In the Shadows of Rome

A Divergent Viewpoint on Roman Hi story

Design Thesis Report By

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Contents

Prologue: A Roman Mystery

This thesis begins with a mystery: the Roman dodecahedron. A strange, twelve-sided bronze object from the Roman Empire has been found across Europe, from Britain to Hungary, yet no one knows for certain what it was used for. Scholars and enthusiasts have suggested they were measuring tools, astronomical instruments, religious symbols, or even devices for knitting gloves. The truth is, we do not know.

This uncertainty served as the starting point for my own reflections on Roman life. If one object can hold so many possibilities, what does that say about the countless lives that have left even fewer traces? From this small enigma, my thesis began: a deeper investigation into the Roman Empire, not through emperors and monuments, but through the hidden and mysterious histories of those who lived in its shadows.

The Roman dodecahedron serves as a reminder that history is rarely complete, and that absence itself can be a meaningful presence. Its unknown purpose embodies the gaps in our knowledge, gaps that resist closure yet invite interpretation. In the same way, much of Roman life is only partly visible through archaeology. Countless experiences and perspectives have left behind only fragments, resistant to certainty but rich with possibility. We cannot fully reconstruct these worlds, but we can design with what remains , using space, light, and atmosphere to let absence and ambiguity speak.

Abstract

This thesis explores the hidden, often overlooked lives of those who sustained the Roman Empire, from their diverse cultures, including enslaved labourers, auxiliary soldiers, domestic servants, craftsmen, and women, through the prism of architectural design. While Roman history is often presented as a narrative of emperors, monuments, and military victories (Bird, 2015), this official narrative obscures the realities of labour, coercion, and the marginalization of power. By engaging with archaeological evidence from sites such as Vindolanda, Pompeii, and Hadrian's Wall, along with inscriptions and artifacts scattered throughout the empire, the project reframes Rome not only as a great civilization, but also as one built on exploitation, adaptation, and hidden contributions.

The design is conceived as a behind-the-scenes museum, centred around a 360-degree revolving theatre that showcases Rome's monumental facade before leading visitors into immersive galleries dedicated to marginalized groups. Each gallery uses light, materiality, shadow, and spatial pressure to evoke the conditions of life in the shadows, from shackled prisoners to domestic workers, from global trade routes to civilian women's care.

The design also includes a gallery staff cottages and a theatre. Placed alongside the museum, it connects Rome's hidden workers to the ongoing, often invisible, work that sustains heritage today. Through this approach, the thesis argues that architecture can function not only as a container for artifacts but also as an effective means of storytelling, shifting perspectives from admiration of imperial power to empathy for the human cost behind it.

Introduction

Roman history is often told as a story of power, order, and victory. When visiting museums or heritage sites, we typically encounter grand monuments, statues of emperors, and stories of military triumph. These narratives highlight the achievements of elite leaders, emperors, and wealthy patrons, while obscuring the lives of the majority who sustained the empire but lived without political power or lasting recognition.
Among these were enslaved labourers, auxiliary soldiers, quarrymen, armorers, merchants, domestic servants, and others who sustained Rome's army, economy, and urban life through their labour. Their contributions were vital, yet their experiences survive only in scattered archaeological remains.

How history is presented matters. As Laurajan Smith (2006) argues, heritage is not just about preserving objects; it also involves shaping cultural memory through selective storytelling. In the case of Rome, the dominant narrative celebrates imperial power "on the front" while leaving in the shadows its "hidden" reality of labour, coercion, marginalization, and more. This imbalance limits the public's understanding of the empire's complexity and the human cost of its achievements.

This thesis poses the question: How can architecture make Rome's hidden history tangible, impactful, and central to public interpretation? It proposes an "immersive museum behind the scenes," where visitors begin in a bright, symmetrical space representing the official image of Rome from a postmodern perspective and then move into a network of darker, more enclosed environments. Each space represents a different marginalized class or order, from domestic servants and shackled prisoners to gunsmiths, merchants, quarrymen, and powerful women.

The design uses light, materiality, spatial pressure, and sensory cues to embody the conditions of these lives. By combining archaeological evidence with spatial narratives, the project aims to foster empathy and critical reflection without judgment on the past, shifting visitors' perspective from the grandeur of the Roman façade to the human realities that sustained it.

By reframing the experience of Roman history in a designed space, this thesis aims to expand visitors' understanding of the empire. It invites them to move from the monumental "stage" of Rome's public image to the complex, often obscure, realities that supported it.

Historical & Archaeological Context

Roman history is usually told through its emperors, generals, and monuments. Yet beneath these official narratives were the everyday lives of enslaved workers, auxiliary soldiers, traders, and servants whose labour sustained the empire. Their contributions survive not in marble statues or triumphal arches, but in scattered archaeological traces , worn shoes, cooking pots, shackles, writing tablets. This chapter surveys the historical and material evidence that informs the design of the Backstage Museum.

1- Enslavement, Servitude, and Punishment

Slavery was fundamental to the Roman economy. Enslaved people worked in agriculture, construction, mines, workshops, and households. They had no legal rights and could be punished, sold, or killed at will (Bradley, 1994). Domestic servants , both enslaved and free , maintained villas and military garrisons, often living in cramped, windowless rooms at the back of buildings (Scheidel, 2005). Archaeological finds such as cooking pots, hearths, and personal items like hairpins from Pompeii, Herculaneum, and Vindolanda provide rare glimpses of their lives (Vindolanda Trust, 2023).

Punishment was central to maintaining control. Methods ranged from flogging and shackling to execution and exile (Fagan, 2011). The shackled burial discovered at Great Casterton in 2015, where a man was buried with iron fetters still fastened around his ankles, of` fers chilling physical evidence of captivity in Roman Britain (Thomas, 2021). These traces reveal a world where coercion was a constant presence.

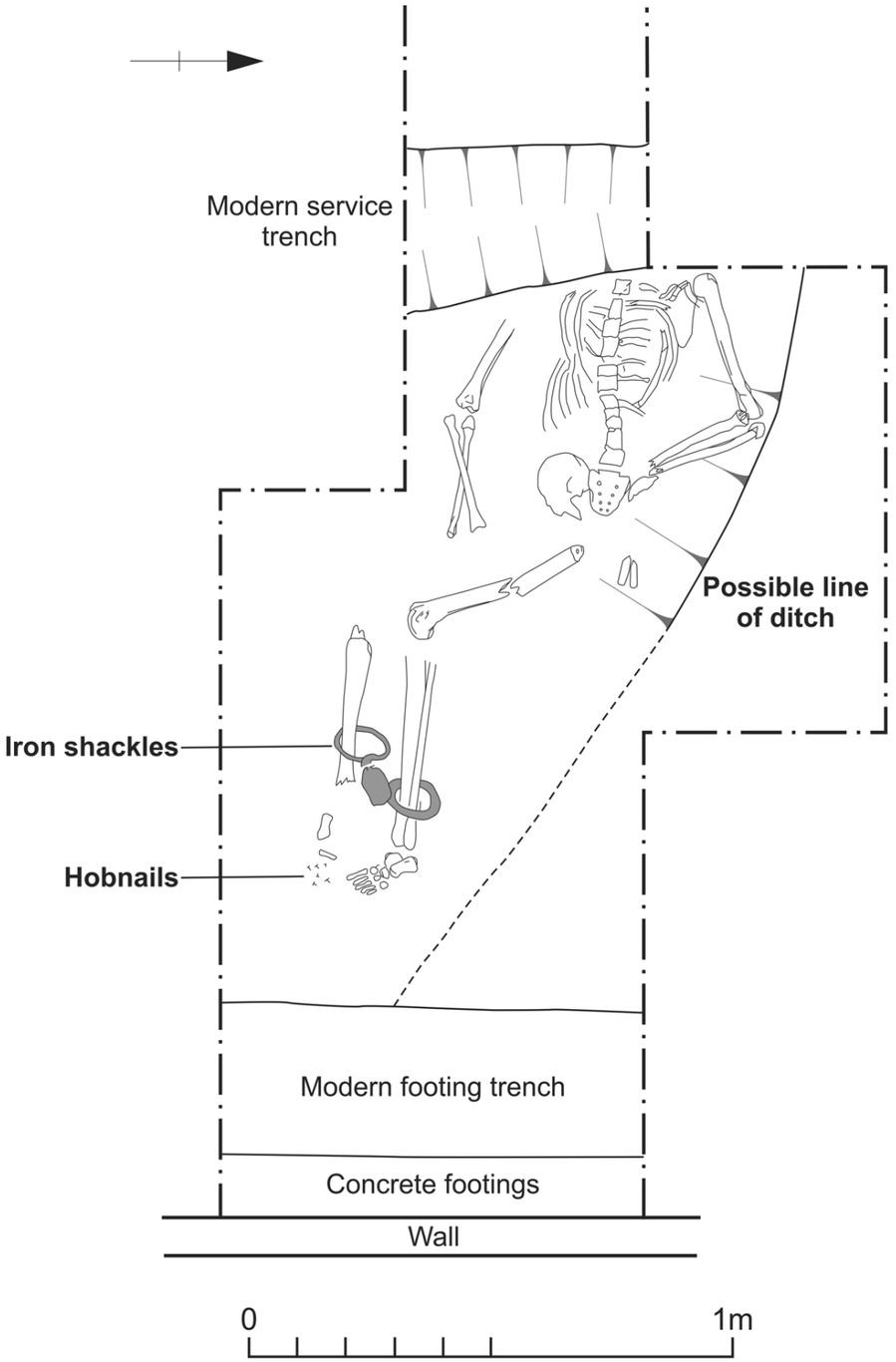


Figure 1.1: Shackled burial from Great Casterton (Rutland, UK), showing iron fetters around the ankles (Thomas, 2021).

Figure 1. 2: Domestic servant quarters at Pompeii (narrow, windowless spaces at rear of houses).

Figure 1. 3: Domestic servants' quarters in Pompeii (servant's bed).

It's a tag for a human. Attached to a metal collar, an enslaved person was forced to wear it. Its Latin inscription reads:

Tene me ne fugia(m) et revoca me ad dom(i)num Viventium in ar(e)a Callisti

Hold me, lest I flee, and return me to my master Viventius on the estate of Callistus

Figure 1. 4: A slavery tag, inscribed with information about return. Rome, Italy .

2- Military and Production Networks

The Roman army relied on both citizen legions and auxiliary troops recruited from across the empire. Auxiliaries served long terms under strict discipline, often far from home, before they could gain citizenship (Coulston & Phillips, 1988; Breeze & Dobson, 2012). Their role was essential on the frontiers, including Hadrian's Wall, where units from Spain, Gaul, and North Africa were stationed.

Military success also depended on craftsmen, armourers, leatherworkers, and carpenters , who maintained weapons, armour, and equipment. Vindolanda's excavations have uncovered leather shoes, tent panels, horse tack, and fragments of weaponry, providing direct evidence of production and supply chains (Bishop & Coulston, 2006). These finds show the army as not just a fighting force, but also a community of labour.

Figure 2.1: Roman chamfron (horse head armour) from Vindolanda and Decorated Roman shield boss (umbo).

Man's marching boot

Pair of children's shoes

Baby boot

Lady's slipper

Figure 2.2: Vindolanda leather shoes (everyday footwear of soldiers and civilians).

Masculus to Cerialis his king, greetings.
Please, my lord, give us instructions for what you want us to do tomorrow. Should we all return with the standard, or just half?
Most fortunate and be well-disposed towards me.
My fellow soldiers have no beer—please order some to be sent.

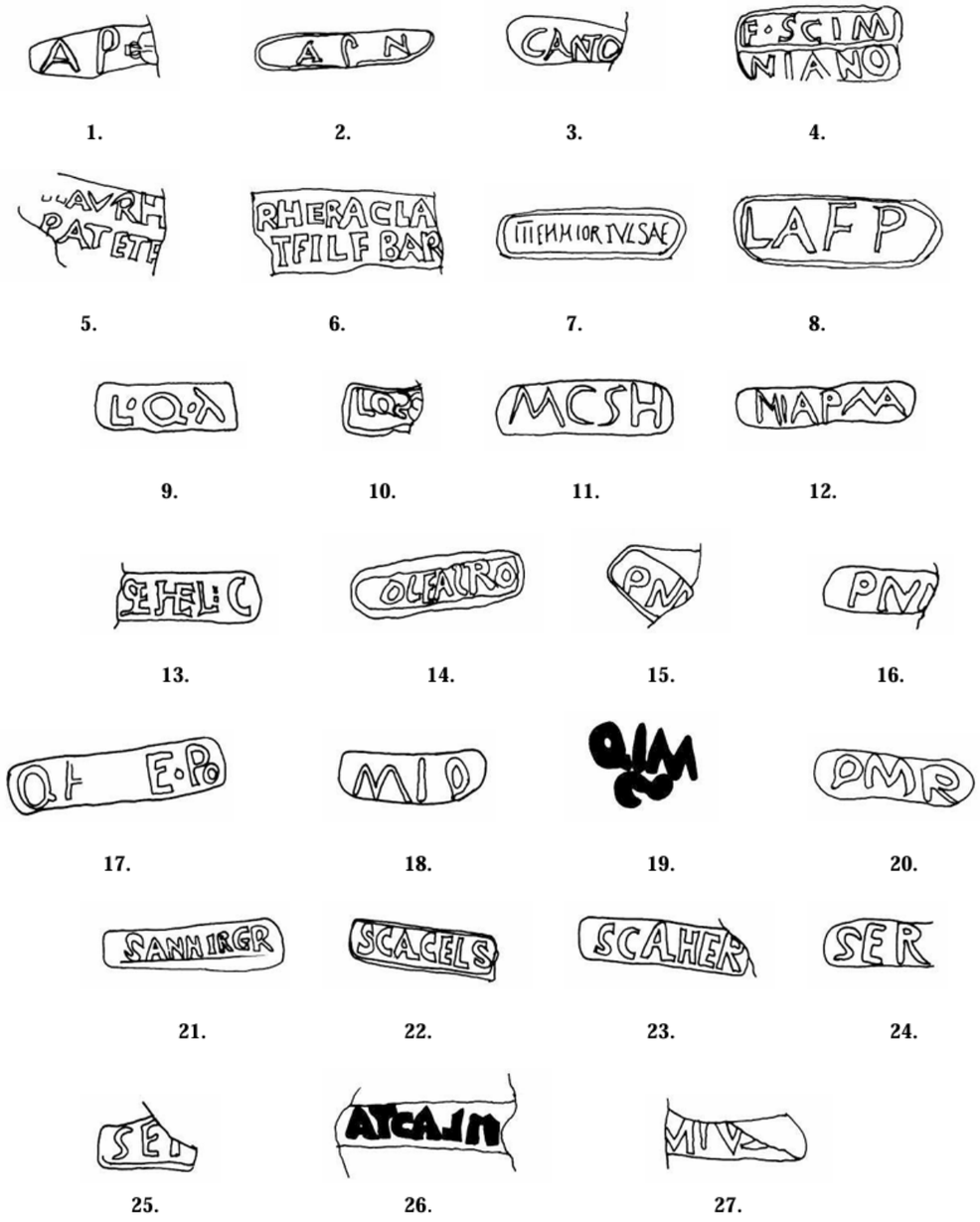
Figure 2.3: Vindolanda Tablet III.628

3- Trade, Resources, and Local Knowledge

Rome's empire was held together by flows of goods and knowledge. Olive oil from Spain, marble from the Mediterranean, and pottery from North Africa travelled thousands of miles to reach Britain (Mattingly, 2006). Stamped amphorae found along Hadrian's Wall, and sigillata pottery from Corbridge and Vindolanda, prove that even remote frontiers were tied into global trade.

The building of Rome's infrastructure relied on quarrying and local expertise. Sites like Haltwhistle Burn reveal unfinished stone blocks and chisel marks left by workers (Russell, 2013). Forts along Hadrian's Wall also adapted to the uneven landscape, reflecting how indigenous knowledge shaped construction (Hingley, 2018). These traces highlight the interaction between imperial systems and local adaptation.

Figure3.1: Stamped Dressel 20 amphora handle fragment from Vindolandaindicative of olive oil imports to Roman forts on the northern frontier.



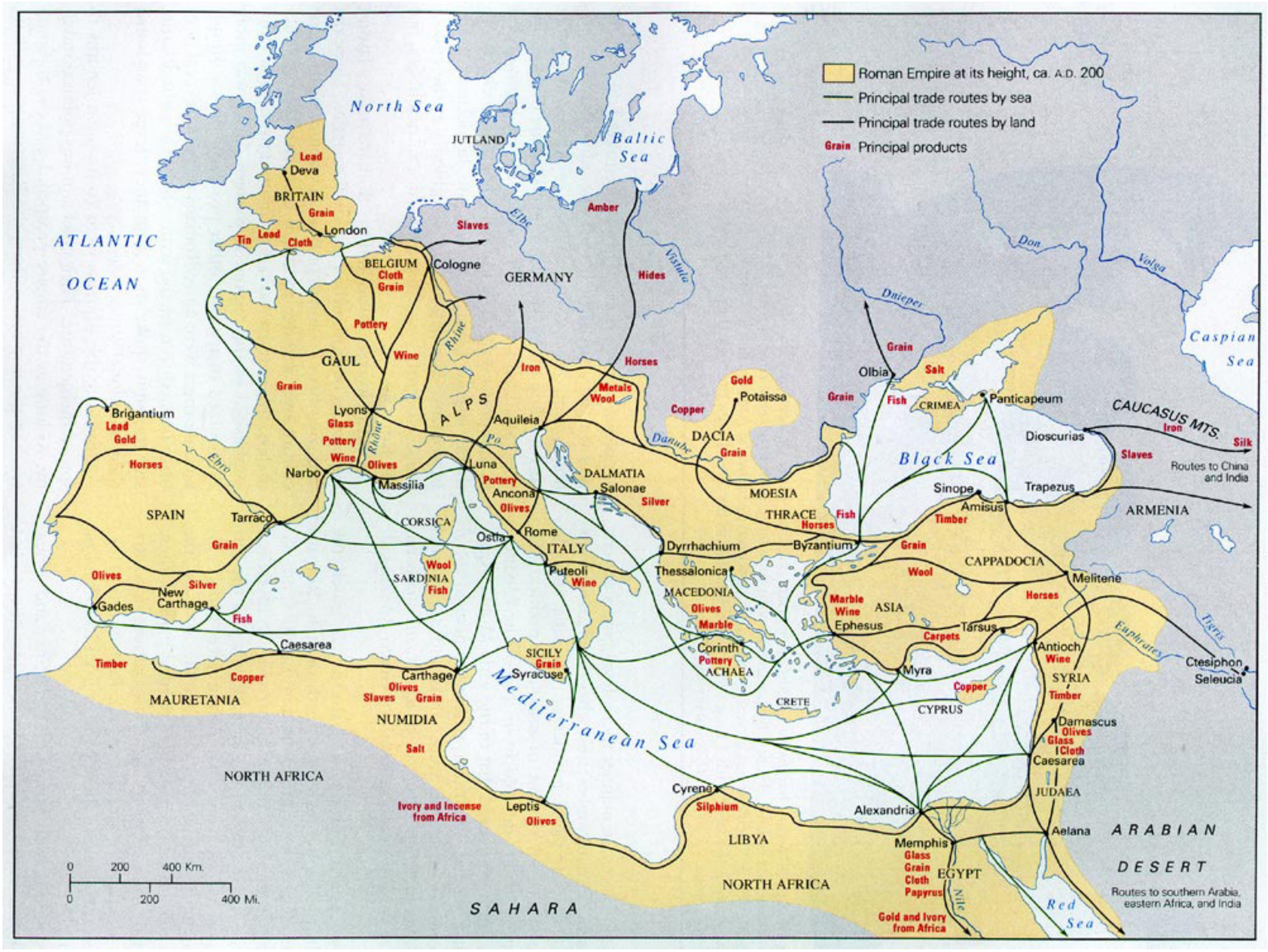


Figure 3.2: Map of Roman trade routes (1st–3rd centuries CE) linking the Mediterranean with Britain, illustrating principal maritime and overland trade corridors..

