

Rules of the Roman Republic

The Roman Army

Each land-owning citizen of Rome was required to serve in the army. In most cases ten years of military service were required. Roman soldiers were organized into legions, or very large groups of armed soldiers. Each legion was made up of between 3,000 to 6,000 heavily armed foot soldiers.

Soldiers on foot are referred to as part of the infantry while soldiers on horseback are part of the cavalry. Cavalry groups supported each legion.

Within each legion were smaller groups called centuries; a century was a group of around 100 men and the Roman officer in charge was called a centurion.

In battle, a legion was only as strong as its ability to quickly move, shift, or rotate. If a legion could not adapt to its opponent it could easily be conquered. Each century in a legion could act independently, and often times when a legion would break apart the centuries would be forced to disband and regroup at a later time.

Government under the Republic:

In the first century BCE, Roman writers bragged that their city had finally achieved a balanced government. They were referring to the perfect balance between a monarchy, oligarchy, and direct democracy. Rome had achieved a republic, or a government where representatives served the needs of the people. In place of a king, Rome had two officials called consuls. In some ways the consuls had king-like powers, however their power was definitely limited. Similar to kings, consuls commanded the army and directed the city's government. However, consul power was limited. A consul's term was only one year long and that same person could not be elected consul again for ten years! Also, the two consuls had to agree for decisions to be made; one consul could always overrule, or veto, the other consul's decision.

The Senate was the more distinguished branch of the Roman government. There were 300 members in the Senate. Early in Rome's history, members of the Senate were chosen from the upper class of Roman society. This meant that only Patricians could serve in the Senate. After the Conflict of the Orders, when the lower class (plebeians) fled Rome and demanded more political rights, the Senate was opened to all Roman males, either Patrician or Plebeian. Senate membership was for life. Consuls would appoint people to the Senate once a seat became available. This meant that while the Consul was constantly changing, the Senate remained firm, strong, and stable. Because of this, the Senate had great influence over both foreign and domestic policy.

Unlike the Senate where members served for life, the Assembly was the more democratic side of the government and represented the views of the "common man." The Assembly had very little power in Rome's early days. For example, the Assembly could vote for laws or to go to war, but the Senate could block their decisions. One grand power the Assembly had was that each year they had the sole power to choose two members of the Senate to serve as Consuls.

However, the Romans were not ready to completely give their government to the people. In times of crisis, the republic could appoint a dictator, or a leader who had absolute power. This rule would have the power to make laws and command the army. The Romans were quick though to place limits on the dictator's power; their term lasted for only six months and dictators were recommended by consuls, then approved by the senate.

Patrician & Plebeians:

In the early republic, two groups of Romans struggled for political power. One group was the patricians; they made up the wealthy, elite landowners and they held most of the power. The other group was called the plebeians. Members of the plebeian class were farmers, artisans, and merchants. The plebeian class made up the majority of the population.

The patrician class claimed that their ancestry gave them the authority to make laws for Rome. They believed they had noble status that was granted from birth and they thought it was their duty and responsibility to make the important decisions for the republic. Plebeians, however were barred by law from holding most important government positions. In time, Plebeians demanded they be given a "say" in government, and eventually created their own assembly called the Tribune of the Pless. The Tribune protected the rights of the plebeians from unfair laws by giving the group the power to veto laws.

Citizenship in the Roman Republic:

The idea of the citizen changed greatly during the Roman Republic, and it continued to evolve during the later Roman Empire. Once the Romans overthrew their Etruscan leaders they created a republic and gave more power to the people; all males over fifteen who were descendants from the original tribes of Rome became citizens. Citizens of Rome distinguished themselves from non-citizens by wearing a toga. When Rome transitioned into an empire, citizens wore white robes while the emperor wore a purple toga to distinguish himself as the princeps, or "first citizen."

Citizenship throughout Rome varied greatly. The full citizen could hold public office, vote on key issues, marry freeborn people, and practice business. Some citizens were not allowed to vote or hold public office but could still practice business. A third type of citizen could vote and practice business, but could not hold office or marry freeborn people.

The Romans had a very unique approach to how they handled the people they conquered. Instead of ruling these people as conquered subjects, the Romans invited them to become citizens. Rather than continuing to fight Rome, these people slowly became integrated into Roman society.

Slaves in the Roman Republic

Slaves had no rights at all in Ancient Rome; they were thought of and treated like property. If slaves disobeyed their masters the most common way they would be punished is by whipping. However, because slaves were expensive, owners would not want to inflict lasting damage. Other than whipping, slaves would also be branded with a hot iron, typically on the forehead. Another punishment was to be branded in the forehead. If a slave committed a capital crime, such as murder, they were commonly crucified in public. Why in public? To set an example for other slaves who thought about disobeying. Eventually, the practice of crucifixion was outlawed under Emperor Constantine.

However, unlike in the United States, slavery in Rome was not confined to one's skin color or race. In Rome, slaves were mostly criminals and foreigners from nearby territories that had warred with Rome. Slavery was also treated as a form of punishment. However, those in slavery could emerge; it was common for slaves to be released after serving their punishment, then they were able to become voting citizens. In hard times, it was not uncommon for families to sell their own children into slavery.

The Household in the Roman Republic

Roman society was structured so that the father of the family had complete authority over his wife and children. Roman law reinforced this superiority as well.

According to Roman Law, the wife . . .

- . . . is the property of her husband and completely subjected to his will.
- . . . could be punished in anyway. This includes killing her or selling her as a slave. Being sold as a slave was banned, however, after 100 BC.
- . . . cannot own anything. Anything she or her children inherit belongs to the husband. This includes any dowry which she brought with her to the marriage.

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1. In the early Roman Republic, which group had most of the political power? How did they claim this authority?

2. Why was the assembly the more democratic side of the government?

3. When could a dictator come to power and how long were they in power?

4. The Roman Army:
 - a. Define legion:

 - b. What is the difference between infantry and cavalry?

5. Who was a citizen in Rome?

How could a slave become a citizen?

What were the obligations and privileges of Roman citizens?

6. How was slavery different in the Roman Republic than it was in the United States? How was it similar?

 7. What rules existed in the household? What rights did women have in the Roman Republic (Give examples).
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