

20 *cingillum, zona* – belt (pl. 26)

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In ancient Rome, the belt was part of the everyday female costume. It was standard with the *tunica*, and it was worn with the *stola*. In general, there were two different kinds of belts: the ‘ordinary’ belt and the *strophium* (B 21). The history of the female belt is neither eventful, nor are we able to see whether its usage changed. The belt appears in our texts with the beginning of Latin literature, and it is also found in the last primary sources considered in this book.¹ Modern research on terminology is quasi non-existent. In most articles, the names for everyday belts even drop out completely. Instead, the focus is on ancient grammarians’ lore on the bridal belt. The following remarks try to correct this lop-sided view.

20.1 Terminology and appearance

In neutral language, Latin had two terms for a woman’s belt: *cingillum* and *zona*. In contrast, a man’s belt was called a *cinctus*.² The words *cinctus* and *cingillum* derive from the Latin verb *cingere* (to gird, belt). The word *zona* (ζώνη) is a Greek loanword, which derives from the verb ζώννυμι (to gird belt).³ Both words for the female belt have no apparent difference in meaning. The form *cingillum* is the diminutive of *cingulum*. As a diminutive, it is metrically unwieldy and looks trivial. It then comes as no surprise that *cingillum* is mainly used in prose⁴ and that poets prefer *zona* (See below). In everyday language, the usage may have been different.⁵ In literary language and epic bombast, an innocent bridal *cingillum* can even become a *balteus*.⁶ Mythical heroines, goddesses, and Amazons usually wear a *cingulum* and a *balteus*.⁷ But that is not everyday life. As

¹ Plaut. Aul. 516; Digest. (Ulpian) 34.2.23.2.

² Varro LL 5.114: *cinctus et cingillum a cingendo, alterum viris, alterum mulieribus attributum* [*cinctus* and *cingillum* derive from *cingere*. The one is assigned to the men, the other to the women]. *cingillum* has correctly been restored by Laetus (1471) out of the transmitted *cingulum*, in accordance with the usage of both words.

³ Cf. LSJ s.v. ζώνη (with N) is to be kept apart from ζώνμα (with M). The latter word designates no belt, but an underwear.

⁴ Varro Men. 187 (see n. 35); cf. A 9 p. 187; LL 5.114; Festus (Verrius) p. 55.13–18 L. (see n. 36); Petron. 67.4 (see n. 10).

⁵ *Cingillum* is in any case no word that designates an exceptional belt or an exceptional act, against OLD.

⁶ Lucan. 2.362 (see n. 11); cf. B 1 p. 272.

⁷ ThLL 3. s.v. *cingulum* col. 1068.6–1069.50; Verg. Aen. 1.492, 5.313, 12.942; against GRD (2007) 35.

to the material, our evidence is slim. Like a man's belt, a woman's belt will usually have consisted of leather or a strong textile.⁸ Presumably, a belt was broader and flatter than the *strophium* (B 21). It could serve as an ornament, like the other accessories. In Petronius, Fortunata features a mamba-green (*galbinus*) belt;⁹ in Lucan, an upper-class bridal belt is decorated with precious stones (*gemmae*).¹⁰ Furies can also use snakes as belts!¹¹ The 'regular' position of a woman's belt was perhaps somewhat lower than that of the *strophium*. A belt was worn on or above the hips, whereas a *strophium* was worn around the waist or under the bust. The belt thus bisected the body much like a modern one. Ovid tells us that a *zona* would have stopped the wild undressing of his lover:

Ovid. Am. 1.747–48

*aut tunicam <a> summa diducere turpiter ora
ad mediam (mediae zona tulisset opem)?*

(Was it not enough) to pull apart her *tunica* from the upper border to its middle in order to shame her? The girdle would have supported the middle part of it.

Corinna's *zona* must have been of a strong material because it prevents her *tunica* (*chiton*) from being torn further down by her lover. The belt's position on the belly (*venter*) is also stressed by Martial in an *Apophoretum*, where he remarks that the *zona* becomes short on a woman's belly when she is pregnant.¹² In general, however, the position of the belt could vary according to individual preference. It could be worn somewhat higher or, if loosened, also lower on the hips, as we see on statues.

20.2 Social usage

Every 'normal' girl and woman used a belt, except for prostitutes, who wore a loose *toga* as their working clothes (B 6). The significance of the belt derived less from what it looked like and more from how it was worn. In some cases, it would even disappear under the folds of the garment. The use of belts was more important in Antiquity than it is for us since garments were minimally tailored and—in comparison to modern

⁸ Ovid. Met. 10.379.

