

## RELIGIOUS FESTIVALS AND CULTURAL ENTREPRENEURSHIP IN THE MONASTERIES OF LESVOS FROM THE TIME OF THE TRAVELLERS TO THE PRESENT DAY

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### **Trikalitis Kostas**

*PhD Candidate, Department of Tourism Management, University of West Attica*  
[kwstas\\_trikalitis@hotmail.com](mailto:kwstas_trikalitis@hotmail.com)

### **Tsatalmpasoglou Anna-Irini**

*PhD Candidate, Department of Tourism Management, University of West Attica*  
[atsatalpasoglou@uniwa.gr](mailto:atsatalpasoglou@uniwa.gr)

### **Maniou Fotini**

*Ph.D. Candidate, Department of Economics and Sustainable Development, Harokopio University of Athens*  
[fmaniou@hua.gr](mailto:fmaniou@hua.gr)

### **Manola Maria**

*Associate Professor, Department of Tourism Management, University of West Attica*  
[mmanola@uniwa.gr](mailto:mmanola@uniwa.gr)

### **Abstract**

*Religious festivals are important events linked to religious traditions, festivals or important events and are crucial for religious life in different countries and cultures. These festivals, while differing according to religious and cultural traditions, have common characteristics that include spirituality, worship and the connection of believers to the divine. At the same time, they offer cultural and tourism value as they attract crowds of devotees, tourists and visitors from different corners of the world.*

*The holy monasteries of Lesvos play an important role in the history and culture of the island, while the religious festivals associated with them have contributed to the development of cultural entrepreneurship from the time of the travelers until today. The interaction of monasteries with religious tourism and the local economy has evolved over the years, creating opportunities for small and medium sized businesses. Tourists visiting Lesvos in the 19th and 20th centuries often described the unique natural beauty of the island and its impressive monasteries. These descriptions brought to the fore the spiritual and cultural importance of monasteries, such as the Holy Monastery of Limon and the Holy Monastery of Ypsilos. The monasteries functioned not only as spiritual centers, but also as centers for the production of local products, such as olive oil and wine, offering hospitality to travelers and attracting pilgrims and visitors. This timeless function of the monasteries was an early form of religious tourism. In modern times, religious festivals around the holy monasteries remain central to the religious life of Lesvos, while at the same time they are a driving force for the local economy and cultural entrepreneurship.*

**Key Words:** *Religion, festivals, cultural entrepreneurship, cultural entrepreneurship, outermost islands, Lesvos*

## **1.THE MONASTERIES OF LESBIANISM IN TRAVEL TEXTS**

Lesvos is home to some of the most famous pilgrimages of the Aegean, such as the Holy Monasteries of Pammegistus Taxiarches, Agios Raphael, Limonos, Ypsilos, Perivas, Pithariou, the Virgin Mary of Agiasos, Petra and many others.

Religious tourism in Lesvos is not limited to the worship experience, but also includes the exploration of the cultural heritage of the island. Monasteries and temples are living museums that bear witness to history, architecture that impress both religious and art lovers (Tsironis, 2019) Some of these monasteries, built in strategic locations overlooking the sea or hidden in lush green landscapes, have been centres of spirituality and education over the centuries. The Monastery of Limonos , for example, founded in the 16th century by the bishop of present-day Molyvos, St Ignatius, includes a rich library and an important collection of manuscripts that make it an attraction for travellers as these documents play an important role in preserving the cultural heritage not only of a monastery but also of the wider region [Trikalitis et al.,2024 ; Trikalitis, & Manola, 2023; Trikalitis & Manola, 2024 ; Trikalitis & Manola, 2024a).

The presence of the I.M.'s could not fail to arouse the interest of the travellers who recorded their experiences during their visit to them, offering valuable testimonies about their lives [Simopoulos,1999 ; Vigopoulou, 2005].

One of the earliest reports is that of the Italian Cristoforo Buondelmonti who sums up their view of the island by saying that it is a place 'full of books and bright spirits'. One of the best known works is by the British traveler William Turner, who visited Lesvos in the early 19th century. In his work 'Journal of a Tour in the Levant', he described the Monastery of Limon as a refuge that harmoniously combines the piety offered by the religiosity of its interior with the simplicity of its rural surroundings. The importance of the Monastery of Limon as a center of education is highlighted by Dodwell, who comments on its importance in the preservation of the Greek language and education during the Ottoman period. At the same time, the French traveler Victor Guérin visited the island and made particular reference to archaeological finds, recording in his work 'Description de l'Île de Lesbos' the architectural details of the Monastery of Ypsilos, noting the way in which the natural elements of the surrounding area were incorporated into the structure.

