

On the meaning of ΠΟΡΦΥΡΑ / ΠΟΡΦΥΡΙΟΝ in greek documentary papyri

von K. A. Worp

From private correspondence I gather that there is, at least with some scholars, a question as to whether the Greek substantive nouns πορφύρα and πορφύριον¹, as far as the Greek documentary papyri and ostraka are concerned, invariably indicate (a) 'purple-colored' wool or (b) '(purple) dye' (used for dyeing wool). In order to find an answer to this question I checked the attestations of these words via the listing in F. Preisigke, *Wörterbuch* II s.v. and on the PHI CD-ROM # 7 (searching for πορφυρ-). The attestations resulting from this search may be split up into three categories:

- (1) Attestations of πορφύρα / πορφύριον = 'dye',
- (2) Attestations of πορφύρα / πορφύριον = 'purple-colored wool', and
- (3) Attestations of πορφύρα / πορφύριον allowing the meaning of both 'dye' and 'purple-colored wool'.

Before proceeding it may be useful to highlight already here that πορφύριον as an equivalent of πορφύρα appears to have been used almost exclusively in private letters. Furthermore, various kinds and varieties of πορφύρα / πορφύριον may be distinguished, viz.:

- (1) 'herbal/root' purple (ρίζιου / ρίζινος): cf. P.Oxy. VII 1051.13, 1069.12, LIV 3765.2 and P.Stras. 131.6,8;
- (2) 'local' (ἐντόπιος): P.Oxy. VIII 1153.26; LIV 3765.3; SB XVI 12628.ii.40;
- (3) 'sea' (θαλάσσιος): BGU VI 1300.25;
- (4) 'five times dyed' (πεντάβαφος): P.Coll.Youtie II 85.3,4;
- (5) 'Fake': cf. P.Oxy. VII 1051.15 (ψευδοπόρφυρος²) and XLII 3080.5 (παράτυπος);
- (6) 'Real mixed' (ἀληθινὴ μικτή): SB XII 11075.8;
- (7) 'From Nicaea': P.Oxy. LIV 3765.1; P.Stras. 131.7
- (8) 'From Berenice': P.Oxy. XX 2273.10;

¹ Cf. also the adjectives πορφυρούς (masc.), -ροῦν (neutr.) and -ρά (fem.). Note the accent distinguishing the latter from the substantive πορφύρα; the editors of P.Giss. I 20.18 and SB VIII 9834 (b).20 apparently overlooked the fact that in their texts they were dealing with the fem. adjective πορφυρά rather than with the noun πορφύρα.

² In my opinion, ψευδοπόρφυρον in P.Oxy. VIII 1051.14-15, γυνεκίο[ν] | ψευδοπόρφυρον α, is an adjective (LSJ lists it as a noun).

(9) 'Tyrianthine' purple: P.Hamb. I 10.23;

(10) 'α[...η]' purple: SPP XX 85^V (p. 76).¹³

Some metrological information will also be helpful for better appreciating the following listing: 1 Roman lb. = 327.45 gr.; 1 Mna = approx. 1 Roman lb.; 1 Roman ounce (= 1/12 Roman lb.) = ca. 27 gr.; 1 Stater (= .5 Roman ounce / 1/24 Roman lb.) = ca. 13.5 gr.

And now the three categories as I distinguish them, viz.:

(1) Attestations of πορφύρα / πορφύριον = 'dye' (questionable cases are preceded by a question-mark):

(1.a) Πορφύρα:

Reference	Comment on context etc.:
P.Cair.Zen. I 59069.8,20 (IIIa)	See context, other dyes mentioned.
P.Cair.Zen. IV 59630.3 (IIIa)	See context: πορφύρα used <i>expressis verbis</i> for dyeing.
BGU VI 1300.25 (III/IIa)	Letter mentions 1 stater of πορφύρα sent; πορφύρα qualified as θάλασσιος, i.e. 'from the sea'; this could point to purple dye made from the purple-fish (<i>Myrex trunculus</i> and <i>purpurus haemastoma</i> , cf. LSJ s.v. πορφύρα); an interpretation 'imported from overseas' seems less likely.
P.Giss. 47.13 (115p)	0.5 Roman lb. of πορφύρα (= 12 staters) costs now 252 instead of 264 dr. (> 1 stater = 21 instead of 22 dr.).
O.Flor. 16.3 (IIp)	19 dr. paid for 3 staters of πορφύρα (> 1 stater = 6.33333 dr.). ⁴
P.Mert. III 114.20 (IIp)	4 dr. to be paid for 1 stater of πορφύρα.

