

# AN INTRODUCTION TO ROMAN WOMEN'S CLOTHING

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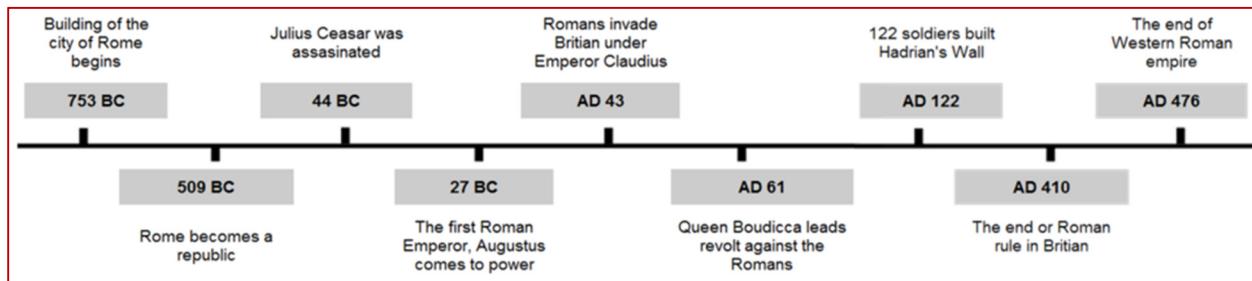
Thank you for your interest in Ancient Roman women's clothing. Please understand that this is a working document, and will be edited as my research dictates. All errors are mine. Feel free to ask me any questions that you have!! I look forward to your emails asking for updates, or if you have information to share or see errors in my document.



## OVERVIEW OF THE TIME PERIOD

The Roman Empire was one of the greatest civilizations in history, beginning in 753 BC. Rome controlled over two million square miles from the Rhine River to Egypt and from Britain to Asia Minor. Because the timeline stretches over a thousand years, the styles of clothing vary significantly from the beginning of the Roman Monarchy (753-509 BCE), through the Republic (509-27 BCE), and the Imperial Period until the end of the Empire (27 BCE to 476 AD).

My focus is the Late Republic to early Imperial (50 BCE to 79 AD) coinciding with the eruption of Mount Vesuvius and the decimation, and subsequent preservation, of Pompeii, Herculaneum, Stabiae, and Oplontis. The goal of this paper is to be helpful for SCAdians who want to dress Roman with a modicum of accuracy. If you are Byzantine, Romano-Celt\*\*, etc., this will be a helpful start but you will need to continue your research. (\*\*My own persona is Romano-Celt, so I have included a page at the end of this document to provide some insight into that garb!)



## INTERPRETING ARTWORK

In the absence of any surviving clothing, art and literature provide the only evidence of classical dress. The existing images and artwork of the period can be grouped into a few clear categories. First, important figures of powerful women, such as empresses and wealthy ladies, were pictured as virtuous and modest. These women were swathed entirely in fine fabrics. Images show the draping and layers. On the opposite spectrum, when portraying deities and physical pleasures or love, nudity was common.

Likewise, when looking at frescoes, it is important to segregate informal, private settings (inside the house where showing skin is unimportant) from public appearances (dinner parties and shopping the markets where modesty was valued) depicted in everyday life scenes, and from mythological stories with an abundance of bare breasts. The Vesuvian frescoes often portray ancient Greek or Etruscan stories (Lessing 137) and thus shows anachronistic dress. This makes perfect sense – it's much more interesting to have your walls tell the story of mythological heroes than of your neighbors. However, it makes it harder to tease out what's actually contemporary Roman clothing versus their idea of archaic style (Croom 13). The epic tales, with their nudity, are more risqué than the normal dress of the times.

For the purposes of this document, I have tried to exclude mythological and anachronistic images, and focus on the images presenting everyday life as identified by experts in the field, historians, professional archeologists, and scholars.

## MATERIALS

Garments were normally woven to size and used the rectangle directly off the loom. Gores, curves, and other shaping concepts were not used. Unless you are portraying a poor person who had to reuse the fabric, the edges would have been selvedge.

Linen is the most common fabric used for Roman garments. Tunics are best made with a medium weight so as not to be sheer and reveal the body. For the palla (veil), a lightweight linen is best. Cotton was imported from Egypt and was pricier than linen, but by the 1<sup>st</sup> century CE it was considered an easily available item. Lightweight wool is also a reasonable fabric to use. Silk and gold threads would have been reserved for very high status ladies, such as an empress. Wool-silk and wool-cotton blends are also appropriate for a wealthy persona.

Wool has a sacred quality, because it is made from a live animal. All ritual clothing (priest robes, the stola, vittae, etc.) is made of wool. To represent her purity, a bride would be married in wool. 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, and their industry with wool is often mentioned in epitaphs. For this reason, a stola, which represented a matron's dedication to her family, would have been made with a lightweight wool.

