Clothing during the Byzantium Era

Social Studies Research Project

ED 4621
Section 2B

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Photos
Mosaic portrait of Empress Theodora (left) and Emperor Justinian (right)
Source: Antique Jewellery University
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1 Thesis and introduction

Did the Byzantine clothing identify their role and status in society? Through our presented research, this question will be answered by closely examining selective roles within Byzantine society. The research outlined herein, will cover the Byzantine clothing worn by both male and female; from the lower class to the highest class of the Emperor and Empress. Other roles in society that will be presented are the clerical attire and clothing worn by the military.
2 Sources and limitations of study

a. Primary and secondary
The primary sources used were specifically from books. As a group, we were unable to locate any primary sources. We used many secondary sources for the project. We used many web-sites which we considered reputable. Many web-sites had cited other sources they received information from. One web-site was a professional web-site based on Byzantine research. The Institute for Byzantium Research holds great regard to preserving history. There are many articles written and artefacts from the ancient Roman times. There are many skilled scholars with high credentials who are responding and interpreting artefacts from this time. There are many valuable resources available on this web-site to give a new perspective on the Byzantine times.

Secondary sources (in alphabetical order):


b. Perspectives
Through the collection of information found, many perspectives were given. Research was completed both from the female and male perspective of the roles in society that are covered.

c. Awareness of perspectives not taken
Much of our resources were secondary sources. Due to the limited nature of primary sources, besides those that were found in the secondary sources, it is difficult to determine the exact proof of what the costumes actually consisted of. The majority, if not all, of the pictures, mosaics, and paintings were taken of the elite, or the emperors and empresses, making it even more difficult to conclude what the common people wore.
3 Argument, discussion and evidence

3.1 Clothing according to class in society

The basic component of everyday attire worn by the Byzantines included a tunica (sometimes referred to as a stola) or tunic as it is commonly known today. Most frequently, the tunic was made from un-dyed wool, which was the most readily available material for clothing; however the wealthy Byzantines preferred to use finer fabrics such as silk, cotton and linen\(^1\) (refer to Appendix: Photographs, Exhibit: 1). A tunic was created to fit loosely over the body and showed little to no skin or flesh of any body parts. The wealthier Byzantines had the privilege of choosing from three different styles; full-length costume (traditional for the upper-class), the full caftan (characterized by wide sleeves) and the straight caftan (tight sleeves)\(^2\). The colors available to the wealthy for tunics were red, ochre (brownish-yellow-orange), yellow and orange. The Byzantines from the lower classes typically wore short tunics where the elite wore long tunics and used it more as an under layer for more elaborate fabrics and additional over layers of clothing called a dalmatic or dalmatica\(^3\). The dalmatic had long sleeves and was sometimes belted at the waist (refer to Appendix: Photographs, Exhibit: 2). The trim applied to the dalmatics was characterized by strips of textiles woven to the cuffs, neck, hem, upper arm and sides, accompanied with precious jewels and stones\(^4\). For the elite Byzantine women, generally the clothing and fabrics were stiff and heavily jewelled.

In public, elite members of society were easily recognizable and stood out from the common

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\(^2\) Ibid.


\(^4\) Ibid.
people as clothing varied among all roles and levels of Byzantium culture. At the highest rank, the emperor would dress in a white, lengthy, tight-sleeved tunic that was made of silk. Over the tunic, he adorned a purple cape-like layer called a chlamys and was decorated both in the front and the back with stitched squares of gold fabric. In addition, the diadem (similar to a crown), was adorned with a range of bright precious stones and pearls. The emperor’s outfit was completed by red scarlet sandals or shoes. In some Byzantine art, wealthy men are seen wearing ankle and knee high boots, decorated with lavish gems and pearls. Shoes worn by the elite females are widely un-documented in photos or art since their gowns often went to the floor and covered the footwear. Empress Theodora is seen with a pair of dainty, pointed black shoes in many paintings. The women empress’s preferred sandals or shoes that did not go above the calf. Typical of women, then and now, they took great care in the trimmings of their shoes and shoes were often seen decorated with gold, pearls and other fine gems. The elite Byzantine females would be identified easily among society, as they were often seen riding in ornamental carriages pulled by mules, likely on their way to the Baths of Zeuxippus, where they would congregate to compare and upstage one another’s clothing, luxurious jewellery while trading high society gossip.

