

# Ancient Roman Garb Basics

by [Lady Anna Dokeianina Syrakousina](#)

*Salvete omnes!*

**Greetings, everyone!**

**One of my most popular periods is the Roman Empire. Even though it's not “technically” Medieval or part of what would be considered the Middle Ages by most individuals, it no doubt shaped the way that Europe evolved into the medieval period, and still has a profound impact GLOBALLY today. It has been a passion of mine since I was in elementary school, one of the main focuses of my academic studies, and I'm thrilled to be able to share my information about Roman clothing to the SCA today.**

**Benefits of Roman clothing in the SCA:**

**Comfort**

**Durability**

**Excellent for hot weather**

**Easy to sew**

## **Endless embellishment opportunities**

**This page will provide a very basic introduction to the popular garments of Roman citizens from about 100BC to CE 400. Think of it as a quick reference guide. For a more in depth look, I recommend the book “The World of Roman Costume” by Judith Sebesta and Larissa Bonfante, which you can easily get at Amazon.com for about \$30. Scans on this page are taken from that book. It’s really an awesome source!**

## **Materials**

**Wool was the preferred fabric of Romans, as sheep were a HUGE part of their economy. Linen was also readily available, but do to its inability to take dyes well, and the dangerous and rather disgusting methods of the creation of linen fabrics from flax and laundering them, it’s easy to see why it may not have been as popular as daily wear. For the sake of modern weaves and costs, linen is an excellent choice for the modern re-enactor or re-creator. If you can find a nice**

**tropical weight wool made from a basic weave, that's your best bet if you want to take that option, but it's often difficult to find. Trust me, I know. Linen blends are not a terrible option. The linen/rayon blend available at Joann's gets a great deal of praise and shames from SCAdians all over. Most of the shame is that rayon is not period, but, as far as price goes, you can't beat it. The rayon helps maintain a lovely drape of the garment and controls the linen's shrinkage. I have several garments made from this material, and they've survived events ranging from formal balls to Pennsic, and frankly, if someone feels it necessary to snark you over that fabric choice, you have my permission to hit them with a giant hammer. 😊**

**Cotton is an interesting topic of discussion, being that it had been cultivated in Egypt during the Roman occupation. There is evidence that cotton was often blended with flax to create a fabric known today as fustian. However, period cotton was spun differently than it is today, so do not consider 100% cotton or Egyptian cotton as an**

**alternative for clothing, no matter the cost. You will regret this, as it is not nearly as durable as wool and linen. It will bleed, stain, wear, and tear more than linen. It also wrinkles terribly. Blargh. I do have a fustian chiton that's beautiful and airy, but the wrinkles...eep.**

## **Basic Garments and Their Construction**

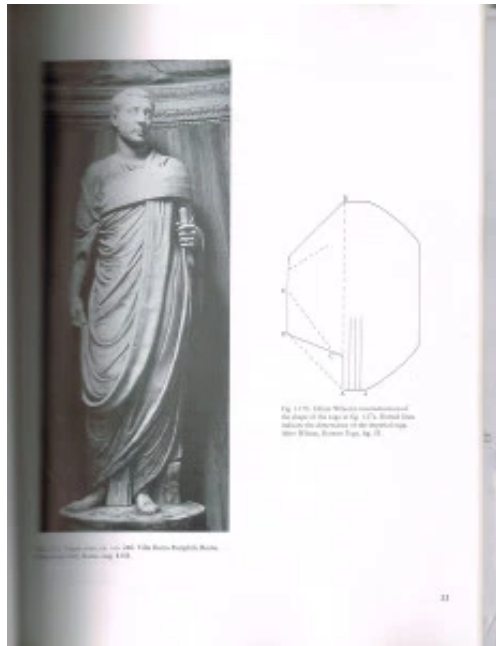
**To begin, the foundation of all Roman clothing is known as the *tunica*. Creative, I know, but Latin isn't the most diverse language when it comes to such terms, which is why you will find that when addressing ancient European clothing, the Greek terms are often employed. Although Greek was very widely spoken during the Roman Empire, even more so than Latin in the later years, I am unsure as to what they would have called their garments. Much like when the Japanese were approached by Westerners about what they called their clothing, and the term *kimono* was used, basically meaning, "what we wear." We use *tunica* as an equally "general" term when discussing Roman clothing, in the case of women who have more than one distinct type of garment,**

**we use the terms *stola*, *peplos*, and *chiton*. The later two of Greek origin, and more popular for the discussion of garments in the SCA.**