Although fancy trim is a handy way to lengthen a slightly-too-short tunica, and is very popular in the SCA, most images don't show this to be accurate. Wide ornamental borders (*instita*) on the lower hem of the tunica were woven and fairly simple, usually just a different solid color of the same fabric type. If you do use trim, stick to simple era-appropriate designs, preferably card-woven or inkle-loomed, and avoid metallic threads unless you are portraying an extremely wealthy or high social status person, such as an empress.

## COLORS

The body of the garment was a single solid color. Stripes, aside from clavii, only appear during this period on upholstery. Avoid polka dots or scattered all-over designs. Patterns appear in earlier periods (Thracian and Etruscan) and again in late antiquity (Byzantine), but not in Rome during the Republic or early Imperial periods.

Pompeii frescoes show ecru, natural, and pastel colors (soft yellow, sky blue, pale green, pink, etc.) for the layers that are linen. Aside from some blues, it is difficult to get linen to retain anything darker than a pastel. Wool takes dye beautifully and makes for a colorful stola or palla, and in some cases tunica. The Romans loved color and, since dyes were expensive, it was another way to show off your wealth. For a really authentic look, avoid the super-saturated look of modern dyes. Black and other dark colors were usually reserved for mourning. Purple was reserved for the emperors and his family. White is reserved for members of the Senate, children, priests and Vestals.

Roman dyers would certainly have had access to the same locally produced, usually plant-based dyes as their neighbors on the Italian peninsula, producing various shades of yellow (weld), blue (woad), green (lichen/woad), red (madder), as well as pink, orange and brown; blacks could be achieved using iron salts and oak gall. Other dyes, or dyed cloths, could have been obtained by trade, or through experimentation.

### Exotic Colors

Throughout the Monarchy, Republican and Imperial eras, the fastest, most expensive and sought-after dye was imported Tyrian purple, obtained from crushing the shells of the Mediterranean Murex mollusks. It took 10,000 shells to make dye just one toga! Its hues were variable, the most desirable being a dark "dried-blood" red. Purple was thought to sanctify and protect those who wore it, and was officially reserved for the border of the *toga praetexta*, and for the solid purple *toga picta*.

The color of indigo was produced by using an expensive dye. Indigo dye held colors fast and this rich color was worn by the wealthy and should not to be confused with the color blue which was produced by using cheap blue dye obtained from plants such as woad.

Saffron yellow was much admired, but costly. It was a deep, bright and fiery yellow-orange, and was associated with purity and constancy. It was used for the *flammeum* (meaning "flame-colored"), a veil used by Roman brides.



## WOMEN'S CLOTHING

There are three basic layers worn by Roman women: the *tunica* (inner dress), *stola* (outer dress), and *palla* (shawl).

- **Tunica alone** – appropriate for freedwomen, merchanting and working women
- **Tunica and palla** – appropriate for unmarried and lower status women in the Republican period, and for all women beginning with the Imperial Period.
- **Tunica, stola, and palla** – for matrons in the Republic and early Imperial Period. When wearing a *stola*, it is important to wear a chiton for the tunica, not a peplos. The *stola* fell out of fashion in the early Imperial Period, but was still worn by traditionalists.

It is difficult for the untrained eye to separate out the different layers of fabric on frescoes and statues. To assist in this, [Dulcia MacPherson](#) posted a collection of colorized statues that help differentiate between the garments, and [Tullia Saturnina](#) added the wording to the image below.



## LENGTH

If you are portraying a working woman, stop the hem at mid-calf or ankles. You can use a *palla* if you would like, but it's not required. Poorer people wore shorter clothes for ease of movement, and because fabric was vastly expensive and time-consuming to make. For wealthier ladies, the tunica should cover the feet so that just the toes are showing, even after belting.

## TUNICA

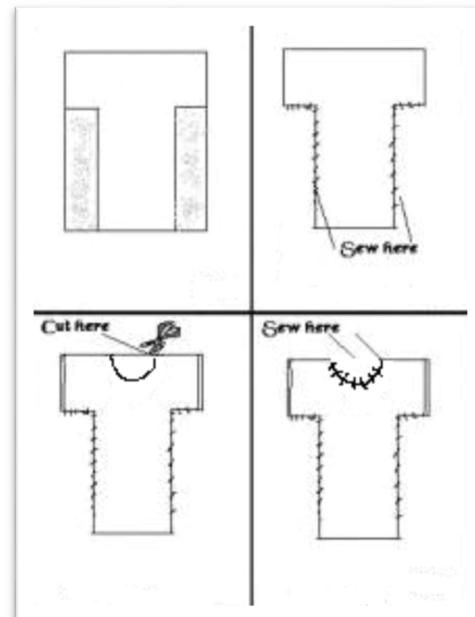
The tunica is the base of the entire outfit. It can be worn alone, or with an unseen linen undertunic, called a *subucula* or *tunica interior*. There are four basic types of tunicas worn by women in Ancient Rome: *tunica opus*, *tunica recta*, *tunica virgo* (*peplos*), and *tunica matrona* (*chiton*). The tunica opus is a working tunic. Tunica recta means “straight”, and refers to the straight seams of this easy to sew tunic. Tunica virgo, or maiden, was often worn by unmarried women and adolescent girls. The tunica matrona was worn by married women.

