

The Limits of Citizenship in the Roman Empire

What rights did different citizens possess in ancient Rome? To what extent was social mobility possible in ancient Rome?

Overview

Students read fictional biographies from across the Roman social system and analyze how citizenship shaped Roman life.

For the complete activity with media resources, visit:

<http://education.nationalgeographic.org/activity/limits-citizenship-roman-empire/>

Program



Directions

1. Have students consider their rights as citizens today.

Divide students into pairs or small groups and distribute a copy of the T Chart graphic organizer to each group. Explain to groups that they will identify rights they have as American citizens today in one column and limits placed on their rights in the other column. Ask:

- *What are you free to do as an American citizen?*
- *What are you not free to do as an American citizen?*

Allow enough time for students to add their ideas to their charts and then invite volunteers to share their responses with the class. Next, ask:

- *Would your parents write the same list? Why or why not?*
- *Would someone living fifty years ago write the same list? Why or why not?*
- *Based on this discussion, how should we think about citizenship in the United States?*

Elicit from students that citizenship is not a fixed idea; it changes over time. Then explain that, just as the United States does today, the Roman Empire also placed limits on the rights that some citizens enjoyed. In this activity, students will investigate how and why the Roman Empire granted citizenship to some and limited it for others.

2. Have students read and analyze a biography of a Roman citizen.

Distribute a copy of Word on the *Via*: Carpenter Valerius Silvanus and the Roman Citizens worksheet to each student. Explain to students that they will now read a set of fictional biographies about Roman citizens. Though each character is made up, they represent a broad range of social classes, genders, careers, as well as location throughout the empire. Students will read these fictional biographies in order to understand what rights were given to different members of Roman society. Ask students to independently read the biography of Silvanus and, as they read, complete columns 2 and 3 for Silvanus in the Roman Citizens worksheet. After students have completed this task, have them share their answers with a partner. Then discuss students' answers as a whole class.

3. Have students read and analyze three additional biographies of Roman citizens.

Divide students into small groups of three or four. Distribute the remaining three Roman mini-biographies to students: Slave Fortunata, Soldier Quintus Valerius Secundus, and Hairdresser Tryphosa. Ask students to work together to read the remaining three biographies and complete columns 2 and 3 in the Roman Citizens worksheet. As students work, monitor groups in order to check their progress and answer student questions. After groups have completed the reading and the relevant parts of the worksheet, have a whole class discussion of their answers to make sure everyone has read and comprehended the readings.

4. Have students rank the citizens according to their place in Rome's social structure.

Ask students to use the last column in the Roman Citizens worksheet to rank the Romans as the directions describe. For any groups that finish early, have them identify other groups that were mentioned in the readings, such as patricians or Roman government officials, and complete an additional row for them. After students have finished ranking, compare rankings as a class. Then ask:

- *Which Roman citizen clearly had the most rights?*
- *Which Roman citizen had the least rights?*
- *Based on the biographies, was social mobility possible? Could one move higher in the Roman social system during his or her lifetime? Explain.*

5. Have students independently answer questions about citizenship in Rome.

Ask students to complete Part 2 of the Roman Citizens worksheet independently. Then discuss students' answers as a whole class.

Modification

If students have access to individual laptops or tablets, have them read the Roman biographies online.

Informal Assessment

Collect students' completed Roman Citizens worksheets and use the provided answer key to check their comprehension of the reading passages and assess their progress toward the learning objectives.

Extending the Learning

Ask students to imagine they are one of the four Romans they read about: Carpenter Valerius Silvanus, Slave Fortunata, Soldier Quintus Valerius Secundus, or Hairdresser Tryphosa. Have each student write a letter from their chosen perspective to a friend who is considering moving to the Roman Empire. Would the Roman they've chosen advise the friend to move to the Roman Empire? Why or why not? Remind students to include specific references to the Roman social structure in their letter to guide their reasoning.