*Viri* (Men)



**Men's clothing in Rome was relatively simple, but most people immediately associate men's dress with the most symbolic garment of the period: The *toga*. So that is where I will start first to attempt to dispel all the dumb myths about it.**



**The Toga, first and foremost, is NOT Greek, no matter what John Belushi led you to believe. There was a similar Greek garment known as a *himation*, but it is not worn in the same fashion, nor cut in the manner you see above. The toga is also a MAN'S ONLY GARMENT. Women did NOT wear this. If a woman was togate (in the toga) she was in disgrace. So, remember that if you're looking for ideas for a toga party.**

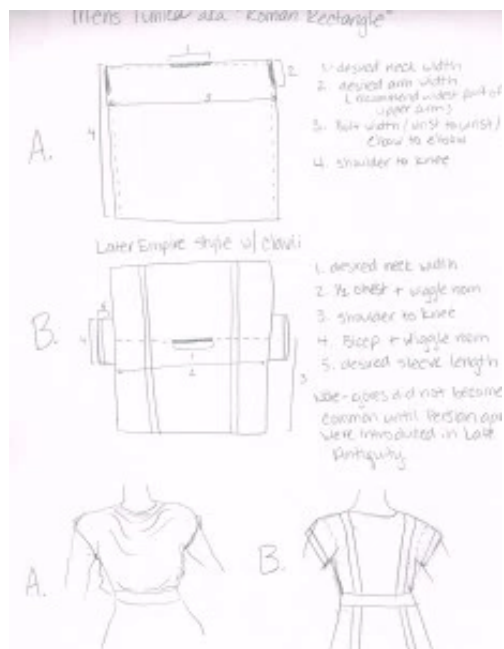
**The toga is a symbol of state. It was worn only by free men in the Republic through the early days of the Empire. Before it completely fell out of fashion, it was worn strictly as a ceremonial**

**garment, or by senators and candidates for office only. The term “candidate” itself is a Latin derivative from “candidas” the stark white toga worn by those sought to be elected to office. Senators would wear the toga with a red or purple stripe along the long edge to signify their office, and only the emperor could wear an entire purple toga.**

**This was not particularly a comfortable garment, being cumbersome, and men often complained that they would either be too hot or cold wearing it, so it fell out of fashion around the time of Emperor Hadrian. It’s approximately 9 yards of wool, and can be recreated successfully using the pattern above. So yeah, take that Scots, the Romans were wearing the “whole 9 yards” first.**

**A man’s tunica is extremely simple in design. My friends and I have dubbed it the “Roman rectangle” and the picture below I illustrated demonstrates pretty much why. It’s basically 1 length of cloth folded, or two sewn up the sides and shoulders with a slit for the head and arms. That’s it. Belting it is what gives the illusion of**

sleeves. Now, toward the later period of the empire, sleeves were becoming more common as a result of extended time at the Northern Frontier, and the influx of Christianity leading people to cover their arms to demonstrate humility. My illustration also shows the *clavii* stripes, which at first signified membership of the equestrian class, but later became more of a fashionable embellishment.



## *inae* (Women)

Much like today, women in Rome had quite a few options when it came to clothing. Lower class women would have worn a tunic much like the men's style above, but most commonly, you



would see them in one of two popular designs, the peplos and the chiton. You might have heard the terms “doric tunica” and “ionic tunica” used to describe these same garments respectively, but there is no proof these terms were used in period, and were probably fabricated by the Victorians at the same time they named the column styles we had to memorize in grade school social studies. More than likely, Latin-speaking women of Rome would have referred to their garments as tunicae or perhaps tunica exterior/interior if they were layers. Greek-speaking citizens would have used the previously mentioned terms, peplos and chiton.

The peplos is probably the most widely spread garment of women everywhere in Europe from early Antiquity well into the Middle Ages. (My handout for my class on The Peplos is available in the link above.) This garment is essentially a tube dress pinned or sewn at the shoulders, with flaps (Peplums! Know your derivatives!) folding over the back and front which allowed for ease of adjustment and more than likely, breast feeding.

