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Aphrodite now presides in Sicily

*** The statue's new home wraps up a controversial period for the Getty.**

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By Jason Felch,

AIDONE, ITALY -- The J. Paul Getty Museum's iconic statue of Aphrodite, which became a symbol of American museums' involvement in the illicit antiquities trade, was unveiled in its new home Tuesday in the windswept Sicilian hill town of Aidone, marking an end to a controversy that has wracked the museum world for the last decade.

A chaotic scrum of politicians, journalists, townspeople and two Getty officials crowded into the small museum in a former Capuchin monastery to see the 7-foot statue of limestone and marble, which the Getty bought in 1988 for \$18 million despite signs that the statue had been recently looted and smuggled out of Italy.

"I feel it's a great victory for what we call in Italy ethics and law enforcement," said Francesco Rutelli, Italy's former culture minister, who negotiated the statue's return. At one point, Rutelli threatened a cultural embargo of the Getty if the statue was not returned. "It was a happy ending, but a tough fight."

Two Getty Museum officials attended the ceremony and thanked Italy for its recent cooperation on a series of archaeological loans that followed the statue's return. In a statement, Getty Museum acting director David Bomford said that Tuesday's event "marks a new chapter in the story of the ancient sculpture."

"The decision to return this statue to Sicily was a turning point in the history of the Getty's antiquities collection, one that was fraught with much debate," Bomford said. "However, in the end, based on scholarly and reasoned research, it was, without a doubt, the right decision."

A parade of regional politicians and Italy's new culture minister, Giancarlo Galan attended the event in the town of 6,000 people. Sicilians hope the statue will become an anchor for a budding archaeological tourism industry in the region.

The archaeological museum in Aidone where the statue is now displayed sees some 10,000 visitors a year -- a trickle compared with the more than 400,000 who visit the Getty Villa every year. But local officials hope the goddess will soon draw many of the tourists who visit the Roman mosaics in nearby Piazza Armerina, a UNESCO world heritage site.

"Our goal is that within three years, Aidone will have 150,000 visitors per year," said Sebastiano Missineo, Sicily's culture minister.

Under a light rain, a forest service band played the hymn of Sicily. After the crowd gathered at the town's meeting hall, half a dozen local political figures wearing red, white and green sashes took turns at a microphone saluting the statue's return. The group then walked through Aidone's steep cobbled streets to the archaeological museum, which holds hundreds of objects found in the nearby ruins of Morgantina, an ancient Greek settlement dating to the 5th century BC.

Some of Morgantina's finest relics ended up in American museums. But after years of painstaking investigations, the museum has seen a windfall of returns. Also on display is a 16-piece silver service returned by the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York in February 2010 and two marble busts of the fertility goddesses Demeter and Persephone, once owned by American collector Maurice Tempelsman.

The Getty's purchase of the statue of the goddess provoked an international scandal after Italian officials

claimed it had been illegally excavated from Morgantina. But clear evidence linking the statue to the site proved elusive, and the statue became a key addition to what would soon become a world-class antiquities collection.

In the 1990s, scientific studies of the statue's limestone linked it to a Sicilian quarry a half-hour drive from Morgantina. But only after the criminal indictment of the former Getty antiquities curator Marion True did the Getty begin serious negotiations with Italy over the statue's return.

In 2007, the goddess was one of 40 objects the Getty promised to return to Italy, part of a broader cultural agreement that has launched a new era of collaboration between the museum and its longtime antagonist.

Among the citizens who turned out were several former "clandestini," the Sicilian term for looters, local officials said. For decades, looting has been a source of income for residents in one of the most impoverished corners of Italy's poorest region.

The event was marked with moments of confusion as crowds attempted to push into the museum, which officially holds about 150 people.

"Confusion?" remarked a blue-uniformed official of the Carabinieri, Italy's national police, as he observed the rush. "In Sicily, it is chaos, not confusion!"

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PHOTO: 'TURNING POINT': Getty Museum officials were in attendance at the unveiling of the Aphrodite statue in a Sicilian museum that gets about 10,000 visitors a year.

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PHOTOGRAPHER:Ralph Frammolino For The Times



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PHOTO: (A1) Italy welcomes Aphrodite statue: The ancient artwork, relinquished by the Getty Museum, is unveiled in its new location in Sicily.

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PHOTOGRAPHER:Associated Press



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