

# Women also competed for status superiority in mid-Republican Rome

13 September 2019, by Johanna Hillgren



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Purple clothing, gold trimmings, earrings and two- or four-wheeled carriages. Among the elite, competition for status superiority was just as vital to women as it was to men in Rome around 2000 years ago. This has been demonstrated in a thesis that investigates the domains and resources women had access to for status competition and how these were regulated by law.

Elite [status competition](#) was a distinguishing feature of mid-Republican Rome (264-133 BCE). Struggles for superiority in status among the senatorial elite catalysed social growth and conflict, and the desire for glory suffused elite society.

Previous studies have focused almost exclusively on the domains and resources of status competition among elite males and the often-ineffective regulation thereof. For his thesis at the University of Gothenburg, Lewis Webb instead chose to focus on status competition among elite [women](#) in this period.

"My aim was to identify and discuss the domains and resources of status competition available to

elite women, and the ways in which these were regulated," says Lewis Webb.

## Status competition

During this period in Rome's history, status differentiation was increasing, and elite men and women competed to attain and enhance their status via conspicuous displays of capital. At their disposal, they had natal and marital resources, which supplied them with the means to continue the struggle to maintain and further enhance their status.

Status competition involved the interconversion of various forms of capital—economic, social, cultural, and symbolic capital—as well as continuous and conspicuous displays of all these forms of capital.

The phenomena discussed in the thesis include the right to hold sacerdotal public office and to participate in public religious rites, access to and the conspicuous display of various modes of transport in public, adornment and religious instruments. The importance of your family connections, houses and villas, banquets and funerals, and female patronage are also discussed—all components of status competition that were largely the same as those for elite men.

"For example, I establish that women were integrated into and benefited from two important domains of elite male status competition, namely magisterial public office and warfare, by virtue of being associated with elite male status symbols such as ancestor masks (*imagines*) and the celebration of triumphs. Daughters could participate in triumphal processions with their fathers and bear names associated with family triumphs and military conquests.

## How women lobbied

The thesis also studied how women in 195 BCE

publicly and successfully lobbied for the repeal of the lex Oppia. This and a similar regulation restricted and/or punished conspicuous displays of the status symbols of the ordo matronarum (order of married women), a social network of elite women. For twenty years, the lex Oppia restricted the conspicuous display of two-wheeled carriages for secular purposes, gold weighing more than one semuncia (half an ounce), and purple clothing. Women's resistance to the lex Oppia also emphasises how important different adornments and modes of transport were, because it was precisely these domains and resources of status competition that lex Oppia sought to regulate.

The domains and resources of status competition available to elite men and women often overlapped and were integrated with each other, affording [elite](#) families a variety of opportunities and means for status comparison. Regulation failed to dampen their desire for glory.

"Elite women in mid-Republican Rome were neither reserved nor self-effacing and they were not confined to marital subservience or producing wool. Instead they were prominent and visible," says Lewis Webb.

Provided by University of Gothenburg

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