Mapping Jews: Cartography and Topography in Rome's Ghetto

Samuel D. Gruber, Dr., Syracuse University

Available at: https://works.bepress.com/samuel_gruber/90/
GIAMBATTISTA NOLLI AND ROME

Mapping the City before and after the Pianta Grande

Edited by Ian Verstegen and Allan Ceen

Studium Urbis
Mapping Jews: Cartography and Topography in Rome’s Ghetto

Samuel D. Gruber

In memory of Maria Raina Fehl (1920-2009)

Pope Paul IV established Rome’s Ghetto on July 14, 1555, with the papal bull “Cum nimis absurdum.” All of the city’s Jews were forced to move to an area defined by the Ponte Quattro Capi and the Portico d’Ottavia on the southeast, and the Piazza Giudea and the Tiber to the northwest. Prior to this Jews lived in various parts of the city, on both sides of the Tiber River. The Roman Ghetto, as it came to be called after the enclosed Jewish quarter established in Venice in 1516, was established in the area with the most historic associations for the Jewish community and its greatest population concentration.

Echoing the language that established the Ghetto in Venice in 1516, the Roman order called for only two entrances to the Ghetto: “...all Jews should live solely in one and the same location, or if that is not possible, in two or three or as many as are necessary, which are to be contiguous and separated completely from the dwellings of the Christians. These places are to be designated by us in our city and by our magistrates in the other cities, holdings, and territories. And they should have one entry alone, and so too one exit.”

Because of the central location of the Ghetto this proved impractical and eventually there were seven entrances in all.

The Ghetto as defined by Paul IV and his surveyors was enlarged twice: once during the pontificate of Sixtus V (1585-90), and then in 1823-4 during the pontificate of Leo XII. With the exception of a brief period of freedom during the Napoleonic rule of Rome, the Jews of the city were confined to the Ghetto until 1848, when the walls and gates were demolished for the last time. The Jews themselves do not appear to have fully understood and accepted the permanency of the new arrangement until 1859, following the expansion by Sixtus V.

Jews, as well as several prominent Christian families, had lived in this area for centuries. There is a reference to a prayer house named for a certain Joseph at Ponte Quattro Capi (called Ponte Jdeororum) around 1000, and a synagogue existed in 1337 on the Piazza Giudea, the commercial center of what was to become the Ghetto.

The appearance of both the medieval Jewish district and the post 16th-century Ghetto is only approximate because of massive changes in the area since the Risorgimento. The erection of the Tiber embankments and the subsequent demolition of a substantial part of the Ghetto, carried out from 1885 to 1908 when the Cinque Scorte, the building that had housed the five

---

1 On the papal bull see Kenneth R. Stow, Catholic Thought and Papal Jewry Policy 1555-1593 (New York, 1977), chapter 1. The complete Latin text with an English translation of Cum nimis absurdum (Since it is absurd and improper that Jews...) is on pp. 291-298.


5 Translation from Stow, op. cit. 295


synagogues of Rome was pulled down, eliminated most of the historic Ghetto area. 9 Today, no streets or buildings from the Ghetto defined by Paul IV remain. Only the small section added by Leo XII, known as the “braccio Leonino” survives, extending from the present Via del Portico d’Ottavia, to the Piazza Mattei, set between the narrow and winding Via di Sant’Ambrogio and the Via della Reginalda. The ancient Portico d’Ottavia which Romans and visitors alike now consider at the heart of the Jewish district was actually outside of the Ghetto walls. The reconstruction of the Ghetto requires, then, a good look backwards, utilizing maps, views, property documents, census documents, and every other available historical resource. A number of studies have contributed to this effort, especially those of Viviana Campajola and Carla Benocci10 who have gathered primary source materials to help correlate the existing street network with the earlier layout of the Ghetto.

Fortunately, the establishment of the Ghetto and its three-century existence parallels the peak period of Roman map making. Plans and maps provide us with a wealth of topographic and architectural information about the development of the area.11 Each map or view gives us a different window on the Ghetto, and as is to be expected, these cannot always be correlated. The Nolli map of 1748 (fig. 1) is certainly the most reliable for the location, proper configuration and dimensions of blocks and spaces, and importantly, the correct relationship of the parts. On his map, Nolli was circumspect about identifying the Ghetto (however, his index captions, Nolli 1025 and 1026, clearly refer to the Ghetto). A quick glance at the plan allows the viewer to see the Ghetto as well integrated into the historic fabric of the medieval and Renaissance city. The outlines of the district are visible if one looks hard, and a single black line separates the long block that is partly within the Ghetto and partly without.

