

## The Language of Red in Latin Literature

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Department of Humanities

Bachelor of Arts in Classical Studies

The Language of Red in Latin Literature

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## Abstract

What red *was* to ancient Roman authors and how is it conveyed in the literature in the absence of abstract color expression? This thesis analyzes some of the convoluted ways that the ancient Romans responded to this challenge in expressions of the color red in Latin literature. One response is that the ancient Romans name shades of red after their origins, either material object or geographical location. In turn, this means that certain shades of red take on the associated connotations of their origins. Another response, as revealed through a close-text literary analysis of the adjectives *sanguineus*, *subrufus*, and *rubens*, is that the Romans relied on the syntax of their language to express distinct shades of red. Both patterns occur on simultaneously linguistic and material levels, particularly when looking at the origins and function of the pigment, cinnabar. As one of the main material sources of red in Roman antiquity, cinnabar was used in wall paintings and political inscriptions in Pompeii. Cinnabar also played a key role in triumphal processions. The pigment was painted onto the cheeks of the statue of Jupiter, as well as onto the bodies of victorious participants. It is then revealed that some of the ancient practices involving material red gave rise to some of the modern symbolic associations that we have of red today, such as wealth, power, victory, and vitality. In understanding the symbolism of red, the association and representation of blood is examined in the etymological origins of the pigment, cinnabar. Some meaning might have slipped through the cracks as Latin adopted Greek terminology, creating ambiguous expressions of red in the literature. The conclusion is that the ancient Romans nevertheless overcame the challenge of conceptualizing color, ultimately giving red an agency like no other.

## Table of Contents

List of Images .....	4
Introduction.....	4
Chapter I: What Was Red? .....	8
Color as Concept .....	8
Shades of Red.....	10
The Spectrum .....	16
Chapter II: Material Sources of Red .....	18
<i>Cinnabaris</i> or <i>Minium</i> ? .....	18
Use & Symbolism of Cinnabar .....	23
Chapter III: Literary Analyses of Red Ajectives .....	27
<i>Sanguineus</i> .....	27
<i>Rubens</i> .....	30
<i>Subrufus</i> .....	33
Conclusions.....	36
Images .....	39
Bibliography .....	40

## **List of Images**

Image I: Wall painting featuring cinnabaris from the Villa Agrippa Postumus at Boscotrecase.	39
Image II: Blackening of Cinnabar on Wall Painting at the Villa di Poppea, Oplonti.....	40

## **Introduction**

A scene in Fellini’s 1972 drama “Roma” uncannily reveals the challenges of looking at color in antiquity. While digging a new underground metro in Rome, members of an engineering crew stumble upon an ancient villa and are stunned into silence by their rare discovery: intact, colorfully painted frescoes. But right before their eyes, the colors of the frescoes immediately start to fade as light and oxygen filter into the previously unexposed villa, and this invaluable glimpse of color, seen how the Romans would have seen it, vanishes forever.

This scene speaks volumes to the limitations of trying to understand color in antiquity by focusing exclusively on material evidence. The scarcity of color that remains from antiquity has fostered the common misconception of Roman antiquity as “classically” white. From pristine white togas to pure marble statuary, we have upheld the false image of a colorless ancient Rome. Despite evidence of polychromy in mosaics, pottery, glassware, and, as will be discussed, wall paintings, we are still limited by color’s inherently impermanent nature. Luckily,

one of the best surviving sources for color in antiquity can be found in texts, supplemented by the, albeit scant, archaeological remains. While written sources may lack the visual immediacy of material color, they more than compensate by providing clear conceptual clues about the implied meanings of specific colors.

This thesis aims to fill important gaps in our understanding of aesthetics in antiquity. In order to understand what color represents symbolically, we might examine how the ancients thought about, wrote about and conceptualized color. An exhaustive treatment of all colors in all Latin literature would be unmanageable in scope. Instead, I will address these questions through the study of one of the most important colors in antiquity, and beyond: red.

“Red is the archetypal color.”<sup>1</sup> Such is the conclusion reached by Michel Pastoureau, whose extensive study on the history of red from antiquity to modernity provides most of the framework for this thesis. In Theory of Colors, Goethe examines the nature and perception of color, arriving at a similar idea as Pastoureau in which he suggests that red “includes all other colors.”<sup>2</sup> Both Pastoreau and Goethe are confirming what we already know instinctively: the color “red” lies at the foundation of life, especially human life.

Red is the color of the blood that courses through our veins and the color of the most important discovery of humankind: fire. As the material color of those things which are critical to human life, and death, red is *the* primal color. Red commands our attention, which is why it functions as a political emblem, conveying authority and power across cultures. For example, red is emblazoned across a majority of national flags. It is also the color donned by Catholic cardinals and used to represent the Republican Party of the United States. But what *was* red to

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<sup>1</sup> Michel Pastoureau, *Red: The History of a Color*, trans. Jody Gladding, Princeton, New Jersey (Princeton University Press, 2017) 7.

<sup>2</sup> Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, *Theory of Colours*, trans. Charles Lock Eastlake (2015), 210.

classical Roman authors? What did it symbolize for them, and by extension, for antique Roman society?

This thesis will attempt to answer the above questions through an exploration of the lexical semantics of the red in Latin texts, focusing mainly on these three: Aulus Gellius' *Noctes Atticae*, Pliny the Elder's *Historia Naturalis*, and Vitruvius' *De Architectura*, with additional attention to other works of around the same period (from the second century BCE to the second century CE). It will survey how red was physically made, how it was expressed in writing, and how it was interpreted by readers.

In terms of frequency, the color "red" follows "black" and "white" as the third most frequently occurring color term in Latin literature. Yet whereas "black" and "white" express degrees of lightness, "red" is the only one of the three that actually expresses a color in its own right. Contrary to popular belief about expressions of color in Latin, red in particular has some of the most abundant and diverse vocabulary associated with it. But the vocabulary is nuanced, rife with misidentifications and connotations that challenge any clear distinction of shades of red. The inconsistent expression of red is rampant throughout the literature, creating a world of ambiguity that challenged the ancient authors themselves, and the modern scholar like myself.

By gaining a fuller knowledge about red, we are able to better understand how the ancients grasped and treated the concept of color as a whole, ultimately revealing important information about broader cultural constructs in the ancient world. It should be noted that all translations of the original Latin text are my own, unless noted otherwise. Any specific red vocabulary is defined by the digitized 1879 edition of the Lewis & Short dictionary, provided online by the lexical database, Collatinus.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Régis Robineau, et al., "Collatinus-Web," *Boîte à Outils Biblissima*, Equipex Biblissima (2014), [outils.biblissima.fr/en/collatinus-web/](http://outils.biblissima.fr/en/collatinus-web/).

Pigments are some of the earliest visual representations of red, used everywhere from prehistoric cave paintings to ancient Egyptian tombs and sarcophagi. Its use in Roman times, however, is most notable as one of the predominant colors found in Pompeii. The brightly hued pigment known as *cinnabaris* is featured in the wall paintings and *programmata*, or “electoral inscriptions,” found on Pompeian villas. *Cinnabaris* was also used in triumphal processions as an emblem of vitality and victory. The material form and function of red in these contexts has intrinsically symbolic meaning. Although some evidence of red pigment still remains in Pompeii, what we have is lacking, and, gradually deteriorating like the frescoes in Fellini’s “Roma.” Given the transient nature of such evidence, I will focus here on the vocabulary used in the text to clarify the significance of red as pigment.

The premise of this thesis is that the ancient Romans were challenged by expressions of red, and, by extension, color in general, because they lacked a clear concept of color theory. This is one of the key points made by Mark Bradley, in his work, Colour and Meaning in Ancient Rome. Bradley claims that “Colour was not, and is not, a static objective *thing*: it was a fluid, subjective, interactive unit of value and meaning.”<sup>4</sup> Using Bradley as a jumping off point, this thesis will be an interpretation of red vocabulary in Latin literature as response to the absence of conceptualized color.

