

SOCIAL HIERARCHY IN THE ROMAN EMPIRE

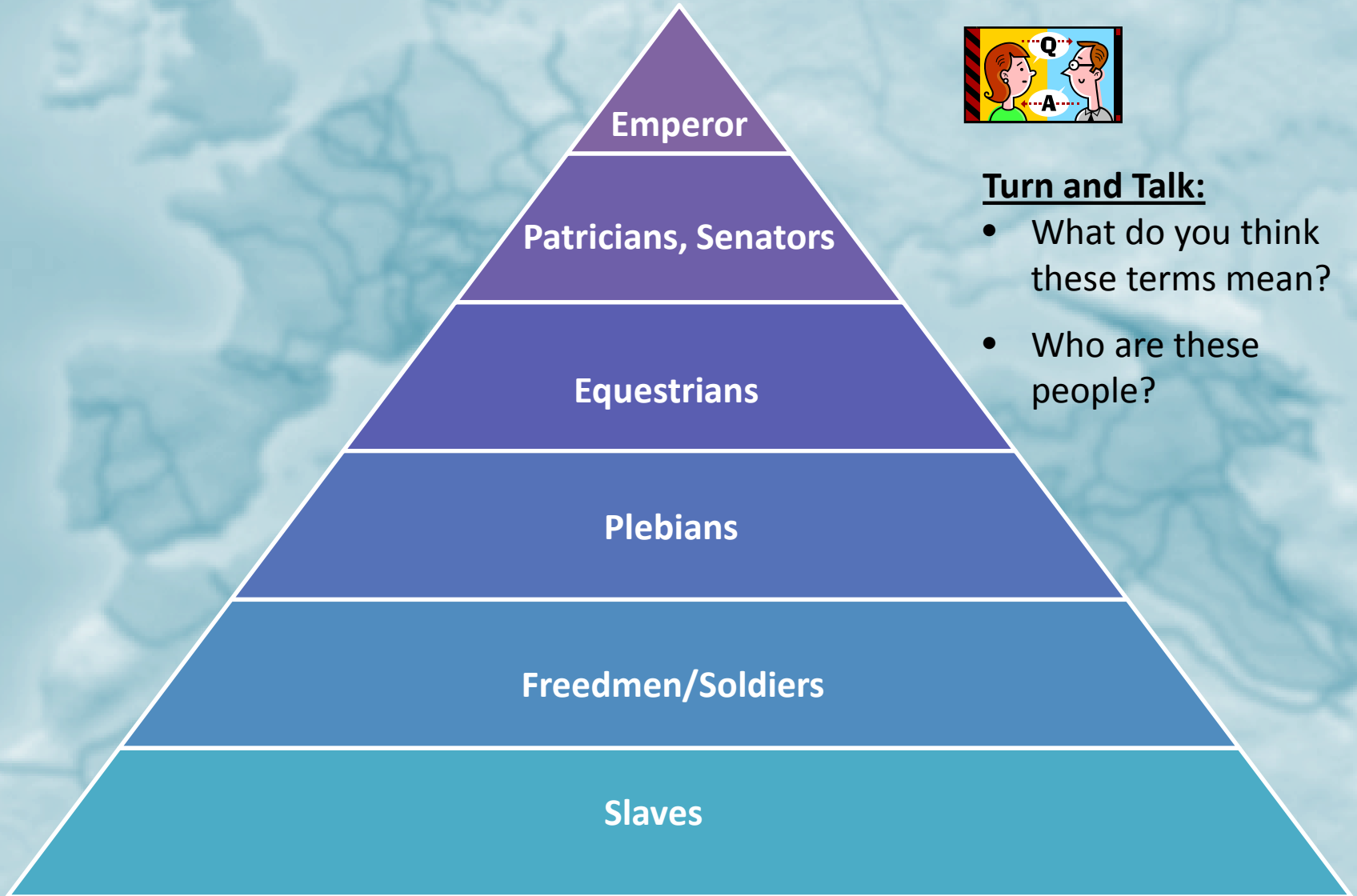
**Emperors, Patricians, Plebeians,
Slaves, and more**



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SOCIAL HIERARCHY OF THE ROMAN EMPIRE



Turn and Talk:

- What do you think these terms mean?
- Who are these people?

