

Byzantine Dress

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1. Thesis

How did clothing reflect and shape identity in the Byzantine Empire? Did clothing shape the identity of the Byzantine Empire?

2. Sources/Limitations of Study

a. Primary and Secondary

Primary sources include the “Consular Ivory Diptychs,” now preserved in museums, Fresco paintings in the Catacombs, sculpture from fourth century A.D. sarcophagi, and mosaics from the earliest Christian Churches. (page 122 from Ancient Greek Roman and Byzantine Costume and Decoration.) Unfortunately, these sources are bound by the choice of medium and audience. Other primary sources include the reconnection of textile remains from a funerary context. An interesting limitation from the exhumations is that it is simply not apparent if one was buried in his/her best clothes and jewels, or if it is a true representation of class. (Harlow, 45)

Secondary sources include various texts written as interpretations by authors from the twentieth century. Although these text often cite primary sources, each author is subjected to his/her interpretation.

b. Perspectives

We will examine garments and jewellery worn during the Byzantine Empire in regard to class and social status. By taking this perspective, we will discover the similarities and differences in values, religion and cultures among the ranks of the Byzantines. This will help us learn about if and how identity was shaped by textiles, jewellery or other aspects of fashion.

c. Awareness of Perspectives Not Taken

As in many ancient cultures, it is difficult to know about what was worn by the poorer members of society because they were unable to afford the expensive and more durable fabrics and materials that would have survived many hundreds or thousands of years. The surviving remnants of Byzantine culture (tile mosaics,

statues, and paintings) tend to depict the very wealthy or members of the church.

As the Byzantine Empire has been somewhat forgotten and neglected for centuries, it is difficult to prove that the subjective interpretations of primary sources of artwork from the period are truly valid.

We took the perspective of men's clothing as very few sources specific to women's clothing.

3. Argument/Discussion/Evidence

"We gain our knowledge of the period chiefly from mosaic wall-decorations in churches, ivory carvings and illuminated manuscripts" (Houston, 134).

We will argue that all societies create systems of classification and are reinforced by all facets of life, including fashion. Within the Byzantine Empire, clothing was used to distinguish between the nobility, middle class, clergy and the lower class as well as ethnicity and political and social views. By accentuating divisions between these class structures, it becomes apparent by only a glance of the wearer's social rank. Unlike in the Roman Empire, where strict laws determined what people of different social classes could wear, the quality of Byzantine dress was limited only by the ability of the wearer to pay for it.

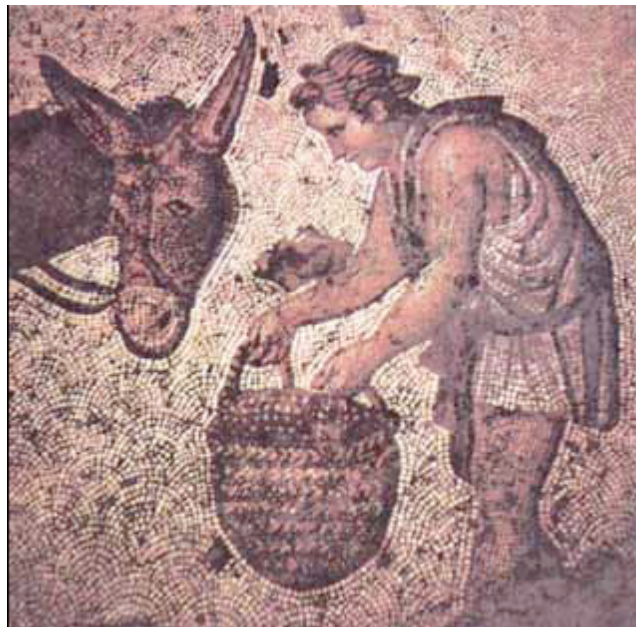
Many changes have occurred in what was once known as the Byzantine Empire. Although some changes constituted greater impacts on the Byzantine way of life, (styles of governing, religious beliefs, etc.) many changes had to do with dress and costume. In fact, many of the changes largely impacted changes in dress. "From the third century A.D. till the sixth century we see the gradual development from the Roman to the Byzantine style" (Houston, 120). During the Roman period, men often wore an article of clothing that is referred to as a toga. However, as time went on and Byzantine came about, there became an increase in the disuse of togas. During the Byzantine time, the toga became known as "a strictly official dress [worn] by the emperor" (Houston, 120). The toga went from being an article of clothing worn by many in periods before, to an article of clothing worn only by the Emperor. It represented wealth and hierarchy within the Empire.

