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Perceptions of Power: Purple in Archaic Greek, Ancient Mesopotamian Inscriptions, and the Hebrew Bible

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Abstract

Purple in the ancient world held common characteristics: symbolic of power, wealth, and beneficence. Purple was also thought to be produced and imported from the Phoenician area, situated along the Levantine coastal shore. Yet between different literature circles, the specifics of purple diverged widely. This article explores the social function of purple-material (and its inherent purple-colour) in the Hebrew Bible in light of wider ancient Near East and eastern Mediterranean texts. As with any given cultural material, the meaning of purple is relative; it is differentially significant according to audience, context, subject matter, and the qualities of the material. By utilising a sociological and comparative approach, in the following I consider the use of purple in Homeric epic, ancient Mesopotamian inscriptions and biblical texts. I demonstrate that purple pigments and dyes, as well as the purple-colour of the object to which the pigments/dyes is applied, is a key means to communicate something culturally-specific. In so doing, this ultimately provides fresh insight into the texts and offers a glimpse into the thought processes of ancient society.

Keywords: *Purple; colour perception; materiality; Homer; ancient Near East; Hebrew Bible*

Introduction

Purple is a prestigious and powerful colour in antiquity.² The production and portrayal of purple throughout the ancient world has

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long been of interest to classicists, anthropologists, and sociologists.³ Meanwhile, archaeologists, historians, and scientists have tried to remake the exact purple described in antiquity.⁴ Yet, purple across the ancient Mediterranean, the ancient Near East, and the southern Levant remains to be explored from a comparative perspective. There is limited material and archaeological evidence of purple in the ancient world, but it is understood that people in all these places imported purple from Phoenicia, either directly or indirectly, as I will go on to show. But even though purple materials used across the ancient Mediterranean and Near East originated from one region, there are distinct differences in how such materials, and by extension their colour, were understood across different cultures. As such, the following uses sociological approaches to uncover the cultural discourses that purple is tied up with cross-culturally. The discussion focuses on the occurrences of purple in Archaic Greek texts, Mesopotamian inscriptions, and in the Hebrew Bible.

Though these texts span a long period and include diverse linguistic registers, which themselves inevitably evolve over time, it is only by studying the rich corpora of ancient literary material can we catch a glimpse of how particular cultures experienced and used colour. Beyond simply telling us what colour something is, these literary

³ Meyer Reinhold, *History of Purple as a Status Symbol in Antiquity* (Brussels: Latomus, 1970); Louise Quillien, "The Economic Role of Coloured Textiles in Babylonia (1st Millennium BCE)," in *The Value of Colour: Material and Economic Aspects in the Ancient World*, eds. Shiyanthi Thavapalan and David A. Warburton (Berlin: Edition Topoi, 2019), 201–30; Mark Bradley, *Colour and Meaning in Ancient Rome* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 189–211; Shiyanthi Thavapalan, *The Meaning of Colour in Ancient Mesopotamia* (Leiden: Brill, 2019), 180–2, 224–3; *idem.*, "Purple Fabrics and Garments in Akkadian Documents," *JANES* 3 (2018): 163–90; Lloyd B. Jensen, "Royal Purple of Tyre," *JNES* 22 (1963): 104–18; Cecilie Brøns, "Sacred Colours: Purple Textiles in Greek Sanctuaries in the Second Half of the 1st Millennium BC," in *Treasures from the Sea: Sea-silk and Purple Dye in Antiquity*, eds. Hedvig Landenius Engren and Francesco Meo (Oxford: Oxbow Books, 2017), 109–17; Adeline Grand-Clément, *La fabrique des couleurs. Histoire du paysage sensible des grecs anciens* (Paris: De Boccard, 2011), 328–39; Hartmut Blum, *Purpur also Statussymbol in der Griechischen Welt* (Bonn: Habelt, 1998).

⁴ I. Irving Ziderman, "Seashells and Ancient Purple Dyeing," *BA* 53 (1990): 98–101; *idem.*, "Purple Dyes Made from Shellfish in Antiquity," *Review of Progress in Coloration* 1 (1986): 46–52; Benedict James Lowe, "The Industrial Exploitation of Murex: Purple Dye Production in the Western Mediterranean," in *Colour in the Ancient Mediterranean World*, eds. Lisa Cleland and Karen Stears (Oxford: John and Erica Hedges, 2004), 46–8; Gary A. Rendsburg, "A Further Note on Purple Dyeing," *BA* 54 (1991): 121; Deborah Ruscillo, "Reconstructing Murex Royal Purple and Biblical Blue in the Aegean," in *Archaeomalacology: Molluscs in Former Environments of Human Behaviour*, ed. Daniela E. Bar-Yosef Mayer (Oxford: Oxbow Books, 2005), 99–106.



descriptions very often employ the hue with various symbolic meanings. A reference to purple might enhance the descriptive qualities of the text, but also contribute to the voice of the author and allude to social meanings. Ultimately, I will argue that purple was broadly understood as a luxurious material in ancient thought, but cultural and societal influences dictate when, where, and how purple should be used. I will support this argument by using a comparative method to firstly analyse the use of purple in Homeric epic and highlight the value of purple and its gendered implications, as well as its dark and dangerous connotations. Secondly, I will examine the significance of purple in both royal and cultic spheres described in Neo and Late Assyrian and Babylonian inscriptions. Employing the insights gained from analyses of Homeric and Mesopotamian uses of purple, I will explore the cultural connotations of purple in the Hebrew Bible and explicate not only the worth of purple but also the cultural nuances that are attached to the colour.

Numerous studies have shown the value of a sociological approach for exploring colour. In particular, Fiona Rose-Greenland argues that a sociological theory of colour must engage with materiality, where the materiality is twofold: the substance of the colour itself, that is, the plants, pigments, chemicals, dyes; and the object to which the colour is applied.⁵ She argues that colour perception is an unstable and contestable phenomenon shaped by social and material factors; a colour's meaning is relative.⁶ While materiality is certainly key, other scholars use sociological and psychological approaches to help appreciate the innate and socially determined ways that colours encode meaning in different cultures.⁷ For example, Scott Noegel has shown the value of blending the different domains of materialism and symbolism when studying the colour red across the ancient Near

⁵ Fiona Rose-Greenland, "Color Perception in Sociology: Materiality and Authenticity at the *Gods in Color* Show," *Sociological Theory* 34 (2016): 81–105.

⁶ Rose-Greenland, "Color Perception," 99.

⁷ E.g., Umberto Eco, "How Culture Conditions the Colours We See," in *On Signs*, ed. Marshall Blonsky (Baltimore, MD: John Hopkins University Press, 1985), 157–75; Anna Wierzbicka, "The Meaning of Colour Terms: Semantics, Cultures and Cognition," *Cognitive Linguistics* 1 (1990): 99–150.

East.⁸ While red certainly had connections to royal and divine contexts, red has been related to stigmatised sexual behaviour, and the significance of blood (as a red-coloured material) encodes notions of protection, fertility and defilement.⁹ I will therefore utilise a sociological approach to colour to explore the various social ramifications of purple, as distinct from other aspects of its ancient context, such as archaeological. I move across the different domains of colour, particularly the material and symbolic domains, to demonstrate that purple provides fresh understanding of the texts and offers insights into the thought processes of ancient society.

Purple in Antiquity

In ancient Western thought, colour was synonymous with textures and material things: “colour was meaningless outside of materiality.”¹⁰ Colours, therefore, were not universal, but material culture and the long cultural history behind purple helps characterise the colour across three cultures.¹¹ Based on a brief summary of this long cultural history of purple, the meaning of purple is relative; it is differentially significant according to audience, context, subject matter, and the qualities of the material. While the idea that purple was a luxury material in the ancient world is well-established in secondary literature, I explore other culturally-specific ideas related to the purple-material and consequently, its “purple” colour in

⁸ Scott B. Noegel, “Scarlet and Harlots: Seeing Red in the Hebrew Bible,” *HUCA* 87 (2016): 1–47; cf. Laura Quick, *Dress, Adornment and the Body in the Hebrew Bible* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2021), 47–156.

⁹ Noegel, “Scarlet and Harlots,” 5.

¹⁰ Rose-Greenland, “Color Perception,” 84.

