

# SOCIAL STRUCTURE IN ANCIENT PERIOD

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## Introduction

**Scope** Social structure can be a very broad term. It refers to the ways societies arrange various subgroups designed to cluster, guide and regulate the behavior of members and organize different functions and interactions (though most people belong to several subgroups). These groups normally include families, at the most basic level, but also extended families and kinship linkages; religious affiliations; ethnic and linguistic affiliations; occupational clusters, such as guilds; legal categories; gender categories (including in many societies various transgender identities). The primary focus, however, though it touches base with many of these subcategories, involves the groupings associated with social stratification – most commonly referred to as social classes. For several millennia many human societies have organized various kinds of social inequality, and the resulting groupings provide the most obvious target for inquiries into social structure—including the ways social structure develops and evolves over time, in the various regions that inform the world history approach.

**Social history** Until the later 20<sup>th</sup> century mainstream history paid relatively little attention to social stratification, focusing more on political and intellectual developments and groups in the power positions in society. The social sciences, however, began paying increasing attention to social structural topics in the 1920s, and even before this Karl Marx had urgently urged awareness of the huge social gaps in any society based on differential access to the means of production – which in modern society particularly meant bourgeoisie and proletariat. By the 1960s historians, some of them Marxists, began to use social class and related stratification groupings as a central analytical framework – for example, E. P. Thompson's celebrated *Making of the English Working Class*, which inspired a great deal of research on both sides of the Atlantic. This focus has dimmed a bit in more recent decades, with the rise of interest in more cultural topics and the decline of the classic kinds of worker-middle class struggle. And in the United States race has often inspired more work than social class, though the two concepts are not unrelated. Still, any standard world history syllabus includes emphasis on the importance of determining the ways societies arrange stratification, and how these can be compared across regions and how they change over time. Social historians continue to argue that a focus on stratification captures basic features of human life in the past, and provide attention and perspective for certain groups that are otherwise frequently ignored.

**Determinants of social class** In any historical or social scientific work, social class can be, indeed must be, approached from several different angles. The first is objective: how do groups differ according to standards of living; educational levels; health conditions; and in some cases political and legal rights. This is arguably the starting point for any further inquiry. The second, however, involves consciousness: do group members share perceptions with each other, and use these to identify differences from other social classes? Is there a “class culture”? (Note: class consciousness may be a factor in active conflict, but it can also emphasize considerable harmony.) The postwar United States features an intriguing tension between these two approaches: 80-85% of all Americans identified themselves as middle class, and were so addressed by politicians; but objective measurements, particularly in terms of education, suggested a much more nuanced class structure. Both approaches, clearly, have a certain degree of reality. Rural-urban divides offer an even more common complexity. Peasants and urban workers may share many objective characteristics, particularly in terms of basic living standards and lack of access to political power; but they may well not share consciousness, and even see themselves in conflict.

**Other angles** While objective measurement and cultural components provide the most important insights into social class, there are other approaches to consider as well. Many societies generate a larger cultural approach to society, that may define social groupings in terms that differ both from objective criteria and from class consciousness. Thus Confucianism in East Asia famously viewed merchants as low prestige, even though they were frequently wealthy and powerful; The Confucian valuation affected merchant self-perception, but it did not define it fully as many merchants clearly shared a sense of group self-worth. In many modern societies many rural social groups retain greater prestige in the general culture than is suggested by their objective situation or their own sense of class confidence (though the disparities may generate a sense of resentment). And of course a focus on social class must not exclude other stratification factors, such as race and ethnicity: in the United States, these identities have notoriously complicated the development of what in many other societies was a standard kind of working class identity, from the later 19<sup>th</sup> century into the later 20<sup>th</sup>. Finally, social stratification, both old and new, intertwines with gender stratification, another relationship to contend with.

**Mobility** The history of social structure obviously embraces an interest in social mobility, or lack thereof. Did the social structure (both objectively and culturally) encourage aspirations and opportunities for mobility, or was greater emphasis placed on stasis? A considerable difference divides modern from traditional societies on this score, but there are differentiations within these categories as well – for example, in a notorious (and significant) American tendency to exaggerate mobility opportunities.

**Politics** Unlike what social historians used to call “conventional history”, interest in social structure does not begin with political features. However, the state is intimately involved in the emergence, definition and evolution of social stratification, so the political concomitants of social structure require consistent attention – though not at the level of detail characteristic of much political history. Study of social stratification over time involves more interest in patterns than in events or narrative.

