



(REVIEW ARTICLE)



## Italian cultural heritage in Leros: Current situation and the role of digital technologies for its promotion (e-culture)

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### Abstract

Italian architecture in the Dodecanese is the result of thirty-one years of Italian rule and is an important and special part of the cultural heritage of the region. The departure of the Italians bequeathed to the islands their rich architectural work, most of which is located in Rhodes, Kos and Leros that were serving as headquarters for the Italians.

Today Italian monuments are an important part of the cultural heritage of the islands, and a valuable asset for their tourism industry, as they provide a unique blend of history and architecture that attracts tourists and contributes to local and cultural development and promotion.

The possibilities of utilizing new technologies could be an important element for the upgrading and promotion of the islands, and especially of Leros, which is the case study of this project.

**Keywords:** Leros; Italian monuments; Tourism; Cultural heritage; History; Digital Technologies; e-Culture.

### 1. Introduction

The term "Cultural Heritage" refers to monuments, groups of buildings and places with aesthetic, archaeological, scientific, ethnological or anthropological value. In short, it expresses a form of heritage, which is indisputable that it must be preserved, in order to be passed on intact to the coming generations (Gandzias, 2010).

According to Kolonas (2002), by the term cultural heritage one means the cultural remains - material and immaterial - that we consider to have a special social value and are of interest to the world because they are related to the tradition of a place or culture, to origin, identity and the authenticity. The authentic appears as the absolute objective category: the love for monuments, nature, landscape, ruins. Cultural heritage has deep meanings, as it characterizes the identity of both individuals and groups. The past is not only about the identity, origin and cultural communication, but is also a factor of creation.

New technologies offer new data and help cultural tourism by providing smart tools in its daily operations, while, simultaneously, improving the customer experience. It is important for cultural entrepreneurs to follow the trends of new technologies in the travel industry. This is especially important, as customer expectations and choices change. Technology and tourism have entered the world's consciousness as interrelated concepts. There is an inseparable relationship between technology and the projection of cultural heritage, as it has been shaped so far and as it is predicted to continue. (Sigala, 2012).

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## 2. Italian occupation and cultural heritage

Italian occupation began in 1911, while the Dodecanese officially joined Greece after World War II in 1947 (Wuyts, 2020). From 1924 to 1936, Italy attempted to combine rationalism and local folk elements, both real and semi-mythical, into a purportedly general "Mediterranean nature" (Insight Guides, 2023). On each island at least one sample in this 'protectorate' style was created, e.g. the post office, the covered market or the governor's mansion, but only in the most densely populated or strategic islands of the Dodecanese, such as Rhodes, Kos, Kalymnos and Leros, were plans drawn up for sweeping urban reorganization (Drakakis, 2021; Kolonas, 2002).

The Italian rule in the Dodecanese greatly influenced both the development and the formation and history of the places. During the period of the Italian occupation, and especially from 1912 to 1943, buildings were built in the Dodecanese, which, today, are historical monuments (Farmakidis, 2020). Italy hoped to find an alternative destination for its surplus population (during the period 1906-1910, 3,256,000 Italians had left their country (Yiannopoulos, 2006).

According to Karamanis & Chatzimichail (2016), the urban planning interventions helped in the remodeling of the historical centers, the improvement of the road network, the expansion or redesign of the urban fabric and contributed to the overall upgrading and promotion of the historical monuments.

Drakakis (2021), states that the Italian occupation of the Dodecanese was accompanied by a strong presence at all levels of the islands' structure, which contributed to the development of historical centers, the organization of the road network, the expansion and pre-planning of the urban planning network. There have been initiatives aimed at highlighting Italian power and promoting specific functions for each island (eg tourism on Rhodes, military bases on Leros). The Italians built a large number of new buildings throughout the Dodecanese, thus creating entirely new forms of symbolic colonial architecture that emphasized the role of the metropolitan state as an agent of modernization. The new public buildings are still notable for their differentiation from earlier styles of local popular architecture in their size, scale and adaptation to the island landscape. (Discover Rhodes, 2024; Kostopoulos, 2003, 2005)

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## 3. Current state

Today, traces of the Italian interventions to preserve and highlight the cultural heritage of the Dodecanese can be found in museums, restoration projects and throughout the islands. The rediscovery and promotion of these islands, as well as their policies and impact on the cultural heritage of the islands are being re-evaluated (Orlandi, 2010), with a dominant tendency to highlight them, in order to attract tourism (Insight Guides, 2023).

