

10 *synthesis* – a cosmopolitan dinner dress

Around the year 85 CE, Martial composed his *Apophoreta* ('Presents to take away'), a book of 223 two-line epigrams, each pretending to be written on greater and smaller gifts made on the occasion of the Saturnalia. About forty of these poems concern garments, textiles, or different types of wool. Starting from the Roman *toga*, the list reads like a catalogue of an international (though somewhat disorderly) warehouse company selling expensive and cheap products coming from all over the Roman Mediterranean world: south and north Italy, Illyria, Greece, Lebanon, Egypt, Libya, southern Spain, and Gaul. Martial obviously does this on purpose, wanting to show the expansion of the *imperium Romanum*. As to dress, however, we see the diffusion of different foreign cultures and the cosmopolitan character that Roman dress had taken on, or—as Roman traditionalists would have said—the deplorable extent to which Roman dress had dissolved into a Mediterranean *koine* at the beginning of the second century CE, shortly before Emperor Hadrian wiped out the last remnant of traditional female Roman dress culture—the *stola*—on the imperial monuments. All of the garments listed by Martial are Roman dress, but they would hardly be called Roman if we look at their provenience.

The last major female garment treated in this book is among the garments mentioned by Martial. It is called—suitable for this chapter—a *synthesis* (combination).¹ It is probably a Greek invention. Its name is also found in many papyri in Roman Egypt, showing that it was also worn in that part of the Roman Empire. However, it comes only last in a long line. Roman fashion at this time is 'international' fashion.

10.1 Appearance and social use

The Greek loanword *synthesis* primarily means set or combination. It can also be used in this sense for other objects.² The name suggests that a *synthesis* consisted of more than one garment. As a *vestis cenatoria* (see below), it initially comprised at least one *tunica* as a basis. The *tunica* was probably usually combined with a scarf (*palliolum*) (B 17).³ This is shown by legal advice given by the jurist Scaevola (2nd century CE). It concerns a testament, the question being whether the value of *syntheseis* was allowed to be impaired by taking single garments from them:

¹ Becker/Göll I (1880) 15–16; Marquardt/Mau (1886) 322, 570–571; Blümner (1911) 219–220; RE 4.2 A (1932) s.v. *Synthesis*, col. 1459–1461 (E. Schuppe); Potthoff (1992) 191–192; Goldman (1994) 235; Croom (2000) 42–43; GRD (2007) 85; Olson (2008) 51.

² Stat. silv. 4.9.44; Mart. 4.46.15.

³ Croom (2000) 42.

Digest. 34.2.38⁴

“Semproniae ... tunicas tres cum palliolis quae elegerit dari volo”: quaero an ex universa veste, id est an ex synthesisi tunicas singulas et palliola Sempronia eligere possit. respondit, si essent tunicae singulares cum palliolis relictas, ex his dumtaxat eligi posse: quod si non est, heredem vel tunicas et palliola tres ex synthesisi praestaturum vel veram aestimationem earum.

“I want Sempronia ... to be given three tunics including *palliola* of her own choice.” I ask whether Sempronia can choose the individual tunics and *palliola* from *all* clothing, i.e. whether she also can choose from the *syntheseis*. He replied: If single tunics and *palliola* are left, she can of course choose from them, but if not, the heir must provide the three tunics and *palliola* from the *syntheseis*, or else their real estimated value.

The term *synthesis* always designates the individual dress combination and not a set of equal garments for several persons. The singular *ex synthesisi* in the passage is to be understood as a collective singular (= *ex synthesibus*) or to be corrected to the plural.⁵ The question and Scaevola’s answer show that a *synthesis* usually consisted of a *tunica* and *palliolum*.⁶ One of the essential characteristics of the garment was that it had artificial colours. Martial, for example, tells us of a rich man’s wardrobe containing many coloured *syntheseis*. He compares the collection to a flowery meadow in spring:

Mart. 2.46.1–4

florida per uarios ut pingitur Hybla colores,

...

sic micat innumeris arcu la synthesibus

As flowery mount Hybla is adorned with various colours ... so your chest flashes with countless *syntheseis*.

In Martial, we also hear of a green *synthesis*; in the papyrus referred to above, we find purple, crimson, red, pink, white garments, and even one with stripes.⁷ All our sources indicate that a *synthesis* was elegant informal clothing, worn almost exclusively at banquets.

It is hence contrasted with the official *toga* used for government and legal business:⁸

⁴ *tres* Radicke: *set* codd.: *sex* Mommsen.

⁵ Against Marquardt/Mau (1886) 571; Blümner (1911) 219.

