THE SACRED TRIANGLE OF ANCIENT GREECE: AN EXPERIENTIAL EDUCATIONAL APPROACH TO CLASSICAL ARCHITECTURE AS A PARADIGM OF SUSTAINABLE REGIONAL DEVELOPMENT AND CULTURAL ENTREPRENEURSHIP

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Abstract
The Sacred Triangle is a hypothetical architectural masterplan supposedly developed in classical Greece to incorporate three temples (the Temple of Poseidon at Cape Sounion, the Temple of Aphaia on the island of Aegina, and the Temple of Hephaestus on top of the Agoraios Kolonos hill at the Agora of Athens).

The purpose of this supposed sacred design remains obscure and open to scholarly debate. Ancient philosophers and geographers (Aristotle, Strabo, etc.) acknowledge that the sites for these temples were not selected randomly. They abide by an internal and occult methodology, though no ancient source seemed willing to reveal the reason and details of the doctrines or ideas underscoring their construction. Modern scholars continue to debate the Sacred Triangle's existence and pursue methods to understand and highlight the multiple levels of meaning attached to ancient Greek religious sites.

The present paper investigates the potential of the three archaeological sites comprising the traditional Sacred Triangle as pillars of sustainable local and regional development. In the early 21st century, all three temples remain popular tourist destinations, attracting hundreds of thousands of visitors annually. Being close enough to Athens to allow for daily excursions, Cape Sounion and the island of Aegina, in particular, combine attractive natural landscapes with a wealth of historical and mythological associations that enrich the visitor experience and enhance the educational role of these monuments in terms of ancient architecture, mythology, use of resources, and sustainability.

It is clear that the concept of the Sacred Triangle can serve as a catalyst to increase public awareness of these ancient sites on a global scale and become the foundation stone for an experiential educational approach to mobilizing material and immaterial culture in the service of sustainable regional development.

Keywords: *Sacred Triangle, Ancient Greece, Education, Tourism, Sustainability*

1. Introduction

The Sacred Triangle is a hypothetical architectural masterplan supposedly developed in classical Greece to incorporate three temples. The purpose of this supposed sacred design remains obscure and open to scholarly debate. Ancient philosophers and geographers acknowledge that the sites for these temples were not selected randomly. They abide by an internal and occult methodology, though no primary source seemed willing to reveal the reason and details of the doctrines or ideas underscoring their construction. Modern scholars continue to debate the Sacred Triangle's existence and pursue methods to understand and highlight the multiple levels of meaning attached to ancient Greek religious sites.

2. The Sacred Triangle in Ancient Greece

This paper investigates the potential of the three archaeological sites comprising the traditional Sacred Triangle as pillars of sustainable local and regional development. In the early 21st century, all three temples remain popular tourist destinations, attracting hundreds of thousands of visitors annually. Being close enough to Athens to allow for daily excursions, Cape Sounion and the island of Aegina, in particular, combine attractive natural landscapes with a wealth of historical and mythological associations that enrich the visitor experience and enhance the educational role of these monuments in terms of ancient architecture, mythology, use of resources, and sustainability.

The concept of the Sacred Triangle can serve as a catalyst to increase public awareness of these ancient sites on a global scale and become the foundation stone for an experiential educational approach to mobilising material and immaterial culture in the service of sustainable regional development.

In its most rudimentary form, the theory of the Sacred Triangle in ancient Greece claims that three temples (the Temple of Hephaestus in Athens, the Temple of Poseidon in Sounio, and the Temple of Aphaia in Aegina) form an isosceles triangle following a sacred geography and a desire to build sanctuaries based on an occult methodology. The theory was initially formulated by Jean Richer, a French professor of literature passionate about symbolism, who supposedly had a dream in the late 1950s while in Delphi. In his dream, the god Apollo turned 180 degrees to face him. When Richer woke up, he started drawing lines on a map, joining Delphi, Athens, and Delos and revealing what he interpreted as the spatial and geometric connection between these sacred sites [Richer, 1994]. A few years later, the concept of the Sacred Triangle became even more popular after Theofanis Manias, a Greek veterinarian, published his study on the geodetic triangulation of ancient Greek temples [Manias, 1973].