¹¹ Beyond the scope of this article is the debated topic of cognitive linguistics in relation to colour perception. Numerous studies have since furthered Brent Berlin and Paul Kay, *Basic Colour Terms: Their Universality and Evolution* (Berkeley, CA: University of California, 1969), which argued for generalisations within colour language based solely on anthropological research. Elsewhere, I have demonstrated the difficulty to determine any universal truths about colour in antiquity, see Ellena Lyell, “Cognitive Linguistics & Chromatic Language: Applying Modern Theories of Colour Perception to the Hebrew Bible,” *SJOT* 35 (2021): 230–41.



antiquity thus elevating the unique status of purple compared to other colours and materials.¹²

Purple was a colour-fast dye widely used from 2000 BCE in Ugarit, Hattusas, Babylon and Assyria.¹³ This dye was extracted from different species of the *murex* sea snail. Local fishermen across the Mediterranean caught thousands of *murex* snails from the shallow waters.¹⁴ The chemical changes wrought by exposure to sunlight, plus factors such as atmospheric conditions, the quality of the vat the fabric soaked in, and the type of *murex* snail used, produced various shades of purple, ranging in hue from pink, brown, red, blue, and black.¹⁵ The colours produced by different types of *murex* shells also had a vivid shine, a sheer iridescence, and were permanent and resistant – all of which were important qualities for the garments to stay clean and colourful.¹⁶ The general theory is that *murex* purple originates from the Phoenician area, situated along the Levantine coastal shore. Some scholars have argued for a connection between the etymology of “Phoenician” and the Greek φοῖνιξ (“red, purple pigment”).¹⁷ After Herakles discovered purple when an animal ate a seashell staining his mouth red/purple, Herakles told Phoenix who

¹²Though, this is not to say that other colours that are associated with royal and divine realms (like red, gold, silver, etc.) do not have further cultural connotations (especially see, Noegel, “Scarlet and Harlots”). As this article explores, the culturally-specific ideas associated with purple is particularly striking when compared across three cultures.

¹³ Reinhold, *History*, 12–13.

¹⁴ Several marine shellfish, particularly from the *Muricidae* and *Thaisidae* families, were obtained from the Mediterranean shoreline; the *Bolinus brandaris* (*murex brandaris*), the *Hexaplex trunculus* (*murex trunculus*) and the *Stramonita haemastoma* (*Thais haemastoma*) were the most highly prized.

¹⁵ Matthew A. James, et al., “High Prestige Royal Purple Dyed Textiles from the Bronze Age Royal Tomb at Qatna, Syria,” *Antiquity* 83 (2009): 1109–18; Wilfred H. van Soldt, “Fabrics and Dyes at Ugarit,” *UF* 22 (1990): 321–57; Brendan Burke, “Purple and Aegean Textile Trade in the Early Second Millennium B.C.,” in *Meletemata: Studies in Aegean Archaeology Presented to Malcolm H. Wiener as He Enters His 65th Year*, eds. P. Betancourt, Vassos Karageorghis, Robert Laffineur and Wolf-Dietrich Niemeier (Liege: Université de Liège, 1999), 75–82 (77).

¹⁶ Stulz’s discussion of Greek terms for purple and red which emphasised the inclusion of brightness and in translation, Heinke Stulz, *Die Farbe Purpur im frühen Griechentum* (Stuttgart: Teubner, 1990), cf. Hartmut Blum, *Purpur als Statussymbol*. On the high costs of purple dye, see Quillien, “The Economic Role,” 217; Ziderman, “Seashells,” 99; Jane Bridgeman, “Purple Dye in Late Antiquity and Byzantium,” in *The Royal Purple and Biblical Blue: Argaman and Tekhelet. The Study of Chief Rabbi Dr Isaac Herzog on the Dye Industries in Ancient Israel and Recent Scientific Contributions*, ed. Ehud Spanier (Jerusalem: Keter, 1987), 159–65; Charlene Elliott, “Purple Past: Color Codification in the Ancient World,” *Law and Social Inquiry* 33 (2008): 173–94 (177).

¹⁷I. Herzog, “Hebrew Porphyrology,” in Spanier, *The Royal Purple*, 17–146 (36).

adorned himself in a purple robe and declared it their national colour.¹⁸ Material findings reinforce the idea that purple dye originated in Phoenicia, as the Phoenician cities of Tyre and Sidon were large production centres for sea-purple.¹⁹ The coastal cities of Phoenicia became renowned for their trade and commerce both by land and sea, with purple their biggest export.²⁰ With a focus on the Late Bronze Age, purple was exported across the ancient Mediterranean, southern Levant and the wider ancient Near East, yet its textual and social use differs.

Purple in the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*

Given the study of ancient colour perception arguably began during the Newton and Goethe debate in the nineteenth century, the catalyst that promoted the study of ancient colour theory came from William Gladstone's three-volume work on Homer which included a small section examining Homer's use of colour.²¹ It is apt then, to use the works of Homer as a starting point for this comparative study on purple. But more than this, Homer's works provide a contemporaneous comparison with ancient Mesopotamian insights in the ancient Near East and the biblical accounts in the southern Levant. We can ask ourselves if the use of purple in the *Iliad* and *Odyssey* reflect the Late Bronze Age Mycenaean society in which the epics are ostensibly set – or does it rather represent the social world

¹⁸ This common myth is recited from Herzog, "Hebrew Porphyrology," 36.

¹⁹ Thavapalan, "Purple Fabrics," 180. Terminology for purple-coloured materials is ambiguous particularly because of the diversity in dyeing techniques practiced in the late Bronze and early Iron Ages, thus it is extremely difficult to decipher between shellfish purple, like *murex*, and plant-based purples. Thavapalan ("Purple Fabrics," 24) states, "the people of the ancient Near East themselves do not appear to have distinguished between genuine, animal-based, fake and plant-based purples in the names for colored fabrics."

²⁰ Amelie Kuhrt, *Ancient Near East c. 3000–330BC. Volume 1* (London: Routledge, 1995); C. L. Crouch, *The Making of Israel: Cultural Diversity in the southern Levant and the Formation of Ethnic Identity in Deuteronomy* (Leiden: Brill, 2016), 11–17.

²¹ William Gladstone, *Studies on Homer and the Homeric Age: Volume III* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1858), 476–7. Newton argued that colours of the spectrum could be recombined by a second lens back into white light, just as the first prism breaks white light into a spectrum of colours. Goethe, however, redirected the study of colour away from the mechanics of colour perception towards the psychology of colour discrimination; he argued colour was formed in our eye and mind. He also studied ancient Greek colour vision, concluding that ancient Greeks derived all colours from white/light and black/darkness.



of the late eighth century, or perhaps even later, when the epics likely took the form in which we know them today?²²

Generally, Homeric Greek had many lexemes to indicate the colour purple, such as πορφυρεος, φοινικεος, and υακινθινος.²³ There were cheaper and similar (counterfeit) purples, but this section analyses the uses of the most common term for purple, πορφυρεος, in Homeric epic.²⁴ Purple in the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* had physical, economic, and political properties and associations. I argue that as Homer uses πορφυρεος thirty-six times as a garment but also in relation to things not typically associated with the colour purple, like καρδια (“heart”), πελαγος (“sea”) θανατος (“death”), αιμα (“blood”), νεφελη (“a cloud”) and ιρις (“a rainbow”), the use of purple in Homer emphasises the value of purple but also the divine, gendered, and dangerous associations attached to the colour.

Garments of Purple

Briefly, Homer’s multiple references to purple garments divide into two sub-categories: 1) weaving of πορφυρεος yarn that would lead to a purple garment; and 2) πορφυρεος cloaks worn upon the person. With the former, the *Iliad* describes women spinning and weaving purple dyed yarn into “double-width sea-purple cloths” to create a beautiful and majestic garment (*Il.* 3.126; 22.441). More specifically, Helen was found by a disguised Iris spinning in the palace and then Andromache was also in the palace weaving a “sea-purple” cloth with multi-coloured flowers. Both women are significant characters

²² On dating the composition of Homeric epic, see Barbara Graziosi, *Inventing Homer: The Early Reception of Epic* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 90–124; Jan Paul Crielaard, “Homer, History and Archaeology: Some Remarks on the Date of the Homeric World,” in *Homeric Questions: Essays in Philology, Ancient History and Archaeology, Including the Papers of a Conference Organized by the Netherlands Institute at Athens (15 May 1993)*, ed. Jan Paul Crielaard (Amsterdam: Gieben, 1995), 201–88; essays by Kurt Raflaub, “Homeric Society,” 624–48; Walter Donlan, “The Homeric Economy,” 649–67; and Hans van Wees, “Homeric Warfare,” 668–93 in *A New Companion to Homer*, eds. Ian Morris and Barry B. Powell (Leiden: Brill, 1997); Martin L. West, “The Date of the *Iliad*,” *MH* 52 (1995): 203–19.

²³ On the etymology of each of these terms, see Brøns, “Sacred Colours,” 109–10. Like στερεον, αλουργος is also a *murex* dye but does not feature in Homeric epic, see Cecilie Brøns and Kerstin Droß-Krüpe, “The Colour Purple? Reconsidering the Greek Word halourgos (αλουργος) and its Relation to Ancient Textiles,” *Textile History* 49 (2018): 22–43.

²⁴ Stulz, *Die Farbe Purpur*, 98.

within the *Iliad*. Helen (daughter of Leda and Zeus/Tyndareus, sister of Clytemnestra, wife of Menelaus) was taken by Paris, a Trojan prince, to Troy, which instigated the Trojan war. Achilles kills the father and brothers of Andromache (daughter of Eetion, king of the Cilician Thebes, wife of Hector), and after Hector died, she became the concubine of Achilles' son Neoptolemus and bore him three sons. These are the only two named women in the *Iliad*, which itself indicates their significances and their skills in spinning the prestigious "sea-purple" yarn, exemplifying their high social status.²⁵

The second sub-category concerns those that wear πορφυρεος dyed cloaks upon the body. This is done only by characters of the highest social status.²⁶ In the *Iliad*, Hector's ashes are "covered with a soft purple cloth" (24.796) and Agamemnon carries his purple cloak in his hand (8.220–21). In the *Odyssey*, Telemachus wears πορφυρεος (4.115, 154), but primarily, πορφυρεος is associated with hero, Odysseus. He draws the purple dyed cloak over his face to hide his tears from the Phaeacians (8.84) and, when leaving for Troy, is given a purple cloak by Penelope, which becomes an identity marker when Odysseus returns disguised as a beggar and begins speaking to his wife again (19.225, 242). Throughout then, πορφυρεος is associated with men and women with power and social status.

