

Kid's KOrner

Archeologists Unearth Buried City

WASHINGTON — They were probably just waking up in the Roman city of Kourion on the southern coast of Cyprus that July morning in A.D. 365.

"For a little after daybreak, preceded by heavy and repeated thunder and lightning, the whole of the firm and solid earth was shaken and trembled," states a fourth-century account of the catastrophic earthquake in the eastern Mediterranean. "Great ships landed on the tops of buildings. Some were driven almost two miles inland."

At Kourion there was little chance to escape. "We're finding people trapped at home, frozen in time right where they lived," says classical archeologist David Soren of the University of Arizona, who headed the team that in August unearthed the skeletons of a man, a woman, and a small child, clinging together in a ruined house.

Magnitude of Vesuvius

"Finding this 'family' huddled together after 1,600 years was the most touching moment," he says. Seven human skeletons have been uncovered in the one house. If this rate continues, Soren believes, the loss of life may prove to be on a scale comparable to that at Pompeii and Herculaneum after the Vesuvius volcanic eruption in A.D. 79, when several thousand people died.

From the way the family of skeletons was positioned, it appears that the three were "hunched over each other, huddled against a wall of the bedroom in a futile attempt to save their lives," says forensic anthropologist Walter H. Birkby of the University of Arizona, a member of the international team of specialists.

"They ran to the wall for shelter, taking the baby with them," he says. "They didn't head for the

door. Was it too late? Had the only doorway already collapsed?"

Both the man and the woman "appeared concerned for protecting the child," Birkby says. "The man was enfolding the woman and the child, and she had her arms around the child's head." As the family was discovered under about three feet of rubble, "We all thought, 'What a shame,'" he says.

The neck of the woman, who was about 19, was broken at a right angle by falling plaster and stones as she clutched the 18-month-old child. The skull and spinal column of the man, who was at least 25 years old, were crushed.

A bone hairpin rests on the woman's skull. Two rings lie near the man's left hand, one of plain iron and the other of copper alloy inscribed with a symbol of Christ, the Greek letters Chi Rho. So the family might have been Christian.

Telltale Toe Bones

The skeletons were found on the last day of this summer's digging season by Caterina Dias, a Portuguese archeology student, who was clearing off a dirt bank within the buried house when she noticed several toe bones sticking out. The excavation was supported in part by the National Geographic Society.

The mystery of Kourion's people began to unfold in 1984, during Soren's first season of digging in the city. He uncovered the skeleton of a young girl, whom he called Camelia, her hands clasped to her face. Her bones lay atop the skeleton of a mule, still tethered by an iron chain to an 800-pound feeding trough that had been hurled into a wall of the house.

An analysis of the girl's teeth by Birkby showed her to be about 13, but her skeletal development was

that of an 11-year-old. She might have been crippled or suffering from some disease, he says.

In 1985 the skeleton of a man between 50 and 60 was found crushed in a doorway of the same house.

Two other skeletons had been discovered during excavations at Kourion in 1934. Records of that work gave Soren a clue to where to start digging 50 years later.

This summer was the team's most successful season. So far the scientists have uncovered 15 rooms in the one house. Besides the skeletons, they have found elaborate painted architectural decorations and a complete kitchen.

The kitchen was equipped with a mud-brick oven (smashed in the disaster, but full of charcoal that will be analyzed), a bronze pitcher, a serving plate, a number of amphorae, several cooking pots, a copper-alloy fishhook, and fragments of about 20 lamps, indicating that people might have worked there at night.

Woman's Lost Necklace

At the bottom of a cistern, the scientists discovered a necklace of amber, coral, and jet that a woman might have accidentally dropped.

A cache of about 400 Roman coins found in 1984 and 1985 is the key to Soren's dating of the destruction of Kourion. The latest appear to have been issued in A.D. 364 and 365 during the joint reign of Emperors Valens and Valentinian I. Some scholars think that Kourion was destroyed in earlier earthquakes.

Although the value of the finds at Kourion increases with each season, Soren says he has barely scratched the surface. He estimates that only 5 percent of the ancient city has been excavated. It



Searching through debris on Cyprus, classical archeologist David Soren, left, and forensic anthropologist Walter H. Birkby, both of the University of Arizona, study results of the earthquake that buried the Roman city of Kourion in A.D. 365.

is thought to extend for several miles.

"Stone by stone, room by room," he says, "we should be able to

unearth the most complete picture of a late-Roman-Empire population trapped in its original context."

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ARCHEOLOGY: LEARNING ABOUT THE PEOPLE OF LONG AGO THROUGH THE BELONGINGS THAT THEY LEFT BEHIND IS CALLED ARCHEOLOGY. "ARCHEOLOGY" COMES FROM TWO GREEK WORDS THAT MEAN "OLD" AND "STUDY." THEY MAKE MANY SURPRISING DISCOVERIES. THEY ONCE FOUND NINE CITIES PILED ON TOP OF ANOTHER.

