

The *Novus Homo*: a study in politics and social mobility in ancient Rome

The term *novus homo* (plural: *homines novi*), ‘new man’, is bandied about quite often in historical textbooks on ancient Rome. It is generally applied to men who were the first in their families to become senators. By the mid-republic, membership of the Senate was afforded to all those who were elected as consuls. For advocates of the republic, the ‘new men’, such as Gaius Duilius, Marcus Porcius Cato and Cicero, define the glowing meritocracy of republican politics. However, the distinction of this term also implies that the men who earned it remained, in some respects, apart from the other politicians in the Senate. While it is significant that men of humble birth were able to rise by virtue of their wits alone, their path was difficult and the playing field far from level. Moreover, while the term is used throughout the republic, one should probably not assume the experience of becoming a *novus homo* was the same for all men.

To understand the developing role of a *novus homo*, it is helpful to look at specific individuals over a broader spectrum of time (see bibliography). It is also important to compare these men and their careers with men from contemporary aristocratic families. To do this, we must first understand the traditional career ladder of the Roman politician, the *cursus honorum* (‘the course of honours’) (Slide 2).

The *cursus honorum*

The path to political success began with lesser elected magistracies, such as the office of quaestor. Any higher office could override acts of a more junior official.

Quaestor (twenty) (Age requirement: must be 25–30 years)
Job description: financial administrator



Curule aedile (two) (Age requirement: must be 36 years)
Job description: administrator of temples, games, public buildings



In the provinces, there was a pro praetor: second-in-command

Praetor (two) (Age requirement: must be 39 years)
Job description: judicial administrator in the courts or on urban matters



In the provinces, there was a pro consul: first-in-command

Consul (two) Automatic entry to the Senate (Age requirement: must be 40 years)
The height of judicial and military power, alternating chairmen of the Senate

Dictator **Censor (elected from senators)**

The *cursus honorum* sets out a clear, prescribed pattern for the development of a political career in Rome. However, like the Roman constitution, the prescribed course of events was not always followed. This is clear in a number of laws, such as the *Lex Villia Annalis* (180 BC) (Slide 3), which sets out, again, the age limitations of office, as well as a minimum of two years between holding these offices. This law was clearly a reaction to the fact that some powerful individuals, especially during times of war, had risen very quickly, sometimes skipping several of the traditional rungs. It is worth noting that none of these men was a *novus homo*.

List of famous homines novi

- Gaius Marcius Rutilius
- Lucius Volumnius Flamma Violens (elected 307 BC and 296 BC)
- Gaius Duilius (elected 260 BC)
- Gaius Lutatius Catulus (elected 241 BC)
- Gaius Flaminius Nepos (elected 223 BC and 217 BC)
- Marcus Porcius Cato (the Censor/Elder) (elected 195 BC)
- Lucius Licinius Lucullus (elected 151 BC)
- Lucius Mummius Achaicus (elected 146 BC)
- Gaius Marius (elected 107 BC, 104–100 BC, 86 BC)
- Marcus Tullius Cicero (elected 63 BC)
- Gaius Cornelius Tacitus (appointed AD 97)

While a list of famous ‘new men’ can give a sense of solidarity over time, one must remember that each of them rose at a different time in Roman history, when the concept of someone rising from humble origins was always slightly different. However, most of the men listed above were successful generals, and all had a difficult (if not long-winded) path to power.

Gaius Marcius Rutilius – the first known plebeian dictator and censor – was elected towards the end of the struggle of the orders in 357 BC, when the battle between plebeians and patricians was a defining factor in society. While social inequality persisted in Rome, these battle lines were subsequently redrawn on a number of occasions. For instance, the Punic Wars neutralized the patrician/plebeian conflict and by the end of the second century BC the vast influx of wealth into Rome meant a person’s political leanings (e.g. whether or not they supported traditional values and austerity, like Marcus Porcius Cato) were more important than the distinction between plebeian and patrician. This does not mean that class distinctions vanished, but they certainly became more strongly based in the accumulation of personal wealth. This is evident in the agrarian crisis under the Gracchi (133–121 BC), when men from Rome’s finest families occupied offices once afforded to plebeians and introduced populist reforms. It was only when Gaius Marius was first elected in 107 BC that a populist reform was successfully proposed by a ‘new man’. The story of the dissolution of the republic can be seen through both the ‘new men’ and the *cursus honorum*, which was continually compromised until it finally vanished: Octavian was made consul by the Senate when he was just eighteen years old.

The accompanying PowerPoint presentation illustrates the *cursus honorum* for a few of these men to show how the process varied both across times and in different classes. It considers the following questions:

- How did a *novus homo* come to power?
- How long did it take to attain these offices?
- Were they able to establish similar roles for their offspring, as aristocratic families did?

Conclusions

That a man such as Cicero, with little military success to his name, was able to rise to become the *princeps senatus*, saviour of the Roman republic (or so he claimed) and a bastion of traditional Roman values is proof positive that the republic could operate as a meritocracy. Courtesy of his speeches, books and his personal letters, we can develop an image and understanding of his character as we can for few other figures in Roman history. While many are inclined to interpret his personality as pompous and conceited (the same charge that is often laid upon Cato the Elder), one wonders if this was not a prerequisite of a 'new man'. Cicero began his career by challenging the cronyism of a powerful and vindictive dictator, established himself by prosecuting a well-connected provincial governor, and then ordered the execution of five Roman citizens for treason. To undertake any one of these tasks, he had to be either supremely confident or suicidal. For many, the most impressive characteristic of the Roman *homines novi* is their courage: these men managed to navigate through and succeed in the treacherous waters of partisan Roman politics, irrespective of whether they were ever truly accepted into the fray.

Bibliography

These two accounts provide a wider scope for the term *novus homo*, examining specific individuals and how the term was applied in practice: H. Van der Blom, *Cicero's Role Models: The Political Strategy of the Newcomer*, Oxford University Press, 2010; T.P. Wiseman, *New Men in the Roman Senate, 139 BC–14 AD*, Oxford University Press, 1971.