

LITURGICAL VESTMENTS

The concept of devoting special apparel for use at worship services has its origin in the Old Testament where God commanded [Moses](#) to prepare sacred garments that would impart dignity and grandeur to his brother, Aaron, and his sons (Ex. 6:3; Nm. 3:2). Vestments for the high priest included a breast piece, an ephod, a mantle, a checkered tunic, a turban, and a sash. They were made of finely woven linen, studded with precious stones, and adorned with gold, violet, purple, and scarlet yarn. Ordinary priests had to wear simpler and less colorful vestments consisting of tunics, sashes, and headdresses (Ex. 28:40).

In contrast to vestments of other churches, where shape and style varied from time to time, those in use by the Coptic church underwent little modification across the ages. This fact is attested by the writings of such ecclesiastical historians as Abu Daqn (1963), Vansleb (1677, p. 60), Renaudot (1847, Vol. 1, pp. 161-63), and Denzinger (1863, Vol. 1, p. 130).

White is the predominant color in Coptic liturgical garments, this color being the symbol of purity (Ps. 101:7; Is. 1:18; Rev. 3:4-5; etc.). It is also the color in which the angels are always robed (Mt. 28:2-3; Mk. 16:5; Acts 1:10; etc.). The twenty-four heavenly priests are also dressed in white (Rev. 4:4).

Consecration of Liturgical Vestments

Before they are first used, liturgical vestments must be consecrated by a BISHOP, who says the following prayer over them:

Master, Lord God Almighty, Father of our Lord, God and Savior Jesus Christ, we beseech and entreat Thy goodness, O Lover of man, to accept unto Thee the offerings of Thy servants, which they have dedicated to Thee. Reward them with eternal gifts in return for their ephemeral ones; heavenly for earthly things; and everlasting in lieu of passing ones.

Graciously, O Lord, sanctify this vestment, purify it through the grace of Thy Holy Spirit. Purify our souls, our bodies, and our spirits. Grant unto us Thy Heavenly Gift, through Thy Only Son, our Lord, our God, and our Savior Jesus Christ.

Here the bishop makes the sign of the cross over the vestment, consecrating it in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit.

Before the celebration of the Divine Liturgy, a priest's or deacon's vestments have to be signed by the officiating priest in the name of the Trinity, but when a bishop is present, it is he who signs them. While the vestments are being put on, the priest should recite Psalm 30 ("I will extol Thee, O Lord") and Psalm 93 ("The Lord reigneth, He is clothed with majesty"), in addition to Isaiah 61:10: "I will greatly rejoice in the Lord, my soul shall exult in my God, for he has clothed me with the garments of salvation, he has covered me with the robe of righteousness, as a bridegroom decks himself with a garland, and as a bride adorns herself with her jewels."

Each of the three grades of the ecclesiastical hierarchy has its own liturgical vestments. Those of the episcopate can be more [elaborate](#) and decorative than the others. Bishops normally wear large bulbous crowns, except in the presence of the patriarch, in which case they wear a special hood known as a *koukoullion*. The bishop of Jerusalem alone may keep his crown on, as he occupies an apostolic metropolitan see.

Cap

The cap is used by bishops as a close-fitting head cover worn under the hood of the *burnus* (cape) and is usually embroidered with golden or silver crosses. It was also worn by deacons during services as a headdress of white silk or linen material with four embroidered crosses around it and an additional small upright cross on top, but this custom has been dropped in many churches where deacons serve bareheaded.

Cape

The cape (Arabic, *burnus*) is a liturgical outer vestment in the form of a loose sleeveless cloak made of linen or silk and embroidered with crosses or other religious inscriptions. It is worn by priests and bishops, the latter having a shield-shaped section attached at the back, studded with precious stones.

Epitrachelion

The epitrachelion is a liturgical vestment worn by priests and bishops over the sticharion (see below). It is a rectangular band of silk or cotton that [measures](#) about six feet by nine inches and is embroidered with crosses or, if worn by a patriarch or bishop, with the figures of the twelve apostles. It has an opening for the head, allowing a small section of it to hang down the back while the remainder reaches down in front to the feet.

