

Rome: Geography & the Roman Republic

The Land and Peoples of Italy

Italy is a peninsula that is about 750 miles long and about 120 miles wide. It is divided down the middle by a mountain range, the Apennines. These mountains are not as rugged as the mountains of Greece, however. The mountains of Italy did not isolate communities from each other like the Greek mountains did. Italy also had more land for farming than Greece, so it could support a large population.

Rome was located on the Tiber River. This gave it access to the sea but it was far enough inland to be safe from pirates. It was built on seven hills, so it could be easily defended. It was located on a place in the Tiber River that could easily be crossed, so it became a natural crossing point for people traveling north to south.

Indo-European peoples moved into Italy during the period from about 1500 to 1000 BCE. Little is known about these groups but one group lived in Latium and spoke Latin. These people were herders and farmers. About 800 BCE, other people began to move to Italy. The two most important groups were the Greeks and the Etruscans. Many Greeks came to Italy during the age of Greek colonization from 750-550 BCE. They settled in southern Italy and islands such as Sicily. The Greeks had a big impact on Rome. The Romans imitated Greek sculpture, architecture, literature and alphabet. The Romans also learned how to grow olives and grapes from the Greeks.

The Etruscans also influenced the Romans. The Etruscans lived north of Rome and after 650 BCE controlled Rome and most of Latium. They changed Rome from a village to a city. The Romans adopted the Etruscans' clothing-the toga and short cloak. The organization of the Roman army was also modeled after the Etruscans.

1. In what ways did the Greeks influence the Romans?

2. In what ways did the Etruscans influence the Romans?

The Roman Republic

In 509 BCE, the Romans overthrew the last Etruscan king and formed a republic. A republic is a form of government in which the leader is not a monarch and certain citizens have the right to elect their officials. For the next two hundred years, Rome was almost continually at war. By 340 BCE, Rome had crushed the Latin states in Latium. During the next fifty years, the Romans were at war with people from the Apennines. Rome was again victorious. Soon, the Romans were at war with the Greek cities in southern Italy. By 267 BCE, they had defeated the Greeks. By 264 BCE the Romans had defeated the Etruscans to the north of Rome. The Romans now had control of almost all of Italy.

To rule Italy, the Romans formed the Roman confederation. Rome allowed some people, especially the Latins to become citizens of Rome. Most other surrounding communities were made allies. They were free to run their own affairs, but they had to provide soldiers for the Roman army. The Romans made it clear that only allies could become citizens. This gave the conquered people a stake in Rome's success.

Rome was very successful because the Romans believed in duty, courage and discipline. They were also good diplomats. They gained support by giving other people Roman citizenship and allowing them to run their own affairs. They also excelled at military matters. If they lost an army or a fleet, they did not quit because they built new ones. As they conquered new areas, they built fortified towns and connected the towns by roads. This allowed them to move their troops quickly around the country.

Finally the Romans were practical politicians. They did not try to build an ideal government; they designed their government in response to problems as they arose.

1. How did the Romans take control of Italy?
2. In what ways were the Romans good diplomats?

The Roman State

Early Rome was divided into two groups—the patricians and the plebeians. The patricians were the wealthy landowners, who became Rome’s ruling class. The plebeians were less wealthy landowners, craftspeople, merchants and small farmers. They were also the larger group. Men in both groups were citizens and could vote, but only the patricians could be elected to government offices. Consuls and praetors were both patricians and headed the executive branch of the Roman government. There were two consuls of Rome, elected every year. They ran the government and led the Roman army into battle. The praetors were in charge of civil law and handled cases for both citizens and non-citizens.

The legislative branch included the Senate and an assembly. The Roman Senate was a group of about three hundred patricians who served for life. By the third century BCE, the Senate was using their power to enforce law. The assembly elected the chief officials, such as the consuls and praetors, and passed laws. It was made up of patricians, and the wealthiest citizens always had a majority.

There were often conflicts between the patricians and the plebeians. The plebeians resented the fact that they were not treated equally. They could not hold government offices, and their children could not marry the children of the patricians. The conflicts between the patricians and the plebeians eventually led to the creation of an assembly for plebeians only. This assembly was known as the council of the plebs and was created in 471 BCE. It elected officials, known as tribunes, to protect the plebeians. In the fourth century BCE, plebeians were permitted to become consuls. Finally, in 287 BCE, the council of the plebs gained the right to pass laws for all Romans. All male citizens were now supposedly equal under the law. In reality, a few wealthy patricians and plebeian families dominated the political offices.

Rome’s first code of laws was the twelve Tables. It was adopted in 450 BCE. From the Twelve Tables, the Romans developed a more sophisticated system of laws. This system only applied to Roman citizens, however. As legal questions arose that involved both Romans and non-Romans, special rules were often needed. These rules formed the basis for a new set of laws, known as the Law of Nations. These laws established standards of justice that applied to all people. A person was considered innocent until proven guilty. People who were accused of crimes were allowed to defend themselves before a judge. The judge was expected to weigh the evidence carefully before making a decision. These principles are the basis for our legal system today.

1. Identify: patricians, plebeians, consuls, praetors and the tribune. Who were they and what was their purpose?
2. Describe the Twelve Tables. What was their purpose?