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RESEARCH TEXT

Via Regia – Traveling on royal paths in and around Leipzig

“You have to go through Leipzig” – Leipzig looks back on a long tradition as a trading and trade fair city. Its cultural roots lie in its advantageous location, which in the past made Leipzig an important hub for the economy of the Free State of Saxony.

The Via Regia

The Via Regia has been crossing eight European countries for over 4.500 years, with a length of around 2.000 kilometres, making it the longest land connection between Eastern and Western Europe. In addition to being used as a trade route, it was also used by the military and as a pilgrimage route to Santiago de Compostela. The Spanish city is the destination of the Way of St. James, as the tomb of the Apostle James is located there.

The term "Via Regia" originally describes a legal situation from the Middle Ages: roads that bore this name were under royal protection. During the times of the Holy Roman Empire of the German Nation, this protection was guaranteed. The road can be found under various names in historical sources. The oldest record of the term "strata regia" dates back to 1252 in a document issued by Margrave Henry the Illustrious for the diocese of Meissen. The German name "Hohe Straße" dates back to the 15th/16th century and describes the section of the trade route in German-speaking countries.

The journey on the route was characterized by short distances between the individual cities and a slow travel speed. Traders and merchants travelled from France to Ukraine according to the principle of slowing down.

Over time, the Via Regia lost importance - partly due to devastating wars that led to the decline of cities and a decline in long-distance trade. The construction of the railways from 1835 onwards also contributed to the loss of importance, as it was now possible to travel distances more quickly by rail. This made the transport of goods much easier.

The exact course of the Via Regia also changed constantly due to changing political circumstances. There were only a few fixed points in nature, such as certain river crossings or mountain ranges, that withstood the passage of time and historical events.

Today, the A4 motorway is the most important road connection between Germany and Poland and essentially follows the historical route of the former trade route. Since 2006, the Via Regia has been a "Cultural Route of the Council of Europe". This title is given to routes that lead through one or more countries that are of great interest because of their history. This Council of Europe project aims to strengthen the identity of European citizens and maintain the European cultural heritage.

Saxony as part of the Königsstraße

The Via Regia route begins in the Ukraine and leads through Poland, Germany, Belgium and France to Spain. The Free State of Saxony is also part of the cultural route - with Leipzig as the largest Saxon city on the route. With its central location at the junction of the Via Regia and Via Imperii, Leipzig developed into an important trading city. The trade fair privilege, which was granted by Emperor Maximilian I in 1497, was another milestone in the city's history. On the market place, in the middle of the city centre, a floor plaque commemorates the trade routes and shows the route through Central Europe. To this day, Leipzig has retained its reputation as an important trade fair city and is also the economic hub in eastern Germany.

On historical traces in the Leipzig region

There are numerous places worth seeing in the Leipzig region on the route from east to west. For example, the Lampertswalde manor with its well-maintained park which was built at the end of the 14th century. The former moated castle was originally used for defensive purposes. A moated castle was later built on the same site but was demolished after the Second World War. The original foundations can still be seen today. The park is characterized by rare botanical highlights, such as a plane tree, a pyramid-shaped oak or the large crocus meadow in spring.

The Dahlener Heide (Dahlen Heath) is also located on the Via Regia route. The flora and fauna of the 150 square kilometer landscape conservation area impresses with its extensive biodiversity. The town of Dahlen itself experienced some serious setbacks in the course of its historical development due to wars, city fires, famines and the plague. However, due to its favorable location on the Via Regia, it was always able to recover economically. Dahlen Castle with its associated castle park and the oldest tulip tree in Saxony also characterize the townscape. After a fire, the castle remained in ruins but has been under restoration since 2005. Another park worth seeing is at Großböhla Castle, a district of Dahlen.

The town of Oschatz lies between the Dahlener Heide (Dahlen Heath) and the Wermsdorfer Wald (Wermsdorf Forest). Its favorable location directly on the Via Regia trade route led to the town being founded around 1200. In the Middle Ages, a merchant settlement developed on the old market square, thus promoting the town's economic development. The town's most famous sight is the St. Aegidien Church, whose 75-meter-high towers can be seen from afar. Anyone who manages to climb the 199 steps

to the historic tower keeper's apartment will be rewarded with a "Schälchen Heeßen" (Saxon for a cup of coffee) and a breathtaking view of the town.

The Wurzen region is also part of the Via Regia route and has numerous attractions. With the Geopark Porphyryland (National Geopark Porphyry Land), interested parties can experience the history of the north-west Saxon stone industry first hand. Numerous educational trails, such as the geo-route "Kleiner Berg" (little mountain) or the Hohburg mining trail, offer interesting information about the quarries and mining in the region.

However, not only the Wurzen region is of interest but also the town of Wurzen itself. In the past, the Via Regia branched off in this area: the river Mulde ran through the route and, depending on the current water level, it could be crossed at three points - Eilenburg, Grimma or Wurzen. In Wurzen, the construction of a bridge was proposed as early as the end of the 17th century to continue and facilitate trade. This first railway bridge in Germany led to an economic boom in the town. Even today, Wurzen is known as an economically strong town: as the seat of two large food companies, it made a name for itself nationally. But Wurzen is also unique in cultural terms - whether as the birthplace of Joachim Ringelnatz or as a stop on the Way of St. James and Luther Trail.

The town of Grimma is another recognized VIA REGIA Begegnungsort (meeting place). The density of cultural and historical sites is particularly high on this part of the route. The city skyline of Grimma is characterized by historical buildings such as the castle, the 12th century Frauenkirche or the Renaissance town hall. In the 14th century, Grimma experienced its economic heyday - especially cloth makers, bakers and potters offered their goods for trade.

The northern branch over the Mulde runs through Eilenburg. The large district town on the edge of the Dübener Heide (Düben Heath) is a paradise for nature lovers and history buffs alike. Eilenburg benefited from the Via Regia for years and based a significant part of its wealth on it. This promoted trade and cultural exchange in the town. It is not without reason that Eilenburg's castle hill can be called the cradle of Saxony. The Wettin territorial state was born around 1089 with the investiture of Count Henry I of Eilenburg with the Margraviate of Meissen. This laid important foundations for the town's economic trading capacity.

The next stop on the Via Regia route is a town to the east of Leipzig, called Machern. The town, which is over 1000 years old, became famous for its grand castle and the noble family of Lindenau. The whole town is steeped in history. Since Püchau, a district of Machern, is the oldest town in Saxony. The bishops of Meissen also had a hand in this - around 1040, Püchau Castle became their worldly property. The town also gained economic importance through its direct connection to the long-distance railway, the Leipzig-Dresden Railway.

Finally, the Via Regia also runs through Leipzig. Above all, the numerous trading yards and trade fair buildings, which are still well preserved, characterize the Leipzig cityscape and promote Leipzig's trade history. The history of Leipzig's economy goes back to the 12th century, when the first markets were held. The Geleitschutzprivileg (escort protection privilege) issued in 1268 laid the foundation for long-distance trade and was accordingly also advantageous for the rise as a trade fair city. Leipzig played a particularly

important role in east-west trade, which can also be attributed to its location on the Via Regia and the support it received from the Saxon rulers.

The Via Regia, with its importance as the most important trade route in Europe, contributed to the economic boom of numerous Saxon cities. Regional and long-distance trade attracted a large number of traveling merchants, who later settled in Leipzig and the surrounding area. The memory of the trade route can still be experienced today with relics, signs and historical buildings.

Further Information

- https://www.leipzig.travel/en/