EMPEROR



- Absolute ruler of the Roman Empire... lived in style in the best villas, eating the best food and wearing the best clothes. He had lots of power and authority...
- The emperor's family lived the life of the rich and famous... they spent time with favorite pastimes, like music, poetry, hunting and horse racing.
- Emperors were not chosen on the basis of their ability or honesty, but simply because they were born in the right family.
- But there was still drama... the throne could pass to brothers, stepsons or even favored courtiers, and sometimes heirs had to be approved by the Senate. As a result, royal palaces were constantly filled with political plots and conspiracies .

PATRICIANS



- Ranked just below the emperor and his relatives, the patrician families dominated Rome and its empire. 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.
- They were educated as young men for leadership, learning poetry and literature, history, and geography.
- The patrician class enjoyed special privileges: its members were excused from some military duties expected of other citizens, and only patricians could become emperor.
- Being a patrician carried its own dangers: patricians could find themselves becoming wrapped up in palace plots for power. If they lost, they could lose their homes and even their lives.

SENATORS

- The Roman Senate started as an advisory council, filled entirely with patricians, when Rome was under kings. By the last two centuries of the republic, however, it had become much more powerful and a major player in politics and government.
- Once Rome became an empire, senators held much less power than they did in the past, although the Senate still had some political power, and occasionally decided who would become emperor.
- This alone ensured that the Senate and its members remained relevant and important.



EQUESTRIANS



- **Ranking immediately below senators, equestrians became an important human resource, whose work was key to the smooth running of the Roman Empire.**
- As its name suggests, the equestrian class was originally composed of the Roman cavalry. In 218 BCE, equestrians took on more business related roles when Senators were prevented from becoming involved in trade or business.
- As a result, many in the equestrian class became wealthy businessmen. Many were tax collectors, bankers, miners and exporters, while others managed things like road building and construction.
- Even though they could gain some wealth, they could not move up to become patricians.

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 CE, 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](#) or [equestrian](#) classes.
- Plebeians were average working citizens of Rome – farmers, bakers, builders or craftsmen – who worked hard to support their families and pay their taxes.

SOLDIERS

- **The Roman Army** was one of the most successful in the history of the world and its soldiers were rightly feared for their training, discipline and stamina. As a result, the army was a major player in Roman politics and maintaining its loyalty was important for any Emperor.
- **The Roman legions-** The Roman Empire was created and controlled by its soldiers. At the core of the army were its legions, who were highly skilled in their training, discipline, and fighting ability.
- The minimum term of service for a soldier during the first century CE was twenty years.



FREEMEN

- Once freed, former slaves could work in the same jobs as plebeians – as craftsmen, midwives or traders. Some even became wealthy.
- However, Rome's society attached importance to social status and even successful freedmen usually found that their past slavery was hard to overcome – people in the higher classes still looked down on them and treated them poorly.



WOMEN

- **Defined by the men in their lives, women in ancient Rome were valued mainly as wives and mothers. Although some were allowed more freedom than others, there was always a limit, even for the daughter of an emperor.**
- Not much information exists about Roman women in the first century. Women were not allowed to be active in politics, so nobody wrote about them. Neither were they taught how to write, so they could not tell their own stories.
- **Legal rights**
We do know a little, however. Unlike society in ancient Egypt, Rome did not regard women as equal to men before the law. They received only a basic education, if any at all, and were subject to the authority of a man.



SLAVES

- You'll learn more about Roman slaves in the next activity... but clearly they were at the bottom of the social order.





GLADIATORS

(HOW COULD WE NOT INCLUDE THEM!)



- **Successful gladiators were the movie stars of the first century. Bloody, brutal but popular, gladiator matches are often seen as the dark side of Roman civilization. Gladiators were one particular class of slaves.**
- **Ceremonial, public violence had been a favorite entertainment of the Romans for centuries. The practice began as an ancient Etruscan funeral ritual: when a tribal chief died, his warriors would make a blood sacrifice to his spirit by fighting to the death by his tomb.**

This changed over time. The nobility began to put on gladiator shows in memory of the dead and by the time Julius Caesar was in charge, these exhibitions had become public spectacles.

- **Organized games**

The games took place in amphitheaters. Gladiators would be sent to the arena to fight to the death before cheering crowds of thousands. As the contests became more organized, gladiators became more specialized.

DISRUPTING THE SOCIAL ORDER...

