

The Parthian haute-couture at Palmyra

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Fig. 1: Bronze statue from Shami, Iran. (© National Museum of Iran, Tehran).

Introduction

The aim of this paper is to draw attention to a certain type of costume at Palmyra that is associated with Iranian peoples. It is alien to the Roman world of fashion and does not belong to the local Palmyrene tradition. Under the Arsacid Parthians, who by c.100 BC ruled over vast territories stretching from the River Euphrates in the west to modern Afghanistan in the east, this type of costume, which was also worn by the king of kings and his entourage, became fashionable outside the political boundaries of the Parthian Empire, and continued to remain popular for centuries. Palmyrene merchants, who traded with the Partho-Sasanian world in Mesopotamia must have seen these costumes in centres such as Seleucia-on-the Tigris and Vologasia and imported this type of outfit into Palmyra where it became fashionable amongst the wealthy inhabitants of the caravan city.²

The Parthian costume³ is a trouser-suit, which consists of a belted tunic or jacket and trousers (fig. 1). Other items of clothing, such as a long-sleeved coat and a shoulder-cloak are sometimes added. In addi-

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2. See al-As’ad and Schmidt-Colinet 1995, 28 who emphasise Palmyra’s close contact in the early Hellenistic period with Seleucid centres along the Euphrates and the Tigris in the East, e.g. Seleucia and Dura, and then later with Parthian-period Hatra.

3. For a detailed discussion of the Parthian costume see Curtis 1988.



Fig. 2a, b: Parthian silver tetradrachm of Phraates IV (38-2 BC) (© Trustees of the British Museum).

tion, royal figures wear either a tall hat (tiara) or a diadem as a symbol of kingship. The trouser-suit appears on Parthian coins (fig. 2) and remains in fashion long after the collapse of the Parthian empire in AD 224 (fig. 3). Just like the Parthian king of kings and the nobility, the Sasanian rulers and their entourages also wore elaborate trousers and tunics. This type of costume became one of the hallmarks of the art of these two Iranian pre-Islamic dynasties. By the first century BC this riding costume had become the haute-couture of the non-Roman east. It was also adopted and worn in a modified fashion as a ceremonial outfit by the neighbouring kings of Commagene.⁴ By the late Parthian period its popularity had risen to such a degree that it was commonly shown in a highly decorated and elaborate fashion in the art of Hatra, Dura Europos and Palmyra.

The trouser-suit had its origins before the Parthian period. Belted tunics and trousers were widely depicted in Achaemenid art (c. 550 - 330 BC), where they were worn by male figures in a variety of contexts,⁵ in-

cluding hunting scenes, combat scenes, and worshipping scenes. But official royal Persian art does not show the king of kings wearing trousers in ceremonial and religious scenes.⁶ However, trousers were worn by Persian satraps and trousers were the traditional costume of a number of delegations who appear on the 6th century BC reliefs at Persepolis. These include Delegations I (the Medes), XI (Scythians, who also present the king of kings with trousers and the long-sleeved coat), and Delegations XIII and XV (Bactrians or Parthians). All these delegations are Iranian speaking peoples, from the east of Iran.⁷

However, it was only with the arrival of the new dynasty of the Arsacid Parthians in the third century BC that this type of costume became the official outfit

Greek art Persians are usually shown wearing trousers, e.g. see the so-called Darius Vase in Curtis and Tallis 2005, 107, fig. 48. 6. E.g. see Darius relief at Bisitun and Darius statue from Susa in Curtis and Tallis 2005, 22, 99, figs. 6, 88. The Alexander Mosaic from Pompeii does show Darius III wearing trousers at the Battle of Issus in 333 BC. For Persians wearing trousers, see also the so-called Alexander Sarcophagus in Sidon, Curtis 1998, pl. III d.

