

Essay Five: Status and Identity in the Roman World

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Mae hon yn fersiwn ddigidol o ddeunydd hawlfraint a wnaed dan drwydded gan ddeiliad yr hawl, ac ni ellir sicrhau ei chywirdeb. Cyfeiriwch at yr argraffiad cyhoeddedig gwreiddiol os gwelwch yn dda.

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Essay Five

Status and identity in the Roman world

BY VALERIE HOPE

Living in order

I happened to be dining with a man – though no particular friend of his – whose elegant economy, as he called it, seemed to me a sort of stingy extravagance. The best dishes were set in front of himself and a select few, and cheap scraps of food before the rest of the company. He had even put wine into tiny little flasks, divided into three categories, not with the idea of giving his guests the opportunity of choosing, but to make it impossible for them to refuse what they were given. One lot was intended for himself and for us, another for his lesser friends (all his friends are graded) and the third for his and our freedmen. My neighbour at table noticed this and asked me if I approved. I said I did not. ‘So what do you do?’ he asked. ‘I serve the same to everyone, for when I invite guests it is for a meal, not to make class distinctions; I have brought them as equals to the same table, so I give them the same treatment in everything.’ ‘Even the freedmen?’ ‘Of course, for then they are my fellow-diners, not freedmen.’

(Pliny the Younger, *Letters* 2.6; trans. Radice, 1963, pp.63–4)

Pliny the Younger, writing at the end of the first century AD, recorded how social distinctions were articulated at a particular dinner by the food and drink supplied to those present. Pliny did not approve of such behaviour and described his own egalitarian dinner parties where the quality of the refreshments was not intended to reflect differences in the perceived worth of his guests. Accounts of other authors suggest, however, that the incident described by Pliny was not an isolated one (Martial, *Epigrams* 9.2; Juvenal, *Satires* 5.24–155; Horace, *Satires* 2.8; Pliny the Elder, *Natural History* 14.91). The dinner party, an event with both public and private overtones, was used by some hosts to display not only their wealth but also how they valued and rated their associates. The seating plan, types of food, quality of the wine and nature of the entertainment could be manipulated to show social relationships and to underline that in a given situation people were not perceived as equal. Simultaneously, these social occasions and their description (and condemnation) in literature, such as Pliny’s letter, suggest that there was an on-going debate about both social etiquette and status evaluation.

To hold a dinner party required a degree of wealth. The majority of the inhabitants of Rome and the empire would have had few opportunities to partake in such social events. These occasions were the preserve of the well to do, and provided an opportunity for them to display their superiority to the wider world and simultaneously to differentiate and debate superiority within their own circles. But there is substantial evidence that differences were also articulated in more public places. Seats in the amphitheatre and theatre were graded and certain modes of dress were restricted to the élite. Such visual ordering and dividing of the populace served to underline that the Roman world was full of social inequalities. This essay will explore the basis of these inequalities especially in relation to the themes of culture, identity and power. The relative power and influence of the individual was conferred by the evaluation of his or her status within the Roman cultural framework. Yet, as will become apparent, the definition of an individual's status involved complex and sometimes contradictory and contested factors, which could be compounded by the geographic and chronological breadth of the empire. It is thus often impossible to provide a finite definition of an individual's status; instead it is more appropriate to consider how individual identity was constructed and perceived.

Inequality is a major part of people's lives (Berreman, 1981, p.4). It is human nature to evaluate ourselves and others and to create a pecking order, even if the specific criteria for evaluation vary between and within societies.¹ For the Roman period, variations in the material evidence, such as houses, public monuments, tombs and personal possessions, are suggestive of inequalities but not the basis of those inequalities. Furthermore there is no surviving definitive or systematic description of the constituent elements or groupings within Roman society. The evidence is indirect and drawn primarily from literature and inscriptions. The relevant literature is diverse in form – letters, legal documents, satire, poetry and so forth can all help to illuminate the criteria by which people were distinguished. This literature often represents a perspective that is élite, urban and male, and thus does not give access to all people and places. Inscriptions provide insights, albeit brief ones, into more lives, but still represent a minority, and not necessarily a representative minority since they cannot have been cheap to inscribe and they show a marked urban over rural bias. In short, inscriptions and literature often present selective views of those named and identified; they construct identities for individuals and groups which fulfil specific purposes. For

1 There is a debate over whether human society has always been hierarchical or if hierarchy arose at some point in prehistory. For a summary of the debate and differing ranking systems see Wason (1994).

example, the composition of an epitaph was a subjective process: some information might be prioritized while other things were left unsaid. Equally a letter such as Pliny's was written with a certain audience in mind and articulated specific views.

Despite all the evidence, whether literary or epigraphic, it remains impossible to compile definitive statistics on status distinctions. In the modern world figures and quantification are taken for granted, especially in demographic studies. For the Roman period we do not know the size of the population or relative levels of income, or how many people were slaves or how many people were citizens. Finding language and terms which are suitable to describe distinctions and divisions is also complex. In the translation of the letter of Pliny the Younger with which this essay began, reference is made to 'class distinctions'. Employing the terminology of class with its Marxist overtones, however, is problematic in the Roman context (Alföldy, 1988, pp.148–50; Garnsey and Saller, 1987, p.109). Labels such as upper, middle and lower class had no equivalent in the ancient world and attempting to equate groups to these modern categories can create more problems than it solves. Even the use of more general terms such as 'social groups' raises difficulties of how membership is to be defined. This is not to dispute that people could be grouped together by categories based, for example, on wealth or legal condition, but one-dimensional classifications risk ignoring the multiple factors and interactions that affected people's lives. There was no simple or single system which ordered society and thus evaluating status is a complex process.

To acknowledge the difficulties in evidence and language is not to dispute that the Roman world was a hierarchical place, but it serves to emphasize instead that the basis for distinctions could be diverse and involved both legal and social factors. It is worth stressing – since we live in a society where everyone is, in theory, equal before the law – that legal distinctions were a reality. A person living in the Roman empire was born into a certain legal condition and had to live with the consequences, although there were opportunities for those of inferior legal condition to improve their lot and occasionally for others to be demoted. Legal status was of substantial importance, but other social advantages, such as wealth, power and honour, could also be conveyed by birth, as well as disadvantages. But as with legal status there were possibilities that fortunes could change, and in addition many elements of social status involved personal judgements and evaluations. The dinner party anecdote reveals that people were rated by the host not only in terms of their legal condition, such as free birth or former servitude, but also by the closeness of their friendship. One may suspect that this man evaluated his friends according to wealth and connections

rather than affection and loyalty. But by using both publicly acknowledged social and legal factors and his own more personal criteria the host was able to create his own social hierarchy which was given physical expression at the dinner table.

The following sections will explore the basis of both the legal and social distinctions present in the Roman world and their impact on the individual. How was one person differentiated from another? And to what degree did social and legal advantages and handicaps colour the lives of the inhabitants of the empire? Initially the basic legal distinctions between slaves, freed slaves and Roman citizens will be explored. This will be followed by an evaluation of the privileges, both legal and social, conveyed by rank, profession, property and wealth. Finally the possibilities for social mobility and the understanding of an individual's overall status rating will be assessed.

Slave or free

The principal distinction in the law of persons is this, that all men are either free or slaves. Next, free men are either freeborn, or freedmen. Freeborn are those born free, freedmen those manumitted from lawful slavery.

