

The Three Women of Mytilini

A Walk Through Historic Social Change & Political Disruption

Welcome to The Three Women of Mytilini walking tour!

With the theme of social change and political disruption, this tour guides you through some significant historical events and current issues experienced in Mytilini, Lesvos.

Starting at Sappho's statue (our first and best known 'woman' of Mytilini) in Sappho Square, we travel northwards to the Asia Minor Mother statue (the second 'woman') and then finally back down to The Statue of Liberty (the third and final 'woman'). Each statue has its own tale of important social and political events in the region's history. Along the way we will encounter some other sites of historic interest, and find out more about activism and issues affecting Mytilini today.

This walk is a great way to learn much about Mytilini's character while getting your bearings if you're new in town, and alongside the history and culture, we'll highlight some touristic hotspots – accessible beaches, restaurants, shops and bars.

On this page you can find more information about Mytilini followed by the information and outline of the walking tour itself. The following linked webpages give information regarding the specific statue sites and legs of the tour, in the order you will meet them.

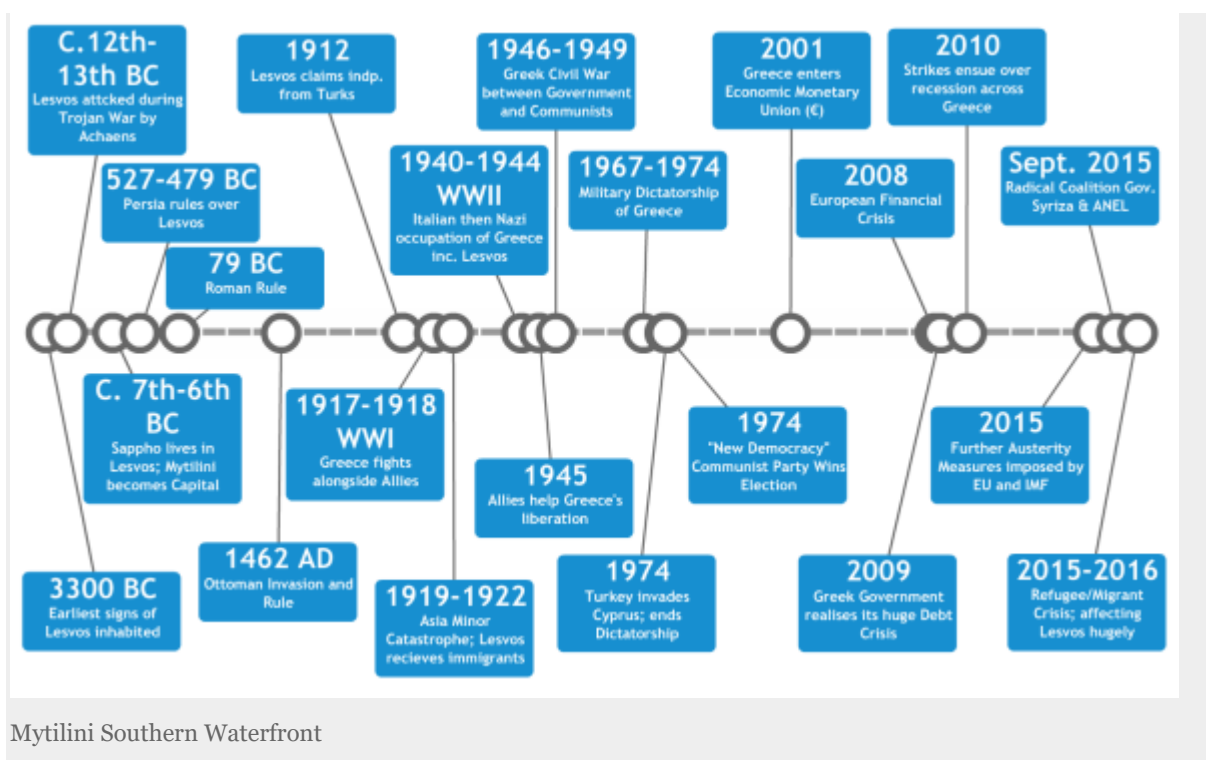
About Mytilini



Mytilini Southern Waterfront

