The Colour of the Sinner or the Righteous? Investigating the Use of Tyrian Purple within the Roman Christian Catacombs

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This article will discuss the dress of early Christians (second–fourth century CE) depicted in the catacombs of Rome, where one colour is prominently recurrent in their garments: purple. This colour had been immensely popular among the Roman elite for centuries, becoming a symbol of great luxury. As such, its wearing was heavily discouraged by many early Christian writers. Why, then, did so many early Christians choose to depict themselves wearing it? Was this merely to mark themselves as members of the elite, or were there potential religious motivations?

Introduction

One of the most renowned early Christian images is the depiction of the three stages of a woman's life, located in the *Cubiculum* of the Velata in the Christian Catacombs of Priscilla in Rome (see fig. 1). Rome contained numerous of these underground burial complexes in which most individuals were interred in small wall-cut niches known as *loculi*. However, those with wealth could commission a cubiculum: a larger burial chamber in which multiple members of the same family were buried.[1]

Since Christianity had not yet become the state religion of the Roman Empire, Christians and pagans rested side by side in these catacombs, with wealthier Christians opting to purchase their own cubicula, where they displayed some of the earliest known Christian imagery. The Cubiculum of the Velata is among the earliest examples, dating to around 250 CE, and is recognizably Christian because of the biblical scenes painted on its walls, including Abraham's sacrifice of Isaac, the three Hebrew youths in the fiery furnace, and Jonah being disgorged by the great fish.[2]

[1] V.F. Nicolai, F. Bisconti and D. Mazzoleni, *The Christian Catacombs of Rome. History, Decoration, Inscirptions* (Regensburg 2002) 93–94.
[2] J. Spier, *Picturing the Bible. The earliest Christian art* (Yale 2007) 70-71.

In the central scene of this cubiculum, a woman in the orant pose looks upward, praying to Christ as the shepherd above her, presenting herself as a devout Christian.[3] Within this composition, the eye is drawn to a piece of the woman's clothing, from which the cubiculum derives its name: her *velatum* (veil), modestly concealing her hair.[4] At first glance, this appears to be a distinctly chaste representation of the woman. However, a closer inspection of her veil reveals something that sharply contrasts with this image of modesty: the veil has been dyed with the most expensive colour of antiquity.

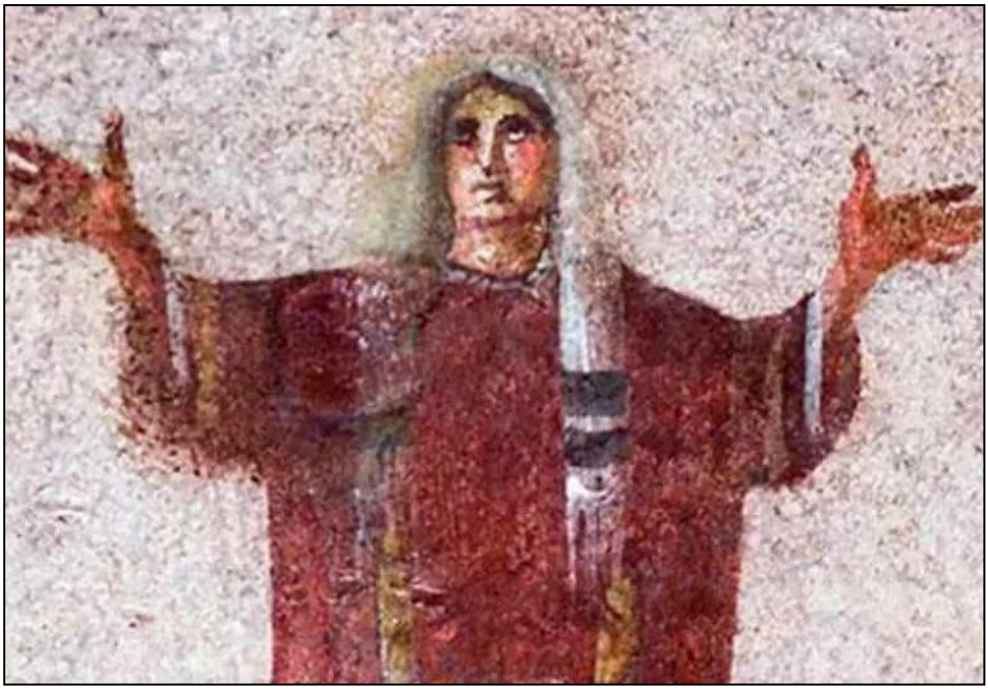

Fig. 1: The veiled woman in the Cubiculum of the Velata wearing a veil dyed with purple. 250 CE. Catacombs of Priscilla, Rome, Italy. Source: UN-aligned. Https://un-aligned.org/culture/a-detailed-look-at-catacombs-of-santa-priscilla/

[3] R.M. Jensen, *Understanding Early Christian Art* (London and New York, NY 2000) 36.
[4] Nicolai, Bisconti and Mazzoleni, *The Christian Catacombs of Rome*, 9.

