Leah Jolifaunt of Schattentor
fuerstme@gmail.com
AS L
July 2015

A Roman Woman's Medicamentum:
Creating the look of Roman Cosmetics with Modern Products

Introduction

A lot of time in the Society is spent talking about various matters of personal adornment - clothes, shoes, jewelry, etc. - cosmetics and body care don't get a lot of attention. The Compleat Anchronist has only had one issue regarding cosmetics, and Tournaments Illuminated boasts only four articles on the subject. I have yet to review these issues yet, so I can't speak to their contents. Stefan's Florilegium archive has two threads on cosmetics, but after a cursory look, the focus seems to be mostly on western European, post-Roman cultures, with perhaps a brief nod to ancient cultures such as Rome to acknowledge the fact that cosmetics were used. Google returns only a few more results - some blog posts with recipes for cosmetics used later in SCA period being the most relevant.

I came to the topic of Roman cosmetics after researching 8th century China, where women's cosmetics were an essential part of their adornment and most notably included a variety of lip and eyebrow styles. While working on skin-out Roman garb, I decided to look into Roman cosmetics to see what was done and how I could achieve the same results using modern cosmetics.

"The Fires of Rome are the Fires of Invention"

Fire relates to this A&S project both in that TRH Xerxis and Belanna, having Roman personas, inspired me to research ancient Roman dress and adornment. Fire is also used in the manufacture of kohl, which was used to accentuate the eyes.

A Note on Recreation Methods

It is not my goal to recreate what Roman women were trying to do by using period materials. This is due in part to the toxicity of substances used in period, and the availability of the non-toxic period options. Instead, my goal is to affect what a Roman woman would have worn using easily available modern materials. I'm not a person who normally wears any makeup, so for me, this was as much a study of modern cosmetics as it is was study of ancient ones.

A Note Regarding Source Material

In researching this topic, I relied primarily on Dr. Kelly Olson's *Dress and the Roman Woman: Self-preservation and Society* (2008). Much of the information regarding Roman cosmetics online and in other works on ancient Roman life and fashion either glosses over the topic, affording it only a few sentences, or is without what I would consider adequate references to primary sources. Olson's work on the subject is a much more detailed look at the subject, focusing on the substances used.

My research here draws heavily on Olson's work, specifically her chapter titled "The Cosmetic Arts and Care of the Body" (pp. 58-79). I also consulted Dr. Susan Stewart's Cosmetics and Perfume in the Roman World (2007).

The majority of Olson's sources are the writings of Roman men. As such, most of them come from moralistic or satirical texts, and so the information regarding cosmetics may be inaccurate or incomplete, since the writer's goal was not to describe the substance and application of cosmetics in detail (Olson, 2008, p. 59). Romans made a distinction between "the preservation of beauty, by means of creams or face-packs" (*to kosmêtikon tês iatrikês meros*) and "the 'unnatural embellishment' of looks: rouge or eye-makeup which provides beauty artificially (*to kommôtikon*) (Olson, 2008, p. 59). The primary sources praise the preservation of beauty through cosmetics, but augmentation was seen as deceptive and immoral. Much of the information gleaned about Roman cosmetics comes from the writings of the hostile anti-cosmetic tradition. Olson notes that it is clear when looking at the archaeological evidence that Roman women ignored these pronouncements against the use of cosmetics - in Dioscorides' *Materia Medica* (written between 50-70 AD), cosmetics count for the majority of non-medical usages of plants (Olson, 2008, p. 131).

Stewart (2007) makes a point in her book, *Cosmetics and Perfumes in the Roman World* that the term "Roman women" is more descriptive of women during a time period and rough geographic area than women of a specific ethnicity, given that women of a variety of different ethnic backgrounds made up Roman society,and this influenced the beauty products available and the ideas surrounding feminine beauty (Olson, 2008, p. 18).

