

## THE FORMATION OF THE PHYSIOGNOMY OF THE CITY OF MONEMVASIA - THE OPINION OF RESIDENTS AND VISITORS

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### **Abstract**

*Monemvasia is a fortified historic medieval town, found on the southeastern Peloponnese coast, in Greece. To this day, it remains one of the oldest and few inhabited castles in Europe. The old medieval town is nestled upon a rock formation connected to the mainland only by a narrow causeway. The new town of Monemvasia, where most of the locals nowadays live, is developed on the mainland, just on the other side of the causeway.*

*This paper examines the unique spatial and cultural identity of Monemvasia, known for its dramatic topography. Monemvasia exemplifies the interplay between natural landscape, historical continuity, and architectural legacy. Through a combination of historical research, spatial analysis, and visitor-based survey methodology, the paper aims to analyze several aspects of the town's physiognomy, including its geographical and geomorphological features, its rich Byzantine and post-Byzantine history, its architectural heritage, and its role in contemporary cultural and economic life. A key focus explores how these various elements do contribute to the town's character as well as sustainable development.*

*A structured questionnaire, from more than 150 individuals with direct experience of the site, offered understandings into the sensory, emotional, and cultural markers, through residents and visitors' perceptions and experiences, aiming to assess how Monemvasia's identity is communicated, interpreted, and remembered. Findings underscore Monemvasia's power as a living heritage site: the Byzantine churches such as Agia Sophia, stone architecture, the sound of the sea, traditional sweets, and the poetic presence of Yannis Ritsos emerge as recurring symbols. This research highlights the rare fusion of natural beauty, cultural heritage, and historical depth of Monemvasia where history and modern life coexist harmoniously. Finally, it frames the town within the context of sustainable heritage management, stressing the explicit need for balanced strategies that fully protect its authenticity while readily supporting cultural tourism.*

**Keywords:** *Monemvasia, heritage landscape, physiognomy, castle, visitor perception, sustainable development, medieval urbanism*

### **Introduction**

Monemvasia stands among the most celebrated historical locales throughout Greece, geographically distinctive and culturally replete. Monemvasia, also often referred to as the "Gibraltar of the East", is a uniquely positioned town that encapsulates centuries of Greek and Mediterranean history. (Bzinkowski 2020) The medieval town rises dramatically from the Myrtoan Sea, is positioned on a rocky outcrop of Peloponnese, linked to the mainland by a narrow isthmus and its natural feature which gives the town its name: from the Greek "μόνη" (only) and "ἔμβασίς" (entrance). This singular entry point symbolizes more than physical

access, as it marks a passage into a space suspended in time, where natural elements, architectural memory, and living tradition converge.

Over the centuries, Monemvasia has served as a strategic stronghold, a trade hub, and a cultural centre. Today, it still fascinates visitors not only for its preserved Byzantine architecture and stunning coastal views but also for the immersive experience it offers, a sensorial journey through stone-paved alleys, the strong scent of the sea, and echoes of poetic voices of Yannis Ritsos, whose roots are etched into the town's soul.

This paper seeks to explore the physiognomy of Monemvasia not merely as a physical form, but as an experiential and symbolic construct. Drawing from historical documentation and from visitor-centered survey, the study investigates how various dimensions spatial, cultural, emotional interact to form a cohesive identity. The results of the survey provide insights into which features leave a lasting impression, such as the religious architecture, the medieval urban structure and traditional gastronomy. Furthermore, the research situates Monemvasia within the wider discourse of sustainable heritage preservation, recognizing both its fragility and its enduring value in the face of modern pressures such as tourism and urban development.

### **Geography and Geomorphology**

Monemvasia is located at the southeastern edge of the Peloponnese, within the regional unit of Laconia, and presents a truly unique phenomenon in the Greek landscape. Built upon a massive rocky formation in the Myrtoan Sea, Monemvasia is connected to the mainland only by a narrow causeway of about 200 meters that is a defining feature that gave the town its name, meaning "single entrance." The rock itself, measuring approximately 1.8 kilometers in length and reaching a height of nearly 300 meters, is primarily composed of limestone, which accounts for its rugged and enduring character. Geomorphologically, Monemvasia's rock is classified as a tombolo, shaped over millions of years by tectonic movements and the erosive action of the sea. A major seismic event around 375 A.D. further influenced its present form, reinforcing its isolated and defensible nature. Despite the steep cliffs that surround it, the summit of the rock is relatively even, allowing the development of the historic Upper Town, while the Lower Town extends along its more accessible southeastern side. (Saroglou, H., et al. 2012)

The wider area of the Municipality of Monemvasia is officially designated as mountainous, with 52.63% of its territory classified as such, although it also boasts a significant coastal front. This coexistence of mountainous and seaside landscapes adds to the area's richness and diversity. The natural environment around Monemvasia supports a variety of plant and animal life. There are many marine species and birds find refuge on the rock's cliffs and surrounding shores. The climate is Mediterranean, with its mild winters, hot summers, and long periods of sunshine, nurtures olive groves, aromatic plants, and several rare endemic species. Moreover, the municipality is traversed by a dense network of streams and rivers, such as Ariana in the northeast and Langada in the south, which help define its natural boundaries. Together, these elements underline how Monemvasia's geography and geomorphology have shaped not only its historical role but also its ongoing identity as a place of natural beauty and cultural significance.

