



# UNIVERSITY OF THE PEOPLE

HIST 1421-01 GREEK & ROMAN CIVILIZATION - AY2024-T3

WRITTEN ASSIGNMENT UNIT 4

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# THE FOUNDING OF THE ROMAN REPUBLIC

## INTRODUCTION

As we study the history of democracy, ancient Rome holds fascinating lessons about the struggle to overthrow monarchies and establish representative rule. After rebelling against the tyranny of kings, Rome took its first steps towards a republic built on shared civic power. However, patrician elites contested plebeian demands for rights through many conflicts. Rome achieved a delicate balance of authority, but its limited inclusivity makes labeling the Republic as a full democracy problematic.

## WHAT CIRCUMSTANCES LED TO THE ESTABLISHMENT OF THE ROMAN REPUBLIC?

The Roman Kingdom existed for over two centuries under the dynastic rule of seven kings. The last king, Tarquinius Superbus, acted as a cruel dictator who ignored the Senate, taking advice only from his inner circle. After the king's son sexually assaulted the noblewoman Lucretia, her relatives led a popular revolt against the Tarquins in 509 BCE. This uprising overthrew the monarchy and expelled the royal family from Rome.

In the aftermath, the Romans agreed not to allow rule by one man again. They established a new Republican government founded on the separation of powers between two Consuls and the Senate. *"The two consuls continued to be elected annually by Roman citizens and advised by the senate. Both consuls were elected for one-year terms and could veto each other's actions"* (Libretexts, 2020). This political structure sought to prevent authoritarianism by requiring decisions to pass through different governing bodies. The reforms dispersed power across patrician families and ended sole hereditary rule.

### WHICH ELEMENTS OF THE REPUBLIC MADE IT DEMOCRATIC?

The most democratic element of the early Republic was opening legislative and judicial powers to the Centuriate Assembly which included all Roman men over 30. This popular assembly acted as a direct check on the authority of the patrician-dominated Senate.

Additionally, the creation of the tribunate office provided commoners a platform to voice grievances. While originally excluded from real authority, their power grew as plebeians could veto unfavorable laws. Over the Republic's first half-century, these reforms represented major concessions from the nobility to democratize a bit.

### WHICH ELEMENTS MADE YOU QUESTION THE REPUBLIC'S DEMOCRATIC NATURE?

However, true political power remained concentrated in the hands of aristocratic families for nearly all the Republic's history. The Consuls held ultimate executive power, while the Senate dominated state affairs and policymaking. Both were exclusive clubs of wealthy, landed patrician elites who shared deep social ties.

While plebeians slowly gained rights like holding the tribunate or consulship, these positions had limited abilities to challenge the established hierarchy. Further, lower social classes, women, slaves, and foreigners had no official voice in Roman politics. Full democratic inclusion only extended to male Roman citizens with wealth and status.

### CONCLUSION

In the beginning, Rome overthrew the rule of kings in favor of a republican system with elements of democracy. However, vestiges of aristocracy and oligarchy endured in restricting real authority to a privileged few elite. *"During the 60s B.C.E., a senator named Cato the Younger had constantly and unnecessarily used procedural delays to block the senate from voting on*

*legislation he did not like for years.” (Little & Little, 2023).* The balance between popular assemblies as a check on senatorial power did bring democracy forward during the Republic. Yet its exclusivity limits considering Rome truly egalitarian or democratic compared to modern standards. The Roman Republic highlights that progress towards democratic ideals often happens gradually through many generations’ struggles against entrenched hierarchies.

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