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MUSEUMS, EDUCATION AND TECHNOLOGY AS DRIVERS OF SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT IN ALONISSOS, LESVOS AND KOS

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ABSTRACT

This study examines the pirate and maritime cultural heritage of Alonnisos, Lesvos, and Kos, three islands that, despite their geographical distance, share a long-standing historical relationship with the sea and the risks associated with maritime activity. It explores how pirate raids, privateering, and maritime rivalries influenced the organization of settlements, the construction of fortifications, economic activity, and the collective memory of local communities. At the same time, the study investigates the potential for connecting the museum collections of Alonnisos, the historical monuments and narratives of Lesvos, and the defensive landscape of Kos through a common cultural route entitled "In the Footsteps of the Pirates."

Particular emphasis is placed on the authenticity of the tourism experience, the historically documented interpretation of piracy, and the avoidance of stereotypical or idealized representations. The study also examines the contribution of museums, thematic events, digital applications, and educational activities to the promotion and interpretation of cultural heritage. It concludes that cooperation among the three islands could strengthen cultural tourism, enrich visitors' experiences, and generate benefits for local economies. Key prerequisites include scholarly documentation, the protection of heritage sites, the participation of local communities, and the connection of cultural resources with local businesses and the distinctive characteristics of each destination. The proposed approach seeks to integrate maritime and pirate heritage into a coherent cultural tourism framework while maintaining historical authenticity and supporting sustainable local development.

Keywords: Pirate Heritage; Maritime Heritage; Cultural Heritage; Cultural Tourism; Heritage Tourism; Alonnisos; Lesvos; Kos; Museums; Cultural Routes; Authenticity; Sustainable Tourism; Local Development.

1 INTRODUCTION

Throughout history, the Aegean Sea has served as a space of communication, trade, and competition. Its islands connected the Black Sea, the coasts of Asia Minor, the eastern Mediterranean, and mainland Greece. The same maritime

routes were used by merchants, pilgrims, soldiers, corsairs, and pirates. Seafaring provided income and opportunities for contact with other cultures, while at the same time exposing island communities to raids, plunder, and captivity.

2 PIRACY IN THE MARITIME HISTORY OF THE AEGEAN

Piracy tended to intensify when political authority was fragmented or control over the sea was limited. The numerous bays, islets, and narrow maritime passages facilitated concealment and surprise attacks. The distinction between a pirate, a corsair, and a state-authorized combatant was not always clear-cut. A seafarer could be regarded as a criminal by one power and as a legitimate combatant by another. The case of Hayreddin Barbarossa illustrates this fluidity particularly well, as his activities were associated both with corsair warfare and with Ottoman state power.

For local inhabitants, however, the consequences were tangible. The loss of goods and vessels, the destruction of facilities, and the capture of people affected production, trade, and family life. In response, communities relocated settlements further inland, established observation points, and reinforced castles and places of refuge. Pirate heritage, therefore, concerns not only the raiders themselves. It also encompasses, and perhaps more importantly, the strategies of adaptation developed by societies that depended on the sea while simultaneously fearing the threats that could come from it.

Alonnisos, Lesvos, and Kos represent three distinct manifestations of this shared historical experience. Alonnisos possesses an organized museum collection; Lesvos brings together historical figures, monuments, and geopolitical transformations; while Kos retains a clearly legible network of fortifications. A comparative approach to these three islands could provide the basis for an inter-island cultural route, provided that their history is presented accurately and without the idealization or romanticization of violence.

2.1 Alonnisos and the Museum Interpretation of Pirate Heritage

The geographical position of Alonnisos in the Northern Sporades placed the island within maritime networks for the movement of people and goods. The complex coastline of the wider area provided safe stopping points for navigation, but could also be used for concealment and surprise attacks. The historical experience of insecurity is reflected in the relationship between settlements and the coastline, as well as in the gradual formation of local collective memory.

A central role in the interpretation and presentation of this memory is played by the Historical and Folklore Museum of Alonnisos, founded by Konstantinos and Angela Mavrikis. The museum's maritime and pirate collection enables visitors to approach the island's history through objects, maps, visual material, and narratives. The value of the exhibits is enhanced when they are situated within a clear historical context: who used them, how life aboard ships was organized, how raids were connected with trade, and how island communities responded to these threats. The exhibition therefore need not portray the pirate as an isolated heroic figure; rather, it can explain the broader system of maritime relations within which piracy developed. The museum is a private institution established in 2001, and its collections include objects recovered from old warships and pirate ships.

