



Classes and Occupations

Most ancient societies could be divided into two very large groups: the “haves” and the “have-nots.” The “haves,” of course, were the upper classes, generally consisting of rulers, nobles, and priests. The “have-nots” was made up mostly of merchants, artisans, and peasants. Although merchants and artisans were far better off than lowly peasants, they were still considered inferior to the upper classes. In every ancient civilization, there was a large slave class at the bottom of the social structure.



The burial mask of Pharaoh Tutankhamen, known in history as King Tut. Like all pharaohs, Tutankhamen had absolute power.

In ancient Egypt there were four social classes. At the top was the royal family, along with a large number of nobles and priests. Next came a class of professional soldiers, followed by a middle class consisting of merchants, artisans, and scribes (recordkeepers). At the bottom were the peasants, who were mostly farmers. Some peasants labored in cities or worked either in rock quarries or in copper and turquoise mines. At the bottom, of course, were the slaves, many of whom had been brought to Egypt as prisoners of war. Other slaves were people who sold themselves to escape debt or foreigners who had come to Egypt.

The ruler of ancient Egypt was the pharaoh, a title that meant “great house.” The pharaoh had absolute power and was believed to be a god on earth. He was very pampered, being waited upon by numerous aides, generals, launderers, and other courtly figures. Records show that twenty officials, including barbers, hairdressers, manicurists, and perfumers—were required to handle his daily dressing. The perfumers thoroughly deodorized the pharaoh’s body and colored his eyelids, cheeks, and lips with cosmetics. Some court attendants carried such lofty titles as “Overseer of the Cosmetic Box” and “Overseer of the Cosmetic Pencil.”

The most powerful figure below the pharaoh was the vizier. The vizier was a combination prime minister, chief justice, and head of the treasury. Next came the governors of the provinces, along with various other nobles and a large class of priests. Below these worthies were the professional soldiers who maintained order throughout the empire.

Foremost among the middle class were the scribes. Scribes were officials who handled such duties as keeping records and going over tax returns.





Because they had gone to special schools, they were usually the only Egyptians who could read and write. Their services were also in great demand as writers and readers of personal letters.

Merchants and artisans, and the peasants below them, all had occupations that were similar to castes. Sons were expected to follow in the footsteps of their fathers and pursue the same endeavors. Slaves had very different lives, depending on whether they worked in a household or in the mines or at other hard labor. Ironically, it was probably easier for slaves to better their lot than for anyone else in society. Many gained their freedom and became quite prominent.

Classes in Mesopotamia mirrored those in Egypt. Although set up a little differently, there were still upper, middle, and lower classes. At the top was the aristocracy, made up of the richest and most powerful families of the region. From the aristocracy came all the high-ranking officials, counselors, priests, soldiers, and ambassadors of the government, as well as the generals of the army. The wealth and power of the aristocracy stemmed from their huge holdings of land, which often exceeded hundreds of acres.

Lumped into the commoner, or “free,” class were farmers, merchants, scribes, fishermen, herdsmen, and a variety of craftsmen. Many craftsmen worked solely for wealthy landlords. Others engaged in private enterprise, in which they were free to sell their services and wares in the open market.

At the bottom of the Mesopotamian social order were the slaves and the serfs. Serfs were peasants who farmed the land. They had to turn over their harvest to a noble, who granted them a miserable ration of food. Many Mesopotamian slaves could attribute their fate to debt. A father could sell his children or his entire family (or even himself) to pay off what he owed. Even so, slaves were not mistreated and even possessed certain rights. They could take part in business, borrow money, and even purchase their own freedom.

In Greece, social classes varied from city-state to city-state. In general, however, classes were based on citizenship. In both Athens and Sparta, children whose parents were citizens became citizens by birth and were therefore part of the upper class and had the right to participate in Greek democratic institutions. Women were also citizens, but they possessed no political rights.

