

ROMAN CLASS STRUCTURE

Frederic Will, Ph.D.

Class structure in general. Class structure inevitably evolves in any society, and just that happened in the lengthy existence of the Roman Republic and Empire, which (in a sense) lasted from the 8th century B.C.E. to the 15th century C.E., when the Ottoman Turks conquered Constantinople. During that period of more than two millennia Rome existed as Kingship, Republic, and Empire, each condition obviously tincturing the tone of class dynamic, though on the whole at least a formal consistency marks Roman class character.

Patricians and plebeians. In the earliest era of the Republic the principal class separation in Rome was between patricians and plebeians, both of which groups could acquire citizenship. (Women and children were excluded from citizenship.) From the beginning, several factors went into determining and distinguishing these two groups: ancestry; census qualifications—a social profile of the individual; honors received; citizenship status. The determinations effective in that early period established family status which in some cases would maintain its position from Republic into Empire.

Levels of citizenship. As the complexity of the Empire grew, with its proliferation of ‘new men,’ freed slaves, foreigners, which mixed in with the older families established centuries before, the formulation of class structure grew increasingly rigid and categorized. Citizenship itself was carefully administered, while the class system nestled into that of citizenship. Citizens included not only freeborn adult males, but freeborn women (who could not vote or hold office), *peregrini* (resident foreigners), and rich freedmen, while within that category of citizens operated the de facto class system of the Roman Empire, one in which the criterion of value was property ownership. The property based classes went from the senatorial class—a minimum wealth requirement applied at each stage—through the *knights* (the *equites*), who exercised doughty political power in the early Republic, then two less financially muscular levels, and finally the *proletarii*, the *proletariat* of whom no financial expectations applied, except the capacity to arm themselves and fight for the government.

Women in business. Various applied, through the many centuries of Roman social existence, this complex pattern of class relations conserved a certain conservative consistency, forever deferential to the patriarchal principle, always respectful of money and power, nevertheless liberal enough to allow for those powerful freedmen who occasionally rose to the top of the pile, or even for those women whose acumen in business occasionally enabled them to assert themselves on the highest levels of the international oil or wine trade.

Readings

Garnsey, P., Saller, Richard, *The Roman Empire: Economy, Society, and Culture*, Berkeley, 1987

Sherwin-White, A.N., *Roman Citizenship*, Oxford, 1979.

Discussion questions

From the inside, as a member of the Roman social structure, did one feel upwardly mobile, as though the sky was the limit? Or oppressed by the rigidity of the system? There is no black and white answer here. But what do you think?

Patriarchy seems to be taken for granted, as a strong and undergirding assumption of Roman class society. The *pater* has the law on his side, wherever you turn; women are not allowed to vote or hold office. How do you explain the firm hold of patriarchy over this society? Are we patriarchal, in America today?

Citizenship in the Empire was closely tied to wealth and property. What do you think of the rationale for that kind of association. Do we in America, today, make the same assumption, that wealth and property qualify a person for governance?