

Status Hierarchies of Color in the Early Roman Empire

Status-seeking and status display were prominent features of Roman civilization -- behaviors that were manifested to a remarkable degree in the Romans' importation, processing, purchase, and display of high-prestige materials such as dyes, pigments, marbles, gems, and even flowers (Bradley 2006, 2009; Goldman 2013; Hawley 2007; Lao 2011; Wharton 2016). The Romans' activity in this respect could rightly be said to be among the most egregious examples of what Norwegian-American economist and social scientist Thorstein Veblen called "conspicuous consumption" (Veblen 2017 [1899]); such status-related displays of consumption are also well-documented in the modern social sciences (Truong 2010).

Among the most centrally important artefacts in this Roman social-economic nexus were textiles colored using a variety of expensive shellfish and insect dyes -- dyes that were used in a range of manufacturing processes, each yielding differing results with respect to the hue, saturation, lightness, and sheen of the products (Cardon 2007). The color range of these products was focused in red to purple range.

The Romans' competitive desire to own and display the most expensive dyes, most of which produced, to our eyes, somewhat similar colors, resulted in their seeking not only new products and processes, but new fine-grained color categories and color names associated with the products in order to distinguish themselves by displaying the latest and most expensive products. Such color concepts/words include not only the well-known words associated with *purpura* (*purpureus*, *purpuratus*, etc.), but *conchylium*, *ostrinus*, *ostricolor*, *coccum* (and its derivatives *cocceus*, *coccinatus*, *coccineus*, *coccinare*, *coccinus*), as well as terms associated with particular hues and/or processes such as *amethystinus*, *ianathinus*, and *dibaphus*.

Such was the Romans' obsession with these dye-textile color categories that they even transferred them into other semantic domains when describing the colors of flowers and gems. In this paper I will illustrate these status-related hierarchies of color with examples drawn from Pliny the Elder's *Natural History* and Martial's *Epigrams*.

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