7. Curtis 1998, 66; Curtis 2007, 419-420; 1998; 2000.

4. Curtis 2001, pl. VI; Errington and Curtis 2011, 11-12, fig. 91.

5. Curtis and Tallis 2005, 159, fig. 200, 170, figs. 258-259. In



Fig. 3: Sasanian rock-relief of Shapur I (AD 240-272) at Bis-hapur, Iran (© G. Herrmann).

of kings. On the reverse of the earliest Parthian coins we find all the items of the Iranian rider costume in association with the royal archer: the tunic, trousers and the long-sleeved coat (fig. 4). The trouser-suit became one of the hallmarks of Parthian iconography, and Parthian statues, reliefs and small finds show male figures dressed in tunics, jackets, trousers and leggings.

By the beginning of the first century BC the Parthian king wears a jacket and trousers on his coins, and often details such as the royal jacket, trousers and leggings and even belt plaques can be seen on their coins.⁸ The large bronze statue from Shami (fig. 1)

8. Curtis 2003, pl. XXI c-d.



Fig. 4a, b: Parthian silver drachm of Mithradates I (171-138 BC) (© Trustees of the British Museum).

and the marble statuette from Susa in southwestern Iran and Stele I, II and III from Parthian Assur in Mesopotamia show male figures wearing the trouser-suit.⁹ On the Shami statue we can see clearly how leggings or over trousers were pulled up at the back and attached to suspenders, which disappeared under the jacket at the back. Numerous examples of the trouser-suit are also known from late Parthian-period reliefs and statues in Iran and Mesopotamia. In Elymais in southwestern Iran a long-sleeved long sash is often worn in addition over the left shoulder.¹⁰ The art of the semi-independent kingdom of Hatra has also produced many examples of the trouser-suit (fig. 5). Here, male worshippers and some of the gods wear elaborately decorated belted tunics which are combined with baggy trousers. Floral and geometric designs running down the centre of the tunic and the

trouser legs and on the hem and cuffs suggest that ornate embroidered textiles were used for these costumes.¹¹

The Parthian costume at Palmyra

At Palmyra there are many funerary and religious reliefs – and some statues – showing male figures dressed in the Parthian fashion. In addition, actual finds of textile fragments from Palmyrene tombs suggest that in the first to third centuries AD a large part of the population adopted the Parthian fashion, while others were dressed in the Roman style of the time.¹² The trouser-suit at Palmyra consisted of a round-necked long-sleeved belted tunic – short, knee-length and long trousers and/or leggings. Often a cloak fastened on the shoulder was worn, or a himation was draped

9. Curtis 1993, 63-69, pls. XIX-XXI; von Gall 1988, pl. 4. Examples of leggings further east include statues from Kampyr Tepe and Butkara, see Curtis 1993, pl. XXII a-c.
10. Cf. Curtis 1994, pls. I, III a-d; 1998, 64-65, pls. IIIa-c, IVb; von Gall 1998, pls. 3b, 5a, 7, 8b; Curtis 2000, pls. 9, 10, 11; Curtis 2001, 302, fig. 1, pl. IX.

11. Curtis 1998, pl. Iva; von Gall 1998, pl. 10 b-d; Curtis 2000, pl. III.

12. Stauffer 1995, 59. For the 'Parthian Kaftan' as example of an eastern-Parthian tradition, see also Stauffer 2000, 33-35, figs. 34, 39.



Fig. 5: Statue of King Walkash, Hatra (© J. E. Curtis).

