

Classical Era Clothing

Part II (How Do I?)

Cynthia Anne of Silver Lakes

Why Classical Era Clothing?

(A story about heat, pretty silks, and being comfortable in the shower line)

A few years ago, at a West/An-Tir War, I saw a beautiful woman wearing enviable clothing. It was enviable both for its beauty and for the fact that it looked very cool to wear: it was almost 80 degrees, and I was wearing a cotehardie made of rather sturdy cotton. I asked her to tell me about what she was wearing, and she very kindly did so, explaining that the style was an homage to Etruscan clothing, and that she made the outer garment out of saris that she purchased on E-Bay. Viscountess Uta then explained to me her method, which I will detail below, of creating this elegant, flowing, VENTILATED garment. She also counseled me that it was rather difficult to document this particular ensemble exactly as she made it – but that elements of it were very plausible.

At this same event, a year later, I saw someone in the shower line wearing what was clearly a Greek-style chiton – made of two terrycloth towels. Before I got out of my tent to get in this line, I had to make a decision: should I completely lose all attempt at being period, and just wear a bathrobe? Or should I ignore modesty and wear my very comfortable chemise, which was made out of handkerchief linen? Or should I suffer through both heat beforehand and the inevitable shower-damp afterward and wear my cotehardie? This Lady's shower chiton seemed a brilliant solution to this dilemma, and so I decided that before my next camping event, I would create one of these garments for myself.

...and - as anyone who has ever seen me attending an event at which there is very warm weather will know – I have embraced not only the shower chiton and Viscountess Uta's lovely Etruscan-esque design, but Classical Era clothing and accessories, in all of their colorful, draping, gold-edged beauty.

How Do I Make This Clothing?

The good news is, there are lots of wonderful website and videos that will talk you through making almost any of these items. The other good news is, I have gathered some of the images and instructions, and am including them here.

Before I go into instructions, however, I want to show you what measurements you will need in order to cut your fabric so that your clothing turns out the way that you want it to.

Bear in mind, during most of the Classical era, these rectangles were woven to be the correct dimension, so there would be four selvages; there was no need to hem garments. If a longer garment was desired – it would be woven to the length needed. If a shorter

garment was desired, it could be belted and pulled until it was the correct length. Draping, rather than tailoring, produced the fashionable look.

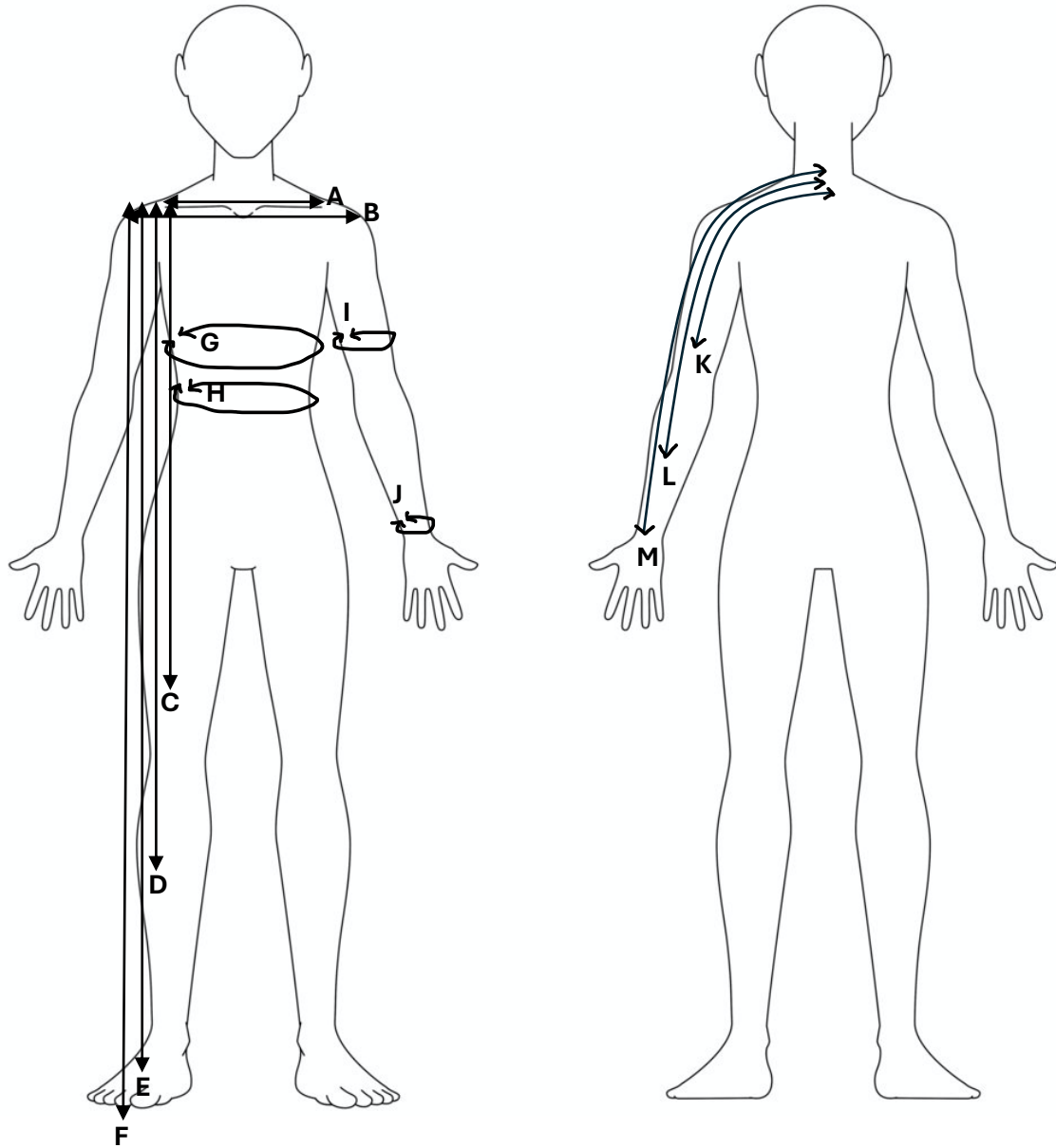
How much fabric will I need?

