



Western Civilization from Prehistory to 1650

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TOPIC 6.1. ROMAN CIVILIZATION: THE REPUBLIC

Supplement to Chambers, *The Western Experience*, Chapter 4: The Roman Republic, pp. 103-133, or McKay, *A History of Western Society*, Chapter 5: The Rise of Rome, pp. 123-149.

<p>THE ORIGINS OF ROME</p>	<p>According to ancient LEGEND, Rome was founded in 753 B.C. by the twin brothers Romulus and Remus, who were saved from death in their infancy by a she-wolf who sheltered and suckled them. Virgil's <i>Aeneid</i> preserved a different tradition that the founder of the Roman races was AENEAS, a Trojan who after the fall of Troy founded a settlement in Latium. Modern scholars believe that in the 8th century B.C., the inhabitants of some small Latin settlements on hills in the Tiber valley united and established a common meeting place, the FORUM, around which the city of Rome grew.</p>
<p>Etruscans</p>	<p>The Etruscans conquered Rome about 600 B.C., and under their tutelage Rome first became an important city-state. From the Etruscans, the Romans received Etruscan WRITING (the word <i>Roma</i> is an Etruscan word), their gods and goddesses and the practice of PROPHESYING by examining animal entrails, and the art of BUILDING -- especially the arch.</p> <p>Rome's political growth followed a line of development similar to that of the Greek city-states: limited monarchy, oligarchy, democracy, and finally, the permanent dictatorship of the Roman emperors.</p>
<p>THE ROMAN MONARCHY To 509 B.C.</p>	<p>According to tradition, early Rome was ruled by KINGS elected by the people. The king's executive power, both civil and military, was called <i>IMPERIUM</i>. Although the imperium was conferred by a popular assembly made up of all arms-bearing citizens, the king turned for advice to a council of nobles, called the SENATE. Each senator had lifelong tenure and the members of this group and their families constituted the PATRICIAN class. The other class of Romans, the PLEBEIANS (commoners) included small farmers, artisans, and many clients (dependents of patrician landowners). In return for a livelihood, the clients gave their patrician patrons political support in the assembly</p>
<p>EARLY REPUBLIC 509-133 B.C. Consuls</p>	<p>In 509 B.C., according to tradition, the patricians expelled the last Etruscan king and established a republic. The imperium was transferred to two new officials called CONSULS. Elected annually from the patrician class, the consul exercised their power in the interests of that class. In the event of war or serious domestic emergency, a dictator could be substituted for the two consuls, but he was given absolute power for only six months.</p>
<p>PLEBEIAN STRUGGLE FOR EQUAL RIGHTS</p>	<p>For more than two centuries following the establishment of the Republic, the plebeians struggled for political and social equality. Outright civil war was averted by the willingness of the patricians to compromise. Much of the plebeians' success in this struggle was also due to their tactics of collective action and to their having organized a corporate group within the state. The unofficial body was known as the <i>CONCILIUM PLEBIS</i>. It was presided over by plebeian officials called TRIBUNES, whose job was to safeguard the interests of the plebeians and to negotiate with the consuls and the Senate.</p>
<p>Fundamental Rights</p>	<p>The advancement of the PLEBEIANS during the early Republic took two main lines: the safeguarding of their FUNDAMENTAL RIGHTS and the progressive enlargement of their share of POLITICAL POWER.</p> <p>Because the consuls often interpreted Rome's unwritten customary law to suit patrician interests, the plebeians demanded that it be written down. As a result, about 450 B.C., the</p>

