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Caroline Roberts

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Deutsches Archäologisches Institut, Zentrale, Podbielskiallee 69–71, 14195 Berlin, Tel: +49 30 187711-0  
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# Creating Sacred Spaces Through Colour Choice in the Roman-Egyptian Tombs of Terenouthis

*Caroline Roberts*

## Abstract

This paper sheds light on colour use in Roman Egypt by examining the polychrome decoration of a group of limestone funerary stelae from Terenouthis. The stelae and their tombs were excavated in 1935, and they are currently preserved in the Kelsey Museum of Archaeology at the University of Michigan. Kelsey Conservators have undertaken a project to investigate colour on the surface of these artefacts and to record the distinct ways colours are used on the stelae. We used the British Museum's technical imaging capture and processing protocols to begin to characterize pigments on

the stelae, including Egyptian blue, rose madder, and green earth, providing new data on pigment selection and access in Roman Egypt. Specific trends were revealed in how colour was used to present people, banquet scenes, text and architectural spaces on the stelae. The paper demonstrates how the inhabitants of Terenouthis made deliberate colour choices to communicate and amplify values and ideas specific to Roman Egyptian culture and funerary religion.

**Keywords:** funerary, imaging, inscribed, polychromy, Roman Egypt, sculpture, Terenouthis, tomb

## Introduction

Egyptian polychromy and colour symbolism are topics that have been explored by Egyptologists, art historians, archaeologists and scientists, but these investigations have focused largely on works of art preceding the Roman occupation of Egypt. The polychrome stelae – or grave markers – from the Roman Egyptian city of Terenouthis provide a unique opportunity to explore patterns in colour use across a large group of funerary sculpture from this period. A collection of almost two hundred of these stelae currently resides in the Kelsey Museum of Archaeology at the University of Michigan, and over half of them retain some amount of their original paint decoration. The stelae offer valuable insight into artistic practices and material selection in Roman Egyptian sculpture, and provide evidence of trends in symbolic colour

use during this period – an area of research that remains largely unexplored.

Investigating colour choice by artists and patrons benefits from the wealth of technical knowledge that has emerged from the scientific research of Roman Egyptian artefacts. Most pigment technical studies focus on painted burial equipment and mummy portraits from the Fayoum<sup>1</sup>, while a smaller number have analysed samples of wall paintings from known archaeological sites, contributing to our knowledge of architectural polychromy in Roman Egypt<sup>2</sup>. One technical study, from the British Museum, identified a range of pigments used on a Roman Egyptian limestone sculpture of Horus in military garb, including red and yellow ochres, green earth (celadonite) and Egyptian blue<sup>3</sup>. Together, these studies provide a

<sup>1</sup> Ramer 1979; Hillyer 1984; Scott et al. 2003; Cartwright – Middleton 2008; Walton – Trentelman 2009; Dawson et al. 2010; Ganio et al. 2015; Delaney et al. 2017; Svoboda – Cartwright 2020.

<sup>2</sup> Berry 1999; Winkels – Riedl 2015; Marey Mahmoud et al. 2019.  
<sup>3</sup> Dyer et al. 2014.

baseline of information on pigment use on artefacts and point to the diverse array of colourants that would have been available to artists during the Roman period.

Apart from the Horus study, we know little about pigments used on Roman Egyptian polychrome sculpture. Research on artistic colour selection is also limited – especially when compared to the expansive literature that is available on the use of colour in Pharaonic Egyptian art<sup>4</sup> and Greek and Roman sculpture<sup>5</sup>. The small number of art historical studies that have examined colour use during the Ptolemaic and Roman periods point to a changing colour symbolism in works of art. Some suggest a departure from earlier, more recognizable systems of colour meaning<sup>6</sup>,

while others consider colour use in Roman Egypt as part of a continuum of change<sup>7</sup>. It is difficult to prove or disprove these arguments, however, given that relatively few case studies examine how colour is used symbolically during this period.

By investigating colour on the Terenouthis stelae, we aim to address two related research questions: How was colour used in Roman Egyptian funerary contexts, both in terms of pigment selection and colour symbolism? And how does this compare to material choices and systems of colour expression seen in the artistic traditions of Pharaonic Egypt and the Hellenistic world? In doing so, we hope to contribute to a growing technical dataset and to identify specific trends in colour choice that are unique to Roman Egypt.

