

ΕΝΔΥΜΑΤΟΛΟΓΙΚΑ/5

DRESS AND POLITICS

Proceedings of the 2014 Annual Meeting of the ICOM Costume Committee

Nafplion and Athens, Greece, 7-13 September 2014



PELOPONNESIAN FOLKLORE FOUNDATION

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NAFPLION 2015

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Purple. Journey from the Ancient Colour of Power to the First Synthetic Fashion Dye Inspired by Alexander Theroux's essay "Purple"

Dorothea Nicolai
Salzburger Festspiele

Abstract

The art of dyeing the colour purple in ancient times is attributed to the Phoenicians. From their country it spread to Egypt, Israel, Crete and Mesopotamia to Greece and Rome. The pigments for purple dye were obtained from sixteen different kinds of sea snails which all belong to the *Murex* family in the Mediterranean Sea. It was a complex dyeing process, and for that reason purple-coloured fabric was rare, precious and reserved to men of power and wealth. Also for this reason this kind of purple was called "Imperial Purple" and "Tyrian Purple", named after the Phoenician capital of Tyros. After the Roman Empire, imperial purple became the most important symbol of power. It was the time of the Byzantine culture. Afterwards, the use of *Murex* snails to obtain the imperial purple pigments was abandoned.¹ Similar pigments were used for dyeing fabric, though without achieving the original beauty of imperial purple. In the middle of the 19th century, British chemist Henry Perkin invented by accident the first synthetic dye named Mauveine which achieves the similar colour result on dyeing fabric like

the purple pigments of *Murex* snails. Thus the beauty of imperial purple became accessible to everyone. In the beginning of the 20th century the chemical formula of *Murex* snail pigments was defined.

Keywords: Imperial Purple; Tyrian Purple; *Murex trunculus*; *Murex brandaris*; Phoenicians; Clavi; Porphyrogénète (born to the purple); Henry Perkin; Mauveine.

The Colour Purple

The visible definition of purple is not clear. This colour has various tonalities between bluish red and reddish blue. In 1672 Isaac Newton discovered that other than the spectral colour of violet with its wavelength of approximately 380-420nm (Küppers 2012: 31), purple is simply a secondary colour, the mix of red and blue, the longest (perceived by the L cone cells in the eyes) and the shortest wavelengths (perceived by the S cone cells in the eyes). The most intense purple nuances form the "line of purple" known as the "purple boundary" on the CIE 1931 colour chart, which represents all visible



Fig.1: Fabric swatches in different tonalities of purple.
Photo: Dorothea Nicolai.



Fig.2: *Murex trunculus*. Photo: Dorothea Nicolai.

colours for the human eye (Küppers 2012: 59). One curious psychophysical difference between purple and violet is their appearance in luminance (apparent brightness): while violet looks bluer as it brightens, this does not happen with purple (called the Bezold-Brücke shift). The perception of purple depends on personal and cultural interpretation. Different words like fuchsia, magenta, pink, mauve, heliotrope, plum, amethyst are only some of the colour ranges attributed to purple (Fig. 2).

Imperial purple pigments are obtained from a mollusk. It is a snail of the *Murex* (*Muricidae*) family in the Mediterranean Sea. There are sixteen different kinds of *Murex* snails known for this purpose. The most common and for dyeing used ones are called Purple Dye Murex (*Murex trunculus*) and Branded Dye Murex (*Murex brandaris*). The pigments are providing a more bluish purple (*Murex trunculus*) and a more reddish purple (*Murex brandaris*). All *Murex* snails measure between 4 to 8 centimetres. In some Mediterranean countries they are sold in the food markets, for example in Spain under the name of *cañailles*. The snails live on the sea ground and feast on other snails and mussels. They drill through the shell of their prey and paralyse it with a yellowish liquid produced in the hypobranchial gland which is situated next to the rectum and the breathing hole.² This liquid is used to produce the imperial purple pigments.

Henri de Lacaze-Duthiers (1829-1901) started the first scientific research on imperial purple dye. In 1919 the German chemist Paul Friedländer succeeded in defining the element structure of the Imperial purple pigment as 6.6' Dibromindigo. The formula for indigo blue is very similar (without the two Brom elements) (Schweppe 1993: 306). (Fig.3)

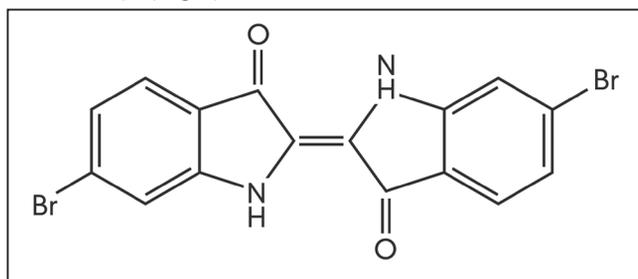


Fig.3: Chemical formula of Dibromindigo 6.6' by Paul Friedländer 1919. Photo: Gerrit Holz.

