

THE ROMAN STRUGGLE

PLEBEIANS *vs.* **PATRICIANS**

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The Roman Struggle

Plebeians & Patricians

1

The city of Rome was first settled by the Latin tribe around the year 753 BCE. They instituted a monarchy and made Romulus their first king. Then, in 616 BCE, a more powerful tribe known as the Etruscans seized control of Rome. They would rule the city until 509 BCE when the Roman people overthrew the last Etruscan king, Tarquin the Great. The Roman people then created a new form of government called a republic - this is a type of government where people elect representatives to make decisions for the community.

However, while still under Etruscan rule, the Etruscans divided Roman society into two classes: a high-class called the patricians and a low-class called the plebeians. The plebeians made up roughly 95% of the population. Meaning "many" in Latin, the *plebs* served as peasants, laborers, and craftsman. They were also required to pay taxes and serve in the military. Patricians, on the other hand, were the elite members of ancient Rome. While only 5% of the population, they were given the best land and often advised the Etruscan kings. *Patres* means "father" in Latin, and patricians were often viewed as the caretakers of Rome, much like a father is to his family.



Early Roman government was dominated by the patricians who held almost complete control over government decisions.

2

In 509 BCE, patricians and plebeians rose together against the Etruscan monarchy to seize control of Rome. They overthrew the last Etruscan king, Tarquin the Great, and expelled him from the city. The Romans invented a new form of government called a republic. Instead of opening the democratic process to all people, like had happened in ancient Athens with the Council of 500, the Romans created a group of 300 men called the Senate that would run the country. Once elected, the Senators served for life, made laws for the city, and served as judges on the most important legal matters. The Senate also chose two leaders who commanded Roman affairs. These two leaders were called Consuls; one focused on maintaining order and security at home while the other commanded the military to protect the city from foreign threats. Each served a one-year term, however in times of crisis, one could be made a temporary dictator for six months (or until order was restored).

3

While the Roman republic was a more fair system, it still only benefited the patrician elite. Plebeians were barred from the political process, could not vote or serve in the Senate, and could never serve as Consul. Roman law was also very biased against plebeians; laws were not written down, so they changed constantly to favor the patricians. Plebeians eventually grew tired and frustrated with living under patrician rule, so in 494 BCE they began to organize their protest. Since 95% of Romans were plebeians, and as a result dominated the military, plebeian leaders decided to use this to their advantage. Known as the Conflict of the Orders, plebeians demanded more political power or they would have no choice but to leave Rome. With the potential for an absent military, the patrician elite grew worrisome that this would endanger the safety of their city.

4

Patricians were right to worry; the lack of a military would make Rome an easy target for a nearby enemy. The plebeians followed through on their threat and fled Rome, en masse, to the Sacred Mount, a hill outside the city. Fearing for the safety and security of their city, the patricians were willing to negotiate. They sent Agrippa Lanatus, a former council who was well-liked by the plebeians, in an attempt to convince the plebeians to return. He spoke about the crucial role the plebeian class played in Roman affairs. He compared Rome to a body, the plebeians to its arms and legs, and the patricians to its the belly; in order for the city to survive, Lanatus argued, all parts needed to support each other. The plebeians agreed with Lanatus, but to return to Rome the plebeian leaders demanded one thing: more political power. The patricians were ready to compromise.



Created in 1849, this engraving shows the plebeian retreat to the Sacred Mount, a hill outside the city of Rome, in their attempt to gain more political power.

5

The result was a massive win for the majority-held plebeian class. First, plebeians secured the right to have their views represented in the Senate. A new group was created called the Tribune of the Plebs that would represent plebeian interests; a council of ten elected plebeians would serve in this body and could veto (or reject) any law, order, or decision decided by the Senate. This group also received absolute protection: any person who laid hands on one of the tribunes would be banished from the city (and the plebeian class was entitled to kill the attacker without fear of punishment). This treated the Tribune members as too important to be interfered with.

6

Second, one of the two Consul positions had to be a plebeian; this meant that now only would plebeians hold power over the Senate, but they would also share control over the leadership of Rome. Third, and finally, plebeians demanded the legal system be changed. No longer were laws to be changed to benefit the patrician elite; for the first time, laws in Roman society were to be written down. These laws were carved into twelve wooden tables and were known as the Twelve Tables. The Twelve Tables formed the basis of law for the Roman Republic and combined strict rules with harsh punishment.

7

This relationship between patricians and plebeians over political power in Rome would last for quite some time. However, in the year 81 BCE, Rome saw the rise of a dictator named Sulla who viewed the Tribune as a threat to his power. He ignored their veto power and refused to support a tribune member's attempt at higher office. Plebeian power further declined with the ascension of Julius Caesar. Being a patrician, Caesar was banned from serving in the Tribune; however, in 48 BCE he illegally took one of its seats to maintain control over the group. Caesar was assassinated in 44 BCE and Rome was plunged into a great civil war; the republic would not survive, but in reality, it had died well before Caesar's rise.

