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A place of emotions: The sacred mount of Varallo

Abstract

Religious geography can be explored from a number of different perspectives. The aim of this paper is to examine the geographical aspects of faith experiences in a specific holy site, the Sacred Mount of Varallo. This case study could be also relevant in the context of debates on the authenticity of the experience, pilgrimage and religious tourism, communitas and contestation, unity and diversity. In particular, the findings of our research indicate the existence of different types of visitors of the holy site, whose main motivations vary between sacred and secular and, at the same time, who are strictly interrelated for their affection for, or spiritual connection to, the Sacred Mount. To understand these different types of visitors, the reasons people set out on their journey to this destination, and how they appreciate what they learn, see and experience along the way, we decided to carry out a survey and compare the results to one undertaken in 1994. The comparison primarily regarded the information of the personal data file and the relationship between visitors, resources and territory, and allowed us to observe what and how some visitors' attitudes have changed over time.

Key words:

pilgrimage; religious tourism; Sacred Mounts; Varallo; Italy

Introduction

Sacred Mounts are specific holy sites that, in the past, were main pilgrimage attractions. Recently, however, these places have begun to lessen in their importance, while other destinations, such as cities or regions, began to increase their attention on cultural and heritage tourism. From a demand-side perspective, this specific type of tourism includes many categories that define the tourist from the objectives for visiting. As Bywater (1993) states, spiritual and religious motivations can also be included in the category of cultural tourism.

Our work proposes a study concerning the sub-category of religious tourism and our goal is to be aware of the heterogeneity of the visitors and their different motivations and needs in a specific holy place, the Sacred Mount of Varallo. Because of the explicit focus of our research on the reasons of the visit at the site, we collected data from a sample of visitors and classified the results using a motive-based segmentation, differentiating tourists into categories by their level of motivation for the religious experi-

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ence at the Sacred Mount. Basing our classification on the centrality of motivations, we aim to identify tourists for whom the journey was strictly for cultural purposes, tourists (and pilgrims) visiting this site and sharing in a spiritual quest or religious devotion in order to obtain spiritual benefits, an indulgence and/or finding the sources of their faith, and also tourists whose visit the sacred site by chance en-route to their destination or only out of curiosity. According to Bywater's classification (1993) we defined these three types of visitors: *culture motivated tourists*, *culturally inspired tourists* and *accidental cultural tourists*.

After this brief introduction, the following section of our article details the Sacred Mount of Varallo and the flows of visitors that characterized this holy place and the surrounding Valsesia area. In the third section we go on to describe the survey and some preliminary results of our case study, while in the conclusion we present our findings regarding the visitors of the Sacred Mount of Varallo. We think these findings are relevant to the context of this special issue about "Pilgrimage: *Communitas* and Contestation, Unity and Difference" because we noted people are still united in a sense of *communitas* (see Turner, 1973, 1974a, 1974b, 1976; Turner & Turner, 1978; Sallnow, 1981; Morinis, 1992) that is built around mutual respect for the importance of the site despite different categories and motivations for visiting this place.

The Sacred Mount of Varallo

A Sacred Mount is a devotional complex located on a mountain, composed of a series of chapels and shrines in which scenes from the Life of Christ, Virgin Mary or the saints are represented with paintings and sculptures. The Sacred Mounts offered pilgrims visiting the opportunity to "see" the Holy Land, on a smaller scale. These buildings are located on a high hill in a secluded location outside of the village, in a more natural environment reachable only through a purposeful pilgrimage journey. A Sacred Mount is characterized by a devotional route along a hill, often in a natural and isolated environment; the presence of churches and inner chapels which illustrate, with suggestive forms of artistic expression (sculpture, painting, etc.), evocative scenes of the devotional path; and an ancient tradition of pilgrimage and faith.

The model of the Sacred Mount is a Christian creation dating from the late fifteenth century, which, during the Counter-Reformation, spread from Italy to Europe and the New World. The purpose of a Sacred Mount was to offer to the pilgrims a safe alternative to a journey to the Holy Land. In the Middle Ages, pilgrimage was an important part of the life of each "good" Christian; it represented a particularly intense moment of agreement (union with God). The most important pilgrimage destinations were Santiago de Compostela, Rome, and Jerusalem (Ferrario, 2010, p. 20). Following the advent of the Turkish power in the East, pilgrimages to the Holy Land stopped being a group phenomenon and became a very expensive and dangerous adventure (Fontana, Lodari & Sorrenti, 2004). At the same time, political instability, a diffused agricultural development, and the improvement of general life conditions had contributed to a reduction of departures from the place of origin to embark on a long pilgrimage. In