⁹ Petron. 67.4 (*galbinum cingillum*).

¹⁰ Lucan. 2.362: *balteus aut fluxos gemmis astrinxit amictus* [or a belt with gemstones fastened the flowing robe].

¹¹ Ennius scen. 30.

¹² Mart. 14.151: *zona: longa satis nunc sum; dulci sed pondere venter || si tumeat, fiam tunc tibi zona brevis*. [girdle: now I am long enough. But if your belly should swell with a sweet burden, I will then be a too short girdle for you]. For the connection of the belt and pregnancy in epigrams, cf. also Anth. Pal. 6.201, 202.

ones—did not cling closely to the body. For this reason, belts and cords were the only means of fixing the *tunica* (or *stola*) in place, regulating its length, and draping it. Given the looseness of Roman garments, affixing the garments was the only means of accentuating the feminine shape of the body and delineating the breasts, waist, and hips. Belting could create folds to make a garment more interesting and to give a vertical structure to what otherwise would have been a piece of even and plain cloth. Belting could also structure a dress horizontally, creating a double fold—a *sinus*—over a woman's chest. Although the belt might be ornamental on its own, the act of girding was more important than the girdle. In consequence, we hear far more about the act of belting than about the belt itself in ancient literature.

The Latin language describes the manifold usage of the belt with the various composites of the verb *cingere* (to gird).¹³ You could take on a belt (*cingere* or *incingere*)¹⁴ and affix your garment with a belt at the front (*praecingere*);¹⁵ you could 'undergird' (*succingere*) and thus gather up your dress with it.¹⁶ You could untighten (*recingere*)¹⁷ or loosen (*solvere*) your belt while still leaving it on, and you could omit it completely (*discingere*).¹⁸ How you used your belt and drape depended on how you wanted to appear, what you wanted to do, and what situation you were in. Usually, you put it on during the day; you affixed it when you walked around in public; you gathered your dress with it to get your *tunica* out of the way (for example, when you wanted to run or work); you loosened it in a private situation when you were indoors and when you were at rest. The way a belt was worn thus showed what an individual was up to. Sometimes the way a belt was worn caused offence because it was contrary to social norms. The following tries to describe some of the implicit social rules and upper-class standards that are not necessarily congruent with actual social behaviour.

According to such rules and standards, a Roman woman should not appear *succincta* in public. Shortening the *tunica* in this way was something only for men. In the case of women, it was regarded as menial¹⁹ and tasteless. It indicated that the woman had to work and that she did not belong to the leisure class. What is worse for moralists, being *succincta* makes the woman's thighs or her undertunic (*subucula*) appear. In Apuleius, the maidservant Photis, whose garment is girded a bit higher (*altius succincta*), seems to deliberately use this for erotic effect. In Petronius, it is one of the multiple mistakes committed by Fortunata. Coming (purportedly) from the kitchen, she puts her valuable undertunic and afterwards even her legs on show by

¹³ Cf., for example, Ovid. *fasti* 2.320.

¹⁴ Ovid. *epist.* 9.66.

¹⁵ ThLL X 2 s.v. *praecingo* col. 435.63–438.80; OLD s.v. *praecingo* and, for example, Cic. *Clod.* F 23; cf. A 10 p. 203; Hor. *sat.* 1.5.6, 2.8.70; Digest. (Ulpian) 34.2.23.2.

¹⁶ OLD s.v. *succingo* and *succinctus*.

¹⁷ OLD s.v. *recingere*.

¹⁸ OLD s.v. *discinctus*.

¹⁹ Ovid. *Met.* 8.660; Hor. *sat.* 2.6.107; Mart. 7.35.1; Apul. *Met.* 2.7, cf. B 1 pp. 271, 276.

appearing *succincta*.²⁰ But there may also be another connotation with being *succincta*: The shortened tunic is also men's dress. Juvenal mocks an active homosexual female intellectual by telling her to behave like a man and gird up her dress.²¹ In Graeco-Roman mythology, things are different. Diana, for example, usually appears in a short tunic (*chiton*) that is gathered up by means of a belt while hunting or fighting.²² In contrast, social norms dictated that well-behaved Roman women should not 'gird up her loins.'