Items of everyday dress included the tunic and short cloak. From contemporary mosaics, it is possible to see elaborately woven and embroidered garments that were worn by churchmen and court officials. Differences in tunics also denoted social rank. A purple stripe worn on the tunic was called a *clavus* and indicated either a senator or was the mark

of the equestrian order. The *tunica palmata* was a brightly coloured tunic embroidered with palm leaves and was worn by a “*triumphator* during his triumph,” or by other dignitaries at other exceptional occasions. The *dalmatica* was the richest form of the tunic. Although the dalmatica had been worn throughout the Roman Empire as well, the Byzantines changed the sleeves to large bell shapes. It was usually worn by the upper class and could be quite ornately decorated with trim and embroidered patches. This, of course, depended on the wealth of the wearer. Pearls, gemstones and even metal panels might also be used. Again, this was a clear indication of the social status of the wearer (Robinson).



Tunica Dalmatica



Tunica Palmata

Byzantine people delighted in decoration. Items of personal adornment included brooches, buckles, jewellery and strap ends in bronze, silver or gold, depending on the status of the owner.



Cloisonné Pendant

Islamic (Egyptian), 11th century

Gold: fabricated from wire and strips of sheet; set with cloisonné enamel and turquoise; originally outlined with strung pearls and/or stones.

The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, N.Y (30.95.37)

Even the middle or lower class, who could not afford fancy jewellery or ornamentation, might have used glass gems in order to provide some decoration (Vikan, 147). As well, the clergy used ornamentation to set themselves apart; for example, by the 4th Century, bishops were associated with metal bracelets and a striped cloth collar called a *pallium*, which hung vertically from the centre front and back. It is possible to see how ornamentation was a device used by the Byzantine people to create separation among ranks (Robinson).

Shoes are overlooked in Byzantine Art. Certain mosaics show the men wearing what appear to be wearing sandals with socks. Emperor Basil II is shown wearing knee high red boots, embroidered with pearls. Other portraits show only the tips of the shoes. People working outside would either have sandals or be barefoot. The sandals follow the Roman model of straps and a thick sole. Military boots are also seen on shepherds. Red sandals were commonly worn by the Emperor.



Emperor Basil II wearing red boots.

While it is clear that Byzantine garments projected information regarding social status, there were also messages conveyed through dress that were common among textiles regardless of quality or cost (Maguire 215). The Byzantines carefully chose decorations and images for their garments that they believed had the ability to guarantee their safety and prosperity. This ornamentation can be seen in the most expensive silks to the cheapest of wools. For example, a common motif in Byzantine textiles was that of a horseman dominating an animal or human enemy. This image was intended to give protective powers to the wearer. More Christian motifs were also typical in Byzantine fabrics. A cross was thought to protect people from demons (Maguire, 219). Crosses were also seen in jewellery, on beds and as relics for the same purpose. Ultimately, because these images and motifs were popular across social status and rank, this reveals the values and priorities of *all* Byzantine citizens, regardless of rank. The desire for security, fortune and protection was coveted by all and considered important enough to print on the cheapest and most

expensive fabrics.

4. Relation/Significance for Contemporary Society or Education

Although the Byzantine style of dress is no longer with us today, the hierarchy of dress and costume from that period still persist in contemporary society. Unfortunately, dress and costume still informally represent one's role in the rankings in our society. Whether one is walking down the street or attending a job interview, their clothing affects how others perceive them. Although we no longer have emperors and empresses, today's society is still built on a hierarchical rule. Not only are people constantly judged by what they are wearing, the intricacies of social class often result in negative connotations on those who do not fit the class of the clothes that are being worn. As in the past, men continue to be perceivably dominant, but women are working to strive equality. Many fashions that were once seen as only male, are breaking into female's closets. Not only are women wearing pants many women can be found wearing suits. From a social and gender perspective, these articles of clothing are perceived to be of a more masculine or dominant form of clothing, then dresses or skirts are, as they were once solely reserved for the male population.

5. Conclusions

To conclude, dress in the Byzantine empire was a large factor in how one was regarded in terms of wealth, status, and hierarchy. Different articles of clothing were assigned to the different status's in the hierarchy. For example, togas went from being worn on a consistent basis by nearly all of the population, to only being worn by the Emperor. The toga became recognized as a fashion symbol of wealth and prestige. Precious stones and jewellery also represented status in the Byzantine empire. However, the poorer class could still maintain this dress by using glass gems as substitutes. Symbols, such as the elephant and crosses, were also embroidered onto the articles of clothing that the Byzantines wore. Although the materials used for the clothing may be different, all classes and citizens would have these symbols on their clothing.

Although the style of dress from the Byzantine empire no longer persists in today's fashion era, the status component still does. In many situations in today's society, people are often criticized by what they wear. Whether one is walking down the street, or attending a job interview, their dress plays a large role in how someone perceives them.

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