

## Notes on Color Terminology in the *Iliad* and the *Epic of Gilgamesh*

*Color terms in Homer's Iliad and in the Epic of Gilgamesh were studied, and some conclusions are drawn regarding the development of human color consciousness as indicated by the development of color terminology.*

### Introduction

In his *Studies on Homer and the Homeric Age*,<sup>1</sup> William Gladstone, later to become English prime minister, commented on the apparent lack of color terms in the Greek literature of antiquity. He concluded "that the organ of color and its impressions were but partially developed among the Greeks of the heroic age." While this conclusion has been largely abandoned today, the paucity of color terms in early epic writing is an unexplained and fascinating subject in connection with the development of human consciousness.

Today we have an endless number of color terms, leading to efforts to standardize them, as in *Color: Universal Language and Dictionary of Names*.<sup>2</sup> It is apparent, however, that we have only 11 basic color terms: white, black, red, green, yellow, blue, brown, purple (violet), pink, orange, and grey. The sequence of the terms in this list is not accidental. According to Berlin and Kay,<sup>3</sup> these color terms appear in nearly all the languages of the world in the same sequence, i.e., there are languages that only have basic color terms for black and white, others have three terms, the next one being red, etc., until we arrive at the most highly developed languages (in terms of color) that have all 11 basic color terms. Berlin and Kay have found a high correlation between the number of basic color terms in a language and the "technological/cultural complexity" of its users. If we assume (and there are no real reasons for not doing so) that color vision of the normal human has remained the same since the time of the development of the first languages and, in particular, of writing, the puzzling use of color terms in languages is evidently a matter of awareness and consciousness. While there is no evidence of our physiological apparatus, at least in its coarse structure, continuing to develop, there is ample evidence that our awareness and consciousness in regard to ourselves as well as the world we

live in is an ongoing and ever-expanding development. To reduce the multitude of perceived colors to 11 basic terms requires the ability of abstraction and the application of logic. In this sense, the study of color terms in the writings of ancient cultures may not give us clues about the physiological development of color vision, but instead about the development of the human mind.

A property of a basic color term is that it generally has no other recognizable meaning. It is unlikely that the color meaning of such words is the only one they ever had, i.e., that they were invented to express that color meaning. More likely, the original, older meanings were irretrievably lost as the language developed. This applies to all English basic color terms except the later-occurring orange, pink, and purple. All other terms are of old Teutonic or Indo-European descent without any recognizable or other known meaning.<sup>4</sup> However, it should be kept in mind that written Germanic literature is of much more recent origin than Greek or Middle-Eastern epics and that the derivation and original meaning is, therefore, much less transparent than in the case where ancient documents exist.

In this sense, it was of interest to study in some detail the color terms used by Homer in the *Iliad* as well as those used in the *Epic of Gilgamesh*, and to draw a few speculative hypotheses from the results.

### Color Terms in Homer's *Iliad*

In any such undertaking, the question of translation, and ultimately of meaning, looms large. Because of the continuing evolution of our consciousness and with it the continuing development of language, there is little possibility that we can recreate the true flavor of a particular word at the time it was written.

Homer's *Iliad* and *Odyssey* are considered high points in the literary development of mankind. They are among the longest and best preserved pieces of writing that have survived from pre-Christian days. Homer is believed to have lived before 700 B.C., and he has put into written form older legendary stories (believed to be, in part, as old as 2000 B.C.). The terminology he used was probably that of his time even though he may have used many older phrases to project more clearly the age of his subject matter (such as

TABLE I. Distribution of color terms in Murray's translation of the *Iliad*.

Term	Number of occurrences
Black	95
White	66
Grey	13
Red	10
Cyanus (blue?)	6
Purple	3
Scarlet	2
Vermilion	1
Green	1

a contemporary writer might do in writing a work with a historical basis). The subject matter of the *Iliad*, of course, is a segment of the legend of the Trojan War: the wrath of Achilles and the deaths of Patroclus and Hector.

A survey of several translations indicated a wide range of interpretation of detail and a widely differing use of color words by the translators. Particularly contemporary translations in verse form are often considerably more colorful (!) than the original seems to justify. The translation selected was that by Murray,<sup>5</sup> which is in prose and has the advantage of being in a bilingual edition next to the original Greek.