¹³ I wonder whether here the adjective ἀλκυρή may be restored, cf. above θαλασσία πορφύρα; cf. also LSJ s.v. ἀλιπόρφυρος.

⁴ It remains, however, to be seen whether this approach is correct. One might compare the phrasing of P.Stras. 531 (below, fn.5) and interpret the Florida ostrakon on the effect that the 19 drachmas were paid for each of the 3 staters. In that case the price would come close to that in the preceding entry, P.Giss. 47.

- P.Stras. 531.9,20 (IIp) 4 dr. to be paid for 1 stater of πορφύρα.⁵
- P.Grenf. I 43.11 = W.Chrest. 57 (IIa) Quantity of 2 staters sent.
- P.Oxy. II 298.11 (Ip) Weighed per stater, quantity/price lost.
- ? P.Oxy. XLII 3080.5 (IIp) Order to send 10 staters (= approx. 135 gr.) of 'fake' πορφύρα; this could be 'dye' rather than 'purple-colored wool'?
- P.Oxy. VI 931.4 (IIp) 1 Ounce of πορφύρα sent.
- P.Oxy. XXXIII 2679.9 (IIp) 1 Ounce of πορφύρα sent.
- ? P.Oxy. XX 2273.10 (IIIp) 2 Ounces of 'Berenician' πορφύρα sent; ed. states his preference for 'purple-colored wool' rather than 'dye', but note the limited quantity [2 ounces = ca. 55 gr.].
- P.Oxy. LIV 3765.1-3 (ca. 327p) Three kinds of πορφύρα in price list of various dyes ['Nicaean', 'herbal/root' (ρίζινη) and 'local' (ἐν-τόπιος)], measured per ounce; see ed.'s notes.
- SB XVI 12628 ii.40 (ca. 330p) Document forms counterpart of P.Oxy. LIV 3765.1-3.
- ? P.Oxy. VIII 1153.26 (Ip) An unspecified amount of ἐντόπιος πορφύρα (cf. P.Oxy. LIV 3765.3 and SB XVI 12628 ii.40) sent, πρόσχρωμον = 'sample' added.
- ? O.Petr. 264.2 (42p) Receipt for 8 πήραι (= 'leather wallets/pouches') of πορ(φύρα).

Cf. also the entry in P.Oxy. XXXI 2567 (253p; 'Registration of Druggist's Stock'), 1.19: .j.. πορφύρου τάλαντα ε- and in P.Mich. VIII 504.13 (private letter, IIp): περιε..α την πορφύραν ἐπάνω τοῦ χάρτου καὶ τῶν βιβλαρίων τὰ ὀνόματα ὑμῶν.

(1.b) Πορφύριον:

- P.Oxy. III 520.18 (IIp) Refers to sale of 4 staters [= 2 ounces] of πορ-φύριον.

⁵ The editor interprets the Greek phrasing πορφύρας τρεῖς στα<τῆ>ρας ἐκ δραχμῶν δ to the effect that the price of 4 drachmas is intended per stater, not for 3 stater. This seems correct, cf. the price indicated in the preceding papyrus.

General comment:

It seems probable that small amounts of πορφύρα weighed by stater (= 13.5 gr.), or 1 or 2 Roman ounces (i.e. approx. 27 or 54 gr.) of πορφύρα conveyed from 'A' to 'B' point toward 'dye' rather than toward 'purple-colored wool'; in the case of P.Oxy. XLII 3080 it remains an open question, whether the quantity of the πορφύρα (weighed per stater!) is too small for excluding wool completely; 'dye', however, seems more likely. Likewise, 8 leather wallets/pouches (πήραι) containing πορφύρα (O.Petr. 264) probably point toward 'dye' rather than 'purple-colored' wool (would one have packed wool in leather pouches?); similarly, indications like 'local purple' (P.Oxy. VIII 1153), 'Nicaean' purple (P.Oxy. LIV 3765) or 'root' purple (ibid.) may be taken as pointing toward the dye stuff, rather than toward purple-colored wool. One might, however, argue that in the case of P.Oxy. 1153 'locally manufactured wool' rather than 'locally manufactured dye stuff' was intended. In the druggist's inventory P.Oxy. XXXI 2567 one expects to find dye, not purple-colored wool. For P.Mich. VIII 504.13 cf. the note ad loc.

(2) Πορφύρα / Πορφύριον = 'purple-colored wool' (questionable cases are preceded by a question-mark):

(2.a) Πορφύρα:

P.Coll.Youtie II 85.1-4 (VIp) Text refers to clothing made from various kinds of wool. In two cases the πορφύρα is qualified as πεντάβαφος = '5x dyed'.

