

Life as a Plebeian in Ancient Rome

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Ancient Roman Plebeians at a Glance

Scholars typically categorize **ancient** Roman history into three distinct time periods: the era of the kings, the Roman Republic, and the Roman Empire. The date of **Rome's** founding is traditionally given as 753 BCE, coincident with the beginning of the regal era. The overthrow of **Rome's** seventh king in 509 BCE marked the beginning of the Roman Republic, which lasted for almost five centuries. During this era, **plebeians** (or common people) gained political and social clout. Although scholars disagree on the precise beginnings of the Roman Empire, most acknowledge Caesar Augustus, who reigned from c. 27 BCE until 14 CE, as the first emperor. Invaders deposed the final Roman emperor in 476 CE.

- **Time Period Dates:** 753 BCE-476 CE
- **Time Period Name:** Ancient Rome
- **Geographic Location:** At its height at the death of Emperor Trajan in 117 CE, the Roman Empire encompassed forty provinces that included parts of forty modern-day countries. **Rome** had under its control the Mediterranean Sea and all lands bordering it, including the provinces of Tarraconensis, Baetica, and Lusitania on the Iberian Peninsula (modern-day Spain); the whole Mediterranean coast of North Africa, divided into the provinces of Africa, Mauretania, Numidia, Cyrenaica, and Aegyptus; the entire lands of Asia Minor (modern-day Turkey) in the east; portions of the modern-day Middle East, including Israel, Syria, and parts of Armenia and Iraq; and, in the north, Britannia (modern-day England), Gaul, which now comprises much of west-central Europe, and the province of Germania, ending at

the Rhine River. The Roman Empire also encompassed modern-day Italy and Greece, and the Roman provinces of Moesia, Thrace, and Dacia which make up the current Balkan countries.

- **Class Rank:** Plebeian
- **Typical Life Span:** Historians have estimated that one-third of all infants and as many as half of all Roman children died before reaching adulthood. Those who survived until their teen years could expect to live until age 55-65, although many died younger and a few lived into advanced old age.

Childhood & Education

Fathers exercised absolute control over their children. Although evidence indicates that Roman children had opportunities to play, working-class children, or the children of Roman plebs, were more than likely thrust into adulthood at a relatively young age. Some scholars have argued that although Romans loved their children, they may have been more valued for their potential to care for their parents later in **life**, which might be particularly true of the **plebeian** class.

Children among the lower classes received only a limited education, perhaps learning the basics of reading, writing and mathematics from their parents. From about the third century BCE, wealthier families could afford to send their children to schools or hire a tutor. Schools accepted both boys and girls, although boys composed much of the student body. Instruction typically ended in the teens.

Personal Relationships & Family Life

At all levels of society, the paterfamilias (literally the father of the family) held the ultimate authority in his household, especially as it concerned more weighty matters as marriage, divorce and death. **Plebeian** women held a subservient position to their fathers and husbands, and sons had no authority over their fathers, even in adulthood.

Until the passage of the Lex Canuleia in 445 BCE, Roman law banned marriage between **plebeians** and patricians. (The law also allowed for children to inherit their father's class.) Although Roman youths could legally marry as young as age twelve or fourteen, most **plebeians** were much older by the time of their marriage. Ceremonies were common, with bride and groom declaring their intent to live as a married couple before family and friends gathered at the bride's family home. While marriages could be legally dissolved through divorce, most marriages resulted in children. The emperor Augustus, a strong proponent of traditional Roman family values, began granting special privileges to the parents of multiple children to encourage higher birth rates.

Living Quarters

The vast majority of Roman **plebeians** lived in apartments located in buildings called insulae (the Latin word for "islands"). During the Roman Republic, these buildings stretched up to seven stories, though the emperor Augustus later capped their height at five stories. The ground floor often contained retail shops, with single or multi-room apartments filling the remaining space.

Rents in **Rome** were considerably higher than those in outlying Italian or provincial cities, so even relatively well-off **plebeians** could often afford only small quarters. Many apartments were cramped and unhealthy, with no running water or heat. Natural light and fresh air came from windows looking onto a small central courtyard. The buildings themselves frequently caught fire or simply collapsed.

Wealthier **plebeians** might instead have lived in detached houses called a domus. A spacious residence of this type was usually arranged around an open courtyard and included separate rooms for dining, relaxing, cooking and sleeping. Brightly colored murals typically decorated the public rooms.

Typical Appearance

Plebeian men rarely had reason to wear the toga, which was mostly reserved for the upper classes and wealthy citizens. Instead, a typical **plebeian** man wore a simple knee-length tunic, perhaps belted at the waist. **Plebeian** women wore tunics as well as a long dress called a stola. Both men and women wore loose cloaks during inclement weather. Romans favored bright colors and liked to adorn themselves with jewelry, including brooches, rings, bracelets and necklaces.

Although Roman fashion changed little over the centuries, hairstyles and facial hair underwent periodic trends. For example, early **plebeian** men typically had beards, although a clean shaven look became the norm during the republican era. The bearded emperor Hadrian again popularized facial hair during his reign in the early second century CE. Some **plebeian** women used cosmetics made of natural substances such as chalk and charcoal to enhance their appearances. However, the extravagant hairstyles associated with some Roman eras would have been beyond the capabilities of **plebeian** women.

Beginning in the third century BCE, public baths became an essential service in all Roman cities. Men and women used separate facilities, and some large bath complexes included gymnasiums and other areas for exercise or recreation. Public toilets were often located near public baths.

