

From: Agade
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RACE TO PRESERVE RARE MOSAIC OF ANCIENT GREEK SYNAGOGUE

A special exhibition of the 4th Century CE mosaic was opened last week on Aegina Island
BY ILANIT CHERNICK

Hidden for hundreds of years on the island of Aegina an hour ferry ride from Athens, a mosaic floor from a destroyed synagogue attests to Jewish life in the Aegean Sea in the fourth century CE.

Last week, a temporary exhibition about the mosaic opened at the Archaeological Museum of Aegina as part of an EcoWeek program under the auspices of the Aegina Municipality and the Culture and Sport Ministry's Ephorate of Antiquities of West Attica, Piraeus and Islands. EcoWeek is an international NGO which raises awareness about environmental issues and climate change, and promotes social and environmental sustainability.

Among the dignitaries were Aegina deputy mayor Nikos Economou, representative of the Central Board for Jewish Communities of Greece Daniel Benardout, and Athens Chief Rabbi Gabriel Negrin.

In a press release, EcoWeek described the geometric mosaic floor as "the most rare and significant finding of Jewish archaeology discovered in Aegina Island in the 19th century. The mosaic is at a dangerous state of damage and neglect and requires urgent preservation and protection."

Aegina, a naval power in the classical world, was home to a community of Romaniote Jews. Living in Greece for many centuries before Sephardi and Ashkenazi arrived, they spoke Judaeo-Greek, a Greek dialect incorporating Hebrew, Aramaic and Turkish words.

"The Jewish community, which was involved in purple-dyeing and tanning, was prosperous enough to establish a synagogue in 300-350 CE with a richly decorated mosaic floor with two inscriptions in Greek," according to EcoWeek. "According to the inscriptions, Theodoros Archysynagogos built the synagogue from donations."

The synagogue remained in use until the seventh century, when the Jewish community fled inland with the rest of the population because of raids from the sea.

“According to published sources, an inscription belonging to a medieval synagogue, was also found in Paleochora – the town where the island population settled,” according to EcoWeek.

The mosaic was discovered by the German archaeologist Ludwig Ross in 1829. In 1928, archaeologist Eleazar Sukenik traveled to Aegina from Mandate Palestine to study the mosaic. Four years later, American archaeologist Belle Mazur, together with Franz Gabriel Welter of the German Archaeological Institute of Athens, “continued the excavation and discovered the apse on the east wall, where according to tradition, the Torah scrolls were kept during service, as well as the place where the elders sat.”

The mosaic was removed from its original location during the 1960s because of construction in the area.

“Today, 60 years later, the mosaic has been damaged due to its proximity to the sea and its exposure to environmental conditions,” EcoWeek said. “Its preservation and protection are urgently needed.”

In a bid to protect and preserve it, architect Dr. Elias Messinas, who curated the exhibition, together with Yvette Nahmia-Messinas, have embarked on a two-year program under the guidance of the Culture and Sports Ministry to repair the damage. The restoration is scheduled to be completed in 2020.

Messinas and Nahmia-Messinas have been raising awareness about the Aegina mosaic preservation project through social media.

At the event last week, Messinas, who has published two books on the history and architecture of Greek synagogues, spoke about the mosaic “and its importance in the context of other Greek synagogues and their preservation.”

The architect, who recently oversaw the renovation of the two synagogues in Thessaloniki, explained “the mosaic of Aegina spans more than two millennia of Greek Jewish history, from ancient times to the present. It is fascinating how much history is hidden behind this mosaic.”

The exhibit will continue until August 24.