The early republic

Other cities in Latium formed an alliance and challenged the new republic† of Rome. The Romans were defeated at Lake Regillus in 496BC, and forced to join the alliance. Over the next century Rome fought many wars against mountain tribes who attacked Roman territory.

At this time, most Romans were poor farmers who had to fight wars simply to defend their land. However, by 400BC, after years of tough fighting and clever political tactics, Roman territory had doubled in size and Rome had become the dominant partner in the Latin alliance.

The Gauls attack Rome

In 387BC the Gauls, people from northern Europe, defeated the Roman army at the River Allia and invaded Rome. According to the historian Livy†, most of the population had fled in terror. Apart from some troops only the Roman senators† remained, sitting calmly in the courtyards of their houses. The Gauls stared in amazement, but when one of them touched a senator’s beard, the senator struck him with his ivory staff.

A massacre followed. The Gauls murdered the senators and then began to destroy Rome. Only the Capitoline Hill survived. According to legend the Gauls attacked it at night, but disturbed some geese that were kept at a temple. The geese warned the Romans of the Gauls’ approach. Finally the invaders were bribed with gold to leave the ruined city. The other Latin cities were delighted to see Rome overthrown.

The Gauls attacked Capitoline Hill by night.

Expansion in Italy

Slowly the Romans recovered from this disaster. In about 380BC they rebuilt much of Rome, and constructed a strong wall around all its seven hills. By improving their army (see page 14), they began to regain lost territory. In 338BC, with the help of the Samnites, a tribe from central Italy, the Romans defeated an alliance of Latin cities. This made them the most powerful people in Latium. This map shows the position of the tribes in Italy around 338BC.

The wars with the Samnites

In 326BC Naples, a city in southern Italy, asked Rome for help against the Samnites. The Samnites objected to Rome’s growing influence in the area, and a series of wars broke out. These wars lasted 40 years until the Samnites were defeated, along with their allies the Gauls and Etruscans. During this period, Rome also won important victories against the Aequi and Hernici tribes. By fighting hard and making clever alliances, Rome began to dominate northern and central Italy.
The Pyrrhic wars

In 282BC Thurii, a Greek town in southern Italy, asked Rome to send a force of soldiers to protect them from the Lucanians, allies of the Samnites. Rome did so, and soon other cities had also put themselves under Roman protection. The nearby Greek city of Tarentum resented this and quarrelled with a Roman delegation. Tarentum was a commercial city, unable to match Rome's army, but it had provoked a situation from which it could not retreat. So in 280BC it hired the army of King Pyrrhus of Epirus in northern Greece.

Pyrrhus defeated the Romans in 280BC and 279BC, but vast numbers of his own soldiers were killed. He said 'If we win one more victory against the Romans we shall be totally ruined.' This is why the phrase 'Pyrrhic victory' is sometimes used when a winner's losses are greater than his gains. Pyrrhus withdrew to Sicily, then returned to Italy in 276BC. He was decisively defeated the following year, and in 272BC Tarentum surrendered. By 264BC Rome dominated the whole of Italy and was recognized as a major power in the Mediterranean.

Colonization in Italy

The Romans succeeded in dominating Italy by combining military strength and political astuteness. When they conquered an area they offered it an alliance, and drew up a treaty that defined the status of the new ally. Some places, like Tusculum, had full Roman citizenship. Others, such as Spoletium, were given 'Latin rights', which included some of the advantages of citizenship. Other areas kept domestic independence, but Rome dictated their foreign policies. All allied states had to provide troops for the Roman army. Rome also formed colonies of Romans or Latins in strategic places throughout Italy. By building roads and improving communications the Romans united the various Italian tribes. Gradually the Latin language and the Roman way of life spread, and linguistic and cultural differences between different areas were reduced.