This will depend entirely on what your measurements are for the look that you want. In general, the look was for very full, draped clothing, so, when in doubt, be generous! In order to know how much fabric you will need, you will, of course, need to take your measurements

Measurements

Please have someone take your measurements as follows. (It is generally not a great idea to take your own measurements, as moving will change them! You may wish to add other measurements according to your preferences - for example, you may prefer that your sleeves reach $\frac{3}{4}$ length – or you may find that you wish for a tunic or chiton length slightly longer or shorter than I have indicated. Mark Antony, for example, is reputed to have worn VERY short tunics, and perhaps you also have great legs and wish to show them! Regardless, bear in mind that successful measurements may vary depending on weight or drape of fabric, so it is always a good idea to pin things in place before sewing.

Measurement Blank for Classical Clothing

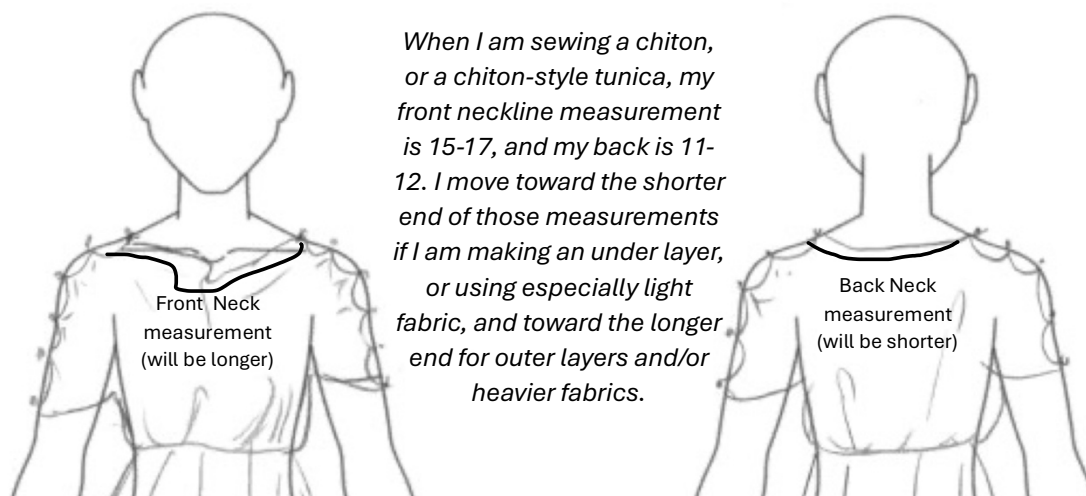


- A. Tank top strap to tank top strap _____
(Please see note below to adjust for comfort and drape)
- B. Shoulder seam to shoulder seam _____
- C. Shoulder seam to mid-thigh _____
- D. Shoulder seam to mid-calf _____
- E. Shoulder seam to ankles _____
- F. Shoulder seam to floor _____

- G. Rib circumference (bra line) _____
- H. Waist circumference _____
- I. Bicep circumference _____
- J. Wrist circumference _____
- K. Neckbone to bicep _____
- L. Neckbone to mid-forearm _____
- M. Neckbone to wrist _____

Important note about the neckline:

Shirts fit more comfortable when they have a little more give in the front, so when making your chiton, pin the shoulders together to give the drape that they need, and measure the front and the back. **These two measurements are essential for comfort and drape:** I recommend taking some trim or ribbon and making a Neck Tape for yourself to use so that you get the correct fit and drape on every garment. *(This adjustment can be done for men's Roman tunics, as well.)*



Roman Tunic – Men

The Roman tunic for men that is easiest to make is literally two rectangles - or squares, depending on your measurements. Tunics were generally made of finely-woven wool...but most SCAians choose linen or cotton. Roman men were discouraged from wearing silk, as it was considered effeminate. Sometimes an undertunic was worn beneath.

