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Names, Roman

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In the late Republic and early Empire a male Roman citizen typically had three names (the *tria nomina*): a *praenomen* (first name), a *nomen* (also called *nomen gentilicium*, identifying the clan or *gens*), and a *cognomen* (a nickname, identifying a particular branch of a *gens*). Thus for Gaius Julius Caesar his *nomen* “Julius” showed that he was of the *gens Julia*, his *cognomen* “Caesar” identified his branch as that of Julii Caesares, and his *praenomen* “Gaius” distinguished him from any brothers. Because foreigners and slaves typically had only single names, three names were so typical of a male Roman citizen that the phrase *tria nomina* was synonymous with Roman citizenship.

Roman women in the same period had names formed from the *nomina gentilicia* of their fathers; thus Caesar's daughter was simply Julia. If a father had more than one daughter, then each was identified informally by an indication of birth order: Julia Maior (the Elder) versus Julia Minor (the Younger), or Julia Prima, Julia Secunda, Julia Tertia, and so on. In public contexts a daughter could be identified by the name of her father or husband; the famous Clodia, married to Quintus Caecilius Metellus Celer, was Clodia Metelli—“Metellus' Clodia”—to distinguish her from her sisters.

The *nomen gentilicium* was originally a patronymic, emerging as early as the eighth century bce. It was by far the most important identifier—hence it was known simply as the *nomen*—and was inherited by all sons and (as described above) daughters.

By the seventh century bce the Romans, as well as most other Italians, developed a system of *praenomen* plus *nomen*, though female *praenomina* disappeared in the fourth century bce. The *praenomen* merely distinguished siblings, and there was little variety: 99 percent of all known Roman men in the Republican period had one of seventeen *praenomina*. Thus *praenomina* were usually abbreviated as follows: A. = Aulus; Ap(p). = Appius; C. = Gaius; Cn. = Gnaeus; D. = Decimus; L. = Lucius; M'. = Manius; M. = Marcus; N. = Numerius; P. = Publius; Q. = Quintus; Ser. = Servius; Sex. = Sextus; Sp. = Spurius; T. = Titus; Tib. = Tiberius; V. = Vibius.

The *cognomen* appears in the fifth century bce as a nickname, to designate the branch of a particular *gens*. The practice was originally aristocratic and spread to the lower classes only in the first century bce. Even then it was optional; Gaius Marius and Marcus Antonius had no *cognomina*. A *cognomen* was originally bestowed on one male family member and then was inherited by his descendants. Many *cognomina* were derived from physical attributes, often unflattering ones: Cicero = “chickpea” (i.e., wart), Crassus = “fat,” Calvus = “bald.” Others were derived from achievements, accidents, or hopes: Pictor = “painter” (i.e., someone who paid for painting), Caesar = “cut” (from the womb), Felix = “fortunate.”

Cognomina could also be derived from foreign languages, especially Greek. Even embarrassing cognomina were a source of aristocratic pride, since what mattered most was the antiquity of the branch.

An agnomen was a name added to the *tria nomina* in a person's lifetime. Successful generals could add names commemorating their conquests: Africanus, Macedonicus, Creticus. Agnomina could also be used in adoptions to preserve the memory of a man's original *gens*: when Gaius Octavius (the future emperor Augustus) was adopted by Gaius Julius Caesar, he became Gaius Julius Caesar Octavianus, though he never used the agnomen.

In ordinary discourse Romans used either praenomen and nomen (Marcus Tullius) or praenomen and cognomen (Marcus Cicero). Use of all three names was extremely formal, and use of nomen or cognomen alone was informal. Use of just the praenomen was either intimate or insulting.

A freed male slave typically took the praenomen and nomen of his former master and added his own personal name as a cognomen; Cicero's secretary, for instance, became Marcus Tullius Tiro. Foreigners who became citizens honored their benefactors in the same way.

The *tria nomina* did not survive the first century ce, largely because of the massive emancipation of slaves and enfranchisement of foreigners. The new citizens usually had the nomina of prominent Romans, especially emperors: there were now huge numbers of Julii, Claudii, Flavii, and Aurelii. They also found the use of praenomina unfamiliar and uncongenial. The cognomen thus became more important as a means of identification and was treated with more flexibility.

For the first time a mother's line of descent could be commemorated, in a cognomen: the son of a Julia might have the cognomen Julianus. Siblings, including women, could be distinguished by cognomina rather than by praenomina: the emperors Titus and Domitian, who were brothers, were both named Titus Flavius, but their cognomina were Vespasianus and Domitianus, respectively.

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