Many of the view-maps clearly label the area as the Ghetto (e.g., Falda). They also give a greater sense of the district as three-dimensional space, though these views must be accepted only in a general way, because it is often difficult, and even impossible to confirm details.

The establishment of the Ghetto and the creation of the great Roman views and maps are both attempts to define and control space. The creation of the Ghetto was physically restrictive and humaly degrading. The creation of city-maps, in all their panoramic glory, was spatially liberating. For the first time, all the parts of the whole city could be understood in full physical relation to the others. Despite the varying level of specificity of each example, there is something almost utopian, or at least ideal, in their realizations. Thus, generalization in depiction is permissible. The glory of the city is revealed, but not the human reality – the stench, the garbage, the disease, the vagrancy – and the hardship of the Ghetto.

We should remember that this same period of mapping – especially in the generation of Nolli – saw the placement of the many plaques forbidding the dumping of “mondezza” (trash) on the city streets – sure signs that it was taking place. This was also the period of the Ghetto’s greatest density. Nolli shows a packed district with little open space, while Falda’s oblique view is full, but still airy. In 1676, when Falda made his print approximately 6,000 Jews were confined to an area of about one and half hectares, but Falda presents the densely packed neighborhood, which he clearly labels “Il Ghetto deli Hebrei,” as relatively spacious, especially in comparison to many other areas of the city. The narrow alleys of the Ghetto are here shown as wide passageways seemingly full of light and air.

The 19th century paintings of these same alleys by E. Roselar Franz depicts them as terribly decrepit, but Franz too, opens up the scenes to more light and air than was probably the case. Artistic license required a wider view to populate these scenes with more activity. Franz’s across-the-street-viewpoint sometimes removes the buildings behind the artist to allow a more panoramic composition.12 In Falda’s map, the two main north-south routes through the Ghetto, the Via Rua and Via Fiumara, have the appearance of major roads, emphasizing their connectedness to the city street network. Only Nolli’s map of 1748 allows us to gauge the actual width – or rather narrowness – of the Ghetto alleys. The size of these streets is comparable to the many medieval streets that were still part of 18th-century Rome, and which in the map are seen in stark contrast to the wider and straighter streets which

---


10 See above, note 3.


began to be pushed through the dense urban fabric near the Ponte Sant’Angelo in the late 15th century and in the more open rione of Campo Marzio and Monti in the 16th century. The enclosure of the Ghetto by Paul IV in 1555 represented the antithesis of the urbanism of his predecessor Paul III, during whose reign straight streets were created to link areas, and public piazza were created – such as the one in front of his own Palazzo Farnese - as open spaces for private and public use.

Bufalini’s map was the first to depict with a reasonable amount of accuracy the intricate street network of the city. It was published in 1551, four years before the creation of the Ghetto. Bufalini, of course cannot show us the Ghetto, but he does label the Platea Iudaea and Via Iudaea, long recognized as urban elements deserving of note (fig. 2).

The Platea, or piazza, consisted of two distinct parts, each roughly triangular in shape which met at a single angle, in an hourglass-like form. This spatial arrangement is almost certainly a residual element of the medieval city, and such piazza arrangements where two distinct but related civic spaces meet at a shared angle can be found in many medieval towns, such as Todi and San Gimignano. In 1508 Julius II had the Ruga Iudeorum widened. This stretch of street appears to have run in dog-leg segments, one fairly straight from Piazza Giudea to near the Piazza del Portico D’Ottavia, and then two segments to the Ponte Quattro Capi. According to a (now lost) inscription, at least part of this Piazza was embellished, probably as part of his general public policy of city beautification with special attention to the riverside routes. In 1555, an entrance to the new ghetto was set at the junction of the two piazza parts, so that one came to be called the Piazza Giudea fuori del Ghetto, and the other dentro il Ghetto (see Nolli 1025 and 1026 and their index references).

The piazza outside the Ghetto was further improved with a fountain in the 17th century, as seen in prints by G. B. Falda from 1648 and Giuseppe Vasi from 1752. An Aqua Vergine fountain was proposed for the site in 1570 by Giacomo della Porta, but a fountain was put in the Piazza Mattei instead. A gate to the Ghetto can be seen in Falda’s print.

A partial plan prepared by Bartolomeo de’ Rocchi around 1555 and now in the Galleria degli Uffizi, clearly indicated what would be the main topographic features during the first generation of the Ghetto (figs. 3 & 4). This plan is extremely important because it shows many features that were subsequently changed, and thus are not part of Nolli’s now-canonical representation.