The Temple of Hephaestus (popularly known as the Hephaisteion or the Thiseion) is a Doric hexastyle peripteral temple on a low hill west of the classical Agora of Athens (Coordinates: 37°58′32.22″N, 23°43′17.01″E). The temple has six columns on the short east and west sides and thirteen columns along the longer north and south sides. It also has a pronaos and an opisthodomos. The temple was jointly dedicated to Hephaestus (the lame god of fire and metallurgy) and Athena (the goddess of wisdom and artisans). Construction began in 449 BCE but was delayed for over three decades as funds and workers were redirected to the Parthenon on the Acropolis [Camp, 1992 and Dinsmoor, 1975].

The Temple of Poseidon at Cape Sounion is another Doric hexastyle peripteral temple located on the southernmost tip of the Attica peninsula, approximately seventy kilometres from downtown Athens (Coordinates: 37.6592°N, 24.0148°E). This temple also has six columns on the short sides and thirteen on the north and south sides. It also has a pronaos and an opisthodomos. The temple was dedicated to Poseidon (the god of the sea and earthquakes).

It was constructed between 444 and 440 BCE to replace an Archaic building that the Persians had destroyed in 480/79 BCE [Theodoropoulou-Polychroniadis, 2015].

The Temple of Aphaia was another hexastyle peripteral Doric order structure with a pronaos and opisthodomos. Unlike the other two temples, this has six columns on the short sides and twelve on the north and south sides. Aphaia was a relatively minor Greek goddess worshipped almost exclusively on the island of Aegina. Initially, she was associated with fertility and the agricultural cycle but was subsequently identified with the goddesses Athena and Artemis and a nymph called Britomartis. The sanctuary of Aphaia was on a low hill on the island's eastern side, approximately thirteen kilometres east of Aegina's main port (Coordinates: 37°45′15″N, 23°32′00″E). The Temple of Aphaia is the oldest of the three structures forming the Sacred Triangle, having been built around 500 BCE over the remains of a much older temple that was constructed circa 570 BCE (and destroyed circa 510 BCE) [Pilafidis-Williams, 1987 and Cartledge, 2002].

This rudimentary and concise description of the three temples suffices to raise a few key points. The structures exhibit many similarities in their plan and architectural style. In fact, the Temple of Hephaestus and the Temple of Poseidon are so similar that the American architectural historian William Bell Dinsmoor argued in the late 1930s for the presence of an (otherwise) nameless architect who designed the temples. Dinsmoor conventionally called him The Hephaisteion Master and credited him with two other temples in Attica (the Temple of Ares in the Agora and the Temple of Nemesis at Rhamnous).

The career of the Hephaisteion Master and his role in constructing two of the supposed triangle's three temples could have some significance in supporting the theory. However, the existence of the Hephaisteion Master remains a controversial proposition since his existence has never been positively demonstrated. Dinsmoor also made disputed assumptions regarding the construction dates of the temples assigned to the architect's oeuvre and proposed the controversial theory that the axes of the temples were laid out on the corresponding deities' birthdays [Seaman and Schultz, 2017].

However, the construction dates of the three temples do not seem to lend credence to the notion of a grand plan to create a masterful representation of an occult message on the ground. Decades or centuries separated the buildings or the period when a particular site was selected to construct a sanctuary. It is also a relatively undisputed fact that the ancient Greeks had more mundane guidelines in choosing the area of a temple. Most religious and civic authorities preferred locations at or near the top of a hill [Camp and Dinsmoor, 1984]. Accessibility and visibility were equally important. Aristotle favoured the so-called conspicuousness (ἐπιφάνεια). At the same time, Xenophon wrote about the need to place altars and temples in conspicuous places that stand out and are off the beaten path (χώραν ἔφη εἶναι πρεπωδεστάτην), so that visitors would be pleasantly surprised upon seeing them and would approach them in a state of religious purity [Mikalson, 2010, p.133].

Plato was even more adamant on the method by which the site for an altar or temple was selected, favouring the role of the gods: oracles, visions, and direct divine intervention guided earlier generations in consecrating sanctuaries and temples. Subsequent architects and politicians had to show appropriate respect for pre-existing sanctuaries, thus limiting their ability to do as they pleased with their architectural projects [Mikalson, 2010, p.132].

