Byzantine Garb Basics

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Eastern Roman (okay, fine, Byzantine) garb to some SCAdians seems daunting, but it’s really not. In fact, most of the patterns are not too much different than what was being worn in the Western portion of the continent. But, much like in period, the Byzantine Empire to us re-creationists is still the mysterious East. The gold, the jewels, the exotic silks and really REALLY weird headwear. I’m going to try to demystify it a bit with this intro to the basics, then eventually get into working toward what I have found for the 11th Century, which is my period.

First and foremost, let’s get the vocabulary lesson out of the way.

Clavi: (pl: Clavii) Greek: Potamia (“rivers”) Vertical stripes going down the length of a tunica or dalmatica.

Segmenta: (pl: Segmentae) Ornamental termini to clavi. Usually in the form of a roundel or square element.

Auretus: Roman word for the use of gold thread in garments.

Tunica: (pl: Tunicae) Greek: Kamision: The general undergarment of the upper classes and usually the only garment for the working classes. It was typically constructed of natural or bleached linen and ornamented with clavi.

Dalmatica – Greek: Delmatikion: Believed to have initially got its name from the use of Dalmatian wool; a unisex over-garment woven into its shape much like the manner of the tunica, but was typically more trapezoidal in style.

Stola – Greek: Kôlovion: A woman’s garment. Basically a large folded rectangle, woven with a neck slit and sewn closed from wrist to hem.

Pallium -Greek: Loros: A very rich, jeweled court tabard, worn by men. Often hem length in the front and longer in the back so that it could be wrapped around the body.

Superhumeral: An elaborate embroidered and jeweled collar. Often edged in pearls.

Ecclesiastical Pallium: A garment that was created when extensions were added to the Superhumeral.

Sudarium: An elaborate embroidered handkerchief.

Paludamentum – Greek: Chlamys: A trapezoidal cloak worn by men, fastened on the right shoulder.

Mandyas: A short cloak fastened in the front. Worn by both men and women.

Tablion: Square shaped designs on the straight edge of a chlamys.

Skaramangion: A name given to a garment in several sources, likely of Persian origin. Possibly a coat, or tunic with elongated sleeves.

Kavadion: A coat, primarily described as a gambeson, but also could be a caftan-like with Persian influence.

Propoloma: Trapezoidal hat worn by non-Imperial ladies of the court

Palla: long wrap or shawl worn by women as an accessory and to cover outdoors.

These words come up A LOT in Byzantine costuming, but you shouldn’t be afraid of them. It’s part of what makes it unique.

Most of this basic information I was able to use with permission from Gryph.com/Byzantine for my first class handout, but the site is long gone. I’m sure if you jumped on the Wayback Machine you can find it. There are numerical footnotes that will link to the sources at the bottom of the page.

This entire page needs an overhaul with my more updated sources, but I continue to give credit where it’s due for my old handout.
-Fabric
Fabrics in Byzantine dress consisted of linen for tunicae and some dalmatics, stolae, and cloaks and silk for richer garments. Wool was also popular in Byzantine clothing, and Egyptian cotton, though rare, has been found to be used in tunicae as well. (1) Linen was woven in a plain weave, especially for the tunica, and wool was very lightweight as well to better suit the tropical-like Mediterranean climate. (2)

Silk was an important part of Byzantine commerce from the 7th century on. It was believed that Justinian I sent messengers to China to smuggle back silkworms, and doing such is what created the industry. Silks were widely used in Byzantium for court and ecclesiastical vestments. Wearing of the finest grades of silks, especially the purple-dyed ones, was limited to the imperial family and entourage, at least through the 9th century. Silk was always considered a luxury product; valued on a par with gold and other precious materials (even sold by weight and bought on speculation), its manufacture and trade was controlled, and its quality guaranteed by the state. Foreign trading of Byzantine silks was restricted and only small quantities were exported to Muslim countries, and the Venetian and other privileged Italian merchants were permitted to sell only lesser quality Byzantine silks. (3)

No matter the fabric, the Byzantines chose very bright, expressive colors. It is said one could stand in the Forum of Constantine and see a rainbow of colors. However, purple was reserved for the royal family due to its expense, (4) and “royal purple” isn’t at all like the color we know as purple today, it was actually closer to magenta.

