Between Object and Idea: Non-Normative Dress in the Roman Republic

Między przedmiotem a ideą: nienormatywne ubrania w Republice Rzymskiej

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ABSTRACT: From its beginning dress has been a cover of human nakedness, a barrier between the human body and the unfriendly outside world. In the meantime, it evolved to be a sign of human status, gender, origin, etc. Thus, there are two worlds of dress: the tangible and the elusive one, the world in which dress is an object and the world in which it is an idea. People tried to subdue the first one, but they never gained full control over the other. That is why in highly hierarchical societies, such as the one of Ancient Rome, dress was one of the most important status guardians and a means of negotiation. In this paper, I introduce the idea of non-normative dress and the methods of studying it in the society of the Roman Republic.

KEYWORDS: dress, non-normative dress, Ancient Rome, empowerment, fashion.

ABSTRAKT: Od swoich początków ubiór stał się okryciem ludzkiej nagości, barierą między ciałem a nieprzyjaznym światem zewnętrznym. Z biegiem czasu ewoluował, stając się oznaką statusu, płci, pochodzenia itp. Wyróżnić można zatem dwa światy ubioru: namacalny i nie-uchwytny — świat, w którym ubiór jest przedmiotem, oraz świat, w którym jest ideą. Ten pierw-szy ludzie próbowali sobie podporządkować, nad drugim nigdy nie uzyskali pełnej kontroli. Dlatego w zhierarchizowanych społeczeństwach, takich jak to w antycznym Rzymie, ubiór stał się jednym z najważniejszych gwarantów statusu i środkiem negocjacji. W niniejszym artykule przedstawiam koncepcję nienormatywnego ubioru oraz metody jego badania w społeczeństwie republikańskiego Rzymu.

SŁOWA KLUCZE: ubiór, nienormatywny ubiór, antyczny Rzym, upodmiotowienie, moda.

Introduction

The official mascot of the 2024 Olympic Games in Paris was the Phrygian cap. This was undoubtedly an unusual choice, as until then (since the Grenoble Games in 1968), mascots have mostly been animals or anthropomorphic creatures. These were considered the best representations of human struggles. However, the official Olympic Games website (https://olympics.com/en/olympic-games/paris-2024/mascot: 28.05.2024) explained the choice of this mascot by referencing the French Revolution: sport can change lives just as the Revolution changed the course of history. However, an interesting point was made by Tony Estanguet, the head of the Organizing Committee, during the press conference where the Olympic Phryge was first presented:

> We chose AN IDEAL rather than an animal. We chose the Phrygian cap because it's a very strong symbol for the French Republic. For French people, it's a very well-known OBJECT that is a symbol of freedom (citation after: https://www.theguardian.com/sport/2022/nov/14/paris-2024-olympic-mascot-paralympic-mascot-phryges-france: 28.05.2024, highlights by the author).

The two words Tony Estanguet spoke—idea and object—best summarize the role of dress throughout human history. Clothing is undoubtedly an object: it has dimensions (size), a raw material from which it is made, colour, texture, smell, etc. Simultaneously, it is a carrier of meaning, and thus it is highly ethereal and elusive, because its sense depends on many variables. It is a form of communication, and as such, it requires a human, a recipient, who continuously interprets and comments on it (Rothe 2012: 60; Olsen 2013: 81; Gawlinski 2017: 171). Moreover, although it conveys much information about the wearer, it can never fully represent who the person is, what they plan, or what they dream of (McFerrin 2021: 217).

Dress needs humans and their bodies to become meaningful. Just as a person without a dress becomes vulnerable, partially stripped of their status, so by merging with the body (Gawilnski 2017: 171), dress becomes the barrier that separates a person from the outside world. As a second skin (Sommer 2013), it has the potential to hide some truths (imperfections of the body) and reveal others (status, wealth, etc). Dress enforces certain movements and gestures (Eco 2007) carried out by the body (Gawlinski 2012: 172). Dress can become the voice of those who cannot otherwise speak (Cluba 2022), but it also becomes a means of subjugation (like in Mao's China or the Khmer Rouge Regime in Cambodia). Additionally, as dress almost constantly covers our body, it has immense potential to evoke and suggest the body (Bryan-Wilson 2017: 232), even when the person is no more.

