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Cover Page Footnote

Author Contribution This paper is the result of the combined efforts of the authors. C. Ferrario wrote sections 1, 2, 3 and 4. Sections 5 and 6 and figure 2 are attributed to R. Afferni.

Religious Tourism and Italian Sacred Mounts: Experiences of networking and co-operation at a UNESCO site

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A Sacred Mount is a historical holy site and former pilgrimage attraction. It is a devotional complex located on a mountain, and composed of a series of chapels and shrines in which scenes from the life of Christ, the Virgin Mary or the saints are represented through paintings and sculptures. In 2003 the Sacred Mounts of Piedmont and Lombardy were included in the UNESCO World Heritage List being considered as representative of something that can be understood, in part, through visitor interactions with the areas in which they are located (see Di Giovine, 2009:208).

The visitors to Sacred Mounts are: tourists for whom the journey is strictly for cultural purposes, pilgrims who visit the site and share a spiritual quest or religious devotion in order to obtain spiritual benefits and/or find the sources of their faith, and tourists who visit the sacred place on their way to other destinations by chance or out of curiosity (see Afferni et al., 2011).

Sacred Mounts are important destinations for religious tourism that can be defined as 'local pilgrimage centres', not because of their cultural and religious values, but because of visitors' flows. However these holy places are not mass destinations, but their cultural, artistic and religious importance is well-known.

Based on exploratory investigation, this article describes the numbers and kinds of visitors to the Sacred Mounts of Piedmont and Lombardy and the projects of preservation being undertaken to maintain cultural and environmental values. The research, in particular, try to evaluate the experiences of networking and co-operation in the UNESCO site, with a focus on the 2015 Milan International Expo.

Key Words: pilgrimage, religious tourism, tourism experience, Sacred Mounts

Introduction: Objectives and Context

Religious tourism is experiencing a marked revival around the globe over the last few decades. Religious visitors are driven by motives such as curiosity, to find out about new cultures or to take part in specific spiritual rituals. They travel to see religious attractions, including cathedrals, statues and temples or to attend religious events. According to academics (Bailey and Sood, 1993; Krausz, 1972; Lupfer and Wald, 1985; Lupfer *et al.*, 1992; McDaniel and Burnett, 1990; Walter, 2002; Wilkes *et al.*, 1986), religion is a fundamental part of culture and is linked to many aspects of our life and behaviour (Poria et al., 2010).

Many people, every years, visit destinations, such as Saint Peter's in the Vatican, Fatima in Portugal, Jerusalem in Israel, Lourdes in France and Czestochowa in Poland (major Christian international pilgrimage centre). These are important destinations

for religious tourism, but there are other destinations, we can define as 'local pilgrimage centres'. This concept does not refer to the 'importance' of their cultural and religious value, but to the low number of the visitors they attract every year - they are not mass destinations. But, they have a great cultural, artistic and religious importance. This article analyses as case study of local pilgrimage, the Sacred Mounts of Piedmont and Lombardy, which have a great historical value and sacredness for humanity but, more importantly, for local communities.

The purpose of this paper is firstly to provide an overview of attempts by scholars to define pilgrims, cultural and religious tourists and their motivations and experiences visiting sacred sites. Next the authors wish to focus on tourism development at the Sacred Mounts, inscribed as a network by UNESCO in their World Heritage List. The authors suggest an evaluation of the project to preserve the cultural and environmental values and tourism attractiveness of the sites, and

Figure 1: The Landscaped Architectural Ensembles of the Sacred Mounts

Source: <http://www.sacrimonti.net> (Photos by Franco Andreone: a) Sacred Mount of Oropa, Panoramic view; b) Sacred Mount of Varese, Chapel V ‘The disputation between Jesus and the doctors in the temple’; c) Sacred Mount of Varallo, Chapel XXXVI – ‘The Road to Calvary’)

concludes by identifying and explaining the findings that emerged from the analyses. The paper is undertaken with a focus on the Milan International Expo, which too, place in 2015.

The Sacred Mounts’ Historical and Religious Value

The model of the Sacred Mounts is an Italian creation dating back to the 15th century which, under the influence of the Counter-Reformation (Centini, 1990), spread across Europe, thanks to San Carlo Borromeo, Archbishop of Milan (Barbero, 2001).

