

Updated 5/13/15 by Domina Tullia Saturnina

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All errors are mine. Research is a continuing process. Email me for updates, if you find an error, or if you have information to share!

## Intro to Roman Clothing

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The Roman Empire stretched over a thousand years (753 BC to 476 BCE) and over multiple continents. My focus is Late Republican (50BCE), in the city of Rome. If you are Byzantine, Romano-Brit, etc this may be helpful but you will need to continue your research. Frescos are from Pompeii. Unattributed sketches are my own.

**For a Roman Bath:** If you have a retinue, arrive fully dressed and then have them remove and guard your outer layers while you bathe. If you are without “slaves,” just come in a tunic. You are welcome to strip down to undergarments. Anything you wear is liable to get olive oiled.

### Construction notes:

Romans generally wove a garment to size, and used the rectangle right off the loom. Gores, curves, and other shaping concepts were not used. Some wove T-tunics as a single cross-shaped piece (used folded in half, with a cut head hole). Unless you are portraying a poor person who had to re-use fabric, the edges would have been selvedge. To duplicate this look, I hand sew hems using small, nearly invisible stitches. With heavy- and mid-weight linen and wool, I use threads from the fabric itself for a perfect color and texture match. Light-weight linen thread doesn't stand up as well to the sewing, so I use modern thread.

Although trim is a handy way to lengthen a slightly-too-short tunic, and is very popular in the SCA, many images of women represent solid colors for tunics. Contrast edges were woven in and fairly simple - usually just a different solid color. If you use trim, stick to simple era-appropriate designs, and avoid metallic thread unless your persona is extremely wealthy and important. Linen is by far the most common

fabric for tunics (Fabrics-store.com is a good source and will email you discounts if you get on their list), although fine wool is also an option. Silk and gold thread would be reserved for very wealthy people, such as emperors and their families. If using a re-purposed sari, chose one that's solid or has edge trim. Beware the scattered "polka dot" patterns unless you are portraying a person from late antiquity. Cotton, since it was imported from Egypt, was as expensive as silk. Wool-silk and wool-cotton blends are an option for the wealthy persona. Don't neglect thrift stores: One of my favorite linen tunics used to be Ikea curtains!

Pompeii frescos show white, natural, and pastel colors (yellow, blue, green, etc.) for the layers that are linen. Dyed wool makes for colorful stolas and pallas (see below), and in some cases tunics. The Romans loved color! Black and other dark colors are for mourning.

It's difficult for the untrained eye (and even the trained one in some cases) to separate out the different layers of fabric. The brilliant Dulcia McPherson posted a collection of colorized statues that help differentiate between the garments. I've added some color-coded terms.



## Examples of Female Outfits:

- 1) Tunica alone.** Appropriate for working women.
- 2) Tunica and palla.** Appropriate for non-matrons in the Republican period, and all women later than that.
- 3) Tunica, stola, and palla.** For matrons in the Republic and early Empire. Don't wear a tube tunica with a stola; you want a tunica type that has some "sleeve" to it.

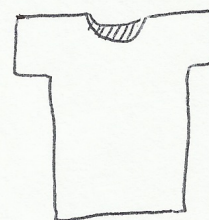
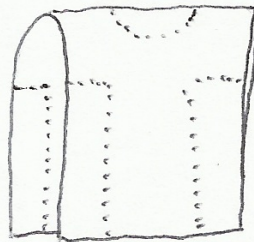
## Women's Tunica:

Tunicas are the building block of the outfit. If you are portraying a working woman, stop the hem at mid calf and you are done – you can use a palla (shawl) if you like but it's not required. Poorer people wore skimpier clothes for ease of movement, and because fabric was vastly expensive and time-consuming to make. Togas and pallas are a way to show off that you can afford extra fabric, and can swath yourself in extra layers because you aren't doing any physical work.

For wealthier women, the tunica should cover the feet so just the toes are showing. Remember to belt your fabric before cutting!

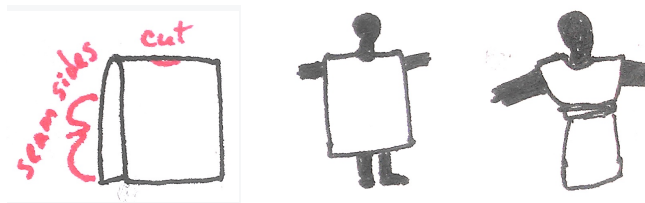
## Four types of tunicas:

**1) T-Tunic:** Not commonly pictured, but seen in some sculptures of working women such as midwives and those selling bread in a bakery stall. These have a scoop neck, and the sleeves go almost to the elbow. They are occasionally seen long-sleeved in frescos (see the hairdresser). This relief of a birthing scene was found in Ostia.