For comparison purposes the German translation of J. H. Voss<sup>6</sup> was also consulted in regard to color terms.

A compilation revealed a total of 197 color terms (in the translation) in a total of 15,693 verse lines (in the original) of the *Iliad*. The distribution of color terms is given in Table I. The Greek color terms were identified with the help of a dictionary<sup>7</sup> and are discussed briefly below.

### Black

There is only one root used in all 95 occurrences, the (phonetically transcribed) word "melaino." The dictionary translates it as "to blacken, make black." Voss uses the German word for "black" but also "blackish" or "dark." The Greek word is used both in a concrete as well as in a metaphorical sense. The concrete uses involve ships, animals, darkness, night, etc., while the metaphoric uses (Homer, of course, was a master of the metaphor) involve rage, death, and fate. A curious, often-occurring use of undetermined classification is in the phrase "black blood." It occurs ten times and more often than not refers to freshly flowing blood. Homer also used other words with the meaning of "blood-red."

### White

Two words with the meaning of "white" occur: "leukolenos" translated as "white-armed," and "argestas," white, bright. White-armed is obviously a sign of womanly status and beauty; it is used as an attribute of the goddess Hera as well as of Hector's wife Andromache and Helen. "Argestas" has many concrete usages such as in connection with chalk, milk, ivory, sheep, barley, etc.

### Grey

The word used is "polios," translated as "grey, white." It only occurs in the phrase "grey sea," which Voss frequently translates as "dark sea."

### Red (Scarlet, Vermilion)

There are five different words used with the general meaning of red:

- (1) daphoinos blood red
- (2) aimatoeis blood red
- (3) miltos red, ochre, vermilion
- (4) phoinikeos red, crimson, purple (Phoenician)
- (5) ereytheo to be red
- erythaino redden

The generally accepted basic Greek color term for red, erythros, occurs in two forms, while the other four terms that occur appear to refer to specific colored or coloring matter: blood, ochre, Phoenician. It is believed, however, that erythros and derivations thereof refer to "dyeing with madder."<sup>8</sup> The position of phoinikeos under the heading "red" is somewhat questionable, since it may very well refer to Tyrian purple. There exists a theory that the (today not clearly identified) Phoenicians obtained their name from the product they sold or used, a purple dye.

### Blue

There are six occurrences of "kyanos," translated as "dark blue, dark, an unidentified bluish material used to adorn metal." In all cases it refers to the latter meaning and is translated by Murray as "cyanus," by Voss as "bluish, dark bluishness of steel." Again, in this case, the recognized basic Greek color term "kyanos" (cyan) had quite obviously originally a meaning derived from coloration technology. Some interpreters believe it to refer to a blue enamel frit, an artificial lapis lazuli, or real lapis lazuli. In this connection, it should be mentioned that the Egyptian hieroglyphic word for lapis lazuli was "khesbet."

### Purple

All three occurrences of purple, "porphyreos," are connected with textiles: blankets and robes clearly of high value. In its original meaning, it also refers to a coloring matter or technique. The distinction between "phoinikeos" and "porphyreos" is not clear. While the former is translated as "red, purple crimson," the latter only has the meaning of "purple."

### Green

The only occurrence of green is in a curious metaphorical term: "omogeron": man in green old age (active old man). Murray and Voss translate it very similarly. It is not clear if the term has the original meaning of "growing old age" with "green old age" possibly being an interpretation of the translators.

There is no real, accepted basic Greek color term for green: “chloron” also has the meaning of yellow and greenish yellow, while “glaucón” has a confusing variety of meanings: from pale green, bluish green, to black; in the case of the color of eyes: light blue or grey.