The term Sacred Mount refers to a number of

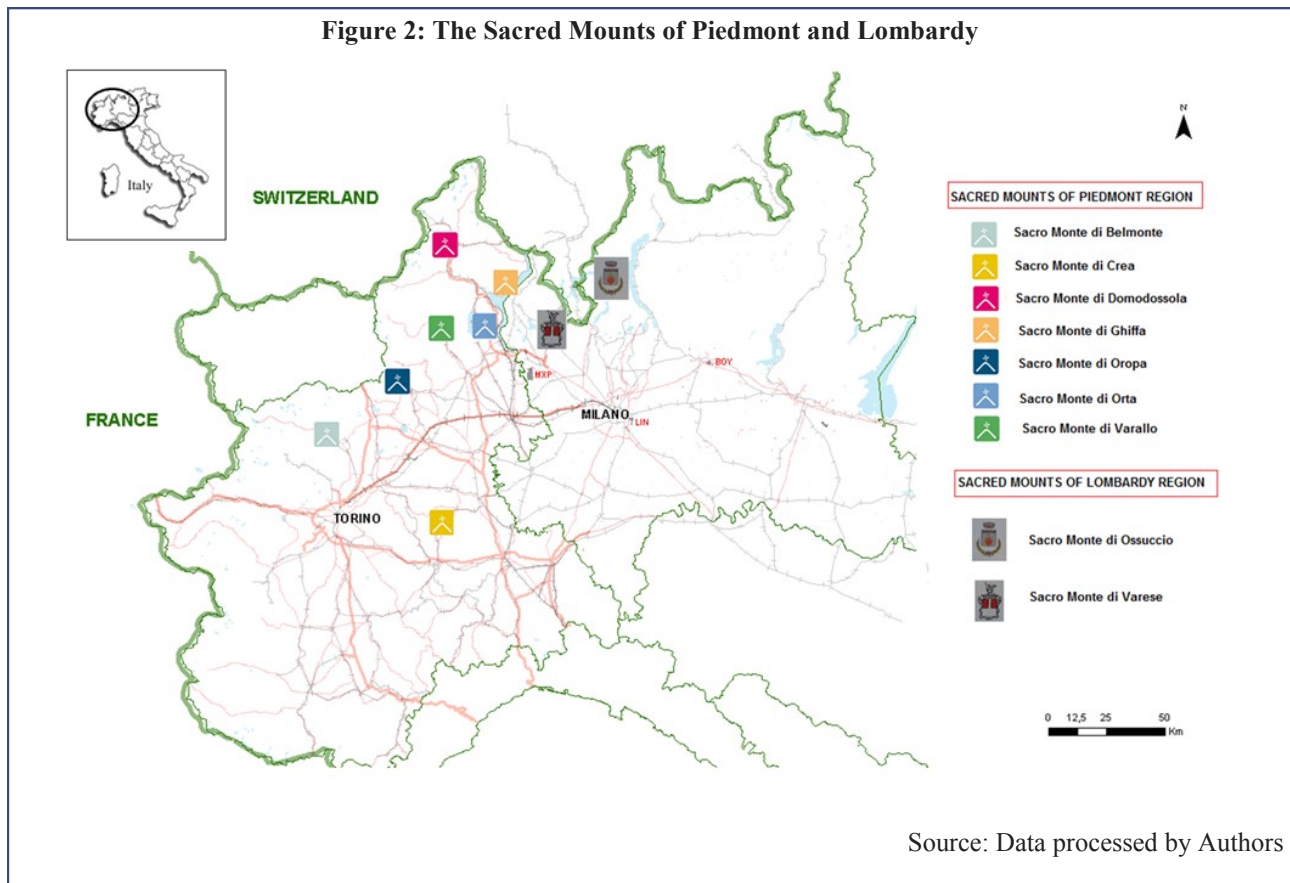
- 1) According to Bonet-Correa (1989), not all Calvaries are Sacred Mounts, even if the Calvary is an essential part of them. Holy Mounts are located in a high place, whereas Calvaries can be built in a flat site. Sacred Mounts are dedicated to the story of Christ, but also to the Virgin Mary, or a Saint, moreover, the Calvary is devoted to Christ’s Passion. So, when a Sacred Mount is dedicated to ‘the Passion’, it is a Calvary, as the Sacred Mount of Domodossola.
- 2) The Via Crucis is the itinerary followed by Jesus, under the weight of the cross, from Pontius Pilato’s place to the top of Golgotha: from his condemnation to death to his crucifixion on Calvary.

landscaped architectural ensembles, whose format entails variously distributed parts which terminate in a sanctuary. These complexes offer a series of devotional stations that wind upward in a sequence of tabernacles, shrines and chapels, each of which contains paintings or statues related to the theme to which that particular devotional route is dedicated. This devotional complex is usually one of three main types: the Path of the Cross, the Calvary^[1] and the Sacred Mount. These categories can be combined in different ways, uniting places and representations that vary from one place to another (see Figure 1).

Lay culture expresses its desire to see religious rituals through images and relics. The Catholic Church, in the 15th century, responded to this need by encouraging the building of devotional places dedicated to the likes of the Nativity, Calvaries, Sacred Mounts and via Crucis^[2] (Barbero, 2001).

Consequently, the themes underlying Sacred Mounts are varied. Some offer detailed and complex accounts of the life of Christ, with special emphasis on the stages of the Passion (as seen in Varallo)^[3]; others focus primarily on the ultimate events of Passion (as Biemonte and Domodossola); or on the Virgin Mary

Figure 2: The Sacred Mounts of Piedmont and Lombardy



Source: Data processed by Authors

(as in Crea and Oropa), or on a special saint such as St Francis (as Orta) or on the Mystery of the Rosary (as in Varese and Ossuccio). The individual episodes of the chosen story are recounted along the 'Via Sacra', composed of groups of life-sized statues modelled in the round in *terracotta* with coloured glaze; or in wood, and some, such as the Sacred Mount of Varallo, are even ornately dressed (Argentiero and Armiraglio, 2008).

The Sacred Mounts are a series of little temples peopled with statuary and arranged in sequence along a trail, creating a sort of virtual system that is a point of meeting between pilgrims and people permanently inhabiting the mountain. They are places where people come together and where the internal and external

merge: the mysteries represented inside the chapels manifest themselves outside in the route. The path both gives and acquires meaning in the broader context of the design of the Mount through its relationship with the foothills and with the alpine geography as a whole.

For this reason, and in particular because of their unique imagery, the Sacred Mounts were accorded the status of World Heritage by UNESCO, who identified nine complexes, in the North of Italy: Belmonte, Crea, Domodossola, Ghiffa, Oropa, Orta and Varallo in the Piedmont region; Ossuccio and Varese in Lombardy (Figure 2). These Sacred Mounts have only a few comparisons outside the Alpine region - sporadic cases can be found in Poland, Spain and Brazil.

The Sacred Mounts of Piedmont and Lombardy were enlisted in the World Heritage List of UNESCO on 3rd of July 2003 as they represent the successful integration of architecture and fine art into a landscape of great beauty, for spiritual reasons at a critical period in the history of the Roman Catholic Church. Moreover, they achieve the most exceptional expression of architecture implantation and sacred art into a natural landscape of Northern Italy for didactic and spiritual purposes and have had a profound influence on subsequent developments elsewhere in

3) Through presenting reproductions of the New Jerusalem, the Sacred Mounts offer pilgrims the possibility to visit Holy Places on a smaller scale, to 'witness' the places where the Passion of Christ took place. During the 15th century, the most important pilgrimage destinations were: Santiago de Compostela, Rome and Jerusalem. Travels to Jerusalem became too dangerous because of the Turkish occupation, therefore, (Ferrario, 2010, p 20). pilgrimages to the Holy Land stopped being a group phenomenon and became a very expensive and dangerous adventure (Fontana, Lodari and Sorrenti, 2004).

Europe (Regione Piemonte, 2000; Sacri Monti, 2010).

The Sacred Mounts were inscribed in the UNESCO because they are representative (or exemplary) of something, and that something can be understood, in part, through visitors' interaction with the areas in which they are located (Di Giovine, 2009). The inclusion in the List is true recognition of the great 'value' of these sites, since they are understood to authoritatively and emotionally speak to the present time about the past, while at the same time giving directions for the future. For example, a traveller on their paths must follow a pre-established, symbolic and devotional itinerary leading to the monumental elements of the complex, built in the past, which, together with the surrounding landscape, constitutes an inseparable cultural entity of each individual site (Barbero, 2001).

