

The Roman Republic

SETTING THE STAGE While the great civilization of Greece was in decline, a new city to the west was developing and increasing its power. Rome grew from a small settlement to a mighty civilization that eventually conquered the Mediterranean world. In time, the Romans would build one of the most famous and influential empires in history.

The Origins of Rome

According to legend, the city of Rome was founded in 753 B.C. by Romulus and Remus, twin sons of the god Mars and a Latin princess. The twins were abandoned on the Tiber River as infants and raised by a she-wolf. The twins decided to build a city near the spot. In reality, it was men not immortals who built the city, and they chose the spot largely for its strategic location and fertile soil.

Rome's Geography Rome was built on seven rolling hills at a curve on the Tiber River, near the center of the Italian peninsula. It was midway between the Alps and Italy's southern tip. Rome also was near the midpoint of the Mediterranean Sea. The historian Livy wrote about the city's site:

PRIMARY SOURCE Not without reason did gods and men choose this spot for the site of our city—the [salubrious] hills, the river to bring us produce from the inland regions and sea-borne commerce from abroad, the sea itself, near enough for convenience yet not so near as to bring danger from foreign fleets, our situation in the very heart of Italy—all these advantages make it of all places in the world the best for a city destined to grow great. LIVY, *The Early History of Rome*

The First Romans The earliest settlers on the Italian peninsula arrived in prehistoric times. From about 1000 to 500 B.C., three groups inhabited the region and eventually battled for control. They were the Latins, the Greeks, and the Etruscans. The Latins built the original settlement at Rome, a cluster of wooden huts atop one of its seven hills, Palatine Hill. These settlers were considered to be the first Romans. Between 750 and 600 B.C., the Greeks established colonies along southern Italy and Sicily. The cities became prosperous and commercially active. They brought all of Italy, including Rome, into closer contact with Greek civilization.

The Etruscans were native to northern Italy. They were skilled metalworkers and engineers. The Etruscans strongly influenced the development of Roman civilization. They boasted a system of writing, for example, and the Romans adopted their alphabet. They also influenced Rome's architecture, especially the use of the arch.

The Early Republic

Around 600 B.C., an Etruscan became king of Rome. In the decades that followed, Rome grew from a collection of hilltop villages to a city that covered nearly 500 square miles. Various kings ordered the construction of Rome's first temples and public centers—the most famous of which was the Forum, the heart of Roman political life.

The last king of Rome was Tarquin the Proud. A harsh tyrant, he was driven from power in 509 B.C. The Romans declared they would never again be ruled by a king. Instead, they established a **republic**, from the Latin phrase *res publica*, which means "public affairs." A republic is a form of government in which power rests with citizens who have the right to vote for their leaders. In Rome, citizenship with voting rights was granted only to free-born male citizens.

Patricians and Plebeians In the early republic, different groups of Romans struggled for power. One group was the **patricians**, the wealthy landowners who held most of the power. The other important group was the **plebeians**, the common farmers, artisans, and merchants who made up the majority of the population.

The patricians inherited their power and social status. They claimed that their ancestry gave them the authority to make laws for Rome. The plebeians were citizens of Rome with the right to vote. However, they were barred by law from holding most important government positions. In time, Rome's leaders allowed the plebeians to form their own assembly and elect representatives called **tribunes**. Tribunes protected the rights of the plebeians from unfair acts of patrician officials.

Twelve Tables An important victory for the plebeians was to force the creation of a written law code. With laws unwritten, patrician officials often interpreted the law to suit themselves. In 451 B.C., a group of ten officials began writing down Rome's

laws. The laws were carved on twelve tablets, or tables, and hung in the Forum. They became the basis for later Roman law. The Twelve Tables established the idea that all free citizens had a right to the protection of the law.

Government Under the Republic In the first century B.C., Roman writers boasted that Rome had achieved a balanced government. What they meant was that their government had taken the best features of a monarchy (government by a king), an aristocracy (government by nobles), and a democracy (government by the people—see the comparison above of Rome to the United States). Rome had two officials called **consuls**. Like kings, they commanded the army and directed the government. However, their power was limited. A consul’s term was only one year long. The same person could not be elected consul again for ten years. Also, one consul could always overrule, or veto, the other’s decisions.

The **senate** was the aristocratic branch of Rome’s government. It had both legislative and administrative functions in the republic. Its 300 members were chosen from the upper class of Roman society. Later, plebeians were allowed in the

senate. The senate exercised great influence over both foreign and domestic policy.

The assemblies represented the more democratic side of the government. For example, an assembly organized by the plebeians, the Tribal Assembly, elected the tribunes and made laws for the common people—and later for the republic itself.

In times of crisis, the republic could appoint a **dictator**—a leader who had absolute power to make laws and command the army. A dictator’s power lasted for only six months. Dictators were chosen by the consuls and then elected by the senate.

The Roman Army In addition to their government, the Romans placed great value on their military. All citizens who owned land were required to serve in the army. Seekers of certain public offices had to perform ten years of military service. Roman soldiers were organized into large military units called **legions**. The Roman legion was made up of some 5,000 heavily armed foot soldiers (infantry). A group of soldiers on horseback (cavalry) supported each legion. Legions were divided into smaller groups of 80 men, each of which was called a century. The military organization and fighting skill of the Roman army were key factors in Rome’s rise to greatness.

Comparing Republican Governments

	Rome	United States of America
Executive	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Two consuls, elected by the assembly for one year—chief executives of the government and commanders-in-chief of the army. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> A president, elected by the people for four years—chief executive of the government and commander-in-chief of the army.
Legislative	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Senate of 300 members, chosen from aristocracy for life—controls foreign and financial policies, advises consuls. Centuriate Assembly, all citizen-soldiers are members for life—selects consuls, makes laws. Tribal Assembly, citizens grouped according to where they live are members for life—elects tribunes and makes laws. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Senate of 100 members, elected by the people for six-year terms—makes laws, advises president on foreign policy. House of Representatives of 435 members, elected by the people for two years—makes laws, originates revenue bills.
Judicial	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Praetors, eight judges chosen for one year by Centuriate Assembly—two oversee civil and criminal courts (the others govern provinces). 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Supreme Court, nine justices appointed for life by president—highest court, hears civil and criminal appeals cases.
Legal code	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Twelve Tables—a list of rules that was the basis of Roman legal system 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> U.S. Constitution—basic law of the United States
Citizenship	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> All adult male landowners 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> All native-born or naturalized adults

SKILLBUILDER: Interpreting Charts

- Comparing** What similarities do you see in the governments of the Roman Republic and the United States?
- Drawing Conclusions** Which government seems more democratic? Why?