Royal Tyrian, or *murex* purple, was the costliest dye of the ancient world. The colour was extracted from the hypobranchial gland of *Muricidae* sea snails, each containing only a minuscule amount of purple pigment.[5] Consequently, vast numbers of snails were required to produce even a small quantity of dye: approximately twelve thousand snails to dye the trim of a single garment.[6] This resulting rarity, combined with the dye's uniquely brilliant hue and its exceptional resistance to fading, in fact, only increasing in brilliance over time, made it a commodity of immense value.[7]

The dye was believed to have been invented in Tyre, a Phoenician city in modern-day Lebanon, where Hercules' dog accidentally bit into a murex snail, staining his mouth a deep purple. Tyros, the nymph that Hercules was attempting to court, requested a garment in the same hue, after which the ever-persistent Hercules invented a way to produce the dye. He then passed the technique on to the local Tyrians.[8] However, the first dated archaeological evidence for murex purple production is not found in Tyre, but on Crete, where the Minoans were already producing purple around 1750 BCE.[9]

Tyrian purple's brilliance, coupled with its rarity, caused it to become a commodity to which immense prestige was attached. As such, various elite groups in antiquity sought to acquire as many, and as high-quality, garments dyed with this colour as possible. As a product of immense luxury, many kings around the Mediterranean began to adopt the colour into their regal dress, causing it simultaneously to become associated with royalty.[10]

While the demand for Tyrian purple had been high throughout the ancient world, it reached its undoubted peak during the Roman Empire. In a society defined by conspicuous consumption, Tyrian purple became one of

[5] C. Cooksey, 'Tyrian Purple: The First Four Thousand Years', *Science Progress* 96.2 (2013) 171-186: 171. For readers interested in learning more about purple-dye production in an accessible and comprehensive format, I would recommend Mohamed Ghassen Nouira's video produced with *Insider Business*: 'Why Tyrian Purple Dye Is So Expensive | So Expensive | Insider Business.' (2023)

[6] D. Jacoby, 'Silk Economics and Cross-Cultural Artistic Interaction: Byzantium, the Muslim World, and the Christian West', *Dumbarton Oaks Papers* 58 (2004) 197-240: 210.

[7] M. Pastoureau, 'The First Color, From Earliest Times to the End of Antiquity' in: idem ed., *Red: The History of a Color* (Princeton, NJ, and Oxford 2017) 12-52: 40.

[8] Julius Pollux, *Onomasticon* 1.45-49.

[9] R.R. Stieglitz, 'The Minoan Origin of Tyrian Purple', *The Biblical Archaeologist* 57.1 (1994) 46-54: 53.

[10] Pastoureau, 'The First Color', 40.

the defining commodities through which the elite sought to distinguish themselves.[11] The person who sought to acquire the highest-quality purple was the emperor, who often took radical measures to obtain the best garments.[12] In the later Roman Empire, the colour was even subject to an imperial monopoly. [13] Emperor Diocletian (r. 284-305 CE) used this prerogative over the prestigious colour to signal that he, his co-emperors, and the imperial family were divine figures, closer to gods than to mere mortals.[14] Nevertheless, garments still reached the elite through a sizeable black market, which only intensified as the imperial prestige attached to the colour grew.[15]

In traditional scholarship on purple dye, when it is addressed at all – as many scholars completely ignore the evolution,[16] – it is assumed that the emperor Constantine (r. 306-337 CE) sought to reframe the symbolism of the colour as previously established by Diocletian.[17] He aimed to align it with his new Christian framework of imperial authority. The historian Bufalo has argued that it was the political-religious transformation – instigated by Constantine – that made purple an integral part of Christian visual imagery, intended to underscore the emperor's divine favor bestowed by God.[18] Bufalo describes this as a deliberate measure by Constantine, which was part

[11] R.B. Goldman, *Color-Terms in Social and Cultural Context* (New York 2013), 42.

[12] Suetonius, *Nero* 32.3. For example under Nero, the wearing of specific shades of purple, that where reserved for the emperor, could get ones possessions confiscated.

[13] C. Elliott, 'Purple Pasts: Color Codification in the Ancient World: Purple Pasts', *Law & Social Inquiry* 33.1 (2008) 173-194: 183–84.

[14] Ibidem.

[15] Ammianus Marcellinus, *Res Gestae Libri* XIV.9.7. In this passage, a Christian deacon is discovered privately producing purple silk garments. He was consequently put to death. However, it does indicate that private production persisted, as the potential profit from these garments continued to grow.

[16] L.B. Jensen, 'Royal Purple of Tyre', *Journal of Near Eastern Studies* 22.2 (1963) 104–18; N.M. Susmann, 'Tyrian, True, Royal, or Real: Archaeological Assumptions about the Roman Murex Dye Industry', *Journal of Eastern Mediterranean Archaeology and Heritage Studies* 8.2 (2020) 159–73; Pastoureau, 'The First Color', 12-54; Cooksey, 'Tyrian Purple', 171-186; Elliott, 'Purple Pasts', 173-194.

[17] J.B. Torres, 'Purple and the Depiction of Constantine in Eusebius and Other Contemporaneous Panegyrical Works', in: M. P. García Ruiz and A.J. Quiroga Puertas ed., *Emperors and Emperorship in Late Antiquity* (2020): 78-89.

[18] D. del Bufalo, F. Licordari and A. Pujia, *Porphyry: Red Imperial Porphyry: Power and Religion* (Turin 2018) 30–31.

of his larger campaign to reframe the Roman religious worldview from a previously polytheistic to a new Christian one.

The idea that purple supposedly only became a central part of Christian visual imagery under Constantine makes the use of purple by the woman in the Catacombs of Priscilla particularly noteworthy. If the colour only became an integral part of Christian visual language in the fourth century, why was it already being used in this pre-Constantinian funerary context from the third century CE? Moreover, the use of purple is not unique to this single woman. Purple garments are extremely common in early Christian funerary paintings. It is such a widespread feature of dress in these paintings that it warrants dedicated investigation. Why precisely is purple used so frequently in early Christian funerary art? Is it merely a display of social status, marking the deceased as a member of the elite, or could there be a religious motivation behind its use?