### Color Terms in the *Epic of Gilgamesh*

The *Epic of Gilgamesh*, a Babylonian poem discovered in various versions on clay tablets, dates in its written form from approximately the seventh century B.C. Since the middle of the 19th century various fragments in Old Babylonian, Assyrian, Sumerian, and Hittite have been found which frequently agree almost verbatim but sometimes differ considerably in details. It is the all-too-human story of the hero Gilgamesh who finds and loses a friend named Enkidu and fails in his quest for eternal life. It contains a famous nonbiblical description of the flood and the ark. There is little doubt that the origins of this epic also are much older than the written versions and that it was passed on orally in previous centuries. It is much shorter in length than the *Iliad*, more condensed, and many of the tablets have suffered considerable damage. It is not surprising, therefore, that only a few color terms occur. The translation used is that by Heidel.<sup>9</sup>

In the main body of the epic there is one single color term “at the green mountain they arrived together.” However, on related tablets included in Heidel’s translation, additional color terms are found. Black occurs twice: “her (Ereshkigal, the goddess of the underworld) lips turned black” and “his body was black” (from a vision of the underworld). White occurs three times in the same phrase: “Let the fields become white” (i.e., render them infertile). Red occurs twice, both times in connection with a garment and as a sign of luxury. Lastly, yellow occurs once: “her (Ereshkigal) face turned yellow like unto a cut-down tamarisk.”

### Discussion

If the *Iliad* and the *Epic of Gilgamesh* can be considered representative of the respective developments of their languages at the time they were written, then in the scheme of Berlin and Kay (B&K) the Greek of Homer might have been an irregular stage V system (irregular because of the absence of yellow) and the Babylonian of the *Gilgamesh* epic a stage IV system. B&K themselves rate Homeric Greek a stage IIIB system (for a tabulation of the B&K stages see Table II). The broad meanings of many of the color terms, malaino not just black but also dark, leuko and argestas not just white but also bright, polios grey and white, kyanos dark as well as blue, indicate to the writer the remnants of a stage I language where only color words for black and white or dark and light (bright) existed. It is possible that “kyanos,” originally having the meaning of dark, assumed the meaning of blue only when differentiation set in (a development of consciousness).

In the same vein, “black blood” may be a remnant, a

TABLE II. The seven stages of the evolution of basic color terms according to Berlin and Kay.<sup>3</sup>

Stage	Basic color terms
I	Black, white
II	Black, white, red
IIa	Black, white, red, green
IIb	Black, white, red, yellow
IV	Black, white, red, green, yellow
V	Black, white, red, green, yellow, blue (a complete opponent-color system)
VI	Black, white, red, green, yellow, blue, brown
VII	Black, white, red, green, yellow, blue, brown, purple, pink, orange, grey

treasured phrase from the time when the color of blood was simply identified as dark. Pre-Homeric Greeks may indeed have had verbal concepts of only dark and light. In Homer’s time an interim stage was reached, with remnants of an earlier muted level of verbal consciousness still evident (black blood, grey sea, etc.) but also with new color-related terms that to some extent may have developed from contacts with other cultures and their coloring techniques. This is supported by the early color theories of Greek philosophers. Pythagoras (c.582–c.507 B.C.) and his followers, as reported by Plutarch, called the surface of objects “chroma” and distinguished four color families only: white, black, red, and yellow. Similarly, Empedokles (c.495–c.435 B.C.), as reported by Strobæus, distinguished four classes of color: white, black, red, and yellow, as there are four basic elements. Demokritus (c.460–c.370 B.C.), also quoted by Strobæus, was famed for his atomic theory. He had not progressed any further and claimed the same four classes of color. On the other hand, Plato (472–347 B.C.), and Aristotle after him, recognized many more classes of color: green, blue, purple, brown, grey, etc.<sup>10</sup> A development in consciousness of color terms is clearly evident here also.

The idea of development of color consciousness discussed here should take into account the rapid rise in the past two decades of our knowledge of the bicameral processing of information in the human brain.<sup>11–13</sup> In a simplistic view, the right side of the brain of the average human processes mainly experiential, emotional, holistic information (possibly including color as an experience), while the left side processes primarily logical, verbal, linear information. There is likely a different type of consciousness emanating from the two halves of the brain. The development of color consciousness referred to concerns primarily the verbal, logical functions. Pre-Homeric Greeks could probably distinguish perceptually as many colors as we can, but they may not have yet had the logical, verbal consciousness to abstract and name them. In Homeric times and in the centuries following, an expanded verbal color consciousness is evident, but a full stage VII level seems only to have been reached in Plato’s time.

It is likely that a similar development of basic color terms of Western European languages could be shown if there existed written documents of a similar age. Our lack of knowledge of the original meanings of our basic color terms

may be due to the late development of a written language and the Dark Ages.

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