The wearing of the epitrachelion is a symbolic allusion to the words of the Psalmist that form part of a hymn chanted by the deacons in the presence of the patriarch when he is thus robed: "Praised be God who has poured His grace upon His priests, like the precious oil upon the head, running down upon the beard, upon the beard of Aaron, running down on the collar of his robes" (Ps. 133:2-3). It also signified the act of carrying the cross and assuming the yoke of responsibility on behalf of the congregation.

Girdle

The girdle is a band of silk or linen embroidered with golden or silver crosses. Its use is nowadays restricted to bishops on certain ceremonial occasions, though in the past, it formed part of the liturgical vestments of priests and bishop alike. It is worn over the epitrachelion around the waist, with its two ends held together by means of a silver clasp.

The girdle stands for the concept of virtue and piety: “Righteousness shall be the girdle of his waist and faithfulness the girdle of his loins” (Is. 11:5). It also symbolizes vigilance and watchfulness: “Let your loins be girded and your lamps burning” (Lk. 12:35). It is associated with the leather girdle that John the Baptist wore round the waist (Mt. 3:4) and with Saint John’s vision of Christ “clothed with a long robe and with a golden girdle round his breast” (Rev. 1:13).

As a liturgical vestment, the girdle was first introduced by the Coptic church. “The use of the girdle in the Coptic Church is more ancient than in the churches of western Christendom,” wrote A. J. Butler (1884, Vol. 2, p. 126), who in some churches in Old Cairo had seen fine examples that date back to the eighth century.

As a monastic vestment, the girdle is still an essential part of a monk’s garments, made of leather to follow the example of the Baptist and of Saint Antony the Great, the Father of Monks.

Miter

Known in Arabic as *taj*, the miter, or crown, is a bulbous headdress ornamented with silver or gold and surmounted by a cross. It may also be studded with gems and decorated with the figures of Christ, the Virgin Mary, and the apostles.

The miter is worn by the patriarch and the bishops during the liturgy and in ceremonial processions. It is one of the insignia that, according to the Rite of Consecration of the Patriarch of Alexandria, is bestowed upon the selected patriarch by the senior bishop, the metropolitan of Jerusalem and the Near East, while the deacons sing, “The Lord reigns; he is robed in majesty” (Ps. 93:1) and “Thou settest a crown of pure gold on his head. He asked life of Thee, and Thou givest it him” (Ps. 21:3-4). Here the bishops, with the exception of the metropolitan of Jerusalem, remove their own miters and cover their heads with the omophorion (see below).

Omophorion

This vestment, referred to as the “white *ballin*” in the ordination service of bishops, is a silk scarf about 13 feet (4 m) long and 4 feet (1.25 m) wide, embroidered with large golden or silver crosses, and sometimes ornamented with precious stones.

It may also be worn at the liturgy, on top of the turban, instead of the *burnus*-hood, and folded crosswise on the chest and the back. As a garment, the omophorion symbolizes the breastplate of faith (1 Thes. 5:8), the crown of thorns placed on Christ’s head, and the napkin brought by [Nicodemus](#) to the burial of Christ.

Orarion

The orarion is a strip of silk or cotton material measuring about 10 feet (3 m) by 6 inches (15 cm) and embroidered with crosses or IC (the first two letters of the name of Jesus Christ). It is worn by deacons over the sticharion (see below). The center section of the strip is held under the right arm and passed upward to the left shoulder across the breast and then allowed to hang down loosely to the feet in front and the back.

Though now commonly used by all ranks of the diaconate (i.e., readers, subdeacons, and deacons), the orarion was originally restricted to deacons alone. According to canon 22 of the [Synod](#) of Laodicea (343-381), “the subdeacon has no right to wear an orarion”; similarly, canon 23 says that “the anagnostos [readers or lectors] and psalts [cantors] have no right to wear oraria and thus read or chant.” The Coptic church, however, rarely enforced this prohibition, and the orarion forms an essential part of all deacons’ vestments, the only difference being that now the lower ranks of the diaconate, among them teenagers, wear it with a horizontal section in the front (in the form of an H) and crossed on the back (in the form of an X).

In the ordination service of a deacon, the officiating bishop, having read the prayers at the altar on behalf of the candidate, turns to the west and places the orarion on the candidate's left shoulder, saying, "Glory and honor to the Holy Consubstantial Trinity."