All these nine sacred places have certain characteristics in common, while other features distinguish them, depending on the cultural status of those who commissioned their construction, on the artists who worked on them, and not least on the expectations of the local congregation (Zanzi, 1995).

For example, the Sacred Mount of Varallo, in Piedmont Region, province of Vercelli, was built in 1486 by Father Caimi. This religious man began the construction of the church of *Santa Maria delle Grazie* near a Franciscan monastery, as well as the first chapels of the Sacred Mount. Other chapels were built and after the death of Father Caimi the work continued, thanks to the reputation that this holy place was beginning to have as a devotional pilgrimage destination and the approval received from the Duke of Milan. The Sacred Mount of Varallo is an example of a garden park organised according to the model of the Italian garden, with hedges, paths and wooded areas; it is also structured as an ideal town (Riserva Naturale Speciale del Sacro Monte di Varallo, 2010a). It is the only Sacred Mount that maintains an 'urban aspect,' with its historical walling and two town squares (the square of the Tribunals and the square of the *Basilica*), which blend into an evocative processional itinerary through the greenery, almost like a long rural *Via Crucis* winding around the hill (Afferni *et al.*, 2010).

In contrast, the Sacred Mount above Varese rises to 883m in altitude. The devotional path extends along the slopes of *Monte Velate*, in a panoramic position that looks down on a beautiful setting of pre-alpine

lakes and the plain. The Sacred Way was built starting in 1604, on the initiative of the *Capuchin* Friar Giovanni Battista Aguggiari, who planned the construction of fourteen chapels dedicated to the Mysteries of the Rosary. The last, with the celestial vision of the Virgin, received and crowned in Paradise, was to have the place of honour in the Sanctuary at the end of the devotional route, founded it is said, by Sant'Ambrogio (Vincenzoni, 1928). The project of *Padre* Aguggiari was soon realised thanks to the support of the local communities and wealthy families. The work continued, especially on the furnishings of the chapels, until the 18th century. The Sacred Mount of Varese is the most uniform and homogeneous of all the Sacred Mounts of Piedmont and Lombardy; all the constructions (the chapels, the three fountains and the three arches that introduce the Mysteries) were designed by a single architect (Giuseppe Bernascone known as 'Il Mancino').

After this introduction, the following sections describes the flows of visitors that characterise these holy places and the importance of the Sacred Mounts for the tourism system. The paper then illustrates how they cast light on how a traditional religious tourism destination can still attract people nowadays. The last part of the paper takes into consideration projects for the valorisation of tourism and suggests some strategies for these UNESCO sites.

Tourism and the Sacred Mounts: theoretical basis

Sacred Mounts are specific holy sites that, in the past, were considered to be important elements of local art. At the end of the 19th century, these extraordinary complexes of monuments were recognised as artworks of the highest quality, in particular, their unique character mix, with elements of architecture, sculpture and painting. Then, in the 20th century the historical-graphical importance of the Sacred Mounts was found and intensified (Zanzi and Zanzi, 2002).

Nowadays, Sacred Mounts are a destination for individuals and groups, and for people coming from every religious community; the devotion of many visitors is witnessed by very large *ex-votos* collected here (Fontana *et al.*, 2004). In some cases, old traditions still exist, like the procession from Malnate (a little town a few kilometres from Varese) to Varese's Sacred Mount, which, since 1604, commemorates the place and the year of the first

preaching originally made to support the construction of *Via delle Cappelle* (the Chapel route). The old pilgrimage from Orta's Sacred Mount to Varallo's one, crossing over Lake Orta and through the *Colma* Pass, has been recently restarted, and annually, boasts a great number of participants (Fontana *et al.*, 2004).

Academic studies define pilgrimage as a ritual journey from the quotidian life to a sacred place, an act of religious / cultural devotion or in quest a sacred experience. As a purposeful traveller, the pilgrim has a destination and often expects a particular outcome from the journey; their voyage is thus passion-laden and hyper-meaningful, and is often steeped in symbols and symbolic actions. So, pilgrimage could be defined as the most emotional and seductive of touristic interactions, and it could generate intense feelings of ecstasy and transcendence, self-inflicted suffering and penitential pain (Di Giovine, 2010).

In the past, according to Baber (1993:1), pilgrimage was

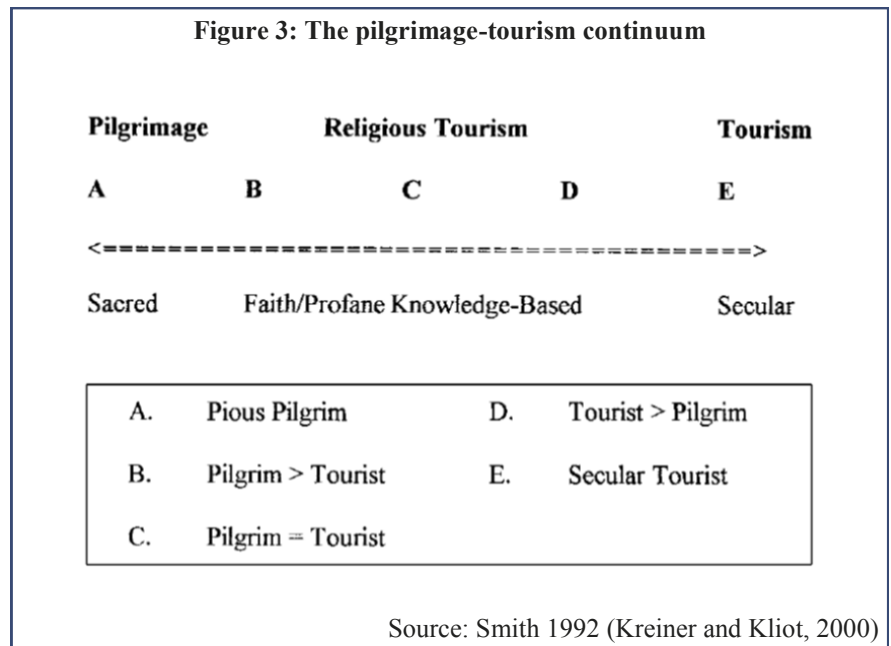
a journey resulting from religious causes, externally to a holy site, and internally for spiritual purposes and internal understanding.

