Introduction: Charting the History of the Equestrian Order

Aims and Rationale

This book is an institutional and social history of the equestrian order (*ordo equester*) in the Roman world. It charts the history of the equestrians (*equites*) in their various guises from the eighth century BC to the fifth century AD. We begin with the mounted aristocracy of the Regal period and the cavalry of the early Republic, as the Romans regarded these warriors as the ancestors of the later equestrian order. The order itself only emerged as a constituent status group within the Roman state (*res publica*), distinct from both the senate and the plebs, in the late second century BC. Membership of the equestrian order in the Republican period included tax-collectors, businessmen, jurors, and military officers. The *equites Romani* were distinguished by their own status symbols, such as gold rings and the tunic with a narrow stripe, ceremonies with religious and political meaning, and privileges such as front-row seats of the theatre. In the age of the emperors, the ranks of the *equites* included governors, financial administrators and other officials, as Augustus and his successors gave them an important role in the management of the *res publica* alongside senators.[1] Over the course of the imperial period equestrian rank was subdivided into further status grades, of which the higher could only be obtained by service in the army or administration. The proliferation of titles and honours bestowed by the Roman state meant that by the mid-fourth century AD the status of *eques Romanus* had become the least prestigious of these imperial perquisites, though it still retained inherent

[1] 'Republic', 'empire', 'imperial period', 'principate' and similar expressions are terms of modern convenience given to specific periods to give shape to our narrative of Roman history. However, in both the 'Republic' and 'empire', the Romans themselves referred to their state as the *res publica*, and recognised the emperor as operating within this system. The 'imperial period', therefore, right through to the fall of Constantinople in 1453, was what we might call a 'monarchical *res publica*'. For this argument, see Kaldellis 2015: 1–31.

value by offering immunities above the level of ordinary citizens. In one form or another, the privileged citizens called *equites* constituted a fundamental part of the socio-political hierarchy of the Roman state for more than a thousand years of history.

The equestrian order has not lacked modern commentators. Fundamental aspects of its social and political history were established by Mommsen in his monumental three-volume *Römisches Staatsrecht* (1871–8). The first independent history of the equestrian order came with Stein's monograph *Der römische Ritterstand*, published in 1927. Stein's work began with the origins of the order proper in the late Roman Republic, but the book primarily focused on equestrians in the imperial period. His research was based on a pioneering prosopographical analysis of *equites* derived from the epigraphic evidence. This demonstrated the analytical potential inherent in Mommsen's *Corpus Inscriptionum Latinarum* and other corpora of inscriptions for prosopographical research and social history. The Regal period and the Republic gained greater attention in Hill's *The Roman Middle Class in the Republican Period* (1952), which, despite its misleading title, was an important and fundamental scholarly work. Hill's book was, however, soon surpassed by Nicolet's seminal *L'ordre équestre à l'époque républicaine (312–43 av. J.-C.)*. The first, analytical volume was published in 1966, followed by a detailed and expansive prosopography of Republican *equites* in 1974. In the course of more than one thousand pages, Nicolet put the study of equestrians in the Republican period on a new footing, especially the ideological function of the order and its relationship with the senatorial order. Nicolet's work was complemented by Badian's short but incisive book of 1972, *Publicans and Sinners*, which brought to life the role played by businessmen and tax-collectors in the administration of the expanding Republic.

In the second half of the twentieth century the imperial period received two new prosopographical corpora which updated and extended the work of Stein. Pflaum harnessed the large number of inscriptions recording equestrian careers to produce his fundamental study of the procuratorial service. *Les procurateurs équestres sous le Haut-Empire Romain* was published in 1950, followed by three volumes of detailed prosopography, *Les carrières procuratoriennes équestres sous le Haut-Empire Romain* in 1960–1, with a further supplement in 1982. The career patterns of *equites* identified by Pflaum have been the subject of some criticism, and not all his conclusions should be accepted, but his study of the material remains unparalleled. The equestrian military officers of the empire were painstakingly assembled

by Devijver in his six-volume work *Prosopographia militiarum equestrium quae fuerunt ab Augusto ad Gallienum* (1976–2001). Devijver accompanied this with a series of important articles on the officers and their career, known as the *militiae equestres*.

