

22 *fascia pectoralis, capitium* – the breast wrap, an erotic piece of underwear (pls. 24.2, 25.3)

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This chapter is the first in line of articles of bodywear. B 22–25 all consider items of tight-fitting clothing worn directly on the skin. The term ‘bodywear’ is chosen deliberately because not all of the following garments are or can be proven to be underwear. The *amictorium* (B 23), for example, is a kind of visible ‘top,’ and the social function of the *subligaculum/subligar* (B 24) is open to debate. Apart from the *fascia pectoralis*, literary and pictorial evidence on dessous is rare since intimate or trivial garments are usually beyond the scope of art. In some cases, as with ‘socks’ (B 25), remnants of textiles help fill in gaps. Most modern research is also flawed in that it mixes everyday terms with numerous ancient scholarly glosses that have nothing to do with body linen. This sometimes results in a pseudo-historical narrative that is difficult to penetrate for non-experts.¹ The following chapters therefore only include those words that belong to neutral language and have a real historical meaning.

22.1 Introduction

In the year 65 CE, Nero found out that a group of senators and knights had conspired against him, and he initiated ‘purges’ among the upper classes. Tacitus tells us a sad story full of meanness, treachery, and cowardice. An unexpected heroic deed by one woman stands out in the account. Unlike many a senator, the Greek freedwoman (*libertina*) Epicharis resisted Nero’s torturers and finally killed herself with her own *fascia*. Tacitus recounts the brutal torture and the woman’s fortitude:²

at illam non verbera, non ignes, non ira eo acrius torquentium, ne a femina spernerentur, pervicere, quin obiecta denegaret. sic primus quaestionis dies contemptus. postero cum ad eosdem cruciatus retraheretur gestamine sellae (nam dissolutis membris insistere nequibat), vincolo fasciae, quam pectori detraxerat, in modum laquei ad arcum sellae restricto indidit cervicem et corporis pondere conisa tenuem iam spiritum expressit, clariore exemplo libertina mulier in tanta necessitate alienos

¹ Cf. most recently N. Goldman, *Reconstructing Roman Clothing*, in: Sebesta/Bonfante (1994), 233–235; Olson (2003) 201–210; GRD (2007) 203.

² Tac. ann. 15.57.2–3.

ac prope ignotos protegendo, cum ingenui et viri et equites Romani senatoresque intacti tormentis carissima suorum quisque pignorum proderent.

Neither whipping, nor fire, nor the wrath of the torturers—they tortured her all the more violently in order not to be mocked by a woman—could induce her to admit to what she was accused of. The first day of interrogation thus remained ineffective. The following day, when she was dragged away to the same torture in a chair—for her limbs were dislocated, and she was unable to stand—, she fastened the *fascia* she had torn from her bosom like a noose to the back of the chair, put it around her neck and, putting all her body's weight on it, pressed out the little breath that was left.

In what is a short obituary, Tacitus goes on to compare Epicharis' behaviour with that of upper-class men (like the poet Lucan), who, in the face of death, even went so far as to denounce their own mothers. In contrast, Epicharis, a (beautiful) mistress and a freedwoman, shows loyalty and strength. Like the emancipated mistresses we know from Love Elegy, she does not give in to male violence. She dies by strangling herself, as a mythical heroine would have done. However, this is real life, and a proper heroic tool is not at hand. For this reason, Epicharis uses her *fascia*, her 'bra.' This 'bra' is probably the point in Tacitus' entire *Annals* where great history gets closest to ordinary life. He even uses—something he hardly ever does—the neutral word for the article of clothing, only slightly upgrading it by adding the noun *vinculum* since a *fascia* does not suit the stylistic conventions of historiography and epic poetry. Tacitus deliberately introduces the *fascia* to sharpen the contrast between social classes, the fortitude of those being tortured, and the tool for committing suicide. A woman of a social status Tacitus does not deign to mention elsewhere, who uses an ordinary object to kill herself, is compared with the senators and knights, who do not dare to end their lives with a sword (*ensis*), as would befit a noble Roman. In Nero's times, a *vinculum fasciae* becomes the symbol for a heroic death. The message is this: It is a perverted age when heroism is needed in the face of government torture and selfish denunciation of others. However, there is always a way to end your life to preserve your honour, no matter how commonplace the means.