The Italian heritage map is rich in attractions and is part of the long history of the Dodecanese (Kollias, 2007). The archaeological and architectural traces are impressive in the historical stratification that has been formed since antiquity, as a material wealth of the cultural and architectural heritage of the islands. The way Italy dealt with this legacy is probably one of the most original stories in the colonial experience of the then Kingdom of Italy, as well as the fascist empire in the Mediterranean (Orlandi, 2022).

Italian architecture in the Dodecanese is an important tourist asset and is visible mainly in Leros, Rhodes and Kos. It includes the development of historic centers, the organization of the road network, the expansion and pre-planning of the city network. The Italians built a large number of new buildings, creating entirely new forms of symbolic colonial architecture. These structures emphasized the role of the metropolitan state as an agent of modernization. New public buildings continue to stand out for their differentiation from earlier styles of local popular architecture in terms of size, scale and adaptation to the island landscape (Drakakis, 2021; Kolonas, 2002).

Today the modernist and art deco buildings, a result of the Italian occupation, surprise many visitors to the Dodecanese. (Greeka, 2024).

The research by Jones and Pilat (2020) includes important information about the heritage and reuse of architectural spaces of the Fascist period. The McGuire study (2020) focuses exclusively on the presence of Italians in the Dodecanese and highlights the uniqueness of the Italian colonial experience. (McGuire 2020).

Troilo (2021) explores the reappropriation of all these traces of the past – in this case, of the Italian experience in Rhodes and the Dodecanese between 1912 and 1943 – by analyzing the contribution of Italian archeology to the definition of the imaginary of European imperial practice starting from the late nineteenth century.

The influence of the Italians regarding the cultural heritage did not only benefit the former conquerors, but also the current local communities of the Dodecanese (Logothetis, 2004; Logothetis, 2012; Louloudaki, 2020); therefore, the ideology must be recognized, preserved and separated from the tangible remains of that era (Manola, 2022).

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#### 4. Cultural heritage and new technologies

Regardless of the state of Italian monuments, new technologies can compensate for the wear and tear of time and promote the island and existing monuments, by providing easy access using social networks and other digital platforms. Technology can be used to create a more interconnected travel experience, as its potential in experiential-cultural tourism drastically expands the hitherto known horizons of experiences. Cultural heritage represents an invaluable wealth for many countries, as well as for Leros, the Dodecanese and Greece as a whole. It is often defined as the "oil" of a nation.

Cultural tourism, which often uses the latest technologies, shows increasingly the demand for innovative media, capable of offering truly immersive experiences. Information is the "soul" of tourism and ICT is a catalytic factor in the competitiveness of a cultural destination (Sigala, 2012).

The solution to the problem is the transformation of cultural spaces into dynamic tools of knowledge and development, accessible to all, which do not lose their essence, but continue to offer authentic and natural experiences, using the power of information and communication technologies and composing the "good" in depth. The creation of "interactive culture" with the help of ICTs highlights the destination (Campbell 2012)

In fact, ICT technologies can instantly provide information that is otherwise difficult to find, transforming the public's approach to cultural works. Through interactivity, it is possible to provide in-depth answers to visitors' questions about the monuments, which helps to increase their participation and also to advertise the monuments, if they are satisfied with the tour and contact.

The multimedia and new technologies used, such as virtual and augmented reality and multisensory experiences are in fact tools able to stimulate the experience of visiting, as well as bridge the gap between cultural sites and visitors, while also acting as advertising modes and spotlights of the local culture. The primary goal of all ICT activities is to create pleasant experiences for consumer tourists, with the aim of extending their stay and projecting their experience on social media to create potential tourists. (Komninou, 2002).

