

Mapping, Memory and Fragmented Representation

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INTRODUCTION

In 1762 Giovanni Battista Piranesi published a large-scale print that he identified as a plan of the ancient Campus Martius, the Rome neighborhood, which he depicted as stacked layers of marble each of which was incised with a different phase in the

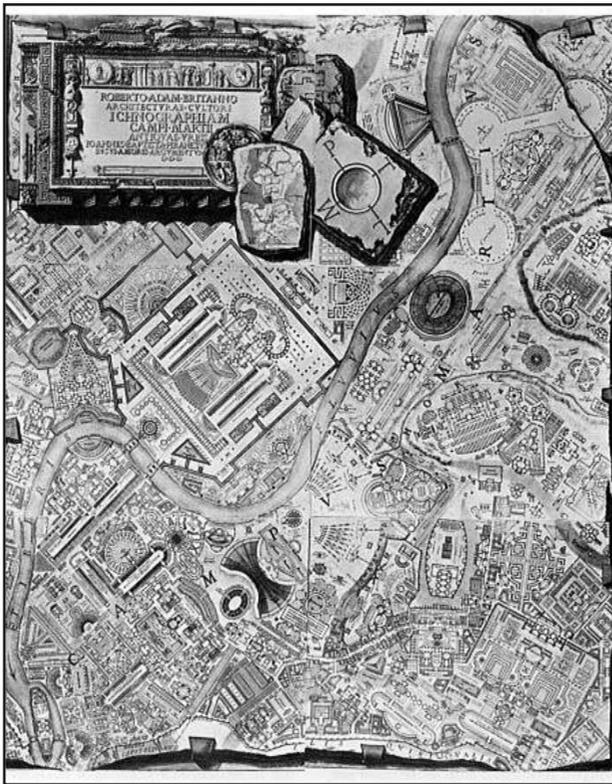


Figure 1: Figure 1. G.B. Piranesi, *Ichnographia* of the Campus Martius, from *Il Campo Marzio dell'Antica Roma* (1762).

city's development (figure 1). Piranesi adduced the fragments of an ancient marble plan of Rome that had been installed during the middle of the eighteenth century on the walls of the Palazzo Nuovo, now one of the Capitoline Museums on the Campidoglio (figure 2). Unlike the ancient original, Piranesi represented buildings at a colossal scale and he transposed some of them to invented contexts by placing, for instance, Hadrian's tomb within a vast precinct featuring two circuses or showing the Flavian amphitheater on the opposite side of the Tiber from where it now stands.¹ Why did Piranesi disrupt the consistency of place, scale, and historical time? Instead of producing a legible map, Piranesi transformed the fragmented pieces of ancient plans into a showpiece for an architectural system transcending precise measurement. The inventive approach to mapping pioneered a role for memory in architectural representation in



Figure 2: Fragment of the Severan Marble Plan of Rome indicating Republican Era Houses (Rome: Soprintendenza Archeologica di Roma).

which the ruined pieces of the marble plan inspired Piranesi to challenge scientific archeology. Piranesi particularly stressed the process of disintegration fragmented plans could represent in order to cast dispersions at the overly ordered city. For Piranesi, the fragment projected memories ruminating in the mind onto the architectural enterprise, sparking visual puns or flights of fantasy, and countering the restrictions imposed by scientific absolutes.

THE MARBLE PLAN OF ROME

Covering an expansive wall within the Forum of Peace in downtown Rome, the map that Piranesi excerpted in 1762 originally consisted of precisely incised slabs of polished marble. It represented the city upon a surface eighteen meters in height and thirteen meters wide and was displayed there during the early third century CE (fig. 3). The marble plan of Rome, or the *forma urbis*, mapped urban space by turning the city into the ornament for a towering wall. After numerous pieces were dug up in 1562, recovered fragments of the monumental map aided in the scholarly investigation of ancient Rome; yet, merely ten percent of the original one hundred and fifty marble slabs now survive. An earlier version of the marble plan had been installed during the first century CE to decorate one large wall of a vast chamber belonging to the Forum of Peace after precise measurements had been completed to document the city. Between 203 and 211 CE, the replacement for the earlier version was installed that portrayed the same precision with