The same rule seems to apply when a woman appears in public in a tunic with a loose belt. In this case, the belt sits very low on the hips or hangs down. The garment therefore expands and flows down to the ground. This type of drapery indicates leisure (*otium*) and is an emblem of the Graces and other goddesses. In Horace, for example, the Graces have loose girdles (*zonae solutae*);²³ Seneca, on the other hand, mocks that silly poets will even show the Graces in formal dress (*praecinctae*).²⁴ In everyday life, however, men and women had to use their belt on their tunics properly if they did not want to incur criticism (at least outside of the informal situation of a banquet). Roman society was perhaps somewhat more severe with (upper-class) men. As Suetonius reports, Sulla mocked Julius Caesar as a spoiled (passive homosexual) dandy because of his loose tunic (*male praecinctum puerum*);²⁵ Seneca criticizes the Epicurean Maecenas for appearing *discinctus* in public.²⁶ As to women, most of them whom we see in a loose *tunica* or with a missing belt are portrayed in one of two ways: practising magic rites²⁷ or running about disheveled (either because she just got out of bed, or she is in a panic, or both). The trope is often exploited for erotic effect. In Catullus, for example, Ariadne has no belt when she is deserted by Jason in the night;²⁸ in Ovid's *Fasti*, Anna rises from bed in a panic dressed in a *tunica recincta*;²⁹ in Propertius, some hetaeras run away hastily without fixing their tunics (*tunicis solutis*).³⁰ In the case of young women, untightening the belt at the 'wrong' time indicates sexual willingness. In Ovid, the fact that Corinna comes to him dressed in a tunic with a loose girdle (*tunica velata recincta*) is the start of a lovers' tryst at lunch time.³¹ This brings us to perhaps the most important social code surrounding women's belts: the specific symbolism connected with loosening a virgin's belt.

²⁰ Petron. 674.

²¹ Iuven. 6.446, cf. B 1 p. 251.

²² Ovid. am. 3.2.31, ars 3.143, Met. 3.156, 9.89, 10.536; Verg. Aen. 1.323 (Venus, dressed as a huntress).

²³ Hor. c. 1.30.6.

²⁴ Sen. ben. 1.3.7.

²⁵ Suet. Div. Iul. 45.3.

²⁶ Sen. epist. 114.4.

²⁷ Verg. Aen. 4.518; Ovid. Met. 1.382, 398; 7.182; Plin. NH 17.266.

²⁸ Cat. 64.65, cf. A 12 p. 217.

²⁹ Ovid. fasti 3.645.

³⁰ Prop. 4.61.

³¹ Ovid. am. 1.5.9, cf. B 1 p. 266.

20.3 Symbolism

The removal of the virgin's belt by her husband as a symbol for her first sexual intercourse and her loss of virginity (*virginitas*) is already found in Greek literature.³² The literary stereotype also fascinated Roman authors.³³ Roman scholars like Varro and Festus (Verrius) even transferred it to old Roman times and marriage customs. Varro, in his *Menippean Satires*, describes how the husband (*novus maritus*) undid the belt of his new wife;³⁴ Festus (Verrius) claims that, back then, the old Roman wedding ceremony involved a belt made of white sheep's wool that was tied by a specific kind of knot.³⁵ Both authors use the Latin word *cingillum* because the Greek loanword *zona* does not fit a primeval Roman ritual. However, we should not take Festus' claim too seriously.³⁶ It is nothing more than another scholar's yarn about an ideal past that never existed.

In the end, we can say that a woman's use of a belt carried a significant amount of social meaning. What a woman's *tunica* indicated derived less from the garment itself, but more from how it was affixed with the help of a belt. Not wearing a belt with a *tunica* was perhaps the most consequential choice of all, codifying the distinction between public and private, formal and intimate. Given this social significance, it is unfortunate that we have so few sources on this humble but meaningful accessory.

³² For parallels, cf. LSJ s.v. ζώνη 1.

³³ Cat. 2.13, 67.28; Ovid. Pont. 2.116, Met. 5.470.

³⁴ Varro. Men. 187: *novos maritus tacitulus taxim uxoris solvebat cingillum* [the new husband would quietly and carefully loosen the wife's belt].

³⁵ Festus (Verrius) p. 55.13–18 L.: *cingillo nova nupta praecingebatur, quod vir in lecto solvebat, factum ex lana ovis ... hoc Herculaneo nodo vinctum vir solvit ominis causa...* [The new bride usually wore a *cingillum* made of sheep wool that was undone by her husband in bed. ... It was tied by a Herculean knot and the husband untied it for the sake of a good omen ...].

³⁶ Against OLD s.v. *cingillum* and GRD (2007) 35.

