

‘Oscillations across time and space: archeoacoustics and the sonic imagination of Hannan Jones’s *A Frontier in Depth* (2025)’

By Philippa Lovatt

What kinds of hidden knowledges exist at the furthest reaches of terrestrial imagination? Together the short films and sonic compositions that comprise Hannan Jones’s *A Frontier in Depth* explore this question as they move across and between elemental registers, orchestrating layers of deep time and space through a compositional logic unbound by colonial ways of knowing and being in the world. Made as part of a commission for the Perspective(s) programme, a collaboration between Artes Mundi and the National Roman Legion Museum in Caerleon in Wales, the sound works included in this vinyl release resonate with the themes of memory and fragmented history found in Jones’s trilogy of short films: ‘A spirit, a deity, a barbarian? Captive in the subterranean,’ ‘Templum Terrarium (re-adapting the spectacle in imperial debris)’ and ‘Cosmotechnic Templum.’ Spanning three planes of knowledge and experience: beneath the ground, in the air, and amongst the stars of the night sky, the spatio-temporal register of *A Frontier in Depth* is poetic and expansive. Across each work, different frequencies coalesce and intertwine, taking form and flight at the limits of earthly perception, momentarily binding the present moment in which they are experienced to others that have been lost to the passage of time as well as to those from a future still to come.

A Frontier in Depth explores sound’s ability to convey hidden frequencies and divergent temporalities ranging from those emanating from deep below the earth to those that can be sensed atmospherically through the medium of air. These points are not in opposition to one another but are part of what composer Pauline Oliveros describes in her work on deep listening as a “sonic continuum” that draws into relation different points in time and space through a deep attunement to the oscillating modalities of pitch and timbre that occur at particular sites. As the Roman word “templum” (meaning “sacred space”) suggests, the works in the series invite an ethical and spiritual encounter with the site at Caerleon, which is imagined as a portal through which all moments in time can be sensed simultaneously. The series contains points of connection and transformation that take form across extended temporalities that exceed the duration of an individual film or composition. These cosmic echoes remind us that time is not linear as colonial logics would have it, but circular – and that the reverberations of the imperial past continue to shape both the present and the future.

The circular nature of time takes visual and sonic form in ‘A spirit, a deity, a barbarian? Captive in the subterranean,’ which was filmed in the archives of the National Roman Legion Museum, where we see a shot of an ancient silver coin spinning on a table. In ‘Templum Terrarium (re-adapting the spectacle in imperial debris),’ the spinning coin seems to return, albeit in an altered state – a cosmic echo in the form of a 360-degree rotation filmed from the centre of the Caerleon Roman Amphitheatre. Resonating against a mesmeric, gently pulsating audio loop, followed later with the words of poet, Dr Nat Raha, multiple exposures overlay the image as it spins around and around, slowly at first but quickening suddenly and then slowing again, blurring the contours and textures of the sacred site. The composition of sound and image in these moments reveals that rather than seeing them as separate or disconnected, one can sense a dynamic flow of energy between the museum and the Amphitheatre – and between the ancient coin and the 16mm Bolex camera. The dizziness and

disorientation produced by the cinematography's kinetic sequences encapsulates the work's haptic aesthetic and extends this understanding of interconnectedness, which is reinforced by the sonic enfolding of thudding heartbeats, flutes, and gongs along with field recordings from the site and studio instrumentation processed through reel-to-reel tape loops. History is no longer a closed book but is something intimate that can be felt in, and communicated through, the vessel of the body. In 'Cosmotechnic Templum', the spinning sensation shifts scale once more from the site of the body to the planetary and the celestial. The celestial bodies of the night sky were used by the Romans both for navigation and to gain a sense of cosmic order. Filmed in 16mm, and retaining the flashes and dust residues from the development process, 'Cosmotechnic Templum' records the diurnal circle of stars and planets that seem to spin across the sky above the Amphitheatre. Coupled with a speculative musical composition involving a synthesizer, alongside infrasonic frequencies, seismic vibrations and electro-magnetic interference that register the atmospheric qualities of the site across different temporal registers, the celestial bodies on film appear to be encircling us, enfolding us within this vast cosmic order as the earth rotates on its axis.

The sonic imagination of *A Frontier in Depth* seeks to retrieve that which has been lost or erased through the careful layering of breath, voice, and music. This compositional strategy involves ancient Roman instruments such as the lyre and the tibia, alongside the voices of knowledge-makers – a curator from the museum (Dr Mark Lewis) and a poet (Dr Nat Raha). In 'A spirit, a deity, a barbarian? Captive in the subterranean,' the camera tenderly traces the contours and surfaces of the figurines and fragments held within the museum's collection, of Apollo, Winged Victoria and a figure who could be a deity, a spirit, or a Barbarian – someone "outside the Roman Empire" perhaps a "captured native," the curator tells us. As the camera pauses on the "outsider" figure, the curator points out his downcast expression and then explains: "If we look to the arm, the left arm seems to be passing behind the body, so this individual has both arms bound behind his back, and this is the typical legionary iconography of a captured native or a Barbarian." In this, and other moments in the film, the acute sensitivity to the delicacy of the fragment alongside a narrative of historic racial violence reveals a deep understanding in Jones's work of the potential of the human hand to cause harm.

Perhaps in another work, oscillations across time and space within such an expanded consciousness could result in a cacophony of sounds and images that would be difficult to make sense of. Instead, what I hear in the archeoacoustics of this work is an order, a precision, and a tenderness in the handling of materials, sonic and otherwise, that reflects a deep desire to eschew the violence of domination found in the historic remains that testify to the site's imperial past. Attending to the reverberations that emerge in these moments, I hear a renewed urgency to call out the ongoing colonial violences of the present. As the embodied breathiness of the tibia plays over images of the museum's artefacts, these remains – that might otherwise lie dormant, hidden in vaults – gain new resonance. What future knowledges and forms of reparation, *A Frontier in Depth* seems to ask, might also be awakened by listening to the past?