which the city had been surveyed previously so as to map the city at a 1:240 scale.² With its display of exacting measurements, the third-century marble map was a showpiece produced for emperor Septimius Severus illustrating the categorization of the city after a census had been taken, taxes levied, and the precise recording of Rome’s impressive urban landscape had been completed.³ The marble plan was not cadastral; it was far too large and too permanent a monument to function as that which recorded changes in property ownership. Nonetheless, the marble plan of Rome did identify the city by measured units of inventoried space in a process of standardization that negated the previously familial or tribal associations that pre-imperial neighborhoods possessed.⁴

GIOVANNI BATTISTA PIRANESI AND GIOVANNI BATTISTA NOLLI

Most of the surviving pieces of Septimius Severus’ marble plan had been unearthed from the ground where the map originally stood. During the seventeenth century, scholars published and carefully documented the recovered fragments.⁵ Later, eighteenth-century architects began to understand the importance of the surviving fragments of the marble plan for maintaining memories of ancient Rome that transmitted a radical approach to neoclassicism. Specifically, innovations in mapping pioneered by Giovanni Battista Nolli together with the knowledge of the city imaged in his plan of Rome sparked a renewed appreciation for antiquities. Even though ruins existed in dismembered fragments, their function in the entirety of Rome provided evidence of a whole cityscape studded with monuments worthy of preservation which, once documented, mapmakers could use to stave off their further demise, thanks to Nolli. In other words, Nolli’s plan galvanized the appreciation of historic monuments in Rome. Mapping together with the physical ruins of ancient architecture also engendered the recovery of memories that halted the rapid disintegration of imperial Rome by documenting the decay in Nolli’s Enlightenment plans.

Piranesi’s interest in mapping Rome originated from working under Giovanni Battista Nolli, beginning in 1741. At the time, Nolli hired the young Piranesi to join as a researcher and member of the artistic team producing exacting documentary graphics that investigated the ancient marble plan.⁶ In 1743,

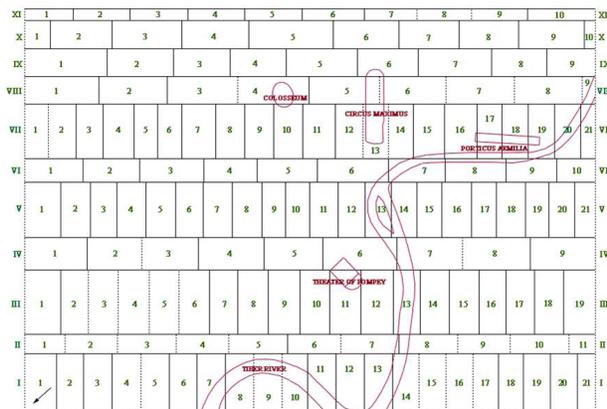


Figure 3: Reconstruction of the Slabs of the Marble Plan of Rome as Arranged in the Forum of Peace (Drawing: Stanford Forma Urbis Romae Project).

Nolli and Piranesi together published a small version of Nolli's full-scale plan of Rome that resulted from scientific research and the systematic investigation of the ancient city. Thus, Piranesi's initial encounter with antiquarian culture introduced him to scientific archeology in which rigorous documentation paired the modern city with ancient remains.⁷ Piranesi, newly arrived in Rome, immersed himself in empirical observation as a close collaborator of Nolli through whom he learned that architectural fragments furnished insights into the past.⁸ Yet, the collaboration between Nolli and Piranesi in the end instigated the latter's rejection of science, since Piranesi pegged the fragmentation of the Roman past onto free invention that departed from history.

