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Lebanon finds 2,900 year old Phoenician remains

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BEIRUT (Reuters) - Lebanese and Spanish archaeologists have discovered 2,900-year-old earthenware pottery that ancient Phoenicians used to store the bones of their dead after burning the corpses.

They said more than 100 jars were discovered at a Phoenician site in the southern coastal city of Tiro. Phoenicians are known to have thrived from 1500 B.C. to 300 B.C and they were also headquartered in the coastal area of

present-day Syria.

"The big jars are like individual tombs. The smaller jars are left empty, but symbolically represent that a soul is stored in them," Ali Badawi, the archaeologist in charge in Tiro, told Reuters Wednesday.

Badawi and a Spanish team from the Pompeu Fabra University in Barcelona have been excavating at the Phoenician site for years. The site was first discovered in 1997 but archaeologists have only been able to dig up 50 square meters per year.

"These discoveries help researchers who work on past Phoenician colonies in Spain, Italy and Tunisia, to pin down a large number of their habits and traditions," said Maria Eugenia Aubet, who leads the Spanish team.

"Especially since there are few studies of the Phoenicians in their motherland 'Lebanon'," Aubet said, adding that the remains proved that the Phoenicians were a people who had a vision for life after death.

The last excavation was in 2005. A war in 2006 between Israel and Hezbollah guerrillas concentrated in southern Lebanon and the tenuous political and security situation in 2007 halted work on the site until this year.

A seafaring civilization, the Phoenicians' earliest cities included Byblos, Tiro and Sidon on Lebanon's coast. From Tiro, the Phoenicians are thought to have expanded into other colonies on the Mediterranean coast.

(Writing by Yara Bayoumy; Editing by Dominic Evans)

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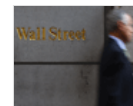
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