



CLOTHING III. IN THE ARSACID PERIOD

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iii. In the Arsacid period

The Parthian period (ca. 250 b.c.e.-224 c.e.), when the Arsacid dynasty ruled, or claimed to rule, Persia, was the period in which trousers and sleeved coats became common garb throughout the Near East. These garments, the direct ancestors of modern dress, crossed political and ethnic boundaries and were worn from northern India to Syria, continuing styles already documented for the Achaemenids (see ii, above; Bittner). The conquests of Alexander the Great and subsequent Seleucid rule produced no change in Persian dress. On the contrary, Persian styles spread and even on occasion influenced the dress of the Greeks.

Male clothing. The most distinctive Parthian garment was trousers (*šalwār*) of fairly fine fabric that fell in elliptical folds to the ankles (Kawami, 1987, pl. 11), where the hems might be fastened snugly or pushed into boot tops (Kawami, 1987, pls. 7, 4). It has been suggested that in some Parthian sculptures, for instance, the well-known bronze figure from Šāmī (Shami) in Kūzestān (ancient Elymais; see [plate lxvii](#)), the representations of trousers were actually intended as leggings of leather, worn for protection while riding (Godard, p. 158). The Šāmī “prince” does indeed wear leggings of an unidentified material,



but they are worn over trousers, not in place of them, and the fine soft drape of the material does not evoke leather. A second type of trousers had sharp vertical pleats (Kawami, 1987, pls. 4, 26). The apparent stiffness of the pleats and their pronounced width suggest a heavy cotton, linen, or wool fabric (for Parthian textiles, see Kawami, 1989). A third type appears only on a relief from Bard-e Nešānda (Bard-i Neshandeh; see [plate lxviii](#)) in Kūzestān, where trousers with horizontal folds or wrinkles are depicted (Kawami, 1987, pl. 26). Neither the trousers with elliptical folds nor those with vertical pleats appear in the Achaemenid reliefs at Persepolis (see ii, above). The third type of trousers is, however, shown as part of the garb of the Bactrian delegation on the Apadāna reliefs (Schmidt, I, p. 195, pl. 41A-B), suggesting a northeastern origin for the garment.

Two types of sleeved garment were worn with the trousers, a fitted jacket that closed in front and a loose tunic with no discernible opening, both worn belted. These garments were worn by royal and nonroyal figures. The earliest version of the jacket resembles Achaemenid examples and is documented at Assur in northern Mesopotamia in the early 1st century c.e. (Colledge, pl. 28b). It was a short, hip-length garment wrapped diagonally across the chest, its snug fit accentuated by a narrow belt at the waist, appropriate dress for such active pursuits as hunting on horseback, when loose folds might have hampered movement. This type of jacket appears on sculptures from Kūzestān, on coins of the Arsacid kings, and in nonroyal representations (Kawami, 1987, pls. 7, 11; *Camb. Hist. Iran* III/1, pls. 4/1, 5/12, 6/1, 9/3). A related version, a knee-length coat left open in front to reveal a tunic underneath, is also known from many Achaemenid representations. In these earlier illustrations, however, the coat is always shown draped loosely over the shoulders, the sleeves dangling empty at the sides. Indeed, a fur coat with sleeves too narrow to be wearable has survived from the 5th-4th century b.c.e. (Kawami, 1989, p. 16 n. 50). Parthian representations of this coat are somewhat later in date than those of the short, fitted jacket. In Persia it is known only from Bard-e Nešānda, where both the Arsacid king and his attendants wear it (Kawami, 1987, pl. 26). Outside Persia, however, it is well documented on royal images, from Hatra in Mesopotamia to the Kushan kingdom in what is now Pakistan and Afghanistan (Ghirshman, p. 89, fig. 100; Colledge, pl. 14).