Sleeves

Sleeves are made of the same material as the epitrachelion and are worn over the sleeves of the sticharion (see below) and fastened with loops and buttons. Although they form part of the liturgical vestments of patriarchs, bishops, and priests, sleeves are now reserved for ceremonial occasions. They are embroidered with braid crosses or studded with gems, and may also have embroidered biblical inscriptions, such as "The right hand of the Lord is exalted: the right hand of the Lord does valiantly" (Ps. 118:16) on the right sleeve and "Thy hands have made me and fashioned me; give me understanding that I may learn thy commandments" (Ps. 119:73) on the left.

The use of sleeves as part of sacerdotal dress may have originated in the Coptic church, from which it later spread to other Eastern and Western churches—a fact for which there is the testimony of A. J. Butler: "Unless we take refuge in the theory of a quite independent origin for this peculiar priestly ornament in the eastern churches and in the Church of Gaul, we are driven to the conclusion that epimanikia [sleeves] were brought from the East— perhaps by some colony of Egyptian monks, such as we know came over to Gaul and to Ireland in the earliest Christian times—and were deliberately adopted by the Gallic clergy. If this idea of eastern influence be correct, it is not merely curious when taken in connection with other tokens of the same influence in the early British and Irish Churches; but it furnishes also an argument for the extreme antiquity of the Coptic sleeves as a sacred vestment" (1884, Vol. 2, pp. 171-72).

The same author expressed particular admiration for a pair of sleeves at

the Church of Abu Kir wa Yuhanna “made of crimson velvet and richly embroidered with stars and crosses wrought in massive thread of silver. . . . Round either end runs a double border enclosing designs, and while one sleeve is ornamented with a representation of the Virgin Mary and her Son, the other has a figure of an angel with outspread wings. Nothing can exceed the fineness of the needlework and the delicacy of the colours in which these figures are embroidered” (1884, Vol. 2, pp. 166-67).

Slippers

According to Ibn al-‘Assal’s *Kitab al-Qawanin* (1927, p. 121), which sets down the provisions of Coptic ritual, shoes are not allowed inside the sanctuary as a sign of respect for its sanctity and as an implied [expression](#) of an inner feeling of security and absence of danger in the house of God; thus, the footwear used by bishops, priests, and deacons is a pair of slippers, made of cotton, wool, or knitted material. The custom of removing the shoes upon entering the church building itself, not merely the sanctuary, was a common practice down to the end of the nineteenth century and may still be observed in the villages of Upper Egypt and, of course, in monasteries. This is done in obedience to God’s commandment to Moses (Ex. 3:5) and to Joshua, the son of Nun (Jos. 5:15).

Sticharion

The sticharion is a long-sleeved linen vestment. In his compendium of church ordinance, Ibn al-‘Assal enjoined that the sticharion must be white, not colored, and must reach down to the ankles (1927, chap. 12). It has an opening on one or both shoulders, with buttons and loops. It is worn by various orders of the clergy from bishops down to subdeacons (the higher the rank, the more ornate the embroidery) and is usually adorned with crosses on the front, back, and sleeves. In the past, some sticharia were ornamented with the figure of the Virgin Mary holding the infant Jesus on her left arm, and, below, the figure of Saint George

slaying the dragon. Other sticharia had embroidered crosses surrounded with the name of Jesus Christ and some verses from the Gospels and, on each sleeve, an angel with outspread wings. As an [expression](#) of the majesty of the Blessed Sacrament, some bishops wear sticharia set with gems or, following an Old Testament tradition, have small bells attached to the sleeves.

It is probable that the term sticharion originally meant a dress used in everyday life. SOZOMEN, who mentioned in his writings that one of the charges brought against [ATHANASIUS I](#) by the Arians was that he had required the Egyptians to furnish contributions of linen sticharia, described them as *chitonion linon phoron*: “Accordingly, came the first indictment that he had imposed upon the Egyptian a tax on linen tunics” (1864, 2.22; Socrates, 1864, 1.27; *Dictionary of Christian Antiquities*, 1880, Vol. 2, pp. 1933-34).

When a priest or deacon puts on the sticharion to celebrate the liturgy, he is to recite Psalm 30 (“I will extol thee, O Lord, for thou hast drawn me up, and hast not let my foes rejoice over me”) and Psalm 93 (“The Lord reigns; he is robed in majesty”).

Taylasan

The *taylasan*, or *shamlah*, is a shawl-like strip of white linen or silk, usually embroidered with crosses, worn by priests over the head and shoulders.

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