

Articoli/Articles

A NOTE ON COLOUR TERMS IN HIPPOCRATIC TEXTS¹

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SUMMARY

The difficulty of translating colour terms is noted. This article explores two common and peculiarly difficult to translate terms. Both are characterized by floating nuances of meanings; in both cases, our analysis demonstrates that the observation and description of colours testifies the high level of attention given by Hippocratic authors to the accuracy of clinical observation.

Names routinely given to colours today are wide-ranging, with at times a somewhat poetic or fanciful element: witness the shade charts produced by paint manufacturers, where every colour of the rainbow, far beyond the basic primaries, is presented in such a bewildering gradation of variants that it becomes hard to distinguish one hue from another, rather than simply to perceive relative depth in each. By contrast, the popular perception of colour and with it colour terminology was very limited in antiquity. Lacking modern artificial colourings, dyes were restricted to organic sources and limited in range. Colour nomenclature and description was derived from observation of natural phenomena: imagery prevailed in similes remarking 'likeness' to sea, sky, vegetation, fire, wine, metals and so on. Nevertheless, philosophical theories of colour did not lack sophistication. Aristotle recognised the 'diverse and indefinite' element in colours (τὸ πολυειδὲς καὶ τὸ ἄπειρον τῶν χρωμάτων, Arist. *Col.* 792b fin.) and attrib-

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uted this to the relative presence of light or shade. Medical theories followed: in the Aristotelian *Problemata*, there is speculation on the reasons for changes in colour in different human conditions and at different ages (Arist. *Probl.* 8. 887b). It is suggested that the absence of heat (fire being light) has a darkening effect. Works in the Galenic corpus evince considerable interest in such questions, both theoretical and practical (*de historia philosophica* 19.257-8 K.; *de humoribus* 19.490 K.). It will be seen in this note that in Hippocratic usage such concern with colour variation and terminology is implicitly foreshadowed though little explored. Both of the terms explored in this note, χλωρός and πελιδνός, are common and yet both are peculiarly difficult to translate. Context governs “semantics”.

In Hippocratic texts, colour terms are most prominent in the meticulous case records of *Epidemics* and in the careful consideration of signs in *Prognostic*. The vocabulary of *Epidemics* in particular is marked by a quest for precision. Colour terms are frequently amplified by the prefix ὑπο- (‘somewhat’), intensified by the prefix ἐκ-, ἐξ- (‘very’), or qualified by the suffix -ειδής or -ώδης (‘like’). Compound terms too appear. The Hippocratic physicians of these texts regarded the evidence of colour as a significant aid in prognosis. The colour of face or complexion, of eyes, of tongue and of hands (especially nails) was sedulously noted. The nature of all visible bodily components, especially fluids secreted or excreted – urine, sputum, pus and so on – was examined and recorded. However, attention to colour is not confined to these works of pragmatic medical care. Throughout the Corpus in texts of every type – in the nosological listing of *On Diseases 2*, *On Internal Affections* and similar works; in the aphoristic guidance of *Aphorisms*, *Koan Prognoses* and such collections; in the surgical instructions of *On Fractures*, *On Articulations* and other manuals; in *On Diseases of Women* and all the gynaecological material – the same concern can be seen. There is some suggestion that colour reflects humoral character, though this

is not consistently expressed. For instance in a passage of *Epidemics* 6, a green tongue colour is said to indicate bile, a red to indicate blood, a black to indicate black bile and a white to indicate phlegm (*Epid.* 6. 5. 8 [5. 318 L.]). Some colour terms do have a regular, if not completely precise, connotation. Among these are notably ἐρυθρός ‘red’, the colour most often applied to healthy blood (though a difference between veins and arteries was observed and in bloodletting blood was found not to be invariably ‘red’; see *Acut.* 22 [5. 390 L.]), μέλας ‘black’ (though this shades into πέλιος ‘grey’ and there is a range of cognate verbs and adjectives describing such transitions) and λευκός ‘white’ (though this shades into the rather indefinite ὠχρός ‘pale’). Leaving aside such relatively fixed terms, we turn now to those with a more floating nuance: χλωρός and πελιδνός. For the former, χλωρός, the standard lexicon offers a series of translations, starting with (I) ‘greenish-yellow’, ‘pale green’, sub-divided (I 2) ‘yellow’, and continuing with (II) ‘pale’, sub-divided (II 2) as, with reference to medical writers, ‘yellow’, ‘bilious-looking’; a final translation (III) without regard to colour is ‘fresh’, opposed to dry². Hippocratic writers illustrate all these senses and, in addition, present the entire gamut of green shades in a variety of ways. In diagnostic and prognostic contexts, χλωρός is most commonly associated with μέλας ‘black’: these are alike sinister when observed as colours of the tongue, in stools or in urine (as *Morb.* 2. 63 [7. 96 L.]; *Coac.* 224 [7. 634 L.]). Similarly an association with πελιδνός ‘dark’ is not good, as in pus (*Morb.* 2. 57 [7. 90 L.]). But χλωρός is associated also with pallor or a lack of colour (χλωρούς καὶ ἀχρόους *Loc. Hom.* 41 [6. 332 L.] in usage which recalls the Homeric expression χλωρόν δέος, hypallage for the face become pale through terror (*Il.* 7. 479, *Od.* 11. 43). Then again χλωρός implies bright green, as in the expression ‘greener than green lizards’ (*Epid.* 6. 5. 8 [5. 318 L.]) and it is evidently yellow, as applied to the yolk of an egg, the part from which the chick comes (*Nat. Pue.* 30 [7. 536 L.]). The sense ‘fresh’ as