This illustration shows a tunic made by sewing about halfway up the sides from the bottom, and sewing the shoulder seams from the edges to roughly **measurement A** on each side of the neck. If you would like the tunic shorter or longer, adjust accordingly. Similarly, if you are more comfortable with a smaller arm hole, you will want to sew closer to the arm – sew what is most comfortable for you!

This can also be made by folding a rectangle that is twice the *length* that you want it in half, thereby eliminating the shoulder seam. This is a later style, and not actually used much by those in Rome. Sewing this in this way does, however, require that you a) don't mind that the front and the back of the neckline will be the same, and b) that you cut and finish the neckline **very carefully** to make sure that it is the correct length, and centered.

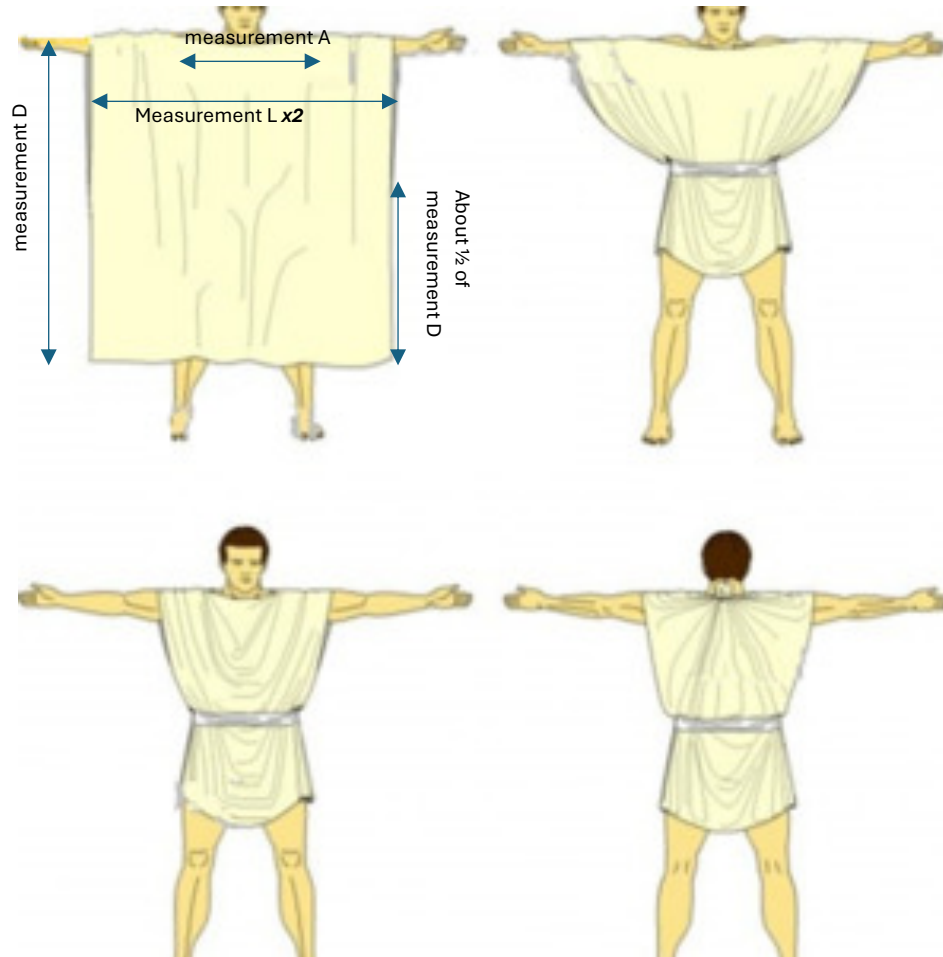


Image from X-Legio, words added by me

Please note a few things:

- 1) If you wear this with a belt, it raises the hem considerably: **try it on and mark the length that you would like before you cut and hem!**
- 2) Roman men considered wearing pants to be barbaric. However, you may wish to wear linen braies (that don't show), or even short or long pants underneath, for comfort.
- 3) Clavi (the characteristic stripes from the shoulder to the hem on Roman tunics) would be added from the top of **measurement D** to the hem, front and back, so you will need trim that is 4x the length of the tunic.
- 4) If you are adding clavi (***recommended to give the Roman look***), I suggest doing so ***before*** sewing the side seams.