Nowadays, pilgrimage is seen differently: it can be defined as a traditional religious or modern secular journey (Collins-Kreiner, 2010). The practice of pilgrimage is currently experiencing resurgence throughout the world with longstanding shrines still attracting those in search of spiritual fulfilment (Digance, 2003). In the modern era, amplifications in spiritually motivated travel have coincided with the growth of tourism (Timothy and Olsen, 2006).

Sacred Mounts can be defined as 'contested sites'. They are sacred locations where there is contestation over access and usage by any number of groups or individuals, who have an interest in being able to freely enter and move around the site (Digance, 2003). Visitors can be pilgrims, but also tourists or a mix, so it would be important to understand the link between pilgrimage and tourism.

The term 'pilgrimage' connotes a religious journey and its Latin derivation *ire per agros* allows many

Figure 3: The pilgrimage-tourism continuum



interpretations, including foreigner, wanderer, exile and traveller, as well as newcomer and stranger. The term 'tourist' indicates an individual who makes a circuitous journey, usually for pleasure, and returns to the starting point (Collins-Kreiner and Kliot, 2000).

Studies have focused on the similarities and the differences between the tourist and the pilgrim (Cohen, 1992, 1998; Collins-Kreiner and Kliot, 2000; Digance, 2003, 2006; MacCannell, 1973; Olsen, 2013; Smith, 1992; Timothy and Olsen, 2006; Turner and Turner, 1978; Urry 2001; Vukoni'c, 1996, 2002). In particular, Cohen (1992) suggests that there is a difference between pilgrimage and tourism regarding the direction of the journey undertaken. The 'pilgrim' goes toward their socio-cultural centre, while the 'tourist' moves in the opposite direction (Collins-Kreiner, 2010).

Smith (1992) suggested that the contemporary use of the terms, identifying the 'pilgrim' as a religious traveller and the 'tourist' as a sightseer, are culturally constructed poles that veil the motives of the traveller (Collins-Kreiner and Kliot, 2000). This model identifies tourism and pilgrimage as opposite end points on a continuum of travel (Figure 3), the polarities on the axis are labelled as sacred vs. secular and between the extremities lie almost infinite possible sacred-secular combinations, with the central area called 'religious tourism'. This position reflects the many motivations of the visitors, whose interests and activities may switch from tourism to pilgrimage and

vice versa. In fact, as Smith said, some religious tourists may be ‘more pilgrim than tourist’, whereas others may be ‘more tourist than pilgrim’ (Sharpley and Sundaram, 2005)^[4].

In our specific case, we recognise three types of visitor to sacred sites who are differentiated according to their intentions and their affection for, or spiritual connection to, the site.

The **first visitor type** is the *pilgrim* (area A in Smith’s continuum), for whom the journey is strictly for spiritual quest or religious devotion. The experience allows the pilgrim to gain spiritual benefits from the trip, both if they are looking for an indulgence^[5] and / or for the sources of their faith. In the past, the pilgrim was recognisable for their dress and for the fact that they were the only person who travelled with merchants (Gazzini, 2002; Vercauteren, 1964). Nowadays, the way to organise a pilgrimage has changed radically. Modern pilgrims are specialised; they request quality services (assistance, housing, means of transport, etc.) and the satisfaction of their necessities creates an inseparable link between religious (the motivation) and ‘secular’ elements (fast and comfortable transport, accommodation in organised structures, etc.) (Ferrario, 2010).

The **second visitor type** is the *tourist* (area C), for whom the sacred site is the primary destination, but not only for religious or spiritual purposes, but also for cultural or environmental interests (Ferrario, 2010). This specific type of tourism includes many categories that define the tourist from the objectives of their visit.

The **third visitor type** is the *traveller* a specific type of secular tourist (area E). This is a person whose destination is not a sacred site but, by chance, it is the visit to a sacred site *en-route* to a destination or, when a site is visited out of curiosity and for cultural motives.

4) In relation to Smith’s continuum, recent studies (Digance, 2003; Collins-Kreiner and Gatrell, 2006; Timothy and Olsen, 2006; Raj and Griffin, 2015) suggest that there is a narrower gap between the sacred and secular than Smith’s continuum indicates. Research conducted, at several religious sites, has divulged that most visitor experiences can be located on the mid-point of Smith’s model; that is, neither a pious religious experience nor a purely secular one (Hughes *et al.*, 2013).

5) As for interceding on his / her behalf and helping to miraculously cure suffering.

Table 1 – Visitors to Sacred Mounts, 2010

Sacred Mount	Visitors total year	Type*
Belmonte	8.000 (about) ^c	Pilgrims Organized Groups Schools
Crea	210.682 ^a	Single Tourist Families Organized Groups Pilgrims
Oropa	8.000 (about) ^c	Single Tourist Families Organized groups Pilgrims
Orta	49.095 ^a	Groups of young people Families Organized Groups Pilgrims Single Tourist
Domodossola	8.688 ^a	Organized groups
Ghiffa	14.800 ^b	Families
Varallo	129.463 ^c	Families Organized Groups Pilgrims Single Tourist
Varese	25.000/30.000 ^c	Organized Groups
Ossuccio	25.000 (about) ^c	Data not available

^a Data year 2010, on the basis of data from Università Luigi Bocconi, 2012

^b Data year 2009, on the basis of data from Afferni *et al.*, 2011

^c Data year 2008, on the basis of data from Regione Piemonte, 2009

* Data on the basis of Università Luigi Bocconi, 2012

Source: Personal elaboration on various data

Nolan and Nolan (1989; 1992) have described the various dimensions of contemporary European pilgrimage with a specific focus on type of tourists that visit holy places. They raised the complex issues of pilgrim types when groups visit religious sites: traditional pilgrims; members of packaged religious tours and; mass tourists checking off sites on their vacation itinerary (Collins-Kreiner N., 2009).

Collins-Keriner (2010) puts the focus on other dimensions and factors that may influence visitor experiences, because the differences between the experiences of pilgrims and tourist can be influenced (Hughes *et al.*, 2013) by factors such as age, gender and social status (Sharpley and Sundaram, 2005).

