the cultural heritage, the history of places and popular traditions. Bonink (1992) [10] identifies the different types of cultural attractions and once again underlines the reasons for visiting sites of cultural interest. In the volume "Le tourisme culturel en Europe" [11], it is also brought up that learning is the defining feature of 'cultural tourism', represented by different types of travel (study trips, art trips and cultural trips), all aimed at getting to know the cultural essence of places.

In Italy, Martelloni (2006) [12] sets out that 'cultural tourism' is a movement of people who move to satisfy specific educational needs while Garibaldi (2012) [13] points to not only to the enjoyment of individual goods, but also to a broader immersion in the *spiritus loci*. Through 'cultural tourism', therefore, the aim is to bring heritage to life: a site or an artifact, understood as a sign of the past, also become a resource of the present [14–16].

'Cultural tourism' is finally, according to Gizzi et al. (2024) [17], that segment of travel based on cultural and historical experiences that is growing strongly within the tourism industry, as also documented by the Report drawn up by ISTAT in 2023 [18]. Within it, the strand of 'cultural routes' is constantly expanding, in which different sites and monumental testimonies present in a territory are grouped under a single theme, so that tourists, travelling along the routes, live a complete experience of the local history and culture according to a specific theme [19].

Studies on 'cultural routes' have taken off since 1984, when the Council of Europe (COE) understood it as a project of tourist expansion based on a historical itinerary, on a prominent figure or on a cultural phenomenon [20].

In 1987, the "European Cultural Routes Programme" was drawn up (The Council of Europe 2001, European Cultural Convention—European CultureRoutes) [21] with the structuring of the first route centered around the "Camino di Santiago de Compostela". The aim was to lay out, through a diachronic and geographical journey, how the cultural heritage of different countries can add up to the diffusion of the entire European heritage [22–24].

'Cultural routes' are based on history, the uniqueness of places and local knowledge. They often trace back well-documented ancient routes and paths with an important historical-cultural significance such as the Pilgrim Routes like the Via Francigena, the Via

Micaelica, and the path of St. Benedict [25–27], the Hohe Strasse path in Hesse [28], the Road of the Roman Emperors, the Imperial Germanic Via Romea [29], the Phoenicians' Route and the more extensive Silk Road [30].

At an international level, to come up with a univocal criterion in the definition of 'cultural routes', the "International Council on Monuments and Sites" (ICOMOS) set up the "International Scientific Committee on Cultural Routes" (CIIC) [31] in 1998. Furthermore, the European Institute of Cultural Routes was founded in 2010, which acts in accordance with the Enlarged Partial Agreement on Cultural Routes [32]. Meanwhile, in 2008, the "Charter on Cultural Itineraries" was drawn up, which lays out the concept of itineraries as the set of several elements (historical, cultural, and social) [33] that stand out due to their specific value based on the places where they have grown up, recognizing the need to valorize and protect cultural heritage through well-planned actions [34,35].

The basis builds on the scientific studies carried out on 'cultural itineraries', kicking off from the publications on medieval pilgrimage routes [36]. In the following years, 'cultural itineraries' have been examined from many aspects, with research focused on wine tourism, creative, industrial, accessible, sustainable and responsible tourism [37]. In the last years 'cultural itineraries' are increasingly at the center of the scientific debate as products of 'cultural tourism' which, on the one hand, guarantee travelers' experiences articulated in time and space [38], and on the other facilitate the socio-economic development of the territories in which they are created [39].

Cultural tourism can be a significant tool for the development of inner areas, offering numerous socio-economic benefits by fostering economic growth, improving quality of life, and safeguarding cultural heritage [40–43]. Inner areas are typically rural regions characterized by low population density and significant distance from major service center such as education, health and mobility facilities [44,45]. Peripheral regions are also linked with issues like economic disadvantage, overall unattractiveness for investors and prospective inhabitants [46]. To ease up on the problems that weigh down inner areas, the SNAI strategy (National Strategy for Internal Areas) was developed in Italy in 2012 [47]. In the Strategy, the valorization of cultural heritage and the tourism promotion are indicated among the main tools to turn around the trend of depopulation and thus step-up local development. In fact, Italian inner areas are also known for their valuable environmental assets and cultural heritage. However, these resources are often unknown and underutilized [48,49]. Therefore, by starting from the history of places, enhancing monumental and environmental resources, investing in the training and participation of local communities and structuring organized tourism through thematic itineraries, it would be possible to overcome the marginalization of internal areas and step up their socio-economic development [46,50]. In fact, in agreement with Graf [51], we are aware that cultural itineraries hold up great potential for local communities: on the one hand, they bring together identity and social cohesion [52] and on the other they shore up the local economy [53].

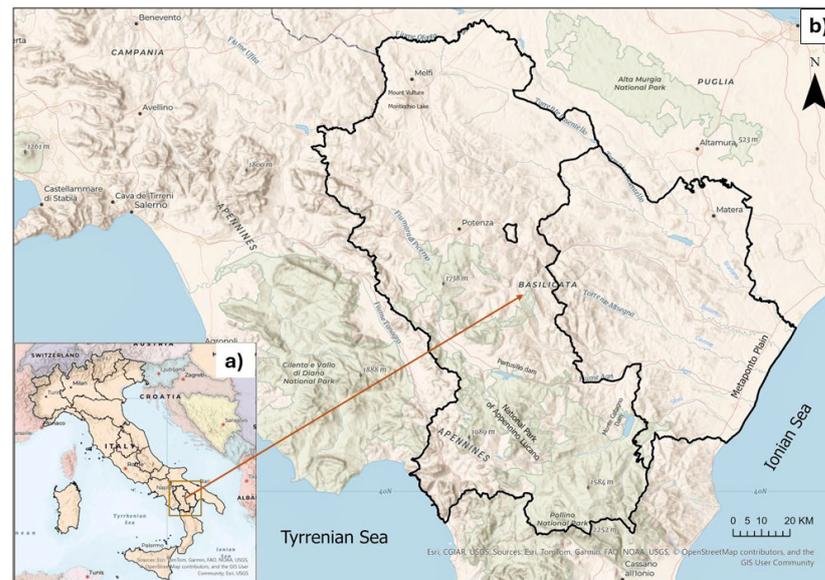
This study aims to contribute to the ongoing discussion on the topic by outlining possible strategies for the valorization and promotion of cultural heritage of internal areas through thematic cultural itineraries. The ultimate goal is to drive forward the economic development of the territories. To test the methodological approach, we considered the Basilicata region (Southern Italy) as a test area. The region, despite being little known, is endowed with a significant archaeological, monumental and environmental heritage [54–57]. The cultural itineraries put forward in this study, enhancing the territorial capital of internal areas, were designed with the theory of endogenous local development in mind. According to this, the economic, cultural, and social growth of an area can be brought about by capitalizing on local resources (e.g., cultural and environmental heritage, specialized skills, traditional knowledge,

and local practices) while emphasizing the importance of actively engaging communities to take part in planning, carrying out, and managing these initiatives [58–60].

The approach taken is modular and can fit into different contexts, making it adaptable to other internal Italian areas or the wider Mediterranean region. The proposed research aligns with SDG 8 and SDG 11.

## 2. Study Area

Basilicata, a region in southern Italy (Figure 1), is made up of two provinces, Matera and Potenza, and comprises 131 municipalities. Potenza serves as the regional capital. The region spans approximately 10,000 km<sup>2</sup> and is home to 533,233 inhabitants [61].



**Figure 1.** Location of the Basilicata region within national context. The main territorial features and towns (a,b) of the Region are also depicted.

The territory is made up of almost 70% mountainous, 22% hilly and only 8% flat [62]. Main rivers are Bradano, Basento, Agri, Sinni, Cavone that go through significant variations in flow during the seasons.

The region boasts two national parks (the Pollino Park, included in the list of UNESCO world geoparks [63], and the Lucanian Apennine Park Val d’Agri Lagonegrese), three regional parks, including the Vulture Park, as well as seven regional nature reserves and eight state reserves [64,65].

The region, considered subject to seismic hazards ranging from ‘moderate’ to ‘high’ [66], has been shaken by strong earthquakes [67,68]. Additionally, 50% of the Lucanian municipalities fall under hydrogeological risk, especially in the hilly areas and along the coastal strips [54].

