

Male Dress Habits in Roman Period Palmyra

By: [Maura Heyn](#) and Rubina Raja

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Abstract:

Palmyra, ancient Tadmor, was in the first three centuries CE a flourishing trade node in the Roman Empire. Situated as the last stop on the Silk Road, camel caravans were reloaded onto donkey caravans, and then went on to the areas west of Palmyra. Although having been under Hellenistic influence for centuries, the region displays little tangible evidence of exactly how such influence impacted the societies in the region. With Pompey's conquest in the 60s BCE, the region came under firm Roman control, and local societies responded to this interaction. This contribution looks at the material evidence from Palmyra from the period between the 1st century CE and the late 3rd century CE in order to gauge the way in which Palmyrene men were represented in the Palmyrene art. Most evidence stems from the funerary sphere, since the public and religious statuary largely has disappeared over the centuries. This paper considers the ways in which local and foreign clothing traditions impacted Palmyrene society and shaped the expression of male identities in this oasis city.¹

Keywords: Portraits | Priests | Cloaks | Textiles | Women | Dresses | Dress codes | Sarcophagi | Men

Book Chapter:

Introduction – sculptural habit and dress in Palmyra

Palmyra, ancient Tadmor, situated in the Syrian Desert halfway between the Euphrates River and the eastern Mediterranean coast, is known for its wealth of archaeological material. The city flourished in the first three centuries CE, when many of the Palmyrene elite were heavily involved in international trade, and the city was a nodal point for caravans (Seland 2015; Meyer *et al.* 2016). This wealth created the opportunity for the upper layers of society to represent themselves to each other as well as to the outside world. One group of sculptural representations, which gives us much information about the dress habits of the Palmyrenes, is the funerary

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sculpture.² This locally produced limestone sculpture representing the deceased was used widely from the 1st century CE until Palmyra was sacked in 273 CE by the Roman emperor Aurelian and his troops in the wake of Zenobia's uprising against the Romans. Sculptural practice for representing the deceased includes busts on rectangular slabs, under life-size, full-body representations on stelae or slabs, and up to life-size, full-body representations on banqueting reliefs and later sarcophagus lids.³ The corpus of Palmyrene funerary sculpture amounts to more than 3,700 portraits – collected within the framework of the Palmyra Portrait Project since 2012 and which provide rich evidence for gendered differences in dress (Raja 2017b). With this material in hand, we have a unique overview of the sculptural practice and its development, providing new insight into trends, sartorial fashions, and the ways in which Palmyrenes used dress codes in order to express themselves in political, economic, and even military terms within their society and the wider world.

Palmyrene male representations in the Palmyrene funerary sphere

Most of the men and many women who are depicted in the sculptural representations in the Palmyrene tombs wore the same two basic garments: the tunic and cloak (Plates 3.1 and 3.2), which they would then embellish in various ways. In addition to the identifying inscription in Palmyrene Aramaic above one or both shoulders, the manner of draping the cloak, the attributes held, the gestures and arm positions displayed (Heyn 2010), the hair styles (and beard, for the men), and headdresses (for the women) all added variety to the individual representations. A look in particular at the garments and their embellishment, however, indicates that gendered differences in costume seem to rely most prominently on additions made to female dress. Women, for example, would commonly display embroidered bands and borders on their garments, fasten them at the left shoulder with intricate brooches, and embellish headdresses with pendants and other adornment items (Krag 2018). These embellishments to the female ensemble give the impression that women display more individuality in their modes of dress than do Palmyrene men. Such a pattern of dress behaviour, wherein the costumes of women were more complex and nuanced than the dress codes of male attire, was not uncommon in the Roman world and may have been related to the role of women in the negotiation of cultural identities, often also being the ones who would have changed family affiliations and location upon marriage for example (Rothe 2013, 265–66). Furthermore, female dress might have been intentionally crafted with the aim of being decorative, with decoration being used to highlight aspects of femininity and gender. A good comparison for this latter motivation is provided by female dress in the 19th century, especially that of elite women, that carried connotations of female leisure, sexuality, and hindered women from working (Barnard 2013, 122–125; Richards 2017, 242–244). This may have been the case in Palmyra as well (Krag 2018 for a monograph on representations of females in Palmyra).

