

Origins of Rome

Is the Legend of Romulus True?

Istanbul's Big Dig

Graffiti Archaeology

Ancient Roots of Kosovo's Blood Feud

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Hill and Temple of Vesta



Fact or Legend?

Debate over the origins of Rome

Archaeologist Andrea Carandini claims he has evidence for a flesh-and-blood Romulus, the legendary founder of Rome. Many of his colleagues dispute his interpretation, believing Romulus to be a mythic figure. Who's right? In this special report, we present both sides of the debate, plus interviews with Carandini and...

Were Romulus and Remus Historical Figures?

by ANDREW SLAYMAN

APRIL 21, 753 B.C.—After being raised by a she-wolf along the banks of the Tiber River, the orphan twins Romulus and Remus decide to found a city. They consult the augurs to see which of them will be king, and the answer comes back: "Romulus." So he marks out a sacred boundary on the Palatine Hill and orders his men to dig a ditch and build a wall around it. Remus, in a fit of jealousy and rage, jumps over the wall. For this sacrilegious transgression, Romulus kills his brother and goes on to fulfill the prophecy by becoming the first king of Rome.

For more than 2,000 years, historians have made a living poking holes in this legend, pointing out that there are inconsistent versions of the story and that parts of it are simply impossible. But over the past two decades, Italian archaeologist Andrea Carandini has uncovered startling evidence in the heart of the Roman Forum that seems to confirm parts of the myth. A professor at the University of Rome, Carandini is one of the deans of contemporary Italian archaeology. His discoveries include a wall (possibly the sacred boundary of legend) and a "royal palace" that he has connected to Rome's earliest years. Based on this evidence he argues that Romulus was a real historical figure. His defense of Rome's mythic origins, which has earned him the admiration of the Roman public but the disapproval of many of his colleagues, represents a sharp break with two millennia of scholarship.

How seriously should we take the legendary accounts of Rome's founding? The Roman historian Livy (59 B.C.—A.D. 17) characterized the traditions surrounding the city's earliest years as "old tales with more of the charm of poetry than of sound historical record." Over the years, the doubt expressed by Livy and other ancient authors crystallized into the archskepticism of historian Theodor Mommsen, who wrote in 1854, "The founding of a city in the strict sense, such as the legend assumes, is of course to be reckoned altogether out of the question: Rome was not built in a day." In 1899, however, Italian archaeologist Giacomo Boni discovered a stele in the Forum with an archaic Latin inscription that included the word *rex* (king), possibly a reference to Romulus or one of the six legendary kings said to have succeeded him. Boni identified the site where he found the stele as the legendary tomb of Romulus, and as a result, the Livian tradition concerning royal Rome once again became a subject of serious debate.

Over the years a scholarly consensus emerged that went something like this: In very ancient times, from the sixteenth

through the ninth centuries B.C., a few small villages occupied the area that was to become Rome.

Historians generally avoided the period, because the early literature was thought to be based on pure myth, and archaeologists wrote of it only in terms of Bronze Age, Iron Age, and numbered ceramic phases. The so-called Latial II and III cultures flourished during the eighth century B.C., when the literary sources said Rome had been founded, but nothing in the archaeological record could be tied to a man named Romulus. By the seventh and sixth centuries B.C. these villages were beginning to coalesce into a city, and by the fifth



Excavations in the Forum may support the legend that inspired a fanciful 1616 depiction of Romulus and Remus by Peter Paul Rubens, the great Flemish painter (facing page).

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century B.C. Boni's inscription announced the presence of a king. But no one even thought of claiming that someone had founded a city on virgin soil, and certainly not someone named Romulus one April day in 753 B.C.

Decades of carefully crafted consensus seemed on the brink of crumbling when, in 1988, Carandini announced the discovery of an ancient wall on the Palatine. There, on the hill's north slope, he found a natural gully shaped into a ditch by human tools. Next to it were the remains of four successive walls, the oldest being of wood and clay and almost five feet wide, dating from the mid-eighth century B.C., bordered on one side by a strip of ground free from construction. "When I excavated the Romulean-age wall I realized that I was looking at the very origins of Rome as a city-state... the first of Romulus's great works," Carandini recently told *ARCHAEOLOGY* (see interview below).

Carandini continued his excavations, and two years ago made yet another major discovery, this time in the form of a large, elaborate structure that he described as a "royal palace," also dating from the eighth century B.C. To him, this confirmed the idea that Rome, although built atop a preexisting settlement, was really founded in the mid-eighth century, and that a king named Romulus truly existed.