### **History, Architecture and Cultural Identity**

The unique geographic and geomorphological features of Monemvasia have not only shaped its natural landscape but have also played a decisive role in its historical evolution and cultural development. The unique rock formation, offering natural defense and strategic

advantage, determined the town's emergence as a vital stronghold and commercial center throughout various historical periods. In turn, the built environment and cultural expressions that developed within its fortified walls reflect the continuous interaction between the natural setting and human activity. Understanding the history, architecture, and cultural life of Monemvasia thus requires an appreciation of how deeply its identity is rooted in its extraordinary physical context.

The history of Monemvasia is deeply interwoven with its unique geography, shaping its role as a strategic fortress and a vibrant cultural center over the centuries. Founded in the 6th century A.D. by inhabitants seeking refuge from invasions, Monemvasia quickly developed into a significant commercial and military hub, especially during the Byzantine era. Its strategic location allowed it to control important maritime routes between the Eastern Mediterranean and the West, while its natural fortifications made it one of the most resilient strongholds in Greek history. Throughout the medieval period, Monemvasia flourished under successive rulers, including Byzantines, Venetians, and Ottomans, each leaving their imprint on the town's character and built environment. Today, the old town remains entirely pedestrianized, as vehicles are not allowed within the castle walls. (Kalliga 2003) This restriction helps preserve the authenticity and atmosphere of the site. The urban structure is traditionally divided into two parts: the Upper Town, also known as "Goulas," which is largely in ruins but historically significant, and the Lower Town, which is still inhabited today and remarkably well preserved. (Eygenidou 2004) In the lower old town of Monemvasia preserves its appearance with a lot of narrow, stone-paved alleys, fortified walls, densely packed stone houses, traditional courtyards limited modern intrusions and more than forty preserved churches, among them the iconic Church of Agia Sophia, perched dramatically on the cliff's summit. Beyond the castle, the modern settlement, commonly referred to as "Gefyra" (meaning "Bridge"), has grown into the functional and residential heart of the area. This part of Monemvasia hosts the majority of the local population and offers all essential public services and infrastructure needed for daily life. It also serves as a lively center for tourism, with numerous hotels, restaurants, cafés, and workshops producing and selling traditional local products. Along the seafront, the modern marina accommodates fishing boats, sailing yachts, and seasonal passenger ferries from Piraeus, supporting both local livelihoods and visitor access. Parking facilities in Gefyra allow visitors to leave their vehicles before crossing into the historic town on foot, maintaining the distinct character and pedestrian charm of the medieval fortress. Culturally, Monemvasia has been for long a symbol of endurance and creativity. Its rich traditions are evident not only in its built heritage but also in its culinary practices, religious festivities, and literary associations. The town is famously linked to the poet Yannis Ritsos, whose works capture the timeless essence of Monemvasia's landscape and spirit. Even today, Monemvasia remains a living testament to a past that continues to inspire, offering a rare combination of historical depth, architectural integrity, and vibrant cultural life. (Kalliga 2010)

### **Living Identity, Cultural Memory, and Sustainable Continuity**

Monemvasia's character cannot be captured by its architecture alone. It lives through the people who shaped it, the traditions that persist, and the quiet, enduring presence of the landscape. Among the many figures associated with the town, the poet Yannis Ritsos stands apart, not just for his literature work, but for the way his words seem carved from the very stone of the place he was born. His life and poetry are inseparable from the rhythms of Monemvasia: the sea, the silence, the resilience. The poet's work is internationally recognized, and he was nominated for the Nobel Prize in 1971. He was awarded the State Poetry Prize in 1956 for his 'Sonata of the Moonlight' and in 1977 he received the Lenin Prize for Peace and

Friendship among Peoples. The poetry collection 'Monovasia' is entirely dedicated to his place of origin. In memory of him, the central alley of the castle has been named after him, and it is called 'Yiannis Ritsos Street.' Additionally, a bust of the great poet Yiannis Ritsos has been placed in the outdoor area of his family home.