## The Stelae in Context

In 1935, a vast necropolis was excavated at Terenouthis (Kom Abou Billou), a city located in Egypt's Nile Delta. The site was excavated by a team led by archaeologists from the University of Michigan, who uncovered hundreds of painted mudbrick tombs dating to the late 3<sup>rd</sup> to early 4<sup>th</sup> cent. A.D. The tombs took various shapes, including domed, pyramidal, and barrel-vaulted structures, and many had forecourts built onto their plastered and painted façades (Fig. 1). The structures provided a festive backdrop for the veneration of deceased individuals, whose likenesses were carved into a painted limestone stela set into a niche at the centre of each tomb's façade. For stelae that were photographed in their find spots (including the stela of a woman named Tasitarion, KM 21169), we can reconstruct how these grave makers functioned as objects of reverence for families and visitors to the necropolis (Fig. 2)<sup>8</sup>.

Each stela presents a standing or reclining figure or figures carved in sunken or (less frequently) bas-relief. Some figures stand frontally with their hands raised in prayer, while others recline on a cushioned funeral couch – or kline – above a funerary banquet. Many stelae have carved or painted Greek inscriptions that record the individual's name,

age and date of death, and, in some cases, a short remark is added on their life or character or a message of comfort to mourners. The deceased is often accompanied by a painted or carved jackal and occasionally by a hawk, symbols of the gods Anubis and Horus. On most stelae, the standing or reclining figures are surrounded by a framing element, either a painted arch or a more elaborately painted or sculpted naiskos or temple-like structure<sup>9</sup>. Much like the Roman period tombs of Alexandria, the Dakhla Oasis, and Hermopolis Magna, the Terenouthis stelae are replete with imagery rooted in Egyptian and Greek funerary traditions<sup>10</sup>. These polychrome grave markers capture the multicultural identities and values of ordinary people who were laid to rest in a vast community burial ground<sup>11</sup>.

Although scholars have already noted colours as they encountered them on the stelae<sup>12</sup>, their descriptions provide no technical or visual analysis of the stelae's polychromy. To learn more about the polychrome decoration on these objects and their original tomb contexts, we first carried out a broad visual survey of the stelae collection. This survey allowed us to identify which elements on the stelae were painted (skin, clothing, objects, inscriptions, architecture,

<sup>4</sup> For a selection, see Mekhitarian 1978, 32–35; Tiradritti 2008, and multiple papers in Davies 2001 and Cleland et al. 2016.

<sup>5</sup> See Brinkmann et al. 2010 and Østergaard – Nielsen 2014, among others.

<sup>6</sup> Baines 1985, 288; Baines 1997, 233; Kessler 2009, 359.

<sup>7</sup> Peters 2018, 13.

<sup>8</sup> Hooper 1961, 1–7; McCleary 1987, 5 f.; Talalay – Alcock 2006, 34.

<sup>9</sup> Aly 1949, 8.

<sup>10</sup> Venit 2016, 95, 110, 113.

<sup>11</sup> Aly 1949, 5–7; Hooper 1961, 5–15, 22 f.

<sup>12</sup> Aly 1949, 8; Hooper 1961, 5 f.; Walker 1997, 151–153.



1 Excavation photographs of the necropolis at Terenouthis (Kelsey Museum Photo Caption Database)





and spaces) and to narrow our analysis to objects that would provide the most colour data. We conducted a photographic sweep of approximately 50 stelae, recording where and how specific colours were used in this group. We then carried out technical imaging of approximately 30 stelae within this group.

## Pigment Study Using Technical Imaging



The goal of this research was to make initial pigment characterizations wherever possible, while identifying areas for sampling and continued analysis. Images were captured and processed using the British Museum's Technical Imaging protocol<sup>13</sup>. Visible light, ultraviolet luminescence (UVL), infrared reflectance (IRR) and visible-induced infrared luminescence (VIL) images were captured using a modified DSLR camera along with PECA 916, 914 and 904 filters. Infrared reflected false colour (IRRFC) images were created during post-processing. A Blak-Ray B100 A/R longwave ultraviolet lamp, Impact VC 500LR mono-lights and a Vidpro Z-96K LED light array were used as ultraviolet and visible light sources. Post-processing was carried out using the British Museum's technical imaging workspace.



