

Gender , Status, and Dress Code as Reflected on the Mosaic Pavements within the historical-geographic area of Eretz Israel towards the end of Late Antiquity

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During Late Antiquity, clothing constitutes an element pertaining to the material culture, it reflected gender, social norms, aesthetic aspects and function that enables examination of the role and status of the figures in society. The appropriate appearance of both sexes, were realized through imperial rules of apparel laid down towards the end of Late Antiquity. These regulations dealt with the supervision and restriction of fashion requirements, external appearance, individual clothing items (color and type of fabric, their cut, number of items, and who was permitted to wear them), its preferred length, whether it should be belted, etc., Men were expected to radiate masculinity, avoiding any features imitating female appearances. His tunic should be secured loosely with a belt. The garment should be such of a length to allow suitable body covering for every season of the year, and the quality of weaving of its tunic should not be too fine or soft, and its color not over-radiant.

In Eretz Israel mosaics one can discern on the one hand the magnificent garments of Orpheus on the Damascus Gate that depicted like an emperor ,dressed in a blue chiton with gold ornament, His red and gold folds chlamys is fasten with fibula set with precious stones. On the other hand the simpler attire of ordinary man or working men. The rules controlled which areas of the body were emphasized or downplayed, and what message the clothes should be conveyed about the person wearing them. Although according to the Christian faith, a righteous woman was characterized by her virtues, "scholars in the service of the church" followed their Roman forebears by adopting the correlation between immorality and bodily exposure and the use of costly and splendid garments. The preachers were compelled to deal with a unified line on the matter, like St. Clement of Alexandria who commented that it was unbecoming for a woman to wear a short garment which reached above her knees. Rather, she should wear a long, flowing garment that reached her ankles to avoid exposing any body part.

The women from the church at Kissufim and Orpheus mosaic are attired in long tunics that blur their body contours. They wear head coverings according to the local custom, which followed the Christian dress code of the Early Byzantine period. Consequently, one can discern the use of clothing as reflecting the normative female dress code of the period, transmitted by means of the wide garment totally enfolding its wearer and concealing her waist and hips.

In view of the demand to completely cover the female body, it is (somewhat) astonishing to see the nursing woman in the-floor mosaic in the church at Horbat Be'er Shem'a: she is wearing a long sleeveless tunic with no outer garment, gold jewelry, head covering and she is barefoot, the latter can be attesting to a lowly status. Her appearance raises questions about her identity: Is she the biological mother? A wet nurse? (Or perhaps) a mistress or servant bringing the infant to be blessed?

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Figure 1. The women from the church at Kissufim, 6th century CE.



Figure 2. Orpheus mosaic, Damascus Gate, Jerusalem, 4th -5th century CE.