Roman Toga – Men

A toga was the equivalent of a suit jacket: if a Roman man was going in public, and had status, he would wear his toga. Togas were made of wool – again, more finely-woven than we generally have available, and most re-enactors use a heavier (7 oz at minimum) linen or cotton that drapes well. Six yards was standard, and the draping of the toga was part of the status of wearing one – but again, many re-enactors choose to make theirs somewhat shorter; less than 4 yards, however, will not give the right drape. Indoors and in private, the toga would generally not be worn.

The toga differs from the *himation* and the *pallium* in four important ways: 1) it is a half-ellipse, rather than a rectangle, 2) it is 6 yards in length, 3), it is always draped over the left shoulder and 4) it is made of wool. Wool was the fabric of ritual – and white was the most formal color for a toga. Some togas had a decorative border or stripe, but that was usually for celebrations.

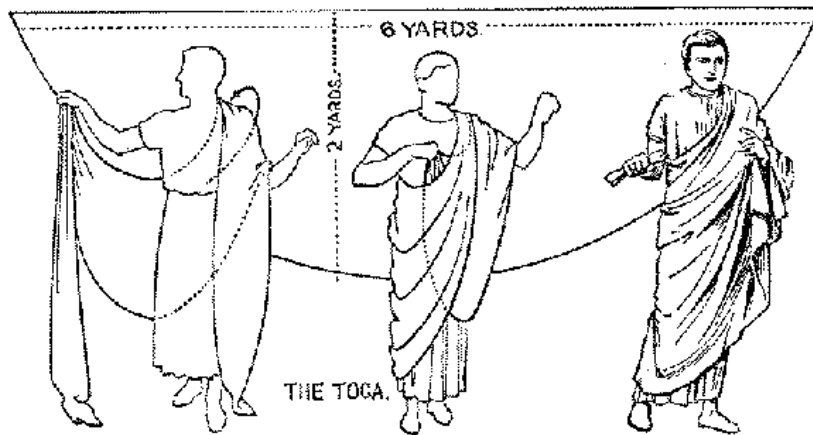


Diagram of how to put on a toga, from *Mediterraneum Forum*

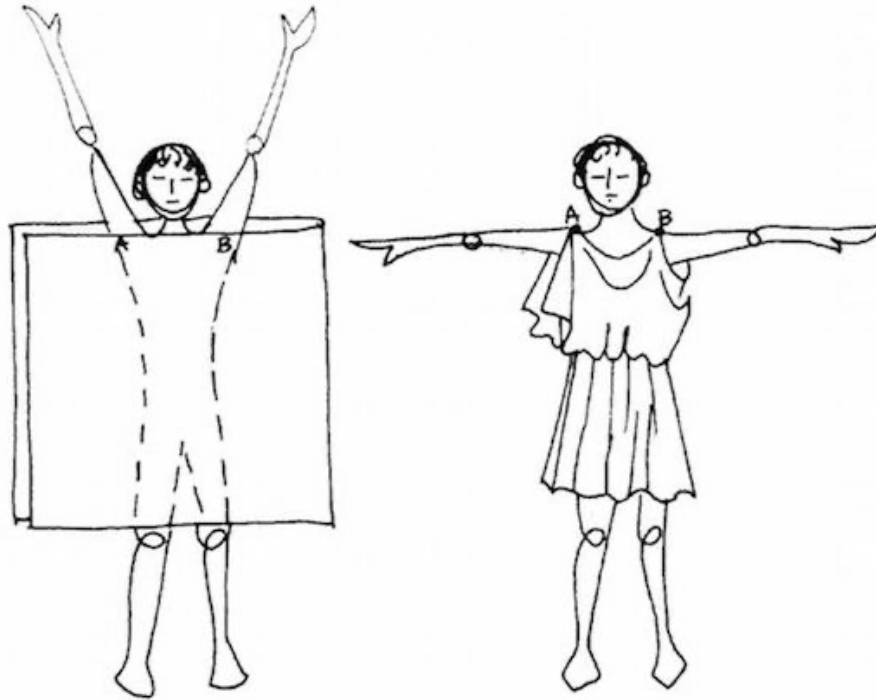
Chiton – Men and Women

The chiton was worn by both men and women, sometimes layered, and sometimes by itself, and sometimes long and sometimes short. Like the tunic, it is made of two rectangles – or one long one - but, unlike the tunic, the shoulder seam is not sewn. In early Greek chitons, the side seam was often left unsewn – but, for practical purposes, I always sew my chiton's side seams, and sometimes sew the shoulders, as well. Sometimes, it was worn only on one shoulder, either as a sole layer, or over another layer.

The fabric for a chiton can be wool, linen, silk, cotton, or even a cotton/silk or cotton/linen blend – but silk is, again, not culturally recommended for men. If using silk, I recommend wearing an additional layer, either under or over, both for modesty and for drape.