Therefore, the significance of dress, one of the most essential aspects of human life, cannot be overstated. The need to cover the body, to dress, is common to all races, genders, and cultures, regardless of the historical period. Dress itself as well as its significance have been the subject of numerous research studies. Yet, almost every publication on textiles or clothing, unless it is part of a monograph dedicated to textile production, begins with an explanation of the role of clothing and its production in the historical process. And that is so despite the fact that dress can be an important source of knowledge on past societies and a measure of change if only the right questions are asked. In this paper, I would like to introduce the notion of non-normative dress in the society of ancient Rome of the Republic. The Roman Republic was long held up as the model of state organization and the source of all virtues, including appropriate dress codes. Of course, some clothing traditions were said to originate from the legendary era of the kings (Plin. NH 9.197). The Republican period is also fascinating because many events contributing to changes in power distribution occurred in the public eye and were well remembered and described by ancient authors (Sumi 2005: 1). If Roman politics ever resembled a performance, this was most evident during the Republic (Sumi 2005: 7, 9). And every performance needs convincing actors, who in turn need good costumes to play their roles well.

When it comes to dress, two worlds can be distinguished: the visible, material, and tangible world, the cloth culture, in which the clothes cover our nakedness (provide comfort, protection from cold, harm, and the gaze of others), and the invisible world, in which clothes are significant carriers of meaning, announcements, ideas. These worlds continuously intertwine, and their boundaries are blurred, as we are deeply rooted in the material world (Olsen 2013: 18; Hodder 2011) but also dependent on the world of intangible signs. At the same time, we can control and protect the first world, but we will never have full control over the second. Let us first consider the material world.

Dress as an object in the Roman Republic

The visible and material world of Roman dress is well-known. There are numerous publications, classical monographs (*The World of Roman Costume and Roman Dress,* 2001 and the *Fabric of Roman Culture*, 2008, to name just two), and projects (Dress ID, which ran from 2008 to 2013, and Euroweb, which ran from 2020 to 2024). It became impossible to cover the complete historiography of Roman dress and textiles in one paper. Much was said about the toga (e.g. Rothe 2012; *Die Macht der Toga* 2013), mainly because of all the ancient garments known to us, the toga is not only best recognised, but it also

has a detailed instruction on how to wear it (Harlow 2018: 161). However, in the early Republic, this type of garment was not exclusive to Roman citizens but could be worn by all inhabitants of Italy (Wallace-Hadrill 2008: 43-45). The women's dress has also received considerable attention; not only the norms (Olson 2008), but also the basic Latin and Greek terms were analysed (Radicke 2023).

Before I move to further considerations, two terms need to be explained: dress and cloth culture.

There exist various terms to describe what people wear and how they modify their bodies. Appearance, clothes and clothing, ornaments and tattoos, costumes and robes, to name just a few. The dress, however, as defined by Mary Ellen Roach-Higgins and Joanne B. Eicher, is the most capacious term, since it includes "an assemblage of modifications of the body and/or supplements to the body" (Roach-Higgins & Eicher 1992: 1).

The notion of cloth cultures is also of importance. The idea was developed by Susanna Harris, who took into consideration the evidence for textile and animal skins and re-examined the relationship between them in the Bronze Age (Harris 2012: 62). Those cultures, much like archaeological ones, are distinguished by the specific way they use cloth-type materials (Harris 2010: 30; Harris 2012: 62; see also Gleba 2017). Most importantly, the notion of cloth cultures invokes not only necessity, but also the ideas of identity, aesthetics, values, or tradition (Harris 2012: 62). There are, of course, some universally shared principles, like technology, but the variation of different kinds of cloths and clothes is decisive.

Although the idea of cloth cultures was developed in relation to Bronze Age societies, it also fits the period of the Roman Republic, since ancient clothes were wrapped and shaped, as exemplified by the toga. Moreover, cloth is something more than a garment, though cloth could be used to make one (Harris 2012: 63).

The Romans had their own cloth culture. Their technology spread over the territory defined by the limes and even beyond. Their way of dressing distinguished them from other ethnicities. They also tried to typologise the clothes—Festus distinguished between vestis (dress) and vestimenta (garments), from which a dress could be assembled (Bonfante Warren 1973: 584). They extended control over the perceptible world of dress by incorporating it into their legislation, including it within the realm of objects, res vestiaria (Casinos Mora 2012: 53).

And so laws concerning dress can be divided into two types: prohibitions and mandates. The former usually concerned luxury items (leges sumptuariae) or things imported from outside the Roman Empire (Pérez González 2021: 147-149). The mandates gained importance relatively late, during the time of

Augustus (e.g. Suet. Aug. 40), who was mainly concerned with the decline of the *mos maiorum*. He issued decrees commanding the citizens to wear togas in strictly defined situations. His goal was possibly to integrate a society torn apart by long civil wars. The toga, as a "national" (Stone 2001) garment, thus became a unifying element for Roman citizens. However, the Roman cloth culture was not a closed one; it constantly got under the influence of other cultures and some external trends prevailed, which made it difficult for the Romans to follow the imposed norms (Radicke 2023: 354).

