

Updated 4/20/16 by Domina Tullia Saturnina

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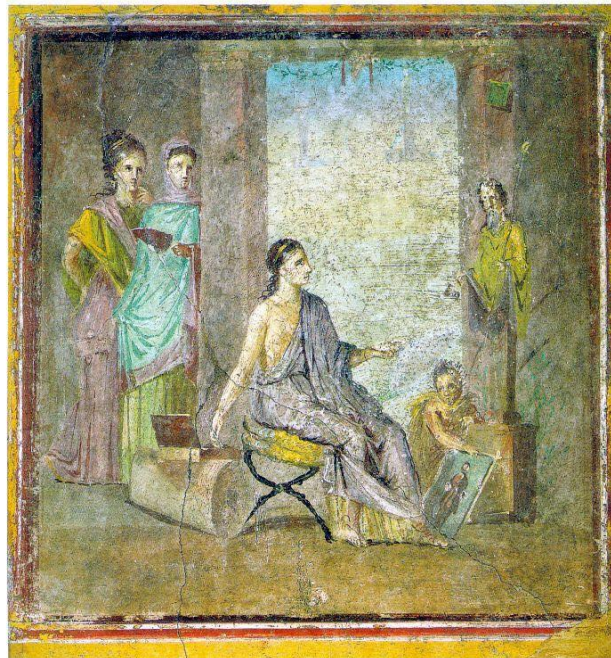
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Website: <http://romanasum.com/>

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

The Roman monarchy (673-509BCE), republic (until 43BCE), and empire (to the third, sixth, or seventh century CE, depending how you count) stretched over a thousand years and multiple continents. As such, the styles vary quite a bit. My focus is Late Republican (50BCE), in the city of Rome. The goal of this paper is to provide an introduction to the garments and their social context. It's intended to be helpful for SCAdians who want to dress Roman with a modicum of accuracy. If you are Byzantine, Romano-Brit, etc., this may be helpful but you will need to continue your research. *Unattributed sketches are my own. Frescos are from Pompeii and other Vesuvian finds. Note that many frescos portray Greek mythology and contain their idea of historic clothing, so I've only used scenes of everyday life.*



Examples of Female Outfits:

- 1) ***Tunica alone.*** Appropriate for working women.
- 2) ***Tunica and palla.*** Appropriate for unmarried and lower status women 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.

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



General 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. Sometimes Tunics were woven 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. Lightweight 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 *tunica*, and is very popular in the SCA, many images of women represent solid colors for tunicas. 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/or high status. Linen is by far the most common fabric for tunics (Fabricstore.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, choose one that's solid or has edge trim. Beware the scattered "polka dot" patterns unless you are portraying a person from late antiquity. Cotton was imported from Egypt and was pricier than linen, but by the 1st century CE it was considered a non-luxury good. Wool-silk and wool-cotton blends are appropriate options for the wealthy persona. Don't neglect thrift stores: My favorite linen *tunica* used to be Ikea curtains!

Note: Wool has a sacred quality, because it's made from a live animal. All ritual clothing (priest robes, the stola, vittae, etc.) are made of wool. To represent her purity, a bride even wears 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.

Pompeii frescos show white, natural, and pastel colors (soft yellow, sky blue, pale green, etc.) for the layers that are linen. Aside from some blues, it's difficult to get linen to retain anything darker than a pastel. Wool takes dye beautifully and makes for a colorful *stola* or *palla* (see below), and in some

cases *tunica*. The Romans loved color and, since dyes were expensive, it was another way to show off your wealth. Black and other dark colors were usually reserved for mourning.

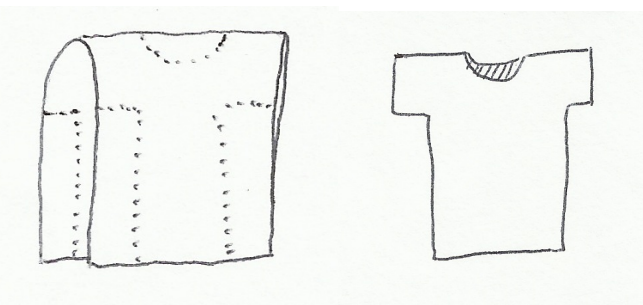
Women's *Tunica*:

The *tunica* is the building block of the outfit. It can be worn alone, or with an unseen linen undertunic, called a *subucula*. 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. The *toga* and *palla* 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 and consider hems before cutting!