Note that sizing is based on height and arm length – you can gain or lose weight and still wear the same clothes! This also makes for easy loaner garb.

### Tunica Opus

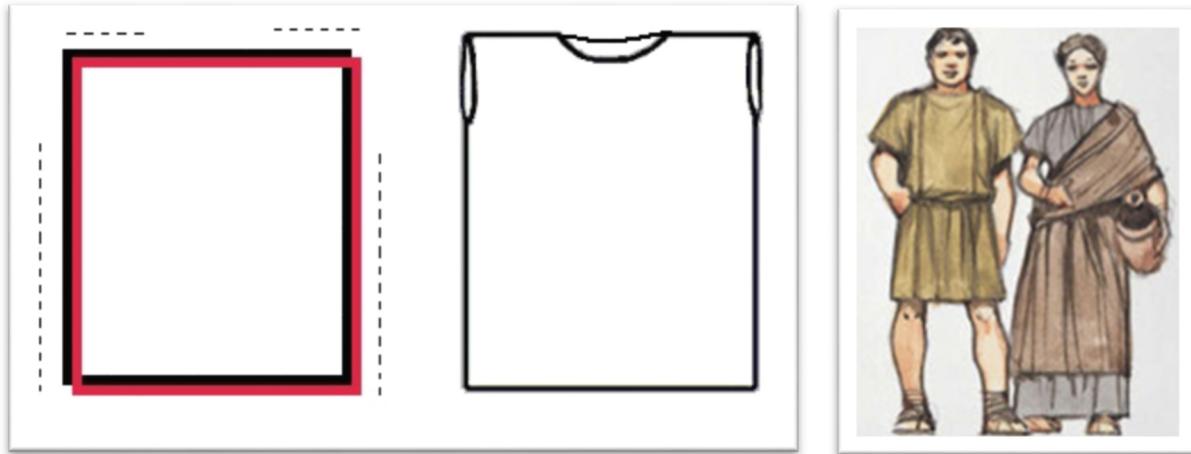
This is a basic T-Tunic. This is less frequently seen and was mostly used by the working class. The picture bottom-left shows a midwife wearing a short-sleeved t-tunic. Another example seen of this tunic is on a hairdresser, and she has long-sleeves. These have a scoop neck and only two seams – one under each arm and down the side. You can purchase premade tunics of this design from many SCA merchants and at events, but it is very simple to make as well.

To make a T-tunic, use fabric twice as long as your shoulders to the ankle, plus extra for belting and hems. Fold in half, cut out rectangles under the arms, and cut out an 8-inch scoop for the neck. Sew your seams, the neck and hem, then belt it under your bust. If you want long sleeves, you can attach them to the end of the short sleeves as a separate set of seams.



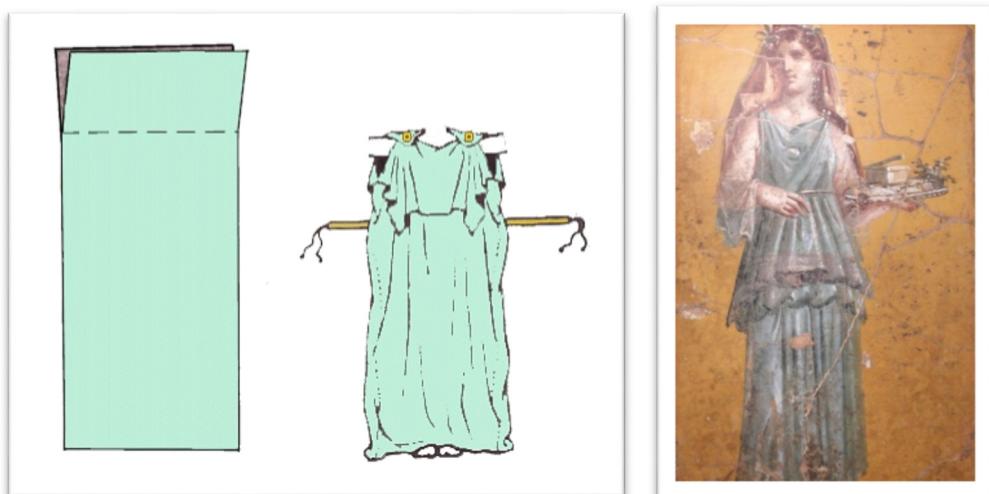
### **Tunica Recta**

This is a simple rectangle, front and back, seamed up both sides leaving a 12-inch arm opening, and sewn across the shoulders, leaving a 12-inch neck opening. This is identical to the male tunic, with the exception of having a little more fabric on the front panel so that it drapes into a V-neck. The sleeves are formed by the fabric slipping over the shoulder, similar to cap sleeves. The width of this should be from elbow to elbow, doubled, plus 5 inches to form the drape.



