[A map is] a social construction of the world expressed through the medium of cartography. Far from holding up a simple mirror of nature that is true or false, maps redescribe the world—like any other document—in terms of relations of power and of cultural practices, preferences, and priorities. What we read on a map is as much related to an invisible social world and to ideology as it is to phenomena seen and measured in the landscape.¹

The Severan Marble Plan is an extraordinary map. Carved between 203 and 211 CE, it represented the imperial city of Rome in plan view, depicting every temple and warehouse, every street and alley, every tenement building and luxury dwelling, every ground-floor room, doorway and internal staircase (Figs 1, 9). Centered on the Capitoline and carved at a scale of 1:240, it mapped an area of more than 13.5km². Its accuracy and detail make it a crucial resource for understanding the imperial city. Unfortunately, only about 12% of

the original survives, in 1,194 fragments. This fragmentation makes the map monumentally difficult to work with, and research has necessarily focused on identifying and piecing together individual fragments. Moreover, scholars have found this map significant primarily for its depiction of monuments attested in ancient texts, and for its help in reconstructing the topography of Rome. Productive as this work has been, it has too often meant treating the map as an objective source of information, an unproblematic reflection of the physical record. Little attention has been paid to this monument as a map, a complex visual image in its own right, and one that raises important questions about the control of information and the conceptual representation of space.

In this article, I draw on the approach of J.B. Harley, cited above, to explore the Severan Marble Plan as a constructed image of the city as much as an indicator of what stood where. This was no

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2 The Stanford Project, in collaboration with the Sovraintendenza Comunale di Roma, has placed photographs and 3D models of 1,186 fragments, many with scholarly commentary, on a public website (http://formaurbis.stanford.edu). Thirty-one newly-discovered fragments from the recent excavations in the Imperial Fora have now been published in FUR 2006, 13-26 and 37-39 (23 of these can be seen on the Stanford Project’s website; all have the inventory number prefix “fn”). The figure of 12% was generated by David Koller of the Stanford Project. For a description of the Project’s work, see David Koller, Jennifer Trimble, Tina Najbjerg, Natasha Gelfand and Marc Levoy, “Fragments of the city: Stanford’s Digital Forma Urbis Romae Project,” in Lothar Haselberger and John Humphrey (eds.), *Imaging Ancient Rome: Documentation—Visualization—Imagination*, Journal of Roman Archaeology Suppl. 61 (2006), 237-52. On the late antique and medieval spoliation of the map, AG 1980, 39-43; see now Riccardo Santangeli Valenziani’s discussion in light of the new excavations, in “Distruzione e Dispersione della Forma Urbis Severiana alla Luce dei Dati Archeologici,” in FUR 2006, 53-59.


4 A precedent for this approach is the work of Richard Talbert on the Peutinger map. See elsewhere in this volume, as well as Richard Talbert, “Rome’s Marble Plan and Peutinger’s Map: Continuity in Cartographic Design,” in F. Beutler and W. Hameter (eds.), ‘Eine ganz normale Inschrift’…und Ähnliches zum Geburtstag von Ekkehard