

## Explore More—The Significance of the Roman Republic

**Directions:** Listen to your teacher talk about the significance of the Roman Republic. Refer to the maps in your Explore Geography Picture Dictionary to locate the places your teacher mentions. Circle any words you don't understand. Underline or highlight important ideas in the text. Write notes in the margins to help you understand key points. Then answer the questions in your own words.

### The Roman Republic

Etruscan kings ruled over the Romans until about 509 B.C. At that time, the Romans forced the Etruscans to leave Rome and pushed the Etruscan king out of power. The Romans then established their own form of government. Rather than having a king, they decided to choose their own leaders. This type of government is known as a republic. Rich landowners and military leaders, called patricians, made up one of Rome's two social classes. Poor artisans, farmers, merchants, and former slaves, who were the majority of the Roman people, made up the other social class, the plebeians. Patricians formed an assembly and chose two men from their class to act as consuls that would lead the Roman Republic. Consuls had the power to administer the law. The advisors to the consuls were called senators. Senators were allowed to serve in government as long as they wanted to; consuls served for one year.

*On the class time line, find the year that the Roman Republic was founded.*

Even though Romans chose their own leaders, the Roman Republic was not a democracy. Plebeians did not have representation in government. Eventually, plebeians began to demand rights and start their own council. Because patricians needed the plebeians to serve in the military and perform jobs in the republic, they agreed to give the plebeians a voice in government matters.

### Key Feature: Written Constitution

One of the changes that were made in the Roman Republic as a result of the plebeians' demands was the writing down of laws. At the beginning of the Roman Republic, only consuls and senators, all representatives of the patricians, had knowledge of the laws. The plebeians thought that this was unfair. If the patricians wanted to change the laws to favor them, they could do so very easily since the laws were not written down.

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About 450 B.C., the plebeians' demands for written laws were met. The patricians wrote the Roman laws down on 12 bronze tablets. These tablets are called the Law of the Twelve Tables. Everyone in the republic—patricians and plebeians alike—was subject to follow the same set of written laws.

### **Key Feature: Tripartite Government**

Something that is “tripartite” is divided into three parts or made up of three parts. The Roman Republic was a tripartite government.

*Point to a chart in the textbook or historical anthology showing the tripartite government of ancient Rome.*

There were three parts of the Roman government that shared the power to rule. The Senators were from the wealthy class called the patricians. The senators elected two consuls from their group. Then there was a third group, an assembly of Roman citizens. In time, the plebeians had representation in the assembly and representatives that were equal to the senators, called tribunes. Tribunes could prevent laws proposed by the Senate from being passed. After a while, plebeians also were able to elect one of the consuls.

### **Key Feature: Checks and Balances**

What does it mean that the Roman Republic had a system of checks and balances? A system of checks and balances in government prevents any one part of a government from becoming too powerful. In ancient Rome, the tripartite government kept any one person or group from taking control of the Republic. The Senate gave the aristocracy a voice in government. The consuls had to be elected by senators and so were dependent on them for their power. The assemblies provided representation for regular citizens. Even today, we value the system of checks and balances. In the United States, we have three branches of government. Power is distributed among the president, the lawmakers, and the courts so that nobody has too much control over government.

### **Key Feature: Civic Duty**

The structure of the Roman Republic demonstrates that its people valued the concept of civic duty. “Civic duty” refers to the types of responsibilities that citizens have to their nation or country. In Rome, people could not rely on a king or dictator to rule them and make decisions for them. Instead, they had to take an active role in their government. People also participated in other ways. Citizens were expected to defend the Republic when required. Citizens like Cincinnatus served the Republic when enemies threatened its existence and the citizens helped defend it. Because the people of Rome took their civic duties seriously, the Republic remained strong and stable for a very long time. ❖



### **Questions for further discussion:**

- What would you like to know more about in terms of the government of the Roman Republic? Frame questions that you can answer by historical study and research. Conduct this research and discuss your findings.
- How is the Roman Republic similar to the government of the United States today? How is it different? Explain the sources of historical continuity and how the combination of ideas and events explains the emergence of new patterns. Do further research if necessary.
- Read the historian Polybius's comments on the government of the Roman Republic. Detect his point of view on historical events and determine the context in which the historical statements were made (the questions he may have asked about the subject, the sources he used, the perspective from which he is writing).