

Dressing the Roman Matron of 50BCE

Sharon Rose / Tullia Saturnina
Oct 4, 2014

“Roman clothing was simple and elegant, practical and comfortable. Based on the rectangles that came directly from the loom, [...] they differed little in shape from the garments that had existed in the Greek [and Etruscan] world. “

~ Norma Goldman, “Reconstructing Roman Clothing,” *The World of Roman Costume*

The Roman Empire stretched over a thousand years (753 BC to 476 BCE) and over multiple continents. Please bear in mind that evolving fashion and the influence of other cultures mean there is no single “Roman outfit.” I am attempting to re-create a single example: A freeborn matron of the very thin middle class in Rome during the reign of Julius Caesar.

Tullia Saturnina is a widowed midwife in the city of Rome. The year is 50BCE.



Hair:

The upper class ladies sported very elaborate structures of braids and curls (Adkins, 346). 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. A working woman like Tullia had more practical considerations. Although she probably would have had one or two slaves to help run her home and business, an ornate hairstyle was probably not a priority (Croom, 115). Fortunately there is a documented hairstyle that is simple enough to handle by myself.

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. Janet Stephens has a wonderful video demonstrating two hairstyles used by 2nd century Empress Faustina II. The first is complex and time-consuming, and was her signature style when she first rose to power. After she had children, she switched to the simpler coiled “bun braid.” If it’s good enough for her, it’s good enough for Tullia!

Married women are often portrayed with thin strips of woolen cloth, called the *vittae* (Sebesta, 46), wrapped around their head. The *vittae* share an association with the *stola* as a symbol of respectable matron status. Sometimes the wealthy adorned them with pearls or other precious gems. Flowers, wreaths, and diadems in the hair are common in artwork.

Wool had sacred properties and was used for ceremonial or symbolic clothing.

Personal note: I was suspicious about the practicality of sewing as a method of securing hair, but once I got the hang of it I found it to be far superior to pins. I can sew myself together at 8am and it will still look fantastic and be perfectly in place when I straggle back to my tent at midnight. The trickier part is cutting the thread free without cutting hair in the process, especially when tired. I will have to acquire an ornatrix at some point.



Julia Caesaris filia was the daughter of Augustus, 39 BCE – 14 CE.



Coin portrait of Octavia (69 - 11 BCE), sister of Augustus, wife of Mark Antony, in 38 BCE



Cleopatra and Caesarion, minted circa 47 BCE



Fulvia (80-40 BCE), minted in Rome 41 BCE

I used to wear a “crown” hairstyle (two pigtail braids, crossed over the top of the head) but now I’m not sure where I saw that. I didn’t come across any images of that style in the process of preparing this documentation.

Accessories:

Makeup, jewelry (earrings, bracelets, necklaces), undergarments, and especially shoes are all topics for future projects. The visible articles I am wearing today are passable if not purely accurate.

Clothing:

Creating fabric was an expensive and time-consuming process. Spinners (*quasillariae*) used a bottom-weighted spindle (Kliener, 93) to spin fibers into thread. Warp-weighted looms were used before and after the Roman Empire to weave those threads into cloth. There is some contention between experts as to whether Imperial Romans used warp-weighted looms (Adkins, 328) or the more difficult double-warp looms (Wild, 36). Kliener refers to weavers (*textores* and *textrices*)(93) using vertical warp-weighted looms. Following a class on the warp-weighted loom at Inlands Iron & Ink, I had a private conversation with Dame Madrun. I like her assertion that they are really the same loom, just used into two different ways.



Recreation of a warp-weighted loom. Vadastra village, Romania.



Roman double-warp loom from Germany. Haus der Geschichte der Bundesrepublik Deutschland.

Once fabric was achieved, the Roman look depended not upon cutting and seaming garments, but upon artful draping.

