Royal Purple

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[Slide] map of the Mediterranean Sea
The following are places which I shall be discussing: Lebanon, ancient Phoenicia, Cyprus, Greece, Aegean Sea, Crete, Carthage

[Slide] map of Lebanon
The following are places which I shall be discussing: Sidon, Tyre, Byblos (Jubayl), Toula and the Zgharta district, al-Mina

[Slide] map of the Aegean Sea

[Slide] purple
Purple, derived from the murex shell and traded by the Phoenicians, has traditionally been symbolic of royalty.

The Phoenicians were the ancient seafaring people, and Lebanon was the beginning of their trade routes, which stretched throughout the Mediterranean Sea during the period from the mid 2nd millennium-c.300 BC.

The term ‘Phoenician’ is usually applied to them from the beginning of the Iron Age from the 12th century, and the most important period of their history was from the 12th-6th centuries. This is the time when the characteristic features of Phoenician culture developed, such as
long distance seafaring, colonisation, trade, and distinctive elements of their language, script and material culture. As well as Lebanon, they occupied parts of the coast of Israel, Syria and Cilicia in modern day Turkey. The rise of the Phoenicians to prominence is associated with disruptions throughout the eastern Mediterranean region at the end of the Bronze Age in c.1200, which led to the decline of the influence of the major empires, and is the period associated with the so called ‘Sea Peoples’.

In contrast to the other ancient empires which were land empires, the Phoenicians had a sea empire. Greeks and Romans conquered the Phoenicians and our account of their history is largely that of the conquerors. Modern research involves high technology investigations, firstly, in the search for underwater wrecks and, secondly, genetic research using DNA in order to identify the ancient Phoenician people and their direct descendents. The Phoenicians absorbed other cultures, such as Egyptian, Mesopotamian, Greek and Roman, and in turn spread them on their trade routes.

The Phoenicians had a string of city states rather than a unified kingdom. The most important cities of Phoenicia were Tyre, Sidon, Arados and Byblos. They were located on the coast of the Mediterranean Sea, this fact being a result of the significance of sea trade in the history of Phoenicia, which thus made these cities important. The importance of these cities in relation to each other varied over the centuries. In the 10th century, the city of Tyre rose to be the leading city, founded colonies throughout the Mediterranean, and exerted influence in the regions of Israel and Cilicia, and as far as the Hittite Empire in Anatolia, which is modern day Turkey. The evidence for this is the Phoenician inscriptions which are found in these regions.
The Phoenicians established colonies and trading posts throughout the Mediterranean Sea, in particular, in the region of the Aegean Sea, North Africa, Malta, Sicily, Sardinia and Spain. Indeed, Phoenician and Punic colonies are found beyond the Straits of Gibraltar and along the Atlantic coast of Morocco. The Aegean Sea was an important area for the exchange of ideas with the Greeks, such as the alphabet. Indeed, the Greeks and the Phoenicians were rival traders and colonists throughout the Mediterranean region for many centuries and undoubtedly learnt much from each other. Since European civilisation is greatly influenced by the Greeks, it is thus significantly influenced by the Phoenicians because of their influence on the Greeks.

The purple dye, which was produced and traded by the Phoenicians, is of great historical significance. This is particularly demonstrated by the fact that the name of the Phoenicians comes from the Greek word *phoinix*, which means ‘purple’, and from their name is derived the Latin word ‘Punic’ for their descendants, the Carthaginians.

[Slides] murex shell

The dye was made from the murex sea shell, which was found along the coasts of the Mediterranean Sea. It was produced using a very laborious method of production. Huge piles of shells are found outside ancient cities as remains of the industrial activity to produce it. These production centres were situated there because of the smell given off in the course of manufacture.
The shells were gathered or caught in baskets and then the secretion was retained because they were killed suddenly. The larger molluscs were opened, or the shells were crushed. The mass was allowed to stand for three days in salt, extracted using water, and thickened slowly to a sixteenth of size of its original volume. During this process, impurities were removed, and pieces of wool were used to test the liquid until the colour was correct.

Recent research suggests a possible origin of the production of the purple die on Crete in the Minoan civilisation in the early 2nd millennium BC, after which the technique was copied by the Phoenicians. The Minoan civilisation was a non-Greek forerunner of Greek culture and is known for the famous palaces at Knossos and Phaistos.

Tyre was considered to be the most important centre of purple production, but it was also practised in the Greek mainland and islands, the Greek cities of Asia, south Italy, north Africa and Mesopotamia.

This is a clay cuneiform tablet with instructions for dyeing wool. It gives recipes to produce purple and blue wools, as well as cheap versions of foreign imports. It is in the British Museum, inv. BM 62788, and was discovered in Mesopotamia in Babylon, and its date is Late Babylonian, 600-500 BC.
This dye, on account of being hard to produce and thus very valuable, and indelible, came to be used for colouring clothes of important people, such as kings, and hence it was known as ‘royal purple’. Alternative names are ‘Tyrian purple’ and ‘imperial purple’.

[Slide] lapis lazuli

Other precious materials were also associated with royalty and power in antiquity. Lapis lazuli, whose only known source is Afghanistan, was traded to the Middle East thousands of years before the period under discussion.

[Slide] lapis lazuli cylinder seals

It was imported in a raw state to Mesopotamia and the Levant, where it was carved into items, such as the cylinder seals. These seals date from the 13th century BC and were made in Kassite Babylonia and the Hittite Empire. They were found in a hoard at Thebes in Boeotia in Greece. The blue colour of lapis lazuli was symbolic of royalty, which is why it was used for luxury items, which were the property of the royal dynasties and aristocratic elites.