Figure 3.3: Roman quarry inscriptions at River Gelt (“Written Rock of Gelt”), showing graffiti carved by soldiers into sandstone quarry faces.

4- Women's Power and Agency

Although women in Rome were excluded from political office, some exercised influence through wealth, religion, and civic patronage. One of the best examples is Eumachia of Pompeii, a public priestess of Venus who used her fortune to finance the monumental Building of Eumachia on the Forum's east side. Latin inscriptions (CIL X 810, 813) record her sponsorship, and she was honoured with a statue from the city's fullers' guild (Laurence, 2007; Cooley & Cooley, 2014).

At Vindolanda, writing tablets also show women's presence on the frontier , managing supplies, corresponding with relatives, and maintaining households (Bowman & Thomas, 1994). Together, these sources reveal women not as passive figures, but as active agents within the constraints of Roman society.

Figure 4.1: The Building of Eumachia in Pompeii (Forum façade).

EUMACHIA L F SACERD(os) PUBL(i-
ca), NOMINE SUO ET M(ARCI) NU-
MISTRI FRONT(onis) FILI(…
) CHALCIDICUM, CRYPTAM, PORTICUS CONCOR-
DIAE AUGUSTAE PIETATI SUA PEQUNIA FECIT EADEM-
QUE DEDICAVIT.
This translates as: "Eumachia, daughter of Lucius, public priest-
ess, in her own name and that of her son Marcus Numistrius
Fronto, built at her own expense a chalcidicum, crypta, and
portico dedicated to Concordia Augusta and Pietas, and dedicat-
ed the same."

Figure 4.2: Latin inscription dedicating Eumachia's building (CIL X 810).

Figure 4.3: Vindolanda writing tablets (Claudia Severa's birthday invitation).

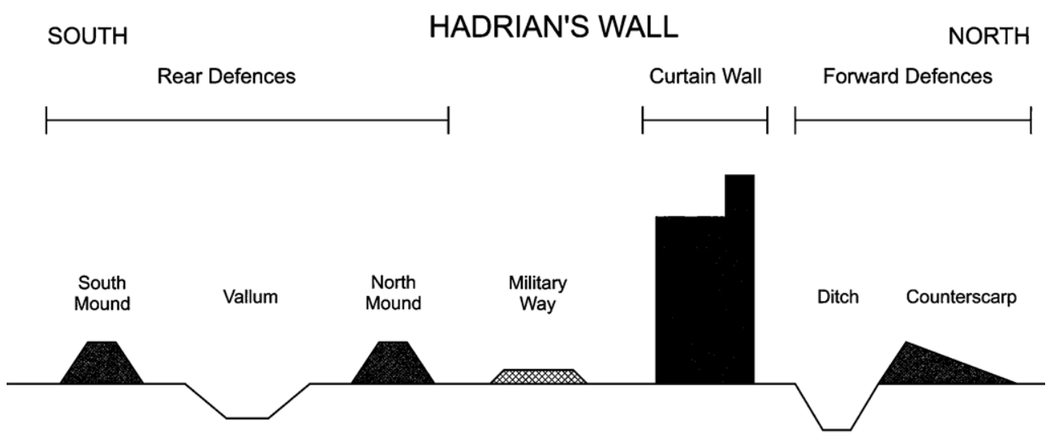
Claudia Severa to her Lepidina greetings. On 11 September, sister, for the day of the celebration of my birthday, I give you a warm invitation to make sure that you come to us, to make the day more enjoyable for me by your arrival, if you are present . Give my greetings to your Cerialis. My Aelius and my little son send him , their greetings. I shall expect you, sister. Farewell, sister, my dearest soul, as I hope to prosper, and hail.

5- Hadrian's Wall: Life on the Edge of Empire

Built in AD 122 by Emperor Hadrian, the Wall marked the northern edge of Roman Britain. Stretching 73 miles from Wallsend in the east to Bowness-on-Solway in the west, it functioned as both a defence and a means of controlling movement across the frontier (Breeze & Dobson, 2000).

Along its length were forts such as Vindolanda, Housesteads, Chesters, and Birdoswald, housing soldiers from across the empire. Between them, milecastles and watchtowers created a constant chain of surveillance. Civilian settlements grew around the forts, with traders, families, and craftsmen forming busy communities. Archaeological studies show that the frontier was not an empty barrier but a dynamic zone where Roman and local cultures mixed.

Vindolanda, just south of the Wall, is especially significant because of its organic preservation. The wooden writing tablets, leather shoes, textiles, and personal letters found there provide unparalleled insight into everyday life , from supply lists to invitations to birthday parties. These small, fragile finds give voice to people often missing from Rome's official history.



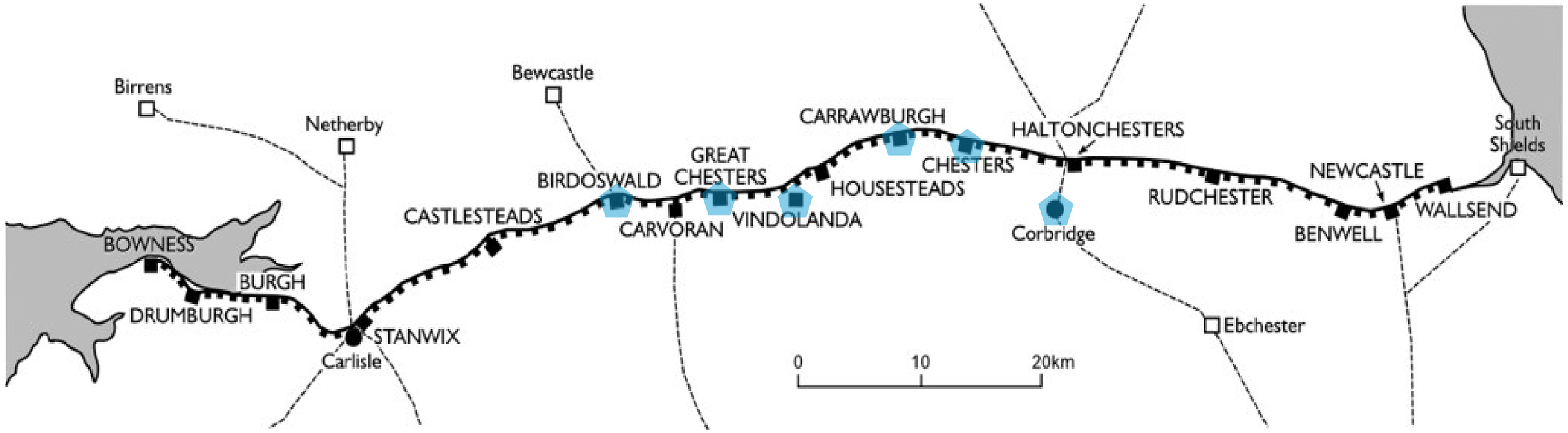
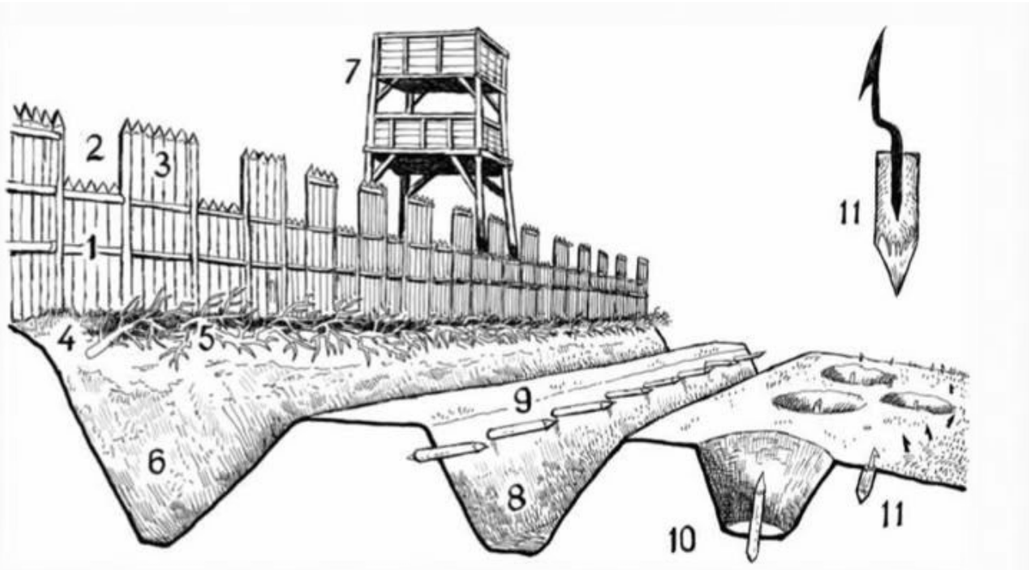


Figure 5.1 : Map of Hadrian's Wall across northern Britain.



Top: Cross-section of the Roman fieldworks at Alesia: 1: Lorica (parapet) made of palisade poles; 2: Pinna (crenel or void); 3: Merlon (upstanding solid sections of a parapet between the crenels, behind which the defenders could shelter); 4: Vallum or agger (earth wall); 5: Cervi (sharpened tree branches acting as obstacle); 6: Fossa (ditch) 7: Turris (tower with artillery); 8: Second ditch; 9: Cippe (sharp poles); 10: Lilium (wolf's pit-concealed interlocking conical excavations about 2 meters in diameter and 2.5 meters deep in which one or more dangerous sharpened stakes or spikes were placed); 11: Stimulus (a sharp barbed iron hook fixed on a short stake stuck in the ground, concealed in grass and planted in great number around a position,

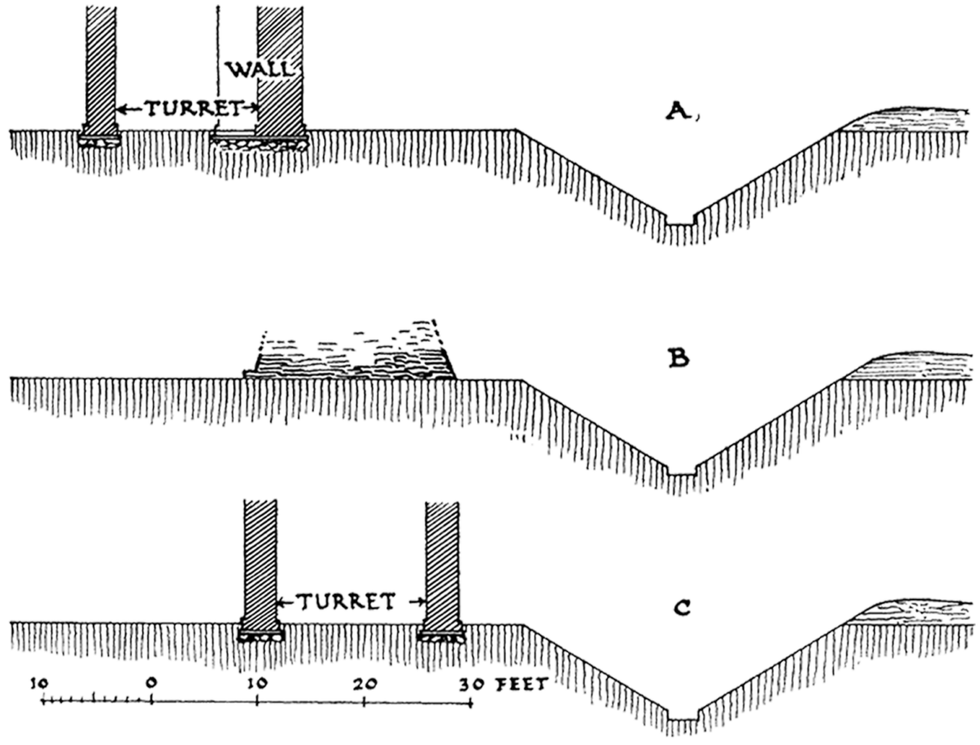


DIAGRAM TO ILLUSTRATE THE ABNORMAL POSITION OF TURRETS BETWEEN WALL BOWERS AND BANKSBURN. A = NORMAL RELATION OF WALL AND TURRET TO DITCH. B = RELATION OF THE TURF WALL TO DITCH. C = RELATION OF TURRETS 51A, 51B AND 52A TO DITCH.

Summary

The historical and archaeological record reveals that Rome's empire was sustained by the lives of enslaved workers, soldiers, craftsmen, traders, women, and locals whose contributions were crucial yet often overlooked. Sites such as Vindolanda and Hadrian's Wall provide the evidence , from shackles to writing tablets , that informs this project. The Backstage Museum translates these fragments into architectural spaces, designed to shift focus from Rome's monuments to its hidden human realities.

Theoretical Framework

1- Heritage and Power

Heritage is never neutral. As Laurajane Smith (2006) argues, heritage is not simply about preserving monuments or artefacts but about selective storytelling , shaping cultural memory through what is highlighted and what is ignored. Roman history as commonly presented reflects this process: emperors, generals, and monuments dominate, while the lives of labourers, slaves, and auxiliary soldiers remain largely invisible.
Michel Foucault's (1977) ideas about power and discipline also help frame this project. In Rome, power was inscribed not only in law and armies but also in space: monumental architecture projected authority, while confinement, surveillance, and punishment-controlled individuals. Reading heritage sites through this lens reveals how architecture both represents and enforces systems of power.

2- Architecture as Narrative

Architecture does not only shelter; it communicates. As Christian Norberg-Schulz (1980) describes, architecture provides a sense of place and carries cultural meaning through its spatial forms. Freeman Tilden (2008) similarly emphasises interpretation: heritage becomes powerful when it connects people emotionally to the past.
For this thesis, architecture is treated as a narrative device , a way to tell stories through space, material, and light. Bernard Tschumi (1994) shows how architecture can use fragmentation, disjunction, and even discomfort as part of its meaning. This idea underpins the design's shift from open, symmetrical spaces to narrow, oppressive ones , embodying the move from Rome's official history to its backstage realities.

3- Shadows, Absence, and Performance

The project also engages with the idea of shadows , both literal and metaphorical. Juhani Pallasmaa (2005) highlights how light and shadow shape atmosphere and evoke memory. Absence and ambiguity can be as powerful as presence.
This resonates with the archaeological record of Rome's marginalised groups, which often survives only in fragments: a broken shoe, a wooden tablet, a set of shackles. These absences are not shortcomings to be corrected but conditions to be acknowledged. By designing with shadows and fragments, the project foregrounds what is missing as much as what is known.
Mike Pearson and Michael Shanks (2001) extend this idea by arguing that archaeology and performance are deeply connected. Both interpret traces of the past in ways that are necessarily partial. Performance, they suggest, is not just a representation of the past but a creative engagement with absence, filling gaps through imagination.
Rebecca Schneider (2011) similarly emphasises that reenactment is always incomplete. Rather than faithfully repeating history, it exposes silences and uncertainties. In her view, the body itself can act as an archive, carrying memory, trauma, and potential.
These perspectives align with this project's design approach. The Backstage Museum is not a literal reconstruction of Roman life but a performative re-staging of its traces. Through architecture, it highlights absence, creates atmosphere, and positions visitors as participants in a theatre of memory , moving through spaces that are as much about what is missing as what is present.

4- Postmodernism as Lens

Postmodern architecture often borrowed from classical Rome, reusing arches, columns, and façades to signal cultural continuity. Charles Jencks (1984) described this as "double-coding": architecture that speaks on two levels, offering familiar references to the general public while also communicating irony or critique to a more critical audience.
This thesis draws on postmodernism not as a style to imitate, but as a lens to frame critique. The interest lies in its ability to use the language of power, monumental façades, symmetry, authority , and simultaneously undermine it. Postmodernism provides a way to reflect on how Rome is remembered, celebrated, and sometimes romanticised, while opening space to question the hidden realities behind the image.

Together, these ideas frame the Backstage Museum as an architectural performance that critiques Rome's official image while giving presence to lives lived in its shadows.

Methodology & Design Approach

This thesis uses architectural design as a research method. Rather than presenting history only through texts or objects, it explores how space, light, and material can interpret the lives of those usually absent from Roman narratives. Archaeological evidence provides the fragments, while design translates them into spatial experiences. In this way, the museum becomes both archive and critique: a place where official histories are confronted with the human realities that supported them.

1- Architecture & Archaeology as Research

This project treats architecture not only as an outcome but also as a method of inquiry. Design becomes a means of asking questions about the past, particularly about those whose lives survive only in fragments. Rather than seeking to reconstruct Roman life in detail, the project uses architecture to translate artefacts into spatial experiences.

Archaeology provides the material starting points. Finds such as shackles from Great Casterton, leather shoes and writing tablets from Vindolanda, or household items from Pompeii and Herculaneum are fragments that hint at broader stories. On their own, these objects cannot fully tell the lives of enslaved workers, auxiliary soldiers, or domestic servants. However, when reinterpreted through design, they can inspire environments that evoke the conditions in which these groups lived.