As was the case in clothing, jewellery was just as important to the upper classes. Women were dramatically decorated with many different types of precious stones, gems and fine ornaments. Due to the various trading relations with India and Persia, precious gems such as garnets,
beryls, corundum and pearls. Assembled on a mantle of gold, bracelets, necklaces, diadems, belts used a collection of colourful stones to decorate clothing⁹.

In the lower classes, the tunics aimed to provide the comfort that allowed the women to work freely in the fields and at the home. As a sole piece of clothing, the plain tunic colors available to the lower class females, as seen in Byzantine art, were slate, blue, raspberry, yellow and red¹⁰. The dalmatics worn on special occasions were decorated from scrap material of shorter length. If the fabric was not made from an expensive textile or from a decorated fabric, then embroidery, pearls and gems would be applied to attempt to make it appear to be a richer fabric than actual fact. A tunic made from rectangles pinned at the shoulders and belted at the waist was a popular way to wear a tunic in the lower working class, as seen most commonly on dock workers. Outside labourers and common male Byzantines would wear Roman sandals (with various straps linking to a thick sole) or simply go barefoot (refer to Appendix: Photographs, Exhibit 3). There is a lack of information available on the shoes of the lower class Byzantine females¹¹.

3.2 Clerical attire
“Church vestments were not inherited from any other religion but gradually evolved out of the ordinary dress of the people of the Roman Empire. In those first days of Christianity the clergy presided in their ordinary clothing although undoubtedly costlier and more beautiful garments were used.”¹² The garments worn by the clergy in the Christian church became amongst the most distinctive of costumes developed by the Byzantines.¹³ Members of the church wore the

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¹⁰ Black Tauna, 2000
¹¹ Sherrard, 1966
same basic bottom layers as the rest of the population but the dalmatica, jewellery, or religious pieces, and top layer vestments took on different roles.

**The bishop** 14

*Great Omophorion:* A long, narrow vestment worn over the sakkos and around the neck and shoulders. The Bishop from the beginning of the Divine Liturgy wears it until the reading of the Gospel, for he represents the Archpriest, Christ, until this time.

*Small Omophorion:* Worn after the Gospel reading until the conclusion of the Divine Liturgy because from that time on he is a simple celebrant and servant of the Lord. The Omophorion, both Great and Small, are usually decorated with the figure of Christ or that of a lamb and are symbolic of the stray sheep that Christ, the ‘good shepherd,’ carried on his shoulders.

*Pectoral Cross:* A cross of precious metal and jewels lays over the Omophorion and is worn as a reminder that the Bishop bears his cross and upholds the commandments of Scripture and faithfully fulfills the holy and saving words of Jesus Christ.

*Engolpion:* A highly decorated round or oval image of Christ or the Theotokos worn on a chain over the Omophorion. It is a sign of the purity of heart, which a Bishop should possess. It is the official distinctive sign of the Bishop, which he may wear at all times.

*Mitra:* The Mitra (Mitre, Crown) is a luxurious headdress. It is decorated with small images of Christ and the four Evangelists within the frames of precious stones, and bears the cross on top. It symbolizes the glory of the Lord and the highest ecclesiastical authority, which is given to a Bishop.

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14 Fotopoulou Sophia, "Byzantine Vestments."
Pastoral Staff: A tall staff of precious metal topped by two serpents with a cross in the center. This is a sign of the Bishop’s authority. The serpents represent the visible and invisible enemies of the Church and the Cross symbolizes the power that Christ has granted to the Church and is entrusted to the Bishop. The staff also reminds us of the staff of Moses with which he led the Israelites to the Promised Land and the good shepherd tending to his flock. Outside of liturgical services the bishop often carries a shorter and simpler staff of wood topped by an ornamental knob.

