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## Book review: Roman Dress and the Fabrics of Roman Culture

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**Roman Dress (J.) Edmondson, (A.) Keith (edd.)  
*Roman Dress and the Fabrics of Roman Culture.*  
(Phoenix Supplementary Volume 46.) Pp. xviii +  
370, pls. Toronto, Buffalo and London: University  
of Toronto Press, 2008. Cased, £55, US\\$85. ISBN:  
978-0-8020-9319-6.**

Glenys Davies

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with the important contributions to the analysis of Roman *memoria* by scholars like E. Flaig, K.-J. Hölkesskamp and U. Walter.

F.'s account is very strong on the practical side of memory sanctions and their perception, but the political motives behind the sanctions sometimes remain obscure. In some cases one misses mention of important documents whose discussion would have made F.'s point even stronger, for example the amnesty ritual in December 69 when all senators swore they had not been *delatores* under Nero, thereby preventing accusations covering up the past by consensual silence (Tac. *Hist.* 4.40). Another example is the fate of Cornelius Nigrinus, a highly distinguished general of Domitian and Trajan's rival for the throne in 97. This man was one of the most decorated generals of the Empire, but we learned of him and his story only in 1973. It seems that after he had lost the Imperial race he was forced to withdraw from the political stage and passed into silence. Here is an instance where disgrace actually – almost – became oblivion.

F. rightly states that memory sanctions were basically an elite phenomenon, but she also cites inscriptions in which the names of ordinary people were erased (pp. 10–11). Must we differentiate between memory sanctions concerning emperors on one hand and private citizens or senators like Cornelius Nigrinus on the other? The means of the sanctions are the same; they only seem to differ in scale. But did they differ in intended outcome? F. states that memory sanctions were floating 'between the extremes of oblivion and disgrace, in a dynamic memory space shaped in part by shame and silence', but she also suggests that memory sanctions may be called 'truly successful [when] they presumably remove persons from subsequent record'. So when she claims to have limited her study to cases that actually fell short of their goals or did not set out to achieve complete erasure (12), it seems that for her the main and ultimate purpose of memory sanctions was obliteration. A clearer distinction between the concepts of disgrace and oblivion and their respective motives in either the methodological outline or conclusion might have been helpful.

Altogether, F. has written a very stimulating, readable and well produced book which convincingly shows that memory sanctions not only reflected Roman political culture, but were an important instrument in shaping it.

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## ROMAN DRESS

EDMONDSON (J.), KEITH (A.) (edd.) *Roman Dress and the Fabrics of Roman Culture*. (Phoenix Supplementary Volume 46.) Pp. xviii + 370, pls. Toronto, Buffalo and London: University of Toronto Press, 2008. Cased, £55, US\$85. ISBN: 978-0-8020-9319-6.

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This book is not about Roman dress or fabrics as studied by traditional historians of dress: it has more to do with broader issues of Roman culture. The contributors for the most part are not specialists, and actual clothing plays a rather minimal part in many of the essays. 'Dress' is interpreted widely to include hair and beards, physical self-presentation, cultivation of the body and even weaving as a literary metaphor. At

times the authors' interests in the wider cultural issues cause them to lose sight of the specifics of dress. Indeed the Introduction, with its unnecessarily derogatory reference to 'the rather sterile costume history' approach (p. 1) of previous work in the field, signals that the book is actually about the *significance* of dress in Roman society, but despite brief references to Bourdieu and Barthes the promise of new approaches informed by sociological and anthropological theory is not really fulfilled in the subsequent chapters, most of which present rather traditional literary or historical treatments of the material.

The book is divided into three parts: 'Investments in Masculinity'; 'Fashioning the Female'; and 'The Cultural Poetics of Dress'. In Chapter 1 Edmondson argues that the toga (and the *stola*) were worn as formal, ceremonial and public dress, not as everyday attire, and that for male citizens the requirement to wear the toga at the law courts, in the forum and at the theatre was a form of social control. The second chapter, by Dolansky, examines a specific moment in a Roman male citizen's life when the toga played an important part: the coming-of-age ceremony, in which the boy's *toga praetexta* was exchanged for the adult's plain white toga. As no single complete account exists she puts together various brief and scattered references in literature to create an imaginative reconstruction of the ceremony and its significance, both in Rome and provincial towns. In Chapter 3 the 'double identity' (individual and institutional) of portrait statues is explored: the body (togate, nude, etc.) is usually seen as stereotyped and so devoid of significance, but Koortbojian argues that these bodies are important in communicating the individual's role in society. In Chapter 4, to my mind the most interesting and original in the volume, George presents a corrective to the image of the toga as a garment embodying respectability and status. This is not how it is presented by Martial and Juvenal, who adopt the viewpoint of the client, 'the impoverished little guy in a toga' (p. 98), for whom the toga was a metaphor for oppression. The toga was a cumbersome garment, difficult to wear, hot, easily stained and hard to launder. The client had to wear it on a round of duties (*opera togata*) at the behest of his patron in the hope of getting a free meal or handout: for him the toga was a negative social symbol, an indicator of his subordination and humiliation, and of his patron's control over him. The next chapter (by Carter) considers the stigma attached to the relatively undressed state of the *retiarus*. Compared with other gladiators he wears little armour and no helmet (thus rejecting masculine costume) and does not fight like a Roman soldier; instead he is suspiciously graceful, and appears effeminate and morally corrupt.