3. Employing the concept of the Sacred Triangle

This paper's aim is not to prove or disprove the reality of the Sacred Triangle. However, this construct has proven helpful in marketing and promoting tours and day trips in Athens, and its environs centred on the concept of the Sacred Triangle. A rudimentary online search returns more than nine million pages for the keywords "the sacred triangle, ancient Greece." The top

results belong to Greek tour operators who anchor their promotional material on Greece's "strong association with being the birthplace of Western mathematics and geometry" and claim that the construction of the three temples was part of a grander design whose ultimate goal remains unclear but subject to scholarly or not-so-scholarly research.

A typical approach argues for "points of natural energy" or the temples' function as a celestial sphere map [Greek Mythology Tours, 2023]. Other tour operators employ the symmetry and its relation to "the motions of the various celestial bodies" as food for thought before encouraging prospective tourists to participate in a "different and exciting journey of acquaintance with the three sanctuaries" [Culture Stories in Greece, 2023]. There is the customary reference to the "ingenuity and intelligence of the ancient Greeks" that "impresses and awes the global astrophysical and geodynamic community" since architects managed to correctly position their buildings without letting the "interference of the sea" affect their calculations [Athens One Day Cruise, 2023].

The effectiveness of this hardly scientific approach to the popularity of the temples above as cultural and sightseeing products remains to be proven. However, what is indisputable is the positive coefficient between tourist legends and the creation of what has been described as "attractive destination properties". Myths and legends have been described as branding marketing tools and critical elements in designing tourist experiences within tourism destinations [Pérez-Aranda, 2015].

In a paper published eight years ago, Oleg Afanasiev and Aleksandra Afanaseva focused on the concept of "tourist legend". They enumerated its fundamental properties: a basic plot, the territorial association with a specific tourist location, the identification and employment of social and tourism functions (entertainment, didactic, motivational, etc.), and a positive contribution to the formation of an attractive image of a spot or broader territory [Afanasiev and Afanaseva, 2015].

More recently, Dorothy Yen, Jungmin Jang, Liyuan Wei, Nigel Morgan and Annette Pritchard explored the role of folklore and fantasy in promoting small destinations [Manola, 2019]. Destination management organisations or other related agencies can enlist story-telling, screen tourism, and product development to establish the proper tourism policies that will encourage and support visitor engagement with resource-constrained places [Yen *et al.*, 2023].

Other authors have addressed the elements that contribute to turning a site into a tourist-worthy destination. Colour (natural scenery or native ways of life), action (entertainment and recreation possibilities), emotion (material or abstract things that generate an emotional response), and uniqueness have been listed as factors affecting the attractiveness of a destination or tourism product [Manola & Koufadakis, 2022]. The diversity and interrelation of these components generate different mixtures of products. The most successful destinations usually have the broadest combination of these ingredients that appeal to the most people [Zurbito, 2023].

In that regard, the concept of the Sacred Triangle can become a useful promotional tool in regional development. Despite its ambiguous scholarly relevance and the fundamental absence of primary references to its validity, the Sacred Triangle has become a legend of sorts with broad popular appeal. There seems to be no official use of the concept in promoting the archaeological sites in the isosceles triangle. Nevertheless, the private sector appears to have no qualms about employing the confidence in the mystical or (supposedly) little-understood capacity of the ancient Greeks in geometry, mathematics, astronomy, and architecture to create tourism products. A resourceful combination of references to reputable ancient sources (Aristotle, Strabo, etc.) with the natural and man-made beauty of the three temples forming the triangle seems to suffice as a generator of foot traffic, at least judging by the proliferation of tourist products catering to this particular concept [Manola *et al.*, 2021].

4. Accessibility and development of an optimum tourism transport network

However, further development and employment of the Sacred Triangle as a marketing tool hinges on the sites' accessibility. The literature has paid particular attention to the role of improved accessibility and the development of an optimum transport network for tourism purposes. Offering visitors the opportunity to enjoy activities must be based on strategies that promote and support tourism in any given destination. In an increasingly connected world of growing competitiveness, policymakers and other shareholders in the travel and tourism industries are forced to adopt different strategies to console the destination image and secure the loyalty of their clients [Sharma, 2019].

Accessibility is fundamental to the success of a destination since it enables larger numbers of visitors to appreciate its unique mixture and serve as potential prescribers. Transport infrastructure underpins tourism development. Modern road networks, new or upgraded transport routes, and the streamlining of pubic transport improve the accessibility of tourist attractions and facilitate the management of tourist flows to benefit local or regional economies and communities [Więckowski, 2012].

