
The privileges of the royal institution in ancient Rome (VIII-II century BC)

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Received: December 4, 2021 | **Revised:** December 20, 2021 | **Accepted:** December 30, 2021

DOI: 10.5281/zenodo.6542810

Abstract

The paper examines the historical reasons, genetic roots and the state of privileges of the elite in Ancient Rome. A significant part of the various economic privileges during the two main periods at that time are distinguished and explained – The Period of Kings and Republic Rome. A comprehensive classification of the types of royal, republican and class privileges of the elite during the said historical period has been made. The respective significant conclusions on the importance of privileges in the ancient Roman society and their impact on its development have been drawn.

Key words: privileges, economic privileges, social privileges, Antiquity, Ancient Rome, Royal period, Republic Rome.

Introduction

Within the social division in Roman society during the Period of Kings (VIII-VI century BC), it is of particular importance to know how “political power was constituted”, what the functions of its institutions were and, consequently, what privileges the ruling elite had. It is about **the king and royal power** in the peculiar commons of states with their leaders, who were usually likened to kings, although the states were not authentic monarchies in the common meaning of this political term. Therefore, the first period of the Roman history of the state is rightly called “Period of Kings” (see in detail the elaboration of the subject matter of power and state institutions during this period, which we refer to here, in: Popov, VI., 2008, pp. 495-504), which is associated with the evolution of power and power relations in it.

Results and Discussion

According to a widespread view in science, the principles of functioning and the system for obtaining royal power in ancient Rome are very specific. They do not correspond to the historical knowledge about the general peculiarities of receiving and inheriting the monarchical power of one kind or another. Because the Roman state at that time was far from a typical hereditary monarchy or a monarchical system of a classical (hereditary) model. This is because during the Period of Kings in Rome, there was a special genealogical system of rights to the throne, and in general it can be argued that then in Rome two systems of rights to royal power were practiced: the first was that the Roman kings were the husbands of daughters of the previous kings, i.e. their sons-in-law; and the second, that they were the sons of the daughters of these kings, that is, their maternal grandchildren. Along with this, the system of inheritance of royal power emerges from this simplified scheme of inheritance and is complicated by a number of other principles that are very specific compared to other societies and countries of the Old World in ancient times.

It should be noted that one of the most significant features of the power of Roman kings is directly related to the existence of specific triumviri (tresviri) of the so-called “Brothers”, representing a union of three persons. These persons could be both direct blood brothers and twins on another

traditional basis, including on the basis of family closeness. At the same time, it was not so much a single person who had the **right of royal power** as a **trio of conjoined brothers, one of whom was nominated and elected king by the popular assemblies**. The elected king did not have the right to rule for life, like the ancient Eastern rulers or the ancient Greek basileuses, but the triad of brothers was given the right to rule for 24 years, respectively 8 years for each of the brothers (after this period, the power was then the right of another triad of conjoined brothers). In this sense, the functions of the Roman king were also very diverse, since **the king was the supreme head of the Roman state**. He performed all the main functions of state power, which were reduced to several main areas – internal, military, judicial, religious, etc. (Popov, VI., 2008, pp. 495-504). That is, the power of the king is described as supreme and is rightly called by the Romans imperium (*imperium*).

In connection to the royal power, the famous expert on Ancient Rome T. Mommsen points out another very significant circumstance: “We would be mistaken if we accept, he writes, the Roman state system to be a theocracy; for the Italians, the terms “god” and “king” never merge into one, as in Egypt or the Eastern peoples. For the people, the **king is not a god, but rather the owner of the state** (*bolding is mine – G.M.*). That is why we do not find in the Romans concepts such as God’s grace, which overshadowed one family at the expense of another, or some mysterious magical power that turns the king into a man of a different origin from that of other people; noble descent, kinship with the king (...) is an advantage, but not a mandatory condition; every adult Roman, healthy in body and spirit, could reach the royal power” (Mommsen, T., 2019, pp. 41-42).

To these characteristics of power, however, we will add the fact that, in spite of everything, **the king also owned part of the supreme religious power**, because he also performed the most important sacrifices, which were accepted as a nationwide work for the gods. In this case, the king’s orders were binding on all citizens of the state, as well as on those who did not have the relevant right and had a different status. These orders were valid only until the king revoked them or while he was alive. Unlike the laws, which were permanently valid until they were repealed or amended in the appropriate order by a vote in the Popular Assembly, the king’s orders ceased to be in force after his death. In other words, the king had a huge dual power – state and religious, which unequivocally meant that **“under the king’s power – according to Cicero – other people are completely excluded from the general legal order and decisions (...) and the multitude can hardly enjoy freedom, as it is deprived of joint participation in (...) power”** (Cicero, 1994, p. 28).