(Gaius, *Institutes* 1.9–11, in Lewis and Reinhold, 1990, p.500)

Gaius, an author of a handbook on Roman law, dwells on the legal distinctions between men. All men were not equal: they differed not only in whether they were free or slave but also, if free, in whether they were born to or acquired this status. The sharpest distinctions, both legal and social, within the Roman system were those created by the institution of slavery. Roman society, at least within Rome and Italy, was a slave society in which the major source of labour was provided by those who were bereft of their freedom: they were born into slavery, sold into slavery or forced into slavery by defeat in war (Hopkins, 1978; Bradley, 1994, pp.31–54). This is not to say that all labour was performed by slaves and in many provinces slavery may not have been widespread. Nevertheless, within Italy of the imperial period a substantial proportion of the population was probably servile. Slaves (*servi*) were the tools and possessions of their masters; they lived at the command of masters who had the power of life and death over them. Slaves could not own property, nor establish legitimate marriages, and any children born to slaves automatically became the property of their masters. For many slaves, especially those employed in agriculture on large rural estates, life must have been harsh and often short. The urban slave may have fared somewhat better. The household slaves were regarded as part of the

familia and their own relationships with fellow slaves, although not legally recognized, were often tolerated and even encouraged (Bradley, 1987, pp.47–80). Some slaves might also be allowed a level of independence and the right to accumulate savings (*peculium*), although this technically remained the property of the master.

Many masters may have treated their slaves humanely. Legislation was gradually introduced to control physical cruelty (Bradley, 1987, pp.127–30; see Lewis and Reinhold, 1990, pp.181–2) and literature often underlined that the slave was a human being deserving of reasonable treatment (e.g. Seneca, *Epistles* 47, in Lewis and Reinhold, 1990, p.179). In his letters Pliny the Younger portrayed himself as a caring and responsible master. He spoke of individual slaves and ex-slaves with concern and kindness and stressed that by allowing his slaves certain rights and freedom a sense of community was engendered among them (*Letters* 5.19; 8.16). But such sentiments should not blind us to the exploitative and oppressive nature of slavery. All masters invested money in their slaves and would gain little by physically abusing this investment. Masters expected loyalty and obedience, and reasonable treatment was one method of ensuring this (Bradley, 1987, pp.140–3). Even Pliny the Younger was forced to acknowledge, after the death of a cruel master at the hands of his slaves, that kindness was a control mechanism, if not always a very adequate one.

There you see the dangers, outrages, and insults to which we are exposed. No master can feel safe because he is kind and considerate; for it is their brutality, not their reasoning capacity, which leads slaves to murder masters.

(Pliny the Younger, *Letters* 3.14; trans. Radice, 1963, p.101)

A fundamental and humanizing aspect of Roman slavery was that slavery was not automatically a life-long state. Slaves could be and regularly were given their freedom. The widespread manumission of slaves was a distinctive feature of Roman slavery. The willingness to free slaves probably had less to do with humanitarian concerns and more to do with control; the prospect of freedom may have encouraged the slave to be obedient and hard working. Once free, provided the slave's master was a Roman citizen and the slave was formally manumitted, the former slave also became a Roman citizen. In other words, the system sought to integrate the former slaves into Roman society rather than creating a permanent underclass. The freed slave could now own property, marry legally and have legitimate children. It was even possible for ex-slaves to marry their former owners and become slave owners in their own right.²

² The freeing of female slaves by their masters in order that the latter could marry the former is particularly well attested.

The freed slave (male *libertus*, female *liberta*) did, however, remain bound to the former master, now termed a patron (*patronus*), by certain legal obligations (Gardner, 1993, pp.20–51); if the ex-slave prospered, the former master also stood to gain. In many respects former slaves (*liberti*), despite freedom and citizenship, continued to be stigmatized by former servitude; not only did they retain a debt of gratitude to their former masters but they were also excluded from certain honourable pursuits, such as service in the army and the holding of magisterial and governing offices; and if found guilty of a crime ex-slaves would often face more severe penalties than their freeborn counterparts (Garnsey, 1970, p.262). Such legal handicaps did not, however, affect any freeborn children of the freed slave, although some social stigmas could remain. Under the emperor Claudius a son of a freedman was even admitted to the senatorial order, but only after his adoption by an *eques* (Suetonius, *Claudius* 24.1). By the first century AD it seems probable that a large proportion of the freeborn citizens of the city of Rome could trace their origins to freed slaves. Tacitus claimed that it was reported in a senatorial debate that freed slaves were everywhere and that even many senators and knights were descended from former slaves (Tacitus, *Annals* 13.27). Such a claim may well have been exaggerated, serving to fuel anxieties about the dilution of ‘Roman’ blood. Nevertheless the freeing of slaves was accepted and the *liberti* formed part of the population profile, even if few freed slaves and their immediate offspring actually rose to great social heights.

Civis romanus sum³

In terms of the law of persons the principal distinction might be between freedom and servitude, but legal differences did not end there. The free man or woman could benefit by holding Roman citizenship. The free non-citizens, or *peregrini*, of the empire were in legal terms disadvantaged compared with Roman citizens. Only citizens could hold positions in the administration of those cities organized as municipalities and colonies, only citizens could serve in the legions, and only citizens enjoyed privileges in private law and the ability to compose a legally binding will (Crook, 1967, pp.253–9; Garnsey, 1970, pp.261–2). Furthermore, if they were found guilty of the same offences the punishments meted out to citizens and non-citizens could differ. In AD 17, for example, the senate took action to stamp out astrology in Rome: those astrologers who were Roman citizens were exiled, and those who were foreigners were put to death (Tacitus, *Annals* 2.32–5). The story of

³ ‘I am a Roman citizen.’

St Paul illustrates how citizenship could also advantage the holder in the provinces. Paul avoided summary justice at the hands of Roman officials by emphasizing that he was a Roman citizen and ultimately was able to appeal to the emperor (*Acts of the Apostles*, 22.25–29; 25.10–12).⁴ Not all the freeborn inhabitants of the empire were as privileged as Paul and thus in the fullest sense they were not ‘Roman’.

In a given province Roman citizens would initially represent the alien presence – they were the administrators, soldiers and colonists. With time the circle of citizenship gradually expanded; citizenship was given to individuals, families and whole settlements as a reward for service to Rome or assimilation to Roman ways. It was probably through such a grant that the family of St Paul gained citizenship. In addition, slaves who were formally manumitted by citizens became citizens themselves, and non-citizens who joined the Roman army became citizens on their discharge. Once attained, providing both parents were citizens, citizenship was passed on to the next generation. Citizenship was sought after for the advantages and privileges that it conveyed throughout the first two centuries of the empire. But the spread of citizenship also brought advantages to central government since it united the empire and helped to make it more uniform. Rome populated its empire with citizens who had never seen the city of Rome; it was less citizenship of a city than of an ideal.

You have not made Rome a world’s conceit, by letting nobody else share in it. No, you have sought out the complement of citizens it deserves. You have made the word ‘Roman’ apply not to a city but to a universal people.