Lesvos is one of Greece's 227 inhabited islands and is part of the Northeastern Aegean Island cluster (visitgreece.com, 2014). Mytilini is the capital of Lesvos, and home to most of its commercial industry. Despite Molyvos in the North boasting most mass tourism attractions relating to sun, sea and sand, Mytilini is undoubtedly the most cosmopolitan part of the island (lesvosgreece.gr, 2015a). Built around its beautiful southern harbor, Mytilini has plenty of bars, shops and restaurants alongside many magnificent cultural heritage sites such as Mytilini Castle and the domed church of Agios Therapon (pictured in *photo above*).

The full history of Lesvos and Mytilini is fascinating. The timeline shown below has been created specifically for this tour, and lists the all relevant historic events discussed within the tour from Ancient Greece through to present day in 2016.



The Walk Itself

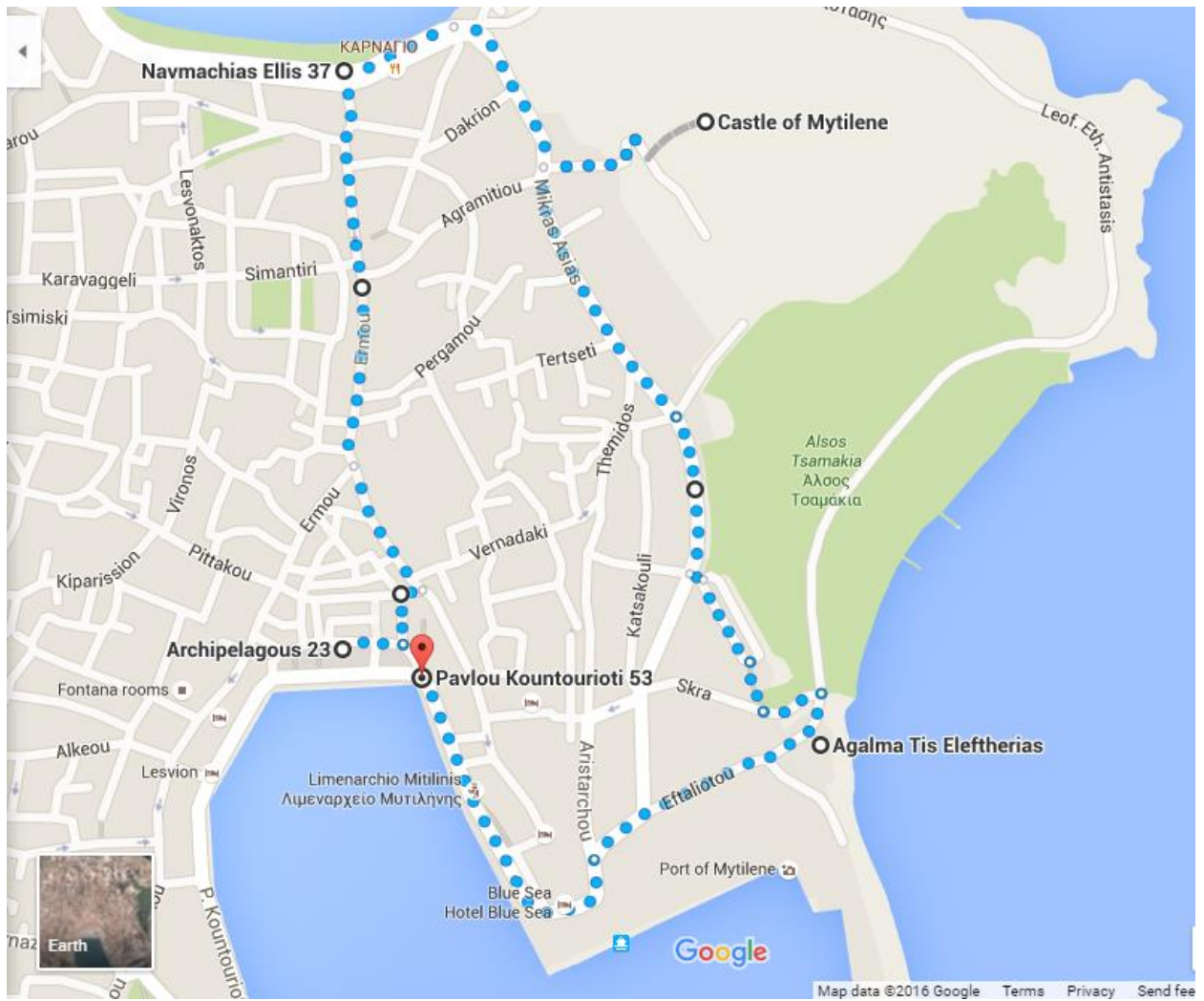
The walk is 2.7 km long in total. Although you could do it in 35 minutes, we recommend you take half a day out to complete this tour, to give you plenty of time for rests, reflection, photography and a thorough exploration of the sites. The route triangulates three noteworthy statues in Mytilini – ‘The Three Women’-. Sappho, Asia Minor Mother and The Statue of Liberty. We recommend travelling in the direction suggested here so that you follow the chronology of the people/events the statues themselves represent, overall travelling from ancient to post-war times. Along the way however, the journey is interspersed with other sites from different periods.