The sanctuaries forming part of the Sacred Triangle offer different accessibility opportunities and challenges based on location. The Temple of Hephaestus is the most readily accessible. Located in downtown Athens, at the heart of the expansive archaeological site of the Ancient Agora, the temple is conveniently located within walking distance from two stations of the Athens Metro: Monastiraki on the Blue Line is 350 metres away (a four-minute walk). At the same time, Thissio on the Green Line is even closer (300 metres). Vehicles are far less useful since there are no designated parking facilities nearby. At the same time, the bus network suffers from infrequent or unreliable service (especially on weekends or during the high tourist season).

The Temple of Poseidon is located approximately 61 kilometres from Syntagma Square. There are three ways to visit the temple. Visitors can rent a car or hire a taxi to reach Sounio. The cost varies considerably, depending on the rental company or the gas price. Nevertheless, even in the best circumstances, it is bound to reach a minimum of twenty euros just for the gasoline required to reach your destination (based on gas prices in the fall of 2023). The road is reasonably well maintained, but it is poorly designed with lots of sudden curves. In addition, high traffic volumes on public holidays or bad driving behaviour by fellow road users can prove challenging to those not accustomed to driving in Greece.

The most inexpensive (and safest) way to visit the temple is by a regional bus called KTEL. The buses depart from a bus stop opposite Pedion tou Areos, close to Victoria Metro Station on the Green Line. There are only two direct buses daily (leaving at 10:30 and 14:30 and returning at 13:45 and 17:30), and the journey lasts approximately two hours (depending on the traffic). They are reasonably inexpensive since a one-way ticket costs about 6.5 euros, with discounts for students and other special groups of passengers. There are also about twelve buses going to Lavrio daily. Still, they are not as convenient as the direct route since they stop in numerous towns along the way, and Lavrio is not within walking distance of the Temple of Poseidon. Unfortunately, the KTEL website is not regularly updated, so procuring pertinent information regarding bus timetables and ticket prices can be challenging.

The Temple of Aphaia is the most difficult to reach since it is located on the eastern coast of the island of Aegina. The island is serviced by ferries that sail frequently daily and throughout the year. The journey from the port of Piraeus to the port of Aegina lasts approximately sixty minutes. High winds or industrial action may hinder the ferry's departure, but such events are infrequent. Once on the island, prospective visitors can use the local KTEL bus between the town of Aegina and the village of Agia Marina to reach the Temple of Aphaia. The bus runs several times daily, especially during the busy tourist season in the

summertime. The bus takes twenty-five minutes from town, and the fare is inexpensive (two euros). As with the Temple of Poseidon, visitors need to confirm the on-site bus schedule since the website may not be regularly updated. Alternatively, you can rent a car (prices vary depending on the company and the rental agreement) and expect to pay approximately three or four euros for the gasoline needed to cover the twelve kilometres from downtown Aegina to the archaeological site. Finally, visitors can also use a taxi, with the price ranging from 14 to 18 euros (fall 2023).

The overall accessibility to the three temples can be described as adequate. The existing road and public transportation network is satisfying (with certain caveats regarding the volume of visitors during the peak of the tourist season in the summertime), and there are several options to reach the destinations depending on financial or time restraints.

5. Cultural entrepreneurship potential

As an alternative form of tourism, archaeological tourism has the potential to enhance the cultural reserve of the temples forming the Sacred Triangle. Visits to monuments, such as archaeological sites, and participation in events that are essential components of the intangible cultural heritage are characteristic elements of cultural tourism. In this context, cultural tourism contributes to the hierarchical improvement and interconnection of the country's museums, monuments, and archaeological capital. (Vardopoulos, et al,2021) Archaeological sites and monuments become more accessible and visible, while stakeholders try to improve organisation and support through the appropriate infrastructure projects. Cultural tourism also highlights local and regional cultural resources and peculiarities, incorporates them into tourist networks, and underpins the creation of museums and theme parks [Mitoula *et al.*, 2008].

A. Regarding cultural entrepreneurship in the three temples, we could propose the creation of multi-space digital representations of historical, mythological and other cultural narratives.

B. It is imperative to ensure accessibility, increase footfall, and create a better organisation centred on local stakeholders, entrepreneurs, and businesses encouraged to take the initiative.

C. Support, promote, and establish festivals, cultural institutions, and other events. A fine example of such initiatives is establishing a *Mythological Park* inspired by Poseidon, the god of the sea. This park will become an outlet for the cultural expression of Cape Sounion residents and will contribute to the area's overall development through cultural tourism from nearby Athens. (Vardopoulos, et al,2023).