Chaotic and Distressing Purple

Adeline Grand-Clément proposed the idea of a link between the verbal πορφυρεος (πορφυρειν) – which can be translated as "disturbed", "troubled", "heaving", "surging" – and contexts of heroes in trouble. This suggests purple also shows inner turmoil of the characters and might explain why Homer uses πορφυρεος to describe καρδια ("heart"), πελαγος ("sea"), and στειρη ("wave"), as

²⁵ Brøns ("Sacred," 114) takes this occurrence of "sea-purple" alongside a female character as a comparison to the idea of purple as a cultic connotation in relation to female deities; *idem.*, *Gods and Garments: Textiles in Greek Sanctuaries from the 7th to the 1st Centuries BC*. (Oxford: Oxbow, 2016). Cf. Propertius 1.3.41, among others. On spinning and (female) social status, see Ionna Papadopoulou-Belmehdi, "Greek Weaving or the Feminine Antithesis," *Diogenes* 167 (1994): 39–56; and Lisa Pace Vetter, *Women's Work' as Political Art: Weaving and Dialectical Politics in Homer, Aristophanes, and Plato* (Lanham: Rowman and Littlefield, 2005).

²⁶ Stulz, *Die Farbe Purpur*, 114.



well as the dyed cloth.²⁷ Briefly, πορφυρεος water coincides with descriptions of chaotic and distressing situations. πορφυρεος modifies the sea twice in the *Iliad*, and three times in the *Odyssey* (*Il.* 14.16; 16.391; *Od.* 2.428; 11.243; 13.85), all of which are contexts of trouble.²⁸ Interestingly, πορφυρω modifies καρδια (“heart”), four times (*Il.* 21.551; *Od.* 4.427, 572; 10.309). These occurrences are translated as “darkly ponders” suggesting an internal battle of some kind; Homer thought purple should represent and reflect troubled thoughts. For example, *Od.* 10.309 says, ἦα, πολλὰ δε μοι κραδιῆ πορφυρε κλοντι (“as I went, my heart purplely pondered many things”). Here, the beautiful witch-goddess Circe turned people into pigs. Eurylochus sees this and runs back to the ship to warn Odysseus, who arms his men. On the way back to Circe’s house, Odysseus is visited by the god Hermes, who gives him advice and instructions on taking a magical herb, which when eaten stops him from turning into an animal. However, when Odysseus stands in front of Circe’s house, about to go in, he thinks dark and troubled thoughts. Odysseus is a key character who has already associated with purple garments. πορφυρεος connects to πορφυρω reflecting Odysseus’s thrashing thoughts. Both of Homer’s descriptions regarding a purple heart and a purple sea push the boundaries of the colour category to reflect troublesome times, danger, and current battles.

²⁷ Grand-Clément, *La fabrique*, 67.

²⁸ The compound ἀλιπορφυρος, a portmanteau of αλις (“sea”) and πορφυρα (“purple”), is used in connection to spinning/weaving purple yarn (*Od.* 6.53, 306; 13.108). This suggests a direct and common relationship between the sea and “sea-purple” dyed yarn, but also asks the question as to why the distinction needs to be made between ἀλιπορφυρος and πορφυρεος; cf. Ps 104:6. Previous scholars have also assumed a cultural meaning to Homer’s infamous οἶνοψ ποντος (“wine-dark sea”), It can be seen to reflect the twilight setting [Robert Rutherford-Dyer, “Homer’s Wine-Dark Sea,” *GR* 30 (1983): 125–8]; relate to the idea of danger [Michael Clarke, “The Semantics,” in Cleland and Stears, *Colour in the Ancient Mediterranean World*, 131–9]; or reflect the tragedy that has just happened [Mark Bradley, “Colour as a Synaesthetic Experience in Antiquity,” in *Synaesthesia and the Ancient Senses*, eds. Shane Butler and Alex Purves (New York: Routledge, 2013), 127–40 (132–3)]. Alice E. Kober, *The Use of Color Terms in the Greek Poets, Including all the Poets from Homer to 146 B.C., Except the Epigrammatists* (Geneva, NY: W.F. Humphrey Press, 1932), 35, suggested the existence of “blue wine” comparable in colour with the sea. Cf. P. G. Maxwell-Stuart, *Studies in Greek Colour Terminology: Volume I, Glaukos* (Leiden: Brill, 1981), 6–11. Eleanor Irwin, *Colour Terms in Greek Poetry* (Toronto, ON: Hunter Rose Company, 1974), 202, translates οἶνοψ as “dark and gleaming” rather than “wine.” See *Il.* 2.613; 5.771; 7.88; 23.143, 316; *Od.* 1.183; 2.421; 3.286; 4.474; 5.132, 221, 349; 6.170; 7.250; 12.388; 19.172, 274.

Considering the relationship that Homer's purple has with chaotic and distressing situations, it is not surprising that Homer uses πορφυρεος to modify αιμα ("blood").²⁹ *Iliad* 17.360–1 says, ὣς Αἴας ἐπετέλλε πελωριος, αιματι δε χθων δευετο πορφυρεω ("Thus, mighty Aias charged them, and the earth grew wet with purple blood"). In Book 16, Achilles's friend Patroclus dies; this part of Book 17 continues the story, as a fight breaks out over to whom Patroclus's armour belonged. Aias the Greater defends Patroclus's corpse, fighting off all those who came near and, in doing so, spilt a lot of blood. The motif of the earth growing wet with blood accentuates the significance of Patroclus's death and the emotional intensity of the battle. Despite the large number of deaths in the *Iliad*, αιμα ("blood") is only used in relation to twelve deaths.³⁰ Of these twelve deaths, πορφυρεος occurs three times in relation to θανατος ("death") itself, as well as αιμα. For example, *Il.* 5.83–4 says, αιματοεσσα δε χειρ πεδιω πεσε. τον δε κατ'οσσε ελλαβε πορφυρεος θανατος και μοιρα κραταιη ("So the arm all bloody fell to the ground; and down over his eyes came a purple death and a mighty fate"). Similarly, *Il.* 16.333–4 and 20.475–6 both read, παν δ' υπεθερμανθη ξιφος αιματι. τον δε κατ'οσσε ελλαβε πορφυρεος θανατος και μοιρα κραταιη ("And all the blade grew warm with his blood, and down over his eyes came a purple death and a mighty fate"). Here the poetic "πορφυρεος θανατος" (literally "purple death") not only parallels blood, but also relates to the eyes. As well as a troubling situation, the image of a "purple" death covering the victim's eyes is a violent image

As mentioned above, πορφυρεος is central to elements of wealth, power, and status; those that wore cloaks and garments of the purple dye had these associations. It is therefore striking to note that all

²⁹ φοινικοεις is also used in reference to blood (*Il.* 23.716); cf. Pliny, *Nat.* 9.62.135, "Its highest glory consists in the colour of congealed blood, blackish at first glance but gleaming when held up to the light." Cf. Andreas Fountoulakis, "The Colours of Desire and Death: Colour Terms in Bion's *Epitaph on Adonis*," in Cleland and Stears, *Colour in the Ancient Mediterranean World*, 110–16.

³⁰ Tamara Neal, "Blood and Hunger in the *Iliad*," *CP* 101 (2006): 15–33 (15). This enjambment is more significant than others because Homer juxtaposes πορφυρα with αιμα; Mark W. Edwards, *The Iliad: A Commentary: Volume V: Books 17–20* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 96–7.



three of these victims who experience πορφυρεος θανατος, Hypsenor (*Il.* 5.83), Cleobulus (*Il.* 16.334), and Echeclus (*Il.* 20.476), were killed by people ranked higher than them. Hypsenor was killed by Euryplyus, who was a leader of the Ormenion men to Troy; Cleobulus was killed by Ajax the Lesser, a leader of the Locrian contingent at Troy; and Echeclus was killed by Achilles, one of the greatest Greek heroes that fought at Troy. Euryplyus, Ajax the Lesser and Achilles all had elements of power and were ranked highly in the social hierarchy. πορφυρεος θανατος becomes a violent mark these important people left on their victims. Thus, there is an interesting and inherent contrast between the colour of blood, and the high status and catastrophe connotations, to which purple is central. Purple is prestigious and luxurious, but with it comes danger and tragedy.