Starting in [Sappho Square](#), we give a brief history on Sappho's life, her activism during Ancient Greek times, and her legacy, which is arguably still affecting social change today. Information is also given on the socio-political use of the square's space in recent years. We then continue into the [backstreets](#). Here we find [at the time of publication] copious amounts of politically charged graffiti reflecting the current social and political tensions that the Island of Lesbos, and Greece as a whole, is facing.

Once we arrive on the northern waterfront of Mytilini, straight across the main road stands the [Asia Minor Mother](#). This memorial relates to the Asia Minor Catastrophe (1919-1922), a time of forced immigration of many ethnically Greek families from the mainland of Asia Minor into Lesbos and the rest of Greece. It represents the social struggle and difficult repercussions of this mass social change. In this leg of the journey there are particular [sites of interest](#) pointed out en route and the option to visit the Castle of Mytilini (a great place to have a picnic if you decide to pack one!).

We next walk on to [The Statue of Liberty](#) which is a remembrance memorial to the Island's heroes and victims during the Balkan, First World War, and Second World War. We reflect on Lesbos' participation in these wars. The Statue of Liberty is also a vantage point, where we can see some hotspots of 2015-16 created by the current refugee crisis. Lesbos' Lady Liberty is where we technically end our tour, but if you were to follow the map through the port it leads you back to the start, at Sappho Square, where you can rest your legs at one of the bars or restaurants perhaps.

The map below highlights the route, starting at the point on the map labelled 'Archipellogos' - which is the road where Sappho Square sits, then to 'Navmachias Ellis', before finally ending at 'Agalma Tis Eleftherias' - Greek for Statue of Liberty. The path then continues on the map to take you back to Sappho Square.



Sappho Square

We start off the walk in Sappho square surrounded by cafes and the beautiful south waterfront. You should see the statue of Sappho with her trademark harp in the centre. Sappho square is a social hub. It is the most bustling part of Mytilini, especially at night with all its surrounding recreational activities. But it also is a focal point for political activism.



Sappho Square, a site of occasional activism

The square has been used increasingly, particularly from 2010-2016, as a protest space since Greece has been facing major crises, stemming from its own financial indebtedness, and the huge influx of refugees from the unrest and civil wars in the Middle East. (See [BDFM, 2016](#)).

So the space here is political in today's society. But Sappho herself has political importance too from ancient times all the way through to present day.

