

The History Guide

Lectures on Ancient and Medieval European History

Lecture 11

Republican Rome, 509-31BC

In 509 B.C., and after having expelled the Etruscans, the Romans constructed a form of political organization we call a republic. Gradually, a series of documents were drawn up which together make up the Roman constitution. The constitution outlined the legal rights of citizens and in Rome, everyone with the exception of women, slaves and resident aliens, qualified as a citizen. The Republic was not intended for the city-state. Instead, the Roman Republic was more like a confederation of states under the control of a representative, central authority.

There were three major political components of the Republic. Two magistrates or consuls who served as the executive branch. They had supreme civil and military authority and held office for one year, then entered the Senate for life. Each consul could veto the action of the other. The Consuls were endowed with the ex-king's *imperium*. They led the army, served as judges, and had religious duties. Then came the Senate, a collection of citizens who served as the legislative branch of the government as well as an advisory body (*senatus* = "council of elders"). At its inception, the Roman Senate contained about 300 citizens. The ranks of the Senate were drawn from ex-consuls and other officers who served for life. By the reign of Julius Caesar, the ranks of the Senate had swollen to more than 800 members. The Assembly of Centuries (*comitia centuriata*), which conducted annual elections of consuls, was composed of all members of the army. In this assembly the wealthier citizen voted first and thereby had a profound influence on voting. Lastly, there was the Assembly of Tribes (*comitia tributa*), which contained all citizens. The Assembly approved or rejected laws and decided issues of war and peace. This is a form of government that we can call "mixed." That is, history – specifically Greek history – had shown the Romans that previous governments of the one, the few or the many just did not work. Instead, they mixed the three principal forms of government together to create a Republic. As such, their constitution was mixed as well: the executives serving as monarchical element, the Senate as the aristocratic and finally, the Assembly as the democratic element. The Greek historian [Polybius](#) (c.205-c.123 B.C.) admired the Roman system and in his *Histories* remarked that:

. . . the elements by which the Roman constitution was controlled were three in number, . . . and all the aspects of the administration were, taken separately, so fairly and so suitably ordered and regulated through the agency of these three elements that it was impossible even for the Romans themselves to declare with certainty whether the whole

system was an aristocracy, a democracy or a monarchy. In fact it was quite natural that this should be so, for if we were to fix our eyes only upon the power of the consuls, the constitution might give the impression of being completely monarchical and royal; if we confined our attention to the Senate it would seem to be aristocratic; and if we looked at the power of the people it would appear to be a clear example of a democracy.

It was, of course, the ideal that such a constitution would prevent any one man or group of men to seize power on their own initiative. In other words, the Republic was a government of checks and balances. This ought to sound familiar since it is the basis of our own form of government, which is not a democracy, but a democratic republic. Again, the ideal was that no one group could seize power. What happened in practice was something decidedly different.

Although the Roman government was intact, the real locus of power in ancient Rome was the family. Alliances, marriages, divorces, adoptions and assassinations could make or break a family's path to political power in the Roman world. The great families or clans (*gens*) grew so powerful that by 100 B.C. it was nearly impossible for a man to become a consul whose ancestors had not also been consuls.

The Struggle of the Orders

One of the most important developments during the early history of the Roman Republic was the "Struggle of the Orders." Between 500 and 300 B.C., there developed within the body of the citizenry, a division between two social groups or classes: patricians and plebeians. Legally defined, that is, defined by the Roman constitution, the patricians were a small group of citizens -- they represented less than 10% of Rome's population -- who were legally and socially superior to the majority of citizens. They had earned their position through wealth or the ownership of land. The patricians held a monopoly of social, political and economic power even though they were outnumbered by the plebeians. The plebeians were those citizens who lacked power although in their composition their ranks included everyone from landless peasant to the very wealthy individual who wanted to become a patrician.

The "Struggle of the Orders" – a struggle between patrician and plebeian – developed over the issue of legality. Remember, whether you were a patrician or plebeian was determined by law and not tradition or custom. As an aristocracy – that is, the rule of the few – only the patricians could belong to the Senate. The plebeians had the right to vote in the Assembly, but their votes were usually swayed by the class of patricians, their social superiors. And since the wealthier citizens of the Senate always voted first, they usually did so as an effective block against other groups.