Through a close-text reading and literary analysis, this thesis will explore the terminology and syntax of instances of red within selected excerpts to better understand what red is being used to define, as well as where and how often it appears. This will also be an attempt to determine what red symbolizes from a philological perspective as a complement to the visual

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<sup>4</sup> Mark Bradley, *Colour and Meaning in Ancient Rome*, Cambridge Classical Studies (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ Press, 2011), x.



evidence in material culture. Overall, this thesis aims to provide the answers to questions of what the function of red was in antiquity and how it was conceptualized. Ultimately, a textual approach to red complements the material one, giving us a more holistic understanding of the language of a color and its deeper meaning in antiquity.

## **Chapter I: What Was Red?**

### **Color as Concept**

The ancient Romans, try as they might have, struggled to express shades of red clearly because they were challenged by conceptual color in general. They are not at fault for not being able to consider color abstractly as it is partly the result of lacking any scientific environment. So, to the Roman mind, color cannot exist independently from its natural origins, and is therefore always tied to something concrete, bringing it into the range of human understanding. One of the goals of this thesis will be to confront precisely this challenge: how did the ancient Romans respond to a lack of abstract color vocabulary?

There are several workarounds that the ancient Romans used in their attempts to treat color conceptually. One of the main responses to a lack of abstract color is suggested by the names of red color vocabulary. The names of colors in Latin often relate to their natural origins, either object or geographical, making it clear that the ancient Romans did not separate abstract sources of color from concrete. Eponymic names of red after their natural origins translates to both abstract and material sources of red in Roman antiquity, and although this workaround

allowed the ancient Romans to express a wide enough spectrum, it also means that red vocabulary takes on the associated connotations and meanings of their material sources.

The ancient Romans were nonetheless able to create a wide enough spectrum of red based on material references that allowed them to express the color adequately. This spectrum operates on a gradient scale, relying on either the material derivatives of the vocabulary, among other linguistic quirks, to convey a lighter or darker shade. What I mean is, we know that a shade of red is lighter or darker based on the dual meaning of the term. The same thing occurs in English: we know that “blood-red” is darker than “fire-engine” red by referencing the image of each material object in our minds. But this method of distinguishing shades of red relies heavily on the subjective nature of human perception. What may look like a “blood-red” hue in one person’s mind doesn’t necessarily correspond to what another person envisions. Although this is more of an epistemological or philosophical challenge that occurs in languages other than Latin and English, it nevertheless plays a huge role in understanding the nature of red color vocabulary in Latin, and how the ancients struggled to express it.

This challenge of expressing color abstractly is confronted by Aulus Gellius in *Noctes Atticae*, which is an invaluable source when considering red in Latin literature. Gellius’ work, which dates to the second century BCE, is a vast anthology of ancient Roman wisdom, containing many excerpts from lost authors. I will focus on an excerpt in Book II in particular, in which Gellius attempts to do precisely what this thesis aims to do, which is understand the nature of color vocabulary in Latin by examining red in particular. Gellius’ insight exposes the complexities of Latin color vocabulary that arise as a result of being challenged by thinking about color as an abstract thing. Yet, through an analysis of these complexities, we can try to understand the many ways the ancient Romans tried to express red in the literature despite the

lack of abstract color terminology, ultimately allowing deeper symbolic meanings about color and cultural constructs to shine through.

In Book II of *Noctes Atticae*, one of the most familiar questions in Classical antiquity is debated: Latin or Greek? While an extensive study comparing and contrasting the color vocabulary of both languages could and has been done, this thesis focuses solely on the Latin, with a few references to Greek sprinkled throughout for good measure. Contrary to popular belief at the time, my research has revealed that Latin *does* have a wealth of red color vocabulary and that a wide enough spectrum of color *does* exist. The problem is that the meaning of each shade of red is deeply embedded in the lexical semantics, which although core to Latin grammar and language, was adopted from the original Greek. So, combined with the nuanced subjectivities of each language, sometimes the meaning of certain red vocabulary was lost. This led to a pattern of misidentification and conflation of red color vocabulary throughout Latin literature. The challenge is therefore not a lack of vocabulary, but the convoluted expression of the vocabulary.

### **Shades of Red**

Book II of *Noctes Atticae* is centered around a conversation between Marcus Fronto, a prominent Roman advocate, and Favorinus, a Roman philosopher, about the differences between Greek and Latin color vocabulary. The basis of the argument, as contended by Favorinus, is that despite the numerous shades of colors that can be perceived by the naked eye, the corresponding vocabulary in Latin is lacking. Marcus Fronto, on the other hand, defends the Latin language on the basis of one color in particular: red. Although other colors are part of the discussion on color in general, red is at the foreground of such an important topic, reinforcing the color's overall

significance in Roman antiquity. This excerpt from *Noctes Atticae* directly reveals how the ancient Romans thought and talked about red, allowing me to link contemporary understandings of the color with ancient ones.

The conversation begins with a distinction between two key terms, *rufus*, or “red,” and *rubor*, or “redness.” In English, “red” is the overarching color term that conveys both the adjective and the abstract color. Although *rufus* is defined as an abstract color in this conversation, it is also the only occurrence of a red as an abstract color in Latin literature. Other instances of *rufus* are expressed either as adjectives or, and this is more frequently the case, the popular name “Rufus.” All other instances of *rufus* in the literature refer to its concrete meaning, used to describe material objects such as the color of sand or hair.

Let us examine, for example, some of the shades discussed in *Noctes Atticae*:

*quae tu modo dixisti, ‘russus’ et ‘ruber,’ sed alia quoque habemus plura quam quae dicta abs te Graeca sunt; ‘fulvus’ enim et ‘flavus’ et ‘rubidus’ et ‘poeniceus’ et ‘rutilus’ et ‘luteus’ et ‘spadix’ appellationes sunt rufi coloris, aut acuentes eum, quasi incendentes, aut cum colore viridi miscentes aut nigro infuscantes aut virenti sensim albo illuminantes.*

“Those [colors] which you have said just now, *russus* and *ruber*, but we also have many others which have been quoted by you from Greek; for *fulvus* and *flavus* and *rubidus* and *poenicus* and *rutilus* and *luteus* and *spadix* are all names of red color, either brighten it, as if inflaming it, or mixing it with the color green or darkening it with black or gradually illuminating it with blooming white.”<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Aulus Gellius, *Attic Nights, Volume I: Books 1-5*, trans. J. C. Rolfe, Loeb Classical Library 195 (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1927), bk. II, 212.

As the conversation continues from *rufus* and *rubor*, it is revealed that *fulvus*, *flavus*, *rubidus*, *poenicus*, *rutilus*, *luteus*, and *spadix* are all terms that express shades of red, one way or another. When considered together, these terms create a gradient spectrum of red, from light to dark. This spectrum is understood through the dual meaning of each term, that is, by simultaneous reference to the shade's material origin. For example, *fulvus* can mean "reddish yellow" or "gold," because it is connected to the verb *fulgere*, which is a verb meaning "to shine." *Flavus* is similar in hue to *fulvus* and is likewise connected to a verb meaning "to blaze" (*flagrare*). These two shades are interesting because they refer to the visual effects produced by their material origin, fire, because the color of fire is itself ambiguous. This is emphasized by the shade *luteus*, which is a derivative of the term for "light," in Latin, *lux*, which is likewise a reference to the visually bright color of the shade's material origins.

*Poenicus* directly refers to Phoenicia, the origin of the famous dye color "Tyrian purple." The famous "Tyrian purple" was produced by crushing the shell of the *murex* snail, a laborious task, rendering it one of the most expensive sources of color in the ancient world. This is evident in the color's use as a dye for togas worn by high-ranking and triumphant magistrates, giving the hue imperial status in ancient Rome. As a shade, *poenicus* likewise contains an association with luxury and status.

