

Patricians and Plebeians Background Information

“When the Roman Republic 1st began in 509 B.C., power was in the hands of the wealthy landowners—the Patricians. The common people, or the Plebeians, had many complaints. They had little voice in the government. They were treated unfairly under the law, and punishments were often severe. They had to pay high interest rates on loans, and could not marry patricians. Between 494 B.C. and 287 B.C. the plebeians struggled to gain equality with the patricians. This period of time was known as the ‘Conflict of the Orders’. The main reason equality was finally achieved was that plebeians were needed for the army and navy. “

Discuss: Why do you think this forced the patricians to give plebeians the rights they demanded?

Who were the citizens in ancient Rome? If you had lived in ancient times, you could have applied to become a Roman citizen.

There were two types of people in ancient Rome - citizens and non-citizens.

Roman law changed several times over the centuries on who could be a citizen and who couldn't. For a while, plebeians (common people) were not citizens. Only patricians (noble class, wealthy landowners, from old families) could be citizens. That law changed. For a while, plebeians could not marry patricians. That law changed. For a while, any children born from two parents who were not both citizens could not be citizens. That law was adjusted so that people could apply to become a Roman citizen. Rome was after purity. But they kept adjusting the laws to suit the times.

Being a citizen of Rome carried legal and social advantages. Some of those advantages included:

- The right to vote
- The right to hold office
- The right to make contracts
- The right to own property
- The right to have a lawful marriage
- The right to have children of any such marriage become Roman citizens automatically
- The right not to pay some taxes, especially local taxes
- The right to sue in court and be sued
- The right to defend oneself in court
- The right to have a legal trial with a judge; the right to appeal a decision
- No Roman citizen could be tortured, whipped, or receive the death penalty (unless found guilty of treason)

Were women citizens? That's a really good question. There is not a very clear answer. In ancient Rome, women fell into their own category. There were three classes of women - full citizen, foreign (alien) and slave. Women, whether they were a "full citizen" or not, could not vote or hold office. For hundreds of years, women could not own property, inherit goods, sign a contract, work outside the home, or run a business. They could not defend themselves in court. They had no rights. A woman was under the full authority of her husband's head of his family (oldest male) and had no legal say in much of anything. So, although women might be given the title of full citizen, they did not have the rights of a full citizen. The title was mostly for the purpose of marriage. The purpose of marriage in ancient Rome was to produce citizens. If a Roman citizen (male) wanted his children to automatically be Roman citizens themselves, he had to marry the daughter of two Roman citizens. There were other ways for his children to become citizens, but that was the easiest.

Were slaves citizens? No.

Were children citizens? That depended upon the status of their parents. If both parents were Roman citizens, then yes. Otherwise, no. That law was relaxed as well as time went on; for example, children of freed slaves could apply to become citizens. Even if both parents were Roman citizens, children had no rights. Boys of Roman citizens went through a ceremony when they were 16 or 17, depending upon how close their birthday was to March 17th, and at that time became citizens of Rome with full benefits. Girls put away their childhood things on the eve of their wedding day, and may have been given the title of citizen, but like their mothers, did not have the rights of a citizen. (from CMAPP handout)