# COMMUNICATING AND TRANSLATING THE ROMAN HERITAGE ACROSS THE ROMAN LIMES CULTURAL ROUTE

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*Abstract*

Migration, demographic transformations, postmodern shifts and the rise of populism in some parts of the globe increasingly distance individuals from their cultural heritage. Thus, international organisations, such as UNESCO, encourage individuals to re-engage with their cultural roots. Cultural heritage is understood here as a cultural and social process through which communities construct meaning and identity. Considering audiences as active agents in interpreting heritage, this paper analyses how Roman heritage is communicated and translated along the Roman Limes cultural route. The research employs qualitative analysis of official documents, mapping of digital communication tools, and a systematic literature review. The Roman Limes exemplifies how historical borders, initially conceived for defence, gain new significance by connecting contemporary communities. Communicating heritage through digital tools enhances visitors' accessibility, giving them the possibility to engage with remote sites, without leaving their place. The process of reflecting on the treasured memory from the past readjust our identity, in accordance to a certain space and contemporaneous time.

**Key-words**: *cultural route, engagement, cultural mediation, digital tools, translation.*

### Introduction

The communication and interpretation of cultural heritage have become increasingly relevant in the contemporary context marked by migration, demographic shifts and rising populism in some parts of the globe. These phenomena encourage individuals to distance themselves from their past, weakening the connection with their cultural legacy. In this context, United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), besides

other international organisations, actively promote initiatives designed to strengthen the relationship between citizens and their cultural heritage.

For our case study, cultural heritage is regarded as a cultural and social process, a discursive construction through which communities assign meaning and value to their environment (Smith, 2006). Heritage audiences, considered as being active agents, participate in mediating and reconstructing those meanings (Vujicic-Lugassy & Frank, 2013). Although, UNESCO's definition of intangible heritage emphasises practices, expressions, and knowledge, even material heritage entails intangible dimensions, such as memory, emotion, and meaning. Thus, for the interpretation of Roman heritage we focus on both dimensions. Communicating and translating the Roman heritage for the audiences implies to create a sense of the place, enhance awareness of the Roman culture, and facilitate understanding of the historical events.

## 1. Research Methods

The research employs a qualitative methodology such as documentary analysis, mapping of digital communication tools and a systematic literature review. Firstly, we proceeded on reviewing official documents and communication materials produced by organisations responsible for managing, interpreting, and promoting the Roman Limes cultural route. Further, we identified and classified digital instruments used for communication and interpretation across the route: websites, mobile applications, AR/VR tools, digital guides, and social media platforms. Finally, we integrated theoretical perspectives from cultural studies, communication studies, and heritage interpretation to contextualize practices observed along the route and evaluate the current state of communication of the Dacian Limes to identify opportunities for improvement.

## 2. Relevance of the Research

Digitalisation and creativity increasingly reshape cultural tourism by transforming how visitors encounter, understand, and emotionally connect with heritage sites. The Roman Limes cultural route, spanning several countries, provides an exemplary context for examining the communication and translation of heritage at a transnational scale. The paper highlights how digital tools enhance accessibility, support engagement, and foster active cultural participation, transforming visitors from passive receptors to co-creators of meaning. Understanding those dynamics is vital for both heritage managers and cultural communication practitioners.

## 3. The Roman Limes as UNESCO World Heritage

The Frontiers of the Roman Empire (Roman Limes) were first included on the UNESCO World Heritage List in 1987, with subsequent extensions in 2005, 2008, 2021 and 2024 (see Table 1). The system comprises fortifications, roads, and watchtowers marking the boundaries of the Empire across Europe, spanning the United Kingdom, Germany, Austria, the Netherlands, Hungary and Romania. As a transnational heritage site, the Roman Limes benefits from coordinated international management. Each national segment further develops local

conservation strategies, ensures accessibility, and supports stakeholder involvement, following UNESCO guidelines for sustainable use and interpretation.

Historical borders that once served defensive functions have transformed into cultural bridges connecting nations and communities (Jones, 2021). The Roman Limes thus embodies both tangible and intangible values, linking memory, identity, and contemporary narratives.

