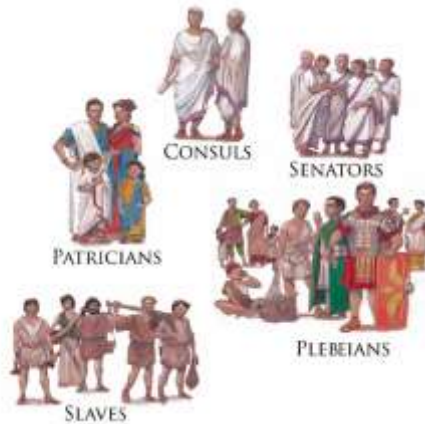


Roman Class Structure



Not all citizens of Rome were treated equally. In fact, some people living in Rome were not citizens at all. People of Rome were divided into groups, each with different rights and privileges under the law.

Powerful Patricians

The smallest and most powerful group was called the patricians. Patricians were Rome's elite, a small group of wealthy, powerful people who owned large homes in the city, vineyards in the country, and villas on the coast. The patricians were citizens of Rome, meaning they had the right to vote, and they had certain protections and privileges under the law. Because they were the most educated and privileged group, the patricians were also the ones most likely to become Senators, so they got to make a lot of the laws in the Roman republic. In contrast to the ancient Greek culture, women in ancient Rome were considered citizens, and wealthy women were part of the elite patrician group, although they could not vote or serve as a senator or consul.

Second-Class Plebeians

Another group of Roman citizens were called plebeians. Plebeians were second-class citizens, meaning that they did not have all the rights and privileges enjoyed by patricians. However, the plebeians had one big advantage: numbers. Because the plebeians made up the largest portion of Roman citizenry – by far – the wealthy patricians learned that they needed to make sure the plebeians were happy, or at least happy enough that they wouldn't rise up and try to take more power for themselves.

Like patricians, plebeians were citizens, so they could vote. However, they were subject to different set of laws than patricians. For instance, a patrician could freely insult and even attack a plebeian, but a plebeian would be in big trouble if he did the same to a patrician.

Plebeians could own property, but it was hard for them to gain enough land or money to become as rich or as powerful as the patricians.

Plebeians came in all shapes and sizes, including fairly wealthy shopkeepers and traders, hardworking farmers and fishermen, and other poor and lowly works. Farmers were important because plentiful crops were very necessary for the success of Rome's culture and civilization. That is one of the main reasons why Romans worshiped Saturn, the god of the harvest.

Many Romans who didn't farm were traders and merchants. They would see goods that came from ships all over the known world. Remember, Italy is a peninsula in the Mediterranean Sea. These goods would be sold in markets in large, open gathering places called forums. In these forums, people could shop, listen to debates, and worship in temples. The biggest forum was in the heart of Rome, and was therefore called the Roman Forum, or just the Forum. The Forum was a very important place in Roman society, serving as a gathering place of culture, economy, politics, religion, and much more.

Lowly Slaves

Another group of people who lived in Rome were the slaves. Slaves were not considered citizens of Rome, so they could not vote. Slaves belonged to their owners, so they did not have the freedom to do as they pleased. Slaves could not choose where to live or work. They had no choice in what job they got to do and they were not allowed to quit the jobs their owners gave them. Roman slaves did have some rights. For instance, Roman slaves were allowed to receive as much education as they needed to be better at whatever job they had. After some time, if slaves worked very hard for their owner, they could earn their freedom. Once slaves were given their freedom, their children were considered full Roman citizens.

You may be wondering where these slaves came from. As Rome expanded into new territories, the Romans fought wars with the people already living in those areas. It was common for the people on the losing side of a war to become slaves for the winning side when the war was over. Slaves were considered the property of their owners; they had to obey their owners and do difficult work for not pay. They were also not allowed to insult or attack a Roman citizen, or there would be consequences. Slaves were considered the most lowly people in Roman society – at the other end of the spectrum from the elite class.

Whether patrician, plebeian, or slave: man, woman, or child -- all of the people of ancient Rome contributed in their own ways to the many components of this ancient civilization.

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