

# Clothing fit for a Late Roman Lady

by Stephen Kenwright



Pharaoh's daughter St. Maria Maggiore, Rome (ca. 430A.D.)

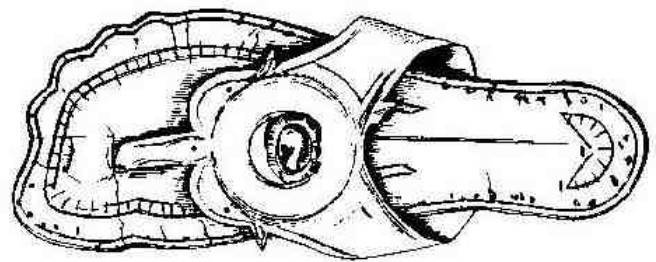
Comitatus usually portray Roman dress in northern Britain in the 4th century, often reflecting the influence of Northern European culture and sometimes native British elements. Post-Roman or Anglo-Saxon events provide an opportunity to display later fashions, particularly the Angles of Yorkshire and Northumbria. Simple kit is surprisingly easy to put together, the key components being dress and shoes.

## Footwear

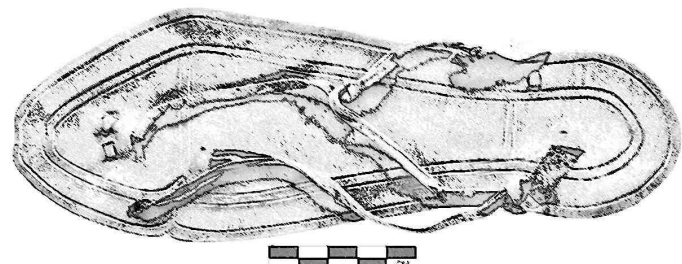
Footwear has no heel, but can have extra sole layers or inners of felt, sheepskin, fur or even cork for comfort. Dura Europos socks (C3<sup>rd</sup>) were made of a form of *Nålbinding*, as were C4<sup>th</sup> socks from Egypt which could be split-toed (like Japanese *tabi*). Sewn 'booties' of woollen cloth were found in Roman Gaul, some which could be gartered with laces below the knee for warmth.

## Solea

Slip-on sandals were similar to today's. Often with a thong between the toes, they could have several layers of sole, cork soles edged in leather and even hobnails. Some sandals are shown worn with socks.



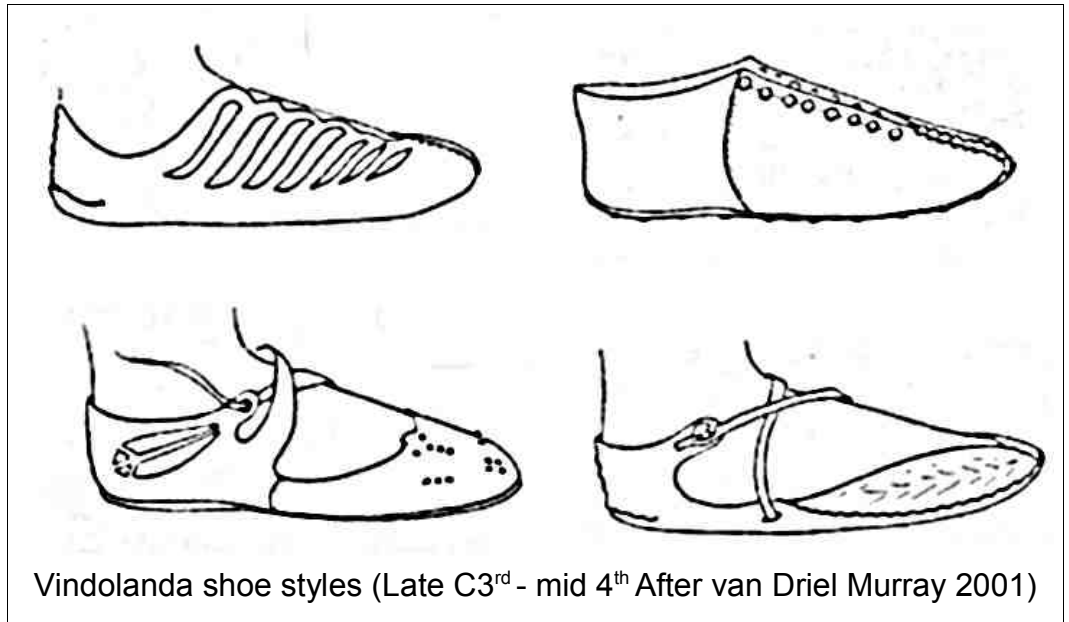
Sandal from Saalburg, Germany (2<sup>nd</sup> century)



Sandal from Cuijk, Netherlands (C4<sup>th</sup>)