Contemporary museology places particular emphasis on interpretation and on the relationship between visitors and heritage. Poria, Butler, and Airey (2003) argue that perceptions are central to heritage tourism and that the relationship between visitors and heritage sites influences their experience and behaviour. Their research highlights the importance of visitors' perceptions and their relationship with the heritage presented at a site. Consequently, the visitor experience depends not only on the exhibit itself but also on the meaning attributed to it. Digital documentation and proposals for enhancing the museum experience in Alonnisos can support this connection, particularly when technology serves the narrative rather than functioning as an end in itself.

The museum visit can also be connected with Old Alonnisos (Palia Chora), its traditional settlement environment, and the surrounding maritime landscape. In this way, visitors can understand how the search for security influenced the location and morphology of settlements. At the same time, the National Marine Park of Alonnisos and Northern Sporades provides an opportunity to connect the history of seafaring with the contemporary protection of the marine environment. The sea can thus be understood simultaneously as a historical route, a natural resource, and an ecosystem that continues to shape the identity of the island. The Municipality of Alonnisos also identifies the museum and the National Marine Park as important components of the island's historical and cultural environment

2.2 Lesvos and the Complex Heritage of Barbarossa

Lesvos occupied a strategic position in the northeastern Aegean, close to the coast of Asia Minor and along important maritime and commercial routes. From the mid-fifteenth to the mid-sixteenth century, the political balance of the region underwent profound transformations. Ottoman expansion, rivalries with Western maritime powers, and corsair activity affected navigation, settlement patterns, and the collective memory of the island (Anagnostou, 2026).

Particular significance can be attributed to the relationship between Lesvos and Hayreddin Barbarossa. His career cannot be easily classified within a single category. Initially associated with corsair activity, he subsequently became integrated into the political and military structures of the Ottoman Empire, eventually reaching the highest level of Ottoman naval command. His biography provides an opportunity to examine the distinctions between piracy, privately conducted warfare under state authorization, and organized state warfare (Lowry, 2014; Yılmaz Önder, 2026).

This connection also has a significant material dimension. Kiel (2018) examines the medrese and imaret in Mytilene associated with Barbarossa and situates these monuments within the broader social and cultural context of Ottoman Lesvos. The historical memory associated with Barbarossa therefore emerges through the relationship between individuals, buildings, charitable institutions, and political authority. The Castle of Mytilene, the island's ports, and its coastal sites further contribute to this network and could function as key points along an open-air historical heritage route. Kiel's study documents the Barbarossa-associated complex as an important, though relatively little-known, aspect of the Ottoman cultural history of Lesvos.

Lesvos differs from Alonnisos in that this particular heritage is more spatially dispersed. Such dispersion does not necessarily constitute a disadvantage, provided that the sites are integrated through maps, signage, and a coherent interpretive narrative. Visitors can thus engage with history within the landscape itself, connecting the harbour, fortifications, and surviving Ottoman remains. Rather than presenting piracy as an isolated phenomenon or romanticizing its protagonists, such an approach can reveal the complex political, economic, and social relationships that shaped the maritime history of the island.

Events and scholarly initiatives focusing on the history of piracy in the Aegean can further contribute to the development of this heritage narrative by bringing together historical research, local traditions, and tourism. Such initiatives, however, require continuity, sound historical documentation, and the dissemination of their findings to both the local community and visitors.

2.3 Kos and the Defensive Landscape of Maritime Insecurity

In the southeastern Aegean, Kos was situated close to the coast of Asia Minor and along maritime routes connecting the Aegean with the eastern Mediterranean. Its geographical position facilitated trade and cultural exchange, but also exposed the island to military operations and maritime raids. The island's pirate heritage can be understood primarily through its fortifications and the geography of its defensive landscape.

The Castle of Neratzia, located at the entrance to the harbour of Kos Town, provides the most direct evidence of the need to control this maritime passage. Its association with the Knights Hospitaller and its position facing the coast of Asia Minor reveal the strategic importance of the harbour. The monument can therefore be interpreted not only as a work of military architecture but also as infrastructure designed to protect people, goods, and maritime communications.

The Castle of Antimachia and Palio Pyli further expand this picture. The fortified inland areas provided refuge when the coastal zones became unsafe. These sites demonstrate how the perceived threat influenced patterns of settlement and the use of the natural terrain. A thematic heritage route extending from the harbour to Antimachia and Palio Pyli would enable visitors to trace the transition from coastal surveillance to the protection of the island's interior.