D. Establish an annual festival dedicated to Poseidon and Aphaia Athena in areas associated with their respective myths. The festival's innovation will be the association with mythological figures and will recreate the stories that supposedly occurred in its locality. The festival should aim to attract a global audience and participants from as many countries as possible. Both goals are attainable through financing in the context of corporate social responsibility (an EU initiative for sustainable development and financial support for cultural activities). A global conference will attempt to connect and coordinate cultural and corporate activities centred on the "Poseidon and Aphaia Athena" axis (Michopoulou, et al., 2021).

E. The Temple of Aphaia in Aegina can serve as the background for the recreation of the deity's myth and her escape from King Minos, who chased her from the island of Crete to the cave in the temple. Such a play will attract spectators and trigger forms of cultural activity and entrepreneurship by residents.

F. Another proposal for cultural entrepreneurship is based on adding a boat route connecting the temple of Aphaia with the temple of Poseidon in Sounion. Passengers will

have the opportunity to enjoy Greek food and music while sailing between the two archaeological sites.

G. Creating thematic culture itineraries of an experiential nature can provide recreation and education and contribute to cultural entrepreneurship either as tourist agency packages or through regional buses (KTEL) and private coaches that will increase demand (Michopoulou, & Maniou, 2020).

Availing of the local tangible or intangible cultural reserves can contribute decisively to the promotion of the tourist product *The Sacred Triangle of Ancient Greece*, which can stimulate the competitiveness of European tourism, create new jobs, protect the environment, and promote sustainable development by improving the quality of available tourist services [Manola, 2022].

6. Research results

Two hundred fifty questionnaires were sent, and 238 were filled out correctly. The answers came from students, secondary school teachers, and the students' family and friends. All responses were entered into the program, from which the results will be graphed descriptively.

Research Participant Profiles

Initially, the participants' results are presented by gender, age group, educational background, marital status and employment status.

Most participants (55%) were women. Men accounted for 38.20%, while 6.70% answered Other.
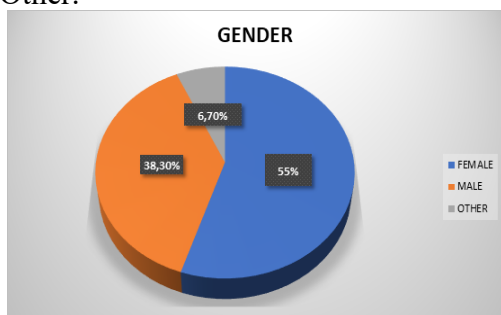
Figure 1: Gender

The largest percentage of participants belongs to the 18-24 age group, 66%, followed by the age group of 25-30 12%, age group of 31-40 and age group of 41-50 9% each and age group of 51-60 4%.
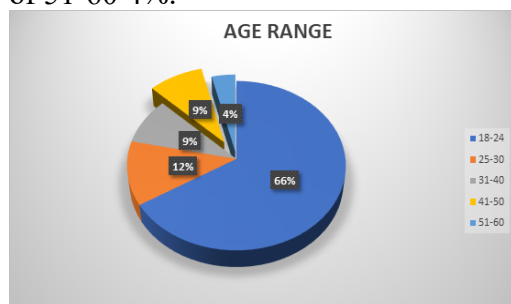

Figure 2: Age Range

Regarding the level of education of the participants 61% are Secondary education. graduates, the categories are following are university graduate and master's degree holder in 16% and 12% respectively and 11% have completed Primary education.
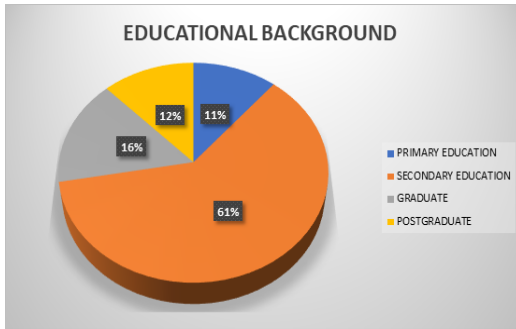
Figure : Educational Background