Objectives

Subjects & Disciplines

Language Arts

- Reading
- Writing (composition)

Social Studies

- World history

Learning Objectives

Students will:

- identify the rights given to various members of society in ancient Rome
- analyze social mobility in ancient Rome and identify how flexible or inflexible it was

Teaching Approach

- Learning-for-use

Teaching Methods

- Brainstorming
- Discussions
- Information organization
- Reading
- Writing

Skills Summary

This activity targets the following skills:

- 21st Century Student Outcomes
 - Learning and Innovation Skills
 - Critical Thinking and Problem Solving

- 21st Century Themes
 - Civic Literacy
- Critical Thinking Skills
 - Analyzing
 - Applying
 - Remembering
 - Understanding

National Standards, Principles, and Practices

National Standards for History

- **World History Era 3 (5-12) Standard 3:**

How major religions and large-scale empires arose in the Mediterranean basin, China, and India, 500 BCE-300 CE

- **World History Era 3 (5-12) Standard 5:**

Major global trends from 1000 BCE-300 CE

Common Core State Standards for English Language Arts & Literacy

- **Reading Standards for Literacy in History/Social Studies 6-12:**

Range of Reading and Level of Text Complexity, RH.11-12.10

- **Reading Standards for Literacy in History/Social Studies 6-12:**

Range of Reading and Level of Text Complexity, RH.9-10.10

- **Reading Standards for Literacy in History/Social Studies 6-12:**

Range of Reading and Level of Text Complexity, RH.6-8.10

The College, Career & Civic Life (C3) Framework for Social Studies State Standards

- **Historical Sources and Evidence: D2.His.10.9-12:**

Detect possible limitations in various kinds of historical evidence and differing secondary interpretations

- **Perspectives: D2.His.4.9-12:**

Analyze complex and interacting factors that influenced the perspectives of people during different historical eras

Preparation

What You'll Need

Materials You Provide

- Pencils
- Pens

Required Technology

- Internet Access: Required
- Tech Setup: 1 computer per classroom, Projector

Physical Space

- Classroom

Grouping

- Large-group instruction
- Small-group instruction

Resources Provided: Handouts & Worksheets

- [T Chart](#)
- [Roman Citizens](#)
- [Roman Citizens Answer Key](#)

Resources Provided: Articles & Profiles

- [Word on the Via: Gaius Valerius Silvanus](#)
- [Word on the Via: Fortunata](#)
- [Word on the Via: Quintus Valerius Secundus](#)
- [Word on the Via: Tryphosa](#)

Background & Vocabulary

Background Information

As Roman armies conquered new territories in the Mediterranean world, Roman political authorities had to decide how new cultures and civilizations would be integrated into the growing Roman political and social system. Would conquered peoples become full members of Roman society, benefitting from attachment to the larger empire? Or would the Roman government limit the boundaries of citizenship to protect the social status of those already within the Empire? As is often the case in history, the answer varied, and geographical and cultural factors dictated the Roman response.

Citizenship in the Roman Empire was a changeable concept. Initially limited to Romans living within Italy proper, the status of citizen was extended by the government to various peoples throughout the Roman Empire as it expanded. Through a process known as “Romanization,” Roman political elites sought to introduce Roman language, culture, religion, and customs to non-Romans across the empire in the hope that such cultural uniformity would produce peace and economic prosperity. In 212 CE, the Roman Emperor Caracalla finally granted citizenship to all free inhabitants of the Roman Empire, ending the piecemeal policies that had governed the past two centuries of Roman history.

Yet some in the Roman Empire never achieved the rank of citizen. Slaves, the lower class, and women always ranked beneath full Romans in a fairly rigid social system. Though advancement from generation to generation was possible, it was also rare.

Prior Knowledge

[“geographic location of the Roman Empire within the Mediterranean world”, “structure of the Roman political system”, “the transition of Rome from republican government to imperial government”]

Recommended Prior Activities

- [Physical Geography and Power in Ancient Rome](#)
- [Republic to Empire: Government in Ancient Rome](#)

Vocabulary

Term	Part of Speech	Definition
ancient		civilization founded on the Mediterranean Sea, lasting from the 8th century BCE to about 476 CE.
Rome	<i>noun</i>	
citizenship	<i>noun</i>	behavior of a person in terms of their community.
patrician	<i>noun</i>	a noble or person of high rank.
plebeian	<i>noun</i>	common or low-ranking person.
social system	<i>noun</i>	process or situation where people are organized by familial, economic, and community relationships.
upward mobility	<i>noun</i>	movement from a lower social class to a higher one, through income or job type.

For Further Exploration

Video

- [National Geographic Channel: Killing Jesus](#)

Partner



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