

1,500-Year-Old Colorful Mosaic Floor with Inscription Uncovered in Ashdod

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Photo Credit: Anat Rasiuk, Israel Antiquities Authority



Tracing the mosaic's writing.

An impressive 1,500-year-old church, with an inscription in Greek mentioning a date according to the Georgian calendar, was uncovered in archaeological excavations in Ashdod in August. According to archaeologists, the floor was part of a Georgian church or monastery.

This is the third season of excavation at the ancient hill of Ashdod-Yam, under the direction of Dr. Alexander Fantalkin of Tel Aviv University's Archaeology and Ancient Near Eastern Civilizations Department, in cooperation with Prof. Angelika Berlejung of Leipzig University.



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An exposed part of the colorful mosaic. / Photo credit: Anat Rasiuk, Israel Antiquities Authority

The colored mosaic came to light during expansion of the excavation at the Ashdod-Yam antiquities site, in a cooperative project with the participation of Dr. Fantalkin, Dr. Balbina Bäbler of the University of Göttingen, and Sa'ar Ganor, Israel Antiquities Authority Ashkelon district archaeologist.

The ancient city of Ashdod-Yam, on the coast of what is now the southern part of the of Ashdod, was one of the most important cities on the coast of the Land of Israel in Byzantine period. The city, known in sources of the period as Azotus Paralios, covered large area, and the renowned Madaba Map shows it with public buildings, including churches and a street flanked by colonnades. Beginning in the last excavation season ancient Ashdod-Yam, hidden under the sand dunes, began to bring forth real surprise which are shedding light on the city's long-ago inhabitants.

The dig uncovered a remarkable mosaic, with a four-line commemoration inscription in Greek dedicated to the structure's builders. The inscription mentions Bishop Procopius whose day the church was built, and the year of its construction, apparently according to the Georgian calendar:

"[By the grace of God (or the Anointed)], this work was done from the foundation under Procopius, our most saintly and most holy bishop, in the month Dios of the 3rd indiction, year 292"

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According to Dr. Leah Di Segni of the Hebrew University of Jerusalem, who deciphered the inscription, the date according to the Georgian calendar corresponds to the year 539 CE. "This is the earliest appearance of the use of the Georgian calendar in the Land of Israel, many years before it was used in Georgia itself," Dr. Di Segni said.



Working on the mosaic. / Photo credit: Anat Rasiuk, Israel Antiquities Authority

Dr. Fantalkin, Dr. Bäbler and Ganor said: "As far as we know, Ashdod is now home to the largest community of Jews of Georgian origin in the world. Testimony to the presence of the actual Georgians in the Land of Israel as far back as the Byzantine period has been found dozens of kilometers from Ashdod – in Jerusalem and its surroundings. But this is the first time that a Georgian church or monastery has been discovered on the Israeli coast."

The archaeologists said that according to historical sources, the famous Georgian prince and bishop Peter the Iberian lived in Ashdod-Yam before his death. "And now it seems that we have uncovered actual evidence of his influence on the Byzantine city of Ashdod-Yam," they added. "This public structure, which has only now begun to come to light, is part of an extensive archaeological complex in the southern part of modern Ashdod. We are now hard at work to raise additional funds to continue the archaeological excavation of Ashdod-Yam," the excavators said.

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