What other more important **governing institutions** are there during this Period of Kings?

The first of them was **the Senate** (created by Romulus – the founder of Rome), which, according to Roman historical tradition, refers to the most ancient state institutions and consists only of patricians. It was a council of representatives of tribal organizations (up to 300 people), nominated by the heads of individual clans or by other persons who had the right to represent them. At the same time, the Roman Senate played an extremely important role in the election of the king, because after the death of the king and until the election of a new one, the power passed entirely to the Senate. However, the functions of government (after the king’s death) were not performed by all senators, but only by the ten “first” on the principle of rotation every five days during the interregnum.

The second essential institution were the **Popular Assemblies (the comitia)**, and in ancient Rome they were gatherings of citizens to vote on a given occasion and were of four main types:

1) The Comitia Curiata – they made various decisions related to: the nomination and election of the king, certain magistrates, religious leaders and priests of individual deities; adoption or rejection of specific laws without proposing and voting on new ones; starting and ending wars; the death penalty for Roman citizens, etc.;

2) The Comitia Tributa, i.e. the so-called “Tribal assemblies” which dealt with certain local issues, such as tax collection, military participation, road maintenance, etc.;

3) The Comitia Centuriata – assemblies in which all Roman citizens had the right to vote, whether they were patricians or plebeians (excluding lower-class citizens without income, as well as women, foreigners and non-citizen slaves);

4) The Comitia Calata – an institution that had no special role and significance for the

government of the state, because it dealt with private issues, such as wills of Roman citizens, some actions of priests, etc.

It should be noted that for the Period of Kings examined, there is very little documented facts and evidence of the existence of **privileges of the ruling elite**. Despite this scarcity, however, some historical data can still be found on the manifestations of one or another privilege that directly derive from political power. Here are just some of them: firstly, we are talking about the notorious **royal privileges of an economic nature**, such as the reduction of the share of military booty to be received by the army and its appropriation; the imposition of extraordinary duties through illegal taxes in order to encroach on the property of citizens; the receipt of the duties upon imported goods, the revenues from the municipal lands, the fee for the right to graze on the municipal meadows, a share of the harvest, which the users of state lands have to pay to the king; fines in kind from livestock, various types of confiscations (Mommsen, T., 2019, pp. 42-44), etc. Then we will highlight the important privilege that derived from power and gave **the right only to rich noble people to bear the name “patricians”** unlike all unknown and poor relatives (and people) (Popov, D., 2020, p. 28); then came **the right to vote first in the Comitia Centuriata of the so-called “First class” and the Equites**, who always voted according to their own interests and often by prior agreement (Popov, V.I., 2008, p. 501); and finally **the division of the native population of Rome (patricians and plebeians) into six property categories, determined by the land qualification**, i.e. according to the amount of land that everyone owned (and not according to money) (Popov, D., 2020, pp. 28-29), and hence the prerogatives to participate in socio-political life. We cannot miss other **privileges – of the senators** (whose main representatives are the patricians), which we will conditionally call **“religious”**. In this case, too early, **the patricians enjoyed a number of privileges**, the most important of which was **the right to act intermediaries between the king and the gods**. Priestly colleges remained extremely patrician in nature until much later. For example, the most prominent priests were: the flamines, or “burning offerings”, each of whom cared for the cult (worship) of a particular deity; augures, who predicted the future based on bird flying; the salii, or “dancers”, who appeased the god Mars by sacred dancing with arms; and finally the Luperici, or “wolf fraternities”, who ran along the Pomerania (the sacred boundary of the city) and thus drove out evil spirits and ensured fertility for women and cattle in the community. But the priests, or the so-called “Pontiffs” were the highest among the king’s assistants in religious affairs: they composed the religious calendar of the municipality, gave advice to the king on the rites, etc., in other words, they took care of the implementation of religious and civil law (Rostovtseff, M., 1994, pp. 25-26), in order to realize his clauses in life.