The work of both Pflaum and Devijver provided an essential foundation for a new socio-political study of imperial *equites*, along the lines of that which Nicolet produced for the Republic. This was Demougin's two-part study, *L'ordre équestre sous les Julio-Claudiens* (1988) and *Prosopographie des chevaliers romains julio-claudiens (43 av. J.-C.–70 ap. J.-C.)* (1992a). Starting with the triumviral period, where Nicolet had concluded his research, Demougin examined the pivotal transformation of the order from Republic to empire and the foundation of the imperial system of equestrian administrative posts. The economic and social world of the equestrian order in the empire has been the subject of a number of important studies by Duncan-Jones, culminating in his 2016 monograph, *Power and Privilege in Roman Society*. Finally, the political and ceremonial function of *equites* in the early empire received renewed attention in Rowe's incisive 2002 book, *Princes and Political Cultures: The New Tiberian Senatorial Decrees*. Rowe demonstrated the vital and important role played by the *ordo* in shaping the political culture of the imperial state, which was not solely determined 'top-down' by the emperors themselves, but also by the willing participation of *equites* individually and collectively. My research stands on the shoulders of these works and those of many other scholars, not only in terms of the prosopographical catalogues of *equites* which they compiled, but also their interpretations of the literary and documentary evidence for the equestrian order.

This book aims to make a contribution by offering a new history of the *equites* and equestrian order from the Regal period to Late Antiquity, the first time (to my knowledge) that this has been attempted since Stein. There are three main aims of this book. The first is to study the many different capacities in which equestrians served the Roman state – as cavalrymen, army officers, jurors in the criminal courts, and financial administrators (to name just a few). We will assess why the official positions available to members of the equestrian order increased significantly over time, especially during the late Republic and the imperial period. The second aim is to examine how membership of the equestrian order functioned on an individual and collective level, in order to discover what it meant to be an *eques Romanus* in the Roman world. In pursuing these first two aims, the book not only moves chronologically from Republic to empire, but also geographically, comparing the significance and function

of equestrian status and the positions held by *equites* in the city of Rome, Italy, and in the provinces. We will examine the commonalities that united the *equites*, as well as areas of fragmentation among its members and resistance to adopting equestrian status.

The third and final aim is to examine the wider sociological function of the equestrian order. We will ask why the order and its members constituted such an important part of Roman society, and why the title of *eques* remained an enduring mark of distinction for many centuries, even after equestrians ceased to be the state cavalry. The Romans were well known for retaining official titles, such as *quaestor* or *praefectus praetorio*, long after the original function of the position had changed. But the survival of the equestrian order and the distinction conveyed by membership represented more than mere administrative inertia; it speaks to a much deeper attachment to what the order represented. Indeed, the chronological framework of the book is designed to allow readers to trace the evolution of the equestrian order over the *longue durée*. Although this type of narrative history has largely fallen out of fashion, it remains a powerful way of assessing and explaining continuities and changes over time.[2] The wide chronological scope of the book, covering over one thousand years of Roman history, enables us to place the evolution of the equestrian order in the context of the transformation of the Roman state itself, which changed from monarchy under the kings into a *res publica*, and then into a curious hybrid, the 'monarchical *res publica*' (better known as the empire). The equestrian order shares many similarities with other elite status groups in pre-modern societies, but it has a unique character and developmental trajectory that can only be explained in the framework of the evolution of the Roman state itself. This is where we will begin our analysis.

The Equestrian Order in Historical Context

Comparative approaches to the civilisations of the ancient world have been especially popular in recent years.[3] This is not merely a fashionable trend, but represents an important step forward in historical analysis for ancient historians. Comparative history has all too often been the domain of

[2] Heather 2005 is a recent successful example (though the intended readership is much broader than this book).

[3] See, for example, Raaflaub and Rosenstein 1999; Mutschler and Mittag 2008; Scheidel 2009d and 2015; Arnason and Raafluab 2010; Bang and Scheidel 2013.

sociologists, political scientists and modern historians rather than classicists, but it has significant potential for understanding the societies and cultures of Greece and Rome.[4] As Scheidel has aptly put it, 'only comparisons with other civilisations make it possible to distinguish common features from culturally specific or unique characteristics and developments'.[5] Put another way, comparative history allow us to ask the question: what was 'Roman' about the Roman empire? The aim of this introductory chapter is to examine the history of the equestrian order in comparative perspective, in order to ascertain similarities and differences with comparable status groups in other pre-industrial societies. Throughout the introduction and the book as a whole, I will use the terms 'status group' or 'order' to describe the *equites* in preference to 'class', just as the Romans themselves did when they used the word *ordo*. Class is a term of economic stratification, whereas the equestrian order was an elite group that was defined by a range of criteria, of which financial wealth was but one.[6] The discussion herein will necessarily involve some simplification of complex historical phenomena in order to highlight essential points of comparison, but it is hoped that the rewards will outweigh any potential negatives that come with generalisation.[7] It also functions as a microcosm of many of the key sociological arguments presented in the book. In order to avoid repetition, the reader will be referred to specific chapters where the evidence is laid out in detail.