In 494 B.C., the plebeians threatened to leave Rome and set up their own independent state (*concilium plebis*). What the plebeians did was to literally create a state within a state. Their object was to acquire protection against the unjust and arbitrary acts of the Senate and consuls. In the end, the Roman constitution was modified to meet a few of the demands of the plebeians, but the patricians retained their measure of full control. What the plebeians gained was right to elect two representatives -- the tribunes (later there were ten tribunes). In typical Roman fashion, the Roman Senate compromised with the plebeians. It was the tribune who perhaps held the most important political power in the early centuries of the Republic. They had absolute veto power; they could not be called to account for their actions; and they could not be harmed in any way even touched. The only actions a tribune

could not veto were those of military commanders or dictators. By 450 B.C. the plebeians had won another important concession - the [LAWS OF THE TWELVE TABLES](#), codes specifying civic matters, crimes and the relations among citizens and family members.

In 445 B.C., the plebeians also won the right to inter-marry with the patricians (the *Lex Canuleia*). This was important for the simple reason that it allowed wealthy plebeians to become patricians themselves, and also permitted them to be elected to high positions within the Assembly or the Senate. In 367 B.C., the tribunes Gaius Licinius and Lucius Sextus passed the Licinian-Sextian laws which specified (1) that one consul every year must be a plebeian, (2) that the office of praetor should serve as assistant consul and (3) and that there should be a law restricting the amount of land held by any citizen. Finally, in 287 B.C., a law was passed that made the decisions of the Assembly of Tribes binding on the whole state without action by any other body (the *Lex Hortensia*). It seemed that for a time the plebeians had won all that they sought and their struggles with the patricians were carried out with little bloodshed and a minimum of violence. The "Struggle of the Orders" did not lead to open civil war. The patricians needed the plebeians to defend Rome in times of war, and the plebeians needed the experience and leadership of the patricians.

Compromise and Assimilation

The importance of the "Struggle of the Orders" during the formative years of the Roman Republic cannot be overlooked -- the Struggle provides a key to understanding the Roman world and the Roman mind. The key here is compromise and assimilation. Wealthy plebeians were assimilated into the patrician class. Through common sense and practicality, a compromise was reached that seemed to satisfy most citizens, regardless of which class they may have belonged. This is a hallmark of Roman civilization. Compromises were reached in the interests of stability and peace. In this way the Romans avoided outright civil war and at the same time provided all citizens with a tolerable way of life. Of course, compromise and assimilation was a Roman strength, but over time it became instead a weakness of the Roman world.

A comparison with the Greeks may be necessary here. For the most part, the Greeks conducted politics in terms of principles and theory – what is the good life? what is virtue? what is the best form of government? They expended a great deal of energy trying to determine the best form of government for the city-state. By the time they had perfected their direct democracy during the Periclean Age, the Greek world was entering a period of crisis. That crisis was the Peloponnesian War. And what followed that war was Philip II, Alexander the Great and the replacement of the comfortable, virtuous life of the *polis*, with the much larger and more impersonal *cosmopolis*.

The Romans perhaps knew the Greeks best – after all, they inhabited the same Mediterranean world. But the Romans, always with an eye toward practicality and efficiency, were not apt to make the same mistakes as had the Greeks. So, they mixed their government, bound the lives of its citizenry to a living constitution, and made compromises to insure the future life and growth of the Republic. I suppose what all this boils down to is the general statement that whereas the Greeks were thinkers, the Romans were doers, and the proof would be the success of the Roman world itself, embodied in the grandeur of the Roman Empire.

By the 3rd century B.C., a new and larger class of patricians had been created. These are the individuals who would eventually

dominate the Roman Senate because they held the highest positions of state and could pass their positions on to their descendants for posterity. It was also this nobility that controlled the state right down to the middle of the 1st century B.C. And although the plebeians gained the means to run the state as a democracy they chose not to do so. Their political involvement was always based on the needs of defense rather than offence.