The Dichotomy of *Medicamentum/Medicamen*

The terms most commonly used for paints, creams, and cosmetics were *medicamentum* or *medicamen.* Interestingly, the same words were used as synonyms for the following:

- to indicate artificial improvement
- remedy, curative, medication, drug
- poison, toxin
- enchantment

Olson discusses this conflation of the terms in Roman culture and views on femininity and adornment, concluding that women applied cosmetics to remedy their appearance, but a misuse of it could be a determent (a poison) to their reputation (Olson, 2008, p. 60).

So What's the Goal?

Did Roman women strive to preserve their natural beauty or augment their appearance to achieve an ideal? Much like modern women, I believe it to be a bit of both. In period literature, across genres and time, the most distinctive element of a woman's makeup is easily the "vivid red-and-

white color of the complexion" (Olson, 2008, p. 63). Some scholars believe this to be comparable to the way in which the artificially red-and-white face physically identified a member of the aristocracy in 18th century England and France. However, there is a noteworthy disconnect between Roman authors and the art of the period - women depicted in frescoes and mosaics have natural skin tones. Olson postulates that these women are either not wearing makeup or else the descriptions in the literature are hyperbolic in order to satirize and condemn feminine frivolity and deception as tied to the use of cosmetics.

Like Olson, I believe that the Roman woman strove for a pale, smooth, blemish-free complexion. A healthy glow to the cheeks was provided by rouge, and the eyes were outlined with kohl and perhaps the lashes and/or were colored. The eyebrows were lengthened with kohl or soot. Lips may or may not have been tinted. To me, this describes a look that isn't too far off our modern ideal - flawless skin, healthy cheeks, lined and accentuated eyes and brows, and little to no focus on the lips. This, along with key words in the descriptions of the individual substances (Ovid talks about a bright and clear complexion, Pliny criticizing a cosmetic for being greasy, etc.) is what guided my vision in the recreation.

Foundations and Face Creams

In Period

1 *Make-up pot with molded tablets of white lead, all having the same diameter and weight (2.75 cm and 5.5 g). Found in a tomb from the 5th c. BC. Currently at the Kerameikos Archaeological Museum in Athens.*

A pale, unblemished complexion considered desirable, with skin ideally being allover white. This ideal was present in a variety of time periods, as evident by the different authors. Stewart (2007) points out that while the skin of the body was ideally white, faces had a bit of color to them so were unlikely pure white, but was compared to ivory or marble (Olson, 2008, p. 26). Women achieved smooth, pale complexions in a variety of ways.

Cerusa, or sugar of lead, was made by pouring vinegar over white lead shavings and letting them dissolve before drying, grounding, and making it into cakes or tablets for application. "Ovid recommends it to brighten a pasty face" (Olson, 2008, p. 61). Ancient Romans knew that lead was poisonous.

Melinum, or white marl, is a clay or mud containing calcium carbonite that naturally occurs in Chios, Melos, or Samos. "Pliny described it as 'excessively greasy'" (Olson, 2008, p. 61.)

Creta, or chalk dust, was used for a variety of household purposes, including to whiten the face. It may have been applied after being mixed with vinegar (Olson, 2008, p. 61).

2 A sample of calcium carbonate, from Wikipedia.

Other skin whiteners mentioned in the literature are *crocodilea*, crocodile dung, bathing in asses's milk, and the waters from the Tibur springs (Olson, 2008, p. 61). Crocodile dung is more commonly referenced as a rouge, along with starling droppings, and Olson points out that this is an example of the details of feminine lives being influenced by masculine voices - women being so frivolous in their desire for beauty that they would smear excrement on their faces. There is, however, an alternative meaning for the word *crocodilea* - "Ethiopian soil" - found Lemnos and Samos, where earth was used in skin care recipes (Olson, 2008, p. 62).

3 Londonium Cream (Everts, 14 Jan. 2013)

In 2003, archaeologists found a sealed pot of skin cream in London dating to the 2nd century AD. The cream was analyzed and found to be made primarily of animal fat, most likely from cattle or sheep, and included starch and cassiterite (a tin dioxide). The researchers mixed a new cream based on their analysis:

"This cream had a pleasant texture when rubbed into the skin. Although it felt greasy initially, owing to the fat melting as a result of body heat, this was quickly overtaken by the smooth, powdery texture created by the starch. Remarkably, starch is still used for this purpose in modern cosmetics. The addition of SnO_2 [tin dioxide] to the starch/fat base confers a white opacity, which is consistent with the cream being a cosmetic. Fashionable Roman women aspired to a fair complexion, and the Londinium cream may have served as a foundation layer" (Everts, 14 Jan. 2013).

