

TYRIAN PURPLE

The purple dye industry developed by the Phoenicians became so renowned that the Greek world came to refer to the Canaanite people from the area of present-day Lebanon as “Phoinikes,” in reference to the color purple.

PHOENICIAN EXPANSION AND PROSPEROUS TRADE (9th century BCE)

With the Phoenician expansion throughout the Mediterranean, a prosperous trade emerged that brought great wealth to both the metropolises and their colonies starting in the 9th century BCE. Various industries were boosted, particularly those dedicated to dyes—especially the so-called “Tyrian purple,” which was highly coveted by the most powerful social classes. This demand eventually threatened the prestige and exclusivity of the dye. Such was the fame of this color that, even during Roman times, it continued to be used as a symbol of distinction.



Murex shell.

THE UNPLEASANT PURPLE WORK

In order to obtain purple dye, two species of carnivorous snails were needed: *Murex trunculus* and *Murex brandaris*, from which their glands had to be extracted. This could be done by crushing the mollusk within its shell or by

removing the gland with a tool. This white mucus, when exposed to air, began to rot, causing a foul smell and changing color, first to green and then to purple. Once enough *Murex* glands were collected, the viscous mass was mixed with seawater and boiled for ten days.

A GROWING REPUTATION

The Phoenicians already had a prosperous trade across the Mediterranean, dealing in products such as wine, perfumes, and ceramics; dyed fabrics contributed to the economic boom, as they were highly prized items.

The production of purple-dyed fabrics was primarily carried out in the city of Tyre, but colonies like Beirut, Arwad, and Sarepta also became notable for this activity.

To obtain 1.4 grams of dye, 12,000 *Murex* snails were required, which barely covered the length of a sleeve. This is why the price of these fabrics was very high, even more valued than gold. The collection of these snails was not enough to meet the growing demand, so the Phoenicians took advantage of their new colonies in the Mediterranean to create specialized facilities for catching these mollusks, such as those found in Almuñécar (Granada), Morro de la Mezquitilla (Málaga), and in areas of modern-day Tunisia and Morocco.

At Sa Caleta, no archaeological remains have been found to indicate large-scale purple production. The earliest evidence of this industry is from the late Punic period. However, many *Murex* remains have been found at the Sa Caleta site, so we cannot rule out small-scale production of this precious dye.