Agriculture has taken root along the Ionian coast with vegetable gardens and orchards and in the northern area (Vulture) with vineyards and olive groves have sprung up. Industrial activity, on the other hand, revolves around a manufacturing hub and a food hub. In the province of Potenza there are two oil areas: in the upper Val d’Agri, the largest continental oil field in Europe [69] and in the upper Sauro Valley (Tempa Rossa-Corleto Perticara) [70].

The region’s most famous cultural site, recognized worldwide, is Matera, the City of Sassi (a UNESCO heritage site since 1993), which has stood out as a UNESCO heritage site since 1993. Matera shot to fame after earning the title of “European Capital of Culture” in 2019, a year in which it drew in over 700,000 visitors [71,72]. Tourism in the region branches out into different types: (a) Cultural tourism, centered on museums and archaeological sites

(such as the Roman colonies of *Venusia* and *Grumentum*), castles (e.g., Melfi, Lagopesole), and ‘ghost towns’ [17]; (b) seaside tourism; (c) mountain tourism.

In the rest of this article, in addition to the regional capital, two sub-areas are delved into: the Vulture-Melfese, located in the north-east of the region, characterized by the presence of a no longer active volcano (Mount Vulture), and the Val d’Agri, located in the center-west, a river basin that stretches from 600 m above sea level to the Metaponto coast in the south (Figure 1). Both sub-regions have been hit hard by strong earthquakes in historical times, including those of 16 December 1857 (Me 5.4) [73], 23 July 1930 (Me 6.7) [74], and 1980.

Finally, it is important to point out Basilicata’s connective marginality, as the region misses out on a regional airport and is largely cut off by mountain roads, which stretch out travel times and make getting around more challenging compared to other Italian regions.

### 3. Materials and Methods

The proposed methodology (Figure 2) is based on three main phases. The first phase (from July to November 2024) involved the knowledge of the itineraries already present in the territory. This was followed up by bibliographic research, the analysis of archaeological sources from the Roman and medieval ages, ancient and modern cartography, archival, erudite and antiquarian testimonies from the 19th century and the early 20th century. The second phase (December 2024) called for engagement with local authorities, to gather detailed information and look into visitor admissions to regional museums and cultural sites, using data put together by the Ministry of Culture—Regional Directorate of National Museums of Basilicata. The information requested concerns the opening periods of the cultural sites also in reference to ongoing restoration interventions, the visiting conditions, the accessibility and reachability in relation to people with disabilities- The third and final phase (from January to March 2025) focused on field surveys, to check out the condition of sites and map out plans for enhancing and improving access to cultural assets along the proposed routes. The analysis parameters considered promotional activities already carried out (websites, organized tours, guided visits, multimedia installations), the availability of information and communication tools (e.g., basic or interactive tourist signage through QR code or contactless chip, Braille signage, signage with kids friendly content both along the route and near the sites), and the provision of complementary services for connectivity, accessibility, usability, and visitor experience.

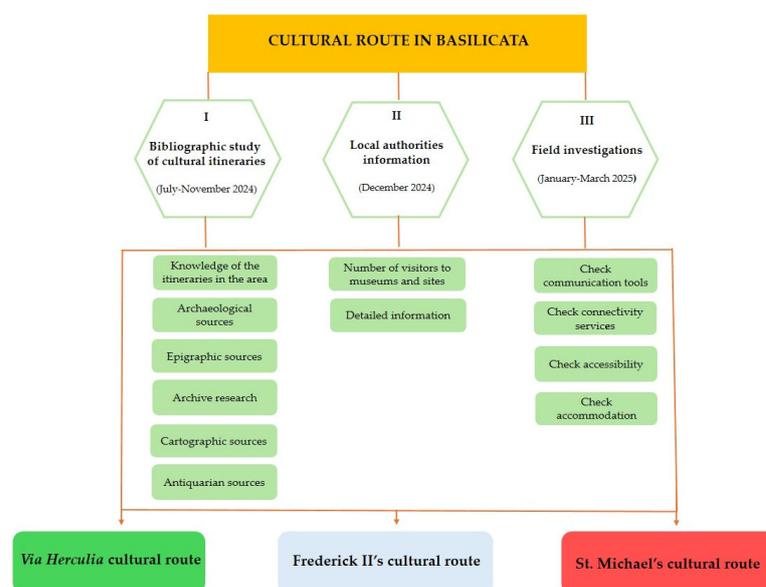
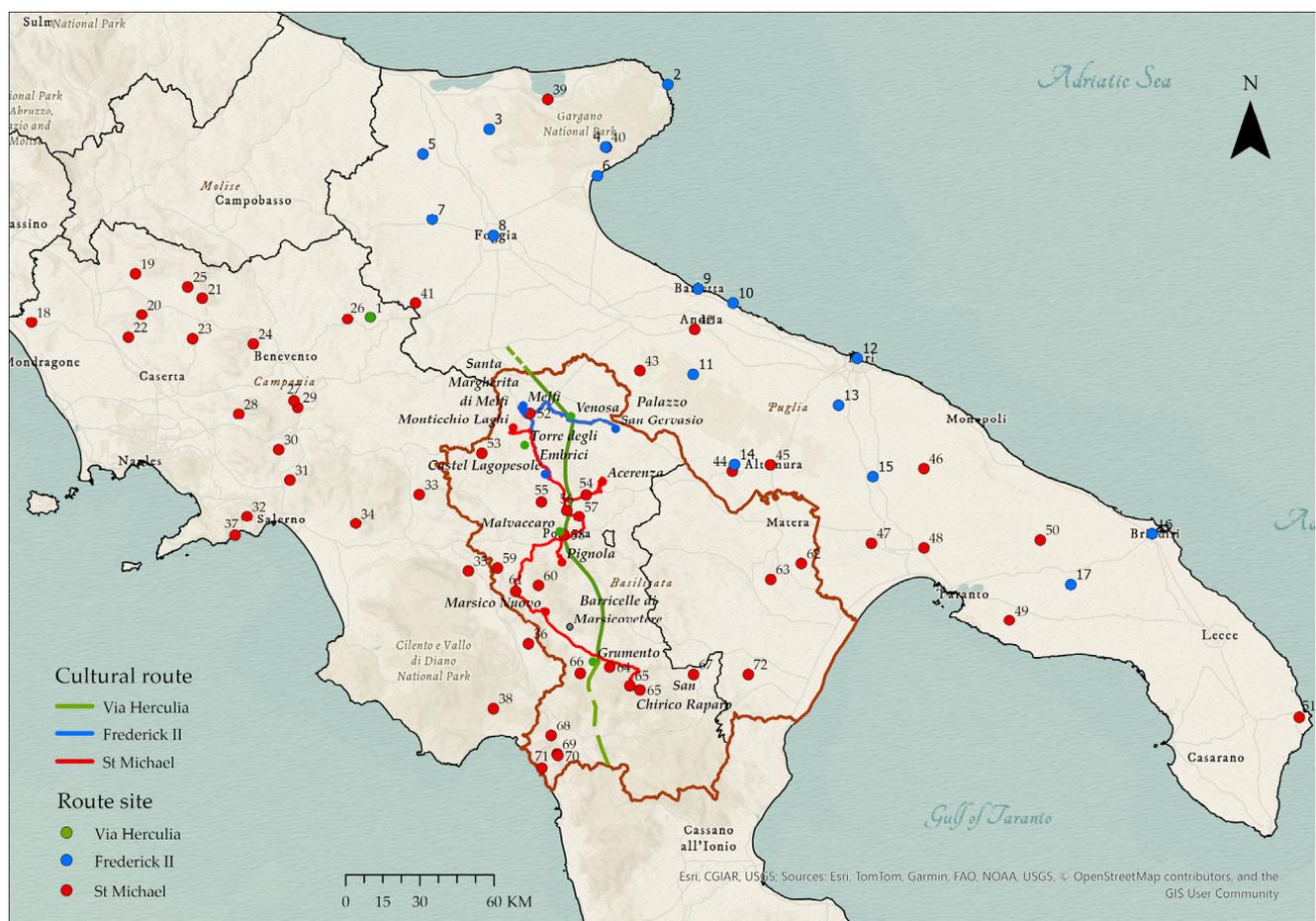


Figure 2. Flowchart illustrating the research methodology applied.

