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– σύνθεσις: Common and
Uncommon Garment Terms
in Dowry Arrangements from
Roman Egypt

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Χιτών – δαλματική – μαφόρτης – σύνθεσις: Common and Uncommon Garment Terms in Dowry Arrangements from Roman Egypt

Kerstin Droß-Krüpe

With regard to ancient textile terms, dictionaries could potentially generate a false sense of security. Their formal accuracy might let us think that we are, without doubt, provided with the term that corresponds perfectly with a particular expression from an ancient Greek and/or Latin document. However, translations in dictionaries are almost exclusively based on reading and interpreting ancient literary sources and tend to neglect documentary evidence. But documentary sources, such as papyri, are a valuable and unique resource for research, referring to manifold aspects of social and economic history. Above all, they offer an insight into the minutiae of individual lives, an aspect of ancient history that is rarely available to current research. These kinds of sources significantly deepen the understanding of the ancient world – compared to information retrieved only from literary sources.

The present contribution derives from a research project made possible by the Pasold Research Fund.¹ It focuses on ancient marriage documents from the province of Egypt with its abundance of papyrological evidence as a case study on the terminology of everyday dress in Roman Imperial times.

Source material: Dowry contracts from Roman Egypt

Before paper and parchment were common writing materials, people used wooden tablets, papyri or potsherds (ostraca) for private correspondence as well as for official documents. Especially the abundance of papyri and ostraca broadens our perspective on antiquity from literary sources. Mainly originating from Egypt, these documents provide a direct and unfiltered view of real life circumstances for

1. ‘Everyday dress in Graeco-Roman Egypt (1st-6th century AD) according to papyri – an analysis of dowry contracts’ (carried out with Yvonne Wagner/Salzburg). I am very grateful to the Pasold Research Fund for enabling our research. I also wish to thank the conference organisers, Marie-Louise Nosch, Cécile Michel and Salvatore Gaspa, for their invitation, and the participants for providing a very stimulating climate of debate. I am indebted to Andrea Jördens/Heidelberg and Deborah Weisselberg-Cassuto/Ramat Gan for valuable comments on linguistic details of this paper and to Virginia Geisel/Marburg and Jane Parsons-Sauer/Kassel for correcting my English. All papyrological editions as well as corresponding literature for papyri, ostraca and tablets are listed in the ‘Checklist of Editions’ (5th edition) which is available online: http://library.duke.edu/rubenstein/scriptorium/papyrus/texts/clist_papyri.html (last accessed December 2014).

all classes of population in this region.² After Alexander III ('the Great') had conquered Egypt and introduced the Greek language in this part of the Mediterranean in 332 BC, it was used for official documents. Until the Arab invasion in 640-642 AD, the Greek language also played an important role in private correspondence. Thus most papyri and ostraca were written in Greek. The majority of Greek papyri and ostraca date back to the first three centuries AD, when Egypt was a province of the Roman Empire. They consist of a variety of documents – works of literature, letters, horoscopes, accounts, receipts, tax registers, declarations, contracts, and more. Making the individual tangible, they let us explore an 'individual micro-history' and bring administrative trading records to life. Their evidence provides an unfiltered view of real-life circumstances of all population classes. With regard to the economic procedures of Roman textile production, they allow for a more detailed analysis.

Marriage and dowry arrangements are of particular value for research on female dress of the Roman period. "One of the main purposes for the composition of a marriage document was to record the delivery of a dowry, its value and contents, and to regulate its position both in the course of the marriage and after its dissolution."³ The detailed description of every item of the dowry was very important because, in case of divorce, it enabled the woman to enforce her right of regaining this dowry within a short time. However, some contracts record the overall value of the dowry rather than its original components. In these cases, which mostly date back to Augustean times, the husband could possibly dispose of dowry components without any special restraints as long as he was still capable of returning the total value.

However, in later marriage documents the components are usually listed in great detail. A typical

dowry from the first three centuries AD in Roman Egypt usually includes clothing, along with cash instalments, jewellery and household implements. The typically high level of detail offers a unique chance to learn about women's garments which were actually worn in everyday life in this part of the Roman Empire. We can discover details about the terminology of female garments, their colours and sometimes even the value of an actual garment.

It is necessary to keep in mind that marriage was important and common in ancient times. Analysing census declarations, Roger Bagnall and Bruce Frier could prove that in Roman Egypt at least 93% of the women aged between 26 and 35 years were married, already divorced, or widowed.⁴ Thus marriage was a very common phenomenon in Imperial Egypt. Nevertheless it must be borne in mind that, although dowries were common, dowry contracts were not obligatory. Especially in earlier times, this written form of arrangement was often composed without any official supervision by a public organ. The contract served to create security for bride and groom in the – not unlikely – case of a later divorce and to secure the women's financial resources, but for a valid marriage arrangement, the dowry contract was not by all means necessary.⁵

Because the contracts come from varied socio-economic backgrounds, the overall value of documented dowries varies a lot – which is not surprising, considering the high percentage of married women. The type and number of items often indicate the socio-economic status of the bride's family. By analysing the garments these women possessed and wore in everyday life we are able to explore the links between clothing and wealth, fashion and status – not just of upper class women but of brides from very different social strata of the multicultural society in the Roman province of Egypt.