(Aelius Aristides, *To Rome* 59–60, in Lewis and Reinhold, 1990, p.59)

Citizenship became increasingly widespread until in AD 212 the emperor Caracalla extended citizenship to the freeborn population of the whole empire.⁵

Roman citizens were physically marked by their right to wear the toga. Its use was prohibited to non-citizens. Attempts by emperors such as Augustus to encourage the wearing of the toga in public places suggest that although the mode of dress retained a symbolic value it may have been little employed in daily life (Suetonius, *Augustus* 40; Juvenal, *Satires* 3.172–8). Citizenship and its associated privileges, whether legal advantages or styles of dress, were most celebrated by new citizens who found a sense of pride and superiority in the freshly acquired identity. The attainment of citizenship was often marked in visual and verbal

4 The reasons why the governor, Festus, allowed Paul to be sent for trial in Rome were probably multiple (see Garnsey, 1970, pp.75–6).

5 For an account of the diffusion of citizenship across the provinces and the reasons and mechanisms for its spread, see Sherwin-White (1973).

forms, especially during the first two centuries AD. This is well illustrated by funerary memorials set up to mark the graves of new citizens. Epitaphs contained the *tria nomina* or three names which were a symbol of citizenship, and contrasted with the single names generally associated with slaves and *peregrini*. The images that accompanied the inscriptions often depicted the new citizen wearing the toga and contained symbols associated with affluence and success. Lucius Ampudius Philomusus, for example, was commemorated in an epitaph that revealed him to be a freed slave (Figure 5.1).



Figure 5.1 The funerary relief of the freedman Lucius Ampudius Philomusus from Rome. Augustan. The British Museum. (© The British Museum)

The letter L in the middle of his name stood as an abbreviation for *Libertus* and was placed next to the first initial of his patron's or former owner's name. As a slave Lucius Ampudius Philomusus would have been known by the single name of Philomusus, but on manumission he adopted the family names of his former master thus acquiring three names (the *tria nomina*) which stood as a symbol of citizenship.⁶ The epitaph was accompanied by a portrait of Lucius Ampudius Philomusus, wearing the toga, flanked by two women who were probably his wife and daughter. Overall the monument proudly celebrated the status symbols of Roman citizenship – name, dress and the right to a legitimate marriage and children (Taylor, 1961).

6 Freed slaves did not automatically become Roman citizens. If their master did not hold citizenship or if they were freed informally or below the legal age they did not attain citizenship. There is some evidence that freed slaves who were not citizens adopted the *tria nomina*. Thus the latter is not in itself an automatic indication that the holder was a Roman citizen.

A similar emphasis on citizenship and its advertisement was found among the soldiers who served on the Roman frontiers at forts and settlements where the natives had often not yet received the franchise. Gaius Faltonius Secundus was a legionary soldier based in Mainz in Germany during the first century AD (see Figure 5.2). His epitaph proudly declared his Roman and military identity by inclusion of the *tria nomina*, the name of his father indicating free birth and the voting tribe into which he was enrolled. The epitaph was complemented by a full figure depiction of the deceased wearing a cloak and military dress including weapons. The central figure of Gaius Faltonius Secundus was flanked by two lesser figures who were not identified in the epitaph. It seems probable that these represented the slaves of the soldier, their diminutive stature emphasizing their social inferiority and thus the superiority of their citizen and military master.

It would not be true to say that all Roman citizens were equal. The advantages conferred by wealth, connections and influence and the disadvantages for the non-privileged will be explored below. In terms of inequality within the overall citizen body it is worth noting here that some citizens were automatically handicapped by their past or gender. The restrictions that applied to former slaves have already been noted. The *libertus* might attain citizenship but the associated privileges were restricted. Others found themselves stigmatized by profession and pursuits. Those who were regarded as polluted, such as undertakers, or those who sold themselves for the pleasure of others, such as actors, gladiators and prostitutes, were, if they were citizens, legally handicapped (Gardner, 1993, pp.110–54; Edwards, 1997). Other social groups – notably women and children – also did not benefit from all the advantages of the franchise. Roman society was patriarchal and male oriented. Women could hold the citizenship but were always, technically at least, under male authority. Within the family the *paterfamilias*, the eldest living male, was head, and all members of the family were in his *potestas* or authority. This included, it should be noted, not only women, slaves and young children but also adult sons (Gardner, 1993, pp.52–83). In theory a mature son who held citizenship remained dependent on his



Figure 5.2 The tombstone of the soldier Gaius Faltonius Secundus from Mainz (Germany), first century AD. (Photo: Landesmuseum Mainz)

father. In practice few fathers probably lived long enough to see their offspring reach adulthood and those that did may rarely have utilized the full weight of their powers (Saller, 1987). But *potestas* serves as a reminder that citizenship was not the only prerequisite for freedom of thought and action.

The extent to which all male citizens wished or were able to benefit from all the advantages of the franchise and were treated as equals by fellow citizens may also be queried. Would a citizen born and bred in Rome really regard himself as the same as or equal to a recently enfranchised man from northern Gaul? Literature suggests that 'old' Romans could be condescending towards new citizens and that grants of citizenship to those who seemed ill-experienced in Roman ways could cause consternation (Tacitus, *Annals* 3.40; Sherwin-White, 1973, pp.258–9). Juvenal complained of Romans of Greek origin who were transforming the capital city (Juvenal, *Satires* 3, in Lewis and Reinhold, 1990, p.151). Martial spoke with disdain of Cappodocians and Syrians (Martial, *Epigrams* 10.76.1). Prejudice existed against certain ethnic and religious groups of people whether they held citizenship or not. Jews, for example, rarely attained high office in the Roman world and Egyptians were stereotyped as irresponsible and barbaric (Alföldy, 1988, p.113; Alston, 1996).

To many inhabitants of the empire citizenship of Rome may have been significant, but citizenship often coexisted with other regional and ethnic identities. Roman citizenship may have been only one element out of many used by individuals to define themselves. It was possible, for example, to be simultaneously a citizen of Rome and a citizen of a city such as Athens. This duality may have been of particular significance in the well-developed settlements of the Greek east where a strong sense of identity already existed. In Alexandria during the first century AD there were serious arguments between the Greek and Jewish inhabitants over who was eligible for Alexandrian citizenship. Although this gave access to Roman citizenship, the arguments were centred on the more immediate privileges that citizenship of the city conveyed; citizenship of Rome was not the priority. (Incidentally, how the Egyptians who were not Greeks, Jews or Roman citizens perceived themselves is unclear.) Equally, St Paul made full use of his Roman citizenship when his activities brought him into conflict with other 'Romans', but before this his citizenship may have been of secondary importance. Thus the relevance and benefits of holding citizenship may have varied according to individual circumstances. In a settlement where the majority of inhabitants were not citizens, citizenship may have conferred substantial social prestige but few practical advantages. Simultaneously, in a settlement where the majority of people did hold citizenship it

conferred many practical advantages, but it was perhaps little noted and celebrated.

Privilege and power

In the Roman world there were numerous legal conditions into which an individual was either born or promoted, such as slave, ex-slave, citizen and non-citizen. But such distinctions could be further reinforced or ameliorated through wealth and prestige. The polarity between the distinguished and non-distinguished was a real one and from the mid second century AD onwards it was increasingly acknowledged through the terms *honestiores* and *humiliores*. The former were those with money, power and influence and the latter were those without (Garnsey, 1970, pp.221–3). This division became even more pronounced during the third century AD when the privileges of citizenship were effectively undermined by the universal grant of Caracalla. Yet throughout the Imperial period, whether the terms *honestiores* and *humiliores* were employed or not, the Roman population was polarized into an upper and a lower strata with little in the way of what might be termed a middle class. A pyramid has been used as a graphic representation of the situation (see Figure 5.3). The lower part of the pyramid was made up of the bulk of the population, who might be differentiated by legal conditions such as slavery or citizenship, and even by social factors such as types of employment and income, but were united by their lack of rank, power and prestige. At the top of the pyramid was the emperor, surrounded and supported by the privileged classes who formed the upper strata of Roman society.

