5 *praetexta* – a dress of young Roman girls (pls. 1.1, 18)

5.1 Introduction

The following chapter is about the *toga praetexta*, the last major traditional 'Roman' garment to be treated in this book.[1] Like the female *toga*, the *praetexta* is a complement to the *stola*, but in a different way. Whereas the female *toga* (B 6) and the *stola* form a social contrast (being worn by opposite social classes), the *praetexta* and the *stola* form a contrast as to the age of the wearer. The girl exchanged the *toga praetexta* for the *stola* when marrying. At least this was so in theory. As we will see, the ornamental garment may have been used much less in everyday life. In its usage and social function, the *praetexta* must be kept clearly distinguished from the female *toga* which is only worn by unfree prostitutes. For this reason, it is called *praetexta* in this chapter in order to mark the difference.

Modern research has long been hampered by omission. In older literature, the *praetexta* is considered a privilege of freeborn boys only. First Wilson (1938) and then Gabelmann (1985) have shown that it was also worn by freeborn girls. This is clear from the archaeological and the literary evidence,[2] and it is surprising that the numerous sources attesting the *praetexta* for girls have been overlooked for so long. It may have to do with the fact that research focused more on male than on the female dress for a long time.

The following chapter collects and discusses all relevant texts in detail. It offers the following narrative, which is partly based on preceding research: The *praetexta*

1 Marquardt/Mau (1886) 124, 545; Blümner (1911) 221, 336; Wilson (1938) 37, 130–131, 137; H. Gabelmann, Römische Kinder in Toga Praetexta, JDAI 100 (1985), 517–522; Goette (1990) 80–82, 158–159; Sebesta (1994) 46–47; Alexandridis (2004) 57; J. Sebesta, The toga praetexta of Roman Children and Praetextate Garments, in: L. Cleland et al. (eds.), The Clothed Body in the Ancient World, Oxford 2005, 113–120; A. Backe-Dahmen, Innocentissima Aetas, Mainz 2006, 82–83; GRD (2007) 151; Olson (2008) 15, 17 and K. Olson, The Appearance of the Young Roman Girl, in: Edmondson/Keith (2008), 142; Croom (2010) 145; L. Caldwell, Roman Girlhood and the Fashioning of Feminity, Cambridge 2015, 57; see also ThLL X 2 s. v. *praetexta* col. 1047.23–1049.72; s. v. *praetextatus* col. 1049.73–1051.67.

2 On the archaeological evidence, cf. p. 688.

https://doi.org/10.1515/9783110711554-021

was a garment reserved for Roman female and male children. It was a sign of their free birth (*ingenuitas*). Girls solemnly put it off shortly before or during the wedding ritual. From the beginning, the *praetexta* belonged to elite dress culture. At the end of the Roman Republic, it was more of an insigne and a ceremonial dress than an everyday garment. The story of its daily use is similar to that of the *stola* and the men's *toga*. Due to legislation on marriage, it probably became a legal privilege under Augustus. The legal questions relating to the *stola* are similar in the case of the *praetexta*. They are discussed in detail in chapter B 4.[3] This chapter will only briefly touch upon them because there is also less evidence.

5.2 Appearance

The appearance of the girl's *praetexta* is rarely described in text, but it is well documented in archaeological evidence (**pls. 1.1, 18**).[4] Its historical development likely followed that of the normal *toga*.[5] This means that the child's *praetexta* would have become larger in Imperial times. It had a purple border, which was adapted from the *toga praetexta* of magistrates, and it was a very festive and expensive cloak (nothing to be worn when playing in the fields). That the border was its most important characteristic is already implied in the garment's name *toga praetexta* (= a *toga* with a woven border).[6]

The only evidence for the colour of the border is found in Livy.[7] Dealing with the events of the year 195 BCE, Livy inserts a fictitious debate about the *lex Oppia*, a luxury law.[8] The consul Valerius Flaccus is arguing for revoking the prohibition of purple. His argumentation includes a long rhetorical question:

> Liv. 34.7.2
> *purpura viri utemur, praetextati in magistratibus, in sacerdotiis, liberi nostri praetextis purpura togis utentur; magistratibus in coloniis municipiisque … togae praetextae habendae ius permittemus, nec id ut vivi solum habeant* [*tantum*] *insigne sed etiam ut cum eo crementur mortui: feminis dumtaxat purpurae usu interdicemus?*
>
> Will we men use purple wearing the *praetexta* as officials and priests? Will our children wear a *toga praetexta* with purple borders? Will we give the right (*ius*) to wear the *praetexta* to officials in colonies and communities … so that they have this insigne not only during their lifetime, but also that they are burnt in it when dead, and at the same time forbid the women alone to use purple?