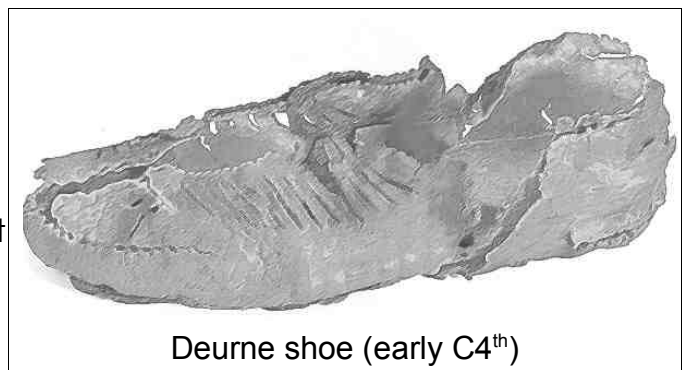
## Carbatinae

A practical light shoe, that is easy to make yourself. Unsurprisingly, shoes are much more common finds than sandals in Britain. They are typically made of one piece of leather, more enclosed, but still well ventilated. They can be worn with or without hobnails and many members make their own using our shoe making guide.



The shoe from Deurne, Holland is associated with a Roman cavalry unit ca. 320 A.D. You can use the group pattern to make your own, or other styles: take a look at my shoe making guide.

Ready made late styles are hard to find. Plantagenet made my C3<sup>rd</sup> boots, a model well field tested by Comitatus and is making some for Helena with late modifications - less cut out and with free laces. Made to your own foot outlines they have long order times and are un-nailed:



<http://www.plantagenetshoes.freemove.co.uk/>

Robin Brown of the Legio VIII <http://www.rigorevali.co.uk/> has made nailed 'fell' boots and variations offered at a discounted price for Comitatus group members – please enquire politely before ordering.

Armamentaria usually have items in stock in standard sizes, including C2<sup>nd</sup> shoes (which have served Helena well and could be adapted to look later) and 'fell' boots and variations.

Sarah Juniper makes late looking un-nailed footwear to order - I'd look at the Saalburg 209 and 219 and the Mainz sandal:

<http://www.sarahjuniper.co.uk/roman.html>



## Clothes

The Late Roman tunic, or *dalmatica* is a generous T-shaped tunic with a slit neck, typically falling in graceful folds. It makes a quick and cheap dress to get started with, as it needs no brooches or belt fittings. They are also very flexible in design, which makes fitting easy: they could have short or long rectangular sleeves, which could be fairly narrow or quite wide. Short sleeved or very wide sleeved tunics were often worn over ankle length, narrow sleeved under-dresses, which is very practical in cooler weather. Wide sleeves were sometimes tied back, presumably for work, giving a butterfly's wing effect. Often they had two full length *clavi* stripes and perhaps stripes near the cuff.

Colour seems wide open, for example, red, pink, orange, yellow, green, blue and white tunics are seen, with *clavi* of black, red, brown, purple, white or gold. The belt, worn under the bust, was often just a tied cord, or could be of plain or decoratively woven cloth and could have a central jewel, perhaps a brooch. As there is no support for such a belt, it was probably sewn or pinned in place for practicality.



Piazza Armerina mosaic bath procession - lady (early C4<sup>th</sup>)



Piazza Armerina bath procession - servants (early C4<sup>th</sup>)





Samaritan woman, Via Latina, Rome (mid C4<sup>th</sup>)



Late Roman overdresses worn with *palliola* scarves. The drape of Sarah's wide sleeve matches the image left



Serena (ca. 400A.D.)

Note the practical slightly short sleeves and hemline and ankle boots visible above in a typical Christian illustration of an ordinary woman with a relatively simple hairstyle and single pearl earrings.

In the late C4<sup>th</sup>, there was a fashion for wearing an inner dress with very tight sleeves, as seen worn by Serena, wife of Stilicho. The over-dress has short sleeves and the fine mantle is carefully draped to display this feature. Research by Comitatus member Sarah Steele suggests that the pronounced wrinkles on the forearms can be re-created with sleeves well beyond hand length pushed well back up the arm.

Note the dragging dress, cloth covered hair, decorated, possibly jewelled high level belt and pearl jewellery of a rich noble at court.

The much later mosaic of Theodora, wife of Justinian is less useful because she is shown in typically male military dress because of her unique status.

## Regional Style

Here Catherine sports excellent shoes, bag, hairstyle and jewellery. The tube construction or *peplos*-style overdress, combined with knife-wearing and the leather waist belt with appropriate copper alloy fittings give a distinctive Northern European flavour to the impression. Paired brooch finds in British forts indicate an association with military families.

Leather belts were generally 1.25" or less wide. Many items could be hung from women's belts including knives, shears, keys, and pouches which might carry fire starting materials and sometimes have a fire steel attached. They might also contain toilet sets (e.g. nail cleaner, tweezers and cosmetic spoon), cosmetics, amulets, spindles, needle & thread or collections of spare or keepsake beads, brooches etc.