Finally, Homer's use of πορφυρεος is interesting in relation to ιρις ("a rainbow") and νεφελη ("a cloud"). These occurrences appear within a couple of verses of each other in Book 17, where Homer remains focussed on the war over Patroclus's body. *Iliad* 17.547 reads, ηυτε πορφυρεην ιριν θνητοισι ταυνοση ("as Zeus stretches a purple rainbow for the mortals"), and *Il.* 17.551 says, ως η πορφυρεη νεφελη πυκασασα ε αυτην ("so Athena wrapped herself in a purple cloud"). The battle intensifies as Zeus sends Iris down as a personified rainbow to warn men of divine intervention (cf. *Il.* 11.25–27) and sends Athena down in a cloud to encourage and rally the Greeks. Both Athena and Iris were seen as a link between the gods and mankind, frequently appearing as messengers in contexts of war and tragedy. As Athena, the daughter of Zeus, is wrapped in a purple cloud, this is likened to physically being adorned with the purple garments and all the royalty and luxuriousness associated with it.

A purple rainbow, however, poses a problem to scholars as it is very unlike the modern conceptions of rainbows. Liz James has studied rainbows in Byzantine art, noting two separate categories: the naturalistic and non-naturalistic. The latter presented a rainbow as a

single or double band of one basic colour term in an arc shape.³¹ James notes that the unnaturalistic rainbow is used to emphasise the glory of deities and gods acting as an arc of divine light,³² which, in this case, is πορφυρεος. Grand-Clément emphasises the divine associations of πορφυρεος, proposing that the ancient understanding of purple credited it with possessing special powers. This is because during the dyeing process, the dyeing agent is a colourless liquid extracted from the *murex* shell; only by exposure to sunlight and air does it take on a violet hue. This metamorphosis meant people believed purple could encapsulate all colours, just like a modern rainbow.³³ Both approaches suggest that the significance of πορφυρεος as a shimmering material creates poetic ekphrasis with a divine ιριν.

Overall, Homer conveys the idea that it was considered an honour to weave it and an honour to wear it. Homer used important female characters to spin the material and portrayed only male heroes adorned in “sea-purple.” These occurrences centre around the ideal male/female body, demonstrating the idea that Homer recognised the wealth and prestige of the material. Homer also conveys a dark side to πορφυρεος. The chaotic, dangerous, and surging nature of the colour is reflected in descriptions of a πορφυρεος στειρη, καρδια, θανατος, αιμα, νεφελη and ιρις. The troubled heart describes Odysseus’ troubled thoughts as he stands in front of Circe’s house; the tragic event of Patroclus’s death and bloodshed is self-explanatory; and, in the final two instances of the rainbow and the cloud, Patroclus is dead and the battle rages around his corpse. The rainbow is a portent and Athena appearing in a cloud reinforces the disturbing nature of the theophany and situation. Homer conveys πορφυρεος from a divine point of view; the divine sends down omens in the shape of πορφυρεος rainbows and clouds, controls the chaotic πορφυρεος sea, and takes away life (πορφυρεος death and blood).

³¹ Liz James, *Light and Colour in Byzantine Art* (New York: Clarendon Press, 1995), 105–9; *idem.*, “Colour and the Byzantine Rainbow,” *Byzantine and Modern Greek Studies* 15 (1991): 66–95.

³² James, *Light and Colour*, 99; *idem.*, “Colour,” 84–7.

³³ Aristotle, *Hist. an.*, 5.14.22–5.



Purple in Mesopotamian Inscriptions

Akkadian dictionaries and other reference works understand *takiltu* and *argamannu* to correspond to the Hebrew תכלת (*tkelt*) and ארגמן (*ʿrgmn*), and denote blue- and red-purple dyes extracted from the *murex* snails.³⁴ There is strong evidence for both to originate from the *murex* snails, albeit different variations: *murex trunculus* produced a bluish tint whereas *murex brandaris* more reddish, respectively thought to map onto *takiltu*/תכלת and *argamannu*/ארגמן.³⁵ Unlike the interchangeable and parallel use of תכלת and ארגמן in biblical literature, *takiltu* and *argamannu* are used as separate terms in different texts from different locations and at different stages of the Akkadian language.³⁶ Purple in the Mesopotamian texts consistently occurs in divine spheres – that is, associated with the gods via temple décor, adornments, and offerings – and in royal realms and similar contexts of the elite. Purple features as part of palace décor, regal clothing, and tribute and booty lists to elaborately depict both the wealth and power of kings. I will explore some of these uses in this section.

Divine Purple

First, the beauty and value of purple made it a suitable offering to the gods. For example, a *takiltu* headpiece is mentioned among a list of votive offerings from Baʿal-malik to Ninurta in a text from Emar (BLMJ 1136:3, 4, 8). In the Eanna temple archives at Uruk, and the Ebabbar temple archives in Sippar, purple garments are recorded as clothing divine statues.³⁷ The ritual clothing ceremonies of such statues (*lubuštu*) are attested from the Old Akkadian period onwards, and mentioned in Assyrian rituals as well as administrative and ritual

³⁴ CAD A/2, 253; CAD T, 70–73; Thavapalan, “Purple Fabrics,” 5. Other colour terms not from the *murex* snail could arguably fit into the purple colour category, such as כרמל, שני, and חרלפה for Hebrew (though these are primarily understood as deep “red” materials) and *ḥašmanu* and *uqnātu* for Akkadian.

³⁵ See Pliny, *Nat.* 9.125–38; cf. Aristotle, *Hist. an.* 5.14.22–5; Vitruvius, *De arch.* 7.13.1–3.

³⁶ For more on the specific types of *takiltu* and *argamannu* (wool and dyed fabrics), see Thavapalan, *Meaning*, 269–84.

³⁷ Thavapalan, *Meaning*, 231; Stefan Zawadzki, *Garments of the Gods: Studies on the Textile Industry and the Pantheon of Sippar According to the Texts from the Ebabbar Archive: Volume 1* (Fribourg: Academic Press Fribourg, 2006); idem., *Garments of the Gods: Volume 2: Texts* (Fribourg: Academic Press Fribourg, 2013); Salvatore Gaspa, *Textiles in the Neo-Assyrian Empire: A Study of Terminology* (Berlin: de Gruyter, 2018), 232.

texts from the Neo-Babylonian period.³⁸ One text describes a *lubuštu* ceremony of the month of Ayaru, which Nabû-bêl-šumāti (a royal delegate and weaver from the northern Babylonian territory of Birati) delivers a range of *takiltu* and *argamannu* fabrics to the Ebbar temple to adorn gods (BM 62626).³⁹ Purple often adorned male deities. In Neo-Babylonian Uruk, the gods Nabû and Nanāya were adorned in (or given with the intention to wear) garments of *argamannu* (NCBT 377:1–5).⁴⁰ The wardrobe of the Sun-god, Šamaš, is treated in detail in a text of Nabû-apal-iddina, king of Babylon (c. 887–855 BCE), wherein he wears a purple headband with a gold ornament, and a blue garment with a golden ornament in the shape of a gate (BM 91002).⁴¹ A Late Babylonian text of the Achaemenid period also mentions Bunene receiving 10 shekels of *takiltu* wool for repairing the chariot of the sun god. Bunene, a minor god of the Babylonian pantheon, was worshipped in Sippar and Uruk.⁴² He was considered the son and charioteer of Šamaš, and worthy of receiving purple fabrics. Šamaš and Bunene were among those adorned in purple according to texts from Sippar: Šamaš in thirty shekels of *takiltu* (BM 50745; BM 51563; BM 51099); Bunene in six shekels (Cyr 104); and also Adad in twenty shekels worth (BM 79134; CAM 382: 5).⁴³ Furthermore, in the temples of Sippar and Uruk, the curtains for the deities' cella are made of *šiddu*.⁴⁴ This comprises three hundred and

³⁸ Chronologically, Old Akkadian roughly attests to 2350–2000 BCE followed by the branching off of two major geographical dialects: Assyrian in northern Mesopotamia and Babylonia in the south. The Old Babylonian/Old Assyrian period dates from 2000–1500 BCE, followed by Mid. Babylonian/Assyrian (1500–1000 BCE), Neo Babylonian/Assyrian (1000–600 BCE) and then Late Babylonian (600 BCE–100 CE); John Huehnergard, *A Grammar of Akkadian* (Georgia: Scholars Press, 1997), xxiii–xxvi. For more on *lubuštu*, see Marc J. H. Linssen, *The Cults of Uruk and Babylon: The Temple Ritual Texts as Evidence for Hellenistic Cult Practice* (Leiden: Brill, 2004), 51–56; *CAD* L, 235.

³⁹ Zawadzki, *Garments* 2, 170. Cf. the deliveries from Bakûa for *lubuštu* during Cyrus's reign (Cyr 191), from Nergal-iddin (BM 61690) and then Bakûa and Nabû-upniya (BM 73185) during Nabonidius's reign.

⁴⁰ Paul-Alain Beaulieu, *The Pantheon of Uruk During the Neo-Babylonian Period* (Leiden: Brill, 2003), 344; Gaspa, *Textiles*, 209; Zawadzki, *Garments* 1, 115.