<p>Political Power</p>	<p>law was inscribed on twelve tablets of bronze and set up publicly in the Forum. The LAW OF THE TWELVE TABLES was the first landmark in the long history of Roman law. The plebeians in time acquired other fundamental rights and safeguards: They secured the right to APPEAL A DEATH SENTENCE imposed by a consul and to be retried before the popular assembly. The tribunes gained a VETO POWER over any legislation or executive act that threatened the rights of the plebeians. MARRIAGE between patricians and plebeians, prohibited by the Law of the Twelve Tablets, was legalized. The enslavement of citizens for DEBT was abolished.</p> <p>Little by little, the plebeian class acquired more power in the functioning of government. In 367 B.C., ONE CONSULSHIP was reserved for the plebeians. Before the end of the century, they were eligible to hold other important MAGISTRACIES: Praetor (in charge of the law courts), Quaestor (treasurer), Censor (supervisor of public morals and state contracts). Some plebeians succeeded in gaining entry to the SENATE. The long struggle for equality ended in 287 B.C. when the <i>Concillium Plebis</i> was recognized as a constitutional body, henceforth known as the TRIBAL ASSEMBLY, with the right to PASS LAWS that were binding on all citizens. The Roman Republic was now technically a democracy, although in actual practice a senatorial aristocracy of patricians and rich plebeians continued to control the state.</p>
<p>The Roman Citizen</p>	<p>The fundamental unit of early Roman society was the FAMILY. The father's power was absolute. STRICT DISCIPLINE was imposed to instill in children those virtues to which the Romans attached particular importance: loyalty, courage, self-control, and respect for laws and ancestral customs.</p>
<p>EFFECTS OF ROMAN EXPANSION</p>	<p>The Romans of the early Republic were STERN, HARD-WORKING, and PRACTICAL. Men's relationship to the universe and the possibilities of immortal life did not concern them very much. RELIGIOUS PRACTICES were confined to placating the spirits of the family and the state. Under Etruscan influence, the major SPIRITS WERE PERSONIFIED: Jupiter (god of the universe, Mars (god of war), Janus (spirit of the city gate).</p> <p>Between 509 and 270 B.C., the Romans crushed all resistance to their rule in ITALY. They then clashed with CARTHAGE (during the Punic Wars) and defeated Carthage in 201 B.C. Having conquered the West, the Romans found themselves drawn to the East and by 133 B.C., MACEDONIA AND GREECE were ruled by Roman governors, the Seleucid emperor in ASIA had been defeated and humbled, and Rome had acquired its first province on the Asian continent.</p>
<p>Disappearance of Small Landowner</p>	<p>With provinces on three continents -- Europe, Africa, and Asia -- the once obscure Roman Republic, was now supreme in the ancient world.</p> <p>As a result of this expansion, important social and economic problems faced Rome by the middle of the second century B.C. One of the most pressing problems was the DISAPPEARANCE OF THE SMALL LANDOWNER. Burdened by frequent military service, his farm buildings destroyed by war, and unable to compete with the cheap grain imported from the new Roman province of Sicily, the SMALL FARMER SOLD OUT and moved to Rome. Here he joined the unemployed, discontented PROLETARIAT.</p>
<p>Large-Scale Scientific Agriculture</p> <p><i>Latifundia</i> (Slave Plantations)</p>	<p>Improved farming methods learned from the Greeks and Carthaginians encouraged RICH ARISTOCRATS to buy more and more land and, abandoning the cultivation of grain, introduce LARGE-SCALE SCIENTIFIC PRODUCTION of olive oil and wine, or of sheep and cattle. This trend was especially profitable because an abundance of cheap SLAVES from the conquered areas was available to work on the estates. These large slave plantations, called <i>LATIFUNDIA</i>, were now common in Italy, while small farms were the exception.</p>

<p>Leasing Territory to Wealthy</p>	<p>The land problem was further complicated by the government's earlier practice of LEASING part of the territory acquired in the conquest of the Italian peninsula to anyone willing to pay a percentage of the crop or animals raised on it. Only the patricians or wealthy plebeians could afford to lease large tracts of this public land and in time they treated it as their own property. Plebeian protests had led to an attempt to limit the holdings of a single individual to 320 acres, but the law was never enforced.</p>
<p>Government Corruption</p>	<p>CORRUPTION IN GOVERNMENT was another growing problem of the Roman Republic. Provincial officials seized opportunities for lucrative GRAFT and a new class of Roman businessmen scrambled selfishly for the profitable STATE CONTRACTS to supply the armies, collect taxes in the provinces, and lease mines and forests.</p>
<p>Senatorial Oligarchy</p>	<p>Although in theory the government was a democracy, in practice it remained a SENATORIAL OLIGARCHY. The tribunes, guardians of the people's rights, had become mere yes-men of the Senate.</p>
<p>Inability to Cope with World-State</p>	<p>Thus by the middle of the second century B.C., the government was in the hands of the wealthy, self-seeking Senate, which was unable to cope with the PROBLEMS OF GOVERNING A WORLD-STATE. Ordinary citizens were for the most part impoverished and landless. Rome swarmed with fortune hunters, imported slaves, unemployed farmers, and discontented war veterans. The poverty of the many, coupled with the opulence of the few, hastened the decay of the old Roman traits of discipline, simplicity, and respect for authority.</p>
<p>THE END OF THE REPUBLIC 133-27 B.C. Gracchi Brothers</p>	<p>As the Mediterranean world succumbed to the Roman legions, the Roman Republic faced civil war and degeneration. The GRACCHI BROTHERS tried to persuade the senatorial oligarchy to allow the enactment of necessary reforms, but to no avail. Tiberius Gracchus, elected tribune in 133 B.C., proposed laws that would divide the farmlands gained in war among the out-of-work farmers and make it against the law for any person to own more than a certain amount of land. Since his proposal would have taken away land from some of the richest families, a group of rich men had him murdered.</p>
<p>Gracchi Brothers</p>	<p>Ten years later, Gaius Gracchus was elected tribune and worked on his brother's reforms. He was able to pass a land reform bill, but the wealthy were again alarmed. His supporters were attacked and he, himself, committed suicide.</p>
<p>Sulla</p>	<p>Rome was now the scene of bitter rivalry between the people's party, supported by the plebeians and the masses, and the Senate, the agent of the rich patricians. The country was divided by VIOLENCE and WAR. Finally, SULLA, an able general and strong supporter of the Senate, restored order. Appointed dictator by the Senate, he doubled the size of this ruling council and limited the power of the veto. His changes wiped out many of the gains made by the plebeians in their struggle for equality. He brought peace to the republic, but his changes did not last.</p>
<p>Julius Caesar</p>	<p>In 60 B.C., after a successful military career, JULIUS CAESAR joined with Pompey (another military hero) and Crassus (one of the wealthiest men in Rome) to form the FIRST TRIUMVIRATE, a three-person governing body that was to rule the Roman state.</p> <p>In 49 B.C., after conquering Gaul and invading Britain, Caesar defied the Senate, which feared his growing power, returned to Rome with his army, defeated Pompey, and declared himself DICTATOR.</p> <p>During his five years of rule, Caesar made moderate reforms. He weakened the power of the Senate, but at the same time increased its membership to 900 by allowing more representation of the provinces. Roman citizenship was extended to persons living outside Italy, an action that helped to unite the Roman territory. In the provinces, taxes were adjusted and the administration worked to reduce corruption. He reduced unemployment</p>