#### 4. Results

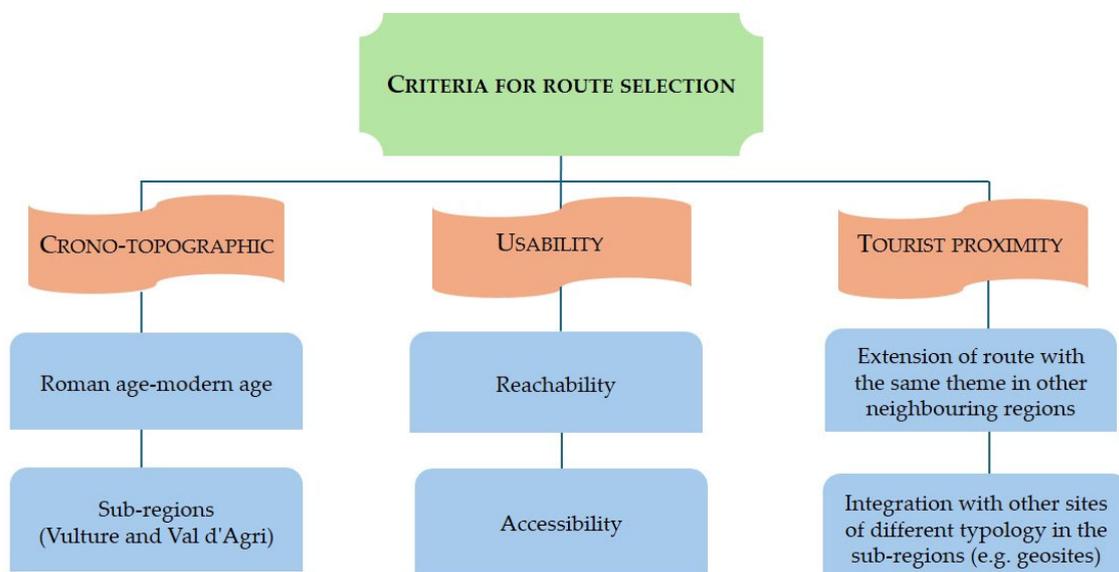
This study focused on three different aspects: the historical-archaeological, artistic-monumental and popular devotion, taking on a chronological-geographical approach. These areas stand out for their significant archaeological, architectural, and environmental value, while at the same time including lesser-known sites that can be brought together for enhanced visibility and visitor experience.

As a result, three thematic cultural routes are laid out across the province of Potenza (Figure 3): (1) a route built around the ancient Roman road system (*Via Herculia*), (2) a route on the places of the emperor Frederick II of Swabia (1194–1250) and (3) an itinerary focusing on the places of worship for the Archangel Michael (or Sant'Angelo). These itineraries are grounded in the principle of endogenous local development, as emphasize the activation and valorization of resources already embedded within the territory, such as architectural, archaeological and rupestrian heritage, through the direct involvement of local communities. Therefore, by building upon existing cultural and historical capital, the routes aim to preserve and promote the identity of the area and stimulate sustainable socio-economic growth from within, rather than relying on external drivers.



**Figure 3.** Map with the three designed cultural routes: the *Via Herculia* route (marked in green), the itinerary of Frederick II (in blue), and the path of Michael (in red). Additionally, monumental landmarks extending beyond the region into Campania and Apulia (Puglia) are highlighted, using the same color scheme to indicate corresponding cultural and historical elements. The numbers on the map are tied into specific sites detailed in the Supplementary File S1 named: “Sites Figure 3”. Each itinerary follows the same time structure, spanning two stages over two days.

The selection of the three itineraries was guided by three criteria: (1) chrono-topographic relevance, (2) usability, and (3) tourist proximity. The chrono-topographic criterion focused on itineraries of significant historical value, characterized by numerous and noteworthy archaeological and historical remains dating from the Roman to the Modern Age, located within two distinct sub-regions of Basilicata (Val d'Agri and Vulture). Usability criteria addressed both the reachability and accessibility of the selected sites, with particular consideration given to individuals with disabilities. Reachability pertains specifically to the ease with which visitors can physically access a site, irrespective of the site's ongoing maintenance or services. In contrast, accessibility refers explicitly to sites equipped with facilities and services designed to support public visitation and enjoyment [75,76]. Lastly, the criterion of tourist proximity influenced itinerary selection based on their potential to extend and integrate into broader cultural routes linking adjacent regions (Campania and Apulia), areas already benefiting from substantial tourist flows (Figure 4).

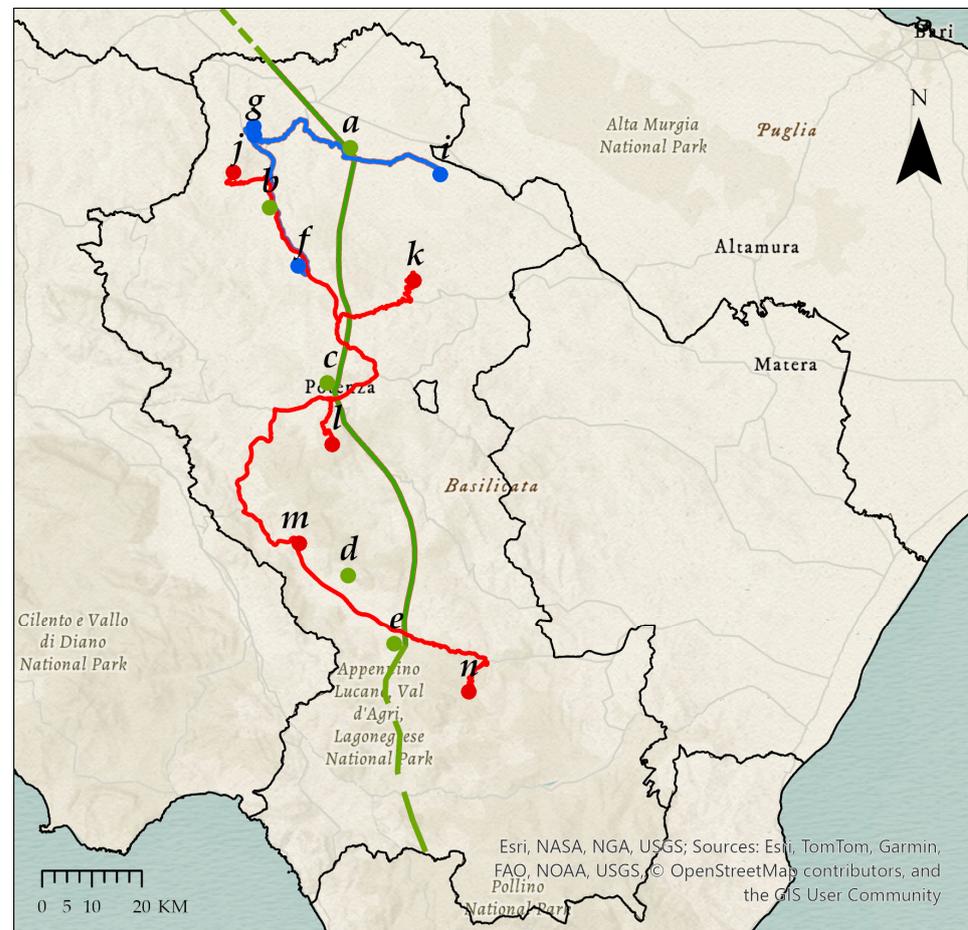


**Figure 4.** Flowchart with criteria considered for cultural route selection.

In particular, the selection of the first route stems from the vital role the *Via Herculia* played in the Roman-era road network in Basilicata, linking up two colonies (*Venusia* and *Grumentum*) and a *municipium* (*Potentia*) while also serving as a key axis for channeling Apulian-Lucanian agri-food production to Italian markets. The second route centers on the multifaceted legacy of Frederick II—his strategic political vision, legislative influence, and cultural innovations—which are reflected in the grandeur of his network of residences and castles. The third route takes shape from the deep-rooted devotion in Basilicata to the Archangel Michael, tying into the historical prominence of the San Michele sanctuary on Mount Gargano (Apulia). His patronal, thaumaturgical, and military attributes led to the establishment of numerous places of worship dedicated to him. Furthermore, the veneration of this saint, which caught on as early as the 5th century, gave rise to the first pilgrimage routes. The goal of this study is to bridge the gap between Basilicata's Roman and medieval past and its modern identity, opening up new opportunities to diversify the region's tourism offerings and draw in a broader audience, appealing to various interests, including history, archaeology, art, architecture, and popular devotion.

