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Why Didn't the Greeks or Romans Wear Pants?

You are walking on a busy street in Classical Athens. It is a summer morning—hot, but not too hot to run errands. White walls glitter in the sun. A murmur of Greek drifts through the dusty air. The mouthwatering aroma of honey cakes, stacked in a nearby stall, competes with the unmistakable stench of a city without a sewage system.

Most of your fellow pedestrians are men. Most of these men are not quite half-naked. Some have a cloak wrapped around their torsos. The rest stroll by in loose, knee-length tunics. The few women in sight are wearing longer tunics, fastened at the shoulders with long pins.* Female and male, the clothes of the poor are the off-white of uncolored wool. The more prosperous are plumed in every shade of yellow, green, and brown.¹

Now transport yourself to a street in early imperial Rome. Although it is nearly noon (or sixth hour, as the Romans call it), the street is still dark, shadowed by the towering apartment buildings on either side. The cobbles underfoot are slick with foul-smelling muck. Smoke spills from the door of a tavern across the street, carrying the scent of roasted chickpeas. A multilingual hubbub fills your ears, and harried pedestrians rush past, all wearing clothes very different from anything in Athens.

A few men are wearing togas. An unfolded toga is a vast woolen expanse up to twenty feet across. Submerging oneself in this sea of cloth is such a complicated process that aristocrats often have a slave whose

* In a pinch, these could be pressed into service as weapons. A crowd of Athenian women once killed a man with their brooches.



From left to right: a Greek man wrapped in a cloak (*himation*), a Greek woman in a tunic (*chiton*), a Roman man in a toga, and a Roman matron in a mantle (*palla*). Images from the public domain

primary duty is to crease and drape it. Since walking in a toga is equal parts art and ordeal—any failure to keep one's left arm at just the right angle spells death for all those careful folds—most of the men on our street have left their togas at home, and they are going about their business in short tunics. Some of the women are swathed in the traditional mantle of the Roman matron. The rest wear full-length tunics in a riot of colors.

Both Greek and Roman clothing was draped over the body. Whether linen, wool, or cotton,* draped clothes were well-suited to a Mediterranean climate and conveniently adaptable to changes in the social situation or weather. They tended, however, to be uncomfortable in the cold and damp. Some, like the toga, required constant attention to wear correctly. All lacked pockets.†

This, it would seem, was a world crying out for pants. Yet with only a few exceptions—such as the eccentric Emperor Elagabalus, who

* The most common fabrics in the classical world were wool and linen. Since wool was warmer, more durable, and easier to dye, it was typically used for outerwear. Linen—more breathable, simpler to clean, and less friendly to lice—was preferred for undergarments and everyday use. Cotton (grown in Egypt) only became common during the Roman imperial era.

† Equivalentents could be improvised: Greek women often drew a portion of their tunics over their belts to create a large pocket, and Roman men stashed leftovers in recesses of their togas. Coins, however, had to be kept in purses suspended from the belt or neck. Alternatively, since the world was yet innocent of germ theory, they could be tucked into a corner of one's mouth.

gloried in his silken slacks*—the Greeks and Romans regarded pants as barbaric. To the Athenians, they recalled the Persians, who had invaded Greece in overwhelming numbers and baggy trousers. The Romans associated them with the tattoo-streaked and beer-swilling peoples of the north, especially the Germans.²

In the end, however, the Romans buckled. The process began among the legions. The knee-length tunics legionaries wore, designed for the heat of a Mediterranean summer, were unpleasantly breezy in northern winters. Inspired by barbarian cavalymen, soldiers stationed in chilly climes began to squeeze into short breeches of wool or leather. Soon, some took the natural next step of wearing full-length pants. Their commanders followed suit: a third-century emperor shocked respectable opinion by wearing such pants (and a floppy blond wig) while leading his troops.³

Over the course of the fourth century, as soldiers in politics made military clothing fashionable, civilians began to trade their own tunics for trousers. By the century's end, the practice had become so widespread that pants were banned from the city of Rome by imperial edict. Any man found so scandalously attired was to be arrested, stripped of his property (and presumably his pants), and sent into perpetual exile. The cause, however, was already lost. Within a few decades, senators were wearing trousers even in the emperor's presence.⁴



Having glanced at the advance of pants, we must confront a more profound question: did the Greeks and Romans wear underwear?

Most women certainly wore the proto-bras we call breast bands.[†] Though fitted versions with shoulder straps existed, these were usually

* Roman emperors were persistent sinners against fashion. Some contented themselves with clothes dyed purple, the classical world's most expensive, and therefore most prestigious, color. (Use of the finest shade of purple, a dark and shimmering crimson the color of dried blood, was sometimes restricted to the imperial family; Nero once set up a sting operation to catch merchants who handled contraband dye.) For others, robes worth more than most villas were too subtle. Caligula liked to costume himself as Zeus, complete with a golden beard and gleaming thunderbolt. Commodus came to the Colosseum in lion skins.

† The evidence for panties is skimpy. There were certainly panty-like garments: some Roman women wore swimsuits in the baths, and female athletes and entertainers appeared in a proto-bikini. (The future empress Theodora, who began her career as a burlesque actress, had a routine that involved strutting onstage in the ancient equivalent of a G-string.) Normally, however, women wore only shifts beneath their street clothes. These had hazards of their own: one Roman poet devoted an unkind epigram to a lady enduring a wedgie from an overtight undertunic.

simple strips of cloth wrapped around the torso. Since small breasts were considered attractive, women often used the bands to flatten their chests.* If we can believe ancient poets, they also served as makeshift pockets for everything from love letters to vials of poison. Breast bands were even reputed to have medicinal properties: a used band wound round one's head was said to relieve headaches.⁵

Greek men apparently had nothing but sunburn and self-assurance beneath their tunics. In the Roman world, a few traditionalists wore loincloths under their togas, and men might sport a sort of Speedo in the baths. Most, however, dispensed with underwear, preferring breathable undertunics of linen or silk. Though comfortable, these garments were not conducive to modesty. A late antique author tells the story of a visitor who sat across a fire from Saint Martin of Tours. The man eased back on his chair, spread his legs—and accidentally gave the saint an expansive view of his genitals.⁶

By the fourth century, when Saint Martin was flashed, Roman clothing was well on its way to becoming medieval. Imagine yourself on a street in late antique Constantinople. Let's say, for the sake of ambience, that it is a crisp autumn afternoon, with a salt-smelling breeze in the air and church bells serenading the mellow light. A pompous court official glides past in a slim version of the traditional toga. Lesser men bustle by in knee-length tunics with broad sleeves and as much embroidery as they can afford. The women's tunics are longer, though equally billowy and bedizened. A few of the wealthiest pedestrians flaunt garments of clinging silk. A few of the most pious bear Christian tattoos on their hands. But none at all, you feel quite certain, is wearing underwear.

* In some contexts, breast bands were erotic; a character in one Greek comedy slowly loosens hers to tease her husband.