

PROTECTING, VALORISING, SHARING

The ICA Project at Elaiussa Sebaste (Ayaş, Mersin – Türkiye)

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HISTORICAL AND URBAN CONTEXT OF ELAIUSSA SEBASTE

Elaiussa Sebaste, a coastal city of Cilicia Tracheia, represents **one of the most articulated and stratified urban contexts of the Eastern Mediterranean**, with occupation phases spanning from the Hellenistic period to Late Antiquity and the Proto-Byzantine era. The settlement occupies a rocky promontory overlooking the sea, connected to the mainland by a sandy isthmus that functioned in antiquity as a natural harbour. This distinctive topographic setting played a decisive role in shaping the long-term development of the city, its maritime orientation and its integration within regional and Mediterranean networks. In Late Antiquity, Elaiussa also emerged as a major production center for **Late Roman 1 amphorae**, widely distributed across the Eastern Mediterranean, reflecting the city's role in large-scale commercial circuits connected to agricultural production and long-distance trade. The site of Elaiussa is characterised by a complex functional organisation and a strong diachronic continuity. Public monuments, residential quarters, productive areas and funerary landscapes form a coherent spatial system, in which architecture and infrastructure are closely interwoven with the natural morphology of the site. The theatre, the agora, the harbour installations, the aqueduct, the thermal complexes and the Byzantine palace testify to the **long-lasting vitality of the settlement** and to its capacity to adapt to changing political, economic and social frameworks. From an archaeological perspective, Elaiussa offers a privileged case study for investigating urban dynamics in a peripheral yet strategically connected region of the Roman and Byzantine world. Processes of expansion, monumentalisation and later reconfiguration provide key evidence for understanding patterns of urban resilience, transformation and reuse over the long term.

The ICA project is developed in cooperation with Kastamonu University, the current holder of the excavation concession, under the scientific direction of Prof. Asena Kızırlarslanoğlu, and under the authority of the **Ministry of Culture of the Republic of Türkiye**. Financed by the **MAECI Fondo Cultura** (Ministerial Decree 157/2025), the project "Italy in Türkiye. Promotion and Valorisation of Italian Archaeological Culture at Elaiussa Sebaste" is implemented in compliance with Italian public procurement legislation and international standards for archaeological documentation and conservation. Within this framework, the proposed approach is conceived as an integrative and progressive structure, bringing together spatial assessment, regulatory requirements and the coordinated planning of research, conservation and public engagement activities, with the aim of ensuring scientific coherence and long-term sustainability.



Fig. 1: Location of Elaiussa Sebaste on the southern coast of Türkiye. The aerial view shows the rocky promontory and sandy isthmus that defined the ancient city's urban layout.



Fig. 2: 3D model of Elaiussa Sebaste illustrating the urban layout on the promontory, the harbour basin and the connection to the mainland.



Fig. 3: Aerial view of the public area of Elaiussa Sebaste.

AIMS AND FRAMEWORK OF THE PROJECT

The Elaiussa Project is conceived as a structured initiative of **international cooperation** aimed at strengthening the role of Italian archaeology abroad through research, conservation and **cultural diplomacy**. Building upon the long-standing Italian investigations conducted at the site between 1995 and 2022, the project seeks to ensure scientific continuity while opening a new phase focused on integrated planning, long-term management and enhanced public accessibility. Particular emphasis is placed on a **coordinated and synergistic approach to site operations**, carried out in close collaboration between the Italian and Turkish teams under the scientific and institutional direction of the Turkish authorities, while reinforcing institutional ties with the Archaeological Museum of Mersin and other cultural stakeholders in the region.

The project aims to implement targeted actions on selected sectors of the site, identified as particularly significant for understanding the urban development of Elaiussa Sebaste and for improving its long-term preservation and legibility. These actions include archaeological documentation and conservation measures designed to **enhance the readability of the remains**, supporting a clearer perception of spatial relationships and circulation patterns within the ancient city. Special attention is devoted to the **restitution of the ancient landscape** through non-invasive strategies, including the selective planting of arboreal or vegetal species informed by historical, archaeological and environmental data. Such interventions are conceived to structure **visitor itineraries** and to guide perception, enabling non-specialist audiences to grasp the original configuration of the site and its topography—now substantially altered—through visual and spatial cues embedded in the landscape itself.

A further objective is the integration of advanced documentation and digital tools, including **periodised 3D models** and visual outputs, developed both for scientific analysis and for communication purposes, such as interpretative panels, audiovisual products and museum displays. These tools are conceived as supports for interpretation rather than simplified reconstructions and are firmly grounded in archaeological evidence. Finally, the project seeks to reinforce the relationship between the archaeological site and its broader social and territorial context, promoting shared awareness of its cultural value through **public archaeology** initiatives, **educational activities** and sustained **dialogue with local communities**. In this perspective, local communities are envisaged as active partners in the long-term care of the site, contributing to a renewed perception of Elaiussa Sebaste as a shared cultural landscape.

TOWARDS AN INTEGRATED ARCHAEOLOGICAL MASTERPLAN

The ICA action at Elaiussa Sebaste outlines a structured and forward-looking strategy that integrates **archaeological research, conservation practices and public engagement** within a coherent and sustainable framework. By grounding all actions in a shared planning vision, the initiative seeks to move beyond isolated interventions and to establish a long-term trajectory capable of responding to both scientific and management needs. These interventions are conceived not as ends in themselves, but as components of a broader process aimed at **enhancing the overall legibility of the urban system** and its historical development, while improving visitor orientation and understanding. At the same time, the project emphasises methodological consistency and institutional coordination, ensuring close alignment between **Italian and Turkish partners** and strengthening cooperation with the **Museum of Mersin** and the wider network of archaeological sites in Cilicia. The integration of advanced documentation techniques and digital tools further supports both research and dissemination, contributing to a more nuanced and evidence-based interpretation of the site. Ultimately, the project is aimed to reinforce the relationship between Elaiussa Sebaste and its contemporary context, promoting **shared awareness** of its cultural value and encouraging forms of participation that support its **protection over time**. In this perspective, Elaiussa is envisaged not only as an archaeological site of outstanding historical significance, but also as a dynamic cultural landscape, capable of generating knowledge, dialogue and **sustainable development** within the wider Cilician region.



Fig. 4: Theatre of Elaiussa Sebaste during a cultural event, illustrating the reuse of the ancient monument as a space for public engagement and community participation.

Regulatory framework and core bibliography

Prime Ministerial Decree (DPCM) of 15 March 2024, no. 57, Regulation on the organisation of the Ministry of Culture; Ministerial Decree of 5 September 2024, no. 270, Organisation of director-level offices and institutes with special autonomy (Art. 30: Central Institute for Archaeology); Ministerial Decree of 15 May 2025, no. 157, MAECI Fund for the promotion of Italian culture and language abroad (2025–2027); Legislative Decree of 31 March 2023, no. 36, Public Procurement Code (Arts. 41, 45).

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