

CHAPTER 33

In the Roman republic, elected senators debated and interpreted the laws.

The Rise of the Roman Republic

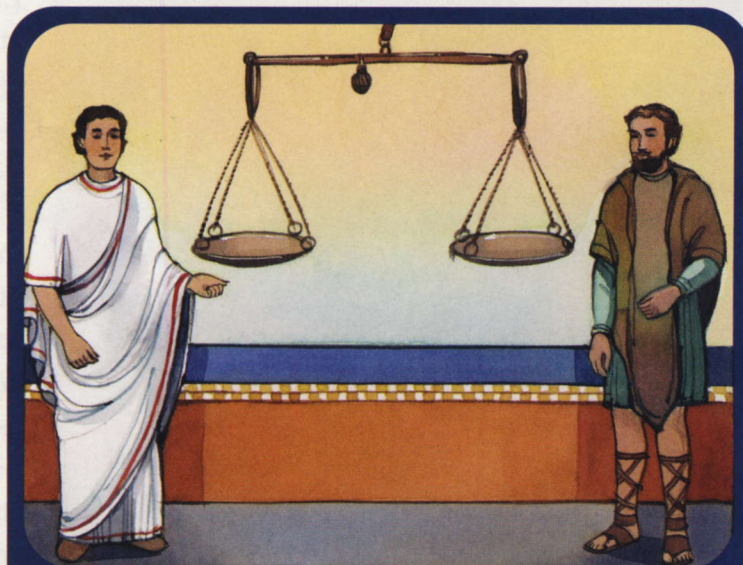
33.1 Introduction

In the last chapter, you learned about Etruscan and Greek influences on Rome. Early Rome was ruled by Etruscan kings from northern Italy. In this chapter, you will learn how the Romans overthrew the Etruscans and created a republic around 509 B.C.E. A **republic** is a form of government with elected leaders.

Ancient Romans told an interesting story about the overthrow of their Etruscan masters. One day, two Etruscan princes went to see the famous oracle at Delphi, in Greece. A Roman named Lucius Junius Brutus traveled with them.

At Delphi, the princes asked the oracle which of them would be the next king of Rome. The oracle answered, “The next man to have authority in Rome will be the man who first kisses his mother.” Hearing these words, Brutus pretended to trip. He fell on his face, and his lips touched the Earth, “the mother of all living things.”

Back in Rome, Brutus led the revolt that drove out the Etruscan kings. He became one of the first leaders of the new republic. In this way, the oracle’s mysterious words came true. The Romans were now free to govern themselves. But not all Romans were equal. Power in the early republic belonged to rich men called **patricians**. The majority of Romans, the **plebeians**, had no say in the government. In this chapter, you will see how a long struggle between patricians and plebeians shaped the government of Rome.



Use this balance as a graphic organizer to help you better understand how political power was distributed between patricians and plebeians during the early Roman Republic.

33.2 Patricians and Plebeians Under Etruscan Rule

Senate a group of 300 men elected to govern Rome in the Roman Republic

consul one of two chief leaders in the Roman Republic

One of the heroes of the early Roman Republic was Lucius Junius Brutus. Here, Brutus is promising to support the new republic.



Between 616 and 509 B.C.E., the Etruscans ruled Rome. During this time, Roman society was divided into two classes, patricians and plebeians.

Upper-class citizens, called *patricians*, came from a small group of wealthy landowners. *Patricians* comes from the Latin word *patres*, which means “father.” The patricians chose the “fathers of the state,” the men who advised the Etruscan king. Patricians controlled the most valuable land. They also held the important military and religious offices.

Lower-class citizens, called *plebeians*, were mostly peasants, laborers, craftspeople, and shopkeepers. The word *plebeians* comes from *plebs*, which means “many.” Plebeians made up about 95 percent of Rome’s population. They could not be priests or government officials. They had little say in the government. Yet they still were forced to serve in the army.

33.3 The Patricians Create a Republic

Over time, the patricians came to resent Etruscan rule. In 509 B.C.E., a group of patricians rebelled. They drove out the last Etruscan king. In place of a king, they created a republic. In a republic, elected officials work for the interests of the people.