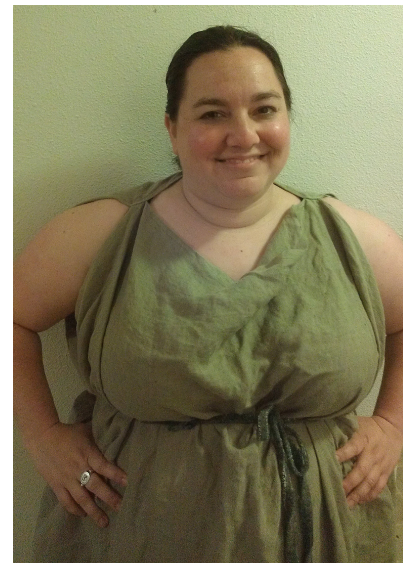


To make a T-tunic, use fabric twice as long as your shoulders to the ankle, plus extra for belting (and hems if needed). Cut out the neck, and extra width under the arms along dotted lines. Leave enough room for ease of movement. Seam under the arms and along the body. Hem the neck. Done! For long sleeves, you can make them separately and join them. Wear it belted under the breasts (optional for slaves). In the Imperial period, women started wearing clavi (see men's section).

**2) Straight Tunica (Tunica Recta):** This is a simple rectangle, folded in half with a head hole cut, OR two identical squares, front and back, seamed on the top and sides. Identical in construction to the male tunic. "Sleeves" are made by the excess fabric (wider than shoulders) draping down the arm.



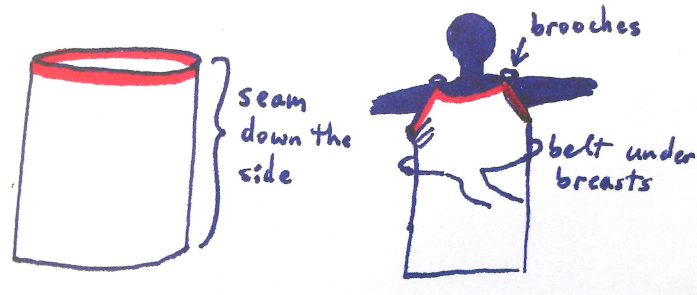
**3) Tube Tunica:** This is the simplest. You literally step into a wide tube and fasten it at the shoulders. The top edge becomes both the neckline and the underarm. Leave the front longer than the back to create the V drape. You can also just pin one shoulder and wear it like a goddess (see the hairdressing fresco). This lightweight linen is flattering even on bigger girls, and wow, is it ever comfortable!



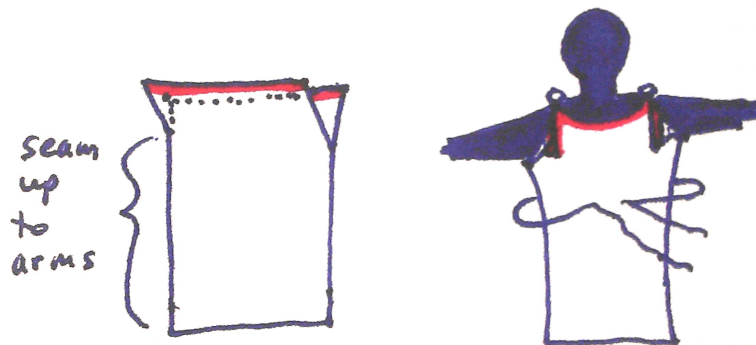
The tube size: Measure from the center of an armpit, up to the shoulder where it will be pinned, across the back of the neck to the other



shoulder, and down to the other armpit. Multiple that by two, and add about 5 inches so you get a nice drape for the front. That's the circumference of the tube.

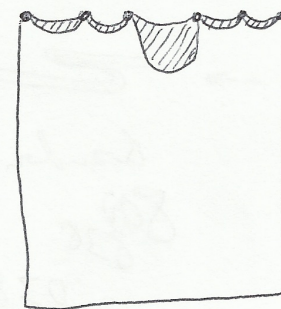
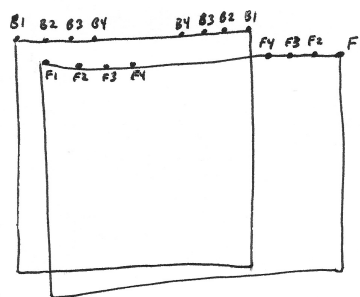


This second method is similar but requires less yardage.