Plinius the Elder (23-79 B.C.) wrote a first detailed description of the dyeing process in his *Naturalis Historia*: The snails are smashed and pickled with salt during several days, and while cooked with urine, the leftovers of the flesh are removed. The fabric is dipped into the dyeing vat, and only under the influence of sunlight an enzyme reaction changes the colour from green to blue

and finally purple is achieved, the whole process being accompanied by a terrible smell.

The imperial purple colour is absolutely lightfast. In order to produce 1.5 grams of pigments, about 12,000 snails are needed, enough to dye a kilogram of wool (Schweppe 1993: 304). Greek mythology tells the story of Hercules who was in love with the nymph Tyros, when her dog broke with his teeth the shell of a snail on the beach and his lips were dyed with the most beautiful red. The nymph told Hercules that she would be with him only if he gave her a robe in this colour. Peter Paul Rubens visualized this story into a beautiful painting titled "The discovery of purple" (1636, Musee Bonnat, Bayonne).

The art of dyeing the colour purple is attributed to the Phoenicians, who were renowned tradesmen around 1600 B.C. They spread this knowledge along the Mediterranean coasts from Egypt, Israel, Crete and Mesopotamia to Greece and Rome. The earliest known places for dyeing fabric with imperial purple was Ugarit (city in Syria), Sidon and Tyre (cities in Lebanon), where broken shells are still to be found on the coast or the sea ground for many miles. Phoenicia is a Greek name meaning "land of purple". The Latin word *purpura* derives from the Greek *porphyra*, the name for the pigment.

In Egypt it is said that Cleopatra welcomed Caesar in a ship with its sails dyed in purple (O'Donoghue 2012). In the Tanach two different words are used to signify purple: תלכת (*tchelet*) is the more bluish purple and אַרְמָנָא (*arnaman*) is the more reddish purple. In תּוֹמַשׁ (*second book of Moses*) there are accurate descriptions of the *Murex* snail and the use of imperial purple for High Priest clothing (Spanier 1987). In December 2013, in the south of Qumran in the Judean Desert, two small pieces of woollen fabric were found in the caves of Muraba'at. The fabric was analyzed by Dr. Na'am Sukenik of the Israel Antiquities Authorities. He identified the dye as being Imperial Purple.

In Greece the *peplos* of the *Hoplites* (soldiers), the elite unit of the Greek army, was dyed with imperial purple (N.N. 2012).

The Roman Empire

In the Roman Empire, strict rules governing the use of purple served to signify various ranks. The purple dyers' guilds were called *purpurarii* and were gathered in the city of Rome.

The tunic worn by Senators was called *tunica laticlavia* with one stripe of imperial purple in the middle (Fig. 4a). The tunic with two lateral imperial purple stripes was

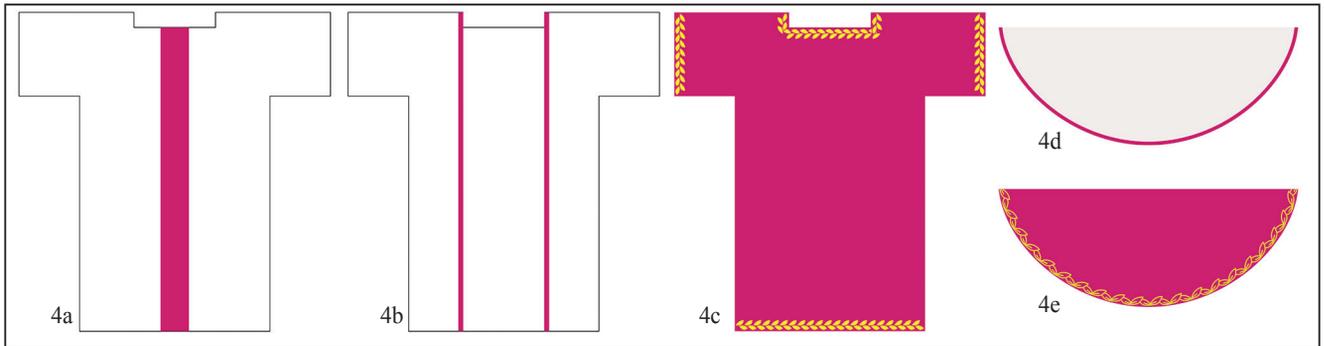


Fig.4: Roman Clavi. Photo: Gerrit Holz.

called *tunica angusticlavia* and was worn by officers in the army (Fig. 4b). The *tunica palmata* was completely dyed in imperial purple and embroidered with gold palm leaves at the edges, as it was worn by homecoming *triumphator* in Rome after victory in battle (Fig. 4c).

