

ANNUAL REPORT: CONSERVATION AND RESTORATION OF ROMAN AND LATE ROMAN MOSAICS – R. OF N. MACEDONIA 2019 FIELD SCHOOL

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The Workshop on Conservation and Restoration of Roman and Late Roman Mosaics – R. of N. Macedonia 2019 took place at the archaeological site of Stobi – a Roman and Early Byzantine city, the capital of the Roman province Macedonia Secunda from June 1st –21st 2019 (three weeks, 15 working days). This educational initiative has been started as a collaboration project between Balkan Heritage Foundation (BHF) and National Institution Stobi (NI Stobi) in 2011. It became part of the BHF – IFR program for the Balkans in 2018.

The main goal of the program is to provide theoretical and hands-on training experience in mosaics conservation. It also aims to raise awareness of the processes a mosaic floor endures after excavation and the consequences of conservation treatment and maintenance (or the lack of these). The course's emphasis is on Roman and Late Roman mosaics, found in abundance at the Roman city of Stobi, R. of N. Macedonia. They present suitable playground for this initiative, due the fact that Stobi has about 1560 square meters of in situ preserved floor mosaics or detached mosaic fragments, partly conserved from 1930 to the present.

The course consists of four study modules. The first module focuses on theory. It consists of lectures on the current conservation practice (including preliminary studies, conservation treatment and documentation, etc.), and lectures on the archaeological and historical context of the mosaics on site. The second module is dedicated to hands-on experience – the participants are actively involved in all stages of a conservation project on pre-selected mosaic floors. The third module consists of study excursions to significant historical sites in the region. The last module is set for homework.

In 2019 six American students took part in the workshop on mosaic conservation. The first two days were dedicated to a series of presentations on the Stobi mosaics in the context of the history and archaeology of Stobi, as well as an introduction to the Roman mosaic making techniques and basic techniques and methods of mosaic conservation and restoration.

The practical conservation activities were focused on the in situ preserved mosaic floor in Room 1 of the House of Parthenius. The first conservation treatment of this mosaic was performed in the 1930's. Until 2017 the mosaic was covered with sand. The current conservation treatment which began 2 years ago includes mechanical cleaning, removal of the old cement fills of the mosaic's lacunae and its replacement with mortar, stabilization of the tesserae and its foundation.

The first task of the students was the preparation of detailed descriptive, technical and photo documentation of the mosaic's condition. Preventive measures on the mosaic began with mechanical cleaning of the mosaic after which the most problematic and unstable parts of the tessellatum (edges and around the lacunae) were faced with gauzes glued with a 15% solution of Paraloid B72 in acetone.

Stabilizing the mosaic surface allowed for the removal of the older repairs of strong grey cement, also to clean the dirt and vegetation underneath. Conservation processes continued with consolidation of the original mortars of the mosaic structure using Acril 33 solution in water, followed by filling the lacunae and the edges with new mortar (consisted of 1-part lime, 1.5 parts sand and 1.5 parts crushed brick). When the mortars were dry and reached the optimal strength, all the gauzes from the tessellatum were detached with the use of pure acetone. These activities were done with an aim to reinforce the mosaic structure that allowed the continuation of cleaning of the mosaic surface where different types of dirt were deposited. Partial removal of the calcification and the bitumen deposits on the mosaic surface was done successfully with sanding of the surface followed by removal of deposits with medical scalpels.

All the activities were concluded with photogrammetric documentation of the mosaic which produced a high resolution ortophotography that can be used in all conservation planning and activities in the future.

The students were actively involved in all processes, under the permanent guidance, supervision and help of the project director Dr. Krassimira Frangova and the conservators of the NI Stobi: Mr. Mishko Tutkovski and Mr. Tome Filov.