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Author(s): Meyer Reinhold
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ON STATUS SYMBOLS IN THE ANCIENT WORLD

When Rousseau, deploring the passing of many traditional status symbols in his lifetime, reflected "Que d'attention chez les Romains à la langue des signes!"; he accurately singled out the most status-symbol-conscious people of the ancient world. Contemporary sociologists have made us self-consciously aware of the almost universal modern need, in the context of increasing urbanization, egalitarianism, and personal anonymity, for the display of recognizable visible signs of social prestige. But they have not cast an historical eye on the phenomenon of status symbolism in antiquity, or, for that matter, in the medieval period, or explored the vast, largely untapped data on this social practice in other societies and regions of the modern world before the twentieth century. Indeed, many sociologists, without historical perspective, treat status symbolism as a special peculiarity of contemporary society, or, at most, abstract earlier instances from their context for comparative purposes in an un-historical fashion. True, Herbert Spencer was the first to subject status symbols to systematic analysis, but he culled his information principally from primitive societies. Anthropologists have during the past fifty years isolated the status symbols of numerous minuscule cultures, or, in some cases, of larger geographical complexes. A systematic study, on historical lines, of this enormous array of data remains to be made. With respect to prestige badges in the ancient world, our past literature has tended to treat this subject, fragmented under specific features, largely from an antiquarian viewpoint. I refer to such standard treatments as those in Darenberg-Saglio, Pauly-Wissowa-Kroll, and Ebert's Reallexikon der Vorgeschichte on such topics, for example, as rings, crowns, wreathe, mode of wearing the hair, garments, colors, shoes, dwelling places, burial practices, conspicuous consumption, prestige seats, mode of transportation, insignia of office.

It is not surprising that the world's earliest extant theoretical statement in the realm of status symbolism is to be found in Aristotle. Though in fact he was commenting on societies in which military decorations are the primary status symbols, his formulation is applicable to the general usage of antiquity: "There are many such practices, varying from people to people,

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3 Principles of sociology (New York 1880), Bk. II, Part IV (Ceremonial occasions).
4 In this connection the "Human relations area file" is a gold mine of information on numerous cultures.
some sanctioned by laws, some by custom.\textsuperscript{75} But it may come as a surprise to sociologists—perhaps even to classicists—to find the modern terminology anticipated in antiquity. The Greek word στήμβολα, with its basic meaning of "token" (generally as proof of identity) had taken on as early as the third century B.C. the sense of "symbol" of prestige.\textsuperscript{6} By the Augustan Age τὰ στήμβολα in the sense of extrinsic status badges, particularly royal insignia, was already current.\textsuperscript{7} A synonym, at least from the second century A.D., appears in the word παράσημα\textsuperscript{8} another in σημεία.\textsuperscript{9} The early Byzantine writer Joannes Lydus preserves the term ἐπίσημα in the sense of symbols of official rank.\textsuperscript{10} Curiously, the modern term "extrinsic symbols" is exactly paralleled by Dio Chrysostom’s τὰ έξωθεν.\textsuperscript{11} The formal Latin term for status symbols is insignia dignitatis, and this embraced both insignia of office and social rank, and also extrinsic prestige tokens exhibited by private persons.\textsuperscript{12}

The historian of antiquity must always guard against undue enthusiasm for "modern" similarities; the differences between ancient and current practices are likely to be distinctively significant. One of the special characteristics of contemporary status symbols is their short life. This

\textsuperscript{5} Politics 1324b.

\textsuperscript{6} Callimachus, Fr. 103 (Plutarch, Mor. 677B); Fr. 122 (Scholia, Pind. Nem. 10.64).

\textsuperscript{7} Dionysius of Halicarnassus 3.61.1; Diodorus Siculus 31.15.2. Cf. Appian, Bell. Pun. 8.9.66; Plutarch, Comp. Cim. et Luc. 3.4.

\textsuperscript{8} Plutarch, Cor. 20, Ant. 33; Athenaeus 12.514a; Appian, Bell. civ. 1.2.16; Eunapius, Vit. soph. 456, Hist. 239D.

