

Sidon discoveries rewrite ancient history

NEW FINDS SHOW BRONZE AGE CIVILIZATION

'No one knew there was anything in the city before 1000 BC ... the excavations illuminate the history of south Lebanon'

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Daily Star staff

"There is enormous potential here," said John Curtis, director of the British Museum for the Near East, describing the archaeological excavations at Sidon.

"We certainly hope to work at the site for a few years. Our hope is that it will be a long-term project."

Curtis spoke with Frederic Hussein, head of the Directorate-General of Antiquities (DGA), along with Ken Churchill, the director of the British Council, and excavation leader Claude Doumit Serhal at a news conference Wednesday to announce important Bronze Age finds. Curtis described the digs as having yielded "remarkable results."

During this third season of excavations, archaeologists have unearthed 19 graves, as well as houses, Egyptian scarabs, and burial objects from the Early and Middle Bronze Ages. These artifacts, the first evidence uncovered to prove that Sidon was even inhabited during the Bronze Age, will rewrite the way historians view the ancient city.

"No one knew that there was anything at Sidon before 1000 BC," Curtis said. "The excavations have not only been successful in producing material, but also in illuminating the history of south Lebanon."

While recent finds may help rewrite the history of ancient Sidon, they are also a turning point in the country's modern

archaeological history. The excavations, a collaborative effort between Lebanon and Britain, mark the first time that the British Museum has ever been involved in a project here.

The dig, funded by the British Museum, is directed by Lebanese archaeologist Serhal and involves seven archaeologists from the British Museum, 10 archaeology students from Lebanese University, and 90 volunteers.

Curtis insisted that it has in all respects been a joint effort. "If we can do this in the form of a collaborative effort, then that is what we hope to do."

The British Museum has reason to stake such an investment in Sidon. Referred to both in the Old Testament and the Bible, Sidon's checkered history includes being ruled by Assyria, Babylonia, Persia, Alexander the Great, the Seleucids, the Ptolemaic dynasty, and the Romans. Now, it is remembered as one of the great seaports of the Phoeni-

cians, and as the most powerful, wealthy, and religiously significant of the Phoenician city states.

It was always an important center of trade, and particularly famous for its purple dyes and glassware.

Recent excavations have uncovered a new chapter in the city's history. Scholars and archaeologists alike are perplexed and excited about discoveries dating from the Middle Bronze Age (2000-1500 BC), in which they have uncovered not just bodies, but a strange story as well.

According to research, it appears that at the end of the Early Bronze Age, the inhabitants of Sidon buried their entire town beneath 1.25 meters of sand.

Though archaeologists have speculated that the locals brought the sand for religious reasons, no temple was ever built there. Soon after, the area was converted to a burial ground.

The astounding finds in this

sand pit have included not only 19 bodies, but also the bodies of infants buried within pottery jars, which were in turn stored inside large clay vessels. The size and shape of the vessels varied, and a number of infants were discovered buried beneath houses.

"There was probably a range of food and drink in each vessel, as well as things to enjoy in the afterlife," Curtis said.

While many of the discoveries at Sidon will require further research, Curtis insisted that patience in archaeology is essential.

"The important thing is not to excavate more than you can preserve, which has been a real problem in the past in Lebanon."

Curtis said he was confident, however, that both local and foreign interest in Sidon would continue. "I hope that Sidon will eventually be turned into an archaeological park," he said. "I think that it's important to preserve a certain amount of cultural heritage."