

THE EARTHQUAKE THAT DESTROYED KOURION

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The total destruction of the village of Kourion and the death of more than 500 people was the result of a massive earthquake that shook Cyprus during the 4th century AD. Kourion suffered from numerous devastating earthquakes between the 3rd and 4th centuries AD, until a severe seismic event, believed to have occurred at approximately AD 365, had led to its permanent destruction.

The relatively numerous references to earthquakes in a time which is otherwise characterized by a paucity of historical records, strengthens the case for a period of high seismic activity. On July 21, AD 365, just after dawn, a cataclysmic event had struck the eastern Mediterranean. Originating under the seafloor, the earthquake shook the entire region and was accompanied by the largest known tsunami, which struck the coastal areas of Egypt and eastern Greece. As a result, 50,000 people lost their lives in Alexandria. Ammianus Marcellinus, a Roman historian, who experienced the terrible disaster in Alexandria, wrote: *"...The sea was driven away, its waves were rolled back, and it disappeared, so that the abyss of the depths was uncovered. The mass of waters returning when least expected killed many thousands by drowning. Huge ships, thrust out by the mad blasts, perched on the roofs of houses, as happened at Alexandria, and others were hurled nearly two miles from the shore..."* It is most probably the same earthquake which caused the uplift of western Crete by up to 10 meters.

Archaeological excavations have shown that at the time many ancient towns in Sicily, Greece, Libya, Cyprus and Egypt were hit and destroyed, possibly by a sequence of destructive earthquakes along the Hellenic and Cyprus Arcs. Numismatists estimate that the life of Kourion ended at AD 364-367.

Evidence that an earthquake may have leveled Kourion first surfaced in 1934, when the American archaeologist J.F. Daniel uncovered the remains of a Roman house in which he found "fingerprints" of an earthquake. During 1984-1987 the American archaeologist D. Soren and his team discovered that the Kourion area was virtually undisturbed: Kourion had been completely abandoned after the disaster and no one had returned to collect the dead. The team felt like a rescue team arriving 16 centuries too late. Soren estimates that 500 people died in the Kourion area, but the toll in all of south-west Cyprus was perhaps in the thousands.

A FAMILY'S LAST MOMENTS (see photograph)

They were in the bedroom. A young mother of 19, still clutched her one-and-a-half-year-old baby to her breast. The child, its teeth still coming in, grasped its mother's elbow. Over them lay a man of about 28, presumably the father, who had tried to shield the pair from a deadly rain of limestone building blocks. The woman, whose neck had been snapped, had a bone hair-pin on her skull. The man wore a ring

inscribed with the first two letters of “Christ” in Greek. Bald skeletons now, displayed at the Local Archeological Museum of Kourion in Episkopi village, had been a family of three, clinging together for life as their home crumbled in an earthquake that leveled Kourion 16 centuries ago.

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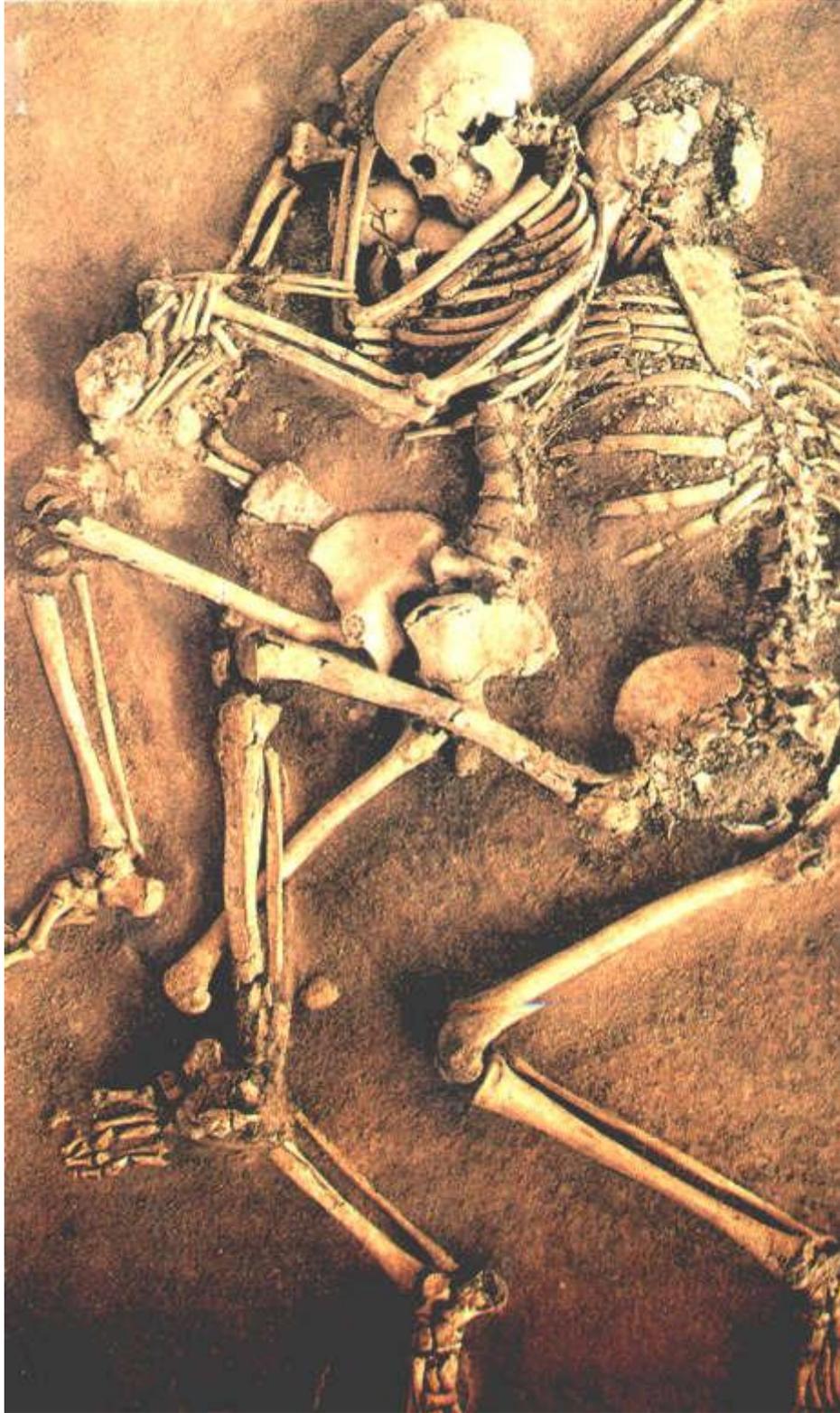
Ammianus Marcellinus, "Rerum Gestarum". *BT*: (378)

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Skeletons of a 3-member family, clinging together for life as their home crumbled in an earthquake that leveled Kourion 16 centuries ago, at around AD 365. They are displayed at the Local Archeological Museum of Kourion in Episkopi village.