The notion that Rome's famous founding myth might actually be true has enduring appeal to the populace of a city steeped from birth in ancient grandeur—and to fans of A.S. Roma, one the city's major soccer teams, whose logo sports

a wolf suckling the twins. And Carandini's discoveries have made him something of a celebrity, at least by archaeological standards. A lecture he gave last fall in Rome attracted a crowd of some 5,000, according to *La Repubblica*, which compared Carandini's popularity favorably with that of Leonardo DiCaprio.

But his argument that Romulus was real has provoked massive scholarly controversy, with an assortment of archaeologists and historians admiring his excavations but reserving judgment on—or even rejecting—many of his conclusions. University of Exeter historian T. P. Wiseman has been one of Carandini's most vocal critics, faulting him for using "the legends of Romulus in the Greek and Latin authors (writing seven centuries or more after the alleged events) as if they were historical evidence that can explain the results of his excavations."

For now, at least, Carandini appears to be in the minority, but there is always the possibility that he might be right. "If he is right—and we might not know this in our lifetimes—he will have made major discoveries of a kind only Boni made 100 years ago," says classical archaeologist Albert Ammerman of Colgate University, who excavated in Rome from 1987 until 2003 (see page 26). "He will have done something to reverse the skeptical tradition of ancient authors and modern ancient historians totally, but in practical terms this will take decades." Either way, only time will tell—time and more excavations.

Andrea Carandini on the Evidence for Romulus

Interviewed by MARCO MERLO



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7 من 5 : like before Romulus—that is, before the eighth

Before the eighth century B.C., a big settlement existed which had no forum or capitol. Around the mid-ninth century B.C., necropolises built between the hills were moved to the outskirts, and the hills were given over completely to huts. The boundaries of the necropolises, therefore, give us a "negative" photograph of the settlement itself, which probably covered about 500 acres. All the other settlements of the time covered at most 25 acres.

The pre-Romulean settlement consisted of a federation of quarters that had roughly the same importance. There were 27 shrines of the Argei, a ritual in which human effigies made of bulrushes were cast into the Tiber, presumably to appease the gods. As the shrines were located in 27 different areas of Rome, this means that there were 27 sections of the city. What we know about the Argei comes from ancient authors who described the location of the different quarters.

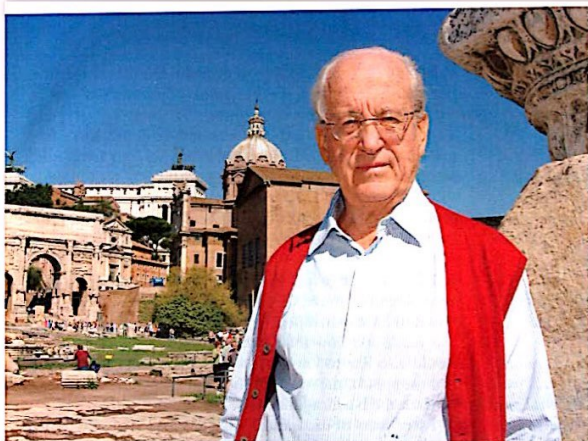
MM: What are the available written sources for Rome's founding?



Carandini supervises the excavation of a palace possibly used by Romulus's descendants.

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His excavations on the north slope of the Palatine Hill have made Carandini a celebrity in his native Rome.

AC: The Roman historian Quintus Fabius Pictor, who worked in the third and second centuries B.C., wrote the first actual account of Rome's origins. What he reports is much older; it dates back to centuries before. Pictor would have seen Rome's Archaic monuments still standing—the Temple of Capitoline Jupiter, various buildings that had not been destroyed by the Gauls [in 390 B.C.]. Many buildings built in the sixth century B.C. survived [in Pictor's time]. Unfortunately, none of the historian's original works have survived, but a number of later writers—Cicero, for example, in *De Republica*—picked up what he wrote.

There are many other significant written sources for early Rome, such as the Law of the 12 Tables. This law dates back to the mid-fifth century B.C., and it includes customary rules that date back to a much earlier time—even to the eighth century B.C. Think also of the famous Praenestine mirror [a fourth-century B.C. mirror decorated with mythological scenes], which may depict the legend of Romulus. All are important elements that help in reconstructing the origins of Rome.

MM: Romulus and Remus are supposed to have been semidivine brothers, like Castor and Pollux. But did they really exist?

