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Inside Hadrian's Walls

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CLOCKWISE FROM TOP: DE AGOSTINI/GETTY IMAGES; APAHA (2)

BIG DIG A team of researchers and students from Columbia University, far left, have been working at Hadrian's Villa, above, uncovering everyday objects like this ceiling fragment, left.

WITH ITS OPULENT fountains, theater and large thermal baths, Hadrian's villa in Tivoli, Italy, was a fitting setting for the second-century Roman emperor to welcome guests, host parties and commemorate battle victories.

Centuries later, it's the mundane—not the magnificent—details of the 300-acre complex causing a stir, as Columbia University researchers and students digging on the Unesco World Heritage site uncover new sections of the villa that offer a rare glimpse of ordinary life in ancient Rome.

"There's a social layer that has always been completely inaccessible," says Francesco de Angelis, leader of the excavation project and an associate professor at Columbia, where he directs the Advanced Program of Ancient History and Art. "We are opening a window on an unknown world."

Since it was rediscovered in the 15th century, Hadrian's villa has been explored and studied by a steady stream of archaeologists and researchers as well as architects such as Le Corbusier and artists including Michelangelo and Raphael. Today, several digs are taking place around the villa and more research projects, including one from the British Museum, have recently started.

Over the past three summers, Mr. de Angelis and Marco Maiuro, an adjunct history professor and associate fellow at Columbia's Italian academy, have brought a team of researchers and students to Tivoli for monthlong digs. Their excavations have unearthed fresh findings at the Lararium, a shrine to the household gods known as *Lares*, and a new building that they believe could have housed high-ranking Romans.

"The skeleton of the Hadrian Villa was already known," says Mr. de Angelis. "We're now recovering the veins, arteries and muscles—the connective tissue that made this site a living organism."

While bigger discoveries at digs can steal the spotlight, small details bring the everyday to life. For instance, in Pompeii, archaeologists found shapes of burned bread that remained intact—if inedible—over the centuries, says Alfredo Carannante, a Neapolitan anthropologist who has studied Roman eating habits. In the early 2000s, in Herculaneum, a town near Naples that was destroyed by the same volcanic eruption that wiped out Pompeii in 79 AD, researchers found remains from the city's drainage system. The volcanic material protected the items in the pipes, leaving them almost intact. These included fish bones, which revealed that first-century residents consumed the same varieties Neapolitans still eat today.

In Tivoli, the Columbia team's findings have brought greater insight into the community that sprang up to serve Hadrian when the emperor moved here to escape the chaos of Rome.

One excavation site featured mosaics and fine flooring that suggest it was once the luxury home of an upper-class Roman. "This is too humble a building for the emperor," says Mr. de Angelis, "but still a high-standard, middle-class apartment. This shows how well the middle class lived here."

Researchers believe that villa personnel attended festivities together and worshiped gods in the same spaces, no matter their social class. Being in the complex's microcity, with better access to the emperor and other high-ranking individuals, meant that slaves and others from the lower classes had greater hope of progressing socially. Life at the villa was also likely easier than in the city, researchers say, with better living conditions.

Mr. de Angelis says the findings, though still preliminary, throw new light on a fundamental issue for the Roman world: the dynamics of a center of power.

"We are still at the beginning, so the picture is necessarily fragmented," he says. But "we are redefining the landscape of the villa through the discovery of new buildings and by looking at those that were already known in a new light."