Introduction to part C

We are now leaving the real world and entering the world of the ancient scholars. Both worlds have often been mixed in modern research, though they are better kept apart. For the Roman scholars' world is not a real, but a literary and derivative one. It is a world of fantasy and miracle, which is full of strange garments and odd dress rituals. It is a phantom world. The reason for this quite disillusioning diagnosis is as follows: In principle, Roman grammarians did the same things as Classicists do now. They explained old and difficult texts. They tried to elucidate bygone times from them and to recover a world that no longer existed. In comparison to modern scholars, they had some advantages. They were closer in time to their field of study (living 'only' about 400–500 years later) and they had some more literary and other artistic evidence, which they fortunately shared with us to large parts. However, there was one important thing that served to their detriment: The ancient scholars lacked methodological skills and hermeneutical distance and therefore often drew the wrong conclusions. Sometimes they seem to have done this even deliberately in order to outdo a scholarly rival. All this caused much harm to truth.

In Rome, literary studies started about the middle of the second century BCE. The practice of editing texts and commenting on them was already well established in the Greek world (Alexandria, Pergamon) by that time and now also took root in Rome through the influence of Greek culture. It formed part of the great cultural transfer we have watched in part B of this book. Roman scholars took up methods from their Greek predecessors and applied them to Latin (high) literature that itself had only started about a century earlier. The Romans themselves dated the official start to the year 240 BCE, when Livius Andronicus brought a drama to stage that was written in Latin.

Dress culture was no separate subject at the beginning. Roman grammarians did not expressly set out to study it, but they hit on it incidentally when reading ancient Latin texts—just like it happened again in the age of Humanism. The topic dress just came up when scholars edited and explained the oldest Latin texts available to them (and in part still to us): (1) the Law of the Twelve Tables (A 1; D 1), the first Latin text in book form, and (2) early Roman plays, especially the comedies of Plautus (A 4–5; D 3–4). The first author we know to have explained the meaning of a dress term is the jurist Sextus Aelius. He already lived at the beginning of the second century BCE and commented on an obscure passage of the Twelve Tables. In the row of names that are going to follow in parts C and D, Sextus is an exception since he precedes the rest of the scholars by half a century and was a jurist. All other scholars are either professional *grammatici* (schoolmen) or, later on, well-off pastime *literati* who cared for the editing and explanation of the old classics. The second author on dress we hear of is a prototype of this class of men. It is the *grammaticus* L. Aelius Stilo, whose *floruit* dates to the second half of the same century. Like Sextus, Stilo did not write systematically about dress, but gave short comments on a particular item of clothing when it was

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necessary to explain the meaning of some incomprehensible word in the texts. Ancient grammarians called these words γλῶσσαι (*glossae*), and they are at the bottom of all that is going to follow. At a later stage, these glosses were separated from their texts and were combined to form dictionaries or individual treatises on the respective topics.

But this is already the end of the story that will be told in part D. Let us proceed in due order and turn back once again to the origins. It cannot be stressed enough that the scholarly discourse about early Roman dress arose out of the explanation of glosses. This is the reason why our extant scholarly texts mention many strange dress terms while they omit the normal ones which did not need explanation for Roman native speakers, and why instead of ordinary and dull tunics they talk of *ricae*, *ricinia*, and other obscure mumbo-jumbo. Focusing on the exceptional, the grammarians give us a distorted view of the Latin language, and what is more, of Roman dress culture. Guided by analogy, by comparison with the fashion of their own times, and, above all, by etymology and inventiveness (which in Antiquity are one and the same thing), they created a world that has no foundation in historical reality. It is a result not of firm knowledge, but of pure exuberant guesswork.

It took some time, however, before the dress glosses emancipated themselves from the original texts and before the grammarians' guesswork about early Roman dress culture became integrated into Roman cultural history. The first author we know to have made an important and lasting contribution in that sense was the senator and polymath M. Terentius Varro (117–26 BCE). Varro was a student of Aelius Stilo and—maybe because of his social standing—helped popularize cultural and linguistic studies within the Roman elite. This part reconstructs Varro's theory about early Roman dress because it is the earliest coherent representation of the subject matter. Unfortunately, Varro's hypotheses are all mistaken. Refuting them is all the more necessary because they were very influential in Antiquity and still have some impact on modern research. It has to be stated clearly: Varro is an important author in this book for good and for ill. Without him, our knowledge of Roman women's dress would be much less. On the other hand, he commits all the grammarians' errors one should always be aware of.

Chapter A 9 and several chapters of part B deal with Varro's positive contribution to Roman dress history, considering all instances where he provides valuable eye-witness evidence on the Roman dress worn in his own time.[1] In contast, part C is all about Varro's problematic side, dealing with his statements on dress which have the status of secondary evidence and describe women's clothing of which Varro did not have any first-hand knowledge. C 1 shows how Varro developed a theory of primeval Roman dress that was both simple and coherent, but nevertheless mistaken. C 2 then turns to the influential hypothesis that in early times Roman women also wore the *toga*, which has been attributed to Varro by modern research, but in reality only dates to Late Antiquity.

1 For an overview, cf. A 9 p. 183.