opposed to dry, is frequently seen when the adjective is used of fruits and vegetables, though when applied to leaves and vegetation it may mean simply 'green'. When the adjective is applied to linen, used in conjunction with flax seeds as the basis of a womb-cleansing procedure, it apparently signifies the fresh plant, still in vegetable form, at a very early stage in the manufacturing process (*Mul.* 1. 78 [8. 190 L.]). For πελιδνός the lexicon offers only 'livid'³. It is noted also that the term properly signifies 'discoloured by extravasated blood'. In different contexts, 'purple', 'black and blue' or 'bluish-grey' are all possible translations. The simile applied to the colour as 'like lead' is telling (*Mul.* 1. 36 [8. 86 L.]). The sinister overtones of πελιδνός and related terms are repeatedly evident in the observations in *Prognostic*, reiterated in other texts, of mortal signs manifested in the body or in body fluids (*Prog.* 2, 3, 13 [2. 118, 122, 144]; see also *Morb.* 1. 20-21 [6. 176-180 L.] and *Morb.* 2. 68 [7. 104 L.]). In surgical texts, darkening of wounds, typically designated by the adjectives μέλας and πελιδνός, is a danger sign for gangrene or necrosis. This is well illustrated by three parallel passages in *On Fractures*, *On Articulations* and *Mochlicon* (*Fract.* 11, *Artic.* 86 and *Mochl.* 30 [3. 458 L., 4. 324 and 372 L.]). Just as χλωρός has been seen to range from light to dark shades of yellow or green, so πελιδνός can range from the pale purplish colour of a recent bruise to the black of incipient mortification⁴. In conclusion, I draw attention to a particular pathology, familiar to Hippocratic physicians and apparently the subject of some early speculation. It is common for pneumonia – or other chest conditions marked by protracted coughing – to cause bruised ribs. Of this, discoloration of the rib area is an outward sign. In a case history of *Epidemics* relating to an acute disease, the side is described as 'inflamed and fired up as if from heat' (ὡς ὑπὸ πυρὸς θαλφθὲν καὶ ἐκκεκαυμένον *Epid.* 7. 44 [5. 412 L.])⁵. The condition is described in *Koan Prognoses*, with some remarks on the supposed internal causes, as πελιώματα περὶ τὴν

πλευρὴν ἔξω ‘external discoloration of the side’. It is remarked that τούτους ἐκάλεον οἱ ἀρχαῖοι βλητούς ‘the ancients called such sufferers “struck”’ (*Coac.* 394 [7. 672 L.]). This account is corroborated in *On Acute Diseases*, where it is more briefly stated that the main reason the ancients used the term βλητούς ‘struck’ was that after death ἡ πλευρὴ πελιδνὴ εὐρίσκεται, ἔκελόν τι πληγῆ ‘the side is found to be purplish, somewhat as if from a blow’ (*Acut.* 5 [2. 260 L.]). Evidently not all who had bruised ribs died suddenly, of stroke or some other cause, and not all who died suddenly suffered from bruised ribs. The Hippocratic writers are implicitly critical of their predecessors’ knowledge as well as their terminology. However, the old accounts are remarkable testimony to the value placed on precise observation, in which observation of colour played a significant part.

BIBLIOGRAPHY AND NOTE

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1. For Cloudy, most demanding and discerning of critics: a limited response to a seemingly simple but rather penetrating question about the translation of colour terms.
2. On problems arising from the tendency of Liddell and Scott to postulate a difference between medical and non-medical language, see E M Craik, ‘Medical Vocabulary, with especial reference to the Hippocratic Corpus’, forthcoming in: Stray C, Clarke M and Katz J (ed.), *Liddell and Scott: The History, Methodology, and Languages of the World’s Leading Lexicon of Ancient Greek*.
3. The etymological association with Greek πελιός, πολιός, πελιώδης, πελίωμα and πελίωσις as well as with Latin *pullus* and *palleo* and with Sanskrit *palitas* – all words with a general ‘grey’ connotation – is remarked.
4. The sense, however, is always distant from the more cheerful γλαυκός ‘light blue or grey’ and κυάνεος ‘dark blue or grey’.
5. The description, with its stress on heat, suggests familiarity also with chilblains.

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