**Table 1. Summary of UNESCO-Inscribed Limes Segments in Europe**

| Segment | Country/ Countries | UNESCO Status | Source |
|---|---|---|---|
| Hadrian's Wall | United Kingdom | Inscribed 1987 (part of FRE) | UNESCO WHC Site 430 |
| Upper German–Raetian Limes | Germany | Inscribed 2005 | UNESCO WHC Site 430 |
| Antonine Wall | United Kingdom | Inscribed 2008 | UNESCO WHC Site 430 |
| Lower German Limes | Germany, Netherlands | Inscribed 2021 | UNESCO WHC Site 1631 |
| Danube Limes (Western Segment) | Germany, Austria, Slovakia | Inscribed 2021 | UNESCO WHC Site 1608 |
| Limes Dacia | Romania | Inscribed 2024 | UNESCO WHC Site 1718 |

**Source: authors**

Even if there are not part of the UNESCO designation, we note the existence of two cultural routes that are connected to the Roman Limes system. **The Roman Emperors and Danube Wine Route**, certified in 2015 by the Institute of Cultural Route (Council of Europe) and **Roman Legacy (Roman Danube Limes Route)**, currently under development as a future cultural route (Roman Legacy Project). These initiatives overlap with UNESCO segments and play an important role in heritage communication, cultural branding and mediation along the frontier.

The only segment of the Roman frontier that is currently inscribed on the UNESCO World Heritage List and lies entirely within the territory of Romania is the property *Frontiers of the Roman Empire- Dacia.* It was added to the List in

2024 and represents the longest and most complex land frontier of a former Roman province in Europe (UNESCO World Heritage Centre).

Within the Romanian context, the inclusion of the Dacian Limes significantly increases the country's representation on the World Heritage List. Romania now counts eleven World Heritage Sites, of which the frontiers of Dacia are among the most recent additions (List of World Heritage Sites in Romania, 2024) and this inscription enhances the international visibility of Romania's Roman archaeological heritage (Radio România Internațional, 2024).

The Dacian Limes corresponds to the fortified borders of the Roman province of Dacia, between the year 106 and 271 and the property comprises 277 component parts, distributed across a wide variety of landscapes in present-day Romania, from the Danube valley to the Transylvanian Plateau and the lowlands of Muntenia (UNESCO World Heritage Centre). UNESCO recognizes the Dacian frontier as having Outstanding Universal Value. All 277 component parts of the *Frontiers of the Roman Empire- Dacia* are legally protected under Romanian heritage legislation and are registered in the National Archaeological Record (Repertoriul Arheologic Național- RAN).

Their protection is further reinforced through spatial-planning instruments, including general urban plans and local regulations that integrate buffer zones and landscape protection. The management system operates on several levels and involves the Ministry of Culture, county councils, the National Institute of Heritage and the National Limes Commission, which coordinates research and monitoring activities (Breeze, Marcu, Cupcea, 2022). A dedicated UNESCO Organising Committee is planned to ensure coordination between these institutions and to support the implementation of management plans for each cluster of sites. Romania also participates in the wider *Frontiers of the Roman Empire World Heritage Cluster* and in transnational initiatives aimed at harmonising the research, conservation and interpretation of Roman frontiers across Europe (Popa, 2020). This transnational framework is particularly relevant for the development of cultural routes and coordinated communication strategies along the Roman Limes.

At the same time, the World Heritage status encourages the use of innovative interpretation tools like digital mapping, virtual tours, augmented reality applications and social media campaigns, all designed to make a geographically, often invisible, archaeological frontier accessible to both local communities and international visitors.

### 4. Communicating and Interpreting the Roman Heritage across the route

#### 4.1. Guiding activities as communicational practice

Guiding activities in the galleries, libraries, archives and museums (GLAM) along the route represent both communication and performance, at the same time. Heritage interpretation, as a conceptual model includes: the phenomenon, the audience, and the interpreter or media conveying the message (Ludwig 2015).

### 4.2 Co-creating with the Audience along the Route

Contemporary communication strategies prioritise engagement, as visitors are challenged to co-create experiences, renegotiate expectations, and reinterpret identity. Access and interaction are prerequisites for this engagement, as real participation requires active involvement and shared agency (Carpentier 2011).

Creative outputs built upon the World Heritage brand, such as artistic interventions, interactive experiences, or co-created digital content, reinforce the visibility and relevance of the Roman frontiers.