To be numbered among the upper strata required money (especially that invested in land), power through office holding, social prestige and membership of one of the leading orders (Alföldy, 1988, p.106). That is to say, the upper strata consisted of senators, equestrians and the *decuriones* of the local communities. The senate was the traditional ruling

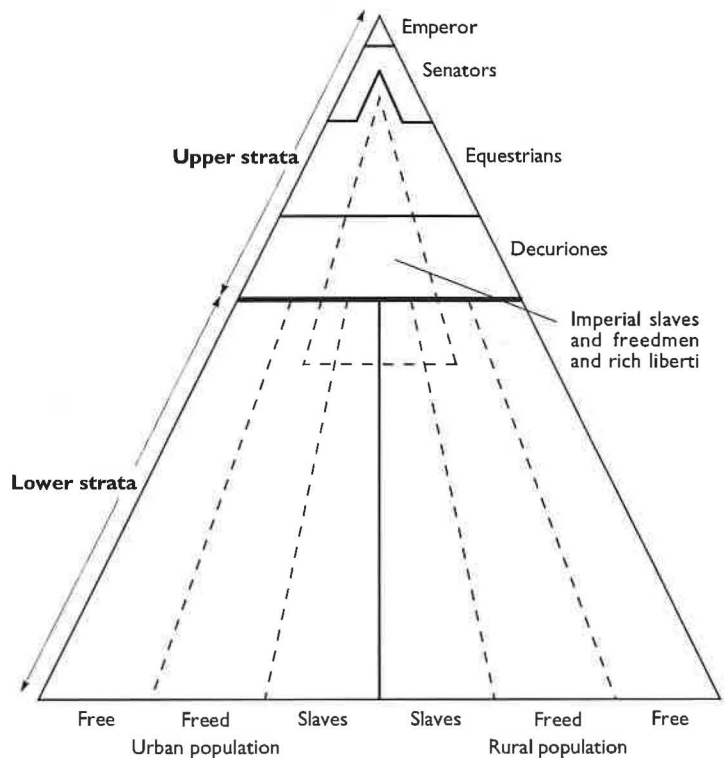


Figure 5.3 A schematic representation of Roman social structure under the principate. (Based on Alföldy, 1988, Figure 1)

body of Rome from which the governing magistrates of the republic were drawn. In the empire the senate continued to represent the citizen élite of the empire as well as Rome, although service to the state now meant increasingly service to the emperor (Alföldy, 1988, p.102). For much of the Imperial period the senate was limited to 600 members whose entrance was dependent on property qualifications and election to key offices. The senate was not a hereditary body, but sons of senators were encouraged to follow in their father's footsteps; they might attend meetings with their father (Suetonius, *Augustus* 38) and the privileges of the office endured for three generations (*Digest* 23.2.44). Despite the incentives senatorial families often failed to reproduce themselves. The senate might be a small and exclusive body but it remained open to new men.

All senators were distinguished not only by extreme wealth but by a sense of privilege and respect which pervaded all aspects of life. A senator stood out through his mode of dress, specifically a broad purple stripe on his toga, and by his occupancy of the best seats at public spectacles held in the amphitheatre and theatre. The senator also held a privileged legal position: if he was found guilty of a crime he was unlikely to face severe penalties, and what would be a capital offence for others often resulted in voluntary exile for the senator (Garnsey, 1970, pp.221–3). The senate, however, also had its own internal hierarchy. The successful senator progressed through a series of offices which entailed administrative, military and religious duties (*cursus honorum*). The titles attained and the power and authority associated with them were a source of senatorial prestige. Honorary inscriptions inscribed on statue bases and funerary monuments focused on the career of the commemorated individual, emphasizing his most important achievements. The lengthy honorary inscription to Gaius Ummidius Durmius Quadratus from Casinum in Italy, for example, lists the attainment of the most prestigious office of *consul* first before recording the other many and varied posts that he had held (*Corpus Inscriptionum Latinarum* 10.5182, in Lewis and Reinhold, 1990, p.44). Success within the senatorial order was dependent, however, not just on personal ability and ambition but also on the quality of one's connections. Family background and/or imperial favour were of the greatest significance for senatorial status and elevation within the order.

The equestrian order, traditionally those who were entitled to a public horse, gained in prominence during the early empire, when the equestrian *cursus* (career) was more clearly defined so that those wishing to pursue a public career held military and administrative posts. As with the senatorial order, membership was dependent on meeting certain monetary requirements and brought privileges and status symbols. The property qualification was considerably less than for a senator but was

still indicative of substantial wealth. Like the senator, the equestrian (*equus romanus*) could wear distinctive clothing (a narrow purple stripe on the toga and a gold ring), had access to choice seats at shows and spectacles and was legally privileged (Garnsey, 1970, pp.237–42). The equestrian order was considerably larger than the senatorial order and many wealthy provincials qualified for membership, although only a minority chose to pursue a political or military career. Strabo, writing in the early first century AD, noted, for example, that the Spanish town of Gades had as many as 500 men who qualified for equestrian status (Strabo, *Geography* 3.5.3; 5.1.7).

The social hierarchy found in the towns and cities of the provinces often mirrored that in Rome. Power and authority lay in the hands of a small wealthy élite who provided the magistrates and governance for the town. Entrance requirements for membership of the town council, the *ordo* of *decuriones*, included free birth, citizenship and wealth. The *decuriones* enjoyed distinctive dress, dined at public expense, had reserved seats in the local theatre and, like the senators and equestrians, were privileged before the law (Garnsey, 1970, pp.242–5). The town councils provided the provincial communities with a high level of autonomy and thus central government was concerned that those holding posts were responsible. Town charters provided rules and regulations for the running of the communities including guidelines for membership of the *ordo*. The charter for the Spanish town of Malaga, for example, specified that the *decuriones* should be of free birth and aged over twenty-five (*Corpus Inscriptionum Latinarum* 2.1964, in Lewis and Reinhold, 1990, pp.233–6). In return for their titles and prestige the local magistrates, in addition to their official duties, were expected to plough money back into their local communities by undertaking building projects and providing entertainment for the population. A public career could therefore prove expensive but it also could bring great prestige. Local benefactors might be honoured by their communities through the erection of a statue. Marcus Servilius Draco Abucianus from Gigthis in north Africa was honoured by a statue and an inscription which recorded his munificence and services to the town, which included several trips to Rome to promote the status of the community (*Corpus Inscriptionum Latinarum* 8.22737, in Lewis and Reinhold, 1990, p.274). No doubt he elevated his own profile in elevating that of the town.

In focusing on the upper section of the hypothetical social pyramid we should not forget the inherent diversity involved. Just as when citizenship was considered it was noted how the term encompassed peasants, aristocrats and soldiers, so the senatorial, equestrian and decurional labels cover a multiplicity of types of people. These people might be united by shared characteristics in terms of wealth and legal

status but their backgrounds, experiences and ambitions might be diverse. Would the equestrian from Gades have much in common with the equestrian from Rome? Equally, we may also wish to question the real value of these titles. A degree of prestige might have been derived, especially on a local level, in describing yourself as a senator, an equestrian or a decurion, but did it really confer any power and authority? Were these offices often no more than empty titles rather than emblems of true power?