**World history** A world historical approach to social structure involves applying core world history categories to this major feature of the human experience. Different regional approaches command attention, an obvious aspect for example of the classical period with the huge distinctions between Indian and Chinese systems. Social structure is also affected by major changes over time, such as the impact of the missionary religions, new trade patterns and of course, in more modern periods, the industrial revolution. Contact among regional societies, another world history staple, is also involved, providing another potential spur to change.

### Study questions

1. What are the tensions between a political and a social-structural approach to history?
2. What are the most important complexities in defining social class?
3. What is class consciousness

### Further reading

Craig Calhoun, “Social Structure”, *Dictionary of the Social Sciences* (Oxford University Press, 2002)

Claude Crothers, *Social Structure* (Routledge, 1996)

E.P. Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class* (Vintage, 1963; rev. ed. 1968)

### Chapter 1: The Impact of Agricultural Society

**Hunting and gathering** Hunting and gathering societies normally had little or no social structure – which is one of the reasons many anthropologists highlight the quality of life they offered compared to what came later in human history. This was of course the original form of human organization, one that lasted for hundreds of thousands of years and still survives in a few isolated areas today. Hunting and gathering groups were small (40-80 people) and relatively egalitarian, among other things because it was impossible to store significant wealth. Men and women had different economic roles but both contributed substantially, reducing gender power distinctions. Many decisions were taken collectively, though children did not participate. Some individual leaders may have gained prominence: burial sites reveal a few

skeletons with special adornment. But systematic social differentiations were not present. Families represented the main social institution apart from the group itself.

**Advent of agriculture** Beginning around 9000 BCE, initially around the Black Sea, reliance on agriculture began to replace the earlier economy, though diffusion of the new system was gradual. Once adopted, agriculture introduced a variety of innovations that might affect social structure. Populations settled down, creating durable communities. And these were larger than the hunting bands – averaging several hundred and sometimes more (quite apart from small cities, that also ultimately emerged). Land ownership became the prime form of wealth. Agricultural economies also normally generated some surplus: eight people could produce enough to support ten, which in principle could support greater occupational differentiation. Agricultural societies also introduced new methods of storing wealth beyond immediate needs. Many of these changes set the basis for new forms of inequality and, therefore, of more complex social structure.

**Persistent equality** A major new (2021) study, however, urges that many agricultural societies, or societies where hunting and fishing combined with some agriculture, long maintained substantial equality, revising the standard assumption that social differentiation came fast on the heels of agriculture. Even the advent of cities did not necessarily alter the picture. David Graeber, an anthropologist, and archeologist David Wengrow have uncovered evidence of substantial cities that display no particular differentiation at all. Catalhoyuk, for example, in present-day Turkey, a settlement of about 5000 people that lasted for hundreds of years, offered the same kind of housing to all inhabitants: there were no mansions or palaces. Hunting and gathering social forms – that is, considerable equality – were preserved, and there was no formal government (and writing, that crucial bureaucratic tool, had not been introduced). In other cases, some cities did at first introduce inequality only to reverse course and tear down the fancy buildings in favor of standardized housing. This occurred for example in Central America. Periodic meetings brought large numbers of people together to make decisions. In some cases, as in the Pacific Northwest, while certain groups did favor inequality, including slave holding, others explicitly held out, finding these new social forms repugnant. In some cases, as in North America, the relatively egalitarian social forms persisted until they were displaced by force by European arrivals. Graeber and Wengrow argue that their nuanced picture not only should revise conventional historical accounts of inequality, but also open windows to conceive of more radical social and political change in contemporary life.

**Most agricultural societies** But major inequality did develop, in almost all agricultural societies. Graeber and Wengrow argue that the origin may have rested in initial inequalities within families. Agriculture permitted and required higher birth rates, which in turn prompted growing divisions between men and women. Over time, these divisions began to affect larger political relationships, encouraging more formal inequality among men as well as between the genders. Property based on land and surplus was also open to possible seizure by unusually strong or greedy men, another potential source of inequality. More complex agricultural economies, often built around irrigation, required more careful coordination and property rights, which ultimately encouraged the emergence of governments (and writing), and new distinctions between those in government and religious posts and the rest of society (and between that minority that could afford to learn how to read and write and the rest of society). Governments also developed more formal military forces, which though small could be used to enforce inequality within a society and also conquer other peoples, sometimes forced into slavery. Finally, while some cities may have persisted in collaboration with the countryside and without formal government apparatus, many cities more clearly differentiated urban from rural populations, working to subordinate the latter in service to the city centers.

