

Social Pecking Order in the Roman World

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Legal status

Roman society is often represented as one of social extremes - with the wealth, power and opulence of an emperor existing alongside the poverty, vulnerability and degradation of a slave. But beyond this, how and why was Roman society stratified? What were the major distinctions that shaped and influenced peoples' lives?

At the end of the first century AD, the Roman administrator, poet and writer Pliny the Younger (today known particularly for his letters) attended a dinner party. He noted that the food and wine on offer differed in quality. The guests were not being treated equally. Instead the host was mirroring status distinctions in the standard of the food and beverages he presented to his guests.

As Pliny's observations show us, in Rome - and across the empire - status mattered. Who and what you were affected how you were treated and how you treated others. In the eyes of Roman law, people were not equal. Legal status helped to define power, influence, criminal punishments, marriage partners, even dress and where you sat in the amphitheater.

The main legal distinctions were between those who were free, and those who were slaves. All inhabitants of the empire were either free or in servitude. Slaves were either born into slavery, or were forced, often through defeat in war, into it.

Slaves were the possessions of their masters and the latter had the power of life and death over them. Slavery was not, however, always a life-long state. Slaves could be - and regularly were - given their freedom.

Citizen and non-citizen

All free inhabitants were either citizens or non-citizens. Only citizens could hold positions in the administration of Rome and the other towns and cities of the empire, only citizens could serve in the legions, and only citizens enjoyed certain legal privileges.

From the end of the first century BC, Rome and the Roman empire were ruled by a succession of emperors. Political and military power was concentrated in their hands, and they represented the pinnacle of the imperial status hierarchy.

Under the emperors the citizen vote in Rome was curtailed, but citizenship expanded rapidly across the empire, and was given as a reward to individuals, families and whole settlements. In AD 212 the emperor Caracalla expanded the franchise to all free inhabitants of the empire.

Citizens can be further divided into the privileged and the non-privileged - with some Roman citizens being very clearly distinguished by their power and privilege. These were the senators, equestrians and the provincial elite.

The senate was the traditional ruling body of Rome, and under the emperors the senate continued to represent the citizen upper crust. The senate was usually limited to 600 members, and entrance was dependent on property qualifications and election to key offices.

The equestrian order was traditionally limited to those who were entitled to a public horse. There were no limits to equestrian numbers, but property requirements had to be met. Senators were recognized by a toga with a broad purple stripe, while the equestrian wore a toga with a narrow purple stripe and a gold finger ring.

Evaluating status

Legal status marked some fundamental boundaries in the life of a Roman man or woman. It mattered whether a person was a senator or a slave, and arguably it was at these extremes that legal status mattered the most. Certainly, our understanding of the Roman social order is colored by ancient sources that tend to focus on the importance of status display and status symbols in elite, urban and male circles.

Whether you were 'in' or 'out' of the leading circles was signaled in the Republic by the division of the population of Rome into 'patricians' - in origin the powerful and established land-holding families - and 'plebeians', basically the rest of the (free) population. And in the late empire the terms *honestiores* and *humiliores* were employed to denote the privileged and the humble.

The powerful were defined by the privileges they enjoyed, and knowledge of some of these aspects of their lives has been handed down to us, but unfortunately the symbols of privilege tell us little about the lives and status expectations of the powerless masses.

For the mass of the free population, did legal status matter? Citizenship may have conferred certain advantages, but these may have been little noted - or just taken for granted - by the urban poor, and by the end of the first century AD it was observed that the toga - the visual symbol of citizenship - was little worn.

On the streets of Rome citizens, non-citizens, slaves and ex-slaves may have mingled quite freely, showing few observable symbols of their status, and confusion could well have arisen over people's exact legal situation.

In an age before mass personal documentation, there were few ways to prove who and what you were. So, for example, illegal marriages were contracted between citizens and non-citizens either through ignorance or mistake. Unless a legal crisis arose, people may have taken their legal status - and that of others - for granted.