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#### 5. Leros - Italian architectural buildings

Leros during Italian rule stood out as one of the most heavily armed islands in the Aegean. Remnants of this effort today are 26 artillery units and over 105 guns of different sizes and functions to protect the island from air and sea threats. (Kostopoulos, 2015). Notably, the artillery found in Katsouni included the famous "Cannons of Navarone", which served as inspiration for the Hollywood movie "The Guns of Navarone" starring Anthony Quinn.

According to Zachariou (2016), the largest urban planning intervention of the Italians in the Dodecanese is located on the island of Leros and is the place of Lakki. Due to its geographical position, the island was chosen for the establishment of military bases in Lakki Bay, which is the largest natural harbor in the Mediterranean. To serve the need for living quarters for officers and their families, the Italian administration founded a new town called Porto Lago. The plan implemented placed the central functions – administration, market, services, culture – in the center of the settlement, creating peripheral residential zones for the military ranks. In the design of the new city, the architects R.Petracco and A.Bernabiti managed to create an excellent set of Mediterranean Rationalism, both at the level of urban planning, as well as the level of architectural creation. Among their works, the most important are the buildings of the administrative center of Porto Lago, as they are the most representative sample in color and different materials of Mediterranean rationalism, combined with the aesthetic needs of the Greek landscape (Dallari, 2017).

Lakki was designed and built from the ground up, reminiscent of a brand new city. Its overall style and aesthetics harmonize with the architectural trends prevailing in Europe at the beginning of the 20th century.

Kolonas (2002) argues that an inclusive and comprehensive treatment and protection of cultural heritage is required – not just financial management of it. Specifically, the aforementioned way of treatment/management includes: interest in cultural heritage, study, research, excavation, recording, documentation, interpretation, evaluation, restoration,

maintenance, safeguarding, legislation, protection policy, illustration, presentation, promotion, as well as economic (including tourism) utilization of cultural heritage.

The most important Italian monuments of Leros according to internet research are the following:

- The Italian city of Porto Lago (Lakki)
- The naval barracks
- The PL906 anti-aircraft naval artillery of Mouplogourna
- The Rodolfo Petrako primary school building
- The Gianni Rossetti aeronautical base (in Lepida of Lakki)
- The Apitiki – the Lago Italian artillery tunnel
- The circular market with the clock tower
- The Hotel Roma, by Armando Bernabiti
- The St. Nicolas Catholic Church (previously known as St. Franscesco Catholic Church)
- The royal barracks/ Caserma di Regina
- The Italian Municipality building
- The Tax Office
- The FASCIO (The offices of Fascism and the seat of the Political Secretary)
- The youth club
- Game rooms, known as DOPO LAVORO
- The post office (POSTA) on the ground floor
- The Italian Pharmacy
- Mussolini's Fascist Guard / MILIZIA

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## 6. Research methodology

### 6.1. Qualitative analysis

Regarding the methodological approach, the use of the office representative interview will be adopted. According to Kvale (1996), the interview is an extremely important research tool of the qualitative method, as it is the only way to approach people's perceptions and derive information in depth. It is considered to be a special kind of "conversation-discourse", because during the interviews the interaction between researcher and narrator becomes "more harmonious and less rationalized" (Habermas, 1971) The qualitative approach to a research, according to Denzin & Lincoln (2000), lies in whether a structured situation actually emerges, one that can be analyzed and researched. For the needs of qualitative research and for the collection of valid information, we considered that Mr. Di.Pierro Francesco, being, not only the cultural officer in the Municipality of Leros, but also a historical writer and researcher of the Italian history of the island, is the most representative and valid sample for the study of the topic of our paper.

### 6.2. Interview

- Mr. Di Pierro, what can you tell us, being the cultural officer in the Municipality of Leros, regarding the current state of the Italian monuments on the island?

-(Mr. Di.Pierro Francesco)..No information can describe the situation, unless one forms a personal opinion by personally visiting the island of Leros!

