

## Social structure and mobility, Greece and Rome

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As a rule, the socioeconomic profile of ancient states resembled that of modern Third World countries: a thin veneer of privilege at the top, virtually no middle class, and a vast underclass toiling away at the bottom. The prevalence of slavery in antiquity further complicates this picture, and distinctions between slaves and the free-born poor could be as hazy to the ancients as they are to modern scholars (Bradley 1994: 89–92). Movement between social strata, particularly upward, was limited but not impossible. The patchy nature of the surviving ancient evidence means that we lack the detailed demographic data needed to track rates of social mobility in any meaningful statistical manner, and instead are thrown back on individual cases alluded to in the sources. This raises the problem of typicality, in that it is hard to say whether any given instance of mobility represents the norm or an exception to it.

The social structure of Mycenaean states remains opaque on current evidence. The shaft graves and tholos tombs at sites like Mycenae, as well as the use of patronymics for some named officials in the Linear B corpus, all suggest a ruling elite adhering to a hereditary principle, but how the aristocrats related to each other or bound the lower classes to them is unclear. The Linear B tablets allow us to perceive an overall ruler (*wanax*) who commanded the loyalties of subordinate officials, such as the *lawagetas* (“leader”) and *basileus* (“lord,” apparently a local boss man), among others. Such leaders stood in a hierarchy over the more lowly *lawos* or *damos* (probably meaning “village” or “commoners”) and slaves, but beyond that it is hard to go (Shelmerdine 2008).

For the Dark Ages we have to rely on the limited data of archaeology, and on Homer and Hesiod, both of whom present a fairly

consistent picture of what Late Dark Age society looked like, although from very different perspectives (Finley 1965). The basic social unit was the household (*oikos*), dominated by the oldest male member (typified by Odysseus in the *Odyssey*). Society had become heavily localized into small villages where the highest recognized authority was the *basileus*. Homer presents the elite as sharing a set of values based on competition for priority in battlefield performance, public speaking, and athletics. Personal ties of guest-friendship (*xenia*), which included the practice of gift-giving, connected these “lords” to each other across local or regional boundaries. In Homer, behind the heroic *basileis*, stood an undifferentiated mass (*plethos*) of commoners, whose main representative in the *Iliad*, Thersites, is held up for rebuke and ridicule when he attempts to usurp lordly speaking privileges at an assembly (Hom. *Il.* 211–77). In the *Odyssey*, the loyal swineherd Eumaeus displays a habit of deference in his dealings with his betters. Hesiod, speaking in the persona of a struggling farmer, berates the privileged class for its greed, corruption, and injustice, which reflects the sort of social tensions that were to persist throughout much of Greek history. There is little in either poem to suggest that mobility between the classes was common, or even possible, with the exception of a rapid downward descent into slavery, if captured in war or during a raid.

The major changes brought about by the emergence of the *polis* and the expansion of the Greek world by the colonization movement of the Archaic Age carried social ramifications, though the details are often difficult to discern. The *polis* reserved full membership of the community to adult male citizens and excluded slaves, women, and foreigners. But even within the citizen body, deep social divisions persisted. The rise of popular leaders from among the aristocratic classes in the seventh century (the tyrants) echoes these tensions. Athens, the city about which we are best informed, had long been in the grip of an

exclusive ruling class based on birth (the *Eupatridai*, “sons of good fathers”). These men monopolized the political institutions, exerted judicial authority, and dominated the socioeconomic landscape by a combination of debt-slavery and a form of indentured servitude termed *hektemoragē* (“sixth-parts”). Other institutions, such as the clan (*genos*) or brotherhood (*phratry*) likely functioned to tie members of the different classes together in ways that remain murky to us, but which likely ensured Eupatrid ascendancy. It is not firmly established whether these social mechanisms stretched all the way back into the Mycenaean period or emerged only the Dark Ages, but discontent among the common population with their exclusionary character appears to have grown intense by the late seventh century, as suggested by the attempted tyranny of Kylon (ca. 632 BCE), the law code of Drakon (ca. 620), and the reforms of Solon (ca. 594–570).