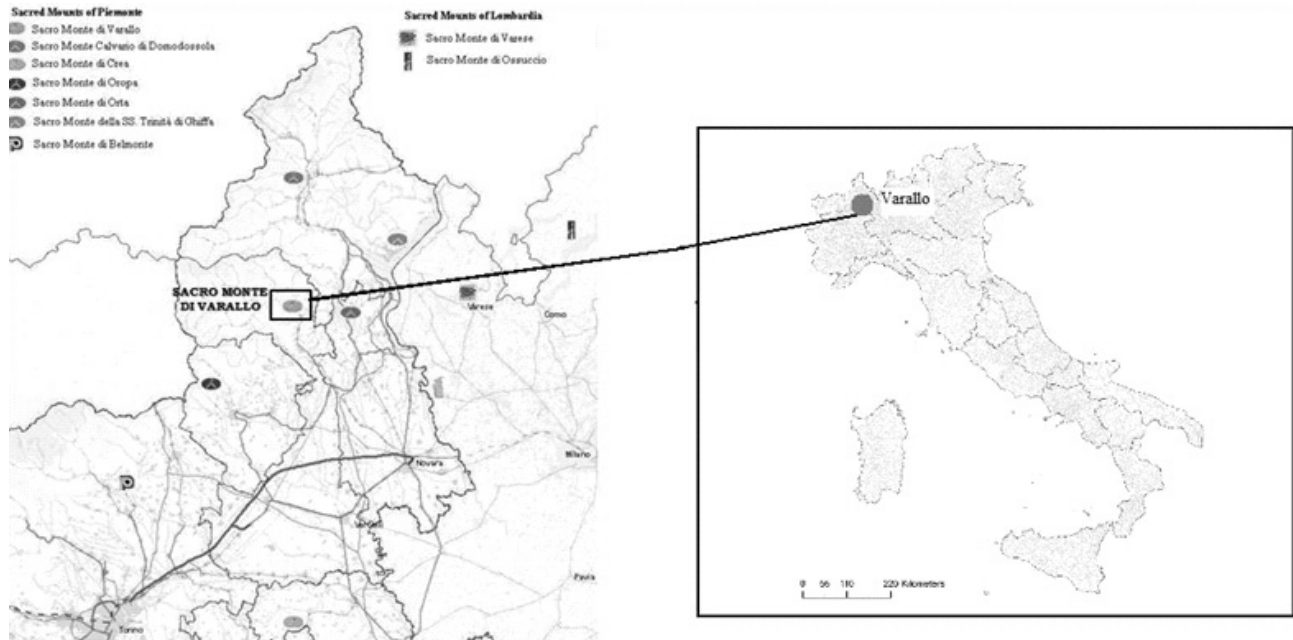
order to provide another possibility to those who could not make an expensive and dangerous voyage, and in order to preserve the sense of pilgrimage, the Catholic Church brought in the so-called substitutive practices; these practices allowed the devotee to obtain the same indulgence that people usually received by going to the Holy Land. Therefore, during the XV century, making a pilgrimage to a given place such as a sanctuary became the "same" as a travel to Jerusalem; if those places also reminded them of the Holy Land – either in their theme or in their architecture or aesthetics – the link was even stronger (Fontana et al., 2004).

When some Franciscan friars, who lived in the Holy Land between the end of the XV and the beginning of the XVI century, returned home to Italy, they decided to recreate the Holy Places of Palestine as accurately as possible. Fr. Bernardino Caimi in Piedmont constructed the New Jerusalem of Varallo Sesia and Fr. Tommaso of Florence constructed the New Jerusalem of Montaione in Tuscany. Both of these complexes gave life to the "ideal" Holy Land pilgrimage, one which was not dangerous and/or expensive to undertake, and therefore quite easily repeatable. In the period following the Council of Trent, thanks to the Counter-Reformation movement promoted by Saint Carlo Borromeo (1538-1584) and his bishops, a series of buildings and devotional routes called Sacred Mounts started to be built throughout the north-western Alps and the Alpine foothills (see Fontana et al., 2004).

An Italian Sacred Mount is usually composed of a series of buildings of different dimensions, forms and styles containing sculptural groups that display religious scenes inspired by a common theme (the life of Jesus, Jesus' Passion on Calvary, or the life of a significant religious figure such as St. Francis). The pilgrims are guided from one building to the next, which allows them to follow the figural narrative that unfolds diachronically (Afferni & Mangano, 2009). The Sacred Mounts of Piedmont and Lombardy (Figure 1) were inscribed on the UNESCO World Heritage List in 2003 because 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 implantation of architecture and sacred art into a natural landscape of northern Italy for didactic and spiritual purposes and had a profound influence on subsequent developments elsewhere in Europe (Sacri Monti, 2010). The Sacred Mounts were inscribed in the UNESCO List not because they were – and still are – something that is easily defined, but rather because they are representative (or exemplary) of something, and that something can be understood, in part, through visitor interactions with the areas in which they are located (see Di Giovine, 2009, p. 208). The inclusion on the List is the 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. In particular, the Sacred Mount of Varallo is the oldest of its kind in northwestern Italy. It is located in Valsesia, in the province of Vercelli. It was named the "New Jerusalem" because it reproduced the Holy Sepulcher, according to Fr. Bernardino Caimi's wish.

Figure 1

SACRED MOUNTS OF PIEDMONT AND LOMBARDY



Source: Personal elaboration

Today, as in the past, visitors to Varallo's Sacred Mount are given the chance to affirm their faith in a natural and enchanting place. In fact, on the doorway of the first chapel one can see the following writing "to enable those who cannot travel to see Jerusalem (and the other holy sites)". Father Caimi had also an educational intention (very important for the Franciscan Order). In fact, the Sacred Mount was built to promote the identification of the believer with the figure of Jesus Christ, hence the design of a devotional journey in the footsteps of the Catholic holy places, populated with the scenes from the Gospels (Fontana et al., 2004).

In 1486, Father Caimi could begin the construction of the church of Santa Maria delle Grazie near the 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 growing reputation of this place as a pilgrimage destination and the approval received from the Duchy of Milan. The Sacred Mount of Varallo is an example of a garden park modeled after an 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 blends into an evocative processional itinerary through the greenery, almost like a long rural *Via Crucis* winding around the hill.