Monarchy and Aristocracy

We begin with Rome as a monarchy. The period from the eighth to the sixth centuries BC, traditionally described as the Regal period, is fiercely debated and is in large part unrecoverable. The Romans themselves believed that they were ruled by seven kings from the foundation of Rome by Romulus (commonly placed in 753 BC, though there were other contenders) to the expulsion of Tarquinius Superbus in 509 BC. Romulus himself is said to

[4] I have benefited from many such studies which take in the broad sweep of human history, especially Mosca 1939; Powis 1984; Mann 1986; Kautsky 1997; and Crone 2003.

[5] Scheidel 2009a: 5.

[6] See Weber 1968: 930–2 and Crone 2003: 101–4 for the basic definitions, and Cohen 1975: 261–7, Demougin 1988: 1–3, and Finley 1999: 49 for their relevance to ancient Rome and the equestrians. However, it is appropriate to use the term 'ruling class' in terms of 'ruling elite', as is common in scholarship by sociologists and political scientists (Mosca 1939: 50; Mann 1986: 25, 270).

[7] Note especially the sage remarks of Matthews 2000b about the complexities that lie beneath broad terms such as 'elite'.

have founded the *Celeres* or 'swift ones', composed of three hundred mounted warriors, whom Pliny the Elder identified as the ancestors of the equestrian order.[8] That the historical kings of Rome were supported by a mounted aristocracy is beyond doubt, though they were probably not a national army, but the personal followers of the king (*rex*). During this period central Italy was home to clans of warrior aristocrats who ranged widely across the region, competing with each other for influence and for kingship in cities such as Rome. It was not until the fifth century BC, a period traditionally identified as the beginning of the *res publica*, that these warrior clans were transformed into landed aristocracy. They preserved their military supremacy by acting as the cavalry of the new state, rather than the king's personal army. Early Rome was not unique in being dominated by a militaristic aristocratic elite; this was a fundamental characteristic of most pre-industrial monarchical societies.[9] Wealth and the ability to equip oneself and one's followers for campaigns has traditionally provided the basis for distinctive elite identity founded on martial valour. In many historical societies, aristocrats socialised their sons to follow in their footsteps by training them in military arts.[10] This helped to create a shared elite system of values, or ideology, which has traditionally provided a more enduring foundation for uniting aristocrats into a coherent social group than landed wealth alone.[11] We can obverse this ideology in the case of the knights of medieval Europe and their chivalric code or the Japanese mounted archers whom we call Samurai, who pursued a ritualised combat unique to their sense of valour and masculinity (to name just two examples).[12] In the Roman world, the culture of military excellence was displayed in the tombs and prestige goods of the warrior aristocracy of the Archaic period. Such military aristocracies exerted their power through what Max Weber called 'traditional authority', a supremacy that derived from accepted customs and norms rather than the rule of law.[13]

[8] The process of evolution described here is discussed in detail in Chapter 1.
[9] Mosca 1939: 53–6, 222–3; Bendix 1978: 231; Kautsky 1997: 144–50; Crone 2003: 26, 42–3; Wickham 2005: 158, 175.
[10] Mosca 1939: 61; Ferguson 1999: 406. For specific examples, see Briant 1999: 113–16 on Achaemenid Persia, and Spence 1993: 198–202 on the *hippeis* of Classical Athens.
[11] On group solidarity defined by ideology, see Mann 1986: 519.
[12] Knights: Barber 1995: 26–7; Kaeuper 2009: 94–115. Samurai: Farris 1999: 60–6; Friday 2003: 103–7, 137–40. Momigliano 1966: 16–17 rejected comparisons between early Roman cavalry and the knights of medieval Europe, but this cannot be sustained in the light of the clear connection between aristocracies and cavalry in world history (thus Cornell 1995: 446 n. 31).
[13] Weber 1968: 226–7.