In this contribution, we focus on the clothing worn by the Palmyrene males, exploring this obvious sameness, speculating as to why this was the case, and examining whether the evident

² For the two standard works on Palmyrene funerary portraiture and Palmyrene art in general, see Ingholt 1928 and Colledge 1976.

³ For the history of Palmyra, see Smith 2013, Sartre-Fauriat & Sartre 2008, Sartre-Fauriat & Sartre 2014 and Sartre-Fauriat & Sartre 2016. For the tombs in general, see Gawlikowski 1970, Sadurska & Bounni 1994 and Henning 2013.

uniformity was made up for through other visual means, such as attributes. We also ask whether specific identities were attached to clothing types or whether choice of clothing could have been determined by type of representation, whether the image was public/funerary/religious, a *loculus* relief, a banqueting relief, or sarcophagus (Butcher 2003, 328). Or, are these male portraits simply meant to be viewed as stereotypes, either as a result of mass production of such types or expressions of cultural affinities and a belonging to the Greek heritage of the region? And what was the case with the group of Palmyrene men and boys depicted with the so-called Parthian dress items, which seem to be more varied in both garment shape and decoration? While there is a lot of similarity in the male dress items generally worn by Palmyrene men, such as the chiton and himation or the so-called Parthian dress, a closer look at the individual dress items reveals that the dress codes that did not come from the Greco-Roman cultural sphere in particular were much more individualized and detailed than the renderings of the generally undecorated chiton and himation.

The male representations and male dress codes in Palmyra

Palmyrene men were depicted in a variety of contexts in Palmyra. The public, the civic, the funerary, and the religious spheres offered space and opportunity for portrait sculpture to be set up. In Palmyra, not much sculpture from the public and religious sphere survives. Marble statues, the stone of which was imported, have largely been looted or destroyed, as has bronze statuary. What survives is the local limestone sculptures and of this by far the largest group stems from the funerary sphere, since the closed environment of the graves protected the limestone from wear and tear.⁴ In Palmyra, statues were put up in large numbers in the cityscape (Yon 2002, 163). While the sculptures are gone, we know this from surviving inscriptions which were engraved on the bases of statues as well as on the many columns flanking the streets of Palmyra. Apart from being placed on bases, statues in Palmyra were also placed high up in the urban space, namely on consoles or protruding shelves located half way up on the columns along the streets. The stacked sculptural environment in the public sphere was a parallel to the dense portrait galleries encountered in the Palmyrene graves, the tower tombs, and the later underground tombs (*hypogea*), in which sometimes up to 400 burials could be placed (Raja *forthcoming*). The sculptural representations in the public sphere communicated the civic importance of Palmyrene individuals to the society as a whole, whereas emphasis in the funerary sphere was put on the importance of the individual within the broader context of the family. Palmyrene male representations make up approximately 60 percent of all aggregate portrait representations from Palmyra (Raja 2015; Kropp and Raja 2016). Of these, about 20 percent depict the men as Palmyrene priests.

The chiton and himation as the dominant clothing fashion in Palmyra

As explained above, most Palmyrene males are represented wearing the chiton and himation in their funerary portraits (Stauffer 2012; Taha 1982). The chiton was a short-sleeved, undecorated, woollen tunic, often with a horizontal neck slit. The himation, also wool and usually unadorned, was a large, rectangular cloak that was worn draped around the body (Stauffer 2012) (Fig. 3.1). Occasionally, the tunic would be long-sleeved (Colledge 1976, 68) and the cloak would be draped differently, but the overwhelming impression is of male attire that is largely monotonous.

⁴ On the quarries of Palmyra, see Schmidt-Colinet 2017.

The impact of polychromy, however, should be considered as a lost factor, as the colours would undoubtedly have changed the perception of the clothing items immensely and have created a detailed variation that we can no longer appreciate (see Sargent and Therkildsen 2010, 14). For example, the stripes that were popular additions to the tunic in the 3rd century may have been painted with intricate designs (Padgett 2001). Notwithstanding any distinction that polychromy would have added, the position of the arms and the gestures of the hands in these portraits contribute to the visual sameness that is suggested by the similar dress choices: the majority of males wear their cloak draped in such a way to catch the right arm in the sling. The right hand is extended over the fold of this cloak, and the left hand is held in a parallel position against the torso. Many of these men also hold one of two common attributes in the left hand: a book roll, which is rendered as a narrow, rectangular object, or a leaf.