Implication of creative industries for communicating and branding of the Roman frontiers heritage sites build on the World Heritage brand and the universal outstanding value of the archaeological structure (Frontiers of the Roman Empire Management Plan).

The communication and interpretation processes serve multiple functions: they facilitate heritage engagement for those who feel excluded, create space for marginalized voices, and identify ways to motivate passive audiences toward active participation in cultural heritage experiences. The goal is fostering a culture of sharing while developing reflexivity and empathy among audiences (Simionescu 2018).

### 4.3. Use of Digital Tools in Communicating and Translation of Roman Heritage

With the increase of online communication, digital tools such as mobile applications, augmented reality, virtual reconstructions, and gamified experiences support immersive engagement, making heritage more understandable and attractive to global audiences (Portalés et al. 2018). Educational platforms like Google Arts & Culture or Europeana host 3D models, educational resources, and virtual tours, extending access to audiences unable to physically visit the sites. Digital technologies help audiences visualise opaque or reconstructed heritage elements, while some other digital tools reveal hidden layers (archaeological remains), or encourage interaction and decision-making ((Petrelli and Roberts 2023).

The Roman Limes cultural route relies on a broad ecosystem of social media pages and online communities (UNESCO networks, Hadrian's Wall platforms, Limes Romania, etc.), contributing to its visibility and community engagement.

### 4.4. Cross-border communication challenges

The cultural management practices in the field of cultural heritage management, are moving from a top-down approach to a more inclusive bottom up, grass roots approach, trying to involve the local community in the stewardship of the cultural heritage (Romero and Herrera 2024). When dealing with a transnational cultural heritage, there is a need of cross-border cooperation among different actors in the field, along with a private and public partnership for achieving the best possible results (Petković, Werner, and Pindžo, 2019). A transnational cultural route demands consistent messaging, multilingual

accessibility, and collaboration between diverse stakeholders. Translating specialised heritage knowledge into accessible narratives is essential (Neves, 2018).

### 5. Comparative Analysis of Heritage Communication Practices Across the Roman Limes: Lessons for Romania

This section aims at identifying how the Roman frontiers in Romania (Frontiers of the Roman Empire- Dacia) can be more effectively communicated and promoted by using European best practices as benchmarks. The analysis is based on document review, online content evaluation, social media mapping, and comparative heritage communication studies. To evaluate the current state of communication of the Dacian Limes and to identify opportunities for improvement, the research employs a comparative gap analysis. This method contrasts:

- best practices from European Roman Limes segments (e.g., Hadrian's Wall, Upper German- Raetian Limes, Lower German Limes, Frontiers of the Roman Empire- The Danube Limes (Western Segment);
- the Romanian situation, as reflected in existing digital platforms, institutional communication strategies, local museum initiatives, national heritage registers, and available promotional materials.

The gap analysis framework assesses five dimensions relevant for heritage communication and cultural interpretation: digital presence and digital mediation tools, branding and visual identity, on-site interpretation and visitor infrastructure, community engagement and educational outreach and transnational cooperation and funding initiatives. This structure allows for a systematic identification of deficits and opportunities for the Romanian Limes.

For the Hadrian's Wall (United Kingdom) we identified a highly professional digital ecosystem, such as dedicated website, social media campaigns, virtual reconstructions. There is a strong storytelling centred around the Roman legacy, using short films, narratives, and interactive timelines. We observe the integration of tourism packages and thematic routes in the websites.

Upper German–Raetian Limes (Germany) have also a cohesive branding (German Limes Road Association /„German Limes Road"), recognisable across all segments, standardised interpretive panels and uniform visitor signage. There is an extensive line of museums and visitor centres along the route.

The Lower German Limes (Netherlands–Germany) is proof of exceptional digital innovation, displaying virtual 3D models, augmented reality experiences and online exhibitions.

Danube Limes (Austria–Slovakia–Germany) is trying to establish a strong EU digital communication strategy in the Danube Region (Roman Legacy as part of Interreg Danube). We observe high-quality online maps, reconstructions and multimedia content.

The analysis of the communication and branding of the above mentioned cultural routes indicate towards: a clear and unified branding; use of multilingual, interactive digital platforms; the quality of the on-site interpretive quality; employment of immersive technologies (VR/AR/3D); strong stakeholder

cooperation and design of community involvement and participatory programmes, as successful factors.