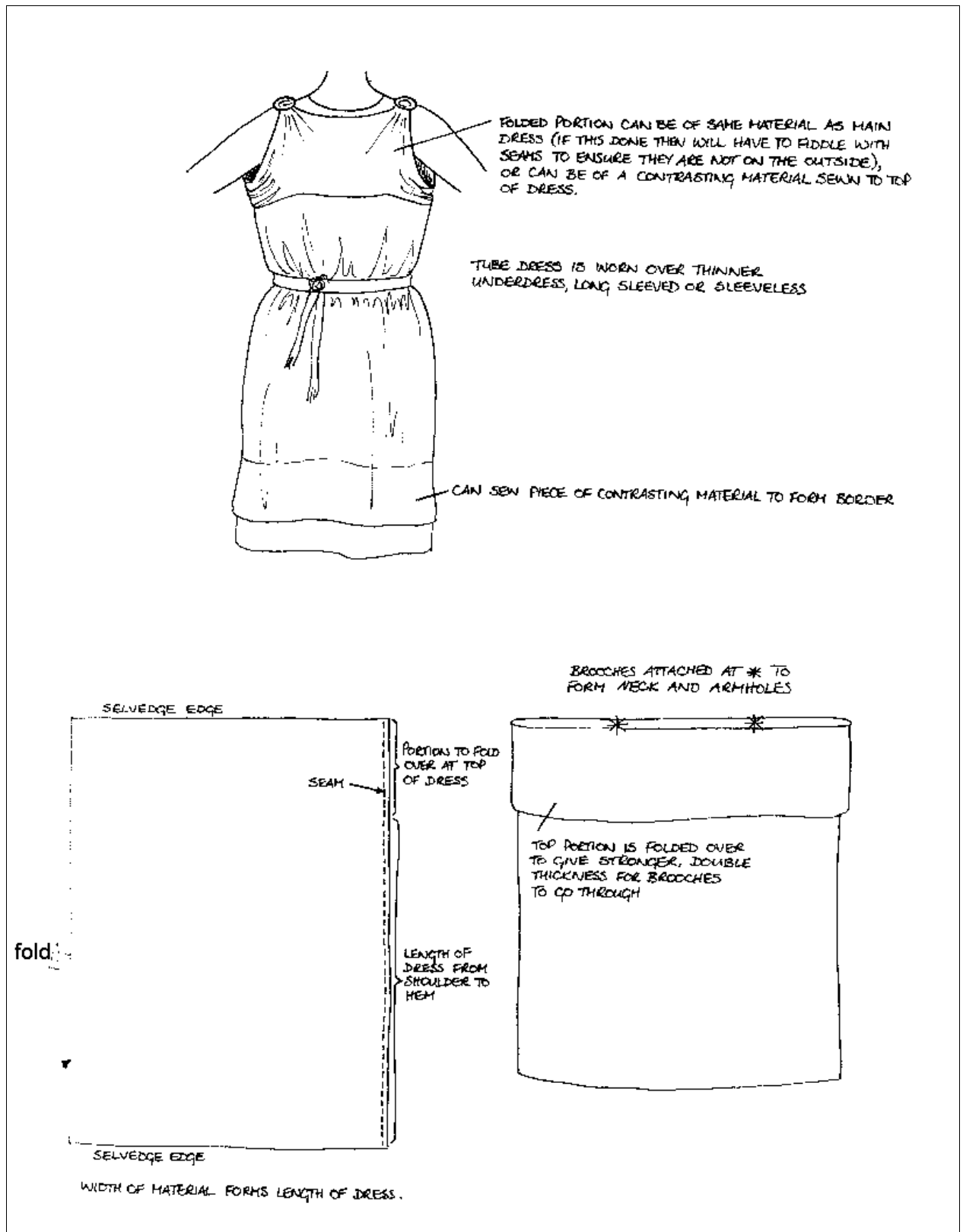
The *peplos*-type tube overdress is quite easy to make: Owen-Crocker (1986) suggests that it could be a rectangle of cloth, simply folded around the body and left open on one side. They might have been woven as a cylinder or might have been made very simply by sewing up the two short (or cut) edges of the cloth to make a tube shape.

One or two brooches would then hold up the dress at the shoulders, with the addition of some tablet weaving to stop the fabric tearing easily, or simple bone pins, or possibly sewing used for simpler impressions.

As they were very generous, (e.g. that from Huldremose in Denmark 1.68m long X 2.64m in circumference), it can be folded down at the top hem to form a cape and help prevent the brooches tearing the cloth. The dress could also be pouched over a girdle at the waist with or without an additional upper belt. A contrasting piece of cloth can be sewn on the top hem for decoration, as with Sarah's example on the right, worn with saucer brooches, which can continue neatly on to a post-Roman impression and a lower border added if desired.