Sappho (Σαπφώ) (in Attic Greek or *Psappho* (Ψάπφώ) in Aeolic Greek) is an ancient Greek poetess, famous for her (homo)erotic, ecstasy based and truly emotive poetry about love, family and the Gods. More to the point she is famous for being one of the first outspoken and independent women in the western world; essentially creating the type of western love poetry we all recognise today (MacInnes et al, 2015). She has a complicated biography with a mixture of truth, contradiction and myth factoring into it (Barnstone, 2009). There is little known about her, but what is known is highly fascinating and her legacy even more so.



Sappho Mural (seen on the approach to Sappho sq. from the west; by the taxi rank)

She was born on the island of Lesbos approx. 630 B.C., most likely in Eressos, but lived most of her life in the capital Mytilini. Plato called her the ‘tenth Muse’. Her poetry was well adored during her own lifetime, with it managing to travel across the rest of Greece including Athens (also to parts of Italy) (MacInnes et al, 2015). This was quite a feat at the time, rather like a music artist “going platinum” in today’s world. Her lyrics were most likely written down by her although only later transcriptions of her work have been found (*ibid.*). Her poetry was most likely performed orally in some way, probably in song form. Evidence from her poetry shows she had an entourage of female followers who may possibly have been her lovers (*ibid.*).



Satue of Sappho in the Square

When she was a young woman, around 600 B.C., there was a lot of political disturbance in Mytilini with lots of factional fighting between aristocratic families over power. There is an understanding Sappho and her entourage played a role in these family politics, ultimately leading to Sappho's period of exile to Sicily (*ibid*; Barnstone, 2009). Her poem *Mikais* about one of her followers switching political sides away from Sappho. From this activity we understand her family to be aristocratic with a clear stake in Mytilini (Barnstone, 2009). This drama during her life time is but one political dimension of Sappho's existence.

Her other political dimension relates to her promotion of female homosexuality both during her lifetime, but more so through her long-lasting legacy inspiring the words "lesbian" and "sapphic" to mean homosexual women or inter-woman love (Harper, 2001). With her aristocratic position and talent she contributed to making female homosexuality overt, equating it to male homosexuality, within ancient Greek society; previously it was only conducted behind closed doors (MacInnes et al, 2015). Her legacy, long into after her death, is where most of her political plight and activist effect lie.

Until the turn of the 20th Century, Sappho's work and poetry throughout the ages was subjected to arson and cover ups by church minded people who wanted to deny the fact she had gay romances (Barnstone, 2009). For example, in 380 A.D. clergymen in Rome and Constantinople, including the Pope, conducted public burnings of Sappho's poems because it was too 'whorish'. Works that

were burnt included those found during the destruction of Alexandria Library by Christian Zealots (*ibid.*). Such destruction has meant there is no one complete collection of her poems to survive past the medieval period. Only a few snippets and one-off poems remain. In addition, up until recently and particularly during Victorian times, Sappho has only been allowed to be thought in a headmistress role to a group of ladies or as a sisterly cult leader. While there is evidence suggesting she tutored other women, her female entourage, as we have mentioned, were more likely her lovers and supporters first and foremost.

‘NO OBLIVION’ by Sappho –

“Someone, I tell you, in another time,
will remember us.”

Today Sappho’s erotic side, the beauty and honesty of her poetry, is much more celebrated. Most lesbian communities, who are still a minority within society, see her as their heroine (MacInnes et al, 2015). Now each year in Eressos, there is a LGBT pride festival dedicated to Sappho (click [here](#) for more info). Overall she is a figure whose legacy is emblematic of the historical and current struggles for lesbian women. She is a true lesbian icon, a source of inspiration for many and her poetry is still prestigious today.

If you have a spare hour, you may enjoy this BBC4 Documentary on [Sappho: love and life on Lesbos](#).

The Backstreets of Mytilini

Upon travelling north towards Asia Minor Mother, the backstreets of Mytilini are riddled with wonderful shops (open before 1pm, closed till 5pm each day before reopening in the evening), cafes and a couple of religious cultural sites namely St. George church (1792) and Yeni Camii mosque (1825) (DETAM et al, date unknown). What is hard to ignore is all the graffiti.