This article aims to answer these questions by examining whether there were possible religious motivations for early Christians to depict themselves wearing purple in the Roman catacombs between the second and fourth centuries CE. As a comprehensive analysis of all known Christian catacombs falls beyond the scope of this study, only depictions from the catacombs of Priscilla, Domitilla, Callixtus, Via Latina, and Marcellinus and Peter in Rome will be considered. Since the pre-Constantinian graves date from the second to the fourth century CE, this period will form the focus of the analysis.

The research will begin by analysing the visual evidence found within these catacombs, examining how often purple garments are depicted, who is shown wearing them, and what exactly they are wearing. With purple garments, not only is the presence of the purple dye important, but also the specific type of garment and the context in which it is displayed. Then it becomes necessary to consider why this specific garment was worn.

Next, the potential religious motivations for this form of display will be sought in surviving early Christian texts. This will first be done by examining the attitudes of early Christian writers towards the colour purple, including how they interpreted its use and how, if at all, they believed Christians should employ it. These texts will be assessed for whether they offer explanations for the widespread appearance of purple in Christian funerary art or whether they instead discourage its use. Although many of these writers did not reside in Rome, where the catacombs are located, their works reflect broader trends within the Christian world. It will become evident that they describe the same forms of dress visible in the Roman

catacombs, thereby rendering their arguments for and against the practice particularly valuable.

Finally relevant biblical and apocryphal texts will be analysed to determine whether any of these offer a theological or scriptural rationale for the widespread use of purple in Christian catacomb imagery. These texts will be examined to assess whether religious writings central to early Christian communities can help explain the prominence of purple in the catacombs.

The use of purple in early Christian catacombs

Before any potential religious motivations for the use of purple can be assessed, it is first necessary to analyze how purple was used in the Christian catacombs in Rome. To do so, it is important to clarify what is meant by 'murex purple', since dye produced from murex sea snails does not result in a single, uniform colour. Rather, it encompasses a wide spectrum of hues, ranging from bright violets and magentas to purples as deep as red clotted blood.[19] This means that depictions of purple within the catacombs are not limited to a single specific shade, but that they encompass a diverse range of hues.

Although garments were dyed with murex purple, using the dye in painting was virtually impossible. The Romans lacked the means to convert murex into an insoluble pigment, and could only apply it as paint by mixing it with honey, an inefficient and unstable method that produced only minute quantities.[20] This technique was so impractical that the only credible evidence of murex being used as paint dates back to its discovery during the middle Minoan period (c. 1700-1800 BCE).[21] Given the exorbitant cost of the dye

[19] A. Marzano, *Harvesting the Sea: The Exploitation of Marine Resources in the Roman Mediterranean* (Oxford 2013) 147.

[20] Vitruvius, *De Architectura*, 7.13.3: 'When the shells have been collected, they are broken up with iron tools. Owing to these beatings a purple ooze like a liquid teardrop is collected by bruising in a mortar. And because it is gathered from the fragments of sea shells it is called *ostrum*. On account of its saltness it soon dries unless it is mixed with honey' [trans. F. Granger]; It is only with the work of Mohamed Ghassen Nouria that a reliable method of producing murex pigment has been developed.

[21] M. Aceto, 'Pigments—the Palette of Organic Colourants in Wall Paintings', *Archaeological and Anthropological Sciences* 13.159 (2021) 1-23: 12-13.

and the technical limitations of painting with it, artists turned to alternative pigments to represent the colour purple in visual art. To create shades of murex purple the most common combination was a mixture of the plant madder and Egyptian blue or indigo.[22] The pigments could be added in various degrees and in several layers to produce different shades of purple.[23]

A valid concern that can thus be raised is how we can even know that the purples depicted on these frescoes are meant to represent murex purple at all. It is true that inferior-quality purples could be produced using various plants and minerals, such as the same madder used to paint purple in catacombs. In the Leiden and Stockholm papyri (c. 284-305 CE), for example, numerous recipes are presented for making purple.[24] However, as these papyri also reveal, these other purples all strived to achieve one thing: imitate Tyrian purple. The recipes in the papyri all describe how one can recreate specific types of purple, with cheaper and more widely available materials.[25]

The prestige associated with Tyrian purple was simply so defining within the Roman world that nearly all uses of purple aimed to recreate, or at least evoke, the prestige attached to the colour. Its social importance was too great for it to be seen as merely one kind of purple among many. This also extends to its depiction in frescoes: individuals displaying themselves wearing purple were not trying to portray themselves in a cheap imitation. Rather, they were attempting to evoke the very colour with which immense wealth and status were associated.

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[22] C. Grifa et al., 'Pompeian Pigments. A Glimpse into Ancient Roman Colouring Materials', *Journal of Archaeological Science* 177 (2025) 1-18: 10.

[23] B. van der Bercken and O.E. Kaper, ed., *Oog in Oog. De Mensen Achter Mummieportetten* (Amsterdam 2023) 78.

[24] Earle Radcliffe Caley, trans., *The Leyden and Stockholm Papyri* (2008) 17-89. Known as the Leiden Papyrus X and the Stockholm papyri, this collection of documents was discovered around 1828 by grave robbers near Thebes in central Egypt. The papyri contain numerous alchemical recipes. One part of the collection was acquired by the *Rijksmuseum van Oudheden* in Leiden (Inv. AMS 66), while the other was obtained by the *Kungliga Vitterhets Historie och Antikvitets Akademien* in Stockholm (*Papyrus Graecus Holmiensis*).

[25] Ibidem. The clearest example of this is recipe 148 in the Stockholm Papyri, where a recipe is given for 'Tyrian purple', that is, murex purple produced through two dye baths, which does not use murex as a dyeing agent at all but instead relies on Phrygian stone. Many more examples like this can be found within the document, such as, for instance, Sicilian or Sardian purple.

