

THE ITALIAN MONUMENTS IN LEROS AS HISTORICAL RELICS OR LIVING PARTS OF MODERN ECONOMIC LIFE

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Abstract

The Italian monuments in the Dodecanese, particularly on the island of Leros, are an important part of the region's cultural heritage, reflecting a unique blend of Greek and Italian history. Leros, shaped by thirty-one years of Italian rule, became a center of architectural and urban interventions. The Italian administration not only modernized the island but also left behind timeless cultural monuments that reflect the values of the era. These monuments, combined with the natural beauty of Leros, form a cultural bridge between Greece and Italy. By incorporating these monuments into cultural routes, their potential as tools for sustainable tourism and cultural exchange can be harnessed, enhancing appreciation for their historical significance.

Keywords: cultural heritage, cultural routes, Leros, Dodecanese, Greece, Italy

1/INTRODUCTION

Cultural and economic tourism are key pillars for the sustainable development of a destination, and Leros is a prime example of this dynamic. The island's historical and architectural heritage, with an emphasis on Italian monuments, acts as a magnet for visitors seeking authenticity, a connection to the past and the uniqueness of the place (Papageorgiou, 2019; Kostopoulos, 2015). At the same time, the economic tourism that stems from the increased tourist traffic strengthens local entrepreneurship, creates new jobs and contributes to the wider development of the region (Zannas, 2003). This coexistence of cultural experience and economic activity makes Leros an emerging destination that combines the preservation of cultural heritage with modern tourist demand (Manola, M. 2019).

The Italian monuments in Leros constitute a unique chapter in the history and cultural identity of the island. However, their role is not limited exclusively to their historical value (Manola, M. 2024). On the contrary, these monuments have been integrated into modern economic and social life, functioning both as a reminder of the past and as a driving force for

the development of the island. This dual dimension enhances their cultural, touristic and economic importance (Aegean Islands Portal. (n.d.).

2/HISTORICAL HERITAGE AND ARCHITECTURAL SIGNIFICANCE OF MONUMENTS

Leros, this small island in the Aegean Sea, bears the imprint of the Italian occupation (1912-1943), with the monuments of this period constituting a living chapter of its cultural and historical identity (Kolonas, 2002). The Italians designed and constructed a multitude of monuments and buildings, trying to transform the island into an important military and administrative center. Important works of the period include the Old War Hospital, the war installations, the settlements of Lakki, as well as public buildings, schools and churches (Venturini, 1988; Karnava, 2011).

The architecture of these monuments reflects the fascist modernism of the era, with a clear emphasis on geometric lines, functional constructions and the use of materials that were resistant to local climatic conditions (Ferrari, 1990). The Italians also tried to incorporate certain elements of the local architectural tradition, creating a unique composition that continues to impress both locals and visitors (Hellenic Ministry of Culture, 2015).

The following is a detailed list of all the Italian monuments built on Leros during the Italian occupation, as well as their importance as an integral part of modern life (Manola, M. 2024).

3/ITALIAN MONUMENTS IN LEROS

3.1. The Settlement of Lakki (Porto Lago)

The settlement of Lakki is the most characteristic work of the Italian period in Leros. Built by the Italians to function as a center of administration and military management, Lakki was designed based on the standards of fascist urban planning (Venturini, 1988). The architect Roberto Brascia and other Italian designers created a settlement that stands out for its geometric lines, public buildings with large openings and functional infrastructure (Kolonas, 2002).

Important buildings in Lakki:

- ✓ The Municipal Market: An impressive building that currently houses commercial activities and tourist shops.
- ✓ The Italian Cathedral of Saint Francis: An architectural jewel that currently functions as an Orthodox church.
- ✓ The Former Italian Town Hall: An administrative center of the time, which now houses public services.

3.2. Old Military Hospital (S. Andrea)

The Leros Hospital, known as S. Andrea, is one of the most important buildings of the Italian occupation. It was built to serve the needs of the army and included modern healthcare facilities. Today, the hospital has been converted into the Leros History Museum, hosting exhibitions that highlight the island's turbulent history (Leros Military History. (n.d.)).

3.3. Military Facilities (Leros Military History. (n.d.))

The strategic importance of Leros led the Italians to build a number of military facilities:

- ✓ Fortifications at Partheni: An extensive network of forts and ammunition depots.

- ✓ The Seaplane Base: On the western side of Lakki, the Italians built seaplane facilities, strengthening the island's military and commercial connections.
- ✓ The Barracks in Lakki and Merikia: Today, these spaces are used for cultural events and exhibitions.

3.4. Public Infrastructure and Housing

The Italians also designed workers' housing and public infrastructure, such as schools, squares and roads, with the aim of serving the military and civil administration.

Important examples:

- ✓ The Italian School in Lakki: Today it functions as a cultural space.
- ✓ The Rotunda Square: It was designed to be the center of social life.