The Romans also embarked on a path which would soon culminate in the establishment of the Roman Empire. Around 493 B.C., the Romans established the Latin League to protect themselves from rival neighbors such as the Etruscans. The League served the same purpose as the Delian League back at Athens (see [Lecture 7](#)). Rome was also an aggressive and imperialistic power. In 396 B.C., the Romans attacked and destroyed the Etruscan town of Veii. This was only one form of expansion. Unlike the Greeks who, under Alexander and those who followed him, forced conquered lands into slavery or submission, the Romans took the conquered and made them partners. In other words, they assimilated them into the Roman *cosmopolis*. This was far more efficient and, at least for the time being, there were fewer problems. This policy of compromise and assimilation continually built up the strength of the Roman Republic.

The conquered communities were organized by various degrees of privilege and responsibility. For instance, some communities were granted full Roman citizenship. Others were granted citizenship but could not vote in the Assembly. At a lower level, some states would simply receive Rome's support in the event of an invasion. This system of "confederating" states was far more successful than the Greek idea of domination and submission. The Greeks sought to demolish the social institutions of conquered lands and to replace them with Greek institutions. Alexander left tens of thousands of his loyal soldiers in the areas that he conquered -- he also made sure that the Greek language was exported as well. He gave his name to more than seventy cities. And to this was added the greatness of Greek science, art, drama, philosophy and architecture. In other words, the Greeks forced their world down the throats of everyone, a process we have identified as Hellenization.

Rather than destroy traditional institutions, or culture, or language, or religion, the Romans accommodated the conquered people within their own political and administrative structure. All these people had to do was to pay taxes and serve Rome in time of need. In other words, the Romans gave these conquered people an "offer they couldn't refuse." They could maintain their "history" as long as they didn't rock the boat. And that meant serving Rome. And since most of these people were made Roman citizens, they too could feel themselves to be a part of this growing Roman world -- and they could find the good life in their own way, anywhere Roman power could be felt. The governing of such a vast territory of land would become easier, the Romans understood, if everyone were made to feel as if they were a partner in such an endeavor. The simply amazing thing is that the Romans pulled it off.

Roman Imperialism

Given the Roman penchant for power, Rome was at war throughout most of the years of the Republic. The most famous of these wars were the [Punic Wars](#) with Carthage (see [map](#)). The [First Punic War](#) (264-241 B.C.) began as a minor conflict over the presence of Carthaginian troops in the Sicilian town of Messana. The Messanians had invited the troops as protection but then decided to replace them with Roman troops. War broke out over control of Sicily. The Romans suffered heavy losses but eventually forced Carthage to abandon Sicily altogether.

The [Second Punic War](#) (218-201 B.C.) began in Spain. Rome protested to Carthage about its treatment of Saguntum, a town within the Carthaginian sphere of influence. As negotiations were underway, [Hannibal](#) (247-182 B.C.) seized Saguntum and made war inevitable. His nation was humiliated at Sicily so now he had his chance for revenge. In 218 B.C., he led an army from Spain, across the Alps and into Italy, but could not arouse any of his allies to revolt. Roman tenacity eventually held out, although a great deal of farmland to the south was destroyed.

The [Third Punic War](#) (149-146 B.C.) saw the capture and destruction of Carthage. Rome now controlled the province of Africa (former Carthaginian territory) and almost all of Spain.

At the same time, Rome was also fighting in [Macedonia](#) and in Asia Minor (205-148 B.C.) . The end result was the annexation of Greece and Asia Minor to the Roman world. Macedonia was officially made a province of the Republic and thus, the Romans brought an end to the independent political life of Greece. By 44 B.C., the Romans controlled all of Spain, Gaul (France), Italy, Greece, Asia Minor, and most of North Africa (80% of the coastal lands of the Mediterranean).

The Roman Republic had to protect its people from outside invasion and they did this by forming careful alliances with their neighbors. The constant warfare of the 4th and 3rd centuries B.C. reinforced this need for common security and mutual defense. This was something the Greeks could not accomplish primarily because of the predominance of Athens as the seat of government, and the isolation of Sparta as a military power. And over time, the Greek army and navy were weakened. Alexander tried to bring some order to this state of affairs but his early death ultimately meant the undoing of his empire.