The Sacred Mount is owned by the town of Varallo. The religious care of the Sanctuary is entrusted to the Oblate Fathers of Saints Gaudenzio and Carlo, representatives of the bishop of Novara. The Sacred Mount of Varallo is managed by the regional

authority called "*Riserva Naturale Speciale del Sacro Monte di Varallo*". This authority was constituted by the Piedmont Region under Regional Law No. 28 of 30 April 1980 to safeguard the environmental and scenic characteristics, guarantee the care and conservation of the historical-religious complex and encourage scientific, cultural and educational projects (until 1980 the Civil Administration, and before it the bishop of Novara, managed the sacred site). The administrators of the *Riserva* aim to conserve and maintain the complex in terms of the history, environment and art with appropriate (public and private funds) financial grants and thanks to the work of its employees (a director and technical and administrative staff, trained to maintain the area and park watch). The *Riserva* manages the site, takes care of its decoration and garden, maintains its paths and structures, and also provides for the maintenance and restoration of the chapels, research work, studies and improvements to the complex (Riserva Naturale Speciale del Sacro Monte di Varallo, 2010b).

Sacred Mounts continue to be a popular destination for individuals and groups, and for people of different religious communities; the aims of many visitors are witnessed by the site's very large collection of *ex-votos* (Catholic pilgrims use them as an object given to God for a grace wanted or received) (Fontana et al., 2004). In some cases old traditions still exist, like the procession from Malnate (as small town a few kilometers 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 (Chapels' route). The traditional annual pilgrimage from Orta's Sacred Mount to Varallo's, crossing over Lake Orta and through the Colma Pass, has been recently restarted and boasts a great number of participants (Fontana et al., 2004).

As a UNESCO-recognized site of natural and cultural heritage, the Sacred Mount of Varallo is not only a religious place, but also an area in which it is possible to have a variety of alternative experiences. It attracts not only religiously motivated tourists, but also secular travelers. Since July 2006, the *Riserva* records pedestrian access to the Sacred Mount of Varallo by counting foot traffic. The monthly data collected are subjected to a calculation by the Settore Statistico of the Piedmont Region, which provides for a reduction of a number of steps corresponding to the person who work or live in the *Riserva*. The number of visitors is revealed in Table 1, which shows how important the flow towards this place is. However, such data does not provide the reasons of the visit, which can only be obtained by asking visitors to identify to which of the Sacred Mounts' elements they were initially attracted (see the following section). We can also note that the Sacred Mount of Varallo is not a mass destination, but a niche place that attracts limited flows of visitors. The number of visitors is increasing over the last several years; in particular, Table 1 shows the flows in the period from 2005 and 2009. In our analyses we supposed that the positive trend could be related to the improved accessibility of the site, mainly with the reopening of the cable car that connects the town of Varallo with the sacred place. The results of the survey discussed in detail in the following section) seem to confirm this assumption that many visitors chose, in fact, this type of service to reach the mount.

Table 1
VISITORS OF SACRED MOUNT OF VARALLO

Years	Visitors
2005	77,906
2006	57,633
2007	111,103
2008	103,901
2009	40,468

Source: Data from Riserva Naturale Speciale del Sacro Monte di Varallo

Table 2 shows seasonal peaks - flows are higher during the summer months and the reason may be the fact the Sacred Mount is an 'open air theatre' and the summer is the best season to visit. Table 3 compares the arrivals and overnights in the town of Varallo with the visitors to the Sacred Mount, who are mainly hikers and are about twenty times as the arrivals in Varallo.

Table 2
MONTHLY FLOWS OF VISITORS

Months	Visitors
August 2008	27,979
September 2008	12,286
October 2008	11,309
November 2008	5,776
December 2008	3,568
January 2009	2,415
February 2009	3,032
March 2009	6,871
April 2009	12,744
May 2009	16,824
June 2009	12,972
July 2009	18,702

Source: Data from Riserva Naturale Speciale del Sacro Monte di Varallo

Table 3
VISITORS, TOURIST ARRIVALS AND OVERNIGHTS

Years	Arrivals in Varallo	Overnights in Varallo	Visitors Sacred Mount
2007	7,868	29,448	162,700
2008	8,240	30,197	150,687
2009*	8,217	36,101	129,463

Source: Data from *Riserva Naturale Speciale del Sacro Monte di Varallo* and *Osservatorio Turistico* of the Piedmont Region.

*The data is underestimated in 2009, because in June there was a failure to "count foot traffic".

Survey and results

The Sacred Mount of Varallo had already been the object of a visitor survey in 1994. Although that survey was intended to define the site's *use value* and *conservation*, we utilized some information included herein with part of our survey results. The comparison regarded the information of the visitors' personal data (as age, sex, education level, professional and social characteristics, etc.) and the relationship between visitors, resources and territory. According to this comparison, we observed visitors' attitudes and how they changed over time.

In 1994, the data collection spanned the 6-month period between May and October—the period of the year characterized by a larger number of visits. The questionnaire, administered to the visitors while they were visiting the Sacred Mount, were left in free distribution. About 500 visitors completed the survey. From that survey, it emerged that the visitors were well-balanced in term of gender (49.5% male and 50.5%). There is a certain unbalance towards the average age; in particular teenagers and young adults (16-30 years old) accounted for 10%, as did those over 65. The highest concentration (more than 45%) were people between 35-65 years old. The ones between 25-45 were about 36%, while the ones between 45-55 were about 24%. Approximately 35% were more than 55 years old. In terms of visitors' educational level, high school graduates had the greatest percentage (40%) together with the secondary school graduates (30%). Primary school graduates acquired 17%, while university graduates were 11%. These results were on line with the Italian educational level for those years. In terms of professional and social characteristics, the categories most represented were public sector employees (for example teachers) and private sector employees (23%), retired (21%), blue-collar (16%), homemakers (12%) and merchants (9%); while the least represented were unemployed (2.3%), students (5.5%) and professionals (7%).