For this to work in a properly flattering manner, **you must use very fine, drapey cloth**. If you are using a modern bra, I recommend pinning the shoulders to the bra straps to hide them. Secure at the shoulders with fabric rosettes or brooches. I usually arrange the tube seam to be under an arm to hide it.

**4) Gap-sleeve:** Also called an ionic chiton and used by Greeks. This is made from 2 rectangles, with the front wider than the back. The front and back are held together by 4-8 small buttons or fabric rosettes. The extra cloth in the front creates a draped "V neck" look.





See the rosettes along the top of my arms? Join F1 to B1, F2 to B2, etc with a rosette or button. The number of gathers is variable. I usually do the ends of the “sleeves” first, then the neck, then figure out how many to add in between depending on the width of the fabric. Note that there is more space in the center front than the back. This is what creates the V fold. Of course you would belt this, and possibly cover it with a stola.

*Wrinkles are period!*

Rosettes are made by holding both layers of fabric, then pulling it up a little, sewing through the base, wrapping additional thread around the base of the rosette, and stitching through to secure it.



You can also use plain metallic or enamel buttons, 0.25-0.5” (see my paper on gap-sleeve fasteners!). If you go the button route, gather the fabric a little for good draping in the gaps. These are sewn in place, not meant to unfasten in the sense of modern buttons.





The Greeks would simply belt as is and allow breezes to enter the sides of the garment. Romans, being more modest, seemed to sew the sides, just leaving the top 6-8" open as armholes.

## Stola:

While tunics appear alone, the stola is only ever worn over a tunic. This is the overgarment that declares "I am a respectable Roman matron." Unmarried girls, slaves, and "bad" women hadn't "earned" the right to wear it. Use lightweight wool, or silk\* if your persona is wealthy. They were made in solid colors. Length varies from a few inches above the ankle to floor-length. Construction is exactly like the tube tunic above, with straps, rosettes, or pins at the shoulders. Usually shown with a gap-sleeve tunic. Note that the stola went out of fashion in the early Empire. Do not wear a toga unless you are portraying a prostitute or crossdressing as a man in formal wear.

\*Pure silk was an extravagance seen only on emperors and empresses, and drew disparaging comments even then. A silk blend, with wool or cotton, would be worn by the very wealthy. My yellow stola with braided straps is 100% silk, and *far* too fancy for my persona, but I'm choosing to be naughty and wear it anyway.



Cameo showing a stola with braided straps.



## Palla:



A wool palla layered over a wool stola (tube style) and a linen gap-sleeved tunic.

The palla is a long rectangle of cloth, usually wool. It ranges from 3.5-5 yards, and is wide enough to act as both a headcover and a cloak. Crosses the torso horizontally in some statues, although it isn't clear what's keeping them in place aside from arm position. Some have contrasting trim either along one long side, or both short sides. Fringe is also seen, infrequently. To put one on, start with an end at your left breast and toss most of it over the left shoulder. It goes around the back, across the chest, and back over the left shoulder. If you have extra length, leave more draped over the left arm when you begin. Note: If you are left-handed you might want to reverse sides.



The palla is sometimes seen wrapped around the waist, particularly in domestic scenes.

Fresco from Pompeii



**Brooches:** Round ones (about 1.5" diameter) appear at the shoulders, joining the front and back of lightweight tunicas. Fibulas, ancient safety pins, are also used to join shoulders and hold pallas in place. Google "make wire fibula" for easy tutorials! Romano-Brits have fantastic, colorful enameled brooches, both round and in animal shapes.