**Early civilizations: Mesopotamia** Certainly by around 4000 BCE the first civilization center, in Sumeria in the Tigris-Euphrates valley, demonstrated pronounced social inequality, with many rural farmers held as slaves by the city-state governments. Early written law codes, ultimately including the famous Hammurabic Code of c.1700 BCE (in Babylonia), went to great lengths to defend differential property holdings and even differential punishments for crimes depending on social status. Thus an offense to a nobleman was punished far more harshly than the same offense to a “villein”, or ordinary subject, while an offense to a slave received even less sanction. And all this on top of clear differentiation between men and women. Some studies of Sumeria also differentiate priests as yet a fourth, and obviously superior,

group, along with the nobles (warriors and government officials), common people (farmers, artisans, merchants) and slaves.

**Egypt** Ancient Egypt developed a basically similar pattern, but long without the substantial slave component. Three main social classes predominated: the royal family and wealthy landowners, government officials and priests; a middle class of merchants, manufacturers and artisans (predominantly urban), and the mass of farmers. Slaves, mainly prisoners of war, were less numerous, and had some rights including opportunities for marriage. Some fluidity existed, particularly between lower and middle: a good marriage or hard work could push a man and his family into a higher group.

**Basic pattern** From the early civilizations onward, most agricultural societies broadly shared a number of social-structural features. A powerful class on top, often hereditary, depended on disproportionate landed wealth plus access to political and religious authority. A major historical study argues that from this point to the present, very few societies have managed to dislodge this top group (though its personnel might change): only major wars or a few revolutions could seriously make a dent. Beneath the upper class, successful merchants came next in wealth, and sometime gained access to political power; but their social status might vary depending on the regional culture. With the towns, solid merchants and guild artisans held a special place, differentiated as well from the majority rural population as well as from an urban lower class of the unskilled (and prostitutes). Many merchant and artisanal guilds worked hard to limit inequality within their own ranks. Rural populations, aside from being partially separate from the cities and, on average, far less likely to be literate, would usually display some gradations in property ownership; and a variety of labor systems developed, from free farmers to serfs to slaves, with obvious implications for position in social structures. Finally, while no agricultural society eagerly promoted social mobility, patterns here varied as well from one regional culture to another. In other words, after an often fascinating gestation period, most agricultural societies developed a mixture between some standard basic features of social structure and a number of important options and variants.

#### Study questions:

1. Why and how did most hunting and gathering societies avoid much formal social differentiation?
2. How much do the recent claims about coexistence between agriculture and social equality alter the standard historical picture?
3. Why and how did social inequality ultimately develop?
4. What were the standard features of agricultural social structure, and what were the main variants?

#### Further reading

David Graeber and David Wengrow, *The Dawn of Everything: a new history of humanity* (Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2021)

R. David, *Handbook to Life in Ancient Egypt* (Oxford University Press, 2007)

Walter Scheidel, *The Great Leveler: violence and the history of inequality from the Stone Age to the twenty-first century* (Princeton University Press, 2017)

#### Chapter 2: Classical China

**Classical societies** Between 800 BCE (or in China's case a bit earlier) and the early centuries CE, major regional civilizations developed in China, South Asia and the Mediterranean. This was a formative period for these civilizations, and this included the elaboration of characteristic social structures and ideas about social differentiation. Regional civilizations in the classical period all worked within the framework of agricultural society, but they generated strikingly distinctive approaches to social differentiation. Further, these approaches would continue to influence social patterns at least until very recently, and arguably to some extent even today.

**China's social signature** Several features stand out in the social structure developed in China during the classical period. Government involvement was one: as in other areas, China's government sought an active role in determining and regulating social distinctions – including specifying special dress in some

cases. On balance, the Chinese approach also downplayed heredity. Inherited wealth and position played a huge role in populating the upper class, but there was always room for some newcomers, and this space tended to expand with time. Chinese cultural values also attributed unusual significance to the peasantry, often ranked officially as the second most important class – though whether this valuation did peasants much good can be open to question. The flip side of this valuation was the low prestige officially attributed to merchants – even though merchants could gain great wealth and influence. This ranking may have affected official policy at some points, and it definitely encouraged some merchants to seek entry to the upper scholar gentry class for themselves or their sons rather than remain in merchant ranks – an impulse visible in some other societies but particularly vigorous in China.