-Trim, Embroidery, and Beading
Stripes on each shoulder running straight down the garment are called clavi. Clavi may end at the hem or terminate mid-garment with a roundel or square element called a segmenta. The clavi could be tapestry woven into the garment at the same time, appliquéd on from another piece of tapestry, embroidered cloth or even commercially made trim. (5) Extant garments show designs that ranged from basic knot work and the classic “Greek Key” design, to more elaborate embroidered scenes of various flora and fauna, mythology and the Bible. Ornamentation at this time was limited only by the weaver and embroiderer’s skills.
Examples of segmentae and embroidery styles.

As far as beadwork goes on garments, the Byzantines were fond of pearls (especially on the Imperial level!) and used them quite a bit in their clothing and jewelry. They also sewed various other types of gemstones and even enameled beads and metal plates onto their clothing. The use of gold and silver threads wasn’t unheard of either in embroidery or trim, as it was a common practice used in lavish garments since the late Roman period. \textbf{(Auratus} is the Latin term for fabric woven with gold thread. (6))

\textbf{– Garments}

The three most common if not primary garments worn during the Byzantine period were the \textit{tunica}, \textit{dalmatica}, and \textit{stola}.

\textbf{The kamision} was the general undergarment of the upper classes and usually the only garment for the working classes. It was typically constructed of natural or bleached linen and ornamented with clavi. Even the most simplest of tunicae were ornamented as many extant samples show as shown above in Figure 3.

Unlike clothing today, the tunica was actually woven in one piece into the t-shape and in the width of the wearer. It was relatively shapeless which allowed it to be worn more efficiently in my opinion.
Very basic tunica from the 3-4th Century with woven clavii.

The delmatikion, which is believed to have initially got it’s name from the use of Dalmatian wool, was a unisex over-garment woven into it’s shape much like the manner of the tunica, but was typically more trapezoidal in style, and as the centuries progressed, so did the style of the dalmatica, mostly in the sleeve department, where they went from long and snug-fitting to short and wide to flared from the elbows like the medieval bliaut dress, and became more tailored. (2)

A dalmatica would be where most of the ornamentation would be, as it was considered the outer most garment for most classes. Jewels, pearls, clavi, segmentae, sleeve facings et al would have their place on this rich article of clothing. The Byzantine-style dalmatica today is still seen in Orthodox and Catholic style liturgical vestments such as the alb and chasuble.
Mosaic of 2 women and a man (middle) in dalmaticae.
Dalmatica supposedly attributed to the Holy Roman Emperor.

The kolovion is a woman’s garment, unchanged much from the Roman time period. It was basically a large folded rectangle, woven with a neck slit and sewn closed from wrist to hem. The Stola was worn belted high under the bust and ornamented with clavi, tapestry-woven into the garment. Fabrics would have been linen or light wool. However as time progressed more and more women began to wear dalmatics, especially if they were of a substantially high class.
Women figures wearing the stola in the Bamberger Guntherbuch tapestry.

However, the most recognizably “Byzantine” garments are probably the Superhumeral and Pallium, which seemed highly restricted to the wearing by the Imperial family only, and hence why it was so common in artwork depicting as such, as well as religious icons.

The loros was a very rich, hem length, jeweled court tabard, worn by men; and the superhumeral was an elaborate gold embroidered and jeweled collar edged in pearls. When extensions were added to the superhumeral, it was called an ecclesiastical pallium. The men’s pallium would be hem length in front and much longer in the back, the back of the pallium was then draped around the torso and hung over the left arm, like Roman togas. The only woman to wear a superhumeral or pallium was the empress, and it was not seen on women elsewhere in Byzantine artwork. (7)
This Emperor’s wrapped in a pallium, or lorum.

Empress Irene is wearing an ecclesiastical pallium.

– Footwear

There’s lots of extant footwear from early Byzantium. Usually leather slippers ornamented with gold leaf. Pointed toes became in fashion in the 11th century.

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**Jewelry**

Hellenistic and Roman traditions had a strong influence on the rise of Byzantine Art. The interaction of various cultures was reflected as richness in the economy of this Empire. All precious metals, stones and artists flowed into Constantinople, which was the center of style in this period.