Mandyas: This is a long purple clock of royal splendour. It covers everything but the head. Its many folds represent the power of God and the wings of angels. A Deacon or Acolyte usually holds the train. It is worn at official ceremonies, but not during the Divine Liturgy.

Trikerion and Dikerion: The triple and double candlesticks represent the Holy Trinity and the two natures of Christ respectively. These are the fundamental truths preached by the Bishop from the throne.

The Priest

The second order of the Holy Priesthood is occupied by the Priest. The priest is in charge of a community, which he spiritually serves. He administers all the sacraments with the exception of the Sacrament of Holy Ordination, and celebrates all the church services with the exception of the ceremony connected with the consecration of a church. He leads the community in prayer and blesses them in the name of the Lord.

Sticharion: Long garment reaching to the floor, with long sleeves like a tunic. Sticharion means ‘garment with lines’ because in ancient times, it was white with darker lines running through it.

Ibid.
This represents the baptismal robe and the spiritual cleanliness the clergy must possess when officiating in the Divine Liturgy and other church services. It signifies the white robe of the angel who announced to the Myrrh bearing women the glad tidings of the Lord’s Resurrection (Mark 16:5).

**Epitrachelion:** This garment worn around the neck, usually consists of two narrow strips sewn or buttoned together in the front. It is richly embroidered with crosses at set distances. This vestment symbolizes the grace of the Holy Spirit that flows down abundantly upon the officiating clergy. Adorning the Epitrachelion are two set of tassels; the set on top represents the souls of the living which the priest is responsible for.

**Zone:** This is a belt worn around the waist over the Sticharion and Epitrachelion. It is a sign of the strength given to the priest by the Holy Spirit to lead the community in prayer. The symbolism of the zone is signified by a following biblical passage, which the celebrant recites while, he fastens it over the Sticharion and the Epitrachelion.

**Epimanikia:** These are cuffs, which are worn around the wrists of the priest. Symbolically they represent the creative power of God. The clergyman recites the following prayer when he puts the Epimankia on his right hand: Your right hand, O Lord, is glorified in strength. Your right hand has crushed the enemies. In the fullness of Your glory You have shattered the adversaries.” (Exodus 15: 6-7) While he places the cuff on his left hand he prays: “Your hands have made me and have fashioned me. Grant me understanding and I shall learn from your commandments.” (Psalm 119:73)

**Epigonation:** This is a diamond shaped piece of stiff cloth that hangs at knee-height.
This vestment is one of distinction, and is worn by the bishop and only a few priests who have been elevated to the ranks of Archimandrite, Protopresbyteros or Economos. The epigonation is decorated with an embroidered cross, the figure of the Savior or that of an angel. It signifies the sword of the Spirit that is the strength of the Word of God. The clergyman recites the following prayer when he puts on the Epigonation: “Gird your sword upon Your thigh, O Mighty One, and in Your splendor and beauty string Your bow. Prosper and reign because of truth, meekness, and righteousness. Your right hand shall lead you wondrously....” (Psalm 45: 3-5)

Phelonion: This is a type of sleeveless cloak in the shape of a cone with an opening for the head. It has the same symbolic meaning as the bishop’s Sakkos, in that it represents the red tunic with which the Romans dressed the Savior before his Crucifixion, and denotes that the priests are invested with truth and should be ministers of the truth.

The Deacon

The Deacon holds the third order of the Priesthood. The word Deacon (Diakonos) means “assistant,” (Matthew 20:26; Acts 6:1-7) and he assists the bishop or the priest in the celebration of the sacraments and church services. During services the Deacon recites the litanies, the Gospel readings and other prayers and assists the celebrant bishop or priest in the sanctuary.