?P.Stras. 131.6-8 (363p) In the marriage contract are listed various types of garments for females ἀπὸ πορφύρας, i.e. made of (rather than: 'dyed with?') various types of purple-colored wool ['Nicaean' and 'herbal' or 'root' purple, cf. P.Oxy. VII 1051.13, 1069.12 and LIV 3765.1,2].

P.Hamb. I 10.21 (IIp) The genitive pl. πορφυρῶν after γυναικείας συνθέσεις (= 'female clothing') seems to indicate 'made from purple wool'.

SB VI 9523.8 (IIp) Like P.Hamb. I 10; garments (made of?) πορφυρῶν.

SB XII 11075.8,10 (Vp) Πορφύρα in same type of document as P.Stras. 131.

P.Mich. VIII 501.12 Mentions πορφύρα coming out of a dyeing shop.

(IIp)

(2.b) Πορφύριον:

P.Lond. III 899.3 (p. 208)

(IIp)

Mentions wool dyed in various shades of the color purple.

General comment:

The context of all documents listed in this section seems to point unequivocally toward πορφύρα = 'purple-colored wool'.

(3) The meanings 'Dye' and 'Purple-colored wool' are apparently both possible in:

(3.a) Πορφύρα:

P.Oxy. VII 1051.13 (IIIp)

'Herbal/root' purple used for 'a scarf weighing half a roman lb.⁶'; the genitive πορφυράς seems to indicate 'made from purple wool', but the use of the qualification ριζίου (gen.) may seem to point toward 'dye' rather than toward 'wool'.

UPZ I 91.ii.17 (159a)

Payment of 120 dr. for an unspecified quantity of πορφύρα in account.

P.Teb. I 112, introd.

(p. 473, # 7) (late IIa)

Payments of 280 dr. (?) for unspecified quantities of πορφύρα in account.

P.Teb. I 117.38,39 (Ia)

Payments of 400 (?), 700 dr. (?) for unspecified quantities of πορφύρα in account.

P.Teb. I 120.3 (Ia)

Payments of 3600 drachmae (?) for unspecified quantity of πορφύρα in account.

P.Oxy. IV 739.17 (Ia - Ip)

20 dr. for unspecified quantity of πορφύρα.

P.Mich. II 127.2,24 (45/46p)

3.5 obols for unspecified quantity of πορφύρα.

P.Oxy. XIV 1727 ii.4 (II/IIIp)

4 dr., 5 ob. for unspecified quantity of πορφύρα; cf. 1727 iv.33: probably same type of entry, but amount of money lost.

⁶ NB: this interpretation differs from that of the *ed. princ.* printing ll. 12-14 as follows: [α]νδρόνιν α, ἡμιλί- | τριπ πορφύρα ριζί | ου, and translating '1 cambric, half a pound of vegetable purple'; there is, however, no need to put a comma between the numeral α and ἡμιλί- | τριπ. For the practice of indicating weights of textiles cf., e.g., SB XII 11075.7ff.

- P.Bon. I 38.A i.16 1 tal., 600 dr. for unspecified quantity of πορφύρα.
- P.Cair.Preis. 45.6 (IVp) 1 tal. for unspecified quantity of πορφύρα.
- SPP XX 85^v (p.76) 1-3 (IVp) Payments of amounts of talents (60, 34 [or 37] Tal.) for unspecified quantity of πορφύρα used for 30 wind-pipes.
- P.Oxy. LIX 4000.11 (IVp) 2 solidi for an unspecified quantity of πορφύρα.
- BGU III 951.3 (Byz.) 300 myriads of denarii for unspecified quantity of πορφύρα etc.
- P.IFAO I 6.4 (II/IIIp) Toll receipt for 4 mnai of πορφύρα imported next to 'worked' wool.
- P.Berl.Zill. 11.17-20 (IIIp) Letter referring to 2 mnai of πορφύρα.
- PSI III 201.4 (379/380) Re delivery of 4.5 Roman lbs of πορφύρα.
- P.Brem. I 59.5 (IIp) An unspecified quantity of πορφύρα mentioned in letter.
- P.Cair.Zeno I 59069.8 (IIIa) An unspecified quantity of πορφύρα packed in a cushion.
- P.Kell. I 74.10,14,23 (IVp) A small quantity of πορφύρα to be used for a chiton.
- P.Michael. 18 iv.16,18 (IIIp) Expenses for an unspecified quantity of πορφύρα.
- PSI IX 1080.10 (IIIp?) An unspecified quantity of πορφύρα sent.
- P.Turner 18.13 (84-96p) An unspecified quantity of πορφύρα to be used for a chiton.
- Cf. also (context very unclear):
- P.Herm. I 30.20 (VIp) In title of officials, reading uncertain.
- P.Kell. I 73.29 (IVp) In mutilated postscript to a private letter; could be adjective.
- P.Lond. VII 2180.17 (IIIa) Context broken.
- P.Oslo III 144.37 Context broken; could also be part of a noun like πορφυράς = 'purple dyer?', cf. LSJ
- (270-275p) Suppl.
- P.Sakaon 75.6 πορφύρα in list of expenses, entry incomplete.
- (316/331/346p)