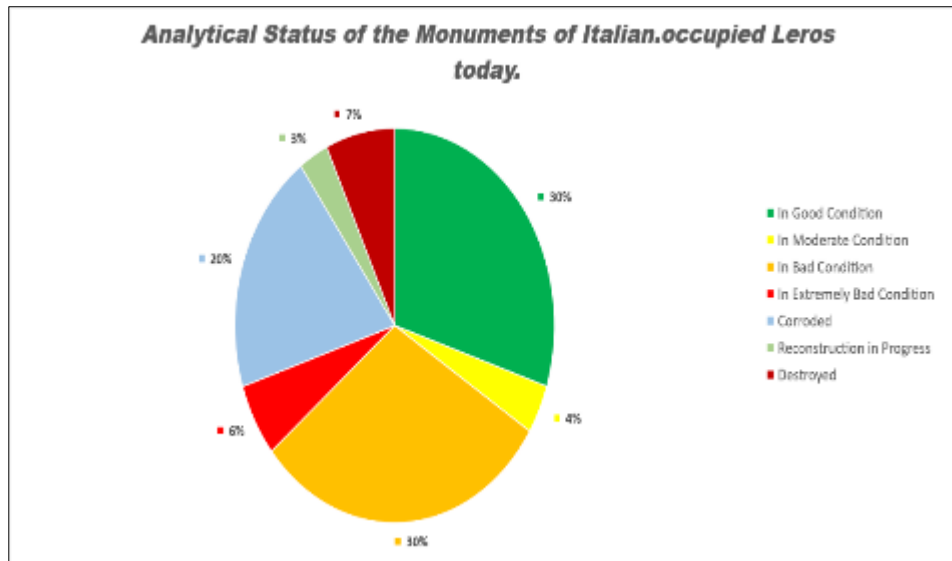
I have been studying the history of this island for ten years; in order to restore everything our ancestors left over time, even the whole state budget of Greece is not enough.

Today, most buildings are in a bad state... with two exceptions, the cinema and the officers' barracks... According to what I see, live and study for decades, 90% of them have been left to their fate, despite the occasional financial contribution of the Greek Government. They were building structures left by the Italians and we tried to maintain them through the ages, roughly and hastily. Efforts are being made for maintenance....God help us, although I am not so optimistic....

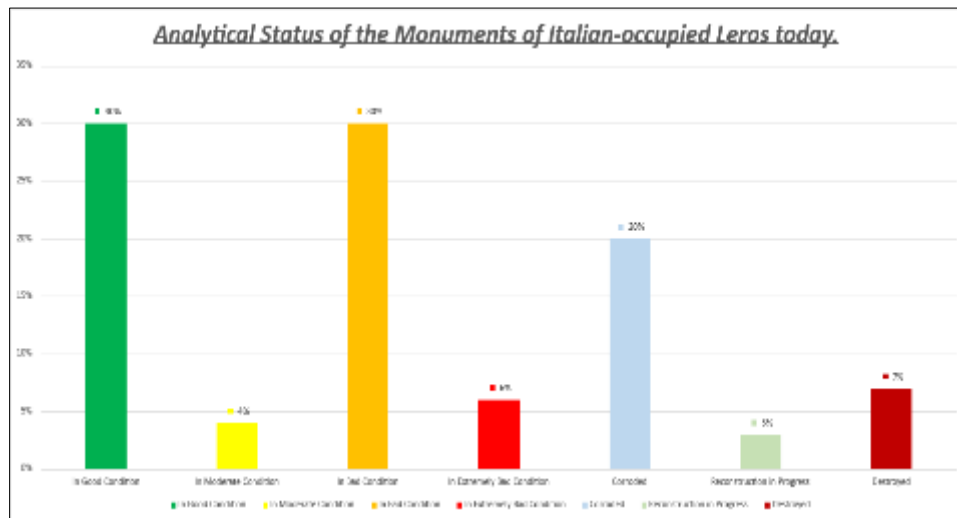
The island of the goddess Artemis fell victim to people who are not really interested in the culture, its proper maintenance and promotion; to politicians, indifferent, rapacious, and uneducated obscurantists ..... The history of this blessed place cannot be properly described.