Moving on to the shade *rutilus*, whose name can most likely be attributed to the *rutilus* fish. The fish, native to the Mediterranean, has silver scales and a red tail and fins. Gellius describes that the shade *rutilus*, along with *spadix*, *exuberantiam splendoremque significant ruboris*, or "express an abundance and brilliance of red."<sup>6</sup> The scales of a *rutilus* fish would explain the gleaming (*splendorem*) quality that Gellius describes of *rutilus*. Although the color

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<sup>6</sup> Aulus Gellius, *Attic Nights*, Volume I: Books 1-5, bk. II, 214.

itself was not literally extracted from the fish, as is the case with the *murex* snail, it is a highly specific example of naming colors after their material origins. When you look at a *rutilus* fish, the fins and tail are not the most distinct shade of red. But the ancient Romans took the entirety of the fish, scales and all, to convey that this shade is not just any red, it's a "shining" red.

Gellius likens the shade *spadix* to the color of unripened palm fruit. According to Gellius, the meaning of the original Greek term is extended to both the actual branch of the palm tree as well as the color of the fruit it bears. Since the term applies to both the branch and the fruit, the shade is therefore a reddish-brown color attributed to both of its material origins. But Gellius claims that *spadix* is a synonym of *poenicus*. How can the red-brown hue of a palm tree be the same as "Tyrian purple?" Moreover, Gellius notes that *poenicus* comes from the term φοῖνιξ, which, in Greek, expresses a "blood-red hue." This is an example of how some of the names of colors in Greek lost their meaning as Latin adopted the terminology. Φοῖνιξ would be closer to the Latin term *sanguineus*, which means "blood-red," as will be examined later on.

Lastly, Gellius defines the shade *rubidus* as *autem est rufus atrior et nigriore multo insustus*, or "moreover it is red burned darker and blacker."<sup>7</sup> This is an allusion to the famous playwright Plautus' *Casina*, which was written roughly two centuries prior to Gellius. In *Casina*, Plautus used the word *rubidus* in the following line, *torreto me pro pane rubido*, or "you will bake me as dark bread."<sup>8</sup> Because *rubidus* is used to describe the color of baked bread, it is understood as just a dark color, not necessarily red, in the context of Plautus. But Gellius' definition likewise describes the darkness of the shade as a result of having been burned (*inustus*). In this case, the term *rubidus* cannot be removed from a material association that

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<sup>7</sup> Gellius, *Attic Nights*, bk. II, 214.

<sup>8</sup> Plautus, *Casina, The Casket Comedy, Curculio, Epidicus, The Two Menaechmuses*, ed. & trans. Wolfgang de Melo, Loeb Classical Library 61 (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2011), *Casina*, 42.

appears in the literature, rather than a natural origin. Moreover, the shade *rubidus* is associated with a material connection to fire, specifically the aftermath of fire (burnt bread), emphasizing the connection between the color red and fire.

Despite these conflations and inconsistencies, a spectrum of red color is nevertheless suggested by the material origins of each of the shades listed. *Poenicus*, *spadix*, and *rubidus* make up the darker end of the red color spectrum, based on their connections purple, brown, and black, respectively. *Rutilus* falls somewhere in the middle of the spectrum because its gleaming aspect indicates lightness, but the color of the fish fins is still a distinct red hue. *Fulvus*, *flavus*, and *luteus* are on the other lighter end of the spectrum, as understood by the qualities of light associated with their material origins, for example, fire, rather than a color per se.

In the Theory of Colours, Goethe systematizes the color spectrum to interpret how color is perceived physiologically. In his observations, Goethe treats color as abstract, which allows him to identify colors as amalgamations on the spectrum. For example, purple is classified as “red-blue,”<sup>9</sup> and orange, “red-yellow.”<sup>10</sup> The ancient Romans, on the hand, because they were unable to conceive of color in its abstract form, did not see purple or orange as Goethe did, which would require abstract notions of red, blue, or yellow. Rather, they saw purple as being derived from its natural origins, which were difficult to extract and expensive. By naming the shade after its origins, the ancient Romans were able to extend the associations of luxury, wealth, and status. Therefore, it seems likely that the shade *poenicus* is categorized under red because

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<sup>9</sup> Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, *Theory of Colours*, trans. Charles Lock Eastlake (2015), 209.

<sup>10</sup> Goethe *Theory of Colours*, 208.

the associated meaning of *poenicus* better reflects the symbolism of red on both a linguistic and material level.

Although the shades *fulvus*, *flavus*, and *luteus* indicate golden or tawny hues, they are likewise considered shades of red. While these shades do not bear a meaning as profoundly symbolic as *poenicus*, they are a response to a lack of Latin terminology for expressing the color orange. In fact, variations of gold vocabulary is used to describe anything remotely close to orange in the literature. The closest word for orange in Latin is *aurantiaco*, which is a direct derivative of *aurum*, or “gold,” but this term does not appear in Classical Latin. Perhaps these shades, which express golden hues, play a similar role as *poenicus*, lending to the symbolism of wealth and grandeur of red color in Latin.

Among the shades catalogued by Gellius, *poenicus*, *rutilus*, and *spadix* are linked to their material origins. *Poenicus* in particular alludes to the original city where this color is produced. For example, although red pigments exist naturally as tangible forms of color, the ancient Romans nevertheless treated them non-conceptually. This is pointed out in the first century BCE by Pliny in the *Historia Naturalis*, an extensive source of ancient knowledge that is essentially the one of the earliest encyclopediae. For instance, Pliny explains that *sinopis*, a type of red earth pigment, *inventum primum in Ponto est; inde nomen a Sinope urbe*, or “was first invented in Pontus, the name is thence from Sinopis.”<sup>11</sup> Just as the shade *poenicus* is eponymous with Phoenician Tyre, famous producer of “Tyrian purple,” the red earth pigment *sinopis* is named after its geographical origins. The same is true of another red pigment, *cinnabaris*, whose natural and etymological origins will be the focus of Chapter II.

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<sup>11</sup> Pliny, *Natural History, Volume IX: Books 33-35*, trans. H. Rackham. Loeb Classical Library 394 (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1952), bk. XXXV, 284.



## The Spectrum

Although the ancient Romans did not think of color conceptually, they still managed to convey a spectrum of the color red through the vocabulary. One way is through the associations with material sources of color, such as those adjectives listed by Aulus Gellius. But there are a few select verbs in Latin that specifically express varying shades and qualities of red. This is something that also occurs in English, but there are only a few colors that also have their own verb forms: for example, to “blacken,” “whiten,” and, evidently, “redden.” Past tense verbs such as “yellowed,” “browned,” and “greyed” exist (as adjectives, really), but these colors do not exist, in a grammatically correct sense, as present verbs in the way that black, white, and red can. As stipulated in the introduction, those three colors are the core of color vocabulary across many languages and cultures, yet only red is truly a color in its own right, as black and white are merely indications of lightness or darkness.

The point is, that, in Latin, red can be expressed through specific verbs, which is a rarity in English as well. These verbs include, but are not limited to, *rubere*, or “to be red,” *rubefacio*, or “to make red,” and *erubescere* and *irrubescere*, both of which mean “to grow red” or “to redden.” Red verbs are another idiosyncrasy of Latin syntax, like red adjectives, that allow secondary meanings of red to shine through. As terms that indicate actions or states of being, verbs contain an intrinsic spectrum of time that isn’t necessarily reflected in a noun or adjective. This may sound redundant, but in terms of color, time plays a significant role in understanding the spectrum of red color through the vocabulary.

The relationship between time and color may be most familiar in dyeing processes, which as I have mentioned, are discussed at length by Bradley in Colour and Meaning in Ancient Rome. But this thesis is focused more on the linguistic elements of expressing red in Roman

antiquity. Take, for example, the verb *erubescere* “to grow red.” The verb indicates that there is a transformation of red color occurring, either from a lighter red to a darker red (or vice versa), or an increase in saturation. The verb *rubere*, on the other hand, which means “to be red” indicates an existing, unchanging state of redness that differs from *erubescere*. So, while the spectrum of red shades can operate on a gradient scale based on verb tense, it is also suggested by some specific prefixes and diminutives that are attached to red vocabulary. In Section III of this thesis, the term *subrufus* will be honed in on as an example of this complexity. Yet like almost all the red color vocabulary in Latin, the terminology and the shades expressed are inconsistent and obscure, reinforcing the claim that although they tried, the ancients nevertheless struggled to conceptualize and convey color.