According to the marital status, 70% are single, 17,40% are married, 7,5% are divorced and 5,10% answered other.
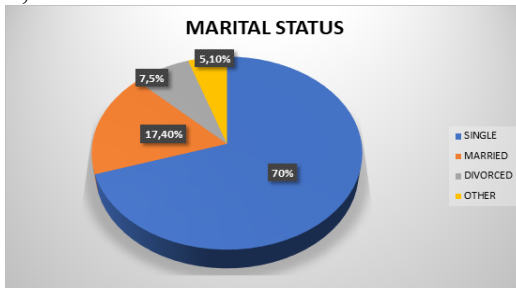

Figure 4: Marital Status

39,40% are student, 24,90% are self-employed, 12,20% are employed in public sector, 10,30% are business owners, 8% are unemployment and 5,20% homemakers.
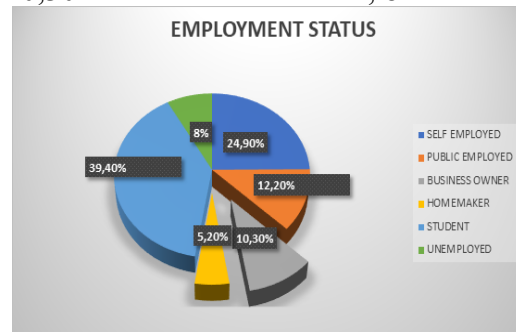

Figure 5: Employment Status

To the question about how many times a year someone visits archaeological sites, 67,10% answered 1 to 2 times, 21,10% 3 to 4 times, 7% 5 to 6 times and 4,80% over 6 times.

Figure 6: Visitation

Subsequently, 86,40% have visited an archaeological site with temple in Attica Area and only 13,60% answered no.

Figure 7: Visitation in archaeological site with temple in Attica area

The most popular period is spring 50,70%, followed by summer 22%, autumn 17,40% and winter gains only 9,90%.
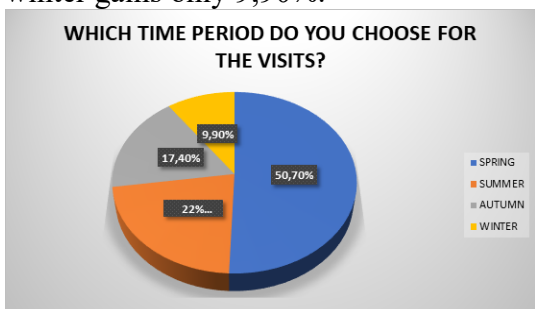

Figure 8: Visitation period

The highest percentage 44,10% chooses duration of the visit 30' to 1 hour, 26,80% 2 hours, 19,70% 10' to 30' and 9,40% over 2 hours.
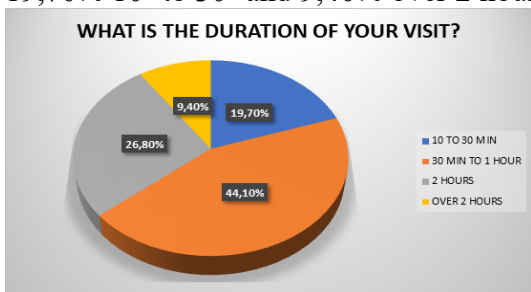

Figure 9: Duration of visit

Acropolis gather the highest percentage 24%, Temple of Poseidon and Columns of Olympian Zeus collect 16% respectively, Temple of Ifaistos and Elefsina 10% respectively, Temple of Afaia Athena 9%, Salamina 8% and Vravrona area 7%.
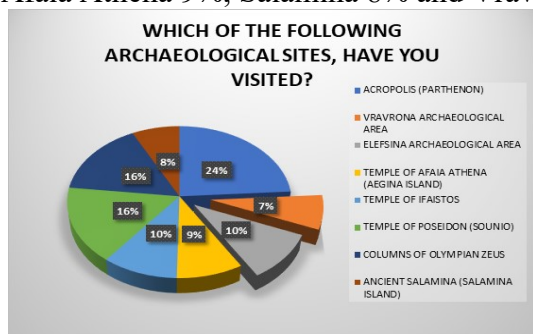

Figure 10: Archaeological sites

53% chooses car as the mode of transportation, 17% metro/subway, 12% city bus, 9% intercity bus, 7% on foot and 2% ferry.
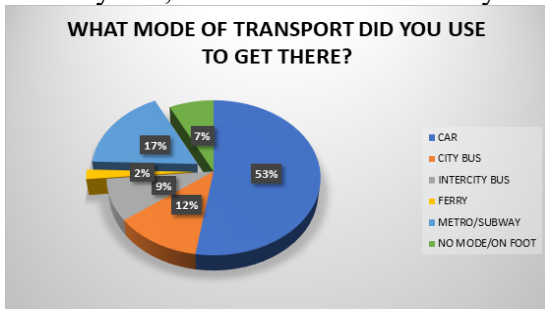

