FROM STRATEGIC NAVAL BASE TO CULTURAL ASSET – THE MILITARY HERITAGE OF LEROS

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Abstract

.This study explores the potential of Leros' military heritage to function as a cultural asset supporting alternative forms of tourism through the adaptive reuse of infrastuctures A survey was conducted among 597 residents of the Dodecanese in order to investigate potential interest in the utilization of military monuments of the Italian occupation aiming at the promotion of mild forms of tourism development. The findings reveal a high level of recognition of the cultural significance of the Italian-period military heritage and strong public support for its adaptive reuse as a resource for cultural and sustainable tourism development. The results highlight the prospects for integrating military heritage into a diversified and sustainable tourism model for the island.

Key words: Leros, Dodecanese, Italian occupation, military heritage, cultural asset, sustainable tourism

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1.1 Introduction

The utilization of the cultural heritage as a development resource constitutes a central pillar of contemporary sustainable tourism strategies, particularly in insular environments where the expansion of mass tourism remains spatially and environmentally constrained. Within this framework, military heritage is no longer approached solely as a historical remnant of armed conflict, but as a multi-layered form of cultural capital that acquires renewed dynamics when integrated into mild tourism development models (Harrison, 2013; Logan & Reeves, 2009) [1,2]. In insular environments, spatial and environmental constraints should not be viewed solely as development limitations. On the contrary, they increasingly function as drivers of innovative planning approaches, encouraging adaptive reuse, resource efficiency, and environmentally responsible heritage management. In this context, military heritage provides an opportunity to promote sustainable forms of cultural tourism through the creative transformation of existing infrastructure rather than new construction (Zhang et al., 2025)[3].

The case of Leros is indicative of this transition. The extensive military infrastructures of the Italian period form a distinctive cultural landscape where architecture, occupation memory, and geostrategic history coexist. Their significance extends

beyond documentary value, encompassing their capacity to function as carriers of narrative and lived visitor experience, aligning with what international scholarship conceptualizes as “difficult heritage” (Ashworth & Tunbridge, 2000) [4].
Through adaptive reuse and interpretive promotion, former military sites may be transformed into visitable spaces of cultural memory, integrated into thematic routes and alternative tourism forms such as military, memory, and historical tourism (Lennon, 2017; Stone, 2006) [5,6]. This transition affects not only tourism activity but also the contemporary cultural identity of the destination. Beyond heritage preservation, the adaptive reuse of military infrastructure is increasingly associated with contemporary ESG-oriented asset management approaches, as it promotes environmental conservation through the reuse of existing structures, reinforces social and cultural value, and supports responsible governance of heritage resources (Li et al., 2025) [7].
From a sustainability perspective, military heritage operates as a mechanism of balanced development (Mitoula, Astara & Kaldis, 2008) [8], as its utilization relies primarily on the reuse of existing infrastructures, limiting environmental impact (Bullen & Love, 2011) [9]. At the same time, it contributes to the extension of the tourist season and the attraction of special-interest visitors, strengthening local economies beyond the conventional “sun and sea” model (Timothy & Boyd, 2003) [10]. The integration of military heritage into sustainable planning strategies reinforces historical memory preservation while linking cultural management with local development (Garrod & Fyall, 2000; McKercher & du Cros, 2002) [11,12]. In this context, heritage protection coexists with tourism and social utilization, shaping diversified development pathways for insular destinations (Richards, 2018) [13].
Despite the growing body of literature, empirical research examining the social reception and local acceptance of military heritage utilization in insular environments remains limited. By addressing local communities' perceptions of the cultural value and adaptive reuse potential of military heritage, the present study contributes to the growing literature on heritage-based tourism development in island destinations and provides empirical evidence to support sustainable cultural planning in the Dodecanese.

1.2 Research Context and Problem Framing

Leros is situated within the broader historical and cultural framework of the Dodecanese, an insular complex that has diachronically occupied a central position within the commercial, cultural, and geostrategic routes of the Eastern Mediterranean (Tsatalmpasoglou et al., 2024) [14]. From the period of the European travellers, the islands of the southeastern Aegean were documented through travel narratives that combined references to classical antiquity with elements of exoticism and Ottoman everyday life, contributing to the formation of the early Western image of the region (Towner, 1985; Simopoulos, 2000) [15,16]. Although references to Leros were more limited compared to larger islands, they were incorporated within the same interpretive framework of recording landscape, monuments, and social practices.
More decisive was the period of Italian rule (1912–1947), during which Leros was transformed into a strategically significant naval base in the southeastern Aegean. The establishment of Portolago (present-day Lakki) as a model naval and urban complex, alongside the development of fortification infrastructures, barracks, administrative buildings, and technical installations, shaped a distinctive military and architectural

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landscape directly linked to the spatial and ideological intervention of the Italian administration in the Dodecanese (Colonas, 2002) [17]. The remains of this period continue to function as key carriers of historical memory and cultural identity for the island (Koltsikoglou et al., 2025) [18].