Money and connections

Money could not buy everything and some who were wealthy were excluded from holding office. Women, where appropriate, were classed as being of senatorial or equestrian status on the basis of the status of their male relatives; women could also amass substantial fortunes but they could hold no posts in the imperial administration. Wealthy women could, however, act as priestesses in certain cults and also become patrons and benefactors, which entailed a certain amount of prestige and influence. The restrictions which divided the upper strata from the lower most notably affected freed slaves. The *libertus* never completely lost the stigma of his past and was debarred from senatorial and equestrian status and could not serve as a decurion. But during the period of the empire the talents of those freed slaves who amassed fortunes were channelled to the advantage of their local communities. Some freed slaves were granted honorary titles entitling them to the symbols of privilege if not the actual office; thus freed slaves could become honorary *decuriones*. Wealthy freed slaves were also often to be found among the ranks of the *augustales* or priests of the imperial cult. The office fulfilled social as well as religious functions, giving the former slaves access to the trappings of office such as titles and privileged seats at public events (D'Arms, 1981, p.127). In return, like the *decuriones*, the *augustales* were expected to put money back into the local communities through acts of public generosity. Gaius Munatius Faustus, a freed slave and *augustalis* of Pompeii, for example, who was commemorated by his wife, received a funerary memorial which recorded his title of *augustalis* and his receipt of a privileged double seat (*bisellium*). The funerary monument was decorated with the image of the *bisellium* but also included a sculptural panel depicting Gaius Munatius Faustus distributing money or corn to an assembled crowd (see Figure 5.4). The monument sought to celebrate not just the titles and honours of the deceased but also the public good that he had done.

In Rome itself a minority of freed slaves also played a prominent role in the administration. The slaves and freed slaves of the emperor could

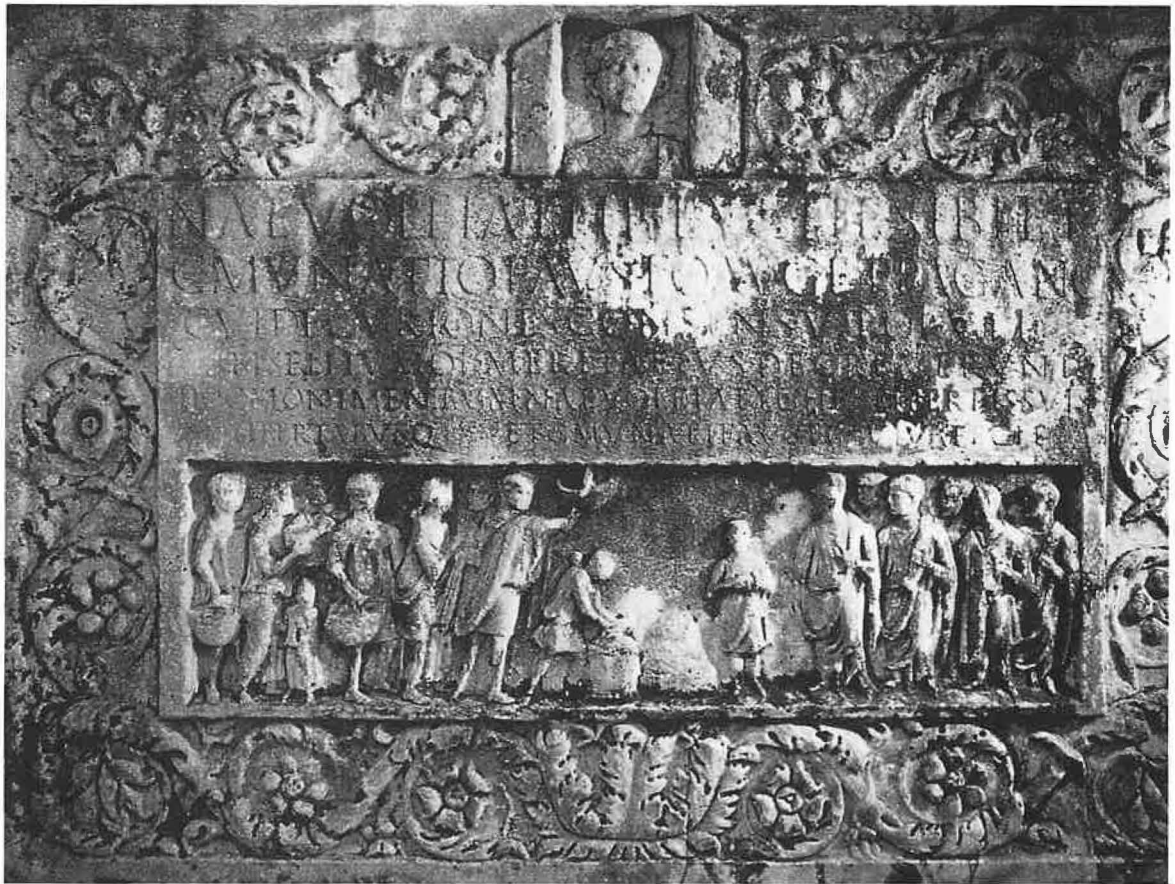


Figure 5.4
The front and side panels of the funerary altar of Gaius Munatius Faustus from Pompeii, first century AD. (Photo: German Archaeological Institute, Rome. Reproduced in Kockel, 1983)

become especially privileged and command considerable influence. The majority of imperial slaves were employed in menial tasks but a few had access to the emperor as advisers and experts. These slaves could never become senators or equestrians or be described as *honestiores*, but their proximity to the seat of power allowed them, indirectly, to wield considerable authority (Weaver, 1974). In many ways it was their very servile status that made the imperial slaves and ex-slaves so well suited for these roles. The freed slave was at the mercy of the emperor: he could be removed or punished with ease and, unlike members of the élite, did not represent a serious rival for imperial power (Hopkins, 1978, p.124). Nevertheless, close proximity to the emperor was a source of status and prestige and some imperial freed slaves could be praised and rewarded (Pliny the Younger, *Letters* 7.29, 8.6). At death, service to the emperor might be recorded with pride in the epitaphs of imperial slaves and *liberti* – the designation of servitude accompanied by the name of the emperor became almost like an office or honorary title. The positions held by these slaves and freedmen were not without controversy and criticism, especially among the élite. It was one of the inconsistencies and ironies of life that those who held prestigious titles often had little real power, while those with power, at least in terms of access to the emperor, had access to few titles or honours.

The question of access to the emperor and the privileges that this could convey raises the issue of the real basis for the emperor's power – the control of the military. The emperor's position was highly dependent on maintaining the support of the vast number of men who served in the Roman army. The emperor relied on representatives in the field to maintain his authority, and this underlined his need for close relationships with the senatorial and equestrian orders from whom the military commanders were recruited. Control of the army thus lay in the hands of the upper strata. The average rank and file soldier was not among the highly privileged; that is to say he was not a senator or an equestrian. Yet military service did bring certain advantages, especially regular pay and gifts of money from the emperor. Soldiers and ex-soldiers also had some legal advantages over non-military counterparts. Veterans could not, for example, be punished for crimes by being beaten or thrown to wild animals in the arena; and, if accused of a crime, serving soldiers probably benefited from trial in a favourable military court (Garnsey, 1970, pp.245–51; Juvenal, *Satires* 16). The army looked after its own and created a sense of community and dependency among its men (MacMullen, 1984). Simultaneously, the army maintained a hierarchical structure through which the average soldier could progress by hard work and commitment, advantaging himself both financially and in terms of prestige. The tombstone of Gaius Faltonius Secundus (Figure 5.2), for example, records pride in military identity

and also suggests a degree of wealth for the deceased and his commemorators who could afford such a monument.

