

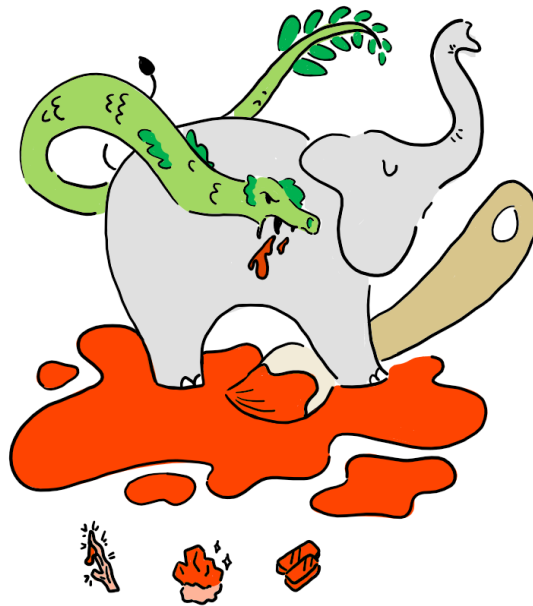
# THE COLOR OF DRAGON'S BLOOD

A Historical Critique on The Etymologies of Isidore of Seville

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Isidore of Seville (6<sup>th</sup> to 7<sup>th</sup> century AD) is known as an eloquent and powerful bishop<sup>1</sup> of the Orthodox Christian Church in the kingdom of the Visigoths, a kingdom that arose after the fall of the Roman Empire in the early Middle Ages.<sup>2</sup> Isidore was a fervent scholar with broad interests. He seemed determined to develop an understanding of the world not only through patristic exegesis, but also through reading the many works of scholars before him.

One of Isidore's most impactful works is his *Etymologies*.<sup>3</sup> It consists of 20 books on various topics, which together form an encyclopedia with all knowledge man needs to know. Isidore created this encompassing work by compiling monastic knowledge together with indispensable Roman and other (ancient) pagan knowledge, and mundane knowledge into one coherent knowledge repository that was appropriate for his time in a Christian kingdom.<sup>4</sup>

The *Etymologies* was formed through encyclopedic, grammatical, and monastic discursive practices of the early Middle Ages.<sup>5</sup> Research at this time was mainly text-based and valued close reading, selecting, and commenting. In the *Etymologies*, meaning is defined by analyzing the origin of words. In the following text, it will be shown how the scholarly practices of Isidore and the authoritative scholars before him influenced the circulation of knowledge and led to the creation of a canon.<sup>6</sup> This will be demonstrated by examining Isidore's etymology for the color of dragon's blood or cinnabar.

Isidore's *Etymologies* aims to cover all knowledge. The first books discuss the liberal arts and ethics, such as language, mathematics, and religion. The second half focuses on more practical subjects such as animals, plants, buildings, and provisions. One of these more practical books is Book 19, titled Ships, Buildings, and Clothing.<sup>7</sup> In this book, constructions, their parts, and uses are described. Additionally, the book covers the relevant artisan crafts of building, decorating, and cloth-making.

Color is regarded as an essential aspect of decoration in the *Etymologies*. With a background in design, the passage about color piqued my interest, as I am aware of how specific colors can carry

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<sup>1</sup> Andrew Fear and Jamie Wood, *A Companion to Isidore of Seville* (Brill, 2013).

<sup>2</sup> *Britannica*, "romanization", accessed October, 2024, <https://www.britannica.com/place/Spain/Romanization>.

<sup>3</sup> Isidore of Seville, *The Etymologies of Isidore of Seville*, trans. Stephen A. Barney et al. (Cambridge University Press, 2006).

<sup>4</sup> David C. Lindberg, "Science and the Medieval Church," in *The Cambridge History of Science*, ed. David C. Lindberg, and Michael H. Shank (Cambridge University Press, 2013), 286-301.

<sup>5</sup> Mark E. Amsler, *Etymology and Grammatical Discourse in Late Antiquity and the Early Middle Ages* (John Benjamins Publishing Company, 1989).