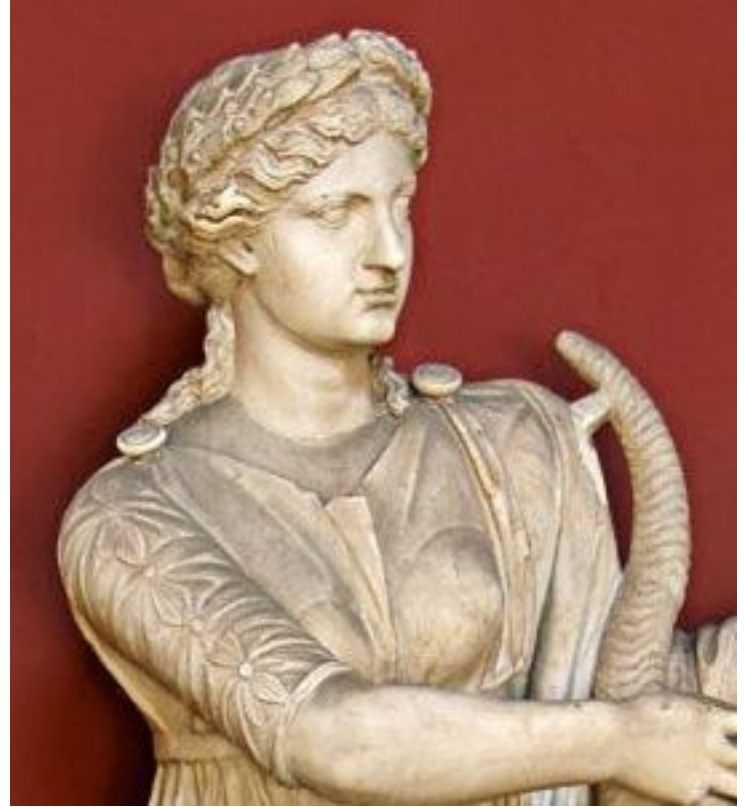


**Belts:** Thin rope belts are worn just under the breasts. They are tied in the front, with symmetrical loops hanging down and the ends tucked along the belt, or hanging loose. There is sometimes a second belt low on the hips, hidden by a flap of draping cloth. Images of goddesses usually wear both belts. This helps visually enlarge the hips. The standard of beauty in that time was smaller breasts (the wraps help with that) and wider, child-bearing hips.

***Note: Wool has a sacred quality, because it's made from a live animal. All ritual clothing (priest robes, wedding clothes, stolas, vittae, etc) are made of wool. To represent her purity, brides even wear woolen slippers! Part of a woman's duty is to make wool clothing for her family. Roman matrons were remembered as virtuous for their spinning and weaving; their industry with wool is often mentioned in epitaphs.***



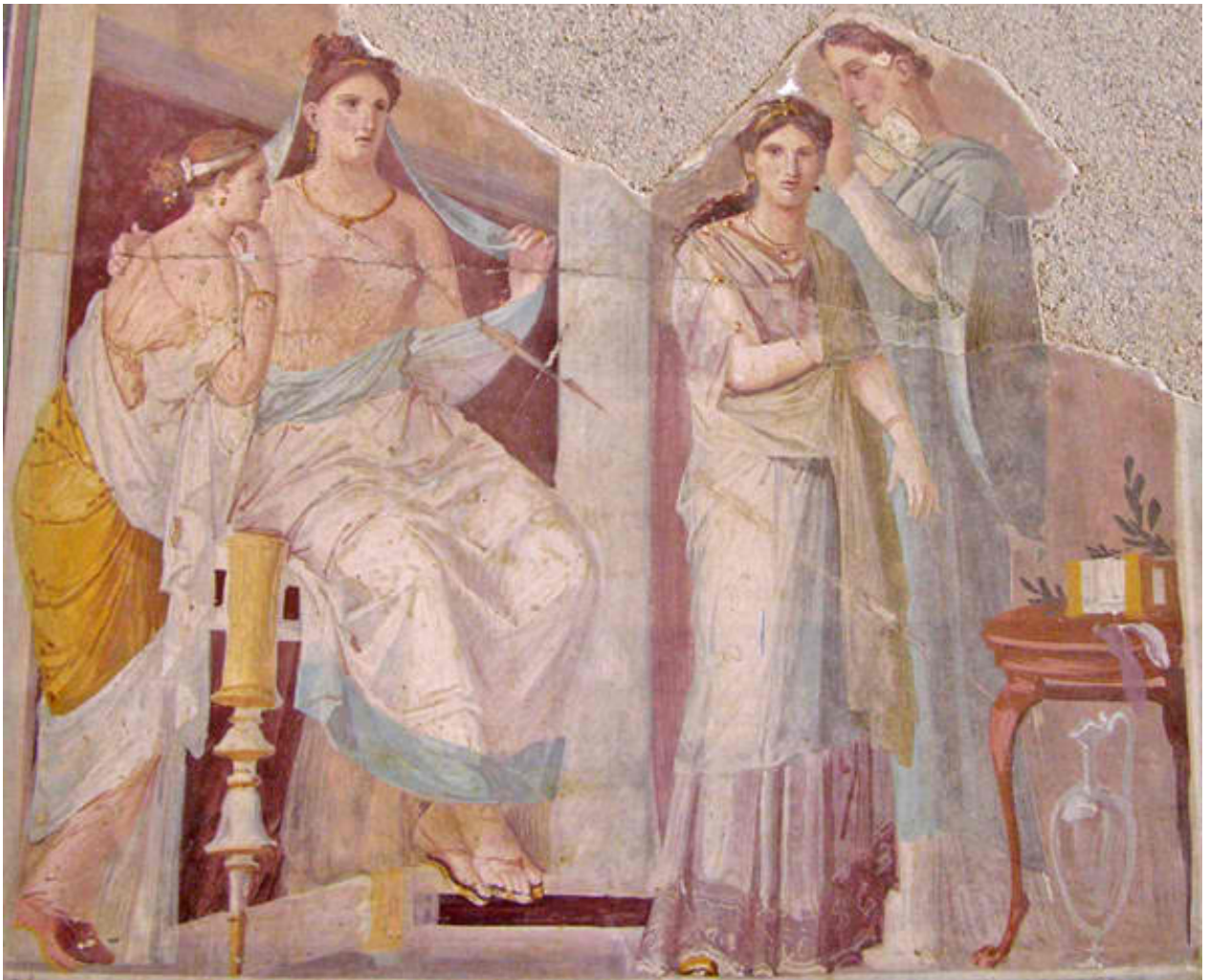
1<sup>st</sup>-2<sup>nd</sup> century CE. Tunica recta, tube stola, palla around the waist. "Flip-flop" style sandals, roses in her hair.