The De Rocchi plan demonstrates where short stretches of new walls are to be erected, or perhaps have just been erected, for enclosing the Ghetto. This work was contracted by Salustio Peruzzi and carried out in a short period during of 1555. While the de Rocchi plan appears at first glance to be an exact measured representation, a comparison to Nolli, which we must assume is essentially correct, indicates that it is not. Notwithstanding later changes to the area, de Rocchi’s streets and blocks do not line up with Nolli, indicating that the de Rocchi map was probably based on ground measurements and estimation, and as such is probably an extended version of a property map of the type common in the period. Drawn house plans became increasingly common in Rome from this period on, usually accompanying written property descriptions.

The view-maps of Mario Cartaro, published in 1576 (fig. 5), and of Dupérac, published in 1577 (fig. 6), are the first to show the new Ghetto complete with gates. De Rocchi showed three entrances to the Ghetto, but we do not know what they were like as they are only shown in plan. One of these was through the new wall built to cordon off the Piazza delle Tre Cannelle, which was clearly an important entrance space into the Ghetto in the years between 1555 and 1589, when Pius IV first closed the Ghetto and Sixtus V expanded it. Antonino Tempestà’s grand view-map of Rome of 1593 (fig. 7) and the view-map of Maggi of 1625 (fig. 8) show the Ghetto with its Sistine extension of 1589, when two

---

13 On Bufalini see Allan Ceen, "Introductory Essay," in Rome 1748: The Pianta Grande di Roma di Giambattista Nolli in Facsimile (Highmount, NY: J. H. Aronsen, 1984) and the essays by Maier and Schlapobersky in this volume. Ceen writes (p. IV): "With respect to all of its medieval and Renaissance predecessors, Bufalini’s map represents a remarkable change. From odd collections of buildings drawn in elevation or oblique view, with little topographical consistency, and a nearly total absence of indications of streets in plans and views like those of Strozzi and Schedel, we suddenly pass to Bufalini’s meticulously complete plan where every street and city block is clearly drawn....it is the first map since antiquity that enables us to grasp the city in its topographic entirety.”


16 Coll. Arch. 4206.
18 Frutaz, Le piante di Roma, Vol II. Cartaro on tav. 238 & 244 (dlt); Dupérac on tav. 247 & 249 (dlt).
new gates were designed and erected by Domenico Fontana. These were contemporary to the slightly more decorative gates Fontana designed for the Villa Montalto, the Pope's estate on the present site of the Stazione Termini. Access to that enclosed space would also have had restrictions.

In the Middle Ages and the early Renaissance, the area that was to become the Ghetto was an important neighborhood, centrally located on major communication arteries of the city. Even after its creation, its centrality can be easily seen on the 1676 city view by Falda where the Ghetto stands out as a major crossroads. Thus, it is not surprising to find prior to the establishment of the Ghetto the family precincts of the powerful Cenci, Savelli and Mattei families clustered in close proximity in the district. By the 19th century, however, the area had changed for the worse. The historian of Rome, Ferdinando Gregorovius, described the fish market at the Portico d'Ottavia, just on the edge of the Ghetto, as “the most sinister and perhaps the most curious part of Rome.” Photos from the late 19th century have emphasized the overall shabbiness of the district at this time.

By 1555, two main routes traversed the area running more or less parallel to the Tiber, roughly northwest to southeast. These would have carried much of the north-south urban traffic. The first is the old Via Maior, an ancient and medieval route from the Ponte Sant'Angelo to the Ponte Fabricio, commonly known as the Ponte Quattro Capi. The road was an important link in the arterial chain that tied the Vatican and Trastevere to the rest of the city. This is a branch off the central member of the Banchi Trivium (Via Peregrinorum). Beginning as the Via dei Banchi Vecchi, and then becoming the Via di Monserrato and the Via Capo di Ferro.

The Nolli map clearly indicates the importance of this route as a link between important urban nodes. The route passes through the Piazza Farnese past the churches of Trinità dei Pellegrini (Nolli 726), San Paolo alla Regola (Nolli 734), curving at the base of Monte Cenci (750), where until the end of the 16th century it originally ended, or possibly transformed into a shoreline track up to the Ponte Quattro Capi. After the creation of the Ghetto this path was maintained and it is visible on the De Rocchi plan, which also shows the new walls erected to enclose the Ghetto; these are built along this part, but do not enclose it. De Rocchi's drawing also indicates the cutting of the new streets for the implementation of the Ghetto enclosure. When in 1589, Pope Sixtus V extended the area of the Ghetto all the way to the river, the shoreline path was cut off by new gates designed by Domenico Fontana.