Political Graffiti

Graffiti texts are usually an expressive social movement tool used to respond to some form of social, political or economic turbulence from below (Downing, 2011). Usually laden with feelings of discontent, outcry or sarcasm, graffiti texts often are used to advocate solidarity or inspire reflection among the public (*ibid.*).

Graffiti has long played a key role in Greece, capturing political tensions throughout the 20th and now 21st century. During both periods of the WWII and the Axis rule (1941-1944) and the Military junta (1967-1974), graffiti was an effective tool in the resistance to the oppressive powers (Downing, 2011). It also later played a role in the victorious legalisation of the communist party, symbolising the return of full democracy to Greece (*ibid.*). Graffiti recently has emerged as a commentary on the public discontent in the wake of the financial crisis of 2008 (*ibid.*). Graffiti of this content has been seen particularly in Athens (click [here](#) for more). This artistic outcry is alongside other publicly displayed self-institutionalised political challenges to authority like riots (Kallianos, 2013).

Kallianos (2013) –

“...the public space of the streets has never been more connected with radical politics.”

Athens has the largest graffiti scene in Greece, however it is very much present across the country, from large cities like Thessaloniki to small islands like Lesvos. Indeed, especially in present day Lesvos (2015-2016), where the coincidence of the refugee crisis and the rise of the far-right, neo-fascist, political party Golden Dawn locally, has sparked a graffiti frenzy (Stearns, 2015).





Above are just a few graffiti texts you should try and look out for along our path through the backstreets of Mytilini. The statements “No Border No Nation” and “Fear is a Prison” are purposefully provocative statements intended to change xenophobic mindsets in a time when solidarity is needed yet fascism is creeping in. “Refugees Welcome”, “Fuck The Patriots” (‘patriots’ being the far-right nationalists) and “Nazis Aren’t Cool” are more literal approaches to the same end. The anarchist symbol pops up everywhere in Mytilini, and classically symbolises Anarchism – a belief in a stateless society and an opposition to authority and hierarchy tied to a certain form of governance (Suissa, 2006). The anarchist symbol graffiti stems from the ongoing discontent many have with the entire political system which they believe is causing inequality, and lies at the root of Greece’s financial crisis.

Street Art

In addition to political graffiti, there is non-political graffiti artwork along our path too. The forms we see in Mytilini are purely creative expressions for a public audience rather than to present socially relevant content. A couple to look out for on the walk are pictured below.



[All the graffiti presented here as part of the walk was there at the time of publication]

Asia Minor Mother

Arriving at Mytilini's northern waterfront, Epano (or Apano) Skala, you should cross the road and see a statue opposite where we just came from. The Statue is called "Asia Minor Mother" or "Mikrasiatisa Mana". It represents a typical refugee family who were forced to move to Greece, particularly the Aegean Islands, as a result of the "Asia Minor Catastrophe" (The European Heritage Project, 2010).