Four types of tunicas:

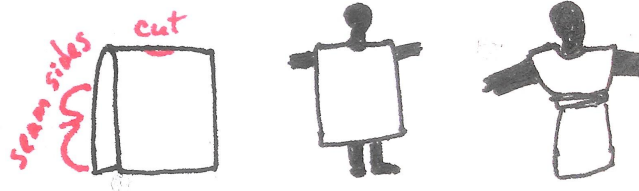
1) T-Tunic: Not commonly pictured, but seen in some sculptures of working women such as midwives and those selling bread in a bakery stall. These have a scoop neck, and the sleeves go almost to the elbow. They are occasionally seen long-sleeved in frescos (see the hairdresser). This relief of a birthing 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. It's identical in construction to the male tunic. "Sleeves" are created by the excess fabric (wider than shoulders) simply draping down the arm.

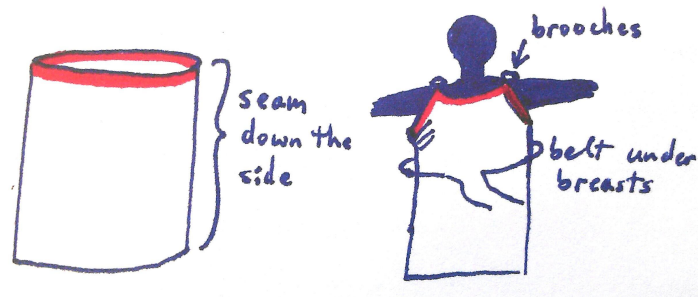


3) Tube *Tunica*: This is the simplest. You literally step into a wide tube and fasten it at the shoulders. The top edge becomes both the neckline and the underarm. Leave the front longer than the back to create the V drape. You can also just pin one shoulder and wear it like a goddess (see the hairdressing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

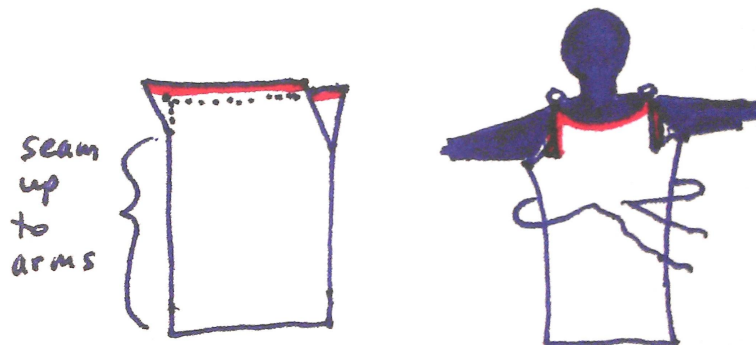


This lightweight linen is flattering even on bigger girls, and wow, is it ever comfortable!

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. Multiply that by two and add about 5 inches so you get a nice drape in the front. That's the circumference of the tube.

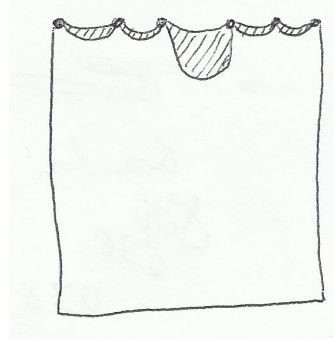
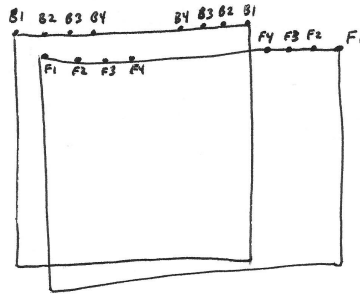


This second method is similar but requires less yardage.



For this to work in a properly flattering manner, **you must use very fine cloth with a good drape**. 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.

