

The Roman Republic

Learn more about this topic! Each section gives more detail on one of the lyrics from the song. Read each section, and then respond by answering the question or taking notes on key ideas.

1. In 509 BCE, Tarquin the Proud, the last of Rome’s seven kings, was overthrown by a group of noblemen. This marked the beginning of the Roman Republic, which lasted until 27 BCE. This period is known for its government structure, which laid the groundwork for modern-day democracy in the United States and other countries. The history of the Roman Republic is one of struggle and political give and take between two classes of citizens known as patricians and plebeians. Patricians were the elite aristocrats, wealthy noblemen who owned large amounts of land. Plebeians were common people, tradesmen and farmers—anyone who was not a patrician. Though plebeians made up most of Rome’s population, patricians held nearly all of the political power. Since Roman citizenship was limited to free men, women and slaves were left out of the political process completely.

Notes

2. The political structure of the Roman Republic consisted of three branches: consuls, the Senate and assemblies. Consuls were the executives of the government, much like the president of the United States. There were two consuls, and each could veto the other to ensure neither had too much power. Serving only a one-year term, consuls were the political and military leaders of Rome. They could even install temporary dictators to handle emergencies. The next branch was the Senate. In the early years of the Republic, only patricians were allowed to become Senators. Later on, the Senate was made up of a combination of patricians and plebeians. Senators served a lifetime term. The Senate handled Rome’s finances and acted as an advisory body to the consuls. Although they were only providing advice, the Senate’s collective influence as a group of noblemen often dictated consuls’ decisions. The third branch is a set of voting assemblies made up of representatives elected by groups of citizens to handle elections, lawmaking and trials. Each assembly voted by group, meaning all members would vote and their representative would cast one vote based on the majority.

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3. Different assemblies of the Roman Republic handled different matters. The Centuriate Assembly voted to elect consuls and other officials who handled military matters. The Centuriate Assembly also held trials that might result in an execution. Though patricians and plebeians were both a part of this assembly, its groups were organized by wealth. The wealthier groups voted first and their vote was given more weight than that of poorer groups. The Tribal Assembly voted in the election of officials who dealt with non-military matters and held trials for cases that did not involve the death penalty. This assembly consisted of both patricians and plebeians. The Plebeian Council consisted solely of plebeians. They voted to enact laws that initially only applied to plebeians, but later applied to all citizens. The Plebeian Council elected non-military officials and served as an appeals court for matters that did not involve the death penalty.

Notes

4. Though the Roman Republic displayed many values of democracy, there was a tendency to favor wealthy patricians. Early on, patricians held all of the political power. Plebeians had no way to read laws that were being passed in the Senate. This put plebeians at risk of being punished for crimes they didn't understand or know existed. In 494 BCE, fed up with their lack of say in the political process, plebeians revolted and left the city. With common people gone, there was no one left to handle the labor that kept the city running, and the Roman military was at risk of losing a huge portion of its troops. As a result of this collective action by the working class, the patricians had to negotiate a deal with plebeians. New political offices and voting assemblies were created, and Roman laws were inscribed in bronze and displayed publicly in the forum for all to see and understand in 451 BCE.

Notes

5. The Roman Republic was a time of rapid expansion through war and conflict. The economy boomed as a result of slave labor and trade as the Romans conquered more and more territory. Needing to adapt its government, Roman leaders organized their new territories into provinces, each with a governor to handle its affairs. Conquered people were often offered some form of citizenship and even voting rights in some cases. This created a sense of shared identity across Rome's growing empire. Back in the city of Rome, despite architectural and infrastructure innovations, inequality between classes created major tension. The rewards of Rome's economy were only enriching patricians while plebeians struggled to survive. This sparked a period of unrest and civil war as a popular governor and military leader named Julius Caesar came to prominence.

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6. After an eight-year tenure as governor of Gaul, a Roman province, Julius Caesar was ordered back to Rome. Instead of returning as a private citizen, he marched his army into Italy, starting a four-year civil war. After his final victory over Pompey, his primary rival for power, Julius Caesar named himself Rome's dictator in 45 BCE. Unlike the temporary dictators before him, Caesar made changes quickly. The Senators disagreed with his decisions and ordered his execution. After Caesar was stabbed to death on the Senate floor on March 15, 44 BCE, Rome went through yet another period of unrest. Fighting over who would rule Rome and its provinces consumed noblemen, military leaders and politicians. When the chaos finally subsided, the next ruler of Rome was not a consul or a temporary dictator, but rather an emperor. By 27 BCE, with Augustus Caesar in power, the period known as the Roman Republic was over, and the Roman Empire had begun.

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