Rome’s republican government (510–27 BCE) was designed to ensure that no one person could have the powers of the despised earlier kings; overall authority rested with two elected magistrates (consuls). In practice, this government found it increasingly difficult to control the rapidly expanding territories of Rome. The beginning of the empire in 27 BCE brought a return to monarchical rule. Republican institutions remained in form but their power was transferred to the emperor. Under the imperial organization, many provincial communities flourished and Roman peace (the Pax Romana) lasted for 200 years.

**REPUBLIC 510–27 BCE**

**ASSEMBLY (COMITIA)** Gathering of the Roman people. Three main assemblies convened to deal with governmental, legislative, and electoral matters:

- **Comitia centuriata** Assembly of Roman citizens organized into economic classes defined by wealth. Originally a military assemblage, each class gathered and voted in centuries (initially units of 100 citizens but poorer class centuries became much larger). Each century had one vote (determined by the members’ majority vote). Wealthy classes had greater voting power than poorer classes because they were divided into more centuries and each century had fewer citizens. Functions: elected consuls, praetors, and censors; conducted trials.

- **Comitia tributa** Assembly of the citizen body organized into 20 tribes (ethnic and residency groups). An individual’s vote was credited to his tribe; his tribe’s vote was the vote of the tribe’s majority. Functions: formed laws; conducted trials; elected quaestors.

- **Comitia plebis** (From 494 BCE) Assembly of plebeians (ordinary people; nonaristocrats). Patricians (the old aristocracy) were not admitted. Voting was by tribes. Functions: enacted laws; conducted trials; elected tribunes of the plebs (who chaired the assembly and protected plebeians from arbitrary acts of magistrates). Assembly’s decisions were binding law from 287 BCE. Plebeian demands for equal rights to political offices were met by 300 BCE.

**MAGISTRATES** Elected executives of the people of Rome; normally members of the Senate. Included:

- **Consuls** (2) Elected to have overall authority throughout Rome and the provinces for one year. Each consul could veto the other’s decisions. By 300 BCE, plebeians could become consuls.

- **Praetors** (6, from 197 BCE) Elected to supervise justice and the law courts.

- **Quaestors** (12–16) Elected to control public finance.

- **Censors** (2) Elected to conduct a general census of Roman citizens according to wealth, property, and morality, for military and voting purposes. Also regulated membership of the Senate and the equestrian order (equites were citizens of wealth and military reputation, but not necessarily of good birth). Only former consuls could be censors.

**SENATE** (300) Advisory council of patricians (aristocrats) and (by 300 BCE) some wealthy plebeians. Membership was given (and could be taken away) by the censors. The Senate issued its decrees as requests to the various assemblies.

**DICTATOR** In times of war or civil unrest, consuls appointed a dictator for six months. Dictators could not be vetoed. Usually strong, popular military leaders.

**EMPIRE 27 BCE–476 CE**

**PEOPLE IN ROME AND ITALY** Assemblies no longer had real legislative or elective powers; they met occasionally to ratify decisions made by magistrates and the Senate. Citizens expressed political opinions by organized clamor at public festivals. To reduce the risk of popular demonstrations in Rome, the emperor provided grain doles and entertainments. After 29 CE, Roman citizens had access to the emperor’s own court of appeal.

**PEOPLE IN THE ROMAN PROVINCES** Many provinces adopted Rome’s language and were upgraded to municipia with full Roman citizenship. Municipia normally had local self-government, consisting of an assembly of adult males and a local council. Officials from Rome had overall authority.

**MAGISTRATES** Gradually reduced to honorary functions. Consuls and praetors took governorships in the provinces after one year of office. Censors produced population classifications for the emperor.

**PROVINCIAL ADMINISTRATORS**

- **Legati** Officials (military commanders) appointed by the emperor to govern the Imperial Provinces (recently conquered border provinces where legions were stationed). Imperial provinces with more than one legion were entrusted to former consuls and those with a legion or less, to former praetors. A procurator collected direct taxes (tributa) from the provinces.

- **Proconsuls** Officials (former consuls) appointed by the Senate (after 285, by the emperor) to govern the Senatorial Provinces (older, pacified and politically stable provinces with no troops). Former quaestors supervised finance and collected taxes.

**SENATE** (600) Senate members continued to fill the highest offices. The Senate’s decrees, although not formally called laws, were binding as law. It became a high court and, until 285, had administrative control of the Senatorial Provinces. Ultimately the Senate lacked real power; it could not dispute the emperor’s wishes and its membership was controlled by the emperor through the census. To maintain numbers, it recruited members from the equestrian order and plebeian class.

**EMPEROR** Absolute authority, with consular office for life. Advised by the concilium principis (imperial council consisting of consuls and 15 senators) on matters of policy. Superintended state finances and eventually organized all executive posts. Imperial civil service organized grain supplies, finance, and public works; posts were given to entrusted freedmen and equites. After 285, the empire was ruled by two emperors, one in Rome and one in Constantinople.