Concordia professor sheds light on roots of ancient Roman villa

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MOORHEAD – After studying more than 10,000 artifacts from a decades-old archaeological dig, a Concordia College professor and his students might have solved a mystery surrounding an ancient Roman villa.

The mystery has dogged McKenzie Lewis, a 41-year-old assistant professor of classical studies, since he first researched the region surrounding the Villa del Vergigno as a graduate student.

“There’s some question about whether it was built in the second century B.C. or early first century B.C. or middle,” Lewis said of the villa, a large working farm that went out of use around the 400s or 500s A.D. “That might seem like it’s not a big deal in the long run, one generation versus the next generation, but it kind of is.”

Located just outside Florence, Italy, in Tuscany, the villa was thought to have been founded by the Roman Empire. But Lewis has always been skeptical of that, which he said speaks to a larger ideological debate in his profession.

“Are things that are big and grand built by an imperial conqueror, or did the imperial conqueror come in because there are already large, grand things there?” he asked.

This past summer, Lewis and two students, senior Noah Dovre and junior Morgan Hinton, analyzed 300 boxes of artifacts from the villa’s foundation and believe they found evidence to prove the latter. Judging from the types of pottery and when those were in vogue, the villa was built in the late 100s B.C., long before the Romans put down military garrisons in 80 B.C.

“It was doing pretty well for itself, which sort of contradicts how people talk about the Roman Empire,” Lewis said. “People like to see the Romans coming in and making everything better and more cultured versus them gaining something from the locals who were already there.”

Ceramics from the villa’s foundation were dug up 20 years ago but went unstudied because local archaeologists ran out of funding, Lewis said. Lewis has led additional excavations every summer since 2013 with more than 50 students from Concordia and other colleges.

Although one mystery might be solved, Lewis is now bursting with other plans for his team. They still have to analyze the coins they found, get a permit to destroy the concrete that’s covering an ancient well, piece together fragmentary vessels for a museum exhibition and finish a database with digital maps of the artifacts in their exact stratigraphic layers.

“The idea behind it is getting this online and making it freely available to anybody who wants to look at it,” Lewis said. “They can go look at the exact evidence that we found and make their own conclusions.”

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