2. Challenging the paradigm of Egypt as a special region of the Roman Empire, which circumstances are contrary to all other regions, consequently encourages the study of the available documents of this province. This backdrop moves the significance of papyri into the focus of ancient economic history research.

3. Yiftach-Firanko 2003, 105.

4. Bagnall & Frier 1994, 117.

5. For a general introduction in this source material see Yiftach-Firanko 2003.

Textiles in Roman dowries

Of the approx. 100 surviving (and edited) dowries dating back to Roman Imperial Times, 46 mention textiles.⁶ This shows the importance of textiles as part of a woman's belongings and highlights the connection between garments, gender, and social status. In contrast to mummy portraits, painted shrouds, statues, reliefs or archaeological textiles obtained from graves, the dowries represent a portrait of actual life. It rather depicts the way a woman was seen on the street than how she wanted to be remembered after her death. Idealisation is insignificant for this kind of source material: we are not facing the ideal concept of a local elite, but everyday dress of women from very different social strata.

This is of particular importance for analysing the terminology used for the garments in dowries. The documented name for an individual garment was the name which was actually given to this very garment by its female wearer, the adjectives used to describe its colour correspond with the woman's own colour impressions. The combination of name and colour enabled her to identify that very garment in case of divorce. This explains quite well why we are rarely facing general terms like "female garments" (ἱμάτια / ἱμάτια γυναικεῖα) but usually detailed descriptions.

Common garments

A closer inspection of dowries and their garment terms suggests that women in Graeco-Roman Egypt did not possess a very broad range of garments. 11 different types of garments appear in the entirety of all dowries from Imperial times. A χιτών (or tunic) is listed in a vast number of dowries. Its colours are manifold and range from purple, mulberry red,

sandalwood red, chrysanth yellow, sulphur yellow, safflower yellow to milk white and white, but interestingly never any shades of blue or green. Another very common garment, the πάλλιον is most often said to be χρωματισμός, colourful, without giving any details about individual colours. These mantles could have had several colours, probably in patterns. Striped and checked textiles are indeed documented in the archaeological records.⁷ Although we often cannot reconstruct the design of a certain garment, these textile fragments may represent mantles. In summary: χιτών and πάλλιον are to be considered the most common female dresses to be found in almost each and every wardrobe in all parts of Egypt during the entire Imperial period. Obviously, these terms were part of a widespread 'standard dress terminology' of that time.

Besides these two very common and clearly defined garments we are presented with others, for example the στολή: This type of garment appears exclusively in dowries dating to the 1st and 2nd century AD and seems to be uncommon during later times.⁸ The σουβρικοπάλλιον is very likely a typo for σουρικοπάλλιον, a Syrian πάλλιον.⁹ It does not appear in the early marriage documents, but from the 2nd century onwards. We also learn about garments called δαλματική and μαφόρτης / μαφόριον. These two terms are particularly interesting as they are listed individually and combined, most likely meaning an entire female costume. They only appear in dowries dating from the late 2nd and the 3rd century AD.

δαλματική and μαφόρτης / μαφόριον

Handbooks and dictionaries offer descriptions and definitions for garments. Whereas the most common dictionary of ancient Greek, Liddell-Scott-Jones, calls the δαλματική just a "robe" without any further

6. Droß-Krüpe & Wagner 2014, 163-166.

7. E.g. Grömer 2010, 166-168, cf. Diod. 5,30,1; Droß-Krüpe 2015.

8. P. Mich. 2/121r, 42 AD, Tebtynis; P.Mich 5/343, before 54 AD, Tebtynis; P.Ryl. 2/154, 66 AD, Bakchias; P.Oxy. 2/265, 81-96 AD, Oxyrhynchos; Pap. Choix. 10, 162 AD, Tebtynis; P.Strasb. 4/225, 2nd half 2nd cent. AD, place unknown; P. Tebt. 2/514, 2nd cent. AD, Tebtynis.

