

Patricians vs. Plebeians

Patricians

Ranked just below the emperor and his relatives, the patrician families dominated Rome and its empire. The word “patrician” comes from the Latin “patres”, meaning “fathers”, and these families provided the empire’s political, religious, and military leadership. Most patricians were wealthy landowners from old families, but the class was open to a chosen few who had been deliberately promoted by the emperor.

A good education

Boys born into a patrician family would receive an extensive education, usually from a private tutor. This would focus on the subjects a sophisticated noble would be expected to know, as well as some required for his future career. Poetry and literature, history and geography, some mythology and important languages – like Greek – would all be taught. The Romans also considered lessons in public speaking and the law to be essential parts of a good education. Most young patrician men would go on to careers in politics and government, for which these two subjects were crucial. However, the patrician families were also expected to help continue the ancient priesthoods.

A privileged position

The patrician class enjoyed few privileges: its members were excused some military duties expected of other citizens, and only patricians could become emperor. But this eligibility carried its own dangers: patricians could find themselves becoming wrapped up in palace intrigue. If they ended up on the losing side, they could easily lose their home, their lands and even their lives. Apart from the plots and politics, however, members of both royal and patrician families faced little work or real responsibility and were blessed with a relatively charmed life – certainly compared to the other inhabitants of Rome at the time.

Plebeians

Rome’s working class, the plebeians had little individual power. Grouped together, however, they became a Roman mob and had to be handled carefully. By the first century AD, plebeians comprised a formal class, which held its own meetings, elected its own officials and kept its own records. The term plebeian referred to all free Roman citizens who were not members of the patrician, senatorial or equestrian classes.

Working class heroes

Plebeians were average working citizens of Rome – farmers, bakers, builders or craftsmen – who worked hard to support their families and pay their taxes. Over the course of this period, early forms of

public welfare were established by Titus and Trajan and, in difficult times, plebeians could ask Roman administrators for help. We know much less about daily life for the lower classes, such as plebeians. Unlike the more privileged classes, most plebeians could not write and therefore they could not record and preserve their experiences.

A glimpse of normal life

This is one reason why archeological sites like the cities of Pompeii and Herculaneum are so important: they preserve the living spaces, shops, tools, and graffiti of the common people that would otherwise be lost to history.

Social climbing

Some plebeians, who were doing reasonably well, might try to save enough money to join the equestrian class. For many, however, life was a daily struggle. But although individual plebeians had little power, there were a lot of them. In bad times, or during political unrest, there was always the risk of the Roman 'mob' rioting or rebelling against the upper classes.

Bread and circuses

The Emperor Augustus was well aware of this risk and was keen to keep the poorest plebeians happy enough and reasonably well fed so that they would not riot. He began the system of state bribery that the writer Juvenal described as 'bread and circuses'. Free grain and controlled food prices meant that plebeians could not starve, while free entertainment – such as chariot races and gladiators in amphitheaters and the Circus Maximus – meant that they would not get bored and restless. Bribery it may have been, but it often worked.

Questions

1. Using evidence from the text give your own definitions of Patricians and Plebeians. RARE
2. Give two reasons from the text as to why the power of Ancient Rome was in the hands of the Patricians. RARE
3. What types of things would the Emperor and Patricians do to try to keep the Plebeians happy? RA
4. Why were the Plebeians seen as a threat to the Patricians? RA
5. What did a normal day look like for Patricians and Plebeians? RARE
6. If you had to choose one group of people to be a part of which one would it be and why? (Patricians or Plebeians)? RA