Asia Minor Mother Statue, Mytilini

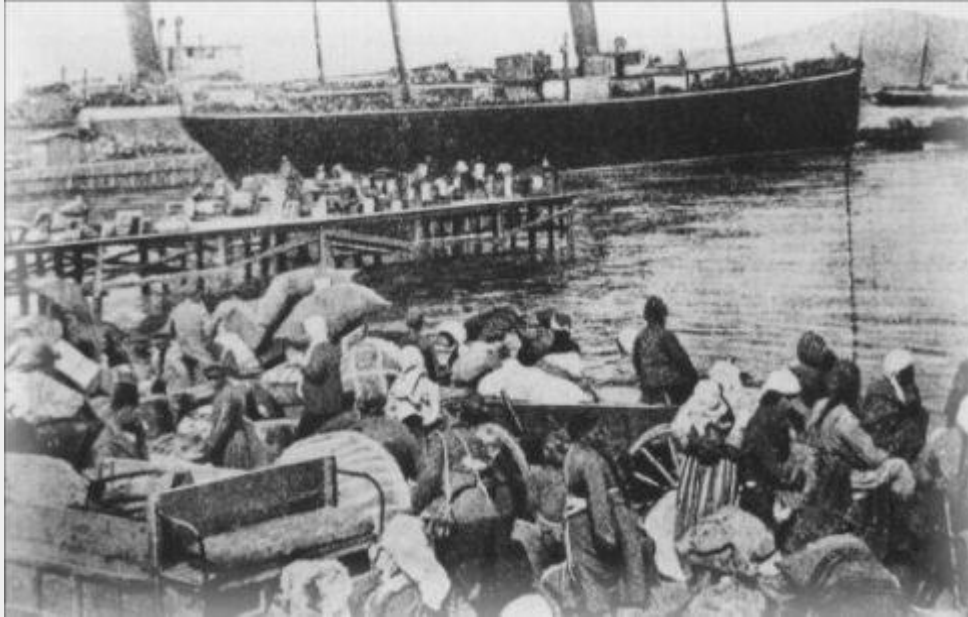
The Asia Minor Catastrophe refers to the Greek-Turkish war of 1919-1922. The war was fought over the Greek invasion of the cities of Smyrna (modern Izmir) and Adrianoupolis (Edrine) for territorial gain on what is now the Turkish mainland (*ibid.*). The invasion was supported by the Allied powers, notably Great Britain. However, the Greeks were defeated by Turkish counter attacks, and as a result lost a lot of the territory gained during the First World War. In 1923 the Greeks were forced to engage in population exchange with Turkey (Barrett, 2016a), and many ethnically Greek communities were forced to move out of Asia Minor and re-settle in Greece. Many of these families had been imprisoned, mistreated or even subjected to genocidal events before their forced expulsion to the nearest Greek settlements including here in Mytilini, Lesbos (The European Heritage Project, 2010).



Apano Skala, neighbourhood settled in by Greek Refugees

Our Asia Minor Mother and Children here typify the common, penniless, refugee family who would reach the shores of Lesbos with a sense of a new beginning in a new country. Unfortunately, many of these families had to live in squalor on the island, or move on, since the mass immigration in the 1920s worsened the already poor conditions of Lesbos – a hangover from previous wars – with the island already lacking the necessary housing (*ibid.*). Those immigrants that stayed in Mytilini settled in the area of Apano Skala in 1922 the coastal area to the West of the statue (Barrett, 2016b).

Overall, this event dramatically changed society, with a huge increase in population numbers not just in Lesbos but across the whole of Greece. By 1928, a Greek census was published by the Educational Institute of Greece, showing that 4.6% of the Northern Aegean Island's population was refugee, with around 56,613 migrants settling there (Revolvy, 2015). It also is a major reason why there is still much political tension between Greece and Turkey.



Greek Refugees Fleeing from Smyrna 1922 (Source: greece.org, 2003)



Refugees fleeing from Syria, landing in Mytilini, 2015 (Source: NEOnline, 2016)

This large-scale humanitarian crisis has many similarities with today's European refugee crisis facing the island. The history of immigration in Lesbos is one of the reasons why the local response to the current crisis, on the whole, has been so peaceful, organised and welcoming. Some of the local population remember what being a refugee was like ([click here](#) for more). In fact in the summer of 2015, the Asia Minor Mother's square and beach was occupied by the refugees coming in off the Aegean – a rather poignant happenstance.

Nowadays here on the northern waterfront there are accessible beaches, a couple of children's playgrounds and a few restaurants that serve very nice fish and seafood.

Sites of Interest En Route

During this next leg of the walk (between Asia Minor Mother and The Statue of Liberty), there are a couple of sites that are worth visiting. These are The Commercial Stoa of the Hellenistic Period (a.k.a. ancient Agora archaeological site) just opposite Asia Minor Mother; and The Castle of Mytilini, halfway through the leg. Although they do not strictly adhere to our themes of political disturbance and social change, they are attractive and have interesting histories.

