The Evolution of the Roman Republic

Directions: Read the text. Then, in complete sentences, answer the review questions that follow.

As we know from the myth of Romulus and Remus, the original community of Rome was founded in 753 BCE. In the late 600’s BCE, Romans were ruled by the Etruscans. The Etruscans were the people who lived north of Rome in central Italy. These northern Italians were highly skilled artisans who knew how to pave roads, drain marshes, and construct sewers. They were also under the control of a monarch.

In 509 BCE wealthy Roman landowners overthrew the Etruscan king and vowed never to be ruled by a monarch again. In place of the monarchy, the Romans established a res publica (Latin for “that which belongs to the people”). In this form of government, which today we call a republic, voters elect officials to run the state. In the Roman Republic, only adult male citizens were entitled to vote and to take part in government. Three important groups of citizens helped govern the republic: the Senate, the magistrates, and the assemblies.

Senate

The Senate was the most influential and powerful of the three governing bodies because it controlled public funds and decided foreign policy. Sometimes the Senate also acted as a court. In time of emergency, the senators could propose that a citizen be named dictator, or absolute ruler. A dictator could rule for up to six months. During that period, he had complete command over the army and the courts.

Magistrates

The magistrates who made up the second group of Roman leaders were elected officials. The magistrates included consuls, praetors, and censors. After the monarchy ended in 509 BCE, two individuals were elected to one-year terms to serve as consuls, or chief executives. The consuls ran the government, commanded the army, and could appoint dictators. Although powerful, consuls governed with the advice of the Senate. In addition, each consul could veto, or refuse to approve, the acts of the other consul (The Latin word veto means “I forbid”). This division of power was an example of the principle of checks and balances, which prevents any one part of the government from becoming too powerful. The United States and many other nations of the modern world later adopted the veto and the principle of checks and balances as safeguards in their own governments.

The Romans elected the praetors to help the consuls. In times of war, praetors commanded armies. In times of peace, they oversaw the Roman legal system. The numbers of praetors varied over time, but they continued to head specific Roman courts. The interpretation of legal questions made by praetors formed much of the civil law in Rome.

Censors registered citizens according to their wealth, appointed candidates to the Senate, and oversaw the moral conduct of all citizens. Censors became very powerful magistrates in the Roman Republic.

Assemblies

Several assemblies existed in the Roman Republic. Citizens in these assemblies voted on laws and elected officials, including the consuls. Some assemblies voted to make war or peace, while others served as courts. The assemblies elected 10 officials called tribunes, who had some power over actions by the Senate and other public officials. If the tribunes believed actions were not in public interest, they could refuse to approve them.

The Conflict of the Orders

The types of people who served as officials in the Roman government changed over time. These changes stemmed from attempts of common people to win more rights. The struggles became known as the Conflict of Orders.
In the early republic, Romans were divided into two classes of people: patricians and plebeians. **Patricians** were powerful landowners who controlled the government. As nobles, they inherited their power. **Plebeians**, who made up most of the population, were mainly farmers and workers. For many years, plebeians had few rights. They could vote, but they were barred from holding most public offices. Plebeians could not even know Roman laws because the laws were not written down. In court, a judge stated and applied the law, but only patricians could serve as judges.

Over time, plebeians increased their power through demands and strikes. They gained the right to join the army, hold government office, form their own assembly and elect tribunes. In one of their greatest victories, they forced the government to write down the laws of the Roman Republic. In about 450 BCE the Romans engraved their laws on tablets called the Twelve Tables. The laws were placed in the Forum, the chief public square, for all to view.

The first plebeians were appointed to the government in the late 400’s BCE. After 342 BCE a plebeian always held one of the consul positions. By about 300 BCE many plebeians had become so powerful and wealthy themselves that they joined with patricians to form the Roman nobility. From that time on, the distinction between patricians and plebeians was not as important. Membership in the nobility was still very important, however. Since government official were not paid a salary, only wealthy nobles could afford to hold office. Thus, the nobles still controlled the republic.

**READING REVIEW:**

1. Define the following terms:
   - republic:
   - dictator:
   - plebeians:
   - patricians:
   - consuls:
   - tribunes:
   - veto:
   - censors:
   - checks and balances:
   - praetors:

2. Before 509 BCE Rome had been ruled by a monarch. When the Romans overthrew their Etruscan king, they chose to set up a republic rather than a new monarchy of their own. Why do you think that they would have set up a republic?

3. Which branch of government in the Roman republic had the most power? Explain your answer

4. In what two ways was the power of the consuls limited?

5. Why was a dictator chosen to head the government in times of emergency?

6. What was the system of checks and balances?

7. What types of injustice existed in the Republic prior to 450 BCE?

8. What did the plebeians do to finally achieve some level of equality?