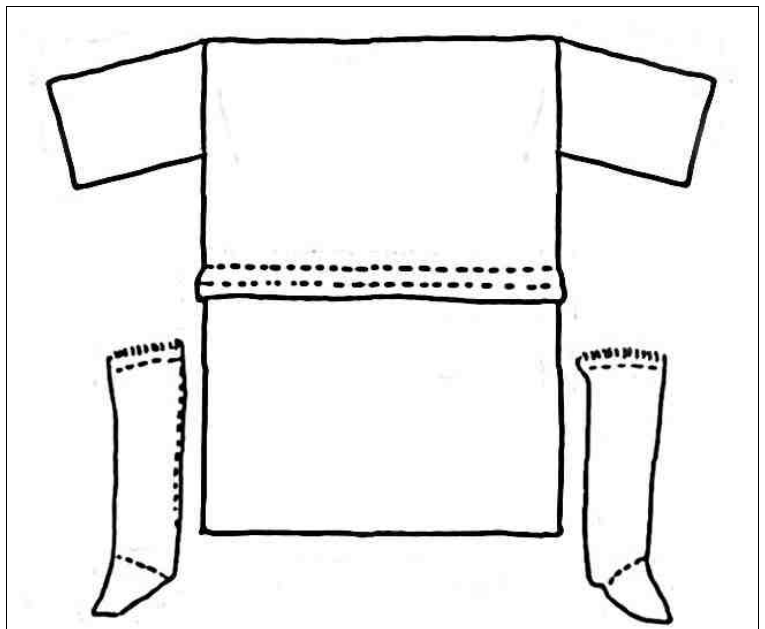
Sarah wearing the Northern peplos



Wild (2004) identifies 10 women wearing the 'Gallic Coat' in C2<sup>nd</sup>-3<sup>rd</sup> British sculpture, a unisex civilian garment which he describes as a wide fitting T-shaped over-tunic with or without short sleeves, worn ankle length and unbelted on women, represented by a C2<sup>nd</sup> find from Les Martres-de-Veyre, France and seeming to me to be simply a generous, undecorated example of the Roman types already shown. Croom (2000) identifies a second type with very full pleats and very baggy sleeves, falling to the hem, like later medieval fashions, which I think Wild (2002) more plausibly interprets as the sides of the wide tunic body and Allason-Jones (2005) as a cloak worn over the top.

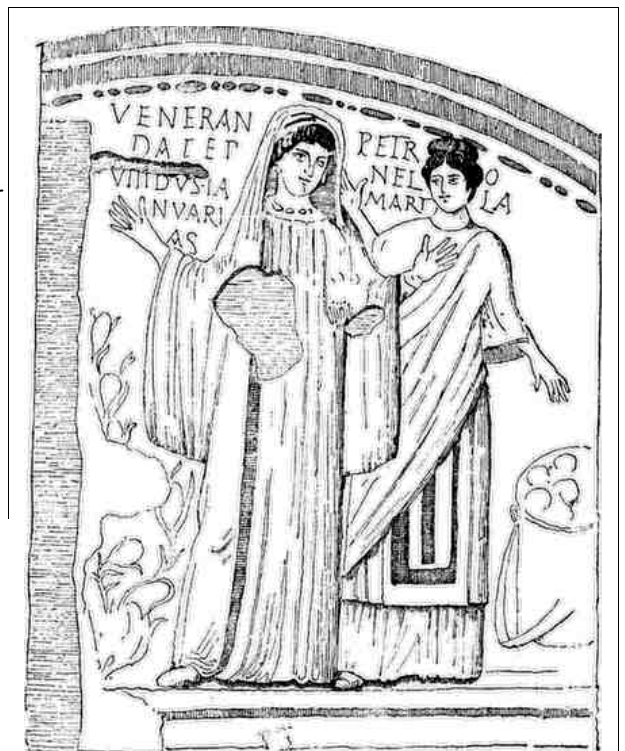


Aurelia Aureliana in a wide 'Gallic Coat', perhaps with cloak over the shoulders (Carlisle RIB 959 C3<sup>rd</sup>)



Woollen cloth stockings and Grave D dress 125cm in length, with a waist tuck, by 90cm across the body, with sleeves 40cm in length, slightly sloped. (Les Martres-de-Veyre C2<sup>nd</sup>)

As weather protection and ornament, ladies would wear various sizes of mantle (*palla* or the smaller *palliola*), a rectangular piece of material cast elegantly over the shoulder like a scarf or draped around the body about town. One end could be cast over the back or worn to the front like a large shawl. The small *palliola* seems often to have had both ends to the back, forming a collar or shoulder cape effect.



