Introduction

Etruscan kings from northern Italy ruled early Rome. Around 509 B.C.E., the Romans overthrew the Etruscans and created a republic, a form of government in which leaders are elected to represent the people.

Ancient Romans told an interesting story about the overthrow of their Etruscan rulers. One day, two Etruscan princes visited the famous oracle at Delphi (DEL-fie), in Greece. A Roman named Lucius Junius Brutus traveled with them.

At Delphi, the princes asked the oracle which one of them would be the next king of Rome. The oracle answered, “The next man to have authority in Rome will be the man who first kisses his mother.” Hearing this prediction, Brutus pretended to trip. He fell on his face, and his lips touched Earth, which is often considered the mother of all living things.

Back in Rome, Brutus led the revolt that eliminated the Etruscan kings. The oracle’s mysterious words came true, to some degree, because Brutus became one of the first leaders of the new republic. The Roman people were now free to govern themselves.

Unfortunately, not all Romans were equal under this new system. Power in the early republic belonged to rich men called patricians (pah-TRIH-shens). The majority of Romans, the plebeians (pleh-BEE-anz), had no voice in the government. In this lesson, you will see how a long struggle between patricians and plebeians shaped the government of Rome.

1. Patricians and Plebeians Under Etruscan Rule

Between 616 and 509 B.C.E., the Etruscans ruled Rome. During this time, Roman society was divided into two classes, patricians and plebeians.

Upper-class citizens, called patricians, came from a small group of wealthy landowners. Patrician comes from the Latin word pater, which translates to “father.” The patricians chose from among themselves the “fathers of the state,” the men who advised the Etruscan king. Patricians controlled the most valuable land and also held the important military and religious offices.

Free non-patricians called plebeians, who comprised about 95 percent of Rome’s population, were mostly peasants, laborers, craftspeople, and shopkeepers.
The word *plebeian* comes from *plebs*, which translates to “the common people.” Plebeians could not be priests or government officials and had little voice in the government, but they were still forced to serve in the army.

2. The Patricians Create a Republic

Eventually, the patricians resented the Etruscan rule. In 509 B.C.E., a group of patricians, led by Lucius Junius Brutus, rebelled and drove out the last Etruscan king. Instead of a monarchy, they developed a republic, in which elected officials govern for the people.

To the patricians, “the people” meant themselves, not the plebeians. The patricians placed most of the power in the hands of the *Senate*, which was a group of 300 patricians elected by patricians. The senators served for life. They also appointed other government officials.

Two elected leaders, called *consuls*, shared command of the army. The Senate was supposed to advise the consuls and their decisions were considered law.

The creation of the republic gave Rome a more democratic form of government. However, only the patricians could participate in that government.

3. The Plebeians Rebel

Even though Rome was now a republic, the patricians retained all the power. They ensured that only they could participate in the government. Only they could become senators or consuls. Plebeians had to obey their decisions. Because laws were not written down, patricians often changed or interpreted the laws to benefit themselves. As a result, a small group of families maintained all the power in Rome.

The plebeians had to unite and fight for what they wanted. They began to demand more political rights. The struggle between plebeians and patricians is referred to as the Conflict of the Orders, a conflict between the two social classes.

The rivalry grew especially heated during times of war. The new republic frequently fought wars against neighboring tribes. Plebeians resented the fact that they were required to fight in the army even though the patricians decided whether to go to war.

The struggle took a dramatic turn in the year 494 B.C.E., at which point Rome was a city of twenty to forty thousand people, and the majority of the population was plebeian. Angry over their lack of power, the plebeians marched out of the city and camped on a nearby hill, refusing to return until the patricians met their demands.

Work in the city and on the farms came to a halt, putting Rome in a crisis. Without the plebeians, patricians feared that the army would be helpless if an enemy struck at Rome. “A great panic seized the city,” wrote Livy, a noted...
Roman historian. With Rome quickly deteriorating, the patricians had little choice but to compromise.

4. The Plebeians Gain Political Equality

The plebeians' revolt led to a major change in Roman government. The patricians agreed to allow the plebeians to elect officials called Tribunes of the Plebs. The **tribunes** represented the plebeians in the Senate and with the consuls. Later, tribunes gained the power to **veto**, or overrule, actions by the Senate and other government officials. Eventually, the number of tribunes increased from two to ten.

Plebeians could also elect a lawmaking body, the Council of Plebs. However, the council created laws only for plebeians, not for patricians.

Although the plebeians had gained some important rights, they still held less power than the patricians. Over the next 200 years, the plebeians conducted a series of protests to gradually win political equality.

First, they demanded that the laws be transcribed, or written down so that the patricians couldn't change them at will. Around the year 451 B.C.E., the patricians agreed, and the laws were **published** on tablets called the Twelve Tables.

Next, in 367 B.C.E., a new law stated that one of the two consuls must be a plebeian. Former consuls held seats in the Senate, so this change also allowed plebeians to become senators.

Finally, in 287 B.C.E., the plebeians earned the right to pass laws for all Roman citizens. Now, assemblies of all Roman citizens, such as the Citizens’ Association, could approve or reject laws. These plebeian assemblies also nominated the consuls, the tribunes, and the members of the Senate. The number of plebeians who served alongside patricians in the Senate continued to increase. After 200 years of struggle, the plebeians had won their fight for equality. The diagram shown here illustrates the organization of the Roman Republic following this victory.

Rome's republican form of government inspired future European and American leaders. Rome became an example of a type of government ruled by a set of basic laws, or a **constitution**. Future political thinkers also drew from Roman ideals of elected assemblies, citizenship, and **civic** duty. They adopted the model of governmental bodies that could check each other's power. Most importantly, they were inspired by the spirit of republicanism, which means that government should rule for the good of the people. Cicero (SIS-eh-roh), a famous Roman statesman, captured this spirit when he wrote, "The people's good is the highest law."

**Lesson Summary**

In this lesson, you learned how the Romans overthrew the Etruscans and created a republic. Romans were proud of their republic, which lasted for about 500 years.
Patricians and Plebeians Under Etruscan Rule  Under the Etruscans, Roman society was divided into two classes, patricians and plebeians. Plebeians comprised about 95 percent of Rome’s population, but had little voice in the government.

The Patricians Create a Republic  In 509 B.C.E., patricians drove out the last of the Etruscan kings and created a republic. Most of the power was maintained by the patrician Senate and the consuls. Only patricians could participate in the new government.

The Plebeians Rebel  The plebeians began to demand more political rights in a struggle with the patricians known as the Conflict of the Orders. In 494 B.C.E., angry over their lack of power, the plebeians rebelled.

The Plebeians Gain Political Equality  The patricians agreed to allow the plebeians to elect Tribunes of the Plebs and the Council of Plebs. Around 451 B.C.E., the Twelve Tables were published. By 287 B.C.E., assemblies of all citizens could pass laws. Plebeians governed alongside patricians, and finally won their fight for equality.