The majority of recipes for cosmetics are for skin care, which makes sense given disease, dirt, and the use of lead and mercury in cosmetics. Pliny's catalog of skin issues includes pimples, blemishes, freckles, peeling, itching, bruises, eruptive diseases, leprous sores, scars, pituitous eruptions, spreading sores, and nameless

"troubles" (Olson, 2008, p. 64). Olson gathers the lists of various writers together, and for ease, I've put them into the chart below (Olson, 2008, pp. 64-65):

Substance	Use
Crocodilea (crocodile dung) mixed with cypress oil	"bright and clear complexion"
ground oyster shells	smoothing the skin
poultry fat mixed with onion	removing pimples
swan's fat	removing wrinkles
asses's milk	removing wrinkles
axle-grease	removing wrinkles
ash of snails	removing freckles, relieving itching, curing leprous sores
white lead	smoothing the skin, removing blemishes
cucumber	*not specific*
rocket	*not specific*
anise	*not specific*
mushrooms	*not specific*
helenium	"made skin perfect and thereby enhanced sexual attractiveness, according to the elder Pliny."
honey, often mixed with galls, bitter vetch, lentil, horehound, iris, rue, soda, or verdigris	cleansing the skin
grease from unwashed sheep's wool (*oesypum*)	softening the skin
barley and vetch	clearing the ski, removing pimples
gum arabic	removing wrinkles
bean-meal paste	removing wrinkles
aphronitrum ("soda scum")	removing wrinkles, removing freckles
frankinsense	cleansing the skin, removing wrinkles, removing freckles
myrrh	cleansing the skin, removing wrinkles, removing freckles
iris	removing freckles, "cured skin complaints"
saltpetre	removing warts
rose leaves and poppy	cleansing the skin
alcyoneum	skin defects

Recreation

Since there is so much attention paid to skin creams for the face, I made sure that prior to using any makeup, I got back into my regular skin care routine. This consists of Neutrogena Ultra Gentle Cleanser, Neutrogena On-The-Spot Acne Treatment, and Olay Complete All-Day Moisturizer for sensitive skin.

I then applied e.l.f.'s Flawless Finish foundation in Porcelain. I used e.l.f. concealer to minimize my dark circles and other flaws. I set everything with Dermablend's white setting powder.

Rouge

Second to foundation, rouge is the next most discussed cosmetic in classical literature. While red mercuric sulfide (red lead), called cinnabar and *minium,* are said to have been used by Roman women as rouge, there is no specific mention of these substances by period authors. Ovid mentions "poisonous compounds" used on the cheeks, which might mean rouge (Olson, 2008, p. 61).

4 Cinnabar pigment. Retrieved from: http://www.earthpigments.com/primary-red-cinnabar-pigment/

Instead, authors list less toxic substances: *rubrica* (red orche), *fucus* (a red dye from the orchella plant), red chalk, alkanet, rose and poppy petals, Tyrian purple dyed powder, and *faex* (wine dregs) (Olson, 2008, p. 61). As mentioned above when discussing foundation, *crocodilea* and starling droppings were also used as rouge, but this may be a misunderstanding of the language or else an instance of male voice condemning cosmetics as a sign of female frivolity.