### **Tunica Virgo (Peplos)**

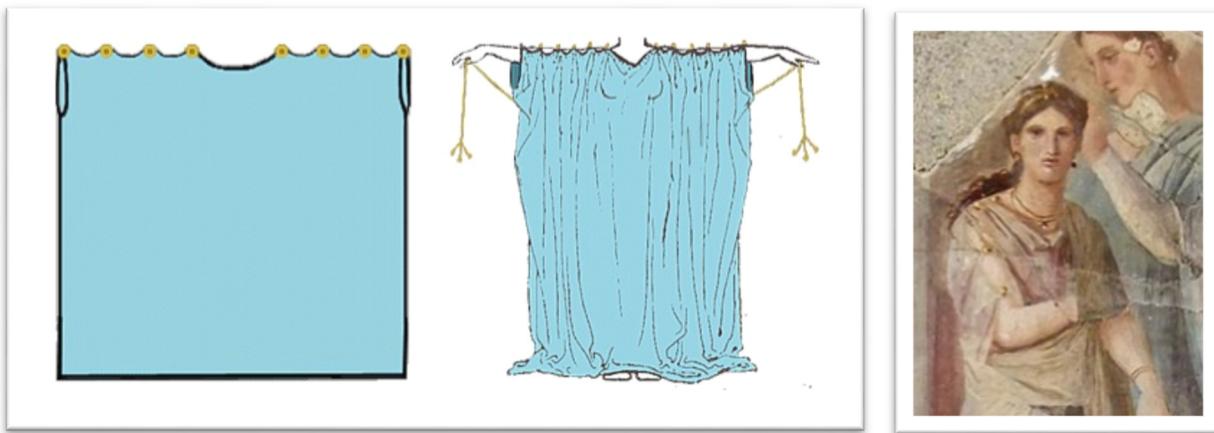
This tunic is often referred to as a “tube tunic”, but was called a *peplos* by the Greeks. This is one of the simplest tunics to sew, as it made of one large rectangular piece of cloth, formed into a cylinder and then folded along the topline into a deep cuff, creating an *apoptyigma*, or overfold. That second layer falls to either the bust, waist, or hip. The neckline and armholes of the peplos were formed by fibulae, broochlike pins that attached the back to the front of the garment at either shoulder. The width of this should be from elbow to elbow, doubled. This is then belted under the bust, at the waist, or at BOTH the bust and waist.



### **Tunica Matrona (Chiton)**

This tunic is often referred to as a “gap-sleeve tunic”, but was called an *ionic chiton* by the Greeks. This tunic is just two rectangles of fabric seamed up the sides, and pinned or buttoned together at two or more points to form shoulder seams, with reserve openings for the head and arms.. The width of this is most often just from elbow to elbow, doubled, plus five inches to form the V-neck drape. This would form a short-sleeved tunica. However, it can also be from wrist to wrist, doubled, plus five inches, to form a long-sleeved tunica.

The number of connecting points is up to you. I usually connect the ends of my sleeves first, then my neck, then spread the remaining pins equally in between those points until I get the right drape. Note that there is more space in the center front than in the back, which forms the V-neck of the tunica. This is then belted under the bust or at the waist.



### **STOLA**

The *stola* is the traditional distinctive garment of a married Roman woman or matron, worn over a gap-sleeved tunica. It was typically made of wool, as a symbol of marriage, and by the late Republic all women married according to Roman law were entitled to wear it. Not all did, of course, since it was not a particularly fashionable or flattering garment, but wearing the stola was a way for a woman to publicly proclaim her respectability and adherence to tradition, as well as to hide the effects of childbearing on her body. By the end of the first century AD, the stola fell out of everyday use, though it was probably quite common at formal or ceremonial occasions.

The stola was properly long enough to cover the feet, and it is worn with a belt high under the bust. At the top, the fabric is gathered into a pair of straps or narrow bands which go over the shoulders, causing the neck opening to form a V-shape. The neck opening is simply a vertical slit, rather than horizontal. The strap over each shoulder could be a loop of cord, with the top corner of the body panel pulled through one end of the loop, folded over, and sewn in place. Or the fabric itself might simply be gathered on either side of the vertical neck slit, fixed at the center by a narrow band wrapped around.

