

# Evolution of the Roman Government During the Early Republic

## I. From Hilltop Settlement to Centre of a Thriving Empire

When the modern student of Roman history begins to study the government of early Rome, he or she is often confused by the many offices, magistracies, assemblies, military systems, power shifts, and unfamiliar terms associated with the Roman system(s) of government. Furthermore, the earliest history of Rome consists of your choice of some of the finest epic poetry ever written or a few shovels full of mud containing some artifacts and traces of primitive settlements on the Palatine and Quirinal Hills.

In order for us to begin to understand the evolution of Roman government, we must briefly review the process of phenomenal growth and expansion that tells the story of this city so unique in history. Along the way, we will begin to understand how both the heroes and the mud will each unveil a portion of the truth.

The very earliest settlements along the Tiber River in the region that later became the city of Rome were most probably ruled by a chieftain or warlord with the support of the heads of the leading families within or near the settlement. Virgil and the other epic writers tell us that the city of Rome was founded by Romulus, and that early on he murdered his brother Remus for ridiculing his pomerium, or the sacred boundary of the city he had founded. This city was named Rome after its legendary founder, and we have a suitably heroic beginning for a city that would one day rule the entire Western world.

Writers of later eras, including many Romans, would infer quite a bit from the part of the story where Romulus murders his brother, and say that as Rome was founded in an act of bloodshed, so the shedding of blood would become part of the Roman legacy. Certainly this is true, but any civilization that became dominant in that era would necessarily have had to shed much blood in the process of doing so.

While most historians consider the founding legends of Rome and the person of Romulus to be non-historical, they are fairly certain that Rome was ruled by kings during her early years. Kings Numa Pompilius and Ancus Marcius are legendary figures shrouded in mystery, while the sixth king, Servius Tullus, emerges as a historical personality. Servius Tullus was responsible for the several major reforms in the military and political organization of the Roman state, about which more will be said later. The period of the kings also includes the period during which Roman politics was dominated by the Etruscan nobility.

Historians are fairly certain that three of Rome's seven kings were Etruscan. None of these early kings were absolute rulers; they all required the support of the ruling aristocracy. The important principle to understand concerning this period is that the ruling class consisted of the heads of the most prominent families of the community. These families were organized into gentes or clans, and the clans were organized into tribes.

Power was derived from who you were, to whom you were related, and what position you held in your family, gens, and tribe. It was an aristocracy based on kinship rather than wealth. As we shall see, wealth later became an important determinant of power and the constant shifting balance of power between the old Patrician aristocracy and the later propertied classes grew to become one of the major driving forces behind Republican era politics. The Regal Period came to an end, traditionally, in 509 BCE when the last Etruscan King, Tarquinius Superbus (Tarquin the Proud) was overthrown by the Romans who set up a republic to rule in his place. According to epic legend, Tarquin was overthrown because he had raped Lucretia, a virtuous Roman matron and the daughter of an important citizen.

The more prosaic explanation offered by many historians is that the Roman aristocracy had been steadily gaining power and the kings found their position growing ever more threatened. A strong personality like Servius Tullus might be able to hold his own in the face of a strong aristocracy, but his much weaker successor was unable to stay the inevitable fall from power.

One must realize that Rome was steadily growing larger from the early years of its foundation through the period of the kings (referred to as Monarchy or Regal Period by historians), and throughout the early years of the

Republic. First, settlements on the Palatine, Quirinal, and other hills banded together under the leadership of the settlement on the Palatine. These settlements steadily grew and incorporated other nearby villages until the City of Rome encompassed settlements on the seven hills and low lying marshy areas between them. Later, by treaty of alliance or outright aggression and assimilation, other cities in the surrounding district of Latium came under Roman control.

These Latins were the peoples most closely related to the Romans. Later still, this process accounted for Rome gaining control of the non Latin towns in Italy, the Italian allies or conquered Italian towns. The fascinating history of the conquest of Latium Central Italy, Samnium, and Magna Graecia is dealt with elsewhere in this series of articles.

