UW-Stout: Social science student helps unearth history at English castle

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Ryan Leckel came to University of Wisconsin-Stout to study engineering but soon found his true passion in the social sciences.

Although UW-Stout doesn't offer a program in archeology, Leckel was eager to get field experience to match his interest in the history of the Anglo-Saxons, who lived during the fifth century.

He found it on the other side of the Atlantic Ocean. Leckel traveled to England for the third time this past spring. He began looking online and found the Archeological Institute of America, which led him to the Bamburgh Research Project, a program created to give archeologists the chance to excavate the grounds of Bamburgh Castle in England.

Soon, the senior in applied social science, was applying for grants to fly overseas to the Northumberland region, where his three stays, so far, have ranged from 10 days to more than a month.

The nine-acre castle site, on a northeast coastal rock outcrop near the village of Bamburgh, has been inhabited for more than 3,000 years. It was once home to the king of the Anglo-Saxons and was in its heyday during Medieval times.

In 1996, a program for excavation began, revealing a greater history left buried and providing a chance for archeologists and others to dig.

In 2016, Leckel, who was born in Shell Lake and spent about half of his childhood in nearby Spooner, reached out to the National Council on Undergraduate Research

and was awarded a $2,000 grant to fulfill his capstone for the geographic information systems minor at UW-Stout. He used the grant for his most recent trip in spring.

A ‘chance to interpret history’

The castle has become a ground of opportunities for Leckel.

His excavation of the castle’s Trench 3, where he was assigned to dig with a team of nearly 20 staff members, is expected to result in a three-dimensional model. The model will allow archaeologists and students to view the site, even after the site is no longer being excavated.

“There’s a large issue in archeology with reproducibility,” Leckel said. “It’s one of those sciences that is very hard to reproduce, because once you dig the site, you don’t have access to that site anymore. Nobody can redig that site because you have already removed the artifacts, you’ve already disturbed the soil.”

Trench 3 offered the potential for significant discoveries. One of the most recent finds was what Leckel referred to as the Bamburgh Bird, a three-centimeter-long copper plate that resembles a bird. Other finds have included objects like iron nails and other remnants of the Anglo-Saxons.

Tools used to find and extract these artifacts include: shovels, spades, mattocks, pointing and leaf trowels, and even everyday spoons. During postexcavation, archeologists use finer tools: loupes, magnifying glasses and toothbrushes.

“Finding any artifact always feels significant. You always get this thrill. Somebody dropped this, somebody left this here, somebody interacted with this in the past. Its location, composition and what it is can tell us so much about our history,” Leckel said. “That’s the best part about being an archeologist, you get the chance to interpret history, you get the chance to add to human knowledge. It’s wonderful.”

He hopes to visit Bamburgh Castle again in the near future. He also wants to expand his 3-D modeling research project into a program for those with or without a background in geographic information systems. Students and other interested individuals would be able to input their own data with their own model of the site and its artifacts.

Leckel has learned something he wished he’d considered earlier in his studies: “You

don’t have to say something necessarily new, or make this groundbreaking discovery in order to contribute to human knowledge. You don’t have to worry about whether or not your research is significant, because any research you are willing to do is significant. It makes a difference.”

Associate Professor Tina Lee, program director of applied social science, emphasized that Leckel works well independently. “He’s taken the resources that exist here and has pursued what he wants to do. The work he is doing is remarkable for someone at this point in his career.”

Leckel’s work ethic was recognized in April when he received one of the Outstanding Student Researcher of the Year awards at UW-Stout.

Lee encourages students to take advantage of the support system provided at UW-Stout, like Leckel has. “If you’re passionate about something, reach out to faculty in something that’s related. They will help point you in the right direction,” she said.

Leckel cited the knowledge and support given to him by his professors and mentors: Innisfree McKinnon, Lee, Christopher Freeman, Nels Paulson, David Seim, Zach Raff, Tom Pearson, Kim Zagorski, Chris Ferguson and other department members.