

Carandini's Royal Houses at the Foot of the Palatine: Fact or Fiction?

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Some remarks on A. Carandini/P. Carafa, Palatium e Sacra via, 1. Prima delle mura, l'età delle mura e l'età delle case arcaiche, *Bollettino di Archeologia* 31-33 (1995 [= February 2000]); A. Carandini, Palatium e Sacra via, 1. Prima delle mura, l'età delle mura e l'età delle case arcaiche. Racconto breve dello scavo con disegni, *Bollettino di Archeologia* 34 (1995 [= March 2000; contains plates and plans to Carandini/Carafa]).¹

The Palatine undoubtedly forms one of the most venerable areas of ancient Rome. Here, according to the literary tradition, Romulus founded the city by constructing the rectangular walls of *Roma quadrata* in 753 BC after having received a positive sign from heaven in the form of a flight of fourteen eagles. He built his hut on the south-western ridge of the hill, with a panorama that included the Aventine, the Tiber with the adjacent Forum Boarium and the Capitol (*LTUR* I, 214). In the late first century BC, the first emperor Augustus decided to construct his own residence nearby. And as late as the fourth century AD the remains of Romulus' hut were still visible and venerated as a monument of the earliest history of the *urbs*. Following the example of the first king, many elite members of Roman society tried to gain a foothold on the Palatine hill. The emperors merely brought this process to a conclusion.

The kings of the second half of the sixth century BC, according to the literary sources did not live on the hill but moved to the Velia, more or less a foothill of the Palatine, and to the adjacent Forum area. Nearby at the eastern end of the Forum stood the Regia, that was to survive the period of the seven Kings of Rome as a relic of old times, serving as a sort of archive building.

In 1985, Andrea Carandini started excavations in the area of these buildings, viz. the zone between the Arch of Titus and the Regia, and especially on the site occupied by the so-called Porticus Margaritaria (actually *horrea* from the era of Vespasian). This zone had been investigated by Giacomo Boni around 1900, but this pioneer in urban Roman archaeology had not reached the lowest levels of human activities, still less the virgin soil (see the contribution by A.M. Tomei, pp. 21-47). Carandini claims to have found parts of the walls of *Roma quadrata* including one of the four entrances, the *Porta Mugonia*,

as well as the remains of offerings made to the gods on the occasion of erecting a fortification, and a hut which, according to him, was used by a guard (pp. 63-72).

In this discussion note I shall concentrate on a second discovery made by Carandini, namely a series of grand houses of the period of the last two kings, around 550-520 BC (see his synopsis pp. 74-76; for the dating see p. 250) and considered to be their residences. The first results were revealed some ten years ago in a path-breaking exhibition on early Rome, 'La grande Roma dei Tarquini', and, more recently, in the exhibition 'Romolo e Remo'.²

So far there have been very few reactions to these important discoveries, presumably because of the excavator's failure to provide full documentation. But now we have at our disposal the first volume of the final publication of his fieldwork and can check the conclusions previously presented in various conferences and in the exhibitions (see note 2).

Before discussing Carandini's conclusions, it is important to stress that this volume presents the results of an enterprise carried out by skilful and devoted scholars, with a vast knowledge of field archaeology and the historical background. Within a commendably short time of the conclusion of the dig they have provided full documentation of their investigations, including stratigraphic records,³ descriptions and illustrations of the finds, and comparisons with pertinent find complexes elsewhere in Rome.⁴ Thanks to these qualities, scholars can now discuss the issues in an informed way. Carandini personally invites the readers

¹ A first draught of this paper was presented during a round table 'New Approaches to the Archaeology of the House', held at Leiden University, 9-10 May 2001, organised by John Bintliff. I received many suggestions for improvement from the participants and from various readers, especially Marijke Gnade, Roger Ling, Stephan T.A.M. Mols and the members of the editorial board of *BABesch*.

² See the accompanying catalogues: M. Cristofani (ed.), *La grande Roma dei Tarquini*, Roma 1990; A. Carandini/R. Cappelli (eds.), *Roma. Romolo e Remo e la fondazione della città*, Milano 2000. Cf. A. Carandini, *La nascita di Roma. Dèi, Lari, eroi e uomini all'alba di una civiltà*, Torino 1997. On the excavation see, *inter alia*, A. Carandini, *BdArch* 16-18 (1992 [= 1995]) 1-33, 111-138.

³ The latter being a rare feature in Italian archaeology according to Carandini (p. 8).