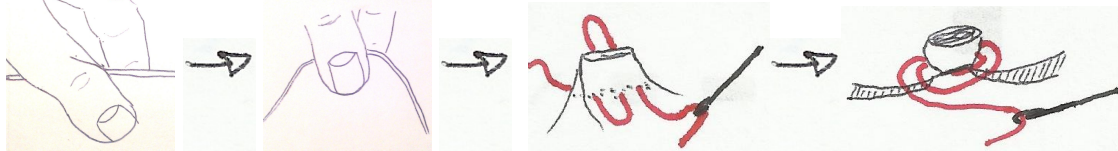
4) Gap-sleeve: Also called an *ionic chiton* and used by Greeks. This is made from 2 rectangles, with the front wider than the back. The front and back are held together by 4-8 small buttons or fabric rosettes. The extra cloth in the front creates a draped "V neck" look.



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 the *tunica* appears alone, the *stola* is only ever worn over a *tunica*. This is the overgarment that declares "I am a respectable Roman matron." Unmarried girls, slaves, and "immoral" women (adulteresses, etc.) were forbidden to wear it. Note that the *stola* went out of fashion in the early Empire, which infuriated uptight Roman men. Under Emperor Tiberius (d. 37CE), a law was proposed to make the *stola* a requirement for *matronae*, but failed. From then onwards, you can layer for warmth but it's not a moral imperative. To wear one might be dreadfully out of fashion, but a would be a powerful statement of your *pudicitia* (modesty, moral fiber) as a good Roman matron. Statues of empresses, goddesses, and powerful women were often dressed in *stola* to emphasize the laudable nature of their subject.

FYI: A mistranslation of "strap" created the idea that the stola had an extra ruffle or "flounce" at the lower hem. This idea persists in some older texts. Ignore it.



Hera Campana. Marble, 2nd century AD. Musée du Louvre, # 21523
Cameo showing a stola with braided straps.

Use lightweight wool, as fine as you can find to get a nice drape. They were made in solid colors or with a simple contrasting border. Length varies from a few inches above the ankle to floor-length. Construction is exactly like the tube *tunica* above, with straps, rosettes, or pins at the shoulders. The major difference is that the stola is longer (“ideally twice as long as the woman is tall”) and worn with a second belt around the hips. The fabric is folded over the belt, hiding it. This increases the visual size of the hips (the better to make more sons for Rome!) with the extra layers. Usually shown with a gap-sleeve *tunica*.

To make one with braided straps: Start with a tube. Braid two straps and sew them in place. Attach them at the back first. I went about 6" apart to help avoiding them sliding off my shoulders. A wider bit between the front straps will give you that sexy drape.

Palla:

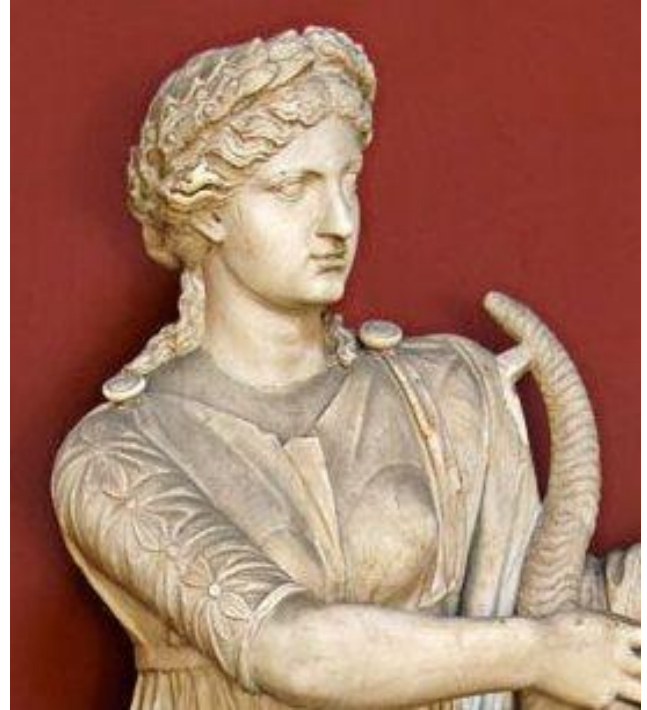


A wool *palla* layered over a wool *stola* (tube style) and a linen gap-sleeved *tunica*.