around the tunic. Occasionally we find evidence of the long-sleeved coat.¹³

An early example of the Parthian costume occurs on the architectural reliefs of the Temple of Bel.¹⁴ The ‘Foundation T’ relief shows a headless rider figure looking right and wearing a round-necked (?) long-sleeved belted tunic, a shoulder cloak and wide trousers/leggings (fig. 6). A decorative vertical band with dots (pearls?) runs down the side of the trouser leg. A similar (divine?) rider figure, but turning left, wears an almost identical outfit with a decorative cable pattern band on the side of the trouser leg.¹⁵ Relief decoration on the stone beams of the Bel Temple shows that trousers were also used to dress divine beings. For example, the god Aglibol wears a long-sleeved tunic with a cuirass, a cloak and wide leggings with the ornamental band at the side of the trouser legs rather than in the centre (fig. 7a). Wide leggings with diagonal folds fall over his shoes. The leggings were probably attached to suspenders covered by the tunic and were pulled up at the outside of the thighs.¹⁶ On the so-called ‘Offering scene’ of the Bel Temple male figures wear a draped himation over long tunics. The legs of two figures on the left are covered with leggings/trousers (fig. 7b). Trousers are also worn on a late first century altar relief from the sanctuary of Baalshamin. Here, the god Malakbel appears with a bushy curly Parthian hairstyle,¹⁷ and next to Malakbel and his chariot stands a dedicant wearing a long sleeved tunic, a draped himation and wide trousers.

An architectural relief from a sanctuary wall in the

13. Unusual is the costume of a winged figure on a ceiling slab from the Bel Temple. Here, a one-piece trouser-suit covers the sleeves and the legs, but leaves the chest bare. See Tanabe 1986, pl. 55

14. The temple of Bel was dedicated to the gods Bel, Iarhibol and Aglibol in AD 32, but building work on this sanctuary continued until the middle of the second century AD. See Colledge 1976, 20, 26

15. Tanabe 1986, pl. 139.

16. Such attachments are clearly visible on the relief of the Sasanian king Shapur I (AD 240-272) at Naqsh-e Rostam near Persepolis. See Curtis 1993, pl. XXII d.

17. Collart and Vicari 1969, pl. CVIII, 1-3; Tanabe 1986, pl. 180.

Fig. 6: Fragment of rider figure from 'Foundation T' relief, Palmyra (© G. Herrmann).



Agora shows a male standing figure flanked by a lion on each side.¹⁸ He may be the god Ares-Mars who wears a cuirass over his tunic, a cloak and trousers. A relief of perhaps the god Malka shows him in tunic and baggy trousers with curly Parthian-style hair.¹⁹

Gods are often clad in tunics, trousers and a cuirass at Palmyra (fig. 8). A relief from Khirbet Ramadan near Palmyra shows the gods Aglibol and Malakbel shaking hands.²⁰ Aglibol wears trousers with a military cuirass while Malakbel appears with belted tunic, cloak and trousers tucked into boots. Both gods have a full bushy hairstyle in the Parthian fashion. The combination of trousers and boots is similar to the outfit of Vologases IV on the second century

AD free-standing rock at Bisitun in western Iran, where the Parthian king of kings holds his right hand over an altar (fig. 9).

Also wearing a trouser-suit is a standing figure at Palmyra identified as Herakles-Nergal. His trousers are baggy with u-shaped folds, and the tunic has a vertical central dotted decorative band.²¹

The Temple of Nebu, which was founded during the first century AD and stayed in use until the fall of the city in the third century,²² includes a first century relief showing figures clad in tunic and draped himation. All three men wear a priestly cap but only the seated figure has his legs covered with trousers or leggings (fig. 10).²³

18. Tanabe 1986, pl. 82.

19. Tanabe 1986, pls. 116-117.

20. Tanabe 1986, pl. 111.

21. Tanabe 1986, 134.

22. Bouni and Saliby 1965, 127-8.

23. Colledge 1976, 41, fig. 21; Tanabe 1986, pl. 173.



Fig. 7a, b: Bel Temple beam relief, Palmyra (© J. E. Curtis).



Fig. 8: Relief from Palmyra Damascus Museum (© J. E. Curtis).



Fig. 9: Parthian relief at Bisitun, Iran (© G. Herrmann).