Usually gap-sleeve metal buttons are not worn with shoulder brooches. At least one (either shoulders or arms) will be knotted, or the stola will have straps.

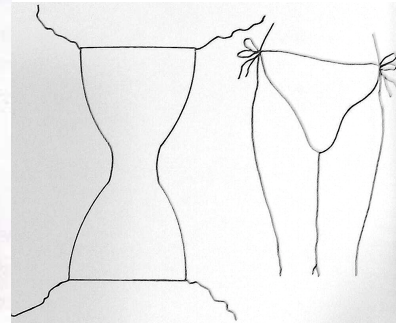
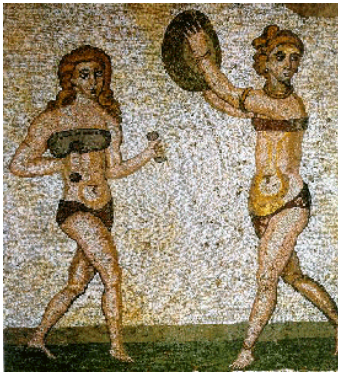
Marble Erato, muse of lyric poetry; Roman, 2nd century CE. Found near Tivoli. Vatican Museum (Hall of the Muses).

On the far left, we have a woman wearing a long sleeved (? Is that fabric at her elbow? Or is the “hem” at her wrist a bracelet?) natural colored tunica, with a saffron stola and a white palla. Next to her a lady has a white palla with blue trim over a natural tube tunica. Second from the right, she’s wearing a gap-sleeve tunica with gold fasteners. Note that the gap-sleeve tunica has a deep contrasting border. She’s also wearing tan leather shoes. The hairdresser on the far right is wearing a long-sleeved white tunica under a blue palla.





## Undergarments:



**Strophium (breast wrap):** A long strip of linen that can go around you 6-7 times, about 5 inches wide, or wider if needed. There is some conflicting evidence as to whether it was used as a flattener or a pushup bra – possibly depending on the circumstance. Tie a knot in front and tuck the ends under.

**Subligaculum (underwear):** These are bikini-style, in linen. There's an extant red leather one, probably for an athlete or circus performer. To make one, cut out an hourglass shape and attach strings at the four corners. Sketch from Sebesta. See also "sublingar" in men's section.