Tourism in the Sacred Mounts: methodology

The methodology employed in this paper uses deductive reasoning and is based on a descriptive approach in the fields of economic geography (in particular tourism), with an emphasis on the type of religious tourism, the system and local networks, the

Table 2 – Tourists in the Towns of the Sacred Mounts, 2012

Sacred Monuts	Town	Establishments	Beds	Domestic Tourism		Inbound Tourism		Total year	
				Arrivals	Overnights	Arrivals	Overnights	Arrivals	Overnights
Belmonte	Valperga*	1	6	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a
Ponzano Monferrato	Crea	4	18	292	437	50	140	342	577
Domodossola	Domodossola	23	415	12.894	54.990	4.531	15.547	17.425	70.537
Ghiffa	Ghiffa	12	420	3.302	14.924	8.171	29.581	11.473	44.505
Biella	Oropa	23	1.212	33.433	88.080	11.794	32.146	45.227	120.226
Orta	Orta San Giulio	20	1.901	10.853	21.752	25.858	75.142	36.711	96.894
Varallo	Varallo	18	519	7.046	27.088	2.271	6.609	9.317	33.697
Ossuccio	Ossuccio*	3	12	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a
Varese	Varese	50	2009	53.839	114.725	66.879	146.215	120.718	260.940

*Italian 'Privacy Law' does not allow publication of the data.

Source: Personal elaboration of data from the Varese and Lombardy Regions.

project of preservation being undertaken to maintain cultural and environmental values.

The approximate numbers and kinds of visitors to the Sacred Mounts of Piedmont and Lombardy, is revealed in Table 1. It is important to underline that the data refer to different sources and collection methods. It is difficult to calculate the exact number of people, who every year visit these sacred places (with the exception of the Sacred Mount of Varallo and Crea, where they count 'foot traffic'), because the greatest number of visitors are hikers, who unfortunately cannot be counted.

There is a mismatch between Table 1 and 2, which notes the flows of tourists in the town of every Sacred Mount (for example, in Varallo there are many visitors to the Sacred place, rather than tourists).

Families are the most common type of visitors to the Sacred Mounts. Organised groups (religion groups / parishes, training / schools, leisure / holiday summer centres etc.), generally represent about 40% of the total visitors (Università Luigi Bocconi, 2012).

On the basis of his analyses, Moraschi (2007) identifies the following segments of tourist demand:

- parish and diocesan pilgrimages from North-east Italy;
- groups of religious and priests;
- youth retreats;
- schools;
- prayer groups;
- singing or art schools;

- families and single visitors;
- summer holidays centre for senior people.

Religion, culture and nature are the primary reasons for traveling to these places. As far as nature is concerned, one of the distinctive features of these holy sites in the Alpine foothills is their arrangement on the landscape, a factor that has guaranteed a lasting visual and an inward record in the past, as well in the present time (Argentiero and Armiraglio, 2008).

The landscape of the Sacred Mounts is considered as a system which unfolds space and time, whose constituent elements are human and divine. All religions, in every time and culture, have their sacred places (in the woods, on the riverside and water sources) where the world was created the seat of the gods, the meeting point between human and divine.^[6]

Findings and Discussion of Results

As stated in the previous section, 'families' are the most common type of visitors of the Sacred Mounts driven by religious, cultural and environmental interests. These interests are related to the historical value and sacredness for both humanity and local communities of the sites, a 'unique' combination of natural habitat and cultural context, which is recognised on a global scale (Università Luigi Bocconi, 2012; Santuario di Oropa, 2013).

6) See ATLAS - *Centro di Documentazione dei Sacri Monti Calvari e Complessi devozionali europei, Religioni e sacri Monti*, a cura di Barbero A. and Piano S.; *Atti del Convegno Internazionale, Torino, Moncalvo, Casale Monferrato, 12-16 ottobre 2004* Centro di Documentazione dei Sacri Monti Calvari e Complessi devozionali europei http://www.sacrimonti.net/DocumentFolder/Sacri_Monti.pdf

To examine project management and planning process regarding the network of Sacred Mounts, that takes into consideration the types of visitors and the most common one, we conducted a documentary analysis. We used information, up to 2000, regarding projects related to these holy places, focusing on reports provided by Civil and Religious organisations and website.^[7]

First of all we have to state that there is no real strategic planning for the entire network of the Sacred Mounts, neither for their valorisation nor the development of their tourism potential. The overall UNESCO site is considered as a universal 'good' and is typically characterised by each Sacred Mount being small. Sites are geographically spread out (see Figure 2), located in two Italian regions: Piedmont and Lombardy; they have different ownership (Civil and Religious organisations) and consequently different managerial philosophies. They are members of a system of protected natural areas (Università Luigi Bocconi, 2012) and most of all they experience different levels of touristic flow. Although the inscription on the World Heritage List has taken place with reference to the 'network of the Sacred Mounts of Piedmont and Lombardy', each 'point in the network' had its own authority (Natural Park or Reserve) for

environmental protection.^[8] The authorities aim to conserve and maintain every specific complex in terms of the history, environment and art of their individual Sacred Mount with appropriate financial grants (public and private) and thanks to the work of their employees (the director, the technical and administrative staff).

Until 1st January 2012, the Sacred Mounts have operated individually regarding environmental conservation and the tourist use of the sites (Minissale, 2010). Since that date, the Piedmont and Lombardy Regions have established two entities for environmental management of the nine Sacred Mounts.^[9] The goal of these new entities is the promotion of the whole system, which may have a particular appeal for 'nature tourism', nowadays a segment with significant growth (Università Luigi Bocconi, 2012). In order to maintain environmental, cultural, artistic and historical values over time and to produce projects related to tourist use of the sites, it is necessary that all stakeholders are involved in the conservation and valorisation of heritage. In 2003 the UNESCO network created a 'Permanent Study and Documentation Centre' (named Documentation Centre of the European Sacred Mounts, Calvaries and Devotional Complexes), at the Natural Park and Equipped Area of the Sacred Mount of Crea. The aim of the Centre (formally established by Piedmont Region Act No. 5/2005) is to promote 'activities of research, and study and occasions for discussion and cooperation' and to collect historical information, management and