The funerary art of Palmyra also provides us with many examples of male figures dressed in tunics and trousers.²⁴ A relief from the tower tomb of Kitôt in the Valley of the Tombs of AD 40 shows the principal reclining figure in the presence of his wife and two sons. Kitôt wears a long-sleeved round-necked tunic, a draped himation and wide trousers with a decorative band; traces of greenish/blue colour were discovered on his trousers.²⁵ A draped himation over the tunic is

24. See also Long, this volume.

25. Colledge 1976, 64-65, fig. 37; Tanabe 1986, pl. 210.



Fig. 10: Relief from the Temple of Nebu, Palmyra, Palmyra Museum (© G. Herrmann).

often worn by priests at Palmyra. Evidence for this type of over garment is also found at Parthian Assur in the first century AD where it is worn by the standing male figure on Stele III, now in the Archaeological Museum in Istanbul.²⁶ It is also worn by some male figures, probably priests, at Hatra and Dura Europos during the second and third centuries AD.²⁷

Banquet reliefs at Palmyra often depict young men in attendance dressed in almost identical outfits to their master. Their costume consists of a belted round-necked, long-sleeved tunic with a decorative band on the neckline, cuffs and hemline, a cloak, tight trousers

26. Curtis 1993, pl. XXIIb.

27. For Hatra, see Safar and Mustafa 1974, pls. 27, 44; Curtis 1994, pl. II b. For Dura Europos, see e.g. paintings from the Private Houses in Perkins 1973, pl. 25.



Fig. 11: Funerary relief from Palmyra, Damascus Museum (© J. E. Curtis).

with a vertical decorative band in the centre and leggings with v-shaped folds that start just above the knee and end at the ankle. Leggings worn by standing, seated and reclining figures are often combined with a short belted tunic that ends either on the thighs or well above the knee (figs. 11 and 12).²⁸ In the banquet relief of the Hypogeum of Artaban of the late second century AD the family is shown around the reclining main figure who wears a tunic, draped mantle and trousers. His son (?) who affectionately rests his feet on his father's leg and places his hand on his father's hand, wears a short belted tunic, trousers and wide leggings pulled up at the sides.²⁹ It is interesting that he has the Iranian name of Artaban.³⁰ All leggings, usually with a decorated band at the top, were

probably attached to suspenders hidden under the tunic (fig. 12a, b).³¹

There are slight differences in the style of Parthian tunics and their decoration at Palmyra. When worn with leggings the tunic is short or knee-length. Tunics are sometimes plain with u-shaped folds but, particularly in the late period, they are elaborately decorated with a band of dotted design (pearls?), scrolls or a floral motif on the cuffs, hems and the centre of the tunic. In the third century decorative bands include vine scrolls; a bird pecking at bunches of grapes and a nude winged Eros figure with a bow.³² The neckline is sometimes made up of round plaques in the Sasanian style.³³ These tunics are sometimes worn with a belt made up of round plaques mounted

28. See also Colledge 1976, pl. 112; Tanabe 1986, pl. 255 (here the leggings are very wide); pls. 416, 440-443, 448.

29. Tanabe 1986, 229-230.

30. Other Iranian names found in Palmyrene inscriptions include Frahat, Orobazes, Hormuz, Vardanes, Orodes, Mithridates and Tiridates. See Starky 1971, 85, 132. This may have been the fashion of the time.

31. Tanabe 1986, pl. 420: funerary relief from the Hypogeum of Ashtor: Colledge 1976, pls. 74, 99 (NCG 1030 & 1082).

32. Tanabe 1986, pls. 374-380, 389-392.

33. For elaborate necklines of the early Sasanian period, see Curtis 1993, pl. XXII d; Herrmann 2000, pls. 13, 15. For Hatra, see for example Curtis 2000, pl. III; Curtis 2001, pl. X.



Fig. 12a, b, c: Palmyrene reliefs and statues showing figures wearing leggings, Palmyra Museum (© J. E. Curtis).