Overall, the vocabulary for red in Latin contains inconsistencies and connotations that make it difficult to distinguish shades. A shade of red can contain admixtures of other colors through its associated meaning. For example, red contains purple, black, and gold, as suggested by *poenicus*, *rubidus*, and *flavus* or *fulvus*, respectively. Or, a shade of red can be defined by the grammatical quirks of its vocabulary, such as *rubens* and *subrufus*, but the meaning can get lost. The challenge occurs on a material level as well, as will be discussed next in relation to the pigments *cinnabaris* and *minium*. But these are all recognized attempts to express color abstractly, and it is through these attempts that the symbolism of red in Roman antiquity is suggested.

## Chapter II: Material Sources of Red

In light of the lack of material evidence when looking at sources of red in antiquity, we turn instead to the literature. But what happens when the literature is inconsistent and even expressions of tangible red are ambiguous? In this chapter, this challenge will be explored in relation to two material forms of red in antiquity, *cinnabaris* and *minium*, and their significant conflation in the texts. I will begin with a discussion of *cinnabaris* and *minium* in Pliny's *Historia Naturalis* and Vitruvius' *De Architectura*, followed by an analysis of the symbolic role of *cinnabaris* in Roman antiquity as a sign of wealth and power.

### *Cinnabaris or Minium?*

The best-known material source of red in Classical antiquity is *cinnabaris*. This pigment is used in everything from wall paintings and tomb inscriptions to triumphal processions, book writing, and medicine, lending it both a practical and a symbolic function. As one of the most expensive pigments available at the time, *cinnabaris* also connotes wealth and affluence, underscoring associations of power with the color red. Two key works of Latin literature discuss *cinnabaris*: Pliny's *Historia Naturalis* and Vitruvius' *De Architectura*. But their treatment of it is inconsistent and confusing, perhaps reflecting the challenge posed by the color red in antiquity as a whole. Specifically, these sources conflate the term *cinnabaris* with its "less fancy" cousin, *minium*, leading to the overall ambiguity of looking at sources of red in antiquity.

The distinction between *cinnabaris* and *minium* is as ambiguous in Latin as it is in English translation, because in Latin the two terms can have different meanings depending on whether they refer to the naturally occurring mineral or to the artificially prepared pigment. In

Latin, *minium* refers to the natural mineral, considered to be true red lead, that is mined from quicksilver. The mineral is then rinsed and ground to produce a synthetic pigment that is still referred to as *minium* in Latin, but in English is translated as “vermillion.” The term *minium* in Latin can likewise refer to native “cinnabar,” which is an ore of mercuric sulphide. In both Latin and English, then, *cinnabaris* or “cinnabar” exclusively refers to the artificial pigment made up of ground *minium*, where *minium* means native “cinnabar” and *not* red lead.

Vitruvius’ *De Architectura* is one of the only surviving manuals on Classical architecture. Book VII of Vitruvius’ work in particular contains a wealth of practical information regarding ancient pigments and their use in interior decoration. Notably, Vitruvius dedicates an entire section to a step-by-step guide on how to extract *minium*, or native “cinnabar,” from quicksilver, and then prepare it as the pigment, *minium*, or “cinnabar,” through multiple rinsing and drying processes: *Revertar nunc ad minii temperaturam. Ipsae enim glabrae, cum sunt aridae, contunduntur pilis ferreis, et lotionibus et cocturis crebris relictis stercoribus efficiuntur, ut adveniant, colores,*<sup>12</sup> or, “Now I will go back to the composition of *minium*. For when the mineral itself is indeed dry, it is pounded with iron mortars, and by means of repeated washing and melting, color is achieved from the yielded excess.”

Throughout the entire *De Architectura*, Vitruvius exclusively references *minium* to mean both native “cinnabar” and *cinnabaris*, the pigment; the actual term *cinnabaris* does not ever appear in this work. In fact, *cinnabaris* occurs in only two works of Latin literature: *Historia Naturalis* and Lucilius’ *Satires*, which is a fragmented collection of poetic satirical work written by the Roman author about a century prior to Pliny (c. 2nd century BCE). But neither author refers to *cinnabaris* as the ore or the pigment; rather they use the term to allude to the *dracaena*

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<sup>12</sup> Vitruvius, *On Architecture, Volume II: Books 6-10*, trans. Frank Granger, Loeb Classical Library 280 (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1934), bk. VII, 114.

*cinnabari*, or “dragon’s-blood tree.” In *Satires*, Lucilius describes an *echinus cinnabari infectus*, or “a vessel having been dyed with dragon’s blood.”<sup>13</sup> Here *cinnabaris* references the resin produced by the *dracaena cinnabaris*, or “dragon’s-blood tree,” whose bright red hue was a key source for dyeing in antiquity.

Pliny, on the other hand, attempts to distinguish *cinnabaris* from *minium*, but his attempt is seemingly futile as he still uses the two terms interchangeably in *Historia Naturalis*. Pliny claims (with a hint of animosity) that the ambiguity surrounding *minium* and *cinnabaris* is a result of the Greek origins of the vocabulary:

*milton vocant Graeci miniumque cinnabarim. unde natus error Indicae cinnabaris nomine. sic enim appellant illi sanie draconis elisi elephantorum morientium pondere permixto utriusque animalis sanguine, ut diximus, neque est alius colos, qui in pictura proprie sanguinem reddat.*<sup>14</sup>

“The Greeks called [*cinnabaris*] *miltos*, and *minium*, *cinnabaris*. From this the error for the name of Indian *cinnabaris* arose, so indeed they called that the bloodiness of a snake crushed by the weight of dying elephants with the blood of whichever animal having been mixed, just as we have said, and nor is there another color, which renders blood in a picture accurately.”

The conflation between *minium* and *cinnabaris* is not only a result of the linguistic process explained by Pliny, however. It is also related to certain material processes involving the minerals as well, as seen in the areas of medicine and painting. In these fields, the conflation had potentially detrimental, even lethal consequences. For example, the resin of the *dracaena cinnabari*, in addition to being a source of red color in dyeing, was commonly used in medicinal remedies. If a remedy called for “dragon’s-blood” *cinnabaris*, meaning the red resin, oftentimes *minium* would be used instead. Pliny condemns doctors for using *minium* instead of “dragon’s-

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<sup>13</sup> Lucilius, *Remains of Old Latin, Volume III: Lucilius, The Twelve Tables*, trans. E. H. Warmington, Loeb Classical Library 329 (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1938), 374.

<sup>14</sup> Pliny, *Natural History, Volume IX: Books 33-35*, bk. XXXIII, 86.

blood” *cinnabaris* in their remedies, as both native “cinnabar” and red lead are highly toxic if ingested.<sup>15</sup>

As a pigment, genuine *cinnabaris* was often adulterated with *minium* (red lead) among other ingredients, which further obscures the distinction between the two on a physical level as well. Pliny values genuine, unadulterated *minium* (the pigment *cinnabaris*) at seventy sesterces per pound due to time consuming and arduous extraction and processing to achieve its purest state.<sup>16</sup> Pliny also delves into more detail about the historical origins of the *minium* (native “cinnabar”), ranking Spain as the primary exporter to Rome. Apparently Spain delivered *minium* (native “cinnabar”) in its crude form so that it could be processed and refined into the pigment, which is also named as *minium* here, on Roman territory.<sup>17</sup> This was supposedly a method of preventing any adulteration of the pigment prior to its arrival in Rome, but the practice was still common among Roman painters and artists to conserve its value given the high price.

Both Pliny and Vitruvius delineate various methods for adulterating *minium*, which refers to the pigment, *cinnabaris*, in both texts. Vitruvius notes that *vitiatur minium admixta calce*, or “cinnabar is corrupted by lime mixed in.”<sup>18</sup> Pliny claims that painters would immediately wash their brushes after painting with *minium* so that any leftover pigment would settle at the bottom to be reused.<sup>19</sup> In some cases, a second rate variety of *minium*, meaning red lead, was also mixed in. Although both authors use the term *minium* throughout each description of adulteration, whereas Vitruvius solely means the pigment *cinnabaris*, Pliny refers to *minium* to mean both *minium* (red lead) and *cinnabaris* (the pigment) interchangeably. In these descriptions, even the

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<sup>15</sup> Pliny, *Natural History, Volume VIII: Books 28-32*, trans. W. H. S. Jones, Loeb Classical Library 418 (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1963), bk. XXIX, 199.