The town's physiognomy is also defined by more subtle "condensers" of identity, such as stone alleys, small chapels, the bridge, and the daily rhythms of residents. All of these are contributing to a sense of place that is lived as much as it is admired. Monemvasia's surrounding environment with the coastal waters around the rock and across the mainland further enhances its character.

Monemvasia's economy is shaped mainly by tourism and the use of local resources. The production of extra virgin olive oil playing a key role both locally and for export. There's also some fishing and limited livestock activity in the surrounding areas. Small scale processing of local goods like wine and olive oil supports the secondary sector. Still, it's tourism that drives most of the local economy, especially in the summer months, with businesses like hotels, cafés, and restaurants providing steady work and income for the community.

Preservation isn't left to chance. A network of legal protections and institutional oversight ensures that changes to the town align with its character. The castle of Monemvasia is located within the protected area of the Natura 2000 network with the code GR2540001. Furthermore, the area has been designated as a Landscape of Outstanding Natural Beauty with the code AT1010010. It is also classified as an archaeological site and a Traditional Settlement. Projects co-funded by the European Union have helped strike a delicate balance of upgrading the essential infrastructure without compromising the feeling of stepping into another century. The installation of an accessibility lift for the castle, improvements in wastewater treatment, and the development of the marina are examples of investments that serve both locals and visitors. These interventions not only modernize necessary infrastructure but also align with the broader goals of sustainable development, ensuring that Monemvasia remains a dynamic and resilient community while honoring its past.

## **Survey**

For the purposes of the present work an online survey was conducted regarding how visitors perceive the physiognomy and identity of Monemvasia. The questionnaire included ten questions and was distributed through travel forums and social media groups focused on the region. A total of 152 anonymous responses were collected from individuals who are living or had visited the area. The survey was conducted in January 2025.

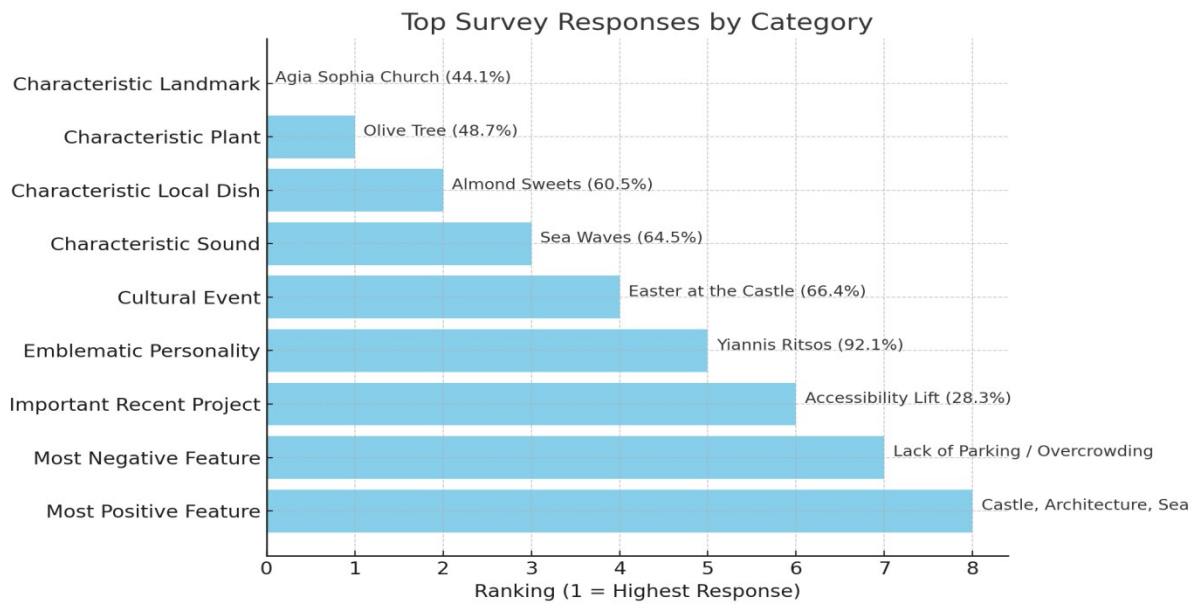


Figure 1. Top responses from each question

According to the results in terms of age 21.1% of the respondents were 18-30 years old, 15,8% were 31-40 years old, 24.3% were 41-50 years old, 21,7% were 51-60 years old and 17.1% were older than 60 years.

To the question “What is the most characteristic landmark of the area?” the 44.1% answered “The church of Agia Sophia”, the 28.9% “the church of Elkomenos Christos”, 19.1% “Yiannis Ritsos house”, 4.6% “the bridge” and 3.3% “Monemvasia Archaeological Collection”. The majority of respondents identified the Church of Agia Sophia, located at the top of the rock on the Upper Town, as the most characteristic monument of Monemvasia and the total 73% recognize two churches in the old town as the most famous monument of Monemvasia. The dominance of religious monuments highlights how deeply Monemvasia’s identity is tied to its Byzantine architectural and spiritual heritage.