This chapter explores the *fascia*, the 'brassiere' of the Roman woman.³ It should, however, be kept in mind that the structure and appearance of the ancient *fascia* differed from those of a modern bra even if the two articles perform a similar function.

³ Becker/Göll III (1882) 252–253; Marquardt/Mau (1886) 484; RE 6.2 (1909) s.v. fasciae, col. 2006–2007 (A. Mau); Blümner (1911) 230; RE 4.1 A (1931) s.v. strophium, col. 378–380 (M. Bieber); Wilson (1938) 164; Goldman (n. 1) 233–235; DNP 4 (1998) s.v. Fasciae, 433–434; DNP 11 (2001) s.v. Strophium, 1056–1057; Olson (2003) 201–210; E. J. Stafford, Viewing and Obscuring the Female Breast. Glimpses on the Ancient Bra, in: L. Cleland et al. (eds.), *The Clothed Body in the Ancient World*, Oxford 2005, 96–110; GRD (2007) 23, 183.

22.2 Terminology and appearance

In neutral language, there are two Latin terms that designate a woman's bra: *capitium* and *fascia pectoralis* (or simply *fascia*). In literary language, we also find the word *taenia*, a Greek loanword, that is equivalent in meaning to *fascia*.⁴ In Greek, the same item is called στηθοδεσμός (chest wrap).⁵ Modern research on the word *capitium* has been hampered because the evidence is difficult and several very similar glosses—*caltula*, *castula*, *capital*, and *capitula*—are mixed up with it. OLD and GRD (2007), for example, give false or misleading definitions of the word.⁶ In order to clear the field, the following remarks will only focus on the term *capitium*, postponing the discussion of the cluster of glosses to chapter D 6.

The word *capitium* is very likely the Latin everyday word for a bra. Nevertheless, scholars should leave it aside because of its mixed history and should use *fascia* (*pectoralis*) instead, which is its exact equivalent. The etymology of *capitium* is under dispute. Varro, the first to mention it in connection with ancient tradition, associated it with the verb *capere* (hold).⁷ Modern discussion usually relates it to *caput* (head).⁸ This time, ancient scholars (often accused of ignorance in this book) may have gotten the better explanation. Dress terms usually refer to the structure or to the function of a garment. It is hard to see how the head should combine with a bra, whereas the notion that a bra holds (*capere*) the breasts, as Varro thought, is quite straightforward. It seems preferable to relate *capitium*—like *capistrum*—to *capere* despite the slightly odd word formation. That the word *capitium* designates a woman's chest wrap is quite certain, even without etymological support.

Laberius (1st century BCE) very likely shows us a woman affixing a letter in her tunic with the help of a *capitium*. This technique is also found in Ovid, where a *puella* is told to do the same with her *fascia* (see below).⁹ Varro mentions the *capitium* three times and expressly states that it was a woman's bra.¹⁰ In Imperial times, direct evidence on the term fails, and we only find the term *fascia*. However, this may simply have to do

4 Apul. Met. 10.21: *ipsa cuncto prorsus spoliata tegmine, taenia quoque, qua decoras devinxerat papillas, lumen propter adsistens* ... [after she herself had completely put off all clothing, including the *fascia* with which she had constricted her beautiful breasts, she took a position next to the lamp].

5 Pollux 7.66 and LSJ s.v. The ending of the word varies.

6 OLD s.v. *capitium*: "a kind of tunic worn by women"; GRD (2007) 30: "possibly a hood (e.g. of the *paenula*), the neck-hole of a tunic, or a garment worn round the chest, either for warmth or as a breastband."