Beyond its historical and architectural significance, the Italian presence in Leros continues to inspire cultural representations and artistic productions (Koltsikoglou, 2020) [19]. Indicatively, the documentary *Portolago: Ghosts in the Aegean* (Asmeniadu-Phocas, 2017) [20] reactivates the memory of the Italian period through its architectural and military imprint, highlighting its contemporary cultural and tourism potential and confirming that even forms of "difficult heritage" may be reinterpreted as development resources.

Within this historical stratification, the military heritage of Leros constitutes the most characteristic material imprint of this period. The network of fortifications, coastal artillery batteries, underground tunnels, naval infrastructures, and administrative facilities forms a multi-layered military landscape that transcends its defensive function and is now incorporated into the sphere of cultural heritage and historical memory (Harrison, 2013; Logan & Reeves, 2009) [21,22]. A prominent position is held by the urban complex of Portolago, designed according to principles of Italian Rationalism and military urban planning (Colonas, 2002; Doumanis, 1997) [17,23,].

Additional layers of memory emerge through infrastructures such as the former Psychiatric Hospital of Leros, which operated post-war within repurposed military facilities, creating a field of multiple historical readings where healthcare, administrative, and anthropogeographical dimensions intersect with wartime memory.

In contemporary planning frameworks, the restoration and adaptive reuse of such infrastructures are incorporated into cultural heritage management strategies[1] aimed at cultural, educational, and tourism utilization (Bullen & Love, 2011; Plevoets & Van Cleempoel, 2019; Tsilika & Vardopoulos, 2022) [24,25,26,].

Technological remnants such as the Aerofono acoustic detection installation, as well as the War Museum developed within underground tunnels, further reinforce the tangible dimension of the island's military past and its interpretive tourism potential (Yung & Chan, 2012) [27]..

The interpretive promotion of these sites strengthens forms of war, memory, and heritage tourism by transforming former military infrastructures into spaces of historical interpretation and experiential learning. Rather than functioning merely as preserved monuments, these places encourage visitors to engage with complex historical narratives, fostering reflection on conflict, collective memory, and local identity. In this way, the visitor experience extends beyond architectural appreciation and becomes an active process of interpreting the past through tangible cultural landscapes (GMC,2022: Lennon, 2017; Smith, 1998; Poria, Butler & Airey, 2003).[28,29,30]

In this sense, Leros' military infrastructure is transformed from an inactive defensive system into an active cultural resource capable of supporting alternative and sustainable tourism development (Ashworth & Tunbridge, 2000) [4], reinforcing theoretical approaches that connect heritage value with experiential engagement (Poria, Butler & Airey, 2003) [230].

[1] Press Release of the Ministry of Culture: Cultural Projects in Leros on Track for Implementation

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Against this background, the present study seeks to investigate the degree to which insular communities recognize and socially accept the military heritage of the Italian period as a potential resource for experiential and sustainable tourism development. Against this background, the present study investigates local communities' perceptions of the cultural value and adaptive reuse potential of the military heritage of the Italian period for sustainable, cultural, and experiential tourism development.

2. Research Methodology

2.1 Methodology

The present study adopts a quantitative research design to explore local communities' perceptions regarding the cultural value and tourism potential of the military heritage of the Italian period in Leros.

The quantitative component was based on a structured, closed-ended questionnaire developed from the relevant literature on cultural heritage, military heritage, adaptive reuse, and sustainable tourism (Babbie, 2018; Durbarry, 2020) [31,32]. The questionnaire consisted of five sections: **(a)** socio-demographic characteristics of the respondents, **(b)** perceptions of the contribution of Italian-period architecture to the cultural identity of the Dodecanese, **(c)** attitudes toward the military heritage of the Italian occupation as a cultural asset, **(d)** perceptions of its tourism potential, and **(e)** attitudes toward the adaptive reuse of military infrastructures for cultural and experiential tourism. All attitudinal items were measured using a five-point Likert scale.