**6.3. Graph illustrating the current state if the monuments of the Italian-occupied Leros**

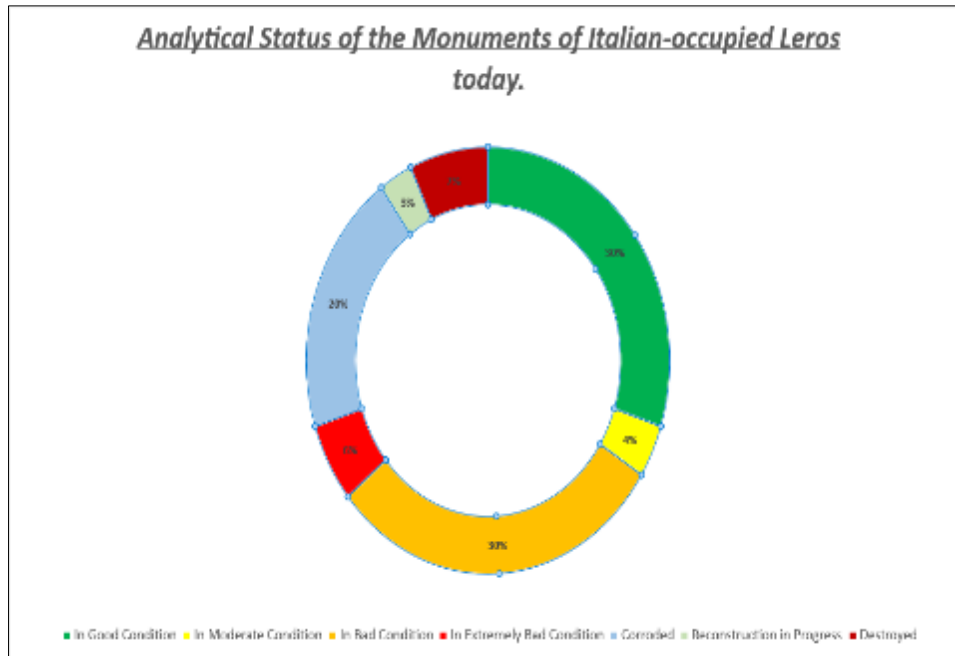
For the creation of the graph, the contribution of Mr. Di Piero Francesco was of vital importance, as, being the cultural officer in the Municipality of Leros, and dealing personally with the history of the Italian monuments of the island, he provided us with answers that helped us form a structured situation, which can be analyzed as follows Fig 1, 2, 3:



**Figure 1** Analytical Status of the Monuments of Italian-Occupied Leros Today



**Figure 2** Analytical Status of the Monuments of Italian-Occupied Leros Today



**Figure 3** Analytical Status of the Monuments of Italian-Occupied Leros Today

## 7. Discussion: the role of e-culture

Generally speaking, E-culture is the culmination of human creativity and communication within the context of information technology adoption. It is defined by the development of free information spaces, virtual forms of expression, remote technologies, and liberal use of content. Electronic - digital culture (e-culture) comes from the convergence of ICT with the traditional form of the cultural sector of human activity. E-culture includes all the axes and manifestations of culture with the strict or in the loosest sense of the term, which are now created, presented, stored, retrieved, transmitted, displayed, accessed, etc., media from the use of ICT services and facilities. Finally, we emphasize the significance of all digital technologies in the field of education and e-culture which are highly correlated. The use of ICTs are highly effective, productive and improves procedures of culture and education via mobile devices that bring education and everywhere [31-33], various ICTs applications that are the main supporters of education and culture [34-39], and AI, STEM, ROBOTICS and Games [40-45] that raise educational procedures to new performance levels. Additionally, the development and integration of ICTs with theories and models of metacognition, mindfulness, meditation, and the cultivation of emotional intelligence [46-54] accelerates and improves the educational and cultural practices for all citizens with or without disabilities.

## 8. Conclusions

The architecture and Italian buildings in Leros and throughout the Dodecanese constitute an indelible mark on the place, a multidimensional map that represents the cultural, social and historical developments of the islands. The wealth that the Dodecanese inherited from the Italian occupation is enhanced by the particular Italian aesthetic, which is not just a presentation of buildings, but serves as a time machine that gives us the opportunity to travel back to the past. The Italian public and private architecture of the Dodecanese is of a high standard and deserves every protection and promotion. The Italian heritage continues to influence the character of the Dodecanese to this day and consists of a collection of buildings and structures which are not only relics of an era of previous regimes, but also symbols of the islands' history and identity. They are living monuments because they continue to be used and often have the same or similar uses as the originals. Italian architecture is a pole of attraction for countless visitors every year; therefore, emphasis must be placed on its proper promotion, preservation and protection, both by local and national bodies.