The visitor experience could be enhanced through digital maps, audio narratives, and augmented-reality applications. Such applications, however, should be grounded in archaeological and historical evidence so that they complement rather than replace scholarly research with fictionalized representations. Gastronomy could also be incorporated into the route, as connecting cultural heritage with local products can create additional opportunities for the participation of local businesses and contribute to the broader cultural tourism experience of Kos (Maniou et al., 2025e).

3 AUTHENTICITY AND THE INTERPRETATION OF DIFFICULT HERITAGE

The interpretation and promotion of pirate history involve an obvious risk: its transformation into a form of easily consumable spectacle. The popular image of the pirate, characterized by theatrical costumes, flags, and hidden treasure, may attract visitors' interest, but it often obscures the violence, captivity, and economic devastation experienced by coastal communities. Museum and tourism narratives therefore need to maintain visitors' engagement without romanticizing or sanitizing the historical phenomenon.

Wang (1999) proposes a broader understanding of authenticity. Beyond the authenticity of the object itself, importance is also attached to the visitor's existential experience and to the sense of participating in something meaningful. Similarly, Kolar and Zabkar (2010) associate objective and existential authenticity with cultural motivations and

destination loyalty. Park, Choi, and Lee (2019) further demonstrate that authenticity in the heritage tourism experience has multiple dimensions and depends on the relationship between place, content, and interpretation.

A dramatized guided tour or historical reenactment is not necessarily inaccurate. Chhabra, Healy, and Sills (2003) demonstrate that visitors may perceive an experience as authentic even when it incorporates elements of staging, provided that it maintains a convincing relationship with the historical context. The international experience of Viking tourism is particularly relevant in this regard. Museums, reconstructed settlements, and themed markets can combine educational objectives with economic activity (Halewood & Hannam, 2001), while festivals can strengthen local identity and encourage community participation (Hannam & Halewood, 2006).

For the three islands, this means that educational games, maritime skills workshops, and historical reenactments can be incorporated into the interpretation of pirate heritage, provided that a clear distinction is maintained between documented historical evidence and creative reconstruction. Narratives should include not only pirates and military actors, but also the merchants, sailors, women, and children who experienced the consequences of raids. In this way, pirate history can move beyond a stereotypical representation and become a means of understanding the social history of the Aegean, its coastal communities, and their complex relationship with the sea.

3.1 A Shared Cultural Route for the Three Islands

The proposed cultural route, "Alonnisos, Lesvos, Kos: In the Footsteps of the Pirates," could be developed around the complementarity of the three destinations. Alonnisos offers a well-established museum collection and a strong connection with the maritime environment. Lesvos contributes the historical figure of Hayreddin Barbarossa, Ottoman monuments, and the broader geopolitical dimension of maritime history. Kos, in turn, offers a network of castles and fortified sites that enables visitors to understand the historical organization of defence within the landscape.

The network could adopt a shared visual identity, supported by a unified website and an interactive digital map. A digital passport could encourage visitors to explore multiple sites without reducing heritage monuments to a mere game of collecting symbols. Joint temporary exhibitions, educational materials for schools, and partnerships with ferry and maritime transport operators could give practical substance to the inter-island connection. The geographical distance between the islands requires realistic planning: the route does not need to be completed within a single trip but could instead operate as a network of interconnected destinations (Poli, 2020).

The route could also operate throughout the year rather than being restricted to the summer season. In spring and autumn, educational visits, small academic conferences, local history workshops, and special-interest tours could be organized. During the summer, when visitor pressure increases, activities could be distributed across different sites and time periods. A joint coordinating body could establish scholarly standards, monitor the condition of heritage sites, and ensure that the commercial use of the theme does not distort its historical content. Collaboration with universities and local archives would also facilitate the gradual incorporation of new, well-documented material (Maniou et al., 2026).

Cultural events could enhance the visibility of the route and contribute to the diversification of visitor demand (Getz, 2008; Getz & Page, 2016). Community participation is particularly important, as festivals can strengthen local relationships and social capital (Arcodia & Whitford, 2006). The co-creation of the visitor experience by both visitors and local residents can further enhance its cultural value, as demonstrated by Alexiou (2020). Examples of pirate-themed festivals on other Greek islands indicate the potential of such initiatives, while also highlighting the need to connect entertainment and spectacle with local historical evidence, community participation, and sustainable development objectives (Manola, Maniou, & Mitoula, 2026).