ICHTNOGRAPHIA

Nearly twenty years after working under the scholarly sway of Nolli, Piranesi published his *Ichnographia* plan in 1762 (figure 1) in which the former apprentice flagrantly violated the master's scientific approach. The print operated as a large fold-out in his book *Il Campo Marzio dell' Antica Roma* featuring a series of representations depicting the Campus Martius from prehistory until late antiquity and hinting that Piranesi remained intimately familiar with both the exactitude of stratigraphy and the chronology that archeology implied.⁹ But the *Ichnographia* print transformed the ancient marble plan of Rome into a statement on temporal and spatial continuities that knew no bounds. Dislocating numerous fragmentary ancient remains from their fixed contexts, Piranesi set forth a theory of renewal that transcended the limits imposed by the



Figure 4: G.B. Piranesi, Plate II of *Antichità romane*

historical past. Plate II from Piranesi's *Antichità romane* makes the city itself appear to be composed of fragments surviving from the marble plan, because the shape of Rome stands in a field as a marble slab accompanied by additional floating pieces resembling those surviving from the Severan period (figure 4). From this image, the dichotomy between the fragmented pieces of a map in ruins and the complete city are broken down. Thus, Piranesi's fragmentation embodied the creative potential for the viewer to imagine the recomposed whole, while it was important to Piranesi for graphic renderings to retain the texture of decomposition. For this reason, as Manfredo Tafuri noted, the representation of "Piranesi's *Campo Marzio* fools no one: this is an experimental design and the city, therefore, remains an unknown."¹⁰ Fragments triggered both memories of the past and anticipation of the future. Indeed, Piranesi wished to transmit the ideas of the historical past into an imagined potential recuperation that, through the artist's insistence on superimposition, did not reduce the built environment to a fixed moment in time.

Registering the lapse in time on the subjective memories of a specific individual was Piranesi's primary concern. The fracture resulting from decomposition when applied to a map by Piranesi introduces the impact of disintegrated memories onto the representation of a given place; these thoughts may have been inspired by the writings of Giambattista Vico.¹¹ For example, the large, fold-out illustration of the Campus Martius features a superimposed marble fragment of the Roman neighborhood at the time of Rome's foundation that registers the earliest memory known at the spot (figure 1). Nature, as a result, has been supplanted by the city of Rome that Piranesi depicted underneath. By graphically presenting both Rome's origins and the supposed high point of civilization, Piranesi hinted that unseen memories resonated in the imagination concerning the earliest times. Piranesi proposed that the multiplication of fragments represented meaningful ornamental units providing architectural theorists with a novel approach to studying the ruins of ancient Rome.¹² To be sure, Piranesi steeped himself in all of the available evidence and specifically referred to ancient testimony, including the theoretical writings of Vitruvius. In his preface to *Il Campo Marzio dell'Antica Roma*, addressing Robert Adam to whom the book is dedicated, Piranesi admits to his subjective approach. "I am

rather afraid that some parts of the Campus which I describe should seem figments of my imagination and not based on any evidence: certainly, if anyone compares them with the architectural theory of the ancients, one will see that they differ greatly from it."¹³ Roman architectural theory provided Piranesi with the ancient term for a ground plan, or *ichnographia*, which Vitruvius defined as a two-dimensional manner of representing a building by lines sketched using a ruler or compass. As a way of mapping architecture that Vitruvius implied could also function as an abstraction of urban space, the term *ichnographia* pointed toward thinking about the city, according to Vitruvius. The ancient author stated that, in a plan, "thought is an effort of the mind, ever incited by the pleasure attendant on success in compassing an object."¹⁴ Piranesi depicted fragments of the ancient plan to instigate contemplative processes, which his encounter with authentic antiquities set in motion. Yet, one wonders, why did Piranesi separate rational time from predetermined space?

Envisioning time and space as the constituent parts of architectural memory was fundamental to Piranesi's manner of investigating ruins. Clearly, Piranesi opted to liberate time from historical chronology and space from historical topography; these moves were central to Piranesi's critique of the scientific method. Piranesi insisted upon the ornamental categories as presenting the uncontextualized, undocumented memories that held meanings whose true significance could not be boxed in by rational parameters.