**Shoes:** Use sandals (flipflop or T-strap style) or thin leather slippers (rounded, natural toe). Laces are legit!

**Jewelry:** Bangle bracelets, rings, drop earrings, necklaces... there's too much to discuss here. Common themes are snakes, orbs, pearls, emeralds, coral. Lots of gold! See Pinterest!  
<http://www.pinterest.com/rosecityacupunc/>



## Hair:



The upper class ladies sported very elaborate structures of braids and curls. These wealthy women had ornatrixes to do their hair and makeup, and had both the time to sit still for it, and the need to present themselves as fashionable. Fortunately there is a hairstyle that is documentable and simple enough to handle by yourself. Julia Caesaris filia was the daughter of Augustus, 39 BCE – 14 CE.

In what I call the “The Bun Braid,” you simply gather the hair at the nape of the neck. Some images have the front combed into small wing-like sections, while others come smoothly back. Make a single braid, and coil it into a bun. Use a bone bodkin to secure it or sew into place.

Now that my hair is short, I duplicate this look by making a ponytail. I got some fake hair to match and braided it, then sewed it into a cup shape. Using a bodkin, I pin it in place over the ponytail.

*Note: Married women are often portrayed with thin strips of woolen cloth, called vittae, wrapped around their head.*

## Other periods:

Later Roman: <http://www.comitatus.net/gallerydresscivlady.html>

Romano-British: For colder weather, wear a long-sleeved T-tunica, with a wool tube dress over it. You can add a rectangular plaid wrap, pinned with a fibula or penannular brooch.



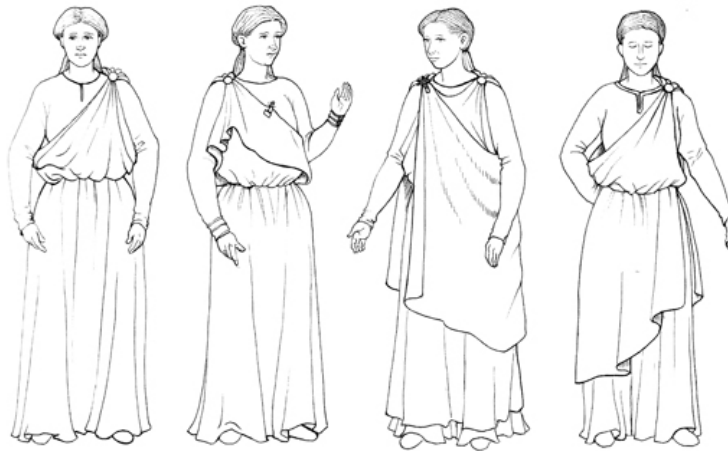
**Penannular Brooch. Shrewsbury Museums Service**

FIGURE 5.11  
Reconstruction of  
the different ways of  
wearing the Anglo-  
Saxon peplos, based  
on the archaeological  
evidence and  
Continental sources.  
Drawing Anthony  
Barton



CHAPTER 5 101

FIGURE 5.14  
Reconstruction of  
the garments worn  
with single and non-  
matching shoulder  
brooches. Drawing  
Anthony Barton



## Girls:

Girls are generally dressed like their mothers. Richer ones have more layers and jewelry, while poorer (ie more active) girls are seen in tunicas only. Girls often wear a lunula (crescent moon shape) amulet.



Southern Italy 200-100BCE, gold  
pendant with inlaid garnet, British  
Museum

Celtic bronze lunula 1<sup>st</sup> c. BCE-2<sup>nd</sup> c. CE

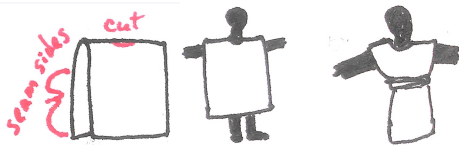
# Men's clothing:

## Tunic:



Digitally restored Caligula, Blackbird Archives. Tunic and matching toga with wide (high-status) stripes.

The linen or woolen tunic is the basic garment for all men, no matter what their status. Slaves would wear rough woven, shorter tunics (just above the knee). Wealthy men would have finer fabric, often in white to represent purity. But again, Romans loved their colors! Tunics would hit below just the knee or longer for older or high status men.



Clavi, reddish-purple vertical stripes run from the edge of the neckhole down, and help identify status. Tunics are plain for most men. Thin stripes are for equestrians, and broad stripes

are reserved for high status men like senators. Construction is very easy: It's just a rectangle of linen or wool (shoulder-to-shoulder for workers or elbow-to-elbow for higher status), and twice as long as you need. Remember to include hems and belting in your length calculations. Fold it in half and cut a head hole. Seam up the sides, leaving room for an armhole. Wear with a belt, unless you are portraying a slave. Military men should wear leather belts. There are no pants, unless you are late Roman, from the northern conquered lands, or elderly/frail. Fancy dining calls for matching long tunics, inner and outer.

