Ancient Rome – Political Structures: The Struggle of the Orders

NAME:\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_

The growing domination of the patricians over political affairs caused resentment and tension between the patricians and plebeians. The patricians had economic and social control over society, and as the plebeians had virtually no rights, their economic situation was steadily becoming more desperate. From 500 BCE, the plebeians began to challenge patrician control, and aimed to reduce the widening gulf between the privileged few and the majority. This series of conflicts has been termed the Struggle of the Orders. Without access to legal and political processes, the plebeians had little chance of improving their economic, social or religious status. During Rome’s wars of expansion, the plebeians were the ones away from home on unpaid military service (landowners were obliged to serve when called upon). They often returned home after years abroad to discover their lands and homes in ruin. The main grievances of the plebeians are outlined in the table below.

**Table 16.2** Grievances of the plebeians

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| **Injustice** | **Description** |
| Political | * patricians monopolised government * only active political role was to vote in *comitia centuriata* |
| Social | * no plebeian could marry a patrician, perpetuating social divisions * even if financially prosperous, they were regarded as inferior * patricians wore distinguishing clothes |
| economic | * many plebeians were poor and ran the risk of being enslaved for debt * excluded from sharing in public land |
| Religious | * plebeians were excluded from (politically important) priestly offices |
| Legal | * laws were unwritten and plebeians subject to whim of patricians with no right of appeal |

One of the plebians’ first moves was to establish their own assembly, the *Concilium Plebis*. The assembly was only officially recognised in 471 BCE, due to the sheer weight of public support for it. Decrees passed by the *Concilium Plebis* were initially only binding on its members, but this changed in 287 BCE when they became applicable to the Senate and people. Patricians were excluded from participation in the plebeian assembly, and it had the right to veto any legislation passed by the Senate.

The next task the plebeians tackled was the codification of laws. Until the mid-fifth century BCE, laws were not written down or published for the information of all people. Magistrates could make any decisions they liked, and plebeians did not have the knowledge or evidence to argue their case. The first codification of Roman laws became known as the Twelve Tables. The twelve bronze tablets were displayed publicly in the Forum for all people to read and theoretically they remained the basic law of Rome for 1000 years. In reality, many laws were forgotten and ignored.

Gradually, access to public office was granted to the plebeians, and laws banning intermarriage between plebeians and patricians were changed. The execution of insolvent debtors was also outlawed. Wealthy plebeians benefitted the most from these changes. Many accrued more wealth than patricians thanks to their business acumen as merchants. These plebians’ wealth made them eligible for recruitment into the cavalry. Consequently, their involvement in the cavalry saw the emergence of a new middle-class in Rome – the *equite*.

The Struggle of the Orders did not eliminate the plebians’ main grievance: the privileged position of the patricians. The patricians retained control over most government institutions, and land ownership continued to be the key to political power and office. The wars of expansion made the rich wealthier as they gained control of more land, and the poor continued to be excluded from power.

1. Identify the following information about the ‘Struggle of the Orders’

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1. Describe some of the key issues the plebians faced:

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1. Create a flow-chart of steps taken by the plebians
2. Explain the outcome/s of the Struggle of the Orders

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