Fig. 2: Christ as a Shepard wearing an angusticlavus. second century CE. Catacomb of Priscilla, Cubiculum of the Velata. Rome, Italy. Source: Wikimedia Commons. Https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Good_shepherd_01_small.jpg

So how common is the depiction of purple in the early Roman catacombs? In dress, it appears to be almost the norm. Nearly all male figures are shown wearing an *angusticlavus*, a tunic adorned with two narrow vertical stripes of murex purple.[26] In some cases, young men are depicted wearing a cloak or shawl dyed entirely in purple. The angusticlavus was the primary

[26] Van der Bercken and Kaper, *Oog in Oog,* 31.

indicator of equestrian rank and given that commissioning a funerary painting was a considerable financial investment, it is unsurprising that most commissioners belonged to the higher social classes of Rome.[27] Moreover, the depiction of men wearing the angusticlavus is also widespread in Roman pagan funerary art, indicating a clear continuity of visual conventions across both pagan and Christian contexts.[28]

What is particularly noteworthy, however, is that this symbol of Roman elite status is not limited to portrayals of the deceased. It is also applied to religious figures. Take, for example, the image of Christ as the Good Shepherd in the Cubiculum of the Velata (see fig 2.), where he is unmistakably dressed in an angusticlavus. This is not an isolated case: in many early Christian catacomb scenes, Christ is regularly depicted in clothing marked with purple stripes. The consistent appearance of this garment in various biblical contexts indicates that the depiction of purple was not restricted to social representation alone, but extended to religious imagery as well.

This widespread pattern of wearing purple was not exclusive to male figures. Women, too – as seen in the depiction of the veiled women –, are frequently shown dressed in garments decorated with purple. However, whereas men are typically depicted in the angusticlavus, female figures appear in a wider variety of styles and shades of murex-dyed clothing. A commonly recurring depiction features a woman in the orant position wearing a veil, the ends of which are marked by two thick stripes of deep purple. Other women are shown dressed in a wide range of garments, most commonly the *stola*, a long sleeveless robe, and *palla,* a type of mantel or cloak, dyed in various tones and decorated in diverse styles. The colours range from bright magentas to deep purples, and the patterns vary from modest to highly expressive.

Notably, while some of these women are portrayed in complex, richly dyed garments indicative of high-quality textiles, they are rarely shown wearing jewellery, such as gold or pearls – an element commonly found in depictions of women in pagan funerary art.[29] This absence of jewellery appears to have been a deliberate choice in early Christian iconography, as it disappears entirely during the Constantinian period. From that point on, it

[27] U. Rothe, A. Hamelink, and N. Delferrière, 'Roman *Clavus* Decoration on Gallic Dress: A Reevaluation Based on New Discoveries', *American Journal of Archaeology* 127, 4.1 (2023) 545-562: 554.
[28] Van der Bercken and Kaper, *Oog in Oog*, 29.
[29] Van der Bercken and Kaper, *Oog in Oog,* 31–37.

becomes standard to depict women adorned with abundant jewellery alongside their purple garments.[30] This change is particularly significant, as it suggests that for women, the depiction of murex-dyed clothing carried a motivation that went beyond simply showcasing personal wealth. to display themselves wearing the elaborate jewellery associated with their social counterparts.

Early Christian attitudes towards purple

With the depiction of murex purple garments being so common in early Christian funerary art, it would be reasonable to assume that early Christian attitudes towards the colour were generally positive. If, for instance, the use of purple was actively encouraged, possible motivations for its appearance in Christian contexts could be identified. However, the writings of early Christian authors suggest the opposite.

Justin Martyr (c. 100–165 CE) is the first apologist to mention and critique the use of murex purple in a Christian context. In his *Dialogue with Trypho*, Justin criticizes the commandment to wear a fringe of purple dye as a physical reminder of God.[31] He notes that this was a law given by Moses, intended to keep God's presence constantly in mind, but that it ultimately failed, evidenced by the fact that many still turned to idolatry. It is for this reason that Christians should reject such external reminders and instead focus on internal faith and devotion, according to Justin.

Now, while he does not endorse its use, Justin does provide a potential motivation for the presence of purple in Christian contexts: as a visual or material reminder of God. He does not explicitly say that early Christians

[30] Nicolai, Bisconti, and Mazzoleni, *The Christian Catacombs of Rome*, 137.

[31] Justin Martyr, *Dialogue with Trypho*, 46: 'You perceive that God by Moses laid all such ordinances upon you on account of the hardness of your people's hearts, in order that, by the large number of them, you might keep God continually, and in every action, before your eyes, and never begin to act unjustly or impiously. For He enjoined you to place around you [a fringe] of purple dye, Numbers 15:38 in order that you might not forget God; (…) But we, because we refuse to sacrifice to those to whom we were of old accustomed to sacrifice, undergo extreme penalties, and rejoice in death — believing that God will raise us up by His Christ, and will make us incorruptible, and undisturbed, and immortal; and we know that the ordinances imposed by reason of the hardness of your people's hearts, contribute nothing to the performance of righteousness and of piety.' [trans. Marcus Dods and George Reith]

were using purple in this way, but his specific mention of the dye suggests that he considered it necessary to issue a warning – possibly because it was, in fact, being adopted for this purpose.