The specific association between cavalry and the aristocracy was not unique to Rome. In the pre-industrial societies of Europe, the Near East and Asia (commonly referred to as the 'Old World'), the ability to tame and breed horses and then deploy them in battle was one of the primary distinguishing features of wealthy military elites.[14] Chariot warfare was the pre-eminent form of aristocratic display and combat in Greece and the Near East from the eighteenth century BC until the seventh century BC.[15] This is demonstrated, for example, by the predominance of chariots in Homer's *Iliad*.[16] By the seventh century BC the civilisations of Greece and the Near East had largely made the transition from fighting from chariots to cavalry warfare. This was the result of horseback riding spreading south from the Eurasian steppe, where it had first developed in the ninth century BC.[17] The employment of chariots did not die out entirely in the Near East, with scythed chariots being used by the Achaemenids and the Seleucids, for example, but it was still very limited in comparison with horseback riding.[18] The shift from chariot to cavalry did not happen simultaneously throughout the Old World. In Asia, chariot warfare remained widespread for longer, with the Chinese aristocrats of the 'Springs and Autumns' period (722–481 BC) riding in their chariots with bows and arrows.[19] In Italy itself, the transition from chariot to horseback during the Archaic period was heavily influenced by contacts with Greek colonies. Although Athens, Sparta and Corinth only adopted cavalry units in the fifth century BC, there had long been a tradition of an aristocratic cavalry elite in good horse-rearing regions such as Thessaly, Boeotia and Macedonia from an early date.[20] The oldest Greek colony in Italy was Cumae, founded in the eighth century BC by settlers from Euboea, and the presence of an aristocratic cavalry cohort in this colony clearly influenced the appearance of a similar elite, famed for their prowess on horseback, in nearby Capua by the sixth century BC.[21] There were several regions in

[14] Ferguson 1999: 424; Bachrach 1999: 292–4; Raber and Tucker 2005. [15] Drews 2004: 51–4.
[16] Drews 2004: 72. Cf. Kelder 2012, marshalling the limited evidence for cavalry in Mycenaean Greece.
[17] Drews 2004: 99. Pre-conquest 'New World' civilisations did not have horses, but there were other ways of differentiating aristocratic combatants in Aztec society (Hassig 1999). Among the ancient Maya, however, elites and non-elites did not even use different weapons (Webster 1999: 343–6).
[18] Sabin and De Souza 2007: 417–18.
[19] Yates 1999: 18–20. Cavalry became important in the subsequent 'Warring states' period (Graff 2002: 21–2).
[20] Spence 1993: 176–8; Sekunda 2013: 201. On Thessalian horses, see Hyland 1990: 16–17. For the emergence of Athenian cavalry in the fifth century BC, see now Spence 2010.
[21] Nicolet 1962; Frederiksen 1968.

Italy, such as Tuscany and Apulia, that were good for horse-rearing and made the emergence of mounted warfare on the peninsula possible, with the proviso that cavalry service was restricted to those wealthy enough to breed and equip horses.[22] It is in this context that we can place the rise of the mobile and mounted warrior aristocracy of Latium, and Rome itself, during the Regal period.

The *Res Publica*

The Roman *res publica* took shape in the fifth and fourth centuries BC after the expulsion of the kings, but it was a system of government and social organisation that was constantly evolving.[23] The name *res publica* meant that the state was essentially 'public property'.[24] At the beginning of the *res publica*, cavalry of the state was supplied by the wealthiest citizens, who were classified as *equites* during the quinquennial census. This meant that the *equites* no longer constituted a group that derived its power from 'traditional authority', as the warrior elites did, but now formed an 'occupational status group', defined by their official function, according to Weber's categories of status.[25] The appropriate Latin word for this new status group was *ordo* (plural: *ordines*) for which the English 'order' is a suitable translation, even if the basic concept does not translate well to our modern social hierarchy. An *ordo* was 'a body of people [with] the same political or social status' as defined in relation to their place within the Roman state.[26] The Romans thus conceived of their *res publica* as being composed of several *ordines* rather than economic classes.[27] Since the early Roman state organised its citizenry along military lines (as shown by the structure of the *comitia centuriata*), the earliest *ordines* were the *equites* (the wealthiest who fought on horses), the *pedites* (the citizen infantry), and the *proletarii* (the non-fighting poor).[28]

How did military elite of the *equites*, which represented one of Weber's true occupational status groups, diversify and transform into an aristocracy which was not solely defined by martial valour? Originally there were only

[22] Frederiksen 1968: 10; Hyland 1990: 17, 188.
[23] On the evolution of the *res publica*, see Hillard 2005 and Flower 2010.
[24] Judge 1974: 280–1; Hammer 2014: 30–1.
[25] Weber 1968: 306. Note especially Stein 1927: 1, who describes the equestrian order as an economic, social and juridical 'status group' (*Stand* in German).
[26] *OLD* s.v. *ordo* 4; Nicolet 1974: 175. [27] Nicolet 1974: 175–6; Cohen 1975; Finley 1999: 45.
[28] Cohen 1975: 281. On military organisation as a basis for social hierarchy, see Ferguson 1999: 400.

