University of the People

HIST 1421 Greek and Roman Civilization

Unit 4 Written Assignment 4

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**Introduction**

The establishment of the Roman Republic in 509 BCE represented a pivotal shift away from monarchical rule toward a political system incorporating elements of citizen participation and shared power. This analysis explores the circumstances surrounding the Republic's founding, the aspects that aligned with democratic principles, and the factors that called into question the true democratic nature of this ancient government. Through an examination of historical accounts and scholarly perspectives, insights are provided into the complexities and contradictions inherent in Rome's path to a more representative political structure.

**Body**

The precipitating event leading to the Roman Republic's formation was the overthrow of the Etruscan king Tarquinius Superbus, whose tyrannical reign and the sexual assault of the noblewoman Lucretia sparked widespread popular unrest, according to the historian Livy's records (Livy, trans. 1919). Seeking to prevent abuses of concentrated power, the Roman populace decided to abolish the monarchy in favor of a new government with distributed authority and a role for ordinary citizens (Morey, 1901).

Elements promoting a democratic character in the Republic included the election of officials like consuls and tribunes by the citizenry for limited terms, as well as legislative assemblies where Romans could vote on laws and policies (Morey, 1901). A system of checks and balances through separate but interlocking institutions aimed to deter power from becoming too centralized (Morey, 1901). These developments represented strides toward more representative governance.

However, several factors undermined the Republic's democratic bona fides. Although not legally prohibited from holding office, in practice the plebeian class faced significant barriers compared to the wealthy, elite patrician families who monopolized political control (Morey, 1901). Additionally, ancient Rome's economic reliance on a vast enslaved population negated core democratic values of equality and liberty (Nagle, 2017). As the Republic expanded through military conquest, the growing influence of successful generals also concentrated power in a manner discordant with a balanced, participatory government (Nagle, 2017).

**Conclusion**

While the founding of the Roman Republic broke from absolute monarchy by incorporating elected representation, legislative bodies, and institutional checks on power, its democratic credentials were compromised by aristocratic dominance, the presence of widespread slavery, and the inexorable rise of military strongmen as the Republic's territorial holdings grew. Though imperfect, this political experiment proved an important milestone by taking initial steps toward more inclusive governance. Examining both the democratic progress and shortcomings illuminates the challenges societies face in fully realizing egalitarian ideals and evolving durable systems of participatory self-rule.

**References**

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Nagle, D. B. (2017). The household as the foundation of Aristotle's Polis. Cambridge University Press.