

The Body as Archive

A forensic investigation into personal adornment, archival erasure, and the persistence of vernacular knowledge across two millennia

RESEARCH STATUS

Active — Phase I

PRIMARY SITE

Salon, Studio & Thermal Suite

METHODOLOGY

Counter-Forensic / Ethnographic

1. Overview

This document sets out the conceptual framework, research objectives, methodology, and institutional logic of The Body as Archive — the first research project of the Rajzyngier Foundation, a forensic architecture research agency.

The project investigates personal adornment — specifically hair — as a site of identity construction, social signaling, and cultural memory across time. It does so by operating simultaneously in two registers: the ancient Mediterranean world, where the material and textual record is fragmentary and elite-biased; and the contemporary research enterprise, where everyday bodily transformation is performed, witnessed, and deliberately archived.

The central forensic claim is this: the gaps in the ancient archive are not accidents of preservation. They are evidence of a system. The project applies counter-forensic methodology to that system — asking not only what survives, but who controlled what survived, and what the systematic examination of those gaps reveals.

"The Herculaneum archive preserved one wealthy Roman's philosophy. We are building the archive the ancient world never made — of the everyday body, across class, across culture, across two and a half thousand years."

2. Research Question

The project is organized around a single primary research question and three subsidiary questions that structure its investigative threads.

PRIMARY QUESTION

How did personal adornment — hair, cosmetics, thermal treatment, and bodily presentation — function as a form of identity construction, social signaling, and cultural memory in the ancient Mediterranean world, and how do those practices persist, transform, or resurface in contemporary grooming and wellness culture? And what does the systematic exclusion of everyday bodily life from the ancient archive reveal about the power structures that governed ancient preservation?

Subsidiary Questions

SQ1 — Archival Erasure

What mechanisms — social, economic, political — determined whose bodily life was preserved in the ancient record, and can those mechanisms be forensically reconstructed from the gaps themselves?

SQ2 — Vernacular Knowledge

How does knowledge encoded in everyday bodily practice survive outside official archives — and what does Aesop's oral tradition tell us about the persistence of marginalized wisdom across two and a half millennia?

SQ3 — Living Reconstruction

What does the deliberate construction of a contemporary photographic and ethnographic archive, gathered across an internationally distributed salon and wellness network, reveal about the continuity and transformation of adornment as identity practice?

3. Intellectual Context

3.1 Forensic Architecture as Method

The project applies the methodological framework of forensic architecture — the use of spatial analysis, material evidence, and counter-forensic investigation to reconstruct what official records obscure or omit. Where the original practice investigates contemporary state violence, this project extends the forensic gaze backward into deep time, treating the ancient archive as a crime scene of systematic erasure.

Forensic architecture operates across three spaces: the field, the laboratory, and the forum. In this project: the salon, thermal suite, and archaeological sites are the field; the photographic archive, textual analysis, and material reconstruction form the laboratory; and public exhibitions, publications, and the Foundation's ongoing output constitute the forum.

3.2 The Herculaneum Problem

The Villa of the Papyri at Herculaneum represents the only intact private library to survive from antiquity. Its 1,785 carbonized papyrus scrolls — now being read for the first time using AI and multispectral imaging through the Vesuvius Challenge — preserve predominantly the Greek Epicurean philosophy favored by one wealthy Roman. The emerging texts discuss pleasure, sensation, and the body as philosophical abstractions.

What the archive does not contain is equally significant: no systematic record of the enslaved workers, the women, the tradespeople, or the grooming, bathing, and bodily practices that constituted the villa's daily life. The same botanical substances discussed philosophically in the scrolls occupied the same physical spaces as the baths, the tonsors' chairs, and the cosmetic preparations of the household. Only the philosophy was deemed worth preserving.

3.3 The Roman Bath as Social Architecture

The *thermae* and *balnea* of the Roman world were not primarily hygiene facilities. They were the most democratic public spaces of Roman civic life — sites where citizens of different classes, genders, and origins occupied the same architecture, moved through the same sequence of spaces (*frigidarium*, *tepidarium*, *caldarium*), and subjected their bodies to the same regime of heat, cold, and immersion.