1,800 cavalrymen, known as the *equites equo publico*, whose horses were supplied at state expense. In 403 BC the state permitted any male citizen who met the highest census qualification to serve as an *eques*, so long as he provided his own horse.[29] However, over the course of subsequent centuries, the Roman state came to rely on auxiliary troops as cavalrymen, meaning that the *equites* themselves now only served as officers. Although military prowess remained important to the collective identity of the *equites*, it began to be rivalled by other sources of prestige, such as the pursuit and display of wealth through land ownership, business ventures and tax collection, as well as excellence in literature, rhetoric and oratory. This meant that the original cavalry aristocracy transformed into a wealthy ruling elite. Such a development was not unique to Rome; indeed, it can be described as a characteristic feature of the evolution of societies as they become more politically and economically complex.[30] By the mid-second century BC the Roman aristocracy was composed of elites who rejoiced in the title of *equites* even if they no longer constituted the main body of the cavalry. What had begun as an occupational status had become a mark of distinction.

The *equites* were composed of senators (of whom there were only 300), and all non-senators who also met the property qualification for cavalry service. The situation changed in the last decades of the second century BC, when members of the eighteen equestrian centuries were forced to relinquish their horse upon admission to the senate, and thus ceased to be *equites*. This measure was soon followed by a series of laws which gave the remaining (non-senatorial) *equites* a prominent and separate role in politics as jurors in the criminal courts. These two developments were the catalyst that forced a separation between senatorial and non-senatorial elites in terms of status distinctions, which had been simmering for centuries.[31] In the new hierarchy of the *res publica*, there was a clear distinction between the senatorial order (*ordo senatorius*) and the equestrian order (*ordo equester*). These *ordines* were superior in status and prestige to the third order, the people or ordinary citizens (*plebs*). Although the Romans continued to be organised in the military organisation of the *comitia centuriata* for voting purposes, the new social hierarchy replaced the old *ordines* of *equites*, *pedites* and *proletarii* of the early

[29] This discussion summarises the conclusions of Chapter 1.
[30] Mosca 1939: 57; Bottomore 1993: 29.
[31] Weber 1968: 306 notes how the acquisition of political influence often results in the formation of new status groups.

Republic.[32] The change does not mean that the equestrian order constituted in any sense an economic 'middle class'; rather, they were the second tier of the Roman aristocracy.[33] The distribution of the wealth acquired by the expanding Roman state in the Republican period shaped this two-tier aristocracy. The profits of empire were disproportionally allocated to affluent elites (senators and equestrians), rather than to ordinary citizens.[34] Indeed, in Polybius' description of the Roman state and the relationship between the senate, the consuls and the people as organs of government, 'the people' are largely wealthy non-senators, rather than the *plebs*.[35] The emergence of the equestrian order therefore gave these rich non-senators an official status within the framework of the *res publica*, elevating them above the other citizens.[36]

This was not a premeditated decision by any individual or group, of course, but the result of long-term evolution. Indeed, sociological studies of aristocracies have shown the vital function they perform in providing states with their essential structure and cohesion.[37] When viewed in historical perspective, we can see that the two-tier aristocratic structure of the Roman state was not a novel form of social organisation. As Mosca has observed, 'below the highest stratum in the ruling class there is always . . . another that is much more numerous and comprises all the capacities for leadership in the country'.[38] In both the Republican and imperial periods the equestrian order constituted the main source for new senators, who numbered between 300 and 600, depending on the time period. There were probably 15,000 *equites* in each generation in the first century BC, rising to 20,000–30,000 in the principate.[39] Moreover, the senate itself was not a closed and exclusively hereditary aristocracy.[40] Entrance into the senate and equestrian order was based upon financial and moral evaluation by the

[32] Cohen 1975: 281.
[33] Cohen 1975: 265; De Ste. Croix 1981: 42, 339–40; Finley 1999: 49–50. It is unfortunate that Hill 1952, which was otherwise a very important book for its time, refers to the equestrians as the 'middle class'. The true 'middle class' of ancient Rome, if we can apply such a concept to the pre-modern world, formed part of the *plebs*. See Harris 2011: 15–26 and E. Mayer 2012: 8–14 for methodological and theoretical reflections on the issue. They suggest that it is possible to think in terms of economic classes in Rome, even if the Romans themselves did not conceptualise their society in this way.
[34] Mann 1986: 256. [35] This is discussed further in Chapter 1.
[36] On the role of states in organising social hierarchies, see Poulantzas 1978: 127.
[37] See, for example, Weber 1968: 305–7; Zmora 2001: 1–2; Scheidel 2013: 19–20.
[38] Mosca 1939: 404. [39] See Chapters 1 and 5.
[40] Hopkins and Burton 1983. For the basic principle of aristocratic replenishment, see also Mosca 1939: 413.