Criticism of the use of purple garments became increasingly severe over time. The Church Father Clement of Alexandria (c. 150-215 CE), for example, is particularly outspoken: he associates purple clothing, along with gold and jewellery, with excessive opulence and argues that such displays should be avoided.[32] A good Christian, he maintains, should dress only in white, as this signified temperance and simplicity: virtues aligned with God's intentions.[33] Wealth, Clement argues, should be used to help the poor rather than to embellish oneself. He also supports his position with a direct biblical reference: the parable of the Rich Man and Lazarus. In this story, the rich man, who is ultimately condemned to hell, is explicitly described as being 'dressed in purple and fine linen' and as having 'lived in luxury every day'.[34] Clement suggests that it was the man's wealth that consumed him and made him 'wicked and haughty'. Displaying oneself in purple should thus be avoided, lest one falls into the same spiritual corruption as the rich man.[35]

This view of purple as a corrupting force was shared by other pre-Constantinian authors, with the Church Father Tertullian (c. 160-230 CE)) taking the argument even further.[36] He acknowledges that certain garments, such as tunics dyed with purple, signify a particular social rank, and notes that in earlier times, such clothing was given as a reward to individuals who had earned the king's favour. Back then, there was nothing inherently wrong with wearing these garments. However, in Tertullian's own day, he argues, purple dress had become unacceptable for Christians. This was because purple had acquired a direct association with pagan religion: idols were now adorned in purple, and thus, to wear purple was to participate in a form of idolatry. According to Tertullian, the garment had become religiously defiled, and no faithful Christian could wear it without compromising their spiritual purity.[37]

[32] Clement of Alexandria, *The Paedagogus*, III.2-11.
[33] Ibidem, III.11.
[34] Luke 16:19 [trans. *The New Oxford Annotated Bible*, fifth edition, eds. M. Coogan and M. Z. Brettler (2018)].
[35] Clement of Alexandria, *The Paedagogus*, III.6.
[36] Hippolytus of Rome, *The Extant Works And Fragments*, II.36; Cyprian of Carthage, *Liber de Habitu Virginum*, 12-13.
[37] Tertulian, *de Idoloatria*, 18.

Tertullian's argument is interesting for two reasons. Firstly, it indirectly attests to the widespread wearing of the angusticlavus by men, as seen in early Christian catacomb art. Secondly, and more importantly, his passage may offer an explanation for why biblical figures are also depicted in these garments. If Roman deities were commonly shown dressed in purple, then portraying biblical figures in similar attire could reflect a reinterpretation of that visual tradition within a Christian framework This being a common pattern in early Christian catacombs, with many pagan visual elements reinterpreted in a Christian context.[38]

While these passages reflect a general discouragement of wearing purple garments, it is particularly striking that many of these early Christian male writers direct their strongest criticism toward one specific group: women. Clement of Alexandria, Tertullian, Hippolytus of Rome (c. 170-235 CE), and Cyprian of Carthage (c. 210-258 CE) – who all wrote during the late second and early third centuries CE, – in various cities across the Empire. In their works, they explicitly argue that women, in particular, should abstain from wearing purple.[39] Such clothing was associated with immodest women or even prostitutes and was seen as a corrupting influence introduced by the devil. In addition to avoiding purple, women were also urged to refrain from wearing gold, silver, or other types of jewellery, and instead encouraged to dress in a manner that reflected modesty and humility.

This specific condemnation of women wearing purple was grounded in scripture within the apocalyptic Book of Revelation. In this text, the punishment of adultery is symbolically depicted through the image of a woman whose elaborate dress signals moral corruption:

> So he carried me away in the spirit into a wilderness, and I saw a woman sitting on a scarlet beast that was full of blasphemous names, and it had seven heads and ten horns. The woman clothed in purple and scarlet, and adorned with gold and jewels and pearls, holding in her hand a golden cup full of abominations and the impurities of her fornication; and on her forehead was written a name, a mystery: 'Babylon the great, mother of whores and of earth's abominations'.[40]

[38] Jensen, *Understanding Early Christain Art*, 32-61.

[39] Clement of Alexandria, *The Paedagogus*, III.6; Tertullian, *De Cultu Feminarum*, 8; Hippolytus of Rome, *The Extant Works And Fragments*, II.36; Cyprian of Carthage, *Liber de Habitu Virginum*, 12-13.

[40] Revelation 17:3-6 [trans. The New Oxford Annotated Bible, fifth edition, eds. M. Coogan and M. Z. Brettler (2018)].

It is the dress of the described woman – known as the 'Whore of Babylon' – that, according to the Church Fathers, should be completely avoided by good Christian women. Cyprian of Carthage even states: 'Having put on silk and purple, they cannot put on Christ.'[41] In other words, to be modest, righteous, and truly Christian, one should not wear purple.

This makes the imagery found in the early Christian catacombs all the more puzzling. Why, if purple was so strongly condemned, is it so widely depicted? For men, one might argue that their display of status through the angusticlavus was considered more important than listening to the arguments of the early Christian writers. But for women, no such socially coded garment existed. While purple could still signal elite status, it is striking that these women are not shown wearing gold, silver, or other forms of jewellery, items displayed commonly among pagan women but conspicuously absent here. It appears, then, that these women were deliberately attempting to present themselves as modestly as possible, omitting jewellery. Purple, however, seemed to have held too much significance not to display.

Could there, then, be a religious explanation for this selective display of purple, particularly among women, who were so explicitly discouraged from wearing it?