Piranesi operated under the premise that engravings and architectural drawings could capture the artist's insights into the power of antiquities, allowing fragments of the ancient built environment to transmit memories into the imagination. Dissatisfaction with topographers and their scientific measurements coincided with Piranesi's general dismissal of accuracy in architectural representation. In place of drawings that expound precision, Piranesi felt that the magnificence of Rome could not be reduced to numeric notation. The dedicatory preface to his text *Prima parte di Architettura* established his esteem for ruins. "I will not repeat here the *wonder* I felt observing at close quarters, the exact perfection of the architectural components of the Buildings, the rarity, the immeasurable mass of the marble one finds everywhere, and also the vast extent of space

that at one time the Circuses, Fora, and the Imperial Palaces occupied: I will tell you only of *such images these speaking ruins have filled my spirit*, that drawings, although *accurate*, even those of the immortal Palladio, have not succeeded in evoking."¹⁵ Piranesi's rejection of exacting precision opened up a theory of ornament in which the persistence of memories inspired the artist's freedom. Rejecting the coherence delivered through regulations, Piranesi avoided "a reconciliation of the parts with the whole: this, I believe, must be achieved and maintained not only in these attributes of architecture but also in all ornaments that one might someday see fit to combine with it."¹⁶ This statement, excerpted from Piranesi's *Opinions on Architecture*, concluded his argument that representations featuring decoration uninhibited by constraints helped the architect to celebrate the powerful imagination, which memories could inspire.

By connecting Piranesi's interest in the fragment to his commitment to the procedures of mapmaking, a theory of ornament derived from ancient plans carved onto marble surfaces emerges that legitimates memories embedded in all the parts of Rome—its aqueducts, sewers, and streets together with its more impressive monuments. Piranesi emphasized the connections between topography and memory by looking at ancient orators who rooted visual memory cues in imaginary places envisioned by the mind.¹⁷ Yet, Piranesi was also invested in uprooting antiquities from their original locations. As a result, Piranesi advanced the cutting-edge notion that the fragmentation of architectural representation available in the surviving pieces of the marble plan paralleled the decontextualized ruin. Both the ruin and the architectural plan hint at completed structures, even though graphics for proposed buildings indicate future construction whereas antiquities gesture toward the past. Piranesi's commitment to transcribing the ancient past, learned under Nolli's tutelage, used mapping as the vehicle with which transmit memories. But the ultimate products in Piranesi's prints transmitted these memories into a meaningful type of ornamentation in which the significance is not bounded by scientific constraints. Instead, the implied future restoration of the fragmented ruin allows the beholder to recreate the immanent potential inherent in the object, encouraging the past to pave the way for the restitution of memories.

Piranesi stood in opposition to the rigorists who celebrated Greek antiquities as vehicles for the delivery of purity in the rationalist approach of Enlightenment architecture. This position was at odds with ancient maps and the discipline of archeology that investigated ancient material with renewed force in the eighteenth-century. In antiquity, the Severan plan installed in the Forum of Peace was preceded by a comprehensive project of surveying and measuring of the city that the marble represents. Evidence that buildings as depicted in the plan illustrated the earlier phases in their construction history rather than their apparent state during the third century CE suggests that earlier campaigns to document the city made their way onto some of the slabs of the plan.¹⁸ Jennifer Trimble further adduces the conflation of different moments in the ancient marble plan to advance her claim that the map features abstraction as a byproduct of the process through which it was created. Consequently, Piranesi's explicit violations of temporal and topographical parameters originated, whether the eighteenth-century engraver perceived it or not, in the ancient fragments of the Severan plan.

CONCLUSION

Neither the advocates of Greek purity nor Piranesi's countervailing stance condoning late imperial Roman grandeur abandoned ornament. By systematizing decorative elements with the ordering system imposed by structure, Greek rigorists imposed severity upon architectural theory. Piranesi's insight suggested that the path to the future could be paved by the fragmented ruin. The way forward, Piranesi hinted in his critique of the Greek purists, was through the decomposed fragment that marked off a trajectory from long ago toward an uncharted future. Piranesi's fragment was a graphic strategy of glancing, impossibly, both at the past and at the future through which the artist in a single image both memorialized and modernized architecture.