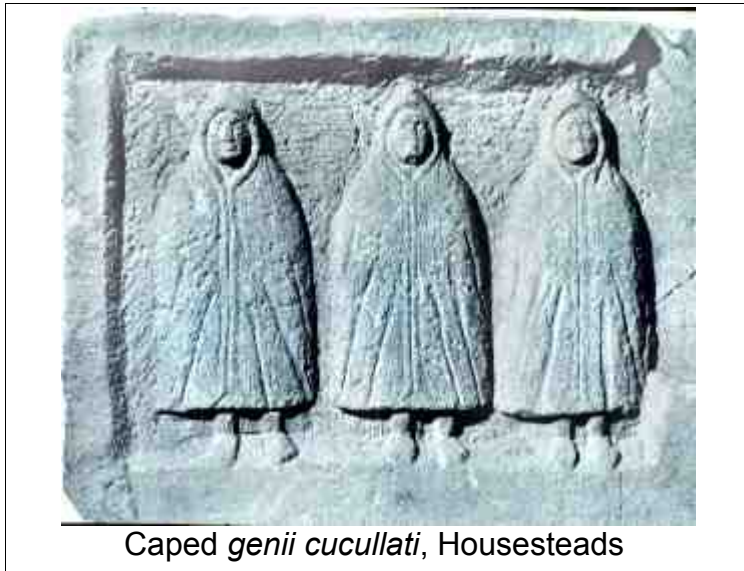
Veneranda and Petronella wearing mantles (Catacomb of Domitilla late 4<sup>th</sup>C)

They could be knotted quickly or pinned with a brooch for practicality. Some literature suggests both traditional pagan and Christian respectable ladies would cover their

hair in the street but, as you can see from the sources, this was not universal.

Ladies would prefer mantles for travel rather than sagum style cloaks, but rural women and athletes were known to wear practical gear for weather protection and presumably camp followers might wear spare military cloaks (perhaps worn with a brooch centrally, rather than on the shoulder), sensible *cucullus* caped hoods and even straw hats for the sun. An apron is useful when working, particularly around the fire, perhaps as an extra peplos front, or as a shorter rectangle of cloth tied at belt level under the bust or at waist level.

The expensive *birrus britannicus*, mentioned in Diocletian's edict on maximum prices might have been a long semi circular hooded cape with front opening:



Caped *genii cucullati*, Housesteads



Semi-circular hooded capes

### Underwear

Underdresses or shifts, probably in a comfortable linen were often worn and are perfectly capable of concealing modern underwear. For the purist experimental re-enactor, the chest might be strapped with a long (5m) cloth, effectively a bandage (known by the general term *fascia*) wrapped 6 or 7 times around the body. Used variously at times to flatten or to emphasise, I understand the security, practicality and comfort can be very variable! Bikini-style briefs were certainly worn by athletes, dancers and at the baths - some leather finds might suggest their use as swimwear.

### Hair

Usually parted and waved or curled closely to the forehead, the ears could be covered or exposed to reveal earrings. Long hair was often worn up in a circular coil or plait on top or at the back of the head, like saint Petronella above, often secured with hairpins. Projecta wears a dense mass of curls on her wedding casket, perhaps covered with a hairnet or cloth. Egyptian examples of 'snoods' are found of loose sprang work in undyed linen, giving a hairnet-like appearance.



Aelia Flavia Flaccilla, wife of Theodosius I, 380's



Hair pieces, e.g. coiled buns, wigs, hair oil and dyes were all used. Empresses seemed to cover the hair increasingly with bands, diadems and headdresses.

The *palla* or *palliola* could be draped over the hair as a veil for modesty or practical protection from sun and rain and shorter head scarves could be tied over in the manner of working women through the ages. Covering the hair when near fires is a good idea and can quickly disguise a recognisable modern style or colour.



Copper alloy, bone or jet pins are common, generally 2½" to 6" long and sometimes with very ornate heads, jet typically with 'diamond faceted' and bronze with 'bead and reel' heads in the C4<sup>th</sup>. They seem to have been used for general dress pinning purposes as well as for hair.