<sup>6</sup> Johan, Östling and David, Larsson Heidenblad, *The History of Knowledge*, trans. Lena Olsson (Cambridge University Press, 2023).

<sup>7</sup> Isidore of Seville, *The Etymologies of Isidore of Seville*, trans. Stephen A. Barney et al. (Cambridge University Press, 2006), Book 19.

meaning within a society. Isidore describes colors in relation to their corresponding pigments in detail. First, the etymology of color itself is described as originating from the words “heat” (calor) and filtered (colere).<sup>8</sup> This etymology shows the inseparability of color with its material quality in the form of pigment, which is filtered and heated. At the time, colors that could be created artificially were limited, and therefore colors were closely connected to the natural material that exhibits them.<sup>9</sup> Isidore continues to describe individual colors based on their material origins, which are often organic or mineral.

That a color had a specific natural source meant that it could be scarce and expensive. The red of dragon’s blood, or cinnabar, was one of these expensive colors. At the time, it was among the most expensive pigments around the Mediterranean.<sup>10</sup> The spectacular origin attached to this color in Isidore’s *Etymologies* might account for its preciousness; namely, that the word cinnabar consists of the Latin words for “dragon” (draconis) and “elephant” (barrus) because the bloody result of their fights is the source of the color of dragon’s blood.

“Cinnabar (cinnabaris) is named from draco (gen. draconis, ‘dragon’) and barrus, that is, ‘elephant,’ for they say that it is the blood of dragons, shed when they entwine themselves around elephants. The elephants charge, and the dragons are overpowered, and the gore they shed dyes the earth, and a pigment is produced from what has stained the soil. It is a red-colored powder.”<sup>11</sup>

Details surrounding the origin of cinnabar are in accordance with the *Etymologies*’ passages on elephants and dragons. Elephants are described as big, sturdy beasts from India, with serpents as their enemies.<sup>12</sup> Dragons are the largest of serpents, capable of flight, and they do not kill with poison but by wrapping around their prey. “Even the elephant with his huge body is not safe from the dragon, for it (...) wraps around their legs in coils and kills them by suffocating them.”<sup>13</sup>

While Isidore shows detailed knowledge about these exotic animals from India, given that the monastic discursive practices in his time mainly focused on literature studies, it seems probable that this information is from one of Isidore’s many literary sources, instead of a personal eyewitness account. In fact, corresponding information is found in the work of Roman author Pliny. Pliny, a Roman scholar, lived approximately 500 years before Isidore and authored a similar encyclopedic

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<sup>8</sup> Isidore of Seville, *The Etymologies of Isidore of Seville*, trans. Stephen A. Barney et al. (Cambridge University Press, 2006), Book 19, passage 17.

<sup>9</sup> Michel Pastoureau, *Red: The History of a Color*, trans. Jody Gladding (Princeton University Press, 2017).

<sup>10</sup> Michel Pastoureau, *Red: The History of a Color*, trans. Jody Gladding (Princeton University Press, 2017).

<sup>11</sup> Isidore of Seville, *The Etymologies of Isidore of Seville*, trans. Stephen A. Barney et al. (Cambridge University Press, 2006).

<sup>12</sup> Isidore of Seville, *The Etymologies of Isidore of Seville*, trans. Stephen A. Barney et al. (Cambridge University Press, 2006), Book 12, passage 2.

<sup>13</sup> Isidore of Seville, *The Etymologies of Isidore of Seville*, trans. Stephen A. Barney et al. (Cambridge University Press, 2006), Book 12, passage 4.

work, *Natural History* (*Historia Naturalis*).<sup>14</sup> It is unclear whether Isidore read Pliny's *Natural History* directly or through secondary sources; either way, its influence on the *Etymologies* is clear.<sup>15</sup> To describe the world, Pliny is known to have taken a more empirical approach; however, he also consulted many texts from Roman and ancient Greek scholars before him, such as Aristotle. Additionally, his sources included folklore, which enriched his encyclopedic entries.<sup>16</sup> One such lively telling regards the feud between the elephant and the serpent, a story described in similar fashion by Isidore:

