

ΑΡΧΙΕΡΑΤΙΚΗ ΘΕΙΑ ΛΕΙΤΟΥΡΓΙΑ ΕΙΣ ΤΑ ΕΡΕΙΠΙΑ ΒΥΖΑΝΤΙΝΟΥ Ι. ΝΑΟΥ ΤΟΥ 5ΟΥ ΑΙΩΝΟΣ ΕΙΣ ΤΗΝ ΠΟΛΙΝ ASHDOD ΤΟΥ ΙΣΡΑΗΛ

Περί τό 1981 εἰς μίαν συνοικίαν τῆς νοτίου Ἀζώτου, σημερινῆς Asdod, κατά τήν ἔναρξιν ἐργασιῶν οἰκοδομῆς νέας οἰκίας, τό σκαπτικόν μηχανήμα εὔρε ἔχνη ψηφιδωτοῦ παλαιοῦ Βυζαντινοῦ Ἱεροῦ Ναοῦ, μέ ἀποτέλεσμα νά ἐπεμβῇ ἡ Ἀρχαιολογική Ὑπηρεσία τοῦ Ἰσραήλ καί νά ἀπαγορεύσῃ τήν συνέχειαν τῶν ἐργασιῶν.

Ἐκτοτε, τό συγκεκριμένον οἰκόπεδον παρέμενεν χέρσον καί περιῆλθεν εἰς τήν ἰδιοκτησίαν τοῦ δημοσίου. Τό 2009, ἡ Ἀρχαιολογική Ὑπηρεσία ἀνέθεσε τήν εὐθύνην τῶν ἀνασκαφῶν εἰς τό συγκεκριμένον οἰκόπεδον εἰς τόν ἀρχαιολόγον δρ. Ἀλέξανδρον Φαντάλκιν, Λέκτορα τοῦ Πανεπιστημίου τοῦ Τέλ Ἀβίβ, μέ εἰδικότητα εἰς τήν Ἀρχαίαν Ἑλλάδα τοῦ 8ου αἰῶνος π.Χ. Αἱ ἀνασκαφαί διεκόπησαν, διά νά συνεχισθοῦν ἔφετος.

Εἰς τās ἀνασκαφάς ἀνεκαλύφθη κτιριακόν συγκρότημα μέ κεντρικόν Ναόν καί παρεκκλήσια μοναδικῆς πνευματικῆς καί ἱστορικῆς ἀξίας με ψηφιδωτά, ἐπιγραφάς καί σταυρούς. Ὑπάρχει μία πιθανότης ὁ ναός νά ἦτο Γυναικεῖον Ἡσυχαστήριον τάγματος γυναικῶν παρθένων διακονισσῶν.

Τήν πρωίαν τῆς Πέμπτης, 16^{ης}/29^{ης} Ἰουλίου 2021, ἐτελέσθη ὑπαίθριος Θεία Λειτουργία ἐπὶ τῶν ἐρείπιων τοῦ ἀρχαίου τούτου Ἱεροῦ Ναοῦ, προεξάρχοντος τοῦ Σεβασμιωτάτου Ἀρχιεπισκόπου Γεράσων κ. Θεοφάνους, τῇ συμμετοχῇ τῶν πανοσιολογιωτάτων Ἀρχιμανδριτῶν, π.π. Ἰγνατίου ἡγουμένου τοῦ Χωρίου τῶν Ποιμένων καί τῆς Μπετζάλλας, π. Κωνσταντίνου ἡγουμένου Ἱερᾶς Μονῆς Χοτζεβᾶ, π. Ἀρτεμίου ἡγουμένου Χάϊφας, π. Λεοντίου ἡγουμένου Ραφιδίων Σαμαρείας, π. Μαρκέλλου ἡγουμένου Ἀγίου Γεωργίου Λύδδης καί π. Ἀλεξάνδρου Γιασέβιτς, ἐφημερίου Ρωσοφῶνων Μπέρ – Σέβας, παρόντων τοῦ Σεβασμιωτάτου Ἀρχιεπισκόπου Ἱεραπόλεως κ. Ἰσιδώρου, τοῦ Ἀρχιμανδρίτου π. Εἰρηνάρχου ἡγουμένου τῆς Καπερναοῦμ καί τοῦ Ἀρχιμανδρίτου π. Χρυσοστόμου ἡγουμένου τῆς Κανᾶ.