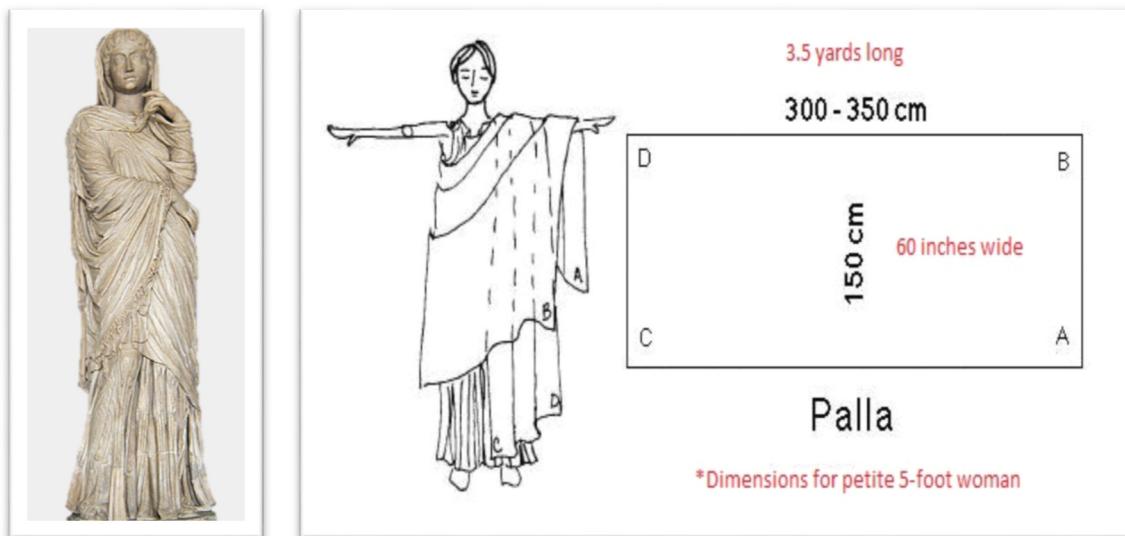
A lot of SCA women wear only the stola in the hot summer months. This is not historically accurate, but it is definitely sexier. Here is a method of making a stola with a figure-flattering drape, drafted years ago by other SCAdians.



## PALLA

All respectable women wore a long cloak, called a *palla*, over their tunic and stola when they went outside. This was rectangular in shape and was typically draped over the left shoulder, under the right arm and back across the body, carried by the left arm or thrown back again over the left shoulder. The palla could also be pulled up to cover the head, as shown in the statue of a matron whose elegantly draped palla has a fringe.

Experts have deduced that the palla was approximately 300cm (3 yards) long by 150cm (60 inches) wide. However, when I used these measurements to recreate one for myself, I suddenly remembered that ladies of the Mediterranean in Ancient times were a lot... more petite... than the average American woman. I find that a full 5 yards gives the appropriate wrap and drape.



## FASTENERS

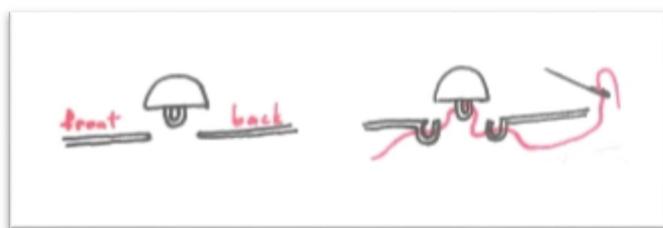
Typical fasteners of Ancient Rome were fibulae, or early safety pins, and brooches. However, these could be expensive, and therefore a woman might own only one set of pins which she switched between her garments. Lesser noble women would make fabric rosettes to hold the clothing together, or would use shank buttons permanently sewn into place.



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 then stitching through to secure it.



You can also use plain metallic or enamel shank buttons, about a quarter- or half-inch in size. If you go the button route, gather the fabric a little for good draping in the gaps. These are sewn into place, not meant to unfasten in the sense of modern buttons.



## BELTS

The tunicas were typically girt with ribbons or tablet woven belts, and tied in a wide variety of ways. One such way was with two belts: the first was worn just below the breasts creating a great number of folds, and the second and wider belt worn around the waist, with the fabric

bloused over each belt. Another method was to come over the neck, like in a halter top, under the brooches at the shoulders, cross at the breasts, go around the back, crossing, and then tie at the waist in front. Both the young bride and the Vestal Virgin would tie their simple belt at the waist with a Herculean knot, to show the strength of the bond.

For the SCA, feel free to use either a woven belt, a rope such as those used for draperies, or a leather belt. In fact, use your protégé, squire, or apprentice belt – just make sure to use a belt or you will trip on all the fabric of the dresses, and they might slip right off of you!!

