

Sumptuary Legislation in Early Modern Rome. An Exceptional Case?

Abstract

This article examines social hierarchies of appearance in early modern Rome by focusing on sumptuary legislation. Since few actual pieces of clothing from the period are preserved, this type of legislation is an important source for studies on early modern clothing, and especially its function as a marker of social identity. Sumptuary laws were often an expression of the desire to draw a visible distinction between people of different status, and are therefore particularly valuable for studies that focus on groups from the lower echelons of society. The various restrictions on what the lower and middle classes could and could not wear resulted in a wide and varied documentation regarding the clothing of ordinary Italians. As this essay explores in greater depth, throughout the whole era of sumptuary legislation, Rome seems to have enacted relatively few laws, and those that were issued seem not to have been particularly strict. By highlighting some of the ways in which Rome differed from other Italian cities both politically and socially, this essay probes whether early modern Rome presents an exceptional case in the history of sumptuary legislation. It makes clear that, in contrast to other cities, sumptuary legislation in Rome seems to have been primarily a question of civic morality dictated by the notion of decorum, which was a central concept of the Tridentine period.