2 From above: the painted barrel-vault tomb of Tasitarion (KM21169); 1935 in situ photograph of her stela (Kelsey Museum Photo Caption Database); 2020 colour photograph of Tasitarion's stela

## Results

Egyptian blue and rose madder were characterized using UVL and VIL imaging based on their resulting visible and infrared luminescence (Fig. 3). Infrared reflected false colour (IRRFC) images generated in post-processing also revealed false colours characteristic of red and green earth pigments<sup>14</sup>. X-ray diffraction analysis carried out during a previous study identified the green background of stela 21180 as

<sup>13</sup> Dyer et al. 2013.

<sup>14</sup> Compared to IRRFC images of Kremer reference pigments in animal glue, gum, egg and beeswax binders captured at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in 2014.



3 Left: colour photograph; middle: stela of Tasitarion under longwave UV light – pink-luminescent rose madder pigment appears in the woman's garment and in the column capitals; right: VIL image of Tasitarion showing Egyptian blue in objects in her hands, banquet scene, and in a kline cushion

green earth – possibly celadonite<sup>15</sup>. These characterizations are consistent with the range of earth pigments, as well as Egyptian blue, that have been identified on Roman Egyptian wall painting and sculpture. While little is known about its use on sculpture, madder does appear on Roman period architecture and ceramics<sup>16</sup>.

Although technical imaging can provide only initial characterizations of pigments, the luminescence of madder and Egyptian blue within their respective wavelength ranges allowed us to map out their locations on the stelae and make observations about how these colourants were used. Madder was frequently found in women's chitons and himations and, along with red pigments, in cushions and façade columns and capitals. Egyptian blue was also used in women's garments, on cushions, and as a representative colour for glass objects such as amphorae. Not all 'blue' things were painted with Egyptian blue pigment, however. For example, on stela 21189, a different

blue-green pigment (the IRRFC images suggest green earth) was used to paint the woman's chiton as well as waves beneath the boat adjacent to her.

Longwave ultraviolet light also revealed a surprising discovery: painted images and inscriptions on stelae KM 21021 and 21162, including the partial name of a woman, a jackal figure and shroud, and a banquet scene that are no longer visible (Fig. 4). These images are somewhat discernable in visible light photographs taken shortly after the stelae's excavation in 1935. But in a later catalogue, these elements are noted as absent in the stelae's descriptions, suggesting that they were no longer visible by the time the archaeologist examined the objects in 1961<sup>17</sup>. While we are still investigating the cause of the disappearance of these images and inscriptions, we suspect that repeated, mid-20<sup>th</sup> century campaigns to clean the stelae of soot (deposited by the coal-fires used to heat the museum prior to modern climate control) may have worn away these painted elements.

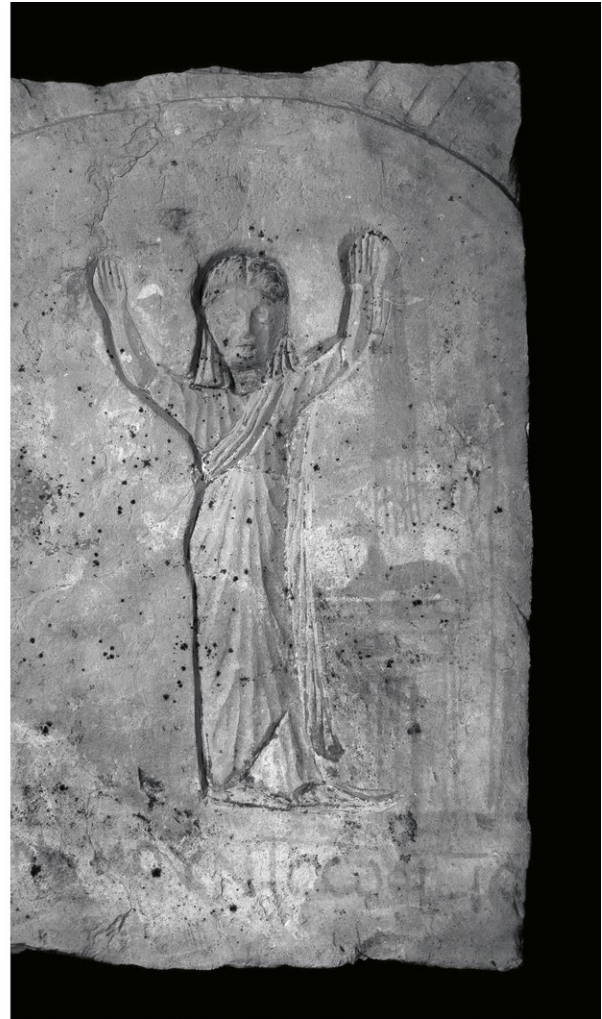
<sup>15</sup> Roberts et al. 2018, 23. 30; X-ray diffraction analysis with the U-M Electron Microbeam Analytical Laboratory's Rikagu Ultima IV X-ray diffractometer, which was set at an angle of 2–70 degrees, 0.02 degree sampling width, and scan speed of 1. Data was