In much of daily life status distinctions based on age, gender, occupation, education and wealth may have been more relevant than legal status alone. The same man could derive status from several co-existing roles: he might be a citizen, an ex-slave, a carpenter, a Briton, a father and a husband. Depending on context, one or all of these identities may have affected how he acted and interacted with others.

Wealth, influence, and connections

Social factors cut across the strict legal divisions. Wealth, unsurprisingly, was one such factor. People could amass a fortune, and money could buy status symbols.

Trimalchio, the fictitious freed slave invented by the Roman writer Petronius, had all the trappings that Roman money could buy. He lived in a vast house, wore extravagant clothes, owned many slaves, entertained lavishly and even built his own grand tomb.

He was portrayed as grotesque, but he may not have been that far removed from reality - it is known that freed slaves did advertise their own personal success stories. The tomb built by the freed slave Eurysaces still stands in Rome. It was built in the shape of a giant oven, decorated with scenes of baking.

We can also note that the highest ranking slaves and freed slaves of the emperors could become wealthy - thanks to their proximity to the seat of power, which allowed them to wield considerable authority. In many ways it was their servility that allowed these men to become so close to the emperor.

Unlike other members of the elite, the slaves were not serious rivals to Imperial power. Besides, a slave was at the mercy of his master; he could easily be dismissed or punished. Freed slaves were also bound to their former masters, whether the master was an emperor, a senator or an artisan.

Such dependency relationships were a marked feature of Roman life. There was a dense and complex patronage network, and this united people of diverse backgrounds, wealth and standing. The emperor eventually became the ultimate patron, and as time went on, without his support and favor, even the most ambitious senator could not hold high office.

Beneath him, the senators acted in their turn as patrons to the lesser senators, and throughout society these relationships were replicated. Thus, through the patronage system, the lower strata of the Roman population could gain some indirect access to power and authority. A client might look to his patron for financial assistance, or legal help. In return the patron received respect, favors and a retinue of followers.

Even for those without great wealth or access to power, there were opportunities to enhance social status and gain recognition among their peers. Many organizations - such as the army, and trade or religious guilds (often organized for burial purposes) - operated on hierarchical principles. In these settings people could hold office and obtain titles, whereas in the wider world they could not.

Social mobility

Trimalchio's story suggests social mobility. The system rewarded hard work, ambition and the accumulation of wealth, but there were limits. Birth remained important, and new citizens, however wealthy, could be stigmatized by their past. Ex-slaves in particular could not escape the taint of slavery, and were not allowed to hold high office.

These nouveaux-riches citizens could be mocked and despised for copying their social betters. Money could not buy everything, and individuals such as Trimalchio could find themselves in an incongruous position, fabulously wealthy but not part of high society.

This of course may not have concerned Trimalchio, or others like him; he had his money, and the trappings that it bought, and within his own house he was king. Although others may have expected Trimalchio to be ashamed of his past, it doesn't necessarily follow that he felt so himself.

In time it became possible to break down some social boundaries. Rome and the empire needed new blood, and even the senate was not a closed body. The ex-slave could not hold office, but eventually his descendants might. The emperor Vitellius was said to have been descended from a freed slave; and the emperors Trajan and Septimius Severus came from provincial families.

For the mass of the urban population, however, we can question whether social mobility was ever a reality. For some, legal status could change; non-citizens could become citizens; a slave could become a free man. This was upward mobility and could bring real advantages, but unless this legal change was accompanied by an economic change the individual may have felt few immediate benefits.

Status symbols

For many Roman people, their unchanging place in the Roman social order was accepted or taken for granted. For others the maintenance, negotiation and re-negotiation of their status position became crucial, and this can be seen in the way that the language and symbols of status were manipulated.

Some people claimed to be citizens when they were not, or wore clothes suggesting senatorial or equestrian status, or tried to sit in the reserved seats at the theatre and amphitheater. Others sought to define their status and that of their guests in the food, seating plans and entertainment offered at their dinner-parties.

On the one hand all this suggests that status distinctions mattered, on the other that status could be disputed, contested and even invented. There were clear levels on the Roman social ladder, but not everyone could be - or wished to be - neatly categorized.