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The Roman Republic

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In the late sixth century B.C., the ancient Romans overthrew the monarchy and established what would become the Roman Republic. It would last for approximately 500 years, and the impact it would have on the Western world and similar forms of government would be profound. The following text details the formation of the Roman Republic, its citizenship, its achievements, and its transition into an empire. As you read, take notes on the structure of the Roman Republic: how was power distributed amongst the citizens and their representatives in the Senate?

The Romans established a form of government — a republic — that was copiedby countries for centuries. In fact, the government of the United States is based partly on Rome's model.

"Cicero Denounces Catiline" by Cesare Maccariis in the public domain.

It all began when the Romans overthrew their Etruscan conquerors in 509 B.C. Centered north of Rome, the Etruscans had ruled overthe Romans for hundreds of years.

Once free, the Romans established a republic,a government in which citizens elected representatives to rule on their behalf. A republic is quite different from a democracy, in which every citizen is expected to play an active role in governing the state.

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The Roman concept of the citizen evolved during the Roman Republic and changed significantly during the later Roman Empire. After the Romans freed themselves from the Etruscans, they established a republic, and all males over 15 who were descended from the original tribes of Rome became citizens. Citizens of Rome distinguished themselves from slaves and other noncitizens by wearing a toga; most wore a white toga. During the Empire, each emperor worea purple toga to distinguish himself as the princeps, or "first citizen." Citizenship varied greatly. The full citizen could vote, marry freeborn persons, and practice commerce. Some citizens were not allowed to vote or hold public office, but maintained the other rights. A third type of citizen could vote and practice commerce, but could not hold officeor marry freeborn women.

In the late Republic, male slaves who were granted their freedom could become full citizens. Around 90 B.C., non-Roman allies of the Republic gained the rights of citizenship, and by 212 A.D., under the Edict of Caracalla, all free people of the Roman Empire could become citizens.

The aristocracy (wealthy class) dominated the early Roman Republic. In Roman society, the aristocrats were known as patricians. The highest positions in the government were held by twoconsuls, or leaders, who ruled the Roman Republic. A senate composed of patricians elected these consuls. At this time, lower-class citizens, or plebeians, had virtually no say in the government. Both men and women were citizens in the Roman Republic, but only men could vote.

Tradition dictated that patricians and plebeians should be strictly separated; marriage between the two classes was even prohibited. Over time, the plebeians elected their own representatives, called tribunes, who gained the power to veto measures passed by thesenate.

Gradually, the plebeians obtained even more power and eventually could hold the position of consul. Despite these changes, though, the patricians were still able to

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use their wealth to buycontrol and influence over elected leaders.

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The Roman Senate

The history of the Roman Senate goes as far back as the history of Rome itself. It was first created as a 100-member advisory group for the Roman kings. Later kings expanded the groupto 300 members. When the kings were expelled from Rome and the Republic was formed, the Senate became the most powerful governing body. Instead of advising the head of state, it elected the chief executives, called consuls.

Senators were, for centuries, strictly from the patrician class. They practiced the skills of rhetoric and oratory to persuade other members of the ruling body. The Senate convened and passed laws in the curia, a large building on the grounds of the RomanForum. Much later, Julius Caesar built a larger curia for an expanded Senate.

By the 3rd century B.C., Rome had conquered vast territories, and the powerful senators sentarmies, negotiated terms of treaties, and had total control over the financial matters of the Republic.

Senatorial control was eventually challenged by Dictator Sulla around 82 B.C. Sulla had hundreds of senators murdered, increased the Senate's membership to 600, and installed many non-patricians as senators. Julius Caesar raised the number to 900 (it was reduced after his assassination). After the creation of the Roman Empire in 27 B.C., the Senate became weakened under strong emperors who often forcefully coerced this ruling body. Although itsurvived until the fall of Rome, the Roman Senate had become merely a ceremonial body ofwealthy, intelligent men with no power to rule.

Occasionally, an emergency situation (such as a war) arose that required the decisive leadership of one individual. Under these circumstances, the Senate and the consuls could appoint a temporary dictator to rule for a limited time until the crisis was resolved. The positionof dictator was very undemocratic in nature. Indeed, a dictator had all the power, made decisions without any approval, and had full control over the military.

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The best example of an ideal dictator was a Roman citizen named Cincinnatus. During a severe military emergency, the Roman Senate called Cincinnatus from his farm to serve as dictator and to lead the Roman army. When Cincinnatus stepped down from the dictatorshipand returned to his farm only 15 days after he successfully defeated Rome's enemies, the republican leaders resumed control over Rome.

The Twelve Tables

One of the innovations of the Roman Republic was the notion of equality under the law. In 449 B.C., government leaders carved some of Rome's most important laws into 12 great tablets. The Twelve Tables, as they came to be known, were the first Roman laws put in writing. Although the laws were rather harsh by today's standards, they did guarantee everycitizen equal treatment under the law.

Here are some examples of laws from the Twelve Tables:

> Females shall remain in guardianship even when they have attained their majority (except Vestal Virgins).
>
> A spendthrift is forbidden to exercise administration over his own goods.
>
> It is permitted to gather fruit falling down on another man's farm.
>
> If any person has sung or composed against another person a song such as was causingslander or insult to another, he shall be clubbed to death.
>
> Quickly kill... a dreadfully deformed child.

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With respect to the law and citizenship, the Romans took a unique approach to the land lands that they conquered. Rather than rule those people as conquered subjects, the Romans invited them to become citizens. These people then became a part of Rome, rather than enemies fighting against it. Naturally, these new citizens received the same legal rights as everyone else

The Punic Wars

The early Roman Republic often found itself in a state of constant warfare with its surrounding neighbors. In one instance, when the Romans were fighting the Carthaginians, Rome was nearly conquered. The people of Carthage (a city in what is today Tunisia in northern Africa) were a successful trading civilization whose interests began to conflict with those of the Romans.

The two sides fought three bloody wars, known as the Punic Wars (264-146 B.C.), over the control of trade in the western Mediterranean Sea. In the second war, Hannibal,[38] a Carthaginian general, successfully invaded Italy by leading an army — complete with elephants— across the Alps.[39] He handed the Roman army a crushing defeat but was unable to sack the city of Rome itself. After occupying and ravaging[40] Italy for more than a decade, Hannibal was finally defeated by the Roman general Scipio[41] at the Battle of Zama[42] in 202 B.C.

By the Third Punic War, Rome was ready to end the Carthaginian threat for good. After a successful several-year siege[43] of Carthage, the Romans burned the city to the ground. Legend has it that the Romans then poured salt into the soil so that nothing would ever grow there again. Carthage was finally defeated, and the Roman Republic was safe.

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