The target population comprised adult permanent residents of the selected islands of the Dodecanese Regional Unit (Rhodes, Kos, Kalymnos, Leros, Karpathos, Patmos, Symi, Kasos, and Kastellorizo). Data collection was carried out between March and April 2025 over a one-month period using both Google Forms and printed questionnaires. Participation was voluntary and anonymous, and no personally identifiable information was collected.

Based on the 2021 Population and Housing Census of the Hellenic Statistical Authority (2023), the reference population consisted of 202,206 permanent residents [33]. For a confidence level of 95% and a margin of error of ±5%, the minimum required sample size was calculated at 384 respondents. The final sample included 597 participants, exceeding the minimum requirement and reducing the estimated sampling error to approximately ±4%, thus increasing the statistical reliability of the findings.

Quantitative data were analysed using SPSS Statistics through descriptive statistical techniques and Correspondence Analysis in order to identify perceptual patterns and associations between socio-demographic characteristics and attitudes toward military heritage.

2.2 Socio-Demographic Profile of Participants

The sample was geographically distributed across the selected islands of the Dodecanese, with Rhodes contributing the largest proportion of respondents, followed by Kos and Kalymnos. Overall, the participants were relatively balanced in terms of gender, predominantly belonged to the economically active age groups, and were

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characterized by medium income levels and relatively high educational attainment. A detailed socio-demographic profile is presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Socio-Demographic Characteristics of the Sample (N=597)

Variable	Category	N	%
Island	Rhodes	302	50.6
	Kos	104	17.4
	Kalymnos	54	9.0
	Leros	33	5.5
	Kasos	31	5.2
	Karpathos	22	3.7
	Patmos	20	3.4
	Symi	16	2.7
	Kastellorizo	15	2.5
Gender	Female	295	49.4
	Male	277	46.4
	Prefer not to answer	25	4.2
Age	18-25	154	25.8
	26-40	149	25.0
	41-55	147	24.6
	56-70	102	17.1
	70+	45	7.5
Income (€)	Up to 15.000	115	19.3
	15.001-25.000	105	17,6
	25.001-35.000	178	29.8
	35.001-50.000	149	24,7
	50.001+	51	8,5
Education	Compulsory	57	9.5
	High school	158	26.5
	Vocational	130	21.8
	Tertiary	219	36.7
	Postgraduate	33	5.5

Question 1: Italian-period Architecture and Cultural Identity

Most respondents (82.9%) expressed high or very high agreement that Italian-period architecture constitutes an important element of the cultural identity of the Dodecanese, while only a small minority reported neutral or negative perceptions (Figure 1). These findings indicate that the architectural legacy of the Italian period is widely recognised by local communities as an integral component of the region's cultural identity.

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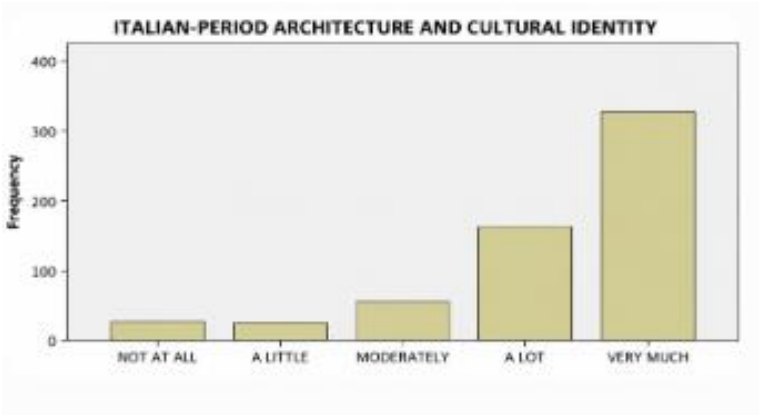


Fig. 1 : Italian architecture as cultural identity

Q2 — Military Infrastructures as Cultural Heritage

Most respondents (80.5%) expressed high or very high agreement that the military infrastructures of the Italian period constitute an important component of the cultural heritage of the Dodecanese, while only a small minority reported neutral or negative perceptions (Figure 2). These findings indicate that local communities widely recognize the military heritage of the Italian period as a valuable cultural asset with strong heritage significance.