The tunic was combined with the toga which was the status symbol reserved for Roman citizens and magistrates. The *toga praetexta* was made of white wool edged with an imperial purple stripe of 7.5 centimetres (Fig. 4d). The *toga picta* combined with the *tunica palmata* (*trabea*) was completely dyed in imperial purple and decorated with gold embroidery (Fig. 4e) (Gaulme and Gaulme 2012:70). Military commanders wore the *paludamentum purpureum*, the half circle cape attached to the shoulders.

The imperial purple shoes (*calceus patricius*) worn by the Senators were later incorporated to the Pope's official dress which includes coloured shoes (Berthod 2011).

In the New Testament it is written that Pilatus gave a coat to Jesus. The colour of this coat is translated in the gospels of Mark (15, 17) and John (19,5) with the word "purple", and in the gospel of Matthew (27, 28) with the word "crimson".

The Byzantines

After the demise of the Roman Empire in the 4th century, the Byzantine era began. The Byzantines emphasized imperial purple as the most important symbol of power, as exemplified by the famous mosaics depicting Emperor Justinian and Empress Theodora in the Ravenna church of San Vitale. Imperial purple was used for the *tabulamentum* and the shoes. Both figures are surrounded by ecclesiastical and political dignitaries wearing a *tabulamentum* in white wool ornamented with the *tablion* in purple.

The crown prince was called "porphyrogénète" (born in purple) because he was born in an imperial purple

chamber in the palace. In our times the term is still used as a metaphor for being born into a life of wealth and privilege.

One of the most famous cloths dyed with imperial purple in the Byzantine era is the shroud of Charlemagne, today displayed at the Musée Cluny in Paris. It dates from around 800 A.D. and depicts a *quadriga* with a triumphator (Gaulme and Gaulme 2012: 64) (Fig. 5).

In 1453 the Ottomans conquered the Byzantine Empire, and the tradition of imperial purple dye was lost in Europe.

The Catholic Religion

Some of the traditions revolving around imperial purple



Fig.5: Samit d'Aix-la-Chapelle: Chart from approx. 800 AD, from the Trésor d'Aix-la-Chapelle; samit fragment depicting a victorious charioteer in the hippodrome (75 x 72.5 cm); Paris, Musée de Cluny – Musée National du Moyen Age CL 13289 / 09-501164. Druckdatei online auf www.photo.rmn.fr.

became a part of the Catholic religion and are still visible in the attire of Catholic priests.

Originally, imperial purple fabric was only used for the clothes of the cardinals who have the highest rank after the Pope. After the end of the Byzantine Empire, the main purveyor of imperial purple fabric to the Catholic Church, because of increasing fraud in the production of this dyed fabric Pope Paul II decided to change the colour of the cardinals' clothes in 1464. Since then their clothes are dyed scarlet with the pigment of cochineal, an insect discovered in America. The use of imperial purple was banned due to the fact that the Pope also ordered the use of indigo instead, with an over layer of kermes, especially for the clothes of bishops who have the third highest rank after the cardinals and the Pope (O'Donoghue 2012: 5).

Mauveine

The colour purple returned to European fashion in 1856 under the name of mauveine. A young British chemist, William Henry Perkin, invented this colour by accident during his research to synthesize quinine. He oxidized aniline using potassium dichromate producing a dark-coloured solid. While cleaning the flask he discovered that this solid mixed with alcohol became a rich purple-



Fig.6: “Mademoiselle Sicot” by Pierre-Auguste Renoir (1841-1919), 1865, oil on canvas, 116x89.5 cm; Chester Dale Collection, 1963.10.209, National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C. Available for free at www.images.nga.gov.

coloured liquid. Perkin patented these pigments which were also suitable as a dye for silk and other materials. One year later he began mass production of the dye in his factory at Greenford on the banks of the Grand Union Canal in London. Mauveine was the first synthetically produced dye pigment on aniline basis. This invention had a huge impact on the chemical and fashion industry. In 1861 Queen Victoria inaugurated the World Exhibition Fair, taking place in London, wearing a mauveine-dyed dress which made the colour very popular. Mr. Perkin became a millionaire (Garfield 2001). Fashion journals reported about mauveine dresses. Many paintings of this period show women in bright mauveine dresses, a famous example being the painting of Auguste Renoir (Fig. 6).

Today

Purple still symbolizes dignity and nobility, spirituality, mystery and creativity. It is associated with vanity, extravagance, individuality, political and social statements, as exemplified by the Purple Heart, the military decoration of the highest order in the United States army, the use of purple in the badges of the women's liberation movement, and the numerous politicians who wear purple ties.

I owe thanks to Angeliki Roumelioti of the Peloponnesian Folklore Foundation who gave me the shells of Murex Trunculus from her favourite beach.

¹ Purple pigments of *Murex* snails are still available for purchase today, for example at the company Kremer Pigmente in Germany. One gram costs 2,439.50 euros, www.kremer-pigmente.com

² A different kind of *Murex* snail exists in Central America where the gland is placed towards the outer end, so the liquid can be milked without killing the animal (Schweppe 1993: 317).

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