Μετά τό πέρας τῆς Θείας Λειτουργίας, ὁ Μακαριώτατος Πατήρ ἡμῶν καί Πατριάρχης Ἱεροσολύμων κ.κ. Θεόφιλος, τῇ συμμετοχῇ τῶν Πατέρων ἐτέλεσε Τρισάγιον ὑπέρ ἀναπαύσεως τῶν ψυχῶν τῶν πρό αἰώνων κεκοιμημένων Πατέρων, τά ὀνόματα τῶν ὁποίων μνημονεύονται εἰς τās διαφόρους ἐπιγραφάς τοῦ μωσαϊκοῦ δαπέδου ὡς π.χ.: *Ἡρακλείου Ἐπισκόπου, Προκοπίου Ἐπισκόπου, Κάρου Ἐπισκόπου, Γαΐανου Πρεσβυτέρου, Στεφάνου Πρεσβυτέρου, Μαξίμου Διακόνου, Σωφρονίας ἡ Εὐφροσύνης μητρός, Σεβήρας Διακονίσσης, Θεοδοσίας Διακονίσσης, Γρηγορίας Διακονίσσης.*

Ἀνεσκάφη καί τάφος μέ ὁστά μικρῶν παιδίων – μᾶλλον λειψάνων, καθ' ὅτι ἡ κεφαλή ἑνός τούτων διεπερᾶτο διά λόγχης ἀπό στόματος ἔως κρανίου, ὅπερ σημεῖον μαρτυρίου.

Κατόπιν, τῇ παρουσίᾳ τῶν Τοπικῶν Ἀρχῶν, ἦτοι τοῦ Ἀντιδημάρχου τῆς πόλεως Ἀσντόντ, τῆς Ἀρχαιολογικῆς Ὑπηρεσίας τοῦ Πανεπιστημίου τοῦ Τελ -Ἀβίβ, ὁ Μακαριώτατος ἐξεναγῆθη ὑπό τοῦ Διευθυντοῦ τῶν ἀνασκαφῶν καθηγητοῦ δρ.

Ἀλεξάνδρου Φαντάλκιν εἰς τόν χῶρον τῶν ἀνασκαφῶν καί προσεφώνησε διά τῆς κάτωθι προσφωνήσεως Αὐτοῦ, ὑπογραμμίζων τήν σημασίαν τῶν ἀνακαλυφθεισῶν εὐρημάτων ὡς συνδέσμου Παλαιᾶς καί Καινῆς Διαθήκης καί ὡς τόπου συναντήσεως ἐρευνητῶν, προσκυνητῶν καί περιηγητῶν, ἐμπνευομένων εἰς μίαν ζώην δημιουργίας, εἰρήνης καί πολιτισμοῦ:

“MR. MAYOR,

Dr Fantalkin,

Ladies and Gentlemen,

It is a great pleasure for us to be here today at this significant site. This church, established by Bishop Procopios in the 6th century, is important evidence of the fact that Ashdod, known then as Azotos, was among the principal cities on the coast during the Byzantine period.

Ashdod has a long and noteworthy history, and we read about it in both the Old and the New Testaments. According to the Book of Joshua, it was given to the Tribe of Judah as their home (Joshua 15:46), and in the Acts of the Apostles, we read that Saint Philip found himself hereafter baptizing the officer of the court of the Ethiopian queen (Acts 8:40).

These are only two examples from its long history. But they speak to the fact that the Bible is a record of our shared sacred history. And the discovery of this Byzantine church, which is for us Christians a significant holy site, is a testimony to the witness that the Patriarchate of Jerusalem has given down the centuries to our sacred history. As the oldest religious institution in the region, the Patriarchate has embodied this sacred history and given it legitimacy.