[Slide] Vermeer painting

Lapis lazuli was also used as a pigment for paint, such as we see in the oil painting in the Mauritshuis, The Hague, *Girl with a Pearl Earring*, dated c.1665, by the Dutch painter
Johannes Vermeer (AD 1632-75). It was used as a colour to depict scenes in royal and wealthy contexts.

Royal purple and the blue of lapis lazuli are both symbolic of royalty because they were expensive to acquire. However, the range of their colours is similar, and the question can be posed about whether the colours themselves are attractive to royalty, or whether this connotation is assigned to them simply because they are expensive to produce.

One of the most important cities which the Phoenicians founded was Carthage in North Africa, situated in modern day Tunisia, whose traditional foundation date is 814 BC. The meaning of Carthage in Phoenician (Qart-Hadasht) is ‘New City’, in other words, ‘New Tyre’, named after Tyre, which was then the most important city in Phoenicia.

Carthage rose in importance so that it had a large empire in the western Mediterranean region. It initially had conflicts with the Greeks on the island of Sicily, which the two peoples shared. It later had three wars with the rival Roman Empire, called the Punic Wars, for the reason which I explained above, that is, the Carthaginians, who exploited the murex shell to produce purple, were referred to as ‘Punic’, that is, the people associated with the purple die, by the Greeks and then the Romans.

The 1st Punic War was dated 264–241 BC and is largely known for its sea battles. The 2nd Punic War is dated 218–201, and is known for Hannibal, the Carthaginian general, crossing
the Alps with elephants, invading Italy and the land battles which took place there. The 3rd Punic War took place in 149–146 and resulted in the final destruction of Carthage by the Romans, which gave them dominance in the western Mediterranean region.

[Slides] Roman togas

The Phoenicians and Carthaginians traded the purple dye with the Romans, who used it for the clothes of their leading magistrates. From the Roman magistrates, the early Christian church inherited the practice for the clothes of their leading bishops, which is the reason why cardinals, archbishops and bishops wear it today.

The Romans inherited the use of royal purple as a die to symbolise regal authority. It was used to colour the edge of the togas of boys of high birth and of certain magistrates. It was the preeminent colour of imperial authority during the Roman Empire, whose first emperor was Augustus, who had complete control of the Roman Empire from 31 BC until his death in AD 14.

This is a recent reconstruction of the statue of the Emperor Gaius, known as Caligula, who reigned from AD 37–41, in the Virginia Museum of Fine Arts, Richmond, VA. The first wears the *toga praetexta*, for those of senatorial rank, and the second, the *toga purpurea*, purple with gold embroidery, for those of more prestigious rank, and especially victorious commanders in triumphal processions.
Fabrics dyed with purple are referred to in the Bible, such as this passage from the *Acts of the Apostles* in the New Testament (Chapter 16, vv. 13-4):

‘And on the Sabbath day we went outside the gate to a riverside, where we were supposing that there would be a place of prayer; and we sat down and began speaking to the women who had assembled. A woman named Lydia, from the city of Thyatira, a seller of purple fabrics, a worshiper of God, was listening’.

This takes place in Asia Minor, modern day Turkey, soon after the death of Jesus Christ, that is, the middle of the 1st century AD.

Purple was inherited by the Byzantine Empire (AD 306-1453) and the Roman Catholic Church as a colour symbolic of royalty and power. Thus, regal and episcopal robes were coloured purple. This is also the case in churches which developed out of the Roman Catholic Church, such as the Anglican Church.

We have expressions in English and other languages which refer to royal purple. ‘Raised to the purple’ means to be appointed to the position of cardinal or bishop in the Roman Catholic Church, since cardinals and bishops wear purple coloured clothes, for the reason just given. The expression can colloquially be used to mean to be appointed to any position of authority.

‘Born in the purple’ is used to describe the children of royal families or prominent people. Since purple was a royal colour derived from the dye, the purple coloured stone porphyry marble also had royal associations. It was used in the Byzantine Empire to decorate the
Porphyra or purple chamber of the Imperial Palace in Constantinople. Thus, Porphyrogenitos, which means 'born in the purple', very specifically meant being born in this chamber.

[Slides] San Vitale mosaics

These mosaics show the Byzantine Emperor Justinian I, who reigned AD 527–65, and his wife, the Empress Theodora, clad in Tyrian purple, 6th century mosaic at Basilica of San Vitale, Ravenna, Italy.

[Slides] royal sarcophagi

Porphyry, the purple granite, was used for royal sarcophagi in the Later Roman and Byzantine periods. The Later Roman Empire is dated from AD 250-476, and the Byzantine Empire from AD 476-1453. These are royal sarcophagi of the early Byzantine emperors, that is, dating from the earlier part of the period, which are in Istanbul in the Istanbul Archaeological Museum. You can see the Christian symbolism, chi-rho, which shows that Christianity was established as the official religion.

[Slide] Shroud of Charlemagne

Purple was used in imperial contexts in western Europe. This is the Shroud of Charlemagne, the Holy Roman Emperor, who died in AD 814. It is a polychrome Byzantine silk with a pattern showing a quadriga, dated to early 9th century AD. It is in Musée National du Moyen Âge in Paris.
Thus, originating from a dye which was expensive to produce, purple, because of its scarcity, acquired the mantle of a symbol of power, firstly, temporal for the Phoenicians, the Greeks and the Romans, and then, spiritual in the Roman Catholic Church. It thus remains a symbol of power in political and religious contexts, and, therefore, is a significant contribution of Phoenicia to world civilisation.

Sources:


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