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# The Civil Society of Ancient Rome

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**Abstract:** *The article explores the Roman concept of civitas, which defined their society as a civil collective bound by shared rights, duties, politics, religion, and ideology. Cicero described civitas as encompassing common laws, justice, and social ties. Unlike Greek polis, Roman citizenship was managed by high magistrates like the censor, emphasizing a hierarchical structure. Roman voting operated on a "one centuria - one vote" principle, differing from the Greek model, and Romans extended more rights to outsiders. Land ownership linked citizenship, with communal land (ager publicus) available for rent. The city boundary (pomerium) had religious importance, protecting civic life. The Romans valued freedom (libertas) and upheld collective values like dignity, courage, and piety. Ancestral customs (mores maiorum) and historical memory were central, maintained through ceremonies and funerary traditions. Debate exists on whether the Roman civitas was a state, with differing views across German, Anglo-American, and Southern European historians. Scholars also disagree on how long the civitas remained a polis-like entity, with opinions ranging from its decline in the 1st century BC to its influence in the Mediterranean empire.*

**Keywords:** Rome, Community, Antiquity, Avila Gelli, Petelius, Magistrates, Collective, Citizenship, Ideology, Community

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## Introduction

The main quality that determined their society for the Romans was the presence of a civil collective, which lives on the same rights and duties, the same customs, united by politics and war, connected by economic relations, has common religious views, ideology and diverse interests. Cicero wrote that citizens have many things in common: a forum, sacred places, porticoes, streets, laws, rights, justice, voting rights, in addition, customs and friendly ties, and many have business relations and agreements (About duties. The word civitas was understood by the Romans simultaneously as a civilian population, a city space, and a public-legal organization (Macdonald, 2020). According to Avlu Gellius, the word civitas was used when talking about a place and a city, and about a common right for all, and about many people (Attic nights. XVIII. 7. 5). Roman citizens - cives, united in three types of people's meetings (commissions), acted as legislators of the Roman community and electoral colleges, they were the people of the Romans (populus Romanus Quirites), were bearers of state supremacy. Expanding over time, the civil collective did not dissolve in the mass of the other population, it was always publicly and legally isolated (Alima, 2014)

## Methodology

This study employs a historical-comparative approach to explore the nature and characteristics of Roman *civitas* compared to Greek polis. Primary and secondary sources were analysed to construct a comprehensive understanding of Roman citizenship and social structures.

The research commenced with a thorough literature review, focusing on classical texts, such as works by Cicero and Gellius, to elucidate the foundational principles of Roman civil society. Key themes were identified, including citizenship rights, social hierarchies, and the legal definitions of *civitas* (Lin, 2024).

To further enrich the analysis, historical documents, archaeological findings, and scholarly articles were examined. This included an assessment of inscriptions, coinage (such as the Denarius Nerva), and legal texts that illustrate the evolution of civil rights in Rome. The review of these materials allowed for an examination of the socio-political context and the impact of historical events on the development of Roman civic identity.

Comparative analysis was also employed to highlight the distinctions between Roman and Greek citizenship. This involved evaluating the administrative structures, voting systems, and social hierarchies of both civil societies. By synthesising the findings from diverse sources, the study aims to provide a nuanced understanding of Roman *civitas* and its enduring legacy in the context of ancient political thought (Kutlu, 2024).

Data were organised thematically, with an emphasis on how collective identity, property rights, and social memory shaped the Roman community's cohesion and resilience. The results are presented in a narrative form, illustrating the interplay between historical developments and civic identity within the Roman *civitas*.

## Result and Discussion

Roman citizenship, compared to the citizenship of Greek polis, had its own characteristics. Registration in the civil collective among Romans was not at the local level, but by the highest magistrates - the censor. Social and political hierarchy in Roman *civitas* played a more significant role in comparison with Greek polis. The collective ability of the Roman elite to rule was much higher than that of the Athenian aristocracy, for example. The vote of each citizen in the people's assembly in the Romans influenced the final result of the vote in a way different from the Greek model, as the principle of "one centuria (kuria, triba) - one vote" worked, which leveled the contribution of each citizen to the decision made. Originally, the territorial principle of organization was more important to the civic collective of the Roman community than to other police communities of Antiquity. The Romans gave outsiders much more civil rights than was accepted in the Greek polis collectives.

