Hands On Learning
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ROMAN COSTUME AH 6/A

We know about Roman clothing from the many statues, paintings, mosaics and other forms of artwork that have survived. Roman writers have also left descriptions of clothes and fashions. We even have a few pieces of Roman cloth, though mainly from Egypt, where the hot and dry climate prevents the rapid decay of textiles.

Despite all this evidence there is still a lot that is not known. It is important to remember that, as in our own society, fashions varied greatly over time. Not all of these shifts are well understood and popular modern assumptions are often based on the styles of a fairly narrow period. Secondly, styles were very different from region to region of the Empire. We know a lot more about clothes in Rome itself than we do about distant Britain. Thirdly, it was important for rich Romans to display their wealth through their clothes, which were very different depending on the wearer's status in society. A slave looked very different from a rich landowner. Most of the statues and paintings which have survived show wealthy people and, even then, such works of art show them in their most formal clothes.

In broad terms the clothes for Roman men and for Roman women were based on the same two basic items.

Firstly, there was the tunic, which was in effect a long under-shirt.

Secondly, there was some sort of loose outer-garment - the toga is one of the forms worn by men, the palla was an equivalent for women.

There was not a great distinction between the clothes worn by children and those worn by adults. On formal occasions rich young boys were expected to wear a toga like their father.

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The Tunic



Tunics were worn by everyone, from slaves to emperors. In its simplest form a tunic is a rectangle of cloth folded over, with slits left for head and arms.

In the first and second-centuries rich men wore their tunics with a belt around the waist. They seem to have generally worn bleached white tunics, though senators were sometimes distinguished by wide or narrow purple striped tunics. Tunics without a belt seem to have been worn by lower-class men. Wall paintings of poor people show their tunics to be brown or yellow, presumably the colour of unbleached wool. Thicker tunics could be worn in winter. The emperor Augustus is once described as wearing four tunics, an under-tunic, a woollen chest-protector as well as a heavy toga. Farm-worker slaves, at the other end of the scale, would hardly have had more than a single tunic.

The shape and style of tunics changed over time. In the third and fourth centuries long, tight-fitting sleeves appeared. More and more decoration seems to have been added - stripes and patterns around the hems and neck, for example.



Women's tunics were generally longer than those worn by men. In the first and second-centuries the seam running along the shoulder was not fully sown up, but was held together at intervals by fastenings. Women's tunics often had coloured stripes and borders. Married women wore a long dress called a stola over their tunic, which was held by bands running over the shoulders. In the third and fourth-centuries long sleeves and greater patterning became fashionable, as with men's tunics. Women generally wore a belt higher than men, just under the bust.

The Toga



The toga is the most familiar item of Roman clothing. It started out as a practical outer-garment, but gradually became more elaborate and was turned into a type of formal dress.

In the very earliest days of Rome both men and women wore togas without any tunic, rather like the length of plaid worn in the Scottish highlands three centuries ago. It was an all purpose piece of cloth, which could be used as clothing or even as a blanket.

By the time of the Empire, though, it had become a status symbol. It could only be worn by a Roman citizen. It was also used to show-off one's wealth. It was made of white wool and a huge amount of material was required it was often 18 feet (5 metres) long. The poet Horace (65-8 BC) mocks an ex-slave for flaunting his new status with a toga that was only a paltry 3 metres long! It was also worn folded in half which meant, because in places it was draped over itself, that the body was covered with several layers of thick cloth - which must have made it quite hot to wear in a country like Italy. It is clear that it took quite a while to arrange a toga properly and that it had to be constantly adjusted by the wearer to keep the folds in good order.

All of these factors led to the toga becoming an unpopular garment. The poet Juvenal (active around AD 100) claimed that 'in many parts of Italy … no man puts on a toga until he is dead'! In the big towns it was required for ceremonial occasions - when putting in an appearance at a town council or before a magistrate, when getting married, or when attending a sacrifice at a temple.

It should be noted that Roman men also wore cloaks (a piece of cloth pinned at the shoulder) and capes (a piece of cloth sown at the front, a bit like a poncho) over their tunics. It is probable that these outer garments were a much more common sight on the streets than a toga.

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The Palla



The palla was the female version of the toga. It consisted of a large rectangle of cloth, without the curved lower edge that was found on a toga, that was wrapped around the body from the shoulder to below the knee. Like the toga it needed one hand to keep it in place. No respectable woman would leave her house without her head covered and her body concealed by it. Women did not wear cloaks and only seem to have worn capes when travelling in bad weather.

Although never as complicated as the toga, the palla does not seem to have been a very practical garment. Rich women with slaves did not need their hands free to carry things, but ordinary women must often have found the garment cumbersome. Nevertheless, it was important to signal one's respectability so the palla continued in use with only slight variations throughout the Roman period. Indeed, the trend over the Roman period was for both men and women to increasingly cover up their body. One writer on Roman clothes concludes that 'women, already well covered in the first century … ended up with only face and hands visible even in the privacy of their own home' (A.T.Croom, *Roman Clothing and Fashion*, p. 148).