Romans generally wove a garment to size. Aside from the famous toga, most were rectangles. Some even wove T-tunics as a single cross-shaped piece (Croom, 18). Finishing would have been as simple as folding the cloth in half, stitching up the sides, and cutting a head hole. Except for poor people who had to re-use fabric, their edges would have been selvedge. To duplicate this look when I have to use a cut edge, I hand sew the hem using small, nearly invisible stitches. If possible, I use

threads from the fabric itself for a perfect color and texture match. This works beautifully for heavy- and mid-weight linen and wool. Lightweight linen thread has proven too fragile to stand up to the sewing, so I use modern thread.

In the late Republic, depending on their status and the setting, women wore various combinations of the **tunica**, the **stola** (an overdress), and the **palla** (a large shawl). The brilliant Dulcia McPherson colorized pictures of statues to help differentiate between the layers of fabric. I've added color-coded terms to one. Others will appear further down.



Bust of Vibia Sabina, wife of Emperor Hadrian, 130CE. Prado Museum.



Valeria Messalina (c. 17/20 – 48 CE), wife of the Emperor Claudius. The Louvre.

In statues, the women are well covered. They are bundled in so many layers of wool and linen it's hard to imagine living like that in an Italian summer. By contrast, in the frescos from Pompeii the women show significantly more skin. The paintings have bare arms and shoulders (many tunics are slipped off one shoulder, particularly when portraying a goddess), and have deeper folds across the chest. The fabric seems translucent, and based on the tiny draped folds must be very, very thin.

This is probably because statues are formal portraits of important, powerful women – empresses, goddesses, and wealthy women– who were being presented as ideally modest and virtuous. On the other hand, the informal settings depicted in the Pompeii frescos reflect everyday life, and may even be more risqué than the normal street dress of the time... sort of an ancient version of the half-dressed hotties on our TV screens. I suspect that in both cases some artistic license was used. The truth lies somewhere between the mummified matron and the exhumed exhibitionists. It does bear pointing out that even the heavily wrapped statues often have clearly visible nipples, even through what should be 2 or 3 layers of linen and wool. By comparison, the Egyptians wore sheer linen gauze (Wilcox, 1), weaving their fabric thin enough to reveal the anatomy underneath, and it was probably similar in Rome. This is borne out by the much smaller Romano-British warp weights (Wild, 34) as compared to other cultures: You’d need lighter weights for thinner threads.

Another complication with the Vesuvian frescos (found in the cities destroyed by Mt. Vesuvius in 79CE: Pompeii, Stabiae, Oplontis, and Herculaneum) is that many of them portray ancient Greek or Etruscan stories (Lessing, 137), and thus show anachronistic dress. This makes perfect sense – It’s much more interesting to have your walls tell the story of Aphrodite or Hercules than the baker down the street – but it makes it harder to tease out what’s actually contemporary Roman vs. their idea of archaic style (Croom, 13).

Am I replicating actual Roman clothing, or “historical” memes in Roman artwork?

Pompeii frescos show white, natural, and pastel colors for the layers that are linen. Dyed wool makes for colorful stolas and pallas. Reds, blues, greens, and yellows were very popular for women. Both men and women wore white. Some books claim that Romans liked to wear layers in the same color family (shades of blue, for example) but I am not seeing that in the frescos. If only the statues were still wearing their paint!

Tunica:

The tunica is the basic building block of Roman costume for both men and women (Adkins, 345). It is the inner layer, and may be worn alone by working people or in private settings. Tunicas were worn ankle length or longer by non-working women Note: Poorer people wore coarser and skimpier clothes for ease of movement, and because fabric was expensive and time-consuming to make. Togas and pallas were a way to show off that you could afford extra fabric, and could swath yourself in extra layers because you weren't doing any physical work.

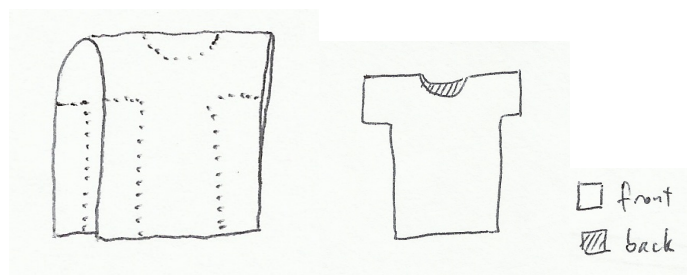
Although trim is a handy way to lengthen a slightly-too-short tunica, and is very popular in the SCA, nearly all images of women represent solid colors for tunicas. In cases where a contrasting edge is seen, they are wide (4+ inches) and woven in. Linen was by far the most common fabric for tunics, although wool was also an option. Silk and cotton, imported from China and Egypt (Sebesta, 69), respectively, were expensive and only worn by the wealthy. Even then, the fabrics were usually blends of imported thread woven with local wool (Sebesta, 71).