9. CPR 1/27, 158 AD, place unknown; P.Oxy. 6/905, 170 AD, Oxyrhynchos; SPP 20/41v, 2nd cent. AD, Hermopolite nome?; CPR 1/21, 230 AD, Ptolemais Euergetis; P. Tebt. 2/405, 3rd cent. AD, Tebtynis.

specification,¹⁰ we are informed elsewhere that a *dalmatic* / δαλματική is “[a] T-shaped tunic with wrist-length tight sleeves cut separately from the main part of the tunic and sewn on, popular in the later Roman Empire, especially the 3rd and 4th centuries AD. Originating in the Illyrian provinces or further east, it was worn by men and women: men’s versions could have coloured and patterned bands and roundels – especially on the shoulders; women’s – shown on many female figures in catacomb paintings – were longer (just above the ankles), worn unbelted and often had contrasting stripes and borders.”¹¹ A deeper insight into the source material for this precise assumption shows that the most detailed description can be found in an etymological encyclopaedia compiled by the Christian bishop Isidore of Seville in the 7th century AD. It says that a δαλματική / *dalmatic* is a bright white tunic for priests with a purple border (*clavus*).¹² According to the *Liber Pontificalis*, the dalmatic was introduced as a priest’s garment by Pope Silvester in the 4th century AD.¹³ We also learn that its use attracted attention, for example when worn by Roman Emperors such as Commodus and Heliogabalus during the high Empire.¹⁴ However this information derives from the *Historia Augusta*, a late Roman collection of biographies of Roman Emperors – a source in which fictional or inaccurate information is deliberately combined with historical material and which is therefore considered unreliable. The same *Historia Augusta* characterises the above-named emperors, allegedly wearing a dalmatic, as effeminate, extravagant

and generally inappropriate rulers. Every other detail regarding this type of garment is either assumed from considerably later Christian sources or is based on the iconographic record. The question remains: If the appearance of the garment named δαλματική has not changed at all over the centuries – are we really in a position to identify a visual representation of a dalmatic or δαλματική, if the only definite information we have is the one mentioned by Isidore and the *Historia Augusta*? This is highly questionable.

In the dowries, this type of garment is mentioned five times in three arrangements, all dating from Dura Europos in Syria or the Arsinoite nome in the 3rd century AD.¹⁵ When specified, its colour is κόκκινος (scarlett), λευκός (white) or σαπιρίνη (l. σαπφείρινος [sapphire]).

As a second example a *mafortium* / μαφόρτης is presented in the dictionaries to be a “veil, head-dress of women and priests”.¹⁶ Elsewhere it is described as “[a] short palla, worn by women, found in later Latin sources”.¹⁷ Again, it is interesting to note the discrepancies in the definitions that indicate a semantic change of the term.¹⁸ It is of semitic origin, most likely deriving from the Hebrew תרופעה (*ma’aforet*), meaning *vestis lintea* or *mantum*. It is mentioned as both a female garment¹⁹ and an element of a male priest’s dress²⁰. Considering this, we ought to admit that we do not know what these garments actually looked like. We maintain an illusion of knowledge without questioning these persistent and self-amplifying definitions.

10. LSJ, s.v., 368.

11. Cleland *et al.* 2007, 46. Cf. also Schrenk 2012, 197-200. See also Mossakowska in this volume.

12. Isid. *orig.* 19,22,9: *Dalmatica vestis primum in Dalmatia, provincia Graeciae, texta est, tunica sacerdotalis candida cum clavis ex purpura.*

13. *Lib. Pont.* 34,7: [*Silvester*] *constituit ut diacones dalmaticas in ecclesia uterentur et pallae linostema leva eorum tenerentur.* Until today the dalmatic is the outer liturgical vestment of the deacon.

14. *HA Comm.* 8; *HA Pertinax* 8 (again referring to Commodus’ garments); *HA Heliog.* 26.

15. CPR 1/21 [= SPP 20/31], 230 AD, Ptolemais Euergetis; P.Dura 30, 232 AD, Dura Europos; P.Tebt. 2/405, 3rd cent. AD, Tebtynis.

16. LSJ, s.v., 1085.

17. Cleland *et al.* 2007, 119.

18. Its etymology is discussed in detail in Mossakowska 1996, 27-28.

19. Isid. *orig.* 19,25,4 and *Non.* p. 542,1.

20. Cassianus, *de institutis coenobiorum* 1,7.

This type of female dress appears in four imperial dowry contracts – one of them mentions two garments of that kind.²¹ Its colour is usually described as πορφύρεος (purple; twice), σαπιρίνη (l. σαπφείρινος [sapphire]) and κόκκινος (scarlet).²²

Three of the dowries containing a δαλματική also list a μαφόρτης. According to P.Dura 30, originating from the vicinity of Dura Europos in Syria and dating to the 3rd century AD, Aurelia Marcellina's dowry contained a combination of a δελματικὴν κ[οκκινὸν] and a μ[α]φόριν πορφυροῦν, thus a scarlet *dalmatic* and a purple *mafortium*. We can clearly detect that both garments were considered as an ensemble, as they are connected by the use of the word καί (and) and share a common value. P.Tebt. 2/405 lists a purple and a scarlet μαφόρτης as well as a sapphire δαλματική. Other dowries, such as P.Oxy. 10/1273 from the 3rd century AD, even join both terms into a new phrase which represents the ensemble: δελματικομαφόρτης. This dowry also contains, among other items, a silver δελματικομαφόρτης (besides, the most valuable garment documented in all marriage contracts [260 drachmai]), a turquoise δελματικομαφόρτης as well as a white and a purple δελματικομαφόρτης.