The important thing to understand is that in order for the small Latin town of Rome to succeed in gaining power and ascendancy over her neighbors in this fashion, she had to use just the right mixture of aggression and diplomacy. To accomplish this, Rome had to make it attractive enough to the ruling establishment in her new allied towns to cause these individuals to cooperate with the Roman plan. Rome implemented this in two ways. In some cases, the Romans agreed to let the local aristocracy continue in power and offered their support in exchange for a pledge of military assistance when Rome needed it. In other cases, Rome offered different classes of citizenship to the people of the allied or conquered towns. One class of citizenship offered full voting privileges and an opportunity for the man or his descendants to gain a magistracy or membership in the Roman senate.

Additionally, one more force acted to shape Roman politics. In many ancient city-states, especially the Greeks from whom the Romans drew many examples on which to base their own society, a man's wealth determined his position in the army and his responsibilities for defense of the community. The horse of a mounted infantryman and the equipment of the heavily armored hoplite warrior were expensive to acquire and maintain. Therefore, only the wealthiest citizens could afford the equipment and provisions required by the heaviest, most well armed troops.

A hoplite's equipment consisted of bronze helmet, cuirass, greaves, sword, and one or more spears. Men with lesser qualifications might equip themselves with less armor or forego the armor altogether, choosing the role of skirmishers equipped with only a sling or spear. This principle contributed to a reorganization of the political structure around classes of military service, which in turn were tied to property qualifications.

To summarize the principles outlined in the preceding paragraphs, several factors worked together to first bring about a system of organization in Roman government, then to bring about changes and reforms to that system. These were:

- The growth of Rome from tiny settlement to ruling city of the Western World.
- The growing power of the old Patrician aristocracy based on family, tribal, and clan relationships.
- A power struggle between the old aristocracy and the kings
- A growing importance of an aristocracy based on wealth
- A need to assimilate individuals from other Latin and Italian towns into the ruling power structure
- A close relationship between wealth and the right and responsibility to bear arms in defense of Rome

## **II. Organization of Governing Institutions**

### **Legendary Heroes (before 715 BCE)**

- Aeneas, son of the goddess Aphrodite and founder of Lavinium
- Ascanius, son of Aeneas and founder of Alba Longa
- Romulus, son of Rhea Silvia, daughter of King Numitor of Alba Longa and the god Mars, founder of Rome
- Titus Tatius, Early Sabine king and contemporary and colleague of Romulus

## The Kings (753 BCE to 509 BCE)

From Rome's traditional founding date of 753 BCE until the establishment of the Republic in 509 BCE, seven kings ruled the city of Rome. These were Romulus, Tullus Hostilius, Numa Pompilius, Ancus Marcius, Lucius Tarquinius Priscus, Servius Tullus, and Lucius Tarquinius Superbus.

The power of the kings was not absolute, and he required the support of the leading citizens to continue to rule. His powers included the duties of leader in war and chief priest. The king also had the power to punish by flogging or execution. He was usually accompanied by twelve *lictors* bearing the *fascēs*, or axe bound within a bundle of sticks. The fasces was a symbol of the king's power to punish or execute.

## The Senate

Established during the period of the kings, lasted until after the fall of the Empire.

Originally, the Roman Senate consisted of a group of one hundred leading Roman citizens that served as an advisory body to the king. The members of the Senate were the *patres*, or fathers of the important families and, by extension, the fathers of their city. Later kings packed the Senate with their own clients and followers. These men were known as the *conscripti* or the enrolled ones, a term with a somewhat negative connotation. Later, the Senate as a whole came to be known as the "Conscript Fathers", or, *Patres Conscripti*. This was a title of respect and the title by which those speaking to the Senate addressed that governing body.