⁴ However, not all finds are documented. Only those important as to dating and determining strata are included (p. 17).

to follow his reasoning and to question it. The results (p. 17) 'non sono per noi delle realtà ma delle ipotesi di realtà, più o meno verosimili'. And he is not afraid of being contradicted (p. 7): 'Le contraddizioni non sono forse l'anticamera del progresso della ricerca, anche nel campo archeologico?'

During the seventh phase of Carandini's chronology, to which the houses belong, the investigated area was apparently subdivided into two blocks occupied by four houses, of which the excavators found wall structures, floors and sewers (pp. 215-282). These houses are dated to the second half of the sixth century BC by Carandini's team and remained in use, affected by various modifications, some bigger and some smaller, until the beginning of the fourth century, when the Gauls sacked Rome (390 BC). The remains are scanty but this does not prevent Carandini from reconstructing substantial houses of the so-called *domus* type.

It is a commonplace that the student of Roman history and archaeology learns the lay out of a *domus* in terms of an idealised scheme and has to bear in mind that no such house has ever been found (see *infra*). The basis for the adoption of the typology, however, is rooted in the remains of Etruscan funerary architecture and in the ground plans of houses in Etruscan, Latial and Campanian settlements from the fifth century BC onwards, as well as in texts dating from the first century BC onwards, especially Vitruvius' *De Architectura*. This traditional *domus* is concentrated around the atrium, which has a partly open roof and functions as a meeting place between the host and his clients and kinsmen. In principle, the Roman house possesses an open structure and gives the opportunity to penetrate relatively easily into the various parts of the ground floor, at least with the eye. In reality, visitors must have known their limits. The houses of Pompeii - the most thoroughly researched source of material - now provide us with relatively good evidence of how the Roman house functioned, thanks to recent studies by scholars such as Andrew Wallace-Hadrill and Jens Arne Dickmann.⁵ No house remains of this type hitherto known date back to the sixth century BC⁶ and thus there is a distinct dearth of comparative material to verify Carandini's reconstruction of the residences of the Roman kings. Indeed, given that we know extremely little about archaic housing in Rome, how did Carandini come to his conclusions?

As it appears to me, Carandini's reconstructions are based on a series of hypotheses which have far-reaching consequences for the whole question of the city's urban society in the fundamental stage of its development. First, Carandini follows the ancient sources literally, for example by using their chronology of the seven kings (753-510 BC) as the foundation of his own time scheme. Even details in their

descriptions of events are enlisted for his reconstructions. So when, according to Livy (I 41, 4), Tanaquil announces the death of her husband, Tarquinius Priscus, from a second floor, this means that the excavated houses must have had a second floor and a sort of Italian *attico* with terrace or balcony.⁷ Second, Carandini assumes that the houses excavated by his team were occupied by the kings. Third, the houses are given the same form and function as those we know from the third, second and first centuries BC in Pompeii. Hence, the kings lived and worked in these houses like magistrates of the late Republic, i.e. in the manner evoked by the writers of the sources that he uses. Fourth, early Rome is presented as a major city, displaying a splendour similar to that of Greek cities of the period (p. 78-79). This last factor seems also to be reflected in the title of the aforementioned exhibition: *La grande Roma dei Tarquini*.

As to the archaeological evidence itself, the elements used for the reconstruction were found in the course of extremely difficult excavations conducted by means of small, deep *sondages*. The sparse lines on Carandini's plans figs. 166-169, pls. 49 and 51 tally with the reconstruction in his pls. 50, 52, 57, 58, and 63 in so far as the outer limits of the insula are concerned, but there is barely any evidence for the reconstruction of the internal walls, floors and sewers. Furthermore, we cannot safely assign all the wall structures to one and the same building, still less to one and the same insula. Houses I and II come out at some 540 square metres, together occupying the entire insula, house III occupied as much as 778 square metres.⁸ On the basis of the few lines on the plan, without having any clue as to how the

⁵ A. Wallace-Hadrill, *Houses and Society in Pompeii and Herculaneum*, Princeton 1994; J.A. Dickmann, *Domus frequentata. Anspruchsvolles Wohnen im pompejanischen Stadthaus*, München 1999 - to name two outstanding studies only.

⁶ For a recent overview see P. Gros, *L'architecture romaine, 2. Maisons, palais, villas et tombeaux*, Paris 2001, 30-38. Cf. P. Carafa in Carandini/Carafa, pp. 266-274.