The shoulder connection can be pinned at the place where a tank top seam would happen, and the ends left to drape, or they can be pinned or buttoned at intervals.

Men's Chiton:

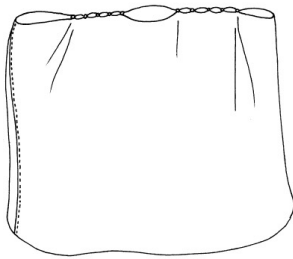


Open on right side,
fold around left side

pin at A & B

Women's Chiton:

(a)



(b)



(c)



Note that one side can be a fold, so this can also be made from one long piece of fabric¹

Tunic/Tunica – Women

An tunic is a good idea to wear under a sheer silk or linen chiton, and should always be worn under a stola. Tunics generally follow the pattern of a chiton, and can be long or short. If the chiton is shorter, the tunic should be more opaque, and it is recommended to have a decorative border at the bottom. Tunics can also be made of very sheer silk, such as georgette or habotai, or linen or cotton, and can be rectangles, or have shaped sleeves. Generally speaking, if I am wearing a sheer outer layer, I wear a heavier tunic, and if I am wearing a heavier outer layer, I prefer a sheer or very light tunic. If my outer layer is shorter than ankle-length, I like for the tunic to be long, and have a border at the bottom that shows beneath the outer layer.

Peplos

A peplos is very similar to a chiton, but is worn only by women, and includes a folded flap from the shoulders that can fall anywhere from just below the breasts to just above the knees. Scholars are not in agreement as to whether the peplos is always of wool, but the folded flap, called the peplum, is always present. The bottom of the peplum can be plain, or have a band of trim that shows at the bottom, or even tassels at the corners. *Note that if you would like to add a band of trim, it will be added to the *inside* of the top of your rectangle to show when worn.*