AC: There is archaeological evidence of the existence of Romulus and Remus. When I excavated the Romulean-age wall on the Palatine, I realized that I was looking at the very origins of Rome as a city-state. This wall, which was the first of Romulus's great works, destroyed the [earlier] hut villages and is dated through a number of foundation



At the House of the Vestal Virgins, Carandini has found evidence of the earliest traces of Rome, dating back to 750-725 B.C.

deposits to about 775–750 B.C. These were not fortifications but should be regarded as sacred walls protecting a sacred place.

Then, in the second half of the eighth century, Romulus commissioned the reclamation of the land beneath the Forum, which had been a swamp, and the construction of a new sacred and political center. There we have uncovered the oldest cobble paving, dating back to the eighth century, which was covered by a newer layer dating from about 650 B.C. The Forum was bounded on one side by the sanctuary of Vesta. The excavations at the Temple of Vesta have given me the ultimate evidence, the actual "marks" of the early city. In the sanctuary of Vesta I actually excavated down to virgin soil. The earth was marked, as if someone had used a tool like a plowshare to demarcate the location of a building.

Opposite the entrance to the Temple of Vesta was the House of the Vestal Virgins. Beneath it I found a hut dating back to between about 750 and 725 B.C.; given its location I think it represents the first House of the Vestal Virgins. While the ancients associated the sanctuary of Vesta with Numa Pompilius [the second king of Rome], the archaeological dating corresponds to Romulus. Hence, my theory is that the construction of the sanctuary started before Numa's accession to the throne, but had been ordered by Romulus himself a few years after the Palatine walls were built.

On the side of the sanctuary facing east, where the Arch of Titus is, we found an extraordinarily innovative small palace that I have identified as the *Domus Regia* [royal palace]. Literary sources tell us that Numa Pompilius and Ancus

Marcus [the fourth king of Rome] lived in this place.

Finally, Romulus created an organization composed of tribes, with a king backed by a royal council and an assembly. There was a shift from the community of the *patres* [the early Roman senate] to a monarchy. Romulus also rationalized the system of the 27 sections. There were three tribes with nine *curiae* [assemblies] each, and he added one in order to have a total of 10 *curiae* [per tribe]. But with Romulus the *curiae* were no longer independent and their role in the

Palatine Hill I was looking not for the founding of Rome, but for the origin of the buildings. My intention was to study the heart of this city, comprising about 2.5 acres and stretching from the Arch of Titus to the Temple of Vesta. I now have tons of evidence for my theories, but I still need to enrich this picture.

MM: What still needs to be discovered to clarify your ideas about Rome's founding?

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MM: What do your archaeological discoveries tell us about early Rome?

AC: These excavations prove that it all started around the mid-eighth century B.C. in these central, public places of worship and politics. After 750 B.C. everything was born. There was no gradual expansion of an old core but the sudden evolution of a city that was great and remains great. At last today we are witnessing a notable convergence of the literary tradition and the archaeological evidence.

MM: Did you expect to find any of this when you began work on the northern slope of the Palatine in 1986?

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MM: What still needs to be discovered to clarify your ideas about Rome's founding?

AC: I would like to find the worship hut of Jupiter Feretrius, a small temple on the Capitoline in which Romulus is supposed to have worshiped, or try to understand how a *curia* was made and how the fabric of the city was composed. I would also like to know more about the rural settlements and the *oppida*, the main fortified settlements, and excavate beneath the Basilica Julia in the Forum.

After years of excavation, I think I have a profile of the city, but I am still missing the details. If I were young I would excavate at least another hectare. Doing this would be a heroic enterprise, but I am not a youngster. Archaeology can find anything, Rome is below our feet. But unfortunately in two or three years of excavations we could not find enough. We would need to work uninterrupted for years and years.

Marco Merola is *ARCHAEOLOGY's* Naples correspondent.

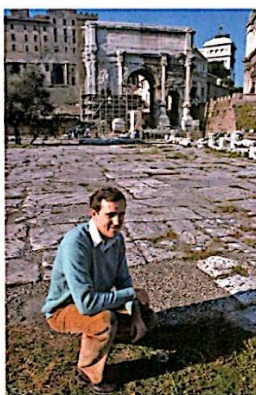
Albert Ammerman on the Origins of Rome

Interviewed by ANDREW SLAYMAN

AS: What do ancient historians have to say about the founding of Rome?

AA: Two main figures have come down to us: Livy [59 B.C.–A.D. 17] and Dionysius of Halicarnassus [who wrote around 25 B.C.]. Livy says that when we're dealing with very remote times he will neither confirm nor deny the historicity of what he's saying; he's just going to repeat what he said.