T-Tunica: This is not commonly pictured, but it's seen in some sculptures of working women such as midwives (two of those!) 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 hairdressing fresco below).



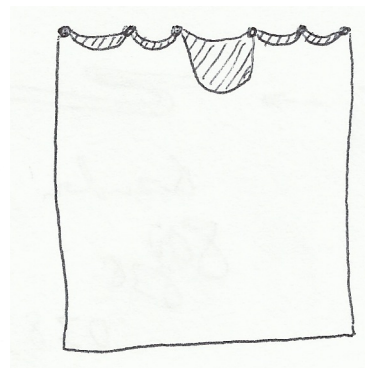
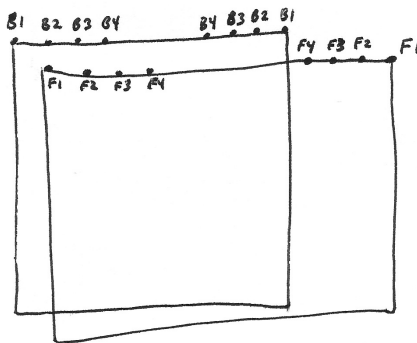
This relief of a birthing scene was found in Ostia.

To make a T-tunic, use fabric twice as long as your shoulders to the desired length, plus extra for belting (and hems if needed). Cut out the neck, and any extra width under the arms along dotted lines. Seam under the arms and along the body. Hem the neck. Long sleeves may be made separately and joined if they are not woven in. Wear it belted under the breasts.



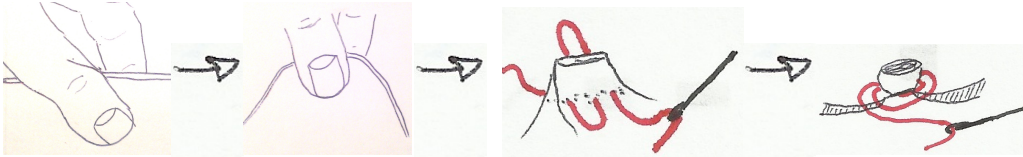
Gap-Sleeve Tunica: This type of tunica was extremely popular, based on the frequency of depiction in statues and frescos. The Greeks called it an **ionic chiton**. The construction is very simple: It's made from 2 rectangles, with the front wider than the back. There are 2-5 gathers along the top of each sleeve. The gathers are held by either small brooches / buttons or folded fabric rosettes. The extra cloth in the front creates a draped "V neck" look.

Detail of a statue of Plautilla (died 212CE), Uffizi Museum.

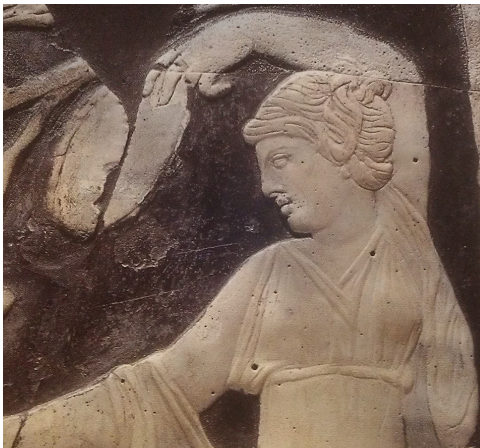


Join F1 to B1, F2 to B2, etc. with a rosette or pin. The number of gathers is variable. I usually do the ends of the "sleeves" first, then the neck, and then figure out how many to add in between depending on the width of the fabric. Note that there is more space in the center front than the back. This is what creates the V fold. Rosettes are made by holding both layers of fabric, pulling it up a little, sewing through the dotted lines, and wrapping additional thread around the base of the rosette.