⁴¹ Zawadzki, *Garments* 2, 175; Gaspa, *Textiles*, 201. Thirty shekels of *takiltu* wool also made up the garments that clothed Šamaš's statue and covered his weapon (BM 59621); Zawadzki, *Garments* 2, 455.

⁴² Beaulieu, *Pantheon*, 335; Gaspa, *Textiles*, 218.

⁴³ Zawadzki, *Garments* 1, 88.

⁴⁴ *CAD* Š/2, 407, proposes the translation of “cloth, curtain” as the word is never mentioned as a linen garment in the Neo-Babylonian texts.



five shekels of combined flax and thirty-one shekels of *takiltu* wool (GCC I 2 381).⁴⁵

Royal Purple

The use of purple as a symbol of prestige and beauty is also found in descriptions of ancient Mesopotamian palace décor, garments worn by royalty, and the tributes that they receive. One Middle Assyrian text describes a *takiltu*-coloured material to decorate the royal throne (A.305),⁴⁶ and ancient wall reliefs also used *takiltu*.⁴⁷ In descriptions of some ceremonies, royal attire is mentioned, and the king was represented by his *sisiktu* (“royal coat, fringe”). The coat was qualified as purple and specifically recorded as worn by the king in the rituals of the Esagil.⁴⁸

Purple clothing is reserved for people with high social status. For example, in his letter to the crown prince, the haruspex Tabnî reminds the prince about the king’s kindness towards Tabnî’s father, who dressed him in *argamannu* robes (SAA 10, 182:12–13). Royalty also adorned other key people in purple clothes as a reward or royal grant: the king adorns a Mannean messenger for telling him about the Mannean king’s whereabouts (SAA 1, 29 r.20–21); the son of Asrukanu is clothed in purple because he tells the king about the death of Dalta and that Baga-parna is lying (SAA 15, 91 r.2); the men of the king’s relative, Abu-eriba, were clothed in purple in an outpouring of gifts (SAA 17, 122:17–e.18); and more generally, the king will reward the faithful that follow him with purple (SAA 1, 134:13). These examples do not only concern the status of a person but also are expressions of loyalty and fidelity towards one power

⁴⁵ Louise Quillien, “Flax and Linen in the First Millennium Babylonia BC: The Origins, Craft Industry and Uses of Remarkable Textile,” in *Prehistoric, Ancient Near Eastern and Aegean Textiles and Dress*, eds. Mary Harlow, Cécile Michel and Marie-Louise Nosch (Oxford: Oxbow, 2014), 271–96 (288).

⁴⁶ Veysel Donbaz, “Complementary Data on Some Assyrian Terms (ḫuruḫurātu, ḫuruḫuru, ḫurūtu, ḫuhuru, akalu, kirum),” *JCS* 40 (1988): 69–80 (72).

⁴⁷ Pauline Albenda, *Ornamental Wall Painting in the Art of the Assyrian Empire* (Leiden: Brill, 2005), 62.

⁴⁸ Francis Joannès, “Fabrics and Clothes from Mesopotamia during the Achaemenid and Seleucid Periods: The Textual References,” in *Wool Economy in the Ancient Near East and the Aegean: From the Beginnings of Sheep Husbandry to Institutional Textile Industry*, eds. Catherine Breniquet and Cécile Michel (Oxford: Oxbow, 2014), 453–64 (458–9).

base over another; transactions of purple convey an inclusion or close association within one royal household.

Purple is also part of Mesopotamian tribute lists to kings in inscriptions. In many Neo-Assyrian royal inscriptions, *takiltu* and *argamannu* appear as items of tribute or booty alongside other precious materials. For example, Tukulti-Ninurta II describes one talent of *takiltu* wool as tribute (RIMA 2 175, 176) and Shalmaneser II obtains twenty talents of *argamannu* wool from the king of Patina (RIMA 3 18). Assurnasirpal II takes *takiltu* and *argamannu* wool as booty (RIMA 2 199, 200),⁴⁹ as does Tiglath-Pileser III (RINAP 1 12: 1; 15: 3; 35 iii 21–22). Interestingly, the etymology of *argamannu* and the Hebrew equivalent אַרְגָּמָן relates to the idea of “tribute.” The terms *argamannu*/אַרְגָּמָן have multiple cognates but no clear Semitic origin;⁵⁰ the earliest known occurrence of *argamannu*/אַרְגָּמָן is found in Ugaritic, where *'argmn* means “tribute” (this is also the case for *argamman* [Hittite] and *arkamman* [Luwian]).⁵¹ While there are connections between the words “tribute” and “purple,” this remains a highly-debated topic. For example, Thavapalan suggests that since red-purple textiles were only a small part of the tribute circulating in the Bronze Age, the Hittite/Luwian word and its Semitic homophones are entirely unrelated,⁵² whereas Dietrich and Loretz demonstrated that Hittite *argammanu* always corresponds to Akkadian *mandattu* (“tribute”) in the Ugaritic manuscript of the treaty between king Šuppiluliuma and Niqmandu.⁵³ There are no literary texts in

⁴⁹ Cf. a different spelling of *takiltu* and *argamannu* wool features as tribute payment to Assurnasirpal (RINAP 5 72: rev. 37).

⁵⁰ Ugaritic, *a/irgmn*; Hittite, *ark/gamman*; Aramaic, *'argawān*; Luwian, *arkamman*; Egyptian, *zargawan*; Syriac, *'argwan* and *'argwanāya*; and Arabic, *'arjwān* and *'urjwānī*; Benjamin J. Noonan, *Non-Semitic Loanwords in the Hebrew Bible* (University Park, PA: Eisenbrauns, 2019), 65. The final double consonant of the Akkadian cognate *argamannu* and the biblical Aramaic, אַרְגָּוֹן, also suggests a foreign loanword; Maximilian Ellenbogen, *Foreign Words in the Old Testament: Their Origin and Etymology* (London: Luzac & Co., 1962), 38. Rabin also pointed to the Persian plant *argawān* which refers to a variety of purple and red flowers that originated from Persia, Chaim Rabin, “Hittite Words in Hebrew,” *Orientalia* 32 (1963): 113–39 (116–18).

⁵¹ Jensen, “Royal Purple,” 105; Reinhold, *History*, 10–11; cf. Stephen A. Kaufman, *The Akkadian Influences on Aramaic* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1974), 35–6.

⁵² Thavapalan, *Meaning*, 225.

⁵³ M. Dietrich and O. Loretz, “Der Vertrag zwischen Šuppiluliuma und Niqmandu: Eine philologische und kulturhistorische Studie,” *WÖ* 3 (1966): 206–45 (218–19).



Phoenician, but, geographically speaking, *argamannu*/ארגמן still point directly towards the Anatolia region where these western languages used tribute and gift exchanges to facilitate the movement of purple dyed materials.⁵⁴ Moving down the coastline, the name of the purple material given as tribute became synonymous with the term itself.⁵⁵ It seems only fitting that purple plays a key part in many tribute lists in Mesopotamian inscriptions.

Overall, purple in ancient Mesopotamian inscriptions emphasise its prestige and value as a material that adorns statues and royalty, and as part of their temple and palace decoration. There are inherent gendered associations with the material, where primarily male cult statues were dressed in *takiltu* or *argamannu* cloth, but both kings and queens were recorded as interacting with the purple material.⁵⁶ It was a material that was first elite because of the extreme cost, and only then, when it becomes a known product, can it be applied to the gods. It was a material deemed worthy enough to gift to the gods and as such, the divine worth of purple drove royalty to collect it in even larger quantities, including receiving it as tribute for themselves.

Purple in the Hebrew Bible

Given purple was used so commonly in tribute lists in the ancient Near East, it is surprising that תכלת and ארגמן are overtly lacking in tribute lists in the Hebrew Bible. In fact, Israelite and Judahite royalty

⁵⁴ Herzog, “Hebrew,” 40. There are, however, many Phoenician inscriptions. See Albrecht Goetz “Contributions to Hittite Lexicography,” *JCS* 5 (1951): 69–73.

⁵⁵ Exactly when and where “tribute” changed to “purple” cannot be determined. This possibly happened at Ugarit as this was the major port within the Hittite realm where both meanings of “tribute” and “purple” are attested in the texts discovered there; Rendsburg, “Further Note,” 121; cf. Itamar Singer, “Purple-Dyers at Lazpa,” in *Anatolian Interfaces: Hittites, Greeks and Their Neighbours*, eds. Billy J. Collins, Mary R. Bachvarova, and Ian C. Rutherford (Oxford: Oxbow Books, 2008), 21–43 (25).