interpreted using PDXL software linked to the Crystallography Open Database (COD).

<sup>16</sup> Kakoulli 2009, 16; KM 6449, 6488, and 6458 – terracotta figurines from Karanis, Egypt.

<sup>17</sup> Hooper 1961, cat. 1 and 144.





4 Left: visible light image of stela 21021; right: UVL image (red channel) showing painted inscription, jackal figure and fringed shroud

## Discussion

Of the pigments characterized so far on the stelae, Egyptian blue has the longest record of use in Egypt, ranging from as early as 3300 B.C.<sup>18</sup> through the Roman period. The pigment was produced in locations throughout the Roman Empire, and when accounting for inflation would have been relatively affordable by the 4<sup>th</sup> cent. A.D.<sup>19</sup>. But Egyptian blue was used somewhat sparingly on the stelae; we found it on only 25% of those we imaged. Egyptian blue and rose madder are also notably absent on the tomb wall painting fragments we examined as part of the imaging survey; their use seems to have been reserved for the

stelae. This could signal that these particular pigments were more costly, or that they were harder to obtain. These pigments are also especially bright and, as with the well-known group of colourful Hellenistic stelae discovered in a hypogeum in Alexandria<sup>20</sup>, these vivid colours would have made the stelae's imagery more luminous inside their dark tomb niches. The painted exteriors of the tombs would not have needed this optical assistance. It is also true that rose madder fades readily upon exposure to natural light, and its bright pink colour would last much longer in a shaded niche than on a tomb's exterior.

<sup>18</sup> Corcoran 2016, 53.

<sup>19</sup> Thiboudot 2020, 49.

<sup>20</sup> Abramitis – Abbe 2019, 21.

Certain pigments found on the stelae, such as rose madder and green earth, were also newer to Egypt at the time of the stelae's manufacture, and there are few published examples of these pigments' use before the Ptolemaic period<sup>21</sup>. These, along with the bright orange-red pigment minium (or red lead) and mixtures of indigo and yellow pigments, are part of an expanding palette of colourants that were available in Egypt during the Roman period<sup>22</sup>. Their presence on the stelae is a product of the movement of pigments from other parts of the Empire to Egypt<sup>23</sup>. These expanded trade connections would have provided artists and patrons with a range of potential choices (and price points) for creating the specific colours they desired<sup>24</sup>.

As for the inscriptions, ours is not the first case in which ultraviolet light uncovered faded or weathered painted elements on polychrome sculpture<sup>25</sup>. While further investigation is needed, we theorize that UVL imaging revealed these images because of the natural luminescence of the stone, which is stronger and of a different colour than the painted elements that are absorbed into the stone's surface. Whatever the mechanism for their capture, and whatever the cause of their disappearance, the discovery of these faded images and texts has significant scholarly implications, in that a number of stelae which were marked 'uninscribed' may have unrecorded inscriptions. This is something previous scholars of the Terenouthis stelae have suspected<sup>26</sup>, but it is only now being confirmed through technical imaging.

## Colour Use and Symbolism

The goal of this research was to record where polychromy is found on the stelae, which colours are visible and, wherever possible, to make observations and identify trends in how specific colours are used. Below, these observations are grouped into categories including trends in people's appearance and dress, objects (including furnishings), inscriptions and registers, and architecture and space.

