

The Roman Republic

By Vickie Chao



¹ For centuries, Italy's Rome has been an important city, playing a pivotal role both culturally and politically. According to the legend, a pair of twin brothers built Rome from scratch in 753 B.C. As the construction was underway, they quarreled over the height of the city walls. In a rage, Romulus killed Remus. After that, he named the city after himself and became the first ruler of Rome. He reigned 36 years.



² The story of Romulus and Remus is fascinating. But its authenticity is very much in doubt.

³ Historians have long established the fact that Rome had existed since 900 B.C. By about 600 B.C., a group of people called the Etruscans (pronounced "ih-TRUS-kunz") took power in Rome. They ruled it for nearly a century. Though the Etruscans left behind many imprints, we know very little about them. In fact, we cannot even say for sure where they came from. Some scholars believed that the Etruscans were indigenous people of Italy. Others believed that they were immigrants from Asia Minor (today's Turkey). Regardless of their origin, we know for certain that the Etruscans spoke a language different from that in Rome. We also know for certain that their authoritarian style of governing was very unpopular. In around 510 B.C. or 509 B.C., the Romans revolted. They expelled the last Etruscan king, Tarquinius Superbus (pronounced "tahr-KWIN-ee-us soo-PUR-bus", also known as Tarquin the Proud).

⁴ With the Etruscans gone, the Romans decided that they would never want to go back to the days of monarchy. To avoid giving too much power to a single person, they came up with the idea of the republic.

⁵ In this new form of government, all citizens who had the right to vote could participate in the selection of their leaders. Once a year, they elected two consuls. The individuals who won the office acted on the advice given by the senate. They were responsible for enforcing the laws and policies of the Roman Republic. Because the consuls would later become senators after their one-year term in office, they almost always did what the senate wanted them to do. As the two men met and discussed state affairs, they attempted to reach unanimous decisions. In the event of a disagreement, minor affairs would be dropped. But serious matters would not. If the disparity dragged on, the Roman law allowed the senate to appoint a dictator. This person would act as a king, but his absolute power was only good for six months.

⁶ In the early days of the Roman Republic, all the senators were the nobles or the patricians. This arrangement did not sit well with the commoners or the plebeians. As the distrust worsened, the plebeians went on strikes. In 494 B.C., they set up their own assembly. They declared that the assembly's tribunes (elected once a year) had the power to reject any decision made by Roman officials or even the senate. Their struggle to gain recognition from the patricians gradually took root. In 450 B.C., the patricians agreed to one of the plebeians' main demands and, thus, gave rise to the Law of the Twelve Tables. The Twelve Tables, hung openly in marketplaces for everyone to see, codified the Roman laws and constitution. It was applied equally to all citizens. Encouraged by the victory, the plebeians continued to fight for their rights. In 367 B.C., they overturned the law that barred them from being consuls. In 287 B.C., they expanded the assembly's legislative power from making laws for the plebeians only to making laws for all Roman citizens!

⁷ As the government structure continued to take shape, the Roman armies went on to conquer new territories for the Republic. The added land did not bring joy. Instead, it brought forth a big problem.

Some suggested the land be given to the plebeians. Others refused. The dispute paralyzed the entire nation. Soon, civil wars erupted. Just when the Roman Republic was heading toward total destruction, a general named Julius Caesar rose to power.

⁸ Julius Caesar was a military genius who fought and won numerous wars. In 49 B.C., he led his troops back to Rome and waged wars against the senate. He won. The senate made him a dictator the following year. Under Roman law, a dictator could rule for only six months. But the senate made an exception, allowing him to be dictator for life. As Caesar's power continued to grow, some senators began to feel uneasy. They felt Caesar had gone too far and had become too powerful. They decided to get rid of him. On March 15, 44 B.C., they assassinated him in a gathering.

⁹ The death of Caesar pushed Rome into turmoil again. The chaos lasted for more than ten years. In the end, Caesar's adopted son, Octavian, managed to quash all the opposing forces and won the civil war. The senate awarded him the title of Augustus (meaning "highly respected") in 27 B.C. It also gave him the absolute power to rule Rome, effectively making him a king. From that point forward, ancient Rome was once again under the control of monarchy. Though Augustus never coined the term "Roman Empire", historians all agree that he was the first emperor of this newly united kingdom. Thus, 27 B.C. became both the end of the Roman Republic and the beginning of the Roman Empire.