

ARCHAEOLOGY TODAY
Mosaic Find at Eretria

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Euboea is the largest Greek island in the Aegean and parallels the coast of Attica with only a narrow strait separating the two. Its more than 3800 square kilometers are typically mountainous, but broken here and there by small fertile plains. Today Euboea is a modest place, rarely visited by the thousands of tourists who flock to Greece each year; in antiquity, however, Euboea was a political force of note in the Aegean, and was the home of two especially important city-states, Chalcis and Eretria.

For the last 15 years, Swiss archaeologists have been excavating at the site of Eretria with increasingly spectacular results. Found so far have been temples, tombs, a large theatre, extensive parts of the town wall, and numerous private houses. In recent years the residential area has been the focus of attention, and now one particular find has furnished ample reward for the archaeologists' labours. As described in the December 1979 issue of Archaeology, the so-called "House of the Mosaics" provides some of the finest Greek mosaics yet discovered in domestic dwellings.

The "House of the Mosaics", dated to the early fourth century B.C., is a roughly square structure (26 by 25 meters) composed of sixteen rooms arranged around a peristyle court. Several of these rooms have now been found to have mosaic floors made of naturally coloured pebbles; not only is the quality of these mosaics high, but they also have been found in an excellent state of preservation. Apparently, the collapse of the house inwards at the time of its destruction placed a protective layer of debris over the floors.

Room 5, for example, has a mosaic floor (of black, white, and red pebbles) which features an impressive head of Medusa surrounded by elaborate floral decoration. Room 8 nearby has a mosaic even more colourful (with yellow and pink pebbles added) and more complex: here two groups are depicted, each one featuring a Sphinx and a panther face to face. Again there is an elaborate floral motif bordering the pictorial panel. Room 9, however, is by far the most impressive: probably used as a banquet area, this room featured a square mosaic (270 centimeters on each side), in the center of which was a complicated rosette design; around this central design are lively scenes of female warriors fighting with fierce griffins and of lions wildly attacking horses. The detail with which the figures of the composition are rendered is vivid testimony to the achievement of the Greeks in the art of the mosaic.

As work at Eretria continues, there is certainly the probability that more finds of such a nature will come to light. Indeed, it now seems likely that Eretria will join the sites of Pella (in northern Greece) and Delos (the sacred island of Apollo) as the major sources of domestic mosaics in the ancient Greek world. Even now, the discoveries in the "House of the Mosaics" have returned to Eretria at least some of the fame she once enjoyed many centuries ago.