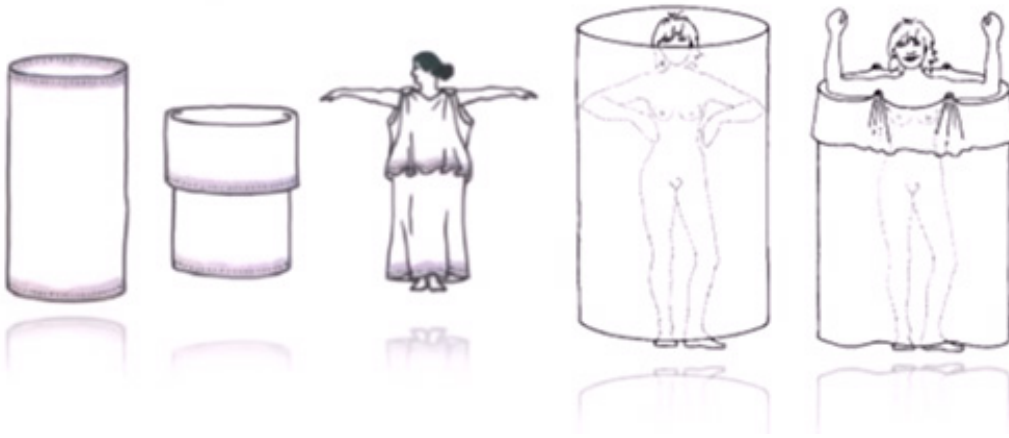


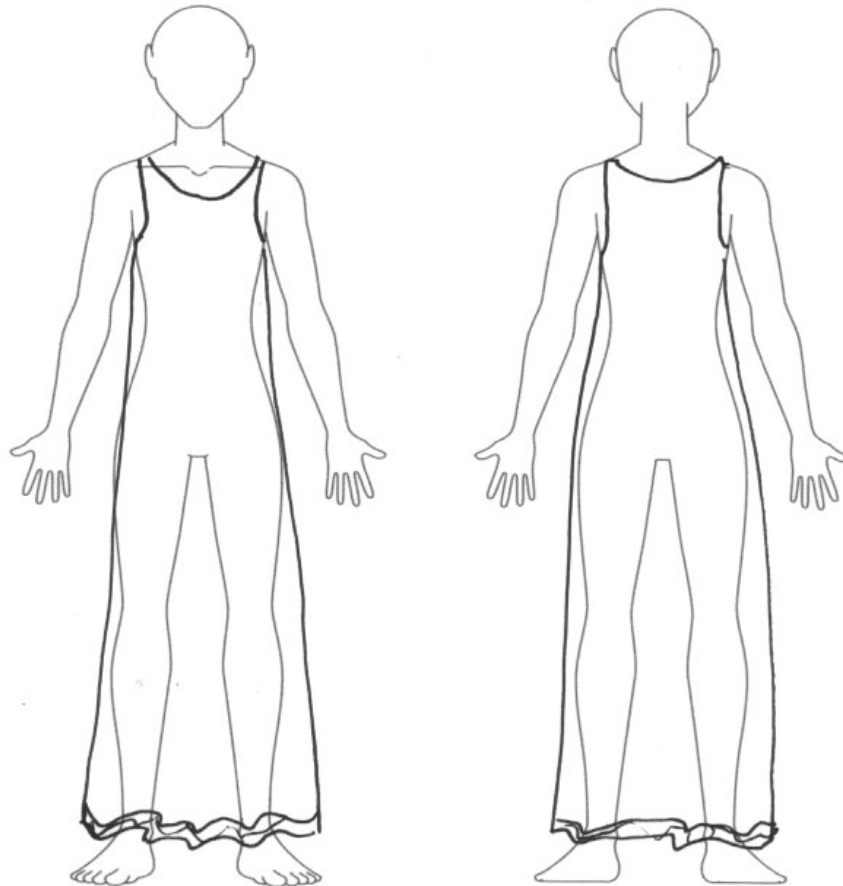
Image from NationalClothing.org

Etruscan-esque Ensemble - Women

This is the ensemble that I mentioned earlier seeing Viscountess Uta wearing at a West/An Tir War. She was kind enough to send me a drawing of how she assembled it – and also let me know that this is **loosely** documentable at best. The parts of it that are documentable are that Etruscan women were known to wear narrower chitons than the Greeks, and that they also wore a narrow front and back apron hung from the shoulders. The sleeves are not **completely** out of the question; they are a very rough cousin to the Ionic chiton sleeve.

Undertunic for Etruscan-esque Ensemble - Women

The undertunic is basically a linen sundress, with trim at the bottom. Depending on how narrow I make it, I sometimes leave a slit up to the knee on both side seams. I use 5 oz. – 13 oz. white linen – but given the love that Etruscans had for color, I am not convinced that white is the only choice. I use heavier than handkerchief-weight linen because it is the only layer in many places. I use a decorative border that may or may not contrast with the border of the outer layer.



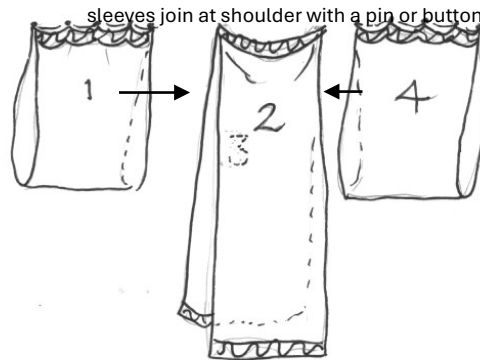
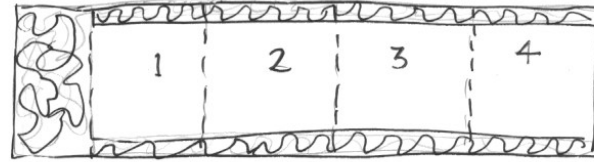
Undertunic of Etruscan-esque Ensemble

Outer Layer of Etruscan-esque Ensemble - Women

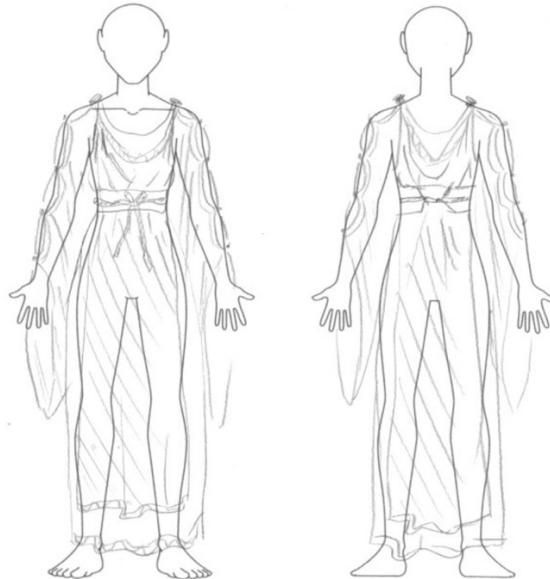
I usually make the outer layer from a sari. I use crepe, habotai-weight, and georgette, and generally use vivid colors. Because this is not a Roman garment, using patterns such as small dots (be careful, though, of having the dots too close, as they will read as modern polka-dots), stars, or even plaids is reasonable. Paisleys will also read as very modern.

Below is a *very* rough drawing of how I use the sari: I cut off the beautiful end, and then cut four rectangles. The width of all four rectangle is my shoulder width – for me, about 20” – plus a very narrow seam allowance. I finish the raw edges, and then connect the sleeves, trim edge to trim edge, as shown below. I use metal buttons or large metal beads to connect the sleeves at intervals,

and then use the same thing to connect the front and back corners to make shoulders. Then, I connect the sleeves to the shoulders, and am ready to make the belt. I use canvas as the base for my belt, and usually use silk taffeta for the outer layer. I attach silk cording or ribbon to the ends of the belt, long enough to go around my ribcage several times, and finish the ends of the ties if necessary.



