

NOVUM

RESEARCH AT THE UNIVERSITY OF MANITOBA

Someone who really digs the classics

by Cheryl Arnold

Eleusis, the spiritual centre of the entire Pagan world for more than 3,500 years, is being uncovered layer by patient layer by a University of Manitoba archaeologist who has already peeled back time to the bronze age.

"The site is second only to the Acropolis in historical significance," explains Dr. Michael Cosmopoulos, who last year began an archaeological excavation of the Greek sanctuary. Vice-provost of University College, Cosmopoulos is a member of the department of classics. He is also a Greek citizen, which gives him and the University of Manitoba a unique window through which to explore the ancient world.

Foreign countries, including Canada, are allowed to dig at only three sites in Greece. As a Greek national, Cosmopoulos has been allowed to direct excavations at an additional two. He started the first one at Oropos in 1989 and is still directing it.

Between 150 and 200 students from the University of Manitoba and from other universities in North America have already worked to assist research at Oropos. Six take part in the Eleusis dig annually.

Cosmopoulos says the excavations, especially at Eleusis, provide students with unique training in the field, and they draw international attention to Canada and the University of Manitoba from the worldwide archaeological community.

"History is a chain of events and you have to reconstruct every link in order to understand our own civilization and culture," says Cosmopoulos.

The chain began at Eleusis around 3000 B.C. when the Greeks constructed a sanctuary at the designated site of the abduction of the Greek goddess Persephone. It ended in 400 A.D., when the Huns destroyed Eleusis.

The sanctuary was dedicated to Persephone and her mother Demeter, the goddess of agriculture. It was run by a society which often engaged in symbolic and mysterious rites to guide Persephone and the rebirth of each growing season.

Secret and inspiring, the rites were never revealed, for violating the oath of secrecy brought instant death. Because this precluded a written record, the only way to reconstruct life in Eleusis is through archaeological digs. Modern excavations, begun in 1880, were halted in 1930.

Since 1994, when Cosmopoulos was given the honour of resuming excavations there, remains of the Roman period, houses from the fifth century classical Greek period and bronze age deposits from the time of the Trojan War have been unearthed.

Cosmopoulos is using these findings to study the economy and social and political organization of each era. His exploration of Eleusis is supported by a \$128,000, three-year grant from the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada. *UM*



Dr. Michael Cosmopoulos (left) conducts the excavations at Eleusis.

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