Here, architecture serves as a research tool by examining how space, light, and material can embody these conditions. Shackles become an index for compressed and enclosed space; shoes and tent panels suggest the scale and atmosphere of workshops; amphorae map the routes of trade. In this way, archaeological evidence is not simply displayed behind glass but becomes instrumental in shaping how visitors move, feel, and reflect.

By combining archaeology and design, the project creates a dialogue between evidence and imagination. Archaeology grounds the work in physical reality, while architecture opens up emotional and interpretive possibilities. Together, they form an approach that captures the hidden aspects of Roman life without claiming a complete reconstruction.

2- Site Integration: Vindolanda & Hadrian's Wall

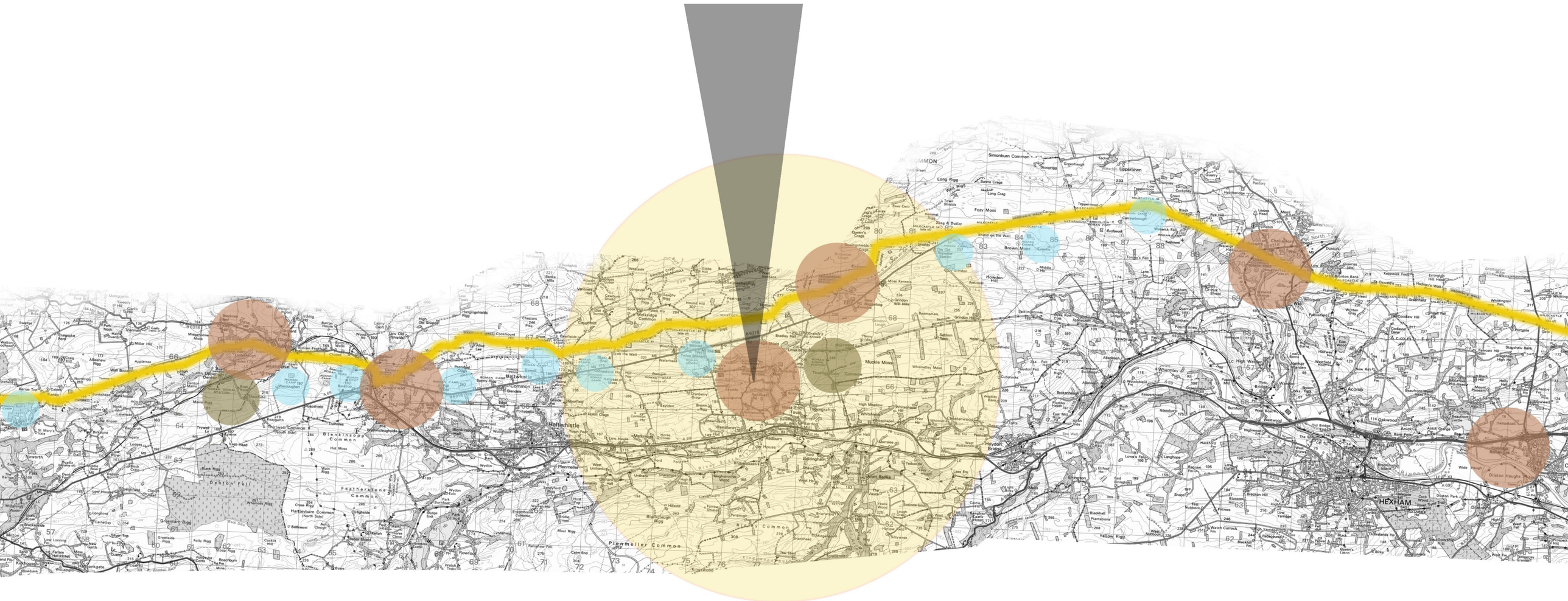
Vindolanda was chosen because it preserves both the monumental and the intimate sides of Rome's frontier. On one hand, it stood alongside Hadrian's Wall, a vast symbol of imperial authority stretching 73 miles across the landscape. On the other, it has yielded fragile writing tablets, preserved in waterlogged soil, that capture personal letters and supply notes in the voices of ordinary people (Bowman & Thomas, 1994). These thin wooden planks act as echoes of daily life, carrying sound and memory across centuries.

A research visit to Vindolanda was essential to this methodology. Experiencing the site directly gave an embodied sense of scale and setting: the compressed remains of barracks, the shifting levels of the terrain, and the constant exposure to weather at the frontier. The visit emphasised both the immense labour that sustained the Wall and the fragile traces left of the people behind it.

Breeze and Dobson (2000) describe Hadrian's Wall as both a defensive line and a stage of imperial performance. Vindolanda, in contrast, reveals the backstage world of barracks, workshops, and households. This duality directly informs the design, allowing the museum to balance the spectacle of Rome's "front stage" with the realities of its supporting cast.

Figure 2.1: an Imaginary image of Vindolanda site in the past

Vindolanda Fort



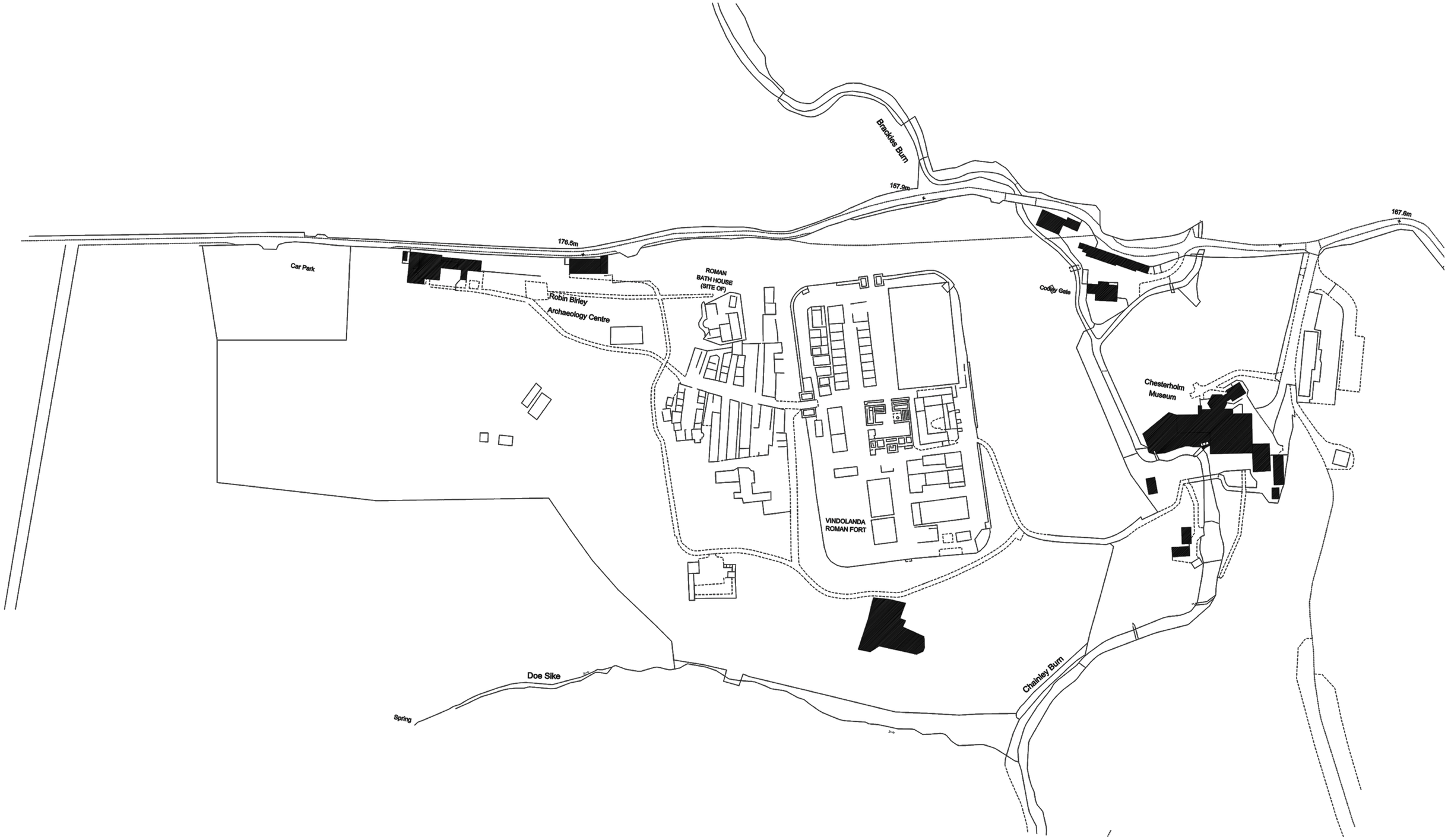

Brackies Burn
157.9m
176.5m
167.6m
Car Park
Robin Birley
Archaeology Centre
ROMAN
BATH HOUSE
(SITE OF)
Cocley Gate
Chesterholm
Museum
VINDOLANDA
ROMAN FORT
Doe Sike
Spring
Chainley Burn

Figure 3.4: Personal photo from the site visit (demonstrating atmosphere and scale).

3- Indexical Drawing

Drawing in this project is not used to reconstruct Roman life as it might have been, but to explore how fragments of evidence can shape space. Following James Corner's (1999) idea of mapping as a creative and interpretive act, drawings here operate as indexes, connecting artefacts to architectural conditions rather than attempting literal representation. Each gallery is developed through this approach. Shackles from Great Casterton are linked to narrow, enclosed spaces that convey physical restraint. Leather shoes and tent panels from Vindolanda inform the scale and atmosphere of a workshop.

Amphorae stamped with makers' marks suggest circulation routes that become mapped into linear movement through the museum. Inscriptions, such as those dedicated to Eumachia at Pompeii, become the basis for monumental surfaces that embody female civic agency. These drawings act as diagrams of evidence translated into spatial form. Plans and sections show how fragments are positioned within larger architectural frameworks, while perspectives test how visitors might experience light, texture, and compression. The method ensures that the design remains grounded in archaeology without reducing it to static display. In this way, drawing becomes an investigative tool , less about accuracy than about interpretation. It visualises the gaps as much as the evidence, allowing absence to have presence in the design.

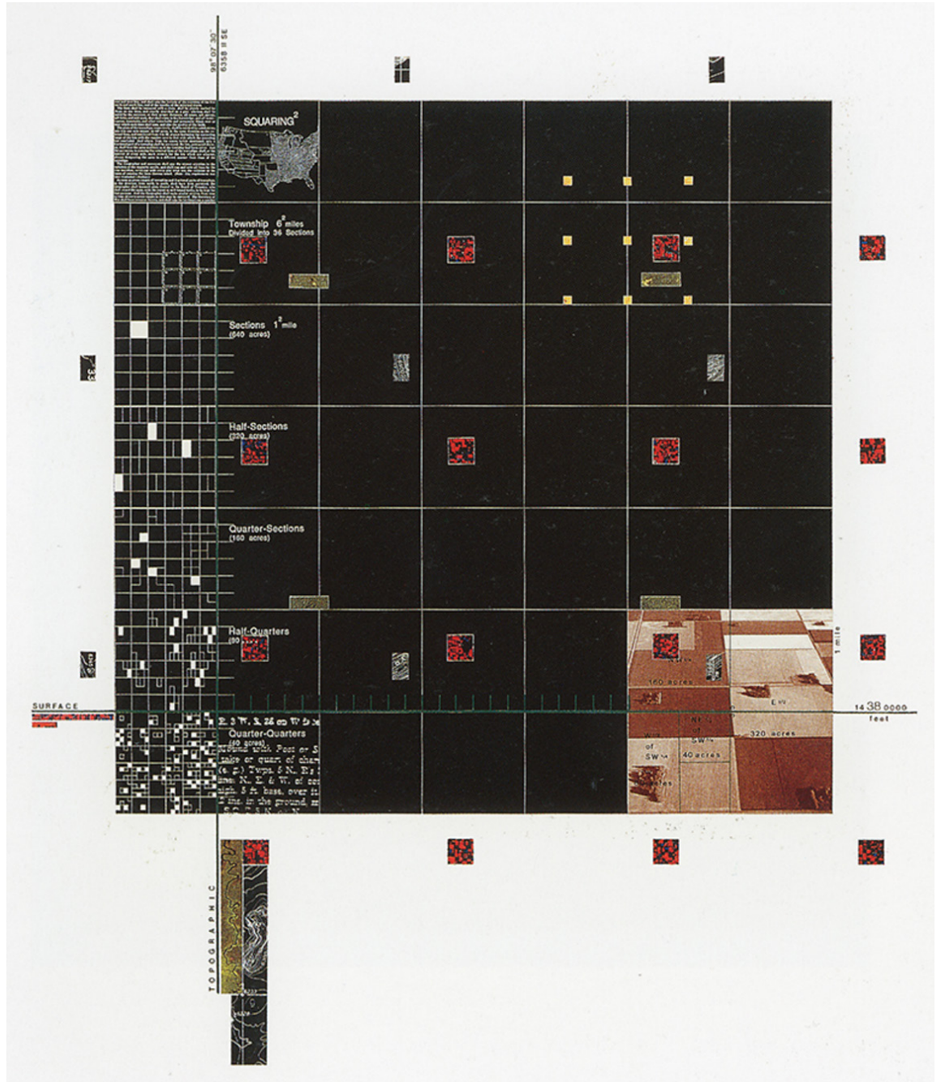
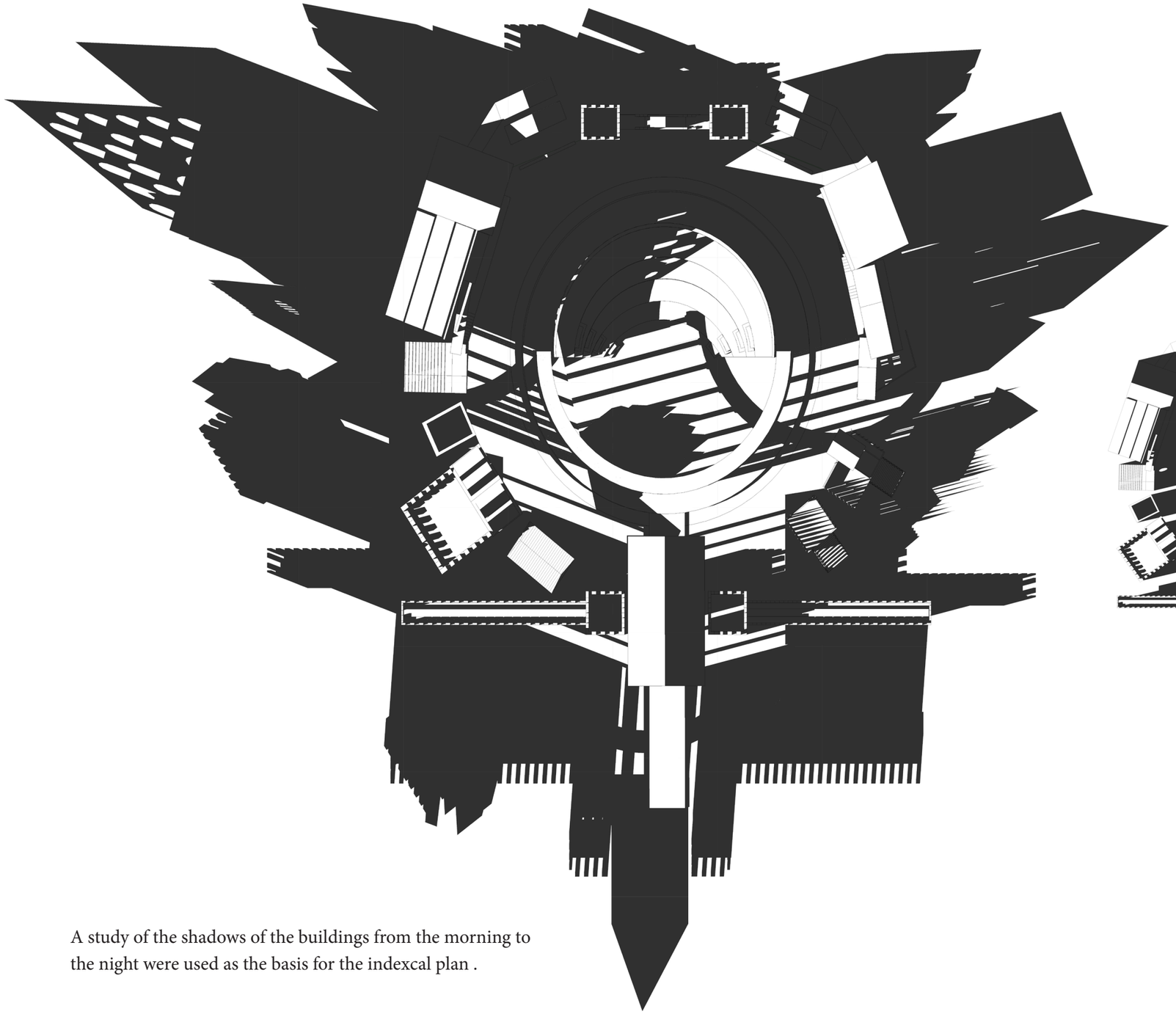
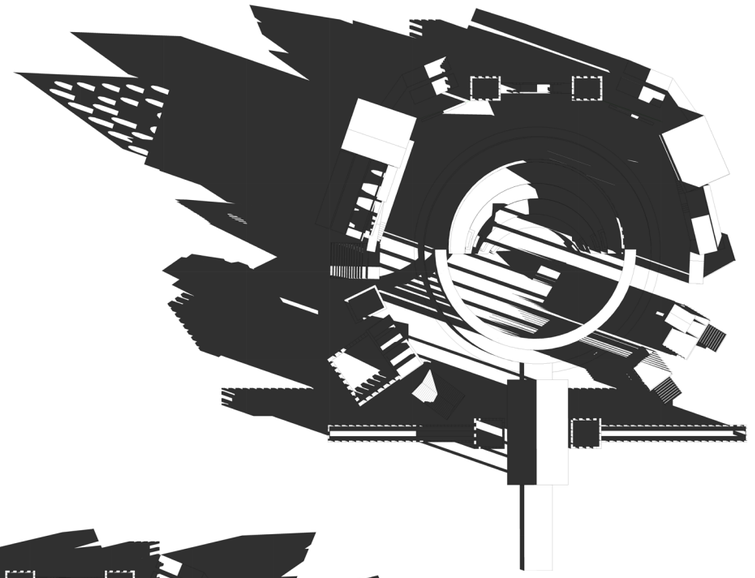
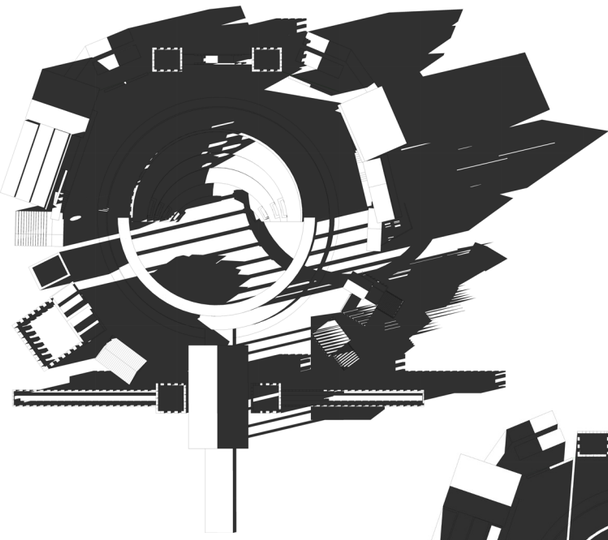
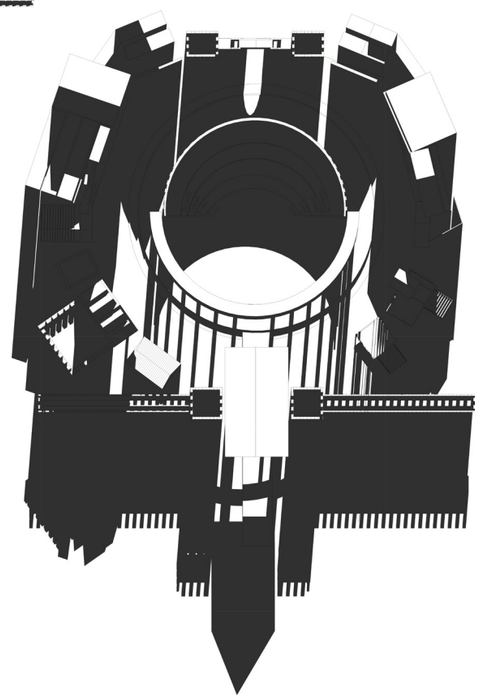


Figure 3.1: James Corner's mapping diagram (as precedent).

