

EARLY REPUBLIC—ERA SUMMARY

510 TO 275 B.C.

DEFEAT OF TARQUIN SUPERBUS TO UNIFICATION OF ITALY

The early years of the republic lasted from the overthrow of [Tarquin Superbus](#) to the conquest of southern Italy in 275 B.C. During this time, Rome fought wars against the [Gauls](#), [Etruscans](#), [Latins](#), and [Samnites](#), eventually bringing all of Italy, from northern Tuscany to the Grecian dominated southern coast, into an alliance with Rome. It is this period that produced many of Rome's most romantic legends and hero stories. During this time the Republican virtues of courage, patriotism, and piety were at their peak, and Rome was still largely unaffected by its exposure to eastern decadence and the corruptions of wealth. The most important historian of this era, is [Livy](#), and most of his writings pertaining to this period still exist.

Rome's Republican government was composed of a group of three hundred senators. Each year, two consuls were selected, usually from among the senators, to administer the state and lead the army in times of war. By selecting two consuls and limiting their service to a single year, the Romans hoped to avoid the emergence of a single powerful tyrant.

By the beginning of the Republican era Rome was already the foremost city in the Latin-speaking region around the Tiber river, but it had not yet established dominance over its neighbors: the Etruscans, Volscians, and Aequilians. [Coriolanus](#) and [Cincinnatus](#) were both heroes of early wars against these enemies during the first hundred years of the republic. The second century produced [Camillus](#), an even greater hero. In addition to conquering Rome's perennial enemy, Veii, he reorganized the army into its famous legions and was instrumental in rebuilding Rome after it was [sacked by the Gauls](#).



CORIOLANUS AT THE GATES OF ROME

The Gauls were a tribe of war-like barbarians from the north, who threatened Rome for over three centuries. Their first encounter at the disastrous *Battle of Allia*, which resulted in the sack of the city, was long remembered as the worst defeat in Roman history. The year 390 B.C. marked that last time that the city of Rome was invaded by barbarians for 800 years.

In addition to the on-going wars with its Italian neighbors, Rome needed to resolve several internal disturbances during the early years. From the beginning of the Republic there was

continual strife between the *patrician* class, who held all of the political power, and the *plebeians*, who were far more numerous. The trouble between them was resolved after a peaceful “walk-out” by the plebeians during one of Rome’s war. The patricians, led by [Menenius](#), submitted to the idea of establishing a tribune to represent the interests of the plebeians. Eventually, there were six *tribunes*, elected from among the plebeians, who had the power to *veto* all legislations proposed by the patrician senate.

In 452 BC, ten Decemvirs were selected to write and promulgate the laws of Rome. Their leader was [Appius Claudius \(Crassus\)](#), but he abused his power and tried to enslave [Virginia](#), resulting in the overthrow of the Decemvirs. However, the laws of Rome were written on the twelve tablets did become the foundation of Roman jurisprudence.

By time the republic was 200 years old, its armies had acquired a reputation for bravery and discipline thanks to the notable deeds of such heroes as [Marcus Curtius](#), [Valerius Corvus](#), [Decius Mus](#), and [Manlius Torquatus](#). The latter were heroes of the Latin and [Samnite Wars](#), which dominated the period 340 to 290 B.C. [Caius Pontius](#) was a Samnite general who trapped the Roman army but did not use his victory wisely and was eventually defeated. [Fabius Rullianus](#) was the hero of the *Battle of Sentium*, which was a decisive victory for the Romans over the Samnites and brought the Samnite wars, which had lasted for nearly fifty years, to a close.

The last unsubdued region of Italy was the southern coast, called *Magna Graecia*, (Greater Greece) because it was populated with Greek colonies. In 280 B.C. the city of Tarentine brought in [Pyrrhus](#), the most famous general of the age, to oppose the Romans. Though he met with early success, his fortune turned for the worse at the *Battle of Beneventum* and the [Pyrrhic Wars in Italy](#) in Italy ended in victory for Rome.

As Rome dominated more and more of Italy, its own security was greatly enhanced, and it began a series of building projects including roads and aqueducts. [Appius Claudius Caecus](#), an important peacetime administrator, was responsible for much of this planning, and the famous Roman road, *Via Appia* (Appian Way), bears his name. In addition to roads, Appius Claudius initiated the building of Rome's first aqueduct, and several important public buildings. By the time Rome conquered all of Italy; it was at its height of civic rectitude, and public morality. Enemies who had attempted to gain the influence of various senators found all of their bribes returned. Enemies who encountered the army found a disciplined and relentless foe. The city of Rome was prosperous, but had not given in to the luxurious vices . . . yet.