

THE REPUBLIC OF ROME

PART 1: 509–218 B.C.

With the expulsion of the last king of Rome, a new period in Roman history started, and a new form of government replaced the monarchy. This period is called the Republic, a name given to the new state by the Romans.

The king was replaced by two men, called *consuls*, who held all the executive power. They also commanded the army in times of war. They were advised by a governing body of ex-magistrates, known as the *Senate*. This council originated during the Etruscan occupation of the city, when it served as an advisory body to the king. Officially, the responsibility of the Senate remained the same, but as Rome

grew in power it became a very influential body of government in regard to internal and foreign policy. The Senate controlled all matters of great importance, such as decisions of war. Other important positions within the government were the judge of the city (*praetor*); the financial officer (*quaestor*); the office of public relations (*aedile*), which organized festivals and other events; and the high priest (*pontifex maximus*). The Roman people were divided into two social classes: the *patricians*, who were the land-owning aristocracy, and the *plebeians* or the common people, who were farmers and traders. In the beginning, only the patricians could hold the offices of consul and be members of the Senate, so they controlled the government. It was also a Roman custom that the patricians become the protectors, or *patroni*, of some poorer people, ex-slaves, or newcomers to the city, who were known as *clientes*. The *patroni* helped the *clientes* financially and legally in return for help in their political and private lives. This custom of patron-client relationship helped the leading aristocratic families retain their influence in the state, both politically and socially.

Internally, during the Early Republic phase (509–133 B.C.), discontentment occurred among the plebeians because they were not allowed to participate in the government, and the little land they owned was slowly being taken by the patricians. This left the plebeians in a state of debt and servitude, which led to a social struggle between the two classes lasting over 200 years. It was a bloodless revolution, however. By means of strikes and refusing to perform their duties to the state, they sought social and political equality. Little by little the plebeians were given certain rights. Every year elections were held for two men, called "tribunes of the people" (known as *tribuni plebis*), who would represent the people in government affairs. The laws of Rome were published on twelve stone tablets and displayed in the Forum. Gradually plebeians were allowed to enter positions in the government. Finally, a law was passed in 287 B.C. known as the *Lex Hortensia*, in which a People's Assembly was officially recognized. This plebeian assembly had the force of the law. It could pass or veto any law that was put before it and make decisions on matters of the state. In theory, the people had the power, but in practice, it was the Senate who decided the complex



This clay dish from Campania shows one of the war elephants of King Pyrrhus of Epirus.

and significant matters of the state. This led to more strife between the two classes and eventually to civil war during the second phase of the Republic period (133–30 B.C.)

Externally, during the first three centuries of the Republic, Rome grew to be a world power. With an efficient army and notable leaders, Rome expanded her domain throughout Italy and the Mediterranean. (See inset map on page 89.) Until 300 B.C. the Romans fought the neighboring mountain tribes known as the Volsci, the Aequi, and the Sabini. In 390 B.C. Rome drove off the Gauls who had invaded from the north across the Alps and had ravaged and burnt the city of Rome. Over the next century the Etruscans of the north and the Latin tribes of Latium were conquered. During the last thirty years of the fourth century, the Samnites were the enemy. The Samnites, who dominated Campania, were the toughest Italic tribe the Romans had to face, but in a series of three wars, the Samnites were finally defeated. By 280 B.C. Rome dominated central and northern Italy. The only people left to conquer in Italy were the Greeks who lived in the south. For fear of a Roman invasion, the Greeks of the city of Tarentum asked for help from their countrymen on the Greek mainland. In 280 B.C. King Pyrrhus of Epirus crossed the Adriatic Sea, landed in Italy, and fought the Romans for five years. The war against the Greeks was called the Pyrrhic war, after the Greek king. Pyrrhus was a tough enemy to defeat because he used elephants in his battles against the Romans. At first, he was successful, because the Romans had never seen elephants before and were scared. But eventually the Roman army was able to deal with the elephants and defeated Pyrrhus in 275 B.C. Pyrrhus withdrew back to Epirus in Greece. By 272 B.C. Tarentum and all the other Greek city-states in Italy had submitted to Rome. Rome made separate alliances with each of the conquered cities. As allies, the cities were independent, but had to supply the Romans with men for their army.

In the third century B.C. the Romans were at war with Carthage, the remaining prominent power in the western Mediterranean. Carthage, located on the coast of North Africa, was a colony established by the Phoenicians, a seafaring people from the Syrian coast (present-day Lebanon). The Phoenicians had dominated the western Mediterranean Sea since the ninth century B.C. and had founded many colonies along the Mediterranean coast. Carthage was the most important of these. Within a century, Carthage controlled the North African and Spanish coasts, Sardinia, Corsica, and western Sicily. Rome fought three wars with Carthage. These were called the Punic Wars (Punic is Latin for Phoenician).

The First Punic War (264–241 B.C.) broke out because of a conflict of interest over Sicily. Fighting was harsh on both land and sea, but the Roman army was strong. Carthage lost, and a truce was made between the two powers. Rome acquired Sicily and Sardinia and these islands together became the first province of Rome. A province was controlled by a Roman magistrate, who set up a local government and collected taxes to be paid to Rome. Carthage, however, would not give up. After the First Punic War, the Carthaginians occupied Spain to replace the island territories they had lost. Another clash between Carthage and Rome became inevitable in 218 B.C., when a Carthaginian general sought revenge for his country. The provocation was a conflict about the possession of the Spanish town of Saguntum. The Second Punic War is discussed in the next chapter.