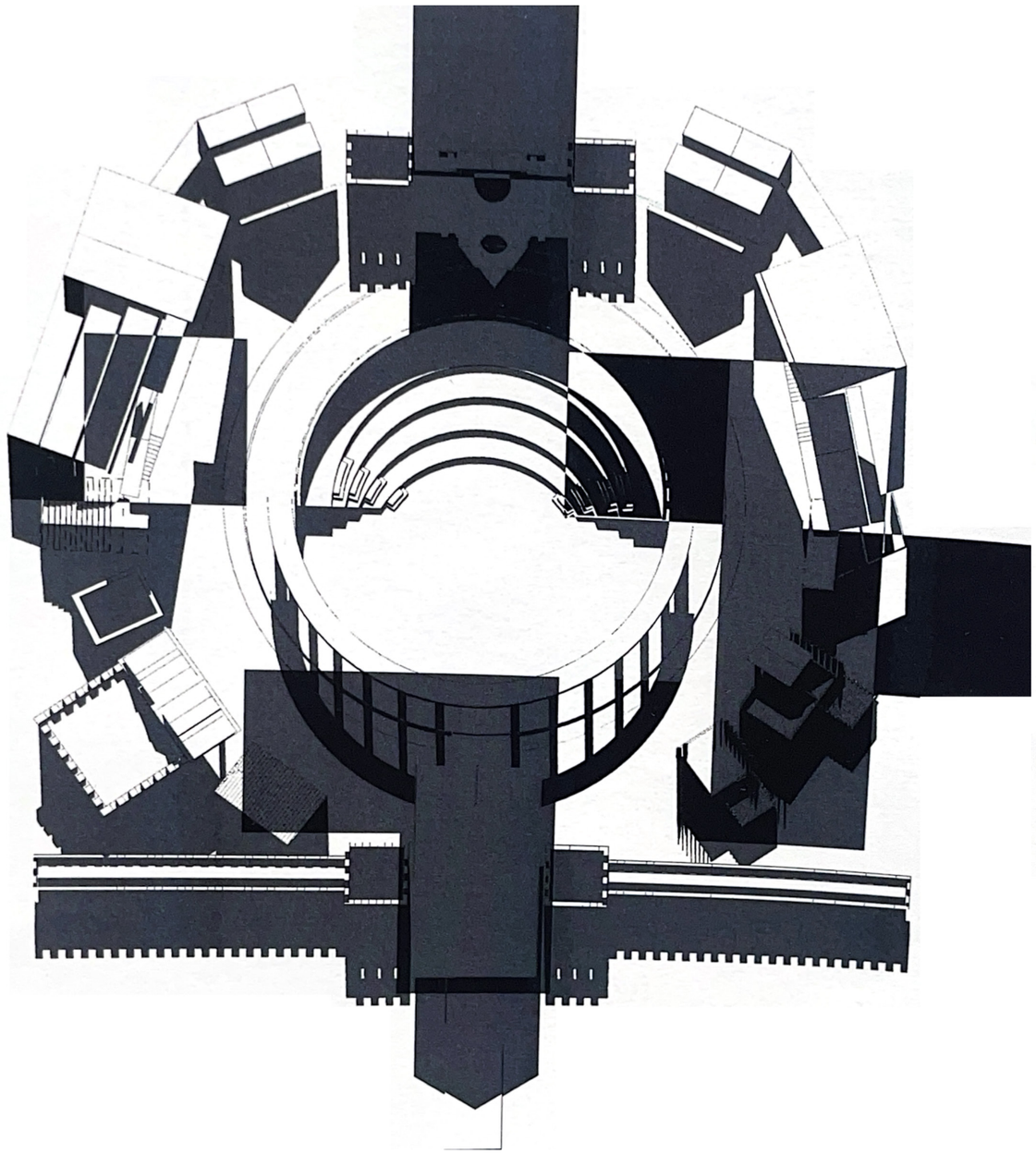








A study of the shadows of the buildings from the morning to the night were used as the basis for the indexcal plan .



4- Postmodern Lens: Irony & Critique

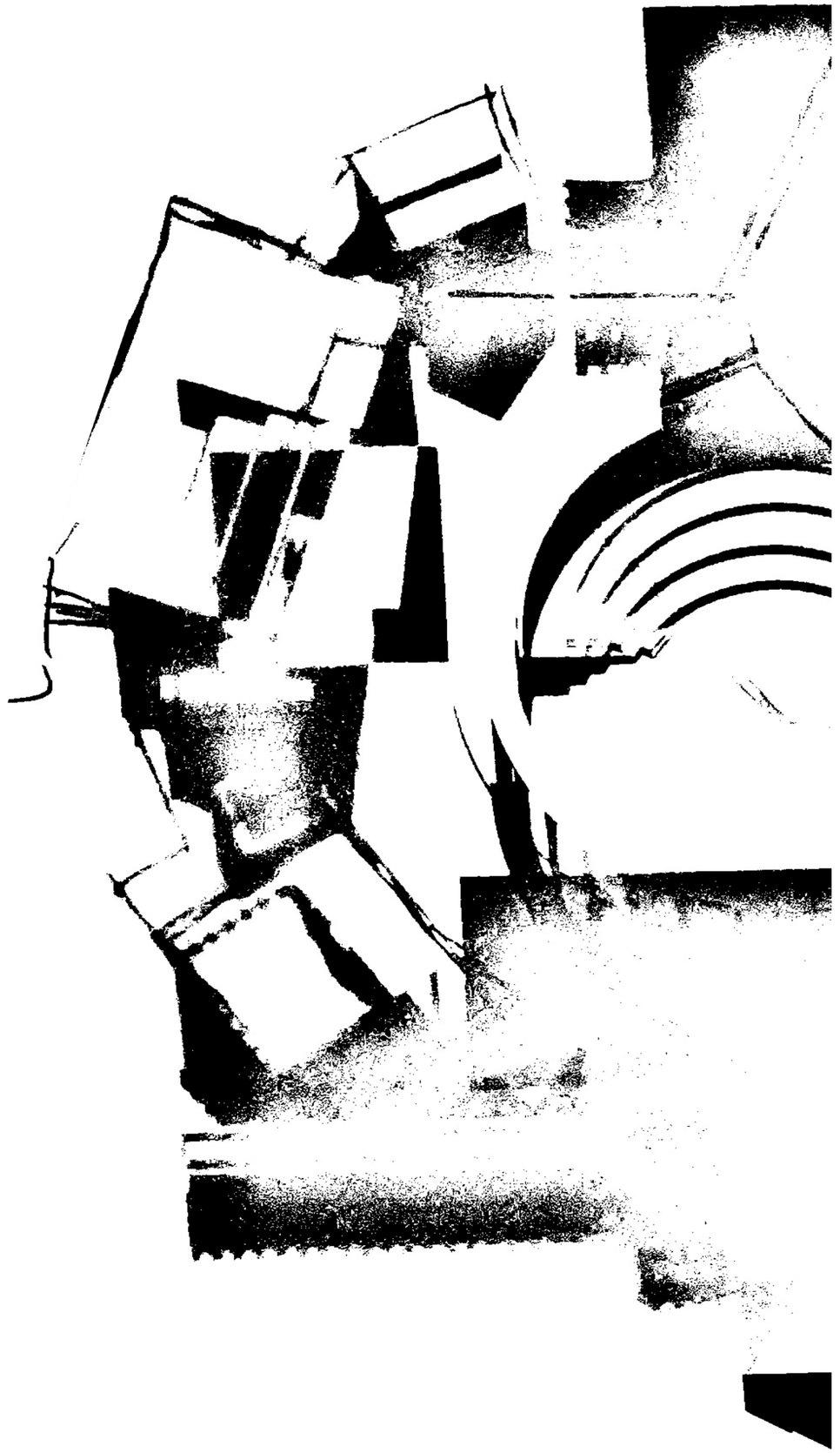
This project adopts postmodernism as a method of critique. It is a strategy of irony, exposing what lies behind the façade and redirecting attention to the hidden lives that sustained the empire. At its centre is a 360° rotating theatre: a polished postmodern façade that presents Rome as it wanted to be seen , monumental, symmetrical, and authoritative. Yet this façade is only a stage set. Behind it, concealed galleries reveal the lives of enslaved workers, auxiliary soldiers, servants, and women whose labour sustained Rome.

The irony lies in turning Rome's own architectural language against itself. The front stage celebrates power, while the backstage exposes its human cost. Through Jencks's notion of double-coding, the design can both reproduce the grandeur of Rome and simultaneously question it.

Figure 4.1: Example of postmodern (e.g., Piazza d'Italia by Charles Moore)

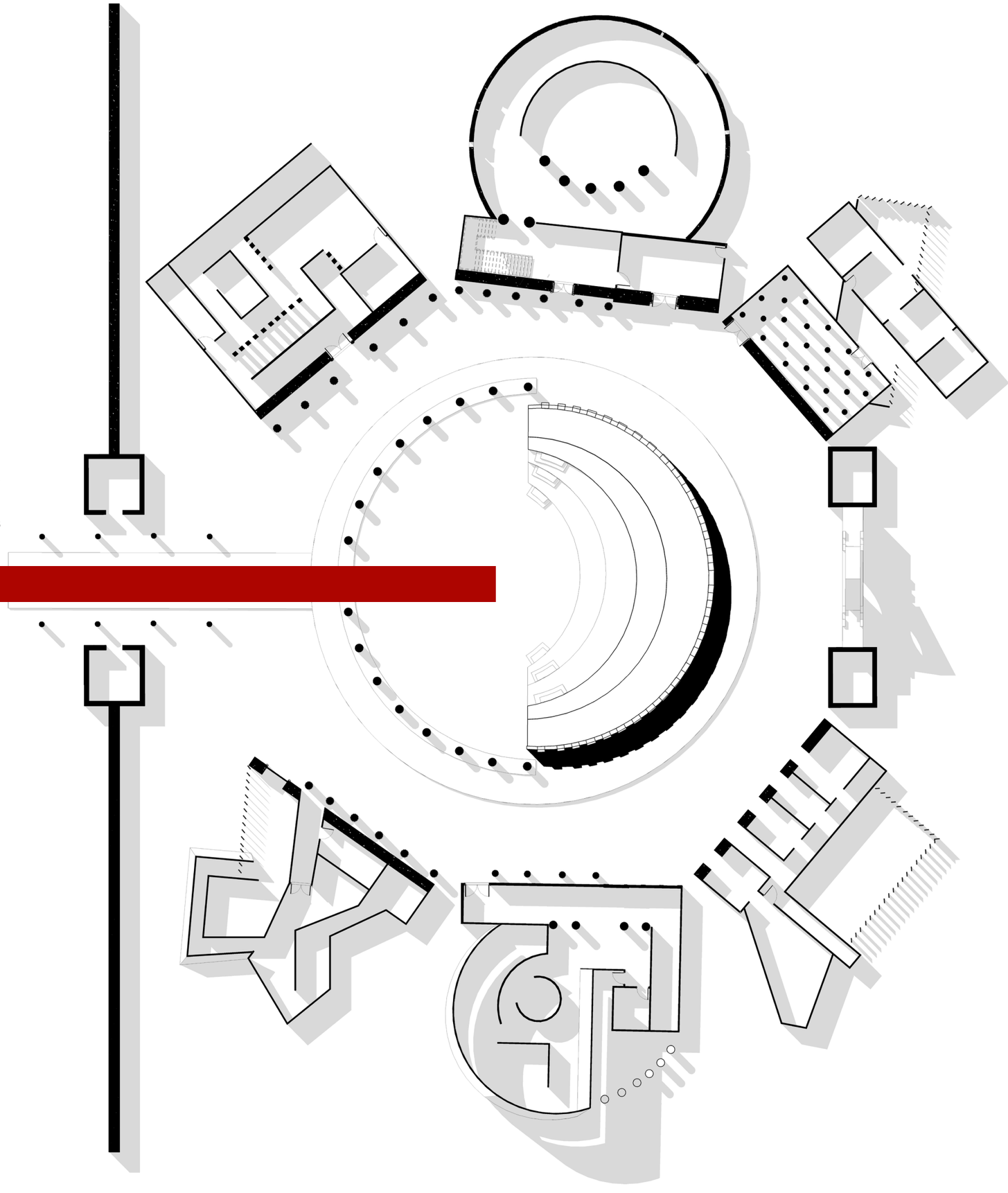
The methodology combines archaeology, site, drawing, and critical theory. It treats architecture not as reconstruction but as interpretation, using fragments of evidence to design spaces that evoke Rome's backstage realities. By grounding the design in Vindolanda, indexing evidence through drawing, and using postmodern theatricality with irony, the project creates a museum that is both archive and critique.

Design Concept: Shifting Perspectives of Power

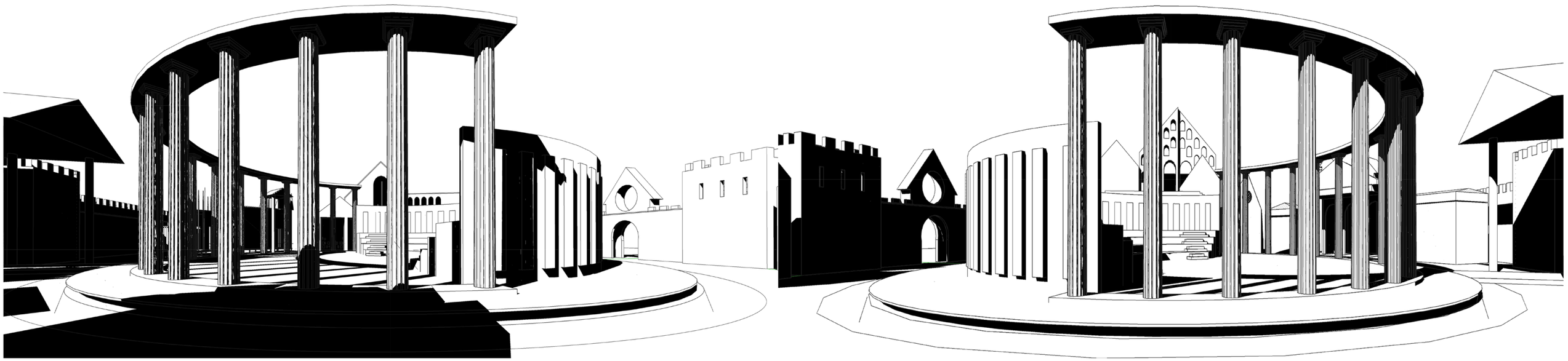


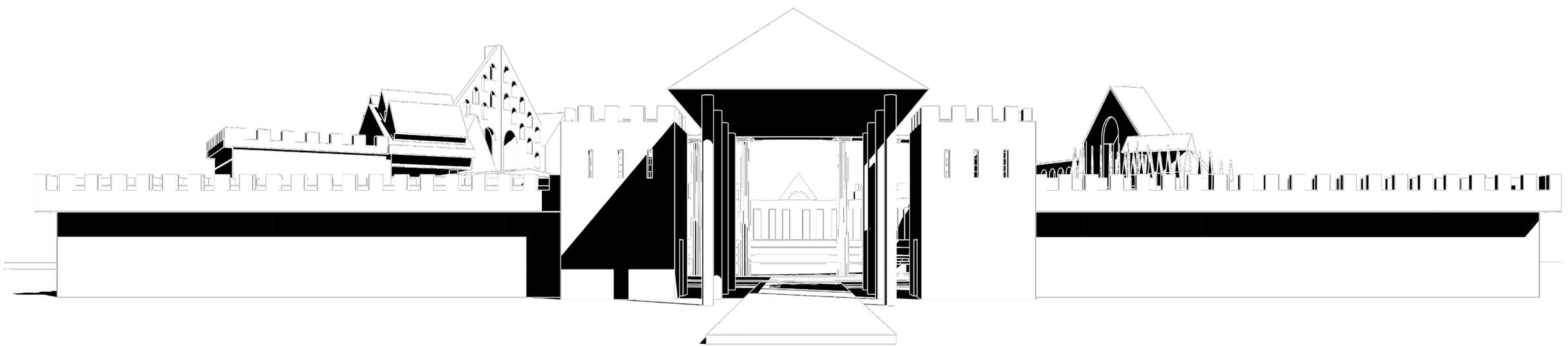
The project is set within the site of Vindolanda, on the frontier of Hadrian's Wall. Visitors begin at the fort's gate, a threshold that echoes the Wall itself. Here, they can purchase tickets for the theatre or choose a quieter route that bypasses the spectacle, leading directly into the fort. This dual entry already hints at the project's central theme: there is always more than one way to enter history.

