

Love shrine displaces Olympic horse track P.6

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Duncan Mackay in Athens

Preparations for the 2004 Olympic Games in Greece, dogged by construction delays, political conflict and lawsuits, have hit an even greater obstacle with the discovery of a string of ruins that could put the timetable of the £1.2bn plan in jeopardy.

During the course of preparing the venues the world's biggest sporting event in the country where the Olympics originated in about 700BC, construction teams have stumbled across ancient sites ranging from tombs dating back 3,600 years to a brothel dedicated to the love goddess Aphrodite.

the architects are continu-

ally being forced to prepare new plans because, under Greek law, archaeologists must be called in to excavate any sites where antiquities are discovered.

Denis Oswald, head of the International Olympic Committee panel overseeing the preparations, which began its latest three-day visit in Athens yesterday, has said repeatedly that the games will be safe only if work continues at full speed.

"If Athens had another year at its disposal for its preparations, then I could say with certainty that it could host wonderful games," he said once. "But now the margins are tight and there is a lot still to be done."

The latest problems are at the site intended for the equestrian events, which has turned out to be a treasure-house of antiquities, including a temple to Aphrodite which experts say doubled as a brothel.

Archaeologists have begun almost 20 separate digs on the site, about nine miles south-east of central Athens.

They say the temple, 2,500 years old, is one of the few sites in the Athens area associated with the goddess. They have found ruins believed to be baths and massage rooms.

"It was not only a spiritual place, but also one of carnal pleasures," Michalis Sklavos, one of the archaeologists involved, said.

"The priestesses offered extra love to the visitors."

The archaeologists have also uncovered farm houses from the fourth century BC and Mycenae tombs 3,600 years old, and the equestrian course has had to be moved 200 metres. In consequence 600 ancient olive trees have been uprooted and are being cared for so that they can be replanted in 2004.

"Anywhere you dig in Greece you will most likely stumble on antiquities," a spokesman for the Athens organisers, Antonis Fourlis, said.

"It was a big problem at first because no one was sure what to do. But now we are used to these finds and things move a bit faster. We are confident

everything will be completed in time."

But the Olympic planners remain fearful of a repetition of last year's dispute which delayed the Schinias rowing centre on a site near the ancient battlefield of Marathon when an ancient burial site was found.

Archaeologists said the lake would cut through an area where some of the fiercest fighting between Greeks and Persians occurred in 490 BC, which is also the symbolic home of the modern-day marathon.

It went ahead when the government produced maps showing that coastline changes had put the lake where sea used to be.

Last week the prime minister, Costas Simitis, toured the Acropolis to see at first hand the proposals to unify the significant historical sites of the city before the Olympics.

They include the gradual removal of the advertising hoardings which used to blight the skyline, revealing breathtaking views of the Parthenon and other historic monuments.

The intention is to restore a number of key ancient sites and link the main archaeological areas by cobbled footpaths in place of the congested roads that now dominate the city.

For the sake of their nerves, however, the IOC must hope that the past stops encroaching on the present.