3 Cf. especially pp. 322–326.
4 Goette (1990) 80–82, 158–159.
5 On its appearance, cf. Archaeological evidence p. 688.
6 On the grammar, cf. B 4 p. 308.
7 Gabelmann (n. 1) 519–521.
8 Cf. A 2 p. 53; A 4 p. 88.

The text tells us more about Livy's literary art than about historical facts. It reflects Augustan thought. It is not an eyewitness account about dress culture of the Middle Roman Republic, but about that during the Imperial period. As usual, the masculine plural *liberi* (= children) includes girls as well as boys. Adult women (*feminae*) are singled out afterwards as the only group (*dumtaxat*) not allowed to wear purple. Livy stresses the significance of the purple border by explicitly drawing attention to it. He also augments the importance of the children's *praetexta* by placing it next to the identical attire of magistrates. Livy uses the term *insigne* here. In a strict sense, the term only pertains to the *praetexta* of the magistrates, but it 'rubs off' on the children's *praetexta* as well, which may have had a similar function in the Augustan period.

5.3 *Ornamentum ingenuitatis* – the *praetexta*, a sign of free birth

By the end of the Roman Republic, the *praetexta* of the Roman girl had become more of an insigne than a garment worn in everyday life (see below). This period gives us the first primary evidence on the garment. Cicero's *Speeches against Verres* (70 BCE) are an invective in which Cicero brands Verres for alleged assaults against Roman citizens. Verres is even maltreating innocent Roman girls:

> Cic. Verr. 2.1.113
> *eripies igitur pupillae togam praetextam, detrahes ornamenta non solum fortunae sed etiam ingenuitatis?*
>
> Will you snatch away the *praetexta* from your ward? Will you strip her of the insigne not only of her social position but also of her free birth (*ingenuitas*)?

Cicero is talking about the last will and testament of the Roman citizen Annius, who had wanted to bequeath his property to his daughter. In his function as Roman praetor, Verres had decided against the daughter in a law case. For this, he is rebuked by Cicero, who makes Verres' decision look a bit like the rape of an innocent Roman girl. Cicero uses the *praetexta* as a symbol to mark the social as well as the legal position of Annius' daughter. The garment indicates that she came from a wealthy family (*fortuna*) and that her civil status was that of a freeborn (*ingenua*) Roman citizen. She possessed, as Cicero stresses, *ingenuitas*. The *praetexta* served as the social *insigne* of this status.

5.4 Childhood and marriage – the *praetexta* and the wedding ritual

The *praetexta* was an expensive ornamental cloak. It seems unlikely that it was ever used very much by children in daily life. It was probably mainly used on festive occasions. The most important (and only) situation we hear of is at weddings. The *praetexta* (the insigne of the unmarried girl) performed its function as the counter-part of the

stola (the insigne of a married Roman woman). In theory, the *stola* was put on after the *praetexta* had been taken off. A stereotyped version of this dress change is found in an elegy of Propertius about the deceased Cornelia. She was a close member of the imperial household and died in the year 16 BCE.[9] In the relevant verses, Cornelia herself is reminiscing about the time of her marriage:[10]

> Prop. 4.11.13
> *mox, ubi iam facibus cessit praetexta maritis,*
> *uinxit et acceptas altera uitta comas*
>
> then, as soon as the *toga praetexta* had given way to the marriage torches, and the second *vitta* had bound and tied her hair

The different garments indicate Cornelia's different civil statuses. Through her marriage (*faces*), she is transformed from Roman girl to Roman matron. She passes from the *patria potestas* to the *potestas* of her husband (*maritus*). Her change of status is expressed by the change of clothes: The *praetexta* is replaced by the *stola* and the *vitta*. Propertius' description of the dress change is probably more than a mere poetic metaphor. It may reflect a dress ritual that took place shortly before or at the beginning of the proper wedding ritual.