The second basic type of sleeved garment, the long tunic, was worn either under the open coat or, more commonly, by itself. Outside Persia it was sometimes patterned all over with diamond shapes, which could also appear



on trousers. Persian tunics were ornamented with bands, probably embroidered or woven, at the wrists and necklines. Occasionally one to three ornamental strips ran down the front of the garment, evoking the decorated tunics of the late Hellenistic Mediterranean (Kawami, 1987, p. 142, pl. 4; Trilling, pp. 47-49, 64-72, 77). The tunic was frequently secured by a loose, low-slung belt worn at the hips. Such belts could be simple broad bands, presumably of leather, or they might feature a variable number of decorative medallions or plaques. A complete gold belt of a similar design has been excavated in northern Afghanistan (Sarianidi, no. 4.2, pp. 150-54, 246-47). Although outside the area of direct Parthian or Arsacid control, this find is dated to the Parthian period. In the second half of the Parthian period two types of tunic can be distinguished in representations. One type, worn with an elaborate broad belt, has a flaring hem suggestive of a smooth, stiff fabric. It has parallels in the dress of the Kushans (Ghirshman, pp. 269, 279; Colledge, pl. 14a-b) and other related groups to the east (Kawami, 1987, pp. 144-45). The other type is distinguished by fine, soft pleats and a narrow belt and is related to contemporary dress at Palmyra in Syria (Ghirshman, p. 3 figs. 4-5, pp. 78-79). Both types of tunic are documented in Kūzestān, where trade routes from eastern and western Asia met. The major regional distinction that can be observed in Parthian dress is the preference in most of western Persia for the short belted jacket, whereas the longer, fuller tunic was preferred in Kūzestān.

Another distinctive item of clothing, a long, narrow bundle of fabric worn over the left shoulder, is known only from Kūzestān. It occurs regularly in depictions of rulers on the early coinage of Elymais issued by the local Kamnaskirid dynasty (1st century b.c.e.-1st century c.e.; *Camb. Hist. Iran* III/1, pls. 11/12, 12/1-2) and later on sculptures in the same region (Kawami, 1987, pls. 26, 38, 59). It was never worn by the Arsacid kings and appears only once outside Kūzestān, at Bīsotūn (Kawami, 1987, pl. 4). As it is usually worn by priestly, rather than secular, figures in these representations, it has been interpreted as a badge of religious office; the evidence of the Kamnaskirid coins would then suggest that they held such office themselves (Henning, p. 165). The origins of the roll are obscure; one possibility is that it was derived from the twist or loop of cloth carried by the figure directly behind the royal figure in a relief in the Treasury at Persepolis (Schmidt, I, pl. 121).

The footgear of this period, boots of soft leather, continues a general type known in the Achaemenid period, but the Achaemenid examples are worn only by delegations from the northeastern regions carved on the Apadāna



reliefs at Persepolis (Schmidt, I, pls. 30B, 33B, 41A-B). The latter illustrate footgear that originated in the regions in which the Arsacid dynasty arose. The simple style precludes recognition of most utilitarian details, showing only the differences in the height of the boot tops and occasionally the use of straps with ornate buckles to secure the loose material at the ankle (Kawami, 1987, pl. 31). Examples of these buckles have been excavated at the Parthian site of Tilga Tepe in northern Afghanistan (Sarianidi, no. 4.1, pp. 182, 246, 247), but none is known from Persia proper. The multiple straps seen in some Achaemenid renderings (Bittner, pls. 2-5a) are not shown in Parthian representations.

Female clothing. Women are seldom represented in Parthian reliefs. Their main dress seems to have consisted of a long, full garment, belted at the waist and falling to the ankles in many fine pleats. It is distinguished from the loose male tunic only by its length. A second element of female garb was a veil covering the back of the head. Such veils were common throughout the Near East and the Aegean from the Achaemenid (see ii, above) through the Parthian period (Macurdy). Footgear was presumably similar to that of men, but the few known representations are too summary to warrant further conclusions.

See also [belts](#).

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