#### 4.1. Ancient Cultural Route: Via Herculia

The Via *Herculia* was built on a previous road and took on its name at the beginning of the 4th century AD. The road served to connect the historical regions of Sannio and Lucania which covered almost all of present-day Basilicata and part of the current province of Salerno and northern Calabria region [77]. The road takes its name from *Maximianus Herculus*, who was proclaimed Caesar in 285 AD and Augustus in 286 during the Tetrarchy. *Herculus*, who took care of the completion of the road [78]. In Lucania, the road made its way to *Venusia*, passing through the *municipium* of *Potentia* before reaching *Grumentum* [79,80]. By mapping out this itinerary, the goal is to bring to light the significance of this imperial road, allowing visitors to ‘travel’ along its historic routes, packed with archaeological, monumental, and museum-like attractions. The decision was made to trace back the ancient route in just two stages, taking into account the geographical proximity of the selected sites. The first stage begins in Venosa and leads to the city of Potenza while the second run from Potenza to Grumento Nova. The complete itinerary stretches over 133.9 kilometers [81] and is split into two days, to ensure a more enjoyable experience while immersing travelers in the local culture, as well as the region’s food and wine traditions (Figures 5 and 6).



**Figure 5.** Map showing the three cultural routes: Via *Herculia* (marked in green) from ‘a’ to ‘e’; Frederick’s itinerary (in blue) from ‘f’ to ‘i’; St. Michael’s cultural route (in red) from ‘j’ to ‘n’. Each route refers to the photographs in Figures 6–8.



**Figure 6.** (a) Venosa, archaeological park-400 mt. s.l.m.; (b) Rionero in Vulture-Torre degli Embrici, villa-542 mt. s.l.m.; (c) Potenza-Malvaccaro, villa-775 mt. s.l.m.; (d) Marsicovetere-Barricelle, villa-655 mt. s.l.m.; (e) Grumento, archaeological park-587 mt. s.l.m. (source: Google Earth™).

Travel point	Starting site	Arrival site	Distance (km)	Travel time (min)
I (first day)	Lagopesole	Melfi-Castello/archaeological museum	31.8	37
II (second day)	Melfi-Santa Margherita	Palazzo San Gervasio	48.4	52



**Figure 7.** (f) Lagopesole, castle-821 m. a.s.l. (photo credits, A.S., 2023); (g) Melfi, castle-562 m. a.s.l. (photo credits, A.S., 2023); (h) Melfi-Santa Margherita, Rupestris church-499 m. a.s.l. (photo credits, F.T.G., 2023); (i) Palazzo San Gervasio, *Palatium Regium*-464 m. a.s.l. (photo credits, A.S., 2023).

Travel point	Starting site	Arrival site	Distance (km)	Travel time (min)
I (first day)	Monticchio Laghi	Acerenza	51.2	59
	Acerenza	Pignola	41.4	55
II (second day)	Pignola	Marsico Nuovo	29	46
	Marsico Nuovo	San Chirico Raparo	52	49



**Figure 8.** (j) Rionero in Vulture-Monticchio Laghi, Abbey-733 m a.s.l.; (k) Acerenza-S. Marco, Rock Church-716 m a.s.l.; (l) Pignola-Sant'Angelo, Rock Church-942 m a.s.l.; (m) Marsico Nuovo, Church-834 m a.s.l.; (n) San Chirico Raparo, Abbey-831 m a.s.l. (photo credits: A.S., 2023).

Venosa stands out as a site of particular significance in the regional landscape, as it was the birthplace of Quinto Orazio Flacco (1st century BC), a poet who captured the essence of daily life and politics of his time. In *Venusia*, a Latin colony founded in 291 BC, which saw major monumental developments during the full imperial age and was partially destroyed by the earthquake of 346 AD, visitors can explore the Archaeological Park [82] (Figure 6a). On site one can observe the urban layout, the fortifications, the thermal facilities (1st–3rd century AD) and the residential buildings of the imperial age. The Park also hosts the episcopal complex (5th–6th century AD) and the *Incompiuta*, a church built in the 12th century to house the tombs of the Norman kings by enlarging the church of the SS. Trinità but not completed due to the suppression of the Benedictine order (1297). Opposite the church stands an elliptical amphitheater (1st century AD) [83–85]. From the Archaeological Park, visitors can head over to the National Archaeological Museum.

The itinerary along the *Via Herculia* move on to the Torre degli Embrici locality (Rionero in Vulture), believed to correspond to the *statio* (place of rest along the Roman roads) of *Pisandes* (Figure 6b), in correspondence with a *villa* (2nd century BC–4th century AD), characterized by four construction phases. In the first phase (2nd century BC–1st century AD), the thermal baths were built. In the second (2nd–3rd AD), rooms were added to the southern part complex. In the third phase (3rd–4th century AD) new rooms were set up in the western sector. During the fourth and final phase (6th–7th century AD), following a fire, a small quadrangular room and another building were put up, incorporating parts of pre-existing structures [86].

From Torre degli Embrici, the tourists can head to *Potentia*, which was founded during the 2nd century BC and turned into a *municipium* in the 1st century BC. The city occupied the central-eastern part of the plateau where the historic center stands today. Within the urban space, the forum and the area of worship, home to the temple of *Mefitis*, can be figured out. Various epigraphs reused in churches and private buildings allow us

to look into the civil, political and religious history of *Potentia* [87,88]. The suburb has given back structures that can be interpreted as rural residential-productive facilities, as in the Malvaccaro area (Figure 6c), where a *villa* can be visited (3rd–6th century AD). The monumental complex shows off several rooms: a *coenatio* (representation hall) set in front of an apse with a refined mosaic floor [89], and rooms, meant for domestic activities with a fireplace and millstone [90–93].

The second stage of the itinerary starts from *Potentia* to reach the upper Agri valley and the locality of Barricelle (Figure 6d), standing out for the presence of a *villa* owned by the *Bruttii Praesentes* family, to which Crispinia, wife of the emperor *Commodus* (180–193 AD), belonged to. The main building (2nd century BC–7th century AD), laid out around a large courtyard, boasts extraordinary finds in the *pars fructuaria* that shed light on the flourishing productive activities of the territory. The *villa*, struck by several earthquakes (late 1st century AD–early 3rd century AD), was restored, with new internal divisions [94]. Regarding earthquakes, the discovery of a skeleton belonging to a male individual in the *pars rustica* (room 3), was laid out in a peculiar position lying on one side, with the lower limbs contracted and an upper limb on the head. The combination of this position and its stratigraphic location, has brought about the belief that the structures came down suddenly due to an earthquake, datable between the end of the 1st and the beginning of the 2nd century AD. Geophysical investigations carried out on the site have confirmed the hypothesis of abandonment due to an earthquake [95] identifying the *villa* as a site of prominent archaeoseismological interest thus increasing its appeal for tourists.

From Barricelle, the itinerary wraps up in the Roman colony of *Grumentum* (Figure 6e), where one can take in the remains of one of the major cities of *Regio III (Lucania et Bruttii)*. In the Archaeological Park [96], the sections of the pavement (2nd century AD), the theatre (1st century AD), Temple A, and a *domus* with refined mosaic floors (first half of the 2nd century AD) can be observed. At the center of the terrace lies the *Forum*. The imperial baths, designed starting from 60 BC and kept in use until the beginning of the 3rd century AD, feature fifteen rooms. Finally, in the north-eastern area of the city, the amphitheater, dating back to the second half of the 1st century BC, with renovations in the 1st century AD [97,98] can be visited. To round off the knowledge of the site, one can visit the National Archaeological Museum of the Alta Val d’Agri, located near the Archaeological Park [99].

The itinerary along the *Via Herculia* can also carry on beyond the region (Figure 3), with a visit to *Aequum Tuticum* (Case S. Eleuterio, Ariano Irpino, AV), an important center crossed through by the *Via Herculia* and set up as a key road junction, from which various communication routes branched out, linking Sannio and Campania as well as the Tyrrhenian and Adriatic sides. In this location, a *vicus* (village) has been dug up, characterized by a thermal building (1st century AD), various rooms (second half of the 2nd century AD) and a rectangular room with a mosaic floor, which was wrecked by the 346 AD earthquake [100].