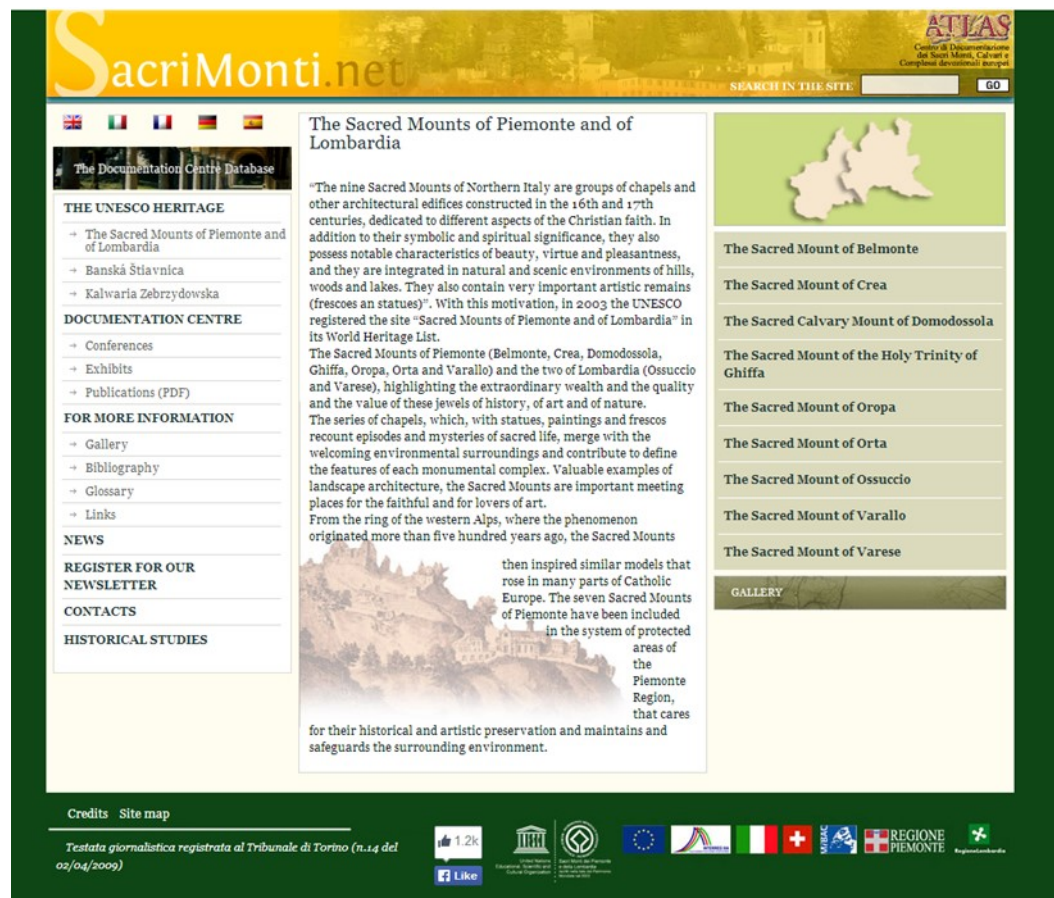
7) The websites survey included analysis of the pages of the network of Sacred Mounts (www.sacrimonti.net/; www.sacri-monti.com/), the pages of every single Sacred Mount (www.sacromonte-domodossola.com/; www.sacromonte-belmonte.com/; www.sacromonte-varallo.com/; www.sacromonte-oropa.com/; www.sacromonte-ghiffa.com/; www.parcocrea.com/; www.sacromonte-orta.com/; www.sacromontevarese.net/; www.comunicare.it/luoghi/luoghi/ossuccio.htm), the webpages of Piedmont and Lombardy Region (www.regione.piemonte.it/; www.regione.lombardia.it/) other Civil and Religious organizations related to Sacred Mounts (among others the Ministry of Cultural Heritage and Activities: www.beniculturali.it/; 'Varese Europea' Association: www.vareseeuropea.org/) and specific pages about projects and events, such as Devotional and Cultural Itineraries Tourism Exchange (www.borsaoropa.it/); Expo Milan 2015 (www.expo2015.org/).

8) For Piedmont Region see Act No. 5/1980 (Natural Park and Equipped Area of Crea); No. 30/1980 (Special Nature Reserve of Varallo); No. 32/1980 (Regional Nature Reserve of Orta); No. 51/1987 (Regional Nature Reserve of Ghiffa); No. 14/1991 (Regional Nature Reserve of Belmonte); No. 65/1991 (Regional Nature Reserve of Domodossola); No. 5/2005 (Regional Nature Reserve of Oropa). For Lombardy see Act No. 17/1984 (Natural Park of *Campo dei Fiori* of Varese). For the Sacred Mount of Ossuccio we detected an absence of specific instruments of environmental protection.

9) For Piedmont Region see Act. No. 19/2009 and 16/2001; for Lombardy see Act. No. 12/2011.

10) According to academic studies, flows of visitors can generate environmental, social, cultural and economic impacts on the local economies, that have been defined as benefits (positive) and costs (negative) (among others see Choi and Murray, 2010; Deery *et al.*, 2012; Easterling, 2004; Gursoy *et al.*, 2002; Lee, 2013; Nunkoo and Ramkissoon, 2012, Università Luigi Bocconi, 2012). Stylidis and Terzidou (2014: 213) have argued that tourism is perceived, specifically in terms of economic impacts, to increase employment and the standard of living, to contribute to infrastructure development, to generate revenue for local communities and governments, and to create new investment opportunities (see Diedrich and Garcia-Buades, 2009; Lee *et al.*, 2007; McDowall and Choi, 2010). Conversely, on the negative side, it has been noted (Schackley, 2012:36) that visitor impacts on a destination, in particular a sacred site, can affect the physical resource itself or in some way diminish the quality of the experience of the tourist and the worshipper, without any physical effects on the fabric of the site. It has also been noted that tourism is often considered responsible for increased crime rates and social problems, as well as for cultural erosion and commodification (among others Dyer *et al.*, 2007; Ko and Stewart, 2002; Tosun, 2002).

