

ROMAN GOVERNMENT

Frederic Will, Ph.D.

Overview While it is simplistic to characterize Roman government, which lasted for two millennia, as a static unit, one can say that for much of that period there was at least the semblance of stable consistent institutions. These institutions were put in place, more or less exactly, in 509 B.C.E., at the overthrow of the Roman monarchy, and the origin of the Roman Republic, and (though in debased form for many centuries in the Christian era), survived until the fall of the Roman Empire in the middle of the 15th century C.E.

The Roman Republic The Roman monarchy (753 B.C.E.--509 B.C.E.) was, by mythical account, founded by Romulus--of Romulus and Remus and the she-wolf--and bore little resemblance, in its absolutism, with the Roman Republic (509 B.C.E.--27 B.C.E.) Though passing through various stages, living through the internal conflicts of a major state, warding off pernicious enemies like the Carthaginians, the Republic laid down the basic regulating principles that were to dominate Roman society throughout its existence. The huge caveat that must be made, however, is that in 27 B.C.E., when Augustus had himself declared 'the first of the citizens,' namely the Emperor, the institutions of governments were virtually absorbed and taken over by the will of the dictator.

The institutions of government From the beginning of the Republic, the Romans conferred regulatory power on two **consuls**, holding power for one year, who exercised control of the army. (Their power-supporters were the patrician landholding families, who had been behind the scenes dominants even during the Monarchy.) Throughout the Republic, at least, these chosen officials were of lofty influence. **Tribunes** were chosen, as representatives and defenders of the people, while the Roman equivalent of a Constitution, The Twelve Tables, were promulgated in 450 B.C.E., codifying statutes securing the little man's rights. Concurrently, a **Senate** was chosen. Initially with 100 members (later with 1000 then with 600, under decree of the Emperor Augustus.) The function of this body of lifetime state servants was advisory, to provide their collective wisdom on state finances, foreign affairs and negotiations; many of Rome's movers and shakers--Cato the Younger, Brutus, Cicero--cut their political teeth in this office. Finally there were a number of lesser offices, which could however prove to be immensely potent steps on the **cursus honorum** (step ladder of honors, leading ever higher in national government). These were the offices of the **aedile** (in charge of public works), the **quaestor** (chief financial officer, collector of government taxes), and the **praetor** (who presides over the senate.)

Afterthought The practice of democracy was slowly won as the Roman Republic matured, but rapidly compromised when the system of Emperors took over. Nonetheless, even in the times when democracy was most seriously debased, in the later Empire, the Romans held on to at least the shadow of their Republican past.

Readings

Eck, Werner, *The Age of Augustus*, Oxford, 2003.

Flower, Harriet, *Roman Republics*, Princeton, 2009.

Discussion questions

How do you explain the emotional hold of the Roman Republic over the Roman people, even after centuries of de facto dictatorship?

What kind of substitute for a Constitution were the Twelve Tables? What kind of security did they provide for the man on the street?

What influence from the Roman government does the government of your state reveal? Can you trace ways in which your own life has been impacted by the government of ancient Rome?