Supposedly the Greeks simply belted the fabric rectangles and allowed breezes to enter the sides of the garment. Since I haven't seen any evidence of that in Roman art, I sewed the sides for modesty, leaving the top 6-8" open as an armhole.

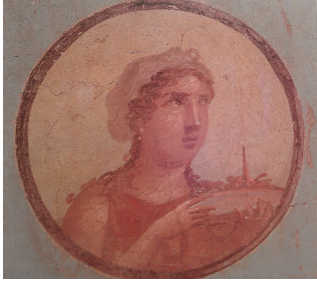


Tube Tunica / Tunica Recta: In my first attempt at recreating the tunica and stola, I read “gathered at the shoulder” in a book and mistakenly invented a style with accordion-type folds. My error was due to using mid-weight linen, IL019 from Fabrics-store.com - heavier than would be used in period – so I needed a way to wrangle all that extra bulk. Even after multiple washes, it's just a little too stiff and bulky at the shoulder folds. One garment I made is particularly bad at the back of the shoulder since, in a desire to use the selvedge edges, I used two identical rectangles rather than a wider one for the front.



Cameo glass plaque from the house of Fabius Rufus, Pompeii.

After looking at more images and statues, I see that the folds are much less regular. The fabric bunches under the arms (great example to the left), and I now recognize the “gathered shoulders” as a tube style construction. I've seen this in both tunicas and stolas. The front and back pieces are joined at the shoulders by brooches, fabric rosettes, or straps (for stolas only) in artistic representations.



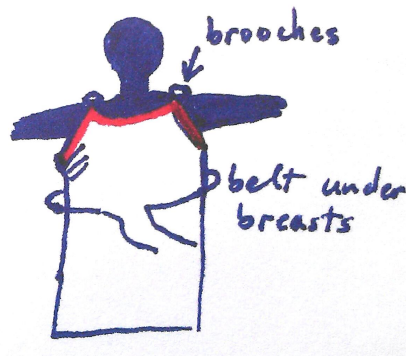
Herculaneum fresco, Naples,
Museo Archeologico Nazionale.



This tunica was too heavy, too dark, and just plain wrong with accordion folds at the shoulder.

Using very fine-weave fabric has been the key in duplicating the drape seen in ancient art.

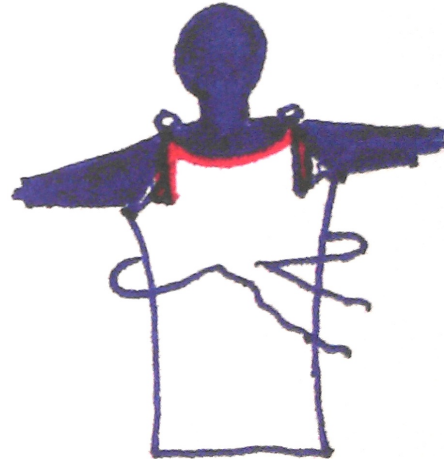
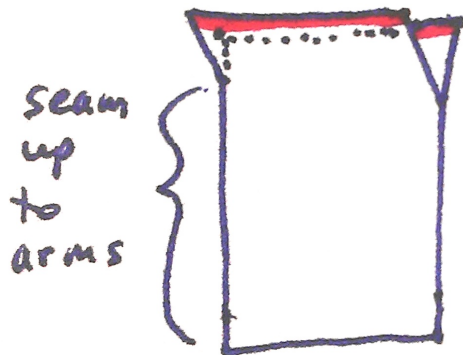
In the future, I would like to weave my own. For now I am using lightweight linen (Fabrics-store.com IL020 & IL030, and other fabric found at thrift stores) with better success.



The tube style is the simplest construction. You literally step into a wide tube and fasten it at the shoulders, with the back pinned over the front. The top edge becomes both the neckline and the underarm (Croom, 18). 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).





