

Visual Competition Strategies in Roman Urban Architecture: Micro-Viewshed Analysis at Pompeii

Alan Kaiser

University of Evansville
USA

Over the last thirty years, the study of Roman urbanism has experienced a complete paradigm shift. No longer do we focus on monumental architecture as the pinnacle expression of the urban phenomenon, but instead have come to focus on human interaction with the entire urban landscape and how that landscape embodied cultural norms.

While the theoretical shift has been enormous, we have been struggling to find new ways of gathering data, so that some of our new conclusions can be based on inductive rather than deductive reasoning. Fortunately, advances in computer technology, particularly Geographic Information Systems software, have opened up opportunities for us to make observations about the urban environment that were difficult, if not impossible, using traditional paper plans. Viewshed analysis is a GIS tool that has been around for more than forty years, yet its use in classical cities is still in its infancy.

This paper takes a step toward the maturation of this technique by exploring the small-scale view from city streets and what it can tell us about how the elite homeowners and non-elite shopkeepers utilized quotidian architecture to win the fierce competition for attention in the crowded and dynamic thoroughfares of Pompeii.