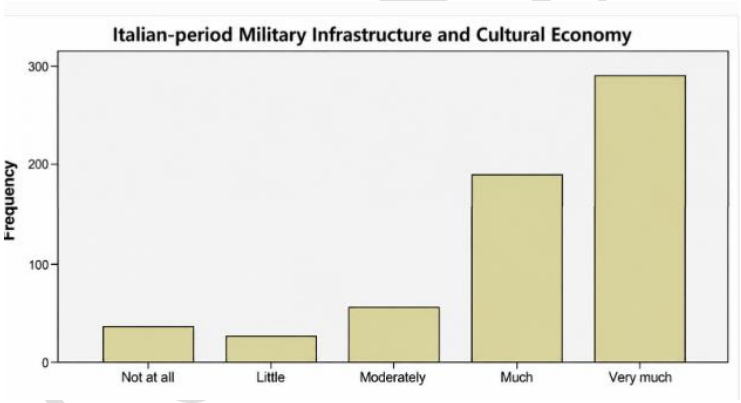


Fig. 2 : military infrastructures as element of cultural identity

Q3 — Tourism Potential of Italian-period Architectural Complexes

Most respondents (79.8%) expressed high or very high agreement that the architectural complexes of the Italian period have considerable potential to attract visitors interested in cultural tourism, while only a small minority reported neutral or negative perceptions (Figure 3). These findings suggest that local communities recognize these architectural complexes as valuable cultural assets capable of enhancing the development of cultural tourism in the Dodecanese.

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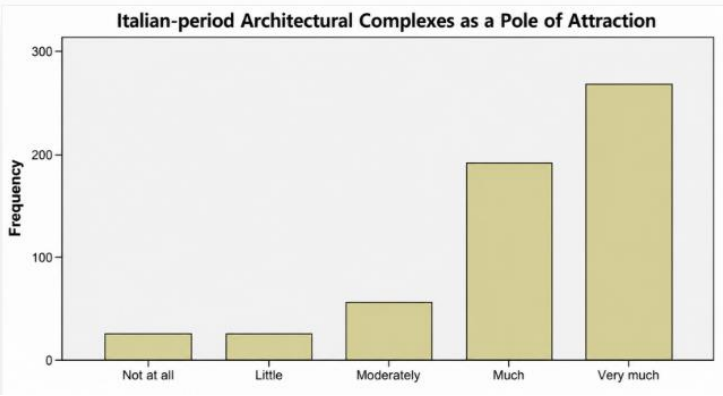


Fig. 3 : Architectural Complexes as tourist destinations

Q4 — Adaptive Reuse of Former Military Buildings

Most respondents (82.1%) expressed high or very high agreement with the adaptive reuse of former military buildings of the Italian period for cultural and experiential tourism purposes, while only a small minority reported neutral or negative perceptions (Figure 4). These findings demonstrate broad public support for the adaptive reuse of military heritage and highlight its perceived potential to contribute to sustainable cultural and experiential tourism development.

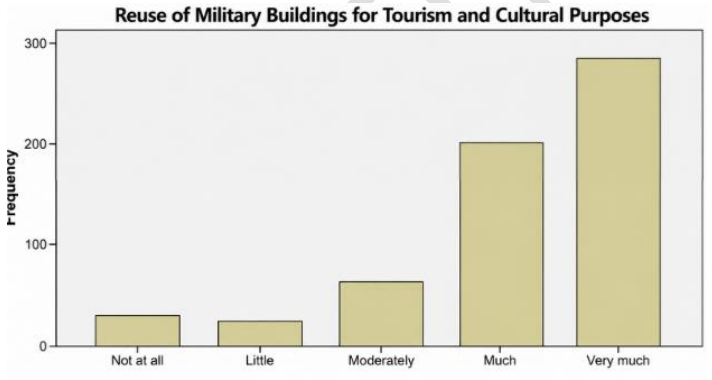


Fig. 4 : Adaptive reuse of military infrastructures

Correspondence Analysis

Correspondence Analysis was employed in order to explore latent associations between socio-demographic variables and perceptions regarding the cultural and tourism valorazation of the Italian-period heritage. Given the unequal distribution of respondents across the islands and the small subsamples for some islands, Correspondence Analysis

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was used as an exploratory technique to examine and visually represent patterns of association between islands and response categories.The method enabled the visual mapping of perceptual proximities and divergences across categorical variables, offering a multidimensional interpretative framework beyond descriptive statistics.

Correspondence analysis revealed a statistically significant association between income and the perception of the architecture of the Italian period as an element of cultural identity (χ^2=104.233, df=32, p<0.001).

