

ACTS 19:12: PAUL'S 'APRONS' AGAIN

The traditional view of the σουδάρια καὶ σιμικίνθια worn by Paul according to Acts 19:12 is that they were used by Paul in his workshop. So Bruce: “The pieces of material were presumably those which Paul used in his tent-making or leather-working – the sweat-rags for tying around his head and the aprons for tying around his waist”.¹ The only modification to this view is that offered by Leary that the *semicinctium* was probably not an apron but a belt.² Leary concludes that the *semicinctium* “is not a specialist garment worn only by leather-workers, but something worn generally”.³ This may well be the case, but Leary and others ignore the context in which Luke writes about these garments. Paul is in Ephesus, and according to 19:9-10 (the verses immediately preceding the mention of these garments) he has been “teaching” (διαλεγόμενος) daily for two years in the σχολή of Tyrannus. This article suggests that Paul wore the σουδάρια καὶ σιμικίνθια not in the workshop but in the σχολή.

The words σουδάρια καὶ σιμικίνθια are transliterated from the Latin *sudaria et semicinctia*. As Leary and others have shown, these two articles of clothing⁴ were used in a variety of contexts. For example, *sudaria* were used in burials, as is demonstrated in John 20:7 where the dead Jesus is said to have had one around his head. The same usage is found in the burial of Lazarus according to John 11:44. It is also known from Petronius that the *sudarium* was worn in the home around the neck and used to wipe dirty hands. So Fortunata wiped her hands on a cloth (*sudario*) which she had around her neck (*in collo*) after dividing the remains of food among slaves (Satyricon 67.13). The term is used regularly in Apuleius' *Apologia*, sometimes in a diminutive form (*sudariolum*), and interchangeably, it would seem, with *linteolum* and *involucrum*. In that work, Apuleius is charged with keeping certain objects wrapped in a linen *sudariolum* kept near some household gods (*Apologia* 53).

¹ F. Bruce, *The Book of The Acts*. Revised edition. Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1988: 367.

² T. Leary, “The 'Aprons' of St Paul - Acts 19:12”, *JTS* 41 (1990) 527-529.

³ ‘Aprons’, 528.

⁴ They are not “rags” as Bruce and others suggest. They were worn on the body. This is important for the sick who want to have clothes taken from the “skin” (ἀπὸ τοῦ χρωτός of Paul (19:12). Rags would not have the same effect.

This would suggest at least that a *sudariolum* was appropriate cloth in which to wrap a sacred object. Apuleius is in fact charged with magic, and that is the context in which these wrapped and hidden objects are mentioned. He denies the magic charge but does not explicitly deny that the cloth contained sacred objects.

What is more relevant given that Paul probably wore *sudaria* while teaching in a σχολή is that in the course of Apuleius' defense in court, a *sudarium* was worn for the purpose of removing sweat from the face (*Apologia* 53.3, 39; 55.3, 7, 8, 16; 57). It would appear that sudaria were worn in court by lawyers, probably as part of the court uniform of that profession. To mop the brow may well have been as much a rhetorical gesture as it was to literally remove the sweat caused by hard work. It was part of the pose of an orator. According to Suetonius, Nero, the poet-orator-singer emperor had someone by his side to warn him to spare his vocal chords and to "hold a handkerchief (*sudarium*) to his mouth" (*Nero* 25.3). Suetonius also writes that Nero often appeared in public and gave audiences in a dinner gown with a kerchief around his neck (*circum collum sudario*) but *sine cinctu* (*Nero* 51). In this passage, the two articles of clothing – the *sudarium* and the *cinctium* - have an implied connection. And since Nero thought himself to be an orator, it is implied that he tried to dress the part. But Suetonius thinks his dress and habits 'shameless', and he judged Nero's habit of appearing in public *sine cinctu* as such.

Quintillian mentions a certain Vantinius who, when on trial, habitually wore black as in mourning, and would wipe his forehead with a white cloth (*candidum sudarium*) as a sign that he was alive and eating and expected to remain so (*Instit.* 6.3.60). I assume that the presence of sweat on the brow was taken to be a sign of physical activity and therefore of life. Quintillian, writing for would-be orators, suggests that the dishevelled look makes an additional appeal to the emotions, and he registers surprise that Pliny 'should think it worthwhile to enjoin the orator to dry his brow with a handkerchief (*sudarium*) in such a way as not to disorder the hair' (11.3.148). Catullus the poet asks that Thallus return his *pallium*, 'Saetaban napkin' (*sudarium*), and Bithynian tablets (*catagraphos*) which Thallus was parading around as if they were heirlooms (*Catullus* 25). Again, it would seem that the *sudarium* was part of the poet's attire.