The army provided a support system for its members, the equivalent of which was not available to the civilian population. Nevertheless, informal dependency relationships were a marked feature of Roman life. The upper strata were connected to the lower strata through a dense and complex patronage network. The emperor functioned as the ultimate patron, for without his support and favour the ambitious senator was unlikely to reach the highest offices. Equally, lesser senators looked to more eminent colleagues to promote their interests. A successful man was marked by the number of dependent clients (*clientes*) who formed his retinue. Yet such relationships were not restricted to the élite and instead pervaded all aspects of Roman society, with people looking to their 'friends' for support, whether they were wealthy office holders or poverty stricken artisans. Such networks provided access to authority and the wheels of power even if in an indirect fashion. The lower strata may have had little political voice, but by way of the patronage system they gained some access to the higher levels of the imperial system. Towns and whole communities might also seek influential patrons who would provide them with a voice in Rome. People could also organize themselves into clubs or *collegia*, associations often based on trade or religious affiliations, which might be supported by patrons. After extensive exploitation by politicians during the late republic, the *collegia* were strictly regulated during the imperial period. Most performed the role of burial clubs – for a small subscription members were guaranteed a decent burial in the association's communal tomb. But the *collegia* also fulfilled social roles: they provided opportunities for people to meet informally and their internal organization often accorded to a hierarchical principle. In the *collegia* people could hold office and obtain titles whereas in the wider world they could not.

Internal hierarchies, whether within the senatorial order or a *collegium*, ordered people's lives and their relationships with others. We should not forget, however, the marked polarity between the haves and have nots. There must have been a highly visible contrast between the wealthy who owned vast houses and estates which Martial likened to kingdoms (Martial, *Epigrams* 12.57.19), and the very poor who endured appalling housing conditions and food shortages (Juvenal, *Satires* 3.194–218, in Lewis and Reinhold, 1990, p.153). The critical comments of authors such as Martial and Juvenal suggest that questions could be raised about the appropriate and inappropriate use of wealth. Yet money could talk and buy the individual status symbols and privileges and even a degree of power and influence through the patronage system. However, wealth and connections were not enough to overcome the

most persistent social stigmas such as those based on gender and lowly birth.

Social mobility

A pyramid (Figure 5.3) is in some respects a useful way of summarizing Roman social structure but, as with all such models, it has its limitations and can be challenged. In particular it tends to simplify the nature of the interaction between the differing levels. The law did underpin distinctions between people. A freed slave could not become a senator; a *peregrinus* could not serve in the Roman legions. But the hierarchical pyramid was not as set as it might at first appear. It may have been difficult for an individual to move upwards by leaps and bounds, but equally the separate strata could not and did not remain static. This is apparent among the senatorial order. The senate may have had the appearance of a hereditary body, but leading families regularly died out and thus the senate had to be constantly regenerated from below (Hopkins, 1974 and 1983). Inherited birth rites were important, but these were not the only criteria for admittance into the senate: money and military and/or administrative skills were also a factor, which for the ambitious could counter the lack of family connections (Hopkins, 1974, p.109). Throughout the Imperial period men with no senatorial background and men from the provincial aristocracy entered the senate. Ultimately recruitment to the highest position in the state – that of emperor – reflected the cosmopolitan nature of the senate. The emperor Trajan (AD 97–117), for example, was from a Spanish family, and Septimius Severus (AD 193–211) came from north Africa. The stigma of a dubious past was not completely removed and stories readily circulated about the pedigree of senators. Publius Vitellius, for example, an *eques* and procurator under Augustus, who was the father of four senators and the grandfather of the emperor Vitellius (AD 15–69), was said to be the son of a prostitute and the grandson of a freed slave and a baker (Suetonius, *Vitellius* 2). Such a story may have been propagated by the opponents of Vitellius but it still illustrates that the ideal was that advantages were conveyed by birth. Thus, although some emperors and their families advanced rapidly, exploiting military connections rather than birth connections, many others inherited power. As the Vitellius anecdote illustrates, upward advancement could take several generations rather than a single lifetime. Barriers might be overcome one at a time: a freed slave, for example, was debarred from holding office but there were no legal barriers, even if there were some social ones, against his son or grandson becoming a local decurion and then he or future generations could gain access to the equestrian order and higher.

Across the empire the extent of social mobility is difficult to quantify with any accuracy. For the majority of the inhabitants of the empire little may have occurred to change their lot from the cradle to the grave. A man born to poverty may have struggled to make any real improvement in his economic circumstances. Nevertheless social mobility was at least a possibility for all, however distant. The Roman system may have been based on the privileges of birth and on the currying of favour, but it also promoted the ideal of rewards for hard work, commitment and ambition. Even the man born with the advantages of senatorial status needed to be determined in his self-promotion if he wished to reach the highest position of consul. At the lower levels of society certain fundamental institutions actively involved changes to a person's social and legal status. A poor citizen, for example, could enter the army and receive pay, food and training, and if he lived long enough his position as a discharged veteran conveyed certain social and monetary benefits. The role of the army in promoting the individual in terms of his legal position is most apparent among the auxiliary units. The auxiliary forces were primarily recruited from *peregrini* and if the recruit survived his long period of army service he left as a Roman citizen. It was the institution of slavery, however, which had the greatest potential for rags to riches stories. A man born a slave could by dedication and loyalty to his master gain his freedom and thus become a Roman citizen. If the ex-slave accumulated wealth, whether by hard work, stealth or patronal connections, he could acquire many status symbols and even office in the imperial cult. Such success stories, however, should not lead us to believe that all ex-slaves were so fortunate. In terms of their change in legal status all ex-slaves were upwardly mobile – even the slave who was informally manumitted and who did not gain citizenship still attained his freedom. But beyond the change in legal status the fortunes of many ex-slaves may have improved little. The majority of freed slaves probably remained dependent on their former masters and some may have found themselves economically worse off since their patrons were no longer obliged to support them.