The highest percentage of visitors, almost 31%, came from the province of Vercelli, followed by that of Novara (about 20%). The provinces of Milano (12%), Biella (7.5%), Varese (7.3%) and Torino (5.3%) together represented a relatively high share, at around 32%. About 4% came from the provinces of Pavia (2.1%) and Alessandria (1.9%). Eight provinces (Verbanò Cusio Ossola, Cuneo, Asti, Aosta, Bergamo, Brescia, Imperia e Savona) achieved a rate of 1%, the other Italian provinces less than 1%. Moreover, it is interesting to notice that about 10% of those who came from the province of Vercelli were from the municipality of Varallo. Approximately 88% of visitors said they reached the site through private transportation (car or motorbike), 6% by foot or by bicycle, 5% by bus and 1% by train.

The majority of the respondents said they visit the Sacred Mount, on average, five times a year. Their principal interest in visiting the Sacred Mount was religious (42.6%), followed by leisure (28.1%), then artistic interest (15.2%) and environmental (10.1%). Only 3.9% expressed different reasons. According to the needs to improve the structures of the Sacred Mount, 32.6% of visitors wished to increase the information system and the guided tours, while about 20% of the respondents asked to create some

picnic areas. Among the visitors (30%) who had identified specific problems inaccessibility, 42.5% indicated as main problem the car park, 20% the traffic and 15% the difficulty of the route. Among the suggestions for resolving those problems of accessibility were: the recovery of the old cable car (48.5%), a shuttle bus (20.1%), a system of escalators (17.9%) and a rack railway (13.4%).

During the summer of 2009, we conducted preliminary research to pilot-test the questionnaire to elicit the most reliable results. The questionnaire was developed based on the ideas that emerged during interviews realized with specific stakeholders, including the manager of the protected area, the priest who oversees the religious aspects of the Sacred Mount, and some administrators of Varallo, the municipality in which the religious complex stands. Thanks to the opinions expressed by stakeholders and their knowledge of the local tourist market, we have structured our questionnaire to take into account a further range of issues.

We did a self-selection sampling because we wanted to be consistent with the methodology used in 1994. The survey was conducted between the end of May and the end of July 2009; 250 copies of the questionnaire were left near Chapel 20 (in proximity to the souvenir shop) and at the bar of the cable railway. As it emerged during the interviews with the local managers, those are strategic points; almost all visitors pass from these points at the end of their visit. Visitors deposited the finished surveys into appropriate boxes according to the instructions. In less than three months 150 copies were completed—a 60% rate of return. From the statistical point of view, this is a good outcome. We have to consider that it is a low complexity questionnaire and so it is not necessary to have a larger number of responses to outline the characteristics and behavior of visitors (Corbetta, 1999; Caselli, 2005). Just to understand if there were prevailing behaviors, the sampling was carried out during both weekends and weekdays. The SPSS standard package for personal computers was used for data processing.

The questionnaire contained a *file-card* including personal data of the visitors according to gender, age, level of education, employment status and origin of visitors. Then twenty questions were divided into four logical sections concerning:

1. *characteristics of the visit*: number of participants, vehicle used to reach Varallo, use of services, type of lunch, type of accommodation (Questions: 5-6-12-13-14-15);
2. *awareness of the area in which the Sacred Mount is located*: Sacred Mount and Valsesia, typology and grounds of attendance, manner of knowledge of the monumental ensemble (Questions 1-2-3-4-7-9-8-10);
3. *evaluation of the Sacred Mount*, related to its state of conservation, the improvement of the site in the last decade, and the services offered by the monumental ensemble (Questions 11-17-19);
4. *expectations and suggestions* to strengthen and improve services and/or infrastructures, the payment of a toll for improving the level of conservation of the Sacred Mount, and interest in returning to the site (questions 16-18-20).

According to the four survey themes we stated above, in this section – organized in sub-sections – we present the results relating to the profile of visitor, the characteristics of the journey, and the awareness of the area in which the Sacred Mount is located. Then we propose some preliminary results concerning the visitors, including their evaluations, expectations and suggestions about their experience in this holy place.