We appreciate very much that the State of Israel and the Antiquities Authority are sensitive to the diverse civilizations that have existed in this region. This has always been a multi-cultural, multi-ethnic, and multi-religious landscape where different peoples have flourished down the ages. And we wish to recognise the hard work and commitment of Dr Fantalkin and the Faculty of Humanities of Tel Aviv University, to which the Department of Archaeology belongs, since the discovery of this site in 2017. They have borne the major burden of the work of this excavation and brought to light this invaluable heritage.

This site is both a holy site as well as a site of supreme historical and academic value. There is an existence of the Christian presence here even before this Church. We know that one of the bishops of this region, Bishop Silouanos, attended the First Ecumenical Council in Nicaea in the year 325. There are inscriptions at this church mentioning the name of Bishop Hierakleios, who participated in both the Third Ecumenical Council of Ephesus in 431 and the Fourth Ecumenical Council at Chalcedon in 451.

But we have here a site that, like Madaba and Megiddo, has the power to draw not only scholars but also tourists and pilgrims in large numbers. We have a treasure here that we must preserve and make accessible to the many hundreds

of thousands of pilgrims who come to the Holy Land every year. As a site of such significant scientific and religious consequence, this site is of immense value to the City of Ashdod, and it is part of the common heritage of all humanity in the Holy Land.

At this site, many tombs have been discovered, including the graves of several women who bore the title *deaconess*. This confirms for us the existence of this office in the early Church. In addition to this, tombs of holy martyrs have been uncovered, which is proof that this place served as a liturgical gathering place before the 4th century. This is evidence that this place was a place of worship during the time of persecution. According to the writings of Saint John Chrysostom, the tombs of the martyrs were used as the altars where the divine Eucharist was celebrated. This discovery alone will draw the presence of pilgrims, both from the East and the West, who will want to venerate this holy site and who hold the martyrs from the age of persecution in high honour.

We thank you, MR. MAYOR, for your care and concern for the preservation of this site that is a witness to our shared sacred history in this region. And we congratulate you, Dr Fantalkin, on your remarkable achievement in bringing this site to the attention of the world community. The conservation and development of this site by the local authorities would strengthen the existing good relations between the State of Israel and the Patriarchate of Jerusalem, and, by extension, with the Christian world in general and with the Orthodox world in particular, such as the nations of Greece, Cyprus, Russia, Rumania, Bulgaria, Serbia, Georgia and others.

In the preservation of this site, today's residents of Ashdod will take pride in the further evidence of the historical and spiritual significance of their beloved city, and if we pay special attention to those who have preceded us and left an indelible stamp of their presence, we would expect future generations to preserve the evidence of our own lives and witness here. As we read in the Book of Psalms:

Then we your people, the flock of your pasture,

will give thanks to you forever;

from generation to generation, we will recount your praise.

(Ps 78 [79]: 13)

It is our fervent hope and desire that this site be preserved intact, and ultimately be made accessible both to scholars and to pilgrims, like all other holy places in our region. This would be a living testimony of the history of this ancient city, and would promote peaceful coexistence, tolerance, and mutual respect. This would be a tangible symbol of the words we read in the Bible, that we are to pursue *righteousness, godliness, faith, love, endurance, and gentleness* (1 Tim. 6:11).

This is the mission of the Patriarchate, and we pledge ourselves to support and assist in this work. MAY this place be a source of both knowledge and

spiritual refreshment for generations to come.

Thank you”.

Εἰς τό σημαντικόν γεγονός τοῦτο ἐπεστάτησεν ὁ Ὑπεύθυνος τοῦ Ρωσοφώνου ποιμνίου τοῦ Πατριαρχείου Σεβασμιώτατος Ἀρχιεπίσκοπος Μαδάβων κ. Ἀριστόβουλος, ὁ ὁποῖος καί εἰς τό τέλος προσέφερεν εἰς τήν Πατριαρχικήν συνοδείαν καί ὅλους τούς συμμετέχοντας τό κόλλυβον ποτήριον ψυχροῦ ὕδατος καί ὀπώρας.

Ἐκ τῆς Ἀρχιγραμματείας