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Fig. 3.1 Loculus relief depicting a male bust, 150–200 CE. University of Pennsylvania Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology, inv. B8906 (Image Courtesy of the Penn Museum, Image no. 295381).

This mode of male representation is reminiscent of the style used for the depiction of freedmen on Roman funerary reliefs from the late Republic and early Empire (Butcher 2003, 329; Kleiner 1977), and the uniformity of the representation in Palmyra may be related to this connection. Any assumptions about the cultural statement associated with this costume choice, however, must contend with the fact that this style of representation originated in the Greek world with the 4th century BCE statues of, for example, Aeschines, holding his arm against his chest in the sling created by the draping of his cloak (Bieber 1959). Funerary representations of men wearing the chiton and himation draped in a similar way subsequently appear in several of the Hellenistic city-states of Asia Minor and Syria in the mid-2nd and early 1st centuries BCE (Zanker 1993). Even though this type ('arm-sling') carried connotations of temperance and self-control in statues such as that of Aeschines, in the Hellenistic and Roman periods in the eastern Mediterranean, it encompassed a wider range of meanings, such as membership in the Greek-speaking koine and participation in civic culture and values, including benefaction, love for the fatherland, and so on. The ubiquity of the type in the public and funerary spheres reveals its success as an emblem of the good citizen (see Fejfer 2009, 196–197; Masségliia 2015; Trimble 2017). In addition to possible connections with an imperial city and/or communities further afield, the visual sameness of these portraits may also have demonstrated membership in the community of Palmyrenes; Michael Koortbojian (2009, 72) argued for a similar phenomenon with regard to the sculpted images of men wearing the toga in Rome: its ubiquity was related to its ability to communicate participation in a civic ideology. In other words, regardless of their provenance, the chiton and himation displayed in certain ways became emblematic of the collective identity in Palmyra.⁵ Alternatively, the relatively plain chiton and himation may simply have been fashionable in Palmyra in the 1st and 2nd centuries CE with the number of men choosing alternative styles of dress and additional adornment increasing in each century (Butcher 2003, 329). It is also possible that the Greco-Roman tunic and cloak, although a popular costume choice for the funerary sphere, was less familiar than so-called Parthian attire and this lack of familiarity resulted in less experimentation.

⁵ For a similar phenomenon behind representational choices for freedmen in Rome, see George 2005, 53–54.

Less than 4 percent of the men who wore the stereotypical chiton and himation added variety to their portraits with wreaths, decorative stripes, or fringes (Figs 3.2 and 3.3). For example, twenty of the men are wearing wreaths on their head that are similar to those decorating the priestly hats (see below). Remnants of paint on one of these leafy crowns suggests that the leaves were gold leaf rather than vegetal (Michalowski 1964, 172; Stucky 1973, 173), adding to the impact both in terms of visual appearance and the suggestion of wealth. The garments of another twenty-one men featured a stripe or fringe on their garment; others displayed a scalloped hem on their cloaks, or a beaded trim on an additional shirt worn under the tunic.⁶ In addition to this small group of men whose portraits were more distinctive, Palmyrene priests also stand out.

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Fig. 3.2 Loculus relief depicting a male bust, 133/134 CE. Ny Carlsberg Glyptotek, Copenhagen, inv. IN 1049 (© Palmyra Portrait Project, Ingholt Archive at Ny Carlsberg Glyptotek, PS 4).

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Fig. 3.3 Loculus relief depicting two male busts, 200–273 CE. Archaeological Museum, Istanbul, inv. 3823/O.M.325 (© Palmyra Portrait Project, Ingholt Archive at Ny Carlsberg Glyptotek, PS 259).