There seem to be traces of the role of *praetexta* in Roman weddings in a remark of Festus (Verrius). On the expression *praetextatus sermo* (youthful, unseemly speech), his dictionary offers the following explanations:

> Festus pp. 282.30–284.2 L.
> *praetextatum sermonem quidam putant dici, quod praetextatis nefas sit obsceno verbo uti, alii quod nubentibus depositis praetextis a multitudine puerorum obscena clamentur.*
>
> Some think that the *sermo praetextatus* takes its name from the fact that people in *praetexta* are not allowed to use obscene words. Others think it is because when brides have taken off their *praetexta*, the crowd of boys shouts obscene words.

The contents of Festus' dictionary go back to Augustan times.[11] It tells us nothing about the time of Republic, much less Roman prehistory. It is not of interest here which of the two linguistic explanations is correct (maybe it is neither of them). However, the second one clearly refers to some existing wedding ritual in which the bride took off her *praetexta*. Dress, dress change, and difference of dress will have played a role in wedding ritual in any case. There were *pueri* and *virgines* present at the ceremony,

9 On this poem, cf. also B 4 pp. 279–281; B 16 p.478; the poem plays an important role as regards the *stola* and *vitta*.

10 Gabelmann (n. 1) 518–519.

11 On Festus and Verrius, cf. Introduction D p. 588; D 5 pp. 589–647.

certainly dressed in *togae praetextae*. The bride was led, as Catullus tells us in a famous marriage poem, by a *puer praetextatus*.[12] On a symbolic level, the contrast between the bride—now wearing a red *flammeum* (scarf) (B 18), later a *stola* (B 4)—and unmarried girls still wearing *praetexta* will have been quite important for the symbolism used in the rite of passage. The accompanying *praetextati* and *praetextatae* represented the social group the bride left when entering the bridal chamber; the *flammeum* and later the *stola* represented the new status she took on by crossing the literal threshold.

Another third oblique hint at the ceremonial function of the *praetexta* may be found in a remark of the Late Antique author Arnobius (3rd to 4th century CE). It is possible that the remark actually goes back further to Varro. Arnobius says that the discarded *praetexta* was offered to the statue of Fortuna Virginalis:

> Arnob. ad gentes 2.67
> *puellarum togulas Fortunam defertis ad Virginalem?*
> Do you bring the little *togae* of the girls to the Fortuna Virginalis?

In this passage, Arnobius draws on the Antique grammarian tradition, as he does elsewhere. The subject matter (wedding ritual and dress offering[13]) and the mention of the temple of Fortuna[14] recall Varro's treatise *De vita populi Romani*, in which Varro discusses these matters. Arnobius' words may at least indirectly go back to him. We thus find ourselves in Roman prehistory where (pious) young girls went to the temple of Fortuna and made a dress offering. The lore about good old Roman times is probably nothing more than a nostalgic invention, although it may contain a grain of truth. The *praetexta* may have been removed immediately before the wedding and then deposited in some temple.

12 Cat. 61.182; cf. also Festus p. 282.22–24.

13 Varro Men. (Sequeulixes) 463: *suspendit Laribus manias mollis pilas* || *reticula ac strophia* [she hung up figurines, soft balls, hairnets, and hair circlets on the *lares*]; cf. A 9 p. 193; B 15 p. 472.

14 Varro F 444 Salvadore (= Plin. NH 8.194): *lanam in colu et fuso Tanaquilis, quae eadem Gaia Caecilia vocata est, in templo Sancus durasse prodente se auctor est M. Varro factamque ab ea togam regiam undulatam in aede Fortunae, qua Ser. Tullius fuerat usus. … ea prima texuit rectam tunicam, quales cum toga pura tirones induuntur novaeque nuptae.* [Varro himself witnesses that wool on the distaff and spindle of Tanaquil, also called Gaia Caecilia, was preserved in the Temple of Sancus until his own times, and that the royal *tunica undulata* in the temple of Fortuna, used by Servius Tullius, was made from it. … Tanaquil was (also) the first woman to weave the *tunica recta* put on by young men together with the *toga pura* and by new brides]; cf. C 1 p. 570 and Gabelmann (n. 1) 520.

5.5 History

5.5.1 The time of the Roman Republic

In broad outlines, the history of the *praetexta* is very similar to that of the *stola*. Both 'traditional' Roman garments shared the same fate in Imperial times. For earlier times, we must rely on cultural inference since Pre-Classical Latin literature does not mention the children's *praetexta*. The fact that it had a purple ornament and was used as an insigne later on suggests that it was an element of Etruscan costume (the Etruscans were the ruling class in Rome for some time). The ornament would have then been extended to the entire (wealthy) population.[15] However, this is only a cultural hypothesis based on the nature of the garment and on analogy with the male *toga* (and *stola*). Gabelmann assumes that the use of the *praetexta* originally applied only to boys and was extended to girls only afterwards,[16] but there is no reason why the elite should have discriminated against its female offspring in this manner.