(3.b) Πορφύριον:

- P.Giss.Univ. III 26.8
(IIIp) In personal letter: 1 mna received, no price indicated
- P.Hamb. II 192.30
(IIIa) In personal letter; no quantities/prices indicated.
- P.Harr. II 235.16
(III/IVp) In personal letter; no quantities/prices indicated.
- P.Jand. II 9.40
(IIp) In personal letter; no quantities/prices indicated.
- P.Oxy. VII 1069.12
(Ip) In personal letter: no quantities/prices indicated.
- P.Oxy. XIV 1678.15
(IIIp) In personal letter; no quantities/prices indicated.
- P.Oxy. XVII 2149.15
(II/IIIp) In personal letter; no quantities/prices indicated.
- P.Oxy. XVII 2150.5
(IIIp) In personal letter; no quantities/prices indicated.
- P.Oxy. XXXI 2599.12,19,35
(III/IVp) In personal letter; no quantities/prices indicated.
- P.Oxy. LVI 3860.34
(IVp) In personal letter; 6 mnai of πορφύριον mentioned.
- P.Warren 15.13 (IIp) In personal letter; no quantities/prices indicated, but according to the author the 'πορφύριον is ready'.
- SB XIV 12080.6 (IVp) In personal letter; 2 Roman lbs of πορφύριον.
- PSI XIV 1426.5 (V-VIp) In personal letter; 1 solidus for delivery of an unspecified amount?
- O.Douch I 33.6 (IVp) In personal letter.

General comment:

Amounts of 2 and 4.5 Roman lbs and of 2, 4 and 6 mnai (1 mna = approx. Roman lb.) are large enough to make one reckon with 'purple-colored wool', but one might also be dealing with larger-than-usual quantities of dyeing stuff. If quantities are not indicated [or lost], price indications remain also uninformative. On prices of purple in Roman Egypt see H.-J. Drexhage, *Preise, Mieten/Pachten, Kosten und Löhne im römischen Ägypten* (St. Katharinen, 1991) 369 (referring to P.Giss. 47, O.Flor. 16 (cf. above, fn. 4) and P.Mert. III

114; add also P.Stras. 531, cf. above fn. 5). In the 4th century A.D. one finds the following indications concerning πορφύρα:

Ref.	Date	Amount	Price
P.Stras. 735.iii. 7	13th ind. (= 324/5?)	1 lb.	1 Tal., 3000 Dr.
P.Oxy. LIV 3765 iii.18	327	1 lb. of ἐντόπιος π.	2 Tal.
SB XVI 12628 ii.40	329/332	1 lb. of ἐντόπιος π.	8 Tal.

Price differences may have been caused by fluctuations in quality, local availability, etc. Even so, one would not expect wildly divergent prices occurring more or less simultaneously within a restricted period of time. As in the tax receipt P.Sakaon 22.3 (Fayum, A.D. 324) 3 Tal., 900 Den. (= 3 Tal., 3600 Dr.) were paid for the price/value (τιμῆς) of an unspecified amount of purple for the 11th indiction (= A.D. 322/23) it becomes very tempting to compare this amount of money with the price paid in the Strasburg papyrus (1 Tal., 3000 Dr./lb.) which may be only 2 years later⁷; did the money payment in P. Sakaon concern an amount of 3 lbs. of πορφύρα at 1 Tal., 1200 dr. (= 300 den.) per lb., i.e. a price difference of only 1800 Dr./lb. with the price mentioned in P.Stras. 735 and was the price in the later document exactly 25% higher (from 7200 dr. > 9000 dr.)? This seems very well possible, but one wonders for what purpose the Roman government would have needed 'purple' ('dye', or 'wool', or both) and therefore required it to be delivered as a tax in kind or (in case a taxpayer had no πορφύρα itself available) to be paid for by way of converting the tax in kind into a money tax. At the same time it is interesting to see that in Oxyrhynchos the price of purple rose from 2 Tal. to 8 Tal. within a relative small period of time: an interesting illustration of the rampant price inflation at the time.