The *palla* is a long rectangle of cloth, usually wool. It ranges from 3.5-5 yards, and is wide enough to act as a headcover (again, protecting your *pudicita*) out in public. It crosses the torso horizontally in some statues, although it isn't clear what's keeping it 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 to the right side, 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 in domestic scenes.



Left: 1st-2nd century CE. *Tunica recta*, tube *stola*, *palla* around the waist. “Flip-flop” style sandals, roses in her hair.

Above: 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).

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



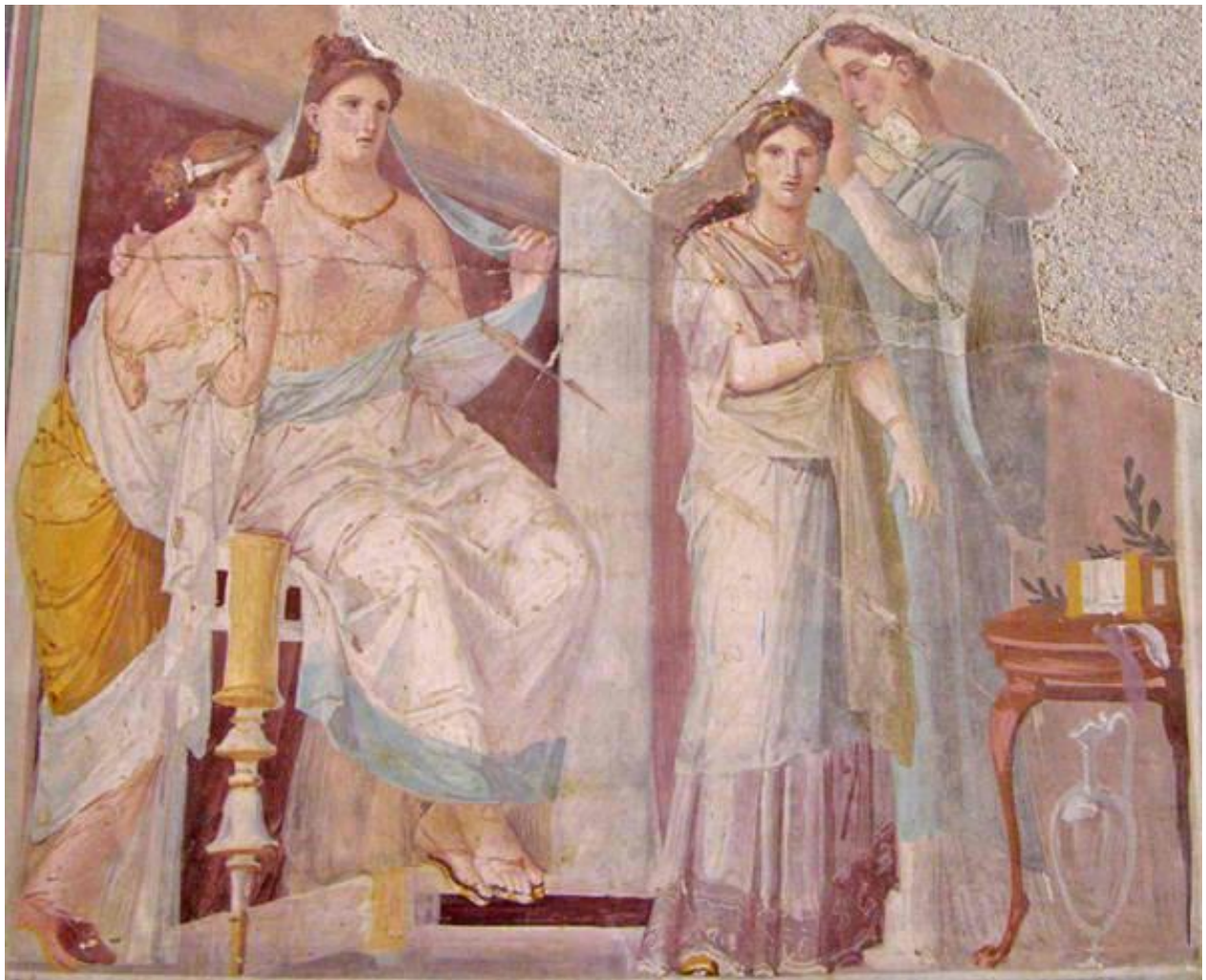
Belts: Thin rope or woven belts are worn just under the breasts. They are tied in the front, with symmetrical loops hanging down and the ends tucked along the belt, or hanging loose. In the case of the *stola*, there is sometimes a second belt low on the hips, hidden by a flap of draping cloth. Images 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.