“Elephants are produced by Africa beyond the deserts of Syrtis and by the country of the Moors; also by the land of Ethiopia and the Trogodytae, as has been said; but the biggest ones by India, as well as serpents that keep up a continual feud and warfare with them, the serpents also being of so large a size that they easily encircle the elephants in their coils and fetter them with a twisted knot. In this duel both combatants die together, and the vanquished elephant in falling crushes with its weight the snake coiled round it.”<sup>17</sup>

The only information that seems to be missing in this entry is the mention of the color dragon's blood or cinnabar. Pliny mentions cinnabar later in Book 33, which concerns minerals. Here, Pliny touches upon a relevant source of confusion surrounding the name “cinnabar”.

“The Greek name for it is 'miltos,' and they call minium 'cinnabar.' This gave rise to a mistake owing to the name 'Indian cinnabar,' for that is the name the Greeks give to the gore of a snake crushed by the weight of dying elephants, when the blood of each animal gets mixed together, as we have said; and there is no other color that properly represents blood in a picture. That kind of cinnabar is extremely useful for antidotes and medicaments.”<sup>18</sup>

It seems that some red pigments are confused in name. The pigments in question are dragon's blood, cinnabar, and vermilion. Dragon's blood is created in the bloody fight between elephants and dragons. Dragon's blood is also called cinnabar,<sup>19</sup> which is synonymously used for the mineral mercury sulfide retrieved from mines.<sup>20</sup> Furthermore, Pliny describes how cinnabar is confused with the red lead vermilion,<sup>21</sup> another mineral pigment also described by Isidore.<sup>22</sup> With their similarity in color and

<sup>14</sup> *Britannica*, “Pliny the Elder”, accessed October, 2024, <https://www.britannica.com/biography/Pliny-the-Elder>.

<sup>15</sup> Andrew Fear and Jamie Wood, *Isidore of Seville and His Reception in the Early Middle Ages: Transmitting and Transforming Knowledge* (Brill, 2021).

<sup>16</sup> *Britannica*, “Pliny the Elder”, accessed October, 2024, <https://www.britannica.com/biography/Pliny-the-Elder>.

<sup>17</sup> Pliny the Elder, *Natural History*, trans. H. Rackham (Harvard University Press, 1952), Book 8, sec. 32.

<sup>18</sup> Pliny the Elder, *Natural History*, trans. H. Rackham (Harvard University Press, 1952), Book 33, sec. 115.

<sup>19</sup> Isidore of Seville, *The Etymologies of Isidore of Seville*, trans. Stephen A. Barney et al. (Cambridge University Press, 2006), Book 19, passage 17.

<sup>20</sup> Michel Pastoureau, *Red: The History of a Color*, trans. Jody Gladding (Princeton University Press, 2017).

<sup>21</sup> Pliny the Elder, *Natural History*, trans. H. Rackham (Harvard University Press, 1952), Book 33, sec. 115.

<sup>22</sup> Isidore of Seville, *The Etymologies of Isidore of Seville*, trans. Stephen A. Barney et al. (Cambridge University Press, 2006), Book 19, passage 17.

overlapping properties as pigments, the confusion of names for these red pigments is not surprising, especially considering the rise of new kingdoms and vernacular tongues at the time.<sup>23</sup>