#### 4.2. Frederick II’s Cultural Route

The network of fortresses, set up to control the territory of the Kingdom of Sicily, is considered one of the distinctive elements of Frederick II of Swabia’s policy, carried out across Apulia and Basilicata. Evidence of this efficient administrative and management strategy turns up in the “*Statutum de reparatione castrorum*”, drawn up between 1241 and 1245, which lays out a list of the kingdom’s castles, along with the obligation of maintenance handed over to local communities [101,102]. In Vulture, where the second proposed itinerary takes shape, there are significant traces that help piece together the legacy of the Swabian emperor. The route starts in Lagopesole, moves through Melfi and wraps up in Palazzo San Gervasio, covering a total distance of 80.2 km, split up into two days (Figures 5 and 7).

The Lagopesole castle (Figure 7f), built in 1242 and completed in 1250, the year of Frederick II's death, follows a rectangular plan with its longer sides oriented in a north–south direction [103]. The ogival portal in the western area leads into two internal courtyards, separated by a curtain wall. The smaller courtyard, located in the southern wing, houses a massive square-based keep at its center, whereas the larger courtyard, positioned at a lower level, shows off mullioned windows separated by circular openings, a central well, and a chapel [104–106].

The itinerary moves on to Melfi, where one can visit the castle (Figure 7g), characterized by an architectural form, which brings together multiple styles due to various masonry techniques and construction phases. The first nucleus (11th–12th century), tied to William of Hauteville, took shape with a square plan and four corner towers [107]. Under Frederick II, a double curtain wall with eight towers was built around the primary nucleus. A moat was dug out, and a drawbridge was built, later replaced by a stone bridge. In 1280, Charles I of Anjou ordered the construction of the north-east wing with the walls and three courtyards. [108]. The Melfi castle hosted papal councils between 1059 and 1101, and in 1231, Frederick II promulgated the *Constitutiones Augustales*, a legal text also put together by Pier delle Vigne (1190–1249), mentioned in Dante's Divine Comedy [109].

The next day, the itinerary moves on to Melfi to explore the rock church of Santa Margherita. This place of worship, carved into the volcanic tuff, features a single nave with pointed vaults and four barrel chapels arranged in pairs [110,111]. The frescoes are particularly remarkable, with the so-called 'Contrast between the living and the dead' or the 'Triumph of Death', standing out for its depiction of skeletons engaged in conversation with the living [112] (Figure 7h). This imagery reflects a medieval legend tied to the theme of travel [78], possibly introduced through the connections between Frederick II's court and the Arab cultural world [113].

The itinerary concludes with a visit to the royal farm of Palazzo San Gervasio (Figure 7i). Originally built by Drogone and Umfredo d'Altavilla in the 11th century, it was later reworked by Frederick II and also served as residence for his son Manfredi. After the battle of Benevento (1266), the *palatium regium* was converted into a stable and later hosted various families. The planimetric layout, reshaped multiple times, follows a quadrangular form and spans two levels. The building also boasts two square towers at the corners, featuring four mullioned windows and a central three-light window. At its core lies a courtyard, encircled by residential rooms [114–116].

To deepen the understanding of Frederick II's policies and the architectural and monumental richness of the period, the itinerary can extend beyond regional borders (Figure 3), exploring Frederick II's sites in Apulia, such as Castel del Monte (Andria, BAT), a UNESCO World Heritage Site since 1996 [117–120].

#### 4.3. St Michael's Cultural Route

The cult of Saint Michael the Archangel in Basilicata probably stems from that of Monte Sant'Angelo in Gargano (Apulia). The veneration was passed down by the Lombards after pulling off a victory over the Byzantines under Emperor Constans II in 663 [121]. The selection of the place of worship was influenced by the presence of three natural elements: the cave, the hill and water. Since the earliest times, sanctuaries have been established near places marked by the presence of these three fundamental natural elements [122]. In Basilicata there are numerous structures dedicated to the Archangel, including rock-hewn sanctuaries, historic churches and centuries-old chapels [123,124] (Figure 3). In such a vast area, the cave sanctuaries of Monticchio, Acerenza, Pignola and San Chirico Raparo, along with the church of Marsico Nuovo, were selected to design the itinerary, covering a route of 173.6 kilometers, planned to be completed over two days (Figures 5 and 8).

The worship site of Monticchio, where it is possible to hypothesize a continuity from more ancient rites linked to the healthful value of water, was consecrated in 1059 by Pope Nicholas II. At the end of the 18th century, the current structure was erected by the Capuchins [125]. Inside the 18th-century church, visitors can observe the cave and a square-plan niche (Figure 8j). At the bottom of the niche, some precious frescoes in the Byzantine style can be seen [126,127]. On the sides, two groups of three apostles are depicted, and on the vault, within a circle, there is a bird, interpreted as an eagle with a halo, perhaps the symbol of St. John the Evangelist or as a vulture, symbolizing the precariousness of the volcanic area of Monticchio, which has been shaped by eruptions in geological times and destructive earthquakes [128].

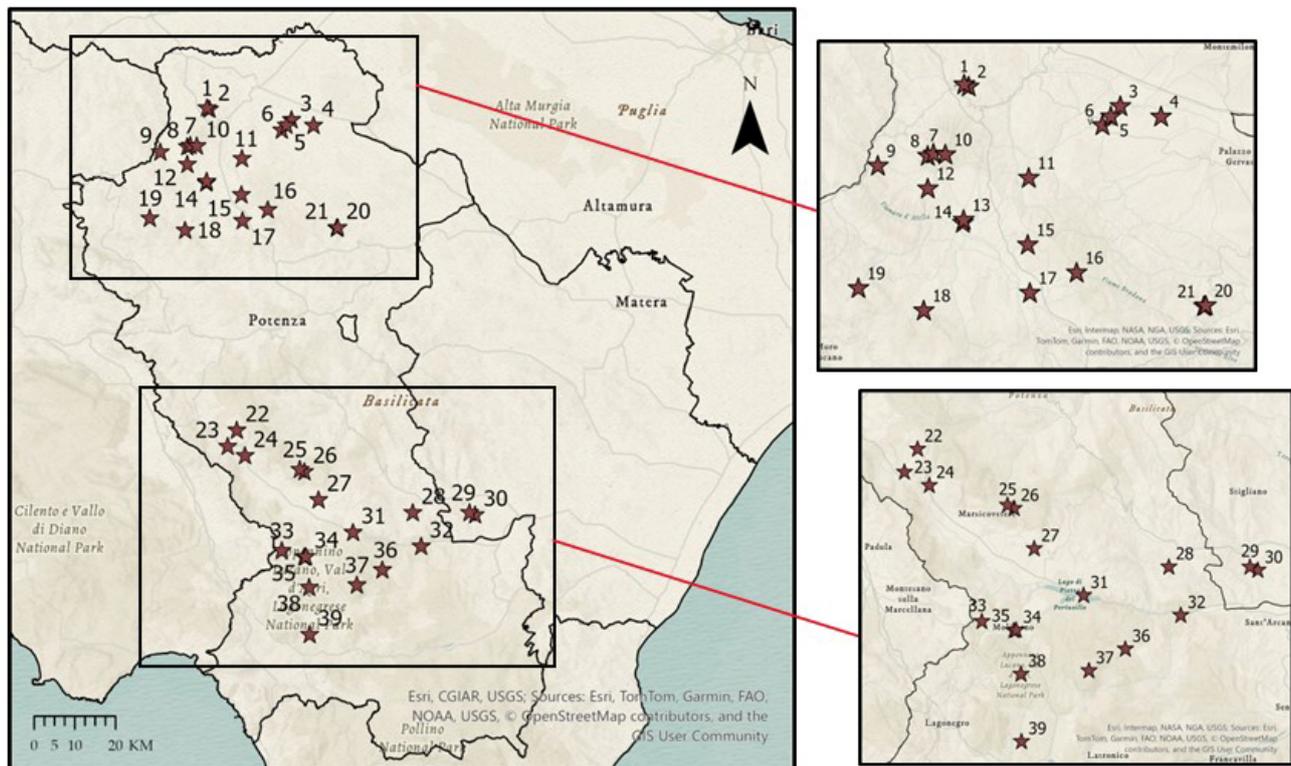
The itinerary continues towards Acerenza (Figure 8k), with a visit to the cave dedicated to Saint Michael the Archangel, featuring paintings of blessing saints and a statue of the Archangel in wood and terracotta [129].

Leaving Acerenza, the itinerary includes a stop in Pignola, where visitors can explore the church (Figure 8l) built in 1535. The interior, with a single nave, houses the statue of the Archangel, a copy of the original dating back to the year 1000. Near the church is the cave where the devotion is practiced [130,131].