The religious motivations for wearing purple

As shown by early Christian writers, Tyrian purple does not have a positive association in the New Testament. As noted, the rich man in the story of Lazarus is dressed in this colour. Similarly, in one of the most significant passages in the Bible, when Jesus is sentenced to be crucified, Pontius Pilate has him clothed in a purple robe and crowned with thorns by a group of Roman soldiers. Here, the royal colour is used deliberately and sarcastically to mock him as the 'King of the Jews'.[42] The soldiers intensify the humiliation by spitting on him and striking him while he is forced to wear the purple robe, as a false king.[43]

However, it is in the Old Testament that the first positive religious associations with purple can be found. Purple garments were repeatedly

[41] Cyprian of Carthage, *Liber de Habitu Virginum*, 13.
[42] Mark 15:17.
[43] Matthew 27:29.

requested by God as decorations and offerings for the Tabernacle, the movable tent and place of worship for God used by the Israelites until the conquest of Canaan. The curtains within the Tabernacle were to be made of linen dyed specifically with *argaman* (אַרְגָּמָן), the Hebrew word for murex purple. New sets of curtains are requested multiple times throughout Exodus, often calling, besides argaman, also for *tekhelet* (תְּכֵלֶת), murex blue.[44] Likewise, God ordered the making of veils dyed with argaman, which were to be housed and displayed in the Tabernacle.[45] In addition to these, several other fabric decorations for the Tabernacle were also to be dyed with murex, making it clear that purple was deemed an important luxury to be donated to God.[46]

The second notable use of purple in the Old Testament is in the holy garments for Aaron, the older brother of Moses and the first high priest of the Israelites. God explicitly commanded Moses to use murex blue, purple, and scarlet for his brother's sacred garments.[47] The religious meaning of these garments has received considerable scholarly attention. The most notable theory, proposed by theologian Slemming, assumes that the murex blue symbolizes heaven, while the scarlet represents the earth. Purple, according to him, should be seen as the colour combining the divine and the human.[48] In his view, the use of purple in these garments is an early allusion to Christ, who was both divine and human.[49] As such, purple symbolizes Christ. However, while the Israelites may have used the colour to allude to the coming of a future prophet, interpreting it as a deliberate reference to the coming of Christ specifically seems like a stretch. Whether early Christians who depicted themselves wearing purple believed in a similar theory is uncertain. However, God's explicit command to use purple in religious contexts does seem to have a direct connection to its use by these Christians. As is suggested by the critique of Justin Martyr, emphasizing that people saw

[44] *Exodus* 25:19, 26:19, 27:4, 35:23-35, 36:8, 38:3.
[45] Ibidem, 26:31-36, 28:2, 36:35-37.
[46] Ibidem, 28:33,28:2, 35:6, 38:18-23.
[47] Ibidem, 39:1.
[48] C.W. Slemming, *The Are the Garments. A Study of the Garments of the High Priest of Isreal* (Pennsylvania 1988) 41.
[49] A.L. Gaskill, 'Clothed in Holy Garments: The Apparel of the Temple Officiants of Ancient Israel' in: D.R. Seely, J.R. Chadwick, and M.J. Grey ed., *Ascending the Mountain of the Lord Temple, Praise, and Worship in the Old Testament*, (Brigham Young 2013) 85-104: 93.

its use as a commandment given to Moses.[50] God's order to use purple may have provided early Christians with a visible reminder of the divine, allowing them to represent God in a way that was still accepted within the expectations of Roman elite culture, where purple was a central marker of status.

A third use of purple in the Old Testament provides a possible explanation as to why particularly women might have been motivated to wear the colour. Within Proverbs, a poem credited to the biblical king Lemuel can be read, called *Wife of Noble Character*. In this poem, several virtues are listed that a good wife should possess, one of which being that 'she is clothed in fine linen and purple'.[51] While this is not a direct command from God, as was the case with the Tabernacle, it nevertheless suggests that wearing purple could be seen as a sign of virtue for women according to King Lemuel. Especially when considered alongside God's explicit instructions for purple garments in Exodus, this association may have offered additional motivation for women to dress themselves in this colour.

Yet again, whereas the Old Testament often presents purple in a positive light, the New Testament largely associates the colour with negative connotations. Purple appears only once in a neutral context, as a commodity sold by Lydia, a Christian woman from Thyatira (Asia Minor)[52]. Elsewhere, it is unmistakably linked to mockery and corruption: the colour draped over Jesus to ridicule him; the lavish clothing of the rich man in the parable; and the symbolic attire of the Whore of Babylon in Revelation. However, while this negative association with purple is evident in the canonical books of the New Testament, a very different depiction can be found in a text excluded from the official Christian canon.

The *Protoevangelium of James*, a text written in the second century CE, recounts the early life of Mary and the birth of Jesus.[53] Although it was never incorporated into the Christian canon, it has nonetheless profoundly shaped beliefs later adopted by the Church. Most notable is the idea that Mary remained a virgin throughout her pregnancy.[54] Despite eventually being condemned by a papal decree in the late fifth or sixth century, the

[50] Justin Martyr, *Dialogue with Trypho*, 46.
[51] Proverbs 31:22.
[52] Acts 16:15.
[53] C. Horn, 'The Protoevangelium of James and Its Reception in the Caucasus: Status Quaestionis', *Scrinium* 14.1 (2018) 223-238: 223–24.
[54] T.J. Horner, 'Jewish Aspects of the Protoevangelium of James', *Journal of Early Christian Studies* 12.3 (2004) 313-335: 313.