<sup>16</sup> Pliny, *Natural History, Volume IX: Books 33-35*, bk. XXXIII, 89.

<sup>17</sup> Pliny, 89.

<sup>18</sup> Vitruvius, *On Architecture, Volume II: Books 6-10*, bk. VII, 119-120.

<sup>19</sup> Pliny, *Natural History, Volume IX: Books 33-35*, bk. XXXIII, 90.

key authors inconsistently express the vocabulary for *minium* and *cinnabaris*, ultimately mirroring the conflation that occurs from physically mixing the two as pigments.

Little scholarly attention has been paid to the terminology of these red pigments. Most modern sources don't even name *minium*, referring to it as "vermillion" instead. In Red: The History of a Color, Pastoureau claims that the term *minium* refers to red lead in its true mineral form, and it can likewise refer to *cinnabar* and even mixtures of other red pigments.<sup>20</sup> Likewise, in an article for the *Studies in Conservation* journal, published in 1972, authors Gettens, Feller, and Chase take on the challenge and attempt to distinguish or *minium*, from *cinnabaris*. The authors refer to the primary sources by quoting A.H. Church's comment that "Pliny's *cinnabaris* or *minium* was true vermillion; so was the *minium* of Vitruvius...In English two names cinnabar and vermillion have been used interchangeably in the past to describe either the natural or manufactured product, but, by the seventeenth century vermillion was used more frequently."<sup>21</sup>

As demonstrated by the example of *cinnabaris* and *minium*, the challenge of expressing red due to a lack of abstract color vocabulary occurs on both the linguistic and material level. Despite their concrete tangibility as both minerals and pigments, the inconsistent and conflated discussion of the two suggests that they are likewise abstractions of red in the literature. As suggested by Aulus Gellius' *Noctes Atticae*, ancient authors did not treat shades of red independently from their natural origins, and therefore named them as such. Based on the interchangeable references to *cinnabaris* and *minium* by Pliny, despite his best efforts, and Vitruvius' exclusive reference to *minium*, it is apparent that the same pattern applies to the names of material sources of red as well. Although Gellius does not comment on *cinnabaris* or *minium*

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<sup>20</sup> Pastoureau, *Red: The History of a Color*, 35.

<sup>21</sup> Rutherford J. Gettens, et al., "Vermilion and Cinnabar," *Studies in Conservation* 17, no. 2 (1972), 45.

specifically, he identifies the overall problem: that the Latin vocabulary for color became entangled in linguistic semantics when adopted from the original Greek. As addressed by Pliny, this is also the case with the names of *cinnabaris* and *minium*. The misnaming of “dragon’s-blood” *cinnabaris* in Greek snowballed as Latin drew from Greek, giving rise to the overarching name *minium* to refer to both itself, as red lead, as well as to *cinnabaris*, meaning either native “cinnabar” and the pigment produced from it. The following section will discuss some of the uses of the pigment “cinnabar,” which is referred to by *minium* in the literature, and its symbolic impact.

### **Use & Symbolism of Cinnabar<sup>22</sup>**

The lack of material evidence is an obstacle for most studies of color in antiquity. Luckily, cinnabar is one of the few remnants of antique color that we have examples of today. Cinnabar has survived at one of the most important sites in Roman history: Pompeii. Practically speaking, the ancient Romans literally “painted the town red,” using cinnabar to paint the frescoes adorning Pompeian villas. The bright red hue, along with black and white pigments, served as the main monochromatic backdrop in third and fourth style wall paintings (see Image I).

The use of cinnabar in Pompeian wall paintings has symbolic meaning that informs our understanding of the color red as a whole. Not only was cinnabar aesthetically striking to the viewer, but it was also a symbol of wealth and affluence. Pompeii was a destination for elite,

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<sup>22</sup> From this point onward, the English translation of *minium* as “cinnabar” will be used in reference to the pigment described in excerpts from *Historia Naturalis* and *De Architectura*.



upper-class Roman citizens, and since cinnabar was one of the most expensive pigments available at the time, its use in the wall paintings reflects the elite status of its residents.

Furthermore, Pliny categorizes cinnabar (*minium*) as one of the *rubricae*, or “red earth pigments.” The term *rubricae*, like most red vocabulary in Latin, has ambiguous meaning. Among authors of the post-Augustan era, such as Perseus and Quintilian, *rubricae* took on the secondary sense of “laws,”<sup>23</sup> because laws at that time were written in red pigment. This practice suggests earlier roots in the use of cinnabar to inscribe *programmata*, or electoral inscriptions, on the facades of Pompeian villas. The use of cinnabar in both wall paintings and *programmata* is therefore material evidence suggestive of the socio-political associations of the color red. In these instances, red functions as an aesthetic symbol of power, wealth and status.

Even though the evidence of cinnabar in Pompeii has survived against all odds, it has nevertheless suffered a fate similar to those frescoes in Fellini’s “Roma.” It is speculated that the remaining pigment has become discolored, turning it from bright red to black (see Image II), due to recent archaeological excavations. But Vitruvius was ahead of his time, pointing out this problem with cinnabar (*minium*), in *De Architectura* in the first century BCE. Vitruvius explains that although one of the main uses for this pigment is in wall decoration, it should only be used in interiors as it is prone to discoloration when used on exteriors as a result of light exposure.<sup>24</sup>

However, Vitruvius’ observations on the adulteration of cinnabar (*minium*) with lime, as discussed prior in Part 1, shines light (so to speak) on another possible reason for this discoloration. Vitruvius explains that the purity of cinnabar (*minium*) can be verified by setting

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<sup>23</sup> Quintilian, *The Orator's Education, Volume V: Books 11-12*, ed. & trans. Donald A. Russell, Loeb Classical Library 494 (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2002), bk. 12.3, 242 & Persius, *Juvenal and Persius*, ed. & trans. Susanna Morton Braund, Loeb Classical Library 91 (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2004), Satire 5, 104.

<sup>24</sup> Vitruvius, *On Architecture, Volume II: Books 6-10*, bk. VII, 117.

it on fire. If the pigment blackens from the fire but then returns to its natural hue, it is proven to be genuine. But, if the pigment remains black after being set aflame, it was adulterated.<sup>25</sup>

Perhaps the once bright red hue of the Pompeian frescoes has blackened not only as a result of recent light and air exposure, but also because the original pigment was adulterated.

One of the most important uses of cinnabar other than in wall paintings is in triumphal processions. As narrated by Pliny, on these occasions, it was customary to color the face of Jupiter's statue, as well as the bodies of those participating in the procession, with the pigment; it was then added to unguents at the banquets following a triumph.<sup>26</sup> The pigment's use in triumphal processions further underlines its association with wealth, status, and power. Only the best pigment should be reserved for the statue of almighty Jupiter, to whom the ancients owed their greatest victory. Pliny even goes so far as to classify cinnabar (*minium*) as a "sacred" pigment in this instance.<sup>27</sup>

The application of a red pigment to the statue's cheeks is meant to represent blood. In this representation, red allows for the anthropomorphization of Jupiter, bringing the god to life. In this light, the tradition of applying cinnabar to the statue's cheeks can be understood as the material response to a challenge that originally occurs on a linguistic level in antiquity. The statue of Jupiter is itself a means of making tangible something that is abstract: a god. Here red in its material form allows for a different kind of conceptualization, albeit one that still parallels the attempt at making color abstract on the linguistic level. The cinnabar applied to the bodies of procession-goers likewise represents blood. Rather than a symbol of vitality, as when applied to the statue of Jupiter, the representation of blood on the bodies of the victorious participants can

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<sup>25</sup> Vitruvius, 120.