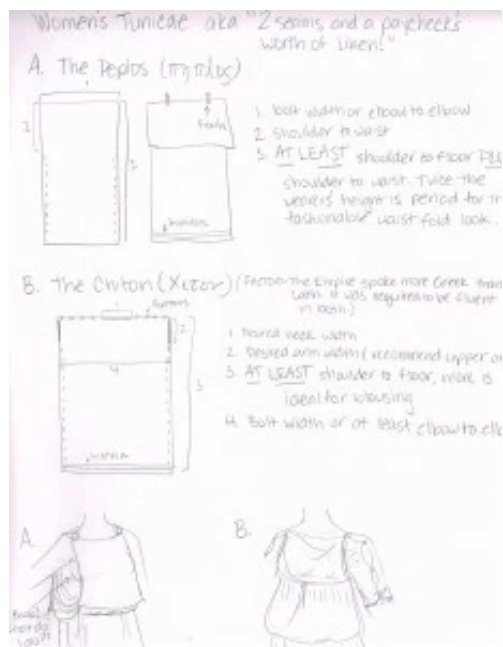
**This can be made of quite some length, as archaeological record has shown this style of dress girdled at the waist and bloused before being brought to the shoulders. In a period in which more fabric meant more money, you can see why this would be impressive. Below is a photo I took from the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York showing this style of blousing on a Roman copy of a Greek original. (Isn't the sculpting on this mindblowing?)**



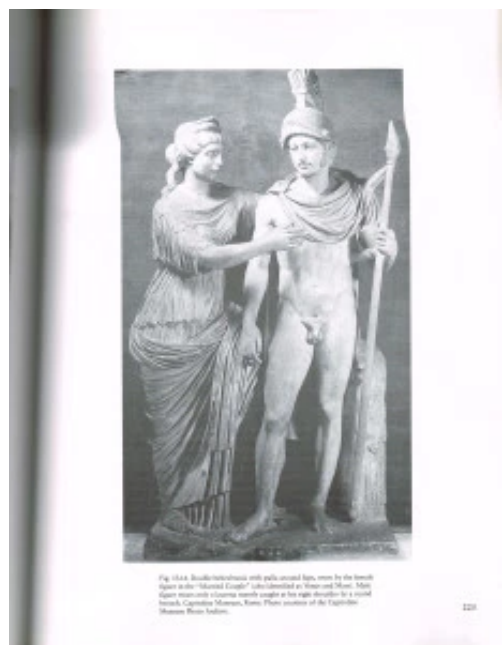
**However, recent research of mine, through the comparing of archaeological and artistic records, have led to be begin believe that the peplos may**

**have been the garment of a maiden or unmarried woman in Rome. It was much more popular in artwork portraying “virgin” goddesses, such as Artemis/Diana and Athena/Minerva rather than married goddesses, such as Hera/Juno and Aphrodite/Venus, almost always seen with a chiton. I’m not implying this is absolutely certain, but it’s a strong hypothesis.**

**The chiton is the same pattern as the men’s “rectangle,” only with buttons or pins on the sleeves, rather than a closed seam. This also could be made with a great deal of additional length to allow for the desirable blousing at the waist. This garment is also seen with elaborate girdling done around the breast area to shape sleeves and perhaps allow for more support.**



**Here is a fantastic image of Venus tending to Mars wearing a beautiful example of a chiton, and how provocative the garment could be.**



**The Roman woman's equivalent of the toga was called the stola. This, rather than being a cumbersome wrap, was a cumbersome dress, about twice the height of the woman, that would be girdled and bloused at the waist, and gathered at the shoulders to allow for a desirable v-neck effect. This was the garment of a matron, or, married woman with more than 4 children, and it was considered a great honor to have the privilege to wear it. But, much like the toga, it was not popular. It was considered unattractive and essentially gives the wearer an blimp-like silhouette, and only seemed to have survived just barely into the Flavian Dynasty (mid 1st Century.) Somewhere, in the bowels of the internet, exists a photo of myself demonstrating the firepower of a fully armed and operational Roman stola that basically makes my hips look like the Hindenburg.**



**Once the stola fell out of favor, it looked like women still layered clothing, and by looks of it, in the form of a peplos over a chiton. There is a new statue at the Boston Museum of Fine Arts of Juno which shows this. Here is a picture I took this past June (ironically.) I hope to get back there and actually see her head attached soon.**



**The last piece of a woman's clothing would be the palla, a 3-6 yard long piece of linen or silk (if she could afford it) that acted as a wrap or shawl. The smaller lengths would be wrapped and pinned across the body for everyday wear, and the longer lengths were worn out of the house to cover the head and body as was dictated by sumptuary laws. Much like medieval Christian and Islamic traditions today, a woman would never leave the home with her head uncovered, it was considered bad taste otherwise. The palla could be simple, or heavily ornamented.**