In the case of Dionysius, who was a Greek historian writing in Greek, he naturally envisioned the founding of Rome by Romulus as if it were a Greek city. The notion of a "foundation" came from the Greek historiographical tradition, in which if you had a major city, like Syracuse or Crotona [Greek colonies in Sicily and southern Italy], you had to have a narrative talking about its founder, the date of its founda-



Albert Ammerman in the Forum, with the A.D. 205 Arch of Septimius Severus in the background.

tion, and so forth. In Rome's case we have the great stories of Romulus and Remus, which have been honed over the centuries to make a wonderful narrative account.

There is also Plutarch on the life of Romulus, together with his parallel life of Theseus, the legendary founder of Athens. Plutarch [about A.D. 46–120] says specifically that these stories sound too good to be true. He tells all kinds of things about the lives of Theseus and Romulus, but he treats them as elaborations added over time, viewing the story as a whole as tradition that is myth-history. It's like George Washington chopping down the cherry tree. No American historian today accepts or believes the story, but they might retell it because it's part of the tradition.

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their own stories, then what should modern scholars do with them?

AA: The consensus embodied in the traditional version of the story—that Romulus founded Rome in 753 B.C.—obscures endless variations in the ancient texts. The classic example is that Livy has Romulus dying in two different ways. In one, he goes to the Forum and the people tear him apart; in the other, he goes up in apotheosis.

The consensus version also embodies its fair share of impossibilities. Seven kings are said to have reigned between 753 and 510 B.C. but if you look at the average length of a reign that this implies, almost 35 years, it's quite clear that either the dates or the list of kings must be wrong.

When you have so many alternative versions, it indicates that elaborations took place as the stories were passed down over the centuries. That there are so many different versions fuels the skeptics—people who, like [nineteenth-century historian] Theodor Mommsen, would say that it's all a pack of lies. In reality you can use it, but you have to take the whole literary tradition together, with all its problems and inconsistencies and anachronisms.

AS: What do modern historians have to say about the origins of Rome?

AA: Looking back at the ancient historians, if you read Dionysius of Halicarnassus he tries to pack the origins of Rome into a great founding figure: Romulus. But if you follow the lead of Livy, the development of the different functions of the city are distributed over the seven kings. They are not all packed into one figure.

Similarly, most historians working today don't want to "front-load" the origins of the city—that is, to say that it all happened in the eighth century B.C. Instead they want to have a certain sequence. They tend to acknowledge that things were happening before the eighth century, but to look for the development of



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things from the Greek world—all of those things took place after 650 B.C.

Where I feel Carandini goes too far is in saying that if you can show that some piece of the archaeological record exists, this somehow validates the literary tradition. In other words, if the literary tradition says that Romulus built a wall on the Palatine in 753 B.C., and you find a wall on the Palatine dating to around 750 B.C., then the wall must be Romulus's wall, and Romulus must have been real. Just because you find a wall somewhere in Scotland, that's not enough to call it Hadrian's Wall.

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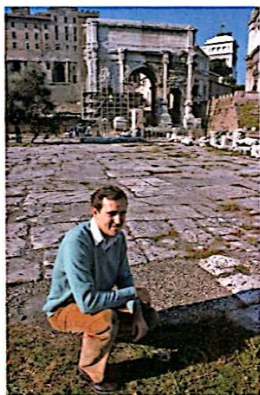
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AS: What about the archaeology?

AA: It's clear from Carandini's work that there's a lot happening in the eighth century, and that there may be a kernel of truth in the legend. We may even be able to accept Roma Quadrata on the Palatine—that is a small, early town with four sides and a sacred boundary known as the *pomerium*—but I would argue that in itself doesn't make Rome. The traditional story of the founding of Rome isn't about urbanism; it's about a sacred entity that can be called an *urbs* [a city]. The real urban takeoff—roofs with tiles, foundation blocks, landscape transformations, inscriptions, art, imports of exotic



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AS: What new work is needed to understand Rome's origins?

AA: We see the origins of the Forum as a major event. Many people now think it's the creation of the Forum that was key to the development of the urban fabric. Carandini is hoping to push this back as far as possible, but we think it's probably more like 650 or 625 B.C. That said, at present it's not possible to reliably date the fill that contributed to the creation of the Forum. To do so, we would have to date the most recent pieces in the fill, but Boni did not keep all of his finds. So to know when Rome began to develop as a city, we need to reexcavate the Forum. This would require digging 20 feet below the marble pavement of the Forum and four feet below the water table, so it is unlikely to happen anytime soon. ■

Andrew Slayman is a former *ARCHAEOLOGY* editor and the director of *ArtfulMedia*.