The reasons for this expansion are mixed. Some scholars maintain this reflects a more liberal attitude towards the Jews on the part of Sixtus V. Others, however, including Kenneth Stow, have suggested that the expansion was pragmatic and fully in keeping with Sixtus's adherence to Catholic Reformation doctrines of stringent separation of undesirables, as well as concerted efforts to convert these undesirables into good Christians. The expansion rewarded some of Sixtus's supporters, including the Cardinal of Santa Croce whom Sixtus had appointed chief administrator of the Roman wool industry and who owned much of the land now enclosed, and thus much more valuable as real estate; and Domenico Fontana, the Pope's architect, who not only built the new wall and gates for the Ghetto expansion, but whose family was given the hereditary right to collect a gate toll.

As part of the expansion, Sixtus ordered a new road made, and this became the Via della Fiumara (Nolli 1031), the last straight stretch of the Via Maior, which finally connected the older route directly to the bridge, albeit by passing through the Ghetto. Sixtus's act also allowed the development of the land actually bordering the river, and in the following decades this was built over, so that a series of new houses in the crowded Ghetto area were entered from the new Via della Fiumara, and they back up against the river, where they were constantly in danger of high water flooding. 19th century photos and paintings preserve the look of the rear of these houses.

Assuming that traffic flowed through the Ghetto along this route, it is interesting to note that the process of enclosure of the Jews actually thus led to an improvement of public space. This early act of Sixtus V, carried out 35 years after the Ghetto was created not only enhanced life for Rome's Jews, but also served to reunite the Ghetto from the city from which it was cut off. An order of 1621 taxed the Jews in order to pay for the maintenance of this street – but this was not an uncommon practice in Rome and elsewhere, where residents were directly responsible for at least partial payment of civic improvements that immediately affected them. American business improvement districts follow the same model.

19 Frutaz, Vol II. Tempesta on tav. 262 & 266 (dfl); Maggi on tav 307 & 316 (dfl).

20 Allan Ceen, The Quartiere de`Banchi: urban planning in Rome in the first half of the Cinquecento (New York: Garland, 1986).

The Via della Fiumara can be understood in many ways, one of which is certainly as a pivotal piece in the overall street network created by Sixtus V to link the crucial pilgrimage and traffic nodes of Rome into one vast and passable network. Ghetto gates did form a physical barrier after dark, when they were closed. During the day, however, they were not a hindrance to passage. Other gates, such as those on the Via della Lungara into Trastevere, and the Borgo, also allowed regular passage into enclosed urban enclaves, but could also be closed to restrict movement as needed.

A first reading of Nolli suggests that the Ghetto gates on the Via della Fiumara are signs of restricting public access, in the way that reading Nolli today allows us to see how many public spaces, especially small piazze and alleyways, have been appropriated over the centuries for private use. While it is difficult to define the space of the Ghetto as purely public, for Nolli, however, even limited access is enough to allow much of the Ghetto to be represented in white, his color indicating the public realm.

The second important route that connects the Ghetto is the Via del Pellegrino which branches off the Via Maior near the Chiesa Nuova, and then continues through Campo dei Fiori (Nolli 630), past the church of San Carlo al Catanari, where in the past it branched with the straight right branch leading directly into the Piazza Giudea (Nolli 1025). Here it continued to the Portico d'Ottavia and the church of Sant'Angelo, and then skirted the Teatro Marcello, until it came to the Piazza della Bocca della Verità, eventually leading to the Marmorata across from the Porto di Ripa Grande.

This important route was kept intact until the 19th century. It was not initially interrupted by the institution of the Ghetto, since the Ghetto entrance from the Piazza Giudea was at the far end leading to the connected, but smaller piazza, and another transverse street. This street too, pre-existed the Ghetto and is already labeled on Bufalini's map as the Via Iudea. It was known subsequently as the Via Rua (Nolli 1027).

These two main routes outside the ghetto were connected by the Vicolo dei Cenci (Nolli 752), which ran outside the Ghetto and along part of the Ghetto wall erected in 1555. This wall divided the Piazza del Mercatello, placing most of the open space within the new Ghetto, where it became known in time as the Piazza delle Cinque Scuole, named after the Ghetto synagogue which contained five separate congregations and worship spaces (Scuole) within the single building complex.