Figure 4: Homepage of the website 'www.sacrimonti.net'



Source: <http://www.sacrimonti.net>

documentation of the individual complexes in order to build a network of European cooperation between stakeholders to share and exchange 'best practice' (Regione Piemonte, 2002; Consiglio Regionale del Piemonte, 2007; Minissale, 2009; De Giorgio, 2011; Sacri Monti, 2013a). However, in its ten-year existence, there are no empirical studies about the success (or not) of the activities of the Documentation Centre to attract increasing volumes of visitors, neither specific types (e.g. families) nor tourists in general. ^[10]

From its inclusion in the UNESCO List, activities have considered local environmental problems and most of all the different levels of touristic flows directed to each specific Sacred Mount. Xxx These held many different initiative as: the restoration of buildings, statues, frescoes and paintings; the creation of disabled accesses and new parking; the implementation of transport (e.g. funicular railway) and accommodation facilities (e.g. 'albergo diffuso')^[11]; the conservation of flora and fauna; the organisation of fairs, exhibitions, walking, touristic and devotional itineraries, concerts,

didactic centres and laboratories, photo contests, conferences, publications and videos. Unfortunately these projects have not been able to promote the entire site as a real 'network'. Many projects result as supporting action of an individual site, especially when they were financed thanks to local public institutions and actors or specific regional funds. For example in 2010 the restoration of the *Cappella della Pietà* (Chapel of Piety) and of the statue of Bernardino Caimi (founder of the Sacred Mount of Varallo) were financed by Fondazione della Cassa di Risparmio di

11) The *albergo diffuso* is a particular type of hotel conceived to provide to the guests a unique experience of living a historical centre of a town or of a village. It provides all the services of traditional hotels (welcoming, assistance, common spaces, meals), although the rooms are scattered around the historical centre, within a radius of approx. 200 meters from the centre and the heart of the hotel (the reception, the common spaces, the restaurant). This new concept of hospitality, was launched in Italy in the early 1980s as a means of reviving small, historic Italian villages and town centres off the usual tourist track (Dichter and Dall'Ara, 2008).

Figure 5: First issue of the Magazine ATLAS

Source: <http://www.sacrimonti.net/DocumentFolder/Rivista3.pdf>

Vercelli (a local charitable organisation) and by Inner Wheel Valsesia (a charity club), respectively; the rebuilding of Santa Maria del Monte crypt in Varese was financed by the Municipality and Lombardy Region. We did not find projects regarding the transport facilities of entire network of the Sacred Mounts but only individual projects of a specific site, e.g. in 2003 the implementation of the funicular railway in Varallo financed by the Municipality of the city. As for the organisation of events many of them were supported by local associations and public institutions, e.g. in 2010 the *Associazione Settembre Musicale S. Giulio* (a local musician association) promoted concerts in the Sacred Mount of Orta and in 2014 *Fondazione Paolo VI per il Sacro Monte di Varese* (a catholic foundation) (in collaboration with the parish church of Santa Maria del Monte and with the support of Regional council of Lombardy, Province and Municipality of Varese) curate the ‘open air’ exhibition about the 30th anniversary of the visit of St. Giovanni Paolo II in the Sacred Mount of Varese.

On the other hand the projects regarding the image of the Sacred Mount as a system are: the website

‘www.sacrimonti.net’; the Magazine ATLAS; the Permanent Conference; the event Devotional and Cultural Itineraries Tourism Exchange (Italian: *Borsa dei Percorsi Devozionali e Culturali* – BpDC); the project ‘Feeding soul and body’; the 10 years anniversary initiative and the Grand Tour.

The website ‘www.sacrimonti.net’, realised and developed by the Documentation Centre of the European Sacred Mounts, Calvaries and Devotional Complexes, contains the information of the previous website ‘www.parcocrea.it’. The new site (figure 4) operates from 1st September 2004 and its pages explain and develop the activities of the entire devotional complex and contain the Database of the Documentation Centre. The database is the fruit of research conducted by the Documentation Centre on 1,812 European devotional complexes and holds for each holy place: a description, a map, some photographs and a bibliography. At this time, the reports on the sites in the following countries can be consulted: Austria, Belgium, France, Germany, Italy, Luxemburg, Holland, Poland, Portugal, Slovakia, Spain, Hungary and Switzerland (Sacri Monti, 2013c).

The Magazine ATLAS is one of the strategic points of reference for researches, although it is not published at regular intervals and the issues are prepared on the occasion of special events and shows (Sacri Monti, 2013b). The first of the six issues of the Magazine (figure 5) was published in 2002 and is about the publication of the atlas as a research work that built collaborative relations between experts, organisations and institutions. The aim of the collaboration was to create and share comparisons and links between unique and unrepeatable structures drawn together by numerous affinities. The last edition is dedicated to the study-journey to the Holy Land that took place in the summer of 2006, with the participation of directors of protected areas, publicists, experts and lovers of Christian archaeology. The journey ‘From Representation To Reality’ was ideated and planned by the Documentation Centre to discover, in the Holy Land, the memories, the places and the religious practices that led to the birth and growth of the Christian Sacred Mounts, Calvaries and Devotional Complexes.

The Permanent Conference is one of the newest projects and operates as a ‘control room’, expressing common guidelines and actions. The first meeting of the Permanent Conference was 7th April 2011 in Turin.

The 40 participants of 5 levels of Institutions (MiBAC^[12], Regions, Religious Authorities, Natural Parks and Reserves, Municipalities) chose Don Vito Nardin (Head of the Centre for Rosminian Spirituality of the Sacred Mount Calvario of Domodossola) as coordinator. The aim of the Permanent Conference is to valorise the knowledge of the entire system of the Sacred Mounts, with a positive economic impact on local communities (De Giorgio, 2011). In particular the 9 Sacred Mounts signed an agreement with MiBAC to participate at Expo 2015^[13] 'Feeding the Planet, Energy for Life' and will promote the network as an excellence of the North-West of Italy (Schifini, 2014). A shared itinerary of the Sacred Mounts is included in the document edited by the famous art critic Vittorio Sgarbi for Expo Milan 2015 that proposes single exhibitions of the main artists of the entire network (from Gaudenzio Ferrari to Romanino, Tanzio from Varallo, Morazzone and Giulio Cesare Procaccini) combine with theatrical and literature pieces of Giovanni Testori (the poet of the Sacred Mounts) (Sgarbi, 2015).

The event Devotional and Cultural Itineraries Tourism Exchange (Italian: *Borsa dei Percorsi Devozionali e Culturali* – BpDC), started in 2005 with its first edition (the following editions were in 2007, 2009, 2011 and 2014), brought together all the players (International Buyers, Italian and Piedmont operators, regional and national representatives for these areas and themes, and so on) involved or interested in this particular niche tourism (*Borsa dei Percorsi Devozionali e Culturali*, 2011).