Denarius Nerva with the image of the voting scene on the reverse (Alimbetov, 2017) Rome. 113-112 BC. In the Roman community, as in all police collectives, the principle that the right to land was conditioned by ownership and the duty of the community to allocate land to the citizen was in effect. Any police organisation presupposed the supreme ownership of the land by the entire civil collective, which did not exclude the understanding

of an individual citizen as a private landowner. But in Rome, the right to land and even the freedom to alienate it were ensured not only by property (*dominium*), but also by possession (*possessio*). The communal land (i.e. the property of the entire civil collective) inherited from ancient times in Rome was called *ager publicus*. The rent of land on *ager publicus* was *possessio*. The norm of police life was the prohibition of enslaving compatriots. The abolition of debt slavery, which enforced this prohibition, was carried out in Rome according to the law of Petellus (313 BC) (Alimbetov et al, 2020).

The city boundary, the measure, signified a magical line that protected the life of *civitas* from external hostile forces. The space within the measure (which has increased over time) had to remain sacred, and an army could not even enter it without a ritual of purification, contacting it in battles with the coming evil from outside. Just as in Greece, the formation of civil society in Rome was synchronous with the emergence of temples. Peace with the gods was a kind of protection of citizens from abuse of the power of the people given by it.

*Civitas* as a collection of Roman citizens as a subject had its own object of possession, common property and common cause - *res publica*, which included material and non-material components, including the political structure, which was different throughout the existence of *civitas*.

The key value concept for the Roman *civitas* was the concept of freedom (*libertas*) characteristic of the ancient polis organization. Collective universally significant values in Rome were those that originally constituted a number of individual values: *dignitas* (dignity), *auctoritas* (authority), *pietas* (piousness), *virtus* (courage), *honor/honos* (honor), *fides* (faith). The self-identification of citizens of the Roman *civitas* was primarily based on maintaining the traditions and customs of ancestors (*mores maiorum*), surrounded by the aura of sanctity. Originating in many ways from the customs of the Roman aristocracy, they became universal to the entire community. Originally, *mores* represented common law, after the writing of laws - mainly moral norms (though they were oriented towards them later for a long time and in judicial practice). The worldview of the citizens of the Roman *civitas* was characterized by the ideas of humanity, *humanitas* (humanity). "Humanist" meant *honestum* (honesty, high morality, virtue) at the same time.

For the Roman civil society, the preservation of historical memory was very important. This was served by ceremonies and holidays, historical topography, memorable places and landscapes, Roman historiography and *exempla maiorum* (examples of ancestors). Genetically-genealogical memorial practices (burial processions, monuments, and tombstones) were aimed at this. Thus, the farewell procession with the deceased connected the past with the present, symbolizing a continuous temporal continuity. In the funeral speeches (*laudatio funebris*) represented by the *litheas* in portrait masks, the merited ancestors (*maiores*) occupied the council chairs and, together with the gathered *populus Romanus*, listened attentively to the praise of the deceased, whose virtues reflected the normative ideal of a citizen.

The question of whether the Roman civitas of the republican period was a state gave rise to two diametrically opposite positions: the ethical ("state") and the non-ethical (rejection of the use of the concept of "state" in the characterization of the Roman society). The second approach is particularly characteristic of Spanish and Italian historiography, while the first is characteristic of German, Anglo-American, and Russian historiography.

There are several main concepts on the problem of the nature of the Republic's political system. German historian M. Gelser (1886-1974) considered it strictly oligarchical, his concept, created at the beginning of the 20th century, was long supported in historiography and had many followers. The theory of "Roman democracy" was developed in the 1980s. F. Miller (1935-2019). [4] Ultimately, he likened the classical Roman Republic to the Athenian state structure of the era of the flourishing of democracy in the 5th century BC, and the late Republic to the Athenian political system of the era of the crisis of the polis in the 4th century BC. The concept of "Roman meritocracy" was proposed by K.I. Helkeskamp. He considers the period from 338 to 295 BC to be the chronological period of Meritocracy's formation, when a new elite emerges and uncompromising personal self-sacrifice and full concentration on politics and war become criteria for public activity.

## Conclusion

In historiography, there is no consensus on the question of how long the Roman civitas existed as a civilian community of the polis type. S. L. Utchenko believed that the Roman community had already lost its polis quality in the 1st century BC. Ya. Yu. Mezheritsky used the concept of quasi civitas for the period from at least the middle of the 2nd century BC (and even from the 3rd century BC). However, there is also an opposite view, advocated by V. V. Dementieva, according to which the Roman state as a Mediterranean empire was formed on the basis of the creation of overpolis institutions while preserving the policy foundations of the civitas Romana itself.

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