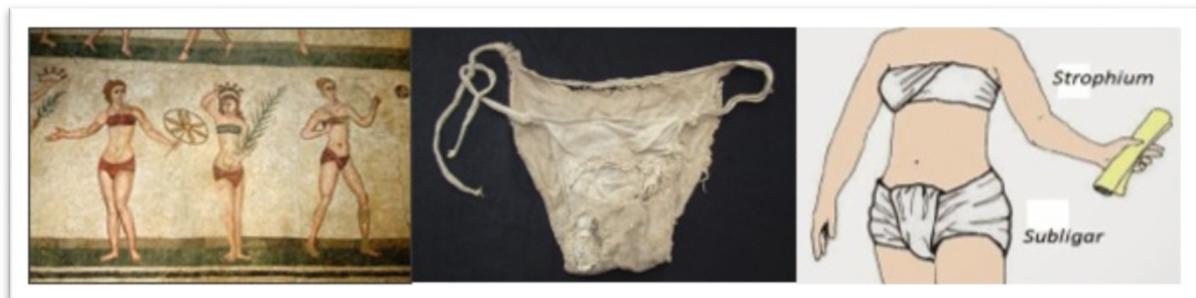


## INTIMATE LINGERIE

The *strophium* (or *mamillare*) is the Roman brassiere in the form of breast binding. It is a band of soft linen or wool 6" to 8" wide (or a folded wider strip), long enough to go around the body a number of times (six or seven for best results). It can be worn in several ways, for example placing the center of the band at the back and crossing the ends in front to support the breasts, then wrapping the ends around and tucking them in at the back again. Evidence is scarce, however, and pins or ties may have been used.

The *subligaculum* was a kind of undergarment worn, which could come either in the form of a pair of shorts, or in the form of a simple loincloth wrapped around the lower body. It could be worn both by men and women. In particular, it was part of the dress of gladiators, athletes, and of actors on the stage. Dancing or exercising girls are shown wearing "bikini briefs", and a pair of woman's panties made of leather have been found in excavations of Roman London; it is

believed that these may have been fairly common for wearing while exercising or playing sports at the baths, but not actually worn under clothing.



## JEWELRY

The Fayum portraits are a set of encaustic (wax) paintings dating back to Imperial Roman Egypt, from the first century AD during the reign of the Emperor Tiberius (42 BC to 37 AD) until the third century AD. Although they were stylistically related to the tradition of Greco-Roman painting, they were created for a typically Egyptian purpose, as portraits inserted in the strips of the face of the mummy so that the deceased's soul can recognize its body in the afterlife. Centuries later, they serve as primary sources into the clothing, jewelry, and hairstyles of our ancient ancestors.

Apart from the gold wreaths worn by many men, with very few exceptions, only women are depicted with jewelry. This generally accords with the common jewelry types of the Graeco-Roman East. Most depict simple gold link chains and massive gold rings. There are also depictions of precious or semi-precious stones like emerald, carnelian, garnet, agate, amethyst, and pearls. The stones were normally ground into cylindrical, spherical, or faceted beads.

There are three basic shapes of ear ornaments: circular or drop-shaped pendants, S-shaped hooks of gold wire on which up to five beads could be strung, and elaborate pendants with a horizontal bar from which two or three vertical rods are suspended with a bead or pearl at the bottom. Other common ornaments include gold hairpins, often decorated with pearls, fine diadems, and gold hairnets.



## SHOES

Romans used a wide variety of practical and decorative footwear, all of it flat soled (without heels). Outdoor shoes were often hobnailed for grip and durability. The most common types of footwear were a one-piece shoe (*carbatina*), sometimes with semi-openwork uppers; a thin-soled sandal (*solea*), secured with thongs; a laced, soft half-shoe (*soccus*); a hobnailed, thick-soled walking shoe (*calcea*); and a heavy-duty, hobnailed standard-issue military marching boot (*caliga*). Thick-soled wooden clogs, with leather uppers, were available for use in wet weather, and by rustics and field-slaves.

Indoors, most reasonably well-off Romans of both sexes wore slippers or light shoes of felt or leather. Brides on their wedding-day may have worn distinctively orange-colored light soft shoes or slippers made of wool (*lutei socci*).

Public protocol required red ankle boots for senators, and shoes with crescent-shaped buckles for equites, though some wore Greek-style sandals to "go with the crowd", therefore it is best to avoid these two design features unless they fit your persona. Costly footwear was a mark of wealth or status, but being completely unshod need not be a mark of poverty. Cato the younger showed his impeccable Republican morality by going publicly barefoot; many images of the Roman gods, and later, statues of the semi-divine Augustus, were unshod.



## HAIRSTYLES

Roman women originally dressed their hair with great simplicity, left loose and confined by a band encircling the head, or platted into braids and then fastened with a large pin. Young girls wore their long hair in simple buns tied at the base of the neck or wore their hair in a top knot. Simple hairstyles for married women changed during the reign of the Emperor Augustus when a variety of different and elaborate hairstyles came into fashion.

For more than just attractiveness, hairstyling was the leisure pursuit of the cultured, elegant female. Hair was seen as much as an indication of wealth and social status as it was of taste and fashion. Having a complex and unnatural hairstyle illustrated the wealth of the wearer in being able to afford to take the time to style their hair. A "natural" style was associated with barbarians, who the Romans believed had neither the money nor the culture to create these styles.

During the rule of the Flavian emperors (69-138 BC) hairstyles were raised to a great height by rows of false curls. Hairstyles involved hair being twisted, waved, curled, and arranged in elaborate layers. Ringlets were created to create hairstyles which fell to the sides and the backs of the head. Wigs and hair pieces were used to create an illusion of abundant locks.