The first dimension explains 63.5% of the inertia and reflects the degree of recognition of the cultural value of Italian architecture, distinguishing strongly positive responses ("much," "very much") from low or neutral evaluations. The second dimension (22.7%) primarily differentiates intermediate attitudes.

Spatially, islands such as Kos, Kalymnos, and Symi are positioned closer to the strongly positive categories, indicating a pronounced recognition of Italian architecture as a component of cultural identity. In contrast, Kastelorizo, Karpathos, and Kasos demonstrate a weaker association, while Rhodes and Leros occupy intermediate positions.

At the income level, middle-income strata display a stronger positive assessment, a pattern that may be associated with higher levels of cultural capital and greater sensitivity toward architectural heritage.

Corrispondence Analysis 1 → Island × Reuse

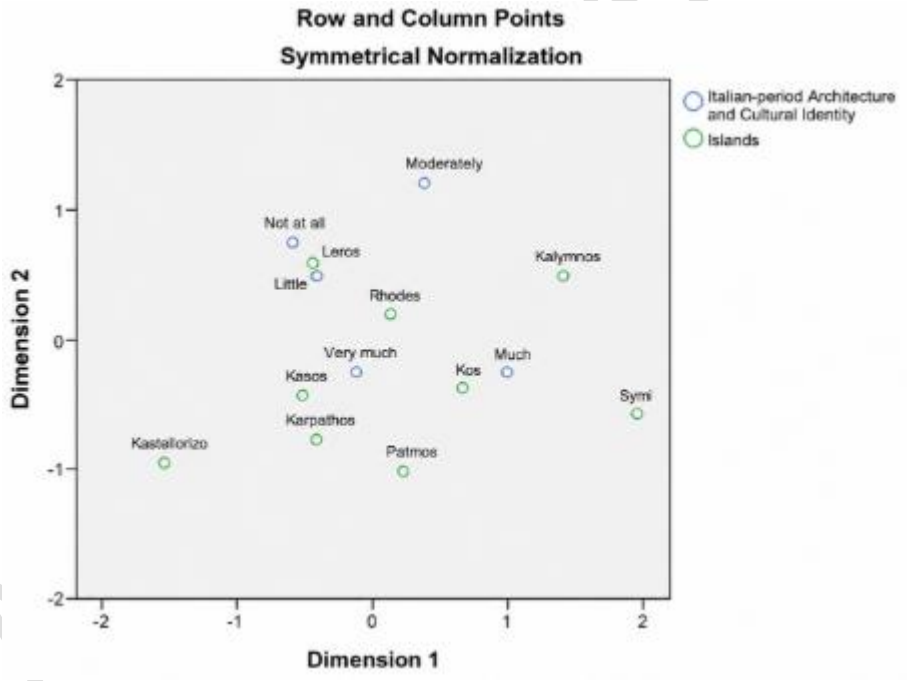


Figure 5. Correspondence analysis map depicting the association between island of residence and perceptions of the architectural heritage of the Italian period as an element of cultural identity (symmetrical normalization).

"To what extent do you agree with the adaptive reuse of former military buildings of the Italian period for experiential cultural and tourism uses?" × "Island"

Correspondence analysis revealed a statistically significant association between participants' island of origin and their perception of the importance of military infrastructures of the Italian period as an element of cultural heritage (χ^2=84.537, df=32, p<0.001).

The first dimension explains 54.7% of the total inertia and reflects the degree of recognition of the cultural value of military installations, distinguishing strongly positive responses ("much," "very much") from lower or neutral evaluations. The second dimension (30.9%) primarily differentiates intermediate attitudes, capturing variations between moderate and strong acceptance.

Spatially, islands such as Kos and Kalymnos are positioned closer to the high-agreement categories, indicating a stronger recognition of military infrastructures as cultural assets. Similarly, Symi also shows an association with positive evaluations, although in a more distinct spatial position.

By contrast, islands such as Kastellorizo, Karpathos, and Kasos demonstrate a weaker association with the high-agreement categories, a pattern that may relate to the limited presence or visibility of military installations of the Italian period within their local spatial context.

Finally, Rhodes and Leros occupy intermediate positions in the plot, suggesting more balanced or differentiated attitudes regarding the cultural evaluation of these infrastructures.