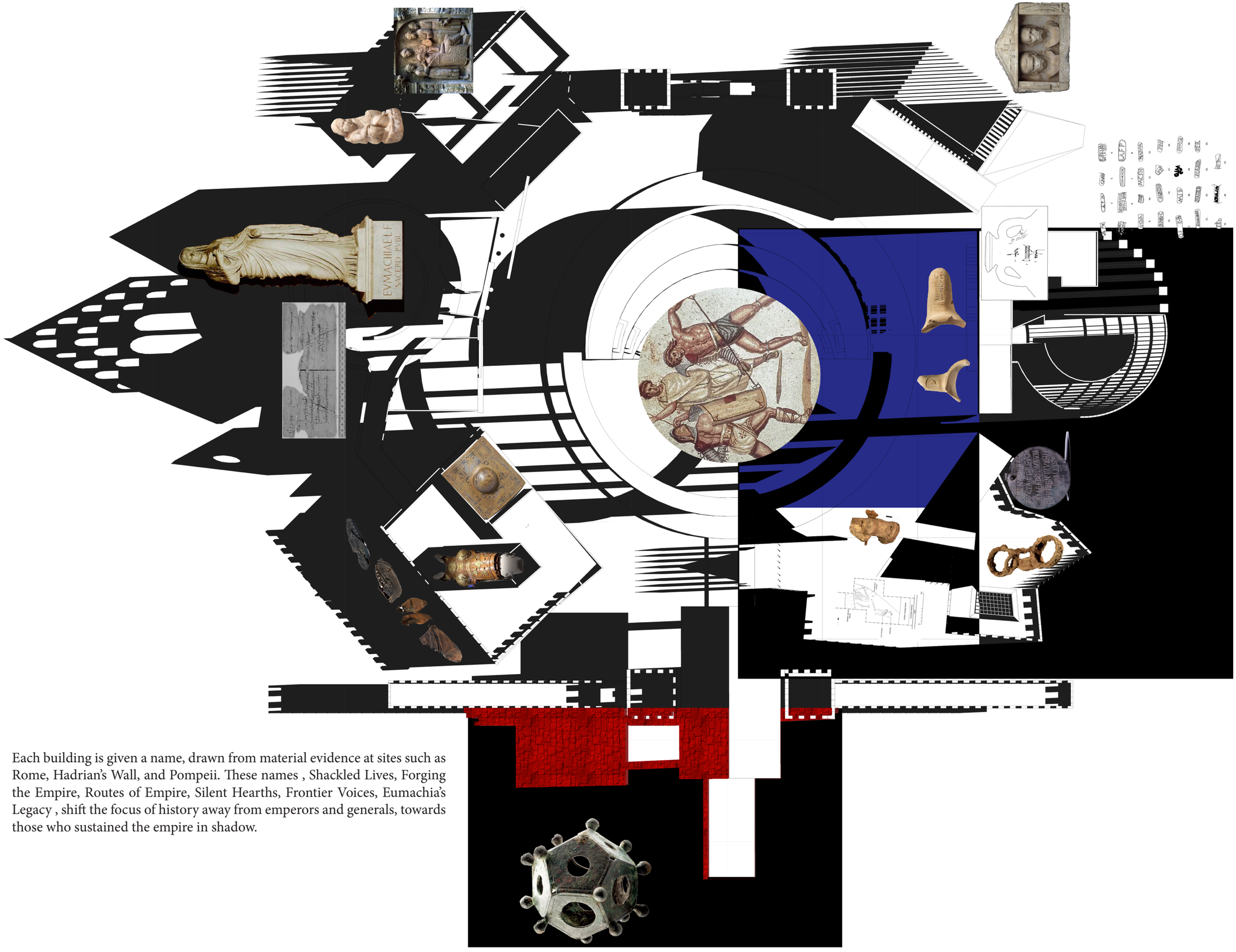
At the heart of the design is a 360-degree revolving theatre. This structure presents an idealised vision of Rome, a polished façade in the postmodern style that exaggerates symmetry, order, and authority. It is Rome as it wanted to be seen monumental, triumphant, and eternal.



Yet this is only the front stage. Behind these façades, a series of hidden galleries create a sharp contrast. Here, the architecture shifts into darkness, compression, and raw materiality. Narrow corridors, uneven floors, and fractured light reveal the backstage realities of the empire: punishment, labour, domestic service, trade, and the limited but significant agency of women. These spaces are not reconstructions but indexical environments, each one grounded in archaeological fragments , shackles, amphorae, servant quarters, inscriptions , reinterpreted as spatial conditions.



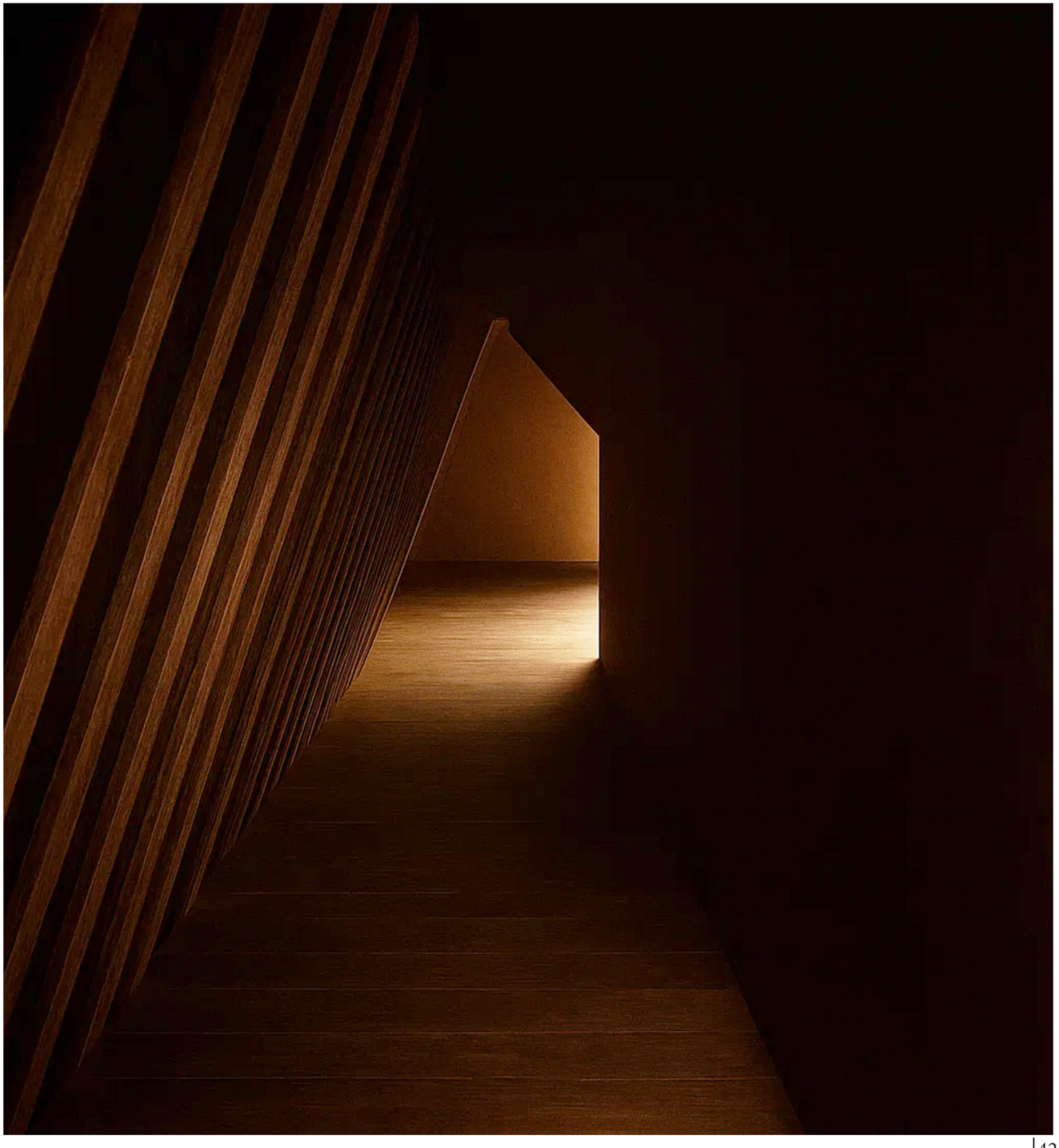


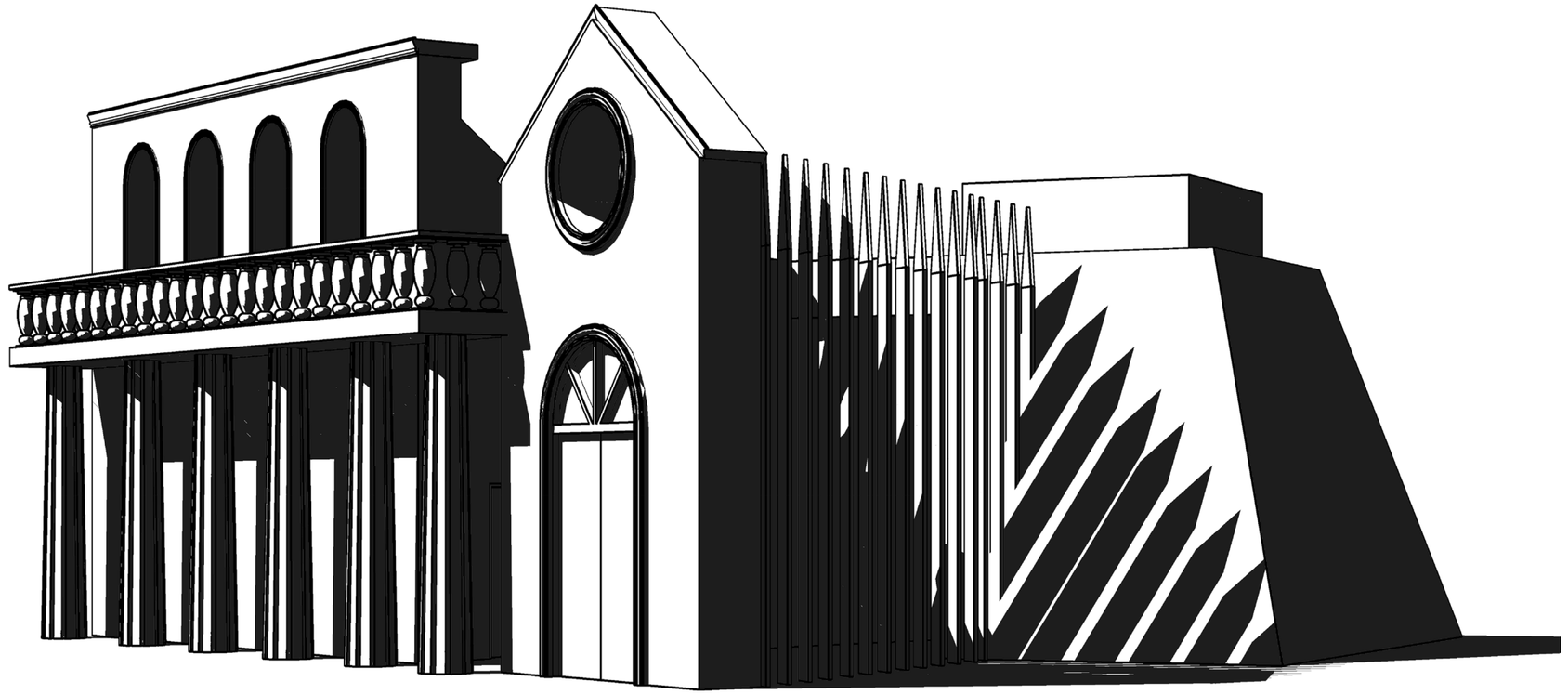


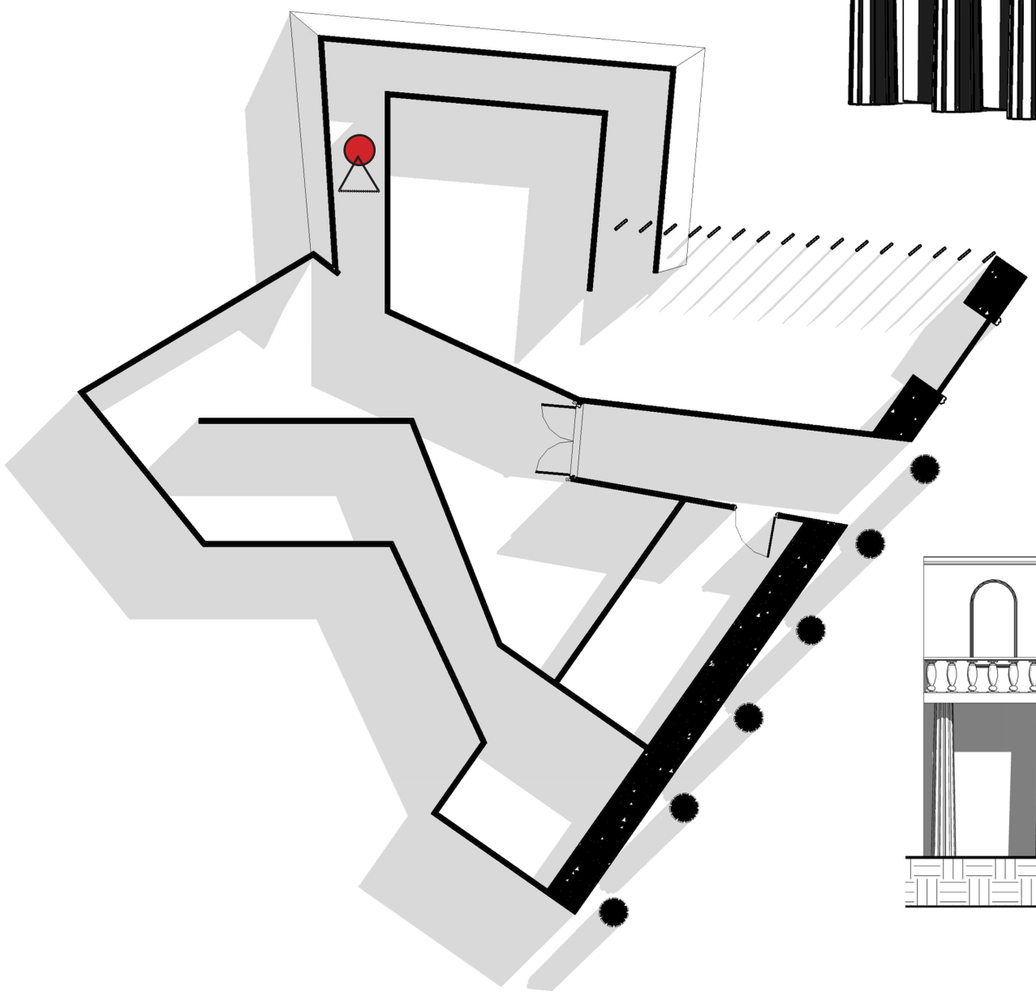
Each building is given a name, drawn from material evidence at sites such as Rome, Hadrian's Wall, and Pompeii. These names , Shackled Lives, Forging the Empire, Routes of Empire, Silent Hearths, Frontier Voices, Eumachia's Legacy , shift the focus of history away from emperors and generals, towards those who sustained the empire in shadow.

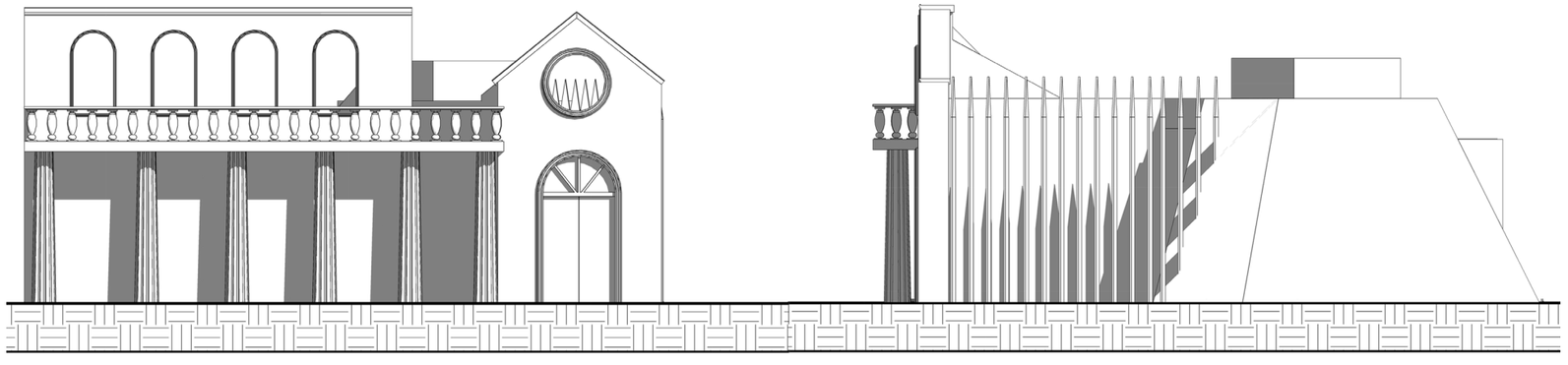
Shackled Lives

Inspired by shackled burials such as the fettered skeleton from Great Casterton (Thomas, 2021), this gallery explores enslavement and punishment in Rome. Archaeological evidence of iron fetters, legal texts, and references to corporal discipline inform the design. Narrow, dim corridors compress the body, forcing visitors into uncomfortable positions. Light falls only in shafts, illuminating shackles mounted as indexical artefacts. The space evokes control, fear, and the constant threat of restraint.