5 Red ochre pigment. Retrieved from: http://shop.kremerpigments.com/en/pigments/red-moroccan-ochre-116430:.html

6 Tyrian purple pigment. Retrieved from: http://www.kremer-pigmente.com/en/pigments/purpurissum-36015.html

7 Powdered alkanet root. Retrieved from: https://www.thesage.com/catalog/products/Alkanet-Root-Powder.html

Recreation

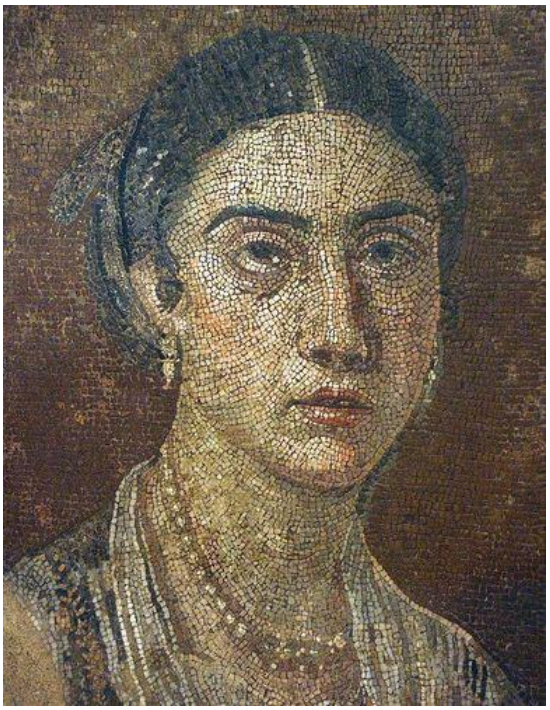
I chose a redder color than I may have normally, since all of the period materials range from scarlet to crimson - and rouge means red! I applied the reddest color in e.l.f.'s Studio Blush Palette in Dark to the apples of my cheeks and blended it in to produce a healthy glow.

Eyes

Ovid and Propertius both described beautiful women as having bright, shining eyes "like stars" (Stewart, 2007, p. 25).

The anti-cosmetic authors continually condemn the lining of eyelids and coloring of lashes. Pliny the Elder describes women's treatment of their lashes - "daily they are dyed with cosmetic by women: such is their desire for beauty that they even color their eyes" - and writes that eyelashes fall out when the woman is overly sexual, but Olson points out that this is not directly connected to colored lashes (Olson, 2008, p. 62).

Eyeliner had the effect of making the eye seem larger, and so was called *platyphthalmon* by Pliny the Elder. Kohl, called *stibium*, was used to outline the eyes and enhance the eyebrows. It was made of soot (*fuligo*), lamp-black, antimony, or ashes (Olson, 2008, p. 62). It was applied to the eye in powdered form with a thin kohl stick made of bone, glass, ivory, or wood. The stick was dipped in oil first and then the powder, then applied much like modern eyeliner is. Ovid mentions saffron also being used to line the eyes.



8 Portrait of a Woman, Pompeiian mosaic. In the Museo Archeologico Nazionale in Napoli. Retrieved from: http://cir.campania.beniculturali.it/museoarcheologiconazionale/thematic-views/image-gallery/RA111/

Olson points out that it is unclear in the literature whether Pliny and the other authors are referring to coloring eyelashes or eyelids, and notes that they likely just did not know the specifics (Olson, 2008, p. 62).

There are countless sources on the internet that point to Romans adopting the green eyeshadow of the Egyptians, made with malachite, but I have not been able to find a citation for this connection. It would appear that malachite was in use in Egypt from the neolithic to at least the 13th century BCE (Lucas, A. 1930. Cosmetics, perfumes and incense in Ancient Egypt. The Journal of Egyptian Archeology, 16(1/2). pp. 41-53). Ovid does caution young men from interrupting women at toilette, writing that he would see all the cosmetic containers and "a thousand colors" (Olson, 2008, p. 62). Olson considers this an allusion to colors of rouge, but could it also be referring to eyeshadow? Stewart (2007) mentions the malachite eyeshadow called *Galena*, which was malachite mixed with silver (Olson, 2008, p. 47).

9 Gilded mummy portrait of a woman, from er-Rubayat, Egypt, Roman Period, AD 160-170. British Museum. The woman's hair is arranged in a mid-second century AD fashion, and her clothing and quality of the portrait show that she was one of the "highlly Romanized elite." Retrieved from: http://www.britishmuseum.org/explore/highlights/highlight_objects/aes/g/gilded_mummy_portrait_of_woman.aspx

The Fayum Mummy portraits portray Greek, Egyptian, and/or Roman women (there is some debate regarding this) are from the Coptic Period - when the Roman Empire included Faiyum. It is difficult to say what sort of cosmetics the women in these images are wearing, apart from eyeliner, and in some cases, rouge. If there is any color on the eyelids, it is certainly not garish, such as green, but may have been natural tones used to further accentuate the eye and make it appear larger.