All these privileges are taken into account, without taking into consideration the broad royal powers (privileges) that result from the additional symbiosis between royal and religious power (special food, royal palaces, hunting trips, etc.) as exclusive rights and benefits belonging solely to the governor. Therefore, **throughout this so-called “Period of Kings” there was a close intertwining of specific political (power) and economic (property) privileges, serving the oligarchic strata of Roman society in the name of a small group of wealthy people who owned the power and power resources.**

The Republican era in the evolution of ancient Rome dates back to 509 BC, when the Roman state changed over the years its overall state structure from a kingdom to a republic. (According to historical data, the Roman Republic was divided into two republics: The Early Republic (V – III century BC), when Rome conquered all of Italy and the number of slaves increased significantly (and they began to separate sharply from other strata of free); and Late Republic (II – I century BC), which marked the flourishing of slave relations in Italy and was characterized by the creation of the Roman Mediterranean state.) (Popov, D., 2020, p. 9). This happened after the abolition of the kings and the establishment of new, republican institutions, with modified function, although most of them (the institutions) bear the same names as during the Period of Kings.

The rise of the Roman Republic is associated entirely with the state system established in ancient Rome, which found its adequate form in a mixed constitution. It will last for almost five

centuries, while Ancient Rome will grow from a small city to a huge Mediterranean Empire. And although the evolution of this state system went through a series of political clashes and upheavals (Bliznashki, G., 2017, p. 72), there is no denying the emergence of the new institutional structure of the state.

In summary, the main elements of the Roman state system were three leading ones: **the people**, who expressed themselves through the popular assemblies and the tribunes of the plebs; **The Senate**, which housed the then aristocracy; and **consuls** who were elected for a limited period of time to acted on behalf of the state. In this sense, the individual elements had their own purpose: the consuls embodied the monarchical element, the Senate – the aristocratic, and the people – the democratic. That is, all the functions of the state were so evenly distributed among its elements that it was very difficult to determine what exactly was the form of government (Bliznashki, G., 2017, p. 83). However, this did not change the gratifying historical circumstance for the democratic components in the structure of the Roman Republic, as well as the even more indisputable circumstance for the existence of various privileges at the highest levels of state power.

After considering the institutional features, let's analyze in particular **the privileges used by the ruling elite in the Roman republican system** during the same period.

Privileges in the ancient republican Roman reality found their real manifestation in the hierarchical structure of positions in public authority, on the place where the size and quality of these privileges depended – salaries, pensions, land, tax collection, etc. (Semov, M., 1984, p. 36). Moreover, the characteristics of the **political hierarchy** were one of the driving forces both in the struggle between the leading classes in society and in the rivalry between the strata within the classes themselves. Over time, these classes acquired the appearance of **the most prominent rich and noble social groups** and gradually established themselves as leaders in the Roman state. This is because, according to José Ortega y Gasset, the old families accumulated from generation to generation lasting wealth, which ensured the creation of a typical aristocracy, whose components were nobility, wealth and skills. Naturally, all this lead to the necessary social supremacy (and “the plebeians circling around the noble lower social strata, and others”) (Ortega y Gasset, H., 2019, pp. 187-188) of the wealthy class strata, which, having the right to participate in power, they distributed public goods, public resources and political privileges.

From this point of view, it should be pointed out that the **privileges of a political and economic nature**, firstly, depended on the applied high property qualification (mainly on the land), and secondly, covered the wealthiest patricians and plebeians, among whom there was a sharp political confrontation for the highest positions in the state hierarchy. In this sense, the rich plebeians received an extremely important privilege, namely the equalization of their civil rights, in which they could actively participate in public and political life (Popov, Vl., 2008, pp. 506-507). This was a significant political privilege of the rich plebeian elite, for whose minority it was of great political importance.

As in all ancient societies, so in republican Rome the first attestation for most positions in politics was the considerable amount of wealth, or the **required property qualification**. This classic **privilege** is given serious attention by the English specialist in classical civilizations **Mary Beard**, who points out that no one could run in an election without passing a financial test that excludes most citizens. Without knowing exactly what the property qualification was, she indirectly concludes that it was limited (the qualification) to the highest peak of the property ladder – the class of the so-called “Equites” (Beard, M., 2019, p. 156). And as for the voting itself, the then electoral system completely gave precedence to the rich, because the property qualification covered all other wealthy and noble classes (aristocratic, senatorial, nobiles). For example, in a centurial commission, each centurion had one vote, no matter how many people were in it; the Equites had eighteen centurions (voices), the engineers and musicians – two each, the proletarians – one centurion, etc. (Scott, M., 2020, p. 64). That is, the system favored the rich classes in every possible way, who always voted first and in fact predetermined the voting on all issues.

Among all noble classes in the Roman Republic, the 300 **senators** were especially respected

as privileged in the country. They embodied the aristocratic element in the state system and occupied a central place in the system of government, which is why **their position was lifelong**. Furthermore, the status of senators had been differentiated according to their elected positions in their previous careers. Moreover, they had the exclusive rights (privileges) to participate simultaneously in the debate and in the voting (Bliznashki, G., 2017, p. 89) and in the overall work of the Senate.