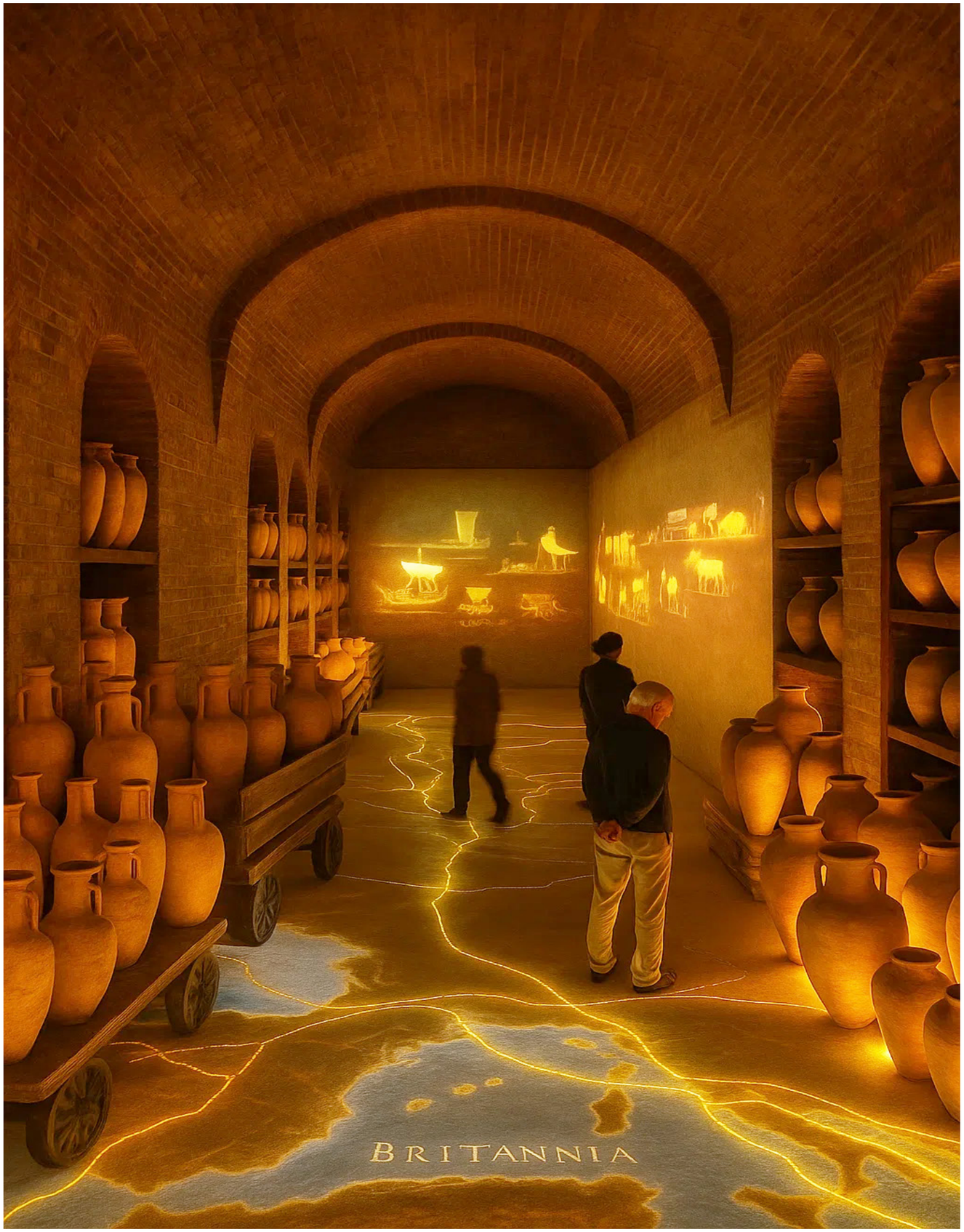


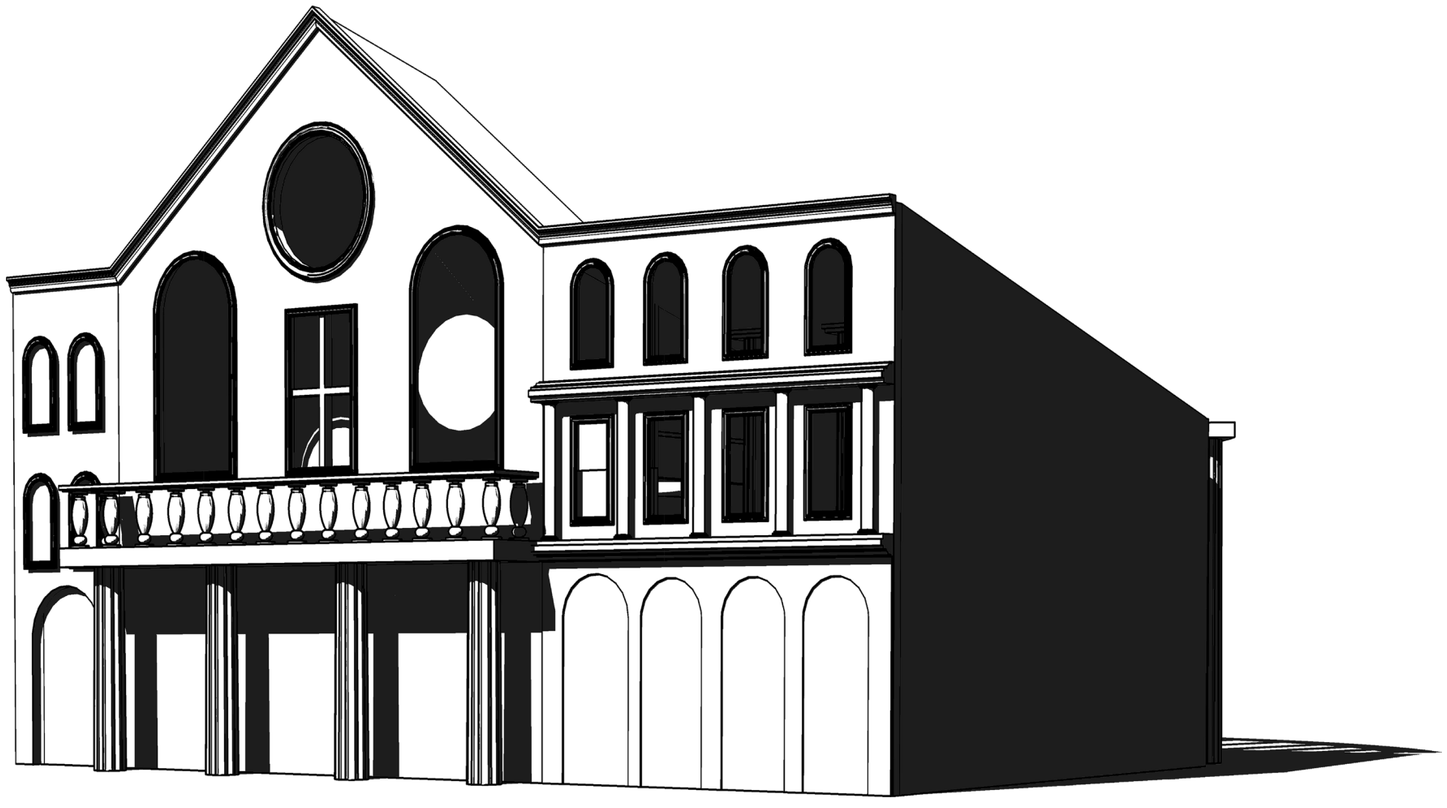


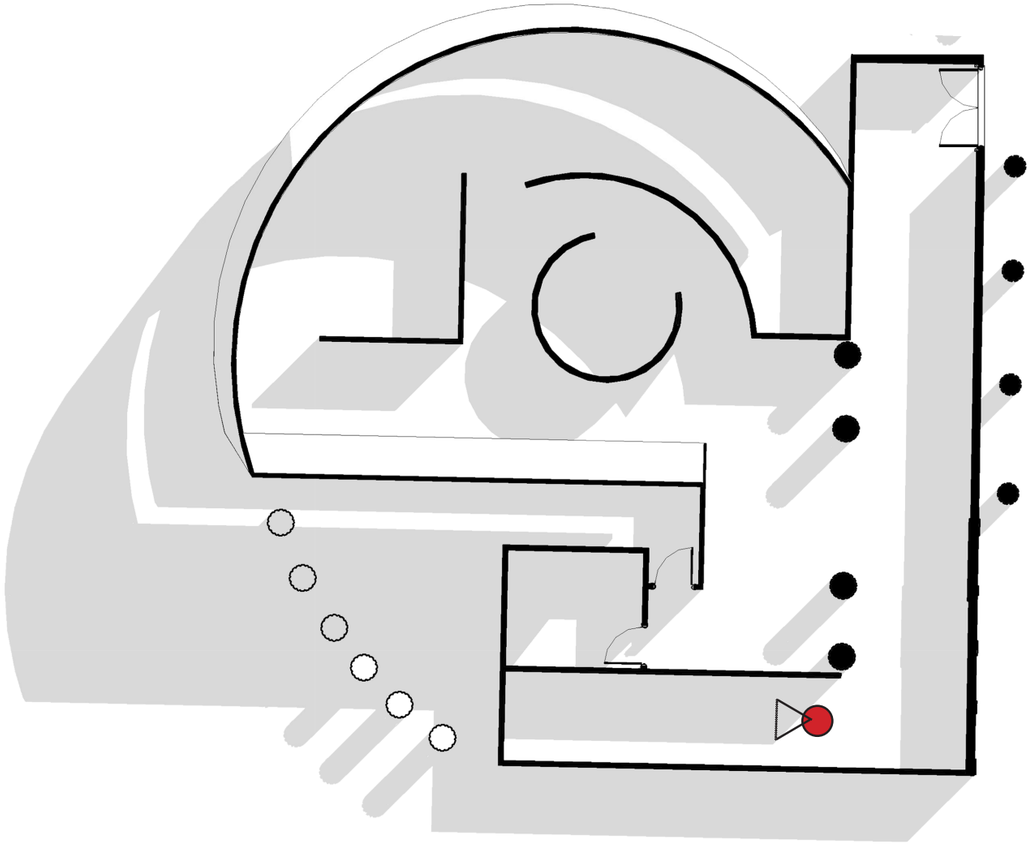


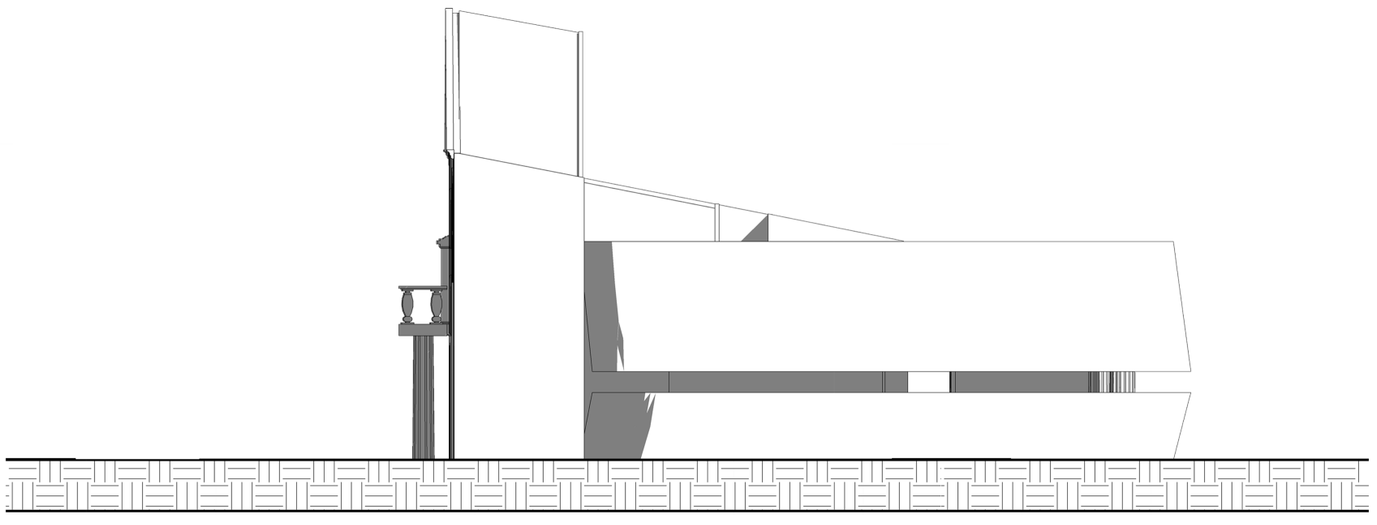
Routes of Empire

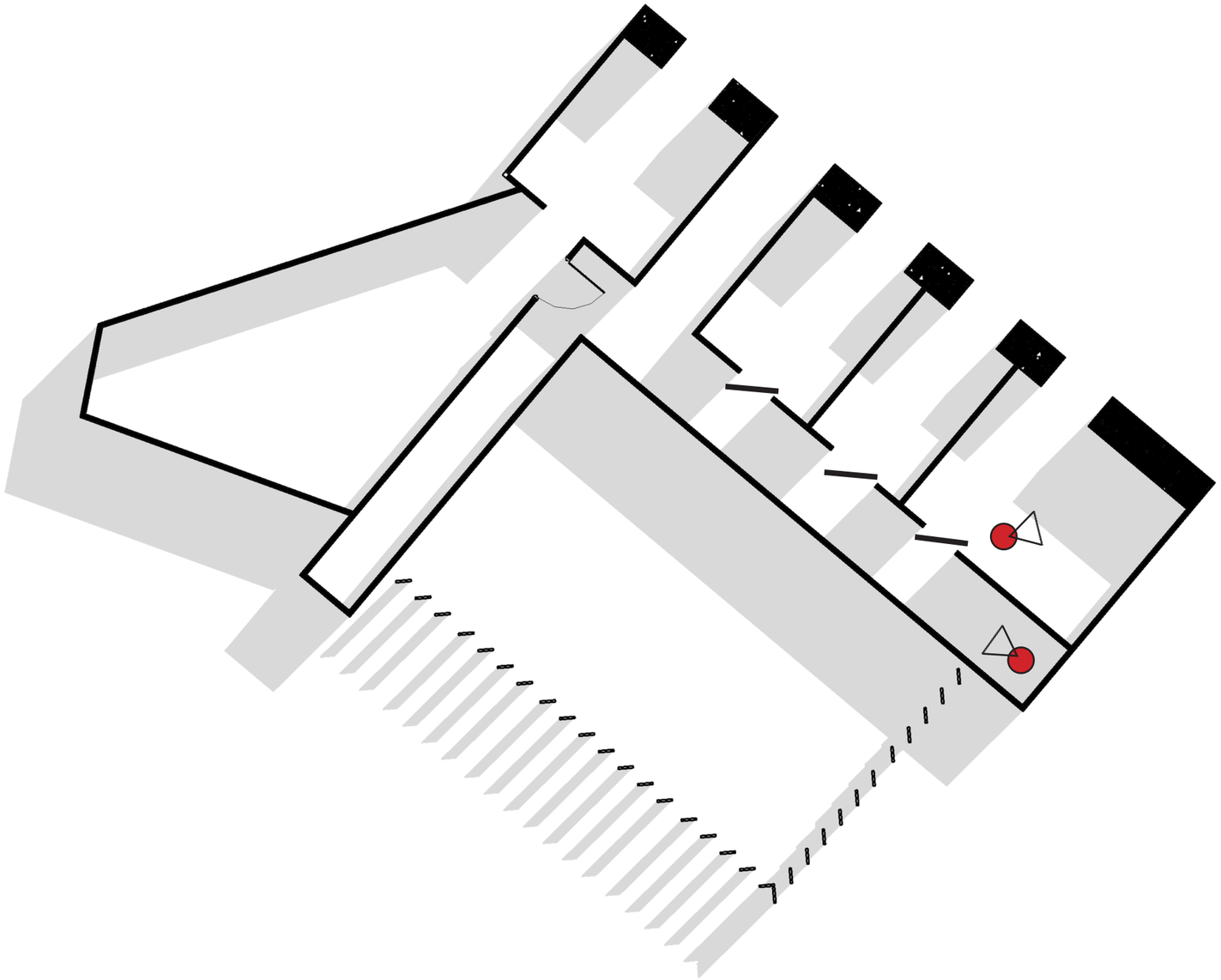
Amphorae stamped with makers' marks and pottery imported from sites along Hadrian's Wall demonstrate the extent of Rome's trade networks (Mattingly, 2006). This exhibit is a long corridor, its walls lined with stacked vessels and goods. The linear space reflects the flow of supply routes that carried oil, wine, and ceramics from across the empire to the northern frontier, and the circular space reflects the shape of the jars. Visitors move in controlled directions, guided as the goods themselves move, experiencing the scale and reach of Rome's economy.