Solon abolished both debt-slavery and *hektemoragē*, and restructured Athenian society along lines of wealth rather than birth. He tied office-holding to minimum property qualifications: “Five hundred bushelmen” (*pentakosiomedimnoi*), “horsemen” (*hippeis*), “yokemen” (*zeugitai*) and “hired workers” (*thetes*). While primarily political in nature, these Solonic categories give us a window onto the social landscape of Archaic Athens, from the landless poor to the large estate owners. Solon also encouraged trade and manufacturing, which enticed foreign residents (*metics*) to settle permanently and added another stratum to Athenian society. He appears to have left the clans and *phratries* untouched, so that they continued to be important facets of the Athenian social system well into the Classical age.

As a rule, full membership in a Greek state was jealously guarded by the citizen body. PERIKLES notoriously introduced a law in 451/50 requiring citizens to show that both parents were of pure Athenian stock (a regulation which disenfranchised some five thousand people, including Perikles’ own son).

Nevertheless, outstanding service to the state could earn individuals social promotion. Pasion, who started out as a slave, became a leading banker in fourth-century Athens and was eventually granted full citizenship for his lavish benefactions to the city, and Pseudo-Aristotle records an inscription on the Acropolis that recorded the rise of one Anthemion from among the *thetes* to the *hippeis* (*Ath. Pol.* 7.4). That the inscription garners attention at all suggests Anthemion’s case was atypical.

The contemporary situation at Sparta was very different, and is harder to discern, due to the poor sources. In the Dark Ages, the Dorian upper class imposed itself on the locals and created a tripartite social structure: the Spartiates (or “peers,” *homoioi*) at the top, with the *perioikoi* (“those who live around us”) and helots (state-owned serfs) below. The exact relationship of the *perioikoi* to the Spartiates is not clear; they were likely either demoted Dorians or promoted locals. The conquest of neighboring Messenia and the reduction of its population to helotry, both processes completed by the end of the seventh century, put immense pressure on Spartan society and appear to have resulted in it becoming closed, centralized, and heavily militarized. Spartiates now devoted themselves exclusively to training for war and associated primarily with other males through the mess (*syssition*) system. A *syssition* comprised sixteen to twenty Spartiates, who contributed proportionally to the mess’ needs from the helot-worked, state-allotted plots of land (*kleroi*). Movement between these classes appears to have been virtually unknown. However, demographic decline among the Spartiates and the pressures of the Peloponnesian War forced some social reengineering, notably the appearance of classes called *neodamodeis* (helots freed in return for military service) and *mothakes* (impoverished Spartiates, or those with only one truly Spartan parent). Both of these developments, however, were *ad hoc*, and so reveal very little about the norms of social mobility in Sparta (Cartledge 2002; Figueira 2004).

How prevalent either the Athenian or Spartan social models were among the 1,000 or more city-states of Classical Greece remains unclear, since evidence is lacking.

Roman society was, if anything, even more hierarchical than Greek, yet social mobility was more fluid (Treggiari 2002). According to Roman tradition, the founder Romulus opened membership in his new community to any and all comers who presented themselves at the asylum on the Capitol. The story reflects a markedly open attitude toward who could count as a citizen, and stands in stark contrast to the more exclusive cast of Greek thought on the matter. The dynamism of Roman society ensured that the social profile of the community changed radically over time, as the Romans first gained control of Italy and then forged a Mediterranean-wide empire.