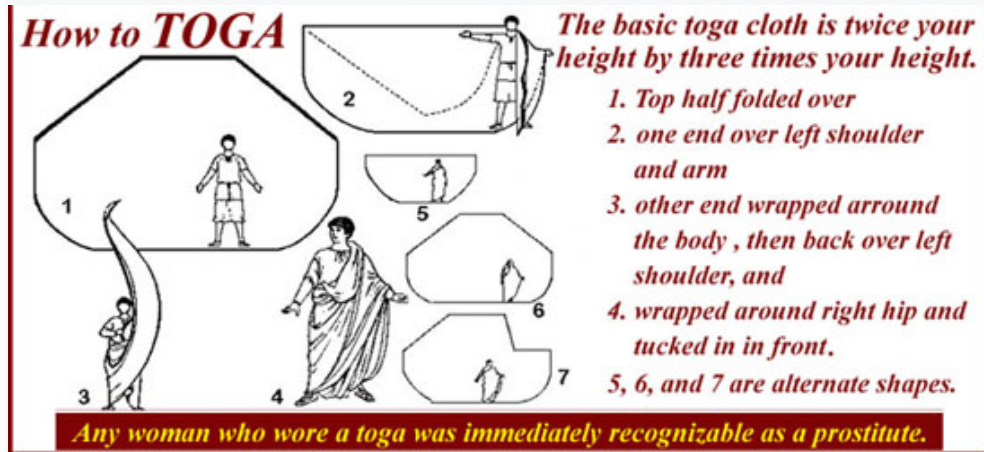


Note the laced caligae (boots)! And the older doctor wearing long sleeves.



## Toga:

For a formal or business occasion, you'll want a toga, the Roman business suit. They are a serious hassle and require constant fussing to stay on (retinue helps). White, with the same stripe rules as tunics.



**Subligar (underwear):** A linen loincloth, worn by men and women. Gladiators performed wearing these with wide belts.

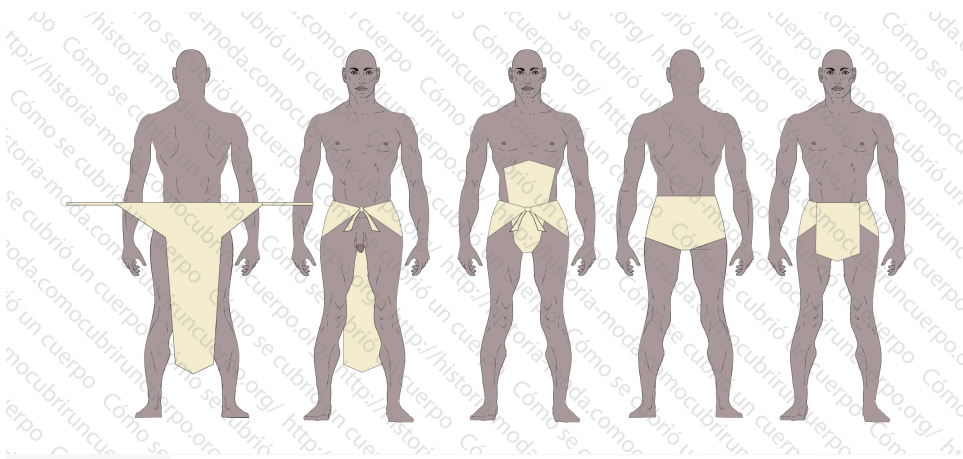
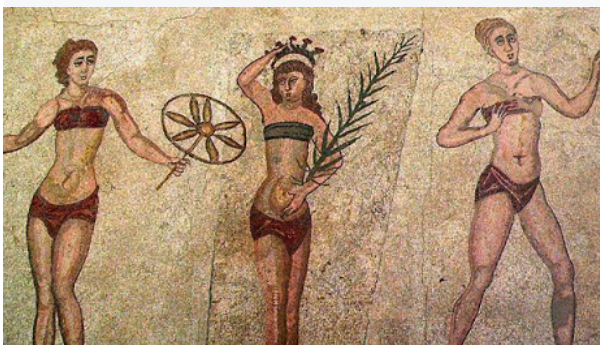


Image from "Cómo se cubrió un cuerpo."

