

Social status in ancient Rome

Class structure in ancient Rome was very formal and official. Records of each class were kept, and being wealthy was often not enough to move up through the classes. There were three basic divisions in Roman society: citizens, noncitizens and slaves.

Being a Roman citizen was of the utmost importance to the Roman people, and foreigners had a very different set of rights within and outside the city. They were even different courts that would hear the cases in which foreigners were involved. Foreigners had different rights, depending on where they came from and how friendly their mother country was to Rome. Populations could attain various levels of Roman citizenship that granted such rights as movement over borders and trading privileges, the right to run for office and more.

Slaves had very few rights at all, and were seen as property owned by their masters. For much of Rome's history, they could even be killed by their masters without any repercussions. As time went on, slaves gained some rights but, even at the best of times, they were very minimal. Slaves generally came as prisoners from defeated lands and originally included those who could not pay off their debts. Any children of slaves were born into slavery.

If a Roman citizen chose to free his slave, they would become a "freedman." This is not the same as being a free man, however, and though the practice of slavery changed slightly throughout Rome's history, slaves generally did not have the same rights as free-born Roman citizens. Any children they had while freed would, however, be considered full Roman citizens with the same rights.

Male citizens of Rome belonged to two distinct social classes: plebeian and patrician. Patricians were those related to the very old and prestigious families of the old senators of Rome. It was not until the emperors that this status could be attained without being born into it. The plebeians were everybody else, the vast majority of the population of Rome. Originally, only patricians could run for office, but eventually the rest of the population could run for these positions as well, though many were still reserved for patricians. When the emperors took power, they began to award patrician status to some worthy citizens.

The citizens were also divided by wealth. The uppermost class was the senatorial class, the extremely wealthy, and still almost exclusively patrician. After these were the *equites*, the "knights" of Rome. The *equites* were also very elite members of society, though not nearly as wealthy as the senatorial class. Several other ranks of men followed, based on their wealth, until the lowest rank, the *proletarii*. The *proletarii* were those who could not afford to fight in the army. In ancient Rome, soldiers had to equip themselves and this equipment was very expensive. The majority of Romans would have found themselves in the *proletarii*. This class structure was important as it greatly affected how people would vote. The highest classes had the fewest numbers of people in their voting classes, or centuries; e.g., the equestrian order had 18

centuries, so each voting group had few people; the entire proletarian class voted as one century, so each person's vote was worth hardly anything.

Women were not actually seen as citizens of ancient Rome. They belonged to the class and rank of their father until married, and then belonged to that of their husband. They did have rights to property, and were protected to a certain extent under the law, but not nearly to the same extent of Roman men. As they were not citizens, they could not run for office, and had to influence government by influencing their husband's vote and opinion. That being said, they were still mothers of Roman citizens, and a very integral part of Roman society. There are many instances of women affecting the outcome of events in Rome, though indirectly. Women could also hold certain religious offices, such as that of the Vestal Virgins.