⁵⁶ Comparatively, female figurines are often dressed in *uqnū* which likely relates to lapis lazuli-coloured cloth rather than *murex*-purple cloth, see e.g., BAM 3 234. Thavapalan (“Purple Fabrics”) discusses the relationship between the names given to valuable stones and the same name given to various coloured wools, arguing it was not dyed with *murex*, rather more likely was a plant-based dye. Cf. B. Landsberger, “Über Farben Im Sumerisch-akkadischen,” *JCS* 21 (1967): 139–73 (163). On divine clothing in first millennium Mesopotamia, see Kiersten Neumann, “Gods among Men: Fashioning the Divine Image in Assyria,” in *What Shall I Say of Clothes? Theoretical and Methodological Approaches to the Study of Dress in Antiquity*, eds. Megan Cifarelli and Laura Gawlinski (Boston: Archaeological Institute of America, 2017), 3–24.

are not recorded as having access to purple, perhaps to emphasise a distinction between them and the divine. This section begins by highlighting three examples of tribute lists that do not include purple and yet the Assyrian inscriptions that describe the same event includes purple. The first example concerns Hezekiah (c. 727–698 BCE), who is depicted as a favourable king for abolishing shrines and pillars, and trusting in Yhwh in the biblical texts (2 Kings 18–19; Isaiah 36–38). 2 Kings 18:5 says that there was no one like him among all the kings of Judah, after him, nor before him. Verse 7 notes that he rebelled against the king of Assyria and would not serve him. The text then jumps to Hezekiah’s fourteenth year and describes Sennacherib (c. 704–681 BCE) marching and seizing all the fortified towns of Judah (v .13). Sennacherib demanded three hundred talents of silver and thirty talents of gold, which Hezekiah gave him (vv. 14–16). 2 Kings 18 does not record Hezekiah giving the Assyrian king purple. This account is also recorded in Assyrian inscriptions and the Assyrian account is not radically different from the biblical.⁵⁷ An inscription of Sennacherib’s third campaign describes his march to the Levant, where he besieged forty-six of Hezekiah’s walled cities and smaller cities in their neighbourhood. Sennacherib lists the tribute he received, including thirty talents of gold and eight hundred talents of silver, some ivory, ebony, garments with a multi-coloured trim, linen garments, *takiltu* wool, *argamannu* wool and utensils of bronze, iron, copper, and tin etc. (RINAP 004: 49). Though both accounts conclude that tribute was paid from Judah to Assyria, 2 Kgs 18:13–16 omits that Hezekiah paid Sennacherib tribute from the Jerusalem Temple to avoid the city’s destruction in 701 BCE in *takiltu* and *argamannu* wool, as well as gold and silver.

The second example focuses on Menahem (c. 745–738 BCE). The biblical authors do not portray Menahem well: he did what was “evil” in the sight of Yhwh and caused Israel “to sin” (2 Kgs 15:18). 2 Kings 15:17–22 focusses on Menahem’s actions to pay off the Assyrian

⁵⁷ For an analysis of the differing accounts, see Nazek Khalid Matty, *Sennacherib’s Campaign Against Judah and Jerusalem in 701 BC: A Historical Reconstruction* (Berlin: de Gruyter, 2016).



monarch who threatened Israel. Menahem pays off King Pul of Assyria with a thousand talents of silver, fifty shekels of silver from every wealthy person (vv. 19–20). This is a considerable amount of money and is a similar amount to that paid to Assyria by Hulli, king of Tabal, and Metenna, king of Tyre (both vassal kings and usurpers) to legitimise their rule.⁵⁸ Menahem arguably then, paid tribute to Assyria to gain support for his weak hold on the throne. King Pul is also known as Tiglath-Pileser III (c. 745–727 BCE), and in comparative Assyrian inscriptions, multiple payments are recorded from Menahem to Tiglath-Pileser III. These included silver and other precious materials including both *takiltu* and *argamannu* wool.⁵⁹ RINAP 1 32: 8–13 describes tributes of *takiltu* and *argamannu* wool, and also describes the Assyrian king's claims to have received purple-fleeced sheep and purple-feathered birds as booty (cf. RINAP 1 14: 10b–15: 3–5). As Hiram of Tyre is also included in these inscriptions, the Phoenician king wanted to please the Assyrians with extravagant presents so also dyed exotic animals' purple.⁶⁰ Menahem's actions then, along with other royal leaders of the ancient world, included paying tribute to the Assyrians in purple textiles *and* animals. Again, no such purple is mentioned in the biblical account of Menahem's tribute.

The third example concerns Ahaz (c. 735–720 BCE), wherein 2 Kgs 16:2 describes Ahaz's sixteen-year reign in Jerusalem specifically in contrast to his ancestor David, for he did not do what was right in the sight of Yhwh. During this time, Ahaz was under siege by Rezin, king of Aram, and Pekah, king of Israel. As such, Ahaz turned to Assyria for help by sending messengers to Tiglath-Pileser III saying, "I am your servant and your son. Come up and rescue me from the hand of the king of Aram and from the hand of the king of Israel, who are attacking me" (v. 7). Verse 8 then records that Ahaz took silver and gold from the house of the Lord and sent them as a present

⁵⁸ Mordechai Cogan and Hayim Tadmor, *II Kings: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary* (Garden City: Doubleday, 1988), 172.

⁵⁹ RINAP 1 14: 10b; 27: 2b; 32: 9; 35 iii 21–22.

⁶⁰ Hayim Tadmor, *The Inscriptions of Tiglath-Pileser III, King of Assyria* (Jerusalem: Israel Academy of Sciences and Humanities, 1994), 69.

to the Assyrian king. According to the biblical text, Tiglath-Pileser III listened and marched against Damascus, captured it, and killed King Rezin. The comparative royal Assyrian inscription collectively juxtaposes Jehoahaz (that is, the lengthened or full name of Ahaz) of the land of Judah alongside a long list of states and places that Tiglath-Pileser III conquered and received tribute from (RINAP 1 47: r6²–r13²). The tribute collectively included gold and silver, but also multi-coloured garments, linen garments and, specifically, *argamannu* wool (RINAP 1 47: r12²). Questions arise as to whether Ahaz paid the Assyrians to protect himself against Israel (as the books of Kings suggests) or whether his payment was part of the tribute that the rest of the states in his region offered because they were under threat from Tiglath-Pileser III (as RINAP 1 47: r6²–r13² suggests). Either way, the biblical text does not describe Ahaz giving purple amongst his tribute, whereas the Assyrian inscriptions record them receiving it.

Royal and Divine Purple

In fact, more broadly speaking, purple is lacking in Israelite and Judahite royal settings entirely. For example, narratives where one might expect purple to occur include passages concerning Saul, David, and Solomon. Saul and David regularly interact with clothing and precious garments, yet none are described as purple.⁶¹ Solomon's palace too, is built with many materials but unlike his temple, it does not include purple. The tributes they receive or take also do not include purple. Furthermore, Hezekiah shows off his treasures, but purple is not specifically recorded (2 Kgs 20:13). Nor is purple associated with royal women in the books of Samuel and Kings. Perhaps the adornments of Jezebel might have included purple (2 Kgs 9:30), or Athaliah's torn clothes (2 Kgs 11:14), yet the text is silent. Arguably, biblical authors wish to disconnect purple from royal contexts, including tribute lists.

⁶¹ On clothing in the David cycle, see Ora Horn Prouser, "Suited to the Throne: The Symbolic Use of Clothing in the David and Saul Narratives," *JOT* 71 (1996): 27–37.



When purple *is* found in royal contexts in the Hebrew Bible, they are predominantly found in foreign royal circumstances. For example, Dan 5:5–12 describes a disembodied hand which writes a mysterious message on the wall, so Belshazzar, ruler of Babylon at the time, called for experts to interpret the inscription. In verse 7 (cf. vv. 16, 29), Belshazzar promises to reward the successful interpreter with ארגון fabrics.⁶² In Est 8:15, Mordecai is rewarded with both תכלת and ארגון robes from the Persian King Ahasuerus, resembling of the Persian banquet décor (Est 1:6).⁶³ Judges 8:26 describes ארגון robes worn by the kings of Midian that Gideon defeated, and Ezek 23:6 depicts Assyrian governors and commanders adorned in תכלת.⁶⁴ All of these instances show purple is associated with non-Israelite royalty. Tyre specialises in purple production (Ezek 27:4, 16, 24), and Solomon even seeks the best purple to use for his temple (2 Chr 2:6, 13), just not for his palace.⁶⁵

Elsewhere in the Hebrew Bible, purple-dyed material was used in the decoration of the Tabernacle in Exodus, and Solomon's Temple in 2 Chronicles.⁶⁶ Yhwh instructs Moses to attain purple for the Tabernacle and Solomon uses purple to build his temple “in the name of the Lord” (1 Kgs 5:5). תכלת is also used to wrap the holy items of the Tabernacle in preparation for travel (Num 4:6, 7, 9, 11, 12) and the ashes of the altar are wrapped in ארגון (Num 4:13). The High Priest's vestments also include a significant amount of purple.⁶⁷ The תכלת rings that hold together the curtains on the entrance to the sanctuary (Exod 26:4) relate to the cords that connect the breastpiece to the ephod (Exod 28:28) and the rosette of gold to the headpiece

⁶² ארגון is the Biblical Aramaic version of ארגון, also denoting a genuine purple dye.

⁶³ On the significance of clothing imagery in the book of Esther, see Laura Quick and Ellena Lyell, “Clothing, Conformity and Power: Garment Imagery in the Book of Esther,” *VT* 72 (2022): 474–94.