3.5. The Naval Settlement in the Port of Agia Marina

The Italians constructed buildings for the needs of the navy in the port of Agia Marina. These buildings are distinguished by their simplicity and durable construction. The Aerophone on Leros is one of the most important remnants of the island's military history, which played a crucial role during World War II. Leros, due to its strategic location in the southeastern Aegean, served as a key naval and air base, especially during the Italian occupation (1912-1943). The Italians, realizing its importance, fortified the island extensively, constructing defense infrastructures such as underground bunkers, gun emplacements, and warning systems, among which the Aerophone is included (Leros" by Neni Panourgia).

The Aerophone was a primitive but effective aeroacoustic detection system, which used large funnels or metal sound collectors to detect the movements of enemy aircraft before they became visible (Leros" by Neni Panourgia). This technology, developed in the early 20th century, relied on the ability to pick up sounds from long distances, giving anti-aircraft forces valuable time to prepare for air raids (The Aerophone of Leros).

The importance of the Aerophone peaked during the Battle of Leros (November 1943), when German forces launched heavy aerial bombardments to capture the island from the British and Italians, who had allied themselves with the Allies after Italy's armistice. Despite strong defenses, Leros fell to the Germans, marking one of the last major German victories in the Aegean ("Mount Patela and the Parabolic Acoustic Wall").

Today, the Aerophone is a rare and unique technological relic of the era, attracting the interest of historians, researchers and visitors. In combination with the other military fortifications and museums of Leros, it contributes to preserving the memory of a critical period in Greek and European history ("Unseen Leros").

4/CULTURAL TOURISM DEVELOPMENT OF LEROS: THE ROLE OF ITALIAN MONUMENTS

Leros attracts visitors from all over the world who are interested in discovering its history and architectural heritage. Tours of the Italian monuments, combined with the rich natural beauty of the island, enhance the tourist identity of Leros.

Beyond their architectural and historical value, the Italian monuments of Leros have become a key pillar of the economic development of the island. Many of them have been restored and reused, now serving modern needs (Zannas, 2003).

These spaces host:

• *Events and Exhibitions*

Many of the buildings from the Italian occupation are now used to host cultural events, such as art exhibitions, concerts and theatrical performances. This new use is reviving the interest of the local community and visitors (Syrigos, 2004).

• *Educational Activities.*

The schools of Leros have included in their programs visits and activities related to Italian monuments, in order to raise awareness among students about their historical and cultural value (Hellenic Ministry of Culture, 2015).

Leros, beyond its natural beauty, has a cultural identity based on its turbulent history and unique architectural heritage. The Italian monuments constitute one of the main pillars on which the economic and tourist development of the island can be based, offering new opportunities for both residents and businesses (Zannas, 2003).

The cultural heritage of Leros, centered on the Italian monuments, is a pole of attraction for a growing number of visitors interested in historical and architectural attractions (Papageorgiou, 2019; Aegean Islands Portal, n.d.).

- ✓ Multiculturalism: Leros attracts tourists who want to experience the unique combination of Greek and Italian architecture, as well as the military history of the island.
- ✓ Events and Festivals: The organization of festivals, such as thematic exhibitions on the Italian occupation, historical reenactment events and tours of Italian monuments, enhance the attractiveness of Leros as a tourist destination (Manola et al., 2023).
- ✓ Promotion of Special Tourism: In recent years, Leros has become known for diving tourism, focusing on the underwater shipwrecks of World War II. Combined with visits to Italian monuments, a comprehensive experience is created for the visitor (Maniou, 2023b).

The Italian monuments are a major attraction for tourism in Leros. Visitors wander the neighborhoodsof Lakki, photographing the impressive buildings, while participating in organized tours of the military sites (Komminos, 2002; Leros Island Official Website, n.d.).

Many of these buildings have found new uses (Hellenic Ministry of Culture, 2015):

- ✓ Hotels and accommodations: Some old buildings have been converted into boutique hotels, offering a unique accommodation experience.
- ✓ Gastronomic Venues: Restaurants and cafes are housed in historic buildings, combining tradition with modern culture. (Manola,2022α; Papaioannouet al., 2024).

5/TOURISM AND CULTURAL EXPLOITATION

One of the main ways of exploiting monuments is to integrate them into the tourist and cultural map of Leros. Places such as the Old Military Hospital have been converted into museums and cultural venues, attracting thousands of visitors every year. This cultural renaissance strengthens the island's tourist identity, making it an attractive destination for those interested in history, architecture and culture (Papageorgiou, 2019).

Visitors who arrive in Leros to experience the Italian monuments are not limited to day trips. Many stay overnight in local hotels, dine in restaurants serving traditional cuisine and participate in local activities, thus strengthening the local economy. Furthermore, cultural tourism is a sector that attracts high-income visitors, which increases the island's overall income (Zannas, 2003).

The conservation, restoration and management of the monuments have created new professional opportunities for the inhabitants of Leros. Architects, conservators, tour guides, as well as workers in the hospitality and catering sectors benefit from the activities related to

the Italian monuments (Maniou, 2023b). At the same time, the organization of cultural events in these places enhances further the employment and participation of the local community (Leros Island Official Website. (n.d.).

