

Patricians and Plebeians

In the very earliest days of the Roman Republic, most people were farmers; no one was extremely rich or extremely poor. However, as time passed, the gap between rich and poor became greater. A small but powerful class called the patricians gained control of the government. Patricians were those who could trace their families back to the first senators. Using their power, they created laws that discriminated against plebeians, the poorer class of Rome. In addition to making all the laws, patricians were the only people who could be judges, so they were also the ones who interpreted the law and presided over trials.



These wealthy Romans had a lot of free time on their hands. One of their favorite things to do was spend time at the public baths, which were not only for hygiene, but served as a private club for the patricians. They also enjoyed many banquets and parties where they ate exotic foods such as jellyfish and animal brains, richly seasoned with honey, onions, fruits, and thick and creamy sauces.

Most Romans, however, were not rich and their lifestyles were very different from the patricians. Plebeians ate simple foods such as cheese, bread, and some vegetables. They had little leisure time, as they had to spend their days working and farming. Besides having little spare time, plebeians also had little money to afford local entertainment such as races or fights at the Coliseum.

Although plebeians were citizens and could vote, they held low status in Roman society. They could not hold public office so they had no way to change the laws. Plebeians were not allowed to marry into the patrician class, so they could not move up the social ladder. Over time, however, the plebeians slowly increased their power by making demands and refusing to work until patricians gave them what they wanted. Then they gained the right to marry patricians and to hold a few offices in the government. They even forced the patricians to write down and display the laws for all to see, to ensure the laws would be applied fairly to all Roman citizens.

What privileges of the patricians do you think BEST enabled them to keep power?

Do you think the plebeian strategy of refusing to work was a good one? Why or why not?

What are some other historical examples of people struggling to increase their rights?

Which of these diagrams do you think BEST demonstrates the make up of Roman society? Explain.