<sup>26</sup> Pliny, *Natural History*, Volume IX: Books 33-35, bk. XXXIII, 85.

<sup>27</sup> Pliny, bk. XXXIII, 85.

be understood as that of their slain enemies. In the context of a triumphal procession, red, as embodied by cinnabar, represents blood as core to both life *and* death, underlining red as the fundamental color, intrinsic to human experience.

Blood plays a key role in understanding both the semantics and symbolism of the color red in Latin literature. As mentioned in the introduction, red is the color of those things which are critical to life, such as fire, and, in this case, blood. From the name of the “dragon’s-blood” tree to the application of cinnabar in triumphal processions, blood underscores the importance of the color red. It is connected to the root of the linguistic challenges of expressing *cinnabaris* versus *minium*, but it also gave the ancients the means to attempt to convey color in an abstract way.

Despite these observations, an important challenge remains: the lack of an abstract conception of color, and the ambiguity surrounding red as a result. As discussed in the previous chapter, this challenge often led to the conflation of terms. Despite being concrete sources of color, *cinnabaris* and *minium* nevertheless fall victim to the same pattern of expressing abstract shades of red in the literature. Although Pliny tries to delineate the two in *Historia Naturalis*, he still uses *cinnabaris* and *minium* interchangeably. Pliny, along with Lucilius, uses the term *cinnabaris* as an eponym for the dye produced by the *dracena cinnabari* tree. This not only adds to the existing confusion surrounding these pigments, but also points to the possible origin of the confusion as a result of the original Greek vocabulary. In *De Architectura*, Vitruvius also confuses *cinnabaris* and *minium*, but his confusion is based on exclusive use of the term *minium* in reference to itself as red lead and to *cinnabaris*, as both native ore and pigment. The fact that the two key primary sources that discuss these pigments are themselves confused by the vocabulary only reinforces my claim that the ancients were challenged when it came to

expressions of color, not only in abstraction but *even* on a material level. Their confusion then trickles down to the rest of ancient society, with the result that painters and physicians, in turn, mixed up *cinnabaris* and *minium* either as a result of or in spite of the high cost of doing so.

### **Chapter III: Literary Analyses of Red Ajectives**

As has been discussed up until now, one response to a lack of abstract color expression in Latin is suggested by the naming and categorizing of different shades of red based on their material origins. In this section, I will continue to explore this challenge, and discuss how it is in turn reflected in the lexical semantics of expressions of the color red. Through this lens, I will conduct a close-text literary analysis of the adjectives *sanguineus*, *rubens*, and *subrufus* in an attempt to examine other instances of red as expressed through syntax of Latin language.

#### *Sanguineus*

We have already seen that blood is a material representation of the color red in the context of triumphal processions. Likewise, blood is connected to the etymology of the pigment, cinnabar. But what about the adjective *sanguineus*? The term is literally understood as “blood-colored;” the implication of the root of “sanguine” is evident. Like most red vocabulary that has been discussed, *sanguineus* is a nod to the shade’s material origins. Therefore, it is understood, through its clear association with blood, that *sanguineus* is another shade on the red color spectrum in Latin.

The term *sanguineus* most often appears in Latin literature as a literal adjective, meaning “bloody,” rather than “blood-colored” or “blood-red.” But there are a few instances in which *sanguineus* is used to describe things that although not literally bloody, are suggestive of blood. The literal English translation of *sanguineus* as “sanguine” better reflects the secondary meaning of the term as suggestive of blood. In this section, I will analyze the application and meaning of *sanguineus* as an adjective implying the color red, as understood by its material origins, in excerpts of Pliny’s *Historia Naturalis* and Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*, among other texts.

In *Historia Naturalis*, the shade *sanguineus* occurs a total of three times. Each instance of *sanguineus* is used exclusively to describe natural objects of sustenance, such as apples, mulberries and wine. For example, in Book XV, Pliny discusses various types of apples and describes some of their distinctive colors. Pliny describes that *est quibusdam sanguineus colos origine ex mori insitu tracta; cunctis vero quae fuere a sole partes rubent*,<sup>28</sup> or “The blood color of some [apples] is drawn from the graft of the mulberry; in fact the parts of all those [apples] are red from the sun.” Whereas all apples *rubent*, or “are red,” only some are *sanguineus*, or “blood-colored.” The overarching verb *rubent* contains the adjective *sanguineus*, emphasizing that it is a shade of red color in Latin. But Pliny nevertheless takes care to distinguish that the two terms have meanings of red on different levels.

The symbolic meaning of the adjective *sanguineus* can be understood through the presence of the mulberry tree in Pliny’s description. Not only are mulberries, as well as cherries, cornels, and grapes (more on these below) described as *sanguineus* in another section of Book

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<sup>28</sup> Pliny, *Natural History, Volume IV: Books 12-16*, trans. H. Rackham, Loeb Classical Library 370, (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1945), bk. XV, 322.

XV,<sup>29</sup> but the fruit symbolically reflects the meaning of *sanguineus* as both “bloody” and “blood-colored.” In order to understand the symbolic meaning of the term *sanguineus*, and its connection to the mulberry, we turn to the most well-known incident involving mulberries in Classical antiquity: the story of Pyramus and Thisbe.

The story is chronicled in *Metamorphoses*, Ovid’s *opus* on Greek mythology which he transcribed into Latin in the first century AD. The story of Pyramus and Thisbe is one of many tragic love stories in Classical mythology, but it is the source that explains the etiological origins of the mulberries’ unique hue. In Book IV of *Metamorphoses*, Ovid narrates that Pyramus, upon learning of his lover Thisbe’s death, stabbed himself, his blood staining the mulberry tree nearby. Ovid describes the color of the mulberry as *quae poma alba ferebat ut nunc nigra ferat contactu sanguinis arbor*,<sup>30</sup> or “the tree which was bearing white fruit that now bears black [fruit] in contact with blood.” The fruit’s mythological origins are characteristic of the overlap between metaphorical and abstract color with physical color in the ancient world. Furthermore, the mulberry tree’s association with blood, and, by extension, death, underscores the importance of the color red as a signifier of those things which are critical to life and death.

Ovid uses the noun *sanguinis*, or “with blood,” to describe the color of the mulberry tree, referring to a literal blood stain, rather than the adjective *sanguineus*, underscoring the material origins of this shade of red. More importantly, though, Ovid combines the noun *sanguinis* with the adjective *nigra*, or “black,” to express what in English would be understood as the hue “dark red.” In Chapter I, we saw that the shade *rubidus*, as it appears in *Noctes Atticae*, is likewise understood as a shade of “dark red” given its allusion to burnt bread. Both

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<sup>29</sup> Pliny, *Natural History*, XV, 362.

<sup>30</sup> Ovid, *Metamorphoses, Volume I: Books 1-8*, trans. Frank Justus Miller, Loeb Classical Library 42, (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1916), bk. IV, 182.

*sanguineus* and *rubidus* are shades that contain admixtures of black as understood through their respective references to material origins. Therefore, both these shades, in accordance with their material associations, make up the darker end of the red color spectrum. The fact that Pliny uses the term *sanguineus* to describe the color of some apples as akin to that of mulberries has meta function. Not only is the adjective used in reference to its material source, blood, but, in light of the the story of Pyramus and Thisbe, it is also an allusion to the symbolic origins of the term.

The third instance in which Pliny describes the adjective *sanguineus* occurs in Book II. In this instance, *sanguineus* is referenced as one of four colors of wine, which are as follows: *albus*, or “white,” *fulvus*, or “brown,” *niger*, or “black,” and *sanguineus*.<sup>31</sup> The connection between blood and wine is incontrovertible in modern times, but it is reinforced by the same symbolism of red in Roman antiquity. What’s interesting about this instance of *sanguineus* is that it is expressed as distinct from *niger*, emphasizing that the shade *sanguineus* alone, meaning “blood-red,” is not as dark a shade as when it is modified by *niger*. Moreover, the color *fulvus*, which is categorized as a shade of red in *Noctes Atticae*, is likewise expressed as distinct from *sanguineus*. Although Gellius defines *fulvus* as a “reddish-yellow” or “tawny” shade,<sup>32</sup> the fact that Pliny names it as a color of wine only highlights the inconsistencies of expressions of red across the ancient authors.