Fig. 13a, b: Banquet reliefs, Palmyra Museum (© G. Herrmann).



on leather straps and knotted in the centre and ending in a bow. Third century banquet reliefs also show figures wearing slightly flared tunics with slits at the sides. This type of tunic is also seen worn by standing figures (fig. 13). Occasionally, figures in tunics and trousers have also the full Parthian tripartite hairstyle

with bunches of curly hair on either side of the head (fig. 14).³⁴

34. Colledge 1976, pl. 109; Tanabe 1986, 434-436; see also Long, this volume.

Fig. 14: Banquet relief, Palmyra (© Palmyra Portrait Project. By permission of Ny Carlsberg Glyptotek).



The Parthian-style tunic at Palmyra is always worn with a belt. This can be in the form of a girdle worn over a cuirass or a long tunic and knotted in the centre. Particularly popular is a looped belt made up of a plain band knotted in the centre with its long ends tucked twice under the waistband, thus creating two semi-circular loops (figs. 11, 13-14). This type of belt is not popular in western Parthia, including Elymais.³⁵ There, we find girdles knotted in the centre but not with the ends tucked under the waistband. Belts made up of plaques, particularly popular in Parthia, are also represented at Palmyra but are not very common (fig. 15).³⁶ A belt with plaques is also worn by an unprovenanced statue of a standing male figure in the Aleppo Museum (fig. 16).

In early third century Hatra belts made up of plaques show representations of busts of deities, animals and mythological creatures, and actual belt plaques with such figural and animal representation are known from within Parthia, as well as neighbouring regions (fig. 5).³⁷ Belts made up of plaques remain an important item of the Iranian costume amongst royal figures and the aristocracy in the Sasanian period.³⁸

Belts have a special significance in the Iranian tradition. They are not merely an item of clothing, but are also a symbol of kingship and rank, and they are seen as a bond between a subject and his superior/king. The modern Persian word '*kamar band*', Middle Persian *kml bnd* consists of the words *kamar/kamal* meaning waist, girdle, belt, and the *band* meaning

35. Curtis 1994, pls. I, III; Curtis 2001, pls. VIII-XI.

36. See also Tanabe 1986, pls. 374, 380.

37. Curtis 2001, 304, figs. 2, 306-308, pls. XII-XIV

38. See Curtis 2001.



Fig. 15: Banquet relief Palmyra (© T. Long).

bond, link. In Old Persian a *bandaka* is a subject of the king, someone who is tied to the king.³⁹

At Palmyra there are also depictions of another type of garment that is associated with the Iranian riding costume. This is the long-sleeved coat, the *kandys* (Old Persian *kantuš*), which is widely depicted in Achaemenid art and continues to be shown in the early Hellenistic period and the early Parthian period when it is usually slung over the shoulders in the Median fashion.⁴⁰ From the first century AD onwards it is worn properly with the arms inside the sleeves and representations of this type of overcoat are found within the Parthian empire, as well as neighbouring regions. This type of overcoat is also part of the costume of the originally nomadic Kushan kings of Bac-

tria in the first/second centuries AD.⁴¹ In the second and third centuries AD the long-sleeved coat appears in the art of Parthian Elymais and Hatra,⁴² and it is found on the wall paintings of the Roman-period Synagogue at Dura-Europos.⁴³

One of the sarcophagi in the tomb chamber of Maqqai,⁴⁴ dated to c. AD 229, shows a reclining figure in the centre – probably Maqqai himself – wearing a long sleeved coat over his elaborate belted tunic and trousers – the latter tucked into elaborate ankle boots. Traces of colour found on the reclining figure indicate that the coat was originally red, the tunic was blue with red bands, and the blue trousers had red stripes.⁴⁵ On the base of the sarcophagus, placed between the legs of the couch another scene was carved, where three armed men in frontal position are shown, one

39. The Iranian epic of *Shahnameh* or *Book of Kings*, completed in AD 1010 but based on a Sasanian *Book of Kings* and also other written and oral sources, often describes how the king of kings of Iran presented local kings and heroes with a belt as symbol of kingship. See Curtis 2001.

