Patricians and Plebeians under Etruscan Rule

Between 616 and 509 B.C.E., the Etruscans ruled Rome. During this time, Roman society was divided into two classes, patricians and plebeians.

Upper-class citizens, called patricians, came from a small group of wealthy landowners. Patrician comes from the Latin word pater, which means “father”. The patricians choose from among themselves the “fathers of the state”, the men who advised the Etruscan king. Patricians controlled the most valuable land. They also held the important military and religious offices.

Free non-patricians called plebeians were mostly peasants, laborers, craftspeople, and shopkeepers. The word plebeian comes from plebs, which means “the common people”. Plebeians made up about 95 percent of Rome’s population. They could not be priests or government officials. They had little voice in the government. Yet they were still forced to serve in the army.

The Patricians Create a Republic

Over time, the patricians began to resent Etruscan rule. In 509 B.C.E., a group of patricians, led by Lucius Julius Brutus, rebelled. They drove out the last Etruscan king. In place of a monarchy, they created a republic. In a republic, elected officials govern for the people.

To the patricians, “the people” meant themselves, not the plebeians. The patricians put most of the power in the hands of the Senate. The Senate was a group of 300 patricians elected by patricians. The senators served for life. They also appointed other government officials and served as judges.

Two elected leaders, called consuls, shared command of the army. The Senate was supposed to advise the consuls. In fact, the Senate’s decisions were treated as law.

The creation of the republic gave Rome a more democratic form of government. But only patricians could participate in that government.
Rome was now a republic, but patricians held all the power. They made sure only they could be a part of the government as senators or consuls. Plebeians had to obey their decisions. Because laws were not written down, they were often changed or interpreted to benefit the patricians. As a result, a small group of families held all the power in Rome.

Fighting for what they wanted, plebeians began to demand more rights. The struggle between the plebeians and patricians is known as the Conflict of the Orders, a conflict between the two social classes.

The conflict grew especially heated during times of war. Plebeians had to fight in the army even though the patricians decided whether to go to war. Plebeians represented this.

The struggle took a dramatic turn in a year 494 B.C.E. By then, Rome was a city around forty thousand people, mostly plebeians. Angry over their lack of power, the plebeians marched out of the city and camped on a nearby hill, refusing to come back until the patricians met their demands.

Rome was in crisis. Work in the city and on the farms came to a halt. Without the plebeians, patricians feared that the army would be helpless if an enemy struck at Rome. The patricians had little choice but to compromise.