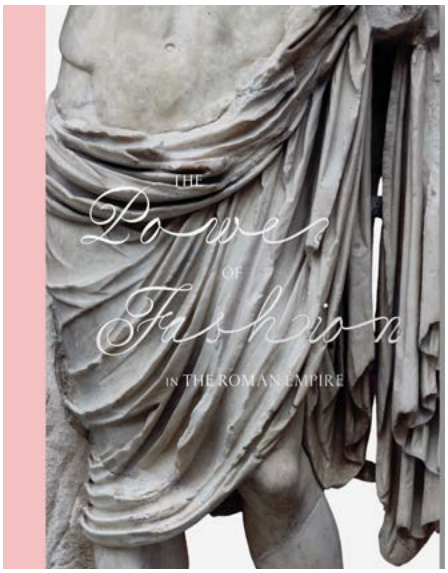
The Power of Fashion in the Roman Empire



This research-based anthology accompanies the special exhibition The Power of Fashion in the Roman Empire, on view at the Ny Carlsberg Glyptotek in Copenhagen in 2026–2027. Bringing together contributions by thirteen leading international scholars from universities in England, the United States, Canada, Sweden, and Denmark, the volume explores the relationship between fashion, dress, power, and identity in the Roman world, with a particular focus on Roman portraiture.

The anthology examines dress and appearance as forms of visual communication, exploring how clothing, hairstyles, jewellery, footwear, colour, and bodily appearance were used to construct, express, and negotiate identity and social status. It considers how representations of dress in ancient art can be interpreted as evidence of Roman clothing and appearance, while also taking into account the conventions and idealisations that shaped visual representations. Particular attention is given to the ways in which power and status were communicated through dress and portraiture. The clothing and representation of the Roman emperor and his family are examined alongside the archetypes through which members of the imperial household could be portrayed, revealing how appearance communicated legitimacy, authority, and political identity. The volume also explores representations of elite Roman women and the idealised ways in which their bodies were presented. Colour is another important theme. Roman sculptures, now often perceived as white marble, were originally vividly polychrome. Their reconstructed colours, including skin, hair, and clothing, offer important insights into the role of visual appearance in communicating identity. The anthology also considers groups beyond the elite, including freedmen, enslaved people, and children, asking how dress and appearance could signal social position and identity. Hairstyles, jewellery, and footwear are explored as particularly significant markers of changing fashion, gender, status, occupation, and social function.

Finally, the volume examines how modern viewers interpret ancient bodies, faces, and portraits, and how our own assumptions about appearance shape our understanding of Roman art. It concludes by placing ancient ideals of the athletic body in a contemporary context through a comparison with modern CrossFit athletes. Taken together, the contributions demonstrate that dress and appearance were far more than matters of personal adornment: they were powerful visual tools for communicating identity, status, gender, authority, and belonging in the Roman world.

FACTS

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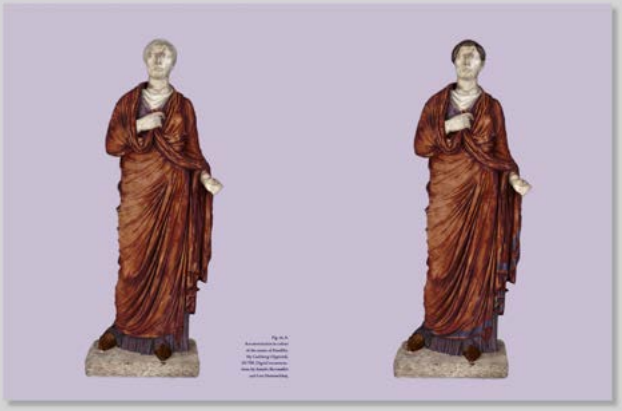

III

THE
COLOUR OF POWER:

THE
MATERIALITY
OF *Purple*
IN ROMAN
REPRESENTATION

BY
CECILIE BRØNS

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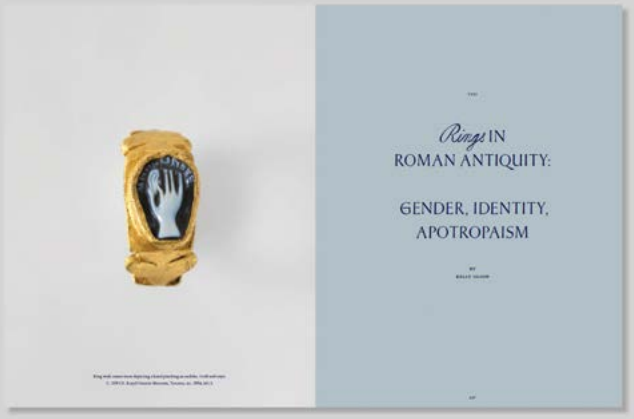

VIII

Rings IN
ROMAN ANTIQUITY:

GENDER, IDENTITY,
APOTROPAISM

BY