⁶⁴ See Rosanne Liebermann, “The Apparel Oft Proclaims the Man”: Clothing and Identity in Ezekiel 23,” *WO* 50 (2020): 234–53. Ezekiel 23:12 also describes the Assyrians clad in מכלול (*mklwl*, “choice clothing”), to which the LXX translates as a corruption of תכלת with εἴσαρφα (“fine purple”).

⁶⁵ Purple is also significant in the way the two kings communicate: when Solomon speaks to Hiram (the Aramaic-speaking king), Solomon uses the Biblical Aramaic ארגון, and when Hiram responds, he uses the Hebrew ארגון (2 Chr 2:6, 13). The linguistic difference emphasises the difference between Israel and foreign lands, but the purple is clearly valuable to both.

⁶⁶ Exod 25:4; 26:1, 31, 36; 27:16; 35:6, 23, 25, 35; 36:8, 35, 37; 38:18, 23; 2 Chr 2:6, 13; 3:14.

⁶⁷ Exod 28:5, 6, 8, 15, 28, 31, 33, 37; 39:1, 2, 3, 5, 8, 21, 22, 24, 29, 31.

(Exod 28:37). The connection between purple in the sanctuary and purple in the High Priest's clothing permits Aaron to enter the sacred space, integrating him into its very structure.⁶⁸

It is perhaps unsurprising to see that תכלת and ארגמן also occur in idolatrous contexts, particularly in dressing cult statues. Biblical texts only occasionally refer to this custom, mostly in polemical texts, but the clothing of cult statues is a widespread custom across the ancient world. Rosanne Liebermann highlights that Ezekiel appears to have been familiar with Neo-Assyrian and Neo-Babylonian practices of dressing cult statues in *takiltu* (the Akkadian cognate to תכלת).⁶⁹ Ezekiel 23:6 depicts Assyrian high ranked פחות (*phwt*, “captains”), סגנים (*sgnym*, “rulers”), בהרי חמד (*bhry hmd*, “desirable young men”), and פרשים (*prsm*, “horsemen”) dressed in תכלת, which is widely interpreted as a reflection of their high-status.⁷⁰ On further exploration, we find that Ezekiel is doing something interesting with תכלת here. Ezekiel 23 describes two sisters, Oholah and Oholibah, who represent two capital cities, Samaria and Jerusalem, respectively; they are the two wives of Yhwh who lust after foreign men – that is the foreign neighbours to Israel and Judah, Assyria and Babylonia – and must therefore be punished. They forgot Yhwh and turned to other nations; the chapter ends with יהוה כי אני אדני יהוה (*ghwlykn ts'nyh wgd'tm ky 'ny 'dny yhw*),

“And you will pay for you idolatry, and you will know that I am the Lord God” (v. 49). At present, we are concerned with Oholah's (Israel's) lust after foreign men (Assyria) and their idols. Interestingly, Oholibah is also described as lusting after the חמד Assyrian men, but they are clad only in armour and מכלול (*mklwl*, “choice clothing”, v.

⁶⁸ Christophe Nihan and Julia Rhyder, “Aaron's Vestments in Exodus 28 and Priestly Leadership,” in *Debating Authority: Concepts of Leadership in the Pentateuch and the Former Prophets*, eds. Katharina Pyschny and Sarah Schulz (Berlin: de Gruyter, 2018), 45–67 (49–50); Carmen Joy Imes, “Between Two Worlds: The Functional and Symbolic Significance of the High Priest Regalia,” in *Dress and Clothing in the Hebrew Bible: For All Her Household are Clothed in Crimson*, ed. Antonios Finitis (London: T&T Clark, 2019), 29–62 (37). It is also relevant to note that the dress of priests may have developed from the dress worn by cult statues, see A. Leo Oppenheim, “Golden Garments of the Gods,” *JNES* 8 (1949): 172–93. On the significance of the priestly garments, see Quick, *Dress, Adornment*, 84–120.

⁶⁹ For an overview, see Liebermann, “The Apparel,” 234–53.

⁷⁰ John Hartley, *The Semantics of Ancient Hebrew Colour Lexemes* (Louvain: Peeters, 2010), 188.



true God, Yhwh, with worthless idols to which some in Israel have respected. Verse 4 emphasises the theme of wisdom and artisans in describing the human production of the idol: carving it from wood, beautifying it (יִפְהַר) with זהב and כסף, and making it sturdy by hammering it with nails. Verse 8 then states that the men that respect these lifeless objects are foolish; instruction given by the idols is as foolish as the idol itself. Despite all its finery, the idol remains an idol.

In the same way that the use of purple in ancient Mesopotamian inscriptions highlights a disconnect between purple and Israelite royalty in biblical narratives, the use of purple in Homeric epic in non-typically purple contexts highlights a need to look the cultural connotations behind purple in poetical and wisdom contexts, which are arguably non-typical in their use of purple. Firstly, the use of ארגמן in Song of Songs 3:7–10 describes Solomon’s portable couch that he made for himself, the seat of the couch being ארגמן (v. 10). Most scholars associate purple and the other precious materials used in the making of the palanquin with royalty and an allusion to Solomon’s building activities elsewhere in the Hebrew Bible.⁷⁴ The regal and prestigious associations are certainly found in this description and initially, one would think a purple seat is a perfect description for a king. Upon a deeper reading, however, these subtle details reveal a mocking undertone to the scene.⁷⁵ The lavishness of the Lebanon wood, silver, gold, and purple is extreme for such a small chair compared to the large buildings Solomon has built elsewhere. The speaker mocks his skill as a master builder by depicting him building on a much smaller scale. The cultural associations behind each of the materials also point towards mockery of his power. For example, after the visit from the Queen of Sheba in 1 Kings 10, Solomon

⁷⁴ For an overview, see Annette Schellenberg, “The Description of Solomon’s Wedding: Song 3:6–11 as a Key to the Overall Understanding of the Song of Songs,” *VT* 70 (2020): 177–92; J. Cheryl Exum, “Seeing Solomon’s Palanquin (Song of Songs 3:6–11),” *BibInt* 11 (2003): 301–16. Some even connect this passage to a royal wedding ceremony like in Psalm 45 albeit this is only mentioned in passing in commentaries, see for example, Othmar Keel, *Song of Songs: A Continental Commentary* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1994), 128; Roland E. Murphy, *The Song of Songs* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 1990), 151; cf. Katharine Dell, *The Solomonic Corpus of Wisdom and Its Influence* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020), 47.

⁷⁵ See Schellenberg, “The Description,” 179–80; J. Cheryl Exum, *Song of Songs: A Commentary* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2005), 147–8.



changed from putting gold into Yhwh's temple (1 Kgs 7:51) to putting gold into another ritual space (called the Forest of Lebanon!);⁷⁶ silver can be connected to chthonic contexts (Ps 12:7) and as a material that needs refining (Isa 48:10; Mal 3:3);⁷⁷ and purple is a material Solomon receives from Hiram, the king of Tyre, to use for his temple (significantly, not his palace). Gold for Solomon is a reminder of his downfall, silver reflects his death, and purple was never a material Solomon owned for himself. They reflect and mock his levels of power.

A second use of purple in Song of Songs is found in 7:6[5], using אַרְגָּמָן to describe the female lover's hair. Jill Munro observes how the royal imagery is particularly associated with the male lover, but it becomes more associated with the female lover as the Song progresses.⁷⁸ As such, she argues that 7:6[5] is a point of reversal where the king is made powerless by her hair and she gains control over him.⁷⁹ This is reinforced by the fact that in Song 4:1 previously, the speaker describes the female lover's hair like a flock of goats, implying not only a dark colour,⁸⁰ but likening her hair to something less powerful. Commentators have suggested the purple hair simile is not poetic, rather the hair is *actually* אַרְגָּמָן, conveying a luxurious and iridescent shine like that of purple.⁸¹ To strengthen this suggestion, it is significant that the beloved's lips are compared to a שָׁנִי (šny, "scarlet") thread and her cheeks to רִקְמָה (rqmh, "pomegranates"; 4:3),

⁷⁶ Ellena Lyell, "Giving Gold, Spices and Stones: A Closer Look at the Queen of Sheba's Gift to King Solomon," *HS* 63 (2022): 201–18.

⁷⁷ Cf. silver amulets from Ketef Hinnom were found in tombs, and also the fact that silver tarnishes, suggesting it is impermanent like human life. Smoak argues that in order to stop it from tarnishing, silver must be continually polished giving the material an apotropaic function – by polishing it and restoring the shine, it could restore the polisher; Jeremy Smoak, "Wearing Divine Words: In Life and Death," *Material Religion* 15 (2019): 433–55 (446).

⁷⁸ Jill M. Munro, *Spikenard and Saffron: The Imagery of the Song of Songs* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1995), 36.

⁷⁹ Munro, *Spikenard*, 36.

⁸⁰ Exum, *Song of Songs*, 162; Duane Garrett and Paul R. House, *Song of Songs/Lamentations* (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson, 2004), 188; Keel, *Song of Songs*, 142.