Part 2 contains four chapters: Chapter 6 (Olson) on the appearance of Roman girls examines the evidence for various items of clothing which appear to be associated with girlhood (*toga praetexta*, breast band, *uittae* and *lunula*), and the evidence for young women wearing cosmetics and jewellery to attract suitors. O. concludes that there was no specific costume or hairstyle which distinguished girls from adult women. Chapter 7, by Fantham, on covering the head at Rome, although in the 'female' section, is as much about male practice. It focusses on Plutarch's *Roman Questions* 10, 11 and 14, which deal with ritual exceptions to the usual gendered social rules. Shumka's Chapter 8 discusses female paraphernalia represented on funerary monuments: she argues that, despite male references to moral rectitude as the defining quality of the ideal woman, for women themselves the female *ars* (skill) was the cultivation of the physical self via ornament, dress, caring for the complexion, and hairstyling. The *mundus muliebris* was a selection of items such as mirrors, combs, cosmetics containers, parasols and slippers – the 'tools of the woman who crafted her appearance' (p. 183) represented in relief on funerary monuments – while elsewhere

the Roman matron is shown using such items just as Venus does. In Chapter 9 Keith examines 'sartorial elegance and poetic finesse in the Sulpicia corpus', where Sulpicia is interpreted as both desiring elegiac poet and desirable elegiac *puella*. Much of the imagery focusses on luxurious and expensive dress such as Coan silk: although she was a matron from an important aristocratic family, and the setting of the poems is the Matronalia, Sulpicia's dress is more like that of the courtesan, designed to attract male attention.

In the first paper in Part 3 Faber examines the woven garment as literary metaphor by focussing on the image of the peplos in the *Ciris*. He explores motifs of the poet weaving his song into a garment and also the use in panegyric works of the image of the vault of heaven as an embroidered robe. The remaining four essays move to the later Roman period and North Africa. Chapter 11, by Dewar, is on consular robes in the panegyric works of Claudian. In the late fourth century A.D. consuls no longer wore the *toga praetexta* but glorious robes (sometimes called the *trabea*) embroidered with figured scenes, like the one given by the emperor Gratian to Ausonius in A.D. 379. Claudian sees Eutropius' assumption of such robes as an abomination: the consulship was for the alpha males of Roman society, not for a eunuch. Consular robes also feature in the panegyrics for Honorius and Stilicho, where the embroidered imagery conveys subtle political messages. Chapter 12 (Bradley) explores two aspects of Apuleius, who uses costume in the *Metamorphoses* to characterise a range of different social types, and, in his own defence at his trial at Sabratha in A.D. 158/9, countered the charge that he was handsome and eloquent by insisting that his hair was tangled and he was not at all elegant. Bradley shows that Apuleius was attempting to appear less of a sophist (characterised by fastidiousness in sartorial matters and personal habits) and more of a philosopher (unkempt and squalid), masculine rather than effeminate, so that the judge would see him as a like-minded philosopher and orator, and his opponents (who were not necessarily well educated or committed to Roman culture) would not see his eloquence as a threat. In Chapter 13, also set in North Africa, Brennan considers Tertullian's *De Pallio*, which ostensibly urged its audience to give up wearing the toga and return to the more dignified dress of Greek philosophers, the *pallium*, but, it is argued, is more concerned that the men of Carthage should turn to the Christian faith, a change in attitude rather than dress. In the final chapter, 'Prudery and Chic in Late Antique Clothing', Métraux uses a martyrdom at Carthage, where the nakedness of female victims in the arena offended not only the martyrs themselves but also the crowd, to introduce evidence for growing prudery about nudity from the third century onwards. He also discusses the 'Brother sarcophagus' in Naples, with its four images of the deceased, three togate, one wearing the *pallium*, which express different aspects of his life.

While there are several thematic links between chapters, this remains a rather loosely linked set of essays: the book provides some interesting glimpses of aspects of the social significance of dress in the Roman world rather than a sustained and coherent analysis. The essays are varied in the amount of new information or insights that they provide, and, indeed, in the extent to which dress really is central to their argument. The book is illustrated by 57 black-and-white illustrations which relate to seven out of the fourteen chapters, though they tend to receive only passing mention in the text.

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