In the late 18th and early 19th century, Edward Lear, who visited Lesvos and left his descriptions describing the monasteries as islands of peace in a landscape of unparalleled natural beauty and history, described how the monks spent time in prayer and study, while showing exceptional hospitality to visitors. Turner, at the same time, was also impressed by the architecture and hospitality of the monks, noting in fact that religion and nature were compatible on Lesvos. Tourists often emphasized the uniqueness of the monasteries' architecture. The rich frescoes, ornate wood-carved temples and the use of local materials attracted their attention.

In modern times, the travelers' records are still valuable sources of history and cultural heritage [Tsatalmpasoglou & Manola, 2024]. According to Smith (1989), the detail and quality of the artwork in the monasteries of Lesvos attest to the interaction between local and Byzantine art on the island and its monastic tradition. As noted, the travel accounts offer a different perspective on the monasteries, linking the past with the present [Papadopoulos, 2003].

## **2.RELIGIOUS FESTIVALS IN LESVOS**

The events, which are mainly organized in honor of saints, have deep roots in the history and identity of the local community, especially in Lesvos the festivals have their roots in the

Byzantine period. One of the best known is the one in honour of the Virgin Mary of Agiasos, one of the best known pilgrimage destinations in the Aegean (Kavouras, 2005). The worship of the Virgin Mary in Agiasos is accompanied by processions, vigils and the traditional procession of the icon. Of great importance is the fact that pilgrims visit the village on foot from all parts of the island, underlining the connection between the religious element and the local landscape. Every year, during August 15th, thousands of believers participate in the procession of the icon, expressing their devotion through traditional customs (Koukiotis, 2020). Another important example is the festival of Taxiarchis in Mantamados, which in earlier years combined the tradition of bull sacrifice with collective prayer, creating a special experience for the participants (Herzfeld, 1985). The sacrifice of the bull is a common place in several villages of Lesbos, such as in Pamphila at the three-day festival in honour of the door openings of Agia Varvara on Thomas Sunday. The custom of horse racing remains strong there but the bull sacrifice has now been replaced by the traditional kiskets. Despite their deep appreciation for tradition, the villagers of Pamphila, guided by contemporary social values, decided to discontinue the procession and ritual sacrifice of the animal. Instead, they limited the celebration to the communal sharing of food on the day of the church festival. The meat is now purchased from local butcher shops and distributed freely, as a kiskets, to attendees following the Divine Liturgy. The most famous of the festivals is that of the village of Agia Paraskevi in honour of St. Charalambos, which takes place in the last days of May before the feast of the Ascension. The customary practice is for the horsemen to show off on horses, horse races and above all the ritual slaughter of the bull and the preparation of kiskets are the dominant features of this fair, which attracts many visitors from all over the island [Manola, 2020a]. The role of the fairs is very important as the religious dimension may play a primary role but they are also a pillar of social cohesion [Herzfeld, 1985]. Entertainment also plays an important role with local rhythms that highlight the musical tradition of the island with the santoor and the violin [Xepapadakou, 2010]. The need for authentic experiences and the affirmation of cultural identity is pushing more and more people to revive the festivals and actively participate in them [Bourke, 2012]. Such activities help to connect visiting travellers with the local culture and highlight the importance of religion as an integral part of everyday life (Chrysafis, 2021).

### **3. BUSINESS AND MONASTERIES: OPPORTUNITIES AND CHALLENGES**

Cultural entrepreneurship refers to the activity that involves the establishment of cultural businesses and the marketing of products and services with cultural value, which can also generate economic benefits [Maniou & al, 2024]. An example of such entrepreneurship is the organization of cultural sites in a city or region into routes that attract visitors, contribute to the development of the areas and promote sustainable development. The benefits of this activity include enhancing cultural heritage, stimulating the local economy, creating jobs and more [Maniou & al, 2024]. Religious tourism in Lesbos also has significant economic and social impacts. Pilgrims and tourists visiting the island boost the local economy through accommodation, catering and the purchase of local products. In addition, the preservation and restoration of religious monuments creates new jobs and promotes sustainable development [Vasilakis & Dimitriou, 2022]. Lesbos offers a unique religious tourism experience that combines spiritual quest with cultural exploration. Through its religious monuments, local customs and cultural richness, natural beauty, the island invites visitors to experience a holistic experience [Tsatalbasoglou A. & Koltsikoglou G., 2021]. Religious tourism not only strengthens the local economy, but also contributes to the preservation of the island's cultural heritage. The development of business activities around monasteries can enhance the local economy. Tourists buy souvenirs, visit traditional restaurants or participate in local events.

Tourism-related businesses, such as hotels, cafés, shops selling traditional products and travel agencies, benefit from the presence of monasteries. (Maniou et al., 2025; Maniou & Mitoula, 2025; Maniou et al.,2025a).