Finally, it may be interesting to notice that in a few cases πορφύρα was apparently used as a means of paying one's dues, cf. P.Hamb. I 90.10-11, P.Giss. 103.14 and P.Kell. I 61.1. Whether such transactions actually happened with purple dye or with purple-colored wool, is not possible to establish with certainty, as both commodities probably represented a certain value.⁸

⁷ The editor does not pronounce himself on a more precise date, but J. Gascou confirms per e-mail that an early-4th century date is very well possible.

⁸ I am most grateful to Dr. A. Alcock (Kassel) and to Mr. J. Spitteler (Amsterdam) for their help in writing this article.

List of documents mentioned supra:

- BGU III 951.3
 BGU VI 1300.25;
 P.Berl.Zill. 11.17-20
 P.Bon. I 38.A i.16
 P.Brem. I 59.5
 P.Cair.Preis. 45.6
 P.Cair.Zeno I 59069.8, 20
 P.Cair.Zen. IV 59630.3
 P.Coll.Youtie II 85.1-4
 P.Giss. I 20.18
 P.Giss. I 47.13
 P.Giss. 103.14,19
 P.Giss.Univ. III 26.8
 P.Grenf. I 43.11
 P.Hamb. I 10.23
 P.Hamb. I 90.10-11
 P.Hamb.II 192.30
 P.Harr. II 235.16
 P.Herm. I 30.20
 P.IFAO I 6.4
 P.Jand. II 9.40
 P.Kell. I 61.1
 P.Kell. I 73.29
 P.Kell. I 74.10,14,23
 P.Lond. III 899.3 (p. 208)
 P.Lond. VII 2180.17
 P.Mert. III 114.20
 P.Mich. II 127.2,24
 P.Mich. VIII 501.12
 P.Mich. VIII 504.13
 P.Michael. 18 iv.16,18
 P.Oslo III 144.37
 P.Oxy. II 298.11
 P.Oxy. III 520.18
 P.Oxy. IV 739.17
 P.Oxy. VI 931.4
 P.Oxy. VII 1051.13, 15
 P.Oxy. VII 1069.12
 P.Oxy. VIII 1153.26
 P.Oxy. XIV 1678.15
 P.Oxy. XIV 1727 ii.4, iv.33
 P.Oxy. XVII 2149.15
 P.Oxy. XVII 2150.5
 P.Oxy. XX 2273.10
 P.Oxy. XXXI 2599.12,19,35
 P.Oxy. XXXIII 2679.9
 P.Oxy. XLII 3080.5
 P.Oxy. LIV 3765.1-3; iii.18
 P.Oxy. LVI 3860.34
 P.Oxy. LIX 4000.11
 P.Sakaon 22.3
 P.Sakaon 75.6
 PSI III 201.4
 PSI IX 1080.10
 PSI XIV 1426.5
 P.Stras. 131.6,8
 P.Stras. 531.9,20
 P.Stras. 735.iii.7
 P.Teb. I 112, introd. (p. 473, # 7)
 P.Teb. I 117.38,39 (cf. P.Tebt. 211)
 P.Teb. I 120.3
 P.Turner 18.13
 P.Warren 15.13
 SB VI 9523.8
 SB VIII 9834 (b).20
 SB XII 11075.8, 10
 SB XIV 12080.6
 SB XVI 12628.ii.40
 SPP XX 85^v (p. 76).1-3
 UPZ I 91.ii.17
 O.Douch I 33.6
 O.Flor. 16.3
 O.Petr. 264.2

Zur Bedeutung von ΠΟΡΦΥΡΑ / ΠΟΡΦΥΡΙΟΝ in griechischen Papyrusurkunden

Zusammenfassung

In diesem Aufsatz wird die Bedeutung der griechischen Wörter πορφύρα / πορφύριον in den griechischen dokumentarischen Papyri untersucht. Die vorhandene Dokumentation wird in drei Kategorien aufgeteilt:

- (1) Belege für πορφύρα / πορφύριον = 'Purpurfarbstoff'
- (2) Belege für πορφύρα / πορφύριον = 'purpurfarbige Wolle'
- (3) Belege für πορφύρα / πορφύριον, die beide Bedeutungen zulassen.

La signification de ΠΟΡΦΥΡΑ / ΠΟΡΦΥΡΙΟΝ dans les documents papyrologique grecques

Résumé

Cette article examine la signification de les mots grecques πορφύρα / πορφύριον dans les documents papyrologique grecques. Le documentation est divisé en trois categories:

- (1) passage à l'appui pour πορφύρα / πορφύριον = 'matière colorante pourpre'
- (2) passage à l'appui pour πορφύρα / πορφύριον = 'laine purpurin'
- (3) passage à l'appui pour πορφύρα / πορφύριον - les deux acceptions.