The reason for introducing restrictions on clothing, especially in the period of the empire, was that luxury clothes were not exclusive to the ruling class. It did not pose too much difficulty for a man of lower birth to afford clothes worn by people of noble birth (Olson 2018: 105). Emperors and the elite of Rome needed sumptuary laws to ensure their exclusive access to the most valued goods.

Dress was also controlled by numerous taboos. They pertained even to the events of great importance to the ever-expanding (and constantly threatened) state, such as the departure of a consul to war. The commander, in addition to taking obligatory oaths, had to change from civilian attire to military pludamentum. Failing to do so could result in the commander being stripped of the imperium necessary for the military campaign (Liv. 41.10; cf. Sumi 2005: 35, note 90).

The Romans put so much emphasis on the dress regulations because it was clear for them that the civilised man was dressed and the barbarian was half-naked or naked (Larson Lovén 2018: 152). Dress also influenced the body, especially in antiquity, when clothes were draped, and some items, such as the toga, were not even supposed to be pinned. This means that men had to be extremely careful with their gestures and movements, as the carefully arranged fabric might slip. People of antiquity were forced to constantly think of and adjust their clothing (Davies & Llewellyn-Jones 2018: 56).

Clothing is inherently tied to fashion, which, although it can be systematized to some extent (Barthes 2005), remains unpredictable and spontaneous. It is a subject of constant change. Similarly to dress, fashion can be brought to objects: clothes, accessories, and shoes. Simultaneously, it is an elusive idea (Riello 2011), as it offers a choice, but is also constrained by social norms. Fashion is thus a form of inclusion, where adherence to norms provides a sense of belonging to those who follow them (McFerrin 2021: 215). Following fashion requires resources (especially financial ones), yet it also allows for creativity and for the use of what is readily available. The availability of certain materials is crucial in creating different modes in most societies (Rooijakkers 2016: 23). Fashion can also be influenced by climatic conditions, but it does not have to be. Fashion gives a sense of power—creating trends that

others follow (Robert 2011: 13), though being too original can carry the risk of self-exclusion.

The idea of Roman "fashion" poses several issues. During the entire continuation of the Roman Empire, scholars have noted numerous changes in the way people did their hair or draped togas (Stone 2001), which can be referred to as "fashion". However, there was no bulk production nor over-consumerism, which became the mark of the current fashion industry (Gawlinski 2017: 164). Nevertheless, just like today, fashion was a battleground between traditionalists (adults) and the young (Radicke 2023: 389).

Finally, fashion influences our perception of the world. Although Augustus' legislation did not stand the test of time, it forever cemented the image of a Roman man in a toga and a Roman woman in a stola.

Dress as an idea in the Roman world

The world of ideas and signs is as fascinating as the material world, yet less tangible to modern researchers. Attempts to comprehend it are sometimes highly speculative (Frazer 1955: 174-175), but most of the time well-balanced (e.g. Dighton 2017; Rothe 2012; Edmondson 2008). And it should not come as a surprise, since our reconstructions of ancient Romans' mental universe(s) behind the dress rely on written evidence. In various ancient texts, clothing served different purposes each time, and the language was carefully crafted to help recipients decode the message (Harlow 2018: 155-156). These codes were probably easily readable for ancient recipients, but for modern researchers they can be the source of misconceptions, since ancient authors used dress to emphasize the natural order and the stereotypical nature of the world rather than to portray the true picture of what was worn at the time (Harlow 2018: 157).

However, decoding the symbolic nature of clothing is crucial because it was so for the Romans. This truth is best exemplified in Roman *pompa funebris*, when not only masks but also the bodies of actors dressed in appropriate garments could evoke the ancestors of the deceased (Polyb. 6.53.6-8; Koortbojian 2008: 71-73). Modern researchers face the challenging task of understanding these elusive ideas in order to obtain the whole picture of Roman everyday life. If, following Alison Laurie's idea, clothes are language, it is necessary to learn its grammar and vocabulary (Laurie 1989: 3-16). The following paragraphs constitute a presentation of a project entitled 'Non-Normative Dress in the City of Rome in the Late Republic (70BCE–27BCE)' that I developed at the Adam Mickiewicz University in the framework of the Research University Excellence Initiative Programme, Competition No. 140.