Typical Meals

Plebeians relied largely on a diet of bread, porridge and vegetables, supplemented by eggs, fruits, fish and poultry. Red meat, such as pork or veal, was financially out of reach for much of **Rome's** working class. Practically all Romans flavored their food with honey, vinegar, herbs and spices. One particularly popular condiment was garum, a strong fish sauce. Meat was popularly consumed at religious festivals, after animal sacrifices were performed.

Roman **plebeians** generally might eat only two meals per day. Breakfast typically consisted of simple fare, such as bread and perhaps some fruit. Early on, lunch served was considered the main meal of the day, with a smaller supper rounding out the evening. It was eventually supplanted by a substantial evening dinner, which became the primary meal. Dinner, or cena, might be comprised of three courses: an appetizer (gustatio), an entrée (prima mensa) and a dessert (secunda mensa). Most Romans consumed watered down wine, and wine that was undiluted was believed to be the drink of only foreigners or provincials (outsiders). Eating amongst the **plebeian** class, of course, was less of a lavish affair; wealthier Romans might recline upon dining couches as they ate.

Typical Earnings

The Roman philosopher and statesman Cicero, who wrote in the latter years of the republic, estimated that the average laborer in the city of **Rome** earned about six and a half denarii (Roman currency) each day, more than five times what a provincial worker typically earned. By the mid-first century CE, that figure had increased greatly as a result of inflation.

Despite this wage premium, the extremely high cost of living in the city kept the real value of those wages down.

Typical Day

Working-class Roman men and women typically awoke early and had a light breakfast before heading out. If the **plebeian** man had an aristocratic patron, he reported to his patron's home to see if he could be of service before reporting to work. The standard workday lasted six hours, although the actual length of those hours varied. Romans divided the day into twelve daylight hours and twelve nighttime hours. Because the hours were tied to periods of light and dark, the duration of those hours varied depending on the season. This meant that the work day was longer during the summer and shorter during the winter.

Lunch may have been eaten at a food stall or bar located near a **plebeian's** place of employment. After work, a **plebeian** may have visited the public baths before returning home to dine and relax with family. A relatively well-off **plebeian** may also have hosted a dinner party for friends or family members. In wealthier households, women typically did not work outside of the home, but remained at home to manage the household and other domestic tasks.

Societal Standing

A **plebeian** described any citizen not born into one of **Rome's ancient**, elite patrician families. Thus, **plebeians** could technically be members of many Roman social classes; the emperor Augustus, for example, had been born a **plebeian**. However, most **plebeians** were working-class citizens, and the term took on that connotation in later years. Nonetheless, **plebeians** held free Roman citizenship, and thus had higher social status than slaves or freedmen.

Middle-class **plebeians** were typically called equestrians, a nod to their historical origins as **Rome's** cavalry. Equestrians often worked as bankers, traders or merchants, and some became quite wealthy. Prominent middle-class citizens of this type gained greater political and social influence in later centuries, occasionally winning senatorial seats and serving in administrative and military posts during the Roman Empire.

Personal Time

Large-scale entertainment was a vital part of **plebeian life**. Publicly and privately staged games marked such events as religious festivals and military victories. These events offered spectacles including gladiatorial fights, exhibitions of exotic animals and relatively lowbrow dramatic and pantomime performances. Chariot racing was also wildly popular, with fans sometimes rabidly supporting one of the city's traditional four racing factions: the greens, the blues, the whites, and the reds. Throughout **Rome's** history, the number of games continually increased as politicians attempted to curry **plebeian** favor or votes or placate the masses.

Religious Life

Although formal religion played a significant role in determining Roman culture and politics, **plebeians** had little direct involvement in the complex traditional sacrifices and ceremonies that informed Roman religion. This is because priests came from the upper classes, and priesthoods held political and financial weight. However, **plebeians** typically honored local spirits called numina, which were thought to protect specific places, items or activities. Household spirits called lares and penates also held great significance for Romans, who believed that these beings protected their homes and families. Accordingly, many Roman homes had shrines honoring these spiritual beings. Numerous religious festivals, sometimes accompanied by games, marked the Roman calendar, and many of **Rome's** public buildings were officially temples.

As **Rome's** geographic control expanded, foreign cults became popular in the city. Romans pursued these religions alongside traditional practices. During the Roman Empire, emperors began declaring themselves gods and thus winning religious devotion. By the empire's late periods, Christianity had growth from cult status to become the state religion.

Political Life

As Roman citizens, **plebeian** men had the opportunity to vote. Although **plebeians** were initially barred from the Roman Senate, in time, they gained the right to sit on that body and to stand for major political office. Special elected officials, called tribunes of the plebs, worked to protect the interests of **plebeians**. At first, only five tribunes existed, but that number had increased to ten by the mid-fifth century BCE. Only **plebeians** could hold the office, which carried the unique power of absolute veto over any other political action undertaken within the city. At the height of the Republic, holding a place in the tribunacy granted entry into the Senate. However, the office lost much of its clout during the **Rome's** empirical period.

Some **plebeians** formed mutually beneficial political relationships with upper-class Romans in a system known as clientela. In return for legal, social or even financial assistance from an upper-class patronus, a **plebeian** cliens offered visible support by accompanying his patron to the Roman forum, voting for him in elections or performing other duties as

requested.

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