In the time of the Roman Republic, children wore the *praetexta* as a social custom in order to show both family wealth and free birth (*ingenuitas*). Hence the history of the *praetexta* is—like that of the *stola*—connected with the history of Roman citizenship and its expansion. We should keep this fluctuation in mind when talking about those who wore the *praetexta*. The most important text is a complicated passage in Macrobius' *Saturnalia* (see below).[17] It tells us that the status of *ingenuitas* was already given to the offspring of mixed marriages—unions between a Roman citizen and a freedwoman (*liberta*)—during the Second Punic War (218–201 BCE). The children of freedmen were probably only granted full civil rights after the Social War (91–88 BCE). At the same time, Roman citizenship was also granted to all inhabitants of Italy up to the Po valley. For this reason, the social group that could, in theory, wear the *praetexta* was expanded up until the first century BCE. At the same time, there was an increase in the number of Roman citizens who had no emotional connection whatsoever with traditional Roman dress. It may be partly for this reason that the traditional Roman garments went out of fashion in this century. Greek influence on Roman culture had always been strong, and there is reason to think that this was also the case with clothes. Greek culture offered several dress alternatives which were more attractive than what was perceived as quaint Roman tradition.

We have literary evidence that the *toga* and the *stola* (B 4) were displaced by Greek fashion, and there is some evidence for this as regards the *praetexta* as well. It is found in a fragment of Varro's treatise *Catus* (or *Cato*) *de liberis educandis* (Catus/o on the upbringing of children). The work belongs to a literary genre Varro himself called *Logistoricus*. It was a philosophical dialogue, similar to those of Cicero, in which

15 Olson (2008) 15 regards the *praetexta* as an apotropaic sign.

16 Gabelmann (n. 1) 520–521.

17 For a full discussion, cf. also B 4 pp. 322–326.

famous historical Romans appear as interlocutors. If the younger Cato (95–46 BCE) was the main character, the *Logistoricus* probably dates to after his death. The text of the short fragment, which is adduced by Nonius, is discussed in detail in chapter A 9.[18] The fragment is of great cultural and historical importance because it shows how little the *praetexta* was used in everyday life:

> Varro F 32 Riese
> *ut puellae habeant potius in vestitu chlanidas, encombomata ac peronatidas quam togas.*
>
> so that the girls wear *chlanides*, *encombomata*, and *peronatides* rather than *togae* for dress.

The fragment is partly corrupt and has to be emended, but the general meaning of the statement is clear. The speaker is complaining that young Roman girls prefer various Greek garments (*potius*) to the Roman *toga praetexta*. It fits the figure of Cato, who upheld Roman tradition, and it reflects Varro's criticism of the fashion of his time. It shows that Greek fashion prevailed in Rome by the end of the Roman Republic and that the girl's *praetexta* was a traditional insigne (for those who wanted to wear it) rather than a garment in everyday use.

5.5.2 The Imperial period

In the time of the Roman Republic, wearing the *praetexta* was a social practice. This is still shown by our first eyewitness account in Cicero (see above). The tradition was probably strengthened by the fact that the *praetexta* was worn by a small group of the population (those who could afford it and who wanted to appear as 'real' Romans) and then only on festive occasions. Non-citizens and the Roman underclass were unlikely to dress their daughters in a *praetexta*, if only because of the cost and the lack of functionality. Chapter B 4 argues that the social custom of the *stola* was transformed into a legal privilege under Augustus and that there was a *ius stolae* connected in some way with the *leges Iuliae* and a new legal definition of *matrimonium*.[19] We may therefore ask whether something similar happened with the *praetexta* as well. Did it also become an exclusive dress privilege for young female and male Roman citizens? There may indeed be some evidence for this hypothesis. It is found in the passage in Macrobius already referred to above. Like Festus' dictionary, the contents of the *Saturnalia* go back to Verrius Flaccus, an important intellectual in Augustan times and the first chief librarian of Augustus' new public library on the Palatine hill. Verrius was a freedman himself. It is not surprising that he deals with the civil status of this social group and