⁷ Carandini/Carafa, p. 238: 'Se escludiamo il famoso brano di Livio in cui Tanaquilla si affacciò dal secondo piano della sua casa presso la *porta Mugonia* per annunciare al popolo la morte del re, non possediamo nella tradizione letteraria altre indicazioni riguardo il numero dei piani delle case arcaiche.' With this wording Carandini only rhetorically suggests that the text may serve as an indication - a way of formulating (and reasoning) he frequently applies.

As a matter of fact, at Murlo traces of second floors have been found in the 'palazzo', but this house did not possess an atrium (information A.J. Nijboer).

⁸ Carandini explains his reconstruction as follows (p. 18): 'Lo stato frammentario dell'evidenza non giustifica mai la rinuncia alla ricostruzione, all'interpretazione: un muro non è mai soltanto un muro, ma la parte di un tutto che non possiamo comunque rimuovere.' While understanding the 'rhetorical' negative tense, one can also argue the opposite.

area investigated was divided, Carandini's former student and main collaborator Paolo Carafa concludes too enthusiastically (p. 266): 'Il dato più rilevante per la storia dell'architettura arcaica etrusco-italica sta a nostro avviso nella planimetria innovativa di questi edifici.' In fact, one could argue, on the basis of the same lines, for a series of smaller houses or even a single, free-standing house within an empty area, maybe used as a garden - similar to those reconstructed at Pompeii in the fifth and fourth centuries BC by Cees Peterse of Nijmegen University.⁹ The objects found in the houses too are scanty. For this reason the location of a kitchen in the rear part of the house, adjacent to a women's quarter, is highly hypothetical and, hence, questionable (pp. 245-246, 247). The reconstruction of the interior arrangements and decoration of the houses as shown in a plastic model is based entirely on the interior of certain Etruscan tombs and, again, on textual sources (pp. 244-248). Unfortunately, none of these elements can be substantiated by either archaeological evidence or written sources.

In respect to the latter form of evidence, I do not wish to become involved in the current heated debate on the reliability of the ancient texts.¹⁰ However, like other scholars, I have to cope with the problem of the time frame and structure of this period, characterised by the ancient authors on the basis of an image of society that matched that of their own experiences.¹¹

About the houses of central Italy we have little information before the fifth century, when the cities of Marzabotto and Cosa in Etruria and Pompeii in Campania come to our aid (p. 239; no publications mentioned in note 46 at p. 275).¹² At neither site, however, have houses of the *domus* type used by Carandini been found. Nor do the late-archaic houses excavated at Satricum, relatively near to Rome, by Dutch teams under the direction of Marianne Maaskant-Kleibrink and Marijke Gnade, match the idea of a *domus*.¹³

Carandini himself admits that no atrium houses are known from Rome (p. 239), but assumes that these must have existed because of the large dimensions of the houses found by his excavation team. This conclusion smacks of circular reasoning and is more or less groundless. Even knowledge of the later houses - which Carandini also exploits in part - does not permit such an optimistic inference. Etruscan tombs from the sixth to the third centuries BC sometimes have a central room, similar in form to the atrium, from which one enters the tomb chambers containing the sarcophagi, urns and cippi. The idea of a house of the dead led various scholars to a reconstruction of Etruscan houses on the basis of this type of tomb.¹⁴ Unfortunately, Rome itself has

no examples of comparable tombs, and certainly not in the period of the Tarquinii with which we are dealing.

Carandini's archaeological team apparently wanted to find evidence for daily practice during the early history of Rome. In his polemically written introduction, Carandini pleads for an application *ad litteram* of the historical texts, notably Livy, on this 'hot spot' in the centre of Rome. His plans show how the early kings built their houses along the Sacra Via, near the *Lucus Vestae* - no traces of which have been found - and, as we *must* deal with royal houses, the traces of houses found further to the east *must* belong to large elite dwellings which could have been uniquely royal residences.

Regarding the 'Gesellschaft', the society of the period of the early kings of Rome, we do not know how the various levels functioned. It is an enormous step from Romulus' hilltop hut of straw and mudbrick to this type of dwelling in the valley. One wonders why these later kings left the top of the Palatine to settle near the Forum. It may be argued that this setting was chosen for a specific reason, namely because

⁹ Cf. C.L.J. Peterse, *Steinfachwerk in Pompeji*, Amsterdam 2000. Carandini reconstructs enclosed *horti* on the basis of (1) infant burials, (2) differences of level, (3) written sources (p. 239, 244).