Crummy Type 3,  
Type B head,  
broken tip, 63mm



Crummy Type 6,  
reel, bead, reel head,  
broken tip, 61mm

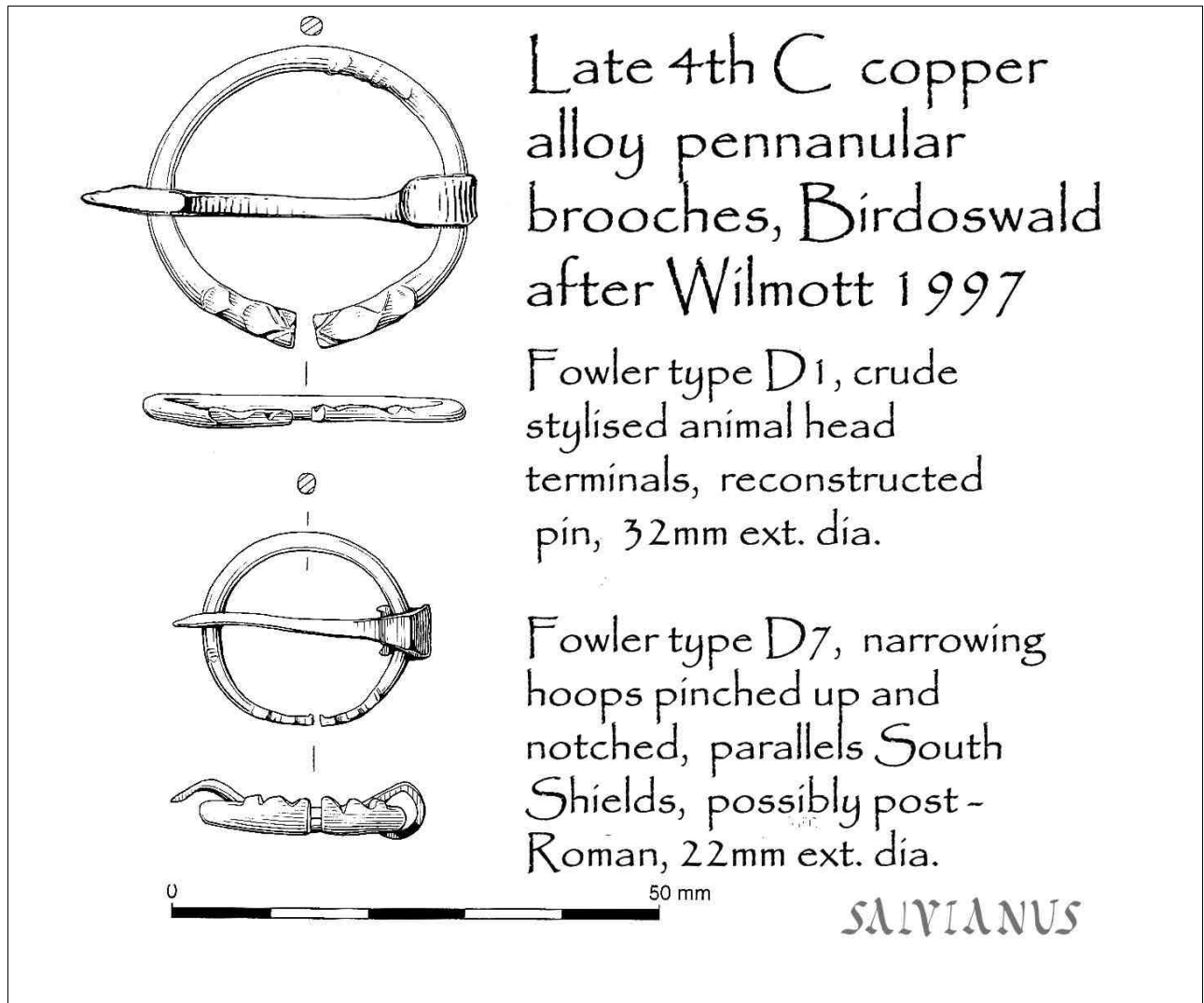
SALVIANUS



Late 4th C bone pins, Birdoswald, after Wilmott 1997

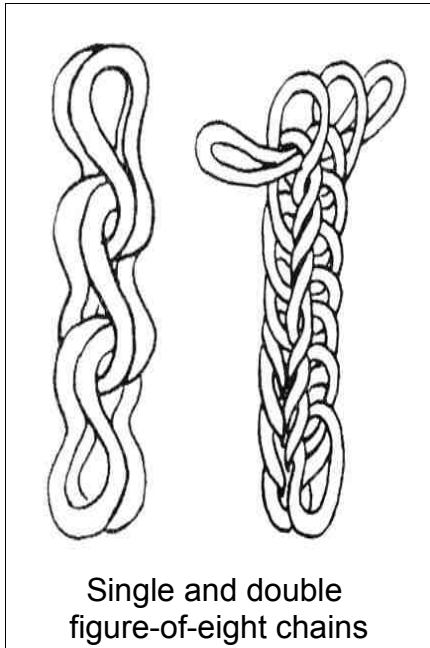
## Jewellery

Jewellery can be minimal. Collecting appropriate pieces can become a long term joy and convenient gift idea! All you need if wearing the peplos are two brooches and not all matched exactly. Penannular copper alloy brooches are the characteristic type in Late Roman Britain, particularly in the north. In the late C4<sup>th</sup> rolled back terminals were replaced by toothed or zoomorphic ones. Avoid highly decorated later 'Celtic' and 'Viking' designs. In North Yorkshire, Anglian annular (closed ring) brooches became the most common over the C5<sup>th</sup>-7<sup>th</sup> including large quoit brooches.

