

American School of Prehistoric Research Field School Scholarship: Final Report

By: Skye McCord



Skye McCord inside an Etruscan tomb in Gradoli, Italy.

Through the generous donation of the American School of Prehistoric Research and the Archaeological Institute of America, I was able to attend the Valle Gianni Archaeological field school, run by Illinois State University in Gradoli, Italy. As an archaeology student, I knew that fieldwork was a vital step in gaining the necessary skills for my career, but I was also told by professors and mentors that not all field schools offered the same level of education and attention to each student. To this, I was incredibly lucky to be referred to the Valle Gianni program by my professor, which is where I met Dr. Kathryn Jasper and Dr. Lea Cline, our program directors who were instrumental in organizing an immersive educational experience. Dr. Jasper specializes in the history and archaeology of the early to late medieval world, and Dr. Cline is a classical art historian. We were also accompanied by Dr. Ally Stone, a zooarchaeologist who was our site manager, and Ryan Lange from the Iowa Office of the State Archaeologist, our GIS and mapping

expert. Luke Munson, a PhD student at The University of Texas at Austin, was the supervisor for my trench. He was great at keeping us on schedule for excavating while allowing us to try out new techniques and dropping in linguistic facts about the ancient world when things were slow.

The site of Valle Gianni has been inhabited since the pre-Roman period, which is what initially drew me to the site. The site itself sits on top of a small hill, surrounded by trees and overlooking the blue waters of Lake Bolesna. There are multiple known Etruscan tombs, a Roman villa, nymphaeum, and medieval dwellings, which encapsulates the dynamic nature of history that made me want to become an archaeologist. Anywhere on Earth, at any time, people were living unique lives and continuing traditions that span hundreds, if not thousands, of years. Valle Gianni shows how empires rise and fall, and how everyday life continues regardless.

Valle Gianni was a very unique program in that students were led through various lessons using a badge system to ensure that everyone learned the necessary skills for fieldwork, such as total station preparation, artifact cleaning, GIS mapping, and many more. Our daily schedule was straightforward: collection at the pick-up spot at 6:30 A.M. sharp, a break at 10 A.M., lunch around noon or 1 P.M., and digging wrapped around 2 or 3 P.M. Valle Gianni is located right in Tuscany, so temperatures easily reached the high 80's Fahrenheit and water breaks were necessary throughout the day. Regardless of the elements, our education was always made a priority, and I'm incredibly lucky to have had my training with this program.

During our excavation season, we uncovered many artifacts, such as an array of Roman glass panes, new layers of wall and floor by the nymphaeum, and so many handfuls of tesserae that we lost track of how many bags we ended up sending to the lab. On our site, I was even able to climb down into an Etruscan tomb. Physically standing in a space that I had read so much about, which held so much cultural importance, was nothing short of amazing. Most shocking to

our team, however, was the uncovering of the remains of what we believe to be an Etruscan temple. During the last two weeks of our dig, what was assumed to be a large rock was removed from a scarp wall, and was found to be an astoundingly intact Etruscan-style column, standing at about two feet tall with the base of the column still intact. One context layer below, we discovered four large foundation stones lined up near perfectly (we could barely fit a trowel tip between them), which would align with the building designs used in temples. Paired with the multiple tombs at the dig site and its proximity to a natural water source, it was looking like we might have been standing atop the remains of an Etruscan temple, which will hopefully be better understood in later dig seasons.

I was incredibly lucky to have the opportunity to work with Dr. Jasper and Dr. Cline for my honors senior thesis, and the findings from this season will be included as part of my capstone project focused on Etruscan culture and its environmental relationships. The work at Valle Gianni was hard, both physically and academically, but it was the best decision I've made for my education and solidified my choice to pursue archaeology as a career. This fall, I will be applying to graduate programs in Roman archaeology, and will hopefully continue my research and fieldwork far beyond this season. Without the contributions of The Archaeological Society of America and the American School for Prehistoric Research, I would not have been able to attend this field school and enrich my education in a way that can only be described as life-changing.



This is me sorting cobbles, and definitely enjoying a break from baking under the sun in the trench!



Luke Munson and I standing over the temple foundation stone – we were both simultaneously thoroughly confused and very excited over what was clearly the base of some structure far larger than we expected.



A quick photo of me half-sliding half-falling into the Etruscan tomb, taken by Matt Ganson. It was well worth the dirt and bugs.



Dr. Cline and I posing together in front of the nymphaeum.



The Etruscan column standing upright for the first time in potentially thousands of years.