The Romanian segment of the Roman Limes presents a mixed landscape with significant potential but currently low public visibility. The analysis identifies the following characteristics:

- for assessing the digital presence, we analysed the official website (limesromania.ro). The structure, usability, and multilingual availability are limited, also the digital visualization is reduced: no widely-publicised virtual reconstructions, no prominent 3D models, no interactive maps publicly highlighted. Social media presence is fragmented and mostly operated by local museums, not by a central coordinating body (Facebook page "Limes – Frontierele Imperiului Roman în România").

- in Romania, the Roman Limes lacks a unified branding and visual identity with a recognisable visual identity (logo, colour scheme, signage templates) comparable to the German Limes Road model. No public documentation of a consistent signage/branding scheme at national level is evident from the reviewed sources.

- regarding on-site interpretation, according to the nomination dossier for the Frontiers of the Roman Empire- Dacia, visitor infrastructure and interpretation strategy are still under development (interpretation strategy listed under "Protection and management requirements"). Many component sites currently have little or no signage; panels vary in language, quality, and visual coherence; few dedicated visitor centres operate specifically for the Roman frontier segments.

- as for community engagement, while there is an emerging National Limes Programme and some local initiatives (as mentioned in scholarly literature), the scale of volunteer programmes, participatory archaeology, educational kits, or cultural festivals dedicated to the Roman frontier appears limited compared to European benchmarks.

- regarding funding and transnational cooperation, Romania takes part in transnational projects (Roman Legacy Project), but appears less active in major European Limes communication and interpretation projects compared to Germany or Austria. The nomination dossier notes the need for coordination and monitoring across agencies (UNESCO World Heritage Centre).

Romania shows high cultural value assets (as recognised by UNESCO for the Dacian Limes) but compared with the performance of the other European routes regarding communication and interpretation of the route, we observe a significant gap between its potential and the current visibility.

**Table 2. Communicational Practices at European level vs. Romania**

| Dimension | European Best Practice | Romania current state | Gap |
|---|---|---|---|
| Digital presence | High-quality websites, apps, VR/AR | Minimal, fragmented | High |
| Branding | Unified, recognisable brand and signage | No consistent national brand | Very High |
| On-site interpretation | Standardised, visitor-friendly, multi-language | Inconsistent, often absent signage, few centres | Very High |
| Community engagement | Volunteer programmes, creative participation | Limited initiatives | Medium-High |
| Transnational cooperation | Strong networks + EU projects | Moderate engagement | Medium |

Source: authors

For Romania, the inscription of the Dacian Limes as a World Heritage Site offers a strong symbolic and institutional framework for the communication and translation of Roman heritage to contemporary audiences. National and regional tourism strategies and touristic offers increasingly present the Dacian Limes as a unifying narrative thread that connects diverse regions of the country through a shared archaeological landscape (Romania Tourism – World Heritage Sites, 2024).

**Conclusions**

The World Heritage status encourages the selected countries to use innovative interpretation tools (digital mapping, virtual tours, augmented reality applications and social media campaigns) to increase visibility and accessibility to geographically dispersed and often "invisible" archaeological sites, for both local communities and international visitors. Thus, communicating and translating the Roman heritage across the Roman Limes cultural route requires coordinated efforts involving interpretation, digital innovation, and transnational collaboration. Digital tools enhance accessibility and engagement, allowing visitors to engage and co-create with the historical heritage.

The promotion of the Roman legacy across The Roman Limes UNESCO route demonstrates how historical borders can be transformed into cultural connectors, fostering identity-building and intercultural dialogue.

The comparative analysis regarding communication and interpretation of different well established European routes and the *Frontiers of the Roman Empire-Dacia* shows that although the *Romanian segment* represents one of the most extensive and archaeologically valuable part of the Roman frontier system listed by UNESCO, its public visibility, digital presence and communication performance remain significantly below European standards. To fill the communicational gap, the following strategic directions emerge for transforming

the Dacian Limes into a more visible, meaningful and engaging heritage experience: Develop a unified national branding system, build a modern digital ecosystem, improve on-site visitor experience, sstrengthen community involvement and expand participation in European heritage networks.

In the end, the process of reflecting on the treasured memory from the past readjust our identity, in accordance to a certain space and contemporaneous time.

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