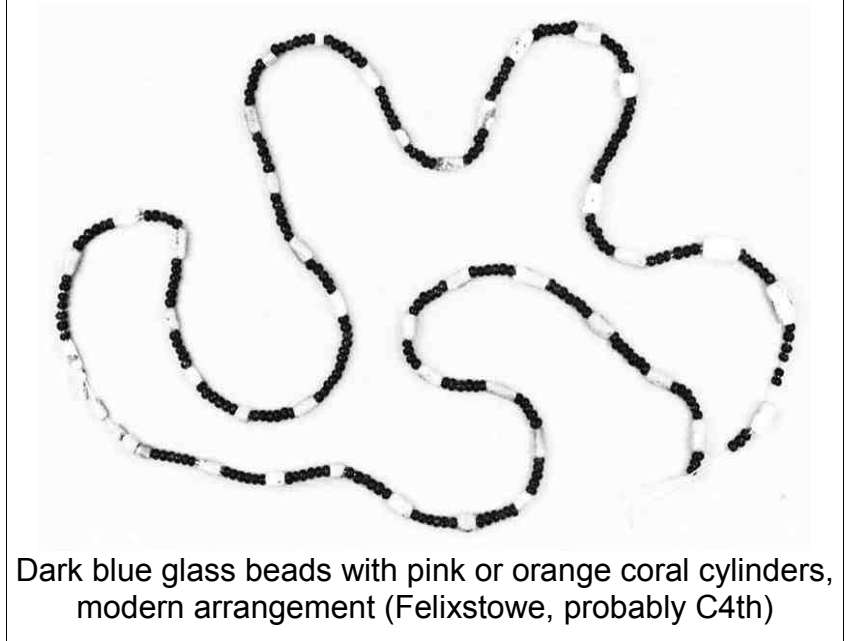


Necklaces were commonly strings of beads, sometimes fastened with a metal clasp and sometimes bearing a larger central bead or pendant. Typical Late Roman beads were translucent glass dark blue 'diamond faceted' (cubes with the corners cut off) or green cylinders. Yellow and clear beads were also worn. 'Melon beads' are distinct but ceased production in the mid C2<sup>nd</sup> (to reappear as post-Roman) and amber and coral are not common. Opaque annular beads might be found with coloured decoration applied, possibly a northern European influence and usable for Anglian impressions.

Strings might be matched in colour, or strung in alternating colours and generally worn at the base of the neck, although it seems women in York preferred unusually long necklaces! (Allason-Jones 1996)

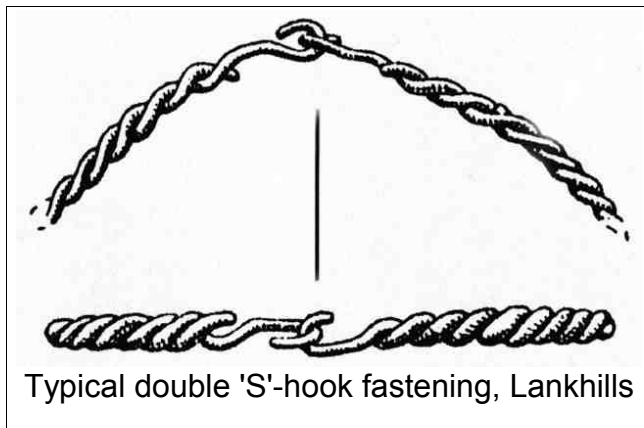


Single and double figure-of-eight chains



Dark blue glass beads with pink or orange coral cylinders, modern arrangement (Felixstowe, probably C4th)

Necklace and body chains were typically figure-of-eight links joined loop-in loop with a 90° twist, often two or three series interlocked. Pearls were particularly prized, seen as strings and as earrings in high status images. Simple copper alloy wire loops were worn in pierced ears, suspending beads or pearls. Plain open loops are the most frequently found, but twisted wire was also common.

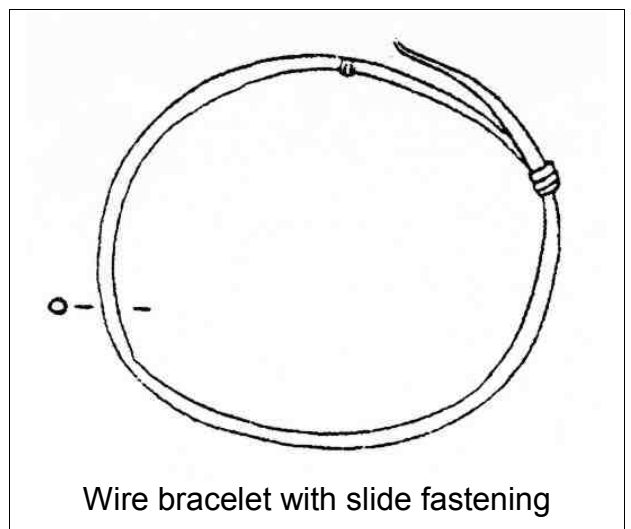


Typical double 'S'-hook fastening, Lankhills



Cast copper alloy bracelet resembling twisted wire (C3<sup>rd</sup>-4<sup>th</sup>) Dorchester