7 Varro LL 5.130: *capitium ab eo quod capit pectus, ut antiqui dicebant, id est comprehendit* [*capitium*, because it holds (*capit*) the chest, as the ancients used to say, i.e. it encloses it]; cf. also C 1 p. 573.

8 Potthoff (1992) 81–83.

9 Laberius Natalicius F 2: *induis capitium, tunicae pittacium* <...> [You put on a *capitium* (around the chest); <you tuck> the note into the tunic]; cf. A 7 pp. 175–178.

10 Varro VPR F 331 S.: *tunicas neque capitia neque strophia neque zonas* [tunics, but neither *capitium*, nor cord, nor belt]; Varro VPR F 332 S. (cf. n. 24), cf. also n. 7.

with the fact that the word *capitium* with its three short syllables does not fit into the hexameter used for Roman erotic elegy and epigram. Since these genres are the only ones that were concerned with female dessous, the word *capitium* fell out of use in Imperial literature in favour of the more metrically suitable *fascia*. We have no direct way of knowing whether everyday usage of the word also ended in the same period, but the word *capitium* seems to be hinted at by Propertius and Martial in two passages on the *fascia pectoralis*.¹¹ The *fascia* is said to hold (*capit*) the breast, which looks like punning on the accepted etymology of *capitium*. In accordance with this hypothesis, the word *capitium* also crops up again among other terms for accessories in Ulpianus.¹² In its function, the *capitium* seems to be completely equivalent to the *fascia pectoralis*, and it very likely had exactly the same shape. For this reason, we may consider both words synonyms.

The etymology of the word *fascia* is much clearer. In contrast to that of *capitium*, it points to the form of the garment. The word *fascia* is connected with *fascis* (bundle) and designates any item or surface that looks similar to a flat stick. It is a general term that is also used in definitions.¹³ As to clothing, it can designate various strips of cloth or leather.¹⁴ We will look at what the term means in connection with shoes later on in this book, while this chapter focuses on textiles.¹⁵ In contrast to a *strophium* and a *vitta*, the term *fascia* refers to a woven textile. If the function of the strip needs specifying, the noun *fascia* takes on an adjective, hence *fascia pectoralis* (for the breast), *cruralis* (for the leg), or *pedulis* (for the foot) (B 25). The present chapter only considers the *fascia pectoralis*, which, in contrast to the other *fasciae*, is a commonly worn garment and is mostly called simply *fascia*.

The structure and function of the *fascia pectoralis* are simple. It is a woven strip of cloth that could have different colours. In Apuleius, Photis makes the *adulescens* see parts of her red bra (an erotic colour).¹⁶ You neither belt (*cingere*) nor loosen it (*recingere, solvere*), but you wrap it (*vincire, devincire*) and pull it off (*detrahere*) because it is a closed ring without an opening or a knot. Different *fasciae pectoralis* could vary in breadth. In Ovid, a maidservant takes a broad (*lata*) *fascia* in order to smuggle a love letter.¹⁷

¹¹ Prop. 4.9.49: *mollis et hirsutum cepit mihi fascia pectus* [and a soft *fascia* held my shaggy breast]; Mart. 14.134 (see below).

¹² Digest. 34.2.23.2: *stolae, pallia, tunicae, capitia, zonae*.

¹³ Varro LL 5.130.

¹⁴ ThLL VI s.v. *fascia*, col. 296.45–297.64.

¹⁵ Cf. B 26 p. 526; B 29 p. 546.

¹⁶ Apul. Met. 2.7, cf. B 1 pp. 275–276. See also Cato *Origines* F 133, if the emendation is correct, cf. A 2 p. 430.

¹⁷ Ovid. ars 3.621–622: *conscia cum possit scriptas portare tabellas, || quas tegat in tepido fascia lata sinu* [although a female accomplice could bring letters, which a broad *fascia* might hide in her warm bosom].

