In Greece’s Saronic Gulf, coastal temples were places where the sacred and functional overlapped, serving as religious spaces, navigational aids, and markers of political and cultural territories. The high visibility and relatively calm waters of the busy Gulf allowed for easy communication between politically different regions of Greece. This location of religious, commercial, and military activity was its own “Saronic neighborhood,” as well as the crossroads of Attica and the Peloponnese and a gateway to the wider Aegean. In this busy maritime world, Poseidon, the chief deity of the sea, played an essential role. Temples of Poseidon hold a particular, although not exclusive, place within maritime religion. While he is neither confined to associations with maritime settings, nor the only god with maritime aspects, Poseidon’s traditional associations with the sea and the frequency of his seaside shrines make him an integral god within the religious practices of seafarers. The location of Poseidon’s sanctuaries throughout Greece reveal some trends: they are often but not always coastal and on high places such as hills or promontories, they are often outside the city walls at territorial edges, and they are frequently situated along major routes of travel.

At three strategically placed Saronic sanctuaries of Poseidon at Sounion, Isthmia, and Kalaureia, the sanctuaries are all oriented toward the gulf but reflect their significance to the Saronic neighborhood in varying ways. This paper explores the various roles played by these sanctuaries in the Saronic community, with a focus on the experience of those approaching by sea, and how these cults of Poseidon changed during the Archaic and Classical periods: from the beginning of monumental temple-building in Greece through the rise and fall of Athenian naval power — so significantly tied to the Saronic Gulf and adjacent waterways. A holistic approach to all available evidence begins to reveal the character of Poseidon’s cult at each location, through examination of local myth, material culture, the textual record, and the landscape. This paper charts the development of these three sanctuaries and their evolving relationships to the maritime community of the Saronic Gulf, focusing on landscape archaeology — including issues of visual connectivity, approachability, manipulation of the landscape, and distances from roads and harbors.

The nautical character of Poseidon at each site is reflected less in how the god is represented, and more in the functions of the sanctuary for its community. Pottery, dedications, and even orientation and location of cult buildings hints at who was worshipping at the site, where they came from, and what they valued. The well-preserved temple at Sounion was a marker of Athenian territory and the boundary of the Gulf, its highly visible promontory sanctuary a beacon for sailors, with exotic dedications reflecting their travels. Isthmia was the crossroads of Greece, a meeting place of celebration, competition, and shared cultural identity during the Isthmian Games. While under Corinthian control, the site accumulated dedications to Poseidon from across Greece, exemplifying the panhellenic character of the site. Kalaureia, on its island peak, was the headquarters of an amphictyonic league and was known as a place of refuge. The study of these three sites has revealed specific and local relationships between Poseidon, his sanctuaries, and the landscape, but also some Saronic trends, including the role of Athens — a strong presence at each site, whose own appreciation of Poseidon grew as their naval influence spread throughout the Saronic Gulf and beyond.