A stop not directly linked to the cave cult, but necessary to break up the long journey to the next stop, San Chirico Raparo, is Marsico Nuovo, where the church of San Michele Arcangelo stands adjacent to the towers of the city walls (Figure 8m). The Romanesque-style external façade features a remarkable Gothic portal (13th century) [132] and an 18th-century bell tower. Inside, the church preserves remains of medieval frescoes, an 18th-century painting on wood depicting the Archangel Michael [133].

From Marsico Nuovo, the itinerary continues towards the abbey of San Michele Arcangelo al Monte Raparo (Figure 8n), which was declared National Monument in 1927. The monastic complex, founded in the 10th century by Byzantine monks, is centered around a cave, with stalactites and stalagmites, located near a spring, and preserves a fresco of San Michele (11th century). Noteworthy are the pictorial fragments that reveal two layers: the first depicting the Eucharist, and the second with a probable reference to the sacrificial and salvific value of the Eucharist itself (12th–13th century). The abbey underwent through various phases and changes in ownership and was gradually abandoned, which led to the partial collapse of the structures [134].

Once the itinerary through Basilicata is complete, the route could also extend beyond the region, reaching the Grotta dell'Angelo in Pertosa in Salerno district [135] or continuing to the Grotta dell'Arcangelo Michele in Apulia (5th century) (Figure 3), which was registered in 2011 in the UNESCO list and recognized in 2014 by the National Geographic Society as "one of the most beautiful sacred caves in the world" [136–138]. The three proposed cultural itineraries can also incorporate other local heritage sites, including monumental, museum, archaeological, and environmental landmarks of notable importance within the two examined sub-areas, the Vulture and the Val d'Agri [139–143]. These sites can serve as an invitation to explore nearby cultural treasures [144] (Figure 9).



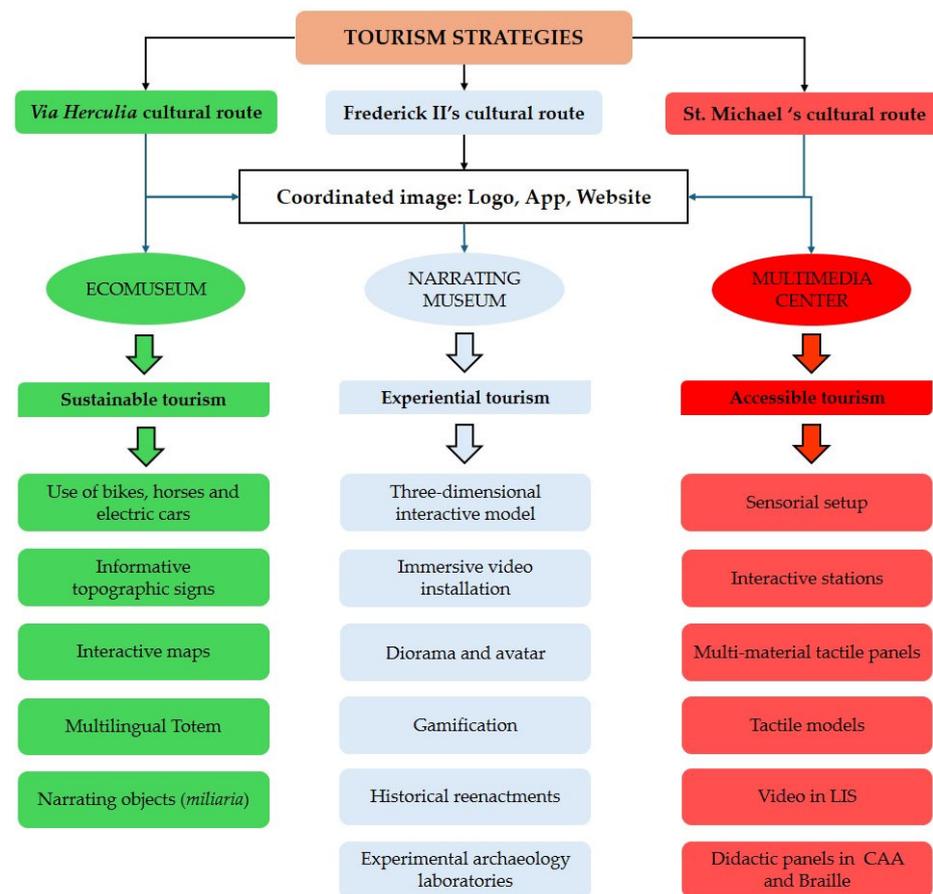
**Figure 9.** Map of Basilicata highlighting the two sub-areas, Vulture and Val d'Agri, along with key points of interest. The numbers correspond to sites detailed in the Supplementary File S2 named: “Sites Figure 9”.

## 5. Discussion

Different tourism development strategies have been identified for the valorization and fruition of the sites along the three itineraries proposed. The first initiative will focus on creating a unique logo for the three itineraries, establishing a coordinated and recognizable visual identity to facilitate their identification. The accessibility and usability of the itineraries will be facilitated through the development of a mobile application for smartphones and tablets, featuring maps, text notes, and photographs, designed to cater to diverse audiences and assist in tour planning. Additionally, a dedicated website will also be launched, offering virtual tours, Italian Sign Language (LIS) videos and audiovisual contents for individuals unable to visit the sites in person. The integration of digital technologies has proven to be an effective and impactful means of enhancing cultural heritage and revitalizing tourism [145]. Smartphones and tablets proved to be useful in cultural tourism by enabling interactive and personalized experiences, making visits more engaging and informative [146]. Furthermore, digital technologies, such as mobile applications, actively support sustainable tourism by offering tools for improved site management and preservation of cultural sites, thereby minimizing the physical footprint on heritage location [147,148]. Furthermore, virtual tours and digital platforms significantly increase the accessibility of cultural sites to a global audience, allowing individuals to explore and learn about cultural heritage remotely from anywhere in the world [149,150].

However, for each itinerary, it will be essential to develop tailored tools that cater to the diverse audiences each route is expected to attract, while also aligning with the “Strategic Tourism Plan 2023–2027”, developed by the Italian Ministry of Tourism [151]. Based on the specificities of each itinerary, three strategic approaches and visitor engagement initiatives have been identified: for the Via *Herculia*, the establishment of an Ecomuseum to promote sustainable tourism; for the Frederick II’s Itinerary, the creation of a Narration Museum

incorporating Digital Storytelling to enhance emotional tourism; and for the Michaelic Path, the development of a multimedia center designed to ensure accessible tourism (Figure 10).



**Figure 10.** Flowchart illustrating the implemented valorization strategies.

The *Via Herculia* itinerary maintains chronological coherence as it includes all the key points of interest from the Roman age, while the national museums showcase the most significant artifacts from the region, spanning various historical periods. To valorize the three centers of Venosa, Potenza and Grumento, along with the sites within their territories, it is essential to set up a thematic itinerary focused on exploring the Roman road. However, the sites along this route differ considerably in terms of both topographical features and touristic appeal, aspects that will be gone over in detail later. In 2023, the Venosa Museum attracted 15,638 visitors [152], a significant number, largely due to the historical and architectural significance of the castle that houses it, as well as the vast Archaeological Park, which lays out the overlapping of multiple settlement phases. Additionally, the site's proximity to Apulia ties it in with numerous tourist circuits coming from this region, further driving up its appeal. The museum has also brought in modern multimedia installations, such as video mapping, animations, and newly set-up 3D modelling technologies [153]. In 2023, the Potenza Museum took in 9128 visitors [152], a noteworthy figure, especially considering the exclusion of the city from major tourist circuits. To step up the enhancement and accessibility of the historic center, signs with QR codes have already been put up on the main cultural landmarks. More recently, digital technologies, such as virtual reality, have been brought in to boost the experience of Torre Guevara (9th century). Additionally, the "Potenza Celata" App has been rolled out, allowing visitors to dive into epigraphic inscriptions from the Roman era, 20th-century architecture, and lesser-known contemporary artworks, all presented along an open-air route [154]. In 2023, the *Grumentum Museum*

brought in 3859 visitors [152]. The relatively low number is mainly due to its remote location compared to other better-known sites. Over the years, various cultural activities have been set up, primarily geared towards local schools, to draw in more engagement and build up interest in the site's historical significance. Recent studies on the *Via Herculia* [155] have helped map out its route and set up valorization initiatives, including the "Appennino Coast to Coast" cycle path and horse trail [156], aimed at pushing forward both the conservation and sustainability of the territory crossed by the ancient Roman road. In tourism strategies, sustainability comes down to preserving what already exists, bringing back old infrastructures, and cutting down on unnecessary consumption. This approach allows cultural itineraries to bring in economic benefits while looking after both the cultural and environmental heritage [157]. Building on this promising initiative and sticking to the same goals, the proposal for an Ecomuseum of the *Via Herculia* has been laid out to open up opportunities for the rediscovery and enhancement of the ancient road layout.