The fact that μαφόρτης and δαλματική form a compound word suggests that these garments were usually two parts of an entire female costume. The term also appears in the Price Edict of Emperor Diocletian, dating from the early 4th century AD.²³ This type of costume is most likely of eastern origin, as the Price

Edict only lists production sites in the Eastern provinces of the Roman Empire, a fact which is supported by its appearance in Egyptian and Syrian papyri.

The fact that the term σύνθεσις appears in several dowries,²⁴ but never concurrently with μαφόρτης or δαλματική, might lead to the assumption that it represents the very same ensemble of garments.²⁵ According to LSJ, σύνθεσις means “putting together, combination; combination of parts so as to form a whole; set (e.g. collection of clothes)”.²⁶ Other textile dictionaries define a σύνθεσις as a dinner robe for men and a religious dress for (male) priests,²⁷ a concept which derives from Roman literary sources like Suetonius and Martial. A closer look into these sources reveals that a σύνθεσις was apparently worn during dinner (which does not define it as a dinner dress per se) and was not regarded as appropriate for a Roman emperor in public²⁸ (possibly because the garment, or rather combination of garments, could also be worn by women.²⁹). On the other hand, according to Martial, the σύνθεσις seemed to be an attribute of Roman elites such as senators and knights (*equites*)³⁰ as well as priests³¹. Here the σύνθεσις is described as a decent and probably rather luxurious garment.

Overall, based on these contradictory statements from sources with little reliability, we cannot get a clear picture as to how a certain dress actually looked like. The question is: Was there a common understanding for a certain type of garment at all, or were some literary sources simply not interested in precisely specifying the textile terms? In any case,

21. CPR 1/21 [= SPP 20/31], 230 AD, Ptolemais Euergetis; P.Hamb. 3/220, 223/4 AD, Ptolemais Euergetis?; P.Dura 30, 232 AD, Dura Europos; P. Tebt. 2/405, 3rd cent. AD, Tebtynis.

22. For further evidence of this term cf. Mossakowska 1996, 27-37.

23. *Ed. Diocl.* 19.

24. P.Oxy. 3/496, 127 AD, Oxyrhynchos; PSI 10/1117, after 138 AD, Tebtynis; SB 5/7535, 198/9 AD, Ptolemais Euergetis; SB 6/9372, 2nd half 2nd cent. AD, Oxyrhynchos; SPP 20/41, 2nd cent. AD, Hermopolite nome?

25. P.Oxy. 3/496, 127 AD, Oxyrhynchos; PSI 10/1117, after 138 AD, Tebtynis; SB 5/7535, 198/9 AD, Ptolemais Euergetis; SB 6/9372, 2nd half 2nd cent. AD, Oxyrhynchos; SPP 20/41, 2nd cent. AD, Hermopolite nome?

26. LSJ, s.v., 1716.

27. Cleland *et al.* 2007, 185.

28. Suet. *Nero* 51.

29. *Dig.* 34,2,38,1.

30. *Mart.* 14,1.

31. *Mart.* 5,79.

although documentary sources provide valuable details like names, colours and value of individual garments, acquiring an impression of their common design still proves to be difficult.

Conclusion

Roman marriage documents from Imperial Egypt provide a unique possibility to detect the characteristics of clothes within social reality – as they were actually worn. They enable us to learn about textile tastes and visualize the wardrobes of women in their time. They provide detailed descriptions as to design and colours and give insights into the everyday life of women. Thus, these documentary sources significantly broaden the perspective presented by literary sources or the iconographic record. Combined with the values of textiles which is often additionally provided, we get a better understanding of the taste of Roman women – at least in the parts of the Roman Empire that provide us with papyrological evidence. Their analysis gives insight into the commonness of garments and their owner's taste in colour. The dominance of reddish and yellowish shades is overwhelming. A garment which is described as 'colourful' (especially in the case of tunics) might be interpreted as 'patterned' – or maybe in some cases being at taqueté decoration or tapestry weave.³² δαλματική and μαφόρτης appear independently from one another or together, are connected with καί, or form a joint term which describes a complete female costume. It is conceivable that the term σύνθεσις which – at least in the dowries – occurs rarely, but never together with either δαλματική or μαφόρτης, was probably used as a synonym for this costume.

List of abbreviations

LSJ = Liddel, H. G. & Scott, R. (1940), *A Greek-English Lexicon*. Revised and augmented throughout by Sir H.S. Jones. Oxford.

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32. Cf. Wild & Droß-Krüpe in this volume.