Sticharion: Long garment reaching to the floor, with long sleeves like a tunic. Sticharion means ‘garment with lines’ because in ancient times, it was white with darker lines running through it. This represents the baptismal robe and the spiritual cleanliness the clergy must possess when officiating in the Divine Liturgy and other church services. It signifies the white robe of the angel who announced to the Myrrh bearing women the glad tidings of the Lord’s Resurrection (Mark 16:5). The clergyman recites the following prayer when he puts on the sticharion: “My soul shall...”

16 Ibid.
rejoice in the Lord, for He has clothed me with the garment of righteousness and has covered me with a robe of gladness....” (Isaiah 61:10)

_Epimanikia:_ These are cuffs, which are worn around the wrists of the priest. Symbolically they represent the creative power of God. The clergyman recites the following prayer when he puts the Epimankia on his right hand: Your right hand, O Lord, is glorified in strength. Your right hand has crushed the enemies. In the fullness of Your glory You have shattered the adversaries.” (Exodus 15: 6-7) While he places the cuff on his left hand he prays: “Your hands have made me and have fashioned me. Grant me understanding and I shall learn from Your commandments.” (Psalm 119:73)

_Orarion:_ This is a long, narrow strip of cloth, unique to the deacon, which the deacon wears on the left shoulder so that one of the ends falls in front and one in the back. When the Lord’s Prayer is recited the deacon changes its shape, wearing it over both shoulders and around his waist crosswise so that both edges fall in front. The change facilitates the Deacon’s movements during Communion. The Orarion is the Deacon’s distinctive vestment. Holding one end of it with his right hand, he raises it slightly when he recites prayers. Symbolically, it represents the wings of angels, the servants of God, and thus signifies that it is the deacon’s responsibility to be a servant of the Church.

**The Sacred Vestments of the Clergy**  

_Rason:_ The Rason (Anteri, Cassock) was the garment of the Byzantine Empire. It was a tight-buttoned garment, which had a belt at the waist.

_Exorason:_ The clothing that monks began wearing at the 9th century made out of linen in order

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17 Ibid.
to protect themselves from the weather conditions. Throughout the years, the Exorason was made in black, and was characteristic of all monks. The Bishops, Priests, and Deacons wear it as a more formal item of clothing to distinguish themselves from the laity.

Kalimafi: A black cylindrical hat worn by many Deacons, Priests and Bishops. It is worn before the Divine Liturgy begins and during other ceremonies and even outside the Church. It is symbol of self-denial from the worldly and devotion to the divine.

Epanokalimafko: A black veil, which completely covers the Kalimafi and falls over the neck and the back. The Epanokalimafko is worn by monastics, and symbolizes the hope of salvation and the ‘helmet’ of faith.

3.3 Military clothing
Social status was an important part of the Byzantine culture. The social status, profession, age, and sex were the main factors for costumes during the Byzantine period. There were two main classes of people at this time:

1. The higher class who consisted of aristocrats, provincial offices (public and military), and clergymen (refer to Appendix: Photographs, Exhibit 5)

2. The lower class citizens who consisted of servants, monks, soldiers, and farmers. (refer to Appendix: Photographs, Exhibit 4)

In the Byzantine army, the Calvary was the highest ranking class. During the seventh and twelfth centuries, they were considered professionals. The uniform consisted of a linen tunic (wool in the wintertime) Tunics normally go down to the ground, but for the more active person, such as the military, they stopped at knee length (refer to Appendix: Photographs, Exhibit 6). Although wool was the most common material, linen (fabric used for the military
tunic) and silk were available for finer, more expensive garments. The tunic was overlaid with leather straps called the pteruges with scale armour wore overtop of it.