The fact that social mobility was a reality, even if only for a minority, is evidenced through literature which hints at the jealousy occasioned by those who benefited from an upturn in their fortunes. The *nouveaux riches* were often mocked and despised for copying their social betters and their forgetfulness of their humble origins. Imperial slaves who had access to the emperor's ear could in particular be a source of resentment, especially among the senatorial élite (Pliny the Younger, *Letters* 7.29, 8.6; Suetonius, *Claudius* 29). What right did a man born to slavery have to exert so much influence in the corridors of power? The plight of the freed slave in many ways captured the hypocrisy and ambiguity inherent in the Roman world. On the one hand the slave was

encouraged to work hard in order to gain his freedom; on the other hand once free he was despised for his former servitude, and however successful he became was never allowed to forget that servile blood coursed through his veins. Pliny the Elder tells of an ex-slave who at his death owned over 4,000 slaves, 7,200 oxen and 60 million sesterces in cash (Pliny the Elder, *Natural History* 33.135). The cash sum alone was sixty times the minimum fortune required of a senator, yet this man would never be able to become one. To break into high society took more than just money and citizenship. This type of inconsistency in how people were evaluated by others has been described, borrowing from the language of sociology, as status dissonance. 'Social mobility may usefully be seen as a process of status dissonance, that is a process in which the social riser rates highly on some status dimensions but not on others' (Hopkins, 1974, p.119). The slaves and freedmen who served the emperor provide a striking example: these imperial servants were stigmatized by their servitude but had access to great power and influence, that is to say that they scored highly in some status areas and lowly in others (Weaver, 1974, p.124). The reversal in the fortunes of successful ex-slaves in general could be perceived as almost unnatural and could lead to scorn and resentment. For the freed slaves the attitudes of others and the contradictions in their position could create social difficulties. Some of these are captured in the character of the larger than life Trimalchio, the literary creation of Petronius (see Essay Four). Trimalchio had triumphed over slavery, becoming a wealthy and successful man who could afford to throw a sumptuous dinner party. He sought every opportunity to advertise his superiority, learning and wealth (Petronius, *Satyricon* 31–4, in Lewis and Reinhold, 1990, pp.158–60). But in fact the dinner promoted the opposite impression: Trimalchio was crass, egotistical and crude. The humour in Petronius' writing lay in the fact that Trimalchio played the gentleman but still had the heart of a slave. Yet it would be wrong to think that Trimalchio sought to disguise his humble origins. He was far from ashamed of his past and instead gloried in his own rags to riches story (Petronius, *Satyricon* 75–7, in Lewis and Reinhold, 1990, pp.168–70).

In planning his tomb Trimalchio was at his egotistical height. His tomb was to be big and brash, just like the living man. It was to be decorated with scenes from his life suggestive of opulence and high living, but also with images of ships, which hinted at how he had come by at least some of his money. The epitaph was to state the size of his fortune and that he was a self-made man, and detail the titles he had held and those he had magnanimously refused – the latter a gesture that only a literary creation would indulge in. The monument constructed and celebrated those aspects of identity selected by Trimalchio; others might have summed up his life in different terms. In the cemeteries of many Roman towns we

find grandiose funerary monuments, although there are admittedly few to rival the extreme plans of Trimalchio. Nevertheless many of these tombs were set up to and by freed slaves. Through images and texts these freed slaves celebrated their economic and personal success. Lucius Ampudius Philomusus, for example, was depicted with members of his family emphasizing his legally recognized marriage and children – a future generation of Roman citizens (Figure 5.1). The portraits were flanked by symbols of his trade, corn measures, suggesting how he had earned a fortune sufficient for an impressive commemoration. Gaius Munatius Faustus from Pompeii was commemorated by a large and impressive funerary monument prominently located adjacent to the roadside just outside the walls of the town (Figure 5.4). The monument was decorated with scenes that captured his public generosity and status, but also with the image of a ship, suggesting his involvement in trade of some kind. In both cases servile origins and associations with trade and labour were not disguised; it was the humble background that made their memorials and their lives impressive. The tombstones celebrated the successes of the freed slaves and gave them prominence in the cemetery, a prominence that they had not so readily found in life. The memorials were a product of the mixed and contradictory status that was the successful ex-slave's lot. It would be too extreme to describe the ex-slaves as social misfits: indeed organizations such as the *augustales* aimed to give them a place within society. Nevertheless the ex-slave and others, such as recently enfranchised provincials, could find themselves occupying uncomfortable positions which left them between social categories.

If upward mobility, however limited, was a reality, was downward movement also possible? It is more difficult to explore this issue, especially since advancement was something marked and celebrated whereas a decline in fortunes was not. Certain features of the Roman system may have mitigated against downward mobility. Legal status and membership of the leading orders were rarely revoked unless an individual fell into criminal ways. Once a freed slave became a citizen he remained one, and a citizen generally passed this status on to his children. The senatorial and equestrian orders were sometimes purged of unworthy members, but the majority held the status for life and passed on the privileges to the next generation. Changes in social rather than legal status were another matter. Authority and respect may have diminished with old age and the passage of time: the elderly were supposed to be respected but failing health could leave even the eminent dependent on others (Valerius Maximus, *Memorable Doings and Sayings* 2, 19; Seneca, *Letters* 12; Pliny, *Letters* 8.18). An individual's financial situation and the power and prestige obtained from this might also fluctuate. Extravagant living could easily diminish a fortune (Juvenal, *Satires* 8). For some the patronage system may have provided a

safety net, keeping the individual solvent in terms of both finance and respect. There is some evidence that if senators and their families fell on hard times the emperor would provide assistance (Suetonius, *Augustus* 41; *Vespasian* 17). Admittedly such acts of generosity not only saved the individuals involved from embarrassment but showed the emperor in a favourable light as a benefactor and patron. The dignity of the senatorial order commanded that its members could not be destitute and any indebtedness tied the senator closer to the emperor. For the bulk of the population economic fortune was fundamental in ensuring stability and security, or indeed the lack of it. How frequent or drastic changes in fortune were, whether for the better or the worse, is difficult to gauge. We hear of people living in abject poverty and of others motivated by greed seeking to improve their lot at any cost (Ovid, *Metamorphoses* 9.669–81; Juvenal, *Satires* 3 and 14). But many of these anecdotes are part of the rhetoric of moral decline, of claims that things were no longer as good as they used to be, that morality and virtue had been replaced by avarice and selfishness, that unprincipled foreigners and freedmen prospered while the honest citizen struggled to survive. Once more resentment at the mobility of those perceived as undeserving by some obscures the overall picture.

Evaluating status?

The story of Trimalchio illustrates the difficulty of providing a simple description of the status hierarchy in the Roman environment. In his own home Trimalchio was king, exerting power and authority over all members of his household. He entertained lavishly and was respected by his peers. Yet in the wider world Trimalchio was legally and socially handicapped by his former servitude. He may have been as wealthy as a senator but he could never be a senator. How people would have regarded Trimalchio and reacted to him would have depended on their own status – the evaluation of others was a relative process. Purcell has emphasized how status varied enormously depending on the observer and on the place (Purcell, 1983, p.126). Status itself is a vague word and an imprecise concept (Finley, 1985, p.45). Thus among certain people and in certain situations Trimalchio had high status, while with other people and in other circumstances he had low status. Extreme disparities in status may have caused social difficulties, but many people may have faced inconsistencies in how they were treated and also in how they treated others in the course of their daily lives. A master baker, for example, may have exerted power and authority over a substantial workforce who would view him as a superior, whereas the same man might be despised by others for his association with labour. A wife of a

senator might oversee a substantial slave household and be respected by many, yet she was still subordinate to her husband's authority.