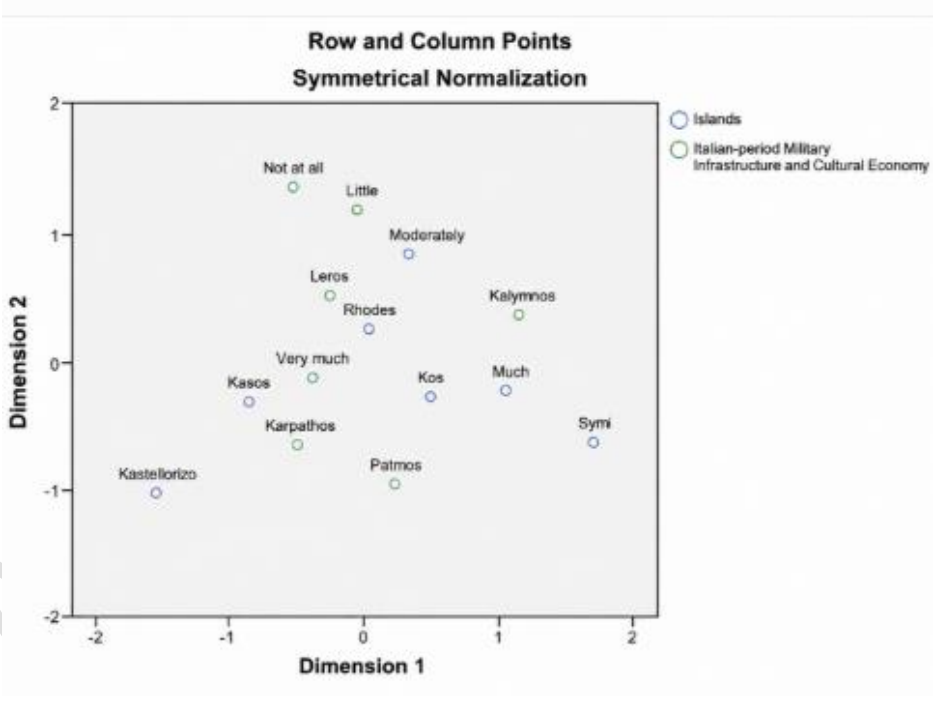


Figure 6: Correspondence analysis map illustrating the association between island of residence and perceptions of Italian-period military infrastructure as an element of cultural heritage (symmetrical normalization).

Corrispondence Analysis 2 → Income × Architectural Complexes – Tourism Utilization

The spatial mapping highlights a clear socio-economic differentiation. Higher income groups (€35,001–50,000 and €50,001+) are positioned closer to the categories "much" and "very much," indicating a stronger belief that the architectural complexes of the Italian period can function as significant attractions for cultural tourism. In contrast, lower income levels (€0–15,000) display greater proximity to less positive categories, suggesting comparatively weaker recognition of their tourism potential.

Middle income strata (€15,001–35,000) occupy intermediate positions on the perceptual map, with a tendency toward the "moderately" category, indicating a cautious but not negative stance regarding the role of these monumental complexes in the development of cultural tourism forms.

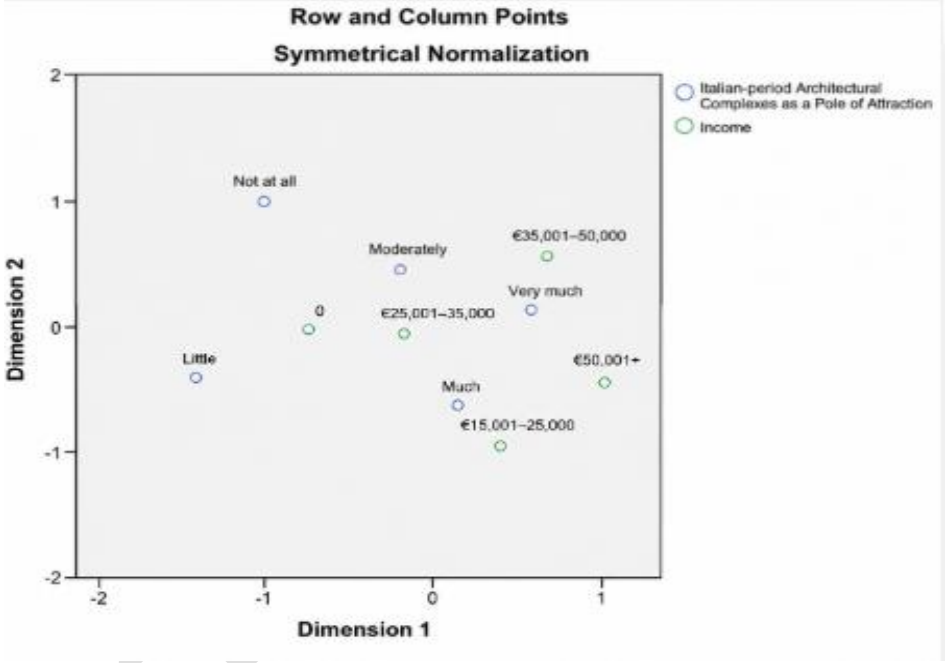


Fig. 7: Corrispondence analysis map between income level and perception of Italian-period architectural complexes as a cultural tourism attraction.

