



The Roman Republic, of ancient Rome, lasted around 500 years.

What are some of its highlights? What was its form of government? Did Ancient Rome have a constitution? Here are some quick bullet points about the Roman Republic:

- Many of the ideas ancient Romans had for a democratic government—and the structures they created to make their government work—set the stage for democracies in the modern age.
- Ancient Rome was a Republic—that is, it had a Republican form of government in which citizens could elect government officials (such as Roman Senators).
- The government structure was complex. In addition to an unwritten Constitution, there were detailed and written laws.
- Leaders of the Roman Republic included elected officials who were called magistrates. Those magistrates had differing levels of authority, given the jobs they did. They included people who held titles.
- Consuls—The highest and most-powerful position in the Roman Republic belonged to the Consul. Romans actually elected two Consuls, making sure that the person “at the top” did not have too much power. A Consul could only serve for one year. If two Consuls, serving at the same time, did not agree, they could veto each other. Consuls made decisions about going to war, collecting taxes (including how much to collect) and enacting laws.
- Senators—Elected for life, these leaders advised the Consuls. This was a prestigious position, for a Roman male, and the Consuls would usually follow the Senators’ advice.
- Peoples Assembly—Also known as the Plebeian Council, this group of elected individuals related to the common people of the Roman Republic (who were known as plebeians). Plebeians could elect their own leaders. These leaders and magistrates could pass laws and hold court.
- Tribunes—Tribunes, in the Roman Republic, were representatives of the Plebeian Council (or Peoples Assembly). Tribunes had the power to veto laws made by the Senate.
- Governors—When the leaders of the Roman Republic decided to go to war, and conquer new lands, someone needed to be the local ruler of the conquered land. Senators would appoint an individual—called a Governor—to rule the conquered land or province. Also called Proconsuls, Governors representing the Roman

Republic were in charge of the local Roman army. They were also responsible to collect taxes in the conquered lands or provinces.

- **Aedile**—City officials who were responsible for maintaining public buildings and holding public festivals had the title of Aedile. The position of Aedile was often a stepping stone to higher office. If an Aedile held a public festival, which the people really liked, that Aedile would have a chance to become popular with the people. That popularity might help the Aedile to achieve higher office (such as becoming Consul).
- **Censor**—The person responsible for counting the number of citizens, and keeping track of that census, was called the Censor. Censors had some responsibility to maintain public morality. They also had some responsibility to watch after public finances.

Constitution of the Roman Republic

Although the Roman Republic did not have a written constitution, which precisely defined what government could (and could not) do, the Republic did have principles and guidelines which were passed from generation to generation.

These principles and rules provided for separate branches of government which helped to maintain a balance of political power.

Equality among People in the Roman Republic

People living in the Roman Republic were not treated equally. Differences in treatment depended on a person's wealth, gender and citizenship.

Wealthy men, who were part of the patrician class, could hold the positions of Consul, Senator and Governor. Women could neither vote nor hold office.

This set-up, however, was not as unfair as it may sound to people living in the 21st-century. The "common people," living in the Roman Republic, at least had some say in how things were done. They could band together through their Assembly, and their Tribunes had the power to say "No" to unfair laws (because they could veto the Senate's votes).

Who were the ordinary people living in ancient Rome? What kind of lives did they lead? What was it like, in ancient times, to live in a city of 1 million people?

We can learn some important things about the ordinary ancient Romans from the items they left behind.

Professor Mary Beard—with a little help from the BBC—takes us on a journey to "Meet the Romans" in some out-of-the-way places.

As the centuries passed, life in the Roman Republic changed in significant ways. Although the Republic did not have a King, governmental power was mostly held by aristocratic families whose wealth and influence were passed from generation to generation.

As Rome expanded, however, more people became wealthy. As wealth increased, so did greed. With greed comes corruption. With corruption comes a weakening of the principles and guidelines on which any organization—including government—is based.

Rome's Republic lasted until Julius Caesar "crossed the Rubicon," setting in motion the end of the Republic (and the power of the Consuls and Senate) and beginning the Roman Empire (in which one man—first a dictator, Julius Caesar, and then successive Emperors—possessed most of the government's power).

This transformation from Republic to Empire was neither simple nor quick. Rome endured years of civil wars, political conflicts and civil disturbances among the people. When Julius Caesar became Rome's dictator, underlying turmoil continued until he was assassinated on the Ides of March (March 15) in 44 B.C.

It was left to Julius Caesar's grandnephew—an 18-year-old teenager named Gaius Julius Caesar Octavianus—to sort-through the discord, restore order and purge all opposition to his total control of the Roman Empire. By 27 B.C., Octavius was known as Caesar Augustus.

That was a time when "all roads lead to Rome." But what was it like for the ordinary people who used those roads? How did they use them? Did they go "back and forth," from home to work, like we do today? Was "street life," in Rome, similar to what we would think of as "street life" today?

Once again, we can go behind the scenes—with Mary Beard and the BBC—to examine how the ordinary people of Rome used their streets. What was it like, for example, to be a teenager living in ancient Rome?

What was Roman marriage like? How did wives and husbands view each other? Did they hold hands? What did they say about their lives together, after one of them died? What about their houses? How did families live—in other words—"Behind Closed Doors?"

Professor Beard takes us on another tour to answer those questions by viewing artifacts—like ancient tombstones and rings—which Romans created thousands of years ago. When we read and understand their words, we have to conclude—at least for some things—that "they" were a lot like "us."

The image, at the top of this page, depicts a fresco of Rome's Senate. The work is by Cesare Maccari. It

recreates a famous scene, from ancient Rome, when "Cicero Denounces Catiline" in a session of the Senate. Created in 1889, the fresco is located at the Palazzo Madama in Rome.

Click on the picture for a full-page view.

See Alignments to State and Common Core standards for this story online at:

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