



# Ancient Rome: Plebeians and Patricians



# Daily Life in the Roman Republic

## PATRICIANS

### **Pater Familias:**

In Roman society, everybody in one family lived in one home, including the great grandparents, grandparents, parents and kids. The head of the family was the oldest male. That could be the father, the grandfather, or perhaps even an uncle! The head of the family was called the **pater familias**.

Each family had slightly different customs and rules, because the head of the family had the power to decide what those rules were for his family. He owned the property, and had total authority, the power of life and death, over every member of his household. Even when his children became adults, he was still the boss. But, he was also responsible for the actions of any member of his household. He could order a kid or a grown-up out of his house, but if they committed a crime, he might be punished for something they did.

### **WOMEN:**

A woman had no authority. Her job was to take care of the house and to have children. During the Republic, divorce was unknown. You married for life. It was important for a woman to choose her husband well, if she was allowed a choice.

### **OLD AGE:**

The ancient Romans greatly respected and cared for their elderly. When the older members of a family became too tired for other activities, they could always play with their grandchildren and great grandchildren, who had all been born under their roof, and would one day be honoring them at the **Parentalia**, the festival of the dead.

### **ROMAN HOUSES:**

The upper class Romans (patricians) lived very comfortably. Their homes were single-family homes, which in ancient Rome meant the great grandparents, grandparents, parents, and kids of one family lived in a home together. Homes were made, quite often, of brick with red tile roofs, with rooms arranged around a central courtyard, called the atrium. The windows and balconies faced the courtyard, not the street, to keep homes safe from burglars. There were paintings on the walls and beautiful mosaics on the floor. There was very little furniture, and no carpeting. Wealthy Romans might have a house with a front door, bedrooms, an office, a kitchen, a dining room, a garden, a temple, a toilet, a private bath, and an atrium—the center of home life.

### **SLAVES:**

Wealthy ancient Romans had slaves. In some homes, slaves were treated like valued servants. In others, they were severely abused. Slaves kept the furnaces burning in the bath houses, cooked meals in smoking chimneys in the kitchens, cleaned, sewed, and did the household and garden labor for wealthy Romans. Intelligent and gifted slaves also tutored the kids (those kids who studied their subjects at home), kept the accounts, and sometimes ran vast farm estates or commercial departments of their masters' firms.

### **FOOD:**

During the Republic, Romans ate mostly vegetables, and dined very simply. Meals were prepared by the mother or by female slaves under her direction. A table was set up in the atrium of the house. The father, mother, and children sat on stools around the table. Often the kids waited on their parents. Table knives and forks were unknown, but the Romans had spoons like ours today. Before food was served, it was cut into finger food, and eaten by using your fingers or a spoon. In the last two centuries of the Republic, this simple style of living changed a bit. A separate dining room was designed. In place of benches or stools, there were dining couches.

## **FASHION:**

The very early Romans wore a toga. It looked like a white sheet nine yards long. Togas were arranged very carefully, in a stylish way. Togas fell out of style rather early. They switched to cotton tunics in the summer and warm wool tunics in the winter. Women enjoyed gazing at themselves in mirrors of highly polished metal (not glass). The ancient Roman women loved ornate necklaces, pins, earrings, bracelets and friendship rings. Pearls were favorites. Women often dyed their hair, usually golden-red. They used false hairpieces to make their hair thicker or longer. Sometimes, Roman women wore their hair up, in carefully arranged styles, held with jeweled hairpins. Sometimes they wore it down, curled in ringlets. Parasols were used, or women might carry fans made of peacock feathers, wood or stretched linen. Women's street shoes were made of leather, like a man's. In the house, most Romans (men and women) wore sandals. Women's sandals were brightly colored. Some were even decorated with pearls.

## **KIDS:**

Kids from wealthy families did not work or help around the house. They had slaves who did all the work for them, so they had lots of time to play. Their games included balls, board games, hobbyhorses, kites, and tiny models of people and animals. The ancient Romans played with hoops, with pieces of metal on them, like bells, to jingle and warn people in their way. Boys walked on stilts and played games with balls. They played tic-tac-toe, and a game called "knucklebones," which is a lot like jacks, only played with bones. The boys played war-type games. They played war, and fought with wooden swords, quite fiercely. The game of "Troy" (lusus Troiae) was a team thing involving resisting a whole pack of kids outnumbering you, who'd try to drag you across a line. The girls played with rags dolls and dolls of wax or clay. Some dolls even had jointed legs and arms. The girls played board and ball games, and even lifted weights.

## **PETS:**

Dogs were common and favorite pets. Cats were not kept as pets under the Republic. They did keep several kinds of birds as pets, though, including pigeons, ducks, quail, and geese.

# Daily Life in the Roman Republic

## PLEBEIANS (PLEBS)

The plebeian group included everyone in ancient Rome (except for the nobility, the patricians) from well-to-do tradesmen all the way down to the very poor.

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In the Plebeian class, the family was structured in the same way as it was in Patrician families. Everybody in one family lived under one roof. Women had no authority except in the home. Old age was honored. The head of the family was the oldest male, called the **pater familias**. In poor families, the head of the house might decide to put a sick baby out to die or to sell grown-ups in his family into slavery, because there wasn't enough food to feed everyone. That was his right. In ancient Rome, this was not a crime. The poor, unless they went out, went to bed as soon as it got dark. They could not afford to keep oil lamps burning. The poor worked constantly.

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### **WEALTHY PLEBEIANS:**

For wealthy plebs, life was very similar to that of the patricians. Well-to-do tradesmen and their families lived in homes with an atrium. They had slaves who did the work. They dressed the same as the patricians. However, a wealthy plebeian family and a wealthy patrician family did not meet socially, although in 445B.C.E, a new law was written that said it was no longer illegal for plebs and patricians to marry.

### **PLEBEIAN HOMES:**

Many plebeians lived in apartments, called flats, above or behind their shops. Even fairly well to do tradesmen might chose to live in an apartment-building compound over their store, with perhaps renters on the upper stories. Their own apartments might be quite roomy, sanitary and pleasant, occasionally with running water. But others were not that nice.

In the poorer apartments, an entire family (grandparents, parents, and children) might all be crowded into one room, without running water. They had to haul their water in from public facilities. Fire was a very real threat because people were cooking meals in crowded quarters, and many of the flats were made of wood. They did not have toilets. They had to use public latrines (toilets). The lower class Romans (plebeians) might have a breakfast of bread, dry or dipped in wine, and water. Sometimes olives, cheese, or raisins were sprinkled on the bread.

## Comparing and Contrasting Patricians and Plebeians

**Directions:** List 5 differences and 5 similarities between the Plebeians and Patricians. Make sure they are complete sentences!!

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