To the patricians, “the people” meant the patricians themselves, not the plebeians. They put most of the power in the hands of the Senate. The **Senate** was a group of 300 men that the patricians elected. The senators served for life. They also appointed other government officials and served as judges.

Two elected leaders called **consuls** shared command of the army. The Senate was supposed to advise the consuls. In fact, the Senate’s decisions were treated as law.

The creation of the republic gave Rome a more democratic government. But only the patricians could participate in that government.

33.4 The Plebeians Rebel

Rome was now a republic, but the patricians held all the power. They made sure that only they could be part of the government. Only they could become senators or consuls. Plebeians had to obey their decisions. Because laws were not written down, patricians often changed or interpreted the laws to benefit themselves. As a result, a small group of families held all the power in Rome.

The plebeians had to fight for what they wanted. They began to demand more political rights. The struggle between the plebeians and the patricians was known as the Conflict of the Orders, or conflict between the classes.

The conflict grew especially heated during times of war. The new republic frequently fought wars against neighboring tribes. Plebeians



had to fight in the army even though the patricians decided whether to go to war. Plebeians resented this.

The struggle took a dramatic turn in 494 B.C.E. By then, Rome was a city of between 25,000 and 40,000 people. Most of the population were plebeians. Angry over their lack of power, the plebeians marched out of the city and camped on a nearby hill. They refused to come back until the patricians met their demands.

Rome was in crisis. Work in the city and on the farms came to a halt. Without the plebeians, patricians feared that the army would be helpless if an enemy struck at Rome. "A great panic seized the city," wrote Livy, a famous Roman historian. The patricians had little choice but to compromise.

For many years, plebeians struggled to gain a share of the political power enjoyed by patricians.

veto to refuse to approve proposals of government made by the Senate

tribune an official of the Roman Republic elected by plebeians to protect their rights

Plebeians won a major victory when patricians agreed to post Rome's laws on the Twelve Tables.



33.5 The Plebeians Gain Political Equality

The plebeians' revolt led to a major change in Roman government. The patricians agreed to let the plebeians elect officials called Tribunes of the Plebs. The **tribunes** spoke for the plebeians to the Senate and the consuls. Later, they gained the power to **veto**, or overrule, actions by the Senate and government officials that they thought were unfair. Over time, the number of tribunes grew from 2 to 10.

Plebeians could also elect a lawmaking body, the Council of Plebs. However, the council made laws only for plebeians, not patricians.

The plebeians had gained some important rights. But they still

had less power than the patricians. Over the next 200 years, the plebeians used a series of protests to gradually win political equality.

First, they demanded that the laws be written down. That way, the patricians couldn't change them at will. Around 451 B.C.E., the patricians agreed. The laws were written down on tablets called the Twelve Tables.

Next, in 367 B.C.E., a new law said that one of the two Roman consuls had to be a plebeian. Former consuls held seats in the Senate, so this change also made it possible for plebeians to become senators.

Finally, in 287 B.C.E., the plebeians gained the right to pass laws for all Roman citizens. Now, assemblies of all Roman citizens could approve or reject laws. These plebeian assemblies also nominated the consuls, the tribunes, and the members of the Senate. More and more plebeians served alongside patricians in the Senate. After 200 years of struggle, the plebeians had won their fight for equality.

Rome's republican form of government inspired future ages in Europe and America. Rome set an example of a government ruled by a written *constitution* (set of basic laws). Future republicans also pointed to Roman ideals of elected assemblies, citizenship, and civic duty. They adopted the model of governmental bodies that could check each other's power. Above all, they were inspired by the spirit of republicanism. Cicero, a famous Roman statesman, captured this spirit when he wrote, "The people's good is the highest law."

33.6 Chapter Summary

In this chapter, you learned how the Romans overthrew the Etruscans and created a republic. Romans were proud of their republic. Sometimes, during times of war, they handed power over to a dictator. Dictators were men who were given special powers for a limited period of time. But for the most part, elected leaders ruled Rome for 500 years.

Because of the conflict between patricians and plebeians, the Roman Republic became more democratic over time. The plebeians eventually won more political power. In time, most of the important differences between patricians and plebeians disappeared.

In the next chapter, you will learn how Rome grew from a small republic into a mighty empire.

In the Senate, Roman senators debated important decisions facing the city.