The applications of technology can contribute to the promotion of the Italian architectural heritage and upgrade tourism and local development, making the island of Leros more accessible and known by potential tourists/consumers, while, at the same time, helping to upgrade it to a dynamic technological achievement.

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## Compliance with ethical standards

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### *Disclosure of conflict of interest*

The Authors proclaim no conflict of interest.

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- [65] Photo 11: <https://lerosisland.gr>
- [66] Photo 12: <https://lerosisland.gr>
- [67] Photo 13: <https://lerosisland.gr>

[68] Photo 14: <https://lerosisland.gr>

[69] Photo 15: <https://www.facebook.com/frantsesko.dipierro/photos>

[70] Photo 16: <https://www.facebook.com/frantsesko.dipierro/photos>

[71] Photo 17: <https://lerosisland.gr>

[72] Photo 18: <https://lerosisland.gr>

[73] Photo 19: <https://lerosisland.gr>

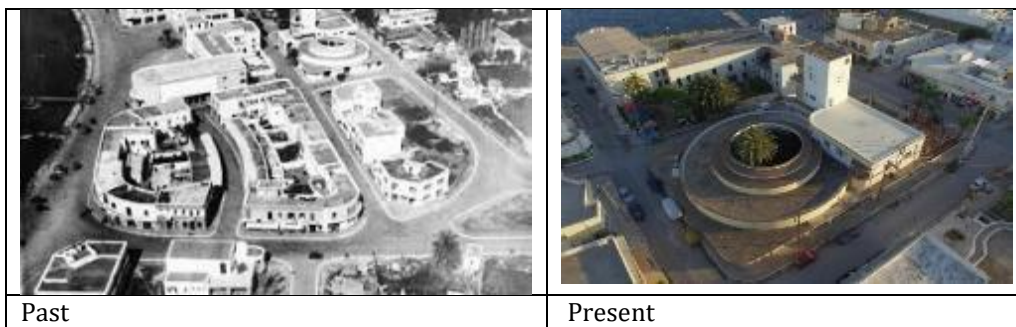
[74] Photo 20: <https://lerosisland.gr>

Photo 21: <https://www.facebook.com/frantsesko.dipierro/photos>

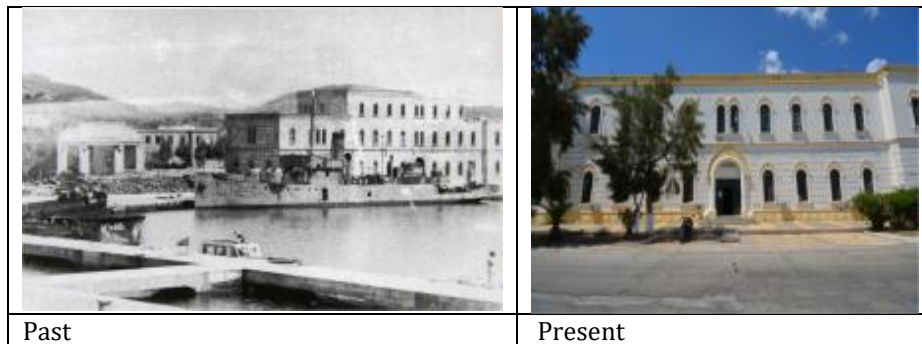
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## Annex - images of monuments of italian-occupied leros, during past and present time