And again it bears repeating that the Romans did not intervene in the internal affairs of their allies. They made many of them full or partial partners in the Roman world. In return, all Rome expected was support in the form of taxes (in kind or a fixed sum of money) and troops. But the Romans still had to administer their allies and this was accomplished through provinces. Each province was assigned to a magistrate and it was his duty to administer government policy quickly, effectively and efficiently. These magistrates or governors were appointed by the Senate. They ruled the provinces with absolute power and in general, the further the province was from Rome, the more absolute was the authority of the magistrate.

The provinces paid tribute to Rome either in money or in kind. The Romans went on to devise a system of tax collection which eventually became totally corrupt. Tax collectors would bid to collect taxes and then pay a fixed sum to the Senate. They then had to go and collect that amount. The tax collectors, or *publicani* as they were called, usually ordered more taxes to be paid than they had originally contracted for, and pocketed the surplus.

The Roman Revolution

From 133 to 27 B.C., the Roman Republic was engaged in a constant succession of civil wars, making up what has come to be known as the [Roman Revolution](#). The acquisition of empire did have some disturbing effects on the social order and administrative structure of the Republic. The Punic and Macedonian Wars of the 3rd and 2nd centuries B.C. had kept Roman soldiers away from Rome for years at a time. Many of these soldiers developed a greater loyalty to the land they were serving than they did to Rome. Others simply enjoyed the spoils and luxuries of conquered lands. Such a scenario also partially explains

how a Roman strength became a Roman weakness. At the same time, the enormous wealth that Roman conquests attained became concentrated in the hands of the senatorial class. Peasants were driven off the land and into the cities where existence was hard. Most of the peasants were unemployed and lived by begging. Still others sold their votes to wealthy patricians, thus giving up one of the key features of their citizenship.

By the middle of the 2nd century, there was a threefold problem brewing in the Roman Republic. First, the senatorial class, growing in number and more wealthy than ever before, wanted to maintain its political position. This meant consolidating its power and not giving in to the interests of any other order except its own. Second, the urban masses were divorced from the land as well as from their citizenship, and now were giving their political allegiance to any faction that would pay them. They literally sold themselves away to the highest bidder. Farmers fared no better -- thanks to Hannibal, there was less available land, and what was left was grabbed up by the aristocracy. And third, the army was disgusted by the senatorial class as well as by the greed and instability of the masses.

By 133 B.C., Roman politics had polarized around two factions in the Senate. On the one hand were the "Optimates," the better people – *aristoi*, if you will – people whose only interest lay with wealth and the senatorial class. Numerically small but politically powerful, the Optimates were by all accounts conservative – they were the defenders of the good old days, defenders of the status quo. On the other hand, there were the "Populares," the champions of the depressed portion of the citizenry. The Populares demanded the redistribution of the land to the dispossessed peasants who now flooded into Rome as well as a reform of the voting procedure.

Tiberius and Gaius Gracchus

The struggle between these two factions came to civil war when the Senate resorted to the assassination of [Tiberius Gracchus](#) (168-133 B.C.). Tiberius had been elected Tribune in 133. He proposed a land bill to the Assembly of Tribes that would effectively divide the land and give it to the Roman citizenry – he wanted the citizenry to be independent of the Senate. The bill limited the amount of land to an individual to about 330 acres -- he added an allowance for each of two sons bringing the total amount for any given family to 660 acres. The Senate would not pass his land bill and so Tiberius went directly to the *concilium plebis*. As a result, Tiberius and 300 of his followers were killed. The bodies were thrown into the Tiber River. The next day more supporters of Tiberius were rounded up and met a similar fate. (See Plutarch on the [MURDER OF TIBERIUS](#).)

The program of Tiberius was taken up by his brother, [Gaius Gracchus](#) (159-121 B.C.). Elected tribune in 123, Gaius wanted to transform Rome into a democracy along Hellenic lines. In his attempt to place checks and restraints on the power of the senators, he had the near total support of the public Assembly. He also won the support of the Assembly by legislating to keep the price of grain sold to citizens permanently low. Gaius built new storehouses and his road-building program kept the citizens at work. He revised the terms of military service, which amounted to a pay raise for soldiers and he also reorganized the way taxes were collected in the provinces. The Senate would have nothing of this and so they declared martial law. Riots broke out and 3000 of the Populares, along with Gaius, were killed. Gaius was beheaded and his body thrown into the Tiber. These assassinations show the ugly realities behind Roman political life. When the selfishness of the Senate was revealed, they resorted to murder.