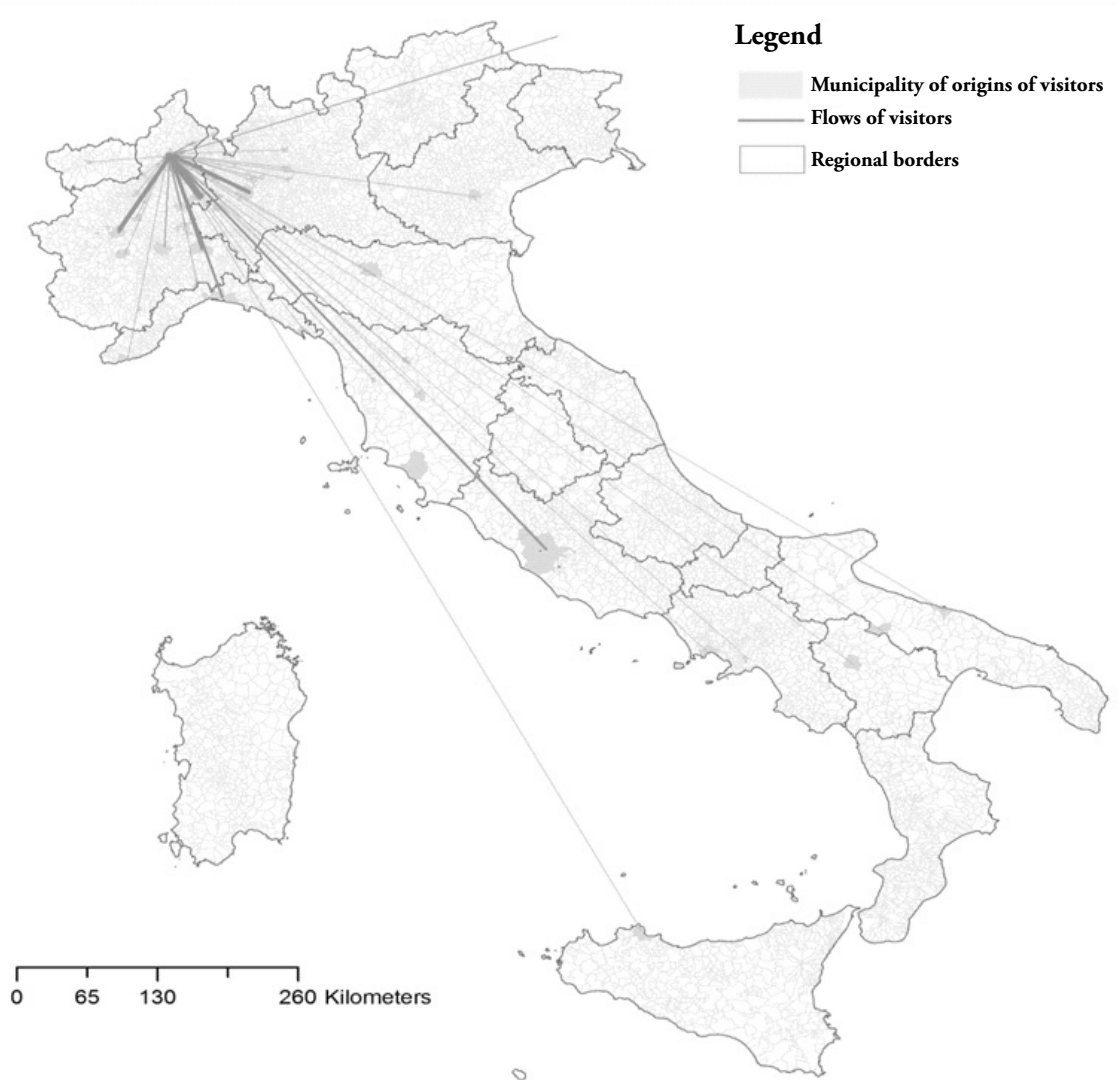
PROFILE OF VISITOR OF THE SACRED MOUNT OF VARALLO

From the *file-card* we can conduct an interesting comparison with the results of the 1994's questionnaire. Both samples were well-balanced in terms of gender: half male and half female. But in terms of age we noted differences: although in 1994 and in 2009 the groups most represented were those in the middle, i.e. 36-50 (31%) years and 51-65 (23%), the over-65 group was approximately 11%, almost stable compared to 1994. Teenagers and young adults (16-25 years) increased from 1994 to 2009, from 10% to 19% percent. So we can suppose that nowadays visitors could have different behaviors, requirements and needs in comparison with the ones enquired in 1994. The growth of the previous category led to changes both in terms of educational level and professional and social ones. While the highest percentage of visitors indicated they obtained a high school diploma (35%), a good percentage of them also received a university degree (33%). Therefore there are fewer primary school graduates; they decreased from 17% (1994) to 8% and secondary school graduates increased from 30% (1994) to 21%. Obviously, these changes also reflect the behavior of today's population; about 33% of Italians have a degree (ISTAT, 2010).

Regarding the differences in terms of professional and social characteristics, that data show that employees (public and private) prevail in both surveys, even if with a dissimilar percentage (in 1994 they were 23%, in 2009 they are 28%). From 1994 to 2009, an increase in students (from 5.5% to 17%) and professionals (from 7% to 15%) were noted, while the opposite trend was noted for merchants (from 9% to 4%), housewives (from 12% to 5%), retirees (from 21% to 17%) and workmen (from 16% to 4%). Unemployed visitors slightly increased from 2.3% to 3%, probably because of the recession. The social and professional distribution, as in the past, corresponds to the national trends (ISTAT, 2010). In comparison to the past, today's visitor of the Sacred Mount of Varallo is younger, has a higher level of education and achieves a more skilled labor, as the general population. Perhaps it means that this visitor looks for a different tourist experience.

Figures 2 and 3 report the geographical origins of the visitors. Knowing the origins of the respondents may contribute to understanding what attracted them. Our aim was to understand if a spiritual motivation for visiting the Sacred Mount of Varallo has gone beyond the immediate nearby population, and what may be the reason. In comparison with 1994, the situation appears to be rather different. In the past, a substantial proportion of visitors came from the Province of Vercelli (30%) and 10% of these from the Municipality of Varallo itself. The attraction area of the complex was more local; today the situation is quite different.