The idea of this cultural system developed in the 1970s, when not only cultural heritage but also natural resources, material and immaterial traditions, and food and wine excellence began to be brought into the spotlight [158,159]. The "Round Table on the Development and the Role of Museums in the Contemporary World", organized by UNESCO and ICOM in 1972, played a key role in shaping up the Ecomuseum concept [160,161]. Since then, the participation of local communities in the heritage-making process has been looked at as crucial—a metacultural process that involves reflecting on and adding value to cultural elements, turning them into heritage through social and cultural practices [162]. In the creation of an Ecomuseum, the community steps in as the main actor and takes on a direct role in management. This happens through the setting up of active citizenship workshops, community mapping activities, public conferences, participatory planning meetings, and festivals [163,164]. During the implementation phase of the Ecomuseum, local communities will play an active role in enhancing the region by organizing archaeological festivals and culinary tours featuring Roman-era recipes, providing ecotourism experiences with local guides, and promoting eco-friendly holidays and rural hospitality centered on interactive culinary activities. These initiatives will offer visitors an authentic immersion into the area's culture and traditions.

This approach was already tried out in 2016 for the *Via Appia*, one of the most important and well-known Roman roads [165]. Building on this model, it is proposed, first and foremost, to set up eco-sustainable and low-impact travel options along the route, such as bike paths, horseback riding trails, and electric car routes, in collaboration with associations, local authorities, and Cultural and Creative Industries connected to cultural heritage. These industries are part of the five Smart Specialization Strategies (S3), which lay out the priorities and specialization areas for directing European structural fund investments into research and innovation. In Basilicata, these industries have been brought together into a dedicated cluster [166,167], which also teams up with two of Italy's most important research institutions—the CNR (National Research Council) and the ENEA (National Agency for New Technologies, Energy, and Sustainable Economic Development)—alongside the University of Basilicata and over 50 companies operating in the cultural and creative sector, including ICT, communication, gaming, cultural heritage management, publishing, and performing arts. Along the route, visitors will be guided through well-placed signage, helping them find their way to the three main centers. Within the towns of Venosa, Potenza, and Grumento, interactive totems will be set up at key points of interest, each featuring both a map of the full itinerary and detailed local maps. These tools will be backed up by historical documentation, aerial photographs, virtual reconstructions of historical architectural layouts, bilingual texts, and QR codes, allowing visitors to dive deeper into specific aspects of the cultural heritage and the surrounding

landscape. By installing appropriate urban signage, the goal is to move beyond a purely monumental approach and instead encourage a broader understanding of the territorial context in which these heritage assets exist [168]. Additionally, near the totems, narrative objects will be put in place, featuring reproductions of miliaria, the inscribed roadside markers once used to indicate distances along Roman public roads. These miliaria will double as video projection surfaces, displaying stories about the settlement of the area, population dynamics, and historical patterns of occupation and usage over time. The itinerary of the places of Frederick II covers three key sites: Lagopesole, Melfi, and Palazzo San Gervasio, where cultural events are put on during the summer season to spread awareness of Frederick II's legacy. The strategies proposed here tie into this broader initiative. Since 2011, Lagopesole Castle has been home to "The World of Frederick II", a Narrating Museum featuring a multimedia artistic installation with projections both outdoors and inside the castle's rooms, along with a simultaneous translation system in two languages [169]. Melfi Castle, one of the most frequented landmarks in the region, is particularly drawn in visitors due to its National Archaeological Museum, which houses significant princely tombs from the area, dating back to the 2nd century AD, including the magnificent "Sarcophagus of Rapolla". In 2023, the museum brought in 32,340 tourists [152]. For strategic alignment, the project also lays out a narrative experience for the castles of Melfi and Palazzo San Gervasio [170], incorporating multimedia content such as 3D modelling, video mapping, virtual reality, digital storytelling tools, scenography, and environmental reconstructions. These tools are meant to bring to life the legacy of Frederick II in an immersive and culturally engaging way. As Serrat points out, storytelling has the power to bring out "powerful emotions and intuitions" [171]. Meanwhile, Corallo, Petousi, and Kasemsarn [172–174] highlight how it serves as an effective method for drawing in visitors and fully engaging them in the experience. Additionally, Colucci Cante [175] explains how this narrative approach can be supported by new technologies, which help get across the content and turn the visit into an emotional journey. Inside each castle, a three-dimensional interactive model of Monte Vulture, the topographical and symbolic landmark of the region, will be set up as a projection surface for video mapping. This geographical contextualization tool [176,177] will help bring across the historical and spatial framework of Frederick II's influence, allowing visitors to immerse themselves in his era and better grasp the significance of the surrounding territory. Next to the 3D model, an immersive video installation will be set up, featuring a dual projection system: a vertical rear projection and a floor projection, both created with 3D content, an original soundtrack, and a dramatized narrative. Additionally, the use of avatars representing key historical figures—such as Frederick II or other members of his court—is planned. These avatars will be brought to life through holographic projections on life-size vertical LED screens. This approach will make it easier for visitors to take in the cultural, political, and social vision of the Swabian emperor, while also diving into the architectural styles of the period. Research has shown that avatars help boost learning outcomes and raise awareness of the historical environment. They play a key role in building up authentic and immersive experiences, fostering a deeper emotional connection with the cultural site and encouraging greater support for local communities [178] which could include the training of animated guides and local actors for shows, immersive visits and narrated walks. In each castle, visitors will come across an interactive table dedicated to a specific historical episode—for example, in Melfi, the virtual reconstructions will focus on the *Constitutiones Augustales*. At the end of the route, a game and quiz station will be set up to help visitors go over the knowledge they've acquired and to wrap up the experience in a participatory and engaging way. Edutainment and gamification are among the most engaging socio-educational tools, particularly for younger audiences [179,180]. These strategies stimulate

the return of visitors and the implementation of a direct promotion process [181]. Digital technologies will also be used to bring out the rich tradition of Falconry, recognized as a living heritage of humanity and listed since 2016 in the UNESCO Intangible Heritage Register as a transnational element [182]. Additionally, the project includes hands-on experimental archaeology workshops focusing on key aspects of medieval life—such as ceramics, food, writing, and heraldry—to help break down the anthropological and cultural dynamics of the Frederician period which can be created in partnership with local cultural associations. During these activities, participants will get to create various artifacts using historical techniques and raw materials, recreating experiences based on medieval craftsmanship [183–186]. In this multifaceted cognitive process, to make the sites even more engaging and draw in diverse audiences, the organization of historical reenactments, cultural events, temporary art exhibitions, and archaeological festivals with community participation will play a key role.

Historical reenactments and cultural events have been shown to significantly drive-up tourism by bringing in visitors eager to immerse themselves in local culture and history. This surge in tourism can, in turn, give a boost to the local economy and spur the growth of related industries [187,188].