Another interesting project is 'Feeding soul and body' (Italian: *NAC – Nutrendo anima e corpo*). It is proposed by the Municipality of Varese and 'Varese Europea' Association and funded by MiBAC with Law No. 77/2006 for actions regarding UNESCO sites. The project (figure 6) has obtained 135,000 euro and its objective is to valorise the serial-site of Piedmont and

12) MiBAC stands for *Ministero dei Beni e delle Attività Culturali* (Ministry of Cultural Heritage and Activities) and it is one of the Italian government bodies to manage cultural heritage.

13) The agreement was signed on 7th October 2014. Expo Milan (1st May – 31st October 2015) is an extraordinary universal event displaying tradition, creativity and innovation in the business of food (Expo, 2013). We noted an interesting initiative connecting Expo to a specific Sacred Mount, the one of Varallo. From Sunday 24th May to Sunday 20th September 2015 a historical train with a steam locomotive connects the holy and the exhibition sites (Ferrovie dello Stato, 2015).

Figure 6: The logo of the project 'Feeding soul and body'



Source: <http://www.vareseeuropea.org/index.html>

Lombardy through the census and the promotion of its special food and wine productions (Varese news, 2012).

The theme of the final conferences of the project (held in the Sacred Mount of Varese on 28th and 29th of March 2014) was the monastic food that fits the themes of Expo Milan 2015 and completed the initiatives promoted in the last two years, as among others: the participation of the network of the Sacred Mounts to the leading tourism trade fairs in Milan (BIT – *Borsa Internazionale del Turismo*), Paris (*Salon Mondial du Tourisme*) and Berlin (ITB Berlin); a coordinated project of tourism incoming; a European workshop in Biella on the 'green tourism' theme (in particular biodiversity, wine & food and territory); the study and valorisation of local wine & food traditions of religious orders to promote both online sale of products and holiday packages for domestic and international markets.

In addition to the previous projects, a study of Università Luigi Bocconi (2012) on behalf of the UNESCO World Heritage site proposes other important initiatives to strengthen and consolidate the image of the holy sites as a system.

The first one regards the adoption of a common communication strategy to provide better identification of the sites as a clear set and to complete and coordinate the content of the promotion. In particular a reorganisation of information is necessary to improve the functions of the various communication tools and the ability to turn them to a non-overlapping public.

The proposal to proclaim, on an annual basis, a 'Day of

Figure 7: The logo of the 10 years anniversary initiative

Source: http://www.sacromontevarallo.eu/upload/20130627191710_logo.jpg

the UNESCO site of the Sacred Mountains of Piedmont and Lombardy' is interesting because this event could represent an opportunity to appeal to visitors and researchers and a moment of involvement of local communities. Every year such a day could focus on a specific theme and take place simultaneously in each Sacred Mount. In particular Wednesday 3rd July 2013 on the occasion of the 10 years anniversary of the UNESCO inscription each sites held a walk along the Sacred Ways to 'rediscover' the importance to be part of the World Heritage List (Figure 7).

According to this perspective of usability of the site UNESCO as a whole, it clearly appears the extreme difficulty of uniting all points of the network with a single path. However, a good experience for local operators may be the launch on the market of a tourist package of the entire complex of the Sacred Mounts. A 'Grand Tour' (in stages) of the UNESCO site could convey an image of unity of the site. A first attempt in this direction is the project of the Authority for

14) The January 2008 issue of the Harvard Business Review was devoted to strategic planning. Articles by Montgomery (2008), Kaplan and Norton (2008), and Porter (2008) in that issue are particularly worthwhile reading. These authors state that the real success of a strategic plan involves translating and integrating the plan's objectives and initiatives with the management and operations of the organization. Regarding religious and cultural tourism, to be successful a strategy must carefully consider a number of factors and practices that address the complex and fragmented nature of both the tourism and religious/culture/heritage sectors.

environmental management of the Sacred Mounts of Piedmont proposing 4 itineraries, regarding the Sacred Mount of Domodossola, Oropa, Orta and Varallo (*Domodossola e il Sacro Monte Calvario; Arte e spiritualità in Valsesia. Sacro Monte e Pinacoteca; Spiritualità sui monti del Lago d'Orta and Stagioni e colori nella aree protette del biellese*) (Sacro Monte di Varallo, 2014).

Conclusions

The Sacred Mounts of Piedmont and Lombardy are a touristic niche destination, spread in two adjoining administrative regions, not only characterised till 2012 by different managerial references and membership of a system of protected natural areas, but also by a remarkable difference in terms of touristic flows.

The operating of many institutions and organisations and the different sets of interest involving the public- and private-sector interests, prevented a successful and shared planning of the site.

According to Shackley (2012:95) only a tiny minority of sacred sites are able to carry out any form of strategic planning^[14] and the management of holy places becomes more complicated if different sets of interest are involved and all such sites, are the *foci* of tiers of public- and private-sector interest. Since the inclusion in the UNESCO List the authorities of the Sacred Mounts carried out many projects, but not all the attempts to develop tourism and promote the site as a network were successful. While sharing the same programmes and objectives, the experience is one of working individually and reacting to crises; such planning that is done is often resulting from an imbalance between demand and supply, or from some architectural reason such the need to close part of a sacred building for conservation. A planning strategy may be forced by the need to plan for some specific event, or to cope with change in financial resources or management structures. The reasons of this lack of a shared planning may be found partly because of the nature of the Sacred Mounts premises and management, partly for the fragmentation of the authorities responsible for each site and partly because of the deficiency of resources (in terms of both finance and experience).

However, we noted that in recent years some projects seem to be able to build the network regarding the image of the system. In particular the suggestion of a

tourist package of all the Sacred Mounts could represent the first key step to communicate outside a unified image of the entire complex and eventually a first try to propose a real package on the national and international tourism market. In this way local actors could exploit the advantage arising from the inscription on the World Heritage List, which represents a guarantee to be 'a place that is worth visiting'. Of course, this solo condition is not clearly sufficient for the visitor to obtain an unforgettable concrete experience of tourism. To make this into reality, local actors should steer strategic planning in tourism towards the valorisation of both the points and the network, and these projects will have a good chance to be successful if they come from a shared planning among all stakeholders.

Author Contribution

This paper is the result of the combined efforts of the authors. C. Ferrario wrote sections 1, 2, 3 and 4. Sections 5 and 6 and figure 2 are attributed to R. Afferni.

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