Protoevangelium had already enjoyed exceptionally wide and enthusiastic reception throughout the Christian world by that time – particularly in the eastern regions of the Roman Empire.[55]

Although later regarded as apocryphal fiction, many early Christians initially saw the Protoevangelium of James as simply part of the New Testament. It is within this highly influential text that another Christian association with purple emerges:

> Now there was a council of the priests saying, 'Let us make a veil for the temple of the Lord.' (…) 'Cast lots to see who shall weave the gold, the amiantus, the linen, the silk, the hyacinth-blue, the scarlet, and the pure purple.' The pure purple and scarlet fell by lot to Mary. And she took them and went home.(…)
>
> And she took the pitcher and went out to draw water, and behold, a voice said to her, 'Hail, highly favoured one, the Lord is with you, you are blessed among women.' And Mary looked around to the right and to the left to see where this voice came from. And, trembling, she went to her house and put down the pitcher and took the purple and sat down on her seat and drew out the thread. And behold, an angel of (the) Lord stood before her and said, 'Do not fear, Mary; for you have found grace before the master of all things and shall conceive by his Word.'(…)the power of God shall overshadow you; therefore the holy one who is born of you shall be called the Son of the Most High. And you shall call his name Jesus; for he shall save his people from their sins.' (...)
>
> And she made ready the purple and the scarlet and brought them to the high-priest. And the high-priest blessed her and said, 'Mary, the Lord God has magnified your name, and you shall be blessed among all generations of the earth.[56]

It is at the precise moment of divine revelation, the Annunciation, that Mary is described as drawing out the purple thread. In doing so, the author of the Protoevangelium deliberately intertwines the colour with the conception of Christ. Within this text, purple is thus elevated: it is no longer merely a luxurious or sacred material requested by God in the Old Testament, it becomes a visual and symbolic marker of divine intervention. Purple is at once a sign of Christ's conception and of Mary's chosenness.

[55] Horn, 'The Protoevangelium of James', 225.
[56] *The Protoevangelium of James*, 10-12 [trans. J.K. Elliott].

For early Christian women in particular, this passage, as well as the colour purple in general, may thus have held profound resonance. It was while working with purple that Mary was chosen to become the Mother of Christ. The colour could therefore serve not only as a reminder of Christ, but also as a symbol of divine motherhood and as a means of personal identification with the sacred. In this way, purple may have functioned as a marker of Christian female identity in the early Church, possibly explaining its widespread appearance in depictions of women within early Christian catacombs.[57]

Beyond providing a religious motivation for the wearing of purple, the passage may also offer an insight into one of its most common forms of display. Although dress styles varied, the most frequent depiction of women in purple shows them wearing veils, the very garment Mary was spinning when the angel appeared before her. Moreover, this was not just any veil, but one with two prominent stripes at the ends, closely mirroring the appearance of the *tallit*, the Jewish prayer shawl. It is therefore not unlikely to hypothesize that the use of such veils may have been adopted from Jewish custom, particularly as they share another defining attribute: the presence of murex dye. Since it was mandatory for the tallit to be dyed with tekhelet, murex blue.[58]

In the early Christian catacombs, however, the depicted stripes are deep purple rather than blue.[59] This potentially suggests that while Christian women may have adopted the visual form of the tallit, they intentionally changed its colour, creating a direct association with Mary. Perhaps imagining that this was what the 'veil for the temple of the Lord' might have looked like.

All of these themes converge strikingly in a remarkable cubiculum within the Catacombs of Priscilla (see fig. 3). In the vault of this chapel, a man clad in an angusticlavus faces a woman seated on a throne, draped in a purple fabric across her shoulders. These figures are most likely the Archangel Gabriel and Mary.[60] In this fresco, what is thought to be the earliest

[57] S. Gilmour, 'The Protoevangelium of James: Mary, Purity, and Womanhood', *Los Angeles* 5.1 (2022) 1-6: 1-4.
[58] Numbers 15:38-40.
[59] L.L. Bronner, 'From Veil to Wig: Jewish Women's Hair Covering', *Judaism*, 42.4 (1993): 467–70.
[60] S. Paşca-Tuşa, Gabriel-Ştefan Solomon, and B. Şopterean, 'THE ANNUNCIATION IN BYZANTINE ART PATTERNS OF REPRESENTATION', *European Journal of Science and Theology* 19.3 (2023) 133-144:

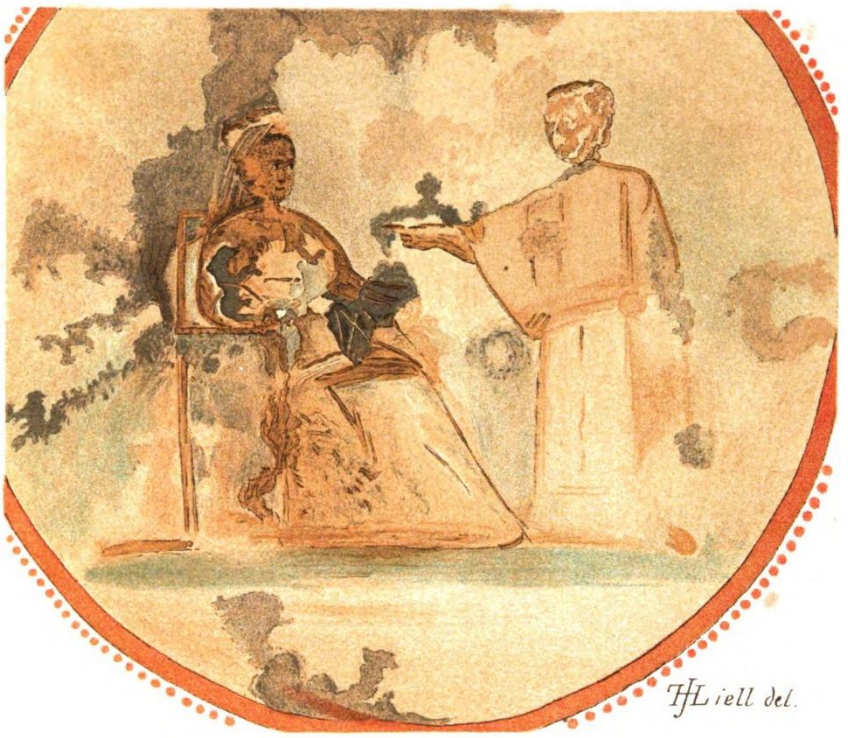

Fig. 3: Reproduction drawing of the oldest depiction of the Annunciation, Mary left, the archangel Gabriel right. Drawing from 1887. Third century CE. Catacombs of Priscilla. Rome, Italy. Source: Wikimedia Commons. Https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Catacomb_of_Priscilla_-

known depiction of the Annunciation, it is therefore perhaps neither coincidence nor mere stylistic choice that both figures are rendered wearing purple. Gabriel's angusticlavus thus signals his divine status, while the purple drapery adorning Mary symbolizes her calling by God, perhaps even

