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Some Say His Digging Up of a Legend Is Just a Myth

By IAN FISHER
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ROME, May 5 - This is a sublime moment for Andrea Carandini, an imposing man with white hair under a blue beret who looks every inch like what he is: one of Italy's most renowned archaeologists. It is not just that he has discovered something extraordinary underneath the tightly packed ruins of the Roman Forum: a palace that he believes belonged to the first king of Rome, who just maybe was actually named Romulus.

But after 20 years of digging into the very heart of Rome, he is also convinced that now, finally, other scholars, whom he calls "my opponents," will be forced to "shut up."

"I can see, little by little, them falling apart," he said, in English unnervingly more refined than that of most people who grew up

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James Hill for The New York Times
Andrea Carandini at the House of the Vestal Virgins in the Forum near excavations where he believes he has found the palace of Rome's first king.

speaking it.

"Opponents" may be too strong a word. But in the two decades that Dr. Carandini, 68, has excavated in and around the Palatine Hill, the epicenter of successive generations of Roman rulers, he has without doubt attracted a fair share of skeptics. That is not for his skills as an archaeologist or for his discoveries, which everyone agrees are world class.

The issue, they say, is how much weight to give the mythical accounts of the early histories of Rome when archaeologists decide what it is they have dug up. How seriously to take the story of Romulus, who by legend was suckled by a she-wolf, killed his brother Remus, then founded Rome on the Palatine, by some accounts, in 753 B.C. (before being swallowed up by a cloud).

Dr. Carandini's answer - and this is what gets him into trouble - is, very seriously.

In fact, he says his latest discoveries show the myth to be quite possibly true, even if the king's name was not necessarily Romulus (though he thinks it could have been), and that his wet-nurse was not a she-wolf.

The new discoveries, he says, also add weight to one he made in the late 1980's - still contentious in the sharp-elbowed world of ancient history - of what he says was a fortifying wall on the Palatine built by the founders of Rome, dated, he says, to about 750 B.C., the same time as Romulus.

He says he is not, as some of his detractors suggest, obsessed with the idea of Romulus or proving the Roman legends correct. But he does think that in the end, he is proving that they are not completely false either.

"There is a convergence between the king who built this wall and the literary tradition of Romulus," he said on a recent tour of his entire excavation, which slopes down from the reconstructed Temple of Vesta. "I don't say one is identical to the other. I say there is convergence."

Others say that in his two decades at the site, Dr. Carandini has sometimes worked backward from myth to explain what he has found, rather than waiting for evidence to emerge from the finds themselves.

"He's a distinguished archaeologist, with a very interesting and imaginative way of interpreting his evidence," said Tim Cornell, director of the Institute of Classical Studies at the University of London.

Dr. Carandini's most recent discoveries have not yet been formally published - a fact that in itself raises some scholarly eyebrows. But over the last two years, he has uncovered what he says is a giant aristocratic house, with two big wooden beams, a banquet hall, seats, pottery and a large courtyard. Just outside the palace, he says, are other important and related discoveries, notably a house that he believes held the household fire of the Virgins of Vesta, the goddess of the early Romans.

On their own, many scholars agree, those discoveries could add important details to the still-vague history of the early Romans. But as a whole, they take on a larger significance - and academic contentiousness - given two other conclusions that he makes.

First is that the palace and what surrounds it could belong only to a king, and probably the first king of Rome - a claim that if proven true would be an invaluable historical find. Second, that like his earlier-discovered wall, it was built at the roughly the same time as that of the Romulus legend, between 775 and 750 B.C.

For Dr. Carandini, the date is important, not only because to him it shows some truth behind the legend of Romulus. It also shows, he says, the development of true political power, a city-state, here in Rome at least a century before some standard estimates. In other words, he argues, it provides more evidence that Rome was not what has often been portrayed, as a backwater lagging behind the Greeks, waiting for the invasion of the Etruscans from the north for a more developed political culture.

Many of his critics are hesitant to speak publicly. But Dr. Cornell echoed the view of half a dozen prominent

archaeologists and classical scholars interviewed by saying Dr. Carandini's theories, while intriguing, for the moment run ahead of his proof.

"It's always difficult to judge a new discovery in the immediate aftermath of the discovery," Dr. Cornell said. "I think it will take 20 to 30 years before you can really assess what this find actually amounts to. At this stage, I would say that it's premature to suggest that this represents the foundation of Rome in 750 B.C."

Even Eugenio La Rocca, the chief architect for the city of Rome and a supporter of Dr. Carandini, urged some degree of caution.

"These excavations have yielded really interesting results," he said. "There are problems of interpretation of the excavations, of course. We have to analyze it, see if they are private houses or public houses. It needs deeper investigation, but we can say that we are at the beginning of something really interesting."

However history judges Dr. Carandini's work, supporters and skeptics alike will soon have an opportunity to judge for themselves. The city of Rome will be putting on the first exhibition of his finds this summer.

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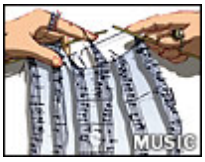

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