

CHAPTER 4

66 LIVY AND EURIPIDES

THE REBELLION OF THE POOR

CLASS CONFLICT AND THE TWELVE TABLES

plebeius = "of the common people"
 Today, the word plebeian describes someone who is crude or lowly. In ancient Rome, it just meant "not an aristocrat."

It was 493 BCE, and Rome's wealthy landowners were in a panic. They had held the reins of government of the new Republic while the workers (also called **plebeians**—or **plebs**, for short) farmed the land. The workers claimed that the rich were useless—that they did nothing except wait for the hardworking poor to feed and serve them. The landowners ignored these complaints at first.

But the plebeians began to abandon their plows and move into the city. There they became craftsmen, traders, and hired workers. As city folk, they no longer had to depend completely upon the landowners for survival. Now they were free to complain and demand greater equality between rich and poor. Justice, they believed, should be the same for everyone. And so they took action. They left the city in huge



A farm worker bends to gather grapes that have fallen in his master's orchard. The workers were poor; the landowners whom they served were rich.

numbers and went to the Sacred Mount, a hilltop several miles northeast of Rome. This got the landowners' attention!

Suddenly, the fear of war loomed large. What if an enemy attacked Rome? The landowners, also called **patricians**, could provide the generals to lead an army. But what good is a general with no men to command, no soldiers to fight? What's more: with the workers gone, who would make sandals, weave cloth, tend chickens, and sell fish? Who would run the roadside inns, bake bread, drive mules, load wagons, and dye cloth for beautiful clothes? Rome couldn't survive without the work of ordinary citizens, and the aristocrats knew it.

The historian Livy tells how Rome's leaders solved the crisis of the workers' walkout. They sent Agrippa Menenius, a smooth talker who was popular with the people, to the Sacred Mount to talk to the rebels. Menenius told them a story about an imaginary time when each body part had its own ideas and could talk to one another. But the body parts didn't always agree and sometimes refused to work together. For example, the hands of this strange body sometimes argued with the feet, and the mouth sometimes disagreed with the teeth.

Menenius told the rebels that one time the various parts of this body became angry at the stomach and ganged up against it. They claimed that

it was unfair that they should have all the worry, trouble, and work of providing for the belly, while the belly had . . . nothing to do but enjoy the good things they gave it. So they plotted that the hands should carry no more food to the mouth and that the . . . teeth would refuse to chew.

The body parts meant to punish the belly, but they all grew weak from lack of food. "They finally figured out that the belly had an important job after all. It received nourishment, but it also gave nourishment. It was no idle task to provide the body parts with what they all needed to survive and thrive." Using this fanciful story, Menenius convinced the workers that their rebellion would be a disaster for everyone, rich and poor alike. Rome needed all of its people.

patria = "fatherland"
 "Patrician" is related to the Latin words for father (*pater*) and fatherland (*patria*). In ancient Rome, the patricians were wealthy landowners who claimed the founding fathers of Rome as their ancestors.

66 Livy, *From the Founding of the City*, 25 BCE

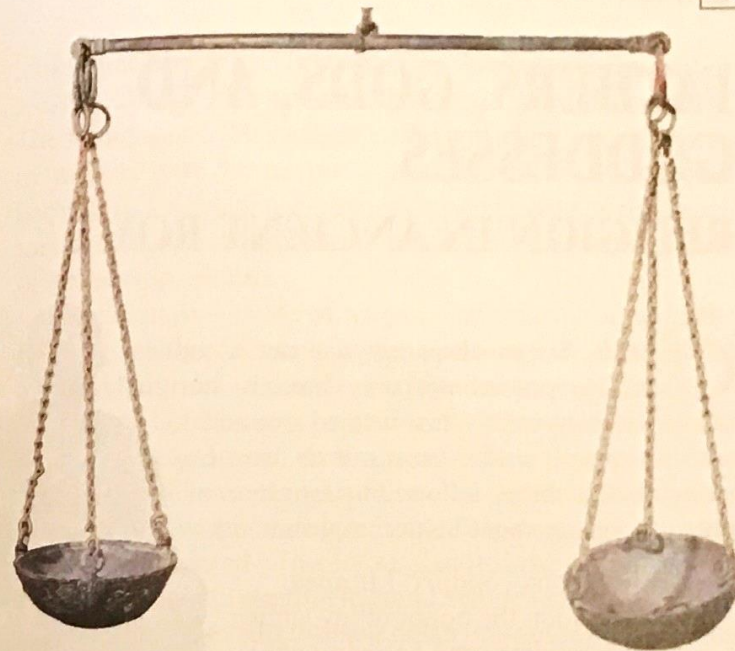
Thanks to Menenius, the workers agreed to go home. But they refused to go back to the *status quo*. One of the plebs' chief complaints was that the law favored the patricians. And since the courts were in the hands of the rich, a poor person had no protection against an unjust judge. A judge could protect his friends or rule according to his own best interests—whatever was best for him. After the plebs made their stand at the Sacred Mount, the Senate voted to give them an assembly of their own and representatives to protect them against injustice. These officials, “tribunes of the plebs,” spoke up for the people and even had the right to veto decrees of the Senate.

veto = “I forbid”
The Romans used the veto to keep any one person or group from becoming too powerful. The United States government uses the veto for the same reason. For instance, the President has the power to veto a bill passed by the Congress.

The plebs still complained that there were no written laws. And a poor-but-free man who owed money could still be forced into slavery if he couldn't pay his debts. So the plebs left the city again about 450 BCE. This protest finally convinced the Senate to create a written set of laws: the Twelve Tables. These laws set down, in writing, the accepted practices of the day. They didn't get to the root of the trouble between patricians and the discontented poor. The poor were still not treated as equals to the landowning rich. But the Twelve Tables were, at least, a start.

The Twelve Tables were completed in 450 BCE. At some point—no one knows exactly when—they were inscribed on 12 bronze tablets that were set up in the Forum for everyone to see. About a third of these early laws have survived because they were copied down by later writers. The others have been lost. The laws that we know about cover all sorts of crimes and conditions. Table 7, for example, decreed that if a road was not in good condition, a man

Cornelius Atimetus (right), a Roman knife maker, shows a customer his wares in front of his shop. This man, like many first century BCE craftsmen, wanted this tombstone to show his occupation.



These delicate scales found in the ruins of Pompeii probably weighed ingredients for medical prescriptions.

could legally drive his oxen across someone else's fields. Table 8 dealt with a more serious question: whether a homeowner had the right to kill a burglar who broke into his house. According to Roman law, he did—but only if the burglar came at night or if a daytime burglar was armed and tried to defend himself.

Many of the laws make sense. For example, a property owner could be forced to trim his trees so that his neighbors would get sunlight. And if someone stole money, he could not be forced to repay more than three times the amount that he stole. But others seem incredibly harsh: for example, capital punishment for a person who sang an insulting song or lied in court. But all Roman citizens had the right to appeal to the Assembly to reverse a death sentence.

Although the silver-tongued Agrippa Menenius had settled the first revolt of the plebs, the struggle between patricians and plebeians lasted for centuries. The plebs kept fighting for greater justice. Though the law still favored the rich, the new written laws were much fairer than the old ones that were based on custom. As the Greek poet Euripides wrote in the fifth century BCE, “When laws are written, rich and poor get equal justice.”



MEANWHILE IN GREECE . . .

A code of laws similar to the Twelve Tables was written in Athens sometime earlier. Like the Twelve Tables, this code was an attempt to ease the tensions between the upper and lower classes.

☞ Euripides, *The Suppliants*, 422 BCE