18 Cf. A 9 pp. 195–199.
19 Cf. B 4 pp. 334–340.

(most importantly) their offspring (*filii*). This time we will not focus on *what* Verrius is telling us, but on *how* he is describing his group's new-won status:

> Macrob. 1.6.13
> *sed postea libertinorum quoque filiis praetexta concessa est ex causa tali … ex quo concessum ut libertinorum quoque filii, qui ex iusta dumtaxat matrefamilias nati fuissent, togam praetextam et lorum in collo pro bullae decore gestarent.*
>
> But later the *toga praetexta* was also granted to the sons of freedmen for the following reason … As a result, it was allowed that sons of freedmen, provided they were born by a regular wife, also wore the *toga praetexta* and a leather necklet serving as an amulet (*bulla*).

It is uncertain whether Verrius (Macrobius) is only referring to freedmen's sons or to their daughters as well. The masculine plural *filii* or *liberi* (see above) can include both genders. Since the *bulla* is not attested with girls, one might opt for the first solution. However, the question of the exact translation of *filii* is not important here because the same civil status will have equally pertained to both genders, male and female, and the passages from Propertius and Arnobius demonstrate beyond a doubt that girls also wore the *praetexta*. All legal and social privileges for boys would thus have applied to them as well. More important than the interpretation of *filii* is the way in which Verrius describes the entire process. For he says that wearing the *praetexta* and the *bulla* was *granted* (*concessum*) to the children of freedmen. This expression suggests that the articles of clothing were legal privileges conferred onto the new Roman citizens and that they symbolized *ingenuitas*, the civil status of a freeborn citizen. Verrius' words hence convey the notion that the *praetexta* was stipulated *by law* and automatically came with citizenship. It thus seems to have been preconditioned by citizenship, being a *legal* dress privilege of citizens.

As always, Verrius' explanations have to be interpreted with much caution. They are certainly anachronistic and do not allow us to make a determination on the Roman laws and customs before Augustus. Verrius is very likely engaging in revisionist history and imperial 'propaganda' on behalf of his patron, Augustus. It seems that he is attempting to legitimize new legal provisions by projecting them back into Roman history. As mentioned above, the use of the *praetexta* during the Republic was probably constrained by social custom and cost. The legal privilege of the children of Roman citizens suggested here by the use of *concessum* would have only come into effect through Augustan marriage laws and civil rights provisions (18 BCE).

This concludes all available literary evidence of the Roman female *praetexta*. The sources cluster in Late Republican and in Augustan times. This roughly squares with the archaeological evidence, in which girls in *praetexta* appear only until Julio-Claudian times (**pls. 1.1, 18**).[20] In contrast to the boy's *praetexta*, which is well attested among

20 Cf. Archaeological Evidence p. 689.

Imperial authors until Tacitus, sources are few as regards the female variant. The lack of literary evidence may be due to the fact that there were fewer occasions to speak about the female garment, given that Roman girls were less involved in public life. The scarcity may, however, also reflect a social reality. Considering the Roman patriarchal society, it is easier to imagine a *cliens* clad (exceptionally) in *toga* leading his *puer praetextatus* to his patron than him doing so with his daughter. This would also explain why the *praetexta* of girls is only referred to once after Augustan times and only in a literary genre that is void of historical life, namely in a declamation of Pseudo-Quintilian (ca. 2nd century CE).[21] In a fictive case, a father accuses his son of having torn up the *praetexta* of a virgin. The short sentence sheds no light on the *praetexta* itself or its social or legal use. The passage is pure literary fiction taking up a literary motif already found in Cicero: the garment as a symbol of virginity.[22] There is no historical information to be gained from this.

Since the evidence for the *praetexta* in the first and second centuries CE is so poor, we have to rely on historical analogy. Like the *stola* (and the male *toga*), the *praetexta* was part of traditional Roman elite culture. Hence, it may have fallen out of use during the first century CE when the other traditional garments also started to disappear. Like its better known adult counter-parts, the *praetexta* became at best a pictorial symbol of a bygone era of 'Romanness.' This is all the silence of our sources may teach us.

21 Ps.-Quint. decl. 349: *viriginis praetextam scidisti* [you have torn the *praetexta* of a virgin].

22 See above p. 357. It is notable that, in contrast to the *stola*, the author does not connect the *praetexta* with the concept of sacrosanctity; cf. on this concept B 4 p. 340.