As to the position, the *fascia* is wrapped around the female breasts on the nipples (*papillae*). In contrast to modern brassieres, it has no shoulder straps (similar to a modern bandeau-style bikini top), and it is not fitted to adapt to the individual breasts. A *fascia* nevertheless stabilizes and shapes the breasts. Terence, Ovid, and Martial talk about this function. In Terence, girls use it to reduce the size of their busts.¹⁸ Ovid counsels one *puella* with small breasts to use a *fascia* to raise and accentuate her bust,¹⁹ and he tells another one with somewhat larger breasts to omit her *fascia* in order to make her appear less attractive and free himself from his love towards her.²⁰ The function of the *fascia* is hence quite similar to that of the *strophium*, which is positioned somewhat lower on the outside of the tunic (B 21). Both items are dress alternatives for the same function.

In contrast to the *strophium*, however, the *fascia* is a form of underwear. It is usually not (or only partly) visible. Our texts usually focus on it alone, but Martial lists the full attire of a young wife (*uxor*) only to complain that she does not sleep naked (*nuda*):²¹

Mart. 11.104.7–8

*fascia te tunicaeque obscuraque pallia celant:
at mihi nulla satis nuda puella iacet.*

You are covered by a *fascia*, tunics, and dark cloaks. But no girl lies in bed naked enough for me.

The woman is wearing tunics and cloaks. In addition, she uses a *fascia*, which serves as underwear. There is no hint of a *subligar* ('panties, briefs') (B 24). This is also never shown in erotic scenes on Pompeian frescoes, whereas the *fascia* is most often shown.

22.3 Social usage

The *fascia pectoralis* was worn by any kind of woman. Martial talks of an *uxor*,²² Ovid and Apuleius of a maidservant.²³ However, a *fascia pectoralis* is always connected with young women. Most of them are *puellae* and libertine freedwomen. There is no mature Roman matron presented as wearing a *fascia* since we hardly see one naked in Roman

¹⁸ Ter. Eun. 313–314: *haud similis virgost virginum nostrarum, quas matres student || demissis umeris esse, vincto pectore, ut gracilae sient* [the girl is not like our girls, whom the mothers want to have their shoulders bent and their chests wrapped so that they are tender].

¹⁹ Ovid, ars 3.274: *angustum circa fascia pectus eat* [if your breast is small, let a *fascia* surround it].

²⁰ Ovid. rem. 337–338: *omne papillae || pectus habent, vitium fascia nulla tegat* [when her breasts take up the whole torso, no *fascia* shall cover the flaw].

²¹ Cf. also Apul. Met. 2.7; Anth. Pal. 6.210.3–4 (Argentarius). A woman is offering her garments after giving birth: καὶ ζώνην καὶ λεπτὸν ὑπένδυμα τοῦτο χιτῶνος || καὶ τὰ περὶ στέρνοις ἀγλαὰ μαστόδετα (*fascia*) [a *zona*, and this fine *subucula*, and the beautiful *fascia pectoralis*].

²² Mart. 11.104.11.

²³ Ovid. ars 3.621–622.

literature. Literary stereotype may nevertheless reflect social usage to a certain degree. In addition, Varro says that the bra was not invented in the circle of Roman matrons (*orbita matrum familiarum*).²⁴ His theory about primeval female dress is, as always, guesswork, but his remarks might mirror social customs of Varro's own lifetime. That would mean that the matrons of his time did not use *fasciae pectorales*, or at least used them less frequently than the young women.

Unlike all other Roman bodywear, the *fascia* is not only made for comfort. It is a fashionable and erotic article of dress. And that is the reason why we hear so much about it and about young women wearing it. If it is mentioned, female breasts and sultry eroticism are never far away. In Apuleius, Photis is wearing a red bra *sub ipsis papillis*.²⁵ Ovid imagines a letter being transported under the *fascia* in the warm cleavage (*tepidus sinus*) of the bosom, and he alludes to female nipples (*papillae*).²⁶ The quintessence of the literary use of the *fascia pectoralis* is summed up in a two-line epigram of Martial in which he addresses the *fascia*:

Mart. 14.134

*fascia, crescentes dominae compesce papillas,
ut sit quod capiat nostra tegatque manus.*

fascia, restrain my girlfriend's swelling bosom so that there is something for my hand to grasp and cover.