Apart from society, hair was used symbolically to mark rites of passage; for instance, loosened hair was common at a funeral, and the *seni crines* (six braids) was the hairstyle worn by brides and Vestal Virgins.

As the Roman Hairstyles for women became more elaborate and an important sign of status, it became necessary for slaves to create the latest fashionable hairstyles. These slaves were highly skilled and valued. The Roman slave hairdressers were called *ornatrices*.

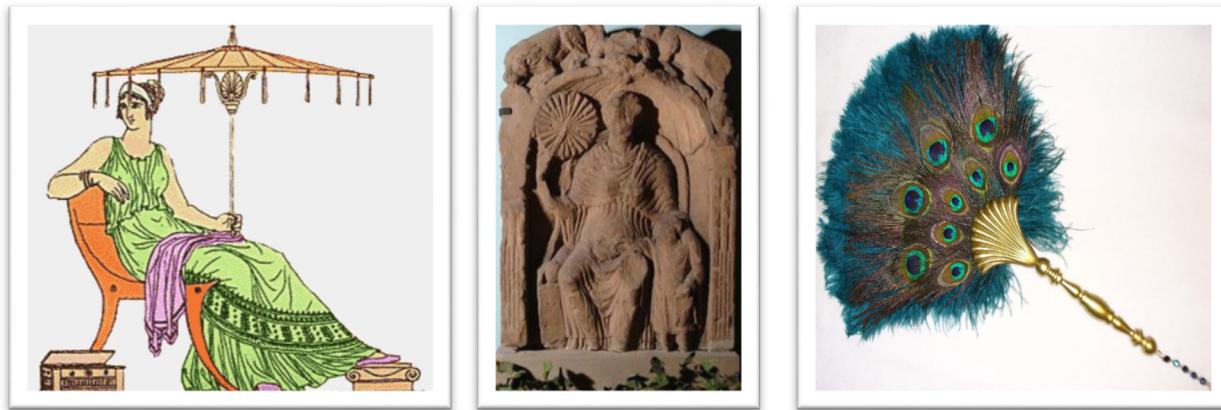
Assisted by expert hairdressers and augmented with false hair and wigs, the Roman women spent much time and effort on their tresses. They even had hair dyes and bleaches. Cosmetics and hairstyling required mirrors, which were made of highly polished bronze or silver in rectangular or round shapes. Grey hair was dyed using a form of walnut dye. Blonde hair was greatly admired by the Romans. Roman women used a form of hair dye to produce the prized blonde hair, or they purchased hair cut from Germanic slaves to make wigs. Wigs were common in Ancient Rome which were combed into elaborate hairstyles. Often ribbons, gold, pearls, and other precious jewels were sewn into the hair to help emphasize the intricate styles.



## OTHER ACCESSORIES

Parasols were necessary in the hot climate because women wore no hats. An attendant held the parasol over her mistress' head. Women had fans made of wings of birds, usually peacock feathers attached to thin sheets of wood connected to a handle, or linen stretched over a frame.

The task of the slave was to keep her mistress cool and untroubled by flies by fanning her. Both men and women wiped perspiration from face and hands by using handkerchiefs of fine linen. To keep the palms cool and dry, ladies held balls of amber or glass, just as eighteenth-century ladies in Europe and America used "hand-coolers" of glass.



## COSMETICS

The Ancient Romans started using cosmetics for ritual purposes, but as time went on, they became part of women's everyday lives. Wealthy people were able to buy imported makeup from China and Germany which were very expensive, while poorer people could only afford cheaper knock-offs of such "high-end" cosmetics.

Due to the weather conditions and the poor quality of their cosmetics, makeup needed to be reapplied several times a day, which wasn't always practical, especially for lower-classes women. Rich ones instead had female slaves called *Cosmetae* whose job was to apply makeup on them as well as making creams, lotions and cosmetics.

Keeping up appearances in ancient Rome was a controversial mission. Today the Italian word for makeup is "trucco", which means trick. In ancient Roman times, it was considered by many as mere manipulation. Ancient Roman poet Juvenal wrote that "a woman buys scents and lotions with adultery in mind" and philosopher Seneca thought that wearing cosmetics led to the decline of the Roman morality.

Romans believed that fair and white skin represents wealth and high position. They therefore would prime their faces with beauty masks that included a mix of sweat from sheep's wool, placenta, excrement, animal urine, sulphur, ground oyster shells, and bile. They would then whiten their skin with marl, crocodile dung, and lead. Swans fat was used to hide wrinkles. Other ingredients used in beauty masks and treatments were rose water, eggs, olive oil, honey, anise, almond oil, and frankincense. Recreate the base layer of pale skin using a foundation a shade or two lighter than your everyday color.

Roman author and natural philosopher Pliny the Elder wrote that they fell out from excessive sex and so it was especially important for women to keep their eyelashes long to prove their chastity. Ladies would use burned cork to create long, thick eyelashes. To recreate this look, either apply false eyelashes or several coats of a black mascara.