For the Michaelic itinerary, the Abbey of San Michele Arcangelo (Monticchio Laghi) was chosen as the starting point, given the importance that this place has for the devotees of the Saint, in direct connection with the cult of Saint Michael in Gargano (Apulia). Monticchio is also a popular tourist destination, particularly during the summer season, due to the presence of volcanic lakes, nature reserves and the Natural History Museum of Vulture. The museum is notably dedicated to the *Acanthobrahmaea europaea*, a rare moth discovered in 1963 by South Tyrolean Count Federico Hartig (1900–1980) [189]. Furthermore, in Monticchio, there are plans to set up a multimedia center that serves as a stable point of reference and connection between the various local cultural and environmental resources. By starting off from a place already well-known to a broader audience, it will be easier to bring in tourist flows to lesser-known areas of Basilicata, setting off possible virtuous circles for the province of Potenza. The multimedia center will be made up of an innovative permanent installation featuring scenography that brings to life cave sanctuaries with woods, springs, and olfactory and sensorial elements (fragrances, sounds, different natural materials to touch). It will also include video projections and interactive stations that draw in visitors, making the experience evocative, emotional, and immersive. In fact, digital technologies also aim to open up new possibilities for inclusiveness, accessibility, extended heritage use, and greater equity in travel experiences [190]. Also, some technologies such as augmented and virtual reality (AR/VR) promote accessibility for travelers with disabilities [191]. Therefore, the multimedia center is designed to offer an immersive, perceptive, and accessible experience, also for people with sensory and cognitive disabilities, with particular attention to the blind and partially sighted. To overcome cultural, cognitive and psycho-sensory barriers, different supports will also be implemented: multimaterial tactile maps (e.g., a floor plan of the abbey, divided into different functional spaces), tactile prototypes (e.g., ex-votos, clay statuettes and anatomical votives associated with the Hellenistic sanctuaries found locally), tactile models (such as the replicase of rock churches), explanatory panels with highly legible characters (in AAC, Augmentative and Alternative Communication) or adapted into Braille, light filters, and audio and video explanations in Italian sign language (LIS), already integrated into other museum contexts and in archaeological areas of the national territory [192–194] and Basilicata [195]. The design and implementation of these services can be entrusted to the local community (e.g., cooperatives, cultural associations, or social enterprises) through participatory workshops. Community members may also contribute to managing the Multimedia Center, welcoming pilgrims through

family-based hospitality (homestays), and providing complementary services, including accessible transportation and dedicated assistance for individuals with disabilities.

In line with the theory of endogenous local development, the itineraries have been mapped out by tapping into the internal resources of the territory, ranging from cultural and environmental heritage to local traditions and knowledge. This approach has already been successfully carried out in other European contexts, notably on the Greek island of Syri (Dodecanese). On Syri, a network of thematic cultural itineraries has been set up, effectively bringing together diverse local assets—including archaeological sites, historic buildings, monumental landmarks, and environmental resources—and leveraging them as catalysts for sustainable local development [157]. Furthermore, the itineraries proposed in this study aim to make the most of territorial resources, boost the local economy, minimize environmental impact, revive historical and territorial identity, and foster inclusiveness and accessibility—all in alignment with Sustainable Development Goals (SDG) 8 and 11. These three itineraries offer concrete solutions designed to drive sustainable tourism development in Basilicata, structured around four key pillars: economy, environment, social impact, and inclusivity and accessibility (Figure 11).



**Figure 11.** Flowchart with solutions for sustainable tourism in Basilicata.

To reinforce the economy pillar, it is essential to encourage overnight stays and promote the purchase of products from short supply chains and local artisans. The three itineraries are deliberately designed to span two days, allowing tourists to stay in the area, immerse themselves in local traditions, and thereby contribute to the local economy. This approach opens up opportunities for agritourism, bed and breakfasts, and artisanal enterprises. In the areas examined (Potenza, Vulture, and Val d'Agri), there are currently 395 accommodation facilities [196], and within the region, craft businesses related to tourism account for 16.5% of the sector [197]. Each of the three proposed itineraries is firmly anchored in this first pillar, as their core aim is to strengthen the local economy and foster the creation of micro-businesses linked to distributed hospitality, traditional cuisine, and local craftsmanship.

The environmental pillar focuses on activities that harmonize with nature, particularly through alternative forms of mobility such as trekking, cycling, and horseback riding.

This theme is central to the *Via Herculia* itinerary, which includes the development of an Ecomuseum—an initiative that could attract investment in light infrastructure and eco-compatible services, thereby generating employment and income for local communities. Additionally, the project promotes eco-friendly accommodation that supports responsible tourism and prioritizes environmental sustainability and local economic growth. These include ‘albergo diffuso’ (widespread hotels) [198], holiday homes and farm stays [199], and glamping sites [200], all of which integrate low-impact solutions like solar panels, photovoltaic systems, and rainwater harvesting. The routes are further enhanced by the use of innovative technologies that align with sustainability goals by optimizing resource use. For example, visitors will be able to access real-time information about scheduled trekking activities or identify nearby eco-friendly lodging options.

From a social impact perspective, the itineraries aim to reinforce a sense of belonging to a shared historical heritage. This objective is particularly evident in the *Via Herculia* route, which supports the rediscovery of historical and territorial identity associated with the ancient Roman path through active civic engagement. Similarly, the itinerary dedicated to Frederick II seeks to foster emotional and cultural connection by narrating the story of the emperor and his historical legacy. The inclusivity and accessibility pillar is grounded in the concept of social sustainability, particularly emphasized in the St. Michael itinerary. This route includes subsidies and tourism initiatives specifically designed for individuals with cognitive, sensory, and motor disabilities. By adapting religious sites to accommodate all visitors, the itinerary expands its audience, increases demand for specialized services, and stimulates the local economy. Furthermore, the creation of accessible spiritual paths enhances the value of places of worship, promoting high-quality, inclusive tourism with positive impacts on local accommodations and related services.

The suggested thematic itineraries present a concrete chance for fighting seasonality of tourist streams [201–204] by making it possible to create a year-round tourism model. This is feasible by promoting a structured events calendar and experience planning distributed over the year. Combatting seasonality does more than help even out visitor flow throughout the year—to relieve ecosystems of strain, minimize accumulation of garbage, natural reserve contamination, and localized congestion—but also helps make the local economy more resilient by making residents and enterprises enjoy more stable income opportunities. In summary, the proposed itineraries represent operational declinations of the theory of endogenous local development, since they are based on the valorization of already existing cultural and natural heritage, on the active involvement of the local population, and on sustainable strategies capable of generating lasting benefits for the territory.

## 6. Limitations and Mitigation Strategies

This research presents two main limitations:

- (1) Economic constraints. The financial resources required to roll out the proposed enhancement activities may exceed the current budgetary capacity of local authorities. Nevertheless, municipalities could pool their resources and work together to reach the shared objective of improved accessibility and cultural engagement. A noteworthy example is the long-standing interest in the *Via Herculia*, as demonstrated by the “La Via delle Meraviglie” project, funded by the Ministry of Culture, which brings together 43 municipalities across Basilicata [205]. In addition, several low-cost or collaborative solutions could be carried out by sector-specific associations or even by students as part of educational or research initiatives. These might include mobile applications, interactive websites, 3D digital reconstructions, typhlo-didactic maps, and multimaterial informational panels. A crowd-sourcing approach could also be set

up to gather contributions, ideas, and even microfunding from the wider community, enhancing both participation and innovation in project development.

- (2) **Sample size limitations.** A second major limitation is the lack of consistent data on the number of visitors to each cultural site included in the proposed itineraries. In many cases, the absence of systematic ticketing makes it difficult to track and break down visitor demographics. Such statistical data would have been instrumental in carrying out a detailed analysis of audience types and in drawing up personalized tourism solutions tailored to specific target groups. Implementing digital access systems or smart counters in the future could help to fill in these data gaps and support evidence-based planning.

## 7. Conclusions

This research explored possible strategies to facilitate the tourist influx into inner areas that are traditionally left out of the most popular cultural routes. The approach was developed for a section of the Basilicata region (Southern Italy), which boasts a significant cultural heritage. Within the cultural itineraries proposed, specific actions for boosting visitor experience were then designed and tailored towards the development of different categories of tourism. One of the strength of this research is undoubtedly the accessibility of the itineraries presented, considering both the geographical contiguity of the selected sites and the short duration, which extends to just two days. Furthermore, the implementation of the proposed initiatives can be achieved by offering a more active role to local communities, inviting them to establish a participatory relationship with cultural heritage, recognizing it as a fundamental opportunity for identity and education. This will also be possible through the involvement of local stakeholders and cultural and creative industries to plan shared promotion and fruition interventions, which could constitute a driving force for socio-economic-cultural development. This aligns closely with the theory of endogenous local development, which emphasizes the importance of leveraging existing territorial assets while involve local actors.

The proposed approach is replicable in other Italian inner areas and Mediterranean countries, as it relies on integrated, theme-based planning adaptable to different territorial contexts. Future research will be oriented towards enhancing tourist fruition through integration with the natural heritage and especially with the geosites present in the territories analyzed, to offer the user a broader knowledge of the context explored.

**Supplementary Materials:** The following supporting information can be downloaded at: <https://www.mdpi.com/article/10.3390/su17104701/s1>, Supplementary File S1 named: "Database sites Figure 3" and Supplementary File S2 named: "Database sites Figure 9".

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