

Making Leonardo Bufalini's Map of Rome

Abstract

In his will, Leonardo Bufalini (d. 1552) identified himself as a *faber lignarius*, but he was much more skilled than that general designation implies, and already famous for his huge woodcut map of Rome, first printed in 1551. During his lifetime, Bufalini worked as a carpenter, carver/designer, and builder; as a surveyor, military engineer and contractor; and as a mapmaker. Although Bufalini's map has survived in only two complete versions, now in London and Rome, neither has ever undergone a satisfying photographic campaign or a comprehensive technical review. In 2024, in collaboration with the Bibliotheca Hertziana, the Vatican Library scanned its twenty-four, pristine woodblock prints. From those high-resolution images, I have assembled a digital map filled with new evidence revealing Bufalini's skills and methods, which until now were obscured.

Analysis of the details in my digital map, when compared with other original sources, support a new thesis. During the 1530s Bufalini was paid to survey Rome for a military map that Pope Paul III Farnese (r. 1534 – 1549) required, but never disclosed. Around 1540, with the survey's accurate and detailed drawings in hand, changed circumstances prompted Bufalini to begin a different, private, entrepreneurial project: his woodcut map. To satisfy a prospective international audience as well as a Roman one, Bufalini redesigned the city's plan by changing the positions of large pieces of the original surveys, which previously had accurately recorded only the contemporary city's defensive military features: Rome's topography, fortification walls, its network of roads and streets, and its city blocks. To those, he decided to add the city's imperial "twin", signified by its iconic but fragmentary remains. Studying, measuring, drawing, and labeling them required another decade of personal studies, field-work, expense, and *vigilia*, primarily in Rome's wasteland areas beyond the urban core (the *disabitato*). Finally, he inserted some fanciful, reconstructed plans of ruined monuments into that vast area to reinforce the map's propagandistic message about Pope Paul's "New Rome" and its vanished precursor. The ancient city was both the imagined source and the lost specter of the modern and beautifully revived city that the Farnese pope had bequeathed to the world. Bufalini's design for his wall-sized map was intended as both a technically precise record and a visually potent emblem that lauded the recently deceased ruler.

Close scrutiny of Bufalini's map confirms his excellence as a surveyor and graphic designer. With his two scales, which are mathematically precise as well as geometrically useful, he cunningly converted surveyed distances into ancient Roman dimensions, and his sequential offsets and rotations of the surveyed places moved them in logical steps into their final snug positions inside the map's classically square boundaries. Consideration of the artistic, technical, and political aspects of Bufalini's woodcut map as it evolved during the 1530s and 1540s suggests new ways to evaluate its truths and subterfuges, and how it could be useful today.