Firstly, it is crucial to identify and define the most urgent questions concerning Roman dress and its symbolism. The previous research focused on the Roman dress, which became a subject of statutory regulations and taboos (e.g. Cicero, de leg. 2.23.59; Suet. Aug. 40.5; Suet. Nero 32.3; Cod. Theod. 15.10.2). That is why the typology of traditional Roman dress and the context in which it was worn is well-researched (E.g. Croom 2010; Rothe 2017; Radicke 2023). Studies on the *toga*, *stola* and Roman identity have a long tradition (Radicke 2023: 5-12), as the attempts to systematize and typologize information on clothes worn at that time were already made in the nineteenth century (Hope 1875, Köhler 1930, first editions in 1812, Yates 1948). Dress norms are therefore well known.

My project sets out from the assumption made by Michel Foucault (Foucault 1982: 780) that what is legal is best demonstrated by what is illegal. That is why one of the most urgent research questions I ask is: what about those instances when the well-known dress norms were transgressed? What did it take to transgress them? What are the main characteristics of dress (its name, type, raw materials, colour etc.) that did not fit the established norms? Transgressing cultural norms, also in dress behaviours, can be read as a sign of disobedience, a questioning or rejection of predetermined role(s) and certain lifestyles. In that sense, dress ought to be considered a powerful and meaningful tool of human agency, giving individuals the possibility to act, especially in those instances where other actions were impossible or limited. Dress empowered individuals, giving them a sense of purpose, and provided the opportunity that—despite living in a highly regulated society with little room for individuality—change was possible (Solarska 2011: 37; Hoy 2004: 9).

To approach the dress that does not comply with the existing regulations and taboos (I shall call it henceforth the non-normative dress) is to assess the actual impact of an individual on the historical process. Assuming the perspective of an individual deciding daily on what to wear is significant, since dress has invariably been an important means of power enhancement, being a "wearable form of protest" (Cuba 2022), such as the red cap of liberty in the French Revolution (Harris 1981), mentioned at the beginning of the article, the mourning gown after the fall of the 1863 January Uprising in Poland (Stankiewicz-Kopeć 2023), or hijab during the Mahsa Amini protests in Iran in 2022 (e.g. Ali & Kayyal 2023).

The research on non-normative dress sets out with the analyses of ancient written sources, namely historical accounts and biographies. Data derived from these sources not only supplement the knowledge of dress in ancient Rome but also reveal the rationale for wearing certain clothing as well as associated terminology. Literary sources require, however, a well-developed critical apparatus to infer the author's intentions as accurately as possible. Therefore,

not only the history and credibility of each author of a particular work, but also the context in which it was written should be taken into account. The author's participation in the events described and active involvement on one side of the dispute certainly influenced the emotional state in which the writer proceeded to record what he had witnessed. Moreover, the purpose of writing a specific text must be taken into consideration in the analyses. The date when an account was written should be attributed equal analytical significance. If events and the account are separated by a distance of time, it is necessary to examine what events, earlier opinions, and even legends or myths may have influenced that narrative. Occasionally, literary sources supply names, less often descriptions of the dress worn by significant figures in the history of the Republic. That is why it is necessary to determine whether a description or a name of the piece of clothing is more accurate for the time of writing up an account of the event or the time of the event itself.

Given the nature of ancient sources, their authors and their audience, it may be presumed that the majority of information will be concerned with the elites at the time. However, this limitation need not adversely affect the relevance and usefulness of the findings for further analysis. It was the upper strata of the Roman society who shaped opinions and views, as well as took an active part in political and social life. When the sources mention other groups, slaves or women, they do so precisely because they breached the rules established by those elites.

Despite this assumption, the project attempts to identify the opportunities that all Roman citizens, regardless of status, health, or gender, had to express themselves through non-normative attire.

Notwithstanding the above caveats, historical sources represent the most comprehensive source of information regarding attire.

Within the framework of the project, the findings from literary sources will be compared with the data derived from the already published analyses of textile remains. It is an important, yet still unpopular method of working with textile and dress descriptions in literary sources. The results of textile analyses add much information to the knowledge of ancient technologies of textile production and dyeing. Findings from experimental archaeology, on the other hand, demonstrate how clothing was manufactured and how clothing types differed. As the reconstruction of dress based on antique accounts poses many difficulties, the results of previous research into archaeological textiles are very important. Increasingly accurate reconstructions of archaeological textiles are equally important (Andersson-Strand 2010). Because of the advanced textile research, modern scholars are better prepared to understand how the dress and textiles functioned in antiquity, looked like and "behaved" (Andresson-Strand et. al. 2022) in various circumstances.