40. See relief of Qizqapan and coins of the Frataraka rulers of Persis in Curtis 2010.

41. Errington and Curtis 2011, fig. 63.

42. Curtis 2001, pls. IX, Xc.

43. Kraeling 1956, pls. XVIII, XIX.

44. Colledge 1976, pl. 102; see Long fig. 3 in this volume.

45. Ingholt 1935, 64; Colledge 1976, 100.

holding a horse. The two outer figures wear flared belted tunics, while the central figure, perhaps once again Maqqai himself, appears in a long sleeved coat. Again, traces of colour have survived,⁴⁶ blue used for the long coat, red for the lining and red between two narrow blue bands for the cuffs. The tunic of the central figure was red with a red waistband and a red sword-strap. Red was also found on his shoes and the trousers were red. The other two figures had red tunics, red belts, blue sword straps and blue trousers with a red central stripe.

A long-sleeved coat in combination with tunic and trousers is also worn by a reclining figure on a 'half sarcophagus' from the Tomb of Ailami and Zebida,⁴⁷ and a long sleeved coat is also worn in the unprovenanced statue from the Aleppo Museum (fig. 16).

Conclusion

A brief survey of the Parthian trouser-suit at Palmyra has shown that this Iranian costume was highly popular in the religious and secular art of this caravan city. It was not the sole type of costume worn by male figures but its frequent appearance, and the careful execution of various items of this type of clothing and the elaborate textile patterns suggest that it was highly desirable for some wealthy inhabitants to be seen wearing the non-Roman haute-couture of the time which originated in the Partho-Iranian world. The trouser-suit was the exotic costume of the east and as such it was associated the wealth generated through the trade of luxury goods in the Parthian empire and beyond. Regardless of whether the Palmyrenes actually wore these highly decorated tunics, trousers and the long-sleeved coat or not in the hot desert climate of the oasis, it became a status symbol for the wealthy inhabitants of Palmyra, including priests, who chose to depict some of their gods in this type of outfit.

The discovery of silk fragments with elaborately woven and embroidered designs suggests that, in fact, such elaborated textile patterns did exist. They were



Fig. 16: Unprovenanced statue in Aleppo Museum (© V. S. Curtis).

not only used for corpse wrappings but were also made for tunics and trousers.⁴⁸ One can only assume

46. Ingholt 1935, 66; Curtis 1988, 251.

47. Makowski 1983, 182, pl. 52a no. 7; Curtis 1988, 276.

48. Colledge 1976, 102-103, fig. 55; Fluck 2004, 137-151; Fluck and Vogelsang 2004, 1; Stauffer 2000, 34-36.

that the more elaborate the designs, the wealthier the deceased must have been. They also would not have been able to afford the lavish tombs and banquet reliefs if they did not have the means to do so. Contact between Palmyra and Parthian Mesopotamia must have been strong, as Palmyrene merchants exported the Parthian high fashion into their own world which was politically under Roman influence. It is not impossible that the Parthians exported actual items of their fashionable costume. It is also possible that Parthian merchants may have moved to and settled in Palmyra where an active trade with Rome and the Parthian East was generating considerable wealth amongst the merchant population of this caravan city. Although names often reflect the fashion of the time, it is nevertheless interesting that Iranian names such as Frahat, Orobazes, Artaban, Hormuz, Vardan, Orodes, Mithradate and Tiridate occur in the inscriptions at Palmyra.⁴⁹ Palmyra and its Semitic population lay outside the political and geographical boundaries of the Parthian empire, but contact with the Parthian world must have been strong enough for merchants to introduce the Parthian costume into Palmyra, and judging by the available evidence, the Parthian haute-couture became very popular in his caravan city.

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49. Ingholt 1936, 94; Starky 1971, 85, 132.

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