As with most of the public urban spaces in Rome, Nolli identified the public places in the Ghetto by number on his map, and the names of these places were listed in full in the accompanying numerical index. The numbering for folio 19/20 of the Pianta Grande's numerical index begins with eleven of the Ghetto sites. The first of these "Piazza Giudea fuori del Ghetto" (Nolli 1025) is actually outside the ghetto, corresponding to its counterpart situated within the Ghetto, which is named "Piazza Giudea dentro del Ghetto" (Nolli 1026). Numbers 1026 to 1035 are situated entirely within the Ghetto. Other sites including the Chiesa di S. Gregorio a Ponte Quattro Capi (Nolli 1036), Piazza di Pescaria (Nolli 1023), the oratorio di S. Maria del Pianto (Nolli 754), the Chiesa di S. Tommaso a Cenci (Nolli 751) and vicolo de' Cenci (Nolli 752) all border the Ghetto.

The removal of the Piazza del Mercatello into the Ghetto appears to have necessitated the creation of a new piazza on the other side of the boundary wall, where a small open space was made in front of the church of S. Tommaso a Cenci. The new street (Vicolo de' Cenci) was designated the boundary between the rioni Regola and Sant'Angelo.

Much of the Vicolo de' Cenci, and its importance, is a result of the Ghetto enclosure. De Rocchi's map clearly indicates how buildings were cleared from the path of the street to allow a straight connection. But this had not been done when Dupérac published his view plan in 1573. Conversely, after the street is cut and the wall is isolated, Maggi in his 1625 view map prefers to show the space lined with houses. For Paul IV, the importance of providing alternative access routes for Christians outside of and circumventing the Ghetto area was both a practical and moral consideration, and part of his overall restrictive policy limiting all contact between Christians and Jews. Sixtus V, who opened the Via Fiumara, appears not to have had these concerns. While he continued the separation of Jews and Christians (as he also tried to separate the prostitutes of Rome from virtuous Christian ladies), he did attempt to roll back some the most odious regulations controlling the activities of the Jews. His reforms, however, were short-lived. Clement VIII repealed the Sistine reforms with his Bull of February 25, 1593 "Caeca et obscura," (Blind and obdurate.) The new bull, did not, however, reverse the Sistine Ghetto expansion. Within the Ghetto proper there was only one direct route between the major cross streets. This is considered a continuation of the Via Rua that runs between the Piazza delle 3 Cannelle (Nolli 1033) and the Piazza di Pescaria (Nolli 1023).

As for other seriously altered parts of Rome, the
great Nolli plan of 1748 provides the most precise representation of what is lost. But Nolli’s ichnographic representation presents only the ground plan of what was a rich, diverse and densely populated three-dimensional neighborhood. His representation, though exact, is hardly complete. His delineation of “public” and “private” space is clear, but given the norms of Jewish life, as well as those forced upon Jews in the Ghetto, the separation between public and private space was not so finely drawn. To some extent, this is rectified by consulting the more detailed Gregorian catasto map of 1819-1822 which is based on Nolli, but included the divisions of individually held private properties. This in itself, as a simpler graphic representation, does much to suggest the population density in the Ghetto in the early 19th century. But that is the topic for another article.
Figure 1: Giambattista Nolli, detail of Pianta Grande, 1748, detail of rione Sant'Angelo showing Roman Ghetto with boundary.
Figure 2: Leonardo Bufalini, Pianta di Roma, 1551, detail of area of future Roman Ghetto showing major streets traversing area.
Figure 3: Bartolomeo De Rocchi, plan of the Roman Ghetto, c. 1555, Florence, Galleria degli Uffizi (after Benocci and Guidoni, 1993, p. 8).

Figure 4: Bartolomeo de Rocchi, detail of plan of the Roman Ghetto, c. 1555, Florence, Galleria degli Uffizi (after Benocci and Guidoni, 1993, p. 8).
Figure 5: Mario Cartaro, Pianta di Roma, 1576, detail of Roman Ghetto.

Figure 6: Stefano Du Pérac (Étienne Dupérac) and Antoine Lafrery, Pianta di Roma, 1577, detail of Roman Ghetto.
Figure 7: Antonio Tempesta, study for Pianta di Roma, 1593, after Finelli et al, 1986, fig. 3), detail of Roman Ghetto.

Figure 8: Giovanni Maggi, Pianta di Roma, 1625, detail of Roman Ghetto.