Fresco of woman with tray in Villa San Marco

This is an interesting garment – it’s clearly a *stola* (double belted, worn over a transparent linen *tunica*) – but the front is folded over like a *peplos*. Is this a representation of Greek historical wear, seen through the eyes of Romans? Or was this another style that failed to be otherwise immortalized?

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, usually 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 (flip-flop or T-strap style) or thin leather slippers (rounded, natural toe). Laces are legit! Note visible shoes in other illustrations in this document.



1st century, Jerusalem

Jewelry: Bangle bracelets, rings, drop earrings, necklaces... there's too much to discuss here. Common themes are snakes, orbs, pearls, emeralds, coral, amber, and glass. Lots of gold! Silver was unusual. In the Empirical period, wealthy women sometimes wore gem headbands. See my Pinterest collections. <http://www.pinterest.com/rosecityacupunc/>

Hair:

If you want to get fancy, you'll appreciate the Flavian hair and other craziness of the Empire period. The upper class ladies sported very elaborate structures of braids and curls. Wealthy women had ornatrixes to do their hair and makeup. They also had both the time to sit still for it, and the need to present themselves as fashionable. Janet Stephens has recreated a number of styles in easy-to-follow [YouTube videos](#).



Note: Married women are often portrayed with thin strips of woolen cloth, called vittae, wrapped around their head. Imperial period women also used diadems - a great way to use your SCA circlet.

Julia Caesaris filia was Augustus' daughter, 39 BCE – 14 C

Fortunately, there is a hairstyle that is documentable and simple enough to handle by yourself. 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 it into place with a bone needle and wool yarn. Even the great Cleopatra used this style.

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. Wigs are period!



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. See sketches below.

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 E.C.4

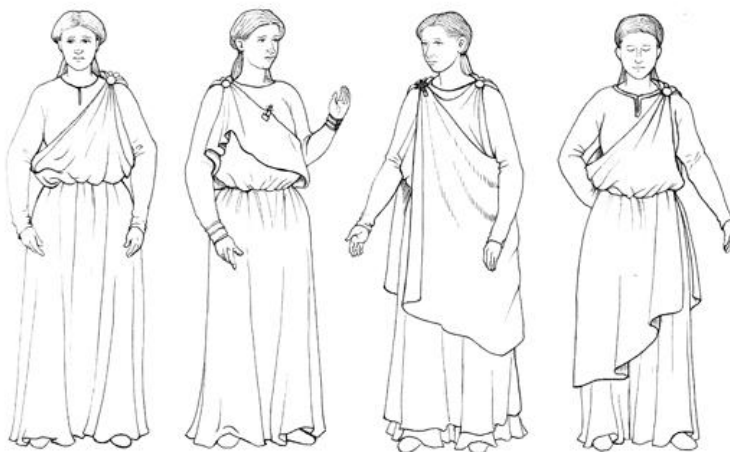


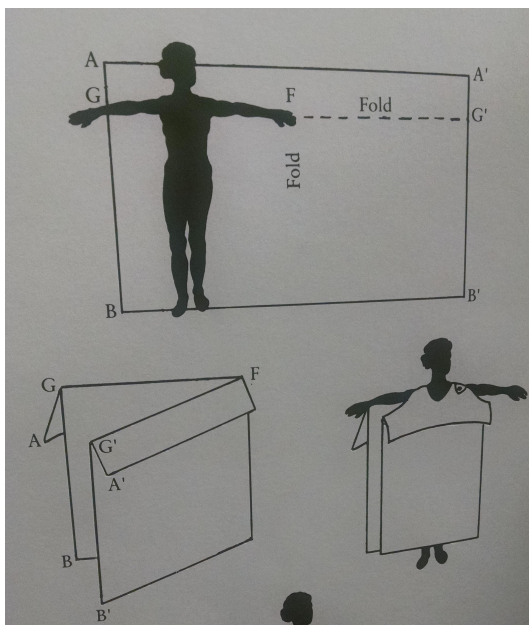
FIGURE 5.14
Reconstruction of the garments worn with single and non-matching shoulder brooches. Drawing Anthony Barton

Romano-British recreations by Penelope Rogers.