Figure 2
MUNICIPALITIES OF ORIGIN OF THE VISITORS






Source: Personal elaboration

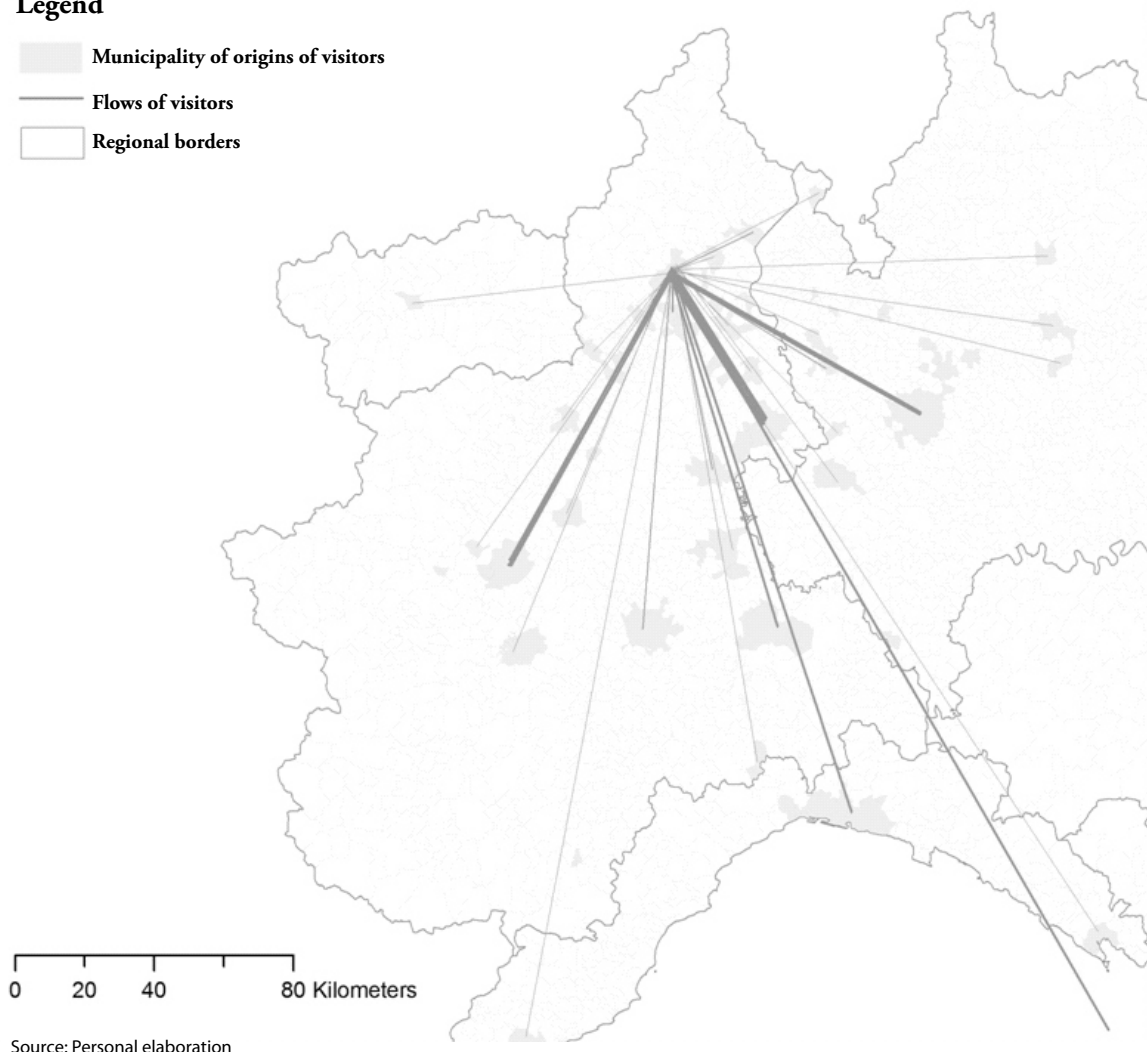
Current data indicate the prevalence of visitors coming from the province of Novara (15%) followed by Turin (11%), Milan (10%), Vercelli (6%), Biella (4%), Varese (3%), Rome (3%), Genoa (3%), Monza and Brianza (2%). A small part of the respondents also came from abroad, in particular from Austria.

The maps show a geographical proximity of the flows, which now transcend the municipalities of Piedmont and include not only the main metropolitan areas of North Italy, but also some other Italian cities.

Figure 3
GEOGRAPHICAL PROXIMITY OF VISITORS

Legend

-  Municipality of origins of visitors
-  Flows of visitors
-  Regional borders



These results allow a series of considerations. As stated earlier, the Sacred Mount of Varallo, together with the others of Piedmont and Lombardy, were inscribed in UNESCO's World Heritage List in 2003. This has probably affected the level of attendance and the attractiveness of these places beyond their natural borders. But this is not the only reason; the current travel market shows new trends in comparison with the past, and more visitors characterized their interests in terms of undertaking new experiences, wanting to escape from the routine, and rediscovering places and situations that had been the subject of what can be defined as "primordial" tourism. So we are able to consider these visitor experiences as a revised form of religious tourism and pilgrimage.

CHARACTERISTICS OF THE VISIT AT THE SACRED MOUNT OF VARALLO

The survey also included questions about the characteristics of the visit itself. First, the data show that 79% of the visitors made the excursion together with family or with friends, 15% in organized groups, and 6% alone.

Another question regards the means of transportation; data shows that visitors mostly use private transportation (76% car and motorbike), even if public transportation has grown from 6% to 16% as well. There are multiple possibilities for this: the growing attention by public administrators towards sustainable forms of transportation, greater attention of tourists to the environment, the strengthening of public services, and the restoration of cable car transport.

Regarding the services used to climb from Varallo's town center to the Sacred Mount, foremost was the cable car (46%), maybe because it is the most accessible form of transportation and it could be a suggestive way to see the beautiful landscape. Another service used by visitors was the souvenir shop (25%); it may represent the means to share the experience with other people, just to perpetuate the experience. Among other facilities sufficiently used are the picnic area (20%) and the catering services (19%). As we noted, the Sacred Mount is inserted in a context where nature is the protagonist and so to have a picnic can be interpreted as an attempt of contemporary society to re-establish contact with the natural environment. The use of catering services may be associated with the growing desire to taste the typical dishes of local culinary tradition (Mangano, 2007). Indeed, among the 132 visitors that had lunch, more than half of them choose a picnic, while less than a quarter went to the restaurant. The other ways of getting lunch appear to be less used and their percentage varies between a maximum of 11% (a lunch in a municipality near Varallo) and a minimum of 1% (a lunch in a farmhouse).