Figure 11: Mode of transportation

Data below are relevant to the previous, 35% has been satisfied much, 32% not a little neither a lot, 15% very much, 9% slightly and 9% none.
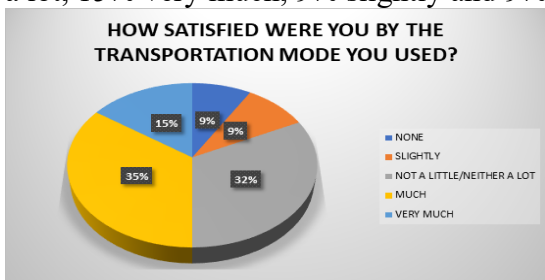

Figure 12: Mode of transportation satisfaction level

Regarding whether the participants encountered difficulties in accessing the point of interest, 26% gave the answer delay due to traffic, 19% gave answers a long wait at the venue and congestion due to crowding, 14% answered a long wait at the ticket publishers, 8% answered bad road network and closed sections, 4% less organization of the venue (inside & outside) and 2% bad weather conditions.
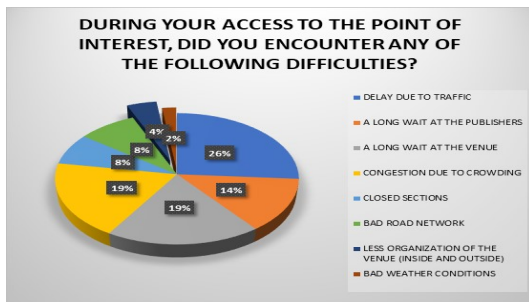

Figure 13: Difficulties during the access

Concerning if the participants knew the history of the temples placed inside the archaeological area they visited, 73% answered yes and 27% answered no.

Figure 14: History of the temples

To the question of whether they would visit the same point of interest again, 80% replied yes and 20% no.
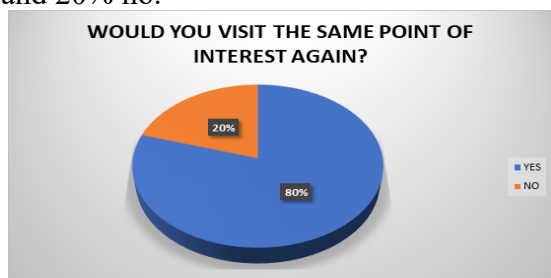

Figure 15: Visit the same point of interest again

In the last question if they knew the Sacred Triangle of Antiquity, the responses of participants were 50% yes and 50% no.
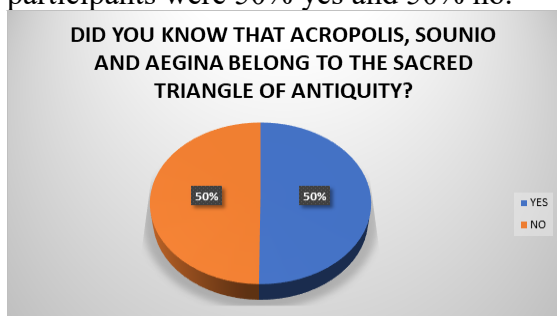

Figure 16: The Sacred Triangle of Antiquity

7. Conclusion

The isosceles triangle formed by the Temple of Hephaestus in Athens, the Temple of Poseidon in Sounio, and the Temple of Aphaia in Aegina has been a popular research subject by researchers puzzled and fascinated by the divine rule that seems to exist in the triangle's unexpected symmetry.

Further research seems imperative to determine whether the triangle results from a conscious design pointing to some unknown scientific or mystical concept guiding the ancient Greeks. Custom-made educational programs adjusted to the visitors' lifelong learning and entertainment needs can enhance knowledge, thinking, experience, and emotional engagement with the monuments and cultural heritage.

These programs require a firm foundation on the experiential involvement of people with history and culture and non-formal learning experiences since experiential actions demonstrably appeal to a broad range of audience categories and increase the popularity and attraction of an archaeological site.

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