3.2 Contribution to the Local Economy

The economic contribution of a cultural route is not limited to ticket revenues. Direct benefits may arise from employment, guided tours, and museum sales, while indirect benefits depend on visitor expenditure on accommodation, restaurants, transportation, retail, and other activities. The more the visit is integrated into a broader stay programme, the greater the potential for income to circulate within the local economy.

Felsenstein and Fleischer (2003) point out that festivals can generate additional tourist expenditure, although the net local economic benefit may be smaller than visitor numbers alone might suggest. A similar consideration applies to museums. A short visit without an overnight stay or additional purchases is likely to have a limited economic impact. For this reason, the cultural route should be connected with local businesses and seek to encourage longer visitor stays, while avoiding excessive pressure on heritage sites and settlements. Their study demonstrates the importance of considering actual visitor expenditure and net local income effects rather than relying solely on aggregate visitor numbers.

Practical partnerships could combine accommodation, museum visits, castle tours, local gastronomy, and maritime activities. Lesvos has already been examined as a setting for sustainable cultural entrepreneurship based on the distinctive characteristics of the island (Maniou et al., 2025a). Similar models could be adapted to Alonnisos and Kos, with an emphasis on small businesses and products that are genuinely connected to the identity and resources of each destination.

Systematic evaluation is essential. The quality of the visitor experience, perceived value, and satisfaction influence visitors' subsequent behavioural intentions (Chen & Chen, 2010). Research by Chen and Chen demonstrates a relationship between experience quality, perceived value, satisfaction, and behavioural intentions in heritage tourism. Brida, Meleddu, and Pulina (2016) highlight differences among visitor groups, while Doxanaki and Linardakis (2022) demonstrate the usefulness of analysing museum visitation decisions in Greece. Visitor surveys, data on length of stay, and assessments of local expenditure would enable stakeholders to identify weaknesses and adjust their strategies, rather than relying solely on visitor numbers as an indicator of success.

The constructive role of digital technologies in cultural entrepreneurship education must be emphasized. To strengthen this field, we must encourage digital integration across all educational areas. We should adopt paradigms from all the domains of exploiting ICT in education, like mobile devices [8], diverse ICTs [9,23,31], and AI STEM & Robotics [10,18,20,29] to enhance core educational processes like evaluation, intervention, and instruction. Furthermore, connecting these ICT tools with models of metacognition, mindfulness, and emotional intelligence development [11,12] accelerates and optimizes educational practices. This holistic approach yields significant results, particularly for cultural entrepreneurship, where psychological resilience and empathy are essential for success.

4 CONCLUSIONS

The comparative examination of Alonnisos, Lesvos, and Kos demonstrates that pirate heritage takes different material and narrative forms on each island. In Alonnisos, it is primarily organized around the museum and its maritime collection. In Lesvos, it is dispersed across monuments, historical figures, and specific sites. In Kos, it is expressed mainly through castles and fortified settlements. This diversity creates the potential for a shared cultural route without eliminating the distinctive identity of each destination.

The success of such a route depends first and foremost on historical accuracy. The narrative should explain the distinctions between piracy, corsair activity, and state-sponsored naval warfare. It should also present the consequences of these activities for local communities rather than focusing exclusively on the adventures of the raiders. Theatrical and digital applications can be valuable interpretive tools when they are based on documented sources, clearly indicate the limits of historical reconstruction, and ultimately direct visitors back to authentic monuments and material objects.

A second prerequisite is the meaningful participation of local communities. Residents can contribute through oral testimonies, family archives and historical objects, the production of educational material, guided tours, and local products. Such participation can strengthen community ownership and acceptance of the initiative while reducing the risk of transforming cultural heritage into a tourism spectacle imposed from outside.

A third prerequisite is the connection between cultural heritage and measurable and equitable local development. Cooperation among museums, municipalities, educational institutions, and businesses can encourage longer visitor stays and distribute visitor expenditure across a wider range of activities. Evaluation should therefore consider not only visitor numbers but also the quality of the visitor experience, the protection of heritage sites, community participation, and the actual economic benefits generated for local communities.

Under these conditions, the proposed “In the Footsteps of the Pirates” route could function as a coherent programme of cultural interpretation rather than simply as a thematic tourism promotion initiative. It would enable visitors to understand how the sea shaped the economy, defence, settlement patterns, and collective memory of the islands. The primary objective would not be the pursuit of a mythical treasure, but the recognition of documented historical evidence and the enduring relationship between Aegean communities and the maritime environment.

STATEMENTS ON COMPLIANCE WITH ETHICAL STANDARDS

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The Authors proclaim no conflict of interest.

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