- Sometimes, enslaved people rebelled and tried to escape.
- Prisoners of war enslaved at the end of the Second Punic War rebelled in 198 BCE.
- This slave uprising in central Italy is the first reliable report of one, although it was surely not the first actual slave uprising.
 - There were other slave uprisings in the 180s.
 - There were 3 major slave revolts in Rome between 140 and 70 BC.



The Imperia

XCVIII AD (98 C.E.)

Hearings in Rome on future

A series of highly publicized crimes and scandals is forcing the Emperor and the Senate to hold hearings on the future of slavery in Rome. Don't worry patricians and plebians... nobody is seriously considering getting rid of slavery. They may be a little unstable, but they sure don't want to work in the mines or in the fields! They are certainly running scared though. Just north of the city of Rome, the slave E. Pluribus attacked and killed his owner, Unum, after Unum slapped E. in the face. Further east, a group of gladiators began chanting "Remember Spartacus" before a match, and several of them refused to fight each other, but instead attacked the centurions. On top of that, all across the empire, slaves are complaining of harsh treatment and running away. In response to this crisis, the Senate is bringing together a range of the peoples' representatives to debate possible changes to our laws about slavery. Stay tuned for more drama!

The Imperia

XCVIII AD (98 C.E.)

Hearings Today!

The emperor himself will join a group of Patricians and Plebians today to address the growing slavery crisis in Rome. They will debate possible changes to our laws and

consider testimony about slavery from all across the empire. It is even rumored that a group of slaves will be permitted to voice their side of the story.

**EXTRA, EXTRA,
READ ALL ABOUT IT!!**

**Be ready to debate at the
hearings!**

6. Suetonius was a second-century-CE Roman writer. This selection shows one way of acquiring a slave:

Staberius Eros was a Thracian bought at a public sale, and later set free because of his interest in literature. ...

Document	Does this document, help or harm your argument on slavery?	How does the account of slavery in this document help or harm your argument? How does this document portray slavery? Does this account make slavery seem more or less acceptable?	How will you use this document in the hearing? What will you highlight? What will you challenge or argue against?
6 From the Patrician point of view	Helps	This document helps my argument because it can show that slavery wasn't so bad, and it shows that some slaves were set free. It also shows that some slaves probably got education and were set free.	I will use this document to show that slaves who work hard and learn can get set free. I will argue that this shows that owners can be nice and fair.
6 From a slave's point of view	Helps and Harms	This document can help me because I can use it to say that only some slaves got set free, so the system isn't fair because it is totally up to the owner. It also shows that slaves were bought and sold like animals, and that is wrong. At the same time, it harms my argument because it shows that some owners could be nicer.	I will use this document along with other documents, especially ones that show owners being cruel. I will argue that a slave's quality of life depends totally on the owner, and so there should be some rules to protect us. I will also use it show that slaves were treated like property.

Welcome to the Fact-Finding Fishbowl!

- Historical Note: The Roman Senate never considered abolishing slavery. Women were never allowed to address the Senate, nor were slaves.
- Ancient Rome had two main eras: the Roman Republic, and then the Roman Empire. Our simulation is focusing on the Empire. During the Roman Republic, there was no emperor. There were, however, still slaves. The Republic came BEFORE the Empire. You will learn more about this in another lesson.
- Our purpose: To consider the important issue of slavery in from the perspectives of different social groups in the Roman Empire.

FISHBOWL QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER:

- **What is the current status of slavery in Rome?**
- **Are we satisfied with our system? Why or why not?**
- **Are new rules for slavery needed to prevent future rebellions and other problems?**

1) *Suetonius was a second-century-CE Roman writer. In this selection we learn about the abandonment of Gaius Melissus:*

Gaius Melissus was born at Spoleto; he was free-born, but abandoned because of an argument between his parents. Because of the interest and efforts of the man who brought him up, he received a higher education and was presented as a gift to Maecenas to use as a grammarian. Because he realized that Maecenas liked him and accepted him as he would a friend, he retained the status of a slave even though his mother claimed his freedom on his behalf, and he preferred his present status to that due to his true birth. For this he was soon freed, and became friendly with Augustus; ...

- Source: Suetonius, *Grammarian* 5, qtd. in Thomas Wiedemann, ed., *Greek and Roman Slavery* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins UP, 1981), 118.