Next in rank were resident aliens (many of them Greeks from other city-states), or noncitizens, most of whom were artisans and merchants. In Athens, such noncitizens were called *metics*. In Sparta, they were referred to as *perioikoi*. Though free to come and go as they pleased, neither the metics or the perioikoi





could own property or exercise full civil rights. And they could not hope to become citizens. Remember that citizenship in both Athens and Sparta was determined by birth.

At the bottom of the Greek social order were masses of slaves. The manner in which these unfortunates were treated depended on the particular city-state. In Athens, slaves were seldom abused. A master did not have the power of life and death over his slaves, nor could he subject them to brutal treatment. A master could, if he chose, free a slave, who then became a freeman, achieving a status similar to that of metics.

Spartan slaves were not so fortunate. Because they outnumbered citizens and perioikoi twenty to one, Spartan authorities took extreme measures to keep them under control. At regular intervals, Spartan soldiers in training went about killing helots—as Spartan slaves were called—at will. Any helot who showed above-average mental or physical ability was guaranteed a short lifespan. The reasons for such brutal treatment were in some ways unclear, because the helots, who were actually serfs bound to a particular piece of land and owing the majority of the harvest of that land to its master, were otherwise left alone. They had their own plots of land to till and they could marry and raise their families as they pleased. Spartans feared an uprising, so they harassed the helots with pogroms (organized massacres) and harsh repression.

Roman society was also broken down into citizens and noncitizens, with huge gaps existing within each group. At the top of the social order were the patricians. They were the rich landowners who could trace their ancestry back to Rome's earliest families. The common citizens, the plebeians, owned little or no land and were mostly farmers, shopkeepers, and laborers. They also had fewer political rights, being barred, for example, from serving in the senate or serving in court. About 10 percent of the population belonged to the patrician class while some 90 percent constituted the plebeians. The word *plebeian* comes from a Latin word meaning “the masses.” Today, first-year students at U.S. military service academies are referred to as “plebes” after this Roman term.

In time, the plebeians began agitating for more equality. Plebeians gained political rights, and a law was passed allowing the two groups to intermarry. There was also a small middle class of the equestrians, or “knights.” They were originally the monarch's cavalrymen (only well-off men could afford to keep



A sixth-century BC bronze figurine depicting a Spartan soldier. The military were the highest social class in Sparta.





horses). Gradually, most of them migrated into business, forming a merchant class. Over time, the patricians, equestrians, and a few wealthy plebeians merged into an aristocratic class, and the distinctions between them disappeared. A political party, the Populares (“on the people’s side”), emerged to represent the common people, and in response the aristocracy formed the Optimates (“the best class”) to try and maintain their privilege.

After the Roman Republic fell, things again became worse for the common people. They lost the rights they had gained and became known as the *humiliores*, in contrast to the *honestiores*, basically the privileged classes. Under the Republic, all men were supposedly equal under the law, but under the Empire, the *humiliores* received harsher sentences than *honestiores* for the same crimes.

In early India, the caste system that came to be associated with that country did not develop for many centuries. At first, Indian society was divided into three classes consisting of the rich and powerful, a middle class of merchants and farmers, and a lower class of workers and slaves. Then, sometime around 1500 BC, a group of people called the *Aryans* moved into the Indus Valley and established the caste system along with the origins of the Hindu religion. There were some 3,000 castes, divided into four classes. The first class consisted of the Brahmins, or priests, followed in order by the nobles and warriors (Kshatriyas), the merchants, farmers, and traders (Vaishyas), and the Sudras. The latter group included all artisans and unskilled workers. At the very bottom of Indian society was a group not belonging to any caste. They were known as the *untouchables* and performed jobs considered polluting, such as that of butchers or street sweepers.

China had nothing resembling a caste system. At the top, below the ruler, was a class of great feudal lords who governed the land in his name. Next came a class of knightly gentry, or landowners, who served at court and fought in the armies of the feudal lords. At the bottom were the peasants on whose labor everyone relied. Merchants and artisans, like slaves, were not recognized as belonging to any class. For the most part, it appears that these groups were simply tolerated.



A fresco from the first-century AD depicting a Roman slave combing a girl's hair. Slaves made up more than one-third of ancient Rome's population.