134-35. The defining indicators that this is, in fact, the Annunciation being depicted are that Mary, as is common in such representations, is seated in a high-backed chair, and that Gabriel is dressed modestly and, importantly, is barefoot. It is therefore the consensus among historians and theologians that the Annunciation is indeed being shown here.

representing the very veil she was spinning when the angel appeared.[61] This specific depiction within the catacombs is far from the only example of Mary wearing purple. In the Western Catholic tradition Mary is often show in blue or scarlet, a convention introduced only in the twelfth century to empahsize her purity and motherly love.[62] However, earlier depictions – as well as images often used in the Orthodox Church today – more commonly show her wearing purple. Some of the clearest examples of this are visible in Sant'Apollinare Nuovo (see fig. 4), located in Ravenna and built during the sixth century, where the Holy Virgin is depicted holding the son of God and is glad in an extravagant purple robe.

Even though purple was discouraged by many early Christian writers – who drew on its negative connotations in certain New Testament passages – the Old Testament and the Protoevangelium of James offered ample motivation for early Christians to depict themselves in purple garments. In these contexts, the colour served as a powerful visual reminder of God, Christ, and Mary.

Conclusion

This article has demonstrated that the depiction of purple within the early Christian catacombs should not be understood solely as an expression of elite luxury. Numerous religious motivations could also have warranted its display, showing that associations between this colour and Christianity were already present well before Constantine. It has become evident that the depiction of individuals wearing purple garments was the norm within early Christian catacomb art. For men, this was typically through the angusticlavus, which

[61] T.C. Catherine, 'Painted Veneration: The Priscilla Catacomb Annunciation and the Protoevangelion of James as Precedents for Late Antique Annunciation Iconography'. *STUDIA PATRISTICA* 59.7 (Oxford2013) 21-39: 32. Even if somewhat difficult to distinguish with the naked eye, both Catherine's observations and my own indicate that Mary's garment is indeed depicted in purple. When the saturation of the image is increased, the surviving purple pigment becomes noticeably clearer. For this observation I also consulted Mouhammed Ghassen Noura, who works daily with murex purple and fully agrees with this assessment. As the publishing rights to the original image are not yet available I would highly recommend looking up the fresco on your own accord.

[62] M. Pastoureau, *Blue: the history of a color* (Oxford 2018) 50-55.

marked their being a part of the Roman elite. Women were depicted in a range of styles, most commonly wearing veils adorned with purple stripes. Strikingly, these women often deliberately omitted jewellery, opting for visual modesty while still wearing what, in antiquity, was the most expensive and prestigious colour.

Fig 4. Enthroned Mary holding baby Jesus glad in an extravagant deep-purple robe. Sixth century CE. Basilica of Sant'Apollinare Nuovo, Ravenna, Italy. Source: author.

An examination of ancient texts reveals that dressing in purple by early Christians writers was heavily frowned upon and actively discouraged by them. Their severe critique contrasts sharply with the practice observed in the catacombs: wearing purple was an extremely common practice within the early Christian community. These writers acknowledged that purple was used as a reminder of God, yet they actively discouraged this practice. In their view, purple symbolized excessive opulence and was a 'defiled' colour, tainted by

its widespread use in pagan rituals to adorn deities. However, this very tradition of adorning gods with purple provided one of the earliest religious motivations for depicting Christ and other biblical figures in purple: a direct adoption from the Roman visual tradition, even if opposed by Christian moralists. For women in particular, wearing purple was especially controversial, as it was seen as a defining attribute of the Whore of Babylon.

While the negative attitude of early Christian writers towards purple is clearly reflected in the canonical New Testament, alternative and more positive religious motivations for wearing and displaying the colour emerge from the Old Testament and the Protoevangelium of James. The Old Testament reveals that garments dyed with murex purple were regularly prescribed for the Tabernacle, that murex-dyed fabrics were to be used in the sacred vestments of Aaron, and that the wearing of purple was presented as a virtue for women. The Protoevangelium of James further elevates the colour by depicting Mary spinning purple precisely as the Annunciation occurs, thereby directly intertwining the dye with the conception of Christ.

Thus, the seemingly modest depictions of individuals wearing the most expensive colour in antiquity within the early Christian catacombs are far from contradictory. Rather, they seem to reflect a deliberate and meaningful use of purple as a potent religious symbol. For men the presence of purple could have simultaneously marked their social status and served as a visual reminder of their connection to God. For Christ and other biblical figures, the use of purple was a deliberate continuation of pagan visual traditions, in which deities were depicted wearing the colour. And for women, who intentionally rejected other displays of wealth, such as jewellery in favour of modesty, the religious significance of purple could have been too strong to simply ignore. In portraying themselves in purple, these women possibly aligned themselves with God and Christ, and perhaps most profoundly, could have created a visual and personal connection with the figure who embodied early Christian womanhood: Mary herself.