Over the shoulders a felt cloak was draped around him. The cloak was for protection from the weather. At night time, the cloak was worn over the gleaming armour to shield themselves from nigh attacks. The military wore boots which came up to their calves, or sandals which were strapped high on the leg. To finish off their uniform they wore a belt tied under the rib cage. This belt represented their rank, just as military have different ranks separating them today\footnote{Oikonomides,. “The Social Structure of the Byzantine Countryside in the First Half of the Xth Century.” Byzantina Symmeikta. Institute for Byzantine Research, Web. 21 Feb 2010. <http://www.byzsym.org/index.php/bz/article/view/808/705>.}


4 Relation and significance for contemporary society or education

“Garments originated by the Byzantines are still worn today by members of the Eastern Orthodox Church, and the influence of the Byzantines can be seen in the robes and headwear of leaders in the Roman Catholic Church, which split from the Eastern Orthodox Church in 1054.”

Today people in our common society dress fairly similar. Specific costumes or uniforms signify our employment, or position, such as the uniform of a police officer, a private school student, or a nun. There are no rules as to what we wear in society, except that clothes are worn.

Throughout our research, we discovered numerous resources and practical examples of how to re-create Byzantine clothing. Possible applications on contemporary education would be to use these accessible resources in the classroom to re-create the Byzantine clothing and re-enact the cultural setting. Students could take on different roles in society; similar to the selective roles we have researched herein our research. Students could research the roles and be actively engaged in the creation process of the clothing for that specific role; from selecting fabrics and textiles, to creating a pattern for a tunic or dalmatic used in during the Byzantium era (refer to Appendix: Photographs, Exhibit 7). By playing the part of different roles and characters in Byzantine society, students would learn the differences and similarities found in the way different cultures dress.

19 “Clothing of the Byzantine Empire.”
5 Conclusion

Throughout the research process, there was a lot of evidence provided to answer the thesis question, “Did the Byzantine clothing identify their role/status in society?” The evidence provided in the research conducted shows that class was a determining factor in which clothes people wore.

People in the military were considered to be of higher class. They were often adorned in wool and armour. Although wool may be worn by lower class, it is considered to be a good fabric which can be wore underneath other clothing. The uniform also was overlaid with leather straps. Like today, the uniform also had a belt which displayed the rank of the person. This also displays the social class of the person. Depending upon if you moved up in the ranks, your social class would change accordingly.

The clerical costumes worn by the Byzantines stemmed from the regular attire but grew distinguished from the rest of the society. There were three main religious leaders of the church: the bishop, the priest, and the deacon. Each wore the same basic under layers as most of the population but had religious vestments that they wore during different segments of the religious ceremonies. Much like the rest of the Byzantine Empire, clerical members were recognized in society and the church by their garments.

There are many differences between the dress of the rich and poor. Although the basic underlays of the outfit were similar (tunic), there were many differences between the classes for the rest of their dress. The higher class dressed up their tunic with many precious jewels, stones and the type of fabric used. The upper class used silks and linen to distinguish from the lower class. The upper class also took great care in the trimmings of their shoes. The lower class
used less expensive fabrics than the upper class. Often they would try to dress up their tunics by adding decorations to the hems and trims of their tunics. The poor were on occasion seen barefoot. There are a lot of differences between the dress of the poor and rich class which assisted in answering our thesis statement.
Appendix: Photographs

Exhibit 1: Byzantine Tunic, 400–500 Byzantine; Said to be from Panopolis, Egypt Linen, undyed, with wool panels in tapestry weave

Exhibit 2: Byzantine dalmatic
Source

Exhibit 3: Byzantine Roman sandal
Source: http://www.roman-empire.net/society/soc-dress-dalmatica.html
Exhibit 4: Typical Byzantine Military Uniform
Source: http://img458.imageshack.us/i/78ko5.jpg/

Exhibit 5: Higher rank Byzantine Military
Source: http://www.anistor.gr/english/enback/ByzantineSoldier.jpg

Exhibit 6: Tenth-Twelfth Military Uniform
Exhibit 7: Basic Patterns for Byzantine dress
Source: Black Tauna Retrieved via URL: <http://blacktauna.tripod.com/byzantine.html>