**The main classes** Accounts of China in the classical period sometimes emphasize three major social groups – aristocracy and government officials at top (though under the emperor and his family – the only clearly hereditary position); peasants; then the major urban groups. From the Zhou dynasty onward, government rankings listed four: upper class; peasants; artisans; and merchants – the latter sometimes required to wear white clothing, not an auspicious color in the Chinese cultural schema. Informally a fifth group also existed: the “mean” people, sometimes marked by wearing a green sash, including prostitutes and entertainers. China had a small slave class, no more than 1% of the total population, mainly devoted to domestic service but sometimes involved in agricultural labor. (Slavery oscillated in Chinese history, expanding under the Mongols; but several dynasties tried to abolish internal slave trading.) Women were assumed to be defined by the social position of their fathers and then husbands.

**Confucianism** Confucius’ social philosophy, developed from the 6<sup>th</sup> century BCE onward and gaining official support particularly under the Han dynasty and its later successors, paid great attention to social hierarchy. Primary focus rested on the two main groups. The upper class was seen as the source of wise governance, its privileges balanced by responsibility to the general welfare. Lower classes, and particularly the peasantry, had a dignity of their own in fulfilling the production needs of society, while according proper deference to their superiors. The money-making impulses of merchants contributed to their low prestige in the Confucian scheme of things. And Confucian values discouraged excessive displays of wealth – leading on occasion to sumptuary laws that punished imprudent businessmen from showing off, sometimes under pain of death. The Confucian system was an ideal, but it sometimes touched base with reality. During periods of dynastic decline, however, aristocratic landlords frequently seized territorial power and increased exactions on the peasantry – usually leading, ultimately, to the advent of a new dynasty and greater protections for the peasantry. Confucian social values included elaborate manners based on hierarchical position, with a series of etiquette books laying out the rules.

**Scholar gentry** China’s definition of the upper class, though acknowledging the importance of the landed aristocracy, gave pride of place to the scholar-gentry class, defined in terms of holding bureaucratic positions either in the central court or in representing the imperial government in the provinces. Education, not inherited position, was in principle the source for this class. Under the Han dynasty the vast majority of government slots were given to sons or other relatives. However, the Han did sponsor extensive training centers for bureaucrats, supplemented by private academies, and began to introduce an examination system as the basis for some recruitment. Talented peasant sons, often sponsored by a generous local official or landlord to gain access to education, might occasionally win through in this system. This created a constructive tension between the general Confucian assumption that most people should emphasize the obligations essential for their social station and the opportunity for limited aspirations to mobility.

**Changes over time** The broad outlines of the classical social structure would last into the 20<sup>th</sup> century, marked by the ups and downs of various dynasties with intermittent periods of invasion or civil war. During the Mongol period the invaders mixed scorn for Chinese hierarchy with a willingness to work with it in the management of the empire. Over time, two main changes occurred. First, from the Tang dynasty onward, the educational and examination system steadily expanded, ultimately embracing tens of thousands of candidates every year – far more than could find bureaucratic posts (though by the time of the Song dynasty 1.3% of the population belonged to the scholar gentry). Unsuccessful aspirants might nevertheless gain local jobs or serve as tutors. Mobility aspirations, though still restrained, tended to expand; so, on occasion, did efforts to cheat the system, for example by hiring substitutes to take the examination or simply trying to guess what the test questions would be in a system that was highly

stylized. The second change reflected the growth of Chinese manufacturing and trade, spurring expansion of urban social classes from the Tang dynasty through the 18<sup>th</sup> century, even as the vast majority of the population remained rural (urbanites were about 12% of the total under the Song dynasty). Merchants increased in numbers and wealth. Some women gained new opportunities through service as courtesans and urban entertainers – and some parents tried to groom their daughters for this kind of success. However, several later dynasties, including the Ming, worked to make most categories of commoners hereditary, particularly for soldiers, craftsmen, and peasants.

**Kinship groups** Official Chinese social structure was always complemented by the importance of elaborate kinship ties among members of extended families. Children were carefully taught the names and prestige status of various relatives. Indeed, the combined importance of kinship and hierarchy defined proper Chinese manners, with little attention paid to strangers unless they had identifiable social prestige.