The most basic social divisions at Rome were between slave and free, citizen and non-citizen. The Roman citizen body was early divided into *ordines* ("ranks") of patricians and plebeians (the origins of both being debated). Originally, the patricians dominated the prestigious advisory council of the state, the Senate. Political conflict between the two *ordines*, centering on debt-slavery, land distribution, and access to Rome's political institutions, was remembered as "The Struggle of the Orders," and stretched from the Early Republic down to the third century BCE. The result was the creation of a patrician-plebeian ruling elite sitting in the Senate (Cornell 1995: 242–71, 327–44; Forsythe 2005: 201–67). In the following century, as Rome marched to wider dominion, a new *ordo* emerged, the Equestrians (*equites*), who were for the most part socioeconomically on a par with the senators, but took little direct part in politics. This was to change under the rule of the emperors, when a slate of important administrative posts for *equites* was created, most notably the prefectures of the Praetorian Guard and of Egypt. By the Late Republic, the senatorial and equestrian *ordines* had already restricted membership through imposing minimum property qualifications.

As Rome established its confederation in Italy, it created a hierarchy of community statuses that permanently altered the social structure of the peninsula. From the mid-fourth century onward, the Romans settled communities of Latin citizens, who had no political rights but enjoyed privileges of intermarriage and trade with full citizens, and could be "naturalized" if they took up residence at Rome. Those who acquired local office in these Latin colonies were upgraded to full citizenship and eventually formed a fourth *ordo* of citizens: a local elite, or "decurions." Colonies of full citizens, particularly of demobilized veterans, became common in the first century BCE onward and were founded outside Italy as well, especially under the empire (Keppie 1983). Existing communities could also attain the Latin right for service to Rome (these places were termed *municipia*), in which case their local elites usually became Roman citizens (Sherwin-White 1973). This process of extending citizenship reached its culmination with the law of Caracalla of 212 CE (the *Constitutio Antoniniana*), which granted citizenship to all freeborn inhabitants of the Empire. In the wake of this development, older and vaguer distinctions between the "more honorable" (*HONESTIORES*) members of society and the "more lowly" (*HUMILIORES*) grew sharper.

Movement between these various statuses appears to have been relatively fluid. Cases are known, especially under the emperors, of citizens being granted equestrian, senatorial, and even patrician status by imperial fiat and the appropriate grants of money. Individuals, as well as communities, could also acquire citizenship. Perhaps the most remarkable case of the latter is the standard Roman practice of enfranchising former slaves upon manumission (the granting of freedom). Augustus introduced a refinement in cases of slaves manumitted outside of due process. Such ex-slaves became "Junian Latins," and could upgrade to full citizenship by performing public service or producing children, or by having their former

owner manumit them again, this time in a formal manner (Treggiari 1969).

Citizen freedmen of whatever status remain an astonishing feature of Roman society and stand as the most striking examples of social mobility in antiquity. The slave in the Roman world was a social nothing, a walking dead person who had been spared (which stands at the root of the Latin for slave, *servus*, or “saved”). Yet freedmen could become so wealthy and prominent that a special local priesthood, the *seviratus Augustalis*, was created specifically for them, in part to encourage them to spend their private fortunes for the good of the community (Ostrow 1990). The quintessential example of the successful freedman is the caricature offered by the Neronian author Petronius in the surviving portion of his sprawling novel, the *Satyricon*. Here the reader is confronted by Trimalchio and his fellow freedmen dinner guests, all rich beyond imagining and gauche beyond vulgarity. Not all freedmen, of course, attained the material comforts of Trimalchio, and many must have lived humble lives. But at least they did so under the umbrella of protections and privileges granted to Roman citizens.

The most prominent freedmen of Roman antiquity were those around the emperor (Weaver 1972) (see *FAMILIA CAESARIS*). Entrusted with key secretarial positions in close proximity to the emperor himself, some rose to the level of virtual kingmakers in the Julio-Claudian era, if our uniformly hostile ancient authors are to be believed. One of them, Narcissus, is reported to have left behind a fortune of 400 million sesterces upon his death in 54 CE. The imperial freedmen long remained powerful at court under the High Empire.

SEE ALSO: Athens; Citizenship; Freedmen and freedwomen; Mycenaean society and culture; *Polis*; Slavery, Greece; Slavery, Rome; Sparta.

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