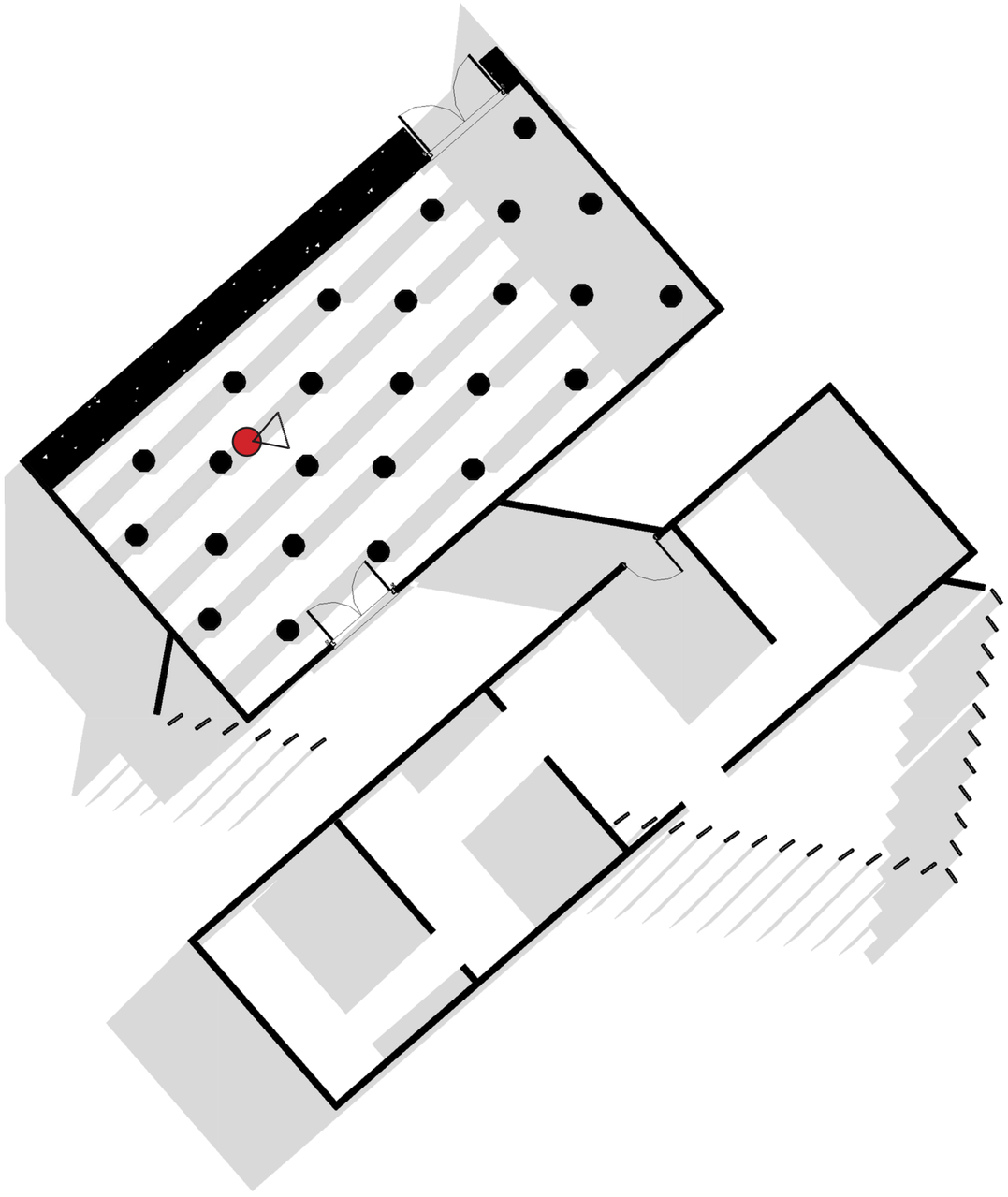






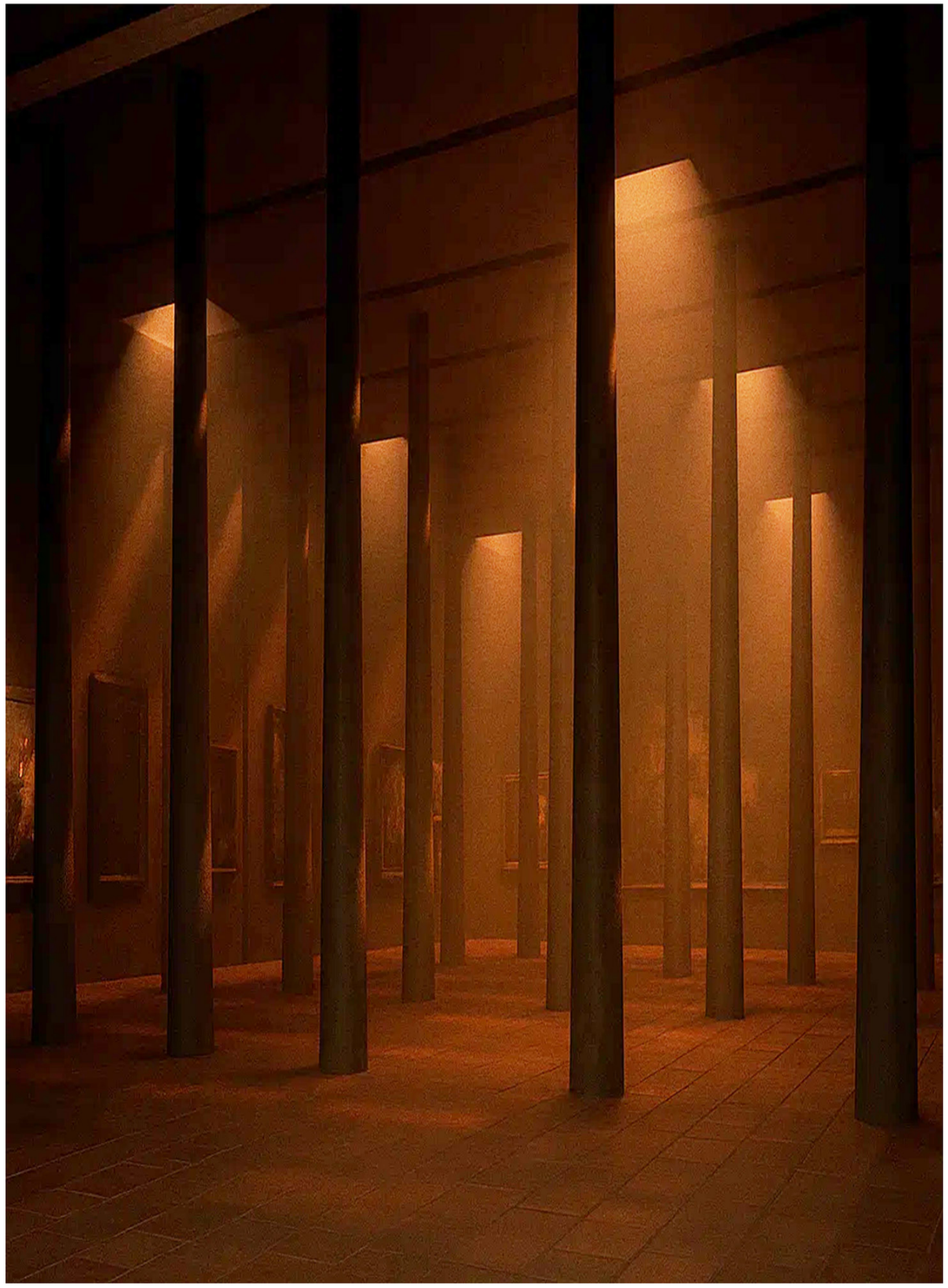
Forging the Empire

Tools, armor fragments, and leather goods from Vindolanda reveal the continuous production required to support the Roman army (Bishop and Colston, 2006). Inspired by these fragments, this exhibition recreates the atmosphere of a workshop: dark walls, low ceilings, and the smell of smoke. Workbenches hold replicas of tools and materials, while the sounds of hammering and creaking leather echo faintly. Visitors experience the labors of the craftsmen, armorers, leatherworkers, and carpenters, who armed and supplied the Roman frontier legions with their skills.



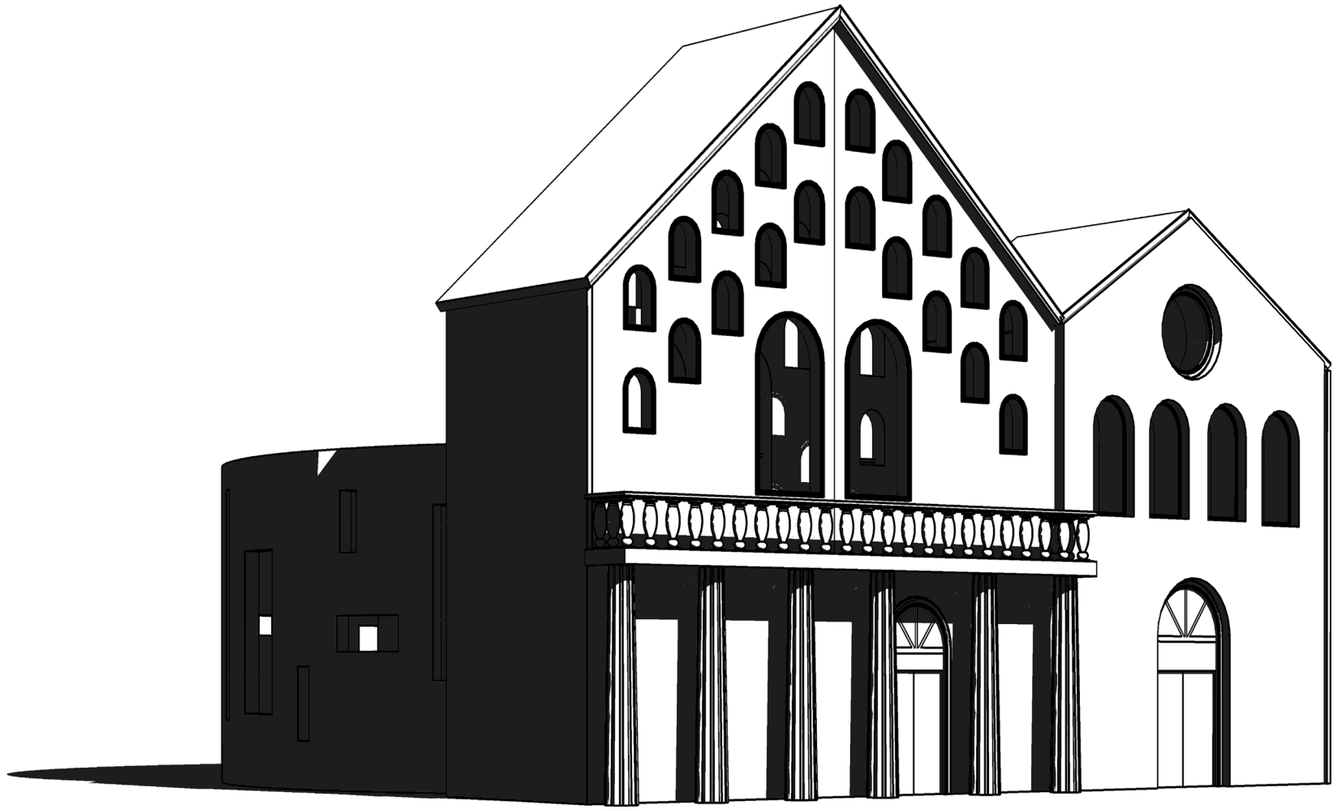
Silent Hearths

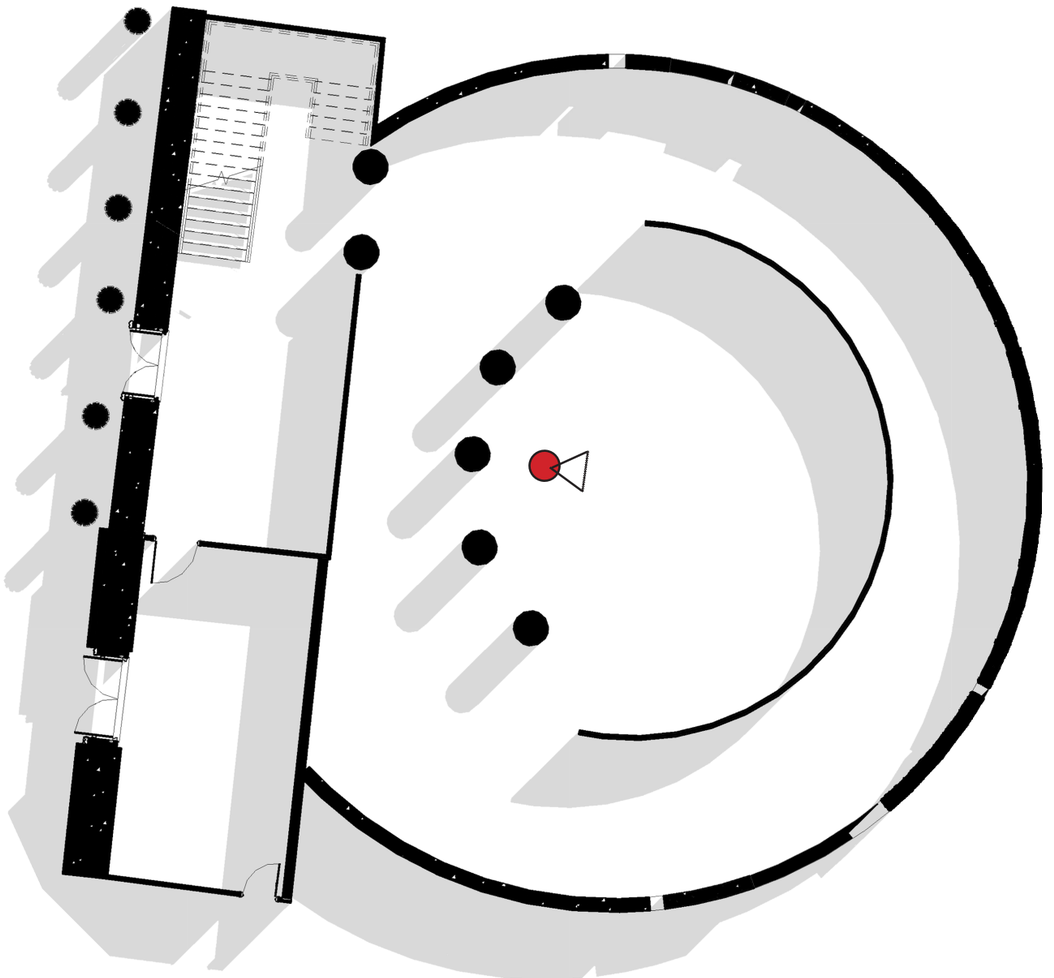
Visitors enter a room filled with warm, smoky columns and wall paintings inspired by the heating system in Roman architecture, where slaves constantly tended the hearths. Artifacts such as cooking pots, hearth remains, and servants' quarters from Pompeii, Herculaneum, and Vindolanda (Bradley, 1994) form an essential part of this exhibition. Small, low-ceilinged rooms, connected by narrow corridors, recreate the hidden world of domestic servants. Visitors must pause or pass through doors, where they encounter shadows and the flickering light of hearths. The design translates pressure into a physical experience, highlighting the hidden labor that sustained families and barracks.

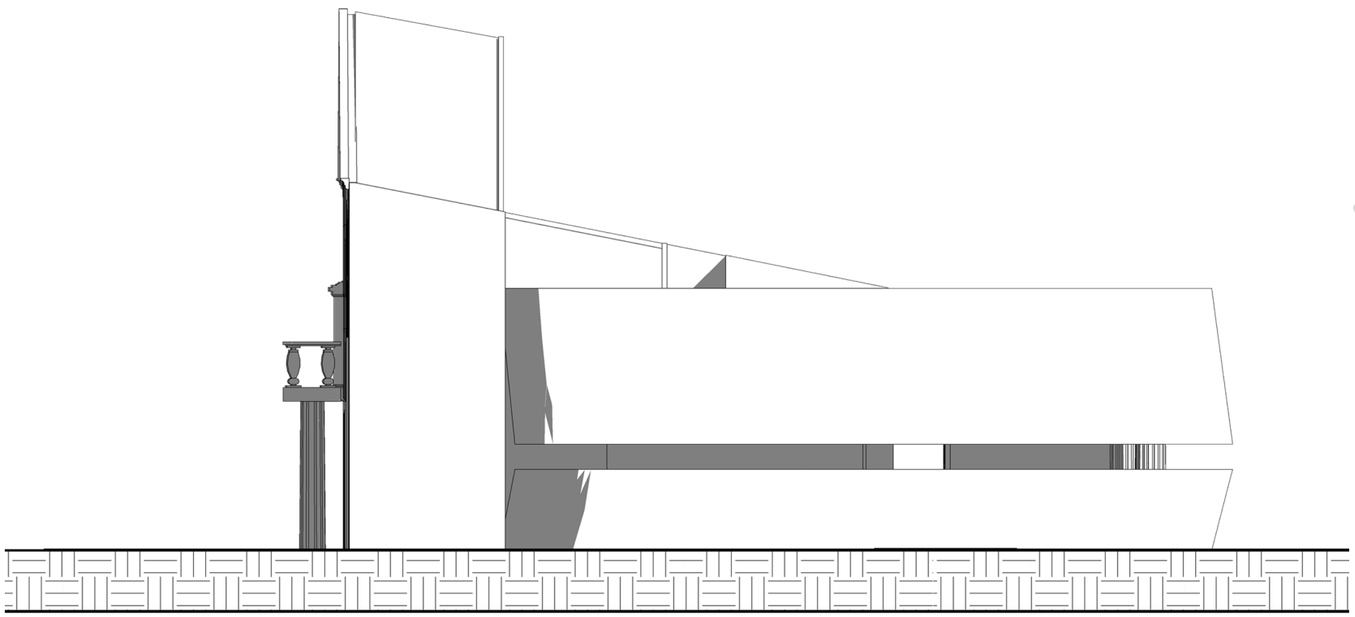


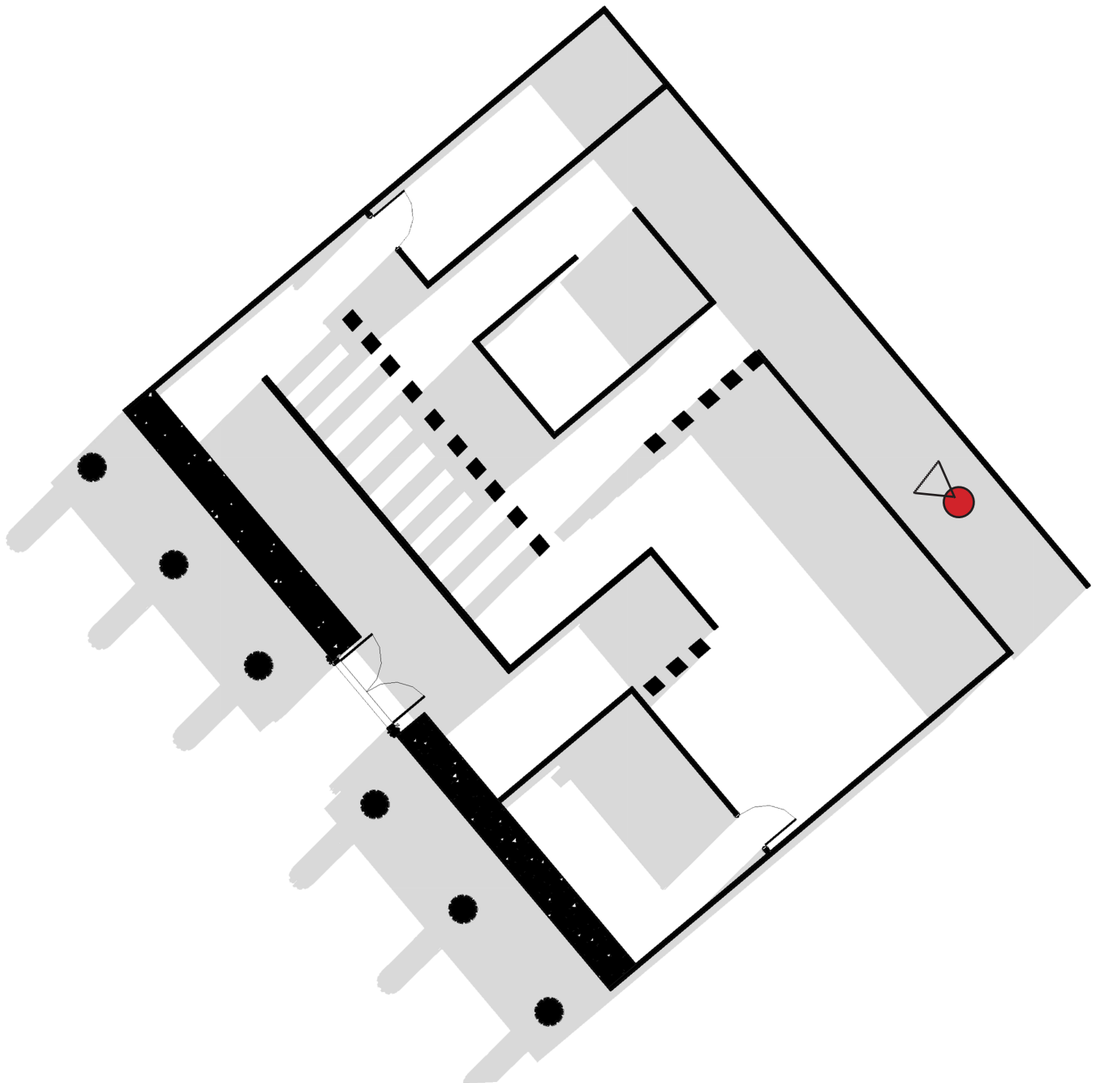
Eumachia's Legacy

The Eumakhia in Pompeii, funded by a wealthy priestess, demonstrates how elite women used wealth and patronage to shape public space (Lawrence, 2007; Colley and Colley, 2014). In this exhibition, archaeological reliefs and columned figures are reinterpreted to represent women's civic roles. Light is reflected from Eumakhia's sculpture, while bas-reliefs link women's patronage to the textile industry. Visitors see how women, despite being excluded from political office, were able to claim a prominent position and influence in civic life.