¹⁰ See the critical discussion of some recent Italian publications by A.M. Bietti Sestieri: The role of archaeological and historical data in the reconstruction of Italian protohistory, in: *Ancient Italy in its Mediterranean Setting. Studies in honour of Ellen Macnamara*, London 2000, 13-31. On Carandini 1997 (here cited in note 2) pp. 15-23.

¹¹ Carandini explains his position at pp. 63-64. See on sources and their impact in general T.J. Cornell, *The Beginnings of Rome*, London 1995, 1-30 and *passim*. A good example of discussion on the Etruscan kings and early Rome is that between the same Cornell and Rasmussen: T. Cornell, Ethnicity as a factor in early Roman history, in: T. Cornell/K. Lomas (eds.), *Gender and Ethnicity in Ancient Italy*, London 1997, 9-21 and T. Rasmussen, The Tarquinians and 'Etruscan Rome', *ibid.*, 23-30. See for a discussion of this problem from the point of view of the Volscians M. Gnade, *Satricum in the Post-Archaic Period. A case study of the interpretation of archaeological remains as indicators of ethno-cultural identity*, Diss. Amsterdam 2000; in press (chapter 4 'The Volscians in Historiography').

¹² A sixth-century house at Roselle should have had an atrium (L. Donati, *La casa dell'impluvium: architettura etrusca a Roselle*, Roma 1994 [non vidi, information L.B. van der Meer]). On Marzabotto see A.J. Nijboer, *From household production to workshops: archaeological evidence for economic transformations, pre-monetary exchange and urbanisation in central Italy from 800 to 400 BC*, Groningen 1998, 171-182, 281-290, 328-331.

¹³ M. Maaskant-Kleibrink, *Settlement Excavations at Borgo Le Ferriere <Satricum>*, I-II, Groningen 1987, 1992; M. Gnade, *Le ricerche olandesi a Satricum dal 1977 ad oggi, MededRom* 56 (1997) 37-55; ead., in this volume pp. 19-32.

¹⁴ The connection between the layout of houses and tombs has recently been discussed by A. Naso, *Architetture dipinte. Decorazioni parietali non figurate nelle tombe a camera dell'Etruria meridionale*, Roma 1996, 301-340, esp. 320-340 (atrium-centred tombs).

it was near the new centre of Rome. The Forum area was in the process of a vigorous development and gaining growing importance within the late-archaic society of the *urbs*.¹⁵ The area had not yet, however, been used for building houses. There were old graveyards nearby, and the Forum, despite all the works that were taking place, must still have been rather empty and dampish. Rome was decidedly not a second Athens.¹⁶

Unfortunately, there seems little evidence available to justify the reconstruction of late Archaic society in Rome around the model of the *domus* that was fashionable in later periods. The nature of society in this early period and what the inhabitants of this small settlement aspired to, are matters that remain in darkness. In sum, Carandini's great enterprise has produced only wall fragments, not royal dwellings. In my opinion, the scientific goals of this project were prematurely defined and its outcome has been heavily influenced from the beginning by a certain degree of chauvinism. Carandini's research can be characterised as Etrusco- and Romanocentric - as 'campanilista': Carandini tries to reconstruct splendour during the earliest phase of historical Rome. As far as I can see, the results of the excavation have been

overestimated. My fear is that it will not be long before his fancy reconstruction plans become 'truth' and enter into student textbooks.¹⁷ A thorough check of his work will be essential but is not easy: the author has an enormous erudition in the field of classics, ancient history and religion and his knowledge of early Rome is unsurpassed. His style of writing is eloquent but complicated and outsiders can be lead into too ready an acceptance of the idea of a 'Grande Roma dei Tarquini'.¹⁸

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¹⁵ See G. Tagliamonte, *LTUR* II (1995) 313-325 s.v. Forum Romanum (fino alla prima età repubblicana), esp. 322-323; C.J. Smith, *Early Rome and Latium*, Oxford 1996, 100-103.

¹⁶ In *Roma. Romolo, Remo e la fondazione della città* (see note 2), p. 188-189 a comparison is made with Athens.

¹⁷ See already Gros (see note 6), 36-37 with figs. 20-21.

¹⁸ Carandini facilitates this *iter* by inserting a booklet with a separate title, in which the main results and ideas are presented in a simpler form, accompanied by beautiful plates that obviate the need of a bulky text.

Addendum: see on Carandini's approach also T.P. Wiseman *JRS* 91 (2001) 187-193.