

“Colours in Antiquity: Colour and Hue from Egypt to Byzantium”, University of Edinburgh, 10th -13th September 2001

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At the start of the 21st century there is no lack of conferences, symposia, workshops and congresses, even for relatively small fields such as archaeology, Classics and art history. Was it, therefore, sensible to participate in another conference on colour after the “Colour in Ancient Greece” conference held at Thessaloniki in 2000? I felt it certainly was. As much as the conference at Thessaloniki was overdue because of its overall theme (Brysbaert and Lindenlauf 2000: 114-115), so too was the Edinburgh conference, since it succeeded in covering a wide range of issues, geographical areas, periods of interest and methodological approaches in only four days.

The conference was divided into eight sessions: Egypt, The Aegean World, Dyes and Pigments, Textiles and Cosmetics, Literature and Philosophy, Classical Art and Archaeology, Symbolism and Culture in the Greek World, and Symbolism and Culture in the Roman and Byzantine Worlds. Each session covered a variety of methodological issues and approaches and provided thorough insights into many different aspects of colour. The very accessible conference website promised an intense and interesting programme and included all abstracts. Thanks to the excellent organisation and good time keeping of all participants, the entire conference went smoothly, only brutally disrupted by the events of September 11.

To give a flavour of the conference without providing a discussion of each paper, specific strands woven throughout the conference are outlined here, referring to specific papers to illustrate them. Participants shared their expertise in a variety of different ways: presentations with traditional visual aids, experimental demonstrations showing the production of different colours (and smells!) (Burke on Ruscillo’s experimental work; Greenspan) and colour schemes of Roman cookery (Grigorieva). A range of informative posters were also available for discussion during the coffee breaks (Chryssikopoulou *et al.*; Clarke; Cleland; Devlin *et al.*; Fountolakis).

Across geographical and chronological boundaries we could observe that colour had a vital role to play in a variety of conceptual schemes within each society. That the meaning of colour was culture specific, and cannot just be transferred and accepted with the same meaning within another cultural context (even if contemporary), was exemplified by Harlow’s paper on the meaning of the colour white both in the Roman and in the early Christian context.

Colour expressed directly or indirectly the concept of power through its meaning, whether or not it was associated with economic value. Gold as a colour and a material was the flesh of the gods and of the rulers in their afterlife in Egypt (Cashman).

It emphasised aspects of divinity and showed clearly how colour and material were intricately intertwined and could not be seen as two separate concepts. The power of the material value of gold was expressed through its yellow colour. Colour use and decorative styles also expressed power in secular contexts as was shown in case studies by Rozenberg (Herod's palace at Jericho) and Baranski (Hellenistic architectural painting in Egypt). Colour issues, associated with power in gender and social status in Egypt and the Aegean, were illustrated by both Rehak and Ribeiro in their discussions on the yellow saffron dye used for clothing in the Aegean Bronze Age. Consequently, as power shifted so did the colour repertoire to express new values, clearly illustrated at Amarna (Eaverly). The role of colour in expressing power was demonstrated by Duigan who discussed its role in the act of deceiving through gift exchange. The phenomenon of deception was also associated with women, for example, in their use of cosmetics.

The colouring of one's complexion through cosmetics was related to gender in relation to people's indoor and outdoor activities, but also expressed gender socially and was hence connected to morality (papers by Hannah and Stewart). The adornment of the human body with clothing, various forms of decoration and aromas and the application of certain hygienic standards are universal phenomena. Colour is vital in the communicative aspect of body adornment because all these items express opinions, feelings, beliefs, status, belonging, power, meaning and fashion. Body adornment can, therefore, be seen as a silent but very expressive language between people from the same or different cultural contexts. We observe again that material and colour were interwoven, here as a language, and that the meaning and symbolism may lie in the colour, the material and its form, or both. Colour as a hierarchical and unifying element in clothing was presented by Fields who discussed the colour of army uniforms. Nosch demonstrated the precision of the Linear B tablets in the descriptions of red textiles in the context of palatial storage during the Aegean Bronze Age. No matter how universal the concept of body adornment, its understanding remains culturally specific. In two different papers, Bobou and Jones explained the specific colour code of red wedding garments in Ancient Greece. It became clear that the colour code was closely connected to religious aspects, as it is still the case today with our white wedding garments.

The majority of papers relating to the discussion of one specific colour were dedicated to the purple derived from murex shells, which, in itself is significant. The interdisciplinary papers were particularly fascinating. Koren, Ziderman and Greenspan demonstrated how the use of semantics, literature, scientific, experimental and religious disciplines can help in our understanding of the variety of colours that were mentioned in antiquity, and what they each meant in their own context. Burke argued convincingly that the start of the production of purple on Crete during the Bronze Age had a serious impact upon the palatial economical system and the emergence of the Minoan elites during the Old Palace period. Another example came from Phoenician production centres such those in the West Mediterranean (Lowe). Monaghan discussed how the cost of these pigments had a direct impact on the organisation of dying activities and the wider craft production during the later Classical and Hellenistic periods.

The importance of an interdisciplinary methodology in colour research became clear as the conference went on. Muskett applied methods from the field of cognitive psychology to demonstrate that there is a connection between colour and form that expresses specific feelings and social status, this is related to the capacity of different areas of the brain to deal with different aspects of perception such as lines, edges, colour and movement. In a comparative study of painted plaster from the Eastern Mediterranean, the author combined experimental archaeology, instrumental analysis and conservation measures to extract the maximum information from very rare and fragile material. Interdisciplinary research was presented in the papers that dealt with colour and language, philosophy and semantics. Clearly, colour terminology and its semantic structure were very much language-specific and culturally predictive. This explained why colours were seen, expressed and understood so differently. In this context the two papers by Rihll and Clarke were very informative. Warburton discussed a previous application of Berlin and Kay's evolutionary language theory model to the Ancient Egyptian colour language in comparison with that of the Akkadians. His conclusions about the words for 'blue' made clear that we should always distinguish the advantages and disadvantages of applying a theoretical model to a specific field (for Berlin and Kay's theory see Borg 1999). Blakholmer showed that in Bronze Age Aegean art colour developed from pure ochres towards three basic colours into complete polychromy. The transformative phase of the colour 'triad' is of particular interest in the way that it expresses more than just the three colours black, white and red.