Correspondence Analysis 3 → Education × reuse

Presentation of Correspondence Analysis Results

Correspondence analysis revealed a statistically significant association between educational level and attitudes toward the adaptive reuse of former military buildings of the Italian period for experiential tourism and cultural uses (χ^2=111.892, df=16, p<0.001).

The first dimension explains the largest proportion of total inertia (89.4%), capturing the principal axis of attitudinal differentiation, while the second dimension contributes

complementarily with 8.8%, increasing the overall explanatory capacity of the model to 98.2%.

The spatial representation of the categories demonstrates distinct groupings between educational levels and degrees of agreement, allowing for the visual depiction of relative proximities and distances among variables within the two-dimensional perceptual map.

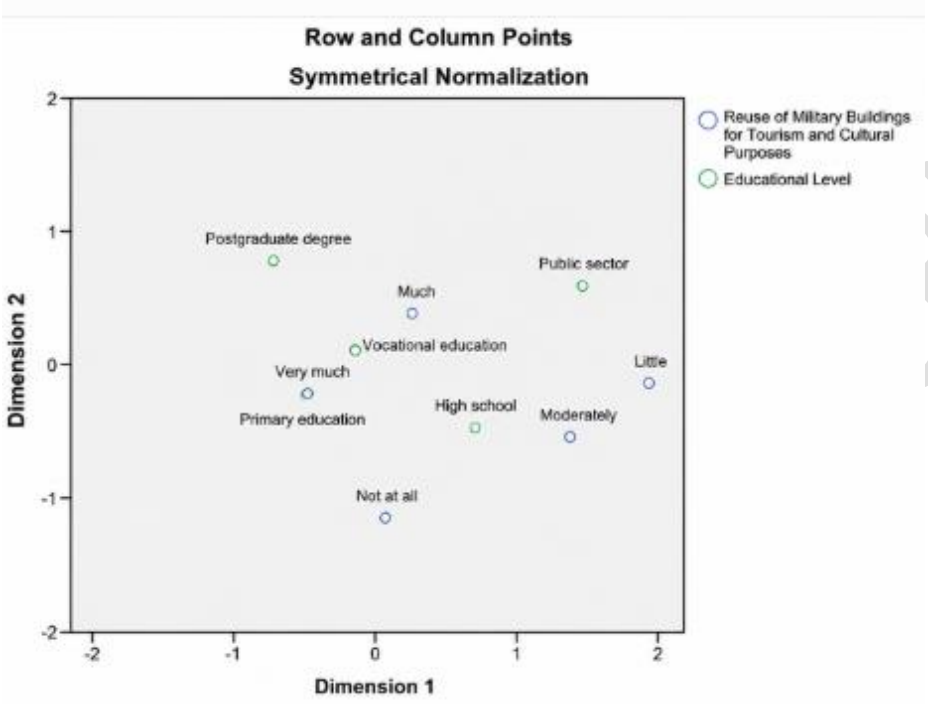


Fig. 8: Correspondence Analysis: Educational Level and Reuse of Former Military Buildings.

3. Discussion

The overall analysis of the quantitative findings reveals a coherent and interpretively robust pattern of attitudes toward the cultural heritage of the Italian period in the Dodecanese and its potential for tourism and experiential utilization. High levels of recognition were recorded regarding both architectural and military infrastructures, indicating that the material remains of the Italian occupation have been integrated into the collective cultural consciousness of local communities.

The concentration of responses within the categories “much” and “very much” across all core variables suggests that participants perceive these monuments not merely as historical remnants but as active components of cultural identity. This perception aligns with theoretical approaches that conceptualize heritage as a dynamic and continuously re-signified field shaping place narratives and identities. The recognition of tourism potential further supports frameworks linking heritage value with visitor experience and emotional engagement (Poria, Butler & Airey, 2003) [30].