Table 4
ACCOMMODATION USED BY VISITORS

Type of accommodation	% of respondents
Family / friends	24
Hotel	21
Holiday house	17
Bed and breakfast	14
Farmhouse	7
Motel	5
Religious house	5
Camper	5
Camping	2
Total	100

In total, 132 visitors provided information about the kind of visit they had—less than 70% were day-trippers; another 16% made a day trip during a holiday in Valsesia, 7% a day trip during a holiday in Piedmont and the same percentage a business trip at the

Sacred Mount or in neighbor cities. Only 1% made a day trip as part of a holiday in Italy. These results are also confirmed by the type of accommodations chosen by the respondents who have made an overnight stay (42%). As shown in Table 4, informal accommodations—home of relatives and/or friends—is the most used. This behavior suggests that a visit to the Sacred Mount is the result of a spontaneous decision, more than a planned choice.

AWARENESS OF THE AREA IN WHICH THE SACRED MOUNT OF VARALLO IS LOCATED

Concerning visitors' knowledge of the Sacred Mount, more than half of the 146 respondents of this question gave a positive answer. The accustomed visitors of the site are 46% and the 51% of them visit the Sacred Mount several times a year. Only 28% come to Varallo once a year, 12% every two years, and 9% on special occasions. The fact that there is not a high level of loyalty is not a disadvantage; probably it means that awareness of the Sacred Mount is quite widespread and not restricted to repeat visitors. Most of the respondents (56%) usually visit Valsesia and, as seen in Table 5, most of them declare that they are basically motivated by historical and cultural interests, or nature-related purposes. This question draws attention to the fact that very often the attraction characterized by a single factor (historical, artistic, cultural, etc.) is not sufficient to motivate the tourist visit.

It is interesting to note whether respondents know other Sacred Mounts for at least two reasons. The first is related to the use of visiting places with similar characteristics that evoke similar suggestions. The second is related to the fact that they are all relatively close and can be a pleasant destination for an excursion in a suggestive natural landscape that combines art, nature and sacred objects. Over 62% of respondents (93 visitors) said they knew of other Sacred Mounts; among them the most popular were Orta (60%), Oropa (29%) and Crea (25%) in Piedmont and Varese (35%) in Lombardy. As in the 1994 study, secular interests (historical and cultural, as well as artistic that attracted the most visitors) along with the religious ones prevail.

Table 5

MOTIVATION TO VISIT THE VALSESIA

Type of motivation *	% of respondents
Cultural/historical interest	29
Natural interest	23
Holiday house	18
Trekking	16
Other	13
Recreational interest	11
Gastronomy	9
Skiing	2
Work	2

*Informants could provide multiple responses

Table 5. presents the reason to visit Valsesia (or Valsesia region), while Table 6 presents motives for visiting the Sacred Mount – this then can be linked to Bywater’s typologies mentioned in the introductory section.

Table 6

INTERESTS THAT DRIVE THE VISIT THE SACRED MOUNT

Type of motivation*	% of respondents
Religious	37
Historical/cultural	35
Artistic	29
Environmental	22
Recreational	16
Proximity to residence or primary vacation	16
Love for the place	7
Other	10

*Informants could provide multiple responses

Knowledge of the Sacred Mountain is mainly due to word of mouth (44%) and proximity to place of residence or holiday (21%). In many cases, therefore, it is spontaneous knowledge; it is not the result of the search for something specific, even if a fairly high percentage of visitors have known about the Sacred Mount thanks to the Internet and tourist guides (Table 7). There are therefore two possible assumptions: either visitors come to the Sacred Mount looking at random from among different destinations, or it was the result of a specific search. But since the most widely accessed web pages were the websites of the Sacred Mounts of Piedmont and Lombardy or the Sacred Mount of Varallo, this could endorse the idea that the choice of destination was not random.

The use of the Internet before making the visit, close to 40%, can probably be related to the large number of young people, who are the main users of cyberspace and in the increasing availability of the Internet compared with 1994.

Table 7

KNOWLEDGE OF THE SACRED MOUNT

Information source*	% of respondents
Word of mouth	44
Prox places of residence/holiday	21
Internet	16
Tourist guide	14
Magazines	5
Newspaper articles	3
Television	2
Local press	1

*Multiple response

EVALUATION, EXPECTATIONS AND SUGGESTIONS OF THE SACRED MOUNT

But what evaluations and suggestions emerge from the survey? Do tourists positively evaluate the state of conservation of the site and do they detect improvements in the last decade in the services offered by the monumental ensemble? The data elicit interesting implications for management policies in the future as the result of answers about the proposal of new services and activities. About half of the 150 completed questionnaires gave a positive response to question n. 16 ('Are you interested in the improvement or creation of new services or structures?'), and most of the visitors expressed interest in the organization of concerts. In this case, respondents propose classical or religious music concerts, types of events that we consider to be able to take into account the characteristic of this holy place. Some visitors are also interested in purchasing picnic baskets with local products offered at a special price. We decided to include such an option among the possible answers in order to emphasize the relevance of the history and traditions of Varallo, and the Valsesia region in general. As we noted earlier, visitors seem to be looking for an authentic experience, a mix of religion, culture, art and tradition. This last element can be represented by the taste of typical flavors of this territory. We interpret the appreciation by the visitors of this proposal as a positive signal of a possibility of sustaining the broader local economy.

Other answers stress the necessity of more conferences and cultural initiative at the Sacred Mount, in addition to the improvement of guided tours. Regarding the request for audio-guides, the Administrators of the *Riserva* have provided this new service in February 2010.

