

# ROMAN SOCIAL HISTORY

Frederic Will, Ph.D.

## Contents

Part I : Class Structure

Part II : Gender Relations

### Class structure

**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 8<sup>th</sup> century B.C.E. to the 15<sup>th</sup> 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?

## Gender Relations

**Marriage** The story of Roman gender relations begins and ends with marriage, which was the cornerstone of the structure of society. As in all ancient cultures, this marriage was about bringing two families, and two sets of assets, together, and very little about romance; though culture-history reminds us that some beautiful loves actually emerged from the Roman marriage. Meanwhile, in any case, the actual procedure of the Roman marriage was all about moving the nubile, and prospectively fertile, woman from her paternal home to that of her bridegroom. Protocols surrounded every act of this transition.

Two families agreed on the marriage, the bride to be's father having initiated the connection, and in 'elite level' cases often having settled the marriage details from the bride's birth on. A dowry was agreed on, a date set—in some auspicious month like June—and the proper gown and veil chosen for the bride. Out of the ensuing complex ceremony, which culminated in the wedding night, and which lived in the hope of reproduction, the Roman woman (if she was lucky enough to be fertile; especially if she was able to bring forth the three offspring traditionally hoped for) emerged more independent and powerful than had the Athenian married woman five centuries earlier. Marriage for the luckiest of brides was a portal to a fulfilling adulthood.

**Women and society** Depending on the historical moment of the Roman woman's marriage—by the Empire such women began to have free control over their dowries, and many more options for divorce—the Roman woman was poised to play an active role outside the house, not in politics or even at the ballot box, but as an active social presence. Under the Empire some women moved strongly into business, making themselves captains of industry. For example, female business entrepreneurs made themselves dominant CEO's in the trans-Mediterranean wine and oil trades.

**Sexualities and gender relations** Marriage and procreation were far from the only deployments of sexuality in Roman society. Men of standing were accustomed to shopping around sexually, both with prostitutes and with homosexual partners and entertainers of either sex, making out at will with slaves, 'delicate young boys,' and other guys—providing the relationship guaranteed the lover a dominant position, penetrating but not penetrated. The freeborn Roman citizen, male and proud, considered it a humiliation to be penetrated, although on rare occasions even a Roman Emperor (examples the Emperors Nero and Helagabalus) became a married bride, flaunting his deviance with reckless scorn for middle class values.

## Readings

Saller, Richard, *Patriarchy, Property, and Death in the Roman Family*, Cambridge, 1994.

Williams, Craig, *Roman Homosexuality*, Oxford, 1999.

## Discussion questions

The marriage arrangement described above—dowry, offspring, responsible eye to the future—obviously did not pertain to every married couple at every time in Roman history. What about the little guy or gal on the street? What kind of marriage rite would have been staged for the little guy?

Lesbian love, of the kind celebrated often in ancient Greece, was much less common or significant in Roman society. Why do suppose? Had it something to with the social view of woman, in general, in ancient Rome?

Homosexual love in ancient Greek society tended to prioritize learning along with sex. The lover man was presumed to teach, instruct the beloved teen age boy he fancied. Why was this traditional expectation missing in Roman culture, where the lover and the young man he loved were only sexually bound together?