### Study questions

1. What were the distinctive characteristics of the Chinese upper class?
2. In what sense was the Chinese government unusually important in shaping social structure?
3. What were the major tensions in Chinese social structure, and how did these increase over time?

### Further reading

Ch'u T'ung-tsu, *Han Social Structure* (University of Washington Press, 1972)

Susan Naquim and Evelyn Rawski, eds., *Chinese Society in the Eighteenth Century* (Yale University Press, 1989)

Li Yi, *The Structure and Evolution of Chinese Social Stratification* (University Press of America, 2005)

## Chapter 3: India and the Caste System

**The problem of castes** The word caste derives from a Portuguese term introduced in the 16<sup>th</sup> century to describe the social structure they thought they saw in India. (Spaniards also applied the term to kinship groups they found in the Americas.) The word denotes a rigid, endogamous social group with hereditary transmission and membership, defining both permitted occupations and range of social interactions. The challenge, in dealing with the history of social structure in premodern India, is that the term is often used in an unduly simplistic fashion, making the Indian social system seem more inflexible than it actually was. Many impressions of the caste system were based on observations by Muslims and then Europeans, who did not understand the complexity of actual structures. At the same time, there is no question that, from the classical period onward, Indian society was defined in part by inherited categories, that differed from systems of inequality in other classical societies. There is also no question that religion, and particularly the religion that ultimately developed into Hinduism, played an unusually great role in shaping and legitimizing Indian social stratification. Interestingly, while Indian governments were affected by the caste system, particularly in terms of bureaucratic recruitment, they had little to do with its initial development – in contrast to the situation in China.

**Varnas** Early religious epics into the 4<sup>th</sup> century BCE suggest a society divided into four groups, or *varnas*, with the Brahmins, or priests, as the top group. Most current interpretations stress that the schema was probably designed to elevate the priests over other social groups, notably the warriors, who were put in second place. (The high place of priests in traditional Indian social structure is obviously a distinctive feature, quite apart from the caste system, compared to classical China or the Mediterranean where military and government service, as well as land ownership, featured more strongly.) But, again according to most recent scholarship, the varnas at this point were not rigid castes, with a lowest group held out as morally and ritually impure. However, many epics do paint the Brahmins as dedicated to truth, austerity and pure conduct, whereas groups such as the warriors were more appropriate for people prone to anger and capable of physical courage. (The second caste, *Kshatriya*, would also be the source of government officials.) Peasants and artisans were seen as a third group (initially also including merchants), while the last group, the Shudras, were dedicated to service. None of this necessarily describes actual social entities, which were based more on kinship ties, but rather offered a theoretical

picture of social organization. The main point is that this literary and religious seedbed of what is now called the caste system suggests a great deal of tentativeness and flexibility. But it is widely agreed that this very general, fourfold division of society continued to describe much Indian social thought and practice from that point onward.

**The “untouchables”** The idea of a low group, the Shudras, similarly emerged gradually. It may have applied particularly to aboriginal peoples taken over during the in-migration of IndoEuropeans. It may also have applied to groups originally held as slaves. Ultimately --- though the timing is not clear – the lowest castes were associated with morally tainted (though useful) occupations such as leather work and handling dead bodies, and were regarded as impure, barred from social contact with higher groups (though they were for the most part not literally slaves, in the sense of being owned by others). Complicating all this still further is that fact that the nascent caste system varied greatly from one region of India to another, and among the different major religious (including Jainism, for example, as well as Hinduism), and many Indians were not clearly described by a caste system at all, with sons for example frequently choosing occupations that differed from those of their fathers.

**Mauryan and Gupta empires** By the time of the Mauryan empire (321-185 BCE), what is now called the caste system was apparently becoming more rigid, though particularly in the northern part of the subcontinent. It especially described acceptable marriage boundaries, with choices rigidly confined to one’s own caste; and caste membership increasingly became based on inheritance – hence the notion that while one could fall out of a caste by inappropriate behavior, one could not rise into a higher one. Hindu belief began to solidify this notion by arguing that appropriate performance of caste duties was a matter of religious as well as social obligation, that would be rewarded by advancement in the next life, through reincarnation, either into a higher caste or ultimately into a higher spiritual plane altogether. Caste and religion in this sense became increasingly intertwined – at least in some Hindu regions. Further, primary loyalties tended to prioritize social groups, including castes, over devotion to the state; in many region, villages, organized by caste, defined and regulated caste functions. Women at this point were seen in terms of inherited caste, though inferior to men within each group. The later Gupta empire saw the beginnings of a proliferation of castes, building out from the original four. In some regions, for example, a specific merchant caste was identified (with fairly high status).