Pieces for Outer Layer of Etruscan-esque Ensemble, shown cut from sari; pieces 1 and 4 are the sleeves, and connect at the *shoulders only* with pieces 2 and 3.



Undertunic, Outer Layer, and Belt/Girdle of Etruscan-esque Ensemble.

Stola

This quintessential Roman garment is worn by all respectable matrons, and, as is typical of Classical Era clothing, is flattering on all body types! Stolae are always worn over a **tunica**, and, in public, always worn under a **palla**.

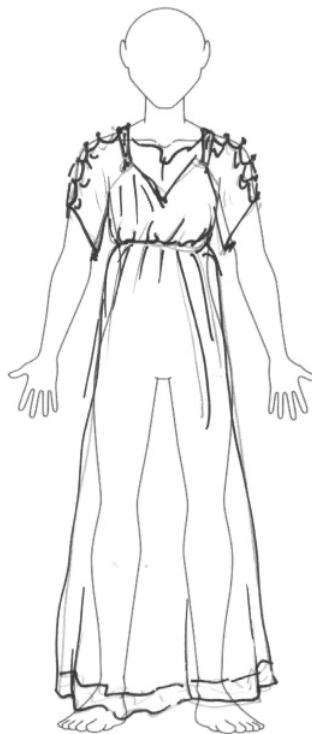
The stola is floor-length, to facilitate graceful draping over arms created when taking up extra fabric while walking. As I generally have something in my arms while walking, I usually compromise and make mine ankle-length. There can be a decorative band at the bottom, or it can be plain.

There are three known options for the neckling of a stola: pinned, strapped, and banded.

- The **pinned** style of stola neckline is worn very much like a chiton, and pinned in one place at each shoulder; some artwork shows the fabric gathered in a rosette.
- The **strapped** style appears to be a separate strap at each shoulder, sewn or pinned to connect the front top edge of the stola to the back top edge of the stola. It is unclear whether the neckline of the strapped stola can be shaped or even sewn, or whether the deep V is created with skillful draping.
- The **banded** style appears to be gathered into either a rounded band, or into a straight band which curved with the weight of the gathered material. I have made my banded stolae with circular bands, with no differentiation between front and back.



pinned stola



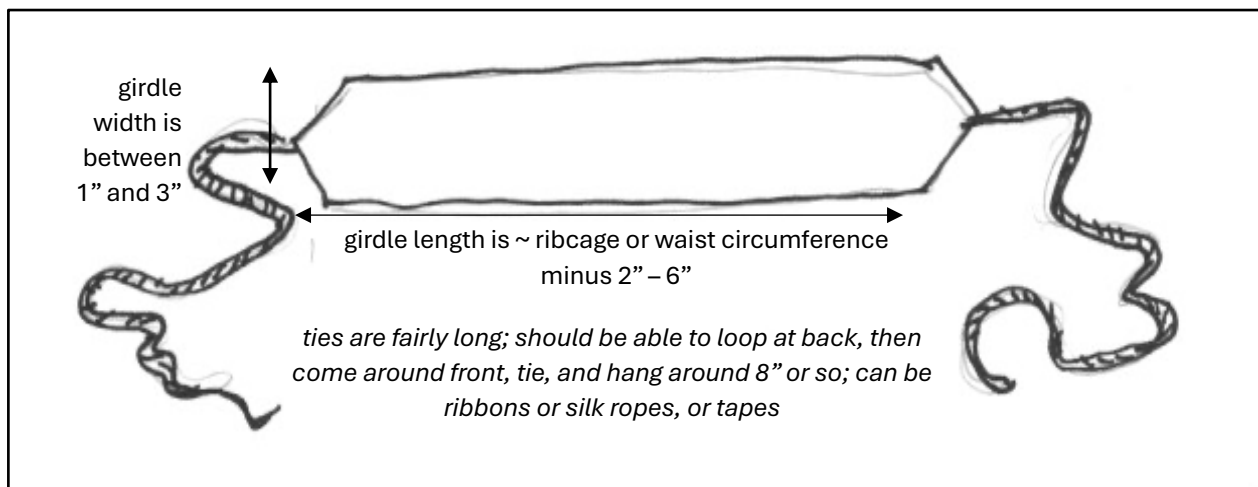
strapped stola



banded stola

The Stola can be worn unbelted, or belted with a silk-rope style belt, a narrow belt, or a wide belt; the latter is usually referred to as a girdle. These can be work at the natural waist, or under the bust. All of the belts seem to have very long ties, which appear to loop in the back and then come forward to tie in the front.