### ***Rubens***

White, black, and red are the only colors that have their own active verbs in English that have a sense of imparting their color: “to redden,” “to whiten,” and “to blacken.” In fact, just as

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<sup>31</sup> Pliny, *Natural History*, XIV, 238-9

<sup>32</sup> Aulus Gellius, *Attic Nights, Volume I: Books 1-5*, bk. II, 215.

the colors black and white are considered more as degrees of light and dark, “to whiten” and “to blacken” don’t necessarily even indicate a shift in color, only in light. Only the verb “to redden” expresses an actual transformation of color. In Latin, there are few such verbs that are specific to expressions of red: *rubefacere*, or “to make red,” *rubere*, or “to be red,” *rubescere*, or “to grow red.” Each of these terms are built of two components: the noun, *rubor*, or “redness,” and a verb that expresses a distinct state of red. The state of red is therefore defined by the agency, as understood through transitive versus intransitive sense, and aspect of each verb. For example, *rubefacere*, or “to make red,” not only expresses an intransitive sense of red, in which the object is made red through being described by this verb, but it also indicates that the state of red is only potential as the state of red is indeterminate. *Rubescere*, or “to grow,” is similar to *rubefacere* in aspect; it likewise expresses the potentiality of red. However, *rubescere*, unlike *rubefacere*, expresses transitive sense, in which the object of red is simultaneously the subject, gradually growing red. *Rubere*, or “to be red,” on the other hand, is more determinate than the other two terms, because it expresses an existing state of red that is less indeterminate.

A verb must (arguably) always be part time and part agency and therefore these observations may seem insignificant. But these are both critical elements of Latin syntax that suggest idiosyncratic meaning, particularly when looking at expressions of color. Therefore, through a syntactical analysis of some of these verbs, I will suggest another way the ancient Romans express shades of red in response to the lack of abstract color vocabulary.

In Book XXXIII of *Historia Naturalis*, Pliny recounts the origins of *minium*, a term which, as I have already discussed, has ambiguous meaning; in this context, the term *minium* is understood as “native” cinnabar, or *cinnabaris*. In his description of one variety of *minium* (*cinnabaris*), Pliny uses the verb *rubere* to describe the color of the sand in the region near



Ephesus. First, Pliny describes *aurum excoqui posse harenae rubenti*,<sup>33</sup> or “[that] it was possible for gold to be boiled away from the red sand.” In this instance, *rubere* appears in the participial form, *rubenti*, which means “being red” (here in the Dative case to express separation; literally “from the sand being red”). Although a form of the verb *rubere*, because *rubenti* is expressed here as a participle it takes on the function of an adjective. Pliny does not just express the color of the sand through any red adjective, as would be expected in English. The red color of the sand is therefore distinct from other shades of red on the spectrum, as it takes on the agency and meaning of its expression, which, in this case, is a participial verb.

But then Pliny goes a step further in his attempts to specify the shade of red. Pliny describes the same sand as *harena cocci colorem habente*,<sup>34</sup> or “the sand having the color of the kermes-insect.” The fact that it takes Pliny two different workarounds, *rubenti*, “being red,” and *cocci colorem*, “the color of the kermes-insects,” to convey a particular shade of red highlights how he was challenged in expressing color. This could be attributed to the fact that sand intrinsically has no singular color, rather it is composed of many. But it is evident that Pliny is trying to drive a point home: that the sand is *red*. Moreover, the color of the sand, which is itself a material, is expressed through another material source of color, which, as I have discussed, is a key response to the lack of abstract color expression. As a result of this pattern, the sands of Ephesus take on the association of the *cocci*, or “kermes-insects.” In ancient Rome, *cocci* were dried and crushed to produce a dye that bore similar associations with wealth and luxury as *poenicus* did with “Tyrian purple.”

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<sup>33</sup> Pliny, *Natural History, Volume IX: Books 33-35*, bk. XXXIII, 86.

<sup>34</sup> Pliny, *Natural History, Volume IX: Books 33-35*, bk. XXXIII, 86.

## *Subrufus*

Up until now, the spectrum of red in Latin language has been interpreted through aspect, in addition to material associations. But, the spectrum of red is not limited to temporal expressions: there is also a spatial spectrum that is used to express shades of red. This spectrum is likewise suggested through Latin syntax, specifically in prepositions and diminutives, to further distinguish shades of red. Like most Latin color vocabulary, this pattern is most probably rooted in Greek origins. Modern Indo-European languages follow a similar pattern. For example, the shades “reddish,” in English and “rougeâtre” in French both contain the root word for red, but are distinguished by their respective suffixes. Latin, on the other hand, attaches a preposition, rather than a suffix, as I will analyze through the adjective *subrufus*. The term *subrufus* is translated as the English equivalent, “reddish,” but, as will be discussed, the meaning of the term in Latin is ambiguous.

In Latin, *subrufus* is a combination of the preposition *sub*, which means “under,” “below,” or “less,” and the adjective *rufus*. We have already encountered *rufus* in the context of *Noctes Atticae*, in which Gellius defines the term as the color “red” in an attempt to give it abstract meaning.<sup>35</sup> However, the convoluted expression of the color suggests that Gellius’ definition did not translate to other authors because *rufus* is not treated as abstract in its other instances in the literature. Yet again, we are faced with an attempt at abstract color expression in Latin, but is ultimately thwarted through its inconsistent expression. Although Gellius references *rufus*, he does not shed any light on the particular shade, *subrufus*. In fact, the term *subrufus*

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<sup>35</sup> Gellius. *Attic Nights, Volume I: Books 1-5*, trans. J. C. Rolfe, Loeb Classical Library 195 (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1927), bk. II, 210.

appears in only three works of Latin literature: Pliny's *Historia Naturalis*, Vitruvius' *De Architectura*, and Plautus' play *Captivi*. Not only are instances of *subrufus* rare, but they are likewise inconsistent across the authors.

The preposition *sub* has ambiguous meaning when attached to *rufus*. As an expression of physical classification, *subrufus* could be understood literally as “under or beneath red.” Logically, a color that is described as “under red” would suggest a darkening or deepening of the color. There is also no such evidence of a “*superrufus*,” which would express a lighter end of the spectrum. The preposition *sub* is inherently spatial, representing the shade of red as distant from its original color term, *rufus*. Yet, why could this distinction be expressed through another preposition, such as *ab*, or “away from?” In any case, it seems then that perhaps *subrufus* more likely means “less red,” as it does in English. But this is yet another example of how Latin syntax is used to not only express red, but create a spectrum of color.

In *De Architectura*, Vitruvius uses the term *subrufo* in his explanation of the extraction process of *minium* (“native” *cinnabaris*). Vitruvius describes the ore as having *vena uti ferrum, magis subrufo colore, habens circa se rubrum pulverem*,<sup>36</sup> or “veins just like iron, more reddish in respect to [its] color, having a red dust around it.” In this line Vitruvius expresses three distinct shades of red to describe a singular natural source of color. First, the color of the ore's veins are likened to *ferrum*, or “iron.” There is, in fact, a specific term in Latin to express the color of iron: *ferrugine*, or “iron-rust colored,” which is itself a shade of dark, dusky red, as understood through its material origin. Although *ferrum* is connected to *ferrugine*, it's noteworthy that Vitruvius uses the noun form, meaning simply “iron,” rather than the adjective *ferrugine*, which expresses color, to describe the ore's veins. Moreover, Vitruvius also describes

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<sup>36</sup> Vitruvius. *On Architecture, Volume II: Books 6-10*, trans. Frank Granger. Loeb Classical Library 280) Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1934), bk. VII, 114.

the ore as *subrufo*, or “reddish,” and *rubrum*, or “red.” The fact that Vitruvius uses three distinct terms to simultaneously describe the color of the ore reflects the ambiguity of *minium* in the literature, suggesting that expressions of color are convoluted on both linguistic and material levels.