To the question " What is the most characteristic plant of the town?" 48.7% answered “Olive tree”, 24.3% “Lilium Candidum”, 11.8% “Capers”, 9.2% “Jasmin” and 5.9% “Tulips”. From the answers we find that the olive tree, that is one of the most common plants in south Greece, is also considered the most representative plant of the area of Monemvasia.

To the question “What is the town’s most characteristic local dish?” 60.5% answered “Monemvasia Almond Sweets”, 11.8% “Tsaitia”, 11.2% “Malvasia wine”, 8.6% “Stuffed Zucchini Blossoms” and 3.9% answered both “Extra virgin olive oil and Diples”. Traditional sweets and historic wine production connect visitors to the town’s gastronomic identity.

To the question “What is the most characteristic sound of the town?” 64.5% picked “The sound of the sea waves”, 16.4% “The church bells”, 13.8% “Cicadas sound” and 5.3% “Human conversations”. Most respondents associated the town with the sound of the sea, highlighting the town’s close connection to its coastal environment, as it is almost entirely surrounded by the sea.

To the question “Which cultural event or traditional festivity best represents the identity of the town?” 66.4% answered “Easter at the castle of `Monemvasia”, 14.5% “International festival of Malvasia”, 13.8% “Summer concerts” and 5.3% “Monemvasia run challenge”. Religious traditions remain a powerful community and visitor experience, combining spirituality with the town’s historic atmosphere.

To the question “Who is the most emblematic personality associated with the town?” 92.1% answered “Yiannis Ritsos”, 5.9% “Antonis Sgardelis”, 1.3% “Iraklis Tracheilis” and

0.7% “ Kalligas Alexandros and Xaris Kalliga”. The respondents almost unanimously chose Ritsos as the personality linked with Monemvasia as Ritsos' poetry, often inspired by Monemvasia itself, reinforces the emotional bond between the town and his cultural legacy.

To the question “Which recent project is considered the most important” 28.3% answered “Installation of an accessibility lift for individuals at Monemvasia Castle”, 27,6% “Installation of lighting at Monemvasia Castle”, 21.7% “Improvement of wastewater treatment facilities”, 19,7% “Upgrade of Monemvasia Marina”, 2.6% “Installation of lighting at the Monemvasia Tourist Port”. Accessibility improvements were considered the most significant project, that allows a wider audience, including people with disabilities, to experience the historic environment.

To the question “What is considered the most negative feature of the town?” most respondents pointed to lack of parking and overcrowding during peak tourist seasons. Infrastructure limitations threaten visitor satisfaction and the quality of the overall experience. To the question “What is considered the most positive feature of the town”, the majority of respondents highlighted the castle of Monemvasia surrounded by the sea, with the historical atmosphere, the architectural authenticity, and the natural landscape as the most positive aspects of Monemvasia. The combination of historical preservation and natural beauty clearly defines Monemvasia’s charm for visitors.

## **Conclusions**

This study aimed to analyze the physiognomy of Monemvasia focusing on the interplay of its physical features, their history, the architecture, and the culture that still exists there. The findings reaffirm Monemvasia’s status as a rare example of an inhabited medieval settlement, where history and daily life coexist within a uniquely preserved urban and natural landscape.

The geographic singularity of Monemvasia, as a massive rock almost entirely surrounded by the sea and connected to the mainland by a single causeway, continues to define both its physical identity and its historical significance. Visitors marvel at the magnificently preserved stone buildings, the Byzantine monuments alongside traditional cultural expressions, which leaves a lasting impression on visitors.

The visitor survey demonstrated which elements are most strongly associated with Monemvasia: the emblematic Church of Agia Sophia, the omnipresent olive tree, the sound of the sea, the taste of traditional local products such as almond sweets and Malvasia wine, and the lasting legacy of Yannis Ritsos. Changes to the accessibility of the castle, were widely recognized as positive developments enhancing visitor experience and inclusivity.

Nevertheless, challenges remain. Issues such as limited parking facilities and overcrowding during peak tourist seasons were consistently highlighted as factors that could affect the Monemvasia’s sustainability as a cultural destination, which could undermine the quality of the visitor experience if not properly managed.

In conclusion, Monemvasia offers a powerful model of sustainable cultural heritage management, balancing historical preservation with contemporary needs. Respondents emphasized the town’s ability to transport them "back in time". Moving forward, emphasis must be placed on protecting the town’s authenticity while carefully managing visitor flows, thereby ensuring that Monemvasia continues to thrive as a living testament to Greece’s enduring cultural legacy.

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