

Citizenship in the Roman Republic

As you remember from our study of Greece, citizenship in Athens focused on the rights of the individual under the law. In the Roman Republic, the emphasis was on a citizen's responsibility to the society, otherwise known as civic duty.

Any child born in a legal marriage of Roman citizens was automatically a citizen. However, as the Republic grew, other ways of gaining citizenship became necessary. For example, people could be granted citizenship for outstanding service to the Republic, such as serving 25 years in the Roman legions. The children of freed slaves were declared to be citizens. It was possible to buy citizenship, but that was very expensive. Eventually all free people who lived in the Roman Republic were granted citizenship.

Under the laws stated on the Twelve Tables, Roman citizens had the right to vote and hold public office, and to marry. They had full legal rights, including the right to sign contracts, to appeal court decisions, and to be protected from torture. Both patricians and plebeians were considered citizens. However, the plebeians had lower social status and their rights were limited.

The rights of citizenship were accompanied by responsibilities. Male patricians were expected to take part in government through service in the legions, voting, and holding various offices. Citizens paid taxes and followed the laws. They produced goods on their farms and in their workshops.

There were non-citizens in the Roman Republic, whose rights changed over time. At first, conquered people in the various provinces had limited rights; these conquered peoples were later given paths to become citizens. Slaves had no rights. They were considered property. Roman women were almost a separate class, they were technically citizens, but their rights were different from the rights of men. Roman women could not vote or hold office. Women did have some personal freedom but little choice over what they would do with their lives. Women were expected to marry and have and raise children.

Non-citizens didn't have all the rights of citizens, but they still were required to contribute their taxes and labor to the welfare of the Republic. Conquered people in the provinces produced trade goods that brought wealth to the Republic. Slaves worked long hours in the fields, in dangerous mines, and in the houses of the patricians.