A variant on the tube style leaves the top few inches of the tube unseamed, so when you pin the fabric at the shoulders the corners are left to hang free. This version requires less fabric.

Again, the sides could either be belted overlapping, or sewn up to the armpits. You can see the dangling corner at the right armpit in a statue of Cybele, dated about 50CE. J. Paul Getty Antiquities Collection.



My entry tunic is 100% linen. Because it is made from Ikea curtains found at Goodwill, it is neither dyed with period dyes, nor completely hand-sewn. The pale seafoam green color is achievable with dyes of the period (Sebesta, 66). I left the commercial stitching down the side, and just joined the panels by hand. I did remove the commercial stitching and redo the visible (top and bottom) hems by hand to more closely mimic a selvedge edge. The construction is an ionic chiton / gap-sleeve tunic with fabric rosettes along the sleeves.

Stola:



Funerary statue from the Flavian period (c. 80 CE). Note medium-sized disc brooch at her shoulder. British Museum.

Dulcia McPherson has colorized a yellow diadem and palla, blue stola, and green tunic.

While tunics appear alone, the stola is only ever worn over a tunic. This is the over garment that declares “I am a respectable Roman matron.” Unmarried girls and “bad” women hadn’t “earned” the right to wear it (Sebesta, 48). They were made of lightweight wool, or possibly silk-wool blends for the very wealthy. They are generally portrayed in solid colors. Length varies from a few inches above the ankle to floor-length. Construction is tube style with rosettes, pins, or straps at the shoulders. Although many academic documents mention stola straps, nearly all images are tube style. Note that the stola went out of fashion in the early Empire, shortly after my period. Even so, later statues often

show women wearing them to emphasize their modesty and respectability. The two main attributes of a Roman matron are her fecundity and her dignity (Getty, 159), and the stola symbolizes virtuous motherhood.

Empresses were often portrayed as goddesses. Art does not always reflect life: SCA members in 2850AD may well study a Michael Bay film (the horror!) and conclude that it was common for early 21st century American women to wear white pantsuits and stiletto heels. I sometimes feel that I am coming to similarly misguided conclusions.

Ironically, my fanatic focus on primary sources required tempering with secondary and tertiary sources written by experts in the field, because in this case the primary sources lie!



Three relatively rare stola representations with straps. Left: Cameo brooch, 90-100 CE. London, British Museum. Center: Unidentified. (Both colorized by Dulcia McPherson). Right: A young Roman wife of 30 CE, Glyptothek Munich.

My entry stola is white hand stitched wool twill (Wild, 43 and Croom, 19) in the split-top tube construction. White was a popular color for both men and women (Croom, 27).

Palla:

The palla is the protector of a Roman lady's modesty (Sebesta, 49). It's simply a long rectangle of cloth, usually wool. It ranges from about 3.5-5 yards long, and can be wide enough to act as both a head cover and a cloak. The palla 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 will probably want to reverse these directions to leave your left arm free.

