

«THE YELLOW SCALE».

RETRIEVING THE YELLOW RANGE

VIA THE DOCUMENTARY PAPIROLOGY

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ABSTRACT · The paper aims to analyse thoroughly the Greek adjectives employed to define the various yellow shades. To do so we will rely on two types of evidence: the first one consists of the contribution of documentary papyri, of which text and translation will be provided; the second one will be, instead, the Greek literature and, occasionally, the first monographic treaty on artmaking in the Western world, known as *Libro dell'Arte* and written by Cennino Cennini between 1390 and 1437.

KEYWORDS · Yellow, Vocabulary, Gradient.

YELLOW has surely a long usage history and for a certain amount of time, it has been associated with a specific meaning, especially in Crete, where one of the plants from which the colour was produced, saffron, was extendedly cultivated and used in

ritual practices.¹ If we likewise think about the usage of yellow or rather gold, we realise that it was related to chrysography, and we already read recipes to write in these luxurious yellow shades amongst the Greek alchemical papyri.² The yellow ink – although way less common if compared to black or red inks – was variously obtained, as widely known, by mineral pigments, and as was the case for other coloured inks, the base materials were ground into a *mortarium* with a *pistillum* up to get a fine powder to be mixed with Arabic gum or egg white.³ Whilst in the papyrological approach we usually talk about the use of realgar as a typical yellow pigment (chemically, arsenic trisulfide or As_2S_3), then known by the name of orpiment, after research conducted in codicology notably by Maria Luisa

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The article's title already allows us to imagine the fulcrum on which it is hinged: «The Yellow Scale»'s author, the Czech painter František Kupka, achieves here a radical exploration of the power of colour, in full compliance with the Symbolist/Modernist mindset that he embraced during his years in Wien and Paris. The self-portrait, nowadays part of the Museum of Fine Arts of Houston (object number 94.247; oil on canvas) through the generosity of Audrey Jones Beck, is dated 1907 and the yellow gradient takes centre stage. In the lower-left corner, the painter writes: «11^e étude pour la Gamme jaune».

¹ On the saffron cultivation in Crete, see N. MARINATOS, *An Offering of Saffron to the Minoan Goddess of Nature: The Role of the Monkey and the Importance of Saffron*, in T. LINDERS-G. NORDQUIST (eds.), *Gifts to the Gods*, Uppsala 1987, pp. 123-132 and M. NEGBI-O. NEGBI, *Saffron Crocus in Domestication in Bronze Age Crete*, in W. H. WALDREN-J. A. ENSENYAT (eds.), *World Islands in Prehistory: International Insular Investigations: v Deia International Conference of Prehistory*, Oxford 2002, pp. 267-274. The contribution by R. Dewan is, furthermore, remarkable since it points out how the saffron colour (i.e., saffron yellow or, in Ancient Greek, κρόκινος, -η, -ον) was systematically associa-

ted with wealth, notably during the Minoan period. The example proposed by the author is also punctual since it draws a parallel with the literary tradition, mainly with the Homeric usage of the epithet κροκόπεπλος (Hom., Il. VIII, 1) to «describe Eos' garment» (R. DEWAN, *Bronze Age Flower Power: The Minoan Use and Social Significance of Saffron and Crocus Flowers*, «Chronika» 5, 2015, p. 45).

² Examples of the aforementioned recipes in M. BERTHELOT, *Collection des anciens alchimistes grecs*, 1, London 1963, *passim*; R. HALLEUX, *Les alchimistes grecs. Papyrus de Leyde. Papyrus de Stockholm. Fragments de recettes. Texte établi et traduit par Robert Halleux*, Paris 1981; A. COLINET, *L'anonyme de Zuretti ou L'art sacré et divin de la chrysopée par un anonyme. Texte établi et traduit par Andrée Colinet*, Paris 2000. A more recent example in M. MARTELLI, *Alchemical textiles: colourful garments, recipes and dyeing techniques*, in M. HARLOW-M. L. NOSCH (eds.), *Greek and Roman Textiles and Dress. An Interdisciplinary Anthology*, Oxford-Philadelphia 2014, pp. 111-129.

³ On the inks used to write on papyrus and their production, see M. CAPASSO, *Introduzione alla papirologia*, Bologna 2005, pp. 107-110. Further codicological bibliography and examples of how inks' chemical components are identified in M. L. AGATÌ, *Il libro manoscritto da Oriente a Occidente. Per una codicologia comparata*, Roma 2009, pp. 267-275.