The Senate grew from being just an advisory body under the kings to a position of sharing its power with the two elected consuls during the evolution of the Republic. During the later Republic, the Senate became the most powerful of Rome's governing bodies, with more power than the two elected consuls. During the late Republic, a series of strong military leaders emerged who raised armies loyal to themselves rather than Rome. These were called the Imperators and included men like Sulla, Pompey, Julius Caesar, Marc Antony, and Octavian.

The Imperators ruled with at least an appearance of legal powers mainly by intimidating the Senate through the threat of military force. During the period of the Roman Empire from about 27 BCE to CE 476 (in the West), the Senate continued to be a prestigious group of the top Roman aristocracy but whose power was more symbolic. The real governing power was in the hands of the emperor.

## The Consuls

(From the beginning of the Republic through the period of Ostrogothic Italy)The consuls were the two men elected for the period of one year who had *auctoritas*, or ruling power. They were elected by the Centuriate Assembly, and governed with the guidance and cooperation of the Senate. Each consul has the power to veto the acts of the other one.

This created a system of checks and balances where both consuls had to act in cooperation. Sometimes, there were cases when one consul became so powerful and had a great enough following that he could effectively act on his own, ignoring the objections of his colleague. This most often happened during the late Republic and period of the civil wars. The consuls would lead the Roman armies during war and also had priestly powers, which were important because this meant control of the Roman state religion. This was an important aspect of political power.

## The Curiate Assembly

From Early Regal Period through the Republic

The earliest popular assembly in Rome was the Curiate Assembly. From before written history, the Roman people had been organized into *curiae* or groups of clans. Each clan, called a *gens*, was composed of several families, and each *curia* comprised several *gentes*. The number of curiae grew as the surrounding towns were incorporated into the growing Roman state and the leading citizens of these towns were given a place in Roman

society and politics. Curiae were added until the total reached thirty. The thirty curiae were organized into three tribes, the Ramnes, the Tities, and the Luceres.

When all the curiae met, this was called the Curiate Assembly. This body did not have the power to pass laws, but its cooperation was vital if a king wished to rule successfully. The Curiate Assembly was convened by the king to approve legal acts such as wills and grants of citizenship. Also, their approval was required to declare war or to elect a new king.

As the Roman State continued to expand, a different form of tribal organization was used and the Curiate Assembly became less and less important. It was never abolished, but during later years, its powers were mostly ceremonial.

## The Centuriate Assembly and Classes of Military Service

One of the reforms of Servius Tullus included a new governing body based on classes of military service although some authors date these changes to about 440 BCE, about 100 years after Servius Tullus. The size of the army was increased and the warriors were drawn from different property classes of the wealthier citizens.

Originally, a man was either of the class (from the Latin *classis* or calling), meaning he could afford to equip himself with the full armour and weapons of a hoplite warrior, or he was "below the class", or (*infra classem*), in which case he could not afford to equip himself as a hoplite.

Eventually, this system was expanded to include five classes of military service plus the *equites* or cavalry, and an additional group containing musicians and engineers. The army was composed of a certain number of centuries, or groups of one hundred men from each class. These men were drawn from those of military age from each property class. These centuries also formed the voting units of the new popular assembly called the Centuriate Assembly.

Since the Centuriate Assembly was a political body based on military service and not merely a military organization in and of itself, some means had to be provided to include the elders of the community. These were the men beyond the maximum active duty military age of forty five years. So, an equal number of senior centuries and junior centuries from each class were incorporated into the Centuriate Assembly.

According to the Roman historian Livy, the levies of centuries from the various classes was organized as follows:

The First Class consisted of wealthy citizens, the value of whose property exceeded 100,000 *asses*. The First Class contributed forty centuries of juniors (of military age) and forty centuries of seniors. The juniors of the First Class were required to supply themselves with a bronze helmet, round *parma* style shield, bronze breastplate, bronze greaves (shin armor), short sword and spear.

The property requirements of the Second Class were 75,000 to 100,000 *asses* and they contributed ten centuries of juniors and ten centuries of seniors. Their equipment was the same as that of the First Class hoplites except they were not required to have a breastplate and the shield could be of the square type that was later to evolve into the *scutum*.