<p>Augustus</p>	<p>among the poor by creating public building projects.</p> <p>On the Ides of March, 44 B.C., Caesar was murdered on the floor of the Senate by a group of men who feared he intended to make himself king.</p> <p>In 27 B.C., the Senate gave Caesar's heir Octavian the honorary title of AUGUSTUS. After a century of civil war, Rome at last had been united under one ruler. With the reign of Augustus, the ROMAN EMPIRE BEGAN.</p> <p>AUGUSTUS proved to be a wise ruler. On the surface, the old republican institutions, such as the Senate, were preserved, but Augustus wielded the real power in the new government. He improved the government that had grown corrupt during the later days of the republic by creating a professional civil service, open to all classes and based on talent. In addition, he established a permanent, professional army that was loyal to the emperor and stationed away from the political arena in the isolated frontier provinces. He took a census of citizens and adjusted the tax rates. He began a program of public works and built roads and bridges.</p> <p>From the time of TIBERIUS, Augustus' successor, to the end of the western empire in 476 A.D., Rome was ruled by more than 70 emperors, only a few of whom were capable. In spite of incompetent rulers, the empire held together because efficient administrators at many levels of responsibility maintained justice and order. In addition, commercial strength helped keep the empire stable. Only when economic decline and social unrest set in did the lack of good leadership at the top seriously weaken the empire.</p> <p>Adapted from The Western Heritage by Donald Kagan et al.</p>
<p>ONLINE RESOURCES</p>	<p>For more information on the Roman Republic, explore one or more of the following online resources:</p> <p>The Roman Republic: Overview of the republic. Includes history, government institutions, social classes, etc.</p> <p>Constitution of the Roman Republic: Good summary of government institutions and how Romans assimilated conquered territories.</p> <p>Ancient History Sourcebook: Slavery in the Roman Republic: Primary source relating to the conduct and treatment of slaves.</p> <p>Daily Life in Ancient Rome: Everything from hair styles to weddings. Very informative.</p> <p>Life in Roman Times: Discussion of marriage and family, home and hearth, Roman baths, entertainment, and religious practices.</p> <p>Antique Roman Dishes: Roman recipes (from Roman burgers to tuna salad).</p> <p>Julius Caesar Crosses the Ribicon: Short essay on a pivotal point in history (includes primary source account).</p> <p>The Roman Technology Handbook: Interesting site with information on survival (food, clothing, shelter), arts and crafts, construction and engineering, and lots more.</p> <p>The Roman Army in the First Century CE: Josephus' description of the Roman armies and the Roman camps.</p> <p>Augustus Caesar and the Pax Romana: Summarizes the career of the first Roman emperor and some of the significant emperors that followed him.</p>

**DISCUSSION
QUESTIONS**

Drawing on the resources you have had an opportunity to explore (textbook, course documents, online resources, library resources), answer one or more of the following questions:

How did the early Republic evolve into a more inclusive representative government?

What effect did the expansion of the Republic have on Roman society?

What effect did Roman administration have on the conquered societies?

What role did slavery play in the expanding Roman state?

How did the lives of the small Roman landowners change as Rome expanded? How did these problems affect city life?

The Roman Republic had a constitution that resembled that of a Greek city-state in many ways, but it collapsed and gave way to one-man rule. How might Roman statesmen and the Senate have preserved the republican constitution?

How did the Republic collapse? What role did civil war play in that collapse?

Why was the empire able to survive during periods when there were bad rulers?