

Chapter 33

The Rise of the Roman Republic

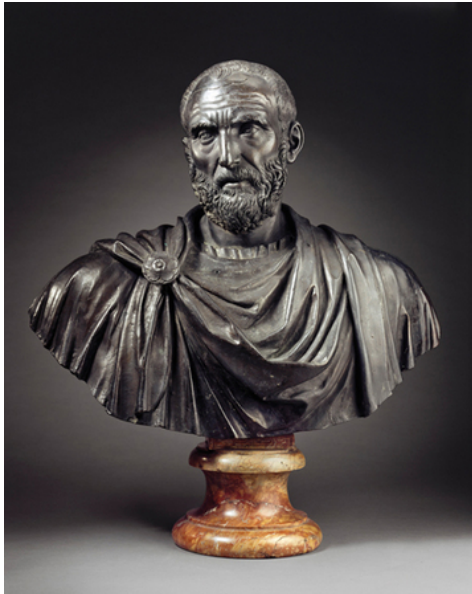
EQ: What were the characteristics of the Roman Republic and how did they change over time?

33.1 Introduction

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 in which leaders are elected to represent the people.

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

At Delphi, the princes asked the oracle which one 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 this prediction, Brutus pretended to trip. He fell on his face, and his lips touched 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 Roman people were now free to govern themselves. But not all Romans were equal. Power in the early republic belonged to rich men called patricians (pah-TRIH-shens). The majority of Romans, the plebeians (pleh-BEE-anz), had no voice in the government. In this chapter, you will see how a long struggle between patricians and plebeians shaped the government of Rome.

33.2 Patricians and Plebeians Under Etruscan Rule

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. *Patrician* comes from the Latin word *pater*, which means “father.” The patricians chose from among themselves 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.

Free non-patricians called **plebeians** were mostly peasants, laborers, craftspeople, and shopkeepers. The word *plebeian* comes from *plebs*, which means “the common people.” Plebeians made up about 95 percent of Rome's population. They could not be priests or government officials. They had little voice 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, led by Lucius Junius Brutus, rebelled. They drove out the last Etruscan king. In place of a monarchy, they created a republic. In a **republic**, elected officials govern for the people. To the patricians, “the people” meant themselves, not the plebeians. The patricians put most of the power in the hands of the Senate. The **Senate** was a group of 300 patricians elected by patricians. 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 form of 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 plebeians and patricians is known as the Conflict of the Orders, a conflict between the two social 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 the year 494 B.C.E. By then, Rome was a city of twenty to forty thousand people. Most of the population was plebeian. 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 noted Roman historian. The patricians had little choice but to compromise.

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 in the Senate and with the consuls. Later, tribunes gained the power to **veto**, or overrule, actions by the Senate and other government officials. Over time, the number of tribunes grew from two to ten.

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

The plebeians had gained some important rights. However, they still had less power than the patricians. Over the next 200 years, the plebeians staged a series of protests to gradually win political equality.

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

Next, in 367 B.C.E., a new law said that one of the two consuls had to be a plebeian. Former consuls held seats in the Senate, so this change also allowed 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, such as the Citizens' Association, 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 leaders in Europe and America. Rome became an example of a type of government ruled by a set of basic laws, or a **constitution**. Future political thinkers 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. This means that government should rule for the good of the people. Cicero (SIS-eh-roh), a famous Roman statesman, captured this spirit when he wrote, "The people's good is the highest law."