Put together, these passages suggest that the *sudarium* worn around the neck was part of the uniform of an orator and was worn and used for effect as much as it was for practical purposes. This understanding is confirmed by a comment made by Petronius. He was giving an oration to a large audience when his teacher, Agememnon, came up, curious to see who had attracted such a crowd. ‘He declined to allow me to declaim longer in the Portico than he himself sweated in the school’ (*Non est passus Agememnon me diutius declamara in portico, quam ipse in schola sudaverat* [*Satyricon* 3]). The verb *sudaverat* I used metaphorically, and its use in combination with *schola* and *declamare* parallels closely the Greek terms used by Luke (διαλογέμονος ... σχολή ... σουδάρια καὶ σιμικίνθια).

So I suggest that Paul also wore the *sudarium* while he was teaching in the σχολή of Tyrannus in Ephesus. This seems more likely than the traditional view. In addition, craftworkers were not highly regarded, and a worker with animal skins would not have been thought to possess ‘power’ in his clothing or skin. An orator, on the other hand, was thought to have that essential power or δύναμις. The sophist Gorgias of Leontini said: “Speech is the great power which performs great divine works through a very hidden and insignificant form” (Gorgias, *Encomium of Helen* 8; translation mine). Much closer to Luke’s day, Dio Chrysostom addresses the Rhodians and talks of divine men (θεῖοι ἄνδρες) who speak with eloquence. Dio felt that his own oratory was not of his own choosing, but was the will of some deity who gave him courage to speak (*32nd Discourse* 12.21). Luke’s audience already has seen the power of Paul’s loud voice (14:10). In addition, the sweat of a holy and ‘divine’ man was also thought to be effective in countering the fluids of the evil and demonic powers. As Preisigke says, the sweat from Paul’s body saturates the clothing and so the clothing then has the same power that is in Paul’s body. Paul’s bodily fluid is stronger than that of the demons and so absorbs the power from the other and defeats it. There is a battle between the two fluids – that of Paul’s and that of the demons - and since Paul’s fluid possesses the greatest power, the evil spirit must disappear.⁵

What about the *semicinctium*, traditionally understood to be some kind of apron? In the *Satyricon*, Petronius threatens to hang himself with a *semicinctium* tied to the bed

⁵ F. Preisigke, “Die Gotteskraft der frühchristlichen Zeit”. In: *Der Wunderbegriff im Neuen Testament*. Original 1922. Edited by A. Suhl, Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft 1980: 210-247. Here 223.

(94.8). As already noted, Leary reasonably thinks the use of the *semicinctium* for suicide hardly suggests it is an apron, and so he understands it to refer to a belt or sash. It would appear to be nothing more than a thinner version of the *cinctium*, or what the Greeks knew as a ζώνη, the girdle. Such girdles or belts were worn commonly by both men and women.

There is the suggestion that the girdle was understood by some to either possess some power or to symbolise a life-giving power. For example, Pliny knows of the belief that 'if the man by whom a woman has conceived unties his girdle (*cincto suo*) and puts it around her waist, and then unties it with the ritual formula, 'I bound, and I too will unloose', then taking his departure, child-birth is made more rapid' (*NH* 28.9). It is also known that women left their girdles in the temple of Artemis in Ephesus after childbirth, and that on one occasion ambassadors visited Artemis' shrine at Sardis and offered tunics to her 'according to the custom'.⁶

As interesting as is the identification of these garments of Paul, equally interesting is the choice on the part of the Ephesians to want to take these garments and put them on the sick and possessed (19:12). The *sudarium* was worn around the neck and so was in touch with the 'power' of the voice; the *semicinctium* went around the area of the stomach and the genitals and so was in touch with the 'power' of that part of the body. That the clothing of a holy man, such as Paul, should be put to such use, and to have such effect, would not have surprised anyone in Luke's audience. That garments of the gods or of 'divine' people should be used for magical purposes is also not surprising. One might note the Coptic magic spell which invokes the powers by their names and 'by your garments' (P. London Hay 10391); and the better known episode in the Gospels in which a woman believes she can be healed by touching Jesus' garments (Mark 5:28).

Paul wore the *sudarium* and the *semicinctium* in the hall of Tyrannus where he debated, dialogued and taught. He wore that clothing because it was the accepted dress of an orator. People wanted access to that particular clothing because the voice

⁶See R. Strelan, *Paul, Artemis, and Jews in Ephesus*. Berlin/New York: de Gruyter, 1996: 48-49.

and the stomach/genital area of a holy man were considered bodily areas of special power.