10 Balbinus Sarcophagus, Detail of head of Balbinus' wife. From the Catacomb of Praetextatus, Rome (Italy). History of Art Department, Visual Records Collection. University of Michigan. Retrieved from: http://quod.lib.umich.edu/h/hart/x-701606/07d117042

Eyebrows were ideally long, going as far as to the outline of the cheekbone, and either joined or came very close to one another between the eyes (Olson, 2008, p. 63). The majority of frescos and other visual art I have seen doesn't bring the eyebrows this close together, although the sculpted head of the wife of Balbinus (elected joint Emperor in AD 238) on a sarcophagus has eyebrows that touch in the middle. Eyebrows were darkened and extended using kohl, and false eyebrows were also sometimes used to create this look (Olson, 2008, p. 63).

Recreation

I used NYX Kohl Eyeliner Pencil and e.l.f Eyeliner and Shadow Stick in Black and Smoke to line my lids, the latter only on the top because it doesn't have as fine a point. Rather than use false eyelashes, I colored my own lashes using e.l.f. Studio 3-in-1 Mascara. I then used a Christi Harris Brow Kit to fill in and extend my brows.

Lips

The classical authors do not mention lip color. There is one mention by Tertullian (c. 155 - c. 240 CE), telling Christian women to "color their lips with silence" (Olson, 2008, p. 63). This implies that Christian and non-Christian women were tinting their lips. Olson notes that if Roman women were coloring their lips that they "would have been singled out for mention by the author, especially the love poets" (Olson, 2008, p. 63). I hypothesize that women put some sort of product on their lips - a balm, perhaps - if only to protect against the elements. It is difficult to tell if lips are colored when looking at frescos and mosaics.

Recreation

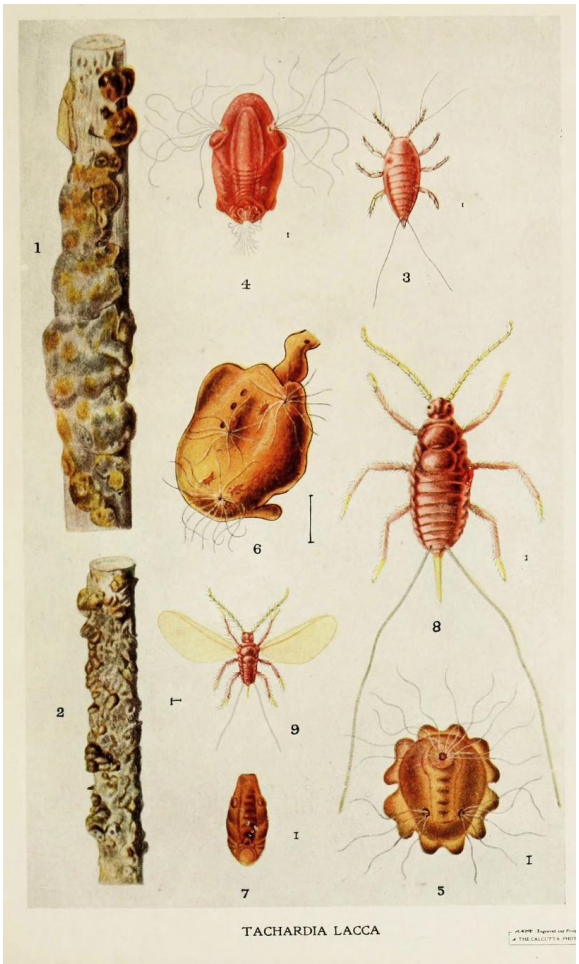
After applying foundation to create the pale, smooth complexion, my lips were also incredibly pale. This could be rectified by avoiding my lips when applying foundation. I applied Burt's Bees Peppermint lip balm and then NYX's Soft Matte Lip Cream in Antwerp, since Tertullian mentions lip color. The color is close to my natural lip color. I then went back with my concealer and a sponge to touch up the lines.