The Commercial Stoa

In 1929, while constructing a refugee market in the aftermath of the Asia Minor Catastrophe (discussed in [Asia Minor Mother](#)), the remains of a two-story ancient stoa – a walkway for public use – was discovered, and preserved until the 2000 when even more of the stoa was excavated (Kourtzellis, 2013; DETAM et al, date unknown).



The Commercial Stoa of the Hellenic Period

Currently the site is 87 m x 16 m (Kourtzellis, 2013). The stoa was constructed around 3rd C. – 4th C. BC, but other excavated stoa sites locally and its position on the coast indicate the site was an Agora (marketplace) (*ibid.*; Ministry of Culture and Sports Ephorate of Antiquities of Lesvos, 2013). Made out of pinkish volcanic rock, limestone and with a marble facade, the plan of the site shows the Stylobate (top entry step), many adjoining room areas and indicates the area was once under a roof implying a colonnade arcade-like set-up (*ibid.*). Being on the coast close to where boats would harbour up, the arcade would have sold mercantile goods, supplying the whole of ancient Mytilini (Kourtzellis, 2013).

Once finished here please refer back to the map to go up towards the Castle of Mytilini.

Castle of Mytilini (or Fortress of Mytilini)

Mytilini's 60,000 m² castle lies between the sea and small pine forest, and is one of the largest castles in the Mediterranean (Papathanassiou, 2012). It was originally built on the remnants of Mytilini's ancient Acropolis, during the Byzantine years when Justinian I ruled, constituting the first, top, area of the fortification (DETAM et al, date unknown). However most of the castle, particularly the extension into the second section of the castle, was constructed during the Gattelouzi period in 1373 when the Genoese pirate Francesco Gattilusio was made Archon (Lord) of Lesbos by a Byzantine Emperor, and lived in Mytilini with his family (lesvosgreece.gr, 2016; DETAM et al, date unknown).



Mytilini Castle

The Ottoman Turks took over the castle in 1462, and made some big alterations and additions to the castle, including the construction of the whole third, bottom, section of the fort (Papathanassiou, 2012). This was only completed in 1677. It included the erection of watch towers, a mosque/communion area, and prisons (DETAM et al, date unknown).

There is a lot of area to explore here with some beautiful views to take in too. You do have to pay €2, but you may consider taking half an hour out to take it all in and it is a nice spot for a picnic.

The Statue of Liberty

To reach The Statue of Liberty from Mytilini Castle you can either follow the map's route which will lead you down the main road, or you can take a more scenic route and follow an alternate path through the pine forest. This path can be found on your left as you travel down from the castle back toward the road where you came in from. If you decide to take the pine path then when you reach the end of the woodland pathway, take a right and follow the road till you see The Statue of Liberty by the ferry port.

The Statue of Liberty



The Statue of Liberty

The Statue of Liberty is primarily a memorial of Lesvos' struggle for independence and final liberation from Ottoman rule in 1912 (Bacas, 2005). However, it also commemorates the losses of many Christian Ottoman Greeks relating to the First World War and Greco-Turkish war periods (1917-1922), including the aftermath of the [Asia Minor Catastrophe](#) (*ibid.*). During WWI, in 1914, the Ottoman government initiated a Greek genocide, with Turkey ethnically cleansing its population of Christian Ottoman Greeks. This continued through the period of the Greco-Turkish War (Jones, 2011). This is considered a crucial factor for Greece's (late) entry into the First World War in 1917 (*ibid.*). Therefore Mytilini's Lady Liberty commemorates all the victims who fell

during, and in the aftermath of, Greek independence, as signified by the original inscription regarding the time period of 1912-1922 seen in the picture below on the left.



The memorial was unveiled in 1930, one hundred years after the beginning of an earlier Greek revolution against the Ottomans (Bacas, 2005). Annually on March 25th, the anniversary of this Greek revolution, local authorities lay wreaths at the statue as an act of remembrance for all the lives lost to gain and maintain independence for people (DETAM et al, date unknown). This includes remembering the fallen of the Second World War, when the Italian army followed by the German Nazi forces occupied Lesvos, killing many citizens between 1940-1944 (The European

Heritage Project, 2010). This is commemorated by the later addition of a names plaque to the statue as the picture on the right above shows.