\textsuperscript{9} E.g., Dio Chrysostom 4.61.

\textsuperscript{10} De magistr. 1.7, 9, 13, 32; 23, 22.

\textsuperscript{11} 4.61. The phrase results from the expressed contrast in Cynic doctrine between the natural qualities of mind and character of the real king and the outward insignia of royal power, such as tiaras and purple robes.

\textsuperscript{12} E.g., Cicero, Phil. 2.105, Ad fam. 10.6.2, Ad Q. fr. 1.4.13; Tacitus, Ann. 16.31; Apuleius, Apol. 75; Jerome, Epist. 29.3; Tertullian, De idol. 18; CIL 10.1709; Florus, Epit. 1.1.6, 1.25.5.

high rate of obsolescence results from the constant effort in open societies on the part of persons of lower social status to expropriate symbols of groups above them, so as to reduce the social distance. In an industrialized consumer society, especially in periods of affluence, almost all status symbols are accessible and relatively easy to arrogate, for they can be mass produced in inexpensive copies, or even rented for limited periods. As a result, the "in" groups are constantly at pains to change their status symbols, or to make them deceptively subtle, in order to maintain a degree of social distance. By contrast with this rapid velocity of change, status symbols in the ancient world generally maintained currency for centuries, some even for millennia. This was due to the lower incidence of social mobility in antiquity, the protection of distinctive status symbols of elite groups by legislation, the great weight of tradition, and the choice of visible symbols which facilitated protection against encroachment or arrogation by non-elites.

A prime instance of longevity as a status symbol in antiquity is the color purple. Its cachet of exclusivity arose from two sources: the great expense of producing this unique animal dye from the mollusk murex, and the fact that it was the only colorfast dye known in antiquity. We do not know when or where the dye was discovered (we may conjecture the Syro-Phoenician coast), but we are now able to affirm that purple already had a high prestige value as early as the first half of the fourteenth century B.C. The excavations at Ugarit (Ras Shamra) reveal that purple was being manufactured there in the middle of the second millennium B.C., and Ugaritic documents show that purple garments were sent as tribute by King Niqmard of Ugarit to King Suppiluliumas, the mighty ruler of the Hittite Empire. Indeed, it is likely that the dye and purple garments were highly prized for some time before, because by this time the word purple in Ugaritic, argmn, and in Hittite, ar-
kamman, had also taken on the significance of "tribute." Thereafter, until the end of the Byzantine Empire it remained, with some special exceptions, the elite color of antiquity both in the Near East and in the eastern and western Mediterranean.

In this connection antiquarian errors of long standing still survive in our encyclopedias and handbooks, and new inaccuracies have been interposed more recently. The Austrian Egyptologist Dedekind (who was a fanatical enthusiast for the study of purple and went so far as to propose a new branch of scholarship to be known as purprology) is responsible for the oft-repeated dictum that the use of purple as a prestige color was introduced by the Egyptians, and that it was from the Egyptians that the Jews learned the use of purple as a ritual color. But Dedekind's conclusions are based on the thinnest tissue of flimsy conjecture, and his views must be expunged from our handbooks and encyclopedias. Moreover, the color purple was never interdicted from general private use in antiquity or during the middle ages so as to be reserved as an exclusive royal and official prerogative. It is true that in some periods during the Roman Empire and the middle ages restrictions were placed upon the use of the highest qualities of purple (dibapha, blatta, oxyblatta, hyacinthina, amethystina) and these were reserved for imperial insignia, but the color itself remained available to all who could afford it. There were many less expensive qualities of purple in common use. The availability to the general public of purple of all qualities in the late third century A.D. is revealed by Diocletian's Edict on maximum prices. This accessibility is now illuminated by our papyrological evidence, which documents the use of purple by private persons in Hellenistic Egypt and the Roman province in all periods. The ownership of articles dyed with this prestige color and the purchase of purple dye is found in business accounts, inventories of property, lists of articles in dowries, items for sale, declarations of stolen articles, pawnbrokers' accounts, evidence of merchants dealing in purple.