Key dates

510-509BC Founding of republic.
496BC Romans forced to join Latin alliance after Battle of Lake Regillus.
By 400BC Rome has emerged as the dominant partner in the Latin alliance.
387BC Gauls attack Rome.
338BC Romans and Samnites defeat other Latin cities.
326BC War breaks out between Romans and Samnites.
286BC Rome defeats Samnites, Gaurs, and Etruscans, and takes control of northern and central Italy.
280BC Beginning of Pyrrhic wars.
275BC Pyrrhus's army defeated at the Battle of Beneventum.
272BC Tarentum surrenders.
By 264BC Rome dominates the whole of Italy.
Rome's social and political structure

The occupants of Roman territory fell into two groups: *cives* (Roman citizens) and *peregrini* (foreigners). Citizens had special privileges. They were allowed to vote in elections and to serve in the army; non-citizens were not. At first only people with Roman parents qualified for citizenship. Later the government began granting citizenship to certain foreigners. These two groups were further divided, as shown below. There were three classes of citizen. These divisions began very early in Rome's history. The non-citizens included provincials (people who lived outside Rome itself but within Roman territory; see pages 26-27), and slaves (see page 53).

**Citizens**

The richest citizens, called patricians, were probably descended from early rich landowners and political leaders.

*Equites* (businessmen) were descendants of the first Roman cavalry officers (see page 14).

Plebeians (commoners) were probably the descendants of poor farmers and traders.

**Non-citizens**

Slaves were owned by other people. They had no freedom or rights. During the early republic there were very few slaves, but later the number grew.

Provincials did not have the full rights of Romans. They also had to pay taxes to the government in Rome. Citizens did not pay these taxes.

**Families**

The concept of the family was very important to the Romans. Every family was led by a *paterfamilias* (father), and included his wife and children, his sons' wives and children, and all their property and slaves. When the *paterfamilias* died, each of his sons might become the head of a new family, linked by name to the old one. The resulting chain of related families formed a clan called a *gens*.

The *paterfamilias* commanded awe and respect. He held the power of life and death over the family, and looked after the welfare of its members. He also directed the family's religious activities (see page 62).

**The patronage system**

The client visited his patron regularly to be given food or money.

People who did not have the legal protection of a family (for example, newcomers to Rome, ex-slaves, or people who had left their own families) could attach themselves to an existing family. They were known as *clientes* (clients), and their protectors as *patroni* (patrons). The *clientes* gave his *patronus* political and social support in return for financial and legal protection.
The government of the Roman republic

Rome was governed by the Senate, originally a group of 100 men who were leaders of important patrician families. Later the number of senators was increased; by 82BC there were 600. Senators normally served for life. Each year citizens voted in an election, known as an Assembly, to select senators to be government officials. The various officials and their duties are shown below.

- **Eight praetores** were elected, mainly to be judges in the law courts (see pages 74-75).
- **Four aediles** looked after markets, streets and public buildings. They also organized and paid for public games (see pages 58-59), and could become very popular.
- **Each year 20 financial administrators called quaestores** were chosen. They did not have to be senators to be elected. After 80BC anyone elected as a quaestor also became a senator.
- **In emergencies the state could nominate a dictator, who normally ruled for a maximum of six months. He had absolute authority over everyone else. A dictator could nominate his own assistant, called the magister equitum (master of the horse).**

Social change

At first only patricians could become senators, and they tried to preserve their privileged positions. But many plebeians lived in poverty, and their resentment of the patricians’ power caused violent political struggles. The plebeians went on strike five times, threatening to leave Rome whenever they were most needed as soldiers. In 494BC, after the first strike, they set up their own Popular Assembly, which excluded patricians. Each year they chose officials called tribunes to protect their interests.

The plebeians held frequent demonstrations on the streets of Rome.

To pacify the plebeians, the patricians gave them the power to stop any laws passed by the Senate. The plebeians then demanded that the laws be written down and published, to stop judges using unwritten laws against them. A list of laws, known as the Twelve Tables, was published in 450BC.

The plebeians slowly won the right to stand for official positions. The first plebeian consul was elected in 366BC. In 287BC a ruling was passed stating that all resolutions passed by the Popular Assembly should become law. But during the Carthaginian wars (see pages 8-9), plebeian generals misused their power. Many people thought that only the patricians had the ability to run the country during a war. So the patricians still kept political control.