The Statue of Liberty lies on a spot where until 1922 stood a rampart or a bastion as part of the [Castle](#) (DETAM et al, date unknown). Standing at 15 m high, the monument consists of the bronze statue herself on top of a marble base. The statue was a donation from the island's expatriate population at the time (1920's). It was designed by Lesvian artist Georgios Lakovides and inspired by New York's Statue of Liberty (*ibid.*). It was sculpted by Gregorios Zevgolis and cast in Germany. It was then sent over to Mytilini via motor boat (Bacas, 2005).



The Statue of Liberty on marble plinth, looking out across the Aegean

The monument is meant to symbolise freedom (Bacas, 2005). Its physical setting, next to the beach of Tsamakia, as well as its positioning – facing out to sea and gesturing with the outstretched arm holding the torch emphasises two symbolic meanings (*ibid.*). The statue can be interpreted as firstly a positive peaceful statement welcoming people and the prospect of a harmonious future. At the same time, another interpretation is as a solemn acknowledgement of loss; the Greek lives lost in battles, war, persecution and, from a more metaphorical perspective, the loss of the many formerly Greek villages of Asia Minor as she stares longingly toward them across the Aegean Sea.

Refugee Crisis Hot Spots

Recently the Statue of Liberty also looks over one of the biggest political challenges facing Europe. From the statue's raised platform, there are a couple of places that can be seen which were particularly important sites of the refugee crisis in 2015-16. One was a refugee camp called "No

Border Kitchen Camp” set up on Tsamakia Beach (usually a touristic hotspot) by a group of activists to temporarily house and look after the migrants after the first part of their treacherous journey from war-torn Middle-East (see more [here](#)). The site can be seen to the left of the Statue if you are facing the sea.



“No Border Kitchen Camp” looking much quieter than in Summer 2015 (Spring 2016)

The other is Mytilini Port seen to the right of the statue if facing the sea. It played a crucial role in the refugees’ passage into Europe since ferries from here would take the migrants to Athens. Migrants would often walk from as far as Molyvos, where they would come in from in the north of Lesbos, for three days to catch a ferry from Mytilini Port.



Ferry carrying refugee passengers to Athens from Mytilini just prior to EU-Turkey agreement (Spring 2016)

Both these sites would have been busiest in the summer of 2015 before the weather turned sour in Winter, making it harder to cross, and before the EU deal with Turkey came in, closing off the opportunity to come into Europe without having claimed asylum first (See more [here](#)). For now (since April 2016) those who do cross to Lesbos will be catching boats back to Turkey, instead of Athens, from Mytilini.

This event brings us to the social and political turbulence Lesbos is facing today. In light of this modern-day catastrophe, one positive has come through. The Greek Islanders and volunteers, particularly on Lesbos who are at the European front line of the migrant crisis, have been nominated for the Nobel Peace Prize (See more [here](#)). Most of Lesbos' people have been incredibly selfless, pro-active and understanding toward the whole situation; welcoming and helping the refugees who reach their shores. Perhaps, as our historic walk has illuminated, this is partially because past events on Lesbos have shaped a positive perspective toward migrants. As we know, a few even remember what it was like to be the migrants (see [Asia Minor Mother](#)).

What is for sure is that Mytilini and Lesbos as a whole has a fascinating socio-political profile. From Ancient Greece to present day, Lesbos has been the centre of much political disruption and activism and also subjected to huge social change.

This completes our tour!

We hope you enjoyed it and you learnt a lot. Though the tour does end here, the map's path continues. It will take you back to Sappho Square via the port and southern waterfront of Mytilini. Here you can reflect and finally rest your feet at one of the many restaurants, cafes or bars. Thank you for joining us!



Sappho Square's Eateries