**Jati** *Jati* constituted groups within caste, probably originally based on kinship, clustered around specific occupations. *Jati* may have originated early on, though references in the early epics were sparse; but their importance and complexity undoubtedly increased over time. Smaller than castes, *jati* provided considerable flexibility; their number and definition changed according to economic need. In the cities, *jati* were often associated the artisanal trades. Most marriages occurred, not only within the caste but within the *jati*; however, because definitions of *jati* evolved, some social mobility was possible. Further, even castes themselves did not described fixed economic positions: members of the Brahman caste, for example, might vary greatly in wealth, with impoverished families nevertheless clinging proudly to their high status. The caste system proved compatible with considerable flexibility, and many people undoubtedly concentrated more on their occupational group and individual opportunities than on the more abstract social categories.

**Evolution** After the classical period the caste and *jati* system tended to spread southward, to other parts of the subcontinent, though there was always great regional variation in the precise definitions and numbers of the social groups. The sheer number of both groups expanded. Neither Buddhist nor Muslim minorities fully accepted the caste system, though at the village level there was considerable overlap. There is no question that the Mughal empire, launched early in the 16<sup>th</sup> century under Muslim rulers, solidified the caste system in extending control over rural areas. Regional Mughal administrators were chosen from the higher castes (mainly the top two), and were responsible for control over the peasantry including taxation. At the same time, majority Hindu groups also emphasized caste loyalties to protect Hindu culture despite Muslim rule at the top. Then the British, particularly by the 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century, gave further impetus to the caste system. They identified the Brahmans as their main contact points, using members of this caste as subordinate administrators and providing opportunities for a more Western education that were not extended to other groups. They also codified lists of caste and *jati* in documents such as the “scheduled Castes” in the 1935 Government of India Act. Many current critics of British rule make much of this intensification, which unquestionably complicates interpretations of the

caste system before Mughal and British rule. At the same time British courts did not fully accept the caste system, for example refusing to adjust punishments to caste position; the railway system that developed from the 1850s onward did not enforce caste distinctions. Further, gradual economic changes in the British period, including some factory development, further complicated the system.

### Study questions

1. What is a caste? What are some of the key complexities in dealing with the history of India's caste system?
2. In what ways did the caste system allow some social mobility?
3. What was the relationship between the caste system and Hinduism?
4. How did the caste system change under the Mughals and the British?

### Further reading

Tim Dyson, *A Population History of India, from the first modern people to the present day* (Oxford University Press, 2018)

Susan Bayly, *Caste, Society and Politics in India from the Eighteenth Century to the Modern Age* (Cambridge University Press, 2001)

Louis Dumont, *Homo Hierarchicus: the caste system and its implications* (revised ed., University of Chicago Press, 1963)

### Chapter 4: Greece and Rome

**Overview** Classical Greece and Rome both emphasized the importance of the landed aristocracy, in a pattern not totally dissimilar to that of classical China though with less emphasis on the importance of bureaucratic position and service. As in China as well, the social structure allowed some possibilities for mobility – there was no effort to implement even a flexible caste structure – though there was no equivalent to China's formal upper-class education and examination system. Merchants ranked somewhat higher on the social prestige scale than in China, though there was considerable reliance on foreigners. On the other hand the Mediterranean was marked by much more extensive slavery than was the case in the other two classical societies.

**Aristocracy** The term aristocracy comes from a Greek word meaning "rule of the best", and many classical political philosophers, including Aristotle, urged the importance of having a superior class of people with the wisdom and resources to rule well. Many Greek city states, and also republican Rome with its Senate, emphasized governance by a largely hereditary aristocracy (though in the later republic some wealthy nonaristocrats also were selected for the Senate). However, the basic position of the aristocracy in the Mediterranean societies rested on extensive agricultural estates. Many Greek city states, and then republican Rome, experienced a period of intense struggle between the aristocracy and a substantial free peasantry, as the former expanded their estates often with a focus on more commercial agricultural products such as grapes and olives that required substantial investment. In both cases the aristocracy essentially won out, reducing the range of independent farming. During the Roman Empire the role of the aristocracy persisted, even as the powers of the Senate were steadily reduced; elements of the aristocracy increasingly indulged in elaborate consumer pleasures, at the expense of some of the moral qualities that the class had previously emphasized. Here was one of a number of historical cases where a privileged aristocracy rose on the basis of military leadership as well as land ownership, evolving toward greater emphasis on political role and then distinctive lifestyle.

