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Audrey Gouy

► **To cite this version:**

Audrey Gouy. The Performative Clothing in pre-Roman Italy. Ritual Function of Etruscan Dress among Mediterranean Interactions and Cultural Identity (6th-5th cent. BC). Sessions 6–8, Single Contributions. Archaeology and Economy in the Ancient World – Proceedings of the 19th International Congress of Classical Archaeology, Cologne/Bonn 2018, 55, pp.49-50, 2023, 10.11588/propylaeum.1035.c14047 . hal-04559134

HAL Id: hal-04559134

<https://hal.science/hal-04559134>

Submitted on 25 Apr 2024

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The Performative Clothing in Pre-Roman Italy. Ritual Function of Etruscan Dress among Mediterranean Interactions and Cultural Identity (6th–5th century BC)

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The representations of ritual performances found in Tyrrhenian Etruria and dated from the 6th and 5th centuries BC enable the identification of a complete repertoire of Etruscan clothes for this period. The studies of Larissa Bonfante¹ distinguished the clothes inspired by the Mediterranean area and those properly Etruscan. My paper proposes an innovative functional and anthropological study in order to stress a cultural definition of Etruscan dress and to focus on its importance as a ritual device. Thus, it is focused on Etruscan dance and representations of body movements in visual art and was built on the results of my PhD, which constituted the first comprehensive study on Etruscan dance and the first ‘anthropo-iconological’ study of ancient dance by focusing on iconography, non-verbal communication, visuality and phenomenology. It was based on the serial and typological analysis of the Etruscan visual representations of dance and of 2,143 body postures – or *schemata*.²

(1) How can we determine clothes had a ritual function, and what was it? My thesis on Etruscan dance highlighted that specific clothes were employed for rituals, and that they were used according to the moments and the functions of the rituals. This brings me to consider them as performative tools. I presented the reliefs from Chiusi and the tomb paintings from Tarquinia where we can see that specific types of dance were always carefully selected, as well as specific moments of dance, and most of the time final moments of these dances. This helps to understand the different phases and sequences of each kind of dances. Additionally, it is possible to argue that the orgiastic dance is very often the kind that is selected and represented, and the culmination point of the dance is most of the time the moment chosen to be depicted. This culmination point is indicated by the body postures (legs wide open and jumping, arms raised, mantle knotted around the females’ chest or waist). It is usually argued that all the feminine figures wearing the long *chiton*, the mantle on the shoulders and the conic hat, that we call a *tutulus*, are aristocratic women. A new study of these feminine figures and of their clothes invites an argument for a different interpretation. It seems indeed that these figures appear in specific phases of the dances, and seem to have had a specific role compared to the other female dancers. Rather than an aristocratic status, I suggest they had a powerful ritual function, highlighted by the clothes. Further, that these particular figures were in charge of the ritual’s opening, while others figures, e.g. those wearing two overlapping tunics, were in charge of the ending.

(2) Consequently, it questions the actors’ status in rituals. It is possible to draw differences of clothing between performers and thus their different functions during rituals. In consequence, the clothes are understood as propitiatory ritual devices. On this

point, the female castanet player is of primary importance. While all the female dancers have the same clothes, this figure wears significantly different clothes and often appears in representations of dance. She appears as marginal, wearing a long and transparent *chiton*, on which a short *chiton* is placed, red, and sleeveless. Moreover, this figure is interesting because she does not appear only in representations of dance, but also in representations of sports performance. The sound of her castanets was resonating and thundering. So she might have had the function to raise and increase the pressure and the suspense. In orgiastic dance performances, the aim of this castanets player was to increase the effects of wine consumption, and to help the dancers to access another state of consciousness, certainly a state of trance.

(3) Finally, the differences of use and clothing between imported textiles from the Mediterranean area and those Etruscan have been analysed. It seems that the ritual function of clothes is defined by their geographical origin, their colours and motives. If buying clothes far from Etruria reinforced their marginal and thus their ritual function, and if the ritual function of clothes was defined by their geographical origin, it possibly created a ritual trade. This point dealt with aspects of identity and cultural interactions.

Notes

¹ Bonfante 1975.

² Catoni 2005.

References

Bonfante 1975

L. Bonfante, *Etruscan Dress* (Baltimore 1975).

Catoni 2005

M. L. Catoni, *Schemata. Comunicazione non verbale nella Grecia antica* (Pisa 2005).