Another question that we consider particularly significant is the one that asks the visitors if they are willing to pay a ticket to improve the conservation status of the Sacred Mount of Varallo. Most of those interviewed responded positively, and 84 % declared that they would pay a ticket up to € 5. It is also notable that 16% of visitors are willing to spend between €5 and €10 to ensure the maintenance of the site. These responses are an expression of tourists' sensitivity to the preservation of cultural authenticity and to environmental sustainability. Even though part of the visitors responded that they would like to buy a ticket whose proceeds would go towards the conservation of Sacred Mount of Varallo, most of the respondents actually consider the site well-preserved; this is interesting data, which assumes a greater importance with reference to the fact that some of them are repeat visitors and notice an improvement in the site's state of conservation. This question could be used as a proxy to evaluate the effectiveness of the policies carried out in the past by the Administrators of Sacred Mount of Varallo. Most of the visitors (both frequent and occasional repeat visitors) indicate an improvement in the site and many of them pointed out the maintenance of interior design of the gardens, the conservation of historical and artistic status of the complex, its accessibility, and the tourist services. Comparing the results of 2009 questionnaire with the previous survey, we noted that the shortcomings that had been observed in 1994 seem to have been effectively overcome. In particular, respondents judged that the problems linked to accessibility and the lack of some services, as the limited pre-

sence of picnic areas and the absence of guided visits had been solved. The respondents also expressed a positive evaluation (about 70 percent) of the facilities offered at Sacred Mount; we think this is good news for the Administrators, thereby justifying again, albeit indirectly, the effectiveness of the actions and policies adopted. During the last decades the *Riserva* carried out many initiatives to limit, and where possible eliminate, the problems pointed out in the previous questionnaire. One of these was the renovation and the reopening of the old cable car in 2003, which, in fact, allowed an appreciable improvement in the quality of mobility and significantly reduced problems connected with traffic and lack of parking.

Discussion and conclusion

In this final part we attempt to unpack the results of the questionnaire more fully, in order to link our conclusions to the theme of this special issue of the journal – the debates on the authenticity of the experience, pilgrimage and religious tourism, *communitas and contestation*, unity and diversity – and to the different types of visitors we identified at the Sacred Mount of Varallo and their evaluation and expectations about this holy place.

The data we collected allowed us to point out that the Sacred Mount of Varallo is a site that attracts a diversity of visitors, with different motivations for traveling and different senses of affection for, or spiritual connection to the site. According to the typology of visitors we proposed in the first section, as we expected, the data indicate that most of the visitors of the Sacred Mount of Varallo are *culturally inspired tourists*, who have deliberately included in their journey the visit of this holy place for historical and cultural interests or for nature-related purposes. As we pointed out in previous section, these tourists stay short time at the Sacred Mount and are attracted not by a single factor (historical, artistic, cultural, etc), but a mix of elements, which they mention as reasons for returning in survey question 20. In fact, most of the respondents positively evaluate their experience at the Sacred Mount of Varallo and wish to return (78 percent). They indicated various secular motives, such as the outstanding artistic value of the sculptures and paintings or the landscape, in addition to specific religious reasons. Accessibility and the quality of the welcome and information also seem to have been important factors in encouraging the visitor to return.

Moreover, the case study does not seem to indicate the existence of a contrast between the different categories of visitors we proposed; therefore, we think that there exists a sort of unity of them in their differences. We do not recognize a *culture motivated vs. culturally inspired tourists* dichotomy, but instead we identify a unity in the perception of the heritage of this holy place that seems to reunite the various visitors. Comparing the responses to the question concerning the elements that attracted visitors to the Sacred Mount of Varallo, and to the question about the reasons that would bring them back to this place, we also noted that the majority of people visited the holy complex for the same purposes that would be incentives for their return. The response given by visitors to our questionnaire seems to indicate that people are satisfied with the experi-

ence and even seduced by it, and the reason could be sought in the climb to the mount that allow them to transcend the immediate past and present and to connect with the Sacred Mysteries. The entire experience of the visitor seems to be surrounded by an "aura" that, as Di Giovine (2009, p. 27) drawing on Mazzarella (2003, p. 53) points out, provides the human with an initial motivation for interaction with such a place – to commune with its authenticity, to link oneself with the time and space which is imbued deeply in the essence of the site. The Sacred Mount of Varallo, through its aura, actually touches the human before he tangibly interacts with this place. Thus, the Sacred Mount's perceived authenticity references a time and space that is distanced from the actual time and space of the particular interaction. In so doing, the complex of Varallo, as the other Sacred Mounts of Piedmont and Lombardy, actualize the life history of the images they portray – they are able to render the inanimate buildings animate in the minds of the human participants such that tourists can really believe, and even imagine, the monuments existing and interacting with others outside their discrete experience with them.

In the end, what emerges from our analysis about the Sacred Mount of Varallo is that the site may host multiple visitors, whose main motivations vary between sacred and secular. We can even envision tourism at this holy site as a "polymorphic" phenomenon, characterized by multiplicity and multivocality, and while the individual motivations for ritual participation clearly may vary, so too may the group interpretations of the ritual. This last statement does not exclude Turner's conception of *communitas*, but we must abandon the notion of a universal religious community. Essentially then, the distinction becomes to what extent societal forces mingle with the religious field of symbols, and at what level of identity are these forces salient. In sum, regarding the general theme of this special issue of the Journal we find that theories concerning *communitas* and contestation in contemporary religious tourism are not mutually exclusive; they go hand-in-hand, and *communitas* on one social level engenders contestation on another.

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Submitted: 01/25/2011

Accepted: 06/08/2011