**Patricians and plebeians in Rome** In Rome (both republic and empire), the hereditary aristocracy were called patricians. Many patricians had extensive clientage relationships with ordinary people (plebeians), who provided a number of services in return for support: this mutual relationship was one of the unifying features in Roman society. Many plebeian families managed to acquire considerable wealth, often through trade, while some patricians fell into poverty. However, the hereditary distinction between the two groups long persisted, at one point even involving prohibitions on intermarriage. Only by the time of the later republic did the difference between the two groups (at the upper end of the wealth scale) decline somewhat.



**Slavery** The prominence of slavery in Greece and Rome was a particularly distinctive feature of the social structure. Many slaves were seized as prisoners of war (particularly during Rome's expansion, when many Greeks among others were taken) – including many women and children. (In the Greek city state of Sparta, conquered locals were held as *helots*, who were at least near-slaves and constituted the majority of the agricultural labor force.) The conquests of the later Roman republic and empire brought many slaves from northern Europe and North Africa. The status was hereditary, and Roman law devoted great attention to specifying the status of slaves as property and the lack of significant legal rights (plus the authority of owners to inflict punishments). Slaves were bought and sold in markets in Rome and elsewhere. More slaves worked in agriculture than in any other sectors, particularly as the aristocratic estates expanded. Slaves who were violent or disobedient or were otherwise regarded as dangerous were sent to work in the mines, where conditions were exceptionally bleak. Athenian silver mining, for example, was based on slave labor. However, slaves might provide a variety of other functions. Educated slaves, including many Greeks, often served as tutors. Others ran shops or performed additional forms of service. A few slaves were able to advance their education, sometimes with encouragement by their owners: Epictetus, for example, born a slave in Greece around 50 CE, became a prominent Stoic philosopher. The variety of slave occupations (as well as the variety of ethnic groups serving as slaves) complicates any generalizations. In at least a few cases, impoverished Romans sought to sell their children as slaves, believing that they would gain more assured support in that condition. Overall, by the time of the early Roman empire, up to a third of the population was held as slaves, though percentages are estimates at best. Though a few slave revolts marked Roman history, they were in fact rare. Reliance on slaves helps explain the aggressive foreign policy of many Greek city states and also Rome, eager to seize additional prisoners and reliant on this labor force to expand production. By the same token, use of slaves may help explain the relative lack of technological innovation in manufacturing and agriculture, compared for example to classical China.

**Freed slaves** For a variety of reasons, including gratitude for service, a number of owners freed slaves (sometimes at death). Further, thanks to the variety of occupations available for some slaves, it was also not uncommon to purchase freedom. The taint of former slavery persisted, however, at least for several generations, though over time a few descendants of slaves managed considerable economic and social success.

**Legacies** Classical Mediterranean social structure largely persisted in the Byzantine Empire, with distinctions between the “privileged” (*honestiores*) and the humble, along with considerable slavery, though (as in Rome) there was a significant intermediate business class as well. A variety of family relationships and intermarriage helped sustain the privileges of the upper class, often including some links to the imperial family. In the western Mediterranean, however, the collapse of the Roman empire largely eliminated the characteristic social structure. Outright slavery declined (though it persisted more strongly in medieval Western Europe than is sometimes realized), and the aristocracy was reconstituted. Here, the classical heritage rested more strongly in the philosophical support for aristocracy as the rule of the best, and in the legal traditions involved with slavery, some of which would be revived later on with the rise of Atlantic slavery.

### Study questions

1. What were the most distinctive features of classical Mediterranean social structure?
2. What forms of social mobility were available for a few?
3. What were the functions and impacts of slavery?

### Further reading

Moses Finley, *Ancient Slavery and Modern Ideology* (expanded ed., B.D. Shaw ed., Markus Wiener, 1988)

David Small, *Ancient Greece: social structure and evolution* (Cambridge University Press, 2019)

Henry Boren, *Roman Society* (Cengage Learning, 1991)