After reading this section,
what would you name it?

1

Title: _____

Q: The year of the founding of Rome? A: _____

Descriptions of a Plebeian:

- 1.) _____ % all Romans were _____
- 2.) _____
- 3.) Required to pay _____ and serve in _____
- 4.) _____
- 5.) "Plebs" means " _____ "

Descriptions of a Patrician:

- 1.) Only _____ % of all Romans were _____
- 2.) _____
- 3.) Chose _____ to the King
- 4.) _____
- 5.) "Patres" means " _____ "

2

Title: _____

Q: The ruling tribe of Rome before Patricians?

A: _____

Q: A republic was established when Patricians rebelled. What is a republic?

A: _____

Q: Number of people in the Senate?

A: _____

Q: Responsibilities of Senators?

- 1.) _____
- 2.) _____
- 3.) _____

Q: Who are the Consuls, and how are they chosen?

A: _____



4

Title: _____

Write a short conversation between Plebeian leaders and Agrippa Lanatus that shows their encounter on the Sacred Mount.

3

Title: _____

I. Plebeians were _____ from the new political process, just like _____.

II. Laws were very _____ and favored the _____.

III. Only _____ could be _____.

IV. Laws were _____ down, which led to Patricians constantly _____ the laws.

V. The _____ of _____ represents the Plebeians attempt to finally fight back.



5 & 6

Title: _____

Imagine you are a Patrician and you are writing a letter to a Plebeian. Your letter needs to show at least three ways your political power has improved as a result of the Conflict of the Orders.

Dear _____, a Plebeian:

Sincerely, _____, a Patrician

7

Title: _____

Q: This dictator began limiting plebeian power?

A: _____

Q: How did Julius Caesar build on the work of Sulla with regard to political rights for plebeians?

A: _____

Q: What rights were taken from plebeians as the republic began to fall?

A: _____

Q: Why might any leader seek to do similar actions to what Sulla and Caesar did?

A: _____

After reading this section,
what would you name it?

KEY

1

Title: _____

Q: The year of the founding of Rome? A: 753 BCE

Descriptions of a Plebeian:

- 1.) 95 % all Romans were plebeians
- 2.) answers will vary
- 3.) Required to pay taxes and serve in military
- 4.) answers will vary
- 5.) "Plebs" means " many "

Descriptions of a Patrician:

- 1.) Only 5 % of all Romans were patricians
- 2.) answers will vary
- 3.) Chose advisors to the King
- 4.) answers will vary
- 5.) "Patres" means " father "

2

Title: _____

Q: The ruling tribe of Rome before Patricians?

A: Etruscans

Q: A republic was established when Patricians rebelled. What is a republic?

A: (consult box 1 -- a government where people choose their leaders)

Q: Number of people in the Senate?

A: 300

Q: Responsibilities of Senators?

- 1.) law makers, served as judges, served for life
- 2.) _____
- 3.) _____

Q: Who are the Consuls, and how are they chosen?

A: 2 leaders of Rome, chose by Senate

4

Title: _____

Write a short conversation between Plebeian leaders and Agrippa Lanatus that shows their encounter on the Sacred Mount.

answers will vary

3

Title: _____

I. Plebeians were banned from the new political process, just like before.

II. Laws were very biased and favored the patrician.

III. Only patrician could be Consul/Senator.

IV. Laws were not written down, which led to Patricians constantly change the laws.

V. The Conflict of the Orders represents the Plebeians attempt to finally fight back.

5

&

6

Title: _____

Imagine you are a Patrician and you are writing a letter to a Plebeian. Your letter needs to show at least three ways your political power has improved as a result of the Conflict of the Orders.

Dear _____, a Plebeian:

answers will vary, but should have:

- *creation of Tribune of the Plebs (10 elected plebeians)*
- *protection for Tribunes / death and banishment for any violence to them*
- *one of two Consuls must be plebeian*
- *can veto any actions by Consuls*
- *laws written down called the Twelve Tables*

Sincerely, _____, a Patrician

7

Title: _____

Q: This dictator began limiting plebeian power?

A: *Sulla*

Q: How did Julius Caesar build on the work of Sulla with regard to political rights for plebeians?

A: *Forced himself into Tribune despite being a patrician*

Q: What rights were taken from plebeians as the republic began to fall?

A: *Could not veto, no longer just plebeian, could not serve in higher office.*

Q: Why might any leader seek to do similar actions to what Sulla and Caesar did?

A: *It is a way to limit the majority, low class in an attempt to seize larger control over an area.*