

Professor hopes to save Greek history

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By Tony Davis

MICHAEL COSMOPoulos hopes when he returns to Greece in May, the archeological discoveries he unearthed last spring will not have been bull-dozed into oblivion.

For the last three years, Cosmopoulos, 27, an assistant professor of classics at the University of Manitoba, has taken about two dozen university students and archeology buffs on a working holiday to Greece. With eyes glued to the ground, the amateur sleuths spend about two weeks zig-zagging across a 10-square kilometre triangle of orchards, vineyards and coastline, 50 kilometres north of Athens, in a search for archeological clues to the past.

Cosmopoulos has been given rare permission to explore the area because of his Greek citizenry.

But the rural patch of land being scoured as part of his archeological survey is being threatened by a booming tourist industry.

As more new hotels and villas are built in the area, hidden secrets which could further illuminate the development of Western civilization in Greece some 2,500 years ago, could be lost forever, he says.

Tourist centre

"One of the main reasons for investigating this area now is that it's becoming a major tourist centre," says Cosmopoulos.

"We are just trying to save and record as much history as possible before the entire area is built over and the sites destroyed."

Cosmopoulos initiated the excursions (dubbed the Oropos Survey Project) in 1988 as a graduate student at Washington University in St. Louis. He plans to take a group of 24 Manitobans, who go at their own expense, to the Mediterranean country

from May 27-June 11.

But beating out bulldozers to the land isn't his only problem.

Sites identified

Planned staff cuts in the U of M's classics department include the elimination of Cosmopoulos's job by August. His OSP research will continue from his next university posting.

Since the project was initiated, the OSP has identified 31 new sites — including the discovery of a harbor, later identified as the ancient and sacred port of Delphinion, under three metres of seawater.

But other discoveries have been permanently lost to unscrupulous or ignorant developers, says Cosmopoulos.

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... is covered
in antiquities'*

"A couple of sites that we found in 1989, they did not exist in 1990," he says.

"And another I found in May 1990, when I returned in August to make a final check, it was destroyed by a bulldozer. I had to call in the police."

Cosmopoulos, who teaches Greek and Roman art history and archeology at the U of M, says it's illegal in Greece to build on historical sites once they are identified.

"But the government does not have enough guards to protect all of the sites," he says, adding it can take authorities two or three months to process the paperwork designating a site as protected.

His work, says Cosmopoulos, represents a new direction in classical archeology. The excavation of major sites, such as the famous Parthenon in Athens, he explains, yields only fragmented information about a region's history.

The OSP technique, developed in the last decade, gives a broader overview of entire areas, he adds.

The land Cosmopoulos and the students are probing is located between the ancient cities of Oropos, which lies underneath the modern village of Oropos, and Amphiraos, a medical sanctuary used to treat the sick from about 420 BC until AD 300.

Though many archeologists have picked over both cities, the hilly stretch linking the two, once an important trade route for Athens and Thebes, has been ignored, says Cosmopoulos.

He believes artifacts discovered there could corroborate stories in ancient Greek writings about wars that Athens and Thebes fought in order to win control of the route.

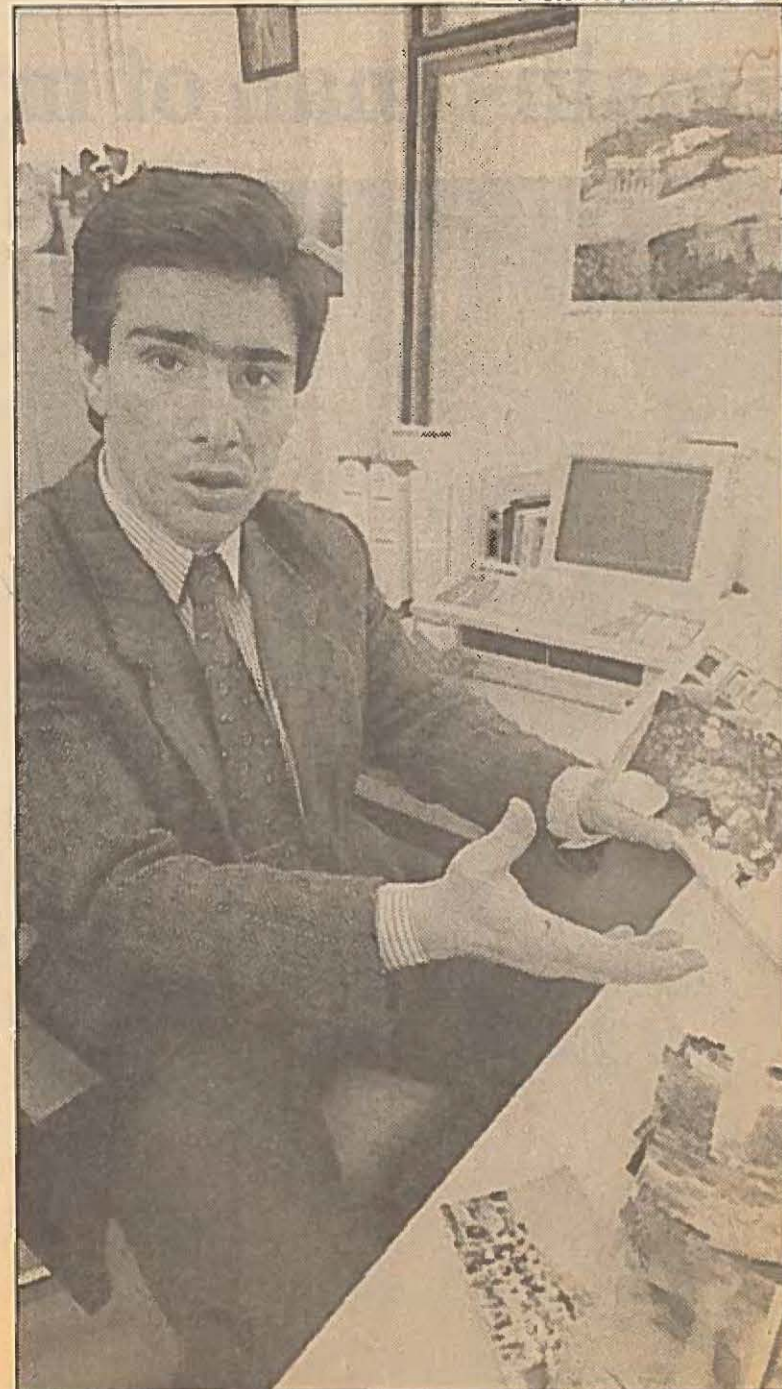
Ancient tools

Finding artifacts, he says, has been relatively easy.

"Every corner of Greece is covered in antiquities," says Cosmopoulos, explaining that rain, earthquakes, and plowing by farmers often pushes pottery shards, ancient tools and other objects to the surface.

For Doris Schafer, a government librarian in her 40s, stumbling upon some ancient loom weights last spring was the highlight of her involvement in the project.

A member of the Classical Association of Manitoba, a group for people interested in Greek and Roman history, Schafer joined the survey to learn more about ancient Greece first-hand.



Cosmopoulos leads students on archeological surveys.