- Souvenir and local products shops

One of the most common business models around monasteries are shops selling souvenirs and local products. Usually 'magnets' are the main souvenir of a visit [Manola, 2020b]. Shops, especially those located within the monasteries can offer religious items such as icons, rosaries and candles, as well as traditional products such as honey, herbs or wine produced in the area. According to Shackley (2001), visitors like to carry with them souvenirs that embody the experience of the visit.

- Accommodation and restaurants

The development of accommodation near monasteries is another important business activity. Traditional guesthouses or modern hotels can cater to the needs of visitors. Also, local cuisine can attract tourists, especially if meals based on monastic recipes or local ingredients are offered.

#### **4.ACTIVITIES THAT COULD BE CARRIED OUT AROUND THE EXISTENCE OF THE I.M.S.**

The operation of monasteries contributes to the economic development of local communities. The production and sale of traditional products such as honey, wine and handicrafts creates jobs and strengthens the local economy. In addition, the existence of the monasteries attracts pilgrims and tourists, increasing the demand for hospitality, catering and commercial services. The case of Kalambaka and Meteora is a typical example where the presence of monasteries has led to significant tourism development and economic prosperity in the region. Many of Lesvos' monasteries are located in areas of outstanding natural beauty and biodiversity. The management of these areas by the monasteries contributes to the protection of the environment and the promotion of sustainable development. The preservation of ecosystems and the promotion of ecological awareness, which are in any case part of the monastic tradition, contribute to the overall well-being of local communities (Maniou, 2024 ; Maniou et al.,2024b; Maniou et al.,2024c ; Maniou, 2024b).

Additional activities that could promote sustainability-based tourism are :

- Cultural events and educational activities.
- Entrepreneurs can organize cultural events, such as exhibitions, musical performances or seminars, linked to the history and tradition of the monastery. These activities enhance the cultural experience and prolong the stay of visitors.
- Guided tour services.Guided tour services and organised excursions are central to the development of religious tourism in combination with nature-based or other forms of sustainable development. Tour guides who are familiar with the history and theology of the monastery can offer visitors a deeper understanding of the place.
- It would also be important to establish and support departments of Religious Tourism in the SACs because it is essential that people involved in this form of tourism have the appropriate training
- Integration of technology.Technological applications can offer significant benefits for the development of cultural tourism. With the help of technological tools such as computer games and virtual reality, users can enjoy more enriching experiences. The depiction of monuments in their current state, combined with descriptions by tour guides or writers,

can stimulate interest in visiting them, especially in less popular or hard-to-reach locations. Such applications can go beyond simply providing information and contribute substantially to educational and cultural activities, especially through the use of mobile devices such as smartphones and tablets [Tsatalmpasoglou A. & al, 2024]. An important activity in this area is performed by the Geopark of Lesbos which promotes the geological, natural and cultural heritage of the island, offering visitors opportunities for exploration, educational programmes, marine activities, festivals, tastings and hikes in landscapes walked by Aristotle and Theophrastus. On the Geopark's website there are extensive references to cultural topics with hyperlinks.

- Linking different forms of tourism. It should not be omitted here the fact that the potential of the island is huge and can meet multiple tourism needs in terms of sustainable development [Tsatalbassoglou A., Koltsikoglou G. (2021)] such as literary, museum tourism, gastronomic [Tsatalbassoglou A. & Maniou F., 2024] or wellness as it has many spas and of course nature tourism. Lesbos is an island with rich geological landscapes, natural beauties, ecosystems and cultural monuments that contributed to its inclusion in the UNESCO World Network of Geoparks. Apart from the geological monuments, it has a great biodiversity, which is reflected in the areas belonging to the European Natura 2000 network. Three of these have been designated as Sites of Community Importance, such as the Petrified Forest and the Kalloni wetlands, while nine areas are Special Protection Areas.
- The development of holistic tourist routes that will include a combination of interests in order to meet the needs of a larger proportion of the tourist market and highlight destinations on the island, such as the salt marshes or residents involved in the promotion of local gastronomy products through women's cooperatives.

## **5.CONCLUSION**

Lesbos can undoubtedly be considered an ideal destination for developing activities that focus on promoting cultural entrepreneurship around the island's monasteries. The island is renowned for its rich cultural heritage and religious traditions, which have historically been instrumental in shaping the local culture. Lesbos, with its unique monasteries and religious events, has the potential to become a multicultural center that shapes trends and attracts visitors with specific interests.

This cultural wealth can be harnessed as a foundation for creating new cultural routes that highlight the island's religious and cultural heritage. These routes could include visits to monasteries, pilgrimage sites, religious ceremonies, and festivals, offering visitors the opportunity to engage in an immersive experience of the local traditions and lifestyle.

The development of such specialized combined tours, which connect religious and cultural experiences with nature, local gastronomy, and tradition, could serve as a powerful tool for promoting sustainable tourism development on Lesbos. Additionally, these activities could boost the local economy, as collaboration with local producers and businesses would encourage the promotion of local products and services.

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