The sequence of cold plunge and heated chamber is one of the most archaeologically well-documented bodily practices in antiquity, attested across the Roman Empire from Britain to North Africa. It appears in literary sources, architectural remains, fresco programmes, and material culture. And yet the lived experience of that practice — what it meant to those who underwent it daily, what social negotiations took place in the water, what knowledge was transmitted in the steam — is almost entirely absent from the archive.

The contemporary cold water and sauna suite is a direct spatial reconstruction of that sequence. It is not decorative. It is a forensic experiment: what happens when the ancient thermal regime is reinstated as a living practice, and what does the embodied experience of that reinstatement reveal about what the architectural record alone cannot tell us?

3.4 Aesop and the Vernacular Archive

Aesop — enslaved, marginalized, and possibly of African or Phrygian origin — is the ancient world's most important figure for this project not because of his fables but because of what his survival represents. He left no written archive. His wisdom survived entirely through oral transmission, embedded in the daily lives of people across class and geography. Socrates spent his final hours turning Aesop's fables into verse.

The project takes Aesop as its methodological patron: the embodiment of knowledge that persists not through institutional preservation but through the body, through practice, through repetition across generations. The before/after archive the salon generates, the botanical formulations of the apothecary bar, and the thermal protocols of the cold and heat suite are all living Aesopic traditions — vernacular, embodied, and deliberately constructed to survive.

3.5 Hair as Forensic Evidence

Roman portrait busts are used by archaeologists to date artifacts when no inscription survives — because imperial women's hairstyles changed with sufficient regularity and documentation to function as a chronological index. Hair in the ancient world was a legible social text encoding status, religion, mourning, citizenship, sexuality, and political allegiance.

The contemporary salon is the primary site where this text is still being written. The before/after photograph records not just an aesthetic change but a social negotiation — between the person who arrived and the person they intend to become. This is the core forensic parallel: both the Roman portrait archive and the salon's photographic archive are records of identity at the moment of its construction.

4. The Research Enterprise

The research is conducted through a purpose-built commercial enterprise — a hair salon with an integrated portrait studio, apothecary bar, and thermal suite — which functions simultaneously as the project's primary field site, revenue engine, and living laboratory. This structure is not incidental. It is the methodological commitment made concrete: the research cannot be conducted from outside the practice it studies.

Component	Function	Research Role
Hair Salon	Primary revenue + client flow	Ethnographic field site; generates the before/after archive
Portrait Studio	Before/after photography	Primary data collection; longitudinal identity archive
Apothecary Bar	Dual-use botanical products	Living reconstruction of ancient cura corporis practice
Cold Plunge & Sauna Suite	Thermal treatment rooms	Spatial reconstruction of Roman frigidarium/caldarium sequence
International Network	Scaled global presence	Comparative cross-cultural dataset on adornment and identity

4.1 The Cold Plunge & Sauna Suite

The thermal suite consists of a cold water plunge pool and a dry sauna — a direct spatial analogue of the Roman frigidarium and caldarium sequence. It is the most architecturally explicit reconstruction in the enterprise: a room sequence that has been documented across hundreds of Roman sites, from the legionary baths of Hadrian's Wall to the imperial thermae of Rome, here reinstated as a living practice.

The suite serves the enterprise commercially as a premium wellness offering. Its research function is threefold. First, it generates ethnographic data on how the thermal sequence is experienced and understood by contemporary users — data directly comparable to the fragmentary literary accounts that describe ancient bathing culture. Second, it reconstructs the social architecture of the Roman bath: a space where conversation, negotiation, and community occurred in the context of bodily exposure and shared physical vulnerability. Third, it tests the hypothesis that the ancient thermal sequence encodes a form of embodied knowledge — about recovery, about social trust, about the relationship between physical sensation and psychological state — that has persisted across millennia despite the absence of any formal archive.

The apothecary bar's botanical formulations extend into the thermal suite: steam infusions, cold plunge additives, and post-thermal treatments drawn from ancient sources connect the two spaces into a single reconstructive environment.

4.2 The Apothecary Bar

The apothecary bar reconstructs the ancient world's unified approach to botanical substances — in which the same ingredient served simultaneously as food, medicine, and cosmetic. Every

formulation can be consumed as a drink and applied topically to hair or scalp. The menu is structured as a living fable sequence, with each formulation named for an Aesop fable and annotated with its ancient parallel, its botanical rationale, and its research significance.