The recognition of the importance of the Italian monuments has also led to investment opportunities. International and domestic bodies have funded restoration programs, while local authorities have undertaken initiatives for the promotion and management of these monuments (Hellenic Ministry of Culture, 2015). These investments are not limited only to the restoration of the monuments themselves, but also extend to the island's infrastructure, such as roads, ports and hospitality services (Syrigos, 2004).

The Italian buildings in Leros form a significant part of the cultural heritage of the region, encompassing both tangible and intangible elements of social value. This cultural heritage extends beyond the buildings themselves and includes traditions, language, and religious practices. The authenticity of the past is linked to contemporary identity and cultural communication between generations and peoples. The entrepreneurial and touristic utilization of this heritage can contribute to the local economy, while sustainable development that respects the environment and local community is essential. The use of new technologies, such as digital mapping and virtual reality, offers new opportunities for promoting this heritage and enhancing tourism. Maniou et al., 2025; Maniou 2023; Maniou 2024a; Maniou 2024b; Maniou 2024c; Manola, 2022b; Mitoula & Maniou, 2024).

6/THE CONSERVATION AND MODERN USE OF MONUMENTS

The current state of the Italian monuments on Leros varies. While some have been restored and used, many of them remain in a state of abandonment. Nevertheless, interest in their conservation and promotion has increased significantly in recent years (Kostopoulos, 2015).

Despite the contribution of Italian monuments to the contemporary life of Leros, their exploitation is not always a simple matter. There are challenges related to preserving their historical authenticity, financing restoration projects and managing tourism (Hellenic Ministry of Culture, 2015).

The transformation of monuments into tourist attractions carries the risk of altering their historical identity. It is important that restoration projects respect the original architecture and do not transform the sites into commercialized attractions, disconnected from their historical significance.

The preservation of monuments requires significant financial resources. Although considerable investments have been made, securing stable funding remains a challenge. Furthermore, cooperation between public and private entities is essential for the sustainable management of these sites.

Increased tourist traffic can put pressure on the island's infrastructure and natural environment. For example, excessive visitor numbers can lead to deterioration of monuments or environmental degradation. It is essential to implement sustainable tourism development policies that ensure a balance between development and protection.

Leros has the potential to further strengthen its position as an international cultural destination, strategically utilizing its Italian monuments and historical heritage (Tsatalmpasoglou et al., 2024).

- ✓ International Promotion: Through cooperation programs with international organizations, Leros can be promoted as a model of cultural heritage preservation.
- ✓ Development of Digital Tools: The creation of digital tours, augmented reality applications and virtual tours can attract new types of visitors.
- ✓ Collaboration with Universities: Research and education around the monuments can bring students and academics to the island, strengthening its economy and cultural identity.

The Italian monuments on Leros have the unique ability to act as a bridge connecting the past with the present and the future. On the one hand, they remind us of the geopolitical importance and turbulent history of the Aegean. On the other hand, they contribute to local development, strengthening the island's economy and attracting international interest (Manola, 2022).

The future of these monuments depends on Leros' ability to manage them with respect and strategic thinking. With the right approach, these monuments can continue to inspire, educate and strengthen the economic life of the island, while maintaining their historical significance. In this way, Leros can emerge not only as a place of historical importance but also as a model of sustainable tourism and cultural development in the Aegean. In this way, the Italian monuments will remain living parts of local life, proving that history is not just a relic of the past, but an invaluable resource for the present and the future.

While tourism is a key driver of economic growth, Leros needs to carefully manage the balance between tourism development and the protection of its Italian monuments. Excessive development can lead to deterioration, while a sustainable tourism strategy can ensure long-term benefits (Kostopoulos, 2015).

7/CONCLUSION

The Italian monuments on Leros are not simply historical relics of another era, but have become living parts of the island's contemporary economic and cultural life. Through their touristic exploitation, job creation and strengthening of the local economy, these monuments continue to contribute to the sustainable development of Leros (Venturini, 1988).

However, the challenge lies in maintaining the balance between economic exploitation and the preservation of their historical and cultural authenticity. Leros is called upon to face this challenge with responsibility and long-term planning.

The integration of monuments into modern life should not lead to the degradation of their cultural value. On the contrary, preserving authenticity, highlighting their historical significance and raising awareness among the local community and visitors are essential steps for a sustainable approach. Education, events, and the promotion of academic research around Italian monuments can enhance collective understanding and ensure their protection.

Furthermore, local authorities and entrepreneurs are called upon to maintain a balanced tourism policy that will ensure the quality of the visitor experience, without affecting the daily lives of residents or the natural environment. The monuments, as symbols of historical heritage, belong not only to Leros but also to the collective memory of the Mediterranean. Thus, their preservation concerns not only the local community, but also the international cultural landscape.

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