I generally make my girdles about 2" in width, and about 2"–6" shorter than my under-bust circumference, and shape the ends to which I sew the ties. I also wear this girdle-style belt with a chiton, and with the Etruscan-style ensemble. I usually make mine with a layer or two of canvas, and covered with silk taffeta. I also sometimes add a band of trim through the middle of the outer layer.



Palla/ Veil - Women

The palla is the Roman name for a veil always worn in public by respectable women, but both Greek and Roman culture had long periods of time when it was expected for women to appear veiled in public.

Like the toga, the palla could be up to six yards long – but unlike the toga, it was almost exclusively rectangular, and made from very sheer fabric. Veils in other Classical cultures could also be quite long, but could be much shorter. I have found that I prefer my veils to be about three yards. I usually wear a veil with all of my Classical Era ensembles, unless I am staying in camp, or doing physical work.

I like silk georgette best for a palla, as synthetic fabrics are extremely slippery, and will *not* stay pinned in my hair! Some people I know have better luck with synthetics – but they are also very warm!

...and speaking of warm, I have one palla of sheer wool crepe. It is lovely, and drapes beautifully – but *is* wool, and keeps me quite warm. (It is also gray, which is a mourning color, so less appropriate for most occasions. ;D) Different people use handkerchief linen and other weaves of silk with great success – experiment, and see what works best for you!

The general way to drape the veil is to start by making a braid to which the veil can be pinned. I have very long hair, so I usually make two braids and bobby-pin them to the top of my head. For pins, I use long glass-headed veil pins, which I weave in and out of my braid, as I have hair that otherwise spits out veil pins. When I pin the veil in place, it is not centered: the shorter end is on my right – short enough that it does not touch the ground – and the longer end is whatever is left, usually around 2-4 yards.

Once the veil is pinned securely (usually about 4-5 veil pins for me), I put the longer end behind me, and loop it under my left arm. Then, I put the end on my right shoulder, and let the remainder fall behind me. For me, this drape looks good, is practical (...well, as practical as wearing a veil can be!), and uses between 3 and 4 yards of 36” to 52” fabric. If you are wearing a longer veil, it can also wrap around the hips, either before or after going over the shoulder – but I do not wear the authentic 6 yard palla, for practical purposes.

I like for my veil to be a contrastic color to my stola or chiton. If wearing a blue or red chiton or stolla, I like a yellow or white veil, etc. My red banded stola with a palla of egg-yolk yellow always seems to evoke the essence of the Roman look, and I like to wear it with lots of gold jewelry, because...well, I love wearing accessories!



My typical ensemble: tunic, banded stola, palla and pins, sandals, earrings, bracelets, necklaces

When to Wear Classical Era Clothing?

I have gone from wearing a chiton for shower purposes, to wearing Classical dress because of a Classically-themed event, to wearing it because of the weather, to wearing Classical dress whenever I can! It is delightfully vented in hot weather – but the veil, as well as the options of layering, makes this style also wear-able in chillier weather. I am still learning about this style of clothing, and will continue to read and research to become more knowledgeable about it.

Recommended Reading:

Boardman, John, Jasper Griffin, and Oswin Murray, eds. *The Oxford History of the Classical World*. Oxford University Press. 1986.

Cartledge, Paul, ed. *The Cambridge Illustrated History of Ancient Greece*. Cambridge University Press. 1998.

Cleland, Lisa, Glenys Davies and Lloyd Llewellyn-Jones. *Greek and Roman Dress from A to Z*. Routledge, Taylor and Francis Group. 2007.

Cook, R.M. *Greek Art: Its Development, Character, and Influence*. Penguin Books. 1972.

Gullberg, Elsa, and Paul Åström. *The Thread of Ariadne: A Study of Ancient Greek Dress*. Lund. 1970.

Llewellyn-Jones, Lloyd, ed. *Women's Dress in the Ancient Greek World*. The Classical Press of Wales. 2023.

Richter, Gisela M. A. *A Handbook of Greek Art*. Phaidon. 1959.

Sebesta, Judith Lynn, and Larissa Bonfante, eds. *The World of Roman Costume*. The University of Wisconsin Press. 2001.

Websites that I Have Found Helpful:

<https://romanasum.com/>

- A SCAdian blog-style site about Roman clothing that is readable, informative, and very well-organized.

<https://annasrome.com/roman-garb-basics/>

- Another excellent SCAdian blog about Roman and Greek clothing.

<https://www.thecollector.com/womens-fashion-what-did-women-wear-in-ancient-greece/>

- *An informative site about Classical clothing, with some excellent images and links.*

https://arthistoriography.wordpress.com/wp-content/uploads/2011/02/media_183218_en.pdf

- *An online PDF of an excellent exploration of color and its use and meaning in the Classical world.*

Image footnotes:

¹ Lee, M. (2015). Garments. In *Body, Dress, and Identity in Ancient Greece* (pp. 89-126). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.