

Part 5: The Roman Republic

The world we live in begins mainly with ancient Greece. It was the Greeks who began to push humanity upward from the archaic plateau, and it was mainly Greek ideas that were reborn in the “Renaissance” (Rebirth). But there was another thread of progress in ancient times that became combined with Greek culture. We now turn to the story of *Rome*. It was in Rome that a “republic” with unique protections for individual rights was first created. This served as another important example to the Founding Fathers of the United States. It was Rome that eventually conquered Greece and used Greek ideas to shape the huge *Roman Empire*. This is why after Rome collapsed in 476 AD, and the Dark Ages passed, the people of the Renaissance revived not just Greek culture but *Greco-Roman* ideas.

I. Legendary Origins

A. Remus and Romulus

1. The Romans believed that their city had been founded by a pair of brother called Remus and Romulus.
2. The legend says that the two boys were the children of the Roman god Mars and a priestess of the goddess Vesta.
3. When the king discovered that the priestess had had children (which was illegal), he ordered her and the children killed, but a servant took the boys and placed them on the river Tiber in a basket.
4. They floated downstream, to be discovered by a she-wolf who suckled them, and then they were discovered and raised by a shepherd.
5. When the boys returned to Rome as men, they competed to see who would be king. Romulus killed his brother, and became the city's first legendary king.

B. War with the Sabines

1. Another famous story concerning early Roman history is that Romulus led the men of the city of Rome in a series of wars against a neighboring tribe called the Sabines.
2. The Romans wanted to capture Sabine women, and take them as brides.
3. After a generation of struggles between the two sides, the war between them was stopped only by the intervention of the kidnapped brides.
4. These Sabine women, daughters of the Sabine warriors, and wives of the Roman soldiers, threw themselves (and their children) between the men during a battle.
5. The two sides were convinced to stop fighting, and the Sabines and Romans became one people.

II. Rise of the Roman Republic

A. From Monarchy to Aristocracy (c.509 BC)

1. Before 509 BC, Rome was ruled by a dynasty of kings known as the Tarquins.
2. Roman history begins when the Romans deposed their last king, Tarquinius Superbus in 509 BC.
3. Rome then became a government that people often call a “republic,” but which was still very aristocratic. It would take time for this republic to truly rise up out of aristocracy.
4. It was ruled by the nobles, called “patricians.” (The word “patrician” comes from the Latin word for father, which is “pater.” A patrician was a son of a noble father.)
5. Only members of the thirty or so patrician clans could participate in the government.
6. The commoners, known as “plebeians,” had not control over the government.
7. The patrician assembly created the laws of Rome, and selected the two officials to enforce the laws, known as “consuls.”
8. The consuls had complete power over all Roman citizens during their term of office, but they only held office for one year. Afterwards, if they had not ruled well, they could be put on trial for their actions, and even killed. This placed a major limitation on their power, and was the first step towards a republic.
9. The consuls were advised by the clan leaders, whose assembly was known as the Senate.

B. The First Secession of the Plebeians (494 BC)

1. As in Athens, the commoners were under the power of the government, and often treated unfairly. For one, they experienced debt slavery just as in Athens (by failing to returned borrowed food and money, and having their property and freedom taken from them to pay the debt.)
2. To protest the aristocracy in general and debt slavery in particular, the entire plebeian population left the city in a time of war and began to construct another city. This is an example of “secession,” which means the breaking away of a part of a country to form a separate country.
3. The patricians realized that they could not defend Rome by themselves against its enemies. They were forced to free all the debt slaves and to give the plebeians protection from the power of the consuls.

C. The Beginning of the Roman Republic

1. The patricians agreed to allow the plebeians to be protected by two government officials, who acted like a combination of police officer and lawyer. These officers were called “tribunes.”

2. The tribunes were given special powers. They could personally intervene to stop a patrician or plebeian from taking any action whatsoever.
3. Most importantly, they could stop a consul from arresting or harming a plebeian.
4. Anyone who interfered with a tribune instantly became an “outlaw.” (He could legally be killed by anyone. Even a tribune could be outlawed this way!)
5. The plebeians did not get any power in the government. They could not make any laws. But they were protected *from the government* by the tribunes.
6. This was a new idea. Nobody in history had ever created a government where part of the government could obstruct the functions of another part of the government, thus protecting the people from the unchecked power of the government. This is an important part of the idea of a “republic,” which American Founding Fathers referred to as “checks and balances.”