2) *The Theodosian Code was a compilation of fourth- and fifth-century Roman laws, published in 438 CE. This selection is from a law passed by Constantine in the early fourth century CE: The August Emperor Constantine, to the Italians.*

In accordance with the decisions of earlier emperors, any person who lawfully obtains a new-born child in any manner and intends to bring it up, shall have the right to hold it in a state of slavery; so that if after a series of years anyone asserts that it is free, or claims it as his own slave, that person must provide another similar slave or pay an equivalent price.

- Source: The *Theodosian Code* 5.10.1, qtd. in Thomas Wiedemann, ed., *Greek and Roman Slavery* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins UP, 1981), 118-9.

3) *This contract on papyrus records the sale, in 142 CE, of ten-year-old Abaskantis:*

Pamphilos, otherwise known as Kanopos, son of Aigyptos, from Alexandria, has purchased in the marketplace from Artemidoros, son of Aristokles, the slave girl Abaskantis, or by whatever other name she may be known, a ten-year-old Galatian, for the sum of 280 silver *denarii*. M. Aelius Gavianus **stands surety for** and guarantees the sale. The girl is healthy, in accordance with the Edict of the Aediles ... is free of liability in all respects, is prone neither to wandering nor running away, and is free of epilepsy ...

- Source: *P. Turner 22*, in Keith R. Bradley, *Slavery and Society at Rome* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1994), 2

4) *Galen was a second-century-CE doctor and philosopher. This selection shows some ways in which masters abused their slaves:*

There are other people who don't just hit their slaves, but kick them and gouge out their eyes and strike them with a pen if they happen to be holding one. ... The story is told that the emperor Hadrian struck one of his attendants in the eye with a pen. When he realized that he had become blind in one eye as a result of this stroke, he called him to him and offered to let him ask him for any gift to make up for what he had suffered. When the victim remained silent, Hadrian again asked him to make a request of whatever he wanted. He declined to accept anything else, but asked for his eye back. ...

- Source: Galen, *Diseases of the Mind* 4, qtd. in Thomas Wiedemann, ed., *Greek and Roman Slavery* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins UP, 1981), 180-1.

5) *This papyrus records a complaint filed before the authorities in Roman Egypt against an abusive husband and master:*

He shut up his own slaves and mine with my foster-daughters and his agent and son for seven whole days in his cellars, having insulted his slaves and my slave Zoe and halfkilled them with blows, and he applied fire to my foster-daughters, having stripped them quite naked, which is contrary to the laws. ...

- Source: *P. Oxy. 903*, in Keith R. Bradley, *Slavery and Society at Rome* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1994), 171.

6) *Suetonius was a second-century-CE Roman writer. This selection shows one way of acquiring a slave:*

Staberius Eros was a Thracian bought at a public sale, and later set free because of his interest in literature. ...

- Source: Suetonius, *Grammarians* 13, qtd. in Thomas Wiedemann, ed., *Greek and Roman Slavery* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins UP, 1981), 127.

7) *The Digest was a compilation of more than 700 years of Roman legislation enacted under the emperor Justinian in the early sixth century CE. This selection shows that slaves were property:*

“If anyone kills unlawfully a [male] slave or [slave-girl] belonging to someone else or a four-footed beast of the class of cattle, let him be condemned to pay the owner the highest value that the property had attained in the preceding year. ...”

- Source: *The Digest of Justinian* 9.2.2, Vol. I, trans. Alan Watson (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1985), 277.

8) *The Digest* was a compilation of more than 700 years of Roman legislation enacted under the emperor Justinian in the early sixth century CE. In this selection we read about a variety of slave occupations:

... Trebatius [a lawyer] further thinks that a baker and barber, intended to serve the needs of the rural household, are included [with the equipment of the farm]; likewise, the mason, who is intended to repair the villa, and the women who cook bread and look after the villa; likewise, the millers, if they are intended for use on the estate; likewise, the kitchen maid and the **steward's** wife ... likewise, the wool-makers who make clothes for the rural household and those women who cook relishes for the rural slaves. ...

- Source: *The Digest of Justinian* 33.7.12, Vol. III, trans. Alan Watson (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1985), 125.