⁸¹ Murphy, *Song of Songs*, 186. Further, there is adduced evidence from Ugaritic mythological texts for cosmetic use of *murex*; cf. *KTU* 1.3.3.1; 1.3.4.45; 1.14.3.52–54.

suggestive of a red pigment.⁸² רַקְמָה is found in Psalm 45 which depicts the bride before the royal wedding ceremony (v. 14), but both שָׁנִי and רַמּוֹן are also used in the sanctuary furnishing, priestly dress and priestly ritual.⁸³ In fact, if the Song is to be interpreted as a marriage metaphor text, then the woman would be quasi-divine as Yhwh's bride and adorned in very similar luxurious materials (see above).⁸⁴ Whether real purple hair or not, there are also very erotic undertones to having purple hair. It is one of the most sensuous images in the book: Hunt argues "it would be a most willing captivity" and "a common male fantasy" to have her luxuriant hair bind him.⁸⁵ There is this idea that, through purple, the royal power the male character had is mocked, and the female lover gains not only royal power, but divine power.

Finally, the woman of valour is clothed in שֵׁשׁ and אֲרָגְמָן (Prov 31:22). Proverbs 31 emphasises the domestic success and economic gain that a woman would bring to a marriage. The woman in Prov 31:10–31 is described in terms of how she benefits her husband and their household, but ultimately is a construction to teach about the power and importance of wisdom.⁸⁶ Jacqueline Vayntrub argues that Prov 31:10–31 prioritises the acquired skill of wisdom over the innate gift of beauty.⁸⁷ Verse 22 says מַרְבָּדִים עֲשֵׂתֶה-לָּהּ שֵׁשׁ וְאֲרָגְמָן לְבוּשָׁה (*mrbdym 'stb-*

⁸² Quick, *Dress, Adornment*, 159; cf. Brian P. Gault, *Body as Landscape, Love as Intoxication: Conceptual Metaphors in the Song of Songs* (Atlanta: SBL Press, 2019), 160–5.

⁸³ Exod 25:4; 26:2, 31, 36; 27:16; 28:5, 6, 8, 15, 33; 35:6, 23, 25, 35; 36:8, 35, 37; 38:18, 23; 39:1, 2, 5, 8, 24, 29; Lev 14:4, 6, 49, 51; Num 4:8; 19:6.

⁸⁴ For a recent bibliography on this interpretation, see Edmée Kingsmill, *The Song of Songs and the Eros of God: A Study in Biblical Intertextuality* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 17–46.

⁸⁵ Patrick Hunt, *Poetry in the Song of Songs: A Literary Analysis* (New York: Peter Lang, 2008), 266.

⁸⁶ Some commentators question whether she is a real person, a personified Woman Wisdom, see Thomas P. McCreesh, "Wisdom as Wife: Proverbs 31:10–31," *Revue biblique* 92 (1985): 25–46; Roland Murphy, *Proverbs* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1998), 248. On the female figures in Proverbs as a pedagogical tool, see Michael V. Fox, *Proverbs 10–31* (London: Yale University Press, 2009), 911–12; Mahri Leonard-Fleckman, "Scribal Innovation, Education, and the Female Body in Ezekiel and Proverbs," *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion* 35 (2019): 35–50.

⁸⁷ Jacqueline Vayntrub, "Beauty, Wisdom and Handiwork in Proverbs 31:10–31," *HTR* 113 (2020): 45–62 (51, 54, 58–60).



לְבַשׁ שֵׁשׁ רְגָמָן לְבַשׁ שָׁבֵל, “Coverings⁸⁸ she made for herself, her clothing is fine linen and red-purple”). Many scholars simply suggest that her clothing places her in the upper-class.⁸⁹ But in light of the divine connotations of purple which I have uncovered, the implication here is that through the adornment of “fine linen” and “purple,” the woman of valour is adorned in divine clothing. But what is key, she also has the craftsmanship to make or weave the material and thus links wisdom to the divine realm. Laura Quick explores the metaphorical role of clothing, that is being clothed in “glory”, “trembling”, “vengeance” or “salvation” for example.⁹⁰ Given the connections to the divine sphere, Quick translates שֵׁשׁ and אֲרָגָמָן as “majesty” to capture the divine-like skill and splendour of the woman.⁹¹ Given that above I argued the female lover in Song of Songs began with dark, goat-like hair and transitioned to purple hair as she gained power, the Woman of Valour in Proverbs 31 also applies royal and divine colours to a mundane woman.

Conclusions

It is no secret that purple was valuable and prestigious in the ancient world. This article has explored the uses of purple in Homeric epic and ancient Mesopotamian inscriptions and, along with previous scholarly works on the topic, has also used these findings to reassess the occurrences of purple in the Hebrew Bible. By methodologically undertaking a sociological and comparative approach in analysing the perception of purple in Archaic Greek, Assyrian and Babylonian, and biblical texts, I have demonstrated that purple certainly was

⁸⁸ מַרְבָּדִים is only found elsewhere in Prov 7:16 where the strange woman is trying to lure her lovers to her bed which is covered in Egyptian linen (אַטוֹן מִצְרַיִם). Scholars have previously suggested the strange woman imitates woman wisdom (and in this case, the woman of valour) as well as the lovers in Song of Songs.

⁸⁹ Stefan Fischer, “Women’s Dress Codes in the Book of Proverbs,” in Berner et al., *Clothing and Nudity*, 543–56; Christine Roy Yoder, *As a Woman of Substance: A Socioeconomic Reading of Proverbs 1-9 and 31:10-31* (Berlin: de Gruyter, 2014), 85. Here, Yoder also suggests that מַרְבָּדִים has royal connections.

⁹⁰ For clothing of glory, see Ps 8:6; Job 19:9; for clothing of trembling, see Ezek 26:16; for clothing of vengeance, see Isa 59:17; for clothing of salvation, see Isa 61:10. See Quick, *Dress, Adornment*, 49.

⁹¹ Quick, *Dress, Adornment*, 51.

universally understood as a luxurious material, but also that there are cultural nuances to how purple was used.

Studying purple in Homeric epic illustrated that for Homer, πορφύρεος referred to a person's prestige; it is used in relation to key characters, both male and female, within the epic. Homer dwelled on the importance of skilled workers weaving the material, specifically hands of prominent women, and also emphasised the heroic nature of a person when a male character handles a purple garment.⁹² Purple, however, is more than just a luxurious material. Purple is also a chaotic, dangerous, and divine colour used poetically in distressing situations. Whether this is a troubled sea, disturbed thoughts, or the loss of blood and life, purple in the *Iliad* and *Odyssey* offers a glimpse into the value of the material and also the wider cultural associations cognitively associated with the colour.

Purple in ancient Mesopotamian inscriptions also emphasised the prestige and value of purple, as *argamannu* and *takiltu* connects deities, idols, and cult statues with political leaders, royalty, and other men of high social status. Purple was a material that adorned temples and palaces, and was a material offered as gifts to the gods and as such, collected in large quantities by kings. The fact that purple featured in tribute lists along with other precious materials so often, led to Thavapalan suspecting it as a standard phrase, included by the scribe in the booty and tribute lists as “a matter of form.”⁹³

Yet formulaic phrases concerning purple (and other precious materials) can also be found in the Hebrew Bible, in the Tabernacle texts in Exodus. Studying purple in ancient Mesopotamian inscriptions and the Hebrew Bible highlights a disconnect between placing purple in the royal sphere as the scribes of Assyria and Babylonia do and placing purple in the divine sphere as the biblical authors do. In fact, this article has shown three examples where purple is absent in royal biblical contexts but is found in Assyrian

⁹² This gender dynamic is interesting. It contrasts the transaction described by Lee who argued bronze mirrors crafted by *men* for *female* adornment and prestige, Mireille M. Lee, “The Gendered Economics of Greek Mirrors: Reflections on Reciprocity and Feminine Agency,” *Arethusa* 50 (2017): 143–68.

⁹³ Thavapalan, *Meaning*, 231.



inscriptions referring to the same event. There are tributes of silver and some gold in the biblical texts, but a distinct lack of purple. This suggests that biblical authors did not wish to record that purple was lost, and more specifically, lost to a foreign ruler.

The influences of Homer and his poetic use of purple asks the question about the cultural associations attached to purple in the poetic and wisdom genres of the Hebrew Bible. Initially, it seems straight forwardly associated with power, beauty, and prestige in descriptions of Solomon, and two key female characters (the female lover in Song of Songs and the Woman of Valour in Proverbs 31). However, understanding the wider context of Song 3 and the idea of mockery towards King Solomon, for example, means purple is part of a larger motif towards the *transfer* of power from a significant male to the female lover. The female lover in Song of Songs is described to have purple hair, but in Song 4:1 begins with dark hair. If she is of lower class, implied by her darkened skin and her darkened hair, the mockery continues that even her hair has this prestigious colour – and the king is caught up and bound in it.

Purple in the ancient world held common characteristics: symbolic of power, wealth, and beneficence. This may be traced to the historical fact of its expensive production, and limited market. Yet between different royal and literature circles, the specifics of purple diverged widely. These were reflections of each group's theological notions, sense of propriety, and even in the case of the Hebrew Bible, likely a rewriting of royal context (even bad royals) to delineate between cult and throne.