It is likely that most of these purple articles were not manufactured with dyes of the highest quality. Indeed, thriving industries existed in antiquity engaged in manufacturing not only imitation purples, through the use of adulterated animal dye and inexpensive vegetable dyes, but also

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14 Purple had no currency in Egypt until the Hellenistic period. For about a half century in Athens during the fifth century B.C., because of anti-Persian feeling, the use of purple was condemned, and it remained, in fact, throughout antiquity, despite its widespread use, a rhetorical cliché to characterize tyranny. Cf. A. Alfeld, "Gewaltherrscher und Theaterkönig," Late classical and mediaeval studies in honor of Albert Mathias Friend, Jr. (Princeton 1955), pp. 40-48. It is interesting to observe that about 2500 years after the tribute in purple garments sent to a Hittite king, the Byzantine emperor Alexis I Comnenus (ca. 1100 A.D.) sent a German king a payment of 100 purple garments (Anna Commena 3.10).

15 For Dedekind's bibliography and reasoning see K. Schneider, Pauly-Wissowa-Kroll 23.2009.

inexpensive substitutes, through synthetics that simulated costly objects, for all sorts of items for individuals who sought to imitate the status symbols of richer strata of the population. This tendency was given strong impetus in the Roman empire mainly as a result of the sociopolitical philosophy of Augustus. His reorganization of the social structure of the entire empire, which introduced a wide range of social stratification based principally on property ownership, induced widespread efforts to usurp social status and the accompanying status symbols through fraudulent and illicit means. This striving for more rapid social mobility is evidenced both in the provinces and Italy. It was especially true of affluent Roman freedmen who, despite legal disabilities, often surreptitiously usurped and displayed status symbols of the Equestrian order. It is interesting to note that to circumvent the exclusiveness of one of the symbols of the Equestrian order, the right to wear the gold ring, there developed the practice of gold-plating rings of inferior metals; numerous gilded bronze rings from the Roman Empire have come down to us. The Roman imperial period also represents the acme of conspicuous consumption in antiquity for the purpose of exhibiting economic and social status. I refer not only to the well-known display of affluence through luxury spending in Rome but also to the numerous lavish expenditures made throughout the empire by the rich in their own communities. This practice, reminiscent of the potlach ceremonies of the Kwakiutl Indians of the Northwest, was largely the result of the character of ancient economy, which was in essence a redistributive rather than a production economy. Since large surpluses of wealth could not be returned to the production processes, the distribution of such surpluses either by governments or private nabobs was institutionalized into various forms of unproductive displays of such prestige wealth. This performed a different function from that of the conspicuous consumption of modern times.

Such conspicuous consumption to display status was already in evidence during the Hellenistic period. It is from this source that the Romans borrowed the institutions, and, with their greater resources, expanded them. In this connection, the manifestations of cross-cultural influences in the area of status symbolism in antiquity need further study. This would be especially interesting with regard to the relationships between the Assyrians, Medes and Persians, as well as to the influences of the Persians upon the Greeks of the fifth and fourth centuries, not to mention the Hellenistic states, and, equally important, upon the Roman practices.

In another significant area of ancient history, the preliterate societies, we are beginning to accumulate data on the distinctive tokens of upper strata of the population. For instance, in the Bronze Age cultures of Europe, ranging from Yorkshire


19 See Martial, *Ep.* 2.29, 3.95, 4.61, 5.8, 14.23, 25, 27, 35, 39, 8.6, 9.59, 10.87, 12.69.


in England to South Russia and Transcaucasia, we find numerous princely burials of pastoral chieftains and their aristocracy which contain four-wheeled wagons (later two-wheeled chariots), in the period from 2000 B.C. to the first century B.C. This was a prime status symbol in these cultures, like being buried with one's Rolls Royce.25

A whole host of problems remains to be solved in this feature of the social system of antiquity. Our task is not so much to demonstrate that the striving for status symbols is an ancient phenomenon as it is to demonstrate that the generalizations of sociologists need to be corrected by historical study of such practices in earlier societies.