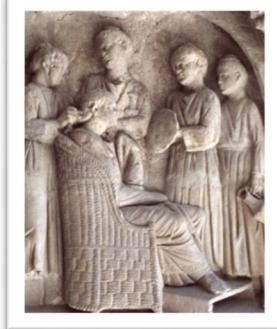
They did have colored eyeshadows, but only in the colors of blue and green which resulted from ground minerals. Eyeliner was made from kohl, soot, ash, and even burned rose petals and date pits, all mixed with antimony. Roman men liked dark eyebrows that met in the center, and Women tried to achieve this by darkening their eyebrows with antimony or soot and then extending them inward. Because modern society doesn't find that attractive, I suggest you overemphasize your brows with a dark brown or black filler, having them close together but not touching in the middle.

Red lips were achieved using bromine, beetle juice and beeswax, with a dollop of henna. Rouge was made from expensive imported red ochre, rose petals, poppies, or even poisonous red lead. Cheaper rouge was made with dregs of wine and mulberry, and crocodile dung. They would apply a light pink rouge to their cheeks, which signified good health and vitality.

There is archeological evidence that Roman women created a red nail polish from the crushed bodies of an insect imported from India.

Make up smelled so bad that Roman women wore entirely too much perfume to mask the scent. They came in all sort of forms: liquid, solid and sticky, and every occasion had a specific scent. Deodorants made from alum, iris and rose petals were quite common. They were mostly made using a maceration process with flowers or herbs and oil.

Women would remove body hair by plucking or shaving. They also used a resin paste to strip them or a pumice stone to scrape them.



## ROMANO-CELT, OR “BARBARIAN” CLOTHING

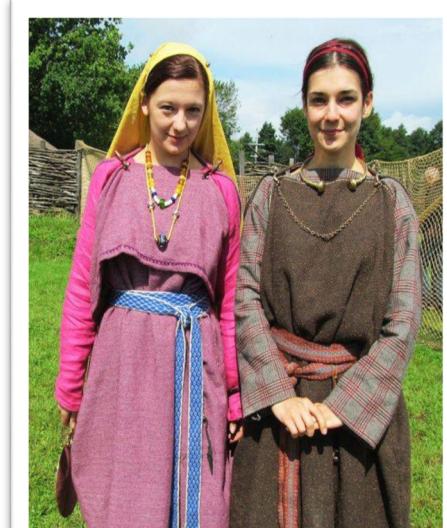
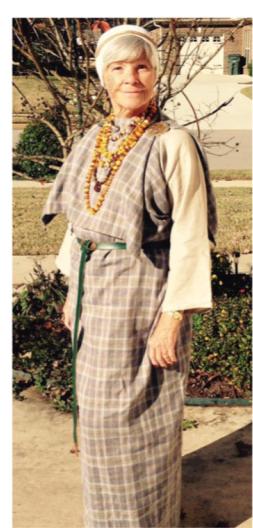
The clothing worn by Celtic, British, or Germanic women was also seen during early Roman times. Before the Romans conquered a provincial's culture, the clothes were quite different and unique to each region. Afterwards, the clothes began to resemble Roman women's clothing, except with more plaid, stripes, and checks.

To recreate this clothing, researchers have a few excellent sources from bog finds, plus artwork and Roman descriptions. At least one bog find consists of a woolen skirt apparently worn over a linen tunic or shirt, which did not survive.

Although the fabric pattern included patterns, solids were often worn too, and the provincials did not place much emphasis on matching colors. Over the tunic or dress is often a cloak, either a woolen rectangle or a trapezoid made of hide (goat, sheep, deer, cow, etc.). The furry side can be worn in or out, depending on need. Edges or hems, especially on cloaks, were usually fringed. Narrow tablet-woven woolen strips were used as dress borders or belts.

The feet were wrapped in squares of linen or wool, or even fur. Fabric socks were worn, reaching anywhere from ankle to knee.

Every well-dressed barbarian would have necklaces pinned to her brooches, wear several bracelets and rings, and have earrings in her ear. She may very well be wearing woad, have tattoos, and her hair in complex braided fashions or simply loose and wild.



## RESOURCES

<http://www.larp.com/legioxx/civcloth.html> -- Roman Legion XX, an authority on the subject of Ancient Rome that even the SCA College of Heralds recognizes

<http://www.vroma.org/~bmcmmanus/clothing2.html> -- Roman women's clothing by VROMA

<http://www.classicsunveiled.com/romel/html/clothwomen.html> -- Classics Unveiled

<https://www.thoughtco.com/roman-dress-for-women-117821> -- Roman Dress for Women

<http://www.morethancod.net/as-50-challenge-persona/2014/4/17/5-supporting-the-girls-a-strophium> -- Tips for making a strophium for well-endowed women

<http://housebarra.com/EP/ep05/14chiton.html> -- House Barra's article on the chiton

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aoTrRkfQhcE> – Makeup

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