In the context of Plautus, the term *subrufus* is used exclusively to describe the color of hair. For example, in *Captivi*, a play about prisoners and slavery, the character Aristophontes describes his friend Philocrates as having hair that is “*subrufus aliquantum, crispus, cincinnatus*,”<sup>37</sup> which translates as “somewhat reddish, wavy, and curly.” The accompanying *aliquantum* seems redundant to the *sub* preposition attached to the original color term, *rufus*. If *aliquantum* translates as “somewhat,” then what additional meaning does *sub* contribute? While it could be chalked up to redundancy, it suggests that the distinction of red shades, already obscured by the preposition *sub*, can become even more intricate as authors struggle to express color conceptually.

In the comedic play, *Asinaria*, Plautus describes another character as having similar reddish hair color. In this instance, though, Plautus uses the phrase *rufulus aliquantum*,<sup>38</sup> or “somewhat reddish,” in contrast to *subrufus aliquantum*, which also expressed “somewhat reddish,” in *Captivi*. Plautus again employs an additional adverb, *aliquantum*, or “somewhat,” to further distinguish the shade of red. Yet, whereas *subrufus* contains the preposition *sub*, *rufulus* contains the diminutive ending *-ulus*. Nevertheless, both *rufulus* and *subrufus* are derived from the original color term *rufus*, and both express varying degrees of “reddish.”

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<sup>37</sup> Plautus, *Amphitryon, The Comedy of Asses, The Pot of Gold, The Two Bacchises, The Captives*, ed. trans. Wolfgang de Melo, Loeb Classical Library 60 (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2011), *Captivi*, 575.

<sup>38</sup> Plautus, *The Comedy of Asses*, 184.

## Conclusions

The original focus of this thesis was a thorough exploration of color across all Latin literature. I sought to understand how colors were defined, expressed, and interpreted, but, moreover, what they *meant* to the ancient Romans. Yet as I pored over the texts, it was clear that the language of all colors in Latin is ambiguous at its core. This turned me to Mark Bradley's work Theory of Color in Ancient Rome. Bradley's research guided my understanding of why Latin color expression is so ambiguous: because the ancient Romans lacked conceptualized color. Therefore, the ancient Roman authors were compelled to rely on other methods of communicating abstract color using what was available and familiar to them. For example, shades of red are referenced by their material origins or expressed through the nuances of Latin syntax. Through these methods, the ancients were more or less able to convey a spectrum of red color.

However, these methods were subjective to and inconsistent among the Roman authors, obscuring the meaning of red in antiquity. The ambiguity surrounding red in Latin is not unique to this one color, or even this language. Most of the vocabulary is bound by the strictures of Greek language, from which Latin originates. Ancient Greek language faces its own challenges of expressing color, so, when adopted into Latin, the meaning of some colors lose their original malleability. The sheer volume of red in comparison to other colors in the literature allowed me to cross-reference and interpret the color as a significant part of Latin color language as a whole. Although the primary authors' methods may have been inconsistent, they nevertheless signal how ancient Romans thought about and perceived color.

In answer to the questions posed in the introduction (What *was* red to classical Roman authors? What did it symbolize for them, and by extension, for antique society?), it seems that the ancient Romans grasped the significance of red as intuitive to human nature not in spite of, but as a result of lacking abstract color expression. This is why the vocabulary used to express red in Latin, such as *sanguineus*, *rubidus*, and even *cinnabaris*, is associated with elements of blood and fire. The ancient Romans were also able to use material functions of red to express what it meant to them symbolically. For example, red pigment in Pompei had socio-political influence, as suggested by the use of *cinnabaris* in wall paintings and electoral descriptions. In triumphal processions, *cinnabaris* was applied to the statue of Jupiter as a symbol of vitality, and to the bodies of participants as a symbol of victory. This symbolic function of red in antiquity is itself a response to a lack of abstract color expression in the literature. As the color of blood, red had the agency to anthropomorphize the statue of Jupiter and simultaneously link the ancient Romans to the god, who was himself an abstraction.

Although ambiguous, the attempts of the ancient Romans to convey color abstractly were certainly not in vain. It seems that the ancient Romans were merely at a circumstantial disadvantage. Without the necessary scientific and mathematical environments at their disposal, mistakes such as mixing *minium* instead of “dragon’s-blood” *cinnabaris* into remedies were inevitable. But the ancient Romans did their best to conceive conceptual color with what tools they had available to them. Therefore we should not criticize or blame the authors, such as Pliny and Vitruvius, for their inconsistencies in expressing the color red. It is not that they did not try, they were just hindered by something that was greater than them: the limitations of their environment.

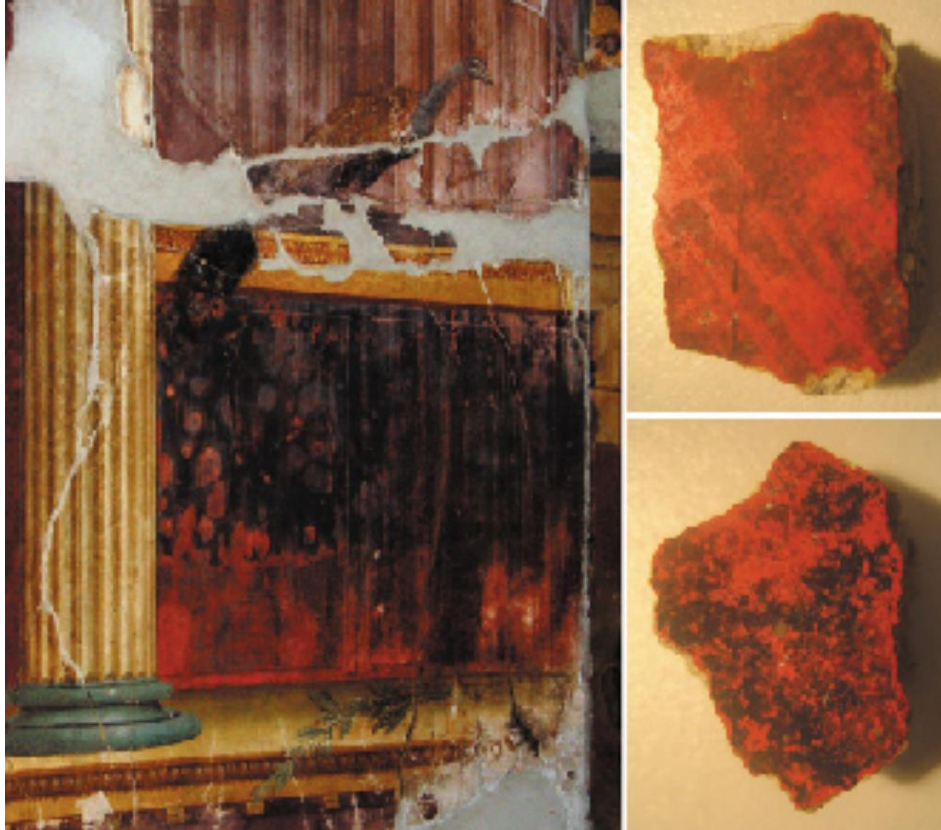
This thesis is necessarily only partial because you can talk about red Roman antiquity, and, not to mention, Greek, in so many other ways. One could look into more abstractions of color in antiquity and abstract terminology in Latin in general to better understand the path from materiality to abstraction in Roman antiquity. One avenue of research could be looking into the emotions and subjectivities associated with red in the context of shame and anger. Or perhaps an exploration of other red pigments and their cosmetic uses. Another focus could be a comprehensive analysis of the color *purpura*, which I alluded to briefly in relation to the shade *poenicus*. These are all possibilities that would reveal so much more about the nature of red, as well as other colors, in Roman antiquity. This thesis is but a small piece in the puzzle in our understanding of our ancient counterparts.

## Images



*Image I: Wall painting featuring cinnabaris from the Villa Agrippa Postumus at Boscotrecase.*





*Image II: Blackening of Cinnabar on Wall Painting at the Villa di Poppea, Oplonti.*

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