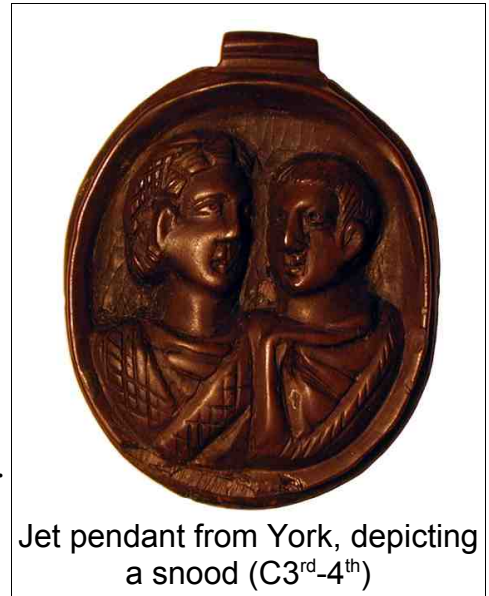
Simple bracelets of copper alloy were common, with plain wire or D-section, or 'cable bracelets' of twisted wire. Bracelets made of flat strips of copper alloy with hook and eye fastenings decorated with zigzag patterns are characteristic of Late Roman Britain, as well as ring and dot and sometimes in mixed symmetrical panels with hatching, ribs and so on. Cog wheels - apparently bracelets - are nearly unique to Britain, including one from Heslington Field, York.



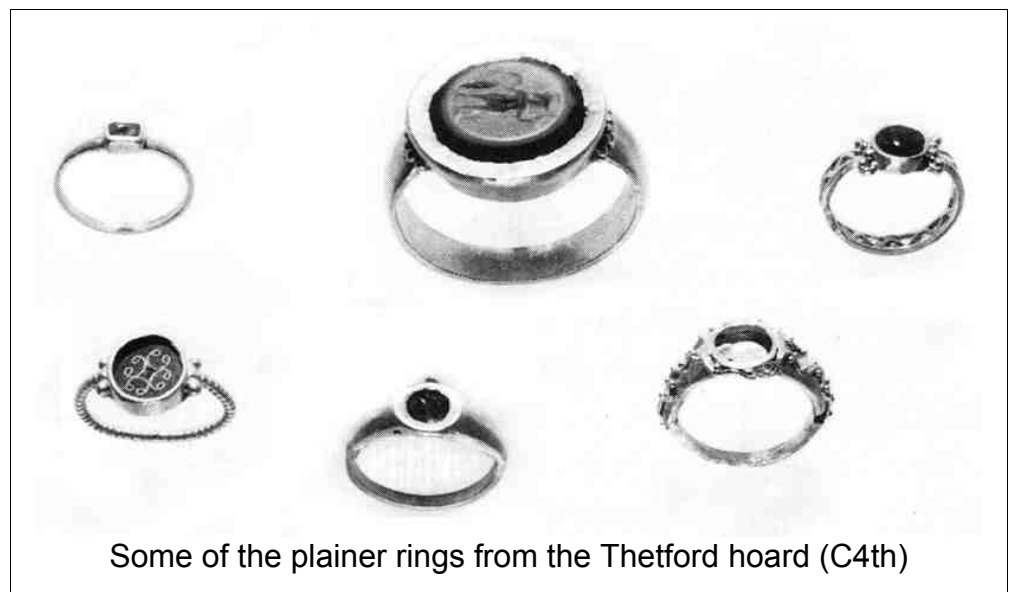
Wire bracelet with slide fastening

Plain or simply ribbed circular rings and bangles or armlets of dark glass, bone or (particularly around York) jet were popular.

Whitby jet was worked in York in the late C2<sup>nd</sup>-4<sup>th</sup> leaving a wealth of finds, many rare elsewhere in the empire and the Yorkshire Museum has an excellent collection for inspiration. Cylindrical beads, notched to make 1-4 'barrels' or multiple rounded discs were characteristically C3<sup>rd</sup>-4<sup>th</sup>. Armlets could be plain, sometimes very thick, cabled or richly 'chip-carved' in diamond patterns. Silver and even gold bracelets appear in hoards with plain and beaded filigree applied to surfaces or as openwork. Gold rings often had a stone setting or carved intaglio and some were inscribed. More elaborate styles of jewellery require careful research to ensure authenticity.



Jet pendant from York, depicting a snood (C3<sup>rd</sup>-4<sup>th</sup>)



Some of the plainer rings from the Thetford hoard (C4<sup>th</sup>)

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