11 Lac from Kerria lacca insect. Image from Wikipedia.

Nails

Olson does not spend much time on nail care, but she does mention that both literary and artistic works show that women wore their nails short and pared. Women of means had their nails trimmed by barbers who either came to the house or were employed as part of the household staff (p. 70). There is a single reference to nail polish in classical literature, from Quintilian's *Institutio Oratoria* (an instructional book on rhetoric), book 8: "It is with a more virile spirit that we should pursue eloquence, who, if only her whole body be sound, will never think it her duty to polish her nails and tire her hair" (Thayer, 13 Feb 2006).

Stewart (2007) has uncovered a reference to colored nail lacquer in a *Periplus of Erythrean sea*, a handbook for merchant sailors from the first century AD (p. 47). The book describes goods traded around the Gulf of Aden and the Red Sea as well as East Africa and India, and includes imported red dye extracted from insects, called *lac* (Steward, 2007, 47). Stewart also mentions henna (*cyprinum*) being used to color nails (p. 47).



12 Picture of Kerria lacca from book Indian Insect Life: a Manual of the Insects of the Plains by Harold Maxwell-Lefroy. Retrieved from Wikipedia.

Recreation

For my nails, I visited a manicurist to have them cleaned and trimmed, which is in line with the period practice. I found a color close to the lac made from *kerria lacca* - a bright red.

Hair and Hygiene (Just for Fun)

While not really considered a cosmetic by modern standards, it is interesting to point out a few hygienic issues that received attention from Roman authors when discussing feminine beauty.

Hair in relation to cosmetics is an interesting topic in and of itself, and treated well by both Olson and forensic hairdresser Janet Stephens. Olson briefly mentions body hair, pointing out that several authors in a variety of genres and across time periods imply that the ideal was for a woman to be without body hair (Olson, 2008, p. 65). Pliny writes about women removing body hair, and Ovid writes about women shaving their legs, both as part of the ideal feminine beauty (Olson, 2008, p. 65). Lucian writes: "the rest of a woman's body [apart from her head] has not a hair growing on it and shines more brilliantly than amber [...] or Sidonian crystal" (Olson, 2008, p. 65). Both sexes eliminated hair from legs and genitals using a variety of methods: plucking, scraping with a pumice stone, stripped using resin, or other methods (Olson, 2008, p. 66). Given the aforementioned ideal and treatment of eyebrows, I believe that these remained intact and were enhanced rather than removed and redrawn using cosmetics.

Ovid advised that women should avoid body odor, and Pliny the Elder described deodorant made from alum, iris, or rose petals (Olson, 2008, p. 70).

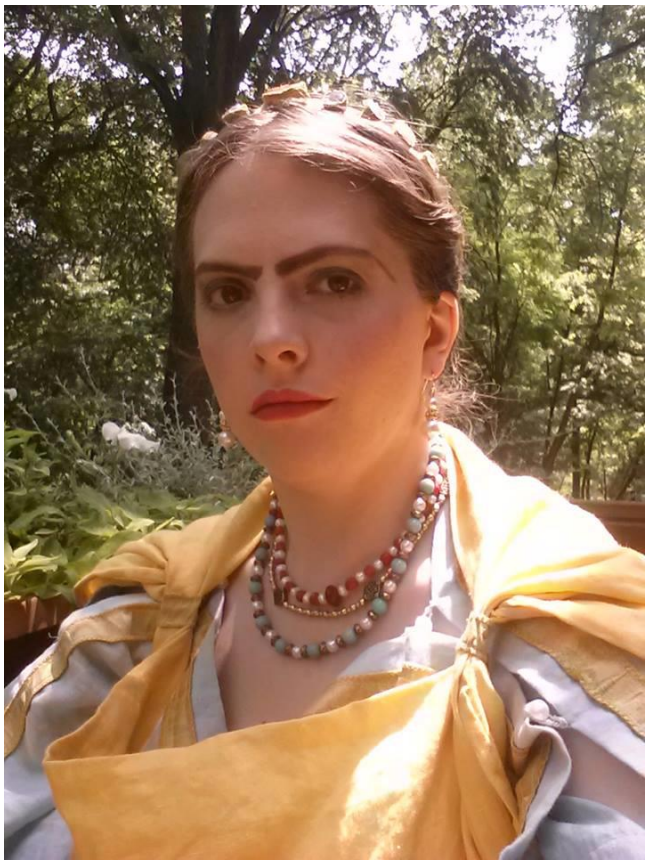
Roman women cleaned their teeth with a variety of powders, including those made of horn or ash (Olson, 2008, p. 70). Decayed teeth were a mark of crones and old courtesans in literature, and the poet Martial notes that false teeth were easy to spot because they were pure white (Olson, 2008, p. 70).