Girls:

Girls dressed like their mothers, in that richer ones had more layers and jewelry, while poorer (i.e. more active) girls were seen in tunicas only. The *palla* is not worn by girls. There is some scholarly contention about whether or not they used fillets (*vittae*) in their hair.

There is an article of clothing, the *supparus*, specific to girls. We know it is made of linen, covers the thighs and has short sleeves, and is “narrow,” so I imagine it was a close-fitting T-Tunic. This explains a statue I saw in the MFA of a pre-teen girl wearing a T-tunic under a tube *tunica*.



Peplos sketch from Sebasta.

Some girls are portrayed wearing a *peplos*, which was originally a Greek garment. This is known to have been worn by the Vestal Virgins, and seems to be suitable for virgins of all ages, but my research is incomplete.

Citizen children of both genders wore the *toga praetexta* (*toga* with a red-purple striped border). Both the wool and the stripe had apotropaic (protective) properties. In addition to warding off evil, the garment warned people to use proper language in their presence, and not to take sexual advantage of the children.

Girls often wear a *lunula* (crescent moon shape) amulet.

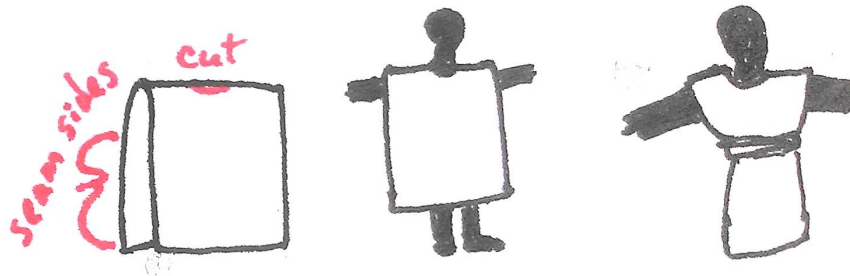


Southern Italy 200-100BCE, gold pendant with inlaid garnet, British Museum

Celtic bronze lunula 1st c. BCE-2nd c. CE

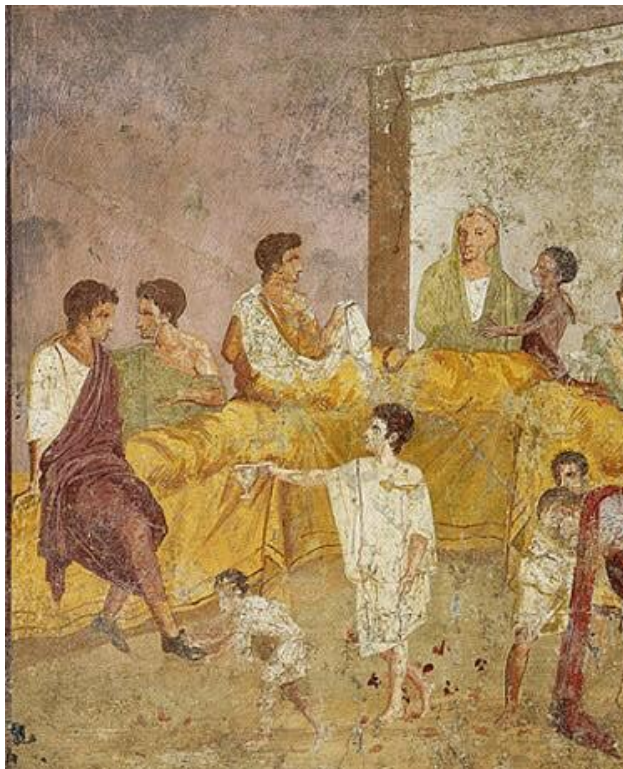
Men's clothing:

Tunic:



Mosaic from Leptus Magna, in modern Libya.