Palmyrene priestly dress

The priestly status of some Palmyrene men was signified by their attire (Fig. 3.4).⁷ In a few cases representations are accompanied by inscriptions, which underline the fact that these men were priests. Men acting as priests either wear, or appear with a hat particular to Palmyra, a cylindrical hat with a flat top, most likely made in some sort of stiff textile or felt. These priestly hats could be elaborately decorated with encircling wreaths made in floral designs, decorated at the centre with representations of precious stone jewels or small male busts, sometimes in medallions, either of a young male person without any attributes or of a priest. Priests often wear tunics which are more decorated than those seen on other male representations. Finally, they wear cloaks, often also partly decorated and sometimes fastened with large, elaborate brooches. These, although not exclusive to Palmyrene priests, do seem to have particular associations with them, as they are shown worn by 82 out of 278 priests (29 percent of all the priest representations), perhaps underlining the elite status of the families from which the Palmyrene priests came. Priests also often carry items that explicitly associate them with priesthood, namely the small libation pitcher and the incense bowl. Often these items were also decorated, and so could act as identifying characteristic objects that could further personalize the portraits. The variation in the decorative motifs used on libation pitchers and bowls thus added to the individuality of the represented figure, and separated his image further from the other male portraits within the tomb (see also Heyn 2018).

⁶ For example, Ny Carlsberg Glyptotek, I. N. 1048 has beaded trim visible on his undershirt (Ploug 1995, 178, cat. 72).

⁷ See the recently published article by Raja 2017a, also for further references. Further on priests, see Raja 2017e, 2017d, 2017c and 2018.

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Fig. 3.4 Loculus relief depicting a bust of a priest, unknown location, 100–150 CE (© Palmyra Portrait Project, Ingholt Archive at Ny Carlsberg Glyptotek, PS 794).

Banqueting reliefs and sarcophagi

Banqueting reliefs were also used in the funerary sphere in Palmyra (Fig. 3.5). These most often show men in so-called Parthian clothing: a tunic, a long, draping cloak, wide trousers, and soft boots. The garments are richly embellished, reflecting clothes with richly woven patterns and/or embroidered bands, as well as boots possibly made of soft leather that was later embroidered or had added sewn pieces (compare with the boot found in the Pazyryk burial mound 2, now at the State Hermitage Museum, inv. no. 1684–218: Rudenko 1970, 87). Such attire was usually found in banqueting scenes and is also used in the numerous sarcophagus lids scenes from Palmyra. In the 2nd century CE, sarcophagi were introduced as grave monuments in Palmyra. Fragments from more than 400 of these sarcophagi exist, underlining that this monument type became quite popular. The boxes display up to seventeen individuals, but the norm was to show three or four portraits in bust form. Their massive lids, which could hold representation of up to eight individuals on one lid,⁸ often display men, women, and children alongside each other, with the more important figures shown in larger scale, reclining, and holding bowls or other vessels. Usually one to three men were represented reclining, with women, children, and other male figures shown in smaller scale.⁹ Men or boys wearing the chiton and himation are shown in the background of the scene standing behind the reclining figure(s). For these reclining figures, Parthian attire is preferred over the chiton and himation. Men wearing the Parthian costume outnumber those in the Greco-Roman tunic and cloak by two to one (Heyn 2008, 177). When the reclining males within a group wear different styles of costume, the male in Parthian dress seems to have pride of place, while the male in chiton and himation is always shown in second position, behind the figure who wears Parthian dress (Heyn 2008, 178). This might indicate that there was a hierarchy of figures and costumes in these scenes, with the more honoured figures in Parthian dress, and the figures in ancillary or secondary roles either in Parthian or Greco-Roman style of dress. This, in turn, suggests that proper Palmyrene banqueting attire might have been the Parthian-inspired dress items. The fact remains that dress codes could be and were combined in banqueting scenes. Greco-Roman style dress could be used alongside Parthian-style clothing, even though Parthian-style clothes were perhaps seen as more popular or appropriate for banquets. Across all types of Palmyrene sculpture, only 17 percent of Palmyrene males were depicted in Parthian clothing.¹⁰ What Parthian style dress did allow for was showing off much more detail than the Greco-Roman-style dress, which tended to be much plainer, and had limited areas that allowed for decoration, namely the border of the himation, and, on occasion, one or two bands that extended downwards from the neckline. In contrast, Parthian-style clothing offered multiple areas for decoration: the neckline, the central part, the cuffs, and the hemline of the tunic, the central part of the trouser legs, and the borders of the cloak.

⁸ Sarcophagus in Palmyra Museum (Seyrig 1937, 21, fig. 12; Will 1951, 87–88, fig. 7–8; Parlasca 1984, 290–291, fig. 7; Schmidt-Colinet 1992, vol. II, pl. 73a; Wielgosz 1997, 71, pl. 4.1).