9) *Cassius Dio* was a second- and third-century-CE writer. He reports an excessive case of abuse in which the slave was saved by the emperor himself:

This same year Vedius Pollio died, a man who ... belonged to the **knights**, and had performed no brilliant deeds; but he had become very famous for his wealth and for his cruelty, so that he has even gained a place in history. Most of the things he did it would be wearisome to relate, but I may mention that he kept in reservoirs huge **lampreys** that had been trained to eat men, and he was accustomed to throw to them such of his slaves as he desired to put to death. Once, when he was entertaining [the emperor] Augustus, his cup-bearer broke a crystal goblet, and without regard for his guest, Pollio ordered the fellow to be thrown to the lampreys. Hereupon the slave fell on his knees before Augustus and supplicated him, and Augustus at first tried to persuade Pollio not to commit so monstrous a deed. Then, when Pollio paid no heed to him, the emperor said, "Bring all the rest of the drinking vessels which are of like sort or any others of value that you possess, in order that I may use them," and when they were brought, he ordered them to be broken. When Pollio saw this, he was vexed, of course; but since he was no longer angry over the one goblet, considering the great number of the others that were ruined, and, on the other hand, could not punish his servant for what Augustus also had done, he held his peace, though much against his will. ...

- Source: Cassius Dio, *Roman History* 54.23, Vol. VI, trans. Earnest Cary (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1960), 339-43.

10) *This contract written on papyrus in 139 CE records the sale of six-year-old Passia in the Roman province of Dacia, present-day Romania. The seller has to guarantee that she has not tried to flee:*

Maximus Bato buys the girl named Passia, or whatever other name she has, more or less six years old ... She is now a healthy girl [and] is not a runaway or a wanderer ...

- Source: *CIL III 3937 (FIRA2 III no. 87)*, in Carl Bruns, ed., *Fontes Iuris Romani Antiqui* (Aalen, Germany: Scientia Antiquariat, 1958), 330; translated from Latin by the writer of this unit.

11) *The Digest was a compilation of more than 700 years of Roman legislation enacted under the emperor Justinian in the early sixth century CE. In this selection we read that some slaves may have resorted to suicide as a means of resistance:*

No valuation is put on slaves who have been drowned, any more than if they had sickened and died on board or thrown themselves into the sea. ... The damage arising when a slave wounds himself is not a deductible item, any more than if he had committed suicide or thrown himself over a cliff; ... He is deemed a bad slave who does something to remove himself from human affairs, for example, he strangles himself or drinks a poisonous potion, casts himself from a height, or does something else in the hope of resulting death; it is as though there is nothing that he would not venture against others, who dares to do it against himself.

- Source: *The Digest of Justinian* 14.2.2.5, 15.1.9, and 21.1.23.3, Vols. I and II, trans. Alan Watson (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1985), 420 and 439 (Vol. I), 609 (Vol. II).

12) *Plutarch was a second-century CE writer. In this selection we read about the beginning of Spartacus' rebellion.*

The insurrection of the gladiators and their devastation of Italy, which is generally called the war of Spartacus, had its origin as follows. A certain Lentulus Batiatus had a school of gladiators at Capua, most of whom were Gauls and Thracians. Through no misconduct of theirs, but owing to the injustice of their owner, they were kept in close confinement and reserved for gladiatorial combats. Two hundred of these planned to make their escape, and when information was laid against them, those who got wind of it and succeeded in getting away, seventy-eight in number, seized cleavers and spits from some kitchen and sallied out. On the road they fell in with wagons conveying gladiators' weapons to another city; these they plundered and armed themselves. Then they took up a strong position and elected three leaders. The first of these was Spartacus, a Thracian ... They were also joined by many of the herdsmen and shepherds of the region, sturdy men and swift of foot, some of whom they armed fully, and employed others as scouts and light infantry. ... [After the rebels defeated the Romans in several battles, the senate] chose Crassus to conduct the war ...

- Source: Plutarch, *Parallel Lives*, Vol. III, *Crassus* 8-10, trans. Bernadotte Perrin (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1916), 337-43; first-century-CE bronze statuette: Getty Villa, # 96.AB.189, "© 2009. The J. Paul Getty Trust. All rights reserved," <http://www.getty.edu/art/gettyguide/artObjectDetails?artobj=35439>

Reflection:

- Based upon what you know about the social hierarchy of Rome, what are some reasons why slavery was never abolished in Rome?

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