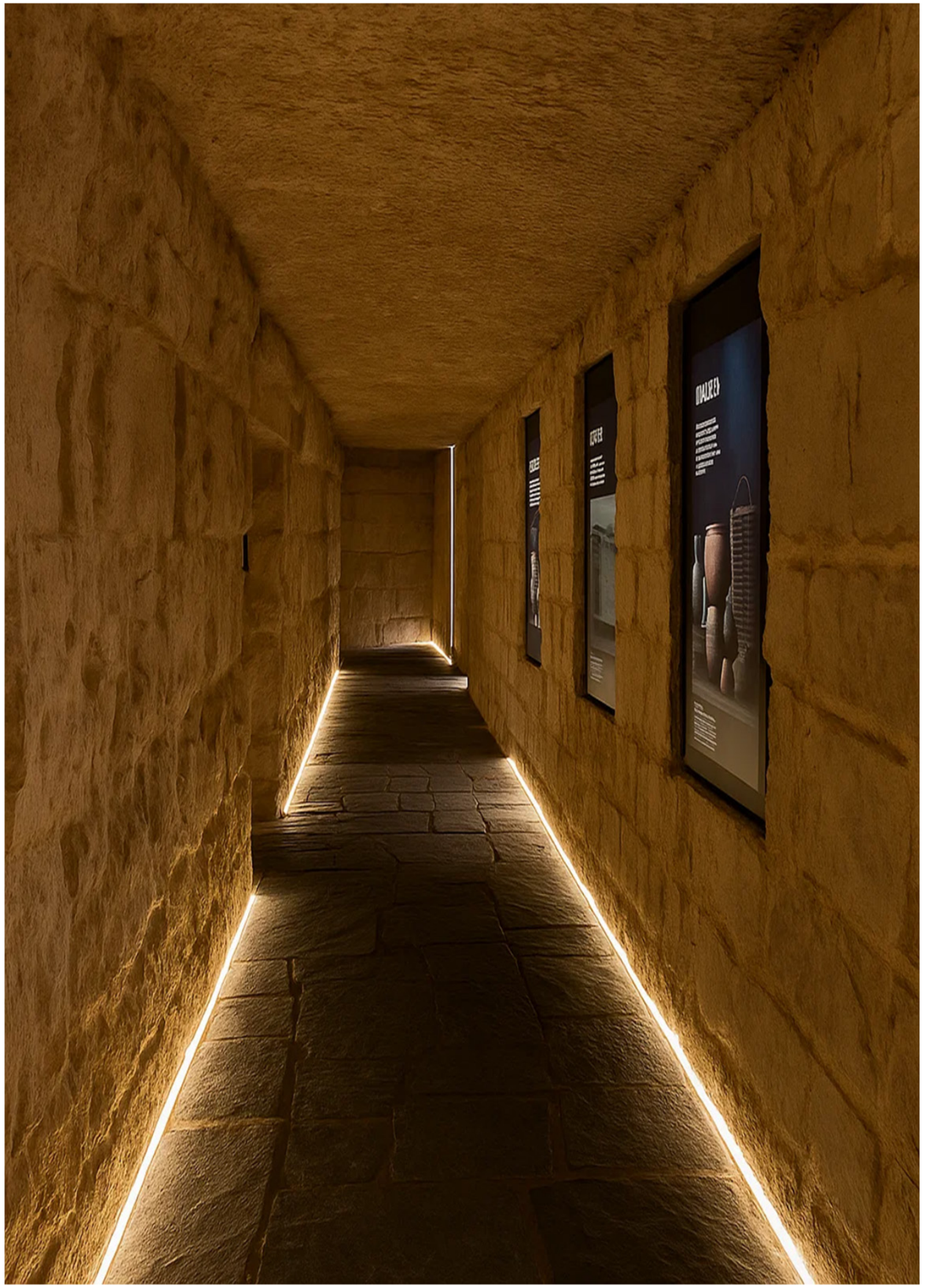




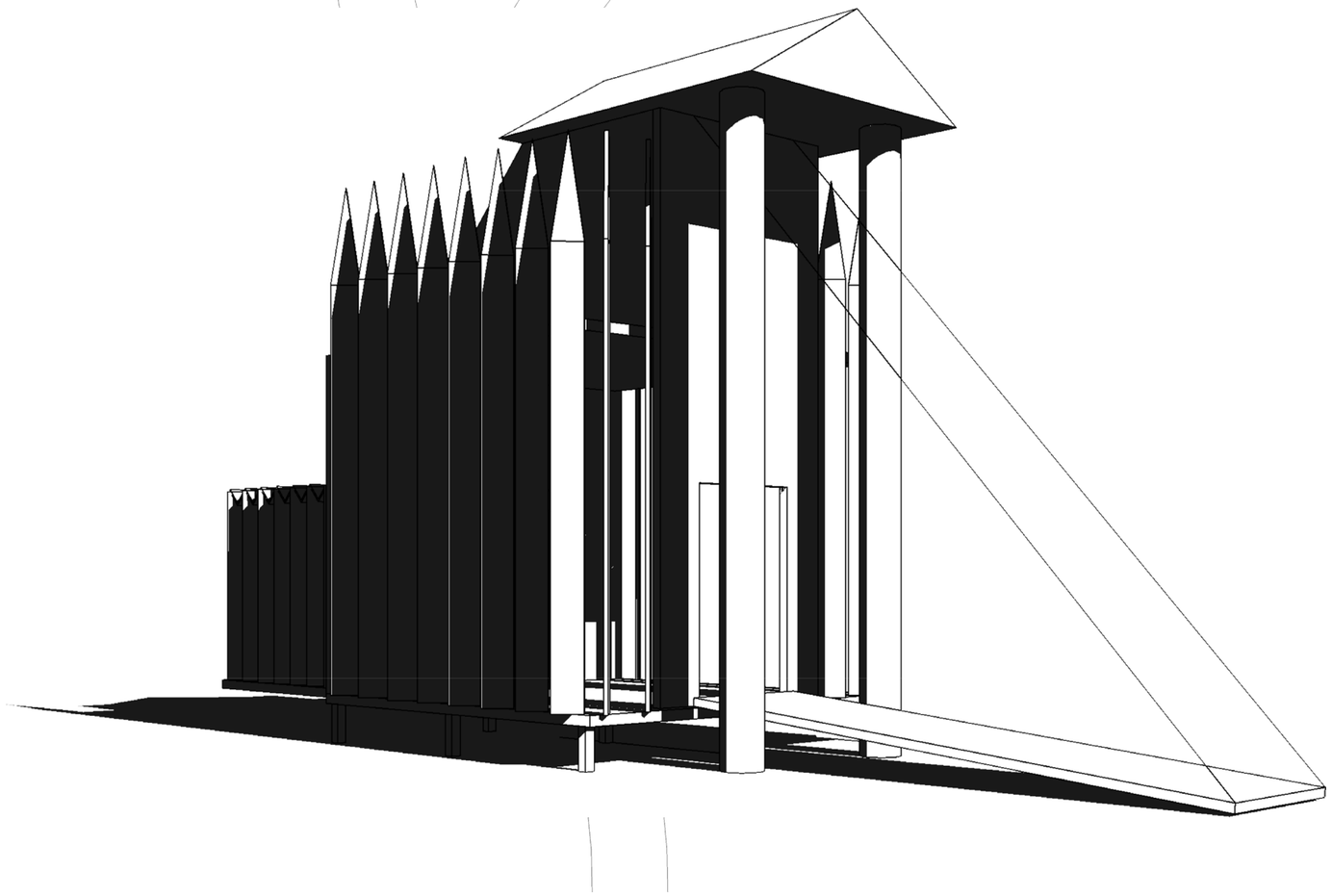


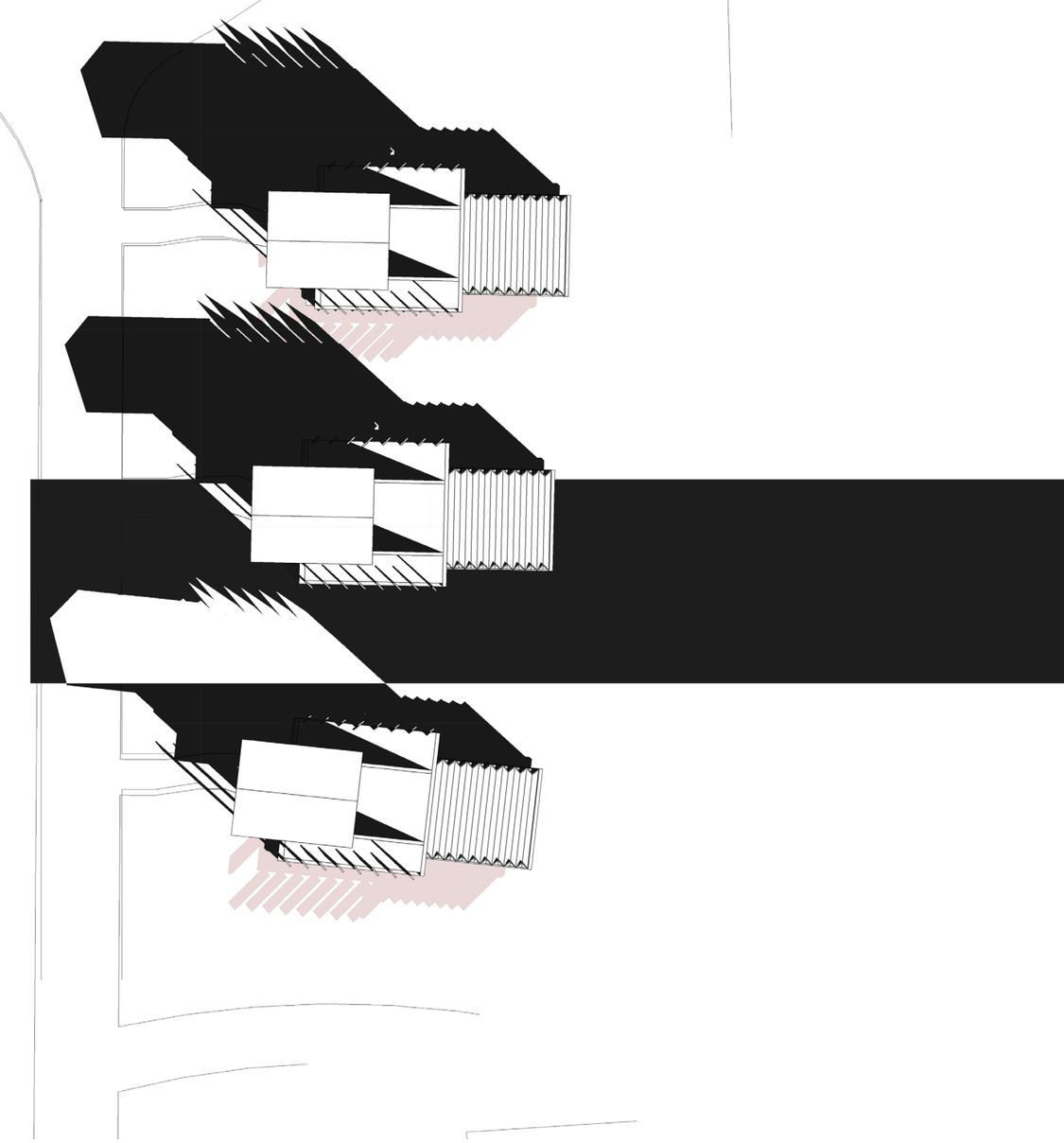
Frontier Voices

Inspired by Vindolanda's writing tablets and adaptive fort layouts, this space celebrates local knowledge. Walls and paving embody Rome's dependence on indigenous expertise and that of others.

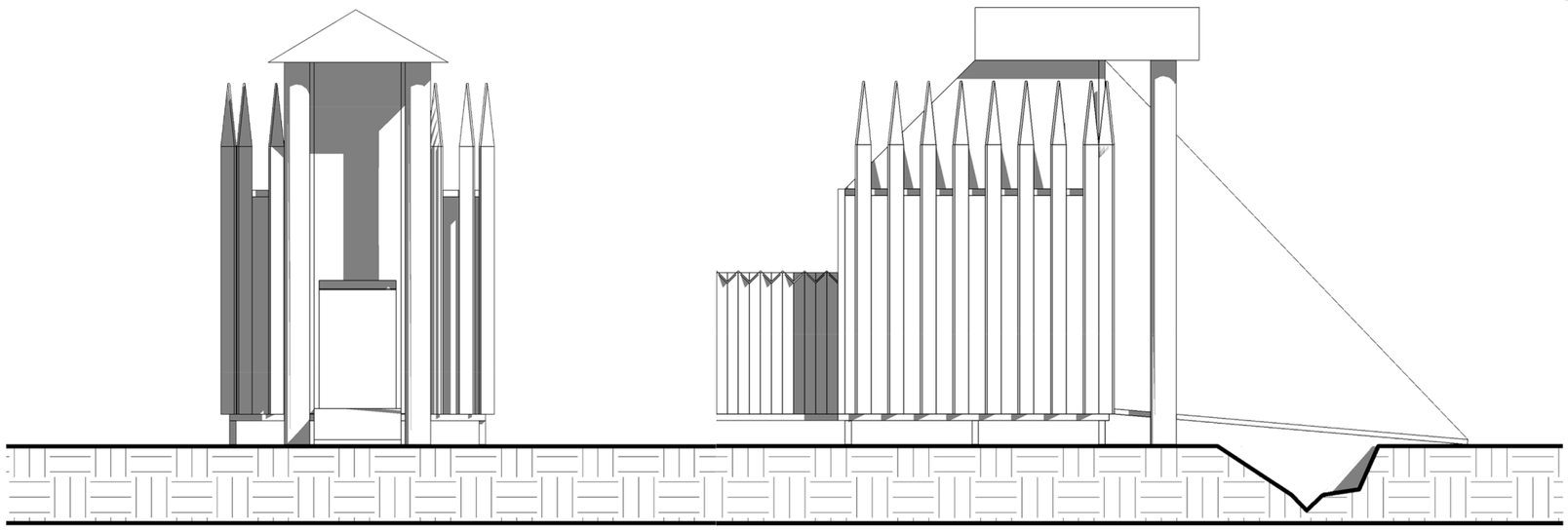


Behind the theatre stands a workers' bothy, a modest shelter inspired by the Roman siege tower. Unlike the monumental façades, this structure acknowledges continuity: just as unseen labour-built Rome, contemporary workers care for and preserve Vindolanda today. The bothy grounds the project in the present, reminding visitors that hidden labour is not confined to antiquity.





Together, the theatre and its backstage galleries create a journey of shifting perspectives. Visitors move from admiration of Rome's grandeur to empathy with the lives that supported it. Architecture becomes the medium for this transformation: light and shadow, polished stone and rough timber, monumental scale and claustrophobic confinement. The project invites visitors to step into the shadows of Rome, where power is not only celebrated but questioned.



Conclusion

This thesis aims to reframe the way Roman history is told. Rather than repeating the familiar stories of emperors, victories, and monuments, it has turned attention to the people whose lives usually remain in shadow, enslaved labourers, auxiliary soldiers, servants, craftspeople, traders, and women who shaped civic life. These groups left behind only fragments: shackles, shoes, tablets, amphorae, and inscriptions. Yet through design, these fragments have been transformed into spaces that invite empathy, reflection, and new perspectives.

The methodology combined archaeology and architecture as research. Objects and traces were not reconstructed into literal replicas but reinterpreted indexically , each gallery acting as a spatial diagram of evidence. This approach allowed absence and ambiguity to become part of the story, acknowledging the limits of what we know while still making these hidden lives present.

The Backstage Museum concept emerged from this process: a rotating theatre that presents the polished façade of Rome, followed by a sequence of galleries that expose what lay behind it. Shackled Lives, Silent Hearths, Routes of Empire, Frontier Voices, Forging the Empire, and Eumachia's Legacy together form a journey that shifts the visitor's perspective from admiration of Rome's grandeur to awareness of its human cost.

Placing the project at Vindolanda, alongside Hadrian's Wall, grounds this narrative in one of the empire's most charged landscapes. The Wall embodies the front stage of imperial power, while Vindolanda's barracks, writing tablets, and artefacts reveal the backstage of everyday survival. The addition of a workers' bothy, inspired by a Roman siege tower, links past and present labour, reminding us that the unseen workforce continues to underpin monumental achievements.

Ultimately, this thesis demonstrates that architecture can act as more than a container for history. It can interpret, critique, and question. By translating fragments into immersive spaces, design becomes a medium for exploring silence, absence, and power. In doing so, the project not only reimagines how we might encounter Rome's past but also reflects on how we tell histories today , whose stories we foreground, and whose remain in the shadows.

AI Use Statement

Artificial Intelligence (AI) tools were used exclusively for translation purposes and for rendering the existing design.

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