### Trends

The majority of men are painted with a dark red skin tone, while a few are painted with yellow or pink skin tones. Women most often appear with pink skin tones, with one or two instances of yellow (KM 21123) or white (Fig. 5). There is a limit to what we can infer from this about the values and identities of the deceased, but the variations we see in skin colour on the stelae are interesting, and could reflect the notable diversity of Roman Egypt's population<sup>27</sup>. Most of the stelae's men and women are dressed in 'everyday'

Greek style dress consisting of a himation (or mantle) over a chiton (or tunic)<sup>28</sup>. Women are depicted in colourful garments, often pink and blue in combination. In one case, KM 20121, pink and blue pigments may have been blended to produce a purple, a textile colour associated with luxury, affluence and royalty in Roman Egypt<sup>29</sup>. Men's clothing appears either white (KM 21052) or in reserve against a colourful background (KM 21051), formal colours that would have signalled their status as Roman citizens<sup>30</sup>.

On stelae where the deceased is in a reclining position, the figure rests on a cushioned kline or couch. These resemble the wooden or stone couches found in Hellenistic and Roman Egyptian tomb contexts<sup>31</sup>, including a similarly striped, painted kline found in a tomb at Fort Saleh in Alexandria<sup>32</sup>. The upholstery colours depicted on the stelae are often red, pink, and blue-green interposed (Fig. 6), colourful bands that would have connoted luxury as the deceased took part in their funeral banquet. Banquet scenes present a standardized set of vessels and foods, much like the food offering scenes found in Pharaonic (BM EA37986) and Roman period wall paintings<sup>33</sup>. These include

21 Scott 2016, 193–196.

22 Roberts 2020, 40–42.

23 Svoboda – Walton 2007, 153; Bradley et al. 2020, 69.

24 Morley 2016, 105–107.

25 Østergaard 2010, 91; Koch-Brinkmann et al. 2014, 129.

26 Aly 1949, 8.

27 Venit 2002, 11; Vandorpe 2012, 268–271.

28 Riggs 2005, 13.

29 Martelli 2015, 121.

30 Houston 1966, 92.

31 Guimier-Sorbets et al. 2001, 163–166; Lembke 2015, 14–17.

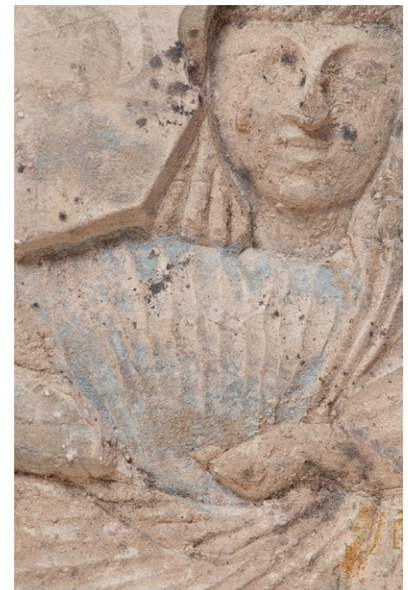
32 Venit 1999, 657.

33 Venit 2016, 168 f.; see the tomb of Nebamun at the British Museum, EA37986, and the East Wall of the tomb of Petosiris at el-Muzawwqa for examples.





5 Stela of a woman (left) and her husband, Pheebos (KM21174), showing notably different skin tones



6 From left: stela of a woman, Pheebos, wearing a light blue chiton (KM21127); stela of a woman, Thermouthis, reclining on red and green-striped couch cushions (KM21140); green harvest bundle and amphora from the stela of Tapesteosis (KM21152)

harvest bundles, amphorae, three-legged tables (or altars), jugs, and drinking vessels<sup>34</sup>. In most cases, colour is used primarily to convey the essential character of each object and is more or less representative of the material that the object is made of: green vegetal bundles, red ceramic vessels, yellow/brown wood or

metal table legs. But on stelae 21169 and 21140, which have blue- and green-painted amphorae, the significance of this choice of colour is less clear. These could be glass or faience vessels, or they could represent some quality inherent to their specific colours: water, rebirth, and regeneration (Fig. 6)<sup>35</sup>.

<sup>34</sup> Hooper 1961, 13.

<sup>35</sup> Tiradritti 2008, 49.