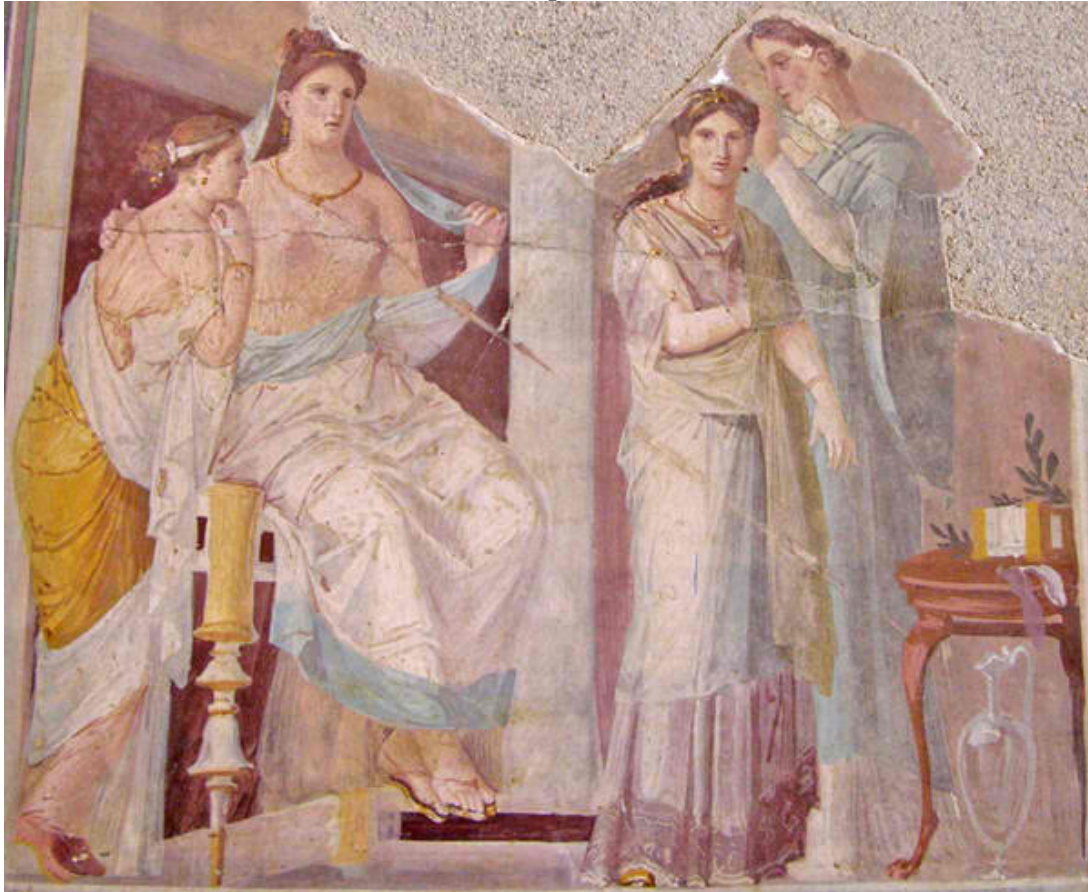


A wool palla layered over a wool stola and a linen gap-sleeved tunica.

The palla would be replaced by the ricinium (a square, toga-like garment) if a woman was widowed and thus lost her status as materfamilias. Even if her husband died, if she had living sons she would retain the title and the palla (Sebesta, 50). Tullia has a surviving son and daughter.

My palla entry is red wool. Like my tunica, I had to simulate selvedge edges with hand stitching. It's commercially dyed, and I am also not sure about the crepe texture of the wool. However, the color (Sebesta, 67) and drape are period, and I've found it to be a highly versatile garment. It blocks the sun during the day, and due to its light weave, is not overpoweringly hot. It is surprisingly warm in the evening, however, when wrapped as a cloak.

There's so much to look at in the Pompeian fresco below! On the far left, a woman wears 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 a blue edge over a natural-colored tube tunica over her left shoulder, with her right shoulder bare. Second from the right, she's wearing a gap-sleeve tunica with gold fasteners. Her tunica has a deep contrasting border. She has tan leather shoes. The hairdresser on the far right wears a long-sleeved white tunica under a blue palla, with no visible stola.



Some fresco women have their stola / palla wrapped or rolled around the waist. The houses had small exterior windows (if any) and depended upon skylights for light and circulation. The inside would have been unbearably hot in the summer. Nudity was not as taboo for them, and it makes perfect sense to strip down for comfort in the privacy of your atrium (Roberts, 74).

Brooches:

The Roman love affair with the fibula is well documented (Swift, 14). The arched “safety-pin” shape is ideal to handle bunched up fabric, and they used them well and often. I was personally more intrigued by the medium-sized round brooches (about 1” diameter) that appear in statues at the shoulders, joining the front and back of lightweight tunics and stolas.



Statues from the Villa of the Papyri, Herculaneum, with garments pinned at the shoulders with medium-sized round brooches. These figures are represented in an archaic Greek style (wearing peplos, with the extra chest flap) as mythical and divine figures often are.



Statue of Erato, muse of lyric poetry; Roman, 2nd century CE. Her name is derived from *eros* (love, passion). The statue was found near Tivoli. Rome, Vatican Museum (Hall of the Muses).