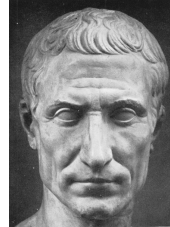




## Shoes:

Use either sandals or plain thin leather shoes or ankle boots with natural toes. They get more complicated but that's a good start. Note: Men, do not wear sandals with a toga! That's like wearing Nikes with a business suit.

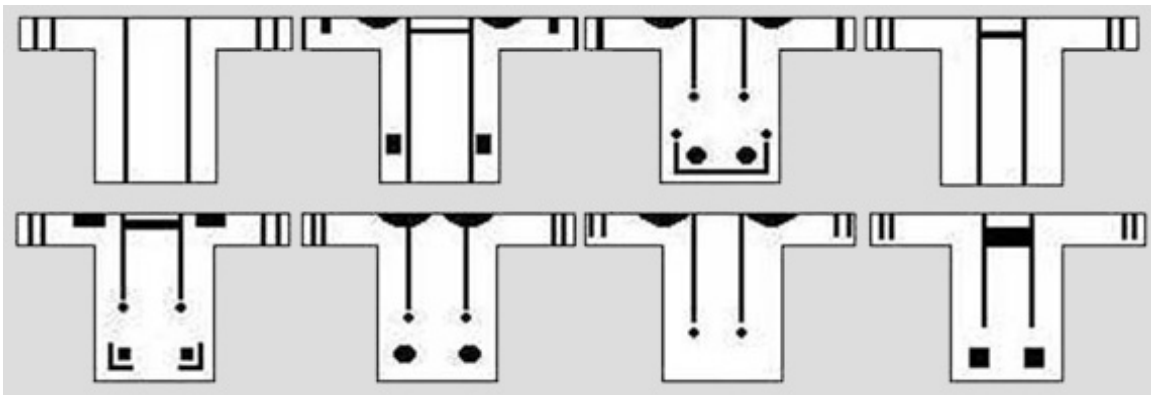
**Hair:** If your hair is short, consider brushing it forward in a Julius Caesar style. If your hair is curly, try a little olive oil as a taming product.



**Jewelry:** A nice flat signet ring is always in good taste.

**Cold weather:** Rectangular wool cloak pinned at the shoulder with a round brooch. In northern conquered lands, adopt the local customs such as leg wraps, pants, etc.

**Other Periods:** Google Coptic tunic if you like tablet weaving!



## Boys:

Boys wear tunics. Even the poor kids have clavi (stripes), which serve a protective function. Also for protection, boys wear a bulla (amulet pouch). This will be a small leather bag on a string necklace, unless he is wealthy enough to have a metal one.

At 15, a boy is considered a man.



## Resources:

Adkins, Lesley, and Adkins, Roy A. *Handbook to Life in Ancient Rome*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994.

"Ancient Rome, Unit 9, Daily Life" – image of toga retrieved from <http://www.mmdtkw.org/ALRIAncRomUnit9Slides.html>

*Blackbird Archive, Fall 2013, Vol 12, No. 2*  
[http://www.blackbird.vcu.edu/v12n2/gallery/schertz\\_p/caligula.shtml](http://www.blackbird.vcu.edu/v12n2/gallery/schertz_p/caligula.shtml)

*Comitatus*, British Late Roman recreation society, retrieved from <http://www.comitatus.net/index.html>

"Cómo se cubrió un cuerpo," info on underwear including a pattern,  
<http://historia-moda.comocubriruncuerpo.org/tag/subligaculum/>

Croom, Alexandra. *Roman Clothing and Fashion*. Stroud, UK: Amberly Publishing, 2000.

<https://www.fabrics-store.com/> – for linen

<http://www.fabricmartfabrics.com/> source of 100% fine wool suiting

McPherson, Dulcia, colorized fabric layers:  
<https://plus.google.com/photos/112323533785461667340/albums/5739626260804382385>

Roberts, Paul. *Life and Death in Pompeii and Herculaneum*. London, Oxford University Press, 2013.

Sebesta, Judith L. *The World of Roman Costume*. Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press, 2001.

Stephens, Janet. Series of videos on Roman hairstyles.  
<http://www.youtube.com/user/jntvstp>

Symons, David J. *Costume of Ancient Rome*. New York: Chelsea House, 1987.

Toga graphic: <http://www.mmdtkw.org/ALRIAncRomUnit9Slides.html>