A number of inscriptions are underscored and outlined with incised lines that are painted red or pink. Painted plaster fragments that come from the stelae's original tomb chapels also show the use of thick red lines as framing elements. In addition to its practical use as a means of emphasizing writing, as in many examples of Roman funerary inscriptions, including one from Terenouthis (KM 21193), the colour red also carried a symbolic aspect in both Egyptian and Graeco-Roman funerary religion. The colour red held strong associations with Osiris, the god of resurrection and rebirth<sup>36</sup>, and with the protection and veneration of the deceased during the Roman period<sup>37</sup>.

Like the framing lines, many of the arches and temple façades that frame the stelae's scenes are painted red or pink (Fig. 7). Frames served a dual purpose in Roman Egyptian funerary religion: they provided a means of display, of presenting the deceased as an object of veneration. They could also act as a gateway through which the deceased must pass in order to reach the afterlife<sup>38</sup>. The most elaborate use of colour is seen on the stelae's architectural gateways, particularly on the columns. These are decorated with painted cross-hatching, dots, fluting and vegetal motifs, elements that may represent reticulation, netting<sup>39</sup>, or simply painted plaster. The colours red and pink frequently appear on the lower halves of columns, evoking the colour of *rosso antico* marble or, perhaps, Egyptian red granite.

The spaces within these temple façades are frequently painted, with the colours red and blue appearing in the backgrounds of a number of stelae. In a few cases these backgrounds have painted horizontal registers, such as the coloured zones of the background of KM 21114 (Fig. 8). The coloured background creates an impression of space and resembles wall painting found in tomb contexts elsewhere in Roman Egypt. In house-tomb M 5/SE at Tuna el-Gebel, for example, the wall behind the baldachin bay in grave building 12 (the niche in which a burial couch would have stood) is painted with two horizontal zones of yellow and green<sup>40</sup>. On the Terenouthis stelae, these colourful backgrounds open up the stelae into rooms, suggesting that the arches and façades are, in effect, doorways into a sacred, tomb-like interior – a residence for the deceased in the afterlife.



7 Above: stela of a child, Aphrodite (KM 21067); below: stela of a man, Nemesion (KM 21052)

<sup>36</sup> Taylor 2001, 166 f.

<sup>37</sup> Pastoureau 2017, 29.

<sup>38</sup> McCleary 1987, 8; Riggs 2005, 157.

<sup>39</sup> Venit 2016, 96, figure 3. 4.

<sup>40</sup> Lembke 2015, 17.





8 Detail of Tasitarion's multicolour striped tunic and red shroud, KM 21169

## Discussion

While certain forms of colour use reflect a degree of continuity with earlier forms of Egyptian and Greek painting – for example, in the somewhat gendered breakdown of skin colour – others are unique to the Roman period. The stelae's textile colour choices fit squarely within modes of contemporary Roman fashion, where colour played an important role in communicating an individual's social status<sup>41</sup>. Textile colours depicted on the stelae may best be compared to those seen in painted Fayoum portraits. In these, the major-

ity of men are shown wearing white tunics, while the same percentage of women are depicted wearing colourful, often pink or purple garments<sup>42</sup>. As with the portraits, the stelae's luxurious textile colours were clearly chosen to communicate the deceased's social status. With a wide range of dyestuffs available to produce even purple textiles, the people of Terenouthis may well have worn garments like these in life<sup>43</sup>.

As in earlier periods, colour continues to be used as a means of communicating the key qualities of natural materials, such as the items laid out in the deceased's funerary banquet. On the stelae's temple-like façade columns, the colour red seems to be used to elevate the white limestone of the stelae's reliefs into a finer category of materials, such as coloured marble or granite. We see this sort of illusionistic polychromy throughout the Roman world, from tomb wall paintings in Egypt<sup>44</sup> to domestic wall painting decoration in Italy<sup>45</sup>. But the use of paint to create an impression of higher quality material has precedents, too, in Pharaonic Egypt, where red granite was reproduced in wall paintings using multicolour dots over a pink background<sup>46</sup>.

