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Review Of "Rome: Day One" By A. Carandini

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Andrea Carandini, Rome: Day One (first published in Italian 2007). Princeton; Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2011. Pp. 172. ISBN 9780691139227. \$24.95.

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[Preview](#)

This brief and fascinating book is an English translation of Andrea Carandini's *Roma: Il Primo Giorno*, first published in 2007 by Laterza in Rome. Its compact size (the main body is only 74 pages long, including 47 figures), appealing style, and lack of bibliography make it clear that the book is intended for non-specialists. Its translation into English means that those who do not read Italian now have a serviceable introduction to the work of Carandini, who for twenty years directed excavations on one of the most significant little stretches of land in all of Rome: the north slope of the Palatine. Carandini has written a great deal on his findings over the past two decades,¹ and, not surprisingly, over that same period his controversial perspective on the early history of Rome has garnered a considerable amount of attention in both academic and non-academic media.² The book under review includes several new claims, supported by the evidence of Carandini's six major archaeological discoveries (see below). But the central claims are very much in keeping with Carandini's earlier writings: that Romulus really founded Rome in the mid-eighth century BC, in the month of April, and that even at its founding Rome was not just a rustic cluster of huts but a full-fledged city-state. So the title of this book is not only a play on the idea that Rome may in fact have been built in a day. It also contains a resonance of "Roma: *dal primo giorno*" ("Rome: *from day one!*") because the archaeological finds lead Carandini to conclude that Romulus did not just build a wall on April 21, c. 750 BC. By establishing central, public places of politics and worship, he built a state: "...that is, a *res publica*, what today we would call a state..." (116).

Specialists and archaeology students will want to stick with the Italian version (with which most are probably already familiar). A full appreciation of Carandini's argument requires the reader to do the work of tracing the ways in which the author implicitly engages with other scholarship and rival claims; that is because, with one exception,³ there is no explicit acknowledgement in this book of any contemporary work on the early history of Rome not written by Carandini himself. In what follows I will offer a rapid overview of the book's contents, an assessment of the quality of the translation, and my opinion of its success as a form of outreach.

The core of the book consists of the six discoveries, described in the second and third chapters. Chapter Two ("The Palatine," 41-63) will culminate with the dating of the remains of the "Romulean" wall (61) at the northwest corner of the Palatine (56f.)—an early and most significant finding of Carandini's excavations.⁴ Carandini now dates the wall to the second quarter of the eighth century BC (this is the first of the six discoveries), with the help of a "foundational deposit" (59)—the furniture of the tomb of a young girl—unearthed under the threshold of the Porta Mugonia. We read of Romulus's institution of this wall (according

to the Etruscan rite of the *sulcus primigenius*), and of the young girl's sacrifice, as part of Carandini's speculative reconstruction of the order of events on April 21, c. 750 BC.

The third chapter ("The Founding of the Forum, the Capitol, and the Citadel," 64-100) includes the other five major discoveries: the remains of the "first *domus* in Rome" (a *domus regia*) in the sanctuary of Vesta, also with a founding tomb as a deposit, datable to the late eighth century (74); a second *domus regia*, late-seventh/early-sixth century BC, connected by an underground path to the Vesta sanctuary (76); the restructuring and transformation of the *domus regia* during the late sixth century (80); a second-century BC *aedes Larum* in the Vesta complex (83); the last discovery is the primitive hut of the vestal virgins, dating from the second quarter of the eighth century BC and lying beneath the late-Republican structure (86). In a synthesis of the six discoveries, Carandini concludes that "Romulus's first achievement, involving the blessing and walling of the Palatine, dates from the second quarter of the eighth century BC, and a fundamental part of the second achievement, involving the Sanctuary of Vesta in the Forum, also dates from the same part of the century, which would make it part of the same project of Romulus. We therefore have not only the urbs on the Palatine but also the sacred and political center of the regnum...we have, from its very beginnings ("fin da principio," p.77 of the Italian edition), the city but also the state" (88).

Stephen Sartarelli's translation is generally excellent, but it could be faulted for occasionally remaining too faithful to Italian style and syntax; for example:

The scholars of ancient Rome (Gli antiquari romani), who didn't have any mytho-historical overview but were simply very curious about rare details (che non avevano un disegno mitistorico ma che erano curiosissimi di rari dettagli), as scholars always are (come sempre gli eruditi), have revealed to us the name of the realities that immediately preceded the establishment of Rome: Septimontium (ci hanno rivelato il nome della realtà che hanno preceduto immediatamente Roma: Septimontium). (22-24; 22 of the Italian edition)

Even if the rhythm and word-choice of such sentences somehow retain a distinctly Italian feel, the meaning remains clear. And on the whole the translation is a pleasure to read, as when Sartarelli finds felicitous ways to capture Carandini's appealing and informal narrative style: "...I would like to take the reader by the hand and have him or her descend with me some thirteen meters under the city of Rome—to where, atop the rubble and rubbish, the living settlements once grew, one on top of the other—and go back more than twenty-seven centuries into the past, in search of the first acts and the first day of Rome's existence: April 21, around 750 BC" (6). Note especially the artful translation of "rubble and rubbish" (6) for the alliterative and rhyming "macerie e immondizie" (p. 9 of the Italian edition).

As a work intended for a general readership, *Rome: Day One* has much to offer. There are more than 60 informative illustrations; an appendix that includes a wealth of primary sources (also translated into English) on the Romulus legend and related material (not just Livy, Ovid, and Plutarch, but also Ennius, Servius, and Censorinus, among others), and beautiful cover art. But it must be said that the arguments at the heart of *Rome: Day One* are often very hard to follow for anyone not already familiar with the topography and history of early Rome. The relative absence of contextualization and the absolute avoidance of bibliography keep the volume slim (surely a virtue in a work of outreach), but the result is that it will most likely prove too difficult for the non-specialist to distinguish between what has been generally accepted and what may be a controversial new solution to an old problem.

Notes:

1. Carandini's other books on the early history of Rome include *Storie della terra* (1996, Turin); *La nascita di Roma* (1997/2003, Turin); *Roma: Romolo, Remo e la fondazione della città* (2000, Milan); *Archeologia del mito* (2002, Turin); *Palatino, Velia e Sacra Via* (2004, Rome); *Remo e Romolo* (2006, Turin); *La leggenda di Roma* (2006, 2010, Milan); *Cercando Quirino* (2007, Turin); *Re Tarquinio e il divino bastardo* (2010, Milan).
2. For a critical assessment of Carandini's work from 2001, see T. P. Wiseman's "Reading Carandini," *JRS* 91, pp. 182-193.
3. Note 1, p. 108: L. Capogrossi Colognesi, "Curie, centurie e 'heredia,'" in *Studi in onore di Francesco Grelle* (Bari: Edipuglia, 2006), pp. 41-49.

4. The works in Note 1 are largely based on this major find.

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