Status was multi-dimensional. For some people many dimensions worked in their favour. A senator, for example, was by definition a wealthy adult male, distinguished and a Roman citizen. On this basis the senator could command and expect deferential treatment. His status was physically expressed through his financial ability to afford an extravagant lifestyle and to support a large number of dependants. His superior position was further reinforced through exclusive access to certain status symbols such as distinctive dress and legal privileges. At the other extreme some people commanded very little status. For example, a slave who belonged to a poor peasant was not a citizen, was bereft of his freedom, owned no property and thus had access to no physical status symbols. Many inhabitants of the empire, however, may have rated highly on some status dimensions and lowly on others. An individual might hold citizenship but be poor, or be wealthy but not a citizen and so forth. This combining of factors, as was noted above, could create status dissonance, but it also serves to remind us that the weight or worth attached to differing elements was not constant or consistent. The man who was a father, husband, son, Roman citizen, British, carpenter and ex-slave saw himself and was seen by others as all these things or only some of them depending on circumstances. We need to be particularly aware of this mixing of factors when we assess the impact of legal status. Legal status provides a hierarchical principle that we can readily grasp and use to grade people; in terms of legal status it is apparent that a freed slave was of higher status than a slave, a citizen was of higher status than a *peregrinus* and so forth. In reality many elements such as age, gender, experience, education and wealth ordered people's lives, and legal condition was thus only one factor in a person's status profile. Note how in the social pyramid (Figure 5.3) this is expressed by the use of vertical rather than horizontal lines to mark legal distinctions among the lower strata. This is not to say that legal status did not matter: advantages and disadvantages did accompany the varied legal conditions. These were perhaps most apparent in rules governing marriage and the status of the resulting children. But in many other respects we may wonder how often the issue of legal status came to the fore in the transactions of daily life.

Among the lower strata, *peregrini*, citizens, slaves and ex-slaves intermingled with few observable indicators of their exact legal status. The toga may have been the physical symbol of citizenship, but in everyday life legal status may have found few visible expressions. Seneca noted that if slaves had worn distinctive dress and had thus been able to recognize each other and the strength of their numbers, they might have become a substantial threat (Seneca, *On Clemency* 1.24.1). The fact

that confusion could arise over people's exact status suggests that until a crisis involving a legal element arose, legal status often went unrecorded or unobserved. Legal rulings to cover the possibility of people marrying an individual of a lesser legal condition (for example, a Roman citizen woman who had married a male *peregrinus*), through either ignorance or mistake, suggest that people were not always aware of their own legal status or of all the implications concerning that status (Gardner, 1997, p.51). The story of Petronia Iusta indicates how proving legal status could be problematic. This legal case, recorded on tablets found at Herculaneum, involved a young woman calling herself Petronia Iusta. She claimed that she was the freeborn daughter of a freedwoman, but the wife of her mother's former owner claimed that Petronia was born before her mother was freed, and that Petronia had later been freed herself. The two people who could have clarified the legal status of Petronia, her mother and her mother's former master, were both dead. Neither party could produce documents to prove their case and were thus dependent on the contradictory testimony of witnesses. We do not know the outcome of the case or the motives which drove it, but it seems probable that the disagreement over the legal status of Petronia had arisen over an issue of property and/or inheritance rites (Gardner, 1986, pp.1–2; Weaver, 1997, pp.69–71). The majority of the population with little property to argue over probably managed to avoid legal disputes and took their own legal status (and moreover the legal status of others) for granted. In theory documents to prove legal status were available. From Augustus on, for example, a birth register existed for citizens, but this system was not compulsory and did not cover those who gained citizenship later in life. Besides, birth certificates could be lost or forged (Gardner, 1986, pp.4–5). Establishing who and what you were could be a complex issue.

Any overall evaluation of Roman legal and social status also needs to take account of regional and chronological factors. Roman citizenship brought certain privileges and was sought after in the early empire. Yet, as was noted earlier, citizenship may not have been equally valued everywhere in the empire. It was possible to be a citizen of Rome and a citizen of another city. Distinctions based on ethnic and religious affiliations may also have been given greater weight in some areas. St Paul, for example, may have been able to claim the advantages of Roman citizenship, but in the Jewish communities where he lived and worked religious affiliation and religious office were, for the majority of the population, more significant in the assessment of status. This is not to say that Roman citizenship was incompatible with ethnicity or religious beliefs, just that many inhabitants of the empire had diverse facets to their identity. The value of citizenship was also chronologically variable: in the later empire, when citizenship became commonplace,

the socio-economic privilege engendered in the *honestiores* and *humiliores* division become more significant. The disadvantages of falling outside the small circle of privilege were striking, especially within the judicial system, where by the end of the second century AD a dual penalty system operated with one set of punishments existing for the *honestiores* and another for the *humiliores*. Definition of membership of the upper and lower strata could also exhibit substantial regional differences. Cities and settlements varied in size and thus also differed in their prerequisites for office holding. In a small and less affluent community the property requirement for joining the *decuriones* may have been considerably less than in a large and thriving community. In a large city such as Comum (Como) in north Italy the minimum property requirement for a decurion was 100,000 sesterces, whereas in the small African municipalities it was only 20,000 (Alföldy, 1988, p.128). People might be rich and important by local standards, but on an empire-wide scale be no more than minnows in a very large pond.

Conclusion

Status mattered in the Roman world, but it is not always possible for us to distinguish which elements of status mattered most and thus create an overall scale on which everyone fits neatly. Too many diverse elements contributed to someone's status profile to make this possible, and the majority of the population did not have their status intricately marked and measured. At times the language and symbols of status seem to have mattered more than the actual status. People could use the language and symbols to present themselves in certain ways: an identity could be constructed that reflected what was important to the individual and how the individual wished to be perceived. With so many diverse elements of status available and few ways of providing proof, it is perhaps unsurprising that sometimes people took this a stage further and pretended to be things that they were not. Some, for example, claimed to be citizens when they were slaves or *peregrini*, others tried to pass themselves off as soldiers or veterans when they had never seen the ranks (Reinhold, 1971). People might wear clothes that suggested senatorial or equestrian status. Pliny the Elder notes that slaves and freedmen often wore gold-plated iron rings in order to pass as members of the equestrian order (Pliny the Elder, *Natural History* 33.6.23). In several epigrams Martial records how people who were not entitled to the honour attempted to sit in theatre seats reserved for equestrians (Martial, *Epigrams* 5.8, 5.14). Such behaviour emphasizes the public side of Roman life and how people were evaluated by what they were seen to be and do; a whole range of factors and status categories allowed the

individual to impress or be impressed, to judge and be judged. The very fact that the boundaries between status divisions could be challenged and manipulated also reminds us of the flexibility in how people were defined and the different criteria which could be employed. Discussions and debates recorded in the literature of the first two centuries AD which address issues such as who should sit where in the theatre, social etiquette at dinner parties, the nature of avaricious money-grabbers and the evils of social climbers, all suggest that there were conflicting opinions as to how status should be expressed and defined. Attempts may have been made to systematize the language and symbols of status: legislation, for example, dictated where you could sit in the theatre. But these rules could be and were broken. The very need to introduce such rules suggests that at least some people were uncertain about their own identity and that of others, and that the traditional divisions were inadequate. This uncertainty may have had its roots in the imperial system. With one man in power the value of established status distinctions was questionable and ripe for renegotiation, even if the emperor himself wished to be seen to be promoting the old values that his very position undermined.

In short, the Roman world was a status-conscious place, where a value was put on access to and use of status symbols such as a special seat at the theatre or a detail of dress. But the fact that these things had a value emphasizes how people themselves were rarely so easily defined and categorized. There was a desire, at least in some quarters, to use such outward and visible symbols to evaluate and judge others and to create an identity for oneself. But appearances could be deceptive and did not reveal all aspects of status. Status was multi-dimensional, and across the Roman empire the language and symbols of status were not uniformly employed or uniformly evaluated.

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