The repetition and abundance of red on the stelae point to the significance of this colour within the funerary art of Terenouthis. The few burials that were discovered at Terenouthis are described as being encased in plastered body wrappings painted red and black<sup>47</sup>. We see a similar use of red in other burials from the period, including mummies discovered at Hawara and el-Hibeh that were wrapped in brightly painted red shrouds<sup>48</sup>. The red-painted veil that remains visible over the figure of Tasitarion on stela 21169 echoes the use of red cloth as a symbolic covering for the dead, a tradition which extends back to the early dynastic period (Fig. 8)<sup>49</sup>. Her striped tunic, by contrast, presents a more realistic use of colour: the depiction of an intricately striped garment similar to real textiles found in contemporary Roman Egyptian burials<sup>50</sup>. The polychromy of Tasitarion's clothing represents the dual ways in which colour is used on the stelae: it communicates (and perhaps elevates) the status of the individual by presenting them in sumptuous clothing and architectural surroundings, while also evoking longstanding symbolisms of bounty, safe passage, and resurrection.

41 The Encyclopedia of Ancient History (2012) s. v. Clothing, Greece and Rome (L. Cleland); <https://doi.org/10.1002/9781444338386.wbeah22059>.

42 APPEAR Project, J. Paul Getty, accessed 16.3.2021 – see JPG 73.AP.91 and 79.AP.141 for examples.

43 Martelli 2015, 127.

44 Winkels – Riederer 2015, 279–285.

45 Barker – Clayton Fant 2019, 799–804.

46 Tiradritti 2009, 58.

47 Hooper 1961, 3.

48 Corcoran 1995, 40; Svoboda – Walton 2007, 149.

49 Corcoran 1995, 57.

50 Walker 1997, 178.

## Conclusions and Future Directions

This investigation of pigment selection and applications, along with trends in colour choices on the Terenouthis stelae, has uncovered new data that aid in understanding colour use in Roman Egypt. We were able to characterize Egyptian blue, rose madder and green earth on the stelae, pigments that have been identified on other artworks from the period. But by looking at pigment use across a whole collection, it was also possible to see where and how frequently specific colourants were applied (or where they are absent) and to begin to identify trends in colour use.

In addition to building upon a growing Roman Egyptian pigment dataset, we were able to make observations about how colour is employed symbolically. Specific textile colours were depicted as a way to denote status, while the required funerary objects were painted with colours representing their material and function. Inscriptions and images were outlined in red and pink colours, which were also used frequently in the painted arches and portals that frame the deceased. Finally, colour was used to transform these limestone reliefs into rich, opulent tomb spaces for the dead.

This research has also provided new insights into the people who created the stelae. Our pigment data provide new evidence of a notable expansion in the pigments available to artists and patrons, and of methods for achieving specific colours – notably through the use of green earth as a ‘blue’ colour and by mixing rose madder with Egyptian blue to create the effect of a purple garment. These are creative solutions adapted by people who had the agency to express themselves, but who may have been limited by the practical bounds of prices and the availability of art materials. Although there were some examples of con-

tinuity with earlier art forms in terms of colour preference – in the abundance of red, for example – the colour choices made by the people of Terenouthis communicate ideas that are culturally unique to Roman Egypt.

These colour choices are also shaped by the identities of the people who commissioned the stelae, and these individuals – who may have been local elites, but not royals or members of the religious nobility – could have been communicating information about their own cultural antecedents or status. Rather than categorize their artistic contributions as a departure from a perceived core canon of colour use in Pharaonic Egypt or the classical world, we should interpret their polychromy within the context of the multicultural society in which they lived.

More research is needed, both to confirm the initial pigment characterizations reported here and to explore broader symbolic patterns in colour use in Roman Egypt. At the Kelsey Museum, analytical work to study pigments on the stelae will continue, starting with a technical survey using X-ray fluorescence spectroscopy. We also plan to examine more closely stelae that appear to be uninscribed for possible hidden inscriptions and images. Finally, research will expand to investigate colour on daily life artefacts from Karanis, a Roman Egyptian village in the Fayoum that was excavated in the 1920’s and 30’s by a University of Michigan-led team. We hope that this work will inspire others to take a comprehensive look at Roman Egyptian polychromy and consider the ways in which colour has been adapted to the new funerary traditions and art forms that emerged in this fascinating period of Egypt’s history.

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## Author

Caroline Roberts  
Kelsey Museum of Archaeology, University of Michigan  
[cirobert@umich.edu](mailto:cirobert@umich.edu)  
ORCID: 0000-0002-6068-8455  
ROR: <https://ror.org/00jmfr291>

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