Moreover, the archaeological methods serve to identify and conceptualize the sites of importance for the Romans, i.e., spaces where dress norms were transgressed and their location in the city. In addition, archaeological research published to date has yielded a very detailed plan of the ancient city of Rome, thanks to which one can identify the sites where the acts of transgressing dress norms occurred most often. Archaeology offers insights into the context in which works of art or other elements of material culture were discovered and, based on that, the circumstances in which a particular work was to be viewed and read, as well as the intended target of the underlying message, may be determined. More recent research has also made it possible to determine how many of Rome's residents were able to witness the ongoing events at the chief venue of Roman public life, the Forum (Kopij et al. 2023: 9-11). In consequence, one can attempt to describe the potential audiences, their status, and hence their potential influence on the political and social reality.

The project is designed to use art history and iconography methods to understand how the Romans visualized their appearance and how they wanted to be seen (viewed). The Roman legacy includes numerous visual sources, from large-scale monuments and life-size statues to reliefs and paintings (Larsson Lovén 2018: 135). A semiotic analysis of visual sources (Barthes 2008; 2009) will not only result in a description of the representations, but also facilitate an examination of the sign—or a broader context—that the viewer was referred to. According to Roland Barthes, fashion is the most perfect of sign systems because it introduces a multitude of meanings between the clothes and the wearer, being capable of encapsulating any human activity and lending it meaning (2005: 77, 238, 263). Moreover, Roland Barthes notes that the image offers much broader interpretive possibilities than the word (Barthes 2005: 29). An examination of the sign, sensu Barthes, is likely to disclose the intention behind erecting a particular monument and to suggest how the public may have interpreted it. An accurate interpretation, which allows for such specific circumstances of display, may shed light on true intention of the wearer. Tonio Hölscher's notion (1987) that particular styles and patterns were informed by the content and the theme of the planned depiction enables a more accurate reading of the imagery. This is relevant insofar as visual sources in ancient Rome were tools of propaganda, although the Romans did not know the word, nor did they have institutions tasked with the propagation of ideas (Żyromski 2009: 36). Instead, "propaganda" should be understood as a means of informing the public about the premises formulated by the authorities and their guiding ideals, communicated by intelligible signs. In this sense, "propaganda" was also used by private individuals, for whom the erection of a monument was a way of commemorating themselves and their qualities, primarily their virtues

(*virtutes*) and deeds (*gestae*), thus presenting the founder's family in a particular light (Woolf 1996).

Finally, cultural studies are to supply methods enabling the development of the proper definition of non-normative dress in ancient Roman society. Among them, Bruno Latour's (2005) actor-network theory is particularly relevant in the context of this study. Although it was not conceived as a ready-made analytical model, it highlights important aspects of social research by formulating five social uncertainties (nature of groups, actions, objects, facts, research). They reveal that there are many different ways to lend identity to actors, and that actors themselves may change their baseline goals. Uncertainty about the nature of objects draws attention to their agency. Restoring the narrative to the actors (separating it from the narrative of the observer, the chronicler), tracing how they congregated into (or separated from) a group to give their actions a new dimension, will make it possible to assess the significance of transgressing dress norms and to reconstruct the intentions of those involved. At the same time, having recognized the agency of dress, one can try to determine the influence that dress itself had on the outcome of transgression, and estimate the extent to which dress triggered specific reactions, unintended by the wearer, entrapping them and compelling them to act (Hodder 2011: 161), as well as prompting an interpretation of their actions in others (e.g. Cic. Vat. 31). But the most important of Latour's observations is that the agencies are only visible in acting, transforming (Latour 2005: 75) and that the development and controversies sustain the interest for longer (Latour 2005: 114).

Conclusion

The research on the non-normative dress of the Roman Republic has the potential to fill an important gap in the study of ancient dress. Transgressing cultural norms through the choice of dress may be understood as a sign of opposition and dissent. Opposition, in turn, means a rejection of the imposed roles and lifestyles (Solarska 2011: 37), while the rejection of the established world order has a substantial impact on historical process, leading to changes in the course of history and adding to its essential fabric. Hence, the knowledge on transgressing the dress norms will not only lead to the reassessment of the significance of 'the world of Roman fashion', but also afford a better understanding of Roman culture in general.

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