

Cyprus: crews stumble on 2-millennia-old coffins

May 19 2010



A Cyprus Antiquities Department archaeologist cleans a clay coffin estimated to be some 2,000 years old in the coastal resort of Protaras, Cyprus, Wednesday, May 19, 2010. Work crews accidentally unearthed four such clay coffins from what is believed to be an ancient cemetery. Antiquities Department Director Maria Hadjicosti said the coffins adorned with floral patterns date from the east Mediterranean island's Hellenistic to early Roman periods, between 300 B.C. and 100 A.D. Hadjicosti said similar coffins dating from the same period have been found. But she called the latest find significant because the coffins were untouched by grave robbers. She said other items found at the site included human skeletal remains, glass vessels and terra cotta urns. (AP Photo/Petros Karadjias)

(AP) -- Work crews in Cyprus have accidentally unearthed four rare clay coffins estimated to be some 2,000 years old, the country's Antiquities Department director said Wednesday.

Maria Hadjicosti said the coffins adorned with floral patterns date from the east Mediterranean island's Hellenistic to early Roman periods, between 300 B.C. and 100 A.D.

She said the coffins were dug up this week from what is believed to be an ancient cemetery in the eastern coastal resort of Protaras.

Hadjicosti said similar coffins dating from the same period have been discovered. Two such coffins are on display in the capital's Archaeological Museum, while three others remain in storage there. But she called the latest find significant because the coffins were untouched by grave robbers.

"The undisturbed coffins will help us add to our knowledge and understanding of that period of Cyprus history," Hadjicosti said.

She said other items found at the site included human skeletal remains, glass vessels and terra cotta urns, indicating that the cemetery was in use over a long period of time.

The official said the cemetery is one of several found throughout island's northeast, but scientists don't know which undiscovered settlement the bodies came from.

Crews stumbled on the coffins - or sarcophagi - while working to complete a sidewalk at the resort.

Excavations on Cyprus have uncovered settlements dating back to around 9000 B.C. Cyprus then saw successive waves of colonization, including Phoenicians, Mycenaean Greeks, Romans and, in the Middle Ages, Franks and Venetians. The island was conquered by Ottoman Turks in 1571 and became part of the British Empire in 1878 before winning independence in 1960.

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Citation: Cyprus: crews stumble on 2-millennia-old coffins (2010, May 19) retrieved 19 April 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2010-05-cyprus-crews-stumble-millennia-old-coffins.html>

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