ENDNOTES

1 Susan M. Dixon, "Illustrating Ancient Rome, or the *Ichnographia* as Uchronia and Other time Warps in Piranesi's *Il Campo Marzio*," in *Envisioning the Past: Archaeology and the Image*, S. Smiles and S. Moser eds. (Oxford: Blackwell, 2005), 115-133.

2 Pier Luigi Tucci, "Eight fragments of the Marble Plan of Rome: Shedding New Light on the *Transtiberim*." *Papers of the British School at Rome* 72 (2004): 185-202.

3 Lucos Cozza in Carettoni, Gianfilippo; Colini, Antonio; Cozza, Lucos; and Gatti, Guglielmo, eds. *La pianta marmorea di Roma antica. Forma urbis Romae* (Rome 1960); Claude Nicolet, *Space, Geography, and Politics in the Early Roman Empire* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1991), 202.

4 Nicolet, *Space, Geography, and Politics in the Early Roman Empire*, 194-204.

5 See, for example, G.P. Bellori, *Fragmenta vestigii veteris Romae ex lapidibus Farnesianis nunc primum in lucem edita cum notis* (Rome 1673).

6 Mario Bevilacqua, *Roma nel secolo dei Lumi. Architettura erudizione scienza nella Pianta di G.B. Nolli "célèbre geometra"* (Naples: Electa, 1998).

7 Werner Oechslin, "L'intérêt archéologique et l'expérience architecturale avant et après Piranèse," in *Piranèse et les Français: colloque tenu à la Villa Médicis*, G. Brunel ed. (Rome: Edizioni dell'Elefante, 1978), 397-418.

8 Mario Bevilacqua, "The Young Piranesi: The Itineraries of his Formation." In *The Serpent and the Stylus: Essays on Giovanni Battista Piranesi*, *Memoirs of the American Academy in Rome Supplements* 4, M. Bevilacqua et al. eds. (Rome: American Academy in Rome, 2006), 13-53.

9 Dixon, "Illustrating Ancient Rome."

10 Manfredo Tafuri, *Architecture and Utopia: Design and Capitalist Development*, B. L. La Penta trans. (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1976), 15.

11 Giambattista Vico, *New Science*, trans. D. Marsh (London: Penguin, 1999 [1744]), 314-315; Patrick Hutton, *History as an Art of Memory* (Hannover, NH: University Press of New England, 1993), 32-36.

12 Peter Eisenman, "Piranesi and the City," in *Piranesi as Designer*, Sarah Lawrence ed. (New York: Cooper-Hewitt, 2007).

13 Giovanni Battista Piranesi, "Letter of Dedication" preface to *Il Campo Marzio dell'Antica Roma* (Rome, 1762).

14 Vitruvius, *On Architecture* I.2.2.

15 G.B. Piranesi quoted in Andrew Robinson, *Giovanni Battista Piranesi: The Early Architectural Fantasies* (Washington, DC: National Gallery of Art, 1978), 96.

16 Giovanni Battista Piranesi, *Observations on the Letter of Monsieur Mariette with Opinions on Architecture*, trans. C. Beamish and David Britt (Los Angeles: Getty, 2002 [1765]), 113.

17 Marcel Baumgartner, "Topographie als Medium der Erinnerung in Piranesi's 'Campo Marzio dell'Antica Roma,'" in *Architektur und Erinnerung*, Wolfram Martini ed. (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck und Ruprecht, 2000), 71-102.

18 Jennifer Trimble, "Process and Transformation on the Severan Marble Plan of Rome," in *Cartography in Antiquity and the Middle Ages: Fresh Perspective, New Methods*, R.J.A. Talbert and R. W. Unger eds. (Leiden: Brill, 2008), 76-78.