As new texts are recovered from the Herculaneum scrolls — particularly the works of Philodemus on pleasure and sensation — the menu is updated to reflect newly available ancient evidence. The bar is therefore a living research instrument as well as a revenue stream.

4.3 The International Dimension

As the enterprise scales internationally, each new location generates a geographically and culturally distinct dataset. The forensic question the network poses is comparative: how do standards of adornment and bodily practice — what constitutes a transformation worth recording, what thermal protocols exist in different cultures, what counts as wellness — vary across contexts, and what do those variations reveal about whose standards have been globally imposed and whose have been locally generated?

5. Research Matrix

The following matrix maps the project's investigative threads across the ancient record, the contemporary enterprise, and the forensic research question each pairing generates.

Ancient Evidence	Contemporary Parallel	Forensic Research Question
Roman portrait busts as chronological indices	Before/after salon photography	What does hair document about identity at the moment of transformation?
Herculaneum scrolls — philosophy of pleasure and sensation	Apothecary bar — botanical consumption	What was the unified ancient body practice the archive fragmented?
Thermae and balnea — frigidarium to caldarium sequence	Cold plunge and sauna suite	What embodied knowledge does the thermal sequence encode that architecture alone cannot preserve?
Aesop's oral fable tradition	Stylist and attendant conversation	How does vernacular wisdom persist in the space of bodily care?
Elite archive vs. enslaved and female absence	Salon and thermal clientele across class and culture	Whose transformation has historically been deemed worth recording?
Ancient grooming substances — olive oil, honey, wine, herbs	Dual-use botanical formulations	What continuity exists between ancient and contemporary cura corporis?

6. Output — Field, Laboratory, Forum

Following the forensic architecture model, the project operates across three distinct spaces of production and dissemination.

The Field	The salon, studio, apothecary bar, and thermal suite constitute the primary field site. Every client appointment is an ethnographic encounter. Every before/after photograph is a data point. Every thermal session is a reconstructive experiment. The international network extends the field to multiple cultural contexts simultaneously.
The Laboratory	The photographic archive, textual and material analysis of ancient sources, 3D spatial reconstruction of ancient bathing and grooming environments, and comparative analysis across the international dataset constitute the laboratory. The laboratory synthesizes field data with classical scholarship, producing findings that neither discipline could generate alone.
The Forum	Research outputs take three forms: academic publications submitted to journals of classical studies, archaeology, and forensic methodology; public-facing exhibitions and installations that present the archive and its implications to non-specialist audiences; and the Foundation's ongoing publication connecting the ancient and contemporary records for a general readership.

7. Indicative Timeline

Phase	Period	Activity
I	Year 1	Establish salon, studio, apothecary bar, and thermal suite. Begin before/after archive and thermal ethnography. Launch newsletter.
II	Year 2	First academic publication. Expand archive. First international location. Begin comparative cross-cultural analysis.
III	Year 3	Third location. First public exhibition. Commission 3D spatial reconstruction of Roman bathing and grooming environment. Apply for external research funding.
IV	Year 4–5	International network of 5+ locations. Monograph in preparation. Formal academic partnership with classical studies department.

8. Significance

This project makes four original contributions.

First, it applies forensic architecture methodology to a pre-modern archival context for the first time — treating ancient archival gaps not as problems of preservation but as evidence of a system of exclusion amenable to counter-forensic investigation.

Second, it proposes the contemporary hair salon and thermal suite as legitimate research instruments: sites of situated testimony, longitudinal data collection, and ethnographic encounter that generate evidence directly comparable to the ancient record. The cold plunge and sauna suite in particular constitutes a spatial reconstruction of one of the most extensively documented but least experientially understood practices of the ancient world.

Third, it recovers Aesop as a methodological figure — the ancient world's most important theorist of knowledge that survives outside institutional preservation — connecting the oral fable tradition, the gaps in the Herculaneum archive, and the everyday practice of the salon into a single argument about who gets archived and at what cost.

Fourth, it establishes a model for research enterprises that fund themselves through the commercial operation of the very practice they study — making the research self-sustaining, globally scalable, and independent of institutional patronage.

This project is not studying the past from the present. It is building, in the present, the archive the past refused to make.

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This document is a living instrument and will be updated as the research develops.