Terms for colours not only described hue, brightness and saturation but also movement. Colour terminology was often related to its origin (geography, fauna, flora, production modes, and used materials) as Fox showed. Irwin and Clarke demonstrated that colour use in language may differ according to its use in prose or poetry. Zardini then dealt with the question of whether art had an influence upon language or vice versa. My feeling is that there must have been an impact and influence that went both directions, as is still the case today. Rihll stated that language may be lagging behind in colour descriptions. Although this may be the case for written language, people's daily use of spoken language must have been much richer, as it continues to be. Dialectic, local and some poetic language was not necessarily written down because it simply did not always have a practical use as such, but it is spoken language that shows creativity, innovation, and imagination of expression.

A paper that interested me personally was presented by Steel. She discussed the hidden social meaning of colour when chosen as a decorative element on pottery. She saw a clear relation between colour, form and function. This, in my opinion, shows a strong relation between colour and technology. One can see, therefore, the possibility of discussing colour as functional (as opposed to merely stylistic) in relation to technology. The study of colour or pigment/paint technology via instrumental analysis can recover information pertaining to a range of modes of production and the manipulation of raw materials into usable products. Consequently, colour technology studies can also reveal cross-craft interactions (for instance between potters, mural painters, glass workers, metal smiths, etc.) as a result of human agency and the choices they make and, moreover, as a mode of communication. James presented another paper that argued strongly for the relation between colour and form. She

claimed that no fixed colour symbolism existed in late Antiquity or the early Byzantine period, since colours were transient and mutable. Their meaning was, above all, embedded in their context. She convincingly demonstrated that art, as a concept without colour, did not exist in a Byzantine context, and that colour in fact made the difference between 'writing' and 'painting'.

Several case studies showed how colour was associated with different aspects of religious life and divinities (Stratiki; Deacy and Villing). It would be very interesting to see if their findings can also be related to religious beliefs practiced in earlier periods in the same geographic areas and whether colour could in fact help in the identification of additional deities who are not mentioned in any written sources so far recovered.

In his case study, Posamentir was the only speaker who made a point of emphasising the relationship between techniques of pigment manufacture and their state of preservation. In this sense the paper can be compared to that presented by Twilley at the Thessaloniki Conference in 2000.

The Thessaloniki Conference provided the attendants with stimulating presentations and discussions across disciplines, and the Edinburgh Conference did equally well. I was very pleased to see the topics missing from Thessaloniki addressed this time i.e. colour, linguistics and semiotics, colour and the body, the role of colour in the social, religious and political vocabulary of specific societies, and experimental approaches to colour in its range of applications.

The "Colours in Antiquity" conference at Edinburgh formed, for a broad range of specialists, a highly stimulating forum on 'what comes next'. As much as light travels infinitely, so does colour, so does people's perception of it, and so does people's curiosity. More comparative work on colour approaches across geographical and chronological boundaries and media would have been advantageous in this conference, although the two papers by Gillis and Baranski crossed geographical boundaries. However, many specialists did meet here, and my feeling is that it is just a matter of time before future conferences will result that address topics such as the meaning of colour in the prehistoric cultures of the entire Mediterranean and the Near East, the cognitive and material transfer of colour use between contemporary societies through cross-craft interaction, the active role of agency in colour issues and anthropological approaches to colour in archaeology, art history, classics and related fields.

Through the presented papers, it became obvious that some of the sessions shared overlapping issues and, therefore, I felt that some of the issues were too separated (some of the literature and linguistic issues in the Greek world, for example). However, in order to keep the conference thematically well organised, the sessions were well defined, and the discussions afterwards criss-crossed issues, sessions, geographical and time boundaries as we had all hoped for. The organisation of the discussion at the end of each session, with the chair as moderator, worked beautifully because it stimulated more thought provoking questions and discourses.

Two remarks emerge at the close of this review. First, interdisciplinary work is on the move. However, I feel that we are still left with too much of a split between the sciences and humanities in a field such as colour studies. Jones addressed within his field of study how a perfect marriage between these two sides can be achieved successfully (Jones 2002). I therefore firmly believe that his ideas and arguments are perfectly applicable to a field such as colour studies and that colour studies will benefit from it in a major way. Second, if one wants to advocate an interdisciplinary approach for colour studies, one cannot emphasize enough the necessity, at the interpretative level, for a dialectical approach in our methodology to extract the maximum of knowledge and understanding from the material under study. As Barrett (1990) and Wylie (1993) have both emphasised, a constant tacking back and forth between material evidence and theoretically informed notions of how aspects of society are reproduced, is vital to learn more about the meaning of things. Colour, as both a material (powder pigment, purple dye, saffron flower) and a non-material (kuwa-no, prismatic breaking of white light, Munsell Colour chart code) concept will benefit from such a methodological approach especially when studied from a variety of angles through interdisciplinary research.

Addendum

Since the preparation of this review, a new publication has come to light that may interest the reader. Edited by Jones and MacGregor (2002), *Colouring the Past* offers a multidisciplinary collection of papers dealing with *The Significance of Colour in Archaeological Research* across many of the abovementioned boundaries.

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