Enameled bronze brooches from the early Romano-British period. Described as “slightly reduced” in the text (Roman Crafts, III) and measuring 0.75”-1.25” on the page.

“This 1st century Roman disc plate brooch was found on a villa site during excavations along the line of the Warminster by-pass in 1987. It is currently held by Salisbury and South Wiltshire museum.” – Wessex Archeology



My entry brooch: The original was 3.85cm wide, tinned bronze with bone doughnut beads. I commissioned Fjorlief InHaga to duplicate a pair for me in silver and bone. Although this particular find is slightly later (100 years or so) than my period, this size brooch is seen at the shoulders in statuary both earlier and later, so I feel justified in using them. A bigger question than the size and placement is the shape. The classical Roman brooches are represented with smooth round edges, while this indented “snowflake” pattern is indicative of British influence (Swift, 18).



Still, they are gorgeous, and I had them made, so I’m going to wear them. I don’t feel too bad given the trade that existed with Britain in my period (Goldsworthy).



Belt: Women wore thin rope belts tied just under the breasts or at the natural waist. They are tied in the front, usually with symmetrical loops hanging down and the ends tucked along the belt. There is sometimes a second belt low on the hips, hidden by a flap of draping cloth. Images of goddesses usually wear both belts (Croom, 13). This helps visually enlarge the hips. The standard of beauty in that time was smaller breasts (the wraps help with that) and wider, childbearing hips.



Athena with the face of the Carpegna type (late first century BC to early first century CE), Piazza dell'Emporio, Rome



The *Campana Hera*, a Roman copy of a Hellenistic original, from the Louvre.

My belt entry: Woven from undyed linen.

RESOURCES:

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

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

Goldsworthy, Adrian. "How Rome Fell (Podcast of speech). *Kansas City Public Library*, Oct 15, 2009 <http://www.kclibrary.org/event/adrian-goldsworthy-how-rome-fell>

Haus der Geschichte der Bundesrepublik Deutschland in Bonn: Roman loom (2. century AD) exhibition. Retrieved from http://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/Haus_der_Geschichte#mediaviewer/File:Roman_loom.jpg Museum website: <http://www.hdg.de/stiftung/>

Glyptothek Museum, Germany, retrieved from <http://www.antike-am-koenigsplatz.mwn.de/de/glyptothek-muenchen.html>

J.Paul Getty Museum. *Handbook of the Antiquities Collection*. Los Angeles: Getty Publications, 2002.

Kleiner, Diana E and Matheson, Susan B. *I, Claudia: Women in Ancient Rome*. Austin: University of Texas Press, 1996.

Klepper, Erhard. *Costume Through the Ages*. Mineola, New York: Dover Publications, 1999.

Lessing, Erich. *Pompeii*. Paris: Editions Pierre Terrail, 1996 (English translation)

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.

-
Salisbury Museum <http://www.salisburymuseum.org.uk/>

Sebesta, Judith. "Weavers of Fate: Symbolism in the Costume of Roman Women" retrieved from <https://www.usd.edu/arts-and-sciences/upload/Harrington-Lecture-Sebesta.pdf>

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

Stephens, Janet. "The Hairstyles of Faustina the Younger" Retrieved from https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=M_HPjg-f8iQ

Strong, Donald. *Roman Crafts*. London: Gerald Duckworth & Co, LTD, 1976.

Vadastra village. Roman villa, vertical loom.
<http://www.panoramio.com/photo/90814567>

Wessex Archeology <http://www.wessexarch.co.uk/>
http://www.vroma.org/images/mcmanus_images/matronasarcophagus.jpg

Wilcox, R. *The Mode in Costume*. Mineola, New York: Dover Publications, 1888.

Wild, John P. *Textiles in Archeology*. Buckinghamshire, UK: Shire Publications, 2003.

**For more information, the latest version of this project, or just fabulous geeking out, please contact Sharon Rose / Tullia Saturnina at sharon@rosecityacupuncture.com.
<http://romanasum.com/>**