⁹ Sarcophagus box in Palmyra Museum, inv. no. B 2723/9160 (Rumscheid 2000, 222–223, cat. 271, pl. 65.1–3; Kaizer 2002, 180, pls. 5–6; Schmidt-Colinet & al-As'ad 2007, 276–278, pl. 90; Sartre- Fauriat & Sartre 2008, 77; Wielgosz-Rondolino 2016, 77–79, fig. 17a–c).

¹⁰ This number stems from the Palmyra Portrait Project database.

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Fig. 3.5 Banquet relief depicting a reclining priest and a seated female, 146/147 CE. Ny Carlsberg Glyptotek, Copenhagen, inv. IN 1159 and IN 1160 (Courtesy of Ny Carlsberg Glyptotek, photo by Palmyra Portrait Project).

The significance of production economy and textiles in the Palmyrene sculptural habit

Textiles – both high quality linen as well as decorated and fine and delicate fabrics, such as silks – were expensive items in antiquity. In Palmyra, we know that luxury textiles from all over the known world were traded, and silks from as far away as China have been attested in Palmyra (Stauffer 2012 as well as Schmidt-Colinet 1995 and Schmidt-Colinet, Al-As'ad and Chehade 2005). The famous Tax Tariff of the 2nd century CE was set up in Palmyra in order to regulate the trade moving through the city, but it also adds to our knowledge about the textile trade (Shifman 2014). Textiles, more than any other material (leather, for example), were used for creating various and numerous clothing items, and were essential for covering one's body. One could, so to say, not do without it. The fact that Palmyrene sculptural representations put so much emphasis on textiles, and that their rendering can be extremely detailed, does alert us to the fact that textiles could be used for showing off one's wealth. A himation – although it might have been plain – would have taken up several metres of cloth and therefore in itself would have been a pricey clothing item. A tunic, although not consisting of that much fabric, could have pearl borders sewn around the neck and sleeves, for example, and therefore been an expensive item. The Parthian-style clothing items, however, take the representation of wealth through textiles to an altogether different level. These ornamented items display considerable wealth, but also give insight into the rich world of textile patterns available to Palmyrene customers, sculptors, and craftsmen. Textile pieces found in tombs include Chinese silk imports, as well as locally-made fabrics, some of which have adaptations of Chinese patterns. They reveal a wide variety of patterns, ranging from simple but expensive, purple-dyed bands, to elaborate floral, vegetal, or geometric patterns, displayed in juxtaposed bands, placed around textile borders, or covering all the area of the fabric. The comparison between the patterns on these fabrics and those shown in sculpture shows that sculptors were familiar with, and replicated contemporary clothing, perhaps even using the same pattern books as craftsmen working on wool or linen (Schmidt-Colinet, Stauffer and Al-As'ad 2000) (Plate 3.3). Such dress items show that Palmyrenes were concerned with showing off such knowledge about dress codes both internally in the family graves, but also to the outside world in the public sphere. This can be inferred by the frequent use of Parthian-style clothing in banqueting scenes that, more than likely, reflected contemporary Palmyrene practices and customs. Dress and clothing items were highly loaded with messages about knowledge of the world not only locally but also on a much more global scale.

Conclusion

While the chiton and himation worn by most men depicted in the Palmyrene funerary portraits are less adorned than the garments of many Palmyrene women, the simplicity of the ensemble should not be equated with a lack of significance for the identity of the deceased. On the contrary, the general uniformity of the style and manner in which these male garments were worn likely contributed to a sense of cohesion and inclusion in the Palmyrene community. Alongside this potential significance of the Palmyrene dress code is the acknowledgement that

male dress in Palmyra was much more detailed and elaborated than until now accepted in scholarship. While a cursory examination gives the impression that men either wore Greco-Roman style clothing or Parthian banqueting clothes, it becomes clear when looking more closely at the male dress divided on the types of sculpture at hand in Palmyra that dress codes were combined in a variety of ways. This variety of choices indicates that the decision to be displayed in chiton and himation was deliberate, as was the selection of Parthian attire or the choice of a long, draped cloak over Parthian tunic and trousers. Much more than indicating loyalty or adherence to one cultural sphere, the way in which the various garments were used and combined underlined the Palmyrene local knowledge about the dress codes available in the global world of which they were a firm part. Even the relatively uniform chiton and himation enabled identification as part of the local and/or regional community, but also allowed for a certain amount of individualization.

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