The solid public prestige of Roman **senators** was defined and linked to the notion of “dignity”, which was maintained at **great expense for representation**. For example, every senator had to have a house in Rome, organize lavish guest receptions and create a suitable retinue of service staff (maids, cleaners, cooks, waiters, security guards, etc.) to welcome at the expense of the state his numerous guests (Bliznashki, G., 2017, pp. 89-90). What is more – usually from the **senatorial class** (or *nobiles*) **the highest magistrates of state, such as consuls, censors, dictators, praetors, etc. were elected** (Popov, VI., 2008, p. 631), which was another important right (and privilege) of the ranks of the Roman Republican Senate.

Another actual fact speaks of the high social status of senators: they **dressed differently** than other Romans, they had gold rings and wore special badges of high dignity, which were invariably recognized by the state. This garment was a special tunic, exclusively embroidered with wide vertical purple stripes; senatorial toga (called “toga praetexta”), which was a sign of their high public authority (and status), etc. Later, or towards the end of the republic, the senators were assigned special places during the public games and performances (Popov, VI., 2008, p. 524). That is, in that way the **privileges for separate garment and clothes of the senators** with money from the state treasury were imposed even in that distant time, in order to always maintain in a brilliant form, the image of the then rulers.

In the Roman Senate Republic, wealth and power are clearly expressed in the external symbolism of the eligible elites, because there were sharp status differences in terms of clothing, food, housing, and jewelry. We have already emphasized that **meat in food was a privilege of the rich**, the elite and some of the middle classes. That is, in pre-industrial civilizations, products of external, non-local origin were available only to the elite and the middle classes. These were important symbols of power of the high aristocracy in ancient Rome, such as the chariots used in funeral processions for hunting, war and competition. Along with this, war chariots were especially characteristic of the wars in the II and I millennium BC, and expensive defenses, such as helmets, armor, shields, are also available only to the rich – the military aristocracy and middle class fighters (*equites*, knights) (Katsarski, Ivan, 2007, p. 152). In this sense, we can also speak of a **privileged elite in the military sphere (military privileges)** in ancient Roman society, insofar as only a certain social minority has the right to use expensive military accessories.

It may sound paradoxical that a very specific but real activity was taking place in the Roman Senate Republic, such as the **“vote trading”** by senators, which we believe was a **clear manifestation of economic privilege** in ancient society. Reliable data about it were provided by the Social Democrat **K. Kautsky**, who in his book “Foundations of Christianity” (see the detailed exposition of this privilege in: Kautsky, K., 1955, pp. 116-118, on which we rely on this and the following pages) analyzes in detail the political “vote trading” in the Roman Republic, pointing out that every wealthy Roman and every wealthy family had numerous votes that they rule in the interest of the clique to which they unconditionally belonged.

Thus, several clans of wealthy families held the government in their hands and regularly enforced the election of their members to senior government positions, and hence in the Senate. In this case, democracy did not change much, except that it allowed wealthy plebeian families to enter this circle, which was previously reserved only for patricians.

To the discussed privileges we should also include some more that are developing in the economic sphere of the Roman Republic. These **“economic privileges”** were widely used among the rich and oligarchic classes, for which we rely on the following, more important facts: 1) for the **Equites** (at the end of the republic) this was **the ransom system of Roman state finances**, in which an individual under a contract against advance payment of a fixed amount could buy from the state a

state property (imperial mansions, mines, etc.), as and to collect the respective tax for one or more years (Berov, L., 1999, p. 85), of course, in his favor; and 2) in the case of **centurias, not only were they not obliged to pay their taxes** (i.e. they did not pay them), but they were also regularly **exempted from military service** (Morgan, L., 1939, p. 334). Or, here we were talking about only a few hundred rich nobles who, thanks to their political and economic power, enjoyed these privileges to the detriment of the state.

It is interesting to note another privilege in the Roman Republic, which did not directly affect the central institutions of power. It was a question of the exclusive right of the old citizenship to occupy all municipal positions and thus to use all municipal privileges (Mommsen, T., 2019, p. 81), which together with the huge wealth were completely accumulated in the hands of a few aristocrats. This was a new variety in the privileged position of the authorized local persons, which added additional touches to the rich palette of different privileges of the ruling political elite (central and local).

Conclusions

From all that has been said so far about the evolution of privileges during this republican period, it can be concluded that their spread is constantly increasing (compared to the Period of Kings) regardless of some democratic orders in the social order of Ancient Rome.

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