### *The Italian city of Porto Lago ( Lakki)*



### *The naval barracks*

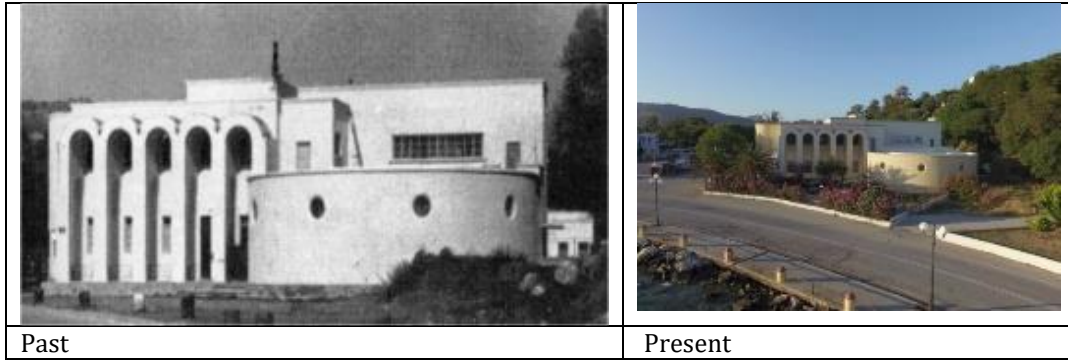


### *The PL906 anti-aircraft naval artillery of Mouplogourna*



Present

### *The Rodolfo Petrako primary school building*



*The Gianni Rossetti aeronautical base (in Lepida of Lakki)*

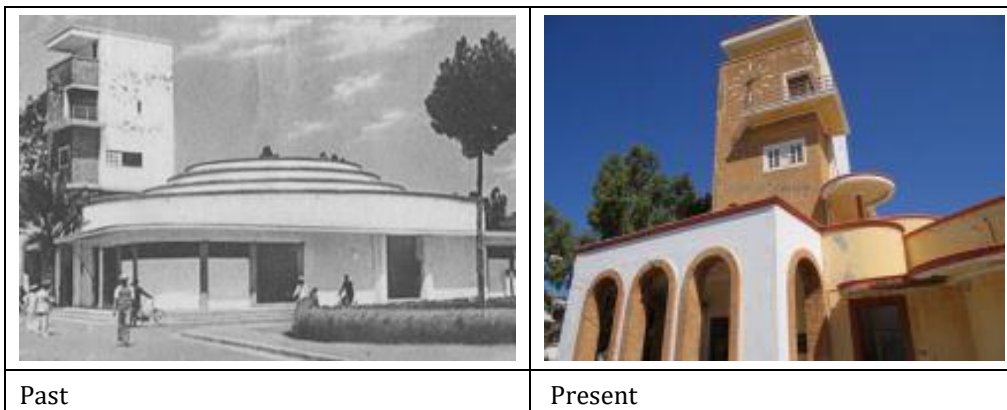


*The Apitiki – the Lago Italian artillery tunnel*

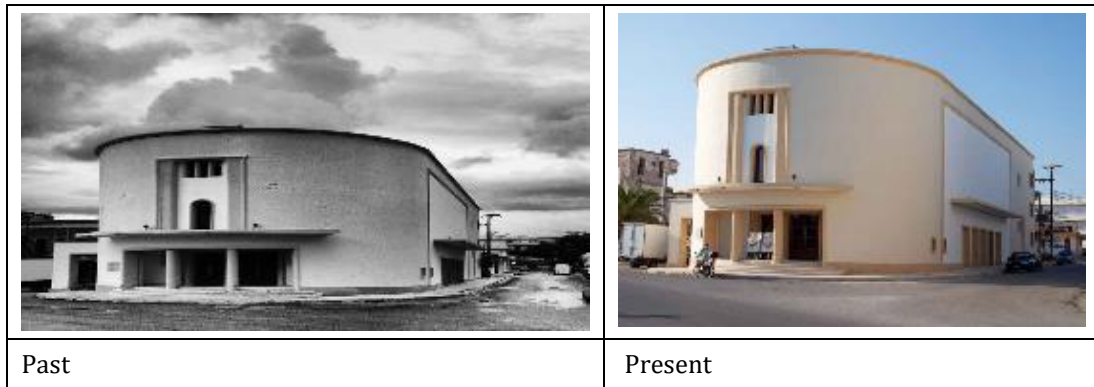


Present

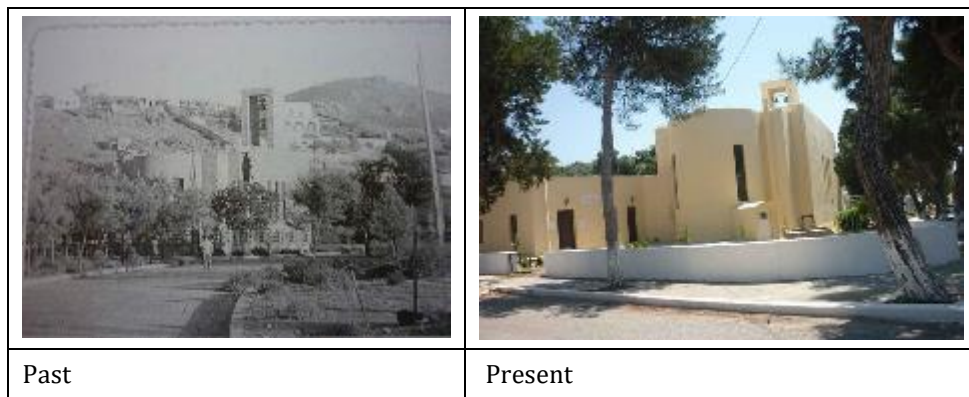
### 8.1. The circular market with the clock tower



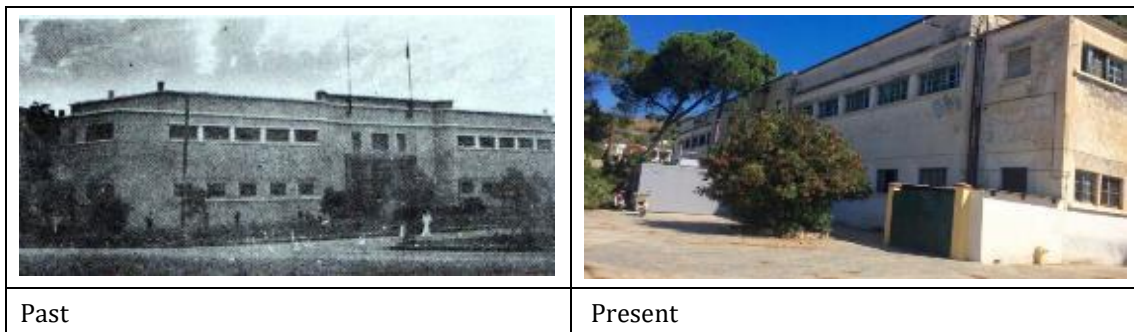
**8.2. The Hotel Roma, by Armando Bernabiti**



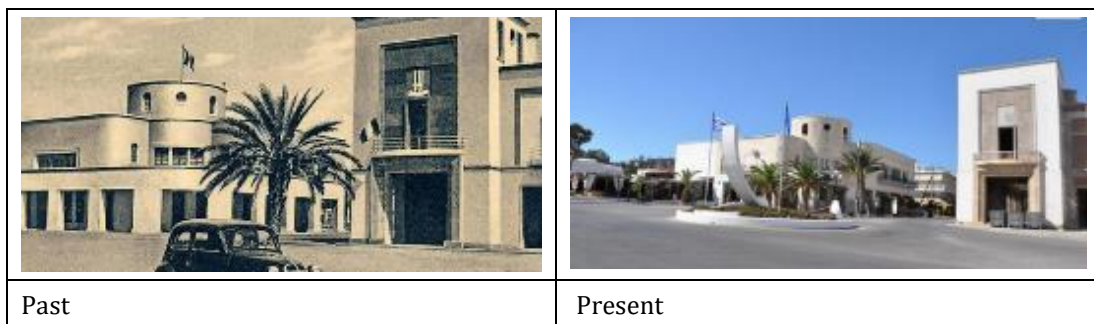
*The St. Nicolas Catholic Church (previously known as St. Fransesco Catholic Church)*



*The royal barracks/ Caserma di Regina*



*The Italian Municipality building*



*The Italian Pharmacy*



Present

**Note**

In addition to the aforementioned, there are other monuments worth mentioning, which, after extensive research, no quality material was found to present about, such as:

- The Tax Office that became Officers Club
- The FASCIO (The offices of Fascism and the seat of the Political Secretary)
- The youth club, which, after several modifications, became a patisserie
- The post office (POSTA), which became an auto repair shop
- The Mussolini's Fascist Guard / MILIZIA