Tunica recta: "Sleeves" are created by the excess fabric (wider than shoulders) simply draping down the arm.



Note the thin *clavi* on the far left gentleman in this fresco of a Pompeii dinner scene. The darker *toga* may represent mourning. Next to him in a simple tunic is probably his slave. The center man with a white *toga* / tan tunic is chatting with a woman wearing a green *palla*.

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), sometimes lacking a belt. 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. The *tunica taleris* (ankle-length) was acceptable for the elderly, but mocked as effeminate for younger men. Linen undertunics (*subucula*) were optional.

Clavi, reddish-purple vertical stripes, run from the edge of the neckhole down and help identify class. Tunics are plain for most men. Thin stripes are for equestrians; 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 would wear leather belts, with the end hanging down in front. There are no pants, unless you are late Roman, from the northern conquered lands, or elderly/frail. Fancy dining calls for matching longer tunics, both inner and outer.

Toga:

A word on the *toga*: It evolved from an earlier Etruscan garment, the *tebenna*. In the early Republic (500s BCE), it was worn by both genders. By the 2nd century BCE, there were specific types with very rigid social rules. Slaves were forbidden to wear the *toga*.

toga praetexta – white with a red-purple stripe. Protective, for children, and for the ruling class

toga virilis / toga alba / toga pura - man's formal attire, usually plain white

toga candida – bleached to dazzling white, to represent purity, worn by men running for office

toga pulla – a dark toga for mourning men

toga picta / toga purpurea – dyed and embroidered, for special events like a Triumph (men only)

toga muliebris – Darker colored, for prostitutes. Expensive courtesans wore translucent silk or silk-blend.



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

For a formal or business occasion (like SCA court), you'll want a toga virilis, 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.

How to TOGA

The basic toga cloth is twice your height by three times your height.

1. Top half folded over
2. one end over left shoulder and arm
3. other end wrapped around the body, then back over left shoulder, and
4. wrapped around right hip and tucked in in front.
- 5, 6, and 7 are alternate shapes.

Any woman who wore a toga was immediately recognizable as a prostitute.

The wrap and drape of the toga creates a sort of front pocket, called the *sinus*, that was used with varying degrees of success by men who didn't want to entrust their burdens to their slaves. There's a story about a senator who was embarrassed by his lover's shoe falling from his *sinus* during a public oration.

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

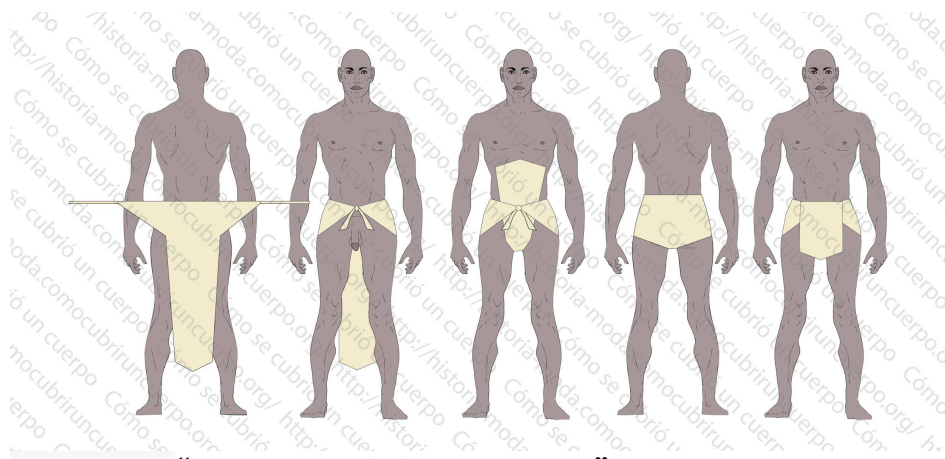
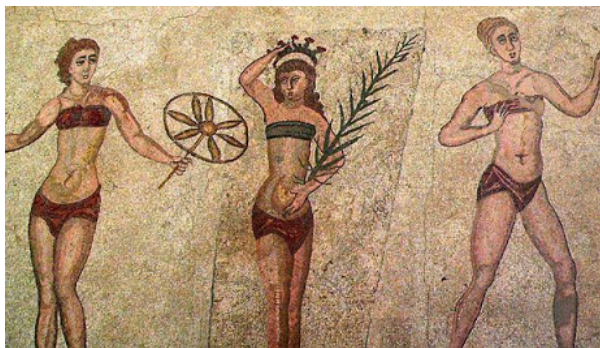


Image from “[Cómo se cubrió un cuerpo.](#)”



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 tuxedo.