The Third Class had to possess 50,000 *asses* worth of property and were equipped like the Second Class hoplites with the exception that they were not required to wear greaves. They also supplied ten centuries each of juniors and seniors.

The Fourth Class property requirements were 25,000 *asses* and ten centuries each of juniors and seniors were recruited from them. The Fourth Class warriors carried only a spear and a javelin.

The Fifth Class property requirements were 11,000 *asses*. They were equipped only with slings and were used as skirmishers. Thirty centuries total were drawn from the Fifth Class, which included juniors and seniors.

Four centuries of specialized troops were raised from among the classes, two centuries of engineers and two centuries of musicians. Ancient sources differ on which classes supplied the engineers and musicians, as well as some minor details concerning equipment.

All the rest of the citizens of Rome were not deemed to be of any property class. They were called *infra classem*, or, below the class. From these was drawn one century which was exempt from military service.

In addition to the centuries levied from the five propertied classes and one century from the classless citizens, eighteen centuries of cavalry were recruited from amongst the wealthiest Roman citizens.

In all the Centuriate Assembly consisted of 193 voting centuries. Voting was first done within the centuries, then the vote of each century was taken until a majority had either voted for or against the issue under consideration. The votes were first taken from the eighteen cavalry centuries, then the centuries from the upper classes, and finally the lower classes voted in their turn. This system was not really fair, because sometimes the lower classes did not even get to vote if the wealthier classes and the cavalry centuries sided together, as sometimes happened.

The Centuriate Assembly had the power to declare war and to appoint men to the more important magistracies, including the consuls. They also voted on laws proposed to them by the more important magistrates. The laws voted on and appointments made by the Centuriate Assembly, however, had to be ratified by the Senate.

The Centuriate Assembly did not replace the old Curiate Assembly, but the two bodies functioned side by side for many years. Gradually, the Curiate assembly grew to become a largely ceremonial body, eventually having only a single man representing each curia.

### III. A Government's Constant Process of Evolving

of the things that makes the study of the Roman government such a complex undertaking is the fact that the government was shaped by many social, military, and economic forces just as modern governments are. It is as complex as or even more complex than the development of the government of the English people from early Celtic Britain through Saxon, Danish, and Norman kings and finally Parliament and the Commonwealth.

By contrast, the government of the United States has retained the same basic form and Constitution for almost 225 years as of this writing. Also relatively static was the medieval relationship between feudal overlords and vassals, the Church, and the king. In these last two cases, there have been many dynamic influence shifts between the major power groups, but the basic fabric of government remained constant. By contrast, changes in the form and fabric of the Roman government can be traced to social, economic, and military developments. For example, some of the reforms of Marius dating from about 110 BCE helped lay the foundation for the destruction of the Republic.

Most noteworthy was that he started enlisting an army of paid volunteer professional soldiers in place of the old system of property classification. Earlier arrangements were only for a maintenance allowance for troops away from their farms and businesses, but Marius' arrangement to pay the soldiers made them loyal to him, rather than the Roman State. Thus was instituted the system whereby *imperators* like Sulla, Pompey, and Julius Caesar bought Roman armies with regular pay, loot, and a promise of land upon retirement.

This system brought about the terrible civil wars that finally tore the Republic apart and paved the way for Octavian to restore order and become the first Roman emperor, Augustus. Also, because the plebeians were discontented with their lack of economic power and their say in the government, the two offices of Tribune of the Plebs were created and these men eventually had veto power over any law passed by the Senate.

The existence of Rome and the Roman Empire spanned a period of time extending from classical antiquity to the dawn of a modern society (the subsequent fragmentation of Europe during the Dark Ages notwithstanding). The evolution of her government brought into being institutions which are the precursors to most of the institutions we see today in modern governments. In other areas of this site, especially in the series of articles on the Roman emperors, we explore some of these institutions and the history of the times that brought them about.