As Sdrali (2020) [34] emphasizes, however, the effective utilization of Italian cultural heritage presupposes not only preservation but also the development of creative strategies, including experiential tourism forms, cultural routes, and participatory initiatives.

The particularly positive assessment of adaptive reuse practices reflects a shift from static protection models toward functional heritage utilization. Participants appear to view former military infrastructures as potential nuclei for cultural and experiential tourism development, a perspective closely associated with contemporary sustainable tourism strategies (Mitoula, 2023) [35].

This finding is especially significant in light of the theory of "difficult heritage," according to which conflict-related infrastructures often generate ambivalent social interpretations (Tunbridge & Ashworth, 1996) [36]. The present results suggest that Italian-period military heritage is increasingly perceived not only as a tourism development resource but also as a mechanism for strengthening local cohesion and quality of life (Kokkossis & Tsartas, 2019) [37], in line with sustainability approaches emphasizing community participation and cultural resource protection (Xypolias & Astara, 2023) [38].

Correspondence analysis provided additional interpretive depth, revealing spatial and socio-economic differentiations not immediately visible through descriptive statistics. Island of residence appeared to influence levels of recognition, possibly reflecting variations in the visibility, preservation, or promotion of Italian-period monuments. Similarly, income and educational level were associated with attitudinal differentiation, supporting theoretical assumptions regarding the relationship between cultural capital and heritage perception. In particular, educational attainment demonstrated strong explanatory weight, suggesting that higher levels of education enhance understanding of the historical significance of monumental complexes and foster positive attitudes toward adaptive reuse practices (Bourdieu, 1986) [39]. These findings also reveal a degree of different evaluations and the heterogeneity among the respondents, suggesting that socio-economic background influences the ways in which military heritage is interpreted and valued. Such differences may reflect variations in cultural capital, educational exposure, and familiarity with heritage resources, resulting in differentiated evaluations of their cultural and tourism potential (Yan & al., 2025)[40]

4. Conclusions

This observed convergence of attitudes acquires particular significance when viewed through the lens of contemporary development planning for island destinations. The positive social perception of Italian architecture and military infrastructures as cultural and tourism resources indicates the existence of a mature social foundation for the implementation of cultural management and adaptive reuse interventions. In other words, local communities do not appear merely receptive but potentially participatory in strategies that transform historical assets into experiential resources.

At the same time, the differentiations recorded across socio-economic and educational indicators highlight the need for targeted cultural policies aimed at strengthening interpretation, accessibility, and participation around the monuments of the Italian period. The promotion of their cultural value cannot be confined to material restoration alone but must extend to educational, narrative, and experiential practices that integrate both visitors and residents into a shared process of place meaning-making.

From this perspective, the research findings not only document existing acceptance but also function as an indicative planning guide. The development of cultural routes, the conversion of military installations into spaces of cultural experience, and their integration into sustainable tourism models can build upon an already established social base of acceptance, thereby increasing the likelihood of successful implementation and local embedding. More specifically, different categories of military heritage may support

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different forms of adaptive reuse according to their historical and spatial characteristics. Underground tunnels may be further developed as spaces of war and memory, coastal batteries may be incorporated into thematic cultural and landscape routes, while the rationalist architecture of Lakki (Portolago) offers opportunities for cultural, educational, and creative uses that reinforce the island's distinctive identity. Furthermore, the adaptive reuse of existing military heritage demonstrates how cultural resources can contribute to local economic diversification while minimizing the need for new construction and additional environmental pressures. This approach is consistent with sustainable development strategies that seek to reconcile economic growth with resource conservation (Ma et al., 2025).[41]The sustainable adaptive reuse of military heritage also requires collaborative governance involving local authorities, heritage institutions, public agencies and local communities. A comparable approach has been proposed for the former Southern Naval Fortress of Aegina, Greece, where stakeholder consultation and cooperation are considered essential components of the sustainable reuse of decommissioned military infrastructure (Alyfanti, 2025)[42]. Such an approach may also provide a useful governance framework for Leros, where the complex administrative and historical status of military assets requires coordination among the relevant authorities and local stakeholders.

The present study has certain limitations that should be acknowledged. The findings are based exclusively on the perceptions of permanent residents of the Dodecanese and therefore cannot be generalized beyond the study area. Future research could expand the geographical scope of the investigation, include additional groups involved in heritage management and tourism planning, and further integrate qualitative evidence to provide a more comprehensive understanding of the adaptive reuse of military heritage for sustainable tourism development.

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