The cross appeared everywhere from earrings to doorknockers. True Christian themes began to emerge in Byzantine jewelry of the 5th and 6th centuries. Representations of Christ, the Virgin Mary, and Angels and saints, appeared in jewelry. Symbolic and allegorical themes – the peacock for immortality, the tree for life, and many others – came to augment the earlier floral, faunal and geometric designs of Byzantine jewelry. (9)

Eventually as the Roman styles dwindled, Constantinople became the jewelry center of the Empire as of the 6th century, and developed its unique forms, motifs and techniques.

The use of jewels and goods made of precious metals was much more common in Byzantium than in the rest of Europe. Workshops based in the imperial palace mostly served the imperial family and the nobles processed precious goods to be sent to the Pope and foreign countries. Glass was the most commonly used material in the jewelry workshops that served the public.

Even in the periods when the empire had political and economic difficulties, women did not give up adorning themselves, but the use of jewelry made of cheap materials increased. The use of colorful stones in jewelry was a reflection of oriental influences on Byzantine Art. Among this jewelry are crowns, earrings, necklaces, fibulas, brooches, belts and rings. Whereas crowns symbolized nobility and power, earrings were among the jewelry that all women wore. Roman forms were used in earrings, and crescent-shaped golden earrings were preferred as wedding gifts. In Rome, giving a ring to somebody meant granting the authority of signature. The jewelers of Byzantium also maintained this tradition and borrowed all sorts of rings and ornaments from the Romans. (8)

![Basic gold earrings with “hoop and hook” fasteners, c.800-900.](image-url)
Silver earrings inlaid with a red glass stone. C.900-1000.

Replica gold earrings cast from the originals at the British Museum. Original c. 600.

Overall I’ve personally found that the best way of learning about Byzantine jewelry is looking at existing pieces, as most sources, especially online, will either tell you how to make a Byzantine chainmaille weave, sell you Byzantine “style” jewelry, or just spam you entirely. It’s unfortunate that not more about it is written then the source I found above.

Through my own research of extant pieces that show up on eBay now and then and a trip through the Metropolitan Museum of Art, I’ve found that Byzantines were very fond of earrings, and designs ranged from simple hoops to the more well-known and distinctive half-moon shape.
An even more interesting piece of aristocratic jewelry is the temple pendant, which was probably worn on a loop of hair or attached to a headdress. They dangled near the temple or the cheek. In a lot of artwork, you’ll see strands of pearls here as well.

![Cloisonne Temple Pendant. PLATAR Collection, Ukraine. Might also be Kievan Rus.](image)

The Byzantines were also fond of strands of stones or glass that could mimic natural stone. The Imperial Workshop was known for some of its jeweled beadwork, and the overall theme seemed to included anything that could dangle or jingle, catching the light of the Mediterranean sun or the eyes of passers-by. A lot of modern jewelry in style right now seems to pay homage to this.

### Cosmetics

Unlike their Roman predecessors, the Byzantines weren’t as fond of caking their faces with make-up. Instead, they developed a love of fragrance, and developed rich perfumes using ingredients obtained in trade from China, India, and Persia, modern-day Iran. Perfume making was developed as an esteemed trade. (10) Frankincense and myrrh, of course, were the primary ingredients being as gifts the Magi brought to the Christ child, and were heavily valued as church incenses as they still are today.

As for facial enhancements, Byzantine women used bean flour to wash their faces, powdered their faces to make their complexion fairer, reddened their lips and cheeks, dyed their eyebrows black, and used eye shadow and hair dye, despite what the new Christian laws dictated. (11) Although they didn’t seem to use heavy preparations for their skin as the Romans did. Cosmetics however, didn’t appear to be less toxic, as I do recall reading someone that the Church allowed a woman who’s face was scarrred by poisonous makeup, probably lead powder, to use a “Holy face cream” to restore her beauty so her husband would
love her again. So, if the Church said it was okay…use your face cream, ladies!

– Headwear? Anyone?

I’m working on some of this, including parsing the headcoverings of this woman at the Metropolitan Museum of Art. A post is in the works. Eventually.

Check out my work on the Propoloma with this post here explaining the hat, and this post on a walk-through of me making one!

Marble Bust of a Lady of Rank, c. 400-500; Constantinople. Metropolitan Museum of Art

Citations (this original handout I based this on is ancient, so most of these links are dead. I will be posting a more comprehensive biblio of updated sources in the future.)

11. The Byzantines by Guglielmo Cavallo, pg 127
12. Vestarios, the Compleat Anachronist Vol 75.