The bra is supposed to give form (*compesce papillas*) to the swelling breasts. By using the term *domina* (mistress), Martial hints at Love Elegy as his literary model. There are also allusions to Ovid's elegies (*fascia, papillae, tegat*). The Varronian etymology of *capitium* seems to also be implied.²⁷ The most important aspect of the *fascia* addressed by Martial is not the object itself, but the well-formed breasts the lover wants to cup with his hands. Readers are probably meant to imagine an erotic scene with the man standing behind the woman, something we see on Pompeian murals.

22.4 History

Writing a proper history of the *fascia* is impossible. A chest wrap is something normal and will have been used throughout Roman history. But the way in which a woman

²⁴ Varro VPR F 332 S.: *neque id ab orbita matrum familias instituti, quod eae pectore ac lacertis erant apertis nec capitia habebant* [and this invention did not originate from the circle of mothers, because these were naked on the chest and on the upper arms and did not wear a *capitium*], cf. also C 1 p. 573.

²⁵ Apul. Met. 2.7.

²⁶ Ovid. ars 3.622; rem. 337.

²⁷ Varro LL 5.130 (n. 7).

presented her breasts and décolleté may have changed in Antiquity, as it did in modern times.²⁸ Hence, a *fascia* may have been more fashionable at some time than at another.

In contrast to the *strophium*, the *fascia* is not much attested in literary sources from Classical fifth-century Athens. It may hide behind the ἀπόδεσμοι (*apodesmoi*) referred to in a fragment of Aristophanes' second *Thesmophoriazusai*.²⁹ The fashion of directly wrapping the breasts is then mentioned in the *Eunuchus* of Terence, which is based on a play of Menander (ca. 342/1–290 BCE) by the same name. A character tells us that mothers tie the breasts of their young daughters to make them appear smaller (and more beautiful).³⁰ This is the only evidence in Hellenistic Greek literature. We then find a ταινία μαστῶν (= *fascia pectoralis*) in Imperial literature, in the *Anacreontea*, which are poems written in the vein of Anacreon,³¹ and in the epigrammatist Argentarius.³²

The Latin etymologies of the words *capitium* and *fascia* show that the dress item was probably not a Greek import. If the emendation is correct, we first find *fasciae* (even red ones) in Cato (A 2). Our next sources, Varro and Laberius, date to the second half of first century BCE. The mention of the *fascia* then clusters in Imperial times. We have many Latin testimonies from this period showing us that it was an everyday garment of young women. The *fascia* is referred to by Propertius, Ovid, Martial, and Apuleius,³³ and it even finds its way, as we have seen at the beginning of this chapter, into grand history, Tacitus' *Annals*. It is also often shown on frescoes in Pompeii and represented on statues (pl. 24.2).³⁴ Literary evidence is therefore congruent with archaeological sources. Considering the Greek evidence, one gets the impression that the *fascia* became a fashionable dress style in Imperial times. However, this may be misleading because literary conventions changed, and we simply hear more about naked women in Imperial authors. In general, one might say that Latin literature gets ever closer to the naked body over time. The *fascia* may thus owe its multiple appearances to the fact that eroticism changed form and increased in 'high' literature (in contrast to vulgar pornography). However, that is not the story of this book.

²⁸ For modern taste and visualization, cf. A. Hollander, *Fabric of Vision. Dress and Drapery in Painting*, London 2002, 153–163.

²⁹ Aristoph. F 338 K.-A., cf. Pollux 7.66. The transmission of the text is difficult.

³⁰ Ter. Eun. 313–314 (n. 18).

³¹ Ancreont. 22.13.

³² Anth. Pal. 6.210.3–4.

³³ Prop. 4.9.49; Ovid. ars 3.274, 622, rem. 338; Mart. 11.104.7, 14.134; Apul. Met. 2.7, 10.21.

³⁴ Cf. p. 695.