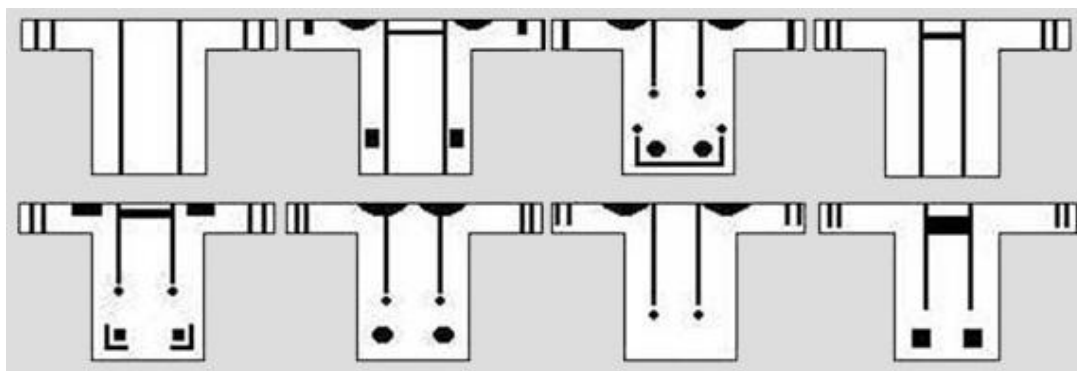
Hair: If your hair is short, brush it forward. If it’s curly, use olive oil as a taming product.

Facial hair trends changed to match the current ruler. Most civilians were clean-shaven until Hadrian, who adopted the soldier’s beard. No goatees or moustaches – it’s all or nothing.

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

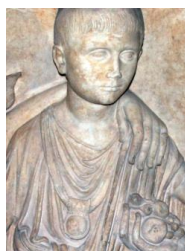
Cold weather: Rectangular wool cloak pinned at the shoulder with a round brooch. In northern conquered lands, adopt the local customs such as leg wraps, pants, etc.

Other Periods: Google Coptic tunic if you like weaving!



Boys:

Boys wear tunics. Even the poor kids have clavi (stripes), which serve a protective function. See the *toga praetexta* note in the girls section. 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.



Social Context:

Scraps of fabric, especially when rectangular and simply decorated, are not the most fascinating objects in history. What's captivating about Roman clothing to me is what it reveals about their culture.

Roman history is full of sumptuary laws regulating jewelry, the use of purple dyes, and other conspicuous consumption. These were a people very concerned with morality and righteous living. Likewise, the obsession of each life-stage and status having its own uniform helped people know their roles and the roles of others they encountered.

There is an interesting passage in Cicero's Second Philippic (43BCE) where he criticizes Marcus Antonius - known to the modern world as Mark Antony - for his youthful indiscretions. It seems as soon as he had attained the status of manhood, donning the *toga virilis*, M. Antonius drew scorn by being a passive sexual partner to Scribonius Curio. He began wearing the *toga muliebris*! "Curio then took him off the street, as it were, and set him up 'in a stable and fixed wedlock.'" It was, claims Cicero, as if he had given Antonius a *stola*. (Edmunson, 36).

This anecdote reveals the social significance of clothing for the Romans. Each stage of life has its own garments, and people literally wrapped themselves in their identities. In this case, Marcus' feminine (receptive) actions put him into women's wardrobe. Side note: The Romans didn't have a concept of homosexuality in the modern sense. This was more misogyny than homophobia, but that's a subject for another paper....

Imagine a family swelling with pride the first time a boy dressed as a man, or when a young bride donned her first *stola*. In Roman life, linen and wool hold the weight of cultural mores. Getting it right - or as right as possible - means understanding the context, and respecting the traditions of a culture that still shapes how we see the world.

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

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