Women used a great number and variety of cosmetics to achieve ideal feminine beauty, but they removed these substances at night (Olson, 2008, p. 65). Night-time remedies are also written of, but they are in conjunction with adultery and licentiousness, and so, as Olson points out, are perhaps not indicative of an actual cosmetic product (Olson, 2008, p. 65).

Final Thoughts

Based on what little I know of the world of modern skin care and cosmetics - how much money, time, and print, and online media is taken up with ads for products, tips, and tutorials - Roman women cared as much about how they looked as the modern woman does. Writers condemned women for frivolity, deceitfulness, and licentiousness - all tied to physical adornment (Olson, 2008, p. 80-85), and not unlike the double-edged sword of modern media in regard to feminine fashion.

My application of modern products to achieve an ancient style has plenty of room for improvement. I struggled to achieve the pale, flawless complexion, mostly due to my under-eye circles and acne



scars. But, like Roman women, modern women also struggle with these challenges when striving for an arguably unreachable ideal. I am intrigued by the mosaic portrait and the Fayum Mummy portrait images included earlier, as under-eye lines are visible. Was this not seen as a flaw?

I actually ran out of my e.l.f. foundation in the application I took pictures of, so at this event, I'll be wearing a different brand and hopefully will have better results.

This project was a challenge for me both because of the relatively limited literature on the topic and my own knowledge of cosmetic application – but moreso because I have never been a "make-up" person. Reading the snippets of what Roman men wrote that Olson quotes and refers to in her book reminded me so much of the underlying message communicated to me my entire life – you should wear cosmetics to look like you aren't wearing any cosmetics, and if you wear too much, you're worthy of so many unfavorable descriptors and stereotypes.

This entry was entirely different from any other entry I have ever done for an A&S fair or competition in the SCA. Rather than researching an object, recreating it, and putting it on display, I am displaying myself. While any creation is part of oneself, this is fundamentally different. I am effectively the entry, or my appearance is – not any accessory or clothing, but my face. That's more than a little unnerving, and it brings to the fore all of the ancient and modern stigmas and issues surrounding cosmetics.

The Coronation of Calontir's 64th King and Queen will be my first time wearing Roman garb, and I have enjoyed the research into clothing and cosmetics. I am greatly indebted to Lady Anna Dokeianina Syrakousina from the East Kingdom for sharing her research into Roman women's clothing on her blog.

References

Everts, S. 14 Jan. 2013, "Ancient Roman cosmetics: Skin cream from the 2nd century A.D., Chemical and Engineering News. Retrieved from http://cenblog.org/artful-science/2013/01/14/ancient-roman-cosmetics-skin-cream-from-the-2nd-century-a-d/

Olson, K. (2008). *Dress and the Roman woman: Self-preservation and society.* New York: Routledge.

Stewart, S. (2007). *Cosmetics and perfume in the Roman world.* Stroud, Gloucestershire: Tempus.

Thayer, B. (13 Feb. 2006). "Quintilian: Institutio Oratoria." *LacusCurtius.* Retrieved from: http://penelope.uchicago.edu/Thayer/E/Roman/Texts/Quintilian/Institutio_Oratoria/home.html