⁶ It was probably not the only combination. This is suggested by a papyrus from Egypt in which various *syntheseis* are described, PHamb. 10. In this, we hear of a *synthesis* that included a belt and a cloak (*pallium*) (ἐν αἷς ἃ μετὰ ὑποζώνης καὶ παλλίου). On the text, cf. B 11 p. 421.

⁷ PHamb. 10 cf. B 11 pp. 420–424; Mart. 10.29.4: *prasina ... synthesis* [a green *synthesis*]; POxy. 1153.22–23: τῆς γινομέ(νης) συνθέσεως πρόσχρωμον [a colour sample of the *synthesis* which is about to be manufactured].

⁸ Mart. 14.142.

Mart. 14.142

synthesis

*dum toga per quinas gaudet requiescere luces,
hos poteris cultus sumere iure tuo*

synthesis: While the *toga* is glad to rest for five days, you can put on this garment with good conscience.

In its function as private dinner dress, it features prominently as the first word in Martial's *Apophoreta* pertaining to the celebration of Saturnalia:⁹ *synthesibus dum gaudet eques dominusque senator* (while the knights and the ruling senators rejoice in *syntheseis*). Since Martial connects his epigrams with banquets and their private atmosphere, it is no surprise that the *synthesis* is often mentioned by him. In a scoptic epigram, he mocks someone for having changed his *synthesis* during the banquet eleven times because he was afraid of sweating through it.¹⁰ For this reason, wearing it outside and in public was probably thought improper behaviour. It was at least considered unseemly for the emperor Nero to show himself in public dressed in one.¹¹

The *synthesis* was worn by both genders. Most testimonies from literature concern men, but Martial also speaks of a woman's *synthesis* in one place:

Mart. 10.29.1–4

*quam mihi mittebas Saturni tempore lancem,
misisti dominae, Sextiliane, tuae;
et quam donabas dictis a Marte Kalendis,
de nostra prasina est synthesis empta toga.*

The dish you used to send me at the Saturnalia, Sextilianus, you sent to your mistress. And the green *synthesis* you gave her on the Kalends of March was bought out of my *toga*.

The *synthesis* is an elegant, but otherwise perfectly normal female clothing. Again, the name should not mislead us to think that it was a unisex dress. There were different male and female versions of it to be specified if necessary. Accordingly, a σύνθεσις γυναικεία

⁹ Mart. 14.1.1.

¹⁰ Mart. 5.79.1–2: *undecies una surrexti, Zoile, cena, || et mutata tibi est synthesis undecies* [eleven times, Zoilus, you rose from table during one single dinner, and eleven times you changed your *synthesis*]; cf. also Mart. 2.46.1–4, 4.66.1–4: *egisti uitam semper, Line, municipalem, || qua nihil omnino uilius esse potest. || Idibus et raris togula est excussa Kalendis, || duxit et aestates synthesis una decem* [Linus, you have always led the life of an inhabitant of a small city, which is cheaper than all others. On the Ides and the Kalends, you have sometimes shaken out your *toga*, and one *synthesis* lasted for ten summers]; 10.29.4.

¹¹ Suet. Nero 51: *plerumque synthesinam indutus ligato circum collum sudario in publicum sine cinctu et discalciatus* [very often, he (sc. Nero) appeared in public dressed in a *tunica synthesina* and with a *sudarium* bound around his neck, without belt and without shoes].

(female *synthesis*) is distinguished from a σύνθεις παιδική (children's *synthesis*) in the formal list of the papyrus mentioned above.

10.2 History

The *synthesis* is the last garment to appear in Latin Classical literature. It is first attested in Martial.¹² It is also found in the inscription of the Arval brotherhood¹³ and in Greek papyri dating to the first or second century CE.¹⁴ All in all, the evidence indicates that the term and the associated custom of combining several garments only emerged in the second half of the first century CE, establishing a new fashion. The Greek loanword may show that it originated in the Hellenized east. If we take the Egyptian papyri as a basis, many of the women we see on the mummy portraits could be wearing garments called *synthesis* in Antiquity. The *synthesis* was a cosmopolitan garment in an 'international' world, at least for those who could afford this kind of luxury. Its name and composition mirror the syncretic 'Roman' culture produced through military expansion.

¹² Mart. 2.46.1–4, 4.66.1–4, 5.79.1–4, 10.29.4, 14.1.1, 14.14.2.

¹³ CIL 6.2068.8 (59.2.8 Scheid; 91 CE): *cum sintesibus epulati sunt* [they have dined in *synthesis*].

¹⁴ LSJ s.v. σύνθεις IV; in addition, cf. PMert. 13.12, 71.12; PMich. 465.34, 603.15; PMil. 248.4; POxy. 3060.3; SB XVI 12314.71; PWisc. 73.21.