While it seems that we have distinguished Isidore's etymology of dragon's blood from other red pigments and confirmed its origin through Pliny's work, I propose an alternative possibility. The color of dragon's blood may not originate from the bloody fights between elephants and dragons, nor from a mineral. Instead, I propose that the dragon's blood or cinnabar that is described, actually originates from the resin of the dragon's blood tree (*Dracaena cinnabari*). This tree mainly grows in the Socotra Archipelago of Yemen, and its sap is red as blood.<sup>24</sup> The resin of the dragon's blood tree was first mentioned as cinnabar in a sailing manual from the first century AD, *The Periplus of the Erythraean Sea*.<sup>25</sup> This book describes sailing routes and ports from the Mediterranean Sea to the waters of the Middle East and India, and provides useful information for trading. Given Yemen's location on the route to and from India, the resin of the dragon's blood tree could have been transported on Indian ships and sold through Indian merchants. The coincidence of India being the habitat for elephants and dragons, combined with the name of the resin being "dragon's blood", could have created the belief that the origin of the pigment involved real elephants and dragons. Hereby, we can acknowledge that misunderstandings are prone to arise through translations of the languages involved in trading. In addition to geographical closeness, the medicinal uses of dragon's blood could also point to botanic origins. The sap of the dragon's blood tree is known for its medical properties,<sup>26</sup> which Pliny also mentions: "[the Indian] kind of cinnabar is extremely useful for antidotes and medicaments".<sup>27</sup> Considering the analogous and illustrative names, known trading routes via India, and similar properties, dragon's blood being a dragon's blood tree resin seems convincing as its actual origin and etymology.

Through our exploration of the origin and etymology of dragon's blood in Isidore's *Etymologies*, the text based discursive practices of the Middle Ages became visible.<sup>28</sup> Isidore's proclaimed etymology of dragon's blood being logically derived from "dragon" (*draconis*) and "elephant" (*barrus*), has unfolded into an examination of the circulation of knowledge<sup>29</sup> involving

<sup>23</sup> Gaston Javier, Basile, "Dragon's Blood or the Red Delusion: Textual Tradition, Craftsmanship, and Discovery in the Early Modern Period," *Renaissance Quarterly* 76, no. 4 (2023): 1223–71.

<sup>24</sup> Al-Aokaishi, A. "Exploring the Historical Distribution of *Dracaena cinnabari* Using Ethnobotanical Knowledge on Socotra Island, Yemen," *Journal of Ethnobiology and Ethnomedicine* 17, no. 22 (2021).

<sup>25</sup> *The Periplus Maris Erythraei : Text with Introduction, Translation, and Commentary* (Princeton University Press, 1989).

<sup>26</sup> Yahya S. Al-Awthan and Omar S. Bahattab, "Phytochemistry and Pharmacological Activities of *Dracaena cinnabari* Resin," *BioMed Research International* (2021).

<sup>27</sup> Pliny the Elder, *Natural History*, trans. H. Rackham (Harvard University Press, 1952), Book 33, sec. 115.

<sup>28</sup> Mark E. Amsler, *Etymology and Grammatical Discourse in Late Antiquity and the Early Middle Ages* (John Benjamins Publishing Company, 1989).

<sup>29</sup> Johan, Östling and David, Larsson Heidenblad, *The History of Knowledge*, trans. Lena Olsson (Cambridge University Press, 2023).

Isidore's sources, transformations of meaning and knowledge regarding animals, plants, minerals, and the fantastical. It is evident that texts from previous scholars, such as Pliny, still retained authority in the early Middle Ages, even when they initially fell outside the Christian framework. These texts were carefully studied, just as a monk would be familiar studying biblical texts, and were preserved through replication.<sup>30</sup> The focus on texts enabled gathering of knowledge across a wide range of subjects by reading, allowing for the creation of all-encompassing encyclopedias like Isidore's. However, learning and replication from texts has also proved prone to mistakes when knowledge is interpreted, translated, and transformed across societies in various places and times. It is impressive how Isidore compiled this kind of fragmented knowledge into a coherent encyclopedia with all the knowledge needed in his Christian community and beyond.<sup>31</sup> With his *Etymologies*, Isidore established a canon of knowledge that would persist far into the Middle Ages, making him an authority on knowledge himself.

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<sup>30</sup> David C. Lindberg, "Science and the Medieval Church," in *The Cambridge History of Science*, ed. David C. Lindberg, and Michael H. Shank (Cambridge University Press, 2013), 286-301.

<sup>31</sup> David C. Lindberg, "Science and the Medieval Church," in *The Cambridge History of Science*, ed. David C. Lindberg, and Michael H. Shank (Cambridge University Press, 2013), 286-301.