"Corruption in high places was part of what had gone wrong," suggested Finley Hooper.

The example was set at the top. If men of old and honorable families with the best education and the highest offices were scrambling for what they could win, why should any man refuse a share of the spoils? In much that has been written about the Gracchan era the ruling classes have been blamed for the decay of honesty and fair dealing. Yet, as the wise Solon of Athens once observed, the rich are not inherently any more greedy or corruptible than their poorer fellow citizens. At Rome, their powerful positions, overseas commands, and inside information had simply given them the first chance. [Roman Realities, (1979), p.176.]

Severe weaknesses in the Senatorial system were brought into the light during a series of invasions of the Republic by Germanic tribes to the north of the Danube River. The armies sent by the Senate to dispel this threat were poorly organized, unwilling to fight, and corrupt. The situation was saved by [Gaius Marius](#) (c.157-86 B.C.), a man born into a family recently admitted to equestrian (*equites*) status but who was politically well-connected. Marius managed to raise a professional army on his own. He eventually defeated the Germanic tribes and thus earned the support of the Roman army, which he then began to reform. He abolished the requirement that a soldier must own property. He also accepted volunteers. As a result, the army was composed of poor men who looked to Marius as their patron. He was elected consul seven times.

In 88 B.C., Gaius Marius and his army were overthrown by Sulla (c.138-78 B.C.), a statesman and a general who had made his reputation in the Italian War of the 90s. In the 80s civil war broke out in Rome among the factions of the Senate. One group rallied behind Sulla and in 88 B.C. he invaded Rome. The following year Sulla departed for a campaign against Mithridates, who ruled the kingdom of Pontus on the south coast of the Black Sea. While he was away, rival factions seized Rome. Returning in 82 B.C., Sulla once again occupied Rome. Hundreds of his opponents were killed and he had himself named dictator for life.

Sulla used his power as dictator to refashion the Roman state. He believed that there were two forces that had curtailed the Senate's power: the tribunes and strong generals in the army. So, Sulla passed legislation forbidding the tribunes to pass a law without Senate approval. He passed another law that prevented tribunes from ever holding another office -- thus effectively making the office of tribune unattractive to those men with political ambitions. Sulla then restricted the term of governor of a province to one year -- this prevented one commander from becoming a hero to his troops and lead a march on Rome. Sulla thus skillfully prevented the rise of another Sulla.

The careers of Gaius Marius and Sulla represent the path to political power in the last century of the Roman Republic. There were three stages that both men had followed. The first was to play off the senatorial fear of the masses as well as the resentment the masses harbored toward senatorial privilege. This was followed by the appearance of a soldier/hero who would again play one class off another. A personal army would then be created and the victor would march on Rome to bring peace and prosperity to the Roman people. I mention this because this pattern was followed by [Pompey](#) in the 60s, [Crassus](#) in the 50s and [Julius Caesar](#) in the 40s.

[Mark Antony](#) (c.83-c.30 B.C.) tried to embark on this same path in the 30s but was opposed by Octavian (63 B.C.-A.D.14), Caesar's grand nephew. Antony seized power at Caesar's death and undertook the elimination of the Senate. However, when Caesar's will was read, it was discovered that not Antony but Octavian was the true heir to the throne. Rather than start yet another civil war, Antony, Octavian and Lepidus formed an alliance, the Second Triumvirate (43 B.C.). The Roman world was now

divided between these rulers (Antony: eastern provinces; Octavian: western provinces; Lepidus: Sicily and North Africa).

Octavian went on to present Antony as an enemy because of his alliance with [Cleopatra](#) in Egypt. He then made a solid alliance with the Senate, and then had Lepidus removed. By the time Octavian broke with Antony, the Roman people were tired. They had endured one hundred years of civil war. They wanted peace. They wanted to enjoy their world, not constantly defend it. And they were offended by Antony's supposed defection to Cleopatra. At the [Battle of Actium](#) (31 B.C.), the forces of Antony and Cleopatra were defeated. Both patrician and plebeian rallied behind Octavian, who now preferred to be called Augustus Caesar. And with the battle of Actium, the world of the Roman Republic comes to an end, and the new world of the Roman Empire begins.

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